

Small Towns Project
Report on the Community Assessment
The Town of Marshall, North Carolina

Executive Summary



RIVER + RIDGE



RAIL + ROAD



RICHES + ROOTS

Marshall, North Carolina sits rather majestically at the crossroads of RIVER, the French Broad River, RAIL, the endless tracks, ROAD, the blending of Highway 25/70 and Highway 251, and RIDGE, the Smoky Mountains, Southern Appalachian range. The county seat of Madison County, Marshall has **less than 900 residents** within a small county population of approximately 18,773 in 1999.

Marshall is about a 30-minute drive from Asheville, the largest metropolitan area of the region, yet exudes a strong, rural mountain identity. Marshall still reflects by-gone days when most of the retail, service, governmental and religious needs of the town and surrounding area were met within its several block corridor. Once the center of business and civic life in Madison County, over the years downtown Marshall has changed and today finds itself with under-used and vacant buildings, shop-worn public spaces and more businesses located on the by-pass than downtown. (See the Appendix, pages A-1–2 for an in-depth review of data about Marshall.)

Despite these changes, there is a compelling small-town presence born of the mountain culture that offers tremendous potential for revival. Marshall enjoys a collection of civic leaders who recognize the potential and particular value of Marshall and have stepped forward to recapture their town. The leaders recognize that they are at risk of losing *their one-of-a-kind Marshall* to unchecked development, apathy, and neglect.

To direct the destiny of Marshall, town leaders decided to focus targeted energy and resources on downtown and community development. The Town took two actions. They appointed a revitalization committee and invited HandMade in America to covenant with them and provide services through their Small Towns Project. HandMade is a regional organization dedicated to sustainable community development and the promotion of the region as the center of handmade crafts. The first step in the Small Towns' process is an intensive look at the community's assets and challenges. This report is the result of Marshall's Community Assessment. Following the assessment, the two groups will collaborate to implement the plans that emerged.

The Revitalization Committee planned an intensive the Community Assessment. Through the assessment, interaction with other towns tackling the same challenges, assistance provided by HandMade and completion of important projects, the community will find the exhilaration, satisfaction and, yes, the exhaustion of setting community destiny. This report provides a road map for that journey.

Prior to the Community Assessment, the Revitalization Committee envisioned a future for Marshall once the process has been activated. They answered the question, "What are your hopes and wishes for Marshall's revitalization process?" Answers ranged from greater cleanliness and less junk to better infrastructure, an expanded tax base, and common settings on the Town's clocks. (See the Appendix, page A-3 for a list of responses.) While the responses were visionary, they are also achievable, if the right ingredients are blended together.

A Resource Team, charged with conducting a Community Assessment, visited Marshall July 22-24, 1999. After studying the community and listening to approximately 100 citizens, the Team discovered a mountain gem in the rough. A gem that with care, protection, and polish, can once again emerge as an active, distinctive and functional center of community life. This report contains 50 recommendations divided into the following five sections that provide the road map to revitalization:

1. Organization
2. Economic Restructuring
3. Promotions
4. Design and Preservation
5. Landscape and Appearance

The highly successful Main Street Model of the National Trust for Historic Preservation was used by the Team as a basis for the assessment, as revised over time by the Small Towns Project. The report also includes helpful hints to take along on the journey, embellishment about each of the recommendations, a sample list of important projects and near-term action steps. It is filled with straightforward suggestions, a rationale for pursuing the journey and a healthy dose of "down home" inspiration and motivation. The report is meant to be a working document, a handy reference that is consulted on a frequent basis. (Note: Due to the need for certain chapters to "stand alone," the report contains some repetitive concepts and information.)

While the revitalization effort in Marshall has many advantages going for it, the Team acknowledges that formidable challenges loom ahead. In the introduction to this report, six important words are illuminated: RIVER + RIDGE, RAIL + ROAD, RICHES + ROOTS. Embodied in these words are the inspiration, challenge, and salvation of Marshall.

Perhaps the most important peril ahead is creating the *human infrastructure* for getting the work done and generating the political vision and will to see it through. In the report we address this with several recommendations. Success will be limited, however, if the public and private sectors fail to connect, to agree to push together in the same direction. Success will also be limited if certain people or groups are excluded. Research confirms that community development programs ignite only when close collaboration between the public and private sectors is present. County Commissioners and staff, Tourism Development Authority, Town Board and staff, School Board and staff, and others must unite under a common sense of destiny and self-determination. Some one – some group must organize and lead those partners. The Team believes that responsibility falls to the Revitalization Committee and Town officials. The organization section of this report offers multiple ideas on this topic.

A second formidable challenge is inculcating and strengthening an ethic within the community of *protecting and building on cultural and historical assets*. The Team acknowledges the good work accomplished thus far with the Courthouse, Depot, and other resources. Build and strengthen those successes. For your cultural and historical resources to be used as an economic generator, their immeasurable worth must be acknowledged and respected. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has a slogan: *Protecting the Irreplaceable. The Island and School buildings are irreplaceable.* The mountain views from Town are irreplaceable. The First Union building is irreplaceable. Most of the commercial buildings along the corridor are irreplaceable. Madison County history is irreplaceable. Work together now to understand, preserve, protect, enhance, and use your irreplaceable assets. In the *Design and Preservation* and *Landscape and Appearance* sections of this report this important challenge is evaluated and suggestions are offered.

A third formidable challenge is devising a *complementary land use and community/economic development strategy*. Given the boundaries and terrain in Marshall, land is valuable and will only become more so in the future. Basic questions beg for answers and direction. How will the town sustain itself economically? How can the downtown and the by-pass complement each other so land is used wisely? *What is the appropriate role for the by-pass?* *What appearance policies* could be implemented that ensure that the by-pass area will beckon the motorist to linger? How can we grow economically while respecting

the past and insuring a quality future? What steps could be taken that preserve the community interest and respect individual interest? While the natural gravitation for development has recently been toward the by-pass, neither the by-pass nor the downtown will reach their potential if the downtown is ignored.

Complex economic situations must be viewed systemically and holistically. How do jobs, quality of life, business, land development, and culture all fit together? Economic diversification is the name of the success game in today's economy. While hunting and attracting industry is one important way to strengthen the community's economy, small business development and encouragement of entrepreneurs should have equal stature. After all, isn't **wealth creation** – the generation of and **retention of dollars** – the real objective? A community that generates wealth looks at its economy as an inclusive system and works to make all the pieces fit together.




Wealth creation and small businesses are closely aligned with a healthy downtown area. The downtown provides a space where investment and incubation take place and businesses are nurtured and grown. Building stock, multiple uses, infrastructure, and appearance are all downtown building blocks for economic success. Looking systematically, why spend tax dollars to create another economic center when your forebears invested previously? Why not **strengthen the profitability and subsequent tax yield of existing commercial structures rather than transferring that burden to residential properties?**

While in Marshall it seems almost ludicrous to mention and imagine commercial sprawl, if left unmanaged and unorganized, commercial development *will* have a damaging effect on quality of life in Madison County. Sprawl increases the cost of providing public services, diminishes the economic advantage of co-locating businesses, and diffuses the synergy of a densely clustered town center. Many leaders across the United States, in North Carolina and our region are addressing this threat. As Hugh McColl, Chairman and CEO of Bank of America, said this year, "This is as good a time as any to step back and take a look at the country (town) we're building and ask ourselves, "Do we like where we're going? What will this country (town) look like in another hundred years?" Can we do better?

Can we do better? That is for Marshall to decide. This much is true: left to its own devices, commercial growth over time will follow the path of least resistance often without regard for the common good. Civic leaders must be the voice of the common good, lest Marshall diminish its mountain heritage, generational memories, and distinctive identity. In the *Economic Restructuring* section of this report, suggestions are offered concerning this challenge. The *Marketing and Promotion* section also addresses this topic from the community identity perspective.

The last formidable challenge looming ahead is *focused and innovative leadership*. To be successful at community development, creative leaders are mandatory, and entrepreneurs are essential. Risk takers who start and grow small businesses in the downtown are critical to success, to be sure. Another type of entrepreneur is also needed – *the civic entrepreneur*. They trudge on and persevere. Civic entrepreneurs ignore thoughts and comments such as: “we can’t do it, “we’ve never done it that way,” and “well, let’s just sit back and see if they can pull this off.” Civic entrepreneurs are “catalysts who help communities go through the change process. They build economic community – tight, resilient linkages between community and economic interests for mutual benefit.” (*Grassroots Leaders for a New Economy*, Henton, Melville, and Welsh) This concept is explained more fully in the *Summation and Call to Action* chapter of this report.

Civic entrepreneurs are absolutely vital for community visions to come into reality. It will not happen without them. Three years from now when the community looks back to assess its progress on community revitalization, what will it see? That depends on civic entrepreneurs who have stepped up, worked hard together, resolved differences, accomplished projects, learned continuously, and taught others. Marshal your forces and seize the challenge!

 RIVER + RIDGE  RAIL + ROAD  RICHES + ROOTS