

QUICKNOTES

Coping with Downtown Noise

The sounds of downtown are familiar to longtime residents: delivery trucks, construction equipment, al fresco diners, live music, and bar patrons filing out at closing time. Because these sounds signal economic health, local officials often find it difficult to draw and enforce the lines between “normal” and “nuisance” when it comes to noise.

Many urban and suburban downtowns have experienced a surge in demand for downtown living over the past 20 years, giving new life to old city centers and creating vibrant mixed use districts in formerly sleepy bedroom communities. However, creating a downtown area conducive to both business owners and residents can be challenging, especially in communities where many of the residents have relocated from quiet single-family neighborhoods to the denser, noisier city center.

Background

Successful downtowns typically include a diverse mix of uses. While residences have long been part of this use mix, the number of downtown residences is on the rise, due, in large part, to demographic changes. Baby boomers are retiring and trading their suburban homes for downtown condominiums and apartments. Meanwhile, millennials are delaying marriage and childbirth longer than previous generations.

Furthermore, the mix of nonresidential uses in many successful downtowns is quite different than in the decades following World War II. Downtowns are still hubs for storefront retail and services; professional offices; and civic, cultural, and religious institutions. However, an influx of new residents creates greater interest in nighttime uses, such as restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and theaters. This, coupled with shrinking demand for brick-and-mortar retail, has left many downtowns more economically dependent on noisier uses than in the postwar period. The upshot of these changes is that a larger number of residents are living in closer proximity to noisier commercial uses, which creates more opportunities for noise-related conflicts. This is particularly true if the downtown serves as a regional destination for dining and nightlife, where visitors may be contributing disproportionately to noise nuisances.

Organize for Success

One effective tactic for mitigating these conflicts is to form a special commission or resource group to foster dialog, guide local decision making, and assist business owners and residents. This group should include staff from local agencies involved in planning, code enforcement, and public safety, as well as representatives from the business community and resident organizations. Through regular meetings, a standing resource group can identify common complaints and code enforcement issues and solicit feedback on potential policy and programmatic solutions. Some cities and downtown management organizations have even created new positions for nighttime economy managers (or “nighttime mayors”) to help balance competing priorities. For example, Iowa City, Iowa’s Downtown District employs a nighttime mayor to serve as a liaison between downtown businesses and residents.

Update Regulations

There are several distinct regulatory tactics that cities can use to mitigate noise-related conflicts. These include district-specific noise standards, zoning and construction standards for mixed use development, and “good neighbor” requirements for noisier uses.

Many cities apply the same noise limits citywide, without regard to differences in land-use mix or intensity. Successful downtowns have a complementary mix of uses that translate to more

Geoff Livingston, Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)



Over the past 20 years, downtown Austin, Texas, has experienced a residential building boom, putting new residents in close proximity to the city's well-established downtown entertainment districts.



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

activity and more noise throughout a longer portion of the day than predominantly residential neighborhoods. Because perceptions of noise are relevant to ambient sound levels, it makes sense to adopt district-specific noise limits that permit louder sounds in high-intensity zoning districts than in low-intensity districts. Additionally, for downtowns with a high concentration of entertainment uses, consider permitting louder sounds later into the evening on weekends.

Many cities use zoning standards to control the permissible mix of uses as well as site and building design in their downtowns. Standards that require at least one floor between louder commercial uses, like nightclubs and theaters, and residences can minimize conflicts over nighttime noise. Similarly, standards that control the location and orientation of entrances and windows can limit residents' exposure to noise from outdoor seating areas or commercial vehicles. Additionally, building and construction codes that require soundproofing measures for mixed use developments can prevent conflicts associated with routine activities.

Beyond this, some cities have adopted "good neighbor" requirements for noisier uses that require operators to submit operations and management plans that demonstrate how they will limit noise and other potential nuisance behaviors. For example, Boulder, Colorado, requires prospective operators of downtown restaurants, brewpubs, and taverns to hold a meeting with surrounding property owners to present a management plan for mitigating noise and other operations-related nuisances.

Provide Education and Assistance

Apart from convening stakeholders and updating regulations, cities and downtown management organizations can also use education and financial or technical assistance to mitigate noise-related conflicts. Some of the most promising tactics are outreach to real estate professionals, downtown tours, and soundproofing assistance.

Prospective buyers and tenants often rely on real estate agents or brokers for information about area conditions. In downtowns undergoing rapid change, real estate professionals may be out of touch with how activities in the area change from day to night. Reaching out to these professionals through informal networking sessions or structured meetings can help them provide the best information to their clients to ensure a good fit between new and established residents and businesses.

Another way to manage the expectations of prospective buyers and tenants is to conduct nighttime walking tours of the downtown area. When led by residents, these tours can serve the dual purpose of highlighting the vibrancy of the downtown and providing an insider's perspective on the pros and cons of living downtown.

Older commercial buildings often lack features that can reduce low-frequency sounds, which can rattle nearby residences. Consequently, providing technical or financial assistance to established business that are dependent on amplified sound can be an effective tactic for improving neighbor relations. For example, Austin, Texas, provides low-interest loans through its Music Venue Assistance Program to help existing nightclubs and theaters invest in acoustical treatments and sound system upgrades to mitigate nuisance noise.

CONCLUSIONS

Noise-related conflicts are a relatively common "growing pain" for new or revitalized downtowns. Often, the most effective tactics for mitigating these conflicts are stakeholder engagement, context-sensitive regulations, and education and assistance. In some cases, though, noise complaints can be an early warning signal for more pervasive conflicts between businesses, patrons, and residents. In these instances, it is important to deal with noise within the context of a wider strategy for managing downtown change.

PAS QuickNotes (ISSN 2169-1940) is a publication of the American Planning Association's Planning Advisory Service (PAS). © 2017 by the American Planning Association. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing. Visit PAS online at planning.org/pas to find out how PAS can work for you. American Planning Association staff: James M. Drinan, JD, Executive Director; David Rouse, FAICP, Managing Director of Research and Advisory Services; David Morley, AICP, and Anna Read, AICP, QuickNotes Editors; Julie Von Bergen, Senior Editor; Susan Deegan, Senior Graphic Designer

FURTHER READING

1. Published by the American Planning Association

Aggarwala, Rohit T. 2016. "The First Principles of Urbanism: Part I." *APA Blog*, September 12. Available at planning.org/blog/blog-post/9111247.

Kreyling, Christine. 2015. "When Arts and Culture Take Center Stage." *Planning*, November. Available at planning.org/planning/2015/nov/artsculture.htm.

2. Other Resources

Kitsinger, Andy. 2014. "Avoiding a Nightmare on Main Street: Handling Conflicts between Living & Playing Downtown." *PlannersWeb*, July 29. Available at tinyurl.com/ybv3xla3.

Peters, Jim, and Alicia Lakomski. 2010. "Got Nightlife? Manage Sociability as an Economic Engine." *PM Magazine*, November. Available at tinyurl.com/y6www3hl.

Responsible Hospitality Institute. 2017. "Becoming a Sociable City." Available at rhiweb.org.