

## Reinvigorating the main street



**OPINION David West**

**How can mainstreet precincts stay competitive in an environment of increasing online shopping and massive malls? Mainstreet SA chairman David West examines the challenges and success stories.**

CUSTOMERS want clean and safe streets, quality events and activities, good street design, and a variety of quirky, interesting shops.

While shopping centres have a single property owner and manager to coordinate all these activities, street precincts face challenges such as multiple property owners and often a voluntary trader association to deliver services for the main street.

Some have sufficient funds to pay for a part-time coordinator. The Adelaide West End Association has an annual budget of \$20,900, a part-time coordinator and many voluntary unpaid hours, while Stirling Business Association has a modest \$76,000 annually and is able to deliver marketing, monthly markets, garden festivals and a quality website.

King William Road businesses contribute \$130,000 annually to deliver a range of high-quality fashion and food events, directories and the Tour Down Under party.

Rundle Mall is Adelaide's premier shopping precinct, attracting visitors and shoppers from all over the state and interstate, while also catering for city office workers and students. The professionally delivered management, marketing and events program is funded through a separate rate levy and supported by council, with the Rundle Mall Management Authority responsible for the strategic direction of the Mall and advocacy.

The not-for-profit organisation Mainstreet SA was launched last year to promote and foster the business, tourism and place-making interests of its members through recognising main streets as the beating heart of their local communities. It provides valuable networking, education, support and strategic direction for all stakeholders, and leadership to address issues of concern.

The organisation recently hosted a networking function which looked at the need for sustainable funding to cover services and activities such as a professional street manager, marketing programs and events. An update was provided on best-practice funding models in the United Kingdom.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) are successfully lifting the performance of high streets overseas, and this strategy can be adapted for Australia.

BIDS in the UK and United States are professional and democratic, and they deliver great outcomes. Small towns and street precincts such as Bristol Broadmead and large cities like Philadelphia and London are establishing BIDS to lift the standards of cleaning, safety and marketing, and to reduce costs for business.

BID funding for high streets is usually committed for five years, which allows independent, professional staff to plan ahead and deliver measurable results. Businesses vote for a five-year business plan and commit funds to deliver the plan. After this time, they vote again to continue or cease the BID, and from 2003 to 2012 more than 95 per cent have been continued, which demonstrates business support.

BIDS are driven by the private sector and sanctioned by government. The business plans are longer term and do not rely on the political periods of council. In many cases, the BID can attract more investment and commitment from the private sector. Street precincts in Adelaide, its suburbs or SA country regions could benefit from the collective energy harnessed by a BID.

Rundle Street in the city is a good example of what can be achieved through a coordinated approach to building the business mix. The Maras Group has attracted many high-quality fashion stores and created clusters of like retailers. In Marylebone High Road in London, the Walden Estate has also worked towards developing a quality mix to attract customers.

A detailed review of high streets across the UK revealed that a coordinated approach to improving high streets and town centres needed a “Town Team” of stakeholders or a Business Improvement District to manage and professionally coordinate business activities and attract more customers.

In South Australia, we have recently launched a Mainstreet Awards program to reward business associations and councils that are working hard to deliver better main streets in cities, the suburbs and country areas. Award categories include marketing, events, business mix, street design, and sustainability, and members of the public can also vote for their favourite main street in the People’s Choice Award until September 21.

