



Cities Mean **BUSINESS**

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A catalyst for growth

**Cities improve infrastructure to
promote economic development**

Downtown tours

**Leaders visit revitalization projects
in peer cities for inspiration**

*Community Development Block Grants allow
cities to complete improvements crucial to
economic development efforts.*



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By Amy Geier Edgar

Cover: The historic seaport city of Georgetown has received \$3.5 million in CDBG funds for streetscape and drainage improvements. The upgrades have spurred residential growth, with commercial development expected to follow.

(Photo courtesy of city of Georgetown)



COVER STORY

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Letter from the **EDITOR**

That old adage “don’t judge a book by its cover” doesn’t

always hold true when economic development prospects come calling. First impressions do count, and well-kept downtowns and neighborhoods can often make or break an initial economic development inquiry.

This issue of *Cities Mean Business* magazine takes a look at several cities that have made investments in upgrading building façades downtown and rehabbing dilapidated homes, resulting in new business growth and revitalized neighborhoods.

Helped along by federal funding through Community Development Block Grants in many cases, these cities are leveraging dollars from a variety of sources to make their communities more appealing and attractive for businesses and residents. From an old Western Auto in Sumter that’s now a higher education facility, to an old textile mill in Chester that had become an eyesore, cities are finding creative ways to match funding sources with local needs.

Also in this issue, we look at how cities around the state are sharing good ideas, best practices and lessons learned. Several mayors have made field trips around the state to personally see what their peers are doing to meet similar challenges. As Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin said about seeing other cities’ successes first hand, “It’s the difference between having the facts and having the experience.”



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Editor

Workers install a section of 7-foot diameter pipe for a \$15 million stormwater drainage project in Georgetown. A \$1 million CDBG award helped make the project possible. (Photo courtesy Frank Timko, Davis and Floyd)



CATALYST FOR GROWTH

CITIES IMPROVE AGING INFRASTRUCTURE TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By Amy Geier Edgar

In the town of Wagener, the aging water and sewer infrastructure has led to massive leaks on Main Street. Underground asbestos pipes, which are obsolete these days, have had several breaks in the past few years. One area of town near the high school had no fire hydrants. Officials feared that if the school ever caught fire, they would have to run a hose from town to extinguish the flames.



Workers in Wagener repairing damages to their aging water/sewer infrastructure, thanks to CDBG funding. (Photo courtesy of Mayor Michael Miller)

BEFORE



AFTER



These before and after photos document the result of a renovation and façade improvement project in Triangle City, the business district within West Columbia. (Photos courtesy of the city of West Columbia)

But the town has received more than \$600,000 in funds during the past year from the federal Community Development Block Grant program, ensuring that Wagener will be able to improve its water system along two major roads in town, clean up contamination and remove an eyesore by tearing down a vacant gas station.

With the city's budget already stretched thin, "We could not possibly repair our sewer and water systems with what we have," said Wagener Mayor Michael Miller.

Wagener repairs leaks regularly, but after paying for the equipment, tests, lab fees and chemicals that are necessary to stay in compliance with DHEC, OSHA and EPA regulations, there is not enough money left to make replacements, said Public Works Director Jamie Preacher.

"All we can do is patch and pray," Preacher said. "There are a lot of unseen costs in operating a public works department, and without the grants from CDBG, municipalities cannot repair their infrastructure."

Community Development Block Grants, a program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development since the mid-1970s, fund local projects like affordable housing, anti-poverty programs and infrastructure development. Proposed CDBG projects must benefit a majority of low-to-moderate income people, prevent blight or meet an urgent health need. Just last year, South Carolina communities of all sizes received more than \$50 million through CDBG to support local development projects.

In countless cities and towns, CDBG funds provide the infrastructure improvements that are a catalyst for economic development.

Façade and renovation projects funded by CDBG have brought new life to the business district in West Columbia, according to Mayor Bobby Horton.

West Columbia recently completed the second phase of a renovation and façade improvement project in a two-block area of Triangle City, the city's business district since the 1940s, said Economic Development

Director Donna Smith. The work has had a positive aesthetic impact on the area and has sparked economic revitalization, she said.

The city also has received preliminary approval on a water line improvement project for one of the oldest districts in the city. The current water lines are small and rusted, break frequently and do not accommodate fire hydrants. The project proposes upgrading the lines and adding three hydrants, Smith said.

"The façade and renovation projects would not have been undertaken without CDBG funding. Both have promoted new and increased business in the Triangle City portion of West Columbia. These projects have resulted in private businesses upgrading and improving their facilities, bringing growth and jobs to that area," Horton said. "Some water and sewer projects in very low income portions of the city would have taken years to complete, if at all. CDBG funding is critical to provide similar improvements in economically disadvantaged areas of the city."

BEFORE



AFTER



The city of Georgetown is seeing the results of work completed with CDBG funds. The historic seaport city has received \$3.5 million in CDBG the last two years for streetscape and drainage improvements. Those upgrades have spurred residential growth, with commercial development expected to follow, according to City Administrator Chris Eldridge.

“We have 26 homes slated for construction and four Habitat houses,” Eldridge said. “Once the stormwater project is completed, it will make our Highway 17 corridor more attractive to commercial development due to lessened flooding risk.”

Eldridge noted that the work also is generating jobs, with around 30-40 people working on the stormwater project on a daily basis.

The grants also are important to small towns like Harleyville, which has a population of 654.

In 2004, the town began an overhaul of its water system, which was originally installed during the 1960s. Harleyville was awarded a total of \$1 million for its water project,

according to Amanda Childers, Harleyville’s town clerk and treasurer. In addition, the town has been awarded more than \$250,000 in CDBG funds to rehab two of its sewer pump stations.

“These CDBG projects have been vitally important for our city,” Childers said. “The ability to keep our utility systems updated allows us to provide services to new businesses. Without this funding, our aging system would very likely have been unable to support our current population, much less any new growth.”

Funding is always an issue in a small town, and projects could not be completed without the grant money, said Mayor Charles Ackerman. Yet without such updates, development options are limited.


“We’re trying to prepare for a combination of residential and business growth,” he said.

The town of Port Royal has used CDBG funds for several sewer upgrades in low-to-moderate income areas, and was awarded a planning grant that allowed the town to identify

where its septic systems were failing. Funds also helped the town begin the process of creating a capital improvements plan to identify those areas most desperately in need of sewer due to potential impacts on critical areas nearby.

“For the town, it is about improving the quality of our residents’ lives and preserving our adjacent critical water bodies that could be impaired due to failing septic systems,” said Town Manager Van Willis.

Without CDBG funds, Port Royal does not have the resources to make the significant sewer improvements necessary in its low-income areas, Willis said. The town is considering applying for another CDBG through the Village Renaissance program to address the impact of the economy on the downtown area, and to help improve the prospects for selling its closed and blighted port.

“As a traditionally blue-collar community, under the current constraints of legislation governing taxation, it would be absolutely impossible to take these projects on financially,” he added. 

CURB APPEAL

Old buildings find successful new life through renovation

By Amy Geier Edgar

In many cities, older buildings can sit vacant for years, falling into disrepair and becoming eyesores. Through renovation and rehabilitation supported by the city, however, these structures can find a successful second life and add vibrancy and a new purpose to a downtown.

The city of Abbeville first took on downtown revitalization in the 1970s when it restored its downtown façades to their original 19th century charm. In the following decades, however, downtown Abbeville lost businesses and its appeal as a tourist destination. City leaders, determined to breathe new life into their downtown, created a comprehensive downtown redevelopment plan. A central part of their plan involved renovating the 1840s-era Trinity Street Livery Stable into a multi-use facility.

The project used funds from a South Carolina National Heritage Corridor grant, matching funds from the city and revenues from a local hospitality tax to pay for the renovations. Trinity Street has gone from an area with vacant and dilapidated storefronts to an active corridor of businesses, restaurants and entertainment. Less than a year after its official dedication, the Stable has served as a venue to everything from wedding receptions to a seasonal farmers market, said Kacy



Clover's new community center is in a renovated post office building. (Photo courtesy town of Clover)

Pearman, executive director of the Greater Abbeville Chamber of Commerce.

“It is a huge asset to our downtown business community,” Pearman explained. “The Livery Stable was a true historical gem in the rough and the finished product has provided a remarkable springboard for increasing tourism, due to the versatility of events that the Stable can accommodate.”

The town of Clover also found a new purpose for a historic building when leaders decided to purchase a former post office building and transform it into a community center.

As the town's population grew, so too did the need for a community center to hold events like teen dances, training sessions and

indoor recreation programs. Town leaders realized they could not afford to build a new center, so they began looking at the post office building, conveniently located near the historic downtown district.

The total purchase cost of the land, building and renovations was \$403,000, according to Clover Town Administrator Allison Harvey. The center was completed in June 2010 and now offers a variety of educational, social and recreational activities, along with office and meeting space.

“We have received many, many positive comments from the community and business leaders,” Harvey said. “We've been able to better serve the public by making the



An abandoned downtown building in Sumter was renovated into the new Central Carolina Technical College Health Sciences Center. (Photo courtesy city of Sumter)

recreation department much more accessible (geographically and for the physically disabled), having a venue to host art shows, self-defense classes, pumpkin carving contests and more great social and cultural programs with much more to come, and having a permanent meeting spot for the town council and various other town committees.”

In Beaufort, private investors rehabilitated a 1950s Greyhound bus station, transforming it into a sophisticated boutique hotel that has had a positive impact on the commercial district.

The former bus station sat vacant for decades, serving only as home to scores of pigeons. Local businessman Kevin Cuppia walked past the building every day for years, imagining how it could be transformed. When previous plans fell through and the owner put the building on the market, Cuppia decided to take a chance.

Cuppia and his wife Rosemary spent about a year on renovations for the building, which included putting on a new roof and restoring the building’s original façade. The result is The Greyhound Flats, a chic hotel with two large suites just a block from the waterfront park and steps away from downtown restaurants and shopping.

“The addition of the extra rooms in the core commercial district for people to spend

the night is a great addition to downtown Beaufort,” said Main Street Beaufort, USA Executive Director LaNelle Fabian. “The rooms are constantly booked and they have breathed new life into a building that was empty for decades.”

New life also came to a shuttered building in Sumter’s downtown.

Western Auto Co. closed its 70,000-square-foot facility on South Main Street downtown in the 1970s. The building was a blemish on downtown for decades, until the city completed a feasibility study a few years ago as part of its downtown revitalization plan and determined that it could partner with Central Carolina Technical College to create a new Health Sciences Center.

The collaboration addressed the needs of both the college and the city. Faced with growing demand, CCTC needed to expand its healthcare training programs but did not have room to expand its main campus facility. City leaders wanted to eliminate blight and attract more people downtown to help businesses.

The CCTC Health Science Center opened Aug. 23, 2010. Today, nearly 1,000 college students attend health care classes in the heart of downtown Sumter. CCTC is now able to expand its curriculum and hopes to



In Beaufort, private investors rehabilitated a 1950s Greyhound Bus Station and transformed it into a sophisticated boutique hotel that has had a positive impact on the commercial district. (Photos courtesy Main Street Beaufort, USA)

bring in more students to the downtown facility. On top of that, visitors and sales have increased for downtown businesses and restaurants.

“The impact for downtown has been outstanding,” said Downtown Growth and Development Manager Ray Reich. “It transformed blight to a beautiful asset and has added hundreds of students to our downtown traffic every day.”

Improved aesthetics revitalize neighborhoods and lead to economic development

By Amy Geier Edgar

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. The old adage applies to people just as much as it does to cities looking to attract economic development.

Chester city officials knew the blighted, former textile mill in the city limits was an eyesore and a deterrent to potential investors.

“Every time economic developers would bring prospects into town, they’d see the mill, shake their heads and walk away,” said former Chester Mayor Mitch Foster.

The city was awarded a \$500,000 Community Development Block Grant to remove the vacant mill. It’s all part of a continuing effort to revitalize the downtown and spark economic development.

“It’s done so much just for the attitude and spirit in town,” Foster said. “We’ve been fighting this for years.”

And the revitalization efforts continue. The city also received a \$500,000 CDBG grant to upgrade its water/sewer lines and was awarded a \$25,000 grant to study the infrastructure needs in the East Chester Community.



Top: The former Springsteen Mill in Chester that was demolished and cleaned up in 2010. This project was possible due to a \$500,000 CDBG award. (Photo courtesy of the city of Chester) Right: Homes in Pickens were rehabilitated using a \$20,000 grant from CDBG. (Photo courtesy of the Appalachian Councils of Government)



The city’s reliance and utilization of CDBG funds goes back many years, said Chester City Administrator Jeff Kerr. In the past, the city has been awarded housing grants to rehab low-income homes in town.

“Without those grants, certain parts of town would be dilapidated. People would be living in squalor,” Foster said.

The city of Hartsville also has used CDBG funds to rehab low-income homes and help

residents. In July 2008, the city was awarded a \$50,000 CDBG grant to rehabilitate the exterior of homes in the South Hartsville neighborhood. Through the Paint the Town Grant, the city rehabilitated nine homes and 30 low- to-moderate income people benefitted from the improvements, said City Manager Natalie Zeigler.

Rehabilitating the houses has improved the neighborhood’s aesthetics and also increased home values.



The city put out notices letting residents know the grant was available to certain low-income areas near the downtown, and residents applied, said Brenda Kelley, planning and zoning administrator. New roofs were placed on six homes. On one house, the roof had been exposed down to the rafters, Kelley said. Five homes received a fresh coat of paint. One home had some fascia boards replaced and some vinyl siding repaired.

“When you drove by before, they had a dilapidated appearance. But now they’re quaint and cute,” Kelley said. “The residents who did benefit have been so grateful. Most of them, without the grant, would never have been able to do these repairs.”

A \$20,000 Village Renaissance CDBG was awarded to the city of Pickens in December 2010 to revitalize a low-income neighborhood on the U.S. 178 corridor leading into downtown. This type of grant allows a community to revamp a neighborhood that is within walking distance of its downtown and business centers. The city hopes to receive a total of \$1 million in CDBG money to complete the work, which could include water, sewer and drainage infrastructure improvements, said City Administrator Katherine Brackett.

“We’re working to improve a poor, neglected part of town to make it safer, walkable and more attractive,” Brackett said. “The community is really excited to see improvements there.”



Hartsville’s Paint the Town project was made possible through \$50,000 in CDBG funds that improved the neighborhood’s aesthetics and increased home values. (Photos courtesy of the city of Hartsville)





DOWNTOWN TOURS

The difference between having the facts and having the experience

Photo/Ryan Wilcox

Downtowns are the heartbeat of a city. They are home to local businesses, employing many people in the area and contributing to the community's tax base. They also attract tourists, provide services and reflect a city's history and quality of life. So it's not surprising to see that city officials put so much energy and effort into preserving and revitalizing their Main Street.

Some city officials currently undertaking revitalization projects have found it helpful to visit their peers in other municipalities with their own successful revitalization stories.

In the town of Lexington, where officials are working on a Vision Plan to map out the next two decades, visits to other cities provided leaders an opportunity to discuss challenges and successes with other local officials and bring home ideas and inspiration. In early February, Lexington officials toured the downtown areas of Travelers Rest, Greenville and Simpsonville.



Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin and Councilwoman Belinda Gergel talk with Greenville developer Bob Hughes. City officials were touring Hughes' developments in Greenville to get a sense of what he might bring to the Bull Street property, which he recently agreed to buy. (Photo/James T. Hammond)

The visits included a stop in a renovated furniture store in Travelers Rest, discussions with councilmembers about power lines and trailway projects, insight on Greenville's Farmers Market, and comparisons to Simpsonville's roads and intersections, said Lexington Town Administrator Britt Poole.

"Making these visits gives you a different perspective," Poole said. "You can see what's

been done and what's worked."

Some of the projects they hope to implement back home in Lexington will take time. Other specific ideas can be put into place immediately. Lexington Mayor Randy Halfacre said Greenville's Farmers Market inspired him and other officials. He hopes to have a Farmers Market up and running this spring.

The trip also gave them ideas to consider for the future. The municipalities that Lexington leaders visited use hospitality tax revenues to finance key downtown projects, Halfacre said. Each of those cities had a plan that they shared with their local businesses and residents, he said. Lexington had its own hospitality tax years ago, but it was ill-advised and the public and businesses opposed it, Halfacre said. Yet the field trips proved that such a tax can be useful if the public is informed and educated about it, he said.

“When and if we decide to put a hospitality tax forward again, we would do our due diligence, share information with our constituents and have a plan,” Halfacre said.

Visiting other municipalities helps to develop relationships between cities, and allows them to learn from each other.

“We don’t need to reinvent the wheel,” Halfacre said. “We can take lessons learned from other municipalities and bring them back home.”

Officials from the city of Columbia were looking to take lessons from the city of Greenville during a February field trip to the Upstate. Columbia finds itself in a unique position to shape the downtown, as it looks to develop a 165-acre tract of land on Bull Street that belonged to the S.C. Department of Mental Health. Greenville developer Bob Hughes wants to develop the land.

“This is the largest urban development project east of the Mississippi River. If we do this right, it can add tremendous value to the city of Columbia,” City Manager Steve Gantt said.

Fred Delk, executive director of the Columbia Development Corp., helped set up the visit between Columbia and Greenville officials. They had a brief meeting with Hughes and toured some of his downtown Greenville projects including, the River Place development, the Next Innovation Center, the Wachovia building on Main Street and the historic Greenville County Courthouse on Main Street.



Photo/Ryan Wilcox



Lexington leaders visit Travelers Rest to look at a trailways project. (Photo courtesy town of Lexington)



Columbia leaders also visited Greenville's Falls Park. (Photo/Ryan Wilcox)

Columbia officials saw numerous examples of how public/private partnerships have played a key role in the rebirth of Greenville's city center. They also had frank discussions with city leaders, like Mayor Knox White, about the steps they took in laying out a clear vision and how they worked to make that vision a reality, said Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin.

"I don't expect that everything that works in downtown Greenville will work for Columbia or vice versa," Benjamin said. "But I can tell you that we face a lot of the same challenges and, hopefully, we can learn from their experiences as we move forward with our own vision."

Walking through downtown Greenville and seeing firsthand what the city has accomplished was invaluable, Benjamin said.

"Even if I recited every statistic from October's 35-21 Gamecock victory over No. 1 ranked Alabama, you still wouldn't know what it was like to be in Williams-Brice

Stadium that night. It's the difference between having the facts and having the experience," Benjamin said.

"Making trips like this allows us to build and strengthen relationships between our cities and open new lines of communication so that we aren't stuck trying to face shared challenges with limited individual resources," Benjamin added. "We can rise to meet them together."

The city of Greenville has been happy to share its experiences of several decades of revitalization work with other municipalities, said Nancy Whitworth, Greenville's economic development director. She encourages cities to take some of Greenville's ideas and adapt them to their individual cities.

"There's not a one-size fits all formula," she said.


Whitworth advises other cities seeking downtown revitalization to look at public-private partnerships, which has proven

successful in Greenville. Cities also should be aware that they are stepping into long-term investments and patience is required, she said.

"To be successful, you must be in it for the long-haul," she said. "You need to have a constant focus on what you need to do, and still maintain what you have."

All the effort put forth into revitalizing downtown areas show the importance of Main Street. Everyone — from local residents and business owners to visitors and potential investors — judges how vibrant and attractive a city is by the condition of its Main Street, Benjamin said.

Main Street is the heart and soul of a city, Halfacre added.

"It's a community's anchor, it's their identity," he said. "Towns spawn from a Main Street." 



You see a police car.

We see a police officer named Hal who works closely with fire departments and EMS, who knows every business owner downtown, who can name every city street and who buys 12 snow cones on Saturdays even though his T-ball team has never won a game.

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