Executive Summary

The Florence Downtown Master Plan (2010 - 2015) was developed in conjunction with and as a component of, the City of Florence Comprehensive Plan. It encapsulates a body of planning work spanning approximately 10 years beginning with Vision 2010 (adopted in 2001). The impetus for this version of the plan is due to several factors not least of which has been the generous investments in major cultural institutions by the Doctors Bruce and Lee Foundations. These landmark projects have radically transformed portions of Downtown and solidified its role as the civic and cultural hub of the region. A number of new projects currently in the pre-feasibility or discussion phases warrant a plan update to ensure that they are being thought through collectively and in context with the entire Downtown.

This plan was developed over several months in conjunction with an ad hoc Downtown Advisory Committee. The results from a community-wide planning forum held on March 22, 2010, as well as numerous interviews with city business leaders and real estate professionals, were used to inform plan recommendations and implementation strategies.
Implementation

Effective implementation begins by aligning the community’s energies and resources around projects that are currently in play. These projects should be coaxed along by helping to plug financing gaps, expedited permitting, facilitating property negotiations, marshalling political support, coordinated infrastructure improvements, and creatively looking for ways to leverage private programs. Concurrently, the City should begin to put in place the programs and institutional structures leading to a sustainable climate of reinvestment. Policy and project-specific measures are presented below in three- to five-year intervals.

THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

The City’s admirable efforts to garner recognition for its Downtown historic district, including getting parts of it listed on the National Register, is a solid first step in building more local appreciation for it (and developer interest in it). A rigorous code enforcement program will protect the buildings from prolonged periods of deferred maintenance; many of them are at risk of demolition through neglect. It helps instill investor confidence by protecting the value of new projects against back-and-forth blight, and helps “mothball” historic buildings awaiting renovation. The implementation of such a code would empower the City to take preventative action.

Historic renovation projects in smaller cities like Florence are often very difficult to make work financially. Even with various tax credits, the costs of renovation often exceed the building’s revenue generating potential. The City should be receptive to project ideas that require creative “deal structuring” to make work including those involving affordable housing tax credits, rehabilitation tax credits, New Markets Tax Credits, potential TIF financing.

PARKING

Downtowns must accommodate parking, without becoming overwhelmed with parking. As voiced in the public meetings for this plan, the city is in need of comprehensive, shared parking strategies in order to move away from the “one building, one parking lot” development pattern that has left large holes in the City’s urban fabric.

Florence will need to maximize off-street parking opportunities by strategically placing public lots and structured parking. Parking structures, however, are very expensive to build ($15,000 - $20,000 per space) and generally don’t make financial sense where land costs are low and land vacancy is high. Greater development density or major public incentives will likely need to accompany private developments. These three locations are under consideration: City/County Building lot; north side of Cheves Street roughly between Coll and Barbee Streets; and along Hwy Street in the vicinity of the Little Theater and Library.

HOUSING

Downtowns need people living in them in order to thrive. Most successful Downtown rejuvenation efforts over the past 20 years have actually led with housing which has provided a market for Downtown businesses and provided consistent activity at various times of the day and week. Although most cities prefer “market rate” housing, the leading edge of the housing market usually consists of a significant percentage of affordable housing. Any effort therefore to encourage Downtown reinvestment should focus on housing as one of the first courses of action.

At present, there are far too few people living in the heart of Downtown to support local businesses and maintain consistent activity. Also, given current conditions Downtown, and the limited size of the local luxury urban housing market, the City shouldn’t expect a flood of condominiums or high-end townhouses to make the market any recover. The City therefore would be wise to encourage more high-quality affordable housing developments Downtown, particularly in some of the historic buildings that probably won’t get restored without some type of major tax incentives (i.e. where the cost of rehab is likely to greatly exceed resale value or projected rental income). As a good local example, Coil Village is a newly constructed project that has, by most accounts, been positively received in the market.

MOBILITY

Downtown Florence is a fairly easy place to get around by automobile. It isn’t as convenient to navigate by other means, and walking is inhibited by the distance between major building groups and heavy traffic on through streets. The edges of Downtown and its major attractions are also not well marked giving it a pass-through quality. In all cases, the city needs to place greater emphasis on the overall user experience for visitors and pedestrians by accommodating alternative forms of transit such as bike and bus.

This plan doesn’t put forth any new recommendations for major street improvements except for those that add to overall street functionality and appearance such as streetscaping, wayfinding signs, and maximizing opportunities for bike lanes and on-street parking. New sidewalks should eventually be added to improve the walking experience. If and when any of the sites along the street get redeveloped, they should better define the street space by being oriented to the street and placed closer to it.

Such a facility needs to be located near a concentration of potential ridership generators, and where buses can be staged without conflicting with adjacent uses. Most importantly, the project will have to tie in to Amtrak’s Palmetto line service in order to be considered truly multi-modal. This will require relocating the current Amtrak station to a more central Downtown location.

TRANSIT CENTER

Exciting efforts are currently underway to build a new intermodal transit center Downtown. Such a facility promises to stimulate other investments and will help reinforce Downtown as the place where all things come together. Such a facility needs to be located near a concentration of potential ridership generators, and where buses can be staged without conflicting with adjacent uses. Most importantly, the project will have to tie in to Amtrak’s Palmetto line service in order to be considered truly multi-modal. This will require relocating the current Amtrak station to a more central Downtown location.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In today’s economic environment, a singular focus on real estate development (supply) without a complementary effort to develop or recruit businesses to occupy it (demand) will have limited success. Incentives and supports need to be created for businesses as well as buildings, and the City will sometimes need to facilitate difficult projects into existence using all resources at its disposal.

The City’s main role in getting private real estate projects off the ground will typically involve three things: assembling and reselling land (possibly at a discount), providing low cost, and will help reinforce Downtown as the place where all things come together. Such a facility needs to be located near a concentration of potential ridership generators, and where buses can be staged without conflicting with adjacent uses. Most importantly, the project will have to tie in to Amtrak’s Palmetto line service in order to be considered truly multi-modal. This will require relocating the current Amtrak station to a more central Downtown location.

In today’s economic environment, a singular focus on real estate development (supply) without a complementary effort to develop or recruit businesses to occupy it (demand) will have limited success. Incentives and supports need to be created for businesses as well as buildings, and the City will sometimes need to facilitate difficult projects into existence using all resources at its disposal.

The City’s main role in getting private real estate projects off the ground will typically involve three things: assembling and reselling land (possibly at a discount), providing low-cost, small business incentives, and will help reinforce Downtown as the place where all things come together. Such a facility needs to be located near a concentration of potential ridership generators, and where buses can be staged without conflicting with adjacent uses. Most importantly, the project will have to tie in to Amtrak’s Palmetto line service in order to be considered truly multi-modal. This will require relocating the current Amtrak station to a more central Downtown location.