

The Carl Vinson Institute of Government is using an organized and systematic approach to downtown redevelopment and revitalization modeled after the Main Street Four-Point Approach®. The process involves creating a community vision based on broad community engagement and input that leads to the development of an implementation plan with a step-by-step guide for success. The plan focuses on four program components: Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Development. To be successful, communities must look to address issues and opportunities in each of the components, working with broad public support for the betterment of the community.

Across each of the four program components, there is one critical element: public input and engagement. Those who live in a place know more than anyone what is needed and what is wanted. The buy-in and support of the community are essential so that we can address issues and seize opportunities. A community must, first and foremost, meet the needs of its residents—after that, opportunities to increase tourism and other economic opportunities will follow. Americus has created a work program built upon the input of its residents that addresses the following components:

1. **Organization:** Organization refers to working to establish accord and co-action among the various and diverse groups that have a stake in the downtown district. By getting everyone in the downtown district as well as other community stakeholders to work together toward a unified goal, the coordination of the Main Street Program can provide direct and consistent management for downtown.
2. **Promotion:** The goal of promotion is two-fold: creating a positive image of downtown that will both ignite community pride and improve consumer and investor confidence in the downtown. Promotion includes advertising, retail promotion, special events, and the marketing of events.
3. **Design:** Design simply means re-creating downtown to be a safe, beautiful, and welcoming space for all who visit, work, and live there. Design includes giving attention to public and private buildings, storefronts, signage, public spaces, parking areas, street furniture, public art, landscaping, merchandizing, window displays, and promotional materials.
4. **Economic Development** (the Four-Point Approach uses the term “economic restructuring”): Economic development means building on and strengthening a community’s existing economic assets while diversifying the economic base. Economic development can be achieved through techniques to retain and expand successful businesses and thus providing a balanced commercial mix. Other strategies include sharpening the competitiveness and merchandizing skills of business owners and attracting new businesses the local market can support.

These four points work together, each supporting and assisting the others, to improve the social, political, physical, and economic vitality of a downtown.

The Americus community overwhelmingly sees downtown as its heart and soul. The community also sees the health and vibrancy of downtown as a greater indicator of the overall health and vibrancy of the surrounding region. Therefore, it is necessary to pay particular attention to the future development of the downtown area. The downtown is more than merely the traditional commercial district. Downtown Americus’ future greatly depends on the historic neighborhoods

that surround downtown. It also depends on the reuse of the agricultural industrial area and buildings that have played a prominent role in the city's agricultural economy, which relied on a local manufacturing and distribution network. Finally, the commercial corridors into and out of downtown play a significant role in the future success of downtown.

For downtown Americus to be considered a vibrant area, it needs more people, living, working and playing. People are the key to a vibrant downtown. Focusing first on living and working will create the critical numbers needed for playing to follow.

## **Organization**

**Communicating with Students:** In this age of email, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, newspapers, etc., the best way for the city and the students to communicate is directly, face-to-face. The College Student Focus Group reiterated the need for word-of-mouth communication methods. Moving forward, Ben Andrews, community development director, will attend a monthly GSW Student Government meeting to encourage better engagement and coordination between the GSW students and the Americus community. A similar meeting with SGTC is encouraged as well.

**GSW and SGTC Community Involvement:** The GSW and SGTC students are currently participating in the Americus community and are volunteering in places like Magnolia Manor. However, the community as a whole is unaware of student involvement. This could possibly be attributed to the students not identifying themselves as students (i.e. wearing school branded clothing). The students tend not to wear SGTC or GSW clothing; thus the greater community does not recognize the student involvement.

## **Connectivity**

**Connecting GSW Students to Downtown:** GSW students are seeking the full college experience that a traditional state school offers. To achieve the "college experience" students need more activities, especially on the weekends. By not having many Friday classes, most students pack up and head home on the Thursday night and return late Sunday. This greatly discourages campus life. This also impacts the Americus community. The student mass exodus greatly decreases the downtown college town "feel".

**Connecting Downtown with GSW Campus:** Coordinating a transportation system during peak times could greatly enhance the appeal of downtown, especially to students who do not have vehicles. One can walk along the sidewalk from downtown to GSW, but a majority of students feel that it is too far.

**Infrastructure Connectivity:** The people of Americus love to walk. Walking for exercise, leisure, or shopping was discussed throughout the public input phase. People living in Americus view downtown as walkable and would like to continue to improve the walkable infrastructure. Below are several potential action steps that could improve connectivity:

- Determine the maintenance schedule for all downtown infrastructure: water, sewers, streets, and sidewalks. If possible, coordinate sidewalk and aesthetic improvements with the city maintenance schedule.

- **Sidewalks:** Continue to improve downtown sidewalks. The hexagon pavers are costly and harder to maintain than traditional cement sidewalks. In the future, the hexagon design could be stamped into concrete, allowing a similar look and feel, but with less cost and lower maintenance.
- **Bike Lanes:** Connectivity is a sense of pride for the citizens of Americus. Walking as well as biking are activities identified in the public input phase that people in Americus enjoy doing. Integrate bike lanes to create more connections.
- **Secondary Roads:** In the downtown area, increase sidewalks on secondary downtown streets to create more connections to parking lots and the rear of buildings.
- **Greening:** Plant shade trees on secondary roads and roads that are not controlled by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT). These trees should be species that have a large canopy. Crape myrtle is not a good option for producing shade and requires more maintenance than other options.
- **Curb Cuts:** Decrease the number of curb cuts where possible, increase the number sidewalks, and add green infrastructure to improve the appearance of the streetscape as well as pedestrian safety.
- **Connect Downtown and the HWY 19 Park:** Develop a walking and bicycling connection between downtown Americus and the HWY 19 Park via secondary roads.

**Rails with Trails:** Americus could make a connection between GSW, Americus Sumter High School, and downtown by adding a greenway that would run adjacent to the railroad track. The railroad has a very low grade change, so it would allow for a flat greenway network. People could walk, bike, and even use electric vehicles like golf carts to get around.

**Golf Carts:** Encouraging all modes of transportation to connect people in the residential districts and downtown could be helpful. Golf carts could be a way to encourage people to get out and about.

**Electronic Car Charging Station:** Another possibility is to install a DC quick charge station behind City Hall and the Windsor Hotel. (During a public input session, the idea was discussed, and it was agreed that funding could be possible.) This would be another asset to attract tourists to the area. Currently, there are only two other charging stations in Southwest Georgia, in Valdosta and Albany.

**Clean Up Downtown:** The downtown area is in need of a little TLC. It is important to make sure that downtown is an attractive area, that plants are maintained, that weeds are pulled, that sidewalks are clean and in good condition, that streets are cleaned regularly, and that litter is picked up. Every day, someone has to make sure downtown looks clean and tidy. The city could allocate a work crew to only service downtown.

**City Services Downtown:** As the city continues to grow, it is important to strategically keep city services like bill-pay downtown. Each trip downtown by an Americus citizen is a person that contributes to downtown vibrancy.

**Civic Leadership Quarterly Meetings:** Americus has many civic groups because of a rich heritage of service and commitment to the community. However, there is a sense of a lack of

communication with these groups. To address this issue, the community development director could host quarterly civic group strategic planning sessions, which would allow these groups to better communicate and serve the community.

**Improve the Look of Gateways/Corridors:** The appearance of the major roadways into and out of town, such as HWY 280 and HWY 19, is an issue that was continually raised throughout the public engagement process. These gateways are the first and last impressions made by the City of Americus on visitors and locals alike. Gateways are a visual indicator of a community's pride. Is the community prosperous, or is it in decline? Zoning can be a useful tool to create aesthetically pleasing commercial corridors that are economically sustainable. Americus could increase the zoning requirements for all commercial corridors or develop special overlay districts that have more stringent zoning and ensure better development. One only has to look at Madison, Georgia's HWY 441–129 to see the positive impact commercial corridor zoning/design standards can have on a gateway.

An initial first step to Gateway improvement could be Island Beautification/Plantings on HWY 280. By simply adding wild flowers these gateways would be visually improved.

**100 Volunteers:** The Main Street Program is responsible for the effort to build a stronger local economy through revitalization of the downtown area. Many of these efforts are volunteer driven. In order to grow the Main Street program and their effectiveness, dedicated volunteers are needed. Developing a list of 100 volunteers and keeping the list up to date would be a tremendous resources to the downtown development efforts.

**Burglary:** One issue cited during the public engagement process is the rise in the crime rate due to burglaries taking place between the hours of 10:00 am and 2:00 pm. The city police department and citizens must continue to work together to address this situation. Hiring a new police chief is a necessary first step in improving community morale. Implementing multiple Neighborhood Watch programs in partnership with the local police force would be another good initial step.

## **Promotion**

**Coordinate Extended-Hour Events:** An overwhelming percentage of people surveyed commented on the limited store hours in downtown, saying that downtown retail shops close at 5:00 in the evening. Instituting extended hours of operation for downtown businesses would populate downtown after 5:00, helping transform the function of downtown from primarily governmental and business services to commercial retail and entertainment services at night. If downtown Americus decides to practice extended hours, then merchants can coordinate and advertise extended schedules, creating a more event-like feel.

**Create a First Friday Event:** First Fridays are a way to reintroduce residents to their downtown with family-friendly activities: shops hold extended hours, and live music and other festival-like activities are provided. These events would help community members associate downtown Americus with energy and fun, keeping people excited about their downtown and encouraging them to return.

**Rylander Theater:** The Rylander Theater is a much-loved building that gives the Americus community a great sense of pride. There is a strong feeling of community-wide ownership. Thus, many people see the Rylander playing a prominent role in attracting more people downtown. Ways in which the Rylander could be used to help encourage Americus residents and visitors to come downtown include the following:

- Kids' matinee movies on big shopping days: On large downtown sale days such as the day after Thanksgiving, the Rylander could show a children's matinee movie to encourage families to come downtown and shop while providing a safe and fun activity for kids.
- A monthly Thursday, Friday, or Saturday Night Movie: Once a month show a movie targeting an adult audience. Combine the movie night with special deals from participating downtown restaurants to create a "dinner-and-a-movie" event.
- Rylander Social/Mixer: Every fall, the Rylander could host a social targeting Georgia Southwestern State University (GSW) faculty. This event would welcome both new and old faculty to the start of the new school year as well as being a fabulous way to introduce the faculty to the greater Americus community.

**Dinner and a Movie:** The focus groups and survey responses made it clear that people would like to have an evening of activities in downtown. The Rylander Theater is an incredible asset for Americus. The community overwhelmingly supports the theater. There is an opportunity to utilize the theater for movies on scheduled evenings and combine the movies with local restaurants that would offer special deals for a dinner and movie ticket option. Setting up "dinner-and-a-movie" nights in downtown would give both restaurants and the theater a boost, keeping people downtown after dark and contributing to Americus' reputation as a destination. The dinner-and-a-movie concept could also be included with its normal theatrical performances, which might bring new viewers to these events.

**Farm to Table Walk:** A farm to table walk could be an engaging evening activity for the entire family. Business owners would showcase local foods and residents and visitors would walk from store to store, viewing the business, drinking wine, and sampling local foods. A passport of locations could be created: if a person visits all of the locations within the passport, then he or she is eligible for a raffle drawing. The farm to Table Walk would expose many different people to stores and food in a fun and festive atmosphere.

**Develop a "Shop Downtown" Campaign:** The community could work in partnership with both SGTC and GSW to create a shop local or shop downtown campaign as a way to integrate new college students into the local business community. A campaign would also help to remind community members to consider spending money locally rather than at national chain stores or the internet. For every \$100 spent in locally owned stores, \$68 returns to the community through taxes, payroll, and other expenditures. For every \$100 spent in a national chain, only \$43 stays local. Spend it online, and nothing stays local. By working with SGTC and GSW students, the community could develop a local customer base of students.

**Students' Advertisement:** If local businesses would like to increase student purchases, then creating a small student discount could help. During the fall semester, GSW provides students with welcome information about the local community. Businesses that offer student discounts are listed. Often these are the locations that capture the student business.

**Calendar Coordination and Promotion:** Americus has a very strong sense of civic duty. There are many organizations and clubs throughout Americus. Communication amongst these clubs and city organizations is key to maximize their efforts and impact. A coordinated monthly calendar partnership between the paper and the city is a good first step in communicating to the community all of the events and activities taking place in Americus.

**Promote 1, 2, 3 Day Trips:** Americus has many historic tourism draws from the two national parks to the Historic Windsor Hotel and Rylander Theater to name only a few. Heritage tourists spend more money and stay longer than other tourists on average. Fortunately, Americus has a historic hotel, which separates it from almost all other downtowns in the state. By creating one, two and three day trips that use Americus as the base will help to continue to grow the tourism industry.

**Yearly Fashion Events:** Create a yearly fun filled fashion event that would incorporate many of the people that work in the cosmetology field. Locals enjoy an opportunity to participate in a community event out of the ordinary especially for a good cause like community solidarity. A yearly fashion event like a 1920's prohibition themed evening could spark downtown excitement.

**Walk Campaign:** many people choose to walk as form of exercise and leisure. Multiple people commented about walking down Lee Street and the importance of downtown as the destination. To build on an already loved activity the community could create a "Walk Campaign". Distances could be determined between key destination locations and displayed to communicate how easily accessible downtown is by foot to encourage more people to walk.

**Smile Americus Campaign:** Cross marketing is essential for the tourism industry. When tourists arrive to town they often ask employees and owners the question, what is there to do?" The response can set the tone and duration of their stay. By creating and then disseminating an agreed upon list of recommendation a positive brand can be created.

## **Design**

**Beautify Downtown Derelict Properties:** The best way to address the negative appearance of derelict buildings in downtown Americus is to start with a can of paint. Many of the downtown buildings could be vastly improved with a coat of paint and other minor exterior cosmetic fixes. Owners of derelict buildings should be contacted for their involvement in downtown improvements. However, if they are not willing to comply, the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and the city could step in to improve the appearance of such buildings.

**Playground at the Farmers Market:** The Downtown Farmers Market is a great destination for families. By simply adding a fruit- and vegetable-themed play area, the Farmers Market would create a permanent amenity for younger children, allowing their parents more time to sell, shop, and socialize.

**McGarrah Street Entry Corridor:** The McGarrah Street entryway could be greatly improved by decreasing the road width, planting trees along the street, and improving the sidewalks. Also, the streetscape improvements could incorporate Civil Rights memorabilia to pay homage to Americus' rich Civil Rights history.

**Jackson Street Depot:** Jackson Street could be a prominent historic residential street. Currently, Jackson Street has two derelict buildings and multiple vacant lots. The vacant buildings need to be razed or rehabilitated. The vacant lots are ideal for new single-family and/or condominium row-home-styled infill development. Public investment in the form of streetscape and a new Jackson Street Depot could be a catalyst for such redevelopment. The Jackson Street Depot is two blocks from downtown and would allow for easy pedestrian access from the Sam Shortline to downtown.

**Traffic Calming:** Lamar and Forsyth are the main roads running through Americus. Because these roads are under the control of the state Department of Transportation, they have been designed to encourage more vehicular traffic to quickly and safely pass through downtown and the commercial corridor. The roads are one-way and have multiple lanes. This leads to people driving more than 25 mph through the downtown area. People need obey the speed limit for safety reason. A first step toward slowing the traffic could be "How Fast Are You Going" signs posted in and out of the downtown area.

**Lamar Street and Forsyth Street Reconfigurations:** A different road configuration could slow traffic and benefit downtown pedestrians and businesses. Currently, 9,540 vehicles per day are on Lamar Street, and 10,670 vehicles per day are on Forsyth Street. Implementing a pedestrian-friendly design could benefit downtown.

**Pedestrian Crossings on Lamar Street and West Forsyth Streets:** Throughout the focus group sessions, people discussed the difficulty of pedestrians crossing these streets. The city could with the Americus-area GDOT representative to determine what could be done to make crossing safer.

**Rylander Park:** The new Rylander Park is a great downtown asset and provides a needed green space. There is an opportunity to expand this park by redesigning the adjacent rear row of buildings that front Cotton Ave. By creating rear business access on a pedestrian or green area, Americus would create a lively outdoor area that could accommodate multiple types of programing, increasing the number of people in the area throughout the day and evening.

**Complete Streets Policy:** People in Americus would like to make it easier and safer for its citizens to be able to walk and bike all over Americus. One approach that would enable this desire would be the implementation of complete Streets Policy by the City. Complete Streets are streets for everyone. They are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Complete Streets make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work. They allow buses to run on time and make it safe for people to walk to and from train stations.

Creating Complete Streets means transportation agencies must change their approach to community roads. By adopting a Complete Streets policy, communities direct their

transportation planners and engineers to routinely design and operate the entire right of way to enable safe access for all users, regardless of age, ability, or mode of transportation. This means that every transportation project will make the street network better and safer for drivers, transit users, pedestrians, and bicyclists – making your town a better place to live.

**Design Helper Group:** Often property and business owners would like to update the façade of their buildings, but historic preservation guidelines can be confusing. By creating a group that could offer free design assistance an initial barrier to façade improvements can be eliminated.

**Garden Club Downtown Planters:** Americus has many garden clubs. Often these clubs are looking for projects that would better the community. Downtown Americus could always use beautification assistance. A coordinate and committed effort from a few of these garden clubs has the potential to transform downtown into a showcase of vegetative beauty.

### **Economic Development**

The key to downtown economic development is to increase the number of people living in and around downtown. Also, downtown must continue to increase the number of businesses and jobs.

**Business Retention:** Prior to creating a business recruitment program, a business retention and expansion philosophy needs to be fully embraced. First, the city must determine the largest current employers in the downtown (e.g., Habitat for Humanity, Sumter County, local small businesses, and the City of Americus). Think of these identified groups are the crucial industries. Develop a communication and partnership strategy to help them succeed. Make sure the city plays a significant role as they strategically plan for their future.

- **Business Retention and Expansion:** Another step in retaining and expanding current employers is to look at existing businesses throughout Americus and determine the technical assistance that could most benefit them, especially local businesses. The city could work with the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Georgia to offer the technical assistance needed for businesses to be successful.
- **Business Recruitment:** Often communities with institutions of higher education view the student population as a four-year economic driver. Communities that coordinate local industries' needs with these institutions create long-term economic development. The city should continue to work with both SGTC and GSW students to encourage them to seek employment locally or to open a business in Americus.
- **Recruit New Businesses:** The need to attract new businesses and fill vacant spaces was discussed in multiple focus groups. Currently, the Americus DDA takes many steps to recruit businesses. Some additional steps like categorizing vacant buildings as “move-in ready” or “not move-in ready” could help spur more development. Another step would be to recruit regional downtown businesses that that would be interested in opening an additional businesses in Americus.
- **Downtown Incentive Workshop:** Another way to recruit business is to host a downtown incentives workshop for bankers and realtors. Downtown already offers many incentives such as façade grants, preservation tax credits, and low interest loan programs. These programs can be the critical ingredients to make downtown development deals successful. It is important that local realtors and bankers know, support, and utilize these



incentives. A yearly workshop could kick-start this process, and the Americus DDA could host a breakfast or lunch meeting. Speakers from the Department of Community Affairs and the Georgia Cities Foundation revolving loan programs could attend and give presentations.

**Housing Redevelopment Tools:** There are both federal and state tax credit programs to incentivize the redevelopment of historic properties. The downtown commercial core and Americus' residential historic district are both listed on the National Register. Thus, these buildings are eligible for the tax credits if renovation adheres to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. An application process must be completed in order to be eligible for the tax credits. The application can sometimes be a barrier to access the tax credits. The Americus DDA could develop or contract with a person who would provide the technical assistance necessary to complete the application process to encourage redevelopment.

**Façade Grant Program:** The Americus DDA already administers a downtown façade grant program, and the city council has recently allocated increased funds to the program. The DDA could consider extending the grant program to the rear of buildings to encourage the maintenance and rehabilitation of all sides of buildings, especially the buildings that have rear parking

**SGTC, GSW and Downtown:** The city should also explore downtown property development for future SGTC and GSW campus needs. SGTC has already made physical investment to downtown Americus with their Stein Center.

Just visit Columbus, Georgia to see the positive impact that Columbus State University (CSU) has had its downtown through significant capital investment. As an example of possible development that a university can bring to a city, CSU now offers the following:

- Student housing for 400 students
- The Rankin Den and Dining (for students and the public)
- A bookstore
- A University Police office
- A regular shuttle between downtown and the main campus
- CSU's Coca-Cola Space Science Center
- Schwob School of Music located inside the city's beautiful River Center for the Performing Arts
- CSU's Theatre on the Park and the Corn Center for Visual Arts, home to the departments of art and theatre, including:
  - Two theatres
  - A lighting lab, costume shop, design studio, woodworking spaces
  - An oversized art gallery
  - Almost a dozen spaces customized for art study, work, and display
  - Student lounge
- Carpenters Hall, home of CSU's Department of Communications.
- Yancey Center at One Arsenal Place, featuring administrative offices for the College of the Arts as well as faculty and staff offices for the departments of art, theatre, and history and geography

- Dillingham Place, home of Mac computer labs and classrooms equipped with specialized software

Both CSU and the City of Columbus have greatly benefitted from a shared vision as well as strategic plans that make that vision a reality.

**Historic Residential Neighborhoods:** It is imperative that downtown residential neighborhoods become the desired location for all ages and types of people. In order to have a vibrant downtown, people living in or close proximity are crucial.

**Code Enforcement:** Code enforcement is necessary to stabilize downtown residential historic neighborhoods. The older homes are amazing treasures that significantly add to Americus' sense of place. These homes are investments in Americus' future. The city must be vigilant in making sure that property owners, especially multifamily developments, are adhering to city codes. Code enforcement can be a difficult issue that takes political will and the support of the entire community to be successful. A first step is to complete a city-wide code enforcement audit of city-owned properties to ensure that the city is not accidentally violating its own codes. Effective code enforcement only happens when all people are held to the same standards and are treated equally. There will inevitably be public push-back; therefore, the positive aspects of code enforcement must be repeatedly communicated to make sure that public support does not wane over time.

**Safety Grants:** The city should consider applying for safety grants. Wiring and fire safety grants could encourage upper-story housing redevelopment. (Consider creating and implementing a sprinkler and upper-story wiring system program similar to Dahlonga's.)

**Form-Based Code:** A form-based code focuses on the appearance of a building instead of its use. It allows many uses in an area. This approach somewhat simulates the organic nature of downtown development. It would allow for a mixed-use area where work, live, and play go hand-in-hand. Form-based codes could be very advantageous for downtown Americus in areas where redevelopment needs to take place. Instead of creating limits and restrictions, form-based codes could incentive redevelopment. Outside of the downtown commercial business district surrounding the Windsor Hotel, there are many areas that need redevelopment. For example, one such area begins at the railroad tracks west of downtown then runs along either side W. Forsyth Street to North Hampton Street. The City of Thomasville, Georgia, has recently implemented a form-based overlay district for Vitoria Place. The overlay has been successful and is encouraging new housing in the downtown area.

- **Entertainment District:** Using vacant areas of downtown for an arts and entertainment district could create a redevelopment opportunity. Allowing establishments more flexibility in hours of operation and beverage service could incentive redevelopment.

**Land Bank:** Land banks are quasi-governmental entities created by counties or municipalities to effectively manage and repurpose an inventory of underused, abandoned, or foreclosed properties. They are often chartered to have powers that allow them to accomplish these goals in ways that existing government agencies cannot. Americus could create a land bank to assist with downtown housing redevelopment.