Frozen downtown begins thaw

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What will remain after the melt is anyone's guess, though. City leaders have no formal plan.

Jordan Gilmore, an attorney who lives and works in downtown Salisbury, poses in front of his residence. / Staff photo by Todd Dudek

Downtown redevelopment trends

Kent Robertson, a researcher at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota and revitalization evangelist, has outlined seven trends in downtown redevelopment efforts in small cities.• Emphasis on a multi-functional downtown, involving housing, entertainment, hotels, churches, libraries and other types of establishments.• Enhancing sense of place.• Involving community in planning.• Employing public and private partnerships.• Applying the Main Street approach developed by the National Trust for Historic Places. (Salisbury is working on renewing its membership.)• Marketing downtown's businesses, attractions and events.• Creating "new suburban" downtowns in places that traditionally had no core.Source: Kent Robertson

Case Studies in Revitalization

Brevard, N.C.: After several plant closures, business advocates created a retiree "resource network," which provided consulting services to businesses. The idea won the 2007 outstanding county program award from the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners.**Etowah, Tenn.:** The city paid $1.6 million for an abandoned rail line that led to a nearby national park. Boosters leveraged the success of the rail excursions by marketing downtown's large agglomeration of second-hand stores to tourists.**Douglas, Ga.:** This town of 10,000 on the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp was the first rural community in Georgia to be named "entrepreneur-friendly" by the state. Chamber and government officials partnered to produce a "How to Start and Grow a Business" resource guide, and the chamber created a mentoring program for new business owners to learn from established owners. The town also developed a retail incubator, enabling entrepreneurs to lease space month-to-month to test their ideas.**Fairfield, Iowa:** Nicknamed "Silicorn Valley," Fairfield initiated a volunteer-driven program in 1989 to link entrepreneurs with colleagues and public support. Notably, it created a relocation program designed to lure entrepreneurs by offering breaks on rents and telecommunications, training and access to capital.Source: "Small Towns, Big Ideas: Case Studies in Small Town Community

Economic Development," University of North Carolina School of Government and the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center

Fire, water and ice. They are the elements that have tested downtown's resilience and the resolve of its people through the years. Devastating blazes ripped through Salisbury's budding business district in 1860 and 1886, erasing the vestiges of its colonial history the first time and leaving nothing behind but brick walls and chimneys the next. The next trial came crashing down in 1909. The Humphreys Lake dam broke, causing one of downtown's most photographed landmarks to vanish in a matter of hours.

Downtown rebounded each time, almost as if nothing had happened.

This, however, is a story about the third element: ice. The heart of Salisbury has been frozen for at least three decades, stubbornly resisting public and private attempts to get it beating again.

Shops and restaurants come and go. Well-meaning civic efforts accomplish superficial changes — planter boxes, brick pavers, a half-finished riverwalk — and little else. Festivals draw thousands of patrons who invariably disappear afterward as quickly as they appeared.

A renewed vigor has taken hold during the past year or so, though, and it is transforming years of inertia into tangible steps toward creating a place where people want to live and work — again.

"We've spent 30 years having these experts tell us what to do, and now we're doing it," said Mayor Jim Ireton, who has made downtown revitalization one of his administration's top priorities since he took office in 2009.

With last April's election of urban planner Jake Day to the City Council, the mayor added, "it's now lead, follow or get out of the way."

Interviews with people who have the most at stake in downtown's future — urban planners, elected officials, business owners and those who use its space — suggest much more needs to happen before the ice's long-awaited melt, though.

In search of an anchor

Salisbury could be the next Annapolis or Alexandria, Va.

Downtown looks the way it does today largely because of one developer's strict adherence to that belief. And Palmer Gillis isn't done yet.

"You're watching a movie one frame at a time," Gillis said the other day from his development company's second-floor office overlooking the Downtown Plaza. "I've been down here so long I feel like I've gotten involved in everything."

Just about, anyway.

The Plaza Gateway building, The Gallery Building, the Old Synagogue and the Feldman's

building are just a few examples of the historic downtown structures that Gillis Gilkerson has renovated during the past 30 years.

Gillis grew up in Salisbury. But for him, redevelopment is personal. The Feldman's building, now being transformed into office and retail space, was operated from 1890-1913 by a wholesale grocer called B.L. Gillis & Son, a company owned by a distant relative.

He fell hard for the historic centers of Annapolis and Alexandria, where the next art gallery or cafe is just a stroll away. The Gallery Building was his attempt at creating a new Torpedo Factory, an arts center in Alexandria.

It didn't quite work out as planned, but the presence on the first floor of the Art Institute & Gallery is a testament to his original inspiration, he said. He also reconfigured the space inside the building and the Plaza Gateway to allow patrons to walk through to the plaza from the parking lot south of the strip.

His decades of planning may be at odds now with the public sector's vision for downtown.

The city has been shopping its several surface parking lots to would-be developers for the better part of a decade. Gillis himself once spent two years trying to get Salisbury University and other investors to develop a high-rise student residence, office building and parking garage at the parking area, known as Lot 1.

Earlier this year, Ireton announced that his administration was vetting a new bidder for the sprawling lot. He offered few other details, and Maryland's records law allows governmental real estate transactions to take place out of view.

Gillis said he is happy to see the sprawling space moving toward a better use, but he thinks the city is making a mistake by not insisting on the creation of a focal point for downtown first. It could be a movie theater, a performing arts venue, anything to give people a reason to show up.

"Personally, I think you need an engine before you have a car," Gillis said.

Considering the next step

A click on the "Downtown Revitalization" link on the city's website shows a variety of documents, most notably the mayor's 2012 parking lot sale manifesto and a series of renderings developed by the Maryland Department of Planning showing how those lots could be developed.

But several observers, including Ireton's ally Day, note that the city has no formal downtown revitalization plan. Architecture and planning students from the University of Maryland are using the downtown this spring as a laboratory to develop a community-based redevelopment plan.

But that plan is months away from completion, and it's unclear whether city leaders will adopt it.

Gillis added that whatever gets built at Lot 1 could be doomed to fail unless it includes parking.

Ireton disagrees. The existing parking garage has more than enough space to accommodate the

new development, he said.

Those who oppose the transition forget their history, he added. During early downtown reclamation efforts in the 1960s, old buildings were demolished, leaving behind parking lots that were intended only to last until something else could be done with them.

Slowly, but surely

Scenes from the new downtown:

• This past New Year's Eve, a celebration organized by community volunteers attracts 3,300 revelers downtown. In his State of the City address a few months later, Ireton singles out the event as perhaps "the crowning achievement of the year."

• When Ireton first took office, downtown had four restaurants. Now, it has 11 and three more are on the way, he said.

• The off-hours are still long downtown, but an unmistakable increase in patrons begins to populate its shops and restaurants.

"I've been living here (in Salisbury) for six years, and it's only in the last year that I've been coming downtown," says Sean McCarthy as he grabs a cup of coffee at Main Roots Cafe one sunny weekday. "I never had a reason before."

• An unlikely group of collaborators — the city, Salisbury University, the University of Maryland, Baltimore and the University of Maryland Eastern Shore — gather to plan the creation of a medical school to be sited near the hospital.

The next step

"The only thing left here to do is heads and beds," Ireton likes to say.

One of those beds belongs to Jordan Gilmore. He lives in an apartment above the plaza and works in a fifth-floor office in the One Plaza East building a block away.

"I think I put about 5,500 miles on my car last year, so that's nice," said Gilmore, an attorney specializing in family law and bankruptcy cases. He also served as Day's campaign treasurer when he ran for office last year.

He has lived downtown since 2009. No one keeps track of exactly how many people live downtown, but city planners know that none of the dozens of refurbished apartments stays empty for long.

Gilmore, 32, said he likes being able to walk to bars and restaurants. The only time he uses his car is to get groceries.

His office is spare: a desk, a pair of chairs, a couple of cabinets. The walls are painted a lime green that seems to make the room's contents glow.

Gilmore doesn't want for much else downtown. But one idea came to mind the other day when he opened his window blinds.

"Well," he said, "hopefully that parking lot won't be there anymore."