

The Fairfield Village Green: A New Downtown for a Sustainable City

Arthur Pizzano

Quality of life evidences itself in a variety of ways from one jurisdiction to the next. In Fairfield, Ohio, a community approaching 45,000 residents, this intrinsic value is best manifested in the city's newly emerging downtown. When Fairfield incorporated itself as a city in 1955, its land use pattern was typical of many post-World War II suburbs, in that it developed several, disparate commercial areas but had no identifiable downtown business district to call its own. Forty years later, city officials began to take concerted steps to embark on a program that would provide a central focus for residents.

Thoughtful Planning: A Critical Element

Planning for the Fairfield Village Green started almost a decade ago, and development began in earnest over the past five years. The Village Green is envisioned as the first of four quadrants, all in the geographic center of the city that will ultimately compose Fairfield's downtown. The commitment to public and private coordination, targeted investment, and high quality has brought about a distinctive destination that has emerged as a true community gathering place.

The Village Green also is a source of intense civic pride and provides a much-needed citywide focus and "sense of place." It has been a key element in Fairfield's overall strategy to establish itself as a sustainable city, so that it can remain a

community of choice as the city continues to mature.

Initial public funding occurred when the city council authorized the creation of a contoured and heavily landscaped central park, or Green. The two-acre park site had been donated as a condition of a planned-unit development (PUD) process by a local developer of what once was a 120-acre farm, bypassed by development for almost five decades. The parcel is strategically located at the city's historic crossroads and adjoins the Fairfield Municipal Building.

The Green contains a lake, meandering creeks, an assortment of water features and fountains, walking paths, an outdoor amphitheater, and a tots' playground. Construction costs for the park's development totaled \$2.1 million, financed from accumulated annual cash balances from the city's general fund, which were then systematically transferred to its dedicated Downtown Development Fund. The Green lies between two parcels of land (3.0 and 4.8 acres) that were later purchased by the city to showcase two new signature public facilities.

One of these, the 25,000-square-foot Fairfield Lane Library, which opened in September 2001, is technologically advanced and features a prominent clock tower, a Vermont-slate roof, and interior vaulted ceilings. Circulation has increased 83 percent since the new facility opened, and library patron usage is up 132 percent. The library site is juxtaposed with that of the 40,000-square-foot Fairfield Community Arts Center, scheduled for completion in early 2005.

The arts center will feature a 250-seat performing arts theater, a senior citizens' lounge complete with double-sided fireplace, a child-care facility, an art gallery, and spaces for dry and wet crafts, dance, aerobics, and other individual and group activities. The facility also will contain leasable space for large gatherings and receptions in a three-section multipurpose room. There, groups will enjoy access to an adjacent, outdoor second-story deck from which to over-



Planners of Fairfield, Ohio's Village Green, which is located in the center of the city, are on the way to making it Fairfield's downtown.

look events being held at the park and the amphitheater within it.

Return on Investment: Getting Down to Business

A variety of private development investment has occurred in response to this targeted use of public capital. In turn, this investment has had significant and positive economic effects on the community; 160 units of single-family residential housing have been developed within the PUD, and lot sales have exceeded expectations, particularly given the fairly unconventional nature of the project's somewhat denser, in-town subdivision configuration. The detached housing caters to a broad mix of lifestyles, including those of young families, empty-nesters, and seniors.

A 120-unit, independent-living complex was later built within the overall master-planned project area to meet the specialized needs of its occupants. Clientele of this facility have found the pedestrian-oriented, one-stop aspects of the mixed-use residential, civic, and commercial Village Green area to be user-friendly.

Attractively designed commercial development has added desirable character and balance to the downtown as well. A new 72,000-square-foot, full-service Kroger supermarket and 195,000 square

feet of adjacent retail stores and offices have become fully occupied in just two years. Uses include the 400-seat Symmes Tavern on the Green restaurant, the Village Green Coffee Shop, the Pottery Place, a bank, and lawyers' and doctors' offices.

While the anticipated negative traffic impacts on the existing residential areas initially met with protests, the careful attention to traffic mitigation, buffers, lighting, and so forth has enabled the community to embrace the commercial component as integral to the overall fabric of the neighborhood.

Meeting the Implicit Goal: A Sense of Community

Most significant has been the community spirit and activity evident within the Village Green. Annual July 4th activities have drawn thousands to the area, and arts festivals have been promoted regionally. The Thursday-night "Groovin on the Green" concert series at the outdoor amphitheater has been supplemented with community theater events, as well as by Friday-night "Movies in the Park," sponsored by the Fairfield Fire Department.

An award-winning sculpture acquisition program has added nine life-size bronze pieces to the downtown, thus providing a comfortable yet urbane,



Fairfield residents enjoy concerts, movies, and theater events at the Village Green's outdoor amphitheater.

hands-on exposure to the arts. Plans for a major, annual fall event that will be uniquely Fairfield are in the works. It is likely that the venues will include international food (Fairfield is home to the nationally acclaimed Jungle Jim's International Market), along with art, crafts, and a variety of music and performing groups.

Resiliency: Staying on Course

However, things have not always gone smoothly. Residual effects of the city's rapid 1960s through 1980s suburban growth boom continue to be evident from time to time. For example, while substantial efforts and public expenditures have been made by the city to deal with water and sewer management issues, problems persist within the community despite more than \$22 million in remedial public improvements to the utility systems. The city is in the midst of considering pre-disaster mitigation measures, including the outright purchase of a number of homes that lie within flood-affected areas.

Also, during the course of the city's development, in 1989 Fairfield lost its major employer, which had been housed in a 1.3 million-square-foot General Motors-Fisher Body industrial plant. While the facility had employed 5,100 people at its peak, its use has

since been reinvented, and it now accommodates a variety of smaller tenants, much as a business incubator does. But the loss of the substantial local earnings tax revenues that had previously flowed to the city was a major blow to Fairfield's financial underpinnings. (The municipal income tax is the principal source of general-fund revenue for Ohio cities.)

Fortunately, Fairfield's subsequent concerted efforts to attract replacement industry on its abundantly available and well-located land have been rewarded. These steps have also demonstrated the city's resiliency and resolve. Over the past 15 years, Fairfield has diversified and broadened its tax base and is now home to a variety of light-manufacturing, warehousing, research and development, and, increasingly, service sector businesses.

Daytime employment is currently estimated at 26,000. The earnings tax has seen more than a decade of steady and substantial growth. Another byproduct of this metamorphosis is that the city has shed its "company town," single-industry image and is considered a leading and progressive center of commerce within the region.

Today, the city competes favorably for market share in the burgeoning Cincinnati/Dayton corridor, as a part of booming Butler County in southeast Ohio. Fairfield includes the home offices

of the Cincinnati Financial Insurance Corporation, Ohio Casualty Insurance, and Skyline Chili. Pella Windows, Medco Health Solutions (formerly Merck Medco Pharmaceuticals), and DNA Diagnostics Center also are members of the city's corporate family.

The combination of a growing and stable financial base and a record of responsive and responsible service delivery has enabled Fairfield to enhance its offerings beyond the provision of basic services. The city's nationally accredited police department, highly competitive utility rates, and aggressive street maintenance program are a few of the municipal offerings that stand out.

Community Results = Community Support

As Fairfield readies itself to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its incorporation in 2005, it has positioned itself to build strategically on its strong foundation. It is prepared to reinvent itself to help sustain its neighborhoods, business community, and tax base. Fairfield's ability to fund new quality-of-life facilities and programs has enabled this maturing suburb to offer residents and businesses an environment and lifestyle not readily available elsewhere in the region.

What's important is that residents also sense an enhanced level of respect from the surrounding metropolitan area. The community now has a distinct and distinguishing image. Fairfield is enthusiastic about its evolving reputation as a progressive city with a vibrant downtown center. The synergy that exists among a highly focused mayor and council leadership team, a supportive public, and a dedicated staff is evident. It's for these reasons that the city's economic development literature carries the tag line "Fairfield Works." 

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