

**McComb, MISSISSIPPI**

**ASSET MAPPING REPORT**

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**McCOMB, MISSISSIPPI  
PIKE COUNTY  
ASSET MAPPING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS**

**By University of Southern Mississippi Students, Joy Foy and Brandi Hough  
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The purpose of asset mapping a community is to have a team of experts analyze the community from a fresh perspective. In other words, we come with the purpose of looking at what assets are available and finding new ways to use these assets. These outsiders do not have the disadvantage of the citizens who are limited by their familiarity with the way things have always been used. Geography students and their professor, Mark Miller, from University of Southern Mississippi (USM) joined the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) Asset Development Division to make up the McComb Asset Mapping Team.



The Ironwood Festival was in full swing on the day of our visit, complete with craft exhibits, local musicians playing, and a 5-K run event in the downtown area. Festivals are great ways to utilize local assets. The team selected the following three broad asset groups as their choices to offer additional ways to build on the McComb momentum already in place.

**Top Three Assets**

1. Music, Art, and Entertainment
2. Railroad Theme
3. Existing Enterprises and Available Buildings

**Asset One: MUSIC, ART AND ENTERTAINMENT**

The team was inspired by seeing the crowd the Ironwood Market Arts and Craft festival brought into McComb and led us to recommend building on this type venue. The unique restaurants like Topisal, the Caboose, Broadway Deli and the Dinner Bell could become partners to feed and entertain groups as day trips to McComb are promoted. There are many themes to build a day trip event around. For example, workshops to learn or write music, to hear lectures on the latest health care ideas, to take an art class,



or to enjoy the talent of local storytellers. Nature tours, bike rides and other racing events could also add to the reasons for people to visit McComb.

We are not suggesting that you have the same type of workshops that other communities are offering, but rather to be purposeful about being different and standing out. The day of the 5-K was memorable for the stretching routine before the race. This was new and different, something unexpected and it set the tone for the whole day. Packaging multiple opportunities as creative getaways with start and end times to accommodate a train ride from Jackson or New Orleans could foster a reputation that would get McComb added to the bucket-list of numerous age groups. For example, offer a long weekend packaged “stay-vacation” building on what you did with the Ironwood Market and the party the night before.

### Recommendations

1. Partnering with the medical staff at the hospital for cutting edge medical programs and healthy living advice could also be marketed as a “looking younger at any age” workshop. You could have active, healthy, older individuals serving as testimonials for eating correctly or making exercise a part of daily living. For example, invite Dr. John Pendergrass (Telephone: 601-268-5144) of Hattiesburg who is an Ironman triathlon 60+ year-old to tell stories about his runs in different countries. He is also author of the book, “Against the Odds” and is still a practicing ophthalmologist.



This workshop could include activities in keeping with a health spa getaway, lectures, massages, makeup advice, clothing advice, fashion shows. Make the McComb experience special and different each day of the trip with a bike ride each morning where the vacationers would take pictures and blog about what they were seeing along the trail. Of course, the local restaurants would alternate serving meals to give the visitors a new experience each day. The guest would purchase a ticket for the package deal that included their Amtrak train ride, hotel/bed and breakfast room, all their meals. It would include an agenda that mapped out their stay-vacation from the time they got on the train until they left town at the end of the stay.

2. Offer a package deal to artist groups in Jackson to have a day in the country and enjoy outdoor classes. The artists would arrive at a predetermined time and could be treated to



tours of the beautiful homes and sites of the city. You might consider tours of the surrounding woodlands or a walking tour with a guide to showcase the town's train history. They would then set up their easels along the linear park area from the overpass bridge to the train depot on the north end of the depot. Each artist who purchases this stay-vacation packet would receive a big colorful hat or cap to make it feel more festive as they paint.

The day would begin with a talented story teller giving a fun story about the history of McComb to set the mood and music would play in the background all day. Maybe local musicians like Artis Brown would play for the artists. At lunch they would go as a group to one of the restaurants for lunch and enjoy meeting and visiting with locals. Local business owners should be encouraged to visit the artists and really make them feel special in McComb. The day would close with all the art work being judged and discussed. Art teachers from local schools, community college or USM might be utilized as judges. The winner or winners could be sold as numbered prints and over time the money earned could partially be used as prize money. The TV stations and newspapers would be invited to cover the judging session and the selection of the best overall work. Making the event into an artist camp where winning the McComb event would be the caliber they would add to their resume.

The day would conclude with the locals coming out to view the work and have a social event with a wine and cheese toast to the artist of the day. Their paintings of McComb would serve as good publicity for the city and they would tell their friends about the good time and the wonderful people they met in McComb.

3. Showcase downtown redevelopment projects by offering an open house of the renovated spaces. Invite locals, developers and their spouses from near and far to participate and have the owners or managers of the building share stories about the renovation in each of the buildings. The visitors could then be invited to purchase tickets for a progressive meal that takes them from one eatery to another. The stores in the mall could be invited to do a pop-up store along the linear park area in downtown. Tents could serve as housing for Belk, J.C. Penney, Ashley Furniture or some of the other 47 mall merchants. This will help to inform locals and outsiders about the progress and the varied assets available to the city. Tying the assets from the mall to downtown will help cross market the two areas.

**NOTES:** Utilizing the best talent available for all workshops and using creative marketing to attract the desired audience will ensure rave reviews and all workshops should be of the caliber to make the participants eager to attend the next one. Promote the events on social media and on the website. Create "event emails" to invite participation, place articles in the local paper and speak to surrounding civic clubs about



upcoming opportunities for fun in McComb. Utilize the Pike County Welcome Center to promote all of your events. One of the best ways is to make sure the Welcome Center employees are aware of what you have to offer in downtown and that they are informed about the fun things McComb has to offer.

It seems that several good projects similar to these we have suggested start here, but they have never really taken root or realized a long life. We think these kinds of “stay-vacations” would:

- a. Involve many different citizens;
- b. Bring people into town on a regular basis;
- c. Create visibility; and
- d. Be a good marketing platform to promote McComb.

This would include leaders from the hospital, elected officials, volunteers, and chamber members. We suggest that the more leaders involved and the bigger the crowds attracted, the better McComb’s chance for creating momentum will be in order to sustain it for the long term.

### **Asset Two: RAILROAD THEME**

McComb can be true to its history by adopting a railroad theme throughout. The investment in the depot, the old train cars, and the active rail line are all good reasons to build on this theme. We were told there are plans to purchase one of the little cars used by the railroad to run the mail from the depot to the post office. So we know you are already thinking of adding to the investment of your railroad assets.

### **Recommendations**

1. Paint the fire hydrants downtown. A new paint job could make these features stand out in a positive way. We suggest painting the hydrants with train-themed caps on top to enhance the train neighborhood theme.
2. Have a weekly article in the local newspaper with a railroad title such as “The Choo-Choo News” or “Rail Town Updates” to promote positive news about McComb.



3. To further build upon the unique railroad theme and to help brand McComb as a train city, the team recommends that you include the coal shoot and the saw tooth buildings in marketing materials. Many cities and towns have trains and depots, but McComb has additional unique railroad related buildings and sites to offer.
4. Stamp street names into every street to match the ones that have survived over time to build on the way McComb looked in the heyday of trains.
5. Use murals to help tell the train story of McComb. Murals will dress up vacant walls and hide broken windows and empty buildings. The old bordello hotel windows could be “fixed” with murals showing “the ladies of the night” peeking out the windows. This is a fun historic story and a life-like picture in place of blacked out windows will offer opportunities to tell that story to make people’s visits more memorable.
6. Long-term, we suggest you aim to have the former “bordello” renovated into a bed and breakfast inn. It could even be called the Bordello B&B. This would make for quite the travel experience. No doubt, savvy travel writers would come to McComb to write about this unique lodging option. Peter Sharpe, (601-948-3429) owner of the Fairview Inn, would be a good contact for doing a bed & breakfast correctly.
7. Work with the Mississippi Agriculture Museum to get over runs of toy train models when they can no longer house the intake from families who leave these trains to the museum. Lise Foy, (601-432-4500), the director, will help you.
8. Visitors love to take home a memento of their travels; therefore the team suggests that railroad-themed specialty items be available for purchase. The museum could have a fund raiser to purchase these and they could be available for sale either at the museum or at one or more of the downtown shops. This would be a revenue source for the Museum as well as a draw for the downtown shops. You could also sell posters made from the winning workshop art.
9. Mississippi Department of Transportation will offer the Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) grant in November. It was established under the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and replaces the Transportation Enhancement Program, Safe Routes to School Program, as well as the Recreational Trails Program. We suggest this grant be utilized to create a bike and/or walking trail from the hotels at the interstate and from the hospital into downtown. The hotels and hospital could offer bikes for rent as a means of healthier transportation into town. The bikes could be painted to continue the train theme. This could become a business or a perk for the visitors and would reinforce the image of McComb promoting healthy living. The grant guidelines are at [www.mdot.ms.gov](http://www.mdot.ms.gov) or you may contact Paula Morgan at [pmorgan@mdot.ms.gov](mailto:pmorgan@mdot.ms.gov) or 601-359-7222.

10. Have a plan for things that need to be accomplished so when money becomes available you can take immediate action and be able to meet the deadlines of the new funding application.

### **Asset Three: EXISTING ENTERPRISES AND AVAILABLE BUILDINGS**

Greater downtown McComb has an extensive amount of empty buildings in a wide range of interesting architectural styles ranging from developed and available to derelict. Some of these buildings, such as the old hospital and restaurant are located on prominent sites. There are two good examples in our State about how community leaders have revitalized their downtowns.

1. In Water Valley a group of young women took hammers and paint brushes and renovated the BTC building. The name stands for "Be The Change you want to see". Their success has been written in the New York Times. A copy of the article is included at the end of these recommendations as Attachment A. The Main Street Manager Mickey Howley writes editorials each week for the local newspaper to keep the public informed about the positive things happening in Water Valley. Attachment B includes excerpts from a speech given by Doug Loescher, National Main Street Director. These types of stories then get picked up by the national wire services and they reach a bigger audience.
2. The second example of revitalization we are recommending is Eupora. A group formed their own LLC partnership and pooled their money to purchase downtown buildings. They bought one building at a time, made the necessary renovations, and then either sold or rented it to a desirable business that complimented the desired downtown retail environment. These partners have pledged to take no money out of the LLC for at least ten years so all the profits from the sale or rent of the buildings go back to grow the investment pool of money which allows them to continue doing high-end redevelopment projects.

This is an email from one of the investors.

"We have purchased 4 properties but it has amounted to 5 buildings. One of the buildings was divided into 2 separate spaces that could be rented. Vocational Rehab is in half of that building with the other space being available. NMMC – Home Health is in two of the buildings that we ended up connecting to meet their needs for the additional space. We have Hatlee's Boutique in the building that was built in the early 1900's as a Standard Oil Service Station with a café. We bought the building next to that one that was probably one of the junkiest pieces of property in Eupora and redid that building which now houses Once Was New. The other piece of property that we bought was a burned out lot on Dunn Street. The City bought it from us for

the Arts Council and that purchase was used as the match for a MS Arts Commission grant.

Since we made the investment there have been renovations done on both of the other buildings in the block where our property is located with one new business opening in what was the old Texaco Station. Central Service Grill is the other building and it has expanded into the whole building where it is located because they needed a bigger kitchen and dining area.

There have been at least 8 additional buildings and or properties that other owners have renovated since the work we did took place. One piece of property was sold and the new owners renovated/repurposed what was the Phillips Lumber Company dry kiln that had sat totally forgotten just behind where Community Counseling is located. The new owners also sold some of the property that had highway frontage and it now has an urgent care type business in one side of the new building that was constructed and an Alfa Insurance agency in the other half. A new street was built by the property owners to provide new access to their building and with the new access street 3 new businesses have been created: a medical rehab business, a sandwich shop and a pottery business that also sells wooden frames and handmade furniture along with gift items.

One of the members of our investment group bought a piece of property separate from our investment group. He flipped the property and now it houses a new lumber company, Nabors Do-It Center.

It is interesting how when either one or more renovations of property are done then others see the potential and rewards that can happen. This spurs other work and improves the appearance and profitability of the town."

## **Recommendations**

1. City hall and the elected officials should be the lead on having a picturesque downtown. The city-owned property should set the standard of looking neat and clean. Always build the high-end product as the budget will allow. The mayor, chamber and main street directors should ride the streets once a month looking for things that need attention. These would include buildings that need a facelift, leaning or broken signage, grass that needs cutting or edged, and special attention to all entrances into the city. Keep a list of the things that need to be repaired and share the list with the appropriate people to make the corrections. The next month,



the trip begins with reviewing the previous list, checking to see what has been accomplished or not; while a new list is created each month.

2. Inventory the available buildings and compile a listing of the owner's name, contact information and the square footage. Include anything that is needed to market the building. This information should be available at city hall, the main street office, and the chamber office.
3. The mayor and main street manager should arrange a visit to the City of Laurel to see how they have utilized large banners with local images to dress up the façade of empty available building in their downtown area. These banners make a very positive visual image.
4. Work with a local developer to recruit investors and analyze best usage of the facility. Host an open house of all the available buildings in downtown. Invite developers from near and far to participate and have the owners or managers of the building on hand to answer questions. After the tours and allowing people to view the buildings, the renderings from the LSU students could be shown to help spark interest. The mayor could outline the permit process followed in McComb to ensure there would be no surprises once the renovation work began. Leland Speed might be invited to testify to the value of redeveloping property which reopens empty buildings and improves the value of surrounding property.
5. Invest in good signage, perhaps with a railroad theme, to help visitors know how to get to your shopping malls, the ball fields, or let the hospital visitors know about downtown shopping and restaurants.
6. Develop a marketing campaign to inform visitors to the mall, your interstate hotels, and the hospital about special sales or events in downtown. Ocean Springs takes an updated list monthly to the restaurants, gift shops and casinos all along the coast about the events happening the next month. They promote sales from downtown businesses, menus from the restaurants, and city events to attract people on the coast to Ocean Springs. This is an inexpensive way to advertise and will also provide great networking opportunities with leaders at the hotels and hospital which will help them feel part of the revitalization.
7. Utilize the green strip at the train depot from the bridge on the north end to as far as the city owns to the south as a linear park to create an environment that attracts local people to this area. There could be walking trails, picnic tables, playground equipment, or after five events on the green.



8. Offer a regular Friday-night event downtown to keep people coming and returning to downtown. Hattiesburg, for example, has developed a large repeat audience for its "Live at Five" Friday evening event in April and October. This event features a different band every Friday night, local arts and crafts vendors, food, outdoor movies and beer sales.
9. Showcase the musical talents of famous McComb musicians by playing their music in the downtown area, e.g. Bo Diddley, the Williams Brothers and Brandi Norwood, for example.
10. Downtown McComb presents a unique location for music-based tourism, nightlife, and related development. There are a number of available buildings, including several theaters in various stages of repair.



## Conclusion

The asset mapping team was impressed with the activities already in play and offers these recommendations as added projects to build momentum. It is very important that you adopt a vision and stay focused on those goals to realize the vision. One of the best ways to keep people focused is to work together. Involve any and everyone who will participate. Assign the action items to committees. This can be done by asking for volunteers to head up each action step as the lead person and then to form their committee by inviting other people with an interest in that topic. Meeting regularly to report progress will hold people accountable and publicize the accomplishments. Initially, we recommend meeting weekly for these updates to build trust by getting to know each other better and to get everyone accustomed to making progress.

Thank you for the opportunity to work with you in McComb. We enjoyed our time with you and appreciate the friendship you showed to us.