



VIRGINIA MAIN STREET SUMMER TOOLKIT: CULTIVATING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL DOWNTOWN

At the end of the first day of Virginia Main Street's Summer Toolkit on *Cultivating an Entrepreneurial Downtown*, participants identified questions from the day's sessions and areas in which they wanted to dig deeper. On day two, participants had the opportunity to explore them together. Here's how the questions aligned and the results of the conversations.

1 On Creating a Collective *What if...?* Vision (building consensus around a vision for the district – appearance & function)

Questions

- How do you move forward when everyone in the community seems to have a different **vision** for the future?
 - Develop a vision statement
 - Visioning is part of a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) planning grant
 - Who are key players? The downtown organization can be the essential partner in implementing the grant and arranging public input
 - WDDI just went through the CDBG planning grant process and emerged with a new vision statement
- How do I get complete **buy-in with local government** officials?
- How do you move forward with an unsupportive city council that see us more as a charity?
- I want to maintain enthusiasm in the community and better handle the **doubters**, who are plentiful.
 - Outreach
 - Talk with the decision makers
 - Casual meetings with community leaders
 - Divide & conquer – develop a work plan with responsibilities for each board member and volunteer
 - Make the town planners an ally
 - What is the Main Street Organization's Message?
 - Organizational structure is necessary
 - Publicize the message and often
 - Media-Message
 - Education-Mission

- Local government presence
 - Council Meetings
- How do you get **beyond the fear** of outside influence?
 - I wish I could process all of this information. My biggest challenge with downtown are **regional** forces and decisions from neighboring jurisdictions which we have no control over, yet that greatly influence our efforts. This includes transportation/land use/etc.”
 - Gel resources, pull together
 - Use the power of the people
- I want to go deeper: The **What-if/ Vision Statement**. How do you get to a working document? How many people involved? How do you get consensus?
 - Can you give us some additional ideas for overcoming those invisible walls for shoppers on Main Street...empty storefronts, a section of businesses before coming to more shopping...etc...
 - **Clusters...**How do you make theme happen? Building owners just want to rent their properties. Most prefer office space over retail. How do we make them see the light?
 - How do I engage the business owner in the **leasing plan process**?
 - Property Owners are profit driven
 - Absentee
 - Talk money
 - What is the local market?
 - —Know the assessments
 - Value of surrounding real estate
 - Rents
 - Value added from Main Street
 - Local Ordinance Enforcement
 - Peer Pressure

2 On Partnering with Property Owners (engaging this specific stakeholder group)

Questions

- How do we **involve more property owners** in downtown revitalization?
 - Why do property owners not repair/lease/sell property?
 - Tax benefits
 - Religious beliefs
 - Emotional/Sentimental
 - Can we try minimum maintenance standards?
 - What has worked?
 - Incentives/grant money
 - Sources
 - Town
 - Community Development Block Grants
 - Matching 50% from owner
 - Cap on amount
 - Architectural Services for design
 - Historic Overlay
 - Technical Assistance from Todd
- We have many **buildings that are in poor repair**. They couldn't be leased even if we found a prospect. What do you do?
- How do you inspire property owners to make vacancies ready to show/lease
- We have several uncooperative and/or **absentee building owners** in our tow. How do we deal with them? The properties are sitting vacant and deteriorating.
- How do we get absentee landlords to buy into the program?
- How do I get absentee property owners to
 - Put realistic values on their fixer-upper properties?
 - Better maintain their buildings?
- We have **one family that owns numerous buildings**—and maintains none of these properties. How do we get them to invest in these properties?
- A property owner talked about rehabbing the upper floor of his building into condos. How do we **facilitate him in moving forward**?

3 On the Motivated Merchants (supporting existing businesses)

Questions

- How do you **engage** ‘apathetic’ merchants?
- How can I challenge/inspire business owners who are just working toward retirement (i.e. are resistant to change)?
- We have a significant number of **hobby entrepreneurs**. How do you (or not!) convert them to rally around a “what if” plan to float all boats in the community?
 - Let numbers talk. Use counts of visitors during non-open hours.
 - Let numbers talk. Use Marc Willson’s figures....*80% of purchases are made outside of traditional 9-5 business hours*: Source: International Council of Shopping Centers (*Shopping Center Today* magazine) and the White House Conference on Small Business.
 - Use merchant leadership....find the ‘block captains’
 - Use a focus group to help them come to the conclusion of a need to change
 - The term ‘hobbyist’ can put people off, we may not want to call them that...our language has to be one of respect

- We’ve had some merchant movement toward **expanded hours**. How do we build more momentum in that direction?
- Can you give us any additional ideas to get current merchants to extend hours?
- Can a local town mandate later hours for their stores?
 - Family quality of life is important to many of these merchants
 - A change of hours may have to be put in terms of gains in family life...if they lose the dinner hour with family, what are they gaining?
 - Be aware of past efforts: if it didn’t work, there’s a hurdle that will have to be overcome.
 - Start small—try efforts around bank holidays—build success.
 - Start small. Harrisonburg has a “Light up the Night” program to get businesses to at least keep their lights on in the window even if they aren’t open
 - It may use energy, but lower energy bulbs can be used
 - It prevents crime
 - It shows off merchandise that someone might want to come buy later
 - Try to get some merchants to track—even anecdotally the benefits of this (transactions prompted)
 - Formalize an agreement: *make it a program*

- What are the benefits to the merchants for changing hours
 - Cooperative Advertising: Television, print
 - They are part of a group—a collective, sense of community, an experience.
 - Newspaper articles spotlighting merchants (Orange does this)
 - Other promotional efforts
 - The real benefit is foot traffic!
 - Profitability! It has to be demonstrated.
 - Coupons can help with counts and with promotional benefits
 - How do you pay for benefits
 - Municipality
 - Merchant contributions (let them pay for the value)
 - Sponsorships—can specific sponsors pay for the banners, advertising
 - What existing programs can be tapped into? A local arts walk in Harrisonburg is a natural partner. Can merchants think creatively about how they can participate in something that already brings people into downtown after hours?
 - Formalize an agreement: Put it in the lease
 - Work with property owners to require certain hours of operations in leases
 - Other promotions to get people downtown and into stores
 - Window decorating contests
 - Win the Window Contests
 - Bike VA tour (only once every 5 years for a community)
 - Coupons
 - Sales
 - Getting merchants to take advantage of promotions
 - “We assume that they’ll understand the benefits of getting people into their stores” but they don’t. “You have to always sell it.”
 - Do a tip sheet that helps merchants take advantage of promotions. Rocky Mount and Blackstone have examples.
 - Do a kick-off event for a promotion where it’s explained to the merchants and they are given tips for working with customers. It builds energy.
 - For a holiday promotion, combine the kick-off event with Marc Willson’s visit!
- How can you get business owners to accept help or even reveal that they need it before it’s too late?

- Secret shopper programs can help point out problems from the customer's standpoint. They use this in Blackstone in an inexpensive way with a self-tailored and managed program.
- Checking in on a regular basis with merchants is important. Some of us do it with weekly rounds, others do it as they shop—less formally
- The relationship is important—ask the question openly, “How are you doing” Half may decline to talk, but if they know that you are sincere, will keep it confidential, and actually care, many may open up to you.
 - Don't sell a service...put that information in your newsletter
 - Be there for them to talk to
- Harrisonburg is putting together a Business Resource Guide
 - A two person team is practicing the delivery with feedback from the other person.
 - After identifying the best practices of delivery, one person will go out to meet with businesses to review the guide (which also includes events) with the business owners. It should be a good conversation opener, that they will leave with the businesses. It includes groups like SCORE and the SBDC.
- Use merchant association meetings or informal sessions to move action forward.
 - Once there's been a little bit of griping, and it's out of their system, move it to the problem solving stage.
 - Ask the question: “Okay, this issue has come up for the past three meetings, is there a need to do something?”
 - Then: “What's standing in our way...How can we work together to move this obstacle aside”
 - “Why not here?”
 - Invite an outside person to facilitate the discussion.
- Let ER committee members and board members check in with businesses. The effort should have more faces than just the staff person or lead volunteer.
- Use an outside consultant visit to also strengthen your relationship with merchants. Even though the information they share with the consultant is confidential, they might share with you after the visit. A follow up visit from you can reinforce the learnings and further connect you to the day's success.

4 Encouraging Entrepreneurs (with a realistic, supportive approach)

Questions

- How do we encourage more people to pursue entrepreneurial enterprises rather than just train everyone to get a job?

Take homes:

- Take more advantage of SBDCs
- Get downtown owners and businesses thinking collectively vs. individually
- You've got to do the leg work on developing the group vision before the community vision
 - Creating a community attractive to entrepreneurs
 - Are you exporting your entrepreneurs?
 - Encourage folks to come back.
 - Why is one place more attractive than others
 - Family
 - Quality of Life
 - Accidental Tourist
 - Look and Feel
 - Ask those successful entrepreneurs what attracted them to the community
 - Outsiders with energy
 - How can Main Street help?
 - Bring in experts to help educate
 - Coaches
 - Supporting business through change
 - Help them figure out what they DON'T know.
 - Encouragement but realistic
 - Educational Process
 - Teach entrepreneurship
 - Financial literacy
 - How to be in business for yourself
 - How to get incorporated into the educational system
 - JR Achievement
 - JR Chamber of Commerce
 - Breaking out of the traditional models: Building wealth
 - Strongly encourage business planning
 - Contingency planning for changes
 - Succession plan

- Where/How do we find complementary entrepreneurs who are looking for biz opportunities in our small but heavily touristed town? How do we identify complementary businesses to go with what we already have
- What is the best route for analysis on what stores/businesses we need to bring in? Ask current businesses....a survey?
 - Complementary businesses
 - Some common sense
 - Available space
 - Smaller space within a larger space
 - Seasonal/temporary in underutilized space
 - Breaking up larger storefronts
 - (though problem with owners)
- How can I find small short term **loans** for our businesses? Most resources have dried up!
- I want my banks to give low-interest loans.
 - Loans – Lack of marketing from microlenders
 - Create a community loan pool
 - Owner-financing to sell buildings
 - Rethinking on blight enforcement

5 Other Questions (and VMS action items)

Questions

- I want to go deeper into the “how-tos” of **Sketch-Up**
- I cant’ wait to work with the GIS staff to utilize the Google Sketch-Up program
 - Website tools
 - Maps
 - Facades
- Can Sketch-Up be used in place of an architect for grants?

- How does a town set up a **façade program** and apply for a façade grant.

- Who coordinates the relationships of the ED, the chamber of commerce, and the merchant’s association?
- I need help with a new and rewarding volunteer campaign.
- At what point does a revitalization effort have to mature from a volunteer to a paid/budgeted effort?
- How do I use Craigslist?
- Fundraising: When to ask for \$? Beginning of the year or right before the event? Does anyone have an annual plan?

VMS will work to set up a half-day, hands-on tutorial on Sketch-Up. It will be held at Kathy Frazier’s office in Staunton.

About 2/3 of the group on Friday seemed interested. Stay tuned!

Contact [Kyle Myer](#)— there are some great examples of façade programs across the VMS communities, and each one works just a little differently!

All of these are good questions: And we’re going to look at them on September 22 & 23 in Abingdon

Main Street Essentials:
Organization & Promotion

Register soon at www.dhcd.virginia.org/mainstreet