

## RURAL DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDY

### Bamberg, SC

In the last few decades, the city of Bamberg, SC has suffered population and economic loss. Jobs disappeared following the shutdown of some major employers, including a hospital closure which cost the city of Bamberg around 325 jobs around 2012. Officials report that the city has more homes for sale today than ever in recent memory.

Occupancy in the city's downtown is low with little to no foot traffic into the businesses remaining in operation. Walkability in the district is poor, in large part due to the traversing presence of U.S. Highway 301, which bears significant trucking and freight thru-traffic. State transportation engineers recently widened the roadway, removing street parking and shrinking the available sidewalks. Without a reliable source of tax revenue, the city lacks the organizational capacity for planning or major public works projects or revitalization.

On November 14 and 15, 2016, the Smart Growth America technical assistance team visited Bamberg to deliver a workshop pursuant to a USDA grant for the Planning for Economic and Fiscal Health tool. The visit included a walking and window tour of Bamberg and public presentation on day one, and a community workshop on day two.

Participant working groups identified three discussion and problem solving areas: Revitalizing Downtown; Improving Communication and Coordination; and Developing and Marketing Bamberg's Identity.

#### Obstacles:

- Rapid population decline
- High poverty and few job opportunities
- High property and city taxes relative to the region
- Limited hospitality offerings
- Little economic activity in downtown
- Downtown presence of Highway 301
- Unreliable broadband service
- Bamberg does not own the right of way adjacent to most of the downtown strip

#### Opportunities:

- Ness Sports Complex
- Cross Rhodes Industrial Park (including Freudenberg facility)
- Strong and well-supported public education system
- A national historic district with more than 60 properties
- A proud athletic tradition
- One of the longest hunting seasons in the country
- Edisto River
- New, well-built civic facilities

#### Targets for near-term success:

- Re-establish a downtown development organization
- Share calendars and agendas across civic and public organizations
- Create a unified vision team to coordinate multi-agency efforts

- Beautify downtown areas that are in city-owned right of way
- Breaking up portions of the railings along Main Highway to improve cross-street walkability
- Connect with businesses already serving adventure tourism on the Edisto
- Found an annual gathering rooted in Bamberg's history to promote community spirit and encourage tourism

## **Recommendations**

Smart Growth America's observations and community feedback from facilitated small group sessions, informed the following recommendations:

### 1. Reclaim Main Highway as a true downtown thoroughfare

So long as Bamberg's downtown is built to accommodate a highway and not people, the district will struggle to attract and sustain development. This will take negotiation with the state DOT, but some improvements can be made without major overhaul.

### 2. Create walkable and bikeable connections to Richard Carroll Elementary

Adding or striping a walking path through the parking lot can encourage pedestrian commutes to school. Studies show substantial personal health benefits when physical activity is integrated into a daily routine like a commute or occupation, and not restricted to planned exercise.

### 3. Actively foster and promote Bamberg's tourist attractions

Access to the blackwaters of the Edisto River and one of the nation's longest deer hunting seasons presents an opportunity to develop a robust outdoor adventure industry. A custom oak barrel company, Black Water Barrels, has recently set up shop in the city, providing not only jobs for Bamberg's skilled labor force, but a potential tourist attraction.

### 4. Found a signature, annual event or festival that celebrates Bamberg

An annual gathering or festival will help solidify an in-facing and out-facing cultural identity for Bamberg. One starting point could be the city's proud athletic tradition.

### 5. Explore public/private partnerships to fill downtown vacancies

Downtown Bamberg is blighted by several vacant and deteriorating storefronts. Developing a public/private acquisition strategy—ironed out between the city and the local housing non-profit—is one way that the city could obtain, develop and deploy these structures for better use. USDA Rural Development offers several grants and incentives that would be of use to Bamberg in this effort.

### 6. Engage area MPO's planning services to develop an actionable Downtown plan

The Lower Savannah Council of Governments offers planning support to its member jurisdictions. Bamberg should engage their planning office to assist in developing a downtown plan that would satisfy the state's funding requirements.