

Chapter 14 Revitalization

Introduction

Cities, and areas within cities, often go through periods of community and economic health as well as periods of stress. Virtually all cities have areas within them that at some time are in need of rehabilitation and revitalization. The City of Harrisonburg has identified a number of areas of the City where revitalization strategies should be applied. The goal is to help these areas return to their original prosperity, attractiveness, and function so that they again become assets to the community and meet the needs of businesses and/or residents.

Background

Downtown

Downtown Harrisonburg was once the economic center of the City and the region, but has been overshadowed by new commercial and business areas. The City has made steps toward revitalizing its downtown, recognizing that a vital city center attracts business, tourists, and improves the overall quality of life for residents. To that end, Harrisonburg offers tax incentives to downtown property owners, has created special districts and zones, and has provided support for Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, a non-profit organization seeking revitalization of downtown.

Central Business District: The City has established tax incentives to encourage the renovation and/or rehabilitation of older structures downtown. The incentive is offered to owners of B-1, Central Business District commercial and residential real estate that is at least 25 years old. It provides partial exemption of real estate taxes, not to exceed the amount of the increase in assessed value due to the renovation, for up to five years.

Arts and Cultural District: The ordinance establishing the Arts and Cultural District was adopted in 2001. The district is comprised of the B-1, Central Business District, parts of B-2, General Business District adjacent to B-1, and James Madison University's (JMU) main campus. The City's stated goal in creating the district is "to improve the economic conditions of the central portion of the City, which could, in turn, benefit the welfare of the citizens of Harrisonburg." The district offers qualified arts organizations exemption from business, professional, and occupational license taxes and fees for three years. In addition, organizations are exempt from admission taxes and can qualify for the Central Business District tax incentive described above.

Harrisonburg Downtown Technology Zone: The zone was created to encourage technology businesses to locate in this limited area of downtown. Incentives include water and sewer connection fee exemption and 3 year business, professional, and occupational license tax exemption for qualified high-technology businesses.

Economic Revitalization Zone: This zone is defined as all parcels of real estate located within the City's B-1, Central Business District and the City's Virginia Main Street district. Tax incentives include partial exemption for 5-10 years from real estate taxation for new commercial and residential mixed-use construction exceeding \$1 million and containing at least 40 percent retail on the ground floor.

Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance: This organization grew out of an effort initiated by City Council in April 2002 to evaluate a proposal to create a pedestrian mall in downtown Harrisonburg. Its mission has since broadened in scope, and is to “work in partnership with City government and the community to develop a comprehensive vision and master plan to revitalize downtown Harrisonburg into a prosperous and vibrant city center.” Its board of directors and advisory board include representatives of City government, non-profits, and the universities, as well as individual property and business owners and professionals.

Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance’s board of directors has laid out the following organizational objectives:

- Economic: To strengthen the downtown district’s existing economic base, seek ways to introduce new types of commerce suitable for a downtown venue, and convert underutilized space into productive uses.
- Design: To promote the enhanced physical appearance of the district by capitalizing on its assets, rehabilitating historic buildings, encouraging supportive new construction and beautifying the streetscape.
- Promotion: To market the downtown district’s unique qualities to potential customers, investors, new businesses, local citizens, and visitors through effective strategies and special events.
- Organization: To build cooperation and consensus between all stakeholders in an effort to meet our mission and objectives, to strengthen our Main Street program, and to improve the quality of life for the people who live, work, and visit downtown Harrisonburg.

Harrisonburg applied for and became a designated community with the Virginia Main Street program in August 2004 and will use the resources of that program to further the goals of downtown revitalization and the goals, objectives, and strategies of the comprehensive vision and master plan called for in Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance’s mission statement and organizational objectives. Included in the latter is the development of a document from August 2008 by Eugene Stoltzfus Architects titled: *Urban Values & Vision for Downtown Harrisonburg*, which is incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan by reference. This plan addresses a wide range of issues, among them the following:

- Local, regional, national and global perspectives
- Urban design principles and urban trees
- Opportunities for private building renovation and new construction
- Creative public projects and enhancements
- Guiding concepts and values

Edom Road Revitalization Area

The City has identified several blocks around Edom Road, as shown on the Plan Framework Map, as an area in need of revitalization. Located next to downtown, this area currently exhibits low quality and deteriorating building stock and conflicting land uses. The goal is to encourage reinvestment and to seek coordinated redevelopment of the area transforming it into an attractive and vital City asset. The revitalization plan for this area should consider such issues as the following:

- Quality of building stock

- Number of vacancies
- Presence of historic and environmental resources
- Economic viability of businesses
- Parcels where redevelopment is recommended
- Appropriate land uses and zoning
- Redevelopment and building rehabilitation incentives
- Needed public investments (roads, sidewalks, streetscape, infrastructure)

Neighborhood Conservation Areas

The Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee has identified a number of neighborhoods around the edges of downtown as experiencing stress. These neighborhoods are highlighted on the Plan Framework Map. Some are suffering from poorly maintained, deteriorating, or vacant homes and spot conversions of single family homes to apartments, often for students. Other areas contain older deteriorating apartment buildings. Some are affected by encroaching commercial development or inappropriate conversion of houses to non-residential uses. Impacts of traffic on highly traveled roadways may also be creating neighborhood stress. This plan recommends that for each of these areas a community-based neighborhood plan be developed to address these and other issues raised by the community. Such plans might include:

- Programs to encourage the rehabilitation and renovation of older houses;
- Programs to facilitate home ownership and improve the quality of rental housing;
- Revisions to the Zoning Ordinance to reduce the number of variances and conditional use permits needed to build and renovate older homes on small lots;
- Strategies to reduce land use conflicts, including conflicts between residential areas and adjacent commercial or industrial areas and conflicts created by the expansion of public and institutional uses within neighborhoods;
- Programs to reduce pressures to convert single family houses and lots to other uses;
- Traffic impact analyses addressing commuter traffic on major through roads and industrial truck traffic;
- Recommended infrastructure improvements, including street and sidewalk repairs, traffic calming measures, new sidewalks and trails, upgraded water and sewer lines;
- Other public investments, such as street tree planting, pocket parks, and community centers;
- Resolution of safety and security issues;
- Programs to encourage the involvement of neighborhood residents in the improvement and maintenance of their neighborhoods (building leadership capacity, encouraging civic involvement); and
- Standards for public landscaping, streets, and utilities in the historic districts to enhance their distinctive design.

Revitalization Goal, Objectives and Strategies

Goal 15. To enhance and revitalize existing residential and commercial areas.

Objective 15.1 To make downtown revitalization a major, high priority public/private initiative, the cornerstone of the City's economic development, tourism, historic preservation, and civic pride enhancement efforts.

Strategy 15.1.1 To support the initiatives of Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance in such areas as:

- Creating a permanent, well funded downtown revitalization organization
- Developing design guidelines and design enhancement projects
- Marketing and promoting downtown businesses, restaurants and retailers
- Promoting the Arts and Cultural District and encouraging the location of museums and other cultural facilities downtown
- Strengthening downtown's economic base as a regional destination
- Making downtown the focal point for community and regional events.
- Encouraging flexibility and creativity in the use of public property and resources in the downtown (i.e. restaurant/cafe use of public sidewalk, and other proposals for public properties)

Strategy 15.1.2 To develop with Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance a downtown revitalization plan to guide the rehabilitation and development of the area. This plan should address the following:

- Recommended changes in land use
- The appropriate density and intensity of downtown development and redevelopment
- Incentives to rehabilitate existing quality buildings
- Design guidelines addressing such issues as building height, setback, orientation, façade treatment, commercial signage, etc.
- Parking needs and standards for the location and design of parking lots and structures
- Needed transportation improvements, including roads, sidewalks, bicycle lanes and trails, transit stops, etc.
- Streetscape improvements, including signage, lighting, street trees, landscaping, paving materials, and street furniture.
- Parks and public spaces, including bathrooms and a permanent stage for the park adjoining the Turner Pavilion.

Strategy 15.1.3 To promote and create incentives for development of new housing downtown in accordance with the downtown revitalization plan.

Strategy 15.1.4 To conduct a downtown parking survey and/or study directed toward identifying current and future needs and strategies which address those needed in light of the critical role that parking resources play in

- promoting and accommodating existing and additional retail and housing growth.
- Strategy 15.1.5 To prepare a redevelopment and revitalization plan for the Edom Road Revitalization Area, which is located adjacent to downtown.
- Objective 15.2 To examine the extent to which changes in the retail sector are related to retail growth versus retail relocation, to seek to minimize long-term retail vacancies, and to initiate programs to redevelop and revitalize abandoned older retail areas.
- Strategy 15.2.1 To understand and monitor trends and conditions in the local and regional retail market.
- Strategy 15.2.2 To consider the impacts of new retail commercial rezonings on the current retail supply and demand.
- Strategy 15.2.3 To actively market older shopping centers with high vacancies including consideration of conversion to other uses.
- Objective 15.3 To identify neighborhoods under stress and seek to stabilize, improve the maintenance of, and revitalize these neighborhoods.
- Strategy 15.3.1 To prepare community-based neighborhood plans for neighborhood conservation areas identified on the Plan Framework Map. Such plans might include:
- Programs to encourage quality rehabilitation and renovation of older houses;
 - Programs to facilitate home ownership and improve the quality of rental housing;
 - Revisions to the Zoning Ordinance to reduce the number of variances and special use permits needed to build and renovate older homes on small lots;
 - Strategies to reduce land use conflicts, including conflicts between residential areas and adjacent commercial or industrial areas and conflicts created by the expansion of public and institutional uses within neighborhoods;
 - Tools to assure compliance with zoning and property maintenance codes, particularly for residential rental units;
 - Programs to reduce pressures to convert single family houses and lots to inappropriate other uses;
 - Traffic impact analyses addressing commuter traffic on major through roads and industrial truck traffic;
 - Recommended infrastructure improvements, including street and sidewalk repairs, traffic calming measures, new sidewalks and trails, upgraded water and sewer lines;
 - Other public investments, such as street tree planting, pocket parks, and community centers;
 - Resolution of safety and security issues;

- Programs to encourage the involvement of neighborhood residents in the improvement and maintenance of their neighborhoods (building leadership capacity, encouraging civic involvement); and
- Standards for public landscape, streets, and utilities in the historic districts to enhance their distinctive design.

Strategy 15.3.2 To utilize the planning process described under Objective 3.1

Strategy 15.3.3 To implement neighborhood conservation area plans.