Metter, Georgia

A Better Hometown Design Charrette 1999

Sponsors:
City and Citizens of Metter
Georgia Department of Community Affairs
The University of Georgia’s School of
Environmental Design (SED)

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Acknowledgements

Landscape architecture (MLA, BLA) and historic preservation (MHP) students at the University of Georgia’s School of Environmental Design produced this study, after collaborating with professionals and citizens of Metter, Georgia. We would like to acknowledge our instructors, Associate Professor Pratt Cassity and Dean Jack Crowley, and Irina Kukina, visiting faculty from Russia for their leadership and direction. We would also like to thank Chrissy Marlowe, DCA Regional Representative for Region 8, for her analysis of the Zoning Ordinance of Metter. We also thank Cindy Thilenius, Martha Reimann, and Peter Drey for their professional expertise. Most importantly, we would like to thank the generous citizens of Metter, who attended the sessions and shared with us their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about where Metter has been, and where it should go. It was their commitment and motivation that energized the design charrette; and, ultimately, it will be that same commitment and motivation that will see this plan to completion.

*Everything’s Better in Metter*…and this is only the beginning!
OVERVIEW

Across Georgia, and the nation, small communities are finding it increasingly challenging to compete in the changing market economy. Small family farms are sold to agribusiness, “mom-and-pop” stores are eclipsed by discount retailers on the highway bypass, and young people are leaving town for the attractions of larger metropolitan areas.

These challenges, however, do not inevitably signal the loss of qualities that define the character of a small town amidst a rural environment, qualities that make these areas some of the most livable places in America. Consider, “Rural America has enjoyed a net inflow of 2 million Americans this decade—that is, 2 million more people have moved from metropolitan centers to rural areas than have gone the traditional small-town-to-big-city route. (In the 1980s, by contrast, rural areas suffered a net loss of 1.4 million people.)”

Throughout Georgia, the Better Hometown Program and Downtown Development Authorities have demonstrated that investment in community design can make the difference between a community’s survival or its decay.

Initiated by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Better Hometown Program (BHT) helps Georgia communities with populations between 1,000 and 5,000. BHT’s revitalization strategy focuses on four programmatic areas:

- **Design**—preserving and reusing existing resources;
- **Organization**—organizing the community leadership;
- **Economic Restructuring**—working to restructure the local economy by attracting small business downtown; and
- **Promotion**—promoting the city and the downtown area.

It will take time and effort to focus on these four areas to revitalize Metter. A local approach with citizens participating in the process will ensure improvement. Community change is inevitable. Metter need not be overwhelmed by it—they will manage it!

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A design charrette was conducted March 7 – 11, 1999, with activities based at the rehabilitated Metter Depot. A charrette refers to a design assembly whereby different teams participate on the same design challenge within a limited amount of time. The goal of the charrette was to illustrate Metter’s potential by proposing new designs and concepts, with consideration for its developmental history. Participants included:

**University of Georgia Students:**
- Andrea Greco, MLA, New York
- Marianne Happek, BLA, Germany
- Winslow Hastie, MHP, South Carolina
- Mike Kidd, MLA, Louisiana
- Jennifer Lewis, MHP, South Carolina
- Eleonora Machado, MLA, Brazil
- Julie Miller, MLA, Texas
- Lawton Myrick, MLA, South Carolina
- Angie Parker, MLA, Kentucky
- Tom Pfister, MHP, Michigan
- Stephanie Smith, MLA, Massachusetts
- Matt Whitaker, MLA, Alabama

**University of Georgia Faculty and Staff:**
- Pratt Cassity, Director, Public Service and Outreach (PS&O)
- Jack Crowley, Dean, School of Environmental Design
- Chris Cochran, Program Coordinator, PS&O
- Irina Kukina, Visiting Faculty from Russia
- Bill Russell, Business Outreach Services

**Professionals:**
- Shay Brantley, DCA
- Chrissy Marlowe, DCA
- Martha Reimann, DCA
- Cindy Thilenius, DCA
- Peter Drey, Peter Drey & Associates
OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEW RESULTS

Observations and interview results making Metter even better
Citizens of Metter shared with us their observations about their city. We compiled the results in the categories of existing advantages, existing disadvantages, and future desires for Metter.

### Existing Advantages

- Plenty of downtown parking
- Employee parking well managed
- Central Park West with fountain
- An increase in professional services
- “Another Bloomin’ Festival”
- Perception of low crime rate
- A great place to live and raise children
- Perception of bicycle friendly
- The boulevards’ azaleas and oaks
- Interest in façade programs
- Tree City USA/tree survey
- Candler County Hospital
- Well-paying jobs
- City’s original grid plan is good
- Combination hardware store/soda fountain
- Farmers’ Market
- Industrial Park with its walking trail, nature trail, pond & picnic areas
- Depot—Outstanding Historic Preservation
- Proximity to Statesboro,
- Savannah, Swainsboro, Vidalia, and Interstate 16
- Potential to attract small businesses

### Existing Disadvantages

- Dangerous parking conditions
- Poorly defined crosswalks
- Decline in retail business
- Not enough outdoor seating
- Not enough parking
- Lack of youth activities
- Lack of retailers helping during festival(s)
- Poor curbcuts with bad lighting
- Unattractive streetlights
- Some trees and shrubs overgrown
- Need a tree maintenance plan
- Lack of middle-aged population
- No public pool
- Too much bad signage on buildings
- Some façade work is needed
- Sidewalks are messy
- Too few sidewalks along and within squares
- Highway 46 east and west corridors are ugly
- Downtown needs directional signs for tourists
- “The Strip” (to Interstate) is hard to drive
- Americans with Disabilities Act improvements needed
- Proximity to Statesboro and Savannah
- Drug problem in town: buying, selling, and using
- Underage drinking
- Loitering and its consequences
- Teens don’t have a designated place to go downtown
- I-16 interchange is unattractive
- Very few social activities and cultural events
Future Desires for Metter

- Built environment needs cohesive connection
- Economic development/critical business mass
- Balanced government
- Market Metter better
- Focus on quality of life issues
- TEA-21 grant project
- A greater understanding of the built environment
- Monitor façade improvements
- Monitor public improvements
- High quality new school, its design, and its siting
- More antique stores
- Need places for teens to hangout
- A coffee shop that is “cool”
- Public fitness center with focus on non-team teens
- Recreational elements such as: bowling alley, miniature golf course, and skating rink for rollerblades
- Playground-safe areas at parks for children
- Movie theater, possibly with second-run shows
- Tree maintenance and personnel
- Adding greenspace to parking lots
- Trash cans should be attractive and accessible
**Zoning Ordinance Review and Suggestions**

The Zoning Ordinance of Metter should reinforce historic dwelling patterns and historic uses to fully benefit the civic heart of downtown.

**Currently, permissible uses in the Central Business District (CBD) do not include:**
- Dwellings (conditional only);
- Produce, fruits, vegetables;
- Off-site signs

**Effect:** These exclusions limit the CBD’s economic diversity and aesthetic character.

**Currently, permissible uses in the Neighborhood/General Commercial District (CR) which surrounds the CBD include:**
- Bottle gas, storage and distribution
- Welding shop (conditional)
- Cesspool builder, sales-service
- Tire repairing-supplies (conditional)
- Disposal plant, sewage (conditional)
- Storage yard, equipment (conditional)
- Dwelling, single-family (conditional)
- Paving, temporary batch plant (cond.)
- Manufacturing, light, limited (cond.)

**Effect:** These permissible uses are not compatible with the traditional and existing uses of the area and could detract from the CBD as well as the CR district.

**CBD and CR District Schedules:**

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**CBD and CR District Schedules:**

**Effect:** Lot areas allowances are much larger than existing lots, especially in the CBD. The setback requirement is too large and does not reflect traditional development patterns. There are no height restrictions for the CBD. The ordinance should state that new infill construction be no taller than the tallest building and no shorter than the shortest building existing in the CBD.

**Buffer screens around parking lots:** A width of 10 feet with 1 evergreen shrub or tree every 25 linear feet; OR 64 square feet with 1 evergreen shrub or tree per 10 cars.

**Effect:** The buffer screen is a good planning tool. The requirement should be well enforced. The requirements should be strengthened to provide a more solid screening effect with even more evergreen shrubs or trees.

**Recommendations:**

The zoning ordinance needs review and adjusting to reflect historic character and traditional land use. In the process, the ordinance should encourage future desired land use. Enforcement of the ordinance is key toward encouraging the revitalization of Metter.

Consider adopting a historic preservation ordinance. A local preservation ordinance enhances a zoning ordinance. A district designated under a preservation ordinance will be an overlay district upon existing zoning.
Community Assets and Recommendations

Metter Depot and Greenbelt

Visitors are reminded that Metter used to be a railroad town by the presence of the rehabilitated depot on the east edge of downtown. Creating a green corridor that runs into the city along Georgia Highway 46 will invite travelers to explore Metter, and should moderate summer temperature due to increased tree canopy. The same tree species found in the downtown square are recommended for planting along the depot property and the lot across the street, allowing for a harmonious appearance and regularly scheduled maintenance.

Thanks to recent rehabilitation of the depot, Metter realizes the historic nature of its downtown. In an effort to continue economic development, a façade improvement program has been established in Metter. The historic character of buildings should be maintained as a sign of financial health and to attract more small businesses.

Candler County Courthouse

Candler County Courthouse, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, deserves an impressive landscape. As this is the westerly corridor to downtown, a planting of oaks is indicated to balance the oaks located in the square across South Broad Street. A formal garden of various plantings is also suggested for the courthouse lot.

Removing the existing flagpole from the central walk and replacing with two in the center of opposing lawns will open up the view to the front steps of the courthouse.

Lewis Street Median

The city layout has been preserved since its inception. Boulevards lead into downtown with stately oaks and azaleas. In keeping with that tradition, an extension of the boulevard down Lewis Street toward Interstate 16 will serve to entice highway travelers into downtown. A welcome sign will also encourage visitors to venture even farther into Historic Metter.

Downtown Squares

Downtown Metter’s three squares represent untapped resources. Enhancing the existing parking lots by incorporating green space will create a more desirable destination. Hardscape materials should be consistent through all three squares and through town. Scored concrete walking paths would reflect where
the railroad tracks once ran. Benches of similar construction would be easy to maintain, as would exterior light posts that are 8 feet to 10 feet tall, excluding globes. This treatment will personalize the outdoor space and complement downtown businesses.

**Streetscape**

To make the downtown more walkable for pedestrians, installing traffic calming devices like crosswalks and “bumpouts” would be beneficial. “Bumpouts” also create extra space on sidewalks for outdoor seating and plant materials. Extending sidewalks from residential neighborhoods to downtown will allow easy walking to the CBD. They should be constructed of materials that are currently used for sidewalks in downtown.

**Old School Complex**

To better serve Metter’s younger generation, an adaptive-use feasibility study is recommended for the old school. This would determine costs and best uses for the building and can aide in a fundraising campaign.
IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing the Recommendations

making Metter even better
Implementing the Recommendations

Key aspects of successful community collaborations include:

**Keep it simple.**
Consider that to collaborate is to work together. Pretty simple. Pretty simple to forget.

**You get what you pay for.**
This document makes initial, cursory recommendations. The City of Metter must hire an architect, engineer, and/or landscape architect to produce construction documents before any of the recommendations can be built.

**Empowerment.**
When communities are empowered, they take responsibility for solving problems, and through their own efforts, they will succeed. Empowerment allows for cooperation and collaboration. Each person views their role as essential to the success of the group—and together, they make a difference.

**Training leaders is necessary.**
Community leaders are always in short supply. The only way to get the leadership that is needed is to identify those capable, and then train them.

**Community planning must be inclusive.**
It is important to be inclusive in all phases. Both public and private sectors can leverage resources by developing partnerships and collaboration.

**Teamwork is essential.**
New partnerships must be formed. Creative new partnerships are needed to address problems more efficiently by pooling interests and resources.

“**We’re in it for the long haul.”**
Metter’s problems developed over the years, and therefore it is not realistic to expect solutions overnight. It will take time to experience the real difference that investing in the community can make.
Building collaborative efforts takes a long time; the work is incremental and organic. However, collaboration is worth the long hours required on the front end. There are no short cuts to success.

“If you build it, they will come.”