Downtown Asheville

Center City Plan

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Downtown Visions

Economic Development

Vision: Downtown Asheville will be the dominant economic, social, cultural, and symbolic center of the Western North Carolina region. The Center City will be the focal point of office and retail development and the center of banking, finance, government, and employment. Its many attractions and unique character will make Downtown an exciting and primary destination for visitors. A large and diverse residential population will support the various components of the Downtown economy and labor force, contributing towards a vibrant twenty-four hour neighborhood. Downtown will continue to provide high-paying jobs, an attractive environment, an efficient use of resources, and an increased tax base, making it a model of Smart Growth.

Housing

Vision: Downtown Asheville will be a clean, safe, and vibrant neighborhood, consisting of distinct districts where a diverse population lives among a rich variety of workplace, cultural, shopping, and entertainment options. Quality public spaces, pocket parks, and streetscape amenities will give identity and a sense of community to Downtown and serve as magnets to attract residents to a wide range of housing options.

Physical Environment

Vision: Downtown Asheville will build upon its spectacular physical environment, clearly establishing it as a showpiece of the region. Improved gateway entrances will herald the approach into a visually rewarding Center City. Downtown's compact development pattern, woven of exceptional architecture, intimate streetscapes, and quality open spaces, will set the stage for increased private investment and will provide visitors with an indelible image of a place to which they long to return.

Transportation & Accessibility

Vision: Downtown Asheville will be accessible from throughout the community via a safe and efficient multi-modal transportation system. Once Downtown, wayfinding signage and attractive streetscapes will assist visitors as they travel easily from place to place.

Introduction

"The great cities, large and small, and the places in them that year after year attract and delight throngs of people are woven of many threads into a rich and varied tapestry. Central to all is the lively downtown."

From Designing the Successful Downtown - The Urban Land Institute

Regional Importance of Downtown

As the economic, social, cultural and entertainment center of Western North Carolina, Downtown Asheville is the heart that pumps vitality throughout the region. As such, Downtown's continued revitalization will play a critical role in strengthening the region's economy and improving the quality of life for area residents.

A vibrant and healthy Downtown is one of the strongest and most important engines that drives the regional economy. Not only is Downtown a major source of jobs and income for City and County residents, it is a major producer of tax revenue, which supports public investments to improve other neighborhoods and commercial districts throughout the City. Downtown has become a destination for tourists and area residents alike. These visitors support local businesses and contribute greatly to the regional economy. Additionally, a strong and vital Downtown serves to attract new businesses into the area. Whether a business locates Downtown or in another area of the City or County, the vitality of Downtown Asheville and the amenities that Downtown offers (such as museums, theaters, restaurants and shops) are important quality of life assets that influence a company's decision to locate in the area.

The vitality of Downtown Asheville significantly improves the quality of life for area residents, providing a wonderful "living room" in which the community can gather, celebrate, shop, and be entertained. Continued Downtown development and revitalization will strengthen the City's already positive identity and leave visitors with a lasting impression.

Finally, emphasizing Downtown development and revitalization is the epitome of Smart Growth because it utilizes existing infrastructure, promotes density and mixed-use development, reduces reliance on automobiles, and acts to counter urban sprawl.

Why a Downtown Plan?

Downtown Asheville has experienced remarkable growth and revitalization in recent years,

contributing to its status as one of the most livable cities in the country. These positive changes have resulted in an increase in tourists, residents, and the many businesses that serve them. However, it is important to realize that downtowns are never "finished". They are constantly-evolving, dynamic organisms that require constant attention. As much as Downtown has improved during the past twenty years, it has only "scratched the surface" of what it can become. In order for Downtown Asheville to realize its enormous potential as one of the greatest downtowns in America, we must have a shared vision and a plan to achieve it.

In the past, a number of plans have been developed that address various aspects of Downtown, including the Asheville Downtown Streetscape Plan (1991) and the Comprehensive Parking Study (1998). There is a strong need for an all-encompassing, comprehensive plan that addresses all aspects of the functionality of Downtown Asheville.

Recognizing this need, the City, in collaboration with the community, has developed the Center City Plan to address the full range of Downtown issues and to serve as a guide for

Smart Growth and Downtown Asheville

What is Smart Growth? Smart Growth essentially comes down to making an efficient use of resources while creating economically vibrant human scaled communities. In 1999, the Asheville City Council adopted the following definition of Smart Growth:

Smart Growth is a proposed City of Asheville development pattern that makes efficient use of our limited land, fully utilizes our urban services and infrastructure, promotes a wide variety of transportation and housing options, absorbs and effectively serves a significant portion of the future population growth of Buncombe County and Western North Carolina, protects the architectural and environmental character of the City through compatible, high quality, and environmentally-sensitive development practices, and recognizes the City's role as a regional hub of commerce and employment. Inherent to this definition is the need to implement Smart Growth through comprehensive, consistent, and effective policies, regulations, capital projects, and incentives.

Downtown Asheville is a model of Smart Growth for the City and region. The following Smart Growth principles strongly support a continued emphasis on Downtown development and revitalization:

- Provide compact building design and a wide mix of land uses
- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
- Create walkable communities
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
- Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities where investments in infrastructure have already been made
- Provide a variety of transportation options

the future growth and development of Downtown Asheville. The Center City Plan establishes a shared vision for what Downtown can become over the next twenty years. The essential mission of the plan is to strengthen Downtown as the social, cultural, and economic center of the region, while ensuring that the unique characteristics that attract residents and visitors to its streets, shops, and businesses, are well preserved. The Plan addresses the major issues facing downtown and identifies the goals and strategies that will function as stepping stones towards achieving long-term success.

The Center City Plan differs from many downtown plans in several important ways. First, the Plan was developed "in house" by people who have a working knowledge of the many issues facing Downtown, rather than by an outside consultant. Second, the Plan was developed with extensive community input and involvement. Because of the high level of citizen participation, the Plan reflects the community's shared vision for the future of Downtown. Finally, the Plan has an implementation focus. The implementation matrix, beginning on page 91, lists each goal and strategy contained in the Plan and assigns various groups and organizations with the responsibility for implementing them. This matrix will be used to monitor implementation efforts and success.

How to Use the Center City Plan

The Center City Plan was developed with all Downtown stakeholders in mind. Merchants, property owners, residents, downtown workers, developers, investors, Downtown Boards and Commissions, City staff, and elected officials have a shared interest in a healthy, vibrant Downtown. The Plan should be used by each of these groups as a guide for making and coordinating decisions, both large and small, regarding Downtown improvements and sustainability.

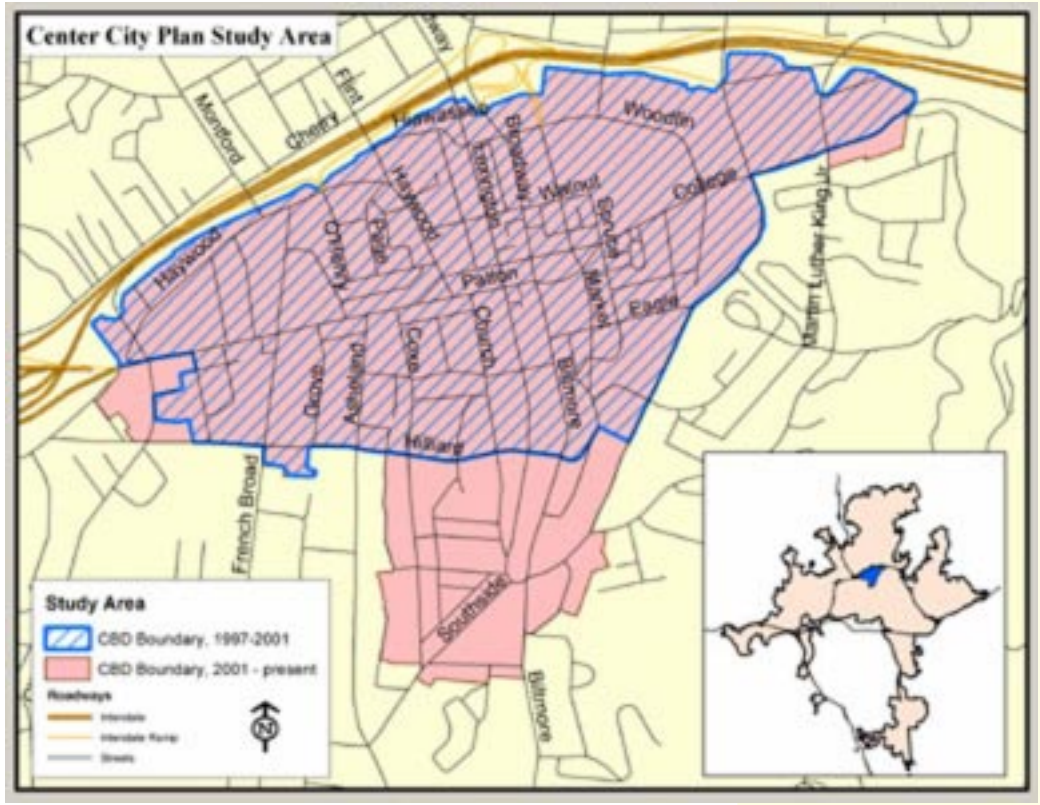
The Plan addresses four key topics that are of primary importance to the future of Downtown. These topics are economic development, housing, the physical environment, and transportation/accessibility. Located at the end of each section is a list of goals and strategies. These goals and strategies are the backbone of the Plan. They give clear direction regarding how each of the issues should be addressed in order for Downtown to reach its full potential. Because of their importance, the reader should give high priority to reading and understanding the goals and strategies.

Study Area

The study area for the Center City Plan coincides with the area currently zoned Central Business District, which was recently expanded to accommodate anticipated Downtown growth. Downtown Asheville does not exist in a vacuum. It both influences and is influenced by its surrounding neighborhoods. Therefore, in some cases, the Center City Plan suggests strategies that involve areas outside of the Central Business District.

A Brief History of Downtown Asheville

Downtown Asheville has always been the center of the City. The intersection of Biltmore Avenue/Broadway with Patton Avenue is the original Cherokee crossroads that developed into the county seat in 1793. The Village of Asheville was incorporated in 1797. Asheville developed as a stopover for livestock drovers and other travelers on the Buncombe Turnpike. With the completion of the railroad in 1880, scenic beauty and mild summers quickly established Asheville as a destination for tourists, summer residents, and health seekers.



The Center City Plan Study Area covers the Central Business District (CBD). The CBD was expanded by the Asheville City Council in November, 2001 to accommdate and foster anticipated Downtown growth.

"The outburst of private and public projects completed here during the twenties makes building Rome in a day a proposition worth considering."

Roger McGuire, from his Pen and Plate club manuscript, "Happy New Year, Altamont!"

In the late 1880s George Vanderbilt decided to build his country estate in the Asheville area. As a result, he brought a large number of craftsmen from across the country and even from overseas. Many of these craftsmen stayed on after the Biltmore Estate was completed and made important contributions to Asheville's architecture. Many African-Americans also came to the Asheville area as craftspeople and laborers.

YMI Durgstore, 1910; Photo courtesy of Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, UNCA Ramsey Library

Asheville continued to grow, with investment reaching a fevered pitch during the Roaring Twenties. Land speculation was comparable to the speculation occurring in St. Petersburg, Florida, and Atlantic City during the same period. Today we see the evidence of that prosperous period in the magnificent buildings that remain.

Although Asheville was known as a haven of pure air and cooler temperatures, it was not idyllic for everyone. Prejudice against African-Americans forced segregation. Blacks were usually not allowed to rent or own property in the same areas as whites. Therefore, a separate business district developed in the area east of Biltmore Avenue and south of Pack Square. The Eagle/Market Street area was quite properous and quickly became the center of African-American commerce in Western North Carolina. As with the rest of Downtown, the prosperity did not last forever.

With the stock market crash in 1929, everything came tumbling down. The City and County together owed approximately fifty million dollars and were sued by creditors. A debt repayment plan was designed and pay-

ments started in 1936. It took the next forty years to repay the debt. The last bonds were burned in 1976. The legacy of the debt was two fold: the City was not able to take adequate care of its infrastructure of streets, water lines, and sidewalks—they were patched and repaired, but replacement or repaving was not feasible; second, more positively, the City could not afford to tear down many of the older buildings that may have been viewed as outdated. The result is a considerable stock of beautiful, historically significant buildings in the Downtown area.

Downtown Asheville continued to serve as the regional hub for shopping and commerce until the early 1970s. Department stores such as Sears, Ivey's, Woolworth's, J.C. Penney, and Bon Marche continued to do business Downtown and even expanded. When the Asheville Mall opened in 1972, businesses began leaving and by the second half of the decade, Downtown was considered by most people to be "dead."

In 1977 the Asheville Revitalization Commission was created with the goal of revitalizing Downtown. The Commission developed a plan called *A Revitalized Downtown*, which called for making Downtown more livable and developing its strengths by enhancing Downtown neighborhoods with the character of villages.

During this period, investment was slowly occurring in Downtown. John Lantzius, a landscape architect, invested in buildings on Lexington Avenue and Broadway, creating Lexington Park, a mixed use area with apartments, offices, and pocket parks. Also, the Akzona Corporation built its headquarters on Pack Square, replacing a series of historic buildings with a modern office building designed by I.M. Pei.

In 1979, a proposal was made by the Strouse Greenberg Company to build a shopping mall that would demolish and replace eleven blocks of Downtown. The proposal was quite controversial and deeply divided the community. The project came to an end when a public referendum was held in November 1981, and defeated by a margin of two to one. The defeat of the Strouse Greenberg proposal served to galvanize the community and sparked renewed

Renovations to Wall Street in 1987.

interest in Downtown revitalization and historic preservation.

Since that landmark vote, the City, non-profit organizations, such as Asheville-Buncombe Discovery and the Asheville Downtown Association, and hundreds of volunteers have worked tirelessly on Downtown revitalization efforts. Both public and private investment has been key to attracting new businesses, investors, and residents.

Key Public-Private Downtown Investments include:

- Wall Street project, 1987 (Included streetscape improvements, building rehabilitation, and a parking structure)
- Pack Plaza, completed 1990
- Haywood Street Streetscape and Rankin Parking Deck (1989-91), built in conjunction with the Haywood Park Hotel and offices, and 21 Haywood Street residences (private sector)
- Pack Place, 1992
- YMI Cultural Center, 1992
- Thomas Wolfe Visitor Center, 1993
- Pritchard Park and adjacent sidewalk, 2001
- Streetscape and paving around Grove Arcade, 2002, done in conjunction with the rehabilitation of the Grove Arcade

In addition to the public-private projects that have been completed Downtown, a great deal of private investment has occurred. Both long-standing businesses and new businesses took risks in staying or locating in Downtown when many people still doubted that Downtown could ever come back. Their investment was critical to the success of Downtown. State and Federal tax credits have helped property owners restore buildings to their former glory. Asheville leads the state of North Carolina in use of historic tax credits.

Also key to Downtown's success has been the many organizations and volunteers who have made efforts to bring people to shop, work, and live Downtown. From festivals and events, to taskforces on streetscape and the Urban Trail, hundreds of individuals have worked to create today's vibrant, highly livable Center City.

Two people who made enormous contributions to Downtown's rebirth were Roger McGuire and Julian Price. McGuire, the founding editor

of Southern Living magazine, retired to Asheville and became involved in Downtown revitalization efforts. Most notably, he headed the Pack Place project, raising 6 million dollars in private funds for its construction. McGuire also started and funded Asheville-Buncombe Discovery, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the community's quality of life. In 1986, McGuire helped put together the Urban Design Action Forum, which brought together citizens, downtown stakeholders, and designers to discuss ideas for design in Downtown. McGuire was a tireless downtown booster, preaching the benefits of a vibrant, livable downtown.

Julian Price moved to Asheville in 1990 and immediately became interested in the health of his community. He became an advocate for urban livability, specifically pedestrian issues and improving City trees. Price supported new businesses such as Laughing Seed and the Greenline (now Mountain Xpress). Perhaps most importantly, he created Public Interest Projects, Inc. (PIP), a for-profit development company to "expand downtown-housing opportunities across the entire economic spectrum and to increase the number and strength of downtown businesses whose presence makes Downtown a more attractive place to live, work and visit." At the latest count, PIP has rehabilitated eighteen buildings and created over seventy-five housing units. Not only has PIP completed a number of significant projects such as the Carolina Apartments, the Asheville Hotel, and the Vanderbilt Apartment renovations, but the company has invested also in a number of notable downtown businesses such as Salsa, Zambra, and Malaprops. Julian Price left a great legacy of a more livable, enjoyable Downtown.

The Asheville Hotel, below, was boarded up and in poor shape before Public Interest Projects renovated it and turned it into a vibrant mixed use building including a bookstore, market rate apartments, and a restaurant.

In addition to his non-profit activities, Roger McGuire developed some of the first condos in downtown Asheville at 60 Haywood Street in the Haverty's Furniture Building, above.