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Coordinated Approaches to Economic Development in Cecil County

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Cecil County Overview	4
Problem Definition	6
Research Objective	7
Methodology	8
Findings	9
Importance of Small Businesses and New Infrastructure	9
Historic and Nature Preservation	11
Appealing to Tourists	13
Community Engagement	15
Grants	18
Recommendations	20
Discussion	25
References	26
Appendix	29

Executive Summary

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Maryland's Cecil County has experienced remarkable population growth. Increasingly, more people are moving to or visiting the County, a trend that is triggering economic growth. This paper highlights standard practices for small-town economic development that Cecil County can use as the demands on its economy continue to evolve. A thorough literature review was the primary research mode, but we also gleaned vital insights on the County from two of its officials, Stephen O'Connor and Sandy Turner. O'Connor is Cecil County's Land Use & Development Director and was our project liaison. Turner is the County's Tourism Manager.

Our research found that fostering a welcoming environment for small businesses is key to rural economic development. Public-private partnerships can be an effective tool for realizing this objective. Additionally, the preservation of historic sites allows towns to retain their unique identity, connecting to another important facet of rural development: tourism. Communities that leverage their distinct characteristics as tourist attractions can significantly boost local and regional revenues. Finally, engaging community members is imperative and increases the likelihood of success in economic development initiatives. Cecil County's eight towns are different, but if they incorporate these findings into their individual development strategies, they may secure sustained prosperity for the County for years to come.

Introduction

Cecil County Overview

A decade ago, Cecil County experienced economic stagnation following the 2008 recession and housing crisis. Since 2014, however, a notable shift has occurred as investment poured into manufacturing-level jobs, like warehousing, rejuvenating the local economy. The County's location near major landmarks, such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, Delaware Bay, and the University of Delaware, further boost its prospects for economic development. Although this momentum has slowed in recent years, more people are relocating to Cecil County post-Covid, which has caused a surge in housing demand. This influx has sparked interest in investing in retail-level businesses to cater to the growing population's needs.

There are eight incorporated municipalities in Cecil County: Cecilton, Charlestown, Chesapeake City, Elkton, North East, Perryville, Port Deposit, and Rising Sun. Each one is distinct, with diverse needs and characteristics. The towns' main streets, along the highways, are predominantly populated by small businesses and boutiques. In the North East, downtown areas face traffic congestion issues, deterring visitors. In Elkton, family-owned small businesses thrive, contributing to the local economy. North East benefits from its waterfront location, while Elkton, off Route 40, is positioned as a growth corridor. Chesapeake City has a more upscale atmosphere, situated along the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal rather than the main street. Cecilton is a tranquil

town, a crossroads community at the intersection of Routes 213 and 282. Charlestown offers water amenities, attracting visitors seeking aquatic leisure. Perryville stands out as a destination with a casino and Great Wolf Lodge, drawing tourists and locals. Port Deposit aims to maintain its old-fashioned charm despite its smaller size, while Rising Sun seeks to enhance its appeal to attract more visitors. Throughout these areas, the main streets retain their historic significance, anchoring local identity and charm.

Cecil County's economic landscape is characterized by a patchwork of funding sources, with government support for towns proving inconsistent. Port Deposit, operating on a modest annual budget of \$675,000, seeks opportunities for financial grants and loans. Typically, grants require matching funds for projects, prompting a reliance on partnerships either with other governmental entities or businesses.

In Perryville the Video Lottery Terminal (VLT) fund, contributes 35%, and along with other fundraising initiatives, underscore the County's creative approach to funding, often leveraging profits from the small casino in Perryville for community enhancement projects.

Despite limited taxpayer funding, the County fosters a culture of collaboration, with organizations like the Upper Shore Regional Council playing a pivotal role. While grants are sought after by towns like Charlestown and Rising Sun, the towns of North East and Elkton demonstrate success through events and proactive funding efforts, including initiatives led by the Chamber of Commerce, such as the popular monthly Soup Night.

Cecil County has set forth ambitious economic goals and plans aimed at enhancing its communities while maintaining a prudent fiscal stance. Amidst current program initiatives like Winter Lights Cecil Nights, which spotlight downtown areas, and the operation of a small casino in Perryville with profits directed towards Route 40 beautification, the County strives to avoid reliance on taxpayer funds; its preference is to leverage grants and partnerships.

Problem Definition

Cecil County Land Use and Development Services is seeking a plan to promote economic growth in the County's downtown areas. This research aims to identify the best standard practices for economic development that create thriving downtowns. Despite population growth in the County, the absence of substantial local businesses means residents lack places to spend their money. Downtowns are growing too slowly relative to the changing economic status of residents. Therefore, the County's towns should look to attract investment, enhance infrastructure, and foster an inviting environment for businesses and community members. Future development in central, downtown areas is likely to spark greater economic output, resident satisfaction, and a thriving tourism industry for Cecil County.

Based on the distinct demographics, history, and needs of Cecil County towns, recommendations should be standard, yet adaptable to each town. Three types of downtowns exist in Cecil County: historic, nature- and recreation-based, and city-like. Each of the downtown areas wants to promote one of these themes. In the recreation category, many of the residents enjoy the Chesapeake Bay and trails as a form of recreation. In the historic town category, residents

emphasize their history to market to tourists. In city-like towns, residents rely on the main street for useful small businesses. The recommendations are made in the context of these themes. A challenge for this project is to meet the needs of eight distinct downtown areas in a single template of best practices.

A potential obstacle to economic growth in Cecil County is the limited availability of funding sources. Cecil County funds municipalities when there is funding available and on a case-by-case basis, however, it can be inconsistent. Our client highlighted that the government prefers to not solely use taxpayer money to develop economic plans. While grants can provide valuable financial support for economic development initiatives, they often come with specific requirements and limitations. Moreover, the County's small government staff is constrained in terms of expertise, time, and resources to effectively pursue and manage grant opportunities. Despite these hurdles, searching for grants that apply to municipalities could offer Cecil County more funds for economic development. Funding streams are essential to ensuring best practices can be implemented.

Research Objective

The study's research aims to identify the best practices for economic development that Cecil County can employ. Downtowns are often the focal point of a town's culture, identity, and economy. Given this, the project seeks to close the knowledge gap between research and practice by creating a comprehensive, research-based approach to enhancing downtown areas. Overall, the literature on small-town and rural development suggests promoting local businesses and

historic or cultural preservation. Most case studies and resident surveys highlight the importance of appealing to a community niche, such as history or nature.

Additionally, the project aims to ascertain community members' opinions, which can help inform pathways to successful downtowns. Research highlights the importance of community engagement and involvement when developing downtowns. Case studies and creating a survey will help determine the business preferences of Cecil County residents.

Methodology

The recommendations for best practices for economic development in Cecil County's eight towns are based on a combination of a literature review and information from meetings with Cecil County stakeholders. The findings were developed from a literature review, an in-depth, qualitative journal review. Specifically, if a recommendation or an important conclusion was mentioned more than twice in the academic literature, it was included in the findings. Literature review sources came from academic journals and government-published materials.

Client meetings were bi-weekly with Stephen O'Connor, Cecil County's Land Use & Development Director, and a one-time meeting with Sandy Turner, Office of Tourism. In these meetings, we gained valuable information on Cecil County culture, previous and current policy proposals, and specific information on each of the downtown areas. In addition to client information, we also independently researched events and organizations the clients mentioned. Using

these methods of data collection, we determined our findings and recommendations for best practices for economic development in Cecil County's downtown areas.

Findings

Importance of Small Businesses and New Infrastructure

In the research, academic sources highlight the importance of towns partnering with small, local businesses to create events and expand the economic impact of downtown areas. New infrastructure can also help modernize towns and make them more accessible. This section analyzes the literature, specific cases, and the steps towns have taken to partner with local businesses.

Shepard (2023) talks about the importance of local businesses for economic growth, specifically in the context of breweries. Building a local brewery creates economic growth and inspires community building. For example, the New Glarus Brewing Company was beneficial to Hillsboro, Wisconsin. The brewery employed residents and added to community events. In 2018, breweries added \$79.1 billion to the US economy (Shepard, 2023). The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation claimed that breweries are a great way to “fill empty downtown spaces” since they appeal to a wide range of demographics. Breweries are an example of one type of small business that can have a great impact on the local economy.

Similarly, Olfert and Partridge (2010) discuss the importance of rural towns having internet access and modernization to economic output. Infrastructure

improvements including new transportation models and internet access can connect rural towns and improve small-town development. Better infrastructure can also lead to more entrepreneurship and capacity for small businesses. White (2022) also discusses the importance of broadband and technological infrastructure in developing small towns and local businesses. By investing in small-town infrastructure, municipalities set themselves up for future economic growth.

The University of North Carolina School of Government (2013) covers small-town strategies for development and the impact of these investments on the local economy. Through more than 50 case studies of small towns, UNC suggests that towns need partnerships for growth. Using grants, one town in North Carolina offered a space for small business development, which led to more businesses in the downtown area. In Oakland, Maryland, Walmart promoted small businesses with flyers in all shopping bags. Marketing campaigns also proved useful in other towns. Local partnerships with businesses, public-private partnerships, and nearby towns all participated. The report also suggested that Chambers of Commerce work with the business community on marketing. Renovating retail areas and revitalizing local libraries or community resources showed promise. The case studies highlight the importance of partnering with local businesses for small-town economic development.

White (2022) writes about the importance of small towns partnering with local businesses and fostering a space for small business growth. In case studies of towns that promoted small businesses, there was an increase in growth. For

example, a Nebraska town focused on promoting entrepreneurship and incentivizing business, including the tactic of a buy-local campaign, which led to increased state investment after promising results.

The Environmental Protection Agency (2010) recommends engaging small businesses in the revitalization process, including revitalizing existing assets and creating new spaces. When small businesses are engaged, main streets and existing infrastructure are prioritized. Small businesses help meet residents' needs without compromising community character. Businesses also help keep employment local. One suggestion is to engage in a business recognition program to help businesses with press and marketing efforts.

According to O'Connor, Cecil County government has successfully supported small businesses in the past (O'Connor, personal communication, April 2024). The Winter Nights Cecil Lights event brought residents to the downtown areas and engaged with tourists (Cecil County Government Tourism Office, personal communication, March 2024). Events that allow small businesses to sponsor and collaborate with government and other businesses help the local economy.

Finding: Promoting and partnering with small businesses will promote the local economy in downtown areas.

Historic and Nature Preservation

The literature review showed the significance of historic preservation in small-town economic development. Historic preservation has been shown to

encourage economic growth by attracting tourists, creating jobs, increasing property value, cultivating cultural identity, encouraging sustainable development, and providing educational opportunities. The findings also highlight the relevance of preservation strategies for boosting local economies by attracting visitors, safeguarding heritage, and stimulating investment in sustainable practices and distinctive cultural experiences.

Ellis (2019) explains that community developers often include historic preservation in their community and economic redevelopment efforts. Community development prioritizes infrastructure and morale and can be linked with historic preservation principles. This is particularly relevant when working with communal homes, centers, parks, and public facilities.

Historic preservation technologies reduce energy costs and promote economic sustainability. For example, repurposing materials allows for high-quality building renovations at a reasonable cost. Historic preservation can enhance community development by highlighting distinctive and historically significant structures. Historic preservation enables community developers to utilize existing structures to promote growth and boost morale in growing areas.

Another source, written by Kuriyama, N. and Ochsner, J. K. (2021), supports historic and natural preservation. In 2009, the City of Seattle established the Pike/Pine Conservation Overlay District to retain the corridor's identity while accommodating significant expansion in population and building size. Overlay District aims to balance growth with the preservation of older architecture and small local businesses. The article examines the district's use of facade retention for townscape conservation, as well as its overall approach to

integrated conservation. The Pike/Pine Conservation Overlay District serves as a model for cities seeking to balance growth with historic preservation.

The EPA and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) (2010) corroborate the importance of historic and nature preservation. Historic preservation can help reinvigorate older business areas. Historic private homes, country farms, and city landmarks create a feeling of place for residents and visitors.

Federal and state tax credit programs support various preservation activities. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Four Point Approach offers a framework for revitalizing older downtowns. This technique's four points—economic vitality, design, promotion, and organization—combine historic preservation initiatives with marketing efforts in historic downtown neighborhoods to boost economic investment. The plan prioritizes unique design, a pedestrian-friendly environment, local business ownership, and a sense of community. The Main Street model can lead to job creation and increased local ownership of small businesses.

Finding: Historic preservation plays a vital role in small-town economic development, as supported by multiple sources highlighting its significance and effectiveness in community development efforts.

Appealing to Tourists

According to Sandy Turner, Cecil County's Tourism Manager, tourism is a major facet of the County's economy. The County attracts more than a million

visitors a year, who come from Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey. Visitors from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for example, visit because Cecil offers the closest water access. Due to the County's regional draw, tourism is a multi-million-dollar industry.

Turner shared that marketing Cecil as a tourist destination is a central goal. Events like the Winter Lights Cecil Nights, during which organizers decorate most of the County's eight towns and host an array of winter-themed activities, draw locals and visitors. Overall, tourism is a vital component of Cecil's economic development initiatives, and the literature reveals that this is true in other rural areas as well.

The EPA and the ICMA (2010) recognize that some local economies are built on tourism. One tool they list for rural economic development is agritourism, which leverages farms to draw visitors. Vermont, for instance, has prioritized agritourism for decades. Many of the state's farms offer different attractions, such as tours, and have boosted their annual incomes as a result. This demonstrates the value of tailoring tourist opportunities based on a community's unique characteristics, something that Turner and others in Cecil County are keenly aware of.

Bender & Kerstetter (2020) discuss the impact of tourism on Tucker County, West Virginia. The article points to tourism as a contributor to the County's recent economic growth, with the County's natural beauty as a central appeal. More specifically, however, the article focuses on how residents perceive increased tourist activity in the region. Ambivalence is a common sentiment among Tucker residents. Many are excited that tourists are stimulating local

economies, but also fear that tourists might change the County's character. Cecil County residents could react similarly to heightened tourist activity.

Finding: Crafting tourist opportunities based on a community's unique characteristics is a highly effective way to stimulate rural economic development. Rural leaders are wise to consider residents' views on tourism.

Community Engagement

The literature repeatedly finds community engagement to be a vital part of successful revitalization in small-town economic development. Community engagement, particularly through community surveys and community-engaged research, allows governments to initiate projects that meet community needs and desires. This section focuses on evidence surrounding community engagement through case studies and literature articles.

Both Robertson et al. (2004) and Solis et al. (2024) find similar support for community surveys in small-town economic development. Community surveys provided useful information and resources for governments to create programs that cater to community needs (Solis et al., 2024). They provided the information needed to create an updated version of their community. In New Richmond, Minnesota, community engagement surveys adapted from the downtown and business district market analysis toolkit helped community members identify the types of businesses, restaurants, and attractions they would want in their town (Robertson et al., 2004). This allowed the government to better understand which

projects would succeed and where to allocate funding. Furthermore, case studies compiled by Solis et al. identified community-engaged research as a tool for uplifting community values and needs.

Bass (2020) also finds that an imperative factor of successful small-town economic development is the active role community residents play in the decision-making process. After decades of stagnant economic growth, Kinston, North Carolina engaged community members in an active and intentional role and was able to revitalize its economy and build community investment. Bass also identifies the importance of engaging residents based on their extensive and personal knowledge of the town. A community of people who know the local ins and outs and who maintain a strong sense of place and belonging is a critical component in small town development.

Finally, Bosworth and Atterton (2012) find that community leaders who invest time and energy into economic development build strong ties outside the community positively impact economic development. Researchers also find that local actors are a significant driving factor in economic development in small-town communities. These ties strengthen connections both in and outside the community and ultimately leads to a more successful economic development initiative. Because community leaders are engaged in decision-making, they are more invested in its success.

Finding: Community engagement, particularly through community surveys, community-engaged research, and active involvement of community

members and leaders, is essential for successful small-town economic development.

Grants

All eight towns should search for State and federal grants that aim to promote economic development in small or rural towns. The towns should also encourage small businesses to search for State grants or loans that aim to promote small business development. Possible sources include:

- Rural Maryland Economic Development Fund¹
- Maryland Small Business Grants: Project Restore²
- Federal grants through Grants.Gov for Municipalities

The grant application process is both extensive and arduous, however, following a step-by-step process can guide businesses, municipalities, and Cecil.

1. Research Grant Opportunities: Identify grant opportunities that align with the project, organization, or goals.
2. Read Grant Guidelines: Review the guidelines provided by the grantor, paying close attention to eligibility criteria, deadlines, application requirements, and any specific instructions.

¹ <https://www.washco-md.net/grant-management/rural-md-grant/>

² <https://dhcd.maryland.gov/Business/Pages/Small-Business-Grants.aspx>

3. **Develop a Project Proposal:** Craft a proposal that clearly outlines objectives, methodology, timeline, and budget. Tailor the proposal to meet the goals and priorities of the grant program.
4. **Gather Required Documents:** Collect all necessary documents such as financial statements, organizational information, resumes of key personnel, letters of support, and any additional materials requested in the application guidelines.
5. **Write a Grant Application:** Follow the application instructions provided by the grantor. This typically involves completing an online application form and uploading the required documents.
6. **Review and Edit the Application:** Before submitting, carefully review the application for any errors or inconsistencies. It's helpful to have someone else review the application as well to provide feedback.
7. **Prepare a Budget:** Develop a detailed budget that outlines how grant funds will be used. Include all project-related expenses, including salaries, supplies, equipment, travel, and overhead costs.
8. **Submit the Application:** Submit the completed application before the deadline. Make sure to submit all required documents and double-check that the application is complete.
9. **Manage Grant Funds:** If the application is successful, carefully manage the grant funds according to the terms and conditions outlined in the grant agreement. Keep accurate records of expenses and progress toward project goals. However, if the application isn't successful, consider requesting feedback from the grantor to understand areas for improvement.

Recommendations

This section connects findings to actions that Cecil County's towns can take to promote economic growth.

1. Each town should hold individual events where downtown areas partner with and are sponsored by small businesses.

As the findings suggest, small businesses, especially those with a social element, are essential to downtown growth. Due to the importance of small business growth and infrastructure to help businesses thrive, we recommend that each municipality should hold events where towns can partner with small businesses and small businesses can sponsor events. Cecil County has sponsored events such as Winter Lights Cecil Nights, a county-wide event. Towns can recreate events in a similar style to promote their businesses. A smaller, local event can allow more sponsorship and promotion of small businesses in the downtown area. Partnering with small businesses can come in the form of food trucks, giveaways, or sponsorships.

Offering incentives to businesses to expand into downtown areas is an important part of economic growth and development. Municipalities should partner with the Chambers of Commerce to determine best practices for driving business growth. The Cecil County Chamber of Commerce can also partner with businesses to help them expand. Inviting and partnering with Chambers of Commerce will provide small businesses with resources and spark economic

growth. This can be a resource for businesses that can help them create a business plan, find partners, and advertise (Cecil County Chamber of Commerce).

These events can be publicized in the Cecil Whig, Upcoming Events section of the Cecil Daily newspaper, posted on Facebook, and in other media in nearby towns or states to draw a wide audience to the downtowns. New small businesses can also be promoted through county websites and the newspaper. Hosting events and supporting small businesses will attract residents to downtown areas and encourage economic growth. These events can also inspire community engagement and help community members play an active role in downtown life.

2. Cecil County should continue to invest in community spaces and in infrastructure and broadband in downtown areas.

Investing in community spaces, perhaps using grant money to build business spaces, will provide resources for Cecil County residents and small business owners. Expanding on projects that build infrastructure, such as the broadband project and other updated infrastructure projects, will incentivize and encourage new small businesses in downtown areas. Public-private partnerships are a tool to expand infrastructure and the County should plan new infrastructure projects to promote business development in downtown areas.

Improved landscaping and infrastructure, such as various social spaces, are important to attract residents to downtown areas. Art, main street

revitalization, and improved nature and community spaces are investments in downtown areas that make it easier for businesses to grow.

Supporting new business owners will help entrepreneurs expand in downtown areas. Similarly, it is important that all towns connect with small business owners to determine the needs of downtown residents and entrepreneurs. Many grants aim to support small businesses. Publicizing these grants to small business owners will help fund downtown areas.

3. Cecil County should continue to invest in historic preservation using facade restoration and the Main Street America's Four Point Approach.

To enhance the County's preservation and revitalization efforts it's imperative to prioritize facade retention in renovation and new construction projects, preserving historical character while accommodating modern needs. The Route 40 Business Revitalization Program and county-level funding through the Maryland Facade Improvement Program can support local initiatives.

Also, implementing Main Street America's Four Point Approach, advocated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is key to rejuvenating older downtown areas by focusing on design, pedestrian-friendly environments, local business support, and community building. Collaboration with the Main Street Maryland Program can further tailor approaches to Cecil County, building on successful models like Main Street Chestertown, to sustain and expand revitalization efforts.

4. Cecil County should continue its current approach to tourism while also giving residents opportunities to share ideas for new attractions.

Cecil County's robust tourism industry is already an asset to the County's economic development. The county's natural, historical, and cultural offerings offer a range of options and tourist appeal. Cecil County could boost its tourism industry by encouraging residents to think of additional aspects of the County that could draw visitors; some locals may have creative ideas for new attractions. To generate excitement and involve residents, the County could elevate participants as tourism "ambassadors" or "innovators." Even if residents don't have fresh ideas for tourism, inspiring them to share about existing attractions with their business and social networks could be beneficial. Residents' voices are inherently more personal than those of County officials and may have greater influence with visitors.

5. Cecil County should survey residents to identify community needs and desires.

Engaging the community in the economic development discussion would be a promising research tool. Cecil County should distribute a survey to citizens and businesses to identify the programs and events that are working and areas needing improvement. Citizens can provide vital information for various events, shops, restaurants, etc. that would be successful in downtown areas. Business owners can provide opportunities for partnerships and events.

Surveys should be distributed at county events to gather feedback on participants' interest levels and likelihood of attending again. Surveys could be

conducted by local government employees or through QR codes in flyers or areas surrounding an event.

The surveys should include general questions relevant to all eight towns and questions about specific towns. Community participation can lead to an engaged community and revitalization.

A sample survey in Appendix A is a starting point for the county and specific municipalities to create and release their own surveys.

Discussion

This paper outlines best practices for economic growth and development in small towns. Its findings and recommendations are tailored to Cecil County and its eight downtown areas. Based on extensive research, using literature reviews and client interviews, it outlines best practices for economic development in Cecil County.

The findings outline four themes: the importance of small businesses, appealing to a community niche, attracting tourists, and community engagement. Based on these findings, municipalities should partner with small businesses for local events, continued investment in local infrastructure, and community engagement.

Further, the findings point out the importance of investing in community spaces and infrastructure projects, to empower County residents and business owners, fostering downtown development and new business models.

Another key finding is the need for Cecil County to engage the community in economic development discussions, perhaps by surveys of citizens and businesses. Additionally, the findings show the importance of Cecil County continuing to engage in historic preservation, including facade restoration and using Main Street America's Four Point Approach.

These findings and recommendations can be applied to each downtown area and guide future economic development strategies. These recommendations should help Cecil County's downtown areas generate more business, tourism, and revenue.

However, all the recommendations highlight the importance of planning and engagement. We believe that program monitoring and evaluation are important for a prosperous economic future. Cecil County and its municipalities should continuously check in on its policies, program progress, and desired outcomes to ensure development goals are being met.

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Appendix

Sample Community Engagement Survey

General Survey Questions

1. What businesses, restaurants, or retail stores would you be interested in having in your community?
2. How active are you in community events?
3. How do you hear about community events?
4. How can the local government better support your engagement in your community?
5. What new spaces are you looking for in your downtown areas?
6. What excites you about your downtown areas?

Event Survey Questions

1. How did you hear about this event?
2. How would you rate this event?
3. How likely are you to share your experience at this event with others?
4. How likely are you to attend this event, or an event similar, in the future?
5. What did you like about this event?
6. In what ways can this event improve in the future?
7. Is there an event that you would like to see in your community?

Municipality-Specific Survey Questions

1. How important is maintaining a historic atmosphere in your downtown area?
2. Do you feel that your downtown is modernized?
3. Do you feel local governments use environmental attractions appropriately?