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## Survey looks at which retailers can thrive downtown

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The Wichita Eagle

In about eight weeks, Wichita officials should have the beginnings of a retail recruitment checklist, spelling out the types of businesses that can prosper in a successfully revitalized downtown.

That's the job before Michael Berne of MJB Consulting, the Goody Clancy consultant studying the city's downtown retail markets.

It's a massive job on the surface: identifying who will shop in downtown Wichita and what they'll want to buy.

Berne is not working a classic market study, said David Dixon, principal in charge of planning and urban design at Boston-based Goody Clancy.

That's a good thing, Dixon said.

"I've learned over the years the hard way to be skeptical of many market studies," Dixon said, "because their projections are only as useful as the approach."

It's a huge challenge, said Wichita State economics professor John Wong.

"The thing that makes this study more difficult is the function of downtown is unclear and part of that's a function of the community and the vision it has for downtown," Wong said.

He compared Wichita's retail development to a donut — with downtown the hole in the middle.

"The market created the Waterfront on the east side," Wong said. "Local government and developers are trying to create a WaterWalk downtown.

"And to a large extent, they overlap. I'm not sure there's enough people here to have two, and that might be part of the problem."

Berne's approach is sociological: Who are the people coming downtown? What are their personal habits? How do they spend their money?

The goal is a retail niche for downtown, Berne said, not the overlap that Wong outlined.

"It's one thing to compete against an existing district that's successful," he said. "It's another to find a customer that existing districts aren't catering to. That's how they coexist."

Old Town is the example that Berne's working from.

"It's clear that Old Town has hit on something that the edges of the donut, if you will, weren't quite meeting," Berne said. "It's a question of finding what they've done right in retail terms and how much further it can be taken and expanded."

Such information is critical, said Wichita Downtown Development Corp. president Jeff Fluhr, to recruit and land the right businesses for downtown.

"My hope is he'll end at a place where he can identify the specific types of retailing that can complement a LuCinda's, a Larkspur, a Sabor, the successful industries that we already have downtown," Fluhr said.

The checklist also will drive Fluhr's growing WDDC business grants program, which handed out \$136,000 in 2009 for tenant improvements, relocation and for participation in downtown events.

The broader Goody Clancy comprehensive downtown revitalization plan should begin taking shape in midsummer, Fluhr said.

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