

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this Plan is to write the next chapter in the story of how Downtown Sylvania becomes an even more attractive, vibrant and exciting place in the community. Many regard Downtown Sylvania as the place that most clearly expresses community identity and an authentic sense of place. Perhaps like no other area, Downtown Sylvania speaks to the essence of the community and serves as a formal front door for visitors.

In past decades, regional growth pressures in Northwest Ohio fueled substantial construction activity and suburban development in the Sylvania area. Attractive suburban homes were built to satisfy growing demands to live in the Sylvania area and new businesses were constructed along major corridors to accommodate the varied needs of more residents. In little more than two generations, Sylvania nearly quadrupled in residents from 5,187 (1960) to 18,965 (2010). Today, for various reasons, much of this outward physical growth has ended and the community we see today is largely built-out and Sylvania is likely to have a relatively stable population in the years to come.

For many years Sylvania has been a work in progress. Physical development has been obvious to even the casual observer, while community leaders deliberately built an outstanding school system, an excellent park system and many other attributes of a highly desirable place to live and work. Against this backdrop of growth and change,

downtown Sylvania has stood as a reminder of community beginnings and roots. In more recent years, the community seems to have refocused on downtown. To be sure, past efforts in the 1980's and 1990's have included many steps to improve the downtown area. Market studies envisioned many potential improvements and acquisitions of key properties made way for new uses such as Wingate Hotel.

More recently however, attention toward the downtown area has intensified at many levels. Property acquisitions and property demolitions in the past few years now clear the way for the 5.2 acre SOMO (South of Monroe Street) redevelopment project and a newly completed market study provides insights into business opportunities for specific uses. The Sylvania Gateway Project defines future enhancements for the Monroe Street Corridor leading to Downtown and the new Sylvania River Trail will soon connect downtown Sylvania to the Flower Hospital Campus. This \$1.2 million project will add to the growing network of community recreational trails and help connect downtown with non-motorized transportation options. Additionally, a new parking study helps to shed light on parking needs downtown, while a newly constructed wayfinding signage system encourages visitors to travel toward major community destinations.

Going forward, this Downtown Plan seeks to build on current and recent initiatives and set a general course for the future. The planning process used to create this

plan revealed many interesting opportunities that flowed from a highly engaged group of stakeholders and Steering Committee Members. This planning process formally began with successfully applying for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Tier I: Planning Grant dollars which enabled the City to hire professional planners experienced with Downtown Planning. A Request for Qualifications was published and Poggemeyer Design Group, Inc. (PDG) was hired to facilitate the Downtown planning process. An appointed Steering Committee worked collaboratively with PDG as specific steps were taken.

The planning process used to develop this plan was inspired by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's trademarked Four Point Approach to Downtown Revitalization. The Four Points of the Main Street approach work together to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort. The first of the Four Points is Organization. Organization relates to establishing consensus and cooperation with partnerships among stakeholders. Secondly, Promotion is focused on creating a positive image and consumer/investor confidence. Promotion includes advertising, retail promotions, special events, and marketing campaigns that help sell the image and promise of Main Street. Thirdly, Design focuses on appearance and means getting Main Street into top physical shape and providing a safe, inviting environment for everyone. Finally, Economic



“Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work.”

- Peter Drucker

**“ If you think you’re beaten, you are;
If you think you dare not, you don’t;
If you’d like to win, but this you can’t,
It’s almost a cinch you won’t.
If you think you will lose, you’re lost;**

**For out in the world we find
Success begins with a fellow’s will,
It’s all in the state of mind.
If you think you’re outclassed, you are;
You’ve got to think high to rise.
You’ve got to hustle before**

**You can ever win a prize.
Life’s battles don’t always go
To the stronger or faster man,
But sooner or later the man who wins
Is the one who thinks he can.”**

- Walter D. Wintle

Restructuring focuses on economic assets and diversifying the economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding successful businesses and working toward a balanced commercial mix that responds to the needs of today’s consumers.

City leaders were drawn to “grass-roots” emphasis championed by the Main Street Approach and valued the way it breaks down the work load into manageable pieces, balancing a variety of projects with a comprehensive revitalization effort. At two points along the planning process, two other subconsultants were asked to join the team and provide insights into key issues. Land Design Studio, Inc. participated in the planning process to help support the conversations related to physical design. Similarly, Land Use USA joined the team to provide insight into market forces at work in Downtown Sylvania.

Planning Themes

There are many interrelated themes that will become evident to the reader of this plan. First, there is a deliberate focus toward **creating a sense of place**. Increasingly, professional planners and communities are recognizing the need to support and encourage a sense of place as an economic development driver. Richard Florida, in his book “The Rise of the Creative Class” asserts that communities must invest in the arts, culture, education, and recreation to provide a quality of life that will attract talented, educated people. Investments in downtowns can make the city more

attractive and support the growth of related businesses such as bookstores, art galleries, crafts stores, antiques shops, specialty clothing stores, coffee houses, pubs and restaurants. For reasons that will be explained later, Sylvania is uniquely positioned to create, cultivate and nurture this sense of place.

Second, **physical design matters** a lot. The Physical Design Chapter takes a deep dive into many issues that relate to how downtown looks and feels. Sylvania has a strong tradition of maintaining high standards for new development, but nowhere is this more important than in Downtown. Considerable attention is devoted to the area north of Maplewood as the planning process uncovered significant opportunities to create unique and compelling downtown spaces. However, subtle details of buildings, public spaces and public infrastructure are important throughout Downtown and speak volumes about how a place makes one feel and how likely visitors are to return. The City has taken some steps to update regulatory tools, but more deliberate steps are needed now that this plan is completed and there is a greater level of consensus regarding what stakeholders wish to see in the future.

Third, **we need a little help from our friends** - because downtown redevelopment goes nowhere without a strong organization. Perhaps one of the most time consuming elements of the planning process, was the discussion about how to create, re-establish and re-energize a downtown organization. Regardless of how much public support flows

from City Hall, there is no substitute for an effective downtown organization to carry out many essential functions. After overcoming past history and baggage, a new downtown organization has emerged that is fully engaged and ready to lead. It will be the singular voice of Downtown and it is ready to help take Downtown to new heights.

Finally, we have to **be market-wise and actively engaged**. Downtown Sylvania has coped with the recent economic downturn more successfully than most, but important challenges remain. One of the deliverables within this Plan is a market study that identifies specific challenges and opportunities. This information needs to be activated and put to practical use such that it supports deliberate steps to recruit businesses that can fill voids in the existing business mix.