Downtown Christiansburg Inc.

Recommendations for achieving a more vibrant Downtown Christiansburg

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Executive Summary

Christiansburg was established in 1792 and became an incorporated town in 1833, with its downtown serving as a commercial center and heart of the town until the rise of big box stores in the 1990s. Today, a local, all-volunteer, non-profit organization in Christiansburg, called Downtown Christiansburg Inc. (DCI), wants to be a major organizing force in revitalizing the downtown. The organization has undergone changes, and now its members wish to understand DCI's role better in revitalization efforts.

DCI commissioned the Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development (OED) to conduct an analysis of the downtown, and review the strengths and weaknesses of DCI with respect to opportunities presented in downtown Christiansburg. OED researchers took several approaches to this research, beginning with a socio-economic and mapping analysis of the downtown, an assessment of downtown revitalization best practices, and interviews with comparable organizations. The OED team then analyzed local perceptions of downtown Christiansburg and DCI through interviews with business owners, local government officials, and residents; over 100 community surveys distributed via social media; and two facilitated sessions with community and DCI board members.

Downtown Christiansburg and DCI Assets

Both the downtown and DCI have assets that DCI could leverage to improve revitalization efforts. Christiansburg has a rich history. The town was originally part of the Great Wilderness Road, a commonly travelled path used by pioneers exploring the western frontier.[1] Downtown Christiansburg is also a Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The downtown has four historic districts, which could attract people downtown. Another key asset is a sufficient number of commercially zoned areas and other necessary infrastructure like sidewalks and vacant buildings, which could contribute to increasing vibrancy. Since Montgomery County and Christiansburg are growing in population, with a particular increase in young adults moving to town, DCI has an opportunity to market to this growing population.

DCI also has many strengths that members could harness. DCI has already successfully attracted more than 10,000 to the downtown with its annual Food Truck Rodeo. Its board members are passionate, dedicated, and work well together. Their openness and determination are evidenced by the fact that they voluntarily reached out to OED for professional consultation. An even larger pool of community members exist who have shown interest in volunteering with DCI. The organization also has professional branding and materials for increasing its public outreach and engagement. Now, DCI members have a clear interest in furthering their role in the community beyond hosting events.

Recommendations

1. **Define downtown Christiansburg and pursue physical infrastructure changes that would promote walkability and conform to Virginia Main Street program criteria.**
   - Focus on the area with the highest density of retail, local restaurants, mixed use, and vacancies. The Christiansburg Downtown Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places closely aligns with OED's proposed area and Virginia Main Street (VMS) requirements.

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[1] Christiansburg, Va. Community Profile. Retrieved from: http://www.christiansburg.org/index.aspx?nid=572.

- Ensure that the downtown area remains walkable with continuous sidewalk connectivity.
2. **Alter DCI's organizational structure to mimic the Virginia Main Street suggested structure**
   - DCI could prepare for VMS Program affiliation by forming the following committees: Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization. This four-group structure has helped other main street organizations to manage tasks more efficiently and increase volunteer involvement.
3. **Establish a sustainable funding model**
   - Diversify funding streams by forming strong local and regional partnerships, particularly with the Town of Christiansburg. All VMS organizations interviewed had significant funding from their local governments. Another option could be memberships for businesses and community members. Low-cost, quick activities can help to develop and sustain partnerships over time.
4. **Collaborate with the local government by promoting better policies, improving streetscapes, and attracting and supporting downtown businesses**
   - Advocate for more mixed-use buildings in the downtown area.
   - Work with the town to provide incentives to attract local retailers, local restaurants, bars, breweries, and live music in the downtown area.
   - Work on a grant with the town to increase the number of greenspaces, street furniture, and gathering spaces.
   - Have a town representative regularly at board and/or committee meetings to better align activities. Fredericksburg's main street program is a good example here.
   - Have regular conversations with town officials about how DCI can support activities in the town.
5. **Increase communication between DCI and business owners**
   - Work with the Town of Christiansburg Central Business Committee to demonstrate that DCI is working for local businesses. Engage other organizations including business associations.
   - Include downtown business owners on the DCI board.
   - Let business owners know that DCI is there to support them. Meet each business owner and hear their concerns, then brainstorm with businesses ways of addressing those concerns.
   - Form a business alliance, a contact list, and create space for business owners to collaborate.
   - Consider how DCI events will promote local businesses.
   - Demonstrate that DCI is going to advocate for local businesses by making it easier for businesses to open in the downtown. This will entail working with the town to change policies.
6. **Increase public outreach, marketing and branding efforts**
   - Increase communication with the community about what DCI is and how community members can contribute to the organization. Respond quickly to concerns or questions from community members. Increase activity on social media, commit to it.
   - Identify groups that DCI may not currently reach and the ways they get their local information. Pursue those communication routes in addition to existing social media methods. Consider weekly or monthly newsletters about current events in downtown area.
   - Clearly articulate volunteer needs and give community members more opportunities to volunteer with DCI. Consider creating sub-committees for special events such as the Food Truck Rodeo, which allows more people to volunteer with less of a time commitment.
7. **Network with and learn from other VMS communities**
   - Other communities working on downtown revitalization have experienced similar challenges to downtown Christiansburg. It would be useful to connect with other communities to learn how they dealt with such challenges.

Introduction

Downtown Christiansburg, established in 1792, once served as the government and commerce center of the area.[2] However, like many other small rural towns, the town experienced a decline. In Christiansburg specifically, the increase of commercial activity along 460 Business has contributed to the decline of the downtown as to town's center of commerce. A local, all-volunteer, non-profit organization in Christiansburg, called Downtown Christiansburg Inc. (DCI), wants to be a major organizing force in downtown revitalization efforts. Its members commissioned the Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development (OED) to explore opportunities for the all-volunteer, civic organization to pursue this revitalization effort. This report reviews the strengths and weaknesses of DCI with respect to opportunities presented in downtown Christiansburg.

Methodology

For this project, OED researched best practices related to the revitalization of downtowns. OED examined three organizations that have a similar size and capacity to DCI and are affiliates of the Virginia Main Street (VMS) program: Fredericksburg, Staunton, and Wytheville. Interviews with the executive directors of these organizations shed light on how they have been successful in supporting more vibrant downtowns, what their roles were in that process, and their successes and challenges with the VMS program. As part of these case studies, the team explored how their affiliation with the Virginia Main Street Program functions. OED then conducted an analysis of downtown Christiansburg, which was defined in concert with DCI. This included gathering secondary data such as demographic statistics and land use data. To understand more about the businesses operating in the downtown area, OED conducted a vacancy study in the defined downtown area and then digitized those findings on a map. Finally, OED assessed community perceptions and future visions for downtown Christiansburg and DCI through community interviews, surveys, and two facilitated sessions.
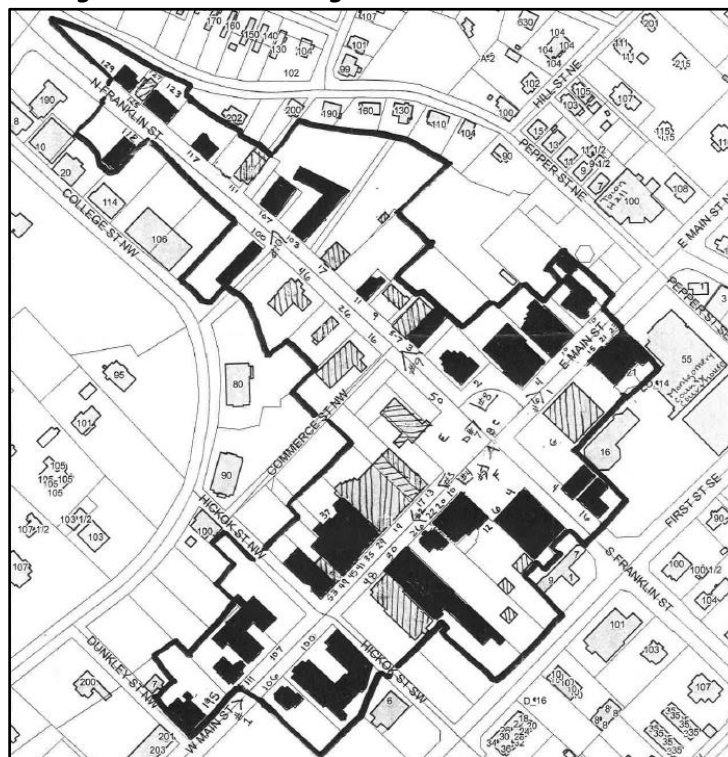
Downtown Christiansburg Assets

Best practices literature on downtown revitalization suggests that it is important to determine community assets and leverage them with revitalization efforts. Downtowns have physical, cultural, and economic assets that can be leveraged to attract new investment. Rural downtown assets may include access to waterways, natural areas, and other environmental resources, access to locally-grown agricultural products, historic buildings and landmarks, proximity to major metropolitan areas and regional transportation routes, affordable housing opportunities, unique economic niches, and established cultural events (e.g. festivals, fairs, etc.).[3]

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[2] National Park Service. National Register of Historic Places Program. Retrieved from: https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/places/13000340.htm

[3] Houston-Galveston Area Council. 2015. Bringing back Main Street: A Guide to Downtown Revitalization for Local Governments.

Christiansburg has a rich history; it was chartered in 1792 and was incorporated as a town in 1833.[4] The town was originally part of the Great Wilderness Road, a path that pioneers took when exploring the frontier out West, with taverns and rest stops.[5] Christiansburg has been referred to as the "Home of the Heroes" because Davy Crockett served as an apprentice for a local newspaper printer for a short time.[6] There is a legend that Daniel Boone once lived in the Christiansburg area, evidenced by a warrant from the old courthouse that states he stole food prior to his trek to Kentucky.[7] Downtown Christiansburg includes the Christiansburg Industrial Institute, a primary school for African-Americans, founded in 1866. The school was once supervised by Booker T. Washington.[8] Three of the Institute's buildings still exist, one of which currently houses the Montgomery Museum.[9] Downtown Christiansburg was listed on the National Register of Historic Places Program as a Historic District in 2013; within that district, there are 38 contributing structures. Additionally, the Town of Christiansburg has four local historic districts. Christiansburg could draw on these historical assets to attract people downtown.

Figure 1. Christiansburg National Historic District [10]

[4] Christiansburg, Va. Community Profile. Retrieved from: http://www.christiansburg.org/index.aspx?nid=572.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Art Center. Christiansburg. Retrieved from:
https://montgomerymuseum.org/learn/montgomery-county/christiansburg.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Virginia is for Lovers. Christiansburg, Historic Area. Retrieved from:
https://www.virginia.org/listings/CulturalHeritage/ChristiansburgHistoricArea/.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Retrieved by:
http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Counties/Montgomery/154-5025.ChristiansburgDwntwnHD.photos.html

Located in Montgomery County, Christiansburg has a total population of about 21,800 people.[11] Both Christiansburg and Montgomery County have growing populations. Specifically, the population in Christiansburg has increased by 11% in the last 10 years.[12] Christiansburg has a younger population compared to other southwest Virginia towns, evidenced by the town's median age (36.6).[13] This younger demographic is due in part to the proximity of both Radford University and Virginia Tech. The largest segment of the population is between the ages of 25 and 34 (18.8%), which tends to be more active on social media and thus easier to reach and engage.[14] Ease in creating awareness and building connections may lead to increased participation and volunteering from community members (especially this age group) in revitalization efforts. In addition, most revitalization activities need a balance of community buy-in and funding sources. The residents in Christiansburg have a higher median household income than the region, which equals $54,501. As such, residents may be able to contribute more easily to revitalization efforts with both their time and money.[15]

Downtown Christiansburg has potential to be very pedestrian-friendly and a strong commercial district. A mapping analysis of downtown Christiansburg showed that 30%, or 43 out of 147 building fronts are within 15 feet from the street frontage, which is 5% higher than the Virginia Main Street program requirement.[16] The sidewalks are contiguous with only four breakages (Figure 4). The intersection of 1st Street and Chrisman Street was noticeably dangerous for pedestrians however. Additionally, there are 77 businesses and 93 commercial structures in the proposed downtown area, signifying an opportunity for businesses to locate in downtown (Figure 5).

Community participants in this research indicated that they frequent downtown Christiansburg mostly for food and beverage businesses, for government activities, and for other business services. The most common response, food and beverage businesses, was largely for visits to Macado's and the Mockingbird Café. Many respondents attend the farmers' market as well, which is compatible with the town's vision for making it a more permanent event in the downtown.

When describing downtown Christiansburg, survey respondents most often said "potential", which illustrates an overall optimism about what downtown Christiansburg could be (Figure 2). People also referred to Christiansburg as historic, quaint, and home. These could be assets to draw on when determining what characteristics should be considered with revitalization.

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[11] American Community Survey (2016). 5-Year Estimates.
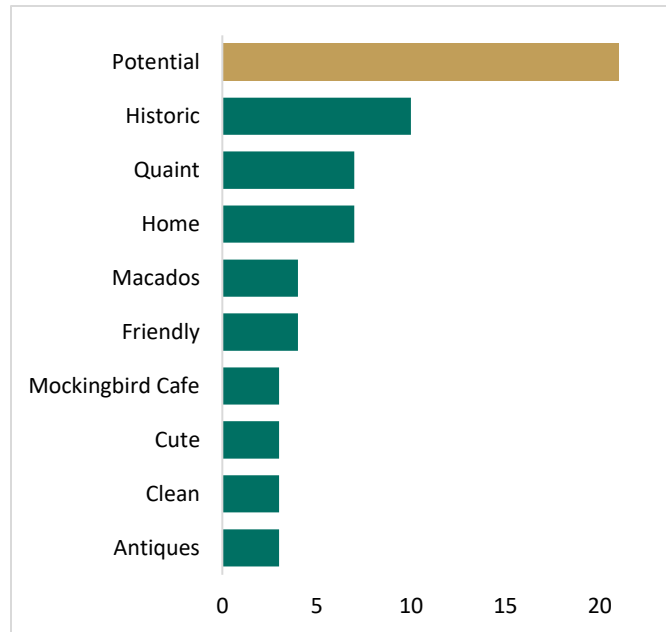[12] EMSI
[13] American Community Survey (2016). 5-Year Estimates.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Using ArcGIS, OED digitized the map of downtown Christiansburg. Digitally mapping the sidewalks, we created a 15-foot buffer. All buildings that intersected the buffer were selected, indicating they are within 15 feet from the road. There are approximately 147 buildings in Downtown Christiansburg, 47 of which meet VMS 15-foot requirements.

Figure 2. Top Positive Words Describing Christiansburg

Positive aspects about DCI

DCI is a passionate organization with dedicated board members who have energy, persistence, and who work well together. DCI has a vision, hosts successful events, and has professional branding and materials for the organization. The organization's most popular community event, the Food Truck Rodeo, attracted over 10,000 people to the Downtown Christiansburg area in 2017 to enjoy food, craft beer, local wine, and live music. The Roanoke Times voted the Food Truck Rodeo as the second best community event in the New River Valley. This event has been in the community since 2012 and increases in size and capacity each year. Additionally, DCI members care more about how the town and community perceive them and DCI's work. They want to be seen as a leader, a trusted and respected organization that promotes economic development in downtown Christiansburg.
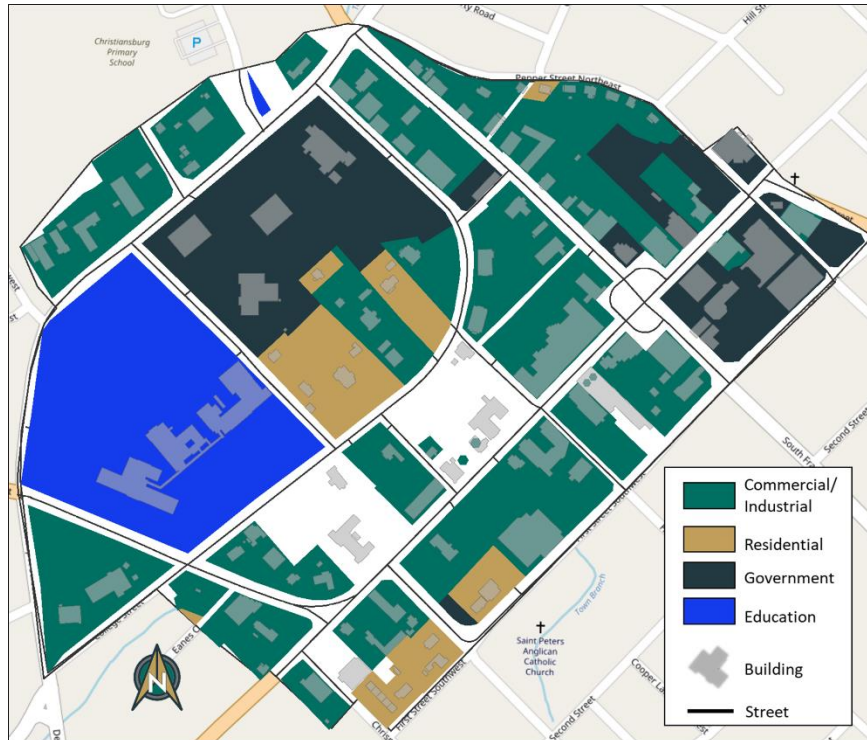
Recommendations

1. Define downtown Christiansburg and pursue physical infrastructure changes that would promote walkability and conform to Virginia Main Street program criteria.

The proposed downtown Christiansburg area is approximately 117 acres and was chosen based on its higher frequency of businesses and lower frequency of government buildings and residential housing. Christiansburg is larger than other comparable downtown areas such as Wytheville, Fredericksburg, and Staunton; however, the downtown district also includes the 16-acre Old Middle School lot, which is currently underutilized and could be excluded from the focal area to more closely align with the size of

other VMS communities. There are approximately 200 residents living within the proposed downtown area and more than 1,000 employees working at 77 establishments. The land in downtown Christiansburg is zoned 77% commercial and/or industrial, 13% government or churches, and approximately 10% residential composed of apartments and single-family homes (Figure 3).

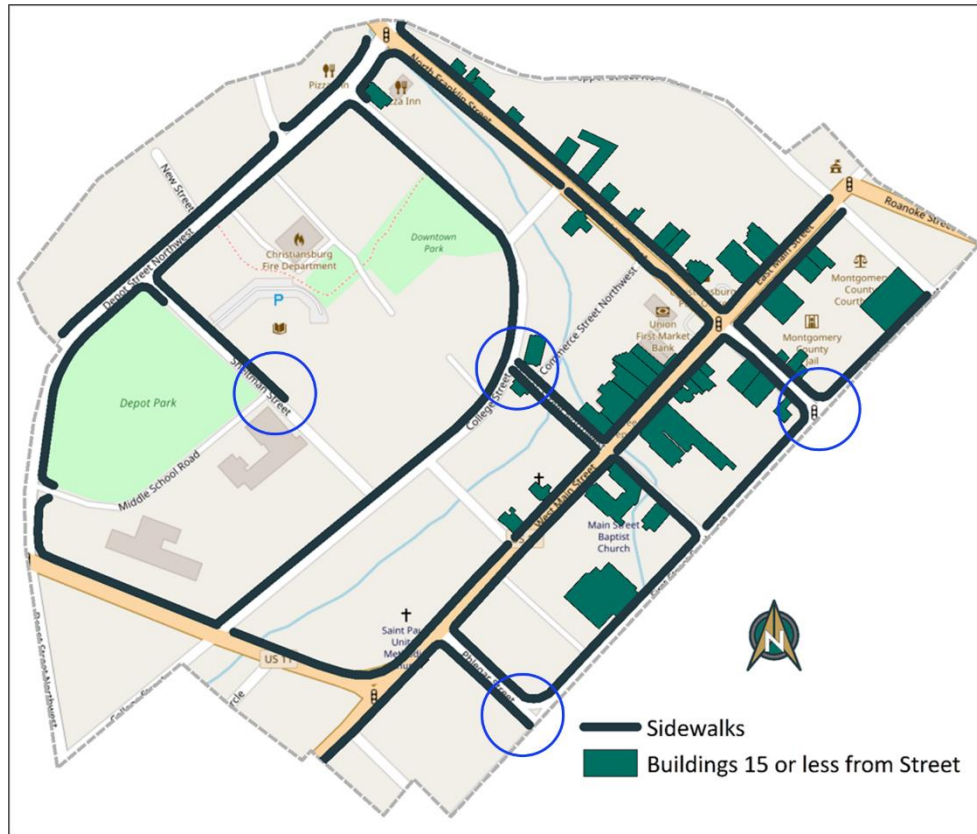*Figure 3. Downtown Christiansburg Zoning Map*

This was created by Ross Hammes of Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development for Downtown Christiansburg Inc. May 2018

Becoming a Virginia Main Street program affiliate is one opportunity for DCI and the Town of Christiansburg. To become a designated Virginia Main Street (VMS) community and to focus DCI's efforts, the geographic boundaries of the downtown area must be clearly defined. After reviewing several possible geographies, the OED team identified one possible district comprising the commercial core of the downtown. This district includes Depot Street to the north, Radford Street to the west, 1st Street to the south, and Pepper Street to the east. The defined geography is based on the need to meet designation criteria outlined by the Department of Housing and Community Development's (DHCD) Virginia Main Street Program Guidelines. Virginia Main Street designated communities must be located within a town or city with a population of no more than 75,000 people. Christiansburg has a population of approximately 21,800.

Downtown Christiansburg meets other VMS criteria, such as a minimum of 25% of the building fronts must be no more than 15 feet from the sidewalk paralleling the street. There are approximately 147 buildings in downtown Christiansburg; of those, 30% or 43 building fronts are within 15 feet from the street. Another VMS criteria, a previously stated strength of downtown Christiansburg, is its potential for walkability. The sidewalks in the proposed downtown area are contiguous with only four breakages along the main paths excluding crosswalks. The OED team noticed a dangerous intersection at the 1st

Street and Chrisman Street block requiring pedestrians to walk onto the road. The buildings meeting VMS setback requirements and the sidewalk network can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Downtown Christiansburg Sidewalks and Building Street Frontage

This was created by Ross Hammes of Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development for Downtown Christiansburg Inc. May 2018

Downtown Christiansburg meets another VMS requirement since more than 70% of the parcels are commercially zoned. The proposed downtown area also contains about 20 non-conforming residential uses. At least 50 commercial properties are open for business, and there are at least 70 physical commercial structures present in the proposed area. In fact, there are 93 commercial structures with 77 structures currently open for business as commercial enterprises. The composition of buildings includes 14 retail shops, six local restaurants, three chain restaurants, 45 professional services businesses such legal and banking services, 17 institutional buildings, 37 residential dwellings, and about 10 other buildings being used for mixed living and working space, including offices and/or apartments.

Figure 5 highlights buildings and businesses that may benefit from DCI engagement.
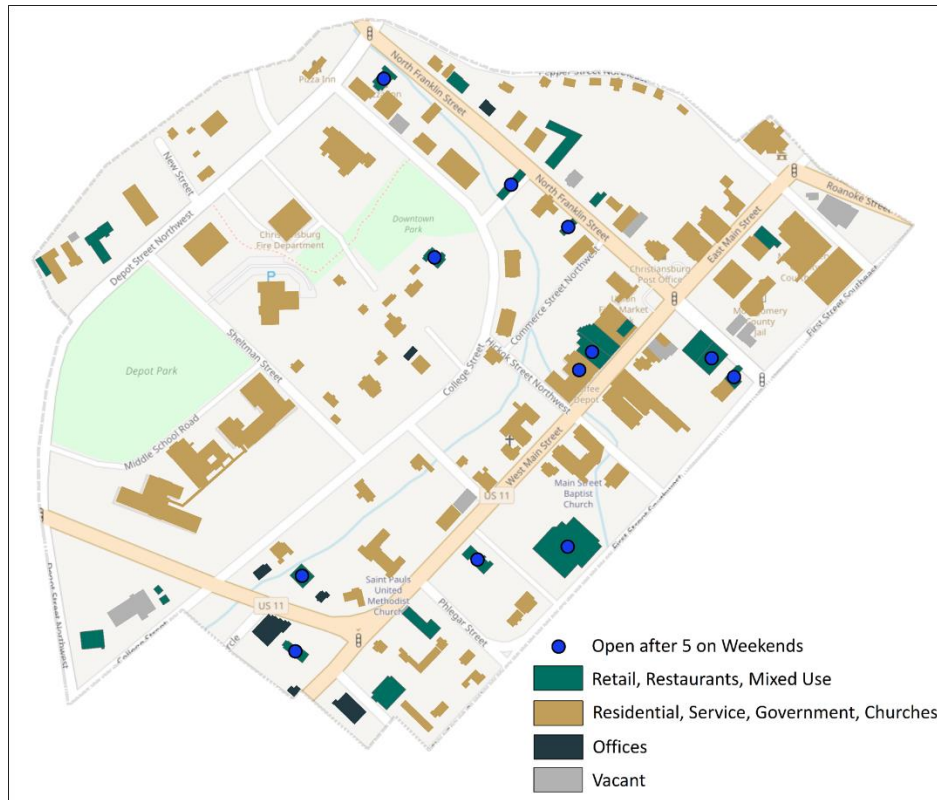
- The buildings shaded in green may benefit most from DCI collaboration and engagement as they represent essential actors that should be involved in downtown redevelopment. They include existing retail, restaurants, and mixed-use establishments.
- The blue dots represent businesses that are open after 5:00 pm. Only 12% of the 110 non-residential dwellings are open past 5:00 pm on Fridays and Saturdays. Of the open mixed-use, retail, restaurants, and service buildings, five out of six are closed on weekends and/or after

5pm during the week. Since weekdays, evenings and weekends are the times when individuals and groups socialize, helping appropriate businesses find ways of staying open (possibly by working with those already open during those hours) may prove useful to downtown vitality.

- The gold buildings depict neutral building types such as residential, service, government, and churches that should be of minimal concern for DCI's efforts. Service buildings include banks/brokers, barber shops, legal services, bail services, a tattoo parlor, community services, etc. However, under certain circumstances, partnering with churches and community entities may be a great way of getting groups to stay and explore the downtown.
- The dark blue buildings are office spaces, which do not include law offices but rather professional working spaces.
- The buildings that are grey show vacancies. There are approximately 16 vacancies in the downtown area.

In conclusion, there is an apparent clustering of establishments opened past 5:00 pm on weekends following West Main Street and North Franklin Street which can be the primary focus for revitalization.[17]

Figure 5. Downtown Christiansburg Vacancy and Building Types

This was created by Ross Hammes of Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development for Downtown Christiansburg Inc. May 2018

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[17] Historic Registers: Montgomery County. *Virginia Department of Historic Resources.* Retrieved from: https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Counties/register_Montgomery.htm

What are other communities doing?

Downtown Fredericksburg is walkable, has pedestrian-friendly sidewalks within the downtown district and has multiple options for transportation. They have a trolley downtown, the city has a bus that makes stops in downtown, there is parking for cars, and a bike tour is opening soon. The organization is considering a campaign to promote the walkability of the downtown district, which would entail putting up signage that publicizes the walking time from the parking lot at one end of downtown Fredericksburg to the other end of the downtown district. Many people think that the downtown it too big and thus not very walkable. In truth, it is only a 10 to 15 minute walk by foot. In addition, Fredericksburg has a map delineating their downtown district on their website, which includes an interactive map with all of the businesses in the downtown area.

Downtown Wytheville Inc. (DWI) provides internet access for downtown businesses as it designates this area as a technology zone. The downtown district is also part of an enterprise zone, these zones are areas targeted for economic expansion and business investment. After a massive investment in its streetscape, downtown Wytheville area has all street infrastructure necessary for pedestrian foot traffic to promote healthier lifestyles. They have also marked trails downtown to focus on the historic aspects of the town and even have a brick walkway that ties the two parts of downtown together. DWI is also currently trying to bring in signalization at their crosswalks and signs to alert vehicle traffic of pedestrians, which promotes pedestrian-safety. The executive director of DWI said that while challenging, "massive streetscape project was worth it, and it has paid off enormously." All the VMS case study communities have met the VMS program downtown district requirements.

2. Alter DCI's organizational structure to mimic the Virginia Main Street structure

DCI could prepare for Virginia Main Street Program affiliation by forming the following committees: Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization recommended by the Main Street Approach. All VMS organizations interviewed for this research use this organizational structure. One of the executive directors mentioned that the organizational framework proposed by the Main Street Approach has been useful for nonprofit organizations by providing them with a structure to follow that involves the primary elements necessary for revitalization. This structure helped Wytheville streamline its efforts to manage tasks efficiently and saved the organization a lot of time reorganizing post-VMS program affiliation. The framework is more task-oriented, and is based upon the following four themes described below:

- The **Economic Vitality committee** is responsible for working towards creating a business-friendly atmosphere in downtown. These responsibilities include attracting businesses downtown, which could include collaborating with the local government to offer incentives to promote downtown business attraction.

- The **Design committee's** overarching mission is to improve the aesthetics of the downtown district. This could include organizing clean-up campaigns, facilitating mural art, or working with

the local government to provide facade improvement grants or working to secure grant funding to improve the streetscape.[18]

- ○ The **Promotion committee** is focused on advertising and marketing the downtown district. They are responsible for the events hosted by the Main Street organization; however, the events should be tied to promoting the economic vitality of the downtown businesses, since this is the primary aim of revitalization.

- ○ The **Organization committee** is designed to provide stability for the organization and to consider the long-term viability of the organization. The committee is charged with organizing and communicating with volunteers.[19] It is also in charge of the communications element of the organization, public relations, as well as fundraising opportunities.

This restructuring could also address a need expressed by community members. At the Talk of the Town event, attendees indicated that DCI needs to have a clear organizational vision to be successful with revitalization efforts in Christiansburg. Community members also mentioned that they see DCI as a long-range planning/visioning organization.

3. Establish a sustainable funding model

Identifying diverse funding streams is essential for any organization to sustain downtown revitalization efforts over the long term and ultimately be successful in its efforts. DCI board members and community participants at the Talk of the Town event confirmed the organization's need to establish a sustainable funding model. Furthermore, to realize their vision of vibrant downtown, several community members believe DCI and the community as a whole should pursue opportunities for infrastructure design and redevelopment as well as business recruitment, all of which requires more funding.

Community members mentioned one way to increase funding for DCI could be if the organization offered affordable memberships with useful benefits. This seems to be a good suggestion owing to the fact that compared to the other VMS communities examined during this study, Christiansburg has the highest median household income at $54,501, and standard of living may be comparable or less expensive.[20]

Best Practices
In many cases, downtown revitalization organizations often depend on grants to sustain their operations, which can lead to challenges; for example, an organization may be too focused on finding the next funding opportunity that it does not effectively implement projects with the funding it has, or it forgets its ultimate mission (i.e. mission drift). To avoid these pitfalls, organizations attempt to diversify

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[18] Department of Housing and Community Development (2017).Virginia Main Street Program Guidelines. Retrieved from: www.dhcd.virginia.gov/mainstreet.
[19] Ibid.
[20] American Community Survey (2016). 5-Year Estimates.

their funding streams so that they are never wholly dependent on one funding source that they compromise their work or mission.

Diverse funding streams rely on strong partnerships. One approach to developing these partnerships and different funding streams, while still carrying out the organization's mission and developing strategies, is "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" (LQC). This approach utilizes incremental steps, such as low-cost experiments and tapping into local talents (e.g. citizens, entrepreneurs, developers, and city staff).[21] These low-cost, quick activities can help to develop and sustain partnerships over the long-term, ensuring that partners see progress and achieve "wins" that keep them motivated to continue the work.

Organizations may then expand LQC activities through these partnerships and other collaborations to attract public and private investment. Increased visitor spending may also be an option if these activities become more multijurisdictional. Indeed, cross-community partnerships can maximize the reach of inter-jurisdictional marketing efforts in a cost effective way. These steps will also enable the organization to diversify their funding options, for instance, community members could provide complementary services and accommodations for tourists. Early progress should be made to build these relationships and infrastructure to attract private sector developers and investors who will ultimately drive the downtown revitalization effort. Successful downtown revitalization efforts have demonstrated that for every $1 of public investment, there will be $10 to $15 of private money invested in downtown.[22]

What are other communities doing?
In interviews with the three VMS communities, the executive directors mentioned how funding has been a challenge in downtown revitalization efforts and provided some good recommendations to address them. Fredericksburg had the VMS program in the 1990s; however, it failed because there was not enough funding to sustain the organization. Fredericksburg learned from that experience with their second attempt and established good relations with the city government. The city is now the organization's primary funding source, and is committed to the program. Similarly, in Wytheville, around 70% of DWI's funds come from the government while the rest is funded by sponsorships and donations from the local community. According to the Downtown Wytheville Business Recruitment packet, the town government has helped with revitalization efforts by providing $500,000 to relocate the Wytheville Farmers' Market and allocating over two million dollars for streetscape improvements with the help of the Department of Housing and Community Development grant.[23]

Staunton has a special tax district program that has contributed to the longevity of their Virginia Main Street program. Currently, all commercial properties pay a special assessment tax that helps pay for the

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[21] Project for Public Spaces. 2011. Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper: A Low-Cost, High-Impact approach. Retrieved from: https://www.pps.org/article/lighter-quicker-cheaper-a-low-cost-high-impact-approach.
[22] Smart Growth America. 2015. (Re)Building Downtown: A Guidebook for Revitalization. Retrieved from: https://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/app/legacy/documents/rebuilding-downtown.pdf.
[23] Wytheville received a Department of Housing and Community Development grant to help fund streetscape improvements, however, the town had to match that funding. Grants are one way towns can leverage funding to promote revitalization of downtown districts.

Staunton Downtown Development Association (SDDA). This tax is 15 cents for every one hundred dollars of property tax. The businesses located within the SDDA boundaries receive benefits for being located within the special tax district; businesses outside of the boundary do not receive these benefits.[24] Strong partnerships with downtown businesses has also contributed to SDDA's funding. Because these funding streams are so stable, SDDA hosts only two major events a year, and spends the rest of its time and funds focusing on how to support downtown businesses. SDDA's executive director also stresses the importance of being transparent with the community about funds utilization. For instance, SDDA's website has its budget online, which the public can be access to see how SDDA is using money from the special tax district and fundraising efforts. Staunton also has a tiered membership program where businesses pay and receive benefits based on the membership type. As with all downtown nonprofits, donations from individuals and corporations in the area is very important and is made easier through 501(c)3 nonprofit status. As such, businesses can write off their memberships in their taxes.

The executive directors of the Fredericksburg, Staunton and Wytheville nonprofits also claim that becoming VMS designated communities has increased their opportunities to obtain additional funding. The organizations in these communities have taken advantage of the many grants that the Virginia Main Street program offers to improve the streetscape, create wayfinding signs, or brand the downtown area.

4. Collaborate with local government by promoting better policies, improving streetscapes, and attracting and supporting downtown businesses

Local government can be a great resource for community organizations working to revitalize their downtowns because local governments can assist with funding as well as policies necessary for promoting vibrancy. Based on the surveys conducted by OED, community members generally felt as though the town and DCI were not on the same page with revitalization and that the town had not contributed enough time or funding to revitalization efforts. Many of the interviewees felt that a unified vision is missing for the downtown area and so focusing on that would help with revitalization efforts. In addition, one of the survey respondents doubted the future existence of the farmers' market owing to the existing town management. However, people mentioned that DCI can be both a collaborator and facilitator among the businesses, the community, and the town. Specifically, respondents noted that DCI would need to collaborate with the town to achieve a more vibrant downtown Christiansburg.

In Christiansburg, evidence from this study suggests that there is a lack of vibrancy and part of this is attributable to town policies. Vibrancy, for the purposes of this study, is defined as pedestrian activity in the downtown, particularly with respect to weekends and after 5:00 pm on weekdays. Some of the policy changes suggested by community members include allowing community residents access to parking lots after 5:00 pm and creating policies that promote mixed-use development. DCI should also partner with the town to provide incentives to attract more visitor-friendly businesses, and work with the town, perhaps on a grant, to improve the aesthetics of the downtown area. The last

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[24] Staunton's tax district is special and had to be passed by the state legislature, although, it could be one the primary reasons that Staunton is one of the most established and successful VMS programs.

recommendation, to improve the walkability and streetscape, could include increasing greenspaces, street furniture, and gathering spaces in downtown Christiansburg. Infrastructural changes suggested by survey respondents included better roads, safe sidewalks, more wayfinding signs, façade improvements, preservation of old buildings in the downtown area to give it a small town feel.

Other communities, specifically Fredericksburg, Staunton, and Wytheville, noted the importance of having a strong partnership with the local government for revitalization. The downtown organization executive directors explained that they collaborate with many departments within their local governments. For example, the FVMS executive director explained that they partner with their Parks and Recreation Department for events. The Staunton executive director noted that they collaborate with the City of Staunton and other departments like the Economic Development department, Tourism, the Police department, and Parks and Recreation.

Fredericksburg's executive director indicated the importance of partnerships among all stakeholders; the organization works in all facets of downtown revitalization and cannot revitalize the downtown on its own. Fredericksburg's downtown organization collaborates with the city for funding and a number of activities including organizing historic tax credit incentives in a more consumer-friendly format. Liaisons from the City Council, the EDA, and the economic development and tourism department are part of the of the organization's board of directors. However, the government officials do not have voting privileges due to their conflict of interest: the city is the organization's primary funder. This relationship allows the organization to remain independent but still have strong, regular connections with local government. According to the executive director of the nonprofit in Staunton, having a contract has been helpful for their organization, as it has helped to clarify and outline responsibilities of the organization and the city to avoid miscommunications. The executive director from Staunton acknowledged that she could not accomplish much if it were not for the strong relationship she has forged with the city especially since they assist with funding and programming, as well as matching in-kind funds for grants. Finally, those at the Wytheville downtown revitalization nonprofit view their organization as a true partner with town government, which has been integral for the organization's success.

Loosening town policy and regulations to promote downtown revitalization. DCI can facilitate conversations about what regulations the town must address for better downtown development. The organization can also work with the town to identify and develop better policy to address challenges faced by downtown businesses.

When asked what types of businesses bring survey respondents to downtown Christiansburg, food and beverage, special events, and government were the most popular responses (Figure 8). Retail businesses ranked the lowest among all types. Figure 9 depicts the specific businesses that people frequent in downtown, which reinforces the results displayed in Figure 8. Survey respondents frequent Macado's the most followed by the Mockingbird Café. There does not seem to be much competition among restaurants, which may indicate opportunities in downtown Christiansburg for more local restaurants and retail. However, the perceived high meals tax in Christiansburg could potentially deter people from opening restaurants—this could be an area where DCI could work with the town to change policy.

Figure 8. What Brings Survey Respondents to Downtown Christiansburg?
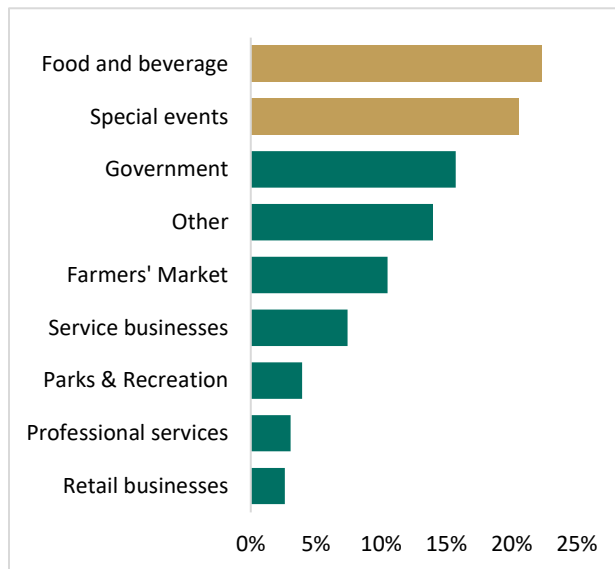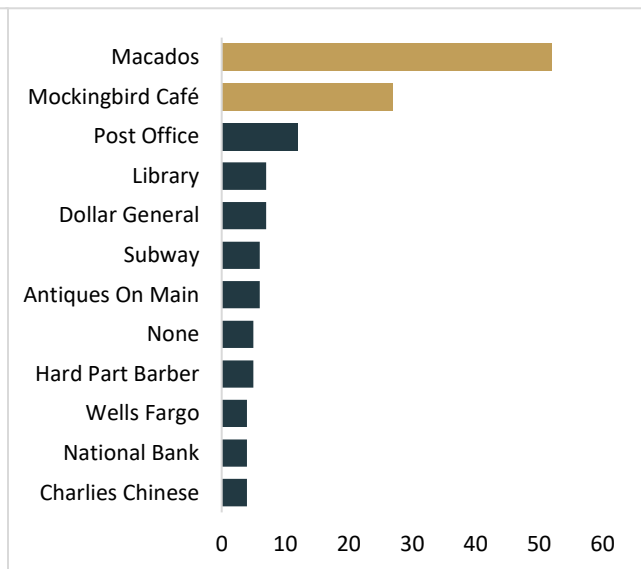

Figure 9. What Businesses do Survey Respondents Frequent the Most in Downtown Christiansburg?
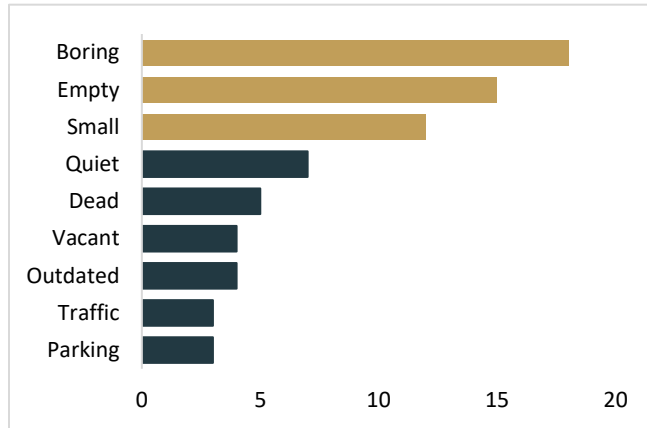
Additionally, DCI could advocate for more mixed-use buildings in the downtown area. Business owners expressed that they wish the town would make it easier for small businesses to open downtown and that it was easier to have mixed-use buildings in the downtown area. One business owner explicitly expressed how current town policies were cumbersome and inhibited mixed-use development in the downtown.

Develop incentives for restaurant, retail, and mixed-use development. DCI can work with the town to identify best practices on how to incentivize business development downtown. DCI may also work with businesses to facilitate access to town and regional services that help businesses establish themselves and grow.

One approach to growing and diversifying businesses in a downtown is to increase pedestrian traffic by promoting a variety of activities that give people more reasons to visit. Part of this approach is developing a strategy to both support and promote downtown retail. This could include retail spaces for everyday errands as well as major or unique shopping destinations.
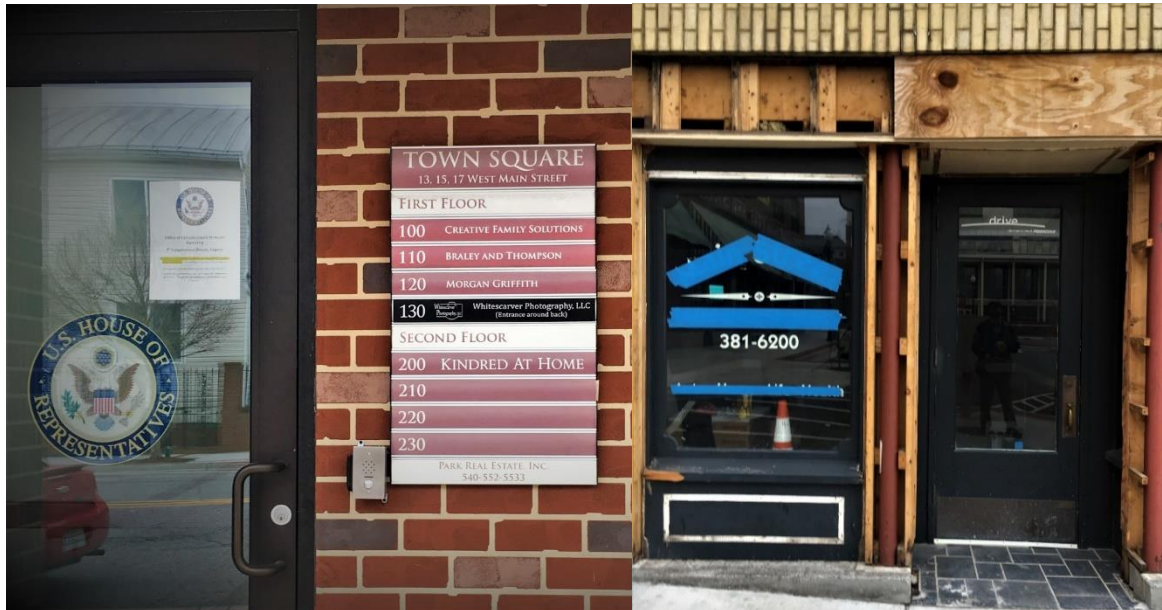
One way for Christiansburg to increase vibrancy would be for the town to provide incentives to attract local retailers, local restaurants, bars, breweries, and live music in the downtown. Of the open mixed-use, retail, restaurants, and service buildings, approximately five out of six businesses are closed on weekends or close at 5:00 pm. Additionally, only 12% of the 110 non-residential dwellings are open past 5:00 pm on Fridays and Saturdays. This could be a contributing factor as to why survey respondents thought that downtown Christiansburg is vacant, dead, and empty (Figure 6). People tended to feel more negatively about downtown Christiansburg than positively, as there were 150 negative words used to describe Christiansburg and only 115 positive words.

Figure 6. Top Negative Words Describing Christiansburg

The vacancies in downtown Christiansburg are relatively low since there are only about 16 vacancies. However, prime real estate at The Main Street and Franklin Street intersection, which appeared to be the center of the downtown, contains some of these vacancies (shown in Figure 7). This is an important intersection with the Antiques shop and the DCI office and could become more vibrant with the addition of other local restaurants and retail shops.

Figure 7. Vacant buildings on West Main Street (left) and at the intersection of Main Street and Franklin Street (right)

Community members remarked that they envision future downtown Christiansburg as a thriving, youthful, and vibrant place. With this, they hope to see more local retail shops, locally owned restaurants and social gathering spots such as bars, breweries or wineries. Of the 105 responses to the survey, more than 40 respondents reiterated that the presence of more eateries such as local restaurants, bars/breweries, and cafés in the downtown would improve the atmosphere. They want

downtown Christiansburg to be a destination that attracts people who want to spend time in the downtown area; they envision it as a family-friendly and walkable place. Around 33 respondents emphasized that having more local businesses and a variety of retail shops, which are open after 5:00 pm and on weekends, would provide people with an opportunity to shop and stroll. Some community members commented that they would like to see more events, particularly public arts/music events, and mixed-use buildings in downtown. Moreover, several respondents highlighted that making the downtown more welcoming to visitors and attracting more traffic to the downtown would mean shifting the focus from the Christiansburg mall area (on 460 Business) to the downtown. One way of doing this is connecting the downtown to the Huckleberry Trail. Overall, community members believe that DCI should be a key partner with the town to effectively achieve this vision.

What are other communities doing to promote and attract businesses?
Filling vacant buildings with more restaurants (especially more local restaurants than food chains) and retail can promote vibrancy. In Wytheville, there are currently many service businesses. Wytheville's downtown organization and town government are actively trying to change the business mix to more retail/restaurant and some lodging businesses. Wytheville, for instance, introduced a number of tax incentives to attract businesses to downtown. They have an incentive to freeze property values downtown, for example, a five-year freeze on property tax for downtown businesses that improve their facades. They also introduced a 7% meal tax rebate for restaurants that locate in the downtown area during their first five years. Moreover, Downtown Wytheville Inc. worked with downtown property owners and the town to provide incentives to increase mixed-use buildings in the downtown area.

While Fredericksburg's Main Street district does not have financial incentives, they do provide resources and tools including a facade improvement grant. Depending on the size of the businesses and the number of employees, the city waives the permits and fees for businesses. Additionally, Fredericksburg had a different problem in relation to vibrancy, because they have many restaurants, but the retail stores close after 5:00 pm. Therefore, they started an Open Late campaign to increase the vibrancy of the downtown areas to help restaurant owners and retail shop owners alike. Staunton is also running a similar campaign to increase foot traffic after 5:00 pm and on the weekends. These efforts are typically during the spring and the summer since the Fredericksburg executive director explained that pedestrian traffic in the downtown district largely depends on the weather.

Promote streetscape improvements. DCI can help the town by spotting areas that require sidewalk improvements or other aesthetic amenities. DCI and the town may work together to acquire more funding for streetscape improvement include signage, benches, infrastructure to slow down traffic and improve the walkability of the district, and other streetscape development for creating more public space in the downtown.

Visitors first experience downtown from the street; therefore, crafting an attractive, pedestrian-friendly streetscape is critical for creating a favorable perception of the area that encourages visitors to regularly spend time downtown and patronize nearby businesses. On the other hand, gaps or breaks in the sidewalks could interrupt this experience and discourage pedestrian foot traffic hence undermining

downtown vitality. Some elements that contribute to making downtowns more attractive may include landscaping, enhancing or installing street furniture, improving facades, allowing for temporary uses of vacant lots, and adding public art based on cultural and historical background of the community. Additionally, considering how people can access the downtown area, like public transportation and parking lots is also important. Therefore, accessing the downtown area should be convenient for people.

During a site visit, the OED team noticed there were streets with missing or broken sidewalks, such as where Main Street intersects First Street, which makes them less pedestrian friendly. The businesses along Depot Street were difficult to identify, due to a lack of signage, and were run-down. Furthermore the traffic was busy in that area which was potentially hazardous for pedestrians. To improve the walkability of downtowns, many towns have paid particular attention to maintaining the quality of their sidewalks and creating ways of slowing down traffic (e.g. crosswalks, speed bumps, etc). Downtown revitalization organizations have helped by spotting areas where street maintenance is needed, as well as identifying areas and ways of slowing traffic for the benefit of pedestrians.

Many participants in this study noted the absence of gathering spaces in downtown; this is an area where DCI can work with the Town to promote more gathering spaces, which could include more green spaces and street furniture. Some suggestions from community members include more places to meet and get together with friends, more dog-friendly parks, an active farmers' market, and improved infrastructure. The survey respondents also highlighted the importance of making the downtown more walkable, filling up the vacant spaces, developing more green spaces, and opening parking lots for community members. During the site visit to Christiansburg, the team learned that one business owner found it difficult to make any changes to the facades of their buildings. The owner explained that modifying the signage boards or putting something on the outside wall becomes a major challenge with existing town policy. People felt that the Town of Christiansburg also had bad parking, too many government buildings in the downtown and was not pedestrian friendly.

What are other communities doing to promote streetscape improvements?
The Town of Wytheville has helped with revitalization efforts in the downtown area by funding $500,000 to relocate the Wytheville Farmers' Market and funded over $2 million for streetscape improvements. Downtown Wytheville Inc. invested 3 years of planning on the streetscape of the downtown and leveraged a Community Development Block Grant. The Staunton executive director mentioned that adding flowers and benches as well as improving facades will encourage people to visit the downtown area. The more money that is invested in the beautification of the downtown area will increase the likelihood of people wanting to visit. The Staunton Downtown Development Association has taken advantage of the many grants that the Virginia Main Street program has to offer to make many of these improvements to Staunton's downtown area and the executive director recommends that newer Virginia Main Street programs should also take advantage of these funds. Fredericksburg Virginia Main Street has done similar work; they raised money to add flower planters in the downtown district to beautify the downtown area. This cost about $7,000, which was acquired through donations. Both executive directors in Wytheville and Fredericksburg noted how the VMS program helped them with

facade improvement since businesses in their downtown districts could receive free sign design from a local business in Staunton as part of the VMS program.

5. Increase communication between DCI and business owners

Interviews, surveys and site visits revealed communication and coordination challenges among downtown businesses, the town, and DCI. For example, one of the interviewees was unhappy with the Food Truck Rodeo, explaining it blocked off the streets and prevented patronage of downtown businesses. When asked about participating in downtown revitalization, the same interviewee said, "It depends on what you mean by revitalization. Revitalization can mean so many different things. If you talk about revitalizing it as a social center, but it does not help retail businesses, I do not want to help with that. I have no problem with that, but my shop suffers." Another one of the business interviewees wants to help because she says working on downtown revitalization helps her business. DCI needs to make it clear to downtown businesses that the organization is an advocate for businesses. In order to accomplish this, increased outreach with property and business owners will be necessary.

While many business owners and downtown stakeholders also said they were happy to contribute to downtown revitalization efforts, many were unsure on how to help. They suggested better coordination with different stakeholders with planning these activities and increasing communication about what is needed from stakeholders. At Talk of the Town, community members thought that DCI could act as a support for new, small businesses, particularly as a collaborator. During site visits, some of the downtown businesses did not specify exactly what they wanted, but were excited to hear that people were working on revitalization efforts in downtown Christiansburg. DCI could leverage the downtown businesses' excitement by increasing communication and showing that DCI is there to advocate and support downtown businesses.

In the DCI Board Meeting Visioning session, members also thought that business support was one of their weaknesses. They want to be viewed as a leader, a trusted and respected organization that supports existing businesses and promotes economic development in downtown Christiansburg. DCI should work with the Town of Christiansburg Central Business Committee to demonstrate that DCI is there to support and advocate for downtown businesses. It should also consider forming a business alliance, a contact list, and create space for business owners to collaborate and discuss their challenges.

Best practices
Many communities and practitioners recommend that downtown redevelopment organizations should identify stakeholders and reach out to downtown businesses to get their input on revitalization efforts. Revitalizing downtown is about bringing people together; therefore, engaging stakeholders from the beginning encourages transparency and responsiveness on the part of the organization and helps to build trusting relationships during the revitalization process. Some stakeholders may include residents, local elected officials and staff, local government agencies, and local businesses.

Successful outreach and feedback from diverse participants allows the public to share their needs and vision for the downtown area. In addition, people living and working downtown can provide insider

information on its condition and functionality, which can be used to create a successful revitalization strategy. Building consensus among different interests lays the foundation for partnerships to help improve downtown, thus increasing the likelihood that the vision will be realized. These objectives can be achieved by conducting market studies, gathering demographic information, conducting surveys, a fiscal impact study of the town services, and other data gathering techniques.

What are other communities doing?
Those at the Staunton Downtown Development Association (SDDA) believe that successful Virginia Main Street programs involve communication and good relationships with many downtown businesses. The SDDA promotes businesses through weekly email updates, social media, and press releases so that business owners, members, and the public are aware of what is going on and are kept up to date on activities. The SDDA also constantly communicates with its members and small business owners to ensure that they are serving the population efficiently. For example, the organization sends out surveys and will have "business ambassadors" from their organization visit downtown businesses to get input and feedback on the SDDA. Similarly, The Fredericksburg Virginia Main Street program started by knocking on doors to engage business and property owners in the Virginia Main Street effort; this process took the organization roughly two years to obtain buy-in from businesses. The organization also uses social media to promote new and existing businesses in the downtown area and hosts ribbon cuttings for opening businesses. Fredericksburg, Staunton, and Wytheville all support downtown businesses by providing information that helps them navigate governmental policy.

Meanwhile, Downtown Wytheville Inc. has a Start-up Wythe New Business Idea competition in collaboration with IDA of Wythe County to encourage entrepreneurship and job creation in downtown. Their first annual business idea competition to inspire economic development and job creation. Wytheville has a designated area known as 'Downtown Business District', which lies within the Technology Zone, and provides internet access for downtown businesses.

Without these downtown organizations communicating and listening to businesses in the downtown area, they would not know how to properly serve these businesses or make the downtown area successful. DCI can establish practices similar to Fredericksburg and Staunton to better serve the downtown businesses. DCI may also collaborate with organizations that support start-ups in the region (e.g. Beans and Rice or the SBDC) to encourage more entrepreneurial events and start-up activity in downtown Christiansburg.
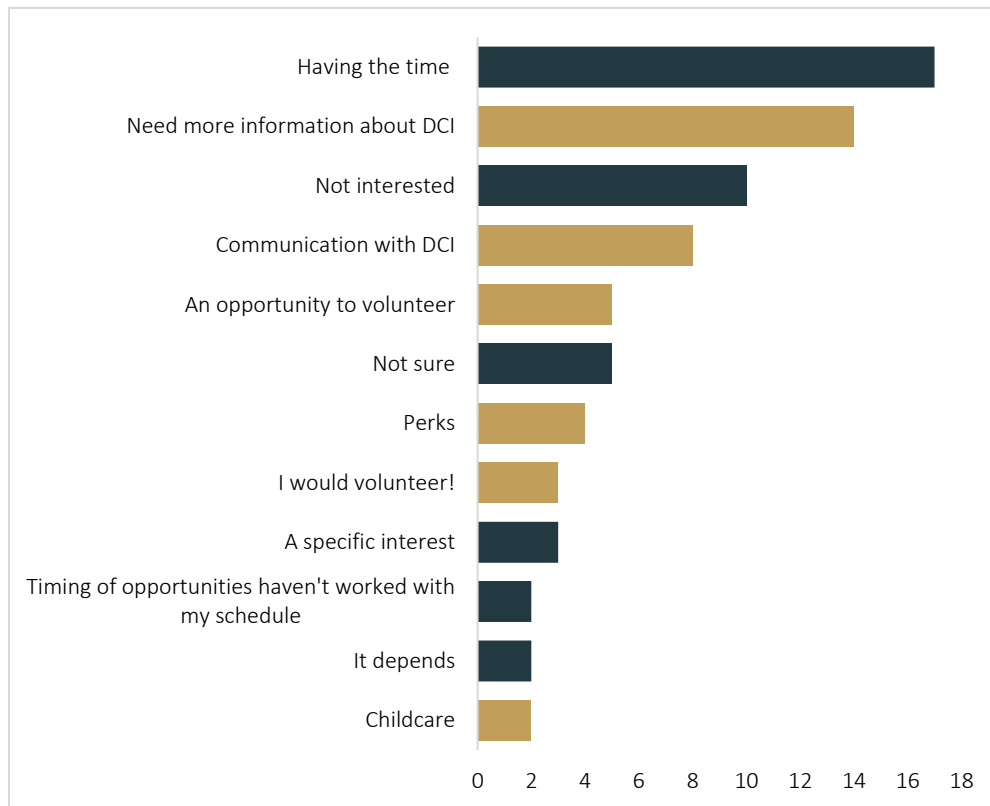
6. Increase public outreach, marketing and branding efforts

As illustrated above, DCI should communicate better with the community about what DCI is and what opportunities are available to volunteers including how they can contribute to the organization. Findings from OED's stakeholder engagement revealed that many community members did not know much about DCI. Many community members, arguably in DCI's immediate sphere of communication, were unsure what DCI does for the community. Many survey respondents needed more information about DCI before they would consider volunteering with the organization.

There are many opportunities to more clearly communicate DCI's mission and activities. The high number of residents in proximity to downtown, the increasing population of young adults moving to Christiansburg, the ability to collaborate with other communities in the region, and most importantly, the existing community buy-in may all contribute to this effort. Most of the current public outreach is done through existing events, such as the Food Truck Rodeo and social media, which limits DCI to those who attend DCI events and those who already follow DCI's social media accounts.

When marketing, community stakeholders noted that it was important to consider all stakeholders, both young and old, when DCI communicates with the community. For example, community members distinguished between social media and in-person communication. Marketing efforts should also be expanded to include visiting businesses. In addition to better marketing and communicating volunteer needs, other community stakeholders recommended offering volunteer incentives like drink tickets or free T-shirts. Figure 10 below demonstrates what it would take for survey respondents to volunteer with DCI, the gold bars are categories where DCI could facilitate more involvement. For example, almost 15 respondents noted that they would need more information about DCI. Survey respondents also noted that they would like to be asked to volunteer which can be achieved through greater outreach and marketing efforts.

Figure 10. What would it take for Survey Respondents to Volunteer with DCI?

Best practices

Successful outreach and feedback from diverse participants allows the public to share their needs and vision for the downtown area so that DCI can better understand the community. Best practices for public outreach in an area such as Christiansburg could include effectively marketing the physical, cultural, and economic assets as well as opportunities for members of the community to engage in the efforts. Marketing efforts should draw attention to unique assets that differentiates a given community from others and creates a positive image and sense of place for residents and visitors. Local businesses can use this branding in their own marketing efforts, further strengthening the brand's image and expanding its reach.

What are other communities doing for public outreach?

Fredericksburg's downtown organization, FVMS, is primarily volunteer-driven. The FVMS website acknowledges that it takes over 2,000 volunteer hours to have a truly successful organization. Since the inception of FVMS, the organization has worked to engage their stakeholders and be an inclusive organization, because their goal is to help everyone in the downtown district. When the organization first formed, it held a large public visioning session to ask community members how they viewed downtown Fredericksburg in 20 years. The organization utilized this session to create its mission and vision statements. The months and years following that session demonstrated the importance of community buy-in from the beginning.

Downtown Wytheville Inc. (DWI) engages its community by encouraging citizens to volunteer for events. One way DWI worked to resolve low volunteer turnout and prevent potential burnout was by forming sub-committees for events, which required shorter time commitments. DWI also held community information sessions and public forums to attract more volunteers for their events. DWI's executive director mentioned that maintaining a careful balance between board members with different thinking and willingness to contribute their time and resources can be difficult sometimes. This diligence and outreach has paid off, with the organization receiving more enthusiastic volunteers in recent months.

What are other communities doing for marketing?

Marketing strategies include social media campaigns as well as branding. FVMS has a social media campaign using #FXBG where they share events that are happening in downtown. In order to protect their brand and make sure they have a consistent, clear voice, FVMS has developed a social media guide. The FVMS executive director explained that promoting a sense of place in the downtown district is part of what they do as an organization, which has been successful by effectively branding the downtown area. The FVMS director also warned not to start a social media campaign unless the organization can really commit to it through regular updates and timely responses to comments and events occurring in the downtown.

While Fredericksburg's social media is volunteer-run, Staunton has a marketing manager to help put all of the Staunton Downtown Development Association (SDDA) events together, come up with new ideas for events, place weekly ads for businesses, handle social media accounts and the SDDA website, and

coordinate merchant outreach. Merchant outreach requires constant communication to ensure that the SDDA is meeting the needs of businesses. In addition, the marketing manager creates press releases and Facebook posts about SDDA accomplishments, services, volunteer opportunities, member benefits, etc. They update the SDDA member brochure by including their feedback from the previous year in addition to maintaining and updating the procedural contingency plan and Main Street member database.

Wytheville's executive director mentioned that Downtown Wytheville Inc. (DWI) has a big social presence in the town, which began when DWI identified a clear need in the community. When the town was conducting a major streetscape construction project, DWI provided updates about construction and road closures. The organization's vigilance with updating the community about progress contributed to more than 5,200 followers on Facebook today. Furthermore, community members are encouraged to talk about events happening in the downtown using these social platforms to increase their outreach. DWI has also built a strong partnership with the tourism department and has collaborated on marketing efforts including Virginia Tourism grants. DWI started working on the branding of the downtown before it became a Virginia Main Street program. It formed a small sub-committee to initiate branding. DWI used this strategy to organize better events in downtown Wytheville. As part of this branding effort, DWI designed and developed a wayfinding system that consisted of over 100 street signs to attract tourists from the interstate to visit the downtown.

7. Network with and learn from VMS communities

Executive directors from Fredericksburg, Staunton, Wytheville, and the VMS program lauded the benefits of networking with other Main Street communities in Virginia and across the nation. Virginia Main Street affiliated communities are required to join the America Main Street network, which the executive directors explained was one of the biggest advantages to the program. The executive director from Fredericksburg remarked that another Main Street community has likely dealt with whatever problem Christiansburg is having, so reaching out to other communities could be fruitful for DCI. DWI's executive director thought that DCI should start by networking with other communities who are already a part of Virginia Main Street Program. This will help DCI to understand what these communities did and more importantly, why they did what they did. Additionally, the Staunton executive director explained that the VMS program provides opportunities to network and gain knowledge from other communities that have been in the program longer, which could help DCI map its trajectory over time. While there are requirements to remain a VMS affiliate such as monthly reports, access to the many VMS resources, such as funding and network opportunities, outweigh this burden. The executive directors from Fredericksburg and Staunton both mentioned explicitly that they did not believe there were any drawbacks to joining the VMS program.