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Author:

[Saum, Christine](#)

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Zero Emissions and More in Chattanooga

Christine Saum

In October, I visited an urban design workshop that was studying the southern area of Chattanooga's central business district. Places like this, cut off from other parts of town by freeways and characterized by abandoned or marginal industrial facilities and pockets of neglected worker housing, can be found in many cities. It's the sort of neighborhood that fills one with despair because of the waste it represents — waste of character-filled buildings, infrastructure and strategically located developable land.

The goal of the three-day workshop (organized by RiverValley Partners, a private redevelopment non-profit, and architect Bill McDonough) was to develop a plan that not only spurs economic development in the south CBD but also makes the area a model of sustainability.

The workshop began with discussions among property owners, residents and political leaders of the issues that would guide the plan. Then a team of designers retreated to Chattanooga's Riverfront/Downtown Planning and Design Center to draft a preliminary plan. (The center coordinates and guides public and private development projects in the city and receives both public and private funding.) The team presented its work at the end of the workshop; a final plan (prepared by Calthorpe Associates,

RiverValley and the planning and design center staff) will be presented at a meeting of the President's Council on Sustainable Development in Chattanooga in January.

The guiding principle that emerged was to transform the area into a "zero emissions zone," which means that all industrial and residential waste generated in the area would be treated there as well. (This is one of several ideas McDonough has outlined as the "Chattanooga Principles.") RiverValley also wants to persuade companies with a commitment to sustainable operations and products to build facilities there. Still other strategies would help cut auto use (and emissions) — improving pedestrian and transit connections between south CBD and the rest of Chattanooga, and encouraging a diversity of uses within the district so people can live, shop, work and play in a pedestrian-oriented neighborhood.

The workshop also generated ideas for breaking down the barriers that single-minded, single-purpose places pose to improving urban environments. A request by citizens to ameliorate the visual impact of a freeway interchange led to a proposal for an urban forest along the right-of-way; it would function as a tree bank for public landscaping projects. A desire to reduce the expanse of unattractive, non-porous surface parking that normally surrounds a stadium (one was proposed for a local university) resulted in a suggestion for "parking streets" that would accommodate overflow parking during stadium events and provide grassy medians at other times. The jewel in the environmental crown would be a bioremediation center, which would not only treat industrial waste from within the district but also be a place where citizens could learn about the process.

Can Chattanooga pull the plan off? The city does have a track record of following big ideas through. By the late 1970s, its manufacturing base of coal-fired industries was virtually obsolete. The local Lindhurst Foundation underwrote a plan called Vision 2000; it resulted in \$800 million worth of investment (\$200 million of it public funds) in downtown redevelopment, affordable housing and an aquarium. Both the Planning and Design Center and RiverValley Partners were instrumental in making the plan work.

For this new plan to be successful, city government would have to make capital investments, change zoning laws and be prepared to lure businesses with financial enticements. Local business and political leaders, including the heads of the Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau, see Chattanooga's commitment to "green" industry as a marketing strategy; the city has already developed a fledgling industry in electric busses, which are used in Chattanooga and marketed to other communities. But while council member David Crockett thinks Chattanooga could be the American Curitiba, other local officials are reticent about the plan and are taking a wait-and-see attitude.

Cities must continually renew and reinvent themselves, and Chattanooga's efforts should inspire leaders in other communities. The strategies the workshop formulated offer a structure for guiding countless public policy decisions, and the city has been successful in using urban design to weave together the many concerns — including sound economic development, environmental sustainability, preservation of local history and culture — that go together to make a livable community.