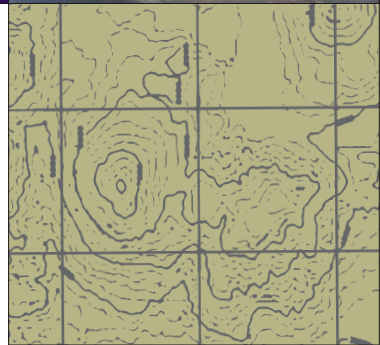


Weaving Together Community Betterment and Design
Forest City SDAT

A Report by the Sustainable
Design Assessment Team



Forest City, North Carolina
July 20–23, 2005

Alan Mallach, FAICP, SDAT Team Leader

Celeste Allen Novak, AIA, LEED AP, *Environment*

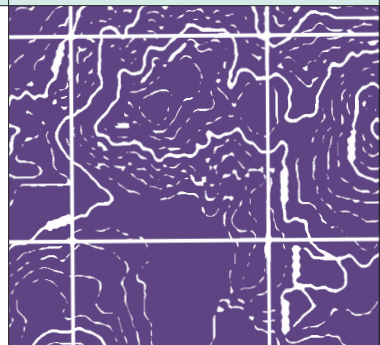
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INTRODUCTION

In March 2005, the town of Forest City, N.C., submitted a proposal to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for a Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT) to assist the town and its citizens in addressing key issues facing the community. The issues ranged from the broad question of the community's future economic and job base to specific questions about the former Florence Mill and the design of Main Street.

The AIA accepted the proposal and, after an initial scoping visit by a small group in June, the SDAT members arrived in Forest City on July 20. For three days, the team members, working closely with local officials, community leaders, technical experts, and citizens, studied the community and its concerns. During those three days, the team came to understand the issues and used their expertise to frame a wide range of recommendations, which were presented to the community in a public meeting at the Forest City Club House on July 23.

This report is a more detailed version of the findings and recommendations that were presented to the community on July 23. After a brief overview of the SDAT program and process, and a short discussion of Forest City and the issues it is facing, the report covers the following areas:

- Economic development
- Natural resources
- Transportation
- Better housing and neighborhoods
- Florence Mill
- Downtown/Main Street
- Trade Street.

A closing section offers some thoughts on how the community can best move forward to address the range of issues and recommendations covered in the report.

What is the SDAT Program?

The SDAT program is an interdisciplinary community assistance program that focuses on principles of sustainability. Launched in 2005, the program represents an exciting new chapter in the AIA's history of supporting communities with volunteer design expertise. The Forest City SDAT is the second completed project under the new program.

The SDAT program is modeled on the AIA's R/UDAT (Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team) program. Although the R/UDAT program provides communities with specific design solutions, the SDAT program provides broad assessments to help frame future policies or design solutions in the context of sustainability and helps communities plan the first steps of implementation. The SDAT program is based on an understanding of design as a process that:

- Is integrative, holistic, and visual
- Is central to achieving a sustainable relationship between humans, the natural environment, and the place
- Gives three-dimensional form to a culture and a place
- Achieves balance between culture, environment, and economic systems.

The SDAT program is grounded in the AIA design assistance team values, which call for a multidisciplinary approach, objectivity of the participating team members, and broad public participation.

Why is the SDAT Program Valuable?

Many communities are immobilized by conflicting agendas, politics, personalities, or even the overabundance of opportunity. Many communities have not yet taken stock of their current practices and policies within a sustainability framework, while others have identified issues of concern but desire assistance in developing a plan of action to increase sustainability. The SDAT process ensures that alternative solutions are given a fair hearing and that options are weighed impartially. The SDAT process:

- Informs the community of opportunities and encourages them to take action to protect local and regional resources
- Helps the community understand the structure of the place at various scales and contexts—from regional resources to the neighborhood scale

- Explores and articulates the larger contexts and interactions of ecological, socio-logical, economic, and physical systems
- Visualizes potential futures
- Recognizes and describes the qualities of a place by preserving the best elements of the past, addressing the needs of the present, and planning for the needs of future generations
- Identifies and describes choices and consequences
- Connects plans and actions
- Advances the principles of quality sustainable communities
- Helps the community define the roles of various stakeholders
- Develops a roadmap for the implementation of more sustainable policies and practices.



The key to SDAT success is diversity and participation; the process involves multiple disciplines and multiple stakeholders. The SDAT process includes not only the expert team but also government agencies and officials, private businesses, schools and students, community members, and other parties as appropriate.

Who are the Key Participants in the SDAT Process?

SDATs bring a team of respected professionals, selected on the basis of their experience with the specific issues facing the community, to work with community decision-makers to help them develop a vision and framework for a sustainable future. Team members volunteer their time to be a member of the SDAT and agree to refrain from taking work for three years from the date of completion of the SDAT project. A distinct team is assembled for each project based on the project's unique features. The team consists of a leader and five to seven members, and a staff person from the AIA Center for Communities by Design.



The professional stature of the SDAT team members, their independence, and the pro bono nature of their work generate community respect and enthusiasm for the SDAT process which, in turn, encourages the participation of community stakeholders. The passion and creativity that are unleashed by a top-notch multidisciplinary team of professionals working collaboratively can produce extraordinary results.

Local Steering Committee. The steering committee is the key organizing group for an SDAT project. It is responsible for assembling local and regional information, organizing the preliminary meeting and SDAT visit, and generating local media coverage during the entire project. After the SDAT visits, the steering committee typically evolves into a group that is dedicated to implementing the SDAT recommendations.

Local Technical Committee. The local technical committee is the technical support group for the SDAT project, including locally based design professionals, environmental professionals, economists, and others whose skills and experience parallel those of the SDAT members and who bring with them detailed knowledge of local conditions, issues, and information resources. Their presence magnifies the effectiveness of the team.

Citizens. In the end, the citizens of the community are the critical players, both for their insights and observations during the team visit and for their support for the new directions that emerge from the SDAT process.

On behalf of the Forest City SDAT and the American Institute of Architects, it is hoped this report will be a useful guide to the Forest City community as it charts its future for the coming years and for coming generations.

FOREST CITY TODAY

The town of Forest City is a small community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, 60 miles west of Charlotte with a population of roughly 7,600. Like many other towns in this part of the United States, Forest City is a mill town, with its economy traditionally dependent on the textile mills that grew up in the area in the late 19th century. In contrast to nearby Rutherfordton, the county seat of Rutherford County which contains the courts and the regional hospital, Forest City is the principal commercial center of the area. In addition to the town's downtown centered on Main Street, Forest City also contains the area's principal automobile-oriented shopping, including a mall, Wal-Mart, Lowe's, and similar stores along the Highway 74 bypass roughly 1.5 miles from downtown.

Downtown Main Street, four blocks of beautifully landscaped street with retail stores and offices, is the heart of the community. Off Main Street, the town contains a variety of attractive residential neighborhoods. Although Forest City does not have the grand upscale residential areas that grace some Southern communities, it has many older historic neighborhoods of more modest homes, including attractive 1920s and 1930s bungalows, many characteristic of the traditional mill village. The single remaining mill village, in Alexander Mills, is an area of great charm with great revitalization potential.



At the same time, many areas along and off Main Street present a dispiriting appearance. Vacant industrial buildings and barren parking lots cover much of the area on either side of Main Street, while even in attractive residential areas, incompatible land uses, such as service stations or poorly maintained commercial buildings, are widespread. Grahamtown, the town's historical African-American neighborhood, is particularly forlorn, the result of years of disinvestment, acute poverty, and neglect.

Forest City is not a wealthy community, measured by the economic conditions of its residents. The mill economy provided a living but not a generous one. In recent years, as that economy has declined, the social and economic conditions of Forest City's residents have become more difficult. A few statistics are worth noting (all from the 2000 Census):

- Unemployment in 2000, before the Florence Mill closed, was 10 percent, more than twice the national unemployment rate at the time
- Thirty-four percent of the town's workforce worked in manufacturing, compared to 15 percent of the national workforce
- The median household income was \$24,243, only 62 percent of the North Carolina statewide median of \$39,184
- Only 15 percent of workers living in Forest City worked outside the county
- Thirty percent of the households were headed by a person 65 or older, higher than the national level of 22 percent
- Fifty percent of all households with children were headed by a single person rather than a married couple, almost double the national level of 27 percent
- Fifty-one percent of households are homeowners, fewer than the national level of 67 percent; only 28 percent of Forest City's African-American households are homeowners
- Vacancy rates are high for both owner-occupied (5 percent) and rental (15 percent) housing.

Forest City's assets, however, outweigh its problems. One strong asset is the financial strength of the town government and its willingness to use it for the community's betterment. Thanks to solid management and ownership of local sewer, water, and electric utilities, the town is on a far stronger financial footing than almost any other community of similar size and economic base. Municipal services are well-funded and municipal facilities, ranging from the state-of-the-art police and fire buildings to large parks and recreation facilities, are well-maintained and of high quality. The town's decision to acquire the Florence Mill when it closed, and to commit significant resources to its redevelopment, reflect an energetic, proactive, approach to solving community problems.

Another asset, readily apparent throughout the team visit, was the quality and commitment of the community's civic leadership. There are many individuals from all walks of life who care deeply about Forest City and are willing to use their skills and their energy to make it a better place. Many of these are either "returnees," people born or raised in Forest City who have come back after many years living elsewhere, or in-migrants, people from outside the area who have chosen to make Forest City their home. Both groups bring valuable energy and talent to the community. At the same time, Forest City needs to become more inclusive. Many newcomers seemed to feel they were not welcomed into the community, and the town's African-American community, nearly one-third of the population, as well as the town's small but growing Latino population are both underrepresented in the community's governmental, civic, and business life.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Forest City is at a critical point in its economic future. The mill economy that has sustained the city for more than 100 years is part of the past, doomed by global economic trends outside the control of any town, county, or state. While accepting that reality is a difficult hurdle for a small community, it is an important one and can lead to a valuable opportunity to take stock, to assess one's strengths, and to develop a plan built on these strengths. With an honest approach, thoughtful planning, and hard work, a community can diversify its economic base, insulating itself against dislocations arising from future global changes. Specifically:

- The community's response to global changes must lead to a more diverse local economy built on technology and services
- Development should preserve and build upon Forest City's small-town character.

Forest City has valuable assets for economic development. The town has a motivated and experienced workforce that, with job training for specialized positions, should be able to staff most new enterprises. Nearly two-thirds of all of Forest City's adults have a high school diploma or additional education beyond high school. Forest City has ample low-cost power and water through its public utility entities. It has good access to major markets and suppliers, being centrally located between Charlotte and Asheville and served by major highways and rail lines. It also boasts a general aviation airport and a high-quality nearby medical center. Ample land is available for development. Forest City's location, small-town appeal, and rich historical and cultural heritage make it an attractive destination for tourists and an appropriate location for retirement homes. Finally, its natural beauty, clean air and water, and access to nature make it a most desirable location for work and leisure activity.

Based on an evaluation of these assets and an understanding of the larger economic trends, the following recommendations are offered to help to strengthen and diversify the local economy.

Continue to Aggressively Seek New Industry

Today's industries are likely to be smaller, more high-tech, and more demand-driven than the traditional "smokestack" industries of the past. New and emerging industries, such as plastics and composites, medical diagnostic equipment, and specialty coatings, are among the region's growth industries and should be sought out for sites in and

around Forest City (there are already 13 companies employing more than 1,200 people in the plastics industry in Rutherford County). Small businesses and entrepreneurs, however, are just as important to the area's economic development and should be supported as well.

Promote “Nostalgia Tourism”

Today more people live in urbanized areas than ever before. Increasingly, they look for places where life is “the way it used to be,” where the pace is slower and the people are genuinely friendly. This appeal is reinforced by museums and cultural activities, crafts outlets, and historical interpretation, but the major attraction is the small-town atmosphere Forest City already has. Forest City can capitalize on the nucleus of a strong and growing tourism industry that already exists in Rutherford County. In addition to jobs in the hospitality industry, tourism can foster artists' studios, crafts collectives, performances, and other activities. Forest City can provide assistance to individual artists and arts activities by providing venues, studio space, and administrative support, fostering cooperative efforts with nearby communities wherever possible.

Make Forest City a Retirement Destination

A growing number of people are finding that, after working in urban settings for part or all of their professional lives, as they get older, they are eager to slow down and simplify their lives. Western North Carolina has already developed a reputation as a retirement haven. Retirees bring independent sources of income, including savings and pensions, which strengthen the local economy, creating a demand for a wide range of goods and services. They also bring different expectations, such as smaller-scale housing, a cultural infrastructure, specialized services such as medical facilities, and a pedestrian-friendly environment.

An influx of retirees will stimulate housing market demand for a variety of products, including small-scale single-family or townhouse units close to downtown. It will also generate demand for additional cultural activities, shopping amenities, and services, all of which will create additional jobs. Forest City must be ready, however, to welcome retirees and offer them the opportunity to integrate into the community.

Expand Job Training Opportunities

To capitalize on these opportunities, job training will have to be provided. Training in the construction industry will be particularly important as carpentry, masonry, plumb-

ing, and electrical jobs will be in greater demand. Other productive training areas may include medical technician and other health-related skills, automotive repair, and office work.

Job training is now carried out by several county, state, and federal agencies, largely through Isothermal Community College. It appears, however, that there are stresses on the system that must be addressed for it to become more effective. Lack of properly situated spaces, funding limitations, and the absence of a regional transit system make access to retraining difficult. To address these issues, a multi-organizational Job Training Action Team should be created, consisting of representatives of the appropriate agencies, the town, affected industries, and the wider community. The Job Training Action Team should deal with such issues as community-based training programs, transportation, child care, communications, and other impediments to the availability and effective use of training programs. Given the auto-dependence of the Forest City area, the community should research car ownership and sharing programs to increase access by low-income residents to training and job opportunities.

Improve Access to Capital

One of the greatest needs for new ventures, particularly small businesses, is access to capital and credit. Many local banks have been taken over by regional or national chains, and decision-making moved to Charlotte, Atlanta, or Richmond. In order for new businesses to have access to the funding and credit they need, the community must forge new relationships with the banking industry, which may involve moving beyond working with local branch officers.

For entrepreneurs and small businesses with modest demands, a small loan or “micro loan” program, perhaps operated by a local nonprofit organization and capitalized with a combination of equity and low-interest debt from foundations, banks, and others, should be explored. This would become a revolving loan program as the first loans are repaid and new loans are made, which could either be set up as a new program, or the community could work with an existing organization within the state to establish a local program.

Finally, any program to increase capital access must directly reach out to the area’s African-American and Latino communities. As the latter community grows, it will be increasingly important to provide multilingual information and support services.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Forest City is blessed with clean air and water, and a beautiful natural environment of woods, scattered farms, and rolling hills. While that might be considered good reason that the issue of environmental protection need not be addressed, the SDAT believes these issues must be addressed because Forest City currently enjoys such high environmental quality. This is the time to increase awareness of the importance of environmental quality, so that the quality of life that it offers can be preserved. If the quality of life is lost, it may be too late to bring it back.

The quality of the area's natural resources is not only important in itself but is critical to the area's future economic development strategy. The ability of Forest City and Rutherford County to capitalize on new economic opportunities, including both high-tech business and retirement communities, will depend heavily on its ability to maintain its environmental quality and on the commitment of the community's residents to maintain that quality in years to come.

Maintain Good Air Quality

To maintain the good air quality of the area, it is important that people become aware of what is involved in air quality—what the different features and elements that affect air quality are—and how to maintain it. It is recommended that:

- Air quality guidelines should be published in the local newspaper and educational materials for children made available through local schools
- Air quality monitoring should be available and encouraged with respect to small manufacturing, repair, and other facilities, including home workshops, to ensure that these are healthy work environments
- Forest City and Rutherford County should consider the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's retrofit programs for city vehicle fleets and county school buses.

Upgrade Systems to Maintain Water Quality

The town has high-quality water supply and sewerage treatment systems but both may be under increasing pressure as population grows. Both water and sewer systems should be constantly upgraded to maintain state-of-the-art quality. Water supply is constrained during periods of low rainfall and conservation measures are important. It is recommended that:

- Conservation measures should be improved, including irrigation and use of gray water in construction
- Stormwater should be filtered
- Best practices for water use in small business and industry should be promoted
- Run-off from small businesses, such as auto repair shops, should be monitored to ensure water quality.

Plan Land Use

Many people in largely rural areas such as Rutherford County tend to take the beauty of their natural environment for granted and assume it will remain that way indefinitely. Experience elsewhere has shown that is not true—poorly planned and controlled development can destroy an area’s natural beauty and undermine economic opportunities that are heavily dependent on those qualities.

Forest City has limited tools with which to direct land use in undeveloped areas, which are largely under county rather than town jurisdiction. At the same time, by taking certain local steps and advocating for better practices at the county level, Forest City and its civic leadership can make a difference:

- Establish strong natural resource preservation and landscape treatment policies for all development in Forest City and in its extra-territorial jurisdiction (ETJ) area, particularly as that area may expand in the future
- Advocate at the county and state levels for best practices to encourage continued farming and good woodland stewardship
- Advocate at the county level for strong planning and land use regulations that help preserve the natural environment and landscape (although the SDAT recognizes zoning is not currently an option, it should be stressed there are many land use tools, including establishing strong site planning and subdivision standards, landscape preservation regulations, and strong links between land use planning and infrastructure extension, that should be explored).

Become a Model of Stewardship

By adopting best practices in its stewardship of its own natural resources, Forest City can become a model for small towns in North Carolina and nationally:

- Develop community education programs around natural systems
- Design sites and buildings, and adopt regulations for private development, to preserve and rehabilitate natural systems
- Remove invasive non-native species and select appropriate new, low-maintenance, plants and trees, including plantings of diverse communities of species
- Reduce use of gas-powered, polluting maintenance equipment
- Reduce “tree-topping” and provide proper tree care and trimming
- Manage local woodlands as a natural community and create a network of woodland trails in the community.



TRANSPORTATION

Transportation issues in Forest City are multifaceted and include existing and future vehicular traffic, new roadway connections and improvements, parking, pedestrian connectivity and walkability, bicycle travel and routes, and signage and wayfinding.

Review Vehicular Traffic Patterns

Vehicular traffic operations within Forest City appear to be at acceptable levels of service, with little traffic congestion. The Main Street/South Broadway intersection, however, was identified as one intersection that has long delays and queuing. The Main Street/South Broadway intersection as well as other intersections along Main Street should be investigated to ensure that vehicle detection is provided. Timing of traffic signals should be reviewed and fine-tuned to improve vehicular traffic operations.

Traffic generated by the future development of the Florence Mill development should be reviewed and travel routes to and from the development carefully planned such that the development does not cause congestion in and around the downtown area. Traffic should be considered in the approval process of future developments to ensure traffic congestion does not become a problem. To this end, it is recommended the town maintain residential zoning and control land use on the property between Oak Street and Thermal Belt Railway (future “rail to trail”) to eliminate the possibility of vehicle-oriented strip commercial development.

Provide New Roadway Connections and Improvements

- Oak Street should be further extended from Broadway to Old Caroleen Road to increase accessibility, provide a new and more direct route into Forest City, and permit truck traffic to be shifted off residential roadways. The town should continue to plan and lobby for the construction of this extension, and be proactive in the review process to ensure the roadway design is compatible with the future vision of Oak Street.
- New roadways, streets, and parking areas tied to the development of the Florence Mill site should be carefully planned. The realignment of Pryor Street, removal of Depot Street as a through roadway, and the streetscape/traffic calming treatment of Mill Street are integral parts of this development and traffic operations in the downtown area.

- The town should continue to advocate for proposed but delayed improvements of US 221 to improve regional access to Forest City and Rutherford County.
- Uncontrolled access/egress from commercial establishments along West Main Street west of Church Street to the Spindale town line should be changed to provide for specific driveway cuts from West Main Street to minimize conflict points on West Main Street and provide an orderly traffic flow. The town should also develop access control guidelines for all new developments.
- The North Carolina Department of Transportation’s (NCDOT) strategic roadway improvement plan for Forest City includes the conversion of South Broadway and South Powell Street to a one-way couple. The town and the NCDOT should re-evaluate this recommendation once the Oak Street Extension between Broadway and Old Caroleen Road has been completed. One-way couples often have a negative effect on adjacent land uses, and many such systems that have been adopted in the past have since been found undesirable and restored to two-way traffic.
- Truck traffic on Main Street impacts flow and disrupts the pedestrian-friendly nature of that street. The town should consider seeking to have Main Street (US 74 Business) decommissioned to prohibit truck traffic. As an alternate, Oak Street should be designated the official through truck route.

Improve Pedestrian Connectivity

Forest City’s walkability is an important lifestyle amenity the community can offer and is crucial to its economic development strategy. Retirees, in particular, are attracted to an environment where they can walk to many of their daily needs. Pedestrian connectivity, safety, and comfort should be improved and maintained, especially in the downtown area, in order to attract new residents and improve the quality of life for existing residents.

Main Street can be made more pedestrian friendly by pursuing the following strategies:

- Re-route through truck traffic to Oak Street
- Establish pedestrian crossing locations and provide appropriate treatment to provide for safe and efficient crossing, including defined crosswalks using textured materials
- Provide pedestrian nodes (“bump-outs”) at crossing locations to reduce crossing widths

- Add pedestrian signals and push buttons at existing intersections with traffic signals
- Coordinate sidewalks with crosswalks on central landscape islands
- Coordinate crosswalks with connections to off-street parking areas.

A serious pedestrian issue is the difficulty that pedestrians from south of Oak Street will have crossing Oak Street at Harmon Street which is the most direct route for many pedestrians, including those living in the Housing Authority buildings south of Oak Street. While proposed traffic signals at the Oak Street intersections with Young Street and Church Street will assist with pedestrian crossing at those locations, no signal is planned for the Oak Street/Harmon Street intersection.



- Pedestrian crosswalks and “yield for pedestrians” signage should be provided at this intersection before it is opened for traffic. The need for traffic signals (with pedestrian signals) should be evaluated in conjunction with the opening of the Florence Mill development, as the Oak Street/Harmon Street intersection will be the main entrance to this development.
- Pedestrian connections from off-street parking areas to attractions along Main Street and other roadways should be clearly defined, well-lit, and attractive.

- There are many narrow sidewalks and areas where no sidewalks exist along these side streets. The town should develop a comprehensive sidewalk plan identifying pedestrian desire lines and establishing minimum sidewalk construction standards for widths, pedestrian curb ramps, streetscape, and tree grates.
- As part of the larger revitalization plans for Grahamtown, attractive sidewalks and street lighting should be provided along Forest Street from Oak Street to Hardin Road, and along Hardin Road from Church Street to Oak Street.

Identify Parking Needs

- While the current parking supply exceeds the demand, Forest City should prepare a comprehensive traffic supply/demand study to identify the need for additional parking and ensure the parking supply will not be inadequate in the future. The Florence Mill development will need additional parking as will any future development, particularly if the Trade Street project proposed in this report is pursued. The study should locate and define new parking areas for City Hall as well as other new land uses, including the proposed cinema. On-street parking should be provided on Trade Street and others, including the side streets that connect to Main Street.
- Forest City should institute a parking management program to improve use of existing parking spaces, minimize employee use of prime parking spaces, and reduce all-day parking on Main Street.
- Signage for off-street parking areas should be improved as part of a comprehensive wayfinding system for downtown, defined connections should be provided to off-street parking areas, and parking landscape standards should be implemented to improve appearance of parking areas.

With proper planning and management, there is little or no danger that parking in and around downtown Forest City will fall short of the demand, either in the short- or long-term future. If anything, care should be taken to avoid devoting excessive amounts of valuable downtown land to parking spaces.

Increase Bicycle Travel

The scale of Forest City is highly suitable for biking. While many neighborhoods are a long walk from downtown, they are within easy biking distance. Moreover, the back roads both within and outside of town are perfect for the serious recreational cyclist. Forest City has the potential to increase bicycle usage among children, casual adult riders, and serious recreational cyclists and bicycle tourists.

- Roadways in Forest City do not offer bicycle lanes or other facilities, and bicyclists must share the road with cars and trucks. To improve bicycle travel in Forest City, separate bicycle lanes should be considered on the following roads:
 - a. West Main Street—Eliminate the two-way left turn lane on West Main Street west of Church Street and reallocate roadway cross section to include bicycle lanes
 - b. Vance Street from Main Street to Paul Dunbar Elementary School
 - c. Continue bicycle lanes on various streets from Oak Street to Main Street
 - d. Trade Street from Vance Street to Cherry Mountain Street
 - e. Cherry Mountain Street from Trade Street to Crowe Park.
- The town should consider developing a multipurpose trail along Brackett Creek, extending from the water treatment facility near US 74 to Oak Street, and continue to pursue the conversion of the Thermal Belt Railway right-of-way for future trail use.



Improve Signage and Wayfinding

- Destination signage is not provided on I-85/I-26 for Forest City. Forest City should work with the NCDOT to add guide feeder signs for Forest City on I-85/I-26.
- Forest City lacks signage for Main Street or other points of interest for drivers as they enter the town. The town should commission and install a professionally designed wayfinding and guide signage system.
- The Forest City area contains several roadways with very similar and confusing route numbers: US 221 Alt, US 221, US 74, US 74A, US 74 Bypass, and US 74 Business. The town should consider working with the NCDOT to decommission US roadways and provide new NC route numbers or SR numbers, providing distinct identities to roadways in and around the town.

Finally, it is recommended Forest City explore future transportation opportunities and challenges, including expanding the limited transit opportunities to create better ways for people to get from home to child care, school, work, shopping, and recreation.



BETTER HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Housing is an important issue for the future of Forest City. The housing market is not strong. Home ownership is low (in Spindale, which is similar economically, 60 percent of families are homeowners), while vacancy rates are high and sales prices low, in many areas below replacement price. Although the town has many attractive neighborhoods, many of its citizens live in substandard housing. While new housing has been built outside town, including within the ETJ, virtually no housing has been built inside Forest City in recent years.

These issues are important not only in themselves but are critical to the community's economic revival. To take advantage of the opportunities for economic revitalization, the town should focus on three areas:

- Preserving and strengthening the town's sound and historic neighborhoods
- Revitalizing challenged areas, particularly Grahamtown and Alexander Mills
- Creating new housing to foster more downtown living and a more diverse community.

These activities should be carried out as part of an overall housing strategy, linked to the mill redevelopment and plans to turn downtown into a shopping and visitor destination.

Preserve and Strengthen Sound and Historic Neighborhoods

Forest City's sound and historic neighborhoods are important to its future. Although these areas are generally well-maintained, they contain scattered deteriorated or neglected properties, recent improvements that do not conform to proper standards, and incompatible land uses. A multifaceted strategy should be initiated to enhance the attractiveness and value of these areas as residential neighborhoods of choice:

- Aggressively enforce codes through targeted enforcement against eyesores and properties neglected by their owners
- Use nuisance abatement, where the town carries out the work and takes a lien against the property, to address persistent conditions that are hazards to public health or safety
- Create a program to offer affordable home improvement loans to property owners and new home buyers; such a program could possibly be funded through a partnership between the town and one or more of the local banks
- Encourage homeowners and new home buyers to use the state historic tax credit program to improve their properties

- Create incentives as well as voluntary buyout provisions to encourage appropriate reuse of properties currently being used for incompatible purposes
- Remove commercial zoning along East Main Street, east of South Broadway
- Explore the removal of commercial zoning along South Broadway below Oak Street Extension.

The town should explore using municipal funds to initiate efforts such as a homeowner loan program or a program of incentives for reuse of properties currently being used for incompatible purposes. These programs can be structured so that the town's funds will be returned over time and may represent a good investment of the community's funds.

Develop a Comprehensive Revitalization Strategy for Grahamtown

Grahamtown is the historic heart of Forest City's African-American community. Today, however, it contains at most one-half the homes it once contained, the other half having been demolished or lost through fire or neglect, and one-quarter or fewer of the town's African-American residents. It represents the town's largest concentration of substandard housing, with a large amount of vacant and underused land. Although located directly between downtown and the Highway 74A commercial hub, its irregular street pattern and lack of infrastructure make it seem remote from both.

A comprehensive revitalization strategy is needed for Grahamtown. Scattered fix-up programs or home improvement loans and grants, however valuable for individual families, will have little impact on the neighborhood as a whole. An educated guess



would suggest that of the 150 homes in Grahamtown today, roughly one-third should be demolished, one-third will need grants or low-interest loans to be brought up to good standard, and another one-third are either in good condition or in need of only cosmetic improvements. It is likely the great majority of the residents have very low income and will need some form of help either to improve their homes or be provided with sound replacement housing.



The strategy must focus on three elements simultaneously:

- Improving living conditions for the people who live in Grahamtown today
- Building a market to attract families, particularly homeowners, back to Grahamtown
- Addressing other needs of the community, particularly training and job opportunities.

The town should retain a qualified individual or organization to work closely with the residents of the community, as well as other stakeholders, to develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy for the area. Some of the elements that should be included are:

- Deferred loans and grants for low-income homeowners to improve their properties, using state Single Family Rehabilitation Program and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds
- Acquisition and demolition of substandard housing unsuitable for rehabilitation

- Where tenants occupy housing suitable for rehabilitation, a combination of rehabilitation and a program to assist them to purchase their homes from the landlords
- Construction of new affordable or mixed-income housing (Housing should be single-family homes and at least 60 percent of all new units should be for owner-occupancy, using the state New Homes Loan Pool and Self-Help Loan Pool programs. Rental housing should be developed only in conjunction with an experienced, highly qualified nonprofit developer or manager of affordable housing.)
- Installation of continuous sidewalks and improved street lighting along Forest Street and Hardin Road
- Enhanced job training and employment opportunities for neighborhood adults and youth
- Increased connectivity of the street pattern, both within Grahamtown and linking Grahamtown to other parts of the community (a more regular street pattern can be created as parcels are assembled for new construction).

The old Dunbar School, a valuable community resource, is severely underused. The town should work with the community to make this facility a center for education, training, and other community support activities.

Develop a Home Improvement Program for Alexander Mills

The historic mill village at Alexander Mills, which recently became part of the town of Forest City, is a potential community asset. Not only is it one of the few surviving intact mill villages in the area, it is a charming community with major revitalization potential. At present many houses are in substandard condition and absentee ownership appears to be on the increase. A revitalization strategy is needed to improve properties, reverse the decline in owner-occupancy, and enable this area to achieve its potential.

Much of the area’s charm lies in its scale—not only the small cottages but also the narrow, winding, rural, curbless streets. Any revitalization or construction activities should preserve its scale and historic character, avoiding new houses that would be inappropriate or out of scale, or inappropriate roadway widening or other “improvements.” Serious consideration should be given to designating the area as a historic district. Other recommendations are:

- Offer deferred loans and grants for low-income homeowners to improve their properties, using state Single Family Rehabilitation Program and CDBG funds
- Help lower-income renters become homeowners, using the state New Homes Loan Pool and Self-Help Loan Pool programs (the town may want to explore

a program where it would actively buy properties—particularly from absentee owners—rehabilitate them, and sell them to first-time homebuyers)

- Provide enhanced job training and employment opportunities for neighborhood adults and youth.

Create New Housing to Foster More Downtown Living and a More Diverse Community

Downtown housing is critical to Forest City’s economic development strategy. To become a vibrant center, downtown Forest City needs housing and people who will use downtown for its shopping, entertainment, and quality-of-life amenities. The construction of 50–60 condominiums in the Florence Mill project is an excellent beginning but, in the long term, far more is needed. Furthermore, although it may be appropriate to have some percentage of new downtown units as affordable housing for low- and moderate-income households, the great majority should be designed to attract a middle- and upper-income market, with greater disposable income to support the downtown.

Retirees and empty nesters represent a strong target market for downtown housing suitable to their needs. This market represents part of the older population that is likely to look for “small town America” rather than resorts or segregated “active adult” communities. A trickle of such households, generally couples, is already moving into Forest City, often buying homes in historic districts such as that along East Main Street. These households are likely to look for a mix of different housing types, with some seeking condominiums, some townhouses, and some small one-story single-family houses. They are financially comfortable, often with enough assets from the sale of a home in their prior community to pay all cash for a house or condominium selling for \$150,000 to \$300,000. They are not only looking for an attractive house or apartment but for one in a setting that feels like a community. As a result, developments to attract this market must be large enough so that they create an environment, as well as link to the town’s major quality-of-life assets, Main Street and the Florence Mill.

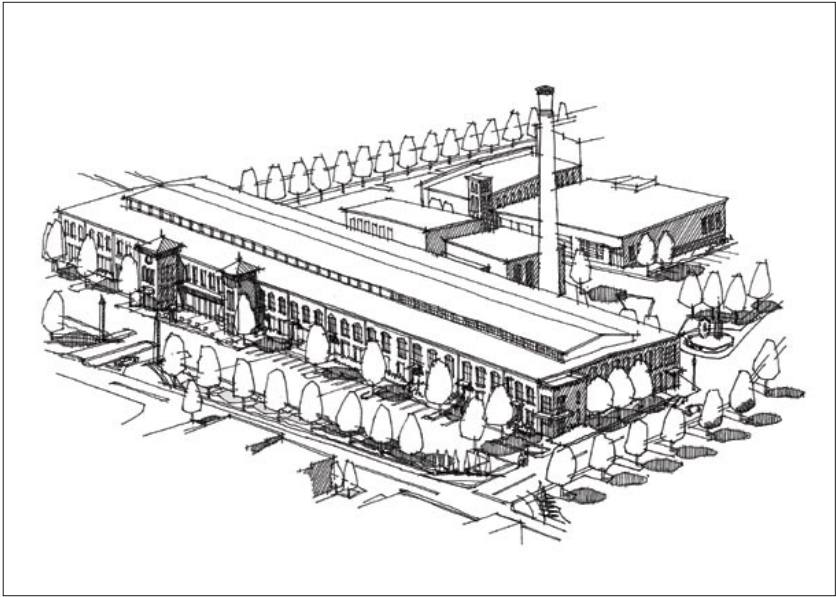
Two areas close to Main Street and the mill have particular advantages for attracting this market, each with a significantly different housing type:

- New Mill Village, in Hammertown and between the Florence Mill and the Oak Street Extension
- Trade Street Village, along both sides of a newly reconfigured Trade Street from east of North Broadway to Yarboro.

They are described in further detail in later sections of this report.

FLORENCE MILL

In contrast to some of the preceding sections, where the SDAT was dealing with a relatively clean slate or responding to conceptual ideas, in the case of the Florence Mill, the team was asked to respond to an already well-developed program and site plan. For this reason, this section is as much an analysis and commentary on that plan as it is a series of specific recommendations.



Reconfigure the Florence Mill Plan

Although the historic rehabilitation of Florence Mill is a great opportunity for the city, the mixture of uses in one structure may have the effect of relegating the new City Hall offices to back-door status on the site. The current concept for the building is to share an atrium entrance with the restaurant and residential uses. The entrance, and the location of parking around the site, may create confusion about how and where to access the city offices, as well as deprive the community of a civic entrance to their most important public building.

While the northeast entry may be shared by all uses, a formal entrance to City Hall should be located on the east end of the northern face of the structure. A more formalized entrance facing the old cornstarch towers will create an opportunity for a well-defined civic plaza, encouraging municipal office visitors to park in the lots to the west of the site. The cornstarch towers will serve as monumental place makers, anchoring the civic space in front of the formal entrance. Although vehicular access to the restaurant service entrance and indoor parking for condominiums may be limited, the developer should study the possibility of accessing the first-level parking from the south side of the building and providing restaurant support through the covered parking area. This will eliminate the access drive on the north side of the building and strengthen the connection between the civic plaza and public activity spaces.



Abandoning Depot Street as a through street will create a safer, more pleasing pedestrian experience for citizens to access both the municipal offices and special events held in the public space north of the old mill building. A user of the facilities in the mill will be able to access mill parking from Main Street, and then exit from the parking lot on Pryor Street, or vice versa. Realigning Pryor Street will simplify traffic patterns and create safer access to the old mill facility.

Mill Street will remain in its current location, providing primary access to parking for the residential and restaurant components of the rehabilitated mill. Since the bulk of the parking for these functions is immediately east of the old mill structure, pedestrian access should be along the northern facade of the building, with on-site parking moved to the north of this access point. This should facilitate greater use of the Mill Street pedestrian crossing and enhance the visitor's approach experience by mitigating the tall, simple factory facade with appropriate landscape elements. If on-site parking is desired, this site element can serve as a transition between the civic nature of the greater site and the specific needs of restaurant clientele. The reserved parking for condominium owners on the south side of the structure will encourage them to use their reserved entries as primary access to the building.

The rehabilitated mill and new movie complex provide prospects for enhanced downtown activities but the mass of the proposed theater building makes creating effective pedestrian access to the mill's public spaces a challenge. While the cinema structure limits visual access to the site, it also offers an opportunity to create a dynamic visual "hook" to lure people along the Mill Street pedestrian corridor. This should be a bold, simple, and interesting visual object, which should stand out to people at least 170 feet north of the proposed cinema wall that extends into the current sidewalk. While the large artwork will attract pedestrians down Mill Street, an adjacent "gateway" component should be designed at a more pedestrian scale to welcome the visitor to the mill public space. From this gateway, the potential visitor will begin to read the site, being presented with a view of the civic pavilion, mill tower, playground amenity, and mill building.

Pedestrian movement to and through the public space between the rehabilitated mill building and the new movie complex should be improved. The formal path of the proposed north-south axis potentially splits the site, creating "no-man's lands" on either side. The western side of the site also needs greater definition. This can be mitigated by adjusting program elements to the east of the current conceptual layout to incorporate the eastern side of the site into active use. This should reinforce the civic plaza area at

the new municipal office entrance, provide greater definition along the western boundary, and position parking behind the rehabilitated office building on the northwest corner of the public space. Barring potential brownfield issues, the projected filling of the northern end of the site may be eliminated, while pedestrian access to and from the new display and vendor area will enhance the user friendliness of the site.



The proposed pavilion should be relocated to become a major focal point when seen from the old mill, the civic plaza at the City Hall entrance, the rehabilitated office building, and the Mill Street gateway, as well as from vehicular traffic along Mill Street. It is crucial that the structure be visually appealing as a centerpiece for the public space. While the pavilion may be the architectural centerpiece, ample opportunity for “people watching” should be available from locations adjacent to the public space.



Create Destinations Around the Mill

The Florence Mill represents an important opportunity for Forest City to create something that will not only be a stand-alone project but a catalyst for other development to complement its role as both a center for the community and a visitor destination. To that end, the town should aggressively focus on reusing adjacent buildings for complementary activities, as well as enhancing the quality and visibility of an already existing attraction. The facilities should include activities that will attract large numbers of people on an ongoing basis, and which can be supported, at least in part, from operating revenues. The goal is to create a “critical mass” of destinations which together with Main Street will both enhance residents’ quality of life and draw visitors in substantial numbers, who would remain in Forest City long enough to help support the local economy.

- The former Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola buildings should be reused in ways that further the crafts, visual, and performing arts. One building might be most suitably used as a crafts center, which could include both work and display/selling space for craftspeople and visual arts, while the other might include a performing space. They could also include space and facilities for educational purposes—both for young people and adults—as well as office and meeting space for arts organizations.



- The current Farm Museum offers much promise as a visitor attraction, as well as an educational center that celebrates the area’s agricultural heritage but currently falls well below its potential. The town should work with the operators of the museum to redesign the facility to become a more visible attraction, as well as reorganize the exhibits, using the substantial outdoor space as well as the buildings for display and educational purposes.

Develop a New Mill Village

As mentioned earlier, it is recommended that key properties in close proximity to the mill, between the railway line and the Oak Street Extension from Young to Harmon Streets and in Hammertown, be developed as a new mill village, a development of

modest, one-story single-family homes using the vernacular of the traditional North Carolina mill village. While this area has somewhat complex topography, it can be configured with an attractive site plan to accommodate approximately 50 homes. This location, in short walking distance of the mill and Main Street, should be very attractive to retirees looking for a walkable, active, small-town lifestyle, as well as to some younger families eager to be close to the Mill and Main Street.

- The town should move aggressively to seek to acquire the properties in this area, including those currently owned by the NCDOT, in order to assemble the site, and develop a Request for Proposals, so that development of this site can take place simultaneously with, or immediately after, the Florence Mill redevelopment.
- The selected developer should be required to follow guidelines that establish an appropriate character, as well as quality construction and design. The new mill village should have an intimate scale, with a tight grid of narrow streets and small blocks. The architecture of the houses should be based on the traditional mill village vernacular of bungalows and cottages, with generous front porches. The quality of the construction and materials used must be high, including wood windows and siding and trim of wood or fiber-cement.

A development of this character would both reinforce the aesthetic of the Florence Mill site as well as appeal by virtue of the size of the lots and the houses to the core market of middle-income empty nesters and retirees who are most likely to move into Forest City. Adding new houses in this area will increase users for the public spaces in the mill and help support the local economy generally.

DOWNTOWN/MAIN STREET

Main Street is Forest City’s most distinctive asset, the heart and soul of the community. It is the reason many people will want to live in the community and businesses choose to locate nearby. It is already attractive, with a strong mix of businesses, and will be further enhanced by the Florence Mill redevelopment and the multiplex cinema entrance on Main Street. At the same time, many of its buildings are underused or vacant, while the street configuration is in many respects unfriendly to pedestrians and visitors. During the coming years, the town should develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to build on Main Street’s existing strengths to make it more of a destination for visitors and a center for the entire community.



Make Main Street Easier for Visitors to Find

- Ensure that attractive signage designed to get people to Main Street begins on the interstate system and continues on access streets such as South Broadway and the Oak Street extension, as discussed in the transportation section of this report. Clear signage should also direct visitors to public parking areas.

Improve Gateways and Arrival Points So That Visitors Know When They've Arrived, and the Initial Impression of Main Street is Positive

Two critical gateways that must be addressed are the arrival points from the south along South Broadway and Church Street. At present, the driver arriving along South Broadway is greeted by a drab concrete parking lot and a former car dealership converted to a furniture store. At the end of Church Street lies a vacant lot for which a large pharmacy is apparently planned.



- The South Broadway entrance should be reconfigured to create a strong visual entrance. The south edge of the parking lot should be developed with storefronts that line the sidewalk and face South Broadway so that the character of the Main Street historic district is extended to this entry point.
- The planning and design of any development at Church Street and Main Street should be carefully controlled to ensure that it is sited and designed in ways that establish Main Street as an important destination.

Foster a More Diverse Mix of Businesses along Main Street

To sustain the interest of a diverse body of residents and visitors, a diverse mix of businesses needs to be encouraged. At present, only a few of the businesses along Main Street are appealing to visitors and local people engaging in discretionary spending. Stores that are conducive to browsing as well as buying should be encouraged.

- The town, Historic Downtown Forest City, and others should develop a strategy to recruit and support businesses that fill gaps in the street’s retail and service mix. This, in turn, requires the active cooperation of the owners of properties on Main Street, particularly those who own vacant or underused buildings.

Improve the Quality of the Visitor Experience

Once the resident or visitor has arrived on Main Street, the experience of walking along Main Street must be appealing. To that end, it is important that there be storefront continuity, and that facades and displays be interesting and attractive. Owners should be encouraged to rent to solid business firms that foster a lively and varied street wall, such as retail stores—particularly those dealing with interesting and unusual merchandise—and restaurants. Office uses, while acceptable, should be seen as a last resort for ground-level storefronts on Main Street. Offices for professional and other services should be encouraged to locate on upper floors above retail stores or on side streets.

- The town and Historic Downtown Forest City should work with property owners, as they have begun to do, to upgrade their buildings, and with retailers to improve their window displays.



Raise the Bar for Property Owners to Bring All Storefronts and Facades to a High Level of Quality

A small but significant number of Main Street property owners act in ways that undermine the future of the community, and the property values of their neighbors, by allowing their buildings to remain in a state of disrepair and/or to remain vacant. While vacancy in itself is not in violation of municipal codes, the combination of vacancy and disrepair is.

- The town must make it clear that continued neglect of Main Street properties will not be tolerated.
- Property maintenance and building codes should be strictly enforced along Main Street and nuisance abatement tools used where owners are unresponsive to code enforcement efforts.
- The town should consider including Main Street in a redevelopment area so that eminent domain powers can be used with respect to buildings that are a blighting influence on their neighbors.

Enhance the Pedestrian Environment

Visitors and residents need to be able to cross the street easily, frequently, and comfortably.

- As discussed earlier, a well-marked, easily used crosswalk system should be installed.
- Median plantings should be redesigned, and the hollies removed, to permit people to cross in mid-block (if someone sees a store across the street they want to go to, let them go there).
- Sidewalks should be wider to encourage sidewalk cafés and other pedestrian-oriented activities.
- Small sitting areas should be provided, either along widened sidewalks or at key locations in the landscaped medians, to encourage pedestrians to stay longer in the area.
- Mid-block pedestrian alleys, including a “gateway” at the intersection of the Mill Street pedestrian alley with Blanton Alley, should be encouraged to increase the pedestrian-oriented character of the downtown area and encourage direct pedestrian connections between parking and major attractions.

Create a Wide Range of Attractions for Current Residents and New Residents

The variety of activities available in downtown, including both scheduled and informal events, is an important attraction for new residents, particularly retirees. The Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola buildings adjacent to the mill represent an important venue for such activities, as well as the mill itself, but the more the better.

- The town should aggressively program events, festivals, and activities along and close to Main Street, taking advantage of the wealth of local musical and other talent available.
- The town should look at reusing the old City Hall in a way that will enhance Main Street and increase its attractiveness, rather than use it for municipal activities that do not need to be located adjacent to Main Street or in such a distinctive and attractive building. One suggestion was that it be the location of an expanded library, which can be an important attraction in itself to retirees.
- Wireless Internet access along Main Street will encourage residents to stay downtown and thereby increase downtown activity and interaction.

Don't Compete Against Yourself

Forest City has two well-established commercial districts: Main Street as its traditional downtown and the automobile-oriented shopping district on Highway 74A. When one includes the side streets leading into Main from Trade Street, it is clear that there are more than enough potential buildings and sites to accommodate future retail and service demand. Allowing commercial zoning in other areas dilutes the extent of the retail/service market that can be captured by Main Street, while creating unsustainable, scattered retail pockets elsewhere that often undermine adjacent residential neighborhoods.

- Forest City should rezone inappropriate commercial areas to residential use, such as Main Street east of South Broadway.
- The town should avoid creating new commercial zones in locations that appear superficially appropriate, such as the frontage along the new Oak Street extension. The Oak Street extension frontage should be zoned for residential uses.

All these steps will generate more activity and street life on Main Street which, in turn, will trigger more jobs and economic activity town-wide. Downtown Forest City, however, must not be limited to Main Street. A downtown should have depth as well as length, with side streets that visitors can explore and streets and blocks of varying character. While the redevelopment of the Florence Mill, along with the ancillary projects recommended such as the Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola buildings, will help move downtown to the south, it is important to push downtown northward to Trade Street as well, making Trade Street an important, vibrant, part of a new downtown Forest City.

TRADE STREET

Trade Street, as it parallels Main Street in downtown Forest City, presents a dispirited and barren appearance, containing a series of parking lots and scattered commercial buildings of varying size and quality. The street is treeless and unappealing to pedestrians, who tend to shun it except to get from their car to their destination. Although some of the side streets between Main and Trade still contain older buildings of character, including some commercial buildings and the City Hall, Trade Street itself has little character, except for a handful of surviving mule barns that have been converted to other uses. From today's viewpoint, Trade Street is a back alley, largely used to access parking for Main Street.



Trade Street, however, represents a great opportunity for Forest City. The open land on Trade Street, much of it under city control, creates an exceptional development opportunity that can strengthen the downtown area and respond to potential residential demands. Trade Street, from east of North Broadway to Thomas Street, should become a residential avenue, with new townhouses and condominiums lining a landscaped boulevard. The parking that is needed to accommodate the needs of Main Street and the new cinema can be sited in the interior of the blocks between Main and Trade Streets, while side streets can be enhanced with existing buildings upgraded or restored to become commercial extensions of Main Street. The key features of the new Trade Street are these:

- Rebuild Trade Street as a landscaped avenue, with wide sidewalks, shade trees, and on-street parking.

- Create sites for a mix of townhouses and condominium apartments along both sides of Trade Street, designed to attract but not be limited to retirees and empty nesters. It is estimated that the area under consideration could provide sites for up to approximately 200 new housing units.
- Townhouses, in one- and two-story structures, should be developed primarily east of Broad Street. Two- and three-story “loft” buildings with condominiums should be developed between Cherry and Broad Streets. It is important to develop both sides of Trade Street between Cherry and Broad in order to fundamentally change the image of Trade Street and recreate it as a downtown residential district.
- Reconfigure the interior of the blocks between Main and Trade Streets for parking, using Blanton Alley as interior access to the blocks. The parking areas should be attractively fenced and landscaped, and small sitting areas should be located appropriately. Our analysis indicates that by using all of this area efficiently, all of the parking that will be needed can be provided in the interior of the blocks, allowing all the Trade Street frontage to be developed for other uses. Where appropriate, mid-block pedestrian links should be provided from the parking areas to Main Street. Additional parking can be provided through on-street parking.
- Upgrade existing historic buildings and build on existing retail along North Broadway, North Powell, Cherry, Mountain, and Thomas streets for commercial use to complement Main Street, providing both additional retail and restaurant opportunities and enhancing the walkability of downtown Forest City.

Trade Street itself would be a predominately residential street, with limited nonresidential uses such as home offices and professional services. Perhaps some small retail nodes at intersections should be permitted.

The vision for Trade Street will require not only the town’s leadership but the cooperation of the property owners along the street. Although the town owns much of the land on the south side of Trade Street, the rest of the land, including the north side, is in private ownership, whose support must be enlisted to ensure the entire vision can be carried out. The SDAT believes, however, this support should be forthcoming as property owners come to realize that this vision is not only a way by which they will leave a legacy to their community but will significantly enhance the value of their property.

MOVING FORWARD

This report has outlined an extensive road map for the future of Forest City, designed to enable Forest City to build a new economy to replace the traditional mill economy that has sustained it for the past 100 years. While no one can predict the future, the goal in outlining this road map is to try, to the extent possible, to suggest the directions that will provide for the community's long-term sustainability and vitality, rather than offer "quick-fix" solutions for tomorrow.

Creating and implementing a long-term vision for a community is difficult and requires the sustained commitment from the local government, the business and civic leadership, and the community as a whole. Four themes are suggested to help focus that commitment as Forest City moves forward in the years to come.

Communicate a Vision for the Future

The Bible tells us that "where there is no vision, the people perish." While change comes slowly step by step, if it is not driven by a vision, it is hard to get people to take the steps or even know what steps to take. One of the most important roles of a town's leaders is to frame a compelling vision of their community's future, and then communicate it—in conversations, speeches, pamphlets, newspaper articles, posters, Web sites, and more—to the people of the community, the region, and the nation.

Take the Initiative

Communities have to make their vision happen; they cannot rely on others to come in and make it happen for them. Forest City showed leadership by buying the mill when it closed and selecting the developer who could make the community's vision a reality. That was a great achievement, but it represents only the first step toward realizing a long-term vision. Over the coming years, whether creating a new Trade Street, or new uses for the Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola buildings, or upgrading Main Street, the town and its leaders will be called upon many times to show similar leadership, to establish the ground rules for development, or bring people together to make something happen. How effectively the town acts in each of these areas will determine how well the vision will be realized.

Tackle the Problems

Forest City has great assets but it also has serious problems. They range from specific physical problems, such as neglected vacant buildings on Main Street, to large social and economic problems, such as the high level of unemployment and underemployment, and the extent to which many parts of the community, including the town's African-American community, are not fully integrated into the decisions being made about the community's future.

These problems are not likely to go away on their own and, if not addressed, can undo much of the good work being done by the community in other spheres. A dilapidated building on Main Street can reduce the property values of everybody else on the block and discourage a valued retailer from moving in. If people do not share in the community vision, or believe they will benefit from its realization, they are unlikely to support it. Without a true consensus, the ability to implement the vision may not be there.

The town's leadership must move to deal with these problems, even when it may be difficult to do so. Tackling problem properties may bring local government into conflict with powerful community figures. Confronting deep-rooted social and economic disparities may be uncomfortable, even painful. This is, of course, what leadership is about.

Leave a Legacy Behind

What is built today will still be part of Forest City 20, 50, even 100 years from now, and will either enhance or detract from the community's quality of life. Even small things, such as the sign on a building or the location of a parking lot, have their impact on the future. As ordinances are drafted or decisions made, those responsible should always be thinking, How will this affect the future of the community? How will this be part of a legacy I will leave behind for my children and grandchildren? If the people of Forest City want their children to stay in the community—or more likely, to come back to the city after having experienced the wider world—the best way to do that is by making Forest City the best community it can possibly be.

This report concludes with a specific suggestion. The greatest strengths Forest City has are its financial strength and its ability to bring financial resources to bear to create long-term value, whether by creating a park or by supporting redevelopment of the mill. The town should make a long-term commitment to create a Legacy Fund, through which funds would be allocated annually, or bonds issued against future revenues, specifically for capital projects and activities that will help build the long-term sustainable

future of the community. These funds could be used for property acquisition, or low-cost home improvement loans in Grahamtown or Alexander Mills, to help underwrite a major venture like the Trade Street project or many other projects. The specific projects and their timing and priority should be the product of extensive discussion within the community. What is important, however, is that it be a long-term commitment—a commitment by the entire community to its future, to leave a legacy to future generations.

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