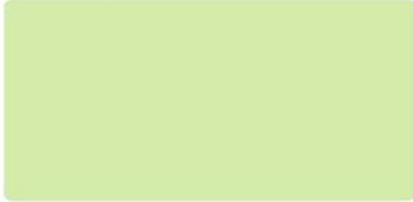
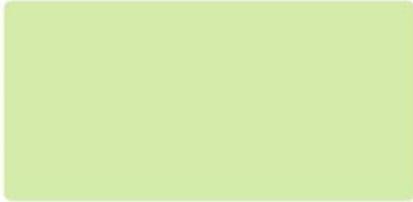


Sustainable Communities in Appalachia

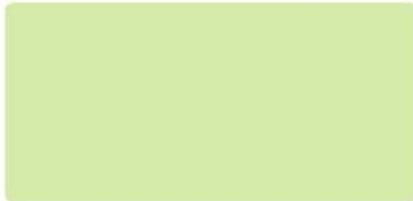
Technical Assistance Program



Strengthening
Community Livability:
Actions and Strategies for
North Wilkesboro, NC



October 28, 2014



1. Community Story

North Wilkesboro is a town of about 4,200 people in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The town was founded in 1891 when railroad tracks reached Wilkes County along the north side of the Yadkin River. North Wilkesboro quickly sprung up as the industrial center of Wilkes County, while Wilkesboro remained the county seat and center of government. The railroad brought jobs in the timber, glass, and furniture industries. The town also played an important role in the advent of stock car racing and is home to the North Wilkesboro Motor Speedway, one of the original NASCAR tracks. The town is also the birthplace of Lowe's, the national home improvement company.

Today, like many small towns in the Appalachian region, North Wilkesboro is going through a period of economic transition. Many of the original industries and startup companies have left. Lowe's moved its corporate headquarters to the Charlotte area, and the speedway hosted its last NASCAR race in 1996. While some industrial and

corporate jobs continue to support the regional economy, including the Tysons chicken processing plant and a call center for Lowe's, the town is focusing its economic development efforts around its unique assets. These include a walkable historic downtown, access to the Blue Ridge Mountains, the local arts and crafts culture, local foods, and its popular festivals.

North Wilkesboro is already tapping into the value of its cultural and agricultural assets through the Merlefest, which each spring brings thousands of people to town to celebrate and enjoy traditional Appalachian music, and the Brushy Mountain Apple Festival, which is one of the largest arts and crafts festivals in the Southeast. The Town is now looking to build on its successful festivals and reputation as a cultural hub of Wilkes County by expanding its farmers' market into the Yadkin Valley Marketplace. This project will move the Wilkes County Farmers' Market from a park on the outskirts of the downtown to



Figure 1 - Main Street images, North Wilkesboro

Principles of Livability

- Provide more transportation choices
- Promote equitable, affordable housing
- Enhance economic competitiveness
- Support existing communities
- Coordinate and leverage federal policies & investment
- Value communities and neighborhoods

a central location that is only one block from the town's most prominent intersection and across the street from its historic train depot. The Town hopes to leverage redevelopment of the Depot and revitalization of its downtown by moving the market into a permanent site at 9th Street and the Central Business District Loop, and expanding the programming to include more arts, crafts, local food vendors, and programs.

The Town also has plans to improve the streetscape of Main Street in an effort to make it more walkable and attractive. However, this plan, like several others prepared by the town, has not moved forward as quickly as some officials and citizens would like. One of the important underlying issues in the town is that it has prepared several plans that have identified more projects than it can realistically implement. The Town is in search of a roadmap forward that will identify the most important projects to advance in the near term the most prominent of which is to make progress on developing the Yadkin Valley Marketplace at the 9th street lot downtown.

North Wilkesboro's vision for the Yadkin Valley Marketplace and its Main Street improvements made it a natural fit for the Sustainable Communities in Appalachia program. This program, conducted through a partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), supports community planning in small towns and cities throughout the Appalachian region that want to improve community livability and strengthen their local food system. The agencies selected North Wilkesboro as one of nine communities to receive technical assistance in 2014.

Livability is a fairly new term for describing several timeless concepts in community planning. Cities and towns that are focused on improving livability, including North Wilkesboro, are taking steps to increase transportation choices so that people can walk, bike, or drive to meet their daily needs; add affordable housing close to work, school, and shops; diversify their economies to increase resiliency; and encourage growth and development in existing neighborhoods that already have supporting infrastructure in place.

Many cities and towns also found that supporting local foods is an effective way to attract investment and bring more people to traditional downtown areas. One community that participated in the Sustainable Communities in Appalachia program - New Albany, Miss. - has experienced this benefit first hand since moving its Biscuits and Jam Farmers' Market to a temporary downtown location in 2012. Downtown vendors have reported on average a 25 percent increase in business on the second Saturday of each month, when the market expands to include folk art and music. North Wilkesboro is working to leverage similar economic development opportunities, using the farmers' market to attract people downtown and help them visit shops on Main Street, and generally bring more activity and foot traffic downtown.

North Wilkesboro's participation in the Sustainable Communities in Appalachia program included a two-day workshop that provided the information and ideas on which this action plan is based. The Town is also eligible for an implementation award from ARC of up to \$20,000 to help advance one or more of the ideas identified in this plan. The following sections describe the workshop and process leading to the action plan, describe the Town's vision and values that are guiding its investments, and lays out a series of initiatives and next steps the Town can take to realize its vision of a more livable future.

2. Community Engagement

A centerpiece of North Wilkesboro's participation in the program was a two-day workshop that brought together key stakeholders from the town and officials from regional, state, and federal agencies that are in a position to help North Wilkesboro achieve its vision. One of the greatest benefits of the workshop was the development of new relationships within the town and between town stakeholders and these regional, state and federal agencies. Participants in the workshop included elected officials; local business owners; local farmers; the North Carolina Department of Transportation; the Downtown North Wilkesboro Partnership; Wilkes County; the Wilkes County School District; the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project; the Health Foundation; and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, along with program sponsors EPA, USDA-RD, and ARC.

Participants worked to improve upon a plan to move the Wilkes County Farmers' Market to a new downtown location and expand it with new programs and offerings under the Yadkin Valley Marketplace name. They also worked to identify actions from existing Town plans that will improve the connection from the market to Main Street, allowing the expanded market to leverage economic development throughout the downtown area. The workshop started with a tour of key sites in the city including Main Street, a former industrial site that is now the town's Block 46 redevelopment area, the future Yadkin Valley Marketplace, the historic train depot, the Wilkes Art Gallery, and park space. A two-day work session involving more than 25 participants followed the tour. This first day included presentations on livability and the importance of local food systems, and a discussion about the attendees' vision for the city's future. The second day explored North Wilkesboro's goals and potential actions to achieve them, resulting in a refined concept plan for the Yadkin Valley Marketplace site. The goal was to make the Marketplace a vibrant public space not only when the market is in session, but throughout the year. The workshop was just one event, albeit an important one, in the Town's participation in the Sustainable Communities in Appalachia Program. The steps in the process that resulted in this action plan are described in Figure 3 below.



Figure 2 - Workshop photos, day 2, site design and programming exercises followed by action planning.

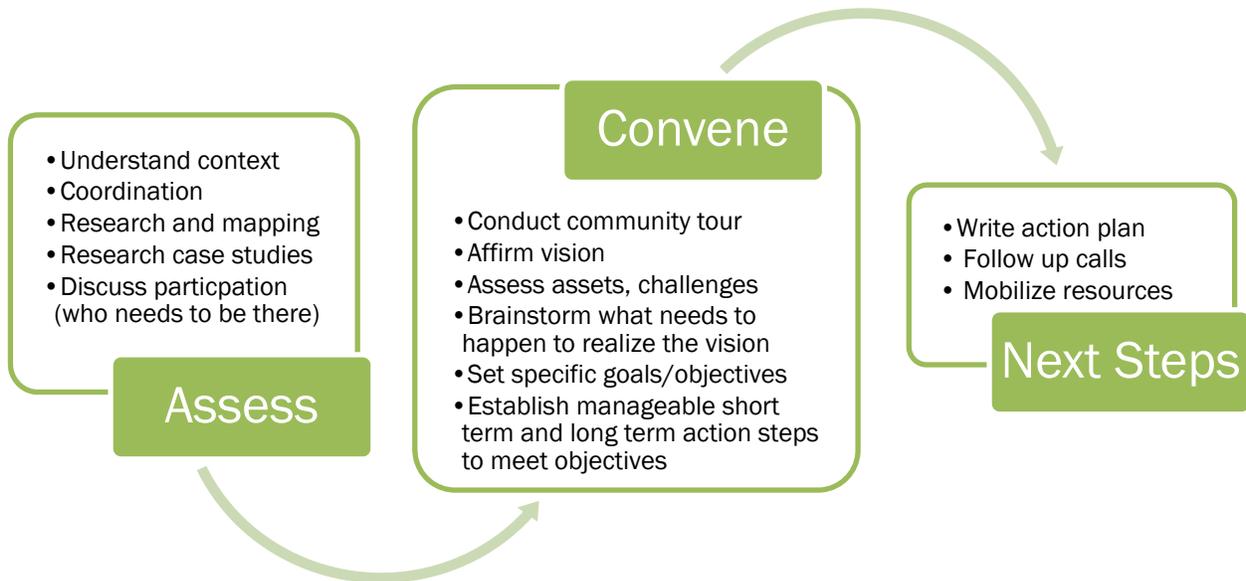


Figure 3 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

3. Underlying the Action Plan – Values, Vision, Issues, & Opportunities

Strengthening the local food system is a key component of the Town’s vision of a vibrant and authentic downtown, filled with local shops and products that represent the Yadkin Valley and the mountains of western North Carolina. The workshop facilitators led exercises and discussions that helped participants articulate specific goals and actions to achieve the vision.

First, workshop attendees shared what they believe about downtown North Wilkesboro and the Yadkin Valley Marketplace. This exercise revealed several themes and pointed to some specific values that are captured in the Word Cloud in Figure 4 below. They describe North Wilkesboro as a community of people that value local unique places, working together to solve problems, attracting new young families, improving health, and supporting local businesses. This action plan identifies the top projects and some design considerations for the Yadkin Valley Marketplace that are consistent with these values.

Figure 4 - Word Cloud of Things People Value about Downtown North Wilkesboro and the Yadkin Valley Marketplace



Citizens and workshop attendees also participated in an exercise during the first session of the workshop that revealed some of their hopes for the future. They broke into small groups and created a hypothetical news headline from 20 years into the future that describes a significant event that has happened, or milestone achieved, in North Wilkesboro. The headlines from this exercise were:

- North Wilkesboro Named the Healthiest Community in America.
- North Wilkesboro Celebrates Success of Local Distilleries with Frank Foster Concert.
- Downtown North Wilkesboro is the Premier Retirement Community in the Blue Ridge.
- Assisted Living Farmers' and Craft Market Opens for Season.

While some of the headlines are humorous, they reveal a desire in the community to grow from within, tapping into the existing assets of its people, place, and natural environment. North Wilkesboro is situated in a beautiful part of the country with deep traditions in arts, crafts, and agriculture. These can be a source of the Town's economic renewal and growth in the future. Workshop participants turned their attention during the second day to identifying specific actions that will help North Wilkesboro realize its vision. The outcomes of these discussions are summarized in the next section and presented in more detail in Appendix A.

4. Action Plan for Implementation

An important conclusion from the workshop is that achieving North Wilkesboro's vision of a vibrant downtown filled with successful local businesses and anchored by the Yadkin Valley Marketplace will require new partnerships and funding resources. The Town has identified many projects and programs in prior plans that would move it towards this vision, but lacks the financial resources to implement most of them. The workshop narrowed the Town's focus on three major goals (Figure 5) and a focused set of actions to achieve each one. The action plan is based around these three major goals for the downtown. The goals are shown overlapping in the diagram to demonstrate that they are all related to the overarching vision and goal of improving livability for all of North Wilkesboro's citizens.



Figure 5 Major goals of the action plan.

Corresponding actions are outlined below for each of the major goals listed in Figure 5. The goals are listed in their more specific form below, and each is accompanied by a set of actions to achieve the goal. The goals and actions are also presented in Appendix A with additional information about the time frame, lead person or agency, a list of supporting people and agencies, funding sources, cost estimates, and some near term steps to keep the momentum going.

Goal 1: Rethink the design and programming of the Yadkin Valley Marketplace to make it a successful place 365 days per year.

- **Action 1.1** - Reach out to existing farmers' market vendors to gather input from everyone on how the market should grow and evolve.
- **Action 1.2** - Start a "Local Foods Restaurant Walk" focused on getting people connected to the Yadkin Valley Marketplace and downtown.
- **Action 1.3** - Reach out to the Wilkes Art Gallery and art community to get feedback on integrating art into future Yadkin Valley Marketplace.
- **Action 1.4** - Develop a revised concept plan for the Yadkin Valley Marketplace that considers the ideas discussed during the Sustainable Communities in Appalachia workshop.
- **Action 1.5** - Create a new committee under the Downtown North Wilkesboro Partnership to manage the Yadkin Valley Marketplace and the site.
- **Action 1.6** - Revisit the farmers' market bylaws to ensure they still meet the goals of the farmers' market.

Goal 2: Target walkability improvements to Main Street and the streets that connect Main Street with the Yadkin Valley Marketplace.

- **Action 2.1** - Install curb extensions at the intersection of 9th and Main Streets.
- **Action 2.2** - Install way-finding signage directing people to the historic downtown and to key destinations in the downtown area, such as the Yadkin Valley Marketplace.
- **Action 2.3** - Improve the streetscape on Main Street from 4th Street to the CBD Loop. This will include new sidewalks, curb ramps, street trees, street lights, and underground utilities.
- **Action 2.4** - Improve walkability from the Yadkin Valley Marketplace to Main Street.
- **Action 2.5** - Extend the Yadkin Valley Greenway along the rail line that runs behind the train depot and connect Block 46 into the greenway system with a bridge over the Reddies River.
- **Action 2.6** - Improve the walkway that runs along the police department (at 8th/Main) and connects Main Street with the Yadkin Valley Marketplace. The improvements could include way-finding signage, human-scale lighting, seating, flowers, and public art.

Goal 3: Beautify Main Street and adjoining streets through low cost interventions and partnerships with businesses and other agencies.

- **Action 3.1** - Transform portions of the concrete walls that form three sides of the Yadkin Valley Marketplace into living walls (plantings).
- **Action 3.2** - Partner with sponsors to add flower pots, beds, and street trees where possible along Main Street.

5. Design and Programming Concepts

Workshop participants spent a half-day session devoted to thinking through some design considerations and programming concepts for the market property. They started by reviewing a few “best practices” for creating a public space that is well-utilized, using images of existing elements in the downtown area of North Wilkesboro. This presentation is in Appendix F. Various time-lines for projects and initiatives were explored that could influence the use of the parking deck plaza, which is currently situated at the future site of the Yadkin Valley Marketplace. This portion focused on identifying the programmatic needs of a space that could be improved upon and utilized immediately, while still allowing for the flexibility of use that is needed to accommodate the growth of the farmers market over time as well as the impacts of the business activity generated by the development of Block 46 and other nearby properties.

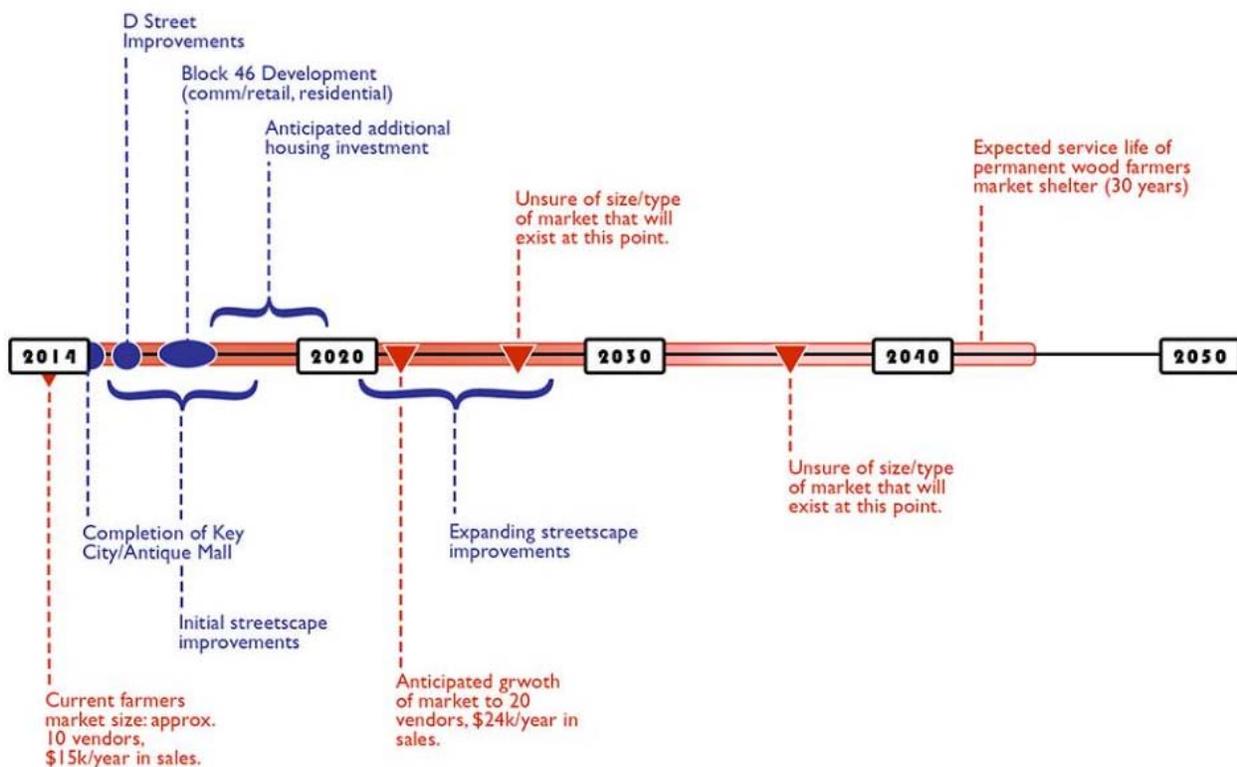


Figure 6 - Results of the timeline exercise.

From the timeline exercise the group learned that much business and downtown development will happen in the next 5 years and the growth of the farmers markets (both what is desired by the participating farmers and what is possible) could take much longer, especially considering the current lack of producers in the immediate area willing to sell at the market. Therefore, the construction of market structures that are flexible both in their use (encouraging non-farmers market use of the space) and their layout and capacity will better serve the short and long-term needs of the North Wilkesboro community. Participants expressed the need for design solutions to be flexible in size, use, and configuration to allow for a more dynamic and multi-purpose public amenity than the currently proposed market shelter building and configuration.

The participants talked about the particular assets and challenges of the plaza site. Participants worked in three groups, and the following graphic summarizes the lessons learned:

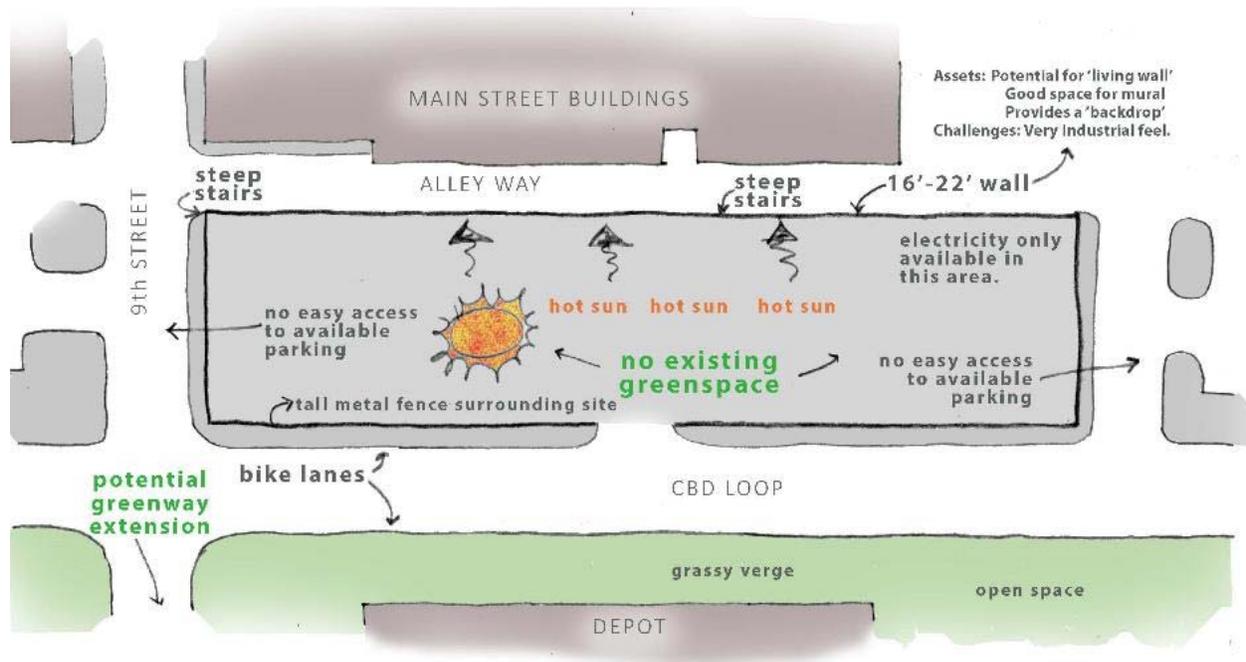


Figure 7 - Graphic summarizing strengths, features and assets of site in its current condition.

Many aspects of the site, such as the sun and the high wall, are seen as both assets and challenges. Proximity to the Main Street and 9th Street intersection and the potential for linkages to a proposed greenway extension make the plaza a particularly good “node” for public space in North Wilkesboro.

Workshop participants listed a number of elements that they would like to see included in the plaza design:

- Space for local musicians to perform
- Potential for Merlefest to expand to include this site in some activities
- A larger variety and quantity of fresh produce, accessible for SNAP/EBT
- Wireless capability
- Cooking demonstrations and nutrition education during farmers market
- Programmed activities throughout the week (and throughout the year) to draw people to the space: art classes, other community gatherings
- Shady places and plants that will help to break up the space and provide shelter from the hot sun
- Better access from the street and nearby parking lots
- Connection to the depot and the proposed greenway extension, possibly linking to the people who workout at the nearby gym
- An entryway that is inviting
- Murals
- Living walls

- Shade and rain structure for farmers market as well as other activities
- Clean restrooms
- Lighting
- Specific to the farmers market:
 - 12-foot center aisles
 - 10x20' stall spaces, with plenty of room for trucks to back in and out
 - Vendor parking
 - Parking solution for market patrons that have accessibility issues

Workshop participants worked within three small groups to discuss site designs that responded to those programmatic elements, and several themes emerged which are listed below. The images from the workshop sketch sessions are included in Appendix B

- The “pocket park” area (tree grove, planted areas, park seating, etc.) should stay on the western end of the park: the proximity to the 9th and Main Street node make this end the ideal “entrance” to the park, and trees on this end will help mitigate the hot afternoon sun coming from the west.
- The stage should probably be on the eastern end because that is where the electrical service is, and—more importantly—since most performances will be in the afternoon or early evening, it would be more comfortable for the crowd to not face the setting sun. The stage can include a shade structure such that the performers are protected from the harshest angles of the sun. Additionally, the suggestion was made that the stage can be set at an angle in the northeast corner of the plaza so that it is not facing directly west.
- There was much discussion about the location of a market structure: one suggestion was for the market to be located centrally—perhaps even on a raised platform—so that it would exist as a central feature of the market. Although this would present accessibility challenges for visitors with mobility issues, the core idea of making a shaded market structure the central feature of the plaza is highly workable.
- Other participants suggested building shaded market structures on the periphery—along the high wall lining the northern edge of the plaza, as well as along the southern and eastern edges of the plaza, creating a more defined public space similar to urban squares or plazas that are typically surrounded by buildings or outdoor market stalls. This creates a more flexible public space and also helps to define the plaza as a “place” and not simply a walk-through area.
- Parking considerations remain a concern, and there are several unknowns that once resolved will provide clarity on how much parking is needed, and how close to the plaza site it should be. The rehabilitation and use of the Depot, the development of Block 46, the impact of other downtown streetscape improvements, and the potential for extending the greenway along the railed across the CBD loop all play a role in determining the parking type and amount needed. Workshop participants also pointed out the need to balance convenience and accessibility for lower-mobility visitors with public safety and the “greening” of the plaza.

Following the workshop, the consultant team produced a number of visualizations to illustrate some concepts and desired design features expressed during the workshop exercise.

Figure 8 depicts a pleasant, pedestrian gateway entrance at the corner of 9th Street and the CBD Loop. Workshop participants identified the need for a better, more accessible entryway

to the marketplace—a gateway that would establish a better sense of place, as well as one that would connect to the 9th and Main Street, Block 46, and the Depot nodes.

Figure 9 illustrates how the addition of street trees along the edge of the lot could both offer shade and “soften” the industrial feel of the property. There was much discussion about the solar aspect of the market property—shade structures built on the site would provide little protection from the sun due to the southern exposure, but the use of street trees on the south side would provide some shade, in addition to softening the industrial feel.

Figure 10 shows how the addition of trees to the interior, as well as a decorated mural along the rear retaining wall could serve to enliven the space and soften the industrial feel. Workshop participants shared mural ideas that illustrate the history of North Wilkesboro and specifically this location adjacent to the depot that revolved around trains, railways, and the different products of note that have been produced in the region over its history. The addition of trees within the park site may be problematic, and the city should consult permitting records to determine the depth and configuration of the concrete pavement and any footers that remain from its use as a parking deck before proceeding too far in the design process.

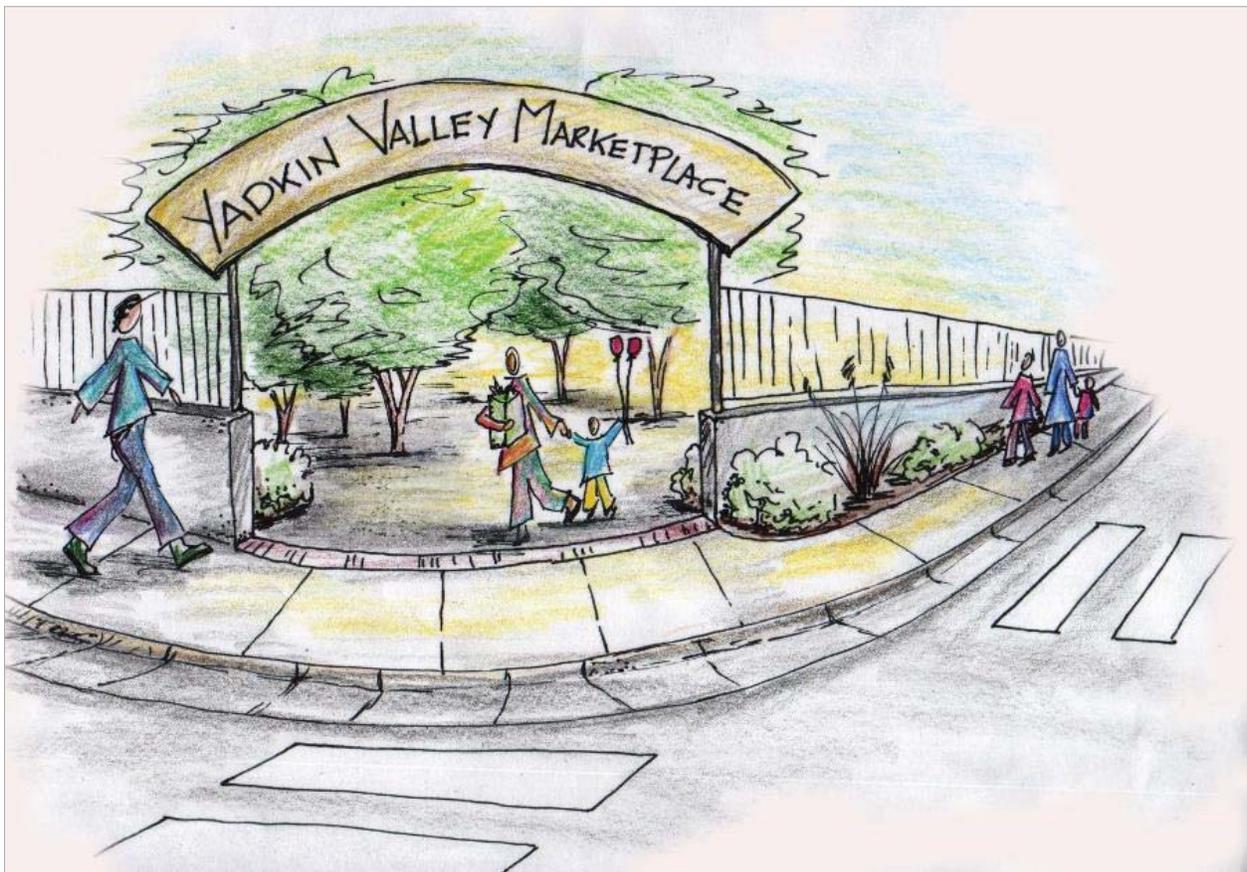


Figure 8 - Illustration of a pedestrian entrance at the corner of 9th and CBD Loop.



Figure 9 - Photo rendering depicting the addition of street trees and a pedestrian entrance.



Figure 10 - Photo rendering showing addition of trees and a mural.

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In addition, as an alternative to a permanent structure for the farmers' market there are a number of temporary, yet safe and attractive, shelters options available. Below are some examples of temporary structures that could provide more flexible use of the space while still allowing for the shade and comfort of both the farmer's market vendors and patrons, as well as visitors of the space year round. These structures allow for greater flexibility for non-farmers market uses such as community events, small group gatherings, and everyday use, as well as allowing for easy removal of the shade structure in the case of strong winds, though many of the design shown below are rated for up to 80 mph winds.



Figure 11 - Examples of tensile shade structures, Las Vegas, NV, <http://www.tensionstructures.com/portfolio.htm>.



Figure 12 - Community Church, Vero Beach Florida. <http://www.tenshon.com/>.



Figure 13 - Or the site could be outfitted with a number of tensile umbrellas
[:http://shadesails.com/galleries/commercial/tensile-umbrellas](http://shadesails.com/galleries/commercial/tensile-umbrellas).

The existing plaza area is the original base level of a 2-story parking deck which presents a number of potential construction difficulties, especially in relation to the planting of trees and shrubs. An exact assessment of the current site situation can be made through researching the permits that were required to build the original parking deck and conducting concrete scanning with ground penetrating radar or x-ray machines to determine depth, location of footings, and the existence of any reinforcing steel imbedded in the concrete.

In areas where it is deemed possible to remove portions of concrete for planting trees and other plant material, the root zones for the plants must be protected both from foot traffic compaction and from a lack of drainage. Like many urban trees, those that are planted in this plaza are essentially planted in sub-surface planter boxes: the surrounding compacted soils and concrete serve as barriers to water and air movement. Fifty percent of a tree's roots exist in the top 6 inches of soil, and groundwater flow of rainwater typically happens in the top 3 inches, especially in urban areas that have experienced long-term soil compaction. One way to mitigate these issues is to use "structural soils" and engineered systems to plant trees within the plaza. Cornell University has produced an informative document ¹ about the need for and the creation of structural soil systems for urban environments.

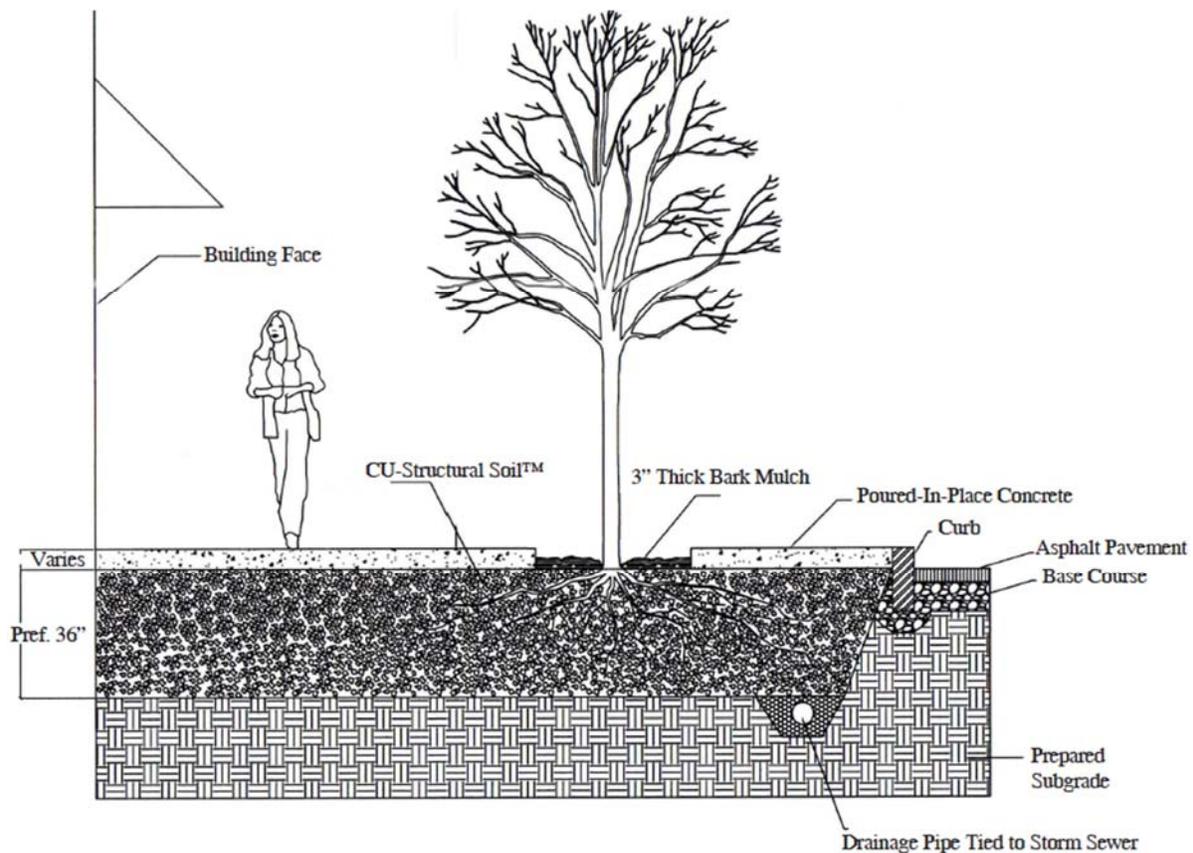


Figure 14 - A cross-section of a structural soil system.
<http://www.hort.cornell.edu/uhi/outreach/pdfs/custructuralsoilwebpdf.pdf>.

¹ Bassuk, Nina. Jason Grabosky, Peter Trowbridge. 2005. Using CU-Structural Soil™ in the Urban Environment. Cornell University, Urban Horticulture Institute.
<http://www.hort.cornell.edu/uhi/outreach/pdfs/custructuralsoilwebpdf.pdf>.

6. Implementation

ARC provided a cash-grant of up to \$20,000 to support implementation of projects or supporting programs identified in the previous section. The Town's top priority is building the Yadkin Valley Marketplace, which is expected to cost \$193,000. As of September 2014, the Town had raised \$100,500 from Wilkes Communications, the Health Foundation, the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, the Town of North Wilkesboro, the Downtown North Wilkesboro Partnership, and the Wilkes County Health Department. The Town has also applied for a \$50,000 "hometown grant" from the Lowe's Charitable and Educational Foundation. The ARC grant would bring the Town close to completely filling the funding gap.²

Key Actions for Potential ARC Grant Support

Following the workshop, North Wilkesboro decided to apply the \$20,000 to the development of....

Livability Principles Advanced through Action Plan

- **Provide more transportation choices:** Building a more walkable Main Street is one of the Town's top priorities, and is the focus of one of this action plan's three goals. The Town also plans to strengthen the pedestrian paths and sidewalks between Main Street and the Yadkin Valley Marketplace. In the longer term, the Town would also like to acquire the former rail right of way on the south side of downtown and extend the Yadkin Valley Greenway along it.
- **Enhance economic competitiveness:** The Yadkin Valley Marketplace will be a cultural hub for the entire Yadkin Valley region. It will be a place where tourists and residents can come to purchase produce and unique arts and crafts from throughout the region. Streetscape improvements that strengthen the connection between Main Street and the Marketplace will also enhance the economy by making it easier for Marketplace shoppers to also visit Main Street businesses. This spillover effect has been pronounced in some small towns, such as New Albany, Mississippi, where downtown businesses saw a 25 percent boost in sales on the Saturday each month when the downtown farmers' market included music, arts, and crafts.
- **Support existing communities:** The Yadkin Valley Marketplace will fill a noticeable gap in the downtown. The former parking deck where the Town plans to build the Marketplace has an austere and industrial feel due to large wall and predominance of concrete. The Yadkin Valley Marketplace will turn that space into an inviting place that welcomes people to downtown and provides a public space where people can congregate and enjoy their Town. It has the potential to be a magnet for people and development, including helping to foster the future redevelopment of the historic train depot.
- **Coordinate and leverage federal policies and investment:** The workshop efforts identified several opportunities to leverage different local, state, and federal funding sources to support the Yadkin Valley Marketplace vision and the walkability

² Storrow, Emily. "New farmers market key part of plans." *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*. September 24, 2014

improvements in downtown. For example, the Town may be able to tap into funding programs from North Carolina DOT, state ARC funds and the USDA-Rural Development office. The workshop also set up North Wilkesboro to tap into ARC implementation assistance at the federal level. Moving forward on the goals of the action plan will take a coordinated effort and will require funds from several different sources. This is especially true for the streetscape improvements that are still unfunded.

- **Value communities and neighborhoods:** The actions identified in this plan will help strengthen the vibrancy of the existing downtown area and increase the attractiveness and livability of the surrounding neighborhoods by providing access to healthy, local foods and expanding transportation choices.

In addition to the implementation support provided by the ARC, Appendix H lists several other federal and state funding sources. The ARC grant could potentially be bundled with other funds to pursue a project beyond the financial limits of the ARC grant.

7. Appendices

- Appendix A: Implementation Action Plan Tables
- Appendix B: Additional Exercise Results (This I believe, Design exercise, etc)
- Appendix C: Information on Wilkes County Food System
- Appendix D: Workshop Participants and Contact Information
- Appendix E: Presentation Slides
- Appendix F: Design Considerations Slideshow (Jen Walker)
- Appendix G: Workshop Photo Album
- Appendix H: Funding Resources
- Appendix I: Additional References and Resources