

Ayden, North Carolina

	Ayden
Population (2000)	4,620
Municipal budget (2006)	\$17.5 million ⁶²
Per capita income (2000)	\$14,500
Median household income (2000)	\$24,000
Poverty rate (2000)	26%
Minority population (2000)	52%
Proximity to urban center	93 miles to Raleigh, N.C.
Proximity to interstate highway	56 miles
Strategic approach	Downtown revitalization
Time frame	2005-2007

The town of Ayden partnered with North Carolina's Small Town Main Street Program to redevelop its crumbling downtown. In the mid 1980s, a highway reconfiguration project rerouted traffic away from Main Street and dealt a major blow to Ayden's downtown business community. After several failed revitalization attempts by the local Chamber of Commerce and others, Ayden formed a partnership in 2006 with the Main Street Program. The objective of the partnership was to take a comprehensive approach to downtown redevelopment. Since then, Ayden has organized its redevelopment efforts, conducted a downtown market study and improved streetscapes to bring new business and investment into the downtown.

The community and its history

After convincing the Atlantic Coast Railroad Co. that his 40-acre parcel of land would be an ideal railroad depot, William Henry Harris founded Ayden in 1891. The railroad industry and businesses that supported it became the economic engine for Ayden through the 1950s. The tobacco industry was Ayden's other economic mainstay, which was supplemented by a modest manufacturing base.

Through the 1970s, highway N.C. 11 – the main north-south route from Greenville to Kinston – passed directly through downtown Ayden. In 1979, however, the N.C. Department of Transportation rerouted N.C. 11 one mile west of town and widened it to four lanes. During the 1980s and '90s, businesses in Ayden's downtown corridor struggled to



Instead of allowing failed projects from the past to depress the community further, Ayden creates a new vision, enables local residents to implement the vision and revitalizes both downtown and a sense of civic pride.

⁶² Town of Ayden website: www.ayden.com/ayden-nc-annual-budget-downloads.asp. Accessed on May 15, 2007.

stay afloat. The local Chamber of Commerce attempted, on a number of occasions, to revitalize portions of downtown. But what Ayden needed was a comprehensive approach. In 2005, a failed planning project with an expensive group of private consultants left community leaders and residents dismayed. “We had high vacancy rates and declining facades,” said Chris Padgett, director of planning. “What we were really in need of was a road map to get our downtown back to where it once was.”

The strategy

Ayden’s strategy is comprehensive downtown revitalization based on the national Main Street model for commercial district revitalization.⁶³ In March of 2006, Padgett and other local officials decided to apply to the North Carolina Main Street Program.⁶⁴ In July of the same year, Ayden was selected for participation, which entitled the community to receive three years of technical assistance and guidance in the development of a comprehensive revitalization program. Ayden also was eligible for various forms of small business assistance and training for local leaders. Although supported by the Main Street Program, community leaders – not outside consultants – assumed the responsibility for doing the difficult work of planning and implementing a revitalization strategy to bring downtown Ayden into the 21st century.

To kick off their community’s strategy, Padgett and the Ayden Town Board of Commissioners hosted a three-day charette in October of 2006.⁶⁵ Ayden tapped into the expertise of architects and landscape architects from nearby Greenville to guide citizens, officials and business owners through a visioning exercise. At the end of the three days, residents and officials had a clear and consistent vision for the future of downtown Ayden, and a new energy swept through town. “Two business owners were so excited about the work we were doing that they went ahead and updated their facades the next month,” Padgett said.

The next step was to channel the community’s excitement about downtown Ayden into a series of monthly meetings and to begin the real work of revitalization. Business owners, residents and officials were organized into three groups: design, economic restructuring and promotions. To get early results, the design group revamped Ayden’s existing facade improvement grant program. Matching grants for facade improvements were doubled, encouraging more extensive renovations. In addition, Ayden’s planning department offered free design consultations for updating Main Street storefronts. Results of this work were almost immediate, as applications to the facade improvement program jumped within days.

In the meantime, the economic restructuring group commissioned a market study to explore and highlight specific economic sectors and business types that were likely to thrive in down-

⁶³ “The National Main Street Program, developed by the National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, includes a four-point approach to downtown revitalization based on a comprehensive strategy of work, tailored to meet local needs and opportunities. For more information, see www.mainstreet.org.”

⁶⁴ The North Carolina Small Town Main Street Program (STMSP), an offshoot of the Main Street program, provides market analysis to rural communities and gives small businesses the resources to evaluate their market opportunities.

⁶⁵ A charette is an intensive planning session where citizens, designers and others collaborate on a vision for development.

town Ayden. Town Manager Adam Mitchell said the study, released in March of 2007, indicated an enormous void in Ayden's retail market that forced residents to shop in surrounding towns. The study estimated that businesses in downtown Ayden, particularly restaurants, clothing and shoe stores, could capture nearly \$9 million in revenue that, at the time, was leaving town and being spent in neighboring communities.

Armed with convincing research, local officials in Ayden had an effective tool to quell fears about locating new businesses in the downtown. "We are using the study to show successful businesses in the surrounding four counties that there is a market for their business in Ayden," Padgett said. "It's not meant to attract them away from their current location but rather to inform them that if they are looking to expand, downtown Ayden is a good place to locate."

The final group, promotions, rolled out a new marketing campaign for Ayden in March of 2007. The campaign includes a logo and the brand "Downtown Ayden: Close to Home, Close to Your Heart." Currently, the promotions group is working to put streetlight banners with the logo and brand throughout downtown Ayden. The objectives of Ayden's downtown revitalization projects are to create a welcoming place for businesses to prosper and for local residents to shop and spend time.

What are the lessons from this story?

Downtown revitalization can be an effective economic development strategy. While every small town hopes for a large economic development project that results in hundreds of new jobs, downtown revitalization can facilitate the growth of existing small businesses and create conditions for additional growth engines. Downtown revitalization is also a means to building partnerships and trust among community leaders so that when a big opportunity does come along, the community is ready to act.

Economic development requires a comprehensive rather than piecemeal approach. Ayden made several unsuccessful attempts to re-inject energy into downtown. According to Chris Padgett, this failure may have been because the limited scope of previous projects. In 1990, for example, Ayden's chamber set up a marketing campaign to promote downtown business. In a separate effort five years later, the chamber tried to improve the downtown streetscape. In each case, the effort was splintered and never dealt with the full range of downtown challenges. Through the Main Street Program, Ayden is tackling a range of issues, from small business development and business recruitment, to downtown streetscapes and facade grants. "In one form or another, our town has tried to revitalize," Padgett said, "but never have we undergone a more comprehensive revitalization than right now." By forging such a broad approach, Ayden's officials and citizens will be able to better address the complex issues facing their downtown.

Connecting with state or national resources to support community development efforts can make the difference. Through the N.C. Main Street Program, Ayden tapped into resources and an approach to downtown revitalization that moved forward more quickly, and with more success, than the community could achieve on its own.

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