

# Downtown and Riverfront Development Strategy Sidney, Ohio

December 2020



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sidney, Ohio is a small city situated along the Great Miami River with a prototypical downtown Square oriented around its impressive County Courthouse. It shares many characteristics with a number of communities of its size in central Ohio. However, in just as many ways it is unique, as its residents and visitors will attest to. As stated by Sidney's Visitor Bureau, *"At first glance Sidney, Ohio appears to be an ordinary small midwestern town waiting to be discovered. To the contrary, however, Sidney enjoys a rich and storied past coupled with a wonderful array of today's experiences to entice every travel experience."* Many of the communities along the Great Miami River/I-75 corridor are experiencing renewed interest as places to live, work and play. While Sidney has not yet experienced such a revitalization, there is strong interest in catalyzing a similar momentum in Sidney, and the creation of the Downtown and Riverfront Development Strategy is seen as an important step in this direction.

Sidney has many of the positive attributes of a small city that also serves as the county seat: a prototypical Courthouse Square populated by primarily locally owned businesses and services; proximity to the Great Miami River, a strong industrial base, a well utilized park system, and affordable historic neighborhoods within easy proximity to its Square.



While the downtown area is currently not as robust as many would like it to be, the Square and its immediate surrounds retain “good bones”; that is, a strong base on which it can build additional economic vitality. The City and its downtown supporters are actively engaged in a variety of efforts to assist in this revitalization. Additional investment and businesses in and around downtown have recently occurred; a new zoning code and branding initiative are in process; and interest appears to be growing in related to downtown properties for potential redevelopment, at least prior to the economic stalemate caused by the current pandemic; and a relatively new downtown-focused organization, Sidney Alive, has become a positive force for downtown’s growth. These in aggregate provide the momentum to move to the next phase of downtown’s revitalization through the crafting of this Development Strategy.

As this work has moved forward, care has been taken to ensure that some of the most common misconceptions of such efforts were to be avoided. Among the most common are 1) trying to mimic what similar communities have done, rather than learning from these efforts and adapting common issues to the specific characteristics of downtown Sidney; 2) focusing only on physical improvements; 3) ignoring or minimizing market conditions and the realities

of development economics; 4) supporting or subsidizing any proposed development project without undertaking appropriate due diligence; and 5) seeking one “magic bullet” that will solve a myriad of problems all at once.

To its credit, Sidney understands well that these common missteps are to be avoided. Rather, an integrated and coordinated program composed of a variety of initiatives and efforts that support downtown’s economic health, tailored to the specific characteristics of Sidney’s downtown and that recognize its unique local assets - as well as its challenges - has been encouraged and supported.

## DOWNTOWN’S ASSETS

Every community – and its downtown – has a certain group of assets, some unique to that community, that can form a base upon which to build upon. For a city its size, Sidney has an impressive number of such community assets, and thus is well positioned to take advantage of these assets as much as possible in its downtown and riverfront revitalization efforts.

These assets include the following:

## Location

From purely a physical and geographic perspective, the City of Sidney - and more specifically its downtown "Square" - is well positioned. A direct and short connection from the heavily traveled I-75 and the City/County's major employment centers; proximity to the City's impressive and well utilized park system and the Great Miami River and its increasing use as a major recreational corridor; and its nexus at the center of surrounding historic urban neighborhoods; all provide downtown Sidney with strong locational assets.



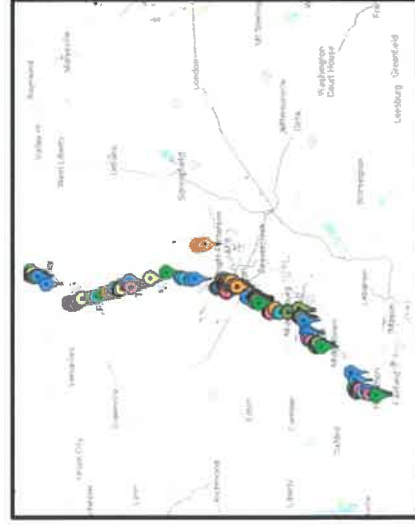
## Authenticity

In documenting the assets of downtown Sidney, its "authenticity of place" stands out as one of its strongest characteristics. Most downtowns, particularly those developed in a County Courthouse Square configuration, obviously were "authentic" when initially laid out and built. Many, however, have lost much of this authenticity over time, through demolition, deterioration or "modernization" of buildings, intrusion of surface parking lots, relocation of business out of the square to strip corridors or suburban locations, transformation of street level retailing into other uses, or introduction of new buildings out of scale with the area. *Fortunately for Sidney, these intrusions have for the most part not occurred, and the Square retains much of its authenticity.*



## Regional Attractions

While the physical character of downtown Sidney and the Square serves as a major asset, its proximity to a number of nearby attractions that generator activity serves as an additional strength. The Great Miami River, less than a third of a mile from the Courthouse, has become in recent years a highly utilized source of recreation along its entire 99-mile stretch from Sidney to Hamilton. Recreation on the River by canoeists and kayakers has been increasing year by year, as have pedestrians and bicyclists along its banks. In addition, many communities along this stretch have taken advantage of increased use of the River and Riverway by encouraging the development of services for these recreationalists as well as housing and commercial establishments, within short and easy access to the River.



*Recreational activity sites along the Great Miami River*

One of the most iconic and treasured vehicles in the country is the Airstream camper, and the location of the Airstream Factory within Shelby County in Jackson Center 20 minutes from the Square is another opportunity for downtown.



*Airstream Factory*

With tourists, Airstream owners and Airstream aficionados “streaming” to the factory, both on a daily basis and for special events held on site, a visit to downtown Sidney should be encouraged. In addition, highlighting and celebrating this iconic locally manufactured product as part of the authenticity of downtown Sidney - in a variety of fun and innovative ways - by itself will add to the charm and allure of downtown.

## Downtown Infrastructure

Downtown Sidney is a well-designed place, and has retained much of the character of such a distinct Courthouse Square. In fact, it has been honored by the National Trust for Historic Places as one of the “Great American Public Places.”



*Shelby County Courthouse and Lawn*

The beauty and formality of the Courthouse and the lawn and its mature trees when combined with downtown’s wide sidewalks in relatively good condition, pedestrian scaled street lighting, Piper Park - a “pocket park,” and ample parking forms a strong base, one that many similar communities would envy. Although there are significant improvements that could make these spaces work more productively and actively, the existing base nevertheless is a major asset of downtown Sidney.



*Wide sidewalks, pedestrian lighting, mature trees, ample parking*



*Piper Park... downtown’s pocket park*

## Strong Downtown Organization

In recent years, cities of all sizes have realized that a downtown area is similar in many ways to any business, in that it requires management and planning and promotion. Successful downtown revitalization efforts require such skills and personnel at a level often far greater than the city government and individual businesses are able to provide. Fortunately, the creation of Sidney Alive has filled that need for downtown Sidney, and its scope and focus has expanded as the needs of downtown demands.

## DORA

The City of Sidney has recently designated downtown Sidney as a **Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area (DORA)** which enables patrons who purchase beverages to move around the district and enjoy their beverage without being required to remain in the establishment in which it was originally purchased.

The DORA provides downtown Sidney with an important mechanism to encourage people to both come downtown and remain, an important component of any healthy downtown.

## Surrounding Neighborhoods

While there are a lack of residential units immediately within the downtown district, adjacent to downtown sit a number of residential neighborhoods, including the Walnut Avenue Historic District to its northwest and the South Ohio/Main Street district to its south. These areas provide extremely affordable and, in many instances, charming homes that provide a market for downtown's goods and services within easy walking distance.



*Walnut Avenue Historic District*



*South Ohio Avenue/South Main Avenue*

## I-75 Industrial Corridor

Sidney has a large industrial center - larger than a city this size would presume to have - with approximately 7,500 employees located adjacent to I-75 just a few miles from its downtown. This employment base provides a potential market for downtown, especially in the provision of affordable housing in the downtown area and surrounding neighborhoods. While these connections to downtown may not currently be strong, the employment center does provide an asset in which to tap into in the future.



*I-75 Industrial Corridor*

## HEALTHY DOWNTOWNS

While no two downtowns are alike, and each has its own set of assets and challenges, there nonetheless are certain common characteristics that are likely to be present in most robust downtown environments, and likewise tend to be missing in downtowns that are struggling. This is most commonly experienced in small downtown areas similar to Sidney: they may appear on initial inspection to be quite similar, yet there is a great disparity among their activity levels and their economic health. It is only when one then reviews a list of variables that contribute to the level of activity that one can better understand these differences.





Those variables most often associated with “healthy downtowns” are the following:

*Downtown has retained its historic fabric*

*There are few “gaps” in the streetwalls*

*New buildings are generally within the same height and massing as the historic scale of the downtown*

*There are continuous, appropriately sized, and well maintained downtown sidewalks*

*Downtown is brightly lit in the evening with attractive pedestrian-scaled light standards*

*There are significant number of people out on the street during the day or evening*

*There are plenty of locations with outdoor seating, either for outdoor dining or gathering?*

*People live in the downtown area or in easily walked neighborhoods adjacent to downtown?*

*The ground floor spaces of downtown’s buildings are generally filled with retail/eating/drinking/service shops*



*There are numerous food-oriented retailers, including restaurants, pubs, bars, cafes, coffee shops*



*There are “third places” that serve as gathering spots where people tend to come in and stay for a while, both indoor and outdoor*

*There is an adequate supply of on-street parking available, as the main supply of parking or in conjunction with off-street parking*

*The streetscape and outdoor spaces offer a pleasant and welcoming environment for pedestrians*

*There are significant trees and landscaping, and green open spaces for people to gather and use*

*The downtown is filled with color and movement, such as banners, flags, awnings, and interesting signs that enliven the environment*



*There is evidence of creativity, either through public art, art galleries, museums, temporary installations or street fairs*



*There are places downtown that serve as common focal points, such as Courthouses or other public buildings, clocks, flagpoles, gazebos, statues?*

*There are frequent programs taking place, be they sidewalk sales, farmers markets, car shows, flea markets, fun runs, etc.*

*It is quite easy to get to downtown and navigate the street pattern, parking, and finding directions to attractions*

*It is clear and easy to find and access the riverfront, bike paths, and parks*

*There are indications communicating that you're in downtown, welcoming you to downtown, highlighting and celebrating what's special now that you've arrived*



As is the case with most communities, downtown Sidney stacks up well on a number of these “healthy downtown” factors, such as its historic fabric, its authenticity, its building scale, wide sidewalks and parking. For others, deficiencies exist that need to be addressed. Such work is the focus of the Strategy’s recommendations.

Generally speaking, however, downtown Sidney’s strengths outweigh its deficiencies, which is a positive situation to be in. It means that while more work needs to be done, it has a good base upon which to build from. Its development strategy should therefore focus on optimizing its strengths, alleviating or eliminating its weaknesses...and reinforcing and celebrating what makes Sidney unique.



*Celebrating at the Big Four Bridge*

## HISTORIC RESOURCES

Every community has certain elements of its past or present that serve as community “icons;” references and symbols of their community that resonate with a large portion of their population, are looked upon with pride, and often talked about to friends and visitors from outside of the community. Sidney is fortunate that it has a rather large number of these “icons,” and equally fortunate that most of these are located within the downtown or quite close to downtown. These iconic elements add to the historic character of Sidney as well as its authenticity, and not only should be more proactively celebrated, but incorporated into elements of its economic development strategy where opportunities may arise. Everyone likely has a list of their own community icons, but foremost among those that positively impact downtown are the following:

### Peoples Savings and Loan Bank Building

Renowned American architect Louis Sullivan designed a number of small bank buildings, including eight in Ohio for the People Savings and Loan Bank collectively known as his “jewel box banks.” His bank at the corner of State and Ohio Streets is considered to be one of his finest works, and remarkably, stands as the last remaining unadulterated of the jewel box banks in Ohio.



### Soldier in Blue (Sargeant Baker)

The gabled center pediment of the intricately carved Victorian Gothic Monument Building façade contains a niche exhibiting the bronze “Soldier in Blue” statue, also known as Sargeant Baker, which has over the years become a symbol of the city as well as the “spokesperson” for the Shelby County Historical Society’s childrens programs.



## The Spot



*The Spot - 1941*

This iconic downtown eatery was originally the location of a chuck wagon operated by Spot Miller in 1907, and the current building dates to 1941. Today The Spot retains much of the same design and ambience as it has had since its construction, including its midcentury modern neon sign over its front door.

## Sidney Theater

Built in 1921 as the Majestic Theater, the Sidney Theater served as Sidney's major venue for live theatrical performances into the 1960s, and then was operated as a movie house until 2004. It is currently undergoing extensive renovations by Raise the Roof, Inc. and the theater's classic marquee sign, however, has recently been fully restored and its distinctive lighting is now on view.



## Big Four Bridge



The Big Four Bridge completed over the Great Miami River in 1924 has ever since been a major presence in Sidney Ohio. According to the Shelby County Historical Society *"Throughout its 75-year existence, this mammoth structure has physically defined our skyline like nothing else"*.

## Ross Covered Bridge

The Ross Covered Bridge, located in Tawawa Park, presents Sidney with an iconic image, in a lovely setting a short distance from downtown. Although not a historic bridge – constructed in 1971 – the imagery of the bridge could certainly be included in any collection of Sidney icons.



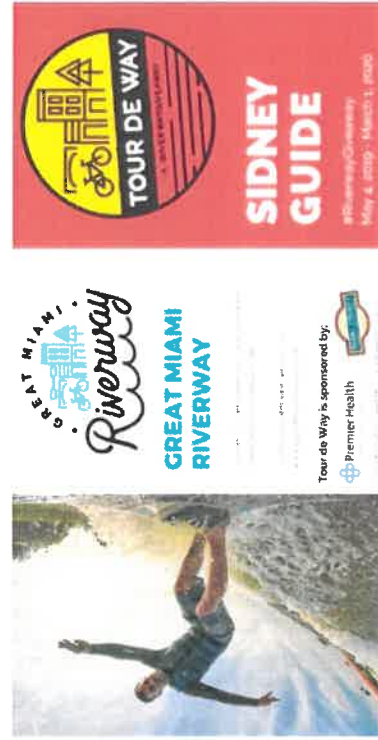
## Bonnyconnellan Castle



The Bonnyconnellan Castle has occupied its prominent position atop Walnut Avenue since its construction as Sidney's first grand mansion in 1886. Although the property has had a somewhat checkered history in recent years, its 40 hand-cut stone steps and its massive limestone tower nevertheless serve as a striking visual presence over the downtown area.

## River Access and Connectivity

Since the original settlement of Sidney along the western bank of the Great Miami River, the River – as well as the Miami-Erie Canal – has played a major role in the life of the community and remains a strong symbol of Sidney. While water-related commerce has long since left the River, in recent years the Great Miami River has been transformed into a major recreational corridor, both for canoeing and kayaking on the River and active use of the Riverway pedestrian and bicycle trail. The 99-mile segment of the River, from Sidney to Hamilton, has become a popular destination for outdoor recreation.



With its strategic location at the headway of this important recreational system – combined with its extensive, well-utilized and highly regarded local park and bikeway system - Sidney is well positioned to become a major recreational

center along the Great Miami River corridor. The opportunity certainly exists to encourage more of these River users to also visit downtown Sidney.

Certain gaps in the system remain, however, both within Sidney and connections just to the south that currently limit this potential. In terms of the regional system, an interruption along the Riverway Trail from Sidney south to Piqua reduces the ability of Sidney to serve as the true headway of the trail system. Within Sidney, there remains a gap in the trail between and among Roadside Park, the downtown area, and the local trail at Tawawa Park. These gaps, however, are currently in the process of being filled.



*Current Great Miami River Trail System from Hamilton to Piqua*

A larger issue is the lack of attention given to the River in downtown and along the major connections between these two points. Nothing is presented in downtown that announces or “celebrates” the significance of the River to the community, either in imagery, signage, or directions to the River access points at Canal Street or Roadside Park. For those utilizing the bike paths along the River or through the local park system, there are no bicycle lanes that connect to downtown, nor are there bike racks or facilities in the downtown area. And the most direct connections to the River from downtown, via the Court and North Street Bridges, have no indications that the River and downtown connect via these streets.

These are not insurmountable challenges, and with some careful interventions they can be ameliorated. If, however, a major component of the City of Sidney’s future growth and vitality is its position as the northern headway to this vibrant 99-mile River corridor, then its downtown should express this “asset” in proud and bold ways, and the connections between the two should be strong and welcoming.

## RECOMMENDED STRATEGIC ACTIONS

The previous sections of this report have documented the character of downtown Sidney and its connection to the River, downtown’s strengths and weaknesses, the assets that it contains, and – most importantly – what makes it a place people will want to visit, live within or near, and invest in. Foremost to keep in mind is that downtown Sidney is in many ways a charming, prototypical courthouse square that has retained its character and authenticity. It also is strategically located just a short distance from the headway of a major river-focused recreational corridor on a strong growth trajectory of recreational use.

While these circumstances bode well for downtown Sidney, its current level of vibrancy and economic health is far from robust, although this is improving. The key to the long-term sustainable health of downtown is increasing the level of activity as much as possible. There is no greater economic development “tool” than lots of people downtown.

Those interested in living downtown, opening a business, investing in a redevelopment project, or looking for a place to eat or drink or shop, will most likely choose not to do any of these things in downtown Sidney if there are few people visible on the streets – or evidence of activity – when then walk, bike, or drive through.



On the other hand, if one sees an active place, with people on the sidewalks, or sitting at a café or bench, or tables and chairs set out for diners, with storefronts and buildings alive with color and activity, a positive impression is immediately formed.



*A typical "healthy" downtown street*

The goal, therefore, of the strategic actions that follow is designed to - in aggregate - raise the level of activity in the downtown as well as between downtown and the River; to move downtown Sidney from a place that is active intermittently - during festivals and holidays, when the

Farmers Market is operating, etc. - to a place that is active on a regular basis. As stated earlier, downtown Sidney already has what has been referred to as "good bones," so that major and costly projects, infrastructure, and developments are not required for this to occur. Certain actions will be necessary and require some outlay of public and/or civic funds, especially those that fill an important existing gap in downtown. But overall, these actions are smaller in scale and designed to "build a stronger base" for downtown.

## **Improve Downtown Aesthetics**

The physical configuration of the Courthouse Square in downtown Sidney is quite impressive in a variety of ways. The Courthouse itself and its surrounding lawn have been restored and are in exceptional condition; the historic nature of the buildings on all four sides of the Square have for the most part been retained and those that have been replaced have not seriously damaged the visual quality of the Square; most of its business are local and have not been forced out by national chains, sidewalks are wide, parking is plentiful. Physically it is a place that many communities would envy.

The robustness of the Square in terms of day-to-day activity, however, remains challenging, although its momentum is moving in a positive direction. Some of this is a result of the relatively small number of people in and around the Square at any given time. But much of it is a result of the need for additional aesthetic and physical improvements to its public realm that help to animate the Square and add to the sense of vitality. In some cases, positive characteristics such as wide sidewalks become negatives when few people are present.

Various ways to build upon the positive character of the Square in order to enliven it are recommended:

**Activate the sidewalks.** Increasing the public's use of the sidewalks along the Square as well as those encircling the Courthouse Lawn should be a high priority. This can be achieved by encouraging the use of the currently unused portions of these spaces for 1) outdoor dining; 2) outdoor seating; 3) sidewalk sales areas; 4) third place uses; 5) people gathering ("conversation areas"); 6) public art; 7) art-infused bike racks 8) community icons; 9) food trucks/carts; 10) celebratory signage.



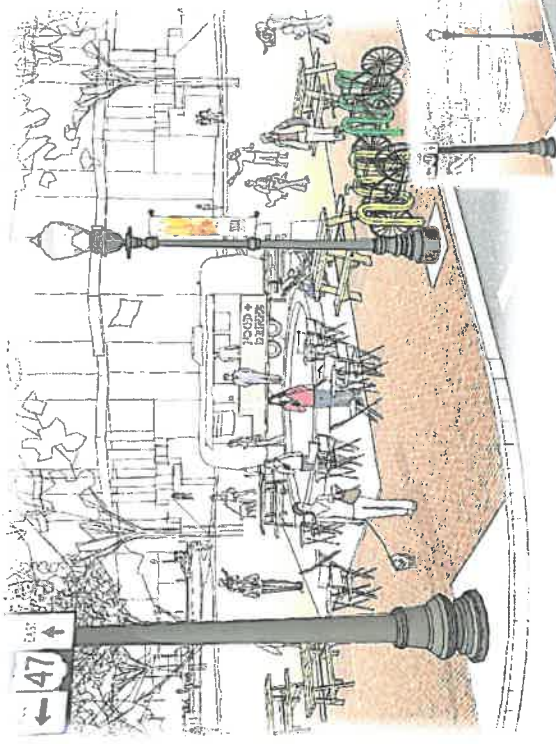
**Activate downtown's green space.** Downtown Sidney's "green space" is defined primarily as the lawn surrounding the Courthouse, which reads more as a continuous green "courthouse grounds" than as a central open space, except during festivals and Farmers Market days. In addition, there the Square contains Piper Park, a "pocket park" located adjacent to the Piper Building. Although both are well designed, neither space optimizes its use in terms of activating the downtown. It is recommended that the pocket park be animated via the addition of a mobile coffee and/or cafe truck, with outdoor seating. The use of an Airstream as the mobile vehicle is strongly recommended.



*Piper Park*

The Courthouse Square lawn should be re-imagined as having four distinct open space “corners” rather than as one large continuous lawn area. It already has a formal design with fountains anchoring each of these corners. However, its current design is oriented towards people entering and exiting the Courthouse, rather than those within the Square, with standard park benches and a stone curb separating these formal areas from the adjacent sidewalk. It is recommended that each of these four areas be activated through a variety of improvements that include more casual seating (tables/chairs/umbrellas), encouragement of food trucks/carts stationed at these corners; temporary public art installations; and a

“community icon” art element at each corner (e.g. Louis Sullivan, Soldier in Blue, Joe Cook).



*Courthouse Lawn corner*

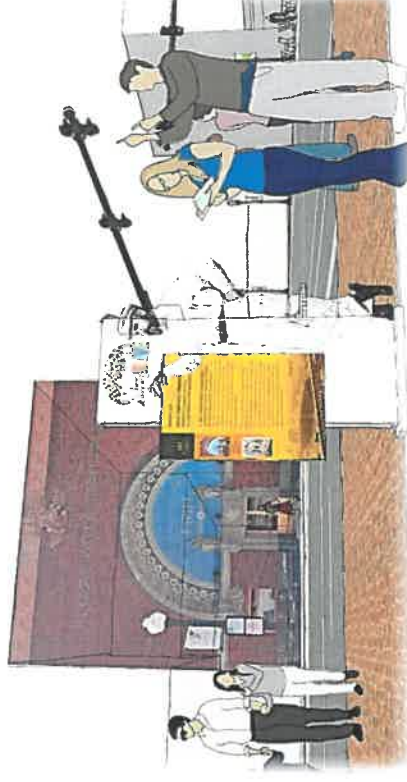
**Add color and movement.** Encouraging the use of colorful awnings, flags and banners on both the downtown buildings and light standards adds to the sense of vitality, as well as sandwich-board type signage (regulated through design standards).

## Reinforce Downtown's Authenticity

One of the most attractive assets of Sidney is the authenticity of its downtown, especially its Courthouse Square. A number of its buildings as well as significant unique features of its history present interesting – and charming – references that may be known to residents, but are less obvious to those with a more casual knowledge of Sidney's past. These features, however, if brought “down to the ground” and celebrated, in both a dignified but also light-hearted manner, can not only add to the charm of the Square, but also reinforce the uniqueness of Sidney. Such a “celebrate and reinforce” approach has multiple benefits.

In the past, such assets – especially dealing with historic buildings and/or events – were most commonly memorialized in plaques erected on their sites. These are generally static in nature and word-heavy. The Peoples Federal Bank plaque is a typical example. There are today, however, more engaging and interactive means of achieving these dual purposes. Imaging instead a life size statue of Louis Sullivan at the Courthouse fountain pointing to the Bank building with a quote about architecture, complemented by a phone app providing details about its unique architecture. Incorporating some of its most iconic design features – such as its arch, glass windows, gargoyles

and pediments – into downtown's signage and wayfinding is another way to celebrate and reinforce its importance to Sidney.



Similar uses of icons such as the Soldier in Blue, the Cook family at the Spot Diner, Sidney's covered bridge, the Big Four Bridge, and the Bonneyconnellan Castle should all be incorporated into downtown Sidney's imagery and - when possible - in three dimensions, to enliven the Square and reinforce the array of unique features that Sidney possesses. Life size statues, either as actual portraits or some stylized design version of Louis Sullivan, Ed Cook, the Soldier in Blue, and perhaps one other local icon could be located at each of the revamped “conversation nooks” at the four corners of the Courthouse lawn, animating these spaces even when there are few if any people.

### Third Places

The concept of “third places” – relaxed locations where people can spend some time informally - are increasingly important assets to have in a small or mid-sized downtown, especially one within easy walking distance from adjacent neighborhoods and where the physical configuration of the downtown adds to their ability to “see the Square.” Courthouse Square in Sidney meets these criteria extremely well, but unfortunately currently does not have such places. Sidney’s coffee shops are located outside of downtown, and while its library serves such a function as a community gathering space, it has not yet developed the typical third place benefits.

A strong recommendation is for the City to proactively recruit one of the local coffee purveyors, High Grounds and Winan’s, to consider a downtown location. Both entities are community-oriented and may be attracted to serving such a purpose. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this, each with particular advantages. There are currently available vacant downtown storefronts that can be tenanted by a coffee/café establishment. There could be food trucks, either mobile or permanently stationed, that would serve as anchors for a number of the streetscape areas that need activation, such as the courthouse lawn corners and the pocket park adjacent to the Piper Building. The use of an Airstream as a mobile coffee shop or light

food café would be especially attractive to animate the street with people and activity and also reinforce Shelby County’s connection to Airstream. The Spot began its existence as a mobile Chuck Wagon, and the current owners could be approached to determine if they would like to see a reference to The Spot’s heritage return in a 21<sup>st</sup> century configuration. Given the celebratory aspect of its unique heritage, Sidney’s third place should attempt to connect to such “brands.”

Bookstores often serve these same third place functions, although bookstores today face serious economic realities. A combination bookstore/coffee shop – perhaps one that transforms itself into an evening bar or brew pub - might be attractive to young local entrepreneurs. Public support for such an endeavor should be a high priority. Its return on investment in its ability to activate the Square, and at the same time add to the marketability of downtown living, will be far greater and long lasting than any initial subsidy that may be required.

### Additional Commercial/Food & Drink

The most critical new businesses for downtown Sidney to attract are food and drink establishments. These can range from informal places such as coffee shops, and casual dining spots, to brew pubs/cafes, and more upscale venues such as Tavolos. The goal is to have a mix of places that in

aggregate provide a range of experiences that - over time - encourage people to “go down to the Square” in addition to going to a specific restaurant. The draw of an active downtown is ultimately as important as the draw of each individual establishment.

The ability to create an inviting and attractive experience is a key element to the success of food and drink establishments, which by definition tend to be high risk endeavors for their owners/operators. This was increasingly important even before the Coronavirus pandemic and will remain even more important post-pandemic. The ability to provide outdoor seating and dining for an extended period of time will become critical for business success and sustainability. Sidney, fortunately, has very wide sidewalks that can easily allow for outdoor seating, although the “zones” in which it can be provided needs flexibility. Traditional zoning permits seating adjacent to the building, and if alcohol is served, in an area that is physically delineated and/or separated. While this can work in Sidney (see the Tovolo and The Bridges outdoor areas), there is also an opportunity to better utilize the “bands” of sidewalk with that are not part of the normal pedestrian traffic flow, such as the band in which the trees and light poles are situated.

This area of the sidewalk – as well as the adjacent brick bank out to the curb - is not otherwise utilized, and its width unintentionally adds to a sense of emptiness when few people are on the sidewalks.



Allowing seating and dining along this band may be a better – and more cost effective – way to easily provide outdoor seating. With the establishment of the DORA, the need for fully separated areas when serving alcohol may not be needed.

In addition to more flexibility in outdoor seating, the revised municipal regulations now in process should allow for – and encourage – additional elements that enliven the street, both for restaurants and other retail establishments. The ability to add awnings and banners to buildings, providing more visual excitement, color, and shade, should be encouraged. The ability to allow for free-standing signage, either temporary or permanent, should also be encouraged, although with each of these additions design standards must be set and enforced. But setting standards to help encourage appropriate and well-designed amenities is different than setting standards as a way to discourage them. It appears that the new zoning code will have the ability to do the former.

### **Encourage the redevelopment of the Old County Jail as a casual food and drink establishment.**

The Old County Jail property now stands as a vacant “relic” of a past time, but as a building adds to the visual interest of the Square. Its size and layout – if combined with the former maintenance building site immediately to its east – presents an opportunity for a casual and light-hearted reuse as a commercial property. Preliminary analysis suggests a reuse potential as a casual eatery and/or pub, which given its history and internal “cells” could serve as a unique “destination” for downtown. Examples of similar

former jails transformed into pizza parlors, cafes and bars in other communities suggest that such a reuse would be well received in Sidney and add significantly to the downtown’s vibrancy and vitality.



*Potential reuse of Old County Jail as food/drink emporium*

### **Establish a Downtown Commercial Loan Fund**

Retail business, especially those undertaken by local entrepreneurs, often have significant start-up costs that are difficult to raise and service as debt until the business becomes fully stabilized. This is especially true for food and drinking establishments that require kitchen and/or other

food service equipment that can be quite expensive, and often difficult to finance. Many cities have established commercial loan funds to assist with these challenging start-up costs. It is highly recommended that Sidney consider the establishment of such a fund, to provide low cost loans for commercial space build-out. These loans could be provided directly to retail tenants, or in some cases to the building owner if the cost of tenant improvements are to be amortized through rent payments. In either case, the funds would be targeted specifically for first floor retail operations.

Such a fund could be part of a larger pool of downtown investment funding, or remain separate. These funds are most commonly capitalized through a combination of public and private funding sources, but is best operated outside of municipal government. The capitalization and operation of the fund would to some extent determine the size and conditions of each loan, but in Sidney a \$50,000 maximum would appear to be appropriate. Terms of each loan could vary, but to be successful they would be less rigorous than traditional financing would require.

### **Additional Residential Units**

Any strong downtown, be it large or small, is most robust when there are people living in the downtown, immediately

adjacent to the downtown, and/or populating strong neighborhoods within comfortable walking distance to the downtown. All of these areas in Sidney qualify as priorities for the creation of additional residential units. Units created in the upper stories of downtown buildings provide limited numbers of units, but should nonetheless be encouraged whenever a building is being considered for redevelopment; a downtown residential loan fund, similar in scale and operations as the Commercial Loan Fund (perhaps under the joint aegis of a Downtown Investment Fund) should be created.

Opportunities to infill vacant parcels - usually adjacent to downtown – with a variety of housing options should be strongly encouraged; these tend to provide a higher density of units. And those neighborhoods adjacent to downtown that provide new homes on vacant lot and rehabilitation opportunities for houses in disrepair provide a potentially significantly higher number of new residents within the overall downtown “neighborhood”.

There are a number of well situated and appropriately sized parcels of vacant land adjacent to downtown in which a moderate density of new homes likely could be constructed that would have strong market demand. These include the parking lot overlooking Julia Lamb Field, two parcels along North Miami Street, the parking lot at S. Miami and Poplar;





*Infill housing examples*

the parking lot at Ohio and Lane; vacant properties along North and West Streets; as well as the former elementary school building at Poplar and Miami that appears to be a good redevelopment candidate.

These properties offer land of a size on which a modest development could be undertake in a variety of housing styles that fit the market, be they garden apartments, townhouses, cottage courts, and other newer flexible housing prototypes that provide attractively priced housing, and do not require massive infrastructure investment or absorption levels that may not currently exist. Some of these are privately owned and some in the public sector and/or non-profit hands.

The third housing “priority” is a strategic focus of attention on the historic neighborhoods that ring downtown Sidney, which are within easy walking distance to the Square and thus provide significant market demand to downtown businesses. While increasing the number of residential units in downtown itself should continue to be a goal, the total number of such units pales in comparison with the number of housing units found in adjacent neighborhoods. If, as a complementary action, these surrounding neighborhood could add units, upgrade more properties, rehabilitate deteriorated housing or those with code violations, and bring a wider mix of income levels and

homeowners to them, the impact on downtown would be substantial. Experience has shown that the cost of such “incentivization” is far lower than the impact of such action.

A means to implement such a strategy is the creation of a public/private investment fund with its purpose to invest and stabilize these neighborhoods. The structure of such a mechanism may vary widely, but at its core they must have the same mission: To assemble property within a targeted area, clear out many of the obstacles that currently exist, and then offer them for purchase to interested buyers as properties with their adjacent risks eliminated. Given the rather low acquisition price of many of the deteriorated or “problem” properties in these neighborhoods, 4-6 properties on a block can likely be assembled for the price of one or two in a market such as Dayton. The Shelby County Land Bank has already assembled some properties that could be incorporated into such a program.

Discussions regarding the creation of such a **Downtown Investment Fund** have already begun, and interest appears strong. Such a Fund – and its administration – could be combined with the downtown housing and commercial loan funds, or they can be operated separately. But the aggregate impact would in either case substantially improve the economic health of downtown Sidney.

## **Strengthen Connections to the River**

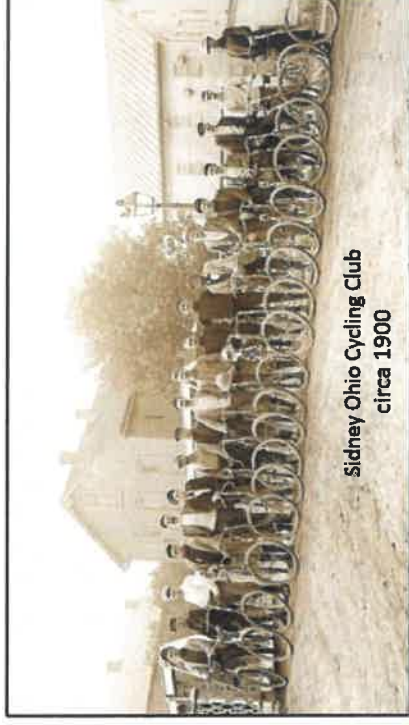
Downtown Sidney is a very short distance to and from the Miami River, as well as to a number of the “gems” of the region’s park system; it is a very easy and comfortable walk or bike ride. The ability to recreate along, in, and adjacent to the River and parks and at the same time easily partake of the downtown’s resources is a great asset, and one that many other cities would envy. Currently, however, this asset is not being optimized, and the River connection is not highlighted as much as it should – and could - be. Certain improvements should be considered that would improve both the physical connections as well as the information provided for those in the downtown area:

**Work towards completion of the River trail system within Sidney and connections south.** The major missing “gap” currently is the lack of a trail from Roadside Park to Custenborder Field/Tawawa Park. This can be rectified in large part by creating a trail or bike lane along South Miami Avenue. The river berm on the west side of the River could provide such a connection along Miami Avenue, although there may be some deed restrictions from many years ago that may inhibit portions of it. Nonetheless, it should be pursued. However, an alternative would be to stripe a bike lane in the South Miami right-of-way, which could tie-in to additional bike lanes in the downtown area.

**Adding bike lanes** throughout the downtown area, especially along the length of Miami to Canal Street and the pedestrian bridge at the River would not only accommodate bicyclists, it would also highlight the connections to the River and the Parks trail systems. Street widths in and around the downtown area are more than adequate in width to accommodate bike lanes, and adding them to the one-way streets would also help reduce the expanse of pavement that the one-way system creates. In effect, it would serve multiple purposes.

Currently, there is very little **informational signage** within downtown and its environs that indicate the proximity of the Great Miami River and the variety of recreational opportunities that it provides. In fact, there is little ‘awareness’ of the River at all in the downtown area. Until one travels across the bridges at Court and North Streets, the River is a non-entity in terms of perception, directions, and celebration. It is therefore recommended that directional signage to the River, the trail system, and its access points be developed and placed in key locations within the downtown area. These should not be standard, road signage, but rather more bold, celebratory, and even whimsical signage, serving to reinforce that the River is, and has always been, a major force in the development of the City. Using the historic “Sidney Bike Club” photo as a

unifying marker for directional signage to and along the bike paths would serve these multiple purposes.



In addition, identity signage within the downtown should reference and use symbols of the River and its proximity to the Riverway as much as possible, again in a celebratory manner. Combining it with the symbol of the Big Four Bridge – another icon of Sidney – would highlight both the River and this powerful and beautiful piece of civic architecture.

The installation of bike racks in the downtown would also add to the ambience, especially if – as many cities are doing – these bike racks are designed to serve as elements of public art. These would add much needed color, vitality, and creativity to the downtown area.



*Artist-designed bike racks*

### Activate the River

Highlighting the significance of the Great Miami River, as well as providing improved connection to the River, are important components of reinforcing the River's importance to downtown and the overall City of Sidney.

The need to better activate the River is equally important, especially if additional activation points could be closer and more directly connected to the downtown area. Currently, the closest points to get to the River's edge and also to be able to "put in" a canoe or kayak, are at the terminus of Canal Street at the Bridge/Dam and at Roadside Park. These are relatively close to the Square - with Canal Street a bit

closer – but they nevertheless are outside of the physical and psychological realm of downtown. Two much closer points – both in distance and perception - are at East Poplar and North Streets. At East Poplar, the street terminates in an ungracious manner at the river berm. Preliminary discussions about creating an access point along the berm adjacent to Jackson Towers to allow for canoe/kayak access at this point have been undertaken, and should continued to be pursued. Although not far from the ramp at Custenborder Field, having an ability to see, touch, and access the River on the downtown side of the River is critical to cementing the downtown/river connection. The creation of such an access point should be given a high priority.

North Street provides significant opportunity as well to access the River, as well as view it. The lack of river viewing points is also a major deficiency of the downtown/river connection. Although the main portion of Julia Lamb Field is within the floodplain and thus unlikely as a development site, the ability to provide viewing access to the River should be further explored. This could take the form of an elevated platform/viewshed off of the existing walking trail. In addition, the upper portion of the Field as well as adjacent vacant property appears to be at elevations that would permit development. Such development could include

residential and/or commercial uses that could provide highly desirable river views.

### **Redevelop Vacant Properties**

The redevelopment of currently vacant, deteriorating, and/or underutilized buildings in and around the Courthouse Square should be a high priority, in order to both retain the historic character of the Square and to add to the activity levels within downtown. The redevelopment of historic properties always present economic challenges, especially in communities such as Sidney where both residential and commercial rental rates are relatively low, compared cities where rehabilitation projects are more common. Some public/private participation in such efforts is most likely to be required.

Nonetheless, redevelopment of these properties that meet the goals of the downtown strategy should be encouraged. Recent examples of the redevelopment of the Piper Building and the Chamber of Commerce Building are good positive examples of such efforts.

Incentive programs such as façade loans/grants, CRA designation, and low interest secondary financing should be established. Redevelopment efforts considered for such assistance should be given highest priority if they provide for ground floor retail tenants, upper story residential units,

and restoration of facades/storefronts to their historic standards. Buildings under public ownership, such as the Ohio Building and the Old County Jail, should be proactively marketed for reuse with these objectives in mind and appropriate incentivization funding attached.

Redevelopment projects such as these are often complicated, regardless of the size of the project, and in many instances involve a variety of programs, funding options, incentives, etc. The active provision of technical assistance to anyone considering such a redevelopment should be offered, either through existing resources such as Sidney Alive or the Shelby County Economic Partnership, or outside resources that these entities may have at their disposal.

### **Strengthen Adjacent Neighborhoods and Better Connect to Downtown**

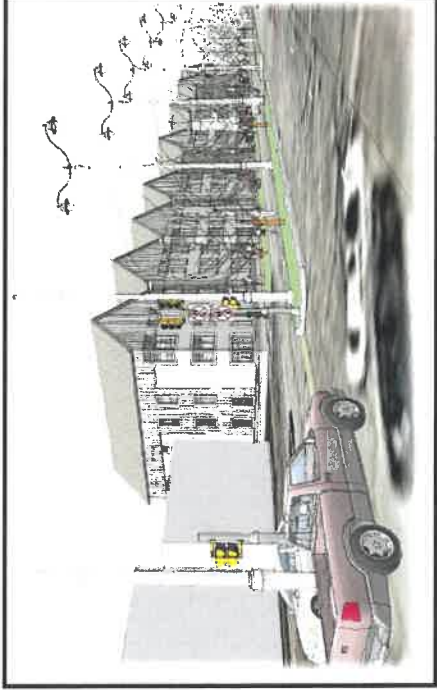
The economic health and vitality of downtown Sidney is dependent to a large extent on the health and vitality of its surrounding neighborhoods, which provide a market on a day-to-day basis for its goods and services. The potential to increase the market demand and attractiveness of these neighborhoods as a place to live by focusing attention on their weakest blocks through an Investment Fund concept has been cited earlier. Such a housing market intervention

within these blocks, many of which are closest to downtown along S. Miami, N. Miami and along both West and Walnut Avenues in the Walnut Avenue Historic District will help stabilize these neighborhoods and serve as catalysts for future investment.

In addition to this housing market intervention, the adjoining neighborhoods are in need of better connection to the downtown area:

N. Miami Avenue – The stretch of N. Miami Avenue just north of the Square to Lane Street is a lovely environment, including the charming brick pavement of Lane Street. North of Lane, however, its conditions deteriorate up to Canal Street, with large parcels and few amenities. Continuing past Canal, however, the introduction of a green median returns a pleasant neighborhood feel to the street. While the section between Lane and Canal is somewhat narrower than north of Canal, extending some version of this median south towards downtown is recommended. There is ample right-of-way available to increase street width if necessary, although with a somewhat narrower median this may not be necessary. Incorporating a bike lane into the median would also benefit by connecting to the river access at Canal Street. Combining this improvement with an infill residential development on one or more of the vacant parcels on the west side of the street

would greatly solidify this as a new and growing downtown residential neighborhood.



*N. Miami Street with median and infill housing (northbound)*

West/Walnut Avenues – The Sidney Walnut Historic District contains a charming collection of large, Victorian former “mansions” that still comprise a stately residential neighborhood. As with other neighborhoods adjoining Sidney’s downtown, there are pockets of disinvestment within the District that need to be addressed, especially along North West Avenue, as well as a positive resolution of the Bonnyconnellan property which in spite of its unfortunate recent past remains a valuable visual community icon. In addition, these streets most direct connections to downtown Sidney from North to Poplar are relatively weak and may serve to discourage walking

between the two areas. Focusing on infill development of the vacant parcels in these blocks is recommended, especially those at the corners and publicly controlled parking areas atop the former rail right of way.

### **Engage the Community**

All downtown and neighborhood revitalization strategies to be successful and sustainable require strong and active participation from all sectors of the community, including local government, local businesses, major corporations and employers, financial institutions, the philanthropic community, and neighborhood groups. Not only is this important in terms of providing necessary funding for strategic initiatives, but these initiatives must be seen as ultimately improving each sector's business or clientele, and leading to a stronger overall community. These sectors have been actively involved throughout the development of this downtown development strategy, and have in fact begun to work collaboratively on moving a number of these initiatives forward. Hopefully these activities will continue, towards the following goals:

- Participation in the creation and administration of the proposed downtown incentive funds

- Participation in the creation and administration of the proposed Neighborhood Investment Fund
- Corporate support for the creation and marketing of in-town (downtown and neighborhoods) housing opportunities by providing information/assistance on affordable neighborhood options and/ or down payment assistance programs.
- Financing of new in-fill development projects
- Support of downtown public art/icon/bike rack initiatives