

Cities Mean **BUSINESS**

A PUBLICATION OF THE MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA

ISSUE 2 | 2020

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By Jenny Boulware



Cover Photo:

A mural commemorating Conway's railroad history is a focal point in the renovated Kingston Park. Photo: City of Conway.

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Letter From the **DIRECTOR**



Todd Glover
Executive Director,
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Association of SC

Pandemic disruptions have been difficult for all of us, threatening lives, health and economic stability. During this time, local elected leaders in cities and towns have helped to keep residents safe and labored to support their local businesses as well.

This issue of *Cities Mean Business* looks at the many ways that cities support entrepreneurs and promote all types of businesses in their communities. One of the articles examines cities' response to COVID-19 in Abbeville, Aiken and Camden, where municipalities have been helping connect businesses to assistance programs and in some cases even setting up local loan programs.

Another story takes a look at transforming historic downtowns in decline into newly vibrant, attractive and walkable districts. This piece examines the specific strategies happening in Conway, Laurens and Cheraw.

Communicating about projects is a critical part of economic development work. Take a look at how officials in Goose Creek, Spartanburg and West Columbia have been sharing information on new economic development projects in their communities. Another aspect of working with businesses is to find ways to make permitting, licensing and paying bills as easy as possible. See how the cities of Sumter and Forest Acres have enhanced their customer service for businesses and residents alike.

Healthy local economies can benefit significantly from the initiatives of municipal governments. Local leaders are deeply involved in the success of their cities and towns, and they're going to remain critical leaders through whatever difficulties may come next.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "B. Todd Glover".

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HELPING BUSINESSES NAVIGATE THE PANDEMIC

By Megan Sexton



As the coronavirus pandemic entered South Carolina, anxiety swept through businesses facing shutdowns, layoffs and revenue losses. At the same time, cities and towns stepped up to help with answers to questions and pathways to financial support.

Some cities were able to offer loan programs, redirecting money budgeted initially for other projects. Others set up drive-through farmers markets, and some have worked as conduits between business owners and state and federal programs.

At the beginning of the economic shutdown, Tim O'Briant, Aiken's economic development director, said social distancing "was voluntary except for restaurants, but we anticipated that would expand. We wanted to act quickly."



Top: Customers wear masks at the Kershaw County Farmers Market. Left: A sign reminds customers of new protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Photos: City of Camden.

Aiken City Council passed an emergency ordinance on March 23 to create a \$1 million loan program to provide relief for local merchants. The City of Aiken joined with local community development organizations including the Aiken Corporation, the local Security Federal Bank and the Aiken Chamber of Commerce to offer loan guarantees to help local merchants.

“We were able to get this rolled out before the payroll protection program was passed by Congress and before they had initial Small Business Administration loans,” O’Briant said. “People were nervous about what to do with employees, about whether they should close their doors.”

The program offered loans to brick-and-mortar small businesses located within the city limits that had 25 or fewer full-time equivalent workers. Those with a business license and an ability to meet some creditworthiness and underwriting standards were able to borrow up to \$10,000, with payments deferred for either six months or a year. The loans offered a two-year payback with 2% interest.

The application asked owners to explain the impact of COVID-19 on their business



Aunt B's Kettle Corn stand at the Kershaw County Farmers Market offers the now-familiar sight of hand sanitizer, masks and signs for following COVID-19 safety measures. Photo: City of Camden.

and give the same documentation required by the SBA. Of the 50 applications received by late April, 45 were approved.

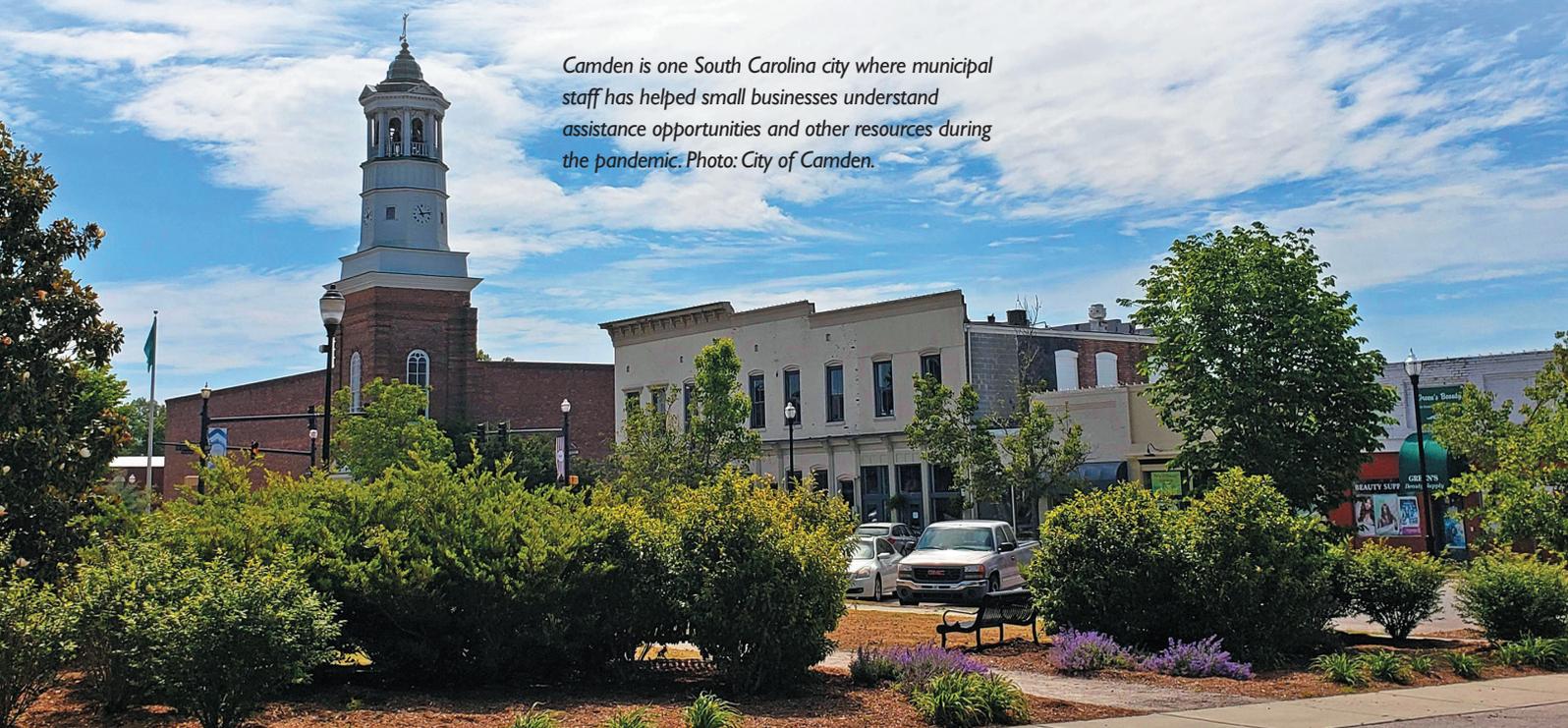
The \$500,000 share of the funding provided by the city came from a master economic development plan already in the works. The original, prepandemic plan aimed to spur residential and business expansion.

Camden is one South Carolina city where municipal staff has helped small businesses understand assistance opportunities and other resources during the pandemic. Photo: City of Camden.

O’Briant spoke with more than 300 representatives from local businesses — some who needed the loans and some who had questions about the emerging economic climate.

“We wanted to be a resource that could counsel businesses financially and emotionally,” he said. “We posted a link on our website, and we set hours where we had counselors available. You could go in and self-select your time,” he said. “We did that for two and a half weeks, nonstop. We were making sure we were the experts locally, although the city has no connection to the SBA, but we could guide people through our knowledge. I’ve very proud of the help we were able to offer, and we’ve gotten a wonderful reaction from the business community.”

City staff in Camden also helped small business owners understand the available funding and other assistance they may be able to access during the pandemic. Emails and direct mail were sent to business owners to inform them about SBA disaster loans and the process for applying for help. Main Street program manager Katharine Spadacenta and city staff made themselves available to



small business owners who had questions or needed help applying for SBA Economic Injury Disaster Loans and the Kershaw County Small Business Stabilization grants administered by Kershaw County.

“We also walked business owners through the application over the phone, by video chat or Zoom meeting and even in person. Some of our business owners do not have access to computers or the internet, or were not familiar enough with the technology to complete the EIDL application, and so staff also made ourselves and the necessary technology available to business owners who needed that access in order to apply for an EIDL,” she said.

The Downtown Camden marketing budget, which was intended to promote spring events and tourism, shifted to instead support a campaign that promotes ways for people to support small businesses and help them keep their doors open. The campaign suggested alternatives to in-person support, including online and over-the-phone shopping, takeout or delivery from restaurants, maintaining memberships at businesses and purchasing gift cards to be used in the future.

“The majority of our eating establishments went straight to curbside pickup and local delivery when their dining rooms were closed down by the governor’s executive order,” Spadacenta said. “Some of our lunch locations also began preparing family-style ‘heat and eat’ meals for people to take home. Our retail boutiques took their inventory to social media, offering Facebook Live sales and FaceTime or video chat tours of their shops. Many offered front-porch delivery to Camden residents. Our bookstore recorded a ‘story time’ with a local author who was scheduled to have an in-store event, and published it to Facebook. And, our locally owned athletic club began offering its classes online, with instructors posting videos on YouTube and going live on Facebook.”



Tim O'Briant, right, Aiken's economic development director, reviews loan applications with Sabina Craig, development project manager. Photo: Shiann Sivell, Aiken Standard.

Like many cities, Camden waived late fees for utility bills and worked one-on-one with residents and business owners who are losing income because of hardships related to COVID-19. The city also worked to get fresh food to residents through the Kershaw County Farmers Market, a nonprofit, weekly market in downtown Camden. The market asked the city for guidance and approval to operate an “Essential Market” so residents could access fresh, locally grown produce, meats, other food items, and soaps and other hygiene products. In the first few weeks, it offered a drive-thru lane for those who didn’t feel comfortable getting out of their cars.

Many South Carolina municipalities have pulled together directories of resources available to their small businesses and residents and shared those through websites. In Abbeville, the city put together a comprehensive list of federal resources, along with other tools available to help businesses and residents.

“The main thing we try to do with all resources and information out there is to be a resource conduit,” said Mike Clary,

Abbeville’s community development director. “We created this repository of different information, whether federal, state or local, where businesses and residents can go to that one site. Everything from SBA loans, if local banks are offering mortgage deferments, things like that.”

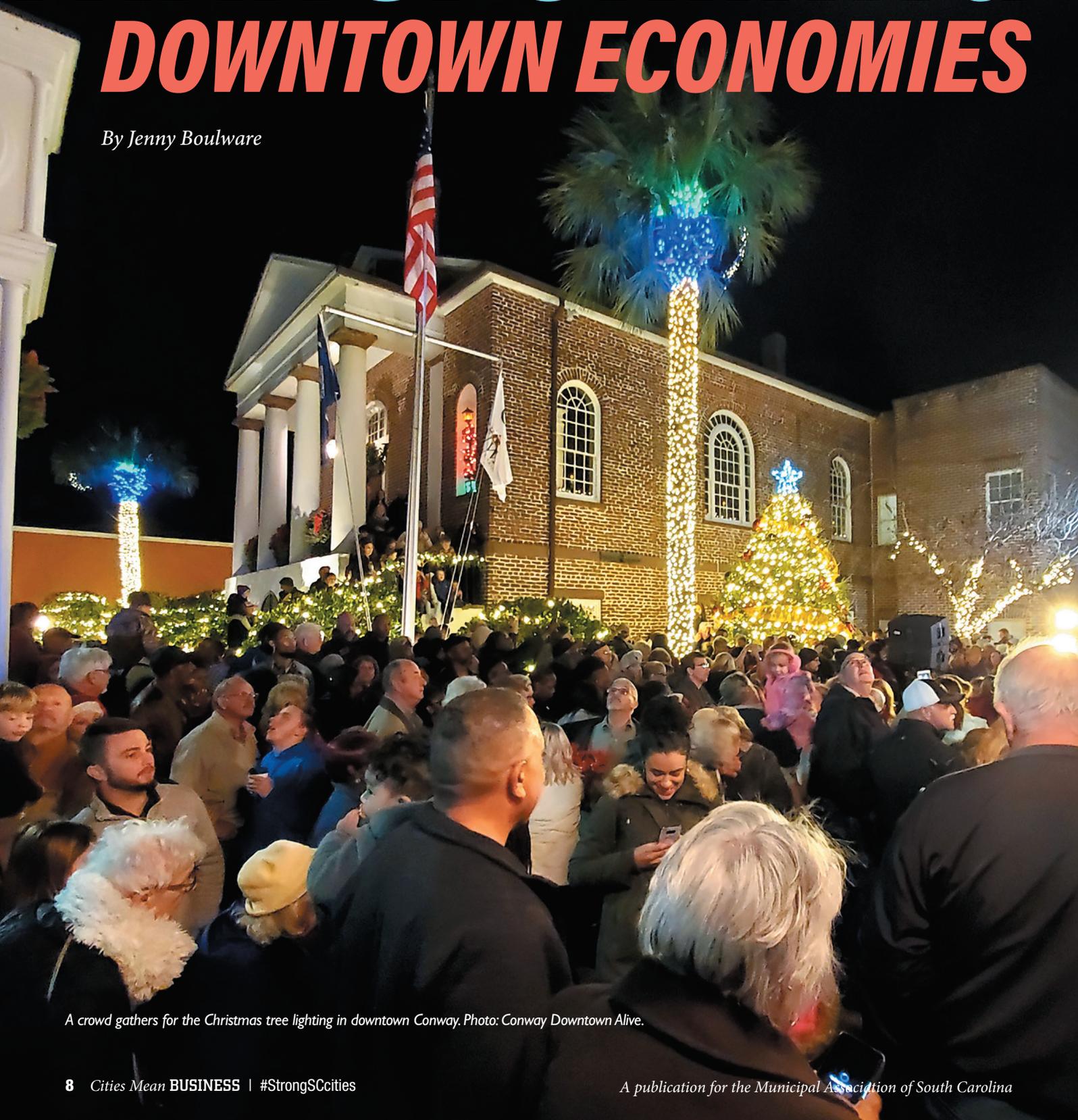
Abbeville has also used its social media channels to communicate with residents, offering details on restaurant hours for takeout service and other updates on retail shops.

Other cities around the state have put together resource pages to offer technical assistance, alerting small businesses and residents to help available from state and federal channels. York, Isle of Palms, Liberty, Florence and other municipalities have cultivated resource pages and technical assistance.

“We always try to offer information to businesses and residents, but certainly the pandemic has changed how everyone operates to a degree,” Clary said. “The suddenness of all this made us reconsider how we put out that information.” ●

TRANSFORMING DOWNTOWN ECONOMIES

By Jenny Boulware



A crowd gathers for the Christmas tree lighting in downtown Conway. Photo: Conway Downtown Alive.

Where South Carolina's downtowns were often distressed commercial districts in recent years, many have worked to transform into vibrant walkable neighborhoods.

Challenges remain, with the massive business disruption of COVID-19 being a major one. Even so, through coordinated revitalization efforts these districts have attracted new businesses, retained local talent and cultivated community engagement. Conway, Laurens and Cheraw are three municipalities that have demonstrated the effects of incremental, comprehensive downtown planning.

CONWAY

Less than 20 miles from the Grand Strand, the historic river city of Conway has seen tremendous growth recently, but this was not always the case. In 2009 with more than 50 empty storefronts, downtown looked bleak. Today the vacancy rate is near 0% in the city's retail and restaurant district. This improvement partially stems from heightened resiliency. Conway has faced repeated disasters including flooding and fires over the last few years, but its residents have managed to develop greater community resolve. One recent affirmation has been the role residents play in sustaining and growing the downtown economy. For years, residents assumed that tourists led downtown investment, but when the city's main access bridge was closed for six months, the majority of the downtown economy remained robust. Residents turned inward to support local businesses and found that downtown could satisfy their shopping and dining needs.

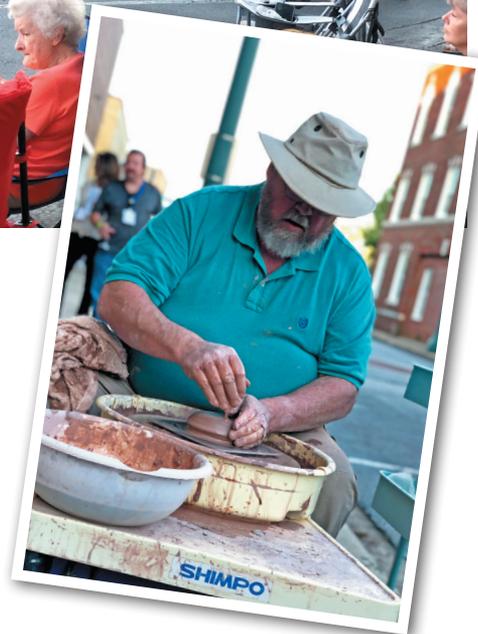
Hillary Howard, executive director of Conway Alive, noted that beautification partnerships continue to be Conway's best



The City of Conway completed a renovation of Kingston Park in 2019. Photo: City of Conway.



Above: Main Street Laurens organizes Finally Friday on the Square, which features live music, extended shopping and dinner specials. Right: Pottery making takes place at the Laurens Sip-&-Stroll Wine Tasting. Photos: Main Street Laurens.





Events in downtown Cheraw include the Annual Cheraw Lantern Parade, Spring Festival and SC Jazz Festival. Photos: Town of Cheraw.

strategy for downtown improvement. One example is Kingston Park, completed in fall 2019.

“This is a showstopper. It was a great collaboration between the Main Street program, the chamber [of commerce] and the city,” she said.

Simple placemaking measures such as the installation of overhead lighting, landscaping and a mural transformed an unimpressive green space into a stunning corner park.

The next opportunity to grow the city’s downtown is development of amenities along the Waccamaw River. To complement the existing 1.3-mile Riverwalk, leaders plan to connect downtown to this natural asset through the coordination of live, work, play activities. The city recently purchased significant riverfront property which Howard described as a “real game changer” for catalyzing the riverfront’s potential.

LAURENS

Gateway to the Upstate and the greater Greenville area, Laurens’ iconic courthouse square and nearby historic neighborhoods create a charming downtown district. Its walkability recently improved because of a push to incrementally expand the commercial district. A crosswalk connection to a public parking lot significantly improved

access to the courthouse square. This much-needed crosswalk simply required a phone call to the SC Department of Transportation to coordinate the installation and a lane change in sync with a scheduled highway repaving.

Mayor Nathan Senn said “It was an easy ask, because it was a common-sense solution that was already identified in the downtown master plan.”

Additional downtown master plan concepts have been realized in close coordination with the downtown development nonprofit, Main Street Laurens. The Food Truck Plaza, a dedicated venue for community food trucks, is a catalytic component of the city’s focus on growing its arts and food culture.

Jonathan Irick, executive director of Main Street Laurens, is helping to spur the culinary arts and arts initiatives to grow Laurens’ downtown economy.

Irick said, “We have learned to not overthink plans. Small, fast wins are just as impactful, if not more, than one large project that takes years to develop. For instance, the installation of overhead festoon lighting in the alleyways has boosted evening appeal in these formerly dark spaces.”

Together, Irick and Senn note that positive communication has strengthened

the partnership between the city and Main Street Laurens.

“Leaders are elected to lead,” Senn said. “Play the long game. Be patient. Be willing to say no, not right now or yes because it’s the right thing to do.”

CHERAW

In recent years, the historic core of Cheraw struggled. A small mix of business anchors were surrounded by dilapidated buildings slated for demolition. That bleakness changed when Cheraw’s town leadership voted to create a Main Street program to implement a comprehensive downtown plan. Today, Cheraw has a more unified vision with short- and long-term goals.

Rob Wolfe, Cheraw’s first Main Street executive director, links this vision to the town’s positive relationship with engaged merchants building a modern shopping and dining experience.

“My role is to provide direction on how best to achieve that. For instance, we have hosted several workshops to offer practical solutions that address window design and business development.”

Merchants immediately embraced the recommendations and storefronts were cleverly redesigned with appealing displays.

Cheraw in just one year has harnessed its residents' enthusiasm to help downtown succeed.

"People are noticing that things are happening," said Wolfe. "In fact, some residents compared Cheraw to a 'Hallmark' community after a successful evening lantern parade."

Business districts must capitalize on the assets that make them unique.

"We have the best-preserved historic district outside of Charleston," Wolfe said. "Our historic district is the most visible asset with an enormous collection of pre-Civil War buildings including over 170 residential and commercial structures."

A district of this age, however, has its challenges. Most buildings are unused and need rehabilitation, but this is changing. One particular project that has the community encouraged is a downtown hotel.

Wolfe noted that "this is a very rare opportunity for a town of our size to secure a major outside investment. It's a huge boost for downtown and one that required the creation and approval of an incentive package and a land swap."

The goal is to retain Cheraw's large daytime workforce — a key asset — while spurring additional investment downtown.

A SHARED VISION

Revitalization is more than physical improvements. It is also about leaders and residents working together.

Jenny Boulware, manager of Main Street South Carolina, noted that revitalization "requires bringing people together to develop and implement a shared vision. This can stimulate economic growth, creativity and activity downtown."

Identifying specific development strategies can take downtown districts to

new levels of livelihood. Begin by identifying assets, resources and partnerships to inform long-term planning. An understanding of local market conditions — why people live and work downtown — helps craft a vision of downtown's role in the greater economy. Through public engagement, strategic planning, public commitment and ongoing support, South Carolina's cities and towns can create a place that unites community, attracts visitors and supports small businesses. ●

Main Street South Carolina is a technical assistance program that empowers communities as they revitalize their historic downtowns, encouraging economic development and historic preservation. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: Main Street).

Cheraw has implemented a plan to revitalize historic downtown buildings and develop a modern shopping and dining experience. Photo: Town of Cheraw.





SPREADING THE WORD ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By Russell Cox

When city leaders in Goose Creek looked at the explosive population growth that their Lowcountry community has recently experienced, they decided that a rebranding project would help them more accurately reflect what the city has come to offer. The results of that effort, including a refreshed logo and style book as well as a “Creek Rising” campaign, won Goose Creek a 2019 Municipal Association of SC Achievement Award.

“We think the change alone got us some attention, and it got us in some conversations that we may have not been in before,” said Matt Brady, economic development director for Goose Creek.

Goose Creek has an economic development web landing page, www.creekrising.com, that features city-based business incentives, site selection and relocation data and information on the Goose Creek Local Branded program, which has an interactive map of local businesses.

Brady also spoke of the value of emphasizing the city’s role in proactively pursuing economic development. He stressed the importance of having something to say “every



Matt Brady, economic development director of Goose Creek, is leading a “Creek Rising” rebranding effort in the rapidly growing Lowcountry city. Photo: City of Goose Creek.

time you get a win — if you get a new company, you get an expansion or something like that, [it’s important to push out] your press releases and social media, amplifying it however you can.”

Brady described the project as part of a panel discussion on economic development messaging during a Communications Workshop at the Municipal Association. He was joined by Anna Huffman, communications and technology director for the City of West Columbia and Christopher George, communications manager for the City of Spartanburg.

Huffman described the city’s communication pushes at a time when it opened multiple quality-of-life projects, including its Interactive Art Park as well as the Art on State project. For communications, she said the city capitalized on every aspect of the projects from groundbreaking to the actual opening. The projects aim to further the economic development of West Columbia by making it a more attractive place to live and work.

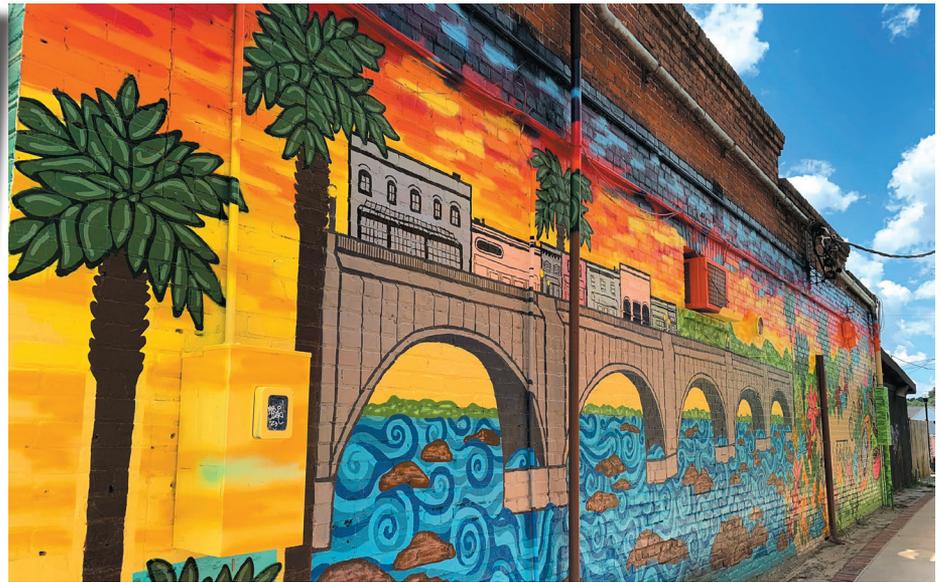
“All the parks have art installations that are interactive. So, we keep pushing the message out, ‘come, check out our parks, interact with the art, things are always changing,’” Huffman said.

The art installations have been opening at the same time as new private development and parking expansions in the city’s riverfront area, and Huffman said that areas on Meeting and State streets as well as Triangle City are ready for infill development.

“We’re seeing a lot redevelopment and restaurant investment and nightlife, so we’re really promoting that on our social media, trying to get people over the river to see what’s going on in West Columbia, to eat here, to hang out,” she said.



Above and right: West Columbia has created its Interactive Art Park and Art on State project to enhance its economic development efforts. Photo: City of West Columbia.



George described Spartanburg’s development-focused projects receiving attention from his department including streetscaping, recreational trails and parking. Sometimes, he said, messages really need repeating. A major development of a downtown hotel caught the attention of detractors, he said, and so the city repeatedly made the case that market growth really created demand for those hotel rooms. The city even has residents who he said are “active defenders” of specific efforts on social media, and hearing from neighbors on social media does create authenticity.

“Residents take it a lot better if it comes from the neighbors, but I don’t think we would have gotten that if we hadn’t been pretty assertive and aggressive in the beginning in saying, ‘hey, good stuff is coming,’” he said.

Spartanburg has a website, www.seespartanburgrise.com, with an interactive map that tracks downtown development projects and cumulative investment amounts since 1996. George said the city works with outside partners on communicating about projects, giving the example of the restoration of the historic high-rise Montgomery Building. The city published videos of the project in various stages and had the developers come on as guests for the city podcast.

“We made it our business to tell that story in all sorts of ways,” George said. ●



Above: Downtown Spartanburg has recently seen major projects such as the restoration of the Montgomery Building. Below: Christopher George, right, communications manager for the City of Spartanburg, leads a podcast discussing the Montgomery Building project. Photos: City of Spartanburg.



RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES AS CUSTOMERS

Cities Build Better Relationships With Transaction Improvements

By Page Ivey

Whether it's offering a one-stop shop for business licensing or streamlining billing for utility customers, cities and towns are putting a greater focus on customer service for residents and businesses, particularly in the areas of utility billing and business licensing.

The City of Sumter has drastically changed its utility billing processes over the past few years to include shorter wait times for customers and implemented electronic metering to improve the accuracy of bills. The key, said Candi Quiroz, utility business director for the City of Sumter, has been to take a "get to know your customer" approach, and one that takes into account the presence of Shaw Air Force Base in the community.

"Sumter is a military town, so over the years, we realized a lot of military personnel will call and try to set up their account before they get to town," Quiroz said. "But it was hard for us to do, because they had to mail stuff in or we had to email back and forth."

Now the process is entirely online and new customers can set up an account without ever having to go to the office.

A second automation tool that the city uses is to call customers when a bill is past due.

"As long as we have updated phone numbers, we will send out a reminder call to make a payment, and customers have really responded well to that," Quiroz said.

Automation is also used when customers take a trip to the office to turn on service. Documents such as lease agreements and photo IDs are scanned into the computer system and originals are returned to the customer. There are no files of photocopied



From left: The City of Forest Acres' David Parnell, code enforcement officer/commercial inspector; Keith Lindler, city engineer/building official; and Roy McBee, code enforcement officer. Photo: City of Forest Acres.

or handwritten items spilling out of folders anymore — it's all electronic.

In March 2019, the City of Sumter moved utility billing out of the back of the Sumter Opera House, where a retrofitted space was too small for the traffic it received, and into a new purpose-built office with plenty of space.

Another major change made in the city was a new focus on certain metrics of customer service. Wait times, both in person and on the phone, are recorded, as are instances of customers who either leave or hang up before completing their business. The city reviews how long it takes to complete a service for a customer. Those numbers are reviewed with employees each month and with management each quarter.

"What gets measured gets improved," Quiroz said. "I think it helps employees feel informed. It makes them feel like a part of everything that's going on. They see what value they can bring to the table."

Getting city workers on board as a way to

improve service has also proved critical for the City of Forest Acres as well. This is especially true in the business licensing department of the small city with robust economic development.

Shaun Greenwood, city administrator for Forest Acres, cross trains his city employees so they can handle basic tasks outside of their purview.

"We're fairly small, but basically what we've done is we've tried to make a one-stop shop when people come in to do any business," Greenwood said. "Whether it's code enforcement, business licensing, everyone can answer basic questions and we can help someone immediately."

Everyone in the office can help fill out an application, get the proper code for the type of business and get the applicant out the door in 15 minutes with a license.

The city handles about 1,500 licenses a year with a staff of eight, including Greenwood, who also serves as president of the South Carolina Business Licensing Officials Association.

Greenwood noted the importance of not only thinking about not what people are experiencing when they are working with the City of Forest Acres, but also what they're experiencing when they work with other jurisdictions as well.

"A lot of the frustration that businesses have is when they go from city to city and have things done differently," Greenwood said. "We're trying to consolidate and standardize everything as best we can. We're looking at our processes to make sure they are fair and that we are interpreting things in the same way that other cities are." ●



The city of Sumter has revamped its utility billing processes to shorten customer wait times and improve accuracy of bills. Photos: City of Sumter.

HOMETOWN SNAPSHOT



Photos: City of Rock Hill.

In 2019, My Ride Rock Hill became the state's first public transit system to start up from the beginning with all electric buses. The system has seven buses running four routes along the city's main corridors, and the buses have USB charging ports for every seat, free Wi-Fi and bike racks.



You see a ballpark...



We see an investment in hometown quality of life that offers a special place to host national tournaments and welcome visitors. This is the same special place where kids of all ages can enjoy sports and outdoor activities with neighbors and friends.

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