



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## Bridging Urban Appalachia

Ric Cavender, Executive Director  
Charleston Main Streets

Ric Cavender, a lifelong Kanawha County resident, serves as executive director of Charleston Main Streets, a collaborative group focusing on economic and community development in the capital city's west side and east end. Since the program's inception, the districts have experienced public and private investments total more than \$450 million.

Cavender earned his bachelor's degree in business administration, with a concentration in marketing and management, from West Virginia State University.

He is a graduate of Leadership West Virginia, earned *The State Journal's* "Generation Next: 40 Under 40" award and serves on the boards of the YMCA of Kanawha Valley and the West Virginia State University Foundation, among others.

As local economies across the country continue to focus on ways they will diversify, attract new industry and retain residents and workers, they must also balance these efforts with a focus on sustaining a unique market position and building a distinctive brand. This has proven to be a difficult feat and certainly a growing challenge in West Virginia. The past 15 years in Charleston have set a new precedent for economic and community development and how we tackle the challenges presented across the Mountain State. Within the capital city exist unique opportunities and potential barriers that have been examined and applied to the work done to improve our city every day.

Our organization, Charleston Main Streets, is one of those groups working with multiple partners, including the City of Charleston, the Charleston Urban Renewal Authority, the West Virginia Development Office and countless private businesses, to ensure a bright economic future for the east end and west side of the city. Thus, our mantra: Bridging Urban Appalachia.

One concept that transfers through the work we do at CMS is the notion that our state is only as strong as its urban core. We believe that Charleston is the heartbeat that supplies a consistent blood



flow to its surrounding areas, making a strong and diverse local economy imperative.

Earlier this summer, I had the privilege to join more than a dozen of my fellow economic and community development leaders from across the state for a trip to Detroit, hosted by the Kresge Foundation. For two days, we saw firsthand the results of private industry, city government, downtown development organizations and philanthropy joining forces to not only revitalize a city, but prepare for the next chapter of its story.

Working hand in hand with the aforementioned partners, the Kresge Foundation helped assemble a project management team that developed



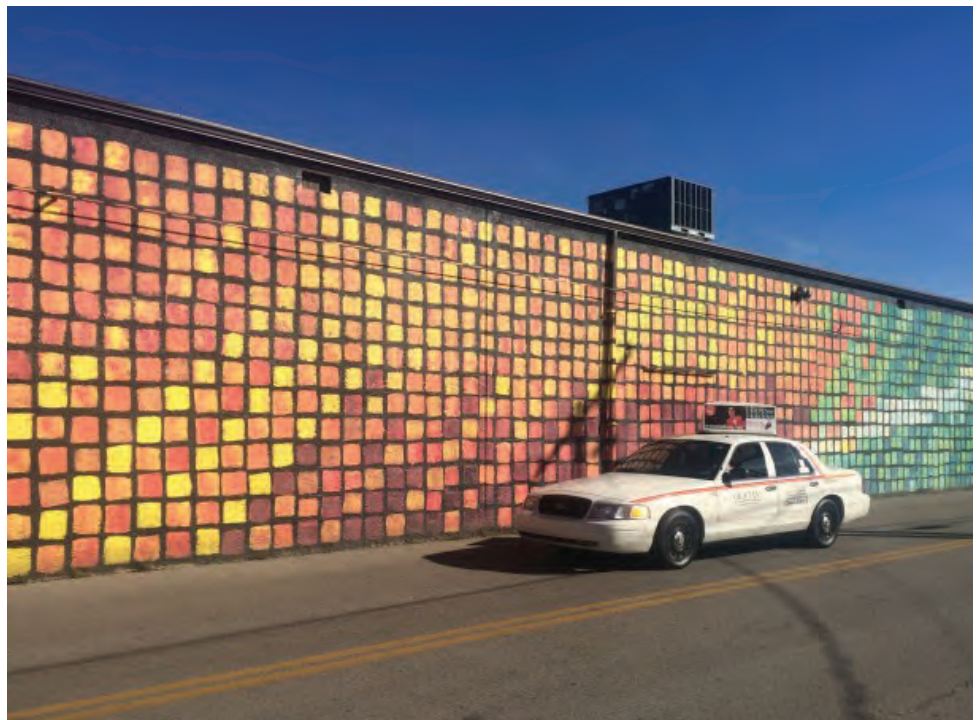
*Young's Department Store owner Jim Oatridge (second from left) is joined by local architect David Marshall (far left), Mayor Danny Jones (middle), Steven Romano and Ric Cavender of CMS to celebrate the grand reopening after a multi-faceted renovation of the landmark west side business*

“Re-Imagining Detroit 2020.” This plan outlines nine pillars of focus that include entrepreneurial development, health care innovation and excellence, re-shaping the city, mass transit, education redesign and more. After two days of tours and meetings with stakeholders across the city, we soon realized that for every cultural contrast that exists between West Virginia and Detroit, just as many economic and cultural comparisons were recognized.

So, considering the insight gained during our trip to Detroit, what about Charleston and West Virginia can we ascertain as community and economic trends? What part of the cultural landscape has changed or improved? The answers to these questions are as apparent as the challenges we face. Since 2002, more than \$450 million in public and private investment has been made in Charleston’s east end and west side including streets, infrastructure, business, public art and anchors like Appalachian Power Park, the Clay Center, Capitol Market and more.

Vacancy rates on the east end have dropped from 36 percent to less than 12 percent, and private developers have taken advantage of historic tax credits and our façade and sign grant programs, and started reinvesting in old buildings. The City of Charleston and Charleston Urban Renewal Authority have worked tirelessly to reinvest in our downtown. The Charleston Civic Center is currently undergoing more than \$90 million in renovations; new public space improvement projects are underway across the city; and, millennials are moving downtown to be closer to work, shops and local eateries.

CMS has assiduously worked to develop a five-year strategic plan that places a strong focus on five key development drivers: economic, financial, marketing, organizational and programs. Each driver outlines a list of priorities and strategies that place the focus on making urban Charleston the most sought-after, economically successful and unique destination in the state. We believe the capital city should not only set an example, but also set the trends for community and economic



*CMS worked with the property owners at Plaza East in the east end warehouse district to commission the sixth public arts mural, “Power,” by Rebecca Recco*

development throughout West Virginia. Yes, we’re proud of the work we’ve done so far to attract new business and strengthen existing business; open thousands of new eyes to our districts through the production of destination events; build solid partnerships with the most talented leaders, community members, businesses and agencies in the region; and, cultivate an environment that protects past investment while encouraging new ventures. But, the pride we have for our city and its positive influence on the rest of the state is what defines our work. We believe the attention that has been given to urban resurgence on a national scale is not different in Charleston, and as more young professionals, families and empty nesters continue to trade in their suburban digs for life in the city, part of our job is to carve out the best living and working environment while planning for urban growth.

I continue to be amazed at the dedication and hard work of our board of directors, boards of advisors, volunteers, promotional partners and staff who all march to the same drumbeat and fulfill our mission of “Bridging Urban Appalachia.” As the

heart of Charleston continues to beat stronger, we’re optimistic, more now than ever, that the growth and success experienced here will be realized throughout our great state. ▽