ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Blacksburg Community
We would also like to thank the citizens of Blacksburg for their active participation throughout this planning process, including through the public meetings and online surveys.
**Town Staff**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town Manager</td>
<td>Marc Verniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Town Manager of Community Development</td>
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<td>Planning and Building Director</td>
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</tbody>
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A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN BLACKSBURG

All communities must continually plan and adapt for changing times and circumstances. This is especially true for Blacksburg’s Downtown, a historic center of the community and a part of town facing new challenges and exciting opportunities.

This plan presents a strategic vision to guide the evolution of Blacksburg’s Downtown into the years ahead. Rooted in community input and analysis, the plan provides a blueprint for action through policy, capital improvements, and development that advance community priorities.

Three Key Factors to Hold in Balance

There are three key factors that Blacksburg must balance as it looks to Downtown’s future. The first factor is the importance of preserving and celebrating Blacksburg’s identity, as expressed through its architecture, its public realm, and its parks and open spaces. A place’s identity can be difficult to define, but is central to what helps to draw people to a community and keep them in town. It is important to celebrate this character, but also to balance that goal with other priorities of the community.

The second factor is the strategic need to accommodate Blacksburg’s growth. The town’s population and economic growth, driven in large part by Virginia Tech and its future investments in the Creativity and Innovation District abutting Downtown, present a great opportunity for Blacksburg to diversify and expand its economy. But seizing this strategic opportunity will require a holistic approach to development, facilitating needed residential and commercial development in appropriate locations.

The third key factor is the community’s desire to maintain housing affordability. The demand from the growing student population, coupled with a reluctance to allow greater density of residential development attracting students, have led to rising housing prices that are increasingly unaffordable to working and professional families, particularly in locations close to Downtown. Resolving this challenge will relieve pressure on Downtown’s surrounding neighborhoods, and further help to address traffic concerns in town, while ensuring that Blacksburg remains an inclusive and accessible community for current residents and for those who would like to be a part of it.

This strategic plan offers an actionable framework that balances these three key factors in service of creating a vibrant, equitable, and distinct Downtown. The plan is organized into six chapters that describe this strategic vision:

Process: Community Input

Chapter 1 summarizes the process of community input, and highlights takeaways about Downtown Blacksburg’s challenges and opportunities. These community conversations and the feedback provided through online surveys also helped to define the vision that this Strategic Plan aims to bring to life.
Analysis: A Framework for Downtown Blacksburg

Chapter 2 describes key findings from the analysis of community demographics, housing, the economy, and Downtown’s physical environment. This analysis confirms the importance of balancing the three factors described above – growth, town identity, and cost of housing – to ensure that Downtown evolves in ways that support the broader community’s livability and success.

Goals and Objectives

Chapter 3 lays out the goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan: the guideposts for how to shape a growing, changing Downtown Blacksburg. These set a foundation for the strategies that follow, and ensure that the plan aligns with community priorities.

Seven Strategies for Downtown

Chapter 4 describes a series of targeted strategies for advancing the plan’s goals. These strategies span a broad range of issues, from housing to transportation, and from the public realm to economic development. These areas of action are mutually reinforcing, and involve the partnership of a wide range of stakeholders in the Blacksburg community.

Downtown’s Six Districts

Chapter 5 presents a districting framework, defining six geographic areas within Downtown that have their own distinct characters, identities, and mixes of uses. This section envisions how the strategies presented in

Chapter 4 could shape these districts over the coming 10-15 years, and identifies potential catalyst projects that could bring that vision to life.

Implementation

The final chapter, Chapter 6, offers a roadmap for implementation of the Downtown Strategy, including the specific actions that can advance the strategies and the key partners involved. This roadmap identifies implementation priorities related to capital improvements as well as for the regulatory updates and other policies needed to lay the groundwork for advancing community goals.

This strategic plan for Downtown Blacksburg offers a long-term outlook to help the town work toward an exciting future, and have greater control over its own destiny even as external conditions change. The opportunity is immense: for Blacksburg to cultivate its Downtown as an active, dynamic, and accessible neighborhood with a diverse economic base and a distinctive town identity.
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3. CHAPTER 2 ANALYSIS: A FRAMEWORK FOR DOWNTOWN BLACKSBURG

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5. CHAPTER 4 SEVEN STRATEGIES FOR DOWNTOWN

6. CHAPTER 5 DOWNTOWN’S SIX DISTRICTS

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INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY

Blacksburg has the opportunity to cultivate its Downtown as a dynamic, active, and accessible neighborhood. Doing so will require a shift in its development paradigm, enabling the town to celebrate its rich past while also nurturing its bright future.

Located in the shadow of the Allegheny Mountains, Blacksburg is defined by its geography. It is remote from major regional cities and surrounded by mountains on three sides, which has nurtured its small-town, close-knit character. It is also defined by its local institution—Virginia Tech, the state’s third-largest university and the largest employer in the region. With nearly 30,000 students and 8,000 faculty and staff members, Virginia Tech is the town’s primary economic driver, bringing in levels of talent and intellect unusual for a community of Blacksburg’s size.

Over the past several decades, as Virginia Tech’s student enrollment has steadily increased, Blacksburg has felt the pressures of its geographical limitations. The 2015 Downtown Blacksburg Housing Market Strategy found that even with the construction of purpose-built, off-campus housing for students, student housing supply has not kept up with demand, and students have spread out to live in all parts of town, including in single-family homes. The resulting increase in housing values has driven much of the non-student population to the outskirts of town and to the neighboring communities of Christiansburg and Radford. It has also discouraged the growth of a local business community, as employers find it difficult to attract and retain employees as they struggle to afford the town’s living costs.

At the same time, the development of new, more dense, more affordable housing for non-students has been stymied by restrictive land use policies put in place to prevent all housing in town from becoming undergraduate student housing. With Virginia Tech expected to add nearly 5,000 more students over the next decade, these pressures will only intensify.

Nowhere are these challenges experienced more acutely than in Downtown Blacksburg. Centered around Main Street, the town’s primary north-south corridor, and bordering Virginia Tech’s campus, Downtown contains many important community gathering places. These include Market Square Park, College Avenue, and Henderson Lawn. It is also home to many local restaurants and retail businesses that reflect the town’s unique identity. Yet, the relatively low density and intensity of Downtown development, the lack of housing appropriate for non-students, and limited multi-modal access points have made the neighborhood a driving destination, leading to traffic and parking struggles for many.

Development Strategies was hired by the Town of Blacksburg to study these challenges...
as they relate to Downtown, and to formulate a set of strategic recommendations that could guide how the town approaches future Downtown development. The study considered how the town could balance its expected growth, its challenges with housing affordability, its desire to maintain its small town identity, and its potential to have a more vibrant Downtown. The resulting district framework, recommended strategies, and suggested implementation steps found in later chapters of the plan all point to a path forward in achieving that balance.

The ultimate opportunity here is for Blacksburg to turn Downtown into a dynamic, active, inclusive neighborhood for students and non-students alike. But doing so will require it to change its development paradigm. This means thinking about Downtown as encompassing not only Main Street, but some of the adjacent blocks as well. It means recognizing that Downtown has districts with unique characteristics, able to successfully support distinct mixes of land use. It means encouraging the strategic development of denser housing and retail buildings in Downtown, along with more infrastructure for bicycle, pedestrians, and bus riders, so as to create a less car-dependent place. And it means balancing a celebration of Blacksburg’s rich past with a nurturing of its bright future, so that the town can continue to thrive as it has for the past two hundred years.
DOWNTOWN PROGRESS

Public and private investments along Main Street have made Downtown Blacksburg a more vibrant and welcoming place. Major planned projects will significantly add to that ongoing transformation.

The Downtown Blacksburg of today is already a more vibrant place than it was twenty years ago, thanks to a number of major public and private investments in the area. On the public side, the town has improved the sidewalk environment along Main Street and College Avenue, creating a more pleasant place to walk, shop, and dine. These improvements were punctuated by the creation of the Prices Fork Roundabout, which eased traffic flow on and off of Main Street and elevated the appearance of the entrance to Downtown from the north. The town also renovated Market Square Park, the Alexander Black House, and the Blacksburg Motor Company building, creating more inviting spaces for community and civic activities.

These public efforts have been complemented by private development all along Main Street, primarily of new residential units. These include new buildings on previously under-developed sites, such as Kent Square (made possible through a public-private partnership) and the Brownstone, as well as the rehabilitation of historic buildings such as the Lofts at the Lyric and Lofts at the Bank. Virginia Tech has also contributed to enhancing Downtown activity, with the development of a cultural destination in the Moss Arts Center and new commercial space and parking capacity at North End Center. Finally, the development of The Edge, the largest student housing complex within walking distance of Downtown, offers a precedent for bringing students closer to campus and Downtown, potentially reducing traffic on and around Main Street.

Today, there are three major planned projects in Downtown that will have at least as great an impact, if not greater, than all of these previous efforts combined. The first is the redevelopment of the Old Blacksburg Middle School site, which will bring hundreds of new rental and for-sale housing units and tens of thousands of square feet of new commercial and employment space to Downtown.

The second is the formation of the Creativity and Innovation District (CID) at Virginia Tech—a cluster of buildings at the eastern edge of campus, bordering Downtown, that are being reimagined as spaces to foster innovative collaboration across academic disciplines and between the university and the private sector. The CID will include new classrooms and work spaces, as well as housing, bringing many more students, faculty, and staff to the western edge of Downtown.

Finally, the Town of Blacksburg is planning to build a new parking garage on the site of an existing municipal parking lot along Progress Street, in order to provide more parking capacity in the heart of Downtown. All three of these projects, which will bring an influx of people, jobs, and activity into Downtown, will be in motion very soon. The time to plan for accommodating, welcoming, and supporting this influx is now.
STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Downtown Strategy aims to provide actionable recommendations to guide the area’s evolution and growth, grounded in a long-term outlook and an understanding of changing conditions impacting the town.

Strategic Planning

What is strategic planning? At its simplest, it is a process by which an organization takes stock of its current direction, how conditions have changed or are changing since it last planned, and what it needs to do differently—and when—to address the issues and opportunities of the day. Strategic planning is undertaken by municipalities, and also by institutions, businesses large and small, foundations, and non-profits. In short, any group that is looking ahead to its future and where it will be in the next decade may engage in a strategic planning process. No entity exists in a vacuum – it is continually impacted by changes in the world around it. And no organization does everything perfectly. In fact, the ones that convince themselves that they do leave themselves susceptible to future failure.

Strategic planning differs in important ways from comprehensive planning and master planning. A comprehensive plan, such as the document continually being updated by the Town, looks at every inch of a place and groups them into high-level categories of future land use. A master plan digs deep into a specific area of a community, providing physical design recommendations for future development. The strategic plan exists somewhere in the middle. It can be more targeted than a comprehensive plan—for instance, looking just at a downtown area. At the same time, it is more conceptual than a master plan, recommending a broad range of actions that can accomplish a set of goals and objectives for a place. In short, a strategic plan informs a larger comprehensive plan, while providing guidance on priority areas for master planning.

A strategic plan for Downtown Blacksburg will help the town have greater control over its own destiny. This type of long-term outlook will provide the town with stability despite changing external conditions, helping to guide adaptation towards creating a diversified and resilient community.

Process

The Downtown Strategy Plan followed a four-step process, allowing the consultant team to engage in an iterative dialogue with the public and key stakeholders. Each step brought the process closer to a preferred set of recommended strategies for guiding the future of Downtown. Specific descriptions of each step are provided on the following page.
The **Understand** phase established the baseline conditions in Downtown Blacksburg, particularly as they related to growth, town identity, cost of housing, and Downtown activity. This included analysis of:

- Residential and commercial markets
- Industry trends and patterns
- Transportation and physical assets

This phase concluded with the first public meeting.

The **Strategize** phase built on the foundation of the market, economic, and physical analysis to create a set of goals and objectives for the future of Downtown Blacksburg. These goals and objectives are outlined in Chapter 3. Building on the goals and objectives, the consultant team created a districting framework for Downtown that identified distinct areas within the neighborhood that were particularly well-suited to specific types of development. This framework is presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Engagement in this phase included two meetings with the Strategic Plan stakeholder committee, a work session with the Town Council and Planning Commission, and the second public meeting.

In the **Decide** phase, the consultant team formulated a group of strategies that would allow the town to achieve its goals and objectives within the context of the district framework. These strategies are presented in Chapter 4. The team also designed a set of conceptual development alternatives for key sites Downtown.

The strategies and conceptual development alternatives were presented to the stakeholder committee, Town Council, the Planning Commission, and the public for feedback and refinement.

In the final phase, **Frameworks**, the team developed suggestions for tools and policies that could be used to implement the strategies.

The final set of goals, objectives, strategies, and implementation tools, as well as the preferred development concept for the core Downtown blocks, were presented in the fourth public meeting and to the Town Council and Planning Commission.
CHAPTER 1

PROCESS: COMMUNITY INPUT
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Strategic planning involves an active dialogue within a community to determine what the community wants for itself and what types of initiatives are possible for it to implement.

Strategic planning for a community should be rooted in meaningful and extensive community engagement. While the consulting team could provide expertise on market trends and forces, examples of best practices, and potential implementation tools, only the members of the Blacksburg community could provide expertise on Blacksburg—its past, present, and desired future. As the consulting team and the community shared their knowledge with one another, they gained a greater understanding of what the community wanted to be as well as what it can be, resulting in a set of strategies that are both desirable and feasible.

Prior to this strategic planning effort, the community had engaged in several studies that helped inform the consulting team. These included the previous Downtown Master Plan from 2001; retail market and economic development studies from 2001, 2007, and 2013; and the Downtown Housing Strategy from 2015. These plans demonstrated the community’s priorities over the past twenty years, and revealed what it had managed to achieve in that timeframe. While many themes that presented themselves in this process had been a feature of these previous plans, the on-the-ground successes resulting from them were clear signs that this is a community that can recognize when change needs to occur and is open to making that change happen.

This Downtown Strategy included three levels of community engagement. The first was with a stakeholder committee, which included members representing a variety of community viewpoints, such as real estate developers, Downtown residents, Downtown business and property owners, Virginia Tech, and historic preservationists. The committee provided the consultant team with initial feedback on its ideas, allowing for refinement through small group conversation. The second level was with the general public, who helped to shape the strategy through four public meetings and three community surveys. The third level was with Town Council and the Planning Commission, which refined key strategies through a series of in-depth work sessions. Combined, these levels of engagement provided a breadth and depth of feedback that allowed the consultant team to develop goals, objectives, and strategies that respond to community concerns while also encouraging the community to make the changes needed to address its opportunities and challenges.

Downtown Master Plan
Year: 2001
Created By: Blacksburg Collaborative
Main Themes: Opportunity to leverage the University’s presence while also diversifying amenities and gathering spaces to serve all members of the community

Economic Development Strategy
Year: 2001, Updated 2013
Created By: Arnett Muldrow & Associates
Main Themes: Importance of mixed-use redevelopment of key sites, fostering entrepreneurialism, residential development as a component of economic development, and continued public-private partnerships

Retail Market Study
Year: 2007
Created By: Arnett Muldrow & Associates
Main Themes: Community desire for a broader range of amenities and attractions Downtown; Opportunity to position Downtown as an arts and culture destination

Downtown Parking Study
Year: 2014
Created By: Arnett Muldrow & Associates
Main Themes: Opportunities to update parking pricing and collection to better align with parking demand

Downtown Housing Strategy
Year: 2015
Created By: Development Strategies
Main Themes: Opportunity to expand and diversify housing supply to aid in attracting and retaining young- and mid-career professionals in Blacksburg
PLANNING PROCESS

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE

WHAT DO YOU WANT IT TO BE?

PLANNING TEAM KNOWLEDGE

WHAT CAN IT BE?

EDUCATION

FEEDBACK

ALTERNATIVES

DIALOGUE

Public Participation & Outreach
Stakeholder Involvement
Social Media

Urban Design
Public Policy
Economics
Market Analysis
Placemaking
Best Practices/National Trends

© Development Strategies
PUBLIC MEETING #1

The community shares a desire for a more active, accessible, diverse, and vibrant Downtown. Achieving this vision will require balancing growth, town identity, cost of housing, and placemaking.

Approximately 110 residents attended the first Downtown Strategy meeting on December 5, 2017 at the Blacksburg Community Center. The meeting began with a presentation that explained the purpose and process of strategic planning, and outlined the opportunities and challenges Blacksburg faces today. It also introduced a framework for approaching the future potential for Downtown—specifically, that a successful, sustainable future will require a balance between elements shaping the area’s evolution: growth, town identity, cost of housing, and placemaking.

Following the presentation, attendees were invited to visit four stations related to those key issues. Each station included activities with comment cards, maps, and boards, allowing attendees to provide feedback on how they view Downtown today, how they use Downtown today, and what they want to see in the Downtown of the future.

One activity asked attendees to describe their ideal future Downtown in one word; the results are reflected in the word cloud on the facing page. It demonstrates that the community wants to see more in Downtown—more activity, more access, more diversity, and more vibrancy. Achieving that vision is the guiding mission for the recommendations contained in this plan.
In one word, how do you hope to describe DOWNTOWN BLACKSBURG IN 2025?

- Ecological
- Accessible
- Friendly
- Alive
- Car Free
- Expandable
- Beautiful
- Charming
- Modern
- Authentic
- Affordable
- Safe
- Happy
- Livable
- Dynamic
- Small
- Green
- Bikeable
- Diverse
- Thriving
- Human Scale
- Prospering
- Progressive
- Attractive
- Inclusive
- Thriving
- Developing
- Less Congestion
- Occupied
COMMUNITY SURVEY

Survey findings reinforce the importance of providing more capacity Downtown for housing, commercial space, and transportation systems.

Following the first public meeting, Blacksburg residents were invited to participate in an online survey to guide the Downtown Strategy. The survey included twenty-seven questions related to participants’ current use and future aspirations for Downtown. Approximately 750 residents completed the survey over a period of six weeks in December and January 2018.

Survey Respondents

One of the main successes of the community survey was the high percentage of respondents who were non-students working in Blacksburg. Given that the student population is largely a transitory one, it was critical to hear from members of the community who will be in Blacksburg for the next ten to fifteen years and beyond. This allowed the consulting team to understand what needs to happen in Downtown to best serve those residents who will be there to experience it in the future.

Survey respondents also evenly represented long-time residents of Blacksburg—in the community more than ten years—and newer residents. This indicates that the survey responses reflect a broad range of perspectives, both from those with a deep knowledge of Blacksburg’s history and evolution, as well as those with more recent experience living in other communities who may see untapped potential for innovative approaches.

Findings

Several key survey findings are presented on the facing page. There was near consensus that parking and traffic present Downtown’s major obstacles today, and that these are challenges that will only worsen as the town grows. There was also agreement that there are not enough housing options at the different price points needed to support a diverse population Downtown, and that the town should seek opportunities to increase and diversify its housing supply. Respondents also wanted more activities and amenities Downtown, specifically in the areas of non-student oriented shopping and dining. Preservation of Downtown’s historic character also emerged as a clear, shared priority. These responses confirmed that the plan must address how to increase Downtown’s capacity for housing, commercial space, and multi-modal transportation systems.

The survey also asked respondents to think about what they consider to be the boundaries of “Downtown.” The resulting map indicates that while most respondents have a fairly narrow view of Downtown—primarily Clay Street to Turner Street, centered on Main Street—some community members have a more expansive view of Downtown, stretching farther in all directions. The districting framework presented in Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrates how a more expansive view of Downtown will better position the community to accomplish its future goals for the area.
Downtown needs a greater quantity and quality of activity, particularly for the non-student population.

Developing housing for full-time, non-student residents, especially professionals, is a priority.

Need to address access issues, particularly around parking availability and traffic.

Community and natural assets are the most highly valued aspects of Town’s character.

Majority perception is of a small Downtown, but there is room for discussion of wider boundaries.

### Public Survey Takeaways

#### What Would You Like to See More of Downtown?

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<tr>
<th>Local Retail Businesses</th>
<th>Restaurants</th>
<th>Micro-Breweries</th>
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<td>50%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>36%</td>
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#### What Are Downtown’s Greatest Challenges?

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<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Office + Co-Working Space</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>Downtown space is not being utilized or there is not enough space and it is preventing job growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>Downtown does not have enough housing options for non-student residents, and more should be built</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of Housing</td>
<td>28%</td>
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**NOTE:** Respondents could select more than one option. Percentages total more than 100.
Community feedback during and after the meeting helped to shape the vision for each of Downtown’s six distinct districts.

Approximately 75 residents attended the second Downtown Strategy meeting on March 19, 2018 at the Blacksburg Community Center. At this meeting, the consulting team presented the goals and objectives for Downtown distilled from the feedback provided by the public and through workshops with the stakeholder committee. These goals and objectives are detailed in Chapter 3.

This meeting also introduced a districting framework for Downtown, which identifies six distinct geographic districts in the area. Each district represents different opportunities for development and placemaking—investments in public spaces that enhance a place’s distinct identity. The character and future potential of each district are described in detail in Chapter 5.

Following the presentation, meeting attendees reviewed boards outlining current conditions and future opportunities for the six districts. Meeting participants also spoke with members of the consultant team and Town staff, and completed surveys describing what they liked and disliked about each district concept. The presentation and boards were posted online for those not able to attend the meeting or unable to complete surveys on-site. Between the in-person and online responses, approximately 235 residents provided feedback on at least one district concept.
Over 65 residents attended the third Downtown Strategy meeting on April 30, 2018 at the Blacksburg Community Center. This meeting focused on the strategies for the plan—those actions that will allow the town to achieve its goals and objectives for Downtown. The strategies range from allowing greater density of development, to building a more robust bike and pedestrian system, to improving and enhancing Downtown’s parks and public gathering spaces.

The consultant team also presented a series of conceptual design alternatives for Central Downtown—the district comprising the three core blocks of Downtown, from Turner to Jackson Streets and from Main to Progress Streets. These concepts focused on key sites within Central Downtown, each with its own opportunity for redevelopment. Attendees reviewed the Central Downtown concepts in detail, and provided comments on their relative strengths and weaknesses. As with the districting framework, the concepts were also posted online to invite broader feedback. With guidance from the public, the stakeholder committee, and the Town Council and Planning Commission, the consulting team refined the concepts into a single preferred alternative that can guide future investment in this core Downtown area.
At this open house format meeting, the consultant team invited community members to workshop a set of seven strategies for guiding the evolution of Downtown Blacksburg. These strategies address issues in the realms of transportation and mobility, parks and the public realm, economic growth and innovation, housing affordability, cultural and historic resources, celebrating the town’s distinct identity, and the opportunities for development that support the intended outcomes of the other strategies. These strategies offer a series of tangible actions that can ensure the plan’s goals and objectives come to fruition. Each of these seven strategies, as refined by community input, are detailed in Chapter 4 of this plan.

Putting clear strategies in place is key to encourage the types of investments that advance the goals for Downtown. This framework will help to balance the three elements critical to Downtown’s future—growth, cost of housing, and town identity—by guiding enhancements to the community’s historic and cultural assets, creating opportunities for economic growth and innovation, and addressing the need to diversify and expand housing options available Downtown.
VISION STATEMENT

The vision that emerged through the public participation process offers a lens through which to understand the conditions affecting Downtown Blacksburg’s evolution. It also offers a foundation for the goals, objectives, and tangible strategies for guiding the area’s future.

The community’s input helped to crystalize a clear vision for the future of Blacksburg’s Downtown. This vision strives for a balance between the three elements shaping the area’s future: growth of the area’s population and economy, a commitment to expressing and celebrating Blacksburg’s distinct identity, and the need to address the rising cost of housing in order to ensure that Blacksburg is an equitable community as it develops and grows. Each of these three elements must come together in a way that allows Downtown to be the type of place that is inviting, accessible, vibrant, walkable, and, above all, unique to Blacksburg.

The remainder of this Downtown Strategy document explores the opportunities and challenges presented by Downtown Blacksburg’s existing market, economic, physical, and policy context, then expands on the goals, objectives, and strategies that the town can pursue to achieve this vision. These strategies will help to guide the tangible investments in Downtown that will shape its evolution into the future.

What is our vision for the future of Downtown Blacksburg?

Downtown will be a dynamic, progressive, and accessible place that fosters growth and innovation; celebrates the town’s history, character, and distinctiveness; and offers a diversity of housing options to ensure an equitable future.
CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS: A FRAMEWORK FOR DOWNTOWN
A FRAMEWORK FOR DOWNTOWN

The future of Downtown Blacksburg will depend on three important factors—growth, town identity, and the cost and availability of housing. The key is balance; overemphasis on any one will be detrimental to the other two. This plan aims to align these factors, strategically forming a strong foundation for Downtown’s future.

Growth

Blacksburg is growing, and will continue to grow in the years ahead. Virginia Tech is expanding their student enrollment and adding faculty and staff. State projections estimate that job growth will occur outside the university as well. In particular, the future development of the Creativity and Innovation District (CID), combined with continued expansion at the Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center, should attract new companies to start up or relocate to Blacksburg, bringing additional workforce to the community.

This growth is a great opportunity for Blacksburg to diversify and expand its economy, capitalizing on the talented workforce graduating from Virginia Tech each year. However, if the town does not prepare to thoughtfully integrate this growth by facilitating needed residential and commercial space development in strategic locations, it will quickly have the effect of either driving up rental rates to unaffordable levels or overpowering the town’s unique architectural and public realm characteristics.

Town Identity

There are many facets to Blacksburg’s unique identity. One is its close-knit community feel. Another is its remote location and proximity to nature. A third is its history, embodied in key public buildings such as the Alexander Black House, Old Town Hall, and St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall, in the street grid of the town’s original 16 blocks, and in many of its well-maintained older homes. These characteristics help draw people to Blacksburg and keep them in town, and it is important that they be celebrated and given visibility. However, as in the case of new development, it is critical that the town preserve these characteristics strategically and in a targeted way. Too great an emphasis on maintaining Blacksburg “as it has always been” will stunt its ability to adapt to growth, moderate rental rates, and realize its economic opportunities.

Cost of Housing

A major concern for Blacksburg in recent years has been the cost of housing in town—specifically, the cost (and supply) of housing options for non-student residents. The combined pressures of high demand from the student population for rental housing, competition from people purchasing properties as an investment, and the community’s hesitancy to allow denser residential development in town have driven up the price of housing to levels unaffordable to most working and professional families, particularly close to Downtown. As a result, many people who work in Blacksburg—including many who work at Virginia Tech—have had to look for housing on the outskirts of town or in other communities. This in turn has led to heavy commuter traffic into the employment centers in and near Downtown. Further, many areas close to Downtown have turned from mostly owner-occupied to mostly student renter-occupied, impacting the character of these neighborhoods. This situation will only be exacerbated if growth and town identity are not brought into balance.

Downtown

Today, Downtown is Blacksburg’s employment, commercial, and cultural center. A number of key investments have been made in the street environment and public realm to support this important position. However, the prominence of student residents, volume of daily traffic, and lack of adequate affordable residential and commercial space have limited the capacity of Downtown to address future town issues relating to growth, town identity, and cost of housing. The center of a community needs to be a place with the most capacity to adapt to change, not the least. Yet, today, well-intentioned efforts to moderate student influence and maintain town character have limited even desirable types of growth.

In order to create a vibrant Downtown of the future, the elements of growth, town identity, and cost of housing will have to be brought into balance. Additionally, issues of access, walkability, and livability are critical to consider and will involve both public and private investments in infrastructure and open spaces. The remainder of this chapter will provide an analysis of these forces and issues in greater detail, revealing the opportunities for targeted actions to put Downtown on a successful, sustainable path to the future.
Chapter 2 - Analysis: A Framework for Downtown Blacksburg

Balancing Cost of Housing, Town Identity, and Growth

- Workforce Housing
- Affordable Housing
- Cost of Living
- Proximity
- Policy
- Equity
- Livability
- Quality of Life
- Density, Height
- Sprawl, Traffic
- Architecture, Transitions
- Form
- History, Culture
- Preferences
- Neighborhoods
- Streets
- Jobs
- Innovation
- Talent
- Education
- Land
- Development
- Economy
- Transportation
- Infrastructure

COST OF HOUSING
TOWN IDENTITY
GROWTH
DOWNTOWN & PLACE
GROWTH AND DENSITY

Allowing increased density at appropriate sites Downtown can accommodate growth while also reducing negative impacts on sprawl, traffic, congestion, and housing affordability.

Growth Option 1: Build Outward

There are two ways for communities to accommodate growth. One is to build outward—that is, to sprawl. This option allows a community to accommodate low-density single-family homes and can help it feel less crowded. However, it also typically results in longer commutes and increased traffic, particularly in a place like Blacksburg where employment is very centralized. This traffic has negative impacts on the environment, on regional infrastructure, and on the quality of life for residents.

Growth Option 2: Build Up

The other option for accommodating growth is to build up—to increase the density of the built environment. This means the development of multi family buildings and single family homes on smaller lots. While many have concerns that this sort of density results in more crowds and traffic, if done near employment centers (such as Virginia Tech), it can actually lead to less traffic, as more people live close enough to walk, bike, or take the bus to work. Further, greater density can make an area more vibrant and dynamic. And the impact on the environment is reduced, as fewer people drive, land is used more efficiently, and open space, forest, and farmland are preserved.

Visualizing Development

A helpful touchstone for imagining the density needed to accommodate Blacksburg’s coming growth within the town is the Original 16 Squares—the original footprint of the town—illustrated on the following page. At current single-family density allowances of four units per acre, the town would have to develop on an area nearly nine times the size of the Original 16 to accommodate 1,000 units of housing (just a fraction of what will be needed over the next decade). However, at a density of 25 units per acre, these units could be built on less than two times the area of the Original 16; and at 60 units per acre, on an area smaller than the town’s original size.

Balancing Needs

Allowing for greater density of development is not just about efficiency. It is also about access. The constraints on housing supply caused by low-density development is one of the major factors driving up the cost of housing in town. As a result, many of the people who work in town, and would like to live in town, simply cannot afford to do so. If Blacksburg wants to be an inclusive community that welcomes people from all different backgrounds and stages of life, it will need to make it possible for that diversity of households to find appropriate housing. But density does not have to mean skyscrapers. There are many ways in which building design can both accommodate density and fit within the character of a place. Understanding and creating guidelines around these design options will be an important piece in balancing the town’s needs without compromising the character of its neighborhoods.
1,000 New Housing Units

- at 4 units/acre
  Total: 250 acres

- at 15 units/acre
  Total: 66 acres

- at 25 units/acre
  Total: 40 acres

- at 60 units/acre
  Total: 17 acres

VISUALIZING DEVELOPMENT DENSITY

Original 16 Blocks
1 block = 1.8 acres
PEOPLE AND HOUSING

Population growth is increasing the need for more housing. Strategically, accommodating more young professionals is a priority for the town.

The demographic composition of Blacksburg with its large student population is somewhat skewed since nearly 60 percent of the population is enrolled in a degree program. The average age is younger and income levels are lower since most of the population has yet to enter the workforce.

Population

The population of Blacksburg grew by about three percent between 2010 and 2016, from 42,500 to 44,500. This growth trajectory is estimated to continue and even possibly accelerate. While population growth in general will drive demand for more housing and commercial development, the types of development desired will be dictated by the demographic make-up of the town’s residents.

Age

Between 2010 and 2016, the growth of Blacksburg’s population aged 50 and older exceeded the national average, 21 percent to 17 percent, respectively. Coupled with the fact that nearly 50 percent of the population is aged 18 to 24 due to the large student population, this implies that there will be an increasing need to attract and retain a talented workforce to maintain a sustainable tax base. It is critical that Blacksburg provides the resources to support a well-diversified economy and maintain a competitive workforce.

Housing products and development types that serve the needs of these young and mid-career professional and empty-nester families should be the focus of future town development. Retaining these growing populations through housing and employment opportunities in Downtown Blacksburg will also help to add vibrancy, and increase the variety of retail options and other amenities.

Household Income

The median household income in Blacksburg ($35,000) is considerably lower than the county ($49,000), Metropolitan Statistical Area ($47,000), and state ($66,000) median income; however, cities and towns with large college student populations tend to have lower income levels since most students are not working full time. While this median income number is instructive, it does not directly inform housing affordability due to the pattern of parental support for students’ living expenses.

OVER THE NEXT 8-10 YEARS
BLACKSBURG IS EXPECTED TO ADD

| Students | 4,700 |
| Non-Students | 4,000 |
| VT Faculty and Staff | 725 |
| Non-VT Jobs | 3,400 |

Source: Virginia Tech Master Plan, ESRI
More telling is that the average income for those aged 25 and older with a graduate degree in Blacksburg ($53,000) is generally consistent with the Metropolitan Statistical Area and county, but lower than the national ($68,000) and state ($79,000) average. This implies that retaining talent will require continued diversification of the local economy and housing stock.

Households headed by individuals aged 25 to 44—typically, young and mid-career professional singles, couples, and families—earn a median income of $49,000 annually. As the analysis on cost of housing will show, the affordability levels of these groups are currently below the average home price in Blacksburg, making it difficult to attract and retain non-student households to live in town.

**KEY METRICS**

**44,500**

Blacksburg population in 2016, 45% of the population of Montgomery County

**50%**

Of Blacksburg is aged 18-24

**+2,900**

residents not enrolled at VT (2010-2016)

**$35,000**

Median household income in Blacksburg

**+22%**

Increase in population aged 50 and older (2010-2016)

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**500-750 UNITS**

Projected 10-year demand for non-student market-rate housing units in Downtown Blacksburg

In 2015, Development Strategies completed a housing market strategy for the Town of Blacksburg. The study revealed that downtown housing development is important for accommodating the community’s growth, and it is also key to attracting and retaining Blacksburg’s young professionals. Companies in Blacksburg’s emerging research and technology sectors rely on these workers to grow their businesses, and report that the amenities of a walkable, vibrant downtown are essential to their recruitment efforts.

The study projected a ten-year demand for 500 to 750 non-student, market-rate housing units in Downtown Blacksburg. The study also tested the market feasibility of various housing products, finding that only denser development types—such as mixed-use housing products, undergraduate housing, and rental housing for graduate students and young professionals—are economically viable on key sites in the study area.

* Data from ESRI unless otherwise stated.
**Economic Growth**

Virginia Tech is producing talent that is supportive of a knowledge-based economy; it is critical that the regional economy continues to diversify and align itself with national trends in order to attract and retain a talented workforce.

**Economic Trends**

Nationwide, the economy is shifting. Industry sectors that are major components to the knowledge economy, including Health Care & Social Assistance, Professional & Business Services, Educational Services, and Financial Activities, are driving employment growth overall, while manufacturing sectors continue to decline. These shifts to the knowledge economy favor those markets that can create opportunities for knowledge-based sectors through recruitment and retention. Blacksburg already has a strong talent base in town, in the form of the Virginia Tech student body. In order to retain those students after they graduate—in support of economic growth and diversification—the town will need to create an environment that fosters career development and company growth in highly-skilled, knowledge economy sectors.

**Entrepreneurship and Innovation**

Important to achieving that goal is the fostering of local entrepreneurship and innovation. Locally-grown businesses, though often small, are big assets to a community. They tend to stay in town and invest in the community, creating stability in the economy. They are also the true drivers of economic growth. Nearly 90 percent of new jobs in communities nationwide resulted from the creation of a new business or the expansion of an existing in-state business (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities). One third of jobs created annually since 2010 have been from start-up companies, which includes not just firms in the tech sector, but also local retail or professional businesses (US Census). These new local businesses often support other industries and employment sectors in an economy, creating local demand for goods and services. These trends imply that communities with a strong growth-from-within economic strategy will be more robust and resilient moving forward.

Analyzing performance of local innovation and entrepreneurship can rely on a number of metrics such as venture capital investment or patents issued per capita; however, these measures are typically more associated with technology-related fields. The positive impacts of innovation and entrepreneurship can be felt throughout all industry sectors from high tech startups to new restaurants or retail business. Today, the Blacksburg-Christianburg-Radford Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) ranks behind the state and nation in terms of the number of new businesses created annually as a percent of total businesses (also known as the startup rate). This indicates a need to better position local talent and small business services for success, as creating a culture of entrepreneurship can have a positive impact across all sectors.
The Role of Downtown

There are growing trends nationally of merging institutional innovation and entrepreneurial activity with vibrant mixed-use downtown areas. This type of downtown environment is best suited for fostering interaction, collaboration and a cross-pollination of people, ideas, and industries. Successful innovation districts break down physical boundaries between institutions and their surrounding communities so that they seamlessly blend and allow for more interaction between students, faculty, local businesses, local government, and advocacy organizations. The ultimate goal is to transition ideas and talent from the university into the local economy triggering job growth and long-term opportunities for graduates.

Engaging in this type of innovation and entrepreneurship development strategy will be critical for the future of the Blacksburg regional economy since the startup rate—the number of new businesses created annually for every 100 businesses—was only 7.7 in 2014. That rate is lower than the national average (10.0) and the lowest it has ever been since the 1970s. In other words, Blacksburg has the talent, but there is a need to create the environment to spur more home-grown economic growth.

Based on regional employment trends and the long-term development of the University’s Creativity and Innovation District, Downtown Blacksburg should be positioned to provide more opportunity for knowledge-based economic activity through the further development of higher-density residential and commercial space to capture more new business activity.

Not including the future job creation spurred by planned development of the University’s Creativity and Innovation District, projected regional employment growth alone will generate around 300,000 square feet of demand for conventional office space over the next 10 years. Blacksburg could be poised to capture this economic growth Downtown if it fosters the right mix of housing options, and the vibrant, walkable, and dynamic environments that attract workers in these growth sectors.

KEY METRICS

7.7
Start-up rate in Blacksburg MSA (2014), lower than both national average (10) and state average (9.5)

90%
Of new job creation nationwide occurs through the creation of new businesses or the expansion of an existing in-state business

1/3
Of jobs created annually since 2010 have been from start-up companies

300,000 SF
Of net new office demand over next 10 years, Blacksburg MSA
BLACKSBURG & INNOVATION

Blacksburg has the opportunity to leverage Virginia Tech’s investment in the Creativity and Innovation District to enhance vibrancy and economic opportunity Downtown.

Innovation Districts

Recognizing the role of innovation and entrepreneurship to support economic growth and vibrancy, many communities have established innovation districts that bring together public, private, and institutional stakeholders to create an environment of creativity, collaboration and commercialization. This has resulted in a shift from developing isolated industrial and office parks to creating environments that better promote a cross-pollination of industries and face-to-face interactions. In particular, research has shown that building up and creating enhanced exchanges between science and tech professionals, business and entrepreneurship professionals, and design and creative professionals is correlated with higher entrepreneurial activity.

The modern day innovation district typically takes on a more urban, mixed-use form, with an emphasis on an inviting public realm and “Third Places” such as cafes, in which business can be conducted more casually and interactions can take place that foster informal idea exchanges. While employment is still the dominant use, restaurants, retail, and housing are important components that extend the activity of the place beyond the workday. It is this model that can inform the development of VT’s Creativity and Technology, and the School of Visual Arts. The plan also includes a long-term vision for the development of living spaces, studios, and shared learning spaces.

The Creativity and Innovation District

In 2016, Virginia Tech announced plans to develop its Creativity and Innovation District (CID), to be located on the eastern edge of campus adjacent to Downtown Blacksburg. The goal of the CID is to “fully support the complexities of innovation — from idea creation to commercialization,” and as such it will be home to the School of Performing Arts, the Moss Arts Center, the Institute for Creativity, Arts, and Technology, and the School of Visual Arts. The programmatic elements of the CID are consistent with successful innovation districts, providing linkages between technology, creativity, and business within the university community. But the long-term impacts on the regional economy will be dependent on forging alliances with the town, business community, and other local stakeholders to create natural linkages, both physical and elemental, to the

KEY STATS

- 600,000 new sq. ft.
- 500 new housing units
- No new retail/dining amenities
district from outside the university. The ultimate goal of the CID should be not only to create a well-integrated mixed-use environment on-campus, but also to provide the residential and commercial development, vibrant public spaces, transportation, partnerships, and programming to allow students, graduates, and faculty to thrive as members of the Blacksburg community.

The university, recognizing the importance of this link, has kept the living space component of the CID small, and included no dining amenities, thus encouraging those involved with the CID to interact with the adjoining areas of Downtown. Downtown has the potential to meet the new demand for residential and retail/dining space, as well as to provide new office space to bring the local business community closer to the CID. However, without an active strategy to make it happen, the town risks losing an opportunity to build the mix of amenities in proximity to the CID that are desirable to the knowledge sector workforce.

If those involved with the CID do not see the town as a place that they can grow outside of the university, it will ultimately serve as a launching point for innovators and entrepreneurs to take their ideas and businesses to other markets, representing a missed opportunity for local economic growth. Rather, the development of the CID presents the perfect occasion to expand the number and diversity of jobs available downtown.

Universities across the country are planning and investing in Research Parks and Innovation Districts that seek to combine institutional knowledge and investment with established industry partners and start-ups in mixed-use, urban environments. The following examples could serve as precedents for how the Town and Virginia Tech could work together to make the CID into a fully mixed-use district.

**PEER INSTITUTIONS**

**University of Florida Innovation Square**
Gainesville, Florida
University Partners: University of Florida, Gainesville

The university’s recent master plan creates a 40-acre research and innovation campus that includes housing, retail, hotel, office, and research uses. Located between the University of Florida Campus and Downtown Gainesville, it has an emphasis on technological ventures and start-ups. The Infusion Technology Center includes over 150,000 square feet of customizable space available for private companies looking to locate in Innovation Square.

**Research Triangle Park**
Research Triangle Park, North Carolina
University Partners: Duke, UNC, NC State

Research Triangle Park (RTP) is considered one of the country’s leading high-tech research and development centers. However, even with this success, it has realized that it needs to develop a new mixed-use core in order to compete in the marketplace. A 2012 master plan created a plan for a dense, 100-acre mixed-use core with public space, and office, residential and retail users. Located at the main entrance to the park, Park Center will form a visible edge to the research and technology taking place inside the 7,000 acre park. It also has a focus on start-ups, with both incubator and accelerator space provided in the plan. This new addition is aimed at keeping RTP competitive and by responding to both technology employers and meeting the needs and desires of employees. RTP is managed by the Research Triangle Foundation, a private non-profit. Most of the land is owner-occupied, but additional rental space is expected as part of the new Park Center and other planned development.

**Discovery Park District**
West Lafayette, Indiana
University Partners: Purdue University

Discovery Park sits on 40 acres on the southwest edge of Purdue’s campus, and includes a wide range of facilities to support interdisciplinary research and innovation. The Purdue Research Foundation (PRF) and Purdue University have partnered with Browning to create a master-planned vision for the further development of 450 acres currently owned by PRF into additional space for research, as well as residential uses and recreation.
IDENTITY

Development and investment Downtown must take great care to respect Blacksburg’s history and character, while also helping the community evolve and thrive as it grows and conditions change.

Town Identity

Town identity is a difficult concept to measure. It is about the people who make up a place—the residents of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The tangible elements of a community—its buildings, streets, and open spaces—are a part of it, but so too are less tangible ones: culture, art, openness, friendliness, and many more.

As town identity is forged over time, it is also ever-evolving, responding to changes both internal and external to the community. This change is necessary—even if it is uncomfortable at times.

In the moment, it is human nature to resist change, to want to preserve the identity of the present, one that is familiar and beloved. With great care, balancing preservation with the need to adapt can lead not to a completely new identity, but to one that is fuller, more nuanced and multi-faceted. It is that complexity—the mixing of old and new, proven and innovative, close-knit and inclusive—that can create a truly great place.

History and Character

Blacksburg’s history is an integral part of its identity, and is reflected throughout the built environment. The grid of the Original 16 Squares, which comprised the town at its beginning, has remained intact for over two hundred years. So have a number of buildings important to the history of the town, including the Alexander Black House, Old Town Hall, and St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall. The town still contains many examples of architectural styles from the different eras in Blacksburg’s history, creating an eclectic architectural character. Over 160 buildings in Blacksburg’s historic district—which includes the Original 16—have been designated as contributing structures in recognition of their historic/cultural importance.

While some of these historic and contributing structures have been well-maintained and are visible and accessible to residents and visitors, many others have been under-maintained over the years. In some cases, they detract from the neighborhood character, given their state of disrepair. One of the town’s major challenges in balancing town identity with growth and cost of housing will be strategically and effectively preserving its historic character while fostering appropriate redevelopment of those structures that no longer contribute to that character.
Architecture and Transitions

Part of maintaining balance in respecting and celebrating town identity is working with the development community to design new buildings that can co-exist with existing structures. This co-existence can occur through architectural standards, and through thoughtful height and materials transitions. Through the strategy process, Blacksburg residents indicated their preferences for particular types of building design and material that they feel fits their community. Since town identity is shaped by the preferences of people, understanding those preferences can lead to architectural guidelines that support Blacksburg’s identity.

In Downtown Blacksburg, the highest and densest buildings are built along Main Street, with the density dropping off immediately to neighborhoods of single-family homes at the mid-block between Main Street and Progress Street to the east and at Draper Road to the west. This results not only in too little supply of needed housing Downtown, but also in a stark separation between Main Street and its adjacent blocks. A less dramatic transition through the development of medium-density buildings leading away from Main Street would tie adjoining neighborhoods to the main activity corridor, creating a fuller and more dynamic Downtown.

Contributing Structures

In 1999, the Town of Blacksburg established the Blacksburg Historic District, located near downtown. Several structures within this designated district, including many in the Original 16, are classified as contributing structures, meaning they have been surveyed and determined to have specific contributions to the historic character of the district.

This district designation provides a means of protecting the town’s cultural assets. Proposed changes to any structure of site within the district requires review by the town’s Historic or Design Review Board.
Density and Sprawl

Thoughtfully designed, greater density can improve transitions and connectivity Downtown, as well as attract new growth to what is already the employment and activity center of Blacksburg. In best practice urban design, the center of a community is its densest area, becoming a vibrant place where residential and commercial uses co-exist and residents, visitors, and workers can access different amenities in close proximity. The more housing, retail, and office space that is available close together, the less there is a need for such development to happen on the peripheries of a community. This reduction in sprawl is beneficial to the environment, to reduced traffic congestion, to infrastructure, and to living costs.

Traffic and Employment

Downtown Blacksburg today is fairly low density and low intensity relative to comparable downtowns. As a result, much of the new housing, retail, and office development has occurred outside of Downtown, along South Main, down US-460, and into Christiansburg. Yet, Virginia Tech’s Campus and Downtown are still the employment centers of the region. Nearly 16,000 workers commute into Blacksburg each day, while just 5,350 employees both live and work in town, and 4,700 commute out of town. The resulting traffic congestion has been highlighted through this strategic process as the number one concern of Blacksburg residents. Given the town’s existing street grid, Blacksburg is unable to expand its road infrastructure to accommodate increased traffic.

Accommodating future growth will mean aligning land use and transportation policies to reduce single-occupancy vehicles as the primary means of transportation. If we continue on this trajectory, with housing becoming less affordable and traffic congestion increasing in the Downtown area, local companies who are not tied to Downtown may find it more beneficial to move closer to where their employees live—outside of Downtown, and potentially outside of Blacksburg. The resulting job loss, particularly of non-university jobs, will stunt Blacksburg’s ability to diversify and strengthen its economy. Furthermore, fewer non-university employees will mean a less diversified Downtown, with uses focused more on the needs of the university community, rather than providing for the non-university community as well.

Multifamily housing can be built on 93% less land area. Close-in, multifamily housing can cut traffic by 31%.

**BLACKSBURG HOSTS 21,000 EMPLOYEES EACH DAY**

15,900 COMMUTE INTO TOWN

5,350 BOTH LIVE AND WORK IN TOWN

4,700 COMMUTE OUT OF TOWN
COST OF HOUSING

A lack of housing supply and restrictions on the density of new residential development can lead to rising housing costs and strain the ability of Blacksburg’s residents to afford their homes.

Demand and Home Prices

The third element impacting the future of Downtown—the cost of housing—is both simple and complex. Simply put, the price of housing is determined by the market—how many people need housing, and how much they can pay for it. Prices will always rise to the highest level of affordability, and as that demand is met, prices will come down to meet lower levels. The larger the gap between supply and demand, the fewer homes available at lower levels of affordability. Today in Blacksburg, particularly in Downtown, the demand for housing is much higher than the supply, and so prices are typically out of reach for the average working household.

The complexity of Blacksburg housing in particular relates to its location and its student-dominated market. First, the town is hemmed in on three sides by mountains, which means that there is limited room to grow outwards. One upside to outward growth—though this sprawl has many downsides—is that it takes some pressure off of housing costs in a region. In the case of Blacksburg, these pressure valves are limited.

Second, the demand by students for off-campus rental housing, particularly in areas close to campus, has led to the conversion of many single-family homes into student rental properties. By taking these homes off of the for-sale market for households looking to buy a house, supply is further constricted for the non-student population. Even for households willing to rent a house, the affordability level of three to four (or more) students renting a house by the room is much higher than that of an individual, couple, or family.

In short, the supply gap in housing in Blacksburg, and especially in Downtown, has made it an increasingly unaffordable place for many, students and non-students alike. This unaffordability leads to a community that is less equitable, less accessible, less vibrant, and less livable for all those who would like to be a part of it.

“Restricting housing supply anywhere pushes up prices everywhere.”
—Edward Glaeser, Urban Economist
What is Affordability?

As alluded to in the previous section, housing affordability is, in the simplest terms, the amount that a household can afford to pay for its housing. That amount is, of course, determined by a household’s income and by its other expenses. The general rule of thumb is that no more than thirty percent of a household’s income should be spent towards housing. More than that, and the housing is considered “unaffordable” for that household.

In reality, many households throughout the country are living in housing that is unaffordable to them. In communities where demand is high and housing prices have risen to match, low- and middle-income households can often not find housing that meets the thirty percent threshold. In some cases, these households may be able to find affordable housing through government programs, either in properties that are rent-restricted or through the use of rent vouchers. However, these programs are limited to households making below certain income levels, and even then, these programs are not large enough to serve everyone who is eligible.

For households who cannot find housing in their community that is affordable to them, one option is to pay the market rent and forego other expenses in order to pay for housing costs. These “cost burdens” from housing reduce the resources available for families to invest in opportunities for their children, in education, or in other priorities. Other families may instead be forced to move to other communities where prices are more affordable to them.
Density and Affordability

The density of development—as well as broader market forces—can have a significant impact on the affordability of housing. A building with more units per acre can spread costs like land purchase and design over those units, lowering the costs passed on to individual renters or buyers. Conversely, a building with fewer units per acre would have to charge higher rents to recover land and design costs, pushing housing costs out of affordable reach for many households in the community.

This connection between density and affordability also impacts what development types are economically feasible. Density can help developers keep rents low enough to meet the housing demand in a community. Restrictions on density, alternatively, can make development so costly and unmarketable that development does not occur at all, further constraining supply.

The chart to the right demonstrates how these development economics impact affordability for buyers and renters. Lower density development translates into higher home prices or rents per unit, which only a small slice of Blacksburg’s households can afford. Higher density development, by comparison, is in reach for a broader range of residents in Blacksburg.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Density Per Acre</th>
<th>Required Home Value/Rent/Unit</th>
<th>Required Household Income</th>
<th>% of Blacksburg Households Who Can Afford Housing Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 units</td>
<td>$685,000</td>
<td>$185,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 units</td>
<td>$460,000</td>
<td>$125,000</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 units</td>
<td>$1,450 per month</td>
<td>$58,000</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 units</td>
<td>$1,350 per month</td>
<td>$54,000</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Downtown Blacksburg has many features that contribute to quality of place. Many more opportunities exist to build on this momentum and further enhance Downtown.

Sense of place is a combination of all the elements that create the physical environments in which we live, work, shop, and visit. It is the part of a town that we see and interact with. Downtown Blacksburg provides opportunity to participate in those activities at various levels. Economics, market forces, and policies are “hidden” components that contribute to and shape the spaces we live in. Whether we are conscious of them or not, they can provide both opportunities and constraints in different aspects of a town’s sense of place. A town with a robust economy, for example, has more to invest in places than one without.

A town’s sense of place can also strengthen its economy. Great places help communities attract and retain talent, improving their economic performance. Great places are more marketable for housing, jobs, retail, and visitors. Great places feel like home. Successful places bring people back over and over again. They can alter market forces. They can bend the curve. The six key components to a great place are: livability, walkability, vibrancy, navigability, dynamism, anchors, and amenities. When arranged properly, these foundational elements can greatly impact the functionality, appearance, and usefulness of a place. The roles they do and can play in Downtown Blacksburg are explored further on the following pages.
Livability might best be described as the degree to which a place is designed for people (as opposed to automobiles). On one hand it is about scale—human-scaled places that function well for pedestrians, that are shaded in the right places at the right times of year, and that provide outdoor seating and visible and usable public spaces. A livable place is a comfortable one that is not consumed by the noise of trucks, the speed of cars, or faceless concrete buildings at eye level.

Walkable towns are places in which it is comfortable to get around by foot. They have comfortable street crossings, and bumpouts, boulevards, and other elements that reduce the time of that crossing. A walkable place has great streetside zones, not just sidewalks. It has places for outdoor dining, visual interest at eye level, on-street parking to buffer people from moving vehicles, or no parking at all with fewer lanes and lower speed limits. Street furniture and thoughtful streetscape elements, such as different surface materials, and lighting and plantings, also contribute to walkability.

Vibrancy is best measured by the number of people seen walking within a place throughout the day. But it is about more than that. People need places to shop and patronize, so attractive and varied storefronts are vital. Housing is critical. Downtowns and employment districts often become desolate after five o’clock, but residential areas come alive on evenings and weekends. Vibrancy relies on shop owners who dedicate themselves to distinctive crafts, such as food, that delight shoppers and celebrate local culture. Festivals and public art are also important contributors to community vibrancy.

Navigability can be defined in different ways. In its most literal sense, it is about getting around—how easy is it for drivers and non-motorists alike to get from one place to another?

Navigability can also be thought of more broadly. A place that is easy to understand is one that is accessible. Logical districts within a downtown with distinct, descriptive names let you know which areas are relatively more residential, or for dining, or hospitality. They identify a town’s parks and its employment centers.

Dynamism is about economic activity, and the ability of a place to adapt and evolve over time. Great places welcome entrepreneurs, innovation, start-ups, business, and commerce. Dynamism contributes to the ability of a town’s people to adapt to changing economic conditions and to global, national, and local trends. Third places—coffee shops, and other places where people from different professions can meet and share knowledge—are critical to today’s knowledge economy. Hospitality is important, in the form of quality places for out-of-town businesses to stay.

Anchors and amenities are typically the things that draw people to a place — and keep them coming back. A small, well-placed and designed park can anchor a residential neighborhood. A large civic space can bring people in for regional festivals, weekend events, and tourism. A large commercial business, such as a brewery, can anchor an entertainment district. A corporate business, such as a hospital, can anchor a health care district. Institutions and cultural destinations, such as libraries, post offices, university branches, museums, or recreation centers can also draw people.
LIVABILITY

Blacksburg has many buildings and public spaces that contribute to a livable Downtown. Applying many of these principles elsewhere will create a stronger sense of place throughout.

The Original 16 blocks (between Jackson Street, Wharton Street, Clay Street, and Draper Road) provide a link to Blacksburg’s past, and are home to many historic structures that help tell the story of the community and its history. Some buildings have a specific town history, such as the Old Town Hall, while others have unique architecture that displays the foundational small town character of Downtown Blacksburg.

The map at the right shows that the most livable parts of Downtown tend to be on Main Street and College Avenue, in and near the Original 16. Areas to the north are too auto-dominated.

The Original 16’s blocks display typical small town character due to their walkable size. Downtown could build on this by seeking opportunities to break up block lengths elsewhere.

Public Space

Downtown Blacksburg’s many public spaces contribute to the area’s livability. College Avenue, Market Square Park, and Henderson Lawn are frequented by patrons of Downtown. College Avenue’s comfortable streetscape elements and outdoor dining options keep the sidewalks active and walkable. Market Square Park and Henderson Lawn hold a variety of events, including the Farmers Market and outdoor concerts, adding greenspace Downtown and creating destinations for Blacksburg residents.

Downtown also has several alleys and in-between spaces which could provide character mid-block and in spaces between buildings. Incorporating existing and new public spaces in any redevelopment decisions will be key to keep expanding Downtown’s livability.

College Avenue at Henderson Lawn

Public spaces along Main Street in Downtown Blacksburg
**Walkability**

Recent efforts to improve walkability on College Avenue and Main Street could be applied to the less walkable parts of Downtown to improve connectivity and the pedestrian experience.

**Walkability and the Public Realm**

Streetscape elements such as crosswalks, benches, buffering between pedestrians and motorists, outdoor dining, unique buildings, and lighting can be found in select places Downtown, including College Avenue and Main Street. These enhance the walkability of Downtown by providing a well-designed and comfortable pedestrian environment.

The addition of streetscape elements in other areas would enhance the public realm and encourage people to walk to and from neighborhoods and Main Street, such as the Original 16. Currently, much of the Original 16 is badly in need of better streetscape infrastructure.

Enhancing the built environment also contributes to an attractive public realm, making people want to stay longer and visit businesses, anchors, and amenities. While North Main Street has a quality streetscape, the pedestrian infrastructure has a suburban, auto-oriented layout and feel, which discourages pedestrians from venturing into this part of the downtown area.

**Strong Connections**

Downtown Blacksburg is filled with a variety of public spaces, corridors, and amenities. Many are not well connected to each other. College Avenue and Main Street are some of the best-connected, most walkable parts of Downtown Blacksburg today. Progress Street, Draper Road, and Otey Street have the potential to be important east-west connections, and can be enhanced to strengthen Downtown’s connectivity. Improving the visibility, design, and connectivity of these places and streets, and making them more inviting, would simplify and enhance how people get around town.
VIBRANCY

Downtown has many elements of a vibrant place. Broadening housing and storefront offerings to target more non-students will enable it to reach its full potential.

Active Uses, Events, and Places

In Downtown Blacksburg, pockets of vibrancy are thriving. The central section of Main Street and College Avenue is active and has continued growing with new restaurants, shops, and personal service establishments. These primary sources of vibrancy Downtown bring life into the Town’s historic storefronts. Downtown amenities and events such as the Farmers Market and outdoor concerts draw many residents and visitors. Small examples of public art such as murals have also popped up.

But much more can be done to make more parts of Downtown vibrant. Developing more housing will make Downtown a stronger neighborhood, activating additional spaces organically on evenings and weekends.

Housing

Places are more vibrant when there are more people around. Having the right amount of suitable housing in Downtown Blacksburg would allow for it to be a place of activity after business hours on weekdays and on the weekends during the day as well as during the summer months. Creating a more active place brings business to local establishments, makes spaces feel safer as more people are around, and improves the appearance and reputation of a town. Currently, there is not much available housing suitable for students or non-students in Downtown other than the nearby single-family homes.

Increasing both the amount and variety of housing not only adds vibrancy; it is an important economic strategy. Retaining young professionals is crucial to the Town’s success. It is a demographic that has demonstrated strong preference for Downtown living both nationally and in Blacksburg. Bringing full-time non-students into Downtown would attract a greater variety of businesses, improve stability during evenings and weekends, and support Downtown by taking part in events and being patrons of local establishments.

The 2015 Downtown Blacksburg Housing Market Study surveyed employees in Blacksburg and found many would prefer living in smaller units within walking distance of work or amenities.

DOWNTOWN HOUSING MARKET STUDY SURVEY RESULTS (2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CRC</th>
<th>Modea/TechPad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between 18 and 34 years old</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are renters</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Downtown</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would consider moving Downtown</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Districting allows visitors to know the best area within Downtown to go out to eat, and visit cultural attractions—and also which areas belong to residents, after a certain hour. Branding districts with names, banners, and other design elements creates distinct district characters and edges. Adding wayfinding like gateways, maps, or signage can assist visitors in navigating to the districts they want to visit.

Downtown’s atmospheres change every few blocks. Some areas are mostly residential while others are home to the iconic shops and restaurants that represent Downtown. With modifications in some places, these distinct atmospheres and uses delineate specific districts that embody those unique qualities.

Parking

Driving is, and will likely remain, the primary mode by which people access Downtown. Therefore parking facilities in Downtown need to serve the needs of residents, workers, and visitors throughout the day and week. At the same time, ongoing technological changes in personal transportation options will require critical thinking about how to future proof parking infrastructure investments.

The 2014 Blacksburg Parking Management Plan concluded that the core of Blacksburg has a deficit in parking in high activity places, including the College Avenue/Main Street intersection, Progress Street, and the College Avenue/Otey Street intersection.

Improved signage and walkability would make people more willing to walk from the existing parking. Communicating available parking and parking limits will assist visitors, residents, and employees find parking and simplify their Downtown experience. A new parking garage at the current public lot on Progress, as well as coordinating public use of privately-owned parking structures on nights and weekends, could further alleviate parking problems in the future.
NAVIGABILITY

Blacksburg has transit assets which provide opportunities to improve access to, through, and around Downtown. Improving bike infrastructure would greatly improve traffic.

Transit

Buses and shuttles operated by Blacksburg Transit are the public transportation options in Blacksburg. Multiple transit lines go through Downtown and fifteen percent of Blacksburg Transit rides are taken along Main Street. However, only seven percent of Blacksburg Transit riders are non-students. The large amount of non-students are most likely driving into and around Downtown. This creates more traffic throughout Blacksburg and puts pressure on Downtown’s parking. If the routing and timing of transit shifted to better serve non-students, more non-students could use public transportation to access Downtown.

Bike Infrastructure

While there are some bike routes both on and off street Downtown, additional routes would improve accessibility and reduce traffic congestion. Some streets could manage new bike facilities due to their width. In places where streets cannot feasibly accommodate a full bike lane, there are other options—such as sharrows, the elimination of on-street parking, and contraflow lanes—that can help to accommodate cyclists. New bicycle parking facilities, particularly as part of new redevelopment, are also important pieces of bike infrastructure.

The Huckleberry Trail begins in Downtown Blacksburg on Draper Road between Clay Street and Miller Street. The trail could be strategically connected to other nearby green spaces. Linking Downtown’s existing green assets to the Huckleberry Trail will emphasize Downtown as a destination point to the region. The town should continue other efforts to implement its Bike Master Plan and recent Prices Fork Safety and Mobility Study to create more ways to get people Downtown. The option of biking in Downtown needs to be highly visible in the areas of greatest pedestrian and business activity.
Dynamism is about economic activity, and the ability of a place to adapt and evolve over time. Great places welcome entrepreneurs, innovation, start-ups, business, and commerce.

Future Prosperity

In order to strengthen its economy, Blacksburg will have to continue to adapt to new and different types of business. Downtown can and should be the center of that adaptation. It has become a home for start-ups and entrepreneurs due in large part to its proximity to Virginia Tech. The university is also investing in a new Creativity and Innovation District adjacent to Downtown near Otey Street that the town can incorporate into its redevelopment and marketing. Creating a dynamic Downtown is key for Blacksburg to leverage these opportunities in a way that builds a more resilient local economy and enhances quality of life.

The built environment impacts a town’s dynamism. The growth of new office uses for start-ups and entrepreneurs, hospitality uses, and innovation economy uses will require a built environment that accommodates them. This may require different building types, architecture, or densities. The transition of the existing to the new built environment should be seamless to improve connections and retain the existing atmosphere of Downtown. Physical improvements to the built environment could include streetscape elements like plantings and signage, the continuation of building design features like awnings or materials, or the creation of pedestrian-oriented corridors that connect commercial and civic spaces.

Adaptation

Existing buildings could also be repurposed for new uses as demand grows and surrounding uses change. This would preserve some of the historic and architecturally important buildings that represent Downtown Blacksburg’s character today. Depending on the rehab potential, these buildings could be reused as office space, restaurants, or bed and breakfasts.

Dynamism

Dynamism is about economic activity, and the ability of a place to adapt and evolve over time. Great places welcome entrepreneurs, innovation, start-ups, business, and commerce.
ANCHORS AND AMENITIES

Anchors and amenities are often the things that draw casual users to a downtown in the first place—and keep them coming back. Downtown Blacksburg is fortunate to have a variety of anchors and amenities that serve residents and draw in tourists.

Celebrating Assets

Many of Downtown Blacksburg’s anchors have historic roots. The main historic anchors are St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall, Old Town Hall, and the Alexander Black House.

Downtown’s greenspace amenities include Market Square Park, Wong Park, Henderson Lawn, Marcia’s Park, and the Huckleberry Trail. Arts-related anchors include the Moss Arts Center and Lyric Theatre, while institutional anchors include Town Hall, Blacksburg Motor Company, and the Library.

Blacksburg has the opportunity to better link its anchors and amenities through strategies such as districting, wayfinding, pedestrian enhancements, or biking facilities. Some of these anchors and amenities also have the opportunity to become more prominent in Downtown. St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall, Old Town Hall, Wong Park, and Marcia’s Park are all extremely close to the center of Downtown but could benefit from better visibility, connections, and additional elements such as landscaping, recreation assets, or historical descriptions and event programming to attract visitors.

Incorporating existing and new anchors and amenities into redevelopment decisions will be key to preserve Downtown’s character and continue attracting people to visit.
Downtown anchors and amenities
CHAPTER 3

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Building up to actionable strategies by identifying goals and objectives creates a stable foundation for a Downtown Strategy that remains relevant over time.

The guiding principles of this Downtown Strategy exist on three levels—goals, objectives, and strategies.

- **Goals** are broad statements of what the community wants to accomplish and why.
- **Objectives** are the more tangible statements of efforts that the community wants to undertake in order to reach these goals.
- **Strategies** are the specific actions that can be taken to achieve those objectives.

While the strategies are the tangible outcomes of this process, those strategies must be built on goals and objectives to have lasting power. It will not be possible to accomplish all of the strategies presented in a couple of years; some will take a decade or more to come to fruition. The goals and objectives provide constant reminders of why these strategies matter to the community, and why the community needs to stay committed to pursuing them in the long-term.

**Goals**

The goals of the Downtown Strategy were built around the framework presented in Chapter 2—the forces of growth and change, town identity, and the cost of housing—and how they come together in Downtown. The goal statements reflect the desired outcomes that would bring those forces into balance with one another and create the future Downtown that the community wants:

- **Cost of Housing:** Provide Housing Appropriate for a Wide Spectrum of Demographics and Income Levels
- **Town Identity:** Honor Downtown’s Natural Resources and Historic Assets
- **Economy:** Position Downtown to Welcome and Adapt to Economic Growth Opportunities
- **Downtown:** Create a Vibrant, Livable Downtown Neighborhood

These goal statements embody the motivations for doing this Plan; they will also be the motivations for implementing it.

**Objectives**

The Downtown Strategy objectives define the types of efforts that will help the community reach its goals. As bridges between goals and strategies, the objectives serve to focus community actions on those that will be most impactful. In the same way that the strategy framework informed the goal statements, the input received from the town council, planning commission, stakeholder committee, and the public on the opportunities and challenges facing Blacksburg heavily informed the objective statements.

**1 - COST OF HOUSING**

**PROVIDE HOUSING APPROPRIATE FOR A WIDE SPECTRUM OF DEMOGRAPHICS AND INCOME LEVELS**

Explore locations for greater density of housing development

Explore redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels

Identify sites downtown best suited for student-oriented housing

Explore tools to encourage more full-time, non-student residents
2 - TOWN IDENTITY

HONOR DOWNTOWN’S NATURAL RESOURCES AND HISTORIC ASSETS

Improve connections to existing parks

Enhance programming and infrastructure in parks and at historic sites

Provide better access and visibility for buildings central to the history of Blacksburg

Explore ways to actively celebrate historic assets and foster interest in revitalization/rehabilitation of historic buildings

Promote development that respects community preferences and architectural context and provides thoughtful transitions to the scale of existing development

3 - ECONOMY & EMPLOYMENT

POSITION DOWNTOWN TO WELCOME AND ADAPT TO ECONOMIC GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Promote complementary development opportunities adjacent to Virginia Tech’s Creativity and Innovation District

Promote investments that can foster a stronger start-up/innovation community and grow Blacksburg’s knowledge economy jobs

Promote needed investments that will help attract and retain employees

Increase Downtown's capacity as a center of economic activity efficiency of land use by developing centrally-located structured parking

4 - DOWNTOWN

CREATE A VIBRANT, LIVABLE DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD

Encourage development of a mix of uses

Encourage and support local businesses

Improve multimodal access to and within Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods

Increase convenience and safety for pedestrians and cyclists through all of Downtown

Increase Downtown vibrancy via public spaces, public art, spaces for cultural expression, and streetscaping

Promote development of economically-feasible, human-scaled structures

Improve the Downtown experience and future development by defining Downtown districts

Expand “boundaries” of Downtown to guide development
1 - COST OF HOUSING

PROVIDE HOUSING APPROPRIATE FOR A WIDE SPECTRUM OF RESIDENTS

A principal goal of the Downtown Strategy is to provide housing options that make Blacksburg an affordable place to live, not just for high-income residents or students, but also for working families, young professionals, and older adults. This will help to ensure that Blacksburg is an equitable community, welcoming to a broad range of people interested in moving to or staying in the area. It will also help to manage traffic by improving walkability and by giving residents better access to employment opportunities Downtown.

Identifying potential development sites for new housing—and for other in-demand uses—in Downtown will be central to successfully addressing housing costs in Blacksburg. The key will be to not only identify the best sites for new housing, but to identify sites where housing can be developed at a higher density than what is currently available. This density will create a more efficient, walkable, accessible, and affordable Downtown housing market. While development opportunities Downtown will not be the only means available to address the community’s housing needs, they will be a key component.

Development Opportunities

Explore locations for greater density of housing development
Explore redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels

Target Key Demographics

Identify sites downtown best suited for student-oriented housing
Explore tools to encourage more full-time, non-student residents

It will also be critical to target new housing development to key demographic groups. Specifically, it will be important to develop housing specifically oriented to students and housing specifically oriented to non-students. This targeted development will help alleviate some of the pressures that student rental demand is placing on the existing housing supply—especially in certain neighborhoods—while will also providing each demographic with the distinct types of housing products that suit their needs and stage of life.
### Chapter 3 - Goals and Objectives

#### HONOR DOWNTOWN’S NATURAL RESOURCES AND HISTORIC ASSETS

The second goal of the Downtown Strategy is to preserve and celebrate important elements of the community’s culture. Strategies for honoring existing parks and historic assets Downtown aim to help Blacksburg connect to its past and express its unique character, while also evolving to meet its current challenges and future aspirations. Connecting to and preserving the town’s natural resources and historic assets also has important benefits to quality of life, outdoor recreation, civic spaces, and public health.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Resources</th>
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<tr>
<td>Improve connections to existing parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance programming and infrastructure in parks</td>
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Downtown is home to three great public park assets—Wong Park, Marcia’s Park, and Market Square Park—as well as Virginia Tech’s Henderson Lawn. All of these provide opportunities for residents to enjoy greenspace in the midst of the urban Downtown environment. However, two of these open space assets—Wong Park and Marcia’s Park—are not well used today, both because they lack visibility and because they have limited programming and amenities. Enhancing the connections between these parks and encouraging their use will help to elevate these beautiful spaces and better integrate them into the Downtown experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historic Assets</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explore ways to actively celebrate historic assets and foster interest in revitalization/rehabilitation of historic buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote development that respects community preferences and architectural context and provides transition to the scale of existing development</td>
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Blacksburg’s rich history is reflected in its built environment, and there are many buildings and neighborhoods that contribute to the town’s unique character. The town can work to elevate the visibility and condition of those important assets, both by preserving certain buildings and by creating guidelines that preserve neighborhood character while allowing for needed redevelopment.
Welcoming and adapting to economic opportunities will be central to Blacksburg’s economic sustainability. Creating opportunities for employers to grow and for new businesses to start up will help the community with attraction and retention efforts, including by welcoming Virginia Tech students to stay in Blacksburg after they graduate or return later in their career. A more robust, diverse, and adaptable economy will also allow the community to be less reliant on the University for its economic strength and resiliency.

The development of Virginia Tech’s Creativity and Innovation District (CID) adjacent to Downtown offers a golden opportunity for the town to invest in its start-up and innovation economy. By facilitating housing, retail, and office space development that complements the mission of the CID, as well as serves the need of knowledge economy employers and employees more generally, the town will be able to attract and retain these firms and workers and diversify and strengthen its economy.

Promote complementary development opportunities adjacent to Virginia Tech’s Creativity and Innovation District

Promote investments that can foster a stronger start-up/innovation community and grow Blacksburg’s knowledge economy jobs

Promote needed investments that will help attract and retain employees

Increase Downtown’s capacity as a center for economic activity and efficiency of land use by developing centrally-located structured parking

As growth comes to Downtown, providing sufficient parking will be an ever-increasing challenge. The development of a large garage Downtown that significantly increases current parking capacity will alleviate demand pressure from Downtown visitors, employees, and residents. Further, centrally locating the garage will improve accessibility, as it will be easier to access most Downtown destinations on foot.

Expanding Downtown’s capacity for economic activity will have a positive impact on the neighborhoods surrounding Downtown, by increasing residents’ and visitors’ ability to efficiently access a broad range of amenities and destinations in the center of town.
CREATE A VIBRANT, LIVABLE DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD

The fourth goal of the Downtown Strategy is all about creating a place where people want to be: a place that is attractive, lively, and inviting. A mix of uses, programs, and open spaces will ensure that Downtown is active throughout the day. Mobility improvements, branding, and public art will help Downtown feel more welcoming and will help orient visitors as they visit different areas within town. Above all, Downtown will serve as a vibrant and livable heart for the Blacksburg community.

### Development Opportunities
- Encourage development of a mix of uses
- Encourage and support local businesses

A vibrant downtown is a place where there are amenities for a wide variety of people at a variety of times. This means providing a mix of uses, so that the neighborhood becomes an active and dynamic place for visitors, employees, and residents alike. An integral part of the mix is the local business community, which will contribute a unique character to the area, making it not just any downtown, but Downtown Blacksburg.

### Access
Improve multimodal access to and within Downtown by enhancing transit and through investments in bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure

Providing amenities in Downtown is only one piece of the puzzle. Those amenities must also be accessible by the variety of people they serve. And they should be accessible by a variety of modes, so as to mitigate traffic, encourage walking and biking, and welcome the non-driving community. This will require a mix of parking, bike/pedestrian, and transit facilities and systems.

### Public Space
Increase Downtown vibrancy via public spaces, public art, venues for cultural expression, and streetscaping

The outside environment in Downtown should match the vibrancy of its indoor establishments. Creating spaces for outdoor gathering and events, as well as developing beautiful art and landscaping, will make the streets of Downtown as much of a destination as its shops and restaurants.

### Target Key Demographics
Promote development of economically-feasible, human-scaled structures

New development in Downtown should contribute to the attractiveness and comfort of the outdoor environment. This can be accomplished through thoughtful building design and choice of materials. At the same time, any guidelines promoting sensitive architectural and urban design need to balance design preferences with the realities of development economics, in order to encourage projects that are both desirable and feasible.

### Branding
Improve Downtown experience and future development by defining Downtown districts
Expand "boundaries" of Downtown to guide development

Finally, defining distinct districts within Downtown can highlight the vibrancy and diversity of the area. Not every element that makes up a great Downtown fits in every part of the neighborhood; districting will help the town focus different types of development in the most strategically-appropriate places. It will also improve the visitor experience, making it easy to understand where to find different activities and uses.
CHAPTER 4

7 STRATEGIES FOR DOWNTOWN
STRATEGIES

Seven interrelated and mutually-reinforcing strategies will help guide specific investments to help Downtown Blacksburg thrive.

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.

As the following section will discuss, these seven strategies mutually reinforce one another. Each strategy is tied to several others, both making the other efforts possible while also relying on their success.
Establishing residential and mixed-use development opportunities is critical for addressing the **cost of housing** in a community, as well as for encouraging job **creation, retention, and attraction**. It also helps to shape a **framework for districts** within a downtown, each with their own distinct character and development trajectory. Clearly identifying key sites, expectations, and goals for residential and commercial development can further help to inform other types of investments, such as in public realm improvements, preservation of historic buildings, the arts, and small businesses.

**Address Housing Affordability**

Addressing housing affordability relies on identifying and appropriately shaping **development opportunities** such that they increase a community’s supply of housing while also enhancing its character.

Additionally, creating new housing options in proximity to amenities and employment opportunities can help to reduce traffic and support mobility. The development of the right housing types at the right price points and in the right locations (**appropriate to each downtown district**) will also help to aid in the retention and attraction of workers essential to a community’s economic strategy.

**Move People, Not Cars**

Enhancing mobility and improving accessibility can help to define various areas within a Downtown as **distinct districts** with their own character and predominant land uses. These districts, in turn, help to orient people to different areas within the town and make it easier for visitors to find their way around. A mobility strategy that prioritizes people over cars also supports economic activity and community vibrancy by providing expanded access to jobs, shopping, and small businesses downtown. In tandem with the development of new housing opportunities, this strategy can help create a more **walkable, bikeable, and vibrant** place.
Enhancing and enriching a community’s public realm is a central part of celebrating a place’s history and character. Investing in streetscapes, parks, and other public spaces—both large and small—also helps to give different districts within a downtown their own distinct character.

Public realm improvements should be carefully considered alongside development opportunities; together, these investments can enhance a community’s walkability, livability, and vibrancy.

Fostering innovation and a resilient local economy is closely linked with each of the other strategies: it is essential for leveraging the potential of new development; it shapes the identity and clarity of different districts within a Downtown; and it relies on thoughtful and appropriate investments in new housing, mobility, and the public realm. New small businesses, start-ups, and jobs in arts and innovation also help to express and celebrate a place’s distinctive character and culture.
A community’s identity and personality helps to shape its evolution across many of the strategies: particularly investments in the public realm, and the definition of districts within the area.

Economic innovation and resiliency, new development, and mobility improvements are also opportunities to express a place’s distinct character. Small businesses, shops, restaurants, and expanded mobility infrastructure—for motorists and non-motorists—all give a place its unique identity.

A districting framework is where all of the other strategies come together: each strategy takes on a different flavor within various areas of a downtown, helping to give each district its own, distinct personality. Districts also orient visitors to a place, clarifying key destinations and attractions, as well as which parts of downtown are more residential in character. Formalizing such a districting framework can help make a place more legible and more welcoming as it evolves.
To cultivate desired development in Downtown Blacksburg, the Town should establish a framework for guiding investment at key sites. This includes: creating guidelines for building and site design that fit with the community’s preferences, as well as the constraints of economic feasibility; and providing subsidies, where needed and appropriate, to catalyze development of key uses in key locations.

Creating Developer Guidelines for Building Design

Identifying the best location for desired development is the first step in realizing the town’s goals for Downtown. A next step is to establish design standards for those developments that fit with the community’s preferences, while also recognizing the constraints of development economics. The Town’s 2011 Residential Infill Development Guidelines document provides a solid foundation in outlining these design standards, and the Town should continue to reference and refine these standards to meet evolving needs specific to Downtown’s distinct districts. Any guideline refinement should occur in dialogue with the developer community and citizen stakeholders. Such dialogue can help the Town understand which aspects of the guidelines present economic challenges for developers, as well as clarify for developers the community preferences that led to the specific guidelines. Developers can then explore ways to satisfy community desires within the parameters of a feasible project, and are more likely to bring proposals to the town that are acceptable to all parties involved.

The town should also work with owners of key redevelopment sites to craft requests for development proposals that include clear design standards for specific development types. Establishing these standards upfront, before owners begin any negotiations with developers, will increase the likelihood that proposed developments will satisfy town goals.

Provide Incentives/Subsidies for Desired Development Types/Locations

While the map of key redevelopment sites can reflect the town’s goals for Downtown, it does not necessarily reflect feasibility. To encourage specific types of development at specific locations, the town will have to be open to providing incentives when developments are not feasible in terms of market demand or development economics. Development incentives available to the town include:

- **Incremental revenue**: New or additional tax revenue generated by new development or redevelopment can be invested back into public elements of the projected or rebated back through the Economic Development Authority.
- **Density bonuses**: Zoning ordinance amendments can permit greater density for projects that accomplish town development goals such as LEED and affordable housing.
- **Special service district**: Higher levels of town service or public improvements, such as parking garages, can be financed by an additional tax rate imposed in the service district.

The use of incentives should be judicious, and focused on developments desired by the community and catalytic for Downtown. Developments receiving incentives should satisfy specific community desires for the site in terms of use, design, and quality. It should be clear to developers that incentives will be tied to specific goals and objectives. A document outlining the parameters and requirements for the use of incentives should be available.
DEVELOPMENT FEASIBILITY: THE VALUE OF DENSITY AND LARGE SITES

Development Feasibility is a critical element in shaping the character, quality, and affordability of cities. Feasibility is the degree to which a particular project can be accomplished by a developer, and is impacted by things ranging from density, rents, building costs, lending standards, and zoning. Simply put, where land is expensive, such as in a downtown, small-scale, low density buildings are rarely feasible.

The hypothetical redevelopment of apartments at the two-acre “bookstore site,” at Roanoke and Lee and Main, illustrates this point. At a modest density, 50 units could be built at a cost of $8 million, but the development value is only $6 million, meaning the project is infeasible, with a 25 percent funding gap of $2 million. A higher density development, with more amenities, could be built for $20 million, which still yields a $2 million funding gap, but the percentage of this gap is just 10 percent. This means that the Town could enter into a partnership with a developer by using tax incentives, and very likely get its money back over time.

The less risky, higher density project is made possible by a larger site which yields more site design options and flexibility—in this example, a larger site accommodates a parking garage that supports the higher density. It is for this reason that several larger sites have been identified in this plan for potential development.

STRATEGY 1 OBJECTIVES

- Explore redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels
- Identify sites throughout town best suited for student-oriented housing
- Explore tools to encourage more full-time, non-student residents
- Promote development that respects community preferences and architectural context and provides transition to the scale of existing development
A first step in establishing development opportunities is to identify appropriate redevelopment sites, as well as the uses and densities they are poised to accommodate. This plan highlights underdeveloped and underutilized sites which may not best serve the goals and desires of the community, and recommends development types that could better serve the needs within Blacksburg’s evolving Downtown.

**STRATEGIES: 7 STRATEGIES FOR DOWNTOWN**

**S1 ESTABLISH DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES (continued)**

In order to cultivate desired development in Downtown, a first proactive step by the town should be to identify sites and areas of Downtown that are ripe for redevelopment and strategically located to best accommodate and support particular types of development. The development types needed in and desired for Downtown can be separated into four general categories:

- **Dense or multifamily residential**
- **Retail**
- **Mixed-Use**, which includes non-student housing units plus ground floor retail
- **Mixed-Use Student**, which includes student housing units plus ground floor retail

The accompanying map provides a recommendation of sites and areas for the town to target for redevelopment, as well as their most strategic development type. In addition to the four development types described at left, it also includes the proposed site of a new public parking garage.

In general, sites that are well-positioned for redevelopment are those that could be considered underdeveloped – that is, they are either not developed to as great a density as they could accommodate, and/or they are developed with uses that may not best serve the current needs and desires of the community. Focusing on redevelopment of these key sites into new and higher-density uses will help address the imminent need for more housing units in town, as well as the desire for higher quality residential and retail offerings in Downtown specifically. It is recommended that the town create a map that illustrates these key sites and areas, which should directly relate to the districting framework presented in Strategy 7.
DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- Retail
- Mixed Use
- Residential
- Mixed Use Student
- Garage
Several parallel approaches are needed to mitigate the high costs of housing in Downtown. These approaches include: allowing for greater density in new residential development; improving the affordability of existing housing by exploring University-Town partnerships; a Housing Trust Fund and a Community Land Trust; and encouraging developers to target non-students for a portion of the new housing development downtown.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the cost of housing is impacted in large part by supply and demand. Blacksburg today has high demand for housing, from students and non-students, but limited supply, especially Downtown. The cost of housing is additionally impacted by development economics. There are certain costs of developing a site, such as land costs and preparation, which are the same no matter how many units are developed. Therefore, the fewer units that can be built on a site, the more a developer has to charge for each unit to cover these base costs.

Given these forces, the town can help mitigate the cost of housing by allowing housing to be built at greater densities in desirable neighborhoods such as Downtown, specifically targeting non-students in most locations. Current zoning in some parts of Downtown allows for 48 beds per acre, which in a typical non-student housing development would translate into 25 to 30 units per acre. It is recommended that the town double that allowance on targeted redevelopment sites, with the option to increase it even further as a density bonus. A density of 60 units per acre for multifamily housing is not uncommon in many downtowns, and this density would help relieve current pressures on both housing supply and costs.

Establish a University-Town Housing Partnership:

- Explore an Employer Assisted Housing Program (EAP) between the town and Virginia Tech. This type of program has been used in several university cities and towns across the United States to encourage employees to live closer to where they work by assisting with the financing of housing in designated areas or across the community. Such a program may include down payment assistance, low-interest loan programs in cooperation with local banks, or forgivable loans from Virginia Tech to assist faculty and staff in buying homes in targeted neighborhoods.

- Continue and expand the town’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program, which acquires and rehabilitates homes in target neighborhoods in order to increase the supply of affordable decent homes for sale and to stabilize neighborhoods.

The town could accelerate these efforts by examining funding a local Housing Trust Fund to support property acquisition, rehabilitation, and other initiatives to increase both the supply and overall quality of affordable workforce housing. The town should also continue exploring Community Land Trusts (CLT) to create permanently affordable homeownership opportunities. The following page provides additional information about CLTs and their benefit.
Much of the pressure on Downtown housing supply comes from student demand for off-campus housing. Given that there is not enough higher-end student-oriented housing available to meet current demand, students end up living in all different types of housing Downtown, or far from campus. This drives up prices, leaves few options for the non-student population, and adds to traffic and parking challenges. While part of addressing this challenge is to encourage the development of more student-oriented housing, the town can also create guidelines that target non-student residents in certain new developments. These guidelines could include:

- Requiring tenants to income-qualify for units on their own (i.e., without a guarantor).
- Renting apartments by the unit rather than by the bedroom.
- Developing smaller units with just one or two bedrooms.

While it would be up to the developer or property manager to institute these guidelines, the town can encourage their use by leveraging the incentives outlined in Strategy 1. It would be appropriate to utilize incentives such as density bonuses in this scenario, both because non-student housing units are typically less profitable than student housing units, and because the provision of more housing for non-students is a stated objective for Downtown.

Each Community Land Trust (CLT) is unique but the fundamentals remain the same. A CLT has the mission to create and maintain permanently affordable homeownership opportunities by retaining the ownership of the land beneath houses. The home itself is within a legal structure that functions much like a traditional mortgage from the perspective of the buyer, but which enables the community to retain and preserve the affordability element of the unit over time.

CLTs work in multiple ways but the overall goal is to ensure that homes stay affordable, are well-maintained, and are resold to income-qualified buyers. There are two existing CLTs in the Commonwealth—one in Charlottesville and one in Richmond.

Community Home Trust’s homeownership program creates permanent affordable housing opportunities, while allowing current homeownership to build equity as homes accrue limited appreciation each year. The organization also provides services that help homeowners achieve and sustain affordable homeownership, such as homebuyer education, financial counseling, and help selecting qualified home repair vendors. Since its establishment in 2000, Community Home Trust has worked to create and preserve 315 permanently affordable homes in Chapel Hill and Carrboro.

**STRATEGY 2 OBJECTIVES**

- Explore locations for greater density of housing development
- Explore tools to encourage more full-time, non-student residents
- Promote needed investments to help attract and retain employees
Downtown Blacksburg will benefit from a comprehensive approach to mobility and traffic mitigation, supporting alternative modes of transportation alongside strategies to accommodate motorists. This comprehensive approach should include: enhancing transit options; developing a centrally-located garage; and creating a North-South Bike/Pedestrian Corridor.

One strategy for reducing vehicular traffic is to increase usage of Blacksburg Transit. Even though the bus system connects to Downtown and other centers of employment including the VT Corporate Research Center, Moog, and Montgomery Regional Hospital, 93 percent of riders are associated with Virginia Tech. There is, therefore, an impression among many residents that the transit system exists only for Tech. Given its potential to reduce traffic and increase accessibility, it would be in the interest of Blacksburg Transit to raise awareness of the system’s reach and availability to non-VT affiliated individuals.

One program that has been used successfully in other cities to increase transit use is a “Try and Ride” program. Participating residents receive printed information on the system, as well as a number of free rides to try out the system. The goal is that, once individuals see how the system works and how it can serve their needs, they will continue to use it regularly.

Another approach for increasing ridership would be to conduct a community survey— similar to the survey conducted in Christianburg— that asks residents about their impressions, preferences, and needs relating to transit. The survey could both inform future frequency or time adjustments on existing routes, and get residents thinking about transit as a viable way to get where they need to go.

Even as the town undertakes a comprehensive approach to mobility, the majority of people will continue to access Downtown by car. As such, a second strategy for mitigating traffic is to provide more parking in a central location. A recent study found that, while the town has plenty of parking supply throughout Downtown to meet demand, there is an undersupply of parking within the core blocks of Downtown, centered on Main Street and College Avenue. More parking in this core would allow visitors to park once and easily walk to most Downtown destinations, rather than circle blocks continuously searching for parking.

The town has set aside funds to plan for additional capacity, focused on the current Progress Street parking lot. The site is well positioned for this, as it could accommodate a garage with double or triple the current number of spaces available in the lot. Extra parking in this location would both alleviate existing parking constraints and open up opportunities for future business development on adjacent properties.

Specific consideration should be given to designing the garage to fit with the residential surroundings along Progress. One popular concept is a residential building that lines the outside of the structure, which would both create a more pleasing façade and add capacity to the Downtown housing market, thus meeting two objectives for Downtown.
A third strategy for reducing vehicular traffic in and through Downtown is to enhance bicycle and pedestrian connections to and through the area. As a complement to Main Street - the primary north-south automobile corridor through Blacksburg - the town should build a north-south bike/pedestrian corridor on less-heavily trafficked streets that provides a clear path through Downtown.

Based on Downtown’s current grid of streets and alleys, the most promising streets for this corridor are Progress and Draper. Progress runs from North Main to Jackson Street within Downtown, and also connects to neighborhoods north of North Main. Draper would provide riders and walkers a straight path from College Avenue to the Huckleberry Trail. A well-placed connection across Main Street would complete the corridor.

It is recommended that funds for bike/pedestrian facilities on Progress and Draper be included in future capital improvement plans. The town has already committed funds for the first phase of a Corridor Improvement Project for Progress, as well as for streetscape improvements on Draper. Utilizing the design recommendations found in the town’s Bicycle Master Plan the town should determine the types of facilities that will best serve the community’s needs, and incorporate those design practices into the upcoming streetscape projects.

**SPOTLIGHT: PROTECTED NORTH-SOUTH BIKEWAY**

Create a North-South Bike/Pedestrian Corridor

Establishing a North-South transportation alternative as part of a broader bike and pedestrian network can complement Main Street’s roadway capacity and help to manage traffic downtown. Draper and Progress are both less-heavily trafficked streets that present potential routes for this bike and pedestrian corridor. This corridor can also connect several popular parks in downtown, and to the Huckleberry Trail.

**STRATEGY 3 OBJECTIVES**

› Improve **multimodal access** to and within Downtown area

› Increase Downtown’s capacity for growth and efficiency of land use by developing **centrally-located structured parking**
Blacksburg can enhance its public realm by making investments in streetscapes and a range of public spaces such as parks, large gathering spaces, as well as smaller spaces. These investments include: developing a plaza in the heart of Downtown; encouraging development of “in-between” spaces; enhancing parks’ infrastructure and programming; and implementing streetscaping plans on key streets.

The intersection of College Avenue and Main Street represents the physical and social heart of Blacksburg. It serves as a gateway to the Virginia Tech campus as well as the businesses in Central Downtown. In recent years, significant streetscape upgrades to the campus portion of College Avenue, west of Main Street, have enhanced the public realm with landscaping, street seating and aesthetic improvements. To the east of Main, College Avenue is more utilitarian and awkwardly designed, quickly bending to parallel Main Street before intersecting with Wilson Avenue.

This extension of College Avenue offers an opportunity to create a signature public plaza and community gathering space at the most prominent location in Downtown Blacksburg. Existing landscaping along the edge of Main, combined with an already plaza-like streetscape north of Wilson, set the stage to create a grander, more visible, and more useable public space. With the creation of expanding public parking nearby, the few existing pull-in spaces on College Avenue will no longer be needed, while more organized surface parking behind the buildings will provide business loading zones. Likewise, improvements to the rear alley system will interconnect Faculty Street to Jackson Street, eliminating the need for a vehicular connection via College Avenue. With these improvements in place, this space can be transformed into a more fitting front door to Downtown Blacksburg.

Pedestrian connections between buildings offer unique opportunities to create interesting public spaces that contribute to the vibrancy and eclectic character of Downtown Blacksburg. Otherwise drab walkways linking the alley and rear parking areas to the front doors of businesses along Main Street can be transformed with lighting, landscaping, seating, material improvements and public art. These interstitial – or “in-between” – spaces are places where people can be pleasantly surprised by something unexpected just around the corner, like a mural, a shaded garden, or an outdoor patio serving an adjacent restaurant. These are spaces that might otherwise feel uninviting, but can be celebrated as integral pieces of the urban fabric if thoughtfully designed.

These spaces can also link the Main Street plaza space to a new, flexible public space between the Progress Street parking garage and the buildings along Main Street. The interior portion of the block bounded by Main Street, Progress Street, Faculty Street and Jackson Street will need to serve a wide variety of functions, including parking, loading zones, pedestrian and bicycle access, and dumpster service. This area can serve these necessary day-to-day functions, while also providing space for impromptu public gathering and temporary activities such as pop-up retail kiosks, food trucks, and special events.
In addition to creating new gathering spaces, the town should enhance its existing Downtown parks: Wong Park and Marcia’s Park. Neither park has the high visibility of the recommended streetside plaza; however, their locations provide a respite from the hustle of Main Street. As such, they should be celebrated and made into desirable destinations.

Each park has the potential to serve different community segments, as recognized in the town’s Parks and Recreation Master Plan. Marcia’s Park is smaller and closer to Main Street and Virginia Tech, and is already a popular lunch spot. Adding more tables and seating can support this use. Additionally, the park’s location at the entrance to the Huckleberry Trail could be highlighted with elements such as signage and facilities for cyclists.

Wong Park is larger, farther from Main Street, and embedded in a residential neighborhood, making it well-suited to serve families and host community events. Considerations might include an expansion of the existing playground and picnic tables, as well as the construction of a larger space to host outdoor community events. Redevelopment of Wong Park could also include an enhanced pedestrian entrance via Faculty Street, improving the park’s visibility and accessibility from Main Street.

A civic, streetside plaza provides a central gathering space for a community, and serves as a complement to smaller spaces and parks, each with their own character. These larger civic spaces can be programmed with a variety of activities for a range of audiences and seasons.

Blacksburg’s intersection of College and Main serves as the physical and social heart of Downtown, and offers the best opportunity to create this type of signature gathering space for Blacksburg.

STRATEGY 4 OBJECTIVES

› Improve connections to existing parks
› Enhance programming and infrastructure in parks
› Increase Downtown vibrancy via public spaces, public art, spaces for cultural expression, and streetscaping
To cultivate a competitive and dynamic Downtown Blacksburg, the Town should encourage the creation of space needed to accommodate and support job growth in key sectors. This includes: developing office space for knowledge economy jobs that leverages Virginia Tech’s investment in the Creativity and Innovation District (CID); and encouraging the development of the in-demand retail and housing needed to attract and retain young professionals.

The establishment of the Creativity and Innovation District (CID) at Virginia Tech represents an opportunity for Blacksburg to grow and diversify its economic base. In order to leverage this opportunity and attract new firms to Downtown, the town needs to help provide the right space and the right workers. Many firms today are looking for office space that is flexible, streamlined, and affordable, and the town should encourage the development of these types of spaces, especially in the Downtown West area adjacent to the CID. This includes co-working spaces, which serve companies with only a few employees. These types of office space are not always profitable, given the lower rent affordability of small firms. The town can support their development through the use of incentive tools. Another needed type of space is incubator space. Incubators serve start-up firms, providing not only space and amenities, but also a system of mentorship and financial support to help get firms off the ground. They are commonly found in innovation districts, and plans for the CID include one. Going forward, the town should collaborate with Virginia Tech and other major employers to support and expand incubator space as appropriate to serve the needs of local entrepreneurs.
A second component of promoting a dynamic and resilient local economy is attracting and retaining the workforce that local firms need. Virginia Tech graduates represent a major and easily-accessible source of this workforce. However, getting students to stay in town after graduation requires more than providing them with a good job. They will also look for quality housing that they can afford, close to desirable restaurant, retail, and recreational amenities. If Blacksburg cannot provide those elements, graduates will look for work in places that can.

Downtown has the potential to be that attractive place for professionals, particularly those who are younger and may not have families yet. Yet, as discussed in strategy two, the area lacks housing that is both appropriate and affordable for this demographic. Further, many of the existing bars, restaurants, and shops Downtown are more geared towards students and tourists, not professionals. The efforts discussed in strategies two and six to promote varied housing, retail, and dining development can therefore do more than make Downtown more accessible, vibrant, and desirable for residents. They can also play a major role in the success of the town’s local business community and the diversification of its economy.

With greater access to knowledge, information, global supply chains, and less expensive forms of marketing (like web-based platforms) sound ideas can raise capital and be converted into economic catalysts faster than ever before. This has placed greater emphasis on idea-generation itself, which often requires cross-disciplinary interaction, ultimately placing greater emphasis on idea-sharing.

As a result, the assembly of talented, innovative people in places that foster formal and informal interaction has never been more important to economic growth. When taking these elements together, it underscores the need for alignment of interest and talent.

The Creativity and Innovation District, planned by Virginia Tech, represents the principal opportunity to foster these interactions and alignments in Blacksburg, and for the community to participate in the potential growth resulting from these shifts in the economy. Public, private, and institutional sectors can partner in new ways that benefit everyone, when properly aligned.

Research and Education
Institutions such as research hospitals and universities generate a multitude of ideas through research and development. Increasingly, they need to work with cities to create authentic places to help attract and retain talented researchers, as well as entrepreneurs who can help them vet, monetize, commercialize, and otherwise fund ideas that generate returns.

Entrepreneurs
Investment-minded business professionals seek to translate innovative ideas into commercializable products, and secure or provide financing. As members of the real estate development community, they also can contribute to the physical development of a town in ways that attract talent.

Towns
The public sector can facilitate institutional and entrepreneurial growth by partnering on infrastructure development, economic and land development policy, and catalytic projects—all in an effort to derive greater economic value than could be achieved through private or institutional finance alone.

**STRATEGY 5 OBJECTIVES**

- Promote **complementary development** opportunities adjacent to Virginia Tech’s Creativity and Innovation District
- Promote investments that can **foster a stronger start-up/innovation community** and grow Blacksburg’s **knowledge economy jobs**
- Promote needed investments will help **attract and retain employees**
Downtown Blacksburg is ripe with opportunities to celebrate the town’s unique identity. Part of seizing this opportunity will involve refining the Town’s approach to historic preservation in ways that clarify the Town’s preservation goals and encourage rehabilitation of historic structures. The small business and arts community would also benefit from support in the form of financial assistance and zoning changes that allow more flexibility for artistic or gallery uses.

Historic Preservation is clearly a priority for Blacksburg. To date, much of the historic preservation has been through an advisory regulatory process that provides design guidance and oversight in designated districts. Blacksburg has the opportunity to create a comprehensive historic preservation plan that examines opportunities for a pro-active and thorough preservation program to preserve and enhance the town’s eclectic architectural character. Such a plan should compile existing guidelines and regulations, clearly define the goals of the town for historic preservation, and create guidelines to identify high-priority structures (not limited to the existing Blacksburg Historic District) towards which the town should target rehabilitation initiatives. This may involve creating additional National Register or Virginia Landmark listings or districts.

The plan should also identify funding sources, such as a revolving loan fund for rehabilitation of high-priority structures that may not qualify or have been listed on the National Register or as a Virginia Landmark. This fund may be tied to the Housing Trust Fund or the Community Land Trust mentioned earlier in this chapter. The Virginia Historic Tax Credit program provides credits for both owner-occupied and income-producing property. The town should actively promote this program, and consider providing assistance and incentives for developers that participate.

Small independent businesses are the foundation for the vibrancy of downtown Blacksburg. Expanding support for these businesses could involve a revolving or forgivable loan fund; a creative spaces grant that would encourage use of space for public gathering, dining, and art (a similar initiative exists in Virginia Beach); and the encouragement of micro-retail spaces in mixed use infill structures that can serve as springboards for new small businesses.

The town should also expand zoning allowance for non-residential uses in single-family homes in selected areas and with conditions. These may allow for retail and restaurant uses in addition to offices in key areas—making certain non-residential uses by right in targeted districts such as downtown West—and tie small business development back to the historic preservation initiatives mentioned earlier in this chapter.
Chapter 2 - Analysis: A Framework for Downtown

Alleys and small spaces add distinctiveness to the public realm, and offer fun opportunities to highlight and partner with local artists and small businesses. This spaces give places a unique flavor.

Whereas a signature civic plaza may welcome you to a community, these smaller spaces are places you have to stumble upon.

- Encourage and support local businesses
- Increase Downtown vibrancy via public spaces, public art, spaces for cultural expression, and streetscaping
- Provide better access and visibility for buildings central to the history of Blacksburg
- Explore ways to actively celebrate historic assets and foster interest in revitalization/rehabilitation of historic buildings

Foster Creative Community

An active and well-resourced arts community can have a profound impact on the overall vibrancy and economic vitality of a place, especially in dense, walkable communities like Downtown Blacksburg. Recognizing the value of arts and culture for the future of Blacksburg, Town Council passed Ordinance 1660 in 2012 for the establishment of an Arts and Cultural District to allow for and encourage more creative and cultural uses in select sub-districts in and around Downtown. Moving forward, there is a need to enhance the visibility of these districts, so the local and regional arts community can take full advantage of existing incentives, benefits, and resources.

Public art can help contribute to the quality of life and collective identity of a community and is often a crucial component to revitalization efforts. Relatively low-cost interventions such as murals, lighting, installation, and sculpture can create cohesion within a district, fill visual voids in the built environment, make spaces feel more inviting, reduce neglect and vandalism, and unlock development potential. There is a need to create systems that allow for more opportunities for public art in Downtown Blacksburg. Much like the importance of thoughtful, community-driven planning for the physical development of a community, public art must also be part of a cohesive plan that creates forums for community dialogue and aligns with local and broader regional initiatives.

Alleys and small spaces add distinctiveness to the public realm, and offer fun opportunities to highlight and partner with local artists and small businesses.

This spaces give places a unique flavor. Whereas a signature civic plaza may welcome you to a community, these smaller spaces are places you have to stumble upon and discover as you explore the community. Encouraging pop-ups, public art, and programming can help make these spaces more active and dynamic, while also encouraging pedestrians to enjoy more of the town on foot.

SPOTLIGHT: SMALL SPACES

Foster Creative Community and discover as you explore the community. Encouraging pop-ups, public art, and programming can help make these spaces more active and dynamic, while also encouraging pedestrians to enjoy more of the town on foot.
This final strategy outlines a district-based framework through which Blacksburg can apply the other strategies. Each strategy will play a unique role in the different districts.

Formalizing the district framework will help strategically guide the location of future development, including the uses and design parameters appropriate to different parts of downtown, as well as a branding and wayfinding strategy to orient people to different areas within the town.

The district framework for Downtown Blacksburg includes six distinct districts. The boundaries, character, and recommended uses for each are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Formalize Districting Framework

The district framework for Downtown Blacksburg recommended in this study is more than shapes on a map. It is a roadmap for the future of Downtown. There are many objectives that the community wants to achieve in the Downtown of the future, but not all sites are equally appropriate for fulfilling every objective. By taking an expansive view of Downtown, and recognizing that different areas are best positioned to fulfill different community needs and desires, the community can achieve all of its Downtown objectives in an intentional and strategic way.

Taking the step to formalize the district framework will allow the town to clearly and strategically guide the location of future development. A formal districting framework will inform the community as to what they can expect to happen in different areas of Downtown, and it will signal to property owners and developers what types of uses will be met with approval from the town on particular sites. This will eliminate a level of uncertainty from the development process, leading to more successful projects.

Once formalized, the district framework should be incorporated into residents’ and visitors’ daily interactions with Downtown. This can be accomplished through a branding strategy and a subsequent update of the town’s wayfinding plan.

Today, the Original 16 Squares logo serves as a signal that one is in Downtown Blacksburg. While this logo highlights an important aspect of Blacksburg’s identity, there is much more to Downtown than the Original 16 Squares, and the neighborhood’s brand should reflect that breadth. It is therefore recommended that the town engage with a branding consultant to revise the brand for Downtown in the context of the districting framework.

A rebranding of Downtown will in turn inform updates to the town’s wayfinding plan. Specifically, the districting framework and new brand should be incorporated into signage and maps throughout Downtown. The districting framework map in particular will provide a clear guide for visitors to find the activities that they want to do Downtown. In addition, the town should expand and improve signage that directs drivers to public parking, especially when the new public garage is built. It should be easy for drivers to figure out where to go to park, so that they do not waste time and create traffic looking for a space.
Cities and towns commonly define districts within their downtowns to aid access and connections. Districting strategies brand different areas of the town based on their primary functions or amenities. This type of system helps people orient themselves and better understand a place, making it more accessible for residents and visitors alike.

Districts can also help to celebrate the various identities of different areas within a town, as well as guide distinct approaches to preservation, public realm improvements, and development.

Incentives for each district should be specific to the preferred development types, rather than being an open offer of any type of incentive. For instance, incentives for the development of student housing in Downtown Northwest, which will be very profitable, could include a density bonus that allows the developer to build the needed supply; while incentives for building office space in Downtown West, which will likely not be profitable, could include a tax abatement or rebate that helps make the project economically feasible.

The content of these zoning overlays should be informed by the district use recommendations in Chapter 5.
Downtown Blacksburg Strategic Plan
CHAPTER 5

DOWNTOWN’S SIX DISTRICTS
**DOWNTOWN DISTRICTS**

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 15 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 town. One of the most impactful tools for supporting this accessibility and clarity is the implementation of a districting strategy that brands different areas of a town based on their primary functions or amenities. This system helps people orient themselves and better understand different areas of the town making it more accessible, which is good for business. A districting strategy also provides a framework for guiding the densities, uses, and character of new development and public realm investments in different parts of a town. Translating this vision into zoning can ensure that each district’s evolution is consistent with its distinct personality, and that all of the districts complement each other in service of a larger, unified Downtown.

This chapter proposes six districts within Downtown, evaluates their assets and opportunities, and illustrates a unique vision for each. The following chapter, Chapter 6, outlines an implementation framework that can help the town and its partners bring this vision to life and advance broader goals, objectives, and strategies for Downtown.

### 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 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 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.

### 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 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 through sensitive redevelopment or other reuse of its neighboring parcels.

### 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.
DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT SUMMARY

535 units
Non-Student Housing

1,600 beds
Student Housing

2.3 acres
Open Space

150k sq. ft.
Retail Space

195k sq. ft.
Office Space

DOWNTOWN: 20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

new construction & redevelopment
open space & streetscape
THE ORIGINAL 16

Key Issues & Opportunities

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.

Existing Conditions

The Original 16 District holds a special place in the collective identity of Blacksburg. Church Street has a particularly strong stock of historic church buildings and other places of worship. Main Street has seen significant streetscape improvements that have greatly improved its 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. Curbs and gutters are lacking in several places. The streets themselves are in fair condition. Several buildings—some of which are contributing structures—are in fair to poor condition; a product of poorly-maintained and managed student housing conditions. The large, grid-shaped blocks lend themselves to downtown-scale development, which can be witnessed at Kent Square and The Brownstone; it is generally not desired that this scale be replicated in many places east of Main Street.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MARKET</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>› High demand for housing and office</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLACE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>› Historic Church Street an asset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Poor street/pedestrian network conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Fair to poor building conditions in some areas</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>› Many historic structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Original 16 important to Town identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECONOMIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>› Low-density single family and townhome infill is economically challenging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CURRENT CONDITIONS

SURFACE PARKING (DASHED LINE)

HISTORIC PLACES OF WORSHIP

AREAS WITH CONTRIBUTING STRUCTURES

AREAS WITH LESS ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

GOOD URBAN FORM

assets

opportunity areas
Vision

The vision for the Original 16 is that it serves as an important vestige and reminder of Blacksburg’s small-town history, celebrating this identity. The street environment will see reinvestment, providing sidewalks and well-maintained streets throughout the district. Appropriate street furniture, decorative lighting, and banners will reinforce a historic and small-town feel, as well as a sense of permanence. Incentives and partnerships will be leveraged, where practical, to improve the conditions of existing historic homes. New development, where appropriate (either due to poor building conditions, or the presence of surface parking or non-contributing structures) should be sensitive to the architectural context of this district’s historic character. A broader mix of commercial uses could be permitted, but not required, on Church Street, including dining, retail, and office. These uses would not be encouraged moving farther east toward Penn and Wharton Streets, as this east side of Church Street provides an important transition to adjacent residential areas.

CHARACTER & IDENTITY

› Preservation-forward
› Small-town character
› Select infill projects
› Sidewalk/streetscape improvements
› Branding/celebrate the 16
› Rehab policy/programs
› Zoning refinements

STRATEGIES

S1 Establish Development Opportunities
S2 Address Housing Affordability
S3 Move People, Not Cars
S4 Enhance the Public Realm
S5 Foster Innovation and a Resilient Local Economy
S6 Celebrate Town Distinctiveness
S7 Six Districts, One Downtown
20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

- Preservation
- New construction & redevelopment
- Good urban form

Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts
Catalyst

The catalyst for the Original 16 is not a single project, but a combination of efforts, both public and private. An enhanced street, streetscape, and pedestrian environment – while very costly and therefore requiring a gradual, phased approach – will greatly improve the livability, walkability, and intrinsic charm of the place. While lower density townhome infill is preferred along Wharton and Penn Street, the economic viability of this scale of development may be somewhat limited. An opportunity exists for a larger-scale project (provided the architecture is context sensitive) on the two blocks between Church Street to the west, Penn Street to the east, Lee Street to the north, and Clay Street to the south. Here, 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. 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.
Objectives

GOAL 1 - Cost of Housing
Objectives
- Catalogue building conditions; identify appropriate sites for development, infill, and rehabilitation
- Allow for dense development at appropriate sites near Church Street and Clay Street
- Allow for mixed-use development flexibility along Church Street
- Create design guidelines to ensure quality architecture and urban form with a historic feel—or complementarity
- Queue capital improvements funds/seek additional funding sources for public realm improvements
- Explore land trusts and a historic preservation fund as means of investing in and ensuring the quality of existing contributing structures in the area
- Expand efforts to brand-market/celebrate the Original 16
- Create a comprehensive historic preservation plan to inform a pro-active and thorough preservation strategy
- Work with local artist groups and developers to identify opportunities for public art in the public realm and open spaces

GOAL 2 - Town Identity
Objectives
- Development complementary to VT CID
- Investments in Start-up economy
- Employee attraction and retention
- Capacity for economic development
- Medium-density mixed use
- Streetscaping and street enhancements
- Six-unit walkups

GOAL 3 - Economy & Employment
Objectives
- Live/Work buildings
- Multi-modal access
- Investments in walkability and vibrancy
- Economically-feasible, human scale development
- Downtown districting
- Expansion of Downtown boundaries
- MEETS OBJECTIVE • SUPPORTS OBJECTIVE
**DOWNTOWN WEST**

**Key Issues & Opportunities**

The areas west of Main and south of Virginia Tech’s emerging CID 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. 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.

**Existing Conditions**

Downtown West is an area that is rich in complexity and character, and adjacent to Virginia Tech’s Creativity and Innovation District, which is intended to foster innovation, start-ups, art, and creativity. How the town responds will greatly determine the degree to which a true synergy will emerge between public, private, and institutional entities to create a more modern, adaptive, and resilient economy. Within Downtown West, two sub-areas were identified that center on their respective primary streets: Otey and Draper.

**Existing Conditions: Otey**

North of Wall Street, Otey will one day cut through the heart of Virginia Tech’s CID. South of that, from Wall Street to Washington Street, are some of the Town’s most architecturally significant buildings—mostly single family homes that are limited to serving as institutional uses or private residences. Many of these buildings, while not designated as contributing structures, merit preservation. Otey dead-ends at Washington Street, denying a more direct connection from Virginia Tech to the Huckleberry Trail. Buildings to the south of Washington generally have less architectural significance and historic value than those to the north. Washington itself is a busy street, providing a back-door entry to the Virginia Tech Campus that could become more of a gateway.
CURRENT CONDITIONS

DOWNTOWN WEST: OTEY

Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts
Vision: Otey Historic District

The Vision for Otey is about infusing a historic area with more vibrancy and dynamism, while providing a true connection between it and the soon-to-be densely developed CID. Dynamism and vibrancy can be encouraged by broadening allowable uses in many of the architecturally significant buildings north of Washington. Such uses could include office and co-working, restaurant, bed and breakfast, and art studio space. By investing in a cohesive streetscape on Otey from College Avenue to Washington, an inviting link can be created from the CID to the historic district, even though the densities will be very different. A second benefit will be the encouragement of pedestrian traffic, which will help support new businesses in the historic buildings.

South of Washington, new non-student residential uses will be encouraged to capitalize on the proximity to Downtown, the University, the CID, and Huckleberry Trail. The potential to extend Otey beyond Washington to create a more direct connection to the Huckleberry Trail could greatly improve the area’s attractiveness and walkability, and merits further exploration.

CHARACTER & IDENTITY

› Broadened Zoning Uses
› Historic Preservation
› Otey Streetscape
› Incubators and Start Ups
› Art Studios
› Bed and Breakfasts
› Pedestrian Orientation
› University-Town Interface

STRATEGIES

S1 Establish Development Opportunities
S2 Address Housing Affordability
S3 Move People, Not Cars
S4 Enhance the Public Realm
S5 Foster Innovation and a Resilient Local Economy
S6 Celebrate Town Distinctiveness
S7 Six Districts, One Downtown
20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

- new construction & redevelopment
- open space & streetscape
- preservation

DOWNTOWN WEST: OTEY

Chapter 5 – Downtown's Six Districts
Catalyst: Otey Historic District

Extending Otey beyond Washington Street creates exciting potential for catalyst projects that both reinforce Washington as a key connection through the district, and create a connection between the emerging CID, a broader range of uses in existing buildings on Washington, and the Huckleberry Trail. Medium-density residential buildings, with a maximum height of three stories, along with new streetscaping, will make dramatic improvements to 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. The connection between Otey and the Huckleberry Trail could exist as a park or secondary trailhead; determining the most appropriate concept will require further study.
### Objectives

#### GOAL 1 - Cost of Housing
- Locations for denser housing
- Redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels
- Sites for student housing
- Sites for non-student housing

#### GOAL 2 - Town Identity
- Connections to existing parks
- Park infrastructure and programming
- Access and visibility to historic buildings
- Celebration and rehab of historic buildings
- Complementary/transitional development

#### GOAL 3 - Economy & Employment
- Development complementary to VT CID
- Investments in Start-up economy
- Employee attraction and retention
- Capacity for economic development

#### GOAL 4 - Downtown
- Development of mix of uses
- Local businesses
- Multi-modal access
- Investments in walkability and vibrancy
- Economically-feasible, human scale development
- Downtown districting
- Expansion of Downtown boundaries

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#### IMPLEMENTATION

**DISTRICT NAME:** OTEY

- Explore extension of Otey to Clay and/or through to Huckleberry Trail
- Explore connections between Otey extension and Huckleberry Trail
- Broaden use categories zoned in Otey district
- Preserve historic buildings in Otey district
- Invest in Otey streetscape with University
- Explore creation of “gateways” at entrances to Virginia Tech and the CID in partnership with University
- Allow medium-density residential development east of Washington Street
DOWNTOWN WEST: DRAPER

Existing Conditions: Draper

Draper Road holds great promise and potential, with many assets in place. However, it lacks cohesion today, sometimes serving more as a service alley to Main Street. Several buildings are oriented away from Draper; others lack architectural detail. In terms of public amenities, Draper links Henderson Lawn and College Avenue on one end—two gems of Blacksburg—and the Huckleberry Trail on the other. In between are numerous assets, including the popular Market Square Park, the underutilized Marcia’s Park, the beautifully restored Alexander Black House—which serves as both a museum and an important community asset—Kent Square—which is a key office building—and civic assets such as the Library and the Municipal Building. With public realm improvements, private development, and institutional development, the area’s assets could be linked in ways that make Draper distinctive, livable, and a dynamic presence in Blacksburg’s emerging innovation economy.
CURRENT CONDITIONS

Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts

assets
opportunity areas
open space, streetscape

DOWNTOWN WEST: DRAPER
**Vision: Draper Cultural District**

The central theme for Draper is to support arts and culture with an enhanced street environment to link its many assets and targeted infill that fully delivers on its opportunity and functionality. 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 were to be co-located on adjacent sites along Draper.

A small private food hall could sit near Market Square, serving the students, faculty, and staff at the future Creativity and Innovation District (CID). Underutilized sites could be developed more densely for office and co-working, creating space for spin-off activity related to the CID as it develops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTER &amp; IDENTITY</th>
<th>STRATEGIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>› Museum Row</td>
<td>S1 Establish Development Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Park Enhancement</td>
<td>S2 Address Housing Affordability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Office/Coworking</td>
<td>S3 Move People, Not Cars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Bike and Pedestrian Network</td>
<td>S4 Enhance the Public Realm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Streetscape</td>
<td>S5 Foster Innovation and a Resilient Local Economy</td>
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<tr>
<td>› Public Art</td>
<td>S6 Celebrate Town Distinctiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>› Food/Food Hall</td>
<td>S7 Six Districts, One Downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Restaurants/Dining</td>
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<tr>
<td>› Infill South of Washington</td>
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</table>
20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

DOWNTOWN WEST: DRAPER

Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts

- Preservation
- New construction & redevelopment
- Open space & streetscape
Catalyst: Draper Cultural District

While the greatest catalyst for Draper is likely the improvement to the public right of way and street environment itself, 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 concentrated transformation. The block between Roanoke and Lee Streets, which includes the bookstore, could be assembled into a two-acre parcel and developed to include ground floor retail (perhaps still including the bookstore and/or the bank) and upper floors with Class A office space. This is a critical opportunity in enabling the Town to capitalize on the University’s investments in the CID and potential job spin-off potential. To the north a small food hall could be added to capitalize on CID traffic and nearby job density. To the south, around the Blacksburg Museum, additional museum/cultural amenities could be added to create a destination—a Museum Row—that celebrates Blacksburg’s history and culture.
**Objectives**

**GOAL 1 - Cost of Housing**
- Locations for denser housing
- Redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels
- Sites for student housing
- Sites for non-student housing

**GOAL 2 - Town Identity**
- Connections to existing parks
- Park infrastructure and programming
- Access and visibility to historic buildings
- Celebration and rehab of historic buildings
- Complementary/transitional development

**GOAL 3 - Economy & Employment**
- Development complementary to VT CID
- Investments in Start-up economy
- Employee attraction and retention
- Capacity for economic development

**GOAL 4 - Downtown**
- Development of mix of uses
- Local businesses
- Multi-modal access
- Investments in walkability and vibrancy
- Economically-feasible, human scale development
- Downtown districting
- Expansion of Downtown boundaries

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**IMPLEMENTATION**

**DOWNTOWN WEST: DRAPER**

- Invest in Draper streetscape and bike and pedestrian facilities
- Partner with Developers and/or University on office, co-working, and food hall development
- Encourage, incorporate public art
- Explore co-location of other museum/cultural assets near the Blacksburg Museum
- Explore Marcia’s Park investments and/or expansion
- Create Huckleberry Trail gateway/trailhead in front of the library
Key Issues & Opportunities

Downtown Northwest today is comprised of a mix of uncoordinated, car-dominated uses. This area also has a great deal of high-value land, including sites adjacent to Virginia Tech. Along Prices Fork Road the north end of the district is emerging as a retail center, and has capacity to support additional anchor stores. There is also an opportunity to provide a more dignified environment for St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall, important historic resources for Blacksburg.

Existing Conditions

Downtown Northwest consists of a great deal of high-value land that, particularly on the southern end, could be far more attractive, vibrant, and value-adding than it currently is. 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 uncoordinated, car-dominated uses impede the district’s walkability and livability, registering more as a commercial strip than as part of a university downtown environment. Along Prices Fork Road, where car traffic and foot traffic meet, lies one of the best opportunities to introduce retail anchors into the downtown. Recent development has been of high quality, and presents a better model for auto-oriented retail. St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall, which has significant historic value to Blacksburg, is currently isolated by incompatible, auto-oriented uses on all sides.

MARKET
- Very high demand for upscale student housing
- Very high demand for high-volume restaurants and retail

PLACE
- Too many auto-oriented uses and curb cuts
- Superblock limits connectivity and walkability
- Campus-adjacent

POLICY
- No adjacent neighborhoods
- Few structures of architectural value
- Strong physical link to Virginia Tech campus

ECONOMIC
- Land costs very high, even for Downtown
CURRENT CONDITIONS

DOWNTOWN NORTHWEST

Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts

opportunity areas
assets
open space, streetscape
Vision

The vision for Downtown Northwest is one that is far more walkable, urban, architecturally appealing, mixed in use on the southern end, and continues the effort to locate quality retail anchors along Prices Fork. The southern end could be redeveloped into a dense, mixed-use environment—the only one in Downtown that truly targets students—that reinforces Main Street and Turner as walkable urban places. New streets would be added to break up the superblock, forming four development sites that total over 6 acres. Buildings could be oriented around a plaza or green. Along Prices Fork, the town can leverage auto access to target downtown 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 requires special consideration. The Wendy’s that currently occupies the site does not provide a very dignified environment for the neighboring historic site of St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall. One option is to support context-sensitive redevelopment of the site with a use that complements St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall, likely aligning resources to assist in acquisition of the corner site. A second option is to create new open space at this corner, programmed as an active gathering space and with elements that help residents and visitors engage with this historic site.
Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts

20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

- New construction & redevelopment
- Open space & streetscape
- Preservation

- Future high-density mixed-use / student housing
- Retail opportunity
- Key site
- St Luke and Odd Fellows Hall
- Parking garage
- St Luke’s Road
- Newtown plaza
- High density mixed-use / student housing
- Old Turner extension
Catalyst

The catalyst for a more walkable, vibrant, and architecturally beautiful Downtown Northwest is the redevelopment of its southern half. Its very high land costs (even by Downtown standards) will require greater density to initiate redevelopment that is of high architectural quality.

Upscale student housing is the most logical, and likely the only economically viable redevelopment option. With high design standards and a ground-floor retail requirement, this portion of Downtown can be remade in ways that will better integrate it with the university on the western end, and with Main Street on the eastern end. Through assembly and coordinated master development, a series of new buildings could be added, along with new streets that provide better connectivity—especially from campus to Main Street and the Bennet Hill-Progress neighborhood beyond. A new civic plaza or green could add meaningful public space to Downtown.
### Objectives

**GOAL 1 - Cost of Housing**
- Locations for denser housing
- Redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels
- Sites for student housing
- Sites for non-student housing

**GOAL 2 - Town Identity**
- Connections to existing parks
- Park infrastructure and programming
- Access and visibility to historic buildings
- Celebration and rehab of historic buildings
- Complementary/transitional development

**GOAL 3 - Economy & Employment**
- Development complementary to VT CID
- Investments in Start-up economy
- Employee attraction and retention
- Capacity for economic development

**GOAL 4 - Downtown**
- Development of mix of uses
- Local businesses
- Multi-modal access
- Investments in walkability and vibrancy
- Economically-feasible, human scale development
- Downtown districting
- Expansion of Downtown boundaries

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**Implementations**

- Update zoning to allow for dense, mixed-use buildings of up to six to nine stories, transitioning to four to five stories on Main Street.
- Create design guidelines to ensure quality architecture and urban form on Main and Progress Streets.
- Create Old Turner Street/Pedestrian Extension to break up superblock and link to Downtown.
- Create meaningful public space in the form of a civic plaza or green.
- Seek opportunities for Town-Developer partnerships that ensure the greatest quality in development; consider a formal developer RFP process.
DOWNTOWN NORTHEAST

Key Issues & Opportunities

Today, the uses along Main Street give Downtown Northeast the character more 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.

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.

Movement north on Main Street past Turner is greeted by a gas station, an auto repair shop, and a drive-through restaurant, signaling to pedestrians that downtown has effectively ended. 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. The neighborhood behind Main Street consists largely of single family rentals, with a small group of historic structures closer to Turner.

MARKET

› Strong demand for non-student housing
› Opportunity to extend Main Street Retail

PLACE

› Too many auto-oriented uses and curb cuts
› Residential superblocks limit connectivity and walkability
› Potential as a gateway to downtown

POLICY

› Few contributing structures
› Opportunity to increase full-time non-student residency

ECONOMIC

› Higher densities needed to make mixed use development feasible
› Land costs too high for single family and townhome development
Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts

CURRENT CONDITIONS

- assets
- opportunity areas
- open space, streetscape

DOWNTOWN NORTHEAST
Vision

The vision for Downtown Northeast is to create a seamless link to the walkable, mixed-use downtown environment to the south. Buildings will be mixed-use, with ground floor retail and upper floor residential targeting young professionals and other non-students. Ideal businesses will include local, eclectic, and creative/craft operators, such as a craft brewery, creamery, and coffee roaster, and distinctive dining experiences. Buildings will be of a high architectural quality, with storefront windows and outdoor seating at the ground level, and durable materials on upper levels.

Buildings will transition from up to four or five stories on Main Street to three-story residential on the west side of Progress Street, which will have improved bike/pedestrian facilities. Across Progress Street, quality townhome infill will be permitted. A new street or pedestrian walkway mid-block between Turner and Giles will break up a superblock with mid-block crossings to make this part of Downtown more walkable and inviting. The cumulative effect will be a new, vibrant part of Downtown Blacksburg that positions it to attract and retain the next generation of talented workers, by providing needed amenities and quality workforce housing.
20-YEAR ILLUSTRATIVE VISION

- Preservation
- New construction & redevelopment
- Open space & streetscape
Catalyst

The opportunity for a catalyst project in Downtown Northeast is immense; a new, quality project could truly transform a whole part of the downtown from a commercial strip to a vibrant, walkable place—one that is critical for retaining a young, talented workforce. Development challenges for a quality developer are equally great. Uses such as gas stations and fast food restaurants are very costly to acquire, requiring density to create economic viability. The density, in turn, requires costly structured parking. Any new development should provide thoughtful transitions to adjacent single family and historic structures on Progress Street, as well as to community aspirations for an enhanced alleyway. This translates into a need for the assembly of multiple parcels, some of which may need to be nearby, but not contiguous, in order to accommodate parking needs. The potential upside is great; however, a catalyst project would meet multiple town objectives, creating the strategic rationale for a public-private partnership.
### Objectives

#### GOAL 1 - Cost of Housing
- Locations for denser housing
- Redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels
- Sites for student housing
- Sites for non-student housing

#### GOAL 2 - Town Identity
- Connections to existing parks
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- Investments in walkability and vibrancy
- Economically-feasible, human scale development
- Downtown districting
- Expansion of Downtown boundaries

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**IMPLEMENTATION**

**DOWNTOWN NORTHEAST**

- Update zoning to allow for dense, mixed-use buildings of up to five stories on Main Street, transitioning to three stories on the west side of Progress Street
- Explore bike/pedestrian facility options on Progress Street; provide for funding in capital improvements plan
- Allow Townhome infill east of Progress Street
- Create design guidelines to ensure quality architecture and urban form on Main and Progress Streets
- Use incentives, where necessary, to ensure quality development
- Take appropriate steps to ensure housing and retail development targets non-students
- Create Old Turner Street/Pedestrian Extension to break up superblock between Turner and Giles
- Recruit distinctive ground floor tenant mix that promotes entrepreneurs, artists, and crafters
- Seek opportunities for Town-Developer partnerships that ensure the greatest quality in development; consider a formal developer RFP process
- Explore creation of a historic district for the neighborhood east side of Progress Street
OLD BLACKSBURG MIDDLE SCHOOL SITE

Key Issues & Opportunities

The Old Blacksburg Middle School site presents perhaps the most immediate opportunity for redevelopment in Downtown. An existing development proposal envisions a broad mix of uses that would create new jobs, significantly expand the town’s housing supply, while sensitively transitioning to existing uses surrounding the site.

Existing Conditions

Today largely vacant, this 22-acre development site presents a major opportunity to expand the town’s supply and diversity of housing, add significant new open space to Downtown, and extend the mixed-use character south along Main. The town is engaging in a true public-private partnership to facilitate development that would bring this opportunity to fruition.

An existing development proposal envisions a mix of higher-density mixed use development on Main Street, transitioning to moderate- and low-density residential uses east from Main. This housing is targeted at young professionals and/or retirees, and does not include student-oriented housing. The plan also envisions a new partial urban street grid, and a series of interconnected plazas, pedestrian ways, and open spaces to provide access across the site and spaces for community gathering and events. In addition to space for ground-floor retail and other commercial space, the plan also incorporates two opportunities for civic uses, including a new town public safety building.

Objectives

GOAL 1 - Cost of Housing
- Locations for denser housing
- Redevelopment of underdeveloped parcels
- Sites for student housing
- Sites for non-student housing

GOAL 2 - Town Identity
- Connections to existing parks
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- Downtown districting
- Expansion of Downtown boundaries

MEETS OBJECTIVE • SUPPORTS OBJECTIVE
20-YEAR VISION

OLD BLACKSBURG MIDDLE SCHOOL SITE

Chapter 5 - Downtown’s Six Districts
**CENTRAL DOWNTOWN**

**Key Issues & Opportunities**

This district at the heart of Blacksburg is a dynamic nexus between the many parts of Downtown. Central Downtown also 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 to create opportunities for active retail and non-student housing, and new transportation facilities along Progress.

**Existing Conditions**

As its name implies, Central Downtown is where Downtown truly comes together, making it a rich and vibrant place, but also one that is far from a finished product. Improving it in ways that achieve its full potential, are sensitive to context, and advance town goals will require great care and attention. To the north, the Baptist Church site occupies roughly three acres and has great potential as a catalyst site. But sensitivity is needed regarding architecture, historic structures along Progress Street, and the community’s desire to maintain the alley.

In the Central Main area on the side east of North Main Street, buildings south of Wilson Avenue are generally historic and worthy of preservation; those north of Wilson are generally not historic and therefore new development at that site would need to integrate elements of a Baptist Church development to the north and historic buildings to the south. The College Avenue extension needs new thinking; it currently provides limited utility as a street and parking area. On the Progress Street side, a town-owned lot presents an opportunity to build structured parking, and Progress street itself has the greatest potential to provide legitimate non-motorized transportation infrastructure for bicyclists and pedestrians.
CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Areas with historic structures
- Opportunity areas
- Assets
- Open space, streetscape

Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts
Vision

The vision for Central Downtown is for it to be the activity hub of the entire Downtown, and the place where many town goals and objectives are met. New, quality housing, office, and retail development with forward-thinking and appropriately-scaled architecture will help attract and retain young professionals. The College Avenue extension will be transformed into a central gathering plaza serving as a front door to the community. This large space will be complemented by adjacent smaller spaces, such as in the alley, that create the opportunity for pop-ups and public art highlighting the town’s distinct character. A new parking garage on the Municipal Lot will support businesses and enables visitors to “park once” when they come Downtown. Improvements to Progress will help to form a bike and pedestrian network that links people to jobs and activity, taking cars off the road, while also helping to better link people to Wong Park.

Retail space will be occupied by a blend of national and local storefronts and entrepreneurs that appeals to non-students as well as students. New buildings will integrate art, interesting materials, and street furniture to ensure that new development is distinctive, and does not feel generic or homogeneous. Central Downtown is and should continue to be enhanced as the most active and vibrant part of Downtown—a central place of gathering that belongs to everyone.

Character & Identity

- 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

Strategies

- Establish Development Opportunities
- Address Housing Affordability
- Move People, Not Cars
- Enhance the Public Realm
- Foster Innovation and a Resilient Local Economy
- Celebrate Town Distinctiveness
- Six Districts, One Downtown
Chapter 5 – Downtown’s Six Districts

20-Year Illustrative Vision

- New construction & redevelopment
- Open space & streetscape
- Preservation
- Progress bike and ped
- Streetside plaza
- Parking garage with residential liner
- Preservation
- Active alley entrance
- Link to Wong Park
- Baptist church site
- Continued good streetscape
- Blend of national and local stores
- Henson lawn
- Creativity and innovation district
- Link to Draper cultural district
Catalyst 1: Development at the Baptist Church Site

The Baptist Church site, including the church itself, as well as adjacent properties located within the block bounded by Main, Progress, Faculty, and Turner Streets, is an underutilized opportunity site in a critical location in Central Downtown. With the church considering divestment of the property and construction of a new facility in a different location, the site offers great potential to catalyze private investment in Downtown by introducing new mixed-use development and additional commercial space, as well as by 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 and also as a shared space that accommodates vehicular access, pedestrian and bicycle activity, and service functions. On the east portion of the block, the alley can provide access to structured parking lined with residential units along Progress and Turner Streets. Four floors of structured parking would be sufficient to accommodate the combined commercial and residential uses on the block, and could be linked across the alley with a pedestrian walkway as a convenience to residents of the Main Street building. Care should be taken to ensure the scaling and massing of development along Main and Progress Streets is varied, avoiding the appearance of a monolithic structure and transitioning to the existing fabric north and east of Progress Street. Well-designed architecture can accommodate efficient modern construction while also complementing the surrounding historic context of existing structures, including the preservation of the Wes Gray House at the northwest corner of Faculty and Progress.

Catalyst 2: Central Main and a new “Front Door”

The intersection of College Avenue and Main Street is the physical and social heart of Blacksburg. It serves as a gateway to the Virginia Tech campus as well as to businesses in Central Downtown. This extension of College Avenue offers an opportunity to create a signature public plaza and community gathering space at the most prominent location in Downtown Blacksburg. Existing landscaping along Main, together with a plaza-like streetscape north of Wilson, will create a more visible and useable public space: a new “front door” to Blacksburg. After the creation of structured parking in a central location nearby, the few pull-in spaces on College Avenue will no longer be needed. Surface parking behind the buildings will provide business loading zones. Likewise, improvements to the rear alley system will connect Faculty Street to Jackson Street, eliminating the need for a vehicular connection via College Avenue.
With these improvements in place, the automobile-oriented street can be transformed into a more fitting front door to Downtown Blacksburg, and the signature public gathering space within the town.

**Catalyst 3: Progress Street Transportation**

Progress Street provides an important north-south connection from the Patrick Henry corridor to downtown. It is also a transition point from the commercial and mixed-use character of Downtown to the historic residential character of neighborhoods to the east. As such, this street has the potential to fulfill multiple objectives of this plan. While Progress Street can accommodate new downtown redevelopment on its west side, the historic homes on the east side of the street will largely be preserved. Development potential on the west side of Progress offers an opportunity to improve the streetscape and transform it into a more inviting, multi-modal street that will also add value to the homes that remain.

The current municipal parking lot on Progress Street is positioned to accommodate a new structured parking facility, fronted on two sides by a liner with residential uses. This garage will help to mitigate traffic and correct the current undersupply of parking in this central part of Downtown.

Progress Street itself currently has a relatively utilitarian design, with no elements that buffer pedestrians from traffic, and a street width insufficient to accommodate both dedicated on-street bike lanes and the existing on-street parking on the east side of the street. Travel lanes are currently marked with bicycle “sharrows”. 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. These improvements on Progress Street within the Central Downtown District have the potential to extend north, contributing to a broader network of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.
### POTENTIAL CATALYSTS

- Bike/ped facilities
- Office/coworking
- Graduate/professional housing

### DOWNTOWN’S SIX DISTRICTS

**DOWNTOWN'S SIX DISTRICTS**

- **District Development Summary**
  - **Graduate/Professional Housing**: 40 units
  - **Mid-Career Apartments**: 30 units
  - **Office**: 55k square feet
  - **Ground-Floor Retail**: 25k square feet
  - **Central Downtown Plaza**: 0.7 acres

**New construction & redevelopment**

- **Open space & streetscape**

**Preservation**
Establish overlay districts with zoning and design standards suitable for new downtown development

Initiate dialogue with property owners, establish public-private partnerships and/or negotiate necessary property acquisition for right-of-way or other public improvements

Initiate design plans for public improvements in Central Downtown (e.g., parking garage, College Avenue plaza, Progress Street improvements, alley and pedestrian connection improvements, etc.)

Issue RFP for development/management of residential liner buildings along the edges of the public parking garage

Prioritize and designate phasing of public improvements in the CIP

Explore programs and partnerships with property owners and community organizations to beautify and activate pedestrian spaces (e.g., the alley, connections between buildings, etc.) throughout Central Downtown
A new pedestrian plaza at the intersection of College and Main has the potential to serve as a signature gateway to Downtown, and a central community gathering space for the town.
New development in Central Downtown will preserve spaces that function as alleys, and also as shared spaces that accommodate vehicular access, pedestrian and bicycle activity, and service functions.
Progress Street provides a critical north-south connection for Blacksburg. A new bike and pedestrian path, and a new parking garage (lined with residential development) will improve mobility to and through Downtown.
CHAPTER 6

IMPLEMENTATION
IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

Implementation of the strategies laid out in the plan will span efforts in capital improvements, regulatory updates, and other policies that facilitate the type of development that aligns with the town’s priorities and goals.

The Strategic Plan for Downtown Blacksburg sets forth a vision that will add housing, improve the public realm, and spur economic growth. To ensure that implementation does not stall or become eclipsed by other day-to-day needs, it is recommended to designate a point-person or a small committee responsible for overseeing the implementation of this plan. This person or group will act as a project manager, reviewing progress regularly, coordinating the efforts of the various Town departments, advocating for necessary funding, maintaining ongoing communication with citizens and businesses involved in creating the plan, and fostering connections with other entities that can take the lead on specific tasks.

The implementation matrix presented in this chapter summarizes all of the plan’s key implementation items and identifies key participants that will likely need to be involved. The matrix also includes a timeline which outlines the general phasing and prioritization of efforts that will need to take place. While streetscape improvements and other investments in public facilities are highly visible and generate the most excitement, they are also the most expensive efforts and will need to be phased over a long period of time, prioritizing projects where they are most likely to catalyze key development opportunities downtown. Updates to policy and town regulations, however, are often done at low expense and are critical first steps towards enabling the private sector to respond with projects that will meet the needs of the community. The value of these somewhat more “invisible” changes should not be underestimated and every effort should be made to complete a majority of these updates within two years after adoption of this plan.

It is also important to note that the town may need to be actively involved to facilitate redevelopment of several key sites, with the possibility of forming public/private partnerships, assembling properties, or drafting requests for proposals.

IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERS

Strategy 1: Establish Development Opportunities
- Town of Blacksburg
- Development Community

Strategy 2: Address Housing Affordability
- Town of Blacksburg
- Virginia Tech
- Virginia Tech Foundation
- Affordable Housing Non-Profit Groups

Strategy 3: Move People, Not Cars
- Town of Blacksburg
- Virginia Tech
- Virginia Department of Transportation

Strategy 4: Enhance the Public Realm
- Town of Blacksburg
- Development Community
- Virginia Tech

Strategy 5: Foster Innovation & Economic Growth
- Town of Blacksburg
- Development Community
- Virginia Tech
- Virginia Tech Foundation
- Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce
- Business Community
- Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce
- Local Arts Groups
- Blacksburg Museum and Cultural Foundation
- Affordable Housing Non-Profit Groups

Strategy 6: Celebrate Town Distinctiveness
- Town of Blacksburg
- Development Community
- Community at large

Strategy 7: Six Districts, One Downtown
- Town of Blacksburg
- Development Community
- Community at large
### Strategy 1: Establish Development Opportunities

#### Construction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>KEYS</th>
<th>PRICE</th>
<th>GENERAL PHASING</th>
<th>PRICE</th>
<th>DISTRICTS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New residential infill construction at Church &amp; Clay</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Original 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New residential infill construction—incorporate extension of Clay Street</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Downtown West</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Zoning & Regulations

- Create overlays specific to each district to guide desired uses and densities, as well as key site design elements.
- Incorporate desired future road segments (to remove superblocks) into Comprehensive Plan.
- Amend zoning regulations to allow limited commercial uses—such as co-working, restaurant, small-scale retail, and art studio space—in existing residential buildings.

#### Incentives

- Develop a General Economic Incentive Policy that outlines incentive policies specific to preferred development types, as well as associated requirements for site design, building design, and/or public realm improvements.

#### Other Policy-Planning

- Facilitate development of key Downtown sites, including: the Wendy’s site and the catalyst project at the McDonalds/Union Bank site in Downtown Northwest; mixed-use infill at Main & Turner in Downtown Northeast; the Old Blacksburg Middle School site; a potential food hall in Downtown West; and the Baptist Church site in Central Downtown.
- Identify redevelopment opportunities along streets intersecting Washington Street.
- Allow for flexibility in development review to accommodate the challenges of development in the existing urban fabric.

---

**KEY PLAYERS**

- Lead Actor
- Supporting Actor

**PRICE**

- $<50K
- $50 - 200K
- $200 - 500K
- $500K - 2M
- $2M+
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<tr>
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<th>PRICE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lead Actor</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<td>$50 - 200K</td>
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<td>$</td>
<td>$200 - 500K</td>
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<td>$</td>
<td>$500K - 2M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$</td>
<td>$2M+</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY PLAYERS</th>
<th>GENERAL PHASING</th>
<th>PRICE</th>
<th>DISTRICTS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town of Blacksburg</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Virginia Department of Transportation</td>
<td>Virginia Tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown Blacksburg Strategic Plan</td>
<td>IMPLEMENTATION</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Strategy 2: Address Housing Affordability

#### Zoning & Regulations
- Update zoning regulations to allow for more dense housing in identified areas

#### Incentives
- Explore ways to use financial incentives or density bonuses to encourage housing targeted towards non-students

#### Other Policy/Planning
- Expand the Town’s acquisition and rehabilitation program
- Explore options for Housing Trust Funds or Community Land Trusts
- Create non-profit to collect funds for proposed Housing Trust Fund/Community Land Trust
- Establish Employer Assisted Housing Program
### Strategy 3: Move People, Not Cars

#### Construction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Key Players</th>
<th>General Phasing</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design and construct bike/pedestrian streetscape improvements to create</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>$$$$</td>
<td>Downtown West, Downtown Northeast, Central Downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>north/south route (Progress/Draper)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design &amp; build centrally located downtown parking garage</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>$$$$$</td>
<td>Central Downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand the number of covered bus shelters</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue with efforts such as bike lockers and ways to increase accessible</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bike parking in Downtown</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore options to add more Gotcha Bike hubs in the downtown area</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase articulated buses to expand capacity on transit lines</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore options to expand paid parking past 5pm in preparation for the</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creation of a public parking garage</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Other Policy Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Key Players</th>
<th>General Phasing</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conduct survey of non-student residents about public transit</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td>$$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase frequency of buses on select routes</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td>$$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create annual outreach programs to students and non-student encouraging</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td>$$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transit usage</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue efforts to improve bike and pedestrian access to Downtown,</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including implementation of key recommendations from the Bicycle Safety</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Mobility Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue efforts to support efficient use of existing on-street parking</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown through new technology</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue to pursue “Bicycle Friendly Community” designation and include</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td>$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
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<tr>
<td>desired elements into Bicycle Master Plan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore options to accommodate emerging transportation modes/technologies,</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td>$$</td>
<td>All Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>such as electronic scooters and bicycles, ride share (through drop-off spaces),</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and autonomous vehicles</td>
<td>○</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Strategy 4: Enhance the Public Realm

#### Construction

- Create a gateway to the Huckleberry Trail at the Blacksburg Library
- Complete Main Street streetscape (from Roanoke to Lee)
- Streetscape improvements in Downtown West
- Streetscape improvements in Old Blacksburg Middle School Site
- Streetscape improvements in Downtown Northeast
- Streetscape improvements in Downtown Northwest
- Streetscape improvements in Original 16
- Create new pedestrian plaza at northeast corner of Main & College
- Add additional seating and signage to Margocia’s park and provide better connection to Huckleberry Trail
- Improve playground equipment and other amenities at Wong Park

#### Other Policy-Planning

- Develop plan for physical improvements to, or relocation of, a Progress Street Alley that maintains the service function of a mid-block alley space
- Develop plan for potential expansion of Marocia’s Park after new Police Department building is constructed
- Study opportunities to better connect Wong Park to Main Street
- Explore creative options to improve hillside access to Wong Park

### Strategy 5: Foster Innovation and a Resilient Local Economy

#### Incentives

- Explore the option of the use of incentives to encourage co-working and start up space

#### Other Policy-Planning

- Facilitate the development of new incubator and start-up space
- Facilitate the development of new co-working space
- Develop mentoring program for entrepreneurs
- Develop grant program for start-ups
- Expand entrepreneurship and new economic skills training
### Strategy 6: Celebrate Town Distinctiveness

#### Zoning & Regulations
- Reevaluate Historic or Design Review Board (HORB) guidelines and explore opportunities to streamline review process: ○
- Amend regulations to allow for “pop-up” businesses and other micro-retail spaces: ○ ○

#### Incentives
- Explore use of incentives for providing public art: ○

#### Other Policy-Planning
- Create a comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan: ○
- Strategically reintroduce a commercial façade grant program: ○
- Establish home improvement assistance program for historic properties: ○ ○
- Explore incentives for maintenance of structures Downtown: ○ ○
- Explore creation of a historic district for the neighborhood east of Progress Street: ○
- Seek out opportunities to co-locate cultural institutions into Draper Cultural District: ○
- Create a public art plan for Downtown, including alleys and small spaces: ○ ○
- Establish revolving loan fund for small businesses: ○ ○ ○
- Enhance downtown programming, including unique activities in alleys and small spaces: ○ ○ ○

#### General Phasing
- 1-3 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years

#### Price
- $<50K
- $50-200K
- $200-500K
- $500K-2M
- $2M+

#### Districts
- All Districts
- Downtown Northeast
- Downtown West
- Old Blacksburg Middle School
- Central Downtown

### Strategy 7: Six Districts, One Downtown

#### Other Policy-Planning
- Formalize district framework for Downtown: ○
- Create branding strategy for Downtown: ○
- Update the Town’s wayfinding plan: ○