

One-Way Streets Have Got To Go

Downtown Pensacola is very familiar and very maneuverable to those of us that work or live downtown. For those that regularly patronize a downtown business but don't work or live downtown, the traffic patterns have likewise become a relatively non-issue. The reason for both occurrences is because the direction of traffic flow is familiar and has been the same for several decades.

Back in the seventies and early eighties when the traffic directions were changed, it was done so to make it easier to get large numbers of vehicles through and out of downtown. In many ways, we treated the local streets of downtown the same way that we treat a major vehicular artery like Highway 29. Our concern was for many years to move as many vehicles through an area as quickly and efficiently as possible. That concept works for four and six lane roads with broad shoulders and building set back far off the highway. It doesn't work for pedestrian-scaled historic downtowns.

During the last decade, most urban planners and almost all downtown developers have come to the realization that one-way streets are one of the proverbial "glass ceilings" to sustainable downtown revitalization. Less than two months ago, the team of national retail consultants that presented the roadmap (i.e. Downtown Retail Strategy) for enhancing and growing the retail presence and vitality of downtown, called out the unnecessary challenge that one-way streets cause for retailers – be they local independents or national chains. The retail consultants noted that any retailer located on a one-way street is losing one half of their potential visibility and probably up to 50% of their real potential in sales because of the way the one-way streets limit exposure, access, and merchandising. They also noted that many national retailers (as well as established independents), that would be potential good fits in Downtown Pensacola, will not even consider a location here because they have location policies that prohibit stores on one-way streets.

We also know that tourist and other non-resident visitors to our community consider one-way streets confusing and frustrating. As a result, such through-fares are avoided or quickly exited to a "more interesting" street where the visitor can turn-around and go back to the place they saw without circling many city blocks several times. Tourists like the rest of us have been conditioned to think that one-way streets are for "moving traffic" not for pausing to experience the local flavor of a charming old city. The Pensacola Region annually host 4.7 million tourists or non-resident visitors. Several million of these folks go right down Garden Street or Main Street every year. Regrettably, few currently enter – much less stop in - the core of the downtown retail district. We have got to remove the traffic prompters that are discouraging such visits.

Later this month, it is expected that representatives of the City and the DIB will start formal talks to plan how and when to change the traffic (i.e. visitor) (i.e. customer) patterns along and through some of our downtown streets. When accomplished, the benefits will be measured in the bottom lines of Downtown businesses and the activity

found in the previously empty or under-utilized storefronts. The Downtown Retail Council last month ranked “changing S. Palafox Place back to two-way traffic” as the number one recommendation from the Downtown Retail Strategy. Let’s hope that enough of the stakeholders will agree to get behind this effort sooner rather than later. I’m convinced that it can happen.

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