Interning for the City of Smithville: Creating a Cultural District

Submitted by: April R. Daniels

May 10, 2012

adanielsard@yahoo.com
As a non-traditional student returning to college after nearly twenty years in the private sector, I chose to pursue an internship that related directly to my hometown of Smithville, Texas. As a Main Street business owner, I have worked closely with my community toward developing strategies that will attract investment and tourism to our town, attending community meetings, participating in forums and town hall style discussions, meeting with community leaders and discussing growth opportunities with other business owners in Smithville. My goal in this internship was to complete a project that could prove useful to Smithville in the long term. The opportunity to apply for a Cultural District Designation for the City of Smithville (the City) through the Texas Commission of the Arts was discussed at several informal meetings held with different arts groups in Smithville, including the Lost Pines Artisan’s Alliance (LPAA), where I serve on the Executive Board. In discussing the designation, the opportunity to apply for a designation through a joint partnership with the City and LPAA arose.

The City of Smithville-sponsored Comprehensive Plan (available for review at http://www.ci.smithville.tx.us/Smithville-Comprehensive-Plan.aspx) spells out a plan for revitalization of Smithville’s downtown area:

The City of Smithville is way ahead of many cities in one important respect: our downtown was developed during a time when pedestrians ruled and mixed use was ubiquitous. Many newer cities must expend resources to recreate what we already have...The goal of the downtown area is to become a true destination that serves residents and visitors alike and will attract people from across the region to spend time and money in Smithville.

The Plan goes on to identify several opportunities for growth and tourism incentives including encouraging retail development on Main Street, holding public events in the downtown area and searching out funding avenues for capital improvements and pedestrian amenities. Keeping the language of the Comprehensive Plan in mind as it relates to downtown development, it became necessary to lay out the basic goals of this internship. The overall makeup of the City, economic development opportunities, business incentive practices and plans and arts opportunities are integral to the process. These elements will be discussed in
detail, particularly as they relate to the overall goal of the Comprehensive Plan and the steps considered necessary to pursue a cultural district designation and, ultimately, revitalization of downtown spaces.

**Smithville: A Main Street in Decline**

Smithville’s City Hall, which houses the Mayor, City Manager, Municipal Court, City Council Chambers, Grants Administrator, Utilities Department, Planning & Zoning and all other aspects of City government is located on Main Street. Many residents have commented in various public forums that the only reason they visit the downtown area is to “pay their light bill and check their mail”, this last being accomplished by walking across the street from City Hall to the post office. Residents feel disconnected from a Main Street that was once a thriving town center but is now devoid of most basic services. With the grocery store and the Dollar General located away from the City center, residents no longer visit downtown on a regular basis.

A Downtown Needs Assessment is critically important for the City. As this is outside the scope of this report, comment will be kept to the subject of a Cultural District designation, the first step toward a revitalized downtown area.

**What Is A Cultural District and What Are the Benefits of Designation as a Cultural District?**

The Texas Commission on the Arts defines a Cultural District as follows:

Cultural Districts are well-recognized, labeled, mixed-use, compact areas of a city in which a high concentration of cultural facilities serve as the anchor. They are established to encourage city and county governments to partner with the local community to enhance the quality of life and enrich the local economy. They can also serve as destinations for visitors and for creative entrepreneurs who want to start businesses.

Having a Cultural District certification will help draw attention to the cultural, historical and artistic attractions that already exist in Smithville as well as build on those attractions by encouraging further preservation of historic structures, promoting its artistic and cultural
diversity, and promoting downtown Smithville as an important regional cultural venue. It will lead to developing organizational, financial and business support systems to enhance the expanding creative economy in Smithville.

Not coincidently, designation of the Smithville Cultural District is consistent with the aims and objectives of Smithville’s Comprehensive Plan, particularly the goals to cultivate and promote Smithville’s cultural richness and recreational opportunities and to revitalize our community's downtown as a hub of business, government and civic activity.

The impact of Cultural Districts is measurable. The arts and areas with historic structures attract residents and tourists who also support adjacent businesses such as restaurants, lodging, retail and entertainment venues. The presence of the arts and cultural opportunities enhances property values, the profitability of surrounding businesses and the tax base of the region. These districts attract a diverse and well-educated workforce, a key incentive for new and relocating businesses. And these districts contribute to the creativity and innovation of a community.

The mere process of applying for and gaining certification as a Cultural District will create greater recognition of and encourage collaboration among Smithville’s many creative organizations, events and historic and cultural facilities. The formation of a Cultural District will bring added support for artists and art-based businesses of all types, and will draw more artists to live and work in the District. More tourists will visit the City, resulting in a vibrant, sustainable economy and a more interesting place to live, eat, shop and recreate.

According to the Texas Commission on the Arts, more than ninety cities in the United States have planned or implemented a cultural district, positioning the arts at the center of urban revitalization efforts. This is accomplished in a variety of ways, including beautifying the city, providing employment, supporting and complementing adjacent businesses, attracting residents and tourists to the city, expanding the tax base and contributing to a creative, innovative atmosphere. Not unimportant on this list is creating access to various funding sources in the form of grants and private foundation monies that will look with interest at
communities actively pursuing historic preservation and projects focused on attracting tourists and creating culturally diverse areas.

**A Cultural District and Smithville’s Rich Cultural Past**

The 1920’s were a boom time for the City. The railroad was the thriving center of the town. Main Street offered every possible amenity for City residents. One interview subject shared: “My mother’s best friend had never been to Austin in her life – and she was gray haired when she told me that.” The obvious pride the subject felt in the past self-reliance of the town was evident.

Many of the town’s residents were railroad men working hard, blue collar jobs. These men, though working demanding physical jobs, still found the time to volunteer their time and participate in community entertainments. Carol Snyder, President of the Smithville Heritage Society, points out:

“The wonderful Maney Opera House [on Smithville’s Main Street] [hosted community performances and plays]. One such play occurred January 27, 1922, and was called "Old Deestrich Skule". This was one of many locally-written and produced plays... Many of the actors' names can be found in early MKT railroad records as engineers, brakemen, or firemen.

Even after the Opera House burned, there are records of many, many plays being given by...local...groups. After 1928, they were held at other facilities, including the ‘new’ high school auditorium, and the American Legion and VFW buildings.”

Local history, in the form of live entertainment, museums, bands, school plays, community theater productions, church productions which often including locally written and produced plays, is an important part of the cultural makeup of Smithville and as such will be a central part of the Cultural District application.

**Focus and Concept: Community Involvement and the Creation of Desire**

Working toward a Cultural District Designation required a variety of steps, not the least of which was informing the public of our plan to apply for the designation and respond
positively to the proposal. Dr. Jill Strube, City Grants Administrator, advised the following steps at the outset:

1. PUBLIC MEETING: An initial public meeting was posted and held to announce the intention of the City to enter into a partnership with the Lost Pines Artisan’s Alliance (LPAA), the local arts organization and a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. This public meeting was held with good attendance and participation by the community. I served as facilitator for this meeting. The Mayor, City Grants Administrator, two City Council Members and the City Manager attended the meeting along with approximately twenty private citizens. The overall response of attendees was positive and the City chose to move forward with the application process at that time.

2. NOTICE OF INTENT TO TEXAS COMMISSION ON THE ARTS (TCOA): I was tasked with notifying the TCOA of the City’s intent to apply for Cultural District Designation by the deadline of January 31, 2012 (letter attached in Appendix). The TCOA accepted the letter of intent and forwarded instructions and the official application.

3. COMMUNITY OPINION AND SUPPORT INTERVIEWS: I was charged by my internship supervisor with conducting one-on-one interviews with various members of the Smithville Community. These interviews were conducted almost exclusively as one on one, face to face meetings between me and the interview subject. These interviews were conducted using a basic script, developed according to anthropological guidelines (Ervin 2002: pg. 171), along with advice from the Anthropology Department internship coordinator and my internship supervisor Dr. Jill Strube. Dr. Strube advised me of the importance of listening to the expressed needs (felt needs) of the interview subjects, paying particular attention to their position on arts and historic sites as downtown anchors. Following Dr. Strube’s advice, I created a script which consisted of the following basic concepts, which narrowed or widened in scope as needed during each interview:
a. General discussion of a Cultural District and the essential characteristics, legal background, overall scope and final intent of the application process;
b. Discussion of the subject’s initial impression of the Cultural District application goals and objectives;
c. Discussion of the subject’s personal experience as a business owner, City leader, volunteer, long term resident or support services provider; and
d. The future of the downtown area and the subject’s beliefs and comments regarding City support, Chamber of Commerce support, tourism, economic development or arts issues as relevant.

Interviews were conducted over a sixty day period, beginning in early February 2012 and continuing to early April 2012. A total of twenty six interviews were conducted, nearly all in informal settings with me approaching the interview subject in their place of business as often as was feasible. Two interviews were conducted with Cammy Snyder, President of the LPAA Board in attendance.

It became apparent to me early in the interview process that a very serious level of hostility existed among downtown business owners regarding the Smithville Chamber of Commerce and, to a lesser extent, the City of Smithville. Again and again interview subjects offered very similar stories such as the following:

EXAMPLE QUOTES FROM INTERVIEW SUBJECTS:

“The Chamber doesn’t want antique stores on Main Street.”

“The Council said NOT ANOTHER ANTIQUE STORE when approached about a tax incentive by a proposed new business investor. The investor was so incensed by this comment they chose to open their store in Bastrop instead.”
“The Chamber is always shutting down Main Street for parades, making it impossible for Main Street merchants to unload and load merchandise for paying customers.”

“The Chamber President never shops in my store and always discourages tourists and Chamber board members from shopping in my store because she doesn’t like me.”

The interview subjects were very earnest in their complaints but also very similar (if not eerily identical) in the language of their complaints. It became apparent, after approximately ten interviews, that an atmosphere of distrust prevailed. When asked for specifics, subjects spoke in general terms of having “heard” this story from a trusted friend or colleague. When asked whether the subject had ever personally experienced the negative attentions of City employees or Chamber personnel, had any specific examples of loss of business due to a Chamber sponsored event (which, incidentally, holds only one parade each year at Christmas time, held at night after all Main Street shops have closed) the subjects in the business owner category were hard pressed to come up with examples. There are parades held by other organizations, but those organizations are beloved by residents so were not blamed for loss of business. This attitude has often proved harmful to shop owners in that they have failed to proactively create partnerships with organizations with the express mission of aiding them in drawing customers to their doorstep. One shop owner, when asked why she refused to stay open when a large Chamber of Commerce bus tour can through town, stated that she would not give the Chamber the satisfaction of hosting a successful shopping event on Main Street. Though this is obviously completely at odds with the shop owner’s desire for more business, the reliance on information from other shop owners and their negative feelings toward the Chamber led to a feeling that it would be disloyal to aid the Chamber in any way. Though I found these positions, expressed over and over by shop owners to be completely counter-intuitive, I should not have been surprised by the similarity of responses. Dr. Emily Brunson, Texas State University
anthropologist, and her social network study regarding attitudes toward vaccination among parents, studies this phenomenon in her thesis *The Point of the Needle: An Anthropological Study of Childhood Vaccination in the United States:*

A parent may “…rely on others—family members, friends, health care providers and so on—for information, advice and direction...most parents also have the option to obtain additional information and advice directly, through non-human sources—the internet, newspapers, magazine articles, books and so forth. Thus, instead of deciding to accept or reject vaccination on their own, parents make vaccination decisions in concert with their social networks, broadly defined as including the people they interact with and the non-human sources of information they consult.”

(Source: www.research.gov).

Like the parents making critical health care decisions for their children, these Smithville business owners do not choose to make decisions that directly affect the success (or “health) of their shops based on research or attendance of public meetings or consultations with successful business owners three blocks away from their own shop. They do not even, in most cases, base their decisions on personal experience. They base their decisions largely on anecdotal evidence passed along to them by other business owners, relying on their social networks to make decisions that directly impact their livelihood.

This attitude of distrust made it difficult for me to find an overall feeling of community support for the cultural district application when couched in terms of City sponsorship. It became necessary, then, to begin emphasizing the positive aspects of the Cultural District application such as signage grants, façade grants, building owner incentives, tourism impact and attraction of working
artists. Once these points became the focus of the interview process, subjects expressed extreme interest in and support of the project and many volunteered to serve on a proposed Citizen’s Advisory Council should the designation be granted. Ervin discusses this in depth, advising approaching interview informants from within their own cultural framework. Changing the focus of the interview from my perspective, which depended largely on the idea that a City-sponsored district was a positive for business owners, I instead approached the interviews from what seemed glaringly apparent, e.g. the expressed needs of the business owners to feel some ownership of the project without dwelling on the City’s involvement.

4. COMMUNITY GROUP PRESENTATIONS: I was invited to address various groups to discuss the intent of the Cultural District application. The following groups were addressed and each group expressed unanimous support for the project including issuing official statements of support:

- Smithville City Council;
- Precinct 2 Commissioner;
- Smithville Noon Lion’s Club;
- Smithville Chamber of Commerce;
- Smithville Heritage Society; and
- Smithville Business Association

An overview of the Cultural District application process was given to each organization with a question and answer period following. All of the referenced presentations were given by my Dr. Strube, my internship supervisor, in attendance at most with the exception of the Chamber of Commerce meeting.

5. RESEARCH: I conducted extensive research of the history of the arts and significant cultural events in Smithville for inclusion in the Cultural District application. The Smithville Heritage Society and local historian David Herrington were interviewed and provided historical details for use in the application.
Examples of communication between me and volunteer researchers are attached to this report at the Appendix section. As a direct result of this research, I chose to focus a large portion of the Cultural District application around the concept of “homegrown” entertainment. Smithville is a prime example of a small town with a love of the arts and a real desire to preserve its history.

Dr. Hadder put me in touch with Grady Hillman, Texas State University cultural district expert. I consulted Mr. Hillman via e-mail and phone. Mr. Hillman provided valuable insight into the application process and the ideal language to use when completing the application for submission to TCOA. Mr. Hillman provided examples of the application he completed for the City of Huntsville which I referenced on several occasions when preparing the application. Mr. Hillman’s advice on the inclusion of history with regard to racial tensions led me to valuable historical information on the Chittlin’ Trail, Mt. Pleasant Baptists Church and West End areas of Smithville, integral parts of the cultural history of Smithville.

6. FOOTPRINT: The area of Smithville’s downtown district that should be included in the application, referred to by the TCOA as the “footprint area”, is an essential part of the application process. Attached to this report is the proposed footprint map, discussed in three community forum meetings where I served as the facilitator. Each public forum was advertised to the community as a whole through the local newspaper, online resources such as Facebook and website postings and via e-mail blasts sent out by the City of Smithville, the Smithville Chamber of Commerce, the Lost Pines Artisan’s Alliance and my own extensive e-mail subscriber list. Public forums are typically under-attended in Smithville and this was no exception. As of this report, two of the three public forums have been held. The first, held on May 8, 2012, was attended by seven Smithville residents. The second, held on May 10, 2012, was attended by fourteen
Smithville residents. Though the groups were small, they consisted of several critical key stakeholders including the City Mayor, the President of the Chamber of Commerce, a resident who has written a book on the history of Smithville, the President of the Smithville Heritage Society, various business owners, a newspaper reporter, a pastor and a City Council member. These meetings turned out to be much more like focus groups as attendees expressed their thoughts on not just the stated goal of the meeting (identifying the footprint of the proposed cultural district) but also engaged in a lively back and forth between each other. When it became apparent that this public forum was an ideal opportunity to discuss the “felt needs” of a very active portion of the community, I decided to focus some of the discussion on each group’s identification of important moments in the history of the town.

While the first meeting focused largely on the history of the town and the location of points of interest, both past and current, the second meeting quickly became bogged down in discussions of racial inequality and the need to focus on the “other side of the railroad tracks”. Though the assertion of one meeting attendant that “Smithville is the most racist town I’ve ever lived in...” was met with a stunned silence by everyone in the room (and a sharp rebuke from the Heritage Society President), the overall tenor of the meeting was one of inclusion. At one point, an African American waitress at the restaurant where we were meeting started cleaning a table nearby, then stopped and joined in the discussion when she heard the group discussing D.J. Screw, a popular rap artist from Smithville. As this young woman was the only minority voice heard in any of the public forums to date, I quickly asked several additional questions about areas of town she thought should be included in the cultural district and other people she thought were significant as artists, past and present. This encounter led to the young woman suggesting there be another meeting held at Martin Luther King Park. She then volunteered to set up the meeting, contact the
pastor of the African American Baptist Church and assist in recruiting members of the African American community of Smithville for a footprint meeting.

7. **FINANCIAL INCENTIVES:** Financial incentive packages are a critical component of a successful cultural district. When considering economic incentives and fund raising options for inclusion in the cultural district application I researched traditional sources of funding such as Hotel Motel Taxes (HOT Funds), Economic Development Corporation funds (EDC) and Municipal tax incentives. It became apparent that these traditional funding sources simply are not available. As a result, creative incentives are needed. Building owners must be approached and convinced that offering below market rents to qualifying working, capitalized artists is in their best interest. With these packages, the owner would receive some rents for a building that has been empty for a long period of time, the building would be improved by the proposed tenant at no cost to the owner and the rental agreement could include a stair step agreement with the tenant.

As of the date of this report, one owner of several downtown spaces has expressed willingness to participate in this incentive plan with the understanding that the proposed tenant would be required to have a sound business plan in place and the rental agreement would require certain improvements and maintenance to be carried out by the tenant.

The City of Smithville Grants Administrator has agreed to actively participate in the writing of grants made available to designated Cultural Districts including landlord incentive grants, signage and façade grants, infrastructure improvement grants and lighting and aesthetics grants (murals, benches, greenery, etc.). Additionally, the City Manager has agreed that the City will support all efforts toward improving and maintaining the Cultural District area and will participate in grant administration.
Conclusion

This internship has brought with it the realization that there is much more work to be done and many more possible projects to pursue, including the application for the Main Street Program (through the Texas Historical Commission), the possible organization of a City/Lower Colorado River Authority partnership to open up river access in the Main Street corridor and the continued pursuit of the arduous task of overhauling a crumbling Main Street with very few funding sources immediately apparent.

As a business owner on Main Street Smithville I will continue to work toward a revitalized downtown district. I would strongly suggest strong community involvement to anyone interested in pursuing this type of very personally relevant internship. Meeting with fellow business owners, community leaders and service providers would have been virtually impossible had I not had some experience with City Council meetings, Chamber of Commerce and Small Business Association dynamics and issues near and dear to the hearts of small business owners. The biggest lesson I learned was that it really is essential to participate in your community at an activist level, attending City Council meetings, community forums, town hall groups and Lion’s Club lunches. Join in the events that shape your world or your voice will be left out of the conversation.
APPENDIX

1. Letter of Intent to Texas Commission on the Arts
2. Volunteer Historian Communication (history of arts in Smithville)
3. Photos of cultural arts venues in Smithville (historic)
4. Proposed Cultural District footprint map
Lost Pines Artisan's Alliance
301 Burleson
Smithville, TX 78957
512-360-7397
E-mail: playhousesmithville@yahoo.com
January 26, 2012

culturaldistricts@arts.state.tx.us
Texas Commission on the Arts
P.O. Box 13406
Austin, Texas 78711-3406

Re: Request for TCoA Assessment, Cultural District Designation

Dear Cultural Districts Representative:

The Lost Pines Artisan's Alliance would like to request a TCoA assessment of Smithville, Texas, particularly the downtown area (Main Street), as a Cultural District. The Lost Pines Artisans Alliance is designated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, public charity, EIN: 84-1715122.

The proposed cultural district will include the Main Street area of Smithville, Texas, encompassing the 100 to 700 blocks, as well as the 1st through 7th Street areas which intersect Main Street, two to three city blocks east and west of Main Street.

We propose a cultural district with a "Downtown Focus: A cultural district that encompasses most of the downtown area, including the central business district, and uses most or all of a community's cultural attractions to attract citizens and visitors to include arts institutions such as a community theatre, art galleries, popular attractions, restaurants, nightclubs, movie theaters, museums, parks and tourism sites."

TIMELINE:

1. Designation of LPAA Committee on Cultural District, April Daniels, Chair;
2. Town Hall meeting at Smithville City Hall to discuss Cultural District Designation (December 5, 2011), hosted by City officials;
3. Request Assessment by TCoA;
4. Upon completion of the TCoA assessment, the Lost Pines Artisans Alliance, in conjunction with other partnering community groups such as Keep Smithville Beautiful, Smithville Chamber of Commerce, Arts Cottage at Rock C Ranch, City of Smithville, Smithville Downtown Business Association, etc., will complete the required Cultural Arts Designation Application and submit no later than June 1, 2012 for review by TCoA.

Sincerely,

April R. Daniels
LPAA Board Member
Chair, Committee on Cultural District Designation (LPAA)
From: Carol Snyder, President, Smithville Heritage Society

To: April Daniels

Re: History of Arts in Smithville

The wonderful Maney Opera House was a large two-story building with retail establishments, usually including a saloon, on the ground floor and the opulent Opera House on the second floor. It was built in 1893, and sadly, it burned down in 1928.

One program we have from 1896 shows pupils of Miss Morrison, apparently a piano or music teacher, giving a recital in the opera house. There is historical evidence of there being a myriad of entertainment to be found during the heyday years of the Maney Opera House, including many plays.

One such play occurred January 27, 1922, and was called "Old Deestrict Skule". This was one of many locally-written and produced plays, such as those currently being produced at Playhouse Smithville. From the book "Images of America - Smithville": ...the play "was apparently a satire, with characters such as Lydia Pinkham, John Jacob Astor, Brigham Young, Buster Brown, Cornelia Vanderbilt, Christopher Columbus, and Jesse James - all familiar names on this date in history. Many of the actors' names can be found in early MKT railroad records as engineers, brakemen, or firemen." There was a chorus and accompanist listed in the play's bulletin.

Even after the Opera House burned, there are records of many, many plays being given by both local and traveling groups. After 1928, they were held at other facilities, including the "new" high school auditorium, and the American Legion and VFW buildings.

From: Carol Snyder

To: April Daniels

Re: History of Arts in Smithville

In addition to the Margaret Woodrow Wilson concert (discussed in an earlier email), there has always been a love of music in Smithville. During the late 1800s and 1900s, the River Park Band entertained at picnics, especially at the River Park on the banks of the Colorado River, parties, and other types of gatherings in and around Smithville. This
13-member band was composed of 13 men, mainly playing brass and percussion instruments.

There has never been a shortage of music teachers in Smithville, including piano, band and orchestra instruments. In 1896, a Miss Morrison used to give recitals in the Maney Opera House. Another prominent teacher was Gus G. Streithoff, who taught pupils during the 1920s and 1930s. Found in the Heritage Society archives are many programs from Streithoff's recitals, sometimes given at Smithville's City Hall. From 1925-1930, at least, there was actually a "Music Week" held at the auditorium of Smithville High School each year. In the 1950s and 1960s, Mrs. G. W. Kunath and Mrs. F.P. Loughridge taught music.

For the African-American community, beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, the "West End" performances of up-and-coming blues musicians, many actually from the Smithville area, is legend in this area. Nationally recognized performing jazz and blues musician and composer Hannibal Locumbe grew up in Smithville just a short distance from the "West End" roadhouse, loved the music he heard there and thus became a performing and composing artist himself. One symphony he composed has been performed by major symphonies such as the Houston Symphony.

Last but not least, the local churches have always had choirs which performed popular and well-attended music programs for Easter, Christmas, and other occasions.
3. Photos of cultural arts venues in Smithville (historic)

Main Street Smithville c. 1928

Play at Smithville Central School c. 1927

The River Bend Band – Smithville

Play at Smithville Central School

Star Theater – Smithville, TX
4. Proposed Cultural District footprint map