

# GDA Newsletter



Volume 1 ♦ September 2006

## Welcome from the President Denise Brinson, Suwanee

There is a love affair going on in Georgia. Yes, there is growing evidence that our citizens and visitors are enchanted with Georgia's downtowns.



Yes, some of it is anecdotal, and word-of-mouth notions rooted in experience can be powerful indicators of what is. But we also have trend lines; trends that provide validation well beyond the warm and fuzzy feeling created by streetscape improvements. Today, we are seeing a validation of downtown through the opening of new businesses, restaurants and a revival of the theater, both through restoration and new construction. Not only are buildings finding new uses but we are also deploying the central strategy for success, bringing in people, not to just attend events or stroll, but to live and work. Creativity is accelerating in terms of how we redefine the place we call downtown. And cities are competing as they work to put their best foot forward, a bit of entrepreneurialism if I might, through lasting partnerships and incentives to attract private investment.

As downtown professionals, we are the matchmakers in this love affair with Georgia's downtowns, connecting the dots between people, ideas, projects and capital. I hope this new GDA Newsletter will bring us closer together in our efforts to preserve and grow the character and vitality of Georgia's downtowns.

## Downtown Association Hosts Premier Conference

The 2006 Georgia Downtown Conference and Annual Awards Extravaganza, sponsored by the Georgia Downtown Association (GDA) in partnership with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), will take place October 11 - 13 in Valdosta and will take attendees behind the scenes to explore successful downtown development adventures.



The conference features educational workshops highlighting the most talked about downtown development issues facing downtowns today; exhibitors with the hottest products/services for the downtown scene; a **Red Carpet Reception**; and an opportunity to hear from downtown stars and their adventures. The Georgia Downtown Awards will be showcased at the **Red Carpet Extravaganza** at the award-winning Wild Adventure Theme Park.

Among the conference highlights are:

- Check Out the World Of DDA's
- Red Carpet Reception in Bennie's Alley
- GDA Awards Extravaganza with free theme park admission
- See How the Downtown Stars Live!
- How to Develop Booming Hot Spots in Downtown?

- Take Two: Scenes from the Tax Improvement Districts
- Roll the Camera and Hear About Redevelopment Law and Adapt Reuse

### The Host City

Valdosta was recently designated as the premier city of the new Metropolitan Statistical Area and serves as a regional trade area and retail hub for 11 surrounding South Georgia and North Florida counties and more than 1.2 million people. The mild climate, progressive economy and strategic location make Valdosta (known as "The Azalea City") an ideal environment for business, industry and commerce. For this reason, Valdosta's motto is "A City without Limits and a Region of Opportunity."



Downtown Valdosta

Valdosta is a progressive community, but it has worked hard to retain its small-town southern charm. The city has created a local historic district which consists of four National Historic Register Districts that are protected by a strong historic preservation ordinance. The downtown boasts over 30 residences on the upper floors of the buildings, creating a unique yet urban place to live.

A local church purchased and rehabilitated a downtown historic building, keeping the first floor of the building commercial space by creating a coffeehouse and bookstore and locating the church on the second and third floor. From its 1860s beginnings, downtown Valdosta has been a center of commerce and government for Lowndes County. Today, the downtown is a vibrant neighborhood that offers much for visitors and residents day and night.

For more information about the conference, please contact Kimberly Carter, [kcarter@dca.state.ga.us](mailto:kcarter@dca.state.ga.us), (404) 679-0604.

### Professional Development Program

Almost 100 of Georgia's downtown development professionals have participated in the design and development of the Georgia Downtown Association's (GDA) new Professional Development Program.



Three years ago, the Association's Board of Directors created the Professional Development Committee and charged it to develop a program to help guide GDA members' professional growth. The Board set three objectives for the program:

1. Elevate the image and strength of the downtown development profession in Georgia;
2. Recognize Georgia professionals for their accomplishments; and
3. Provide a "road map" for downtown professionals' self-improvement.

Numerous discussions with national organizations (including the National Main Street Center, the International Economic Development Council (which includes the former Council on Urban Economic Development), and the International Downtown Association) revealed that there was no state-specific program that contained everything GDA members and leadership wanted. So the Professional Development Committee created a unique program that will likely serve as a model for other states to follow.

The program designates three levels of professional success, each requiring and recognizing more professional success than the preceding level:

- **Georgia Downtown Development Professional**, demonstrating a thorough

working knowledge in the professional practice of downtown development in Georgia;

- **Senior Downtown Development Professional**, demonstrating proficiency in application of critical knowledge, skills, and tools in the professional practice of downtown development in Georgia; and
- **Master Downtown Development Professional**, demonstrating mastery in the professional practice of downtown development in Georgia and significant contributions to the profession.

Each level requires training, on-the-job accomplishments, activity in GDA, and an examination. Flexibility is built into the requirements, and the cost is miniscule compared with a typical investment in ongoing professional development. The application deadline is mid-year (beginning in 2007), with testing and announcements to be held at the Annual Georgia Downtown Conference.

Professional development is an investment in a roadmap for success to establish and sustain a community's central business district and its "sense of place." People come to the downtown development profession from a variety of backgrounds. And a successful practice is a dynamic exercise with an ever-changing mix of best practices, programs of assistance, allies, and laws. GDA's Professional Development Program is designed to provide a systematic approach for basic training and continuing education that encourages and recognizes a well rounded professional practice for the benefit of Georgia's downtowns.

Watch for details in October at the Georgia Downtown Conference.

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#### *Downtown Development Authorities in Georgia: What's in It for My City?*

Downtown development has been shown to be an essential component of a community's overall economic development strategy. A vibrant, active city center is a critical factor for a successful economic development program and in the development of local tourism. In the spring of 2003, a poll conducted by Insider Advantage Inc. for GMA showed that people value a safe, vibrant, and healthy downtown even if they do not live within a city's limits. Throughout Georgia, downtowns are becoming thriving centers for small business development

and housing - both rehabilitation and new development. More and more people are interested in living, working, and playing in Georgia's downtowns. In addition to the economic health of a community, downtowns symbolize a quality of life, a sense of place, public-private partnerships, and local history.



*Downtown Senoia*

What role do downtown development authorities have in the success of a typical downtown? The primary objective for activating a downtown development authority (DDA) is to assist in the revitalization and redevelopment downtown areas. In the 1970's, a push to create DDAs was motivated by the decline of central business districts as a result of commercial development on the suburban fringes of cities. Over the past 30 years, many Georgia cities have discovered that downtown development authorities provide much-needed flexibility to accomplish projects, turning dreams for downtown revitalization into reality.

Today, Georgia's downtowns continue to face stiff competition from shopping malls and discount outlet stores located outside the central business district. The successful revitalization of our downtowns depends largely on the ability to identify resources, build support from the community, business and public officials, and maintain a clear focus on the needs of the downtown. According to the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, which manages Georgia's Main Street and Better Hometown Programs, the downtown development authority is one of the most widely used tools for successful downtown revitalization.

In Georgia, state law (O.C.G.A. § 36-42) provides that every city has the authorization to create a DDA by

action of the governing authority. According to the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, there are 147 registered downtown development authorities in the state in 2006. All that is required to activate a DDA is for the City Council to adopt a resolution declaring the need for the authority, to appoint a board of directors, and to establish downtown development boundaries. A good way to start the process is to select members of the public and private sectors invested and involved in downtown development in your community to attend GMA-sponsored DDA training programs. Under state law, there are rules guiding the make-up of the board.

These programs occur four times each year, two of which are held in conjunction with the GMA Mayor's Day meeting held each January in Atlanta and the GMA Annual Convention held each June in Savannah.

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs recommends that the practical economic development or revitalization of downtown should follow the Main Street Four Point Approach™, a comprehensive strategy used by the Georgia Main Street/Better Hometown Programs. The Four Point Approach™ includes:

**Organization**

Consensus and cooperation among many groups and individuals who have a stake in the revitalization process. This provides a forum for many different groups to work together toward the shared goal of a vital downtown center.

**Promotion**

Promoting downtown as the center of activity through events and marketing to bring people downtown to shop, work, and invest. Positioning the downtown to be the most resilient to economic change.



*Downtown Suwanee*

**Design**

Rehabilitation of existing buildings in order to create an attractive, pedestrian friendly downtown center. Paying attention to all physical attributes in and around downtown. A successful program promotes the rehabilitation of existing buildings by educating property owners and local building and fire officials. Financial incentives may be used to initiate this activity.

**Economic Restructuring**

Enhancement of existing businesses through retention, expansion; and expanding the economic base through the recruitment of new businesses.

DCA has discovered in studying downtowns across Georgia that cities that have an organized, community-based revitalization program, including an active DDA and a manager responsible for downtown revitalization, have a much greater chance at promoting and sustaining economic development efforts and private investment in downtowns. According to research done by DCA, a successful downtown revitalization program benefits local business owners, city and county governments, and local schools.

For more information on how to activate the DDA in your city, and for information regarding the benefits of having a DDA, city officials are encouraged to contact Billy Parrish, Director of the Office of Downtown Development with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, by phone at 404-679-3115 or by email at bparrish@dca.state.ga.us. Information on the Four Point Approach™ and the National Main Street Center can be found at <http://www.mainstreet.org>. For additional questions, please contact Patrice Williams of the GMA staff at 678-686-6213.

**The Renaissance of Olde Towne Woodstock**

Located along I-575, Woodstock is the gateway between urban-Atlanta and the historic-High Country. The heart of the community is Olde Towne. Borne out of necessity as a railroad town of the late nineteenth century, Olde Towne is home to city government, education, entertainment, commerce, banking, dining, and transit.



*Hedgewood Phase I in Downtown Woodstock*

On the west side of Main Street, historic buildings greet consumers with unique shopping opportunities, services, and a glimpse into the past at Dean’s Store Welcome Center. Just across the railroad is the future of the Olde Towne. A mixed-use development by Hedgewood Homes, *Woodstock Downtown* includes family housing from the \$200s-\$600s, retail, dining, and a charming park system. This new development essentially doubles the commercial space of downtown while staying true to the charming atmosphere and turn-of-the-century architecture. The Woodstock Downtown Development Authority and the City of Woodstock are also looking at the creation of a Downtown Tax Allocation District to further mixed-use growth through the construction of infrastructure.



*Christine's Creations in Downtown Woodstock*

Created in March of 2006, the Woodstock Area Convention & Visitors Bureau Authority, which is staffed and directed by the DDA, is working closely with the City of Woodstock to promote the many family events held in the Olde Towne area. The CVB is also working closely with the area’s most popular attraction—Dixie Speedway—to attract even more guests downtown. The partnership of the DDA, CVB, and the private sector are creating a

standard of community involvement and pride. Olde Towne Woodstock is truly the place “where modern amenities meet olde southern charm!”

### *Plans for Fourth Mentoring Bus Tour Underway*

The Georgia Cities Foundation is finalizing plans for the fourth Peer-to-Peer Mentoring bus tour scheduled for October 3-4, 2006. The purpose of this tour is to expose representatives from cities that are interested in downtown revitalization to community leaders from cities that have experienced success in their revitalization efforts.

This year’s “mentor” cities include Acworth, Canton, Cartersville and Rome. The mentor cities will share with the tour participants their experiences, both positive and negative, and any specific local issues they have encountered in downtown revitalization. They will also take the tour participants on a walking tour of three downtown projects.



*Downtown Covington*

The invited “mentee” cities include: Blairsville, Centerville, Lincolnton, Millen, Remerton, Roberta, Statham, Stone Mountain, and Wrens. In addition to Foundation staff, a representative from various state agencies and organizations will participate as a resource team during the tour. These individuals will be available to discuss the various services their agency or organization has available to assist cities with downtown revitalization efforts.

For more information, contact Linda Wilkes, [lwilkes@gmanet.com](mailto:lwilkes@gmanet.com), (678) 686-6243.

## Introducing Georgia's First Downtown Speakers Bureau

At this year's annual downtown conference in Valdosta, don't miss the exciting opportunity to share your downtown knowledge and expertise with others across the state by joining the "Georgia Downtown Speakers Bureau." Whether someone is seeking a keynote speaker, a special guest, or "educator for the day" for their next event, GDA's Speakers Bureau will help them tap into our world of insightful and entertaining downtown speakers. Not only can we educate our fellow cities, but we are a resource for economic development across the state.

Once a database is established, the goal is to make it accessible via the GDA website where interested parties may browse the bureaus' link by a speakers name, topic, title, city, speaking engagement, etc. The accessibility would not only be endless, but would be promoted for use by organizations of all types. This program will provide the services we strive to offer in a continuing effort to promote awareness and education about downtown revitalization while also providing opportunities for GDA members to gain exposure in the marketplace.

Interested persons will be able to sign up at the GDA's booth at this year's annual conference in Valdosta or you may contact Stephanie Howell, [sshowell@nctv.com](mailto:sshowell@nctv.com).

### Acworth's Redevelopment Incentive Program

Recently, the City of Acworth presented its Redevelopment Incentive Program to the public. This program is a joint effort between the Acworth Downtown Development Authority and the City of Acworth and seeks to encourage redevelopment and revitalization of the older commercial areas in the DDA's district that are beyond the heart of the Central Business District. It is the goal of this project to encourage significant renovation of commercial properties in the target area that will improve the exterior appearance of buildings, attract business to the City, increase the tax base, generate employment opportunities, and beautify and improve the community as a whole.

The first part of the Redevelopment Incentive Program is the Acworth DDA's Architectural Design Grant that is

available to property owners in the Acworth DDA District. The DDA will provide grants to property owners for up to 50% of the cost of professional architectural design services for major design improvements to existing building facades (up to a maximum of \$1,000). The completed application along with supporting documentation is submitted to the DDA's Design Committee for evaluation. The Design Committee then makes its recommendation to accept or deny the project application. Upon acceptance, the applicant contracts with an architect who will submit preliminary design drawings to the DDA Design Committee for review and comments. Once the construction drawings are completed, they will be submitted to the DDA, which will then reimburse the developer up to 50% of the cost of the design services (not to exceed \$1,000). The final construction drawings become the property of the DDA thus enabling a future owner or tenant to construct the improvements if the present applicant is not immediately able to complete the project.



Downtown Acworth

Once a project has been awarded the Architectural Design Grant and the completed plans are completed, the applicant is ready to move to the City's portion of the Redevelopment Incentive Program. This includes the possibility of receiving a 50-50-façade grant of up to \$5,000 for the implementation of the project, an exemption of commercial occupational tax for up to 5 years, and the waiving of all permit fees covering the renovation project.

For more information on the DDA/City of Acworth Redevelopment Incentive Program, please contact Jan Harris, CMSM - Director of Acworth Main Street Program at 770-974-8813 or by email at [jharris@acworth.org](mailto:jharris@acworth.org).