Honoring Tradition, Supporting Innovation: Redevelopment of Conover Station

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Conover’s downtown, like many others in North Carolina, once buzzed with furniture and textile factories. The industrious and innovative nature of the local people, coupled with good transportation linkages and natural resources, provided for a strong economy. However, in the early 2000s, the economic landscape dramatically changed. Conover and other cities in the Hickory region witnessed the decline of manufacturing and staggering losses in employment. From 2000 to 2012, Catawba County lost 23,152 jobs. In February 2010 the unemployment rate for the metro peaked at 15.8%. Broyhill Furniture, once a fixture in downtown Conover, was one of many that closed its doors, leaving over 400 workers without a job and over 400,000 square feet of vacant factory space. Though no long-term vision was in place for the site, the City of Conover was concerned about the future of land situated so prominently in the downtown and took a proactive approach by purchasing the 27-acre property.

Crafting a Vision

After purchasing the factory space, Conover city leaders sought public input from the community, beginning with surveys and focus groups seeking opinions on the future of the site. A day-long public workshop was held downtown, complete with hamburgers, hot dogs, maps and markers. Over time, a vision for the site emerged that was comprehensive and expansive in nature: to pave the way for quality redevelopment to revitalize downtown, meet future transportation needs, empower entrepreneurs and manufacturers, improve the environment, preserve local heritage, and be a source of community pride. Building upon and augmenting the downtown’s character was paramount. City staff crafted a master plan that included design standards encouraging zero setbacks, shared parking, increased density, and architecture that was sensitive to the context of the area.

Sharing the vision and illustrating the potential of the site to elected and appointed officials and the public is always a challenge. The planning department has found that visualization software is invaluable in helping non-planners understand the potential of proposed development. Sketchup software, which creates computer animated illustrations of possible development, has allowed staff to illustrate the overall vision in a matter of seconds, including through video “tours” on the City’s YouTube page and Facebook page, as well as still images on Flickr.
Turning Dirt: Site Renovation

Following the visioning process, the city enlisted experts in the fields of architecture, engineering, environmental, and historic analysis. Architects and engineers determined that the factory, which was actually one building with over twenty additions ranging from 1920s until 1990, was structurally deficient and it became clear it would be cost prohibitive to renovate. Subsequently, the majority of the buildings on the site were demolished. Thankfully, the oldest building on site, a 1918 textile mill, was saved and determined to be a good candidate for renovation.

Conover applied for and was awarded a $735,000 grant in Economic Development Initiatives funding for water, sewer, street, and sidewalk improvements on the site. The street was designed with over 180 on-street parking spaces, placing over half in the unbuildable railroad right of way to make most efficient use of the land area. This has allowed for shared parking possibilities among uses which lessens the amount of off-street parking required, reduces impervious surfaces and urban heat island effect, and incentivizes development by lowering or eliminating the amount of parking that a private developer or business moving into the site would be required to build.

Sustainable Redevelopment

Throughout the redevelopment and renovation process, the Planning Department chose to maintain a focus on environmental sustainability and green development. First, the project sought to maintain, and even improve, water quality and open space in the area. The southern portion of the site is the headwaters of McLin Creek, a tributary of the Catawba River which is listed as an impaired waterway by the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources. Where others might have seen an obstacle to site development, Conover saw this as an opportunity to improve water quality, preserve open space and create a new city park.

Conover applied for and received a $415,000 North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund Grant which funded the design and construction of an engineered stormwater wetland structure that provides significantly improved water quality. The wetlands have become the centerpiece of a new environmentally themed educational public park. In addition, Conover applied for and received a $333,000 grant from the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund to provide park amenities such as a walking trail, wetland boardwalk, shelter, playgrounds, and an interactive splash pad. The park is also located along the Carolina Thread Trail, a 16 county trail system that will link millions of citizens together with safe pedestrian routes.

Planners saw an opportunity to integrate the project with broader, statewide plans for transportation development. Conover is fortunate to be located along the North Carolina Department of Transportation’s (NCDOT) future Western Passenger Rail Corridor that will run from Salisbury to Asheville. With this in mind, Conover recognized an opportunity to repurpose the mill building into a multimodal transit center. Working with the Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority, Conover insured the fixed bus route would also service this site.

Because of the multimodal element of the building, Conover applied for and received Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding of $2,146,200. These funds have provided the means to renovate the mill building into a multi-use, multimodal transit center. In addition to the transit uses, the LEED Gold rehabilitation also houses the Conover Branch Library on the 3rd floor and a 270 seat community conference room on the 1st floor. The building was completed in fall 2011 and is now a vibrant community space and a source of local pride.

The Future of Manufacturing in Conover

Conover has been committed to respecting and maintaining its roots in industry and manufacturing while also preparing for the next century. In 2009, Conover formed an invaluable partnership with the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC) which shares the City’s belief that innovation and technology can help foster a diverse and robust manufacturing environment. Born from Catawba
Valley Community College (CVCC), MSC has been working for over two decades to assist industries through materials testing, streamlining design, and manufacturing innovations. With an ever-expanding list of national and international clients, MSC had outgrown their facility and was seeking to expand. In addition, they were seeking to support entrepreneurs by offering new “launch pad” spaces for emerging technology businesses. The City’s land available for development at Conover Station was a perfect match for MSC’s need of a new, larger facility. Together with the Manufacturing Solutions Center and CVCC, Conover applied for and received $2,700,000 in funding to go toward a new city-owned, MSC occupied facility at Conover Station. This partnership has allowed MSC to expand their services to assist and support industries, while allowing Conover to honor its heritage, and build manufacturing competitiveness for the future.

A Catalyst for Private Investment

The substantial public investment made on the Conover Station site reflects the City’s broader vision of revitalizing the entire downtown area. In late 2014, with the groundbreaking on a new 45,000 square foot commercial building at Conover Station, this goal became a reality. The new building will house a fitness center, restaurant, retail, and office space. Like the new MSC facility and renovated mill at Conover Station, the architecture of this two-story building relies heavily upon the design standards set forth in the master plan and the vernacular of the manufacturing heritage of the area.

The City’s commitment to the Conover Station project and the downtown has helped to serve as a catalyst for redevelopment. Over the past three years, over 16.5 million dollars in public and private development has occurred on-site and in the immediate vicinity. Over 200,000 square feet of building and factory space has been renovated and 160 new employees are working downtown. For example, in 2012, Lee Industries, a leader in sustainable furniture manufacturing, renovated a deteriorating factory adjacent to Conover Station and moved their corporate headquarters to Conover. We consider this an important success for the project and, most importantly, for the future of Conover. Crafting a vision and establishing a concise plan has provided the project a blueprint for success.

Conclusion

Conover leaders believe that this project can serve as an example of how even a small community can make a dramatic positive change in its economic landscape. Communities across North Carolina are faced with the dilemma of vacant or underutilized factories and buildings that can hinder revitalization efforts in the city’s core. With proper planning, these sites can be returned to productive assets for a city. By facilitating infill development that utilizes existing infrastructure, a city can experience growth and investment and help to avoid sprawl and unsustainable patterns. By gaining citizen and political support along with establishing a shared vision, Conover was able to transform liabilities into assets and help an underutilized property prosper. The City has gone beyond its customary role of providing basic services and ventured into uncharted territory. In ten short years, a once vacant, deteriorating factory that served as a reminder of better days has been transformed into a vibrant, bustling community center that gives residents hope and tools for a solid economic future.