

Downtown



Downtown Versailles is anchored at the intersection of Main Street and US 60 and spreads north and south for a few blocks in either direction. Churches and other civic buildings line the streets and impart a feeling of reverence and permanence. The architecture is exceptional and there is tremendous potential for re-establishing a thriving main street environment and robust surrounding neighborhoods. Historically, Downtown was a center of commerce, housing and civic activities. As automobile use increased, population spread out, and highways were built, stores and offices moved out along US 60 to take advantage of road improvements and abundant land available for parking.

Downtown vs. The Highway



Understanding the effect of commercial development along US 60 and the Bypass is key. A strategy for revitalizing and encouraging development downtown must then take into account the retail advantages strip commercial often has:

- common management regulates the mix of tenants and maintains the property
- readily available parking is perceived as a convenience
- existing zoning encourages strip development while impeding downtown redevelopment
- easy financing in the mortgage system currently encourages building at the edge
- highway-building redirects economic energy away from downtown

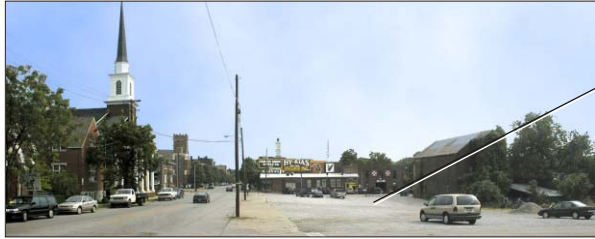
Creating the Downtown Advantage

Downtown Versailles has suffered from a pattern seen in many other downtowns across the country: market share has been lost to a nearby commercial strip because of unfair competition.

The contemporary strip sprang from highway subsidy, cheaper land, and a host of government policies (including zoning) that promoted sprawl and auto-oriented development. These factors, combined with unsound urban renewal practices which further weakened downtowns, created advantages that seem to give the strip an edge: lots of passersby and loud buildings to lure them, low rents, easy financing for development, and plenty of land for convenient parking. The shopping centers further leveraged their large scale with common management, control of tenant mix, and coordination between tenants.

In the typical pattern seen in the late twentieth century, local retail gradually abandoned downtown to a large extent and relocated to the strip-mall or succumbed to national chains in malls. Housing inventories in downtown declined, depriving merchants and restaurants of their traditional customer base. Office uses and service businesses, in search of low rent, began to take over once-prominent retail locations on the main street. Historic buildings were bulldozed for parking or left to fall down on their own, eroding the street scene and the sense of place.

But throughout the country, there are now many downtowns that are beating the strip and the mall at their own game. For example, Park Avenue in Winter Park, Florida; Downtown West Palm Beach, Florida; and Downtown Franklin, Tennessee. The lesson gleaned from these examples is that Downtown can compete with outlying commercial development if the playing field is leveled and if downtown leaders and merchants always keep the competition's advantages and disadvantages in mind.



In the heart of Downtown Versailles, a vacant lot provides the space for strategic infill.



A mixed-use building containing an office, boutique or salon could be located on the street. The only difference on the outside might be the sign attached to the building.



Rowhouses are a versatile building type that allow for a variety of uses inside, without changing the character outside. Residences could line the first and second floors.

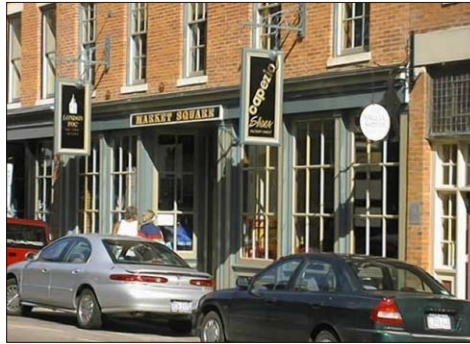
Part of what will make downtown Versailles successful is to add housing that will create a market. The new residents of downtown can support the surrounding stores and businesses.



Since the environment created supports the pedestrian, the additional 'traffic' generated by a change in use would be mitigated.

Adding a corner store can serve the needs of the immediate population and the community at large.

Main Street in Galena, Illinois is the center of this historic Community. The Main Street has experienced a renaissance in the last decade. It is the center of the community as well as a regional destination for tourism. Galena's success is in part to a very active Chamber of Commerce. (www.galenachamber.com)



Main Street in Jonesborough is one of the original settlements in Tennessee. The street is the center of the community, providing daily needs and services. It is also a regional destination for tourism. Jonesborough hosts a National Storytelling Festival annually, which is a tremendous economic draw for the City. (Storytellingfestival.net/festival99/historic.htm)



Park Avenue, in Winter Park Florida is affectionately referred to as the 'street that beat the mall'. This Main Street has historically performed well against nearby mall, that has been redeveloped as the new 'Uptown'. (www.ci.winter-park.fl.us)



In order to compete, Downtown businesses should apply some of the lessons learned at other modern retail and mixed-use developments. This begins with better coordination between the many merchants and owners. Getting organized is the starting point for competitiveness with the newer outlying development. (Note that this does not mean that Downtown should adopt a “mall mentality” or try to physically reconfigure itself to more closely resemble a strip mall!)

The downtown community can also be competitive by building upon the existing business framework. Creation of additional retail stores and restaurants is basic, although an extreme amount of new square footage is unnecessary. What is required is to re-establish a loyal following of customers, drawn from both nearby and outlying areas.

Downtown's greatest competitive advantage is to continue to foster a satisfying, people-friendly environment. To put it another way, the typical strip development today offers a bland, disagreeable experience: stressful traffic, ugly parking lots, homogenized chain stores, and buildings that seem plastic and fake. How did this happen? The developers of the recent past traded away the sense of place to get convenience and expedience, and tenants and customers responded. If the strip commercial pattern hadn't made money, the developers would have dropped the experiment.

But after a couple of generations of this pattern, however, there has emerged dissatisfaction with the results out on the strip: Woodford Countians mourn the decline of the town's overall charm and character, the weakening bonds of community, the loss of uniqueness, and above all the rise in traffic. There is also evidence of a newly sophisticated marketplace, in which discriminating customers demand a better *experience* when they shop or dine. Also, the hundreds of citizens who participated in creating this plan were adamant that revitalization of Downtown is among their primary goals.

Therefore the timing is excellent for re-establishing Downtown as a vibrant center, based on *its* prime competitive advantage, its charm and physical sense of place.

Making downtown a more pleasant place to walk is a basic aim. The resulting environment will be sought after by, among others, “New Economy” businesses and their employees.

A new road will help pedestrian and vehicular movement.

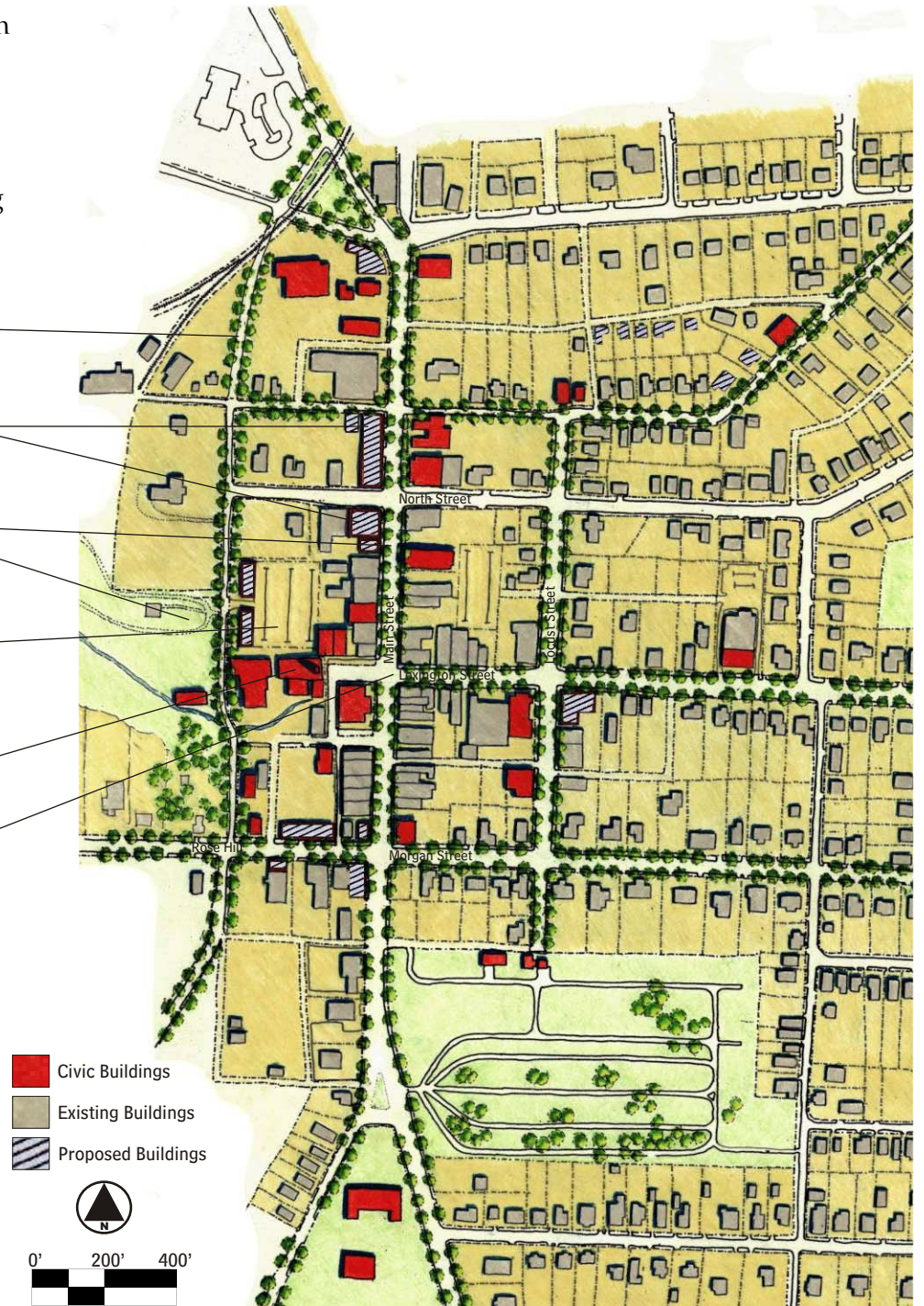
New buildings complete the street. They also provide opportunities for new homes, businesses and retail.

Adding street trees and landscaping will enhance the pedestrian experience.

Additional parking is provided behind buildings. Way-finding signage indicates parking throughout the Downtown.

Civic presence maintains the character of Downtown and ensures Downtown is a destination for the community.

Lexington Street is redeveloped as a safe, traffic calmed street.





Celebrate the corner with a tower element.

Add a cornice to define the building.

Add street trees.

Restore existing buildings.

Proposed

Windows provide natural surveillance, eyes on the street.

Expression Line adds architectural interests.

Awnings and Marquees

Plentiful Glass

Small Corner Radii calms traffic and enhances pedestrian



Wide sidewalks encourage pedestrian activity.

On-street parking is essential for healthy retail, the parked cars also create pedestrian safety.

Selective infill is a key ingredient for the success of Downtown Versailles. As an example, this site is presently a gas station, and while serving a function, it does little else than be a gas station. The proposed building could be offices, stores, or apartments, and provide much more to the vitality of Versailles. Since the buildings are close to the street and provide shade and shelter, the area encourages pedestrian activity.

The Downtown Strategy for Success

1. Provide more opportunities for living downtown. Add new buildings as identified in the Master Plan. Encouraging a balance of people living and working downtown has several benefits:

- Merchants benefit from people living downtown because they will frequent and support the local businesses;
- Living and working in the same area removes daily trips that rely on the regional road network;
- New housing downtown can provide a greater variety of housing options in Versailles.

2. Maintain the safety and appearance of downtown streets. Keep the physical details of Downtown attractive and clean. This is an indicator to the community and those wanting to invest that this is a cared-for place. These details include:

- Regular maintenance of trees, benches, lights, awnings and sidewalks;
- Adding and replacing street furniture and trees where needed;
- Pressure cleaning sidewalks; and
- Repainting or pressure cleaning buildings when necessary.

3. Keep the street well merchandised. Merchants should work together to keep Downtown interesting. Attractive shopfront windows have traditionally been a way to advertise and entice people to enter the store. The fronts of retail stores and restaurants should be welcoming; pedestrians should be able to see inside. Retail shops should frequently re-arrange their windows and merchandise to keep interest. Merchandise in the display windows should be well lit both during the day and at night when stores are closed.

4. Eliminate the perception of a parking shortage. Provide signage indicating the way to all locations of off-street parking. Promotional brochures for the downtown should point out the locations of all available off-street parking. Update and keep implementing the parking plan.

5. Set and promote common operating hours. Downtown merchants should agree on particular evenings to stay open later and advertise these hours. Eighty percent of all retail purchases occur during the workweek after 5:00 pm and on Sundays (source: Gibbs Planning Group). These are precisely the hours that most of the stores are not open downtown. Participation in the common-hours program can be voluntary, but should be required for any businesses or landlords that wish to take part in incentive programs, such as funding for façade improvements or tax incentives.

6. Promote 'best of kind' businesses. Celebrate businesses that allow people from outside to enjoy the things that you cherish. The major advantage downtown has over the strip development is that it can provide a unique retail environment with local products and services that major chain retailers cannot. For example, Woodford County Reserve bourbon is a local product that could be showcased.

7. Promote tourism around unique qualities of Downtown Versailles and Woodford County. Use tourism as a revenue-producing industry that generates funds to be spent on downtown revitalization, historic preservation and acquisition of rural lands. A study by Bluegrass Tomorrow indicates that Woodford County is only promoting itself 1/100 as much as neighboring counties. Much more can and should be done. Stories are told of how, in the past, Woodford Countians deliberately avoided marketing to outsiders. Downtown Versailles needs the spending power of visitors, though, and has paid a terrible price for that policy. The cash spent by tourists is vital to bolstering Main Street businesses, and complements the income from local customers. Woodford

County should develop a marketing plan to embrace tourism as a legitimate tool for accomplishing its goals and set about establishing a tourism market position based on quality, history, and local values.

8. Encourage more businesses downtown. Make tax incentives, loans, and grants available to merchants and business owners in the downtown in order to encourage people to start or expand businesses downtown (e.g. rent for \$1 a month, property tax deferrals, etc). Clearly there will be more sales and success downtown if a “critical mass” is generated.

9. Create development incentives and fix the regulations. Create new architectural and design standards that can accelerate the development approval process. Faster permitting of specific development types can encourage the desired type of development. Relieve downtown properties of any burdensome parking requirements, lot-size minimums, lot-coverage or setback requirements, and impediments to mixed uses, while holding downtown developers to higher design standards, such as build-to lines and glazing criteria. Adopt “smart building codes,” like those recently made law in Maryland and New Jersey, to make renovation of old buildings feasible.

10. Foster civic presence. Ensure that civic buildings and their activities remain downtown; these draw people to Downtown and keep it part of normal community life. The presence of numerous civic buildings also fosters the sense of place and the special character of Downtown Versailles. Take whatever steps necessary to discourage the departure of churches and government functions from Downtown.

11. Ensure confidence. Invest in a market study, if it is needed to prove the vitality of Main Street shopping in Versailles to investors or the community at large. Nationally, the trend is that many retail stores and other businesses are rejecting malls and returning to main streets. A market

analysis, for example, can identify a retail tenant mix based on categories. The analysis can identify the types of retail that are supportable and those that are vulnerable to over competition.

12. Use new buildings to fill in strategic locations. Capture lost space downtown by building upon strategic lots as they become available. Adding more places to live and work will ensure the viability downtown merchants. Note that retailers need not occupy all of the new buildings' downstairs levels, especially on the edges of the core area; most functional main streets are less than 1000 feet long.

General References

The Hometown Advantage: How to Defend Your Main Street against Chain Stores...and Why It Matters by Stacey Mitchell from the Institute for Local Self Reliance ISBN: 0-917582-89-6 www.newrules.org

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Encouraging Downtown Business, Incentives & Regulations

West Palm Beach: The Resurrection Why People Return to the Downtown
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Challenges and Opportunities for Design in Sustainable Development
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For information on why downtowns are a good choice for redevelopment:
<http://www.plannersweb.com/trends/8down.html>