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# David R. Pesuit: Smith College clearly benefits from vital Northampton downtown

By DAVID R. PESUIT

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NORTHAMPTON — I am a downtown Northampton property owner who remembers the 1970s, when much of Northampton's commercial and residential downtown was on weak legs. Many downtowns were hurting then. Many never recovered. Nearby malls and mail-order catalogs with lower prices sucked downtowns dry.

Smith College is lucky it did not have to revitalize Northampton, for downtown property owners did that work for them. Many colleges in this country had to do it themselves. Consider Mount Holyoke College, which had to create a large new commercial center and theater complex across the street in South Hadley in order to compete with Smith for students and faculty. And consider Colgate University and Trinity College in Hartford, to cite just a few.

Smith saved a great deal of money when it did not have to revitalize downtown Northampton, money that surely went instead to improving its physical plant and its endowment. Consequently, Smith had the advantage of a vital nearby downtown during the 1980s and 1990s when many other colleges did not.

Therefore, it seems to me that Smith should recognize that it has a duty to support downtown vitality and to pay the city back in part for what was done for them.

In my mind, the only major issue that Smith should be considering at this point is how to honor such a commitment.

Smith professor Nicholas Howe and former Chief Financial Officer Ruth Constantine made valid points in their recent guest columns in the Gazette when they noted that Smith's payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOT) contribution to the city would not be coming in large part from its endowment but instead from student fees and reduced college expenditures.

But that cannot and should not stop the college from stepping up to the plate.

The same college that can afford to spend \$100 million to rehabilitate its library can also find a way to amply support a city with one of the highest percentages of untaxable real estate value in the Commonwealth, due in large part to the value of Smith's properties.

Smith already contributes in several ways to the city and its residents, but it does not financially support the basic city services of police, fire, emergency services and road upkeep, which we all rely upon and which at present consume 25 percent of our city budget.

Part of Smith's contribution could also help the city contribute to the new Downtown Northampton Association (aptly named the DNA), which will replace the Business Improvement District, and to other projects that will help maintain and increase the vitality of Northampton for all of its residents and visitors.

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