

Downtown's Missing Link

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One key element has been missing from downtown Hartford's revitalization: the designation of downtown as a business improvement district, also known as a special services district.

Several attempts to create such a district have been made, but the lack of faith that downtown could rise again doomed them.

The pace of development - with the new Hartford 21 building, the Connecticut Convention Center and Marriott Hotel, Trumbull on the Park, 55 on the Park, Riverfront Recapture and other projects on the way - has now reach a point, however, that it would be foolhardy to delay the improvement district any longer.

Next month, a proposal developed by the Metro-Hartford Alliance to create the district goes before the city council for authorization. In addition to the downtown area, the district's boundaries would include parts of Asylum Hill and Farmington Avenue to the city line on Prospect Avenue.

If approved by property owners within the district in a special election, it would represent an enormous commitment on the part of the business community to downtown's long-term viability. Property owners would be voluntarily paying an additional tax each year to pay for improved safety, cleanliness, marketing, landscaping, holiday lighting, parking, special events and other services that supplement what city government provides.

A nonprofit corporation headed by a board of directors and a manager would run the district. Based on the experience of hundreds of other districts, including many in Connecticut, a downtown business improvement district is virtually guaranteed to succeed.

In time, downtown will likely transform itself from what is still essentially a 9-to-5 neighborhood to a 24-hour community with a vibrant nightlife. Property values could be expected to rise; employment will probably increase and building owners would be able to see a dramatic drop in the office vacancy rate.

Council members are urged to approve the plan. Property owners in turn shouldn't pass up such a golden opportunity.

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