

Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities: Building Blocks

Community: Macon-Bibb County, GA
Tool: Smart Growth Implementation 101
Date: April 15-16, 2015

TO: Alex Morrison

FROM: Elizabeth Schilling, Smart Growth America
John Robert Smith, Transportation for America

DATE: July 6, 2015

RE: Meeting Summary and Suggested Next Steps

Background

The residents and leadership of Macon-Bibb County, Georgia, have devoted substantial time, energy and money to increasing the appeal of their downtown neighborhoods to residents, visitors, businesses, and investors. The current movement can be traced back to 2009, when residents of the College Hill neighborhood and students of its neighbor, Mercer University, joined together to focus on redevelopment in the College Hill Corridor.

The current Mayor, Robert Reichert, presided over a merger of Macon and Bibb County in 2012, and initiated or continued to work on three strategic priorities – improvements along 2nd Street through downtown, blight remediation, and a neighborhood stabilization and revitalization program known as 5x5 (it annually selects a five-block neighborhood in each of the nine commission districts and works with city agencies and other organizations to focus resources there over five weeks.)

In 2014, the Knight Foundation and Peyton Anderson Foundation awarded funding to the Macon-Bibb Urban Development Authority (UDA) to initiate a master plan to guide the City's efforts to reactivate and reinvest in the urban core. The UDA has presented a draft of that plan, now known as the Macon Action Plan, or MAP, to residents for feedback. It focuses on placemaking strategies that will attract people downtown, increase safety, and increase the use of public spaces. Local commissions have been updated throughout the MAP process, and UDA staff expect the plan to be adopted within the next few months.

Downtown Macon has “great bones” – historic architecture surviving from a number of periods, a restored train station and civic auditorium, a closely-spaced street network with alleyways, and accessible parks. Mercer University, which employs a total of 1600 faculty and staff and serves 8500 students on all of its campuses, has embraced its role as an economic and civic anchor. Navicent Health is another important downtown anchor, employing 4600 people and acting as the primary teaching hospital for Mercer medical school.

Macon-Bibb experienced stagnant or negative growth in population and employment over the last decade. The US Census Bureau estimated that Macon County's population was 153,204 in 2014, 1% less than in 2010; however, research conducted for MAP suggests that the population in the plan's study area has actually increased by 6% over the same period.

Macon-Bibb applied for this technical assistance workshop to increase awareness of the basic framework for smart growth in order to show more people how downtown redevelopment efforts fit into a larger community development strategy.

Key issues for Macon-Bibb County, GA

Separation of powers - Both the City and County of Macon delegated their planning and zoning powers to a separate Commission in the 1950s, to be independently funded by fees. This separation of powers was continued when the City and County merged in 2012, and while the Mayor now appoints all P&Z Commissioners, there is no other formal, institutional relationship between the Commission and Macon-Bibb County.

This separation is an issue because many of the goals articulated by the Macon-Bibb Strategic Plan and the MAP plan require changes to land use plans and adopted zoning regulations, while building permitting and code enforcement processes are among the most powerful tools a community has to facilitate implementation. Additionally, perhaps because of the long-term separation, there is little awareness of the relevance of planning and zoning powers to economic development, so the barriers to using these tools may be extraordinarily high.

Vacancy - Macon-Bibb has very high vacancy rates in and around the central core. Downtown, MAP researchers report that 21% of the study area is either vacant land or vacant buildings, and there are also many buildings that are obviously partially occupied. Several residential neighborhoods adjacent to downtown also suffer from vacancy and abandonment, and many inhabited homes appear to be in very poor condition.

Several groups have come up with innovative methods to temporarily fill in gaps downtown, and the 5x5 program, described above, is in place to begin to address issues in neighborhoods.

MAP process - The downtown redevelopment vision being shaped through the MAP process under the auspices of the UDA has strong support from the citizens and leaders who participated in the process, including Mayor Reichert. It was unclear whether the County Commissioners or Planning and Zoning Commissioners were aware of the Plan.

Downtown housing supply - In addition to the downtown growth noted above, the non-profit New Town Macon reports that demand for downtown housing is outstripping supply, in part because they have not yet been able to attract investors to take on larger projects, including new construction.

Workshop Proceedings and Participant Viewpoints

On April 15th, we presented an introduction to this workshop to an audience of about 18 residents

and local officials in the Macon-Bibb Commission Chamber. This presentation was also filmed and broadcast on local cable television.

On April 16th, an audience of more than 50 County and regional agency staff and officials attended the full workshop at the restored Train Terminal in downtown Macon. Participants included several Planning and Zoning Commissioners and the Planning and Zoning Director, one County Commissioner, the County Administrator and Deputy Administrator, and the Mayor. While our local partner had hoped for the presence of additional County Commissioners, he was pleased with the breadth of the organizations and agencies represented. We also welcomed Raabia Budwhani and Latoya Jones, representatives of the SC2 Partnership in Macon-Bibb.

John Robert Smith introduced the workshop with a narrative about his experience implementing historic restoration and downtown revitalization in Meridian, Mississippi. He inspired participants with a sense of what is possible, and reminded them that the work they were engaged in was a long-term project that would ultimately benefit their grandchildren.

Elizabeth Schilling presented the workshop in two modules. The first, *Definitions*, is designed to build a common vocabulary among professionals from diverse backgrounds. It uses the ten smart growth principles to illustrate how each of the “silos” usually used to govern and manage growth and development issues and impacts is related to each other. The second, *Implementation*, was designed to address the specific issues and choices facing Macon-Bibb, including the need to break down silos between the Planning and Zoning Commission and other City functions.

During the afternoon, participants each took time to answer the question, “What are your personal goals for Macon-Bibb?” After some discussion, participants voted for their top three goals, and the following rose to the top:

- Attention and care to areas on the periphery and underserved, undernoticed areas...areas of concentrated poverty.
- A vibrant core which drives the integrated social and positive economic growth throughout the County. Work from the center outward.
- Pedestrian-friendly walkability in the downtown to make people feel “safe” from one part of downtown to another.
- Transform Downtown Macon into a thriving, vibrant, enviable commercial core that preserves historic buildings and is unique to us. A city where people want to live, work and play.
- An integrated, multi-cultural community centered on a world-class downtown where everyone lives in safe, walkable neighborhoods and enjoys access to an education to build any future children can imagine.

In the subsequent discussion, participants began to identify specific strategies to achieve these goals, including:

- Engage all Macon-Bibb County Commissioners and encourage their participation in articulating and supporting a vision for downtown.
- Focus on walkability in the downtown area, improving traffic safety, personal security, and convenience.
- Include younger adults in planning and development decisions by

- appointing them to Commissions and Boards.
- Adopt an approach to economic development that considers regional impacts of major investments and supports downtown redevelopment goals. (The example cited was a new mall on the northern edge of the County, which is perceived as a barrier to new retail development downtown.)

Targeted strategies

1. *Redevelop downtown Macon.* Downtown redevelopment is itself a smart growth implementation strategy. It is central to several of the goals participants prioritized in our workshop, which reflects the level of support and understanding this strategy already enjoys.
2. *Stabilize and strengthen neighborhoods.* The neighborhoods surrounding Macon also play a role in the eventual success of downtown. Not only are they the first thing people see as they enter the central business district, but they are ideal locations for workers who want to be close to their jobs and for families who want to be close to town but not in it. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to allow people living in these neighborhoods now to stay, maintain their homes and become part of the new downtown workforce if they choose to.
3. *Participate in planning processes, development of laws, policy tools and investment strategies that institutionalize regional support for downtown redevelopment.* Downtown Macon functions as one piece of a larger regional economy, and major investments, land use changes, and development decisions in surrounding areas have the potential to support or detract from downtown redevelopment goals. The Planning and Zoning Commission, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission and the Georgia Department of Transportation all work on plans and projects with potential impacts.
4. *Adopt Macon Action Plan as official City and P&Z Commission policy.* Current plans for MAP are that it will be adopted by the UDA Board, although several of the recommendations in the draft will require County and P&Z Commission action for full implementation, and other County and P&Z actions and decisions will impact the plan's success in coming years. The best way to ensure that MAP is implemented over time is to adopt it as official policy of these governments.

Actions to address policies/strategies

1. Redevelop downtown Macon.

Macon-Bibb is already addressing this strategy with several different public projects and civic initiatives that appear to be very well conceived and implemented. But during the workshop participants suggested that Macon-Bibb needs to continue to build public awareness of and support for downtown redevelopment – including all of the great things that have already been done.

- *Communicate the economic and fiscal relationship between downtown redevelopment and the rest of Macon.* Downtown redevelopment is one of the most cost-effective ways to grow the tax base, reduce costs of government services, retain existing businesses, attract new ones, retain skilled workers, and

encourage tourism. Create talking points about the value of downtown development and encourage credible civic and elected leaders to use them whenever possible.

- *Make everyone welcome.* While economic evidence can be very useful with many audiences, there are other people in Macon-Bibb who may feel that investments in downtown are meant to exclude rather than welcome them. Opposition to downtown investment will continue as long as people believe it leaves them out or leaves them behind.
 - Prioritize public events and place-making projects that honor people of color and other groups who share in downtown's history (and its future).
 - Continue to program events that bring everyone downtown to see and feel the impact of recent changes and investments.
- *Share the credit.* Because the City of Macon and Bibb County merged so recently, and because Commissioners are still responsible for specific geographic areas, it may be difficult for them to "own" downtown successes. Make the point that the downtown belongs to everyone by celebrating success: for instance, stage a ribbon cutting or other launch event downtown and give all Commissioners a prominent place on the podium.

2. Stabilize and strengthen neighborhoods

- *Expand the 5x5 program.* The 5x5 program is an excellent way to bring attention to the needs of neighborhoods. Expanding the program to increase the length of time spent in some areas, or to increase the number of areas addressed each year, would allow for greater impact. If additional neighborhoods are added, the program would ideally incorporate one or more downtown or downtown-adjacent neighborhoods each year.
- *Focus on health.* Neighborhoods with high rates of unemployment and poverty are also extremely likely to have disparities in health outcomes and health care. The solutions to these disparities - including healthy homes, access to fresh food, access to safe parks and active transportation facilities, high-quality education, and social inclusion – dovetails with Macon-Bibb's revitalization strategies. The long list of additional allies seeking to support better health outcomes could be especially helpful in building coalitions for politically difficult changes that impact the entire City-County, such as updated transportation facility standards.
- *Identify bicycle, pedestrian and transit improvements* to improve safety and convenience of access between downtown-adjacent neighborhoods and downtown job centers.

3. Participate in planning processes, development of laws, policy tools and investment strategies that institutionalize regional support for downtown redevelopment.

- *Audit existing plans and zoning codes.* Identify sections that need to be changed to better support desired redevelopment outcomes. Work with Planning and Zoning

staff and leadership to identify the best process for reviewing and adopting desired changes.

- *Review the adopted plans of other City Authorities.* Identify projects and investment policies that need to be changed to better support desired redevelopment outcomes. Work with each Authority to modify plans as needed.
- *Work with the Middle Georgia Regional Commission.* Identify additional plans, policy tools and processes that may impact redevelopment generally as well as specific redevelopment projects. Actively participate in transportation planning processes to support infrastructure priorities that achieve redevelopment goals.
- *Appoint young leaders to Authorities and Commissions.* Macon's recent energy comes in part from a group of young adults that want to live in and use a revitalized downtown Macon. Seek out these people who "get it" and engage their energy and leadership by giving them a role in shifting the focus of Authorities and Commissions.

4. Adopt Macon Action Plan as official City and P&Z Commission policy.

There is no clear path to MAP adoption by the City and the P&Z Commission, but MAP is unlikely to have its intended impact without becoming official policy.

- *Explore different options that give MAP recommendations staying power.* Informally convene experts on Macon-Bibb law and politics to brainstorm different options and evaluate their impact and feasibility. Some ideas include:
 - Incorporating MAP goals into the City's adopted strategic plan and incorporating recommendations as adopted priority projects;
 - Working with the Planning and Zoning Commission to determine whether they can adopt MAP and how to go about that;
 - Determining whether the City's and County's delegation of their police powers to the Commission prevents them from adopting MAP in its current form.
- *Designate responsible staff.* Make it the full-time job of one employee to lead efforts to adopt MAP and convene the public officials and staff required to implement it. In addition to understanding MAP and the larger goals of downtown redevelopment, the employee should have a strong position in the Macon-Bibb hierarchy and the support of the Mayor and County Administrator.

Measuring progress

One month

1. Participate in planning - Begin audit of existing plans and zoning codes – Select County staff or retain volunteers with understanding of downtown redevelopment goals to review existing codes and identify areas of concern. Use a tool such as the Smart Growth Code

and Zoning Audit.¹

2. Redevelop downtown - Communicate the economic and fiscal relationship between downtown redevelopment and the rest of Macon – Begin to use information about the economic and fiscal benefits of downtown redevelopment in op-eds, speeches, and talking points.
3. Adopt MAP - Begin to explore different options to give MAP staying power. Investigate the different suggestions and additional mechanisms to incorporate MAP goals and proposals into official policy, focusing on questions of legality, political feasibility, and long-term effectiveness.

Six months

4. Redevelop downtown – Identify groups that articulate a desire to be better represented in downtown revitalization. Seek their help in identifying public events and place-making projects that are important to them.
5. Redevelop downtown - Continue to program events that bring everyone downtown to see and feel the impact of recent changes and investments.
6. Redevelop downtown – Identify significant downtown events where County Commissioners can be included. Select at least one event and focus effort and attention on engaging and celebrating Commissioners' efforts.
7. Participate in planning - Complete audit of plans and zoning codes.
8. Participate in planning - Initiate process of proposing changes to plans and zoning codes.
9. Participate in planning - Review the adopted plans of other City Authorities.
10. Participate in planning - Work with the Middle Georgia Regional Commission to identify relevant opportunities for participation and appoint representatives.
11. Participate in planning - Begin to appoint young leaders to Authorities and Commissions.
12. Strengthen neighborhoods – Identify health-focused businesses, non-profits, and community groups who are already working on active living, safe housing, and healthy food initiatives.
13. Strengthen neighborhoods - Identify opportunities to work with health-oriented partners in specific neighborhoods, prioritizing those adjacent to downtown.
14. Adopt MAP - Designate responsible staff to manage process of adopting MAP goals and recommendations.

¹ Available from <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/leadership-institute/implementation-tools/code-and-zoning-audit/>

Twelve months

In addition to continuing effort on the six-month goals as necessary, aim to have completed the following items:

1. Strengthen neighborhoods – Identify additional resources – public or private – to allow for expansion of the 5x5 program
2. Strengthen neighborhoods – Appoint a committee to identify and prioritize bicycle, pedestrian and transit improvements that link neighborhoods downtown.
3. Adopt MAP - Act on identified options to give MAP recommendations staying power.
4. Participate in Planning - Have at least 5 people under 40 on Authorities and Commissions.