SEVEN STRATEGIES FOR DOWNTOWN

Using the goals and objectives established for Downtown, a set of strategies was identified, grouped into seven categories. These strategies are the concrete steps that the Town can take to start transforming the Downtown of the future. The strategies vary in magnitude of cost, effort, and time needed to complete, as well as which types of partners may need to come together to make them happen. And not all of them might be attainable, particularly in the next ten or fifteen years. But they provide a guide that will help the town prepare for coming changes and work intentionally towards accomplishing the community’s goals and objectives for Downtown along with those changing conditions.
Each of Downtown’s six districts is envisioned to have its own distinct mix of uses, character, and development trajectory over the coming 10 to 20 years. While placemaking is focused on creating attractive places, it is equally important to make it as easy as possible for residents and visitors alike to navigate and travel between different areas of the Downtown. This strategic plan proposes six districts within Downtown, evaluates their assets and opportunities, and illustrates a unique vision for each.

DOWNTOWN BLACKSBURG TODAY

20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

DOWNTOWN’S SIX DISTRICTS

The Original 16

The blocks bounded by Draper, Jackson, Wharton, and Clay are the historic center of Blacksburg. The area contains many of the structures that contribute to the Blacksburg Historic District, and has good urban form along many parts of Main Street. Alongside context-sensitive development, a range of policy initiatives will aid in the preservation and enhancement of this area’s historic character.

Downtown Northwest

The blocks tucked between North Main Street and Virginia Tech’s campus are today an assembly of auto-oriented retail and residential uses. This area is also home to an important historic resource for Blacksburg: St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall. The opportunity in this district is to create dense, student-oriented mixed use development, while also providing a more dignified environment for this important and historic site.

Central Downtown

This district is the physical, economic, and social center of Downtown, and plays an immense role in expressing Blacksburg’s character. Investing in new public spaces both large and small, the creation of new transportation facilities, and strategic development on key sites will further elevate this area as the front door to the Blacksburg community.

Downtown West

The district west of Draper and South of Virginia Tech’s Creativity and Innovation District is rich with assets, as well as opportunities to create an exciting synergy with the emerging innovation economy growing in the area. This area, comprised of two subdistricts, has the potential to become a vibrant neighborhood within Downtown that celebrates arts and culture while also knitting new and existing uses into the fabric of Blacksburg.

Downtown Northeast

This district north of Turner and east of Main feels disconnected from Downtown today, without the pedestrian-friendly environment that typifies the blocks of Main Street to the area’s south. But new mixed-use development along Main, and new streets that break up existing superblocks, will help to extend Downtown’s quality public realm north, while also reconnecting the Bennett Hill-Progress neighborhood to Main and the rest of Downtown.

Old Blacksburg Middle School Site

This district presents an incredible opportunity for development that expands the town’s supply of housing, contributes to a mixed-use environment along Main Street, and creates new jobs for the community. The town’s active facilitation of development at this site will significantly expand on Downtown’s livability, accessibility, and vibrancy.
The Original 16 blocks are the historic center of Blacksburg. But the public realm and historic homes in some parts of the district are in deteriorating condition. Rehabilitating and enhancing the historic fabric, alongside infill and moderate density development on select blocks, will restore this area to a place of prominence in Downtown.

**Character & Identity**
- Preservation-forward
- Small-town character
- Select infill projects
- Sidewalk/streetscape improvements
- Branding/celebrate the 16
- Rehab policy/programs
- Zoning refinement

**Vision**
The vision for the Original 16 is that it serves as an important reminder of Blacksburg's small-town history. Reinvestments in the street environment will provide sidewalks and well-maintained streets throughout the district. Street furniture, lighting, and banners will reinforce the historic and small-town feel. Incentives and partnerships will be leveraged to improve the conditions of existing historic homes. New development should be sensitive to the architectural context of this district's historic character. A broader mix of commercial uses—such as dining, retail, and office—could be permitted on Church Street, but not encouraged moving farther east toward Penn and Wharton Streets.

**Catalyst**
The intent of a catalyst in the Original 16 is to selectively replace development that is not sensitive to context and character with development that is, and leverage revenue to improve the public realm and invest in the preservation of historic structures. Lower-density townhome infill is preferred along Wharton and Penn Street, though the economic viability of this development may be limited. A larger-scale project with apartments, office, or mixed use development could take on a scale of three to four stories, transitioning to lower-scale townhomes along Penn Street and Lee Street.

**20-Year Illustrative Vision**
- Preservation of Historic Structures
- Medium-Density Residential
- Townhome Infill
- Small Business Retail

**Potential Catalyst**
- Streetcaping and Street Enhancements
- Medium-Density Mixed Use
- Six-Unit Walkups

**Catalyst Development Summary**
- Historical Church Street an asset
- Floor street/pedestrian network conditions
- Fair to poor building conditions in some areas
- Many historic structures
- Original 16 important to town identity

**Existing Conditions**
The Original 16 holds a special place in the collective identity of Blacksburg. Church Street has several historic places of worship. Significant streetscape improvements have greatly improved Main Street's walkability. However, there is much room for improvement in the public realm east of Main Street, where sidewalks are narrow, in fair condition, or non-existent. Several buildings are in fair to poor condition. The large, grid-shaped blocks lend themselves to downtown-scale development; it is generally not desired that this scale be replicated in many places east of Main Street.

**The Original 16 Today**
- High demand for housing and office
- Low-density single family and townhome infill is economically challenging
- Many historic structures
- Original 16 important to town identity
The areas west of Main and south of Virginia Tech’s emerging Creativity and Innovation District are ripe with potential, though they currently lack cohesion. Along Otey, the opportunity is to enhance the district’s existing character by reprogramming existing buildings with new innovation-oriented uses, and by extending Otey to connect to Huckleberry Trail.

**Vision for Otey**

- Broadened zoning uses
- Historic preservation
- Otey streetscape
- Incubators and start-ups
- Art studios
- Bed and breakfasts
- Pedestrian orientation
- University-town interface

**Catalyst**

Extending Otey beyond Washington Street creates exciting potential for catalyst projects that reinforce Washington as a key connection through the district and create a connection to the emerging CID, a broader range of uses on Washington, and the Huckleberry Trail.

Medium-density residential buildings and new streetscaping will dramatically improve the walkability and vibrancy of the area. Further extending Otey as a pedestrian and cycling path, or even a street, could create an enhanced connection to the Huckleberry Trail, increasing its accessibility from the rest of Downtown.
DOWNTOWN'S SIX DISTRICTS
CHARACTER & IDENTITY
ECONOMY
POLICY
MARKET
PLACE
STRATEGIC PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN BLACKSBURG, VA

The areas west of Main and south of Virginia Tech’s emerging Creativity and Innovation District are ripe with potential, though they currently lack cohesion. Along Draper, the opportunity is to support Blacksburg’s emerging innovation sectors through streetscape improvements and new programs on key sites.

DOWNTOWN WEST: DRAPER

THE DRAPER CULTURAL DISTRICT TODAY

In between are many assets, including the popular Market Square Park, Marcia’s Park, the beautifully restored Alexander Black House, Kent Square, and civic assets such as the Library and the Municipal Building. Linking the area’s assets could make Draper distinctive, livable, and a dynamic presence in Blacksburg’s emerging innovation economy.

EXISTING CONDITIONS
Draper Road holds great promise and potential, but lacks cohesion today. Several buildings are oriented away from Draper; others lack architectural detail. Draper links Henderson Lawn and College Avenue on one end—two gems of Blacksburg—and the Huckleberry Trail on the other.

CHARACTER & IDENTITY

» Museum row
» Park enhancement
» Office/coworking
» Bike and pedestrian network
» Streetscape
» Public art
» Food/food hall
» Restaurants/dining
» Infill south of Washington

VISION

The central theme for Draper is to support arts and culture with an enhanced street environment and targeted infill. Draper can serve as a seam between some of Virginia Tech’s most creative and innovative colleges and the town. The public realm should be inviting and artful, with great bike and pedestrian facilities. Assets like the Blacksburg Museum will be celebrated, perhaps anchoring a Museum Row if other cultural institutions co-locate on adjacent sites. A small private food hall could serve students, faculty, and staff at the future Creativity and Innovation District (CID). Underutilized sites could be re-developed for office and co-working, creating space for spin-off activity related to the CID.

POSSIBLE PRECIPITATING EVENTS

20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

» Housing demand high
» Office demand to increase with Creativity and Innovation District
» Start-Up/Innovation Potential

» Land costs moderate
» Expanded uses could increase viability of existing homes

ECONOMY

» Expanded uses could increase viability of existing homes

MARKET

» Limited permitted uses
» Outside historic district
» J/V partnership potential

PLACE

» Adjacent to the Creativity and Innovation District
» Architecturally significant buildings
» Cultural and recreational assets
» Washington Street gateway potential

POLICY

» Adjacent to the Creativity and Innovation District
» Architecturally significant buildings
» Cultural and recreational assets
» Washington Street gateway potential

CATALYST

While the greatest catalyst for Draper is likely the Improvement to the street environment, the area including the bookstore site, the site to the north of the farmers market, and the Blacksburg Museum to the south hold the greatest potential for transformation. The block between Roanoke and Lee Streets, which includes the bookstore, could develop to include ground-floor retail and upper floors with Class A office space.

CATALYST DEVELOPMENT SUMMARY

CATALYST

A small food hall could be added to capitalize on CID traffic and nearby job density. To the south, additional museum/cultural amenities could be added to create a destination—a Museum Row—celebrating Blacksburg’s history and culture.

POTENTIAL CATALYST

Creek Park

Office Space

Retail and Office Space

50k sq. ft.

10k sq. ft.

30k sq. ft.

90k sq. ft.

90k sq. ft.

30k sq. ft.

Food Hall

Co-working and Incubator Space

Class A Office Space

Ground-Floor Retail

Stroubles Creek Park

Old Hotel Site

Blacksburg Museum

Market Square Park

Upgraded Parks and Trails

Public Art

Retail and Office Space

4.1 acres

20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

Bike/Ped Facilities

Upgraded Parks and Trails

Public Art

Retail and Office Space

Bike/Ped Facilities

Upgraded Parks and Trails

Public Art

Streetscape

Office Space

Retail and Office Space
**CHARACTER & IDENTITY**

- High quality buildings
- Mix of uses
- Ground floor retail
- Density and urbanity
- Student-oriented
- Public square or green
- New street connections
- Walkability
- Dignified location
- Compatibility

**VISION**

The vision for Downtown Northwest is one that is far more walkable, urban, architecturally appealing, and mixed in use. The southern end could be redeveloped into a dense, mixed-use environment—the only one in downtown truly targeting students. New streets could break up the superblock, with buildings oriented around a plaza or green. Along Prices Fork, the town can target retail anchors, such as a general merchandise store or a high-quality grocer. The site at the southern corner of Prices Fork Road and North Main Street could accommodate context-sensitive redevelopment that complements St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall, or a new open space programmed with elements that help residents and visitors engage with this historic site.

**EXISTING CONDITIONS**

Downtown Northwest consists of a great deal of high-value land that, particularly on the southern end, could be far more attractive and vibrant. While there have been significant efforts to upgrade the streetscape on Turner and Main Streets, curb cuts abound on private land, largely supporting auto-oriented restaurants.

This mix of car-dominated uses impedes the district’s walkability and livability. Along Prices Fork Road lies one of the best opportunities to introduce retail anchors into the downtown. Recent development has been of high quality, presenting a better model for auto-oriented retail. The Historic St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall is currently isolated by incompatible, auto-oriented uses.

**20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION**

**POTENTIAL CATALYST**

With high design standards and a ground-floor retail requirement, this portion of Downtown can better integrate it with the university, and with Main Street. A series of new buildings and new streets could provide better connectivity—especially from campus to Main Street and the Bennett Hill-Progress neighborhood. A new civic plaza or green could add meaningful public space to Downtown.
DOWNTOWN NORTHEAST

DOWNTOWN NORTHEAST TODAY

EXISTING CONDITIONS
Recent streetscape improvements to the public right of way and the roundabout at Prices Fork have greatly improved the appearance and functionality of the public realm. However, the land uses make Downtown Northeast read less as a part of Downtown and more as an assemblage of unrelated uses—a gas station, an auto repair shop, and a drive-through restaurant signal to pedestrians that Downtown has effectively ended.

CHARACTER & IDENTITY
- Expansion of Downtown
- Quality architecture
- Non-student housing
- Leverage density
- Young workforce attraction and retention
- Walkability/bikeability
- Mix of uses
- Access to jobs, restaurants, art and entertainment

VISION
The vision for Downtown Northeast is to create a link to the walkable Downtown environment to the south. Buildings will be mixed-use, with residential targeting young professionals and other non-students, and ground-floor retail with local, eclectic, and creative/craft operators. Buildings will be of a high architectural quality, with storefront windows and outdoor seating. Buildings will transition from up to four or five stories on Main Street to three-story residential on the west side of Progress Street. Across Progress Street, quality townhome infill will be permitted. A new street or pedestrian walkway will break up a superblock and make this part of Downtown more walkable.

VISION
- High Architectural Standards
- Walkability
- New Green Space
- General Merchandise Store

POTENTIAL CATALYST
The opportunity for a catalyst project in Downtown Northeast is immense; a new, quality project could truly transform a whole part of Downtown from a commercial strip to a vibrant, walkable place. Challenges for a quality developer are equally great. Gas stations and fast food restaurants are very costly structured parking. New development should provide thoughtful transitions to single family and historic structures on Progress Street, and an enhanced alleyway. The potential upside is great; a catalyst project would meet multiple town objectives, creating the strategic rationale for a public-private partnership.

CATALYST DEVELOPMENT SUMMARY
- Walkability / Public Space
- 3- to 4-Story Mixed Use
- Walk-Up Buildings

Catalyst Development Summary
- 65 Big-Career Apartments
- 19k Ground-Floor Retail
- 3- to 4-Story Mixed Use
- Walk-Up Buildings

Today, the uses along Main Street give Downtown Northeast the character of a commercial strip than an integrated part of Downtown. There exist great opportunities to re-knit this district back into Downtown Blacksburg by extending the active retail environment north along Main, creating new housing options for young professionals, and adding new streets or pedestrian linkages that break up the superblocks.

The 800-foot block length between Turner and Giles adds to the commercial strip feel. At Giles, a more interesting, although perhaps not historic, mix of buildings contributes to a college town feel.

DOWNTOWN’S SIX DISTRICTS
CHARACTER & IDENTITY
ECONOMY
POLICY
MARKET
PLACE
STRATEGIC PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN BLACKSBURG, VA |
CENTRAL DOWNTOWN

This district at the heart of Blacksburg is a dynamic nexus between the many parts of Downtown. Central Downtown has several development sites in key locations. The major opportunities are for the creation of a central streetside plaza to serve as a “front door” for the community, architecturally-sensitive redevelopment of sites for active retail and non-student housing, and new transportation facilities along Progress.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Central Downtown is where Downtown truly comes together. Improving it in ways that are sensitive to context and advance town goals will require great care. The Baptist Church site has great potential as a catalyst site. In the Central Main area on the side east of North Main Street, buildings south of Wilson Avenue are generally historic. Any new development north of Wilson would need to integrate elements of a Baptist Church development and historic buildings to the south.

ECONOMY & MARKET

> Mixed-use, with a blend of historic and forward-thinking architecture
> Places for local and distinctive national businesses
> Enhanced public space, such as at College Avenue extension
> Support employee attraction and retention
> Investments in walkability and non-motorized transportation
> Better links to Wong Park and Huckleberry Trail
> Capacity for parking

VISION

The vision for Central Downtown is for it to be the activity hub of the entire Downtown. New residential, office, and retail will help attract and retain young professionals. The College Avenue extension will be transformed into a central gathering plaza, complemented by smaller spaces with opportunity for public art highlighting the town’s character. New structured parking on the Progress Street Lot will support businesses and enable visitors to “park once” when they come to Downtown. Improvements to Progress will help to form a bike and pedestrian network. New buildings will integrate art, interesting materials, and street furniture to ensure that development is distinctive. Central Downtown should continue to be enhanced as the most vibrant part of Downtown—a place that belongs to everyone.

20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

Potential Catalyst

CATALYST 1: DEVELOPMENT AT THE BAPTIST CHURCH SITE

With the church considering divestment of the property, the site offers great potential for mixed-use development and additional commercial space, meeting part of the demand for Downtown housing. Development along Main Street should serve as a transition point in height and scale from the north to south, with up to five stories along Main, consisting of ground-floor retail/restaurant space and upper-floor residential. This plan envisions preserving a space that functions as an alley. Care should be taken to ensure the scaling and massing of development along Main and Progress Streets is varied, transitioning to the existing fabric north and east of Progress Street.
Catalyst 2: Central Main and a new “front door”
The extension of College Avenue offers an opportunity to create a public plaza and community gathering space at the most prominent location in Downtown Blacksburg. After the creation of structured parking nearby, the few pull-in spaces on College Avenue will no longer be needed. Surface parking behind the buildings will provide business loading zones.

Improvements to the alley system will connect Faculty Street to Jackson Street, eliminating the need for a vehicular connection via College Avenue.

Catalyst 3: Progress Street Transportation
The current municipal lot on Progress Street is positioned to accommodate a new structured parking facility, fronted on two sides by a liner with residential uses. A rebuild of Progress Street, combined with appropriately scaled redevelopment on its west side, could transform the street into a more pedestrian and bicycle-friendly street. This plan envisions a wide shared-use path on the west side of the street, buffered from the curb with landscaping where space allows.