Historic Downtown Delaware, Ohio

Everyone knows that downtown Delaware, Ohio, is a great place. Now it is officially an *award-winning* great place! The Ohio Chapter of the American Planning Association in 2018, awarded downtown Delaware a "Great Place in Ohio" designation for the way it celebrates the historical context of the community by integrating its past into current and future success. The downtown's signature feature is a fairly intact historic business district, parts of which are on the National Register of Historic Places. The three-block, Sandusky Street Corridor boasts a variety of niche shopping, dining and brew pubs.

"The downtown is Delaware's most defining element," Delaware Planning and Community Development Director Dave Efland said. "It is preserved historic buildings still very much resembling their 19th-century origins, as well as eclectic shopping, patio dining and cultural offerings."

Delaware's commitment to its bustling downtown is reflected in the Historic Preservation Commission, tasked with preserving the character of the downtown's historic structures. City Hall also supports planning efforts to update historic façades, implement streetscape improvements, install wayfinding signage and preserve century-old buildings. In addition, the City of Delaware provides financial support each year to Main Street Delaware.

"The cumulative effect of all of this is a vibrant Downtown District where visitors, business, university, and the arts create a synergy defining Delaware's personality," Efland said.

Downtown Delaware and the Sandusky Street Corridor date back 211 years, to May 9, 1808, when city founder Moses Byxbe of Massachusetts filed or "platted" the "plan of the town of Delaware," marking the true beginning of the present City of Delaware. The establishment of a burgeoning community on the previous site of a Mingo Indian village along the scenic Olentangy River (formerly the Whetstone River) was envisioned under the master planning of Byxbe and continues to benefit from his forethought.

He laid out Sandusky Street '6 poles wide' – 33 feet wider than nearby streets set in the basic gridiron-style layout. This extra width helped to naturally establish the downtown central business district. As the designated county seat, this decision also easily accommodated the County

Sandusky Street Corridor More than 200 Years in the Making

1) The Sandusky Street Corridor dates back more than 200 years, to May 9, 1808, when Colonel Moses Byxbe filed or "platted" the "plan of the town of Delaware," marking the true beginning of the present City of Delaware.

2) Set in the basic gridiron-style layout, Sandusky Street, at "6 poles wide," was planned 33 feet wider than nearby streets, easily accommodating the Courthouse (1816) and Ohio Wesleyan University (1842) as downtown anchors.

3) Through our first 100 years, focused planning by city leaders gave rise to about 150 multi-story Victorian-style buildings. Past and current mixed uses include bakeries, eateries, retail, brewers, government & upper floor living.

4) City leaders halted the retail exodus of the 1970s and 1980s by becoming historic preservationists. National, state and local designations guided successful Sandusky Street redevelopment through the 2000s that continues today

5) Supported by APA award-winning plans, current efforts include sidewalk patios, wayfinding signs, and a $1 million façade program. Our 95% retail occupancy brings "feet to the street" and testifies to the vibrant downtown Byxbe intended.

Courthouse (erected in 1816) to the north and the Ohio Wesleyan University (founded in 1842) to the south, as downtown anchors.

The Sandusky Street Corridor is a mixture of approximately 150 buildings. Land uses range from government to retail, eating and drinking establishments, offices, and upper-floor residential units. Two- and three-story buildings reflect late Victorian architectural style with sporadic 1940s-1960s buildings and recent infill buildings which reflect the historic fabric of the central business district.

Specific planning efforts contributed to and helped sustain the corridor's character and vibrancy through downturns, including in the 1970s and 1980s, when high vacancy rates, boarded-up buildings, and lack of business threatened some of corridor's ornate historic architecture. Public input through meetings and now social media help shape these planning documents and ensure a cross-section of the city's demographics are represented in the development of the downtown district and community as seen today.

With the goal of reversing the decline and preserving the heart of the city – and as part of a national movement – City administrators became advocates for the preservation of the downtown's architectural heritage to help halt retail exodus. The Sandusky Street Corridor became a designated National Register Historic District in 1982. City Council subsequently established the Historic Preservation Commission in 1998, basing its guidelines on the U.S. Department of Interior Preservation Briefs. The Commission is tasked with preserving the character of the downtown's historic structures and ensuring compatible new construction with the district. Fires or neglect took a toll on a number of downtown buildings, and infill structures were constructed to blend with the historic feel of the business district.

City administrators took advantage of funding offered through the Ohio Department of Transportation and Ohio Department of Development to increase pedestrian walkability and connectivity. Between 1998 and 2002, $5 million of local and state funds was invested in downtown streetscape and infrastructure enhancements, including decorative light poles, brick pavers, and much needed drainage, curb, and sidewalk upgrades that included accessibility improvements. City Council in turn began to offer local commercial and residential tax incentives to owners to re-invest in their downtown buildings.

In 2003, the City of Delaware became a Certified Local Government and Main Street Delaware, Inc. became accredited under the National Main Street Program--both under the National Historic Preservation Act. These designations bolstered the commitment to preserve and protect the unique architectural characteristics of 19th century structures, while endeavoring to offer a variety of unique and trendy shopping and dining experiences.

In 2005, the City's Comprehensive Plan and the Gateways and Corridors Design Standards were awarded the Ohio Planning Conference "Plans of the Year" and also helped guide the corridor's redevelopment. Storefronts filled and residents, visitors, and college students were taking advantage of the offerings of restaurants, antique and book stores, microbreweries, coffee shops, ice cream parlors, and moved into refurbished apartments on upper floors. Bikeways were constructed to connect people, parks, neighborhoods, services, and businesses. A number community parks circle the downtown and are within walking distance, providing places to relax and play close to friends and neighbors, while extending the downtown experience.

Momentum suffered a setback in 2008 when the economy faltered. Delaware officials moved quickly to offer a series of local stimuli. In 2009, patio permit applications were developed by the City Planning Department to allow alfresco dining and seating areas on the city sidewalks for the first time. This unique offering brought patrons downtown to experience this novel outdoor

experience. With no industry utilizing the City's Community Development Block Grant economic development revolving loan fund, the City petitioned the Ohio Department of Development to use the funds on other eligible projects to benefit the downtown. First, a façade program was created in 2012, offering 50-percent grants for painting, masonry repair, storefront restoration, and roof replacement to help business owners invest in their properties, while improving the appearance and historic character of Downtown Delaware. To date, 29 building/business owners took advantage of the program totaling more than $985,000 in total public/private investments in six years. Having evolved into a destination location, in 2016, a Wayfinding Plan developed by a steering committee of community-wide stakeholders addressed and installed directional signs to effectively move pedestrians and motorists from outside to the area and within the area itself. This initiative was followed by a new Parking Plan in 2017 to help direct consumers to downtown area merchants and utilize under-utilized parking lots within walking distance.

Advocating specifically for the business district, Main Street Delaware rallied a sense of community with "First Friday" parties, twice-weekly Farmers Markets, live music, sidewalk chalk art, and a 6-week Christmas season celebration. A partnership was created with the Preservation Parks District to place planters filled with greenery and colorful flowers along the sidewalks to bring a natural and refreshing element downtown. A rain-barrel decorating contest downtown helped bring the importance of water conservation to the public's attention. Recycle bins and solar-powered trash cans made their appearance on the streets to emphasize sustainability on a small but important scale. To help promote health and fitness goals of the citizens of Delaware, the City became a host for the annual Ironman competition. This event draws hundreds of participants, spectators, and residents to visit the downtown area. Other organizers became involved, hosting arts festivals, car shows, dog walks, and county fair horse parades, all bringing "feet to the street" and back to the heart of the city.

With the current upturn in the local economy, the City of Delaware has maintained the comfortable scale and pace of hometown life, but it is also a growing city of now 41,000 very much on the move. A new generation of investors, from Delaware itself and the nearby Columbus area, has taken up the torch of historic preservation efforts as current building owners are beginning to retire and enjoy the fruits of their committed efforts to revitalize Downtown Delaware. With a substantial increase in population, the new and some existing building owners are beginning to rehabilitate the vacant upper floors of historic buildings into attractive apartments and lofts to bring and sustain economic vitality to the Sandusky Street Corridor. The downtown's signature feature is a historic business district which also boasts a variety of niche shopping, dining, and brew pubs. The downtown has recently been dubbed the "North Short North," a take on the popular Columbus location just 20 miles to the south.

Visitors can sip a smooth micro-brew pint at Restoration Brew Worx, only a few buildings away from where noted abolitionist Frederick Douglass spoke on the issue of slavery in June 1856. That Sandusky Street building still stands and according to the plaque on its front façade, the cost to hear Douglass was 25 cents and proceeds went to support the Underground Railroad. Just across Sandusky Street, the famously quaint Hamburger Inn Diner continues to make, serve and sell meals and sweet baked "delicious-ness" the way it has since the 1930s – but to a new generation of foodies fascinated by the unique "diner" feel and motto: "A million burgers sold - 37 at a time."

Around the corner, arts and entertainment have a home in Winter Street galleries and the iconic Strand Theater, which celebrated a "century of cinema" three years ago. A short walk west is the celebrated Bun's Restaurant, whose sidewalk-to-sidewalk arch over Winter Street has welcomed downtown visitors since its Civil War-era opening in 1864.

Delaware's commitment to its bustling downtown over the past 200 years has resulted in considerable historical, aesthetic and economic benefits to the community and, indirectly, for the Central Ohio region.

The downtown has more than 310,000 square feet of commercial space. Of this amount, about 200,000 square feet is retail use. Reflecting the current positive vibe downtown, the occupancy rate for usable space has increased from about 70 percent in 2000 to more than 95 percent more recently. And by emphasizing the downtown business district's destination appeal, market analysts predict the district can attract an additional 150,000 square feet of retail space.

The Ohio Wesleyan University sits on more than 200 acres adjoining downtown Delaware and is a viable partner in development efforts. This advantageous location offers cultural and educational opportunities for students, businesses and the community. As an example, a few feet from where Teddy Roosevelt spoke on campus in the early 1900s, a public art display in 2017 projected architectural-scale images of downtown life and history on the exterior façade of the university's Ross Art Museum. A highlight of the video exhibit, "The Shadows We Cast," was the spirit of collaboration that made it possible between Ohio Wesleyan, the Delaware County Historical Society, City of Delaware, and Main Street Delaware.

Public input through planning processes, and creating and maintaining productive and communicating cross-functional teams, such as City administration, Main Street Delaware, the Ohio Wesleyan University, and building and business owners, has led to the survival and growth of the vibrant downtown Moses Byxbe envisioned more than 200 years ago.

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