

A Plan for
Strengthening &
Preserving Downtown



Delaware Public Administration Institute
College of Urban Affairs & Public Policy
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All across America small towns have experienced the economic and physical decline of their downtown commercial and retail centers. This phenomenon has been occurring for decades and has elicited both tremendous concern and extensive efforts to curtail and reverse the deterioration. The efforts have taken many forms and been the object of millions of dollars in expenditures. The result has been a mixture of successes and failures.

Seaford, Delaware, has experienced similar problems with much of its retail activity moving out of the downtown and into shopping strips that lie along the highways that run through and past the greater Seaford area. The recently adopted Seaford Comprehensive Plan commits the city to "promote the revitalization of the traditional commercial core through the preparation, adoption, and implementation of a downtown plan" (Seaford Comprehensive Plan, 1988).

In this light and as part of their on-going effort to improve the quality of life in Seaford, officials of the city approached the College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy of the University of Delaware for advice about how the downtown area ought to evolve and develop. They wanted to know whether the downtown should be allowed to develop on its own without public or community intervention or whether action should be taken to change or improve its condition, such as strengthening it as a retail and/or commercial center, promoting residential use, or supporting renovation so that it could recapture its historic character.

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eafood is a distinct place with its own character and history; it is not just a collection of housing developments and businesses spread along a highway. Seaford's downtown has the advantages (and disadvantages) of being compact. Businesses and services are close enough that clients can walk from one store or office to another. It retains some of the historic qualities of late 19th and early 20th century small town America. It has an interesting diversity of architectural styles and a mix of residential and commercial uses. The activities that predominate in the downtown tend to be service-oriented and are owned or operated by independent business people and community organizations rather than by national or regional chains. The condition of the downtown area has a significant impact on how the Seaford community is perceived. A downtown in disrepair reflects badly on the entire community. The downtown is also a place where local heritage and culture can be preserved and celebrated.

The goal of the community should be to strengthen and preserve the downtown as a place which provides facilities for community-oriented functions, businesses, and services. The downtown should be the symbolic center of Seaford, the place that gives Seaford its identity and character and celebrates its history. Efforts to return the downtown to its historic position as the location of the primary economic activities of the community probably would not work and would end up destroying its character.

In this spirit, the project team has gathered information about attitudes, problems, community achievements, and visions for the future directly from the people of Seaford. We have also gathered information about the physical condition of the downtown area by careful observation and have captured some of these observations in photographs. We trust that the following recommendations will serve as the basis for a downtown plan that will help Seaford maintain a viable and healthy downtown, a center that will enhance the image and identity of the entire community.

What Can Be Done?

Create a Government Service Center on High Street

Relocation of local government activities to High Street would be a major step toward stabilizing the downtown. Consolidation of public offices in the vicinity of the Post Office would locate a major, anchoring activity in approximately the center of town and would reinforce the perception that the downtown is the center of the community. There is a large, unimproved lot across the street from the Post Office at the corner of Pearl Street and High Street which provides an opportunity to construct a public parking lot that can be used by visitors to public offices, customers of the Post Office, and patrons of the downtown. A pedestrian walkway could be constructed to give pedestrians the right-of-way. Cars would be required to stop at this point to allow pedestrians to cross the street from the parking lot to the Post Office.

The Post Office is an important facility and should be retained on High Street. Loss of the customer service activities of the Post Office to a location outside of the downtown would seriously diminish the level of activity on High Street. Parking is a problem at the Post Office, a situation which is inconvenient for customers and, at times, creates congestion and potential for traffic accidents. This condition could be resolved by the development of public parking. The sorting and distribution functions of the Post Office could be moved to another location, thereby reducing truck traffic in the downtown and making available a small customer parking lot next to the Post Office, or, as mentioned above, by converting the lot at the corner of Pearl and High into a public parking facility.

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Establish an Attractive Entrance to the Downtown

Attention should be paid to improving the entrance to the downtown, that is, the intersection of High Street with Market Street and Front Street and the area near the bridge to Blades. The entrance looks tired and cluttered and, in the words of one respondent, gives the impression of "a coal mining town of the 1930s." This visual impression is inaccurate because, in fact, the downtown is in relatively good shape with businesses that are viable and buildings that are structurally sound. Visual impressions are important, however, so work needs to be done to make the first impression of downtown Seaford more positive.

The triangular plot of ground bounded by High, Market and Front Streets is a critical spot. The building on the site is unattractive, strictly utilitarian, and poorly landscaped. Moving the business and razing the structure would notably improve the physical appearance of the downtown. The plot could be then landscaped, perhaps with a flower bed and city seal, and provided with benches for public use.

The spaces on either side of the bridge over the Nanticoke also provide opportunities for improving the look of the downtown and for establishing a link between the river and the downtown. The area on the west side of Market Street, behind the power plant, is owned by the city. It could be landscaped, made accessible to the public, and provided with benches so that people, particularly senior citizens, could enjoy sitting by the river. The area could also be integrated with a walkway along the river. By adoption of the Comprehensive Plan, the city is committed to working "towards the creation of a public walkway along the Nanticoke River, east of the railroad" (Seaford Comprehensive Plan, 1988). Such a walkway would be an important attraction. It should be kept as simple and natural as possible, using natural, low maintenance materials for the path (e.g., oyster shells). Attention would have to be paid, of course, to ensuring that the area was safe and that city would not incur liabilities or excessive insurance costs by allowing greater access to the river.

On the east side of Market Street, there is now an open space which recently was occupied by an old warehouse. Demolition of the building has made the area more attractive, although the chain link fence around the property is not very pleasing. Hopefully, when the private owners make decisions about the future use of the property, they will keep in mind that it can have a substantial positive or negative impact on the appearance of the downtown. If a new building is to be constructed, it should be aesthetically pleasing and the property should be landscaped.

A moderate amount of landscaping and attention paid to maintaining attractive signs at the Royal Farm Store would be helpful. The empty Seaford Inn is also a bit of an eyesore. The building has a quaint look and could enhance Seaford's historic and small town image if it could be refurbished and adapted to an economical use. In lieu of a prompt resolution of its use, a good coat of paint on the side facing High Street would be a low cost contribution to the appearance of the downtown.

Finally, the parking lot on the northwestern corner of High Street and Market Street is very unattractive. It is poorly surfaced with a material that spreads across the sidewalk. This lot should be improved, landscaped, and linked to a general effort to improve the availability of parking in the downtown.

The eastern entrance to downtown Seaford could be given a welcoming appearance.



Develop New Parking Areas and Use Parking to Create a Visual Theme

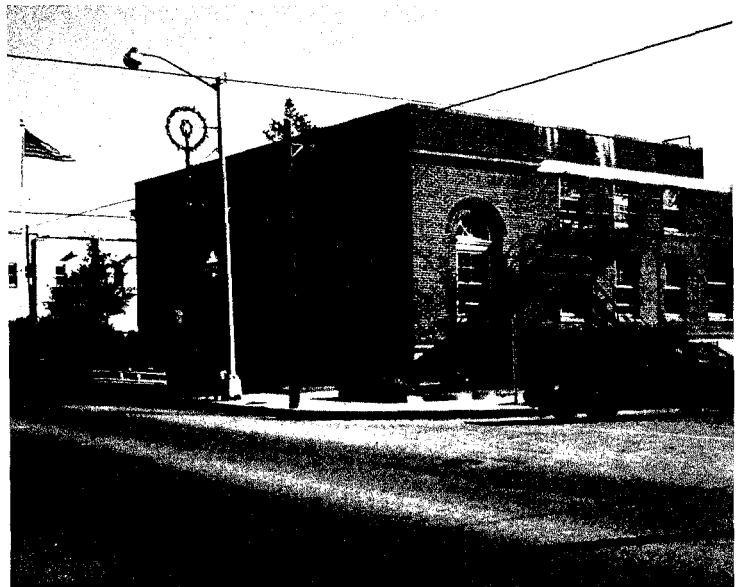
Parking has frequently been cited as a problem in the downtown. A number of merchants noted that their customers perceive parking to be inconvenient. As previously indicated, the Post Office also generates a significant amount of traffic but does not have a parking lot.

Close observation reveals that there are plenty of places to put parking in the downtown, but these sites are currently underutilized. At present, High Street has only one public parking lot, which is located adjacent to the Methodist Church. The lot is small and not well advertised. More visible signs are needed to alert motorists that parking is available. Along High Street, there are a number of unimproved or poorly landscaped, privately owned lots that could be used for public parking. There are the above mentioned lots at the intersections of High Street and Market and High Street and Pearl. There is a lot on Arch Street across from the Senior Center and a small lot next to Lomar Office Supplies. There are also private lots next to C & D Flowers, alongside and behind Peninsula Oil, and behind Burton's Hardware.

One or more of these lots could be developed for public use. Several of the private lots are now eyesores. Paving the surfaces and landscaping the borders would greatly contribute to the attractiveness of the downtown. The landscaping theme should be simple, easy to maintain, and consistent, perhaps along the lines already established at the Peninsula Oil parking lot. Signs that follow a uniform style would help to identify the public and private lots. The city could encourage improvement of private lots by entering into contractual agreements to share the cost of surfacing, landscaping, and maintenance in exchange for use of the lot for public parking. The most critical sites for parking improvement are the lots at High Street and Market and High Street and Pearl. Development of these two sites would provide convenient and visible public parking and significantly improve the appearance of the downtown.

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The Post Office brings people to High Street.



Create a More Welcoming Appearance

Signage

The phrase "there is more than meets the eye" can be appropriately applied to Seaford's downtown. A casual observer can easily conclude that there is a great deal of vacancy and an insufficient variety of stores and services. Indeed, it is difficult for a motorist to determine what kinds of stores are actually operating in the downtown. Careful observation reveals that seemingly vacant buildings, in fact, contain active businesses or services. Unfortunately, signs in the downtown are either too small, poorly placed; unattractive, or, in some cases, even nonexistent. For example, it is hard to tell what is going on in the building that houses the Old Curiosity Shop. The signs for Seaford Medical, Fantasy Beauty Salon, and Hearn Insurance should be larger and placed flat against the buildings above the window displays. A larger and more distinct sign would be a welcome addition to the Bon Appetit building. All About Crafts has a large sign but it is unattractive. Burton's Hardware is in one of the most interesting buildings in the downtown but the clutter of signs advertising specific products

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distracts the viewer from seeing the wonderful old facade. One good example of an attractive and visible sign that complements the physical appearance of a building is the sign for the Hair Studio.

The downtown association should organize an effort to upgrade the signs in the downtown. There need not be a consistent theme to the signs, perhaps with the exception that signs advertising public and private parking lots should follow a uniform pattern. Signs should be large enough to be visible but not too large or too numerous that they damage the physical appearance of a building. Simple and tasteful signs that are compatible with the architectural features of the buildings in the downtown will contribute in a major way to the overall appearance of the downtown and reveal rather than conceal the services and businesses that are available.

Window Displays

Good window displays can greatly contribute to the appearance of a business area and attract customers.

All of the merchants could use some help with window displays. Good window displays can greatly contribute to the appearance of a business area and attract customers and clients. Many of the displays in downtown Seaford are poorly presented, giving an impression of clutter or desolation. The downtown association should sponsor a seminar for merchants and service providers on the subject of window displays. Assistance for the development of a seminar may be available at the University in the College Human Resources.

Vacant storefronts should be decorated with attractive displays. The local schools and other public and charitable groups should be invited to provide displays.

Building Facades

...Seaford has an interesting mix of architectural styles. Efforts should be made to highlight and preserve this diversity.

The Downtown Association and the city administration should encourage individual and cooperative refurbishing efforts to repair and repaint storefronts, clean windows, install new curtains and shades in upper floor windows, and clean brick or stonework. Whenever possible, facades should be consistent with the original character and period of the building. For the most part, the buildings in the downtown are in good structural condition. They represent a variety of periods from the late 19th century to different decades of the 20th century, giving downtown Seaford an interesting mix of architectural styles. Efforts should be made to highlight and preserve this diversity.

Modern signs can be tastefully blended with the facades of old buildings.

Sometimes facades conflict with the original character of the building, such as the stucco front on the brick residence next to Dick's Barber Shop or the wood cover over the brick on the front of the Seaford Medical Supply store. The appearance of Seaford Medical could be considerably improved if the wood

front were removed and an attractive sign put above the window. Removal of the metal front on the All About Crafts building would enhance the appearance of the downtown. The rather grim looking Sussex Guide building is not a good introduction to the downtown. Adding a bit of color to the trim would be a major improvement. Some cosmetic work and new siding for the building housing Shear Pleasure and C & D flowers and cleaning of the front of the Bank of Delaware building are needed. Adding a porch on the front of the building next to the Sussex Guide would recall some of the features of old downtown Seaford. These are some examples of inexpensive improvements to facades which, if made, would help to beautify the downtown.



Some good examples of building maintenance and refurbishment which complement the original character of buildings include The Hair Studio, Act II Florist, High Street Antiques, Peninsula Oil, and Bon Appetit. Burton's Hardware is in a delightful building and just needs some simplification of the signs. The porch on the side of H.M. James Insurance is particularly attractive. Upper stories of all building should be put in good repair to present the best possible image to the public. Care and concern for customers and clients can be demonstrated by keeping flowers and curtains in upstairs rooms that are used for storage.

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Establish a Program of Continuing Downtown Beautification

The city administration should support revitalization through a continuing program of downtown beautification, including improvement of sidewalks and curbs, landscaping, street lighting, public signs, and maintenance of fixtures and plantings. Several sections of the sidewalk are in need of repair, including an area near the Oak Rail Restaurant and an area at the corner of Arcadia and High. A few more benches should be placed on High Street for the convenience of senior citizens. Beautification of the downtown will promote a sense of pride among residents of Seaford.

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Improve the Residential Character of the Downtown

There should be an organized effort, supported by the business community, to improve the residential structures in and around the downtown. Upper floors that can be used for apartments should be renovated, and vacant residential facilities should be restored and made suitable for occupancy. This will contribute to the physical revitalization of the downtown and generate additional activity that will add to the general vitality of the area.

Retain the Senior Center in the Downtown

Every effort should be made to keep the senior center in the downtown. Improvements to lighting, signs, sidewalks, landscaping, and facilities (such as benches) should take into account the needs of senior citizens. This recommendation is made in light of the changing demographic structure of Sussex County. Making the downtown safe and attractive for senior citizens will bring activity and people to High Street. If the city hall is moved to High Street, consideration should be given to converting the present facility into a community center to house the senior center as well as youth programs and other community activities.

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Provide Management Support to Existing and New Businesses

The Downtown Association should sponsor seminars on a variety of topics related to the establishment and operation of new and existing small businesses. Small businesses frequently need assistance in the development of business plans, cash flow analyses, financial statements, commercial loan packages, accounting and inventory systems, and advertising techniques. Assistance can be obtained from the University of Delaware's Small Business Development Center. The association should also develop closer ties with the banking industry. Almost all of the federal and state programs that are intended to provide capital to small business do so through banks.

Enhance the Public Sense of Security

The police ought to patrol the downtown area until midnight. Many people mentioned feeling unsafe in the downtown at night. One business person stated "Just one mugging and my business would have to close. As the city works to beautify the area, the potential for effective vandalism will increase. There ought to be police presence in the downtown area, especially from 4:00 p.m. to midnight."

Establish a Seaford Museum and Walking Tour

A museum might be linked to a walking tour of the downtown which includes the river.

An effective way to focus attention on the downtown would be to create a Seaford museum, or perhaps a museum of southwestern Delaware, to celebrate the history of the community and the Nanticoke River. The museum should be located on High Street so that it contributes to the level of activity on the street and highlights the role of the downtown in Seaford's history. A museum might be linked to a walking tour of the downtown which includes the river. Pictures (or drawings) of old Seaford, such as those that presently hang in Dick's Barber Shop, or depictions of early activity on the river could be reproduced on anodized tin plates and placed on pedestals at appropriate sites on the street, in store windows, or along the river. Images of buildings that have been destroyed, such as the old Seaford Inn, could be preserved on these plaques so that young people and visitors could imagine how Seaford once looked.

City owned property on the river provides an opportunity for landscaping and a river walk.



The museum should be in an older building and perhaps provide a new use for a vacant facility. The white building on the corner of High Street and Pearl is, perhaps, the best candidate because it could be included in the complex of activities around the Post Office and, possibly, the city hall, and benefit from the availability of convenient parking if the adjacent lot is developed as public parking. Easily accessible parking is required in order to attract visitors to a museum. Other possibilities include the vacant building at the corner of High Street and Arch and the facility located between Sugar Shell Antiques and the Sussex Guide.

The establishment and maintenance of a community museum would require a substantial effort on the part of a local community group or historical society with support from the Downtown Association and the city. Careful analysis needs to be made regarding the costs of acquiring and maintaining a facility and developing and preserving a collection. Assistance in determining how a community museum might be established and operated can be obtained from the Museum Studies Program at the University of Delaware.

Who Needs to Help?

What Should They Do?

A Downtown Seaford Revitalization Task Force Should be Established

Strengthening and preserving the downtown will require the coordinated efforts of the public and private sectors and community organizations. To promote this coordination, a Downtown Seaford Revitalization Task Force should be established. The task force should include the mayor, the city manager, the chair of the Downtown Association, and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, the banking industry, the Historical Society, the Kiwanis Club, and the Soroptimist Club. The task force should be responsible for developing the official Downtown Plan. This plan should determine priorities among the proposals presented in this report, establish a time table, and delegate responsibility (1) to the City Council for actions to be taken by the city, (2) to the Downtown Association and the Chamber of Commerce for actions to be taken by the business community, and (3) to the Historical Society for actions to be taken with regard to the establishment of a museum and/or walking tour. Other community organizations, such as the Kiwanis Club and the Soroptimist Club, may also be asked to participate in a downtown revitalization effort. Once agreements have been made by the city and by other organizations to take responsibility for specific efforts, the task force should monitor progress and make recommendations for changes in the revitalization effort.

The task force should be responsible for developing the official Downtown Plan.

City Government Should Take the Lead

City government should take the leading role in mobilizing efforts to strengthen and preserve the downtown by going forward with several key initiatives. These include (1) considering a move of the city hall to High Street, (2) establishing a public parking lot at the corner of High and Pearl Streets and working with property owners to upgrade other critical parking sites in the downtown, particularly the lot at High and Market Streets, (3) refurbishing the entrance to the downtown by acquiring the triangle and landscaping this site along with the property owned by the city next to the bridge over the Nanticoke, and (4) creating a continuing program of downtown beautification that includes sidewalk improvements, landscaping, street lighting, public signage, and a river walk.

The Downtown Association and the Chamber of Commerce Should Promote Private Actions

The Downtown Association and the Chamber of Commerce should encourage property owners, merchants, and service providers located in the downtown to support the revitalization effort. A Committee on Downtown Cleanup and Revitalization should be established to accomplish the following tasks: (1) promoting an annual cleanup week to encourage the city, merchants, professionals, residents, and organizations located in the downtown to clean curbs and sidewalks and remove weeds and refuse from all properties including vacant lots and (2) encouraging individual and cooperative refurbishing efforts to repair and repaint storefronts, clean windows, install new curtains and shades in upper floor windows, and clean brick and stonework.

The business organizations should sponsor seminars on a variety of topics that will support existing and new business such as creating attractive window displays, business management techniques, and advertising.

The business organizations should also organize efforts to improve building facades and signage. With support from the city government and the business community, a professional with expertise in building design could be hired to examine individual buildings and provide basic suggestions as to how the facades and signs should be improved.

The Historic Society Should Work to Develop a Museum and Walking Tour

The Historic Society should give serious consideration to establishing a museum and walking tour in the downtown. A committee should be set up with representatives from the Historic Society, the Downtown Association, and city government to investigate the feasibility and costs of a museum and walking tour. Assistance for this effort should be obtained from the Museum Studies Program of the University of Delaware.

The Kiwanis Club and the Soroptimist Club Should Support Downtown Beautification

The Kiwanis Club and the Soroptimist Club, in cooperation with the proposed Downtown Seaford Revitalization Task Force and city government, should become involved in landscaping and beautification projects in the downtown. These organizations could also work with the Historic Society to establish a museum and walking tour.

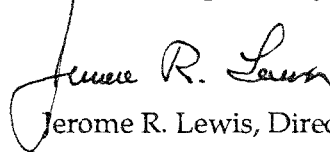
We believe that these recommendations are consistent with the goal stated in the Comprehensive Plan: "to achieve an overall development pattern that simultaneously reinforces the character of the existing city and presents new opportunities for growth." We have attempted to articulate a general vision and direction for the downtown that is in keeping with the interests of the general citizenry of the City of Seaford.

Director's Comments

The Delaware Public Administration Institute is pleased to publish this plan, co-authored by Timothy K. Barnekov and Ralph A. Reeb, for the city of Seaford, Delaware.

Along with the authors, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Mayor Guy Longo, City Manager Dolores Slatcher, Assistant City Manager Ron Breeding, the members of the Downtown Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Kiwanis Club, the Soroptimist Club, and merchants and residents of downtown Seaford.

I also want to recognize the contributions made by the following individuals in producing the report: Audrey Helfman coordinated the overall effort to produce the final printed report; Mary Helen Callahan provided editorial guidance and review; Judi Isaacson handled the design and layout for the report.



Jerome R. Lewis, Director, DPA Institute

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About the Institute

The Delaware Public Administration Institute links the research and resources of the University of Delaware with the management and information needs of local, state, and regional governments in the Delaware Valley. The Institute provides assistance to agencies and local governments through direct staff assistance and research projects as well as training programs and policy forums. The Delaware Public Administration Institute is located on the University's Newark Campus in 180 Graham Hall. Dr. Jerome R. Lewis is the director of the Institute. Dr. Lewis can be contacted at (302) 451-8971.