

Journal of Rural and Community Development

Stakeholder Perceptions for Supporting Main Street Revitalization In a Small South Georgia City

Authors: RoShonda Welch, Alexis Smith, Linda Kimsey, & Andrew Hansen

Citation:

Welch, R., Smith, A., Kimsey, L., & Hansen, A. R. (2022). Stakeholder perceptions for supporting main street revitalization in a small South Georgia city. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 17(4), 118–138.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

This journal provides open access to all of its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work.



Stakeholder Perceptions for Supporting Main Street Revitalization In a Small South Georgia City

RoShonda Welch

Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, GA, United States
rw16489@georgiasouthern.edu

Alexis Smith

Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, GA, United States
as14680@georgiasouthern.edu

Linda Kimsey

Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, GA, United States
lkimsey@georgiasouthern.edu

Andrew Hansen

Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, GA, United States
ahansen@georgiasouthern.edu

Abstract

Local stakeholders offer significant insight and perspectives throughout the implementation of revitalization projects that would be difficult to otherwise garner by individuals not native to the specific town. The purpose of this study was to examine what conditions exist for local stakeholders to support or oppose revitalization in a rural, southern Georgia town and if able to support, what were their priorities. In-depth individual interviews with 32 business owners and other stakeholders were done. Questions were based on the guidelines and stakeholder survey developed by Schmeer (2001). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes within each question. Themes were identified and communicated to city officials to provide guidance to stakeholders of perceived priorities. An overwhelming majority of the participants interviewed (87.5 %) strongly supported revitalization. Renovation had the highest priority, followed by demolition, and creation of green space. Conditions that might lead to support existed including leadership and actions by others, a clear plan, and no negative impact to business. Conditions that might lead to opposition included conflict with culture or beliefs, and a lack of planning or transparency. Understanding the perceptions of local business owners is essential to understanding how to maintain stakeholder support, mitigate disruptions caused by revitalization, and avoiding stakeholder alienation.

Keywords: main street revitalization, stakeholder perceptions, community based, conditions for supporting, development priorities, downtown development process

Perceptions des parties prenantes pour le soutien Revitalisation de la rue principale Dans une petite ville de Géorgie du Sud

Résumé

Les intervenants locaux offrent des perceptions et des perspectives importantes tout au long de la mise en œuvre des projets de revitalisation qui seraient autrement difficiles à obtenir par des personnes non originaires de la ville en question. Le but de cette étude était d'examiner quelles conditions existent pour que les parties prenantes locales soutiennent ou s'opposent à la revitalisation dans une ville rurale du sud de la Géorgie et, si elles sont en mesure de soutenir, quelles étaient leurs priorités. Des entretiens individuels approfondis avec 32 propriétaires d'entreprises et d'autres parties prenantes ont été réalisés. Les questions étaient fondées sur les lignes directrices et l'enquête auprès des intervenants élaborées par Schmeer (2001). Les entretiens ont été enregistrés, transcrits et analysés pour les thèmes de chaque question. Des thèmes ont été identifiés et communiqués aux responsables de la ville pour fournir des conseils aux parties prenantes sur les priorités perçues. Une écrasante majorité des participants interrogés (87,5 %) étaient fortement en faveur de la revitalisation. La rénovation avait la plus haute priorité, suivie de la démolition et de la création d'espaces verts. Les conditions pouvant conduire à un soutien existaient, notamment le leadership et les actions d'autres personnes, un plan clair et aucun impact négatif sur les activités. Les conditions susceptibles de conduire à une opposition comprenaient un conflit avec la culture ou les croyances, et un manque de planification ou de transparence. Comprendre les perceptions des propriétaires d'entreprises locales est essentiel pour comprendre comment maintenir le soutien des parties prenantes, atténuer les perturbations causées par la revitalisation et éviter l'aliénation des parties prenantes.

Mots-clés : revitalisation de la rue principale, perceptions des intervenants, communautaire, conditions de soutien, priorités de développement, processus de développement du centre-ville

1.0 Introduction

Small cities and their downtowns play an important role in rural areas. Small cities act as a hub for the towns and communities that surround it (Robertson, 1999). Small cities have populations that range from 25,000 to 50,000 and historically the downtown would act as pinnacle of commerce and community gatherings, establishing a distinct sense of place unique to the city itself (Robertson, 1999). However, as these areas grow, businesses and industries located in downtown areas struggled to sustain themselves because of the ever-changing environment within small rural cities and towns (Mishkovsky et al., 2010). Small cities and towns that exist in rural areas face unique challenges. Construction of highway bypasses and decentralizing of business away from the downtown core redirect resources that would have contributed to the growth and preservation of the downtown (Robertson, 1999). As a result, residents and businesses alike migrate to the less populated and fast-growing areas on the periphery that present properties at lower cost and which offer more opportunity for growth than what was available in downtown cores (Love & Powe, 2020; Reckien & Martinez-Fernandez, 2011; Robertson, 1999). As the migration of businesses and populations increased, surrounding areas experienced key characteristics of sprawl; low-density single-family dwellings, spiraling growth, redevelopment, and increased reliance on automobiles (Brody, 2013; Van Leuven, 2021).

‘Sprawl’ has long been a popular way to describe the dominant growth pattern in the United States, where regions extend away from their core urban areas into low-density suburbs (Laidley, 2016). Urban sprawl has developmental characteristics that differ from rural sprawl. Urban sprawl is distinguished by population growth causing residential areas to expand outward into less dense areas. Increased incomes encourage residents to buy larger houses in areas where the housing market is cheaper and investment in transportation infrastructure that reduces commuting costs also encourages outward expansion (Brueckner, 2000; Carruthers & Ulfarsson, 2003). While some factors affect both rural and urban areas, certain factors are unique to rural areas. Rural sprawl is distinguished by migration of residents and businesses into densely developed neighborhoods and commercial strips outside of city centers (Faulk, 2006). For rural areas in which businesses and residents out-migrate, sprawl has benefits as well as consequences. Sprawl can benefit a region by creating economic growth, but it is a concern when considering the environmental and public health consequences. Due to the increased reliance on automobiles, sprawl increases air pollution, automobile crashes, and pedestrian injuries and fatalities. In response to land use, sprawl increases sedentary lifestyles, worsens threats to water quantity and quality, and expands the urban heat island effect (Frumkin, 2002; Lopez, 2004).

As sprawl perpetuates, it becomes increasingly difficult for the downtown of small cities to compete with new discount stores in the periphery. As a result, small cities will find it even more difficult to attract businesses and people to the downtown. Without businesses in older buildings, it is more challenging to preserve them and maintain attractive store fronts thus compounding the problem of attracting new businesses and restoring vitality (Faulk, 2006; Robertson, 1999). As a way of combating sprawl and curbing the decay of city centers, rural revitalization is sometimes undertaken. Rural revitalization is a plan of action that intends to improve the quality of life of a rural small city and town communities (Duxbury & Campbell, 2011; Faulk, 2006; Grunwell & Ha, 2014). The essence of revitalization lies in the process of creating vitality and new life within something. This includes restoration,

reconstruction, modernization, and actions aimed at revival of a district or town (Wilczkiewicz & Wilkosz-Mamcarczyk, 2015).

As noted by Faulk (2006), there was a dearth of literature on downtown revitalization in small cities. However, there is consensus in the need to attain community input for the successful implementation of a community-based revitalization initiative through fostering a sense of ownership among community members (Faulk, 2006; Houston–Galveston Area Council, 2015; Usadolo & Caldwell, 2016). Local stakeholders offer significant insight and perspectives throughout the implementation of revitalization projects that would be difficult to otherwise garner by individuals not native to the area. During this period of gathering community stakeholder input, a city is moving through stage five (organization redevelop/revitalize, advocacy) of the downtown development process (Faulk, 2006), and stage six (identification of projects, and husbandry) before action is taking in stage seven (revitalization). All eight stages of the development process are outlined by Faulk (2006), in *The Process and Practice of Downtown Revitalization*. Acting without input from local stakeholders could easily turn a good intention into a project that loses community advocates necessary for support and sense of ownership. The city of focus in this study was in stage five and six of the development process (Faulk, 2006). Hence, the purpose of this study was to engage local stakeholders to examine what conditions need to exist for supporting revitalization of a downtown south main street in a small city in South Georgia, and if able to support, what were their priorities for revitalization projects.

2.0 Methods

2.1 Participants

Stakeholders associated in the form of business ownership, partnership with businesses, or related entities with interest in the section of the city main street targeted for revitalization were included in recruitment for input. Geographically, this included businesses located on South Main Street, intersecting streets, and parallel streets. The small city is in the southeast portion of the state of Georgia, United States with a population around 30,000 giving it a small city designation and one that acts as a hub for the small towns and communities within the county and other counties that surround it (Robertson, 1999). It is about 60 miles (96.6 kilometers) west of the nearest large city of Savannah. The county is 689 square miles (1784.5 square kilometers), has a population of around 70,000. The five adjacent counties to the west, north, and south have a combined population of around 70,000 with many residents of the surrounding counties traveling to the city for entertainment and essential shopping.

2.2 Recruitment

The chairperson of the revitalization committee was interviewed first, and they facilitated introductions to other members of the coalition. Members of the revitalization coalition were then contacted and interviewed. This coalition committee was a grass roots organization made up of community leaders, volunteers, and organizations. Each member recommended other stakeholders that could be interviewed, helping generate a diverse list of business owners and members of local government. Stakeholders with businesses along South Main Street not identified by committee members were added to the list. A purposeful

sampling of businesses was done to ensure good representation of commercial sub-sectors. Stakeholders were then contacted via phone or email and an interview date was set.

2.3 Instrumentation

The guidelines and questionnaire developed by Schmeer (2001) were employed to develop the questionnaire. The lead researcher, two members of the coalition committee, and seven doctoral public health students reviewed and modified the questionnaire to meet the needs of the coalition. The final interview questionnaire comprised 24 questions that assessed stakeholders' characteristics, including (a) the stakeholder's organization, (b) knowledge of the City's Main Street Revitalization Coalition, (c) understanding of the meaning of revitalization, (d) position on the revitalization concept and coalition, (e) level of interest, (f) potential benefits and disadvantages, (g) alliances, (h) availability of resources and ability to mobilize, (i) leadership/initiative, and (j) conditions for supporting.

2.4 Data Collection

Individual in-depth interviews were employed to elicit information from stakeholders. Interviews were conducted at a time and location best suited to the stakeholder. Interviewers introduced themselves to develop an initial rapport and did so again at the time of interview. The purpose of the interview and project, as well as how data would be used, were shared with participants and they were informed that the study was reviewed by the University Institutional Review Board. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes depending on the amount of information the stakeholder wished to share. To develop a consistent process, all interviewers attended the first interview conducted by the senior faculty–principal investigator. The principal investigator then attended the first interview of each interviewer to further reinforce consistency. The structured survey questions provided an additional layer of consistency that ensured all stakeholders were asked the same questions.

2.5 Analysis

Frequencies were calculated for quantitative dichotomous (yes/no) and categorical ranking questions. Responses to qualitative questions of all stakeholders were consolidated by question into a single document and all identifiers removed. Transcripts were analyzed using a classic systematic manual process (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Each question of the survey served as the domain and were analyzed separately. Responses of each stakeholder withing each question were reviewed to get an understanding of the information context. Questions that were a continuation of a prior question or a probing question of a main question were viewed together. An inductive process of coding was utilized as the study sought to explore stakeholder concerns rather than test a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Two reviewers individually sorted stakeholder response statements into initial emergent themes using an open coding process ensuring to provide notes with each code. Then each stakeholder comment was scrutinized with an axial coding process to determine final themes under each question. Coders compared results and utilized a consensus approach to achieve 100% inter-coder agreement (Hill et al., 2005). After responses under all questions were analyzed and themed, selective coding was then done to elicit overarching themes that summarized conditions necessary to support revitalization.

3.0 Results

Thirty-two stakeholders were interviewed from commercial (n=29), government (n=2), and other (n=1) sectors. Sub-groups of the commercial sector included retail (n=13), restaurant (n=6), banking (n=3), real-estate (n=2), developer (n=2), and hotel (n=1).

3.1 Stakeholder Knowledge and Perceived Benefits, Disadvantages, and Concerns of Revitalization

3.1.1 Knowledge. When asked about revitalization for South Main, 68.8% of participants reported hearing of the Main Street Coalition through word of mouth from an individual or organization, while the other 31% had not heard of the proposed revitalization project. Five stakeholders thought that it was for a different area of downtown which had already been revitalized. Twelve stakeholders perceived revitalization as similar to the definition established by the coalition which was “taking steps necessary to enhance the residential, commercial, and green space environment of South Main to maximize the quality of life” (D. Burnett, personal communication January 16, 2016). Eighteen stakeholders viewed revitalization in terms of aesthetics, economics, and as ‘buying property to revitalize,’ while two were unsure. Participant 12’s view on revitalization was “to improve the street scape, make it more attractive to tourists. To get rid of the empty lots. That is what I would like to see.” Participant 17 felt that revitalization should, “Make it look better and bring more businesses and clean up the area.” Participant 25 said, “I don’t know really. I believe it has something to do with a walk from the college. About all I heard about it.” While according to another participant:

Well, I don't know. It seems that every time I have been involved, they have talked about low interest loans, green spaces. I don't understand what they mean by green spaces because there are businesses already here and where are they going to go. I don't know what they want me to do. (Participant 32)

3.1.2 Perceived benefits. When asked what the potential benefits were to revitalization, the majority identified an increase in customer traffic (n=18). Participant 6 said, “it’s a big thing for me. It’s going to revitalize the area. It would bring more people & traffic. Right now, the area is dying.” Participant 11 suggested “increase more traffic, so it can help my business. If we get businesses to relocate and occupy empty buildings, it will help the town.”

Other responses to benefits included, aesthetics (n=6), business development (more business, and events, to give jobs to student workforce) (n=5), quality of life (n=2), residential investment (n=2), and not sure (n=1). Participant 29 said, “if everything was more uniform it would look classier....We renovated when we first moved in and everyone else followed suit. So having more people do the same thing would be great for this area.” According to Participant 30, “recruitment of students—attractive retail stores that fit student tastes and needs. Businesses that want to locate here. They want college work-ready graduates. Both of these go hand and hand.” Other comments were:

The only thing I can see that can be helpful is if it is a safer place and would not deteriorate anymore. It has been sinking economically, the growth has

gone that way towards the bypass area, the mall, Lowes: the east side of town (Participant 32)

Quality of life is important to attract business e.g., more manufactures. We need a place that is inviting. Currently feel is back several decades. It hurts attraction. Current businesses lose out as people will go a different route. It may not be perceived as safe. Hotels and businesses to be give customers sense of comfort. (Participant 9)

3.1.3 Perceived disadvantages and concerns. When asked what the potential disadvantages of revitalization would be, 12 stakeholders stated there were none, while nine were concerned about construction when projects started. Participant 22 stated “depending on construction. It could interfere with day-to-day business. Any kind of direct cost. I don’t own this building I actually lease. Unfortunately, the owner is cheap and won’t put any money in unless he’s forced.” Participant 25 said, “can’t think of any, unless they block off the roads to make changes. They did that with East Main and that hurt a lot of businesses.”

Some stakeholders were concerned about the cost due to taxes (n=3), and meeting new building guidelines, codes, and zoning (n=3). As stated by Participant 19, “there would be taxes. There is also a danger that they will destroy it and make it worse than it is now.” According to Participant 26, “one disadvantage can be dependent upon how much money I would have to spend to meet any standards that are put in place”; while Participant 32 commented, “you would have someone dictating to you what you can do. Parameters you would have to deal with. I don’t know because it has never been successful. There has always been a lot of talk but never any action.”

Other concerns included gentrification (n= 2), unequal distribution of resources (city) (n = 2), and lack of funding (n=2). Some participants commented on these concerns:

Quality of life issues. We think of middle class, we have a perception of what it could be. However, many in poverty here could be displaced. With no public transportation how do they get to work etc. If people of lower income can live in a clean area...the perception is low income equals crime. How do we mix housing? (Participant 9)

...Perception or reality of one part of the city getting more resources and attention than other parts of the city - we can’t dedicate all of our time and attention, - or workforce resources and finances to main street while not focusing on other parts of the city... (Participant 31)

Disadvantages, that’s hard for me. There are lots of positive things about our community, it’s going to be hard to find a disadvantage. I wouldn’t say

disadvantages, more like obstacles to enhance the areas/community and to find funding is a real challenge. (Participant 18)

3.2 Project Priorities

After having the opportunity to discuss advantages and disadvantages, based on the definition provided, most stakeholders stated they strongly supported (90.6%) revitalization, and one somewhat supported. Two were neutral and none opposed. Next, they were provided three aspects of revitalization and asked to rank which of these they supported? Most stakeholders ranked renovating buildings as the priority, and half ranked demolition first or second (see Table 1). Table 1. *Revitalization Aspects Prioritized by Stakeholders*

Aspect	Ranking priority			
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	Totals
Renovate (update, and occupy current buildings)	18	7	7	32
Demolition (of unsalvageable buildings)	12	14	6	32
Green space and connectivity for pedestrians	0	7	25	32

3.3 Supporting Revitalization

Stakeholders were asked in what manner they would demonstrate their support for the revitalization initiative. Answers varied widely with most stating they would attend meetings—advocate or give ideas—(n=12), serve on committees (n=4), or renovate their property (n=4). Two had already invested in renovating their property and another two would do this if others did. Other responses included, spreading the word—by mouth advertisement—(n=2), volunteering (n=2), being a good citizen by maintaining current property (n=2), provide incentives for renovating (n=2), not rock boat to avoid retribution (n=1). Two participants commented that:

Our business is currently supporting, by buying vacant lots and rezoning these lots for development. We are also renovating properties on various streets around downtown. We are putting our money where our mouth is and being very aggressive on identifying opportunities. (Participant 01)

Once we see a plan of what is going to happen. We would be willing to upgrade the façade of our building. We don't want to be an eyesore in the middle of the Garden of Eden... We don't want to be the only one who does it either. (Participant 22)

Stakeholders were then asked about the resources they would have to support the revitalization initiative. Most stakeholders (n=23) stated that they would have some resources to support this initiative in the form of (a) advertising, (b) supplying food

at meetings, (c) influence or putting pressure on property owners, (d) people, and (e) time. Most stakeholders (n=28) would do this publicly and most (n=26) would ally with others, in particular with other businesses. Money was not a resource that stakeholders were willing to spare.

3.4 Conditions for Supporting

As part of the central question to this study, stakeholders were asked what conditions would have to exist for them to express their support. Two themes that rose to the top from stakeholder responses included leadership or action by the committee, (n=7) and seeing a clear plan and guidelines (n=6). Participant 11 saw, “some progress and [a] motivated group of people” while Participant 25 notes, “that they are actually going to get something done and not just talk about it.” Participant 31 comments, “when the elected officials make their decisions—and the city” and participant 19 reports that, “I would have to be in favor of what they are trying to do. I need to know what is happening. I need to know the specifics”. Participant 21 says “A well thought out plan, with ample support financially. For example, if they have a 25-million-dollar plan and only get 500k it would be a waste.” Another participant comments that:

I already have expressed support. I believe we need to have a plan, which includes all of the details. There will need to be some guidelines on what we want to do. A person will put a business where it will be supported. Owners’ autonomy with guidance. (Participant 24)

In addition to the above themes, other conditions stated by stakeholders/participants included: assurance that the project would either improve or not hurt current business (n=5), action or support of other businesses (n=4), need funding and financial incentives (n=4), if there is a plan for local residents (n=2). Four stakeholders were either not sure or gave no conditions. According to Participant 7, “If the goal is to bring more traffic to South Main, I will support it.” Participant 10 states, “positive things. I don’t want to support some that will hurt my business” and Participant 29 says, “if it is within my morals I would support. Also, if it doesn’t take away from my business.” Participant 12 comments, “I would like to see the other businesses contribute as well. Everyone do an equal share based on property/ownership size. I would not expect the gas station to give as much as a hotel” while Participant 20 shares, “have the TAD [tax allocation district] signed. Will do whatever it takes. It would help develop the area I would support. Incentives, like free dumpage when tearing down.” Participant 3 says, “need to know that funds are going to our section to south main—funds or time—the commercial side is what I’m talking about.” Participant 1 stated that “as long as there is still a need from those to live downtown, then we will continue. If this need stops though, we might start to pull back on what we are doing downtown” and Participant 15 commented that there “has to be a clear plan as to what residential life look like in area.”

Stakeholders were asked next if they would either take the initiative in supporting revitalization or wait for others to do so. Seventeen stakeholders said they would wait to support; eleven said they would take an initiative, and three could be characterized as innovators, since they had already taken initiative. Participant 20 said, “don’t think I am smart enough. Time is such a factor I would rather others

take the initiative. I am too old to take the initiative.” Two other participant comments were:

It would have to be in conjunction with other people. I’m not sure I could stand alone in doing anything. I really don’t have any way to take the initiative. Of course any property owner could take the initiative by keeping up his own property (Participant 19).

I would wait for others to show initiative. I am really busy and I have a lot of things going on. I can’t take on anything right now. But I could be on the sidelines and give moral support. Perhaps doing fundraising (Participant 29).

3.5 Conditions for not Supporting

When asked ‘under what conditions would you choose not to support revitalization,’ six stakeholders said no conditions existed. Others would not be supportive if development went against the current culture, beliefs, or mission—that is, all bars, or encroaching on a stakeholder’s business (n=8)—if the project became all talk with no action (n=5), if other businesses, the city, or community did not support (n=5), if there was any financial cost to the stakeholder directly (n= 3), or if there was corruption and no transparency (n=3). Participant 32 said, “none whatsoever. We have done our best by sticking through the bad years here where other people would have cut and run.” Participant 6 stated, “if you want to bring a business that is not good for a community, I will not support i.e. not so decent bars.” Participant 29 comments, “if it goes against what I morally believe. I wouldn’t support a strip club or a bar. I wouldn’t support it. If it went against my religious beliefs I would have to say no” and Participant 15 asks “Is plan going to be harmful to people notable to advocate and disenfranchise.” Participant 22 said, “it goes back to the plan and how it affects my business. If they come up with some crazy thing, I have to do to my business I would be opposed to that.” Participant 16 commented, “if they are not committed to the cause. Do not do what they say they are going to do.” Participant 3 notes “if it is not going to bring business downtown—everything that is done is not for us—nothing is done to bring people this way—even when there is first Friday we will not have people.” Participant 5 remarked, “maybe if it took too much money out of our own pockets.” Participant 9 said “where you see people leading the direction of what we are trying to accomplish solely for gross personal gain. Corruption. Something not transparent” while Participant 19 stated that “...if what they are going to do is collecting money for no good purpose. They may end up creating bureaucracy that makes things worse.” Participant 4 said, “if the city was not an active participant” and Participant 24 remarked, “if it was losing community support, a large number of people. If people started losing interest. I would not be in support of just a Band-Aid fix.” Other participant comments were:

If they were going to tear everything down or anything that cost me business. I cannot afford to think 9 months down the road. I can't afford for them to block traffic for a month. I would have no choice but to oppose it. (Participant 28)

Green space is a feel-good idea that other people have. I just don't see the place where this can happen. You cannot change a US Highway (301). Who is going to give up space for this green space? Are we going to have to tear down buildings? I just want to be left alone; I would not publicly show opposition. (Participant 32)

3.6 Other Supporters

3.6.1 Benefits. Stakeholders were asked to reflect on what they thought other organizations and people would have to gain from revitalization. Comments aligned with their views about themselves including increased business (n=22), quality of life (n=8), aesthetics (n=8), student traffic (n=6), and pride (n=3). When asked who they thought would take the initiative to support revitalization, stakeholders put the spotlight on the city, the downtown development authority, and Chamber of Commerce. Participant 07 stated, “more businesses. Better looking downtown for visitors. People will just take a drive to see the beauty of the city. More students.” Participant 26 said “more business opportunity. It increases property values, easier access for people that live around the school. It would make it easier to walk around at night, without fear of getting robbed.” Another participant commented:

I think quality of life is one of the biggest things. We want that live/play environment. For the biggest thing we all can do is improve quality of life. For example, the farmers market is getting bigger every year and we can continue to improve and create new cultural activities. (Participant 1)

3.6.2 Conditions for others to support. Similar to conditions they stated for themselves, stakeholders thought others would only support revitalization plans if they could see the positive benefits (n=8), the plans were clear (n=4), that the city supported (n=3), and incentives were offered (n=3). Participant 18 said, “come up with funds and grants-something that we have really missed. Need someone to help find grants. Frontier grants opportunities offer \$25K to help small business revitalize their business.” Participant 20 commented, “if we get it kicked off and start seeing positive results. Once a politician gets rolling others jump on the band wagon. Must sell the benefits to the whole town.” Participant 01 notes that “if everyone can see and understand about what are doing downtown, then they will be on board. A plan needs to be clearly communicated to the public” while Participant 15 says, “solid plan 85-95% agreement of what is being done.” Participant 04 remarked “finally feel like the city is behind them, citizens want to help. Use to be vibrant when 301 was it. Get on board and it will make life better for business and residents.” Other participant comments were:

Landowners- help them realize that improving South Main improves community and will attract big business that can support all business. May help businesses be created here instead of going to bigger city. Find incentives that help landlords provide subsidized housing that is mixed. Hard part is ensuring maintenance. (Participant 9)

Something that would lessen the blow of any kind of expenditure that they would be putting out i.e., tax reduction or tax rebates or not only the tax issue. An illustrated benefit to them financially. If we had a documented plan that shows another city that has done something similar. These are things that can help get support. WE have to show that it works to improve revenue. It is all about the dollar. (Participant 22)

3.6.3 Conditions for others to oppose. Stakeholders were also asked under what conditions they thought other organizations and people would come to oppose revitalization. Almost half (n=15) said there were no conditions they could think of, while eleven stakeholders thought the biggest concerns would be negative impact to business in the form of lost business and increased costs. Another big worry would be taxes that directly affect them through cost burden or taxes that would redirect funds away from them. Participant 14 said “fear rent increase; not being aware of what it means for them.” Participant 31 remarked, “private enterprises oppose revitalization if they feel it isn’t safe to invest resources, increase their tax bills, or cost of development, if these particular resources are taken away from other parts of the city.” Participant 4 stated, “the TAD concept because it redirects funds. The Board of Education gets a percentage, county, city; they would have to be willing to take a delay. Takes tax dollars away from these groups and redirects funds to TAD” and Participant 9 commented, “Some people are used to a smaller community and are resistant to change. Like the way things are. Don't want tax dollars towards this. If it can't stand on its own, why are we supporting it?”

In addition, stakeholders identified specific groups that may constitute the bulk of opposition and why. Most stakeholders (n=16) did not identify any, while others thought property owners and private businesses (n=11). Specifically, statements referenced motels and rental property for residents that had not been invested in and had become unsightly. In addition, three stakeholders felt that low-income tenants and other residents would oppose as they would be pushed out by higher rent and property values, they could no longer afford to pay taxes on. Participant 13 remarked, “the motels wouldn't because they don't want to put money in. They are run down and may take so much money.” Participant 18 commented, “I do think it could be more on the lines of people who own rental properties. If you own rental properties, you are not going to take care of it as if it's your own...” Participant 19 noted, “Property owners that don't want to pay any more taxes. People like me who have seen government foul up a lot of things” and Participant 28 stated, “I think people who were scared they didn't have enough money to pay for revitalization. If there aren't funds available, they probably wouldn't want to listen to the chamber of commerce.” Other comments were:

Sectors of business that may actively oppose - taxes, cost of development will increase - fear that it will happen city wide - more expensive to do business residents - become concerned that it will take it away from their concerns that have been addressed - inequitable - may end up with a city

councilman that may oppose allocation of resources for south main because their district may not receive the attention they have received. (Participant 31)

I know businesses that need to be shut down because they are bringing down the area. People are very skeptical and not very trusting because the money and property have to come from somewhere. Especially greenspace, who maintains it, pays for it, etc. For example, the walking trail. They got a federal grant to get it, but now we have to pay for it to maintain it. (Participant 32)

3.7 Project Identification

Thinking ahead to stage six of the downtown development process (Faulk, 2016), to close out the interview, stakeholders were shown concept art that depicts what specific projects could look like, and they were asked to rank their preference for features in priority using a pile sort method. The amphitheater–meeting place received the most 1st place votes, with remodeled buildings, and widened pavements with trees and fountains, receiving seven and five 1st place votes. Combined with 2nd and 3rd place votes, these three projects, took most votes at 22, 18, and 18 respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Concepts Ranked by Stakeholder Preference*

Concept Picture	Ranking priority								
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th
Amphitheater–Meeting Place	13	5	4	3	1	1	0	0	1
Remodeled Buildings (visitor center)	7	9	2	0	2	0	1	1	4
Pavements widened, trees, and fountains	5	6	7	1	1	0	0	0	3
Bridge (water feature)	2	1	4	3	4	1	2	2	4
Illuminated Islands	2	2	1	3	2	1	3	6	6
Contemporary seating	1	1	3	6	2	3	0	3	4
Illuminated sidewalks	1	4	2	2	1	2	2	1	6
Video projection on buildings	0	4	6	3	7	1	1	1	7
Sculptures (local music and people)	0	2	3	3	2	5	2	1	6

Note: Question was presented as “Please look at the following concept pictures and rank them according to your preference and how they match your vision. Please suggest visions you may have different from what you see.” Pictures of each concept were laid out on a table and participant sorted in order of preference.

4.0 Discussion

Stakeholder responses to the central questions regarding benefits, disadvantages, and conditions for supporting, revealed some overarching themes. With regards to benefits and disadvantages, increased business traffic was the main benefit. Aesthetics, development, and quality of life were also considered. Disruptions from construction and potential additional costs were the main disadvantages. While 90% (n=29) strongly supported revitalization and none opposed, there were conditions for supporting that could be summed into three main themes:

- having a clear, transparent plan that considers the current culture of businesses and residents
- action by leadership, organizers and other businesses included, following a well communicated plan
- benefits must outweigh cost in the short and long term

While revitalization would eventually increase traffic, it would have to outweigh the costs incurred by business owners associated with loss of business due to either construction or meeting new building codes.

This survey was a first important step in getting public participation (Daniels et al., 2007) and knowing where business owners were in terms of knowledge, attitude, and willingness to support the project. The result of the first questions of the survey in section 3.1 revealed that most stakeholders knew about the revitalization idea, but some confusion still existed regarding where and what revitalization meant. Stakeholders expressed interest in understanding the components of a revitalization project. Though the components this study inquired about may vary from other cities, depending on the project goals, they align with the key factors of transformation, reconstruction, and innovation (Liu, 2018). The main benefits stated by stakeholders— attracting business and customers—are also the top problems facing small city downtown areas (Robertson, 1999). Similarly, the concern stakeholders had for quality of life and housing is typical of an aging area and it is understandable that community members would see reduced affordable housing occurring from gentrification as a challenge (Faulk, 2006).

The first, and main, objective of this study was to determine what conditions would need to exist for stakeholders to support the revitalization of the South Main Street. One overarching theme was that stakeholders needed to see a clear, transparent plan that considers the current culture of businesses and residents. By engaging stakeholders, determining community assets, and conducting a market analysis, a clear understanding of what revitalization looks like for the collective can be agreed upon. Houston–Galveston Area Council’s (2015) “A Guide to Downtown Revitalization for Local Governments” suggests that this is accomplished by creating a community-based vision. Without approval and collaboration from stakeholders, developing and executing a revitalization plan will not be successful (Houston-Galveston, 2015; Mishkovsky et al., 2010). This guide also states that revitalization plans should be comprehensive, actionable, supportable, and measurable. Ensuring that the plan adheres to these criteria will allow for stakeholders at any level to actively participate in and communicate about the project (Houston-Galveston, 2015). A second overarching theme was that stakeholders wanted to see organizers and other businesses acting on a well communicated plan. This is common when asking a population to adopt an idea which will diffuse through a community starting with innovators followed by early and late adopters

(Rogers, 2003). It seemed like most stakeholders interviewed would fall into the early or late adoption stages but could easily become laggards if they saw no action and poor leadership. Third, was that benefits must outweigh costs. Costs and financial responsibility towards the revitalization process was a great concern for stakeholders within these communities. Stakeholders are hesitant to participate or support revitalization efforts when they are uncertain of the cost they might incur (Bergquist, n.d.b; Grunwell & Ha, 2014; Houston-Galveston, 2015). There are also concerns that new businesses will come in and replace existing businesses (Love & Powe, 2020). A case studies done in Lavonia, Georgia found that a focus on business retention rather than business recruitment, is more likely to encourage revitalization and redevelopment efforts (Bergquist, n.d.a)

It was disappointing that green space and connectivity for pedestrians were not seen as a priority in comparison to transforming buildings. As a condition for not supporting, one participant even criticized the idea of green space, but qualified this by stating “you cannot change a US Highway.” In addition, where would it go and who would pay to maintain it was also concerning. This ‘down to business’ perspective aligns with the major challenge of stage six which is what to do with vacant and other spaces (Faulk, 2006). Transforming buildings through renovations, facilitating reconstruction through demolition of unsalvageable buildings, and fostering innovation by creating green space and connectivity for pedestrians are key components of the revitalization efforts that affect stakeholders (Bergquist, n.d.a; Huang et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2021). One aspect potentially influencing stakeholders is cost. The investment stakeholders have made in their businesses cannot be understated and if they are to believe retention is a priority, consideration for their costs is imperative. Improving the aesthetics, adding greenspace and infrastructure require funding through public or private donors. Part of the public-private relationship is that streets and sidewalks are the city’s share of the burden (Daniels et al., 2007). However, additional costs incurred by business was still a concern and condition for not supporting. Stakeholders expressed concern that this cost burden would be placed on them in the form of taxes and meeting new codes. This provides challenges as maintaining a viable downtown is more than just bringing more business, it needs the inclusion of history, civic public spaces, and street level activity (Robertson, 1999). It is important then for planning committees to demonstrate how these principles will be achieved and maintained and where the funds to do so come from.

Strong partnerships with city and state officials are an important avenue for addressing stakeholder concerns. As part of this planning process, the community-based concept (Houston-Galveston, 2015; Mishkovsky et al., 2010) must go beyond asking community members. Special attention needs to be given to the inclusion of stakeholders from the very start of revitalization efforts. Many stakeholder responses expressed a desire to be active in and aware of all project components. Allowing and preparing the stakeholder to actively participate in the revitalization project is a protective factor for the success of such efforts (Kerselaers et al., 2013). Ensuring community members are involved collaboratively and that voices are representative of all members is imperative., Population sub-groups, which may include race, gender, socio-economic status, income level, job type, and social influence within the community, should be considered. The community-based approach has many interpretations, however, from the perspective of public health and community health we recommend applying concepts suggested by Israel et al. (2005) and

Chávez et al. (2008). To ensure cultural consideration, community-based accounts for culture through cultural competence (knowledge), cultural humility (self-awareness), and cultural safety (skills) offered by researchers or planning experts, to the communities they are collaborating with. The dynamics of this type of collaboration facilitate power issues and tensions that can be mitigated with mutual understanding of language, culture, and values of the multicultural populations that are present in these communities (Israel et al., 2005; Chávez et al., 2008).

Interestingly, while greenspace was downplayed early in the survey questions as a priority, results in Table 2 demonstrate that when specific potential projects were shared with participants, greenspace and wider sidewalks received support and the first choice amphitheater-meeting space also included greenspace. This show of mixed responses is important for planners to consider. Bridging disconnect between vision, plans, and drawings is essential to achieve buy-in for stakeholders. Without concept pictures that were shown, many stakeholders may have easily dismissed the effort or become frustrated with always hearing of a vision, but never being able to envision it themselves (Houston–Galveston, 2015; Mishkovsky et al., 2010). Daniels et al. (2007) recommend that in a community with populations less than 500, the community should be involved before the technical planning phase. The ‘general phase’ would then attempt to get wider participation. Results of the current study suggest that even in a small city that has a small town feel where communities are tightly knit, the same may hold true to avoid issues later in the process. Engaging in a survey like this with business owners is a worthwhile step to inform further approaches and aligns with the community-based approach suggested earlier.

Another consideration in the case of greenspace and connectivity. While parks are one version of greenspace, changing this perception may require clearly defined versions of green space that include enhancements to streetscapes and properties with trees and shrubs, not only large parks. Messaging needs to convey the benefits and big picture such that, incorporating green spaces has the added benefit of increasing the property value of homes and businesses that are near the changes being made (Nicholls, 2004; Read & Fernandez, 2010). Also, adding smaller enhancements could be a way to reap aesthetic and health benefits and control potential residential property value spikes that may occur with larger parks (Wolch et al, 2014). Considering aesthetics was one of many benefits mentioned by stakeholders, this is a potential path to gaining advocacy. While challenging, it is necessary to demonstrate how green space improves the overall wellbeing of the community by providing residents with exposure to nature that encourages a healthy lifestyle and provides increased opportunity for individuals to reduce stress while improving mindfulness, general attitudes, and social capital (World Health Organization, 2017; Wolf, 2017).

Another interesting observation was that most stakeholders said they would ally with others to demonstrate support. The interpersonal relationships that occur within a community can influence how different goals and objectives are met. Revitalization efforts require the expertise of many different groups within a community to maximize effectiveness. These groups range from community members to business owners, building coalitions, zoning officials, and more. The collaborative nature of a revitalization effort assumes that all involved are working toward a common vision, but that does not mean that they are all coming from the same perspective. Considering the interpersonal dynamics of revitalization, the tasks that need to be completed should be delegated in accordance with the perspective from which these

stakeholders operate (Beierle, 2002; Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2015, Israel et al., 2005; Chávez et al., 2008). Those operating from a normative perspective prioritize economic importance as well as the human-centered values of the project while those who operate from an instrumental perspective explore how stakeholder participation can be used to achieve the performance objectives of the project. It also considers how stakeholders can be used as a tool in strategic decision making to achieve predetermined objectives (Usadolo & Caldwell, 2016; Kerselaers et al., 2013).

This study has limitations with cross-sectional design and therefore can only provide perspectives for the single time point. Interviews were conducted prior to stage seven—project implementation—which would involve the disruptions from construction to the road and sidewalks. Responses, mostly supportive, may be different during a construction phase versus the planning stages. Another limitation is response bias. Qualitative individual interviews could affect the responses of participants through social desirability where they may say what we wanted to hear or hold back on details for fear of being seen as a naysayer. A third limitation is that participants primarily represented one type of stakeholder—business owners. Hence, the perspectives shared do not necessarily reflect that of residents. Strengths of our study included the structured validated interview instrument and the process in which interviews were conducted to ensure consistency of questions asked. Finally, for the defined target area and population, many different businesses sectors were included.

5.0 Conclusions

This study was conducted as part of stage five (organizing and advocacy) in the overall planning process, but it included pieces of stage six, (identifying projects, and husbandry) by trying to give some visual to what revitalization could look like. Information gathered was informative in understanding what needed to be addressed to garner advocacy from key stakeholders (businesses) who would be directly impacted by revitalization. Numerous conditions are needed to gain support from stakeholders and can be summarized as:

- Have a clear transparent plan that considers the current culture of businesses and residents. This plan should be accessible to all, and care taken to control property value and tax increases and prevent pushing out low-income residents.
- Act and communicate well. Planners must act but will be more successful if they find innovators who will act first and be seen as the model for others to follow. As they disseminate plans, messaging must communicate an accurate vision.
- Benefits must outweigh cost in the short and long term. No matter how well planned, laggards will be present if clear benefits like those stated by stakeholders do not come to fruition and if incentives are not provided to help existing businesses mitigate costs due to taxes or adhering to new codes.

The plan must have considerations for the disruptions caused by construction and potential reduction in traffic. This study was one of many information gathering mechanisms in the formative process that helped inform committee decisions in guiding further attempts to gain feedback from the wider public. Through gathering this information from small, directly affected groups early, messages and plans could be adjusted before going out to larger groups. This can help ensure action can

be taken to build the planning committee in a way that there is capacity to address specific concerns. In addition, there can be a continuation of positive perception of revitalization instead of proliferating negative perceptions that come with fear of construction disruptions, costs, and lack of transparency. While this study interviewed mostly business owners and local government, a recommendation is to engage in a full community-based approach where small groups are representative of population sub-groups that also include residents, other relevant sectors, and multi-cultural populations to ensure buy-in and long-term support from all sectors and, as much as possible, prevent the unintended alienation of community members.

References

- Beierle T. C. (2002). The quality of stakeholder-based decisions. *Risk Analysis*, 22(4), 739–749. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0272-4332.00065>
- Bergquist, P. (n.d.a). *Rural community spotlight: Lavonia, Georgia*. NADO Research Foundation. <https://www.nado.org/rural-community-spotlight-lavonia-georgia/>
- Bergquist, P. (n.d.b). *Vibrant rural communities: Rome, Georgia*. NADO Research Foundation. <https://www.nado.org/vibrant-rural-communities-rome-georgia/>
- Brody, S. (2013). The characteristics, causes, and consequences of sprawling development patterns in the United States. *Nature Education Knowledge*, 4(5) 2 <https://www.nature.com/scitable/knowledge/library/the-characteristics-causes-and-consequences-of-sprawling-103014747/>
- Brueckner, J. K. (2000). Urban sprawl: Diagnosis and remedies. *International Regional Science Review*, 23(2), 160–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016001700761012710>
- Carruthers, J. I., & Ulfarsson, G. F. (2003). Urban sprawl and the cost of public services. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 30(4), 503–522. <https://doi.org/10.1068/b12847>
- Chávez, V., Duran, B., Baker, Q. E., Avila, M. M., & Wallerstein, N. (2008). The dance of privilege and race in CBPR. In M. Minkler, & N. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health: From process to outcomes* (2nd ed., pp.91–105). Jossey-Bass.
- Daniels, T. L., Keller, J.W., Lapping, M. B., Daniels, K., & Segedy, J. (2007). *The small town planning handbook* (3rd ed.) American Planning Association.
- Duxbury, N., & Campbell, H. (2011). Developing and revitalizing rural communities through arts and culture. *Small Cities Imprint*, 3(1), 111–122. <https://smallcities.tru.ca/index.php/cura/article/view/39>
- Faulk, D. (2006), The process and practice of downtown revitalization. *Review of Policy Research*, 23(2), 625–645. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-1338.2006.00219.x>
- Frumkin, H. (2002). Urban sprawl and public health. *Public Health Reports*, 117(3), 201–217. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1497432/pdf/12432132.pdf>

- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.
- Grunwell, S. S. & Ha, S. (2014). How to revitalize a small rural town? An empirical study of factors for success. University-community collaboration with a small historic rural tourism town. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 9(2), 32–50. <https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/858>
- Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Williams, E. N., Hess, S. A., & Ladany, N., (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 196–205. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.196>
- Houston–Galveston Area Council. (2015) Bringing back Main Street: A guide to downtown revitalization for local governments. <https://www.h-gac.com/getmedia/1d767845-bc51-41a5-9894-4d55055aeeca/Bringing-Back-Main-Street-May-2015.pdf>
- Huang, Y., Hui, E. C. M., Zhou, J., Lang, W., Chen, T., & Li, X. (2020). Rural revitalization in China: Land-use optimization through the practice of place-making. *Land Use Policy*, 97, Article 104788. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104788>
- Israel, B.A., Eng, E., Schulz, A.J., & Parker, E.A. (2005). Methods in community-based participatory research for health. In B. A. Israel, E. Eng, A. J. Schulz & E. A. Parker (Eds.), *Methods in community-based participatory research for health* (2nd ed., pp. 3–26). Jossey-Bass.
- Kerselaers, E., Rogge, E., Vanempen, E., Lauwers, L., & Van Huylenbroeck, G. (2013). Changing land use in the countryside: Stakeholders' perception of the ongoing rural planning processes in Flanders. *Land Use Policy*, 32, 197–206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2012.10.016>
- Krueger, R. A. & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Laidley, T. (2016). The problem of urban sprawl. *Contexts*, 15(3), 74–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504216662257>
- Lin, Y., Shui, W., Li, Z., Huang, S., Wu, K., Sun, X., & Liang, J. (2021). Green space optimization for rural vitality: Insights for planning and policy. *Land Use Policy*, 108, Article 105545. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105545>
- Liu, Y. S. (2018). Research on the urban-rural integration and rural revitalization in the new era in China. *Dili Xuebao/Acta Geographica Sinica*, 73, 637–650. <https://doi.org/10.11821/dlxb201804004>
- Lopez, R. (2004). Urban sprawl and risk for being overweight or obese. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94, 1574–1579. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.94.9.1574>
- Love, H. & Powe, M. (2020, December 1). Building resilient rural places: Strategies from local leaders to strengthen rural assets, diversity, and dynamism. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/building-resilient-rural-places-strategies-from-local-leaders-to-strengthen-rural-assets-diversity-and-dynamism/>

- Mishkovsky, N., Dalbey, M., Bertaina, S., Read, A., & McGalliard, T. (2010). *Putting smart growth to work in rural communities*. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association (ICMA). <https://icma.org/documents/putting-smart-growth-work-rural-communities>
- Nicholls, S. (2004). Measuring the impact of parks on property values: New research shows that green spaces increase the value of nearby housing. *Parks and Recreation*, 39(3), 24–32.
- Read, A., & Fernandez, I. (2010). Integrated greenspace networks a smart option: Find out the benefits of investing in green infrastructure. *Public Management*, 92(10), 16. https://icma.org/documents?keyword=&document_type%5B10166%5D=10166&document_type%5B10974%5D=10974&page=16
- Reckien, D., & Martinez-Fernandez, C. (2011). Why do cities shrink? *European Planning Studies*, 19(8), 1375–1397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2011.593333>
- Robertson, K. A. (1999). Can small-city downtowns remain viable? *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 65(3), 270–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944369908976057>
- Rogers, E.M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). Free Press.
- Schmeer, K. (2001). *Stakeholder analysis guidelines*. Partnerships for Health Reform, USAID. <https://www.hfgproject.org/stakeholder-analysis-guidelines/>
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge University Press.
- Usadolo, S. E., & Caldwell, M. (2016). A stakeholder approach to community participation in a rural development project. *SAGE Open*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016638132>
- Van Leuven, A. J. (2021). The impact of main street revitalization on the economic vitality of small-town business districts. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 36(3), 193–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912424211038060>
- Wilczkiewicz, M. & Wilkosz-Mamcarczyk, M. (2015). Revitalization—definition, genesis, examples. *Geomatics, Landmanagement and Landscape*, 2. <https://bibliotekanauki.pl/articles/100418>
- Wolch, J. R., Byrne, J., & Newell, J. P. (2014). Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities ‘just green enough’. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 125, 234–244. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2014.01.017>
- Wolf, K. (2017, April 3). The health benefits of small parks and green spaces. *Parks & Recreation*, 52(4) 28–29. <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2017/april/the-health-benefits-of-small-parks-and-green-spaces/>
- World Health Organization. (2017). *Urban green spaces: A brief for action*. https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/342289/Urban-Green-Spaces_EN_WHO_web3.pdf%3Fua=1