Citizens Share Visions of Downtown Carbondale

Aziza McNeese and Anna Spoerre

The downtown of a community often represents an important piece of the area’s history, and acts as a representation of the community as a whole. This raises the following question: “How well does your downtown represent your community’s cultures, values and presence?”

Carbondale is currently in the process of redeveloping the downtown area, and community involvement is not only encouraged, but essential to the success of this project. The people of Carbondale are the heart and soul of the city. That is why a film crew of SIU students participated in an Imagining Geographies and Civic Communication Collective project – entitled “Citizens Speak”. The students took to the streets this past month to ask whomever they came across the question, “What do you think should be the vision guiding the redevelopment of Carbondale’s downtown area?”

Over 80 Carbondale residents were interviewed, and many different perspectives were voiced by individuals ranging from high school and college students to senior citizens. Apart from people who have lived in Carbondale for many years, most interviewed were not aware of the downtown redevelopment project. However, they were enthusiastic to give their opinion on how the center of town could appeal more to them.

As would be expected, most of the responses that the student teams collected involved common entertainment elements of a downtown area. Community member Rick Green stated, “A nice entertainment district could be good, whether it be places to eat, or places to go out and have a beer, [or] a good glass of wine.” Interviewees frequently suggested that they would like to see more restaurants and food variety, as well as facilities for recreational activities…”not just bars”.

Skateboarder and current SIU student Ryan Geiss said that “an open plaza skate park would open up an ability for regular citizens to come and enjoy the space and also allow skateboarders to enjoy their sport while safely performing without risking hurting people on the strip.”

Another desire frequently voiced was for a beautification of downtown and Illinois Avenue, known as the “Strip.” There is not much in place to please the eye, so many respondents said that downtown area needs “more greenery and open park-like spaces that could create a more inviting and friendly atmosphere”. Doing so could bring in events and businesses that cater more to families and older community members. Changes like these would help draw a larger demographic than just college students to the downtown area on weekends.

It was common for there to be mention of how geared towards university students the area is. Overall, it seems that there are a lot of bars and not enough family or community-focused businesses. However, one common issue for everyone seems to be the accessibility of the area. Kendall Blue, a local musician who was found playing music outside the Varsity Center for the
Arts, said, "A big thing for me would also be like a more bike accessible downtown because if you’re on the sidewalks [on your bike] you’ll get pulled over and if you’re on the streets you’ll get run over. Neither of them are safe for everybody." This concern was also echoed by those who can only travel to the Strip by wheelchair who routinely encounter hazards such crumbling sidewalks or poorly-positioned curbs.

Peter Lemish, professor in SIU School of Journalism, facilitator of Imagining Geographies, and Executive Producer of WSIU’s new series “Civic Soul” consolidated the input gathered, and grouped the vision statements of how Carbondale should be redeveloped into the following themes:

_Downtown Carbondale_ should be:
  • active, vibrant, and vital
  • an arts and entertainment haven
  • beautified
  • a buy-local, entrepreneurial hub
  • a caring space
  • communal
  • green and sustainable
  • safe and secure
  • student friendly

As we continue to grow as a community, we need a downtown that adapts and develops with us, and the voices expressed here are just a small sample of all that can be done to make Carbondale more of a city for the people. Thrift Shop employee Jeremiah Wallace said it best when he expressed his thoughts on the best way to go about reshaping the heart of the city. “Let’s start in our community by taking back some of this area. I would say just a sense of place, a sense of community. A sense that maybe one day I’d want to raise my kids here.”

* The full report of views gathered in Citizens Speak is available at www.imagining.siu.edu.

The authors are students in SIU’s College of Mass Communication and Media Arts, and members of the Civic Communication Collective that conducted this Citizens Speak project.