

Cities Mean **BUSINESS**

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ISSUE 2 | 2021

Laying the Groundwork

**Cities Focus on Downtown
Enhancements as
Economic Investments**

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Cover Photo:
The massive CenterG streetscape project used a shared-surface street concept, a pedestrian-focused design that lacks curbs and makes transitioning the street into a special event space easier. Photo: City of Greer.



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Letter From the **DIRECTOR**



Todd Glover
*Executive Director,
Municipal
Association of SC*

City government leaders are the first to understand their community's assets and its challenges, and then work hard to help the community reach its potential. When municipal governments use creativity, diligence and careful attention to detail, they become powerful engines for local economic growth.

This issue of *Cities Means Business* explores the many ways that local governments invest in themselves to spur transformative changes.

One of the feature stories looks at how downtown development organizations in Sumter, Moncks Corner and Williamston delivered new economic opportunities during the coronavirus pandemic. With shutdowns and social distancing requirements eliminating much of the state's usual tourism activity, these downtown programs turned their attention to marketing the businesses of their core commercial districts to their own residents — people who at times are not aware of the newest developments in their hometowns.

Another article examines streetscaping, which is critically important in business districts but often gets attention only when it's missing or inadequate. Elements like proper lighting, landscaping, parking and well-built sidewalks can stand as the difference between an inviting place for businesses and a place that visitors will avoid.

Other stories in this issue explore creative solutions that our state's cities and towns have pursued in recent years. This includes establishing a city-run commercial kitchen incubator to make the difficult process of starting up a local restaurant a little easier, and converting old, disused facilities into brand-new municipal parks or recreation facilities. The residents and the leaders who choose to make a place their hometown are the ones who best understand its needs and potential. Over and over, we see local governments finding new and often surprising ways to invest in themselves and drive their communities to new heights.

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

B. Todd Glover

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Executive Director, Municipal Association of SC

Reimagining

Old Spaces as New Parks

By Megan Sexton,
Contributing Writer

The City of Walterboro is home to South Carolina's largest municipal park — 600 acres of boardwalk, hiking and canoe trails that wind through the woodlands and creeks of the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto Basin that make up the Walterboro Wildlife Sanctuary.

Now, the park has a downtown component, too.

The Walterboro Wildlife Center, featuring an exhibit hall highlighting the significance of the wildlife sanctuary, opened in a formerly vacant building in downtown Walterboro. Displays detail the history and hydrology of what is commonly known as the ACE Basin, and exhibits explain native plants and animal life of the Lowcountry swamps. It also is home to a large meeting space and an amphitheater for public performances and events.

Walterboro is just one example of cities and towns transforming old buildings or abandoned properties for new recreation purposes. From an old sewage lagoon redeveloped as a waterfront park to a former golf course turned into a nature and birdwatching park, South Carolina municipalities have found adaptive reuse solutions that draw visitors to their towns and expand offerings for residents.

In Walterboro, the city purchased an empty downtown building in 2013. The

Walterboro Wildlife Center opened to the public in January 2020.

“The City of Walterboro has invested millions of dollars in beautification efforts to attract people downtown. Repurposing an abandoned building downtown helped the city transform the property into a great public space at the city's center,” said Jeff Molinari, Walterboro's city manager. “The creation of the large event space and amphitheater will infuse more vitality into the downtown area that will lead to increased activity over time.”

The Wildlife Sanctuary attracts visitors from all over the country, especially those traveling on the Interstate 95 corridor that passes by the city. Future plans for the center include increasing wildlife programming and presentations, field trips, event rentals for private and public functions, concerts and theatrical events in the amphitheater.

Molinari said the city was able to secure \$625,000 in grant funding, including a Hometown Economic Development Grant, over the years to help pay for the center.



The Walterboro Wildlife Center celebrates the ecology of the Walterboro Wildlife Refuge, and also serves as an event and meeting space in the city's downtown. Photo: City of Walterboro.



The Wateree Riverfront Environmental Park, seen on the left, provided a cost-effective new purpose for a former wastewater lagoon. The lagoon is now a pond surrounded by walking trails, and the park offers a kayak ramp onto the Wateree River. Photo: City of Camden.

“Partnerships were critical to the project. U.S. Congressman James Clyburn helped the city secure a federal grant to purchase the building and property. The FROGS Committee, or Friends of the Great Swamp Sanctuary, a local nonprofit, helped to keep the idea moving forward, and Colleton County sold an adjacent 75-space parking lot to the city which allowed the city to improve the design by placing all of the parking off-site,” Molinari said.

In Camden, more stringent environmental regulations and improved treatment technologies forced the city to replace the 16.5-acre wastewater treatment lagoon it had operated for 40 years. But instead of simply filling in the huge hole, city staff and council brainstormed what to do with the site and decided on a combination of conservation and recreation.

Now, on the site where Camden’s river ferry operated in the 1700s, sits a place for wildlife, environmental education and recreation opportunities — the Wateree Riverfront Environmental Park.

The City of Camden expanded the site to a 26-acre park with an overlook to the Wateree River. The first phase, which includes walking trails, islands, a parking lot and kayak ramp, was completed in spring 2020. The park features an accessible ramp compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and a canoe and kayak slide. About a mile of walking trails wind around the pond, with the land planted with grasses and trees.

The park also provides the only public access to the Wateree River in Camden.

“We wanted to give something back to the public and the environment. While we could have filled it in, the park option created a wildlife habitat and encourages people to get out and enjoy nature,” said Ray Peterson, deputy director of public works and utilities for Camden. “Where once there was a wastewater lagoon, there is now a sheltered conservation area.”

Peterson noted that bird watchers visit the park for the opportunity to see many species of waterfowl and other animals, while kayakers can test their skills in the pond, in addition to launching on the river. Local students can use the park for environmental education programs, and the facility is close to Camden High School.

“Catch-and-release fishing can be done along the pond banks, and fishermen also can access the river for unlimited fishing, following SC Department of Natural Resources regulations. The fire department also uses the facility for training as well as rescue and recovery operations,” Peterson said.

Among the grants the city received for the project included \$500,000 from the Land and Water Conservation Fund through the SC Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, and \$100,000 from the SC Department of Natural Resources Recreational Waters Fund. The city budgeted for the remainder of the \$1.4 million project.

Camden also received a technical assistance grant from the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program through the National Park Service, which helped facilitate meetings, prioritize objectives and identify possible funding sources.

Camden hopes to expand the park with additional phases that will incorporate more boardwalks and bridges, and may include several observation platforms and possibly a small dock. The city also hopes to add more interpretive kiosks that point out the cultural history of the area along with the flora and fauna.

“The city took an old, outdated wastewater lagoon and turned it into a conservation area where people can learn about their natural environment, get outdoors with their families, and explore the history of the area,” Peterson said. “And, it was done for less than half of what it would have cost if we had simply filled in the former hole in the ground.”

On Hilton Head Island, the town purchased 15 holes of the former Port Royal Plantation Planters Row Golf Course in 2013 to protect the 103 acres from development. As part of the town and the parks and recreation planning, consultants and town leaders identified the land known as the Mid Island Tract as a perfect spot for a new community park for Hilton Head Island.

In 2020, the town did some work on the land — maintaining a primary drainage

channel, cleaning up storm damage and removing hazardous trees — to make the property safe for the public to explore. The town also worked with a local Audubon Society group to make sure it protected trees that were known to host native bird populations.

“With growing local interest to allow public access to the property, the town installed a temporary off-street parking area and opened the property to the public for passive use in March 2021,” said Jennifer Ray, Hilton Head Island’s interim community development director. “While remnants of the golf course remain and can be visible, much of the property has returned to nature. Almost 4 miles of cart paths are now accessible for the public to walk or ride bikes. The site is also popular for bird watching.”

Planners hoped to provide a mixture of passive and active uses at this new park to take advantage of the natural landscape and offset overuse of recreation facilities at some of Hilton Head Island’s other parks.

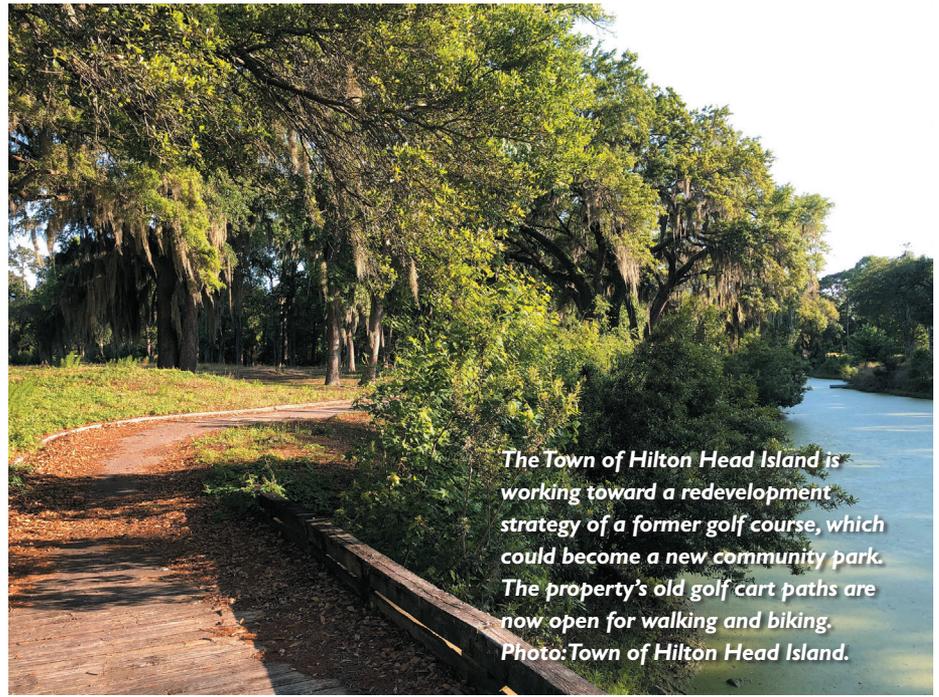
The list of proposals for the park include a fitness trail, cross country running or single-track bike trail, inclusive playground, and conservation area with interpretation and overlooks. Active recreation facilities on the list include a disc golf course, two to three rectangular sports fields, and a bike pump track — a group of banked turns and other features — to be ridden entirely while pumping the bike pedals.

The town is in the process of soliciting bids for a consultant to work with the staff and community on a redevelopment strategy for the property, Ray said.

“This will include design development for the park through to construction. The town is interested in working with local nature and conservation groups to ensure appropriate areas of the property are conserved and enhanced for educational purposes or for hobbyists,” she said.

She also said it was helpful that Hilton Head Island has a land acquisition plan that allows the town to anticipate future needs that can be helped through land ownership.

“The town uses this program to acquire land for investment, conservation and preservation of natural view sheds and corridors and parks,” she said.



The Town of Hilton Head Island is working toward a redevelopment strategy of a former golf course, which could become a new community park. The property’s old golf cart paths are now open for walking and biking. Photo: Town of Hilton Head Island.



Still possessing many of the features of the former golf course, the Mid Island Tract may see a variety of new recreation opportunities after its redevelopment. Photo: Town of Hilton Head Island.

The ongoing effort at the former golf course isn’t the only park effort happening on Hilton Head Island recently, as the town opened a park in December. The 10-acre Lowcountry Celebration Park had been under construction since 2018. Now it’s a venue for festivals and special events, the new home for the Sandbox Children’s Museum and a destination playground.

Ray has this advice for other municipalities looking at projects similar to the Mid Island Tract effort: “Include the community in the planning process for new parks. Find

out what the people want in their neighborhood. Be sure to focus not only on the community in general, but also neighborhoods directly adjacent to the property. Engage local recreation providers and parks interest groups. Find ways to make fallow property accessible to the public if there will be lag in time before development begins. There was lots of interest from island residents who just wanted to walk on the old cart paths, so the town took measures to bring the property to a safe standard for public use until it is developed.”



The City of Greer completed CenterG — a streetscape project that has transformed Trade Street into a pedestrian-friendly, aesthetically pleasing and economically thriving central business district. Photos: City of Greer.

Paving the Way for **Success**

By Megan Sexton, Contributing Writer

In the late spring of 2020, the City of Greer completed CenterG — a \$10-million streetscape project that has transformed Trade Street into a pedestrian-friendly, aesthetically pleasing and economically thriving central business district.

The project was a far cry from what the city had originally discussed years earlier. Business activity was already strong downtown, with several restaurants located on the main thoroughfare. The project began, Greer Mayor Rick Danner said, as a simple

reworking of the streetscape — “maybe find some places to punch out the sidewalk to accommodate some tables and redo the street with fresh asphalt. Maybe add some street lighting.”

A look at Greer’s downtown today shows what can happen when cities involve community stakeholders and pursue opportunities they believe will pay off. It’s an example of how cities and towns around South Carolina can use streetscaping, lighting and additional parking to improve the economic

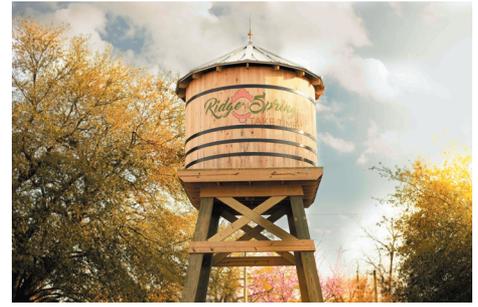
health of downtowns and the quality of life for residents and visitors.

In Greer, the process began with input from the downtown business community and residents, with council keenly interested in the process.

“We started to think, ‘If we do something, maybe we should take a bold approach,’” Danner said.

The city hired Kimley-Horn, a design and planning firm, to help plan and design downtown’s new look. Greer settled on a

The Town of Ridge Spring



The Town of Ridge Spring made its downtown more attractive and accessible by adding parking, improving streetscapes and enhancing the farmers market. The downtown now features a replica of a water tank from the early days of Ridge Spring, when it was used in part to provide water for steam engines stopping in the railroad town. Photos: Town of Ridge Spring.

shared-surface street concept, which replaces curbs with multicolored pavers and other methods to direct traffic. The change allows the street to be easily transformed into a pedestrian plaza for special events. It's a look that is common in the plazas of Italy and Spain, but not often seen in South Carolina.

"What it does is take an auto-centric design and flips it to a pedestrian-centric plan. You shrink two lanes of traffic to the bare minimum and take a 4- to 5-foot sidewalk to an 8- to 10-foot sidewalk on both sides of the street," Danner said. "We instantly realized people were so comfortable walking around downtown. It changes the dynamic of the area."

Although the project was completed during the pandemic, the city was able to stage some limited events during the summer and fall that showed the flexibility of the space. The lights that are strung across the street have been immensely popular, drawing compliments and downtown photo shoots.

But as the plans grew, so did the budget. Along with the beautification work, the city's public works department replaced the aging infrastructure.

"It's not a cheap project. You need to be upfront about that. We saved some money.

We had a good price on work that needed to be done. We communicated about what we were going to do and how it was going to be done," Danner said.

The city made it clear at the beginning that its first concern would be keeping businesses open during construction and keeping merchants informed. Greer formed a communications team of staff members, merchants, the chamber, economic development leaders, the contractor and an outside communications firm. Every merchant knew what the city was doing and how long each stage of the process would take.

"We had feet on the ground and on the street that could communicate," Danner said. "We had a full-time person for the city who was a liaison down there. Our commitment to the merchants was that during the construction process there was never a time when you'd be without your front door for more than three days. Most had alley access or parking lot access. In the end, nobody was without a front door for more than 48 hours. This was a multimillion-dollar project that came in on time, under budget and kept those businesses open. That doesn't happen without a lot of people communicating."

The success has been obvious. Greer's downtown has seen more than \$100 million of new investment, with a hotel, a city-built parking garage, and 200-plus urban apartments.

In the Town of Ridge Spring, an ambitious plan to enhance the downtown and create more parking was helped by a Community Development Block Grant and funding from the Saluda County Capital Project Tax.

Pat Asbill, who has been mayor for 12 years, said one of her goals was to bring more businesses to Ridge Spring's downtown. The work was successful, with five antique shops and three restaurants operating in the town.

"We're growing in the way little towns grow. But we didn't have parking," she said. "When you'd come in on a Friday afternoon or a Saturday, there was not a place to park. That was a good thing, but we had to figure out how to use an old parking lot and an old garden to make room for more."

The town took over a property that had been leased to a garden club for more than 30 years, rearranged the plantings and added more parking. It also enhanced its farmers

The City of Anderson



Left: Anderson's latest downtown development efforts include a new hotel and parking deck. Above: The new mural along Orr Street, a project of Leadership Anderson Class 36, draws from Anderson's history. Photos: City of Anderson.

market by adding parking and restrooms. By the end, it had added 30 parking spaces, improved the streetscape, enhanced the farmers market and made the downtown more attractive.

"But we really wanted something that would attract people's attention," she said.

That has come in the form of a decorative wooden water tower, a focal point in the town park. It's a replica of a water tank that was used in the early days of Ridge Spring, when it was used in part to provide water for steam engines stopping in the railroad town.

"It's absolutely the nicest water tank. We've had a wedding under it already. People come and take lots and lots of pictures. We're very proud of what we've done in the past two years," she said.

The City of Anderson is also proud of the success that has come following years of work to make the downtown area attractive to residents and visitors.

"Right now, we are seeing the fruits of a couple of decades of infrastructure and streetscape improvements," City Manager David McCuen said. "We realize that we are not 'in the business of business,' but it is our role to

create an environment attractive to business."

He said the city was particularly proud to see 12 new businesses open downtown in 2020, despite the economic challenges brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

"This speaks to the fact that we focused on a quality foundation on several fronts. A parking study revealed that our growth patterns could support a second parking garage. This data helped us as we partnered with developers to plan a new hotel, fronting Main Street, and an adjacent 305-space garage," McCuen said.

The city also improved its downtown landscaping.

"We weren't afraid to chop things down and dig things up, editing our landscaping to provide shade and aesthetic appeal. We added a horticulturalist to our staff to ensure the health of our trees and to care for a stunning array of seasonal plantings," he said. "This has added a layer of organic vibrancy to complement our notable array of public art."

The city also asked residents, visitors and businesses how they perceived Anderson's downtown, and used the information to address lighting and general cleanliness issues.

"We moved and added benches and trash receptacles to serviceable positions," he said. "Though these things might seem small, we realized they were very important to the overall curb appeal of the city."

As a new hotel opens this summer, McCuen said the surrounding block will get a major facelift with a shady street to flank the new development. His advice for other cities and towns: plan, but be flexible.

"We had solid streetscape plans and we have revised and updated them over the years. We are always willing to partner with developers to meet their needs where we can and work within our shared goals. And most importantly, be willing to make the financial investment. It will pay off."

Greer's Danner also points out the importance of leadership when cities undertake major or minor streetscaping or other plans.

"(The CenterG project) made me realize it's not always just about solutions; it's about leadership," Danner said. "We had lots of solutions to do what we wanted to do. It was that leadership by our council and our staff that gave our community and merchants the confidence to say, 'If you think you can pull this off, we're willing to take the risk.'"

Replacing a compromised structure, the building that houses the Sumter Original Brewery is an example of new construction in a historic downtown. Photo: City of Sumter.



Preserving South Carolina's Unique Downtowns

By Jenny Boulware,
Main Street SC Manager, Municipal Association of SC

Tourism, one of South Carolina's major economic drivers, faced a major challenge as the coronavirus pandemic shut down many traditional tourism activities. Recognizing the need to harness a new approach to boost the local economy, communities such as Sumter, Moncks Corner and Williamston shifted their focuses from out-of-state visitors to their own residents by embracing the "love where you live" movement.



Downtown Sumter's Hyatt Place hotel opened in 2018 just across Main Street from the iconic Sumter Opera House. Photo: City of Sumter.

Sumter

The City of Sumter is known for its U.S. Air Force base and its nationally recognized historic business district. Encompassing more than 60 historic structures dating from 1880 to 1912, Sumter's downtown has grown into a vibrant destination with restaurants, a hotel and a brewery. This was not the case 20 years ago, when abandoned and underutilized buildings dominated downtown. The transformation required a collective, holistic reinvestment.

Embracing their most fundamental anchors like The Opera House in the heart of downtown, Swan Lake Iris Gardens, and proximity to two state parks, community leaders expanded their focus on Sumter's arts, entertainment and dining options. Sumter now offers a full-day downtown experience with live concerts, more than 20 restaurants and overnight stays.

The downtown, said Leigh Newman, Downtown Sumter coordinator, is now "more well-rounded, with lots to offer both locals and out-of-town visitors."

Even during last year's pandemic disruptions, the Opera House continued to entertain. Small groups rent the 500-seat venue for private movie events.

Sumter's extraordinary downtown turnaround has three critical elements: city leadership embraced its role in revitalizing the commercial district, private local investors renovated key buildings and residents began to support downtown's business community regularly.

Highly successful years of major investment and activity are great, but Newman also acknowledged that slow, incremental progress is just as important.

"Quiet years lay the foundation for future achievements," she said.

With the positive developments such as a brewery, hotel and a four-star restaurant, more work lies ahead, especially as Sumter continues to address its empty buildings. Preserving historic buildings is always a major goal, but the updates needed to make them functional for new businesses are not always possible. For example, the Sumter Original Brewery, which has a rooftop bar, is an entirely new build that replaced a compromised historic structure.

"We still have a long way to go," Newman said. "As long as you've got empty buildings, you've got opportunity."

Moncks Corner

Seventy miles south of Sumter, the "Lowcountry's Hometown" of Moncks Corner has rapidly grown in both population and economic development prospects. One of Moncks Corner's valuable assets is



Moncks Corner's revitalizing downtown is located in the Charleston region, which is experiencing strong overall growth. Photos: Town of Moncks Corner.



Mineral Springs Park, one of the oldest public parks in the nation, sits just next to Williamston's downtown. Photo: Town of Williamston.

located just outside of its downtown: the town's state-of-the-art Regional Recreation Complex. Its location has helped downtown thrive by providing a hub for sports, and it also serves as the venue for a farmers market and events.

Catalytic projects like the recreational complex have further ignited community-wide developments.

"One of our greatest successes has been the growth in the number and in the quality of businesses," said Doug Polen, community development director for the Town of Moncks Corner. "When we became a Main Street community, we began a comprehensive approach to business retention and recruitment. And now there's a lot more to do downtown."

A semi-permanent food truck vendor is serving takeout five nights a week and two new restaurants are slated to open. Molly Willard, Main Street director and public information officer, continues to focus on stimulating economic development downtown while Polen facilitates neighborhood developments. This team approach to attract, expand and retain development is what developers and small businesses value most, said Polen.

"You get me and my department to help guide the process," he said.

In a five-year span, the town's population increased nearly 30%. This growth surge is both a challenge and an opportunity, Polen said. Part of Willard's job is to strategically reach these residents and remind them that

Moncks Corner's commercial downtown has a lot to offer.

"Thousands of Moncks Corner residents commute daily to work in Charleston and Goose Creek, and many have never even been to Moncks Corner's downtown. They don't know it's here," Polen said.

Williamston

Far to the northwest in the Upstate, Williamston is also working to celebrate its small town sense of place and local pride by bringing activity back downtown. Originally a bustling resort town known as "The Saratoga of the South," Williamston's resort hotel industry declined in the 19th century. While that industry is unlikely to rebound, Williamston is home to one of the nation's oldest public parks, Mineral Springs Park, which sits adjacent to its downtown core.

Embracing the Mineral Springs Park as its major asset, the town is working to connect to nearby biking and walking trails to become a bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly community. Lisa Cope, Williamston's Main Street director, noted that downtown's compactness is its draw.

"You can walk from one end to the other and not break a sweat. Pretty soon we'll have a trail system that will blend recreation and shopping," she said.

Cope hopes to grow local foot traffic with enough business diversity that residents do not need to go elsewhere. The city has the goal of attracting new business and help residents see the potential of Williamston.

"We are so close to having everything in town — to the point where you don't need to leave town to shop. The promise of having everything that the average family shopper or recreational visitor needs in the downtown area is exciting," she said.

Focusing on the distinctive

Communities that capitalize on the very assets that characterize their downtowns, like distinctive architecture, pedestrian-friendly environments and unique senses of place, ensure that their downtowns are vibrant, said Jenny Boulware, manager of Main Street South Carolina.

"Not everyone has an opera house or a signature park, but everyone has something that people can't find elsewhere," she said. "Cities should encourage residents to rediscover the best parts of their hometown. Spend a day, a weekend, or even a whole week playing tourist. Visit the museums, local attractions, shops and restaurants that you usually only bring visitors to see. This can help you see more clearly how to capitalize on the things that make South Carolina's downtowns distinctly different."

Main Street South Carolina is a technical assistance program for communities seeking to revitalize their historic downtown commercial districts. Main Street SC offers several community membership levels ranging in cost and requirements. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: Main Street).

Cooking Up Economic Development

By Megan Sexton, Contributing Writer

City-sponsored commercial kitchens and incubators for food service businesses don't just result in more food options and an enhanced quality of life — they make good business sense. Just ask a few cities where they are open or in the works.

In Florence, for example, a former warehouse for the Atlantic Coast Line railroad has been transformed into the City Center Market and Kitchen. The 800-square-foot commercial kitchen features rent-by-the-hour space where the city provides large appliances such as stoves, ovens, food processors, meat slicers and large stand mixers, offering entrepreneurs space to make and bake their goods.

"We opened the kitchen in September (2020) and by March we are practically over-subscribed in the rent-by-the-hour kitchen. I do think that COVID has had some impact on folks wanting to pursue new small business ideas, but that can't be all of the demand on the space," said Jennie Pez , project manager for the City of Florence Local Foods Initiative.



Florence's City Center Market and Kitchen offers rent-by-the-hour commercial kitchen space. Photos: City of Florence.

The city created the commercial kitchen to address food access from multiple angles — providing infrastructure for food entrepreneurs, creating a place for experimentation and a creative enterprise, and including a place to offer nutrition education. The city's farmers market, hosted on the same property all year, offers a retail outlet for food producers.

"We are going for an innovative and multi-layered approach to building the community's own ability to modernize the food culture," Pez  said.

The kitchen received financing through TIF funds, or Tax Increment Financing funds. Repurposing the building and designating an overlay district was part of a





This rendering shows the design of Anderson's planned kitchen incubator. Photo: City of Anderson.

larger effort to complement Florence's work to address community health and wellness, she said.

The Florence commercial kitchen was inspired by Colleton County Kitchen in Walterboro and the Blue Mountain Station in Dayton, Washington, which has a farmers market and food production incubator spaces.

The Florence facility also features three small private spaces for annual lease where food or artisan production businesses can get started, although Pezé said the city has had a more difficult time filling those "next-step" spaces with entrepreneurs who want to grow their local food businesses. Those tenants can be assisted in developing a transition plan by the Francis Marion University Kelley Center for Economic Development, and will be encouraged to participate in the weekly City Center Farmers Market.

The kitchen continues to grow in popularity, and nutrition classes will start soon. The facility originally planned these classes with HopeHealth and the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control, but delayed them since last spring because of COVID-19 concerns.

"We are looking at how to expand capacity with the kitchen and with nutrition education. The region needs a food hub, so we need to think about how to participate in that," she said. "The farmers market, which complements the retail opportunities for some of the kitchen renters, is growing exponentially."

In Anderson, the lack of commercial kitchen space has meant food entrepreneurs were forced to rent space from restaurants after regular business hours or from community facilities such as churches. Both of those options were problematic because of time

constraints and scheduling issues. Other food entrepreneurs would leave Anderson and travel outside the region to use shared commercial kitchens.

The city decided to repurpose 2,500 square feet of city-owned property to create a shared kitchen incubator. Located on the street level of a downtown parking garage, the facility will feature two kitchens, one for general food production and one designed specifically for baking. Other amenities will include a packaging area, cold and dry rentable storage and retail space for product displays. Kitchen rentals will be available daily and programs will be scheduled every month, said Mary Haley Thompson, project manager in Anderson's economic development office.

Anderson's City Council pursued this project with a vision and hope to see new businesses open, products launched and partnerships created around the local food industry, she said.

"A major obstacle for food industry entrepreneurs is the inability to access commercial kitchen space. Due to regulatory requirements and the high costs associated with commercial kitchen equipment, regional producers are unable to meet the consumer demand for such value-added products," Thompson said. "City staff reported consistent feedback from our pipeline of local food entrepreneurs that support this need."

Anderson was awarded \$500,000 from the Appalachian Regional Commission and \$500,000 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Business Development Grant program for the construction of the project, which is expected to be complete by early 2022.

Local food entrepreneurs are already eager to use the facility. Thompson said one of those entrepreneurs, Diane Leary, has

been gifting her popular pimento cheese to friends and family for more than 40 years. She has never been able to sell the cheese because it would require the recipe be prepared in a kitchen approved by DHEC. The Anderson kitchen will allow her the opportunity to sell her product and will provide additional income she wasn't expecting as an 81-year-old, Thompson said.

Laurens doesn't have a city-owned commercial kitchen, but a coworking and event space in a renovated downtown storefront allows food entrepreneurs and restaurants from other cities to host dining events. The Midtown Building, located right next to city hall, was a paint store before it was restored by private owners to showcase the original wooden floors and exposed brick walls.

Jonathan Irick, executive director of Main Street Laurens, said no food preparation takes place inside the building. Instead, restaurants set up mobile kitchens in the outdoor area and serve food indoors. It offers a chance for residents to enjoy types of food that aren't readily available in Laurens.

For example, Halls Chophouse from Greenville served a four-course Valentine's Day meal, while barbecue and sushi restaurants also have set up pop-up outdoor kitchens and served meals indoors. Take-out options also are available.

"It's been a huge success. All of the events have sold out," Irick said. "For one thing, they're offering food we don't have here in Laurens. It's also the experience. This building was completely owner-financed and rehabbed during COVID. They bought it in December 2019 and started working on it in March 2020. All the renovations were done last year. In the middle of COVID, this was our bright spot."

As the world begins to recover from the pandemic, shared commercial kitchens and incubators may even provide a few rays of hope for the future.

"Due to the recent global health crisis, the concept of a shared kitchen incubator may be an economic development trend and way of the future for food entrepreneurs," Anderson's Thompson said. "As food businesses have shut down around the world, shared kitchen incubators have the power to promote stability and reignite growth among those affected."

HOMETOWN SNAPSHOT



Known at the “Main Street to the Mountains,” the City of Walhalla sits in the shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the northwestern corner of South Carolina. In early 2021, Main Street Walhalla, the city’s downtown development organization, advanced to the Aspiring level of its participation in the Main Street South Carolina program. At this level, it will receive three years of hands-on guidance to help it build a strong operation focused on diversifying its downtown economic base.

Photo: Main Street Walhalla.

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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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