

A Vision for Our Downtown: The Marion Cultural Corridor

Marion Area Convention & Visitors Bureau
Downtown Marion Inc.



Executive Summary

The Marion Cultural Corridor project is a collaboration between the Marion Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) and Downtown Marion Inc. The purpose of the project is expressed in the introductory document shared with the community in September, 2016.

The historic Downtown Marion area will be the cultural hub of the community where residents and visitors gather to experience a truly local environment of shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues while creating a sense of place that the community uses as a foundation for feelings of pride and self-worth. That sense of pride and place, while triggered by a revitalized downtown, will not be restricted to the downtown, but will be applied to the entire city and county. For that reason, we will use the term “**cultural corridor**” to describe the area bounded on the east by the Harding Home and the west by Union Station. The distance north and south of that line should be fluid, dictated by the activities of local businesses.

Cultural corridor initiatives have been successfully achieved throughout the U.S. and internationally. While those projects focused on the cultural and performing arts in development planning, the Marion Cultural Corridor speaks to the broader definition of the term. This broader definition, defined by Merriam Webster’s dictionary as, “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations,” is the glue that holds us together and requires a physical presence best achieved in a historic downtown area.

A working group was convened in November, 2016 consisting of:
Mark Holbrook, Marion Area Convention & Visitors Bureau
Beth Meadows, Downtown Marion Inc.
Clarissa Myers (January, 2017), Downtown Marion Inc.
Pam Hall, Marion Area Chamber of Commerce
Sherry Hall, Harding Home & Memorial
Randy Winland, Marion County Historical Society
Mayor Scott Schertzer, City of Marion
Andrew Carter, Marion Star
Lisa Mendoza, Marion Can Do!
Bev Ford, Marion Palace Theatre
BJ Gruber, Marion Police Department

Meetings with the working group were held several times to explore and examine successes in similar sized cities in Ohio, discuss Marion's unique assets and challenges, and to discuss what a successful cultural corridor would look like in Marion. These meetings culminated in a walking tour and discussion of the corridor area in April, 2017. Also at this time, the CVB and Downtown Marion Inc. met on a weekly basis.

The results of the eight-month process of research, exploration, and discussion are the visions for a vibrant, thriving, healthy cultural corridor in our community as expressed in the following report.

For the purposes of this project, the group focused on the below elements to a successful corridor. Each will be addressed individually as they apply to the Marion Cultural Corridor.

Streetscape

Commerce

Office Space

Housing

Historic Preservation

Government Center

Culture and Entertainment

Open Space

Streetscape

Definition:

To design a balanced transportation system which is supportive of other downtown goals and which recognizes that the transportation system should provide more efficient use of both right-of-way and vehicles. This means reducing reliance on the automobile, increasing the number of persons per car and increasing the number of persons moving through the area on foot and bicycle.

Perhaps the most prominent in the eyes of local residents, our streetscape is the aesthetic that conveys the personality of the corridor. But there is also a strong functionality to a well-planned, successful streetscape. Understanding that the central city's streetscape was changed several years ago and today's views on what a modern streetscape should be are different than in the 1980s, future changes should be viewed to appeal to today's residents and visitors.



While few would disagree that changing our corridor streets back to two-way would be beneficial and is perhaps the most important change needed in our streetscape, it is not the intention of this group to insist on that change. Such a project would cost several million dollars and, although desirable, is one that should be addressed by city officials and regional planning professionals. That said, we do believe that doing so would be an investment that would benefit the community in many ways.

Parking is an issue that often generates passionate responses. Some believe we have too many parking spaces, others far too few. The truth is, a recent study determined that, in the United States, we have eight parking spaces for every car in the country. The Marion corridor area contains 1 parking space for every 10 households in the county. Those 2,400 parking spaces in the area mean that no business is more than two blocks from ample, free parking. It is apparent that better signage is necessary to identify public parking in the cultural corridor. We recommend a comprehensive analysis to determine the number and placement of signage for all public parking locations.

American historian, sociologist, and philosopher of technology Lewis Mumford wrote more than half a century ago, "The right to have access to every building in the city by private motorcar in an age when everyone possesses such a vehicle is the right to destroy the city." Prophetic words as cities like Marion strive to combat the car culture of corporate commercial developments. In fact, the perception of parking in a downtown versus a corporate commercial

area is quite deceiving. Drivers perceive a business is closer to the spot they park because the storefront is large and visible from a distance. That same distance in the corridor where storefronts are small and drivers often must walk around a corner is perceived as much farther away.

The **view of a driver** passing through the corridor should be one that is pleasing to the eye and draws attention to the area's architecture and the businesses within those buildings. Such a view slows traffic, a necessity for increasing business along a street, while also helping the driver to get a sense of the density of businesses on that street. We envision our corridor streets as ones that draw attention to our historic buildings in such a way that the view invites drivers to park and spend some time there. To accomplish this, current visual obstacles should be evaluated and changes considered. For example, are the trees in our downtown too large and thus block the view of our buildings while creating a tunnel effect? That tunnel effect reinforces a sense of a street being no more than a way to get from point A to B, dissuading drivers from considering the street as a place to stop and explore.

Another important element for creating a streetscape that is inviting and avoids the tunnel effect is an **abundance of seating**. This can take the form of sidewalk seating for restaurants, coffee shops, etc., public seating along sidewalks and public buildings, and park spaces (addressed in the public spaces section). Outdoor restaurant seating is currently possible under city ordinances and we expect that, as more and more restaurants open, increased outdoor dining will contribute to enhancing the streetscape. Additional seating throughout the area can best be achieved by evaluating current public building outdoor spaces to identify where benches, and other forms of seating can be installed.

While the possibility of removing trees to better focus on building and businesses is a sound approach, the presence of growing things in a downtown are essential to creating a pleasant, attractive environment. Current best practices in planning now look to create green spaces, primarily small ones, that are more horizontal than vertical. Doing so helps to frame the historic architecture rather than hide it. Of course, hanging baskets and blooming plants are an important and desirable part of a streetscape. The most successful way to accomplish this would be an approach that includes both the city of Marion and corridor building/business owners.

Public art continues to play a major role in downtown revitalization projects throughout Ohio and beyond. The current *Cardinal Community* project to place 17 large Cardinal statues throughout the corridor will create a sense of pride in the community and will be a conversation starter for visitors, potential visitors, and media. Our current corridor area murals are a great asset and we encourage artists and city officials to continue to explore additional sites for murals and other public art projects.

Sometimes, a shift in perspective is all that is needed to turn a negative situation around. Such is the case with utility lines in Marion. While it would be preferred to bury transmission lines to improve the above-ground aesthetic, the sheer volume of lines running through the corridor make that financially unfeasible. The utility poles that most impact downtown visually are the steel, double-masted lines running through the alleys just East and West of South Main Street. With the possibility of burying or rerouting these lines being difficult, perhaps a better solution is to consider transforming the towers to something more visually appealing. Some paints and an artist's talent could convert these steel structures from an eyesore to conversation pieces.



As is the case with any community, multiple projects and programs work toward creating a better community. In Marion, the Smart Streets Initiative led by Ohio Health's office of Creating Healthy Communities is an excellent example. Smart Streets will address future planning and construction in the corridor that will ensure our community streetscape is safe, provides access to all, and is friendly to vehicle, bicycle, and foot traffic.

Commerce

Definition:

Enhance the cultural corridor's role as a leading center for retail goods and consumer services by providing an atmosphere conducive to investment. Determine what a successful business mix would be for the area.

This component speaks to the retail businesses as opposed to professional services such as banking, insurance, attorneys, and the like. Commerce businesses can include fashion/jewelry retail shops, antique and second-hand shops, artist galleries/studios, artisan shops, and book stores. A recent study in Madison, Wisconsin looking at the density of downtown retail businesses found that 75% of individuals who made a purchase in their downtown did not visit the area primarily to shop, but rather as tourists, to visit friends and family or to eat out. This is understandable as small, locally owned shops are more appealing as a group, rather than as an individual destination. While Marion currently has shops in all of the above categories, there are not enough to create a sense of density or of a shopping district. While it is difficult to say how many shops it will take to create a healthy density, common sense tells us that, when the number of occupied storefronts outnumber the unoccupied at a level that makes the downtown seem full, we have reached a productive density in businesses.

In order to achieve the density necessary to make the corridor a shopping destination, it is important to identify what types of commerce make for a successful destination sector. A 2008 study entitled Small Towns from the University of North Carolina's School of Government looked at 45 success stories of revitalization in small towns throughout the country. One of those towns was Nelsonville, Ohio in the southeast part of the state. A vacant downtown that was decaying was transformed into a bustling commerce district through the efforts of local property owners and civic-minded citizens who developed a program that subsidized local artists and crafts people. The results saw downtown building occupancy go from 25% to 85% in four years.

While we are not necessarily recommending a subsidy program, a concerted effort to attract the most likely small businesses, artists and craft people, to create enough density to make the corridor a destination should be strongly considered. The recently developed business Incubator, The Forge is a good first step in this process.

Another element of successful commerce development is the creation of districts. Districts can define the concentration of activities in an area such as performing arts districts or retail districts. They can also simply refer to a historical aspect of an area, such as the brewery district in Columbus. For Marion, with the Cultural Corridor spanning almost exactly one mile from East to West, defining districts would help residents and visitors better identify areas and shrink the distance psychologically to make it seem more intimate.

Office Space

Definition:

Strengthen the corridor's role as an important center for administrative, financial, personal and professional business, service and government activities.

According to a 2013 study by the Sonoran Institute Office,

People's attitudes about where they want to live, work, shop and play are changing.

According to the National Association of Realtors (NAR) "2013 Community Preference Survey," 60 percent of respondents favor a neighborhood with a mix of houses, stores and other businesses that are within walking distance, rather than neighborhoods requiring driving between home, work and recreation. Respondents indicated that while the size of a home or yard does matter, most are willing to compromise size for a preferred neighborhood and less commuting. For example, 55 percent of respondents were willing to forgo a home with a larger yard if it meant they could live within walking distance of schools, stores and restaurants.

While Marion's corridor currently houses a number of office space-type businesses, attracting additional tenants in this area makes sense. The more people working in the corridor, the more support retailers and restaurants will receive. It is believed that, as more restaurants, shops, and cultural businesses open, the corridor will become a much more desirable place for those seeking office space. We recommend a goal of 40% office space and 60% commerce for street-level building space within the cultural corridor.



Housing

Definition:

To give high priority to increasing the number of residential accommodations in the corridor area for a mix of age and income groups, taking into consideration that residents of the corridor and adjacent areas are essential to the growth, stability and general health of a city.

Of the areas of city core development that Marion excels, housing is among the best. With more than 200 units available in the main corridors of Center and Church Streets, current housing levels meet or exceed demand. However, we believe that, as the Cultural Corridor develops, demand will increase. Planning by building owners and others should keep an eye toward expanding housing availability in step with business development.



Typically, as city core development occurs, revitalization tends to spread outward. For Marion, that spread can and should address the residential streets bordering the corridor. Creating a walkable corridor area where people can work, live, and socialize naturally encompasses the surrounding neighborhood streets.

Historic Preservation

Definition:

Identify, preserve, protect and dramatize historical structures and locations within a city core.

Document the stories of our historic buildings.

Regardless of size, a city or town's historic central sector's architecture is the aesthetic core of a community's identity. The nostalgic atmosphere of old buildings tends to slow us down and make us want to spend time there. Older buildings have a character and individuality uniquely suited to the types of businesses that make a downtown a destination. Artists, crafts people, and other small businesses just seem to fit in vintage storefronts. And Marion has an abundance of these buildings thanks to the foresight and dedication of our property owners. In fact, the preserved historic buildings in the Marion corridor area are an accomplishment in itself. Many towns of similar size cannot boast the number of historic buildings we have in Marion. Old buildings provide a sense of place and permanence. We recognize that these impressive structures of brick, marble, and stone were built to last. There is a curiosity about old buildings that is not present with new construction. A revitalized cultural corridor takes advantage of that curiosity when business owners open their doors.

While we have much to be proud of in the preservation of our buildings, there is much yet to do. And much that has already been done. Responsible property owners have done well in restoration of buildings and these are the ones that are seeing good results in occupancy. It will be important as we go forward to identify properties that could be a detriment to development and seek solutions through education of buildings owners.



Government Center

Definition:

Strengthen the corridor's role as the seat of local and regional government, by developing new municipal offices in proximity to the existing seats of government. Inventory upcoming downtown city projects that might impact cultural corridor planning.

In evaluating this element of our community, we have found that the Marion city core is indeed the government center for our community. With city and county offices firmly positioned in the heart of the corridor, Marion can be proud that our local government remains where it began in 1822.



Culture and Entertainment

Definition:

Promote the cultural corridor as the entertainment and cultural center of the metropolitan area. Identify potential spaces for cultural and entertainment venues.

Most County Seat towns in rural areas have a historic theatre. However, few compare to the Marion Palace Theatre in size or quality. We are indeed fortunate to have such a performance space as the Palace and its robust schedule of touring artists, local productions, and highly developed community theatre program. We also know that, in order to further the corridor as a destination place, greater density is needed so locals and visitors have several options to choose from.



Fortunately, the Palace fulfills the role of a large performance space, so can be checked off the list. To compliment the Palace, several smaller performance spaces are needed. These spaces will provide more appropriate outlets for artists and performers who are a better fit for small venues. This could include individual or small group non-traditional musical performers who fall outside of the restaurant/lounge category, incubator-type theatrical performances, or dance.

Marion is also fortunate to have two significant cultural destinations in the Harding Home and Heritage Hall. Both attract residents as well as visitors to the area. In fact, they also are often trigger points for the decision to visit our community. As with other areas of development, density is a critical factor in making the corridor a destination. A great leap in density will

occur in 2020 when the Harding Presidential Center opens and the library and museum, along with the Home and Press House elevates the East end of the Cultural Corridor to a major national destination. But more is needed.

When considering developing cultural, non-performance experiences, two factors should be addressed. One is audience. What type of experience will draw people to the area? Second is relevance. The destination should have some tie to the community, just as Heritage Hall and the Harding Home do. Exploring the possibility of a child-based experience can address the audience question effectively. Children's museums and other child-focused cultural/educational destinations have proved successful in cities both large and small. As to relevance, we can look to the Popcorn Museum as an example of a locally relevant part of our community that can be made in to a visitor experience. Our question then is, can current parts of our community, such as robotics be thought of in the same vein and a museum-type experience be developed?

Open Space

Definition:

Provide major and minor open space within the corridor area adaptable to a wide variety of uses. Define what those spaces may functionally include and inventory potential locations.

Other than its architecture, nothing defines a city core more than its open spaces. Open spaces are not the absence of buildings, but rather the presence of intentional areas for people to gather formally and informally. While park space is important, here we are speaking about functional space that may certainly include green space, but are places that invite gathering as well as facilitate an increase in creative ideas for such gatherings.

Research of other towns in Ohio showed that most had a main public gathering place. Sometimes this was a gazebo in the center of a town square, sometimes it was a community pavilion, and sometimes it included a dedicated performance space with a permanent stage. Much speculation has accompanied the recent demolition of buildings at Main and Church Streets adjacent to Founders Park. While the Cultural Corridor Working Group's role is not to make specific recommendations for particular properties, we do encourage the evaluation to address how using this space to create a permanent gathering place for outdoor performances and other activities would greatly benefit the community. Such a permanent gathering place would provide for a better experience for Third Thursdays in the summer, the proposed Blues & BBQ festival, serve as a stage during the Popcorn Festival and, most importantly, inspire new events and activities in the corridor.



Open spaces are also valuable in slowing down the pace in the corridor. They can create a desire to stop and experience instead of passing through. One way to achieve this is simply by providing places to sit. Seating strategically placed throughout the corridor send a message of invitation to spend time in the area. Public art can also slow the pace and the upcoming Cardinal Project will do just that. The most important thing about public spaces, whether green spaces, public art or otherwise is that they are surprise spaces. Areas that get our attention and are inviting. It is important that we avoid our open spaces being generic in appearance and with little functionality.

Conclusion

Few would argue the necessity of revitalizing our city core to spur economic growth in our community. A thriving, engaging cultural corridor facilitates entrepreneurial endeavors, is attractive to large businesses coming to Marion, keeps more dollars local, attracts more visitors, and helps to create a positive image for Marion. Beyond that, there is a more important reason to see the center of our city filled with locally-owned or managed restaurants, shops, attractions, and entertainment venues. That is, to regain a proper balance in our community. In the absence of a healthy city core, a community loses its sense of self - it forgets how to spend time together strolling down its streets, becoming friends with business owners, and feeling like you belong. The challenge is a difficult one as the modern world presses in for us to shop online, dine at chain restaurants with huge marketing budgets, and stay isolated in our homes gazing at screens of all sizes. And the results of succumbing to this new community model are ones we are experiencing today. High unemployment, drug abuse, young residents moving away and more come not just from a lack of opportunity, but also from the absence of communal ties. If people don't feel like they have a stake in their community, they are less likely to invest in it.

Rather, a healthy cultural corridor provides good jobs where employees work directly with the owner. Small, locally owned businesses support families. Large, corporate owned businesses create low wage service industry jobs. While both large industry and some corporate retailers are an important part of a local economy, they do not build community like local businesses can. A thriving corridor also serves our community as a whole. While some may have the option to drive several miles to enjoy leisure time with friends, many of our residents do not. A corridor with many activities and options within walking distance or a short drive means that every resident of Marion has access to community and cultural experiences. The secondary benefit to this is that residents from all socio-economic classes share the same experiences, further deepening our sense of community. Special care should be made to support the East and West ends of the corridor, those being Union Station and the Harding Home/Public Library areas.

While we as a community will strive to plan well, make wise decisions about our community's future, and employ best practice for revitalization, none of this will succeed without fostering and supporting the dreamers in our community. Entrepreneurs are people who cannot not do what their passion leads them to. We must as a community support these potential business owners by removing obstacles, encouraging creativity and risk taking, and investing in them with our time and dollars. Small business owners are the future of, not only our downtown, but our entire community. We should pledge together to support those with dreams, ideas, and passion. That pledge must come from elected officials, government departments, community leaders, and all Marion County residents.