

## **Downtown Revitalization Visits in South Carolina and Georgia**

May 2013

I travelled in North and South Carolina and Georgia, visiting several towns and cities with previous downtown revitalization projects. The take-away messages I understood are that revitalization efforts can work and that transportation is a key aspect of success, as is adequate signage and information for visitors. Here are highlights. Photos are available.

### **Charlestown, SC**

Charleston's population 2013 estimate is 125,000. Charleston has approximately 4.5 million visitors a year who generate an estimated economic impact of \$3.2 billion. One of Charleston's attractions for visitors is its large historic district. Charleston is a regional medical and educational center, as well as a significant port and naval center. A free bus connects all areas of downtown with hospitals, hotels and the historic district. This bus-trolley (a bus customized to look like an old fashioned trolley but with wheelchair access) runs from 7am to 9pm.

Charlestown made a major commitment to historic preservation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This commitment did not falter when, in 1989, Hurricane Hugo inflicted nearly \$3 billion in damages to the area.

The historic district has a large City Market area of booths for artisans, farmers, food vendors that stretches about 3 city blocks. A pedestrian car-free area allows access to more shops and kiosks, including spots for tickets to tour the historic district by carriage or bus. The city specifies several routes through the historic district and allows only a few carriages or vehicles on each route at each time. This minimizes congestion and keeps residential districts from being overwhelmed. The city collects a head tax on each passenger.

Charleston is a cultural center for South Carolina and draws visitors to several of its musical and other events. Hotels have information about the downtown and historic areas. Way finding signs are infrequent in the districts themselves.

**Georgetown, SC** has a population of about 9,200 and an economy based on its port, pulp mills and steel plant. Heritage tourism has become an important part of the economy and retirees have begun to move to the area. The historic district has about 50 homes, buildings and other sites, some on the National Register. Despite its small size and the proximity of the paper and steel mills, Georgetown has a vital (and revitalized) downtown that is attractive to visitors and serves both visitors and locals with a variety of retail and commercial services. The main street is wide, with wide sidewalks, trees, benches or chairs in front of businesses. The wide cement sidewalks have large brick areas for wheelchair access and turnaround. Businesses have fabric awnings for shade. Shop windows are large and inviting. A Harbor

Walk has been recently installed. The walk is made of planks. About four blocks long, shops have entrances that back onto the Walk, condos looking out onto the Walk and river and short ramps to small docks for 2-3 boats. Two small museums that feature Georgetown's history are located on the main street. There are no formal tours of the historic residential district, but it is easy to drive or walk through the tree shaded streets.

**Beaufort, SC** has a population of about 12,500. Its economy seems largely based on nearby military installations and their associated employment. Tourism has become a significant part of its economy with about 2 million visitors to Beaufort and the surrounding area. Festivals and other events draw people to Beaufort, especially in the spring and fall. Beaufort has a historic area noted for its ante bellum architecture and listed on the National Register. However, the downtown is now mostly reserved for visitors and the commercial services for locals are along the major highways. Poor signage makes it difficult to find the historic core and maps are not easily found at hotels or public places. The harbor area has a parking lot but the area in general, except for some restaurants, is not developed to attract visitors. Again, signage is limited. No pathway encourages walkers to explore the harbor. Although Beaufort boasts its history, it does not seem to this visitor to make exploration easy for visitors.

### **Savannah, GA**

Savannah has a population of about 143,000 and an economy based on its port, manufacturing, the military and tourism. Approximately 12 million visitors spend \$2 billion per year and generate employment for 17,000. These visitors are especially attracted to Savannah's rich history. Savannah sets itself up for pleasant tourism experience.

In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, downtown Savannah had been largely abandoned as commerce moved to the newer suburban areas. City fathers wanted to build parking garages and tear down the "old" buildings. Luckily, not too many were destroyed before Savannah made a commitment to historic preservation and the visitor industry.

Savannah's downtown area, which includes the Savannah Historic District, the Savannah Victorian Historic District and 22 park squares with fountains or statuary, is one of the largest National Historic Landmark Districts in the United States. Downtown Savannah largely retains the original town plan prescribed by founder George Oglethorpe. In addition, the riverfront harbor area has a Riverwalk, plaza and a Factor's walk, all using the original harbor area and historic commercial buildings now with residential and retail uses.

Maps of the districts are easily available. Several tour companies market historic tours and sell tickets at hotels and downtown locations, including along a pedestrian only street. Retail businesses also distribute maps. Everyone is friendly and welcoming to visitors. Several museums explain Savannah's

history and direct people to historic sites. The Visitor's Information Center is accessible by free transit, has a large parking lot, and several smaller sites around town.

The DOT (**D**owntown **T**ransportation) system provides fare free transportation in the Historic District. Services include shuttle buses (every 20 minutes), the River Street Streetcar (out of service when I was there), and a free ferry to Hutchinson Island and the Savannah International Trade and Convention Center. The buses have a distinctive logo and color that distinguishes them from the area transit buses.

### Summary

It was fun to visit these very different cities and see that they were successful in creating vibrant downtowns that were attractive to locals and visitors by stressing their historic character, making the most of waterfront with walkways, and providing free transit between lodgings and places of interest.