DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION CASE STUDIES

PLANNER'S PORTFOLIO

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DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION CASE STUDIES

Planner's Portfolio Series

The Planner's Portfolio Series is an outreach effort developed by Delaware County Council in order to explore the planning concepts available for communities to take advantage of the unique opportunities across Delaware County.

The pattern on the cover page, and found throughout this series, represents the importance of each individual component in the larger network. The Planner's Portfolio Series explores several of these components and how they can support community character in Delaware County.

For more information, contact the Delaware County Planning Department at 610-891-5200 or visit www.co.delaware.pa.us/planning to see the complete Planner's Portfolio series.

OVERVIEW

The idea of a "downtown" brings images of bustling shops, outdoor seating, and community events to mind for many people. It is often a walkable destination integrated into the surrounding neighborhoods; they can be found in both Mature Neighborhoods and Growing Suburbs (for more information on Mature Neighborhoods and Growing Suburbs, see Issue 1 of the Planner's Portfolio Series—Character Areas). Streets typically have improved pedestrian amenities, such as wider sidewalks, benches, and enhanced crosswalks. Mixed land uses, with a range of building sizes and density, lead to unique character and identity for these areas. Apartments or offices can often be found above street level retail in buildings along the primary streets. The surrounding streets are typically comprised of apartments and single-family homes.

Real estate trends in recent years show an increased desire for homes within or near a vibrant and walkable downtown area. The Central Places, or downtowns, of Delaware County generally developed around mass transit hubs or intersections of roadways. This historical development patterns gives these communities a distinct advantage in a market with an appetite for walkable downtowns. Communities can look to other downtowns in the region as models of success and follow similar steps toward improvement.

In all of the case studies highlighted in this document, the efforts taken by the community and nonprofit organizations have inspired growth and bustling downtowns. It is important to note that different communities are nearly always at different stages in this progression and that a thriving downtown does not occur overnight, but rather an accumulation of efforts over time.

These case studies are a brief summary of how each downtown has taken steps toward positive change over the years.

Ambler, Pennsylvania

Downtown Ambler Borough is focused along Butler Avenue, which is filled with wide, tree-lined sidewalks, restaurants, and shops. It is located along SEPTA's Lansdale-Doylestown regional rail line which provides great access into Philadelphia, making the borough a great location for commuters. The borough has made significant strides over the past 20 years to increase development and pedestrian traffic downtown. The borough created both a revitalization committee and a redevelopment committee; both worked to guide the cultural, commercial, and residential improvements downtown. Efforts focused on improving the pedestrian experience, concentrating development near transit, and preserving the local history. For example, a nonprofit organization bought the historic downtown theatre and spent millions to restore its character. It now serves as a major attraction and anchor downtown.

Photo Credit: montgomerynews.com
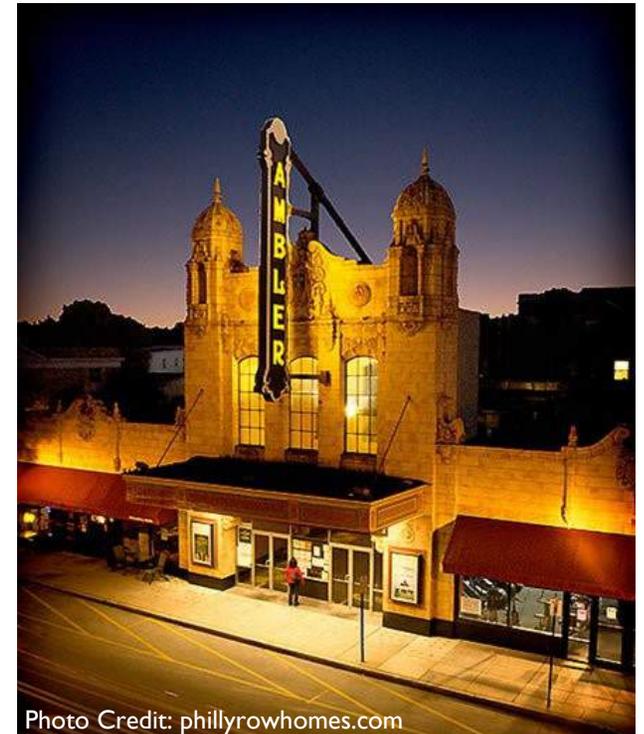
Photo Credit: phillyrowhomes.com

The Borough worked to renovate the Ambler Boiler House, which was once a thriving industrial space, as modern office space with outdoor gathering spaces. The reuse of an existing structure preserved the history and character of the area while site's proximity to transit helped to entice employers.

Photo Credit: DiD Agency via glassdoor.com

Community members, business owners, and other stakeholders established Ambler Main Street in the 1990s. This nonprofit organization received funding from federal and local government agencies in order to host annual events to benefit the community. Events included farmers' markets, car shows, and First Fridays to showcase local businesses and attract residents from across the region into downtown Ambler.

Photo Credit: uwishunu.com

Ardmore, Pennsylvania

Downtown Ardmore is located in Lower Merion Township along Lancaster Avenue and SEPTA's Paoli-Thorndale regional rail line (also serviced by Amtrak). Lancaster Avenue, and many of the cross-streets, are lined with retail and restaurants at street level and offices and apartments above in two- to four-story buildings. Suburban Square, a large, outdoor shopping center designed to mimic a traditional town square, is owned by a separate entity that is not involved with the programs provided by the Ardmore Initiative as described below. Ardmore maximizes its location around a highly serviced transit station by locating businesses near the station and maintaining clear signage and local marketing campaigns.
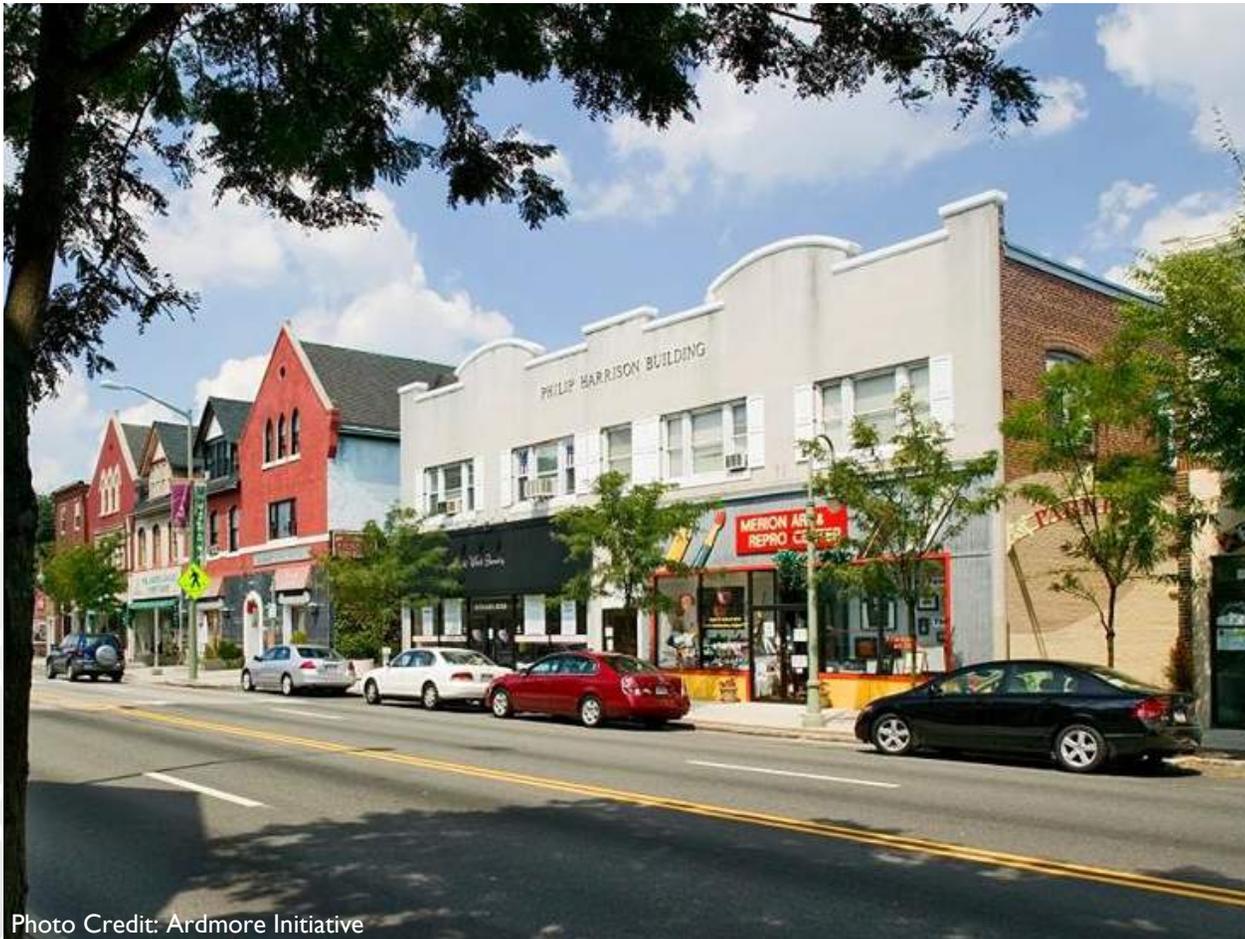
Photo Credit: Ardmore Initiative

The Ardmore Initiative was started in 1988 as the Ardmore Main Street Program to establish and maintain a pleasant and economically active downtown. Over the years, the Ardmore Initiative has administered street cleaning programs, streetscape improvements, façade improvement programs, and marketing and promotion. The Ardmore Initiative recognizes the importance of volunteer efforts in the community through an annual awards program.
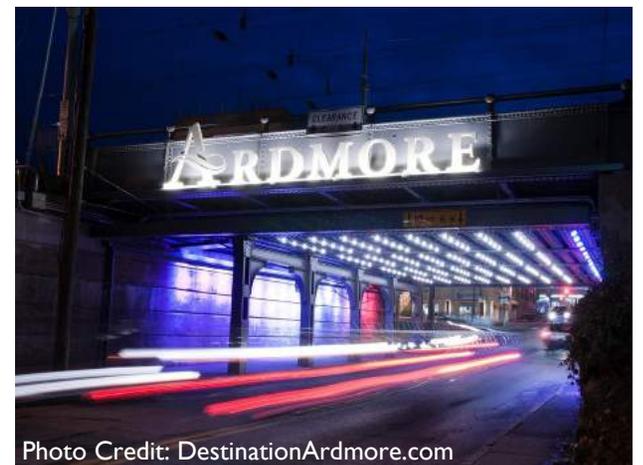

Photo Credit: DestinationArdmore.com

The Ardmore Business Association was formed to help improve the business environment within downtown Ardmore. The funds contributed by member businesses help to support various programs, such as local marketing for businesses and events, networking events, and discounted bulk mailing rates. The association works closely with partner agencies, such as the Ardmore Initiative and the surrounding communities. It also works with First Friday Main Line, a nonprofit community organization that aims to connect local artist and business owners along the Main Line.

Photo Credit: visitphilly.com

Photo Credit: Ardmore Initiative

Doylestown, Pennsylvania

Downtown Doylestown is located along State and Main Streets and Oakland Avenue and is the county seat for Bucks County. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Doylestown Borough experienced increased vacancy rates and reduced visitors to its downtown area as a result of competition from nearby shopping and dining destinations. As a response, the borough established an independent Doylestown Revitalization Board in 1993 to promote an on-going, sustainable economic and community development strategy. A nonprofit organization formed to purchase the County Theatre, which was no longer in use at the time. The organization was able to preserve the unique character of the theatre and eventually bring it back in to use, creating a unique destination for movie screenings in the heart of downtown.

Photo Credit: bucks.happening.com

Discover Doylestown is a nonprofit organization that puts on various events throughout the year to help promote the local culture and businesses within Doylestown. Events, such as the Doylestown Arts Festival, the Bucks County Classic Bike Race, and the Doylestown at Dusk Car Show, can bring visitors from across the region into downtown Doylestown. These events, and associated marketing, also help to build a regional profile for Doylestown.

Photo Credit: uwishunu.com

Photo Credit: visitphiladelphia.com

Photo Credit: visitphiladelphia.com

The Doylestown Revitalization Board is a volunteer board that helps borough council in making the borough a vital community to live, work, or visit. The board consists of several committees – Design, Economic Development, and Communications. The Design Committee assists and advises the borough on beautification and infrastructure projects, including gateway and informational signage and coordination with large projects in the borough, such as the new Bucks County government facilities. It also helps to preserve the historic character of the Doylestown Historic District. The Economic Development Committee works to identify and implement strategies which will increase investment and the number of visitors. The Communications Committee focuses on marketing and outreach to businesses, residents, and visitors.

Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

Downtown Lansdowne is concentrated along Lansdowne and Baltimore Avenues and is easily accessible from the Lansdowne Station on SEPTA's Media-Elwyn regional rail line. The Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC) was formed in 1998 when residents and business owners in Lansdowne Borough noticed a decline in business and an increase in vacancies along Lansdowne Avenue. Additionally, the Historic Lansdowne Theatre Corporation, established in 2006, helped find funding in order to revitalize the historic structure as a way to encourage pedestrian traffic and economic development. With the efforts of the LEDC and the Historic Theatre Corporation, Lansdowne Avenue has become a regional destination over the past decade.

The LEDC was formed in order to encourage investment and economic development within the borough. The group worked to streamline improvement efforts by unifying a vision for the community and acting as the coordinating organization for all of the stakeholders involved. In the spring of 2011, LEDC worked with Lansdowne and Yeadon Borough to start an Elm Street Program to apply similar revitalization efforts to the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

Photo Credit: John Kelly Green Photography

The LEDC has several committees that allow the organization to work toward its goals through various methods. The Farmers' Market Committee, for instance, organizes a weekly farmers' market during the summer months. The Lansdowne farmers' market is programmed to encourage business development in downtown Lansdowne by featuring local businesses and artists as well as farmers. This committee also establishes special event days, such as Kidcentric Day when additional activities are held at the market for children. The Marketing Committee works to promote downtown Lansdowne as a place to visit, work, and shop, particularly for the many special events. Arts on the Avenue is one of the premier events, with over 2,500 people attending. In addition to over 40 different artists and musicians which fill the street, food trucks and outdoor dining from local restaurants are featured. The Marketing Committee can assist new businesses in marketing events and even help organize press releases and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Media, Pennsylvania

Media Borough is the county seat for Delaware County. It is located at the terminus of SEPTA's Route 101 trolley and just north of the Media Station on SEPTA's Media-Elywn regional rail line. It is known as "everybody's hometown" for its emphasis on community and walkability downtown. State Street, the borough's main street, is lined with restaurants, shops, residences, and offices that encourage pedestrian traffic morning through night. Infrastructure improvements, such as wider sidewalks, enhanced crosswalks, and accessible transit, encourage visitors to stroll through town. Although Media's physical environment has been a big part of its success, the community has also created a tremendous atmosphere of community events. Special markets and festivals, in addition to weekly events such as Dining Under the Stars, draw visitors from across the region.

The borough was certified as America's first "Fair Trade Town" in 2006. This commitment to sell and serve fair trade products supports fair development across the globe. Additionally, Media hosts community events and educational sessions in schools and workplaces in the area to raise awareness about the importance of being a Fair Trade Town.

Photo Credit: mediarestaurants.com

The Media Business Authority was formed by businesses located in downtown Media in order to better compete with malls and other shopping centers in the region. It works closely with the borough to encourage economic growth, create a visually appealing downtown, nurture business development, and help organize programs that attract visitors. One of the most popular events, Dining Under the Stars, closes off portions of State Street for added outdoor restaurant seating. The Business Authority regularly updates its strategic action plan to set goals and coordinate the actions of the many stakeholders involved.

Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania

Mt. Airy serves as home to many people working in the City of Philadelphia and surrounding counties. Germantown Avenue runs through the downtown area, making it the downtown's central hub for restaurants and businesses. The Mt. Airy Business Improvement District (BID) is a collaborative effort between businesses in the downtown area and community members. The BID collects funds from members for community improvement projects, such as beautification services for the district, including cleaning services for the commercial corridor, vacant lot maintenance, seasonal planters, and benches/trash receptacles and other street furniture. In conjunction with other community organizations, the BID also coordinates additional parking for nights and weekends through agreements with landowners that do not use parking during those times (e.g., a bank parking lot).

Photo Credit: visitphilly.com

The Mt. Airy BID strives to make the area more attractive and welcoming for businesses to want to be a part of. Over the years, the BID has made parking more accessible, installed rain collector barrels designed by local artists, fixed benches, installed trash and recycling bins, and made the Germantown Ave area more pedestrian friendly with energy efficient lights and enacting a façade improvement grant program.

Photo Credit: G. Widman for Visit Philadelphia

Mt. Airy USA is a community development corporation created by community members who wanted to bring back the lively Germantown Ave area. Mt. Airy USA has worked over the years to highlight the attractive aspects of Mt. Airy and work to fix the areas that need work. The organization has a four pronged mission – Housing Counseling, Real Estate Development, Commercial Corridor Revitalization, and a Public Schools initiative – in place in order to fulfill their overall goal of making Mt. Airy a great place to live. The Commercial Corridor Revitalization effort included creating a business association to encourage businesses to work together and promote Mt. Airy businesses. BAM (Business Association of Mt. Airy) members are promoted through social media and other local advertising efforts. The Real Estate section helps transform abandoned and deteriorated homes into affordable housing units. Mt. Airy USA also helps put on events such as Moonlight Movies, an open air movie viewing, and Street Fare, a food truck fair, which promote community members to come together.

Photo Credit: Natavan Werbock for NewsWorks

Swarthmore, Pennsylvania

Swarthmore Borough is located along SEPTA's Media-Elwyn regional rail and is home to Swarthmore College. The borough has made significant improvements to the streetscape in recent years to increase foot traffic downtown, including enhanced crosswalks and wider sidewalks. The Inn at Swarthmore, which opened downtown in 2016, offers a restaurant and guest rooms for out-of-town visitors. It also includes the Swarthmore College bookstore, which will help to attract students into the downtown area.

Over the years, Swarthmore has become home to several unique organizations, including the Swarthmore Co-op. The Co-op helps to anchor the business district and prove fairy priced groceries and a sense of community for all. Additionally, the borough is home to a weekly farmer's markets which attracts visitors from surrounding communities.

The Swarthmore Town Center Inc. is a nonprofit organization that works to encourage community members to visit the downtown and engage in events that take place within the business district. The organization promotes the local businesses and helps to attract new business. Additionally, the Swarthmore Makers' Market is a seasonal, open-air market that highlights local artisans and vendors.

Photo Credit: Carrie Piccard, https://carriepiccard.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/21-picture-perfect-swarthmore.jpg

Photo Credit: Mary Gelb

The borough takes advantage of its location along SEPTA's Media-Elwyn regional rail line by providing clear pedestrian and bicycle connections throughout downtown (above left and above). Additionally, various organizations host events downtown throughout the year, such as the Swarthmore Fun Fair (left).

West Chester, Pennsylvania

Downtown West Chester is concentrated around two streets, Gay Street and Market Street, at the western terminus of West Chester Pike and is anchored to the south by West Chester University. It is also the county seat for Chester County. The borough has worked over the years to instill a local sense of pride in its community by undertaking investment in physical infrastructure and preserving the historic character. The downtown area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and, as such, undergoes rigorous design review before any significant development. These efforts have helped to preserve the architectural character of the community. A streetscape with extra amenities, including street furniture, enhanced crosswalks, and street trees, increases the comfort of pedestrians and encourages longer visits.

Photo Credit: downtownwestchester.com

Photo Credit: thcphotography.com

The West Chester Business Improvement District (BID) was formed in 2000 to fund and implement of variety of programs to increase customer traffic and sales; retain, expand, and recruit viable businesses; and to advocate the interest of downtown to government agencies. The West Chester BID works closely with numerous businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations in the borough to achieve common goals.
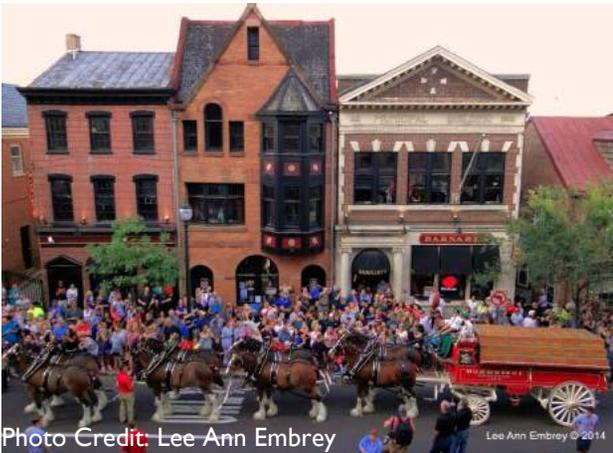
Photo Credit: Lee Ann Embrey

Photo Credit: West Chester Downtown Foundation

Photo Credit: dubc4miler.com

The borough hosts many special events throughout the year. This programming simultaneously brings community members together and promotes the business district. These events are a collaborative effort between the borough, BID, and businesses. For example, Gay Street is closed down for Swingin' Summer Thursdays, an evening event filled with music and dancing that is organized by the Borough Parks and Recreation Department and sponsored by the BID. West Chester's Gallery Walk, which is organized by the Greater West Chester Chamber of Commerce and sponsored by the BID, is an art exhibition featuring work for sale by local artists.

OTHER PLANNER'S PORTFOLIOS:

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March 2016

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April 2016

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April 2016

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