

RURAL DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDY

Quitman, MS

Quitman, MS (2015 population 2,209) is a small town serving as the seat of Clarke County on the Alabama border. Over time, Quitman moved from being an agricultural center to a center for timber, oil, and textiles. However, in recent years, textile factories in the region have closed and timber prices have fallen. This has led to a shift in the city's workforce towards jobs in the area's growing oil sector. While the transition to the oil and gas sector has softened the decline of textile- and timber-oriented employment, recent drops in the price of oil have impacted that sector as well. Home prices have dropped to an average of \$83,000, and blighted homes and commercial buildings are common.

Actions for success:

- Stimulate economic growth
- Foster a vibrant town center
- Improve the local quality of life
- Harness its recently installed broadband Internet access for economic development

Opportunities:

- Existing retail, new restaurants, and a coffee shop
- A tight and walkable development pattern
- A large tract of developable property adjacent to it

Quitman proactively sought guidance to address these issues. The community was selected to receive a technical assistance workshop on planning for economic and fiscal health funded by an EPA Building Blocks grant to help it find its path towards sustainable prosperity. The workshop gave attending elected officials, business owners, and civic leaders the chance to take stock of the city's history and its current state of affairs in order to craft an aspirational vision for Quitman's future. Themes identified by participants at the workshop included:

- Reuse of existing assets including the renovation and redeployment of unused properties such as old buildings, vacant lots and abandoned public spaces
- The need for more public gathering spaces
- Better marketing and promotion for the city's tourism assets
- Opportunities for redevelopment of the 49-acre Bazor Lumber Yard site into a community resource

Echoing themes raised in the workshop, Quitman also received a revenue "hotspot" analysis funded by USDA Rural Development. A fiscal hotspot analysis addresses three questions:

1. Is our community's tax base driven by a few geographic spots within our jurisdiction?
2. How much of our tax base is concentrated there?
3. Are these areas places we might want to consider for investment in redevelopment?

The fiscal hotspot analysis was applied to six potential redevelopment sites, including the Bazor lumber site. The analysis examined parcel values in the community and found clusters of high-value parcels (based on total value per acre) – hotspots – to be located downtown as well as near Archusa Creek Lake, a popular recreation area. It found that this 5 percent of the city's land has:

- 32 percent of its overall value and 10x more commercial value per acre than Quitman as a whole
- 13.4 percent of the roads—in quantitative terms, \$867 of property value per foot of road in the hotspots compared to only \$363 per foot of road in Quitman as a whole

This analysis examined the six properties to suggest the potential areas where development is most likely to be successful in the near term and provide a positive net fiscal impact (that is, new revenues in excess of additional municipal costs). The analysis indicated the Bazor site, located adjacent to the most significant revenue hotspot, as the most promising opportunity by far to support the town's vision of a vibrant, walkable community. Redeveloping this site would produce the greatest return on public dollar investment.

With regard to the Bazor site, the study also noted that:

- Its present value per acre is significantly lower than the average value of land in Quitman as a whole – just \$4,080 per acre compared to \$18,000 per acre in Quitman and \$180,000 per acre in the hotspots.
- For successful redevelopment, it would require an expanded and more gridded road network internally as it is not well served by roadways within its boundaries.

While these values would also be true for the other sites analyzed, they are more remote and would involve higher municipal infrastructure costs to serve them. Therefore, the hotspot analysis demonstrates that the other sites have lower revenue potential than the Bazor site.

The technical assistance showed that, as with any rural town:

- Quitman is willing and interested in investing within city limits.
- The key is developing a strategy that uses that willingness and the city's financial capacities effectively. The "hotspot" analysis offers a recommendation for a specific location at which to begin investment.

Following a productive discussion with various stakeholders—including residents, advocates, business owners and elected officials—Smart Growth America recommended the following next steps for Quitman:

1. Create a marketing and branding campaign
2. Improve Quitman's visibility within the region as a destination through improved roadway signage marketing the community to passing motorists
3. Adopt a Complete Streets Policy and Implementation Strategy
4. Focus efforts on internal circulation within the town center and connections to nearby neighborhoods
5. Focus on placemaking and streetscapes in the town center to make it a destination where people want to visit and to linger
6. Utilize the Internet as a tool to market local businesses as well as the community as a whole
7. Look for opportunities to increase affordable housing within and connected to the town center - including for an aging population
8. Create a long-term plan for redeveloping the Bazor Lumber Yard