

2.0 Strategic Assessment

The following is the synopsis of the information shared during the individual and small group interviews conducted in initial kick-off workshop. A great deal of input was gathered during these meetings, and the most pertinent points and themes are listed in the following pages. The passages below are summaries of these comments and represent perceptions of the community as conveyed to the consultant team. These comments do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the consultants but instead are derived from the input given by the interviewees.

2.1 What We Heard – Strengths

- Blackstone is the retail center of a rural area that includes Nottoway County and adjacent areas. All of the area retail (including grocery stores & Wal-mart) are located in Blackstone and attract customers from a broad geography.
- Blackstone has a good stock of downtown buildings and historic architecture. Some of these buildings are in various states of disrepair and some are vacant, but there are a number of quality, turn-of-the-century buildings located in downtown.
- Some key downtown retailers attract customers from a very broad area and attract visitors into the community. Furniture, antiques, and some specialty shops are the current “anchors” of downtown retail.
- Fort Pickett is a tremendous market for Blackstone and its downtown. Home of Virginia National Guard, between 70,000 to 80,000 people come to the Fort each year for annual and weekend training. From May to July, the base is full of activity seven days a week. For the remainder of the year, the base is busy during the weekends. There are between 800-900 full time employees at the base, the majority of which reside in and around Blackstone, making it one of the largest target markets.
- Similarly, the Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center in Blackstone brings in visitors from all over the state of Virginia, North Carolina and beyond. VUMAC had over 19,000 visitors last year and is booked virtually every weekend.
- Blackstone has a history of success in securing interest and grants from state agencies. Currently, there are at least three projects occurring in Blackstone that are funded in part through VA Department of Housing and Community Development grants.

2.2 What We Heard – Challenges

- While Downtown Blackstone Incorporated presents a great opportunity to begin the systematic revitalization of downtown, it is currently in its infancy. Many people are said to be confusing the efforts of DBI as they relate to the Town of Blackstone and the Chamber. Also, DBI currently has no budget and no permanent space.
- Similarly, the Chamber is experiencing a rebuilding mode of itself. While the Chamber has been successful in hosting the annual Arts & Crafts Festival, it experienced significant turnover 3 years ago and has been rebuilding since then. Like DBI, it has no real dedicated space and only a part time director. It needs a full time director and office space outside of Schwartz Tavern.
- There is a general lack of small business support in Blackstone and Nottoway County. County economic development focuses more on industrial recruitment (which is typical), and do not have the capacity for small business development. There used to be a small business incubator at Pickett, but it is no longer in existence. There is a need for small office space in Blackstone.
- There are a number of buildings in Downtown Blackstone that are in a tremendous state of disrepair. The building with Dominion Carpet is in very bad shape as is the Epps building at the corner of Broad and Brown Streets. There may be the potential to save the façade of the Epps building, but the rest of the building is too far gone. Other blighted areas include “the hole” on the west side of Main between Broad and Elm Streets.
- There is not a good mix of shops in Blackstone currently, with a predominance of financial businesses, beauty shops, and office uses. More retail is needed as well as support facilities for Fort Pickett and VUMAC visitors.
- Downtown Blackstone “closes” at 5:00pm according to many interviewees. One stakeholder mentioned that downtown businesses are working for the unemployed due to the fact that they are not open after normal working hours, giving the worker no other option than to shop elsewhere. In fact, the most successful businesses are those that do not depend on local businesses, but rather cater to a larger regional market, including staying open later.
- Blackstone appears to be a regional hub in terms of general merchandising, grocery, and personal needs, but faces strong regional competition for restaurants, specialty retail, lodging, and other business. Farmville (30 miles), Petersburg (38 miles), and Greater Richmond (about 55 miles) each draw consumers away from Blackstone due to a general lack of demand. There is a need to change Blackstonians’ mindsets to get them to shop locally.
- Similarly, there is a need to instill pride in community for Blackstone’s residents and businesses. There seems to be an apathy in Blackstone where people do not have respect in the community and businesses tend to neglect their properties. According to more than one stakeholder, Downtown Blackstone has “lost its beauty”.

Downtown merchants as a whole need to realize that personal service is what sets them apart from their suburban counterparts.

- While there are over 100,000 visitors coming into Blackstone each year to VUMAC and Fort Pickett, there is little impact of these visitors in Downtown other than restaurants. Both destinations present significant challenges in terms of creating a market in downtown, but there is currently little effort to tap these markets.
- There is a need for affordable housing here now. There are a lot of houses currently on the market, but there is a need for a product below \$100,000. In general, there seems to be little new construction in Blackstone itself. There is a need for low to moderate income housing in the Town.
- Blackstone demographics may be flat. There seems to be very little growth overall, and the per capita income is low when compared to the State average.

2.3 What We Heard – Opportunities

- Downtown Blackstone has the potential to create a vision for the community, provide a voice for downtown merchants, and systematically revitalize downtown through economic development, promotion, and the physical improvements of the core. The Main Street model for downtown revitalization is a proven grass-roots mechanism for creating vibrant communities and Blackstone should be very proud of its designation as a Virginia Main Street.
- With the efforts of DBI, combined with the renewed Chamber, there is the potential to build a strong small business and retail support system that has never been seen in Blackstone. With the efforts of the Town with the CBDG construction grant and other projects, the physical landscape of the downtown is likely to change as well.
- Some of the physical opportunities would include redeveloping the CBDG area including the Epps location and adjoining buildings. Also, the development of “the hole” is pending with the potential for a private mixed-use developing including retail, office, and residential (or lodging). This space could also have some outdoor public space as well. It has also been mentioned that the new development in the hole could potentially support new joint office space for the Chamber and DBI.
- There are several very significant visitor oriented developments or redevelopments on the horizon. With Schwartz Tavern as a potential visitor center, the development of the Carriage Museum, the Farmer’s Museum, and the old service station, Blackstone would have multiple destinations that could help it become a cultural hub of Southside Virginia.
- There does seem to be residential growth in the region bringing additional population and higher income into the Blackstone Market. Retirees are coming to the area purchasing 30-40 acre “farmettes” in the northern part of Nottoway County. This has

the potential to be a market for downtown Blackstone, and perhaps support for higher end goods and services, including restaurants. High-end restaurants have worked here before, proving the concept.

- The recently formed Blackstone Historical Society is also helping to revitalize the community by stabilizing the Armory and creating a space to interpret Blackstone's history to residents and visitors. They are also creating an oral history of Blackstone that can be used to help educate the community in the importance of preservation.

2.4 What We Heard – Needs

The following is a list of businesses and uses that were said to be needed during the public input process:

- Coffee Shop
- Restaurants (multiple price points)
- Antiques Stores
- Women's clothing
- Office Supply
- Local produce or Farmers market
- Bookstore
- Ice Cream Parlor
- Hallmark Store
- Family clothing
- Bakery
- Gourmet Foods
- Outdoor Theater
- Low- to moderate-income housing
- Lodging
- Support facilities for Fort (i.e. laundry)
- Public outdoor space
- Activities for children
- Downtown Parking
- Recreational opportunities
- Assisted living

Other needs specifically related to marketing include:

- Promotional packets for Picket, VUMAC, New Residents
- Marketing specific business opportunities (sites and market data)
- DBI logo, website
- Chamber website
- New signage marketing downtown off of 460
- Cross marketing and promotional efforts between merchants
- New Town Website
- Easily available historic information on community (website, brochures, etc)
- Historical Society logo