

Analysis: Downtown Today

Downtown Context

Downtown State College is located in the south central part of Centre County, not far from the geographic center of the State of Pennsylvania. Downtown State College is at the junction of State Routes 322 and 26 and is bordered to the north by the Pennsylvania State University's University Park campus. The heart of downtown is defined by the intersection of Allen Street and College Avenue which is also the historic gateway to the Penn State campus (see *Exhibit 1: Downtown Context and Study Area*, opposite page).

Historical Overview

Stage College can trace its origins to the 1850's when the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society started the "Farmer's High School" on approximately 200 acres of land near the community of Centre Furnace. The school's first address was Boalsburg, Pa. until 1860 when a post office was opened in Old Main. In 1862 the name of the school was changed to the "Agricultural College of Pennsylvania" and it continued to grow. By this time, a small hamlet grew up around the school and consisted of farms, houses and a hotel where the Hotel State College is currently located at College Avenue and Allen Street. State College continued to grow as it attracted people to work at the college or provide services and was incorporated as a borough in 1896. As it grew, surrounding farms were subdivided into lots and sold. The Borough's first zoning ordinance was passed in 1927.

Today, the population is approximately 42,000.

Penn State, an illustrated history, Michael Bezilla

Background Materials Review

Numerous background materials were provided to the planning and design team to inform the master planning process. These materials included strategic planning, planning and design documents related to Borough Council, the Centre Region, Downtown, Neighborhoods, West End/Urban Village, Penn State University, design guidelines, Arts Festival, parking and transportation among others. A complete list of background materials is included in Appendix B.

Summary of Stakeholder Input

During the August 20-24, 2012 and November 5-8, 2012 work sessions in State College, the planning and design team met with numerous stakeholders to garner input on downtown – its assets, challenges and opportunities. The team augmented this input with reconnaissance and professional observations. Stakeholders continued to provide additional input via the Borough's website following both work sessions. Throughout the week and during the following weeks with input via the Borough's website, the team heard and observed several reoccurring themes regarding downtown State College today; these are summarized below and further detailed in Appendix A.

Stakeholder Meetings and Interviews

Uses and Activities

Stakeholders have identified many positive uses and

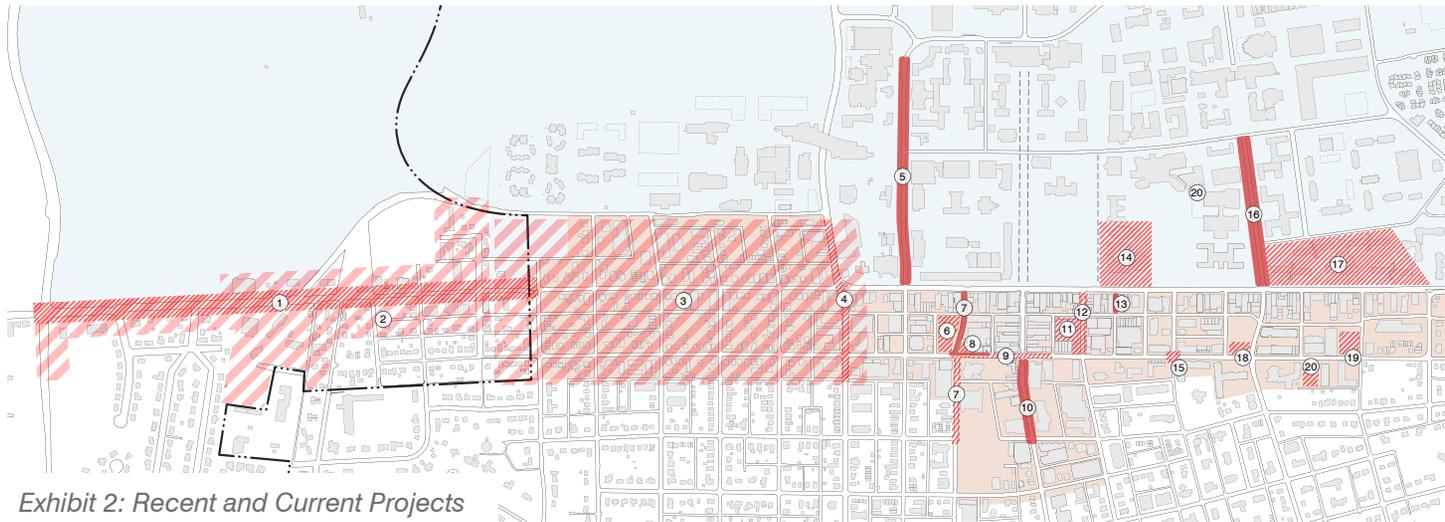


Exhibit 2: Recent and Current Projects

activities in downtown and suggest that there is an opportunity to build upon the many projects already completed or underway (see *Exhibit 2: Recent and Current Projects*). There is a general desire to have a greater variety of uses and events that appeal to a broad range of people including young professionals, families and seniors in addition to the student population.

Development and Community Sustainability

Stakeholders recognize that Penn State University is the economic engine for State College as the Borough is 70% students and downtown is very appealing for visitors and returning alumni who have fond memories of the community. However, there is a strong desire to balance downtown with a variety of housing and businesses that would attract young professionals, seniors and the local visitors.

The Downtown Retail Market Report indicates that Downtown State College has a strong local, regional and visitor pull attracting customers from each of these market segments. There is an opportunity gap of retail sales outlined in the Retail Market Report that indicates additional local demand for certain store types. Furthermore, more diverse housing options in downtown alongside additional office uses would reinforce the district as a multi-faceted destination resulting

in a more sustainable community.

Design and Placemaking

There was a significant amount of discussion with stakeholders regarding Downtown State College with regard to design and placemaking. Overall impressions of downtown are generally positive; however, stakeholders have indicated many opportunities for improvement to make it a “great place” and that these improvements are critical if there is a desire for downtown to appeal to more than simply the student population. Improvements need to consider higher quality architectural design as well as higher quality streetscapes. College Avenue, Beaver Avenue, the 100 block of Allen Street and Calder Way were identified as the streets with the most potential for enhancements.

Mobility

Downtown State College continues to emerge as a multi-modal community where transportation needs are by way of car, bus, bicycle and pedestrian modes of travel. In particular, the quintessential town-gown relationship between the University and downtown results in a community with high levels of pedestrian activity on the streets. Generally, stakeholders see this as an asset and something many downtowns strive. But it is also as a constraint when

Recent (Completed) Project

Current Project

1. West College Ave Streetscape
2. Ferguson Twp. Terraced Streetscape District
3. West End Plan
4. Atherton Corridor Improvements
5. Burrowes St. Master Plan
6. Fraser Centre
7. Fraser St. Streetscape
8. Fraser Corner Study
9. Beaver Ave. Streetscape
10. Allen St. Streetscape
11. Pugh St. Garage Replacement
12. Pugh St. Concept
13. Centennial Alley
14. Henderson Plan
15. Locust St. Bulb-Outs
16. Shortlidge Rd. Improvements
17. South Halls Plan
18. Hillel Student Center
19. New Student Housing
20. LDS Worship/Gospel Study Center

considering narrow sidewalks, limited gathering areas and potential for pedestrian vehicular conflicts. The Borough desires to trend toward a “park once” downtown where workers and visitors park in the garages then travel by foot to accommodate most of their downtown business. As with many communities, there are perceptions (on the part of local residents rather than visitors) that downtown does not have adequate parking.

Branding

Many stakeholders have identified that there is a need for a strong downtown brand; one that celebrates the quintessential “town gown” college town environment as well as downtown’s connection to the surrounding natural amenities. The downtown brand needs to be something that Penn State can use to help “sell” downtown to prospective students and one that responds to the Penn State alumni who are the largest base of tourism. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, the branding and marketing needs to reacquaint the local community with downtown and help address unfavorable stereotypes. Downtown Improvement District is a valuable steward of the quality of life downtown—including extensive work maintaining the district—presenting events and working with merchants and the branding should help reinforce the organization’s role. More importantly however, the marketing should demonstrate that Downtown State College is a vital part of the overall community.

General

While it is agreed that there is student behavior that results in many undesirable activities—keeping many local residents from using downtown on a regular basis—many of the stakeholders agree that students often get a bad rap and that they are critical to the economy and vibrancy of Downtown State College.

Community Meetings #1-#3

The planning and design team facilitated three community meetings during the assessment phase, between late August and early November to garner input to inform the design recommendations described and illustrated in this plan.

Bottom right: Hotel State College/The Corner Room

Following is a summary of the input received during these meetings, organized around several specific questions.

1. Postcard: What is the one image that best represents Downtown State College?

- The Hotel State College; Corner Room; College/Allen Intersection
- The Tavern
- Diversity of people and activity on the street
- Outdoor recreation (fishing, bike riding)
- Allen Street
- Farming valley as one approaches downtown from the west
- Mount Nittany
- College Avenue – literal town-gown relationship
- View down Allen to the Mall
- View of Old Main from College Avenue
- Arts Festival looking down Allen Street
- Centennial Alley/pig statue
- Schlow Library
- Friedman Parklet/overlook to Memorial Field
- People pictures/shopping/active sidewalks
- First Night ice sculptures



- Murals on Heister
- Penn State football game day experience
- The Waffle Shop
- Fraser Street businesses
- Café 210
- Sculpture above the entryway of the Red Cross
- The Allen Street gates

2. Tagline: How would you summarize your community in one phrase or tagline?

- We are!
- Happy Valley
- Diversity
- A big city in a small town
- The real Brigadoon
- We used to be in the middle of nowhere, now we have all these great roads
- The middle of somewhere
- The Centre of it all
- Well-centred
- Centrally isolated
- “Insulated” over “Isolated”
- Insulated urbanity
- In the “X”; X marks the spot
- Own little bubble
- Tree City

3. The Magic Wand: If you could change one thing about downtown, what would it be?

- Wider streetscapes
- Close Calder Way to cars or for a portion of the day
- European-style cycle track on College and Beaver
- Borough code enforcement entity
- Tunnel Atherton Street below existing grade
- Re-imagine bus station on Atherton
- Monorail around campus and downtown
- Downtown water feature
- Open up Friedman Parklet to some sunshine
- Get rid of cars on College Avenue
- Get PennDOT to re-route PA 26 away from College



Top left: Mt. Nittany as seen from downtown.



Middle left: Centennial Alley as seen from Calder Way.



Bottom left: Heister Street mural.

Top right: The planning team shared initial findings with the Steering Committee during the November 2012 workshop in State College.

Bottom right: Community members view exhibits following Community Meeting #3.

- Avenue
- Get rid of “wall effect” between campus and downtown
- Replace Hammond Building with suitably sized buildings
- Replace yellow street lights with more natural light
- Add 3” of insulation on all downtown buildings
- Double the setbacks of new development
- More/better food cart culture
- Bring back Phi-Psi 500
- Specialty restaurant district
- Curb excessive alcohol consumption
- User Calder Way as an inviting place for families
- More green space (i.e.: park)
- Integrated architectural design theme – unify buildings, design guidelines
- Indoor farmer’s market
- Downtown department store
- Improve integration between the town and student population on east
- Fight negative behavior

4. The Wish List: What would you like to have in downtown that you do not currently?

- First run movie theater
- Rental housing geared to young professionals
- High-level restaurant on upper floor of Glennland Building
- Take advantage of views of surrounding land
- “Mall” character/sense of place without losing parking (Redlands, CA)
- More high-quality spaces where you can sit
- Public Wi-Fi
- “Real beauty” in the built environment (vs. just “settling”)
- Diversity in places/uniqueness
- More activities for families and under-21 college students
- Diversity of ethnic restaurants
- IMAX (regional destination, education)
- Downtown visitors center
- Architecture that reacts to and interacts with street



- activity (library as example)
- Public space surrounded by mixed-use development (create vitality)
- Comprehensive multi-modal facility
- Bus stop at Allen and College being more attractive and well-designed
- More public art (with an organized initiative)
- Cultural/art center (with or without shared art space, cohesive, brings people together)
- Community photo lab (family-oriented)

5. *Name a downtown you love and why...*

- Ithaca, NY: lots of people, places to go shopping, eating; pedestrian center, open air food shops, public art
- Asheville, NC: eclectic, easy to navigate
- Austin, TX: people-friendly, easy to navigate, lots of outdoor stuff and food shops
- Madison, WI: weekend farmers market, State Street
- Ann Arbor, MI: multi-block core, no chain stores
- Dubuque, IA: events
- Santa Barbara and Ventura, CA: wider sidewalks, 2-hour parking
- Lancaster, PA: arts corridor, First Friday events, good linkages, building on local artists, gallery row, painted pianos
- Norwich, VT: town committee to mitigate emissions and develop building code
- Bloomington, IN: farmers market, coffee shop that serves out of the window
- Portland, OR; Washington, DC; New York, NY: bike-friendly in the core
- Oak Park, IL: bike share, strong buy-local campaign

6. *The Downtown Master Plan: Whatever you do...*

Do this:

- Emphasize pedestrian scale and funky character of Calder Way
- Provide more outdoor seating
- Use plants native to PA

- Incorporate West College Avenue into commercial area
- Improve wayfinding to garages
- Explore business incentives
- Add more bike racks
- Make downtown cohesive
- Create events that allow student and town populations to mingle
- Increase safety between 2 and 6 AM
- Increase pedestrian lighting on Locust Lane
- Consider an energy impact assessment in conjunction with any recommendations
- Be visionary (and practical)
- Decide for whom downtown will be (student/tourist/family/young professional/other?)
- Create an environment that many people enjoy (balance)
- Be transparent/open for feedback
- Get the University to participate in the improvement of downtown

Do not do this:

- Encourage more chain stores/restaurants
- Continue to create barriers /battles between students and residents
- Do not use the students as excuses for not doing things
- Try to be everything for everyone

Market Assessment

Understanding the market and economic conditions of Downtown State College is a fundamental underpinning of any recommendations for downtown whether they are physical, marketing, or policy oriented. Furthermore, the market report helps the partners better understand how to position downtown amidst the retail growth occurring throughout the greater Centre region and as a destination for students, visitors and residents.

This market study explores the overall economic health of downtown that will further enhance its appeal to local,