

ATHENS DOWNTOWN MASTER PLAN

MAY 18, 2010



Athens Downtown Master Plan

May 18, 2010

prepared by



SEC Planning, LLC

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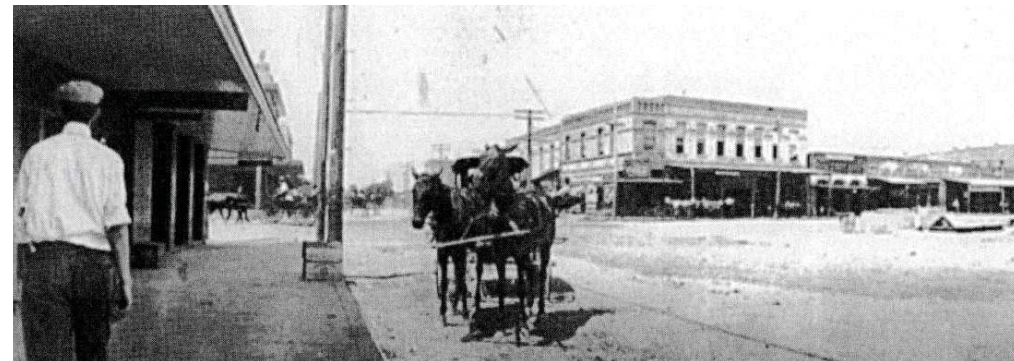
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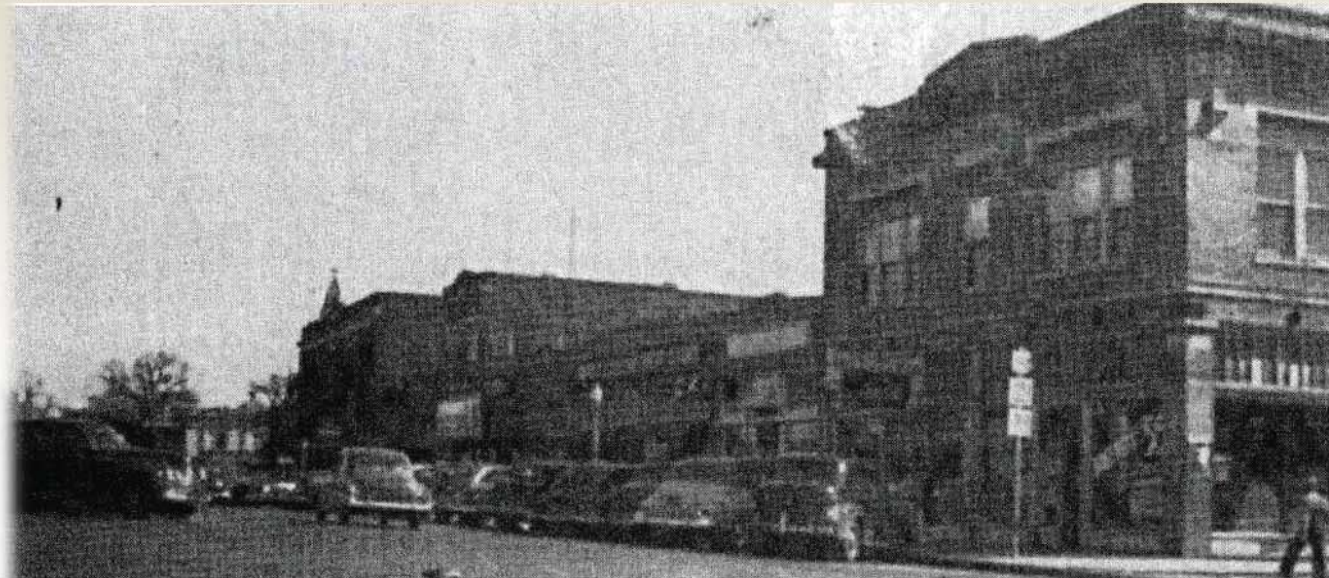
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Typical street scene, circa 1908. Taken on the courthouse square, north and northwest side



INTRODUCTION 1





Henderson County Courthouse, circa 1930



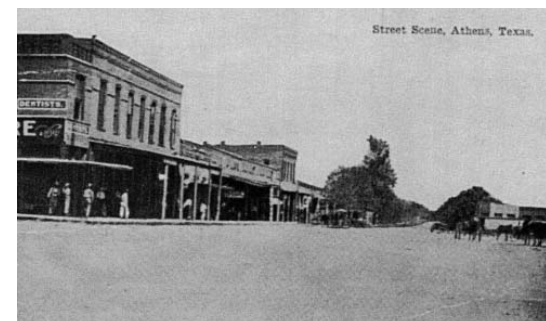
INTRODUCTION

The City of Athens, Texas has commissioned SEC Planning to create a Downtown Master Plan for the revitalization of the downtown district. This Downtown Master Plan will provide the City a vision to build upon as the community grows, creating a positive community image that will appeal to residents and visitors alike.

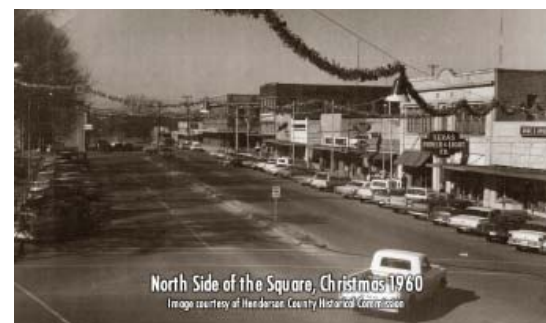
Many aging cities across the country share the same issues as Athens, that of deteriorating downtowns. Once the center of activity, downtowns are facing challenges that must be addressed in order to bring economic vitality back to the core of the community. Downtowns have suffered for many reasons, including a shift in traffic and shopping patterns, the development of new business and regional shopping centers away from downtown, neglected buildings, storefront vacancies, deteriorating surrounding housing, increased levels of crime, and a lack of funding to revitalize downtown.

While the City of Athens' newer areas are developing, downtown has not kept pace and is showing the classic symptoms of urban decay due to long deferred maintenance, significant vacancies, deterioration of buildings, absence of landscaping, and undesirable tenant mix.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the existing conditions of the downtown district and provide the City tools to enhance the downtown while guiding them through the planning and revitalization process. As the downtown district continues to evolve, it is critical to have a cohesive and resolute plan to guide the implementation of the economic and aesthetic vision for the downtown revitalization.



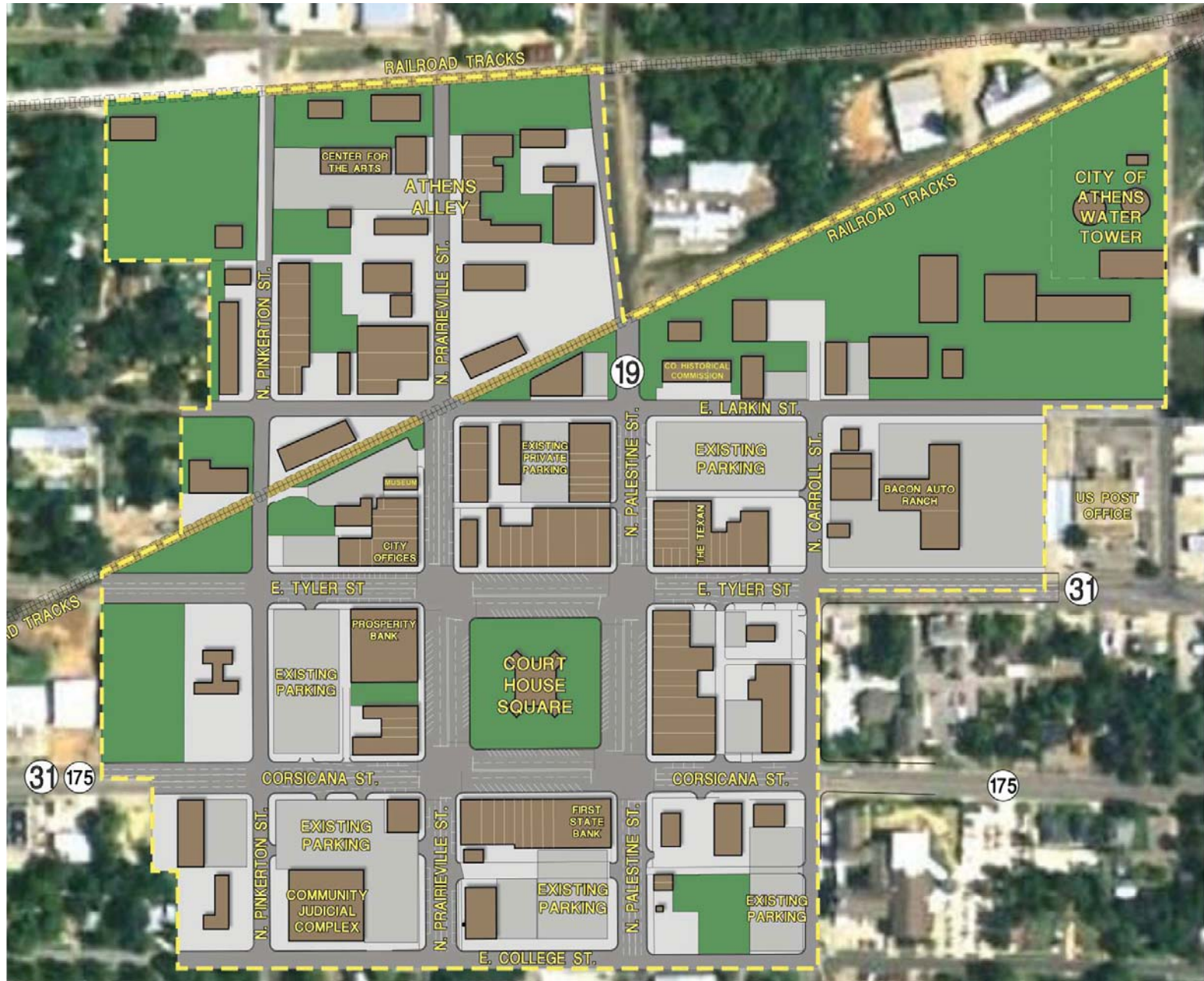
Northwest corner of Tyler and Prairieville Streets, looking east



North Side of the Square, Christmas, 1960



Crowd on the Square, 1940



Athens Downtown Study Area Boundary and Existing Conditions



PROCESS

In order to provide the City with a thorough and complete Master Plan, several steps were essential in the preparation of this document. Due to the significance of the downtown district, it was essential to analyze existing conditions and encourage public input prior to preparing any recommendations or design solutions. This analysis and public participation process allowed the consultant team to create design and planning responses that coincide with the desires and vision of Athens' residents.

The following steps and tasks were performed in the preparation of this Downtown Master Plan.

- Collected base information and photographic inventory.
- Utilizing the base data, prepared maps and exhibits to analyze and document existing downtown uses, building conditions, streetscape, parking and aesthetics.
- Evaluated existing codes and ordinances.
- Prepared community survey to gather and incorporate the desires and vision of Athens' residents. Survey results were used to guide the content of the design recommendations in this study.
- Held open house workshop to present existing condition observations, survey results and gather additional public input.
- Using survey results and feedback from the community workshop, defined goals and objectives for the downtown study to guide the content of the Downtown Master Plan report.
- Prepared land use recommendations and outlined redevelopment opportunities to guide future downtown planning decisions.



Community members meet for a workshop conducted by SEC Planning - February 2, 2010

Approximately 200,000 people live within 40 miles of the downtown district

Athens lies within an easy drive from three interstate highways; I-20, I-35 and I-45

It is ideally located:

- 75 miles southeast of Dallas
- 189 miles north of Houston
- 35 miles from Tyler, Corsicana and Palestine
- 26 miles from Canton

The city of Athens covers 13 square miles and has a population of 11,297

Henderson County covers 943 square miles and has a population of 62,000



- Prepared recommendations for aesthetic and streetscape enhancements to improve the quality of the downtown experience, including design guidelines.
- Outlined implementation and financing strategies to be evaluated by the City for future application.
- Presented design recommendations and implementation strategies at a second public workshop to gather feedback from the community.
- Finalized Downtown Master Plan report to incorporate community and City input.



Image board displays for workshop



Approximately 120 Athens residents participate in planning workshop



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION 2



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The Downtown Master Plan was designed to reflect residents' desires, goals and vision for the downtown district. As such, community input was critical to the success and guidance of the recommendations and design standards prepared for this study.

To engage residents in the design process, SEC Planning prepared a community survey to gain an understanding of opportunities, issues and expectations for the Downtown Master Plan. The survey results served as a blueprint for enhancement/revitalization recommendations, project prioritization and content of the Downtown Master Plan study. Over 250 surveys were completed by Athens' residents, providing a wealth of insight and ideas to guide the planning process.

Following the release of the resident survey, SEC Planning facilitated a public workshop on Tuesday, February 2, 2010, to present the initial results of the survey, preliminary observations and open a dialog with residents to discuss opportunities, concerns and expectations for the revitalization for the downtown district.

The workshop was well attended, with an estimated 120 people participating in the evening's activities, which included small group discussions of the survey responses, identification of issues and topics not addressed in the survey and definition of goals for the study.

The following goals and objectives were derived from the public workshop and resident survey to guide downtown planning recommendations and decisions:



Henderson County Courthouse



Utilize talents of community residents



GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Identify funding sources to provide financial incentives for the attraction of new businesses downtown and for the implementation of aesthetic improvements.

Objectives:

- Identify grant programs, tax incentives and other financing mechanisms to facilitate the implementation of the Downtown Master Plan
 - Outline a process for selecting aesthetic improvement projects for funding assistance
 - Outline a process for creating incentive packages and the qualification process for businesses seeking assistance
2. Recruit a variety of business types to downtown Athens, creating a well-rounded downtown experience that includes shopping, dining and entertainment destinations.

Objectives:

- Identify individuals or groups to focus on recruiting specific businesses to the downtown district
 - Conduct a market study to evaluate community demand for new business types in Athens
 - Attract restaurants, specialty shops, entertainment venue and art galleries to the downtown district
 - Define opportunities for events and festivals that will attract visitors and provide foot traffic and exposure for downtown businesses
3. Improve, enhance and preserve the aesthetic quality of the downtown architecture.

Objectives:

- Restore the historic architectural quality
- Create architectural standards and design guidelines for downtown redevelopment and rehabilitation
- Implement a method for administering architectural standards



Athens residents discuss downtown planning goals during the public workshop



Restoration of historic buildings adds character and connects with the city's heritage

4. Create a safer and more aesthetically pleasing streetscape and pedestrian experience downtown.

Objectives:

- Add landscape and street trees where possible
- Improve sidewalks and crosswalks for safety, accessibility and appearance
- Address quality of lighting for safety and appearance
- Incorporate clear signage and wayfinding for pedestrian circulation
- Incorporate public art to add character, visual interest and unique element to the downtown experience

5. Address parking concerns downtown.

Objectives:

- Identify areas for parking expansion and/or addition as well as opportunities for shared and employee parking
- Address pedestrian circulation, studying the pedestrian experience and the distance from parking lots to destinations to create safer routes to and around the downtown district

6. Identify stakeholders and community leaders who can implement specific elements of the downtown plan.

Objectives:

- Utilize City staff and community groups to organize and facilitate specialized stakeholder groups to help implement specific components of the downtown plan. Individuals and groups should include:
 - City Administrator
 - City Planning Director
 - Chamber of Commerce
 - Economic Development Corporation
 - Keep Athens Beautiful
 - Athens Retirement Ready



Landscape and street trees add color and enhance the pedestrian experience



Public art enhances public spaces and adds to the unique character of a place



Colorful pavers, crosswalks, lighting and landscape all contribute to a pedestrian friendly environment



- 7. Prepare phasing and timeline recommendations for implementation of proposed downtown improvements.

Objectives:

- Create a phasing plan that outlines priorities and target schedules for enhancements, construction and implementation of the downtown revitalization plan recommendations

SURVEY RESULTS

In order to document the community feedback from the downtown study survey, the following summary has been provided. This data should be retained by the City for future reference to understand the guiding sentiment that was used to craft the recommendations and content of the downtown master plan.

- 1. Would you dine and shop downtown if there were more restaurants and retail businesses?

- a. Yes 90.7%
- b. No 0.4%
- c. Maybe 8.9%

- 2. Would you support an entertainment establishment downtown? (Please select all that apply)

- a. Theatre 78.7%
- b. Music venue 74.5%
- c. Artist galleries 54.6%
- d. Not at all 5.6%
- e. Others, please list
 - i. Restaurants (Diner to Fine Dining)
 - ii. Shops (Affordable)
 - iii. Movie/Dinner Theater/ Performing Arts
 - iv. Bar (Wine/Sports)
 - v. Museum (Interactive & New)
 - vi. Family Friendly Events



Local cafes are great community meeting places



Theatres and other entertainment destinations contribute to the downtown's vibrancy

3. What types of retail would you prefer to see in Athens? (Please select all that apply)

- | | |
|--|-------|
| a. <u>Clothing</u> | 57.8% |
| b. Jewelry | 22.9% |
| c. Antiques | 37.7% |
| d. Gourmet Kitchen | 39.5% |
| e. <u>Home Décor</u> | 51.6% |
| f. <u>Bakery</u> | 65.5% |
| g. Sports Grille | 48.9% |
| h. Art Gallery | 35.4% |
| i. <u>Farmers Market</u> | 79.4% |
| j. None | 0.9% |
| k. Others, please list | |
| i. Soda Fountain/ Lunch Diner/ General Store | |
| ii. Nicer Grocery Stores/ Meat Market/ Organic Foods | |
| iii. Coffee Shop/Book Store | |
| iv. Affordable Shopping (Clothing, Shoes, General Household) | |

4. Of the retail choices listed in Question 3, which is the most important to you? (Please select one)

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| a. <u>Clothing</u> | 14.8% |
| b. Jewelry | 0.5% |
| c. Antiques | 3.8% |
| d. Gourmet Kitchen | 6.2% |
| e. Home Décor | 6.7% |
| f. Bakery | 7.1% |
| g. <u>Sports Grille</u> | 19.0% |
| h. Art Gallery | 1.9% |
| i. <u>Farmers Market</u> | 36.7% |
| j. None | 3.3% |
| k. Others, please list | |



Farmers Market provides a unique community event and promotes local growers and businesses

5. What do you interpret as the biggest problem(s) facing the revitalization of downtown Athens? (Please select all that apply)

- a. Parking 81.3%
- b. Traffic congestion 43.0%
- c. Economy 32.2%
- d. Aesthetics 29.4%
- e. Pedestrian access 26.2%
- f. Safety 9.8%
- g. Others, please list
 - i. Wheelchair Accessible
 - ii. Vacant Stores
 - iii. Traffic Light Timing
 - iv. No Bike Routes



Additional parking alternatives may be explored to provide access to downtown businesses

6. Would you be willing to walk 300' (approximately one block) from your parking space to a downtown destination if there were clearly marked pedestrian routes?

- a. Yes 93.8%
- b. No 6.2%
- c. If No, what distance would you walk?
 - i. 150'
 - ii. It is not safe and takes too long to cross at the crosswalks.



Festivals, concerts and fairs bring visitors downtown, strengthen the community's social fabric and contribute to the city's character

7. What activities, events, festivals or other attractions would you like to see take place or that you feel would improve the success of downtown?

- a. Black-Eyed Pea Festival & Hamburger Cook-off
- b. Old Fiddlers Contest (Move it over a weekend so more people can participate and enjoy.)
- c. Parades, Fairs, Outdoor Concerts, Live Music, Plays, & Dances
- d. Market, Craft Fair, Swap Meet, Art Shows
- e. Something to coincide with Canton's "First Monday" Trade Day (make it a regional event)
- f. Seasonal/Holiday Festivals & Events, Heritage Festivals, After Harvest Festival, Charity Events
- g. Wine Festival, October Fest, Cinco de Mayo

"Anything to help us have a thriving downtown, I am in favor of. It would be nice to have a place to draw people to Athens for dining, shopping, etc. Many other small towns in Texas are known for their charming, thriving downtowns. I don't see why we can't have that also!" *Athens resident quote*

8. What streetscape improvements do you think would benefit the aesthetics of downtown? (Please select all that apply)

- | | |
|---|-------|
| a. <u>Street trees</u> | 46.5% |
| b. <u>Street furnishings</u> | 55.0% |
| c. Covered walkways | 33.2% |
| d. <u>Improved lighting</u> | 60.4% |
| e. Banners | 16.8% |
| f. Directional and Informational signage | 35.1% |
| g. Handicapped accessible walkways | 22.3% |
| h. Others, please list | |
| i. Planters & Islands With Seasonal Color | |
| ii. Shade In Summer | |
| iii. Public Art | |
| iv. Public Restrooms | |
| v. Building Façades & Sign Improvements | |
| vi. Improved Walkways and Crosswalks | |
| vii. Brick the Intersections | |
| viii. Safety Lighting | |



Awnings and landscaping add character

9. What architectural improvements or upgrades do you think would improve the quality of downtown? (Please select all that apply)

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| a. Signage improvements | 34.7% |
| b. Awnings | 42.5% |
| c. <u>Restored historic fronts</u> | 94.5% |
| d. Others, please list | |

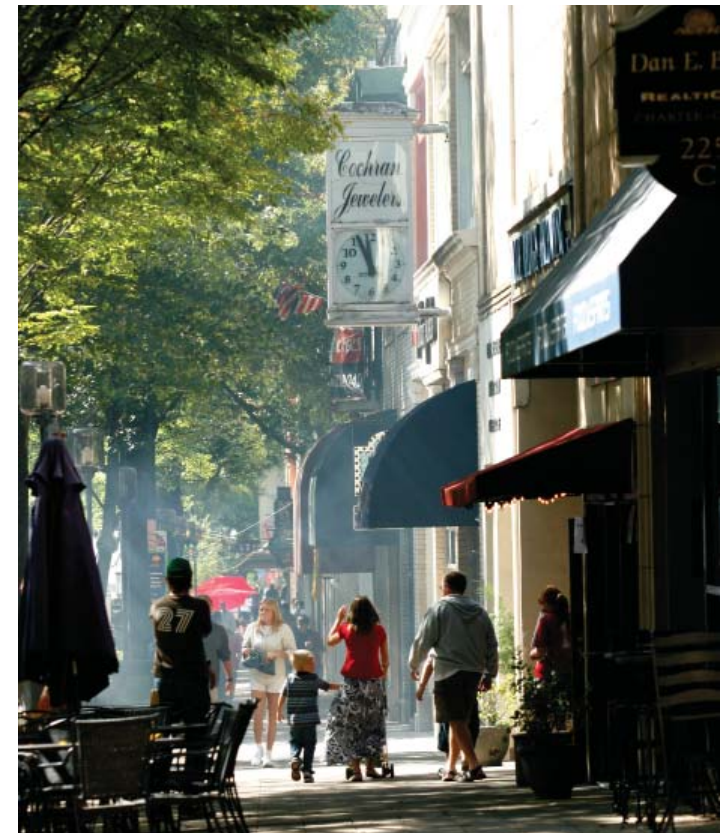
10. What social or community groups are available and willing to organize and facilitate downtown activities or festivals? (Please select all that apply)

- | | |
|--|-------|
| a. Arts and crafts organizations | 56.4% |
| b. Historic commission | 62.8% |
| c. Church groups | 37.2% |
| d. <u>Chamber of Commerce/ Visitors Bureau</u> | 89.1% |
| e. Music organization | 43.6% |
| f. Others, please list | |
| i. Community Volunteers | |
| ii. Schools & Colleges | |



11. How often do you visit downtown?
- | | |
|------------|--------------|
| a. Daily | 22.1% |
| b. Weekly | 23.5% |
| c. Monthly | 16.2% |
| d. Seldom | <u>38.2%</u> |
12. Please list any downtown destinations you visit on a regular basis.
- | | |
|---|--------------|
| a. Civic (Courthouse, Tax Office, Library) | 20.1% |
| b. Retail (Boutique, Furniture, Antique, Phone Company) | <u>42.6%</u> |
| c. Office (Bank, Attorney, Insurance) | 26.4% |
| d. None | 10.9% |
13. What is your opinion of the image of downtown for your community?
- Vacant, Neglected, Lonely
 - Beautiful Courthouse
 - Just alright, but has a ton of potential with some community support.
 - Lacking Restaurants, Entertainment, Attractions, and Nightlife
 - Too much Traffic and Not Enough Parking
 - Has the potential of being very charming with the right tenants and updates.
 - Not a lot of selection in the types of businesses and shopping.
 - A little dilapidated but has some great potential
14. How do you think the image of downtown can be improved?
- Building façade updates, lighting, and planters/vegetation
 - More accessible Parking
 - Reduce traffic and correct light timing
 - Public art
 - Need a comprehensive plan for architecture, signage, and landscaping (gardens, street trees, and planters).
 - A wider array of businesses, restaurants and establishments with different price points and products.
 - More events and celebrations
 - Fill Vacant Buildings
 - Wider/nicer sidewalks and more pedestrian friendly
 - Nightlife businesses

Athens, Texas, county seat of Henderson County, is often referred to as the Gateway to East Texas, just one of its many titles which include The Black-Eyed Pea Capital and Home of the Hamburger.



Awnings, cafe seating, decorative furnishings and landscaping contribute to a thriving, pedestrian friendly downtown

“First is appearance, make it look good. Next give folks a reason to stay. Provide choices for shopping, activities, bookstores, coffee shops, a nice eating establishment. Things that say not only welcome, but come and stay awhile. Look good for visitors, there are more than just relatives coming in and through town. Use festivals, venues and events to draw folks here and give them a knockout first impression, not just looks but the experience. That’s what’ll hook them!” *Athens resident quote*

15. Do you take your out of town guests to visit downtown?
- Yes, please list destinations 30.5%
 - No, please explain why 69.5%
 - There is nothing to do.
 - We take them to other towns with more to do.
 - There is no parking.
 - Nothing is open on weekends when our visitors are in town.
 - Yes-Furniture Store, Antique Store, Boutique, Coffee Shop
 - If I didn’t like them I would take them downtown.
16. Would you support the use of City/Economic Development Corp. funds to offer incentives to businesses locating downtown?
- Yes 72.2%
 - No 5.4%
 - Maybe 22.4%
17. Would you support the use of City/EDC funds to implement aesthetic enhancement projects downtown (i.e. tree planting, sidewalk improvements, etc.)?
- Yes 75.3%
 - No 9.4%
 - Maybe 15.2%



Landscape islands add aesthetic value as well as providing a pedestrian/vehicular buffer



Landscaping at street level creates a more appealing pedestrian experience

18. What are the primary restrictions for pedestrian accessibility in the downtown area?
(Please select all that apply)

- a. Handicap accessibility 18.6%
- b. Traffic 56.2%
- c. Adequate street crossings 35.7%
- d. Convenient parking 78.6%
- e. Signage (informational and directional) 20.5%
- f. Visual experience and enjoyment 54.8%
- g. Others, please list
 - i. Traffic signal timing
 - ii. Unsafe Crosswalks
 - iii. Lack of parking around the square

19. Do you feel safe when visiting downtown?

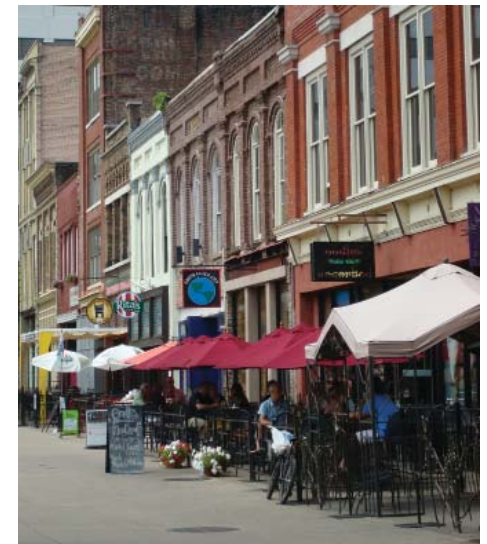
- a. Yes 95.0%
- b. No, why, please explain 5.0%
 - i. Not when crossing the streets
 - ii. Too much traffic
 - iii. Nighttime is a little scary because there is no one downtown and the lighting is poor.

20. Please list any business types you feel should be avoided in the downtown area?

- a. Pawn Shops, Payday Loans, & Bail Bonds
- b. Adult Oriented Businesses
- c. Tattoo and Piercing Shops
- d. Banks (in the future)
- e. Law Offices (in the future)
- f. Fast Food
- g. Furniture & Antique Stores (in the future)
- h. Bars and Night Clubs
- i. Anything that requires a large amount of parking.



Pavers, curb cuts and stop signs create safer street crossings



Main street cafes and shops create an appealing community gathering place

21. Which groups and/or individuals do you think should be actively involved in the rehabilitation of the downtown area? (Please select all that apply)

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| a. City residents | <u>87.0%</u> |
| b. County | 59.2% |
| c. State Highway department | 49.3% |
| d. Building/Business owners | <u>93.3%</u> |
| e. Chamber of Commerce | <u>87.0%</u> |
| f. Economic Development Corporation | <u>83.9%</u> |
| g. Rail Road | 22.0% |
| h. Others, please list | |
| i. Historical Commission | |
| ii. All citizens, organizations, and City departments | |
| iii. "Keep Athens Beautiful" KAB | |
| iv. Visitors/Tourist Center | |
| v. Richard Sanders and Jerry West with the County | |
| vi. Everyone has something to gain by this. | |

22. Please list/describe any images or symbols of the City that you would like to see incorporated into the redevelopment of the downtown. (i.e. City logo, brand such as Austin's Music Capital of the World, etc.)

- City Logo
- History: Town, People, Accomplishments, Industry (Brick and Clay Factories)
- Fiddlers, Black-Eye Pea, and Hamburger
- Fishing, Hatchery, Lakes, and outdoor activities
- East Texas: Music Capital, Wine Capital, Boating/Fishing Capital.



Festivals enhance pride in community and encourage tourism



Athens city logo



SITE INVENTORY & ANALYSIS 3



SITE INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

In order to understand the opportunities and challenges in the Athens' downtown district, SEC Planning prepared a series of plans and photographic images to document the existing conditions. The analysis included documentation of the following conditions:

1. Existing tenants and land uses
 - a. Each building and use was mapped to understand the development trends downtown and to use as a guide for future land use decisions.
2. Approximate square footage of uses downtown
 - a. Understanding the general land use and approximate square footage is important for understanding parking demand and competition for various businesses.
3. Location and quantity of vacant buildings/lots downtown
 - a. Identifying the vacant space can help to highlight where immediate opportunities exist for new businesses or redevelopment.
4. Traffic and circulation patterns
 - a. Traffic volume and vehicular and pedestrian circulation are critical components to understand when evaluating downtown planning decisions.
5. Existing parking lots (public, private and on-street)
 - a. Parking counts were calculated to compare with the square footage of uses downtown and to understand the geographic relationship of the parking facilities with the downtown businesses.
6. Streetscape aesthetics
 - a. The visual quality of the downtown streetscape plays a vital role in the success of a destination such as the courthouse square. Existing conditions were evaluated to highlight positive and negative qualities of the downtown visual experience.
7. Architectural condition of existing buildings
 - a. Each street within the downtown study area was photographed and sewn together to provide a documentation reference for the existing conditions at the time of this study. The composite views were then analyzed to identify opportunities for enhancements, redevelopment or rehabilitation.



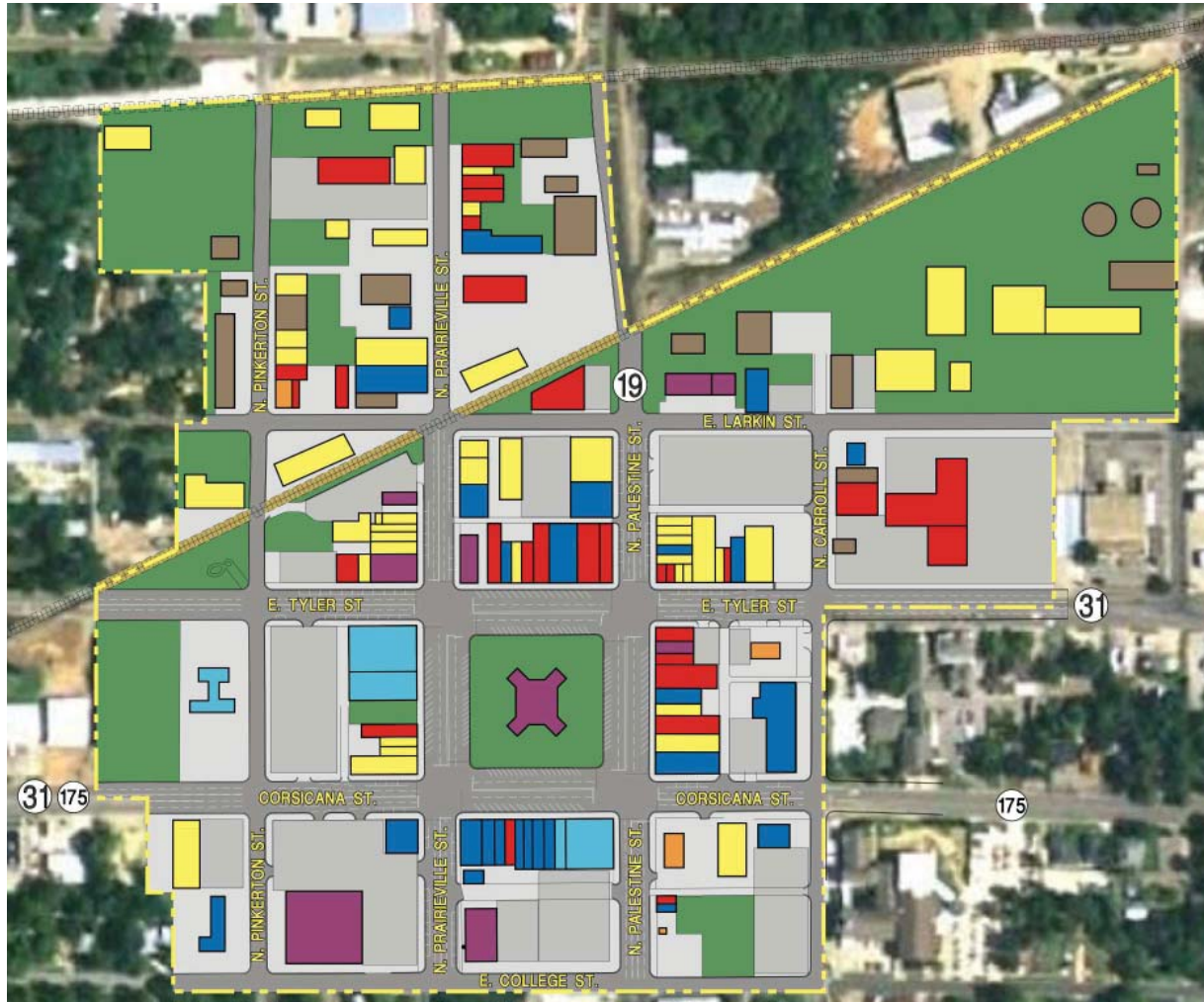
Downtown park



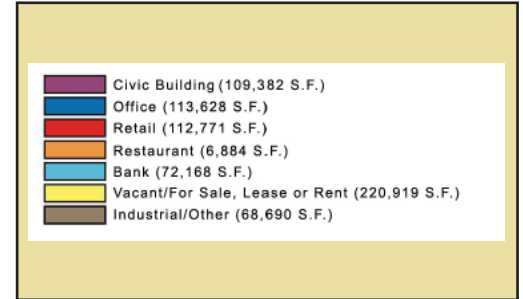
Large intersections create pedestrian barriers



EXISTING LAND USE

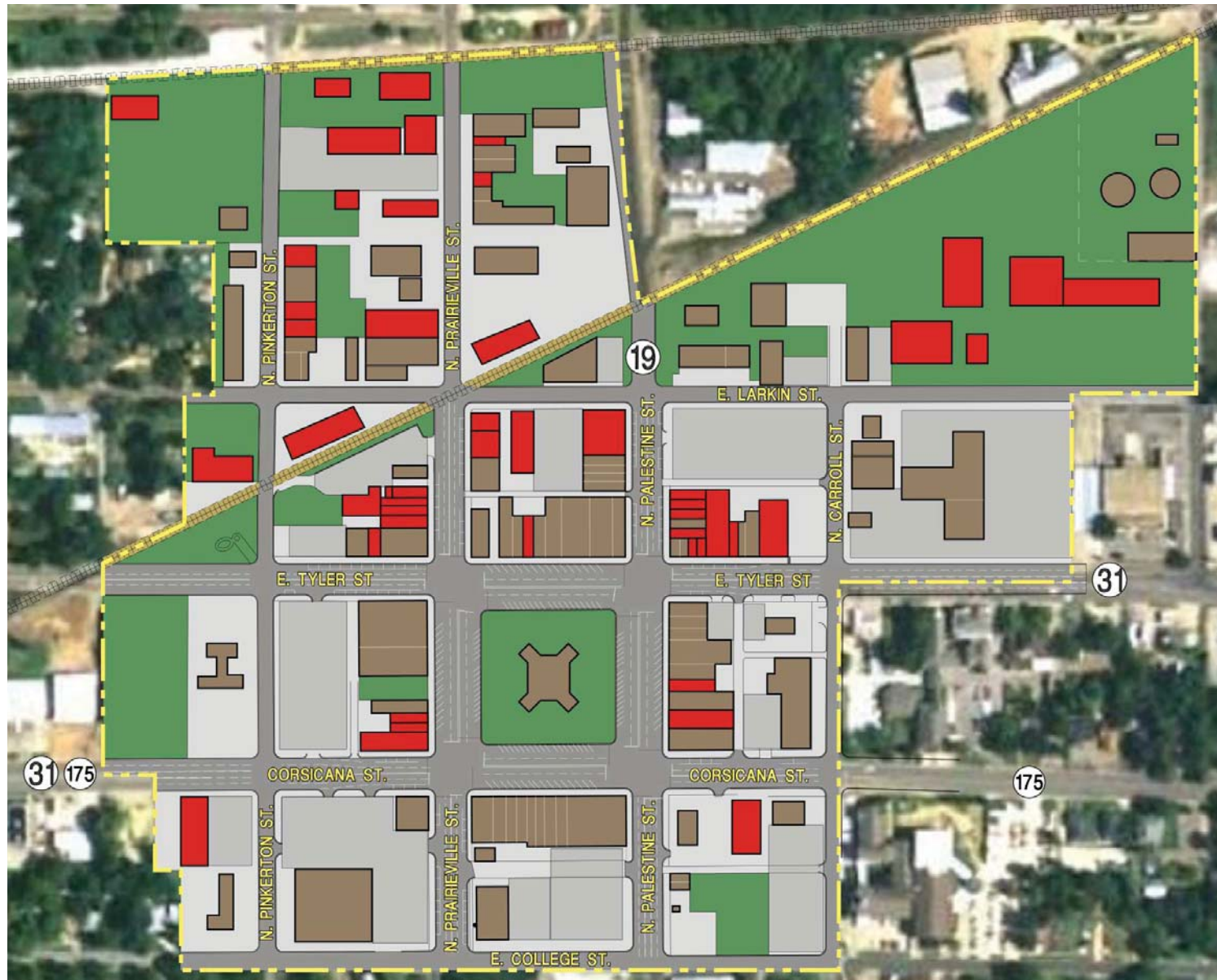


Current Athens Land Use Conditions, 2010



N. Palestine Street, east side of courthouse

VACANCY



Approximately 220,000 sq. ft. of vacant space exists within the study area or 31% of the total downtown square footage

The red blocks indicate the locations of vacant buildings within the study area



Building has been torn down, leaving an empty lot downtown



Dilapidated façade and landscape



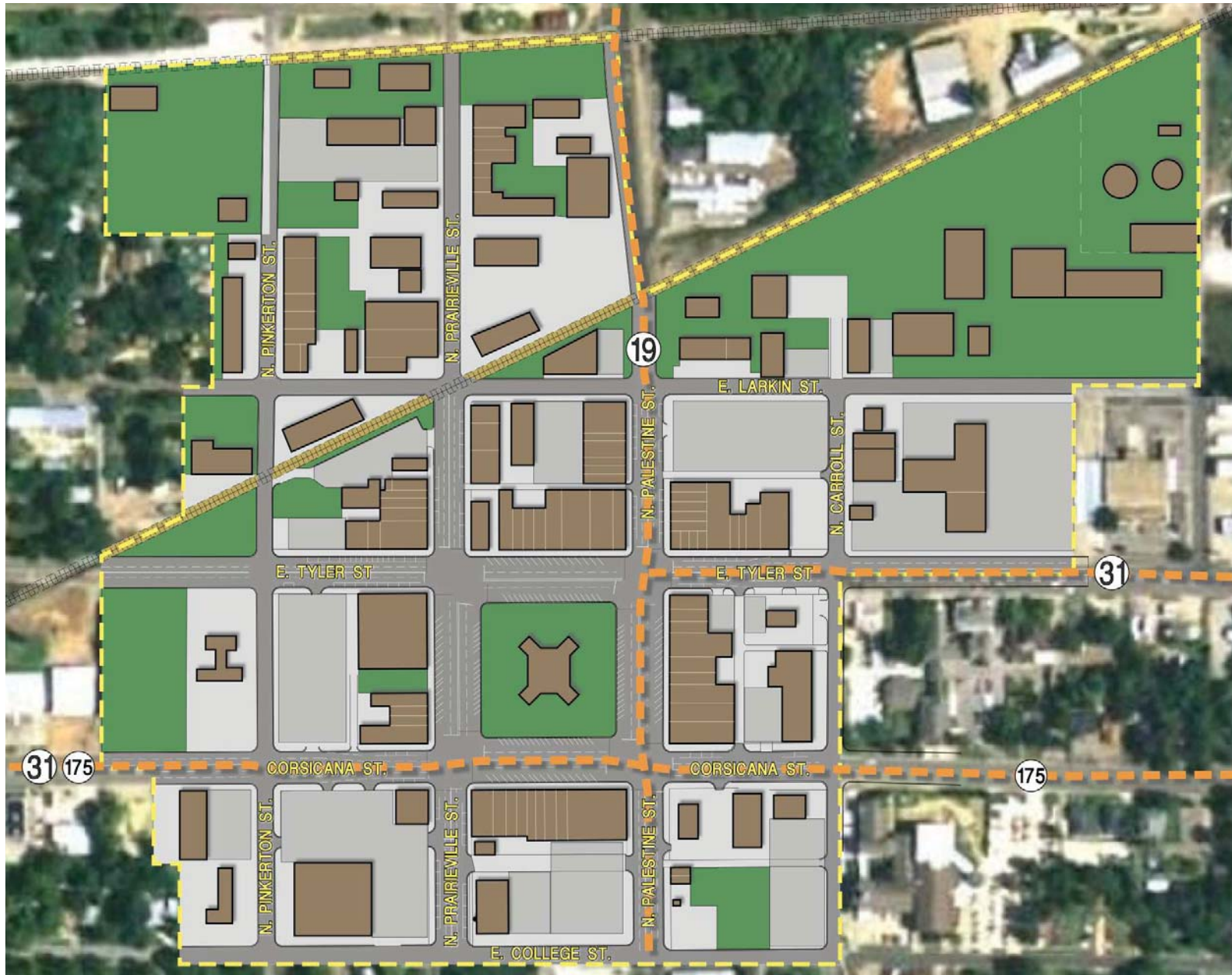
Several businesses remain vacant



Several buildings have been rehabilitated and are ready for occupancy



This building is a prime candidate for tear down and redevelopment



Orange lines denote downtown highway circulation and areas of heaviest congestion



TRAFFIC AND CIRCULATION PATTERNS

Traffic volume and congestion downtown can pose positive and negative consequences. Due to the highway circulation around the courthouse square in Athens, visibility is very high for downtown tenants. However, the volume of traffic can also detract from the quaintness of the courthouse square and the pedestrian friendly environment that is so important for a downtown experience. In order to provide recommendations for downtown enhancement, it is critical to identify and understand the obstacles posed by vehicular traffic on the downtown area.

The Highway 31/Corsicana Street circulation and convergence with Highway 19/N. Palestine Street, pose challenges for a pedestrian oriented environment. Due to these constraints, it will be important for the downtown plan to address pedestrian safety at street crossings. The traffic pressures may also guide downtown development decisions regarding land use and redevelopment recommendations.

The pedestrian experience is critical to understand in the evaluation of the existing downtown condition. Safety, aesthetics and user experience will be driving forces in making Athens a downtown destination that attracts and retains Athens residents and visitors.



Crossing E. Tyler at Prairieville Street

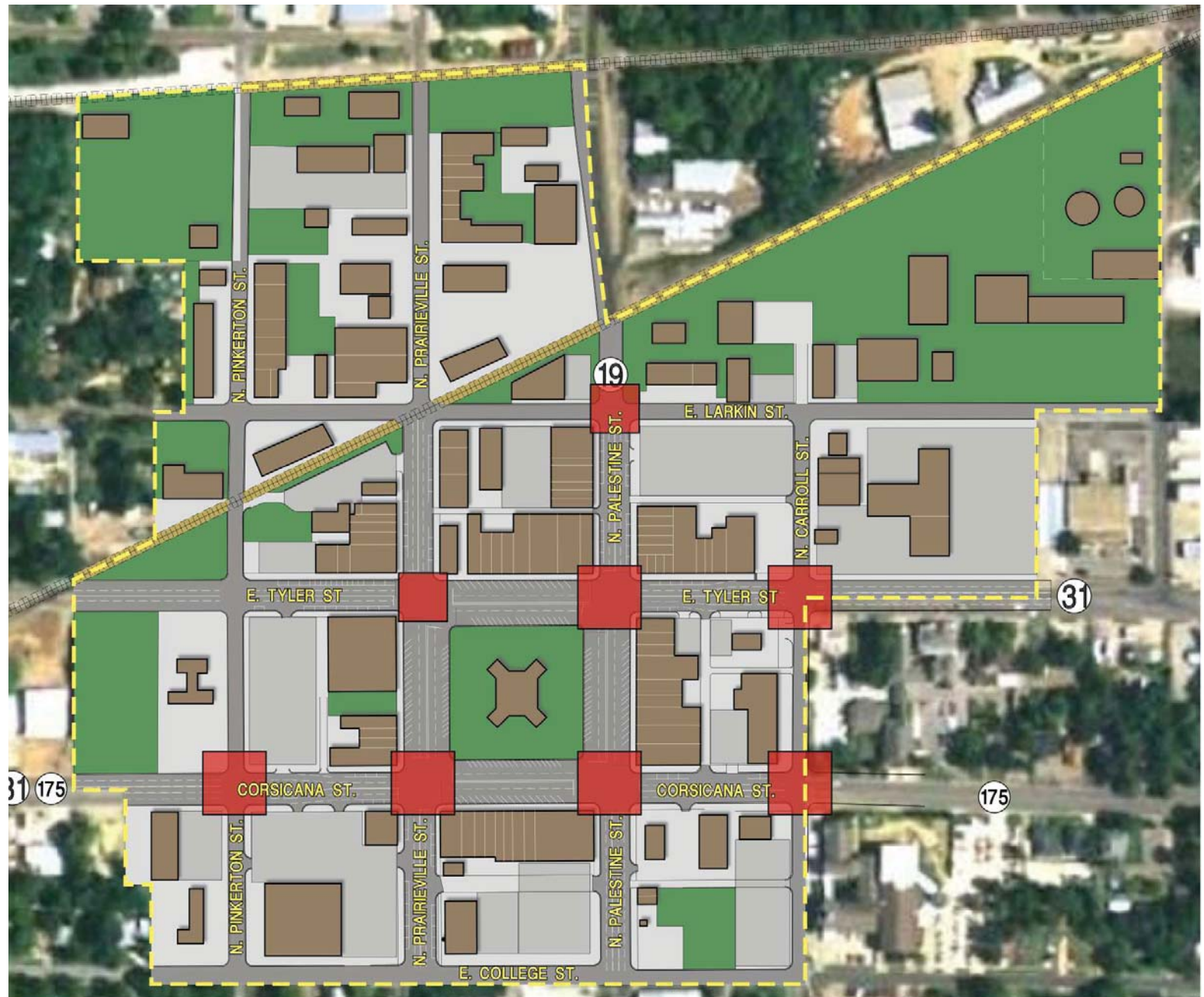


Highway traffic impacts downtown experience



Pedestrian crossings around the square create safety and distance concerns

Highway 31/Corsicana Street/E. Tyler Street and Highway 19/N. Palestine Street convey the heaviest traffic volume and congestion downtown. The traffic impact on the pedestrian experience is more favorable along E. Larkin Street, N. Prairieville Street and E. Tyler Street (west of Highway 19).



Red squares denote intersections with high traffic and unfavorable pedestrian experiences





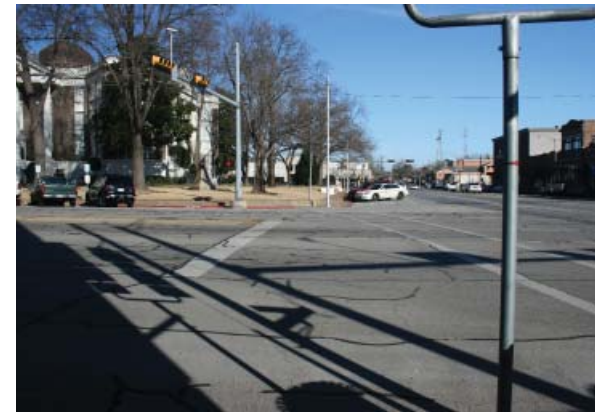
Large expanses of pavement make pedestrian crossings difficult



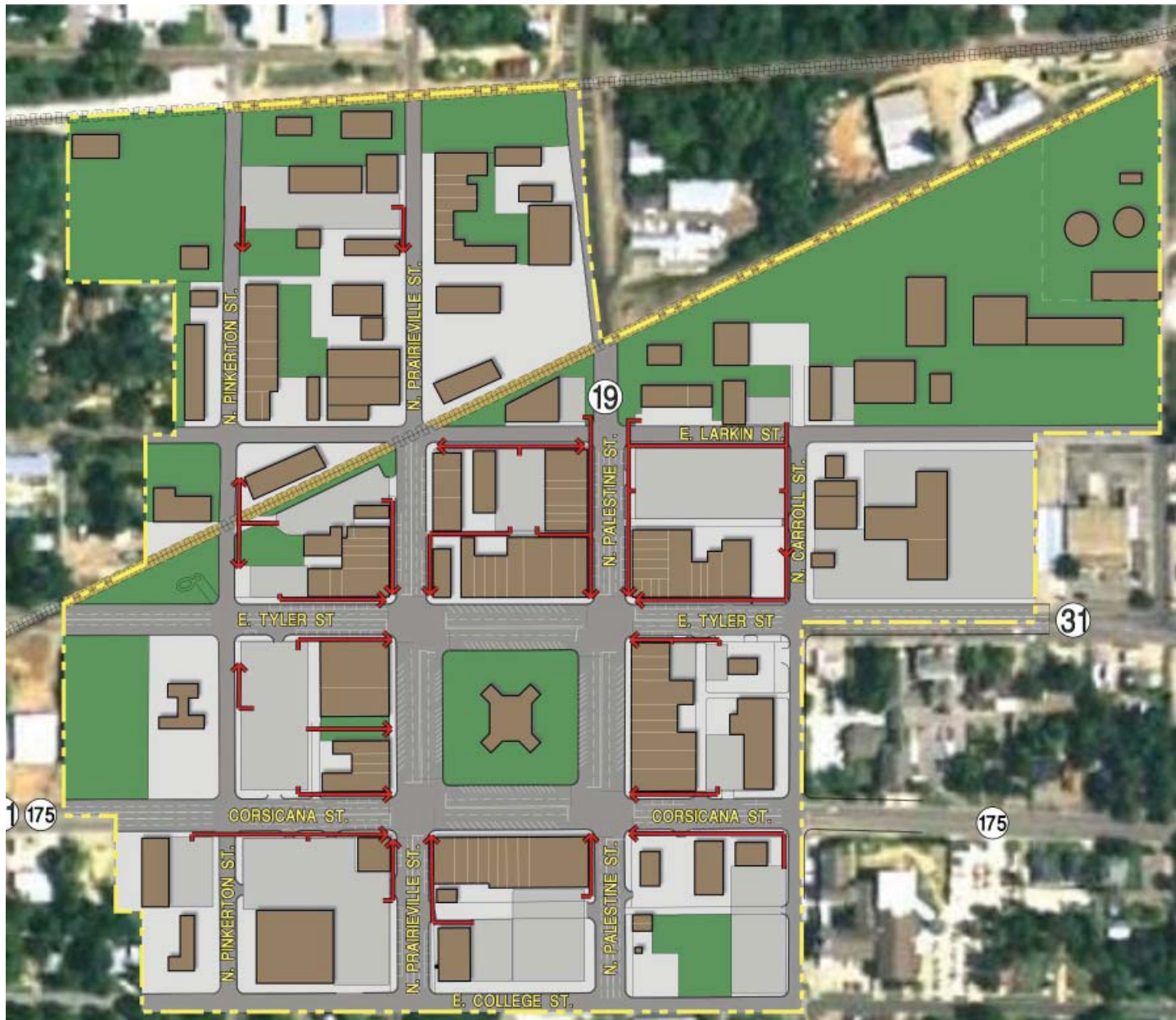
Intersection at East Tyler and N. Prairieville Streets



Intersection at Highway 31 & N. Carroll Street



N. Prairieville Street crossing at Highway 31



Red arrows indicate existing pedestrian circulation patterns from parking facilities

The pedestrian experience from parking facilities to the visitor's intended destination is very important. Currently, there is a lack of quality, pedestrian walkways connecting parking lots to businesses. Cracked or non-ADA accessible sidewalks, limited landscaping and lack of shade all impact the experience and impression of the pedestrian. Once the primary circulation routes are identified, solutions and recommendations can be prepared to improve the aesthetics of the street.



Existing vegetation has outgrown tree grate, creating ADA accessibility hazard



Landscaping has outgrown the pedestrian space



Landscaping along streetscape would enhance the pedestrian experience

PARKING

Parking limitations exist around much of the courthouse square and are worsened during peak traffic hours during the weekdays. It has been relayed that County employees often utilize the on-street parking around the courthouse square, limiting available spaces for other businesses. Several public parking lots are available, but challenges related to unsafe street crossings and unattractive pedestrian streetscapes make these parking spaces seem remote or inaccessible.

Some private parking lots also exist which could be utilized for evening or weekend events, if agreements could be reached with the owners.

Parking facilities are fairly evenly distributed around the courthouse square, but highway traffic and private parking spaces limit visitor accessibility. Signage directing visitors and identifying public parking is not apparent. When vacant space downtown is occupied by new tenants, additional surface parking lots may be necessary to accommodate the additional businesses. On-street parking should be preserved for the downtown merchants' customers, employees and visitors while long-term parking should be restricted and violations enforced.



Private parking lot along Larkin Street

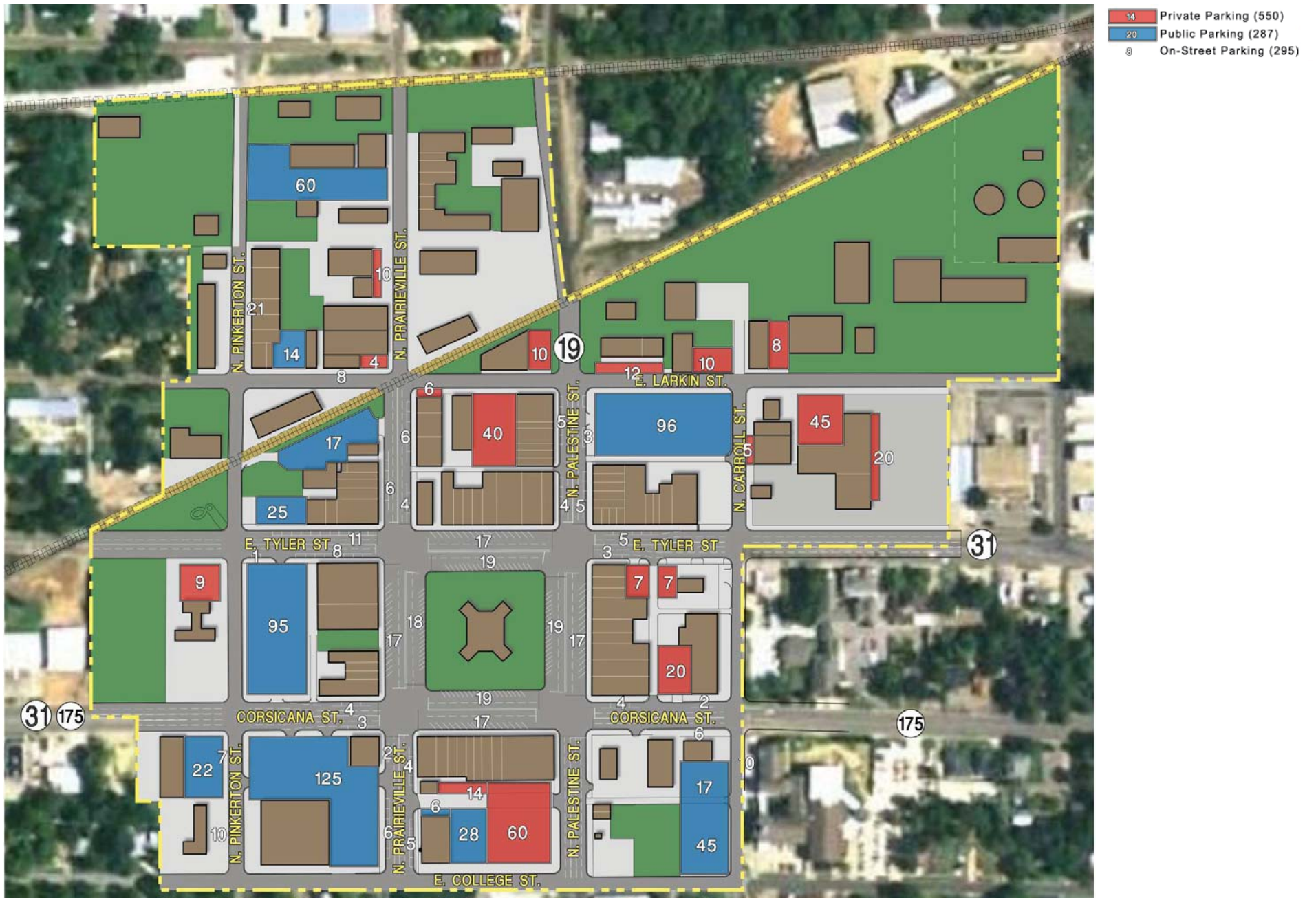


On street parking should be restricted to customers and visitors



Existing parking lot behind Prosperity Bank





This plan illustrates the number of available parking spaces in downtown Athens. Red indicates private lots and blue denotes public lots.

STREETSCAPE AESTHETICS EXISTING CONDITIONS

The existing courthouse square has some poignant issues concerning the existing streetscape conditions as far as safety, aesthetics and circulation are concerned. Many of the pedestrian passageways are not handicap accessible, have large curbs, lack adequate space for vegetation, and are not shaded.

Planning for the pedestrian is an essential function of a successful downtown. Communities that have a well-planned, aesthetically pleasing and functional pedestrian network are typically more livable and more marketable than those that do not.

A well-planned pedestrian circulation system can provide a community with safe areas for individuals to walk and bike and can contribute to a higher level of recreational activity in the town. Such a system can, furthermore, promote a healthy interaction between different types of land uses, strengthening the social fabric and building a more complete sense of community.



Tall curbs limit pedestrian accessibility



Handicap accessibility should be evaluated downtown





Pedestrian circulation in downtown Athens is hampered by unsafe intersection crossings and the aesthetic condition of the existing streetscape



Electrical wires clutter building façades



Landscape buffers help beautify streetscape



Dilapidated façades negatively impact the streetscape



Street furnishings need to have a consistent look throughout the city

ARCHITECTURAL CONDITIONS

All of the streets and areas of downtown were photographically documented. These photo compositions allow an overall visual analysis to be performed for downtown. Using the photos as a framework, design recommendations, architectural suggestions, rehabilitation opportunities and redevelopment

sites can be identified and illustrated. The street scene documentation also provides a record of the conditions in Athens at the time of this study.



Existing downtown Athens streetscape environment



E. Tyler Street intersection



E. Tyler Street looking west toward Texan Theatre

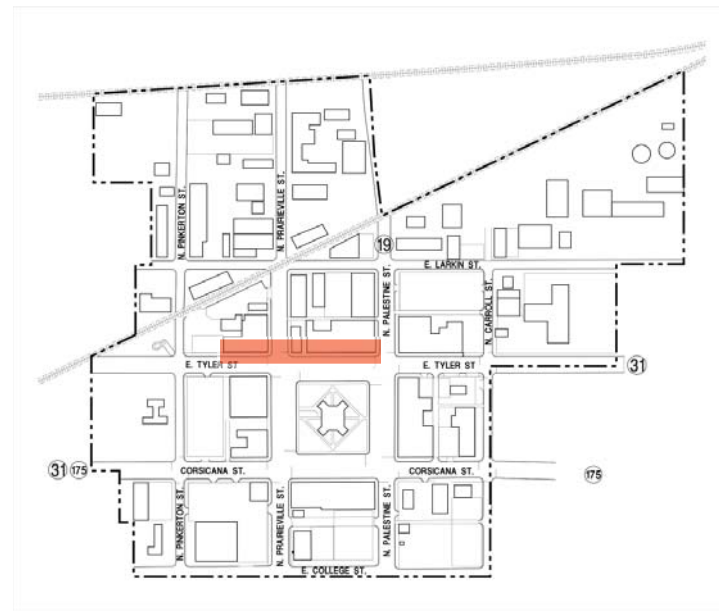


Tyler Street Elevation - North





Example of a streetscape exhibiting similar/complementary architectural character, consistencies among finishings, lighting, street trees and landscape materials



Elevation Location Key Map





E. Tyler Street Elevation - South



E. Tyler Street Elevation - South

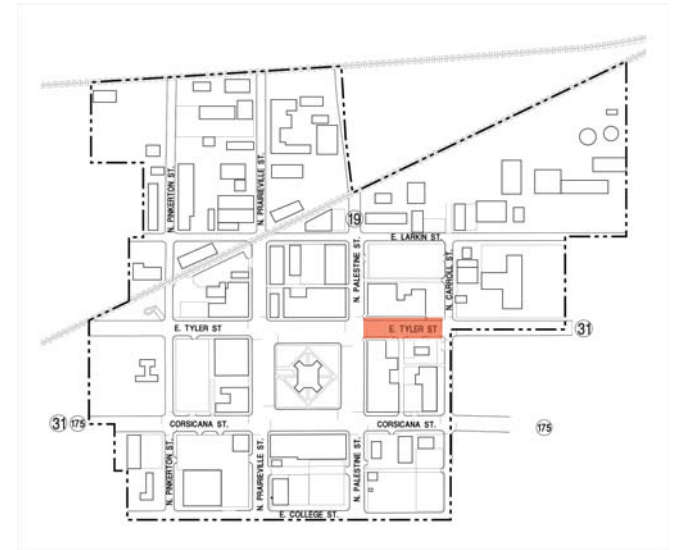


E. Tyler Street Elevation - North





Varied scale of landscape plantings and signage adds visual interest



Elevation Location Key Map





Buried utilities create a more open, appealing downtown streetscape



Landscape enhances the pedestrian experience and creates a destination feel



N. Palestine Street Elevation - East





Awnings, second story windows, contextually appropriate architecture and natural brick create an attractive downtown environment



Elevation Location Key Map



inconsistent building facade doesn't fit historical character

signage dominates facade and is not appropriate for historic character

missing awning

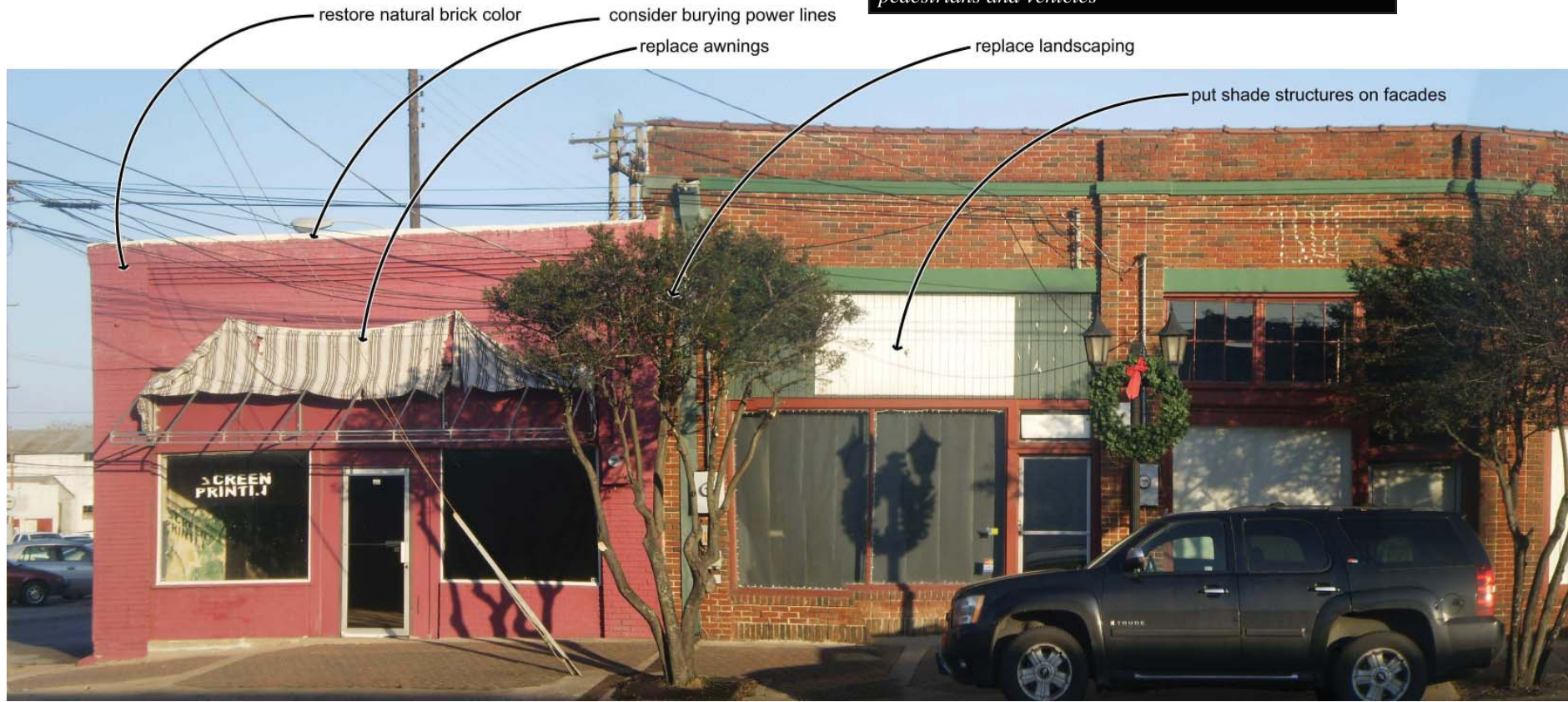
building doesn't fit vernacular of other historical buildings



Awnings and street trees provide shade contributing to a pedestrian friendly environment



Street trees provide color as well as a buffer between pedestrians and vehicles

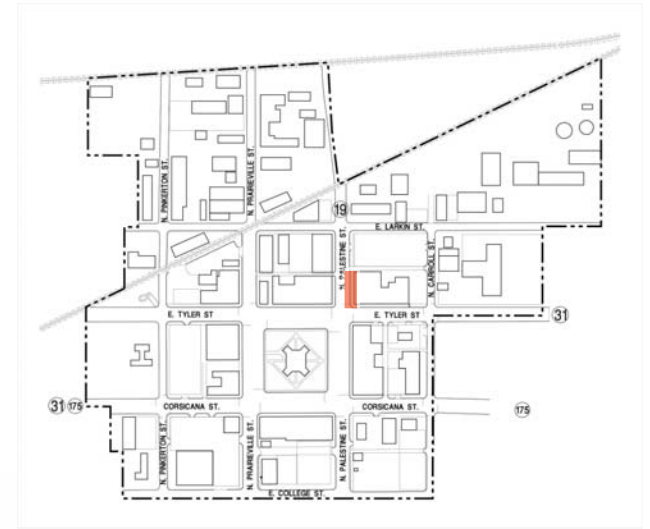


N. Palestine Street Elevation - East





Seating areas and landscape create an inviting downtown environment



Elevation Location Key Map

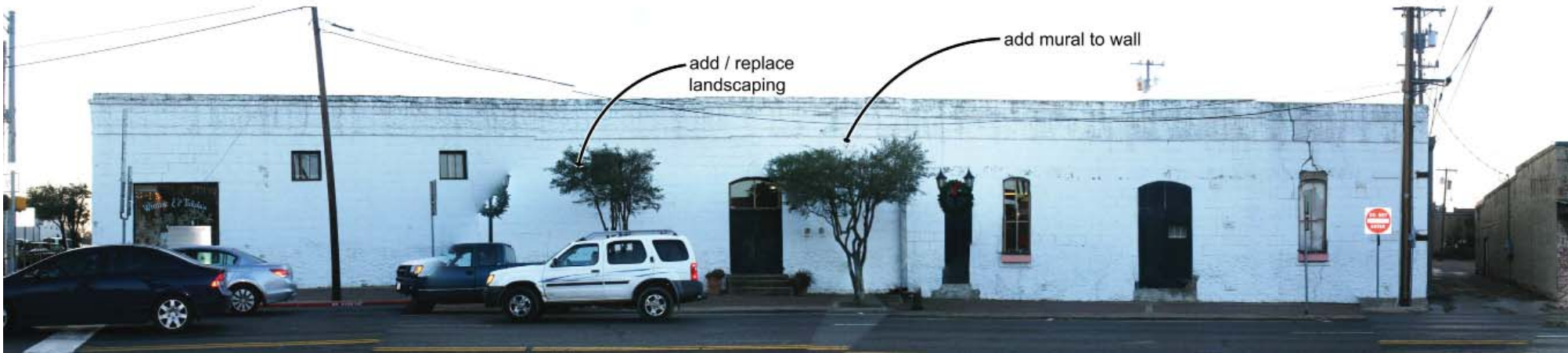


restore storefronts with wooden door frames, consistent transom windows, recessed entries

hide utility meters



Opportunities exist along N. Palestine Street to utilize building façades to display local artists' works and murals that depict the heritage and culture of Athens

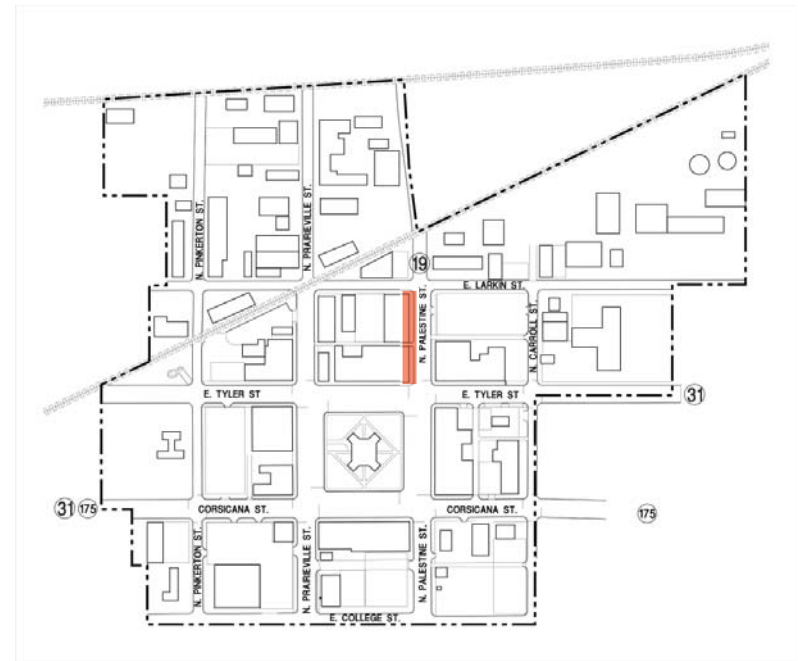


N. Palestine Street Elevation - West

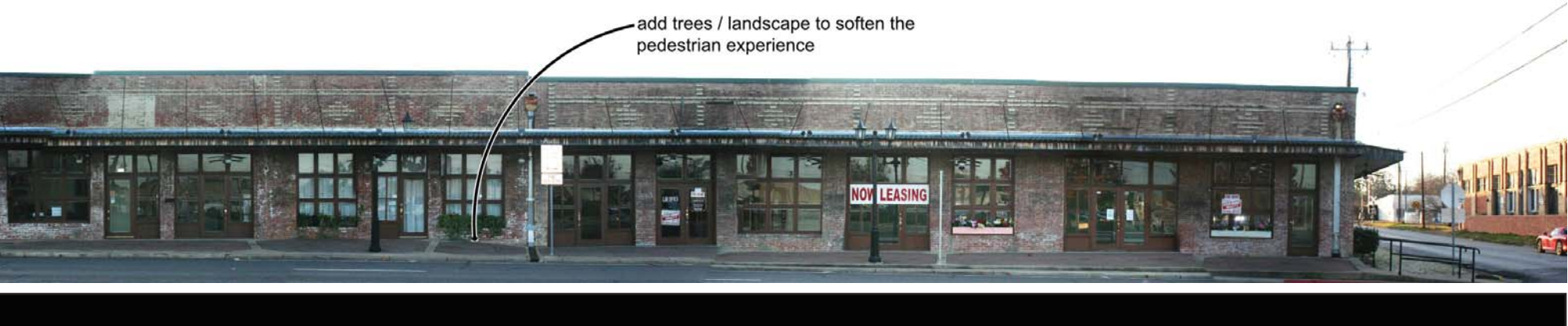




Murals provide a unique window into the history and character of the city



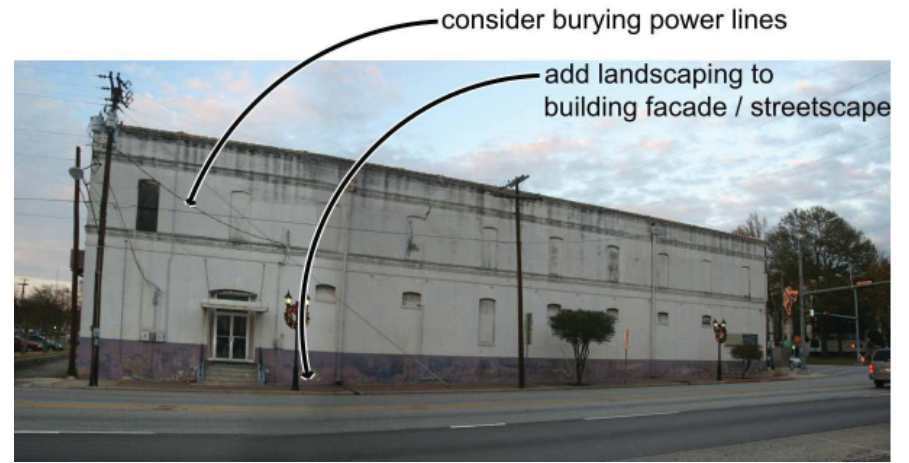
Elevation Location Key Map



add trees / landscape to soften the pedestrian experience



Southwest corner of Corsicana Street and Prairieville Street



Northwest corner of Corsicana Street and Prairieville Street

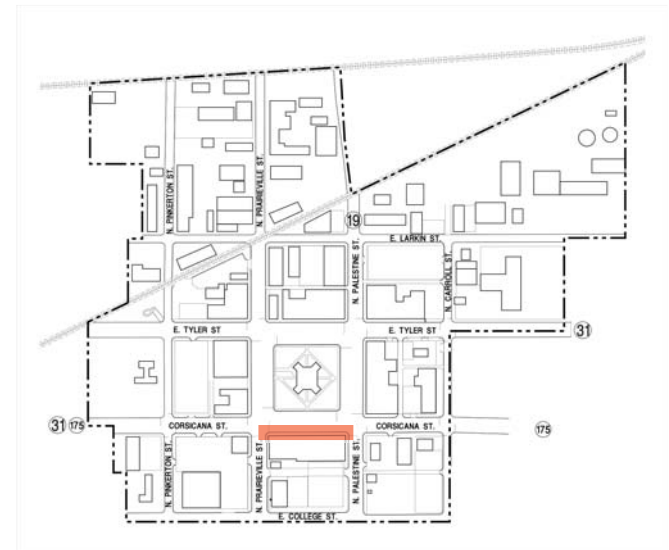


Corsicana Street Elevation - South





Trees and planters enhance the pedestrian experience



Elevation Location Key Map





Opportunities exist to restore buildings to their historical appearance through appropriate window spacing, trim and double hung windows



section to be re-developed by bank

N. Prairieville Street Elevation - West





Park between the gift shop and Prosperity Bank provides an attractive community gathering space



Elevation Location Key Map



add landscaping to building facade

consider wrap around awning to break up mass of facade and provide shade



N. Prairieville Street Elevation - East

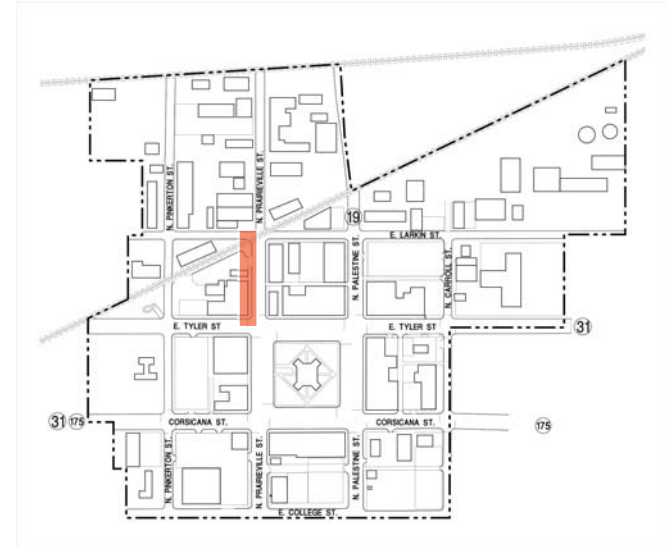


N. Prairieville Street Elevation - West





Architecture of the Dean Hotel could be used as a historic model for a new bank building that incorporates similar standards and design elements



Elevation Location Key Map



replace double hung windows

cleanup alleyway

restore storefront windows and glass door

remove glass blocks

add wood trim, glass door and transom



Create places for people to sit outside as well as space to stroll



Festivals and entertainment attract residents downtown

create landscape area between road and businesses, extend sidewalk, add pedestrian level lighting

tear down building or do complete rehabilitation

add curb and gutter, street trees, sidewalks

consider burying power lines



N. Prairieville Street Elevation - West





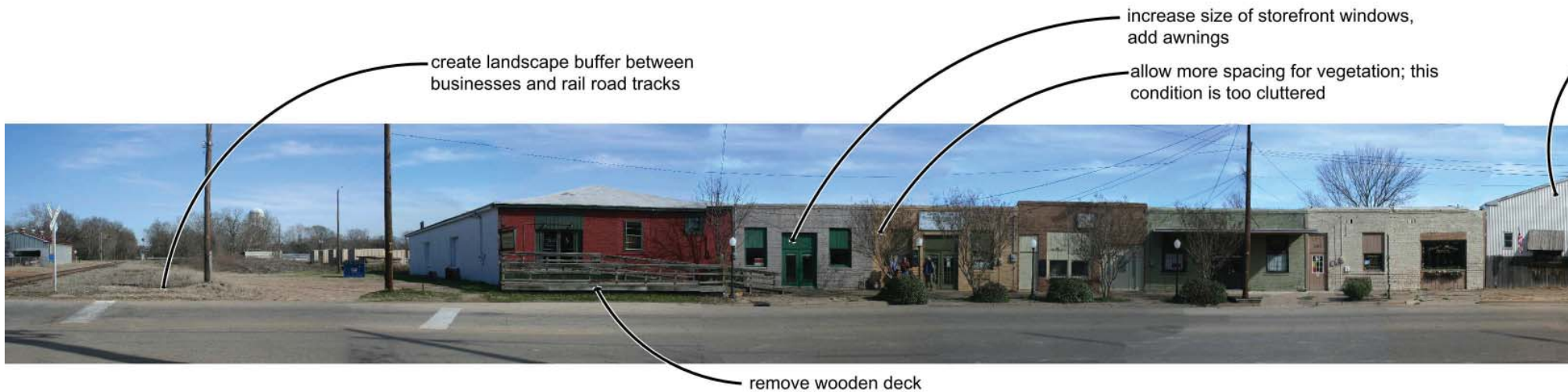
Incorporate public art



Store fronts with character and pedestrian level interest



Awnings, lighting and trees create an attractive, inviting environment



N. Prairieville Street Elevation - East

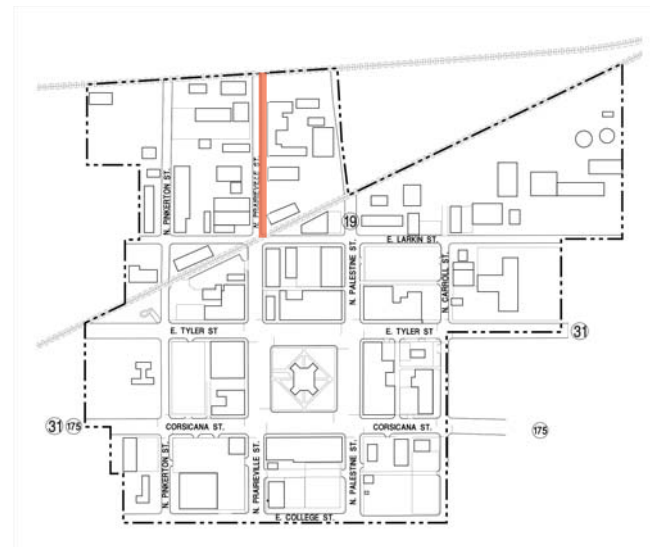




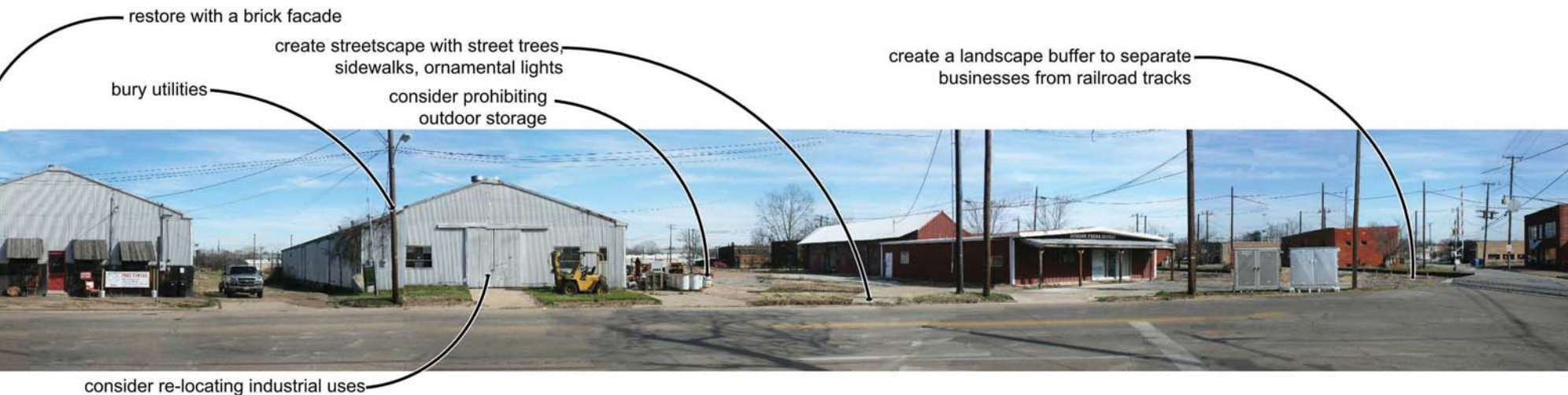
Landscaping adds an effective and attractive buffer between parking, buildings and railroad tracks



Art classes could become a downtown attraction that connects to Athens' cultural heritage



Elevation Location Key Map



restore with a brick facade

create streetscape with street trees, sidewalks, ornamental lights

bury utilities

consider prohibiting outdoor storage

create a landscape buffer to separate businesses from railroad tracks

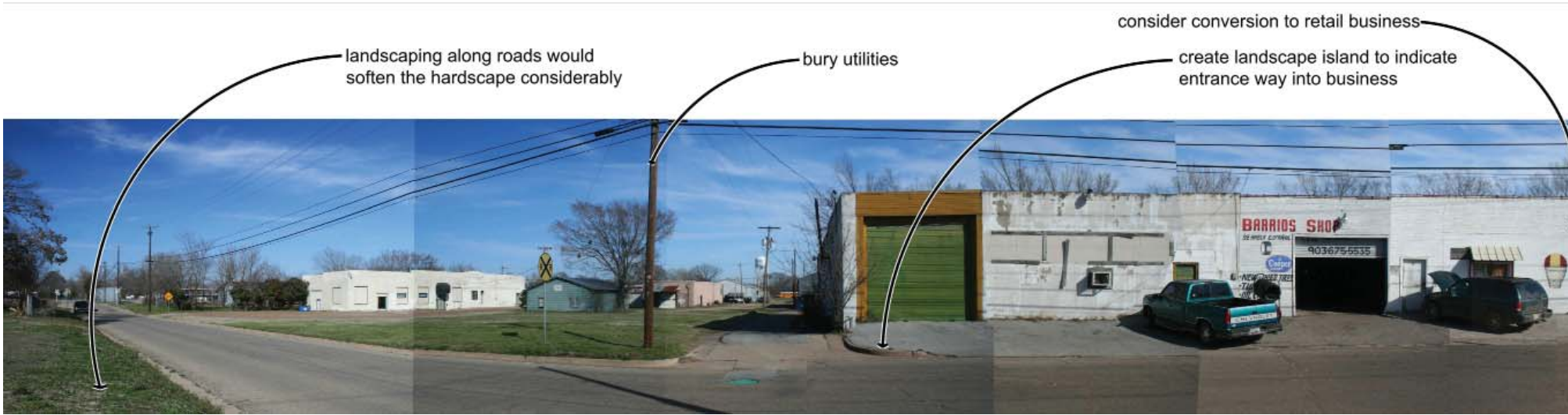
consider re-locating industrial uses



Industrial businesses along the west side of N. Pinkerton Street



Vacant building along the west side of N. Pinkerton Street



N. Pinkerton Street Elevation - East





Create a landscape buffer between parking and buildings to maintain pedestrian safety



Elevation Location Key Map



re-develop with storefront windows, glass and doors

create a landscape buffer and add sidewalks between buildings and parking areas

add curb and gutter, sidewalks, street trees, to make Pinkerton an urban extension to downtown

create landscape island to indicate entrance way into business



Opportunities exist for a streetscape revitalization project along N. Prairieville Street - bury utilities, add curbs, gutters, street trees, sidewalks and furnishings, relocate industrial uses and rehabilitate storefronts





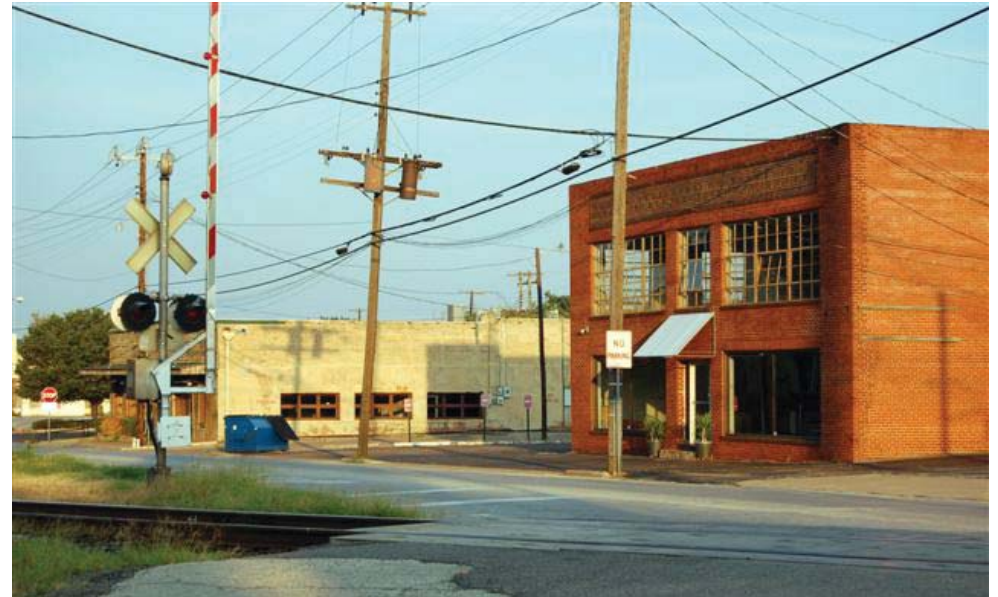
E. Larkin Street - north side needs landscaping and enhancements to building



E. Larkin Street - Henderson County Historical Commission



E. Larkin Street - Building is dilapidated and could be removed



E. Larkin Street - Restored building needs sidewalk and landscaping to enhance appeal and accessibility



East Larkin Street - Consider prohibiting outdoor storage within the downtown district



East Larkin Street - Warehouses and barns detract from downtown environment



East Larkin Street - Potential redevelopment site located behind the Athens Economic Development Corporation and museum



East Larkin Street - Looking west toward N. Prairieville Street, behind museum



East Larkin Street - Consider relocating industrial uses outside of downtown



East Larkin Street - Corner at N. Pinkerton needs landscape and sidewalks



East Larkin Street - Opportunity for redevelopment



East Larkin Street - Restored historic building demonstrates potential for creating an attractive downtown environment, although still lacking landscape and furnishings



E. Larkin Street - Looking west from N. Prairieville Street - presents opportunities for streetscape revitalization



E. Larkin Street - Northwest corner at N. Palestine has potential for establishing a pedestrian friendly environment through the integration of crosswalk pavers, site furnishings and landscape



E. Larkin Street - North edge of public parking lot needs a landscape buffer to soften its appearance and a defined walkway for pedestrian traffic



E. Larkin Street - Consider removing metal and pre-fabricated buildings from the downtown district to enhance historic look and appeal

LAND USE/DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS 4



Based upon the residents' feedback and analysis of the existing conditions in downtown Athens, SEC Planning evaluated design recommendations from multiple perspectives. In each case, the goals and objectives for the downtown study were utilized as guiding principles.

- A comparison was performed between the existing land uses, vacancy locations, parking, traffic, circulation and the responses to the community survey questions to determine appropriate locations for specific land uses
- Existing building conditions were evaluated to identify opportunities for façade rehabilitation or infill redevelopment
- Vacant lots were considered as sites for new development and surface parking expansion possibilities
- Alternatives were studied to enhance the streetscape and pedestrian circulation experience
- Design guidelines were crafted to be utilized by architects and developers to ensure that future development meets the community's vision for downtown

The recommendations that have been prepared should not be interpreted as immediate, "fix all" solutions, but rather as a vision for what downtown Athens can become. The study area was evaluated with a long term, multi phased approach to guide downtown planning decisions for many years to come. Some of the recommendations can be implemented in a short time frame for a more immediate impact, and others may take many years of growth and increased demand to come to fruition. A phasing and implementation chapter has been added to this report to offer further explanation and guidance on strategies for logical timing and delivery of specific recommendations.



Vacant feed building



The area on N. Pinkerton needs sidewalks and landscape as well as its facade rehabilitated



Vacant lot provides opportunity for redevelopment



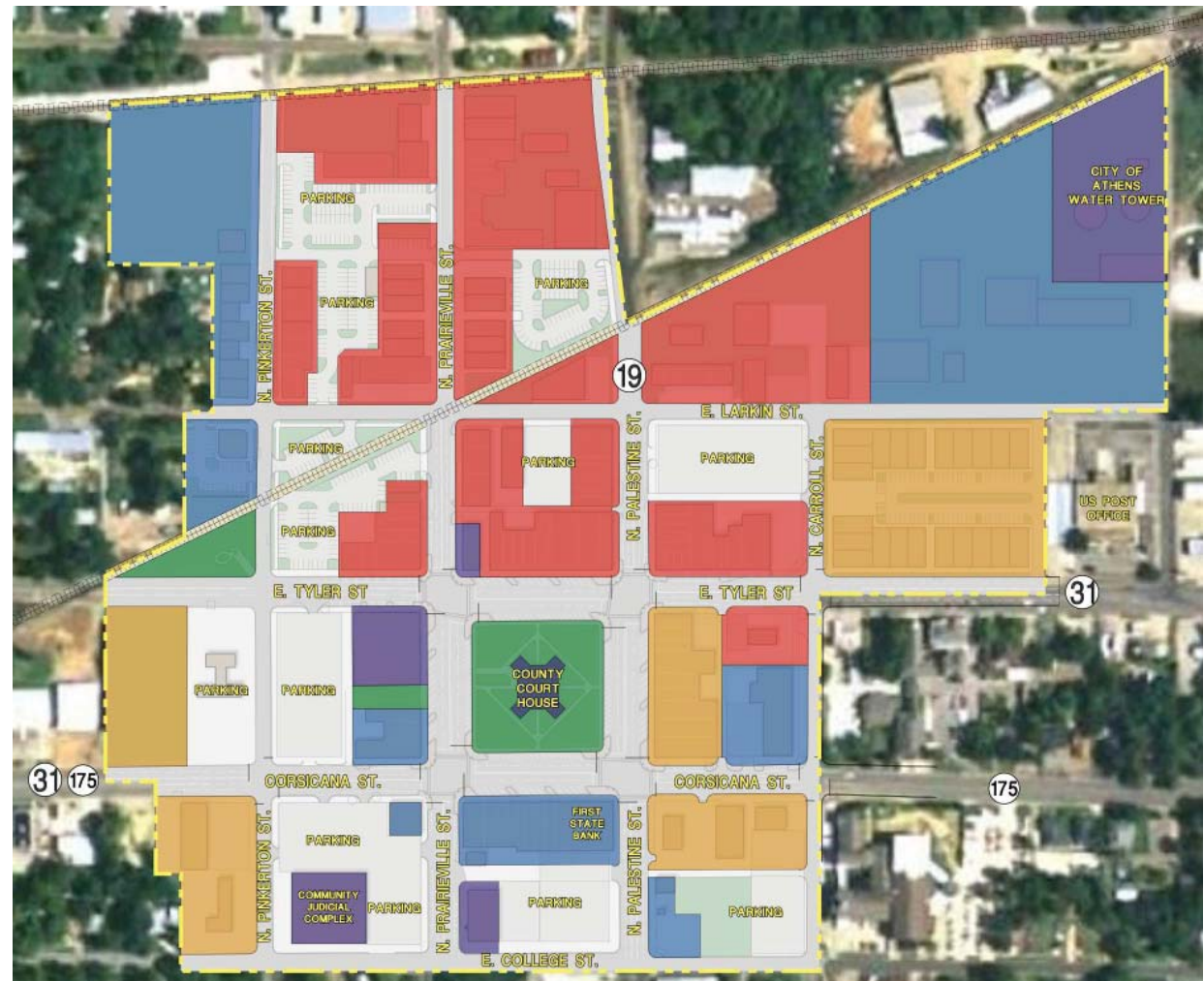
LAND USE

As a tool to guide efforts for attracting new businesses downtown, a conceptual land use diagram has been prepared to illustrate areas of emphasis for development downtown. The community surveys indicate a tremendous desire for downtown restaurants, shops, Farmers Market and entertainment venues. It is important to note that downtown office users and employers contribute daytime customers for downtown restaurants and shops. The opportunity for more people to live downtown would also add an energy that would keep the courthouse square active after regular business hours.

Buildings on the west and south side of the courthouse square are predominantly professional office and bank uses. With the recent announcement of the County purchasing the Prosperity Bank building and Prosperity Bank creating plans for a new facility at the southwest corner of the courthouse square, these areas take on an office oriented identity.

The high traffic congestion along the Highway 31/Corsicana Street also poses challenges to a pedestrian oriented, mixed use zone. The route of the highway around the courthouse square creates a barrier to the creation of a pedestrian friendly

- Office/Professional Services/Retail/Lofts
- Retail/Restaurants/Entertainment/Visitor Attractions/Lofts
- Civic/Cultural
- Office/Loft/Residential/Retail/Restaurants
- Open Space/Parks



Land Use Plan

environment. This highway route also cuts off the pedestrian connection from some of the larger parking lots south of Corsicana Street because of the unsafe intersection crossings that must be navigated to access downtown businesses.

The buildings north of the courthouse square on E. Tyler, N. Palestine, N. Prairieville and E. Larkin Streets pose a high potential for attracting new mixed use tenants downtown. Several vacancies and the presence of existing specialty shops provide the opportunity to create a non-office, destination environment in the downtown. Close proximity to the existing public parking lots provides easy access to this area as well. If evening and weekend shared parking agreements could be arranged for the private parking lot on E. Larkin, additional parking would also be available for this area.

As Athens grows as a community and the downtown begins to experience success, opportunities exist to expand a mixed use destination component to the north. Along N. Prairieville Street, a few shops exist in the area known as Athens Alley. Several redevelopment opportunities exist in this area and the potential to create a pedestrian oriented street is very high. The traffic levels are quieter and the space exists for wide, tree lined sidewalks and outdoor plazas, making this area an attractive spot for a collection of specialty stores, artists' galleries, restaurants, public parking, and lofts.

The North Pinkerton Street area is another location that may act as a potential extension of downtown. The existing El San Luis restaurant serves as a magnet to this area. The existing park and artistic mural by the railroad tracks also give



Example of residential lofts over retail in a downtown setting

this area a unique character. However, the streetscape is dominated by parking and overhead power lines. The area is industrial in nature and serves as a poor transition to the surrounding residential neighborhoods. As a long term goal, it is recommended that industrial uses be allocated away from downtown and N. Pinkerton Street be redeveloped with curb and gutter, sidewalks and office/retail uses.



At the eastern edge of the study area, along E. Larkin and N. Carroll Streets, a square block is dedicated to an auto dealership. Automobile dealerships play a critical role in the tax base of any City. As Athens continues to grow and demand for downtown land increases, this site would be attractive for future redevelopment. When this event occurs, the City should consider working with the auto dealership to consider other sites within Athens so that the downtown block could be redeveloped for additional retail/office/lofts/restaurants.

Directly north of the auto dealership, a significant area occupied by barns and warehouses exists. As the City pursues new businesses and employers, this area north of the auto dealership could be an attractive site for its proximity to Highway 31 and location adjacent to the downtown core. The addition of a new employer in this area would add daytime customers for downtown businesses and restaurants.

REDEVELOPMENT OR REHABILITATION BUILDINGS/ SITES

In an effort to illustrate a further level of detail and communicate potential design alternatives, a series of redevelopment sites and buildings were selected for additional evaluation. These redevelopment studies are intended to help citizens visualize what could be possible as Athens' downtown develops. The plans are not intended to hinder the creativity of future downtown developers or architects, but rather serve as a guideline for visioning.



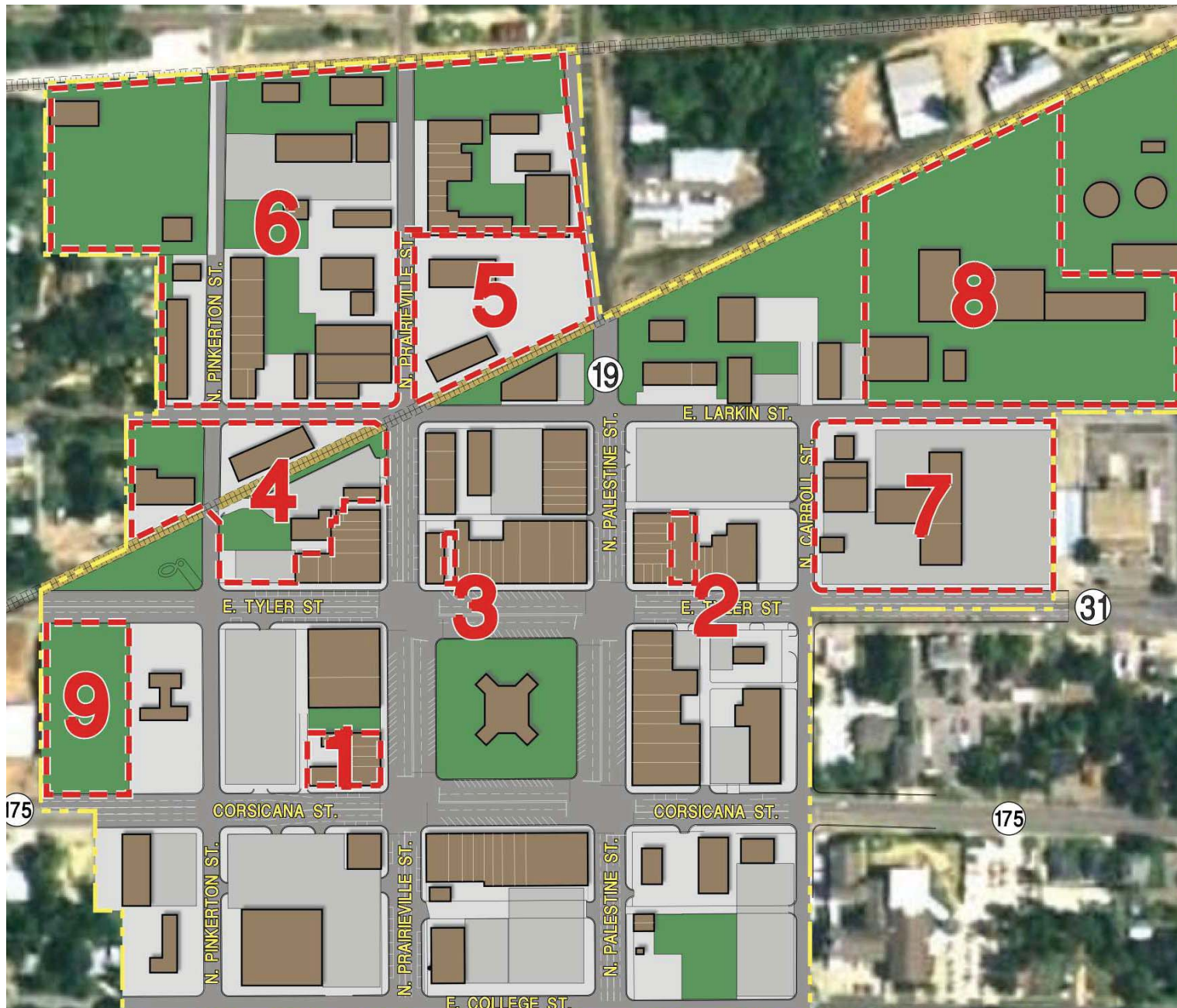
Example of inviting streetscape environment with ornamental lights, landscape and wide walkways



The courthouse is heart of our downtown . . . new businesses planting roots in downtown . . . introduce an "Athens specific" festival that highlights the music and the arts that is family oriented. . . more evening attractions . . . places for music and art to be displayed . . . unique eateries & shopping & galleries must be distributed around all sides of the square . . . strolling and outside dining areas need to be created . . . a park feel should be created around the square . . . most people are very impressed with the square.

Responses from Resident Survey





1. New Prosperity Bank site
2. Former Texan Theater
3. Vacant lot
4. Potential parking and market location
5. Potential parking and storefront expansion on Athens Alley
6. Rehabilitation of Athens Alley and N. Pinkerton Street
7. Auto dealership site
8. Vacant buildings – opportunity for new employers/businesses
9. Vacant lot – gateway into downtown district, potential for retail, lofts, offices, etc.

Redevelopment Site Context Map

1. New Prosperity Bank Site

At the time of this study, the existing Prosperity Bank building was in the process of being purchased by the County for County office expansion. The buildings on the corner of N. Prairieville and Corsicana were slated for demolition and the creation of a new Prosperity Bank building. The overwhelming response from the community regarding architectural improvements downtown was to restore historic façades. Due to the high visual impact of this corner property on the courthouse square, an example has been prepared to illustrate how a new building could incorporate design elements and details that reflect a historical theme appropriate for Athens. The revitalization of this corner could set a very positive tone for future development and rehabilitation in downtown Athens if appropriately implemented.



Awnings add shade, shelter and character



Existing buildings planned to be removed and replaced with the new Prosperity Bank





Redevelopment Area Key Map



Brick façade adds historical look to buildings



Artist's interpretation of appropriate architectural design for new bank site

2. Texan Theatre Site

The site of the former Texan theater provides a tremendous opportunity if an entertainment venue can be attracted back to downtown Athens. The location is adjacent to an existing public parking lot, making it ideal for serving larger audiences. The existing foundation maintains the original sloping floor which could be utilized in a redevelopment of this site. A theater, playhouse or music venue would provide a tremendous catalyst for downtown restaurants and shops and create a level

of downtown activity after normal business hours. A specially focused stakeholder group could be assigned with the task of identifying and marketing potential entertainment venue developers and identifying event promoters and entertainment acts that might be possible if the proper venue was provided.



Texan Theater current condition





Redevelopment Area Key Map



Texan Theater interior sloping floor is still intact, providing redevelopment opportunities for a movie or live theater/entertainment venue



Prototypical example of a historic theatre

3. Vacant Lot on E. Tyler Street

During the course of this study, a downtown building on the north side of the courthouse square was demolished. This vacant lot provides a key opportunity for an infill project that could include a restaurant or specialty retail store. If so desired,

a second level living unit could also be incorporated into a new building. Similar to the new bank site, a building on this lot could set an example for desired new development downtown that fits contextually with Athens' historic architectural character.



Pre-demolition photo of razed building in downtown Athens - site is currently a vacant lot





Redevelopment Area Key Map



Artist's rendering of potential architectural character for structure built in vacant lot along the north side of the square



Area by City offices and bookstore



4. Potential Parking and Farmers Market Location on E. Tyler Street

This site along E. Tyler and N. Pinkerton Streets holds potential for additional public parking and a Farmers Market destination. If designed cohesively, the area behind the museum and the Athens Economic Development Corporation building could serve multiple purposes and accommodate a number of new parking spaces. The existing triangle park and artistic mural add a unique character, identity and pedestrian open space to this part of downtown. Additional surface parking behind the existing Prosperity Bank building would allow an event like a weekly Farmers Market to grow on the weekends to include additional vendors, concerts and children’s activities.

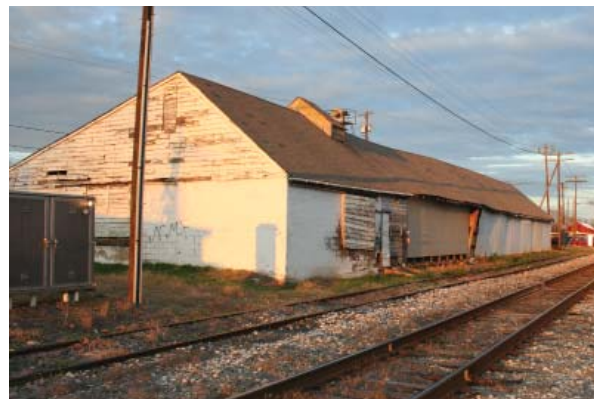
Dilapidated buildings exist immediately north of the railroad tracks that could be removed and replaced with additional public parking. One idea for the artistic mural could involve tearing down the building while preserving and reinforcing a free standing wall for the mural. This additional surface parking could also support the El San Luis café and future businesses that could extend along N. Pinkerton Street.



Art Festivals and Farmers Markets are excellent venues to showcase the unique character of the community



Consider showcasing mural as a free-standing wall



Remove vacant buildings for additional parking lots



Redevelopment Area Key Map



Redevelopment site provides opportunities for streetscape improvements and extending the downtown into a revitalized Athens Alley



5. Parking and Storefront Expansion on Athens Alley

Athens Alley has a history of business activity and the potential exists for this area to again become a downtown destination. A vacant feed store and an industrial paint shop occupy a significant area north of the railroad tracks. Additional public parking could be possible in this area to support new development along

N. Prairieville and N. Palestine Streets. In the future, as downtown thrives, additional buildings could be incorporated with a revitalized streetscape to extend downtown activities to the north and blend into the existing businesses on N. Prairieville Street.



Vacant feed store could be replaced with new store fronts



Industrial uses could be relocated to allow for downtown redevelopment



Redevelopment Area Key Map



Revitalized buildings provide opportunities for shops and cafes



New development in Athens Alley can create a thriving downtown destination



Athens Alley Redevelopment Plan



6. Athens Alley and N. Pinkerton Street Revitalization

This large sub-area of town holds potential for future rehabilitation and redevelopment. As the core of downtown Athens is revitalized, these streets hold great potential as logical extensions of the downtown urban fabric. The timing of improvements in this area would be subject to future demand and developer interest. Although these areas will take time to revitalize, a long-term vision for what these areas could become in the future is an important tool for planning and land use decisions moving forward.

N. Pinkerton and N. Prairieville Streets, north of the courthouse square, are relatively quiet traffic areas, which would be favorable for the creation of a pedestrian friendly environment if substantial streetscape improvements and building rehabilitation were to occur. Industrial uses and buildings could gradually be relocated to alternative locations in Athens, opening the door for new development and street improvements.

If N. Pinkerton Street were redeveloped with small scale office and residential uses, the transition from the downtown environment to the adjacent neighborhood to the west would be more seamless and cohesive. The Athens Alley area would be an attractive location for a collection of galleries, boutique shops, garden offices and residential lofts. In any case, significant street improvements such as curb and gutter, sidewalks, street trees and burying overhead utility lines would be necessary to give this part of town a face lift that could attract new development and be appealing to residents and visitors as a destination.

Because the area is not as visible from the highways as other parts of the courthouse square, signage, marketing and promotion of the area as an Athens' destination would be critical. As such, these areas may not see any recognizable redevelopment until after the core of downtown gains traction and vibrancy again.



Mixed use buildings with active street scene



Redevelopment Area Key Map



Auto dealership block could be transformed in the future as a mix of retail, lofts, offices and restaurants



7. Auto Dealership Site

As the population of Athens grows and the demand for downtown property increases, one long-term strategy could involve the redevelopment of the block currently occupied by Bacon Auto Ranch. While serving a critical need for the community and being an asset to Athens, automobile dealerships can detract from the visual appearance and perception of a downtown. In the future, if there is significant developer demand for the site, this block could hold great potential for future retail, offices and lofts or higher density residential. The frontage of the site could be greatly enhanced with landscape and sidewalks to create an attractive gateway to downtown from the east.



Redevelopment Area Key Map



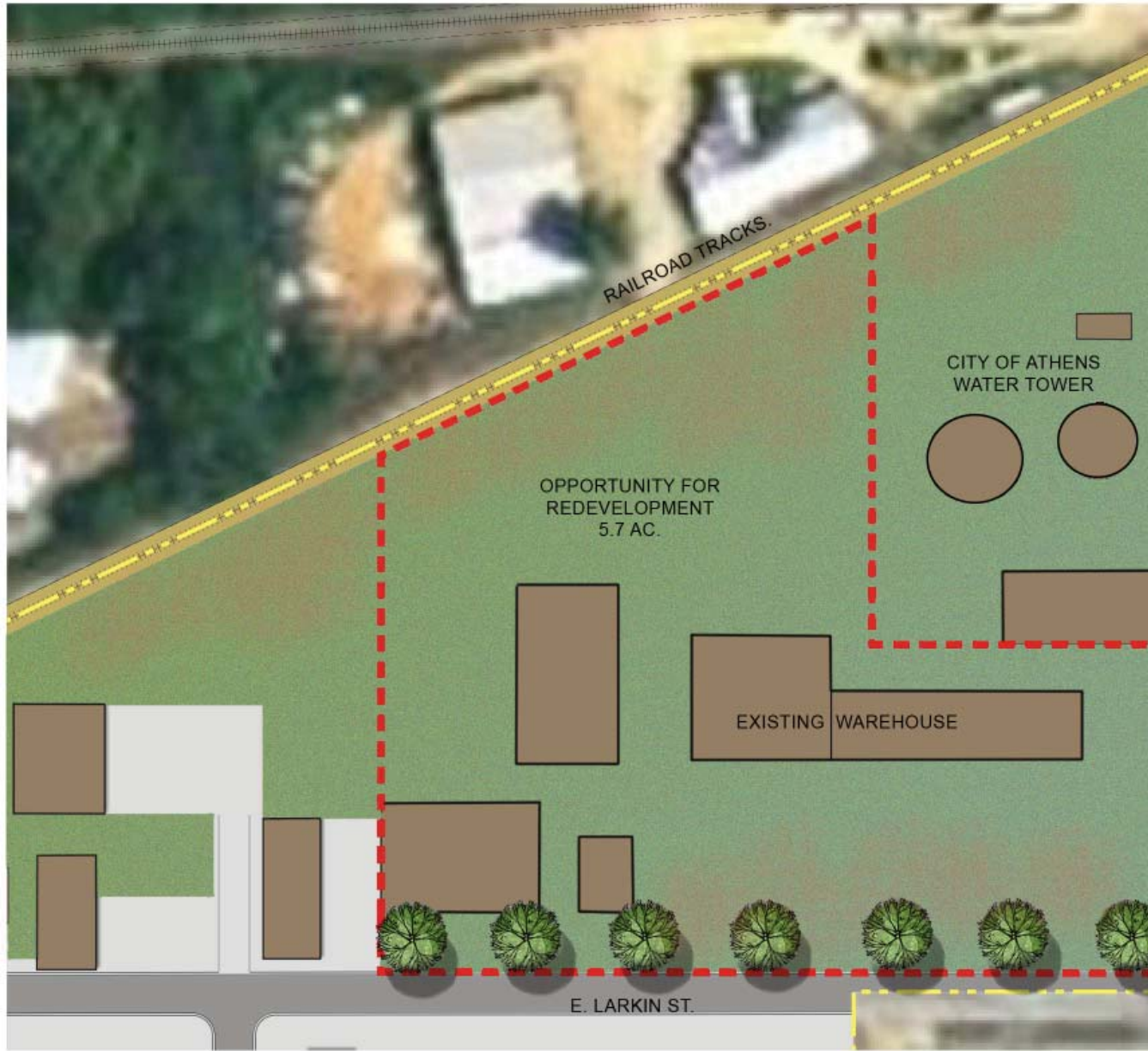
Current view of auto dealership block



Opportunities exist to develop a mixed use block featuring retail, entertainment and service related uses on the street level with office and residential space on the upper floors



Example of high-end, higher density residential development proposed as an alternative for the auto dealership site



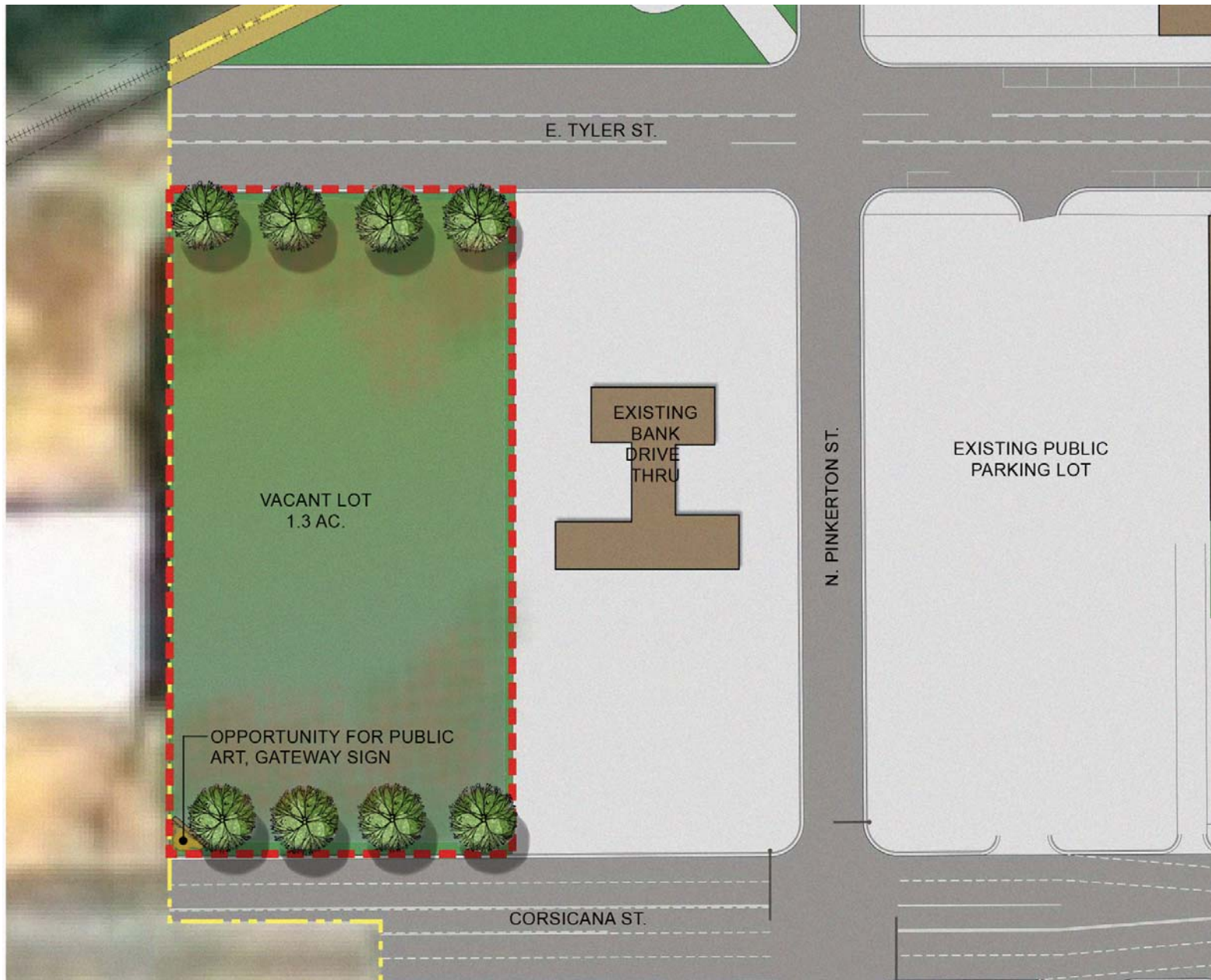
Vacant lots and warehouses dominate this area



Neglected barns present opportunities for demolition and redevelopment

Area adjacent to water towers is occupied by vacant barns and warehouse space





Vacant lot provides an opportunity for future offices, retail, residential lofts and parks





Mixed use development

9. Vacant Lot on Corsicana Street

This currently vacant, one acre lot is adjacent to the existing Prosperity Bank drive thru with frontage along Corsicana Street, making it an attractive location for redevelopment. The site could become a mix of retail along Corsicana Street, combined with offices or higher density residential product. As Athens continues to grow and the downtown is revitalized, demand for living and working close to the courthouse square will increase.

This site also serves as the western boundary of the downtown study area and poses potential for a “gateway” into the downtown district. Public art, signage and landscaping along this frontage could create an attractive and unique arrival sequence for visitors entering downtown from the west.



Outdoor retail environment



Redevelopment Area Key Map

Parking Expansion Alternatives

A shortage of downtown parking spaces is an issue that has been expressed by Athens' residents. In an effort to address potential solutions to this problem, several ideas have been evaluated. Structured parking alternatives were discussed by some groups at the public workshop as well as additional surface parking options. Other considerations that affect the perception of a parking shortage are the abuse of on-street parking by downtown employees and the distance and safety associated with navigating from the public parking lots to the downtown businesses.

It is recommended that additional surface parking spaces be evaluated in the near term. Based upon the amount of vacant area available downtown, the opportunity exists to create additional surface parking in close proximity to the courthouse square. Structured parking may become a viable option one day, but the costs of structured parking are prohibitive. A parking garage structure typically costs approximately \$15,000 per space, compared to \$2,500-\$3,000 per space for surface parking. When land values increase substantially, parking garages become a more viable option for parking relief.

It is also recommended that the City and the County work together to address solutions for downtown on-street parking abuse. With the County purchase of the Prosperity Bank building, some of the parking issues may be resolved by County employees utilizing the parking lot behind the bank building. Efforts should be made to emphasize that on-street parking is for downtown customers. Alternatives to consider include requiring downtown employees to have parking permit stickers that restrict the areas they can park during daytime hours, designating daytime reserved spaces in the parking lots for employees and stricter ticket enforcement for on-street parking violations.

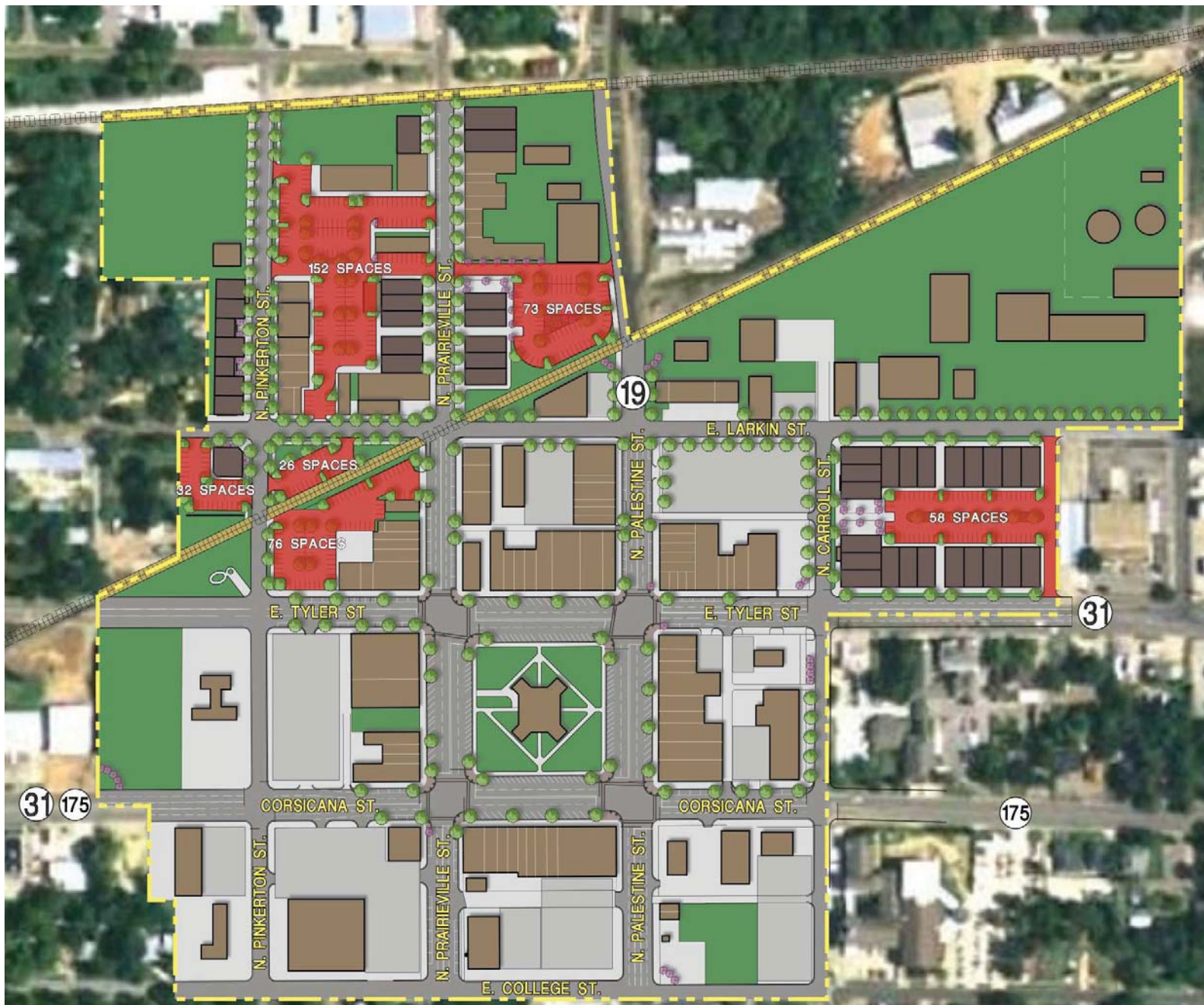


Existing on street parking



Public parking lot behind Texan Theatre





Proposed sites for adding parking within the downtown district

STREETSCAPE ENHANCEMENTS

As previously mentioned, a major component to the success of a revitalized downtown is the streetscape and pedestrian experience. The attractiveness of downtown as a destination will involve a successful mix of diverse land uses combined

with an attractive and safe pedestrian environment. Because of this critical relationship, several streetscape enhancement projects are recommended.



The attractiveness of the streetscape and pedestrian spaces promote a destination environment

The recommendations address the following:

- Crosswalks/Intersection Enhancements
- Street Trees/Landscape/Sidewalks
- Public Art
- Site Furnishings
- Signage and Wayfinding
- Lighting
- Utility Placement





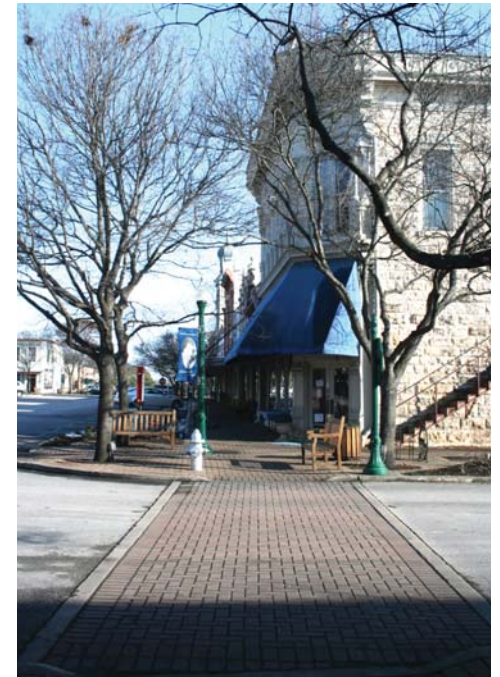
Overall Streetscape Enhancement Recommendations

CROSSWALKS

Currently the distance to cross existing roadways is excessive. In several locations, a pedestrian must rush to cross the street before traffic signals change. As a potential solution, one recommendation involves the creation of landscape islands at each corner. The islands would reduce the walking distance across the intersections by 30-40 feet. The islands would also provide an opportunity to locate signage, enhanced pavers and landscaping to beautify the intersections.

Future crosswalks can emphasize the pedestrian zone by incorporating a change in paving material. These improvements greatly enhance the visual character of downtown while also serving as traffic calming devices, indicating to motorists a heightened sense of pedestrian awareness.

Implementation of the enhancements along the highways would involve coordination and approval with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). If the recommendations are desired by the City, it is recommended that the City engineer begin discussions with TxDOT officials to review the City's desired vision for downtown and define a strategy for implementation of the improvements. Other enhanced crosswalks on secondary streets could be implemented with City street improvement projects.



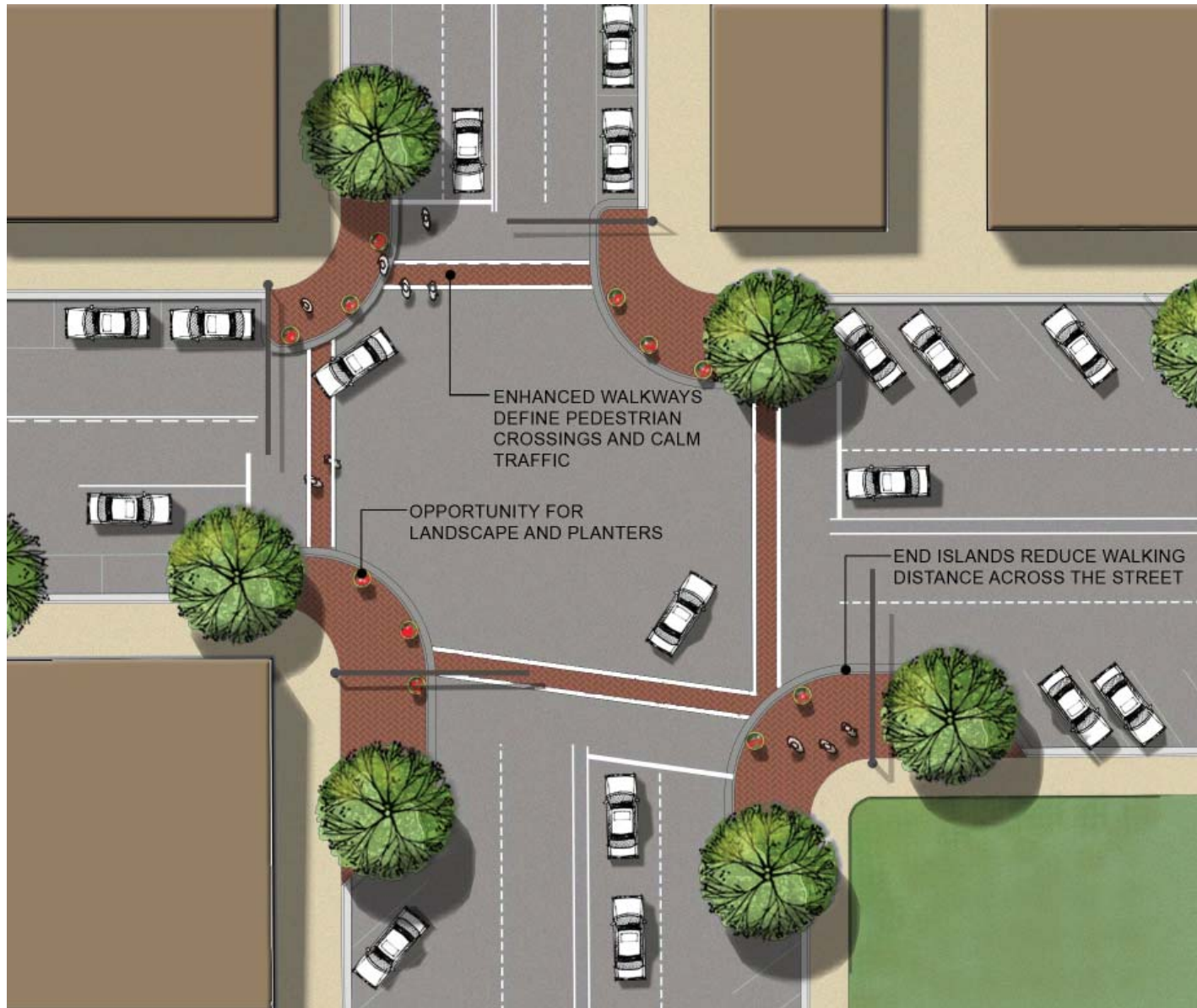
Change in paving material defines pedestrian crosswalk



Islands, landscape and pavers create safer pedestrian street crossings



Enhanced Crosswalk Location Key Map



Prototypical Crosswalk Enhancement Recommendation



Restore functioning crosswalk signals

- End islands at the intersections would reduce walking distance, create space for landscaping and planters, and serve as traffic calming elements
- Crosswalk distance could be reduced by 30-40 feet, making crosswalks shorter and safer
- Changes in paving material send visual signal to motorists that they are in a pedestrian environment

STREET TREES, LANDSCAPE, SIDEWALKS

Downtown Athens is lacking in vegetation and greenery as well as sufficient sidewalks in several locations. Street trees, planters and pockets of landscape have a tremendous impact on the pedestrian experience. The landscape provides shade, color and appeal to the street scene and would improve the overall visual quality of Athens.

One recommendation involves the implementation of a street tree program downtown. Due to limited width along existing sidewalks, selective parking spaces could be converted to landscape islands to incorporate street trees and landscape around the courthouse square.

As street improvements are planned in the future, consistent street rehabilitation projects could also be incorporated along N. Prairieville, E. Larkin, N. Carroll and N. Pinkerton Streets. The addition of curb and gutter, street trees and wide sidewalks should be planned into future right of way improvement projects. A minimum of 15'-18' should be planned between the back of curb and face of building, where space allows, to accommodate wide sidewalks, awnings, landscape pockets and street trees. In order for the downtown to grow into a thriving destination, walkable and attractive streets must be part of the vision.

As a general guideline, all development fronting onto streets within the Study Area shall incorporate street trees in accordance with the following standards:

Location

Street trees shall be located along the frontage of a property, a minimum of three (3) feet behind the curb. Utility locations, existing trees and proper sight distance should be considered in the planting of the street trees. However, the design intent is to create a formal, consistent line of parkway trees along the identified roadways.



Planters and street trees could enhance the pedestrian experience



Use of multi-colored pavers and landscape median create visual interest and a pedestrian friendly environment





Street trees and landscape islands contribute to an aesthetically appealing downtown



Landscape islands

Enlarged view of Athens Square illustrates opportunities to create landscape islands for the addition of street trees

Spacing

Street trees shall be planted at the minimum rate of one tree for every forty (40) feet of street frontage.

Size and Species

Street trees shall be a minimum of three (3) caliper inches measured three (3) feet above finished grade after planting. Trees shall be selected from the following species:

- Cathedral Live Oak (*Quercus virginiana* ‘Cathedral’)
- Texas Red Oak (*Quercus texana*)
- Shumard Oak (*Quercus shumardii*)
- Chinkapin Oak (*Quercus muehlenbergii*)
- Chinese Pistache (*Pistachia chinensis*)
- Thornless Honey Locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos* var *inermis*)

Tree Grates

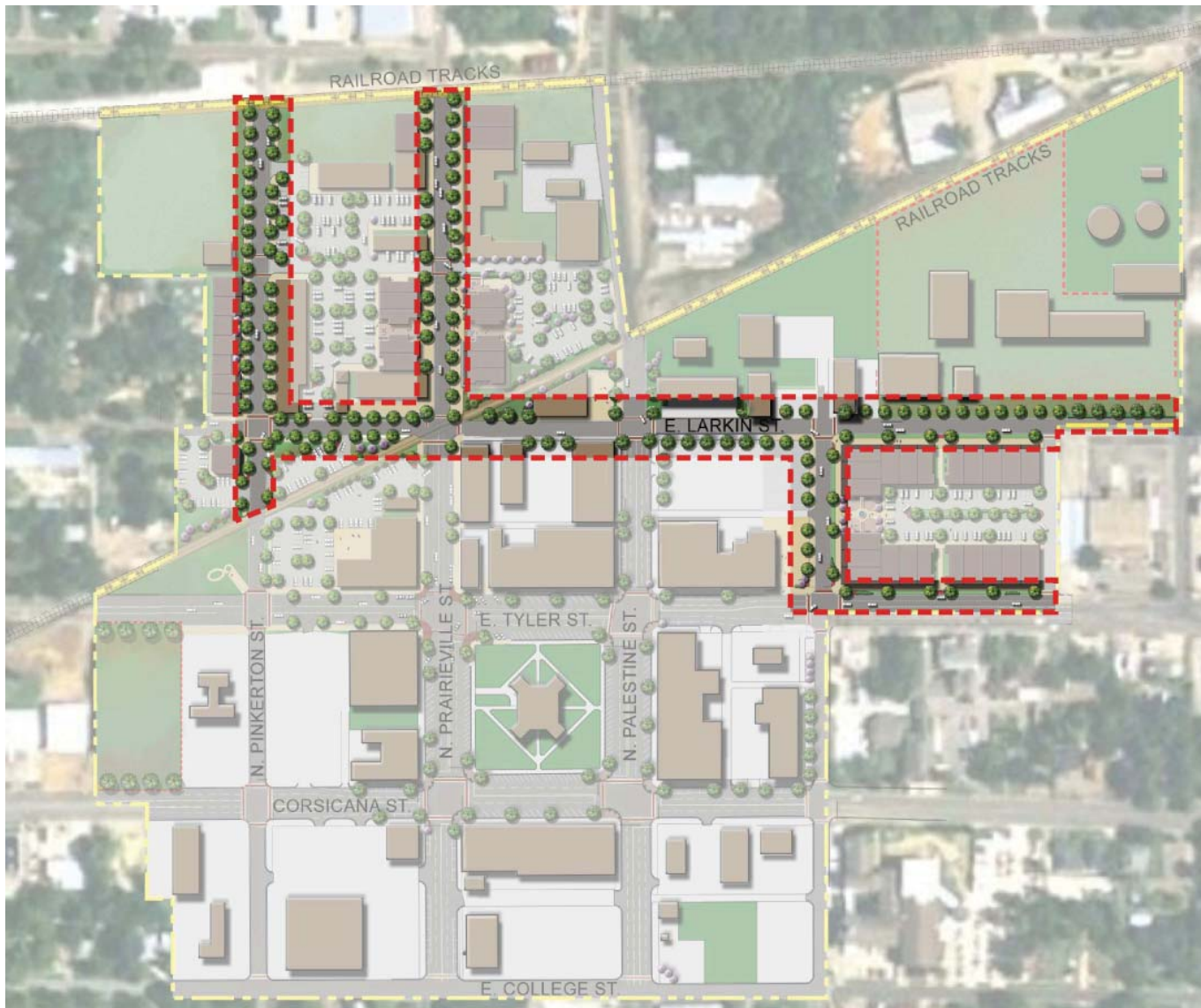
Where street trees are planted in an urban setting within walkways, tree grates are required for protection of the trees. A consistent style and design should be selected for all tree grates. It is recommended that the design currently employed for the downtown tree grates be continued in new development areas.



Routine care and maintenance of tree grates and street trees contributes to a safe and inviting pedestrian environment



Athens' existing tree grates are functional and attractive



Areas identified for streetscape redevelopment



Prototypical street plan



Texas Red Oak



Cathedral Live Oak



Shumard Oak



Chinkapin Oak



Chinese Pistache



Thornless Honey Locust



PUBLIC ART

Incorporating outdoor sculptures, fountains, murals and other artwork is encouraged in the downtown district. Such elements and features help establish strong visual identities for individual facilities and greatly enhance the unique character of Athens. Existing murals have already been incorporated within the downtown study area and it is recommended that additional artwork be commissioned to expand the character and identity of downtown.

- Artwork should have relevance to the City of Athens; past, present or future.
- The placement of artwork should be visible to users within the downtown district; either as vehicular or pedestrian way finding references.
- Accent public open spaces with sculptures or fountains to give added community character.



Public plazas with fountains, benches and/or public art create a focal point, destination and community gathering area



Existing mural by the judicial complex



Street banners add color and seasonal decoration



Sculptures connect with the history of the community



Water features, fountains, fire pits and hearths create dynamic elements within public spaces



Artistic use of blank building facades enhances the downtown environment



Existing mural adds character and a unique element within the downtown district

SITE FURNISHINGS

A palette of complementary site furnishings shall be used throughout Athens to provide continuity as downtown expands. The palette of consistent furnishings should include the following: seating, planters, waste receptacles and street lights. When development occurs downtown, the following furnishings or equivalent styles should be utilized in the site design in keeping with the established design guidelines and approved by City planning staff.



Use of similar materials and colors will create a cohesive site furnishing system unique to Athens



Opportunities exist to enhance existing furnishings and sign poles



Landscape, seating areas and lighting contribute to creating a pedestrian friendly environment



Seating areas, shade structures, planters and lighting establish community gathering areas



Utilize bench and trash receptacle style that is currently employed downtown for a consistent appearance



Decorative lamp posts, benches, planters and trash receptacles enhance the downtown experience

SIGNAGE AND WAYFINDING

Athens currently does not have any major “gateway” or directional signage that announces/welcomes visitors into the downtown district. Opportunities exist in key locations along Highway 31 and Highway 19 to create a sense of arrival and also provide direction to specific destinations and public facilities.

When deemed necessary, easy to read motorist and pedestrian directional signs should be placed along internal drives and parking lot areas within downtown to guide visitors and improve wayfinding to downtown destinations.

Additionally, the Athens outer loop should be studied for additional signage directing visitors to the downtown district.



Public parking identification



Informational kiosk



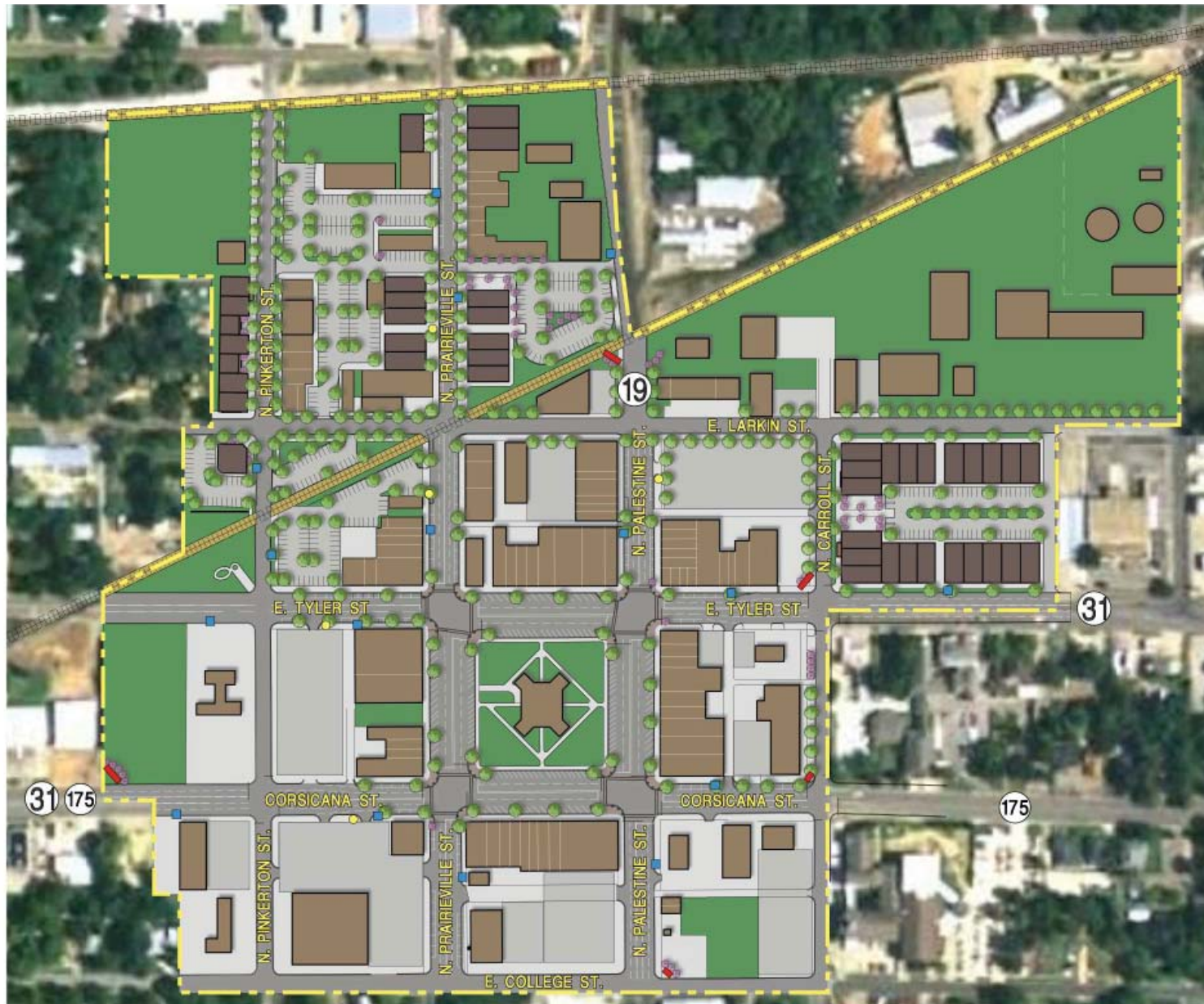
Directional sign



Directional sign



Parking sign



- Information Kiosk
- Directional Sign
- Gateway Sign

Signage Location Plan



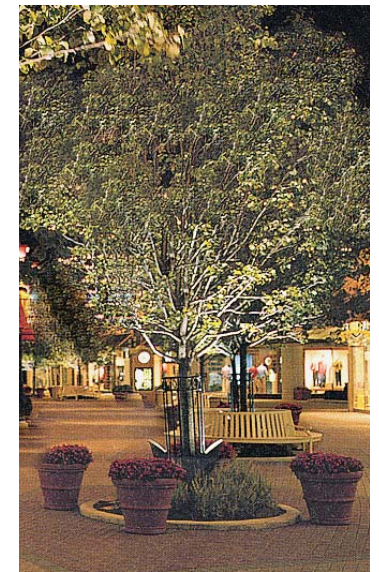
LIGHTING

Developing a family of lighting fixtures is critical to successfully developing a consistent style throughout the Athens downtown. As a prominent element in the landscape, during the day and night, lighting must respond to a number of design criteria, including:

- The City of Athens standard ornamental street light should be utilized along all downtown streets and future street redevelopment projects.
- Banner attachments should be added to the light poles, allowing for seasonal banners and as a consistent element pronouncing the arrival to Downtown.
- Lights should be pedestrian in scale; larger lighting applications such as traffic lights shall incorporate a detailed base which provides interest at the pedestrian level and shall match the color of the decorative streetlights, which are black. Coordination with the Texas Department of Transportation is recommended to evaluate the opportunity to add upgraded, painted traffic signals and cobra lighting poles to enhance the aesthetic appearance of downtown.
- Highlight interesting architectural or landscape elements with the use of accent lighting.
- Light fixtures attached to buildings shall be consistent with the style of the lighting family and compatible with the architectural style.
- Creatively utilize lighting to emphasize design elements, including entry signage and public art.
- Fixtures shall be appropriately shielded so that the light source is not directly visible from public roads or adjacent properties.
- Aesthetic and other non-security lights shall be placed on timers which are set to turn off during non-peak hours of the evening.
- Indirect light designs should limit light pollution onto surrounding properties.



Athens' existing ornamental lights



Accent lighting



Banners, planters and directional signs add color and provide visual interest to lamp posts



Current galvanized cobra lights and signal poles could be upgraded or enhanced



Painted lights and signal poles create elements that coordinate with downtown site furnishings and soften their impact on downtown



Lamps should be appropriately shielded



Utilize lighting to emphasize design elements, materials and colors



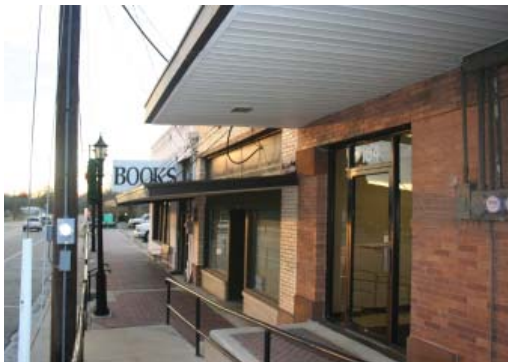
Lighting should be pedestrian in scale



UTILITY PLACEMENT

One major element that impacts the visual character of downtown is overhead electric lines. As downtown develops and expands in the coming years and streetscape enhancement projects are planned, it is recommended that overhead electric lines be buried or relocated to alleys and rear yards. The removal of these features from the visual landscape will greatly enhance the appearance and quality of the downtown streetscape, providing an attractive destination and experience.

Utility relocations and underground placement is an expensive endeavor. Priorities should be placed on the areas of highest pedestrian activity and visibility. As activity increases downtown, additional streetscape beautification projects could be planned as part of the City's annual budget. If a developer is interested in a redevelopment project within the study area, the City could require that utilities be buried. This regulation could be adopted as an update to the City's ordinances for development within the downtown district.



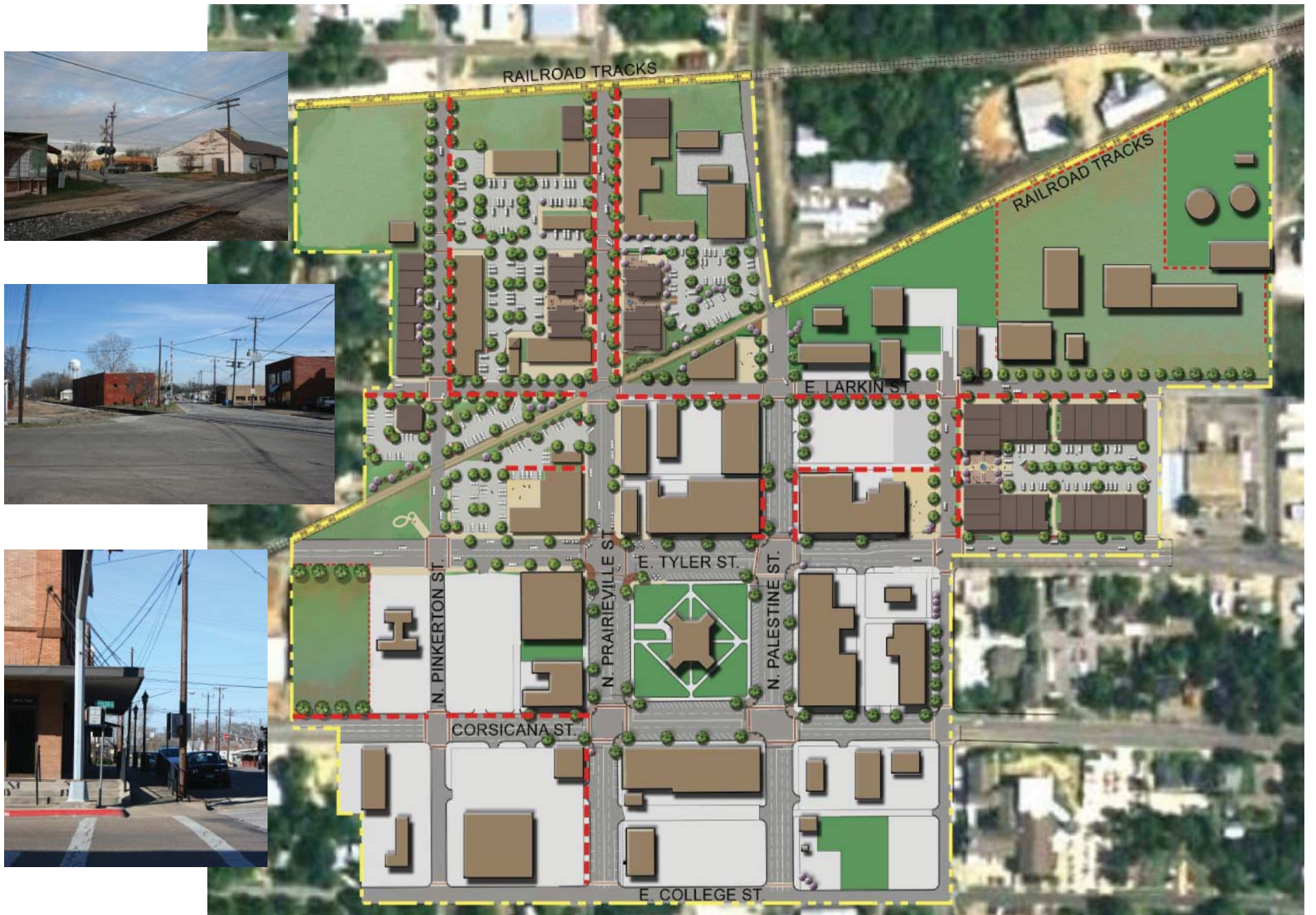
Power lines, meters and utility poles add clutter to downtown streetscape



A forest of power lines, utility boxes and poles distract from the downtown experience



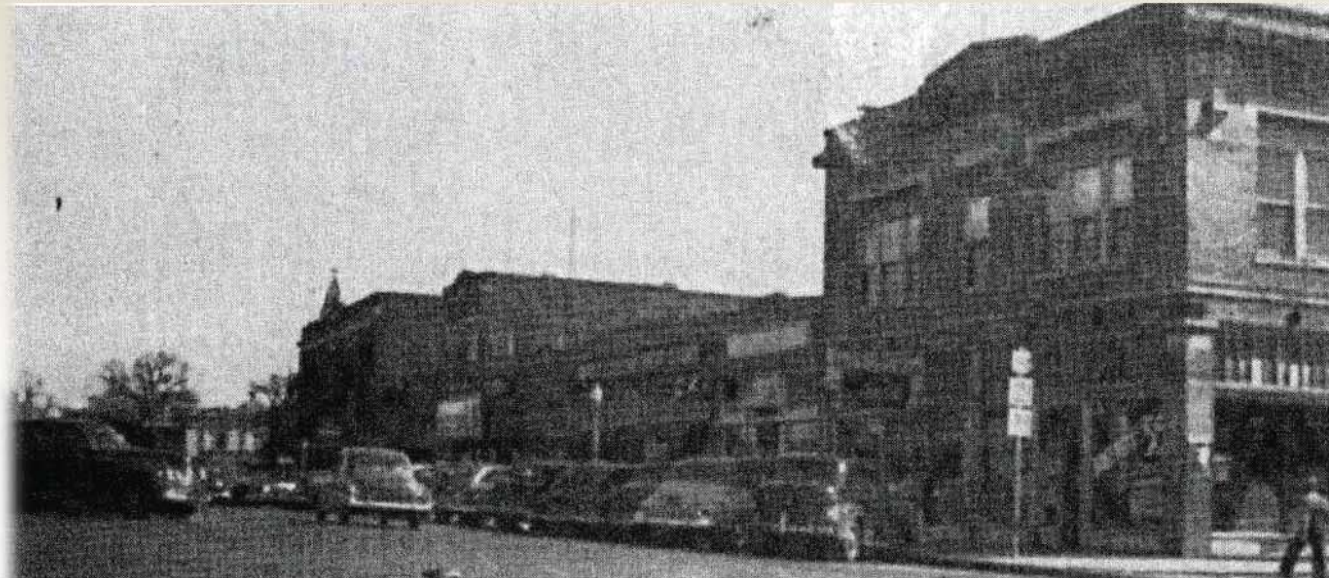
Buried power lines contribute to a more inviting streetscape



Red dashes on diagram illustrate locations where overhead utilities should be relocated or buried



DESIGN GUIDELINES 5



DESIGN GUIDELINES

As a tool to help guide redevelopment and rehabilitation efforts in downtown Athens, design criteria have been prepared to address the following elements:

- Architectural Design and Historic Rehabilitation
 - Storefront Design
 - Materials
 - Windows
 - Awnings
 - Roof Treatment
- Signage
- Landscape Design

An emphasis has been placed on the restoration of historic architectural elements. The appearance of any structure can be greatly enhanced by making improvements that are consistent with its historic character. No matter how simple the design or modest the materials used, identifying and preserving the original design intent of a historic structure is always the preferred preservation solution. It is never advisable to remove historic features in an attempt to “modernize,” nor to “historicize” by fabricating historic-looking features that were not part of the original building. Preservation is guided by the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation published by the National Park Service and used for historic properties throughout the country. The general principles are the following:

- Identify, retain and preserve those character-defining features and materials that establish a building’s historic look
- Protect and maintain those features and materials to extend their useful life
- Repair historic materials using the least intervention possible
- Replace with new materials of the same kind, only when the level of damage or deterioration is beyond repair



Historic buildings contribute to the unique appeal of Athens' downtown



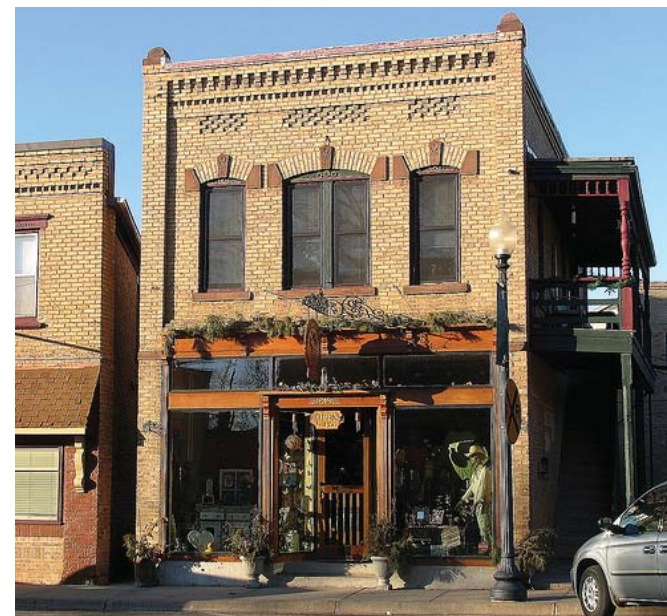
Preserve and restore the materials and features that define historic buildings



STOREFRONT DESIGN GENERAL CRITERIA

In general, storefronts should incorporate such typical architectural features as recessed entries, display windows, and base panels, in keeping with the original design of the building. Storefronts along the same block should have a consistent design and relate to the entire building as a whole. When new commercial structures are built within the existing downtown district, it should be compatible in height, proportion, setback, and exterior materials with adjacent historic buildings.

- Façade elements, such as entrances, windows and signage should provide clarity and lend interest to the storefront. A distinction between individual storefronts and the whole of the building façade is important.
- Individual storefronts should be clearly defined by architectural characteristics such as storefront cornices, sign boards, pillars, or separations of glass and base panels.
- Multi-story new buildings should be designed with a projecting brick string course or change in brick pattern to identify the separation of floors.
- Building corners should also incorporate brick offsets or projections to provide architectural interest.
- A horizontal band at the top of each storefront can serve as an appropriate location for business signage. Back lit signs are discouraged.
- Storefront windows and doors should be consistent in height and design to create a cohesive appearance.
- To add to the pedestrian experience, storefront window displays should be provided in both retail and non-retail businesses to add color, texture, information, and/or visual activity.
- Use traditional late 19th – early 20th century storefront configuration as a guide when contemplating improvements to existing storefronts, if the original appearance is unknown. This includes a three-part configuration with bulkhead (typically wood-paneled or masonry with rectangular accent framing), large, single-pane display windows and transoms.



Traditional historic storefront with single pane display windows, transom and second floor windows



Storefront display windows add dimension and visual interest

- Storefront entries should be recessed with wood and a single glass panel door and transoms above. Aluminum doors with dark brown or anodized finish may be acceptable. Sidelights are typical and may be incorporated.
- Preferred storefront framing materials are wood, copper or painted metal having a profile with a series of indentations.
- Maintain/restore the original width of historic storefront openings which have been filled in or covered over. Do keep/restore the original height and display window area in historic buildings.
- Maintain/restore storefront windows with large sheets of clear glass to allow view into the retail space.
- Maintain/replace transoms windows (the small windows above a door or window) and recessed entries in historic buildings. Add transom windows to new building design.
- Maintain/replace/add base panels (the low wall area under a storefront window). Base panels should not be higher than 2 feet.
- Do not reduce the size, block or fill in original storefront openings in historic buildings.
- Do not use solid doors, glass block or tinted, opaque or mirrored glass.



Large storefront windows are inviting to visitors and add interest to the street scene



Avoid glass block or opaque windows in storefront design

FAÇADE MATERIALS

- All new construction shall be 100% brick masonry on all four sides.
- Stone may be used as an accent for variety.
- Wood or simulated wood products should be used only for window and door frames.
- Wood, metal, tile or fiberglass may be used to create detailed cornices at roof lines and provide architectural accents.
- Painting over brick is discouraged.
- Repair or replace original building materials with matching materials in historic buildings. For new or infill buildings, use materials that complement adjacent buildings.
- Original wall materials such as brick and stone should be repaired and maintained. Metal, stucco or imitation siding materials should all be avoided on brick and stone buildings.
- Do not add false fronts or mansard roofs that cover or obscure the façade of historic buildings.
- Remove non-original siding materials and false fronts on historic buildings.
- Never sandblast brick or stone with sand or other abrasives. When cleaning, use water or chemicals, whichever is the recommended and the gentlest method possible to remove dirt and debris while protecting and preserving the building's appearance and longevity.



Restore storefront windows and natural brick color



Restore original second story façade materials and design elements and replace awning and sign with designs that complement the building's architectural character

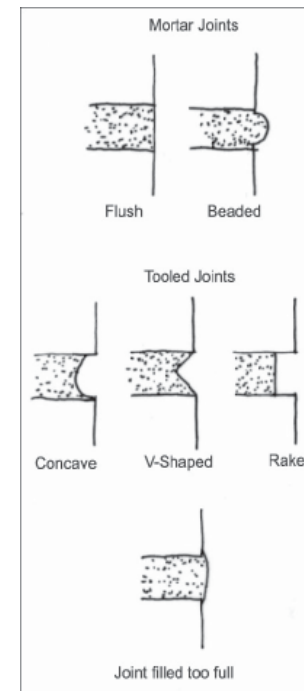
- Tuckpoint when needed and attempt to use the original joint shape and color if known. If not known, use a flush or tooled (recessed) joint for face brick, a flush joint for common brick, and a beaded (curved, projecting) joint for rough cut stone. Do not let the mortar extend over the face of the brick. This will permit water penetration behind the mortar and cause it to crack and fall out.
- Repaint wood clapboard when cracking and peeling appear. Scrape thoroughly first, caulk, prime and then paint with a high quality, preferably oil based paint. Repair deteriorated sections with boards of the same width and thickness.
- Do not cover or replace wood siding with modern siding, such as aluminum or vinyl. It will eventually cause damage to the wood underneath by trapping moisture inside. Do not cover original brick with artificial stone siding or stucco.

BUILDING COLORS

- Primary building colors shall be muted, earth tones.
- Primary colors are prohibited.
- Contrasting colors shall be reserved for building accents such as trim, railings and entries.
- Traffic signal casings, poles and street light poles must be black to match the street lights.

WINDOWS

- Retain the same size and shape of all window openings, especially on the front and sides of the property visible from the street. Windows are the single most character-defining feature of an old building.



Tuckpoint brick joints to restore façade



Restore architectural details, stone ledges and original size and shape of windows on historic buildings



- The first floor of retail/business buildings shall have large display windows with transoms.
- Restore the original size of any filled in or covered over upper-story window openings and repair/replace windows in like kind to match.
- Multi-story buildings shall have vertically oriented windows on the upper floors, similar in size and proportion to historic windows found in Athens.
- Upper level windows should have stone window ledges.
- Remove security grilles.
- Framing systems should generally be painted dark colors. Aluminum finishes should be avoided.
- Do not fill in or cover over upper story window openings in historic buildings. New windows and doors should be sized to fit within the original openings. Altering or partially filling the window openings around the window panes is discouraged.
- Retain original wood sash whenever possible, especially on the front of buildings.
- If windows are severely deteriorated and must be replaced, be sure the replacement frames are wood, and in the same size, style, profile and have the same number and configuration of window panes as the original. Most commercial blocks from the late 19th to early 20th century have double hung, wood sash windows with one upper pane and one lower pane. Shutters should not be installed unless they appear on historic photographs.



Remove security grilles from windows to reveal the building's character



Restore window openings and repair/replace with historically appropriate window designs

- Retain as much of the original outer wood trim as possible or replace with new trim to match.
- If window openings have been changed in a prior modernization attempt, determine the original size and shape through some of the earlier suggested methods such as markings on the façade, old photos or similarly styled buildings elsewhere in the community. Rebuild the original window openings and install historically compatible wood frame, double hung, sash windows.

AWNINGS

- Awnings should be mounted in a location that respects the original design of the building, such as storefront bays, piers and columns, decorative moldings, and window and door patterns. In general, awnings should not obscure piers, columns and decorative features.
- Where awnings are used along a row of contiguous buildings, use a consistent form, material, color, location and mounting arrangement.
- Awnings should be located to provide a consistent minimum 8 feet vertical clearance, with a maximum not to exceed 12 feet.
- Colors of awnings must complement the buildings.
- Mount awnings within individual bays or storefront openings.
- Use awnings of woven cloth or linen fabric, and limit signs on awnings to the valance (the awning flap) or small logos on the awning itself.
- Do not use awnings that extend up to the building wall, cover decorative features, or stretch continuously across masonry piers or arches.



Restore or replace wood trim around windows to maintain character of historic buildings



Replace awning with design that showcases and complements the architectural character of the building

- Do not use bubble awnings, exaggerated-shaped awnings, elongated bull nose entrance canopies or canopy supports attached to the sidewalk.
- Do not use metal, vinyl or rubber awnings that are internally illuminated or covered with signs, phone numbers, etc.

ROOF TREATMENT

- Roof lines shall be varied for visual interest.
- Detailed cornices, friezes and parapet walls are required for flat roofs and should be compatible in character with historically rehabilitated structures in Athens.
- Retain the height and character of parapet walls. If they must be rebuilt, use matching brick from elsewhere in the building or from a brick salvage company that is similar in color and texture.
- All rooftop equipment, including satellite dishes and antennae, must be fully screened from view and located below the highest vertical element of the building.
- Avoid rooflines running in continuous planes more than 65 feet. Offset or jog the roof planes to increase visual interest.
- Do not remove decorative trim such as cornices, brackets, etc. Check regularly for holes or cracks and seal with caulk and repaint. If the ornamentation is beyond repair and must be removed, save pieces to use as a pattern for future replacement.
- Replace cornices that are missing, if possible, using wood, sheet metal or fiberglass. Cornice design should be based on historic evidence or on similar cornice styles on other buildings from the same time period and architectural style.
- Patch or re-roof with the same materials as the original whenever possible on mansard or decorative peaked roofs. If original materials are no longer available, select a modern substitute in a shingle style and color compatible with the original. Flat roofs generally present no preservation issues.



Parapet walls enhance the visual appeal of historic buildings



Decorative cornices add interest to the façade

SIGNAGE

The major purpose of a commercial sign is to identify a business, its merchandise and services. Signs should not be large and overbearing or cluttered with excessive information. They should be simple and complement other neighboring signs. Randomly located signs, signs containing too much information, too many signs and signs that dominate individual shops are often unattractive, hard to read or are easily missed by pedestrian shoppers and drivers. Such signs can give local shopping areas a cluttered, confusing and unattractive image. Simple signs with a consistent size and location from one storefront to the next make locating businesses easier.

For the purpose of this Downtown Study, signage treatment will be critical to the overall aesthetic enhancement of the study area. Proposed signage should be evaluated on material, color, shape, scale, size, location and overall appropriateness. In general:

- Signs attached to buildings should not dominate the façade or distract from the architectural street scene.
- Signs with individual letters are encouraged over panel signs.
- Reuse and restore historic signs on historic buildings when possible.

Signage Colors

- Sign colors should complement the colors and theme of the entire streetscape.
- Avoid too many colors. Small accents may be utilized to enhance a sign's visual appeal but limit the number of colors used.

Materials

- Sign materials should be compatible with the materials used on the building façade upon which they are associated.
- New materials may be utilized only if they are designed in a manner consistent with the architectural character of the building and complement the existing design elements.



Utilize signs that are composed of individual letters rather than panel signs



Sign design should complement the building colors and materials





Signage dominates façade and windows



Temporary and banner signs are not appropriate for downtown



Individually lettered signs with back lighting are encouraged



Simple, elegant text styles are encouraged

- Metal signs are permitted but avoid finishes that create glare.
- Paper and cloth signs are not permitted unless incorporated onto an awning.
- Do not attach paper flyers to storefront windows or use materials such as plywood, plastic or Styrofoam that are not high quality and durable.

Legibility

- Limit the number of text styles to avoid confusion and increase legibility.
- Avoid symbols and fonts that are hard to read or too intricate.
- Use symbols and logos in place of words whenever appropriate.

Illumination

- Illuminate only signs that are necessary, allow for illumination from other sources, i.e. streetlights or pedestrian lights.
- Individually illuminated signs, either individual illuminated letters or back-lit letters are encouraged if sign lighting is desired.



Example of sign design and illumination that complements the building's architecture

- Internally illuminated plastic cabinet signs are prohibited. Signs with individual letters are better integrated with the architecture.
- Utilize neon or simple external lighting like gooseneck fixtures when illuminating signs.
- Conceal electrical transformer boxes, conduit and electrical raceways.

Location

- Signs should not dominate the structure in height and should not project above the rooflines of the buildings.
- Do not mount signs in areas where they cover windows or decorative features of the building.
- Locate or place signs so that they do not extend above, below or beyond storefront openings, sign panels or sign bands (the wall area above the storefront window).
- Large signs on upper façades should be avoided.
- Signs should not obstruct doors or windows.
- Signage should be designed as an integral part of the building. The sign should be placed in the most appropriate location that best fits the character and architectural features of the building.



Wall signage integrated into architectural design

Wall Signs

- All wall signs should not project more than 12 inches from the surface of which they are mounted.
- Wall signs should be located where the building's architectural features suggest. Wall signs can help break up large blank walls and provide a variation on walls greater than one story.
- New wall signs on a structure or streetscape should be consistent in location with all other adjacent wall signs in the streetscape.
- Wall signs should not project above the roofline or outside the edge of a building corner.



Lighting and signage should reflect the same design aesthetic

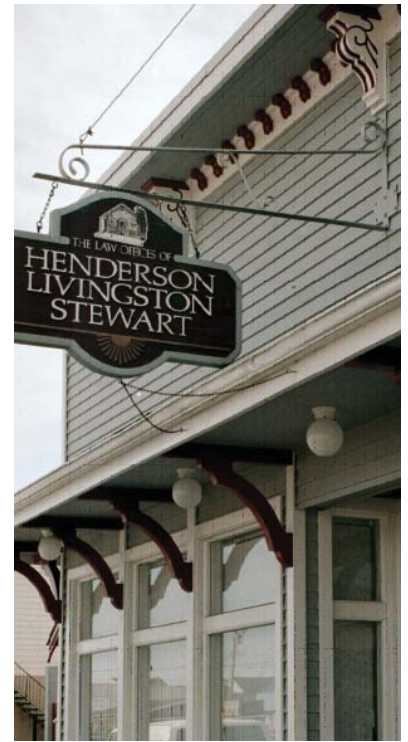
Projecting Signs

- On a multi-storied building, the sign should be suspended between the bottom of the second floor windowsill and the top of the first floor doors.
- Projecting signs should be made of metal, wood or fiberglass. Plastic signs are discouraged.
- Signs should be hung at a 90 degree angle to the building façade. Signs should be pinned away from the building slightly to increase visibility but should not protrude into the vertical plane of drives or streets.
- Signs should be no more than 10 square feet in size with a maximum vertical dimension of 4 feet and a maximum 4 foot projection from the building.
- The bottom of the sign should provide a 10 foot clearance above pedestrian sidewalks.
- Decorative iron and wood brackets are encouraged and should complement the overall design theme of the building.

Window Signs

- Signs should be limited to individual letters placed on the interior surface of the window.
- Window signs should not cover a majority of the window and should be oriented to be viewed from the outside.
- Letters should be white, black or gold leaf paint. Avoid bright, distracting colors that may become too dominant and contrast the overall theme.
- Window signs should not cover more than 25% of the display window.

It is recommended that the City modify the existing sign ordinance to better define the sizes, types and locations of signs desired for Athens. It is recommended that the proposed guidelines be utilized as the framework for revising the ordinance.



Examples of projecting sign design alternatives



LANDSCAPE

In an effort to enhance the aesthetic appearance and visual perception of Athens, several key design standards are proposed for future development and redevelopment along the streets within the study area boundaries.

Intersections and Site Entrances

Intersections and parking lot entrances should be identified with ornamental landscaping coordinated with the signage. Clearly enhancing the entrances with landscaping and lighting will help identify key access points and add to the aesthetic appeal of downtown.

Landscaping Adjacent to Buildings

- Incorporate planting beds into plazas to create shade and add human scale.
- Consider solar orientation when selecting plants and defining pedestrian spaces.
- Accent entrances and architectural elements with ornamental plantings.
- All landscape areas must be fully irrigated.
- Landscaped islands shall be planted with seasonal color and/or groundcover.
- Use plantings adjacent to buildings and along walkways to soften the built environment.
- Incorporate landscape beds and planters at key entryways and seating areas.
- Landscaping is encouraged at pedestrian crossings and seating areas. However, consideration should be given to vehicular/pedestrian sight lines.
- Explore opportunities to break up large expanses of pavement.



A well maintained landscape creates an inviting environment



Ornamental landscape helps identify entries

Perimeter Parking Lot Landscaping

Landscaping should be provided between parking areas, public right-of-ways and drives. The minimum landscaping required for this purpose shall be based on the measured linear footage that extends along the length of the property line (excluding driveways) adjacent to the roadway. To determine the minimum quantity of landscaping, the following guidelines apply:

- one (1) shade tree species per 50 linear feet.
- one (1) ornamental species per 20 linear feet.
- one (1) 5-gallon container size shrub per 4 linear feet.
- The specific location of trees and shrubs along the perimeter shall be designed by a landscape architect and submitted to and approved by the City.

Interior Parking Lot Landscaping

Landscape islands are required at the terminus of each parking bay. Within each island, 2 shade trees or 2 ornamental trees shall be planted. The ground plane shall be seeded with grass, mulched or planted with groundcover.

- Avoid more than 10 parking stalls in a row without a landscaped island.
- A 10 foot landscape median is required between every other parking bay.
- Landscaping within each landscape median shall include:
 - one (1) shade tree per 50 linear feet, or;
 - one (1) ornamental tree every 25 linear feet.
- Every parking stall must be located within 60 feet of a tree.



Plant hearty species in parking areas to withstand variations in temperature and weather conditions



Parking lot trees beautify roadway and provide a sound buffer

Unimproved Pad Sites

All portions of the downtown study area that are not occupied by buildings, structures, vehicle access and parking areas, loading/unloading areas and approved storage areas shall be kept in a neat and orderly manner though no landscaping is required. Outdoor storage should be prohibited in the downtown district.

Dumpster/Trash Receptacles/Outdoor Storage

All proposed dumpsters, trash receptacles, refuse storage containers and outdoor storage shall be located within an enclosure providing screening by means of the following elements:

- Decorative masonry wall with a non-masonry gate, a minimum of 6 feet in height. The construction materials of the wall shall match material used on the principal building.
- Large shrubs and small trees shall be arranged as foundation planting around the perimeter of the enclosure. One small tree shall be planted on each of the three sides of the enclosure, except the side where the gate is located. One (1) large shrub shall be planted for every 4 linear feet of wall constructed. The opening for the enclosure shall not be obstructed. Minimum shrub height at installation shall be 2.5 feet. The above landscape requirements do not apply when the enclosure is an architectural extension of a principal building or where service areas are not visible.

Ground Mounted Utility Equipment

All proposed ground mounted utility equipment shall be screened by planting one (1), 5-gallon large shrub for every 3 linear feet around the boundary of the equipment. Shrubs shall be a minimum height of 2.5 feet at installation.



Gated brick enclosure provides an attractive screen for trash receptacle and dumpster storage



Screen utility boxes with trees and shrubs to create a more attractive environment

General Planting Requirements

Proper installation and maintenance of landscape plantings is essential to achieving the desired downtown character. The following requirements specify critical considerations for landscape plantings.

- At the time of installation, all shrubs planted for the purpose of screening shall have a minimum height of 2.5 feet measured from the top of the root ball to the top of the plant.
- No more than 50% of the trees and shrubs shall be from the same species.
- All landscaping shall be separated from vehicular use areas by some form of barrier such as raised concrete curbing, bollards, curb stops or other suitable permanent alternative.
- Landscaping shall not obstruct the view between access drives and parking aisles, nor shall any landscaping which obstructs views be located in the radius of any curb return.
- No artificial plant material may be used to satisfy the requirements of this section.
- At the intersection of two streets, or at the intersection of a driveway and a street, nothing shall be erected, placed or planted that will impede vision between the height of 3 feet and 10 feet above the curb within a triangle formed by the intersecting streets or street and driveway, and measuring 40 feet along the sides of the triangle that face the intersection. Triangle sides shall be measured from the face of the curb to the face of the curb at intersections and driveways.

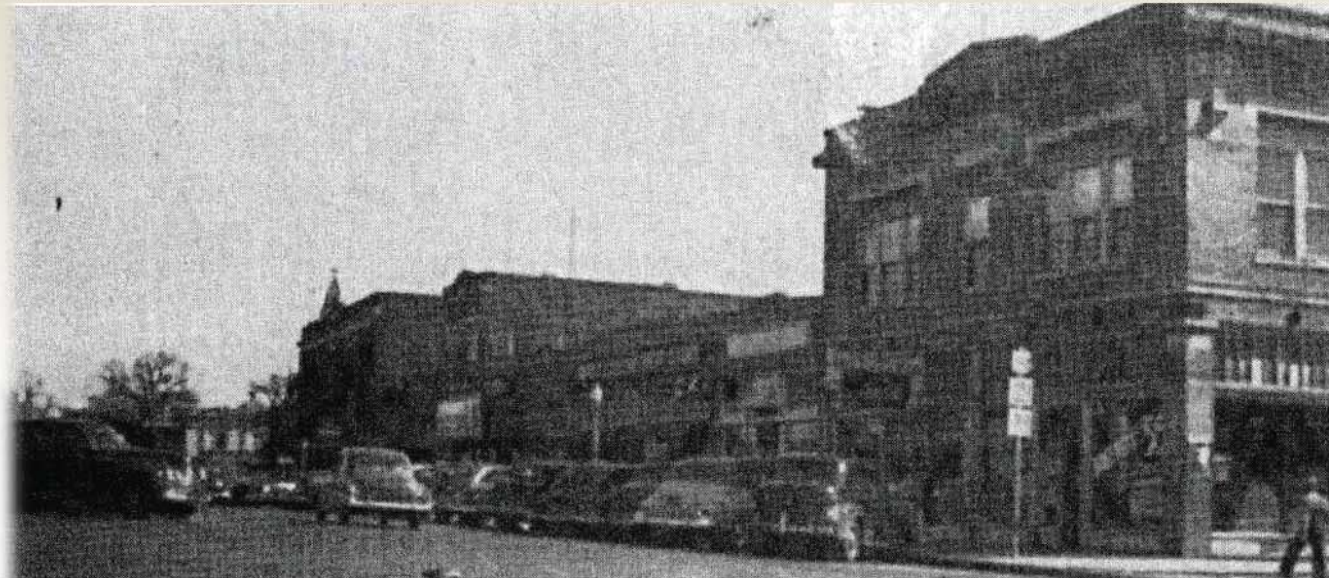


Landscape adds color and texture to the downtown environment



Landscape enhances the pedestrian experience

IMPLEMENTATION/PHASING 6



IMPLEMENTATION/PHASING

The recommendations found in this downtown study are wide ranging in scope and magnitude and should be interpreted as long range guidelines for growth. The ultimate success and timing of the downtown revitalization efforts are contingent upon many factors, including continued community population growth, new employment, economic conditions and the involvement of residents and community leaders. Some revitalization efforts and strategies can be implemented immediately and others may take many years and community expansion to realize.

The full context of the plan can be daunting and overwhelming if the proposals are not broken into discernable phases and time tables. In order to assist in the organization and implementation of the downtown revitalization, a series of strategies ranging from financing and economic development to community participation and phasing have been considered.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Many people will have a hand in making downtown Athens a thriving destination. The vast talents of residents in the community will be invaluable. Active and involved residents learn from each other, support the local economy, provide ideas to rehabilitate the infrastructure and create an overall stronger community. This involvement and support will lead to the attraction of new businesses and families to the community.

One of the most critical components for the implementation of this downtown master plan involves the utilization of local community assets. Athens contains a blend of talented and diverse individuals who could be tapped for

their professional experience and expertise. The success of this downtown revitalization effort will rely upon the involvement and persistence of these local assets. It is recommended that the City staff, Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Corporation work together with local assets to address complex issues and create well conceived solutions to downtown redevelopment issues.

The following task forces or stakeholder groups are examples of how community involvement could be utilized to refine the best solutions for Athens.

Aesthetic/Streetscape Improvements, Historic Preservation/Restoration and Landscape Beautification/Maintenance Team

- Engage local architects, engineers, builders, developers, landscape architects, designers and downtown business owners to work with City staff to refine downtown zoning standards and guidelines.
- Utilize members of team to serve on a design review board for downtown development or rehabilitation projects.



Athens' residents have already demonstrated their commitment to the downtown revitalization process through their participation in the community workshop and resident survey



- Assist City with design and implementation of Capital Improvement projects involving downtown enhancements.
- Utilize local historians and longtime Athens residents to document all downtown historic structures and identify any potential landmarks or opportunities for national historic registration.
- Research and provide guidance on federal and state historic restoration grant programs.
- Assist architects, builders, contractors and owners in understanding historically accurate building design for use in façade rehabilitation and restoration.
- Utilize local gardening clubs, arboretum staff, landscape architects and contractors to help implement and maintain downtown aesthetic improvement projects such as seasonal plantings, landscape maintenance, landscape planters and street tree maintenance.

Business Retention/Recruitment and Financing/Incentive Packages

- Identify local retail brokers, real estate professionals, developers, Tourism and Visitors Bureau, Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Corporation to define a unified message and strategy for approaching and attracting new businesses.
- Utilize local downtown merchants to help recruit additional retailers and restaurants. Current merchants can provide information on their customers, trends and benefits of re-locating to the downtown district.
- Compose a team of local bankers, attorneys, developers, investment professionals and accountants to work with the Economic Development Corporation and City staff to identify the financing mechanisms and incentive packages that are the right fit and would be the most

effective tool for attracting new business to Athens' downtown.

Promotion/Marketing and Cultural Arts/Entertainment Team

- Identify local marketing professionals, event promoters and organizers to work with the Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau to define a marketing strategy and campaign to promote the downtown district as a place to run a business, plan a visit or host an event/meeting.
- The team could develop a list of publications and other outlets in which to advertise; define new marketing materials and message to promote downtown; and coordinate events and festivals.
- Organize and manage the logistics of large scale events.
- Engage local artists, musicians, event promoters, etc. to identify a pool of potential artists and musicians who would participate in community events/festivals; i.e. Farmers Markets, Art Festival or Music on the Square.
- Define an entertainment calendar that might be used to promote the redevelopment of the Texan Theatre venue to potential developers.
- Identify locations and design for public art projects that could be incorporated downtown, such as additional murals and sculpture.



An attractive, pedestrian friendly streetscape will draw residents to the downtown

Recommendation Summary:

- Survey the community to identify local expertise that can be utilized to implement specific components of the plan.
- Engage local community groups and organizations to be involved in the downtown revitalization efforts.
- Identify a key City staff member(s) to organize, inform and guide community volunteer efforts.
- Form individual stakeholder groups as outlined above to work with City staff in evaluating the best solutions and implementation strategies that fit Athens.

ZONING AND REGULATORY RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the roles of the public sector is to put in place policies that guide development and inform design and capital investment decisions. The regulatory suggestions contained herein should ensure compliance with the downtown vision, but should also be crafted in a way that is attractive to potential developers.

The Downtown Master Plan lays a foundation of the overall vision, design guidelines, and policy recommendations that should later be refined and integrated into the City's regulatory framework. In order to administer the design recommendations for downtown redevelopment and rehabilitation, the City should consider the expansion of a downtown zoning district and adoption of key design criteria required within the downtown district.

The revised downtown zoning code will be the tool through which the vision for downtown will be regulated and enforced. The code should encourage quality development that is compatible with the vision for a pedestrian friendly environment, which includes ground floor retail, restaurants, entertainment, mixed uses, and active public spaces. As the City develops zoning standards, it is recommended that informal work sessions be held with community

members with expertise in development, building, architecture, engineering, historic restoration, landscape architecture and economic development to formulate a code that is embraced and well conceived by the community.

Once a revised downtown zoning code is refined, the City should consider the formation of a design review board composed of an architect, engineer, landscape architect and City staff to evaluate development proposals within the downtown area. To aide in the process for potential developers, the City should create a list of submittal requirements and process for review and approval of downtown projects.

Additional regulatory items that should be further refined include parking regulations, roadway standards and streetscape/landscape enhancements.



Parks and plazas create public gathering areas and attractive venues for festivals and community events



Recommendation Summary:

- Adopt Downtown Master Plan as part of City of Athens' Comprehensive Plan.
- Direct City staff to review the zoning code and comprehensive plan and refine those documents to be consistent with the Downtown Master Plan.
- Involve community experts in code revisions.
- Establish a design review board to review downtown projects.
- Develop an education campaign to ensure that downtown businesses and their employees understand the importance of maintaining downtown parking for visitors.
- Enforce downtown parking regulations.
- Approach private parking lot owners to define and execute a shared parking agreement.
- Adopt new roadway/streetscape standard sections for application in the downtown district. Street sections should specify street tree locations, minimum sidewalk width, on-street parking, pavement width, lighting standards, utility placement and minimum building setbacks.
- Require that future landscape plans, pedestrian plazas, parks and streetscape projects be designed and sealed by a licensed landscape architect prior to City approval.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

There are a variety of actions that the City can undertake to enhance the downtown district. They include marketing, promotional programs, recruitment, retention and physical improvements. Specific suggestions are outlined below:

Marketing

- Prepare and distribute marketing brochures with information and directions to restaurants, services and stores.



Thoughtful zoning and regulatory policies will guide downtown development and help Athens create a thriving community destination

- Reach out to residents, visitors and recent arrivals so they know the range of goods and services available locally.
- Promote certified retirement community designation and associated attractions in publications that target the retirement market, such as the AARP Magazine.
- Feature advertisements or articles in each of the surrounding communities' newspapers highlighting downtown merchants, festivals and events.
- Prepare a postcard with a map showing the location of area businesses for stores to give to customers.
- Identify a list of desired downtown businesses and develop a strategy for promoting Athens to those potential tenants.
- Initiate a comprehensive signage program including signage for gateways, public parking and wayfinding.
- Establish a marketable identity/brand for Athens to promote the city (i.e. What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas, etc.)

Promotional Programs

- Establish a calendar of special events and promote them to a wider area, attracting new shoppers to discover Athens.
- Coordinate events with other surrounding jurisdictions to maximize potential attendance. (i.e. Canton First Mondays).
- Encourage stores to be open longer hours or non-traditional hours such as 11:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m. versus 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. to attract more working people to their stores.
- Formulate a branding and marketing campaign (i.e. “Shop Athens”) targeted at keeping sales tax dollars local to support municipal services.
- Create “Downtown Athens coupons” available on the city’s website that encourage residents and visitors to print and redeem at downtown businesses, thereby promoting local businesses and increasing traffic to the downtown district.
- Incorporate the Athens identity/brand into promotional materials and events to reinforce the community message.

Retail Recruitment and Retention

In order to create synergy and develop critical mass within downtown, it is important that desired retailers be located adjacent to or within close proximity to each other. Street frontage which is interrupted by office and other service uses will often not be as successful as consistent retail frontage. Clusters which combine restaurants, retail and entertainment create the most impact.

Given the relatively small scale of the downtown and changing market dynamics with national chains, the most appropriate niche for downtown would be regional and Texas based retailers and restaurants. It is important that the City maximize the abilities of the Chamber of Commerce in terms of working with local brokers, the City and representatives of the financial community to recruit the most appropriate tenants for retail space within the downtown

district. The Chamber should be able to promote Athens to prospective businesses by providing information regarding available properties, prevailing lease terms, permitting, current market/demographic profile, etc. The Chamber and the City should also work together to prepare marketing information and incentive alternatives for prospective tenants.

Since the downtown district does not have the leverage of a single landowner to require cooperation (as in a shopping mall, where all of the leases are controlled by one company), downtown efforts will be largely voluntary (with the assistance of potential incentives and effective zoning and land use controls) and based on persuasion and volunteer efforts rather than a mandated tenant/merchandise mix.

Other cities have successfully developed a cohesive downtown tenant mix over time by devoting a dedicated team (to include key representatives from the City, banking industry and local retailing community) to the effort. Given the random land ownership pattern of downtown Athens, it must be emphasized that the effort to recruit retailers will take time, patience and dedication by those involved.



Streetscape standards for the downtown will encourage a pedestrian friendly, engaging environment that will attract businesses, residents and visitors



Downtown retail recruitment is not an overnight process. It should be expected that it may take two to three years for substantive improvements to take place. Although results are not immediate, the sustained effort can attract new retailers if the general character of the downtown district is improved and the retail recruitment effort is maintained.

Suggestions for downtown retail recruitment include the following:

- Prepare a professional looking promotional brochure for businesses and developers inquiring about sites. Brochure should include demographics, current estimates and projections, a list of available sites, lease rates and regulations including business licenses and background community information.
- Prepare a “wish list” of desired users to guide in the specific recruitment of businesses to the downtown.
- Request contact information from the Texas Restaurant Association for restaurant owners looking to expand in the region.
- Include promotional information on the City website that is easy to locate and update it frequently.
- Recruit the types of businesses consistent with the vision for the downtown district.
- Encourage the Chamber of Commerce to work with existing merchants to provide guidance on topics such as attractive window displays, cost effective advertising, quality customer service, preservation guidelines and incentives.
- Establish a recruitment task force, using expertise from the EDC, Chamber of Commerce and residents with a background in commercial real estate to target and approach retail, restaurant and entertainment businesses regarding relocation to downtown.

FINANCIAL TOOLS AND INCENTIVES

Many incentives are available to encourage redevelopment. The City can undertake a variety of actions to encourage redevelopment: land assembly, write-down of land costs, demolition, site preparation, relocation, parking and infrastructure. The mix of incentives may vary from city to city as individual municipalities weigh the alternatives and decide which tools are appropriate to their local circumstances. As the City reviews the tools and incentives, it should consider several issues:

- Are there available means to finance the program with other funds?
- What is the financial benefit and how long before the City receives a return on its investment?
- What is the developer’s track record?
- Have the developer’s recent projects been successful?
- Are the developer’s financial projections realistic?
- Is there public support for the use of an incentive for the specific development?
- If there is public opposition to a particular incentive – is it due to a misunderstanding of how the incentive would benefit property owners, existing merchants and the community?
- Is the public opposition based on clear policy concerns?

Regulatory Relief

For the developer, regulatory relief reduces the time, expense and uncertainty of obtaining final project approval. Relief might include waivers of building permit fees or reducing fees for business and liquor licenses.

Façade Improvements

The owners of a few buildings have improved their façades and updated their signage. We recommend that the City institute a façade improvement program for property owners to enhance their façades, upgrade the tenant spaces and improve visual merchandising.

Owners who wish to participate in the program would submit drawings to the staff/architectural review board for review and approval. These drawings must comply with zoning standards and design guidelines adopted for downtown. After the architectural review board approves the plans, the owner's contractor completes the work. The City inspects the work to verify that it has been done according to the approved plans and other City requirements. Upon documentation of the façade improvement costs, the City provides a grant to the owner which rebates a portion of the expenses. Typically, a municipality provides a dollar for dollar match for approved façade improvements up to a maximum amount.

The City may decide instead that funding more buildings to undertake minor improvements is preferable to funding fewer buildings for substantial improvements. Typically eligible costs should include exterior improvements such as restoration of historic storefronts, painting, tuckpointing, repair of historic windows, new windows or doors when replacing non-historic windows and doors, lighting, signage and parking lot improvements. Interior improvements are usually ineligible with the exception of compliance with life safety codes, ADA modifications and restoration of significant historic features.

If the City does not wish to fund the program, City leaders should consider approaching local financial institutions. They may be willing to provide a revolving loan to fund the program. The bank(s) may offer property owners attractive terms, such as a longer repayment schedule or below market interest rates as an incentive to enhance their façades.

Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits

Owners of designated landmarks, whether local or National Register, are eligible for specific tax credits. The Federal government established the historic rehabilitation tax credits in 1976. Historic tax credits up to 20% can be used to provide tax incentives for investors to consider renovation of older commercial buildings within the historic core. The program provides a tax credit for substantial rehabilitation of income producing buildings over 40 years old which are listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

To qualify for the Historic Tax Credits, the building must meet the standards established by the US Department of the Interior for eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. Secondly, the building modifications must meet the standards of the US Department of the Interior for Certified Rehabilitation of Certified Historic Buildings. In general, a historic tax credit is a dollar for dollar reduction in the amount of federal taxes owed.

While the use of historic tax credits requires additional approvals and the need to meet certain design and construction standards, saving 20% of the approved project cost against tax obligations can greatly improve the viability of a commercial restoration project. In Texas, the historic credits are administered by the Texas Historical Commission.



Property Tax Exemption

Local property tax exemptions can encourage revitalization and reinvestment in historic buildings. An incentive such as a property tax freeze at pre-rehabilitation values for qualified projects could encourage investment in downtown buildings.

This tool reduces the assessment level for new commercial development or substantial rehabilitation. It is not used frequently because the municipality's portion of the total tax bill is small. The abatement can be a significant incentive if some of the other taxing bodies such as the school district also participate.

Additionally, a process for forgiveness of back taxes, maintenance and water bills in exchange for improvements to historic structures could encourage improvements.

Targeted Financial Assistance

For the types of businesses that the City is anxious to recruit, it could offer assistance to pay for relocation expenses and the first three months rent. The grant or loan would be awarded to viable businesses who provide sales tax revenue and who have signed a long term lease.

Because a retail business is expensive in the early years due to costs of renovation and fit up of interiors, purchase of merchandise and provision of operating costs while building a customer base (and even higher for food service due to the costs of commercial kitchens), any incentives that can reduce initial costs will be most effective.

These incentives could include access to reduced cost financing, deferred or reduced rents or direct subsidy of store improvements (such as the façade grants).

Sales Tax Rebate

The City could rebate a portion of the local sales tax generated by new retail development. This typically takes the form of a negotiated agreement based on the sales generated by a new store over the existing sales tax generated at that location. The sales tax is shared between the municipality and retailer or developer and is usually phased out after a specified number of years. The split between the municipality and retailer is negotiable and the actual deals vary considerably. The rebate is typically offered to large retailers or projects.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF)/Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZ)

A TIF/TIRZ is a tool that allows local governments to publicly finance needed public improvements within a defined area. The initial capital improvement costs are repaid by the collection of future property and/or sales tax revenues by each of the taxing units that levy taxes against future developments. In Texas, TIFs are also known as Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZ), which are funded and operated under the same regulatory requirements as TIF districts.

It is up to each taxing unit to dedicate all or a portion of the tax revenue that is attributable to the increase in property values due to the improvements within the designated zone. Under Texas law, a TIF may be initiated through two methods: (1) a property owner petition representing at least 50% of the appraised value of property within a defined zone, or (2) by a city council and/or county government. Once initiated, counties, school districts and other districts may consider participating based upon the impact to their anticipated long term revenues resulting from future growth. These agreements are sometimes called Interlocal Agreements.

According to Chapter 311 of the Texas Tax Code, the collected TIF revenues can be applied as direct payments to fund project costs or through the sale of TIF bonds that will be repaid over time with the tax increments. The legislation requires that the designated area meet certain criteria. For example, “the area’s present condition must substantially impair the City’s growth, retard the provision of housing, or constitute an economic or social liability to the public health, safety, morals or welfare”. Further, this condition must exist because of the presence of one or more of the following conditions:

- A substantial number of substandard or deteriorating structures
- Inadequate sidewalks or street layout
- Faulty lot layouts
- Unsanitary or unsafe conditions
- A tax or special assessment delinquency that exceeds the fair market value of the land
- Defective or unusual conditions of title
- Conditions that endanger life or property by fire or other cause

If a designated area qualifies for tax increment financing, there is a ten step process that must be followed and the City must justify the use of TIF by meeting the standards outlined in the state legislation. Some of the steps and process include the following:

- Preparation of a preliminary financing plan
- A hearing held for other taxing jurisdictions in the area
- A formal presentation to the other taxing units
- A public hearing regarding the creation of the zone
- Annual reports to all affected taxing districts

The size of the tax increment is completely based on allocations of future development. If the market is weak or the designated project’s density is limited, the increment generated may not be sufficient to cover the debt service for the improvements.

Public Improvement District (PID)

A Public Improvement district would allow the City to levy and collect special assessments on properties within an identified area to pay for a variety of improvements. PIDs are established by the Texas Legislature. It is a type of “self tax” and can be formed to create improvements such as:

- Water
- Waste water
- Health and sanitation
- Drainage
- Street and sidewalk
- Parking
- Park, recreation and cultural
- Landscaping and other aesthetic improvements
- Art installation
- Public safety and security services
- Advertising and business recruitment

Establishing a PID for downtown Athens would require a consensus among downtown owners within the designated area and creating a formalized agreement with the City to collect and distribute the special PID tax.



Capital Improvements Programming

The City should consider reviewing its annual budget and incorporate funding for specific capital improvement projects that are suggested within the Downtown Master Plan. The City should prioritize key downtown enhancement projects and dedicate certain funds over the course of several years to gradually implement the improvements.

City Lease Back Program

The City could consider taking or retaining ownership of key buildings downtown and offering attractive lease rates or deferred rent to attract new retailers or restaurants downtown. The City attorney should first investigate the Texas law regarding the requirements or rules governing this process.

This approach could be an effective way to revitalize the downtown theatre.

Creative Industries Attraction

The City could provide space in downtown buildings or approach building owners to discuss the possibilities of interim uses for vacant space. Temporary studio space could be provided for artists to bring cultural activities to the downtown area or establish an artist in



An artist in residence program will contribute to the unique character of Downtown Athens

residence program. If enough interest is generated, artists could rotate in and out of the vacant spaces. The temporary studios would need to be open to the public, so visitors can interact with the artists and observe their work. Artists must be willing to work during busy retail hours and weekends to provide an attraction and cultural diversity to the downtown district.

PHASING

In an effort to organize and prioritize the multitude of downtown revitalization recommendations, the following phases and action items have been outlined as a guide for moving forward. The phases and action items are divided into broadly defined time periods. Some actions must occur early in the process, either because other actions are dependent on them or because they will act as a catalyst to encourage outside parties to improve the downtown area. Other actions occur later in the process because they are more complex or dependent on market forces and other outside factors. However, the City can modify the sequence to respond to changing circumstances or to capitalize on actions by others.

Short Term Actions – One to Two Years

- City Council adopts Downtown Master Plan as part of the City's Comprehensive Master Plan.
- Form task force groups to address:
 - Aesthetics
 - Financing options
 - Business retention and recruitment
 - Event Planning
 - Arts/Entertainment
 - Marketing and Promotion

- Coordinate with TxDOT to review the desired streetscape improvements and identify any concerns or obstructions that need to be addressed in order to gain necessary approvals for enhancements within TxDOT right of way.
- Establish a Farmers Market at redevelopment site 4 or in the public parking lot on E. Larkin Street.
- Design and implement a downtown directional and wayfinding signage program.
- Consider a civic art participation project, i.e. Cows on Parade or Austin Guitartown, with local groups, businesses and artists sponsoring and/or decorating a fiddle or black eyed pea to be displayed around town, creating destinations, promoting exploration of the downtown and enhancing the sense of community.
- Establish a façade enhancement program and market to property owners.
- Amend zoning ordinance to adopt specific design criteria to be applied in the downtown district for new development/rehabilitation.
- Commission public art mural at Highway 19 and E. Larkin Street.
- Recruit targeted retailers/restaurants that will enhance downtown.
- Identify which funding or incentive mechanisms are a fit for Athens and develop an incentive strategy that can be used in recruitment.
- Define a downtown marketing and promotional campaign that sends a consistent message from all City organizations.
- Invest in streetscape enhancement projects to signal to property owners that real change is occurring.
- Coordinate with Prosperity Bank on design and construction of new bank building that fits Athens downtown design aesthetic.
- Develop marketing brochure listing retailers and services downtown; update list of properties available on website.

Mid Term Actions – Two to Five Years

- Review infrastructure adequacy for redevelopment; City staff should review the current state of municipal infrastructure – water, sewer and storm water management and identify any necessary improvements to provide adequate capacity to support the downtown master plan.
- Enhance crosswalks around the courthouse square to improve pedestrian safety.
- Implement street tree program around the courthouse square.
- Demolish white barn in redevelopment site 4.
- Begin parking lot and redevelopment improvements on redevelopment site 4.
- Attract entertainment developer for redevelopment site 2, former Texan theatre.
- Consider demolition of feed store in redevelopment site 5.
- Construct on-going streetscape improvements: landscaping, lighting, sidewalks, gateway signs, intersection enhancements, public art, etc.

Long Term Actions – More than Five Years

- Bury overhead utilities in phases; required for all future redevelopment projects.
- Athens Alley streetscape.
- N. Pinkerton streetscape improvements.
- Relocation of car dealership for redevelopment site.
- Redevelopment of site 5 with additional public parking.
- Enhancement and development of Athens Alley area.



CONCLUSION

As previously stated, the Athens' Downtown Master Plan recommendations and guidelines provide a vision for future planning and design improvements downtown. Many of the issues and suggestions are complex and will require on-going refinement and work to implement. However, if no guiding principles and framework are established today, there will be no way to protect against random, undesirable development in the future. The successful implementation of the Downtown Master Plan will require determination, persistence, patience, community involvement and great leadership. All of these qualities exist in Athens and can be harnessed to change the course of downtown and re-establish it as the social, financial and cultural center of the city.

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