

## Downtown in prime position for more retail

By *Debbie Messina*

The *Virginian-Pilot*

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Downtown is well-positioned to lure new retailers with its mix of restaurants, old buildings, cultural amenities, waterfront location, growing residential population, upscale mall and – in 2010 – a new light-rail system.

That's the early impression from consultants working with the Downtown Norfolk Council on a plan to enhance retail offerings, mainly around Granby Street.

"We have a real downtown experience here, and we want to capitalize on that," Margaret McCauley, principal of Downtown Works, based in the Washington, D.C., area, said after spending three days in Norfolk.

McCauley said that despite the current economic challenges, it's a good time to start laying the groundwork for growing downtown's retail mix. "We will bounce back from this, and we will be ready when we do," she said.

Restaurants typically start the downtown buzz in revitalization efforts, McCauley said.

"Entertainment by itself will not be sustainable," she added. "You need full-time activity."

The one-year, \$130,000 contract to develop and implement a plan will be funded from the council's membership dues and the Business Improvement District tax.

Downtown Works has completed similar plans in other cities including St. Louis; Austin, Texas; Nashville, Tenn.; Memphis, Tenn.; and Milwaukee.

Five to six years after developing a plan in downtown St. Louis, that city now boasts 100 new stores and restaurants, McCauley said.

Scott Schuler, another Downtown Works principal, said selling the idea of shopping downtown will be easier in Norfolk because MacArthur Center has already acclimated shoppers to downtown.

A Downtown Norfolk Council survey shows that the mall is the No. 1 attraction downtown.

McCauley acknowledged that the first deals bringing new retailers to the Granby district will be the hardest. "Then others will follow," she said. "It mushrooms over time."

She warns that it's not an overnight process – the recruitment period for signing a new retailer generally runs one to three years.

In the meantime, she suggests that property owners start fixing up their facades so Granby Street has a fresher look.

"We need to get things in better physical condition," McCauley said.

Independent retailers will more likely be attracted to the Granby district than large national chains, which tend to locate in malls and in new lifestyle centers such as Virginia Beach's Town Center.

"Urban-style retailers will understand there won't be free parking at their front door," she said.

Schuler said, "In downtown, you're selling the experience."



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MacArthur Center has already acclimated shoppers to downtown Norfolk, a consultant said. A survey shows that the mall is the No. 1 attraction downtown.

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