

GHC Downtown Enhancement Committee Recommendations for Hagerstown's My Downtown Plan 2025

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as presented by

The Greater Hagerstown Committee, Inc.

and

GHC Downtown Enhancement Committee



A Catalyst for
**GROWTH
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Introduction

Background

As part of our ongoing commitment to the success and revitalization of Downtown Hagerstown, the Greater Hagerstown Committee (GHC) has identified “vibrant urban centers” as one of its four strategic priorities. To advance this goal, GHC has maintained a Downtown Enhancement Committee (DEC) since 1987, dedicated to identifying and supporting initiatives that strengthen the heart of our city.

The GHC DEC respectfully submits the following recommendations to be considered as priority focus areas for the upcoming 10-Year My Downtown Plan.

These priorities were developed through collaborative discussions among committee members and informed by input from key community partners, including the City of Hagerstown, the Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau, Main Street Hagerstown, and local business leaders. The recommendations reflect both community-identified needs and strategic opportunities to build on recent momentum in the city center.

Since the launch of the original City Center Plan in 2015, Downtown Hagerstown has made significant progress. Many of the original goals and projects have been realized. Notably, our educational presence downtown has expanded with the doubling of the Barbara Ingram School for the Arts and enhanced programming at USMH. In 2024, the \$90 million Meritus Park multi-use stadium opened, drawing more than 200,000 visitors annually and serving as a major economic and cultural catalyst. Other key investments included the construction of the new \$25M Hagerstown Field House and a new public parking deck, supporting continued commercial and event-related growth.

While these investments have driven record levels of revitalization and renewed energy, we recognize that critical work remains. Our small businesses within the downtown continue to struggle with insufficient foot traffic and limited disposable income from visitors or residents in the neighboring areas. Only a few businesses are able to attract enough customers to remain open during evenings and weekends, which research shows are the times people spend the most money.

In developing priorities for the 2025 My Downtown Plan update, the committee examined the shared characteristics of successful downtowns (*Appendix A*), consulted a range of expert resources (*Appendix B*), and evaluated Hagerstown’s current conditions through that lens.

Based on our analysis, we believe the new My Downtown Plan must focus on three core priorities:

- 1. Attract more disposable income and a diverse housing stock to support the downtown.**
- 2. Increase, sustain, and incentivize public activity in the evenings and on weekends.**
- 3. Improve the public safety perception of downtown and lessen public nuisance activity.**

Priority Project/Initiative Recommendations

Priority Area 1: Cultural Trail Master Plan

We recommend the creation of a formal Cultural Trail Master Plan to expand and enhance connectivity through downtown via walkable, bikeable, art-focused corridors. An expanded cultural trail would support tourism, community pride, and create safer, more active pedestrian routes drawing people and income to downtown. This plan should build upon existing trail infrastructure and explore routes in all four directions:

The Master Plan should include:

- New trail segments that connect cultural anchors, public amenities, commercial areas and residential neighborhoods to our Arts and Entertainment District
- Opportunities for interactive public art, educational elements, photo ops, micro-parks, and wayfinding signage.
- Inclusion of underutilized alleyways and pathways to improve mobility and exploration.
- Detailed mapping of new trail alignments
- Identification of publicly owned land and privately owned land within the trail's footprint
- List of specific right of way (ROW) needs
- Estimated costs for property acquisition and construction.
- Prioritized phases for the project's completion over 10 years based on each phase's return on investment, cost, and feasible annual budget allocations.
- Possible local, state, and federal funding sources

Priority Area 2: Diversify the Downtown Housing Stock to Grow Disposable Income

Expanding and diversifying the housing stock in Center City remains a top priority for the GHC Downtown Enhancement Committee. At present, there is a high concentration of subsidized and low-income housing surrounding the Arts & Entertainment District and the core of our downtown business community. This concentration, combined with a lack of residents with disposable income, presents a challenge to the financial sustainability of downtown's small businesses and cultural assets.

To support a thriving and economically resilient downtown, we must work toward a more balanced housing ecosystem. Ideally, housing adjacent and inside the downtown should include a healthy mix of low-, middle-, and upper-income residents—particularly those with the capacity and interest to contribute to the downtown economy through daily activity, patronage, and investment.

We support the expansion of **market-rate**, **middle-housing**, **workforce**, and **artist-focused** housing options within downtown that can bring life and economic activity to the commercial district throughout the day and into the evening hours. Specifically, we recommend:

- **Incentives for upper-floor residential development** to make better use of existing downtown buildings.
- **Support for mixed-use redevelopment projects** that integrate residential, commercial, and cultural uses.
- **Public-private partnerships** to help finance and deliver large-scale housing investments.
- **Targeted projects** designed specifically to attract young professionals and upwardly mobile residents beginning their careers.

Promoting housing diversity and accessibility attracting residents that have the financial ability to spend money downtown will be essential to increasing downtown vibrancy, attracting new investment, and achieving long-term economic sustainability.

Priority Area 3: Enhanced Beautification and Amenity Improvements

To strengthen the appeal and safety of Downtown Hagerstown, we recommend sustained investment in streetscape beautification and visitor amenities. Enhancing the downtown environment will not only elevate the area’s visual character but also support local business growth, improve perceptions of safety and walkability, and encourage visitors to stay longer and return more often.

Recommended actions include:

- **Installation of decorative and functional lighting** in key pedestrian corridors and alleyways to improve visibility, ambiance, and safety. This may require the creation of “Street Lighting Guidelines” and incentives to control and promote private investment in decorative lighting.
- **Expanded use of hanging flower baskets, planters, and greenery**, with attention to consistent maintenance and seasonal refreshment.
- **Ongoing maintenance of pedestrian areas, alleys, and strategic updates to sidewalk furnishings, benches, and public art**, as well as the creation of interactive "selfie spots" and photo opportunities to inspire organic promotion of downtown attractions.
- **Installation of Automated Public Restroom Facilities** to meet the needs of visitors and enhance convenience. We recommend exploring modern, self-cleaning public restroom models—similar to those used in other urban areas—that are secure, accessible, and designed for durability. Features may include baby changing stations, ADA-compliant access, time-controlled entry to limit dwell time, and integrated systems for needle disposal and vandalism prevention.
- **Parking payment system improvements and Rates that encourage evening and weekend activity:** In response to repeated vandalism and coin theft, the City recently removed all coin-operated meters and shifted to an app-based payment model. Downtown businesses have raised concerns about the current app-only street parking payment system, particularly on behalf of older patrons who may have difficulty navigating mobile technology. To address accessibility challenges, the City is now installing new credit card-enabled parking kiosks in targeted locations. In addition, the designated parking app has announced upcoming software updates aimed at improving user friendliness. We encourage the City to continue pursuing best-in-class digital payment solutions that serve a broad range of users and accommodate diverse needs.

Additionally, the current evening and weekend parking deck rates (\$2/hour, \$24 daily max) fail to incentivize visits during evening and weekends—precisely when more foot traffic and “walking wallets” are most needed to improve our downtown’s vitality. We recommend that the City evaluate and adopt a more dynamic rate structure that actively promotes and incentivizes evening and weekend visits, while also ensuring the long-term sustainability of the parking system.

Together, these enhancements will improve both the functionality, aesthetics, and vitality of downtown, increase visitors’ lengths of stay, and reinforce downtown as a safe, inviting, and vibrant destination for residents, workers, and visitors alike.

Priority Area 4: Creative Space Activation and Flexible Use Models

Reducing storefront vacancies and cultivating a more vibrant downtown economy requires creative approaches to space use. We recommend supporting initiatives such as *Zero Empty Spaces*, hybrid retail concepts, and other flexible-use programs that activate underutilized commercial properties while supporting the local creative economy.

These efforts can help fill vacant storefronts and energize key corridors through:

- **Pop-up shops and micro-retail opportunities** for local artisans, makers, and online entrepreneurs to test products and engage with customers face-to-face.
- **Rotating gallery spaces, art installations, and maker exhibits** that bring color, movement, and community pride to the streetscape.
- **Short-term and low-barrier leasing models** that allow start-ups and small businesses to pilot ideas before committing to long-term leases.
- **Collaborative workspaces or shared studios** for creatives, freelancers, or remote workers to build community and attract daily foot traffic.

These models align with broader efforts to create a dynamic, visually engaging, and inclusive downtown. By lowering the barriers to entry for entrepreneurs and creatives, Hagerstown can foster innovation, support economic resilience, and reduce the visual and economic impact of vacant spaces.

Priority Area 5: Continued Emphasis on Events and Community Gathering Spaces

The Committee applauds the significant growth in the number and diversity of downtown events over the past five years. These gatherings have played a vital role in strengthening community bonds, increasing foot traffic, and showcasing Hagerstown as a vibrant, welcoming destination.

We recommend continued investment in city-supported events and creative placemaking efforts that foster a sense of connection and drive consistent visitation to the downtown core. Events such as *PorchFest*, *Hagerfest*, *Thunder in the Square*, *MDWK Music Concerts*, *the Farmers Market*, and various cultural festivals have proven highly effective at attracting both locals and tourists.

To sustain and expand this momentum, we recommend:

- **Preserving and increasing support for existing events** that consistently draw diverse audiences.
- **Encouraging new and seasonal events** that activate underused spaces and align with community interests.
- **Strengthening partnerships** with local churches, neighborhood associations, nonprofits, and businesses to co-host, co-promote, and co-fund community-driven programming.
- **Exploring enhancements to public gathering spaces**—such as better lighting, flexible seating, and performance infrastructure—to make spontaneous and organized use easier and more attractive year-round.

Continued emphasis on community-centered events will enhance downtown's reputation as a lively, inclusive place to come together—supporting both social connection and economic growth.

Priority Area 6: Impactful Reuse of Strategic Downtown Properties

The revitalization of key underutilized or distressed properties is critical to the continued transformation of Downtown Hagerstown. Several high-visibility sites present both significant challenges and unique opportunities to improve perceptions of safety, attract investment, and expand the downtown residential and commercial base.

The Committee recommends prioritizing planning, incentive strategies, and partnerships to support the following catalytic redevelopment opportunities:

A. Dagmar Hotel – Revitalizing the Dagmar Hotel has long been a top priority due to persistent public safety concerns, nuisance activity, and deteriorating building conditions. This property negatively impacts the surrounding downtown environment and remains a barrier to broader revitalization efforts.

We strongly urge the City to continue exploring multiple strategies for improvement, including:

- Enhanced code enforcement and sustained police presence
- Public-private redevelopment incentives
- Active engagement with the property owner

Potential reuse options—such as market-rate apartments or a boutique hotel—could significantly enhance this high-profile corner and reshape public perception of safety and vitality in the area.

B. Former YMCA Building – This historic structure has strong architectural character and a central location, but its redevelopment faces challenges, including structural degradation, environmental issues, and limited on-site parking. Redevelopment will likely require substantial financial incentives and flexibility in zoning or parking requirements.

However, the building’s cultural significance and potential for creative reuse—such as housing, arts/cultural space, or adaptive reuse for education services—make it a high-value opportunity if paired with the right incentives and development partners.

C. Former Washington County Hospital Site (Including Parking Deck) – Currently under private ownership with preliminary residential plans, this large site presents an important opportunity to connect new housing with the downtown core.

We recommend prioritizing improvements along the first three blocks of East Antietam Street to:

- Create a clean, attractive, and safe pedestrian link from the hospital site to downtown
- Address ongoing issues related to drug use, homelessness, and loitering in the corridor including in and around the site’s parking deck
- Encourage new residents—especially those with disposable income—to engage with downtown businesses, cultural amenities, and events

This connection is key to transforming new residents into active participants in the downtown economy.

D. Old Surrey School – Located directly across from Hagerstown City Park and near the end of the Cultural Trail, this former school and childcare facility is well-positioned for adaptive reuse. Its proximity to park amenities and downtown attractions makes it an ideal candidate for redevelopment into:

- Market-rate residential housing
- A boutique hotel or lodging facility
- Mixed-use development that supports trail activation and park programming

This site offers a unique opportunity to bridge cultural, recreational, and residential assets.

E. Hagerstown Police Department Headquarters (Burhans Blvd) – Contingent upon the construction of a new public safety facility, the existing HPD headquarters—formerly a historic train station—could become a prime redevelopment site later in this plan’s 10-year window.

We recommend that the City:

- Begin preliminary planning to identify feasible reuse options
- Include this site in future RFPs once a relocation timeline is confirmed
- Consider adaptive reuse that honors the building’s historic character while supporting a new purpose—such as civic, residential, or commercial use

This site has the potential to serve as a key anchor for redevelopment on the west side of downtown.

F. Antietam Paper Building / Visitors Center – The Committee supports the activation of the Antietam Paper Building as a future home for the region’s new Visitors Center. This highly visible, historically significant property is well-positioned to serve as a welcoming entry point for tourists and visitors to Downtown Hagerstown. A well-designed Visitor Center at this location would not only elevate the city’s image and orientation experience for newcomers but also help draw increased foot traffic to the surrounding businesses and cultural sites. Strategic investment in this site—alongside coordinated marketing and wayfinding—can establish the location as a key downtown asset. Visit Hagerstown recently secured \$1M in state funding to support this project. Current designs would incorporate the visitors center into the front half of the building. The building owners have plans to transform the back half of the building into residential condos on the top floors and commercial space on the first floor.

Strategic reuse of these properties will not only help eliminate blight and improve perceptions of safety, but also expand the downtown tax base, stimulate private investment, and increase downtown residency—key factors in long-term economic success.

G. Former Herald Mail Building –This property occupies a highly strategic and visible location along the Cultural Trail, adjacent to the new Meritus Park Multi-use Stadium, the Antietam Paper Building, District Court, and the Dagmar Hotel. Its thoughtful reuse could enhance and complement one or more of these nearby assets, or serve as a strong, standalone destination. The City should actively support efforts to facilitate a successful and impactful redevelopment of this key site.

H. Circuit Court Building (24 Summit Ave.) – County and State officials have had preliminary discussions on finding a new home for the Circuit Court to add capacity and bring it up to more modern standards. Should this occur, careful consideration should be given to the reuse of this historic building located in the heart of downtown.

Priority Area 7: Attracting a Corporate Anchor Employer

To support long-term economic sustainability and foot traffic downtown, we recommend prioritizing the attraction of a mid-to-large corporate anchor employer to locate within the downtown. This concept was part of the original City Center Plan and would build on a steady influx of daytime employees, help activate nearby small businesses, and serve as a catalyst for additional investment in services, housing, and amenities. This type of anchor institution—whether in tech, finance, healthcare administration, or a regional office may be challenging to attract in today’s Class A office market. But, it could create a multiplier effect by spurring demand for dining, retail, housing, and transit options.

We recommend the City and its partners pursue targeted business attraction strategies, explore incentive packages, and consider creative reuse of larger vacant buildings that could accommodate such a tenant.

Closing Comments

The Committee commends the meaningful progress made in Downtown Hagerstown since the implementation of the previous City Center Plan. We extend our sincere appreciation to the many stakeholders, city officials, and community partners whose dedication has contributed to this shared success.

At the same time, we recognize that continued strategic investment and thoughtful action are essential to address ongoing challenges and fully realize the city center's potential. From increasing housing diversity and improving public safety to expanding cultural events and enhancing economic vitality, the next 10-Year My Downtown Plan must build on the momentum we've collectively created and serve as a roadmap for inclusive and lasting revitalization.

We also appreciate the City's open and collaborative approach to public engagement throughout this process. GHC is committed to supporting these efforts and is actively promoting the Downtown Plan survey and upcoming open houses among its membership and community partners. We strongly encourage ongoing collaboration between city leaders, residents, business owners, nonprofits, and consultants to shape a bold and achievable vision for downtown's future.

We look forward to continued involvement in stakeholder meetings and additional engagement opportunities as the plan evolves. Questions or comments regarding the recommendations in this report can be directed to:

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Appendix A:

Traits of a Successful Downtown *(Based on multiple sources Appendix B):*

GREEN: Positive, Doing Well, Not A Priority. **YELLOW:** Needs More Work. **RED:** Negative, Doing Poorly, Priority for Improvement

Physical Characteristics of a Successful Downtown

- Pedestrian-friendly environment
- Clean, well-maintained streets and sidewalks
- Greenery: trees, shrubs, flowers, planters, etc.
- Traffic slowing features that force drivers to slow down
- Availability of public restroom facilities
- Street furniture, such as benches and seating
- Substantial street lights and well lit areas
- Trash and recycling bins
- Directional signage (parking, destinations, etc.)
- Easy access to adequate parking facilities
- Reasonable Parking rates that encourage longer stays and evening and weekend use
- Frequent and reliable public transportation
- Bike lanes, paths, and racks
- Open public space such as a park
- Preservation of historic character, including historic sites and reuse of existing historic buildings
- Maintenance of a consistent scale for buildings/streetscapes
- Outdoor restaurants that draw patrons outside, increase foot traffic, and create a highly visible gathering place
- Attractive storefronts that encourage window-shopping
- Playgrounds and play areas for children
- Adequate Parking facilities

Business Traits of a Bustling Downtown Area

- Continuous line of storefronts closely clustered together, with few gaps between the buildings and roughly in-line with each other
- Low commercial vacancy rates
- Variety of businesses, including:
 - Retail and non-retail stores and services
 - Unique, one-of-a-kind or “Mom and Pop” shops
 - Basic necessities such as food shops and pharmacies
 - Quality restaurants and nightlife
 - Public markets such as Farmer’s Markets

Common Resources Available to the Community

- Availability of a community center that provides diverse services and acts as a gathering place (ex. Library, Town Hall, Community Theater)
- Availability of cultural venues in addition to movie theaters (ex. Museums, Art Galleries, Music Venues)
- Regular series of ongoing outdoor festivals and community celebrations, including a progression of events throughout the year
- Community bulletin boards and other centralized information sources and publications

Safety Amenities of a Downtown

- Present police support and a feeling of safety throughout the downtown
- *Night lighting.* Ensuring that the district is well-lit makes pedestrians feel safer, creates visual interest, and highlights businesses that are open, making it easy to navigate the district after dark.
- Directional signage
- Low degree of social dislocations (ex. graffiti, dirty streets, panhandlers, drug use, public nuisances)

Appendix B:

Sources Used As We Examined Traits of a Successful Downtown:

- [North Carolina Community & Economic Development Blog](#)
- [American Investment Properties Website](#)
- [Wisconsin Economic Development - Wisconsin Main Street May 26, 2023](#)
- [August 2022 Intersections blog post on district lighting](#)
- [Denver Street Lighting Guidelines](#)





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