

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Downtown takes another hit

As the first executive director of the Galesburg Downtown Village Council in 1975, I can certainly relate to the controversy of the current changes being made downtown. Because Galesburg received one of the first three "Main Street Project" awards from the National Trust for Historic Preservation during my tenure, in 1977 I was invited to speak to a Downtown Core Renewal Conference in Toronto, Canada. My speech pretty much summed up the history of the Galesburg Downtown renewal program up to that point.

It's interesting to reread it today. I spoke about the formal incorporation of the Galesburg Downtown Council in 1973, as a private, non-profit corporation which urged the city council to become concerned with the preservation of the Central Business District. A research firm conducted a market and economic analysis of the business district and made recommendations. In 1974, Scruggs and Hammond, landscape architects from Peoria, produced a preliminary plan for physical improvements for the downtown. Later, traffic, transportation and parking studies were done by the city.

The downtown group recommended to the city council acceptance of the plan at an estimated cost of \$2 million. After some negotiations, the city council approved the plan and agreed to split the cost with slightly more than \$1 million provided by the central business district property owners and the city slightly less. It was decided to use the newly-passed state legislation which would enable the city to levy a tax on the downtown property owners to pay for their share of the cost of improvements and maintenance of the improvements. This taxing district is called the Special Service Area tax. Public

hearings were required and objections by 51 percent of the property owners and electors from the area were needed to kill the proposed district.

The ordinance passed in April, 1975, just before the Special Service Area bonds were to be advertised for sale. A local company filed suit against the city, saying they would derive no benefits from the additional tax. This caused the improvements project to be implemented in two phases, with the city paying its portion first.

The first phase was completed in December of 1975, which was one quarter of the work. It was a year before the improvements were completed. It was in October of 1975, when only a part of the improvements were completed, lawsuits loomed, Sandburg Mall had just opened, enclosing two of our former downtown stores, Sears and Pennys, downtowners were becoming painfully aware of parking meters and winter weather and feeling almost entirely negative, that I was hired as the council's first full time director.

I was charged with the job of establishing an office, setting up programs of fund-raising, tenant acquisition and retention, promotions and marketing, maintenance and somehow communicating that these improvements were going to be completed, beautiful, and just what Galesburg needed.

I reported to the Toronto conference, "For the first time in my life I felt the terror that must have been in the hearts of the Christians who were thrown to the lions. I was in a newly-created job. Most people, including many of the merchants downtown, did not understand the role of the downtown council, my job, or the need for improvements. We had nowhere to go but up, and up we did."

By the fall of 1976 the improvements



were completed. They included extended corners of the intersections, to bring the sides of a very wide Main Street closer together. Originally there were brick, mid-block cross walks and they sure didn't last long. In typical fashion, Galesburg drivers would not stop for the pedestrian crossings and citizens were running for their lives. It's a wonder we all lived through it.

Four bus shelters were built and I doubt if a bus has stopped at one yet. The plans included Park Plaza, with a permanent stage and seating for about 500 and is still the center for many activities downtown, a little green park (by Leaths) benches, trees, flowers, pots of flowers on the sidewalk, decorative lighting, and the renovating of our old fire station into a community center. The best public relations possible was the arrival of spring, when everything finally bloomed and the downtown became beautiful and attractive.

The first thing I did after being hired in 1975 was to approach the whole project like it was a political campaign. I headed for the sidewalk and stopped at every business in the Special Service District, introduced myself, listened to a myriad of complaints and discussed what was going on. One question I always asked of those who bitterly complained about the improvements, "Did you make an effort to see the plans during the years they were being discussed? Did you call your alderman? Did you go to any city council meetings? Did you express your opinion to the downtown council?" To those who said "no," which was most of them, I said I had little sympathy for their alarm and opposition. It was simply too late.

Today we have these same trees, now almost 30 years old, being chopped down, the planters being removed and landscape being changed again. To those who wonder what's happening, I ask the same question. "Where have you been when all this was being presented and reviewed?" The downtown indeed looks like portions of Afghanistan and again, some of the merchants are complaining. Most Main street and side street businesses have parking lots behind them, so the problem can't be all that bad. Even at the mall we have to walk some distance to get into the place and visit a store.

I confess I haven't paid much attention to the new plans. Here's one old downtown promoter who will be curious to see what develops.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at cporter@galesburg.net.