



LETCHER COUNTY Downtown Revitalization Project Summary 2020

Community & Economic
Development Initiative of Kentucky

 College of Agriculture,
Food and Environment

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[Cover Image]

Student rendering of improvements
to Elkhorn Lake in Jenkins

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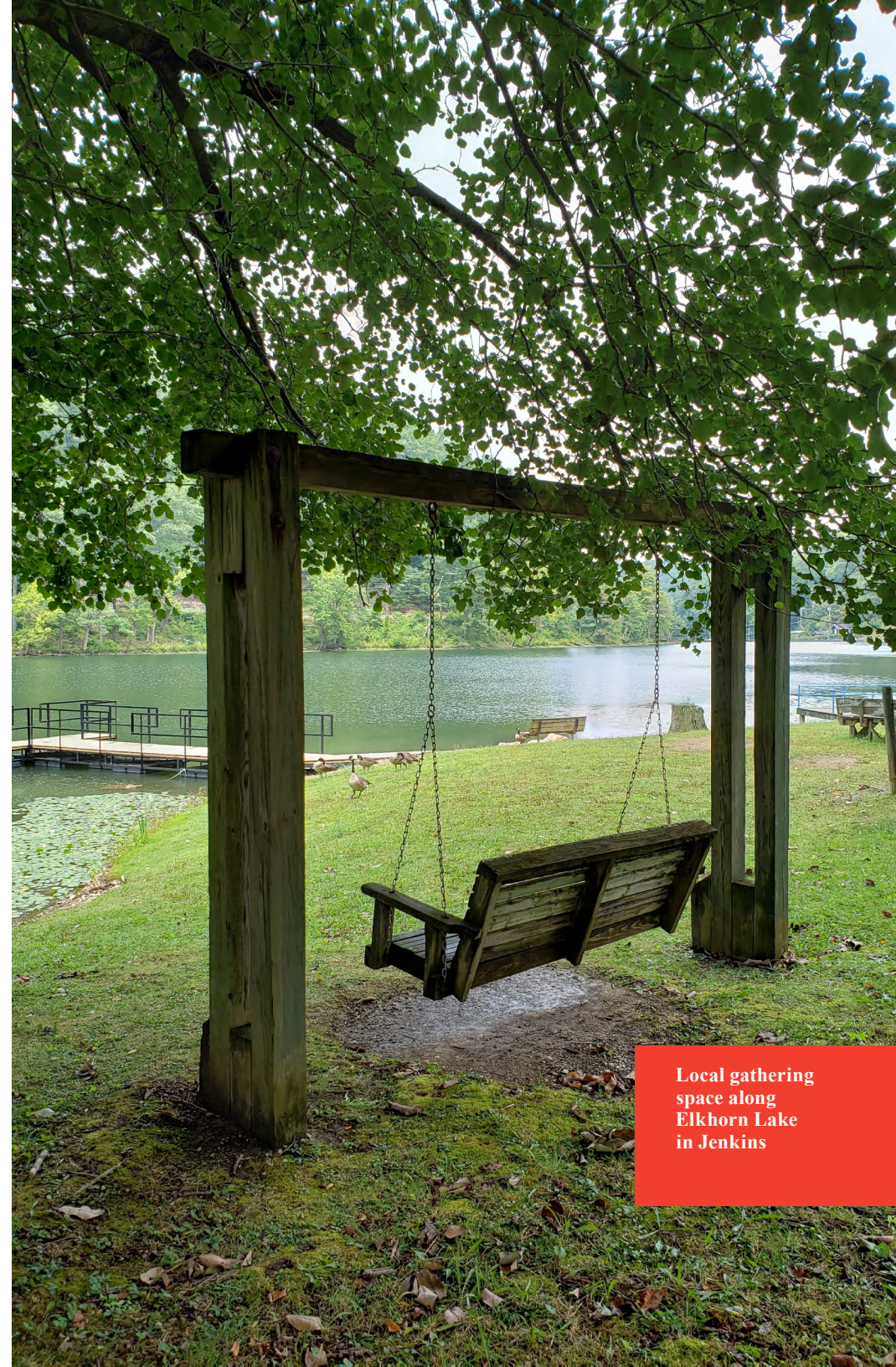
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PROJECT INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In 2017, the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) launched a three year, Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) grant from the POWER (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization) Initiative. This grant funded a Downtown Revitalization Project in Kentucky's eight Promise Zone counties. These eight counties are Bell, Clay, Harlan, Knox, Leslie, Letcher, Perry and Whitley. Within these eight counties, twelve downtowns signed up to be a part of this project, including Corbin and Williamsburg, Kentucky.

Within the broad scope of this downtown revitalization project, CEDIK offered a wide range of programs and technical assistance, along with networking opportunities to address the unique challenges each community faces in regards to their respective downtowns. Every community was able to select services to best meet their needs. CEDIK also facilitated quarterly convenings to allow participating communities to share ideas, strategies and information vital to successful revitalization efforts in the region. Communities that participated in this project were then able to access grant money to fund projects in their downtowns in order to successfully move from a planning phase into direct action.



Local gathering space along Elkhorn Lake in Jenkins

WHAT IS CEDIK?

The Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) emerged as a college level unit within the University of Kentucky's College of Agriculture, Food and Environment (CAFE) in 2010. The CAFE administration recognized the need for both an internal source of professional development and instruction for students and county Extension agents, as well as an external outreach mechanism for Kentucky communities with programming and research that focused on community and economic development. CEDIK's programming has dramatically expanded to meet the evolving nature of places and economies, as well as recognizing the intricacies of economic development. This Whitley County Downtown Revitalization Project Summary is an example of this evolution, exploring how quality and intentional design and planning initiatives can create a more economically resilient downtown.

CEDIK'S GOALS

- Provide research and information that supports community and economic development.
- Build the leadership and organizational capacity of peoples and communities.
- Support community decision-making and collaborative initiatives.
- Facilitate partnerships and networks that enable communities to thrive economically, physically and socially.
- Sustain CEDIK's organizational capacity to efficiently and effectively accomplish its mission and vision.

IMPORTANCE OF DOWNTOWNS

Downtowns are iconic and powerful symbols for a city and often contain the most culturally relevant landmarks, distinctive features and unique neighborhoods in a city. Given that most downtowns are generally the oldest part of a city, they offer rare insights into their city's past, present and potential future.

Following de-industrialization and the growth of suburban development in the middle of the last century, many cities across the country forgot about their downtowns. During this period private investment in downtowns stagnated while it increased dramatically on the outskirts of cities. This happened throughout the western world, from Glasgow, Kentucky to Glasgow, Scotland. In Whitley County, this manifested in the suburban style of development often found adjacent to Interstate 75. Here, national big box retailers and



Image
Historic mixed use buildings along
Main St. in downtown Jenkins

fast food restaurants opened, drawing the businesses and services that were once a staple of 'going to town' out into the periphery. This reduced foot traffic and the critical mass necessary to support a vibrant and economically resilient downtown and drove future development to the car-centric periphery. Consequently, new developments featured national retail stores rather than the locally based and owned stores that tend to be staples of downtowns. While these new stores offered much needed jobs it often came at the expense of the local downtown landscape and economy.

PRIORITIZING DOWNTOWN

Downtowns are complex places. Physically they are often the oldest part of a city, making redevelopment of infrastructure and buildings challenging. Culturally, many people have memories of 'going to town' and what the downtown looked like when it was bustling, influencing their perception of what the downtown should be in the future. Additionally, downtowns are where most civic, judicial and medical services are located. Each of the elements that have historically represented the important role and function of a downtown are discussed below.

CIVIC

Civic spaces in downtowns bring people together and nurture the larger community. Civic spaces are more than the aesthetic center of the town where public events take place; they allow cultural, economic and social exchanges to occur. Consequently, downtowns that do not have a civic space tend to feel less connected to area residents. As a result, communities without civic spaces are most likely to experience decline in the various forms of community health & wellness (socially, economically, culturally, and environmentally.)

RELIGION AND CULTURE

Vibrant downtowns foster the exchange of religion and culture through various daily interactions and public activities (farmers markets, festivals, etc). As a long-term result, people are more likely to stay connected, develop broader relationships and adopt healthy practices as they integrate other people's culture and/or religion into their everyday life.

MEDICAL

A prospering city and downtown will likely attract new residents, and with the increased residents, the demand for larger hospitals and other medical services will increase to meet demand. New medical facilities to meet the demands of patients will create jobs encouraging medical professionals to move into or stay in the area.

COMMERCIAL/SHOPPING

Downtown spaces are where people are most likely going to be throughout the day. Shops will emerge in the area to meet the public's increased demand for goods and services, leading to higher profits and increased job opportunities.

ENTERTAINMENT

Downtown areas have a civic center where public activities for entertainment can occur. After many successful functions in the area, locals will brainstorm more events to have in the civic center of the downtown area.

SOCIAL

The social aspects of downtown can consist of a town hall, cafe/ diner and even parks/plazas. Some events can also create social atmospheres, like festivals. These areas bring people together for socialization.

RESIDENTIAL

As the downtown renaissance occurs in communities across the country, people will be more likely to move downtown because it is close to their place of employment and in proximity to a variety of resources. This has led to a higher demand for residential spaces in downtown areas, which is a key component of a vibrant and walkable communities

FINANCIAL

Downtowns are historically where a city's central financial hub is located, serving the community as well as local government. These financial services play a key part in the welfare and longevity of the broader community.

EMPLOYMENT

High population densities typically found in thriving downtown areas attract businesses. As a result, there will be an increased demand for workers to meet the growing needs of residents.

EDUCATIONAL

Downtown areas allow people from various backgrounds to engage with each other on a special level. For children, this creates friendly, hands-on learning opportunities to discover other cultures in their community. This socialization can also foster place identity and community connection.

[Image Right]
Marker of historic site in Jenkins
along a walking trail.

WHY INVEST IN DOWNTOWN?

Downtowns have a significant intrinsic value not easily replicated in new developments. The historic density and concentration of assets, people and businesses make downtowns natural hubs for jobs and tax revenue. Downtowns illuminate and showcase a community's culture and provide insights on its historic identity. Healthy and productive downtowns also have the opportunity to generate a high tax revenue per acre due to the mix and density of their use. Downtowns can be notably economically productive and as a result investments in downtown have the potential to generate great returns. Over time, downtowns have proven to be quite resilient because of the entanglement of built assets, ingrained memories and diversity of uses.



Downtowns are for everyone and often their vibrancy is associated with the density of small businesses and the foot traffic supporting them. Investment in revitalization can create jobs, increase property values, improve quality of life and attract new visitors and residents. Downtowns are also important investments for industrial attraction. Many sites are selected based on the quality of life for employees and a downtown's cultural and recreational amenities - not just labor, schools, housing and infrastructure. Industries want to be located in unique and authentic places where employees can be happy and healthy.

Downtown investments are as diverse as downtowns themselves. For example, investments can be made in accessibility, public art, building facades or parks and green spaces (to suggest a few) but they all serve a unique purpose while collectively contributing to the vibrancy and value of downtown.



[Image]
Downtown Park in Jenkins

Parks and green spaces are vital in providing a good quality of life, promoting health and wellness, and contributing to economic growth even though they are rarely considered as important as infrastructure that serves community needs like water, sewage and electricity.

Downtowns are multifaceted systems and the investments we make to support revitalization efforts are increasingly broad as well. There is no singular way to measure downtown revitalization success over time. Rather, we suggest a broad set of indicators similar to the 2014 University of Illinois Extension 'Downtown Success Indicators' found in the appendix. This publication was used to provide insights on how to begin broadening how we measure revitalization progress. The provided indicators and metrics increase our understanding of, and measure the success of, downtown investments.



[Image]
Historic home near along Elkhorn Lake in Jenkins

WHAT IS COMMUNITY DESIGN?

Community design focuses on the creation and implementation of places for people. This process promotes change to the built environment from the neighborhood to regional scale, and aims to meet community needs through participatory decision-making at all levels.

One of the more innovative ways CEDIK achieves its mission is through the use of community design. The value of design and planning is often overlooked during economic development and revitalization efforts, especially in rural communities. This project seeks to challenge that. These efforts began in 2012, with the hiring of a faculty member in the Department of Landscape Architecture (UKLA) who partners with CEDIK through the Cooperative Extension Services. Deploying these efforts through Cooperative Extension, CEDIK has developed a library of publications centered around spatial design and planning elements for communities to learn from and incorporate themselves. These are available through the CEDIK website (<https://cedik.ca.uky.edu/>).

The following section presents a summary of community design efforts undertaken as part of the Downtown Revitalization Project.



Participants at the Chalk and Talk engagement activity at the 2017 Whitesburg Oktoberfest

ELKHORN LAKE MASTER PLAN

PROJECT BACKGROUND

During the fall of 2019 CEDIK's Community Design Program Manager led a multi-disciplinary intern team focusing on Jenkins. The team was tasked to use their respective backgrounds, which were graphic design and landscape architecture, to create a recreation master plan for Elkhorn Lake.

PROJECT GOALS

This project aims to connect the surrounding trails, recreational fields, Elkhorn Lake and Downtown Jenkins together, in order to create a unique experience that attracts tourists to Jenkins. Jenkins' previous planning document and in-person visits to Jenkins indicate that there is a hidden potential embedded within Elkhorn Lake.

Elkhorn Lake, in its current state, is primarily being used for fishing and is the source of the town's clean water. Surrounding the lake are multiple sports fields, a city pool and a seasonal event space. If each area surrounding Elkhorn Lake was connected, upgraded and capitalized on it could lead to a great asset for the community of Jenkins. The overall goal of this plan is to provide a vision for Elkhorn Lake and its future within the community as a tourist attraction and an amenity for every resident.

ALIGNING WITH THEIR STRATEGIC PLAN

The Jenkins Strategic Plan acts as this plan's main resource for the community's voice in the recommendations provided. Within the Jenkins Strategic Plan there are four main goals expressed by the community that this plan gives visioning for.

Promote an Active Lifestyle

As part of the community's request, they wanted to see more people being active, physically and within the community. Residents discussed that they want people to be outdoors at parks and other recreational facilities. This could be done with tourism and adventure trails or through downtown focused recreational amenities.

Create a Local Economy

A local economy is also requested from community members. In order to create more jobs, food, tourism, activities and amenities, first, one must find what makes Jenkins unique and capitalize on that uniqueness so that it attracts more people and revenue. Of the many opportunities Jenkins has, capitalizing on the downtown's directly adjacent lake seems the most obvious. This lake could be constructed as a tourism attraction as well as a community amenity.

Health and Wellness

An overall improvement in health and wellness is indicated as a need for the community. This includes things like physical well-being, social activity, and mental health. Mental health is important to improve within any community and this can be done by providing more exposure to nature, providing opportunities for social engagement and providing updated recreational activities for the community.

Upgrade Infrastructure

Upgrading infrastructure was a part of the community's request of improvements for the town. This includes things such as sewage, sidewalks, water and utilities. Although this plan has no direct way of upgrading utilities, there are potential ways of bringing attention to this need, or use natural material to help mitigate the need for upgrades.

RECOMMENDATIONS

JENKINS RECREATIONAL PLAN

Through an inventory and analysis of downtown Jenkins, the findings indicate that Jenkins has a strong potential to increase tourism and the community's health and wellness by further developing the area surrounding Elkhorn Lake. The goal of the Elkhorn Lake Master Plan is to connect existing amenities surrounding Elkhorn Lake, connect surrounding neighborhoods with downtown and the local school system. This development would align with and further the community's four main goals located in the Jenkins Strategic Plan. The four goals provided by the community are: Promoting an active lifestyle, creating a local economy, improving health and wellness, and upgrading infrastructure. This recreation plan includes three major focus areas that address each goal identified by the community.

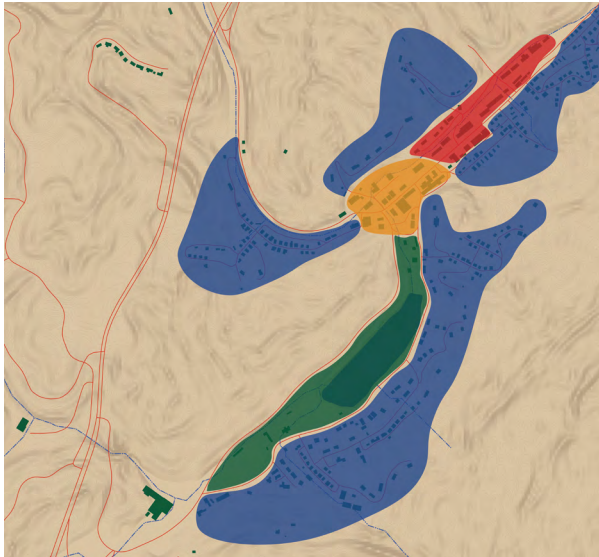
GENERAL LAND USE PATTERNS IN JENKINS

Green:
Elkhorn Lake & recreation areas

Orange:
Downtown Jenkins

Red: Historic coal buildings

Blue:
Residential neighborhoods



ROBERT PUD SHUBERT PARK

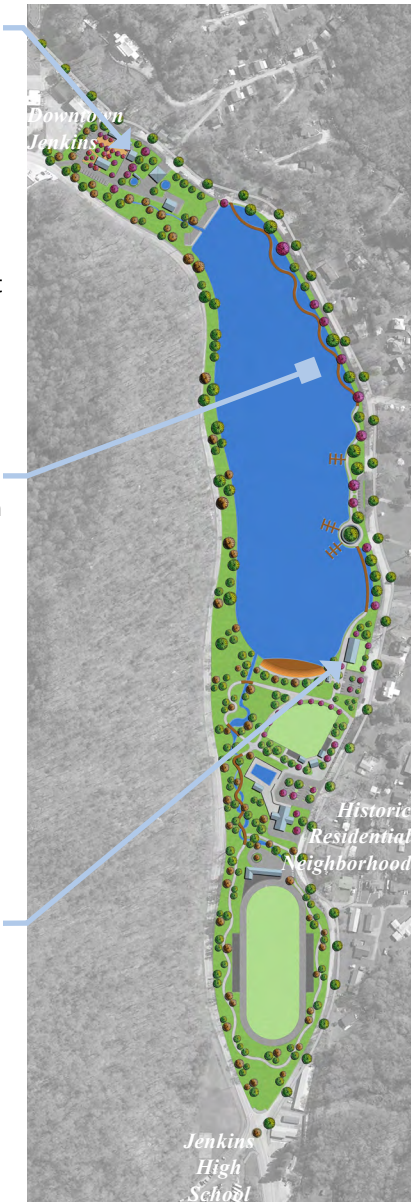
- Support existing investments by the City
- Provide a space for local outdoor markets
- Create a space for local events to be programmed
- Visually buffer water treatment plant
- Mitigate storm water flowing from the outlet of the dam

ELKHORN LAKE

- Provide a connection between surrounding amenities
- Increase the number of people visiting through an enhanced pedestrian experience
- Improve water quality
- Increase access to various physical activities

JENKINS CITY PARK

- Improve accessibility
- Connect existing amenities to be more cohesive
- Increase the amount of plant material
- Restore native aquatic plant life to its original condition





ROBERT PUD SHUBERT PARK

The redesign of this park includes an enhanced stage area and connections with the heart of downtown to Elkhorn Lake, the historic neighborhoods, park facilities and the high school. Additionally, this increases access to nature, recreation and healthier lifestyle opportunities.



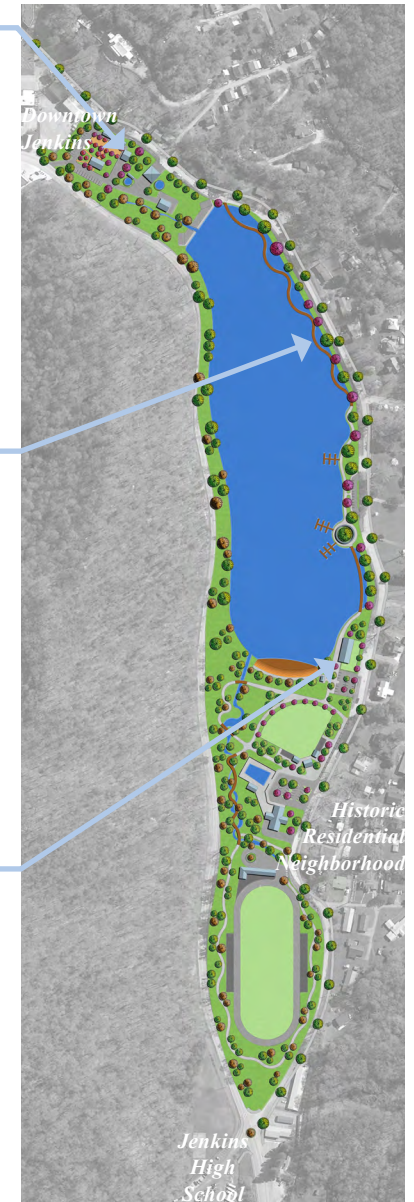
ELKHORN LAKE

The current pedestrian access along Lakeside Drive doesn't feel safe, and this concept uses boardwalks to provide a safe walking experience while engaging people with Elkhorn Lake. This is a unique amenity in the region that would help set Jenkins apart from its peers.



JENKINS CITY PARK

While Shubert Park hosts festivals and concerts, City Park serves the everyday needs of residents. This concept improves the picnic pavilion and playground area, and better integrates them with the surrounding lake, neighborhoods and high school facilities.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - WHITESBURG

CHALK AND TALK

At Whitesburg's 2017 Oktoberfest, a Chalk and Talk event sought to engage people in a creative and non-confrontational way about their city. Without creating any expectations for delivery from CEDIK or local partners, the prompt "Next time I come to Whitesburg.." was selected, seeking to embody this spirit. A surprising result was how people took each piece of the prompt that was on each panel and responded accordingly. Below are the findings from the comments written on the boards, in addition to conversations had with participants and passers-byers.

These comments were photographed, transcribed and grouped by likeness. The following themes emerged, and represent a summary of the report presented to local partners in Whitesburg.

Outdoors

- People expressed, both on the board and during conversations, that they would like to see more access to the outdoors. Whitesburg is surrounded by some of the most stunning natural landscapes in the country and there is an opportunity to improve the access to these places. This, in turn, could help support an outdoor economy while providing positive impacts on regional health indicators.

Social Spaces

- Attendees really enjoyed having the street shut down for community use. People were delighted to listen to live music, eat local foods and dance in the street, which normally serves vehicular traffic. Events like this bring people together and creates a central place for the community to come together.

Visitors appreciated the character of the city, and remarked that Whitesburg has a distinct 'sense of place' that should be embraced and central to the city.

Diversity of Activities

- Whitesburg has a lot of features that cities throughout the region would love to have. Comments on the board hinted at these features while expressing a desire for an increase in diversity on multiple fronts, from multi-modal transportation (bikes), social spaces (coffee shop), attendees themselves (people watching) and entertainment (drag shows).

Community Pride

- Throughout the day of the event, both current and former residents verbally and physically expressed pride in their community. The importance of this pride cannot be understated, and shows the opportunity for local branding as Whitesburg has such a unique identity.



[Image]
Participants at the Chalk and Talk event in Whitesburg

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

WHAT IS FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

First Impressions is a structured assessment program that enables communities to learn about the first impression they convey to outsiders. It offers a fresh perspective on the appearance, services and infrastructure of each community. Volunteer teams undertake unannounced, one-day visits, record their observations, and give constructive feedback to the community. Their photos and responses are then compiled and presented back to the community by a CEDIK representative. In addition, the program offers suggestions and resources to address the areas identified for potential improvement. The knowledge gained through this program is intended to serve as a basis for community action.

First Impressions was developed by Andy Lewis, University of Wisconsin Extension Associate Professor, and James Schneider, Grant County (WI) Economic Development Director. CEDIK has adapted the First Impressions Program to meet the needs of Kentucky communities.



Elkhorn Lake in
Jenkins looking
towards Pine
Mountain

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OVERVIEW

This program coordinates anonymous visits to the community by professionals in community and economic development, small business owners, community leaders and more, depending upon the specific community assessment needs. Analysis includes detailed feedback from Internet search engines, social media platforms and in-person experiences. Visitors document their experience and interactions with community members.

PROCESS

Visits to Letcher County were conducted by 12 team members on both weekdays and weekends to capture a variety of activity within the community. The Letcher County First Impressions team consisted of small business owners, traveling retirees, and community development students. Overall, conditions were favorable for visiting and exploring the roads, small communities, parks and businesses within Letcher County. While quotations in this report should not be considered exhaustive, they do provide a valuable snapshot of a visitor's perspective in Letcher County from a variety of ages, life experiences and interests.

WEB PRESENCE

Prior to visiting Whitesburg, assessors researched the community on the internet. They visited official and non-official sites from search engines, restaurant and hotel reviews and even school and newspaper outlets. Overall, visitor impressions of Whitesburg's web presence were mixed. Several assessors noted that the official city website was difficult to find and offered limited information for visitors. They also noted that the pictures on the site were only of City Hall and not the downtown area.

Reviewers suggested working to build the Google listing of the official site, and adding additional content instead of links that lead to other sites. One visitor found Whyletchercounty.org and commented, "I really liked the website. It was interesting. It had plenty of pictures and links. It provided information on things that I wanted to see or learn about." They also noted they could not remember how they found the site and suggested improving keywords. Assessors also analyzed Tripadvisor, Thrillist and Yelp reviews to identify strengths and weaknesses. All assessors reported planning their trip and selecting locations to visit based on reviews on these sites. While there were ample reviews for restaurants, there were limited reviews for lodging. On social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, reviewers had largely positive responses. Some observed high traffic on Facebook but noted that most posts



[Image]
E. Main St. in downtown Whitesburg

were by people who lived in Whitesburg or visited and tagged the city. This shows a lively community, but not as much effort by the official page host. The Instagram page seemed up to date, but full of outdoor photos. Assessors reported that while the outdoor photos were beautiful and invited them to go hiking, they would have enjoyed seeing some photos of people and Whitesburg downtown area as well.

Based on internet research, assessors believed Whitesburg to be a small town with a mainly older population, good food, an active community and natural beauty, but not very 'tourist friendly.'

COMMUNITY VISITS

After completing their pre-visit research, the team began their time in Whitesburg by doing a Quick Pass Impression: driving through the community quickly without stopping to create an instinctual impression without focusing too much on detail. During the Quick Pass, reviewers overwhelmingly had positive impressions of the quality and consistency of the signage throughout the county. Other positive reactions included mention of beautiful flowering trees, murals, cute store fronts and an active community.

Assessors returned to locations that caught their attention and began detailed exploration and documentation of the community. Highlights from these categories include large, clean and easy to find healthcare facilities, wide sidewalks, a variety of local retail and foods, active community spaces and an observable emphasis placed on arts and culture. Several assessors stated

[Top Right Image]
Combs Overlook on
Pine Mountain over
Jenkins

[Middle Right Image]
Informational sign on
KY 23 at Pound Gap

[Bottom Right Image]
Golf course on a
former strip mine in
Jenkins



that navigating downtown streets felt challenging and unsafe. Nearly all visitors noted the Whitesburg benches and city murals. The benches were characterized as cute and welcoming, and the murals made visitors feel like they were in a much larger city. One assessor remarked, "Gosh, they have all kinds of murals, barn quilts and even a couple of art sculptures." Whitesburg had several reports of positive civic engagement. While it seemed that young people they spoke with said there was 'nothing to do' in Whitesburg, assessors met a restaurant owner who attends city council meetings, noticed rotary club and numerous other entrance shops, noted upcoming festivals and explored the offerings of Appalshop.



[image]
Post-It art on the public library in
downtown Whitesburg

Appalshop caught the eye of our assessors. Several assessors mentioned how helpful the staff was in recommending local attractions, and one noted that they would return to see the Appalshop gallery. Visitors were pleasantly surprised by the variety of shopping and food establishments. The bookstore, gaming shop, music store, coffee shop, hardware store, Pine Mountain Outfitters, Harvest Kitchen, Pine Mountain Grill and 606 Steakhouse were all mentioned favorably. Every assessor who visited these establishments also commented on the friendliness of the employees. Visitors spent most of their time at the local restaurants, shops, parks and on hiking trails.

While most visitors reacted favorably to Whitesburg's downtown, one burned building was mentioned by at least half of the group. "The churches, most of the houses, the restaurants and the public buildings (courthouse, library, fire and police departments) were in good repair, but some empty buildings looked very bad. One building between the library and courthouse was literally falling in." None of the assessors could find a visitors center. One remarked that they saw a sign to one on the edge of town, but it led to an empty office. After several hours exploring Whitesburg, assessors documented their Lasting Impressions on assets, challenges and opportunities they envision for the community, and made recommendations for further appeal to visitors that travel to the area. Most visitors acknowledged that Whitesburg's biggest obstacle is its natural location as the town is considered very hard to get to. They also suggested additional organized events and a campaign to increase local pride as residents said there was not much to do.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the feedback compiled from visits to Letcher County, the following suggestions are recommended for future opportunities:

Improve Online Presence

- “Developing a strategic plan around marketing and online presence would draw visitors, potential businesses and tourists. Since the physical location of Whitesburg was mentioned as a barrier for several visitors, visitors, online marketing should be targeted to regional visitors.

Assess Downtown Walkability and Public Safety

- Assessors noted that heavy vehicular traffic downtown may contribute to the lack of observed pedestrian traffic. For instance, crosswalks seemed unsafe without stoplights for vehicles and finding available parking was an issue. By conducting a walkability assessment, the city can improve safety and attract more pedestrians to downtown.

Continue to Address Empty or Abandoned Buildings

- While assessors celebrated the many small businesses Whitesburg has to offer, they still noted burned, falling in and dilapidated buildings. A volunteer clean-up day to spruce up dirty storefronts could be organized for high impact. Community members should also continue to develop strategies for addressing blighted properties.

SUMMARY OF EFFORTS

After compiling the information into a full-length report, a CEDIK representative presented the findings to Letcher County stakeholders in two community forums: one in April and one in May 2019. Stakeholders in attendance included elected officials, chamber members, community foundation representatives, downtown development coordinators and community volunteers. After reviewing the Community Assessment Report, attendees then participated in a CEDIK facilitated community forum to identify action items and priorities to address the information received.

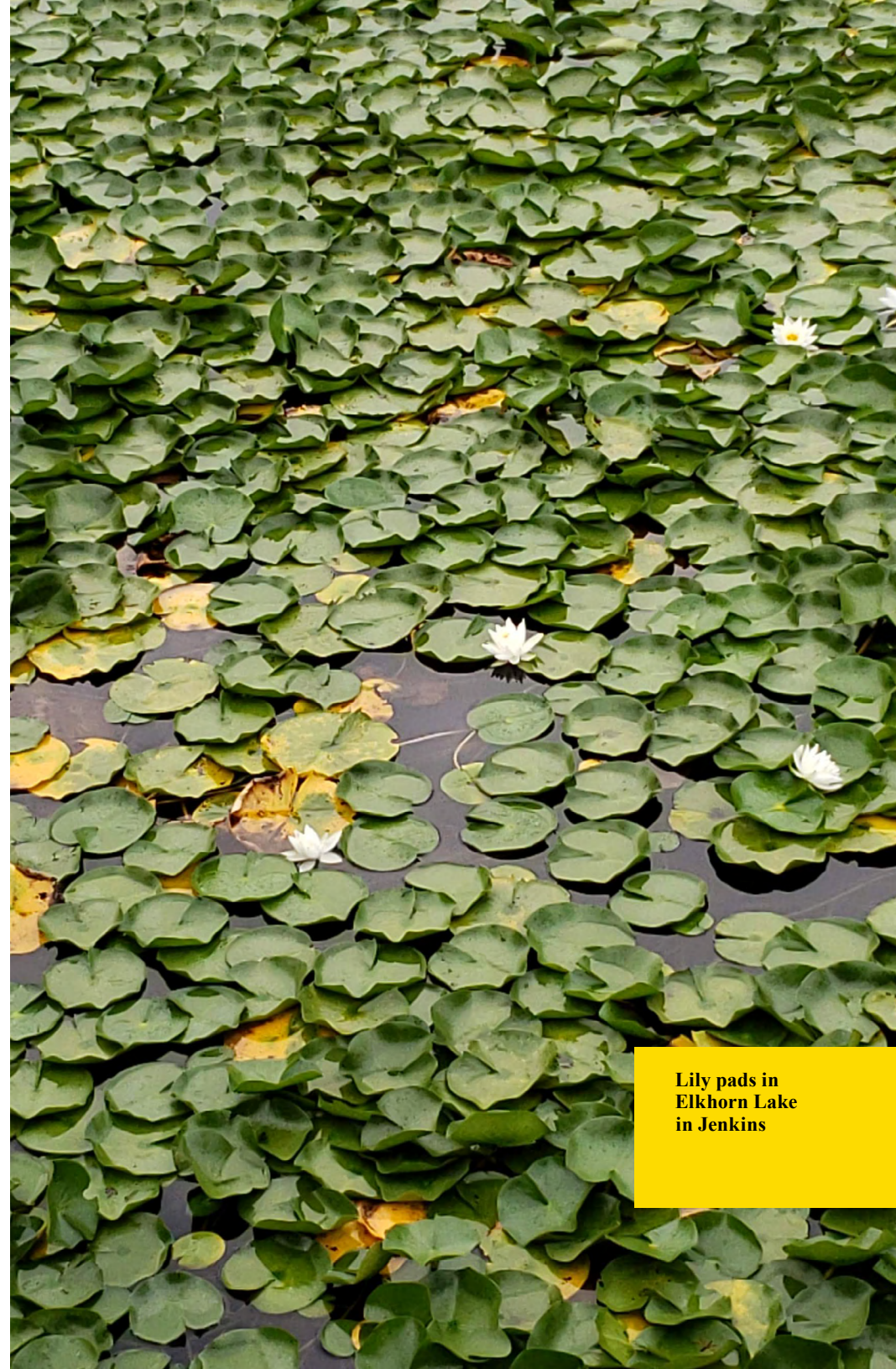


[Image]
Communal tables set up during the
2017 Oktoberfest in Whitesburg

STAKEHOLDER NETWORKING

COMING TOGETHER

Downtown revitalization takes more than a single person's best intentions. It requires a collective effort involving many people working towards mutual goals. More times than not, the process starts with a single person or organization investing their time and attempting to address an issue they've identified as the most important. Any process can begin with an individual vision for change, but cultivating shared ownership and positive results requires a deeper commitment and understanding of the connections between the community's assets, challenges and vision for the future. This deep connection and understanding is at the heart of downtown stakeholder networking.



**Lily pads in
Elkhorn Lake
in Jenkins**

DOWNTOWN STAKEHOLDER TEAM

Each participating community in the Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization project was led by a local stakeholder team representing active organizations and the downtown's diverse constituency. The varying perspectives of team members resulted in more diverse solutions being drawn upon. Teams were composed of representatives from local government, chambers of commerce, Main Street organizations, local business owners, tourism organizations, downtown managers/staff, historical societies, county extension agents, community foundations, health departments, local colleges, financial institutions and issues focused nonprofits.

Quarterly convenings provided a dedicated space and time for downtown stakeholders to come together to share, collaborate and inspire each other. These rotating meetings were hosted in different communities as a way to showcase local efforts



[Image] Letcher County participants brainstorm at the regional convening in Pineville

and bring attention to the stakeholder's collective and shared interests. Convenings often included concurrent sessions providing technical assistance on topics like walkability, hosting film productions, historic preservation, data analysis/collection (intercept survey methods), grant writing and more, but also provided dedicated space for local updates and sharing.

Convenings included panels composed of local partners, spotlight presentations on local efforts and exercises aimed at illuminating shared regional assets and visions. These networking opportunities facilitated the pollination of ideas and in many cases led to communities adopting similar programs they heard others share. For example, nearly every community was inspired by Pineville's local development incentive programs, Harlan's inventory and reinvestment program for vacant or underutilized buildings and Williamsburg's inspiring story of the River Fog Park enhancements and subsequent local festival planned in its space.



[Image] Letcher County participants present at the regional convening in Pineville

DOWNTOWN INVESTMENTS

About

Participating Promise Zone downtown stakeholder teams that utilized available programing like the First Impressions Program, Business Retention and Expansion Program and community design planning were eligible to apply for funding to implement at least one strategy from their downtown revitalization engagement. Communities accessed two cycles of grant funding to support implementation.

The first funding opportunity was a mini grant to initiate efforts often illuminated by the First Impressions report. These early mini grants acted as catalytic projects providing pathways for broader community engagement and collaboration. Stakeholder teams accessed larger implementation grants as more programs were deployed leading to a more firm vision of the necessary strategies required to move revitalization efforts forward. All applications were reviewed by a regional committee composed of individuals from CEDIK, Kentucky Main Street Program and Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky. The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky executed agreements with each community and provided fiduciary responsibility.



Streetscape
in the heart
of downtown
Whitesburg

MINI GRANTS - WHITESBURG

Whitesburg, Kentucky received funds to support walkability and improved wayfinding on the Tanglewood Trail. The trail, in its completed form, will follow the route of a former CSX rail bed for three miles. A broad coalition of community partners interested in improving economic opportunities and quality of life have worked to increase connectivity between the existing trail and downtown, including access to both the Farmers Market and ARH Hospital.

This specific effort aims to improve walkability, access to businesses and civic amenities from the trail, improve access to health and exercise options, increase economic and cultural activity downtown and improve stakeholder collaboration for downtown planning.

OUTCOMES

In August of 2018, coordinated meetings took place among coalition members and subcommittees were selected soon after to lead various efforts. Maps were created to document existing and potential future trail infrastructure using data collected over the course of a number of meetings. GPS coordinates were inventoried as part of this process for future mapping needs. Stakeholders have remained committed to sustained participatory engagement and coalition building.

Public Engagement

- The design subcommittee held two public forums and pop-up community engagement events to gather feedback on initial sign design and locations. More than 70 Whitesburg residents and stakeholder representatives attended meetings to provide a clearer picture of preferred designs for Whitesburg's trail.

New Signage Trail Installed

- Trail mileage signs were installed along 2 miles of trail and downtown directional signs have been installed, helping residents and visitors find amenities and attractions downtown.

IMPLEMENTATION GRANT - WHITESBURG

Appalshop, City of Whitesburg, HOMES, Headwater Inc., Letcher County Tourism, Letcher County Farmers Market, Mountain Comprehensive Health Corporation, Center for Rural Strategies and Letcher County Extension collaborated to increase walkability, access to businesses and civic amenities from an existing trail, improve downtown stakeholder engagement, develop an educational green infrastructure demonstration project and produce a long-range assessment of future walkability improvements.

OBJECTIVE

Identify and make improvements to pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in downtown Whitesburg. A previously completed walkability assessment identified at least 10 intersections or road segments with "moderate" or "poor" walkability. Targeted improvements to segments of sidewalks and curbs and replacing large obstacles like trash cans or planters that reduce mobility will enhance pedestrian and biking accessibility.

OUTCOMES

A survey launched in March of 2020 received feedback from nearly 100 respondents. The survey generated responses to questions about the quality of pedestrian infrastructure and the ease of finding destinations in downtown Whitesburg. Compiled survey feedback provides invaluable data for Whitesburg's downtown revitalization.

Survey Results

In March of 2020 project stakeholders launched a community development survey to help shape future development in downtown Whitesburg.

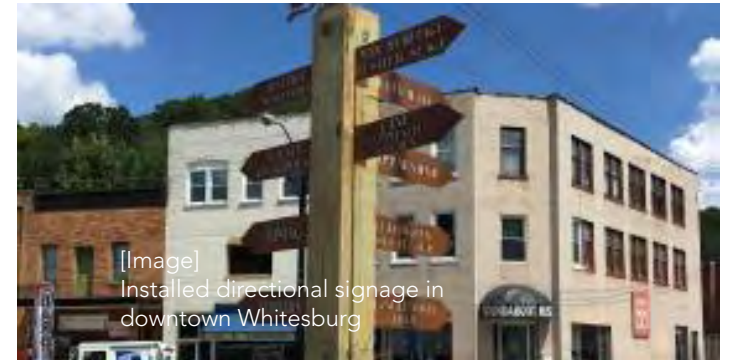
- 38% of respondents are daily visitors of downtown Whitesburg and additional 25% are weekly visitors.
- 75% of respondents reported they go downtown to eat and another 40% noted they work downtown.
- 50% of downtown visitors are attending the Farmers Market.
- 50% of respondents shared they use the walking trail a few times a month or more, with 20% identifying as weekly users.
- 90% of trail users refer to their use as recreational.
- 53% believe extending the trail should be the highest priority trail improvement.
- 23% believe introducing river access along the trail should be the highest priority trail improvement.
- The three most frequently chosen factors for improving quality of life in Whitesburg were;
 - Nearby employment opportunities.
 - Water and environmental quality.
 - Vibrant downtown area.
- 48% of respondents believe the quality of life has improved in Whitesburg over the last 5 years.
- More than 75% of respondents shared they would recommend Whitesburg to family and friends as a good place to live.

Street Assessment

- Approximately 12 sections within the downtown corridor were assessed using a pedestrian infrastructure assessment methodology. This component was initiated but interrupted with the onset of community lockdowns, and remains incomplete.

Financial Assessment of Walkability Improvements

- Farmer and Morgan planning firm analyzed probable cost for improvements to approximately 10 different priority walkability improvement areas in downtown Whitesburg. Stakeholder meetings before the onset of COVID restrictions identified the selected sites. Specifically, stakeholders identified sections they thought would help close the accessibility gap in heavily used sections of the walking trail. A plan has been made with City of Whitesburg to implement future improvements, including replacing 300ft of sidewalk and curbs and removing other impediments identified in the assessment.



OBJECTIVE

Install wayfinding signage to help visitors and residents find businesses and attractions in downtown. Visitors participating in CEDIK's First Impressions program expressed a general lack of useful wayfinding which is also an issue repeatedly brought up in surveys of residents and stakeholders when asked how to improve downtown Whitesburg.

OUTCOMES

Signage

- Signage designs were based on existing sign designs at the Pine Mountain Overlooks created by Letcher County Tourism Commission, a stakeholder partner. Final designs have been made, exact locations chosen and easement permits from state DOT have been sought but COVID-19 has slowed this timeline.

OBJECTIVE

Upgrade existing receptacles and install additional matching receptacles in convenient locations to provide more frequent opportunities to recycle, while also removing some existing pedestrian impediments. Litter is an issue along the North Fork of the Kentucky River and downtown Whitesburg. In response to this, seasonal litter cleanups have been carried out by Headwaters over the last several years. With each cleanup, municipal dumpsters are filled to capacity with litter removed from the downtown area and river basin. Six large trash cans were identified as obstructions to sidewalk mobility along Main Street in downtown Whitesburg. These receptacles do not allow for sufficient litter disposal or collection of recycling despite a municipal recycling program.

OUTCOMES

Identify Type, Style and Source for Trash and Recycling Cans

- Locations for new receptacles were negotiated between the City of Whitesburg, Letcher County Tourism and downtown stakeholders. Bear-proof cans were chosen based on concerns from stakeholders about the growing presence of bears along the walking trail. The cans include both recycling and landfill receptacles, and were placed at key locations along the walking trail where there were previously no trash cans available.

Quarterly Litter Cleanup Events

- All clean ups scheduled after the December 2019 cleanup have been interrupted by COVID-19 restrictions but are planned to resume when possible.

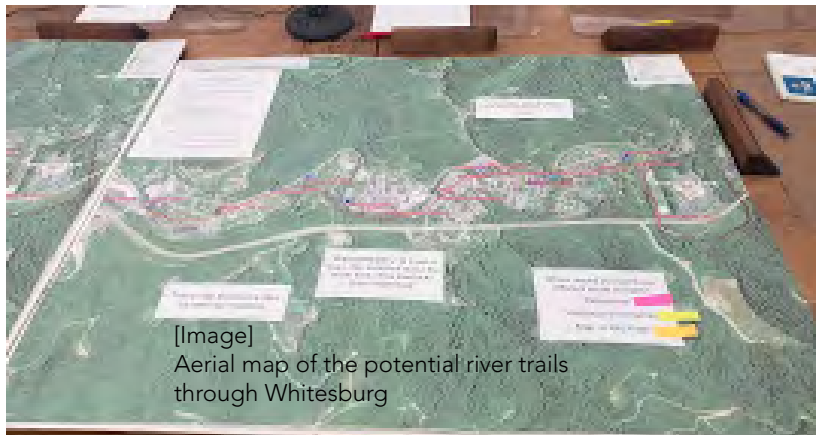


[Image]
Branded bench in the heart of
downtown Whitesburg

OBJECTIVE

Develop and produce Walkability, Wayfinding and Green Infrastructure Improvement Assessment for downtown Whitesburg. This includes estimating budgeting for future projects and installing one green infrastructure demonstration site with interpretive signage. Green Infrastructure installations could address major stormwater erosion areas in the downtown corridor previously identified in the 2017 "BRIGHT Opportunities for Whitesburg" report.

This project will address at least one of the six major erosion areas highlighted in the BRIGHT report. Two data measurements will measure effectiveness, including quantitative water quality measurements at selected outfalls for fecal coliform, sediment, turbidity, conductivity and ph. Additionally, a qualitative assessment will be conducted to gauge the importance of the North Fork of the Kentucky River to future investments in Downtown Whitesburg.

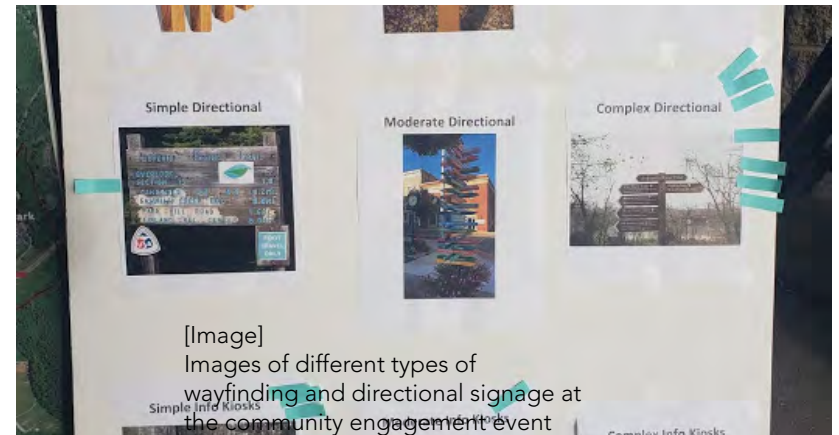


[Image]
Aerial map of the potential river trails through Whitesburg

OUTCOMES

Green Infrastructure Improvement Assessment and Installation

- Stakeholders convened discussions about priorities for walkability and green infrastructure improvements, conducted workshops and created two designs for improvement at identified sites, with one design ultimately installed at a final site. Water quality testing occurred at several stormwater outfalls along the Kentucky River. The analysis indicated water quality is negatively impacted by upstream human impacts including impervious surfaces and road runoff.
- Headwaters and Appalshop hosted three in-person workshops and a fourth, remotely, covering topics like green infrastructure, sustainable forestry, and rain water management. Workshops provided opportunities to gather additional public input on the location and style of the rain garden or green infrastructure installation. Ultimately two designs were completed and one installation occurred. The original design was not actionable for the City of Whitesburg due to a change in site use and staffing challenges. However, an alternative design and site was actionable and installed with interpretive signage.



[Image]
Images of different types of wayfinding and directional signage at the community engagement event

HEALTHY DOWNTOWN INITIATIVE GRANT

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic induced economic uncertainty, and growing from the success of the Southeast Kentucky Downtown Stimulus Fund, the Appalachian Impact Fund, CEDIK, The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky and Invest 606 collaborated to create the Healthy Downtowns Initiative.

Philanthropic funding was made available to existing community collaboratives and provided support to nonprofit organizations, local businesses and public partners focused on downtown revitalization, community economic development, engagement and public health during the COVID-19 pandemic and Kentucky's reopening. Applicants were chosen based on their collaborative capacity. Letcher County Tourism and Convention Commission received grant funds to develop an underutilized building in need of repair into open air seating and destination for downtown visitors overlooking the river. A mini grant program for local businesses was established to provide support to local businesses impacted by the ongoing pandemic related economic uncertainty.



OUTCOMES

Mini Grant Program

- Letcher County Tourism and Convention Commission has begun accepting and reviewing applications for business mini grants. Eligible businesses include those physically located downtown and that positively contribute the downtown ecosystem. Mini grants are designed to allow businesses to remain in operation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building Activation

- A structural engineer was engaged to approve intended improvements to building site and worked with HOMEs to install the new wooden floors. The building, built in the 1920s and once serving as the first Greyhound bus stop in Whitesburg was last occupied in the 1990s by a cable company. The structure, conveniently situated beside the riverside and downtown, has no roof, windows or doors, but is being activated as open air seating for downtown visitors. It is now leased and will open to the public soon. The site is conveniently situated beside the riverside and downtown.



PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

ABOUT

Over the course of the project (2017-20) local stakeholders, partners, technical assistance providers and communities at large have engaged in and with their downtowns in new ways. We have learned from each other, built collaborative partnerships, explored other downtowns, successfully developed and implemented projects, ignited new ideas, developed new skills, built the skills of others and endured a global pandemic together. However, these accomplishments only represent a launch point for more sustained downtown revitalization efforts in the future. The collective lessons learned, established practices and challenges illuminated can provide the foundation for future downtown revitalization efforts.



Classic
mountain scene
in south eastern
Kentucky

LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND CAPACITY

Downtown revitalization takes more than a single person's best intentions and requires a collective effort working towards mutual goals. The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has shown that local leadership, shared ownership, and broad capacity create positive results but requires a deep commitment and understanding between downtown stakeholders, and about community assets, challenges, and visions for the future.

Understandably, every community is different in regards to skills, abilities, interests, assets and existing investments in downtown revitalization. With so much occupying the development landscape it is understandable why this may be the case. As such, the timeline and delivery of technical assistance programs was not linear or prescriptive but rather delivered as requested, allowing community stakeholders to commit to only what they felt was feasible and impactful. For example, not every community committed to the Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Program because it required a substantial time commitment. As a result, communities may have missed out on the relationship building with local business owners noted as an unexpected outcome by communities that participated in the BRE program. Local capacity is foundational to future efforts.

Communities with dedicated, paid staff, responsible for downtown revitalization efforts (however narrow or broadly defined) often demonstrated greater overall capacity. A critical piece for many downtown teams in the Promise Zone was a paid staff member to drive, coordinate and provide leadership for the community's downtown revitalization process. Practices often associated with paid downtown coordinators that provide capacity to development efforts were observed:

- Project coordination and acting as liaison between multiple parties.
- Data collection to measure and document project impacts.
- Promotion of downtown activities, opportunities, programs and events.
- Often tasked with grant writing and administration.
- If affiliated with the Kentucky Main Street, the main street manager has programmatic commitment to support enhanced urban design & placemaking efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Work to create or develop a dedicated funding source for a paid staff member devoted to supporting coordination and providing local leadership and continuity to downtown revitalization efforts.
2. Continue to seek out opportunities to build the skills, abilities and leadership capacity of elected officials, community volunteers, business owners and downtown stakeholders to address current and future challenges.



[Image]
Attendees at the regional convening
in Harlan

LOCAL FOUNDATIONS AND PHILANTHROPIC CAPACITY

At the onset of the pandemic, some of the first organizational responses emerged from local nonprofits and philanthropic organizations. In the Kentucky Promise Zone, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky took a leadership role, in partnership with the Appalachian Impact Fund, CEDIK and Invest 606 to create the Eastern Kentucky Downtown Business Stimulus Fund. This fund leveraged existing assets, relationships and donations to respond directly to local businesses. Communities with existing foundations also created their own hyper-local responses to support businesses, often taking the shape of a stimulus fund or mini grant program.

The Eastern Kentucky Downtown Business Stimulus Fund provided 153 grants, ranging from \$600 to \$3000. In total, \$385,400 went to business owners (60% female) in 23 counties representing a mix of restaurants, unique retail, attractions, personal services and other businesses active in the broader downtown and tourism ecosystem. The fund received over 550 applications requesting more than \$1.5 million dollars.

Communities with existing local philanthropic leadership, capacity and available assets accessed financial support more quickly than communities without existing relationships with philanthropic organizations. Communities without this specialized capacity were relegated to navigate the often confusing assortment of federal assistance programs and loan products available for COVID-19 relief.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Continue developing local (or regional) philanthropic programs or organizations to build local knowledge, leadership, capacity and interests to serve needs with local giving and investment.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

The arc of this project has shown that our ability to come together and work towards revitalizing our downtowns is often built upon relationships – both existing and those we build. The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has helped build and establish new relationships within downtowns, counties and among the region. At the heart of the project was an intentional effort to create a regional network of stakeholders using a series of facilitated convenings to learn together, collaborate on efforts, share ideas and support each other's efforts. Even public policies were shared among the network inspiring their implementation in other communities. For example, communities have learned about and later adopted downtown business development incentive programs and nuisance code enforcement updates to address underutilized, vacant, abandoned or dangerous properties as well as litter. The relationships and information shared has inspired and supported a number of innovative regional downtown revitalization strategies.

At quarterly convenings, attendees cultivated space for skills building (team and personal). Stakeholders shared, more often than not, that the networking opportunities and relationship building components that took place during the convenings were most impactful. In focus group conversations with downtown stakeholders, many noted the convenings as among the most impactful elements outside of the First Impressions Program and community design projects.

These networking opportunities facilitated pollination of ideas and in many cases led communities to adapting similar programs or policies they heard shared by others. Stakeholders shared they now feel more comfortable speaking in public as a result of presenting to the regional network and providing updates and that they felt

valued being asked to share insights with other communities. Some shared they were empowered to learn there were mutual challenges faced in other communities ultimately helping them solve issues together, while others shared a new commitment to regionalism and collaboration within their own counties and in the region at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to embrace regional efforts, collaborations and shared ownership (within counties and the region) focusing on mutual interests, assets and capacity to address shared challenges.
2. Seek out opportunities to join regional networks, collaborations or initiatives that provide relationship building opportunities with other stakeholders seeking solutions to shared challenges.

COVID-19

The most dramatic and impactful issue encountered during this project revolves around the unprecedented COVID-19 global health pandemic. The challenges have been substantial, however what we have learned about ourselves and our communities has also been substantial. We have been forced to confront our values and reevaluate priorities. As we consider what is next after the pandemic it is important to reflect on the impacts and observations from this time. For some these impacts may have been mere inconveniences and for others life altering. It has meant working virtually from home, not working at all, travel and crowd restrictions, canceled events and community engagement opportunities, supply chain disruptions, economic uncertainty, job insecurity, increased commitments at home with youth or elders, virtual learning, shifting shopping patterns and dealing with the reality of death and losses in our families and communities. The last year has been incredibly taxing on individuals, families, communities and society.

BROADBAND

While physical distancing and other public health practices have been encouraged we have not lost the need to stay connected. This has largely meant outreach, engagement, organizing and simply maintaining interpersonal relationships has shifted to virtual platforms. Not only have we seen the ways we connect change in real time but we are collectively shaping how we use technology moving forward. While virtual spaces are limited by internet connectivity it is important to note that virtual spaces have been more accessible to some. For example, individuals who traditionally work during meetings have been able to join remotely, and for others it has meant not choosing between childcare and attending a meeting. However challenges still persist in terms of access to broadband internet. It is important to note that mobile phone ownership has increased connectivity options. In May of 2019, the Pew Research Center reported that 44 percent of adults in households with incomes below \$30,000 do not have broadband but 71% own smart phones.

Addressing broadband access, while important to the work of this project, was not a central focus. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed the issue to the forefront, and this section would be incomplete without providing recommendations focusing on broadband access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to close the digital divide by prioritizing the reduction of barriers to broadband access and costs associated with realizing the 'last mile.'
2. Continue to develop mobile friendly alternatives to desktop web interfaces and the infrastructure supporting its networks.
3. Continue to hold internet service providers accountable for

services (including upload and download speeds) they have committed to when contracted to provide broadband products.

OUTDOOR SPACES AND THE PUBLIC REALM

COVID-19 has left no place unaffected. Its impacts have reached every rural, urban and suburban community whether they have the infrastructure or capacity to deal with these new challenges or not. The connectivity between people and places has perhaps never mattered more or at least been more obvious. The connections between the physical, social, civic and financial capacity of yesterday is the foundation for our resilience and recovery today.

During lockdown phases and subsequent periods of increased public restrictions and precautions, including social distancing, or limited indoor capacity, the ability to go outside and get some fresh air never felt so important. Parks and outdoor spaces have always been known to offer benefits related to physical and mental health, community relationship building and habitat protection. In seeking refuge from the pandemic, outdoor spaces have been elevated from mere amenities to critical infrastructure needed for escape and recharging.

It has been well documented throughout the pandemic that more people sought out outdoor spaces. Many parks, green spaces, and trail systems have experienced increases in local use. At times, high visitation strained the capacity of local parks and resulted in modified restrictions on the numbers of users at a time, the activities available and in some cases temporary closures. These moments of access inspired many people to explore their neighborhood for outdoor recreation. Many communities throughout the region noted that as car traffic decreased, pedestrian traffic increased. This was most

notable in downtowns and adjacent neighborhoods.

When given the opportunity to invest philanthropic funds targeted at supporting COVID related economic recovery as part of the Healthy Downtowns Initiative, two thirds of the participating Promise Zone communities prioritized investments in the public realm and public spaces. The stakeholders responsible for a community garden and outdoor classroom (planned pre-pandemic) noted that it had a larger impact now than they originally anticipated. They attributed their observation to more residents simply needing a place to go because they have been in their homes more than ever. Each example highlights a real investment in increasing access to outdoor spaces by promoting both public health and economic development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prioritize investments in pedestrian infrastructure that promote increasing accessibility, connectivity and improved access to sidewalks, walking, hiking and biking trails and nearby water resources.
2. Determine the impact of decreased car traffic on downtown streets and businesses and consider the conversion and redesign of currently underutilized parking, alleys or even roads as outdoor seating and dining to support local businesses.
3. Consider prioritizing future investments in accessible pedestrian infrastructure, maintaining aging infrastructure and designing new public spaces that serve the needs of people above cars.
4. Prioritize flexible or multi-use outdoor learning environments and experiences that provide access to COVID safe, family-friendly extracurricular activities, bridging the need for respite from virtual learning and opportunities to enjoy and receive the benefits of being outdoors.

LOCAL MATTERS

It has never been so evident that communities are passionate about their local businesses. As economic uncertainty loomed over every community, one of the most resounding responses were collective actions/programs to support local business enterprises. Never before has the idea of supporting local, generating local tax dollars and keeping businesses open been so prioritized and championed. We have seen the creation of take-out bingo cards, gift card incentive programs, initiatives to feed front line health workers by local businesses, transitioning outdoor spaces to serve the needs of local restaurants with no longer accessible indoor spaces.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to develop programs that promote, bring attention to, and ultimately contribute to the success of local businesses and enterprises.
2. Consider developing a local first campaign, building off of the collective support shown during the pandemic and the collective sacrifices made by many front line retail workers.

WHAT'S NEXT?

DOWNTOWN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has documented that revitalization efforts are multifaceted and complicated at times because of all the moving parts. It makes sense, given the development histories and existing infrastructure in the region's downtowns, that reimagining their uses can come with challenges. Sustained revitalization will require moving beyond the successes of this project (visioning, planning, skill relationship building, assessments, design solutions, prioritization and implementing

projects) to thinking about how our collective efforts will contribute to a broader investment landscape and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

A September 2020 study by the National Main Street organization, in partnership with the Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking, investigated the impacts that being located in a downtown core had on an establishment's ability to mitigate negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in both urban and rural downtowns. In nearly every example, small businesses in older, established commercial corridors, downtowns and Main Streets proved more likely to leverage their physical location (in proximity to other businesses, resources and amenities that) in ways that mitigated COVID-19 impacts more than businesses in other locations. The affirmation that businesses located in downtowns have generally been more resilient during the pandemic speaks directly to the built environment underpinning a community's resilience more broadly.

Perhaps the most significant and insurmountable challenge faced in the built environment during the Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project were the physical constraints and limitations presented by the realities of downtown buildings. Nearly every community has at least one building, however large or small, that presents a real challenge with tangible and varying obstacles. While downtown buildings are iconic they are also difficult to restore and maintain once they have fallen into disrepair. The reality is many Kentucky Promise Zone downtowns are burdened with underutilized or abandoned structures, and transitioning these spaces will require outside private capital investments beyond what is traditionally available in grant supported efforts. The next iteration of CEDIK's downtown revitalization to address just this question is the recently funded ARC POWER grant to launch The ReVitalize, ReInvest, ReDevelop Appalachia (R3) Initiative.

THE REVITALIZE, REINVEST, REDEVELOP APPALACHIA (R3) INITIATIVE

R3 is a strategic partnership between the Appalachian Impact Fund at the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky and the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) at the University of Kentucky to revitalize southeastern Kentucky's downtowns, support entrepreneurial ecosystems and promising sectors and begin readying our communities for new investment. By creating comprehensive downtown revitalization plans oriented towards supporting entrepreneurs in the downtown ecosystem, building the capacity of local leaders and attracting new private investments, the R3 initiative will help infuse much needed outside capital into our downtowns.

The R3 Initiative takes a four-step approach to readying communities for investment and building markets for multiple forms of capital absorption. These steps include: city-wide planning that engages a diverse set of stakeholders, identification of tangible catalytic projects, deployment of early-stage impact investment capital to amplify the competitiveness for outside capital investment, followed by deployment of later-stage traditional capital to complete projects. In order to concentrate investments into the hardest-to-serve communities there is an underlying need to supplement the existing investment ecosystem that R3 aims to address.

CEDIK is fulfilling a vital need at the front-end of this progression to build local capacity that enables inclusive and comprehensive planning, helping communities determine the necessary and impactful revitalization projects in their own downtowns. The R3 Initiative will help build the Appalachian Impact Fund's existing social impact investment fund with investment capital targeted for

the implementation of catalytic downtown revitalization projects. These investments will be used for downtown revitalization projects that present entrepreneurial opportunities that can: improve infrastructure and the built environment, start and grow small businesses, retain and attract families, draw in visitors for extended stays across the region and attract additional private investment.

[Image Top]
View at Pine Mountain
Settlement School

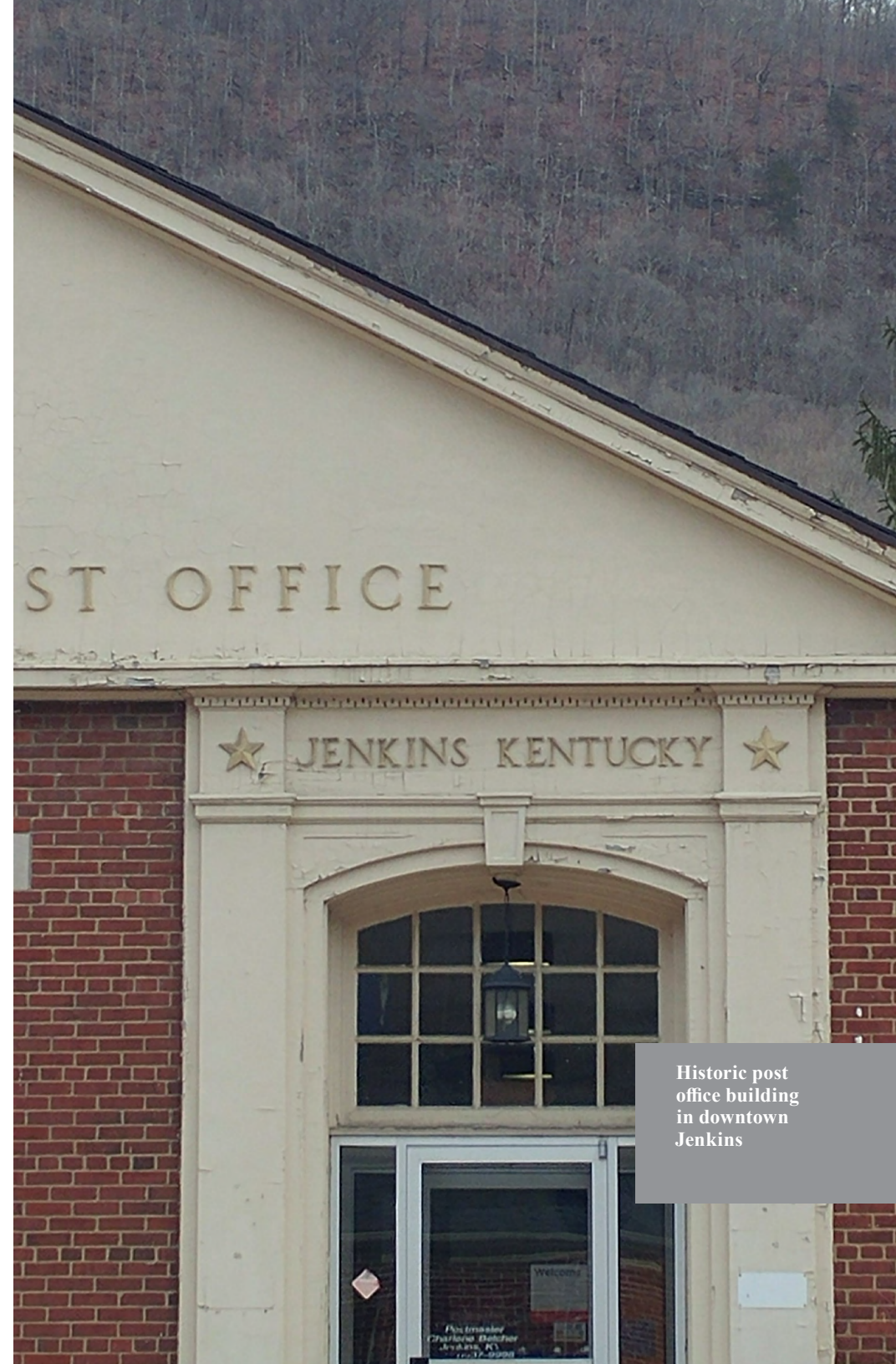
[Image Bottom]
Kentucky historic
marker



INDICATORS OF DOWNTOWN SUCCESS

A number of broad indicators were introduced using the 2014 University of Illinois Extension 'Downtown Success Indicators' publication to provide insights on how to begin measuring revitalization progress. CEDIK references these indicators in its own work to gain perspective and evaluate the relative successes of investments to downtowns. While broad, all the following indicators focus on a need to get people downtown for unique experiences not easily replicated in suburban development. The following represents a summary of indicators to consider in tracking downtown revitalization investments and metrics.

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and University of Illinois Extension. "Downtown Success Indicators: A Review of Literature." August 2014. <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/resilientdowntowns/files/2016/06/59491.pdf>



Historic post office building in downtown Jenkins

DOWNTOWN RETAIL

Downtown Retail has long been understood as an indicator of downtown health and vibrancy. Retail activity attracts a daytime population, contributes to the local tax base and increases to sidewalk activity.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of all retail businesses located downtown
- Increase in retail businesses downtown over a time period
- Occupancy rate and longevity of businesses
- Daytime population
- Business mix

DOWNTOWN HOUSING

Downtown Housing and residents provide a 24 hour customer base for downtown businesses and associated amenities. Downtowns provide unique housing opportunities for a number of target populations.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of city's population residing downtown
- Increase in downtown housing units over a time period
- Surrounding market rate of residential neighborhoods
- Regulatory framework supporting downtown housing

ORGANIZATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Organizations and Partnerships are critical to the implementation of downtown revitalization efforts. They play active leadership roles while bringing a variety of stakeholders together to develop the community's long term vision.

Suggested Measures:

- Active partnerships and coalitions
- Downtown development authority (or organizational support)
- Downtown centric plan
- Community involvement/engagement (affection from citizenry)

DOWNTOWN TRAFFIC GENERATORS

Downtown Traffic Generators come in a variety of forms but ultimately aim to attract people downtown. These assets, when leveraged, provide a competitive advantage. Traffic generators can be both man-made, like a university, or natural, like a waterfront.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of the city's civic and cultural uses located downtown
- Access to natural amenities (or waterfront development or parks)
- Arts and entertainment amenities
- Educational establishments
- Civic or judicial buildings

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Preservation and Rehabilitation of structures neglected by the retail exodus to the periphery protect the identity of unique places not replicable in the suburbs. Historic preservation helps define the character of place and encourages investment in neglected and underutilized buildings.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of city's registered historic structures located downtown
- Number of hotel/motel rooms per 1,000 central city residents
- Rehabilitation and Historic preservation initiatives
- Heritage tourism programs and sites

IMMIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

Immigration and Diversity are relatively new indicators of downtown success. Looking at diversity provides insights into a community's openness to a diverse population that includes non-traditional families, LGBTQIA+ and immigrants of varying faiths and ethnicities.

Suggested Measures:

- Percentage of foreign born population in the city
- Percentage of non-white population in the city
- Civic leaders' attitude toward diverse populations

MIXED USES

Multi-functionality refers to the historic roles downtown have played over time as destinations for shopping, services, employment, housing and culture. Successful downtowns offer a variety of interwoven opportunities that serve to attract people at various times of the day.

Suggested Measures:

- Variety of land uses downtown
- Mixed use development featuring housing, office use or conference/meeting space

DESIGN AND PLANNING

Downtown Design can improve the quality of life of residents and functionality of the built environment. Successful downtowns have clear boundaries and entrances - you should know when you have arrived. The sense of place is a cumulative expression of a multitude of downtown design elements.

Suggested Measures:

- Clear boundary and entrances
- Design guidelines
- Bike/pedestrian friendliness
- Public spaces
- Streetscape and facade improvement programs
- Accessibility and connectivity

BRANDING AND MARKETING

Branding and Promotion are marketing strategies deployed to reach larger audiences and disseminate information about downtown programs, opportunities and vision. Successful downtowns use marketing strategies to let residents and tourists know about the unique experiences their downtowns offer.

Suggested Measures:

- Special events
- Marketing initiatives

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Downtown Finance, employment and demographic data provide insights on long term changes.

Suggested Measures:

- Change in assessed value of property
- Change in real property investment
- Change in downtown employment by sector
- Percentage increase in rental value
- Income of downtown residents
- Crime known to police per 1000 residents
- Downtown labor force

COUNTY DATA PROFILES

CEDIK's research team has created and maintains updated data profiles for stakeholders to use, relevant to the community. These data profiles provide insights on a number of valuable metrics and can support various decision making processes. To access the most recent data profiles for your community please visit <https://cedik.ca.uky.edu/CountyDataProfiles>

After selecting the appropriate profile type simply click on your county name using the dropdown menu. These data profiles are compiled from data gathered from federal, state and local databases and are updated as new information becomes available.

County Budget Profile

- Population Estimates
- Total Tax Revenues
- Change in Population
- Change in Revenues
- Change in Spending
- County Revenue Sources
- Weather Related Disaster Indicators

Economic Profile

- Employment (top industries and location quotient)
- Labor Force
- Commute Times
- Median Household Income
- Poverty %
- Unemployment Rate
- Personal Income

Housing Profile

- Total Housing Units
- Owner Occupied Units
- Renter Occupied Units
- Homeowner Vacancy
- Renter Vacancy
- Housing Stock Age
- Housing Characteristics (mortgage rent, taxes, cost burden, etc.)
- Commuting Patterns

Retail Profile

- Retail Employment and Pull Factors
- Percent Change in Retail Employment and Sales
- Retail Earnings and Employee Age

Small Business Profile

- Total Jobs (Gains and Losses)
- Sales per Business & Employee
- Top Employment Industries
- Small Business Types
- Self-Employment

Workforce Profile

- Workforce by Education and Gender
- Commuting Patterns
- Employment by Occupation
- Earnings

