

**“Overcoming Identity Crisis through Placemaking:
Perks and Pitfalls of being Nashville’s Neighbor”**

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Respectfully submitted to:

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Introduction

The City of Goodlettsville is Nashville's direct neighbor to the North, just 13 miles straight up Interstate 65. Despite its close proximity to the "It City", and a thriving business and residential community, Goodlettsville has much to overcome with regard to outside public perception.

For years, Goodlettsville has been primarily associated with RiverGate Mall, as it was a destination for shoppers in surrounding communities from the 1970s to the 2000s. In the face of the retail apocalypse, referenced in hashtags in article after article on LinkedIn over the last year and a half, many brand name stores have left. Anchor store, Sears in 2019, and then most recently announced in early January of 2020, the Goodlettsville Macy's was one of 30 stores in 19 states to announce closure.¹ In turn, public confidence levels in the vitality of the area and sense of place have diminished.

This report will describe the existing problems Goodlettsville faces in light of changes in retail, tax revenue losses that follow, and public perception. Next it will discuss the strategic plan city leaders and community partners formed prior to those problems to address lack of identity, how that plan has been implemented thus far, and how it is evolving today to meet the needs of the past and the future.

The City of Goodlettsville must create a strong identity to stay relevant and to lay ground work for economic vitality. Goodlettsville must also discover how to be unique enough to not be overshadowed by Nashville. There is a silver lining. Many small business owners are being pushed out of Nashville to make room for bigger developments and tourists, but Goodlettsville has a plan to make room for them. Placemaking will be the driving force to lead the change. Wikipedia defines placemaking as, "a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and

management of public spaces. Placemaking capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being.”ⁱⁱ

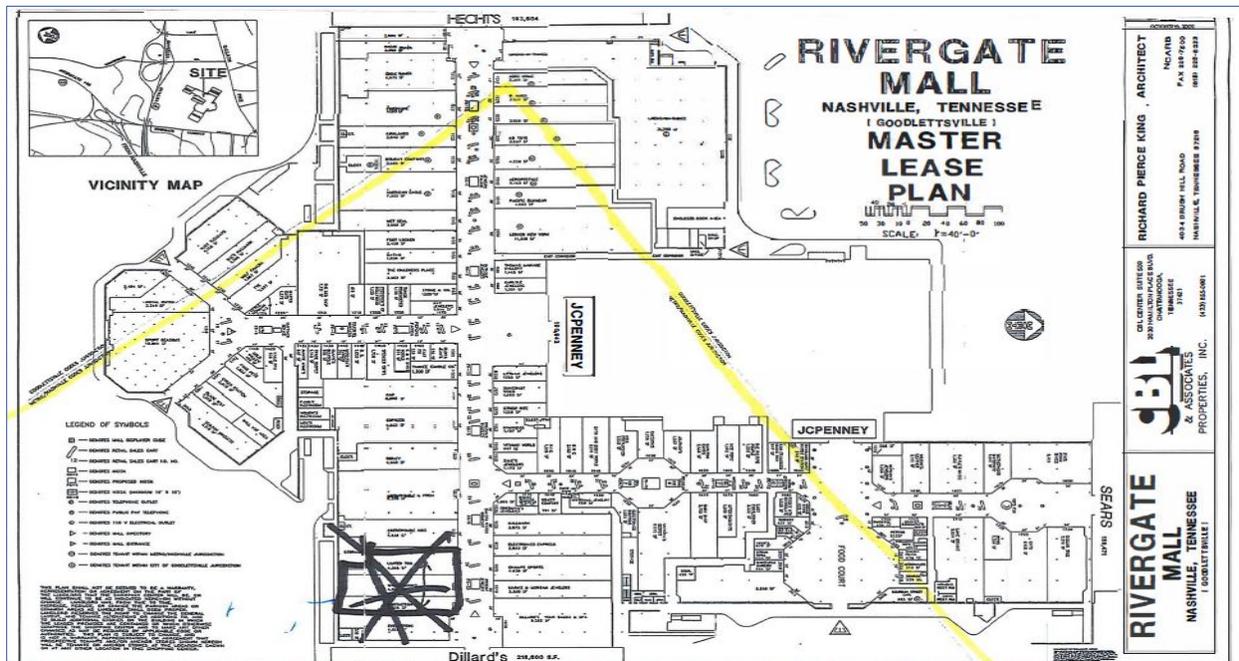
Background

The City of Goodlettsville was most recently incorporated in 1958. Straddling both Davidson and Sumner counties, Goodlettsville is considered one of five satellite cities operating within the Metropolitan Nashville area, as it chose to remain autonomous in 1963 when the City of Nashville merged with the government of Davidson County.ⁱⁱⁱ Goodlettsvillians have long proclaimed to have the best of both worlds having “a small-town community feel with larger city amenities”, as has been printed on City marketing materials throughout the years. Many of the approximately 16,900 residents^{iv} would agree with that statement. They enjoy Nashville's entertainment and foodie scene and a relatively (comparatively) short work commute, while coming home to a community steeped in strong faith and family values. Locals tout the hashtag #GoodInGoodlettsville in their social media posts and on business signs, as there truly is a tightknit community feel in the city. A few of the notable community assets Goodlettsville residents appreciate are the top-performing schools (Sumner County side)^v, strong youth sports leagues and inviting acres of green space in Moss-Wright Park. Regarding commerce and transportation, Goodlettsville's connectivity is ideal. The City has three exits off of Interstate 65 and is also served directly by U.S. 41, U.S. 31-W and State Route 386.

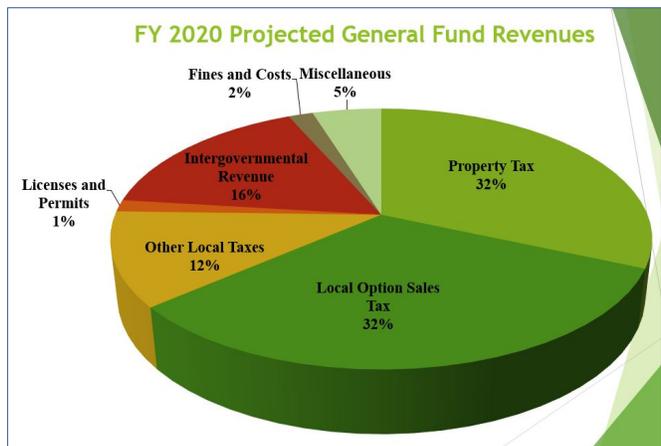
The Need

Goodlettsville needs to overcome negative public perception coming mostly from people in neighboring communities. The decline in RiverGate Mall fuels much of this. Ironically, only

part of the mall is actually inside the city limits, as shown in the map below. The map is a bit dated, but the city limits line (in yellow) remains the same. Macy's, shown on the map as Hecht's, a portion of JCPenney, and Sears lie within the Goodlettsville city limits. Much of the interior stores, the food court, and Dillard's are in Metro Davidson County/Madison postal code 37116.



While the city's budget does rely partially on sales tax revenue, 32% coming in from the local option sales tax as shown on the fiscal year 2020 projected general fund revenues for this year in the graph to the right,^{vi} Goodlettsville is so much more than a shopping mall. This being said, the intent of this paper is not to bite the hand that feeds the city, rather it is to bring awareness to some other positive attributes the city can



leverage to help build up a stronger identity which will hopefully result in building in some new channels for revenue.

In the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer course, “Strategic Planning for Economic Development”, Dr. David R. Kolzow emphasized to students, “Failing to plan is planning to fail.” City leaders recognized the need to create a vibrant downtown center years ago. Along with city staff, the professional design team Lose & Associates, Inc., a steering committee, input from a general public meeting, the Nashville Electric Service, and the Tennessee Department of Transportation, city leaders constructed the Goodlettsville Streetscape Plan in 2004 to direct their work towards doing just that. The plan recommended aesthetic design elements and incorporated functional strategies to improve pedestrian and vehicular circulation throughout downtown Goodlettsville. Specifically, it addressed three major categories: Gateways into the City, Streetscape Design and Zones, and the Transportation Network within the city. Using downtown Franklin, Tennessee as stellar example of a thriving city center, city leaders knew they had their work cut out for them.

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build strong communities. PPS suggests that, “Placemaking shows people just how powerful their collective vision can be. It helps them to re-imagine everyday spaces, and to see anew the potential of parks, downtowns, waterfronts, plazas, neighborhoods, streets, markets, campuses and public buildings.”^{vii} With input from stakeholders and a plan in place, Goodlettsville was on the right track to re-imagine what its Main Street could be.

Current Situation

The City of Goodlettsville has successfully addressed the gateways into the city category to let visitors and residents know when they have entered into the City of Goodlettsville. The city horticulturist has landscaped the interstate on and off ramps, as well as, city limits entrances on other main corridors. The city is working towards addressing the traffic flow issue one step at a time. It has purchased property to eventually realign Rivergate Parkway and Harris Street (roads coming off of Main Street) to provide better access for a new housing development coming in and to address existing safety issues. The streetscape design for Goodlettsville's Main Street is the third category, and it is the main focus of this paper.

Main Street/Dickerson Pike is considered downtown Goodlettsville, with Goodlettsville City Hall as the central institution. Main Street is a major thoroughfare for commuters going to and from Nashville heading back up North. It is also a State highway, which presents its own set of challenges when trying to create a downtown atmosphere with slowed traffic and pedestrian friendly areas. To work towards a solution, the City of Goodlettsville applied for, and was awarded in 2014, a federal funding source to be administered through the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT). The city was allocated 11.7 million dollars for the "reconfiguration of lanes and intersections, landscaping and lighting improvements in support of economic development, improved pedestrian access, safety and congestion mitigation and redevelopment of the Main Street Corridor and intersecting streets," as written in the project description, for a stretch of 1.20 miles from Dorris Avenue to Shevel Drive.^{viii} The City of Goodlettsville would then be responsible for 20 percent of the total project cost, so in essence, this is an 80/20 matching grant at completion.

Now in 2020, Goodlettsville is working through the project and is in the easement acquisition phase, as well as, working with the utility companies to agree on the best placement. Regarding the execution of the Goodlettsville Streetscape Plan as a whole, everything seems to have worked out pretty well. Ironically, one of the recorded comments that came out of the steering committee meeting way back in 2004 when the plan was made, was “Goodlettsville is not a suburb of RiverGate Mall”. This sentiment brings us back to the original problem Goodlettsville is facing today. A city can do all sorts of things to try to set itself apart from other cities, but until it achieves a unique identity, it is like so many other places trying to do the same things.

Dr. David R. Kolzow said in the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer course, “Strategic Planning for Economic Development”, that “It is the successful transformation of the community that is ultimately important; not the successful implementation of the plan.” He was trying to convey that communities can get so wrapped up in the plan that they lose sight of why they made it in the first place and what they are working towards. To put it simply, things change, and we have to change with them for the betterment of our communities. Goodlettsville is a great example of this since the Streetscape Plan was made sixteen years ago, and frankly, at that time it was still riding on the popular retail wave from which it had always benefitted. So, at the time the plan was made, city leaders were not in the same situation as they are in now, regarding negative public perception due to declining retail options, but they still wanted to create something for Goodlettsville to be known for; a vibrant city center on Main Street. In Goodlettsville’s case, it is not so much of a change in plans as it is an addition to the plan to really give it life. Where the work of those that have come before in the form of the Streetscape Plan, ends, the work of placemaking begins.

Action Plan

To many of the younger generation of economic developers, the term “placemaking” is a newfound idea Millennials dreamed up for a really cool concept – create spaces where people want to be. However, PPS has been using the term since the mid-1990s to describe their mission and “groundbreaking ideas about designing cities for people, not just cars and shopping centers.”^{ix}

The City of Goodlettsville’s Economic Development Department is working on a plan to give facelifts to the existing businesses on Main Street and also to position Main Street as a place to set up business for ousted Nashville small business owners. The idea is that they can re-establish that neighborhood feel they once had in Nashville, and still very easily describe their location to existing customers. They can be a part of something new in an established area. This idea stems from real life examples and phone calls received at the Goodlettsville ECD office. One story in particular stood out.

An Italian Market was being kicked out of its location of 14 years so that the building could be demolished to make room for 13 row houses to be used for AirBnBs. The business owner was given two weeks to vacate the premises. He did not want to lose his faithful customers, some driving from Alabama straight up Interstate 65 to buy his homemade raviolis and sauces. He lived in a neighboring community so he was familiar with the area, and a vacant building on Goodlettsville’s Main Street had caught his eye. The building was across from appealing shops; a lovely gift store and boutique named Sweet Tea and Shopping (now rebranded as Perk Up Café and Gifts to include food and beverages) and Chic Artic, a destination home goods decor and gift store. Goodlettsville City Hall was also just next door with only a street to separate the two buildings. In the Placemaking Assessment Tool prepared

by the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute for Michigan Communities, researchers found that, “Placemaking activities in proximity to anchor institutions are likely to have greater economic benefit than elsewhere. The large number of people working in anchor institutions, and the increased activity level and buying power they bring are critical for successful placemaking.”^x The stage was set. What could go wrong? Sadly, that building was working through flooding issues, and was not available, but Goodlettsville’s ECD office was made aware of a great need and opportunity in misplaced Nashville businesses.

The City of Goodlettsville’s Economic Development Department is working to establish the Main Street Matching Grant Program to assist building owners with the implementation of the vision city leaders set forth. The grant program’s purpose is to ultimately provide for a unique blend of retail, service businesses, offices, and possibly residential uses to look their best for public and semi-public uses, while preserving and building upon the historic character of Main Street. In addition to the eligible uses for improvements to the exterior of buildings, window and door replacement and repairs, awnings and signs, landscaping and parking areas, grants can also be used for murals and other placemaking elements. In 2019 the Goodlettsville Area Chamber of Commerce commissioned an artist to paint a vibrant mural on the side of Perk Up Café and Gifts at the property owner’s agreement. This action spurred much excitement amongst locals and city leaders. Soon after, the Goodlettsville City Manager brought forth to the Board of Commissioners a preliminary draft of the Goodlettsville Main Street Matching Grant Program.



Here is the specific funding breakdown. All applicants must provide matching funds on a minimum 1:1 ratio for grants up to \$5,000. Grants over \$5,000 shall require a 1:1 match on the first \$5,000 and 2:1 match on each dollar thereafter. For example, an applicant seeking a \$10,000 grant would need to contribute \$15,000 towards the improvements: \$5,000 for the first \$5,000 (1:1) plus \$10,000 for the remaining \$5,000 (2:1).

The Board of Commissioners was pleased with the proposal and asked that it move forward for additional discussion and more specifics. Assuming the Board approves the program and the funding for it, Goodlettsville would be able to accept applications in fiscal year 2020/2021 and grant funds for use in 2021.

Goodlettsville is considering application for the Tennessee Main Street Program through the Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development. This designation would obviously enhance public confidence in the city's goals for Main Street, among other long-term benefits.

Challenges

Goodlettsville has used a holistic approach to work towards creating a community identity separate from RiverGate Mall and distinct enough to try to entice tourists to stray from the busyness of Nashville, and/or to exit the interstate to spend some time in downtown Goodlettsville. Clearly much work is left to do to accomplish these goals. However, there is a large piece missing from the efforts thus far, and if you are a marketing person, you will have picked up on that by now. Where is the brand? Goodlettsville is a lot of things to a lot of people, and that has worked out just fine for locals for quite some time. But, the city struggles with branding outside of its clear asset, which is location to Nashville, which ironically is also sort of its identity conundrum.

Then there's buy in. How will Goodlettsville build public confidence to a level where Main Street businesses and stakeholders will act on the Main Street Grant Program? This is a bit of a grey area. The city certainly has a network of movers and shakers, a strong grassroots way of spreading news, and supportive city leadership, but is that enough in the face of so much change in economics and the Nashville boom? There is some room left for magic (if you are a dreamer type person or an unwavering optimist) if you consider the grit and success of the people that are already here doing business now and the potential for new entrepreneurs to take a chance on something different. At this juncture, Goodlettsville is going to do what Arthur Ashe said, "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can."^{xi}

Conclusion

Through the Main Street Grant Program and placemaking elements, the City of Goodlettsville is working towards creating an identity that will resonate with residents and one

that will grow outside of the city so that it can turn around a negative public perception and draw in visitors and new businesses to create new revenue channels. Currently between being Nashville's neighbor and the perception that Goodlettsville and RiverGate Mall are synonymous, the City must recreate itself. Placemaking is the key to do that. The ultimate goal of this project for Goodlettsville to have a chance at reinvention of self and to be known for its charming downtown city center.

ⁱ USA Today online article titled, "Macy's is closing nearly 30 stores in 19 states. Is your location on the list?", written by Kelly Tyko and published on January 7, 2020:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/01/07/macys-store-closings-2020-list-more-than-dozen-stores-shutter/2829013001/>

ⁱⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Placemaking>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodlettsville,_Tennessee

^{iv} U.S. Census Bureau 2018 estimate:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/goodlettsvillecitytennessee>

^v Online article titled, "14 Sumner schools named Reward Schools by state", written by Tena Lee and published on August 29, 2019: https://www.gallatinnews.com/community/sumner-schools-named-reward-schools-by-state/article_3382494c-cad6-11e9-9e88-57bbc6cb251f.html

^{vi} Graph provided by the Goodlettsville Assistant City Manager and Finance Director. This illustration was used for Economy Day for the 2019 Leadership Goodlettsville group.

^{vii} <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>

^{viii} Nashville MPO website: pdf document showing Davidson County projects for FYs 2014-2017: http://nashvillempotest.nashville.gov/docs/TIP/2014_2017/DavidsonCountyProjects.pdf

^{ix} <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>

^x Placemaking Assessment Tool, Prepared by the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute for Michigan Communities, Page 8/75, Section titled, "Relationship of Anchor Institutions to Placemaking": https://www.canr.msu.edu/landpolicy/uploads/files/Resources/Tools/MIplace_Partnership_Initiative/PlacemakingAssessmentTool_LPI_WCAG2.0_updated_041515.pdf

^{xi} Arthur Ashe biography: <https://www.biography.com/athlete/arthur-ashe>