



## Chapter 2

# Community Input

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This plan recommends policies largely based on opinions and perceptions of those who know the community best—its residents, business owners, and property owners. In order to gauge these opinions and perceptions, a survey was distributed to 27 members of the Downtown Marshalltown Taskforce and 118 business and property owners in the district. In addition, a series of focus groups and a community meeting involving various stakeholders provided additional input.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

A total of 13 taskforce members and 72 businesses and property owners completed the survey, for a response rate of 59%. The 72 business and property owners included 18 business owners, 3 property owners, and 33 individuals who own both businesses and properties. Of the property owners, 31 own only one downtown property, while 8 own more than one property. This section summarizes major survey findings.

## Rating of Features

Community members place a high value on downtown Marshalltown's appearance, public improvements, and marketing and promotional activities. The district's public perception, business mix, cultural facilities, and quality of adjacent residential areas are considered major shortcomings.

Survey participants completed a "report card" question, asking respondents to rank various features of downtown on a "5" to "1" scale. Figure 2.1 illustrates the results of the rankings among taskforce members and Figure 2.2 business and property owners.

Taskforce members identified the following as substantial strengths of downtown:

1. Traffic Circulation
2. Marketing and Promotional Activities
3. Streetscape and Public Environment
4. Overall Appearance as a District
5. Adequacy of Parking

The following features received consistently low rankings by taskforce members:

1. Condition of the Surrounding Residential Area
2. Amount of Business Attracted from Outside Marshalltown
3. Business Variety
4. Growth in the Office Market
5. Cultural Facilities and Attractions

Business and property owners identified similar strengths and weaknesses, but rated the district's adequacy of parking much lower. Their rankings are as follows:

1. Marketing and Promotional Activities
2. Traffic Circulation
3. Streetscape and Public Environment



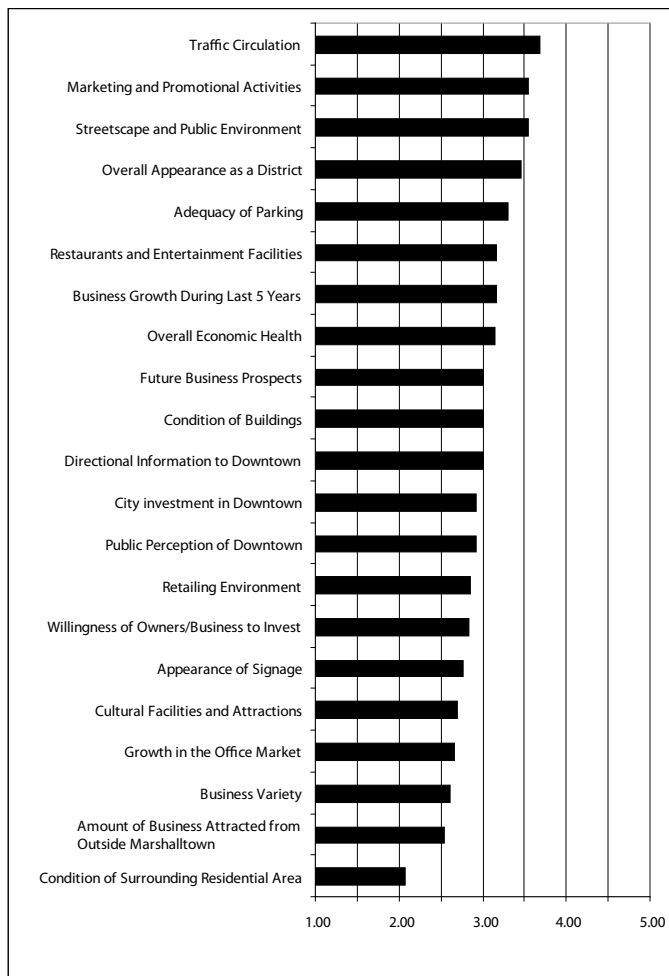
4. Overall Appearance as a District

5. Restaurants and Entertainment Facilities

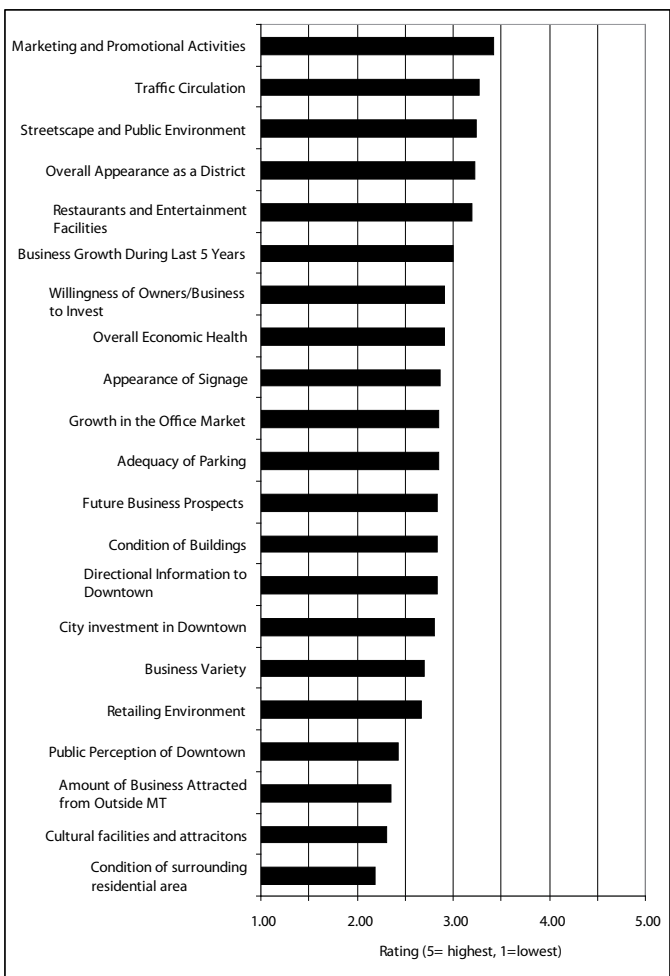
Business and property owners consistently gave low ratings to the following features:

1. Condition of Surrounding Residential Area
2. Cultural Facilities and Attractions
3. Amount of Business Attracted from Outside Marshalltown
4. Public Perception of Downtown
5. Retailing Environment

**FIGURE 2.1: Downtown Marshalltown Report Card, Taskforce Members**



**FIGURE 2.2: Downtown Marshalltown Report Card, Business and Property Owners**

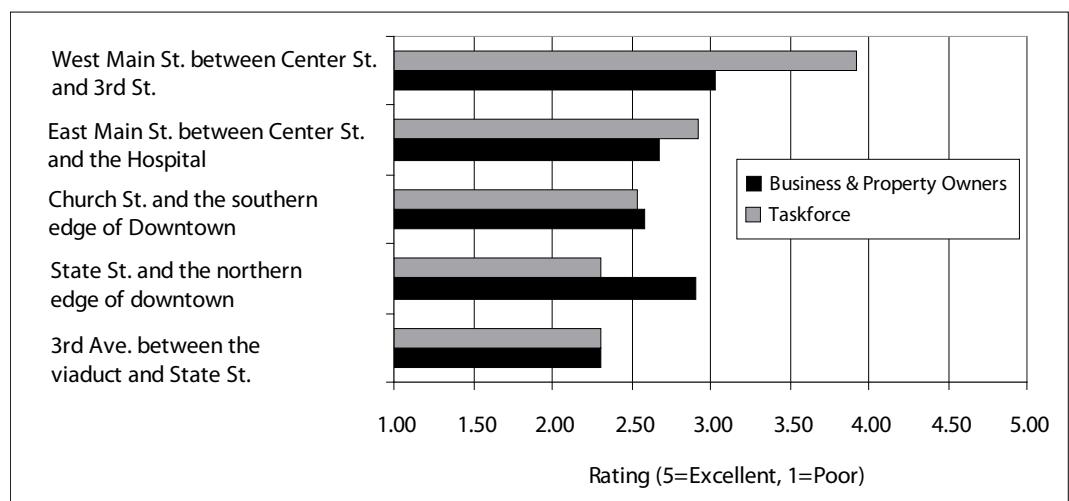


Survey participants generally viewed Main Street and western portions of downtown as positive contributors to the overall health and quality of the district and had negative opinions of downtown's periphery.

Survey participants were also asked to rate downtown's geographic areas on the same "5" to "1" scale in terms of their overall health and quality. An understanding of these perceptions helps to identify target areas for improvement. Figure 2.3 displays the results of the rankings.

West Main Street between Center and 3rd Streets received the highest ratings overall. East Main Street between Center Street and the hospital, State Street and the northern edge of downtown, and Church Street and the southern edge of downtown received moderate ratings, while the 3rd Avenue corridor was rated very low.

**FIGURE 2.3: Rating of Geographic Areas based on Overall Health and Quality**



## Downtown Marshalltown's Assets

Respondents identified the county courthouse, enhancements to the public environment, restaurants, and community improvement efforts as downtown's key assets.

The survey included an unprompted question asking taskforce members and business and property owners to list downtown Marshalltown's three greatest assets. By far, the most frequently stated responses included the courthouse, variety of restaurants, and improvements to the public environment, such as streetscape and landscaping. The Main Street program and volunteer efforts to improve and promote the district were also frequently listed as major assets. The list of responses organized by frequency is as follows:

1. Courthouse/government offices (46 responses)
2. Public improvements, including plantings, streetscape, sidewalks, lighting (15)
3. Restaurants/outdoor dining (15)
4. Main Street program (13)
5. Historic building stock (12)
6. Volunteers/business involvement in improvements and promotion (11)
7. Business variety (10)
8. Cleanliness/overall appearance (8)
9. Events/promotion (7)
10. Friendly, local businesses (7)
11. New housing (6)
12. Cultural diversity (4)
13. Central location (4)
14. Churches (2)



## **Downtown Marshalltown's Weaknesses**

*An inadequate parking supply, poor building maintenance, and lack of retail variety were mentioned most frequently as downtown's liabilities.*

In contrast to a consideration of its assets, survey participants were asked to list downtown's three greatest liabilities. The list of responses is as follows:

1. Lack of parking, perception of lack of parking, poor utilization of existing parking (25 responses)
2. Poor building maintenance (21)
3. Lack of retail variety (18)

4. Poor public infrastructure, overall appearance (13)
5. Negative attitudes, unwillingness of business/property owners to invest (10)
6. Vacant storefronts (9)
7. Condition of the Tallcorn building (8)
8. Poor traffic circulation, one-way streets, 4-way stops on Main Street (7)
9. Inadequate business hours (6)
10. Ethnic/cultural division (6)
11. Lack of entertainment/nightlife (4)
12. Poor condition of surrounding residential areas (3)

## Property Investment

*Three-fourths of the property owners who responded indicated that they plan to make physical improvements to their properties in the next 5 years, with façade work and interior renovations being the most commonly stated improvements. In addition, 70% of business owners indicated good relationships with their landlords when working out arrangements for physical improvements.*

Property owners were asked about plans for improving their properties. Over three-fourths (35 of 45 respondents who answered the question) indicated that they plan to make improvements within the next 5 years. Types of improvements listed included:

1. Improve façade (11 responses)
2. Update interior (10)
3. Expand building (6)
4. Paint building (4)
5. Replace roof (4)
6. Add upper-story apartments (3)
7. Add landscaping/improve parking lot (2)



Property owners who indicated that they have no plans for improvements were asked about their reasons for not making improvements. The distribution of responses was as follows:

1. Improvements are not needed (6 responses)
2. Lack of funds (4)
3. Uncertain business future (6)
4. Uncertain commitment to this location (0)
5. Concern regarding value of investment in this area (4)

The most frequently stated reasons for not making improvements were uncertainty about their business' future and a lack of need for improvements. A few respondents suggested that a lack of funds and concern regarding the value of investment contributed to their decision not to make improvements.

Another question asked business owners about the market for their business in downtown. The range of responses was as follows:

1. Good, and getting better (14 responses)
2. Good, and stable (23)
3. Good, but declining (13)
4. Marginal (4)

While 43% of business owners selected option "b," good, and stable, several also chose options "c" and "a." A total of 69% of business owners stated that their business is either good, and getting better or good, and stable. Only 7% of business owners indicated marginal business at their locations.

Business owners were also asked about their relationship with their landlords when dealing with physical improvements to their properties. A total of 70% indicated a good relationship and little difficulty in working out arrangements for improvements. The remaining 30% of business owners indicated a fair relationship and some difficulty in working out arrangements for improvements. No business owners indicated a poor relationship, in which it is very difficult to arrange for improvements.

## Programs and Actions

*Survey participants generally considered downtown's highest priorities to be attracting new businesses, adding parking and reconfiguring existing parking facilities, improving the appearance of building facades, and adding landscaping in certain areas.*

An open-ended question asked survey participants to list types of businesses they would like to see in the district. In order of frequency, responses included:

1. Destination/Specialty Retail (26 responses)
2. Drug Store (22)
3. Restaurants (21)
4. Grocery Store (11)
5. Clothing Stores (9)
6. Nightclubs/Entertainment (8)
7. Offices (7)
8. Anchor/Department Store (6)
9. Convenience Store (6)
10. Bookstore (5)

A question addressing downtown's future asked survey participants to rate a variety of possible actions on the basis of their importance. As with the Report Card, these responses were ranked on a "5" (most important) to "1" (least important) scale. Items receiving an

aggregate rating of 3.5 or above were considered by most to be important to downtown Marshalltown's future. Figure 2.4 displays the results of these ratings among taskforce members and Figure 2.5 shows the results among business and property owners.

According to the taskforce members, the most important actions included the following:

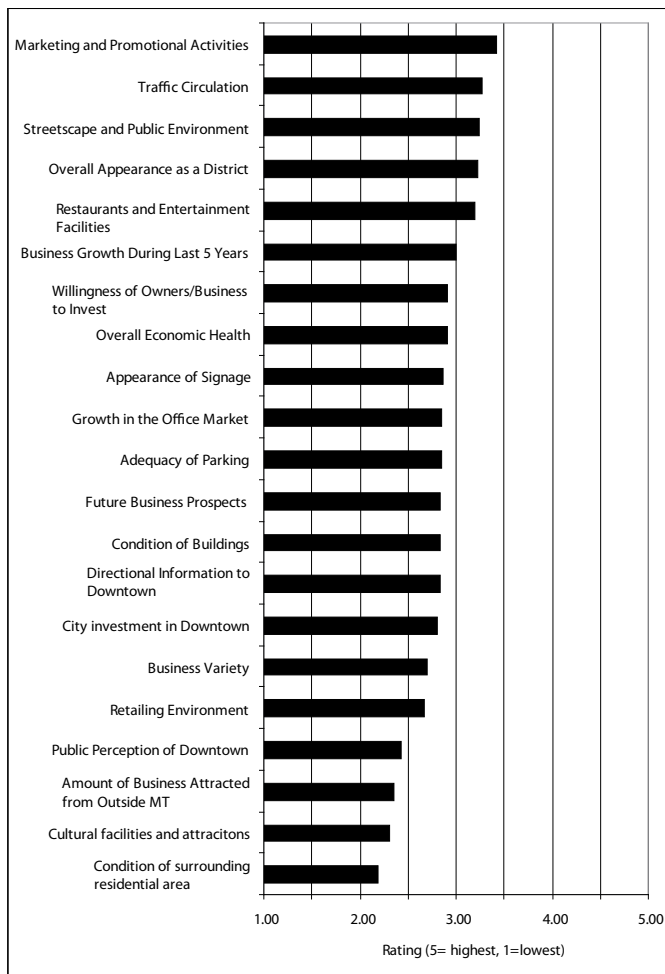
1. Attraction of New Retail Businesses
2. New Construction on Vacant Sites



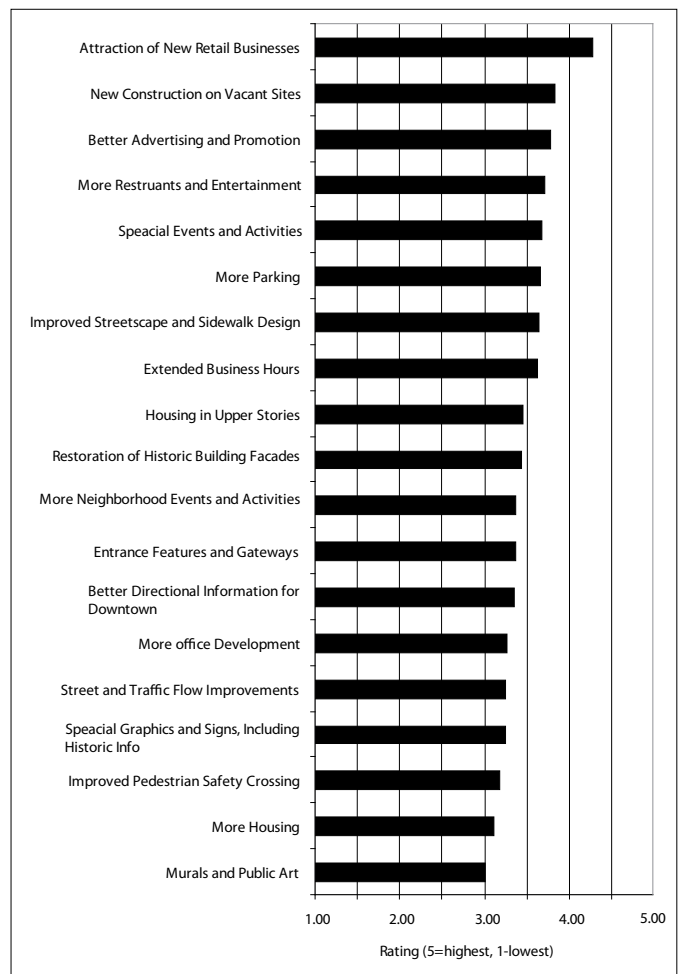


3. More Restaurants and Entertainment
4. Housing in Upper Stories
5. Restoration of Historic Building Facades
6. Entrance Features and Gateways
7. Better Advertising and Promotion
8. Extended Business Hours
9. More Housing

**FIGURE 2.4: Ratings of Suggested Actions based on Importance to Downtown, Taskforce Members**



**FIGURE 2.5: Ratings of Suggested Actions based on Importance to Downtown, Business and Property Owners**



While business and property owners identified a similar set of actions, they emphasized adding parking and gave less priority to housing and building restoration:

1. Attraction of New Retail Businesses
2. New Construction of Vacant Sites
3. Better Advertising and Promotion
4. More Restaurants and Entertainment
5. Special Events and Activities
6. More Parking
7. Improved Streetscape and Sidewalk Design
8. Extended Business Hours
9. Housing in Upper Stories

The survey concluded with an unprompted question asking taskforce members and business and property owners to list the three most important actions or projects that should be completed in downtown Marshalltown during the next five years. The most frequently stated responses addressed attracting new retail businesses, improving building facades, and resolving parking problems. Respondents suggested the following improvements, organized by priority:

1. Attract more retail businesses (25)
2. Improve building facades (19)
3. Add parking/reconfigure existing parking (12)
4. Add landscaping/complete streetscape project (10)
5. Construct a new library (8)
6. Develop new, quality housing/upper-story housing (8)
7. Rebuild Center Street viaduct/improve Center Street gateway into downtown (8)
8. Improve traffic flow/eliminate 4-way stops on Main Street/eliminate one-way streets (6)

9. Develop new offices (5)
10. Demolish blighting structures, including former Arbie Feeds building, Tallcorn building (5)
11. Construct new buildings on vacant sites (2)
12. Improve the condition of surrounding residential areas (2)

## FOCUS GROUPS

A series of focus group meetings were held to garner additional input on major issues affecting downtown and actions that should be taken. These groups included: legal and medical professionals, education and cultural representatives, non-profit and religious officials, members of the Latino community, seniors, industrial leaders, real estate professionals and developers, city officials, county officials, and members of downtown business organizations. Major conclusions included:

### Effectiveness of Business Organizations

Focus group participants were generally positive about the efforts of the Main Street organization and Marshalltown Economic Development Corporation. These organizations have been most successful at marketing and building community pride, and less successful at coordinating retail business hours.

### Civic and Cultural Attractions

Many participants indicated that downtown Marshalltown lacks major cultural attractions. They stressed coordination of efforts to expand cultural facilities and activities. Major cultural efforts should include: renovating the Orpheum theater, increasing use of the Coliseum, expanding the amount of art gallery space, and building on existing civic resources such as the courthouse and hospital. Several participants also indicated that a new library should be constructed in downtown's core.

### Parking

Many participants suggested that certain parts of downtown lack an adequate parking supply, particularly near popular restaurants at the west end of the district. They also expressed concern that downtown employees who park in front of their businesses contribute to the parking shortage. Stakeholders suggested that the city should add

directional signage to parking facilities and more businesses should add rear entrances. A few participants stated that because downtown's north-south alleys are underutilized, they could be converted into lighted walkways between Main Street and peripheral parking lots.

### **Retail Climate**

While participants were generally positive about downtown's restaurants and entertainment options, they were less optimistic about the district's retail trends. They expressed a need for a drug store, convenience store or grocery store, and additional niche retail stores.

### **Surrounding Neighborhoods**

Overall, participants had positive opinions about downtown's core, but negative opinions about areas surrounding downtown, including State Street, Church Street, 3rd Avenue, the industrial area south of downtown, and neighboring residential areas. They stressed the importance of investing in these areas.

### **Building Maintenance**

Focus group participants indicated that buildings in certain parts of downtown, particularly the east end, are poorly maintained, in part because of rent levels and vacancies. They stated that while the Tallcorn building has major historical and architectural value, its poor condition is a liability to the district. Furthermore, the group suggested a need for facade improvements in some areas.

### **Special Events**

Participants were upbeat about downtown's special events and suggested that additional events and increased marketing would benefit the district. Several stakeholders lauded the recent use of the courthouse square for events, particularly use of the band shell for concerts.

### **Open Space and Recreation**

While participants felt that the courthouse square is a major asset to downtown, they would like to see additional green spaces throughout the district for public gathering and events. Several participants indicated a need to improve bicycle accommodation in the district and link downtown to regional trails.

## Traffic

Focus group participants generally favored Main Street's current two-way configuration. Many also felt that converting Church and Linn Streets to two-way traffic would benefit the district.

## COMMUNITY MEETING

*A community meeting was also held in which residents identified downtown's assets and opportunities and identified the most important projects and actions.*

According to meeting attendees, downtown Marshalltown's strengths include:

- Festivals
- Beauty
- Diversity of cultures and businesses
- A positive attitude
- Architecture
- Strong leadership
- Synergy/energy
- Courthouse
- Private investment
- Westtown apartments
- Size of the district/quaintness
- CBD organization
- Camaraderie of business owners
- Continuity of building stock
- Number of restaurants
- Friendliness of community



- Hospital/medical offices
- Renewed sense of pride
- Ease of access
- Center of transit
- City government
- Hispanic community
- Community college
- Fisher Controls
- Churches
- Free Parking
- Dedication of volunteers
- Political party headquarters
- Gardens/flowers
- Banners/streetscape
- Entrepreneurial spirit
- Banks
- Customer service

Attendees were also asked to identify important issues and opportunities for change. They then voted on the issues based on their importance. The list is as follows:

- Limited retail hours (6 votes)
- Lack of public restrooms (5)
- Vacant storefronts (4)
- Safety/gang activity (4)

- Lack of a grocery store (3)
- Lack of entertainment options (3)
- Inadequate marketing (2)
- Lack of businesses targeting young people (2)
- Blighted condition of Arbie Feeds/View from Center Street viaduct (2)
- One-way streets are confusing (2)

Meeting attendees then listed projects and actions that could address the issues, including:

- Communicate
- Enforce city codes
- Deal with safety perceptions to encourage longer business hours/Identify hours
- Market existing activities
- Market the community on a individual basis
- Collaborate with large businesses and service groups
- Add trash containers
- Identify new businesses that people want
- Review and change code requirements
- Identify feasible, incremental changes
- Increase remodeling assistance for homeowners



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## CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions about the current situation and future of downtown Marshalltown suggest that an improvement strategy should include:

- Attracting new retail businesses and offices, including redeveloping vacant and underutilized sites with commercial or mixed-use buildings to increase the supply of usable retail and office space. Survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that improving downtown's business mix is a major priority. Important business types to attract include both destination or specialty retail and neighborhood or convenience retail.
- Incorporating civic and cultural facilities into downtown and bridging ethnic divisions. Additional events and marketing could also stimulate additional investment.
- Providing additional on- and off-street parking facilities in strategic locations and reconfigure existing parking lots to allow for maximum efficiency. While these facilities should accommodate for demand, they should be designed in a manner that does not detract from the pedestrian environment. While survey respondents disagreed as to whether downtown's parking shortage is real or perceived, they generally agreed that parking is an important issue. Additional parking signage, improved access to peripheral parking areas, and encouraging employees not to park in front of Main Street businesses are other potential parking solutions.
- Rehabilitating and preserving important buildings and providing programs and financial incentives to encourage improvements.
- Adding high-quality housing, some of which may be accommodated in upper stories, and improving the condition of the district's edges and surrounding neighborhoods.
- Enhancing downtown's public improvement with additional landscaping, open spaces, and minor streetscape improvements. While survey respondents were generally positive about the district's existing public improvements, several indicated a need for aesthetic improvements, particularly landscaping in certain areas and additional trash receptacles.