

CASE STUDY UPDATE | AYDEN, NC

JULY 2018

IN 2006, THE TOWN OF AYDEN PARTNERED WITH THE NORTH CAROLINA SMALL TOWN MAIN STREET PROGRAM TO REVITALIZE ITS DOWNTOWN. SINCE THEN, THE TOWN HAS CONTINUED ITS EFFORTS.

"I'm looking at framed documents of those initiatives on my wall right now!" Steven Harrell, the Ayden town manager, exclaimed when asked about the 2006 initiatives to rejuvenate the small downtown economy in eastern North Carolina. A little over ten years later, Ayden has shifted its focus and plans to continue growing its economy to better serve its community in today's day and age. Since 2006, the town has implemented various initiatives from updating storefront facades to lobbying for new highway bypasses. This brief document will expand on the details of updates on current plans and the outlines for future ideas.

In 2015, Ayden updated its membership in the Main Street Small Town program to the Main Street Program, as it was recognized for its population and economic growth. The committee is made up of 12 active community members, a collection of town staff, interested citizens and property/business owners. This committee is one of the main drivers of Ayden's growth and initiatives.

Among their championed implementations is the Facade Program, which incentivizes downtown businesses to renovate their storefronts by matching up to \$2,000 for improvements. Harrell reported that half a dozen business owners had taken advantage of the program. Ayden can provide these cash initiatives in part due to the various grants it has won over the years. This last year, in 2017, the Main Street Committee won a \$500,000 block grant from the North Carolina Department of Commerce. This Federal Community Block Grant helped renovate a 1915 2-story building that has been closed for twenty years into a new Quilt Lizzy. Quilt Lizzy, Inc provides quilting supplies and sewing machines and is contributing \$250,000 of its own money to help renovate the building. Harrell says construction for the building will start in early summer of 2018 and should finish in early 2019. This new addition to downtown Ayden will generate eight new jobs and is projected to drive a new customer base of avid quilters from surrounding areas into Ayden, as

Quilt Lizzy has been featured in Home and Garden's top 10 quilting companies in the country.

Other initiatives include addressing downtown needs through newly started stakeholder meetings. In April 2017, three meetings were hosted to spark conversation between the business owners and leaders and the chamber and town board. A consultant came in to help develop an economic strategic plan to outline the strengths, weaknesses and threats of Ayden. The stakeholder meetings created a four-part plan to continue growing Ayden into the town it can be, so that tourists and community members alike come around time and time again.

The first part of the plan is to continue with downtown opportunities by finding stores that will drive more economic growth; something like the Quilt Lizzy store - a niche store that would provide a good or service not otherwise offered in surrounding communities. The town will work with building owners in the downtown to attract further investments in destination retail like Quilt Lizzy.

The second part of the plan is to build a food commercialization center. Ayden plans to use federal and state money to build a food-processing center to allow farmers in their region to box, package and distribute their products right in their own backyard.

The third part of the plan is to take advantage of the new bypass being built by the NC Department of Transportation, US-11. The new bypass will connect 264 and run through Ayden, providing opportunities for more tourists and potential customers to pass through the town. The bypass will make Ayden only 8 minutes away from the Vidant Hospitals in Greenville, which is an advantage for locals.

The fourth and final part of the economic growth plan is to host festivals and events to bring more people to Ayden for a concentrated period of time. This May,

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Ayden will host its third annual BBQ festival (<http://www.aydenbbq.org/>) on May 19. The BBQ festival stemmed from the successful Collard Festival, that is hosted every September and has brought in as many as 10,000 people (Ayden's population is 5,000!). During the summers, Ayden has plans to expand its evening programming by hosting various bands on its downtown stage and inviting the Folk Arts Society of Greenville to lead a clogging night and a contra dancing night. There is even talk of hosting a jazz night this upcoming summer as well.

Despite changing times and economic circumstances, Ayden is a vibrant example of a small town in eastern NC that is capitalizing on grant funding to renovate its historic downtown, leveraging its proximity to the college town of Greenville and promoting a culture of events and festivals to drive economic growth.