



Athens Downtown Assessment

On Friday, July 31, 2015, a team from the Texas Downtown Association completed a downtown assessment in Athens.

Team members included:

- Beverly Abell, City of Tyler
- Debbie Charbonneau, City of Temple
- Shane Shepard, City of Sulphur Springs
- Catherine Sak, Executive Director, Texas Downtown Association

The assessment started with a meeting of downtown stakeholders. The group was diverse and included city staff, property owners, business owners, and community residents. Group members were asked to share their concerns, identify issues, and brainstorm strategies for downtown.

Issues identified by the group included:

- Traffic
- Parking
- Streetscape improvements
- Lack of retail & restaurants

The team then took a walking tour and visited with businesses and organizations located downtown.

Below is a review of what we observed and learned during our tour and visit with stakeholders:

Downtown Athens is beautiful. The courthouse is a wonderful centerpiece that draws visitors to the community and is surrounded by mature trees that offer shade and respite from Texas weather. There is a dedicated group of stakeholders who care about downtown and are committed to change. The people we talked to are proud of their downtown and community but would like to see some new ideas and actions.

The top two issues raised were traffic and parking. We agree that having multiple state highways running through downtown is a challenge for pedestrians, businesses, and property owners. With regard to parking, there seems to be more than enough, in our opinion, for the size of downtown, but parking management could be improved.

Other top concerns were related to streetscape and the lack of retail and restaurants. Streetscape issues included too many signs with too many different messages, and unattractive landscaping. Some stakeholders mentioned that professional offices dominated downtown buildings, preventing the development of retail and restaurants that would draw more people to the downtown district.



Vision for Downtown

Ongoing community meetings should be a priority to allow for constructive discussion and idea sharing. If there is not a clear vision of what the goals are for downtown then you cannot be successful.

Schedule a meeting and invite everyone to talk about downtown. Rules should be developed for the meeting so no one person dominates discussion and that speakers stay on the topic at hand.

Surveys

Survey residents with the same questions utilized by the consultant who did the Downtown Master Plan. This will give you data on residents' top downtown concerns and what they would like to see downtown. You can also compare 2015 results with 2010 and see if anything has changed.

Survey business owners about their needs and ask for suggestions. Both surveys will provide you with ideas about next steps.

Downtown Association

A downtown association would allow business & property owners to organize as a group and develop a plan for their next steps. These stakeholders are especially important since they are on the front line of downtown and are taking the greatest risk. At the same time, they must be active in development plans for downtowns and take responsibility for contributing to growth and change.

The group should organize as a 501(c)(3) since this would allow them to apply for grants from all foundations and agencies. Grants to other types of 501(c) organizations are extremely limited since the tax benefit isn't the same for donors.

Field Trips

Field trips to successful downtowns are always helpful because stakeholders get ideas from other communities and learn how those communities accomplished their goals. Load up a city van and check out what other downtowns are doing. TDA members are always happy to provide tours of their downtowns and share details about how they accomplished their goals.

Marketing

The University of Wisconsin-Extension Service has some free, comprehensive tools that are available online, including a step by step process for completing a market analysis. Completing an analysis like this can tell your business owners what market gaps exist, what businesses you may want to recruit to your downtown, and show the economic impact of downtown business.

Here's a link to the website: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/downtown-market-analysis/>

Social Media

Social media channels can be an effective way to reach out to locals and visitors. Facebook ads are relatively inexpensive and can allow you to target specific audiences with your messages related to downtown businesses, events, and opportunities.



Downtown Master Plan

The Athens Downtown Master Plan was completed in 2010 and offers a great road map for physical improvements in the downtown district. We encourage city and stakeholders to review the plan and compare 2010 conditions with 2015. The goals and objectives were developed with community participation and are general enough to guide initial activities and start a work plan.

Events

Events can be used for a variety of purposes:

- To bring people downtown
- To bring a specific population downtown (families, country music fans, women, etc.)
- As a fundraising tool
- To support downtown businesses

Before starting any new events we suggest that the city complete a review of current events and determine their return on investment. Organizers of annual events should try at least one new thing each year to “refresh” the event and attract attendees.

Traffic

Three state highways pass through downtown and some drivers have only one goal: to pass through as quickly as possible. Traffic affects the perception of safety for pedestrians who have limited time to cross four lanes of highway traffic and for visitors who park in spaces that require backing into oncoming traffic. Business owners on the square consistently cited traffic conditions as a concern. The team agrees with recommendations in the Downtown Master Plan that suggests reducing the number of lanes through downtown, increasing sidewalk width, and slowing traffic.

The Texas Department of Transportation Turn Back Program allows cities to voluntarily take control of certain state highways. This would allow the City of Athens to control the number of lanes, speed, and management of these roadways as they pass through downtown but would also require that the City be responsible for maintenance. City leaders should contact their local TXDOT representative to discuss what options are available.

Parking

Lack of adequate parking was cited as an issue by a number of stakeholders, business owners, and city staff. The Downtown Master Plan included a parking inventory showing 550 private parking spaces, 287 public parking spaces and 295 on-street parking spaces. These numbers indicated to the team that there may be a parking perception and management issue rather than a parking availability issue.

The city should reach out to business owners who have private lots and see if they will consider allowing downtown visitors to use those spaces after business hours. The team spoke to a couple of business owners/employees who said they would be open to this idea.

Signage that directs people to the appropriate parking would be helpful since it's not clear how to find public parking spots besides those available on-street.



Consider the WalMart overlay experiment. Make an outline of the closest WalMart – be sure to include the building and the parking lot – and overlay it across the downtown district. Show it to residents and businesses and ask for their opinions – we think you’ll be surprised by people’s reactions when they realize how far they’re willing to walk to shop at WalMart or another big box store.

Professional Offices

As a county seat, Downtown Athens is home to many professional offices. The city should encourage property owners to use the front 20 feet of their buildings for creative businesses that attract locals and visitors. In many buildings this space is unused and it’s possible that the new business will attract additional foot traffic to existing businesses. The City of Taylor offers a downtown retail rent subsidy to attract retail businesses. The program is funded by general revenue and retailers must meet certain guidelines to receive the subsidy.

Walkability

As we mentioned previously, the streets around the square don’t feel pedestrian friendly. Crossing four state highway lanes can be intimidating and there is limited time to do so. Business owners mentioned that their customers preferred to park directly outside of their businesses so they could avoid having to cross busy highways. In this instance, “if you build it they will come” refers to safe routes that allow pedestrians to cross downtown streets.

Branding/Identity

What is the image that Athens wants to portray to visitors and potential residents? Effective branding can help market the city to a wide audience. Right now there are multiple identities associated with city branding and we recommend that the city consider having consistent images, taglines & logos.

Code & Code Enforcement

The International Existing Building Code (IEBC) is a useful tool for historic downtowns since it offers more flexibility for adaptive reuse.

Code enforcement should be used to ensure that property and business owners are maintaining their buildings for the health, safety, and welfare of building visitors and the public. The International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC) should be adopted and the city should educate property and business owners about how it will be enforced.

Design & Beautification

Design guidelines recommended by the Downtown Master Plan would offer cohesiveness for signage, streetscape improvements, and façade improvements. Many other Texas downtowns have adopted design guidelines and are willing to provide examples of what has worked in their communities. It is our opinion that the city or EDC should provide design review prior to offering incentives to a property owner.

Small Business Support & Development



The small business owners we spoke with would like visits from city, EDC, and chamber staff at their businesses to discuss available resources, issues, and ideas.

Some TDA communities sponsor quarterly breakfast meetings for downtown business and property owners to provide updates on downtown projects or feature speakers that share information about small business marketing, building maintenance, merchandising or other related topics.

The City, EDC & Chamber should consider partnering to offer webinars or seminars for community business owners. Another option would be development of a downtown business incubator that would provide small spaces for new businesses that could potentially move to new locations across downtown and the community.

Permitting

The City of Belton has published a brochure called the Green Tape Program to facilitate the process of opening a business, allowing most permits to be issued in 30 days or less. Their local chamber and EDC also have copies and distribute them as needed.

Incentives

Make it easy for business and property owners to understand what type of incentives are available. Use pictures and graphics to illustrate how incentives can be used and what they can be used for.

Funding and resources

Texas Downtown Association

The Anice Read Fund is a grant program of the Texas Downtown Association and the Communities Foundation of Texas. The Fund provides gap financing for downtown projects and programs.

Private & corporate foundations

Great for lighting and security

Union Pacific Foundation

<https://www.up.com/aboutup/community/foundation/>

Keep Texas Beautiful – GCAA Awards

<http://www.ktb.org/programs/awards/governors-community-achievement-awards.aspx>

Tax Increment Financing (TIF)/Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZ)

TIF/TIRZ have been used by a number of Texas communities for downtown and commercial district investment.