

## WE NEED TO DEFEAT DEFEATIST ATTITUDES ABOUT DOWNTOWN

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NOT TOO long ago, a colleague walked up to me and said, "You know, you're wasting your time."

I wasn't sure what he meant, but he went on: "Downtown's not coming back."

I've written several columns about the possibility of downtown coming back, what it will take and why St. Louisans - all of us, city residents or not - should be excited about the prospect.

My colleague, a wise journalist who occasionally offers me advice when he thinks I've gone off the deep end, said he believes downtown is dead. "It died years ago, and it's not coming back," he said. "Anybody who thinks it can come back is dreaming."

My colleague's not alone in his doubt. I've received letters from people saying the same thing. People occasionally walk up to me on the street and suggest that I stop writing about downtown because they think it's a waste of time.

Some of the comments I've received in the past couple of months have included, "Stop wasting your time. The city's not coming back. I'll never return and neither will anyone else who has left."

"Who cares about downtown? I live in north St. Louis, and I shop in the county. Our neighborhoods need to be fixed up. I don't give a flip about downtown."

"Why should anyone care about downtown? I live near Plaza Frontenac and everything I need is right around here. If downtown died tomorrow, how many people would even notice?"

Quite a few, I suspect. Although some may consider it unimportant, it provides as much as a third of the city's income. Thousands of people work downtown. Downtown will always be the area that tourists will think about when they think of St. Louis. And there's no reason the revitalization of downtown and the renovation of city neighborhoods should be mutually exclusive.

I'm realistic about downtown. It has plenty of problems that need to be addressed. But those problems aren't insurmountable. They'll take a little imagination, a lot of courage and some bucks thrown into the pot - but they can be dealt with.

Our biggest problem is low self-esteem, a belief by many that we can't achieve, a myth that St. Louis can never be as great as other cities.

Nothing spells defeat better than defeatism. Nothing was ever achieved by anyone who didn't believe in what he or she was doing. If you believe i t, you can achieve it.

Downtown has things going for it. All of the area's major highways converge downtown. The city's greatest tourist attraction - the Arch - is downtown. Downtown is hugged on the east by the longest flowing river in the United States. It has a tremendous treasure of old, architecturally significant buildings that other cities would die for.

Downtown has some good minds at work, and those minds don't necessarily belong to Civic Progress. Bob Cassilly didn't wait for the approval of Civic Progress or some other entity before going ahead with his City Museum, which will open Oct. 25. Paul "Pablo" Weiss didn't wait around until some group of top business officials gave their permission for him to open his restaurant and bar, Hot Locust and Pablo's, on Locust Street. Those who are buying and rehabbing old warehouses downtown and turning them into loft apartments haven't been sitting around for some group to give them the go-ahead before pushing ahead on their projects.

A great deal can be achieved by people without waiting for Civic Progress, or St. Louis 2004, or any other organization to give a stamp of approval. While there's no question that it can be difficult at times to get through the bureaucratic maze of St. Louis city government - a system that's crying out to be streamlined, by the way - there's also a lot that can be done.

But if we all sit back dreaming up reasons why things can't be done instead of how they can be done, nothing positive's going to happen.

The folks who are trying to revitalize downtown aren't tilting at windmills, and they're not wasting their time. They're pioneers, leading the way toward a future for what is perhaps the most important location of our region.

No one ever told this nation's pioneers that their lives would be easy. But this country wouldn't have been what it is today had they not pushed forward.

Downtown's pioneers deserve all the support they can get.

- Memo: Gregory Freeman's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. You can reach him on PostLine at 923-2323, then tap in 4076, by fax at 340-3050, by e-mail at [gfreeman@pd.stlnet.com](mailto:gfreeman@pd.stlnet.com) or by writing him at the Post-Dispatch, 900 North Tucker Blvd., St. Louis, Mo. 63101. You can find online discussion of his column on POSTnet ([www.stlnet.com/postnet](http://www.stlnet.com/postnet)).

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