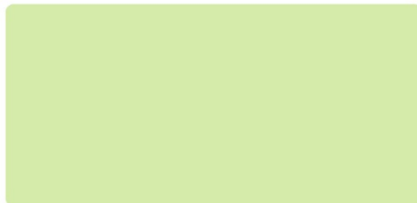
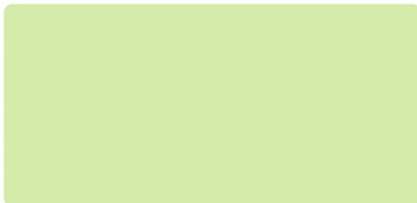
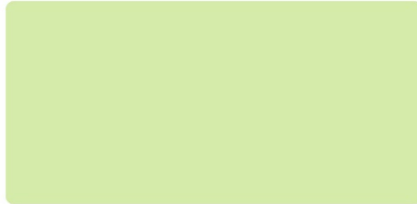
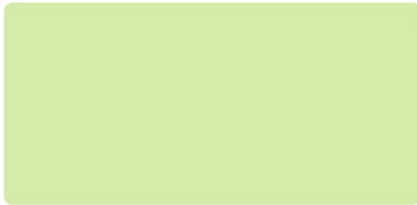




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for
Strengthening
Downtown
Christiansburg with
Local Foods
Christiansburg, VA
January 20, 2017



Community Story

Christiansburg, Virginia is a town of nearly 22,000 people nestled in the foothills of southwest Virginia. The town is the county seat of Montgomery County, which is also home to Blacksburg and Virginia Tech, which are just north of the town limits. The area is known for its natural beauty, with places such as George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, and the New River providing ample opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism. While somewhat isolated from major metropolitan areas, the region is also known for its high quality of life and has seen steady economic expansion for several decades, driven in large part by Virginia Tech, which is the area's largest employer.



Figure 1 - The Downtown Farmers Market is an anchor of downtown on the west end of Main Street. Image Credit: Stephanie Bertaina, EPA.

Christiansburg has shared in the region's economic growth, but local officials are concerned that the downtown area has lagged the rest of the town in development and business growth. In response, the town has invested in rebuilding the streets and sidewalks to create a more walkable and attractive downtown. In 2015 the town established a farmers market downtown to draw more people and increase economic activity. The market has improved access to nutritious food for residents, supports local producers and businesses, and provides a much needed downtown public gathering space.



Figure 2 - The town has rebuilt its sidewalks downtown and used curb extensions to shorten crossing distances. This has improved the walkability of the area. Image Credit: Mike Callahan, Renaissance Planning.

The farmers market anchors the west end of the town's compact business district on Main Street. On the east end are several civic uses, including the county courthouse and town hall. The farmers market is open for business on Thursdays from 3 to 7 PM, May to October. For its first two years of operation, the town has shut down Hickok Street for the market. Hickok is a small local street connecting Main Street and College Street. The vendors set up on either side of Hickok Street and customers stroll down the center of the street. The Town manages the farmers market and has formed a Farmers' Market Committee to support its development. The market accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and offers a program to double the value of SNAP benefits used at the market.

The market is one of several strategies the town is using to increase activity downtown. Christiansburg also hosts food truck rodeos, art events, movie screenings, and the Wilderness Trail Festival. The town's Christmas at the Market event in 2015 brought 65 vendors and 7,000 people downtown. Meanwhile, the food truck rodeo brought in about 6,000 people and 20 food trucks.

In addition to events, the town is also looking at possibilities for investing in infrastructure and business incentives for the downtown area. One major opportunity is the regional Huckleberry Trail, which connects downtown Blacksburg with Christiansburg. It provides a safe place for people to bike, run, and stroll between the communities. But the trail terminates just north of the downtown area, which is a missed opportunity to bring additional people and activity into the downtown. Additionally, a small college is moving from the outskirts of Christiansburg to an old church downtown, which happens to be across the street from the farmers market. The Ignite Life Pacific College will bring between 200 and 300 students downtown each day once it completes its move.

While the town has taken several positive and successful steps towards achieving a more active downtown, it faces several challenges. First, the farmers market is small and there is a desire among town officials to see more vendors and customers. While the vendors that participate report doing well financially due to the small, but committed customer base, more vendors and customers would bring the additional activity that the town is seeking. Second, the downtown area lacks public park space. The market is a temporary event for a few hours once per week. And third, the town would like to see a more diverse mix of businesses in the downtown area. Town officials are especially interested in attracting more restaurants or a brewery to the area, which would increase foot traffic.

The town in 2015 applied for technical assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP) program to achieve its goals for the farmers market and downtown. The LFLP program is supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). The goals of the LFLP program are to create:

- More economic opportunities for local farmers and businesses.
- Better access to healthy, local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- Revitalized downtowns, main streets, and neighborhoods.

Christiansburg, through the LFLP program, focused on planning for the development of the farmers market as an anchor of the downtown. During a two-day workshop, town officials, citizens, and key stakeholders came together to craft an initial vision for the market’s future, with a focus on its design and operations. The group also identified new ways to promote both the market and downtown to new customers and potential businesses. The results of the workshop are captured in this action plan, which

LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Randy Wingfield, Assistant Town Manager

Bill Aldridge, Town Building Inspector

Sarah Belcher, Christiansburg Farmers’ Market
Manager

Dr. Pamela Ray, New River Health District

Barry Robinson, Sustainable Agriculture
Consultant

Donna Speaks, Owner, Mockingbird Café and
Bakery

Figure 3 – LFLP Steering Committee in Christiansburg.

lays out a set of goals and next steps the town can take to implement them. The plan also includes a series of illustrations developed through the workshop that reflect a vision for the future of Hickok Street, which could evolve into the type of great public space the town would like to see downtown.

While many people were involved in the development of this plan, the people listed in Figure 2 were part of a Steering Committee that helped organize the LFLP workshop. The committee plans to continue working after the workshop to help implement the goals and actions outlined in this plan. The remainder of this report and appendices document the engagement process, the workshop activities, and most importantly, the action plan and next steps for achieving the community’s goals.



Figure 4 - Town officials and the LFLP team meet over lunch on Day 1 of the workshop. Image Credit: Mike Callahan, Renaissance Planning.

Engagement

The technical assistance engagement process for LFLP has three phases, illustrated in Figure 3 below. The assessment phase consists of three preparation conference calls among EPA and partner federal agencies, the consulting team, and the LFLP Steering Committee from the local community. The purpose of these calls is to establish the workshop goals, agenda, logistics, and stakeholder invitation lists. The convening phase includes the effort’s capstone event—a two-day workshop in the community. The next steps phase includes three follow up conference calls as well as process reporting and documentation.

The workshop occurred on October 6th and 7th, 2016, and included a lunch gathering with the Steering Committee members and regional, state, and federal partners; a tour of the community; and an evening community meeting at town hall (Day 1); and an action-planning session, also at town hall (Day 2). Key stakeholder groups, residents, and local leaders participated in the all-day working session. The workshop sign-in sheets are provided in Appendix C.

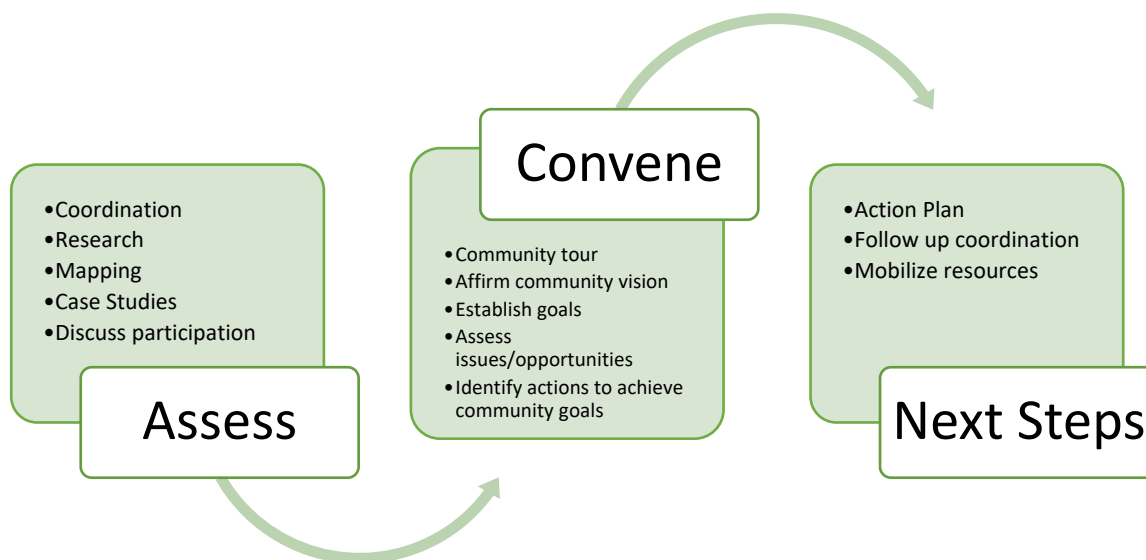


Figure 5 - Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Process Diagram.

Community Tour

The LFLP Steering Committee organized a luncheon on October 6th with key stakeholders at town hall to kick off the workshop. Town officials, the consulting team, and federal agency representatives discussed the town's hopes for the workshop and its downtown area. Following the luncheon, the Steering Committee led a tour of key places and projects in the downtown, including the farmers market, recent streetscape improvements to Main Street streetscape, the historic district that anchors the east end of Main Street, and the Ignite Life Pacific College, which is renovating a church across Main Street from the farmer market. The market and college have tremendous potential as anchors on the west end of Main Street that would increase overall activity downtown.

The tour also highlighted important sites outside the downtown area including the Huckleberry Trail, which is popular for walking and bicycling between Blacksburg and Christiansburg; the Christiansburg Institute, which started as a school for freed slaves in 1866 and continued operation for a century; the Christiansburg Aquatics Center; the site for a large new park near a key suburban commercial strip on Virginia Route 114; and several newer housing developments. The tour showed a clear distinction between the fast-growing suburban areas of the town, and the downtown area, which has great potential but has seen far less development.

Vision and Values

The community's values and hopes for the future of downtown and the farmers market underlie this entire action plan. Several citizens and town officials came out to a community meeting on the evening of Day 1 to share their ideas, and this section captures the major themes that emerged. More than two dozen residents and community leaders attended the community meeting, which began with an overview presentation of the LFLP program and several success stories from other communities that have used local foods to revitalize their downtown areas and provide better access to healthy foods for citizens. Following the presentation, the consulting team introduced a series of discussion

DOWNTOWN & FARMERS MARKET ASSETS AND CHALLENGES

Downtown Assets

- Central location in the region that is easy to access from highways
- Historic buildings that can be repurposed
- Huckleberry Trail nearby with potential to extend it to downtown
- Affordable real estate
- Diverse people and economy
- Authentic
- The population is less transient than Blacksburg where students come and go
- Small town feel
- Recreational opportunities
- Government center that brings jobs and customers for restaurants/retail
- Vision and leadership
- Dense core
- Town is supportive of business

Challenges:

- Want more vendors at the market
- Lack of knowledge on how to use and prepare local products
- Getting more people to the market
- Providing more things to do downtown once people are at the market
- Lack of downtown restaurants
- Lack of transit access to downtown
- Could be more bikeable
- Poor walk/bike connections to nearby neighborhoods
- Perception that parking is difficult
- Visibility of the market from Main Street
- Lack of restrooms at the market
- Need incentives to attract invest to underutilized buildings
- Lack of green space downtown

Figure 6 - Downtown and farmers market assets and challenges identified during the community meeting.

questions to reveal hopes for the future of Christiansburg, assets that set downtown apart in the region, and challenges for revitalizing downtown.

To gain a sense for what citizens would like to see downtown in the future, the consulting team asked the meeting attendees to develop a story about what the farmers market and downtown look like in 20 years. People then shared their stories with each other in small groups and then reported out the highlights of their discussion to the larger group. This exercise revealed the several desires for downtown Christiansburg in 2036:

- People of all ages arrive downtown via car, train, and trail.
- You see families, people strolling, children playing, people talking in the street, people dining on the sidewalk.
- People are enjoying live music, the downtown brewery, locally-owned restaurants, and the farmers market.
- The market has indoor and outdoor space, the outdoor space is covered, it has a stage for music and entertainers.
- It's bustling during the day too with many businesses and entrepreneurs set up in co-working spaces.

Meeting attendees next discussed their views on what sets downtown Christiansburg apart. These assets set the town apart and can help attract investment in the future. They also discussed what they think are the greatest challenges towards the downtown and farmers market reaching their full potential. The attendees recorded their thoughts regarding both assets and challenges on index cards and shared their ideas again in small groups. Following a discussion period, each small group reported on the major themes and ideas that emerged. A summary of these themes is provided in Figure 4 above.

The themes that emerged during the community meeting revealed a desire for new downtown businesses and entrepreneurship opportunities afforded by local foods and products; a walkable downtown with a variety of shops, offices, and housing; more transportation choices for arriving in downtown Christiansburg including passenger rail service and a trail; and an attractive public space to anchor the west end of downtown and host the farmers market.

It was against this positive backdrop of values and visions for the future that the remainder of the workshop unfolded. The public participation in the community meeting helped shape the goals for this action plan, which became the focus of the work sessions on Day 2 of the workshop. The goals also influenced a design charrette, which occurred simultaneously on Day 2 with the two work sessions. The outcome of the design charrette is a vision for the future of a public space and market on Hickok Street, and is presented later in this action plan.



Figure 7 - Citizens and key stakeholders discuss their hopes for the future of downtown Christiansburg and the farmers market. Image Credit: Mike Callahan, Renaissance Planning.

Action Plan

The goals and actions introduced in this section, and described in greater detail in Appendix A, are the culminating product of the workshop. The plan is organized around four goals and includes actions that participants brainstormed at the meeting and the Steering Committee refined during follow up conference calls. The action plan matrix helps to further clarify, prioritize, and define roles and responsibilities for moving forward on these actions. The goals and actions that are part of this plan are summarized below and are contained in their full detail in Appendix A.

GOAL 1: *Build*: Design a future market that meets the needs of customers, vendors, and downtown businesses.

An initial vision for the future of Hickok Street and the downtown farmers market is a key outcome of the workshop. The town will need to take several more steps if it decides to implement this vision. The actions described below lay out those steps, which include getting feedback on the vision and refining it, studying the feasibility of the vision, redesigning Hickok Street, and funding the preferred design.

- **Action 1.1:** Present and discuss with vendors and nearby property owners the design concept for a public space and market on Hickok Street.
- **Action 1.2:** Present the initial design concept to the Town Council, along with feedback from residents, vendors, and property owners.
- **Action 1.3:** Consider a feasibility study for the Hickok Street public space and market concept, and research grant and funding opportunities.
- **Action 1.4:** Prepare a preliminary design for the Hickok Street public and market space, and secure funding for construction.

GOAL 2: *Market*: Promote downtown and the market.

Downtown Christiansburg has many assets that can attract investment in infill development downtown. One of these assets is the downtown farmers market. While the market has been a successful endeavor for vendors, who report earning higher income in Christiansburg than many other markets, town leaders feel it could draw even more people and vendors downtown on Thursday evenings. Workshop participants agreed that promoting the downtown and the farmers market is a key to attracting more investment and more customers and vendors for the market. Successfully promoting the area will require information on why people do and do not come downtown. It also will require signs that direct people to the main attractions, which is especially important for the market, which lacks good visibility from Main Street for people passing by in their vehicles. The town's recruitment and management of events, such as the farmers market and festivals, is also an important factor in achieving this goal.

- **Action 2.1:** Conduct a citizen survey to gather insights on what non-customers would like to see at the farmers market, and what it would take to turn them into customers.
- **Action 2.2:** Design and order temporary directional signs to guide people to the market from Franklin and Main Street, and add the market to eventual wayfinding signs.
- **Action 2.3:** Get an affiliate venue of the Crooked Road music trail in downtown Christiansburg and participate in the Junior Appalachian Musicians program.
- **Action 2.4:** Expand the role of the market manager to increase the visibility of the market through promotion at existing events such as Wilderness Trail Days, the Heritage Festival, and Food Truck Rodeos.

GOAL 3: Operate: Grow the vendor and customer base.

The operation of the market is another important factor in attracting more vendors and customers. The market is run by the town, and has a professional market manager on staff. Being a new market, there are still a few operational issues to work out. This goal lays out some actions that can be taken in relatively short order to continue improving upon the operation of the market.

- **Action 3.1:** Organize a meeting with vendors over the winter to debrief on what worked well and what might work better in 2017.
- **Action 3.2:** Consider combining the special events and farmers market management into a single position or program with 1 to 1.5 full time equivalent staff.
- **Action 3.3:** Increase awareness and grow the customer base of the farmers market by using marketing tools such as direct mail, a water bill flyer, and social media, and installing infrastructure such as benches to make the area more welcoming.
- **Action 3.4:** Find out what the other 16 farmers markets in the region require of vendors for liability insurance.



Figure 8 - A vendor sets up before the farmers market on October 6, 2016. Image Credit: Mike Callahan, Renaissance Planning.

GOAL 4: Incentivize: Attract private investment to downtown properties.

The farmers market is one key strategy for attracting people to the downtown area. This is an important step for increasing activity, which can attract new businesses that want to take advantage of the increased activity. However, there are also financial obstacles to renovating or repurposing older buildings. The town can help accelerate investment in older downtown buildings by providing financial incentives or investing in infrastructure in the downtown area. The actions in support of this goal lay out a few near-term steps the town can take to make infill and redevelopment more attractive.

- **Action 4.1:** Create a plan and seek funding for a façade improvement matching grant program for the downtown.
- **Action 4.2:** Develop a conceptual plan to connect downtown to the Huckleberry Trail.
- **Action 4.3:** Study the feasibility of other incentives the town could provide for downtown development and redevelopment, including a service district to fund enhanced services downtown, a tourism development zone, and property tax abatement to encourage improvements.

Hickok Street Market Design Concept

As the market concludes its second season in 2016, Christiansburg is looking ahead to the future of both Hickok Street and the farmers market. The town would like to build an attractive and vibrant public space downtown that can host the farmers market and other events. Prior to the workshop, Christiansburg had been considering several options for this space, including closing Hickok Street to traffic and building a pavilion on the street right-of-way near its intersection with Main Street. The town used the LFLP workshop to explore this idea and several others. By the conclusion of the workshop the town had settled on an initial design concept to present to key stakeholders and property owners near Hickok Street.

The first step in the design process was to identify the broader context for the farmers market on Hickok Street within the framework of the downtown. The consulting team analyzed both the site and surrounding area from a professional planning perspective and sought the input of participants in the workshop. They expressed concerns about the visibility of Hickok Street, which is partially shielded from the view of motorists on Main Street by building facades and trees. Main Street also has less traffic than nearby Franklin Street, which is both an advantage and disadvantage. While the lower traffic volumes contribute to a more walkable street environment, there are less vehicles passing by the market on Hickok Street. The advantages of the Hickok Street site are that the town controls the street and it has light traffic (less than 2,000 vehicles per day), making it viable to close the street either temporarily or permanently. Hickok is also an anchor on the western edge of the Main Street business district. Building an attractive public space here would enclose the compact business district with a green public space on either end. As Figure 9 below shows, Hickok Street forms one end of the most important block in the downtown from a design character perspective. This block has the most walkable destinations, authentic older buildings and improved streetscape in the downtown area. Another advantage of the Hickok Street location is the Ignite Life Pacific College, which is renovating an old church on the south side of the Hickok and Main Street intersection. The college will eventually have up to 300 students on site and envisions using its campus as a community space. The college and the public space on Hickok Street could make the area an entertainment hub for downtown.



Figure 9 - Downtown Context Map

After weighing the merits of the Hickok Street location, the workshop attendees decided to proceed with developing a design concept for the space. However, the attendees decided that the space should be

designed with future flexibility as a key principle so that it would continue to be a useful space even if the market eventually outgrows it and moves elsewhere in the downtown. This was a key principle in the design approach, which recognized that whatever was designed for this location needed to be a civic amenity for the town for the very long term.

Figure 10 below shows the current market configuration. Vendors park their vehicles on either side of Hickok Street and customers stroll down the center. Workshop participants said this is a convenient set up for vendors, who bring heavy equipment and products to the market. Close access to their vehicles is important.



Figure 10 - Current Market Configuration

Based on a site analysis and extensive participant input and discussion, the consultant team developed a design plan for presentation to the broader community. Figure 11 below is the initial vision that the workshop participants agreed to present to nearby property owners, farmers market vendors, and the town council. The key principles that informed this design are convenience for vendors, traffic calming, walkability, event space, and space for people to sit and linger. The site design plan in Figure 11 shows several key features. First is the transformation of Hickok street into a “shared street.” A shared street is one where the curbs have been eliminated and replaced by decorative paving that separates the street into loose zones for pedestrian and vehicular circulation in an informal shared approach rather than strict relegation of cars away from pedestrians. In other words, the vehicle right-of-way is flush with the sidewalks. Shared streets have the benefit of calming vehicular traffic and enhancing pedestrian traffic through landscaping, street furniture and decorative paving. The vehicular way is purposely not in a straight line and is indicated on the plan in yellow. It follows a meandering path between College Street and Main Street, which also slows speeds and reinforces Hickok Street as a pedestrian space by forcing vehicles to drive slowly through the area. Pedestrian space is delineated in red and is protected from the vehicle space by bollards, but traffic speeds are slow enough that pedestrians feel comfortable walking in the street and crossing it at any point. Bicyclists also feel comfortable using the entire vehicle right-of-way. While the design allows the street right-of-way to become a safe public space, it also maintains street connectivity by allowing vehicles to pass between College and Main Street. This is important because street connectivity is a key principle of urban design in downtown areas.

This vision keeps the farmers market in the street right-of-way, with vendors setting up tents on either side of Hickok Street near their vehicles. However, their vehicles can be temporarily parked in the pedestrian zone on the far side of the bollards. Near the intersection of Hickok and Main Street is a decorative structure that provides an overhanging awning for shade and protection from the elements for market vendors and shoppers, and during other events. The awning hangs over the street right-of-way, but its supporting posts are in the pedestrian zone and protected from vehicles by the bollards. The structure would be sufficiently high to allow for the passage of trucks.

The entrance to Hickok Street from Main Street also features a gateway arch. This arch is envisioned as a steel lattice structure in a traditional style that would have the name of the farmer’s market in steel letters interwoven into the lattice as a formal gate or entry into the space. The location of the arch is shown in Figure 11. It is not shown in Figure 12 because it would have blocked from view other key elements of the design concept.

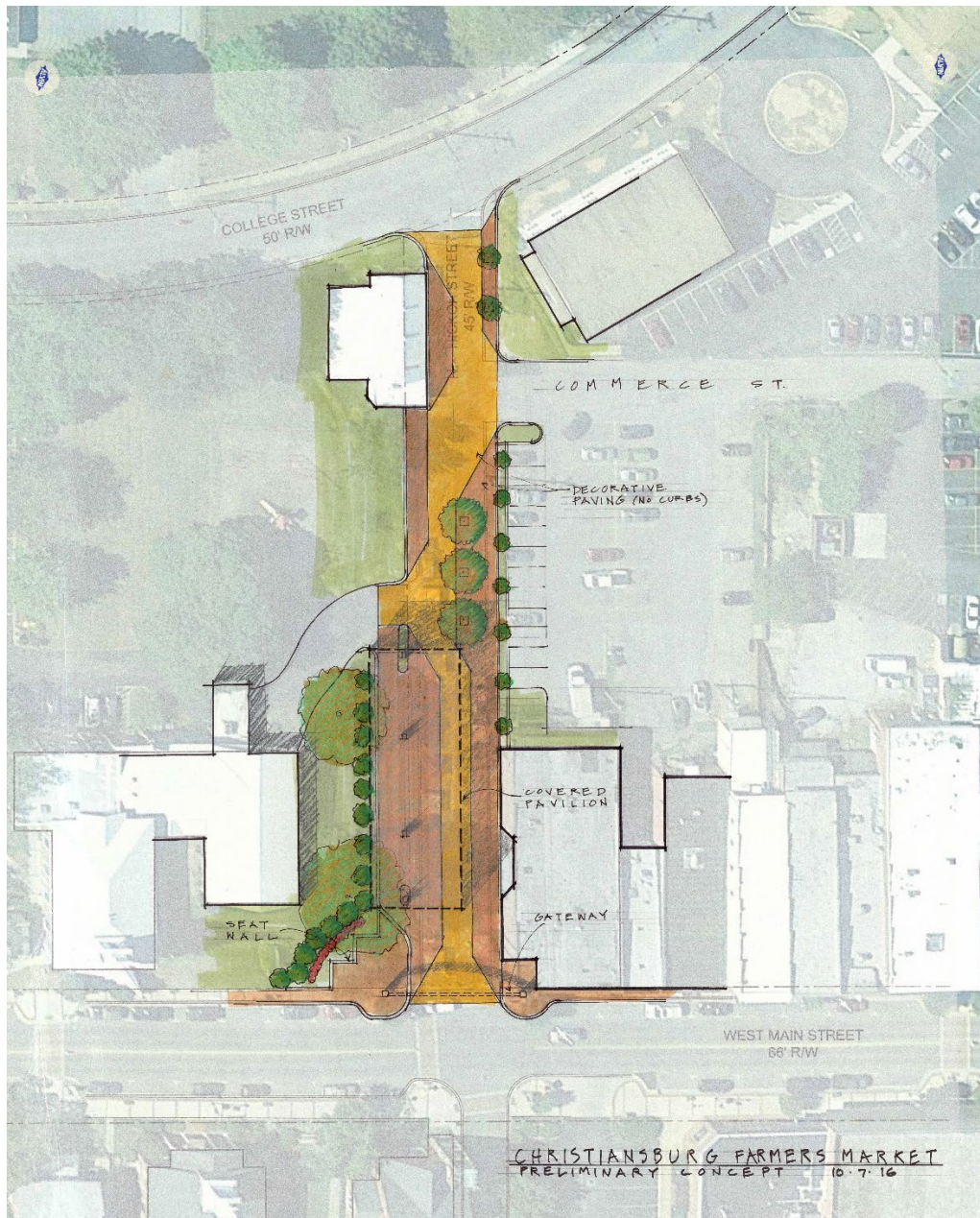


Figure 11 - Site Design Plan for Hickok Street

Figure 12 below shows the design concept at street view as a cross section through the street. This shows Hickok Street during a Thursday market. Vendors are set up on either side of the street and customers are strolling down the center. The street is flush with the curb. The west side of Hickok (left side of the illustration) shows a sitting wall along where the public right-of-way touches the church's right-of-way. Street trees and the overhanging awning provide shade for pedestrians. It also shows the design concept for the permanent awning structure. The structure would be of lightweight steel and wood construction with a curving roof that would collect rainwater which could be channeled into a rain garden on the adjacent church site to provide natural stormwater management. The form of the awning structure is reminiscent of a tree branching structure in keeping with the natural theme of the farmers market but would be designed with modern materials and permanent finishes appropriate to its role as a permanent civic structure and amenity for the town.



Figure 12 - Street Level View of Hickok Street Design Concept

One important caveat regarding this design concept is the need for the town to negotiate with the Christiansburg Presbyterian Church to acquire a portion of its property that abuts Hickok Street. This would be required to enlarge the right-of-way to a sufficient width to allow for the shared street, awning, wide sidewalks, gateway sign, and sitting wall. Town officials plan to discuss the design concept with adjacent property owners before advancing it further.

Implementation and Next Steps

During three post-workshop conference calls the Steering Committee worked to refine this action plan and set priorities for a \$20,000 implementation support award from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). This final section describes the priorities and how the town intends to use this funding.

Appalachian Regional Commission Implementation Assistance

The ARC is making available to each of the LFLP communities in its service area implementation funding assistance of up to \$20,000. The funding is to be targeted towards actions identified in the workshop and post-workshop action planning effort. The Steering Committee identified action items 2.2 and 3.3 as the top priorities for this targeted funding assistance. Action 2.2 calls for taking steps to improve the visibility of the market on Hickok Street. The Town may seek ARC assistance to install wayfinding signs. Action 3.3 calls for taking steps to grow the customer base. The Town may seek ARC assistance to procure and install benches and other infrastructure to make the market more welcoming to visitors.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Implementation Tables
- Appendix B – Community Data Profile
- Appendix C – Workshop Sign-in Sheets
- Appendix D – Funding Resources
- Appendix E – References
- Appendix F – Workshop Photo Album