

Opinion | Downtown's deterioration led to Janae Edmondson's injury. Here's how to turn the neighborhood around.

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By Dan Pistor, Les Sterman

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The horrific crash that critically injured Janae Edmondson was not an accident; it was predictable and preventable.

It was the inevitable result of a conspiracy of silence, indifference and inaction regarding the deteriorating condition of our downtown. That must end now. We need to focus on what needs to be done differently to prevent this kind of tragedy from ever happening again. There is a sensible roadmap to do exactly that.

Over the past few years, volunteer groups of downtown residents, property owners and businesses developed a plan to secure our downtown. It is a commonsense approach shaped by people who live and work downtown every day and who witness firsthand the challenges that we face. We call it the “Five Point Plan for Downtown Safety.” It has been developed and

endorsed by Citizens for a Greater Downtown St. Louis, the Downtown Neighborhood Association and the Downtown Economic Development Council. The plan was provided to the leadership of the City and Greater St. Louis, Inc. nearly two years ago.

The plan has five major elements with multiple actions in each. Importantly, most of these actions are not the responsibility of police; rather, they involve regulatory steps and voluntary action by private entities to reduce the sources of criminal and disorderly activity. While a few of the action steps are being undertaken in limited form already, there must be a comprehensive approach that addresses the entire safety agenda. That doesn't exist now, and this plan is an appeal for community leaders to accept that challenge. If we do not act now, St. Louis will acquire an enduring reputation as a dangerous and failed city.

Space does not permit a description of each of the action steps in the plan, but there are five major categories:

1. Traffic Disorder/Lawlessness. Downtown St Louis is a magnet for cruising and illegal vehicles (ATV's, minibikes, etc.). Areas surrounding downtown are staging areas for this disruptive and often criminal activity. Speeding and red-light running are constant, often by unregistered or stolen cars, resulting in serious crashes. Without consistent police resources, changes in infrastructure, and other methods to frustrate this activity, the cycle continues. The plan describes a long-term strategy to reduce these behaviors.
2. Problem Properties. There are too many properties Downtown that have become principal sources of crime and disorder. The notorious Reign Nightclub and downtown Shell gas station are examples. Parties and events taking place in short-term rental units have generated fights, gunfire and other lawless activity. Drug dealing is a problem in some residential buildings, downtown parks and other properties. Unlike most cities, St. Louis has no ordinance to regulate short-term rentals. We have proposed one.
3. Liquor Licensing. The high concentration of establishments selling alcohol creates problems, especially along Washington Avenue where residential density is highest. Excessive noise, general disorder and frequent violence are driving residents out, reducing demand for downtown living, scaring off tourists, creating negative media coverage and discouraging business. We have outlined regulatory tools that can be used to allow bars and entertainment venues to coexist with residential properties.
4. Unhoused Populations. Downtown St Louis has become home for a disproportionate number of homeless service providers, and is the region's center for the unhoused. Panhandling, drug dealing and use, and encampments on public property are constant issues. The Safety Plan addresses local and regional actions to address this problem.
5. Surface Parking Lots. Large surface parking lots downtown are attractive for illegal and disruptive activities. Many lots lack any kind of security, allowing disruptive activities to flourish. We have drafted an ordinance to require fencing and gates to secure these lots.

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