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Urban specialist finds downtown 'manageable'

By JAY McDANIEL

As a downtown manager, Donald Smartt spends much of his time working with businessmen, but he acknowledges taking inspiration from a radical organizer of the 1930s and insists the revitalization programs he helps create in New Jersey communities are simply efforts to help others "control their own destiny."

Smartt, who is a principal in a Verona-based company, The Community Advocates, is a common presence in the lives of a half-dozen mostly small- and medium-sized communities with struggling central business districts.

"I think the people living in a community should be in control, not just those who simply invest in it or those who control the governmental policies," Smartt said.

"People in the community should determine their own future. This is basically community organizing. There are no magic tools in this approach."

In a field dominated by urban planners, Smartt's company stands out for its emphasis on organization, something he said guarantees his firm a far wider, but more difficult market.

His company, Smartt said, can help the communities organize committees, develop funding programs for revitalization efforts and resolve conflicts "between those parties with a distinct interest" in the life of the central business district.

"We emphasize helping smaller communities manage change in the downtown areas," he said.

"I don't want simply to be a consultant and give advice. For a variety of personal and professional reasons, I want to stay around and see that the intent of the advice is implemented."

The Community Advocates' clients include Cranford, Trenton, Bloomfield, Englewood and Montclair. Cranford, Fair Lawn and Trenton have both created special tax districts to fund their downtown programs. The company is in various stages of negotiations with a few other communities.

Smartt, a 38-year-old Verona resident, grew up on the south side of Newark and attended Jersey City College. He worked in community development programs in Washington, DC, Jersey City and Elizabeth



Photo by Kathleen D. Whelan

Donald R. Smartt, President of The Community Advocates, sits along a new sidewalk in downtown Cranford.

before started the company in 1981 with his wife, Diana Vitrano.

He is often at the fringes of activity well before the company actually lands a contract, and on occasion Smartt is raising for the first time the issue of making a particular older business district more competitive with malls and highway shopping centers by using many of the same techniques malls use to their advantage.

These activities are not always met with open arms. Smartt acknowledged his grassroots approach can, and does, backfire on occasion. In Union Township, the company's efforts ran into opposition from some merchants who questioned Smartt's motivation, and his attempts failed.

Smartt said the competition from shopping centers and malls has affected the central business districts of many New Jersey communities, which must decide whether they will try to manage the inevitable "transition" brought by a changing economy.

Smartt attributes much of his theoretical approach to revitalization to activist Saul Alinsky, who first organized rent strikes in Chicago in the late 1930s and was involved

in numerous self-help programs until his death in 1972.

"He had a reputation of being a radical but from my perspective he simply organized those groups that had the least power," Smartt said.

While his approach is far less confrontational, Smartt's emphasis is on self-determination and participation bears the mark of Alinsky-inspired theory, along with the idea that a good organizer eventually works himself out of a job.

Smartt said his involvement with a community generally lasts for three years, after which the business and government sectors often jointly hire their own manager.

For downtown revitalization programs to work, they need the support of a variety of interests, such as the banks, merchant tenants and government officials, Smartt said. But they rely most strongly on the interests of the people who reside in the community, particularly if residents also own businesses in town, he explained.

"The primary constituent in a downtown that's going to manage its transition is the resident," Smartt said. "Retailers who are residents are the real anchors, and they're rare."

"Malls are not the heart of a community," Smartt said. "When a mall gets the doctors, residents and the post office, then it's a central business district."

In addition to its value as part of the tax base, the downtown area also "acts as your biggest advertisement to the standards and quality of the community," Smartt said.

"Small towns don't have to worry about malls if they find their niche in the community. You don't go to the mall to visit your favorite hardware store or get your suit cleaned."

Unlike revitalization from the "top-down," which frequently emphasizes redevelopment projects, the approach of The Community Advocates leaves far less bricks and mortar behind as a gauge of its success.

Smartt measured his success as much in ongoing activity as anything else. In Cranford, he noted, there is a much needed parking study nearly completed, several promotional events were completed successfully and consideration is being given to hiring a full-time downtown manager.



The Community Advocates