

## INTRODUCTION

Cities across the country are developing pedestrian friendly, mixed use 'downtowns' in an effort to recreate an asset that Smithville is fortunate enough to already have. These faux downtowns are designed with the best assets of historic downtowns, including quality design, apartments above retail uses, and a focus on people rather than cars. Smithville has not yet experienced the tremendous retail growth on Hwy 71 so downtown has been able to maintain its position as the center of the community. This plan identifies strategies that can be pursued to strengthen downtown Smithville. The goal is to make it a true destination that serves residents and visitors alike and will attract people from across the region to spend time and money in Smithville.



In order to accomplish these goals it will be important for a strong partnership to be developed that brings the assets of the city, Chamber of Commerce, downtown business owners and others together. There is too much for one organization to undertake alone and without working together, this plan will not be implemented. The plan lays out projects that will protect the historic character of downtown Smithville and strengthen the business climate.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the goals identified for downtown revitalization tie into goals for economic development and community development. They are part of a larger effort to protect and enhance the overall economic vitality and quality of life in Smithville. As such, these activities should not be considered as individual projects but rather as part of the larger community effort and implementation should be done accordingly. This would mean that instead of simply improving the sidewalks downtown, the effort should include improvements that will allow people to walk to downtown. Simply focusing on one area rather than a holistic approach will not achieve the overall objectives of the comprehensive plan.

### ENCOURAGE RETAIL DEVELOPMENT ON MAIN STREET

To be a true destination, there must be a broad mix of retail establishments on Main Street. A successful downtown will have businesses that can attract visitors while still appealing to residents. Downtown Smithville is still the retail center for the community, with businesses that cater to residents and visitors; however, there are several vacant buildings and opportunities for additional retail to increase the success and vitality of downtown.



### Utilize Demographic Analysis to Market to Prospective Business Owners

The first step in attracting new business is to determine what businesses are appropriate. The demographic analysis identifies many characteristics of residents that can be the starting point to target retailers for recruitment. This information can also be provided to entrepreneurs who may be interested in starting a local business. They can utilize this information in their business planning to determine their market niche. The Chamber of Commerce can take the lead in hosting seminars for prospective business owners to provide them with the demographic information and other assistance that can help them get a business off the ground. In addition, the demographic data can be provided to franchises and chains to encourage them to locate in Smithville. The city is currently making some efforts in this direction to encourage some desired retail development. This type of activity should be continued and expanded.

A retail leakage analysis would also be beneficial to identify how much money Smithville residents spend outside of the community. This information can be used in conjunction with the demographics to help build a business case for a new business. If it can be shown that there is a significant market for a desired service or product, it is more likely that a business will become established to serve that need.

### Encourage Shop at Home to Support Existing Retailers

Many Smithville residents are likely not aware of all the services and products that are available in their local stores. The Chamber of Commerce already does promotion and marketing and this should be continued and expanded to encourage residents to spend their money locally. Small local businesses often do not have a marketing budget and struggle to get the word out. By pooling resources, the Chamber can help maximize the limited resources available to get the word out. This can include regular inserts into the local paper, Chamber mixers, and other activities already under way.

Another important Shop at Home tool is to educate residents on the impact local spending has on the overall economy. Dollars spent at local businesses stay in the community and are reinvested locally rather than being lost. This money pays salaries for local residents and is spent at other local businesses. Sales tax is another major consideration. Every dollar spent outside of Smithville means the city does not collect sales tax on that dollar. This can be a significant source of revenue for city government and increasing local sales tax will provide more resources for local projects. The Chamber and city can both take an active role in educating citizens on this to encourage them to patronize local businesses.

New businesses will be more likely to open in Smithville when they see that existing businesses have strong community support. A Shop at Home program will make existing businesses more successful, increase local revenues, and make Smithville more attractive to prospective businesses. This is a beneficial cycle that will increase the overall economic vitality of the community and enhance the quality of life for existing and future residents.



### Consider Incentives to Targeted Businesses

New businesses face many challenges, not the least of which is finding the money to get started. Other challenges include business planning, marketing, and overall management. This offers an opportunity for the city and Chamber to offer assistance to these businesses to help them get started.

One option may include financial assistance, such as helping pay the rent for a new business. There could also be a low interest loan program set up with local banks to provide reduced cost loans to prospective businesses. This would reduce the financial constraints on a new business and allow them time to become successful. The money for this could come from a special fund set up by the city, or a coordinated effort by local banks to establish the loan pool and then each would have the opportunity to administer those loans on a revolving basis. The La Grange Economic Development Corporation offers a 20 percent match up to \$1,000 dollars for façade improvements. Even an investment of \$10,000 from the city could result in significant improvements to downtown if business owners are encouraged to invest in their properties.

Beyond just financing the Chamber of Commerce can offer in-kind assistance, such as by arranging seminars to help business owners. These may include topics such as Personnel Management, Marketing, Hospitality, and Merchandising. There are a number of speakers and experts that can be utilized to help with this effort. One resource that should be considered is the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE). This is a group of successful business leaders who provide counseling and advisory services to entrepreneurs. The Small Business Administration is another resource. The Chamber should work with neighboring communities, state and regional agencies, and others to develop a series of business training opportunities that will help local entrepreneurs build a successful business.

### ESTABLISH DESIGN GUIDELINES

This effort has been discussed in the community development plan. If the city adopts a Historic Preservation Ordinance, it will likely contain design guidelines for the downtown area. As discussed these can be as stringent or lenient as is appropriate based on local input and concerns. Any design guidelines should serve to protect the integrity and



appearance of downtown and ensure compatible design. This does not mean that any new development has to mimic existing architecture, rather it should have common elements and structure so as to complement existing buildings. The First National Bank building is an excellent example of compatible design because it has similar features to the historic buildings without duplication.

The same process identified in the community development plan should be followed to ensure community support for any guidelines that may be established. To help encourage business owners to utilize the



standards, incentives should be considered. These may include grants or low interest loans to help offset the costs associated with following the guidelines. Non-financial incentives can include an expedited review process so permits are approved and work can be done faster. The idea is to promote compatible design so new development blends with the existing fabric of downtown Smithville.

## IMPROVE PEDESTRIAN AMENITIES DOWNTOWN

A successful downtown is geared for pedestrians rather than automobiles. This means there are amenities and features that encourage people to spend time walking between stores rather than just parking right in front of their destination and leaving immediately after their purchase. Lighting, benches and landscaping are all factors; however, the biggest inducement to people walking is a lively and vital downtown. People do not like to walk past empty, boarded up shops, and especially do not want to walk past parking lots. Smithville is fortunate to not have many vacant lots or parking lots along Main Street, which means the attention can be focused on smaller projects to enhance walkability.

### Ensure Sidewalks are Safe and Connect to the Rest of the Community

The community service plan identifies opportunities for improving the overall pedestrian connectivity in Smithville. Improving sidewalks downtown should be part of this overall effort to encourage people to walk downtown and stay once there. The first step is to inventory the sidewalks to determine where there may be unsafe conditions, such as large cracks or uneven tiles, or where sidewalks do not exist. Any safety hazards should be addressed immediately. With a completed inventory any needed enhancements can be budgeted for, focusing on the areas of greatest need. This includes establishing a clear connection to the park at the north end of Main Street.

Ideally, safe, wide sidewalks will run from one end of Main Street to the other. This will allow visitors to park at one end of town and walk throughout downtown safely and conveniently. This will encourage them to spend more time and therefore more money in Smithville. It will also allow residents access to downtown because of the pedestrian connections established. People will be able to walk or ride their bikes from their homes to downtown businesses.

### Identify Lighting Needs to Cover All of Downtown

Lighting can be a controversial issue because many residents do not want their community lit up like a football field. This issue can be addressed by installing appropriate lighting and designing it to reduce light pollution. The city has appropriate lighting throughout downtown already. Additional lighting is also installed on some of the buildings to light them. This should be encouraged to produce ambient light that will make downtown more attractive and enhance a 'safe' feeling for pedestrians.



Lighting will become more important as downtown becomes more of an evening destination. Ideally there will be visitors and residents patronizing businesses into the evening. As new businesses begin to move in, and downtown becomes more of a destination, this will begin to happen. Currently, most businesses close fairly early, so



there is little reason for anyone to be downtown at night. A truly vibrant, exciting downtown will have traffic and visitors at all hours, thus increasing the need for lighting.

#### Identify Potential for 'Pocket Parks' in Downtown

While people are attracted to downtown because of its mix of businesses, architecture, etc. there is still a need to provide a greenspace to break up the hardscape on the street. This small park can provide a break for pedestrians and a destination for people to come downtown. There are parks at each end of Main Street, which is a tremendous asset in attracting people. There are vacant lots along Main Street that may provide the opportunity for a 'pocket park'.

A small park should include seating, tables, and landscaping to make it an attractive destination. This could be an area for visitors to enjoy lunch from a local restaurant, or families to spend an hour playing. It could also provide an area for entertainment, such as a band, that would attract visitors. Movies in the park are another option that would bring people downtown in the evenings. A small park in the middle of Main Street will become a unique asset to the overall development of downtown.

#### Provide Additional Restrooms Downtown

Currently, the only public restrooms downtown are in Railroad Park and City Hall (when it is open). In order to make downtown a true destination where people are encouraged to spend time, new restrooms should be provided. These should be located near the busiest area of downtown so they are easily accessible and visible. The city and Chamber can partner to identify an appropriate location and identify funding to help pay for the maintenance and cleaning of them once installed. The funding section will have more detail on how to pay for needed downtown improvements.

### **HOLD MORE EVENTS DOWNTOWN**

To be successful, downtown revitalization must create a variety of reasons for people to want to come to the Square. Events and activities will attract people that would otherwise not come downtown. This will introduce them to the businesses on Main Street so they will know what is available. The idea is to give people a reason to come downtown so that the businesses will benefit from the increased traffic.

#### Conduct Regular Events Downtown

Many communities use live music as a draw with local bands giving free concerts to bring visitors into downtown. If these are held in the evening, businesses would be encouraged to stay open later to serve those additional visitors. The concerts could also



be coordinated with the Hyatt Lost Pines Resort so they could shuttle guests from the resort in to Smithville for the concert. In addition, sidewalk sales with all businesses participating would be a draw. These could be held in the evenings with the businesses providing drinks and snacks to patrons. Again, the idea is to introduce new people to downtown and attract more attention to the businesses available. Farmers Markets are



also growing in popularity and would serve the dual purpose of bringing people downtown and providing income and exposure for area farmers.

Larger events can also attract visitors to downtown. The recent Guinness World Record attempt for the largest gingerbread man is an example of a large event that brings people from all over Central Texas to downtown Smithville. These events can be somewhat problematic for business owners because there can be parking and other conflicts that keep people from their business during these events. This can be overcome by working with business owners to ensure their concerns are addressed and reminding them that the more people exposed to downtown will lead to more patronage in their stores.



The goal of all of these efforts is to generate a positive image of downtown Smithville and get people thinking of it as a destination for entertainment. No event will be successful without a marketing campaign to make people aware of what is happening. Business owners should cooperate to develop a publicity campaign to promote their businesses and downtown in general. These can be regular mailings, newspaper inserts, and radio commercials to spread the word. Also, the businesses can work with the Chamber of Commerce to ensure that the Chamber website is informative, accurate, and updated regularly. This website is vital to downtown marketing because it is available to such a wide audience. Banners are another tool to promote Main Street, they can be used to promote businesses and events. The city should also work with businesses to develop signage along the thoroughfares that identify what is downtown and make it easy for people to get there.

### REDEVELOP RAMONA STREET

A long term goal for Smithville should be the redevelopment of the Marhil property on Ramona Street into a complement to Main Street (Illustration 7-1). Having a secondary hub will increase the attractiveness of downtown by providing a wider variety of shopping and service opportunities. The property is currently owned by the City in trust for the other taxing entities. The lease can be terminated if the tenant does not meet the performance expectations in the lease agreement. In the long term, this agreement should be reviewed and if there is an opportunity to terminate, it should be considered to open the property for redevelopment. Redevelopment would be a long term process because it requires the termination of the lease, building demolition, and site preparation before any type of redevelopment can occur. The Chamber of Commerce and / or city could partner with the property owner to market the property for redevelopment. The city could provide some incentive by offering to help with demolition costs and appropriate infrastructure to make the property suitable for development.

### Remove Buildings and Open the Street

If the city pursues this objective, the first step would be to remove the existing buildings and facilities on site. This could be accomplished by the city, or in partnership with the





—  
Illustration 7-1  
Romona Street Property





property owner. There may be an opportunity for the city to acquire the property through tax foreclosure or other means. Having ownership would give the city control over what is built and ensure that it provides the greatest benefit to Smithville. This would remove an eyesore and an anchor on development and make the entire area more attractive. A blighted property affects the entire area around it, not just the individual property so it is important to ameliorate these when possible.

Removing the buildings would make it possible to reconnect Ramona Street through to First Street. The area is also large enough to create a mixed use project that could incorporate high density housing and retail. This would serve the need for lower cost housing and additional retail. Having full time residents in downtown would help other businesses and provide 24 hour activity that would invigorate the area. Downtown residences are a booming trend in cities of all sizes and the Ramona project could provide this opportunity in Smithville.

#### Encourage Redevelopment of the Property

Once the property has been made ready for redevelopment, the city and Chamber can actively market the property. This may involve contacting potential developers and providing them the demographic and marketing information about Smithville and the property specifically. It may also involve an agreement to provide incentives for redevelopment. This may include infrastructure assistance or other incentives as appropriate. If successful, this could provide a tremendous asset to Smithville as a whole by creating a vibrant, mixed use anchor for downtown.



The location of this property with its proximity to Railroad Park, Main Street, City Hall, and other community amenities make it suitable for greater density and mixed use development that incorporates retail and service with residential. Two and three story buildings with retail on the ground floor and residences above would be appropriate and blend with the character of buildings on Main Street. This type of development would provide additional housing opportunities for various incomes and increase the number of people in the downtown area throughout the day and night, thereby increasing its attractiveness for retail and enhancing the safety of the area.

#### **IDENTIFY FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES TO PAY FOR IMPROVEMENTS**

The projects identified in this plan are not inexpensive. They will require a significant investment from the community to be successful. In order to make the plan a reality, the city should look at all opportunities for funding to help accomplish the list of goals.



### Identify Grants That May Be Suitable

There are grants available for many of the projects identified in this town. Money for sidewalks and other pedestrian amenities can often be found through Texas Department of Transportation, federal and Texas Parks and Wildlife grants. Texas Department of Agriculture has funding that can be used for festivals, farmers markets, etc. There are also grants from the state and federal governments and private foundations that can be used for historic renovations and related projects. The city should consider hiring a grant writer to pursue this type of funding to help with prioritized projects. A grant writer typically is paid through an administrative fee on any grants received so it would not be an upfront cost for the city.

### Explore Local Fundraising

Local businesses and residents typically bear the brunt of fundraising for everything from soccer to Scouts, so it can be a challenge to fundraise locally. However, there may be opportunities for this if it is part of a large, community effort that will benefit the entire community. There are many successful programs that are used to help raise money. Local businesses and families can sponsor a lamppost or a bench and receive recognition with a plaque on the bench. 'Buy a Brick' programs are very popular and recognize contributors with a brick that has their name. The city should explore all of these options to help fund needed downtown improvements. Because this is a priority of the citizens, they should support these efforts.

### Explore Potential for Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone or Public Improvement District

Funding options that the city may consider to revitalize downtown are to create a Public Improvement District or a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone. These are tools that will generate funds solely for downtown improvements and can be used to fund building improvements, pedestrian enhancements, burying utilities, rent assistance, public restrooms, and other projects.

A Public Improvement District (PID) is an additional property tax that is imposed on properties in the district. This additional tax is used for downtown improvements. To establish a PID, over 50% of the property owners in the proposed district would have to support to effort. Austin has a PID for the 6<sup>th</sup> Street area that exempts properties valued under \$500,000. This allows those owners with smaller properties to avoid paying higher taxes. An exemption may be appropriate in Smithville, and could be set based on local needs. This may mean the exemption is set at \$100,000 so any property valued at less than that is exempt from the additional tax.

A Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) is similar to a PID, except that it does not require an additional property tax. Rather, it uses any additional tax revenues generated by higher values on property in the TIRZ created by public improvements to the area. For example, if the city created a TIRZ, they could issue bonds to build new sidewalks and bury the utilities. Based on these improvements, properties in the TIRZ would increase in appraised value. The taxes generated on that increased value would be used to pay off the bonds.



While these programs are a reliable source of funding for downtown improvements, they are often contested by property owners unwilling to increase their taxes, and others in the city who resent tax dollars spent solely to benefit downtown properties. As with many of the recommendations in the comprehensive plan, this would require outreach and education to the public so they realize the benefits of implementing these programs.

## CONCLUSION

Smithville is fortunate to have a strong downtown with a mix of businesses that serve local and visitor needs. The recommendations in this plan will help build on that success to create an even more vibrant and thriving Main Street. The overall goal is to increase visitation downtown for residents and tourists alike. The mix of businesses will have to be flexible to accommodate the different needs of these targets; however, there are many examples of successful downtowns that can be a starting point. The Ramona Street project offers an opportunity to create a downtown anchor with residences and businesses. Events and activities will bring new people downtown and expose them to the charms of Main Street. Pedestrian improvements will tie into larger community improvements to increase the walkability of the entire city. This plan will help make Smithville a true destination for all of Central Texas attracting visitors from across the region. It will also increase the quality of life and economic vitality which will make Smithville a desirable place to live and work for all ages and interests.