

**A Lot for Innovation: Downtown Revitalization Through Community and Youth Engagement**

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## **Final Report Narrative**

**Title of Project:** **A Lot for Innovation: Downtown Revitalization Through Community and Youth Engagement**

**Grant Period:** **January 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017**

**Grantee Name:** **The University of Tennessee**

**Project Director:** **Dr. Tim Ezzell**

### **Description of Project**

The students in the 2016 UT ATP class worked with local youth and officials to create a vision for a vacant infill lot in downtown Mountain City, Tennessee. The UT course is Sustainable Communities and included both graduate and undergraduate sections, PS 410 and PS 595. The lot, which had been vacant since a building collapse in 2014, is owned by the town of Mountain City. The lot has been for sale since the collapse but has generated little interest. The UT student team evaluated potential uses for the lot and then explored various alternatives with community members.

The student team conducted extensive research on potential uses and developed two main alternatives – a pop-up business concept and reuse as a public space and entertainment venue. The team explored these alternatives with residents. Special emphasis was given to a group of students at Johnson County High School. Interestingly, the student visions were nearly identical with those developed by the UT team. After consulting with local youth, the UT team created a single concept that included both an entertainment venue and a pop-up business.

The resulting concept was the Longhorn Theater Park – an outdoor movie theater and entertainment space that included a pop-up business – the Longhorn Taqueria. Concept features included the following:

- The space would be dominated by a large permanent movie screen. This would be used for outdoor movie events and themed film festivals.
- A stage would also be built on the site to accommodate concerts, plays, and other performances.
- Seating would be removable to allow for open space events, such as outdoor markets or car shows.
- The taqueria would be developed in conjunction with the culinary arts program at the high school and would provide entrepreneurial training to local students.
- In order to limit costs, the taqueria and park restrooms would be built from recycled shipping containers.

Students also developed a funding and business plan for the development that estimated project costs and revenues and noted potential funders and funding levels.

### **Activities**

The UT students took part in the following activities:

- Students received UT youth safety training.
- Students conducted three site visits to Mountain City (9/23, 11/1, 11/10)
- Students met with local 4-H leaders and extension staff, public officials, and the chamber of commerce (9/23).
- Students assessed the downtown lot. They measured the lot, reviewed deed and sales history, and evaluated access, utilities, and other characteristics.
- Students photographed the lot and conducted drone flights over the lot and downtown Mountain City.
- Students analyzed alternatives visions and explored case studies.
- Students developed alternatives and presented them to local leaders and students.
- Students presented the final concept before a group of local students and teachers (11/10).
- Students discussed college life and public service careers with local high school students.
- Students shared the final concept with the local Chamber of commerce and elected officials.
- Students presented the final project at the ATP conference in Washington.
- Students developed a poster for the ATP conference. The poster was also shared with community representatives.
- The final project was shared with the UT MPPA advisory board.

### **Project Outcomes**

The UT student team created an innovative and viable concept for the infill lot in downtown Mountain City. They created professional-level media to introduce the concept. They presented the concept locally before local civic and business leaders, educators, and high school students.

The project resulted in the following learning outcomes:

- Students will develop a better understanding of Appalachian assets and the challenges facing Appalachian communities.
- UT students gained leadership skills and helped instill similar skills in local youth.
- The project increased the leadership capacity of local youth and introduced them to possible future careers in public service.
- The project exposed local youth to college life and addressed issues related to the college transition.

The UT team also presented their concept at the ATP meeting in Washington. They also created a poster for this event. This poster was also shared with the local community.

The project validated the importance of youth engagement in local development processes.

Local students were exposed to career paths in public service. UT students discussed various majors related to these careers, what these jobs entailed, and typical salary ranges. Careers discussed included jobs in public administration, planning, economic development, and public policy.

The project addressed Goal 5 of the ARC Strategic Plan: *Build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development*

The project was presented before the UT MPPA Advisory Board of an example of student work and engagement. The board is composed mainly of professionals in public policy and administration and includes a number of state officials and congressional staff members. Response to the project was very positive.

The project served as a portfolio component for MPPA students and provided important experience for their professional careers. Following the class one student, Priya Narapareddy, accepted a position with the City of Knoxville's sustainability office.

### **Problems Encountered**

At the outset, the project was conceived as a STEM-type competition with multiple teams presenting competing visions. Early on, though, it became apparent that a single concept would work better. A number of factors contributed to this change.

First, the community had a fairly small high school youth population and these students, while interested in the project, often had competing demands. Established activities, such as Band, athletics, or church limited the number of potential participants and the level of participation.

Secondly, competing visions never really arose. From the outset there was a strong consensus among participants regarding the concept and student ideas were largely complementary. As a result, it simply made more sense to pursue a single consensus driven vision than force a contrived competition.

Lastly, youth safety policies made it difficult or impossible to conduct some typical project activities. Local youth for example, could not be photographed and social media posts were restricted to UT participants.

### **Program Continuation and Sustainability**

The project concept received a mixed reception from the community. Many leaders approved of the concept and were supportive of a creative public use for the lot. Others, however, were reluctant to invest in the site and wanted to either sell it or

convert it to parking. New leadership elected in the November election, particularly at the city level, may lead to a public use for the space.

The ATP is in its fifteenth year at the University of Tennessee. The project has a stable home within the Political Science Department and it is viewed as one of the program's main engagement activities. The ATP has also developed vocal advocates within the Office of Research and the Office of the Provost. For these reasons the ATP is expected to remain active at UT well into the future.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

When the project began most local officials viewed the lot as a liability. Following the project, many began to view it as an opportunity. We are continuing to work with these officials to use the lot to increase downtown activity and help them grow their nascent tourism industry. To that end we continue to recommend the lot be a public space that, in some form or another, contributes to downtown development efforts.

Youth in the community were perceptive and eager to contribute to development efforts. Unlike many adults, they were more willing to think "outside the box" and were excited to help improve their downtown. As a result, we believe they should have a greater role in development and planning efforts – particularly if youth retention is a community goal.

### **Attachments (in PDF format)**

UT ATP Project Expenditures  
Photos from site visits  
UT ATP Conference Presentation  
UT ATP Poster

University of Tennessee  
 Appalachian Teaching Project 2016/17  
 Project Expenditures

<b>Transportation</b>	
UT Van Charge	47.68
Round trip Mileage (Knoxville to Mountain City)	144.76
Mileage to Knoxville Airport	19.74
Airfare (Knoxville to Washington x 6)	1823.52
<b>Lodging</b>	
Washington DC Lodging (3 rooms x 3 nights)	1421.75
<b>Per Diem</b>	
Per Diem for Dr. Ezzell	189.75
Partial Per diem for students (\$100 x 5)	500.00
<b>Other Costs</b>	
Poster mounting at conference	45.00
<b>ASA Conference</b>	
Partial costs for ASA Conferenced	307.80
<b>Total Costs</b>	
Total project costs	4,500.00

**Site Visit Photos**













