

A Vision for the Future Downtown Montross



**Prepared for
The Town of Montross, Virginia
December 9, 2008**

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1. Overview and Purpose

The Town of Montross sees its downtown as key to the community's economic base and ultimately its future. By offering a positive downtown experience, Montross wants to attract local residents, summer vacationers and commuters from their daily pass-through. Over the next several months the town will examine its infrastructure, its economic base and market, and the appeal the downtown offers to both regional residents and outside shoppers. A consensus Vision is a critical first step in focusing future improvement and gathering resources.

Approximately 50 residents, business and property owners, elected officials and regional representatives convened on November 20, 2008 for the Visioning Session, with the purpose to build from the downtown's past accomplishments, learn from its challenges, and to think creatively about new opportunities. The focus question was:

"What do we want to see in place in downtown Montross in 2015?"

The visioning process plus other community organizing activities will facilitate next stage planning efforts including an economic restructuring plan, master plan and funding search. Downtown restructuring and revitalization is a long incremental process but is much more feasible with careful attention to targeting of resources to strategic projects, and building on catalytic opportunities.

The report is broken into key components as follows:

- **Project Context** on the planning process to date and **Future steps** in the planning process
- **Key data** relevant to the plan
- Notes from the downtown visioning process, capturing brainstorm **data and consensus themes, in addition to a draft Vision Statement.**
- A Review of **Community Assets**
- **Outline of potential next steps** for other Community Organizing activities.
- **Agenda and an Attendance List** from the Visioning Session and the follow-up Management Team Meeting



2. Project Context and Next Steps

The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development awarded the Town of Montross a Community Organizing Grant in the Fall 2008. Following the prescribed process connected to that funding stream, the Town has undertaken several initial steps to launch their plan including:

- Convening a Management Team meeting to identify stakeholders and generate community buy-in to the project. The Management Team is a diverse group of people representing public, civic, historic, business and residential interests in the community. Attendance at meetings has been very strong ranging from 25-35 citizens and Management Team members.
- Hiring of a skilled facilitator to lead the Management Team and Community through a Downtown Visioning Process
- Post-Visioning the Town has committed to other community organizing activities outlined in this report.

Following these activities, the Town will be in a position in 2009 to move forward with next phase activities that include the development of an Economic Restructuring Plan, a Master Plan development targeting specific physical improvements with a phasing approach, and a Fundraising Strategy.

With a solid foundation of community organizing activities successfully completed, the Town of Montross will be positioned to seek a set of appropriate, fundable strategies in the areas of physical improvements, business retention and attraction & market/ branding. Additionally, the downtown will be able to confidently seek investment partnerships locally, regionally and statewide.



3. Background and Current Reality Assessment

In the November 20 brainstorm session of historical accomplishments to celebrate and continuing challenges, Montross community members listed the following:

What can we celebrate about our downtown's history?

- Coca Cola plant
- County seat
- Gateway to the Northern Neck
- The historic courthouse
- Museum
- Fall Festival
- Montross Inn
- Small-town heritage
- Hub for tourism,
- Outstanding Small Community
- Closest town to the state park
- Multiple generations that stay here
- John Adams "slept here"
- Peace and quiet and safety
- One of the Lees was in jail here
- Library
- People's Community Bank
- Still have viable businesses here
- Patriotism
- Geographic center of the county
- Local leaders in public office in the Virginia Senate and U.S. Congress
- George Washington's birthplace
- DSL
- James Monroe
- Historical Assets—Tourism Trail

What have been our continuing challenges?

- Empty buildings
- Keeping retail in town
- Length of town –too spread out
- Not enough parking,
- Lack of variety of youth attractions
- Rural economy has shifted
- Lack of employment
- Keeping the next generation here
- Lack of enthusiasm for change
- Deterioration of buildings that are here
- Age of water system and other infrastructure
- No diverse businesses base
- Drive-through town and not a destination
- Not enough of a tax base
- Signage
- Apathy



The Town of Montross is a town of 300 persons in Westmoreland County, Virginia. It is the County seat and houses the Courthouse and administrative offices for the County. The County is the largest employer in the Town. It occupies a central location in the Northern Neck and is a crossroads for the area. The towns of Colonial Beach, Warsaw, Tappahannock and Kilmarnock represent economic “competitors” in the region. Although it is less than 90 minutes from Richmond, the Town is more economically connected to Fredericksburg, Northern Virginia and southern Maryland, which are within 1-2 hours. The downtown area has lost retailers in the past decades as big box retailers located in the region have drawn away customers. There has been some new development in the Town in the past ten years – in particular, a cancer treatment clinic has been successful and brings new visitors to the town on a daily basis. The town’s population has been stable in recent years.

A walkthrough of the downtown area reveals a number of vacant and underutilized buildings that underscore a previous era when the local economy prospered and business was more diverse. There are a significant number of historic structures in the area immediately surrounding the Courthouse – reflecting the long history and important role that the community has served. Montross has been a gathering place historically for both commercial and political reasons.

The Town has completed a survey of residents that asks a series of questions about work, housing, problems and future image. Key findings include:

- The number of respondents who are retired was nearly equal to the number working full time
- Single family development was favored – followed by apartments and senior housing
- The east and west were the most desired areas for new housing development
- Satisfaction with current housing conditions and location was extremely high
- Problems cited include:
 - Population growth
 - Lack of Retail development
 - Traffic
 - Maintaining “small town” character
- The Town’s “Image” in the future should be:
 - A “quaint”, rural enclave
 - Easy living – friendly
 - Good services for residents
 - Shopping



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- Tourism
 - Downtown development
- Respondents also supported a wide range of transportation related improvements

The town will be completing a survey of buildings and businesses in the downtown area over the next several months that will identify vacancies, blight, potential new building uses, business expansion potential and owner interest. Active businesses will be surveyed to determine the patterns of their business activity, including their hours of operation and the characteristics of their customers – including how far they travel to shop in Montross.

Parking, traffic and pedestrian access have already been identified as key concerns within the downtown business community. The next phase of the work should seek to engage these businesses more directly in the restructuring planning process.

Demographic Indicators:

The population of the Town declined 13% in the 1990's, but since 2000, the population has been relatively stable. The median age in the town is 49 – significantly higher than the state average. This reflects the retirement oriented nature of the community and the region. The household size is lower than the average for the state – also pointing to the aging population and the declining number of children who are present in the community. The percentage of the population over the age of 65 is 26

Economic Indicators:

Montross households have incomes that are slightly below the state average but well above what is typical for rural communities in the state. The median household income is \$46,800. The rate of poverty is very low (4%) – less than half of the state average. This again is a reflection of the relative affluence of the community and the number of retirees who have stable incomes.

Housing values are relatively high. The median home value is \$143,000 – below the state average. However, the average asking price of homes on the market last year was significantly higher at \$348,000. The homeownership rate is extraordinarily high at 78% and even more remarkably, 2/3 of the homes in Montross do not have a mortgage. This reinforces the fact that the population is older with a significant number of retirees. Not surprisingly because of its rural character, the cost of living is lower, with an index of 91 (compared to the US average of 100)



Labor Force:

As mentioned above, the County is the major employer in the town and for the reason; “public administration” is the top employment category. The workers who live in town generally tend to work within the region – the average commute time is 15 minutes. The town’s role as County seat also results in a significant number of “professional” jobs – especially in the legal and real estate fields. Unemployment is very low at 1.8%.

Social Indicators:

Education levels for the Town are well above state averages with nearly 86% of the population having at least a high school diploma. As noted above, only 22% of households have a child present who is 18 years of age or younger. As the number of school age children has declined, the Town has fewer activities available for this age group. This lack of “things for kids to do” has been identified as issue that the town hopes to address.

Health indicators for the population are generally better than the state average. The success of the cancer center in the town has encouraged town residents to plan for more health related services in the town that will not only enhance services, but also generate new jobs.

Crime is not an issue in Town – ranking in the lowest quartile for the State. Town residents do cite “drugs” as a concern.

Local and Regional Developments:

The town of Montross and the area surrounding it benefit from a wide variety of social, cultural, recreational and economic opportunities. The Northern Neck is an area that has attracted many vacationers and second home residents who swell the area’s population from spring to fall. These visitors represent a significant aspect of the retail market. While the second home market is also affected by the current downturn in housing, it is anticipated that this market will return strongly in the years ahead – fueled especially by Northern Virginia and the Maryland suburbs.

Retirees also represent a significant economic trend for the region. Many of the retirees are former vacationers or second home owners who have become familiar with the area and choose to move there full time when they retire from their work career. Military personnel are also prominent members of this retirement group



since many have become familiar with the region while they were stationed in the area. There are many military facilities within 100 miles of the community.

The Northern Neck also is the home to many environmental attractions in addition it's the waterfront. These include Westmoreland State Park, Belle Isle State Park and the Voorhees Nature Preserve. These areas preserve the natural environment for both active and passive environmental tourists. Camping, boating, biking and hiking are all activities that are associated with these natural amenities.

Montross is the site of the County museum that serves as a focal point for highlighting the important historical heritage of the Town and the area. Stratford Hall, which is the birthplace and boyhood home of Robert E. Lee, is located nearby. George Washington's birthplace is also located within the County. The Town of Montross is also connected to several other historical figures, including "Light Horse Harry Lee," the father of Robert E. Lee, famed Revolutionary War officer, and Governor of Virginia. The area offers substantial opportunity to attract "heritage" oriented tourism.

There are other new trends in the County that may offer opportunity for both tourism and other economic development. Several wineries have begun operations in the past decade. Local and regional artists have begun to find a market for their work. Bed and breakfast establishments offer easy weekend getaways to the large population markets in Northern and Central Virginia. There is a potential for the expansion of broadband service throughout the region during the next five years. This would be critical to supporting the small e-business operations that have begun to locate in small towns throughout the state.



4. Vision Workshop and Draft Statement

What do we want to see in place in 2015?

Destination Driven, Unique Restaurants and Retail	Entertainment and Cultural Event Center	Planned Village Atmosphere	Outdoor Family Recreation	Montross Overnight Hospitality	Local Professional Sector	Environmentally Responsive Community
Small businesses that compliment each other (2) Specialty shops (2) Upscale restaurant Good shopping and restaurants (2) Antique Mall	Performing Arts Center (2) Cultural Center (historic, artistic) Historical complex Event center Prominent Visitor Center(2) Arts Festival	General colonial theme to the town Uniform look (brick walks, street lamps (4) Tree lined streets/ landscaping (2) Outdoor courtyard/ atmosphere Traffic pattern/ light control Renovated buildings Planned paved parking Quaint, rustic architecture (2)	Pedestrian and Bike Friendly Playground/ Park Center(2) Urban park/ skateboard Recreation Center (2) Nature/ Youth/ Family activities (3)	Overnight accommodations for tourist group attraction Overnight accommodations— Attract those that are compatible with the downtown's image	Expansion of Medical Health Facilities / Jobs Other Professional Services	Ergonomic community (green) Environmental role model

Draft Vision Statement

Downtown Montross is committed to becoming a unique, destination driven restaurant, retail and cultural center for the Northern Neck Region.

Both visitors and residents will experience a planned, environmentally-responsive village atmosphere, complete with outdoor family recreation, entertainment options, local professional services and Montross overnight hospitality.



5. Community Assets

Every community has assets on which to build. The Town of Montross is blessed with a variety of strengths. The success of the Economic Restructuring will rest upon the ability to focus on the best opportunities and understand how to leverage these to create a new future for the Town. Key assets in Montross include:

- The Downtown district is a small, defined space and contains good opportunities for building restorations that will transform the environment and create new possibilities for businesses, shops and dining. The area also has several parcels of vacant land that will allow for the development of new structures that can enhance the existing architectural fabric of the district.
- A portion of the downtown area may be eligible for historic district designation that would create new opportunities for capital investment. This potential district would be centered around the Westmoreland County Courthouse and the Museum.
- Montross has a tradition of serving as a regional hub for commercial activity. Its central location in the region and its relatively high traffic counts can be an asset to support future development. There is an opportunity to rebuild this market, but with a new, more targeted “niche” focus that sets Montross apart from other communities in the region. The downtown cannot compete with Wal-Mart or other big box retailers, but can offer goods and services that are not available in chain stores.
- There is a great opportunity for downtown dining and entertainment. The town currently offers limited quality sit-down dining, and new businesses of this type should meet good market acceptance. During the vacation season, this market is substantially enhanced.
- If the Town is successful in attracting additional, regional healthcare facilities, that could also be a magnet to attract visitors to the Town who may then stay to shop, dine or enjoy other amenities in the downtown.
- Regional economic trends create opportunities for Montross to offer “small town living in a 21st century jobs environment”. Broadband can create new business opportunities for small employers and increased virtual economic development. This same element can appeal to retirees who are far more



active today than retirees of the past and who also view technological infrastructure as an important amenity.

- Montross is located close to active recreation such as biking, hiking, canoeing, and camping. Recreation oriented tourism offers a significant opportunity for the Town. Heritage tourism can also be an important driver for bringing visitors to the area. The historic restoration of the Inn at Montross, for example, could be an important way to build on this theme.
- More housing in the downtown area can help to generate more activity in the area and support retail businesses. Quality retirement housing can also offer new economic development opportunity.

6. Community Organizing: Next Steps

On December 1, the Management Team met (see agenda below) to debrief on the Vision session participation and products. After a lengthy conversation on next step possibilities, the group consensus was to seek a proposal from The Clay Christensen Group LLC for the following community organizing activities:

I. Identify Key Properties

II. Assess Traffic Options

III. Conduct a Historic Assessment

IV. Explore Local Niche / Regional Resources / Partnerships

Pending the results of the additional community organizing activities, the Management Team recommends that the Town apply for a CDBG Planning Grant in Early 2009.

7. Attachments

- **Agenda from Visioning Session**
- **Management Team Meeting Agenda**



Montross: A Vision for the Future of Downtown
November 20, 2008

Agenda

- **Welcome and Purpose**
- **Connecting to Our History**
- **Considering Our Current Reality**
- **Forming Our Community Vision**
- **Next Steps**
- **Close**



**Montross Management Team Meeting
December 1, 2008
7:30 a.m.**

Agenda

- 7:30 a.m. Welcome and Context
- 7:45 a.m. Debrief on Visioning Session
- 8:15 a.m. Next Step Options: Community Organizing
- 9:00 a.m. Consensus for Action
- 9:30 a.m. Next Steps/ Reflection
- 9:45 a.m. Adjourn