

Focusing on 4 vacant buildings will not save downtown St. Louis | Opinion

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Les Sterman

The Millennium Hotel, one of downtown St. Louis' massive, vacant buildings.

Dilip Vishwanat | SLBJ

City of St. Louis and civic leaders have it wrong ... yet again.

The recent headline in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, “These 4 vacant buildings could decide the future of downtown St. Louis,” perfectly describes at least part of their ill-advised strategy. It’s the same strategy that has led to one failed project after another – projects that were all supposed to “save” downtown.

They are leading us down the path of more vacancies, more foreclosures and more lost tax revenue. The future of downtown will not be decided by four vacant buildings, or any single project, no matter how much PR is devoted to it.

We can continue to utilize massive public subsidies to generate more rehabilitated square footage, as we have for over three decades. But it won’t matter if we can’t attract paying tenants because we continue to ignore safety, infrastructure and basic city services.

In recent months several large buildings have been foreclosed by their lenders, including Rudman on the Park, following multiple bankruptcies of hotels and other downtown properties. Many properties in downtown are now for sale as owners look to exit the market.



Les Sterman, a longtime downtown resident, is a member of Citizens for a Greater Downtown St. Louis and the former executive director at East-West Gateway Council of Governments.

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We had the opportunity to begin doing things differently when the Downtown Community Improvement District sought to renew its legal authorization in 2021. We made specific proposals for meaningful reform, including a comprehensive public safety plan. But major Downtown businesses, led by the St. Louis Cardinals, chose to stay the course, stacking the self-selected CID board with folks friendly to maintaining the status quo. As a result, the CID continues business as usual, planting flowers and paying for minimal private security, none of which is making a material difference in reversing the downward trajectory of downtown.

Downtown is now largely dominated by a series of self-contained “islands” – Ballpark Village, Union Station, the Horseshoe Casino and now CityPark. The owners of those properties understandably act in their own self-interest, yet they dominate downtown decision-making on behalf of the 10,000 residents and small businesses that are trying to sustain this neighborhood. We’ve seen the result, and it is the continued deterioration of our downtown.



Ballpark Village is one of several self-contained "islands" of development around downtown.

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While we appreciate the many contributions that the Cardinals and other large businesses make to our community, we would be better served if they allowed others, even those who disagree with them, to sit at the table where decisions are made.

New downtown leadership is needed, including at the CID, that will engage passionate downtown residents and small business owners who focus beyond game days or the occasional convention, and will advance the best plans, policies and services for our neighborhood. Until then it won't matter how many buildings are rehabilitated. Downtown can grow and prosper, but not if we continue to be preoccupied with the subsidized rehab of empty buildings without regard to how they will be filled.

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