

Revitalization Re-Route Highlights

SUMMARY

Objective

In an effort to assist the City of Bellbrook to revitalize downtown, strengthen the local economy and improve the 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 counteract years of harmful and predatory development. The goal of this service is to give communities the necessary tools to rebuild their economy from within.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 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.

- **Organization**
 - Create a new organization to oversee the work that needs to be accomplished.
 - The board for this organization should have clear expectations and a concise mission statement regarding strengthening the local economy and improving quality of life in the community.
 - 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 applicants. A high level of commitment will be asked of the board members. The board should be composed of strong community leaders or individuals having demonstrated the ability to achieve significant accomplishments.
 - The organization is a 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. A mechanism is required to ensure that the work that needs to be accomplished is getting accomplished.

REAL ESTATE

One of the essential means to making a community healthy and strong is in restoring the central marketplace to the heart of the community. As the role of downtown has diminished its physical state has declined. The real estate in downtown has to be repaired and reactivated to house successful businesses.

- **Regulation**

- Review existing property ordinances and determine if they are appropriate and provide enough punitive measure to shift the behavior of absentee property owners. 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.
- 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. Fortunately, investment increases as regulations are put in place and enforced. Developers and investors seek out stability and low risk.

- **Process**

- 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 overly simple, but it must be navigable and have measures in place to ensure quality improvements.

- **Training**

- 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.

- **Assistance**

- The City will need to look at creative ways to provide assistance to potential developers.
- It is necessary to understand the financial parameters of the downtown market and the cost to renovate. Run projections as to what could be generated by rent, add in vacancy

figures and other monthly costs to determine cash flow on a monthly basis and costs on a monthly basis.

- If the cost to renovate cannot be covered on a monthly basis by income, it could be necessary for the City and community to develop means to bridge this gap.
- Look at financing tools and other means similar cities have used to bridge this gap. 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.

AESTHETICS

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.

- **Public Space/Placemaking**

- 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.

- **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: how often to meet; what items are to be addressed; how long should they expect to be involved; etc.
- 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**

Cohesive and attractive signage improves the entire downtown and the businesses participating benefits from the improved aesthetic.

- Signage ordinances need to specify what is and is not allowed. They should address materials, size, location and percentage of store window being taken up by the sign.

- **Standards**

It is imperative that community standards be raised. In lowering standards, we ask less of

one another and people give less back to the community.

COMMUNITYNESS

If people are going to care for their town and get engaged with their place, they have to have a relationship with it and the other people residents.

- **Gathering**
 - 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**
 - Re-create the welcome wagon. Welcome people to the community and invite people out that may have lived in the community for years, but may not have gotten involved.
- **Ownership/Engagement**
 - Find ways and opportunities to give people a greater voice in their community. Let residents know their voices matter and they have the ability to shape their community.
 - The City should be as responsive as possible when people reach out to share their concerns and ideas.
 - Occasionally have contests where residents submit ideas as to how to improve the community. Seek out resources to fund these improvements.
 - 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.
- **Responsibility**

An important part of a healthy community is a feeling of responsibility for its wellbeing.

 - Cultivate a sense of responsibility in property and business owners. Not just for their particular place, but for their community as a whole.

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. A community's identity is not only an important means to communicate with outsiders, but helps residents connect with who they are.

- **Heritage**

A healthy community has deep roots and strong ties to its past. These ties must be preserved and strengthened.

- 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 allow them to feel a part of something bigger than themselves.

- Discover what traditions the community use to celebrate and rekindle them.
- 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. 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.
- Do a bit of social media investigation on the community and see what is being said. Explore ways to better shape the image of the community using these tools.

- **Events**

- 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

Bellbrook has a considerable opportunity to revitalize and restore the economic health it once enjoyed. It will require raising standards and making some unpopular decisions. The way of doing things for the last couple of decades led to a declining downtown. 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 but it will be worth it.