Historic Business District Revitalization

ULI Leadership Institute mTAP Project
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Problem Statement:
The Town of Occoquan is an incorporated municipality with approximately 1,000 residents located on the banks of the Occoquan River in Prince William County. The Riverfront Historic Business District (RHBD) is a National Historic District and includes approximately 60 contributing buildings. The RHBD is the Town’s commercial center and includes approximately 82 percent of the Town’s businesses.

Although a local Arts & Crafts show attracts approximately 20,000 visitors twice a year in the spring and fall, the Town has struggled with sustaining year-round activity in the RHBD, and faces challenges from property owner neglect, limited finances, and periodic flooding. While the Town has done extensive strategic planning and visioning exercises, little has been implemented. We were tasked with providing advice for overcoming these challenges to achieve a more active, robust downtown, while at the same time preserving Occoquan’s unique identity.

Opportunities for Mixed Use:
The Town could use zoning changes or pursue a public/private partnership to achieve the mixed-use redevelopment of a for-sale, 1-acre riverfront parcel. This would give the Town more control of the “destination” character of the RHBD, as well as improve connectivity and access to the Occoquan River.

Historic Buildings:
Educating owners about historic building rehabilitation tax credits could promote reinvestment in the historic downtown. Research is needed on the potential of providing small grants or matching funds from the Arts & Crafts proceeds.

Parking:
The Town should undertake a parking study to assess demand in the RHBD and gauge whether long-term investments in parking are necessary.

Approach and Research:
Based on our visit to the RHBD and subsequent research, we concluded that the most appropriate approach to revitalization is one that encourages the RHBD to be a true destination in the Washington metropolitan region, offering a historic, small-town experience with an idyllic waterfront setting. Our approach has a strong focus on implementation strategies, both short and long term, that center around the Town’s unique and authentic character and builds upon existing assets. These assets include the waterfront, parks, and historic buildings. We also completed a financial analysis and made recommendations for further areas of exploration.

Financial Analysis:
Based on our financial analysis, we concluded that the Town has good financial flexibility to undertake our recommendations, and can afford to make one or two meaningful investments in the RHBD (including the potential acquisition of the for-sale, riverfront parcel). Any such investments should be in partnership with private or public partners, and advise that the expenditures would be justified by increases in the sales and property tax revenue that would come over time with renewed interest in the RHBD.

Placemaking and Pedestrian Focused Efforts:
A few strategically located placemaking projects would connect people to the water and give them a reason to stay in the RHBD. Barges or other infrastructure could be used for riverfront activities and events. The creation of the iconic pedestrian bridge can only benefit the RHBD. Minor changes to Mamie Davis park would create better physical and visual access to the water. Wayfinding signage and crosswalks would enhance and promote the pedestrian experience.