

Downtown focus correct

Downtown Scranton is in the midst of a revival and transformation. It's one of the most counterintuitive developments of the past decade given the city government's and school district's financial problems and economic issues that work against urban development.

So it makes sense to create a downtown business improvement district to sustain or even accelerate the momentum.

Thursday, city council approved the 2018 city budget and introduced an ordinance to create the district under the direction of the nonprofit, non-partisan civic advocacy organization Scranton Tomorrow. The government will provide initial funding of \$325,000, including \$250,000 from the sale of the city sewer system and \$75,000 from the operating budget. The enterprise will seek nearly \$1.5 million more over three years through grants and contributions from interested parties.

The downtown's resurgence has been rooted in the conversion of commercial buildings into quality apartments. It's a new market, driven partially by the success of the Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, the University of Scranton, young people accustomed to living downtown in other cities, and some older residents no longer interested in home ownership.

The downtown business landscape has reacted to that development. There are several new upscale restaurants and boutiques, for example.

The new initiative is likely to sustain that trend through important matters like ensuring that streets and sidewalks are clean and that the community has a voice in City Hall.

But it also will focus more on small business development downtown, the next logical step.

The conversion of the Marketplace at Steamtown from a retail mall to a mixed-use lifestyle center and the conversion of the former Samter's building into an apartment with street-level dining and retail are examples of the trend.

Relocation of Lackawanna County government headquarters next year from 200 Adams Avenue and several other locations into the former Globe Store will offer opportunities on the 100 blocks of Wyoming and Penn avenues.

As the new initiative unfolds, however, it's crucial for the city government and the school district to attend to the major structural issues that impede progress downtown — high taxes and excessively costly parking.

Council and the Courtright administration are on the mark in recognizing the downtown as a key to the city's overall progress. Now they, along with the school district and Lackawanna County's government, need to make it a priority in other elements of government policy.