DEVELOPMENTSTRATEGIES®

East Wooster Street
A Strategy for Redevelopment

Bowling Green, Ohio
February 2019
WHITE PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

In June of 2018, Development Strategies began working with the City of Bowling Green, Ohio and Bowling Green State University to create a land development strategy for East Wooster Street, the main road that connects the interstate to the rest of the community. Despite minor changes to the zoning code and some property assembly by BGSU, the corridor as a whole continues to struggle and is peppered with haphazard development and poor quality buildings. Development Strategies was charged with creating a plan that will spur redevelopment and put the City and BGSU on a shared path to success.

Over a period of six months, Development Strategies thoroughly analyzed market conditions, conducted numerous stakeholder interviews, and worked closely with a steering committee composed of key staff members from the City of Bowling Green and Bowling Green State University. These efforts culminated in a presentation to key stakeholders and city council, and ultimately, this white paper. This document will summarize the challenges and opportunities involved in redevelopment of the Wooster Corridor and identify a way forward, which will require the City and BGSU to work together to enact change.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Poor Entry Impact and Image

Bowling Green is a far more impressive community than its first impression indicates. It has two major assets that many communities would be envious of: a public university and a charming, historic downtown. Even so, **the main corridor that welcomes visitors to the City and connects these destinations gives a negative impression that is hard to overcome**. The investments BGSU has made in the Stroh Center and Falcon Health Center set a new standard for quality; however, both public and private investment will be needed to infuse the 1.8-mile corridor with vitality.

Economic Change

The national economy is changing, but Bowling Green has not adapted its approach to economic development. The City's efforts in regards to industrial/manufacturing jobs have proven fruitful, but this singular focus has come at the expense of knowledge-based industries that are growing and are expected to become increasingly important in the future. This blue-collar focus needs to be balanced with a broader vision of growth that will lead to greater prosperity in the long-term, and this is going to require a new strategic direction that is supported by all members of the community.

Brand and Identity

People are increasingly choosing where they want to live based on the quality of life.[1] Therefore, the quality of place (amenities, public space, walkability, etc.) is becoming a critical component in attracting and retaining the next generation of people who will call a community home. At least two major institutions, BGSU and Wood County Hospital, have clearly stated that the quality of the City, and the state of Wooster Street in particular, are negatively affecting their ability to attract talent. Potential employees don't see the amenities they desire and find it easier to go elsewhere. Top students and their parents come to the community and don't see it as a fun, progressive place they want to spend the next four or more years in. **Bowling Green has a major image problem that needs to be fixed.**

Competition and Urgency

Bowling Green needs to make large strides in quality of place, or risk declining enrollment for its biggest employer. The number of college bound students is likely to decline substantially starting in the year 2025.[2] Officials at BGSU are keenly aware of the challenge before them. Attracting students is going to be increasingly competitive, and students are choosing where to attend based not only on the quality of the campus and educational programs, but increasingly based on the quality of the community where the school is located. BGSU is going head to head with institutions in cities that offer a much higher quality of place than Bowling Green--ones that have facilitated redevelopment in their downtowns, invested in the quality of their streets, feature high quality amenities and restaurants, host numerous community events, and exude charm and character. The condition of the City puts BGSU at a competitive disadvantage and negatively affects the ability of the university to attract students.

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[1] Kreisberg, Nicole; et al. *Top Job Destinations for College Graduates.* Retrieved from https://www.aier.org/research/top-job-destinations-college-graduates

[2] Gawe, Nathan D. *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*. John Hopkins University Press, 2018.

GOALS STATEMENT

The City and BGSU hope to redevelop Wooster Street into a vibrant corridor that features high-quality development with diverse retail, dining, entertainment, employment, and residential options. Wooster Street is seen as an opportunity to create a unique identity for the community that can be used to attract students, faculty, residents, and employees.

WHAT IS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Harness Market Opportunity—Finite/Strategic

The market analysis presented on August 2nd revealed opportunities that can be seized upon immediately, particularly in regards to upscale student housing. Even so, demand in Bowling Green is not unlimited, so opportunities for quality new construction must be used wisely. These new projects must be directed to strategic spots along the Wooster corridor, even though it will require significant effort and intervention on behalf of the City and BGSU.

The "hands off" approach to redevelopment must end—the types of projects the community desires and needs will not happen on their own. The economics of quality development is extremely challenged in Bowling Green, making it all the more important that the City and BGSU work together. **Robust incentives such as TIF and tax abatement will be essential** and property assembly may be necessary. If these efforts are not undertaken, the next student housing project will follow the path of least resistance and happen on "easy" greenfield properties like the former Harshman site, or even worse, on the periphery of the City. These greenfield sites are easier to develop than the alternative, but will not be as catalytic as they will do nothing to remove the undesirable buildings that are detracting from the community and hampering economic development. If greenfield student housing development occurs, the likelihood of the community being able to support another large upscale student housing project is greatly diminished and the opportunity for a transformational project will evaporate. **The power of one transformational project should not be underestimated**; undertaking the first big project can build momentum and set the tone for the rest of what is to come.

Set the Stage for Future Cycles of Investment

While more student housing may not appear to be the first choice of the community right now, the fact remains that it is **one of the only types of products that is currently profitable enough to withstand the costly redevelopment involved along the Wooster corridor.** Additional public outreach is desperately needed to help the community understand these development feasibility issues. Community fears can be lessened by education on how increased density and architectural controls can be used in tandem to produce buildings that will be a source of pride for the city. It is also important to help the community understand the "long game". Once a cycle of investment occurs (a few successful projects, streetscape improvements, etc.), market demand for other products will increase as the area becomes more desirable and higher rents can be achieved. So the young professional housing, mixed-use retail, and boutique hotels that are not possible now, may very well be possible in the future. But **Bowling Green needs to take the first step and use the opportunities available now to ensure that more opportunities will be available later.**

Create a Distinctive Place (attract talent, visitors, grow the economy, grow the pie)

Bowling Green has an opportunity to create a distinctive place by building upon its core assets and rigorously working to improve the elements that detract from its charm. Investments in the quality of place (amenities, streetscapes, art, events) will pay dividends in the future. These improvements will help attract the next generation of residents who will call this city home. These same investments can be used to appeal to tourists, whose purchasing power can be used to help smooth out the slow summer months that deter many businesses

from entering the Bowling Green market. **These efforts will create a virtuous cycle, expanding the local economy and creating more opportunities for growth and future redevelopment.**

WHERE IS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Midtown

In the Midtown District, the key sites are at the northwest and southwest corners of East Wooster & Thurstin/Manville. The sites are very marketable for high-quality student housing as they are adjacent to campus and within walking distance of downtown. The city-owned site would require relocation of one or two facilities, but the large lot depth and single-ownership still make this the ideal place to target for the first catalytic project. Development of these key sites will require many efforts including: rezoning, design guidelines, and incentives. Other "early wins" for Midtown include adaptive reuse of the dual gas stations at East Wooster & Enterprise.

Eds, Meds & Beds

At over ½-mile in length, the Eds, Meds & Beds District is **a long stretch of road that's going to require multiple products and development cycles to fill**. Currently the best market opportunity lies in an additional ambulatory care facility, which Wood County Hospital has expressed interest in. As before, this potential facility needs to be strategically positioned. It will need to be near the existing Falcon Health Center, but rather than building back farther into the neighborhood, this new building should be placed prominently along East Wooster Street with any parking appropriately landscaped and buffered. There is also market support for affordable senior housing, which would tie in nicely to this expanded health care district. While the community initially envisioned this area being ideal for townhomes or other housing for young professionals, the data leads us to believe that product cannot be brought to market at this time, unless BGSU wants to give the land to their selected developer at essentially no cost.

Walkable Hospitality

Rather than identify key sites, the main takeaway for the Walkable Hospitality District is that the City needs to create **a regulatory framework for development**. Standards for setbacks, landscaping, signage, architectural quality, and connectivity need to be established and consistently enforced. The market strength of the area is apparent as many first class tenants are already in place, but those tenants are in in less than ideal properties. Once these city standards are in place, and properties redevelop over time, the quality of the district as a whole will improve.

Interstate

The Interstate District has demand for many tenants that would benefit from the large secondary market area that Bowling Green serves. However, full-scale redevelopment of this district will be incredibly difficult, due to challenging property assembly and expensive land, which would trigger the need for substantial incentives. As with the Walkable Hospitality District, **improvement in City codes would go a long way towards improvement in the aesthetics and functionality of the area**. Incentives may still be required to compel existing properties to conform to new development standards—particularly with respect to pole signs.

AGENTS OF CHANGE URGENTLY NEEDED

In some instances, a leader emerges that has the energy and fortitude to push a community in a new direction and see tough projects through to the end. More often, communities that wait for this singular "savior" fall behind. It is important to emphasize that progress needs to be made quickly, with or without a single leader. **A small group of dedicated individuals will need to work together as a team, as there is much to be done before the first shovel hits the ground—and time is of the essence.** Each new project that's built under insufficient city standards will likely be there for another 30 years or more. Each day that passes, BGSU will face increasing pressure to let student housing development occur on "easy" sites (on-campus locations like the Harshman site) instead of catalytic sites (off-campus locations where low-quality buildings can be removed as part of the redevelopment). Each time a prospective resident, employee, or student comes to town, Bowling Green has lost another opportunity to make a good impression.

THIS CITY AND ITS INHABITANTS NEED TO DO SOME THINGS DIFFERENTLY

City

The city must switch its stance from reactive to proactive. The kind of development that will transform the image of the community will not occur on its own. Bowling Green must find the will to get into the thick of it—helping to assemble sites, using robust incentives, recruiting potential tenants—all the tools in the book that will enable them to encourage high-quality development. The City must also welcome Bowling Green State University as a partner and work to improve communication, develop trust, and enhance collaboration.

BGSU

BGSU will likely need to take the lead on purchasing land at key sites and recruiting developers. Beyond that, the university needs a more visible presence on Wooster and throughout the community as a whole. BGSU can leverage their resources and staff/board knowledge to infuse entrepreneurial roots (like incubators and start-up spaces) and artistic character into the community. To do so, the university will need to work with the City to enact change, much of which needs to happen outside the official campus boundaries. Improved communication with city officials and a dialogue with the community are necessary to develop trust and support, and lay the foundation for greater collaboration.

Hospital

Wood County Hospital and BGSU have many of the same issues in regards to talent attraction, and improved quality of place is essential to the future of both entities. Therefore, both parties should strive to find a way to work together again, for the betterment of the community. The hospital's desire to provide additional ambulatory services along the Wooster corridor might be the best opportunity for collaboration.

Property Owners

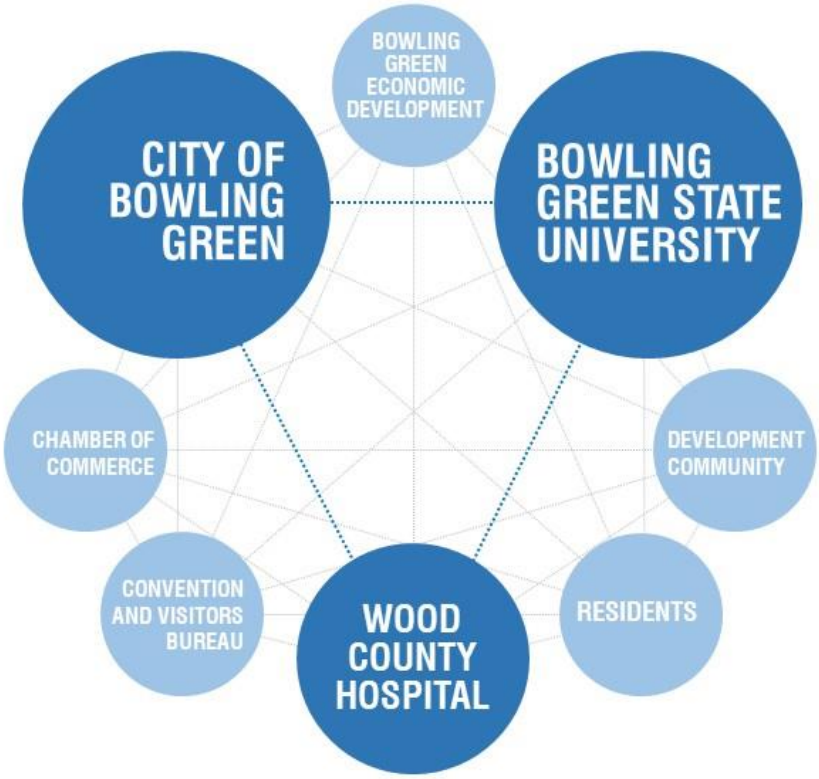
The vision of this plan will need to be shared with local property owners to build a sense of common purpose and to find ways to harness the enthusiasm many of them have for certain elements of the plan. Owners who are holding properties with no intent to improve them need to be encouraged to sell for reasonable prices in the name of progress.

Community

The community needs a broad engagement process to help them understand feasibility issues underlying redevelopment along the corridor. This engagement process should include a robust online component, ensuring that the "silent majority" is being heard. With this improved knowledge, the community will be able to shift their efforts from resisting change and new development to helping craft city requirements that will make predictable outcomes for everyone, focusing on quality and appropriate placement. This public outreach should also be used

as an opportunity to help citizens develop a deeper understanding of BGSU's aspirations, thereby improving confidence and cooperation moving forward.

PARTNERSHIPS



SEQUENCING OF MIDTOWN SITES

As discussed in presentations on September 24th and November 13th, two of the most critical redevelopment sites are at the northwest and southwest corner of Wooster & Thurstin/Manville in the Midtown District. The list below summarizes the steps that must be taken before a high quality project can occur on either of those sites.

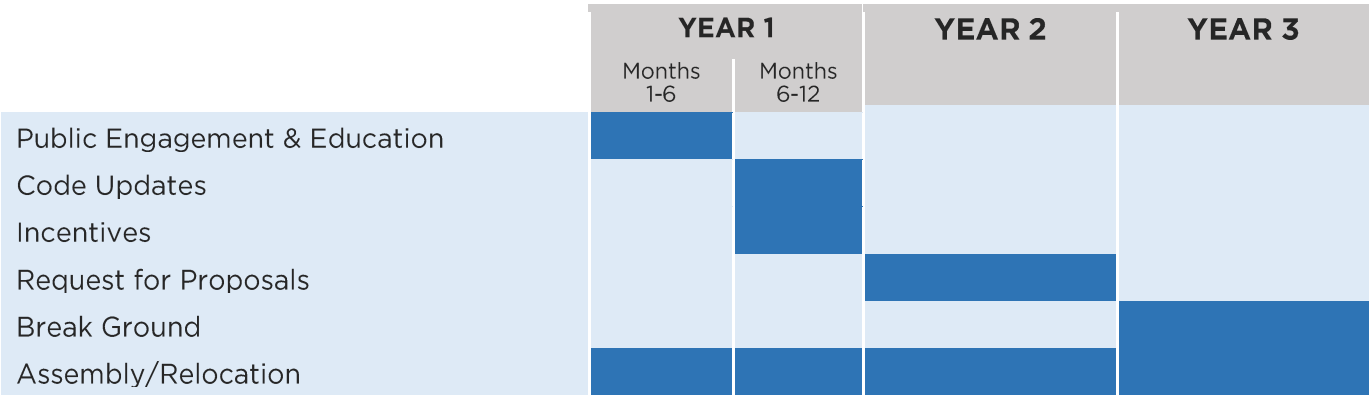
1) Public Engagement & Education
   a. Public outreach needed before code changes or a major development project
   b. Educational component paired with online survey to gather broad community perspective
   c. Explanations on development feasibility, zoning, and architectural standards

2) Code Updates
   a. Zoning & architectural standards to be updated simultaneously (don't want to allow for greater density if you don't have any control over the quality of the product)

3) Incentives
   a. Education of elected officials on use of incentives such as TIF and tax abatement
   b. Outreach to other taxing districts (especially schools)
   c. Expansion of existing districts
   d. Creation of new districts
   e. Development of incentive policy

4) Request for Proposals
   a. Issue RFP for city-owned site at northwest corner of Wooster & Thurstin/Manville—first priority
   b. Choose best developer, negotiate deal—protect best interest of the City, ensure quality of the project
   c. If/when SBX corner at the southwest corner of Wooster & Thurstin/Manville is acquired by BGSU or the City, issue RFP

5) Assembly/Relocation
   a. Start working towards potential relocation of fire station & public utilities building
      i. Look for potential sites and identify funding sources
   b. Start working to acquire SBX corner
      i. If owners are being unreasonable and negotiations are ultimately unsuccessful, consider a blight study



TOP IMPLEMENTATION PRIORITIES

City

- Public outreach and education
- Zoning code update & creation of architectural guidelines
- Incentive districts
- Relocation of city facilities
- Arrange monthly coordination/strategy meetings between key staff members from the City and BGSU

BGSU

- Take the lead on property assembly in Midtown and Eds, Meds & Beds Districts
- Coordinate with hospital to find site for ambulatory care facility along Wooster
- Work to keep nursing program in Bowling Green
- Contribute funds (if possible) to accelerate city-led processes
- After working out a site for the hospital in Eds, Meds & Beds, decide how to proceed with other fully assembled blocks of properties. Three alternatives:
    - Sit tight--Continue to assemble properties and wait for key projects and investments in the Midtown District to improve marketability of the area as a whole. Wait for next cycle of redevelopment when more options might be available.
    - Senior housing--High-quality affordable senior housing is a marketable product that BGSU could pursue right now and get a reasonable return for the land. Senior housing is not as strategic of a move, but it can be an attractive product that can help fill space in a long corridor with limited market demand.
    - Young professionals--Data indicates that young professional housing is not feasible at this time without major concessions on the price of the land. If BGSU is potentially willing to make these concessions to "prime the pump", then issue RFP and carefully evaluate any proposals received.
- Take the lead on infusing public art into the community, starting with highly-visible edge areas of campus and then working with the City to incorporate into streetscapes and public places.
- Utilize BGSU's strengths with the College of Business and well-connected board members to encourage start-ups and entrepreneurial activity in the City
- Expand marketing & outreach to make broader Toledo market aware of activities occurring in/around campus
- Explore opportunity for conference center hotel on BGSU property
- Create forgivable loan program for employees purchasing homes in targeted areas

FULL IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Focus on Midtown**
   - Identify appropriate redevelopment sites
   - Create developer guidelines for building design & quality
   - Update zoning for density & mixed use
   - Develop incentive policy for desired development types/locations
   - Expand existing incentive districts & create new districts (such as TIF)
   - Assemble/package/partner
   - Invest in right-of-way
   - Recruit existing businesses to move to downtown area (creative and legal are good targets)

2. **Create Early Wins**
   - Public art
     - Encourage it, provide it, or require it (or a combination)
     - Philanthropy-identify potential donors who have an interest in the arts and direct/encourage their efforts
   - Adaptive Reuse—particularly former gas stations
   - More community events

3. **Engage & Align**
   - Residents
     - Significant public outreach needed before zoning changes or other major efforts. Get out ahead of any project and educate. Include on-line survey to gather information from younger generation who typically don't attend traditional public meetings.
   - City
     - Set up regular monthly meeting schedule with key people from City, BGSU, and Wood County Hospital (and perhaps members of the local development community—Green/Mecca and Maurer/Greenbriar)
     - Educate public officials on types of incentives available and how they can be used
     - Update incentives & city regulations
     - Coordinate property assembly plan with BGSU for Midtown & Eds, Meds, & Beds districts
     - Create a strategic plan for economic development that acknowledges the quality of place, startups, and growing knowledge industries as strategically important
     - Relocate public utilities buildings & fire station to less prominent locations—potential for using State Capitol Money for this project—partner with BGSU on application
     - Encourage local philanthropy—identify potential projects (art, health & wellness, amenities, etc); consider working with the businesses community to coordinate fundraising
   - University
     - Coordinate property assembly plan with City for Midtown & Eds and Meds districts
     - Work to keep nursing program in Bowling Green
     - Develop plan for future of on-campus housing with an understanding that additional student housing on campus may limit options for redevelopment elsewhere within the community. BGSU needs to determine: how many students to accommodate on campus in the future, what buildings will be renovated, and what buildings will be torn down.
     - Strive to place any new major facilities in highly visible edge areas of campus

    - Contribute art and connect student artists with local opportunities
    - Work on incorporating BGSU strengths on business & entrepreneurship into the community
    - Assist in effort to improve housing stock by creating a forgivable loan program for faculty/staff who choose homes in targeted neighborhoods
    - Encourage local philanthropy—connect potential donors with specific projects and community needs; consider hosting fund raising events for these efforts
- Hospital
    - Work to get new ambulatory project (and future medical growth) in the Eds, Meds & Beds District in highly visible spot along Wooster
    - Consider philanthropic programs, such as health & wellness, that are mission-aligned

4. Develop the Catalysts & Assemble Key Sites

- NW & SW Corners of Wooster & Thurstin/Manville
- Eds, Meds & Beds District (BGSU to continue property assembly)
- Issue Request for Proposals (RFP)
- Select development partners
- Enter into development agreement
- Explore possibility of blight study

5. Get the Policies in Place

- Zoning
    - Increase max height
    - Density bonuses at key corners
    - Circulation & cross-access easements
    - Site layout—maximum front setbacks
    - Landscaping
    - Parking
    - Buffers
    - Signs
    - Evaluate bed & breakfast regulations (might be able to encourage reuse of those large historic homes on Wooster--a good alternative since boutique hotel is not likely right now)
    - Reevaluate requirement for retail on 1st floor in new B5 district (and other use restrictions) — developer flexibility is important.
- Incentives
    - Explore creation of additional districts (such as TIF) or expansion of existing districts (like expanding the Special Improvement District (SID) to include the Midtown area)
    - Develop policy on when incentives will be used
    - Have an independent party review incentive requests and moderate meetings with developers
    - Use incentives to discourage retail east of the interstate
- Architectural design standards
- Future Land Use Map
    - Show desired roadway connections in Walkable Hospitality & Interstate Districts
- Schools—encourage improvement of local public schools
- Historic preservation

6. **Invest in the ROW**
   - Reallocate excess lanes/road widths for bike/ped, wider sidewalks, on-street parking, street trees, etc.
   - Focus on bikability-walkability
   - Develop detailed designs for future roadway cross sections along Wooster
   - Gateways
   - Require ROW dedication as part of new projects in key areas
   - Interstate overpass/ramp beautification

7. **Create the Destination**
   - Explore opportunity for conference center hotel on BGSU property
   - More community & BGSU events that target Toledo population, extend length of farmer's market season
   - Improve outreach & marketing to bring more BG residents to campus for events
   - Use increased tourism to level out the slow summer months, enabling the community to target desired restaurants & shops
   - Consider increase to hotel/motel tax (currently one of the lowest in the region) and invest these funds wisely in the community
   - Add art to the visitor experience

8. **Put Wooster to Work**
   - Partner with BGSU to encourage entrepreneurs & start-ups
   - Broaden definition of economic development—target growing sectors nationally. Don't just focus on industrial/manufacturing. Don't just leave it to private property owners to target specific tenants.
   - Support small business growth. Consider programs such as low interest loans, rent or improvement subsidies, and district-wide marketing efforts.
   - Encourage restaurant growth by exploring designation of Downtown/Midtown area as Community Entertainment District (for additional liquor licenses)