The Arts: A Picture is Worth More than 1,000 Words in Ridgeway

Several years ago, the Town of Ridgeway identified tourism as a key economic driver, so town leaders created a marketing campaign to showcase local art and history. The campaign showcases Ridgeway’s gallery space, art depicting historic Ridgeway and the restoration of the town’s most photographed structures.

Town Council and residents first laid out the ideas for “The Arts: A Picture is Worth More than 1,000 Words in Ridgeway” in the town’s strategic plan and then developed these ideas through the work and collaboration of town committees and county and state organizations.

The newly created Fairfield County Arts Gallery in downtown Ridgeway showcases and sells pieces created by local artists. A second-story gallery space will be used for art classes and events. Selling posters, cards, calendars and a coloring book depicting historic Ridgeway provides funds to preserve the iconic structures of Ridgeway — the World’s Smallest Police Station, the School Arch and the telephone booth, which has a phone that still works for just 25 cents.

Additional funding for preserving Ridgeway’s iconic structures came from the Town of Ridgeway, the Fairfield County Arts Council, the Arts on the Ridge Committee, the Ridgeway Merchants Association, Ridgeway event sponsors and a Hometown Economic Development Grant awarded by the Municipal Association.

Volunteers on town committees were a central part of the effort, so the town highlighted their work in it’s newsletter and website.

Ridgeway isn’t stopping there. Future plans include additional art gallery events, finishing the restoration of the iconic town structures, and a pictorial Ridgeway book sold to the public that highlights the history and people of the community.

Contact Mayor Charlene Herring at charleneherring@gmail.com or 803.337.3316.
**Population 1,001 - 5,000 Category | Town of Saluda**

**Solar Saluda**

Saluda officials knew electric rates would keep going up, so they decided to undergo an energy audit and take control of their future power bills by installing solar panels. In fact, the town installed enough panels to completely offset energy consumption at Town Hall.

Officials got started on the project by first seeking guidance from the S.C. Energy Office. Through the Energy Office, the town received a ConserFund loan to pay for the project. This loan allowed the town to borrow at a very low interest rate to install the panels and to retrofit Town Hall with energy-efficient light bulbs. The town also worked closely with SCE&G and the company’s renewable energy team.

The results have been rewarding. The town, one of the first municipalities in South Carolina to install solar panels, now receives a credit on each power bill for the energy it puts back on the power grid.

At the end of the year, the power company sends the town a check for any power it generated in excess of what it consumed. The town has a 10-year contract to sell power generated at Saluda Town Hall to SCE&G. But since the project will pay for itself after 3 ½ years, town officials expect to be making money for 6 ½ years.

Looking to the future, Saluda officials plan to monitor funds generated by the project and decide whether to install additional solar panels at the police department and other town facilities.

Several businesses in Saluda are watching the town’s solar success to see if they, too, should install solar panels. And town officials are working with schools to teach students about the benefits of alternative energy.

*Contact Tom Brooks at brooks@townofsaluda.com or 864.554.5088.*

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**Population 5,001 - 10,000 Category | City of Hartsville**

**Downtown Revitalization**

Four years ago, leading employers in the City of Hartsville threatened to leave because the atmosphere of the city made it difficult to recruit workers. Hartsville lacked shopping, entertainment and general liveliness downtown. That’s when city officials, private investors and other stakeholders decided to tackle the problem.

In the beginning of the effort, officials moved Hartsville City Hall operations from an outlying site to a beautiful, but empty, downtown building. Other actions were set in motion. The city and non-profit Community Foundation for a Better Hartsville established and funded Startville, a business incubator that provides mentoring, funding and other assistance to new businesses. Main Street Hartsville, which previously operated as an entity separate from the city, became a city department that focuses on improving the downtown through economic restructuring, promotions and beautification. This move better aligned Main Street’s work with the vision of the city.

Together Main Street Hartsville and Startville began the StartUp Hartsville competition. Funded by a grant from the S.C. Department of Commerce, the program offers entrepreneurs a chance to win a forgivable $12,000 loan to occupy an empty downtown space. The city has also created a new department called Business Navigator to provide a central location for businesses to get information about permitting, licensing, building codes and business incentives.
The efforts worked, and now officials from other cities and towns are visiting Hartsville to pick up revitalization lessons.

Since the beginning of the project, more than 40 new businesses, including the Hampton Inn and the Mantissa Executives Suites and Spa, have opened downtown. Hartsville leaders are now eying an expansion of the downtown, because nearly all formerly empty storefronts are occupied. Properties one block from the downtown will be developed into retail and housing, showing that by improving the city’s core, success will ripple to other areas of the city.

Contact Rebecca Edwards at rebecca.edwards@hartsvillesc.gov or at 843.917.0602.

Population 10,001 - 20,000 Category | Town of Lexington

Icehouse Amphitheater

Rapid growth posed a dilemma in the Town of Lexington. In 2010, the fourth-fastest growing municipality in South Carolina had already grown 83 percent since 2000 and was projected to grow another 80 percent in the coming decade. Town leaders implemented a Vision Plan in 2012 to preserve Lexington’s small-town charm and quality of life.

The Vision Plan proposed improvements to the town intended to attract newcomers, foster new economic development and improve quality of life for current residents. One of the primary goals in the Vision Plan was to create an outdoor entertainment venue.

The town reached its goal with the opening of the 900-seat Icehouse Amphitheater in the heart of Lexington. The venue’s first free concert, featuring the Root Doctors, was held in October of 2016. This came after a groundbreaking ceremony in September of 2015 just weeks before the state’s historic flood, a natural disaster that resulted in some construction delays.

The amphitheater’s completion reflected an 18-month process that gathered the input of more than 400 community members, including town committees, the chamber of commerce, school district, state environmental regulators, faith-based organizations, homeowner associations, young professionals, downtown merchants and the general public.

The town used its general fund to purchase, clear and grade the property and created a downtown tax increment financing district to pay for the construction of the amphitheater.

The TIF district consists of seven local taxing jurisdictions, including the Town of Lexington, Lexington County, Lexington School District One, Lexington County Recreation and Aging Commission, Midlands Technical College, the Riverbanks Zoo and Lexington County Community Mental Health Center.

The new venue is building community by encouraging “feet on the street” and connecting traffic to Lexington Square Park, Virginia Hylton Park, the Lexington Municipal Complex and the Palmetto Collegiate Institute. Amphitheater events give residents a centralized meeting place, while providing a safe, family-fun environment.

Contact Jennifer Dowden at jdowden@lexsc.com or 803.356.8238.
Communications Category | Town of Hilton Head Island
2016 Beach Renourishment Public Information Program

In June of 2016, the Town of Hilton Head was scheduled to embark on its third large-scale beach renourishment project, a project that recognized the town’s beaches as a vital asset to residents and the economy. It was crucial to give residents, visitors, prospective visitors and businesses real-time information about what was happening where and for how long on Hilton Head’s famous beaches. About 1,000 feet of beach access per day were restricted by operations.

Officials were keenly sensitive to how much the project, with its noise, pipes and equipment, could disrupt the public’s enjoyment of the beach. For instance, Hilton Head officials knew they had to keep local restaurants in the loop, just as they had to update that bride in Ohio who was planning a beach wedding.

Teaming up with the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce, the town met with representatives of hotels, resorts, home and villa rental companies, and affected property owner associations to present an overview. They formed a beach renourishment communications task force to develop a toolkit for local businesses that included talking points, FAQs, email confirmation verbiage, social media messages, newsletter/blog verbiage, a project timeline map, project brochure and video.

In 2016, the renourishment project section of the town’s website drew 91,063 visitors accounting for nearly 127,000 page views. There were nearly 3,000 subscribers to the town’s e-subscription “2016 Beach Renourishment Project” topic. By the end of the project, more than 11,500 “likes” to the town’s Facebook page extended the social media reach of project notifications to nearly 200,000 people.

The town and its chamber partner produced a project video that was distributed to hotels and other stakeholders. Plus, they printed and distributed 30,000 brochures, which were passed out around the community.

Contact René Phillips at renep@hiltonheadislandsc.gov or 843.341.4792.

Economic Development Category | City of Florence
Joseph P. Riley Jr Award
Downtown Florence: What a Comeback!

The City of Florence once had a downtown that some had described as “a drunk too far gone to be saved” and others considered too risky for private investment. Three failed attempts to revitalize the city’s downtown led to a wakeup call when a perceived lack of amenities and vibrancy contributed to the city’s inability to attract two large industrial prospects. Making things worse, two major healthcare facilities struggled to recruit personnel and physicians for the same reasons.

Simply put, the city needed an inviting downtown to attract a workforce and could no longer expect cosmetic improvements to the downtown to make a lasting difference.

The solution: a Downtown Master Plan, adopted in 2011 with a five-year implementation timeline that started in 2013. City leaders drew on information from community focus groups, interviews and a citizens’ delegation to help inform the plan. Other planning efforts were expanded to include housing, public spaces, employment, mobility, infrastructure and economic development. Goals addressed socioeconomic, physical and cultural aspects of revitalization.
“Small win” landmarks acted as catalysts, spurring a change in public perception and inviting additional investment. Restauranteurs, hoteliers, small business owners and cultural entities then sought opportunities in the city’s downtown.

Because downtown development never truly stops, the city’s updated master plan will prioritize a new geographic area for redevelopment and identify private sector investors. The next steps will include making streetscape enhancements, adding parking, recruiting niche retail, creating more housing, developing a food/artisan overlay district and establishing the downtown as a tourism destination. Ultimately, the downtown will link to the city’s existing trail system to encourage pedestrian traffic.

Contact Drew Griffin at dgriffin@cityofflorence.com or 843.665.3113.

Public Safety Category | City of Camden
Clowning Around and Saving Lives: Sometimes Safety is a Laughing Matter

After a slight increase in residential fires, the Camden Fire Department wanted to expand its focus from responding to fires to preventing fires. So the department’s leadership created the FIRE PALS Characterization Program, complete with puppets, music, large props and, of course, clowns. That’s where Nozzle, Snorkel and Flame, three firefighters with wigs, face paint, suspenders, audience-participation skits and magic tricks, came in.

The trio, along with two other staff members, have been bringing safety lessons to schools in Kershaw and neighboring counties, daycares, churches, and even senior citizen communities and adult daycares. The clown troop emphasizes the importance of a home escape plan, staying low to avoid heat and smoke, convening at a meeting place away from the fire, never returning to a burning building and the importance of working, up-to-date smoke alarms.

While highly entertaining, the presentations also ensure the message of fire prevention falls on attentive ears, making a serious impact on children in a state that loses 80 - 100 people every year to fire.

After school presentations, Nozzle, Snorkel and Flame sometimes stay and have lunch with the children. The clowns are mobbed like rock stars, with students jostling to sit next to the firefighters who stay in character. Presentations are customized to other safety incidents a school has experienced, such as bicycle safety if one of the students’ classmates has gotten hurt, and computer safety.

At least one family has been helped. A 13-year-old girl was home with her brother and an 83-year-old relative. The elderly relative turned the stove on to light a cigarette, but the stove ended up igniting a pan of grease. The teen got everyone out of the home and to a central meeting place, actions she said she learned from the clowns who visited her school.

Contact Caitlin Young at cyoung@camdencity.org or 803.425.6154.

Public Service Category | Town of Mount Pleasant
The Planning Public Outreach and Engagement Program

The planning process can be confusing to residents of any city or town, no matter the size. But for the Town of Mount Pleasant, one of the fastest-growing cities east of the Mississippi River, officials fielded frequent questions about regulations, procedures and how land-use decisions are made.
To address residents’ confusion, the Department of Planning and Development created three programs aimed at strengthening relationships between residents and town employees and providing more transparency to all. One was the Meet and Greet, informational sessions that got residents interested in town services. They are held after business hours and feature different locations throughout the town.

The second program was a two-semester Planning College. Town staff presented an overview of planning principles in the first semester. The residents applied these principles during the second semester as they guided a simulated project through the review process.

Lastly, town leaders created Code for Lunch to engage the professional design and development community. During a brown-bag lunch, staff explained changes to regulations. Town staff also used Code for Lunch to receive feedback on implementation of regulations and codes.

The town involved community partners in various ways. To produce the Annual Report and Planning Calendar, both of which were debuted at a Meet and Greet, the planning department partnered with schools and civic organizations. A local restaurant provided meals for the lunch event.

Feedback from surveys and correspondence from participants continues to help the town refine its programs. In 2017, local middle school students will submit artwork for the Annual Report and Planning Calendar, while the Meet and Greet events, which average more than 100 attendees, will be held in a new location that caters to the town’s older neighborhoods.

Contact Martine Wolfe-Miller at mwolfe@tompsc.com or 843.884.8517.

Public Works Category | Town of Cheraw

New Public Works Facility

Since 2007, the Town of Cheraw had been setting aside money each year to pay for a new public works facility. The aging, run-down public works building had been built in phases over the last 50 years. The structure had a leaky roof, frequent flooding, poor internet and phone service, blown-in insulation — which made it difficult to heat and cool the space — and no central air conditioning.

A new building that would fulfill the town’s needs was estimated to cost $1.7 million and have 15,000 square feet. Saving up money on a tight budget was a slow process. Then came a solution. In 2015, the local National Guard Armory offered to donate its vacant property and building to the town.

The facility, which was in the perfect location, became a blank canvas for the town’s new public works facility. The public works staff worked closely with an architecture firm on the interior layout, making sure all town requirements and guidelines were fulfilled and tailoring the building for the town’s needs.

While Cheraw had the unique good fortune of receiving a building as a gift, the town’s decision to repurpose an old structure instead of demolishing it or leaving it abandoned has proven fiscally wise. With the funds originally set aside for a new public works facility, town officials renovated the armory to accommodate the town’s public works department and parks and grounds department.

Cheraw officials aren’t sitting still. There are future plans to make improvements to the grounds. Uneven terrain, if backfilled and leveled, could provide additional space for growth in the future. Trees, shrubs and other landscaping features will help to enhance the exterior.

Contact Dale Davis at davis@cheraw.com or 843.537.8425.
Town of Bluffton

 Soon after the creation of a 94-acre multi-county industrial park in 2008, the Great Recession hit, affecting the Town of Bluffton’s plans.

 The historic slump frustrated Bluffton’s efforts to attract a master developer and other knowledge-based companies to the park, even though healthcare benefits manager eviCore had relocated its headquarters to the site in 2005. But with tenacity and regional partnerships, the industrial park came into being. Town, county, state and federal funding assisted with the project, along with private investment and tax credits.

 But there’s more to come for the mixed-use town center project. The town anticipates the completion of the publicly funded infrastructure, including the remaining roads, sewer, IT and a public park. Next, the developer will transfer the public park and the new permanent home of the Don Ryan Center for Innovation — the hub for regional economic development — to the Town of Bluffton, and eviCore will expand its corporate campus.

 Contact Debbie Szpanka at dszpanka@townofbluffton.com or 843.706.4534.

City of Cayce

 Before the City of Cayce’s new public safety director arrived, the Cayce Department of Public Safety had little resident engagement and no social media presence, operated in a separate silo from the city and reacted to incidents instead of proactively building community relationships. But in the summer of 2016, the appointment of a new DPS director ushered in some welcome cultural changes — both internally with staff and externally with residents.

 The director gathered community feedback from more than 20 community meetings with church groups, neighborhood associations and watch groups in his first three months. With the help of a U.S. Department of Justice grant and the department’s general fund, the department then created a community response unit, hired three new community outreach officers, started social media accounts and held a contest for elementary school students to name the department’s new K-9 officer.

 Not surprisingly, morale within the department has improved and turnover has dropped. In fact, the city has had to turn away certified officer applicants.

 Contact Rachelle Moody at rmoody@cityofcayce-sc.gov or 803.550.9506.

City of Chester

 When school gets out for the summer, the 4,000 children in the city and county of Chester who rely on free or reduced lunch still need to eat. That’s why since 2013, the City of Chester has sponsored the Summer Feeding Service Program. The program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the S.C. Department of Education, reimburses sponsors $2.09 for each breakfast and $3.69 for each lunch or dinner served.

 Chester’s SFSP bridges nutritional gaps and offers free meals at approved sites during the summer in areas with high concentrations of low-income children. When the program launched in 2013, meals were provided at six sites. The number of sites increased more than tenfold in 2016, allowing the program to serve more than 2,100 youths per day. Chester took it further, generating support from local foundations, public and private partnerships, and area businesses. City officials are now planning to bridge the learning gap that occurs when school is out by providing educational and enrichment activities to prepare kids to start school again in the fall.

 Contact Peggy Johnson at pjohnson@chester.sc.gov or 803.235.3063.

City of Columbia

 Public outcry over blighted commercial buildings contributed to the City of Columbia’s Vacant/Abandoned Building Incentive Loan Program, an initiative that encourages property owners and tenants to purchase, reuse or improve abandoned property.

 The Columbia Empowerment Zone, a non-profit corporation that promotes job creation, offered funds to start the program. The loans range from $1,000 to $20,000 and cannot exceed more than 10 percent of the project cost. The forgivable loans issued on a reimbursable basis for expenses allow recipients to make
improvements to permanent structures of their business, such as windows, doors and signage.

To date, small businesses now occupy 11 buildings that have been renovated and improved. The city and CEZ promoted last year’s Economic Development Week May 8-12 and the launch of the Vacant/Abandoned Building Incentive Loan Program via brochures, flyers, print and digital media, and TV.

Contact Chris Segars at cmsegars@columbiasc.net or 803.545.4143.

City of Denmark

The City of Denmark had a problem intersection that was hard to maneuver. Freight trucks struggling to turn would damage trees, run into light poles or graze the corner of a building. Sections of sidewalk were uplifted by tree roots, and pedestrian crossings lacked clear markings. Something had to be done.

Town officials encouraged the public to participate in two public hearings in the initial design phase and attend meetings of the Denmark Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council.

With a Community Development Block Grant, the city converted the intersection into a wider, two-lane road with a greater turning radius, plantings, drainage with grates, stamped sidewalks with the city’s dogwood tree logo, benches, trash receptacles, bike racks and sidewalks uniquely designed to accommodate large trees. The city installed an irrigation system to maintain the plants and hopes to extend the improvement project for an additional block. The improvements made it easier and safer to shop in downtown Denmark.

Contact Heyward Robinson at hrobi13901@aol.com or 803.793.3734.

City of Easley

While police departments nationwide struggled to maintain positive relationships with residents amid officer-involved shootings and use-of-force controversies, officials in the City of Easley decided to proactively build bridges with residents to avoid the strife seen so often in the news media. The department started by attending community events, bringing candy and popcorn machines to movie and concert series, and greeting attendees with a smile at the events.

But then officials thought of another way to combat fear of police: Education. They wanted the public to know about the day-to-day activities of an officer. As a result, the Easley Citizens Police Academy was born.

The eight-week academy led by officers has been so popular that Easley officials are discussing the creation of an explorer class for children, intended to foster trust between police and youths and to inspire young people to join the profession.

Contact Lindsay Cunningham at lcunningham@cityofeasley.com or 864.855.7900.

Town of Edisto Beach

The coastline in Edisto Beach is affected by waves, tides, storm surges and other forces that cause sand to accrete or erode. Changes are compounded by development activity to accommodate the desire of residents and visitors to be as close to the ocean as possible.

So in 2017, the town restored approximately 835,000 cubic yards of sand to the eroded beach and lengthened 26 groins. The technically complex, multi-million dollar project received funds from local tourism taxes and fees, including Colleton County’s capital project sales tax, and grants from the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The town partnered with Edisto Beach State Park to renourish its beach at the same time as the town. This created cost savings to both. The town contributed 16 percent of the total project cost, thanks to town officials’ success in convincing other partners of the project’s merits.

Contact Iris Hill at ihill@townofedistobeach.com or 843.869.2505.
Town of Fort Mill and City of Tega Cay

The Town of Fort Mill and City of Tega Cay are separated by about half a mile, both situated near the North Carolina border and both experiencing rapid growth. In 2014, officials decided to cooperate on a shared challenge. Officials in both municipalities agreed to create a new joint training program, which allows their planning and zoning officials to fulfill their state-mandated training requirements.

Before, there were few options available to officials of Tega Cay and Fort Mill to get their training. Day-long and multi-day sessions offered by other organizations meant travelling expenses for 21 appointed officials from Fort Mill and 14 from Tega Cay, a costly endeavor. Now the new joint training program is growing. Starting this year, training sessions opened to appointed officials and staff from the City of Rock Hill and Lancaster and York counties.

Future plans may include offering an academy for interested residents and extending the reach of the training by broadcasting it on YouTube and local cable access channels.

Contact Joe Cronin at jcronin@fortmillsc.gov or 803.547.2034 ext. 257 or Susan Britt at sbritt@tegacaysc.gov or 803.548.3513.

City of Greenwood

The Greenwood Chamber of Commerce started the city’s Festival of Flowers in 1968. But in the mid-2000s, there was no centralized focus on Uptown Greenwood, and attendance was declining. In 2007, a pivotal trip to Epcot Center inspired festival volunteers and the horticulture coordinator at Piedmont Technical College to create 13 topiaries.

The Self Family Foundation provided the initial money for topiary frames. Staff of the city, chamber and technical college worked together on the topiaries with help from Lakelands Master Gardeners volunteers. The program was growing. In 2011, the city began managing the program, which now includes four city employees, a greenhouse, and 42 topiaries arranged on the square in Uptown Greenwood in June and July as part of the Festival of Flowers.

Consider the numbers — Greenwood’s hospitality tax revenue in the Uptown Greenwood Special Tax District increased from 2008 to 2016 by 253 percent for the month of June and 337 percent for July. Business licenses have also grown for the Uptown Square by nearly 18 percent from 2008 to 2016.

Contact Charlie Barrineau at charlie.barrineau@gwdcity.com or 864.942.8410.

City of Greer

The Greer Police Department worked with a local TV station, WYFF, on a campaign to show law enforcement in a positive light in 2016. The campaign also offered safety tips to residents about the “100 deadly days of summer,” a period when teen drivers have a higher rate of automobile-crash fatalities.

The series, which continued in 2017 as WYFF’s “4 Your Safety,” aired 36 segments, which were about a minute long. They covered topics such as the importance of yielding the right of way while driving, how to spray a fire extinguisher and how to clean out a lint trap in a dryer to prevent fires. While the Greer Police Department received positive feedback, WYFF’s viewers began calling and emailing with segment ideas. WYFF also shared stories on Facebook Live, garnering thousands of views. The results? Labor Day passed with zero traffic deaths in the city.

Contact Steve Owens at sowens@cityofgreer.org or 864.416.0121.
Town of Hollywood

After the devastating shooting at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in 2015, residents of Hollywood, which had connections to three of the victims, were stricken.

So town officials decided to create a place for healing and reflection where the community could gather to remember the victims. The resulting project: Serenity Garden, which overlooks the Stono River. It features a brick path leading to a bubbling water statue, a swing overlooking the river and nine glass hummingbirds, one for each of the shooting victims. Town leaders plan to hold a yearly activity at the garden; formalize a list of enhancements to the site, such as restrooms; and establish a stakeholder committee tasked with maintaining the memorial and surrounding gardens.

The garden was funded half by the town and half by donations. It came together with the help of 20 volunteers, 10 businesses and seven churches. More than 200 people attended the dedication in 2016.

Contact Jacquelyn Heyward at mayorheyward@aol.com or 843.889.3222.

City of Manning

The City of Manning, like most rural cities and towns, struggled to attract retail businesses, which are important for a broad tax base and a source of jobs for residents. Determined to be proactive, Manning officials attended trade shows of the International Council of Shopping Centers and used a retail marketing consultant’s custom demographic research, gap analysis and marketing guide to target specific retailers and retail concepts that have succeeded in similar markets.

Funding to pay for consulting fees and staff training and travel to trade shows came from the City of Manning and a Hometown Economic Development Grant from the Municipal Association. Since announcing the initiative, three new retailers have been announced. Manning officials are not stopping there.

They are receiving additional training and will update the city’s marketing information and prospects list, while studying regional and national retail trends.

Contact Scott Tanner at stanner@cityofmanning.org or 803.825.9008.

Town of James Island

Some of James Island’s neediest residents live in their homes and pay taxes but have no clear record of ownership, which makes it difficult for the residents to receive aid for home improvements.

Town officials decided to help. To assist with critical home repairs, the Town of James Island and Sea Island Habitat for Humanity teamed up to repair four homes each in 2015 and 2016. Repairs included handicap ramps, roofs, window replacements and other improvements.

Public involvement was key. Town officials advertised the program in local churches and spread the word through community events and neighborhood council leaders. The outreach helped attract volunteers and connected those in need — including residents who hoped to “age in place” in a structurally sound home — with available assistance. After this success, the town plans to expand its home-repair partners to include Operation Home and Homeworks.

Improving the housing stock protects against blight and also generates tax revenue that can be reinvested into the community.

Contact Ashley Kellahan at akellahan@jamesislandsc.us or 843.795.4141.

City of Marion

In 2011, a fire in the City of Marion consumed several downtown buildings, damaged others and displaced businesses. But city leaders were determined not to give up on the area, leading them to ask residents and organizations what they should do with three empty lots on Main Street. The property owners sold two lots to the Historic Marion Revitalization Association. Proceeds from the sale of one donated building helped create a new downtown venue.

From the gaping space left by the fire, emerged the Main Street Commons, an outdoor gathering place with electricity and elevated stage for music entertainment, health fairs, farmers’ markets and other events.
Reflecting the broad-based community involvement in the project, a host of different organizations supplied funding. They included the Marion County Healthcare Foundation, Historic Marion Revitalization Association, the city and others. Future plans for the site include acquiring an adjacent vacant lot and building public restrooms, an arbor and a dining space.

Contact Alan Ammons at aammons@marionsc.gov or 843.423.5961.

City of Mullins

When the City of Mullins lost its finance director, city officials recognized they had an opportunity to look for a new and potentially better way of doing things. Rather than hiring and training someone new and then risk losing the individual to another employer, city officials decided to outsource the majority of its accounting and financial services to a certified public accounting firm.

The city and the contractor were able to customize the firm’s services so that jobs were only restructured, not eliminated. Cost savings from the four-year contract allowed the city to put money into its fund balance and use it for other operations. The change also brought greater effectiveness. City Council now receives more accurate and timely monthly information. Audit findings and adjustments have been reduced due to better internal controls and audit preparations. Plus, there is greater continuity of service, since the CPA firm has several employees who can fill in for one another.

Contact David Hudspeth at dhudspeth@mullinssc.us or 843.464.9583.

City of Newberry

With school art budget cuts and a lack of art classes offered, city officials wanted to create a well-rounded arts experience for residents. So the city invited local artists, art educators and local businesspeople to discuss how best to create visual arts programming and also contribute to economic development.

Undeterred by the prospect of starting a program from scratch with no budget, officials got to work, starting with youth art camps. They used money from the general fund and parks and recreation department, followed by donations from private businesses and foundations. The result? Revenue exceeded expenditures in the second full year, the program twice had to move to a bigger facility and the S.C. Clay Conference was established, drawing participants from four states.

The program now includes a separate art and pottery studio in an iconic downtown location and offers a multidisciplinary visual arts experience to anyone in the community, regardless of age or ability to pay. City officials have their sights set on increasing the size of the clay classes for teens and expanding the traditional art classes for adults and children.

Contact Marquerite Palmer at mpalmer@cityofnewberry.com or 803.321.1015.

City of Rock Hill

While sports tourism has shaped the City of Rock Hill’s identity since 1985, in recent years, officials sought to diversify city offerings to attract new events and tourists. So in the past five years, Rock Hill developed mountain bike trails and two Olympic standard cycling facilities, earning the reputation of a cycling hub. The Giordana Velodrome for track cycling, opened in 2012, and the Novant Health BMX Supercross track, opened in 2014. They have drawn local, state, regional, national and international events.

Funding for the velodrome involved New Market Tax Credits, giving the city a 25 percent reduction on the total loan.

From its 1985 Cherry Park, offering baseball and softball tournaments, to its Rock Hill Tennis Center and Manchester Meadows soccer amenities, Rock Hill has consistently found ways to provide both recreation space and programming for residents and venues for local and international sporting events.

Contact John Taylor at john.taylor@cityofrockhill.com or 803.329.5620.

City of Seneca

While Oconee County is known for its scenic foothills and lakes, the City of Seneca added a new attraction to the landscape by establishing the Bertha Lee Strickland Cultural Museum in 2016. It is the only institution in the county dedicated to preserving and sharing the complete history and culture of local African Americans. The admission-free museum
preserves and celebrates local African American history, while educating the public, inspiring future generations and honoring the past.

Since last year, the museum has had three exhibits and four major events, drawing 2,000 visitors. The city fully funded the museum with hospitality tax funds and the general city budget.

There's more to come: The museum plans to build its collections, improve its website and social media presence, and offer new dynamic programming, events and exhibits.

Contact Shelby Henderson at shenderson@seneca.sc.us or 864.710.9994.

**Town of Summerville**

Now the seventh largest municipality in the state, the Town of Summerville sought to balance its growing size with a commitment to its small-town character. As part of its 2014 Vision Plan of what Summerville will look like in 2040, the town reimagined Hutchinson Square, the town’s gateway, to preserve “the heart of Summerville,” create a gathering place, and attract businesses and residents to the town.

Federal and private grants funded the master plan development and Phase I construction expenses. A kickoff meeting with stakeholders occurred in January of 2015 and was followed by two more public input sessions and a final public meeting. Officials carefully adhered to project goals of increasing safety, visibility and accessibility; integrating public art; providing event space; and protecting grand live oaks. To that end, the town proposed a replica of a historic archway; removed some trees and roots from walkways; installed sidewalks, streetlights and landscape lights; thinned the tree canopy; and proposed a depot-inspired pavilion.

Contact Doyle Best at dbest@summervillesc.gov or 843.851.5211.

**City of Sumter**

City of Sumter officials decided to look at what they already had — tennis courts — and enhance that unique amenity. In the early 2000s, officials made sports tourism a priority. In 2004, the Palmetto Tennis Center opened with 14 courts and a pro shop. Accommodations tax revenues funded the $1 million construction project. In the last 10 years, the Palmetto Tennis Center has undergone two expansions.

Today, the Center has 24 lighted, DecoTurf hard courts, a full-service pro shop and locker rooms. It has garnered lots of recognition, including a top 10 facility designation by the 2016 Sports Planning Guide. The Center’s multi-million-dollar impact from visitor spending reflects a 50 percent jump from 2009. Every year 29,000 visitors and residents use the Center for clinics, lessons, school matches, tournaments and league play. The Center is also the home of the USC-Sumter Fire Ants Tennis Team.

Sumter isn’t stopping there. Future plans include eight additional courts and space for single-practice, youth play and pickle ball, along with a new 3,500-square-foot operations center.

Contact Shelley Kile at skile@sumter-sc.com or 803.795.2463.

**Town of Williamston**

Before the Town of Williamston hired a planning consultant to help promote the town’s unique assets in 2015, issues were addressed in a piecemeal fashion with no master plan. To remedy this, an effort called Envision Williamston came into being. The town used community surveys, focus groups and public presentations to gather ideas on how to ensure Williamston’s vibrancy, growth and sustainability.

The town also received a grant from the S.C. National Heritage Corridor and a Main Street Challenge grant from Innovate Anderson. The town funded way-finding signs, banners, an electronic message board and streetscapes. Events, such as a scarecrow contest, were funded by the town, nonprofits and corporate/private sponsors.

Williamston has more in store. Short-term steps include an electronic message board to promote its Adopt-a-Rest Stop project, a façade improvement grant program to enhance the aesthetics of town businesses, a Main Street Challenge Program to recruit new businesses, a cleanup day and a pocket park feasibility study.

Contact Debbie Chapman at dchapman@williamstonsc.us or 864.847.7473.
Main Street South Carolina Inspiration Awards

Main Street South Carolina empowers residents, business owners and local officials with the knowledge, skills, tools and organizational structure necessary to revitalize downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts into vibrant centers of commerce and community.

Main Street South Carolina is a service of the Municipal Association of SC and is accredited by the National Main Street Center. The program follows National Main Street’s Four Point Approach — economic vitality, design, promotion and organization. Each year, Main Street South Carolina recognizes members’ achievements and successes in downtown revitalization.

Excellence on Main Street Award

Outstanding Promotion
Downtown Sumter’s Pokémon GO Lure-A-Thon

Downtown promotion that encourages consumers and stakeholders to live, work, shop and invest in the Main Street area is one of the core principals of the National Main Street approach. Downtown Sumter’s Pokémon GO Lure-A-Thon event illustrates an effective and creative approach to complement more traditional promotional strategies.

Downtown Sumter recognized the opportunity to capitalize on the national Pokémon craze to attract people downtown. In Pokémon GO, a location-based augmented reality game, players use a mobile device’s GPS to locate, capture, battle and train virtual creatures that appear on the screen.

By strategically using the features of the game, including PokéStops, PokéBalls and lures, and complementing these features with attractions spread across the downtown, the event encouraged participants to walk all over the central business district. Offering more than 50 attractions throughout downtown, the event included face painting, door prizes, a photo booth with Pokémon props, cellphone charging station, Italian Ice, bottled water, and food and drink specials.

The event met its goal of using a trendy, family friendly event to attract a diverse mix of non-traditional visitors to downtown. Many of the estimated 2,000 visitors were exposed for the first time to the physical improvements and businesses added in recent years.

To promote the event, Downtown Sumter designed and printed marketing materials, including posters for the businesses and handouts for Pokémon players. Social media was a centerpiece in promotions. Organizers used the event Facebook page as well as the South Carolina Pokémon and Sumter Pokémon pages to spread the word, an effort that resulted in more than 1,000 shares.
Outstanding Public/Private Partnership
Main Street Hartsville and City of Hartsville

The City of Hartsville worked in concert with private developers to transform a parking lot into a retail corridor, complete with a boutique wine shop, upscale salon, frame shop and art gallery. The effort increased safety and downtown foot traffic, reinvigorated the downtown economy and expanded the tax base.

City officials turned an off-putting alleyway into a pocket park and entrance to the new retail corridor. Along the side of the newly developed space, East College Avenue – once known as rollercoaster alley – was repaired. The city also installed an archway across East College Avenue to welcome visitors to Coker College and the new shopping district.

An additional walking corridor connects the repaved parking lots to Carolina Avenue, the main thoroughfare to Coker College. The result: a downtown that is connected — not only on maps and in pictures, but also with partnerships among private developers, property and business owners, residents and city officials.

Downtown Service Award
Todd Touchberry, Sumter

Todd Touchberry has showed his longstanding support for the City of Sumter’s downtown by preserving and promoting its rich past.

His appreciation for his hometown, and especially its downtown, is reflected in the period décor of Cut Rate Drug Store and Soda Fountain. For the last eight years, Touchberry has managed the soda fountain portion of the drug store. It has been located downtown since 1935 and features authentic pieces from that period and later decades.

In addition to displaying Sumter memorabilia, Touchberry maintains a collection of about 100 yearbooks from the local high school. His collection also includes signs, boxes, and items from current and past downtown Sumter merchants.

While Touchberry participates in the city’s festivals and events, he also organizes antique car shows and drive-in movies as fundraisers for many causes, including the local military museum, the Shriners, and victims of the recent hurricanes and floods. The car shows and drive-in movies are held in the parking lots next to and behind Cut Rate.

Gaines Jontz Rehabilitation Award
Bobby Wilson, Alderman’s 20 Stores in One, Manning

In 2012, the roof of the historic Alderman’s 20 Stores in One building had collapsed, breaking the sprinkler line and flooding the building in downtown Manning.

The 14,750-square-foot structure was left vacant and deteriorating for two years before Bobby Wilson started renovating it. He returned the 1919 building to its former glory by using historical photographs and documents to guide restorations. Plus, he concealed modern building features to avoid compromising the structure’s historic character.

By saving the building instead of razing it and starting over, Wilson’s rehabilitation project serves as a success story to inspire the reuse of other buildings and promotes sustainability and economic development.

Master Merchant Award
Yvan Youssef, Laurens

The City of Laurens needed an inviting bar to help attract customers to its downtown. So, Yvan Youssef, a Kurd from Syria who grew up in France and came to the United States in 2001, decided to expand his downtown restaurant, ROMA, to include a bar.

The City of Laurens allocated $20,000 for Main Street Laurens to develop a restaurant-centered grant, a portion of which assisted in the ROMA expansion. And Youssef dedicated some matching funds toward the expansion and the purchase of new seating and supplies. He also redecorated the venue, updated the menu and named a dish after a longtime Main Street Laurens volunteer. But Youssef’s support doesn’t end there.

During Main Street Laurens events, he opens his restaurant, even if it falls at a time when he ordinarily is closed. He also offers special menus, outdoor seating and live music.