

A Framework For Action



A Report from the Visioning
Committee For
The City of Altoona
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BACKGROUND

On June 28, 2006, by a Resolution of Council #0114-06 2006, Altoona City Mayor Wayne Hippo appointed a "Visioning Committee" to develop some broad strategic recommendations designed to encourage greater economic development activity and investment in Altoona's Central Business District. The committee was asked to provide those recommendations to the Mayor and City Council within 60 days.

Committee members included representatives from the local economic development organization, retail and corporate development interests, financial investors, the architectural community, and heritage tourism. Each offered both an outside and internal perspective to the discussion.

Recognizing the relatively short time frame in which the recommendations were due, coupled with the complexity of both the social-use issues and physical infrastructure requirements impacting the short-term realities of Altoona's Central Business District, the committee worked toward developing a "framework" and resource tool-kit with which more detailed policy and funding discussions can take place. This framework is designed to contribute to a robust comprehensive planning and visioning effort requiring broad stakeholder participation and representation of numerous distinct interests and perspectives.



The committee built upon related past studies commissioned by organizations such as the Greater Altoona Economic Development Corporation, The Altoona Blair County Development Corporation, the Allegheny Ridge Corporation and the Pennsylvania Downtown Center. The committee discussed concurrent efforts already underway while attempting to suggest new pathways and activities that might be considered to achieve a more vital and sustainable business district.

This framework has taken the form of broad bullet-point statements around which the social, economic, environmental, financial and political implications can be addressed.

CONTEXT

Community development organizations and elected officials across the country recognize that successful modern economic development and urban redevelopment strategies encompass all aspects of a community's asset base. That includes traditional infrastructure assets such as land, buildings, housing options, transportation systems and utility infrastructure.

Just as critical are its cultural venues, recreational options, events programming, and educational resources. When viewed holistically, these assets become part of the social and cultural fabric of a community and are reflected in its physical infrastructure, residents and real-estate value.



Their consistent form, function and condition, convey an immediate impression of a community. They create a "sense of place." They help form an opinion of the region's economic health, culture and civic pride. And they contribute to a community's ability to attract wealth generating businesses and sustainable private investments which results in an expanding tax base and overall dynamic vitality.

DEMOGRAPHIC URGENCY

A growing population, especially among the 20 to 49 age cohort, is a critical component in developing a sustainable economy and public service delivery dependent upon a municipal tax base. The City of Altoona, like Blair County and Pennsylvania as a whole, continues to face stagnant in-migration rates coupled with a rapidly aging resident base. Pennsylvania's overall population is expected to grow at only 2.5 percent through the year 2012 while the Nation's population is expected to grow by 17.5 percent. And the population will continue to be diverse. Of Pennsylvania's 2.5 percent, 56 percent will be Asian and Hispanic and 9 percent African American. Less than 1 percent of that growth will be white.

In a recent study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, the Altoona MSA was ranked nationally among the fastest shrinking MSA's

relative to population through the year 2020. That study projected a total net “loss” of 15,014 residents for Altoona’s MSA through the year 2020 which, if that projection holds true, would have a total population of 114,030. Of the worst performing MSA’s relative to population gain, Pennsylvania was represented by six MSA’s further demonstrating this issue as a state-wide demographic challenge.

Statistically relevant population increases for Blair County and the City of Altoona will likely only result from increasing the rate of in-migration (new residents) rather than reversing the rate of out-migration and/or adding to the population through natural birth rates. Therefore it is critical for Altoona to ensure attractive, high quality, and functional infrastructure aligned with national standards to compete for new businesses and residents in a globally competitive landscape.

THE FRAMEWORK

Why does the quality of our urban center matter? A 2006 report by the organization CEOs for Cities notes that two-thirds of college-educated 25 to 34 year-olds say they “will make a decision of where they live first and then look for a job within that area.” That same report indicates that 66 percent of single professionals within that age category seek downtown (city) locations.

Altoona is competing against thousands of small cities and communities across the country for that highly sought after educated demographic cohort that in turn will fuel the businesses that currently exist, will follow or are created.

There is a great opportunity for the City of Altoona. The demand for “new urban” and “micropolitan” living and working options has been increasing nationally since the early 1980s. This fact is affirmed by *LEADER Magazine*, the trade publication for corporate real-estate and site selection community:

Our own research shows that the talent everyone is seeking is largely located, and will move increasingly towards, “micropolitan” (i.e., rural, smaller cities) areas in the United States, primarily because of quality of life concerns. It is therefore incumbent upon corporate real estate professionals to develop a comprehensive “strategy of place” that integrates human resource, information technology, and real estate management functions to meet this extremely critical corporate need to “go where the talent is.” (*LEADER* July – August 2006)

Both competitive major metros and smaller cities have been aggressively redeveloping their core urban centers to meet this demand. Successful models for town center development and

redevelopment projects of various sizes exist in many areas of the country. Several source analysis also exist which index top performing cities annually of various sizes and on a variety of factors. Some of these annual listings include: Expansion Management Magazine’s Annual Mayor’s Challenge; CNN/Money Magazine’s Top 100 Best Places to Live; Inc.Com’s Boomtowns 2006; and the Milken Institute’s Top Performing Cities.

It is clear, based on those model locations listed and national urban development trends, that the City of Altoona is well positioned to leverage its location, diverse economy, events programming and infrastructure assets for positive economic development and new strategic investment.

Several competitive strengths exist for Altoona including a well maintained water and sewer infrastructure able to accommodate significant new development capacity, competitive operational costs, interstate access to major northeast metro markets and a major research university, and numerous underutilized areas of the city offering a large physical capacity for future development.

Altoona’s efforts will also be supported by state and national urban planning policy and funding programs that increasingly encourage the redevelopment of our country’s urban core as a more sustainable alternative to unchecked suburban developments that often require new public infrastructure investment.

The Visioning Committee discussion revealed the following key topics around which future action items and policy development should focus. They are:

1. Need for Market Rate Housing Options
2. Corporate Ownership/Presence in Downtown
3. Leveraging Core Economic Drivers
4. Infrastructure Enhancement
5. Use of Land-use Planning Tools
6. Architectural Review and Design Standards
7. Illustrated Long-term Plan Development

Based on the committee’s discussion, practical evaluation of Altoona’s urban core and their related professional experiences, members drafted several bullet points which are a combination of specific recommendations, rationales, and policy statements intended to guide future discussions, action items, policy development, identification and alignment of financial resources, and the development of specific goals and objectives (short-term/long-term). These issues are intended to assist the Mayor, City Council and staff in achieving an overall goal of a more vibrant and economically sustainable central business district. This list is in no particular order and is weighted equally.

- Urban and higher-density living options are increasingly in demand for knowledge-based wealth generating businesses and their workforce. The committee recognizes that it is critical for Altoona’s Central Business District to offer more market rate, class-one living options targeting the age-cohort 24 and 49. A permanent and diverse residential base fuels retail businesses, food and beverage establishments and enables new corporate options to become viable in light of the proximity and concentration of a potential workforce.



Physical development opportunities for market rate urban-style living options should be encouraged as part of all development projects. The downtown area should consider including “living” as part of its overall marketing strategy and identification: i.e.; Altoona Central Business and Living District.

- Interstate 99 will provide a new opportunity to penetrate the growing State College/Centre County market place. To most effectively leverage this opportunity, the committee encourages municipal leaders to engage in formal discussions with the Centre County planning community, real estate developers and other investors, as well as national organizations such as the American Institute of Architects and the Urban Land Institute to determine best practices, policies and applicable program models to support the long-term vision and redevelopment for City of Altoona.

Aligning planning principles and outcomes based on best practices will increase Altoona’s capacity to meet and exceed new resident and business expectations (see Brookings Institute report attached).

- The committee recommends that City officials discuss targeted population growth goals required to sustain future publicly supported service demands at certain milestones through the year 2030. This type of analysis will be important within the context of new building development, their use, location and ability to derive a return-on-investment for the City and other investment sources.

- The committee recommends context sensitive vertical infrastructure developments (multiple floors), within the city’s central



business and living district to maximize density and ensure Altoona’s urban integrity and distinctive design.

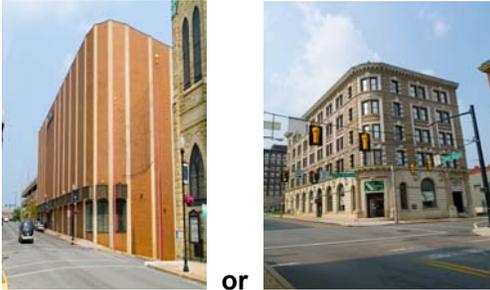
- The committee recommends that the city aggressively monitor and maintain existing public spaces and buildings within the downtown to ensure the highest degree of presentation to visitors and residents – especially in advance of special programming events scheduled in the downtown.



In addition, the city should regularly inventory public spaces and buildings and develop an infrastructure improvement plan that would address any needed rehabilitation to those locations.

- The committee recommends mixed-uses for current and future building development offering first floor retail, second/third floor office and upper floor residential options. This consideration should guide all future building and open space (lot) redevelopment within the City’s central business and living district.
- The committee recommends that all redevelopment strategies include a balanced transportation plan for Altoona’s Central living and business district by developing infrastructure elements that safely enable and encourage alternative modes of transportation such as walking and biking as well as clear and accessible transit user interfaces.

- The committee recommends that a context sensitive design standard be developed and incorporated into both new construction and redevelopment projects to ensure the integrity, continuity and attractiveness of the City's buildings and streetscape. The City's historic buildings and spaces should influence and guide future construction and façade development. The City should encourage façade improvements for anchor



buildings, especially those determined to be of historical or high-value importance to the central business district. Such façade improvements should be aligned with national high-demand standards.

- The committee recognizes that the City of Altoona and Blair County is centrally located within the Allegheny Mountains, which are now being marketed nationally as "The Alleghenies." Eco tourism is one the fastest and sustainable trends in the tourism/recreation industry. Aligning core infrastructure elements to support access, information and programs to support *The Alleghenies* effort is strongly recommended.

Issues that can enhance the tourist experience include view shed protection and enhancement, designated user pathways and transportation corridors leading to higher mountain recreational outlets and points of interest, information sharing and dissemination by Altoona city businesses, and program coordination between City officials and the Alleghenies Tourism Committee.

- The committee recommends formal gateway designations be developed clearly defining entry points into Altoona's central business and living district.
- The committee recommends that a signage and support standard be developed for the City as a whole reflecting a context sensitive design that would encompass visual design elements, directional functionality, applicable speed zones, pedestrian and cycling-centric considerations.

All existing signage should be made consistent with the current "black-post" lighting poles that were installed during recent streetscape improvement projects.



- The committee recognizes the linkage between surrounding Altoona neighborhoods and gateways with the central business and living district. In order to fully develop a vision for the central business district, that vision must be linked closely and complement redevelopment efforts in surrounding neighborhoods and thoroughfares.
- The committee recommends that City Council engage with the City Planning Office to review existing lot size requirements or restrictions to ensure that they support the development of diverse, higher-density, market-rate housing within the city municipal boundaries. Existing zoning or land-use requirements that hinder such development should be corrected.
- The committee recommends that all parking related requirements be reviewed and amended to support the overall growth potential and higher density business and living recommendations proposed by the committee.
- The committee recommends that a financial investment strategy be developed to include both public and private resources. This strategy may best be developed by establishing a standing "strategic re-investment council" whose members would represent the diverse funding entities, program managers and economic core drivers such as the Altoona Blair County Development Corporation, Allegheny Ridge Corporation, Penn State Altoona, GAEDC, the City of Altoona, Redevelopment Authorities, Altoona Regional Health System,

and private developers at both the regional and national levels who specialize in retail, corporate and residential real-estate.

One initial task should be to inventory all existing related programs and funds and develop an internal source matrix designed to leverage private investment. Program overlays should be leveraged as part of the reinvestment strategy such as the Keystone Innovation Zone and the City's Enterprise Zone Program.

Such a council could provide a formal review function for development proposals and proactively develop "Request for Proposals" targeting sites and building under public control.

It is likely that concurrent investment strategies and programs being developed by the state in cooperation with local economic development efforts, such as the "Building-PA Program" can be leveraged and incorporated to support the goals and objectives of Altoona's central business and living district improvement efforts.

- Creative incentives should be considered such as student loan forgiveness zones within the city to encourage younger professionals to locate to Altoona's Central Business and Living district.
- The committee recognizes the critical role of broad local corporate ownership in the revitalization of Altoona's central business and living district. Locally grown organizations offer unique, elective "built-in" expansion opportunities that can positively anchor Altoona's urban redevelopment efforts. And the level of local corporate presence in the central business district further sends a message to national corporate interests. The committee encourages broad corporate ownership in the city's urban redevelopment through their strategic consideration of downtown locations for back-office, financial and administrative operations.
- In addition to the opportunities presented by the completion of interstate 99, the committee recommends further leveraging the three primary core economic drivers already present within the City of Altoona: the Altoona Regional Health System, Penn State Altoona College and the Altoona Area School District. Each provides unique physical development opportunities and program resources, as well as employees and students to fuel new market rate residential housing options.

- Aesthetic improvements alone are not successful in accelerating economic development investment. They must be associated with a larger, practical and marketable development project or vision.

Therefore, the committee recommends that visual and aesthetic enhancements be associated and communicated as part of a larger re-development vision and investment strategy.

The committee's report should be the beginning of a long-term strategic planning process which attempts to envision what the city will look like and how it will function in the year 2030. Given the land-use planning, potential land acquisition and demolition implications required to support a long-term development strategy, the committee encourages close cooperation with and participation of the City's Planning Commission and Redevelopment Authority.

CONCLUSION

Any use or reuse of a building or site is often not the best use. How buildings and sites are constructed or redeveloped and for what purpose, should be decided in the context of the highest and best-use and for the maximum economic life cycle. While the previous bullet points represent specific recommendations and possible long-term action items for City officials and key stakeholders to consider, the committee has also developed some overall conclusions.



1. A long-term illustrated strategic vision supported by enforceable land-use guidelines, a phased development plan (*which can be building specific or in some cases "zone or neighborhood/district specific"*) and an attainable investment strategy should be developed.

Such a plan can ensure that sites and buildings within the City of Altoona attain a consistent physical outcome, ensure their highest and best-use resulting in the maximum economic development potential for City and its residents, while guiding investment interests and projects within a unified and systematic context.

2. While a realistic plan should be accomplished in phases, with the initial phase focused on the Central Business and Living District, surrounding neighborhoods and corridors should be logically incorporated into the overall planned vision in subsequent phases. The progression through the phased development plan should be resource-driven and outlined within the strategic plan.

It is important to note that many of the activities contained in this plan and portions of the subsequent development project outcomes can be achieved by managing and directing existing public operational funds and related public funding sources and programs as part of a formal and strategic systematic process.

Public infrastructure development programs are often designed to “seed” or “induce” private investment by reducing capital risk levels in advance of true market demand.

The Visioning Committee intends that this framework and tool-kit be considered initially in the context of public- private partnerships utilizing “induce demand modeling” with the ultimate intent of attracting and retaining private sector investment and market-driven projects.

3. The city should take steps, either directly or through public/private partnerships, to gain control of available or underutilized properties (building/land), with an early emphasis on those determined to be high-value anchor assets around which redevelopment projects could be directed. The redevelopment of these sites or buildings should follow the framework outlined in this document and be part of a long-term maximum sustainability plan for the City.
4. Modern market-rate housing is critical to success of downtown. All development projects should strive to include a housing component to attract new residents to the downtown and ensure a sustainable economic life-cycle.

TOOLS AND TIME-FRAMES

Modern visual and functional elements can be influenced through a variety of actions, timeframes and cost. Some actions have a short-term focus and can be accomplished through regular maintenance while others require mid-term revision. Future focused improvements can be addressed through long-term strategic planning. Several sources attached to this document illustrate the successful use of many of these elements. Some of these visual, human infrastructure elements include the following:

- o Incorporating and maintaining green space/islands/trees/gardens
- o Incorporating and improving signage to human scale/low profile/integrated designs
- o Incorporating pedestrian-friendly environment, sidewalks, crossings, signals and curbing
- o Traffic calming in parking lots and higher density intersections through green space/buffers/islands
- o Incorporating period/human scaled lighting where applicable
- o Incorporating appropriate highway siding to safely accommodate biking and running routes
- o Incorporating green space offset buffers along major retail/office centers
- o Incorporating themed context sensitive storefront facades where applicable/possible
- o Incorporating curb front retail with rear parking and docking when possible
- o Installing logically integrated welcome/gateway/signage delineators along major corridors
- o Consideration of vertical footprint options where applicable
- o Develop incentive based strategies for private home owners to maintain and improve their structures including green space maintenance, especially along the identified high profile corridors

A variety of methods and best practices are available to community developers to assist in achieving their unique goals and objectives. They include but are not limited to:

- 1) Use of AIA Enlightened Zoning methods, development of policies, plans and resource alignment that incorporate sustainable urban design standards and functional human infrastructure where appropriate
- 2) Use of architectural/design review committees
- 3) Awareness of land/real estate related tax and financial incentives
- 4) Aggressive monitoring and maintenance of existing green space along the identified corridors.
- 5) Adopt a Highway Programs by civic and student groups and application for Scenic Byway designation should be encouraged where applicable.
- 6) Recognition of corporate and residential properties that exemplify modern visual standards.
- 7) Identify elements along gateway corridors for improvement and communicate those findings to appropriate oversight officials, agencies.

- 8) Identify and request infrastructure funding to support rehabilitation projects and improvements along these primary corridors.
- 9) Develop recommended themed façade designs, architectural features, lighting in cooperation with regional tourism agencies/organizations with a focus on authenticity.

ATTACHMENTS / SOURCES

Attached to this report are several resources that have supported the committee's findings and can assist in future discussions and strategy development.

Forecasting 2020 U.S. County and MSA Populations (April 2006): Dr. Peter Linneman and Dr. Albert Saiz, The Wharton School – The University of Pennsylvania

Attracting the Young, College-Educated to Cities (May 2006): Sonja Koehler, CEOs for Cities – Chicago, IL.

Revitalizing Weak Market Cities in the U.S. (May 2006): Bruce Katz, The Brookings Institution

Location Strategies: Where Do You Need to Be? LEADER Magazine (July-August 2006): Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware – Work Design Collaborative and the Future of Work Program

Is Smart Growth Smart for Your Business? Business Facilities Magazine (August 2005):

Better Models for Development in Pennsylvania: Ideas for Creating More Livable and Prosperous Communities (2005): Edward T. McMahon and Shelley S. Mastran, The Conservation Fund and Pennsylvania DCNR

Multi-Family's Rising Star in Mixed-Use Development Development Magazine (Summer 2005): Lisa Harbatkin

Innovations in Zoning – AIA Best Practices (January 2004): The American Institute of Architects

Better Models for Commercial Development (2004): Edward T. McMahon, The Conservation Fund in partnership with Planning Commissioners Journal and Smart Growth Network

City of Altoona / Allegheny Ridge Heritage Area – Comprehensive Heritage Plan Analysis (2002): Pennsylvania Downtown Center

Making A "Visible" Difference (1999): Edward T. McMahon, Planning Commissioners Journal (Number 36 / Fall 1999)

The Economics of Historic Preservation: A Community Leader's Guide (1994): Donovan D. Typkema, National Trust for Historic Preservation