

The Renaissance of Downtown White Bluff

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Re·nais·sanceⁱ

noun, often attributive \,re-nə-'sän(t)s, -'zän(t)s, -'säʱs, -'zäʱs, 're-nə-, , **chiefly British** ri-'nä-sən(t)s\

: a situation or period of time when there is a new interest in something that has not been popular in a long time

: a period of new growth or activity

The Town of White Bluff, Tennessee, located in southeastern Dickson County is the twelfth (12th) fastest growing community by percentage of growth in Middle Tennessee and the twenty-fifth (25th) fastest growing community by percentage of growth in the Stateⁱⁱ. In 2010, the population of White Bluff was 3,206 with 1,254 householdsⁱⁱⁱ, with current populations estimated at 3,500. The Town is located 30 minutes west of Nashville and is surrounded by Montgomery Bell State Park, the Harpeth River Recreation Area, Mound Bottom Archaeological Site, the Harpeth River State Park and the Cheatham County Wildlife Management Area. The Town of White Bluff offers a myriad of recreational opportunities, such as Veterans Memorial Park, the White Bluff Skate and Bike Park, the Field of Dreams Playground, The Jennie Woodworth Library, the White Bluff Community Center, many lakes and streams, and a number of walking, biking and mountain bike trails making the area what some have called “the Natural Side of Nashville”.

Although primarily a rural, bedroom community of Nashville, White Bluff is proud to be the home of two of Dickson County’s top 10 industries in Interstate Packaging and Nashville Wire with several other equally important industrial employers as well. Arguably, White Bluff is best known for Carl’s Perfect Pig Bar-B-Que, rated a Top Ten Bar-B-Que restaurant in the

country by the Wall Street Journal^{iv}. Our quaint downtown is home to several unique shops and service organizations with available commercial space for new businesses to grow and flourish.

The Town of White Bluff actively engages its residents and visitors through various committees and boards, on-line surveys, the Town's website and social media in order to better understand the needs and desires of the community. The community aggressively pursues opportunities to better itself. Recent activities include the following:

- several large infrastructure projects including wastewater systems rehabilitation and storm water management;
- successful application and receipt of several local, State and Federal grants;
- full release from a self-imposed wastewater moratorium from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation; and,
- current construction of the Bibb-White Bluff Civic Center, a 10,300 sq. ft. cultural and life-long learning center.

For all of the positives associated with the community, one area that community leaders are not satisfied with is the lack of business growth in our downtown area. Through discussions with community leaders, downtown business and property owners, comments by White Bluff residents and visitors, and from the Town's on-going strategic planning efforts, the need to revitalize the downtown area was identified as a priority issue vital to the Town's post-recession recovery and long-term success. Community leaders identified the following goals and actions when considering downtown revitalization:

- create a business-friendly environment by identifying and implementing strategies which attract, retain and expand business and job opportunities in our downtown;
- leverage public-private partnerships to create buy-in and fund on-going revitalization activities;
- reduce our commercial vacancy rate of 30% by identifying, attracting and retaining business to our downtown area;
- nurture, grow, and showcase our creative community; and,
- attract both residents and visitors alike back to our downtown through beautification and safety measures and by identifying and targeting service gaps in our downtown.

Additional strategic action items associated with downtown revitalization include:

- a funding plan;
- property improvements;
- streetscape enhancements;
- a marketing plan; and,
- a program to provide our downtown businesses, both existing and future, assistance tools and information they need to be long-term positive contributors to White Bluff's local economy.

Using the aforementioned goals and actions as a guide, a comprehensive program designed to educate community leaders in best management practices as well as tools, tips and techniques on how to revitalize the Town's downtown was sought. By researching other communities and attending revitalization seminars, webinars, and training sessions, the Tennessee Downtowns Program, based on the time tested National Main Street Center's "Main

Street Four-Point Approach to Downtown Revitalization ®”, was identified. Subsequently, a specific downtown area meeting the program requirements was selected and an application for consideration was submitted to Tennessee Economic and Community Development. On February 6, 2013, the Town of White Bluff joined five other communities across Tennessee by being named to Round 3 of the Tennessee Downtowns Program. Comprehensive in scope, the Tennessee Downtowns Program focuses on the following criteria or four-points to achieve successful downtown revitalization: Design, Organization, Promotion and Economic Restructuring. Acceptance into the program also included a \$15,000 grant to assist communities in their revitalization efforts.

According to the National Main Street Center’s “Main Street Four-Point Approach to Downtown Revitalization ®”,^v **Design** means getting downtown into top physical shape and creating a safe, inviting environment for shoppers, workers, and visitors. It takes advantage of the visual opportunities inherent in a commercial district by directing attention to all of its physical elements: public and private buildings, storefronts, signs, public spaces, parking areas, street furniture, public art, landscaping, merchandising, window displays, and promotional materials. An appealing atmosphere, created through attention to all of these visual elements, conveys a positive message about the commercial district and what it has to offer. Design activities also include instilling good maintenance practices in the commercial district, enhancing the district's physical appearance through the rehabilitation of historic buildings, encouraging appropriate new construction, developing sensitive design management systems, educating business and property owners about design quality and long-term planning.

Organization establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in the commercial district. By getting everyone working toward the same goal, the downtown program can provide effective, ongoing management and advocacy for the downtown district. Through volunteer recruitment and collaboration with partners representing a broad cross section of the community, this program can incorporate a wide range of perspectives into its efforts. A governing board of directors and standing committees make up the fundamental organizational structure of volunteer-driven revitalization programs. This structure not only divides the workload and clearly delineates responsibilities, but also builds consensus and cooperation among the various stakeholders.

The goal of **Promotion** is to create a positive image that will rekindle community pride and improve consumer and investor confidence in your commercial district. Advertising, retail promotions, special events, and marketing campaigns help sell the image and promise of downtown to the community and surrounding region. Promotions communicate the commercial district's unique characteristics, business establishments, and activities to shoppers, investors, potential business and property owners, and visitors.

Economic restructuring strengthens your community's existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding successful businesses to provide a balanced commercial mix, sharpening the competitiveness and merchandising skills of business owners, and attracting new businesses that the market can support. Converting unused or underused commercial space into economically productive

property also helps boost the profitability of the district. The goal is to build a commercial district that responds to the needs of today's consumers.

The instructional and start-up grant phase of the Tennessee Downtowns Program began in April 2013 and concluded in June of 2014. The White Bluff Downtown Revitalization Steering Committee, a group of community leaders and involved citizens with the common goal to make downtown White Bluff a better place to live, work, and play, was organized and recognized by the Town's supportive Mayor and Council. Program instruction was provided by Tennessee Economic and Community Development sanctioned educators and included group instruction with fellow Tennessee Downtown Program communities, webinars, on-site visits, phone conferences, and mentoring opportunities with representatives from our Main Street Program sister city. Activities associated with the program included the development of a cultural inventory, building inventory, before and after photography, community SWOT analysis, and development of a downtown White Bluff revitalization Work Plan.

These Main Street Program activities have proven very valuable to the revitalization of downtown White Bluff. For example, based on the cultural inventory completed, it is apparent that a creative, entrepreneurial culture exists in White Bluff and the surrounding area. Artists, singer / songwriters, musicians, technology experts, etc. are prevalent in our area. According to Maureen Collins-Williams session "Introduction to Entrepreneurship: Setting the Stage" during the Tennessee Certified Economic Development "Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Course", we know that if a community brings a supportive culture and assistance programs, for example, small business training and access to capital, to an entrepreneurial area,

the probability of growing that entrepreneurial community increases^{vi}. Completion of the Bibb-White Bluff Civic Center, expected by January 2015, will begin to put in place the physical resources needed (e.g. creative environment, meeting space, classroom facilities, resource library, broadband / Wi-Fi, access to computers) to attract, support, and grow the entrepreneurial community in our area. The development of a variety of assistance programs, from micro-loans to matching grants to mentoring opportunities, are intended to grow and encourage our entrepreneurial community as well.

From the outset, steering committee members felt that professional guidance was critical to assist not only the committee, but the community at large, to visualize what is possible and what other communities have accomplished with downtown revitalization. The services of Kimberly Nyberg, previous Director of the Tennessee Main Street and Tennessee Downtowns Programs, and her husband John, a historic building expert, as well as Nashville architect Laws Nelson were retained. The Nyberg's were tasked with suggesting low-cost, impactful ways to improve each individual property in the project area, while Mr. Nelson was asked to take a more macro-level approach and visually represent suggested streetscape improvements. The outside consultants reviewed previously compiled data (survey results, strategic planning documents, etc.) and met with the steering committee as well as property and business owners to determine the community's vision toward downtown revitalization. Using feedback from the meetings, the Nyberg's produced the Design Assistance Manual which outlines overall impressions of downtown as well as suggested changes each property / business owner might consider in order to accomplish the community's vision. Likewise, Mr. Nelson produced a series of visual representations to assist the committee and community in achieving its streetscape goals. The

Design Assistance Manual and streetscape visuals have proven invaluable to the Town's revitalization efforts by rallying and focusing community support.

Using funds from the Tennessee Downtowns Program grant as well as other sources, a matching grant program was implemented and announced during property owner meetings. The purpose of the matching grant program was to incentivize the revitalization process by offsetting some of the property improvement costs. This incentive proved very beneficial as we were able to implement improvements to 11 out of the 17 properties (64.7%) in the project area during the initial phase of revitalization. Improvements included, but were not limited to, painting building exteriors, awnings, sealing and striping parking lots, paving, repairing historic stained glass windows, cleaning and sealing concrete, landscaping and signage. It should be noted that in addition to the grant provided by the Tennessee Downtowns Program, the steering committee supplemented revitalization funds by securing an additional \$2,800 grant through the Community Foundation for Dickson County as well as two grants from local industries, Interstate Packaging (\$3,000) and Bordeaux Metals (\$1,000).

Downtown revitalization is an ongoing process. Understanding this, the Steering Committee determined the need for a permanent non-profit (501c3) economic development organization to spearhead, fundraise, and oversee the community's on-going revitalization activities. Using information from Dr. David Kolzow's Tennessee Certified Economic Development "Managing Economic Development Organizations Course", the committee formed the Friends of White Bluff, Inc., a non-profit organization focused on Economic Development, Historic Preservation, Life-long Learning and Cultural Enrichment for the White Bluff

community. The process of formation included asking the questions “Who are we?” and “Where are we headed?” Activities included an Organizational Assessment or SWOT Analysis, outlining core competencies, determining a Mission and Vision Statement, discussing the organization’s culture and forming a Board of Directors that promotes the desired culture with the ability to accomplish the organization’s goals. The importance of a shared vision among the Board is also a point of emphasis. To date, the Board has operated effectively with minimal problems to report. Future desires of the Board include developing an organization strategic plan based on “Managing Economic Development Organizations Course” guidelines, determining appropriate measures of job effectiveness and client satisfaction in order to implement a process of continuous performance improvement and development of a comprehensive “toolbox” of finance tools to attract and assist downtown businesses. In Mr. Toby Rittner’s session “Building the Development Finance Toolbox” presented during the Tennessee Certified Economic Development “Economic Development Finance Course”, he stated, “the toolbox approach is a full scale effort to building local and regional finance capacity to serve and impact a variety of business and industry needs.” From micro-loans to matching grants to discussions regarding Payment in Lieu of Tax (PILOT) and Tax Increment Finance (TIF) programs, the town is working with local, county and state agencies to put these programs in place.

Concurrently, the steering committee worked with a local marketing firm to refresh the Town’s website (www.townofwhitebluff.com) and to develop a promotional brochure. The community wanted to emphasize the many outdoor recreation opportunities in and around the town, promote the many area attractions and annual events and wanted to reflect the relaxed lifestyle of the town. David Martin, President of David Martin Creative Services, a White Bluff

full service marketing firm, was retained to implement the town's goals regarding its website, social media integration and promotional brochure. Mr. Martin worked with the steering committee as well as community and business leaders to produce a first-rate product that we are very proud of. The promotional material is currently being used to market the Town's assets to prospective visitors, future residents and relocating businesses. Targeted advertisement was also developed to promote the White Bluff community to the over one million (1,000,000+) visitors to nearby Montgomery Bell State Park.

The steering committee has actively worked on several community projects to date:

- downtown street corners have been landscaped with galvanized planters and perennial plants,
- a bench was installed downtown to encourage residents and visitors to relax and stay awhile,
- street poles were landscaped with native grasses,
- pedestrian-level lighting was installed throughout the project area for safety and to promote walkability,
- a small downtown shed that we wanted to develop as a welcome sign was repaired and stained, and a local sign painter was contracted to paint "Welcome to White Bluff" on the shed roof,
- quilt squares were donated and installed to increase tourism by getting White Bluff included in both the American Quilt Trail and Tennessee Quilt Trail programs, and,
- local artist Eric Lankford was commissioned to develop downtown White Bluff's first public art installation "Serenity".

The steering committee has been very engaged in the community projects and has accomplished much in a short amount of time.

Since the initial phase of the program was completed, the following re-investment statistics have been compiled.

- Positive impact on 11 of 17 properties (65%) in the project area
- Leveraged \$9,050.00 in program grant funding into \$41,686.45 in private improvements
- Indirect private improvements totaled \$89,000.00
- Total private improvements \$130,686.45
- Total public improvements \$15,380.09
- Total investment in downtown as a result of the Tennessee Downtowns Program \$146,066.54
- These statistics do not put a \$ amount to volunteer time
- Total volunteer time 589 hours!

Historically, the Town of White Bluff has not made economic development a priority, relying instead on the Dickson County Chamber of Commerce to direct economic development activities. However, recent chamber direction, lack of focus on rural areas, resignation of the Chambers' President, lengthy search for a new President, etc., has led the town to take more of a leadership role in the community's economic development direction. Using investable dollars associated with the Tennessee Downtowns Program and other previously identified sources, the steering committee / Friends of White Bluff, Inc., has been able to demonstrate how leveraging public money can have very positive impacts on downtown revitalization. An investment of

\$21,800.00 resulted in a \$146,066.54 investment in downtown White Bluff in addition to 598 volunteer hours of work! The Friends of White Bluff organization now has empirical data to present to Town leaders, the Community Foundation for Dickson County, the business community and other grant institutions demonstrating the impact of leveraging public dollars for private good in our downtown community.

While the outcomes of participation in the Tennessee Downtowns Program have been vastly positive, challenges in developing and implementing the downtown White Bluff revitalization program have included:

- a resistance to change by a small, but vocal, minority whose comments and actions have had a dampening effect on some of the volunteers,
- the unavailability of funds by some property owners to implement suggested changes even with program incentives,
- the lack of depth in our volunteer pool which has delayed the implementation of certain improvements / programs,
- development of on-going funding sources to continue overall revitalization efforts and,
- the perception / reality that certain downtown property owners are difficult to work with which is a reason given by some who may be interested in opening a business in downtown White Bluff for not doing so.

Action plans are currently being developed to mitigate these challenges as much as possible.

Future revitalization activities include:

- the completion, furnishing and opening of the Bibb-White Bluff Civic Center which will assist in implementing several of the proposed assistance programs,
- focus on and expand the Work Plan developed during the initial phase of the program,
- develop the Business Training Seminar to assist both new and existing businesses remain strong contributors to our local economy,
- secure ongoing funding sources to encourage improvements and long-term maintenance of our downtown,
- grow the volunteer base in order to keep a vibrant and business-friendly revitalization presence in our community,
- complete additional community projects in line with the goals and objectives set forth by our community leaders and,
- focus on new business growth to fill service gaps and attract a critical mass of synergistic businesses to truly make the Town of White Bluff flourish.

In conclusion, the Tennessee Downtowns Program has been the needed impetus to get the Town of White Bluff well on its way to downtown revitalization. It has helped to breakdown what had seemed to be an overwhelming project into manageable components. For us, the analogy of “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” has often been used to describe the process. It is understood that downtown revitalization is an on-going process and plans have been implemented to continue revitalization into the future. We will continue to use our Work Plan, Design Assistance Manual, Streetscape visuals, Cultural Inventory, Building Inventory and other information developed during the program as the roadmap to our continued renaissance.

RESOURCE PAGE

ⁱ Merriam-Webster on-line dictionary, < <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/renaissance>> (accessed September 18, 2014)

ⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau, “American Fact Finder,” 2010, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml> (accessed August 18, 2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Raymond Sokolov, “The Best Barbeque,” Wall Street Journal 30 June 2007

^v National Main Street Center, “The Main Street Four-Point Approach,” <<http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-approach/#.UvFHuPPna70>> (accessed August 19, 2014)

^{vi} Edward Lowe Foundation, “Economic Gardening: An Entrepreneur-oriented Approach to Economic Prosperity,” <<http://edwardlowe.org/edlowenetwp/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/EG-4-pager.pdf>> (accessed August 20, 2014)