Revitalization Plan for Cornelia
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For the last decade, Cornelia, Georgia, in Habersham County, has suffered a fate common to many downtown areas: When big chain stores open, local businesses shut their doors.

Earlier this year, Cornelia’s mayor, J.C. Irby, proposed creating a revitalization plan for Cornelia. The question was how to bring businesses—along with visitors—back to the historic downtown area.

The revitalization plan idea would dovetail with two previous and ongoing Archway projects in Cornelia: A Retail Market Analysis and a Gateway Corridors Master Plan. The Retail Market Analysis showed that Cornelia’s retail market reflects a healthy mix of store sectors, and the Gateway Corridors Master Plan included a landscape design for Cornelia’s city entrances.

After the revitalization plan was unanimously accepted by Habersham’s Archway Executive Committee, Rick Story connected the town’s Downtown Development Authority with Kevin Trexler, an Archway graduate assistant and MBA student from the University of Georgia’s Terry College of Business. Trexler then generated a strategic marketing plan for Cornelia incorporating economic, education, and workforce development.

The process began on September 27, 2013. The plan asked simple but direct questions and made recommendations about future considerations deemed necessary to sustainability of a revitalized downtown Cornelia. For instance, are the streets clean and are the buildings in good shape? Is the town prepared to work for the long haul?

The plan also pointed out that in order to succeed, Cornelia would have to make a change from its reality to its hoped-for ideal. The ideal: get visitors and consumers walking downtown among the turn-of-the-century buildings surrounding the old train depot. The reality: few customers spend time in “unique” shops and few businesses are open into the evenings.

The recommendations included posting directional signage to downtown, updating city ordinances, cleaning up the streets, and focusing energy on the train depot. Other novel ideas included using the city’s agrarian history to attract people to the downtown farmer’s market and create activities to entice churchgoers to stay in Cornelia on Sundays.

In this vein, the plan asked several more straight-forward questions to determine feasibility. For example, where will visitors eat? Can infrastructure handle additional capacity?

The plan was presented on December 4, 2013, to the Habersham’s Archway Executive Committee and on December 5th to the Downtown Development Authority. City officials instantly saw the value in aligning strategies and focusing on tough questions.

“With this common community goal in place and a good road map of how to accomplish it, the possibilities for economic development and sustainability of downtown Cornelia are limitless,” says Heather Sinyard, Cornelia’s Downtown Manager.

Advancing Community Priorities:
The revitalization plan advances the community’s priorities of propelling economic development plans for the future with a coherent vision, and educates the population to think about the town’s history while providing the workforce with possible new avenues for employment.