

5. Altavista, Brookneal and Rustburg

5.1 Overview: Creating an Identity

Campbell County has a great resource in its towns and villages, and this is most apparent in Altavista, Brookneal and Rustburg. Each of these places has the feel of a rural urban center, but each in a different way. While the pace of large-scale commercial development continues in the Lynchburg MSA, particularly north of Campbell County, the importance of the smaller places grows as convenient centers for County residents and destinations for shoppers and tourists from other places. However, these towns and villages need attention in order to more fully realize their economic potential.

Altavista

Altavista's downtown has struggled with the economic challenge of the loss of some of its core industries and jobs together with strong retail competition from the Lynchburg mall. However, it has a relatively strong downtown, in some respects, and it has the following advantages:

- Strong leadership, sound institutions and committed businesses.
- Relatively heavy vehicular traffic through the downtown.
- Good parking on the streets and in the Town's parking lot.
- Strong institutional presence: Town government, library, CVCC, YMCA, and Chamber of Commerce.
- A varied mix of businesses and services.
- Interesting buildings and physical features.

There is a significant local market resulting from the resident population as well as the regional traffic that passes through and not far outside Altavista. It should be a matter of time as the economy comes back and new uses come to the Lane buildings.

Development Theme: The theme for redevelopment of Altavista should be that the survival of the walking and shopping street in rural south central Virginia is a boon for those who seek an authentic alternative to mall shopping. With the addition of offices and services, downtown Altavista would become more like a multi-purposed village. Main Street in Altavista is "the real deal."



Main Street, Altavista

Brookneal

Brookneal presents a special challenge. It will take a significant initiative to reverse the decline that this small community is experiencing. It seems unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future, that new industries will come to town to fill the place that furniture and textiles have left.

We see a different future. It will require revitalization of the downtown commercial district through an aggressive campaign to retain, expand and recruit retail and other commercial activity. This effort must be carefully coordinated with other Town and County activities. The focus on the downtown need not be exclusive and the benefits of actions to improve the downtown will extend to other commercial and residential areas.



Route 501, Brookneal

The downtown's niche remains to be defined. There are two themes that suggest a strong tourism orientation, the antiques complex/rural design center and the local heritage theme, and perhaps these themes can be united into a unique focus. There is a need to refine that niche in accordance with market potential and community vision. There are specific types of stores and other activities that might serve these particular themes identified below.

Development Theme: Brookneal already has some of the elements of a place where shoppers interested in home décor and furnishings might visit. Similar stores should be clustered here with a “Rural Living” Design Center as an anchor (Exhibit 5-1). We see much greater potential to attract tourists and regional shoppers with a deep investment in this retail niche.

Rustburg

The County seat has the inherent advantage associated with the large governmental presence that brings the need for support retail and commercial services. There are offices for lawyers and other professionals who work with the County, and a few restaurants and stores that support these elements. There are also several craft stores that seem to attract visitors. However, there is no concentrated core of Rustburg and most of the activities spread over a mile along Routes 24/501. This leads to a kind of village sprawl that is unattractive for pedestrians and increases the level of vehicular conflict. We would recommend the encouragement of more intense development closer to the government center and correspondingly less density farther out.



Route 24/501, Rustburg

Development Theme: Rustburg is the place for professional offices and small service businesses. It has a built-in market of County employees and an historic ambiance. The small shops, service businesses and restaurants should do well in this locati

5.2 The “Main Street” Approach

5.2.1 Overview: Program Orientation

There has been discussion of the implementation of a Main Street Program in downtown Altavista. We believe it would be a mistake to limit the implementation of a program of this nature to Altavista. The confined nature of the challenge in that one location would limit the range of choices of the right person for the job and would further limit the scope of the job itself. We feel that Campbell County should promote the creation of a Main Street Director for the region, a highly qualified individual who would allocate time and services according to the needs of the downtowns around the region that request this support. This approach would spread the program cost burden, facilitate a higher level of service and generally enhance the prospects for success.

5.2.2 The Leasing Plan

A primary focus of the Main Street program should be on the creation of a leasing plan that evaluates current and potential locations of retail businesses and related uses in the downtown area. This information is useful in determining how to enhance sales through the clustering of complementary or compatible businesses that can take advantage of similar and overlapping markets. This is particularly important because of the challenges facing the commercial district including poor access and weaknesses in the existing tenant mix. The commercial area should be viewed as one cohesive district with blocks of store types that are complementary to one another. The main objective of the Leasing Plan is to place businesses in locations to take advantage of each other’s customers.

5.2.3 Recruitment

The Program must take the leasing plan into implementation. For each community, it will be important to identify and communicate the market position, retail potential, and business opportunities. Some of the important points to convey in the recruitment effort are:

- The overall vision for the downtown.
- Population and income trends.
- Proximity to US 29.
- Traffic counts on Route 501 and other roads.
- Numbers of tourists to the area.
- Amount of new investment planned for the area.
- Specific opportunities relative to store types and locations.
- Projected amount of new supportable retail space.

The recruitment effort will require professional communications materials that can be mailed or left with prospects. In the final analysis, the Town should simply try to bring the real estate community into the leasing process, providing those tools and assistance it can to facilitate the work of the commercial realtors.

5.2.4 The Marketing Strategy

The marketing strategy identifies specific measures for the Town officials and others to market the downtown, and these measures are part of the retail recruitment process. They include the following:

- Refine target sectors, defining each one in more specific terms (e.g. families traveling from Raleigh-Durham, Richmond, Danville and other locations).
- Formulate a marketing message for the downtown and each business.
- Create marketing materials.
- Continually review and update marketing targets and message.

The County's economic development web site should include the following:

- A section on current Town achievements, such as new company production records; awards or grants given to the school system; new businesses and business expansions; and new commercial development underway. This section should change every few months and provide a snapshot of progressive changes in the community.
- An e-mail program to communicate with potential prospects and media in target areas. This will require identifying the e-mail addresses of prospects, media contacts, and key state and regional contacts. At regular intervals, the region can send information to groups (e.g., prospect companies in the telecommunications industry) or to all contacts.
- Reciprocal links to the State of Virginia Main Street site so that prospects can have information on state and local programs and opportunities regardless of where they enter the system.

5.2.5 Cost and Implementation

It is estimated that this program will cost approximately \$100,000 per year (total cost to the region) for the following expenditures:

▪ Program Coordinator	\$65,000
▪ Benefits/Payroll taxes	\$20,000
▪ Overhead	\$15,000

These funds could be raised through the following sources:

▪ Local match (6 communities) (\$1,500-\$7,500 per town/village)	\$30,000
▪ County contributions (Five)	\$50,000
▪ Corporate/Foundation	\$20,000

The success of this project can be measured by using the following criteria:

- Increases in property values.
- Amount of public and private funds invested.
- Number of new/expanded businesses and net new jobs.
- Increases in sales tax revenues.

5.3 Opportunities for Development and Redevelopment

The development concepts translate into real estate opportunities. Throughout the commercial areas, especially in Brookneal and Altavista, there are land parcels and buildings that represent opportunities for infill development in support of the downtown revitalization process. These sites should be evaluated as development opportunities for

both adaptive reuse and new development on infill parcels that reflect both a vision for downtown and potential for synergy with existing businesses.



Main Street Stores, Brookneal

There are buildings that could provide a good location for the mix of arts, crafts, sports equipment and food geared toward local heritage that would constitute a first-class regional attraction. There should be good parking in the vicinity, on a site so central that it is easy to move from there to any other part of the downtown by walking no more than 5 to 10 minutes. The more concentrated this kind of activity is, the better.

Target Uses

There are many opportunities for specialty stores and other uses in these locations, including:

- Antiques, of both the “standard” household type.
- High quality arts and crafts, as well as an Arts Center and gallery.
- Restaurants that offers good quality food and atmosphere.
- Recreational equipment sales and rental (bikes, kayaks, etc.) for use on trails and the nearby Roanoke River.



Downtown Altavista

- Interactive displays, activities or performances, such as tobacco curing, or furniture refinishing, where visitors may take part in the action.
- “Funky junk” and “shabby chic” objects that attract interior designers.
- Art product and service stores that support decorator activities associated with the interior design industry.
- Interactive retail displays, activities or performances where visitors can participate in activities such as wreath making using raw cotton and cotton plants.

- Specialty shops in clothing that meet diverse needs and tastes.
- Coffee shop or other light fare food shop that makes a strong community statement as well as a food statement.
- Books, records, CDs and other goods that create a strong “browsing opportunity.”
- Interactive displays, activities or performances.
- Health and medical uses, including a health club, clinics and medical service centers.
- “Virtual store” that sells local products and manages a web site where the same products are available.

5.4 Actions and Responsibilities

The Towns themselves can take action, including the following:

- Place an interesting sculpture or graphic piece at a point of entry, something that conveys the sense of entry and suggests the many activities that one might undertake in this location, and provide a clear statement that welcomes visitors to the Town, presents the Town’s identity in a graphic way and further identifies the retail orientation of the surrounding area with respect to the design/furniture theme and the historic warehouse redevelopment.



Antiques Store Window, Brookneal

- Work with their arts communities to establish an entity that could operate a gallery.
- Identify a museum or other type of public attraction that will strengthen the attractiveness of this destination. As an example, Avoca might use a vacant downtown property in Altavista for the Lane collection. In Brookneal there may be an opportunity to house material associated with Patrick Henry.
- Seek a developer who can redevelop properties and package space for appropriate retail uses.
- Consider the development of a shed or similar structure that could serve as a seasonal outdoor market specializing in fresh local produce, plants, seasonal items such as pumpkins, wreaths, dried corn, etc., meats and poultry, cheeses and dairy products, seafood, baked goods, herbs and spices. Additionally, vendors should be sought to provide other specialty items such as cut flowers, crafts, and prepared foods to eat in or take out. An outdoor dining area would provide a festive ambiance.
- Continue steady efforts to improve the appearance of streets with selective landscaping and other physical improvements, including the installation of better signage to link the street with nearby parking.
- It should be possible to create a trail through the downtown with appropriate signage and graphics that orient new visitors.

The County has an important role to play in making all this happen.

- Prepare very simple architectural design guidelines for improvements to historic buildings. The guidelines should provide direction to property owners and contractors on the proper rehabilitation techniques.



Presbyterian Church, Rustburg

- Prepare public improvement plans for Rustburg and Brookneal to enhance the village concept, ambiance and livability of these communities. Pedestrian facilities, lighting, landscaping, parking, open spaces, public performance areas, etc. should be planned in a coordinated fashion.

- Evaluate public-private partnership opportunities to take on major redevelopment projects such as the Lane Corporate Building in Altavista and the Thomasville Plant in Brookneal, in situations where private market force probably won't be able to meet the actual need.
- Develop and manage a program to enhance the appeal of the towns to tourists through improvements to local museums and cultural facilities. This program might include development of a corps of properly trained volunteers to act as docents, museum staff, guides, etc. In addition, new events and interpretive programs could be developed in a coordinated fashion and marketed in a comprehensive manner.
- Create marketing materials for each village that describes their history, interesting sites, and merchants in the area.
- Consider establishment of a bike trail that connects the three places, or segments of trails that begin and end in one or two of them.
- Focus public investment on these places whenever possible, recognizing that all parts of the County need attention but infrastructure is already present at these locations.

5.5 The Special Role of Tourism

These towns have a bigger market area for tourism than most people seem to acknowledge. There is untapped potential in the extended market as well as in tourism in general. The development of the City of Farmville, an hour to the east, illustrates this fact. In order to tap into this greater potential, it will be necessary to communicate a new identity for the Town and a new vision of specific opportunities and attractions to retailers, developers, shoppers and others in the Town, Campbell County and throughout the region.



Furniture Complex, Farmville

Tourists and shoppers from outside the area seek authentic local experiences. Families are eager to find places that hold the interest of both children and adults. Stores that get



Avoca, Altavista

customers involved in putting the product in final form or tailoring it to a specific need or taste can add great value in a downtown location; we call this “interactive retailing.” A product like a wreath that features cotton from the local farm “designed” by the customer brings together local opportunities with desired products and experiences. Also, there could be an associated product store accessible via the Internet to extend these types of customized experiences to a global market.

Seasonal events

The success of “Uncle Billy’s Day” in Altavista is an indication of even greater potential for special events; this weekend draws approximately 30,000-50,000 visitors yearly (see the website www.unclebillysday.1colony.com). There is a need for a few more events in the County to expand the impact of the Town and enhance its identity in the market area and with the potential tourist market. It will be important to create a few events specifically to promote the downtown, at a modest scale but with growth potential. The starting point is the set of strengths that have broad potential market interest, notably historic subject areas.

The early summer weekends will be big weekends for antique shops and the Design Center in general. Special events and weekend activities should be timed to connect with big weekends, and heightened tourist travel times, such as holiday weekends, special seasonal attractions and related activities. Each season should have its signature event, such as a Christmas parade or shopping spree, or a harvest festival in the autumn.

Accommodations

On a related note, there is an opportunity for bed and breakfast accommodations in all three communities. Large homes may be an attractive location for this type of use. There may eventually be market support for a small inn or hotel downtown. The County can facilitate this activity by active promotion and networking, and make the permitting of this use as easy as possible by removing any zoning barriers that might prevent this use.

5.6 Conclusions

While there may be too much commercial space in the area now, given that the population has not grown significantly, there is nevertheless an opportunity to market the towns and villages more effectively. This will require some thinking about uses that are not present in the area and some aggressive public-private partnerships to carry them out.

Altavista, Brookneal and Rustburg all have modest historic, environmental and commercial attractions, but they need to re-focus existing resources, bring people from the highway and regional urban centers and attract shoppers and visitors from outer edges of the defined market area. Themes based on local assets—historic furniture production, antiques, the heritage of Patrick Henry, Charles Lynch and others--could galvanize the identities of these places and generate attention from a wide area and over a long time.