



"When asked to identify what Macon-Bibb needs to do better to attract and retain young professionals, survey respondents...emphasized improvement in **place-based attributes** such as downtown, housing options, and entertainment outlets..."

- Competitive Assessment

3. Places

EXCERPTS FROM THE COMPETITIVE ASSESSMENT

"A community's most attached residents have strong pride in it, a positive outlook on the community's future, and a sense that it is the perfect place for them...According to the 2010 Soul of the Community report from the Knight Foundation and Gallup...just 19.2 percent of (Macon residents) are 'attached'...a majority, 56.2 percent, are 'not attached.' The three most important factors that attract and attach people to a community are: social offerings (such as entertainment venues and places to meet); aesthetics (physical beauty, green spaces, etc.); and openness (the ability for all kinds of people to build networks and thrive)."

"Just 14.2 percent of survey respondents said they visited downtown for shopping and services. The most commonly cited reasons for visiting downtown Macon were dining options (65.4 percent), special events (64.3), cultural amenities (51.0), and work (41.6)."

"...young professionals also highlighted concerns related to social offerings and aesthetics...Input participants of all ages also described numerous "eyesores" and other aesthetic concerns that negatively impact the community. Vacant lots and boarded up buildings that give the impression that **the 'town is closed up and empty – not alive.'** Participants also described a 'dirty' city with pervasive litter and trash, and **highways and gateways into the city that do not 'send a welcoming message.'**"

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The following statements represent broad objectives that should guide the development and ongoing refinement of tactical recommendations that support the third pillar in our approach to community and economic development: our **Places**.

Develop a vibrant downtown that serves as a place to live, work, visit, and do business.

Beautify our most visible places – our corridors, neighborhoods, and activity centers.

Develop amenities and recreational spaces that are attractive to all ages.

Increase resident and business engagement in community improvement initiatives.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS: SUMMARY

The following strategic recommendations are to be pursued by the *One Macon!* Implementation Committee in support of the aforementioned strategic objectives. Strategic recommendations are not organized by objective as many will support multiple objectives. The following pages provide additional detail on each recommendation, its justification, and the relevant actions.



- 3.1 *Support the process of developing an Urban Core Master Plan.*
- 3.2 *Aid in the implementation of the new Urban Core Master Plan.*
- 3.3 *Advance critical components of the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan.*
- 3.4 *Develop a contest to solicit ideas from residents for community improvement initiatives.*
- 3.5 *Expand the City of Macon's "5x5 program" to the entire community and develop a volunteer component that engages residents and connects them to available beautification resources that can help maintain the targeted areas.*
- 3.6 *Promote travel and tourism by developing new tourism product, enhancing existing product, and supporting the implementation of the Macon-Bibb County Convention and Visitors Bureau's (CVB) Vision 2017 Strategic Plan.*
- 3.7 *Develop a corporate-sponsored community beautification competition and a matching neighborhood beautification grant program.*
- 3.8 *Create a Redevelopment Opportunities database and website.*
- 3.9 *Launch a proactive initiative to recruit new retail investment in the community's key activity centers.*
- 3.10 *Work with area colleges and universities to expand the presence of higher education in downtown Macon.*
- 3.11 *Develop a comprehensive volunteerism initiative – Macon's Million Hour Challenge – that encourages and rewards volunteerism in Macon-Bibb.*
- 3.12 *Develop a strategy to acquire blighted or otherwise vacant parcels throughout the community, either returning the land to productive, revenue-generating uses or developing passive neighborhood parks.*
- 3.13 *Establish a Residential Renovation Grant and Loan program to encourage the redevelopment of properties for residential use in downtown Macon.*
- 3.14 *Support the expansion of Ocmulgee National Monument in keeping with the recent boundary study and ultimate pursuit of a change in status to a National Park*

Places: Strategic Recommendations

3.1 Support the process of developing an Urban Core Master Plan.

Justification: Macon-Bibb County's growth and development around its urban core is currently guided in part by a variety of different plans and strategies, including but not limited to the College Hill Corridor Master Plan, the Second Street Master Plan, the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan, and the Main Street Macon annual workplans. Each of these planning efforts are focused on specific areas of the community – either a few city blocks or a specific corridor – and are not comprehensively linked by a single plan for the larger downtown or “urban core.” The Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority (MBCUDA) has recently solicited proposals from qualified firms to develop a new Urban Core Master Plan to achieve this objective, developing a roadmap to help the community bridge different neighborhoods, property uses, and strategic plans into a single cohesive vision for urban core. The Implementation Committee can and should be actively engaged in the strategic planning process and wholly supportive of its subsequent implementation.

Actions: The Implementation Committee should work with the MBCUDA to identify ways in which it can best support the master planning process, potentially including but not limited to:

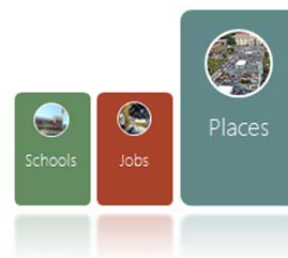
- ✓ Providing strategic guidance to the consultant team as it relates to larger community improvement objectives outlined in the *One Macon!* strategy;
- ✓ Attending and participating in public input sessions such as design charrettes;
- ✓ Helping to publicize and promote the process throughout the community, and;
- ✓ Building support among organizations and institutions that are critical to the master plan's subsequent implementation.

3.2 Aid in the implementation of the new Urban Core Master Plan.

Justification: Macon-Bibb County's growth and development around its urban core is currently guided in part by a variety of different plans and strategies, including but not limited to the College Hill Corridor Master Plan, the Second Street Master Plan, the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan, and the Main Street Macon annual workplans. Each of these planning efforts are focused on specific areas of the community – either a few city blocks or a specific corridor – and are not comprehensively linked by a single plan for the larger downtown or “urban core.” The Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority has recently solicited proposals from qualified firms to develop a new Urban Core Master Plan to achieve this objective, developing a roadmap to help the community bridge different neighborhoods, property uses, and strategic plans into a single cohesive vision for urban core. The Implementation Committee can and should be actively engaged in the strategic planning process and wholly supportive of its subsequent implementation.

Actions: The Implementation Committee should work with the MBCUDA to identify ways in which it can best support the implementation of the Urban Core Master Plan, potentially including but not limited to:

- ✓ Building community support for the plan's recommendations;
- ✓ Identifying and pursuing necessary funding mechanisms for plan implementation, and;
- ✓ Updating the *One Macon!* strategy to accurately reflect the consensus vision for downtown.



3.3 *Help advance critical components of the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan.*

Justification: While this strategy includes a variety of new recommendations that impact downtown Macon and other neighborhoods and activity centers throughout Macon-Bibb County, the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan is a very well developed roadmap for critical initiatives that align with many of this strategy's core objectives. If successfully and fully implemented, the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan will be a truly transformative piece of Macon's history, with both immediate and long-term impacts on residents, businesses, and visitors. While the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan will ultimately be incorporated into a larger Urban Core Master Plan for the entire downtown area (see Recommendations 3.1 and 3.2), it currently contains a strategic focus on a handful of key amenities that were frequently mentioned by residents as among the community's greatest "opportunities" and among the most frequently mentioned items when asked what they would like to see different about the community in 2020.

Actions: Work with representatives from NewTown Macon to identify the ways in which the Steering Committee and its collaborative leadership can most effectively support the timely implementation of the NewTown Macon Strategic Action Plan. While all initiatives have merit, particular attention should be paid to projects that can help catalyze further development and investment. Such priorities include but are by no means limited to:

- ✓ **The Transitional Property Fund:** The Strategic Action Plan proposes the establishment of a fund to help stabilize vacant properties in various states of disrepair through direct purchase and incremental improvements. The goal of the fund is to allow NewTown Macon to serve as a short-term (two year maximum) catalyst for redevelopment before re-introducing the improved properties to the market or transferring title to the Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority. The Steering Committee can assist with the identification of priority projects, the identification of potential private partners to support redevelopment efforts, and the perhaps most importantly, the capitalization of the fund.
- ✓ **Business Incentive Fund:** The establishment of a business fund supporting job creation in downtown can help increase daytime population, the viability of other businesses (particularly restaurants and retail) that depend upon daytime traffic, and potentially help incent the development of new (or redevelopment of existing) office space in a market that currently lacks an abundance of high-quality office space and professional services employment.
- ✓ **Capricorn Studios redevelopment and the construction of an adjacent amphitheater:** The addition of a new amenity for community gatherings is consistent with feedback received by input participants that expressed a desire for more outdoor venues for music and events, while redevelopment of these city blocks will also help fill in an area where greater density can and should be encouraged along an already well landscaped and pedestrian-friendly portion of Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard.
- ✓ **Riverfront mixed-use project and the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail-Ocmulgee Blueway:** The Ocmulgee riverfront is likely one of Macon's best kept secrets and underdeveloped assets. Continued trail developments in terms of connectivity and aesthetics should encourage greater use, and will be complemented tremendously by a new mixed-use development adjacent to downtown that will appeal to those that seek waterfront living, dining, and employment. Riverfront developments have proven to be catalytic projects in communities around the country.

In addition to support for the implementation of the existing Strategic Action Plan, the community and NewTown Macon should begin the process of developing a new master plan for downtown Macon, evaluating potential funding sources for plan development, a timeline for issuing a request for proposals from qualified planning firms, and a timeline for completing plan development that aligns with other organization and strategic objectives.

3.4 *Develop a contest to solicit ideas from residents for community improvement initiatives.*

Justification: A community's residents often have an abundance of untapped and underdeveloped ideas for improving the place that they call "home." Such ideas emerged from the hundreds of residents that participated in online surveys, interviews, and focus groups throughout this process, and have made their way into this strategy. However, many other residents that were not engaged in the community input process have tremendous ideas – large and small – that could transform the community. By providing a forum for residents to submit ideas, discuss these ideas, and vote on the ideas submitted, residents can be empowered to facilitate change in their community.

Actions: Develop a web-based system to solicit ideas for community improvement projects – from public art to streetscaping to new amenities – from residents of Macon-Bibb. Consider utilizing a technology such as MindMixer – an online town hall that enables residents to share and vote on ideas – to facilitate the content. Other similar tools include but are not limited to UserVoice and IdeaScale. Once the technology has been adopted, publicize the contest and begin soliciting resident ideas. Paper surveys or public forums could complement online technologies to allow those without computers or internet access to provide input. Establish Citizen Selection Committees to review the various ideas, with committees organized by either geography (neighborhood) or subject area (type of project). Task the committees with developing a short list of the most viable and impactful suggestions. Once the short list has been developed, solicit votes from residents on the various projects and allow the public to select one project from a variety of categories (potentially geography, subject area, or award size). Selected projects could be funded by public-private funds, with local government and an area foundation each providing 1:1 grants up to a certain level to complement monies donated by the public and raised via crowdfunding using a technology such as Kickstarter, Crowdrise, Crowdfunder, or IndieGoGo.

3.5 *Expand the City of Macon's "5x5 program" to the entire community and develop a volunteer component that engages residents and connects them to available beautification resources that can help maintain the targeted areas.*

Justification: The City's 5x5 program is an initiative whereby enhanced city services are targeted to a five block area for five weeks to beautify the community's neighborhoods and support revitalization. Numerous departments are involved in the collaborative effort, including the Mayor's Office, the Police Department, the Fire Department, Inspection and Fees, Engineering, Public Works, Parks & Recreation, Central Services, Economic and Community Development, and Emergency Management. The program already engages residents by soliciting their input on the specific areas that need services, and encouraging their involvement in clean-up efforts. In Ward I, the program helped remove 18,000 pounds of debris and solid waste, paint more than 8,000 feet of curbs and 200 feet of crosswalks, install 52 new signs, and fix potholes and sidewalks that required patching. The program has been a success and other communities have inquired about its implementation.

Actions: Extend the program to encompass Macon-Bibb County following consolidation. Develop and promote complementary programs that encourage volunteerism and provide funding for ongoing beautification and maintenance in areas that receive targeted services to ensure that the 5x5 program has long-term impacts in the areas that it serves. This could include but is not limited to leveraging the establishment of volunteer Action Teams (see Recommendation 3.11) and the development a community beautification competition and complementary matching grant program (see Recommendation 3.7).

3.6 *Promote travel and tourism by developing new tourism product, enhancing existing product, and supporting the implementation of the Macon-Bibb County Convention and Visitors Bureau's (CVB) Vision 2017 Strategic Plan.*

Justification: Travel and tourism is beginning to pick up once again as the country emerges from the Great Recession; families are resuming vacations with greater discretionary spending and meetings and conventions are returning to pre-recession attendance levels. According to the Georgia Department of Economic Development, traveler expenditures in Macon-Bibb County totaled \$311 million in 2012. This level of expenditure supported nearly 3,300 jobs in the community and produced nearly \$8.8 million in local tax revenues. With various cultural and historical assets (museums, theaters, Ocmulgee Heritage Trail/Ocmulgee National Monument, etc.), existing festival (Cherry Blossom Festival, Bragg Jam Arts and Music Festival, Macon Film Festival, etc.) and emerging college sports programs (particularly Mercer University football), key tourism assets have the potential to not only support economic diversification and generate economic impact, but also provide important recreational outlets for existing residents. Community input participants, particularly young professionals, frequently mentioned the desire for “more to do” in Macon-Bibb.

Actions: In partnership with the CVB, identify the ways in which the community can best support the implementation of the Vision 2017 Strategic Plan. Support should align with the “core values” identified in the plan (community pride, empowerment, stewardship, and hospitality) and promote the specific initiatives outlined in the plan. This includes but is not limited to:

- ✓ **Sustainable funding for tourism promotion:** CVBs and other destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are facing significant funding challenges as most budgets are tied to hotel/motel room tax collections – revenues that are highly susceptible to cyclical economic fluctuations, and are occasionally tapped for other uses besides destination marketing. The community can help the CVB identify new public and private sources of revenues to ensure that the community's best resource for tourism promotion remains well-funded and competitive with other DMOs around the state and country.
- ✓ **Assist with the attraction of meetings and conventions:** Economic development practitioners should partner with the CVB to identify professional associations/conferences, corporate meetings, and conventions that align with the interests of target sectors. The business community should help the CVB attract new events by providing referrals for events that may consider Macon a viable and attractive location.
- ✓ **Macon Arts Calendar:** The Macon Arts Calendar was identified by steering committee members as a key resource that needed to be maintained and enhanced in terms of its visibility and usage by both residents and visitors.

- ✓ **Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and the Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve Initiative:** The potential expansion of the Ocmulgee National Monument into the Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve could be a catalytic event for the travel and tourism sector in Macon-Bibb and Middle Georgia. Continued development of the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail is also critical; it supports a variety of community objectives from recreation to health to beautification.
- ✓ **Developing new tourism packages:** As the community's tourism product grows and diversifies, there will be a greater set of offerings that can hopefully support more overnight stays in Macon-Bibb. Ultimately, overnight stays in local hotels are necessary to maximize the economic impact of travel and tourism. The CVB and various organizations managing tourism product should develop new collaborative promotions/packages that seek to keep visitors in town overnight. Out of town visitors to Mercer University football games represent a new audience for such packages.
- ✓ **Expansion of existing events:** Input participants and steering committee members often praised the community's existing events (most notably the Cherry Blossom Festival, Bragg Jam, and the Macon Film Festival, in addition to others) but also felt that these events had the potential to be expanded in either scale or scope to attract a wider audience from outside the region. The community should work with the CVB and event organizers to conduct market research – inclusive of resident and visitor surveying – to evaluate ways in which the economic impact and recreational appeal of existing events can be maximized.
- ✓ **Establish a mini-grant program to encourage the development of new community events, festivals, and gatherings in Macon-Bibb County:** The community could encourage the development of small scale events (similar to Second Sunday or Big Screen Movie Nights) in various neighborhoods and activity centers by providing mini-grants to organizations and associations seeking to develop and host events that open to the public and promote family gathering in Macon-Bibb. Identify an appropriate non-profit entity to manage the grant program. Establish eligibility and evaluation criteria and develop an application. Define award sizes (potentially ranging from \$100 - \$500) and establish a process for post-event evaluation leveraging surveys of event organizers and attendees, and potentially including an estimation of economic impact for much larger events. Begin publicizing the program. Consider implementing the initiative as a pilot program in a targeted area or neighborhood to evaluate use and effectiveness before extending community-wide.

3.7 Develop a corporate-sponsored community beautification competition and a matching neighborhood beautification grant program.

Justification: While residents responding to the online survey and participating in focus groups often praised the natural beauty of certain parts of Macon-Bibb, many more complained that the community was by-and-large unattractive and in need of significant community beautification efforts. The community is fortunate to have an exemplary chapter of Keep America Beautiful – The Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Commission – and the support of numerous community foundations and local governments that are constantly supporting revitalization and community beautification initiatives. Better engagement of the business community and various neighborhood/homeowner associations can complement existing efforts.

Actions: Consider establishing a community beautification competition that is supported by a matching grant program:

- ✓ **Competition:** A community beautification competition could challenge businesses and neighborhood associations to “adopt a space” – a park, street, intersection, yard, or other area – for various beautification projects. Businesses (representing their corporate stewardship) and associations could support projects through private monies and employee volunteerism (see Recommendation 3.11), potentially complemented by existing and potential new grant monies. Businesses and associations that elect to participate in the challenge could be recognized with tasteful signage at the location they have adopted. Residents could vote each year on the project(s) that they perceive to have the greatest impact on community aesthetics, with multiple categories to recognize different investment levels in terms of dollars and/or volunteer time. Winning companies and associations could receive larger grant monies to replicate their efforts in subsequent years in other parts of the community.
- ✓ **Grant program:** A small matching grant program could incent and reward neighborhood associations and private businesses to participate in the competition and raise money for specific beautification projects that improve both public and private spaces. Eligible projects could include landscape architecture for public space and parks; planting trees, flowers, and other foliage; installing community benches or other infrastructure in accordance with government plans; or maintaining medians. The program could grant matching funds via some ratio (1:1 or 2:1) based on the money raised by the business or association, and up to a specific level (potentially \$500 or \$1,000). Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful could help encourage participation in the program and facilitate appropriate and efficient uses of grants. Other grant programs with similar eligible uses are already in place – such as the Knight Neighborhood Challenge grant – but a new grant program would encompass all areas of Macon-Bibb.

BEST PRACTICE: TULSA BEAUTIFICATION FOUNDATION MATCHING GRANT PROGRAM (TULSA, OKLAHOMA)

Established in 2009, the Tulsa Beautification Foundation Matching Grant Program aids neighborhood and homeowners’ associations with funding beautification programs. The program provides a dollar-for-dollar match to locally-raised funds. The program is intended to incentivize local groups to raise money, engage in partnerships with businesses, and encourage a culture of local volunteerism.

In order to be eligible a project must improve or beautify a neighborhood or public space; involve neighborhood and community residents; have long-standing and sustainable benefits; have a plan before work begins; and provide a maintenance plan for upkeep of the project. Further, in addition to locally-raised money, the program allows for 35 percent of the match to be volunteer hours, which are valued at \$16.19 per hour. The program requires projects to be completed within a 90 day timeline.

One of the grants in 2010 was made to the Shadow Ridge Homeowners Association (SHRA). The SHRA received \$2,800 to beautify the entrance to their neighborhood, which included new trees, lighting, and a Memorial Tree to honor neighborhood residents who had passed away.

3.8 Create a Redevelopment Opportunities database and website.

Justification: While the community has been aggressive in its attempts to enforce codes and demolish tax-delinquent, abandoned properties, the community cannot possibly address every property. Meanwhile, there are numerous properties – residential, commercial, and industrial – that are vacant but current on taxes and ideal for redevelopment. The community can encourage redevelopment opportunities by creating a comprehensive, web-based, searchable database of properties that are suitable for redevelopment.

Actions: Utilizing existing real estate databases and information from key partners (governments, utilities, real estate community, etc.) begin developing a comprehensive list of all vacant and blighted properties across Macon-Bibb. Develop a web-based, searchable database that includes detailed information about each property, including but not limited to zoning, future land use, acreage/square footage, photos, traffic counts, and full property descriptions of condition, accessibility, etc. Establish a schedule to ensure that the inventory is maintained and updated regularly (ideally weekly) with new information and sites. The database and website should be specifically positioned to promote redevelopment – as opposed to greenfield development – opportunities and available incentives.

3.9 Launch a proactive initiative to recruit new retail investment in the community's key activity centers.

Justification: Just 14.2 percent of survey respondents said that they visited downtown for shopping and services. More than 87 percent of survey respondents indicated that retail was not walkable or bikeable from their home. Focus groups participants also lamented the relative lack of retail in close proximity to other residential areas and activity centers. The retention of a specialized retail analytics and site selection firm could help improve the availability of certain types of retail and food service establishments to populations in specific submarkets of Macon-Bibb, potentially supporting other objectives such as revitalization.

Actions: Consider hiring a retail analytics and site selection firm to conduct research that evaluates areas of retail leakage and surplus in specific submarkets within Macon-Bibb, and assist with the proactive identification of retailers that are best suited to meet the needs of residents in specific submarkets. There are multiple research firms and consultants that specialize in matching retailers to appropriate markets. This expertise assists private sector clients in the identification of ideal locations for new retail establishments, but also helps assist communities identify specific retailers that may be a strong fit based on a wide variety of retail analytics. The community should consider engaging a specialized retail analytics and site selection firm to help identify specific retail targets for various submarkets and neighborhoods, leveraging analysis that profiles consumer purchases and identifies areas of expenditure leakage, then matches retailers to areas based on these attributes.

3.10 Work with area colleges and universities to expand the presence of higher education in downtown Macon.

Justification: Many communities benefit greatly from the presence of higher education in their downtowns, even when this presence is not an entire campus but simply one or two buildings housing a few programs. Downtown Macon is already home to the Mercer University's Walter F. George School of Law and Georgia College's Macon Graduate Center. An expanded presence of higher education from

areas institutions, both in terms of instructional space and residential living, could have significant impact on the vibrancy of downtown. Such a presence could bring new employment and student populations to the area, potentially increasing demand for residential housing (such as loft development) as well as increased demand for services, retail, dining, and entertainment options.

Actions: Reach out to area colleges and universities – public and private – to introduce the concept and make the case for the development of new instructional and/or residential space in downtown. Utilizing property information maintained by NewTown Macon, identify a few priority buildings and sites that could be strong matches for either redevelopment or new construction. Seek commitments from one or more institutions to evaluate downtown as a location for future expansion, understanding that such physical expansion is relatively infrequent. Study other communities that have successfully attracted a higher education presence to their downtowns, potentially taking one or more inter-city visits.

BEST PRACTICE: RIVERPARK CAMPUS, COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY (COLUMBUS, GEORGIA)

Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia is home to nearly 7,000 undergraduate students. The University's main campus is located roughly six miles from Downtown Columbus, but the University has undoubtedly been the greatest catalyst for downtown redevelopment in Columbus in recent decades. Columbus State intended to develop new facilities to support its performing arts program, and realized that Downtown Columbus - outside of its main campus - could be a potential location for new facilities. After much planning, the University developed its RiverPark campus in Downtown Columbus and relocated the University's Art, Music, Theatre, and Communications Departments. The University acquired vacant space in Downtown Columbus and redeveloped much of the area – often preserving existing façades – to include student apartments for up to 400 students. Investments also included a collaborative effort to develop the city's RiverCenter for the Performing Arts, which is home to the University's Music Department. Downtown business has thrived with many new coffee shops, bookstores, restaurants, and nightlife opening and flourishing, in part due to the influx of college students. The University operates a shuttle between the main campus and its RiverPark campus.

3.11 *Develop a comprehensive volunteerism initiative – Macon's Million Hour Challenge – that encourages and rewards volunteerism in Macon-Bibb.*

Justification: Volunteerism is an effective way to not only increase community attachment and pride, but also can be a useful vehicle to promote interaction between and exposure to different parts of the community and build community cohesion through collaborative problem-solving. Building volunteer capacity within Macon-Bibb can support a variety of community initiatives. A comprehensive volunteerism initiative that challenges and rewards every adult resident to volunteer at least eight hours each year – for a cumulative one million volunteer hours – could help achieve the objective of community cohesion and pride while also supporting a diverse array of community improvement initiatives.

Actions: Develop a comprehensive volunteerism initiative that is inclusive of the following components:

- ✓ **Macon's Million Hour Challenge:** Working with relevant partners such as Volunteer Macon, the United Way of Central Georgia, and other non-profits, aggressively publicize a challenge to all adult residents to volunteer at least eight hours each year within the community.

- ✓ **Macon's Million Hour Days:** Designate one weekend day each quarter in which residents and businesses are encouraged to set aside time for volunteerism.
- ✓ **Youth Action Teams:** Volunteers of America and the Major League Baseball Players Trust came together in 2003 to encourage high school students to become more involved in their communities. Schools work with interested students to establish Youth Action Teams, led by a Team Captain, to carry out volunteer projects. Teams receive support and materials from Volunteers of America. Bibb County Schools and area private schools should consider establishing Youth Action Teams in each of their high schools.
- ✓ **Community Action Teams:** Challenge local organizations (businesses, homeowner and neighborhood associations, places of worship, student organizations, etc.) to form Community Action Teams and seek commitments from each team member to volunteer at least eight hours each year, fulfilling their portion of the Macon Million Hour Challenge.
- ✓ **Rewards and Recognition:** The community should develop a variety of methods to recognize and reward volunteerism, potentially including but not limited to:
 - Work with area institutions of higher education to establish scholarships for one or more high school students that exhibits outstanding volunteer leadership in Macon-Bibb via Youth Action Teams or other methods of community involvement.
 - Recognize organizations whose employees make outstanding contributions to the community via volunteerism by organizing Community Appreciation events that could include food, live music, and takeaways provided by corporate and community sponsors.
 - Develop a scholarship program, potentially inclusive of a stipend to cover child care and other expenses, for low-income parents seeking continuing education that make outstanding contributions to the community via volunteerism.
 - Develop Volunteer Appreciation Days that coincide with the Macon's Million Hour Days. Seek commitments from area businesses to offer specialized discounts or promotions of some form to all residents on Volunteer Appreciation Days to support participation in the challenge. Special community events could also be organized to show appreciation.
- ✓ **Soliciting New Volunteer Opportunities:** Work with relevant partners to solicit new volunteer opportunities from organizations throughout the community, helping to further populate Volunteer Macon's HandsOnMacon web-based directory of volunteer opportunities.

3.12 Develop a strategy to acquire blighted or otherwise vacant parcels throughout the community land either returning the land to productive, revenue-generating uses or developing passive neighborhood parks.

Justification: When asked to identify specific redevelopment and revitalization needs in neighborhoods throughout the community, survey respondents frequently mentioned the development of more parks and greenspace. More than two-thirds of all survey respondents indicated that there was not a public park within a reasonable walking or biking distance from their home. The Macon City Council recently approved a resolution to allow residents and organizations to plant and maintain community gardens on

vacant public properties. A natural extension of this effort as well as initiatives to acquire and demolish tax delinquent properties would be to deliberately convert certain parcels – or portions of acquired parcels – to public use for small, passive parks. Parks are valuable pieces of the community fabric, elevating nearby property values, serving as a gathering place for residents to socialize, and providing valuable environmental and health benefits. They also contribute to a sense of place that supports community attachment and neighborhood pride among residents. When passive parks are not consistent with neighborhood needs or vision, properties should be reused for tax revenue-generating purposes that are consistent with adjacent uses and existing community or neighborhood plans.

Actions: Evaluate existing household access to public parks via walk-time and drive-time radii and determine areas of the community that should be prioritized for passive park development. Ensure consistency with existing future comprehensive plans, and specific parks and recreation development plans. Acquire parcels as available and begin conversions to greenspace. Seek community involvement in the maintenance and beautification of passive parks (see Recommendations 3.7 and 3.11).

3.13 Establish a Residential Renovation Grant and Loan program to encourage the redevelopment of properties for residential use in downtown Macon.

Justification: Across the country, many communities are seeing a repopulation of their urban cores driven by renewed interest in living in mixed-use, walkable, center cities. NewTown Macon and various partners have worked diligently to encourage loft development in downtown to take advantage of this trend, increase the residential population in downtown, and help build critical mass for revitalization efforts. However, the costs associated with renovating space in downtown may be driving away potential investors, particularly individuals that may be interested in redeveloping a single unit. A Residential Renovation Grant program could help incent such activity and operate in a similar fashion to more common façade grant programs that target commercial spaces. If successful, the program could accelerate the rate of residential redevelopment, improve affordability of downtown living for individuals at all income levels, and elevate property values and associated tax revenues.

Actions: Evaluate the viability of establishing a Residential Renovation Grant that provides grants, potentially in addition to low interest loans, to support renovations and modernizations to the interior and exterior of existing buildings in downtown Macon. Such a program could potentially include the following elements and eligibility criteria:

- ✓ Provide grants requiring a property owner match at some ratio (2:1 or 3:1 owner investment to grant amount) for certain eligible projects (plumbing, electrical work, air conditioning, structural improvements, façade improvements, etc.) up to a certain level (\$2,500, \$5,000, \$10,000 etc.).
- ✓ Consider restricting eligibility for grants to a certain household income threshold or creating a separate grant program specifically targeting low-income households. Such a program would be an eligible use for federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Home Repair funds.
- ✓ Consider establishing a complementary low-interest loan program that targets households and/or developers interested in making large-scale renovations to one or multiple units in downtown.

3.14 Support the expansion of Ocmulgee National Monument in keeping with the recent boundary study and ultimate pursuit of a change in status to a National Park

Justification: The Ocmulgee National Monument is already a prime tourist attraction in the middle Georgia community. Expanding the venue and ultimately achieving National Park status would give middle Georgia the **only** National Park in the State of Georgia further expanding the number of tourists attracted by the site. Development of a national level tourist site will directly grow one of Macon-Bibb's High Impact sectors - tourism – adding to hospitality jobs, community bed-tax revenues, and increased local spending by outside visitors.

Actions: Support the efforts of the Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve Initiative including:

- ✓ Advocating for the expansion of the existing monument site to include all property in the new boundary study.
- ✓ Lobby for expansion of the existing National Monument to be upgraded to National Park status.