

A Vision Assessment of Gate City, Virginia

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The Town of Gate City, Virginia
And
LENOWISCO Planning District Commission

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1.0 Introduction

This report is the result of a brief but in-depth study of Gate City, Virginia that took place on November 30, 2005. The study involved eight community round-table meetings, a public meeting, a community tour, and a review of previous planning efforts and successes of the Gate City community.

This very brief vision report is designed as a draft strategic plan for the town of Gate City and its partners in the revitalization effort. It is a living document and as such should be amended and refined as the community continues in its process. We have identified four themes that emerged through our study that warrant more thorough examination and ultimate support for the community revitalization to be successful. Within each of the themes, there is a “vision statement” and three tiers of implementation recommendations (short, medium, and in some cases long-term) that will help guide the community and its partners. Ultimately, each recommendation should be color coded according to who is the lead group in the effort as this is not a “Town Government” project but rather a partnership project that will involve many facets of the community.

Arnett Muldrow wishes to thank the Gate City community for its hospitality and assistance during our brief stay in town.

2.0 Background Material Review

At the beginning of the visioning session conducted by Arnett Muldrow & Associates, the Town of Gate City provided us with documentation related to the history of the community, the Comprehensive plan, and other information. The town was also in the process of completing the requirements of the downtown revitalization study including the establishment of a management team, a building inventory and assessment, a business inventory, and a customer survey. This body of work by the community will provide a baseline and sets the stage for the future success in its downtown revitalization effort.

3.0 An Attractive Streetscape: Physical Planning for Downtown

Gate City's efforts for downtown revitalization began years ago with a streetscape project that improved the sidewalks, removed and replanted street trees, and installed streetlights along Jackson Street. These public improvements certainly helped transform downtown and create a more attractive environment, yet they did not translate to private investments or renovated buildings that often follow such public expenditures. Today, downtown Gate City retains the core of its historic building stock, but many of these buildings have been altered from their original configuration, or have fallen into varying levels of disrepair. The deterioration ranges from minor cosmetic problems to more significant structural damage that threatens individual buildings.

While many of the downtown buildings are dilapidated, Gate City does retain most of its historic commercial buildings. Many of the buildings that have been altered have been done so in a manner that is reversible. As a result, most of these buildings can be restored to their original historic appearance. As a cornerstone of the revitalization effort, the Town of Gate City must work with individual property owners to encourage and assist the preservation of its historic downtown core, while continuing to make improvements to the public realm.

This vision focuses on public and private sector investment opportunities to continue downtown's revitalization.

Downtown Gate City will get a facelift including clean streets, attractive streetscape, and renovated buildings.

3.1 Year One Recommendations 2006

- **Prepare inventory of buildings in preparation for National Register Designation for downtown district.** In slow growth communities, historic architecture is often spared rather than being razed to further economic development. This is the case in Gate City where the original historic building stock remains throughout downtown. As a first step towards revitalization, the Town of Gate City should prepare a nomination for downtown to become a National Register Historic District. National Register designation is an honor bestowed to districts worthy of preservation, but also carries with it significant incentives for preservation in the form of tax credits.
- **Install ground level landscaping in old tree pits.** When the most recent streetscape project was completed, several trees were removed and the old tree pits remain in their place. This represents an opportunity for additional streetscape enhancements and new plantings. Rather than planting new trees, ground level plants that are attractive, require little maintenance, and do not restrict visibility should be installed. These types of improvements require little investment but are highly visible and show progress while other long term tasks remain to be completed.
- **Eliminate litter problem throughout downtown.** During the one day visioning session, a common theme expressed by interview participants was the need to clean up downtown and the remainder of Gate City. The abundance of litter reflects poorly on the citizens of Gate City and the overall pride of the community. The Town can combat litter through regular maintenance

procedures as well as enforcement of existing city litter ordinances. One key problem area that was mentioned was the municipal parking lot where the market is held each Friday. If necessary, new sidewalk maintenance and litter ordinances should be enacted.

- **Continue enforcement procedures on owners of problem properties.** Gate City has begun to enforce its building and zoning codes on those properties that are in the later stages of disrepair. These steps should continue with the ultimate goal of preserving the structures rather than allowing them to fall into such disrepair that restoration is impossible. In some cases, acquisition of property may be necessary to stabilize and ultimately save the building.

3.2 Next Steps 2007-2010

- **Conduct Physical master plan of downtown Gate City.** A physical master plan will outline the necessary public infrastructure improvements to enhance the streetscape while also laying the groundwork for the private redevelopment of key properties such as the Old Gate City Theater site. The plan should incorporate the commercial area along Kane Street leading to US 421, as well as connections to adjacent residential neighborhoods and parks. A physical master plan would determine appropriate uses, address parking access and availability, and develop funding strategies to complete the public investments.
- **Work with property owners to take advantage of historic tax credits.** Once downtown has been designated a National Register Historic District, contributing historic structures will be eligible for the federal and State tax credits that could result in credits of up to 45% of the qualified rehabilitation expenses. The Town should invite representatives from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to hold a workshop in Gate City on the benefits of preservation and the use of historic tax credits. The ability to use tax credits on private investments has often provided the final piece of the financial puzzle that makes restoration of a historic property feasible. Downtown Gate City has a national bank institution that has been a leader in buying tax credits from private and public property owners to facilitate preservation, and would be a valuable resource in the process.
- **Complete the recreation trail along the Burnt Cabin Branch as well as park improvements.** The Town of Gate City has planned a recreation trail along the Burnt Cabin Branch that will ultimately link into downtown. It is currently seeking funding for this project as well as an expansion to the Town Park. By incorporating these projects into a comprehensive master planning process, Gate City may be able to lobby for other grants or funding sources.
- **Establish local historic district and design guidelines.** Unlike National Register Districts which are honorary, local historic districts are regulatory devices that ensure that changes to individual properties would not negatively impact the historic character of the downtown. Guidelines related to scale, proportion, materials, site planning, streetscape, and new construction would be established to guide property owners wishing to improve their individual properties. Local historic districts are established as an overlay zone by a city's zoning ordinance which would also establish a Historic Preservation Commission that would offer property owners design review and advice.

3.3 Final Steps 2010-2015

- **Work with regional banks to develop a loan program for building restoration.** These programs could provide additional assistance for those seeking to renovate buildings by offering low interest loans for restoration. Any loan pool should be tied to the preservation of the property rather than redevelopment.
- **Link downtown with Grogan Park.** Physical connections from downtown along Park Street to Grogan Park should be a long term task. Ultimately, Gate City should set a goal of having a complete pedestrian network that links downtown to the Park, High School, cultural facilities, and other recreational facilities like the Daniel Boone Wilderness Trail that passes through downtown.
- **Develop a façade grant program tied to historic preservation.** A one-time grant program for façade improvements can be instituted specifically for downtown projects. These programs, usually ranging from \$500 to \$5000 grants can facilitate minor façade improvements such as a new awning or paint, to more substantial projects like the renovation of a storefront. Depending on the nature of these grants and amount of resources, they would need to be matching where the property owner would ultimately be responsible for a portion of the renovation costs. Any façade grant program in downtown Gate City should be tied to the preservation of the historic property following design guidelines as established in the previous section.

4.0 Building the Market: An Economic Development Strategy

Gate City lies within a slow growth region of Virginia, but unlike peer communities, lies only four miles from the Tennessee border and less than ten miles from downtown Kingsport - a growing urban community. This proximity to the Tri Cities metropolitan area comes with benefits as well as challenges. For instance, while the Eastman Chemical Corporation in Kingsport employs a great number of Gate City citizens, the larger city also has the ability to pull these same citizens away from Gate City for retail goods and services. With industrial uses, Gate City lies within a larger region where other communities have better access and developable land for new industry. In light of the challenges and opportunities, Gate City must redefine itself in context within the Southwestern Virginia-Northeast Tennessee region. Focusing on improving the downtown environment, creating activity, and recruiting new businesses can position Gate City as the specialty shopping destination of the region. This is already occurring with the number of quality antiques stores that have chosen to locate in downtown Gate City. Any recruitment effort, of course, must be based on sound market conclusions and real market indicators. An economic development strategy beginning with a comprehensive market analysis will be critical to Gate City's revitalization.

The downtown economic development vision for Gate City is:

Gate City's downtown will become a regional specialty shopping district for the area offering specialty shops, dining, and events.

4.1 Year One Recommendations 2006

- **Conduct retail market analysis to identify opportunities for new shops and restaurants in the community.** Economic development must begin with comprehensive market assessment of downtown. This analysis will define the primary and secondary trade areas, examine leakage trends to determine inflow and outflow by individual retail categories, and ultimately determine what types of businesses are most likely to succeed in the market. This will provide the base information to begin retail recruitment and marketing strategy.
- **Complete shopper survey of downtown Gate City to establish shopping patterns.** This market analysis should be complemented by a study to establish consumer shopping patterns. With its proximity to Kingsport and the Twin Cities, there is likely more inflow and outflow of consumers than in other Southwestern Virginia communities. By learning what products residents are likely to shop for elsewhere, and conversely those which visitors are buying in Gate City, more detailed conclusions can be made as to additional retail opportunities.
- **Pursue acquisition of old Gate City Theater.** The Gate City Theater is in a critical state of disrepair and is likely a threat to overall safety and wellbeing of adjacent properties. The roof has caved in and there are substantial structural failures elsewhere in the building. The preservation of the building façade and the space it lies within are important to the Gate City community and should be a high priority. If the building cannot be saved, alternatives including preserving only the façade and building a new performance venue behind should be explored. The Town should acquire the property and create a plan for its redevelopment.

4.2 Next Steps 2007-2010

- **Plan for expansion and location of Scott County facilities.** Downtown Gate City enjoys activity that being a county seat offers including a significant employment base and cultural facilities. Students and other citizens alike visit the Lonesome Pine Regional Library while area shops and restaurants enjoy activity brought about by residents working or doing business at the county offices. Scott County has already expanded its offices out of the Courthouse and into the library and ultimately will need to find additional space as demand for its services grow. The Gate City community should work with the County on a plan for expansion that includes the preservation of the Courthouse as well as finding new locations for county facilities within the Gate City core.
- **Create retail recruitment program centered on market analysis findings.** Using the comprehensive market analysis completed in the initial phase, Gate City should build a recruitment program around the findings of the report. The report will detail those retail types which can reasonably be expected to be successful based off of existing supply and demand factors. Recruitment would begin by specifically targeting those retailers identified in the report. It should also include a regional demographic analysis to establish the potential for expanded markets.
- **Build antiques cluster in downtown.** Perhaps the most successful way that Gate City is bringing in visitors into the community is through its cluster of antique shops within downtown. While the data from the comprehensive market analysis would suggest the true nature of this opportunity, Gate City should look to recruit additional antique stores and specialty shops in downtown – ultimately positioning itself as the antiques shopping destination of the greater region.
- **Consider business incentives to help fill vacant and underutilized space.** Gate City has an abundance of downtown commercial buildings of which many are currently vacant or underutilized. In an effort to fill these empty spaces, the Town of Gate City should explore business incentives specifically tied to recruiting shops and restaurants as identified in the retail market analysis. Business incentives such as twelfth month rent subsidies and business license abatement can help the community recruit new retailers.
- **Complete development of technology zone in downtown Gate City.** Gate City's opportunities for new employment lie in technology and the service industry rather than the industrial sector. The current goal of creating a technology zone in downtown will help Gate City recruit high tech businesses and higher wage jobs to the community.
- **Create an available property database.** A database of property ownership, square footage, up fit needs, and availability will be an important resource for the Town of Gate City, Scott County and other economic development agencies. This data can be used to recruit desired businesses.

4.3 Final Steps 2010-2015

- **Update market analysis as business environment changes and continue recruitment and retention efforts based on new findings.** The market will ultimately change as new shops and restaurants open up and as growth occurs. A sound market analysis should be updated every five years to account for changes in market forces.
- **Have ten new businesses locate in downtown.** Gate City should set as a benchmark goal the recruitment of at least ten new businesses in downtown related to specialty shopping.

5.0 Market Positioning: Promoting Downtown Gate City

As previously noted, Gate City should define its role in the larger region and position itself within the market. While physical improvements will create an attractive streetscape, an effective marketing campaign will bring activity into the Town's core. Gate City's location adjacent to a metropolitan area offers real opportunities to expand its market, yet the heart and soul of its retail market is and always will be its local base. Therefore, a successful marketing campaign will have both an internal and external strategy, building local loyalty while also reaching out to new customers.

This following vision statement focuses on a marketing campaign for Gate City:

Gate City will have a clear marketing vision promoting its musical heritage, its strategic location, and its rich historical ties.

5.1 Year One Recommendations 2006

- **Develop a marketing brand for downtown Gate City.** Developing a brand for downtown is the very first step in creating a seamless marketing campaign. This brand will be applied to all marketing avenues such as the town website, brochures, events, and shopping guides. The brand would include a logo and tag line and would be based off of a public process to identify what message to convey to those outside the Gate City community.
- **Develop a musical event series focusing on building a recurring activity in downtown.** Gate City has a distinct musical heritage and a number of local musical talents. These musicians, however, do not currently have a local venue in which to display their talents. Small regular events in downtown geared toward local residents can help solidify it as a shopping and entertainment destination while also reintroducing to area residents who do not currently shop downtown. A regular musical series can be established to fulfill this goal and increase activity. Initially, the music series would be outdoors, perhaps in the municipal parking lot, but ultimately could be moved to a renovated Gate City theater. This series could also appeal to the visitor market, particularly since Gate City is located along the route of the Crooked Road Trail and one of its primary venues is located within Scott County.
- **Recruit new hotel space in the community.** Currently, there is no place for visitors to the Gate City community to stay overnight. While there is the potential for a new bed and breakfast in the near future, additional rooms are likely needed to accommodate heritage tourists, Little League tournaments, and other events. The Town should initiate a study for the demand for hotel space and begin to recruit hotel owners into Gate City.
- **Create a local loyalty marketing campaign.** As part of a comprehensive marketing plan, Gate City will want to focus initial efforts on its local market. In the beginning, this campaign will focus on promoting Gate City's heritage, reducing litter, and otherwise building a pride in the community. Later, after the market analysis has been completed, the local loyalty campaign would shift to a shop locally initiative. As with any of the new marketing pieces, the local campaign would utilize the adopted Gate City brand.

- **Develop wayfinding plan for Gate City that includes new parking signs, directional signs, and pedestrian directories.** As part of an overall marketing effort, it is important to direct visitors to the various amenities in downtown. Many communities have implemented comprehensive wayfinding systems to direct people to the various attractions and districts within a community. Gate City's wayfinding in particular would need to focus on directing visitors off of Highway 421 and into downtown. Directional signs to parking, civic and cultural facilities will be necessary once the visitor or resident has reached downtown.

5.2 Next Steps 2007-2010

- **Develop permanent performance space downtown.** A permanent space providing a location for musical events and other performances should be located in downtown, perhaps in the space where the old Gate City Theater is currently. A small venue such as this would serve to bring in local residents while also allowing the community to plan more substantial events with more of a regional appeal. The location, programming, and funding for this space should be part of the physical master planning process.
- **Create antiques event in municipal parking lot.** Another event can be centered on the antiques cluster in Gate City. Throughout the visioning process, it was learned that the existing Friday market in the municipal parking lot has evolved into more of a flea market, rather than the intended crafts market. The focus of these Friday markets can be shifted to antiques, creating a showcase for local and regional antiques dealers while also solidifying Gate City's prominence as an antique destination. This event could potentially be expanded in the future to an annual Antiques Fair.
- **Develop regional marketing strategy to recruit shoppers to downtown from the Tri-Cities and far Southwest Virginia area.** As new shops and restaurants have opened, the antiques cluster grows, and regular events are occurring in downtown, it will be necessary for Gate City to broaden its marketing net to a more regional market. Cooperative efforts between the Town and its merchants can often be more effective and economically feasible than marketing individual businesses. Data learned during the market analysis will help Gate City determine specific geographic and demographic targets from which to build the regional marketing campaign.
- **Install initial phases of wayfinding including new gateway signage.** New primary and secondary gateway signs will be an important part of the overall wayfinding strategy. Primary signs at the four lane should establish that one has arrived in Gate City, and that downtown and its cultural and shopping amenities are close by. Smaller, traditional gateway signage would be appropriate at the threshold into downtown. Any sign would utilize the Gate City brand.

5.3 Final Steps 2010-2015

- **Develop antiques and shopping guide.** Previous steps will lead towards Gate City expanding its antiques cluster while also marketing it as a regional antiques destination. Once the market has expanded with new antique stores and shops, Gate City should create an antiques and specialty shopping guide. Such a guide would include a map with locations and descriptions of each shop and restaurant located within downtown Gate City.

6.0 Organizing for Success: The Implementation Strategy

Organization is the key to a successful implementation of the each of the strategies above. It is critically important to identify the key players, assign them specific tasks, and discover funding sources for the various public and private investments. The Town cannot and should not be responsible for downtown revitalization by itself, particular since many of the tasks above involve cooperation with private property owners. All of the stakeholders involved in the vitality of downtown Gate City should come to the table to discuss their common goals, strengthen and expand their cooperative efforts, and explore new ways to facilitate revitalization, including if necessary the creation of new economic development partnerships.

This following vision statement focuses on an organizational strategy for downtown revitalization in Gate City.

Downtown allies will be active partners with the Town to promote, recruit and enhance downtown Gate City.

6.1 Year One Recommendations 2006

- **Host a leadership roundtable to share economic development efforts.** The responsibilities of implementing the revitalization effort will fall on multiple agencies and organizations. The Town of Gate City should organize a leadership summit with the intent of sharing the economic development goals of each stakeholder. Property owners, business owners, Town and County officials, merchants, real estate professionals, Chamber officials, and local bankers, among others, should be invited the share their common interest related to the revitalization of downtown.
- **Develop a “clean up” team of volunteers with High School Student groups and/or service groups to clean up trash downtown.** Youth in the community, local churches, and other service organizations are all stakeholders in the vitality of downtown. The Town should cooperate with the groups to establish a clean up team to combat litter in downtown and throughout the community. This will serve not only to create pride, but improve the appearance of Gate City of all of its citizens.
- **Form a downtown business organization consisting of retailers, business owners, and property owners to help the Town plan for the future of the community.** Many communities have been successful with having a stakeholder based downtown development entity assist the Town in the implementation of a revitalization plan. These entities can be volunteer based groups serving and advisory role to local government, or they may achieve non-profit status, sometimes issuing a capital campaign to complete projects, and ultimately becoming the primary implementation organization for the revitalization effort. Others have become true development corporations that build public-private partnerships, and acquire and redevelop property. Either way, such an organization will be important to help the Town accomplish its economic development goals.

6.2 Next Steps 2007-2010

- **Identify and lobby for public funding streams to for downtown revitalization including building renovation & streetscape improvements.** As is the case with other similar sized

communities, Gate City is limited in its financial resources, both public and private. Therefore, the success of downtown revitalization is dependent upon location of public funding sources to pay for public and private improvements. Gate City will need to identify these sources, pair them with the appropriate projects, and lobby for their award. Grants are generally awarded to those projects that have been part of an ongoing public planning process.

- **Formalize downtown business group possibly with a Main Street affiliation for downtown.** Eventually, Gate City may look to formalize the downtown development previously listed. An organization with official Main Street designation would facilitate downtown revitalization based on the Main Street points of: Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Restructuring. Main Street entities have been very successful in other Virginia communities.
- **Form an antiques guild.** An antiques guild made up of current and future merchants can be formed to cooperatively market Gate City as an antiques destination, as well as plan for and implement antiques events.

6.3 Final Steps 2010-2015

- **Continue to host annual “progress summits” on revitalization with the public and various stakeholder groups.** Evaluating the success of revitalization will ensure that it is not just a plan that sits on a shelf. The community should have a progress summit to review the plan, reprioritize goals, and establish new strategies and tasks.

7.0 *Concluding Thoughts*

Downtown Gate City seems to be at a crossroads in terms of economic development and eventual revitalization. Many established and successful businesses exist in downtown, while others have closed resulting in a number of vacant retail spaces. The Town has previously invested monies and grant funds in streetscape, however, as many buildings are becoming dilapidated, there is a critical need for private development in the community, as well as continued public investments. Without a continued effort for revitalization including a comprehensive strategy and community involvement, downtown Gate City risks continued decline.