

Durham

from City of the New South

24

Chapter Three: Public Involvement

CHAPTER 3

public involvement

“Men make history and not the other way ‘round. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.”

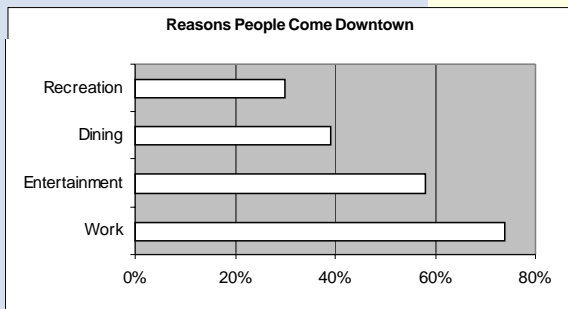
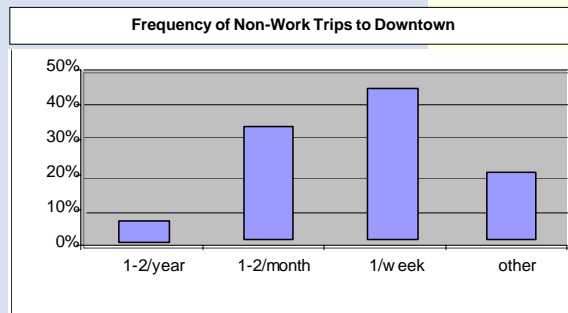
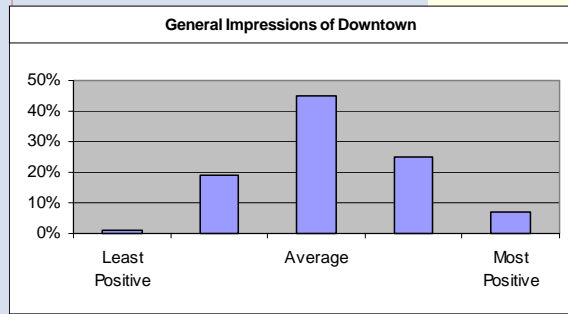
- Harry S. Truman

The Community Speaks Out

As a description of the Durham community's goals for its Downtown, the **Downtown Durham Master Plan** must reflect the concerns of a broad base of constituents. The master planning team utilized a variety of public participation tools to determine how Durham residents and employees use Downtown, what they want Downtown to become, and what obstacles are slowing Downtown development.

Numerous interviews, meetings, and focus group discussions were held to determine what Downtown stakeholders, Durham residents, and business owners feel is critical to the success of the center city. Durham Mayor Nick Tennyson convened two groups to work with the planning team: the Blue Ribbon Committee consists of community and business leaders and the Business Advisory Committee is comprised of businesses and neighborhood stakeholders. Beyond the meetings with those groups and individual interviews that were conducted with stakeholders, the three main components of public participation were Focus Group Discussions, Surveys, and a Public Open House. Following is a summary of the key findings gathered during the public input process.





Focus Group Discussions

The City-County Planning Department organized four separate focus group discussions. Participants were organized around the following topics:

■ Downtown Employees Who Live Outside of Downtown

This focus group indicated that they like working Downtown because of its accessibility, historic architecture, entertainment offerings, and conveniences. They would like more culturally diverse entertainment and public art, and they expressed concern over public relations, safety, limited dining choices, and the difficulty of telling people how to get places Downtown.

■ Suburban Durham Residents

The participating residents expressed concerns regarding traffic patterns, parking, and the need for visible law enforcement. They also wanted larger stores and more entertainment uses. The Carolina Theatre and Durham Arts Council were identified as existing 'draws' and the suggestion of developing a farmers' market as another anchor was made.

■ Downtown Area Neighborhood Residents

Though priorities for this group varied, certain observations and recommendations were consistent across neighborhood boundaries. Residents want improved urban character and increased investment in the public environment, including the stabilization of old buildings and the improvement of traffic patterns. Many residents said that they go elsewhere to shop because they do not feel that Downtown is safe and pedestrian-friendly. They also indicated a need for more parks, bike paths, restaurants, and new housing.

■ Downtown Merchants and Business Leaders

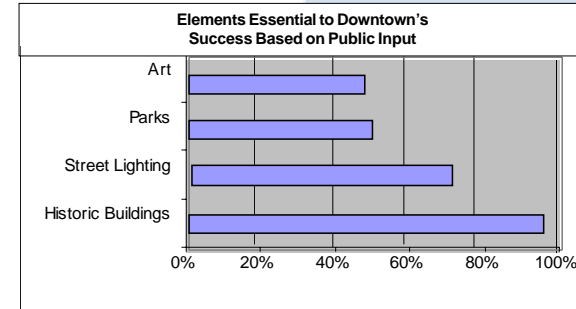
Participants in this group shared many observations and recommendations having to do with street circulation (including a need for more two-way streets), an improved Main Street, parking availability, streetscape appearance, public open spaces, and retail potential. The concerns of traffic and wayfinding were again expressed as business leaders said that getting customers Downtown is confusing and difficult. They also indicated frustration in getting City approvals for start-up businesses.

Surveys

Two surveys were developed and distributed in order to quantify participants' reactions to particular Downtown issues. The Participants' Survey, focused on general opinions regarding parking, accessibility, frequency of trips, etc. and was distributed at the four focus group discussions. The second survey focused on opinions regarding safety, appearance, and visual conditions. This Community Perceptions Survey was distributed during an open house held on April 15, 1999.

In total, participants returned more than 125 surveys. While not a sizeable study group, these surveys do give an indication of some of the public's perceptions of problems and opportunities Downtown.

The majority (53%) of survey respondents reside either Downtown or in the area south-southwest of Downtown. More than half (60%) of the respondents work Downtown. At right is a summary of the principal survey results.



Downtown Master Plan Survey Results

- The majority of respondents had a "middle of the road" attitude regarding their general impression of Downtown. Forty-five percent gave a rating of 3 on a scale of 1 to 5.
- Work and entertainment were cited as the top reasons people come Downtown.
- More than 60% of respondents commute to Downtown in less than 15 minutes.
- More than 75% of respondents indicated that they drive alone when going Downtown.
- More than half said they do not have trouble parking.
- Suburban residents were the only group in which a majority indicated that they have trouble parking.
- More than two times as many respondents said that they prefer surface parking to garages; but nearly half indicated they were comfortable parking in either type of facility.
- Seventy-five percent of respondents said that they felt safe Downtown.
- Only 9% of respondents said they came Downtown to shop.
- Forty-nine percent of respondents did not find Durham generally attractive.
- Seventy-four percent of respondents enjoyed walking to and from Downtown destinations. There appears to be a threshold of 1-3 blocks that is the greatest distance that most respondents care to walk between parking and their destination.
- Respondents heavily favored historic buildings to new construction.
- Seventy percent of respondents cited street lighting as essential to Downtown's success. Parks and public art were each cited by nearly half of the respondents.



Public Open House

On April 15, 1999, a Public Open House was held at the Durham Armory. Nearly 100 people participated in the event. The open house was organized around four stations that focused on the following topics:

■ Downtown Districts Station

For planning purposes, the Downtown area was divided into five sub-areas. At the Downtown Districts station, participants discussed difficulties and opportunities confronting the five sub-areas. The importance of surrounding neighborhoods and their relationships/connections to Downtown were also discussed. Suggestions included placing focus on the north and east districts, creating links between activity centers, creating pedestrian-oriented streetscapes, improving the maintenance of public facilities, developing residential areas, and linking Brightleaf to the core area.

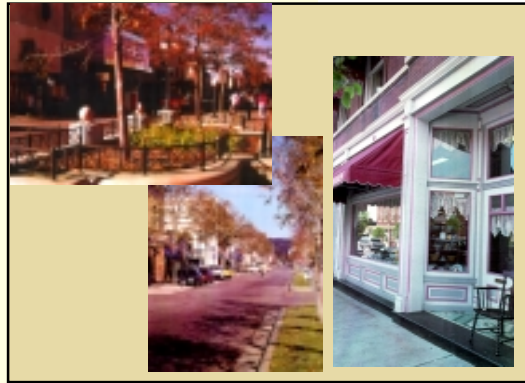
■ Community Perceptions & Urban Design Station

This station focused on participants' views of Downtown in terms of safety, arts, entertainment, recreation, shopping, work, and services, as well as architecture, design elements, landscaping, etc. An assessment of the participants' general opinions of visual conditions was made through a voting exercise. The images at right scored highest in the visual preference exercise reinforcing the priority on landscaping, public art, shaded areas, gathering places, historic architecture, and traditional residential design. Consistent with other information gathered, a majority of participants at this station indicated that they feel safe in Downtown, but the group was evenly divided over whether or not Downtown is attractive. Participants heavily favored historic buildings to new construction. Street lights, parks/green space, and public art were also cited as critical visual elements to incorporate Downtown.





Highly Rated Images: **PARKING**



Highly Rated Images: **STREETSCAPE**



Highly Rated Images: **RESIDENTIAL**



Highly Rated Images: **CIVIC SPACE**



Highly Rated Images: **SITE AMENITIES**



Highly Rated Images: **ARCHITECTURE**

“A city doesn’t get its character from brassy new hotels with space-capsule elevators gliding up the walls. . . Character comes from people, from the past, from tradition, from the interplay of human forces and emotions in the process of daily life.”

- Ian Menzies

■ Land Use & Market Conditions Station

This station focused on the results of a market study prepared as part of the master planning process and on particular land use possibilities. Participants reviewed the major market findings and commented on potential development directions for Downtown. Because the market study examined existing market conditions and how Downtown can respond to them, but also because of the planning team’s belief that Downtown has the ability to “create” a market and capture a greater share of the regional growth, participants were asked what they felt it would take to better position Downtown to compete for new investment.

Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that new housing is needed Downtown and that opportunities for upper floor lofts and rentals in the core would provide a major benefit. Also, participants felt new owner-occupied housing in surrounding neighborhoods would have a significant, positive impact. Participants agreed that Main Street needs a major makeover and should be a primary destination place. Related to issues of Main Street is the need to link Brightleaf to the core area because many view it as being separate from Downtown, although independent surveys completed by the Convention and Visitors Bureau and Downtown Durham, Inc. generated different responses to this issue.

■ Transportation Station

The goal of this station was to determine how participants get Downtown and their reactions to alternative transportation scenarios, such as public transit and street modifications. A general consensus existed among participants that Main Street should become two-way and that it is difficult to give directions within Downtown.

Summary

In total, more than 200 residents, business owners, stakeholders, and local professionals participated in the development of the *Downtown Durham Master Plan*. Many of the participants' comments confirmed the Master Plan team's thoughts in regard to the need for:

- Substantial transportation/street network alterations,
- Stronger connections between activity centers within Downtown,
- More residential development,
- Enhancement of Downtown's role as a regional destination through the provision of additional attractions, and
- Synergy between existing attractions.

“Significant changes in human behavior can be brought about rapidly only if the persons who are expected to change participate in deciding what the change shall be and how it shall be made.”

- Herbert A. Simon
