



VIEW*S*&VISIONS

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Developing on a Sense of Place

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Dougherty earned his bachelor's degree in political science and public communications from American University in Washington, D.C.

He serves on the boards of the Augusta Levy Learning Center, Regional Economic Development Partnership, Wheeling-Ohio County Convention and Visitor's Bureau, OV Connect, Generation West Virginia and Preservation Alliance of West Virginia. He is also a member of the West Virginia Abandoned Properties Coalition.

Wheeling is on the cusp. After decades of population and industrial decline, the city is filled with excitement about its future, particularly the possibilities that exist in the historic downtown. Loft apartments have been built, and more are on their way. A new corporate headquarters, bringing hundreds of jobs downtown, is under construction. Retail, restaurants and breweries are popping up in the Centre Market Historic District. The future of Wheeling looks promising.

An optimistic outlook was not always common in Wheeling. Many people remember a downtown that was filled with stores – department stores, shoe stores, men's and women's stores and grocery stores. They remember squeezing through sidewalks packed with shoppers during the holiday season, and buses full of fans lining the streets when country music stars like Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn and Merle Haggard played at the Capitol Music Hall. Then, one by one, industries disappeared. The employment opportunities diminished. The stores closed and the buildings were left vacant. The outlook was bleak. The once bustling downtown saw decades of disinvestment and decay.

This story is not unfamiliar in West Virginia or elsewhere. Great cities left for dead. Cities only talked about in the past tense. Places haunted by the expectations of their own storied past.

As we look forward, we need to make a decision – do we embrace this history, knowing that the realities of the past might never be the realities of the future, or do we opportunistically plow ahead at the risk of losing the soul of our city?

If the latter is chosen, the sense of place is lost. Maintaining a strong sense of place is critical



in the revitalization effort, because it is that “how we got here” story that makes *somewhere* a distinct and interesting place. It is that story that appeals to people.

Cities *should* change. They should adapt to new economies and changing needs, but they should not become unrecognizable. In West Virginia, we have distinct, authentic places built by people who saw potential in them. Places that are bursting with opportunity and burdened with blight. It is in this tension – between dilapidation, development and the preservation of place – where the rubber meets the road.

Here is a four-point framework for creating an incremental, inclusive and comprehensive revitalization effort that embraces our history and encourages development:

“The difference between a vision and a hallucination is the number of people who see it.”

As with many things, a clear and articulated vision for the future is critical. Without a clear



From top: the Wheeling Suspension Bridge and downtown Wheeling; 14th Street in downtown Wheeling; Centre Market, built in 1853 by architect Thomas Pope, is home to locally-owned shops, boutiques and eateries

Create an enabling environment

We need to do more to create an environment that encourages development. We need to incentivize revitalization that aligns with the community's shared vision for the future. We need to build public-private partnerships that stimulate the economy. In most communities, this means finding ways to contribute not only to corporate expansion, but also to small business and entrepreneurial development.

Distribute leadership

Leadership should be distributed throughout the community to people closest to the challenges – to the people who understand the issues, but who need a little more know-how to address them. These individuals and organizations need to be supported and encouraged. This can be done by bringing the neighborhood leaders to the table, increasing their capacity through technical assistance and providing them with resources.

In Wheeling, it is through this framework that we can utilize our remarkable sense of place to create inclusive economic opportunities for our residents. We can ensure resources are deployed in the downtown where historic properties can be interwoven with new buildings. We can celebrate the history of our city without being tormented by it. We can empower champions in our neighborhoods to promote the vision of the people who live there.

The challenges we face in Wheeling are not that different from the challenges faced by other communities. West Virginia has resilient cities and the coolest small towns filled with potential. It has beautiful mountains and rivers ripe for tourism and outdoor recreation development. Every part of West Virginia has a strong sense of place, where history and culture run deep. Our deeply rooted sense of pride is born from this place. We need to protect, promote and plan our development around this nonrenewable resource with relentless perseverance. ▽

goal, effort moves chaotically in different directions and energy is lost. A shared vision directs energy toward a common goal. It creates a “where we are going” story that compels people to act.

Focus resources on areas of strength

Everyone has limited resources, and we need to find ways to put more resources to work. But, more importantly, we need to

use resources we have right now in places where they have the best chance to spur investment. We need to target resources into areas that have demonstrated economic strength and show promise, so they can be a catalyst for more development. As these areas grow, they will act as a point of reference, encouraging other areas to follow their lead.