RESIDENTS’ VISIONS of CARBONDALE

Contributions to Downtown Redevelopment Efforts

Project undertaken by the Civic Communication Collective

as an Imagining Geographies Project

College of Mass Communication & Media Arts

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This project is intended as a contribution to deliberations by residents, members of the Downtown Advisory Committee [DAC], and, consultants eventually selected to propose concrete plans for redevelopment of Carbondale’s downtown area.

Indeed, this project is a direct outcome of resident and DAC deliberations, as it was sparked by a proposal-question posed by Nick Smaligo, Carbondale resident and SIU graduate student, during DAC’s open community discussion of the session devoted to transportation issues. Nick posed a general question: *What is the vision of Carbondale guiding redevelopment of the downtown area?*

In his elaboration, Nick argued, and we agree, that general plans to be developed and specific proposals for downtown redevelopment should be guided by residents’ visions of our city.

Since Nick’s proposal-question lies at the heart of SIU’s *Imagining Geographies* [IG] initiative, and since one of IG’s ongoing projects – *Voices of Southern Illinois* – gathers concerns, stories, opinions, and desires of residents of our region, it was natural that we would set out to collect the views of Carbondale’s residents - many of whom might not attend or share their views at DAC meetings.

To gather residents’ visions, in a relatively short period of time, we recruited members of the Civic Communication Collective [CCC], composed mostly of undergraduate student-volunteers studying in the SIU College of Mass Communication & Media Arts. The CCC is facilitated and guided this year by graduate students – Lauren Stoelzle, a lifelong Carbondale resident, and Doron Alter.

Altogether we succeeded in video-recording vision proposals of 81 residents over a three week period, from late October to mid-November 2014. In doing so, we asked persons we met, randomly, in shops, cafes, hair salons, and on the street, the question posed by Nick:

*What is the vision of Carbondale you think ought to guide downtown redevelopment efforts?*

Two analyses of the vision statements collected were undertaken – *demographic* and *thematic*.

Surprisingly, *demographic analysis* (see Appendix 1) found that we collected statements from a cross-section of residents, though, again, interviews were conducted by convenience sampling – by interviewing persons students met as they moved up and down the streets of downtown Carbondale. Here are the demographics of resident-participants whose visions were collected:

- **GENDER**: Men – 54% (46) ~ Women – 46% (33)
- **RACE**: Whites - 68% (55) ~ African-Americans - 24% (19) ~ Hispanics - 6% (5) ~ Asians - 2% (2)
- **AGE groups by decade**: 20s – 46% (37) ~ 30s – 15% (12) ~ 40s – 7% (6) ~ 50s – 16% (13) ~ 60s – 6% (5) ~ 70s – 10% (8).
- **ENCOUNTERS**: On the Street - 36% (29) ~ Cafes - 18% (14) ~ Shop Customers - 12% (10) ~ Co-Op - 11% (9) ~ Hair Salons - 9% (7) ~ Shop owners/workers - 6% (5) ~ Varsity Theater - 2% (2).

Also included are vision statements of five residents with disabilities who participated in recording sessions for “Enabling Living Independently”, a program to be broadcast in April 2015 by WSIU in the new *Civic Soul* series.
Thematic Analysis: Since the relatively small number of respondents limits producing meaningful statistical analysis, we identified the main themes that emerged from reading and re-reading residents’ spontaneous responses, as commonly practiced in qualitative research. In doing so, we found the following main themes, listed below in alphabetical order.

Downtown Carbondale should be:

- ACTIVE, VIBRANT, & VITAL
- an ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT HAVEN
- BEAUTIFIED
- a BUY-LOCAL, ENTREPRENEURIAL HUB
- a CARING space
- COMMUNAL
- GREEN & SUSTAINABLE
- SAFE & SECURE
- STUDENT FRIENDLY

Note: Titles employ words used by one or more residents that capture theme’s essence.

Though we have not quantified these themes, there are several noticeable clusters of responses from the full collection of vision statements and interviewees’ explanations worth noting:

- Persons in their 20s – our largest group of respondents, composed mostly of SIU students along with others working in downtown, cited one or more of the following main desires for downtown Carbondale in their responses, listed in order of frequency: They want a city that is - green; provides them with varied activities - not just bars; has more restaurants, shops, and cafes; bike lanes; and free, accessible, and dependable Wi-Fi.

- Senior respondents usually began by addressing the importance of the DAC process of communal deliberation. In doing so, many shared a concern, based on past experience here in Carbondale that this time city leaders, staff, and consultants heed the requests and visions offered by residents in DAC deliberations and found in this report.

- The main concerns of residents with disabilities are (1) transportation – both to downtown by accessible public vehicles & sensitive drivers, as well as safe movement via motorized chairs along downtown streets – especially during the winter when snow and ice are not cleared, or often cover curb cuts and ‘steps’ lining the street; and (2) accessibility to shops and cafes, as well as accessible restrooms and seating in all-too-often tight seating arrangements.

A final note, before proceeding to share with you residents’ visions, in their own words. While we hope you will find the visions, proposals, and thoughts shared by residents worthy of consideration in your deliberations, you may also find that there are no major surprises here. If so, then this report can confirm that, indeed, you do understand the visions, needs, and desires of residents. Whatever your response, we hope that this project will be a meaningful contribution to communal deliberations about the redevelopment of downtown Carbondale.
To start .... Views that capture the essence of residents’ visions & hopes, and the importance of communal deliberations:

“Right now [Carbondale] is known for one thing, but it should aspire for more.” [M/30s/#51] ¹

“We need to be the best small college town we can be. Need greater variety, and vibrancy. Need more night life, great entertainment [...] Need to focus on our strengths - Shawnee National Forest, laid back way of life, more progressive mindset....” [M/40s/#8]

“Let me say this straight: We [students] are the money, so I feel you should dedicate or cater to us so we can feel more comfortable.” [F/20s/#6]

“I think Carbondale should continue to try to stay unique ... a downtown with more places for people to go out publicly and mill around, highlight the artistic, emphasize sustainability.” [M/30s/#44]

“This is where we live. This is where we eat, play [...] and enjoy culture. [M/20s/#55]

On the Downtown Redevelopment Process:

“Our long term goal is almost spiritual. To develop a sense of ourselves as a community. To do so we should focus on qualitative growth not just quantitative. Need to focus on what makes our life good here in Carbondale. We need to do this in a cooperative spirit [...] then we’ll have a sense of pride.” [M/70s/#35]

“If we’re going to come together as a community and rebuild downtown, we first of all, have to have to want to [...] What we need is a paradigm shift from people fighting one another to come together in same direction. We have all the resources needed – SIH, SIU, the farmers, students, entertainment, artists ....but don’t have willingness to work together. Need to move from me, me, me to we – in order to develop, we need to work together.” [F/50s/#16]

“My hope is that something will actually happen with all of this – not ignore or hijack it, like it happened 15 years ago.” [F/60s/#36]

“Help everyone come to agree – Carbondale is a good place to be.” [M/70s/#37]

¹ KEY: Gender / age by decade / # = interviewee code number. Hence M/20s/#82 = male in his 20s interview # 82
DOWNTOWN CARBONDALE SHOULD BE...

ACTIVE, VIBRANT, AND VITAL

“Downtown Carbondale should have more commercial areas where people would just naturally gravitate to come either for recreation or just shopping, with more places to eat. Not just places where you do take-out then leave, but places where you actually go, sit outside, and see people seating out on the street, walking on the sidewalks and staying in the area and not just passing through or coming n’going. That’s what really increases the activity and vitality of a downtown area.” [F/30s/#63]

“... more things for students to do. For instance, pool halls, bowling alleys, things like that would be nice rather than just bars on the strip. Bring foot traffic to downtown instead of them going to the mall. Get some activities going in the Strip area, block it off, create activities there for people of all ages.” [M/20s/#7]

“If there was free Wi-Fi it would help out everyone.” [F/20s/#65]

“A nice entertainment district could be good, whether it be places to eat or places to go out and have a beer, or to have a good glass of wine. I think if you’re going to redo downtown that’s a good direction to go.” [M/50s/#13]

“We need more recreational facilities. As a skateboarder, we aren’t provided a skate park in Carbondale. I think we really need a skate park. An open plaza skate park would open up and ability of regular citizens to come and enjoy the space and also allow skateboarder to enjoy their sport while safely performing without risking hurting people on the Strip.” [F/20s/#50]

“The big thing for me would also be a more bike accessible downtown because if you’re on the sidewalks [on your bike] you’ll get pulled over and if you’re on the streets you’ll get run over. Neither of them are safe for anybody.” [F/32/#32]

“Need more bike lanes and education regarding rights of cyclists.” [M/30s/#51]

“More outdoor, free public spaces for the arts, meeting, resting. And, allow outdoor music on the Strip, right now the police do not like us playing the sidewalks.” [M/20s/#33]

“We should have a COMMONS. An area where we can walk, talk, eat, and play.” [M/70s/#35]
DOWNTOWN CARBONDALE SHOULD BE...

An ARTS HAVEN

“This is an area with so many artists and musicians, but the Strip does not show this at all. We are an artistic community but we have nothing to show for this at all. I know this needs to come from Main Street and City Hall. I also know there are many organizations, but nobody is working together. They all want to do their own thing, but we need to work together.” [M/40/#7]

“Need more arts and music venues. Bring people together creatively. [M/30s/#54]

“Music scene is awesome. Need more promotion – [you can get] great live music at affordable prices, not like in the big cities.” [M/20s/#56]

“I’ve always believed the downtown area could be a center for local small businessmen and particularly artisans. There are some businesses that are like that, that sell local crafts and arts and things. I think a lot more could be done to encourage that.” [M/60s/#42]

“Why not block off Illinois Avenue for activities & shopping. I saw them do that in another small town like Carbondale...Gold Gym led Zumba classes with 150 people participating, arts activities for kids and adults, artists sharing their work. I would love to see artists’ works and to meet them. That is what I would throw my bucks at. People come out to be creative.” [F/50s/#12]

BEAUTIFIED

“Beautifying downtown would be great. More artistic sculptures, some flowerpots, make it look a little nicer. If you go to Champaign or any of the other college town around the area, the downtowns look really nice and ours is just blah. It would be nice to make it look a little nicer, cleaner. [F/20s/#11]

“Old buildings should be brought back to original state. I like architecture of old stuff.” [M/60s/#66]

“Something I kind of miss in the downtown area would be like a main square full of trees. That would be kind of nice. [M/20s/ #28]

“Strip should be more aesthetically pleasing. For example, [pans with her hands & body] from here [Longbranch] to here [Tres Hombres] ...with areas conducive to walking.” [F/50s/ #14]
DOWNTOWN CARBONDALE SHOULD BE...

a BUY-LOCAL, ENTREPRENEURIAL HUB
Enabling us to support local entrepreneurial initiatives in businesses, arts, music.

“Create the downtown area as a buy local zone. Build on local shops, restaurants, arts, entertainment, filmmaking.” [M/30s/#51]

“Downtown needs to be more homemade. Like to see more local, non-corporate business. Need to get away from the corporate. It is all so impersonal…. tedious – leads to unhealthy habits. Like to see more people involved in business community, to see it grow.” [M/20s/#54]

“How? Embrace the ideas of people here. We have wonderful metropolitan, diverse population of people. We need to keep more people here – like in the 60s & 70s, people liked it here, so they became entrepreneurial and found a place for themselves. Need to encourage this across the board.” [M/40s/#8]

“We’re connected to our businesses. I’ve been working here for 2 years, but … this is more than just a paid job. I have a very personal relationship with the store….because I’ve been coming here for so long….I’m just a loyal person. It’s like an actual relationship with another person….even though it’s just a building.” [M/20s/#51]

“Need to develop local businesses – so many left.” [F/40s/#56]

“More & better variety restaurants, stores and bars. Be like other college towns. Nothing magical about it, just regular stores.

People think it [Carbondale] is old but I think it will grow […] there are a large number of international students in this town. I am an international student. I believe and I am very confident that they will make a difference for the cash flow. They will pay. They will buy it. I see a lot of international student with really fancy cars and you can tell that they have money but they go shopping in St. Louis and Chicago. So knowing this means they have the capability to spend money. You don’t have to open a huge mall, but you can open decent stores.” [M/20s/#45]
DOWNTOWN CARBONDALE SHOULD BE...

A CARING SPACE

“Need to assist poor and disadvantaged [...] seems they are at every corner.” [M/30s/#22]

“Need to take care of the homeless and the panhandlers. I know they can make people feel uncomfortable, but I don’t like that they are neglected and banned only because they detract from the businesses.” [F/20s/#5]

“I work at non-profit thrift store. We provide $2000 [a month] worth in clothing. Sales profits go to other NPOs. City needs to support those [NPOs] seeking to help others in need.” [M/30s/#53]

“Native and fruit trees for the homeless to pick.” [F/50s/#27]

“A caring community will return services to center of town, for example, for seniors.” [M/70s/#43]

COMMUNAL - - We’re a community ...in terms of space and place

“I would say just a sense of place, a sense of community. We’ve already known for some things, but me personally, I want more of a sense of place. Like, when you come here, you wouldn’t want to leave, for whatever reason. That what makes a good city. A good place to be has a good sense of place. You won’t have that if all you have are Walmart’s, McDonalds, & Best Buys. You just go there and buy your thing. That’s it. So you don’t care about anything except what you bought. So we’re filling our cities with places we don’t care about. So, let’s start in our community by taking back these spaces. Let’s make this a good place to live....more maybe – let’s think about it as a good place to die. Like - - Carbondale – a good place to die.” [M/230s/#54]

“I stayed here because it was a vibrant place. Rebuilding downtown is making progress, but rebuilding COMMUNITY lags behind. For too long, commercial interests have had their way here. Need to let people decide, not just decide on the basis of money.

There is a way to have it all. For example, in Springfield, they put two hotels in the center of town, then cafes, galleries, and shops opened up nearby, and attracted many locals into downtown, and it became an active, vibrant place.” [F/60s/#38].
GREEN & SUSTAINABLE

“Plant more trees as continuation of Giant City & the Shawnee.” [F/20s/#29]

“Maybe a more community driven and involved recycling program where all that money, rather than going someplace else stays in the community and helps rebuild things like infrastructures and parks [...]” [M/30s/#53]

“Use buildings and open spaces in town center for community building – like downtown farming. Let’s start by taking back some of this area.” [M/30s/#54]

“This is an opportunity to be among the leaders in designing public spaces without cars. And, let’s also require buses to use biodiesel.” [M/60s/#42].

SAFE and SECURE

“The police need to figure out what to do. Shouldn’t be dangerous in a college town.” [M/20s/#56]

“Maybe have a little more police presence at night because there has been fighting going on right on the strip. Police presence would be nice as well.” [F/20s/#7]

“I love everything about Carbondale, especially the education. But the major problem is safety. In order for to go out of my apartment in the evening, I have to go with someone or, if I go out on my own, the police stop to warn me that it is not safe to walk alone. This is not good.”

“... because of everything that’s been going on, we have sexual harassment, we have crime, we have robberies. All of that has become such a severe issue in the past three months that I do feel that we need to have more security [...]. We need to have more focus on all of that because it is extremely unsafe.” [Female/20s/#47]

STUDENT FRIENDLY

“Let’s be known as friendly to students. Make them feel welcome. Provide all the facilities they need.” [M/50s/#30]

“It should definitely be for the people. The people should definitely be kept in mind, not more or less business but how convenient is it especially for the students because this is a college town.”

Let me say it a different way: we are the money so I feel you should dedicate or cater to us so we can feel more comfortable. [...] It’s basically for us. If it makes us happy, it makes school happier, which keeps the money here.” [F/20s/#6]
## APPENDIX

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