

Littering America with Dead Malls and Vacant Superstores

By Stacy Mitchell and Jeff Milchen
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It's no secret that as corporate chains have taken over much of the retail economy, they've left a wake of half-empty downtowns, shuttered family businesses and neighborhood residents dependent on driving to strip malls and "big box" stores for staple items.

Now these same chains are dealing communities a second blow-- vacating existing stores to build bigger outlets, leaving huge empty shells and acres of asphalt behind.

Dead malls and empty superstores now litter the American landscape. Nationwide, fully half a billion square feet of retail space sits empty--the equivalent of about 4,000 shopping malls.

Part of the problem is that chains are building new outlets at a staggering pace and creating a glut of retail space. In the last 12 years alone, per capita retail space has increased 34 percent, from 15 to 20 square feet. Many communities have more retail space than residents can support, so vacancies inevitably follow.

The other part of the problem is that corporate chains feel compelled to reinvent themselves every ten years or so, abandoning existing outlets for new formats. First there were small strip malls, which gave way to enclosed malls. Then came successive waves of ever-larger regional malls. Hundreds of malls then closed following the first wave of big box stores in the 1980s.

In the 1990s the big boxes themselves began to shed their skins, vacating existing stores to build still larger outlets. As a result, Wal-Mart alone has left almost 400 abandoned stores---more than 30 million square feet of vacant retail space surrounded by thousands of acres of asphalt.

The experience of Macon, Georgia is not typical, but instructive. This small city is home to three Wal-Mart carcasses, two of which exceed 100,000 square feet---more than double the size of a football field and triple the size of typical supermarket, and that's not counting their vast parking lots. Like most of the 34 abandoned Wal-Mart stores in Georgia, the three Macon outlets were shuttered after the company built two larger "supercenters," swallowing up still more undeveloped land.

Rather than becoming victims of the corporate cannibalization game, many communities are taking a different approach. Dozens have banned new big box outlets by amending zoning rules to prevent construction of stores over a certain size. Others have prohibited retail expansion into undeveloped areas, requiring instead that new stores locate in

established downtown and neighborhood commercial districts. Many have also shifted tax dollars that have long subsidized new roads and other infrastructure for sprawling development into projects that support downtown commerce.

Some are beginning as well to see the advantages of working with nearby communities to implement a shared vision for development. Instead of engaging in the lose-lose competition for tax base, residents of the Cape Cod region of Massachusetts voted to create the Cape Cod Commission. This regional planning agency reviews all development proposals that could have impacts beyond their host communities, including all retail stores larger than 10,000 square feet. The benefits and costs of new development projects are carefully evaluated and reviewed for conformity to the region's land use plan, which encourages the growth of small businesses that employ local residents and meet community needs.

New ideas are also emerging from independent businesses themselves. In 1998, small business owners in Boulder, Colorado formed the Boulder Independent Business Alliance, a cooperative effort to help one another survive and build stronger bonds with the community. BIBA now encompasses more than 150 member businesses. Through group purchasing and a joint marketing campaign that promotes the benefits of patronizing locally owned stores, BIBA has dramatically improved its members' prospects and made residents aware of just how important the choice "Local or chain?" really is.

Similar alliances have since sprung up in other communities, [including Austin, Salt Lake City, St Louis, Bozeman, Montana and Corvallis, Oregon](#). These alliances work not only to enhance competitiveness and marketing, but also to give independent businesses a much-needed voice in local government decision-making. The Salt Lake alliance, for example, played a pivotal role in blocking taxpayer subsidies for a new mega-mall. Without the subsidies, the project was ultimately scrapped.

A new organization, the American Independent Business Alliance, aims to knit these efforts together into a national coalition that will not only seed, nurture and network further local business alliances, but create a political counterforce to the corporate lobbying groups that promote many of the harmful subsidies driving sprawl and chain store proliferation.

Such efforts will pay big dividends in the long run. Unlike footloose superstores, traditional business districts have been around for hundreds of years and can last for hundreds more. Individual businesses may come and go---yesterday's donut shop becomes today's bagelry and espresso bar---but the independent business base itself retains its essential role in the economic and social fabric of the community.

Unlike global corporations, local businesses are owned by people who live in the community and are committed to its well being. These businesses are vital to our quality of life and sense of place, but they face powerful threats, and it requires conscious action

to ensure their endurance. Thankfully, many communities are responding to the challenge, realizing that the best community qualities don't come in big boxes.

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