

Proposed Landscape and Appearance Strategy

Landscape and appearance issues are vital to the success of any downtown revitalization plan because they highlight the physical face or first impression of many of the other components of a successful community. Litter? Weeds? Junk cars? Overgrown lots? Neglected buildings? Blank walls? Confusing signage? Lots of asphalt? Cracked sidewalks? Well-planned and maintained open space is one of the strongest images and indicators of a pleasing, healthy community. At every step of a revitalization program, it is critical to include planning for landscaping and appearance.

The outdoor environment includes many different facets of what we perceive as the public realm, from scenic roadside views and river corridors to parks, sidewalks, and streetscapes. Because views don't stop at property lines, the contributions of individual property owners impact significantly the overall landscape picture. Efforts to cooperatively address landscape and appearance issues between public and private lands are often the key to a comprehensive and successful approach.

Successful communities cultivate landscapes with certain key elements in common. Among them are:

- A strong sense of place created by the natural setting.
- A pattern of development that respects history and is in harmony with the natural setting in scale and arrangement.
- A coherent and accessible network of attractive and usable outdoor spaces.
- Pride and craftsmanship in the details of the landscape and maintenance evident throughout the community.

Marshall possesses many key elements of a first-class outdoor environment. The town's natural setting on a narrow shelf between the river and the mountains on either side provides a strong and immediate sense of place. The historic pattern of development of the town fits seamlessly into that landscape and is unusually intact. The potential for an open space network is strong, including parks and greenways along the river, a city recreation area at the swimming pool site, and any number of small public spaces throughout downtown. Even at the detail level, while many areas are in need of improvement, traces of past patterns of planting and landscaping exist that can be used as building blocks for an expanded landscape and beautification program.

Challenges facing Marshall include protecting its existing strong visual identity from encroaching suburban-style development, encouraging private landowners to clean up and beautify their properties in and around downtown, and finding creative ways to use vacant or transitional spaces to provide maximum benefit.

Listed below are specific recommendations for implementing a landscape and appearance strategy for Marshall. These recommendations overlap other areas such as planning, historic preservation, and economic development, and must be considered in context of the overall plan to be useful and successful.

Recommendations

Sense of Place

Recommendation: Preserve and capitalize on Marshall's sense of place.

Seize every opportunity to connect residents and visitors with the river, the town, and the mountains, both visually and physically. Among important steps to take are:

1. Establish and protect scenic views of the river and town at each entrance to Marshall. The identity of the town is tied to these views. Be aggressive about protecting them.
 - Retain clear views from opposite side of river.
 - Clean up and beautify areas coming in to town so attention is focused toward the river and mountains.
2. Provide new opportunities for visual and physical access to river.
 - Renovate backs of buildings to address and take advantage of the river.
 - Continue development of island park as river access point.

Challenge: Work with the North Carolina Department of Transportation to plan the new bridge. As much as possible, keep the same scale and alignment with the new one. Maintain the view of the courthouse, the river, and downtown.

Recommendation: Protect and enhance historic development patterns and identity.

Any restoration or additions to Marshall should strengthen the existing development pattern, never detract from it. New buildings and streets should copy the traditional scale and arrangement of existing ones in their relationship to the river, the hills and each other. Because the development pattern determines the size, shape, and location of outdoor spaces, it creates the skeleton on which all other landscape and appearance issues are based. It is as important as the architectural style of a historic house. The identity of a Victorian townhouse is based on the scale and arrangement of its rooms, roofline and porches as well as its furniture, windows, and trim. Just as the addition of a Victorian porch or Palladian window will never fundamentally transform a ranch style house, no amount of landscaping will turn a strip mall into main street.

These actions are important to retaining identity:

1. Protect the obvious "gateways" at each entrance to Marshall where the town begins and ends.
 - Continue to use these areas for signage and decorative landscaping.
 - Make the appearance, maintenance and clean-up of these gateways a priority.
 - Encourage preservation of winding residential entrances to town. For these roads, discourage conversion to commercial use and widening/straightening projects.
2. Replicate historic setbacks, scale, and orientation in new buildings downtown according to their type (commercial, public or residential) in order to preserve the historic relationship of buildings to landscape, streetscape, and green spaces.
 - Set commercial buildings contiguous to the sidewalks.
 - Set residential and public buildings back from the street or sidewalk edge to create front yards or public spaces.
3. Keep downtown pedestrian-friendly.
 - Organize, green and screen parking areas.
 - Minimize the impact of cars on pedestrians.
 - Keep interconnected sidewalks, shaded areas, and resting places.

Challenge: Implement ordinances and/or design guidelines for new development on the by-pass and connecting roads so that it does not detract from or weaken the historic downtown. Require street tree and parking lot planting and landscaping. Implement standards for signs and billboards. Provide incentives to encourage development clusters rather than haphazardly spreading development along undeveloped or residential roads.

Recommendation: Create an accessible network of open spaces.

Create open spaces and green areas, large and small, natural and formal, that can be accessed by a variety of people for a variety of uses. Design every public open space to serve many uses simultaneously and to contribute to the overall appearance and streetscape of Marshall. The following initiatives will help to create that network:

1. Improve recreation access to the river.
 - Continue to develop the island greenway and park.
 - Develop a boat launch on island.
 - Develop areas on the town side of the river where people can overlook river from shops, restaurants, and other businesses.

2. Create links to neighboring recreation areas.
 - Capitalize on scenic bike route along river by adding camping and restaurant facilities.
 - Create portage around dam to allow longer river trips.
 - Plan greenway links to schools, town recreation area and nature trail.

3. Create and protect small parks and green spaces in town.
 - Use city-owned lots as demonstration projects for parks and parking areas.
 - Encourage preservation and beautification of the front yards of residential and public buildings – protect them from conversion to parking lots.

Challenge: Re-open the town's recreation area. Also consider Stewart House as a visitor center/museum/park.

Landscape Projects

Recommendation: Use the Urban Forestry Grant to establish a landscape master plan and initial landscape/streetscape projects.

The U.S. Forest Service's Urban Forestry Grant, which was submitted for Marshall by HandMade in America in July 1999, will be an excellent resource for the town (assuming it is funded!). The grant has been designed to provide resources for the following projects:

- Development of a landscape master plan by a licensed landscape architect.
- Tree inventory the downtown.
- Tree plantings according to the master plan.
- Selection of tree species recommended for planting in downtown, open spaces and along the by-pass.
- Training concerning tree care and streetscape issues.

The town is required to provide matching funds to supplement the grant. The two sources together should provide \$7,050.00 for landscape and appearance projects.

Recommendation: Establish consistent patterns of details to enhance open spaces.

Attention to details greatly enhances the richness of the landscape environment. Use elements from historic landscape patterns to add color, interest, and green throughout Marshall. Consistency of visual cues is critical. What the eye perceives quickly translates as identity to the mind. Creating the right mix of diverse interest and consistent patterns is vital to striking a pleasing, not discordant or confusing visual impression. These actions will enhance the development of landscape and visual patterns:

1. Use historic materials and details such as old paving bricks, low planters, rock walls, and steps, to build visually continuity throughout downtown.
2. Consider establishing a list of recommended tree species to be repeated throughout downtown and other open space areas. Focus on addition of evergreens for winter color.
3. Use professional grade planters/baskets to add color and consistency to the downtown environment

Long range projects:

- Go back to brick sidewalks (using original paver pattern).
- Move power lines off or behind Main Street.
- Institute a lighting plan for downtown that supports evening activities by creating a safe and inviting nighttime environment.
 - Light activity areas, pathways and important landmarks as well as parking lots and doorways.
 - Use shoebox-style area lighting fixtures rather than "cobra head" fixtures to provide ambient light without glare.
 - Choose an appropriate, low-key historic-style lamppost to light pedestrian areas and use it consistently.
 - Use unobtrusive spot lighting to highlight landmarks, signs, and landscaped areas.
 - Consider lighting for the park and riverfront to encourage selected nighttime use and to provide security.

Organization

Recommendation: Create an organizational structure to support these goals.

Organizationally, these projects will require three components to succeed:

First, there must be a *group or steering committee* that understands the whole landscape/open space picture and will assume responsibility for managing the implementation of a landscape and appearance master plan for Marshall. This group *must* be tied in with infrastructure and land use planning for both the Town and County. An organization of this kind and an overall master plan will allow Marshall to take advantage of funding opportunities available through NCDOT, the state's Urban Forestry program, and other organizations.

Second, a *group of committed individuals* should be identified and cultivated to take on the day-to-day tasks of planting and maintaining landscaped areas. (Perhaps this is the current beautification committee.) This work can be done by volunteers, town staff, or contracted out to a local business. Again, consistency and a sense of the overall objectives are critical. Nothing is more discouraging than poorly maintained landscaping projects. Provision of proper maintenance should be a major consideration and commitment from the beginning. A master plan should be developed that uses a backbone of proven, low-maintenance plants and organizes planting areas to simplify and facilitate maintenance tasks. Make taking care of these areas a source of pride and satisfaction for helpers; simplify the tasks and make them manageable and rewarding.

Finally, a spirit of partnership and cooperation must be developed between public organizations and private landowners regarding landscape and appearance. Any efforts to regulate appearance or require landscaping must be based on incentives, partnerships, and facilitation by public agencies and organizations. The point, after all, is to develop an understanding and appreciation of the benefits of a high-quality outdoor environment by the entire community, and to encourage investment by all concerned. This is truly a key to maintaining and improving quality of life in Marshall, now and for the future.



Action Steps for the Proposed Landscape and Appearance Strategy

1. Clean: Eliminate litter, junk, and clutter in areas that are distracting.
2. Green: Add shrubs, trees, and plants where possible to soften the hard surfaces, add interest, and beautify.
3. Screen: Plant shrubs, trees, or vines to cover-up blank walls or other unsightly views.
4. Continue plantings and trail work on the Island.
5. Add decorative landscaping at entryways.
6. Organize and plant parking areas.
7. Develop a boat launch on the Island.
8. Execute the Urban Forestry grant, if awarded.