

Downtown Element

Introduction

Downtown Hagerstown is the institutional and cultural heart of Washington County, the Long-Range Growth Area, and the surrounding tri-state region. This chapter addresses the downtown's role and establishes policies to strengthen the downtown. The goals, issues, policies, and actions in this chapter were created as part of the 2008 Comprehensive Plan development process. They supplement the issues, goals, policies, and actions listed in a May 25, 2004 amendment to the 1997 Comprehensive Plan, which is reprinted in this chapter—with minor changes to reflect tasks completed since the amendment—and made part of this 2008 Comprehensive Plan.

Goals

1. Reinforce downtown Hagerstown's role as the region's government, economic, institutional, and cultural center.
2. Enlarge the City's share of regional retail and tourist revenue by concentrating specialized businesses and cultural amenities in the downtown.

Issues Addressed by this Element

1. Inadequate-progress of Downtown revitalization.
2. Downtown's limited share of overall regional retail and tourist spending.

Downtown Boundaries

The 2008 Comprehensive Plan defines the Downtown as shown in Figure 6-1 (also in Figure 2-1).



Figure 6-1: The Downtown

The Downtown

Downtown includes the City and County government headquarters, retail stores, offices, fifteen churches, and public and private services, including the Central Branch of the Washington County Free Library, the University System of Maryland, Aspiring to Serve, and the central Post Office. Most of the larger-scale buildings date from the industrial boom era of 1880 to 1930, and many are of particular historic interest. There is great potential for rehabilitation and adaptive use of a number of larger older buildings. The Public Square, at Washington and Potomac Streets, is the physical and cultural center of Town, and is an urban open space divided by heavily traveled streets.

Downtown contains a considerable amount of housing: historic rowhouses and a variety of other types. There are five public and publicly-assisted projects in the area, all for elderly persons: Alexander House, a 95 unit conversion of a downtown hotel, Potomac Towers North and Potomac Towers South, high rise public housing with a total of 326 units, Elizabeth Court, another publicly-assisted complex with 111 units, and Walnut Towers, a 150-unit public housing project.

The entire commercial core is a historic district.

Downtown experiences heavy traffic, especially on Washington and Franklin Streets, the one-way pair carrying U.S. Route 40 through the City. Truck and commercial traffic traverses the downtown, although most of these trips have either an origin or a

destination at a downtown business, or in one of the industrial or commercial areas of the City.

Areas south of Antietam Street provide good development potential in underused buildings and land to attract additional activity to the downtown. One large high-rise apartment house is located here, as well as a mix of non-residential structures.

The principle land-use issues in this area will continue to be the following:

- Minimization of through traffic,
- The promotion of residential rehabilitation.
- The identification and attraction of additional economic activity in competition with outlying shopping centers and business locations. A good overall strategy in downtown revitalization is to upgrade the business areas; without this, adjacent residential areas will not rehabilitate.
- The development of infill sites and the adaptive reuse of large underutilized historic buildings and large vacant multi-use buildings.
- The development of a Downtown Parking Master Plan.

A full range of physical improvements should continue to be made on an incremental basis to the downtown area, in accordance with previous plans. These should be aimed at improving the downtown's image and attractiveness through traffic calming measures, gateway and pedestrian enhancements, and improvement of public parking facilities. The City should support and encourage activities that bring people downtown, such as appropriate retail facilities (see the Economic Development Element), the proposed School for the Arts and the Arts Center projects, additional cultural facilities in the Arts and Entertainment District enhancements to existing destinations such as the Central Branch of the Washington County Free Library and the Miller House, and special events.

Links from downtown to attractions such as the City Park and Fairgrounds Park should be considered. Types of links could include open space greenways and distinctive sidewalk treatments. Pedestrian links to the Jonathan Street and Potomac-Broadway neighborhoods should be improved in these ways. The old railroad station should be studied as a possible visitor center and terminus for MARC trains in the future, only if the Police Department were to decide to vacate this facility.

The quality of the downtown housing stock must be improved. Additional downtown residences should be encouraged: rehabilitated townhouses, conversions of larger non-residential buildings to apartments and/or condominiums, upgrades to existing vacant upper floor apartments, and creation of mixed-use buildings with apartments over retail and service uses. Opportunities for middle- and upper-income housing should be explored to balance the existing lower-income housing base. Opportunities to create artist housing in the Arts and Entertainment District should be explored.

Safe and attractive parking areas, as proposed by the Downtown Enhancement Plan, should continue to be developed and expanded as opportunity permits. Businesses should be encouraged to establish attractive secondary entrances toward the rear where parking has been established.

The form and character of areas in the interior of the downtown area's large blocks needs to be designed, aiming for a solid street facade with passageways and alleys to the interior. Interior areas would accommodate parking, secondary entrances to stores, and possibly other activities, such as alley shops. Construction should be permitted on air rights over the interior alleys, providing opportunities for additional commercial space and an incentive for private improvements.

A prime task for the downtown is to establish and maintain an attractive image. This includes the actions discussed above, additional landscaping and streetscaping, the development of distinct downtown gateways—especially on Route 40—and continued restoration of historic buildings and spaces. Uniform signage throughout the downtown would also improve the downtown's appearance (see Action 8-5).

Downtown Enhancement Plan

Revitalize Downtown by Increasing the Demand for Office, Housing, Retail, and Cultural Space.

While street-level space in downtown Hagerstown experiences relatively high occupancy rates, the large size of many downtown buildings and weak demand for space above the first floor leaves high overall vacancy rates. Several strategies could help promote downtown business success and reinvestment and increase demand for office, residential, and retail space.

In recruiting new enterprises to the downtown, the City should diversify its approach to cultivate and accommodate a mix of customers: downtown workers, locals, and visitors. Clusters of businesses could be created and nurtured that appeal to specific groups. In order to attract locals downtown and to capture visitors in our area (i.e., Antietam Battlefield, Prime Outlets, etc.), the downtown must sell unique and sought after products not found in malls and the downtown must cultivate a unique and attractive shopping district atmosphere which cannot be found in malls.

To efficiently and effectively compete with neighboring malls, shopping centers, and other downtowns in the region, the downtown revitalization effort must do the following:

- use our existing assets—help existing businesses to succeed and restore the structural integrity and beauty of the district's buildings;
- promote the business district and its zones—including the Hagerstown Enterprise Zone—to existing and new customer groups.

Downtown has made positive strides in the recent past, and a more focused approach will strengthen revitalization efforts. Hagerstown has a number of organizations with a

mission to renew the downtown, but better coordination of these efforts is necessary to achieve the desired result. It is recommended that community leaders create and support organizations to manage the elements of revitalization, such as:

- ***Hagerstown Neighborhood Development Partnership (HNDP)***—the newly formed community development corporation, the Hagerstown Neighborhood Development Partnership, (HNDP), will be an economic development organization that focuses on redeveloping downtown residential and commercial properties and providing expertise to developers with downtown projects.
- ***Maryland Main Street Program***—a downtown manager and advisory board should be formed under the Maryland Main Street Program to assume the day-to-day responsibility of organizing downtown revitalization activities. The Main Street manager and board would organize committees and volunteers to organize clusters, attract new businesses, assist businesses with storefront designs and displays, and manage promotions.
- ***Destination Hagerstown***—is a group of downtown business representatives, property owners, and organizations with an interest in the growth and revitalization of Downtown Hagerstown. Their vision is to see Downtown Hagerstown become the region’s destination for commerce and culture.

Initial revitalization projects should include making “quality of shopping experience” improvements and developing a marketing plan for downtown. The perceived “parking problem” can be solved through promotion and other programs that educate customers about the availability of plentiful parking. The perception and reality of crime can be addressed with programs like safety ambassadors, bike patrols, and town watch groups. Because the presence of more people on the street deters crime and makes people feel safer, the City needs to promote the existing stores and attract new ones. From a marketing standpoint, special promotions and way-finding signage can be created to increase market penetration (selling more to current customers) and to improve market development (cultivating new customers already in the region). As more customers shop downtown, additional stores need to be added to broaden the variety of stores in a cluster. Recruitment promotions can include special lease rates for targeted businesses, direct mailing about the new downtown, and receptions for prospective merchants.

Owners of boarded or dilapidated properties might be taxed at a higher rate, encouraging them to sell the property to an investor or to reinvest in the property. This objective could be accomplished through a split tax, whereby land is taxed at a higher rate than improvements. Also, the City can use loans and incentives to guide the tenant mix and encourage new activities that generate demand, such as a health club or gym, educational facilities, and shopping.

Where a shortage of parking is an issue, new parking facilities should be developed in the center of city blocks to eliminate interference with the street facades. The City’s existing Central Parking Lot and new Arts & Entertainment District parking deck are examples of such facilities. The A&E District Parking deck opened in September of 2006, at a

construction cost of approximately \$3,000,000 dollars. The deck is 4 and ½ stories tall and holds 188 parking spaces.

To attract and support additional services, a higher income population is desirable in central parts of the City. Strategies to attract middle- and upper-income families include investing in additional amenities downtown and encouraging the redevelopment of existing space into middle- and upper-income housing. The newly formed community development corporation, the Hagerstown Neighborhood Development Partnership (HNDP), will focus its efforts on revitalization of housing and commercial properties in the central part of the City. The CDC will identify buildings with the potential to be higher income housing. The desirable characteristics include buildings of architectural interest in prime locations. Prime areas for this type of development are the Potomac-Broadway neighborhood, S. Prospect Street neighborhood, and second and third blocks of S. Potomac Street. Initially, such projects may need to be subsidized.

Promote Tourism by Making Hagerstown a Vacation and Leisure Time Destination

Tourism is an important economic activity that can support both general economic prosperity and the renewal of the downtown area. The State of Maryland has emphasized the importance of tourism in the State's economy by instituting the Maryland Heritage Area Program in 1995. This program encourages communities to identify, protect, and promote their unique heritage and to capitalize on that heritage through economic development tourism initiatives. State funds and assistance will be made available for interpretive and infrastructure improvements in State-approved heritage areas.

In the winter of 2005-2006, the jurisdictions in the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area in Washington, Frederick, and Carroll Counties endorsed submission of a Management Plan for certification by the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority. The Management Plan for the three-county heritage area outlines the heritage resources in the three counties and recommended interpretative programs, coordination strategies for program providers, conservation strategies for resources, and economic development strategies for intended Target Investment Zones. With certification of the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area by the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority in 2006, State heritage tax credits and special funding programs are available to implement the heritage tourism projects and strategies identified in the Management Plan.

The Comprehensive Plan adopts the boundaries established in the Maryland Civil War Heritage Area Management Plan for the Heritage Area in Washington County, which incorporates the City of Hagerstown, and for the Target Investment Zone in Hagerstown, which overlays a portion of the downtown (See Figure 6-2). The Comprehensive Plan adopts the following revitalization strategies for the Target Investment Zone (TIZ) which are identified in the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area Management Plan:

- ***Focus Revitalization on the Square and its immediate surrounding area.*** Encourage outdoor dining and other street-level activity in the Public Square. The park-like property adjacent to The Plum could be utilized for outdoor seating for diners, bench seating for pedestrians, interpretive panels on Hagerstown history, or other uses that could draw people into the space. Create pocket parks where appropriate, such as



Figure 6-2: Hagerstown TIZ

University Plaza on W. Washington Street. Exhibit space for heritage exhibits could be incorporated into the downtown's core area to bring greater activity to the Square. Vacant storefronts could be used to display Civil War Heritage Area exhibits.

- ***Bring life to downtown after business hours.*** Special evening hours or events could begin to draw evening crowds downtown and could offer businesses a growing base of evening customers to facilitate their staying open later. Encouraging market-rate housing and accommodations would provide a captive audience for downtown restaurants and other businesses after hours. Expanded offerings at the Maryland Theatre could also draw greater crowds of patrons downtown.
- ***Encourage the creation of downtown accommodations.*** The City currently lacks both a downtown hotel for visitors and a conference center. Visitors to Hagerstown must stay in hotels in the outskirts of the City, increasing the likelihood that they will eat and shop out of town as well. The City needs a downtown hotel—a small inn and/or a hotel with enough conference space to support small regional and State meetings. It should provide incentives for the development of downtown hotel facilities, for example, by rehabilitation and upgrading of older facilities. However, for a downtown hotel to be economically viable, the City would need to promote and create additional downtown tourism destinations.
- ***Focus on history, arts, and culture.*** A genealogy center, museums, and historical markers program are all recommended in downtown Hagerstown planning documents. These projects, in addition to the arts and culture projects listed above, could provide a special identity for downtown. With these uses and some specialty retail, such as antiques, the downtown could be a major draw for the heritage area. Highlight the arts portion of downtown with streetscape elements (banners) that announce the arts district.

In 2001, the State of Maryland designated the four block area around Public Square as a *Smart Growth Arts & Entertainment District*. The intent of this program is to create and nurture an environment attractive to artists, arts and entertainment enterprises, shoppers, cultural patrons, and visitors. The program encourages this activity by providing certain tax incentives for eligible artists, development projects, and arts and entertainment enterprises. The Arts Center and the School for the Arts are two proposed downtown development projects that are consistent with the goals of this program, and would help to establish the district as a destination. Other eligible enterprises that would contribute to establishing an arts and entertainment destination in the downtown include art galleries, music and art stores, recording studios, dance companies, orchestras, theaters, etc.

Downtown Implementation Actions

[Implementation Actions established through the 2008 Comprehensive Plan development process, supplemental to actions described in the amendment text above.]

- Action 6-1.** Encourage the continued location and expansion of all levels of government and public uses in the downtown.
- Action 6-2.** Encourage revitalized downtown housing development with a diversity of price ranges.
- Action 6-3.** Continue to work with organizations interested in the downtown including Destination Hagerstown, the Hagerstown Neighborhood Development Partnership, and the Chamber of Commerce's Downtown Task Force.
- Action 6-4.** Strengthen downtown's role as a regional tourist destination by implementing the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area recommendations for new tourism support facilities, interpretive programs, infrastructure enhancements, and marketing endeavors.
- Action 6-5.** Widen sidewalks in appropriate portions of the downtown, including in front of the businesses and restaurants along South Potomac Street.