

Historic Hillsborough

250 years and counting



Prepared for:
Town of Hillsborough Tourism Board

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Entry for Churton Street Corridor Improvement Plan Design Competition

Executive Summary

Churton Street is the backbone of Hillsborough. Its intersections with U.S. 70 and 1-85 are two of the main entry points into town. First impressions are lasting and it is crucial that these areas represent Hillsborough's character appropriately and accurately. In the current conditions, neither entryway accomplishes that objective. The corridor lacks unity and fails to provide a cohesive and rewarding experience for the visitor and resident alike. The recommendations in this report will seek to draw inspiration from the historic district while respecting the changing needs of modern businesses. The recommendations focus on creating not only a coherent identity for the corridor but one that draws people into the downtown.

The suggested improvements look to build upon efforts previously undertaken by Hillsborough's planning department, most notably the Downtown Hillsborough Appearance Improvements Plan from 1997. Focusing much of its effort outside of downtown due to the quality of the Downtown Plan, the design team undertook a process of analysis based on principles formulated by Kevin Lynch. Flowing from the team's analysis, this report offers a set of guidelines and suggestions for improving the entire corridor while focusing the greatest amount of effort on the north and south segments.

In developing our recommendations, we focused on four key design concepts:

- ∴ Celebrate 250 year anniversary
- ∴ Use elements from historic district throughout the corridor
- ∴ Increase density of plantings toward historic district
- ∴ Implement stricter facade and sign requirements

The recommendations in this report encompass both short-term and long-term activities that will require private side participation in addition to the town's involvement. Suggestions for the corridor vary from general improvement ideas for the entire corridor to specific design proposals in specific areas. Recommendations fall into the categories of:

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|---|----------------------------|
| ∴ Landmarks | ∴ Street lights |
| ∴ Community Character Corridor overlay zone | ∴ Traffic lights |
| ∴ Landscaping | ∴ Utilities |
| ∴ Facade improvement | ∴ Sidewalks and crosswalks |
| ∴ Signage | ∴ Site design standards |

The corridor-wide improvements include establishing an overlay zone to implement recommendations such as landscaping, facades and sign regulations. A key recommendation is to bury utility lines along the entire corridor. In terms of specific offerings, the document holds elements such as a site plan for North Churton Street area, facade improvements for South Churton Street and suggested entryway landmark designs. In conclusion, the analysis and recommendations will address the Town of Hillsborough's need for stronger and more relevant entrance corridors.

Overview

Churton Street is the backbone of Hillsborough. Its intersections with U.S. 70 and I-85 are two of the main entry points into town. First impressions are lasting and it is crucial that these areas represent Hillsborough's character appropriately and accurately. In the current conditions, neither entryway accomplishes that objective. The corridor lacks unity and fails to provide a cohesive and rewarding experience for the visitor and resident alike. The recommendations in this report will seek to draw inspiration from the historic district while respecting the changing needs of 20th century businesses. The recommendations will focus on creating not only a coherent identity for the corridor but one that draws people into the downtown.

The remainder of this section will provide a description of Hillsborough and previous planning efforts to provide context for the analysis and recommendations found in later sections. The second section will explain Kevin Lynch's concepts of urban design and how they were applied in our assessment of the Churton Street corridor. The final section provides short and long-term recommendations.

A Brief Description of Hillsborough

Hillsborough is rich in history, character, and opportunity. The town lies at the crossroads of the Eno River and the Great Indian Trading Path. The Occaneechi tribe once had a village nearby; the village has been recreated along the banks of the Eno behind the Orange County Courthouse.

Hillsborough, as we know it today, was founded in 1754. The town played an integral role in not only the development of North Carolina but also the United States. It was home to numerous colonial and early state governors as well as to the Regulators, a radical pre-Revolutionary War political group. Hillsborough also hosted political meetings including a Provincial Congress in 1775 and the state constitutional Convention in 1778. As the seat of Orange County, Hillsborough has maintained its political importance into the 21st century.

Hillsborough's prominence during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century is reflected in the numerous structures that survive from that time. The bulk of these buildings are located in the Historic District that encompasses the one square mile of the original town boundaries. While varied in architectural style, many buildings are wood frame and clad in wood siding. In

addition, brick and other masonry materials such as rubble stone can be found throughout the historic district. In keeping with the varied architecture, roof forms vary but commercial buildings often feature parapets that conceal flat roofs. The commercial buildings also often have "large storefront display windows below bands of smaller upper story windows and fully glazed aluminum or chrome entrance doors." (Hillsborough Historic District Design Guidelines)

Hillsborough is a relatively small town though the town experienced a twenty-seven percent increase in population between the 1990 and 2000 census. As appropriate for the county seat, a number of Orange County government offices are found in Hills borough along with support services such as attorneys and media offices. The downtown is home to several restaurants and boutique retail (e.g., antique stores, gift shops, and day spa). South Churton Street is lined with fast food restaurants, car dealerships and other local service establishments.

Hillsborough's topography is characterized by rolling hills. The Eno River provides a strong natural focus point that is currently underutilized.

Previous Planning Efforts

Concern for Churton Street's appearance first manifested itself in 1997 with the creation of the *Downtown Hillsborough Appearance Improvements Plan*. The plan was developed through a public participation process that included town meetings and a survey. Feedback centered on the following needs:

- .. Preference for utility lines to be underground
- .. Planting of new street trees and seasonal flowers
- .. Decorative lighting
- .. Sidewalk paving
- .. Rehabilitated building facades
- .. Benches

The plan made clear that the pedestrian experience should be emphasized in the downtown area. Recommendations included

- .. Preservation of natural and historic character through the use of architectural and site design guidelines
- .. Enhancement of the downtown character and its uses including trees, planters, litter receptacles, and lighting
- .. Enhancement and increase in open space including public parks

- ∴ Redevelopment of areas south of Margaret Lane and west of Churton Street
- ∴ Need for a parking study
- ∴ Improvement in the mix of uses downtown (i.e., retail and office)

Vision 2010, the town's planning guide adopted in 2000, identified the importance of aesthetics and community character to Hillsborough's future. Included in the vision are several relevant statements, including:

- ∴ Working toward a Hillsborough that...
 - is proud of, and actively supports and promotes its historic foundations 0 has an environment of manicured entranceways, clean well-lighted streets
 - acknowledges, accommodates, and celebrates the diversity of its history and present citizenry and their interests
- ∴ Commercial districts north of Corbin Street and south of the river are visually linked with the historic district using attractive signage, landscaping, and pedestrian friendly streets and parking lots.

Vision 2010 has a number of pertinent goals and objectives as well including:

- ∴ Appointing an Appearance Commission
- ∴ Implementing a street tree program
- ∴ Developing and adopting design guidelines and establish a Design Review Board
- ∴ Implementing a Entranceway Overlay Zone for the major corridors
- ∴ Implementing a downtown streets cape improvement plan

The Tourism Board funded the *Downtown Streetscape Improvements Feasibility Study* in 2002. The recommendations in that study address:

- ∴ Relocation of overhead utility lines
- ∴ Decorative street lights
- ∴ Crosswalks
- ∴ Sidewalk and street repaving
- ∴ Landscaping
- ∴ Long-term maintenance of Churton Street including street cleaning and storm drain maintenance

The study was adopted by the town and has served as the basis for a grant application to the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

Method and Assessment

In analyzing the Churton Street corridor, we felt it was appropriate to use Kevin Lynch's fundamental elements of city form to locate areas of interest. Kevin Lynch, throughout his tenure at MIT, was one of the most significant contributors to the fields of city design and city planning. His most valuable work may have been in creating the idea of place legibility. Lynch found that certain elements are major contributors to people's understanding and enjoyment of city form. The presence and quality of these key elements, explained below, are essential to making cities well used and well liked. Churton Street was assessed using this theory of place legibility, with the results below.

Paths - The channels through which people move. "For many, paths are the predominant element in their city image. ",¹

- . *Existing Paths*: Churton Street
- . *Potential Paths*: Churton Street pedestrian path

Edges - The seams, barriers and breaks in the urban fabric or elements that serve as boundaries between areas and separate one location from another.

. *Existing Edges*:

- U.S. 70
- Eno River
- 1-85

Districts - Areas with a recognizable distinguishing character. These areas are visibly distinct from their neighbors.

• *Existing Districts*:

- Historic Downtown
 - *Location*: South of intersection of North Churton Street and East Corbin Street to intersection of South Churton Street and U.S. 70 (Business)/U.S. 70A
 - *Length (miles)*: 1.1 miles (approx.)
 - *Visual character and land use*: Low density residential and traditional downtown commercial

• *Potential Districts*:

- *North Churton Street*
- *Location*: South of Cornelius Street/U.S. 70 Bypass to intersection of North Churton Street and East Corbin Street
- *Length (miles)*: .275 miles (approx.)
- *Visual character and land use*: Low density residential and strip commercial
- South Churton Street

¹ Kevin Lynch. (1960). *The Image of the City*.

- *Location: South of intersection of South Churton Street and US. 70 (Business)/U.S. 70A to Cardinal Drive/I-85 . Length (miles): 1.7 miles (approx.)*
- *Visual character and land use: Strip commercial centers, single business commercial (e.g., car dealerships, banks) and highway-focused businesses (e.g., fast food restaurants)*

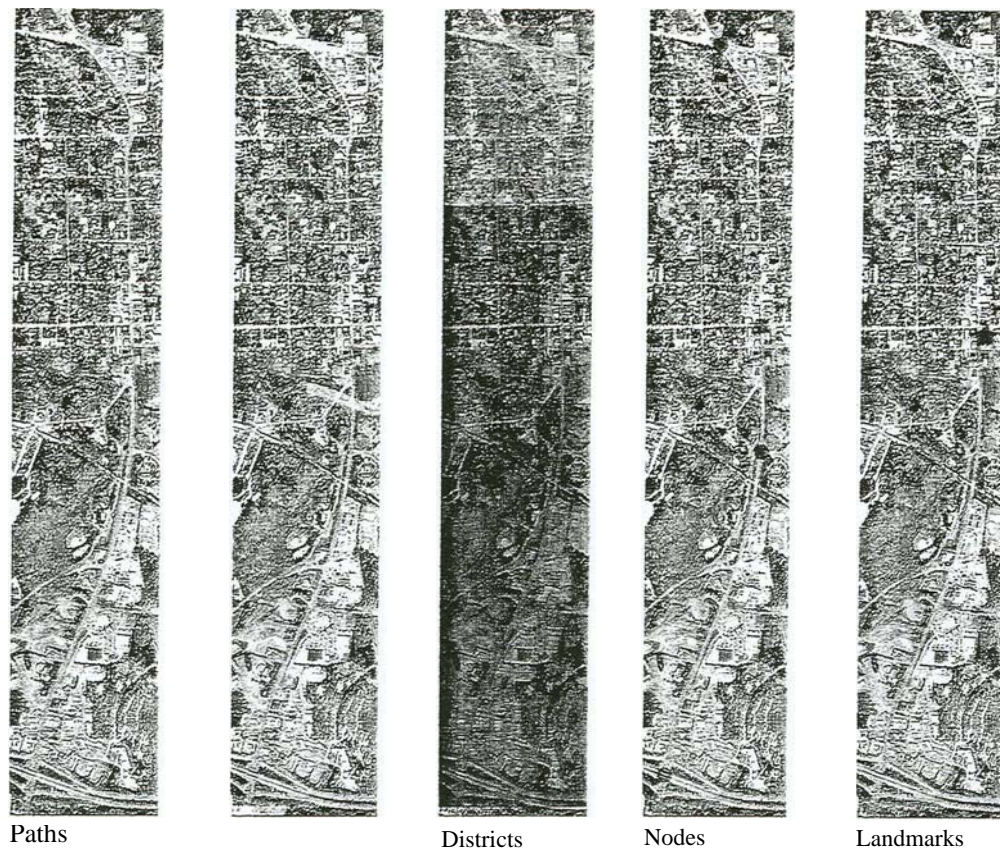
Nodes - Strategic spots of entry.

- *Existing Nodes:*
 - King Street & Churton Street
 - US. 70 Bypass & Churton Street
 - US. 85 & Churton Street
 - N.C. 86 & Churton Street
 - US. 70A, N.C. 86 and Churton Street
- *Potential Nodes:*
 - Corbin Street & Churton Street

Landmarks - Points in space that act as visual cues or references.

- *Existing Landmarks: Orange County Courthouse*
- *Potential Landmarks: North Hills Shopping Center; Eno River Bridge*

Figure 1. Lynch Analysis of Churton Street



Our recommendations focus on the elements described above and illustrated in Figure 1. As mentioned in the introduction, we feel that the corridor lacks unity and fails to provide a coherent and rewarding experience. We suggest the use of landmarks at several nodes or edges to signal their importance. While the landmarks at each of these spots are different, they have shared design elements to create a sense of unity throughout the corridor. In addition, we have indicated which recommendations should be applied to each district (Table 1).

Primary Recommendations

Hillsborough's rich history provides inspiration for our design concepts. The upcoming two hundred and fifty year anniversary should not only be celebrated but also used as the commencement for the Churton Street corridor improvement campaign. We believe that a combination of public investment and targeted private actions assisted by grants will spur the remaining commercial establishments to participate voluntarily in the campaign.

In general, we believe that the appearance of Churton Street would be vastly improved by burying the utility lines and replacing the existing streetlights with decorative poles and fixtures that evoke elements from Hillsborough's past.

Signal lights should be suspended over intersections from poles (as opposed to the current suspension from cables).

Street plantings such as trees and shrubs should be used to create a more coherent visual appearance as one drives along Churton Street. We suggest that the plantings become more dense or concentrated as you approach the downtown area. This approach will serve as a visual cue to drivers, creating anticipation and a sense that they are approaching an important part of town.

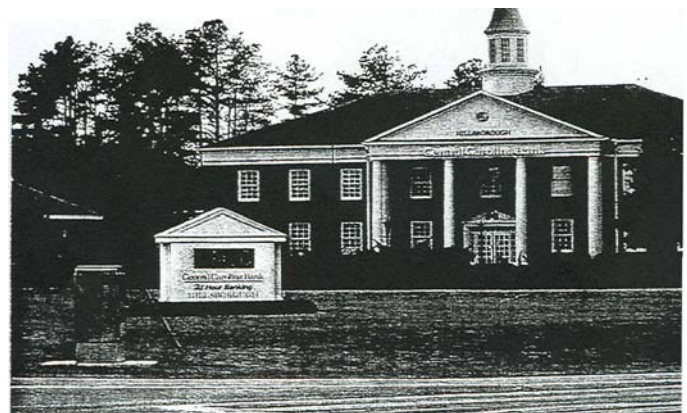
Banners also can be an effective way of creating a unifying element for the corridor. A standard design can be used throughout the year with special occasion banners used occasionally for special events such as Hogs Days. We have created several sample designs, shown in Figure 2, that incorporate key signatures of Hillsborough such as the Orange County Courthouse steeple and the Eno River.

We favor lower, monument style signs that can be integrated into landscape while still being clearly visible to drivers. An excellent example of such a sign is the Central Carolina Bank on South Churton Street (see Figure 3). In addition, strip commercial centers should have coordinated signage and facades. Designs that evoke Hillsborough's historic past should be encouraged.

Figure 2. Proposed Banner Designs



Figure 3. Exemplary sign along South Churton Street



Many of the recommendations suggest above can be implemented by creating a Community Character overlay zone. The zoning should include requirements for street side landscaping and buffering as well as sign types and design requirements. In addition, design requirements for facades should be part of the ordinance. Initially, the requirements should apply to properties that abut Churton Street but if additional corridors are identified the overlay could be expanded.

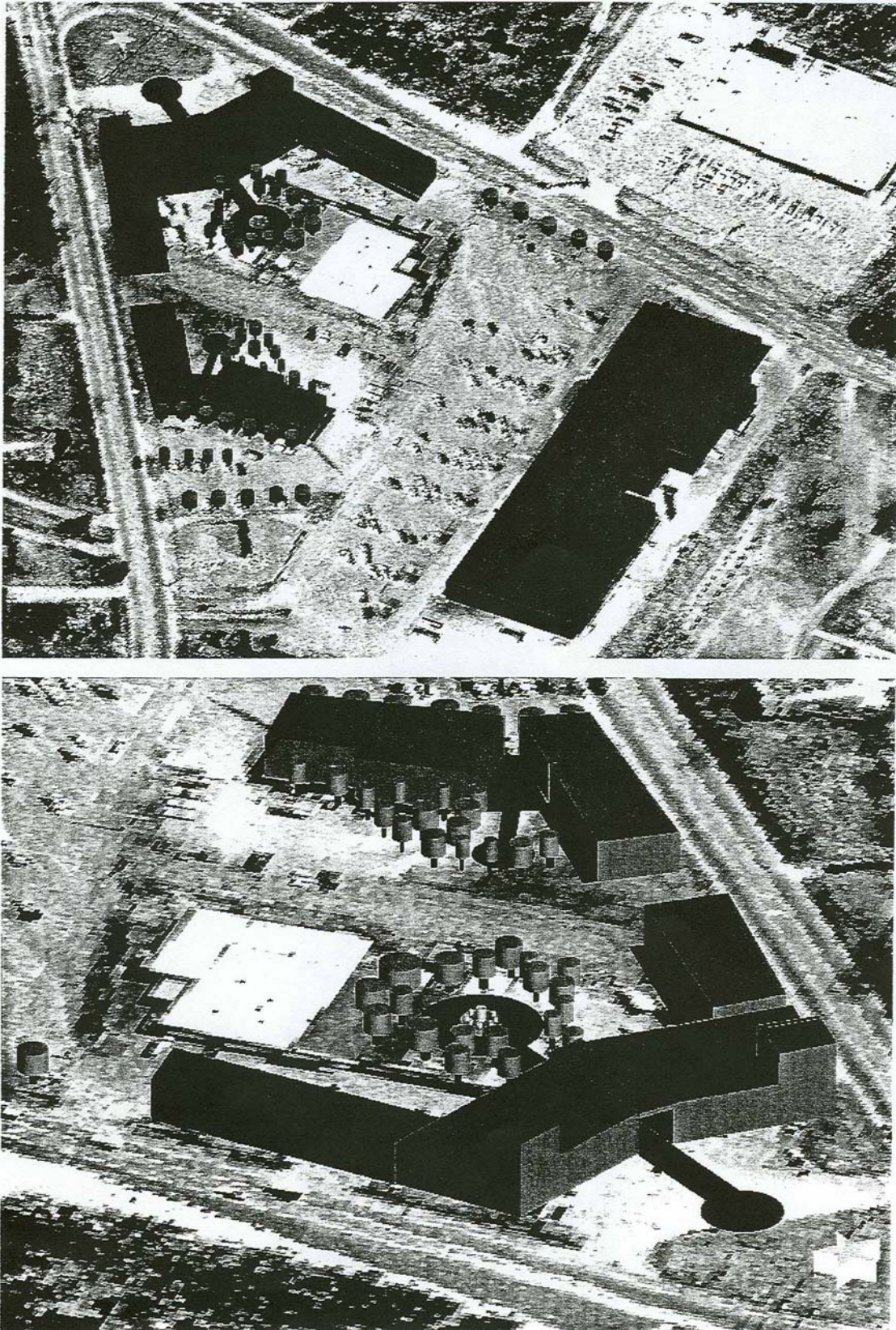
Our specific recommendations for the corridor begin at the north end of Churton Street. An entryway sign is needed at the intersection of U.S. 70 and Churton Street to signal to drivers that they have entered Hillsborough. A suggested entryway sign is illustrated in Figure 4. This rubble stone and wrought iron design should be mimicked at the Eno River Bridge and at the South Churton Street entryway point at 1-85.

Figure 4. North entry sign



We believe that ultimately the North Hill Shopping Center site should be redeveloped as a mixed retail and office center. Its proximity to downtown and the historic residential area as well as easy access from U.S. 70 would make it an ideal location for restaurants, retail shops and offices. Sidewalks connecting the shopping center with the downtown and the historic residential area will be necessary. Crosswalks utilizing imprinted asphalt also should be used as appropriate (i.e., at the Corbin and Churton Streets intersection). A potential site design is provided in Figure 5. Part of the site design includes a fountain that will serve as a landmark for this section of the corridor. The fountain could honor the Native American heritage of Hillsborough.

Figure 5. Proposed North Hill Shopping Center Site Plan



Moving south, to the intersection of North Churton Street and Corbin Street, we suggest that perennial flowers be planted in the median to highlight the historic district sign. A splash of color would call attention to the sign's importance as an entryway marker.

The *Downtown Streetscape Improvements Feasibility Study* provides recommendations that the town already has approved. These recommendations should be implanted as soon as feasible. While the general recommendations provided in this report should compliment the ones in the feasibility study, we have several specific suggestions regarding the Eno River Bridge. We recommend that the current concrete railings be replaced with a rubble stone and wrought iron design as shown in Figure 6. This design will serve to tie the north and south entry points to the

Figure 6. Eno River Bridge with new railings



downtown area. In addition, this configuration will provide enhanced views of the river, especially if they are combined with better lighting of the river from the bridge. This lighting could potentially be done from underneath the bridge or light poles from the top of the bridge. Increased lighting would be an additional benefit to a future pedestrian path along the Eno River. A wrought iron gateway at the south end of the bridge would provide a particularly effective cue that the driver is entering a critical part of the corridor.

The signs for the fast food restaurants at the South Churton Street and I-85 intersection may be considered necessary to attract business from the interstate. The signs, however, are a major

culprit of the visual chaos that confronts when drivers exit the highway. The town should work with the owners of these restaurants to find alternatives to the current high pole signs.

Additional Implementation Recommendations

Landmarks

- Commission a local artist to develop a coordinated set of banners for use throughout the year.
- Work with local stonemason to determine if opportunities exist to use apprentices or other volunteers to build the entryway signs and bridge railings.
- Work with local blacksmith to determine if opportunities exist to use apprentices or other volunteers to build the entryway signs and bridge railings.
- Hold a design competition for the North Churton fountain.

Landscaping

- Coordinate with a local civic organization (e.g., garden club, Lions Club) to plant
- perennials in the median where the historic district sign is located on North Churton Street.
- Hold a workshop to educate homeowners and business owners on indigenous plants and encourage them to use in plantings along the street.

Facade improvement

- Create a retrofit grant or incentive program to help reduce business owners' cost of updating facades.
- Sponsor a facade workshop
- use architects to demonstrate how to improve facade appearance
- Use models, artist renditions or computer images to help owners visualize how the changes could be implemented.
- Create a recognition program for best-improved facades.

Signage

Regulations

- Establish design standards for new or replacement signs (e.g., emphasis on monument-style signs rather than tall pole signs).
- Enforce sign ordinance and require removal of non-conforming signs.
- Offer a bonus in the size of new signs if the owners remove nonconforming signs by a certain date.
- Prohibit the installation of any new signs while a nonconforming sign remains in place.
- Require the owner to remove nonconforming signs if there is a change in the certificate of occupancy or business license on a premise.

Incentives

- Create a retrofit grant program to help reduce business owners' cost of replacing signs.

² Derived from Scenic America's Strategies for Smart Growth and Scenic Stewardship # 3. www.scenic.org:

- Recruit local artists to provide free designs for new signs for existing businesses. .
Create a recognition program for excellence in signage.

Education

- Sponsor a sign workshop - use local artists, graphic designers and architects to demonstrate how to improve sign appearance. Use models, artist renditions or computer images to help owners visualize how the changes could be implemented.
- Distribute design pamphlets to business owners and utilize the Chamber of Commerce and other local business meetings to promote good sign design practices.

Table 1: Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation Category	Applicability			Responsible Department/Organization
	N. Churton	Downtown	S. Churton	
Landmarks	X	X	X	Hillsborough Tourism Board
Community Character overlay zone	X	X	X	Planning
Landscaping	X	X	X	Public Works, private sector
Facade improvement	X		X	Private sector, Planning
Signage	X		X	Private sector, Planning
Street lights		X		Public Works, NC Dept. of Transportation, Alliance for Historic Hillsborough
Traffic lights		X		Public Works, NC Dept. of Transportation
Utilities	X	X	X	Duke Power, Time Warner, Sprint, Alliance for Historic Hillsborough, private sector, Public Works
Sidewalks and crosswalks	X	X		NC DOT, Public Works
Site design standards	X			Planning

Table 2: Short-term and Long-term Recommendations

Recommendation	Short-term	Long-term
<i>Landmarks</i>		
Commission a local artist to develop a coordinated set of banners for use throughout the year.	✓	
Work with local stonemason to determine if opportunities exist to use apprentices or other volunteers to build the entryway signs and bridge railings.	✓	
Work with local blacksmith to determine if opportunities exist to use apprentices or other volunteers to build the entryway signs and bridge railings.	✓	
Install entryway signs and gateway.		✓
Hold a design competition for the North Churton fountain.		✓
<i>Community Character Corridor overlay zone</i>		✓
<i>Landscaping</i>		
Implement street planting program.	✓	
Coordinate with a local civic organization (e.g., garden club, Lions Club) to plant perennials in the median where the historic district sign is located on North Churton Street.	✓	
Hold a workshop to educate homeowners and business owners on indigenous plants and encourage them to use in plantings along the street.		✓
<i>Facade improvement</i>		
Create a retrofit grant or incentive program to help reduce business owners' cost of updating facades.		✓
Sponsor a facade workshop - use architects to demonstrate how to improve facade appearance. Use models, artist renditions or computer images to help owners visualize how the changes could be implemented.	✓	
Create a recognition program for best-improved facades.	✓	

Recommendation	Short-term	Long-term
<i>Signage</i>		
Work with fast food restaurants owners to modify signs.	✓	
Modify sign ordinance to favor monument-style signs.	✓	
Enforce sign ordinance and require removal of non-conforming signs	✓	
Offer a bonus in the size of new signs if the owners remove nonconforming signs by a certain date.	✓	
Prohibit the installation of any new signs while a nonconforming sign remains in place.		✓
Require the owner to remove nonconforming signs if there is a change in the certificate of occupancy or business license on a premise.		✓
<i>Lighting</i>		✓
<i>Traffic lights</i>		✓
<i>Utilities</i>		✓
<i>Sidewalks and crosswalks</i>	✓	
<i>Site design standards</i>		✓