

# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and Purpose

Blackstone, Virginia is the largest community in Nottoway County and lies approximately sixty miles southwest of Richmond and one hundred miles northeast of Durham, NC. Originally called the village of Blacks & Whites, the town dates back to pre-Revolutionary War and was named after two rival taverns.

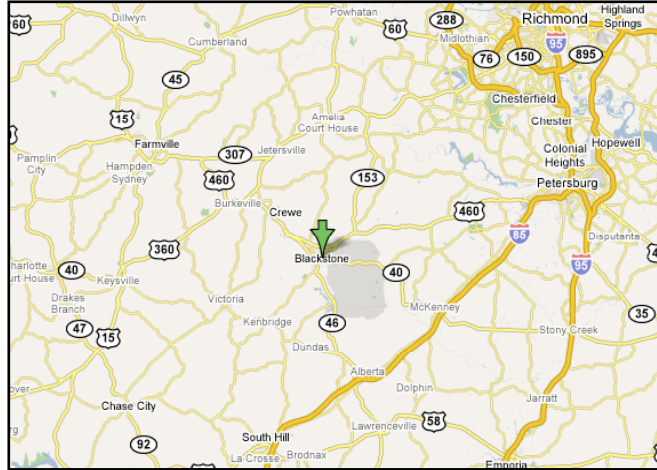


Figure 1: Blackstone Region

Schwartz Tavern, one of the original two, still exists today as a major visitor destination in this historic community. In 1886, the town took on the name of Sir William Blackstone, the father of the modern legal system. Incorporated in 1888, the town has officially been known as Blackstone ever since.

Since its beginning, this small crossroads town has been a regional hub of business and commerce for a multi-county rural region in Southside Virginia. Today, Blackstone is most known for having Fort Pickett, a former US Army military base and now the headquarters for the Virginia National Guard. Between Fort Pickett and the Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center (VUMAC), well over 100,000 visitors come to Blackstone each year.

While Blackstone and its downtown has historically served a broad market of local residents, regional visitors, as well as trainees and event attendees associated with Pickett and VUMAC, its downtown has experienced a certain decline and blight. Fortunately, town leaders have been diligent in pursuing grant projects and completing plans for downtown's improvement and a number of key projects are currently being planned or constructed including:

- Downtown Revitalization – Blackstone is a DHCD grantee for Economic Restructuring Plan and physical improvements in downtown.
- South Main Street Streetscape
- Bon Secours Medical Facility
- Carriage Museum
- Armory

On top of all of these efforts, the Town has recently become one of three new designees for the Virginia Main Street Program. The Main Street program is a proven, comprehensive methodology for downtown revitalization that focuses on the four points

of Design, Promotion, Economic Restructuring, and Organization. In becoming a designated Main Street, a community must create an organization to facilitate the four-point approach and guide economic development activities in downtown. Downtown Blackstone Incorporated (DBI) was formed by the community and consists of a board of downtown stakeholders, as well as an executive director charged with implementing the group's work plan.

Ultimately, the Town of Blackstone, with the assistance of DBI and other stakeholders, will be charged with implementing this economic restructuring plan. The plan report includes:

- A **retail market analysis** that defines the local market base, helps the community understand current market realities, and presents specific opportunities for business support and recruitment that better meets the needs of the market.
- A **demographic and housing market study** that analyzes the makeup of Blackstone's local trade areas, determining consumer needs, target markets, and the potential for new housing products.
- A **branding and marketing strategy** that creates a community brand and marketing concept to ultimately market the community to Blackstone residents, the region, and the visitor market; and
- The **Economic Restructuring Plan recommendations** that outline the strategic tasks necessary to build a solid economic base for downtown Blackstone including business development, recruitment, and an expanded customer base.

## 1.2 Report Format

This plan report is designed to present the findings of the planning process in a brief and easy to understand format. It begins with a report that summarizes the input received in interviews with individual stakeholders and small groups. The report then presents the comprehensive market analysis of downtown Blackstone to outline the economic framework that underpins the recommendations. Next, a demographic analysis is presented to better understand the socioeconomic makeup of the Blackstone Market. A snapshot of the housing market and potential market demand is next.

The report concludes with the Economic Restructuring Plan recommendations that detail all of the economic development, business development, and promotional strategies necessary to revitalize Downtown Blackstone. The recommendations are presented in the form of an implementation strategy and action plan designed to outline the steps needed to begin implementation.

These recommendations are summarized in a "Strategy Board" which distills all of the recommendations of the study into a one-sheet document. These implementation steps are presented as short, medium and, where necessary, long-term improvements.