



Bellbrook Revitalization Re-Route Recommendations

Prepared for: City of Bellbrook

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SUMMARY

Objective

In an effort to assist the City of Bellbrook to revitalize downtown, strengthen the local economy and improve quality of life for residents, Revitalize, or Die. LLC was engaged to provide the Revitalize Re-Route service. The Revitalization Re-Route service was developed as a means of providing communities with a greater overall understanding of the revitalization process and give them the tools to help strengthen their local economy.

Goals

For decades communities have bought into the sprawl method of economic development to disastrous consequences. Part of the Revitalization Re-Route process is educating communities on how they can grow their economy from within and how to counteract years of harmful and predatory development. By engaging in the sprawl economy, so many of the resources a community needs to survive are being syphoned off by national chains and the heart of the community perishes as the central marketplace has shifted to the edges. The goal of this service is to give communities the necessary tools to rebuild their economy from within.

Process

In order to effectively conduct the Revitalization Re-Route service, it is necessary to become familiar with the host community. On Thursday, June 11th, at 12:30pm, we conducted the first meeting of the visit at McIntosh's Pub. This meeting was hosted by City Manager, Melissa Dodd and included officials from the city planning department, fire department, police department as well as others. During this meeting we had a chance to gain an overview of the issues the City of Bellbrook is facing and learn more about what the community has been doing to combat its challenges.

Following the meeting, Revitalize, or Die. team members conducted a self-guided tour of the downtown.

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At 6pm, a question and answer session was held in the former Sugar Creek Elementary School building with members from various Bellbrook City boards and commissions.

At 7pm, a public presentation was held in the auditorium of the former Sugar Creek Elementary School building. The purpose of the presentation was to give community members an overview of how to go about revitalizing their community as well as getting people excited about the prospect of getting more involved with the efforts.

On the following day, June 12th, two question and answer sessions were hosted at the Bellhop Cafe. The first was primarily made up of community stakeholders and the second was business and property owners.

Following the question and answer sessions, a wrap-up meeting was held at the Blueberry Cafe to discuss the overall visit and next steps.

Before departing Bellbrook, Revitalize, or Die. team members conducted another self-guided tour of the downtown in order to capture images and gain additional insights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of the Revitalization Re-Route service, a set of recommendations has been prepared to help guide the community going forward. These recommendations are broken down into five areas:

Capacity; Real Estate; Aesthetics; Communityness; and Identity.

CAPACITY

Capacity is the community's ability to accomplish tasks and take on new initiatives. This requires a strong organization to manage the significant amount of work that has to be undertaken to achieve the community's vision for itself.

Organization

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- Revamp an existing non-profit organization or create a new organization to oversee the work that needs accomplished.
- The organization should have a concise mission regarding strengthening the local economy and improving quality of life in the community.
- It is critical that this organization is very clear in its expectations of board members. A high level of commitment will be asked of board members and it is important that these expectations are clearly indicated.
- Board member recruitment will need to be conducted in a manner more closely associated with hiring employees. A board member application should be developed and interviews conducted with those willing to take on this commitment.
- The board should be composed of strong community leaders or individuals having demonstrated the ability to achieve significant accomplishments.
- The organization is public/private partnership and must always maintain a seat for the head of the municipality.
- The board should conduct strategic planning on a regular basis to ensure it is taking on necessary projects and not losing momentum. Strategic planning is vital to healthy and successful organizations.
- Accountability is key. There have to be mechanisms in place to ensure the work that needs to be accomplished is getting accomplished. The role of this organization is too important to go undone and accountability measures will help ensure community resources are being put to good use.

REAL ESTATE

Revitalization is all about the real estate. One of the essential means to making a community healthy and strong is in restoring the central market place to the heart of the community. As the role of downtown has diminished and its physical state declined, the overall health of the community deteriorates as well. In order to restore that health, the real estate in downtown has to be repaired and reactivated to house successful businesses. While it is complicated to go about the process of

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dealing with private property and individual interest, there is simply no other way to revitalize downtown, but to revitalize the buildings themselves.

Regulation

- Review existing property ordinances and determine if they are appropriate and provide enough punitive measure to shift the behavior of absentee property owners.
- If existing codes do not provide the necessary means to address poorly maintained and vacant property, new legislation will need to be adopted.
- Develop new legislation, utilizing ordinances from other communities to put the necessary measures in place to begin affecting change. Xenia has already implemented a vacant property registry that could be used as a model.
- Commit to enforcing these ordinances.
- Property regulations and enforcement are typically not popular, but there is simply no other way to go about the process of revitalizing a community. The willingness of a few people to not properly maintain or manage their property cannot be allowed to damage the image of an entire community and until people stand up and take action against the few, relatively little will change.
- Fortunately, investment increases as regulations are put in place and enforced. Developers and investors seek out stability and low risk and in the process of putting ordinances in place, the risk is reduced and downtown real estate becomes more attractive.

Process

- As discussed a great deal during the visit, all building approvals are required to go through Greene County. Unfortunately, Greene County is not responsive and is having a significant negative impact on local investment.
 - The community must either apply pressure on the county to make changes or manage the building permitting process in house.
 - The process of improving property must be straightforward, fair and impartially applied. It is not to say the process must be a overly simple, but it must be navigable and have measures in place to ensure quality improvements. The goal of such processes are to ensure that any

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investment made in the community, improves the community. There are plenty of instances of people investing in property that does not make the community better.

Training

- In order to realize new investment in downtown real estate, it is necessary to help people understand how to go about the process. There are some community members already having experience in property renovation, but a community needs a new generation of developers.
- Find a way to reach out to entrepreneurs, potential property owners and developers. There will be some percentage of the community that has interest in becoming property owners and investors.
- Conduct a workshop on small scale real estate development. There are small developers in the region willing to lead these workshops and provide local people with all the necessary knowledge to embark on this endeavor.

Assistance

- The City will need to look at creative ways to provide assistance to potential developers. It may be the case that the cost to renovate downtown buildings currently is not supported by the rents such property would generate. This leads to situation where potential owners would have to be willing to lose money and this obviously will keep property from being repaired. It is necessary to understand the financial parameters of the downtown market and apply tools that will overcome such obstacles.
- Consider one vacant property in the downtown. Determine the cost to renovate that property. These improvements will be financed which will require an investor to incur debt. It is necessary to determine this amount to understand what the monthly debt service amount is that will need to be covered.
- Run projections as to what could be expected for the property to generate in terms of rent on a monthly basis. Add in vacancy figures and other monthly costs. The key is to determine cash flow on a monthly basis and costs on a monthly basis. It is through this process we can gain an understanding of the economic realities of renovating a building.

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- If the cost to renovate cannot be covered on a monthly basis by income, it is then necessary that the City and community develop means of bridging this gap, otherwise property will not be repaired.
- Look at financing tools and other means similar cities have used to bridge this gap. There are many creative methods that can be adopted to address the situation. At some point, those tools will do enough to boost the market that they can be removed and investors will not need assistance to profit from renovating downtown buildings.

By implementing and enforcing appropriate property legislation, improving the process of building and renovating, training new developers and providing assistance, the City of Bellbrook will experience investment in the downtown.

AESTHETICS

The look and feel of the downtown shapes people's opinion of the community and in terms of residents, it shapes their opinion of themselves. The very act of feeling proud of your town has a significant positive effect on people and when the appearance of town is not a source of pride, they may feel a sense of shame in their community. This can have deep, long-lasting impacts. It is necessary for the appearance of the community to provide people with a sense of pride.

Public Space/Placemaking

- Downtown must be attractive and inviting if people are going to use it.
- Assemble a team of design-minded people in the community to do an assessment of the look and feel of downtown and have them develop a set of recommendations.
- These recommendations should then be provided to the new community improvement organization.
- There are countless examples of communities making great strides in the appearance of their downtown and many of these improvements can be very affordable and not overly difficult to implement.
- Consider what it is like to see the community for the first time and whether or not it is providing people with a positive first impression. If not, determine what can be done to fix this.

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Clean up

- Everything requires maintenance, including a community. City staff cannot be solely responsible for the condition of the community. Residents have to take part.
- Assemble a cleanup crew of passionate civic-minded individuals. Give this group specific direction: when are they asked to meet; what things are they being asked to address; how long should they expect to be involved; etc. By being very clear with expectations, it is easier to garner volunteers.
- Develop a punch list of community clean up projects.
- Provide volunteers with shirts to wear when they clean-up to highlight to other residents that they are giving back to the community.

Signage

- There is a tendency for business owners to compete with one another for the largest sign or conversely, underestimate its importance and save money on signage. In both cases, this leads to clutter and an unattractive downtown.
- A signage ordinance needs to be put in place that specifies what is and is not allowed. This should address materials, size, location and percentage of store window being taken up by the sign.
- By having cohesive and attractive signage, the entire downtown improves and each business participating benefits from this improved aesthetic.

Standards

- It is imperative that community standards are raised. Most cities have continuously lowered their standards over the decades for various reasons. This has led to a degradation of community appearances and commitment. In lowering standards, we ask less of one another and people give less back to the community. Bellbrook has to make a decision to begin raising standards and asking more of one another. In asking more of people, they rise to the challenge. People feel a sense of pride in accomplishment. Give people the chance to have new accomplishments.

COMMUNITYNESS

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The health of community is dependent on the sense of community. If people are going to care for their town and get engaged with their place, they have to have a relationship with their place and with the other people residing there. As the nature of travel and shopping has changed, the connection between people has diminished. These connections need reestablished if Bellbrook is going to grow stronger.

Gathering

- In order for people to begin feeling connected to one another they have to spend time with one another on a regular basis.
- The community must create a regular event series that provides people an opportunity to connect.
- Community groups should create book clubs, sports leagues and other various meet-up opportunities. People want to get together, but need good reasons to leave their home.

Belonging

- Recreate the welcome wagon. Welcome people to the community and invite people out that have been living in the community for years, but may not have gotten involved. It is tougher today than ever for people to meet other people. Facilitate this process.

Ownership/Engagement

- Find ways to give people a greater voice in their community.
- The City should work to be as responsive as possible when people reach out to share their concerns and ideas.
- Offer up opportunities for the community to come out and share.
- Let residents know their voices matter and they have the ability to shape their community.
- Occasionally have contests where residents submit ideas as to how to improve the community. Seek out resources to fund these improvements. When residents have a greater hand in shaping their community, they are much more likely to be engaged.
- Work with local schools to create projects that allow students put their stamp on downtown. This will provide students and their parents with a connection to the community.

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Responsibility

- An important part of a healthy community is a feeling of responsibility for its well being. As people come to care more for one another and as local groups commit to clean-ups, the result will be this greater sense of responsibility.
- Cultivate a sense of responsibility in property owners and business owners. Not just for their particular place, but for their community as a whole. Lead by example.

IDENTITY

When a community loses its sense of identity, residents lose a source of pride and understanding about who they are and where they come from. Our identity defines us. A community's identity is not only an important means to communicate with outsiders, but helps residents connect with who they are. Rediscovering and celebrating a community's identity is an essential step in the revitalization process.

Heritage

- A healthy community has deep roots and strong ties to its past. These ties must be preserved and strengthened. Every community has a storied past and benefits from finding ways in which to understand and embrace that past.
- It is through understanding a community's heritage that people grow increasingly proud of their town.
- Historic buildings must be preserved at all costs. These buildings cannot be replicated and offer the most desirable space for commercial businesses and unique residential units.

Traditions

- Traditions bring community members closer together. Just as a family with traditions is more likely to be closer, so is a community. Traditions are what tie people together. Traditions are what make them feel a part of something bigger than themselves.
- Discover what traditions the community use to celebrate and rekindle them.

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- Consider what new traditions could be implemented. A tradition isn't a fundraiser and doesn't need to have a greater cause than bringing people together.

Brand

- A community has a brand whether it knows it or not. This being the case, it is best to take ownership of that brand and shape it in your favor.
- Bellbrook should use available social media tools to shape its brand. In dictating its own story, the community can help inform others about what makes it special.
- Do a bit of social media investigation and see what is being said. Explore ways to better shape the image of the community using these tools.

Events

- Events can be an important means to help a community cultivate a stronger identity. When considering hosting events, make sure they are authentic and help support the image of Bellbrook. An event that is true to the spirit and history of the community will have a greater chance of being successful and help bolster the town's image.

CONCLUSION

I want to thank the City of Bellbrook and the entire community for inviting me. It is a pleasure to work with people so passionate about improving their place. I greatly appreciate the hospitality and willingness of the Bellbrook community to listen to different ideas. Over the course of the first visit, we had a chance to meet with dozens of concerned and engaged citizens. This is the most hopeful sign of all. The idea of reshaping a community's future is a tough prospect and it takes everyone's involvement. I believe Bellbrook has a considerable opportunity to revitalize and restore the economic health it once enjoyed. That being said, it won't be easy. It will require raising standards and making some unpopular decisions. The way of doing things for the last couple of decades led a declining downtown and continuing to do more of the same will only result in more of the same. The strategies for becoming economically independent, resilient and improving the quality of life, requires doing things differently. It requires asking more of everyone and getting everyone involved. It will require people giving more time, money and energy. The effort needed to reshape Bellbrook

will require a great deal, but it will be worth every bit of effort. The satisfaction in restoring the center of town to health, increasing civic pride and enhancing residents quality of life can't be quantified.

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