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Leesburg looks for ways to lift up its downtown

Washington Business Journal - by [Joe Coombs](#) Senior Staff Reporter

Few people deny the charm of downtown Leesburg, with its clusters of shops and antique stores.

But charm doesn't always pay the bills. And with more shoppers going to big outlying retail centers, downtown businesses want to know how they can boost their sales but still keep the area's old-time feel.

Tweaks to the town's zoning rules, infrastructure improvements and other changes are all on the table.

More immediately, business owners are waiting for a 12-member **Urban Land Institute** panel to offer suggestions at a two-day exercise Jan. 29-30. The \$15,000 study will be funded largely through contributions from Leesburg and Loudoun County.

"We want ULI to pick apart our notions and give us an action plan," said Peter Burnett, an attorney and co-chairman of the Downtown Improvement Association, formed last year to address growth issues in the roughly 20-block downtown area.

"A lot of people in Leesburg go out to the town centers, and it's a little disconcerting. We think it has a lot to do with the density and retail mix downtown," Burnett said.

Adding density to the downtown area -- where zoning rules imposed a 45-foot height limit -- while maintaining the neighborhood's historic nature could be a tall order, said Tony Howard, CEO of the Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce.

"I'd hate to see it lose its historic feel, but the knock on a lot of the stores down there is that they shut down at 6 p.m.," he said. "That doesn't work in today's world. The challenge will be, how do you convince the shops to stay open later and get more foot traffic down there at the same time?"

Sue Gladstone, owner of women's clothing store Persnickety Palm on Loudoun Street SW, said there are some infrastructure issues downtown, but merchants need to do a better job announcing their presence.

"One of the things I hear a lot of people talk about is the lack of public bathrooms," she said. "It's hard, because most of the stores are too old or too small to have them."

However, she added, "We really just need to get the word out more about what's down here. We have something unique, unlike the big retail centers."

Several proposed downtown projects could bring up to 400,000 square feet of development, including a plan by Reston-based **Waterford Development LLC** that would put 150,000 square feet of mixed uses on a site near the W & OD trail.

Downtown's aging infrastructure is a hurdle to new development, said Betsy Fields, Leesburg's economic research analyst.

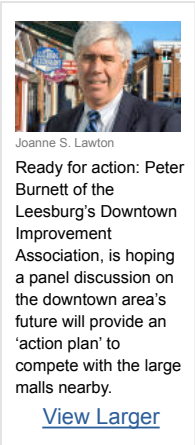
"We see pressing needs for the stormwater management system, and that's one challenge," she said.

A recent Economic Development Commission report criticized the town's approval process, but Leesburg Town Manager John Wells has made improving relations with the business community a top priority as of late, Burnett said.

Burnett said there has not been much new development downtown since the recession of the early 1990s.

But with the ULI exercise and increased interest from downtown business owners, there is finally some momentum, he said. "As long as I've been in Leesburg, I haven't seen this level of excitement toward getting something done."

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Ready for action: Peter Burnett of the Leesburg's Downtown Improvement Association, is hoping a panel discussion on the downtown area's future will provide an 'action plan' to compete with the large malls nearby.

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