

Purpose, Focus and Rationale

This report, *Small Towns Project — Report on the Marshall, North Carolina Community Assessment*, provides a road map for transforming questions and current realities into positive community destinies. It will serve as a collection of choices and helpful hints for the revitalization adventure ahead. The road map will point the way to actions that preserve the character of Marshall and energize the economy.

Communities all across America and in western North Carolina are endangered — endangered of becoming *nowhere and everywhere* communities — so bland and lifeless that all personality is drained away. The devolution of our communities to the automobile and suburbanization has had disastrous effects on many communities. If civic leaders and citizens are not careful, distinctive communities such as Marshall will become only vague memories in the historic past. Unless communities consciously and conscientiously work to preserve their character, it will erode away steadily and subtly.

While the reality is grim, good news is available. The good news is this: initiatives exist that can help a community preserve its unique qualities, simulate the economic engine, and provide differentiation. In a recent study by the University of South Carolina and the National League of Cities, historic preservation was identified by mayors and chief economic development professionals as one of the seven most effective economic development tools, even when matched against traditional ones, such as land acquisition and infrastructure improvements. Of 20 cities identified as the most successful at economic development, 15 of them are among cities with the greatest amount of historic rehabilitation activity.

In the same study, mayors were asked to identify the major target of their economic development activities. Their answer was overwhelmingly *downtowns*. The downtown was also where cities experienced their greatest economic development success. A coincidence that downtowns are also where there is the greatest concentration of historic assets? Not hardly! It makes sense — for cities for and small towns in western North Carolina. If larger cities with much more recalcitrant problems can do it, small towns such as Marshall surely can. Historic preservation is sound economic development that also strengthens community character, personality, and appearance.

What type of impression does Marshall choose to claim? Investors, industries, tourists, and residents routinely judge a people and a community by its outward appearance. Often a community's outward appearance is indicative of its social, economic, political, spiritual, cultural, and governmental climate. Just any appearance won't do, however. The image must be authentic, uniquely Marshall

and western North Carolina. A standard of simple quality must be embraced. Litter, dirty windows, out-of-place signage, forgotten debris, neglected plantings all detract from one's intrinsic feeling about a community. Quality does not inherently mean high cost; yet, Marshall also does not have to accept the lowest common denominator. Be proactive. An ethic of sensitivity and respect toward community environment, landscape, beauty, and character must be active and conscious. Research tells us that the quality of the built and natural environment has a direct effect on behavior. As Winston Churchill said, "We shape our buildings and our buildings shape us." Communities who care about their long-term future care about quality reinvestment now in the heart of their community.

Central business districts, downtowns, are often referred to as the civic intersection of "community" and "place" – the space where the common life is lived. As an extension of this concept, the center city is often called the "living room of the community." This expression provides a graphic image that articulates this blend of "community" and "place." Living rooms are public spaces; they are expressions of the corporate; they are decorated with the public in mind. Living rooms are for living – socializing, entertaining, conviviality, and negotiating. Living rooms and central business districts are both reflective of the community – a group of people living under the same governing structure in the same locality; and place – a location of experience.

The downtown should be cared for as if it is the living room of a home. Attention to detail, positioning of "furniture," provision of people comforts, use of color and happy, smiling faces all make downtowns appealing. Desirable downtowns are expressions of the unique qualities of the location, are visually enticing, have a variety of "happening" activities and uses, and are functional. Research reveals that the application of these characteristics in center cities have a direct correlation to public behavior, reinvestment, criminal activity, social civility and community pride. The quality of the environmental context is a determinant of the quality of community behavior.

Edward T. McMahon, Director of The American Greenways Program of The Conservation Fund, a frequent lecturer in western North Carolina, poignantly describes *nowhere communities* and the impact of apathy. In call-to-action presentations, Mr. McMahon recalls the challenge before us: to save the overall character of our towns by preserving the buildings and landscapes of the past and consciously forming the future. He offers seven *Recommendations for Success* to communities seeking to retain their identity and develop appropriately. They are:

1. Embrace a shared vision for the future.
2. Inventory local resources/assets. Build local economic development, land use and tourism development plans around protection and enhancement of assets.
3. Use education, incentives, and volunteer initiatives, not just regulations to manage growth.
4. Pick and choose among development proposals.
5. Cooperate with resource managers (*i.e.*, National Forest, TVA) for mutual benefit.
6. Consider aesthetics, not just economics and ecology. Use trees, sign control, landscaping and good architectural design to your advantage.
7. Create a quality-of-life "lobby" – people who will see that the vision will be implemented.

Central business districts are where the past is respected and the present is celebrated. The taxpayers of Marshall are the stewards of this unique space that defines a one-of-a-kind community. The retention of the character of the place known as Marshall for future generations depends on the actions of citizens living in Marshall today. Strengthening community economic fiber and refurbishing the downtown are this generation's legacy to the next and those that follow.

The Small Towns Project

During July 22-24, 1999, a team of six professionals from western North Carolina experienced in small business and revitalizing downtowns, came to Marshall to listen, reflect, understand, and offer recommendations for community and downtown renewal. The Team's visit was part of a program conceived by HandMade in America to help revitalize at first four, then six and now 11 towns in western North Carolina. The project was initially funded by the Kathleen Price Bryan Family Fund and is now funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, and the North Carolina Rural Center. The 11 towns currently participating in the program are Mars Hill, Bakersville, West Jefferson, Chimney Rock, Robbinsville, Andrews, Todd, Bryson City, Hayesville, Crossnore, and Marshall.

Following research for a regional guidebook on craft, *The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina*, it became clear to HandMade officials that several towns could benefit from intensive planning to revitalize their downtowns, perhaps using craft as an economic stimulus. The first four towns were interested in the craft heritage corridors developed for the book, but were not able to offer a craft-related site or activity. The original towns were also

Interested in revitalizing their downtowns but were too small to participate in the North Carolina Main Street Program and lacked local professional resources for planning and development. As stated in the grant request to the Bryan Family Fund:

. . .the mountain counties must develop an economy that is sensitive to the unique environment and that also preserves their unique mountain culture. By bring together individuals and organizations throughout the region in a variety of projects; HandMade in America strives to build sustainable economies to benefit all of western North Carolina.

The Small Towns Project, working in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Commerce Division of Community Assistance and the Institute of Government at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), started in 1996 and has evolved over time to be a model of interest to many in far-flung places: Hawaii, New Hampshire, Kentucky and Vermont, to name a few. It is based on seven basic premises of HandMade in America. They are:

1. Self-help and accountability – helping communities help themselves.
2. Citizen leadership.
3. Building upon the heritage, resources, desires, hopes, and aspirations of the community.
4. Involvement of the whole community.
5. Incremental learning.
6. Going at the pace of the community.
7. Sharing stories to help citizens begin to hear each other and talk to one another.
8. Creating new and enduring partnerships.

Marshall and The Small Towns Project

When the work of the Small Towns Project became known to officials in Marshall, they contacted HandMade in America. Community leaders felt Marshall could benefit greatly from the technical assistance and attention the program could provide. Some work had begun prior to the invitation to HandMade, including a community beautification program and discussions concerning the local economy and downtown revitalization.

Prior to the team's arrival, a Steering Committee was convened. Several planning meetings were held by the Steering Committee to organize the visitation and give guidance to the Team. The Community Assessment described in this report is the culmination of this pre-planning phase.

The Resource Team's visit achieved its purpose of creating energy, information, inspiration, and ideas. However, it is imperative that the visit be conceived as only the kick-off to a deliberate and focused revitalization program. The most gratifying and important work will take place in the years following the receipt of this plan and its subsequent implementation.

As part of the covenant with HandMade, the Marshall revitalization group agreed to raise at least \$5,000 locally. The Town readily contributed this amount! This money stays in the community and is used to implement the identified priority projects. If future grants are written with HandMade in America, then the community will be responsible for raising any matching funds for those projects, such as the Urban Forestry grants.

An exciting component of the Small Towns Project has been "sister city visits" between HandMade towns and western North Carolina communities who are more advanced in the revitalization process. Marshall will select a town (within the region that has similar characteristics) to visit and learn from their experience and wisdom. One visit has been made thus far to Bakersville. The tour, dialogue, and confessions from advocates in the selected town will provide a living laboratory for the participants from Marshall. Words of encouragement and support and seeing a successful model will be a testament and inspiration to volunteers. Hopefully, an ongoing relationship will develop between the two towns.

Technical assistance will be provided by HandMade in America to the Town as funding dictates. Monthly visits are available at present plus ongoing support, information, and advice. This assistance will help launch the program and get parts of the plan underway.

With some 11 towns involved across the region, the program has evolved to a new stage. Three clusters of towns involved in the Small Towns Project have been formed; other communities interested in the topic of sustainable community development will be invited. Marshall will be included in the central cluster. Cluster meetings will be held at least three times per year. Fellowship, training, networking, and resourcing each other will comprise the agenda. Topics of special interests, such as facade loan programs or business retention, plus hints for effective leadership and planning will be offered. The sessions will be informative, fun and inspiring.

The Town of Marshall, North Carolina

A serendipitous outcome of the Small Towns Project is the relationships that have developed among the leaders of the communities involved in the project. Through a series of meetings and training held over the initial years of the program, much has been learned and shared – similarities, “war stories,” frustrations and many funny stories. The towns and the region will be strengthened and enriched if the relationships stand the test of time.