



Smart Growth America
Making Neighborhoods Great Together

Huntington, WV:

Planning for Economic and Fiscal Health Report and Suggested Next Steps

Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program

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Introduction

Pursuant to our technical assistance award with the City of Huntington, this Memorandum constitutes our final report summarizing the workshop on Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health and suggesting some possible next steps as Huntington seeks to implement Plan 2025, the City's recently-completed comprehensive plan update.

On August 5 and 6, 2014 Smart Growth America provided assistance under the Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health tool, supported by a grant from the US EPA's *Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities* Program. A Technical Assistance Workshop was conducted in conjunction with City planning staff, which involved presentations Tuesday evening and Wednesday, as well as the facilitation of a "brainstorming" session and discussion of issues and alternatives with the invited group.

The workshop brought together a wide range of professional staff and elected officials, private sector representatives including the real estate community, local residents, the non-profit community, and others interested in the City's future. Among the participants were Mayor Williams and 5 of the 9 members of City Council. The Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health presentations provided an overview of the fiscal and economic impacts of different development patterns, focusing on the differences between sprawling patterns and more compact "smart growth" patterns.

Through the two-day program, Huntington leadership was able to engage community stakeholders around the ways in which smart growth approaches can make the municipality more competitive and reduce taxpayer burdens. The intent of the workshop was neither for Smart Growth America

to create a plan nor bind the community to any particular course of action, but to assist community efforts to create a more vibrant, successful region, consistent with the goals of their adopted plans.

Need for assistance

The current challenges on which this technical assistance is focused center on the implementation of Plan 2025, reducing negative outcomes from a combined stormwater and sanitary system, and encouraging quality housing and business development.

A major aim of the technical assistance was to facilitate thinking about strategies that might help to energize appropriate redevelopment activity and foster the realization of the intended vision. The “Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health” workshop sets the stage by presenting information about factors driving economic change across the nation.

Smart growth and fiscal and economic health

Communities around the nation are always concerned about their fiscal and economic health. By *fiscal* health, we mean a local government’s bottom line: Does the life-cycle cost of new development – upfront infrastructure, ongoing service provision and eventual repair and maintenance – cost more to the town than it brings in tax revenue? By *economic* health, we mean the general economic well-being of the community: How does new growth and development add to or detract from the creation of jobs, wealth, retail sales, economic competitiveness, and fiscal sustainability?

In approaching these questions in the Huntington area, as in any part of the country today, it is important to bear three trends in mind:

Our nation’s demographics are changing in a way that is profoundly affecting the housing market.

Demographic trends are moving the housing market strongly away from conventional suburban housing. The two biggest demographic groups in the nation – retiring Baby Boomers and so-called Millennials (18- 30-year-olds) are both expressing a strong preference for a more walkable, urban/village lifestyle. Indeed, a growing percentage of Millennials prefer to live without cars altogether or to live a “car-lite” lifestyle. The vast majority of net new households being formed have no children at home, and most of them are one and two-person households – which are much more likely to prefer a walking lifestyle.ⁱ Furthermore, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) has fallen below population growth, while the demand for public transportation has been rising steadily. These trends are a complete departure from those experienced for decades in the 20th century.

The formula for economic growth is changing.

Business growth used to be driven by large corporations that operated in a fashion that was both private and linear. In the past, new research breakthroughs occurred in sealed research laboratories controlled by the companies. Manufacturing and other business processes occurred in assembly-line situations. These conditions led to communities that featured large, sealed-off campuses and tended to be linear in their arrangements.

Today, business growth is driven by collaboration among many types of entities – private companies, research institutions, universities, and others – that must interact frequently and work together creatively. This trend requires cities and communities that encourage interaction and collaboration – the opposite of the older model just described. How communities are designed directly impacts their ability to create interactive and collaborative environments.

Most significantly, the “Knowledge Economy” depends heavily on skilled workers. The companies that are driving innovation are pursuing highly-educated talent, especially among the ‘Millennial’ generation. Increasingly, companies find it necessary to locate in places that the work force wants to live in; and this means walkable communities.

Similarly, the market for retail is changing. The suburban shopping malls and “power centers” that thrived for decades are struggling as a result of oversupply, and a shift in preferences. With online buying playing a bigger role for consumers (especially for bargain hunters), many are looking for a more “authentic” experience when they shop in person. This is bringing new value to traditional walkable Main Streets.ⁱⁱ

Suburban development patterns are making it more difficult for local governments to balance their budgets.

Suburban development patterns require extensive investments in capital infrastructure and on-going service delivery. Low-density development requires more infrastructure to serve fewer people and requires service providers such as firefighters and school buses to travel farther. More compact development patterns reduce both life-cycle infrastructure costs and operating costs. A 2013 study by Smart Growth America, *Building Better Budgets: A National Examination of the Fiscal Benefits of Smart Growth Development*ⁱⁱⁱ, concluded that, compared to conventional suburban development, smart growth patterns can save up to one-third in upfront infrastructure cost and 10% annually in ongoing operating expenses. Smart growth development patterns can generate approximately 10 times more revenue on a per-acre basis.

Not all of these trends will be completely relevant in every situation. But it is important to bear all three in mind in considering the fiscal and economic health of any community.

Participant viewpoints

These concepts were elaborated upon in the presentation portion of the workshop, which was followed by a general discussion session among all participants, and the identification of a number of issues or themes bearing on the realization of the regional vision. The purpose was not to establish consensus on a specific plan, but to focus thinking by identifying obstacles and promising possibilities.

Discussion was organized around three focus areas: the Old Main Corridor, Hal Greer Boulevard and the 14th Street West area.

Participants engaged in a robust dialogue, and offered their thoughts on opportunities and obstacles that may impede progress in the region. The following summarizes the ideas and themes presented by the participants at the conclusion of the work session:

Old Main Corridor

Opportunities

- Vacant lots/ need for infill development
- Take advantage of walkability

Ideas

- Downtown trolley line
- Expand public wireless internet access
- Create “Entrepreneur Zones”
 - Incentivize landlords to lower rents to encourage start-up businesses
 - Develop a program to encourage multiple start-up businesses to share space, resources
 - Mentoring program for new business owners (Unlimited Future?)
- Better utilize the riverfront
 - Implement redevelopment plan
 - Widening floodwall crossings
 - Construct a pedestrian bridge from Pullman Square over Veterans Memorial Boulevard and floodwall to Harris Riverfront Park.
 - Maximize access to boaters, add marina options
 - Build skate park and spray waterpark
 - Use floodwall for public art (no paint)
- Review ordinances to determine options for outdoor seating
- Collaboration between Huntington Police Department and Marshall University Police Department for more foot and bike patrols
- Improve way-finding signage
- Virtual map of downtown with smartphone application
- Adopt ways to slow traffic into downtown
- Convert one-way streets into two way streets
- Improve pedestrian mobility on Veterans Memorial Boulevard
- Increase number of bike racks, bike lanes (ongoing)
- Complete streetscapes
- Work to make TTA station an intermodal facility
 - Bike share program
 - Airport shuttle
 - Greyhound terminal with increased routes
 - Shuttle to Amtrak station
- Student oriented services that are not bars
 - Quality and affordable housing
 - Co-op and internship opportunities with businesses
 - Small grocery store/market
- Incentives to fill vacant storefronts

Hal Greer Boulevard

Opportunities

- Gateway to Downtown

- Access to Cabell-Huntington Hospital and Marshall University
- Many opportunities for redevelopment
 - Increase in housing, better quality
 - Promote walkability/safety for all modes of transportation

Ideas

- Make ordinance changes to support implementation of Plan 2025: Huntington's Comprehensive Plan
- Huntington Urban Renewal Authority consolidate properties with its Landbank
- Encourage multi-story, multi-use developments
- Recruit/ seek out developers emphasizing public-private partnerships
- Support multiple options for new housing
- City to demonstrate new ideas

Challenges

- Inconsistent code enforcement
- Public perception of neighborhood
- Current ordinance language
- Lack of resources
 - People
 - Funding

14th Street West

Opportunities

- Play on existing history
 - Fire station
 - Nearby museums
 - Antique retailers
- Tie in with Corbin building redevelopment
- Possible use of vacant West Middle School
- More use of the large and beautiful gazebo
- Connect to existing recreation options
 - Ritter Park
 - PATH
 - St. Cloud Commons

Ideas

- Free shuttle to circulate people from other parts of city to 14th Street West
- Create an identity through marketing
 - Downtown viewed as entertainment area, market 14th Street West as culture and history district rather than just viewed for antiques?
 - "Antique District" seen as too broad, doesn't encompass the entire area
 - Expand area beyond 14th Street West
 - Establish a welcome center in the district/ relocate I-64 welcome center to better highlight 14th Street West Area
- Create/enlarge/ better utilize event space
 - Encourage/ plan for consistent programming in gazebo area

- Redesign traffic pattern
- Encourage infill and multi-use development
- Improve streetscape by adding bike racks, benches (moveable chairs), and repair sidewalks
- Create micro-parks in vacant spaces *and* around the gazebo
- Reconfigure the area around the gazebo so that benches are appropriately situated
- Complete Virginia Avenue to connect to 14th Street West
- Work with property owners to make storefronts uniform/consistent
- Improve way-finding signage
- Seek more input from property owners and customers who frequent the area
- Allow kiosk businesses and vendor carts
- Public wireless internet access
- Remove one-way streets, they are business killers
- Remove restrictions for small entrepreneurs several days a week or a couple of days per month, so these business can ‘test the waters’ of business-hood. Successful entrepreneurs will then be encouraged to go on to create successful businesses.
- Make necessary changes to zoning code for the type of development that is desired.

Challenges

- Geographically isolated
- Lacking ordinance protection to preserve historic character versus status quo development
- Perception of West Huntington/ West End
- Lack of consistent, full-time assistance to aid in implementation of ideas
- Economic/ Cost obstacles
- Maintenance costs of new infrastructure
- Community buy-in

Recommendations

Huntington has made a good start in preparing for a prosperous and sustainable future with the work that has been done in developing Plan 2025. Projects already underway have the potential to be great catalysts for downtown revitalization. (Including: The Marshall University downtown renovation with the new Visual Arts Center; the redevelopment of Northcott Court, making a large commercial property available on a main entrance into city; the renovation and reutilization of the Central City Market, “The Wild Ramp,” together with the local food council/aggregation work; and the River to Rail initiative.) The challenge now is to realize the vision. Many good ideas were offered by workshop participants, as indicated above.

The recommendations that follow are based on the discussions that occurred during the August 6 workshop and discussion:

1. Give attention to the streets.

Deploy the “complete streets” throughout the focus areas. Ensure quality sidewalks, safe crossings, amenities like street trees and lighting, minimal curb cuts for traffic, provisions for bicycles, etc.

On Hal Greer Blvd. it will be especially important to ensure pedestrian-orientation. This means improving street-level pedestrian infrastructure throughout, with special attention to the Medical Center area. Street-level improvements are preferable to pedestrian overpasses because the former is more likely to spur other types of street-level activation, such as additional retail. Better connecting the Medical Center to downtown should be a major goal, overall.

Reduce surface parking. As with many cities, parking lots have come to occupy much downtown space. To address this issue, it is highly recommended that the city **conduct a comprehensive parking audit**. Knowing exactly how large the parking inventory is, and understanding the level of utilization in various locations, will enable a strategy that promotes an efficient supply of parking, and frees up land for higher and better uses.

Strive to create continuous street frontage. Work to fill in “missing teeth” – spaces where the removal of buildings has left gaps in the frontage. In many cases these are now parking lots. The best outcome is usually the construction of new buildings on the site (with parking provided underground, or structured to the rear). Where that is not a near-term possibility, interim strategies may include permitting (encouraging) a portion of the site (to a depth of at least, say, 10 to 20 feet of the lot from the back of the sidewalk) in a manner that helps to activate the street. This could be the erection of small temporary or short-life buildings, or “kiosks” or stands for retail use. Specific uses may include pop-up retail, food trucks or even shipping container retail like Cleveland’s “small box” initiative.

Restore two-way traffic on more downtown streets. The success of 3rd Avenue is already a powerful example of the benefits to be had. There are likely to be even greater benefits from 2-way restoration on other streets in the Old Main/downtown area, as these have good traditional frontage (buildings with storefronts) on both sides. Restoring 2-way service on the roadway will help retail business, and encourage pedestrian traffic.

One-way through streets largely serve to speed vehicular traffic through your community, encouraging them to leave quickly and spend their money somewhere else. A 2-way street can actually function quite efficiently, but traffic will move more calmly, and drivers are more likely to decide to stop and explore the downtown area.

2. Focus your effort.

Work to make one small area (not more than 25-75 acres) a success. Pick an area with promise, create a development program using some of the actions discussed and start working on its implementation. Bring all tools to bear to make it a near-term success. This could include pooling funding resources and channelizing them toward relevant actions and the outlined development program components.

This does not necessarily mean working on ‘one-and-only-one’ place. With regard to the three identified focus areas, it might be possible to have a target in each. The point is to recognize that each of the three areas is quite large. If efforts and initiatives are too dispersed, the necessary synergies may not be realized. Concentrating efforts in a particular target location will make success more likely.

Long-term vision is very important, but its ultimate achievement requires a strategy for near-term successes.

3. Make it easier to do what you want done.

Simplify the process for desired outcomes. Consider changes to local development codes and related ordinances. Consider process re-engineering for things like permit-approval.

An active downtown district or main street can become a valuable destination, generating a large net tax benefit to local government. In general, such areas produce a high return in taxes per acre, while demanding comparatively little in services (like public school costs). The more attractive the district is (both visually and in terms of the availability of amenities), the more it draws activity, the greater the return to both private land owners and the governments to whom they pay taxes. These are reasons to allow a more active, pedestrian-generating mix of uses, with some higher densities and greater height, in target areas. The creation of such an environment is, however, often impeded by local ordinances. For example, many communities have ordinances regulating commercial signage that may be too restrictive. Inappropriate regulation can be a significant problem, especially for the small, entrepreneurial businesses that are important to generate active street life and create the sense of place that you are trying to establish. This includes things like the amount of space allowed per building, the placement of business names on awnings and the use of A-frame signs placed outside of shops. Some local codes may not prohibit sidewalk restaurant seating, but may make it very difficult in practice. Some restrict the appearance of product names on the umbrellas used to provide shade for outdoor seating. It is probably worth asking businesses what regulations are most inhibiting and asking yourself how important those regulations really are to the well-being of the community.

Zoning codes tend to force development into suburban, car-oriented patterns, rather than the walkable environment needed for an attractive downtown place. Inappropriate setback and parking requirements are typically major problems. They can sometimes be relaxed through site-specific granting of exceptions, but this can be cumbersome and discourage applications from developers. One option increasingly used in communities around the country is the substitution, or overlay, of a *form-based code*. This lets citizens, landowners and developers know what is expected, and it simplifies the approval process for everyone. The City may find it useful to refer to existing form-based codes in cities with similar “bones” (such as population size, character and/or development challenges) as Huntington, such as Billings, Montana, or Cincinnati, Ohio.

On the administrative side, the process for permitting in many localities can be difficult, time-consuming, and unnecessarily costly, raising the cost for development that the city desires. Opening a dialogue with affected stakeholders may reveal areas where improvement can be made that maintain the city’s obligation to protect health and safety (that is, the reasons for having permit requirements in the first place), while easing compliance for developers.

4. Connect to the waterfront.

Waterfront and waterways are being used creatively for placemaking all around the world, with strong economic performance. Workshop participants clearly perceived the potential value of the Ohio River. The key is to find one or two places that may offer a good opportunity to link waterfront

activity to downtown activity. If success depends on a “mega-project”, it may never come. On the other hand, even a small connection may yield large benefits.

Note that the “link” (at least in the early-going) may not be physical improvement, but the use of activities and events that bring people from one place to another. Markets, performances, foot races, bike rides – there are many possible activities that can be programmed to create an “occasion” that will be memorable, and generate lasting excitement.

5. Use events.

Make use of events, especially in the early and intermediate stages of revitalization, to draw people to the target places, and as a basis for community organization, and to shift popular thinking about the place. Street festivals; outdoor movies; music and other live performances; sporting events and competitions: Coordinated, promoted, and packaged, they can contribute to an identity for the community, and help to support larger economic development goals. In partnership with local businesses, they can help to boost sales.

6. Establish an institutional framework for enduring collaboration.

To work towards success, there is a need to foster partnership across government, business, land owners, and citizens. It may be worthwhile to consider whether new partnership institutions should be established (or enhancement of those that may exist) that would bring together business and government, private agencies and non-profits, and citizen representatives. (These could be designated for each of the three focus areas, or for some fraction thereof. They need to be focused on an area small enough to generate real change and synergy, but large enough to have “critical mass.”)

A range of organizational types are found in communities around the US, from small downtown revitalization organizations run as non-profits (typically with some kind of joint sponsorship by government and the business community), to business improvement districts (BIDs) that have access to dedicated revenue sources (which may be derived from local taxes, such as a property tax add-on, approved by property owners within the district). Such groups help to bring focus to a downtown or main street district, ensure that its needs receive consistent attention, and help to provide a sense of identity for the target area.

These organizations could have several roles, including providing a non-threatening venue for different sectors to engage each other, thereby helping to improve communication and understanding across the sometimes contentious interests of local businesses, land owners, developers, neighborhoods and government; advocating on behalf of the district, both to the general public and in official processes; promoting local businesses; and perhaps most importantly of all, providing *place management services*. Place management services includes staging and promoting events (weekend festivals, lunchtime concerts, evening open-air movies, etc.); sponsoring ongoing activities (like farmers’ markets, “first Fridays”, etc.); and supporting cleanliness, maintenance and security within the district.

An example of a small group that has had a big impact with limited resources is the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization (CPRO) in Arlington, Virginia, which has operated for more than 25 years with a staff of one to three people and a minimal annual subsidy from the County. Its Board

of Directors includes representatives from business owners, developers, land owners, neighborhood associations, citizen commissions and county government officials. It oversees two weekly farmers markets and an annual blues festival that is a regional draw. It is the principal convener for interested businesses in the corridor it serves. It has been instrumental as an advocate and facilitator for major redevelopment/revitalization efforts, although it has no formal jurisdictional authority.

There are many examples of more formal public-private partnerships that exercise greater powers. A good example is the Bethesda Urban Partnership in Montgomery County, Maryland (see www.bethesda.org), which manages everything from festivals to street beautification to marketing to managing an arts and entertainment district. Other good examples are Downtown Roanoke (www.downtownroanoke.org) in Roanoke, Virginia; River City Company (www.rivercitycompany.com) in Chattanooga, Tennessee; and the James Street Improvement District in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

There are more than 1,000 BIDs in the US today, with varying levels of funding and activities. The International Downtown Association (www.ida-downtown.org) is a good source of information on practices and organizations that perform these functions.

There is also a range of approaches, from informal to highly formalized, that can be taken to facilitate greater impact and collaboration among organizations like these that may already exist in Huntington. In practice, successful interjurisdictional cooperation usually involves a mix of these approaches. It is important to foster an ongoing dialogue by establishing regular meetings to discuss key issues that cut across city and county lines. This process in turn will support more routine collaboration. A move to systematic collaboration is sometimes begun through informal, low-key techniques, such as instituting regular lunches among these groups' representatives to discuss issues in general, or specific topics.

7. Commission a fiscal study.

Commission a study to analyze the relative contribution to municipal revenues (on a per-acre basis) of different areas of the city, and better inform policy and investment decisions. An analysis of this type will often reveal tremendous disparities in "return on investment" of tax dollars.

8. Focus efforts to locate as much employment as possible along the axis created by the Old Main and Hal Greer corridors.

Reestablishing the center of town as the major employment center will bring multiple benefits, including supporting retail sales, boosting attendance for entertainment venues, improving the financial climate for new downtown housing, and making public transportation, bicycling, and walking more viable as primary transportation choices.

To that end, the city should re-assess policies that facilitate employment growth in more dispersed locations. (As an example, consider the Amazon call center at "Kinetic Park." While there are no doubt benefits to Huntington from the siting of this business anywhere within city limits, its remote, auto-centric location sacrifices the many synergies that might have been achieved, had the center been located in the heart of downtown.) The fiscal analysis recommended above may give some

indication of the magnitude of benefit that may be realized by locating more employment in the center, rather than at peripheral, highway-adjacent sites.

9. Examine options to strengthen transit service.

The corridor from Marshall University through Old Main has the best potential for ridership with regular, predictable, and frequent service. It may prove feasible to extend it all the way to the 14th Street West area. The “transverse axis” out Hal Greer Blvd. to the Medical Center is also may have strong potential. Such service, with simple, easy to understand routes and regular frequencies, can serve not only to bring employees to their jobs, but to promote pedestrian traffic, and thereby foster the street atmosphere that creates value in a downtown corridor. Of course, it will also help to mitigate traffic congestion.

Suggested implementation timeline

The recommendations made in the previous section can be grouped into suggested near-term, medium-term, and long-term actions.

Near-term

- Give attention to the streets:
 - Conduct a comprehensive parking audit.
 - Strive to create continuous street frontage.
- Focus your effort. Work to make one small area a success.
- Make it easier to do what you want done.
- Use events, especially in the early and intermediate stages of revitalization, as opportunities to activate focus areas.
- Establish an institutional framework for enduring collaboration.
- Commission a fiscal study.
- Study transit options.

Medium-term

- Continue to give attention to the streets:
 - Deploy “complete streets” strategies throughout the focus areas. Ensure quality sidewalks, safe crossings, amenities like trees and lighting, minimal curb cuts for traffic, provisions for bicycles, etc.
 - Reduce surface parking.
 - Restore two-way traffic on more downtown streets.
- Continue focusing your effort, making it easier to do what you want done, and using events as opportunities to activate focus areas.
- Undertake efforts to connect to the waterfront.
- Focus efforts to locate as much as employment as possible along the axis created by the Old Main and Hal Greer corridors.

Long-term

- Continue to give attention to the streets by undertaking more resource-intensive and systematic “complete streets” projects.

- Continue efforts to focus more employment opportunities along the Old Main and Hal Greer corridors.
- Continue efforts to connect to the waterfront.

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Notes:

ⁱ “Suburbs Try to Prevent an Exodus as Young Adults Move to Cities and Stay,” Joseph Berger, New York Times, April 16, 2014 (on-line at, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/17/nyregion/suburbs-try-to-hold-onto-young-adults-as-exodus-to-cities-appears-to-grow.html?_r=0.)

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ⁱⁱ See: “Business Performance in Walkable Shopping Areas,” Gary Hack, Robert Wood Johnson, Technical Report, November 2013 (available at http://activelivingresearch.org/files/BusinessPerformanceWalkableShoppingAreas_Nov2013.pdf).

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“The Built Environment and Travel: Evidence from the United States,” Robert Cervero, *European Journal of Transport and Infrastructure Research*, 3, no. 2, (2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ The full report can be downloaded at, <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/building-better-budgets>.