

Downtown Revitalization in Small North Carolina Communities

The decline of central business districts (CBDs) has become an issue in large metropolitan cities and small towns across the nation. As the shape of American cities has changed, the retail, industrial, commercial, and residential functions of downtowns have faced increasing competition from population and investment shifts to outlying areas. The causes of downtown decline are found in the gradual and complex evolution of suburban land use patterns and the American consumers' choice of a suburban life style. As people moved out of urban areas, assisted by the automobile, public highway and housing programs, or the lack of overall community land use policies, downtown or main street business centers have been left behind.

North Carolina communities share in these national trends. Because much of the state's population lives in small cities, the focus of this article is on the struggle of downtowns in small cities to survive as viable commercial centers. In North Carolina, the rapid changes in the agricultural economy of the state have been an additional cause for altering the functions of downtown business centers in small towns. During the past twenty years, the majority of small farms have been consolidated into major agricultural land holdings, and the total number of farms has decreased dramatically. Downtowns in many small cities, therefore, no longer function as the agricultural service centers for the small farms in their region.

Interest in forestalling the death of small city downtowns exists across the state. The desire to save downtown springs, in part, from an emotional need to maintain a symbolic identity for a community. The character of a small city is defined largely by the unique fabric of a main street where

institutions, stores, and restaurants are concentrated. The downtown also represents the historic origin of the municipality. Despite the fact that many functions have been removed from downtown and scattered over a wide area, the desire to preserve the unique character of a small city, as exhibited in the historic center, has sponsored many downtown revitalization efforts.

Additionally, the movement to renovate CBDs arises as a reaction to the increasing development of small town sprawl. In many towns, the concentration of existing infrastructure downtown, consisting of public roads, sidewalks, lights, water and sewer lines, and private investment in retail and office space, are deteriorating as unappealing shopping strips and fast food chains develop on the fringe.

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This article documents the overall assessment of downtowns by local officials and businesspersons and describes a cross section of processes and treatments used to revitalize downtowns in North Carolina.

The first section briefly summarizes the results of a questionnaire identifying the basic problems in North Carolina downtowns and programs adopted to date. In the second section, case histories of revitalization efforts in four communities illuminate the factors and relationships involved in a renewal process of a small city.

Community Assessment of Downtown

A questionnaire was distributed in November of 1977 to local public officials and Chambers of Commerce across North Carolina in order to determine the perceived conditions of downtown business districts in the state. Four hundred seven questionnaires were mailed out to the managers and clerks in the 449 cities under 25,000 in population across North Carolina. Questionnaires were also sent to directors of the Chambers of Commerce in seventy-three cities under 25,000 in the state. A response rate of 38 percent provided usable returns from 160 separate communities.

Local officials' and businesspersons' perceptions of the strength of downtown centers were requested as indicators of community evaluations of CBDs. Survey results, as shown in Figure 1, demonstrate that downtowns in small cities in North Carolina have retained a positive position since 1970. Over one-third of the respondents claim that their local downtown is somewhat stronger or much stronger than it was in 1970. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents feel that their CBD is about the same relative to 1970 conditions.

Local assessment of the stability of a small city downtown is correlated both with its distance from a metropolitan area and its age. The downtowns located within a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) are more likely to have gained in strength since 1970. Furthermore, decline of central business areas is less likely to have occurred in newer cities than in those incorporated over 100 years ago.

Population size and rate of growth also impact the stability of a small city's downtown in North Carolina.

Figure 1

The Status of Downtown Compared to 1970

Status of Downtown	Number of Communities	Percent
Much Stronger	11	6.9
Somewhat Stronger	50	31.3
About the Same	45	28.1
Somewhat Weaker	30	18.8
Much Weaker	17	10.6
Not ascertained	7	4.4
TOTAL	160	100.0

Those cities from 6,000 to 15,000' population indicated most often that their downtowns were stronger than in 1970. In addition, communities with large population increases since 1970 responded that their downtown gained strength more frequently than those with slower growth rates.

The most serious problems existing in small North Carolina downtowns according to survey findings are the lack of evening entertainment, the competition from retail shopping centers on the outskirts of downtowns, and the deterioration of buildings. On the other hand, the social problems commonly associated with downtowns in large cities, such as fear of crime and racially segregated shopping areas, are not considered problems by respondents from small cities. The condition of infrastructures such as sidewalks, landscaping, or lighting is infrequently mentioned as a problem.

The final part of the questionnaire listed fourteen programs which North Carolina communities may have undertaken to revitalize their downtowns.

As Figure 2 shows, the revitalization programs most frequently undertaken are small in scope and involve only basic municipal services such as lighting, parking, or landscaping. The more sophisticated and complex programs, such as special tax districts or loan programs, have been utilized in fewer cities. Almost one-third of the respondent communities, however, have enacted plans for revitalizing downtowns.

Case Studies of Revitalization Programs in Four North Carolina Communities

Although the results of the survey provide an overall description of the problems in small downtowns of North Carolina and indicate the types of approaches undertaken to stabilize the status of downtowns, the case studies of four communities allow a more in-depth examination of downtown revitalization procedures in the selected communities. This information identifies the constraints imposed on any revitalization program and indicates which approaches are most effective in the context of a small city.

The case of Smithfield documents one of the first community efforts in the nation to upgrade a deteriorating downtown and is a good example of how coordination of existing community organizations can result in positive improvements. Although outside technical assistance was sought in Whiteville, the Chamber of Commerce has led the way in maintaining the predominance of downtown Whiteville in Columbus County.

The study of Hendersonville shows the success of organizing grass roots community support to revitalize a decaying downtown. Finally, the case study of Hickory describes efforts of a larger community that utilized the federal urban renewal program to upgrade a deteriorating CBD. Although each community faces a unique situation, this cross section of four cities provides a variety of approaches which

Figure 2

**Downtown Revitalization Programs
Undertaken in North Carolina Communities**

Program	Percent of Communities Which Have Used Program
Improved lighting	60
New/expanded parking	36
New landscaping	33
Reconstructed sidewalks	31
Downtown revitalization plan	29
Facade improvements for structures	17
Historic preservation	17
Change in traffic circulation patterns	15
Expanded housing opportunities	15
Economic development corporation	14
Revised CBD zoning	14
Creation of auto-free mall	7
Loan program	2
Special tax incentives for rehabilitation	1

can be adapted to other communities in North Carolina.

Smithfield, North Carolina Population 7,420

Smithfield downtown revitalization began in the early 1960s in response to general physical deterioration and the lack of offstreet parking. Efforts were initiated by merchants through the Chamber of Commerce, and the cooperation of the Smithfield city government was immediately secured. Downtown efforts grew out of an industrial development program instituted by citizens to address the large exodus of population from the declining agricultural economy of Johnston County.

An "idea tour" was sponsored by this group through North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia in order to gather information from other cities which were undertaking downtown programs, and to gather support and stimulate interest within the community. At the time of these efforts, downtown Smithfield was the only retail center for the city and its immediate environs. Although there was not an immediate threat of competition, the anticipation of new retail shopping centers provided a partial impetus for downtown revitalization.

The heart of downtown revitalization in Smithfield was the *Smithfield Plan*. This plan evolved incrementally during the meetings of a Downtown Committee of some forty-two members, set up jointly by the Chamber and the city. The actual administration of the renovation projects was accomplished by the volunteers serving on the Downtown Committee. No staff or budget was established, but the services of both the Chamber and city staffs were utilized when necessary.

A key component of the process in Smithfield was

the support gathered from other community groups. Most of the project ideas emanated from contact with the community through the newspaper and radio station. The forty-two member committee coordinated the media communication and selected which project ideas to implement. Civic groups were given the responsibility to undertake one specific project. This series of projects not only upgraded the physical environment, but also served to focus community attention on the downtown center.

Coordination for each project was achieved through an informal process by which each retailer and property owner was contacted and requested to cooperate by funding his or her own improvements. Group pressure was sufficient in most cases to enlist the participation of an unwilling owner. Funding was entirely private, with the exception of municipal assistance for sidewalk repair or refuse collection on vacant lots.

Downtown Smithfield merchants are beginning to organize forces once again to initiate efforts to upgrade the physical environment of the CBD. An Appearance Commission established in 1974 has implemented several beautification projects within the CBD and immediate surroundings. There appears to be more interest currently in utilizing any public monies which would be available. A design project by two North Carolina State University graduate students has served to renew interest in the process of rejuvenating downtown.

The focus of the twenty-five downtown improvement projects during the late 1960s in Smithfield was the erection of canopies over the sidewalks. Accompanying the installation of canopies were efforts to stimulate painting and other rehabilitation within the CBD. Demolition of abandoned warehouses was a major change in the streetscape of downtown Smithfield, accomplished through the leadership of the Downtown Committee and cooperation of local property owners. New sidewalks were installed by the city, and landscaping projects were undertaken by several civic clubs.

During the 1970s, the development of off-street parking has been a major undertaking. A group of downtown merchants formed a corporation for the purpose of acquiring properties for use as parking lots. At the end of ten years, the corporation's property reverts to the city. This use of land for parking can serve as a land bank device to provide an inventory of land for attracting new businesses to downtown Smithfield.

All of the persons interviewed assessed the downtown revitalization program in Smithfield as successful. There are several indicators of this perceived success in Smithfield. First, investment in new construction by financial institutions on the main street, Market Street, indicates a policy on the part of the banks to stay in downtown. This attitude is also shared by the large retailers, as evidenced by the decision of the major department store to invest in a new structure in downtown. Second, there is a

very low vacancy rate in the smaller stores within the central business district. Third, the merchants interviewed indicated a gradual growth in retail sales over the past decade. The presence of new shopping centers has not caused any decline in sales within downtown. Fourth, the process of promoting interest in downtown improvements developed by the Downtown Committee has continued to stimulate individual upgrading efforts by merchants.

The success of any future efforts will be assisted by the fact that Smithfield is a county seat and county government continues to expand in the downtown area. Additionally, the postal service and municipal library have new facilities in the downtown area, forming a strong institutional basis for commercial revitalization efforts.

Whiteville, North Carolina Population 5,560

Downtown redevelopment efforts in Whiteville began in the mid-1960s with the development of off-street parking through the purchase and demolition of abandoned warehouses by the Chamber of Commerce. As a result of these activities, parking for 600 cars was created behind the row of stores along Madison Street, the main street of Whiteville. Along with the development of parking, the Chamber also sponsored the replacement of overhead wires with underground utilities, the installation of new lighting, and the construction of new sidewalks. A plan sponsored by a state planning grant for more comprehensive redevelopment, including a mall, met local opposition and was not implemented.

These efforts are viewed locally as a means of maintaining Whiteville's prominence as a retail center in Columbus County and not as revitalization of a declining downtown.

The Chamber of Commerce has taken a leading role in stimulating downtown reinvestment by constructing its own offices on Madison Street and initiating other community projects. These projects have been augmented by individual investments in store rehabilitation and modernization. Financing for new sidewalks and lighting consisted largely of private contributions through voluntary assessments. In some cases, the city provided municipal employees to implement the projects.

A good working relationship with the Cape Fear Council of Governments (COG) has provided the Whiteville Chamber and city government with an excellent source of technical assistance. The COG has made the city aware of sources of financial assistance through various grant programs. The Chamber has been successful in raising matching funds from citizen and civic groups.

In 1976, the Chamber approached the Cape Fear COG for technical assistance. In response, the Cape Fear COG staff arranged a contact with the Community Advisory Service Team of the National Council for Urban Economic Development (CUED). The

CUED team visited Whiteville in April 1977 and prepared a revitalization study for the downtown. This study represents the current plan for downtown improvements in Whiteville.

The impetus and leadership for downtown revitalization remains, however, with the Chamber of Commerce. Specific projects which have been designed by the CUED team are currently being planned and pursued by the Chamber in stages. At each step, the opinions of the local merchants and citizens are sought, thus maintaining a high level of participation by the interested community. Priorities

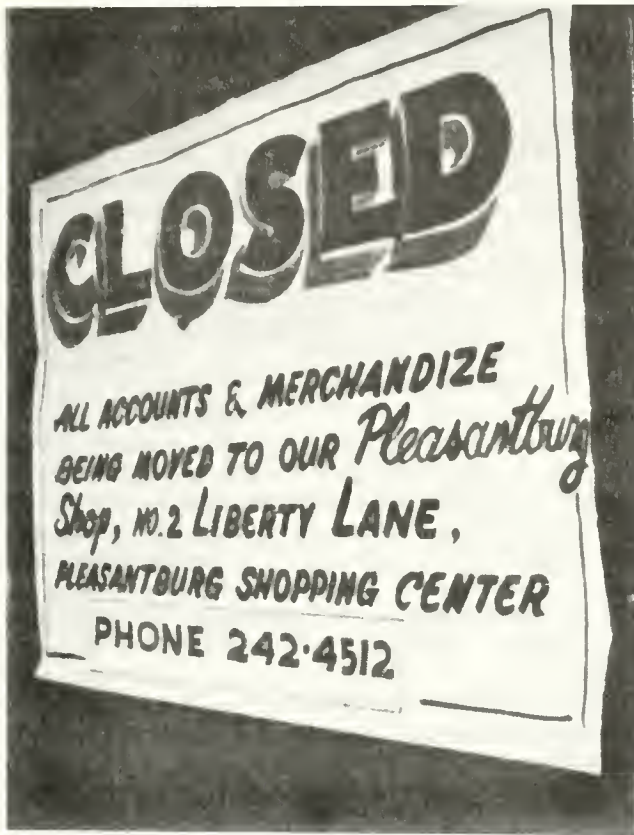
"Chamber leaders point to strong community support as the key to maintaining the stability of downtown Whiteville."

have been set through public meetings, and fund raising activities are underway for the revitalization projects.

The process of downtown development has been formalized considerably. A written document published by the Cape Fear COG outlines plans for three phases of improvements as advised by the CUED study. Phase I of Whiteville's downtown effort calls for developing rear parking lots into plazas, with upgraded rear store entrances. The city has applied for a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to cover the costs of working drawings. Phase II is improvement of the area around the Seaboard Railroad Depot and redevelopment of the depot itself, and Phase III calls for removal of parking from Madison Street and extension of the sidewalks.

The majority of local merchants and officials have supported downtown development efforts. New plans resulting from the CUED study are not accepted totally, but there is firm belief on the part of the Chamber that these ideas can be implemented. Chamber leaders point to strong community support as the key to maintaining the stability of downtown Whiteville.

There are several potential obstacles to the continuing health of the CBD retail center. First, there is the presence of new commercial developments, including a plan for a regional mall. This perceived competition has hastened downtown development efforts on the part of the Chamber. Second, few public institutional anchors exist within the CBD. Even though Whiteville is a county seat, the county government offices are located about five miles from downtown. However, future projects include the construction of a new post office on the fringe of the CBD and the possible reuse of the old post office as municipal office space.



Loss of business to outlying shopping centers has been a problem for some revitalization efforts.

Most likely, downtown redevelopment will continue to be coordinated by the Chamber. No city staff exists currently for providing leadership. The support provided by the city has expanded in the last ten years, and a close working relationship is likely to continue between the Chamber and the municipal government. Cape Fear COG's continuing assistance in securing grants and technical assistance aid also will be crucial to the successful implementation of Whiteville's plans for physical renewal of the central business area.

Hendersonville, North Carolina **Population 7,280**

As early as 1947, a group of merchants in Hendersonville initiated efforts to stimulate a re-investment program for downtown. Professional plans were requested by the downtown business community and completed in 1954 and 1965 in repeated attempts to enlist city government support. However, neither the municipal officials nor the majority of merchants were prepared to fund a downtown renewal program until the mid-1970s.

By early 1974, the physical deterioration in downtown had reached serious proportions despite increasing retail sales. These physical deficiencies included overhead wiring, a lack of convenient parking, and seriously dilapidated facades. In part, this

continued deterioration was due to a large number of absentee landlords who were not willing to invest in the long-term maintenance of downtown store buildings. The downtown problems were exacerbated in Hendersonville, as elsewhere, by the successful development of strip retail centers on the downtown fringe. The exodus of shopowners and closing of stores had resulted in nine vacancies in the central business district by 1975.

In 1974 there was a dramatic 20 percent devaluation of downtown real estate in the countywide property value reassessment. This devaluation was in direct contrast to 40 percent and 50 percent increases elsewhere in the county. After the devaluation, the city and downtown business community became aware of the serious possibility of the death of downtown Hendersonville.

Downtown revitalization in Hendersonville resulted from the efforts of a group of businesspersons seriously committed to avoiding the death of the central business district. In the spring of 1972, a meeting of all downtown merchants was held at the Chamber of Commerce office. A core group of persons successfully convinced these Chamber members to separate the functions of downtown redevelopment from other Chamber activities by establishing a Merchants' Association. In a short period over 200 members joined the new association, the association was incorporated, and a manager was employed. The Merchants' Association played a vital role in initiating, implementing, and funding the Hendersonville downtown renewal.

In 1973 the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Townlift Program was brought to Hendersonville by the city government. TVA Townlift offers free technical advisory teams to downtowns within the TVA area. A three-phase plan for downtown revitalization was designed for Hendersonville, including development of more parking and general beautification of the CBD. A group of involved merchants set up a tour through fifty to sixty communities in the Southeast to gather more ideas.

During 1974, the leadership of the Merchants' Association undertook a massive campaign of community education through a series of over 100 meetings with civic groups and blocks of individual merchants within the downtown. Audiovisual materials were used to convince the audiences that a reinvestment program would lead to a significant improvement in the downtown area.

Apart from the grass roots organizing and educating, the core group of downtown merchants also pursued official political support from the city government. A crucial success on this front was the formation of a Downtown Committee. The committee served to gather necessary support from city government. Furthermore, as the quasi-public body responsible for downtown improvement, the committee has handled public debate on specific projects. The appointed membership met weekly for over two years to implement the series of projects.

In 1974, North Carolina passed enabling legislation allowing the establishment of special tax districts for special public purposes. The Merchants' Association had been so successful in grass roots organizing among merchants and property owners that, at a meeting attended by about 100 persons in December 1974, only three voted in opposition to the establishment of a special tax district in the

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Hendersonville central business district. The City Council could hardly override such public support and voted to establish the district.

The tax district has functioned well in providing the funds necessary for revitalization of downtown Hendersonville. A supplementary annual tax is added to all properties within the CBD in order to finance debt service on the Main Street project loan.

Hendersonville downtown revitalization has been a three-phased program. The first phase was the development of badly needed parking by the Hendersonville Parking Corporation, an organization established by a group of downtown merchants. This corporation identifies available land appropriate for parking and takes out options on these properties. The city can either lease the land from the corporation or acquire it outright.

The second phase of the program has focused on a creation of a downtown shoppers' park along Main Street. Initially, there was a lively public debate over the proposed change. In November 1974, however, initial work was begun on the project and was completed in the fall of 1977. The project included the placement of utility wires underground, redesign of the traffic pattern to a serpentine pattern, extension and redesign of sidewalks, and the installation of planters as part of a total landscaping project.

The end result has been a remarkable beautification of Main Street, especially when the trees and flowers are in full bloom. All of the design work for this construction was donated by professionals, but the city contributed a large amount of construction labor and oversaw most of the work. A fulltime gardener was hired by the city, and half of the salary is paid by the downtown tax district funds.

The third phase of the program is rehabilitation of facades and buildings. A group of retired architects has volunteered its time to assist any merchant or landowner. To date, this phase has not been fully operational, although there are individual examples of investment.

It is generally believed in Hendersonville that the downtown renewal program is responsible for saving the downtown. Indicators of this success include

filling nine vacant stores and arresting further physical deterioration. Public opposition has largely disappeared in the past few years now that physical improvements and landscaping are being completed.

What exists today on Main Street in Hendersonville is a downtown with renewed life and potential. The retail needs that Main Street serves are separate from those served by outlying shopping centers. The strip centers contain the large discount-type stores that do not serve the same market as the smaller specialty shops and major department stores on Main Street.

Downtown Hendersonville most likely will continue to evolve as a center for the expanding Henderson County area. This region has become a retirement center, largely attracting permanent retirees from the Northeast and Midwest. Future plans include the construction of a civic/multipurpose center near or in downtown, the replacement of overhead traffic signals with cantilevered signals, and the construction of walkways from Main Street to off-street parking located behind individual stores.

The Downtown Committee remains functional and will oversee these plans. It is conceivable that downtown functions will expand to include some residential use of the second stories, which is made possible by a recent amendment to the zoning ordinance. Through very effective leadership by a highly dedicated group of citizens, Hendersonville has turned around the decline of Main Street and downtown. There is every indication that future development of a viable and valued downtown will continue to evolve.

Hickory, North Carolina Population 21,860

By the mid-1960s, the central business district in Hickory had become the major government, financial, and retail shopping area of a steadily growing, seven-county region surrounding Catawba County. In spite of this prominence, new shopping centers on the fringe and development along U.S. 64-70 were posing threats to the economic health of downtown. Problems of inconvenient access, lack of parking, seriously deteriorating structures, and a generally unsightly appearance contributed to the city's decision to undertake a major urban renewal program in the central business area. This decision was made jointly by downtown merchants and the city government. In 1965, an Urban Redevelopment Commission was established to administer the planning and implementation of the renewal program.

Downtown revitalization in Hickory has been the result of a federally funded and controlled program allowing massive physical transformation of the downtown. Under the regulations governing U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) urban renewal programs, Hickory pursued a ten year process coordinated by the Urban Redevelopment Commission staff. By the time the Re-

development Commission disbanded in 1976, \$6 million of public monies had been invested in major public infrastructure and property acquisition and demolition.

In direct contrast to the revitalization and downtown development programs of most smaller North Carolina cities, urban renewal provided not only a much higher level of funding but also mandated a public process of planning and implementation. Planning studies were completed by outside consulting firms pursuant to HUD requirements. Public participation was formalized through public hearings and joint city-private sector committees. By 1969, plans for the redevelopment of the seven-acre CBD were approved by HUD, and the program was funded in 1970.

When federal funding for the downtown projects ceased, the Catawba County Chamber of Commerce picked up the lead role in revitalization efforts by establishing a Downtown Task Force. This task force consisted of fourteen members from the public and private sectors. During the next eighteen months, the Downtown Task Force administered a public opinion survey to determine community attitudes toward the new downtown in Hickory, prepared a brochure for dissemination through the Chamber to prospective businesses, and designed a slide and sound show describing the impact of the downtown urban renewal projects in Hickory.

The present phase of downtown revitalization in Hickory is characterized by decentralized decision-making which presents a sharp contrast to the

earlier municipal leadership. Currently, individual private reinvestment is taking place, but the downtown is being transformed from a major retail center to a business and financial center. In response to this long-term functional change, new approaches to the downtown planning and development process will be necessary.

The initial project in Hickory's downtown redevelopment was the removal of the Southern Railroad switching operations from the central downtown. During the course of urban renewal from 1970 to 1974, sixty-eight properties were acquired and demolished within the CBD. Another 101 properties were inspected for rehabilitation, and about 75 percent were actually rehabilitated. The traffic circulation pattern in downtown Hickory was redesigned, streets were widened, and off-street parking was increased by about five times.

In 1976, construction began on Union Square Common, a very attractive mall with newly designed sidewalks, landscaping, and lighting. The remainder of the renewal projects, including linear parking spaces, were completed with second year Community Development program funds.

A number of individual merchants have modernized their facades in response to the substantial public investment in downtown financing. In addition, there has been large-scale investment and commitment to downtown Hickory by the major financial institutions in the community. Most recently, several entertainment facilities have been established, and downtown bars and restaurants have



Extensive use of public and private investment for the Hickory Mall gave the downtown a new look.

Photo by Pat Jenny

opened during the evening. The old city hall is being converted into a performing arts center with funds from a federal Economic Development Administration Public Works project. This activity represents a significant shift from downtown Hickory's established character as a retail center which closed at 5 p.m.

One indicator of the success of Hickory's downtown redevelopment is found in the fact that \$3 million in private money has been expended for rehabilitation and \$10 million for new construction

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within the central business area. A second indication is the vastly improved physical appearance of downtown. Hickory now has an attractive and interesting CBD. Third, many of the urban renewal tracts are being successfully redeveloped into office space for new businesses.

On the other hand, the retail dominance of downtown Hickory has been severely challenged by the presence of outlying shopping centers and the construction of a new regional mall. In fact, three major anchor department stores have left or are planning to leave downtown Hickory. Public opinion surveys indicate a community preference for shopping in the malls or outlying strip centers.

On balance, it appears that downtown Hickory is at a crossroads. There will be no other major public program of redevelopment, and the Chamber of Commerce is ready to turn leadership for downtown projects over to downtown merchants. The Chamber will recommend that a downtown management or development corporation be established, or a professional agency be retained in order to market the new downtown and coordinate new management techniques. Whether downtown Hickory successfully survives this apparent transformation from a major retail center to a downtown center of smaller specialty stores, business/financial institutions, entertainment, and even residential facilities remains to be seen.

Conclusion

As the results of the survey and the case studies indicate, there is considerable interest in strengthening and improving the conditions of central business districts in many North Carolina communities. Although the situation in each city is unique, there are certain conclusions which can be made with respect to the processes and results of downtown revitalization in small North Carolina communities.

In both small and large cities, the level of cooperation between local government and the private sector is a crucial factor. In many small towns with relatively small municipal staffs and low funding levels, local businesspersons have initiated downtown improvement projects. These private initiatives need the support and assistance of local government in the form of coordinated capital improvement projects, applications for state or federal funding assistance, and the use of municipal employees to implement downtown projects.

Where local governments take the lead in sponsoring downtown upgrading projects, it is still necessary to secure the support and interest of the downtown retailers and the business sector. Hickory is one example of cities that have undertaken extensive central business district urban renewal. At this point, enlisting private sector interest in rehabilitation, facade improvements, and other projects is being accomplished through community education activities.

Examples of successful downtown revitalization are found most often in cities where main street physical improvements are a result of larger efforts to enlist community interest in the downtown. Physical upgrading and aesthetic improvements are more effective as tools to stimulate community use of downtown centers than as ends in themselves. As demonstrated in the case studies of Smithfield and Hendersonville, organizing grass roots support and participation are likely propositions in a small North Carolina city.

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The era of major funding programs such as urban renewal for comprehensive physical rehabilitation has passed. Current sources of financing from the federal government rely on the concept of leveraging; that is, using a public grant or loan to instigate and direct private investment in target areas such as a central business district. On the federal level, financing for downtown renewal programs is available from several agencies. The most prominent sources of finance are the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG) and Community Development Block Grant programs for small cities, or the various programs of the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Because success with these federal programs is largely dependent upon sophisticated grantsmanship, their use in many small North Carolina towns is limited.



Facade improvements, like the canopies in Smithfield, increase attractiveness of downtowns.

Photo by Pat Jenny

Other national organizations which have monies available for commercial revitalization include the U. S. Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Farmers' Home Administration. Each of these agencies emphasizes different approaches to the task of revitalizing a downtown area. As shown through the case studies, communities must tailor the opportunities provided by these agencies to their own needs and situation.

On the local level, there are many methods of raising funds and organizing a community for downtown revitalization. These include the creation of a special tax district, the establishment of a community development corporation, and parking authorities. It is clear from the case studies that the utilization of existing civic clubs and merchants' organizations can result in significant change in small town central business areas without elaborate administrative frameworks.

Use of existing buildings is a theme of the 1970s revitalization efforts. This approach of adaptive reuse is promoted and encouraged by the funding agencies. Furthermore, rehabilitation fits into a scheme of rejuvenating community interest in a downtown and can be accomplished with incremental financial outlays by private downtown property owners.

In the long run, the functional changes occurring in North Carolina downtowns must be acknowledged. Many central business districts continue to

have strong retail bases, especially where anchor department stores have remained downtown and in cities that serve regional trade areas. However, the growth of outlying strip shopping centers together with new investment in financial and business offices downtown signals a new era for the central business district.

Several recommendations emerge from this study. First, the future viability of central retail centers may depend on developing the strengths of specialty stores and shops which can serve community needs not met by large discount centers located on the periphery. Second, the commitment of banks and businesses to downtown is evident in many North Carolina communities and should be encouraged. Third, the maintenance of government and civic institutions in downtown is highly desirable. Post offices, libraries, and city and county government offices must be encouraged to reinvest in downtown when their space is outmoded. Finding new uses for obsolete public agency space can be an effective method of maintaining viable centers.

Most importantly, it must be recognized that the process of rejuvenating a main street business district is not a simple one. Given the substantial changes in life style, consumers' tastes, subsequent land use patterns, and small town economics, few communities will be able to resurrect the vitality of downtown present in the pre- or early automobile cities of seventy years ago. The facilities and services of an older downtown have been scattered across wider areas, and a downtown revitalization program will not reverse these trends.

"Use of existing buildings is a theme of the 1970s revitalization efforts."

Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of redirection which can be effected in order to save the tremendous physical, economic, and symbolic resource of a downtown center. This study of efforts in North Carolina has demonstrated the level of commitment and resultant successes. There are many reasons for averting the death of downtown centers. Some of the most important of these are to preserve a community identity which can only be captured by the uniqueness of a downtown center; to circumvent the waste of deteriorated buildings and infrastructure in the central core; and to promote a more energy-efficient pattern of land uses, avoiding the ugliness and waste of sprawl happening even in smaller North Carolina cities. The key to the success of this movement will be found in programs that can capitalize on the changing functions of downtowns and can utilize these changes for the benefit of the whole community.

Note

1. All population figures in this article are based on 1975 estimates for the state of North Carolina.