

THE SECOND ROUND OF LOCKDOWN STUDY



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

I plan on another nationwide evaluation of downtown vacancies due to the 2021 lockdown. This time, I will leave a few days before I did in 2021 and hope it does not get upper 90s temperatures in some of the locations, as I encountered in 2021.

I will also be able to have solid data on office vacancies in many of the big cities during this round. Still, I can also quickly determine the office vacancies in some small towns that I need to rank in the system.

I was thinking of towns like Gillette, Wyoming in particular. Gillette is the "energy capital of the nation" because of the collection of fossil fuels available. There is an out-of-scale skyscraper in the middle of the block. It has taken the form of the citadel of the town. The out-of-scale building could be looked at in several ways regarding the town's development. The size of the building was probably by a variance, but it could be part of a plan to make the city capture more of an office market as a spin-off of being the "energy capital of the nation."

Many of the towns have a few office buildings, and it will be easy to inventory those to see if they are vacant or if they have an available rent sign with the square footage. One town, Redding, California, had just added 200,000 square feet of space as an adjunct to the existing downtown. Much of that is retail space, but it could have doubled as office space because there were a few offices in the complex. For the most part, the 200,000 squares were vacant.

The research is geared more toward retail. Office space utilization will be one attribute that will affect some cities more than others. I will also try to get an assess-

ment of the protest art. In many cases, I would assume that the protest art would be less now, two years after the lockdown, and most of it was on-boarded windows on the first floor, which would relate to closed retail. Like vacant office space, I will treat the diminishing or increasing of protest art as an attribute in assessing the health of the retail in a particular town.

On the first trip, there were a lot of stores that were closed and may have yet to open again. They may have just been shut because of the lockdown, or they could have given up and were not asked to move because of the lockdown. Those businesses that closed but still occupied the space will be inventoried by kind compared to the 2024 use. It will give me a better definition of transitions in the retail space. So, my rule would be if it did not have a sign saying what the condition of the current functionality of the business is (Retired, closed forever, see you after the lockdown) would be considered open.

I plan to create a discrete-time Markov chain (DTMC) model to predict some of the future of towns that are generally not selected for study. I will use the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), the standard used by Federal statistical agencies in classifying business establishments for the purpose of collecting, analyzing, and publishing statistical data related to the U.S. business economy.

In most larger cities, I took one or two parts of the town and only did part of the village. In Philadelphia, I did Kensington Avenue and South Street; in San Francisco, I did Haight Asbury and the Castro, and Fisherman Warf. In Chicago, I inventoried the Magnificent Mile and the Navy Pier.

I inventoried most of Minneapolis's center city and Milwaukee's center city, as well as cities the size of Indianapolis and Louisville, all of which were complete inventories. I will be able to gather some real estate data from those cities and try to draw comparisons.

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Finally, I would like to draw some conclusions about whether the nation's cities have recovered or are making significant progress toward recovery. It is easy to cherry-pick examples, so I took a casual attitude when selecting the cities to participate. I would drive until I saw a town with a historic district or a city with an exciting name and stop there. Some had sentimental value, especially those in West Virginia, where I lived for a while, attending college, but most are random.

I am ramping up the SEO on the blog associated with the last days of the lockdown site, lastdaysoflockdown.com, and I am learning to write with keywords and subheadings. I have a consultant, Morgan Monaghan, who is teaching me the tricks of the trade.

The blog is titled Urban Lockdown, and I will then use that vehicle to comment on developments in the matrix of seventy cities I have selected. The Pennsylvania cities are mostly all my projects: Lock Haven, DuBois, Downingtown, and Phoenixville, as well as the sections of Philadelphia's Kensington Avenue and South Street.

This trip will differ slightly as I must pay the fair market room rate. During the last days of lockdown, rooms were pretty

cheap, as some hotels were starving for customers. I also wonder about the safety issues in some of the cities, particularly the Warf area in San Francisco and some of the regions near the courthouse in Portland.

I will go along the Texas border again, but I may start at the McAllen/Brownsville area rather than Del Rio, Texas. I am contemplating issuing a border report by adding those towns. I will not go to Sedona, Arizona, as I found it a money trap with parking tighter than anywhere else except maybe Phoenixville.

I did not find the Texas border too dangerous as most cities were ghost towns, and I did not see any migrants. The one thing I will be ready for this time is the border stop along Route 90. I could not find my documents in my wallet and had to pull over, but the dogs cleared me of human trafficking, although they went around the car twice. I may alert the border patrol that I am coming, as they followed me until I got to the checkpoint last time. I am also not sure I will photograph the Texas capitol building again, as it brought capitol police with their automatic weapons.

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