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Towns pushing to revitalize centers

Governments across the Triangle seek ways to bring life back to downtowns

By **DAVID BRACKEN**, Staff Writer

Outside Fuquay-Varina Town Hall this month, resident Josh Tate rejoiced after watching the town Board of Commissioners narrowly defeat a proposal that would have located a truck-driving school in the heart of Main Street.

In explaining his opposition to the school, Tate, 30, said he longed for the Main Street of his youth -- a place where families flocked to shop, mingle with friends and lick ice cream cones.

From Fuquay-Varina to Zebulon to Garner and Selma, small-town residents across the Triangle are aching for what they once had. After years of watching a mass exodus of traffic to nondescript shopping centers, towns are hiring consultants, forming committees and applying for grants, all in the name of downtown revitalization.

But with so many towns trying to turn the old and neglected into something new, carving out a niche for Main Street is no easy task.

Rodney Swink, director of North Carolina's Office of Urban Development, said the process requires a mix of planning, persistence and savvy marketing. While Swink has been helping towns resurrect their main streets for more than 20 years, he said that over the past five years, interest in downtown areas has boomed. He has worked with Smithfield, Hendersonville, Wayneville, Salisbury and other communities trying to revitalize their downtowns.

"It's going from 'I wish this would happen' to the reality of action," he said.

Zebulon is one of the towns working to bring new life to its downtown district. Lyddia Pritchard, the town's planning director, said Zebulon formed committees of core residents and officials to shape and monitor redevelopment efforts.

WHAT HELPS DOWNTOWNS

According to Rodney Swink, there are three key elements to revitalizing a downtown. Swink oversees the N.C. Downtown Main Street program for the state Office of Urban Development. The department runs two programs that assist North Carolina towns with main street revitalization efforts.

* Create a public/private partnership that brings together town officials and merchants. This group should meet regularly and keep the community informed on any developments or problems that arise.

* Appoint a person to guide the decision-making process. This person is responsible for collecting residents' views and weaving them into the revitalization plan.

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Downtown Zebulon's magnet is the Whitley Furniture Galleries, which has been around since 1909 and draws big weekend crowds. But Pritchard said Zebulon wants to create a more complete downtown experience, with a variety of shopping and restaurant options.

* Take a long-term view. Set out a series of incremental improvements to make the process more manageable.

Pritchard sees the future of downtowns in specialty businesses that might generate a large percentage of their sales from the Internet but also need a storefront.

Scootworks in downtown Zebulon is one such company. It provides custom accessories for metric motorcycles, a specialty niche market. Co-owner Dave Hockaday said about 70 percent of the company's sales come from the Internet, although he has seen an increase in walk-in traffic since the store opened in December 2003.

Hockaday said bike enthusiasts now ride from as far as 100 miles away to visit the company's showroom or have work done on their bikes. More important for downtown Zebulon, those riders need to eat and buy gas.

Success in Selma

Perhaps no town has been more successful at finding its niche than Selma. Over the past eight years the town has transformed itself into a bustling antiques center with 25 shops and a popular theater, the American Music Jubilee.

"Selma wasn't dead, but was in intensive care," said Bruce Radford, Selma's former town manager. "It needed a special shot in the arm."

In the late 1990s, Radford and town officials decided to turn downtown into an antiques center. Selma announced it would subsidize rents for a year on any building in downtown and actively promoted itself as a future antiques mecca.

Few took the town up on the free rent, but the marketing push got potential shop owners to visit the town, and 14 buildings were purchased over 17 months, Radford said.

While the support of town officials and residents was key, Radford, who is now town manager of Apex, said the project took off once a few shop owners bought into the town's vision and purchased buildings.

In Garner, meanwhile, officials and residents are hoping a local businessman can have a similar effect on its Main Street.

Few people in Garner would disagree that downtown needs help. The three-block strip along Main Street is a virtual ghost town, and many newer residents have no idea it even exists.

Magdy Saad, co-owner of Garner TV & Appliance, is spending more than \$1 million to renovate the historic Henry Bryan building, the largest building on Main Street. Next month the Sunny Side Too Oyster Bar will open on the building's first floor.

Kevin Nelson, head of Garner's Chamber of Commerce, said he has received a half-dozen inquiries about property along Main Street since Saad began his renovations.

The revitalization of Main Street is part of a larger North Garner Plan, which

town officials developed with the help of consultants.

Saad is optimistic about the area's potential, noting Garner's small downtown makes redevelopment manageable. But the town currently has no staff member exclusively focused on economic development, a position Saad said is needed if the town is to follow through on its plans.

In Fuquay-Varina, the trucker-school episode exposed the tensions that can arise when revitalization doesn't happen overnight. A number of residents who supported the school said they are skeptical that Main Street can ever be transformed into a string of quaint specialty shops and high-end restaurants.

Susan Weis, director of the town's revitalization association, said she understands the town can't re-create the past.

"There has to be a common thread," she said. "It looks back to the history but it also has to go forward."

Weis said progress is being made. Over the past several years, the association has given 18 grants for facade improvements and awning removals. Later this year, the town will replace the sidewalks and install new lighting and historic signs on Main Street.

Swink, director of North Carolina's Office of Urban Development, said towns must look at least 10 years ahead and, above all, be patient.

"People have to recognize this is not a quick fix," he said. "There's not one project you can do that solves all the problems."

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