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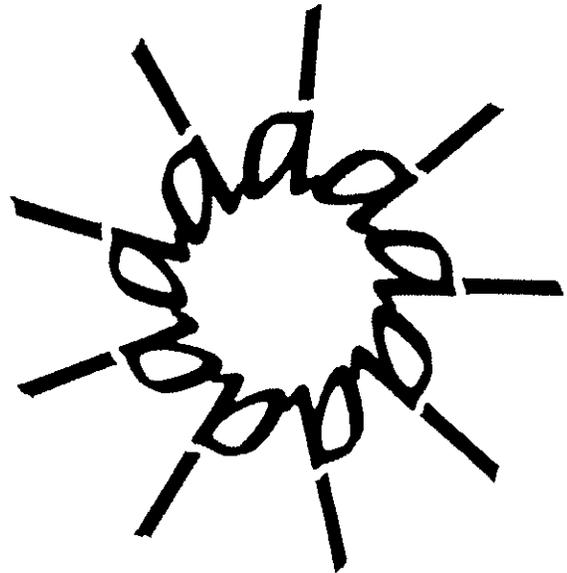
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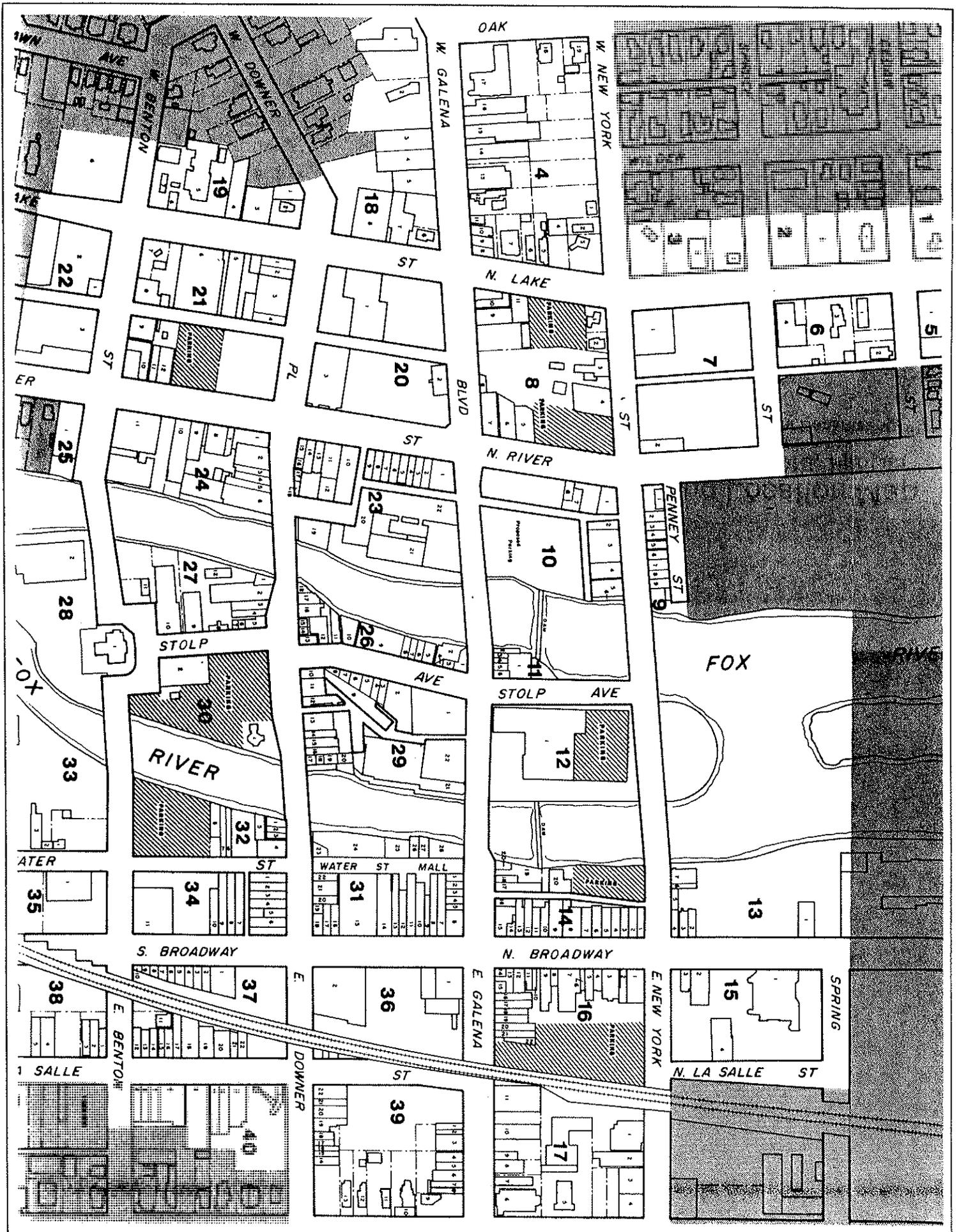
# A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN AURORA, ILLINOIS



Prepared by Robert B. Teska Associates, Inc.  
for the Greater Aurora Chamber of Commerce  
September, 1984

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this assignment was to formulate a "strategic plan" for Downtown Aurora revitalization efforts over the next three to five years. The emphasis is on "getting things done."

What is strategic planning? It is a process of choosing the more desirable future alternatives open to an organization so that better current decisions can be made. It involves setting or confirming objectives, identifying priorities, and acquiring, using, and disposing of resources to pursue specific objectives. It is not a blueprint of the future, but rather a road map for getting there.

The vision of what Downtown Aurora could be has been addressed several times in recent decades. The first such plan was prepared by Jacob L. Crane, Jr. in 1928 and was oriented toward establishing zoning districts for downtown. A more comprehensive and contemporary document, Plans for Progress, was prepared by William S. Lawrence & Associates in 1963. It was funded by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Project 330 and represented a commitment of the private sector to the vitality of the area. Both endeavors reflected Aurora as a free-standing, central city with a substantial hinterland, or market area--the 1928 plan while Aurora was exhibiting substantial growth, and the 1963 plan while the city was beginning to experience the decline of central cities common throughout the nation.

The decade which followed represented an extraordinary period of transition, as Aurora left the ranks of free-standing cities and joined the ranks of commuter suburbs. What was a city at the "crossroads" of transportation became a city at the "crossroads" of time. The impact on downtown was dramatic and, to a considerable degree, well beyond the capability of the city to influence. That impact is still being felt, although new trends are beginning to emerge which reflect the commuter suburb characteristics of Aurora.

For the time being, however, the future of downtown is blurred and uncertain. Its image, still quite positive when compared with other central cities, is now tarnished because it is being compared by the standards of newer, more affluent suburbs.

A new era began in 1974 with the preparation of a comprehensive plan for Downtown Aurora by Ben Ami Friedman, funded by the City of Aurora assisted by federal grants. This program was widely recognized at the time for its public participation, professional creativity, and action orientation. It viewed downtown not only in its historical context

as the center of community life and business activity, but in its future context as a commuter transportation center, cultural center, and recreational area related to the Fox River. The five principal development goals of that plan were to:

1. Establish and maintain downtown Aurora as the center of government, finance, social services, civic, cultural, specialized commercial, and entertainment functions for the city and vicinity.
2. Encourage the redevelopment of the downtown area by means of a coordinated program.
3. Retain and enhance the historic character of buildings.
4. Maximize the potential use and enjoyment of the Fox River.
5. Initiate immediate development activity in the downtown area.

Much has been accomplished since that date, and Aurora can be proud. The Paramount Arts Center has been restored as a building and as a program, new streetscape improvements have been constructed throughout much of downtown, parking facilities have been improved, North Island Center and a central fire station have been constructed, a new transportation center is under construction, and negotiations are underway to locate a branch of Waubensee College downtown--to name a few accomplishments. This is a record to be envied by most cities.

The unique characteristic about most of the recent accomplishments, however, is that they were the result of public initiative and governmental funding. Except for the improvement of certain existing properties, such as the Old Second National Bank, major private investment capital has not been forthcoming.

The City of Aurora and the Greater Aurora Chamber of Commerce share a concern over the future of downtown and the apparent lack of private investment in the area. Although economic development in other parts of the city is encouraging, downtown revitalization has progressed at a slower pace than desired.

With this in mind, the Chamber of Commerce has reaffirmed its commitment to downtown by retaining Robert B. Teska Associates, Inc. to work with key public and private representatives to formulate this strategic plan for the next 3 to 5 years. Through research, participatory workshops, and personal discussions, it has been the consultant's objective to coordinate local ideas and resources as well as provide a fresh and independent point of view. This report summarizes the findings and recommendations.

## STRENGTHS

The first step in the strategic planning process is to evaluate existing strengths of Downtown Aurora. These are the foundation of future development. Among the most important of these are:

### A Central Location

Downtown has historically occupied a highly accessible location at the center of its city, township and larger market area. Over 200,000 persons live within a 10 mile radius of downtown. North-south State Highways 31 and 25 bracket the downtown core on the west and east sides of the Fox River. West Galena Boulevard and East New York Street provide direct east-west access to the downtown.

This degree of centrality within a single municipality is advantageous, especially compared with Chicago, whose market area is physically truncated by Lake Michigan, or Peoria, whose political boundaries are entirely west of the Illinois River.

### River Frontage and Amenity

Lacking in many older, midwest downtowns is any indigenous amenity. Aurora, by comparison, has the Fox River and the sloping topography of its valley. Furthermore, the unique character of Stolp Island substantially increases water frontage--a genuine but underutilized real estate asset. The opportunity for an enhanced environment and recreational activity based on water are a cause for optimism.

### Existing Financial Institutions

There is great strength in Aurora's financial institutions. Fortunately for downtown, virtually every major institution continues to honor its commitment to traditional locations on both sides of the river. These include Aurora Federal Savings & Loan, Old Second National Bank, Home Savings & Loan, Aurora National Bank, and Merchant's National Bank. Not only are they key generators of business and pedestrian activity, they represent critical human and financial resources for revitalization.

### Public, Institutional and Cultural Activities

A fundamental distinction between the traditional downtown and any other form of business district is its mixture of non-retail uses--especially those which represent other dimensions of community life. Downtown Aurora is rich in these. They include the renowned

Paramount Arts Centre, North Island Center, Public Library, GAR Memorial Museum, Wedge Public Cultural Center for the Arts, The Fox River Center For Visual Art, galleries, churches, new YWCA, fraternal organizations, and community center. An extensive collection of buildings with historical and architectural merit also characterizes the downtown. Although many of these facilities may be non-profit and tax exempt, they contribute substantially to the **ambiance and business generation of downtown.**

#### Public Transportation

Downtown is well served by public transportation on which many residents, employees, customers, and visitors depend--from intercity railroad service (Amtrack) to local buses. Commuter rail service to Chicago's Loop via the Burlington Northern Railroad is of significant benefit. Such services will be enhanced by construction of a "new" transportation center on Broadway at the northeast corner of downtown, groundbreaking for which occurs in October.

#### Available Sites and Buildings

The bottom line of any developer's or tenant's investment is the availability of sites and/or buildings of adequate size and shape in appropriate locations at a reasonable price. These are currently available in Downtown Aurora, made possible by the transition which has been underway for the past decade and by the recent recession of 1981-1983.

Based on initial research conducted for this study, it would appear that 1984 offers extraordinary real estate bargains on key properties in prime locations.

#### Organizational Capability

With limited exceptions, the types of organizations and activities that one would rely on for a strong downtown revitalization program already exist in Aurora. They include:

- Aurora Redevelopment Commission
- Aurora Civic Center Authority
- Aurora Community Development Department
- Aurora Economic Development Commission
- Aurora Preservation Commission
- Greater Aurora Chamber of Commerce
- Greater Aurora Chamber Foundation
- Project 330
- Association of Downtown Aurora Merchants
- Downtown Special Service District

Most of these organizations are oriented toward the public sector and are affiliated directly with the City of Aurora. Several have professional staffs and have gained substantial experience with individual ongoing programs. It is not necessary to start from the beginning, as in many communities.

#### Conclusion

One can not help but be impressed with these strengths. Yet, their potential has not been fully achieved. The objective of a strategic plan is to do just that.

## WEAKNESSES

The weaknesses of Downtown Aurora are, unfortunately, serious. But, they are substantially more transitory than the strengths of the area. They are neither indigenous, nor are they pervasive. Principal weaknesses include the following:

### Scale and Fragmentation

As the historic center of commerce in a free-standing city, Downtown Aurora grew to geographic proportions which can no longer be sustained. Neither do they represent contemporary standards of compactness characteristic of thriving business districts. For example, Downtown Aurora encompasses at least 40 city blocks, whereas Downtown Evanston (a city of comparable population up to 1970) encompasses 26 blocks--even several of these are underutilized.

In addition to scale, the unity of downtown is fragmented by the river, railroad tracks and other obstacles. The result is that walking distances are longer than desired and the psychological impact of such obstacles makes distances seem even greater than they are.

### Inadequate Commercial Mix

Like most older downtowns, Aurora has lost its major retail stores--especially its department stores. The departure of Carson, Pirie, Scott on December 31, 1982 was the most recent blow. Unfortunately, the remaining retail businesses do not represent a sufficiently compatible or viable mixture, and they are scattered throughout the downtown, lacking concentration. Except for the financial institutions, major users of office space have never emerged downtown and cannot be relied on to buffer the decline of retailing. Even those businesses which tend to support downtown employees, such as restaurants, apparel shops and convenience type stores are lacking in number and quality. This represents a significant challenge.

### Obsolescence, Deterioration and Vacancies

Older downtowns and their buildings quite naturally become obsolete by contemporary standards without the economic momentum to encourage constant rehabilitation. Obsolescence leads to lack of investment and maintenance, and ultimately to deterioration of structures and environments. Vacancies follow. This has been the pattern in Downtown Aurora, as in other cities. The lack of good taste regarding the design of facades, signage, and window displays exacerbates this problem.

### Inadequate Resident Population

Downtowns of yesteryear were also attractive, sought after residential neighborhoods. This was an important ingredient to their vitality. Along came the 1950s and 1960s when planners, developers and public officials felt it was best to separate commercial and residential areas. Downtown was left to those who, therefore, could not afford or "qualify" for housing elsewhere. This pattern has touched Aurora. As a result, too few persons live in or adjacent to downtown to create the desired 18-hour, seven-day-a-week activity and to support numerous types of desirable businesses. A related problem involves the relatively few persons, called "street people" in Aurora, who live or linger in downtown, but who are so visible in the absence of other pedestrians. Such persons are common to most cities of any significant size, but they blend into the daily activity of more populated downtowns without consequence.

### Access Routes to Downtown

Among the strengths of downtown are the numerous access routes leading to it. Among the current weaknesses, however, is the physical condition of these routes, including traffic congestion, which makes the trip to downtown longer and less desirable than it should be. This creates a perception that downtown is more remote than its competitors, when in fact it may be considerably closer. Perceptions of these problems are particularly acute with respect to access routes from the east and north.

### Lack of Consensus

Ten years have passed since publication of the 1974 Downtown Plan which shaped a public-private consensus and guided the actions of several groups until recently. New personalities, new issues, changing times, mixed reviews on past performance, and that intangible factor called "burn out" have all taken their toll on that alliance--as is likely to occur in most organizations. This lack of consensus is not to be confused with individual desires to see good things happen. There remains a strong residual of enthusiasm; there exists a reservoir of new ideas; and new parties are entering the Aurora scene with capital to invest if there is a likelihood of success. Needed is a new consensus in order to marshal resources for the 1980s.

### Poor Image

All of the above factors lead to a serious weakness involving the image of Downtown Aurora. In addition, however, is the negative attitude, often verbalized in public, of many Aurorans themselves. It

is a common tendency for local residents and business persons in any community to dwell on problems and shortcomings rather than on assets and accomplishments. There is a distinction, however, between constructive criticism and misleading or exaggerated rhetoric. Clearly, customer loyalty and investor confidence is shaken when respected peers in the community or in the real estate/commercial industries challenge one's wisdom regarding the support of downtown. This, too, can be reversed.

#### Conclusion

The foregoing weaknesses can be overcome. They must be faced squarely with the confidence that solutions are, indeed, available.

## EXTERNAL TRENDS

The future of downtown is influenced not only by its own internal strengths and weaknesses, but by external trends over which it has little, if any, direct control. Often these trends are more than just significant, but critical to the success or failure of downtown revitalization--such is the case in Aurora. Among these trends are:

### Strong Population and Employment Growth

Aurora enjoys being in the mainstream of metropolitan growth. Population within a 10 mile radius of downtown grew from 180,400 in 1970 to 207,300 in 1980, or 15 percent. The wave of population growth hit Naperville Township in the 1970s, resulting in an increase of approximately 20,000 new residents. They will be joined by another 55,000 residents between 1980 and 2000; this trend will also absorb Aurora Township during the coming two decades, increasing its population from 99,192 to more than 122,000 persons.

Similarly, non-agricultural employment increased by 149.6 percent in Naperville Township between 1970 and 1980 and by 28.2 percent in Aurora Township; it is expected to increase by 360.8 percent and 45.8 percent in these two townships between 1980 and 2005. Much of this growth is in "high-tech" industries which also produce above average incomes.

At the same time, growth west of the Fox River is increasing dramatically as a percent of existing population and employment. This area will feel the pressure of growth even more, in absolute numbers, after the year 2000. Certainly, this is not the signal of despair for Downtown Aurora.

### Suburbanization of Aurora

The above figures imply that Aurora is no longer the free-standing city it once was, but is being engulfed by Chicago's suburbia. The results include changing life patterns and attitudes, differing from those of life-long residents of Aurora. On the one hand, new residents are more mobile, living in one community, working in another, and shopping in yet a third. This often leads to less identity with their "hometown." They can not be expected to shop in Downtown Aurora just to support local businesses, for example. On the other hand, activities in Downtown Aurora can now compete for employees and customers from an even larger market area--larger in numbers, if not in geography. The Paramount Arts Centre offers evidence of this opportunity.

### Central Neighborhoods in Transition

Historically, downtowns were popular places to live, especially for shop owners and employees--often over their place of business. Hotels and rooming houses flourished. Nearby neighborhoods provided stately homes for business and community leaders. Today's resident population has decreased in numbers, and it seems to include a disproportionate number of elderly, minority, and low income persons. The housing stock itself has deteriorated in both number and quality, and/or the "neighborhood environment" is not up to standard.

Recently, however, these areas have shown that they can be improved, older residences can be rehabilitated, and new housing can be constructed to serve a different residential mix which finds it not only convenient, but attractive to live in a central, highly accessible location. These markets include, in addition to the elderly, professional families, singles and young couples, commuters (near a transportation center) and those who enjoy specific amenities such as a waterfront, the theater, etc. Not only are these market trends evident in most successful larger cities, but also in many suburban communities throughout the country and northeastern Illinois. More and better downtown housing has become a fundamental principal of downtown revitalization.

### Business in Transition

Some of these trends are well known to most observers; other are more recent and may not be as well known outside the industry. All are important to the future of downtown.

First, **retailing follows population and employment.** Over the long run, this trend strongly favors Aurora. However, in recent years, as population and affluence have declined in central Aurora (at least in a relative sense), retailing has followed new subdivision and employment centers at the periphery of the city--especially to Fox Valley Center and Northgate Shopping Center. At least nine other smaller retail shopping centers have also been developed in Aurora.

Second, sales tax records indicate that General Merchandise sales in the city have increased only 2% between 1972 and 1982, compared with 76% statewide. In fact, all retail categories indicate less increase than the state as a whole during this decade, except Food, which increased 215% compared with 154% for the state. Even with the addition of the above shopping centers, therefore, the Aurora performance has been below average. And, of course, no area has felt the blow more than downtown.

Third, in the future fewer regional shopping centers will be constructed nationwide. To the best of our knowledge, no new regional shopping centers are on the drawing boards within the Aurora market area, suggesting that the most severe impacts may be over.

Fourth, more specialty and offprice centers are being developed at moderate scales. Although they, too, are inclined to suburban sites, this trend has been beneficial to some older downtowns--especially in the specialty category which might include eating and drinking places.

Fifth, except for the regional shopping centers and major offprice merchants, businesses are focusing on specialized and multiple markets, rather than on mass markets. These are the types of businesses that are currently being attracted to downtowns.

Sixth, many consumer businesses, such as retailing and dining, are increasingly oriented to providing an "experience" in addition to a product or service. Downtowns can provide this opportunity.

Although not all inclusive, these trends are illustrative of the trends which downtown revitalization must take into account.

#### Downtowns Making a Comeback

Throughout northeastern Illinois, as well as the state and nation, downtowns are definitely making a comeback. Revitalization programs are numerous and are paying dividends economically and in terms of community pride and activity. Virtually every free-standing community in the state over 25,000 population and most suburban communities with business districts are involved. At the largest scale, Chicago's record is impressive and is recognized throughout the world. At a smaller scale it is joined by successful programs in Oak Park, Evanston, Highland Park, Homewood, Hinsdale, Park Ridge, Naperville, Downers Grove and Long Grove--to name but a few.

The most difficult programs are those associated with the former free-standing cities--Waukegan, Elgin, Aurora, Joliet and Kankakee. Each has made significant progress in dealing with major transitions downtown. But because these cities are more diverse, older, and just outside the ring of suburban growth over the past two decades, they can not accommodate change as rapidly as smaller, more affluent, more homogeneous suburbs. With each passing year, however, the forces of metropolitan growth now work to their advantage, rather than to their disadvantage.

### Federal and State Legislation

Federal and state legislation and programs support downtown revitalization. In Illinois the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs is active in many ways to assist communities. Recent legislation creating a state civic center fund has already been of considerable assistance to Aurora. Another recent statute provides for "tax increment financing" as a means to pay for redevelopment and conservation of blighted areas. Federal tax credits accrue directly to property owners who rehabilitate older buildings and have been the catalyst for numerous projects throughout the region. Government at all levels is concerned about this issue and is better prepared than ever to do something about it.

### Riverfronts Are An Asset

Settlement of the midwest was largely determined by its waterways as transportation routes and as sources of power and water for domestic and commercial use. The result in many cases, unfortunately, was unattractive and produced many environmental problems out of harmony with today's public taste and standards. Now the pendulum has swung to the degree that waterfront sites are the hottest item in the real estate industry--whether they are sandy beaches and barrier islands of the U.S. coast, the bluffs and dunes of the Great Lakes, or the shoreline of inland lakes or rivers. In northeastern Illinois lands along rivers and streams are becoming prized possessions, especially now that the hazards of flooding are being better controlled.

Urban riverfront properties have become the sites of many fine new developments, from the Chicago River near the Loop to the Fox River--witness projects in St. Charles, Geneva, and Batavia. Aurora, therefore, must view its riverfronts as its ticket to the future. Already, Kane County and the Fox Valley District are actively working to extend and enhance a regional system of parks southward to Stolp Island.

### Conclusion

External trends, which have been predominantly detrimental over the past two decades, are now beginning to work in favor of downtown revitalization in Aurora. Although the task is never easy, it will be more comfortable moving with the current than against it.

## DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Recommended strategies are divided into two categories: Development Strategies and Resource Strategies. Development Strategies are those which will guide the form and function of Downtown Aurora during the coming three to five year period. It is a conscious choice that they continue to pursue those basic goals and objectives of the 1974 Downtown Plan which have retained their validity, but depart from some aspects of that plan in order to reflect current conditions. Strategies have been assigned a first, second, or third priority based on their importance and timeliness.

### Function

As a matter of principle, Downtown should be the center of business and civic life in Aurora. This is, of course, easier said than done, especially in a period of transition. Nevertheless, it represents the true essence of downtown and deserves the highest possible commitment.

For near term impact, Aurora should lead from its strength. First priority, therefore, should be granted to enhancing the "civic life" function of downtown. This includes cultural, institutional, educational, entertainment, and selected leisure activities that will bring people downtown, generate multi-purpose trips and spinoff business, and heighten awareness of and commitment to the total condition and image of downtown. Among the selected leisure activities that deserve immediate attention are restaurants of various types.

Second priority should be granted to the expansion and recruitment of financial institutions, business and professional offices, and commercial services of many types. These activities are in the mainstream of downtown revitalization nationally and are the cornerstone for long term recovery of "business life". They will be the driving force behind private investment in downtown and represent major contributions to the economic base of the city, as does manufacturing in outlying locations.

Also of second priority is the development of new or rehabilitated market rate housing in and adjacent to downtown. Such housing will improve the physical environment significantly, especially around the edges; it will generate a market for certain downtown businesses and activities; and it will represent a new human commitment to downtown--a major image builder.

Retail development is third priority, not because it is unimportant, but because significant progress depends on other prerequisites. By contrast with the past, when major department stores were the anchors of downtown and generated business for smaller merchants, retailing in

the future will follow other types of anchors and markets. For example, there are several kinds of retail facilities that might be attracted to a performing arts and college complex, others that tend to serve businesses and employees in major office buildings, and others which serve the residents of downtown. A few can become destination type businesses, such as quality restaurants. This is the case of restaurants in Geneva and Dundee.

Also deserving attention, but a third priority, is the relocation of existing incompatible types of businesses and industries. Some of these represent viable economic enterprises, worthy of community support. However, they may occupy critical sites or their impacts may be a deterrent to new and more compatible private investment. Their fate should not be determined by crisis, nor should they be deserted to "sink or swim". Rather, they should be assisted to find desirable locations and compatible neighbors consistent with new standards in their own economic sectors.

#### Physical Arrangement

The regional shopping center is the ultimate of retailing efficiency and is bold testimony to the importance of proper physical arrangement in order to achieve economic success--based largely on the positioning of individual stores and the amenity package which is so appealing to customers. In recent years, the multi-level, mixed-use project has become the model of success in large to medium size downtowns. These are not the only phenomena which strongly suggest that there is an emerging "science" to business district planning and that physical arrangement can not be ad hoc.

First priority goes to three strategies simultaneously: establishing a critical mass, capturing riverfront potentials, and assembling development sites. To begin with, downtown desperately needs a focal point -- not just a visual focal point, but a critical mass of human activity. Because of downtown's size and obsolescence, viable activities are scattered about without unity and impact. Given a limited short term market potential, it is particularly important to establish a viable and hospitable environment in designated areas rather than dilute the effect of progress. For the next three to five years the most important critical mass is north Stolp Island, specifically North Island Center, the Paramount Arts Centre, the ARC/ACCA Building, the Carson's Building, and the Stanley Building. This area must be made to work effectively before significant progress can be anticipated elsewhere.

No city in Illinois has the riverfront potential that Aurora has--at least for its size. Yet, it remains unrealized despite the strong recommendations of the 1974 Plan. Private property owners,

especially, have not taken advantage of these assets--economically or aesthetically (the two should go hand in hand today). Without taking advantage of the riverfront, downtown will be just another business district struggling to survive. Its **riverfronts are key to Aurora's image and economic advantage**. Every effort should be made to refine and implement the Fox Valley Park District's plans north of New York Street within the next five years and to initiating new riverfront improvements south of New York Street. Consideration should also be given to expanding boating facilities and activities near downtown.

Real estate is available for sale in Downtown Aurora in key locations at reasonable prices, but not in the right sizes and shapes. Considering all of the other obstacles to private investment downtown, it is **imperative that adequate development sites be designated and assembled** in advance to attract developer interest. Similarly with buildings, it is imperative that an inventory of available buildings of appropriate size and shape be maintained in order to attract specific types of desired tenants. Such sites and buildings not only reduce the developer's or tenant's direct costs, but reduce the time required to carry out the project--in an era when time is often unpredictable and costly.

The final strategy, given second priority, is that of **achieving compactness in the downtown**. Businesses that "belong" downtown and are oriented to the pedestrian should be located within an area generally defined by a circle 1500 feet in diameter, a distance comparable to the length of a regional shopping center. This is closely associated with the strategy of critical mass, but much more difficult to achieve and requiring an extended period of years. Nevertheless, pursuit of this strategy should begin immediately.

Certain types of businesses should be encouraged not to locate beyond these limits. Peripheral areas may be rezoned for multi-family residential development. Single family neighborhoods should be stabilized and not allowed to change, building by building, to commercial use. Other peripheral sites may be acquired for open space or long term public parking. Over time, therefore, downtown will become more well defined and more accessible to the people who really count--pedestrians.

#### Transportation

In general, transportation systems serving downtown are very good. As a whole, therefore, this category need not receive as much attention in the immediate future as other categories. Nevertheless, several strategies merit priority.

First, the new multi-modal transportation center which will be under construction within days of this report should be expedited as effectively as possible, not only to serve its daily customers better, but to improve the environment of North Broadway.

Also deserving of first priority is improvement of access routes to downtown from the north and east, specifically Routes 31 and 25, and East New York Street. Certain improvements should be made or studied immediately. For example, signage on the East-West Tollway should be modified to indicate "Downtown Aurora" at the Route 31 exit, and additional directional signs (perhaps with a logo) should be placed along Routes 31 and 25, and East New York Street. People need to know or be reminded that downtown is but a short distance away, and visitors need to know how to get there without indecision and delay.

Along all routes, especially Route 25 and East New York Street, the visual environment must be improved. Improved zoning controls, maintenance and rehabilitation of private property, streetscape, and in some cases redevelopment projects should be coordinated as a program to carry out the strategy. "Going downtown" is a total experience. Improving the destination alone is not enough.

Finally, traffic flow should be reviewed and monitored frequently to eliminate congestion and conflict and to reduce travel time to downtown. Especially along Route 31, the progression of traffic lights should be studied to reduce unnecessary delay.

Downtown pedestrian systems and places are designated second priority. Although Aurora deserves credit for the improvement of many sidewalk areas, the continued maintenance of these areas is frequently criticized. Also important is the continued effort to link blocks together internally and with each other to make pedestrian movement even more convenient and comfortable. More riverwalks will serve this purpose, as will an improved pedestrian environment along Stolp Avenue. The Water Street Mall should be provided a stronger role in downtown, mainly through the improvement of abutting properties (including City Hall). And, internal pedestrian systems should be established within blocks by adjacent property owners. This is key to the future of the Carson's block and the old YWCA block.

The improvement of access routes from the south and west is of third priority. As of today they are less congested than routes from the north and east, and they represent adequate environments. However, the rezoning and use of residential buildings for commercial purposes is an emerging problem to be carefully monitored. Now is the time to engage in the conservation of these routes and abutting properties so that they will retain their good qualities as urban growth accelerates in these sectors of the market area.

Parking facilities are also of third priority. Generally, existing facilities (with the addition of the Tivoli Lot) are adequate. Parking rates, including parking meters, are reasonable. As new private development occurs it will become necessary to plan additional parking facilities. In the meantime, it will be important to obtain accurate inventories of parking facilities and use. In addition, it may become desirable to acquire properties for new facilities if they help resolve very specific deficiencies or can contribute to other downtown strategies, such as a "land bank" for interim parking use.

### Appearance

With some outstanding exceptions, the appearance of private properties downtown is simply not up to the standards of the 1980s and is a significant deterrent to persons who might shop, work, or live there. Pride and good taste are not generally evident--although many well motivated business persons and property owners may take exception to this statement. But, this is a competitive world, and downtown Aurora properties do not measure up.

First priority, therefore, goes to improved facades and improved signage. A recently amended sign ordinance will help, as will a recently amended facade rehabilitation loan program; a possible historic district may also help. But, to be effective, such an effort must come voluntarily from within the private sector. The slogan should be: "Good Design is Good Business." If downtown does not look successful, it is not likely to be successful -- simple as that.

Second priority is granted to a much talked about idea, public streetscape west of the Fox River. This is a desirable objective, but not the first priority in this category or in that geographic area. It should be carried out within three to five years, but not necessarily within the first two years.

Third priority goes to the visual improvement of "gateways" to downtown --to the design of recognizable ports of entry. People like to know that they have arrived at a destination. It is like that first glance at a new acquaintance or a friend's new house that makes an important "first impression". Customers buy products this way, employers are influenced by first impressions when they hire employees, and business deals are sometimes won or lost this way. So it is that the success of downtown is influenced by its gateways.

### Conclusion

Recommended development strategies add up to an ambitious undertaking, but nothing less will accomplish the revitalization of Downtown Aurora. They will not be self-fulfilling, however. They require the commitment and orchestration of major resources. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

<u>Category</u>	Priority		
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>
<b>Function:</b>			
Civic life	X		
Financial, office, service		X	
Housing		X	
Retail			X
Incompatible uses			X
<b>Physical Arrangement</b>			
Critical mass	X		
Riverfronts	X		
Development sites	X		
Compactness		X	
<b>Transportation</b>			
Transportation Center	X		
Access from east and north	X		
Pedestrian systems and places		X	
Access from south and west			X
Parking facilities			X
<b>Appearance</b>			
Facades	X		
Signage	X		
West side streetscape		X	
Gateways			X

## RESOURCE STRATEGIES

Resource strategies are those which deal with organization and management, and with the allocation of resources to planning, financing, and promoting downtown revitalization.

### Organization

Except in rare cases, no downtown revitalization program can be successful without strong commitment, effective organization, and continuing management.

Aurora is reasonably well organized already. Currently lacking, however, is strong leadership at the organizational and personal level. This is largely because initial implementation efforts related to the 1974 Plan have been carried out and several organizations are awaiting this report before they proceed with their programs. Experience indicates, however, that, like most meaningful efforts, downtown revitalization responds to the leadership of a few dedicated, capable, and respected persons. Aurora must now be searching within its own ranks for those who will lead this effort for the next three to five years. This is first priority.

Also in this category is a clearer definition of roles for the public and private sectors. To date, the City of Aurora through its various agencies has assumed primary responsibility for implementation of the 1974 Plan--hence the many public improvements to downtown. The City should expand its role to include land assembly for private development and recruitment of downtown developers. On the other hand, the City is not likely to be a very effective agent for attracting individual businesses, and the role of ARC/ACCA as a landlord of a major office building (North Island Center) may be somewhat more than it was originally intended to be.

Conversely, with limited exceptions, the private sector has not assumed its full responsibility, which is best focused on business expansion and attraction, property rehabilitation, and developer recruitment--in addition to promotion and marketing. Ultimately, what is desired is a bonified public-private partnership covering all the bases of downtown revitalization.

To fill the gap in private sector organization, a "downtown development corporation" is strongly recommended as first priority. To be funded by private sources and staffed with professionals, the purpose of this corporation would be to promote and aid the development of downtown, including the acquisition, disposition, rehabilitation, and development of real estate where necessary. An

outline of full responsibilities is included in the Appendix. Among the key founders of this organization would be the major downtown financial institutions. It is important, however, that membership include major corporations and developers of property outside the downtown, because downtown revitalization is a community-wide effort--as is economic development in general. It is possible that Project 330, established back in the 1960s, could be the core of this new corporation. A second alternative would be to adopt the Aurora Economic Development Commission into an autonomous development corporation funded by the City and the private sector, and make it responsible for downtown revitalization. The model for this kind of organization is the Oak Park Development Corporation.

The Aurora Redevelopment Commission and the Aurora Civic Center Authority (ARC/ACCA) have completed their initial mandate as recommended in the 1974 Plan, namely the Paramount Arts Centre and the North Island Center. Granted extraordinary powers under local and state law, these organizations continue to exhibit tremendous potential. Currently, they are working with Waubensee College, Aurora College, and Northern Illinois University to plan an adult education complex downtown. Given this and other possible courses of action, it is of first priority that ARC/ACCA articulates its program for the coming three to five years in concert with this overall strategy.

Also of first priority is a downtown "network" for communications and coordination among the several active public and private organizations. This is not another organization, but a mutually agreed to process by which each organization cooperates with others. It already operates to a significant degree informally. The process can be enhanced with somewhat greater formality short of becoming institutionalized.

Second priority is reserved for another important, but longer range strategy--to improve the City Council perspective on downtown. During workshops conducted in this study, the point was made that aldermen are elected by ward, their constituents being the residents of that ward. The implication is that non-resident downtown businesses and property owners are "under represented". The desirable alternative, of course, is that downtown is everybody's ward, because it is critical to the life and economy of the entire community. Carrying out this strategy will involve nurturing the entire community, not just the aldermen, so that their constituents as well as they themselves demand and support a stronger, more attractive downtown.

There is no third priority in this category.

## Planning

Three strategies are designated first priority, two of which are already underway and merit completion. First is to **streamline the City's review and approval process** on all downtown development projects, eliminating costly delays and uncertainty on behalf of investors. Recent performance in City Hall indicates that substantial progress has been made on this strategy in 1984 and only the "fine tuning" remains. Next is to **update the Aurora Zoning Ordinance** as it relates to business districts, especially compatible permitted uses, and environmentally desirable and financially realistic development standards. City Staff has already prepared amendments to the D1 and D2 Districts. These should be publicly reviewed, refined where necessary, and adopted.

Another first priority strategy is the **preparation of specific project area plans**. The immediate objective is to expedite downtown development. Therefore, resources should be focused on projects rather than downtown in general. For the time being, the 1974 Plan can continue to provide general guidelines.

As time and resources permit, the process of **updating the 1974 Plan** in a more comprehensive manner can be carried out, beginning in the second or third year; this is a second priority. The process may not be as elaborate as that of a decade ago, but should embody a broad perspective and a long range outlook.

Establishing a **Stolp Island Historic District** is also a second priority. Such a district will clearly highlight historic landmarks and will provide extra tax benefits for those who rehabilitate older buildings within the district. However, this step is not a prerequisite to other critical development priorities and may be viewed by some as a threat to private development unless the City's motives and the impact of the district are clearly understood.

Finally, third priority is recommended for a **city-wide cultural plan**. Such a plan would deal not only with urban design and art in public places, but would establish policies for the performing arts, arts in education, minorities in the arts, business and the arts, and cultural facilities (many of which will be located downtown). Such a plan has recently (1984) been published by the Evanston Arts Council after a year long effort involving dozens of community volunteers and numerous public workshops. Aurora, like Evanston, is the type of community that can take full advantage of such an undertaking.

### Financial Resources

It has been said "It takes money to make money". This is certainly true in the case of downtown revitalization. Recommended strategies include the following.

Several sources of public financing merit first priority. One of these is the Metropolitan Civic Center Support Program established in 1970 by State Statute. This fund, administered by the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, has been generous to Aurora in the past. It is replenished annually from race track revenues, and applicants are considered on a first come first serve basis. November is the target date in 1984. Therefore, if ARC/ACCA is to undertake a significant project in 1985, such as rehabilitation of the Carson's Building for use by Waubensee College, it must proceed without delay to prepare its plans and application.

The City's facade rehabilitation program has languished without applicants since its inception in 1983. Apparently those who could use such financial assistance were either unaware of its availability, or below market interest rates were not a sufficient incentive. To address the latter problem, the City has revised its program and now offers "no-interest" loans up to \$15,000 for five years to those who will rehabilitate eligible properties. A campaign to utilize this program should be waged by the Chamber of Commerce or other private organizations.

Federal tax incentives provided by the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 are of extraordinary value to those who rehabilitate buildings over 30 years old. They come in the form of tax credits of from 15 to 25 percent, depending on the age of the building, plus accelerated depreciation for designated historic buildings. The key to utilization of this technique is enhanced public awareness and education on how to take advantage of it. A series of seminars sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce might be considered.

An extraordinary source of financing for public investments is provided by the Real Property Tax Increment Allocation Redevelopment Act of 1977. It establishes a method of "value capture" by which the City can receive for a period of 20 years all real estate tax revenues generated by increased assessed valuations in a designated redevelopment project area, including those which would ordinarily go to their taxing bodies. Therefore, it is probably the most powerful of all available funding sources. This technique is currently being utilized by over 30 municipalities in Illinois, but should only be applied to project areas wherein a substantial new private investment will occur in the near future.

Also second priority are federal and state grants. Usually the time and effort required to receive such funds is substantial and the process is very speculative. Federal and state funds have been curtailed in recent years, but these sources should not be overlooked. One such possibility exists in the Urban Development Action Grant Program (UDAG). The City has recently submitted applications to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for two small downtown projects and is awaiting decisions. It is important, however, that the City have criteria by which to evaluate potential UDAG projects so that a bonafide public purpose is served by this form of governmental assistance. A similar HUD program provides Community Development Block Grants which Aurora has also taken advantage of for downtown

The City should also consider, as second priority, additional **Special Service Areas** or the expansion of the existing Special Service Area to encompass all of downtown. Provided for by State Statutes, this technique permits the City to levy a special ad valorem tax on real estate within a designated area which receives the benefit of the public improvements. This was the technique used to finance street-scape improvements along Broadway and other downtown streets in Aurora.

Other financial resources of interest to Aurorans are local tax abatement and enterprise zones. We give them a weak third priority, however, because they are not applicable to downtowns in the same manner they are to industrial areas. Even as a home rule municipality, it is legally impossible, under current State Statues, for Aurora to grant a tax abatement for commercial development, by contrast with industrial development. Enterprise zones are based on the theory of relaxing governmental restrictions on development, primarily in blighted areas. Although applicable to areas desparately in need of jobs, this alternative is inconsistent with Aurora's objective of upgrading standards in the downtown. Despite our lack of enthusiasm for these techniques at the moment, however, they should be monitored for possible future consideration.

#### Promotion and Marketing

"Downtown" is not just a place; it is a "frame of mind". It is a special place which Aurorans of all ages should identify with. It is a place which should bring people of all ages, backgrounds, and interests together. It is the center of the community. This frame of mind can not be created with mirrors or illusions; there must be substance behind it. However, it can be substantially enhanced by an aggressive promotion and marketing program involving the following strategies.

Not a week in the year should go by without some community event or activity being held downtown, appealing to a wide cross section of Aurorans. Not every event can be as special as the Festival of Lights, but many can come close. Such events and activities should be planned and coordinated one year in advance, and a promotional calendar should be published and made available to every household in the city. This is first priority.

Developer recruitment is an immediate necessity. One reason that Downtown Aurora has not received more private investment is that it has not been promoted. Although local investors should not be overlooked, most developers with the experience and capability to carry out major downtown projects are headquartered outside the community. Some of these are active in the development of areas east of the Fox River, but they seldom have occasion to come downtown. They must be invited, even wooed to invest in downtown Aurora. Otherwise, they will pursue other offers--with which they are inundated every week. Aurora has a good performance record with industrial recruitment; it is time to formulate a similar program for downtown.

The next first priority strategy is an effective downtown public relations program. This is not to be confused with advertising. Rather, a public relations program is genuinely concerned day in and day out with the flow of information about downtown throughout the community, about the needs and satisfaction of people served by downtown (property owners, business persons, employees, customers, visitors), and about the overall image of downtown both within and outside the community. Favorable news is the most important immediate index of a good public relations program, followed by increased people, sales, and investment downtown. A program of this type deserves a full time responsibility.

Other important strategies are designated second priority. These include business expansion and attraction. This was attempted in part by the City of Aurora Department of Development in 1982-83 without success. Unfortunately, this period represented the bottom of the recession when certain regional shopping centers were also struggling. More importantly, however, this is an activity that is best carried out by the private sector. In fact, the best approach is to recruit developers and let them recruit specific businesses by offering a clear deal. What the public sector can do is to advise the developer regarding community preferences and incentives, and about local businesses that may be interested in expanding or relocating. However, most prospective businesses would prefer to negotiate in confidence with their peers in the private sector than with local government in a fish bowl.

Coordinated advertising is another valuable strategy. It establishes greater identity for downtown in the market place, it may reduce the cost of advertising to individual businesses, and it requires that businesses work together for the common good.

Bonafide architectural landmark buildings not only deserve rehabilitation and protection, their presence should be widely publicized and promoted. Oak Park, Dundee, Geneva, and Woodstock are excellent examples of incorporating historic architecture into the economic vitality of the business district. Although larger in scale, Aurora can benefit from this approach as well.

Increased police visibility downtown has been mentioned by several persons as being desirable and making customers feel more secure. Key persons involved in this study do not feel that crime is a serious problem downtown, but they feel that the general public has misconceptions about this fact and is deterred by the "discomfort index" associated with downtown street life. To this extent, more visible police patrols may provide a degree of psychological security. However, such an effort should be undertaken in a quiet, positive, friendly manner, or it too will be mistaken for a reaction to the presence of crime.

Better maintenance of both public and private properties is essential to the promotion of downtown. Customers enjoy shopping centers because they are usually neat and clean; those that are not are often avoided by the discrete shopper. If downtown is going to compete effectively, therefore, it must do a better job of maintenance. Again, it is not only the end product that is important, but the process of carrying out a coordinated maintenance program which involves many people and from which grows pride and satisfaction.

Of third priority are uniform shopping hours and removal of parking meters. Uniform shopping hours are certainly desirable and strongly recommended, but extremely difficult to achieve. The best way is to strengthen the vitality of downtown to the degree that businesses will want to stay open longer hours. Removal of parking meters may be considered a desirable gesture to the customer. However, the existing cost of curb parking is nominal and the removal of meters does not deal with the main problem--encouraging the turnover of customer parking at the curb and enforcing regulations restricting long term parking. If removal of meters is to be given serious consideration, it must be in the context of a comprehensive parking policy review.

### Conclusion

Resource Strategies are the key to successful downtown revitalization in Aurora at this time. They offer the means by which to accomplish the Development Strategies. Three resource strategies are of special significance: Leadership, the activation of a private Downtown Development Corporation with a professional staff, and developer recruitment.

## RESOURCE STRATEGIES

<u>Category</u>	<u>Priority</u>		
	1	2	3
<b>Organization &amp; Responsibilities</b>			
Leadership	X		
Public/Private roles	X		
Private development corporation	X		
ARC/ACCA program	X		
Downtown coordinating "network"	X		
City Council perspective		X	
<b>Planning</b>			
Zoning ordinance update	X		
Streamline permit approval process	X		
Project area plans	X		
1974 Plan update		X	
Historic district		X	
City-wide cultural plan			X
<b>Financial Resources</b>			
Civic center fund	X		
Facade rehab program	X		
Tax credits	X		
Tax Increment Financing	X		
Federal/state grants		X	
Special service area		X	
Tax abatement			X
Enterprise zone			X
<b>Promotion &amp; Marketing</b>			
Activities and events	X		
Developer recruitment	X		
public relations program	X		
Business expansion and attraction		X	
Coordinated advertising		X	
Highlight architectural landmarks		X	
Police visibility		X	
Maintenance		X	
Shopping hours			X
Remove parking meters			X

## SUMMARY

Downtown Aurora is blessed with many strengths, the most important of which are its central location, its riverfronts, and its established organizations. Its weaknesses are due primarily to its age, and the loss of major retail establishments.

Fortunately, external trends which have had severe impacts on downtown in the past two decades will be much more favorable to downtown in the next two decades. The most important of these are population growth and investor interest in the Aurora area as a whole.

Recommended strategies for the next three to five years have been divided into two categories: Development Strategies and Resource Strategies. Among the most important Development Strategies are the short term emphasis on strengthening the "civic life" function of downtown, developing a viable critical mass of activity in the vicinity of Galena Boulevard and Stolp Avenue, and taking better advantage of riverfront amenities. At the top of the list of Resource Strategies are leadership, establishing a private Downtown Development Corporation, and developer recruitment.

The required approach to downtown revitalization in almost all cities is a strong public-private partnership. In Aurora the public sector has carried the vast majority of the responsibility for the past decade. For the next several years the private sector must assume major responsibility and make substantial progress to bring the partnership into proper balance.

Every effort such as this needs a target in time. That target is conveniently provided by history-- Aurora's sesquicentennial in 1987. In that year Aurora should not only celebrate its 150th anniversary, but completion of or major progress on every first priority strategy recommended in this report. All of Aurora will be the beneficiary of this effort.

APPENDIX



City of Aurora  
 Aurora Economic Development Commission  
 40 West Downer Place  
 Aurora, Illinois 60506  
 (312) 897-9214

# POPULATION/ LABOR FORCE

City of Aurora/Greater Aurora Chamber of Commerce

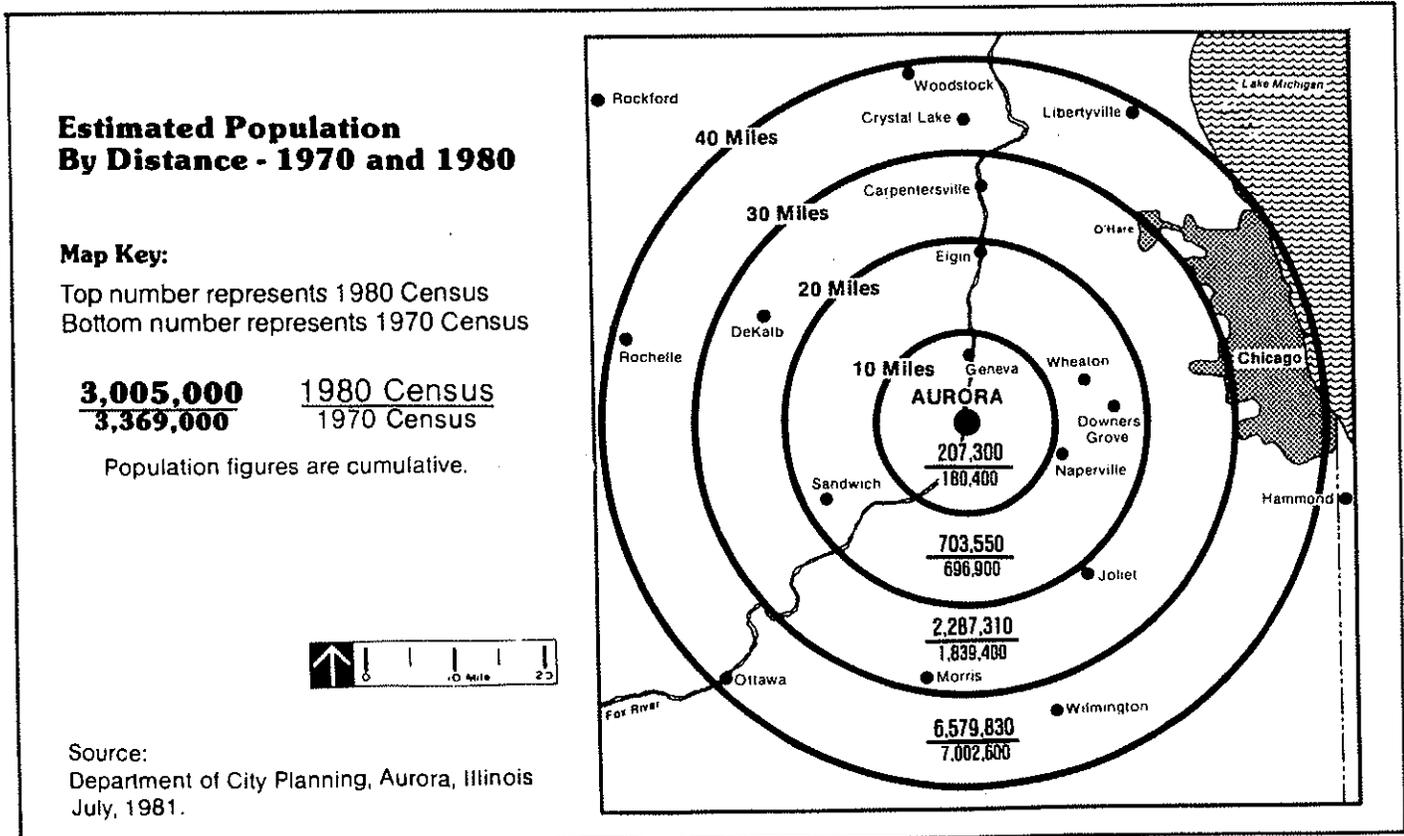
## Population:

Municipality	HISTORIC				FORECAST
	1950	1960	1970	1980	2000
Aurora (City)	50,600	63,700	74,200	81,293	150,800
Aurora (Twp.)	61,497	81,433	95,200	99,192	122,200
Batavia	5,838	7,500	9,060	12,574	18,800
Elgin	44,223	49,450	55,690	63,798	96,000
Geneva	5,139	7,650	9,050	9,881	16,000
Joliet	51,600	66,800	78,890	77,956	90,800
Montgomery	773	2,122	3,278	3,363	6,100
Naperville	7,013	12,933	22,617	42,330	97,800
North Aurora	921	2,088	4,833	5,205	8,700
St. Charles	6,709	9,269	12,950	17,492	31,800
Sugar Grove	-	326	1,230	1,366	5,200
West Chicago	3,973	6,854	10,110	12,550	31,900
Winfield	714	1,575	4,290	4,422	13,500
<b>County</b>					
DuPage	154,599	313,459	490,800	658,177	912,000
Kane	150,388	208,246	251,000	278,405	394,100
Will	134,340	191,620	247,830	324,460	455,700

Size of City: 27.89 Square Miles (1981)

Sources: 1950 to 1980: U.S. Bureau of Census

2000: Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission



ESTIMATED NONAGRICULTURAL WAGE AND SALARY EMPLOYMENT  
IN SELECTED TOWNSHIPS FOR 1970, 1980 AND YEAR 2005 FORECAST

<u>Township</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>% Change 1970-1980</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>% Change 1980-2005</u>
Kane County:					
Aurora Twp.	36,850	47,250	28.2	68,908	45.8
Batavia and Geneva Twp.	11,050	14,700	33.0	19,511	32.7
Blackberry Twp.	2,250	800	-64.4	2,375	196.9
Sugar Grove Twp.	1,150	1,150	0.0	3,583	211.6
DuPage County:					
Naperville Twp.	6,550	16,350	149.6	75,340	360.8
Winfield Twp.	7,000	12,100	72.9	26,613	119.9

Source: Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission: Data Bulletin, Spatial Distribution of Employment in Northeastern Illinois, 1980.

Township Population and Household Forecasts.

Robert B. Teska Associates, Inc.

**RETAIL SALES TRENDS: 1972 - 1982**  
**CITY OF AURORA AND STATE OF ILLINOIS**

Category	Retail Sales (\$1,000)					
	Aurora		Illinois		% Change	
	<u>1972</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1972</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1972</u>	<u>1982</u>
General Merchandise	35,325	36,075	2	3,590,650	2	76
Food	32,200	101,500	215	4,765,375	154	154
Drinking and Eating	13,150	27,975	113	2,249,225	143	143
Apparel	9,100	15,525	71	1,285,700	103	103
Furn., H.H. and Radio	10,600	16,225	53	1,042,550	75	75
Lumber, Bldg., Hardware	18,525	26,975	46	2,406,250	67	67
Automotive and Fill Sta.	53,900	110,100	104	5,812,825	118	118
Misc. Retail/Wholesale	28,050	57,025	103	2,895,800	165	165
Miscellaneous	4,000	9,825	146	843,825	180	180
Manufacturers	<u>17,025</u>	<u>20,175</u>	19	<u>2,188,175</u>	131	131
Total	221,875	421,400	90	27,080,375	60,119,375	122

Source: Illinois Department of Revenue  
 Robert B. Teska Associates, Inc.

-EXAMPLE-

PURPOSES OF A DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

AURORA, ILLINOIS

The purposes for which the downtown development corporation is organized are:

1. To give positive direction to the development of commerce in the City of Aurora;
2. To complement the activities of the City of Aurora directed toward implementing its Comprehensive Plan, especially those aspects related to increasing trade and services and to maintaining and strengthening the role of the central business district as the prime cultural, economic and governmental center of the region;
3. To establish and maintain effective relationships with the State of Illinois, all branches of city and county government, and other organizations in the community related to its business climate and economic future;
4. To study problems such as business location, land use, appearance, transportation, parking, housing, community facilities, historic preservation, assessment, taxation, and finance, and to prepare recommendations for their solution;
5. To promote and assist existing businesses to expand and new businesses to locate in Downtown Aurora, and to provide special assistance to small businesses;
6. To acquire, improve, develop, manage, and dispose of real and personal property;
7. To enter into and carry out contracts for any lawful purpose pursuant to purposes of this organization;
8. To borrow, raise and invest monies for the purposes of this organization;
9. To carry out those activities which will enhance the image and reputation of Aurora as a place to live and invest.

