On May 19, 2015, our mini-Technical Advisory Panel presented strategies for revitalizing the Occoquan Riverfront Historic Business District ("RHBD") to the Mayor and Town Council of Occoquan, Virginia ("Town"). The Town is an incorporated municipality with approximately 1,000 residents located on the banks of the Occoquan River in Prince William County. The RHBD – a National Historic District with approximately 60 contributing buildings (some dating back to the time of the initial settlement in 1750) – is the Town’s small-scale 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. 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 and allowing for implementation within budgetary constraints.

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. To realize its potential as a regional destination, we recommended that the Town explore the following:

- Funding placemaking and pedestrian infrastructure efforts, such as using barges or other structures for riverfront activities and events; making minor landscaping or site enhancements to an existing central park to encourage fuller utilization, and promoting the pedestrian experience with wayfinding signage and crosswalks.

- Educating owners about historic building rehabilitation tax credits to promote reinvestment in the historic downtown, and potentially providing small grants or matching funds from the Arts & Crafts proceeds as an additional incentive.

- Using zoning changes or pursuing a public/private partnership to achieve the mixed-use redevelopment of a for-sale, 1-acre riverfront parcel, to better control the "destination" character of the RHBD and connectivity and access to the Occoquan River.

- Undertaking a parking study to assess demand in the RHBD and gauge whether long-term investments in parking are warranted.

We also conducted an in-depth review of the Town’s current finances. We concluded that the Town has good financial flexibility to undertake the above recommendations, and can afford to make one or two meaningful investments in the RHBD (potentially including participation in the acquisition of the for-sale, riverfront parcel). We recommended that any such investments be in partnership with private or public partners, and advised 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.