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Hindman–Knott County Master Plan



Location: Hindman, Kentucky

Client: cdi Steering Committee, Bill Weinberg, Chair

Design: Lardner/Klein Landscape Architects, P.C.,
Elisabeth Lardner, Principal; R.M. Johnson Engineering, Inc.,
Ron Johnson; ERA, Elaine Carmichael; Allan T. Comp, Ph.D.;
Mary Means and Associates, Inc., Mary Means;
Sandra Blain, Arrowmont

Downtown Hindman sits
astride the Troublesome Creek
between the steep, narrow
valleys of Eastern Kentucky
Photos: Elisabeth Lardner

Eastern Kentucky is a place that survives because of, and in spite of, its landscape. The starkly beautiful mountain terrain provides for the region's livelihood through resource extraction and nurtures a rich literary and craft heritage—but it is also isolating.

Knott County and the city of Hindman, its county seat, are in the heart of this region. Hemmed in by steep slopes and narrow valleys, the town has no rail connections, just recently became accessible by divided highway and is susceptible to floods. Not surprisingly, the area's unemployment rate exceeds that of both the state and the nation.

So when the state decided to choose two communities as models for rural economic development, the city and county—fearful that lack of safe, convenient building sites would push development out of town, and desiring a sounder long-term economic base—leaped into action. Citizens assembled and wrote a proposal, "Using our Heritage to Build Tomorrow's Community," and won the state's support.

Over the course of the following year, the community and its consultants developed a plan for using the area's arts and education legacy as an economic spark. The plan calls for strengthening cultural institutions and economic development networks, upgrading outdated infrastructure and configuring development so that streets and creek-related open space become positive aspects of the public realm. Altogether, the plan represents a comprehensive and remarkably cohesive effort to ground the community's future on those aspects of its history and landscape that most strongly define it as a place.

Economic Development: Institutions and Infrastructure

Hindman is proud of its traditions in education and Appalachian regional culture. The area has produced regionally noted artists, writers and his-

torians, and for a century has been supported by the Hindman Settlement school, which offered basic education for many years and now supplements local schools with adult education and programs that support local folk art, music and crafts.

The plan seeks not only to strengthen arts and educational institutions but also to generate entrepreneurial activity so that arts and crafts education, manufacturing, marketing and distribution become part of an integrated local economy. It proposes two new entities to link the arts and economic development: the Kentucky Technical College of Arts and Crafts and an Artisans' Marketing Center. At the college, students could learn the skills necessary to produce marketable arts and crafts products. The marketing center would provide support services, such as advising the school on curriculum and technology, researching economic information that will help craft producers improve their businesses, and assisting business start-ups and marketing efforts.

The plan also proposes extending educational opportunities more broadly by opening a branch of the local community college and a satellite center that offers access to other universities.

A parallel set of initiatives would upgrade basic infrastructure in Hindman and its environs. The key concerns are inadequate water supply and sewage treatment capacity, which would constrain any economic expansion; extending the reach of the town's water and sewer networks to provide new sites for housing and commercial development directly adjacent to the town; and upgrading bridges whose foundations cause water to back up during heavy flows.

Grounding the Plan in Place

What ties the plan together is a vision for placing these activities in the physical realm. That vision uses the hills and creekway, normally seen as a constraint (as in the name "Troublesome Creek), as the basic framework for the town's



Above: The creekway behind Hindman's main street would become a string of open spaces and pedestrian connections
 Right: Main street.

form. It seeks to encourage growth in small steps that fit into the landscape, as well as into improved networks of streets, sidewalks and open space, reflect vernacular building patterns and makes the most of scarce opportunities.

The creekways will be regarded as a pedestrian spine for the town; the plan calls for restoring the native landscape, building pedestrian walkways, and creating usable open space in the bottomlands. New and expanded buildings would be oriented to the creekway as much as to streets.

The plan suggests constructing two new buildings and expanding and renovating others. The planning team wrote language that was included in the request for architectural services for the new and renovated buildings, urging projects that “reflect the best character, style, materials and traditions of the Appalachian region,” particularly its Works Progress Administration-era architecture, and encourages use of indigenous building materials. For the new community college library, it also wrote guidelines for siting, grading, access and architectural massing and materials.

Finally, the plan points out how to make the most of the money available for improvements. It recommends grouping the local public library and the libraries for the community college and arts school in one building, to help create a new gathering place. It suggests that when a bridge is

raised, a sidewalk might be added at the same time and connections to a parking garage improved, or that a water retention basin could double as an amphitheatre.

Moving Ahead

Citizens were involved in developing the plan through public meetings and workshops, and the final plan met with general public approval. Since the plan was approved in 1999, implementation has proceeded apace. Last summer, a new city hall was dedicated. Two buildings in town were purchased to serve as home to the Artisan’s Marketing Center and Foundation offices; they are strategically located at either end of downtown, they will provide space both for anchor activities and start-up businesses. Creek, water and sewer improvements are underway.

The most significant impact of the plan, however, may have been to give Hindman and Knott County the expectation that their economy can grow in a way that respects what people value most about the place—its architecture, its landscape, its traditions. As one elected official told the local newspaper: “People think things are possible now. Whatever happens, we are ready for it.”

—Todd W. Bressi



Jury Comments

OLIN: This plan deals with family issues, economic issues, ecological issues, flooding; with the dilemmas of the intellectual capital of the community; and how to reinvest. This community knows it has to plan for all those levels at once, and how those levels interact. That is really good thinking.

KLEIN: The shared library was interesting. They have pulled the libraries out of three separate institutions, combined them and made it a community facility. You'll find children and old people there, along with college students.

GRIFFITH: It's the idea of stranded assets. Many communities have assets that aren't being used in a way that's well thought out, that maximizes their use. It's a problem-solving tool that can be used by any community.

OLIN: I'm a sucker for hardscrabble towns that are trying to figure out what to do that's not based on nostalgia or K-Mart.

FRANCK: Or tourism.

GRIFFITH: Many towns like this, when they hit an economic brick wall, say "Let's get a Walmart" or "Let's sell tchotchkes down by the country store." This community has said, "Let's have education." It is encouraging to see, given the options, including the usual suspects, creative and courageous thinking.

HESTER: Many rural towns that have been left behind just make bad decisions. It seems like this community is thinking extremely complexly and going in the right direction.

OLIN: They're proposing a series of very incremental, fine-grained pieces that will put this place together, despite the fact that it's a strip in a valley with highways and parking. They are being very realistic. Yes, they are lucky, they have a little college in their plan, but somebody else would have captured that college if this place hadn't had the smarts.

GRIFFITH: I'm still trying to figure out why this place is not grabbing me. Somehow, the plan is more operational than geographic.

OLIN: It's a mountain town that's strung along a creek at the bottom of a deep valley. It does not have the more conventional centrism of urbanization that you are used to.

GRIFFITH: But how is this plan moving it towards place?

OLIN: They want to invest the town with activities and buildings that will make it the place it never quite was. By the time they're done, the buildings, the roads and the paths will all be related to the creek in a way that they weren't before. They're saying, "If we are going to come into town, and if we are going to park our car and walk, then there has to be more than just the road and the sidewalk." The town is an essay in how to inhabit a linear path with enough episodes of quality that it becomes vital.

HESTER: It is all in the capital improvements plan. It's a perfect case of disjointed incrementalism, which is going to add up to more than the sum of parts.

OLIN: That's why I fell for it. I thought, "Ah ha! That's how you'd build a community. That's how you'd pull it together."



The master plan proposes bridge improvements that will minimize flooding, new educational and civic buildings (including a consolidated library), new open spaces and new walkways (including a creek-side trail).