

# NEWS & *views*

*Economic Development Division*

SUMMER 2005

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## Ten Years After: *Reshaping the Image of a Former Army Town*

*by Shaun A. Suhoski, J.D., Director of Community and Economic Development, Town of Ayer, Massachusetts*

**M**any communities across the nation held their collective breath earlier this year when the federal Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission announced its recommendations to eliminate or streamline U.S. military bases. In Massachusetts, a concerted bi-partisan political effort led by Democratic U.S. Senators Edward M. Kennedy and John F. Kerry, working with Republican Gov. Mitt Romney, were key to an ambitious public-private partnership that succeeded in keeping Hanscom Air Force Base in Bedford off of the dreaded list. But, ten years ago it was a very different story.

During the early 1990s, the same two senators, and Republican Gov. William F. Weld, were unable to prevent the closure of Fort

*(continued on page 4)*



*Main Street, Ayer, Mass.*

## THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR



Since the announcement of the Base Realignment & Closure (BRAC) list's release on May 13th I have been working on little else. My community is slated to lose some 20,000 jobs, and many other communities around the nation are also soon to be affected by job

losses and economic disruption.

While the economic impact is substantial, I find the planning implications of the Department of Defense (DoD) proposals even more disturbing. Within the Washington, DC area, DoD would dislocate some 26,000 employees, moving them from locations on the region's Metro rail system to suburban or rural locations lacking transit. DoD, and Congress, have fashioned a system that not only does not require any real consideration of the environmental effects (they are not a criteria for BRAC decisions), but allows the cost accounting of DoD "savings" to exclude the exportation of billions of dollars of impacts onto local and state governments. The expenditures caused by DoD's location policies do not count against DoD because they are borne by others. Even the residual lease liabilities from relocated

*One agency has single-handedly undone decades of federal policy regarding the location of federal facilities...*

defense agencies don't count against the DoD "savings" because GSA, not DoD, holds the leases. And, none of this increases "military value" or the ability of DoD to protect and defend our nation or conduct war.

One agency has single-handedly undone decades of federal policy regarding the location of federal facilities without any consultation with anyone at any level of government. All of this in the name of "force protection" that mandates huge setbacks, separated parking, and no ground floor retail space. Do DoD employees need or deserve more secure environments than other federal or civilian workers throughout the region? What about the rest of us? More than 90 percent of all terrorist acts are aimed at civilian or business targets — not DoD facilities, so why the institutional paranoia?

At the San Francisco conference, APA adopted a Security Policy that provides a comprehensive and sensible approach to homeland security and antiterrorism planning.

Many communities have worked hard to improve security planning and response for all of their employees and citizens. As a nation, we should promote a sense that we are all in this together and reject individualistic efforts to solve the problem for some at the expense of others, or as Randy Newman once put it: "I don't care 'cause I'm all right." ■

— Terry Holzheimer, AICP, Chair

## IN THIS ISSUE OF NEWS & VIEWS



In this issue of *News and Views*, we are pleased to present three interesting economic development articles, including an international contribution from our economic development planning colleagues in Italy. Our lead article, "Ten Years After:

Reshaping the Image of a Former Army Town," Shaun Suhoski provides an encouraging chronology of how Ayer, Massachusetts survived a U.S. military base closure and is now beginning to prosper. In our second article, "Great Challenges in Downtown Revitalization in Italy," authors, Giovanna Codato and Elena Franco provide a descriptive account of how traditional Italian town centers are trying to maintain their historic

integrity amidst new retail development trends. In this issue's student contribution, "A Primer for Private-Public Ventures in Washington State," author Shana Johnson describes how recent planning graduate student Joshua Curtis developed a "how-to guide" for building public-private partnerships in small towns in Washington.

I will be presenting at the Florida Chapter of the American Planning Association's Annual Meeting from September 7-10 in St. Petersburg, Florida. Please look me up if you plan to be in attendance or call (305) 349-1444 or email [murrayn@fiu.edu](mailto:murrayn@fiu.edu) if you have an idea for a future article you'd like to discuss. It's a great way of promoting your community and the successful work you are doing.

— Ned Murray, AICP, Editor





TEN YEARS AFTER, CONT. FROM P. 4

residents and business owners still feared the worst. The region had suffered the loss of approximately 7,000 military and civilian jobs as a result of the closure, in addition to an exodus of the thousands of soldiers and support staff that frequented the retail and service establishments primarily located in Ayer. Yet, armed with the Reuse Plan, and \$200 million in bonding capacity granted by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, MassDevelopment began its role as redevelopment authority in earnest.

As part of the closure negotiations, the siting of a federal medical prison, and retention of the Army's Reserve Forces Training Area, gave Devens a 1,000-employee head start towards reaching its goal of replacing the jobs lost to the closure. Now, ten years into the 40-year redevelopment timeline envisioned by the state, an estimated 3,500 jobs have been created on the former military base according to figures provided by MassDevelopment. Also, 819,418 square feet of former military buildings have been reused and 3.4 million square feet of new construction — with an additional 1.6 million square feet of potential expansion — have already been completed, thus bringing the redevelopment to 68% of maximum build-out. The redevelopment of Devens has gone so well that the

Department of Defense lists it along with the Charleston Naval Base, in South Carolina, and the Pease Air Force Base in New Hampshire, as three examples of "success stories" in the wake of prior BRAC closures.

### Ayer Survives

The tumbleweeds never did appear on Main Street. In fact, the community found a deep resolve to reinvest in itself. Since 1997 the town has funded construction of a new police station, major library expansion, a complete Town Hall restoration, wastewater treatment expansion and a new fire department headquarters. Ayer's current 5.1 percent unemployment rate equals the statewide average, while its residential real estate values have soared due to the town's prime location near the junction of the north-south Interstate 495 and state Route 2, the only east-west highway along the northern tier of the state.

Fueled by a combination of factors — low mortgage rates, skyrocketing demand for housing, and a strong westward migration from the metro-Boston area to more affordable housing markets in Central Massachusetts — Ayer's property values have increased so sharply that many local families are being forced to relocate

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from their own hometown. Based upon sales of single-family homes and condominiums from January through June in 2005, Ayer's median sales price is now \$292,275, or nearly four times the value immediately following the base closure. The rising residential market threatens to price homeowners out of town, a phenomenon that also impacts the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a whole, as higher costs limit housing options for workers, thus reducing the availability of a workforce proximate to job centers.

A recent analysis published in *MassBenchmarks*, a quarterly economic journal published by the University of Massachusetts and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, concluded that "Massachusetts workers lost the equivalent of 25 workdays (eight-hour days) commuting to and from their jobs," citing longer commutes as one of three prime factors in this productivity drain. The housing trend represents a double-edged sword; higher equity for existing homeowners, but a bleak outlook for local residents strapped with a lower-than-average median income. U.S. Census 2000 data indicate that over one-third of Ayer's rental households are housing cost burdened, or paying more than 30 percent of their household income on rent and utilities. About one-quarter of homeowners are similarly cost burdened. For a community with historically lower property values than the region, lower median income, higher poverty rates, and a substantially higher number of renter and transient households, the upward tick in property values and influx of newer, generally more educated and affluent, households presents a challenging shift in the community's paradigm. But, the people of Ayer have been seen change before, demonstrating resiliency and success with each new chapter of growth.

### Changing Times

Ayer is a child of the Iron Horse. Born during mid-1800s advent of the railroad, the town began as a thriving commercial district in the southern portion of Groton. Known first as Groton Junction, the village was incorporated as its own township in 1871, a modest 9.5 square mile swath of land linked to the Port of Boston, and points west, by the rails. Two generations later the town's identity would change when the United States government established Camp Devens as World War I was winding down. Later, the camp became known as Fort Devens, where tens of thousands of soldiers were trained or stationed over nearly 80 years.

From its founding, Ayer was a contradiction in terms; a rural, agrarian community on its fringe, and a major conduit of commerce at its center. Early on,

railroad switching yards, tanneries, and mills provided ample employment opportunities. During the Army years, the town's businesses thrived by providing personal services to the soldiers. Barbershops, diners, nightclubs and bars were commonplace along the main thoroughfares, and police were always at the ready to deal with rowdy behavior.

Ayer's dichotomy as both a rural and urban community continues. At its heart, Ayer remains a quaint small town of 7,300, but its relatively small population belies the town's large commercial and industrial business sector, and its strong racial and economic diversity steeped from its years as an Army town. However, the base closure has changed the face of the town. Today the community's economy is much more diverse and stable, no longer reliant upon a single source of commerce such as the railroad or military. In fact, the town has bucked national and statewide trends by enjoying an increase in manufacturing jobs, largely due to the strength of industry in Ayer and Devens.

Manufacturing is now the second largest employment sector in Ayer, providing 32.6 percent of the jobs in 2002, compared to just 25 percent in 1995 when the base closure became official. And, the food and kindred services industries niche — recognizable by such national brand names as Pepsi Cola and Aquafina, and a host of regional producers such as Cains salad dressings, Vitasoy tofu and soy products, Catania-Spagna olive and cooking oils, and Joseph's Gourmet Pasta — has become the third largest employment sector with 518 jobs.

In all, the commercial and industrial properties comprise just over 60 percent of the town's property tax levy, subsidizing the split tax rate in favor of residential use. The striking difference between the residential and commercial-industrial rate is becoming a concern as the town tries to remain competitive with other communities in attracting and retaining businesses.

The composition of the residential real estate is also changing. In addition to the strong upward trend in property values and cost-burdened households cited above, the makeup of the households themselves is in a state of flux. Ayer's housing stock, which traditionally served higher-than-average renter households as a result of the transient military population, underwent a sizable reversion towards more owner-occupied units between 1990 and 2000. During that period, owner-occupied units rose from just 44.1 percent of all housing units, to 55.7 percent, though still below

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regional averages. Notwithstanding the base closure, the western migration of families from the higher-priced metro-Boston area helped grow Ayer's population by an impressive 6.1 percent between 1990 and 2000, a remarkable statistic given the sweeping demographic and employment changes during that period.

The pressure of growth is unabated, as evidenced by approval or pending review of 555 subdivision lots, and 64 so-called "Approval Not Required" lots (or ANRs, the acronym for an anachronistic anathema in Massachusetts planning) between 1993 and 2004. The only buffer against en masse construction of units was a state-ordered sewer connection moratorium while the town upgraded its wastewater treatment plant, completed in 2004, and a corollary "rate-of-development" bylaw that limited the number of residential building permits to 36 units in any given year.

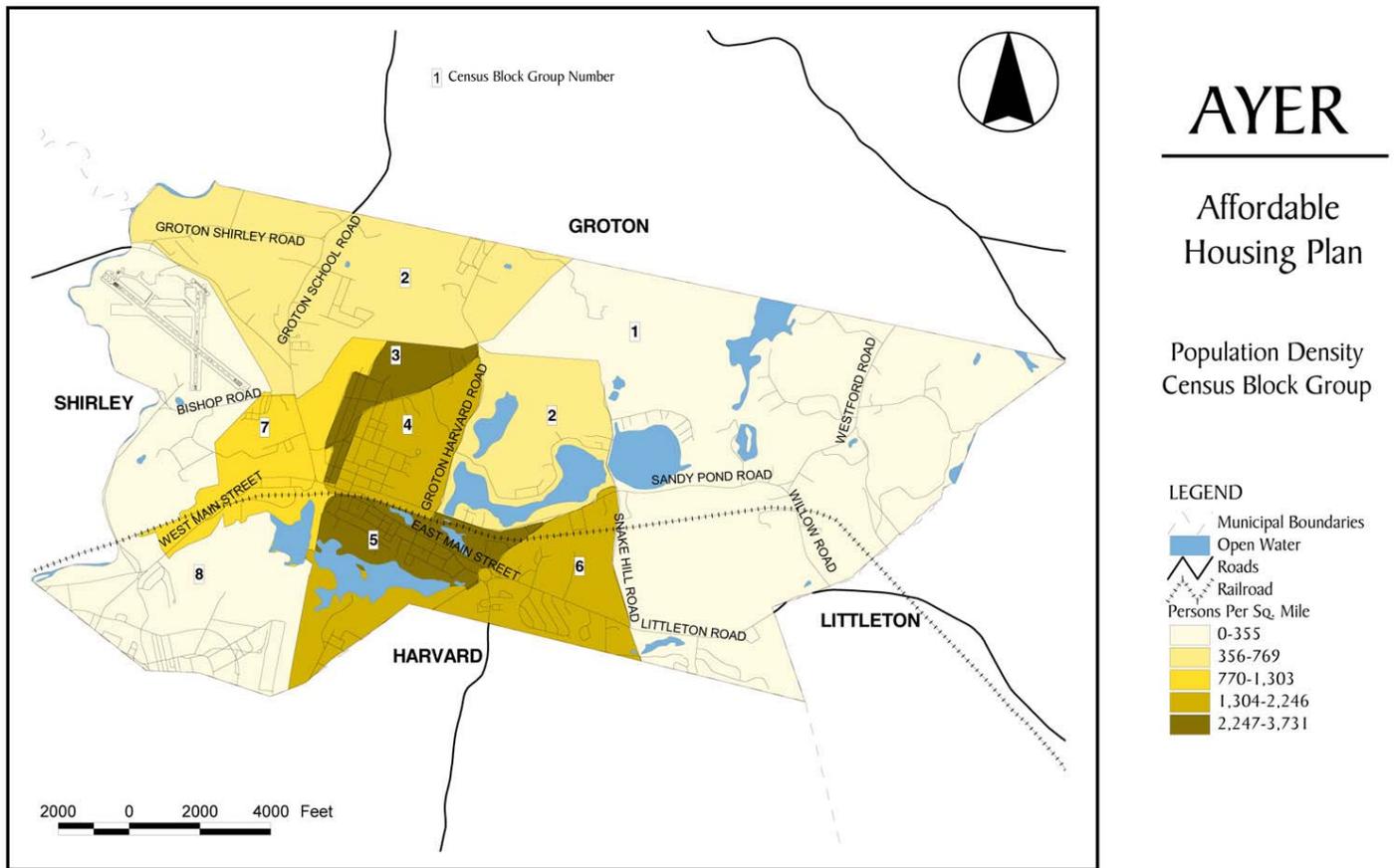
New units will begin to come online in 2006 when the rate-of-development bylaw sunsets. And, because of Ayer's dated zoning regulations, most of the new growth is slated for the outlying areas of town where population density is well below the statewide average

of 810 persons per square mile. The majority of these new units — the total of which represents a whopping 17.5 percent of Ayer's 3,154 total housing units — are planned within traditional, sprawling subdivisions that will transform forests, meadows and other pristine land into "McMansion" villages.

### Future Plans

To combat the potential sprawl, and better plan for Ayer's economic future, a coordinated update to all of the town's major planning documents was spearheaded by the Office of Community and Economic Development (OCED) and completed earlier this year. Working with a professional planning consultant, the town undertook an 18-month effort to update its master plan, open space and recreation plan, and complete its first affordable housing plan. In March 2005, the Planning Board officially adopted the Ayer Comprehensive Plan Update of 2005, an ambitious document that calls for implementation of better zoning controls in keeping with "Smart Growth" principles.

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Base Reuse Plan provided for mixed use redevelopment opportunities including new affordable housing.

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Key to the plan is recommended density increases within the urban core and surrounding zoning districts. Stricter controls and larger lot sizes would be instituted in the aquifer districts and areas of critical environmental concern. Locating additional housing near downtown, and along established transportation routes with existing water, sewer, gas and other infrastructure, makes sense. The mature central neighborhoods, with a city-like population density exceeding 3,000 persons per square mile, offer ready-access to an array of services and transportation options.

But the problem of implementation is real. Ayer, like many smaller Massachusetts communities, has yet to hire a professional planner, though exploration of the potential for doing so is called for in the new master plan. Generally, citizen volunteers that serve on municipal planning boards certainly have the town's best interests at heart. But the lack the technical staff capacity to advance zoning recommendations, distribute consistent and reliable information, and provide day-to-day contact with developers and other town departments puts these communities at risk. In Ayer, the lack of such capacity has resulted in sporadic communication amongst the town's varied permitting boards and professional department heads, and the loss of standardized application of development controls. Without adequate staffing, planning boards are typically placed into a reactive posture; reviewing subdivision plans, conducting site plan reviews, or signing-off on ANR lots. For a volunteer board that meets once or twice per month that leaves little time for what should be a primary function: planning.

Though many towns do have professional department heads with experience and knowledge in development (i.e., municipal engineers, public works directors, community economic development directors, etc.), these positions typically report to the executive office.

For an independently elected planning board, this can breed suspicion that the executive branch is trying to "control" development. These turf wars, common in many communities, serve to slow the delivery of municipal services to the development community, wasting time and money. It also leads to an inordinate amount of time and effort required to advance any zoning changes

while bringing many diverse interests in the community on-board with the proposal.

***Undoubtedly, some of these developments would have occurred due to market forces. But a closer look at the framework of these projects reveals the impact that planning officials can have as agents of change.***

### Planners as Agents of Change

So how, then, do smaller communities — typically with outdated or non-existent master plans, and limited volunteer efforts — initiate better projects while the community-at-large updates its planning documents or builds capacity? Appointed staff, notably planners and community development directors, can steer the community towards advancing the concepts of Smart Growth through a project-based approach.

Ayer's 1997 master plan was a by-product of a planning grant associated with the closure of Fort Devens. Public input was elicited during a time of great concern over the loss of the military operations at Devens, and the plan's recommendations were responsive to those specific concerns. In essence, the plan itself

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was more reactionary than visionary.

By 2002, the key recommendations in the plan had been implemented, forgotten, or relegated to the back burner. It was time to update the plan and gauge the community's goals for the ensuing decade. But, a new plan would be three years in the making. While that effort proceeded with excruciating slowness, the community development office began a concerted effort to encourage "Smart Growth" principles on a project-by-project basis, knowing that, eventually, the master plan would catch up. Focusing its efforts on the urban core, and on vacant keystone buildings, the town's development office initially encouraged formation of public-private partnerships designed to foster reuse of vacant downtown space. In the past five years, the OCED served as a liaison between private developers, selectmen and local permitting boards, to encourage a greater variety of development including:

- Creation of new single-family housing on smaller, non-conforming lots near the urban center with access to commuter rail, recreation facilities, and the wide mix of retail and services available in the downtown district.
- Renovation and reuse of the largest downtown structure, creating over 60 jobs.
- Granting of a density bonus to allow a 16-unit condominium development, including affordable units, in the downtown district.
- Completion of an award-winning restoration of the historic Town Hall, a landmark structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Acquiring a state housing support grant to subsidize restoration of a substantially-vacant Main Street building into seven affordable rental units above renovated commercial space.
- Partner with non-profit developer to secure HUD, state and local subsidies to improve a vacant former nursing home building into a 73-unit affordable assisted living facility.

Ayer has completed, or has under development, 46 new housing units in the urban core. The effort has leveraged approximately \$25 million of public and private investment to spur housing and economic development with direct access to existing roads, infrastructure, mass transit, services and recreational facilities. Undoubtedly, some of these developments would have occurred due to market forces. But a closer look at the framework of these projects reveals the impact that planning officials can have as agents of change. The following projects exemplify this effort in Ayer:

### ■ Page-Moore Block Restoration

At 24,000 square feet, the Page-Moore Block is the single largest structure on Main Street. For years the first floor housed a mishmash of lower-end retail operations. The second floor was partially vacant with some professional offices, and the third floor was a hollow repository of pigeons. Through the leadership of a prominent local family, a stunning \$2.5 million restoration was completed in 2003, yielding total reuse of the structure and creating over 60 jobs in the heart of downtown.

The quality of effort by Zelda Moore, and her son Calvin E. Moore, a fourth generation owner of Moore Lumber Co., another downtown business and major employer, helped raise the bar for subsequent projects. Funding came from the Moore family's personal resources, financing from MassDevelopment and the Ayer Industrial Development Finance Authority, as well as a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) agreement approved by town voters.

### ■ Town Hall Restoration

One might not think of a publicly-finance restoration of a town hall as an important economic development initiative. Yet, the fading condition of Ayer's Town Hall, a rare example of the Ruskin-Gothic style of architecture built between 1872 and 1876, posed a challenge for the community. Debate over the \$2.8 million needed to completely overhaul the structure led to discussion of relocating municipal services from the Main Street landmark to a former school building located in an adjoining residential neighborhood.

Community development staff lobbied for the restoration of the building as another cog in the downtown improvement effort. Keeping municipal services proximate to the post office, banking, legal and retail district also made sense. In the end, the structure was completely renovated, winning a Preservation Award from the Massachusetts Historical Commission in 2003, and providing an attractive anchor to the eastern gateway of downtown.

### ■ Ice House Project

John Grady is a renaissance man. An inventor of medical devices with roughly two dozen patents to his name, he is also an aficionado of classic Packard automobiles, and a visionary developer. In the late 1990s, Mr. Grady and his daughter Lisa Dowd, began an admirable effort to remediate the so-called Ice House property nestled along the shore of the Nashua River. In its past, the Ice House parcel had once been a service

*(continued next page)*



Ice House



Spaulding House

area for trolley cars and a water-powered mill.

An oil spill decades ago stifled interest in the brownfield site until the Ice House Partners saw its potential. The redevelopment included environmental cleanup partially subsidized through a seven-year TIF granted by the town to ease development costs. This local support was a modest, but needed, piece of the \$4 million effort that included repair of a flood control structure, retro-fitting the “power station” building as a functional mini-hydro plant, and construction of a 20,000 square foot R&D and light manufacturing facility in the image of a classic New England mill.

### ■ Spaulding Building

Again working with Calvin Moore, the community development office authored a successful grant to subsidize rehabilitation of seven, affordable rental units on the upper levels of the Spaulding Building, which had been vacant for at least 30 years.

A \$750,000 housing support grant, funded by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, provided enough incentive to leverage private funding to complete the \$2 million project. MassDevelopment was again a partner lender along with substantial out-of-pocket funds from developer. Work on the 1881 mixed-use structure began earlier this year, and occupancy is expected in early 2006. The first floor is expected to house a new restaurant, adding to the downtown’s appeal.

### ■ Zoning Relief

Bringing housing units back online in the downtown area is an important component of the town’s

revitalization strategy. Towards that end, the community development office has worked closely with the zoning and planning boards to better understand the benefits of increasing housing density in the downtown district.

The Zoning Board granted a density bonus to allow construction of 16 condominium units on a former industrial use parcel that abuts the Nashua River Rail Trail downtown. In exchange for the density bonus, the developer made 10 percent of the Chandler Place units affordable to households of low- to moderate-income. All 16 units were completed in 2004 and are now occupied. The market rate condos sold for \$280,000, while the two affordable units were purchased by single-parent families for \$160,000.

The community development office led efforts to sell an undersized, town-owned parcel near downtown for one dollar to Habitat For Humanity. The 5,000 square foot lot once housed a residential home that burned sometime prior to 1972. The vacant lot had remained in tax title for over 30 years. Now the home is nearly complete and an income-eligible family will move in during the next month, plus the property returns to the tax rolls.

### ■ Nashoba Park

Finally, the town engaged in a four-year mating dance with Volunteers of America-Massachusetts, a non-profit agency, to redevelop a vacant former nursing home building into a 73-unit affordable assisted-living facility. After protracted efforts to secure the complex financing and subsidies required to ensure affordability, the project broke ground earlier this year and is sched-

uled for a November 2005 opening.

The \$13 million effort includes restoration of the 20,000-square-foot nursing home (which was once the town's community hospital), and a 20,000-square-foot expansion to the facility. The project received federal HUD loan guarantees to enhance MassDevelopment financing. Many other partners, including the Mass. Dept. of Housing & Community Development, and Ayer IDFA, helped this project become reality. Upon completion, the facility will provide 28 jobs and remove a blight from the neighborhood.

## Looking Ahead

For a community the size of Ayer, there is much happening. The concept of inertia is vital to community development. It can take years to get a plan moving, but once critical mass has been accumulated, and the projects begin to flow, there is no limit to what can be accomplished.

In the coming year, Ayer's community development department will seek to leverage the inertia created by the above projects into other initiatives that will continue the spirit of reinvestment, namely:

- Implementation of transit improvements through up to \$5.1 million in secured federal and state transportation funds for commuter rail station and parking improvements to serve the needs of workers and downtown businesses.
- Continuation of the sign and façade improvement program that provides incentive for private investment in needed property improvements.
- Fall 2005 opening of a new \$6 million fire department headquarters on a remediated downtown brownfield site.
- Continued advocacy for HUD funding to implement a well-conceived collaborative plan to convert a long-vacant school building into 21 units of elderly supportive housing.

Concurrent with the above initiatives, between now and November of 2006, the Towns of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley are working collaboratively with Devens' residents, MassDevelopment, and the Devens Enterprise Commission — the unified permitting authority for the former base — to develop a disposition plan. Upon agreement by five of the above six stakeholders, to be evidenced by approval of their respective executive offices and town meetings, the plan will be presented to the state legislature for formal adoption.

Discussion to date has revolved around two sce-

narios: (1) return of the former base to the historical municipal boundaries and jurisdiction; or (2) creation of a new community, perhaps with portions of land being returned to the underlying municipality. Any new community would become the 352nd in the Commonwealth, and the first since 1920.

The times are exciting, and the face of Ayer is changing once again. But its indomitable spirit remains the same. ■

*Shaun A. Suhoski has twelve years of municipal experience in community development and planning, serving as Director of Community and Economic Development for the Town of Ayer, Massachusetts, for the past six years. He sits on the Board of Directors for the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Planning Association as its Economic Development Chair.*

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# Great Challenges in Downtown Revitalization in Italy

by Giovanna Codato and Elena Franco

In recent years, the distinctive image that has always characterized Italian town centers is gradually fading away, distorted by the erratic colonizing of new in-town and out-of-town commercial developments. From the first appearance of a commercial multiple-story gallery in the Roman Era, Trajan's Forum, and a renewed tentative in the late 1800s with the downtown commercial gallery in Milan, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Italy had been reluctant to commercial sprawl until the 1970s. After a gradual reconciliation, it had a new sheer start in the late '80s: between 1987 and 1992 big boxes more than decupled. There are now over six hundred shopping centers in Italy, 65 percent of which are in Northern Italy, which accommodates up to 35 regional malls, for a pro capita commercial space of 0.30 against the 0.13 of the early '90s (and current 0.25 in the United Kingdom and 0.24 in France).

Recent studies show that this trend is unlikely to change in the years to come. With 2003 seen as the record year, having registered six million square feet in new gross leasable area, there is now an expected increase of 45 percent in the next three years, reaching over 34 million square feet of retailing and innovative leisure and entertainment activities.

The progressively growing "industry" of commerce, prompted by foreign big box chains (over 70 percent total investments are foreign), that predict 30 to 40

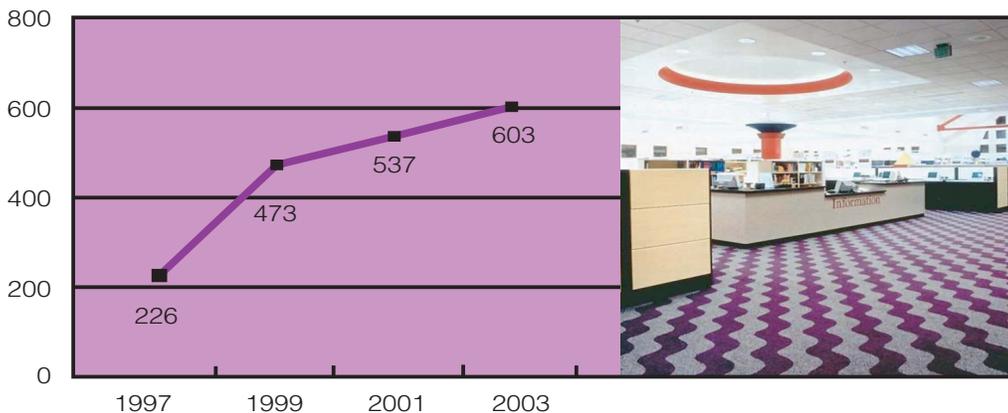
new ventures annually for a total increase of 30 percent in less than 20 years. This has set a frantic pace, especially in Italy's suburban towns, making the government race after growing commercial settlements with laws that work merely as patches to the "leakages" in the commercial development system that has been accompanied by a growing infrastructures collapse (three times the volume of traffic on American highways).

In 1998 the National government passed a new law to enable the country to respond properly to the modernizing economy by attempting to level different types of commercial activities. Local laws were thus enacted by its 20 regions and in 20 different ways. Given the relatively small dimension of the Italian peninsula, this has often generated great idiosyncrasies between contiguous regions, which rarely consult on new commercial developments settlements. The balance the National law claimed was lost to this lack of coordination. Some regions are now working to rationalize their commercial networks, but as a result of the previous conduct, Italy now features 12 outlet centers in a 200-mile radius, all regularly licensed.

Besides the questionable sustainability of such concrete extensions, in terms of infrastructure overload and environmental impact, such new developments being erected in the outskirts of void early 19th-century town centers, also pose a qualitative threat to Italy's unique scenery as a whole, thus dramatically dimming

the Italian suburban landscape, now indistinguishable and uneventful. Such process is already causing a progressive loss of local identity — and charm — its ancient streets, historic districts within cities and exceptional "open air museums," which Italy views as irreplaceable economic resources for tourism, can't afford to see  
*(continued next page)*

Shopping Malls Growth Trend In Italy



decline. Yet the most impressive changes are occurring in ordinary towns and their outskirts, especially in Northern Italy. The towns, by responding to residents' and shoppers' growing demand for standardized services, are witnessing the spreading of retail chains and the consequent supplanting of traditional downtown retail stores and the diminishment of quality historic downtown districts that once offered both shopping and living alike.

### Regulatory Impacts

In Lombardy, the region whose Capital is Milan, some historical commercial districts in suburban villages have literally disappeared as every business activity has moved out to large strip malls and out-of-town plazas. *Au contraire*, the highway that stretches from Turin to Milan is constellated by new shopping centers, power centers and outlets, as crop fields readily give way to concrete, originating an amorphous gamut of citified landscape. Scrolling down the Italian *panorama*, another tendency thus emerges: the modernization of the distribution network of commercial activities and the expansion of medium to large chains that urges investors to flee the downtowns and move on to new opportunities in commercial development, (much like the American 1960s commercial trend), a trend that has literally bewildered Italy's commercial layout.

New shopping patterns do not always harmonize with historic preservation's principles for retailers commonly think in terms of convenience, location, and, of course, economic benefits. Downtown retailers need to respond properly to an environment with ever-changing trends in demand and offer to set the pace. However, renovating older commercial buildings has always paid less than to build from scratch. Retailers and property owners, who usually lead restoration processes individually, overlook the fact that their investments may bring a diffused added value, thus ameliorating an area's economic conditions as a whole. And local authorities often fail to involve them in large-scale restoration projects because of divergent objectives or simply because of lack of communication. Historic retail stores, often passed on from generations, offer a pleasant outlook on Italian tradition and folklore in most downtowns, but they are gradually dematerializing. The main reason for this not-so-subtle change lies in the fact that often, given their historical status, such shops require interventions that limit — or even preclude — profitable expansions or modernizations. The strict regulatory acts enacted by the National Preservation Offices fail to take into account the economic nature of businesses

and let aesthetic principles prevail, paradoxically discouraging renovation. Disregarding the fact that their subjection to limitations in rehabilitation and reuse can improve the town center's image as a whole, historic shop owners find it hard to recognize in them a key resource in downtown's economic revitalization. The relocation to modern buildings and the allure of brand new out-of-town shopping facilities are more appealing to many shop owners.

### Downtown Restoration Initiatives

Some restrictions have in fact proved beneficial, and have in fact contributed to identity-restoring downtown renewal plans, as in the case of Turin's downtown Porticos project. The ongoing restoration of 12 kilometers of Turin's arched porticos, where six hundred shops are present, one third of which maintain traditional furniture and appearance, is part of the strong thrust given by the local municipality to spur urban beautification as it looks toward the 2006 Winter Olympics. This, seemingly, is the last chance for this post-industrial city to renovate and devise a new role for its future. After having witnessed a dramatic increase in poverty, decline and crime rates, the heart of the city, which maintains a baroque aura inherited from Savoy's three-century-long monarchy that had chosen it as its capital, blended with the typical characterization of an industrial city — namely Turin's new identity up until recent recession years — has been at the center of attention for the urban renewal initiatives, funded by the municipality, the central government, and private businesses.

The City of Turin has recently approved a set of guidelines, developed in cooperation with local retailers' associations and the Polytechnic of Turin, that prescribe the types of actions permitted, along with a set of criteria that should be adopted when business and property owner intervene on exterior renovations for both historic and more modern shops that line the arcaded stretch. The businesses may benefit from local funding which covers up to 50 percent of their expenses up to a maximum of 10,000 Euros. Accordingly, the local administration has funded the complete façade renovation of the porticos. Several instruments had already been put into effect in order to properly renovate the historic portions of the town center with facade painting color palette plans and business advertising and lighting regulations. The ladder tool has proven more effective as it recognizes business owners' direct involvement in maintaining historic shops and investing in the downtown.

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On the contrary, some prescriptive measures have simply proven to be ruinous for the economic revitalization of downtowns, where despite massive public interventions in old districts, effective economic revitalization efforts have not followed. Even famous tourist spots now struggle to conserve the typical aura of Italian historic downtowns, as they *adapt* to new economically driven commercial trends, flaunting all-alike franchising chains. Nowadays, Naples' Sorrento may very well proffer the same stores that can be found in Milan, or even in New York City. Fortunately, in the ruinous realm so far described, some regions and local authorities have begun to embrace stronger policies to define commercial development trends. Strategies adopted by single cities, such as Bologna, Perugia, Rome, Pisa, Florence and Palermo seem more focused. Such larger cities have in fact activated multi-sectored integrated measures for downtown revitalization, according to an holistic approach which sees the conjunct action of urban design beautification and the setting up of local associations to *arouse* local sense of community.

Smaller cities seem to react a bit less *energetically*, though innovative downtown economic revitalization processes are taking place in some towns in the Piedmont Region. The Piedmont region was among the first regional governments to approve its commercial uses law, which conjugates commerce and urban planning in order to outline future and existent commercial networks and identify the mechanisms of competitive markets. It did this by enacting two regional regulations aimed at integrating traditional retail and modern commercial centers. It traced two regional networks which link towns according to their potential attractiveness (based on their size) and set up a regional funding system to support urban revitalization through two different programs: PQUs, Urban Revitalization Programs for medium to large towns, aimed at revitalizing downtown historical districts and involve structural interventions for streetscape beautification, pedestrian oriented areas, traffic calming plans, etc, and PIRs, Integrated Revitalization Programs, for towns with population under 3,000, that focus on satisfying town center residents' basic needs, especially in rural and mountainous areas, by bringing business and retail activities back in the downtown.

The programs were set up to restore downtown economies through a strong public thrust initially to encourage private local participation, and a second phase, that would establish local downtown partnerships. Given its relative short life, the program seems to have worked fairly well. Out of 1,200 medium to small



Historic shop in Pinerolo.

towns in the Piedmont region, nearly ten percent took part in this program in the first five years of its existence, and the regional government has contributed over 36 million euros, 34 percent of which was destined to local retailers. The program hasn't completely fulfilled its objectives yet: only six percent of the towns that have applied for the funding program and established downtown partnerships. However, a positive indicator has been retailers' involvement: their investment in new shop windows, shop signs and external lighting, and façade improvements, has followed up public intervention in 50 percent of the cases.

A second regional regulation aims at managing and monitoring the settling of new shopping centers in Piedmont, introducing requirements concerning assessment studies (to evaluate physical and economical impact of the new commercial location on the area) as well as an impact tax for new commercial developments, currently under discussion. Regione Piemonte's strategy is among the most innovative currently in effect, and performance indicators have thus far shown positive trends in downtown revitalization initiatives in response to evolving tendencies. Though no real recipe has been found in this short time's experience, an analysis of best practices showed that key strategies for success have been mediation between the principles of historic and cultural preservation and economic ones based on free trade and marketing, and the holistic approach to downtown revitalization, that takes into

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## GREAT CHALLENGES IN DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION IN ITALY, CONT. FROM P. 14

account other aspects of urban life, such as mobility, socialization and community involvement.

This seems the case of medium-size towns like Pinerolo, where the local administration has devised an urban revitalization program in order to curb a new retail facility's debut just one mile distant from the town center, with 108,000 square feet of gross leasable area, 30 percent of which will be dedicated to food retailing. The local authority has intervened on the main square and has invested in general streetscape improvement, renewing street furniture and public lighting system renewal, while private intervention (both undertaken by business and property owners) included the implementation of restoration plans with new

residential units, firms and stores, restoration of building façades, signboards, awnings and shop windows.

The town, which lies in the main corridor connecting the Olympic venues in the Susa Valley and the City of Turin, and hosts a venue itself, intends to promote its historic business district during the Olympic event, that may very well act as a catalyst for further downtown revitalization actions. The town is now in the process of setting up a local management association of its own.

Another interesting initiative set out to counteract big box cannibalizing tendencies is the one activated by  
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Aerial view of Cuneo. Above left: free downtown shuttle. Above right: downtown porticoes.



Left: Novi Ligure aerial view showing EuroNovi project area. Right: Novi's Main Street.

the town of Cuneo. This medium-sized town, located at the foot of the French Alps and stranded in a traditionally farming area, envisioned new strategies to allure new and old customers back to its pulsing heart — the downtown — by cooperating with the local retailers' association. In the Year 2001, the latter created "il Porticone" (taking the name from the town's long stretch of porticos), an association supported by the local Chamber of Commerce, along with the local authority, whose mission is to economically revitalize the business district. Mainly led by the local retailers' association itself, it actively participates in local authority's meetings concerning retail and mobility issues, and cooperates with it to organize and support promotional activities and set up development strategies for the downtown commercial district (called "the natural shopping center"). At the same time, the local administration has sustained extensive public interventions that include historical preservation projects and adaptive reuse plans for its buildings and its streets, aimed at restoring its ancient medieval charm and attractiveness for new investors. Also it welcomed and financially supported the Porticone's ideas such as the promotion of free downtown bike riding and shuttle transfer from outer parking into the town center.

A more challenging situation is being faced by Novi Ligure, a fairly small town located in the Province of Alessandria, the heart of an important industrial area, due to its proximity to highway and railway connections, and pivotal cities like Milan, Genoa and Turin. Novi Ligure's downtown was threatened by its nearness to the most successful designer outlet in Italy, McArthur-Glen Designer Outlets Serravalle, which accommodates over one hundred shops, including some of world's most renowned names in fashion, sport and housewares, and countless restaurants, bars and eateries. Its presence heavily impacted on the historic commercial district for the first two months after its opening, though slowly the town center's business activities were able to respond to the new *stimuli* and gradually regained most of its market portion. This was also achieved with the actions carried out by a local retailers' Association called "Il Cuore di Novi" (the Heart of Novi, N.d.T.), founded in the Year 2001. Its mission is to promote and support local businesses with events and commerce-enhancing activities, and is also aimed at increasing the evening economy, along with services to businesses.

The most interesting aspect in Novi's marketing strategy lies in the fact that it has identified the down-

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town as the “natural” equivalent of a shopping center, and has, therefore, adopted a Common Area Maintenance structure for its management. In addition, it borrowed marketing approaches, as well as customer fidelity strategies from big-boxes and shopping centers, literally emulating them with lotteries and contests for data retrieval and performance monitoring. The association has been quite successful in the fulfillment of its goals so far. It has raised awareness among retailers, now more flexible and open to new customer needs and desires in terms of hours of operation and services offered. The marketing strategy has promoted a new, dynamic image of Novi’s downtown in and out of the regional territory. However, a new challenge is to be met, as an extensive brown field reconversion to mixed residential and commercial use plan called EuroNovi has been approved with construction underway. Once completed, it will accommodate commercial activities for a total gross leasable area almost three times that of Novi’s Central Business District. The plan foresees the building of new modernly conceived shopping facilities, which include a 135,000-square-foot shopping area where a 40,000-square-foot hypermarket will be built along with 25 new shops. A strip mall will also be built in the same area, with 108,000 square feet of gross leasable area. The adjacent outlet center apparently has not had a lasting impact on the central district’s economy. However, the brownfield conversion area, where Euronovi’s new shopping facilities will settle, with almost triple the downtown’s gross leasable area with very similar merchandise, could, in the long run, be deleterious for the town center. This may be a destiny that more Italian suburban towns will presumably face in the years to come.

## Conclusion

What Italy has been witnessing in the past decade can hardly reflect the National Law’s aspiration: big box chains initially imported from France and now well embraced by Italian entrepreneurship, plaster Italian suburbs, strip malls and all-alike chains congesting Italian towns, centers and outskirts, proposing continuous new tendencies and models of shopping paradises. This widespread enthusiasm for new shopping facilities has gradually penetrated Italy’s traditional “shopping culture” and is even being professed everyday at lunchtime with a new soap opera — one of the top 10 most watched shows — whose main setting for the unraveling of love entanglements and more generalized tragedies is a shopping center. So, despite the downtown efforts undertaken, there are a number of challenges that still

need to be met: some old, such as an innate reluctance to base revitalization strategies on a sense of community, and a lack of volunteer participation and organization; and newer ones, such as expanded big box competition and franchise chains’ cannibalizing strategies. ■

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## Student Research Highlight

# A Primer on Public-Private Ventures in Washington State

by Shana R. Johnson

*Editor's note: students interested in submitting their research for consideration as a future highlight should email sretherford@alumni.clarku.edu for details.*

**J**oshua Curtis, a recent graduate of the University of Washington Master of Urban Planning program, experienced first-hand the world of economic development planning through his professional project in which he developed a "How-To" guide for public-private partnerships for small towns in Washington State. As a consultant for Madrona Planning and Development Services, a firm headed by Rick Sepler, he and one other student developed a feasibility study for a public-private partnership in Buckley, Washington. Joshua additionally produced a "primer" on creating public-private partnerships for small towns in the state as a deliverable for a grant from the Washington State Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED).

Originally from Maui, Joshua came to planning after working in disaster mitigation and rural infrastructure as a Peace Corps volunteer and staff member in the Dominican Republic. Upon returning after four years abroad, he settled in Seattle and quickly became involved in several community organizations. He took a leadership role in the Fremont Solstice Parade (an event of the local Fremont Arts Council) and Fremont Public Association (a local NGO) and through his community involvement became interested in neighborhood revitalization. He decided to stay in Seattle and attend the University of Washington's graduate planning program as his commitment and interest in the neighborhoods of the city grew.

Joshua's "Primer on Public-Private Ventures in Washington State" had its genesis in a 2004 studio project in which first-year planning students drafted a comprehensive plan for the small town of Buckley, Washington. Through the plan, and a subsequent Master Plan, students and faculty recommended the town pursue a feasibility analysis for a potential road realignment and associated redevelopment of two parcels the town received through the Rails to Trails program along the highway SR 410. Seizing on this recommendation, Buckley hired Madrona Planning and Development Services to develop strategies for pursuing a private-public partnership to accomplish its goals. While Joshua researched different partnership structures, fellow University of Washington student Susie Hamilton worked on the financial models for the report.

Early into the process of writing the manual, Joshua encountered "some real salient issues," the main one regarding the legality of public-private partnership in Washington State. Under state law, towns and corporations are not allowed to be partners in "any legal sense of the word." In fact, he soon found that while the term "partnerships" was often used in the context of public-private development, rarely were cities and developers "partners" in the true sense of the word. After speaking with a number of the state's prominent land use lawyers on the subject he

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*Joshua's "Primer on Public-Private Ventures in Washington State" had its genesis in a 2004 studio project in which first-year planning students drafted a comprehensive plan for the small town of Buckley, Washington.*



decided it would be more appropriate to use the term “ventures” rather than “partnerships.” He also decided that while there were many different nuances to the legality of public-private development, a simple heuristic device was needed for smaller towns:

1. A town cannot guarantee a private entities’ debt.
2. A town has to be reasonably compensated for any contribution to a deal with a private entity.

As there was little research concerning strategies for small towns with limited resources wanting to pursue public-private development ventures, Joshua says he felt “on the cutting edge of planning.”

In Buckley’s case, Joshua and his colleagues found that the town needed to seek outside funding for the road realignment and to avoid thinking of the road realignment as a contribution to any private development as that could be construed as an unconstitutional gift under Washington law. Instead Madrona Planning recommended that the public-private venture be viewed as an “incidental” benefit of the road realignment. Following their presentation to city council of Buckley of these proposals in late spring, town officials and planning commission members are now reviewing the recommendations of the report and manual. While the town staff is cautiously optimistic and sees a venture as a way to preserve their small town feel while revitalizing their economy, Buckley also faces challenges similar to other small towns. Currently re-zoning their downtown, the community, Joshua says, “is struggling with what they want to be and how they want to grow.”

Joshua hopes that the accompanying *Primer on*

### Further Resources

City of Buckley: [www.cityofbuckley.com](http://www.cityofbuckley.com)  
 Fremont Arts Council: [www.fremontartscouncil.org](http://www.fremontartscouncil.org)  
 Fremont Public Association: [www.fremontpublic.org](http://www.fremontpublic.org)  
 Madrona Planning and Development: [www.madronaplanning.com](http://www.madronaplanning.com)  
 University of Washington-Seattle Graduate Planning Program:  
[www.caup.washington.edu](http://www.caup.washington.edu)  
 Washington State CTED: [www.cted.wa.gov](http://www.cted.wa.gov)

*Public-Private Ventures* he authored will give Buckley officials a good idea of how and when to bring in a developer and what the procurement options are for them. In the report he emphasized that they need to develop a vision that appeals to a developer, one with exciting ideas. One of the challenges in these ventures, he said, is for both sides to mitigate stereotypes and learn how to speak a common language.

Through the project Joshua came to believe that there is “a lot of potential in the idea that the possibility for small towns to work with regional third partners — development councils, housing authorities, non-governmental organizations, and others. He says he’d “love to see a regional organization that helps municipalities focus on facilitating public-private ventures” as they would bring more professional expertise at an early stage, and would perhaps even invest in the project. Joshua thinks that “there is a lot of potential for small towns if they can find such regional partners.”

Joshua is currently searching for a job in the Seattle area doing real estate and economic development. He can be contacted at [joshua3@u.washington.edu](mailto:joshua3@u.washington.edu). 📧

## Welcome to Our New Members...

Mischelle Anderson	Bartow, FL	Angela Hope-Weusi	Brooklyn, NY	Rita Shade	Wilmington, DE
Sean P. Bender	Boston, MA	Cheryl Howell	Cocoa, FL	Holly Smyth	Lemoore, CA
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Nicole Hendrickson	Oceanside, CA	Gary Romano	Cambridge, MA		

## Calendar of Upcoming Events

### **September 8-9, 2005**

International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Technology-Led Economic Development; <http://www.iedconline.org/?p=calendar#july05>

### **September 12-13, 2005**

International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Economic Development Marketing; <http://www.iedconline.org/?p=calendar#july05>

### **September 22-23, 2005**

International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Neighborhood Development Strategies; [http://www.iedconline.org/AnnualConference/Neighborhood\\_Strategies.html](http://www.iedconline.org/AnnualConference/Neighborhood_Strategies.html)

### **September 22-23, 2005**

International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Business Retention and Expansion; [http://www.iedconline.org/AnnualConference/Neighborhood\\_Strategies.html](http://www.iedconline.org/AnnualConference/Neighborhood_Strategies.html)

### **September 24-25, 2005**

International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Certified Economic Developer Exam; <http://www.iedconline.org/?p=Certification>

### **September 25-27, 2005**

National Association for Business Economists (NABE), NABE Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL; <http://www.nabe.com/meet.htm>

### **September 25-28, 2005**

2005 International Economic Development Council (IEDC) Annual Conference; [http://www.iedconline.org/conferences\\_top.html](http://www.iedconline.org/conferences_top.html)

### **November 2-5, 2005**

Association of University Research Parks (AURP), 2005 Annual Conference, Sheraton Raleigh, North Carolina; <http://www.aurp.net/meet/calendar/cfm>

### **November 8-9, 2005**

International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Course: Business Retention and Expansion; Atlanta, Georgia; [www.pe.gatech.edu](http://www.pe.gatech.edu)

### **December 6-10, 2005**

The National League of Cities, Congress of Cities and Exposition, Charlotte, North Carolina; [http://www.nlc.org/nlc\\_org/site/conferences/future\\_conferences/index.cfm](http://www.nlc.org/nlc_org/site/conferences/future_conferences/index.cfm)

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