

How Tarboro Won the Public/Private Game

A walk in Tarboro is not what you'd expect. No decaying, rundown downtown in this small southern community. It has its empty storefronts, but a poster on the door of one vacant building is indicative of the real story in this town. The poster announces a candlelight tour of the community's historic homes followed by a special concert of seasonal music, and asks interested residents to call Watson or Phil at Tour Headquarters. Tour Headquarters turns out to be the Tarboro Planning Department, and Watson Brown and Phil Guy are two of the planning staff. They're the same people who helped purchase that vacant building, along with several other downtown properties, with a \$2.7 million Urban Development Action Grant for downtown revitalization projects.

Another sign announces "The Great Downtown Tarboro Attic Sale," which was held to raise money for restoring the Blount-Bridgers House, a historic landmark. It will contain an art gallery and community center. Interested in further information? Once again, the sign tells you to call the planning department.

carolina planning traveled to Tarboro to interview planning director Watson Brown about Tarboro's transition from reliance on federal funding to experimentation with public/private ventures.

Tarboro is a community of 10,000 people located on the Tar River in Edgecombe County, North Carolina. It's a community rich in tradition. Since its incorporation in 1760, the number of people and mansions in the town have grown with the tobacco and cotton industry in the surrounding area. Located in North Carolina's coastal plain, Tarboro is approximately seventy-five miles east of Raleigh, in the midst of a triangle formed by the cities of Wilson, Greenville, and Rocky Mount.

Twenty percent (forty-five square blocks) of Tarboro lies within a local historic district, and almost double this amount is included on the National Register of Historic Places. Community historic preservation groups have been in existence since the 1960's, and they have provided the impetus for many of the national listings. This historic pride and preservation have been linked with creative public/private economic revitalization to strengthen the downtown area.

REVITALIZATION PROJECTS

"Tarboro is a preservation-conscious town," observed Brown. "People are aware of the 'per-

fect small town' environment, and want to keep it that way." Beginning with a neighborhood revitalization project near downtown, Tarboro is now involved in a comprehensive program to rehabilitate the downtown district. It involves a retirement center, a rehabilitation loan program for downtown businesses, a pedestrian park, road improvements, a riverfront park, landscaping and sidewalk improvements, and more off-street parking. The planning department helps to publish a monthly newsletter describing the progress of these projects.

"We began with neighborhood revitalization because by stabilizing the downtown area on two sides, it became a more desirable location for businesses," said Brown. "Then we started making plans for the downtown. We hired the firm of Zuchelli, Hunter and Associates to do a market study of the downtown for us, and they recommended we emphasize attracting small specialty shops rather than chain stores. They also said we needed more restaurants."

In 1980 Tarboro was chosen to participate in the National Main Street Center Demonstration Project. A team of revitalization experts came in February last year to make recommendations to improve its established downtown program. Following the team's suggestions, the town established a revolving fund to acquire buildings and property for reuse. The planning department has been recruiting businesses to locate in these buildings. A new french restaurant, "Matt's," will be opening soon. "But it's not just a restaurant", Brown noted. "The Weaver family came from Indianapolis, and they're going to have an art gallery and shop as well as a place for gourmet meals. One of the reasons they chose Tarboro is because of our historic district and active downtown."

The Albemarle retirement village is a seven-acre community right next to downtown. It will have 150 apartments, a medical wing, and dining, social, and recreational facilities. "It's a little town in the middle of downtown. There's nothing like this in the state east of Chapel Hill," Brown remarked. The \$14.4 million center will be constructed entirely with private funds, although the site itself was acquired by the town with UDAG money. The property was sold to the developer in March of 1982.

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The facades of Tarboro Seafood before (left) and after restoration (right). This is one of many Main street buildings rehabilitated with the aid of Tarboro's UDAG money.

Another component of downtown revitalization is the town-wide riverfront park. The town is buying land along the Tar River and will be taking down buildings that block the view to make it more attractive, clean, safe, and accessible. Since it's in the floodplain, it will not be developed more intensively.

The planning department is working to restore the Blount-Bridgers House. Located in the historic district, it is a three-story federal mansion built in 1808. This is another public/private venture that many community groups have worked together to fund. Brown explained, "The catalyst was getting the Hobson Pittman Memorial Gallery in Tarboro." Pittman (1899-1972), an impressionist painter, was born in Edgecombe County and graduated from Tarboro High School. His niece, Alyce Weeks Gordon, is donating numerous works by her uncle along with many of his personal effects.

The gallery will be located in a portion of the Blount-Bridgers House. Brown remarked, "It's going to be a mini civic center. We're going to have concerts and art shows and educational programs here, as well as the gallery. It will be a meeting place for local clubs and organizations. There will even be a bandstand. The town bought it during the Depression for a community house, and with this restoration it will become one again."

FUNDING

Funds for Tarboro's revitalization projects come from several sources, eighty-two percent of them private. A \$2.7 million Urban Develop-

ment Action Grant (UDAG) came to Tarboro in May of 1980, the first to be awarded in North Carolina. With it, the town has leveraged over \$16 million in private funds for various downtown projects. The major private investment is the \$14.4 million Albemarle retirement village. UDAG monies have been used to purchase whole blocks of vacant buildings on Main Street for subsequent recruitment of businesses. In addition to the funding sources already identified, \$943,000 from other federal, state, and local public funds has been committed.

The Blount-Bridgers House is being restored with funds provided by the North Carolina General Assembly (35%), Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (7%), and foundations and private donations (7%). In addition, money will be provided from the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation for an Olympic-sized swimming pool on the same property.

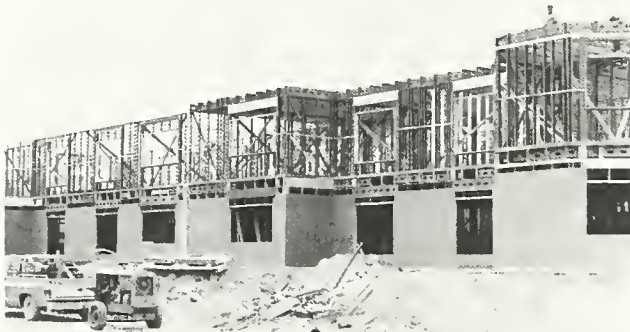
In late 1981 the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation awarded a grant to the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development to assist in the administration of the Main Street Program. This money, as well as a later grant provided by the General Assembly, is being distributed through an incentive grant program for downtown Tarboro. The purpose of the grants is to aid in rehabilitation of buildings while encouraging good design principles, and each incentive grant is limited to \$500 or 25% of the project, whichever is lower.

The primary financial incentive to rehabilitate downtown buildings is an interest subsidy loan program funded through Tarboro's UDAG. This program is dependent on the availability of

interest subsidy funds from the federal government, and it awards loans in accordance with guidelines set by the town and local lending institutions. All seven of Tarboro's banks and savings and loans have committed a total of \$1.5 million for use in this program, which has reduced loan interest rates by four percentage points.

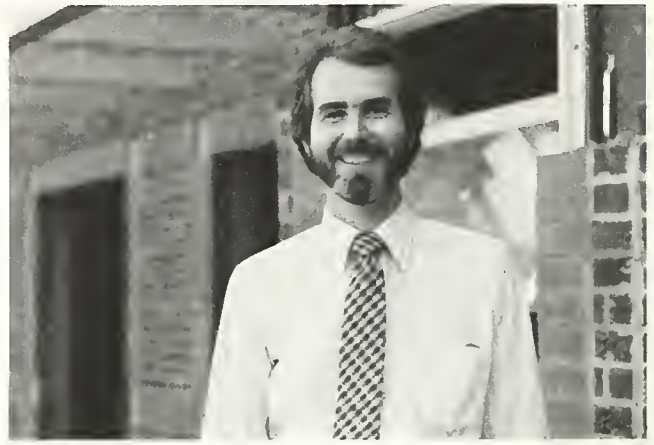
REASONS FOR TARBORO'S SUCCESSFUL VENTURE

Tarboro has not always enjoyed such high levels of downtown activity and planning department involvement. The coinciding evolution of downtown and the planning department is no coincidence. Watson Brown, shortly after completing graduate work in planning and urban design in 1974, became Tarboro's first planner. Prior to that, Tarboro had relied upon planning consultants, but residents realized they needed more consistent guidance when they received Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. Only a year passed before Brown was joined by another planner, and the department was well on its way to its present size of four. Since then, its scope has broadened from dealing with CDBG funds to more traditional planning functions, as well as public/private ventures.



The Albemarle in August of 1982

Brown is originally from Tarboro, and he's found that knowing community traditions has been extremely important in his work. He knows how far to go in suggesting innovations for revitalization, since he has a good feel for what is acceptable to townspeople. The community's atmosphere is also conducive to downtown projects which have been initiated. "Tarboro is a special place," said Brown, "and people in the town feel that." The community's quality of life has been maintained over the years. Residents want to help preserve that quality and do what fits in with the plan for downtown revitalization. As an example of community support, Brown cited instances of residents calling the planning department for advice about colors to paint their houses in order to blend with others in the historic district.



Planning Director Watson Brown

Experience in Tarboro shows that when many of the headaches have been reduced or eliminated for them, business people are more willing to cooperate in the restorations. The town employs an architect who provides downtown merchants with free renovation advice. He collects the plans, specifications, and cost estimates for historic renovations of Main Street building facades, and even oversees the work. Brown and Philip Guy also have design backgrounds, and many of the physical improvements in downtown Tarboro are based on preliminary designs provided by North Carolina State University graduate students. One downtown businessman described his role in the renovation of his storefront in this way: "They organized it. All I did was pay for it."

"Success of Tarboro's public/private experiment is due in large part to the vision of David Brown, Town Manager from 1965 to 1971," asserted Tarboro's planning director. As a community with a history of old money and strong leadership, the people of Tarboro are interested in improving their quality of life, and they are willing to act on that interest. As one town council member expressed it, "In order to be progressive you have to be aggressive."

"That's been Tarboro's history," explains Brown. "If something needs to be done we'll do it ourselves." He mentioned as an example the physical fitness equipment in the town's two recreation centers, which were financed by a local bond issue. Community residents voted to support their own quality recreation program because the town couldn't support a health spa or similar private recreational club.

The planning department is still involved in more traditional activities, such as keeping track of subdivisions and Planned Unit Developments. But even there, things are happening. "We have two PUD's in the planning stage now, where they can get bonus points if they use solar heating. They also get extra points if they increase density and cut costs," Brown remarked. *(Continued on page 23)*

involved in getting reimbursement for training costs.

Work experience in the private sector provides small employers with trainees whose wages are paid in full by a service program during training. Employers provide training and supervision in tasks specific to their small business; examples include carpentry, insurance, dental lab work, car painting, and furniture refinishing. These examples are taken from a demonstration project in northern Wisconsin called Project Opportunity which P/PV developed and assessed. In such programs, the employer is spared not only the cost of wages during training, but also the work involved in recruitment and training, red tape problems, insurance costs, and payroll responsibilities.

Skills training is a more traditional role for the private sector, but the new emphasis is on using public funds to support such programs and only when the private sector has first indicated a demand. In Cleveland, for example, local employers identified an urgent need for machinists who are rapidly aging out of the work force. With the assistance of P/PV, both business and labor involved in the machine trades got together to design a classroom curriculum, provide hands-on work experience, and make provision for OJT slots in their companies for successful graduates.

Providing the expertise necessary to insure that trainees can match the standards of business and industry is a crucial role for the private sector. The unusual success of our Ventures in Community Improvement program model was largely due to the use of union journeymen as supervisors and trainers for small teams of disadvantaged youngsters learning the construction trades. Involving experts from the beginning not only improves the quality of training, but provides entry into the trades for successful graduates.

From the point of view of planning, these few examples hint at the complexities involved. Once the nature of the population in need -- both the disadvantaged and the employers -- and the possible resources are identified, real planning begins. Choosing just the right program or mix of programs to suit different needs, getting the parties to agree to participate, monitoring progress to make sure original goals are not being ignored or subverted, telling the world when it works, and fighting pressures to maintain programs that should not be scuttled are all part of the process.

The major lesson of our experience: just because national policy has expressed itself in legislation that includes the word "partnership" doesn't mean that appropriate job training for the disadvantaged will result. That depends entirely on good local planning.

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The Bakery Shoppe - before



The Bakery Shoppe - after

Tarboro is also trying to recruit industries. "We have a high rate of unemployment in the county, so we need to keep attracting firms," observed Brown. "Tarboro is close to Rocky Mount -- close enough so that Tarboro residents drive to Rocky Mount to do much of their shopping. Businesses say "why invest in a building here?" But we don't want to be a bedroom community for Rocky Mount."

That's when Brown becomes Tarboro's sales representative. The planning department has been working hard to attract businesses to fill the downtown buildings that the community has purchased. Two recent successes are a new dry-cleaning center (a branch of a Rocky Mount business), and a K Mart located in the mall. "With these new stores, people will be more likely to stay in town to shop," said Brown.

The planning department staff enjoys a variety of roles. How does Brown feel about his untraditional mix of responsibilities? "I love to be a salesman for this town. I love packaging programs, negotiating and marketing. I enjoy putting together public/private ventures more than I did just collecting federal money. It's more creative, interesting and exciting."