



LURAY DOWNTOWN INITIATIVE BUILDING IMAGE AND COMMUNITY

**ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT FOR
LURAY DOWNTOWN INITIATIVE
CONDUCTED AUGUST 22, 2006**

A Service of Virginia Main Street

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§I. INTRODUCTION

The organizational assessment is a service that veteran Virginia Main Street programs receive periodically after they have completed the initial three-year start-up phase of Main Street organizational development and have demonstrated a level of success with their downtown revitalization activities.

During the assessment in August, state and national Main Street staff members met with the Luray Main Street program director and board and committee members as well as municipal officials and other downtown and civic leaders to assess strengths, weaknesses, and the progress of the program. In advance of the visit, team members reviewed background materials submitted by the local program, such as the current work plan and operating budget.

The observations and recommendations in this summary report represent the opinions of the Assessment Team. Team members should not be considered the sole “experts” on what’s best for downtown Luray. They offer observation and advice based on years of experience in the field with many different communities, but the citizens of Luray know their community best. The purpose of this report is to stimulate the Main Street organization to focus and think strategically about the recommendations offered and to move forward with those that are appropriate for the community. In fact, within days of the Virginia Main Street visit, Luray Downtown Initiative had already started to implement many of the recommendations in this document based on discussions during the assessment.

§II. ORGANIZATION

Organization refers both to the formal organization known as Luray Downtown Initiative and the grassroots organizing that takes place within a Main Street program. Organizational responsibilities are either internal or external in nature. Internally, the organization must manage the Main Street office and staff members, prepare and approve annual budgets, keep accounting and financial records, oversee personnel evaluation, develop organizational policies and procedures, facilitate the annual action plan, and maintain the board and committee structures. External organizational responsibilities include involving the community in downtown visioning and long-range planning; building broad-based community support through a strong mission, consistent communication of the organization's plans and accomplishments, and a public relations strategy; planning and conducting fund-raising and membership development activities; increasing the volunteer base; developing leadership; and seeking public/private partnerships. These activities can be summarized into five broad categories of work:

- Planning and Operations
- Public Relations and Outreach
- Coalitions and Partnerships
- Raising and Managing Finances
- Developing Volunteers and Staff

Promoting the organization is different from promoting the commercial district. It is important that people realize a commercial revitalization organization is hard at work in downtown Luray. That awareness will make it easier to recruit members and raise funds – both of which are essential to the success of the revitalization effort. Obtaining financial contributions from stakeholders throughout the community is important not only to Luray Downtown Initiative's budget, but to getting everyone "invested" in the effort.

As more people learn about the program, recruiting volunteers for projects and committees becomes easier. To ensure maximum participation, ask people to serve in roles they enjoy. It is up to Luray Downtown Initiative's leaders to educate new volunteers about the program's mission and explain how their work contributes to fulfilling that mission. Those are the hallmarks of good volunteer development.

Program promotion and fund raising go hand-in-hand. The more that people know about the Luray Downtown Initiative, the more likely they are to respond to fund-raising appeals. Conversely, if the public does not know about the program's successes and accomplishments, people probably will not want to make a contribution. A year-round program of public outreach will make the annual fund-raising campaign easier. As the program's leaders and policymakers, board members are the logical fund raisers. Potential contributors will want to discuss their donations with the leaders of the program, not with someone hired to raise money. However, staff can take a strong role in planning fund-raising campaigns and may accompany members of the board on visits to contributors.

Because a Main Street program must tackle so many organizational issues, the workload is usually shared by the board of directors, the Organization Committee, and the program's director.

ORGANIZATION STRENGTHS & ASSETS: BOARD & ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE

The Assessment Team offers the following organizational observations with respect to the Luray Downtown Initiative's board and Organization Committee:

- **Active and stable Board of Directors:** The foundation of a successful Main Street program is built on its board of directors, and Luray Downtown Initiative's board is an asset. Board members are active participants of the program, are conscientious about attendance so there is always a quorum, and are polite to their fellow board members. Board meetings are completed in 1 to 1 ½ hours, and include agendas, minutes, and treasurer's reports.
- **Excellent executive director:** Volunteers describe the program's executive director, Catherine Stewart, as "the human dynamo." The Assessment Team appreciates the energy and vision she brings to her position.
- **Partnership with town:** It is good to see that Luray elected officials support the Main Street effort financially and emotionally. Town staff are also visibly involved, particularly Town Manager Jerry Schiro and Parks and Recreation Director Pat O'Brien.
- **Partnership with Luray Caverns:** Luray Caverns is Luray's biggest single destination and is an important complement to the downtown as an attraction. Partnering is an effective organizational strategy and by working together the two have the potential to build on each other's successes.
- **Fund raising:** Raising money appears to be an organizational strength, with the Cash Party being the prime example: it raised \$26,000 and was turned into the social event of the year, thanks in large part to Starr Johnson. Luray Downtown Initiative's participation in the town's CDBG application is also a good way to tap into valuable financial resources.

ORGANIZATION RECOMMENDATIONS: BOARD & ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE

- **Separate Board and Organization Committee:** There is an understandable temptation within Main Street organizations to eliminate the Organization Committee and transfer those responsibilities to the Board of Directors. There are obvious overlaps between the traditional responsibilities of a Main Street board and a Main Street organization committee, particularly in the area of fund raising. Often times, a significant percentage of organization committee members are also board members, and having two separate meetings may seem to be redundant. However, when this path is chosen it is usually not long before volunteer development, fund raising, and public relations efforts start to suffer. Luray Downtown Initiative has room for improvement in two out of three of these areas as demonstrated by the recommendations below. Because the Board currently meets twice a month, a simple solution would be to make the first meeting of the month a Board meeting and second meeting an Organization Committee meeting. However, if that solution is chosen, be sure to open up the Organization Committee meeting to new, non-board member volunteers. An active Organization Committee will be necessary to implement the remainder of the organization recommendations offered by the Assessment Team below.
- **Consciously attempt to diversify the Board when filling vacancies:** As positions on the Board of Directors become open, strategically fill those openings to increase the diversity of skills and

stakeholders. Ideally, promote people to the board from within. Volunteers who work their way up from special projects, who go on to participate on standing committees and eventually become a committee chair, are developing leadership skills and knowledge in the Main Street approach.

- **Improve organization planning:** One of the eight Main Street principles, or keys to success, is implementation. The importance of implementation lies in the need for many communities to get beyond planning and to actually execute their plans. However, planning is still important, both the end product as well as the process. The Luray Downtown Initiative will be well served by beefing up its planning efforts. First, it should ask for a seat at the town of Luray's comprehensive planning table. A quality comprehensive plan, particularly one that devotes special attention to the downtown and manages commercial development outside the downtown, can be an important tool for Main Street.

Second, the Luray Downtown Initiative should facilitate a community vision for downtown, and invite all residents to participate in the process. While the Luray Downtown Initiative claims the following vision, "to be a vibrant, successful, and economically stable area that attracts visitors and maintains community pride," the Assessment Team recommends a more complete and compelling vision. A true vision statement is a formal statement that describes what the community wants downtown Luray to be in the future; visually, functionally, and emotionally. It represents a consensus on social, economic, and physical development goals for downtown. It is like saying to people: "Imagine it is ten years from today and we have, remarkably enough, created our most desirable district," and then providing them the vision. It establishes the ultimate target toward which all Main Street efforts are directed.

Third, the Board of Directors should schedule a retreat that includes a strategic planning effort. Luray's Main Street neighbor, Harrisonburg, would be a great mentor in this effort. Finally, the whole organization needs to make the annual work plan or action plan a part of meeting management, supplementing the meeting agenda. As committee volunteers discuss a project on the agenda, they should have the action plan for that project in front of them, check off completed tasks, and make corrections and additions to the listed tasks as necessary. The action plan will serve as the committee's memory on how to implement the project in the future.

- **Create a volunteer development program:** Main Street programs, like most service organizations, can always use more volunteers. Volunteer development is the responsibility of everyone throughout the whole Luray Downtown Initiative organization. Recruiting new volunteers is the first challenge, and the challenge that typically receives the most attention. However, properly placing, training, involving, and recognizing new volunteers are the keys to keeping them. Ultimately, the level of satisfaction of existing volunteers will have the most positive impact on the organization's ability to continue to recruit new ones. Satisfied volunteers will tell their friends. The goal is for the Luray Downtown Initiative to become known as the best volunteer opportunity in town. The Assessment Team recommends that the Luray Downtown Initiative get back to the basics of volunteer development.

Some tips specific to Luray include going the extra mile to welcome "outsiders" into the organization since downtown "insiders" have been the most visibly active to date. The Organization Committee should also target more youth volunteers like Clay (with the Design Committee). The more youth involved in the Main Street program, the more youth will be

involved in the downtown, and the more fresh ideas will be generated for downtown revitalization. Finally, distribute the current online version of the volunteer interest form as a printed flyer in a monthly utility bill.

- **Create a public relations program:** The Organization Committee needs to proactively promote Luray Downtown Initiative. A straightforward first step would be to create an organization brochure and distribute it in a monthly utility bill. Eventually developing a media relations plan is critical if the Luray Downtown Initiative wants to position itself, and the downtown, as a player throughout the region because the media has the unique ability to shape public perception of the organization and the downtown. The ways Luray Downtown Initiative communicates with the media will have a lasting impact on the intended or unintended coverage it receives as well as positive or negative coverage. The key issues the Organization Committee will want to explore in developing a media relations plan include understanding the nature of news, packaging and selling your message, the interview process, building valuable relationships, and crisis communication.

To understand the nature of news is to understand how to capitalize on controversy. To package and sell your message, provide the media with complete news “packages” that pitch why the media’s audience will care and how your stories are related to other stories they have recently covered or stories making national headlines. Luray Downtown Initiative needs to plan ahead for the interview process to ensure good preparation, confidence, and solid follow-up. Building valuable relationships with the media will increase the chance that positive perceptions of the organization and the downtown will spill over into all media coverage. Continue cultivating a relationship with the new newspaper editor. Crisis communication may be the strongest argument for proactively developing a media relations plan because during most crises staff and volunteers won’t have much time to think about their response.

- **Help with signage:** (see last section)

§III. PROMOTION

Promotions reverse negative perceptions of a community and draw people back downtown for shopping, services, and entertainment. While other projects may take years to achieve, volunteers can often produce promotions quickly. Although labor intensive, these projects give the Main Street program early, highly visible successes. Main Street programs generally concentrate on three types of promotions:

- **Business promotions.** Because these promotions highlight businesses, they should generate sales. It is important to promote qualities other than price – an area where downtown businesses may not be very competitive. Avoid the all-too-common sidewalk sales and discount coupons. Concentrate on promotions that showcase the variety and quality of goods and services available in downtown Luray.
- **Special events.** While retail promotions “ring the cash register,” special events provide opportunities for people to enjoy downtown in a variety of ways. Some special events, such as festivals or craft fairs, draw large crowds; others – a concert series, for example – may attract a smaller audience. Special event themes can come from almost anything, but community heritage in particular can provide excellent ideas for promotional activities.
- **Image or branding development.** Some promotional campaigns specifically dispel negative images and create positive ones. Advertising campaigns are popular image-development activities, but brochures and slogans can also accomplish this goal.

Ultimately, all promotions work to enhance downtown’s image in the minds of customers, employees, visitors, and the community at large. An annual, successful promotion calendar is a crucial part of any Main Street program's goal to get more people to use the district’s resources and assets. We generally recommend that Main Street programs balance their calendar by having only three special events, producing six business promotions, and addressing image development with one project each year.

PROMOTION STRENGTHS & ASSETS

The Assessment Team offers the following observations about downtown Luray’s promotions:

- **Collection of quality special events:** The Luray Downtown Initiative has a track record of providing opportunities for residents to enjoy downtown including Festival of Spring, 4th of July Family Fun Fest, and Evenings on Main Concert Series.
- **Great core of creative volunteers:** Their innovation and imagination will aid in the development of effective new promotions.
- **Catherine’s talent with promotions:** Promotion is one of Catherine’s strengths. Her experience developing and implementing promotional efforts will be a valuable resource to Promotion Committee volunteers.
- **Branding materials from Muldrow and Frazier visit:** The marketing work to date will be an asset for future image campaigns (“Where the Caverns Meet the Sky”).

- **Luray Cavern’s marketing staff and budget:** They market Luray for all general purposes.

PROMOTION RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Replace interim chair (Catherine):** Catherine was identified as a promotion asset, so the temptation to rely on her to lead Promotion Committee efforts is understandable. However, having her chair the Promotion Committee is not an appropriate role for Main Street program staff. The sooner a volunteer Promotion Committee chair is found the better. Catherine can continue to offer her experience and talent as a staff resource to the Promotion Committee.
- **Create at least one pure image promotion or campaign:** The Promotion Committee should develop an image or brand development campaign that could include both image building events as well as image advertising. The Assessment Team does not consider Cash Night a pure image campaign. This type of campaign should make direct use of the branding materials from the Muldrow and Frazier visit. It should also adopt the billboard project since billboard advertising should be coordinated with all other image advertising. Keys to creating a positive image and increased community awareness are:
 - a consistent message;
 - well-designed/well-planned graphics and events;
 - a thorough understanding of consumer habits and preferences;
 - repeated exposure in various sources; and
 - time.

Do not underestimate the importance of the image portrayed by each individual downtown business to the downtown’s overall image. The committee should assist downtown businesses in improving the look of their merchandising and advertising. This can be done by offering free interior and graphic design assistance or by offering competitive grants to downtown businesses for the hiring of interior designers and commercial artists. Downtown Luray businesses are competing against the merchandising and professional advertising budgets of their competitors, including national chains and franchises.

The Promotion Committee should consider hosting hospitality training for employees throughout Luray. These employees are the front-line ambassadors for the community. If they don’t have a positive image of downtown and a thorough understanding of its businesses and events, they will not be able to share these with the customers they serve.

- **Create at least one tourism campaign:** Tourism campaigns were not specifically listed among the three types of promotions described in the overview above. That is because business promotions, special events, and image or branding development can all serve as tourism campaigns. The distinction lies in the target market. Tourism campaigns target an audience that is outside the downtown’s primary trade area. The Promotion Committee will need to determine the tourism market with the most potential, and then develop a strategy to attract that market to Luray. The strategy may include marketing existing promotions to those tourists, or developing new business promotions, special events, and image or branding development promotions to match the interests of those tourists. Luray Caverns staff members will be valuable partners in

this effort since they are already attracting tourists (they market to the DC Metro area). Once a strategy is implemented, the Promotion Committee should track its effectiveness by collecting information from visitors (e.g. Where are they from? Where did they learn about the promotion? Did they enjoy themselves enough to come back again? etc.).

- **Create at least one business event:** While Luray has popular community events best described as special events, it could use more business promotions. Directly connecting the consumer with goods and services is the key. Business promotions largely take two forms: advertisements and events. Both work best if they target specific consumer markets, which may be different for service and retail businesses. Instead of promoting all businesses in the district, feature a business cluster, which includes businesses selling similar goods and services, businesses selling complementary goods and services, and businesses selling to the same consumer group. A cluster in downtown Luray that lends itself to a business promotion is antiques/collectibles/gifts.

The Promotion Committee should help downtown businesses that are not in a well-defined cluster to develop their own independent “in store” business promotions. Businesses with past success might be asked to serve as mentors or to make a presentation on their “in store” event or promotion at a business breakfast or luncheon. The Promotion Committee could devote its resources toward cooperatively marketing those independent “in store” events and promotions, including coordinating a downtown promotional calendar.

- **Pursue cooperative advertising project:** The Promotion Committee has already expressed interest in fostering joint advertising of downtown Luray businesses. The Assessment Team agrees this is a worthwhile project. Just keep the aforementioned advice in mind that joint ads work best if they feature a business cluster. They should also be designed as a complete composition, not a hodgepodge of individual ads.
- **Help with signage:** (see last section)

§IV. DESIGN

Design is a popular aspect of the Main Street process because its results are tangible and encompasses everything physical in downtown. Historic preservation is an important part of the design action plan, but far from being the only component. The Design Committee must also concern itself with all projects that affect the downtown's appearance, including public improvements, new building construction, traffic flow and parking, sign systems, and visual merchandising. These activities can be summarized into five broad categories of work:

- Historic Preservation Education
- Architectural Assistance
- Building Improvements
- Public Spaces
- Design Regulation & Review

The Main Street Four-Point Approach™ evolved from a design concern: how to preserve the historic commercial buildings found in downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts. Preserving a community's character is still a large part of the Main Street approach, but downtowns must also grow and evolve. Managing and protecting the original character of Luray's downtown will be an essential aspect of its Main Street program.

Why are design and preservation important?

Design improvements are important to economic revitalization for several reasons. The appearance of downtown is the first visual impressions shoppers get – and those visual impressions shape shoppers' perceptions and experiences. Downtown design affects buying decisions as well – just as the packaging of consumer products affects buying decisions. Design of public spaces affects mobility and safety. And design improvements – whether to public spaces or private buildings – show new investment and provide tangible evidence that revitalization is happening and the Main Street program is leading the charge.

Good Main Street design should be paired with good historic preservation practices because it will help retain the authentic character of downtown. Preservation, in practical terms, is often cheaper than building new. And most importantly, if any more buildings are lost, it will become impossible to *revitalize* the downtown. Revitalization very much depends on good existing building stock.

DESIGN STRENGTHS & ASSETS

The Assessment Team offers the following observations about downtown Luray's design issues:

- **Impressive volume of successfully completed projects:** A strength of Luray Downtown Initiative's Design Committee is its volunteers' ability to roll up their sleeves and get to work. They have installed downtown kiosks, developed a building inventory (including photos), managed a hanging basket project, and created a mini-facade grant program (get and follow Frazier designs).

- **Clay Vickers!** It is great to see participation from high school students. It is also great to see Clay “frequenting the downtown.” The more youth involved in the Main Street program, the more youth will be involved in the downtown, and the more fresh ideas will be generated for downtown revitalization.
- **Natural and historical setting:** The Shenandoah Valley, the Luray-Hawksbill Greenway, and the picturesque downtown are true design assets.

DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Keep up the good work:** Many existing projects are ongoing and will need continued attention. In order to tackle some of the recommended projects below, the Design Committee will need to grow or risk burning out current volunteers.
- **Ensure CDBG façade grant recipients adhere to design guidelines or standards:** In order for Luray to get the best bang for its CDBG buck, each façade project should be evaluated for its quality and contribution toward achieving Luray’s vision for downtown. The Design Committee may need to create design guidelines. A “how-to” guide should help property owners understand how to improve their buildings. When it comes to design education, a picture is worth a thousand words, so illustrate all guidelines lavishly. An easy way to produce or illustrate a set of guidelines quickly is to borrow drawings from other sources rather than commission new ones. *The Building Improvement File* published by the National Trust Main Street Center could be a great source. Use the drawings contained in this file to show people what you want them to do.
- **Adopt and/or enforce a maintenance code:** Main Street Design Committee efforts to improve the physical quality of downtown are based on the inherent value, integrity, and condition of the downtown’s existing physical resource. Many historic resources are lost forever not because of proactive demolition but because of neglect and lack of maintenance. Left unchecked, buildings can deteriorate beyond the point of no return and may eventually become so unsafe that they require demolition. This form of “demolition by default” has occurred in downtown Luray. To prevent more demolition, the Design Committee should offer its services to the town of Luray to research maintenance codes and explore how these codes could work in Luray. A maintenance code, when enforced, requires property owners to meet minimum maintenance standards for their buildings. The state of Virginia has a maintenance section to their Uniform Statewide Building Codes [http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/BCAR/Virginia_Uniform_Statewide_Building_Code.htm]. There is also an International Property Maintenance Code. The 2006 edition can be purchased from the International Code Council [<http://www.iccsafe.org/e/prodshow.html?prodid=3500S06>] or a PDF of the 2003 version can be downloaded [<http://www.talgov.com/dncs/neighborhood/pdf/intpropmaint.pdf>].
- **Help with the creation of local historic preservation ordinance:** While a maintenance code is one important step in protecting downtown Luray’s historic resources, it does not protect against proactive demolition or inappropriate alterations. Only a local historic preservation ordinance, when combined with an active historic preservation commission that has officially designated local historic properties and districts, can truly protect downtown Luray’s historic resources. The Design Committee can utilize the Main Street Network [www.mainstreet.org] and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) [www.dhr.virginia.gov] to research successful historic

preservation ordinances for examples. Even the favorite example will need to be customized to meet the unique needs and context of Luray, and the Design Committee can help with that customization.

Even more important is utilizing the Network and SHPO to learn how other communities have successfully navigated the turbulent waters of public opinion when establishing a historic preservation ordinance. Without a well-planned process that includes a heavy amount of public education, even a well-written historic preservation ordinance will not pass. Historic preservation education projects can also help strengthen the local historic preservation ethic.

- **Help with signage:** (see last section)

§V. ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING

Restructuring a commercial economy can be one of the most difficult challenges confronting a Main Street program. Downtown is a fragile subsystem of the community's economy, and the changing role of American downtowns only complicates the restructuring effort. Economic restructuring is one of the four essential building blocks of a successful Main Street program. It involves six types of objectives:

- **Identify and prioritize market opportunities.** Market opportunities exist where demand for products and services exceeds supply. However, how we define products and services must go beyond generic classifications to include intrinsic qualities of those products and services that may also be in demand, such as locally or handmade. These opportunities must also be prioritized based on the community's vision for downtown and the downtown's market position.
- **Strengthen existing businesses.** The Economic Restructuring Committee's first priority should be helping existing businesses better reach their customers and improve their business skills. This may involve assisting those businesses to reposition or expand.
- **Fill vacancies with complementary businesses.** The Economic Restructuring Committee should connect existing and future business owners with downtown vacancies. This may best be accomplished by developing and supporting entrepreneurs and communicating Main Street's priority market opportunities.
- **Assemble incentives and capital.** Business retention, expansion, and start up all require financial capacity, and the Economic Restructuring Committee can help by creating grants, low-interest loans, and angel investment groups.
- **Develop underutilized space.** Main Street can help take advantage of opportunities and find new uses for commercial properties.
- **Monitor and report economic performance.** Downtown stakeholders want and need to know the ongoing results of the revitalization effort.

Luray Downtown Initiative's Economic Restructuring Committee should consider undertaking all of these activities. Achieving these objectives may require specific projects. Primarily, though, the committee will serve as an information service. It should provide "hand-holding," rumor control, partnerships, technical assistance, and help building the confidence of consumers and investors. Simply put, business development is an organized effort to position the downtown district to respond to a constantly changing market. The goal of all economic restructuring efforts is to strengthen the downtown economy to a point where it not only retains current activity, but also supports new commercial endeavors.

ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING (DEVELOPMENT) STRENGTHS & ASSETS

The Assessment Team offers the following observations about downtown Luray's economic issues:

- **Volunteers “on call”:** While not involved in a standing committee, a diverse and representative group of “economic development players” are available to participate in the revitalization effort.
- **Roundtable:** The Economic Restructuring Committee held a roundtable for all businesses in Page Valley. The main purpose was to formulate a common clearinghouse for information.
- **Local business owner feature in newspaper:** The “Faces of Main Street” series in the *Page News & Courier* newspaper is a very effective business retention and promotion strategy. The space is provided in-kind about every other week.
- **Active hosting business prospects:** The Economic Restructuring Committee has served as a resource for businesses looking to join the downtown Luray business mix.
- **Partnership with County:** Economic restructuring success will require coordinated effort, so it is good to see the involvement of County Economic Development staff, including Tom Cardman and Sharon Sampsell. Sharon is coordinating county calendar of events.
- **Downtown anchors:** Luray's downtown is home to some valuable draws, including town and county government, The Page Theater with its seven screens showing first-run movies, and The Mimslyn Inn that could soon be upgraded to four-star status.

ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING (DEVELOPMENT) RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Give Dave Slye a break:** Dave is currently serving as Luray Downtown Initiative's Board of Directors' president as well as Economic Restructuring Committee chair. Three hats is enough (board member, board officer, committee member). While Dave can choose where he feels most comfortable, at this point the Assessment Team sees Dave as being most valuable to the organization in his role as board president. If Dave agrees with this assessment, the Economic Restructuring Committee will need to recruit, orient, and train a new chair.
- **Participate in comprehensive planning effort:** It was already suggested in the Organization section above that the Luray Downtown Initiative participate in the town of Luray's comprehensive planning process. The Economic Restructuring Committee can play its own unique and important role. Committee members can serve as advocates for the downtown economy by paying attention to the importance of physical design in support of commerce. They can also be a proper infill advocate. It will be important to encourage design for strolling shoppers by creating a sequence of storefronts that is uninterrupted. Research shows that breaks in the sequence will stop the strolling and thus the shopping. The Economic Restructuring Committee should work with the Design Committee to ensure that this issue is addressed not only in Luray's comprehensive plan, but in any downtown design guidelines. They should also help create incentives for property owners and developers to meet those design guidelines.

Breaks in the sequence of storefronts are also created by incompatible land use. To illustrate the point, while it is great that Page County government has made a commitment to staying in

downtown Luray, the location of some of its recent investments could have been key sites for encouraging Mimslyn Inn guests to begin strolling and shopping downtown. A business mix/clustering plan is a tool for communicating what new businesses types would most complement and enhance the existing business mix. The clustering plan portion goes even further by communicating what locations might be best for those businesses in order to generate the most foot traffic and cross traffic between neighboring businesses (see www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/dma/18.html for more information). It may also help prevent unforeseen business and user group conflicts.

- **Take the lead on Bridge Theater rehabilitation project:** While visiting Luray, the Assessment Team had the opportunity to tour the Bridge Theater. The Luray Downtown Initiative is very excited about this potential rehabilitation, and rightfully so. The first step in the process would be for the Economic Restructuring Committee to develop a theater operations business plan. All other potential supplemental income from the property should also be included in that business plan. Without exploring the long term economic sustainability of this project it will be difficult to secure the financial resources necessary to pay for physical improvements to the building. The community will likely need an infusion of outside capital in the form of loans or grants and reviewers of those opportunities will need to be sold on the project. Without the best uses identified it will also be difficult to know what design improvements will be most appropriate. For example, the physical improvements that will be made to the building will depending on the new use, whether it includes market rate or upscale housing in the upper floors or offices for technology companies. South Boston, Virginia, just completed a community theatre/arts project last year called the Prizery [www.prizery.com]. This project could serve as a role model for Luray in terms of programming/management, fund development, and historic preservation. Tamyra Vest, the town's community development coordinator, is the contact [(434) 575-4209 or tvost@southboston.com]. If Luray Downtown Initiative decides to serve as developer for this project, members would be wise to read Donovan Rypkema's *Community Initiated Development* manual available from the National Trust Main Street Center [<https://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=5772>].
- **Develop a basic entrepreneurial support program/business retention program:** Downtown Luray has current vacancies to fill. It is also the nature of downtowns, even healthy and vibrant ones, that additional vacancies will open up in the future. The Assessment Team does not recommend proactive business recruitment for historic commercial districts because that strategy requires a considerable investment of human and financial resources to achieve what is typically a paltry level of measurable success. Proactive business recruitment works best when a professional business broker has the time to build relationships with chains/franchises and owners/managers of large blocks of commercial space. In contrast, the strength of historic commercial districts lies in their nonformula businesses and small independent property owners. Typical volunteer-driven proactive business recruitment strategies are inherently weak because they are focused on the business and not the business owner and focused externally rather than internally. Recruited businesses can fail even if a market opportunity exists and non-recruited businesses can flourish even if a market opportunity wasn't identified--all based on the quality of the business owner. Furthermore, many revitalization programs lose existing businesses while they are out recruiting or aren't prepared to support and keep a business they successfully recruit.

The Economic Restructuring Committee should identify action plan projects to meet the goal of retaining and strengthening existing businesses and filling vacancies with entrepreneurial

ventures. A support or development system for entrepreneurs can serve double duty as a business retention program. The services needed by future entrepreneurs are the same services wanted by current district businesses/entrepreneurs. If Luray becomes more entrepreneurial, if its culture reconnects with business ownership, it won't be dependent on business recruitment because a local entrepreneur may step in when a market opportunity is identified or even before a market opportunity is identified. There is no better place than Luray's historic commercial district to serve as incubator. Making the switch from business recruitment to developing a support system for entrepreneurs will not only reestablish the economic health but also the social health of the downtown. More locally owned businesses, more family businesses, and more independent businesses will translate into more civic-minded businesses and reinforce the district as center of commerce, culture, and community life.

Specifically, the Economic Restructuring Committee should provide business training and assistance for entrepreneurial business owners, offer incentives (including financial) for entrepreneurial business startup and expansion, develop support networks connecting entrepreneurs with peers and mentors, and nurture entrepreneurial spirit and community appreciation for entrepreneurs. By marketing the business-friendly efforts of all four Luray Downtown Initiative committees, the Economic Restructuring Committee will essentially create a business owner attraction program. The Internet is filled with great places to learn about specific strategies in these areas. Check out the following websites:

- www.microenterpriseworks.org
- www.energizingentrepreneurs.org
- www.myentre.net
- www.dba.state.va.us
- www.dhcd.virginia.gov/CD/VEI/

Finally, the Economic Restructuring Committee should consider establishing business guidelines. Business guidelines are like design guidelines in that they “set the bar” for business greatness in Downtown Luray. They may include such guides as ideal hours of operation, frequency of window display turnover, customer service, hospitality, etc. Business guidelines are also like design guidelines in that they can only be encouraged through incentives. It might be worth eventually tying any business incentives offered to business guidelines. For a business guidelines example, check out www.molinecentre.org/advertising.php.

- **Help with signage:** (see last section)

§VI. TRANSCENDING ISSUE: SIGNAGE

The Assessment Team discovered during the course of the visit that signage is an issue that is important to the whole organization and thus all four committees. For this reason, recommendations with respect to signage are included here:

- **Billboards:** As far as signage goes, billboards are both good news and bad news. The bad news is that uncontrolled billboards can have a negative impact on the image of Luray held by visitors. Not only that, but too many billboards will reduce the effectiveness of each individual billboard (visitors will miss or ignore billboards when overwhelmed). Billboard design and placement should be included in local sign ordinances. The Design Committee should review Luray's sign ordinance with an eye toward not only understanding it, but also making recommendations for possible improvements. The good news is that billboards can be an effective form of signage to direct visitors to downtown Luray. The importance of the Promotion Committee incorporating billboards into their image advertising campaign was discussed above. The Economic Restructuring Committee should also play a role by helping to determine downtown Luray's market position. The market position should be used to direct the advertising messages.
- **Entrance Signs:** Signs announcing your arrival to Luray and identifying the gateway to the community and downtown can be very powerful. Entrance sign quality should be guided by the Design Committee. Great entrance signs will be wasted, however, if Luray doesn't guide land use at the edge of town to achieve an overall positive entrance. Land-use planning will of course be an important component of Luray's comprehensive or master plan.
- **Wayfinding Signs:** Visitors can get lost, even in small towns. Signs that direct travelers to important public destinations are not a luxury but a necessity. Luray Downtown Initiative committees should work together to identify the key public attractions that should be part of a local wayfinding system.
- **Public Signs:** The Assessment Team heard and observed that public sign clutter may be negatively impacting the overall effectiveness of the public sign system and negatively impacting the image of the community. The Design Committee should work with the town of Luray to perform a public sign survey with the goal of eliminating redundant or unnecessary signs.
- **Private Signs:** Signs that identify individual Luray businesses and the products and services they sell also have room for improvement. The Design Committee can develop sign guidelines to set the bar for quality exterior and interior private signs. While following sign guidelines are in the best interest of Luray businesses (better signs lead to more profits), incentives such as sign loans or grants will result in more immediate improvements. The Economic Restructuring Committee can help by developing the financial incentive for the Design Committee to administer.
- **Not a Sign Theme!** While it is important for all Luray signage to work together, it is not beneficial to establish a signage theme. Quality and compatibility are key, not uniformity. Each business owner should be allowed to create unique signage that fits the personality of their business so long as it also fits the original design and character of the building.

§VII. CONCLUSION

Thank you to all who participated in the organizational assessment through personal interviews and to all who are so committed to keeping downtown Luray a truly special place. We have one final recommendation:

- **Have fun together!** People working on behalf of Luray's wonderful downtown should continue to have fun in the process. When more people start getting involved at the committee level, they will sense the camaraderie and begin to feel that they are part of their community in a special and meaningful way. Make sure that all people feel welcome and part of a fun, vibrant, social environment in the downtown.