Downtown revitalization is progressing as the result of a collaboratively executed plan that values authentically Macon improvement.

Like many major cities across the United States, Downtown Macon struggled to rebound from suburbanization, urban renewal and deindustrialization. Cross-sector initiatives in the city over the past decade sought to reverse those trends through public space improvements, infrastructure upgrades and new commercial and residential development.

Knight Foundation is one of many Macon investors, including but not limited to Mercer University, Peyton Anderson Foundation and Navicent Health, which support the community in revitalizing downtown. Since 1969, Knight Foundation (“Knight”) has directly invested over $82 million in Macon-Bibb, Georgia. In recent years, Knight’s grants have focused on supporting Macon’s efforts to bring renaissance to downtown through partnerships with residents, public leaders and private industry.

The successes, challenges and measurable outcomes gleaned from activities supported by Knight and others to date — further informed by lessons learned from other cities — lay the foundation for continued improvement to ensure the realization of Downtown Macon as a vibrant, inclusive center for home, work, and play.

Macon Investment Objectives

**Economic Development:** Creating employment opportunities by encouraging entrepreneurial and traditional business development

**Bringing City Life Downtown:** Expanding and launching uniquely “Macon” assets which draw diverse audiences

**Enhancing Public Spaces:** Enhancing public spaces and parks and creating a bike- and pedestrian-friendly downtown

Key Macon Urban Core Funding

Since 2012, the following have invested $450M+ of public and private investment in Macon’s Urban Core:

- $300M Mercer University’s capital improvements on campus and Downtown
- $84M Navicent Health’s new Beverly Knight Olson Children’s Hospital
- $77.5M private developer investment in iofts Downtown since 2013
- $8M of Special Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) funding allocated to recreational and cultural improvements in Downtown Macon, 2012-2017
- $2.725M Peyton Anderson Foundation’s investments in Macon Action Plan, Downtown Challenge and Capricorn Studios

Knight Foundation Grants, 2013-2015

To advance economic development and city building objectives in Macon’s Urban Core, between 2013 and 2015, Knight Foundation partnered with other funders and made over $4.7M in grants to four Macon organizations (just a portion of total Knight investments during this period). Successes and challenges learned from these grants should inform future activities in Macon, building on past initiatives.

**Successes**

- Leading with a vision and collaboratively developed plan
- Democratizing revitalization activities
- “Bringing city life downtown” through support of housing strategies and activation grants
- Retaining authentic character

**Challenges**

- Prioritizing inclusive prosperity
- Building a resilient Downtown economy
- Translating infrastructure plans into permanent improvements
EVALUATION ANALYSIS

PROCESS

Knight Foundation retained HR&A Advisors to evaluate the effectiveness of four key grants in advancing economic development and city building objectives for Macon’s Urban Core, as well as to consider future opportunities for Macon. These grants, made with key partners, represent a fraction of the ongoing support throughout the community for Macon’s Urban Core revitalization but offer insights for the future. The process through which recommendations were developed is illustrated graphically below. Analyses were informed by stakeholder interviews, demographic and real estate data research, and analysis of grant reports and public documents.

SELECT KNIGHT SUPPORT WITH PARTNERS, 2013-2015

Macon Action Plan (2013): The Peyton Anderson Foundation and Knight together contributed $450,000 ($225,000 each) to fund the development of a Downtown Master Plan, an “action plan” for a coordinated, focused and action-oriented approach to the revitalization of Macon’s Urban Core.

Downtown Challenge (2015): Knight and the Peyton Anderson Foundation partnered to support the implementation of the Macon Action Plan in Macon’s Urban Core. Each contributed $1.5 million, for a total of $3 million, to support small grants through a semiannual call for new ideas.

Historic Macon Foundation - Beall’s Hill Revitalization (2014): Historic Macon Foundation (HMF) continues to lead a partnership of Knight, Mercer University, Macon-Bibb County, and Macon Housing Authority to restore 32 blocks in Beall’s Hill. In 2014, Knight Foundation supported HMF with $3 million while Mercer University committed over $400,000 in down payment assistance to encourage university staff purchase of Beall’s Hill homes. At the same time, Macon-Bibb committed $2 million in blight funds to support infrastructure improvements in the neighborhood.

Tourism Technology Initiative (2013): A $48,075 grant to bring Macon attractions into the digital age and attract visitors to Macon’s tourist destinations.

KEY OUTPUTS

80% of strategies implemented

130 projects funded

+$47M property value increase (Beall’s Hill, ‘09-’16)

262 tickets sold online

KEY FINDINGS | REVITALIZATION SUCCESSES

1. Leading with a Vision and a Collaboratively Developed Plan. The vision set forth in the Macon Action Plan laid the foundation for organization toward actionable outcomes. Community leaders and investors include Mercer University, Knight, Peyton Anderson Foundation, the Community Foundation of Central Georgia, NewTown Macon and the Macon-Bibb Urban Development Authority. The Macon Action Plan and the Downtown Challenge led to increased alignment among nonprofits, residents, businesses, and other stakeholders, and increased accountability through their actionable frameworks. Many of Macon’s philanthropies, organizations, and residents are moving forward with a collective vision under the Macon Action Plan, which has proven to be an effective strategy to advance revitalization efforts in Macon.

2. Democratizing Revitalization Activities. The Macon Action Plan and Downtown Challenge catalyzed civic engagement and revitalization activities. The Macon Action Plan involved 2,500 unique participants, and Downtown Challenge grants were implemented by 38 distinct individuals and organizations. The Downtown Challenge provided individuals and organizations with the capacity and resources to implement the Macon Action Plan, supporting $3 million of resident-led implementation activities that might not have otherwise been feasible.

3. “Bringing City Life Downtown” through support of housing strategies and activation grants. Housing quality and supply in the Urban Core has improved, particularly in the Beall’s Hill neighborhood. Additionally, the Downtown Challenge advanced Downtown’s reputation as an attractive destination and neighborhood, changing perceptions of Downtown opportunities with frequent programming.

4. Retaining Authentic Character. Macon continues to make progress in finding ways to leverage its history and unique cultural destinations as revitalization tools to support economic development. Historic Macon Foundation, a national leader in historic preservation, is revitalizing the Beall’s Hill neighborhood with historic rehabilitation and new construction using historic architectural elements. Mercer University, with support from Knight Foundation and Peyton Anderson Foundation, is restoring the historic Capricorn recording studios, which is surrounded by the largest ($25 million) mixed-use development in Downtown Macon history.
KEY FINDINGS | REVITALIZATION CHALLENGES

1. **Prioritizing Inclusive Prosperity.** Inclusion of all Macon residents in efforts to improve the Urban Core economy is important. Public perceptions of Macon’s Urban Core rely on improvements to the quality of life and opportunities for all members of the community, including outer neighborhoods of the Urban Core, such as Pleasant Hill and East Macon. While the grants effectively engaged a large number of residents, few implementation activities to date have targeted neighborhoods in the northern and eastern borders of the Urban Core, and the Downtown Challenge grant has struggled to expand the pool of project leaders.

2. **Building a Resilient Downtown Economy.** Public and private community organizations are laying the foundation for attracting new audiences and residents. Downtown through the support of activation, tourism, and housing grants but the establishment of a comprehensive Downtown ecosystem is still in its early stages. Despite economic growth, Downtown's ecosystem is not yet resilient. Business owners spoke about frequent turnover, persistent vacancy and particularly challenging summer months for sales. There has been continued growth in the production of Downtown lofts and increased Downtown residents, but this growth has yet to provide a critical mass of patrons and spending to support Downtown services.

3. **Translating Infrastructure Plans into Permanent Improvements.** While Downtown Challenge grants successfully generated excitement around multimodal transportation and spurred interest in alternative modes of transportation, several of the Macon Action Plan’s connectivity goals, including transportation, access, and open space strategies, require larger investments and more significant public funding than those that have been made to date.

   In cities across the country, publicly-funded improvements to facilities are often a contributing factor to supporting revitalization. After Macon’s city and county governments consolidated, budget shortages led to public concerns about the government’s ability to sustain current levels of support for key services such as transportation and library services. While there is a Special Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) for open space improvements, many of the open space projects and public realm connections outlined in the Macon Action Plan have not yet been implemented. The implementation of these strategies, which are critical to increasing mobility and safety, and improving the urban experience, are also challenged by coordination required for implementation. One notable exception to this challenge has been the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail extension, which more than doubled the number of yearly trail users between 2015 and 2018.

Images: HR&A Advisors
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

HR&A used key findings stemming from the analysis of past grant activity on Macon-Bibb outcomes to date and case studies on national best practices for downtown revitalization to inform recommendations for the future. Potential strategies are rooted in the main objectives of economic development, bringing city life downtown and public spaces, and organized into a set of five key categories of “Future Opportunities.” Additionally, future activities should be evaluated and guided through consideration of three overarching “Lenses.”

**FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES**

The following opportunities to build on the positive momentum in Macon to date:

- **Economic Development:** While grants have supported entrepreneurial and creative industries, the Urban Core still has untapped potential as an employment center. A diversity of quality new jobs and business will be crucial to sustaining development Downtown and creating the critical mass needed to support downtown services.

- **Quality Public Realm:** Existing improvements to sidewalks, medians, parking schemes and signage have contributed to greater business and tourism activity downtown, but further infrastructure and public realm investments will be critical to achieving a connected and accessible Urban Core.

- **Increased Tourism in Urban Core:** Progress has been made advancing the preservation and celebration of Macon’s unique history and culture. Macon’s strengths and authentic attributes should be aggressively preserved, strengthened and communicated more broadly to attract additional visitors.

- **Waterfront Revitalization:** The recent increase in utilization of the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail demonstrates the potential for the activation of the Ocmulgee River Waterfront. One of Macon’s greatest assets is its riverfront, which could serve as a draw for tourism and resident activity downtown. While significant waterfront development is not possible due to land use constraints, improving physical connections to this asset would further support business growth in the area.

- **Strong Arts and Culture Ecosystem:** Macon is already building its reputation as a festival capital, and increased investment in its brand as a cultural center will yield greater activity in the Urban Core. A robust ecosystem of arts and culture in the city would attract new businesses, residents and tourists.

**LENSES TO APPLY TO FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES**

In addition to the expanded opportunity areas described above, there should also be the systematic consideration of the below lenses as priorities are selected. The following lenses are not meant to be specific areas of investment, rather considerations that could make an investment more attractive.

- **Equity and Inclusion:** While Macon has seen progress recently in residential and commercial activity, growth is hindered by disparate opportunities for large segments of the population. Sustained revitalization will be dependent on achieving equitable outcomes for residents and pursuing avenues for including those who experience greater barriers to economic and social opportunities.

- **Geographically Concentrating Downtown Investment:** Downtown Macon’s footprint is larger than those of comparable cities: 5.6 times larger than Asheville, North Carolina, and 1.6 times larger than Chattanooga, Tennessee. Concentrating investment in smaller areas or along key corridors will establish successful nodes of activity that adjacent areas can leverage.

- **Deepening Partnerships:** The partnerships across sectors proved to be key elements in Macon’s current revitalization. Accordingly, Macon Urban Core stakeholders should strengthen existing relationships and develop new alignments with other organizations to continue to ensure successful implementation.
PROGRESS ON MACON INVESTMENT OBJECTIVES

A network of partners have advanced Macon’s revitalization through core investment objectives critical for the development of successful downtowns. While there is still work to be done, particularly in Downtown retail stability, the indicators below provide measurable results against which to benchmark progress.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

43 businesses
Number of businesses opening or expanding Downtown in 2018

+152 net new jobs
Number of net new jobs Downtown in 2018

+7% office rental rates
Increase in average office leasing rates Downtown between 2014 and 2017

**BRINGING CITY LIFE DOWNTOWN**

1,676 events
Number of events held Downtown in 2017

+15% multifamily rental rates
Increase in average multifamily leasing rates Downtown between 2014 and 2017

+104 lofts per year
Average number of lofts delivered per year between 2013 and 2018

0 storefront occupancy change
Net change in storefront occupancy for NewTown Macon Downtown core study area between 2015 and 2018

**ENHANCING PUBLIC SPACES**

77% public approval
On the Table survey respondents who felt public parks and green spaces had improved since 2013, the highest change of any category, 2018

13 miles
Length of the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail after construction is complete in 2019

+900 parking meters
Number of parking meters installed Downtown, 2018

1,500 attendees
Average number of participants in Open Streets Macon events, 2017-2018