

Downtown Hillsborough Appearance Improvements Plan Summary

Mission Statement: To continue to make Hillsborough, which is known for its colonial history and architecture, a special place for residents and visitors by protecting, promoting and improving the historic business district through: maintaining the historic buildings; making appropriate streetscape improvements; involving design guidelines; and promoting and supporting a healthy environment.

Plan Objective: Just as other neighboring towns have developed downtown streetscape plans; Hillsborough will improve the appearance of its street, sidewalks, lighting, landscaping and structures. The Town will work to solve traffic problems in order to create pedestrian safe streets. The downtown will become an important cultural center in the Triangle as River Park and Indian Village sites are completed. The downtown mercantile community will thrive with interesting specialty shops, food stores, and restaurants to serve local citizens and tourists. Hillsborough will be marketed throughout the area as an important historical town that is well endowed with business, cultural and educational opportunities. With strong emphasis on community pride, Hillsborough will be known as a twentieth century town with an eighteenth century heritage.

Plan recommendations:

1. Preservation and rehabilitation of historic and natural resources including creation of design guidelines for new construction, promotion of tax credits, greenway along the Eno River and heritage artwork/landscape program.
2. Character and use enhancement by using materials common to Hillsborough. Encouraging individual expression on private property and in plantings, installing ornamental pedestrian lighting, trash receptacles, benches and a variety of trees.
3. Open space enhancement through development of County River Park, West River Park and Nations Bank Alley, preservation of Cedar Lane and refurbishment of Mayo Park and the Police Station front yard.
4. Coordinate the redevelopment of key non-historic properties with open space and pedestrian activity while providing a mix of use opportunities to serve Hillsborough.
5. Parking study and recommendations.
6. Improve the retail office mix with business development and recruitment plan.

Improvements to make downtown Hillsborough a more attractive setting for business and residents activities should build on the historic and natural character of Hillsborough and include the unique and quirky qualities that make downtown a place of people. Individual expression in design should be fostered within the historic small town framework. The pedestrian scale should predominate while accommodating vehicles. The plan is long term and will be implemented in phases as funding and energy becomes available. Volunteer participation is a large part of the plan providing input for details of certain components, partial funding and maintenance of the many planters that will add color and vibrancy to downtown Hillsborough.

Background:

Historic downtown Hillsborough is a bustling area, home to Orange County government with surrounding neighborhoods and business district. Located prominently on a rise north of the Eno River, the clock tower of the Greek Revival courthouse defines the character of downtown Hillsborough. Newer County owned buildings adopted the colonial style of the historic courthouse. Early twentieth century commercial buildings line Churton Street, Hillsborough's main street. Homes in the area date from the late eighteenth century, nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Even with rich historic architecture, downtown Hillsborough is not a museum but a real 1990's district alive with County government, residences, and a variety of businesses, shops, offices and restaurants.

County property and offices occupy about one quarter of the downtown area. Fortunately County facilities contribute to the character and attractive appearance of downtown. The County is developing a multi-use park on the Eno River which will include an Indian palisade constructed and managed by the Occaneechi Indians, a open structure for performances, seating areas, walks and general open areas for the enjoyment of residents, workers and visitors.

The Post Office is a busy downtown location. Next to it is the Visitors Center with public rest room facilities and an interesting colonial style garden. The downtown area contains many special spots. One of these is old cedar walk between Margaret Lane and King Street. Another is the walkway in front of the Colonial Inn. Many of the restaurants and shops have a distinctive quiriness that invites you to linger at the window or to step in for a visit. Several businesses have provided places to sit near their front or back entrances.

On street parallel parking is available throughout most of downtown. There is additional parking open to the public behind some of the shop and office buildings. Some of the parking is reserved for particular businesses. The County provides some public parking. However during court days, a convenient parking space may be difficult to locate. Parking for tourists is limited and there is no designated parking for tour buses downtown.

Commercial buildings, wide sidewalks with trees that were once attractive line Churton Street. These well-maintained buildings contain professional offices, various shops and eating establishments. These structures have been maintained with a variety of color schemes and details adding to the vibrancy of downtown. Only a few buildings have inappropriate facade treatments such as mansard style shingle awnings. This street generally has lots of pedestrians and heavy intrusive vehicular traffic. The Police Department and City offices have newly constructed facilities on prime property in this area. Although attractive, these buildings have front yards and do not continue the building fabric along the sidewalks established by other commercial buildings. The police department presence adds substance to the impression that downtown is safe. Residents regularly walk in this area during day and evening hours.

Several features detract from downtown's appearance. Crossing the Eno River into downtown, the first building you see is nondescript with a large barren parking area. There are major unsightly utility lines along Margaret Lane, King Street and Tryon Street and to a lesser degree along Churton Street. Churton Street is clogged with loud traffic, much of it large smelly trucks. The street trees are old and straggly. There are trash receptacles chained to these trees. The few benches need repairs. There are newspaper and real estate boxes cluttering the sidewalk in several locations. The cobra head style streetlights illuminate the street but not the pedestrian areas. Some of the food service businesses have plastic chairs that don't complement the character of the downtown on the sidewalk. In spite of these minor detractions, the area maintains a rich appealing character.

There is very little room for new development or redevelopment in downtown Hillsborough. Cherished historic neighborhoods abut the business areas.

The Hillsborough Town Centre Group is leading this planning effort. The project area is bordered by the Eno River, Cameron Street, Queen Street and Wake Street. The group held two public meetings to discuss downtown issues in October 1998 and distributed a questionnaire to gather ideas from concerned citizens. According to the survey, the top downtown activity is dining followed by shopping, socializing, walking and conducting private business. General retail was considered the most important use in downtown followed by Town and County government, professional offices, tourism and recreation. Underground utilities is the top rated improvement followed by new street trees, seasonal flowers, sidewalk paving, benches, rehabilitated building facades and decorative lighting.

When asked what qualities and features could contribute to improving downtown, expanded quality retail and restaurant activity on the ground floors, placing utilities underground and improved traffic were all popular concepts. Participants wanted sidewalk elements to be unified and true to the intrinsic character of Hillsborough. They wanted decorative lighting for pedestrians. They warned to avoid beautification clichés.

They wanted seasonal planters to enliven the downtown and urged coordinating volunteers for installation and maintenance. They wanted new street trees based on the performance needs of the plants. They wanted the new trees to allow views of the historic buildings and businesses. They wanted additional pocket parks for eating lunch or sitting. Celebration of the Eno River was a popular concept with walks and better views of the river areas. They wanted better traffic patterns and urged removal of the through truck traffic from downtown. They suggested a better balance between pedestrians and vehicles and brick cross walks.

The meeting participants were concerned about maintenance of plantings and other downtown improvements. They also want an implementation plan to help them achieve their goals. The attendees were concerned about funding and interested in any grants that might be available. They asked that the plan take individual business owners' financial constraints into consideration. They expressed the need for additional parking. They also want street furnishings to be vandal resistant (theft).

Downtown Hillsborough is in the enviable position of having a unique historic character, well-maintained properties, and a mix of occupants including government workers, residents, shop owners, and professionals. The tourists, shoppers and the locals who visit downtown to socialize and conduct business also contribute to its vitality and character. Many of the people working in, residing in and visiting downtown Hillsborough appreciate its qualities. The popularity and compactness of downtown compound the challenge of accommodating and balancing the needs of each group with an interest in downtown.

MISSION STATEMENT:

To continue to make Hillsborough, which is known for its colonial history and architecture, a special place for residents and visitors by protecting, promoting and improving the historic business district through: maintaining the historic buildings; making appropriate streetscape improvements: involving design guidelines; and promoting and supporting a healthy environment.

Plan Objective:

Just as other neighboring towns have developed downtown streetscape plans, Hillsborough will improve the appearance of its streets, sidewalks, lighting, landscaping and structures. The Town will work to solve traffic problems in order to create pedestrian safe streets. The downtown will become an important cultural center in the Triangle as River Park and Indian Village sites are completed. The downtown mercantile community will thrive with interesting specialty shops, food stores, and restaurants to serve local citizens and tourists. Hillsborough will be marketed throughout the area as an important historical town that is well endowed with business, cultural and educational opportunities. With strong emphasis on community pride, Hillsborough will be known as a twentieth century town with an eighteenth century heritage.

PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation

Local and National Register Historic District status has served to preserve and enhance much of the area's historic character. However some projects have been approved that detract from this character. More specific Historic District Design Guidelines for the downtown commercial area that set architectural standards, building placement standards and site development standards should be developed. These design guidelines should be carefully drafted to allow creativity while protecting the historic character so important to downtown Hillsborough.

Many properties within the downtown area are eligible for a combination of Federal and State tax credits up to 40% of improvements costs for projects that meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Properties can be rehabilitated within this context for viable purposes including restaurants, offices, etc. while maintaining the architectural integrity of the building. This 40% incentive will make some difficult projects economically feasible. As renovated buildings meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, the

appearance of downtown buildings will continue to improve due to the removal of architecturally inappropriate features such as cedar shake mansard awnings and with the rehabilitation of buildings where the costs are prohibitive without the tax credits. North Carolina recently authorized a 30% tax credit for non-income producing properties including residences with similar criteria to those described above. The attachments to this report contain more detailed information about tax credit incentive programs. This incentive should be publicized to property owners and information made available to them.

The historic courthouse should be lighted at night with floodlights.

Similarly, the stories of downtown should be conveyed in the landscape treatment. For example, near the Cornwallis Road stonework, a plaque or other artistic devices should be employed to convey the perceived significance of the stones. Along King Street, there could be a plaque that explains the importance of that road during revolutionary times.

The Eno River is both a natural and historic resource to Hillsborough. Native Americans and early explorers traveled along the Eno River. A greenway can be developed for recreation and to tell the River's story. The Occaneechi palisade celebrates this connection of history and nature. Connectivity to the river should be improved with visual access and walkways to and along the river greenway. The County River Park on the east side of Churton Street provides much needed park lands, the palisade which reminds one of the Town's rich Indian heritage, access to the river and in time a location for performances. When complete this property will be an even more of an asset to downtown. On the west side of Churton Street, another river park should be developed with a greenway under the bridges. A greenway can connect a series of public parks along the Eno River in the greater Hillsborough community.

Character and use enhancement

The character of downtown is a blend of historic features, natural features, and unqiuties that contrast and provide perkiness and life to downtown's appearance. These qualities should be preserved through any improvements. For example, stone and slate are materials endemic to Hillsborough and should be used in an appropriate manner. Items such as the trash receptacles chained to the trees do not contribute positively to downtown's character and should be discontinued.

The quirky and personal features in downtown contribute significantly to its appeal. Items like the landscape seating areas to the rear of shops, the "Cornwallis" stacked stone in the sidewalk on Churton Street south of King Street, the artistic window displays, and non restrained plantings are unique to downtown Hillsborough. This individual expression should be generally encouraged. Improvements to the downtown should blend together but not be totally matched. The design should find that delicate balance between blandness and over orderliness and total disarray. For example, several styles of benches and planters may be used which use the same materials and complement each other even though they don't match. However some dominant streetscape elements such as lights should be consistent to provide a framework that can support the more unique items.

Trees:

Likewise, tree plantings should not only be linear rows of the same variety but include trees historic to the Town as well as new disease resistant cultivars with ornamental virtue which resemble the older varieties. Larger growing trees such as white oaks and maples can be located in select large impervious areas such as the park land along the Eno River, a new park in front of the police station and the lawn behind the police station. Smaller growing ornamentals can be located in paved areas along Churton Street and King Street and where power lines are above. Trees should not hide the businesses. All tree types should handle urban conditions and be disease resistant. The attachments contain additional information on street trees. On King Street, the sidewalk can be narrowed providing a nice wide planting strip for trees, ground cover and other vegetation. Where additional pedestrian access is desirable, a footpath of native stone can provide a spot to cross the vegetation.

Planters:

Planters and small planting areas with a variety of materials including annuals, perennials and shrubs should be located throughout downtown Hillsborough to provide seasonal interest and beauty. Volunteers should be recruited to plant and maintain these planters. Training and coordination should be provided as needed.

Litter Receptacles:

Likewise, trash receptacles can have attractive planters on top. Even the now unsightly dispenser for newspapers, fliers and real-estate information which are chained together, can be clustered in a cabinet like enclosure with planters on top. The community crafts and artists can work together to design a prototype unique to Hillsborough for construction by high school classes or other volunteers. The attachments contain a concept sketch of litter receptacles.

Lighting:

New ornamental lighting that complements downtown Hillsborough's traditional character should be included in downtown improvements. It should meet NCDOT requirements and illuminate the sidewalk area and building facades. Poles should be 14 to 16 foot ornamental steel poles that can withstand bumps. Metal halide fixtures will provide a warm golden light that relights quickly after a loss of power. Work with Duke Power to select a fixture with a refractive globe which places the light in the pedestrian area rather than just lighting the street like the existing cobra head fixtures, select a fixture with a traditional early Twentieth Century styling to complement most of the buildings in downtown Hillsborough. Where economically feasible utility lines should be placed underground. Underground utility service is feasible on Churton Street between Margaret Lane and Tryon Street. Where underground utilities are not feasible, ornamental lighting should still be installed at the pedestrian level on poles 12 to 14 feet tall.

Work with Duke Power to replace wooden poles over time with metal poles painted to match the ornamental poles.

In the park area, alley and on non NCDOT street locations, higher wattage fixtures can be used. The advantage is that fewer fixtures may be required while maintaining similar light levels. Box type fixtures on metal poles may be used to supplement the ornamental lighting as needed. These will fade out of view since they are simple utilitarian fixtures.

During the bleak cold months, winter decorations should be installed to brighten downtown. These might include ornamental lights in the trees, candles in windows, etc. The local artists organizations might assist in planning winter decorations.

All improvements should celebrate pedestrian mobility with easy to walk on surfaces, adequate lighting, and convenient trash receptacles with planters and benches all with special details that add vitality.

Open space enhancement

Open public areas, whether green park like areas, linear greenway or pathway areas or urban terrace areas provide locations for socializing, public gatherings and personal rejuvenation and add to the vitality and appearance of a downtown.

County River Park:

In downtown Hillsborough, the most significant open space is the County Park along the Eno River. The site development plans for this park should be implemented to provide for a broad range of activity including tourism, education, tribal gatherings, festivals, performances, picnicking, informal recreation and observing nature.

West River Park:

The riverfront across Churton Street to the west should be developed as a park with pedestrian access and a greenway as briefly explained in the preservation section of this report. Much of the area should remain natural. This important open space is adjacent to the redevelopment portion of downtown and close to residential areas of Historic Hillsborough and can be developed for a wide range of uses. What is now an unattractive dirt lot can be redeveloped into the gateway to downtown Hillsborough and to west Riverpark with a large circular fountain with spouts of water cascading. The sounds of the fountain will muffle the automotive sounds from Churton Street. At night this fountain can be lighted. Around the fountain is a plaza with walkways leading to the Eno River, to the mix use redevelopment containing legal offices, shops, restaurants and even apartments overlooking the park, and to Margaret Lane and nearby residences. This park should include pockets of playground equipment for children and sculpture that kids of all ages can climb on, perhaps even an area for teens to skateboard, and lots of shady open space planted with those large growing trees, historic to Hillsborough. On the park side of the mixed-use buildings, Hillsborough residents, workers and tourists can eat, visit and stroll on a broad esplanade overlooking the park, provide. A local artist could choose to paint a natural scene from the park or people enjoying the amenities.

Cedar Lane:

Downtown Hillsborough contains several small open areas. One of these is cedar lane. It is just a short walk from west River Park following the attractive pedestrian walkway from the park through the redevelopment area to Margaret Lane. Jim McGraw, PhD, Urban Forestry Specialist with the NC Cooperative Extensive Service visited Cedar Lane and with the assistance of landscape architect and planner, Susan Suggs developed a strategy to revitalize and preserve this unique feature of downtown Hillsborough. The lane is only a 5-foot public right of way with the remaining trees located on private properties. Therefore, total support of the adjoining property owners is necessary to preserve Cedar Lane. The north end of the walk has no cedar trees but there is ample space in the yard on the west side of the lane for planting trees. This yard could have an inviting entrance from the lane for customers to the business located in the house. McGraw recommended that replacement cedar trees *Juniperus virginiana* be dug up from the Hillsborough area and replanted where replacements are needed. Four to five foot trees are a good size to transplant. The non-cedar trees should also be replaced to maintain the true historic character of the lane. Fencing may be included. The walkway itself should be a local gravel material set on existing grade taking care not to disturb the tree roots. At both entrances to cedar lane a rustic cedar arbor/ gateway can hint of the "special ness" of a shaded walk between downtown streets.

Nations Bank Alley:

The alley connecting the west side of Churton Street to the parking behind the buildings provides a critical pedestrian circulation link. Its location central to downtown make it the perfect spot for people to eat a snack, sit and watch pedestrians, or stop for a chat with friends. In its current unimproved condition, it is a harsh uncomfortable space that pedestrians walk through as quickly as possible. To make this alley appealing, an archway with flowering vines and decorative lights will invite people into the alley from both entrances. The archways will define the alley as a "room" rather than as a tunnel. Tile paving, and a warm color of paint on Nations Bank and lots of planters with an array of flowers, grasses, evergreens and small flowering trees will take away the harshness and make this space a comfortable spot. Small tables and chairs, benches, trash receptacles and ornamental lighting should be installed to expand the use of this space and make it more pleasant.

Mayo Park:

Another pocket park is Mayo Park on West King Street next to the hardware store. This park needs sprucing up with new benches that can handle the abuses of public use. The large tree in this area is an important downtown asset. The paved portion of this park should be reduced.

Police Station:

The open area in front of the Police Station is under utilized land with a sea of uninviting paving. This convenient spot should be transformed into an attractive location for people to eat, socialize and hold public ceremonies. A large growing shade tree should be included as well as paving and seating to accommodate a vast range of activities. This tree can have a traditional bench circling its trunk. Over time this tree and the bench encircling it will become part of each citizen's memories of Hillsborough. Stepping stone pathways will lead to the bench from the walkways around the green lawn area. Behind the police station is a lawn area where additional large growing shade heirloom type trees

can be planted.

Private properties owners that have developed attractive seating areas should be recognized for a job well done.

Redevelopment potential

The area south of Margaret Lane and west of Churton Street offers redevelopment potential. Its location is convenient to County Court. Many of the buildings in this area are not historically significant and do not positively contribute to its character. This site should be redeveloped with buildings that complement the historic district - two stories, and hugging the sidewalk with parking to the rear. Professional offices with some ground floor retail is recommended, thus freeing up other coveted ground floor locations for retail use throughout downtown.

A greenway and linear park should be located along the Eno River. Visual and pedestrian access to the park should be apparent. Areas of the large woodland trees should be preserved. The gateway fountain will anchor both the west river park and the redevelopment area. The buildings fronting on the park will share a promenade along the edge of the park and enjoy the view of the park. An attractive well-defined walkway with signature landscaping, lighting and paving shall cross the area south to north connecting the site with Margaret Lane. The interior of the site will contain plenty of parking convenient to the development, park and courthouse area. On Margaret Lane, the new buildings nearest the residential area will be sited like homes with front lawns. The design should also blend with nearby residences. The intensity of the redevelopment should diminish near the abutting residential with adequate buffers.

This area could redevelop totally within the private sector or it may benefit from a collaborative effort of public/private to acquire the property in phases and locate a sensitive yet experienced developer.

Parking

A parking study conducted by the Orange County Economic Development Commission found that the amount parking is adequate in downtown Hillsborough. However on Monday afternoons, during jury selection, and on Friday afternoons when the banks are very busy, convenient parking is at a premium. Much of the parking is on the street parallel spaces that some drivers avoid. Other visitors to downtown do not like parking behind the buildings. Additional study to determine use patterns of existing parking and develop a management plan of existing parking is recommended. Tasteful consistent signage directing drivers to parking and explaining the limits of the parking should be implemented. Perhaps, even owners of parking could work together to create more efficient use of parking which would benefit the whole of downtown.

Downtown is able to currently provide adequate parking for tourists with the exception of those arriving in buses. However as downtown Hillsborough becomes a more popular tourist destination, shuttle van

service for tourist from a designated point should be provided. Short term parking for retail customers should be provided near the shops and long term parking on the fringes of downtown for workers. The County may need to consider shuttle vans for jury pools on Mondays.

The plan includes new parking in the redevelopment area. Behind business properties on King Street, additional new parking is also shown.

Improve retail/office mix

Additional retail and restaurants on the ground floor in spaces occupied by offices is desirable to make downtown a more attractive shopping and browsing location. With more shoppers (dollars) coming into the area, all the businesses would benefit. However, vacant space of any type, especially ground floor, is a rarity. Also, rental rates are high, presenting financial barriers for new businesses with marginal funding. The professional offices (attorneys, doctors, real estate brokers) and financial institutions can typically afford the high rents thus the economics favors office leaseholders. ^

In spite of these realities, efforts should be made to attract new retail and restaurants to the downtown area. A study that identifies the existing businesses, hours of operation and if they are an end destination or not should be conducted. (End destination businesses include veterinarians, plant nurseries or satellite dish stores where the customer goes directly to that business and is very unlikely to continue to another shop in the vicinity and browse.) Businesses which would complement the existing ones should be identified as well as businesses that would be successful in downtown Hillsborough. As vacancies become available, these new businesses should be recruited by an organization representing downtown. Businesses being recruited should have adequate finances to locate in downtown Hillsborough. Parking limits should support a business mix with additional retail and restaurants (more convenient short term parking).

Businesses which do well near government, courthouses, law offices, real estate offices, financial businesses, and insurance businesses like those in downtown Hillsborough include business services, personal services including hair, cleaners, florist, restaurants and card shops. Expansion opportunities for personal business services include classes, fitness and alterations. Hillsborough could also expand its base of home furnishing specialty shops that include antiques, framing, interior design, antiques and gifts with businesses such as interior design, kitchen shops, specialty furniture, home services, and electronics. Shops catering to tourists include specialty gift shops, galleries, book stores with stationary and books about the south, history, etc. and one of a kind novelty shops Hillsborough already has a variety of good places to eat. Additional restaurants with some providing entertainment can expand this business niche.

Summary of Recommendations

Improvements to make downtown Hillsborough a more attractive setting for business and residents activities should build on the historic and natural character of Hillsborough and include the unique and quirky qualities that make downtown a place of people. Individual expression in design should

be fostered within the historic small town framework. The pedestrian scale should predominate while accommodating vehicles. The plan is long term and will be implemented in phases as funding and energy becomes available. Volunteer participation is a large part of the plan providing input for details of certain components, partial funding and maintenance of the many planters that will add color and vibrancy to downtown Hillsborough.

Implementation Strategy

Implementation of this plan to improve downtown Hillsborough will involve the support, efforts and collaboration of many groups and individuals over time. Several of the implementation tasks are already underway. In addition to the Hillsborough Town Center Group, other organizations crucial to the success of downtown Hillsborough and implementation of this Plan include the Hillsborough Town Board, Alliance for Historic Hillsborough, Hillsborough Chamber of Commerce and the Historic District Commission. The listing below identifies many of the tasks of this plan with those groups critical to its implementation. They are grouped as immediate, mid-range and long-term. These timing considerations can and probably will adjust based on interest in a particular project or task.