

THEME 5 - MANAGING THE DISTRICT: FOSTERING A SAFE AND APPEALING DOWNTOWN

Overview

The National Citizen Survey completed in 2012 by the National Research Center and the International City/County Management Association indicated that State College scores higher than other communities and peer university communities in terms of a broad spectrum of quality of life issues. While most residents of State College recognize the importance of students in sustaining a vibrant downtown, there is a perception among some that downtown can be unsafe and is overrun by students as a result of several specific incidents. The year 2008/2009 school year was a particularly low point for downtown when there was a significant level of alcohol abuse and related incidents that negatively impacted downtown and resulted in bad publicity. Since that time, the Borough, Penn State University and the Downtown Improvement District. established a partnership (Campus Community Partnership) and worked diligently to address negative issues and perceptions and have undertaken several important efforts to address these issues.

- Following the incidents of 2008/2009, the Borough Manager and Vice President of Student Affairs at PSU met weekly. A committee was formed to address issues but now this committee meets once or twice a year because a lot has been accomplished.
- In 2009, the Responsible Hospitality Institute (RHI) did a study and the process had a good mix of public and private participation. The report has not been widely reviewed, but the recommendations are important to revisit and pursue with additional community stakeholders.
- Penn State is taking a more aggressive approach to alcohol abuse and communicate with students on a regular basis. Certain offenses are subject to more

severe punishment . Penn State reaches out to students and has established a Student Conduct Department.

- The Borough has encouraged Penn State to require a Freshmen seminar on what it means to be part of a community. A decision to do this is up to the faculty senate and they have been reluctant to do so because it takes time away from other instruction.
- The partnership established a Social Norming Campaign through which they work with student groups to talk about student responsibility. They started a “respect campaign” as a joint project during the first 8 weeks of fall semester. It involves police, New Leaf, code enforcement, health, etc.
- The Borough has installed portable restrooms downtown and increased fines to \$600 for public urination, however, they may not have been as effective as hoped.
- The Borough has been addressing the litter problem from late night activity and event weekends. During football weekends the Borough employs nighttime trash collection and work with student groups who volunteer to cleanup downtown with gloves and bags provided by the Borough. Additionally, key late night businesses such as Canyon Pizza have been responsive to cleaning up litter that accumulates at their storefront. Additionally, the Downtown Improvement District has made commendable contributions to the cleanliness of downtown. Additional recommendations related to downtown cleanup are included later in this section of the report.

As a result of the above efforts, the Borough has seen a reduction in incidents, however, it continues to be a concern for stakeholders.

In addition, the Borough has outlined a number of implementation actions in the State College Borough Sustainable Neighborhood Report 2012 under Goal 1: Maintaining Safe, Stable and attractive Neighborhoods. These implementation actions are centered on three concepts: Community building, Regulatory and Marketing.

Recommendations

For the recommendations listed below, the primary implementation partners (the organizations that takes the lead in implementation) are bolded and other potential supporting partners appear unbolded.

5-A: Communication of Initiatives Done to Date

Identify recent and current initiatives undertaken by the Borough, University, Downtown Improvement District and other partners and share with the community.

*Implementation: **Borough of State College, Penn State University, Downtown Improvement District***

While ensuring a high quality of life in State College is an on-going effort, many in the community are not aware of all that has been done to address issues since 2008-2009. The Borough and University should publicize efforts and associated successes. In addition, the Borough should also identify initiatives that have not been successful and how they are being modified.

5-B: Downtown “Clean and Green”

Build upon the Borough and the Downtown Improvement Districts successful efforts of keeping downtown clean by including businesses and student groups.

*Implementation: **Downtown Improvement District, State College Borough, Penn State University***

Work with downtown businesses to encourage more individual responsibility related to keeping sidewalk areas in front of businesses clean on a regular basis. Additionally, work with student groups to be involved in regular cleanups in addition to those the Borough does related to special events.

5-C: Responsible Hospitality Institute (RHI) Study – Review and Prioritization

Review the RHI report from 2009 and identify those recommendations that are still relevant and prioritize actions.

*Implementation: **Borough of State College, Penn State University, Downtown Improvement District, CVB, Student Groups***

The RHI study was made possible through four funding partners: The Visitors Bureau, Downtown Improvement District, Penn State and the Borough. The main premise of the study was to create more diversity and economic activity downtown in the evening hours. There was general agreement among the partners that the report's recommendations were good and several sub-committees were established to implement the recommendations. A clear mission for the sub-committees was not evident, however, and implementation lacked momentum.

The RHI study was comprehensive, had a broad foundation of public and private participation and resulted in many solid recommendations. As the design and planning team reviewed the recommendations of the study, it became evident that many of the RHI study recommendations dovetail with recommendations outlined in this master plan. These include:

- Include highly visible restrooms in the new parking garage.
- Address Pedestrian Load on Sidewalks. As described earlier in this report, Pedestrian LOS numbers were analyzed and found several blocks of Beaver and College Avenue to be at levels of service “D” and “E.” The public realm enhancements for College Avenue and Beaver Avenue provide for permanently expanded sidewalks in several areas. In addition, there remains the potential to pursue recommendations of the RHI study to temporarily expand sidewalks at peak pedestrian times by closing off a parking lane and allowing pedestrians to use that area rather than walking in the street. This could be particularly effective along some blocks of Beaver Avenue. It should be noted, however, that this should only be explored if College and Beaver Avenues are transferred to the Borough through the Turnback Program discussed earlier in the report. PennDOT has not been receptive to this concept as long as they retain ownership of the two streets.

- Provide multi-use sidewalks that provide for vitality and pedestrian safety. The RHI study recommended the use of kiosks, outdoor seating, performances to create a pleasant sense of place and comfortable place for people to stay.
- Enhance streetscapes. The Borough has been enhancing the downtown environment with streetscape enhancements to Fraser, Pugh and Atherton Streets. The additional recommendations of this master plan will reinforce a positive image for the downtown core area.
- The RHI study indicated that there was limited awareness about parking availability and validated parking by merchants. The branding and marketing recommendations of this master plan provides the Borough and D.I.D. with tools to implement this recommendation.
- Reduce Pedestrian Load on Beaver and College Avenues by Enhancing Pedestrian Environment of Calder Way. The RHI report recommended the exploration of closing Calder Way to cars, however, this is not feasible as it is an important service street and provides access to parking areas and deliveries. Calder Way will be an enhanced as a pedestrian environment by establishing it as “shared space” and using the community branding and arts to make it a more attractive option for pedestrians as described in Theme #3. Additionally, further exploration can be given to closing Calder Way temporarily during certain evenings or event s. This idea was not well-received by several within the community when the idea was suggested at the time of the RHI study. However, it is worth re-visiting as described under Theme 3 as one of many strategies for Calder Way.
- Use Events to Attract a More Diverse Mix of Ages. The RHI study identified marketing techniques to attract a more diverse age group to downtown. Events are important in marketing the downtown, its businesses and in erasing negative perceptions. The Borough has been expanding events and should continue to do so, focusing on drawing a more diverse crowd, earlier in the evenings. The plans for Allen Street Promenade

described in Theme #3 illustrate how the 100 Block of Allen Street can become a venue for regularly scheduled family-friendly events, both large and small. In addition, the plans for Allen Square as illustrated and described in Theme #4 show how the existing park can be better connected to the downtown core through coordinated development of several properties, including a new square on Allen Street. This network of spaces, close to the library and Discovery Space can also be used for event venues. Depending on the size of the event, they could be used in addition to or in place of Allen Street Promenade.

Additionally, RHI’s recommendation to focus on keeping older demographics out between 10PM and midnight are good and regularly scheduled events can help to do this. The recommendation for a new event “Twilight on the Town” as described in Theme 1 reinforces this recommendation.

Communities across the country recognize the importance of events on the downtown economy and downtown’s vibrancy. Refer to Recommendation 5-F for background on evaluating the economic impact of events in other communities.

- The RHI study identified concern with negative press. The branding developed as part of this master plan creates a positive message about downtown and demonstrates how downtown can take control of its image rather than the image being defined for it.
- The study indicated the importance of socializing and the need for more alcohol-free venues. Unfortunately, plans for downtown theater went away, and Sozo moved out of downtown. The Positive news is that Hillel Student Center moving to Beaver and Garner will have a significant presence and will provide meeting and gathering spaces in an alcohol-free environment. Additionally, many of the co-working and incubator spaces in downtowns, as proposed in Theme 4 include spots for gathering for workers etc. At the CRC at Virginia Tech there is a café and coffee shop. The cafe can serve as a gathering spot for workers.

- RHI indicated gaps in dining and a need for higher-end establishments, late night venues with ambient music to allow for conversation, high quality vegetarian restaurants, and venues appealing to families and diverse cultural markets. The market for dining will need to be carefully cultivated and is a challenge on many college campuses. One approach is to consider some sort of food hub/demonstration kitchen as part of a development in the future.
- RHI identified wayfinding as an important feature to attract new customers to downtown and make older customers feel more comfortable. The signage developed in Theme#2 responds to this recommendation.

The Visitors Bureau, Downtown Improvement District, Penn State and the Borough have the opportunity to reinforce the importance of the above actions as part of an overall strategy to improve quality-of-life issues.

5-D: State College Borough Sustainable Neighborhood Report 2012 Actions

Continue to use the State College Borough Sustainable Neighborhood Report as a guide for assessing stabilization of the existing neighborhoods surrounding downtown.

*Implementation: **Borough of State College, CRBC/Bicycle Advocacy Groups***

The 2012 Sustainable Neighborhoods Report identified several future action suggestions including:

- Implement Good Neighbor Program and launch a pilot for the 2012/2013 academic year.
- Develop strategies to implement a Restorative Justice Program and launch a pilot program for the 2013/14 academic year.
- Improve neighborhood communications.
- Implement a Centre Region Building Safety and Property Maintenance Code (PM Code) Revisions
- Expand First-Time Homebuyer Program

- Prepare Neighborhood Community Asset Maps

All of these recommendations and the overall strategies relate strongly to the health of downtown State College and should be implemented for the neighborhoods in the time frames identified in the plan. In addition to these recommendations, some particular tools are explored in greater detail in the recommendations under Theme 4 of this plan.

5-E: “Traditional Downtown”

Continue to reinforce the downtown core as a “traditional downtown.”

*Implementation: **Downtown Improvement District, Borough of State College, CBICC, CVB, Design Review Board***

This is not a new recommendation, rather a repeat of Recommendation 4-A. It warrants referencing here as the projects outlined under Recommendation 4-A are particularly applicable to the premise of Theme 5; to “foster a safe and appealing downtown.”

5-F: Economic Impact of Local Events.

The DID and the Borough of State College should partner with Penn State University to regularly assess the economic impact of special events on Allen Street and throughout downtown.

*Implementation: **Borough of State College, Downtown Improvement District, COG, Consultants, Student Groups***

There are several excellent studies that detail the methodology to conduct the direct, indirect, and induced impacts of special events on downtown. Among the best is Steven R. Miller’s Quantifying the Economic Impact of Community Events from Michigan State University. (<http://www.cea.msu.edu/uploads/files/44/event%20impacts.pdf>)

A detailed study of existing and potential events in State College could provide the community several key things. First, it could demonstrate the economic impact of existing events on downtown. Second, it could suggest new events

that might be considered, evaluate capacity for those events, and propose funding options. And finally, it could help the Borough and Downtown Improvement District build capacity for future events.

Studying the economic impact of special events on Allen Street will help quantify the impacts on local businesses and the overall economy. The survey instrument can specifically ask about spending patterns along Allen Street, in downtown State College as well as provide information about the visitor origin. Outlined below is some additional background information on communities that have found events to be important aspects of downtown in terms of economic development and community vitality.

Events as Economic Development Tools

Ocean Springs and Columbus, MS: Many studies have been conducted that evaluate the economic impact of special events on the local economy. One of the most recent is an assessment of the Peter Anderson Arts Festival in Ocean Springs Mississippi. Mississippi State University used statistically valid intercept surveys to determine that the event had a residual impact of \$13 million in 2010 which rose to \$22 million in 2011 after the event got national sponsorship from Blue Moon Brewing which amplified the advertising for the event and resulted in a 13% increase in attendance. The Peter Anderson Arts Festival closes Washington Avenue in the heart of Ocean Springs.

Source: National Trust for Historic Preservation Main Street Center (<http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/main-street-news/story-of-the-week/2012/120627festivals/measuring-the-economic-impact.html>)

Berlin, MD: Berlin, Maryland has 19 events on the calendar that require street closures and these have been recognized as “economic engines.” Director of Community and Economic Development, Michael Day, indicates that when someone is interested in trying to start a business in Berlin, he tries to get them to come to town during an event. While some of Berlin’s merchants expressed the fact that some events hinder customers coming in and shopping that day, they recognize that the events expose them to hundreds of

potentially new customers. According to Michael, most of the events require street closure of at least two blocks and he has found that the merchants located where the street is not closed now come forward requesting that the street in front of their shop be closed as well.

Frederick, MD: Downtown Frederick Partnership commissioned a study by Davidson-Peterson Associates titled, First Saturday Attendee Profile Study, April 2009 to assess the economic impact of the City’s First Saturday event that occurs monthly. The study indicated that the events are a big draw to downtown, on average they bring in nearly \$450,000 to downtown area businesses during each event; over half of the attendees return to downtown a few days after the event and spend on average \$118. During the event, each attendee spends on average \$133. In addition, the regular occurring event is well-publicized and attendees just know it happens and plan to be downtown.

For more information, contact: Downtown Frederick Partnership (www.downtownfrederick.org)