

## Editorial: Developing a sense of place in the core city is important in shoring up Memphis' tax base

Staff Reports

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Urban planners talk a lot about creating a sense of place when discussing redevelopment of an area.

In smaller suburban cities, sense of place frequently means creating a cohesive aesthetic view that says what the character of the city is. In large cities like Memphis, creating a sense of place likely applies to redeveloping an area that is in decline.

That phrase plays well when you look at the rejuvenation of Cooper-Young, Overton Square, Broad Avenue and Soulsville. Last fall, MEMFix, the tactical urban event that breathed new life into Broad Avenue and Crosstown, held an event at Mississippi and Walker to help residents, planners and potential investors visualize what that once-vibrant commercial area could look like once again.

The city of Memphis is talking a lot about creating a sense of place in redeveloping the fairgrounds property and the proposed Heritage Trails project east of Downtown.

Thanks to Mayor A C Wharton's fellowship in the Urban Land Institute's Daniel Rose Center for Public Leadership in Land Use, Memphis last week was able to host a group of urban planners from across the nation, along with local planners and economic development officials, for a kind of flying workshop focusing on the Memphis Medical Center and the adjacent Edge neighborhood.

The group developed a list of recommendations to improve the Medical Center and the Edge district.

It is probably difficult for Memphians to see how these kinds of gatherings of experts have much relevance to their everyday lives. Granted, in some ways they would be right — if viewed from a narrow context.

In the bigger picture, though, these sense-of-place exercises are important to the health and financial vitality of core cities because rejuvenating areas inside the core city improves a city's tax base.

It is true that annexations help cities grow, but the cost of providing core services to newly annexed areas rarely results in an immediate property tax windfall for the

annexing city.

And in Tennessee, there is a strong likelihood that a city's ability to annex will become more difficult if legislation emerges that would give residents in targeted annexation areas a yes-or-no vote in the matter. The General Assembly last year imposed a one-year moratorium on annexations not sought by the affected residents. It expires this spring but some lawmakers say they'll press for an additional one-year extension or to require approval by annexed residents in referendums before an annexation can occur.

That makes it crucial that the core city is built up to buttress the city's tax base, but also works as a catalyst for economic development opportunities that translate into jobs.

In areas like the Medical Center, creating a sense of place is buttressed by the fact the area is the home of medical, research and higher education facilities. As the planners pointed out, though, the city, in cooperation with its anchors, could do a better job of helping to give the district a distinct look and feel by using tools like umbrella signage to help guide visitors through the area, enhancing open spaces and making it easier for small entrepreneurs to convert vacant buildings into a mix of retail and small industrial uses.

Creating a sense of place in areas without strong anchors will be a more difficult task. Still, for the financial health and vibrancy of the inner city, the effort has to be made.

That is why gatherings of urban planners like the one in Memphis last week are more than just a bunch of pie-in-the-sky rhetoric.



