

LEVERAGING PUBLIC
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

The Role of Arts-based Economic
Development Strategies in Rural
Georgia Communities

CUTHBERT



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CUTHBERT: Capitalizing on a ‘Town and Gown’ Relationship

Though the residents of Cuthbert couldn’t have known it at the time, the appointment of Linda Buchanan as president of Andrew College in June 2015 would have a major impact on their downtown.

When Buchanan took the helm of the small two-year liberal arts college located just off the square, she had two goals in mind: helping to revitalize downtown and growing the college’s enrollment. She believed the two were not mutually exclusive.

“I had this inclination that Andrew College needed to play a role in downtown revitalization,” she says. “And I wanted to do it through the arts – bringing visual arts, music and theatre downtown. At the same time, a vibrant downtown can help with college recruitment efforts.”

What has happened over the last four years is a collaborative effort between the college, the city, the Randolph County Chamber of Commerce and the Randolph County Historical Society to repurpose and revitalize downtown. The efforts have not only brought downtown back to life, but they’ve given tourism a shot in the arm and provided a sense of community pride to the residents. Here is their story.

Start with a Plan

Cuthbert, the county seat of Randolph County with a population of just under 4,000, is located in Southwest Georgia, about 60 miles south of Columbus and about 25 miles east of the Alabama state line. State Route 82 is the main east-west thoroughfare that goes right through Cuthbert, connecting Eufaula, Ala. and Dawson, Ga. State Route 27 also goes through Cuthbert, taking travelers on their way to Florida. That generates a lot of traffic, especially on the weekends.

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Photo courtesy of Andrew College

The key was to give those travelers a reason to stop in Cuthbert, as well as to bring students and residents downtown.

“Like downtowns in many rural towns, ours had languished,” Buchanan says, “partly because of big box retail. But our version of that was the fact that a lot of businesses – like the grocery store, the drug store, and a restaurant – moved a few blocks off the square. That hurt the downtown.”

The catalyst for the improvement efforts came out of a visit from the Georgia Department of Economic Development’s Tourism Product Development Resource Team in 2016. Their report provided a blueprint for ways to improve the downtown area and increase tourism and quality of life in both Cuthbert and Randolph County.

“The college needed to spearhead those efforts,” Buchanan says. “I wanted a more interesting student experience, and the city needed quality occupancy. One of the most influential forces in all of this was Patricia Goodman who at the time was the head of the Chamber and integrally involved in bringing the TPD team to the county. They validated some of our early thoughts about how the college and downtown could be linked, and inspired a lot more good thinking.”

Cover photo courtesy of Andrew College

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- Steve Whatley, Mayor, Cuthbert

Bringing the Arts Downtown

At first, the college seemed like an unlikely partner. Cuthbert Mayor Steve Whatley says up until that point, the two had been separate entities.

“Andrew was like an island, completely separate from the city,” he says. “One of Linda’s chief goals when she came here was to bridge the gap between the college and downtown. And she’s done that.”

Revitalization efforts began when Andrew College began expanding into downtown. The college bought two buildings and received four others through gifts. One donated building - believed to be the oldest building in downtown - was renovated and dedicated in 2017 as a ceramics studio. Of the buildings the college purchased, also in 2017, one is now used for jazz performances, event space and an art gallery and the other is currently under renovation and will serve as a music building for the college. An old theatre building has been renovated and is now a scene shop.

“The school’s efforts are turning the lights back on in downtown,” says Mayor Whatley. “These buildings were not being used.”

It’s also created more pedestrian traffic downtown.

“We now give our students a reason to walk downtown to take a music class, or a ceramics class or a theatre class,” says Buchanan. “It’s not hundreds of students, but it’s dozens of students every week that are making their way downtown and back.”

When it comes to promoting the arts, Buchanan credits the trio that makes up her Fine Arts Department - Chris Johnson, assistant professor of visual arts, Deborah Liss-Green, assistant professor of theatre and Dan Kolan, assistant professor of music - for making a concerted effort to bring the arts downtown.

Johnson, an artist, literally did that by putting art on the buildings.

“I had been traveling around looking at small towns and how they had used murals to improve the city,” he says. “I was surprised there weren’t any in Cuthbert.” So he decided to change that.

His first mural was called “Randolph Ramblings” and it featured Cuthbert native and jazz legend Fletcher Henderson, Jr. In 2017, Johnson was approached by the city of Shellman, 10 miles down the road, to paint a pair of murals on grain bins in the center of downtown. The Randolph County Chamber of Commerce secured a grant for him to do this. The two murals created a focal point for downtown Shellman.

Soon it wasn’t unusual to see Johnson on a hydraulic lift in downtown Cuthbert painting beautiful murals on the sides of buildings. Two murals now adorn opposing walls in an alleyway that showcase the history and people of Cuthbert - including Henderson as well as former football player Roosevelt “Rosie” Greer and current county singer/songwriter Cole Taylor. Johnson also painted a “Welcome to Cuthbert” banner on the side of the theatre building.



Magnolia Alley before and after. Photos courtesy of Andrew College

“People are stopping and getting out of their cars to look at them,” says Mary Jane Salter, special assistant to the president for development at Andrew College, who has been responsible for writing many of the grants to pay for the murals. “They want to get their pictures taken in front of them.”

“These murals have really given the locals a sense of pride in their downtown,” adds Mayor Whatley. “It’s an opportunity to introduce history they may not be aware of and talk about the people who are from here.”

Johnson and a student intern finished the murals just in time for the 2019 “Arts in the Square,” an annual arts festival the college started in 2018 that brings regional musicians and artists into Cuthbert and features art, theatre, music and creative writing.

“There is a sense of permanence in these programs, and the murals give us the foundation,” says Kolan, the music professor. “Developing buildings for homes for our programs – those are permanent structures that will continue to last. You have to have permanence for repeated experiences.”

Liss-Green’s theatre department has also given residents a reason to come downtown, starting with a murder mystery dinner theatre that was actually staged in two locations. Attendees walked across the street for the second act. Both nights almost sold out at 60 seats apiece.

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Ceramics Studio before and after. Photos courtesy of Andrew College



Photos courtesy of Andrew College

She also helped orchestrate a haunted house around Halloween that was a big hit. “The college did this for the town and it was bigger than expected,” says Liss-Green. “These can be huge attractions for locals as well as tourists.”

On top of those efforts, Salter says she has submitted a grant that would fund an art event in the community for eight months in a row – with a variety of music, visual arts, theatre and a lecture series. “We feel like we have the ‘brick and mortar’ in place so we can do even more events downtown,” she says.

A Spirit of Collaboration

While the college has played a huge role in bringing new life to downtown, the city is doing its part as well. Whatley says they bought an abandoned fast food restaurant



Open mic night. Photos courtesy of Andrew College

that was an eyesore and tore it down. The city has also spruced up its streetscapes, making the square look more appealing. The Randolph County Courthouse has been renovated and serves as the city's welcome center as well as a history museum.

The Randolph County Chamber of Commerce – which is housed in the old courthouse – has also stepped up its efforts to get more people downtown and attract new businesses. This includes increasing its social media presence and determining ways to encourage citizens to shop downtown and create more foot traffic.

“We’ve been able to write grants to secure more funding for more projects due to what the college has done and continues to do,” says Rebecca White, the Chamber’s executive director. “We are marketing and promoting

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all the things happening on the square to drive people to shop local, attend events and take more pride in our downtown - with hopes that these efforts along with marketing will spark excitement and bring new business and tourists to our area.”

Though people give Buchanan and Andrew College a lot of the credit for transforming Cuthbert, Buchanan insists that at the heart of all of these efforts is collaboration – everyone working together to make downtown the best place it can be.

“We have to be here for each other,” she says. “The college is here for the community and the community is here for the college and that has to be demonstrated. We have to show what we are doing to support the community and develop ties – the arts is one of the best ways to do that. It brings people together.”

Her staff, at the forefront of it all, agrees.

“All of these efforts have really developed the ambience of downtown and opened the space to allow for more collaboration between the college and the city,” says Kolan. “It’s been a remarkable experience as a new faculty member here. Just to have so many things going on downtown that you can draw a creative influence from and use as an excuse to start developing new projects and really have a great time with it.”



Peachtree courtyard jazz. Photo courtesy of Andrew College