



Revitalize, or Die.

Jeff Siegler, Principal
Revitalize, or Die.
Pittsburgh, PA 15216

September 28th, 2023

Hopkinsville, Kentucky Civic Assessment

Background

Staff with the City of Hopkinsville contacted me this past spring in regard to conducting the 3-Day Civic Assessment. We eventually established September 11th through the 13th as being the best dates for my visit. Planters Bank sponsored the cost of the service.

Visit Summary

During the course of my three-day visit, I had the opportunity to meet with property owners, business owners, economic development officials, chamber officials, tourism officials, the real estate development community, fire department officials, police officers, and city council members. I also had a chance to sit down with Mayor Knight, Administrator Body, Holly Boggess and Elizabeth McCoy. I conducted a series of interviews with these groups to better understand community concerns and what people would like to see happen in Hopkinsville. I was also provided with a tour of downtown as well as recent planning documents to review prior to my visit.

Qualifications

Jeff Siegler is a civic pride consultant, a founder of the firm Revitalize, or Die. In his work with Revitalize, or Die., he assists communities in combating apathy by fostering civic pride and providing places with the tools they need to be successful and healthy. Jeff takes a holistic approach to civic health and uses his platform to educate elected officials on why it is so important to take a people-first approach to community development.

Jeff has a Bachelor's degree from Ohio Wesleyan University in Economics and a Master's in Urban Planning from Virginia Commonwealth University. He has worked in adaptive reuse real estate development, as a Main Street Manager, and ran the Ohio Main Street program for 10 years before becoming a consultant.

Recommendations

- 1. Raise standards.** Standards and expectations are the guardrails of human behavior. It's what shapes society. It is imperative to lay out what is acceptable from people and what is expected. The quickest path to improvement is to raise standards. When we ask more from people, we give them a chance to improve. Which is a gift unto itself. Hopkinsville must raise its standards. Which means setting the bar higher. When it comes to improving a community, the most direct route is code enforcement. The rules are already in place, but rules without accountability are meaningless. So The City must start enforcing the rules and match expectations with accountability. The physical makeup of this city is public and private property. Simply put, when those properties decline, the community declines, when the property improves, the community improves. Properties must be taken care of. The built environment affects how we feel and currently, it's not making people proud of Hopkinsville. So raise standards, and enforce the rules. This community can't let another property fall into disrepair. There is a tremendous cost to letting buildings like the Phoenix crumble before resident's eyes. There is the loss of property tax, the loss of income tax and sales tax, depressed property value for the surrounding buildings, the emotional cost people experience when they see something important fall apart, its dampened civic pride, increased vagrancy, and crime. The cost of vacant and abandoned properties is being carried financially and emotionally by every person in this city. No more buildings can be allowed to decline any further. This is the lowest things can go. Now is the time to take action and hold those who are part of the problem accountable. Because when the condition of the buildings improves, so do all the people that live amongst them.

2. **Improve appearances.** People adapt to their surroundings. When the surroundings are rundown, they feel rundown, when the surroundings are nice, they feel nice. So the community has to prioritize improving the condition of the surroundings. This comes in two parts and they work hand in hand. There is the public realm, the streets, the sidewalks, the alleys, the parks, and civic buildings. These must be elevated. And this also leads to the second part, the private sector. When the public realm improves, an economic opportunity is created for the private sector. A house on a pretty street is worth more than a house on a crumbling street. As the public realm improves, the private sector has a greater opportunity to realize a return on their investment. So the city needs to commit to elevating appearances of the public realm, which is one of the strongest economic incentives for private development and has already occurred on 6th St. As the road was narrowed, the sidewalk dressed up, and the block made generally more attractive and enticing, the private sector responded appropriately with investment. Carry this out again and again. The city should set the stage by improving the public realm so that the private sector can capitalize by investing in places that have suddenly become more desirable to the public.

3. **Slow traffic.** One of the mistakes Hopkinsville and every other city made was thinking motorists needed to have unimpeded freedom to go wherever they wanted at any speed they wanted. Cars dominate the suburbs and the countryside, and wide roads mark the landscape, but we must set aside at least some little space for people. That space is downtown. Pedestrians and cars are incompatible because increasingly, one is killing the other. Pedestrians avoid roads with heavy traffic and fast traffic. So when downtowns overly accommodate cars, they do so at the cost of pedestrians. The most popular places across the country and across the world for that matter are all pedestrian oriented. They are walkable, they have very little vehicular traffic and parking. It's where we all like to go on vacation. Places where we can stay out of our cars (because they are stressful) and walk around with cocktails and pop in shops and see live music. So cars need to be slowed, streets need to be narrowed and the downtown must be configured with the pedestrian in mind.

4. **Determine a vision.** If a community does not decide where it is headed, it can be sure to never arrive. Successful individuals, businesses, and organizations must always set a course for where they are headed and a city is no different. The surest path to success is in deciding where success lies and plotting a course to get

there. So Hopkinsville must decide who it wants to be and what it will take to get there. As the famous American architect Daniel Burnham stated, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood." Set some big goals, be audacious, and give residents something to be excited about. Dream big, why not? But have the courage to follow through, there will be plenty of naysayers and opponents. Many will say it can't be done, these will be the same people who have never dreamed anything for themselves, who have never accomplished their own goals, and who scoff in the shadows at those of us who reach for something greater. Ignore these people. Their opinions don't matter, don't feed their negativity. Turn off Facebook.

5. **Take action.** Relentless incremental improvement is your surest path forward. The only way for Hopkinsville to reach its destination is to constantly move toward it. Too often cities spend too much time talking, a lot of time planning, and a lot of time plotting perfection, none of that time is as valuable as time spent taking action. The key to improvement is putting pride into action. The greatest of plans is useless if not coupled with action. The path to success for Hopkinsville is not in one perfect project but in a million small decisions and actions. It's a ten thousand incremental improvements that add up, it's getting better by 1% every day. There is no need to wait to improve. Improvement won't feel any different tomorrow than today, so you might as well get started on pulling weeds and picking up trash.

6. **Create a Development Plan.** The single most important aspect of community revitalization is creating a quality, attractive, and functional built environment. Getting the streets, sidewalks, and buildings right, will make all the difference. People are drawn to social and pretty places, which in turn, attracts investment. It is vital for the City of Hopkinsville to fill empty lots with quality buildings and to ensure vacant and underutilized buildings are renovated and made attractive and functional once again. When the heart of a community functions properly, it becomes the emotional and economic driver for a region. A vibrant downtown that is attractive, walkable, and full of healthy businesses, will not only expand the tax base but increase resident attachment, improve tourism, enhance property values, foster civic pride, assist with all retention and expansion efforts, and significantly improve residents quality of life. The City should identify all of the underutilized parcels in the priority blocks downtown, determine the highest and best use for each property, and then partner with the local real estate

development community to determine how to best get each project built. All too often, cities create an adversarial relationship with the development community, but relying too heavily on existing processes and not considering intended outcomes. But if the City of Hopkinsville, worked with local developers in advance to map out the process, both parties would benefit from the relationship and experience significant investment and return. Both parties would benefit by working together to rebuild what Hopkinsville is missing.

7. **Celebrate success.** A great deal of progress has already been made in Hopkinsville, it is important to celebrate that progress in an effort to help provide residents with reasons to be optimistic while also building momentum. The act of community revitalization is to a great deal physical improvements, but political and public support will always play a role in getting things accomplished. Creating positive energy around these efforts will generate goodwill and make it easier for the people involved to achieve what needs to be done. Each and every step of the process should be shared with all of the positive impacts being celebrated. I would even suggest creating some type companion campaign to marry with the actual physical efforts as a way to foster increased pride and positivity. Residents want to feel good about their community, they need to have opportunities to feel like things are moving in the right direction and that their hometown is getting better. It can be difficult for some because negativity has often become the norm, but with a concerted and intentional effort, a little bit of positive momentum will begin to drown out the negative minority.

In my professional estimation, these seven recommendations provide Hopkinsville with the greatest opportunity to realize success and become the type of place that fosters resident attachment and civic pride. It has been my experience that a community that becomes a great place to live, also becomes an incredible place to visit and invest. So focus first on being a great place to call home. I don't believe community revitalization is extremely complicated, but it's not easy. It takes political willpower and doing the right thing in the face of opposition. Most municipalities have spent decades making poor decisions that have left them struggling to survive. Continuing down the same path of economic development as usual, will not result in any different outcomes. Instead, Hopkinsville should focus on the above 7 recommendations and turn efforts inwards.

Finally, consider a new lens for decision-making. Civic Pride. As any decision comes before the municipality, it should be considered whether or not moving forward will result in an increased sense of civic pride. Not all investments are positive, not all projects make a community stronger or more resilient. Not all new development is an improvement in current conditions. Instead, with each and every decision, decide if the outcomes will make the community proud.

Thank you for sharing your community with me and I hope the above recommendations provide you with the direction you need and the results you are seeking. I look forward to returning in the future to experience all of Hopkinsville's success firsthand.

Thank you,

Jeff Siegler
Revitalize, or Die.