



**NORTH
WILKESBORO
DOWNTOWN + RIVER
DISTRICT PLAN**

AUGUST ~ 2025





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NORTH WILKESBORO DOWNTOWN + RIVER DISTRICT PLAN

NORTH WILKESBORO'S 15-YEAR PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN + RIVER DISTRICT.

In 2022, Wilkes County launched *The Great State of Wilkes Outdoor Action Plan* to tap into the region's wealth of outdoor recreation opportunities and natural assets. At the confluence of the Yadkin and Reddies rivers, North Wilkesboro sits at the county's center, anchoring the region both geographically and culturally. As a follow-up to the countywide plan, the *Downtown + River District Plan* outlines targeted strategies to strengthen the town's character, economic opportunity, and quality of life over the next 15 years. Guided by three key ingredients — **streetlife + gateways, parks, trails, + open space, and special places** — the town is uniquely positioned to translate the county's broader vision into focused, place-based actions that **leverage North Wilkesboro's historic Downtown, emerging River District, growing Arts District, and Greenway system.**



- A ~ RAIL TRAIL LINEAR PARK
- B ~ CHERRY STREET
- C ~ CBD LOOP
- D ~ THE DEPOT
- E ~ MAIN STREET (EAST SIDE)
- F ~ BLOCK 46 / THE TRIBUTARY

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO ACHIEVE NORTH WILKESBORO'S VISION?

North Wilkesboro's vision for Downtown and the River District is ambitious, and will require a **continued commitment from the community, staff, and elected officials** to implement over several phases:

...Commitment to Making Progress.

- » Adopt the plan formally, understanding that adoption does not prevent future updates.
- » Track and pursue grant opportunities that align with proposed projects.
- » Build momentum through a series of small wins, while bigger moves are still in the works.

...Commitment to Collaboration.

- » Establish a dedicated advisory group of staff, residents, developers, and property owners that serve as stewards of the plan.
- » Assemble an on-call advisory team of design professionals for rapid evaluation on emerging opportunities.

...Commitment to Innovation.

- » Be open to using creative financing tools to support public infrastructure, including developer agreements, reimbursement programs, and public-private partnerships.
- » Be flexible to allow funding to be reallocated as opportunities arise.

WHAT ARE THE IDENTIFIED PHASE 1 / PRIORITY PROJECTS?



**A RAIL TRAIL
LINEAR PARK**

This project is a transformational opportunity to create a loop that connects the Yadkin River Greenway to Downtown and the future River District using the former rail corridor.



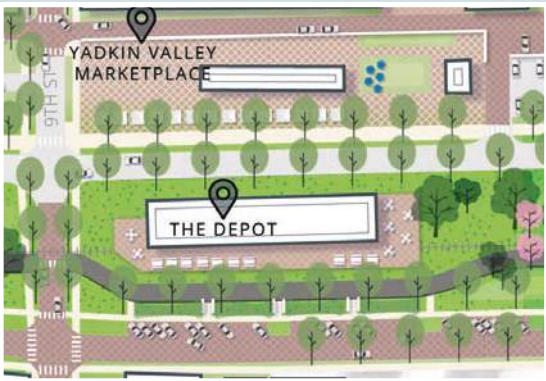
**B CHERRY
STREET**

This project is a key investment to support economic vitality, walkability, and streetlife in the River District.



**C CBD
LOOP**

CBD Loop is the greatest physical barrier between River District and Downtown, and initial assessment indicates that all five travel lanes may not be necessary for the road to still function.



**D THE
DEPOT**

Rehabilitation of the Depot and the Rail Trail/Cherry Street corridor could occur independently or as concurrent projects.



**E EAST MAIN
STREET**

Main Street is a vital entry corridor and should be enhanced to strengthen its role as a welcoming gateway, and as an integrated part of the walkable Downtown area.



**F BLOCK 46 /
THE TRIBUTARY**

This site is uniquely positioned to increase downtown housing supply, activate underutilized parcels, and integrate public spaces into the River District.

WHAT OTHER PROJECTS + INITIATIVES
HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED?

Streetlife + Gateways

- » **West Main Street:** Strategic upgrades to the west end of Main Street, including crossing improvements.
- » Expand walking and biking connections to neighborhoods.
- » Conduct a **Parking Utilization Study** to better understand the distribution and supply of parking in the study area.
- » Improve gateways at multiple scales.

Parks, Trails, + Open Space

- » **B Street Park:** Redesign the hillside to support adjacent development and activate the park more regularly.
- » **New Festival Park:** Relocate Apple Festival Park space to the west end of Main Street and CBD Loop.
- » Develop new park spaces in the River District.
- » Upgrade existing parks in the study area.

Special Places

- » **Arts District:** Formally establish a sub-district within Downtown along 10th Street and Ward Nichols Way.
- » **Artful Alleyways:** Expand placemaking in Downtown with a program that dresses up “between” spaces with local art and historic interpretation.
- » Rollout **branding, wayfinding signage, and monummentation** that incorporates Great State of Wilkes.
- » **Marketplace Alley:** Upgrade and activate the corridor between Main Street and Yadkin Valley Marketplace.
- » Preserve access to scenic viewsheds.







Section One

PLAN FOUNDATIONS



*Where context, baseline conditions, and
creative ideas from the community come
together to shape the plan's direction*

INTRODUCTION

The *North Wilkesboro Downtown + River District Plan* sets an opportunistic and exciting vision for the future, grounded in an understanding of what is important to the community and designed to guide growth in these districts over the next 15 years.



PROJECT PURPOSE

In Fall of 2024, the LandDesign team was engaged by the Town of North Wilkesboro to establish a community-wide vision for the private and public realm in Downtown and the River District; build upon existing assets; set redevelopment goals that focus the town’s efforts and bolster the community’s local economy and quality of life; and guide short- and long-term implementation through actionable steps and strategic partnerships.

The resulting plan leverages the town’s strengths and relationships to advance community-oriented projects, because a community’s parks, streets, and open spaces are a critical tool in achieving North Wilkesboro’s vision for the future of their Downtown and River District. To address the complexity of this project, the plan explores the community’s strengths and challenges through three **“key ingredients”** that, when thoughtfully applied, contribute to a thriving and resilient community:

- 1. Streetlife + Gateways
- 2. Parks, Trails, + Open Space
- 3. Special Places

When implemented, the final plan for North Wilkesboro will create meaningful and memorable connections between the town’s defining areas – a historic, walkable Downtown, vibrant River District, and growing Arts District – woven together by a cohesive network of parks, trails, and open spaces.

PREVIOUS PLANNING

2008

The North Wilkesboro Comprehensive Pedestrian Plan is completed. The plan is focused on improving pedestrian infrastructure, safety, and connectivity.



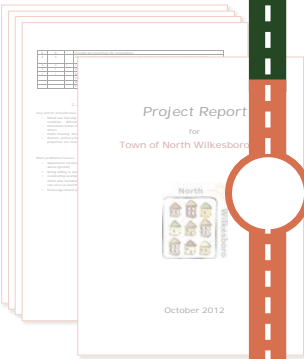
2010

The North Wilkesboro Downtown Streetscape Master Plan is completed, with recommendations for improved infrastructure and other design elements. The plan aims to build a walkable community that supports local businesses and attracts visitors.



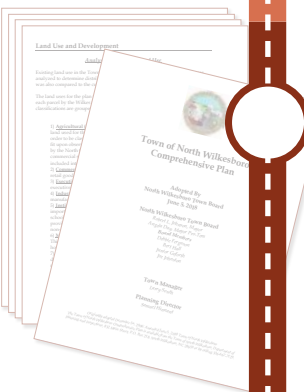
2012

The North Wilkesboro Housing Study is completed. The study outlines the challenges and opportunities for improving housing conditions and affordability in the town.



2018

The North Wilkesboro 25-Year Comprehensive Plan is completed, outlining priorities in housing, infrastructure, downtown revitalization, and parks to create an attractive and comfortable town for current and future residents.



Continued on the facing page.

2022

FROM PLAN TO ACTION

The *Great State of Wilkes Outdoor Action Plan* harnesses a 15-year vision for Wilkes County to grow its economy and tourism by making the most of its outdoor recreation assets. In the plan, **the Yadkin River corridor and surrounding areas are identified as central to North Wilkesboro's revitalization.**

The *North Wilkesboro Downtown + River District Plan* is where **plan meets place** – turning vision into action by identifying key public and private actions and opportunities that promote vibrancy, connectivity, and economic prosperity in North Wilkesboro's Downtown and future River District.



① The *Outdoor Action Plan* notes that investments in **community character**, such as making public spaces more inviting and vibrant, are key to supporting the outdoor economy.

North Wilkesboro will further this effort with the *Downtown + River District Plan* through:

- » Prioritizing pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, including safety and comfort elements like improved sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, and landscaping, to create a cohesive and attractive downtown environment
- » Using signage to promote local attractions and enhance the visitor experience, aligning with the new “Great State of Wilkes” brand to boost regional identity and make the area more navigable and attractive to tourists

② The *Outdoor Action Plan* emphasizes the enhancement of **parks and open spaces** to support recreation, conservation, and accessibility in Wilkes County.

North Wilkesboro will further this effort with the *Downtown + River District Plan* through:

- » Developing the town's Blueways and Greenways to expand connectivity between neighborhoods, parks, Downtown, and River District to improve access for all residents
- » Enhancing public parks and proposing new green spaces with high-quality amenities that will boost usage and activity in these areas
- » Supporting paddle and water recreation through improving and expanding access points

③ The *Outdoor Action Plan* aspires to develop Wilkes County as a distinctive, outdoor-oriented destination through **strategic branding** and Yadkin River corridor development.

North Wilkesboro will further this effort with the *Downtown + River District Plan* through:

- » Leveraging North Wilkesboro's unique identity to support the “Boros” brand and develop the River District – making it a focal point for community activities, dining, and retail that celebrates the Yadkin and Reddies River and surrounding natural beauty
- » Bolster the local economy through cultural and nature-based programming and marketing that highlights the town's assets, historic sites, and cultural resources to attract residents and tourists alike

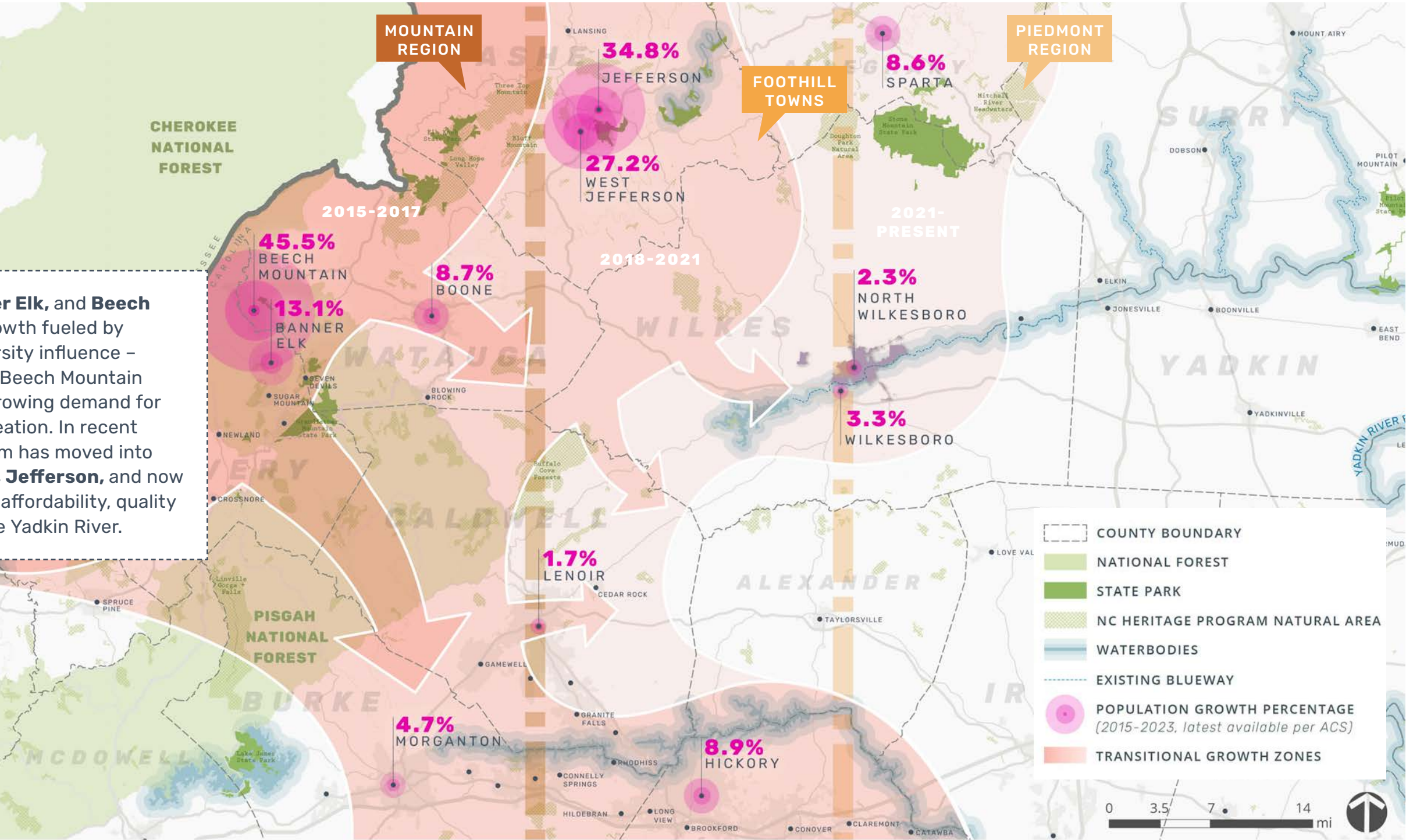
Regional
Growth Map

Over the past 15 years, tourism and regional growth patterns that began in the mountains have spread into the foothills. This shift signals **a new chapter for foothill communities** as they begin to evolve from quiet pass-through towns into vibrant tourist destinations. While housing affordability plays a role, equally important are quality of life factors and access to the great outdoors.

Mountain towns like **Boone, Banner Elk, and Beech Mountain** saw early population growth fueled by tourism, second homes, and university influence – Banner Elk grew 13% annually, and Beech Mountain 45.5% (2015-2023). This reflects growing demand for access to nature and outdoor recreation. In recent years (early 2020s), that momentum has moved into foothill towns like **West Jefferson, Jefferson, and now North Wilkesboro**, likely driven by affordability, quality of life, and access to assets like the Yadkin River.

North Wilkesboro wants thoughtful growth that strengthens its Downtown as a vibrant, walkable heart while leveraging the Yadkin River to drive sustainable development, recreation, and quality of life. This plan will help manage growth that fulfills this vision, at the intersection of mountain tourism and the Piedmont region.

POPULATION GROWTH 2015-2023





THE OUTDOOR
ADVANTAGE

Population and visitor spending trends in North Carolina reflect the growing power of parks, trails, and public lands to shape the future of communities. As investments in outdoor recreation and tourism amenities increase, towns and counties are seeing corresponding economic and community benefits.

Significant increases in tourism revenue and population growth for towns like Boone, Beech Mountain, Jefferson, and West Jefferson between 2015 and 2023 can be closely linked to strategic regional investments in public spaces, cultural events, and outdoor recreation infrastructure. Watauga County growth can also be attributed to Appalachian State University, and the young, available workforce the college town offers to support tourism-related businesses.

MOUNTAIN REGION: WATAUGA COUNTY
(Beech Mountain, Boone)

Visitor spending increased from approximately \$231.4 million in 2015 to \$517.5 million in 2023 (*visitNC.com*). **Strategic investments led to a nearly 20% year-over-year increase in occupancy tax revenues in 2016**, with continued growth in subsequent years.

- **2015-2017.** The Watauga County Tourism Development Authority (TDA) begins to fund several key projects, including:
 - » Middle Fork Greenway: A multi-use trail connecting Boone and Blowing Rock begins construction, enhancing outdoor accessibility.
 - » Northern Peaks Trail Planning: Development of a state trail to promote hiking and nature exploration.
- **2018-2019.** Visitation continues to grow.
 - » The “Step Outside Yourself” marketing campaign and the launch of a new tourism website increased visibility and attracted more visitors.
 - » Rocky Knob Park: A mountain biking destination that attracts adventure tourists is completed.
- **2020-2022.** Middle Fork Greenway sees record usage, prompting new push for funding and connectivity. Blue Ridge Parkway reports some of its highest visitation in decades.
 - » Moses Cone Estate Restoration: Preservation of a historic site with trails, boosting cultural tourism.
 - » Opened in 2021, the \$35 million, 100,000-square-foot Community Recreation Center includes pools, gyms, and event spaces, positioning the County as a hub for sports tourism.

FOOTHILL TOWNS: ASHE COUNTY
(Jefferson, West Jefferson)

Visitor spending increased 73% between 2015-2023, from \$65 million to \$112.6 million (*visitNC.com*). **Ashe County’s most substantial growth year was in 2020**, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and can likely be attributed to its appeal as a destination for outdoor recreation and its effective adaptation to changing travel preferences.

- **2018-2020.** Vision planning and early trail discussions begin. Momentum builds with the Blue Ridge Conservancy (BRC) as regional interest in outdoor recreation surges post-COVID.
- **2021.** Ashe County’s natural attractions, such as the New River and the Blue Ridge Parkway, continue to draw visitors seeking outdoor activities.
 - » The Blue Ridge Conservancy (BRC) transferred 152 acres of Paddy Mountain to the Town of West Jefferson. This land, adjacent to 445 acres of protected area, is designated as a public park and serves as a trailhead for the Northern Peaks State Trail (NPST).
- **2022-2023.** The county expands their trail network.
 - » Three miles of a stacked-loop segment of the NPST are constructed, built to modern, sustainable standards while avoiding sensitive natural areas.
 - » The County received a \$500,000 PARTF grant and \$250,000 in state funding secured to build restrooms, parking, pavilions, signage, and trail infrastructure.
 - » Mount Jefferson Connector Study receives \$80,000 NCDOT grant to plan a pedestrian connection between Paddy Mountain and Mount Jefferson State Natural Area.

Project
Study Area

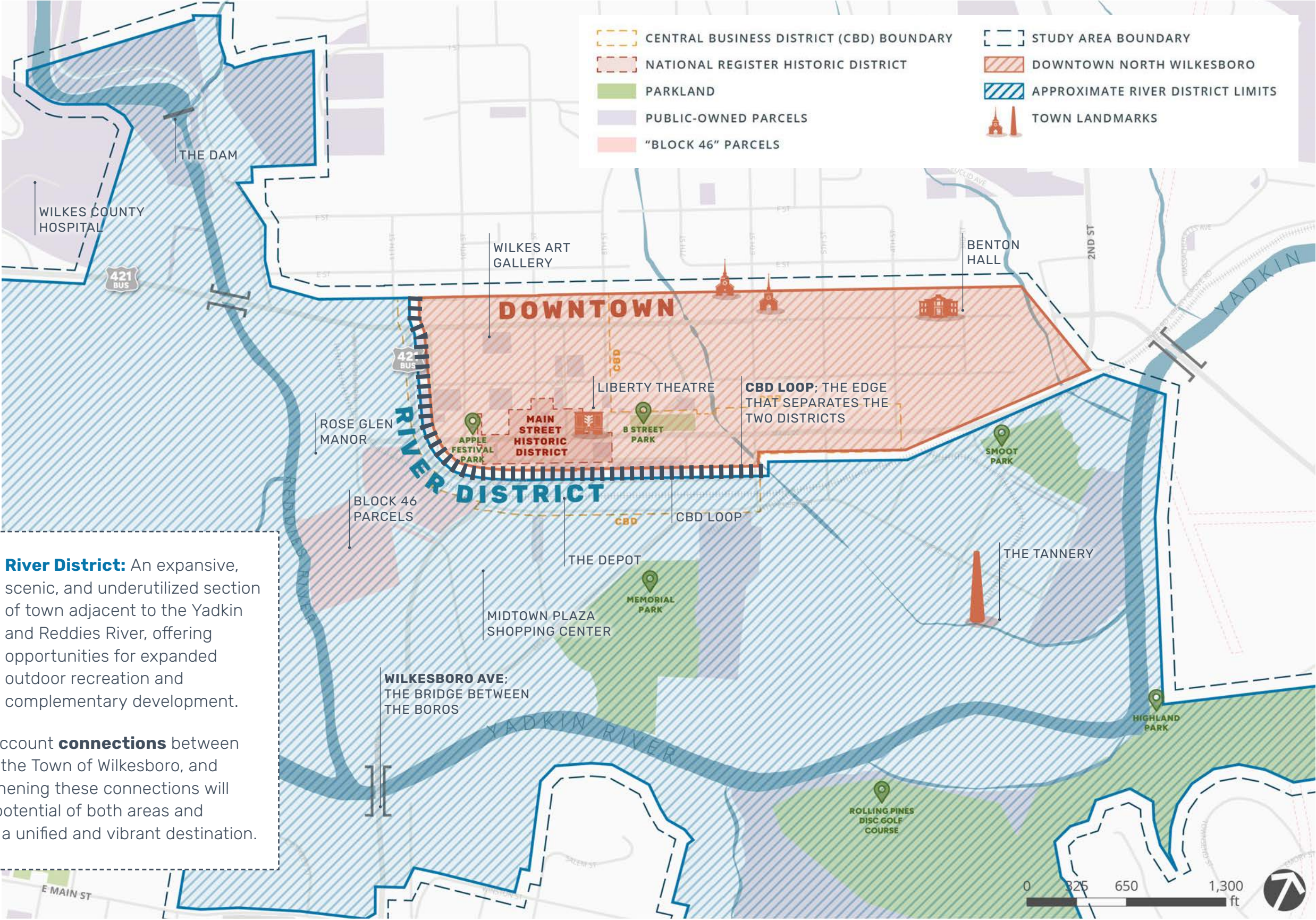
The study area for the *North Wilkesboro Downtown + River District Plan* encompasses the town’s historic Downtown and the adjacent Reddies and Yadkin Riverfront – two areas that are central to the community’s identity, economic development potential, and long-term livability. This plan identifies challenges, assets, and strategic actions for the most opportunity-rich zones in North Wilkesboro for public investment, revitalization, and connection-making.

It includes:

Downtown: Characterized by early 20th-century commercial buildings including the Liberty Theatre and Benton Hall. This area serves as the cultural and economic heart of the town.

The study area also takes into account **connections** between the two districts (CBD Loop), to the Town of Wilkesboro, and nearby regional assets. Strengthening these connections will be critical to unlocking the full potential of both areas and positioning North Wilkesboro as a unified and vibrant destination.

River District: An expansive, scenic, and underutilized section of town adjacent to the Yadkin and Reddies River, offering opportunities for expanded outdoor recreation and complementary development.





THE PLANNING PROCESS

Developed over five phases in 2024 and 2025, the *Downtown + River District Plan* has been guided by input from an active steering committee and the broader public to ensure that the plan reflects community-wide priorities and interests.

For more detailed information on public engagement activities, please see the Appendix, starting on page 102.

SEPTEMBER 2024

NOVEMBER 2024

FEBRUARY 2025

MAY 2025

AUGUST 2025



Phase 1 DISCOVERY

- ✓ Collect data
- ✓ Map the assets and gaps
- ✓ Tour the study area
- ✓ Interview local business owners

Phase 2 ENGAGEMENT 1

- ✓ Community Open House at Light Up Downtown
- ✓ Release an online survey (closed February 6, 2025)

Phase 3 IDEATION

- ✓ Analyze the feedback from Phase 2
- ✓ Generate concepts for Downtown and the River District

Phase 4 ENGAGEMENT 2

- ✓ 2nd Community Open House (May 1, 2025)
- ✓ Release an online survey (closed May 30, 2025)

Phase 5 ADOPTION

- ✓ Prepare a plan and report for Downtown and the River District
- ✓ Town board presentation

Steering Committee

A steering committee comprised of approx. 12 individuals represented the citizens of North Wilkesboro – including City staff, council members, business owners, members of the arts community, and other local

12 INDIVIDUALS

groups to guide the development of the plan. Input from this committee was solicited during all phases of the planning process to ensure that the project remained in alignment with the community's goals and values.

Open Houses

In-person, interactive open houses were held in North Wilkesboro in November 2024 (to lay the plan's foundation and provide information on the planning process) and May 2025 (to determine the community's values and priorities, and solicit feedback on proposed projects in the plan).

The Project Team hosted a booth in Town Hall during the Light Up Downtown event, and later at Talia's Espresso and Wisdom Brewing to capture input from a diverse audience.

2 OPEN HOUSES



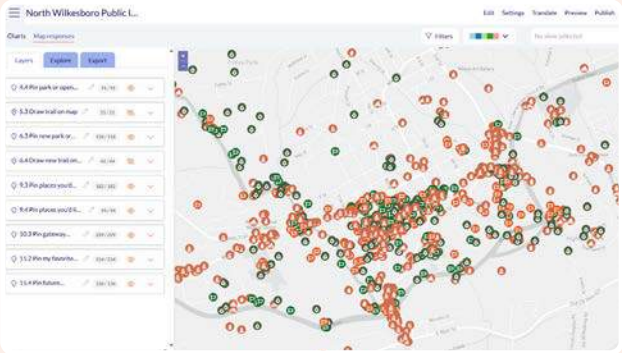
Online Surveys

North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro residents contributed ideas on two surveys that resulted in over 1,800

completed surveys. The surveys recreated the in-person engagement activities to capture comparable data from

folks that may not have been able to attend in-person.

1,204 responses to the first online survey
[approximately 15 people per day!]





PLAN SUMMARY

The *Downtown + River District Plan* provides a clear and actionable framework for the future of North Wilkesboro, addressing the town’s three **key ingredients**:

Streetlife + Gateways focuses on the experience of arriving to and moving throughout Downtown and the River District, emphasizing streetscapes, gateways, and viewsheds that shape the town’s first impressions.

Parks, Trails, + Open Space analyzes the potential for enhancing and connecting the town’s green spaces to ensure they support recreation, health, tourism, and sustainability.

PLAN GOALS

The **Downtown + River District Plan**

will be successful because...

...the plan builds excitement in the community and is adopted.

... the plan aspires to position the area as a regional destination with partnerships with Wilkesboro and Wilkes County.

...the plan is implementable and realistic based on market potential, viable partnerships, and environmental constraints.

...the plan creates a vision for an attractive and lively Downtown that blends and grows into the River District, while retaining its own distinct character.

...the plan identifies a stream of funding opportunities and tools for public sector improvements.

...critical projects and focus areas are identified, illustrated, and described as opportunities with a list of small, bite-sized projects and larger moves.

...development opportunities and partnerships have been identified.

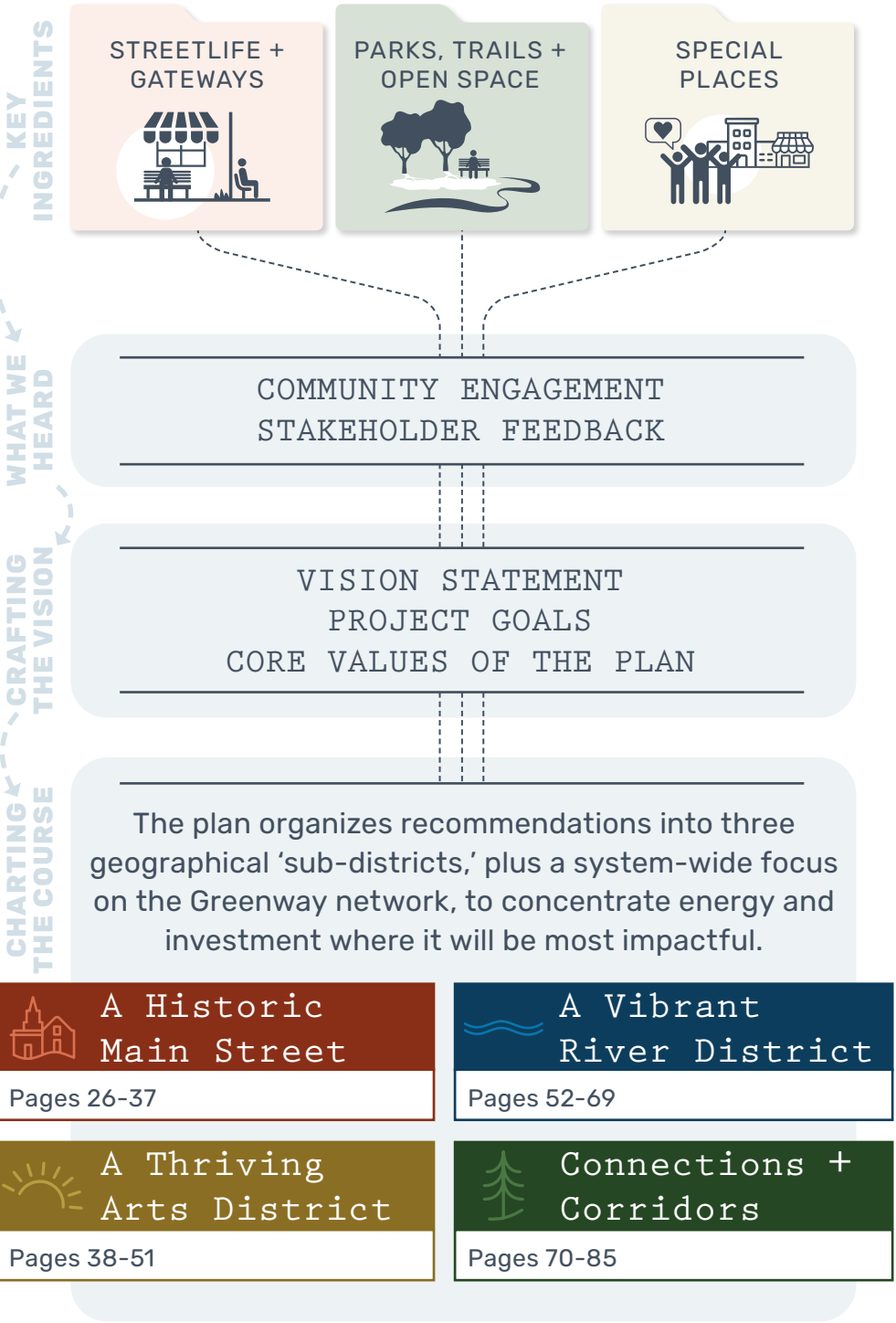
...the recommendations retain and bolster the architectural and community character of North Wilkesboro.

...there is a clear direction for opportunities to support the North Wilkesboro brand.

Special Places looks at the unique locations in town – both established and emerging – that hold cultural, historical, and economic value.

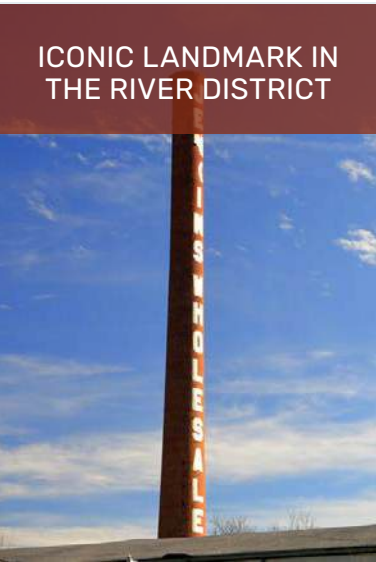
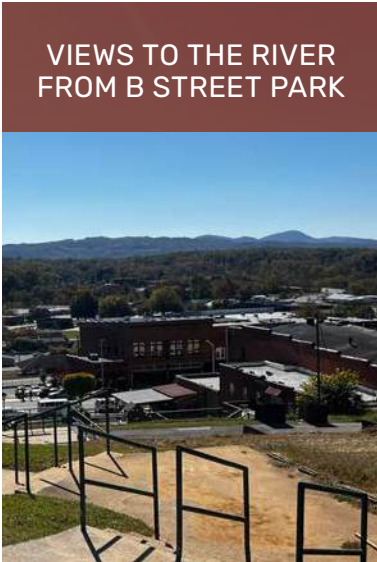
These three lenses provide a solid foundation for analyzing existing conditions, identifying strengths, and uncovering opportunities for improvement. Based on these insights, the plan offers targeted recommendations for three sub-districts: Downtown Main Street, the Arts District (part of Downtown), and a section of the River District. There are also systemwide recommendations for Greenway corridors and connections. The plan serves as a guide for both public and private stakeholders, serving as a reference for decision-making, investment, and long-term planning.

HOW IS THE PLAN STRUCTURED?





Streetlife + Gateways: Current Conditions



Streetlife + Gateways

ASSETS

- **A TOWN WITH A VIEW.** There are many opportunities to capitalize on the iconic landmarks and scenic vistas that overlook the River District.
- **GOOD BONES.** Downtown is walkable, with good depth to the street grid, and interesting historic architecture. There are many local businesses that invest in their community and it shows!

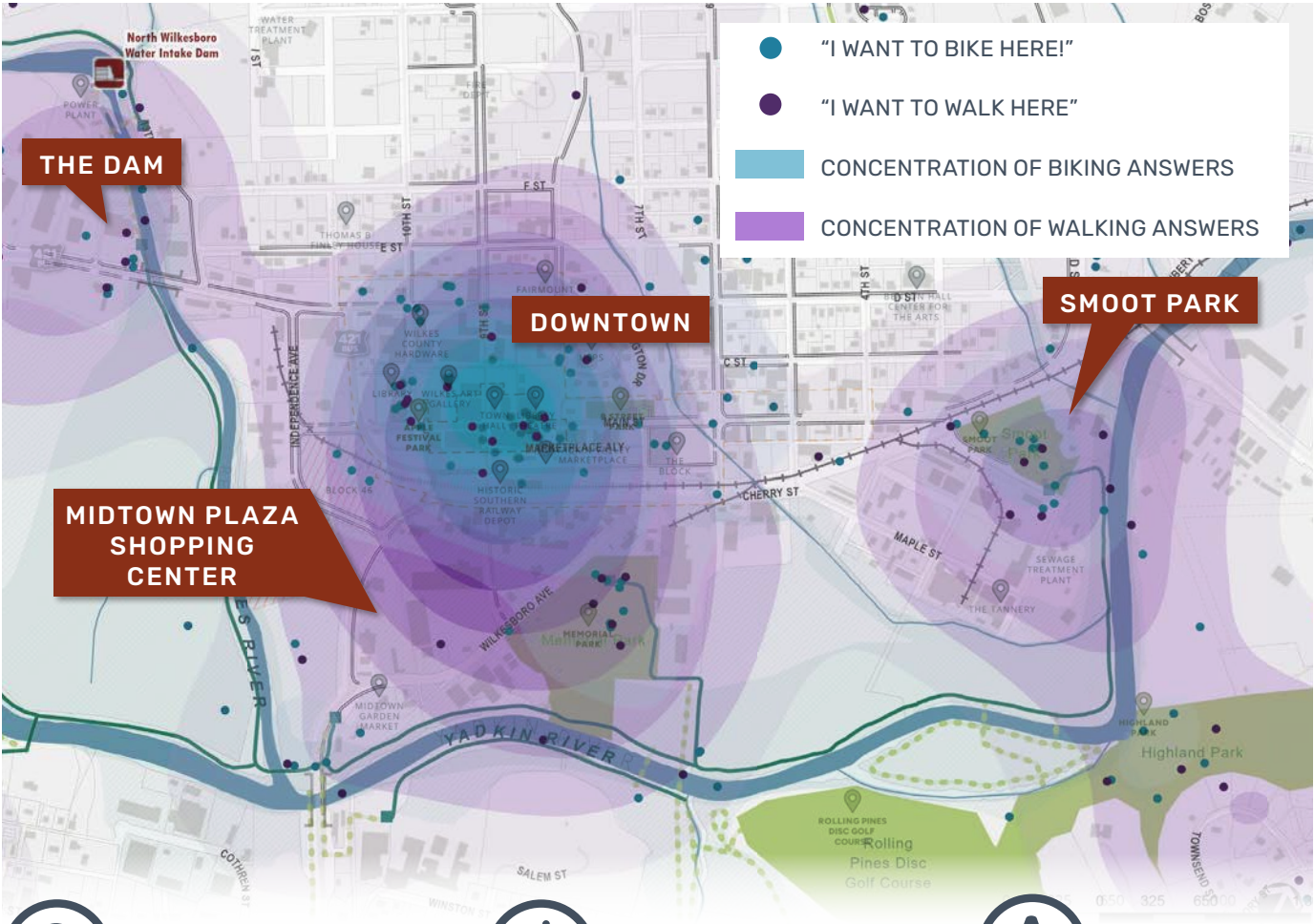
OBSERVATIONS

- **DISTRICTS WITHIN REACH.** The town needs more walkable and bikeable connections between Downtown, the River District, the Greenway, and Wilkesboro.
- **ROCK THE BLOCK.** Ground floor activation and housing in Downtown is lacking.
- **MAKE AN ENTRANCE.** There isn't a clear "sense of arrival" when you drive into Downtown North Wilkesboro.





Streetlife + Gateways: What We Heard



“Nowhere to go” is a major barrier for specific groups:

- » High among college students, singles, and couples without children
- » Younger respondents

Walking distance preferences are generally consistent:

- » Most household types are willing to walk 2.0-2.2 miles (40-45 minutes)
- » Multi-generational households are willing to walk the farthest (50 minutes, 2.5 miles)

Safety concerns disproportionately affect families and single parents with children:

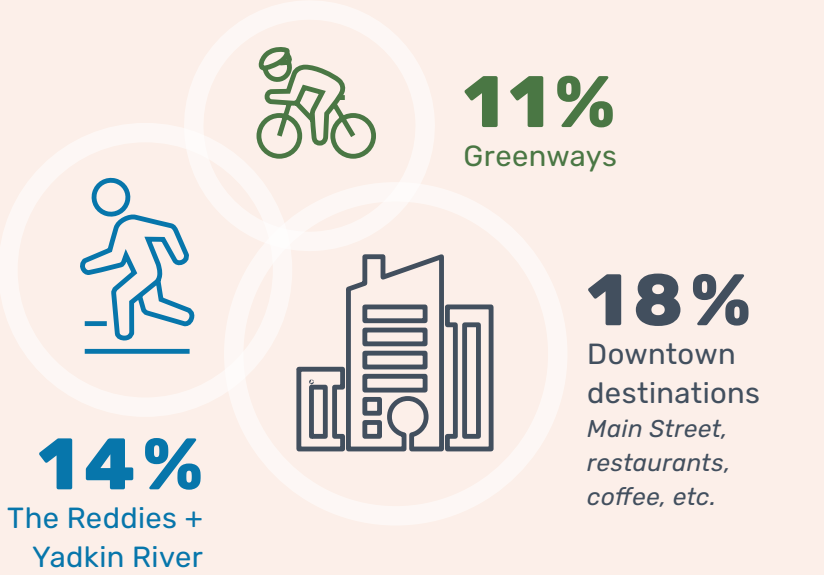
- » Single parents with young children report the highest rate of safety concerns (+33.6% above average)
- » Single parents with young children struggle most with uncomfortable crossings (41.7%)
- » All households with children report above-average safety concerns
- » Single empty nesters also report high safety concerns (52.4%)

Streetlife + Gateways

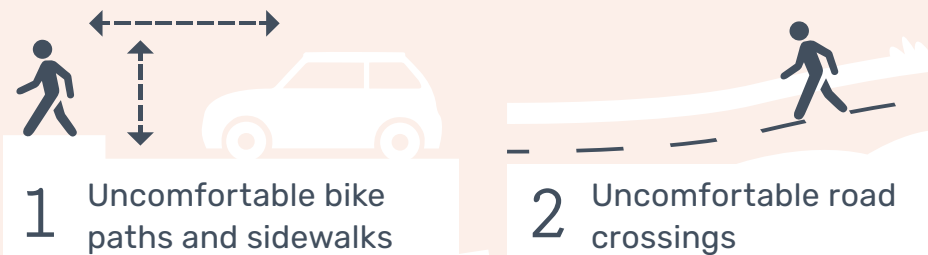
KEY FINDINGS

- CBD Loop is a significant barrier roadway that disconnects Downtown and River District; reducing this barrier is a priority
- Main Street’s character diminishes past The Block and feels less walkable than other parts of Downtown
- Greenways are the preferred routes for cyclists and walkers in town, indicating a desire for facilities that prioritize separation and experience, rather than “shortest route”

TOP 3 DESIRED WALKABLE DESTINATIONS

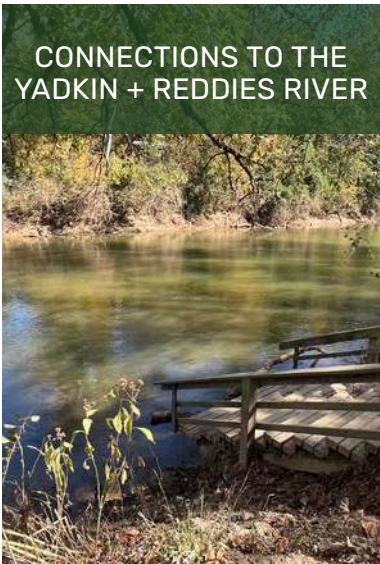
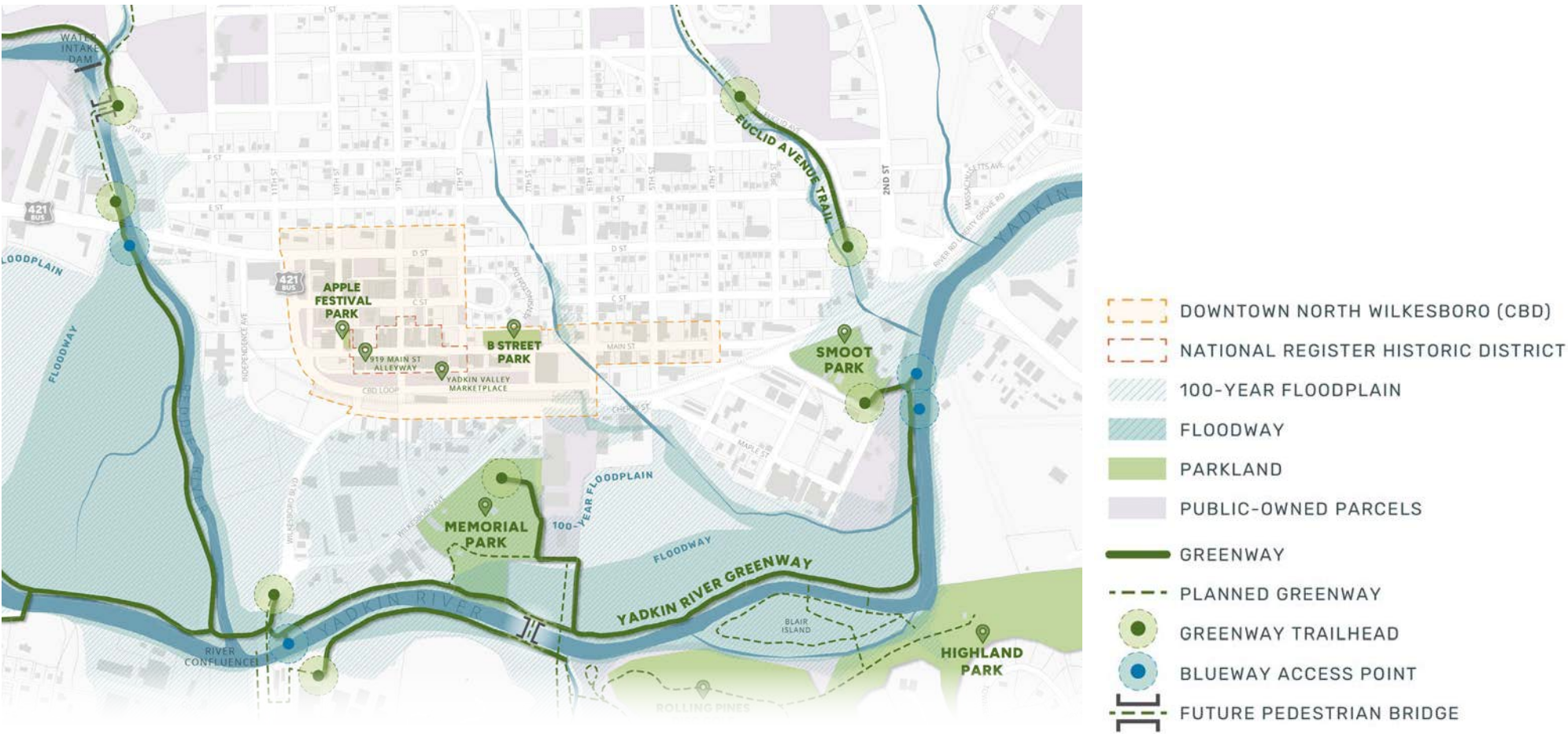


TOP 2 BARRIERS TO WALKING + BIKING IN NORTH WILKESBORO





Parks, Trails, + Open Space: Current Conditions



CONNECTIONS TO THE
YADKIN + REDDIES RIVER



UNDERACTIVE
PARK SPACES



EXTENSIVE TRAIL
SYSTEM



SMOOT PARK
RECONSTRUCTION
(ONGOING)

Parks, Trails + Open Space

ASSETS

- **MANY ASSETS ARE ALREADY IN PLACE.** North Wilkesboro is not lacking in supply of parks, recreation, trails, and open space in Downtown and the River District.
- **KEEPING IT GREEN.** The floodplain limits the intensity of development in River District and sets the stage for a network of open spaces that provide recreational opportunities and places for community, while also increasing flood storage capacity and flood resilience.

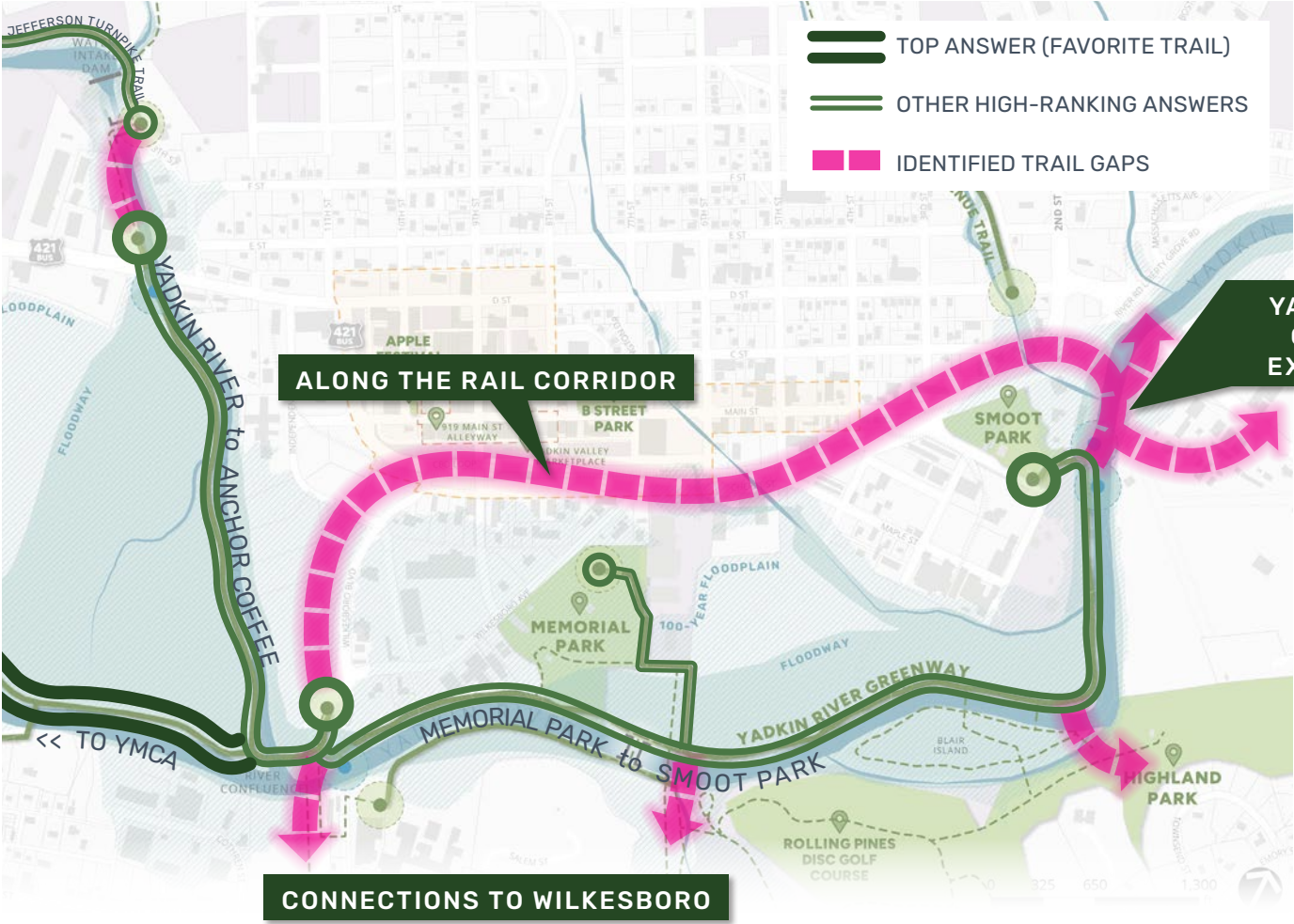
OBSERVATIONS

- **UNDERUTILIZED ASSETS.** Smaller park spaces that are not connected to the Greenway are less active on a daily basis.
- **UNTAPPED POTENTIAL.** The parks, trails, and open space assets in North Wilkesboro could better bolster and support the local outdoor economy to its fullest potential.
- **A RAIL CORRIDOR REVIVAL.** The railroad corridor is a key opportunity to create a North Wilkesboro trail loop.





Parks, Trails, + Open Space: What We Heard



31% OF RESPONDENTS SAID

THE YADKIN RIVER GREENWAY

[FROM REDDIES RIVER TO WEST PARK ROAD]

**WAS THEIR FAVORITE TRAIL
IN NORTH WILKESBORO.**

“The Reddies river section of the Greenway is the prettiest section. The beaches, the quietness, the rhododendron, and river make for a peaceful walking experience.”

Parks, Trails + Open Space

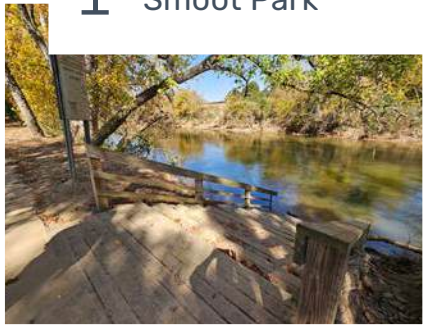
KEY FINDINGS

- Underutilized public spaces include:
 - » B Street Park
 - » Apple Festival Park
 - » Highland Park
- Opportunity to highlight town branding more intentionally in town parks and along the Greenway
- Opportunity to expand on the views and natural terracing of the community to provide unique experiences
- An additional direct connection to the Reddies River through the River District may help tie the two districts together and make the Greenway part of Downtown

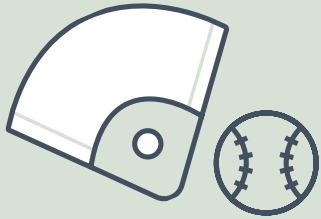
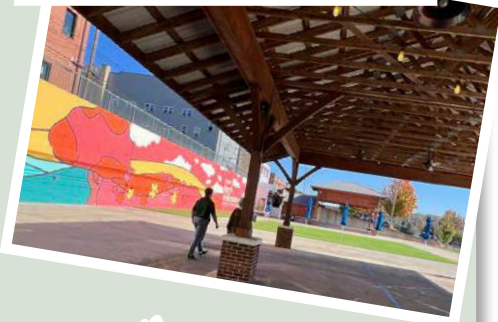
TOP 4 PARKS + OPEN SPACES



1 Smoot Park



2 Yadkin Valley Marketplace



3 Memorial Park



4 Cub Creek
(connects to Wilkesboro)





Special Places: Current Conditions



TOP SPECIAL PLACES
Identified by the public

- A. Power Plant
- B. The Tannery
- C. Blair Island
- D. Highland Park

OTHER SPECIAL PLACES
Identified by the public

- Connections to the Yadkin River
- Smoot Park
- Key City Antique Mall
- The Depot
- B Street Park
- The Block
- Memorial Park

HISTORIC STRUCTURE
TOWN LANDMARKS

Special Places

ASSETS

- **ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT.** The arts and local business community in North Wilkesboro is strong, led by passionate people with lots of ideas.
- **GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES.** There are many great development opportunities in North Wilkesboro and plenty of space to grow.

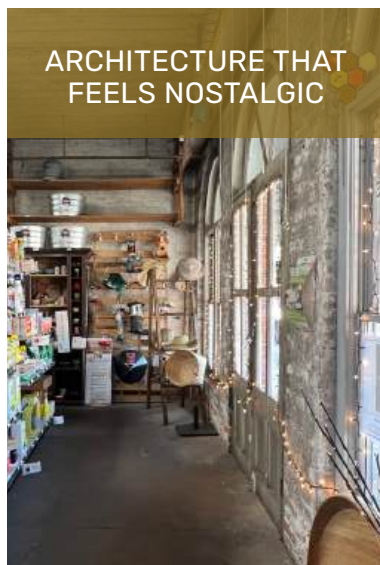


OBSERVATIONS

- **A TOWN IN ITS OWN RIGHT.** North Wilkesboro aspires to distinguish itself from, and complement, Wilkesboro as a “brand”.
- **ROOM TO LIVE.** Housing stock in Downtown is lacking, especially for working class residents.
- **MORE TO LOVE.** People love their local businesses, but also desire more variety in dining options and things to do. With new businesses relocating their offices to Downtown, the demand for restaurant variety is growing.



LOCAL ARTWORK IN
UNEXPECTED PLACES



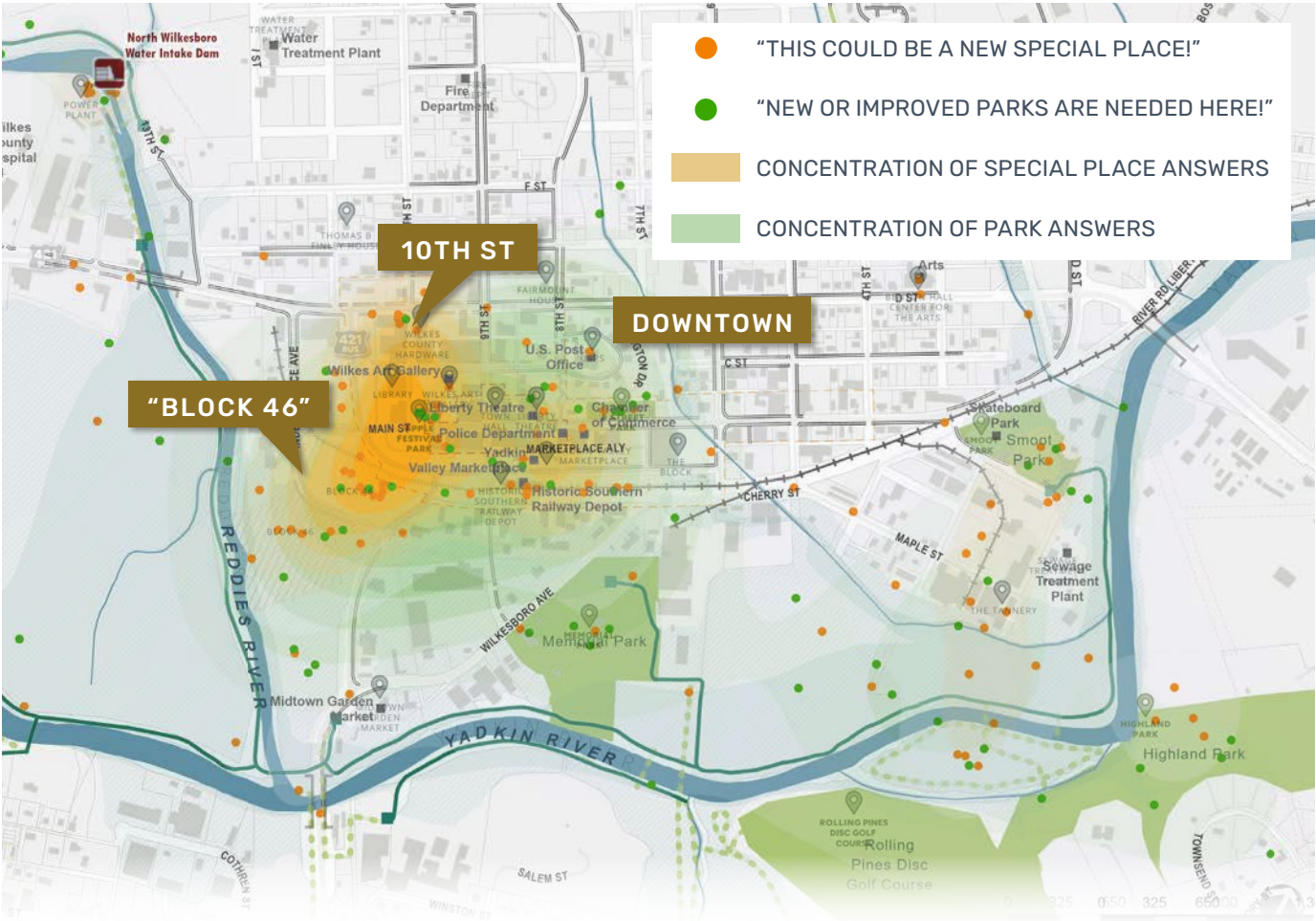
ARCHITECTURE THAT
FEELS NOSTALGIC



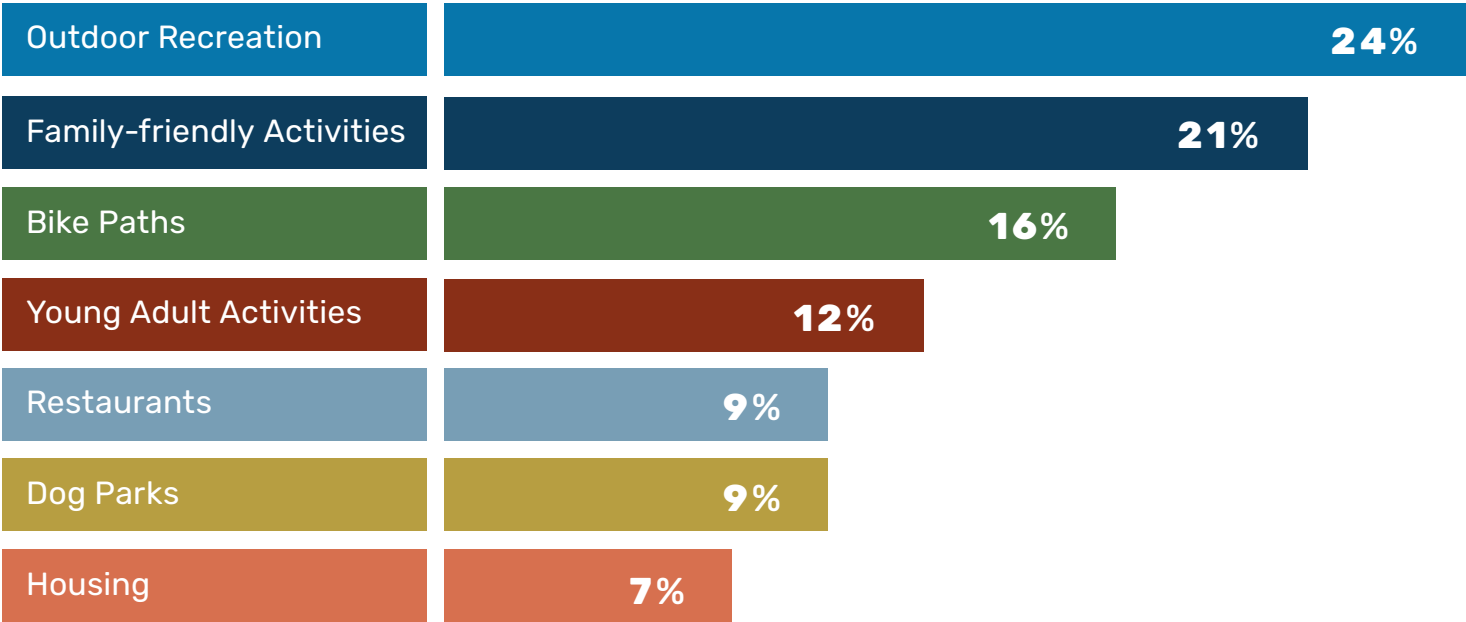
PLACES FOR THE
COMMUNITY TO GATHER



Special Places:
What We Heard



WHAT IS MISSING IN NORTH WILKESBORO?



“ Kayak rentals, art stores, family oriented activities or areas to bring more of our children home after college to grow [and make them] want to stay here. They have nothing to come back to.”

“ I love the river[s] and wish there were more places to enjoy [them].”

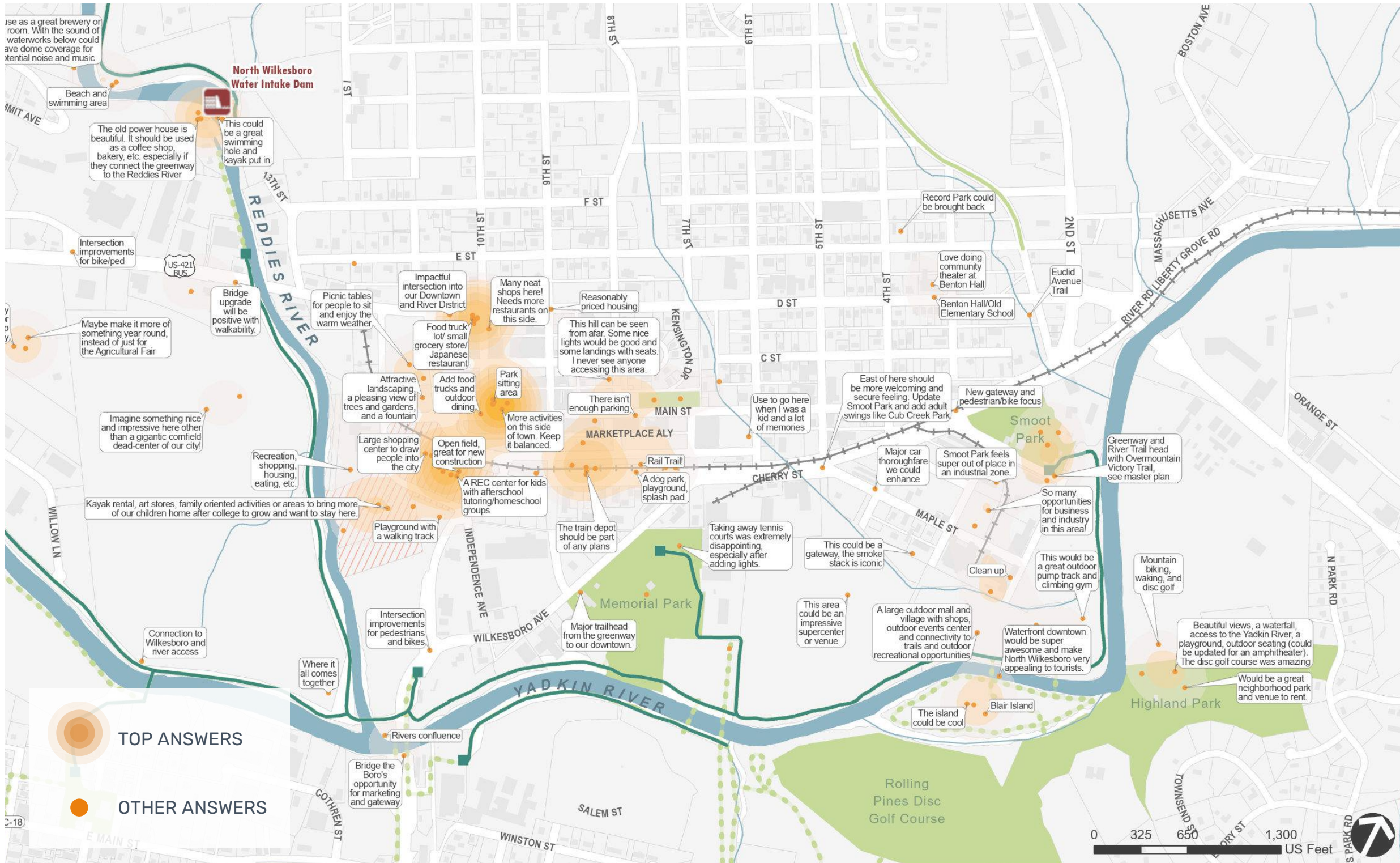
“ [I would like] to stay true to our friendly welcoming small town vibe but to give more places for young teens to have something to do.”

“ I want people to be pleasantly surprised when they come here. We have [so much] opportunity.”

“ I would love to see a push towards a family friendly walkable town that feels safe. I think North Wilkesboro could have a great artsy feel.”

“ I would like to see more restaurants, places to shop. It seems like Downtown has stores that no one goes in.”

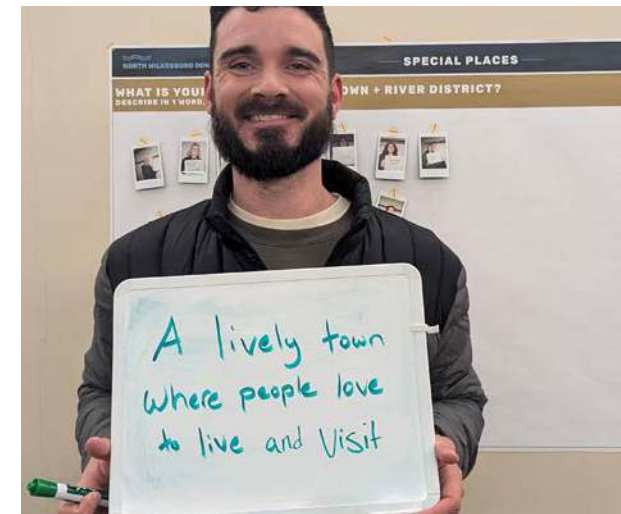
- SURVEY COMMENTS

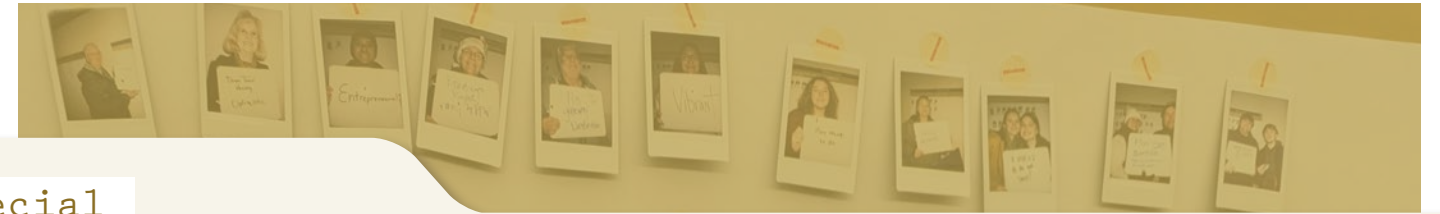
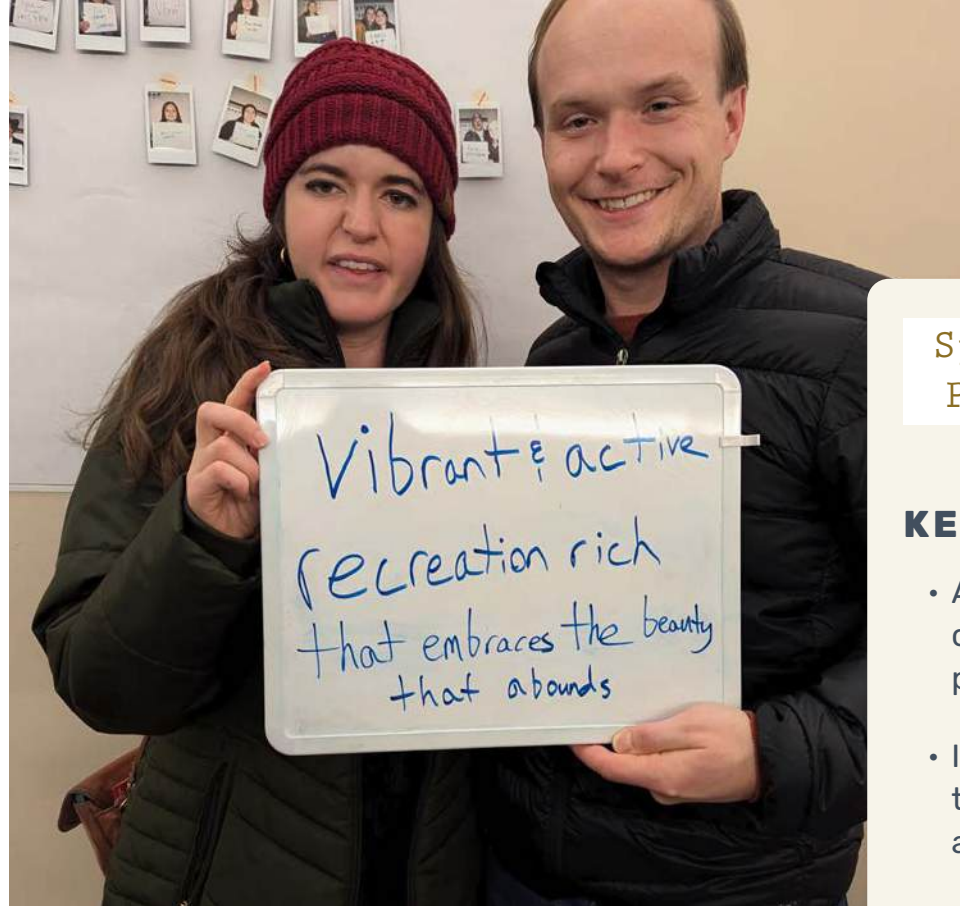


FRAMING THE FUTURE

Survey respondents and Open House attendees were asked to describe their vision for North Wilkesboro in a few words or a short phrase.

To see more responses from the public, see page 106.



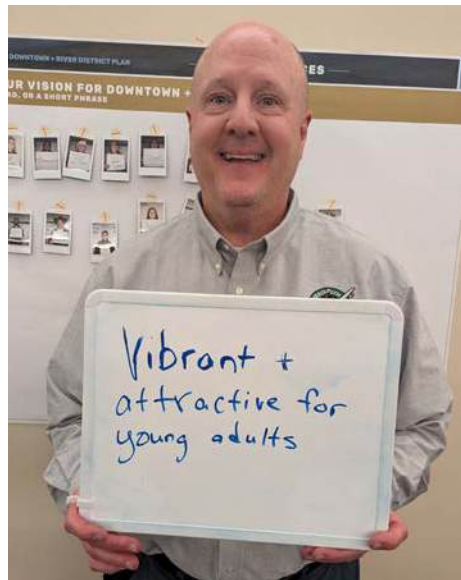


Special Places

KEY FINDINGS

- Amenitize public spaces to catalyze development (AKA provide things to do and see)
- Identify housing opportunities that will build a customer base and activate hot spots
- Leverage the Boros brand and key assets to build North Wilkesboro's reputation:
 - » Yadkin River Greenway
 - » The rivers
 - » Viewsheds and terracing opportunities
 - » The arts community
 - » Small town charm (Downtown has an ideal street grid and good storefront architecture)
 - » Located at the foothills of the Appalachians

HOW THE COMMUNITY DESCRIBES THEIR VISION FOR THE CITY



THE BIG IDEA

Vision Statement

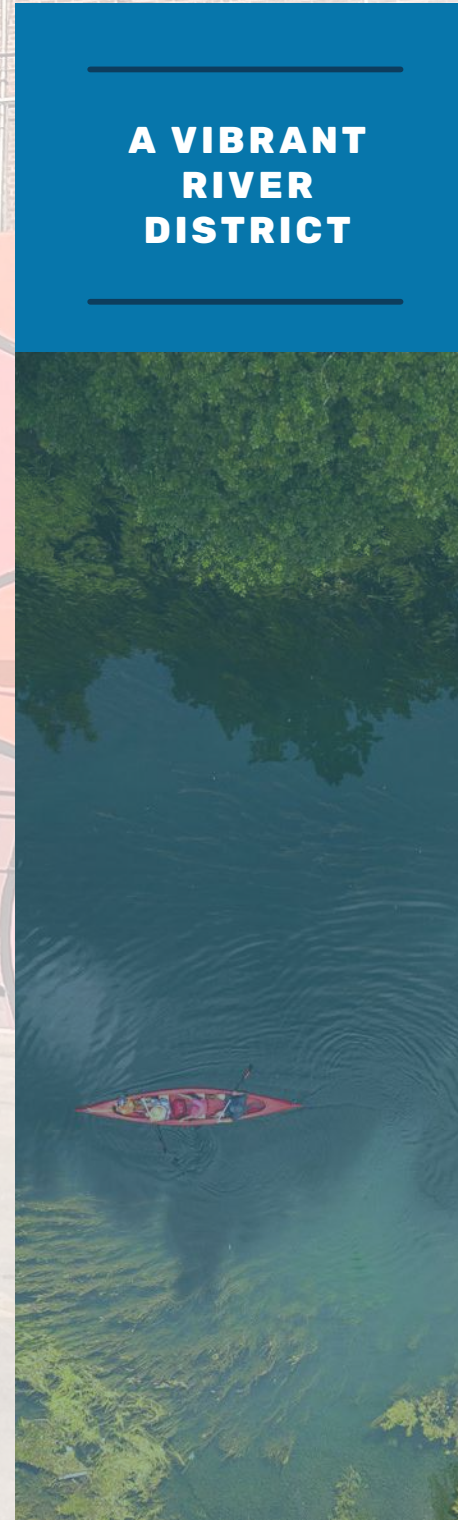
North Wilkesboro is a thriving and connected community where Downtown and the River District work together as a dynamic hub of activity, natural beauty, outdoor recreation, and strategic development that celebrates our local history and enhances quality of life for residents and visitors.



**A HISTORIC,
WALKABLE
DOWNTOWN**



**A VIBRANT
RIVER
DISTRICT**



**A CONNECTED
SYSTEM OF
PARKS, TRAILS
+ OPEN SPACE**



**A THRIVING
ARTS
DISTRICT**





COMMUNITY GOALS

North Wilkesboro will be successful because...

- ...Downtown is vibrant and activated by streetlife that supports businesses and downtown living.
- ...the River District and Downtown are blended and connected, providing more options for entertainment, recreation, work, and living.
- ...it is known for its beautiful open space, rivers, greenways, recreation, and natural assets.
- ...tourism has increased to contribute to the local economy.
- ... it is a community of choice that offers a safe and welcoming environment for families and young individuals to live, work, and play.
- ...the River District and Downtown provide a diverse array of housing options to meet the needs of the community.
- ...vacant land is strategically utilized to strengthen the experience and draw residents and visitors.
- ...it has seen an improved quality of life for its residents.

CORE VALUES OF THE PLAN

The Core Values to the right define how we aim to realize the ideals set forth in the Vision Statement using the recommendations within this document.

As projects and policies are implemented over time, the Core Values can be revisited to ensure that initiatives are in alignment with the community’s evolving needs and its hopes for the future.



The plan prioritizes development in 4 focus areas to compress the energy and gain momentum over time (rather than dispersed investments).



The plan improves access and connectivity between Downtown, River District, Wilkesboro, and the Yadkin River corridor.



The plan capitalizes on the town’s natural terracing and scenic views to create unique experiences for residents and visitors.



The plan identifies housing opportunities that will activate and help build a ‘customer base’ in Downtown and the River District.



The plan recognizes trails as a key opportunity to enhance regional draw in North Wilkesboro.



The plan makes recommendations that inspire design cohesion throughout the town.



As the plan is implemented over time, River District will feed activity in Downtown, rather than compete with it.

THE 3 SUB-DISTRICTS

Downtown is the heart of North Wilkesboro – a walkable center that reflects the town’s history while embracing new energy and ideas. This district is composed of two distinct but connected sub-districts:

Main Street – the town’s traditional commercial and civic spine. With its historic buildings, active storefronts, and community institutions, it remains a central gathering place for residents and visitors

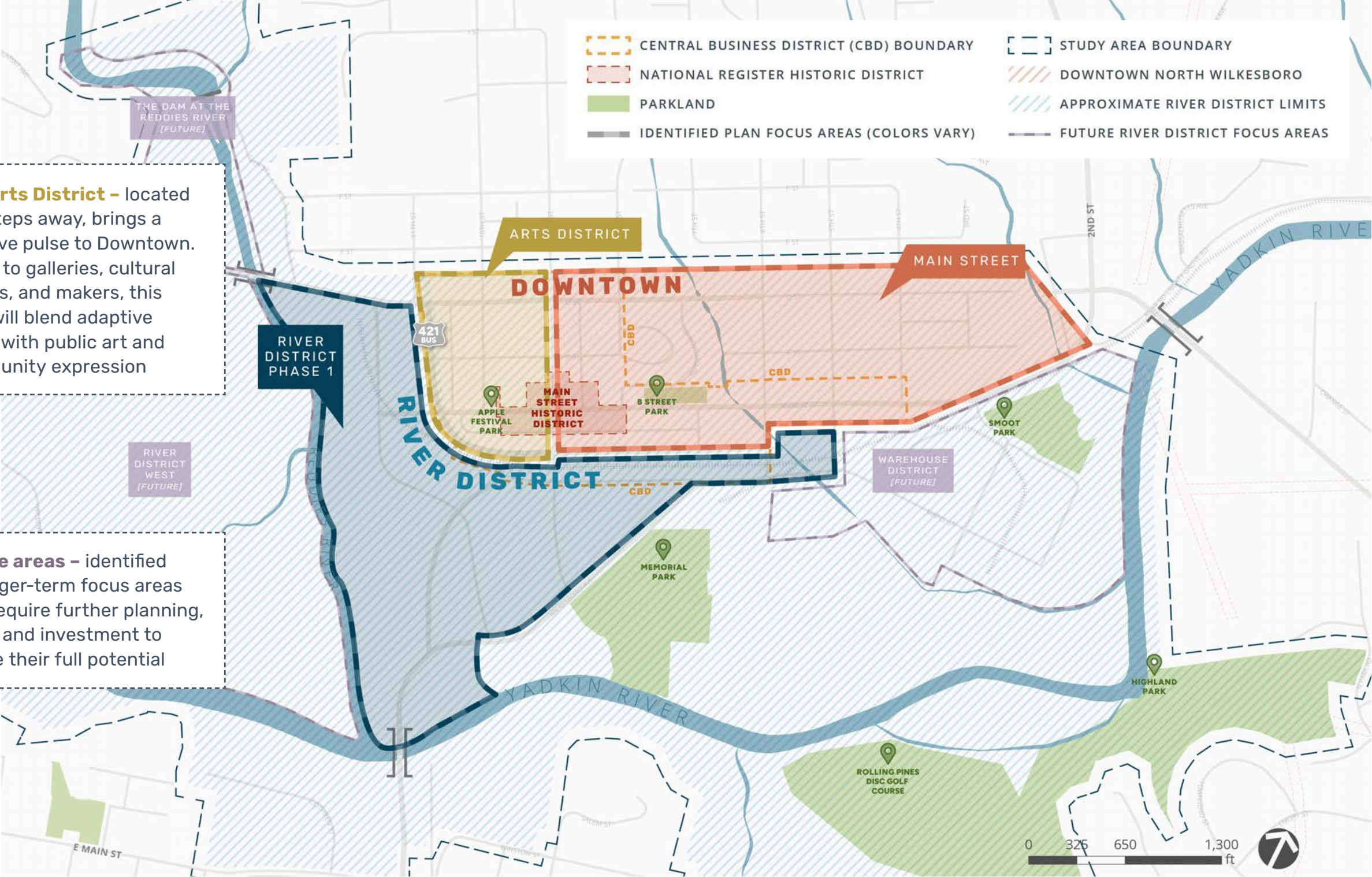
The Arts District – located just steps away, brings a creative pulse to Downtown. Home to galleries, cultural spaces, and makers, this area will blend adaptive reuse with public art and community expression

The **River District** is a larger, former industrial area, with multiple sub-districts targeted for private redevelopment, recreation, and infill:

River District Phase 1 – mostly undeveloped with the greatest potential to create a direct connection to Downtown

Purple areas – identified as longer-term focus areas that require further planning, input, and investment to realize their full potential

The three sub-districts have projects, programs, and policies proposed in this plan that build on existing strengths to promote a mix of uses, improve access, and encourage community vibrancy.





PHASE 1 PROJECTS: THE RIVERFRONT CONFLUENCE

Where Vision, Nature, + Community Meet

At the center of North Wilkesboro’s three sub-districts lies the Riverfront Confluence; a place where beloved community ideas align with real opportunities to give shape to a River District that reflects the town’s identity and future. This plan identifies this central area as a priority in order to build on what residents value most, partnering with landowners and developers to bring a shared vision to life.

The Confluence is where the charm of the historic downtown and the creative pulse of the Arts District flow naturally into the River District, reimagined as the town’s riverside playground.

For more information about the six projects that make up the Riverfront Confluence, please refer to their project pages.



D THE ANCHOR: HISTORIC DEPOT

With its visibility and legacy, the Depot can be reimagined as a vibrant community space, whether as a café, gallery, or gathering spot, bridging Downtown and the River District and sparking new energy in both. *See page 67.*

E MAIN STREET

A THE SOUL: RAIL TRAIL LINEAR PARK

Extending from the Depot, the rail corridor offers a bold opportunity to create a continuous loop and linear park that draws regional Greenway users into the heart of town and becomes a signature element for future generations of residents and visitors alike. *See page 76.*

B THE ENGINE: CHERRY STREET

This corridor has human-scale and intact buildings, perfectly positioned for small-scale infill (think trail-oriented retail, cafés, and local businesses) that supports recreation and activates River District as an extension of Downtown for North Wilkesboro’s growing outdoor economy. *See page 62.*

C CBD LOOP

F BLOCK 46 / THE TRIBUTARY





Section Two

DOWNTOWN: MAIN STREET



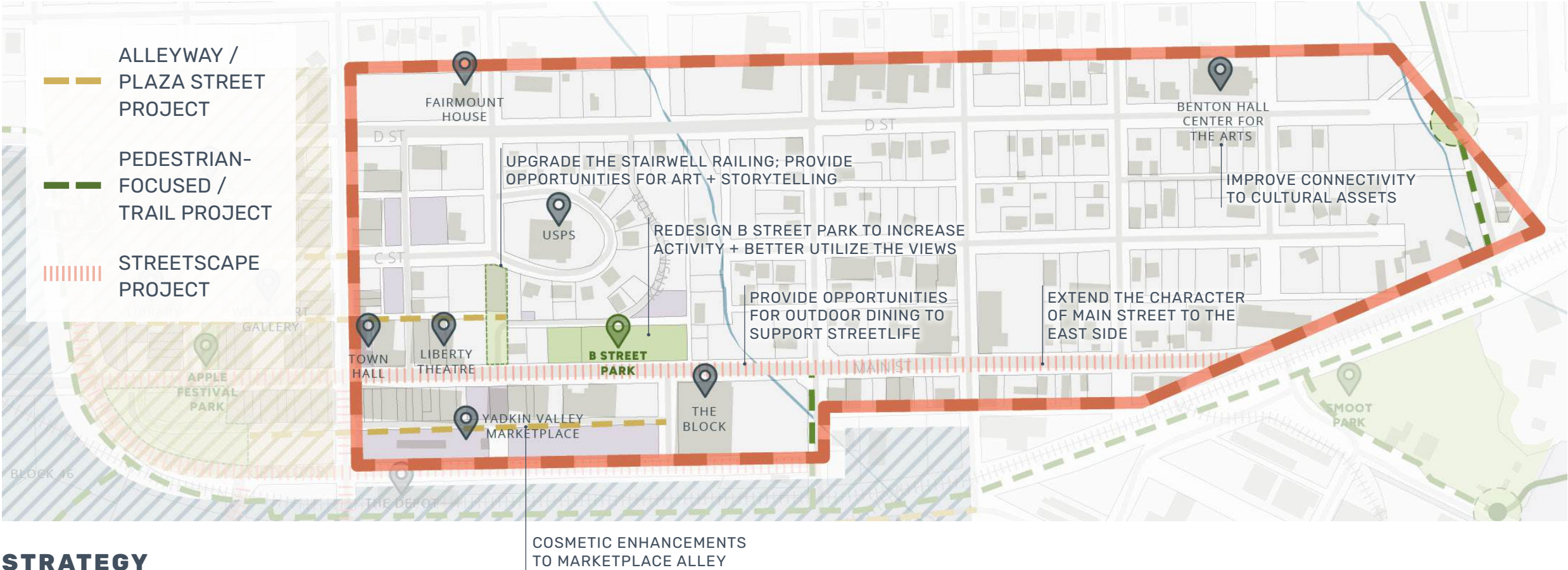
*Recommendations to preserve character,
activate ground floors, support local business,
and reestablish the Main Street corridor as the
economic hub of North Wilkesboro*

OVERVIEW

Familiar Places, New Potential

Unlike many North Carolina towns that create new “town centers” to generate development interest, Main Street is fortunate to have many assets already in place, including historic architecture with local shops, an abundance of park spaces, and a connected street grid.

Investments that preserve Main Street as the heart of commerce and social life will foster vibrant and authentic streetlife in a way that dispersed development cannot replicate.



KEY CHALLENGES

- » The heart of Downtown is situated on a steep hillside, which increases the perceived distance between destinations and makes the area feel less walkable.
- » The Main Street character fades east of 6th Street, leaving that portion of Downtown underutilized and less active.

STRATEGY

Strategic investments in parks, public spaces, and streetscapes – combined with initiatives like wayfinding, public art, and outdoor dining – will promote design cohesion and make Main Street feel **more accessible and integrated with the topography**.

The following projects will help attract the right development and more families, **build value**, and maximize the benefits of having a walkable and dynamic downtown hub:

Streetlife
+ Gateways

- Main Street
- Complementary Pedestrian and Bicycle Connections
- Parking Utilization Study
- Downtown Gateways

Parks, Trails
+ Open Space

- B Street Park Redesign

Special
Places

- Marketplace Alley



Main Street:
Existing Conditions

EAST SIDE



WEST SIDE



MAIN STREET

UNIFYING MAIN STREET

Main Street represents the heart of North Wilkesboro's Downtown, and revitalizing this corridor is a strategic opportunity to spark a new chapter for the area. Enhancing its walkability and visual appeal will not only unify the downtown experience but also build early momentum for future, larger-scale investments in adjacent areas like the River District.

West Main Street already has a relatively walkable, pedestrian-friendly environment (targeted investment can elevate it further), while strategic upgrades to East Main Street will bring the entire corridor up to a cohesive standard. These improvements range from establishing streetscape design guidelines and beautification efforts to identifying infill development sites and activating public spaces. The approach includes both high-impact, low-cost initiatives, such as façade enhancements and outdoor dining incentives, and long-term strategies, such as road diets, unified lighting and signage, and planting large street trees. By **treating Main Street as a continuous and dynamic public space**, these efforts aim to support its transformation into a vibrant, inviting corridor.

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

“To have sufficient impact to both locals and visitors these enhancements must extend from 6th all the way to Chestnut Street.”

“Great idea, I have found that restaurants don't have a lot of patio options.”

“[We] need to be careful with the balance of parking availability and the parklets not eating up too much of that space.”

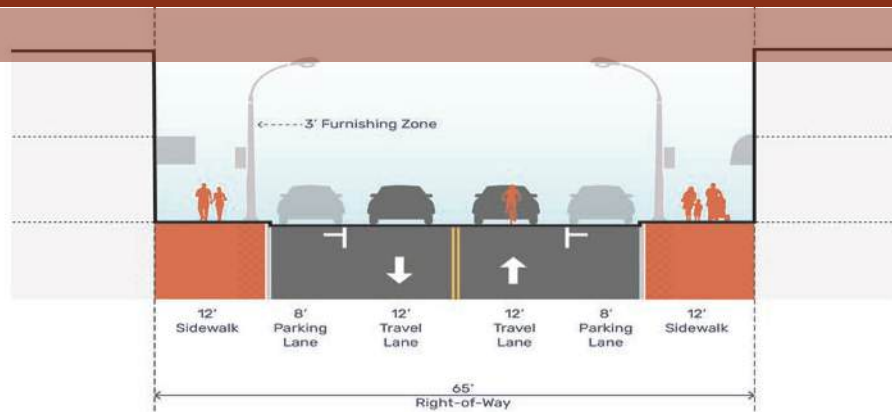


Adding visual interest to Main Street with small-scale, artful features can celebrate local culture and invite whimsical interactions into Downtown. **Greenville, SC's** “Mice on Main” scavenger hunt program is an example of this.



Outdoor dining “parklets” create additional active, people-centered places in Downtown that directly support local businesses and encourage more foot traffic.





EXISTING CONDITIONS

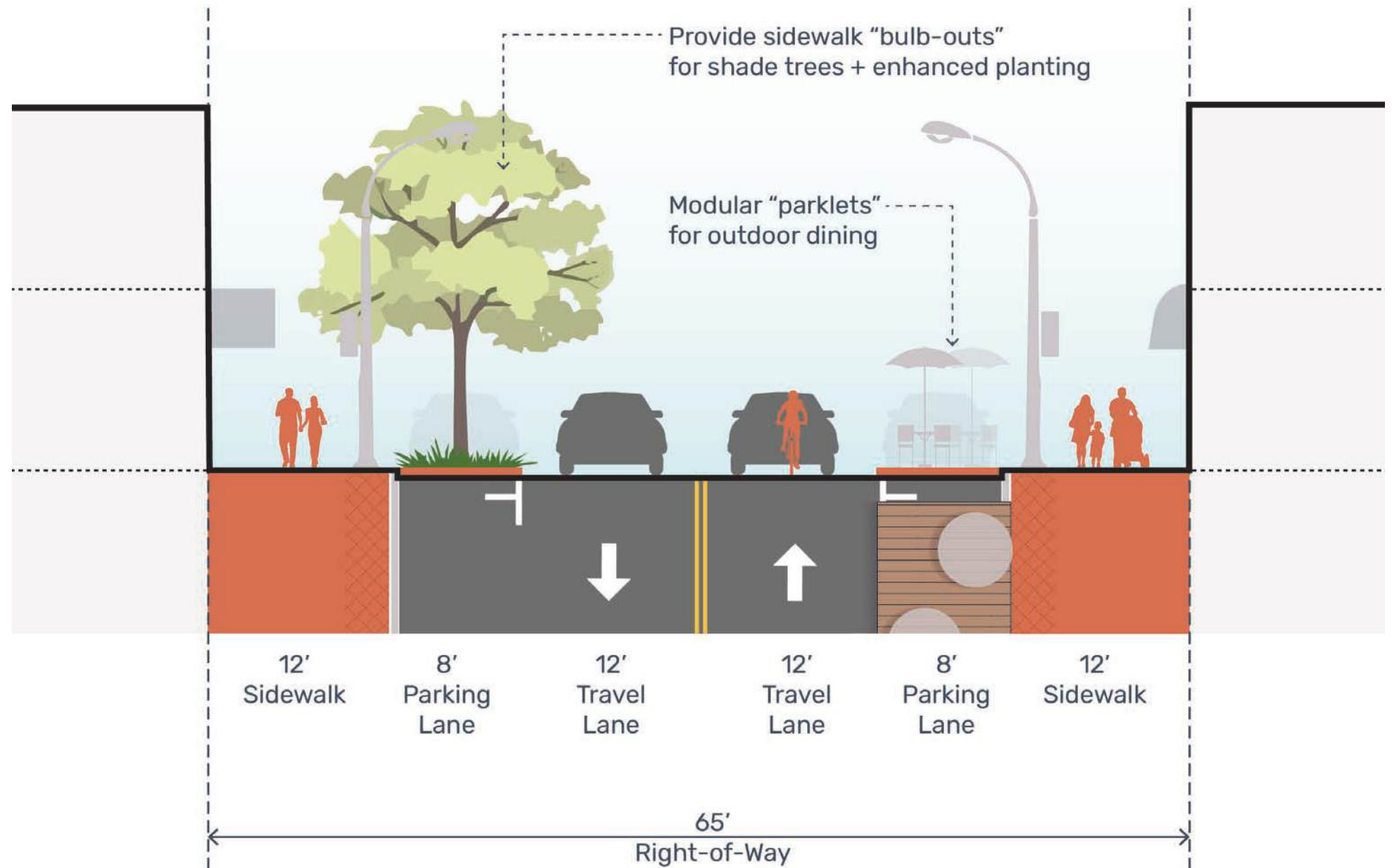
KEY FEATURES

- » Repurpose some on-street and lot parking
- » Establish a more consistent rhythm of trees along the sidewalk to expand the shade canopy
- » Access management

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 1.1. Foster a vibrant and authentic streetscape for Main Street – from the CBD Loop to Smoot Park.

- Develop and adopt cohesive streetscape design guidelines.
- Enhance East Main with widened sidewalks, street trees, landscape strips, and curb extensions.
- Conduct a crosswalk study along Main Street to identify additional crossing opportunities and safety improvements.
- Incentivize private infill development to continue the “Main Street” experience east of 6th Street.
- Improve West Main with pedestrian crossings, consistent furnishings, and visual continuity.
- Activate storefronts and façades through outdoor dining, gardens, and placemaking.



PROPOSED (EAST SIDE)

Please note: The improvements identified on this map are conceptual and intended for planning purposes only. All proposed facilities require further review and coordination with the appropriate regulatory agencies to determine FHWA-approved facility types, dimensions, and feasibility, including right-of-way (ROW).

Obj. 1.2. Create complementary pedestrian and bicycle connections to cultural assets within and outside of Downtown.

-



PARKING UTILIZATION STUDY

A perceived lack of convenient or accessible parking in Downtown was a consistent theme in both phases of community engagement. While some of these concerns may stem from how parking is distributed or used (rather than a true shortage) **a comprehensive parking utilization study is needed to better understand current conditions.** This effort will help determine whether there is adequate parking supply, whether it's located in the right places, and what strategies could improve access, turnover, and efficiency (such as better signage, time limits, or walkability enhancements).

The following actions will help North Wilkesboro address these questions and ensure parking supports a vibrant, accessible downtown.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 1.3. Develop a culture of shared parking and accessibility.

- Conduct a parking and access study for downtown, including ADA gaps and long-term needs.
- Create a communications plan for public parking locations and walkability improvements.
- Promote turnover of prime parking spaces and long-term parking off Main Street.



On-street parking is available throughout most Downtown streets. While signage on Main, 10th, 9th, and C Street indicate a 2-hour limit from 8am-6 pm, this restriction is not enforced. This abundance of free and unregulated parking suggests an opportunity to reassess parking management strategies to support business turnover and encourage walkability.



In addition, Downtown includes eight public surface parking lots (C Street lots, D Street lot, CBD Lots #1-5, and Marketplace Alley). All of these are free and currently have no time restrictions or active management.



DOWNTOWN GATEWAYS

The primary gateways within Downtown (and the future Arts District) bookend Main Street, and create a strong visual cue that drivers are entering a more walkable, slow-speed area. The secondary and tertiary gateways are located at key decision points, oriented towards walkers and bikers navigating to nearby destinations on-foot or -bike.

See page 49 for more information about the Arts District gateways.



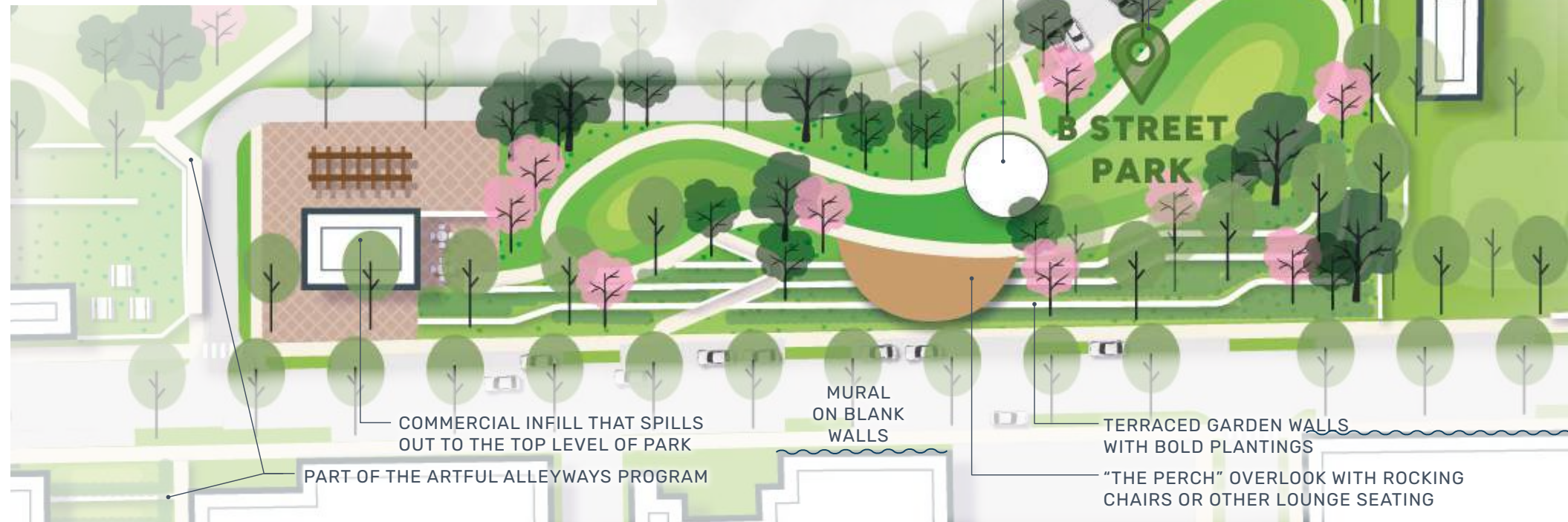
ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 1.4. Improve gateways and identity along key corridors.

- Implement primary gateways with large signage and lighting at regional arrival points.
- Add secondary gateway treatments at key intersections and local routes into downtown.
- Install tertiary gateway features for pedestrians, such as maps, signage, art, and landscape treatments.

B STREET PARK REDESIGN

The proposed improvements to B Street Park will establish it as a signature destination Downtown that celebrates the unique topography and scenic views with a signature overlook (“The Perch”) and gathering space at the top. These upgrades improve accessibility and support adjacent development that will integrate with the multi-level park.



WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

“This is one of the more underutilized parks... and I think a rebrand and upfit will benefit the site immensely.”

“I love thinking vertically and the flower gardens remind of Blowing Rock!!! And thanks for thinking of the parking spaces.”

“As long as it doesn’t slide down, I’m all for it.”

KEY FEATURES

- » Showy garden terraces stabilize the slope and create a flatter open lawn at the top
- » Community front porch overhangs the sidewalk to showcase views down to the river
- » Improve park accessibility with new parking and upgraded paths
- » Opportunity for commercial infill with a 2nd floor patio that integrates with the park

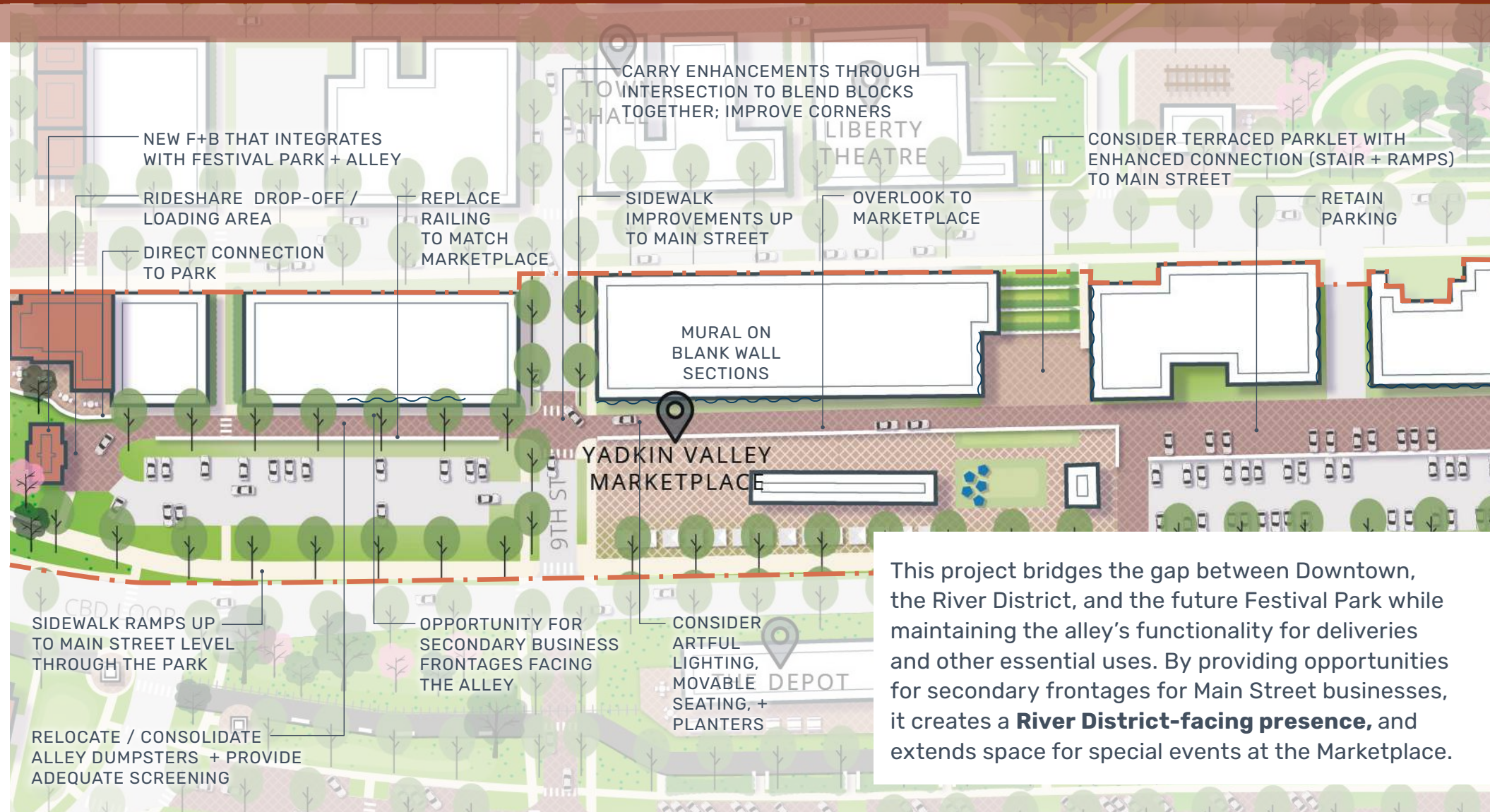
ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 1.5. Improve B Street Park to better support community gathering and public life.

- a. Advance concept design and visioning.
- b. Develop a funding strategy that leverages funding opportunities to stabilize the steep slope.
- c. Encourage activation of park edges.



MARKETPLACE ALLEY



This project bridges the gap between Downtown, the River District, and the future Festival Park while maintaining the alley's functionality for deliveries and other essential uses. By providing opportunities for secondary frontages for Main Street businesses, it creates a **River District-facing presence**, and extends space for special events at the Marketplace.

INTRODUCE A NEW DOWNTOWN EDGE THAT FACES THE RIVER DISTRICT

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

“There needs to be some visual cleanup for all buildings in this area as many look dilapidated.”

KEY FEATURES

- » Protects functionality of the alleyway for deliveries and other uses, but dresses up the corridor for special events
- » Creates opportunities for Main Street businesses to have secondary frontages and entry points from Marketplace Alley

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 1.6. Activate Marketplace Alley with low-cost measures to reclaim the corridor for people and generate excitement for future improvements.

- Temporary activation and pop-ups.
- Coordinate with property and business owners to define the vision and program.
- Seek opportunities and partnerships with local groups to regularly activate the alley as an extension of Yadkin Valley Marketplace.



Marketplace Alley:
Existing Conditions



PROVIDE ACTIVE,
SECONDARY FRONTAGES



PROVIDE OVERLOOKS +
PLACES FOR PEOPLE



FORMALIZE
PARKING AREAS



STREAMLINE + CONCEAL
“BACK-OF-HOUSE” FUNCTIONS



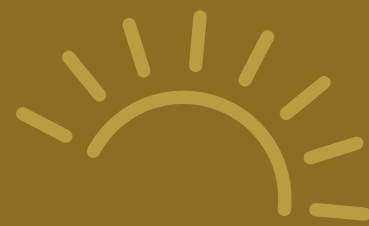
COSMETIC ENHANCEMENTS
THAT BEAUTIFY THE ALLEY



N. WILKESBORO

ARTS
DISTRICT





Section Three

DOWNTOWN: ARTS DISTRICT



Ideas and initiatives to support the local art scene and establish a distinct identity for North Wilkesboro's emerging arts community



OVERVIEW

A Home for the Arts in Downtown

North Wilkesboro’s creative spirit is already taking root along 10th Street – in its historic buildings, passionate local artists, and the growing energy around public art and cultural events.

This chapter explores ideas and initiatives that will nurture the emerging arts scene while helping to establish a clear and authentic identity for Downtown as a place that values creativity, expression, and community.

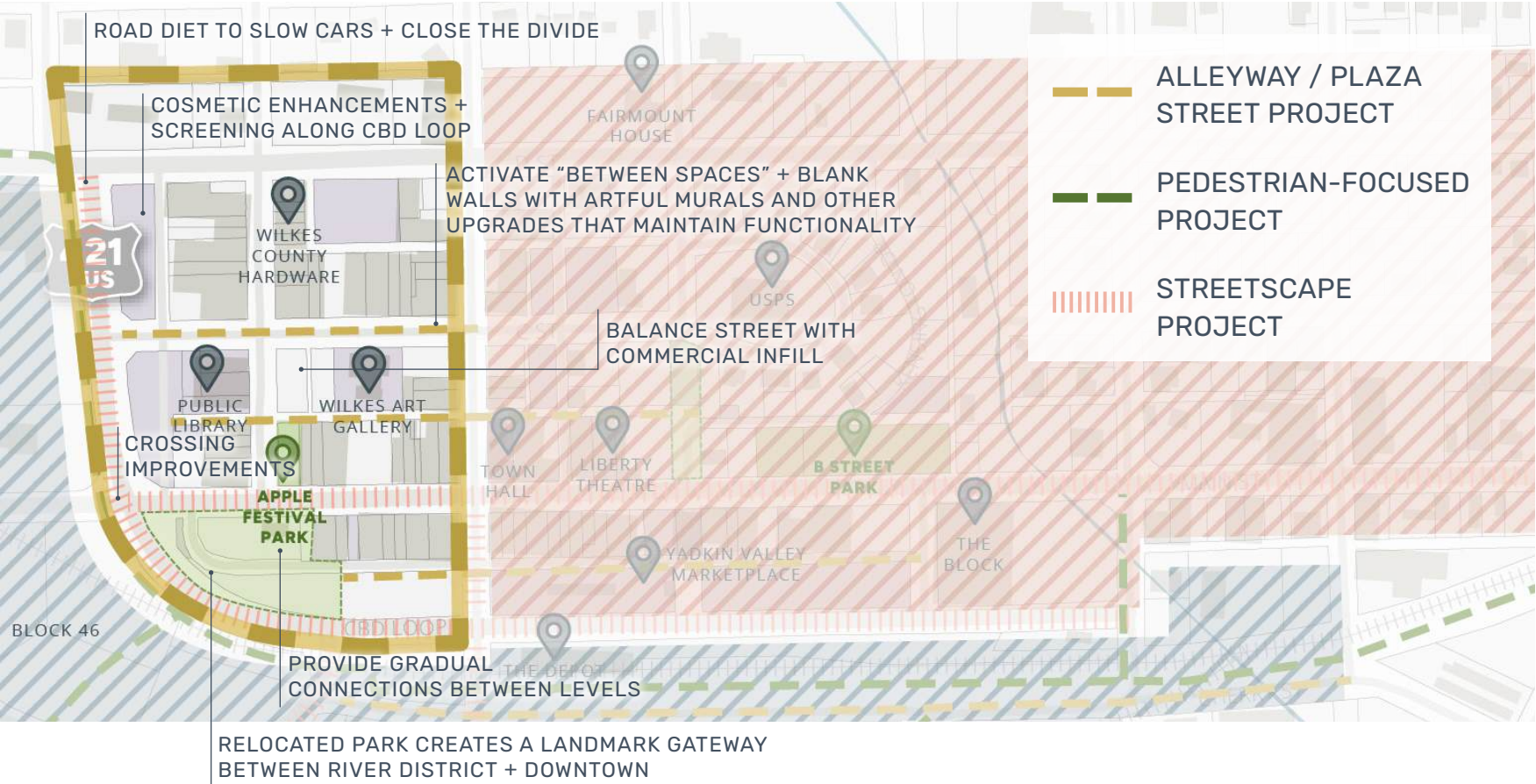
KEY CHALLENGES

- » 10th Street sees less daily activity due to limited commercial interest in this area, resulting in fewer businesses, employees, and customers.
- » Apple Festival Park, while centrally located, is small and under-activated, lacking the amenities needed to serve as a true community gathering space. These conditions contribute to a quieter, less busy corridor.
- » CBD Loop is a significant barrier between Downtown and River District. This corner has been identified as a key opportunity to bridge the gap.

STRATEGY

Focus on **low-cost, high-impact projects** – such as public art and public space enhancements – to build the town’s emerging cultural identity and bring more energy to this part of Downtown. The most ambitious of these projects involves relocating Apple Festival Park to a more prominent location, to serve as a landmark gateway that overlooks both Downtown and the River District. These efforts should be shaped in partnership with local artists, businesses, and community members to ensure authenticity and shared ownership.

The following projects aim to attract Downtown-friendly development, draw more families and visitors, and elevate the district’s role as an accessible, cultural destination within Downtown:



Streetlife
+ Gateways

- 10th Street
- CBD Loop
- US-421
- Arts District Gateways

Parks, Trails
+ Open Space

- Festival Park

Special
Places

- Establishing the District (identity + placemaking)
- Artful Alleyways (program)



10th Street:
Existing Conditions



2ND FLOOR HOUSING
OPPORTUNITIES



UPGRADE ALLEYWAY TO
WILKES ART GALLERY



COMMERCIAL INFILL
(RELOCATE PARK SPACE)

ESTABLISHING THE SUB-DISTRICT

The proposed Arts District is envisioned as a new cultural destination within Downtown, encompassing the Wilkes Art Gallery, Ward Nichols Way, the Wilkes County Public Library and the 10th Street corridor. While this sub-district does not currently exist in a formalized sense, it is being proposed to **recognize and build upon the town's strong appreciation for the arts and to activate an area where many cultural assets are located but pedestrian activity remains limited.** By establishing a defined boundary with a clear identity, the town can better support cultural programming, attract visitors, and encourage arts-based business growth in a concentrated area.

The first step will be defining the district's specific physical boundaries and identity through a collaborative process that engages artists, community members, and local leaders. By building a shared vision rooted in the region's artistic traditions (such as Appalachian heritage, pottery, fine and folk art, music, theater, and craft) the district can evolve into a vibrant hub that lays the groundwork for attracting more cultural and arts events (like MerleFest) to the community.

To ensure long-term success, a strategic plan should be developed to guide investments in public space, programming, and business development. Partnerships with the Cultural Arts Council for Wilkes and related institutions like the Public Library will be critical. A public-private committee can oversee artist selection, content standards, and coordination with property owners, supported by formal agreements that secure public access to artwork. The purpose of the committee will be to bolster the work the Wilkes Art Gallery and Cultural Arts Council is already doing to support ongoing cultural development in North Wilkesboro's public realm.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 2.1. Establish a clear identity and vision for the North Wilkesboro Arts District.

- Define the official boundaries and character of the district through community input, artist engagement, and a shared cultural vision.
- Develop a strategic plan with clear goals for the budget, usage of public space, business mix, art locations, and cultural programming.
- Pursue state and national funding for cultural development in the public realm.



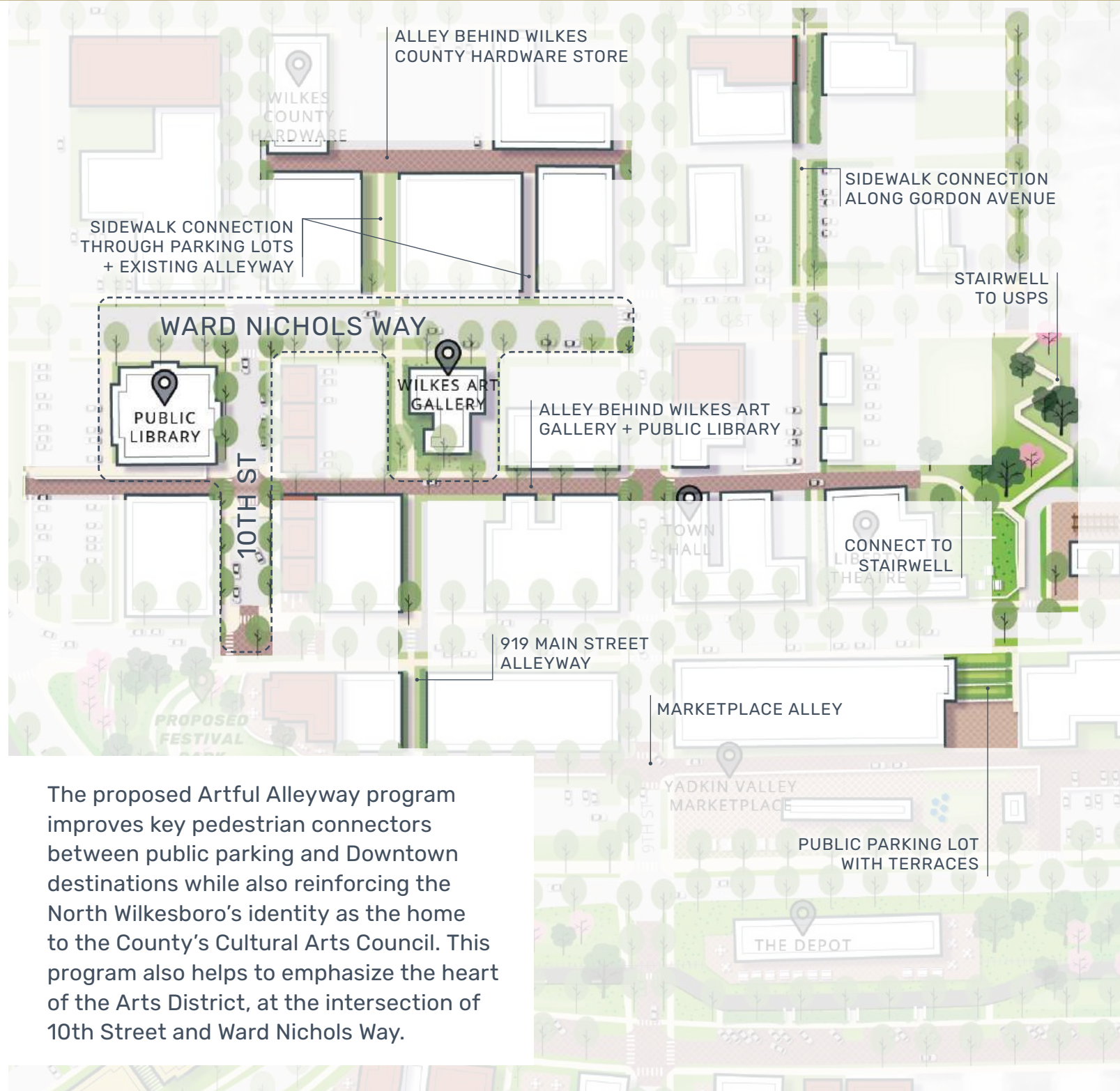
Rotating or temporary art in unexpected places, such as storefront windows, offers a low-cost, low-barrier way for non-art-related businesses to engage with and contribute to the vibrancy of the Arts District.



Wailuku, HI is a strong example of a small community leveraging a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant to launch a creative placemaking program and committee called SMALL TOWN*BIG ART. This initiative served as Phase 1 of a three-phase plan to establish an Arts District in Wailuku, using arts, local history, and culture as a catalyst for economic development and community identity.



ARTFUL ALLEYWAYS



The proposed Artful Alleyway program improves key pedestrian connectors between public parking and Downtown destinations while also reinforcing the North Wilkesboro's identity as the home to the County's Cultural Arts Council. This program also helps to emphasize the heart of the Arts District, at the intersection of 10th Street and Ward Nichols Way.

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

"I like this! I'd love to maintain a sort of design aesthetic that matches the rest of the town, but I think this could be incredible!"

"Please try and keep it local - local artists, local high school artists, etc!"

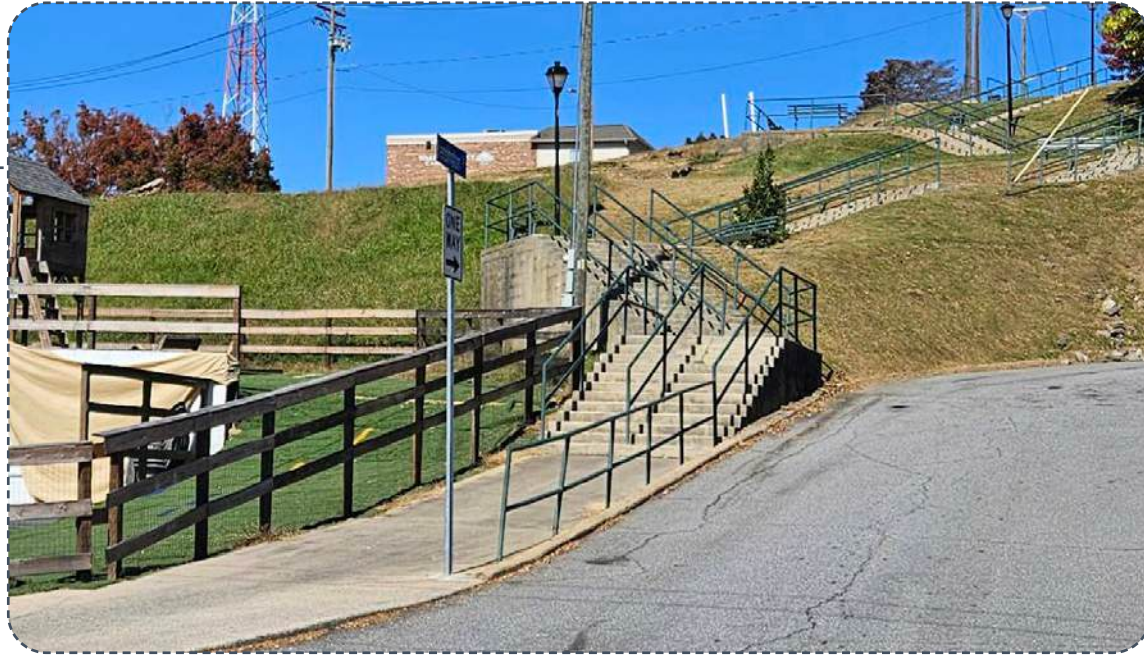
KEY FEATURES

- » Breathes life into a number of underutilized "between spaces" in Downtown with colorful murals and temporary activation
- » Reinforces the arts and cultural identity in Downtown North Wilkesboro
- » Protects functionality of alleyways for deliveries and other daily uses

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 2.2. Activate the public realm with the arts.

- a. Identify and transform 3-5 priority alleyways into pop-up art corridors and gathering places.
- b. Commission local artists and partner with the Cultural Arts Council of Wilkes, or the Patterson School Foundation in Caldwell County.
- c. Add features like projection art, lighting, movable seating, murals, and interpretive signage.
- d. Promote these transformations through social media, walking maps, and branding.



THE STAIRWELL

- » Partner with the local high school, the Public Library, or another organization to paint the tread of each step and each landing area. Consider historic community figures, or tell a story that reveals itself as people walk up the stairs.
- » Upgrade the stairway rails and landing areas. Consider an overlook structure, archway, or pergola at the top.
- » Connect the stairwell to Kensington Drive and B Street Park.
- » Coordinate with engineers on slope stability and drainage to prevent erosion or long-term maintenance issues.



TERRACED PARKING LOT

- » Upgrade existing terraced planting beds with colorful, lush plantings, lighting, and integrated signage or sculpture.
- » Upgrade the stairwell connection to the upper level. Consider opportunities for ADA-accessible routes.
- » Design with flexible infrastructure to allow the space to function both as parking and as a parklet without compromising either use.



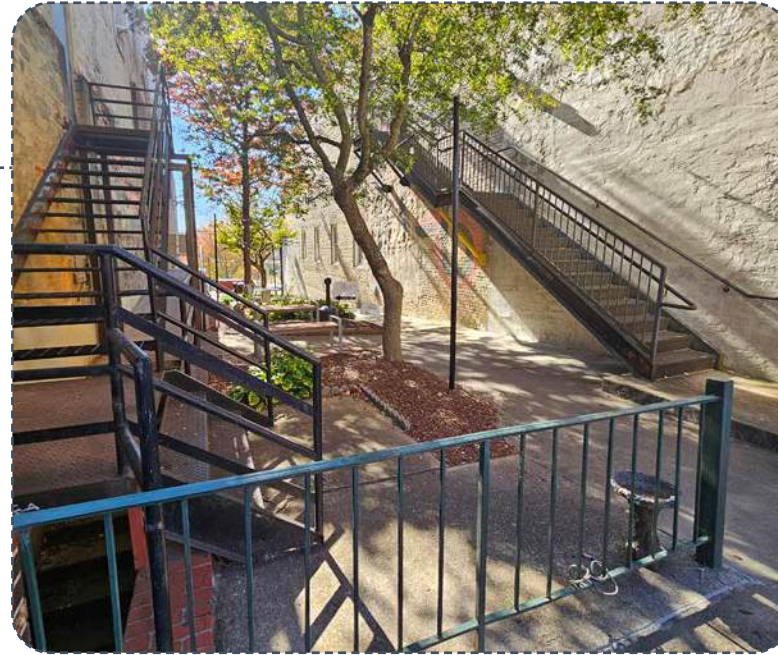
GORDON AVENUE

This alley sees more consistent vehicle use than others, with a direct connection to Main Street. Prioritize small-scale enhancements (like those already in place, *see above*) that preserve traffic flow and avoid obstructing access.



ALLEY BEHIND WILKES ART GALLERY + WILKES COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

- » This corridor provides a direct connection to the cultural assets in the Arts District. Concentrate rotating art installations, murals, and creative lighting here to reinforce the district’s identity and invite exploration.
- » Consider using this space as a curated outdoor gallery, with temporary works that change seasonally or are tied to local events and artists. Incorporate interactive or community-driven elements where feasible to foster engagement.
- » Consider creative wayfinding to the Wilkes Art Gallery or Wilkes County Public Library.



919 MAIN STREET ALLEYWAY

- The 919 Main Street alleyway improvements have recently been completed (May 2025). Efforts include resetting old pavers, thinning out foliage, installing new furnishings, and installing a power outlet that can be used for market lighting and public Wi-Fi.
- » Continue to advance connections through the alleyway to enhance connectivity between Downtown and Marketplace Alley/Yadkin Valley Marketplace.

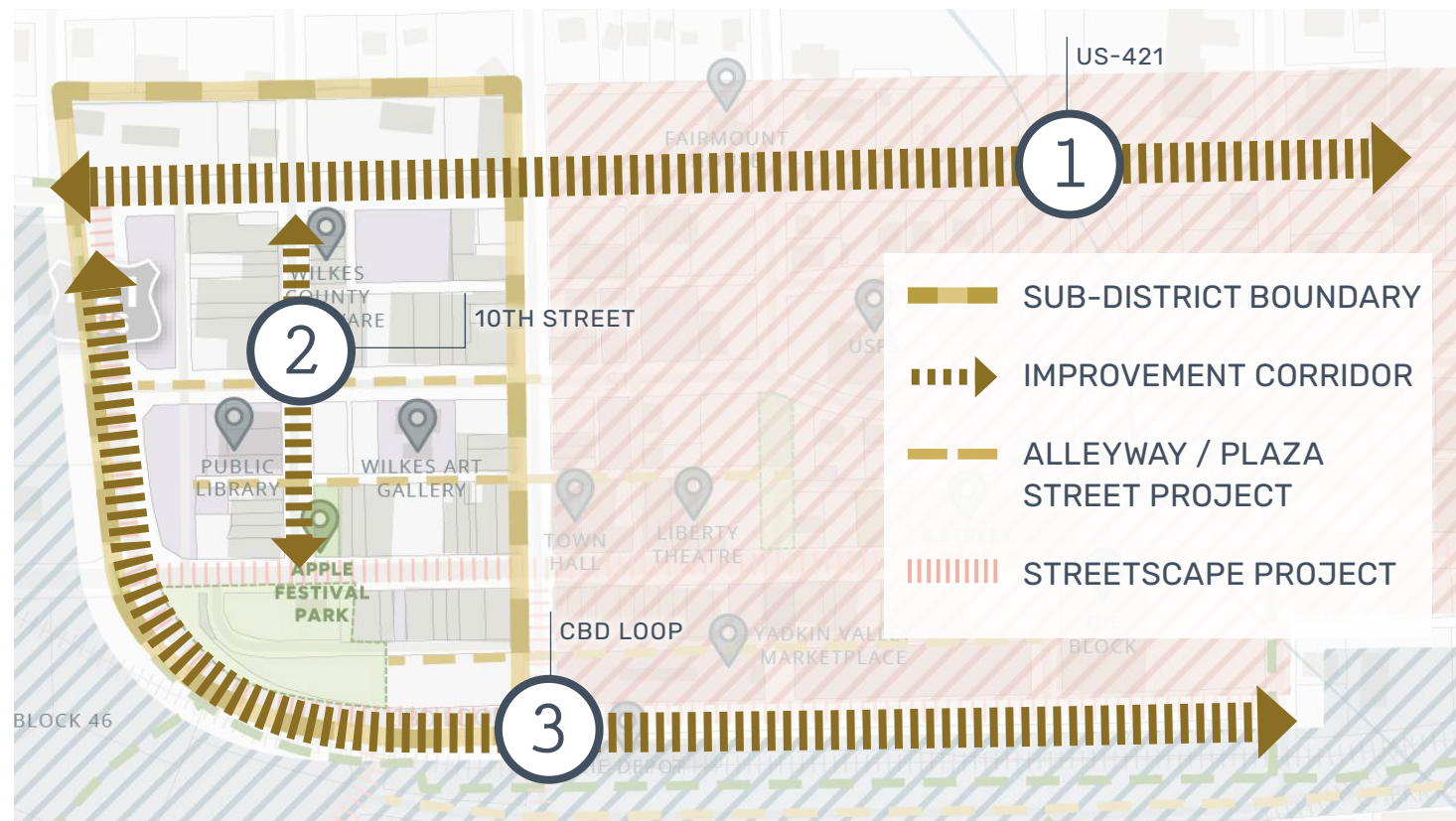


ALLEY BEHIND WILKES COUNTY HARDWARE STORE

- » This corridor opens up to the D Street parking lot, and is visible from BUS-421 (D Street), making it a high-impact opportunity for visual and cultural expression.
- » Consider incorporating historic storytelling and interpretive elements that complement the existing Coca-Cola mural on the Lowe’s building.



STREET IMPROVEMENTS



US-421

1 US-421 is a major arterial that signifies the northern edge of Downtown and the River District. While it will be important to preserve its capacity to move vehicles through town, the town could consider improvements for pedestrian and bicycle safety and comfort. The town should work with NCDOT to conduct a corridor study and safety analysis to explore opportunities for improved multi-modal facilities, enhanced crossings, and traffic calming where needed.

10TH STREET

2 As the heart of the proposed Arts District, 10th Street plays a critical role in shaping the district's sense of place. While it already hosts key cultural assets like the Wilkes County Public Library and Wilkes Art Gallery, the corridor lacks the vibrancy and visual cohesion needed to establish it as a distinct destination within Downtown. A focused effort to improve the built environment along 10th Street and provide art-based programming can help **elevate the corridor's draw and reinforce its cultural role**. These actions will help increase foot traffic, support arts-based economic development, and create a more active, engaging street.

CBD LOOP

3 Community engagement and site analysis points to the CBD Loop as the most significant barrier that separates Downtown and the River District – it wraps around Downtown with up to five lanes in some areas, creating a wide, high-traffic edge that discourages walking and biking and favors through-vehicle movement over pedestrian safety and connectivity. Improving this corridor (with strategies like reducing lane widths and rethinking intersections) will help ease this divide and create a more intentional, integrated connection between Downtown and the River District.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 2.3. Transform the arterial roads that encircle Downtown and the Arts District into safer, more walkable corridors.

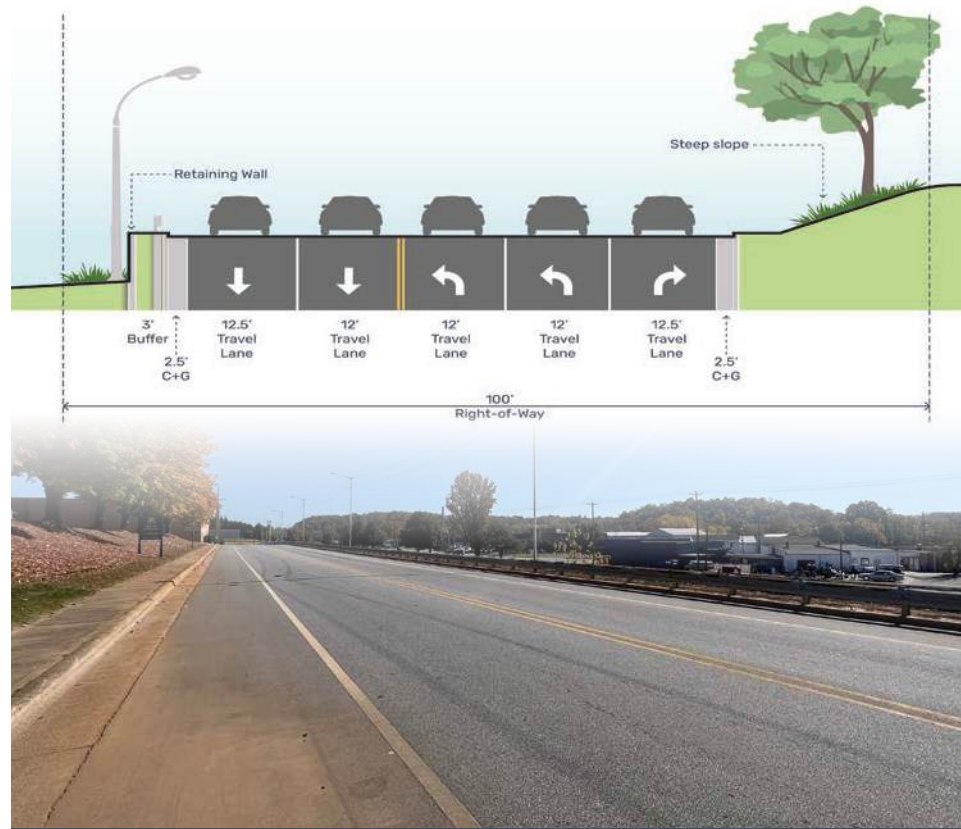
- Pursue a partnership with NCDOT to conduct a study and traffic analysis for CBD Loop to understand road diet feasibility and gather public input.
- Consider design treatments such as curb extensions, landscape strips, shared-use paths, and pedestrian lighting.
- Identify key intersections and pedestrian conflict zones for redesign and safety improvements.
- Install pedestrian countdown signals, crosswalks, and median refuges at major access points such as Main Street, Wilkesboro Blvd, and 9th Street.
- Partner with NCDOT to evaluate safety and multi-modal upgrades along US-421.



Lush landscaping and park-like elements on CBD Loop signal to trail users and drivers that the corridor is a pedestrian-oriented environment and an extension of the Rail Trail Linear Park.

CBD LOOP

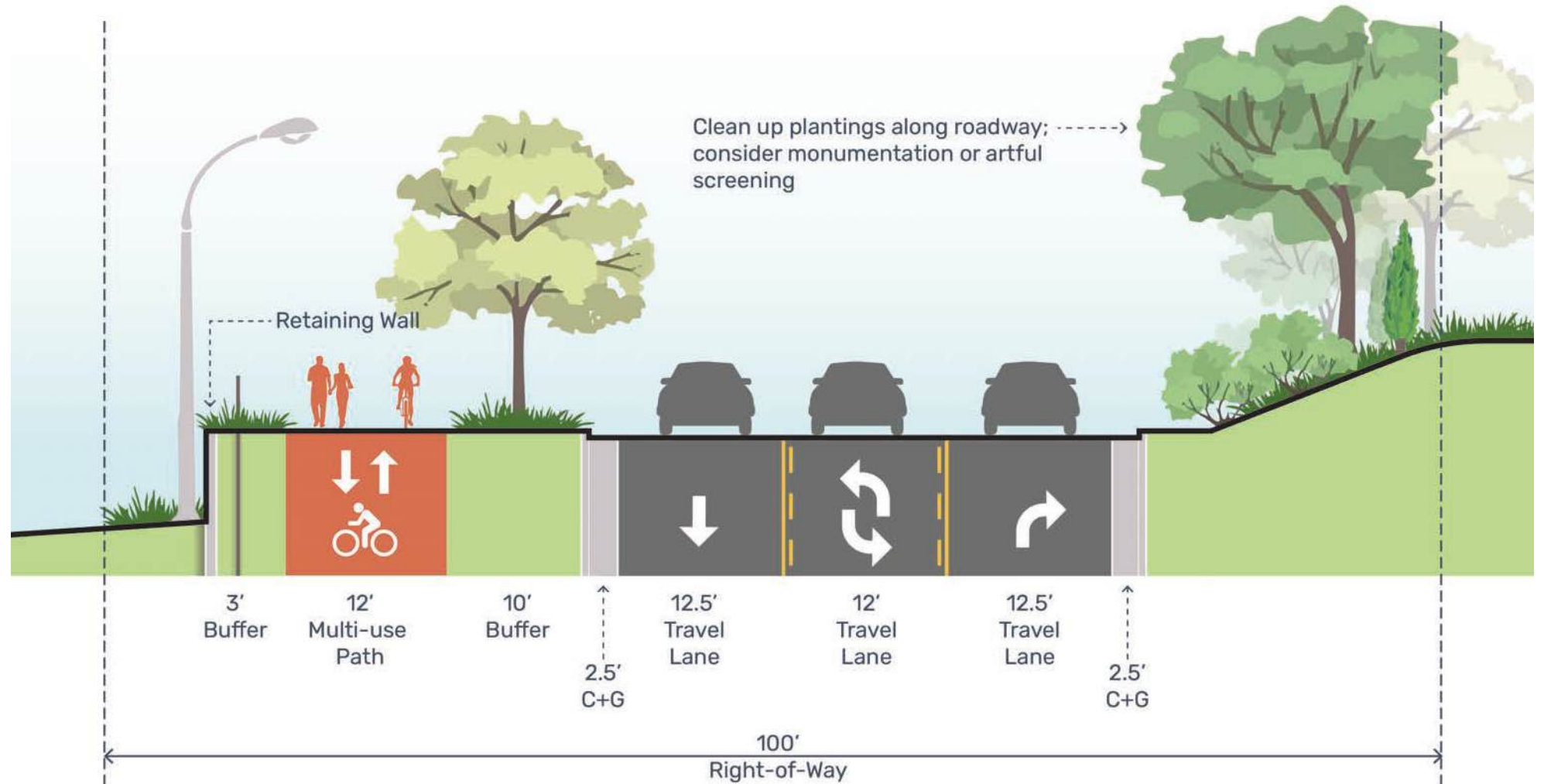
RECONFIGURE SPACE TO REDUCE SEPARATION BETWEEN THE DISTRICTS



EXISTING CONDITIONS (TYPICAL)

KEY FEATURES

- » Reduce the pavement width and number of travel lanes to provide a multi-use path (for bikes and pedestrians) at sidewalk level
- » Beautify the street and improves crossing conditions
- » Path transitions to Rail Trail Linear Park at the Depot (see page 76)



PROPOSED (TYPICAL)

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

- “[I’m] concerned about new traffic flow being [more narrow] with the way certain people drive.”
- “Having a walking/biking path separate from car traffic would be epic!”
- “Much needed to access other parts of downtown [like] the River District.”



AADT = ~5,900 / DAY

According to FHWA’s *Road Diet Information Guide*, streets with AADT <10,000 typically **do not require a formal operational analysis** to justify a 5-to-3 lane conversion.

10TH STREET

THE HEART OF THE ARTS DISTRICT

The Arts District, as a sub-district within Downtown, brings a creative pulse to North Wilkesboro centered around 10th Street and its intersection with Ward Nichols Way. Revitalizing the 10th Street corridor (between Main and D Street) will require a coordinated set of physical and programmatic improvements that reinforce its role within the Arts District.

Strategic design interventions can enhance pedestrian comfort, support ground-floor activation, and create a stronger visual and cultural identity along the corridor. Pairing these enhancements with targeted reinvestment and recurring, arts-focused programming will help transform 10th Street into a more vibrant, economically resilient destination within Downtown.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 2.4. Establish 10th Street and Ward Nichols Way as the heart of the Arts District.

- Improve 10th Street (Main to D Street) with landscape enhancements, street trees, and curb extensions.
- Identify priority parcels and buildings for reinvestment and activation.
- Incentivize arts and culture-related uses, food and beverage, and second-floor residential infill.
- Enhance the streetscape with outdoor dining, lighting, murals, and public art.
- Launch recurring street-based programs like Art Walks or First Fridays.



Much of **Staunton, VA**'s cultural energy centers along the historic Beverly Street, with pockets of creative influence radiating outward. Cultural assets include the Camera Heritage Museum, and the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse. Together, the distinctive architecture, performance centers, galleries, public art, and artisan retail create a cohesive, walkable arts center that defines Staunton's downtown character.



ARTS DISTRICT GATEWAYS

The primary gateway within the future Arts District bookends West Main Street, and creates a strong visual cue that drivers are entering a more walkable, slow-speed area. The secondary and tertiary gateways are located at key decision points, oriented towards walkers and bikers navigating to nearby destinations on-foot or -bike.

See page 34 for more information about the other Downtown gateways.



ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 2.5. Define and implement a tiered gateway strategy to signal arrival and improve wayfinding.

- Install landmark features such as monument signs, public art, or architectural elements at major entry points like CBD and Main.
- Coordinate with NCDOT and transportation agencies for compatibility with road standards and utilities.
- Develop secondary gateways using signage, banners, pavement markings, and landscaping at intersections like D Street and CBD Loop, and CBD Loop and Wilkesboro Avenue.
- Use tertiary pedestrian-scale gateways at walkable intersections such as Main and 10th Street, or D and 10th Street. Incorporate maps, wayfinding, art, and placemaking.
- Include community kiosks and interpretive signage at key pedestrian entry points and public spaces like New Festival Park and trailheads.

FESTIVAL PARK

RELOCATING APPLE FESTIVAL PARK

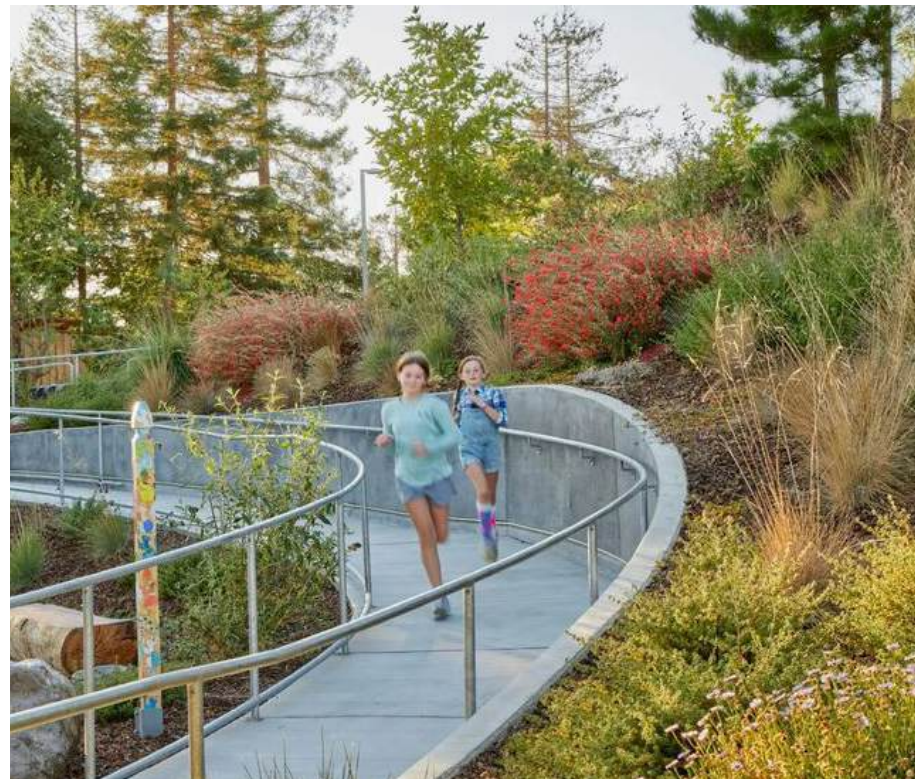
The proposed Festival Park at the corner of Main Street and CBD Loop incorporates terracing and monumentation to create a new landmark community park that **serves as the connective node between Downtown, the Arts District, and the River District**. Its prominent location at a key entry point into downtown makes it an ideal site for a welcoming green space that offers both visual impact and everyday utility. The site also presents a strong opportunity for integration with private development, including new buildings that activate the park's edges.

To bring this vision to life, the project will require a careful and inclusive planning process; one that engages the community, coordinates with existing property owners to expand the footprint of the site, and considers the practical needs of both everyday users and large-scale events. Realizing the full potential of the park as shown in this plan may involve relocating existing businesses to establish the complete footprint. Thoughtful design will be essential to manage the steep topography while maximizing visibility, comfort, and connectivity.

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

“Sweeping ramps...would make the elevation change easier to overcome.”

“Definitely one of my favorite ideas.”

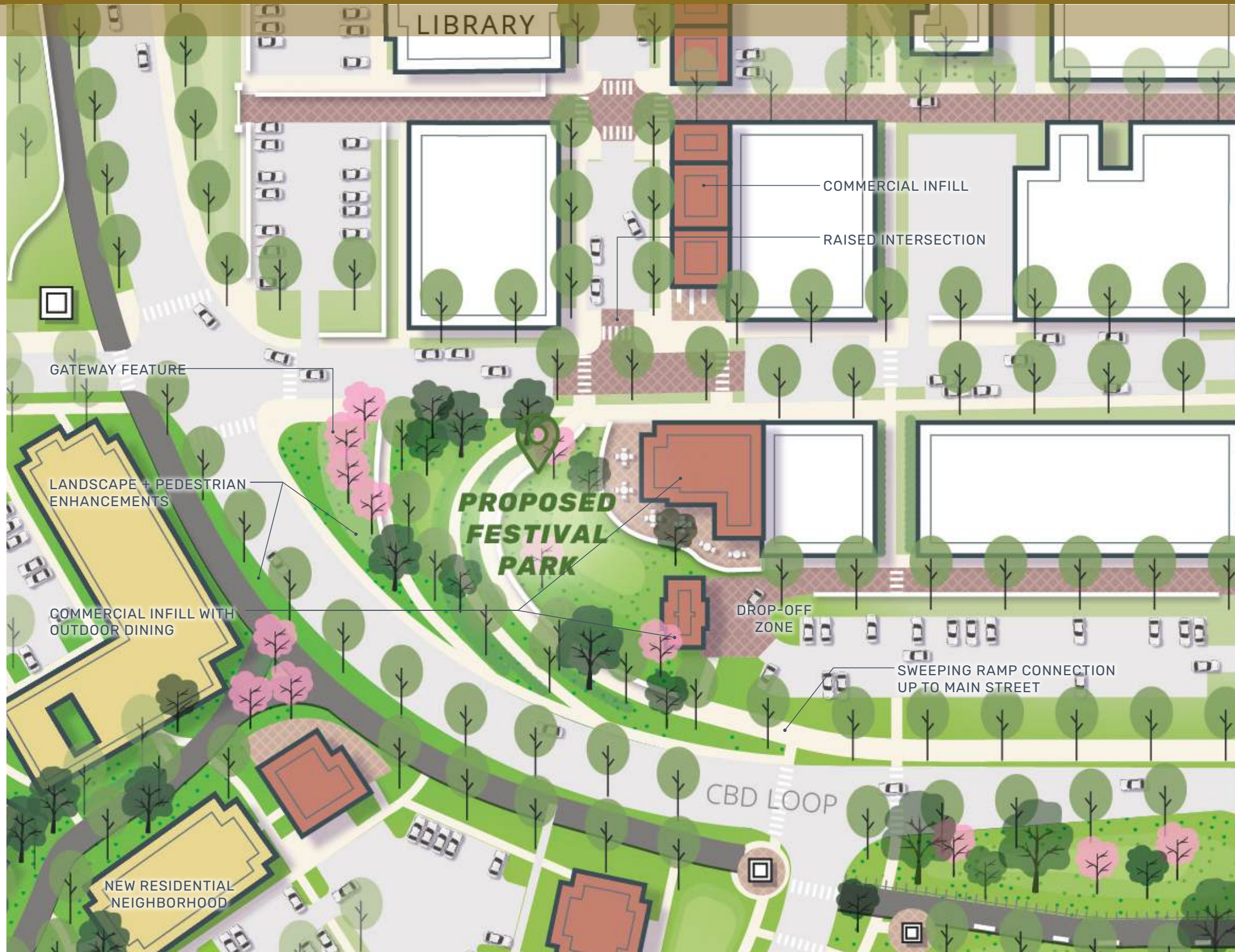


To prioritize accessibility and comfort, the primary pedestrian route through the park should be a wide, gently sloped ramp or walkway that provides a gradual connection from Marketplace Alley to Main Street.



Terracing the hillside will increase the park's functional space by creating level areas that can accommodate lawns, seating, play areas, and gardens that overlook the future River District.





KEY FEATURES

- » Face out towards CBD Loop and the River District to visually connect the two districts
- » Establish a signature gateway to Downtown, visible from CBD Loop and Wilkesboro Ave
- » Terracing and sweeping ramps highlight the scenic views and ease the transition across the park's elevation change
- » Opportunity for commercial infill with outdoor patios

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 2.6. Create New Festival Park as a civic anchor in Downtown/the Arts District.

- a. Conduct a feasibility study with robust community engagement.
- b. Work with property owners on relocation, incentives, and site preparation.
- c. Design the park to include flexible event areas, shade, seating, restrooms, ADA access, and infrastructure for performances and festivals.
- d. Consider unique features like sculptural elements, overlooks, movable seating, and music stations.



N. WILKESBORO

RIVER
DISTRICT





Section Four

A VIBRANT RIVER DISTRICT



Reimagining the riverfront as a vibrant edge of town where recreation, gathering spaces, and development converges to create a place where people live and play



OVERVIEW

North Wilkesboro's Next Frontier

By unlocking the area's scenic assets and improving connections to Downtown, Wilkesboro, and the Reddies and Yadkin Rivers, the River District can evolve into an extension of the town's economic engine, complementing (rather than competing with) Downtown.

This chapter explores ideas and initiatives to reimagine the core of River District as a vibrant edge of town where outdoor recreation and development converges to create a place where people choose to live and play.

KEY CHALLENGES

- » The Yadkin and Reddies River are hidden from street view, creating a disconnect between North Wilkesboro and its scenic natural assets.
- » The existing floodplain limits the intensity of development (new buildings will require special permits and must meet elevation requirements). This will add complexity and cost, but create opportunities for elevated structures with open, flexible ground levels that handle flooding while supporting public space, recreation, or parking below.

STRATEGY

By embracing these constraints, North Wilkesboro can develop a resilient and distinctive riverfront district that **grows steadily over time**. The projects outlined below are key initiatives that will help transform the River District:

Streetlife
+ Gateways

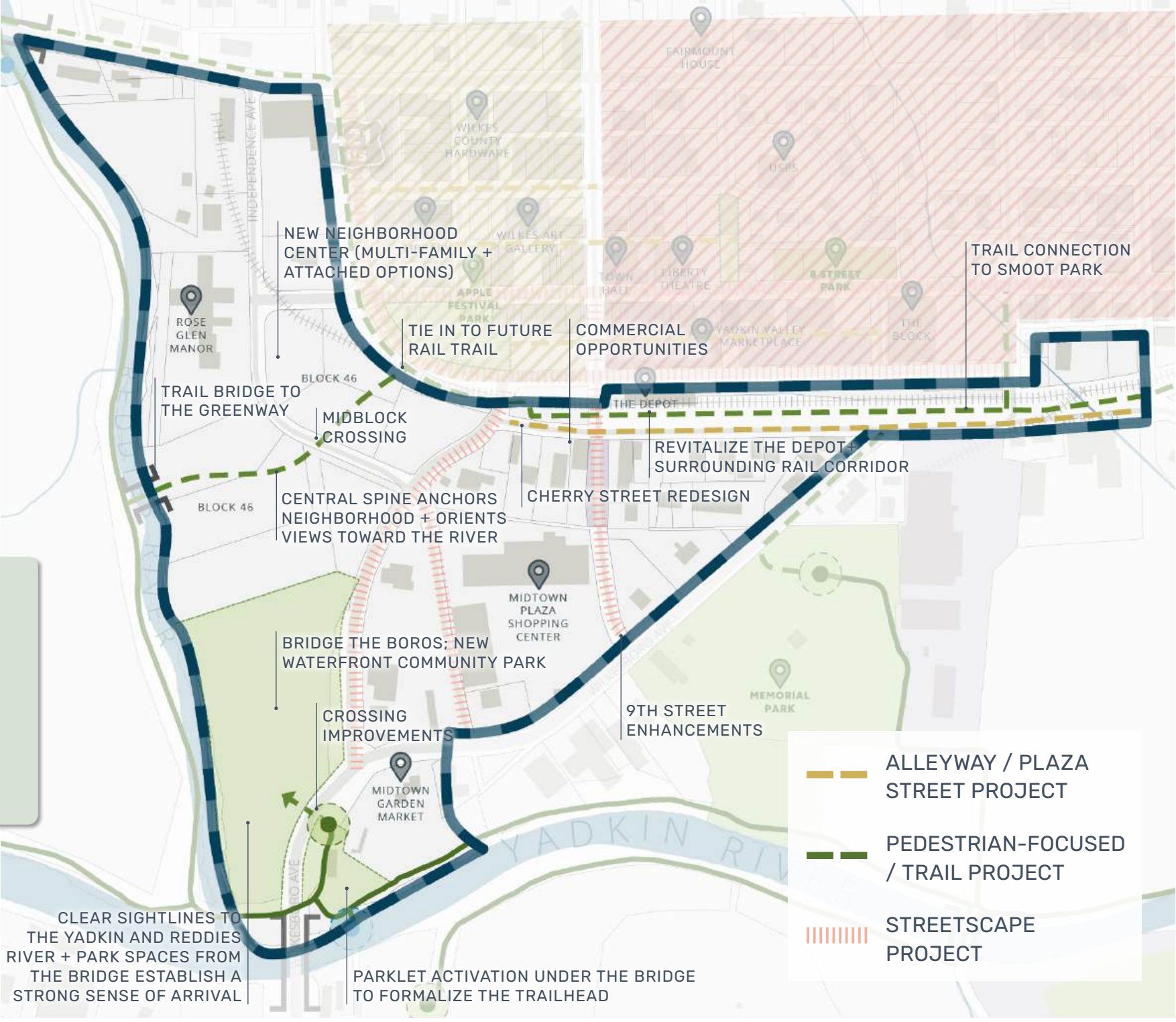
- Cherry Street
- Street Edges
- 9th Street
- Gateways

Parks, Trails
+ Open Space

- The Tributary
- New River District Parks
- Existing Parks

Special
Places

- Strategic Redevelopment Opportunities
- The Depot
- Environmental Considerations





NEW RIVERFRONT PARK

TRAIL BRIDGE

VILLAGE GREEN

"THE TRIBUTARY"

RAIL TRAIL TO SMOOT PARK

NEW FESTIVAL PARK

CORNER RETAIL

CHERRY STREET RETAIL

ROSE GLEN MANOR

MIDTOWN PLAZA SHOPPING CENTER

DOWNTOWN NORTH
WILKESBORO

NORTH WILKESBORO
DOWNTOWN + RIVER DISTRICT PLAN

A PREMIER TRAIL EXPERIENCE

DEFINING MOVEMENT + IDENTITY

Whereas repetition of elements inspires comfort and the confidence to navigate the entire system (see page 75 for more details), distinct elements create memorable experiences that can contribute to preservation, education, and recreation tourism. The emerging River District should use signage, public art, and other feature elements to **differentiate it from other sections of the Reddies/Yadkin River Greenway** to draw people to the area and invite deeper exploration. These elements can help define the district as a destination, rather than just a pass-through space, encouraging longer visits and greater engagement.

Cultural, environmental, and historical storytelling are great starting points when curating experiences in the River District – whether through interpretive panels about the river’s role in local industry, art installations that reflect Appalachian heritage, or features that highlight native plant species and local ecosystems. In the design or redesign of existing and proposed Greenways (see *The Tributary*, page 57), the Town should treat these connections like premier linear parks. Investment in the public assets in this area should include high-quality wayfinding and interpretive signage, rest areas with trailside amenities, and river access points that further develop these corridors as a signature town destination.

Together, these strategies can build a layered, place-based identity that feels authentic and alive.



ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.1. Enhance the trail experience along the Reddies and Yadkin River to elevate the River District as a core recreation and mobility asset.

- Improve ADA accessibility and trail sustainability.
- Enhance wayfinding, rest areas, interpretive signage, and ecosystem education.
- Explore rental equipment opportunities to expand recreational use.
- Highlight trail connections to food, restrooms, and cultural landmarks in signage.

THE TRIBUTARY



The proposed Tributary provides a signature trail and linear park connection through River District Phase 1 and over the river to the Yadkin River Greenway, creating an uninterrupted view to the Reddies River from the new festival park. This connector helps reposition the river as a central part of the town's identity, creating a stronger connection between the natural landscape and the urban town core.



WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

“Adding a riverwalk” with access to restaurants with outdoor seating and patios would be great.”

“Make the river a destination - I like it!”

“It’s such an untapped opportunity here - I often don’t utilize this trail because it’s kind of ugly.”

KEY FEATURES

- » Provide a direct link and view to the Yadkin River Greenway from the future Festival Park and Rail Trail Linear Park
- » Design elements draw inspiration from the river to create a context-sensitive experience

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.2. Establish the Tributary Linear Park – from the CBD Loop to the Reddies River – to anchor the River District.

- Secure a 30’ minimum easement through Block 46 for trail and park connection to Boros Park.
- Explore a pedestrian bridge over the Reddies River to link to the Greenway.
- Design inviting public space with river-themed art, paths, landscaping, and gathering areas.
- Support activation of the district with administrative actions that will incentivize private development in Block 46.

NEW RIVER DISTRICT PARKS



The proposed parks leverage the green space on both sides of the Wilkesboro Avenue bridge to transform the Reddies River from a hidden edge into a celebrated focal point and active recreational asset that serves both Boros. These parks will help **activate the Greenway** by offering unique and inviting spaces to pause, engage, and spend time by the river.

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

“I think this has the potential to be such a beautiful addition to the [town]... [It] would be nice to have a great hang out space by the river.”

“It’s a great spot with a lot of hard assets already in place. It would be a shame to see it go to waste.”

KEY FEATURES

- » The “Boros Park” (name to be confirmed) is envisioned as a passive green space that also works as stormwater management
- » Improve the midblock crossing on Wilkesboro Avenue to the Yadkin River Greenway trailhead
- » Enhance the ramp down to Yadkin River Greenway to create a more formalized trailhead with design elements that draw inspiration from the river

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.3. Reclaim open space around the Wilkesboro Avenue Bridge.

- Formalize Boros ‘Park’ as a flexible community space for recreation and events.
- Conduct a feasibility study and engage landowners and the public.
- Improve the Under-the-Bridge park as a trailhead with lighting, signage, and bike/ped access.
- Add a midblock crossing on Wilkesboro Avenue to link both sides of the green space.

EXISTING PARKS

Existing parks and open spaces in the River District are some of the town’s most valuable assets, offering scenic beauty, recreation, and a direct connection to the Yadkin and Reddies River. To elevate their impact and create a cohesive experience, the town could incorporate a series of improvements that physically and visually unify these parks into a signature, connected open space network.

Developing North Wilkesboro Open Space Design Guidelines is an important first step. The proposed actions described in this plan for existing parks in the River District focus on enhancing access and visibility, celebrating the unique identity of each park, and diversifying programming. They also help the town prepare the parks for increased usage and activity as the River District grows.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.4. Maximize the role of existing riverfront parks as a signature, connected system of public open spaces.

- a. Physically and visually connect parks to form a unified identity.
- b. Enhance and diversify offerings in each park to provide a well-rounded visitor experience.
- c. Improve park entrances and add streetscape enhancements for visibility.
- d. Incorporate ecological, cultural, and economic themes into park design.
- e. Develop and adopt Open Space Design Guidelines for consistency.



MEMORIAL PARK

- » Upgrade existing park infrastructure such as lighting, restrooms, water stations, and ADA-accessible pathways to support broader use.
- » Highlight the path connection to the Yadkin River Greenway from the parking lot with clear signage and trail branding.
- » Retrofit stormwater systems with green infrastructure (bioswales, rain gardens) that improve water quality and model ecological best practices.
- » Consider opportunities for the park to support more sports and event-based tourism (tournaments, leagues, etc.)



SMOOT PARK

- » Explore temporary or mobile activations (food trucks, pop-up splash pads, art installations, etc.) to add vibrancy during off-peak hours.
- » Per action steps outlined in the Downtown Gateways section (see page 34), leverage Smoot Park as the eastern anchor to Main Street.

Concept above provided by the Town of North Wilkesboro.



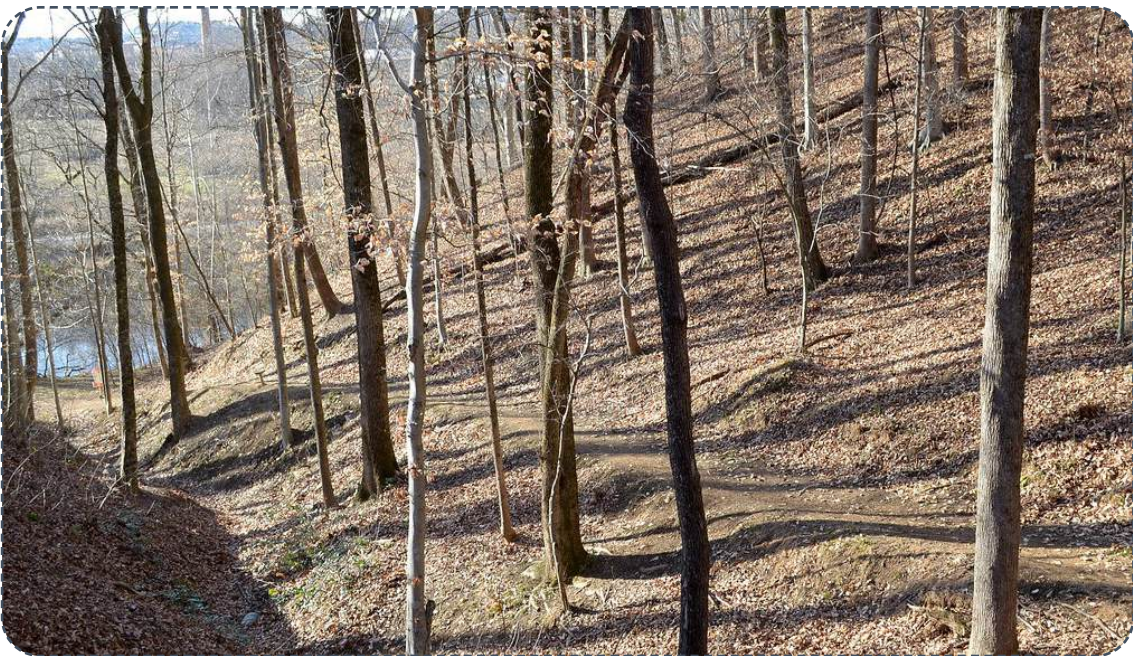
Existing Parks (cont.)



BLAIR ISLAND

- » Position the 10-acre island as a natural “pause point” in the broader Greenway system with small gathering spots.
- » Consider creating dedicated access points (kayak launches, fishing areas, boardwalk, overlooks), a natural surface trail loop, on-site kiosks with historic interpretation, and a bridge crossing to the island.
- » Any interventions should support ecological health of the island and the Yadkin River with low-impact amenities (i.e. solar lighting, permeable surfaces, removable structures, etc.).

Concept above sourced from the Overmountain Victory Historic Trail Master Plan (2016).



HIGHLAND PARK

- » Although located outside the study area, future planning should prioritize visual and physical connections to Highland Park to extend the reach of the River District’s open space network.
- » Park improvements should celebrate its historic buildings, unique topography, and scenic views to enhance its value as a complementary destination.



STREET IMPROVEMENTS

CHERRY STREET

- 1 Cherry Street is a key opportunity for a walkable commercial corridor in the emerging River District. See page 62.

9TH STREET

- 2 This corridor has been identified as a primary pedestrian path between Cherry Street and the River District and the center of Downtown. It also provides a direct connection to the public parking lot next to Yadkin Valley Marketplace. Because of this, sidewalk widening and other pedestrian-focused improvements can help strengthen this critical link, making it safer, more comfortable, and more inviting for people walking between these destinations.

STREETSCAPE IMPROVEMENTS (VARIOUS)

- 3 Well-designed street edges can define a corridor's identity, improve safety and comfort for pedestrians and cyclists, and enhance the visual appeal of the town as a whole. To elevate the character and function of key corridors in North Wilkesboro, a thoughtful, phased approach to streetscape design and investment is essential.

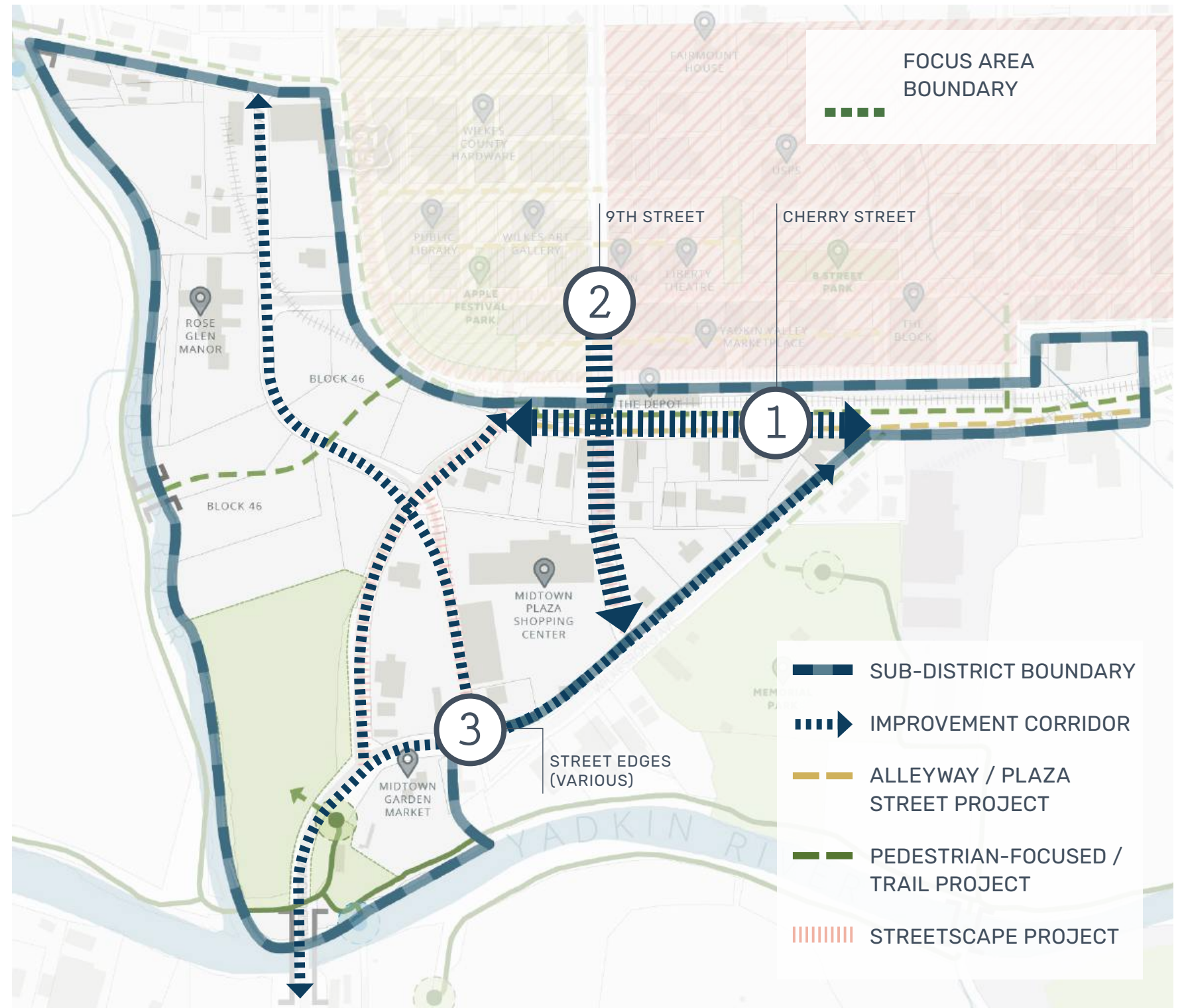
Suggested corridors for streetscape improvements include:

- » Wilkesboro Boulevard
- » Independence Avenue
- » Wilkesboro Avenue

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.5. Improve key roadway corridors.

- a. Identify and prioritize corridors for improvement.
- b. Develop a scoring system for corridor improvements based on cost, ROW, safety, visual impact, and feasibility.
- c. Create conceptual streetscape plans including access management, tree types, sidewalk widths, public art, and phasing.
- d. Coordinate with utility and paving projects to optimize implementation timing and resources.



CHERRY STREET

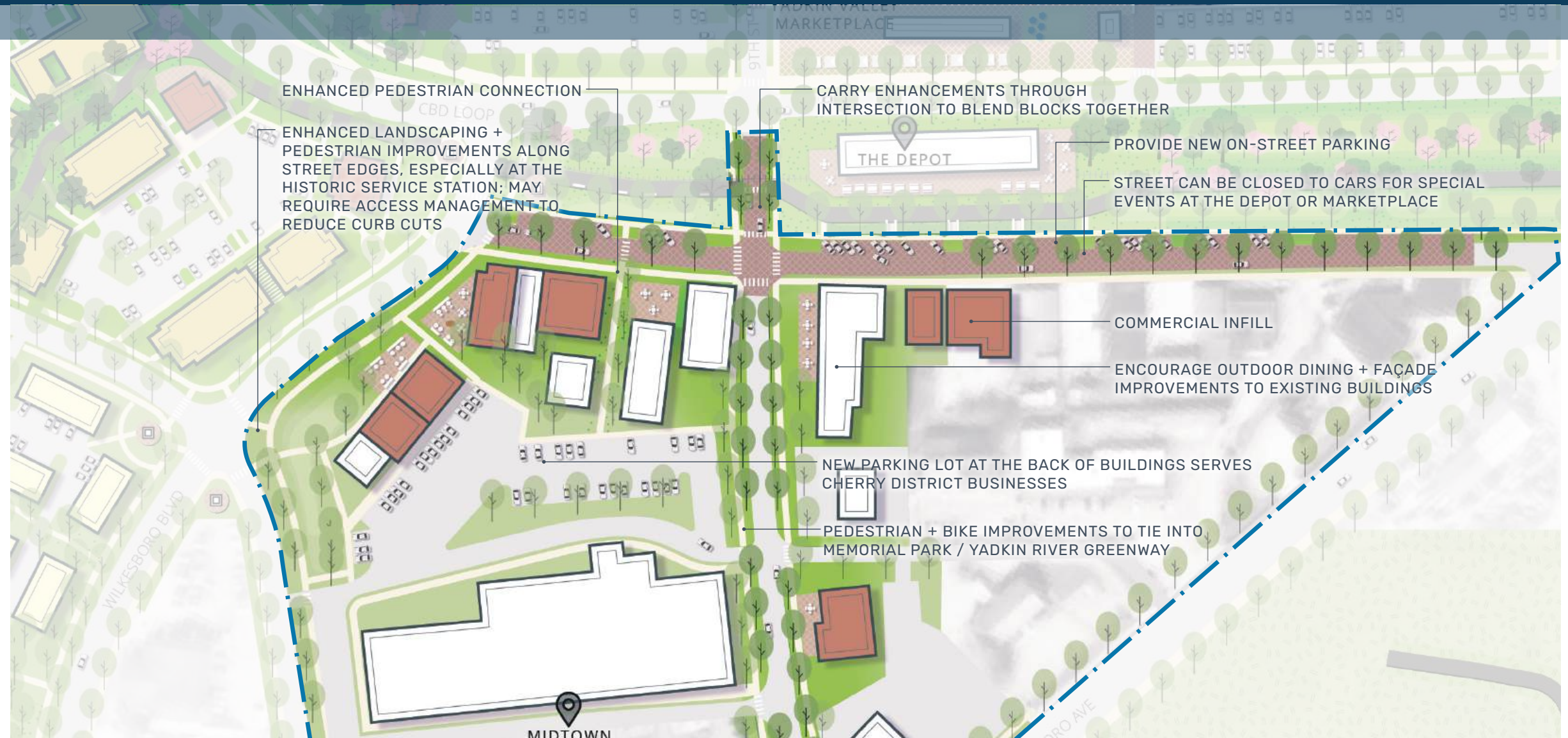
REVITALIZING CHERRY STREET

As a key connector between Downtown and the River District, Cherry Street has the potential to become more than just a pass through – it can serve as a vibrant public space that supports both commerce and community.

The proposed Cherry Street redesign introduces elements of a walkable “plaza street” that beautify the area in order to boost pedestrian activity and strengthen the Cherry District and Midtown Plaza Shopping Center as a destination for commercial and streetlife. Creating a new “destination corridor” here can help attract new businesses, fill vacant storefronts, and foster a more dynamic River District.

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID:

“We need to fill the empty buildings with more eclectic stores like book stores, ethnic restaurants, garden/boutique/antique stores.”





Cherry Street Visualization

KEY FEATURES

- » Convert Cherry Street into a more pedestrian-friendly street, add public parking
- » Encourage adaptive reuse of existing buildings and commercial infill

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.6. Reimagine Cherry Street as a pedestrian-priority plaza street.

- a. Test ideas through temporary improvements such as paint, pop-up events, and closures.
- b. Design a curbless, paver-style streetscape with decorative lighting, on-street parking, and seating areas.
- c. Review ordinances to recommend shifting parking to the side or rear of parcels.
- d. Offer incentives and expedited permitting to encourage renovation of historic buildings.

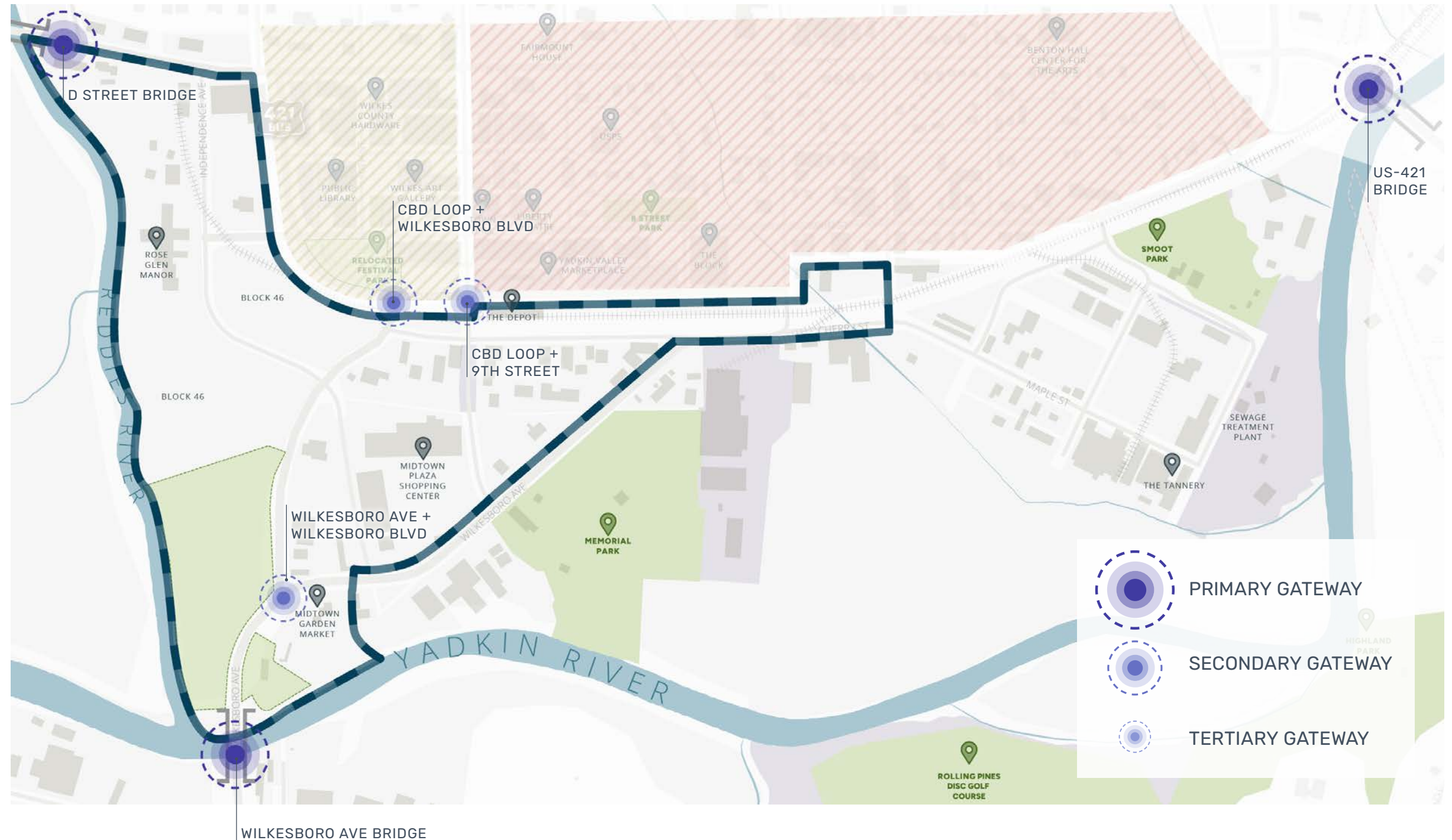
RIVER DISTRICT GATEWAYS

Three of the identified River District gateways are located on bridges of major thoroughfares, signaling entry to not only the River District, but to the town of North Wilkesboro. Treatments for the gateways in this area should welcome people to the community and communicate the town's connection to the river and to neighboring Wilkesboro.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.7. Create and install a family of gateway improvements.

- Design gateway treatments that vary by scale and function, coordinated with traffic and utility plans.
- Primary Gateways: Add major signage, lighting, and public art at D Street, Wilkesboro Avenue, and Statesville Road bridges.
- Secondary Gateways: Use mid-scale signage, crosswalks, and landscape features at neighborhood-scale entry points.



STRATEGIC REDEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

UNLOCK REDEVELOPMENT OF RIVERFRONT ASSETS (OBJ. 3.8)

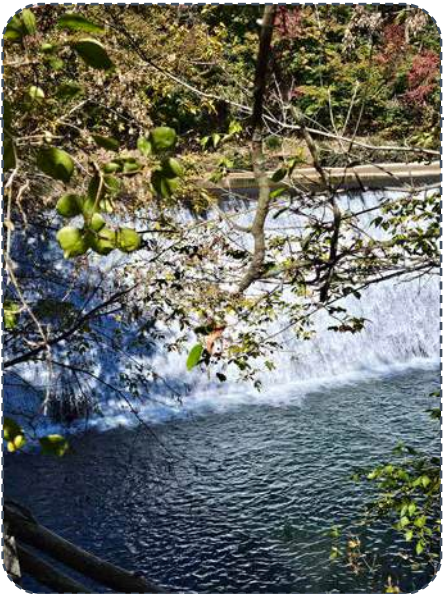
The River District is home to several distinctive sites that reflect North Wilkesboro’s history, industry, and connection to the river – each offering a unique opportunity to build value through thoughtful redevelopment. By recognizing these assets not as obstacles, but as foundational elements of community character, the Town can unlock new possibilities for recreation, business, and cultural identity.

The following sites have been identified during the planning process as “long-term plays” for North Wilkesboro. Each of the identified sites carry historical significance and spatial potential that, when activated, can become **defining features of the future River District.**



SMOOT TANNERY BROWNFIELD

Continue to advance the planning efforts already in motion to prepare the site for revitalization as a destination recreation, dining, and entertainment facility.



THE DAM AT THE REDDIES RIVER

The area around the dam is a distinct opportunity to repurpose a historic site into a welcoming destination for river recreation, trailside activity, and waterfront dining that reflects North Wilkesboro’s character and history.



INDEPENDENT OIL SERVICE STATION

The site’s architecture has local recognition as a part of the town’s history, and could be used as a gateway monument in the short-term. Brownfield remediation will be required to prepare the site for future redevelopment.



THE DEPOT

The historic Southern Railway Depot is a **high-priority asset** that bridges Downtown and the River District. The Depot is a key opportunity to extend the boundaries of the Yadkin Valley Marketplace across CBD Loop to create a community gathering space that could serve a mix of public uses and private development.

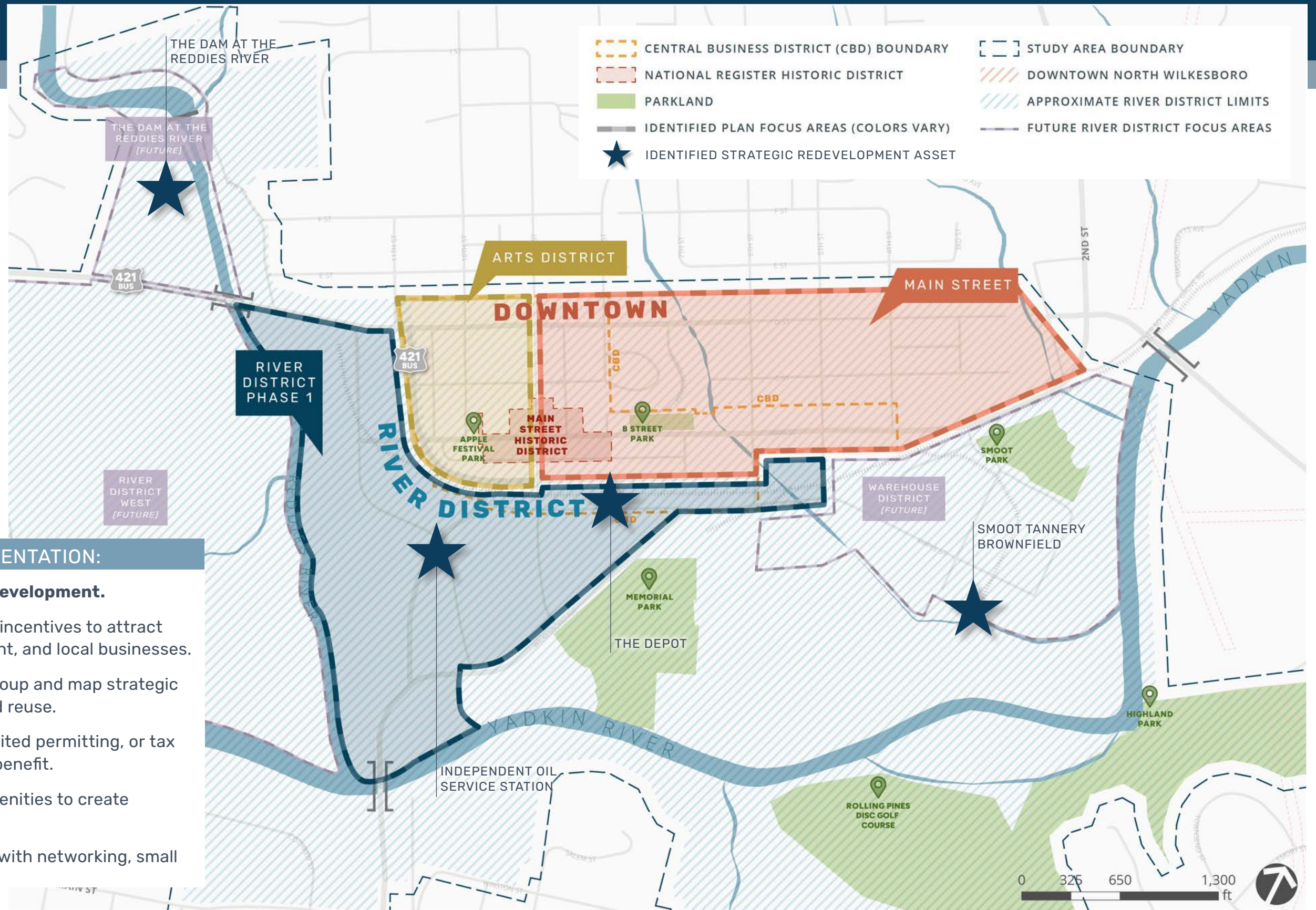
ATTRACT DESIRED NEW DEVELOPMENT

To attract the kinds of development that align with the long-term vision for the River District, the focus must be on creating a strong sense of place that appeals to families, entrepreneurs, and local-serving businesses. Targeted strategies should encourage family-friendly, collaborative commercial uses that strengthen the district as an outdoor destination.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.9. Attract desired new development.

- Use intentional planning and incentives to attract youth-oriented, entertainment, and local businesses.
- Establish a youth advisory group and map strategic opportunity sites for infill and reuse.
- Offer density bonuses, expedited permitting, or tax relief in exchange for public benefit.
- Bundle private and public amenities to create destination spaces.
- Support existing businesses with networking, small



THE DEPOT

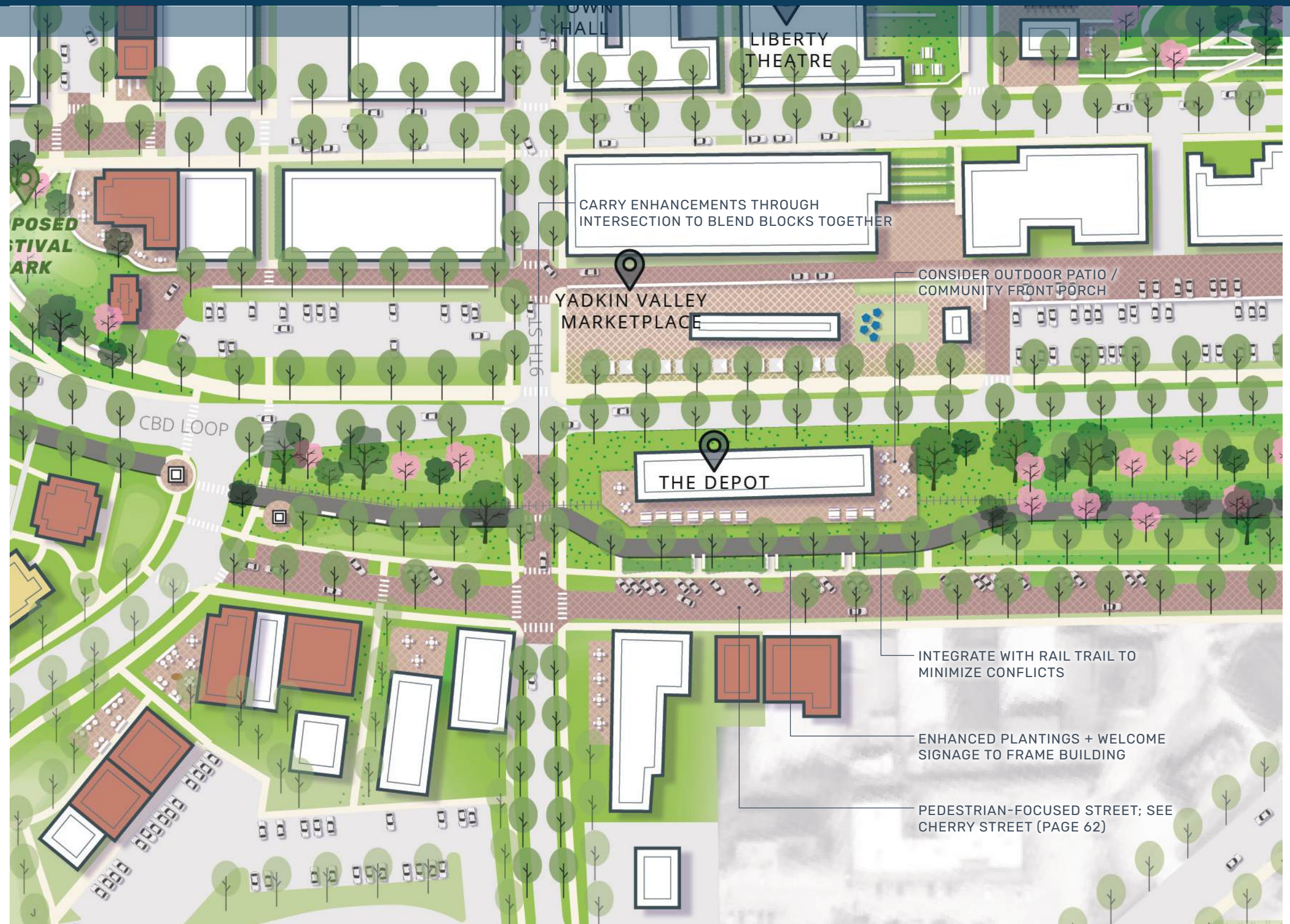
REVITALIZING AN UNDERUTILIZED ASSET

Revitalization of The Depot is a community priority because of its strategic location and architectural significance. As a highly visible but currently underutilized asset, its restoration presents a clear opportunity to increase daily foot traffic, beautify the town's "front door" and catalyze investment in this part of the River District.



THIS PROJECT WAS IDENTIFIED AS THE #1 PRIORITY BY THE PUBLIC IN THE 2ND SURVEY.

Because the Depot is privately owned, its **successful revitalization will require strong collaboration between the property owner, the Town, and other partners.** Establishing a shared vision and formal agreements around public access, maintenance, and future use (such as incorporating a trailhead, restrooms, or visitor information) will be essential. Though coordination may be complex, the Depot's potential to anchor public and private investment in River District and activate a key gateway into town makes the effort well worth pursuing.





The Depot is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (2004)
The current owner says a State Historic Preservation Office official called it the **“best-preserved historic train station in North Carolina.”**



Depot Revitalization

KEY FEATURES

- » Convert the historic Southern Railway Depot into usable indoor/outdoor space for uses that will attract daily visitors
- » Signature gathering space that references community history and fronts the future Rail Trail

NEXT STEPS FOR THE DEPOT

- » Establish key partnerships and property coordination.
- » Pair Depot renovations with the development of the Rail Trail Linear Park and Cherry Street to maximize impact.
- » The Town can help redevelopment by pushing forward the CBD Loop streetscape, rail coordination, and addressing parking needs in the district.



ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

ECOLOGICAL DESIGN

With much of the River District situated within the floodplain, development must be approached with care and creativity. Embracing ecological and resilient design strategies not only helps mitigate flood risks but also enhances the identity of the River District as a place where nature and community meet. Prioritizing green infrastructure, sustainable materials, and nature-based solutions creates a public realm that is both beautiful and adaptive, reinforcing long-term environmental health while inviting investment. The following actions provide a framework to guide these public and private improvements.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.10. Promote ecological and resilient design.

- a. Create a River District pattern book or zoning overlay to guide public/private realm improvements.
- b. Offer incentives for resilient and green infrastructure practices.
- c. Encourage pervious surfaces, low-impact lighting, and educational signage.
- d. Stabilize stream banks using natural systems, not concrete.
- e. Map priority areas for flood storage and habitat conservation to guide long-term protection.

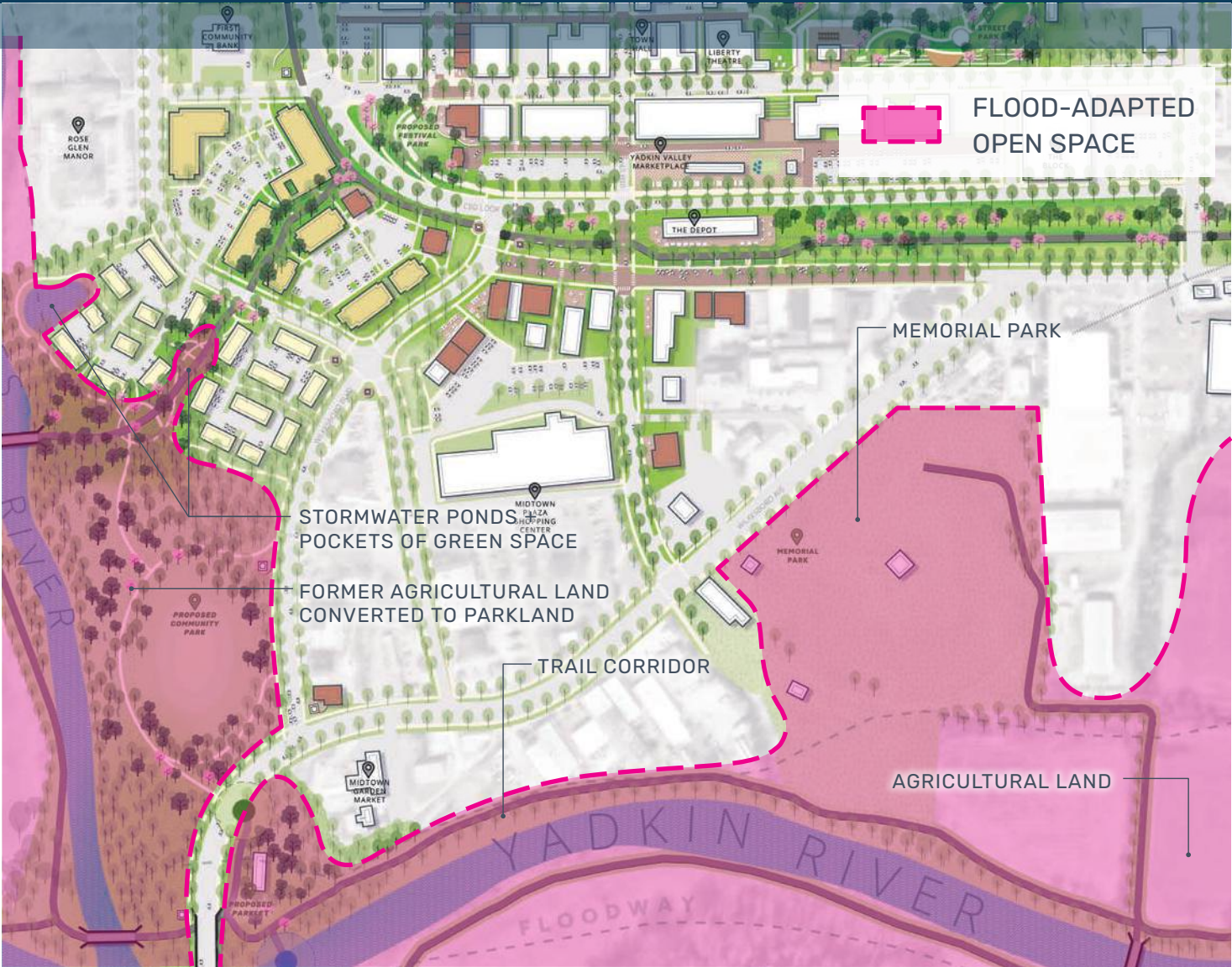
FLOOD MITIGATION

Reimagining flood-prone areas as active assets rather than liabilities will be the key to long-term resilience in the River District. As climate impacts grow more frequent and severe, **integrating flood mitigation into land use, open space, and development planning will protect both people and property.** The development concept shown in this plan highlights **flood-adapted open space** (see right) – passive green areas within the floodplain that can absorb flooding after storm events, while also serving as recreation amenities for residents. By leveraging partnerships and funding sources to restore natural systems and convert vulnerable land into adaptable public space, the River District can be a model for resilient growth in the region.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 3.11. Promote resilient flood mitigation strategies.

- a. Conduct updated floodplain mapping and risk assessments with FEMA and state agencies.
- b. Convert low-lying land to floodable parks and buffers; incorporate stream bank restoration into development.
- c. Apply for grant funding such as FEMA BRIC and NC PARTF to support implementation.







Section Five **CORRIDORS + CONNECTIONS**



*Opportunities to expand, enhance, and unify
trails, corridors, and green spaces into a
seamless network that flows through town*



OVERVIEW

Trails that Tie It All Together

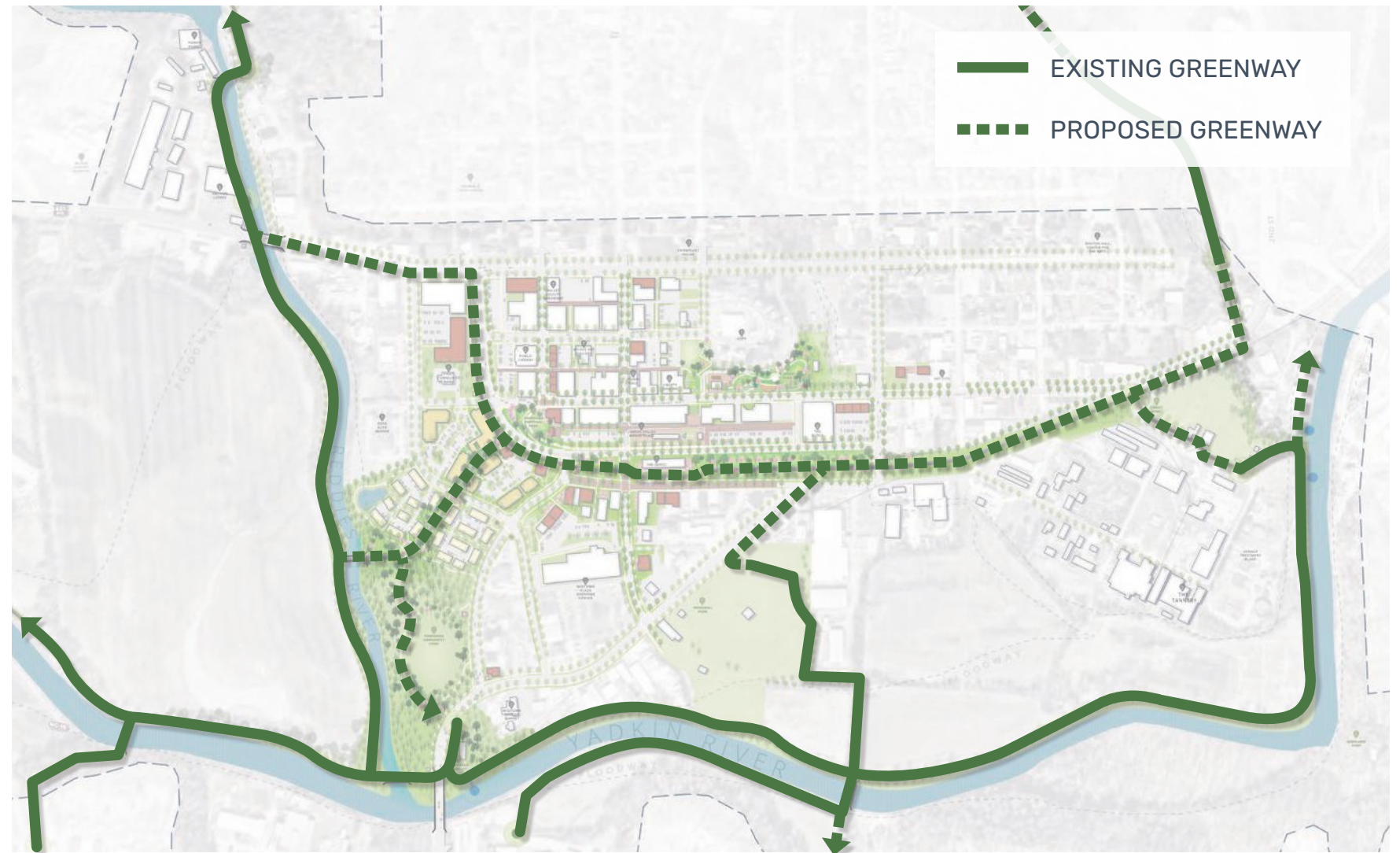
North Wilkesboro's trail and Greenway network is one of its **most powerful assets**—connecting neighborhoods, parks, and destinations while promoting health, sustainability, and economic development. This section encompasses system-wide recommendations that will strengthen connections to the Yadkin River Greenway, the proposed Rail Trail Linear Park, and other key corridors that link the community together.

KEY CHALLENGES

- » Trails within the floodplain need to provide recreational opportunities, connections with nature, and places for community, while also balancing ecological preservation and flood resilience.
- » Existing trail and open space assets could be more physically and visually connected.
- » Wilkes County, North Wilkesboro, and the Yadkin River Greenway all have individual logos and brands, which can create confusion if the signage, wayfinding, and promotional materials lack hierarchy or consistent messaging.

STRATEGY

This section of the action plan outlines strategies to strengthen trail access, sidewalks, and bikeways, and enhance visibility and experience at trailheads. It also introduces design standards and development approaches that integrate public space with housing, businesses, and amenities. By building out a seamless, high-quality active transportation system, North Wilkesboro can elevate the Greenways as a community identity, and beloved recreation resource.



Streetlife + Gateways

- Priority Corridors
- Trail Access Points

Parks, Trails + Open Space

- Enhance Outdoor Recreation
- Rail Trail Linear Park
- Maintenance and Safety
- Quality and Resilience

Special Places

- Branding and Signage
- Scenic Viewsheds
- Policy and Partnerships
- Trail-Oriented Development





Rail Trail Linear Park



ENHANCE OUTDOOR RECREATION

Park, trail, and open space experiences in North Wilkesboro want to be uncomplicated, comfortable, fun, and ultimately deepen the user's connection to the place through the stories told with the amenities, natural assets, and programming offered.

The town's growing trail system is central to creating a more sustainable and connected outdoor recreation culture. **Three signature corridors** (each tied to local assets and landmarks) form the backbone of this network:

- The existing Yadkin River Greenway along the Yadkin and Reddies River
- The planned Town Loop following Hoopers Branch (outside of the study area)
- The proposed Rail Trail Linear Park along the abandoned Norfolk Southern rail line

When fully built, these routes will link neighborhoods, downtown, and natural areas in a continuous loop, with the Rail Trail providing a direct lateral connection through Downtown. High-quality design (see page 75), paired with intentional programming and accessible infrastructure, will ensure these trails are inclusive, well-used, and a lasting part of community life.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.1. Enhance outdoor recreation by focusing on accessibility, sustainability, and community engagement.

- Support diverse recreational programming in collaboration with local partners.
- Host community events to build public use of spaces.
- Encourage outdoor festivals and races.
- Provide ADA-compliant access and facilities for all users.

YADKIN RIVER GREENWAY EXT.

- The Yadkin River Greenway currently offers approx. four miles of paved trail in the River District, with planned extensions that will reach Cub Creek and Wilkes Community College. Beyond North Wilkesboro, the trail is part of a larger combined effort to build a continuous corridor that connects to the Yadkin River Canoe Trail, Mountains-to-Sea Trail, and other regional trail systems. Supporting this vision grants North Wilkesboro residents access to public lands and natural assets across the Yadkin Valley region that, when connected, will further the town's recreation, transportation, and economic development goals.

TOWN LOOP

- The *Outdoor Action Plan* identifies a trail alignment ("Hoopers Branch to Euclid") that forms a continuous loop around town, connecting to the Yadkin River Greenway at Smoot Park and the Dam. Although much of this trail segment is outside the study area, it represents a key long-term opportunity to improve access to Downtown and the River District from northern residential neighborhoods.



RAIL TRAIL LINEAR PARK

- The Rail Trail Linear Park is a high-priority trail connection in one of the most visible parts of town (fronting the Depot and Yadkin Valley Marketplace, and running parallel to Cherry Street and the CBD Loop). This project has the potential to set the bar for a premier trail experience in North Wilkesboro: a space that is comfortable, intuitive, and deeply connected to the town's identity by highlighting its industrial roots along the former rail corridor.

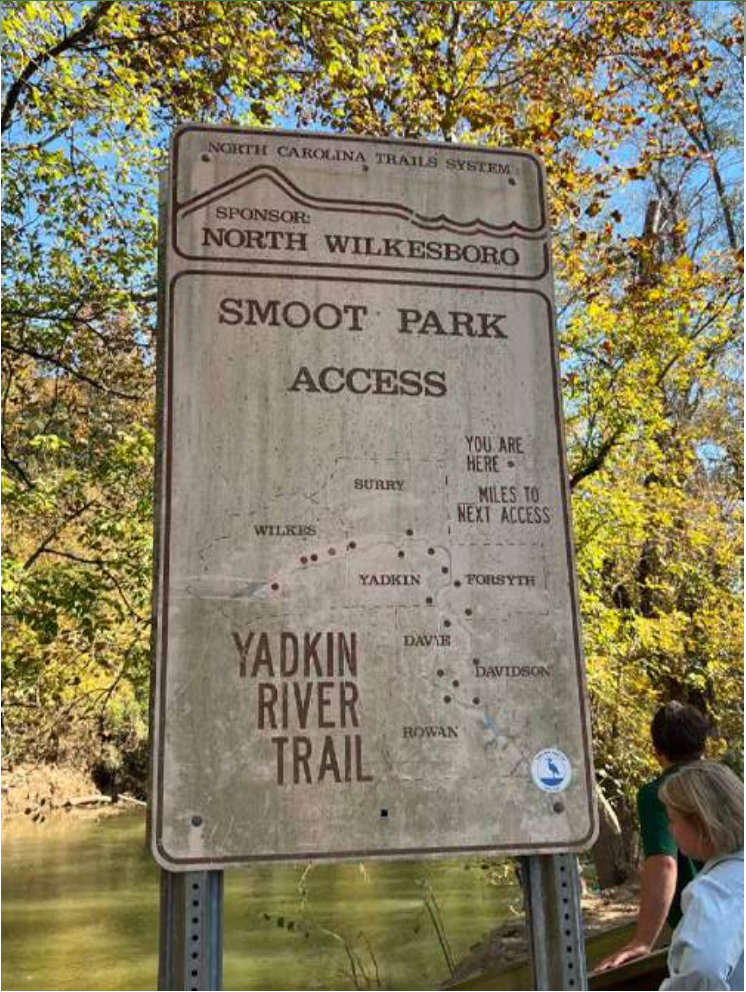
Rail corridors are ideal for trail development because they offer pre-connected, flat routes that allow for seamless connections between destinations. With thoughtful design and strong place-based storytelling, the Rail Trail can be a functional connector and a destination that reinforces the town's identity as a hub for outdoor living.

See page 76 for more details.

COMMITMENT TO QUALITY + RESILIENCE

Implementing a set of standard design elements systemwide (including signature trail access point treatments, signage, and other amenities) will establish a rhythm and expectation for what a North Wilkesboro public asset looks and feels like, and become intuitive to the user – whether they are visiting for the first or 500th time.

To achieve this level of consistency and quality, North Wilkesboro should develop formal park, trail, and open space standards that guide the design and delivery of outdoor spaces across the community. These standards will unify new and existing spaces, support equitable access, and help deliver a sustainable, premier trail experience that reflects the town’s commitment to a high-quality open space experience. With thoughtful design, the **trail system can become a regional draw**, attracting visitors for recreation, supporting local businesses, and reinforcing North Wilkesboro’s reputation as a destination for outdoor living.



ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.2. Ensure a consistent standard of design in North Wilkesboro parks, trails, and open spaces.

- a. Develop park classification system and minimum standards for public spaces.
- b. Include design and wayfinding signage standards, mile markers, and ADA elements that can be applied systemwide.
- c. Use typical trail cross sections and consistent park components across the system.
- d. Design spaces for all user types with appropriate surfacing and signage.

ENSURE A CONSISTENT STANDARD OF DESIGN

North Wilkesboro should adopt consistent design standards for all parks, trails, and open spaces. Establishing shared guidelines and classifications will help ensure that every public space—regardless of size or location—reflects a unified identity, meets a high standard of quality, and supports a seamless user experience.

INCREASE LEVEL OF MAINTENANCE + SAFETY

To protect long-term investments, North Wilkesboro must prioritize the ongoing care of its parks, trails, and public spaces. Developing a sustainable maintenance strategy grounded in data, adequate staffing, and reliable funding will help ensure these assets remain safe, welcoming, and high-performing for years to come.

- e. Work to increase maintenance and assess safety of all town assets.
- f. Annually collect and review park/trail maintenance data.
- g. Include maintenance teams in design decisions.
- h. Develop a maintenance operations plan with landscape guidelines and budgets.
- i. Create sustainable annual budget plans tied to new projects.



PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

By embedding education, volunteerism, and conservation into the everyday experience of the town’s Blueway and Greenway system, the town can foster a stronger connection between people and the landscape, encouraging shared responsibility for protecting natural resources now and into the future.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.3. Promote environmental stewardship of trails and blueways.

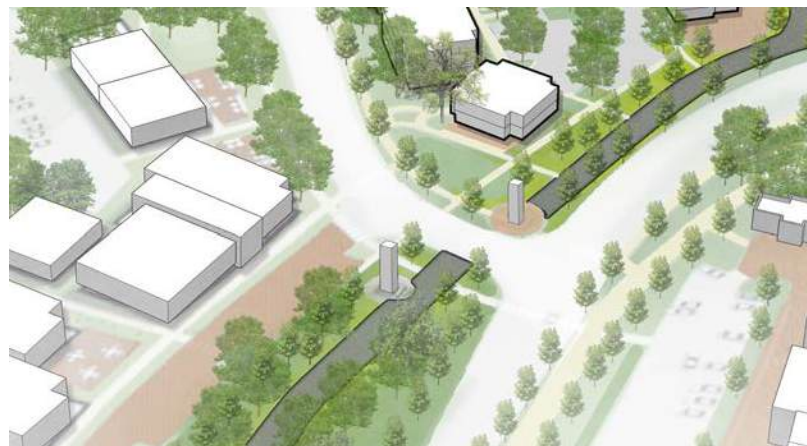
- a. Host regular cleanup days and adopt-a-trail programs.
- b. Enhance and protect stream buffers with signage and demonstration projects.
- c. Install interpretive signage at access points to inform about native species and stream health.

RAIL TRAIL LINEAR PARK

CREATE A SIGNATURE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE RIVER + DOWNTOWN



The railroad corridor, currently owned by Norfolk Southern, is listed as “Determined Eligible” on the NC Historic Preservation Office GIS map, meaning it is **eligible for the National Register of Historic Places**, but not formally listed as historic site.



ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.4. Create a signature connection between the river and Downtown.

- Establish key partnerships and property coordination.
- Advance concept design and visioning.
- Create a “Friends of NW Rail Trail” group.
- Develop a comprehensive funding strategy.
- Phase implementation for early wins.



PRIORITY CORRIDORS

Corridors that provide direct, visible connections to the trail system play a critical role in shaping the town's regional draw and identity. Prioritizing these routes helps reinforce the trail network as part of daily life and enhances the overall accessibility and appeal of the outdoor experience.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.5. Expand connectivity from the Yadkin River Greenway and the future Rail Trail.

- Ensure ADA-accessibility and provide safety enhancements (curb ramps, pedestrian refuge islands, and flashing beacons at crossings).
- Prioritize and fund upgrades to sidewalks linking directly to trail access points, ensuring they are wide, well-maintained, and ADA-compliant.
- Develop low-stress bikeways or bike lanes along connector streets.
- Coordinate with regional partners on connectivity goals and trail system expansion.
- Provide wayfinding at Yadkin River Greenway access points with directional signage to key destinations off the corridor.



TRAIL ACCESS POINTS

MAJOR / "PORTAL"

Signature treatments at key locations that create grand entrances to the Greenway

MINOR

Pedestrian-scale features and scaled-down monumentation at trail access points that assist with navigation

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.6. Develop a signature treatment for trail access areas.

- Develop and adopt townwide standards and guidelines for signature trailheads.
- Use trail street crossings as gateways with unique crosswalks, curb extensions, and on-street features.
- Install identity markers or monuments and custom branded sign toppers.
- Designate signature trailhead 'portals' at key locations with maps, kiosks, and gateway structures.



BRANDING + SIGNAGE

STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY IDENTITY + LEGACY THROUGH BRANDING

North Wilkesboro already has a widely recognized town logo and has now been presented with a new opportunity to align with and be identified as part of “The Great State of Wilkes,” per the County’s *Outdoor Action Plan*, to strengthen the town’s regional identity as an outdoor recreation destination.

Rather than starting from scratch, the goal is to clarify how these brands work together (co-branding) with a thoughtful hierarchy that helps residents, businesses, and visitors understand where they are and how each place fits into the broader story. The town first needs to determine which logo will be the primary brand (*see hierarchy charts below*), and whether that changes if the user is in Downtown or the River District. Other steps focus on co-branding strategies, consistent application, and ensuring that every sign, map, and message reflects a cohesive sense of community.



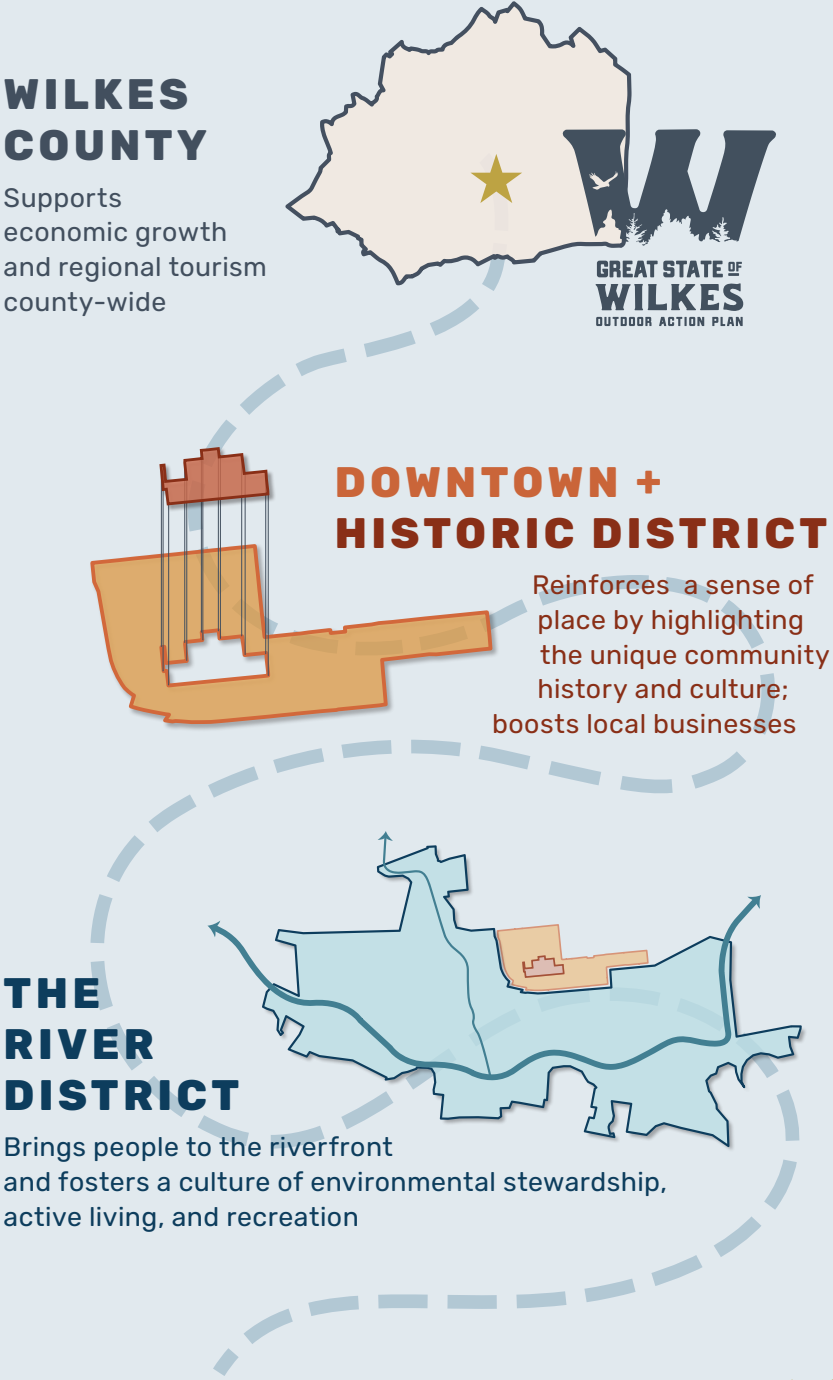
ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.7. Use the trail system to strengthen community identity and legacy.

- a. Establish a unified hierarchy and develop a signage package with consistent design standards. Ensure visual consistency.
- b. Clarify ownership at each brand tier and establish a brand steward to champion implementation of their respective identities.
- c. Clarify usage guidelines as a coordinated effort with the *Outdoor Action Plan* branding recommendations.
- d. Lead a co-branded public roll-out with high-visibility, flagship projects.
- e. Brand campaign or launch event. Integrate the brand across communication channels.

The brand hierarchy could transition based on location. In the River District and around outdoor recreation assets, the Wilkes County brand (currently the “Great State of Wilkes”) can serve as the primary brand – reinforcing the district’s role as the town’s hub for outdoor recreation and connection to the regional system. As users cross the CBD Loop into Downtown, signage could shift to lead with Town of North Wilkesboro branding while still incorporating the Wilkes County brand as a unifying visual element across both areas.

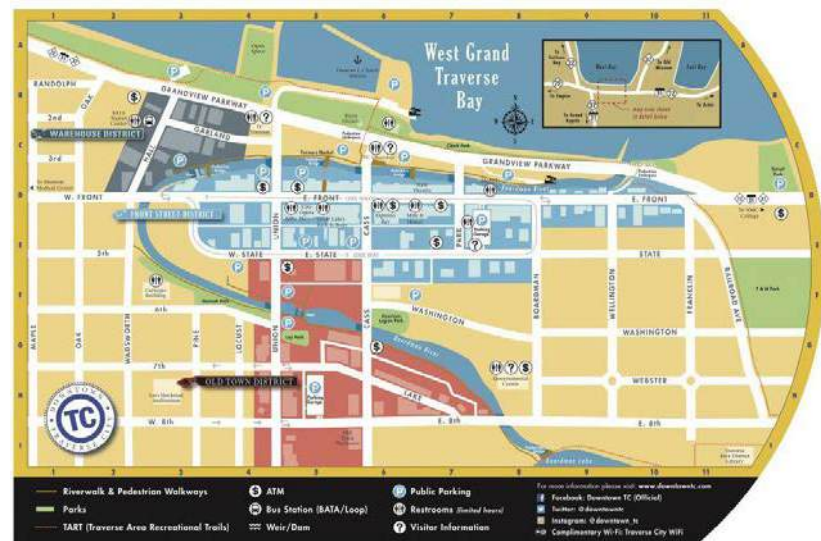
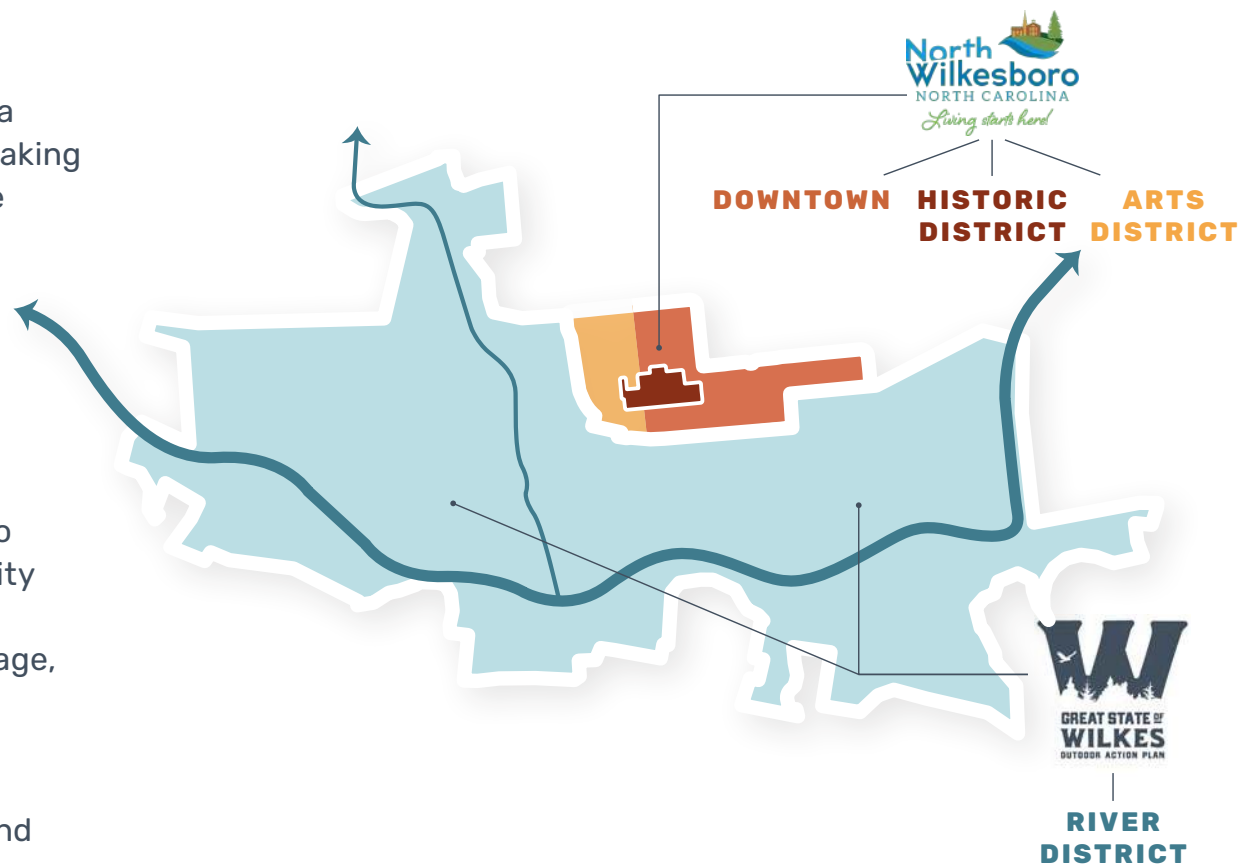
A community’s identity or ‘brand’ has layers.



DISTRICTS

Some communities use color-coded districts as a co-branding and placemaking technique to help people intuitively navigate and connect with different parts of town.

By assigning distinct color or emblem to each district and sub-district, North Wilkesboro can reinforce local identity while maintaining visual consistency across signage, maps, and marketing materials. This strategy supports wayfinding, enhances storytelling, and gives each area a unique sense of character within a unified brand system. It's an especially effective tool for co-branded environments where multiple identities need to work together seamlessly.



Traverse City, MI uses different colors and graphic patterns on the circle sign motif to differentiate the Warehouse District, Old Town, and Downtown.





WAYFINDING SIGNAGE

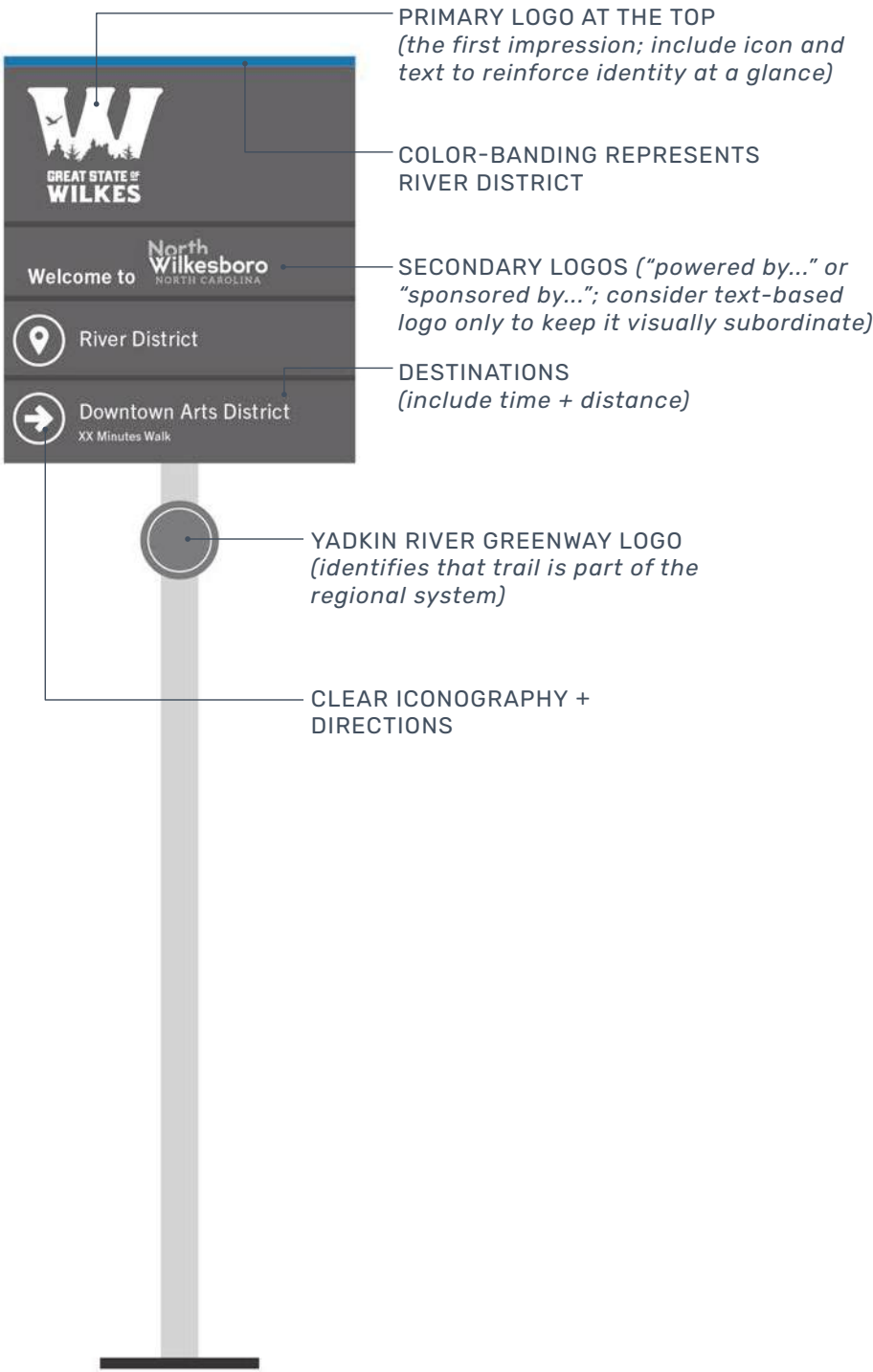
The importance of a clear identity to encourage awareness of destinations and amenities in North Wilkesboro cannot be understated, especially regarding wayfinding and gateway systems. By investing in a well-designed system, the town can shape how residents and visitors experience its public assets, from parks and trails to gathering spaces and cultural sites.

Public assets like parks, trails, and open spaces serve the widest range of users across age, background, and interest. A strong wayfinding system doesn't just help people navigate – it enhances access, invites exploration, and reinforces community pride. Prioritizing signage geared toward pedestrians and bicyclists (not just drivers) increases the visibility and perceived value of the town's natural and recreational system, which can lead to lasting economic and cultural benefits.

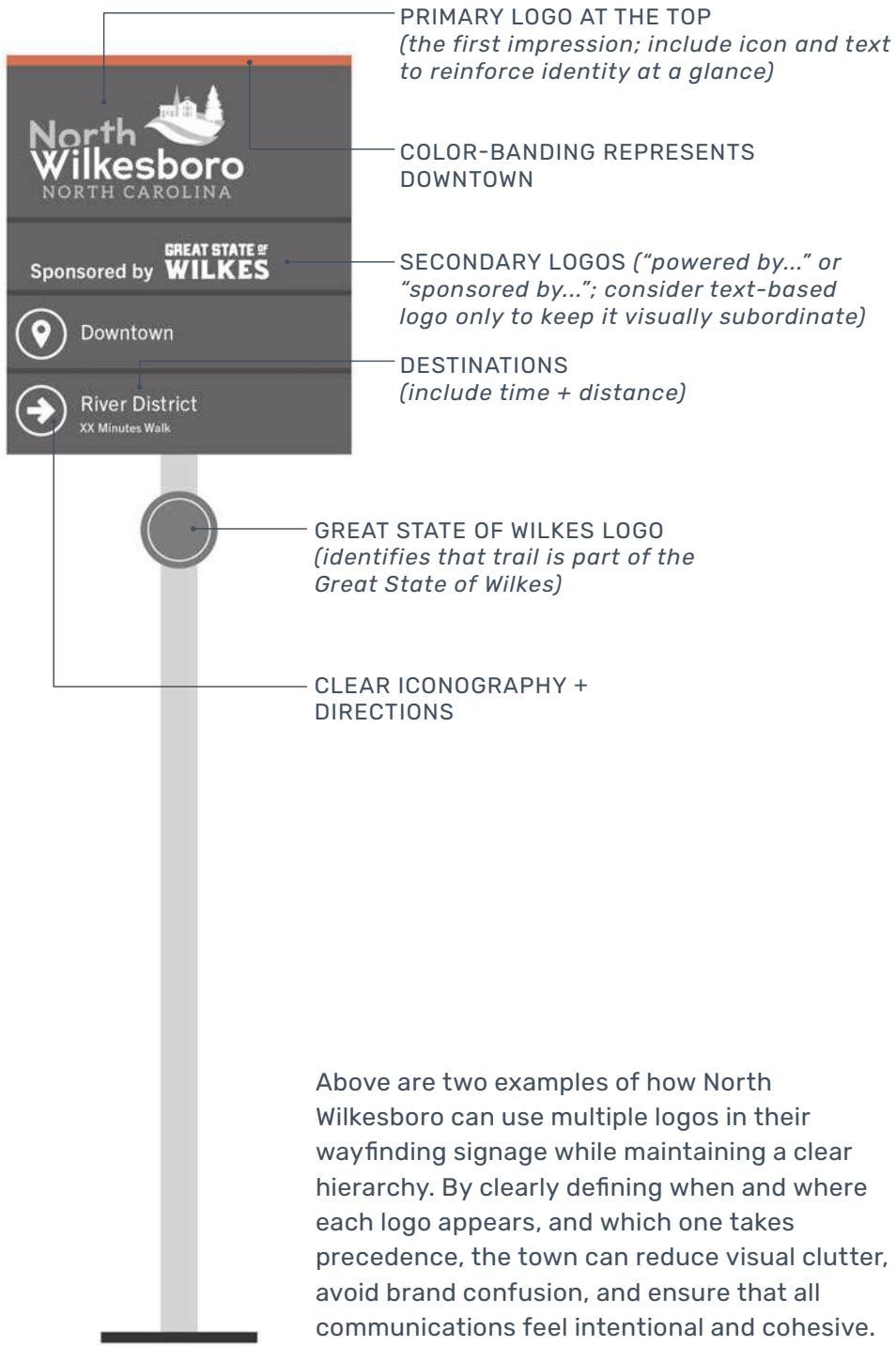
Wayfinding maps need to be widely available in North Wilkesboro, posted at all public park and trailhead locations. The town should include the following information to be posted:

- » System map
- » Schedule of upcoming programming/events
- » Park system etiquette
- » Seasonal environmental educational information
- » In Case of Emergency and maintenance reporting - call number/contact information
- » QR code that directs people to the town's website

RIVER DISTRICT APPLICATION



DOWNTOWN APPLICATION



Above are two examples of how North Wilkesboro can use multiple logos in their wayfinding signage while maintaining a clear hierarchy. By clearly defining when and where each logo appears, and which one takes precedence, the town can reduce visual clutter, avoid brand confusion, and ensure that all communications feel intentional and cohesive.



Branded Gateways

Branding motifs can and should carry over into other elements of the physical environment, including entry signage, trail access points, and gateway treatments. This continuity helps reinforce a unified sense of place and identity across different settings.

At key locations, these motifs can be expressed through color, pattern, materials, and public art that reflects the character of each district while maintaining alignment with the broader brand system. Treatments should be scaled appropriately based on the established tiers (i.e., secondary and tertiary gateways might use smaller-scale details like painted crosswalks, or branded posts).

PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY
<i>Vehicular-scale at major entry points</i>	<i>Scaled down, to support local traffic navigation</i>	<i>Pedestrian-scale features at key decision points</i>



SCENIC VIEWSHEDS

VIEW CORRIDOR PROTECTION

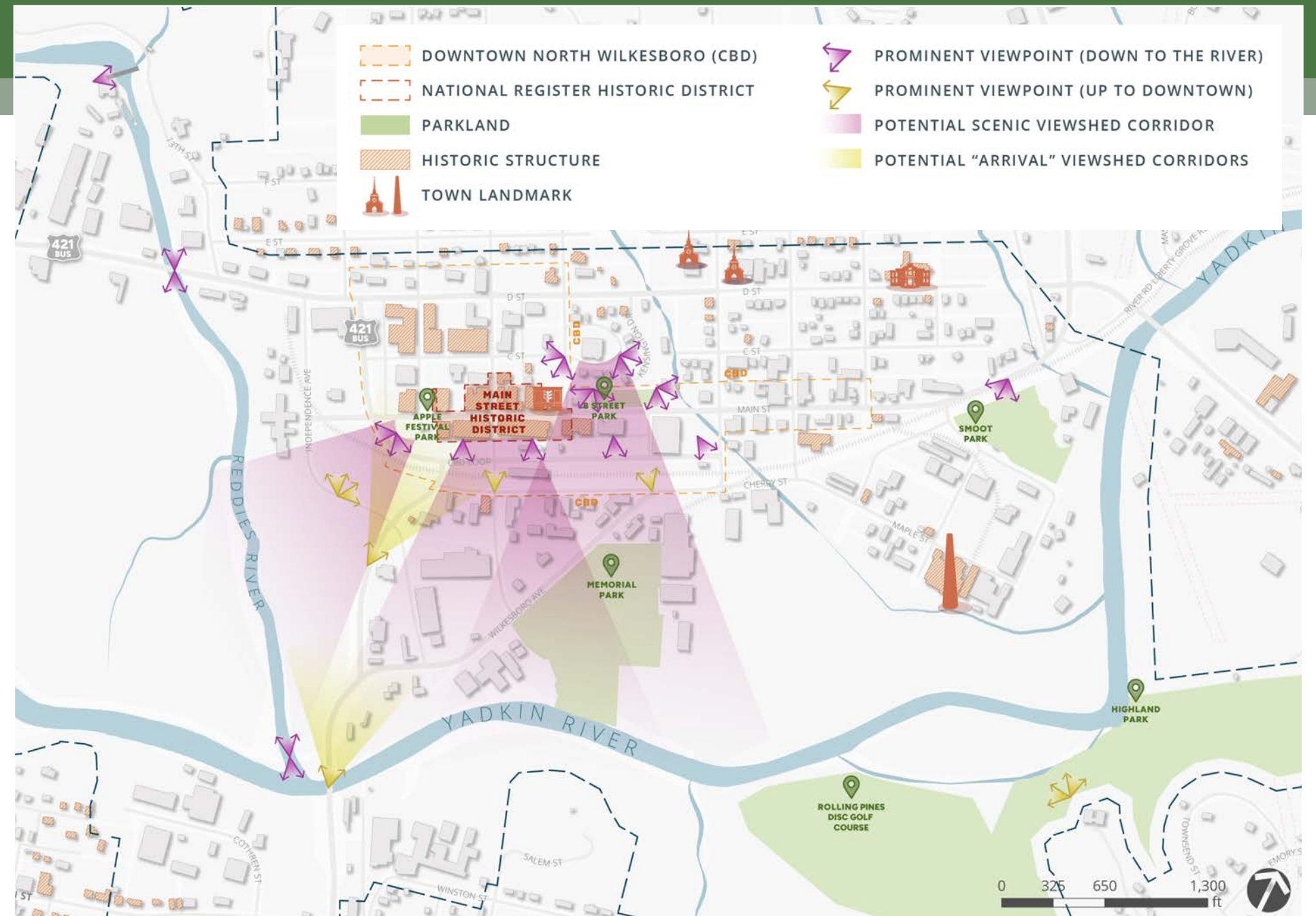
North Wilkesboro's natural topography offers sweeping views down to the river and up to the surrounding ridgeline – identified by staff and the community in this planning process as an underappreciated asset with the potential to shape the town's identity. These scenic vistas not only elevate the experience of place but also create a stronger visual connection between Downtown and the River District.

To build long-term value, the Town should consider formalizing key view corridors through adopted guidance that **protects scenic sightlines and creates more opportunities for the public to experience them**. Some opportunities for scenic viewsheds in existing public spaces have already been described in this plan (see *"The Perch"* overlook on page 35, or *New Festival Park* on page 50).

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Obj. 4.8. Preserve scenic viewsheds to elevate natural assets and the built environment.

- Document priority viewsheds from key public spaces, streets, and trails with GIS, identifying critical sightlines toward the river, ridgelines, and other landmarks (like Downtown).
- Establish design guidelines or overlay zones that protect key visual corridors (limiting building height, massing, and signage that could block views).
- Incorporate view preservation into development review processes, ensuring new construction or infill projects consider and respond to scenic corridors.
- Enhance public access to scenic viewpoints by integrating overlooks, seating areas, or interpretive signage into trailheads, parks, and future redevelopment sites.
- Coordinate with NCDOT to preserve and enhance scenic vistas from key roadways and pedestrian routes.
- Promote upper-story public access (rooftop decks, balconies, viewing platforms, etc.) in strategic locations that offer views of the river or other landmarks.



POLICY + PARTNERSHIPS

Public investment alone won't be enough to expand the Greenway and Blueway network; creative funding strategies, land conservation tools, and collaborations with local and regional partners will be essential to sustain and grow the system. At the same time, the town can use planning and development policy to shape a built environment that embraces trails as everyday infrastructure. By aligning private development with trail access, amenities, and orientation, North Wilkesboro can spark trail-oriented places that feel active, inviting, and connected. The following strategies outline how funding, partnerships, and development policy can work together to support long-term trail success.

SUPPORT PARTNERSHIPS FOR LAND ACQUISITION, TRAIL BUILDING, + FUNDING

Expanding and maintaining North Wilkesboro's trail system will require a diverse mix of funding sources beyond public investment. Leveraging grants, philanthropy, and private sponsorships can unlock new opportunities for growth while building long-term capacity for stewardship and maintenance.



ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

- Obj. 4.9. Continue to support partnerships for land acquisition, trail building, and funding.**
- a. Explore earned income streams to support operations (e.g., vending, paid programming).
 - b. Pursue federal/state grants for renovations and green infrastructure.
 - c. Build new partnerships for capital and operations support.
 - d. Seek land conservation opportunities



Traveler's Rest, SC is a strong example of a "trail town" where the private sector has fully embraced the Swamp Rabbit Trail, strategically positioning shops, restaurants, and housing to face and engage with the Greenway as a central community asset.

TRAIL-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

By encouraging compact, accessible development **within a ¼ mile of key trail corridors** (approx. a 5-minute walk), North Wilkesboro can create vibrant, walkable areas that support both recreation and local business. Aligning land use policy with the trail network will help reinforce trails as active, connected front doors to the community.

Many small towns and rural communities use the ¼ to ½ mile range when planning trail-oriented development or park access.

- » **Elkin, NC:** Promotes housing and retail nodes within ¼ to ½ mile of trailheads.
- » **Brevard, NC:** Uses ¼ mile as a core benchmark in its land use code for trail-adjacent development.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

- Obj. 4.10. Implement trail-oriented development (TrOD) within 1/4 mile of trail corridors.**
- a. Include trail and sidewalk improvements in development requirements.
 - b. Adopt bicycle parking requirements for public spaces and developments.
 - c. Create incentives for trail-oriented retail, cafes, and housing.
 - d. Promote designs that face the trail and embrace it as a front door.







Section Six

CHARTING THE COURSE



*The strategies, recommendations, and
moves that will guide development and
investment over the next 15 years*



HOW TO USE THIS CHAPTER

This chapter includes actionable recommendations and tools that will put the plan into motion. The information provided will prepare the Town of North Wilkesboro for a multi-year process of checking off tasks described in the Action Plan (a separate, more detailed document that pairs with this plan).

IN THIS SECTION

FOUNDATIONAL STEPS

Critical moves that will build capacity for implementation

FUNDING SOURCES + TOOLS

Resources and methods for securing funds

PRIORITY PROJECTS

6 projects pulled from the plan that will be the most impactful in “Phase 1” of implementation

WHAT IS THE ACTION PLAN?

The separate Action Plan is intended as a working guide for Town staff, partners, and community champions to advance the ideas within this report into real, implementable projects. The projects described in previous chapters of this plan vary in scope, intensity, required expertise, and cost. The Action Plan breaks down these projects into smaller, bite-size steps with the ultimate goal of bringing North Wilkesboro’s vision to life.

TYPICAL PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

To avoid repetition in the Action Plan, most projects will follow a common set of steps:

- 1. Assess Capacity:** Determine whether a project can be initiated internally or requires outside expertise or resources.
- 2. Advance the Idea:** Begin with logical next steps such as feasibility studies, planning, or permitting research.
- 3. Conceptual Design:** Develop early visualizations that help build support and guide decision-making.
- 4. Detailed Design:** Prepare technical documentation needed for permitting, bidding, or construction.
- 5. Implementation:** Carry out the project through construction, programming, or policy action, as appropriate.

STRUCTURE OF THE ACTION PLAN

The *Downtown + River District Plan* and Action Plan is organized into four sections that reflect the geographic and functional priorities for implementation. Each section contains place-based recommendations, potential partnerships, and strategies tailored to North Wilkesboro’s unique context:

Downtown: Main Street – Investments that will reinforce and bolster the heart of Downtown as the economic and cultural hub

Downtown: Arts District – Recommendations for supporting an emerging arts identity in Downtown

River District – Centered on enhancing public access, recreation, and redevelopment along the Yadkin River

Corridors + Connections – Strategies for improving multi-modal access, as well as strengthening physical and non-physical links between districts, neighborhoods, and the river





FOUNDATIONAL STEPS

To successfully bring the *Downtown + River District Plan* to life using the Action Plan, the town must first lay the foundational steps to ensure that the plan is able to move from paper to progress. Together, these efforts build the organizational capacity, public trust, and financial readiness needed to guide long-term implementation and deliver visible results.

1 ADOPT THE PLAN FORMALLY.

Adoption signals North Wilkesboro’s commitment to the vision in this plan, strengthens grant applications, builds credibility with funding partners, and ensures long-term alignment between public and private efforts.

Please note:

- » Adoption does not prevent future updates; it simply provides a living framework that can evolve as needs and opportunities arise
- » Formal adoption is often the minimum criteria expected as part of outside funding grant requests

2 ESTABLISH ADVISORY + SUPPORT STRUCTURES.

Form a dedicated group composed of residents, business and property owners, developers, advocates, elected officials, and municipal staff.

This group will:

- » Provide feedback on development proposals and plan refinements
- » Shape design guidance and character-defining elements
- » Identify funding and grant opportunities
- » Explore mechanisms such as self-taxing or special districts
- » Serve as ongoing stewards and champions of the plan

3 IDENTIFY FUNDING FOR LEVERAGE + MATCH.

Develop and maintain an active inventory of federal, state, philanthropic, and private funding programs.

Key Tasks:

- » Identify grant cycles and eligibility aligned with River District projects
- » Support Town efforts to prepare match-ready proposals
- » Help prioritize early-phase projects based on funding readiness

4 PURSUE TARGETED GRANT OPPORTUNITIES.

Apply for grants that align with early-phase projects, including those focused on resilience, recreation, and infrastructure.

Examples include:

- » FEMA BRIC for flood mitigation and stormwater projects
- » NC PARTF for park and trail construction
- » Golden LEAF or EPA Brownfields for redevelopment and environmental resilience



5 **IMPLEMENT** CREATIVE FINANCING TOOLS.

Identify and deploy public finance mechanisms available to North Carolina municipalities to support infrastructure, open space, and development projects.

Key Tools:

- » Development agreements, reimbursement programs, and public-private partnerships
- » Evaluate a Municipal Service District (MSD) to fund long-term enhancements
- » Consider laying the groundwork for synthetic TIF if a major opportunity such as Block 46 advances

6 **ASSEMBLE** AN ON-CALL ADVISORY TEAM.

Assemble a small group of planning, design, and engineering professionals—including Town staff and external consultants—for rapid feedback on new opportunities.

The team will:

- » Provide feedback on development concepts
- » Ensure alignment with Downtown and River District vision
- » Offer technical input on infrastructure, public realm, and resilience

7 **CREATE** A FLEXIBLE FRAMEWORK TO FACILITATE IMPLEMENTATION.

Adopt a nimble implementation process that allows priorities to shift based on new opportunities, funding, or private interest.

Key Principles:

- » Periodically review project priorities with the Advisory Group
- » Allow funding to be reallocated as opportunities arise
- » Encourage creativity and responsiveness to momentum

8 **BUILD** MOMENTUM THROUGH SMALL WINS.

Implement low-cost, high-visibility projects to demonstrate early progress and build community trust.

Examples include:

- » Temporary installations or seasonal programming
- » Pop-up parks, wayfinding, or murals
- » Early trail or streetscape segments that connect key destinations



FUNDING SOURCES + TOOLS

With strategic foundations in place, North Wilkesboro can deploy a range of financial tools, partnerships, and policies to keep momentum going. When used together, the following strategies ensure that the plan is grounded in financial feasibility and broad-based support.

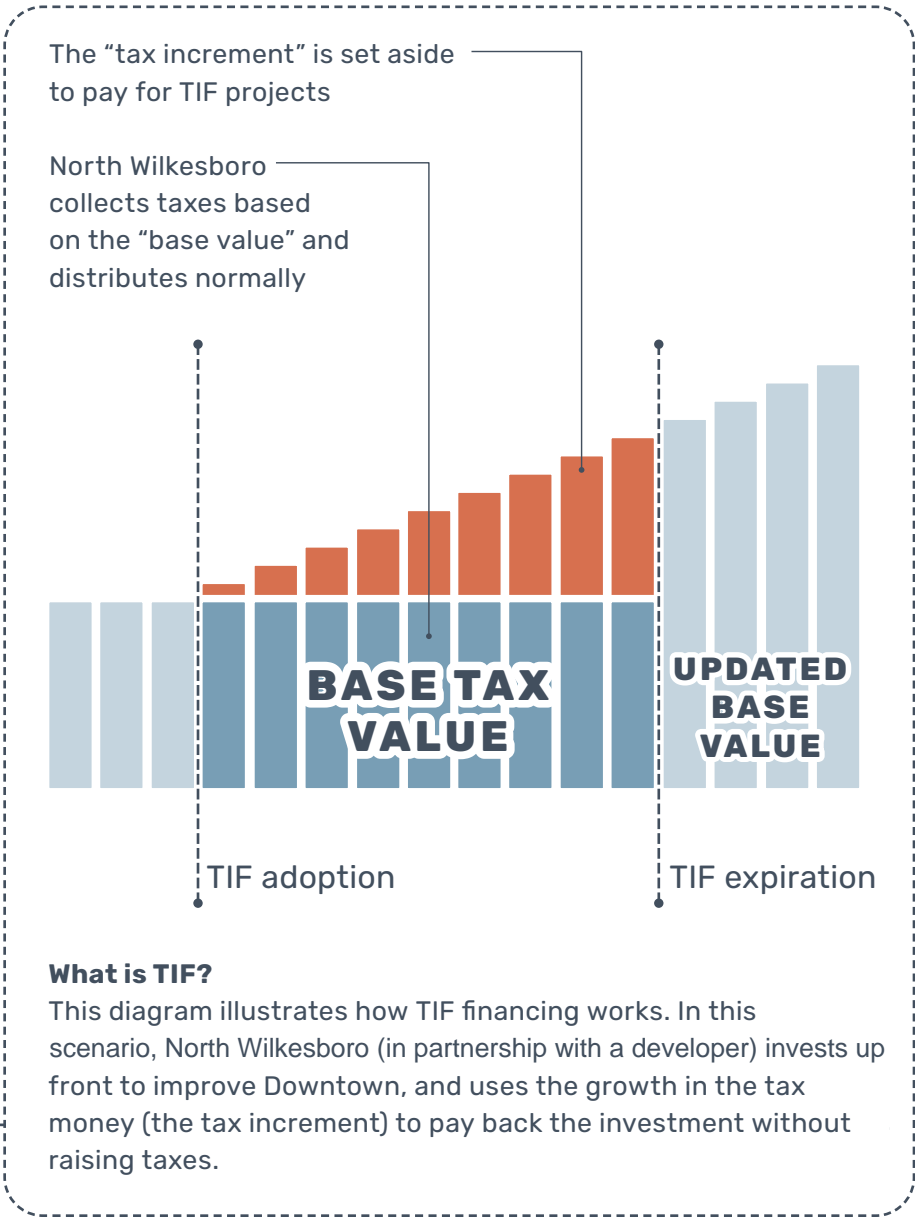
Public Investment + Financing

GENERAL OBLIGATION BONDS (GO BONDS)

General obligation bonds (subject to voter approval through a referendum) could fund transformative projects such as a riverfront park, trail infrastructure, or large-scale downtown improvements. These bonds are typically paid back over 15–30 years, spreading the cost of major projects across generations who will benefit from them. **Early community engagement is critical to ensure public support.**

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT FINANCING (TIF)

North Wilkesboro may consider a targeted Project Development Financing district to capture increased property tax revenue for reinvestment. This should be explored only with strong legal and financial support and limited to the Downtown or River District areas where private development commitments are likely. Typically, this kind of arrangement is structured as a negotiated partnership between the town and a developer, where both sides agree to specific investments and timelines. This approach ensures that tax increments can reliably repay project costs without raising existing tax rates, supporting sustainable revitalization while minimizing risk.





Private Investment + Cost-Sharing Models

REIMBURSEMENT PROGRAMS

Reimbursement programs provide post-completion funding for eligible improvements made by private property owners—such as façade upgrades, utility improvements, or streetscape enhancements. To implement effectively, the Town should:

- » Define eligible projects and application steps up front
- » Require documentation of costs and completion
- » Target areas with high visibility or catalytic potential

Even small reimbursements can have significant impact when paired with outreach and design guidance, encouraging reinvestment aligned with Town priorities.

TIE CONDITIONAL ZONING TO PLAN PRIORITIES

Use the Action Plan as a guide for evaluating conditional zoning requests. For example, rezonings can be negotiated to include public benefits such as trail connections, civic spaces, or affordable housing aligned with the Plan.

Wilmore Centennial Park in **Charlotte, NC** was developed through a partnership between Park and Recreation and Beacon Partners. Built on private land, the park delivers high-quality improvements that wouldn't have been possible through public funding alone and integrates seamlessly with the adjacent mixed-use development.



PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP (P3S)

P3s are collaborative arrangements where the Town and private sector share resources, risks, and rewards to deliver public projects. These types of partnerships can accelerate delivery of parks, mixed-use developments, or trail infrastructure by leveraging private investment and expertise. To be effective, North Wilkesboro should:

- » Focus on projects with strong market potential and community benefit
- » Use clear agreements outlining roles, timelines, and performance benchmarks
- » Engage legal and financial advisors to protect public interests

P3s are most valuable when public goals are well-defined and the Town acts as a proactive, informed partner.

DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENTS

Developer agreements formalize negotiated commitments between the Town and developers, often securing public benefits like trails, civic spaces, or infrastructure upgrades in exchange for entitlements or support. To guide their use, North Wilkesboro should:

- » Prioritize agreements in areas targeted for revitalization
- » Establish a clear policy framework outlining when and how they apply
- » Include timelines, performance measures, and enforcement terms

These agreements allow the Town to shape development in line with the plan, rather than respond to it passively.





Philanthropic + Grant Funding

CORPORATE + PRIVATE DONATION

North Wilkesboro’s employers and residents care about the town’s future. Consider launching a donation initiative to support the Action Plan Fund, including naming opportunities for projects or events.

GRANT TRACKING + PURSUIT

The public and private grant funding landscape is constantly evolving, with new programs created and others becoming discontinued in response to changing policies and economic conditions. To stay competitive, North Wilkesboro must be proactive. An important responsibility of the Plan Leader is to monitor grant opportunities, build relationships with funders, and submit well-timed, competitive applications.

But tracking opportunities isn’t enough. North Wilkesboro must also be grant-ready. This means having an adopted plan with broad public support, clear priorities, and defined project scopes with realistic budgets. Funders also look for evidence of community engagement, implementation capacity, and a plan for matching funds. Completing these foundational steps (*see page 89*) positions the Town to respond quickly when opportunities arise. The following table provides a selection of grant programs that North Wilkesboro may consider to advance the *Downtown + River District Plan*.

GRANT PROGRAM	ADMINISTERING AGENCY	PURPOSE
NORTH CAROLINA-BASED GRANTS		
Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant	NC Department of Commerce	Supports downtown revitalization and economic development initiatives in rural communities.
Rural + Downtown Community Economic Development Grants	NC General Assembly (Legislation Pending)	Provides funding to attract business investment and promote population and revenue growth in rural areas.
Open Grants Program	Golden LEAF Foundation	Supports economic development projects that lead to job creation and long-term economic vitality in rural and economically distressed communities.
Downtown Revitalization Funding Opportunities	NC Main Street + Rural Planning Center	Provides funding and technical assistance to support downtown revitalization in rural communities. Eligible projects include small-scale infrastructure improvements, building rehabilitation, streetscape enhancements, and planning initiatives that strengthen the local economy, preserve historic character, and align with a community’s long-term vision.
EDA Public Works + Economic Adjustment Assistance	US Economic Development Administration	Supports critical infrastructure linked to long-term economic development in distressed areas.
NC IDEA MICRO Grant	NC IDEA Foundation	Early-stage funding to support innovative small-town economic development ideas (more entrepreneurial).
Historic Preservation Fund Grants	NC State Historic Preservation Office	Funds rehabilitation or planning for designated historic properties or districts.
Rural Engagement + Investment Program	NC Department of Commerce	Provides grants for downtown revitalization, resilient neighborhoods, rural community capacity, and community enhancements for economic growth.
Recreational Trails Program	NC Division of Parks + Recreation	Supports trail development and maintenance projects.



GRANT TRACKING + PURSUIT (CONT.)

GRANT PROGRAM	ADMINISTERING AGENCY	PURPOSE
NORTH CAROLINA-BASED GRANTS (CONT.)		
Great Trails State Program	NC State Parks	Provides funding for new trail development and extension of existing trails statewide.
Multimodal Planning Grant Program	NCDOT Integrated Mobility Division	Supports the development of bicycle and pedestrian plans and transit connections with a focus on implementation.
Parks + Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) Grants	NC Division of Parks + Recreation	Matching grants for parks and recreational facilities – up to \$500,000 per project.

GRANT PROGRAM	ADMINISTERING AGENCY	PURPOSE
NATIONAL GRANTS		
Our Town Grant	National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)	Creative placemaking grants that connect arts, culture, and design with revitalization efforts.
Placemaking Grants	Project for Public Spaces	Small grants to activate downtown public spaces and create community gathering places.
Asphalt Art Initiative	Bloomberg Philanthropies	Grants for using public art to improve safety and vibrancy at intersections, streetscapes, and public spaces.
Public Art Challenge	Bloomberg Philanthropies	Funding for large-scale, temporary public art projects tied to civic identity and community engagement.
Safe Streets + Roads for All (SS4A)	US Department of Transportation	Provides funding for safety action plans and implementation projects to reduce roadway fatalities and serious injuries.
Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Grants	US Department of Transportation	Large transportation projects, including downtown streetscapes, bike/pedestrian projects, multimodal improvements. Highly competitive.
Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)	NCDOT through Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) funding	Funds projects related to sidewalks, bikeways, trails, and Safe Routes to School.
Community Grant Program	PeopleForBikes	Small grants for bicycle infrastructure projects, such as bike racks, signage, or minor trail connections.
AARP Community Challenge Grant	AARP (American Association of Retired Persons)	Small grants for quick-build projects that make communities more livable for people of all ages—includes trails, parks, and streetscape improvements.
Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC)	USDA	Supports placemaking planning and capacity-building in rural communities.





Shared Infrastructure Investment Programs

PLANNING DISTRICT OVERLAY (MSD)

A Municipal Service District (MSD) is a tool allowed under North Carolina law that enables towns to levy a supplemental property tax within a defined district, with the proceeds used exclusively for improvements in that area. For North Wilkesboro, this could fund initiatives like streetscape maintenance, marketing, placemaking, business support programs, or staffing to accelerate plan implementation.

However, recent discussions around establishing an MSD for the River District have made clear that broad support from downtown stakeholders is essential. Property owners must have a clear understanding of:

- » What the MSD would fund specifically
- » How decisions about fund use would be made
- » How the funds would be transparently managed and overseen

To move forward successfully, the Town should:

- » Clearly define proposed uses for MSD funds in alignment with the plan priorities (a phased streetscape enhancement plan, shared branding and signage, building improvement incentives).
- » Draft example budgets and visuals to show the scale of improvements that could be delivered.
- » Engage property owners early and consistently to build trust and incorporate feedback.
- » Establish an MSD Advisory Board with diverse representation from downtown stakeholders and transparent selection criteria.
- » Pair MSD establishment with a broader revitalization strategy so property owners understand how their contributions fit into a coordinated vision.

An MSD should not be positioned as a standalone fix, but as **one piece of a broader strategy** to unlock long-term, locally driven investment in the downtown core.



Goldsboro, NC is an example of how, by leveraging MSD funds and strategic partnerships, a small town can transform its historic core into a vibrant, economically-thriving district. Since 2013, downtown Goldsboro has attracted approximately \$51 million in private investment, leading to the renovation of 200 buildings, the creation of 703 new jobs, and the establishment of 62 new businesses and 68 new apartments.



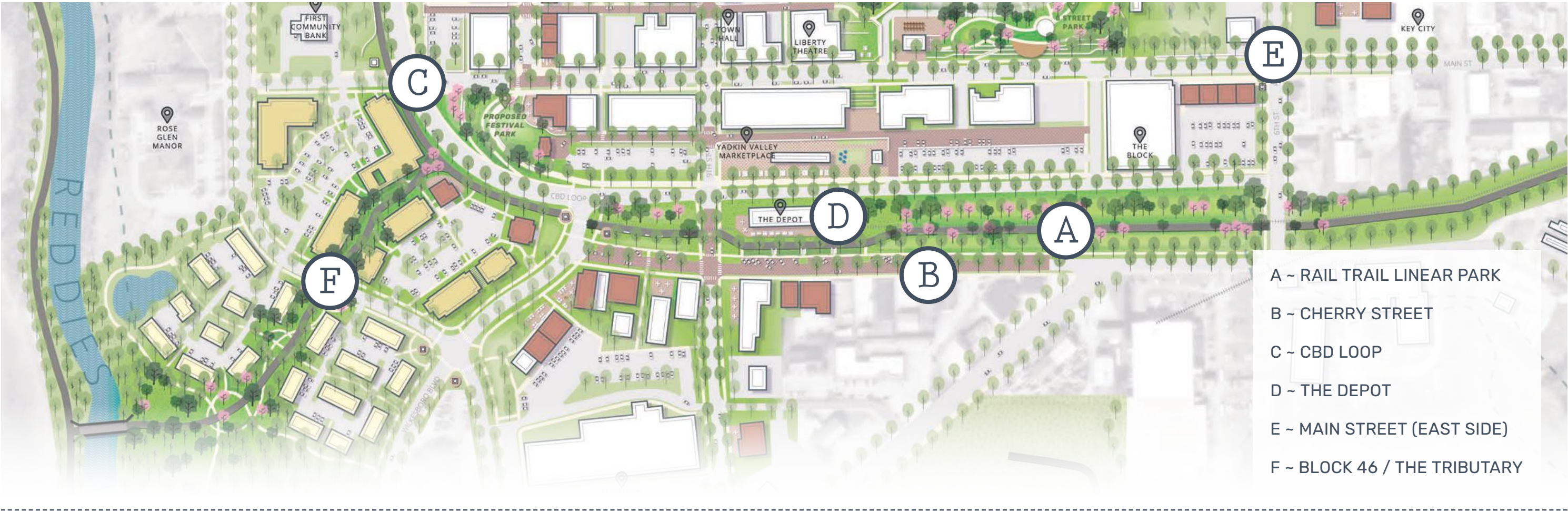
PHASE 1 PROJECTS: THE RIVERFRONT CONFLUENCE

The Confluence is where the charm of the historic downtown and the creative pulse of the Arts District flow naturally into the River District, reimagined as the town’s riverside playground.

6 PROJECTS TO BUILD MOMENTUM

This area has been identified as the focal point for early investment, where energy from Main Street, the Arts District, and the River District naturally comes together. This area presents the strongest opportunity to align community priorities with implementable projects that can catalyze broader transformation. The following six priority projects were selected from the plan for their high impact, visibility, and ability to build early momentum in Phase 1 of implementation.

For more information about implementation of these six projects, please refer to the Action Plan.





A RAIL TRAIL LINEAR PARK

It is recommended that the Town **engage a consultant** to help implement key Action Steps for this project, particularly the early steps, that include coordination with:

- » A title attorney with railroad experience, as ownership of old railroad spurs in NC is often nuanced
- » Norfolk Southern Real Estate Division
- » State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)
- » Regulatory and permitting process

This project will also require an in-depth site assessment (with survey), preliminary concept design, and cost estimation.



B CHERRY STREET

This project is a key investment to support economic vitality, walkability, and streetlife in the River District. Combining Cherry Street upgrades with other improvements, like the Depot and/or Rail Trail, can reduce overall costs and minimize disruptions (like extended road closures), as well as create a more cohesive district experience. This will require **coordination with adjacent property owners** to:

- » Build consensus on a preferred concept
- » Test low-cost activations
- » Incentivize building reuse
- » Coordinate construction schedules



C CBD LOOP

CBD Loop is the greatest physical barrier between River District and Downtown, and initial assessment indicates that all five travel lanes may not be necessary for the road to still function. The Town should **work with a transportation planner** in Phase 1 to:

- » Complete a corridor study that evaluates conversion options and traffic impacts (a formal analysis is likely not necessary)
- » Coordinate with NCDOT (District 11)
- » Consider phased implementation – since NCDOT resurfacing is 10–12 years out, curb and hardscape changes will likely require GO bonds or external funding



D THE DEPOT

Rehabilitation of the Depot and the Rail Trail/Cherry Street corridor could occur independently or as concurrent projects. In either case, **close collaboration with the property owner** will be critical in Phase 1 to:

- » Identify opportunities to amplify the Depot’s historic designation for public engagement, branding, tax credits, and grants
- » Pitch redevelopment opportunities that are synergistic with Rail Trail and incorporate the site as a major trailhead
- » Coordinate with the SHPO to understand design guidance, funding opportunities, or key partnerships



E MAIN STREET (EAST SIDE)

East Main Street is a vital entry corridor into Downtown and should be enhanced to strengthen its role as a welcoming gateway, and as an integrated part of the walkable Downtown area. Recommendations include:

- » Improve pedestrian safety and accessibility through wider sidewalks, mid-block crossings, and ADA upgrades
- » Enhance the streetscape with lighting, trees, and branded wayfinding
- » Reinforce the historic character with façade improvements and sensitive infill

Improvements should be coordinated with upgrades to Smoot Park and the CBD Loop to **unify east-west connections and support continued revitalization.**



F BLOCK 46 / THE TRIBUTARY

This site is uniquely positioned to deliver on key goals of the plan, especially increasing downtown housing supply, activating underutilized parcels, and integrating public spaces like the Tributary. Phase 1 will primarily consist of **administrative actions** to:

- » Finalize the formal transfer of Block 46 parcels from the Block 46 LLC to the town
- » Retain an economic development consultant to prepare an RFQ package targeted to private developers
- » Negotiate tailored development agreements to balance public priorities with developer capacity and refine incentive packages









Section Seven
APPENDIX



SESSION 1 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In-Person at the Light Up Downtown event

On November 22, 2024 the Project Team hosted a booth in Town Hall during the Light Up Downtown annual event to capture input from attending residents about their vision for Downtown and the River District. The following is a summary of what we heard.

WHY?

- » Increase understanding of the unique assets, gaps, and opportunities in North Wilkesboro, as perceived by the community
- » Introduce the project to the community – including the general scope, schedule, and goals of the project
- » Provide residents with QR codes to the online survey to capture additional feedback from folks that did not attend
- » Key findings from this engagement session informed the recommendations for the final plan



TOP 5 COMMUNITY GOALS

NORTH WILKESBORO WILL BE SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE...



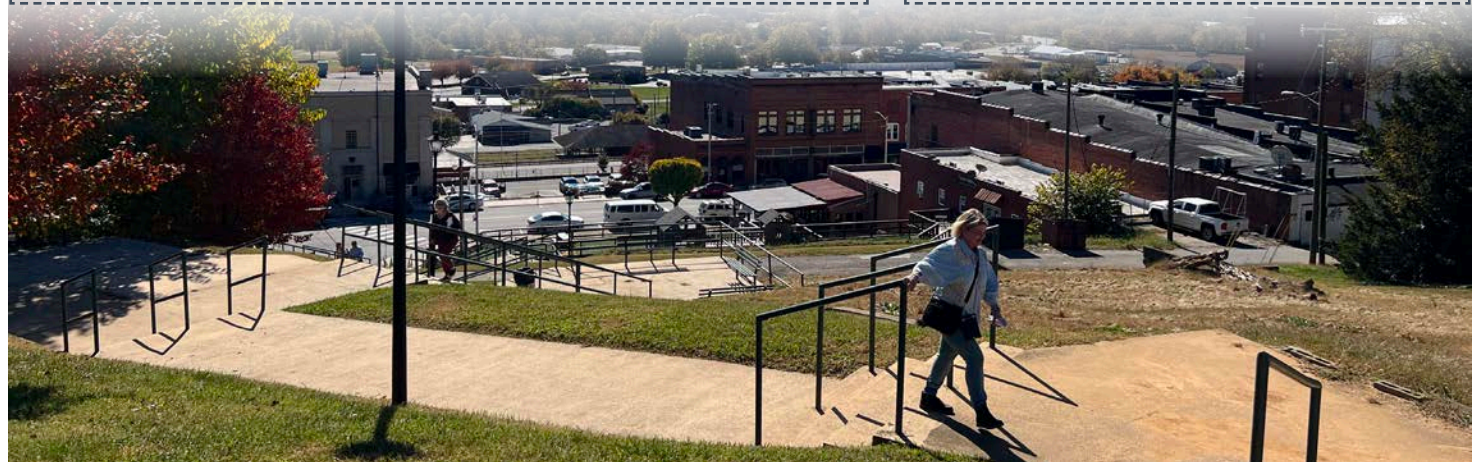
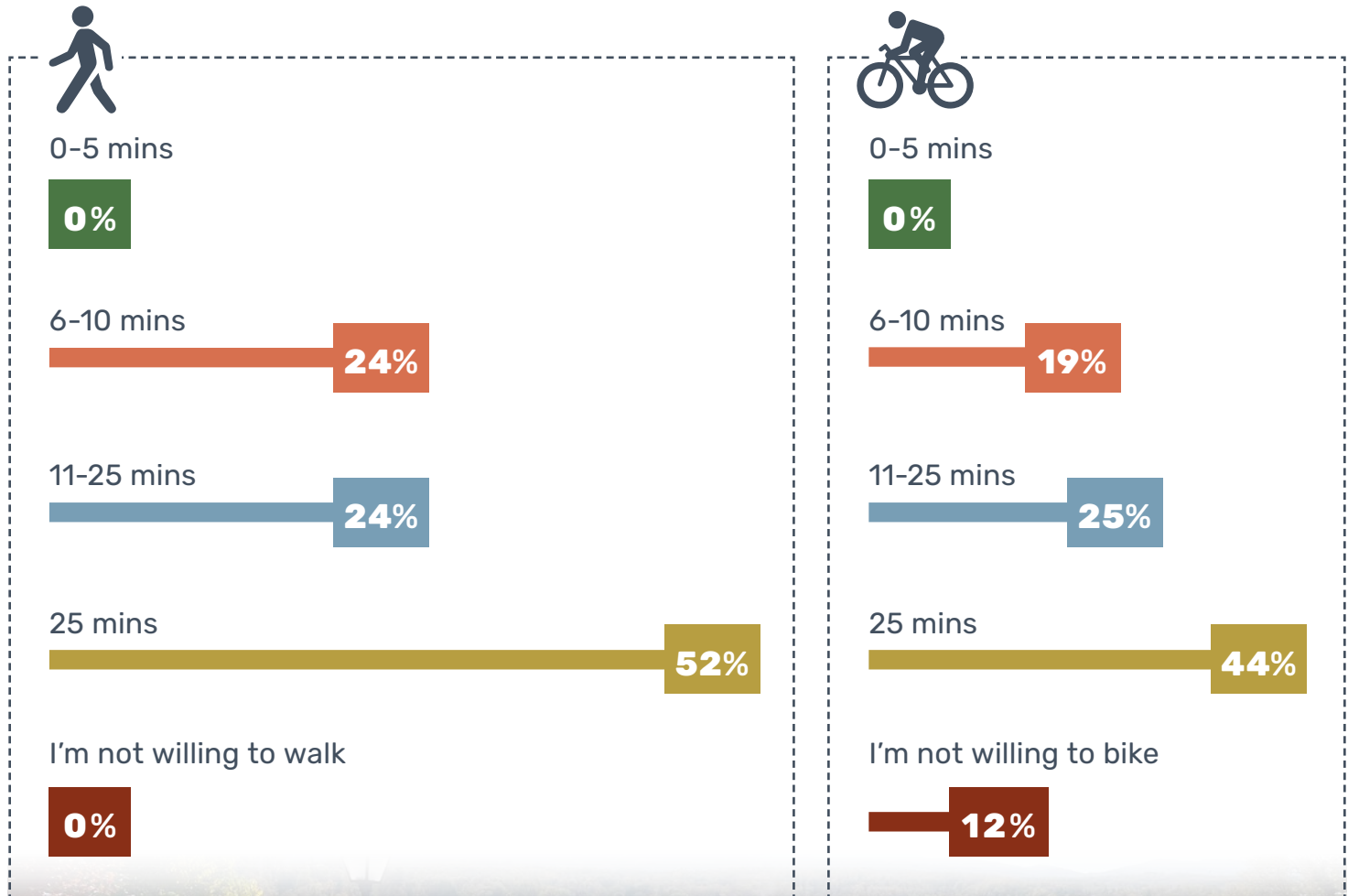
OVER 100
PEOPLE ATTENDED

36
ATTENDEES
SIGNED IN

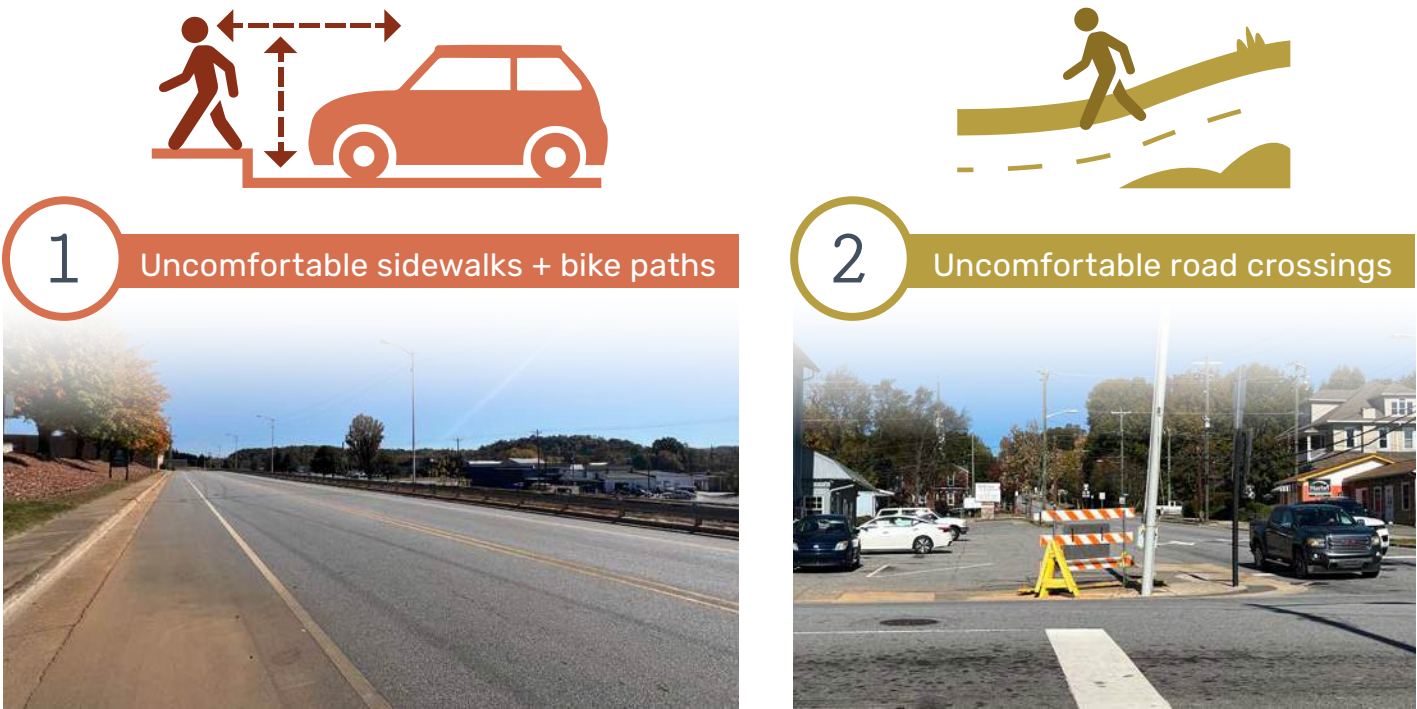




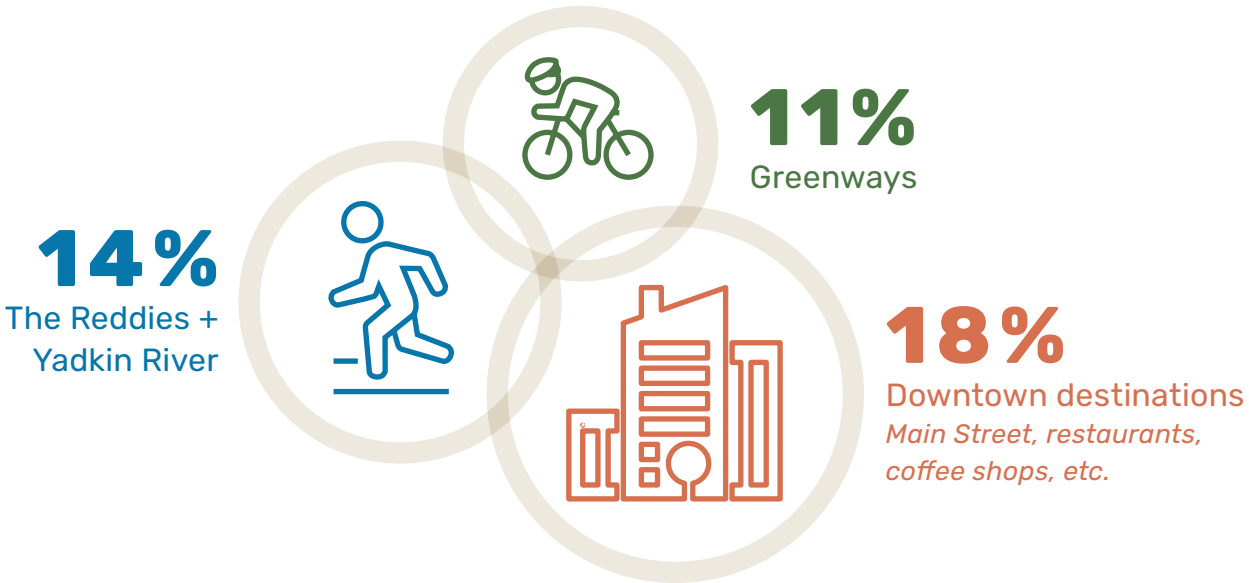
HOW MANY MINUTES ARE PEOPLE WILLING TO WALK/BIKE?



TOP 2 BARRIERS TO WALKING + BIKING



TOP 3 DESIRED WALKABLE DESTINATIONS



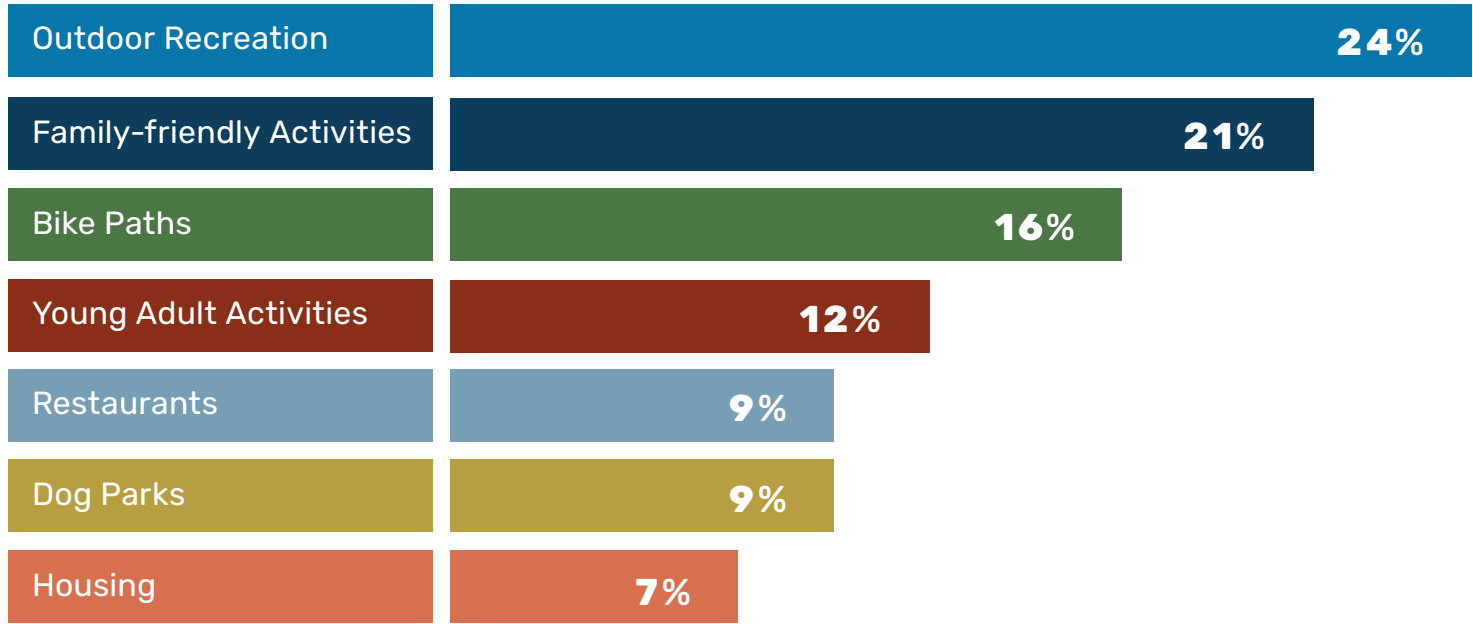


TOP 3 PARKS + OPEN SPACES

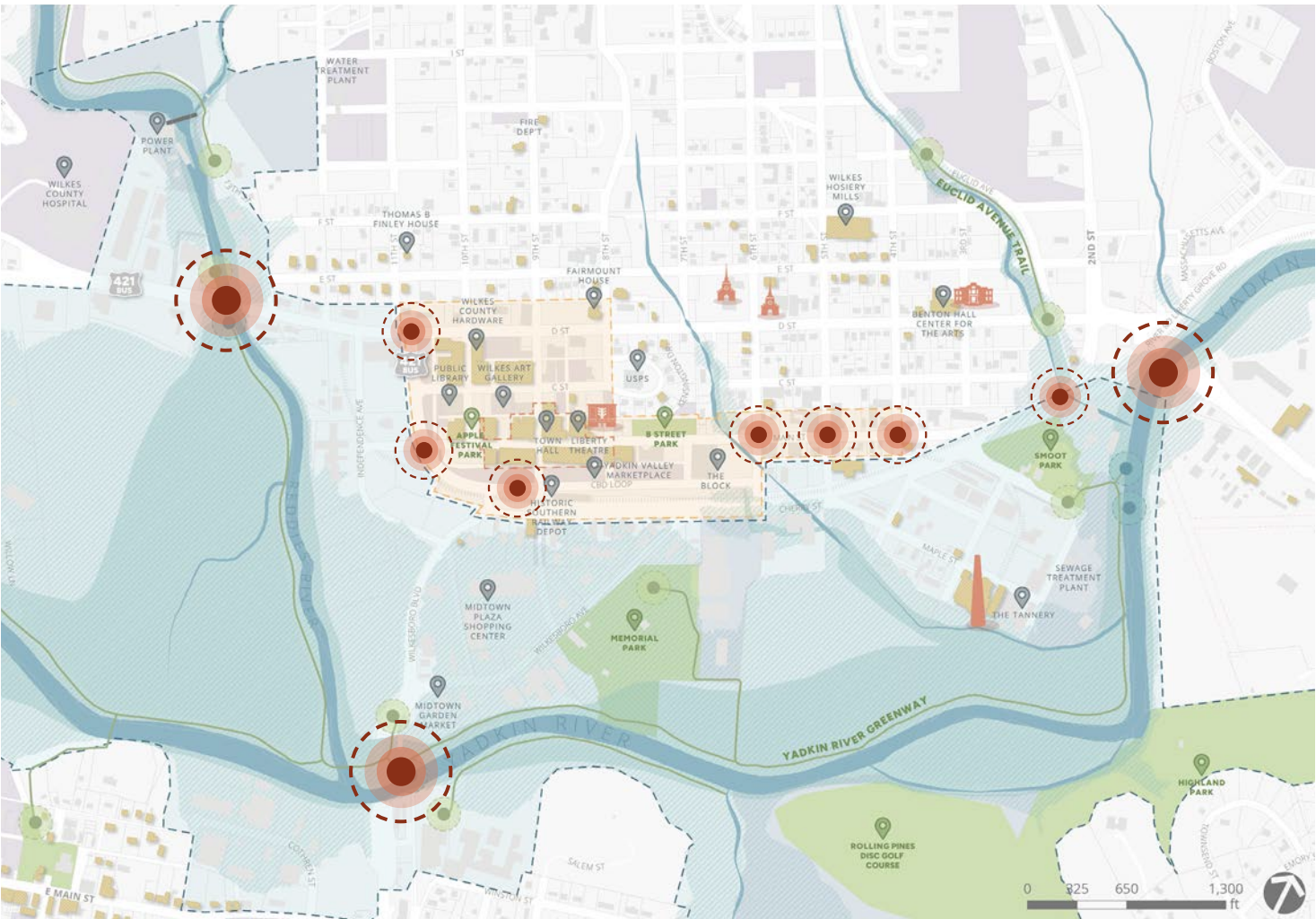


WHAT IS MISSING IN NORTH WILKESBORO?

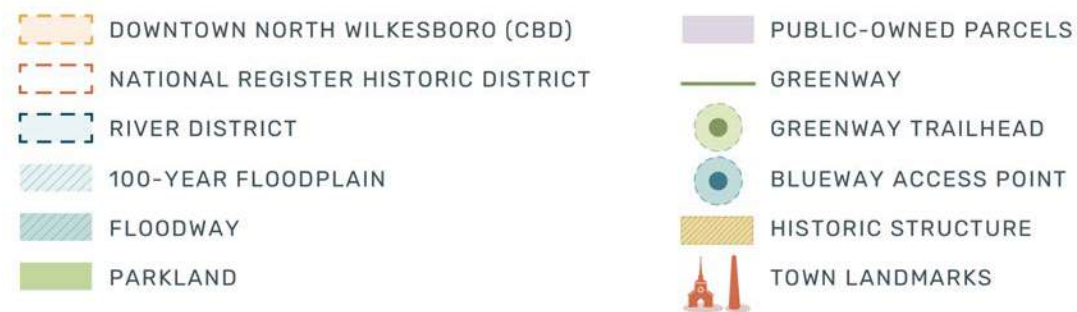
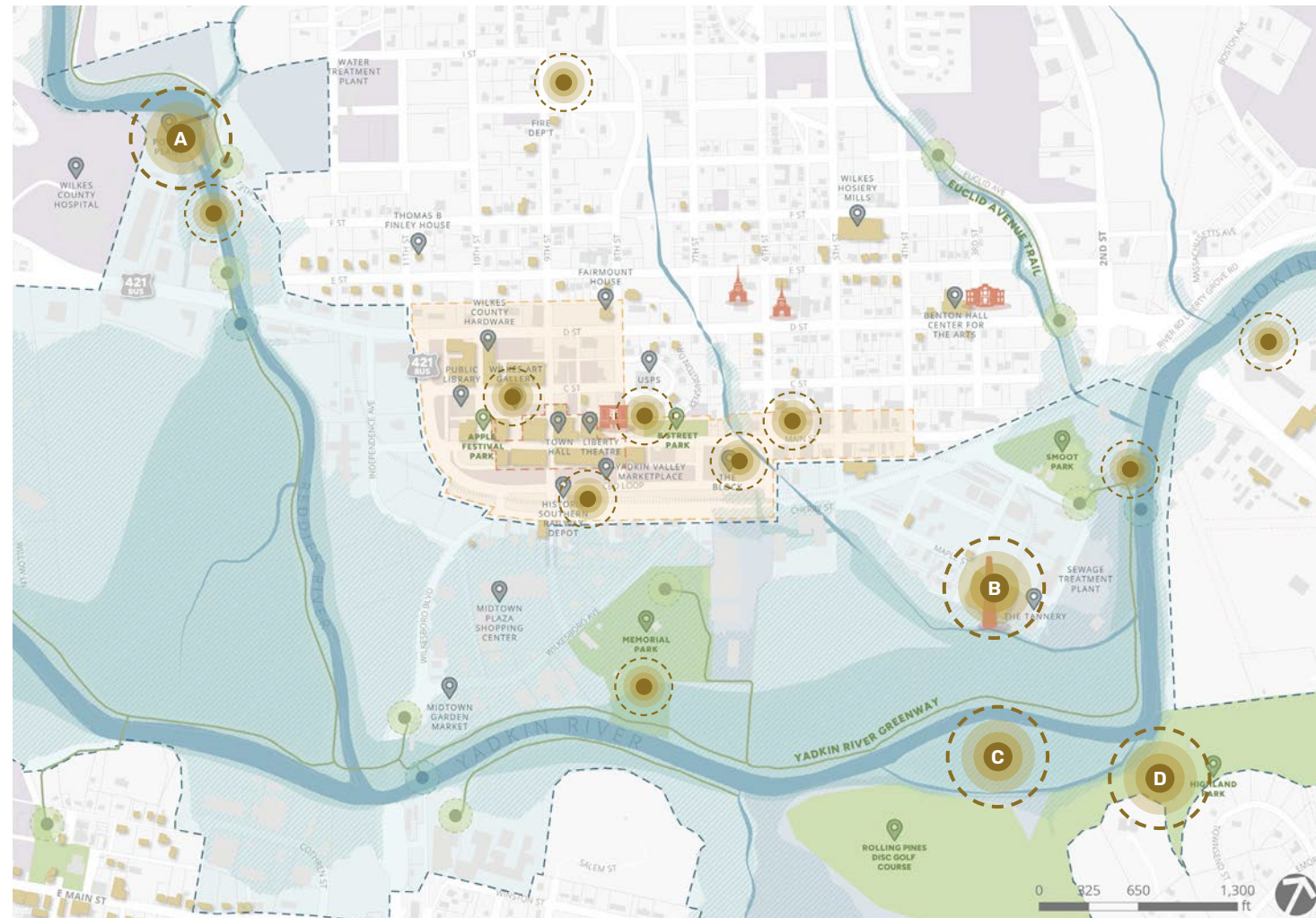
NORTH WILKESBORO'S BIGGEST GAPS



WHERE ARE THE GATEWAYS IN TOWN LOCATED?



WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW SPECIAL PLACES?



TOP ANSWERS

A. Power Plant

B. The Tannery

C. Blair Island

D. Highland Park



OTHER ANSWERS

Connections to the Yadkin River by the VFW

Smoot Park

Key City Antique Mall

Wilkes Art Gallery

The Depot

B Street Park

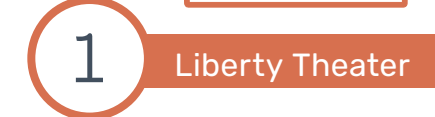
For sale parcel (9th and H St)

The Block

Memorial Park

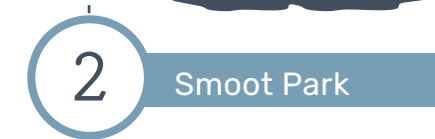
EXISTING SPECIAL PLACES

50+
WRITE-IN
RESPONSES



1

Liberty Theater



2

Smoot Park



3

Anchor Coffee

Brushy Mountain CrossFit

VFW

Wendy's

Smoot Park

Benton Hall Center for the Arts

First Baptist Church

First United Methodist Church

Key City Antique Mall

B Street Park

The Block

Liberty Theater

Yadkin Valley Marketplace

Unified City Church

B Street Park stairs to USPS

Sewage treatment plant

Water treatment plant

Reddies River and Greenway

Wilkes County Hospital



NORTH WILKESBORO TODAY:



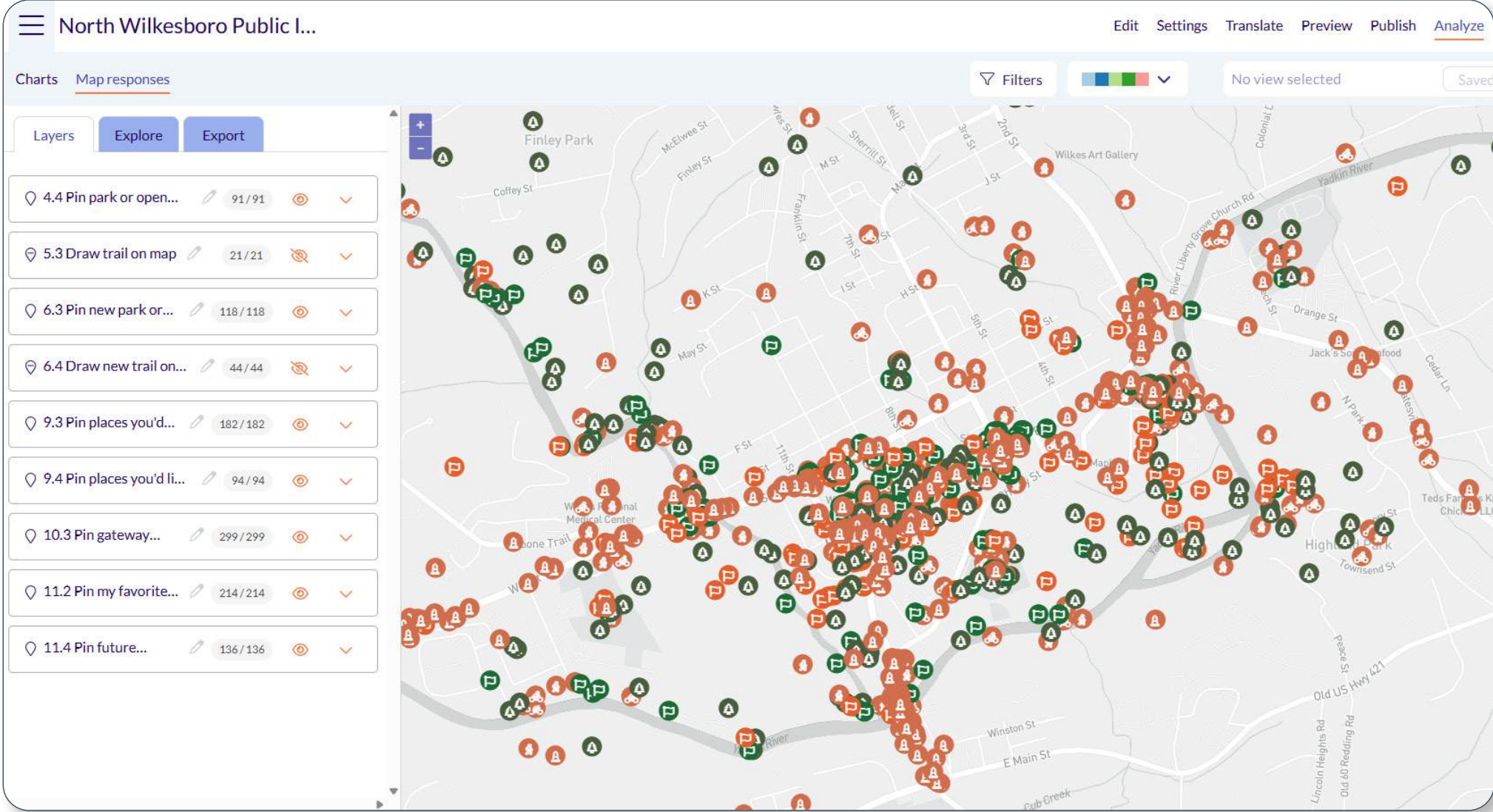
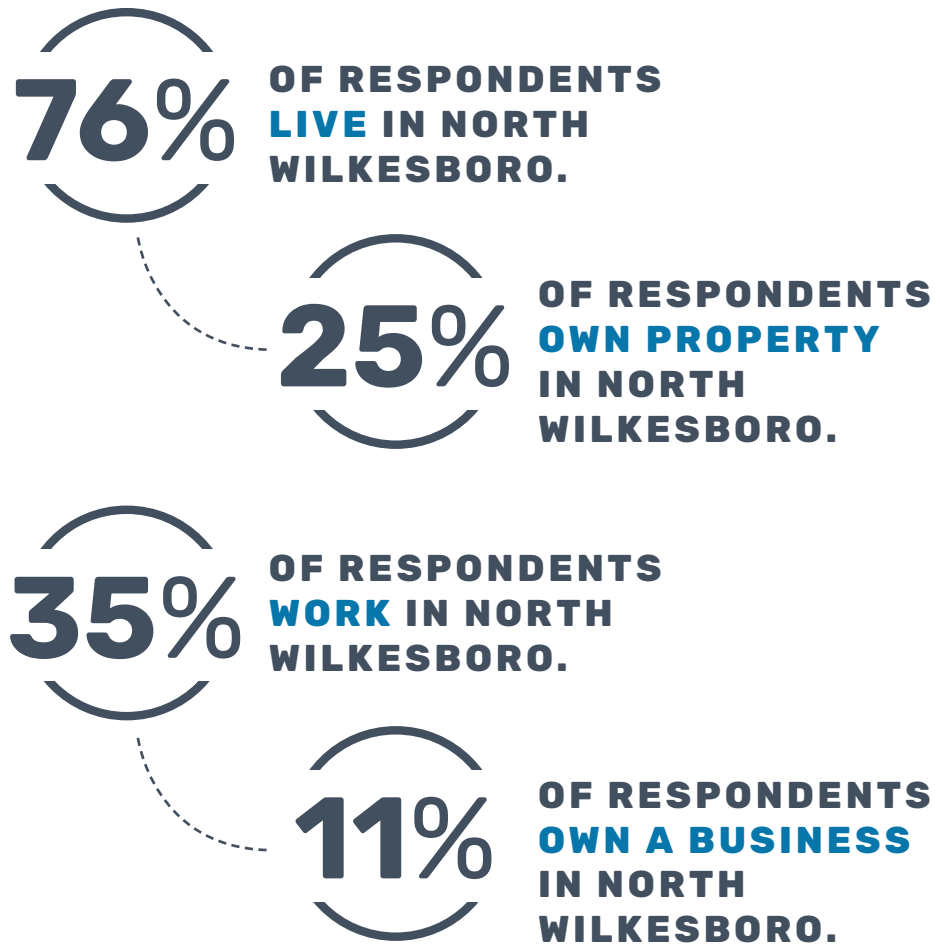


NORTH WILKESBORO TOMORROW: WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY'S VISION FOR DOWNTOWN + THE RIVER DISTRICT?



SESSION 1 COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

The online survey was open for responses after the in-person engagement session to capture additional input from residents that may not have been able to attend in November. The survey was open for responses between November 22, 2024 and February 8, 2025.

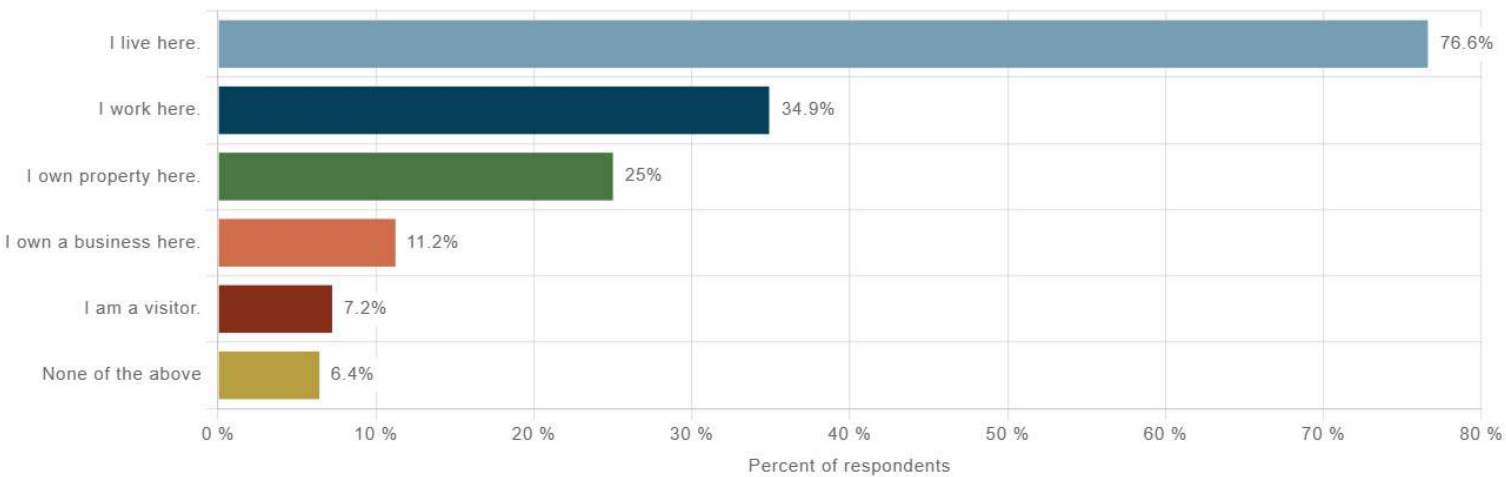


Over the course of 77 days,
1,204 people responded to the survey.
[approximately 15 people per day!]



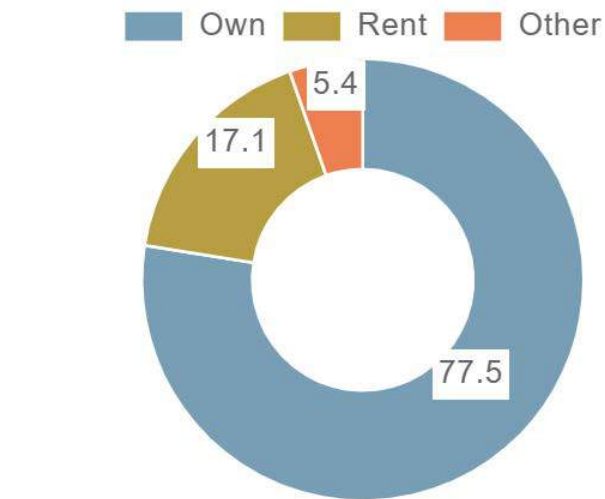
OVERVIEW OF RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Relationship to North Wilkesboro



Total respondents: 748

Home Ownership Status

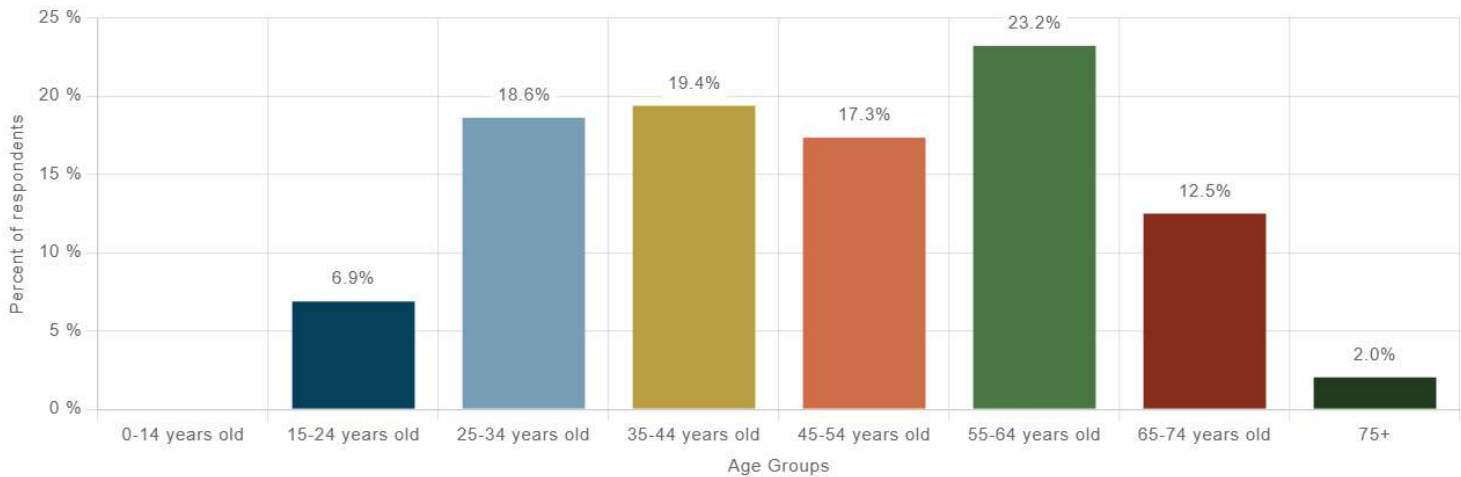


Total respondents: 391

The survey captured strong input from core community members, particularly homeowners and working-age adults.

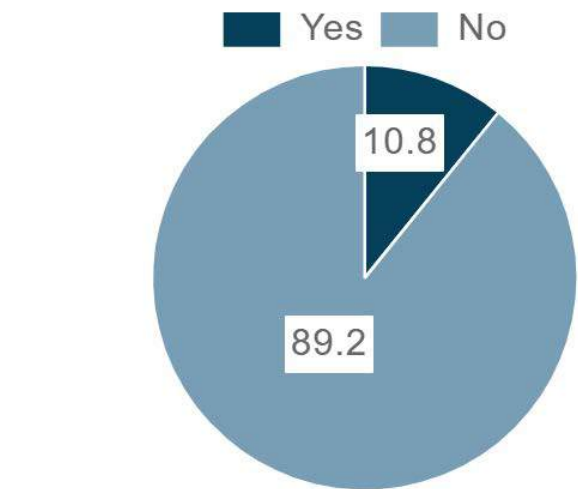
A smaller portion of respondents own a business (11.2%) or identify as a visitor (7.2%). This suggests economic development or tourism-related insights in the online survey may be somewhat underrepresented, which may skew input toward residential vs. commercial/tourism priorities.

Age Group



Total respondents: 392

Accessibility Needs?



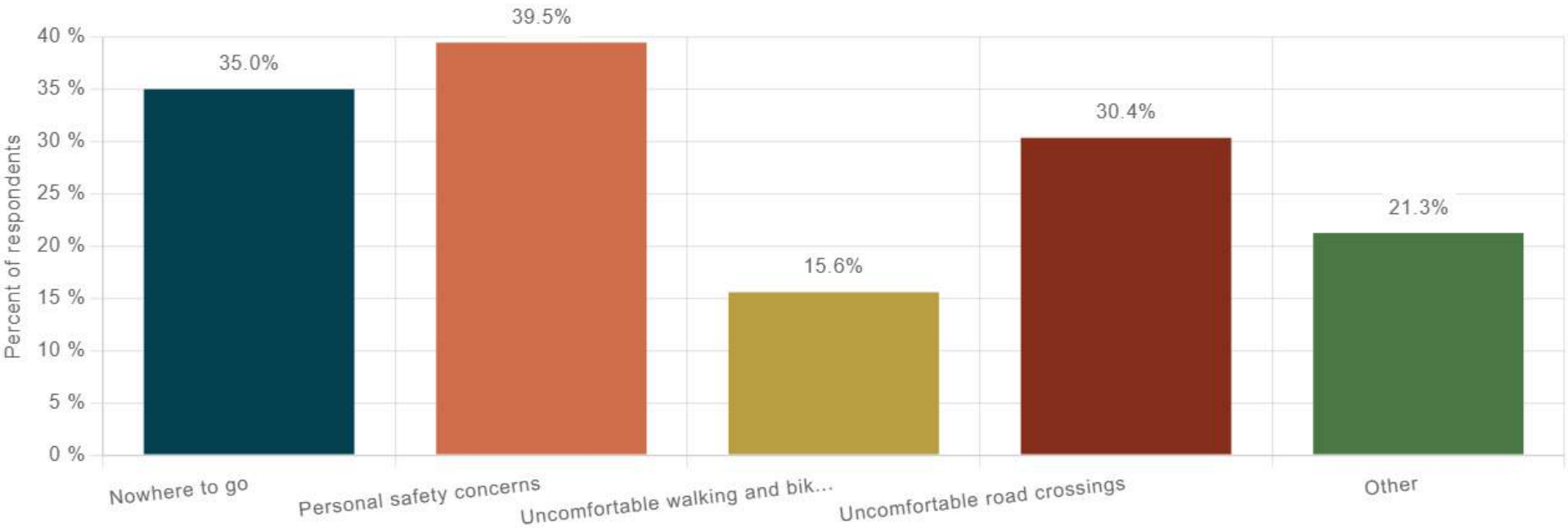
Total respondents: 388

The project team interviewed local business owners and developers separate to the online survey to ensure their perspectives were included, especially regarding challenges and opportunities related to investment, foot traffic, and infrastructure needs in Downtown and other developing commercial areas.



WHAT ARE THE TOP BARRIERS TO WALKING + BIKING IN NORTH WILKESBORO?

Barriers



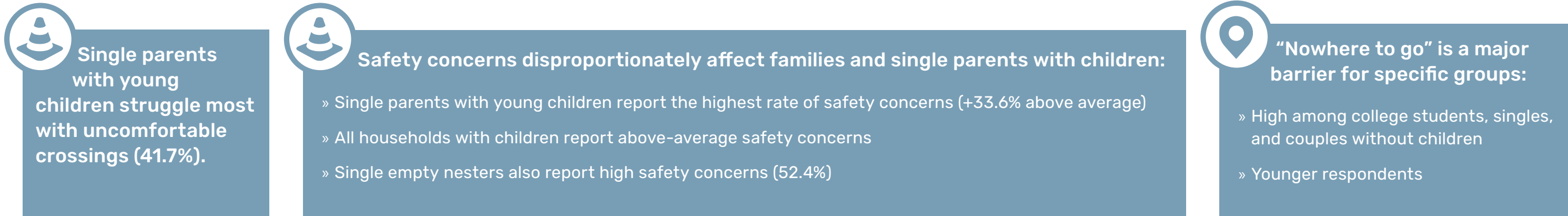
Total respondents: 494

Understanding the perceived barriers to walking and biking is essential for developing targeted strategies that improve street infrastructure and encourage greater community participation in active travel in Downtown and River District.



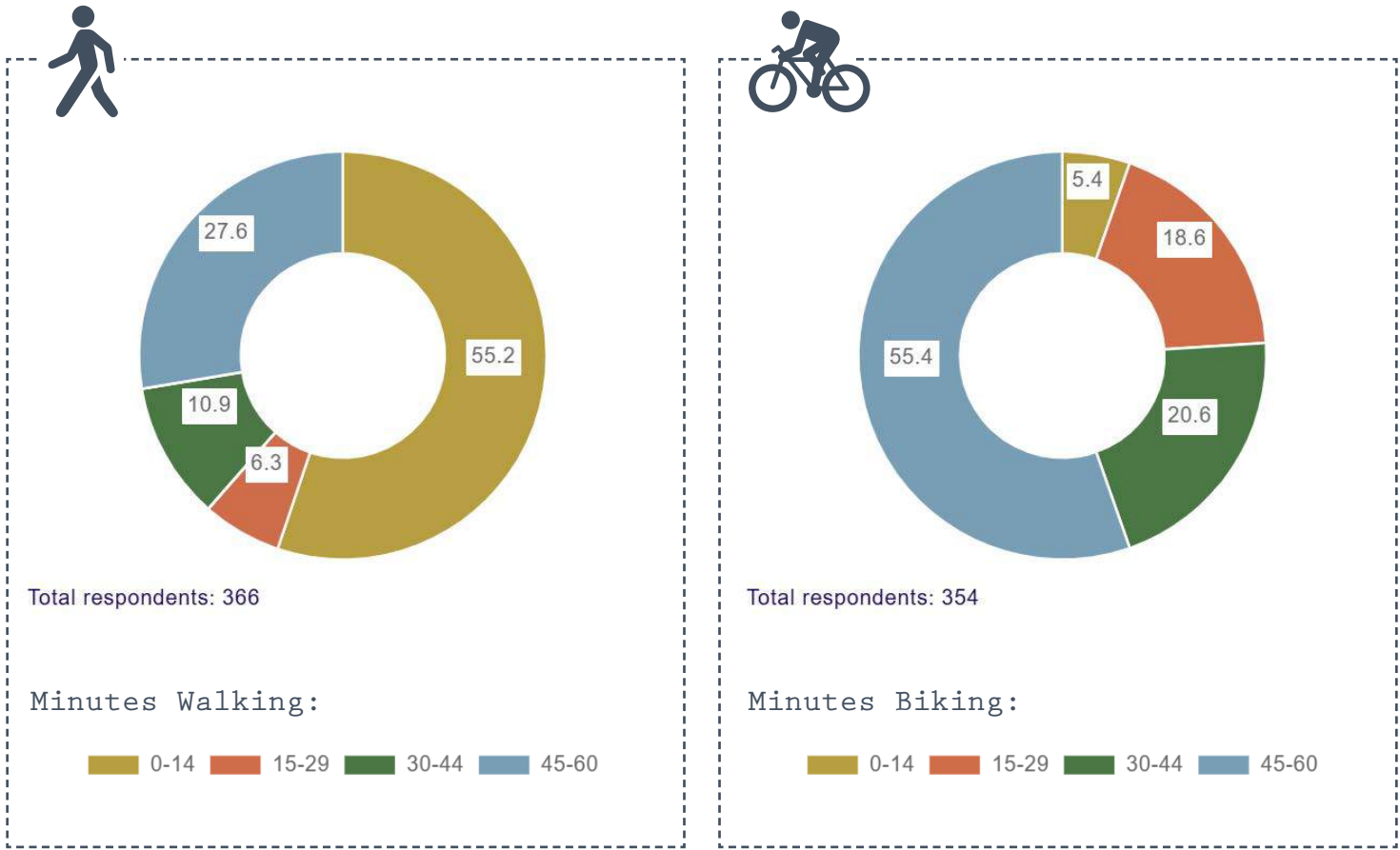
Personal safety concerns and lack of destinations (“nowhere to go”) were the top answers from the survey, highlighting the need for street enhancements – such as lighting, visibility, and traffic calming – and the development of more vibrant destinations that make walking and biking more practical and appealing.

Demographic Trends






HOW MANY MINUTES ARE PEOPLE WILLING TO WALK + BIKE?




Demographic Trends



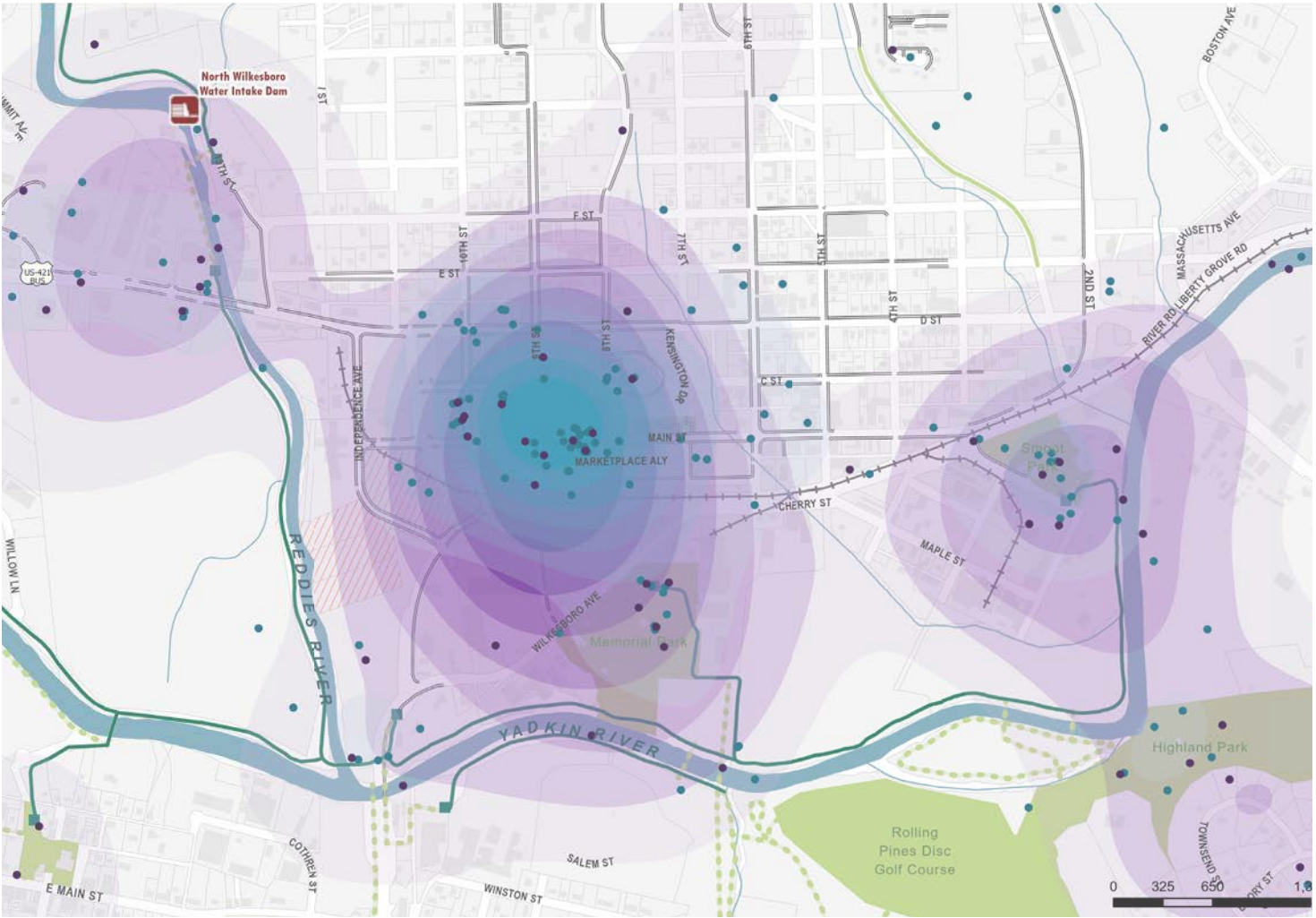
Walking distance preferences are generally consistent:





- » Most household types are willing to walk 2.0-2.2 miles (40-45 minutes)
- » Multi-generational households are willing to walk the farthest (50 minutes, 2.5 miles)



Couples without children and couples with teenagers report the highest willingness to bike.

WHERE DO PEOPLE WANT TO WALK + BIKE?



-  I WANT TO WALK HERE
-  I WANT TO BIKE HERE
-  EXISTING GREENWAY
-  GREENWAY TRAILHEAD

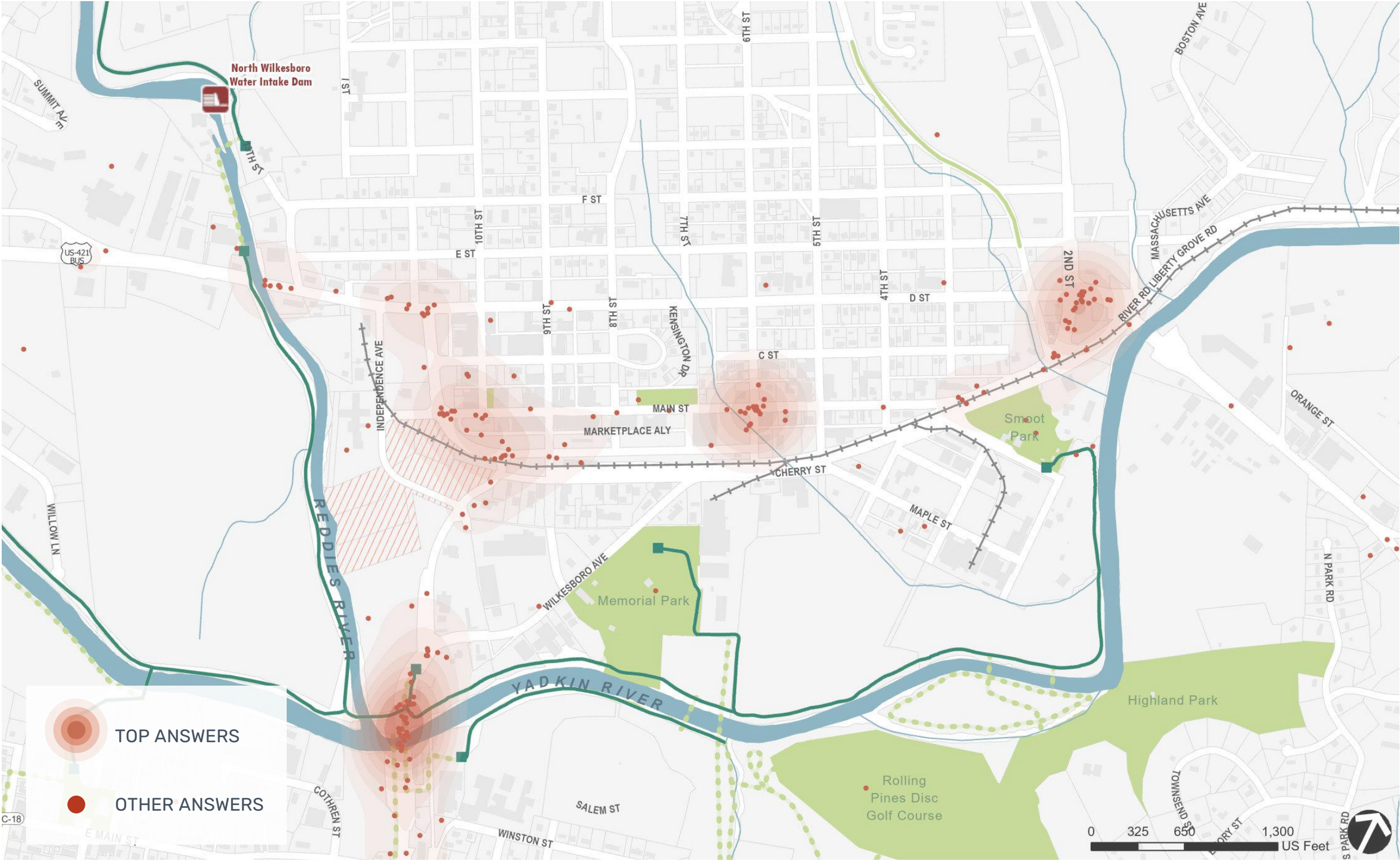
The clustering patterns radiating from key nodes into the River District emphasize a desire for seamless, connected routes between activity centers, especially to Downtown, parks, and nearby neighborhoods.



Existing Gateways

KEY TAKEAWAYS

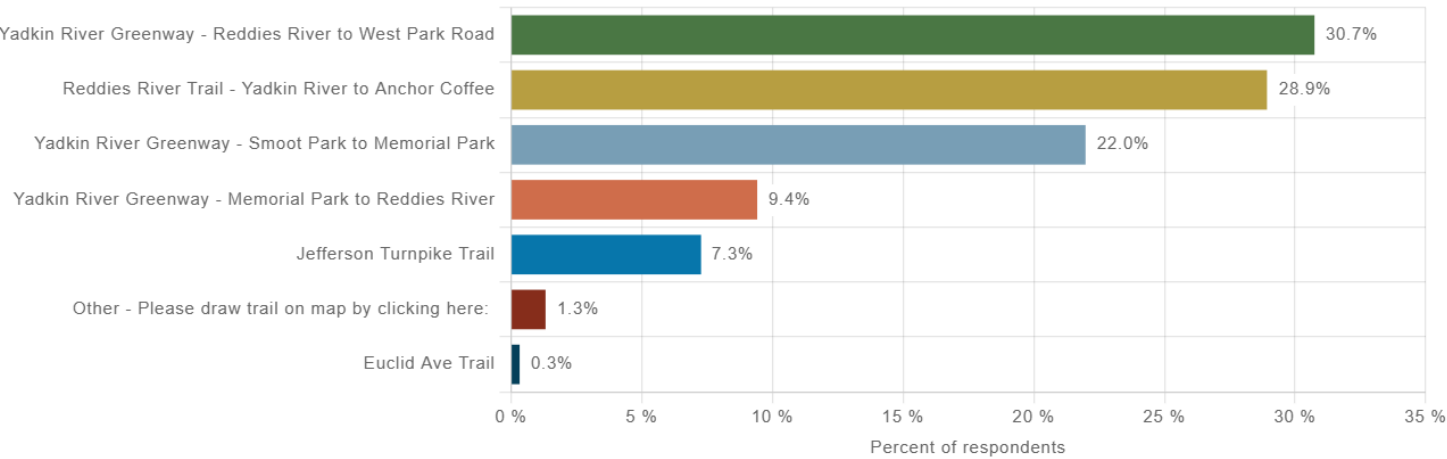
- » The intersections that **bookend Main Street** mark key entry and exit points into Downtown. They signal a shift from surrounding neighborhoods and corridors into a more walkable and visually distinct area, making them natural places where people feel they are arriving, or leaving, Main Street.
- » **Bridges** often mark a clear physical and symbolic transition between places. They serve as memorable landmarks that naturally draw attention and signal arrival, which is why many respondents identified Wilkesboro Ave, D Street, and Statesville Road bridges as gateways.





WHICH TRAILS DO RESPONDENTS ENJOY THE MOST?

Favorite Trail Segments



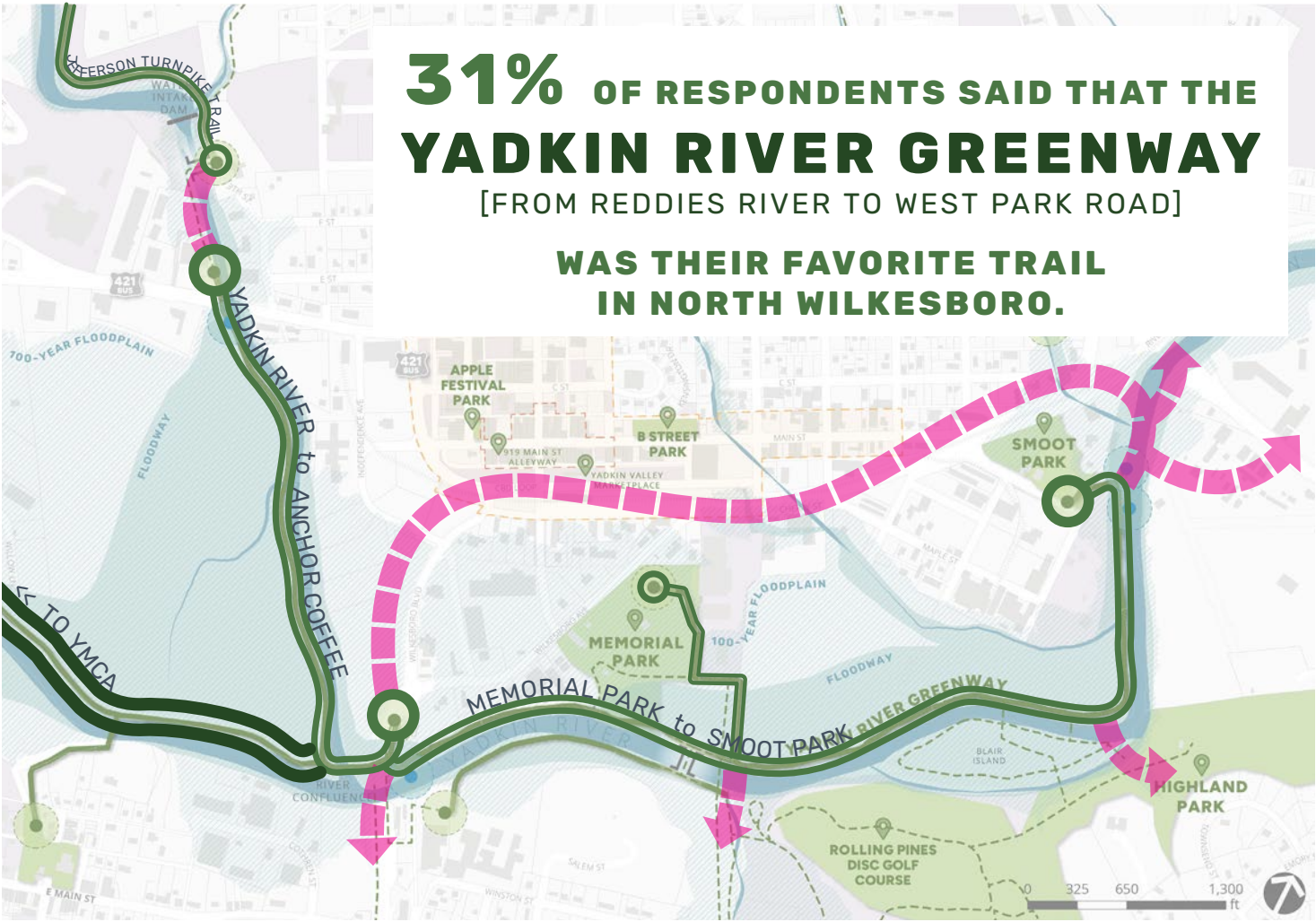
Total respondents: 605

“The area right below the dam is gorgeous, but really needs cleaning up... It could be a great swimming hole. Sometimes the water even has some rapids after a rain, which would be a really cool kayaking feature.”

“The Reddies river section of the greenway is the prettiest section. The beaches, the quietness, the rhododendron, and river make for a peaceful walking experience.”

– SURVEY COMMENTS

WHERE ARE THE PRIORITY TRAIL GAPS?



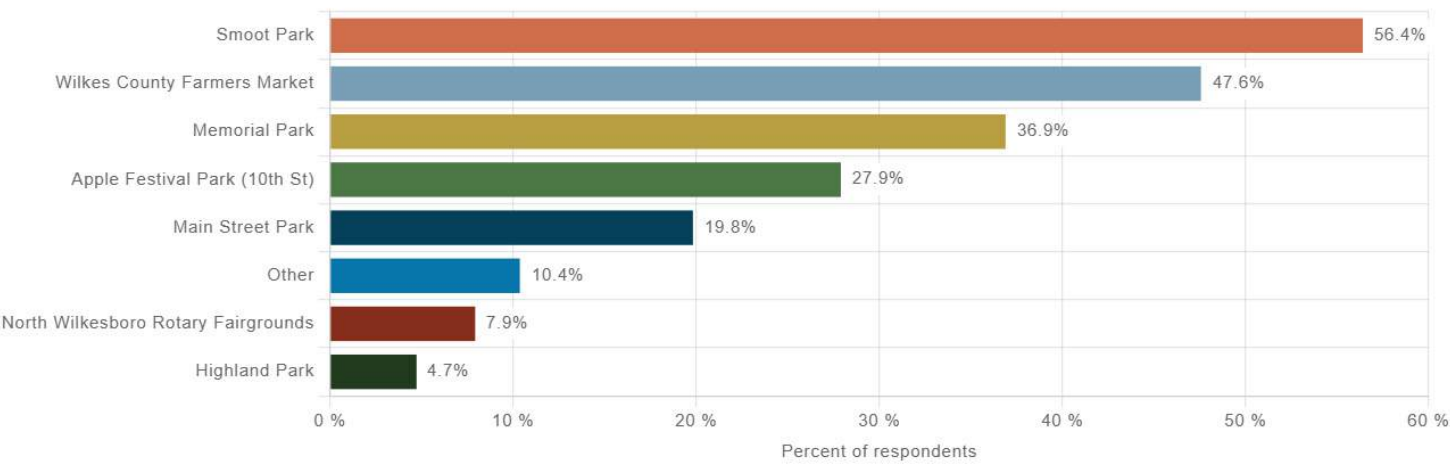
- TOP ANSWER
- OTHER HIGH-RANKING ANSWERS
- IDENTIFIED TRAIL GAPS

The Yadkin River Greenway is a popular corridor, especially where it links recreational assets like Smoot Park and the YMCA. Many respondents pointed out the rail trail corridor/ CBD Loop as a missing link in the trail system, wanting a connection from the River District to Downtown to form a complete loop.



WHAT ARE THE TOWN'S MOST TREASURED PARK ASSETS?

Favorite Parks + Open Spaces

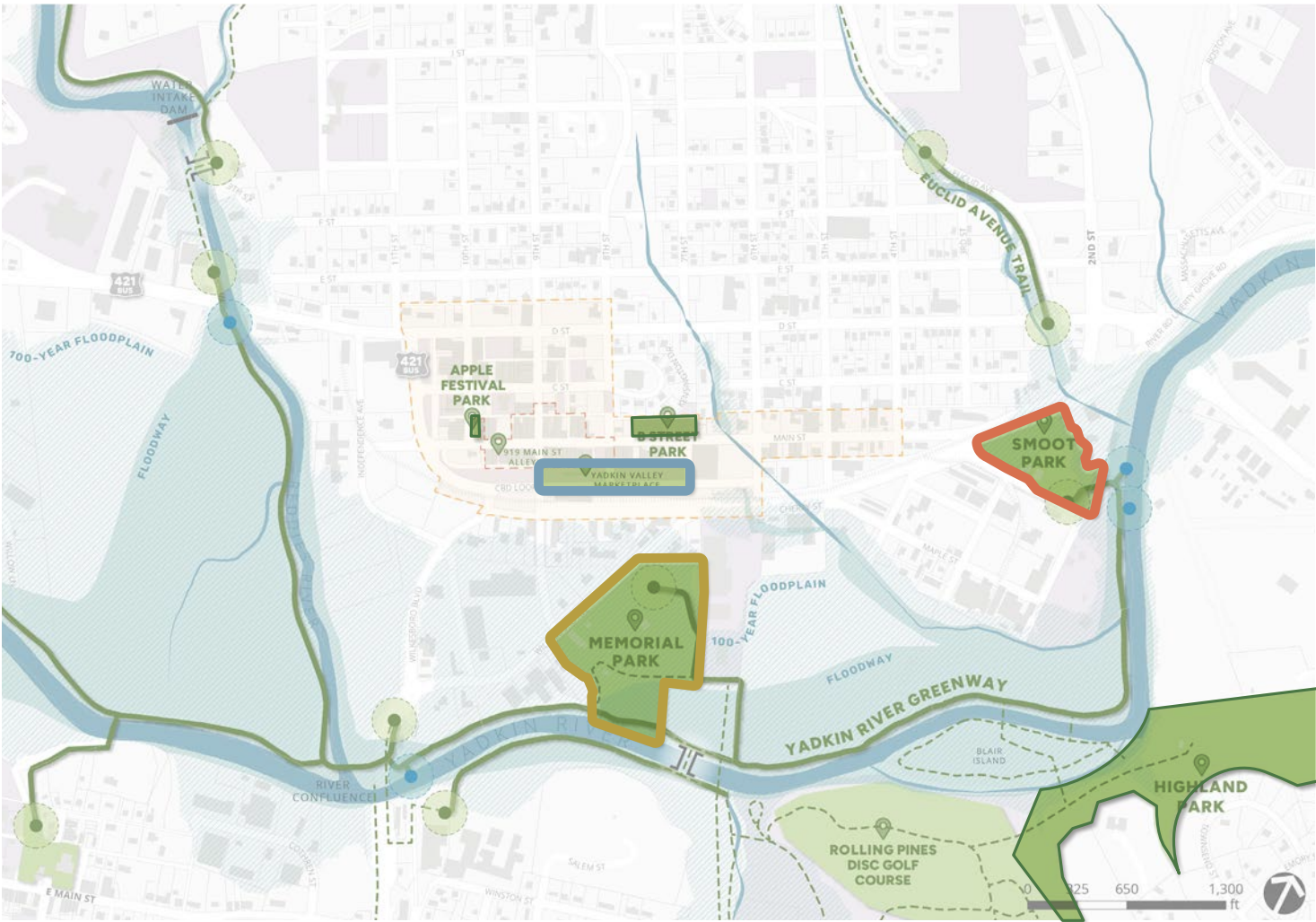


Total respondents: 656

1 Smoot Park

2 Yadkin Valley Marketplace

3 Memorial Park

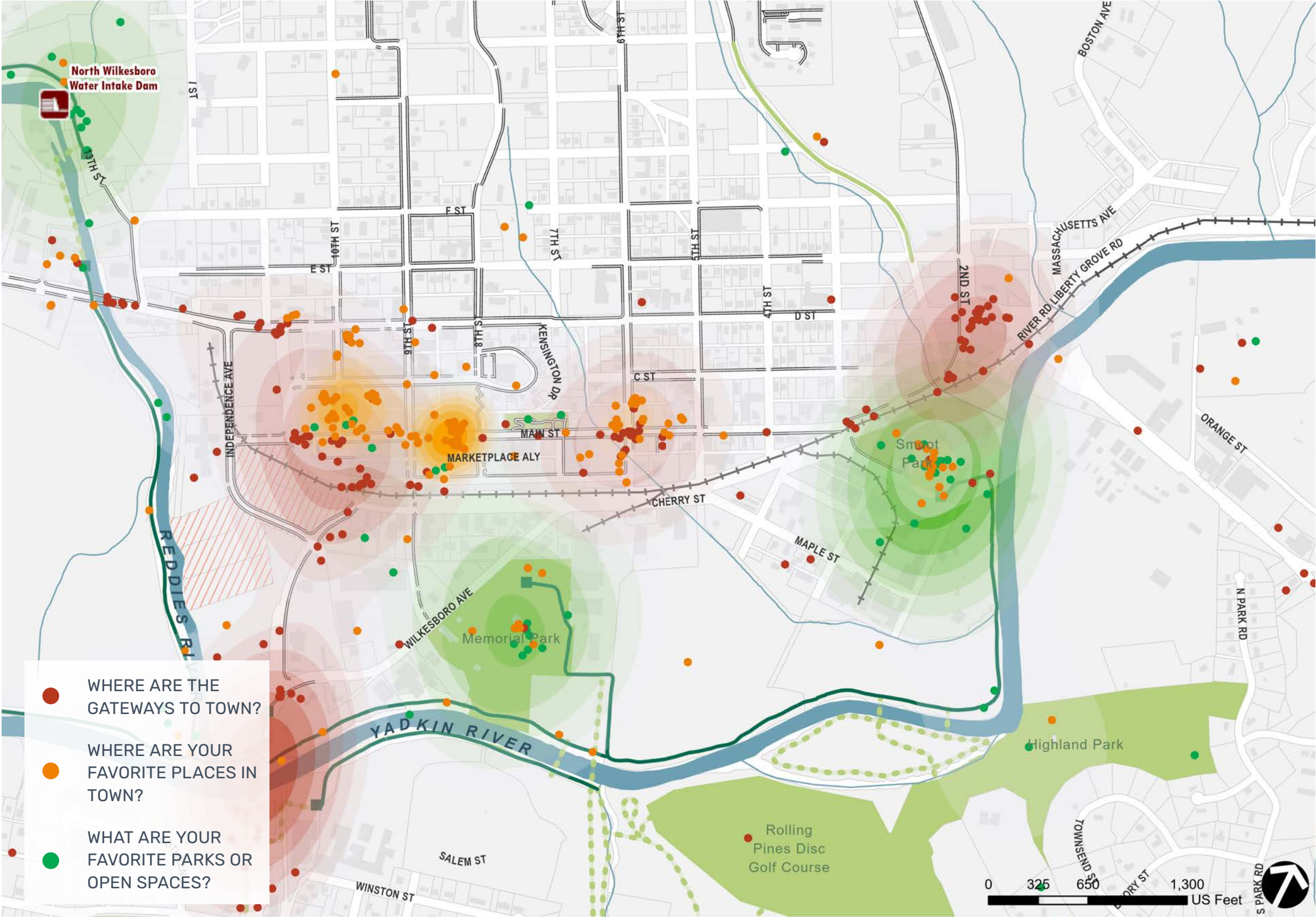


- SMOOT PARK
- MEMORIAL PARK
- YADKIN VALLEY MARKETPLACE

Smoot Park and Memorial Park were the most frequently named parks in the survey, likely due to their size and connections to the Greenway. Smaller parks not linked to the trail system (Main/B Street Park, Highland Park, etc.) were mentioned less often, suggesting lower visibility or use. Responses also highlighted strong appreciation for events at Yadkin Valley Marketplace, pointing to a community preference for active, social spaces that bring people together.

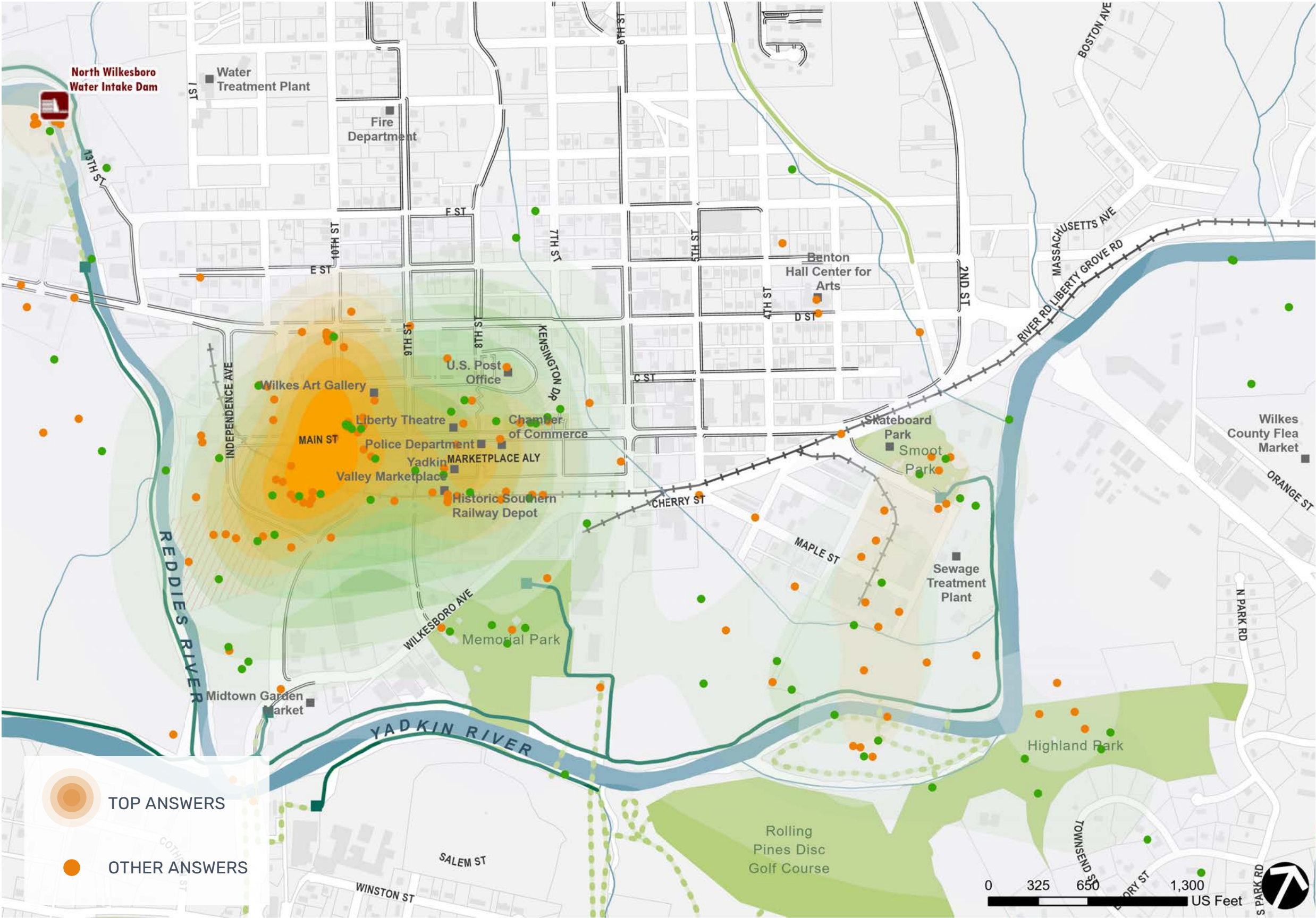


Existing
Special Places



[illegible]

Opportunities
For New
Special Places

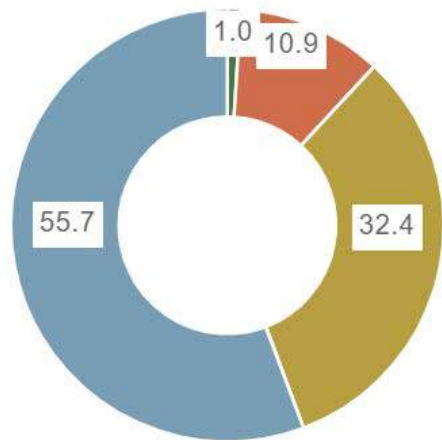


SESSION 2 COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

The second online survey was open for responses between May 1 – May 30 after the in-person engagement session to capture additional input from residents that may not have been able to drop by. Over the course of 30 days, 694 people responded to the survey (approximately 23 people per day!).

HOW MANY RESIDENTS PARTICIPATED IN BOTH PHASES OF ENGAGEMENT?

(shown as percentage)



Total respondents: 497

- Yes, I took a paper survey
- Yes, at Light Up Downtown
- Yes, I took the online survey
- No

DO RESPONDENTS AGREE WITH THE DRAFT VISION STATEMENT?

Draft Vision Statement presented to the community:

North Wilkesboro will be a **thriving, connected community** where Downtown and the River District grow together as a dynamic hub of activity, **natural beauty and recreation flourishes**, and thoughtful development honors the past while enhancing quality of life for **current and future residents and visitors**.

NOTABLE COMMENTS

Please note: The draft vision statement presented in the Session 2 Online Survey (see above) has since been shortened and refined based on feedback from survey respondents.

See page 22 for the revised vision statement.

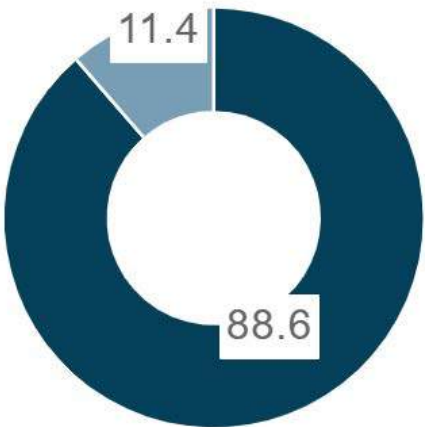
- » "Seems too wordy to me. I'm a firm believer in speaking as though things you desire are already in place. Words are strong. With that being said, I'm not strong the use of 'will be'."
- » "Jobs that help the community grow."

- » "I like this vision statement, but I would like to see something about an integrated or inclusive community with access for all."
- » "Try to make it more succinct, with more positivity and active voice."
- » "I would add something about safety."

- » "There are no "future residents" without housing options where young people want to live."

DO RESPONDENTS HAVE SUGGESTED EDITS FOR THE VISION STATEMENT?

(shown as percentage)



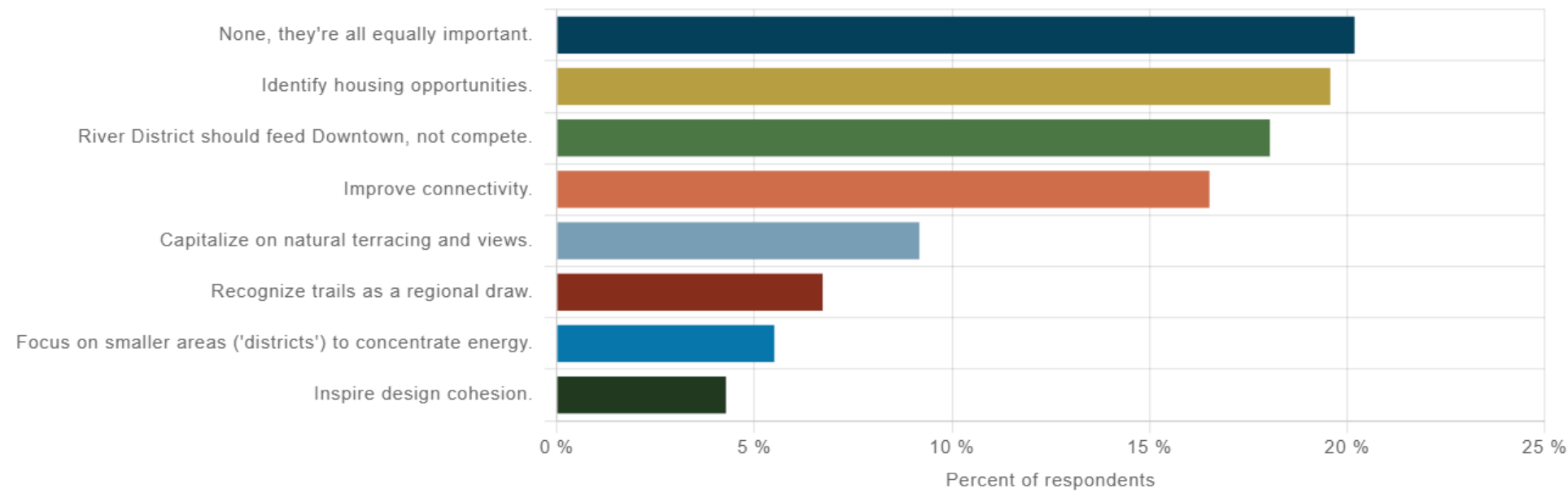
Total respondents: 369

- No, looks good!
- Yes, I have comments



WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CORE VALUES OF THE PLAN?

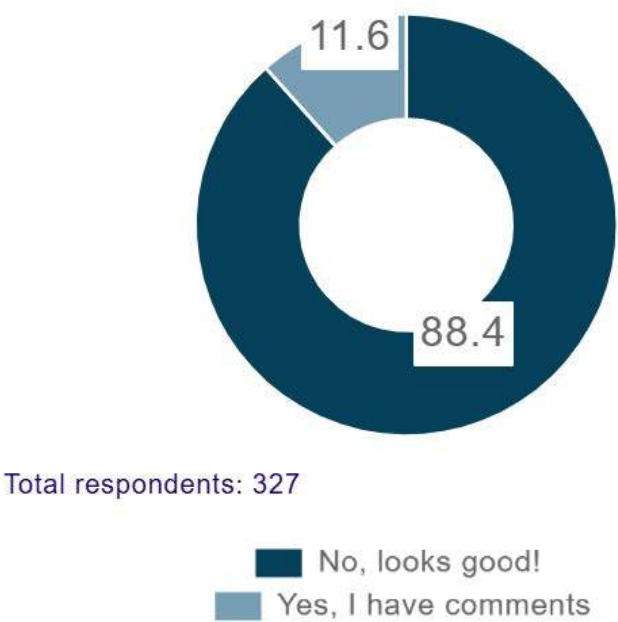
Core Values



Total respondents: 327

DO RESPONDENTS HAVE SUGGESTED EDITS FOR THE CORE VALUES?

(shown as percentage)



Total respondents: 327

NOTABLE COMMENTS

Please note: The draft core values presented in the Session 2 Online Survey (see above) has since been refined based on feedback from survey respondents.

See page 23 for the revised core values.

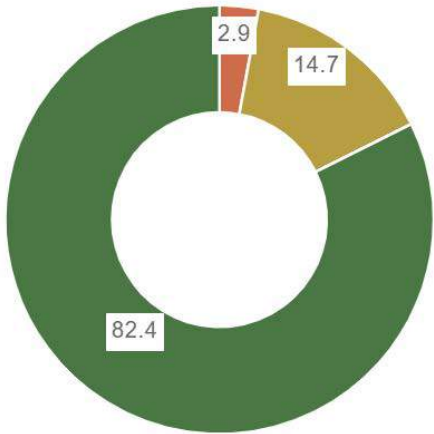
- » "When it comes to housing, theres a great need for affordable housing...[Focus] on making more affordable housing for those of us already in Wilkes."
- » "Elevate the design cohesion and keep it a classy look."
- » "Don't forget the needs of all residents."
- » "Focus on job growth."
- » "It should be a core value that inspiring tourism (and the dollars they spend!) is a worthy goal."
- » "Neither North Wilkesboro nor Wilkesboro can succeed as stand alone entities. [This also goes for the] county as a whole."
- » "Add something about safety."
- » "More walkability into town."
- » "Specific focus on commerce surrounding art and artists and their potential venues for sales of artistic products."
- » "I really don't like residents being referred to as a customer base. It's very corporate sounding."
- » "Housing should be focus #1. With housing can come private green areas and outdoor amenities in new communities."
- » "Tying in the river with path access and terracing is key."
- » "Start with more parking."



DOWNTOWN: MAIN STREET PROJECTS

B Street Park

B Street Park received overall positive support, with 97.1% noting that they “liked” or “loved” the project. There were little to no negative responses.



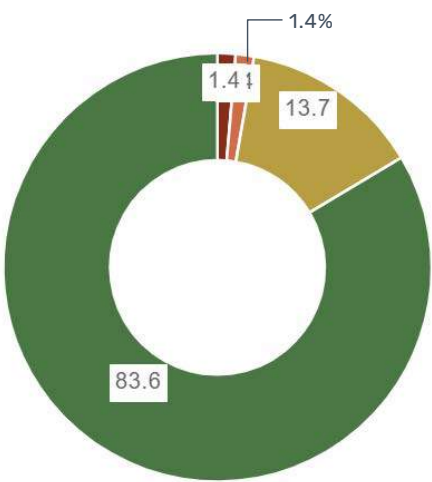
Total respondents: 68

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “This is one of the more underutilized parks...and I think a rebrand and upfit will benefit the site immensely.”
- » “I love thinking vertically and the flower gardens remind of Blowing Rock!!! And thanks for thinking of the parking spaces.”
- » “Possibly install free public use telescopes [and] including distant “points of interest” suggestions on the pictured observation deck.”
- » “As long as it doesn’t slide down, I’m all for it.”
- » “Yes, and [the] post office hill needs this also!!”

Main Street

This project received a very low negative response (only 2.8% don’t like it or feel neutral).



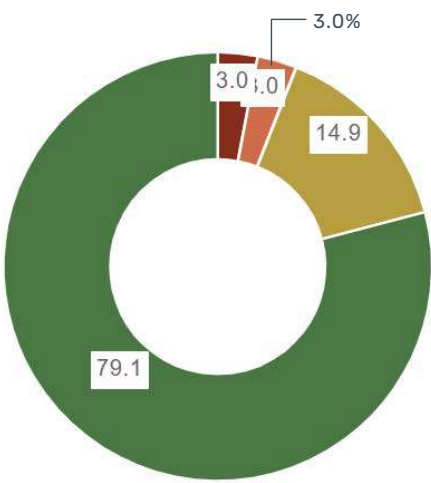
Total respondents: 73

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “To have sufficient impact to both locals and visitors these enhancements must extend from 6th all the way to Chestnut Street.”
- » “Great idea, I have found that restaurants don’t have a lot of patio options.”
- » “[We] need to be careful with the balance of parking availability and the parklets not eating up too much of that space.”
- » “As long as some [historic] buildings and storefronts are not affected too much, like the Liberty or The Dispensary... Covering those would take away from [the town’s image].”

Marketplace Alley

This project has a relatively neutral response (14.9% like the project, 79.1% love it), with approximately 6% of respondents feeling neutral or unsupportive of the project. This project could benefit from stronger storytelling or tweaks in design.



Total respondents: 67

NOTABLE COMMENTS

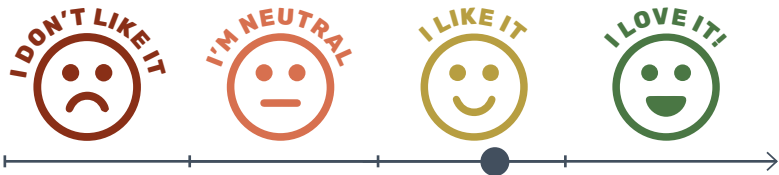
- » “Forget the art installations and focus on green plantings, fountains and benches.”
- » “...There needs to be some visual cleanup for all buildings in this area as many look dilapidated.”
- » “I’m not sold on this yet.”
- » “...There must be multiple ways for pedestrians (both able bodied and disabled) to access Marketplace Alley from Main Street...”



KEY TAKEAWAY

Downtown Main Street projects are well-supported and consistent, with Main Street enhancements showing especially strong favor.

Scale (percent of respondents)

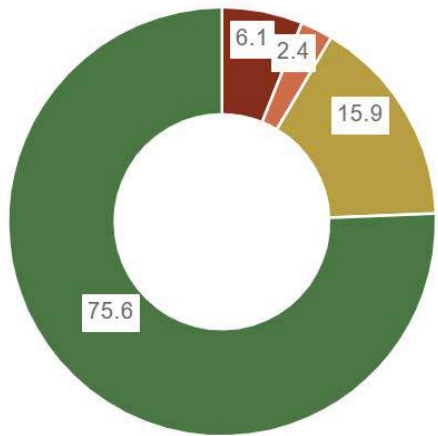




ARTS DISTRICT PROJECTS

Festival Park

Responses for this project have a mixed sentiment and higher opposition – approximately 8.5% of respondents feel neutral or do not support the project. Community engagement for may strengthen support in future phases.



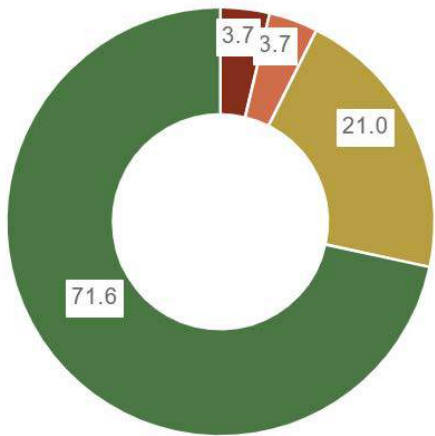
Total respondents: 82

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “[We need] more play space other than at Smoot Park... in the Downtown.”
- » “It removes access to parking, and I don’t see any benefit of overlooking CBD Loop.”
- » “Sweeping ramps...would make the elevation change easier to overcome.”
- » “Definitely one of my favorite ideas.”
- » “Concerned about Town maintaining additional parks.”

CBD Loop

This project has a relatively neutral response (21% like the project, 71.6% love it), with approximately 7.4% of respondents feeling neutral or disliking the project.



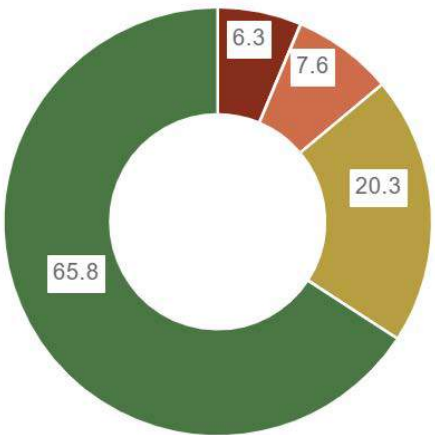
Total respondents: 81

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “I do like the idea of a wide sidewalk, but the road is busy and has some major blind spots. It should be used by all the tractor trailers so safety is a concern.”
- » “Having a walking/biking path separate from car traffic would be epic!”
- » “[I’m] concerned about new traffic flow being [more narrow] with the way certain people drive.”
- » “Much needed to access other parts of

Artful Alleyways

Of the 11 identified projects, this one received **comparatively lower enthusiasm**, with 65.8% of participants selecting “I love it” and 6.3% expressing concerns. This may indicate that the community may have reservations. 20.3% were neutral – suggesting uncertainty or lack of clarity about the project goals.



Total respondents: 79

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “It’s almost too much. Art with history of the town might be a more significant draw to more of Wilkes County and visitors.”
- » “That’s cool, but I would focus more investment on open spaces rather than closed [spaces].”
- » “This would be bottom tier priority [in my opinion.]”



KEY TAKEAWAY

Arts District projects received more mixed reactions from a pool of approximately 80 respondents, and may need additional community engagement before implementation (especially Artful Alleyways and CBD Loop).

It is also important to note that the presented precedent images, showing a more colorful, abstract art style, did not resonate with the community.

Scale (percent of respondents)

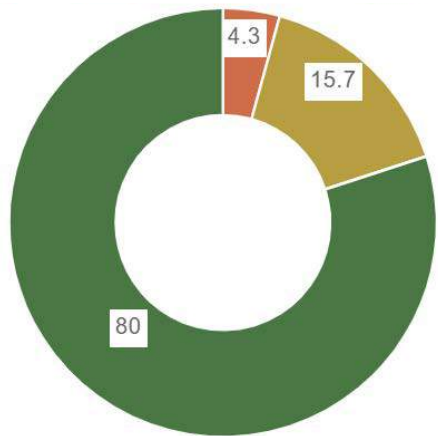




RIVER DISTRICT PROJECTS (WEST)

The Tributary

4 out of 5 participants (80%) said that they “love” The Tributary with a modest neutral group (15.7%). 0% of respondents expressed dislike for the project. This shows broad approval, possibly lacking full excitement but without any opposition – this project is likely worth advancing.



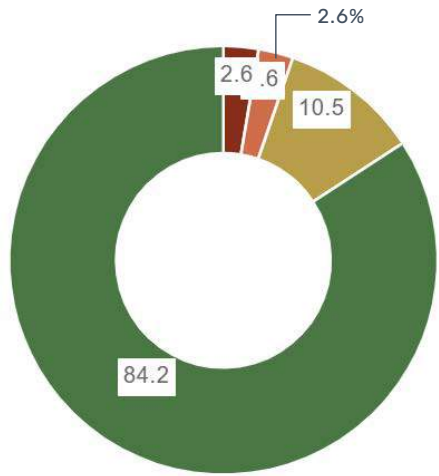
Total respondents: 70

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “Adding a riverwalk” with access to restaurants with outdoor seating and patios would be great.”
- » “Great use of the space. Would be a great place to go. Will need some police presence to keep the feel safe for families and younger people.
- » “Make the river a destination - I like it!”
- » “It’s such an untapped opportunity here - I often don’t utilize this trail because it’s kind of ugly.”

River District Parks

A very high percentage of respondents “love” the River District Parks project, placing it among the **top three most favored projects overall**. Compared to other River District projects like The Depot and Rail Trail Linear Park, this project is similarly well-regarded.



Total respondents: 76

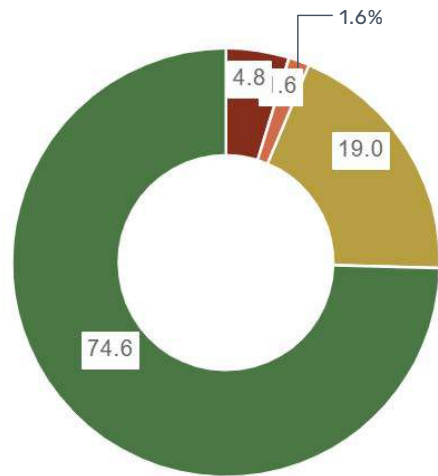
NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “I think this has the potential to be such a beautiful addition to the [town]... [It] would be nice to have a great hang out space by the river.”
- » “We need a connection between Cub Creek Park, Downtown, and the Yadkin River Greenway.”
- » “Yes, yes, yes. We also need a dog park.”
- » “It’s a great spot with a lot of hard assets already in place. It would be a shame to see it go to waste.”

RIVER DISTRICT PROJECTS (EAST)

Cherry Street

This project received a broader range of responses, with a slightly higher share expressing neutrality or concern (6.4%).



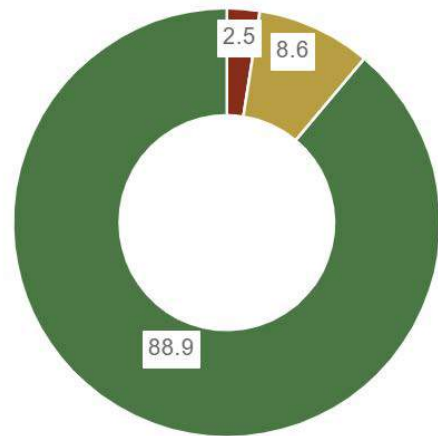
Total respondents: 63

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » “We need to fill the empty buildings with more eclectic stores like book stores, ethnic restaurants, garden/boutique/antique stores.”
- » “A lot of empty buildings in this area [that] make the area feel unsafe and abandoned. Needs a usage and upgrade.”
- » “I think Cherry Street is in the need of the most safety upgrades and physical features.”
- » “Probably less of a priority for me.”
- » “I love the aesthetic, this would help to connect Downtown out towards all the other improvements that are being made.”

The Depot

This redevelopment opportunity received the second most “I love this!” responses, at 88.9%.



Total respondents: 81

NOTABLE COMMENTS

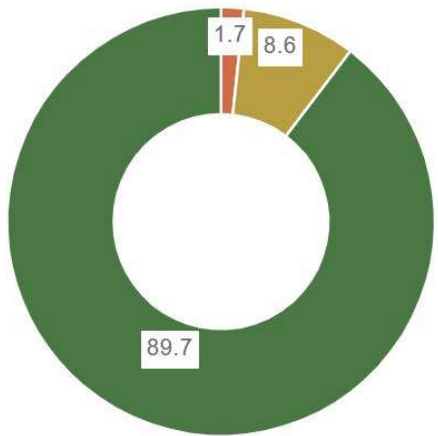
- » “The Depot and surrounding area has always been in [need of] a revamp and could be a very nice area.”
- » “Not sure about it being a welcome center, but would love to see it renovated for commercial use that honors the significance and history of the space.”
- » “Please keep it as original as possible.”
- » “This has to be one of the town’s most underutilized assets. It looks sad right now but could be such an awesome space.”
- » “Can’t wait to see the eye sore turn into a masterpiece.”





Rail Trail Linear Park

Of the 11 identified projects, **this project received the most “I love this!” responses**, at 89.7%. There were no respondents that said “I don’t like this.”



Total respondents: 58

NOTABLE COMMENTS

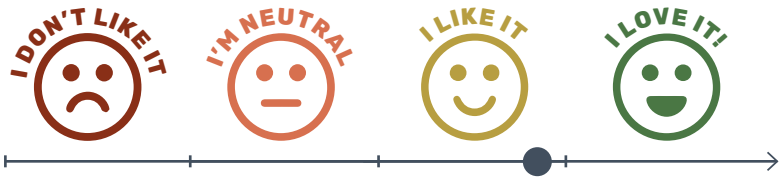
- » “I love this! I think this would be a huge win for North Wilkesboro.”
- » “I run the Greenway often. It would be great to have trail that connects to this space. Even could provide event space for 5k runs!”
- » “Connecting the CBD with Smoot Park is vital to connectivity for our community.”
- » “Need to make sure it is shaded because it is in downtown with no waterways or other nature for a heat sink.”



KEY TAKEAWAY

River District projects are leading in overall enthusiasm, with 4 of the top 6 most supported projects. River District East projects (The Depot, and Rail Trail Linear Park) seemed to generate the most excitement.

Scale (percent of respondents)



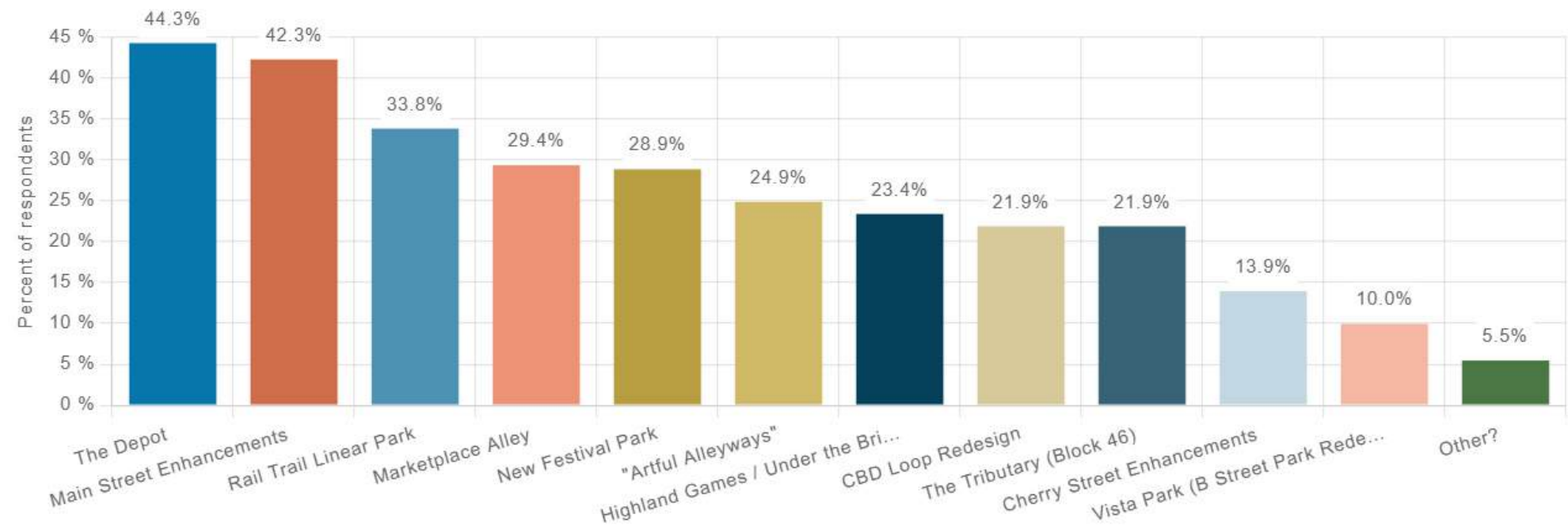
APPLYING WHAT WE HEARD

Reviewing the community’s initial reactions to the 11 individual projects helped surface common themes and highlight which ideas resonated most with the public. Comparing this feedback with the prioritization results (see page 124) showed whether preferences remained consistent across question types or if certain projects received strong community support despite lower overall rankings.



WHAT ARE THE TOP 3 PROJECTS THAT SHOULD BE PRIORITIZED FOR IMPLEMENTATION?

Project Priorities (shown as percentage)



Total respondents: 201

- RIVER DISTRICT (EAST)
- RIVER DISTRICT (WEST)
- DOWNTOWN
- ARTS DISTRICT

NOTABLE COMMENTS

- » "When talking about creating green spaces and honoring our culture can we please include fruit trees in our parks particularly apples. Wilkes County is losing its apple heritage, we are losing our apple farmers and cultivars we use to have unique to this area."
- » "Housing is [my] #1 priority."
- » "Protect and preserve the Jenkins smoke stack. Keep it open for the birds."
- » "More parking please."

After reviewing the high-level details of each project, survey respondents were asked to pick their top three. Comparing this information with the feedback on individual projects helps determine what projects are priorities based not only on overall popularity but also on the specific strengths, concerns, and community values associated with each one.

DISCREPANCIES

- » The River District Parks project (Highland Park / Under the Bridge Park) was popular, but scored lower in prioritization
- » Marketplace Alley scored higher as a priority, but was ranked lower in popularity (i.e. "I love it!" responses)
- » B Street Park ranked as the lowest priority project, despite being loved as an idea

KEY TAKEAWAY

Results from this question are generally consistent with the feedback on the individual projects, with River District and Downtown projects emerging as priorities.

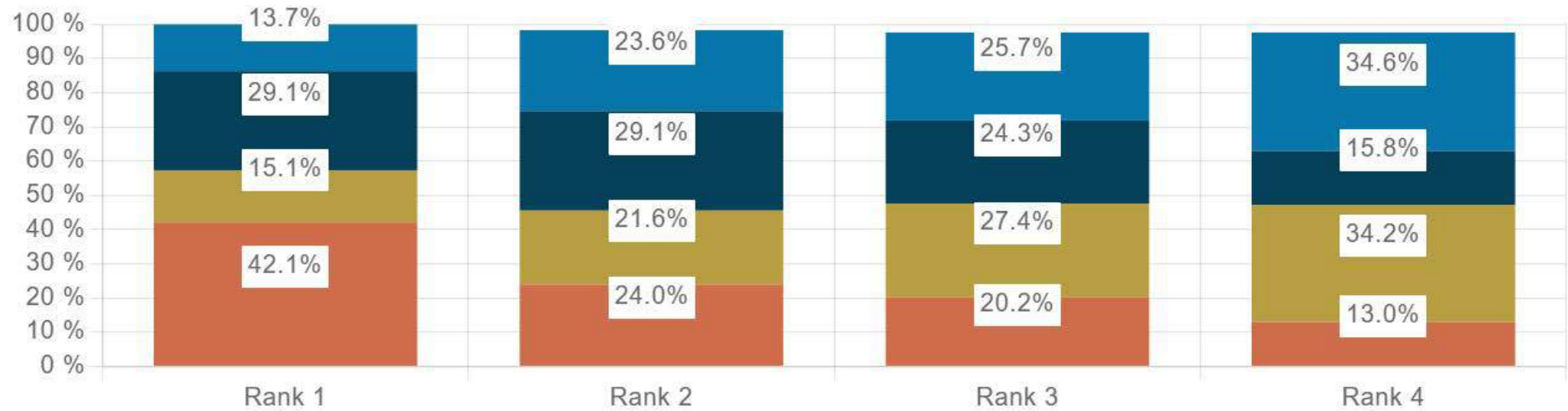
Interestingly, the top five high-priority projects are all located in the same central area at the nexus of the three districts, suggesting that this part of town (surrounding the CBD Loop corridor and Yadkin Valley Marketplace) may be the most in need of early investment, and could serve as a logical starting point for the town.





WHAT DISTRICT SHOULD BE PRIORITIZED FOR IMPLEMENTATION?

District Priorities (shown as percentage)



Total respondents: 292

- RIVER DISTRICT (EAST)
- RIVER DISTRICT (WEST)
- DOWNTOWN: MAIN STREET
- DOWNTOWN: ARTS DISTRICT

RANK	DISTRICT NAME	AVERAGE RANKING
#1	DOWNTOWN: MAIN STREET	2.04
#2	RIVER DISTRICT (WEST)	2.27
#3	DOWNTOWN: ARTS DISTRICT	2.82
#4	RIVER DISTRICT (EAST)	2.83

Survey respondents were asked to pick a district that they think is most important to focus efforts. With this information, we can compare favorable projects with favorable focus areas to identify where priorities align and where there may be gaps in support or understanding.

- » 42.1% of respondents ranked Downtown as their top choice, which is the highest proportion of Rank 1 votes. It also has the lowest percentage of Rank 4 votes (13%), reinforcing its broad appeal.
- » River District West received the second-highest Rank 1 votes (29.1%) and a solid average rank of 2.27, indicating consistent favorability.
- » River District East had the lowest share of Rank 1 votes (13.7%) and relatively even spread, suggesting this area is more polarizing or less understood.
- » Arts District received the highest proportion of Rank 4 votes (34.2%).

KEY TAKEAWAY

Community feedback highlights strong support for elevating Downtown as the heart of North Wilkesboro, with the River District seen as a key asset that can reinforce that role. The Downtown emerged as the clear top priority, followed by the River District, indicating that early investment should focus on these areas and the connections between them.



EXISTING CONDITIONS MAPS

This section includes a series of maps developed during the early phases of planning to better understand North Wilkesboro’s past efforts, current conditions, and the context that shapes future opportunities.

IN THIS SECTION

- » Existing zoning
- » Existing land use
- » Population density
- » Existing street network
- » Parks, trails, and open space

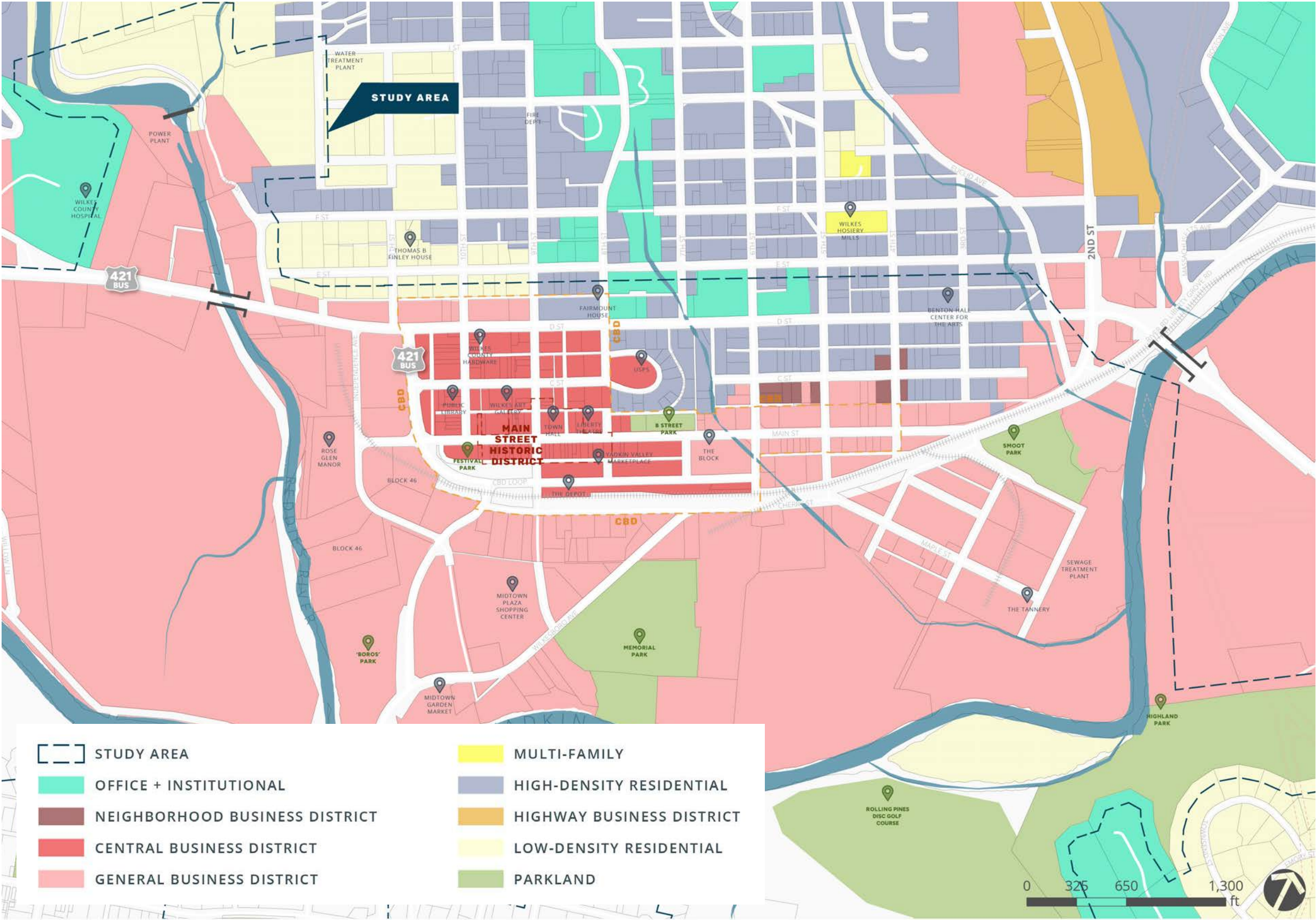


Existing
Zoning

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Zoning in Downtown is primarily oriented toward general and central business uses, supporting a mix of retail, office, and civic functions. This pattern encourages auto-oriented development along key corridors (like CBD Loop and D Street) but allows for walkable, mixed-use development in the core downtown blocks.

In the River District, **zoning is more fragmented**, with industrial and residential areas bordering the Yadkin River, limiting cohesive redevelopment. There are opportunities to better align zoning with community goals for connectivity, active public spaces, and economic revitalization. Adjustments could help support a more vibrant, pedestrian-friendly environment that links Downtown to the riverfront.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Downtown is a mix of commercial, civic, and some residential uses, with the core four blocks anchored by historic buildings and local businesses.

The River District is a blend of open space, industrial sites, and scattered residential areas, reflecting its transitional character. Much of the land along the river remains underutilized or disconnected from Downtown activity. While some nodes are active, gaps in walkability and land use continuity limit the area's vibrancy.



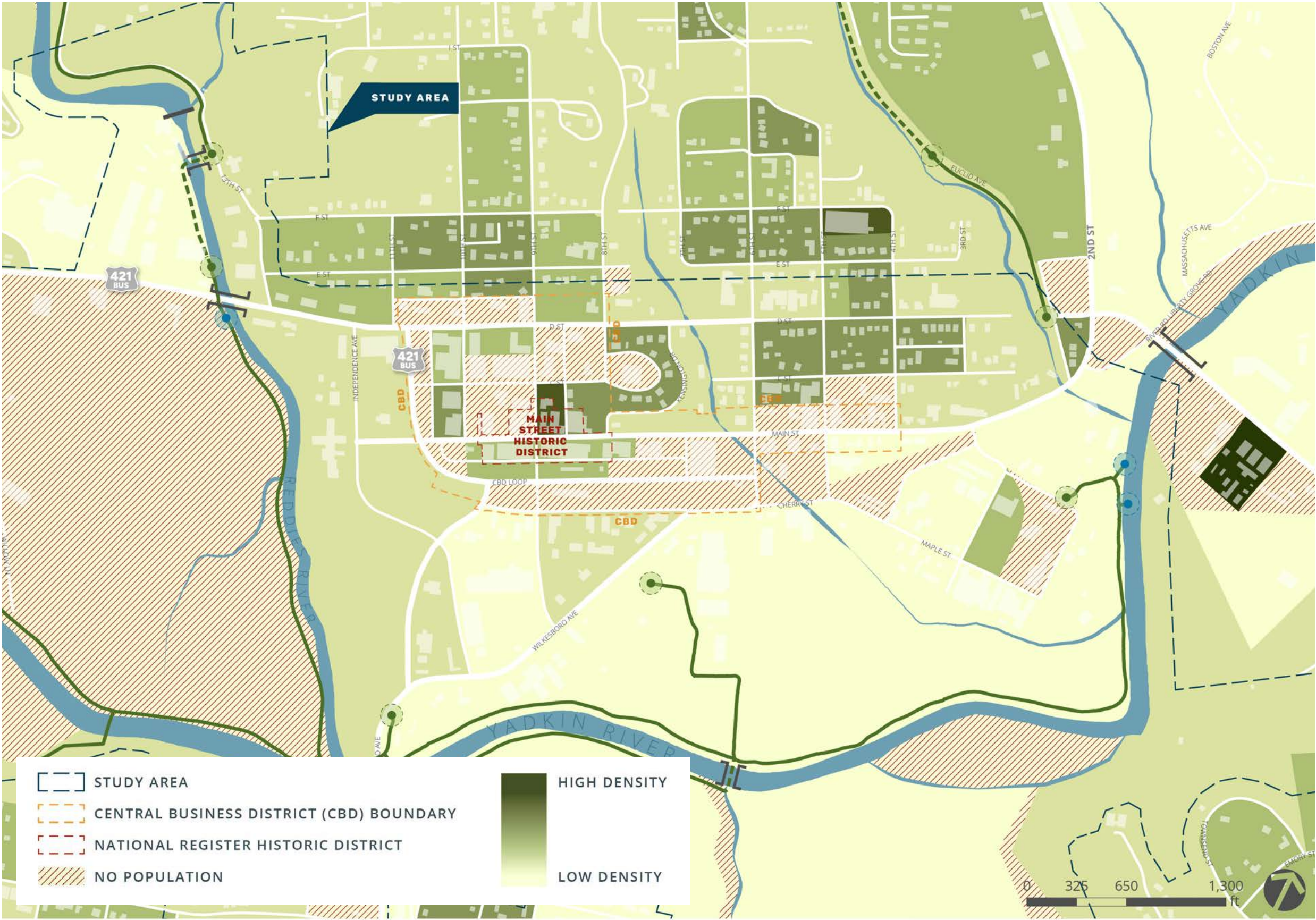


Population Density

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Population **density in the study area is relatively low**, with slightly higher concentrations in the residential neighborhoods surrounding Downtown.

Downtown and the River District have very **limited residential areas**, contributing to a quieter environment outside of business hours. The lack of nearby housing reduces foot traffic and activity that typically support vibrant mixed-use areas. Boosting population in and around Downtown could strengthen local businesses and enhance walkability.

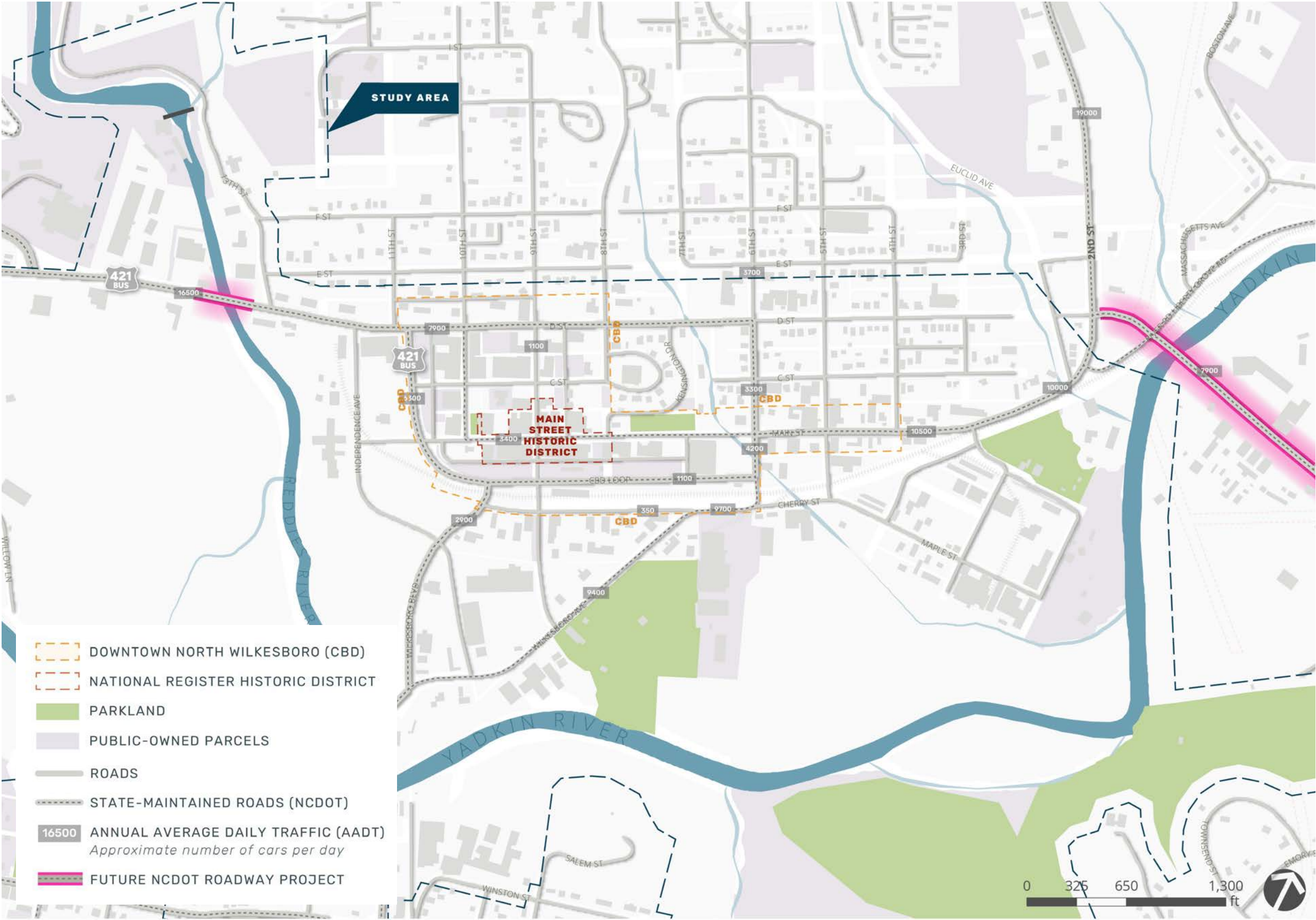


Existing
Street Network

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Daily traffic volumes in both Downtown and the River District are relatively low, suggesting that the existing street network—particularly some state-maintained roads like the CBD Loop—may be overbuilt for current usage. This presents opportunities to reimagine these corridors to better serve pedestrians, cyclists, and public space without compromising vehicle flow.

Oversized roadways could be candidates for lane reductions, traffic calming, or the integration of green infrastructure and multi-modal enhancements.

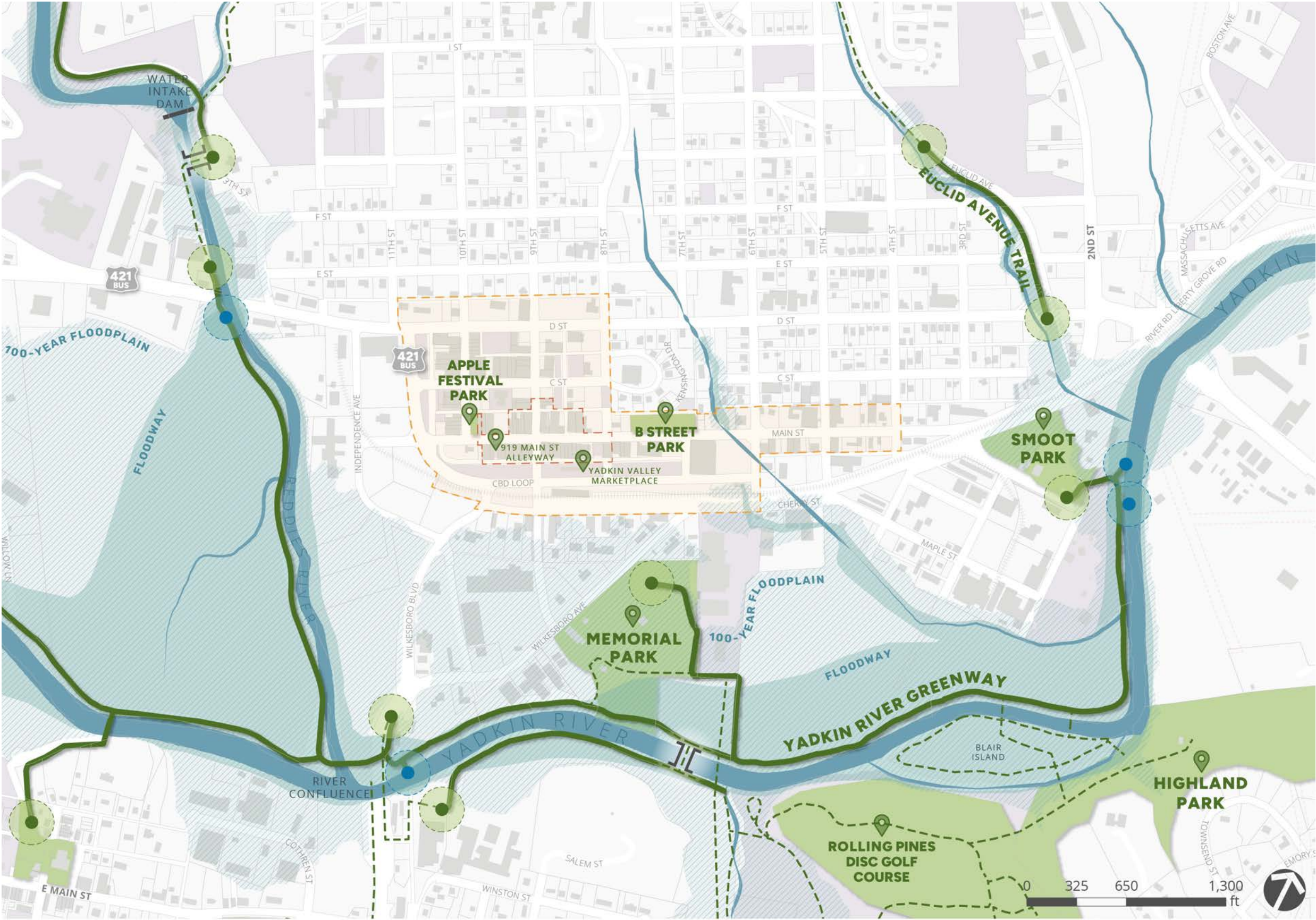




Parks, Trails,
+ Open Space

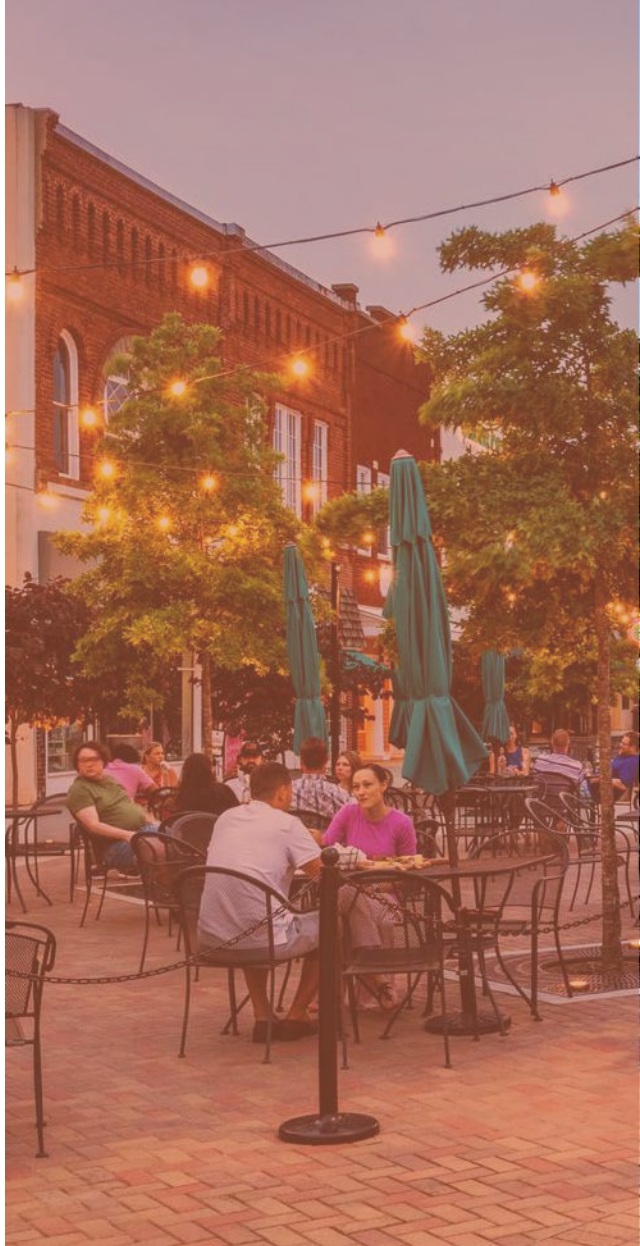
KEY TAKEAWAYS

The town is not lacking in supply of parks, recreation, trails, and open space in Downtown and the River District. Many of the larger park assets are connected in the River District with the Yadkin River Greenway.





**NORTH
WILKESBORO**
DOWNTOWN + RIVER
DISTRICT PLAN



N.WILKESBORO

**A HISTORIC,
WALKABLE
DOWNTOWN**



N.WILKESBORO

**A VIBRANT
RIVER
DISTRICT**



N.WILKESBORO

**A CONNECTED
SYSTEM OF
PARKS, TRAILS
+ OPEN SPACE**



N.WILKESBORO

**A THRIVING
ARTS
DISTRICT**