

Planners Get Results

Old New Bern Gets a New Look

Settled in 1710 by German Palatines and Swiss Colonists, New Bern became a major port and mercantile center because of its protected waters and lack of tidal fluctuation. Its importance as a port declined, however, with the advent of railways and improved roads during the early 1900s. The central business district grew slowly; later, a shopping mall attracted merchants to the outskirts of the city. The viability of the commercial heart of the community was threatened, and the tax base eroded as more stores became vacant.

Recognizing the importance of downtown New Bern and the architectural and historical heritage of the older parts of the city, the community began taking steps to solve some of these problems. The following narrative describes several ways the New Bern Planning and Community Development Department became a part of the downtown revitalization process.

Establishment of the Historic District Commission

During the mid seventies, a 20-block downtown area of commercial and residential structures was nominated and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. At this time, old houses were being sensitively converted to restaurants, specialty shops, and multi-family dwellings. However, many significant buildings were being demolished and commercial structures



were being "modernized" to the extent that they became characterless monoliths slip-covered in aluminum.

It appeared that the only tangible advantages of having a district listed on the National Register were tax advantages for those who could follow certain rehabilitation standards. Meanwhile, the "modernizations" and demolitions continued as property owners simply obtained building permits to do the work.

Many individuals and citizen groups were frustrated by the situation. Organizations such as the New Bern Preservation Foundation, which had a revolving loan fund, could only respond to a few properties at a time and only as they became available. What was needed was a local historic district commission to insure sensitive rehabilitation, compatible new construction, and delayed demolition of historic structures so that alternatives could be considered.

Spurred by community interest, the Planning Department decided to examine the feasibility of establishing a local historic commission. The community had tried previously to establish such a group, but the idea was rejected on the issues of property rights. With the help of the Tryon Palace Commission, the New Bern Historical Society, and the Preservation Foundation, a slide show was presented to citizens that showed "the good, the bad, and the ugly" of the district. From this meeting, it was clear that there was a great deal of interest and enthusiasm for a local commission.

Shortly thereafter, the Board of Aldermen officially established a nine member commission. Its charge was to hammer out an ordinance and guidelines and to report back to the Aldermen with a finished report.

The nine citizen members drafted the ordinance and guidelines, with the Planning Department providing support, overall coordination, and ordinances for the Commission's consideration. Forms had to be developed concerning the operation of the commission and presentations were made to the Downtown Merchants Association and other local civic organizations. Of major importance in this process was an inventory of

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the district as described by the North Carolina General Statutes. This was conducted under a separate grant by an architectural historian whose work dovetailed with the efforts of the Commission.

After eight months, the ordinance and guidelines were adopted as official policy to be effective January 1981. They state that a certificate of appropriateness (CA) must be obtained from the HDC before any exterior portion of a building or appurtenant feature can be erected, altered, restored, or moved. In the case of proposed demolition, the Commission can delay the action up to 180 days and attempt to move the structure or find a new owner.

Over the past two years, the HDC has had an incremental but positive effect on the District. The Planning Department continues to provide support for the HDC by assisting people with CAs and providing technical assistance for ordinance revisions and other matters.

Municipalities considering the adoption of a historic district ordinance should not expect overnight change. Just as development occurs gradually, so will the impact of a commission. There will be the initial start up confusion associated with any new ordinance; for example, there are still instances when a New Bern property owner did not know that a CA was required to erect a sign or fence.

Main Street Designation

The Main Street program is a rigorous, self-help program of downtown revitalization sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Because of private investment in historic structures, the implementation of the historic district ordinance, and other local efforts already in progress, the Planning Department was contacted by the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development for possible inclusion in the program.

The Planning Department developed an application which discussed in depth the measures already underway and the need for a structured process such as that offered by Main Street. New Bern, along with Shelby, Washington, Tarboro, and Salisbury were chosen to submit applications as North Carolina's Main Street communities. From approximately forty state applications across the nation, North Carolina was chosen as one of six states to receive the Main Street designation.

The initial step in the program was to have a resource team of five consultants come for a three day evaluation focusing on New Bern. They met with local and business leaders to assess their ideas, problems, and suggestions concerning the downtown area. The recommendations were presented to citizens, and a booklet was devel-

oped to provide an overall framework for the revitalization effort.

A primary area of concern listed in the resource team booklet was the visual quality of the downtown area. The team recognized that the commercial historic area needed more trees and vegetation. They suggested that trees be planted to unify and soften incompatible architecture along the streets and to make parking lots more attractive. To this end, the Planning Department began contacting businesses and organizations who had parking lots without landscaping. A planting scheme was suggested and cost figures derived from a local nurseryman. Carolina Telephone and Telegraph was the first to volunteer and plant shrubbery and trees along their parking lot. Others followed and soon large expanses of asphalt were naturally softened and cooled by the plantings.



A good example of a small, but effective sign

A second area of concern was rehabilitation. Many of New Bern's buildings were slip-covered with aluminum siding during the fifties, hiding unique architectural features. Community effort, aided by the influence and guidance of the HDC, resulted in the production of some high quality storefront rehabilitations. Instrumental in the process was the Main Street architect hired by NRCDC to serve the five North Carolina Main Street communities. Equipped with the architect's renderings, a staff member of the Planning Department would counsel property owners about the proposed renovations. In many cases, it was a matter of removing the aluminum siding, replacing some brick, replacing several windows, and applying a fresh coat of paint. Massive plastic signs were replaced by smaller, more effective signs that do not mask architectural features and are more in scale with the buildings.

Present in all of the Main Street efforts was Swiss Bear, a non-profit corporation developed to promote downtown revitalizations. Swiss Bear continues to work effectively within the private sector, serving as an overall rallying point for many different organizations.

Processing Tax Applications

Working with Archives and History in Raleigh, the Planning Department researched tax incentives for historic properties and their use in promoting rehabilitation. If an owner could certify that his/her property conformed to the Secretary of the Interior's standards for rehabilitation, then he/she would be entitled to a 25 percent tax credit. This sounds simple in theory, but in practice it was not.

Simply transmitting all the necessary forms to the owner was not enough. As an incentive for rehabilitation, the Planning Department began processing the applications for owners. Basically this involved taking before, during, and after photographs of the renovated structures and supplying a narrative of each phase of the work. The idea was to not radically alter the structure and to retain distinguishing features such as pressed-tin ceilings and original woodwork. Removing original walls and changing the floor plan, for example, would not conform to the standards. The Planning Department counsels the owner on all phases of the work to ensure that it meets the standards, and the HDC also assesses the work. The entire package is sent to Raleigh and then Atlanta for approval, which usually takes between 45 and 60 days.

To date, the Planning Department has processed 16 applications representing over one million dollars in private investment. Tax incentives have proven to be a successful tool in promoting rehabilitation and revitalization.

Implementing Public Improvements

With the advent of Main Street and the HDC, the city took steps to alleviate some of the parking and congestion problems in downtown New Bern. Work began on a parking lot, originally proposed in 1977, that capitalized on existing vacant space in back of stores. As part of the project, all overhead utility lines and transformers were moved underground. Within eight months, the Planning Department had secured permission from 35 individual storeowners and leasees to proceed with the improvements.

Despite construction difficulties, all utilities were underground and operating as of February 1983. The parking lot, which will provide 150 spaces, is expected to be completed this summer, and the total project cost of \$175,000 is being paid by a municipal service district created in 1977. Proving their commitment to the downtown rehabilitation process, owners and leasees in the district pay twice the usual tax rate to finance such improvements.

Organizing the Loan Pool

Emphasizing the Main Street theme of self-help and taking advantage of the excellent rela-



Awnings can add charm and distinction

tionship it had developed with the private sector, Swiss Bear was able to create a \$2 million loan pool for commercial revitalization projects. Four banks contributed funds to the pool, which offers loans at 70 percent of the prime lending rate.

One of the key steps in implementing the loan pool was to designate a part of the CBD as a redevelopment area under the North Carolina Redevelopment Law. The Planning Department was in charge of this step, which involved the evaluation of all buildings within the designated area and ensuring that they fit the prescribed characteristics of the urban redevelopment law. In addition, the Department was responsible for developing the forms and exhibits that applicants have to submit as support for consideration by the loan pool committee. The first loan applications were processed this spring. As another element in New Bern's downtown efforts, the loan pool is an excellent example of a public/private partnership.

Conclusions

Several ways that planning departments can become involved in revitalization efforts were outlined in this article. Planners should be sensitive to specific community problems and frustrations in order to present alternatives and develop productive planning tools, such as the HDC. It is important to increase awareness of available programs and policies in existence at all levels of government and to find those that address special community needs, such as the Main Street program and federal tax incentives for historic properties. Planning departments can successfully implement public improvement programs such as construction and landscaping efforts, while also providing technical expertise to develop urban renewal plans and appropriate financing mechanisms.