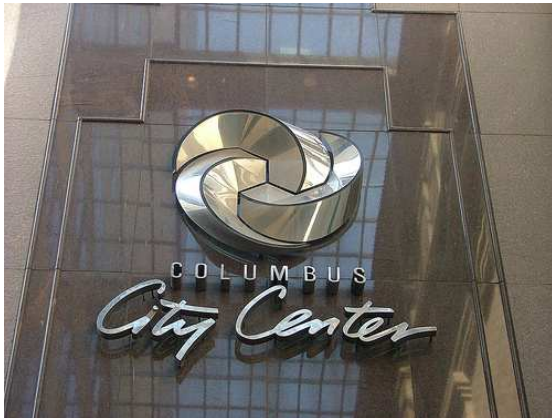


## City Center Demo Prevented Decades of Pain

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The best line of the 2007 mayoral campaign came from challenger Bill Todd – “Mr. Coleman, tear down this mall!” He of course was referring to the then near empty City Center Mall.

Now it’s happening and it’s amazing that many people still complain that demolition crews are destroying the downtown shopping center. They complain that it costs too much, there is no real plan to develop the site, and the city should have

found another use for the building – like a casino.

But if you look at the experiences of other cities- especially small and mid-sized cities – Columbus is doing the right thing. You can debate whether it was wise to build the mall in the first place. You can debate whether government incorrectly gave tax breaks to competing suburban malls. But you can’t debate death. City Center was dead and the best thing to do is bury it.

Take the experience of my hometown, Worcester, Massachusetts. In spirit of early 1970’s urban renewal city and business leaders built a beautiful mall, The Worcester Center Galleria, and a huge above ground parking garage in the heart of downtown across the common from City Hall. (We once bragged that we had the world’s largest indoor parking garage.) At first the two story mall with the two-football-field length glass ceiling thrived. It was the place to shop – so much so that it helped kill department stores on Worcester’s Main Street – just two blocks west.

But over the next 20 years newer malls steadily drew customers away from Galleria. The outlying malls were more convenient and offered those two magical little words: Free. Parking. Soon all but a pharmacy and a bank vacated the Galleria. It sat mostly empty for



several years. It was sold and still sat empty. There was talk of tearing it down. Nothing happened. There was talk of converting it to a convention center. Nothing happened.

In the mid- 1990's the new owners gave the mall new life. They renovated it, and converted it to an outlet mall – The Worcester Common Fashion Outlets. Despite its oxymoronic name, at first the new mall was packed. The community celebrated the re-birth of the mall and waited for the tour buses to bring “destination shoppers” from all around New England.

They did not come. And about 5 years later the mall was all but empty again.

Finally city and business leaders decided they'd had enough. It was time to tear it down. Its new private owners and state and local government announced plans to demolish it and build a new mixed use development – street level retail, condos and offices. That was in 2006. Nothing happened.



Then last spring, another announcement – the project finally was moving forward, the mall was coming down and new buildings were to rise. Nothing happened.

For much of the past 4 decades, a vast swath of downtown real estate has sat dormant. The white elephant (actually it's offwhite) hibernates as a constant reminder of an unwise decision. If Worcester had it to do

over again, it would have torn down the mall after its first death – in 1990.

While it's painful to see the cranes pick apart the once shining City Center, it's the right thing to do. At the very least downtown Columbus will get a park out of it. And if things go right, developers will build housing, offices and stores on the site. It's a lot easier to build success if the failure is gone.

-Mike Thompson