



REIMAGINING DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION FOR THE TOWN OF WISE, VIRGINIA

APPLIED POLICY PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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With gratitude,



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A scenic view of a mountain range. The foreground shows a rocky, grassy slope with green vegetation. In the background, there are layers of rolling green hills and mountains under a blue sky with large, white, fluffy clouds. The word "OVERVIEW" is centered in the middle of the image, underlined.

OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The Town of Wise, Virginia, and the University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVA Wise) stand at a critical juncture in their shared history. As the town seeks to revitalize its historic downtown district and foster economic growth, it faces a unique opportunity to embrace its identity as a college town fully. By capitalizing on its connection to UVA Wise and the broader Southwestern Virginia tourism industry, Wise can stimulate its local economy, attract small businesses, and enhance the downtown area's economic viability and aesthetic appeal.

This policy analysis report aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of potential strategies to encourage increased utilization of the downtown area and bolster the local economy. By examining three distinct policy alternatives—administering a downtown façade improvement program, expanding the town-gown partnership, and increasing downtown access via pedestrian-friendly infrastructure—this report offers insights into the most effective and feasible approaches to achieving these goals.

Through a rigorous assessment of each alternative based on criteria such as economic feasibility for external investment, cost-effectiveness, administrative feasibility, and sustainability, this report presents a clear recommendation for action. By combining the strengths of the downtown façade improvement program with elements of the town-gown partnership, Wise can forge a path towards a vibrant, thriving future that benefits both the town and the university community.

DISCLAIMER

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

CLIENT OVERVIEW

The Town of Wise is nestled in the far reaches of Southwestern Virginia and home to just under 3,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Originally incorporated in 1874, the town lies at the heart of Wise County—one of Virginia’s seven historic coalfield counties. As a self-described “courthouse town” Wise continues to have a strong character defined by its beautiful county courthouse in the center of its historic downtown (Town of Wise, Virginia, 2022). Wise is also located directly adjacent to University of Virginia’s College at Wise. Originally founded in 1954 as Clinch Valley College, the school boasts an enrollment of more than 2,000 undergraduate students (UVA-Wise, 2023). Its students, administration, and staff provide a critical stream of customers for the town’s small business. Despite this, the Town of Wise and UVA-Wise have experienced a strained relationship.

The Town of Wise Administration recognizes the importance of addressing the challenges faced by the community and capitalizing on the unique opportunities presented by its relationship with the University of Virginia’s College at Wise (UVA Wise). As a small town in Southwestern Virginia, Wise has a rich history and a strong sense of community pride, centered around its historic courthouse and downtown district. However, like many rural communities, Wise has struggled in recent years due to the decline of traditional industries, such as coal mining, and the need to adapt to new economic realities.

The problem of embracing Wise’s identity as a college town and strengthening its partnership with UVA Wise aligns closely with the overall goals of the Town of Wise Administration. By addressing this issue, the administration aims to stimulate economic growth, attract new businesses and residents, and enhance the quality of life for all members of the community. The administration recognizes that leveraging the town’s relationship with UVA Wise is critical to achieving these goals and ensuring a vibrant, sustainable future for Wise. The economic challenges facing Wise have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the need for resilience and adaptability in the face of change. At the same time, the pandemic has also presented new opportunities for collaboration and innovation, as communities across the country seek to rebuild and revitalize in the wake of the crisis.

The Town of Wise Administration will play a central role in addressing this problem and driving positive change in the community. As the primary governing body for the town, the administration is responsible for setting strategic priorities, allocating resources, and engaging with key stakeholders to achieve its goals. In 2023, the administration took a significant step forward by establishing the Economic Development Authority, a group of local leaders tasked with promoting economic growth and creating new opportunities for businesses and residents.

Through initiatives like the Economic Development Authority, the Town of Wise Administration is working to build partnerships, leverage resources, and create a more vibrant and prosperous future for the community. By collaborating with UVA Wise, local businesses, and other key stakeholders, the administration is positioning Wise to embrace its identity as a college town and unlock the full potential of this unique and valuable relationship. Ultimately, the success of these efforts will depend on the continued leadership and commitment of the Town of Wise Administration, as well as the support and engagement of the entire community.

Key Population and Economic Metrics

Population of the Town of Wise

According to the 2020 Census, Wise's population stands at 2,971 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Within the town, 189 individuals both live and work, while 708 residents commute outside of Wise for employment and conversely, 3,693 people commute to Wise for work (Town of Wise, 2022). UVA Wise currently enrolls 2,021 students (UVA Wise, 2024).



Wise and Norton, Virginia General District Court in the Town of Wise

Economy of Wise

The 2022 Town of Wise Economic Development Strategic Plan highlights key statistics around the economic landscape of the town, whose broader trade area encompasses a primary trade area with 21,058 residents and a secondary trade area with 29,737 residents, totaling over 50,000 potential consumers (2022). Retail sales within the primary trade area reached \$495.6 million, with residents contributing \$307.3 million in expenditures, reflecting a retail gain of \$188.3 million. In contrast, the secondary trade area saw retail sales of \$387.5 million against consumer expenditures of \$457.8 million, resulting in an overall retail leakage of \$70.3 million. Notably, the primary trade area accounts for 63% of the total retail sales of \$785.3 million in the Big Stone Gap micropolitan area. In 2022, Wise's immediate area consumers spent \$52.4 million, with only approximately 20%, \$10.48 million, of this economic activity occurring in the historic downtown district of the town, which is the focal point of this policy analysis (Town of Wise, 2022).



The Town of Wise and UVA Wise Campus

ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

Acronyms:

UVA Wise - University of Virginia's College at Wise

FIG - Façade Improvement Grants

EDA - Economic Development Authority

DHCD - Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development

ICMA - International City/County Management Association

ARC - Appalachian Regional Commission

VDOT - Virginia Department of Transportation

BLS - U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Definitions:

Façade Improvement Program - A program that provides financial incentives for property owners to enhance and revitalize building facades in a downtown or commercial district.

Town-Gown Partnership - Collaborative initiatives between a municipality (the "town") and a local university or college (the "gown") to drive economic development, social engagement, and community vitality.

Business Incubator - An organization that helps new and startup companies develop by providing services such as management training, access to finance, shared office spaces, and mentoring.

Pedestrian-Friendly Infrastructure - Design elements and facilities that prioritize and accommodate pedestrian movement, safety, and comfort, such as wide sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, and benches.

Spillover Effect - The impact of an economic activity or policy that extends beyond its immediate target and influences adjacent areas or sectors.

Revitalization - The process of improving and reviving a downtown area or neighborhood through economic development, investment, and community engagement initiatives.

Main Street Program - A preservation-based economic and community development approach focused on revitalizing historic commercial districts, administered by the National Main Street Center.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Problem Definition

The Town of Wise, Virginia, and the University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVA Wise) face an opportunity to foster a mutually beneficial partnership that can bolster the social, economic, and cultural vibrancy of the area, building a brighter economic future. As Wise looks to revitalize its historic downtown district, it faces a missed opportunity to fully embrace its identity as a college town. Doing so would enable the town to capitalize on its connection to UVA Wise and Southwestern Virginia tourism, stimulating the local economy, attracting small businesses, and enhancing the downtown's economic viability and aesthetic appeal.

Policy Alternatives and Criteria

Three policy alternatives were considered:

1. Administering a Downtown Façade Improvement Program
2. Expanding the Town-Gown Partnership
3. Increasing Downtown Access via Pedestrian-Friendly Infrastructure

The alternatives were evaluated based on four criteria:

1. Economic Feasibility for External Investment
2. Cost-Effectiveness
3. Administrative Feasibility
4. Sustainability

Findings

The Downtown Façade Improvement Program scored high on likelihood to increase external investment, cost-effectiveness, and administrative feasibility. The Town-Gown Partnership scored low on increasing external investment in the short term but high on administrative feasibility and sustainability. The Pedestrian-Friendly Infrastructure alternative received lower scores overall, with high cost and administrative challenges.

Policy Recommendation

It is recommended that Wise pursue a combination of the Downtown Façade Improvement Program and elements from the Town-Gown Partnership. Integrating joint marketing efforts and events from the town-gown collaboration into the façade improvement initiative can magnify the program's economic impact and foster enduring ties between UVA Wise and Wise. This blended approach balances short-term investment and impact with sustainable gains from deeper university-community collaboration.

Implementation

Successful implementation will require active involvement from various stakeholders, effective management of their perspectives and potential concerns, proactive risk mitigation strategies, and a clearly defined implementation roadmap. Key steps include establishing an implementation team, conducting stakeholder engagement, designing and launching the façade improvement program, establishing the town-gown partnership framework, planning and executing joint initiatives, monitoring progress, and ensuring long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

Revitalizing downtown Wise into a vibrant college town demands a holistic approach, engaging stakeholders and mitigating risks with a clear roadmap. By pursuing the recommended blended approach, Wise can cost-effectively enhance downtown vibrancy while further building an enduring college town identity, driving economic growth and enhancing quality of life for its broad community.

An aerial photograph of a vast, forested mountain range. The foreground is filled with dense, green trees, with some sunlight filtering through the canopy. In the middle ground, rolling hills and valleys are visible, with a layer of mist or fog settling in the lower areas. The background shows more distant mountain ranges under a clear, blue sky. The overall scene is serene and majestic.

PROBLEM DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND

PROBLEM DEFINITION

The Town of Wise, Virginia, and the University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVA Wise) face an opportunity to foster a mutually beneficial partnership that can bolster the social, economic, and cultural vibrancy of the area, building a brighter economic future. The following policy analysis is focused on identifying strategies that can encourage increased utilization of the downtown area and bolster the local economy. As the Town of Wise, Virginia looks to revitalize its historic downtown district it faces a missed opportunity to fully embrace its identity as a college town. Doing so would enable the town to fully capitalize on its connection to UVA Wise and Southwestern Virginia tourism, effectively stimulating the local economy, attracting small businesses, and enhancing the downtown's economic viability and aesthetic appeal.

PROBLEM ORIENTATION

Historical Trends

Southwestern Virginia has a deep-rooted history in coal mining and manufacturing industries, both of which have played pivotal roles in the region's economy. Coal, in particular, served as a significant economic driver for many years. However, recent decades have seen a notable decline in these sectors due to various factors. The depletion of Virginia's coal veins, stringent environmental regulations, and the increasing adoption of automation have collectively contributed to the industrial shift in the region. This shift has not only impacted economic dynamics but has also led to a decline in population as traditional job opportunities dwindled. Younger residents, in particular, have been increasingly drawn to seek employment elsewhere, contributing to an outmigration trend (Yang, Y. & Shanker T, 2023).

In response to these challenges, Southwestern Virginia has undertaken efforts to address critical issues. Significant improvements in transportation infrastructure, encompassing road networks and broadband access, have been made to attract new businesses and support overall economic growth. Despite progress, the region grapples with a digital divide, emphasizing the complexity of achieving comprehensive development (The Town of Wise, 2022; Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2022).



Coalfield in Wise County, Virginia

Projections for the Region

As the region grapples with the decline of traditional industries, Southwestern Virginia is strategically positioning itself for a transition to a knowledge-based economy. Diversification efforts are underway, focusing on investments in healthcare, education, and technology sectors to create new employment opportunities. UVA Wise stands out as a beacon of hope in the local Wise economy, serving as a key player in these economic transformation efforts (The Town of Wise, 2022). Looking ahead, Southwestern Virginia is anticipated to expand its focus on workforce development, particularly in the realm of renewable energy. With a shifting national emphasis toward cleaner energy sources, the region is poised to explore opportunities in solar, wind, and other sustainable energy projects. Concurrently, investments in education and workforce development programs are expected to continue, aiming to equip the local workforce with the skills necessary for emerging industries in renewable energy and technology.

Moreover, Southwestern Virginia is eyeing sustainable tourism as a catalyst for economic development. The region, known for its awe-inspiring natural landscapes, distinctive downtown communities, and rich cultural traditions, sees the preservation and promotion of these assets as crucial for future growth. Grants from the Appalachian Regional Commission are already making a significant impact, injecting \$25 million into 58 tourism-focused projects in 2022, underscoring the commitment to harnessing the potential of sustainable tourism (ARC, 2023).



Installation of solar panels in southwestern Virginia

Contributing Factors to the Problem

Several factors have contributed to the Town of Wise's struggle to fully embrace its identity as a college town and maximize the benefits of its partnership with UVA Wise. One significant factor is the historical reliance on the coal mining industry, which has long been a primary driver of the region's economy. As the coal industry has declined in recent years, the town has faced significant economic challenges and has struggled to adapt to new economic realities.

Another contributing factor is the lack of a clear vision and strategy for leveraging the town's relationship with UVA Wise. While the town and the university have collaborated on various initiatives over the years, there has been no comprehensive plan for aligning their goals and resources in a way that maximizes the benefits for both parties.

The problem has not yet been solved, in part, due to a lack of resources and capacity within the town government. The Town of Wise has limited staff and financial resources, making it challenging to undertake significant revitalization efforts or to develop and implement a comprehensive town-gown partnership strategy.

Equity issues also play a role in the persistence of the problem. The Town of Wise is a small, rural community with a high poverty rate and limited access to resources and opportunities. This has made it more difficult for the town to attract investment and support from outside sources, and has limited the ability of local residents and businesses to participate in revitalization efforts.

Specific sub-populations within the town are particularly affected by these challenges. Low-income residents, including many students and families associated with UVA Wise, often struggle to find affordable housing and access essential services in the downtown area. Minority-owned businesses and entrepreneurs may also face barriers to entry and success in the local market.

Consequences of the Problem

The Town of Wise's failure to fully embrace its identity as a college town and capitalize on its partnership with UVA Wise has far-reaching consequences for the community and its residents. The lack of a strong town-gown relationship has hindered economic growth and development, limiting opportunities for local businesses, entrepreneurs, and job seekers. As a result, the town has struggled to attract and retain young professionals, leading to a brain drain that threatens the long-term vitality of the community.

Moreover, the underutilization of the downtown area has led to a decline in property values, reduced tax revenues, and a lack of investment in critical infrastructure and amenities. This, in turn, has diminished the quality of life for residents and made it more challenging to attract new businesses and residents to the area.



Coal mining equipment - Wise County, Virginia

The financial costs of these consequences are significant. The town has lost potential revenue from sales taxes, property taxes, and other sources, while also facing increased expenses related to the maintenance and upkeep of underutilized properties. Furthermore, the lack of a vibrant downtown and strong town-gown partnership has limited the town's ability to leverage the economic and cultural resources of UVA Wise, resulting in missed opportunities for growth and development.



Fishing in the Clinch River - Wise County, Virginia

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the heart of many small and rural towns in America, a dynamic and untapped resource lies in close proximity to the local community - the college or university. These educational institutions, nestled within the fabric of these communities, possess immense intellectual and economic potential (Mastrodicasa, 2020). However, too often a metaphorical gap has separated the academic world from the vitality of the main streets, causing both entities to function in relative isolation (Glover, 2015). This literature review examines implementation of policy solutions focused on the transformative potential of initiatives that aim to bridge the economic and social divide between the college and the town, revitalizing main streets and increasing student and community member engagement.

Bridging the Metaphorical Gap Between College and Town

Higher education institutions “exist in cities and towns and, therefore, have a direct impact – for good or ill – on their surrounding communities” (Derounian, 2022). Scholars have long described the partnership between these schools and their surrounding communities as a “town-gown” relationship, referencing the collaborative and often complex interactions and partnerships between a town or city and a nearby academic institution, typically a college or university. This relationship encompasses various aspects, such as social, economic, and cultural exchanges, as well as joint initiatives and shared resources. The “town-gown relationship” stands at the core of revitalizing small-town communities like the Town of Wise, Virginia, particularly when it involves such a closely neighboring college (UVA-Wise). Historically, town-gown relations have been a source of “difficulty, frustration and annoyance” for both the university and its neighboring town (Bruning, et al. 2006). The division between a city and a university is centuries old and can be traced to medieval times, originating from centuries-old European university towns like Oxford and Cambridge. The town-gown relationship embodies the idea that the college and town “share a intertwined destiny.”

In these unique town-gown partnerships, there exists the promise of a mutually beneficial relationship where the strengths of each can bridge this gap, leading to main street revitalization and community economic development that benefits all parties. Fundamentally, this policy solution to unite and benefit both the college and the town is based on community engagement. Because town-gown relations often have been strained, many universities have reacted to the difficulties by “isolating the university from the surrounding community,” in effect eliminating the need to manage the town-gown relationship (Bruning et al, 2006). However, an experimental survey carried out by Bruning found that community members who have attended a campus event in the past six months had a significantly more favorable impression of the university than those who had not attended an event (2006). Further, town respondents were also found to be more likely to indicate that the local university was an asset to the community (Bruning et al, 2006).

In a national literature study, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) explores town-gown relationship joint projects and programs being undertaken by local governments and schools throughout the United States and Canada (2014). This study found that successful town-gown relationships involve a variety of strategies to foster positive interactions between universities and their local communities. Key strategies included:

1. **Adjunct Faculty and Class Speakers:** Local government and administrative officials can serve as adjunct faculty members and class speakers at the university. This can provide students with real-world insights and perspectives, enhancing their educational experience.
2. **Government and Business Management Internships:** The local government and other area businesses can provide internships for students, which can lead to job opportunities in the future. This not only benefits the students but also helps the local government attract and retain talent in the local community.
3. **Town-Gown Advisory Committees:** These committees consist of public and school officials, along with representatives of the residents and students. They discuss local concerns and resolve them before they become community issues. These committees can also work on joint projects such as transit projects, parking facilities, community parks, and bikeways.
4. **Joint Projects and Programs:** Town-gown officials can work together to seek funds from higher levels of government for both separate and joint projects and programs, especially when they are mutually advantageous. Through economic programs universities and towns can align their priorities to maximize capital and financial resources, driving local economic development.

Cultivating a successful town-gown partnership doesn't just happen overnight, it's a result of "intentional, ongoing efforts and a commitment to view success collectively" (Chenoweth, 2017). As discussed by Chenoweth, a recent San Jose University initiative provides an example of innovative cooperation (2017). Instead of constructing two new libraries, when there was a requirement for a new one, the city and the university shared the expenses and refurbished an existing library situated

on the outskirts of the campus. This library is accessible to both the general public and students, resulting in mutual advantages for taxpayers and the student body. Additionally, they secured state grants and divided the ongoing operational expenditures.

The discussed findings suggest that a similar pathway for the Town of Wise to continue investing in its partnership with UVA-Wise is paramount to its economic growth. These practices present generalizable strategies to help build a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship between the town and the university, contributing to the social, economic, and cultural vitality of the community that could not be expected otherwise.

Main Street Revitalization

The downtown districts of small, rural towns and cities have been described at the heart of America (Fallow & Fallow, 2023). Main street revitalization initiatives have long been an economic policy solution implemented in Virginia. Administered by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, Virginia's Main Street initiative is a preservation-based economic and community development program focused on revitalizing historic commercial districts. Based on a 2015 impact study, over the past 30 years, Virginia Main Street businesses in the program have generated 11,908 new jobs and established over 3,365 new businesses in Main Street districts (Department of Housing, & Community Development). These districts have demonstrated resilience during economic downturns, attracting over \$1.2 billion in investments, with 71% originating from the private sector, and contributing nearly \$2 billion to the state's overall economic impact (Department of Housing, & Community Development, 2015). While the Town of Wise is already a participant in the program, the town administration can submit applications for the program's additional rounds of competitive funding grants and explore other grant opportunities focused on investing in historic downtown districts.

Building a 'College Town'

Downtown revitalization efforts have also been a key initiative in making towns or cities more connected to their college or university. Recent research has examined how targeted redevelopment projects can strengthen linkages between universities and their host cities or towns. Mapes et al. (2017) conducted a case study of Kent, Ohio, analyzing a \$110 million downtown redevelopment project marketed as reconnecting the city and Kent State University. The project extended the campus esplanade to downtown, created shared public spaces, and attracted university-oriented businesses. It succeeded in place-making and marketing Kent as a vibrant college town, creating economic benefits like 700 new jobs. However, the project focused more on attracting visitors and students rather than including existing residents. While physical reconnection was achieved, community building across town-gown divides was more ambiguous (Mapes et al., 2017).

This highlights the complexity of balancing economic, physical, and social goals in college town redevelopment. Still, the strategic collaboration between Kent and Kent State University on mutually beneficial downtown projects provides an example of how targeted revitalization efforts can strengthen town-gown linkages.

Other literature echoes the potential of downtown redevelopment to improve university integration with surrounding communities. Campus expansion and downtown decline often physically separated institutions from their host towns (Gumprecht, 2018). Strategic investment reversing this decline by attracting university-oriented development downtown helps reestablish connectivity (Perry & Wiewel, 2005). Continuous communication and meaningful community participation are key to ensuring equitable benefits (Bruning et al., 2008). When aligned with local needs, campus growth focused downtown can yield economic gains alongside social integration.



The main library at UVA Wise



ALTERNATIVES AND CRITERIA

ALTERNATIVES

The Town of Wise, Virginia and UVA Wise face an opportunity to foster an enduring, mutually beneficial partnership that bolsters social, economic, and cultural vibrancy, building a brighter and more sustainable future. The following section outlines promising policy alternatives to achieve this, detailing their objectives, potential impacts, and how they aim to encourage increased utilization of the downtown area by county and town residents, the UVA Wise community, and tourists. Each of these alternatives addresses specific facets of the policy problem, aligning with the overarching goal of embracing the town's identity as a college town and capitalizing on its connection to UVA Wise and southwestern Virginia tourism.

ALTERNATIVE #1: ADMINISTERING A DOWNTOWN FAÇADE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Administering a downtown façade improvement program would provide financial incentives for property owners to enhance and revitalize building facades in the historic downtown district. By improving the aesthetic appeal and vibrancy of the downtown, this could attract more foot traffic, new businesses, and private investment aligned with a college town atmosphere. This initiative would encompass a broader scope than solely focusing on façade improvements, aiming to enhance the overall aesthetic appeal and functionality of the downtown area. Alongside façade enhancement grants, the initiative would include provisions for streetscape improvements, such as sidewalk repairs, landscaping, and street furniture installations, to create a more inviting environment for residents, visitors, and businesses alike. By taking a comprehensive approach to downtown beautification, this alternative policy seeks to address not only the visual appeal of buildings but also the overall pedestrian experience and sense of community pride. Collaboration with local stakeholders, community organizations, and relevant government agencies will be essential for the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of this initiative, ensuring that it aligns with the broader goals of historical preservation, economic revitalization, and community development.

ALTERNATIVE #2: EXPANDING THE TOWN-GOWN PARTNERSHIP

This policy alternative focuses on fostering community revitalization in the Town of Wise by deepening the town-gown partnership between the municipality and UVA Wise. This expanded collaboration aims to leverage the resources and expertise of the university to drive economic development, social engagement, and cultural enrichment in the town. Through initiatives such as adjunct faculty programs, internships, joint events, and shared facility usage, the partnership seeks to create a synergistic relationship where the strengths of both entities complement each other. Central to this approach is active engagement from key stakeholders including town administrators, university faculty and administration, local businesses, and students. By strategically selecting and implementing initiatives that maximize economic and social impact, the partnership can work towards transforming Wise into a vibrant and dynamic college town. Evaluating the success of this alternative will involve measuring the tangible outcomes of collaborative efforts while acknowledging the inherent challenges in establishing direct causal relationships. However, by fostering unity, shared resources, and a sense of intertwined destiny, this policy alternative endeavors to catalyze sustainable growth and prosperity for both the town and the university community. Town-gown programs include a diverse array of activities uniting both communities in different ways. This policy analysis specifically focuses on two: the establishment of town-gown committees and advisory groups and the development of a UVA Wise multi-use business incubator and classroom space.

ALTERNATIVE #3: INCREASING DOWNTOWN ACCESS VIA PEDESTRIAN-FRIENDLY INFRASTRUCTURE

Another policy alternative to invigorate the Town of Wise's economic landscape entails bolstering downtown accessibility through the implementation of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, particularly along East Main and Park Avenue, vital arteries linking the town with UVA Wise. Recognizing the profound impact of physical connectivity on economic vitality, this initiative aims to bridge the gap between the downtown area and the college campus, fostering a more cohesive and vibrant community. Drawing upon research highlighting the economic benefits of pedestrian-oriented development, including increased revenue, job creation, and property value appreciation, the proposed infrastructure enhancements seek to stimulate local commerce and attract businesses catering to the college demographic. Collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including town officials, UVA Wise, transportation agencies, local businesses, residents, and regional partners, is paramount for the success of this endeavor. By leveraging collective expertise and resources, and by soliciting input from community members, the Town of Wise can spearhead efforts to enhance walkability and forge stronger connections between neighborhoods, downtown, and the college, thereby realizing its vision of becoming a thriving college town.

CRITERIA

In order to assess the viability and potential impact of the proposed policy alternatives, it is essential to establish a set of criteria against which each option can be evaluated. These criteria should reflect the town's goals, priorities, and practical considerations that will impact the feasibility and success of each alternative. The following section outlines four key criteria: Economic Feasibility for External Investment, Cost-Effectiveness, Administrative Feasibility, and Sustainability. These criteria will serve as essential benchmarks to assess the potential impact, viability, and long-term sustainability of each policy alternative, ensuring informed decision-making and effective allocation of resources.

CRITERION #1: LIKELIHOOD TO INCREASE EXTERNAL INVESTMENT

Catalyzing all forms of economic revitalization is paramount for Wise to fully capitalize on its proximity to UVA Wise. In the context of revitalizing the downtown district in Wise, economic feasibility for external investment specifically assesses the potential positive changes to the local economy. This criteria would examine the creation of new job opportunities, the attraction of businesses, and the overall enhancement of economic activity in the downtown area. To measure this economic impact, focus on indicators such as the increase in local employment specifically in the downtown businesses, growth in revenue for local establishments, the potential rise in property values, and an increase in the total dollars spent by UVA Wise community members (students, professors, staff) downtown. Moving forward, surveys and case studies could capture qualitative aspects, like the perceived economic health of the community by both town and county residents and members of the UVA Wise community. A goal identified in the Town of Wise Economic Development Strategic Plan is that “Wise will become a desirable place to invest, from small business to larger employers, to residential development” (Town of Wise, 2022). The growth of new businesses of all sizes will be a key economic indicator for the success of proposed alternatives.

CRITERION #2: COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Cost effectiveness examines the upfront costs and long-term operational expenses of each alternative relative to the projected economic benefits and return on investment. This criterion evaluates the efficiency and affordability of each policy alternative in achieving the desired outcomes—stimulating economic growth, attracting businesses, and enhancing community vibrancy. It encompasses a comprehensive analysis of the costs associated with implementing and maintaining each alternative relative to the benefits accrued. Cost effectiveness is determined by assessing the ratio of costs to benefits, where lower costs and higher benefits indicate greater efficiency. To operationalize this criteria and measure cost I quantify the cost needed for initiatives like façade improvement programs, expanded partnership programming, and development of pedestrian friendly infrastructure. This includes but is not limited to: infrastructure development costs, construction and labor costs, material costs, personnel costs, administrative costs, maintenance and operational costs. Effectiveness will be measured as the total projected increase in percentage of retail sales volume, a vital economic measure for assessing growth.

CRITERION #3: ADMINISTRATIVE FEASIBILITY

Administrative feasibility gauges the degree of support or opposition from key stakeholders like elected leaders, residents, businesses, and the university itself. Ensuring buy-in from these groups is vital for successful implementation and sustainability. Administrative feasibility evaluates the likelihood of garnering support from stakeholders crucial for the success of downtown revitalization in Wise. This includes elected and appointed members of the local government, residents, members of the Town of Wise Economic Development Authority, the Wise Chamber of Commerce, Wise Small Business Administration, residents of the town and broader county, the UVA Wise community and leadership, and potential external partners in the region. Gauging administrative feasibility will be facilitated through conducting interviews and surveys with key stakeholders. Working alongside my client I believe that this will allow me to assess the level of support or opposition from the stated stakeholders above. Operationalizing administrative feasibility could be done through assessing policy alternatives on a scale from “1” to “5”, with “5” being the most politically feasible, and “1” being the least feasible. One key measurement guideline could also be analyzing how closely a specific policy alternative matches the economic priorities found in the Town of Wise Economic Development Strategic Plan.

CRITERION #4: SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability evaluates the resilience and enduring positive impacts of each alternative over the long-term, considering changing economic and social conditions. Short-term fixes are inadequate - Wise requires strategies that create lasting progress towards its college town vision. Sustainability will assess the enduring impact of each policy alternative on efforts to focus on making Wise a college town, as opposed to simply a town with a college. This involves considering the resilience of each of the policy alternatives in the face of changing economic, social, and environmental conditions. Addressing economic growth in the Town of Wise requires a long-term solution that will continue to make a considerably beneficial impact on the town's economy for the next five to ten years. A major consideration for this sustainability measure will be the costs-over-time. Operationalizing this includes ranking programs with increasing costs as scoring low, programs with sustained costs scoring in the middle, and programs with decreasing costs scoring highly.



FINDINGS

WISE
COUNTY
General
Registrar

WISE COUNTY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

ALTERNATIVE #1: ADMINISTERING A DOWNTOWN FAÇADE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

CRITERION #1 — LIKELIHOOD TO INCREASE EXTERNAL INVESTMENT: HIGH

Launching a downtown façade improvement program is one policy alternative targeted to specifically enhance the external appearance of buildings in the historic downtown district of the Town of Wise. Drawing inspiration from successful main street revitalization strategies, this program aims to strengthen community assets, attract local businesses, and promote economic development. Façade improvement grants would be provided to property owners to invest in the aesthetic enhancement of their buildings, contributing to a core component of revitalizing the downtown area. Main street revitalization initiatives have long been an economic policy solution implemented in Virginia. Administered by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, Virginia's Main Street initiative is a preservation-based economic and community development program focused on revitalizing historic commercial districts. Based on a 2015 impact study, over the past 30 years, Virginia Main Street businesses in the program have generated 11,908 new jobs and established over 3,365 new businesses in Main Street districts (Department of Housing, & Community Development). These districts have demonstrated resilience during economic downturns, attracting over \$1.2 billion in investments, with 71% originating from the private sector, and contributing nearly \$2 billion to the state's overall economic impact (Department of Housing, & Community Development, 2015).

Façade improvement programs have been shown to have a significant economic impact on communities. Better aesthetics increase property values, improve the marketability of space within the buildings, and draw business and residents to the area (City of Birmingham, Alabama, 2020). In an empirical analysis of three U.S. communities in the state of Montana; Helena, Kalispell, and Anaconda, Gibson et. al (2021) explored how façade improvement grants ignited a multiplier effect of spillover investment in the built environment correlated with wider community improvements. The study found that improved facades generated "spillover" effects where other building owners on the same streets also invested in improving their facades, even without grant funding. This domino effect improved whole blocks and generated a sense of positive momentum for downtown revitalization. In Kalispell, an analysis of property tax data from 2013-2017 indicated that both grantees and their immediate neighbors experienced slightly higher increases in taxable property values (12-13%) compared to non-grantees (10%) (Gibson et al., 2021). It is important to note that while the observed 10% growth among non-grantees may include spillover effects from the FIG

program, the extent to which this growth can be causally attributed to the FIG remains uncertain. Further research is needed to assess the specific impact of the FIG program on neighboring properties and determine the magnitude of any spillover effects.

The strong evidence from prior studies demonstrates that the implementation of a downtown façade improvement program in the Town of Wise is highly likely to attract external investment. By leveraging façade improvement grants to enhance the visual appeal of buildings in the historic downtown district, the program aligns with successful main street revitalization strategies. Virginia's Main Street initiative, as a notable example, has generated significant economic benefits, including job creation, business establishment, and private sector investment, demonstrating the effectiveness of similar programs. Additionally, empirical studies from other communities have shown that façade improvement grants can stimulate a multiplier effect of spillover investment, resulting in increased property values and a sense of positive momentum for downtown revitalization. The implementation of a downtown façade improvement program in Wise is positioned to attract substantial external investment and foster economic growth in the community and is therefore assessed as high.

CRITERION #2: COST-EFFECTIVENESS: HIGH

Cost

The Town of Wise indicated that the administration cost for the inaugural year of the façade improvement grants totals \$100,000, with \$70,000 set aside for matching grants to program applicants who can apply for 50% grants between \$5,000 and \$50,000. An additional \$30,000 has been set aside by Wise for payment to the Virginia Main Street Program, a preservation-based economic and community development program that follows the Main Street Approach by the National Main Street Center. The town will incur no supplementary administrative or personnel expenses, as the volunteer-based Town of Wise Economic Development Authority assumes responsibility for additional fund review and administrative support.

Effectiveness

Facade improvement programs enhance the visual appeal of businesses in historic downtown districts, contributing to economic vitality. By creating inviting storefronts, improving neighborhood aesthetics, and attracting foot traffic, these programs boost local sales and property values (Dill, 2019; Department of Housing and Community Development, 2015; Gibson et al., 2021). Further, they preserve historical heritage and foster community pride, making them a valuable investment for towns and cities. While numerous programs cite strong economic benefits, including new businesses opening, raised property tax revenue, and increases in employment and pedestrian foot traffic, few studies have placed a hard number on retail sales volume increases (Department of Housing and Community Development, 2015; City of Pittsburgh, 2024; Mulligan, 2020).

However, a 2015 University of Wisconsin–Extension impact study of facade improvement programs in 24 cities and towns across Wisconsin over a period of 15 years found that over 90% of existing businesses reported an increase in sales and over 80% of reporting businesses experienced an increase in the number of first-time customers (Ryan et al., 2015). For case studies where data was available, sales revenue increased an average of 20% (Ryan et al., 2015). In this cost effectiveness analysis I use a modified and more conservative estimate for a projected increase of total retail sales volume of 15%.

Cost Effectiveness

The cost-effectiveness analysis for the facade improvement program in downtown Wise indicates a promising benefit/cost ratio of 15.72. This calculation is based on the program's total projected cost for all parties of \$100,000 and an estimated increase in retail sales volume of \$1,572,000. These findings suggest that the program represents a sound investment in enhancing the economic vitality of the area by improving storefront aesthetics and attracting foot traffic—cost effectiveness is therefore assessed as high.

CRITERION #3: ADMINISTRATIVE FEASIBILITY: HIGH

The Town of Wise initiated a downtown revitalization effort in 2008, though quantitative data is lacking due to reporting requirements at the time. Information on the town's site details the key components of the campaign, including its façade improvement program, design guidelines for participating businesses, and a revolving microloan program. Four main projects emerged from this initiative: the creation of the Big Glades Amphitheater/Community Square, the purchase and conversion of two old gas stations into Gateway Gardens and a parking lot for the Inn at Wise, respectively. The façade improvement program played a significant role, with the town covering 50% of project costs regardless of scale, demonstrating commitment to local businesses. My client shared that feedback from the façade improvement program was positive, contributing to an enhanced perception of downtown Wise. However, as these projects date back almost 16 years, subsequent generations may be unaware of the town's investment in revitalization efforts. Town of Wise Town Manager Laura Russell noted that the façade improvement program marked a turning point, instilling confidence in property and business owners by showcasing the town's dedication to their success. This initial effort led to improved perceptions of downtown Wise in the years that followed. Additionally, the investment in infrastructure enhancements, including new sidewalks, further enhanced the area's appeal. Despite these positive outcomes, there remains a need to remind the community, particularly newer residents, of the town's ongoing commitment to downtown revitalization. Evidence of that is growing, with the current town planner and town manager having successfully applied for Wise to become a historic commercial district in the Designated Virginia Main Street Program run by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development.

The previous downtown revitalization project in Wise provides a strong foundation for achieving a high administrative feasibility criterion assessment for future endeavors. The clearly defined projects demonstrate the town's capacity for project execution. Positive feedback from the community further underscores administrative effectiveness, suggesting that future initiatives can garner support and cooperation from stakeholders. Additionally, the successful implementation of recent infrastructure enhancements, including new sidewalks, highlights the town's capability to manage and execute projects that enhance the downtown area's appeal. Overall, the track record of the previous revitalization project showcases the Town of Wise's administrative competence and capacity to undertake similar initiatives in the future, contributing to a high administrative feasibility assessment for future related revitalization projects. Given the detailed alignment of the policy alternative with the economic priorities outlined in the Town of Wise Economic Development Strategic Plan, as well as the successful execution of similar projects in the past, and acceptance to the Virginia Main Street Program this policy alternative should be scored a "5" for administrative feasibility. This high score reflects the strong likelihood of successful implementation and execution, supported by the robust foundation of administrative support and strategic alignment with town objectives.

CRITERION #4: SUSTAINABILITY: MEDIUM

The façade improvement program presents an opportunity to enhance the aesthetic appeal of downtown Wise, potentially attracting more visitors and businesses over the long term. However, concerns arise regarding the sustainability of its impact beyond the initial investment period. While the program may initially contribute to economic revitalization, its long-term sustainability is uncertain due to potential challenges in maintaining the improved facades. Without ongoing investment and community engagement, the program's impact may diminish over time. Therefore, the sustainability of the façade Improvement Program is assessed as medium.

ALTERNATIVE #2: EXPANDING THE TOWN-GOWN PARTNERSHIP

CRITERION #1 — LIKELIHOOD TO INCREASE EXTERNAL INVESTMENT: LOW

Research on town-gown partnerships has highlighted how universities play a crucial role in influencing regional, social, and economic development (Massey et al., 2014). Previous research has highlighted the pivotal role of university and town administrators in fostering a positive rapport between students and community members, ultimately promoting graduate retention and yielding long-term economic advantages for the community (Massey et al., 2014). Notably, town-gown relationships exhibit substantial positive impacts on local communities, particularly in rural areas. A study conducted by the University of Georgia revealed that communities engaging in town and gown partnerships were more inclined to formulate written economic development plans and employ various development tools (Hatcher et al., 2020). These collaborative endeavors significantly contribute to the social, political, and economic vitality of the communities they inhabit.

Past studies have demonstrated how strategic town-gown partnerships and engagement between universities and rural communities are central to driving the substantial positive economic impacts quantified in studies, such as increased incomes, innovation, and skilled workforce retention (Kantor & Whalley, 2014). Collaborative initiatives tailored to local needs, from agriculture programs to entrepreneurship support, enable rural communities to leverage university assets for economic development. Studies highlight that the significant economic contributions of universities, from employment to healthcare access, are amplified and maximized through purposeful partnerships between institutions and their host towns and regions (Chenoweth, 2017). The research underscores that town-gown collaboration focused on rural priorities catalyzes universities' abilities to serve as engines of rural economic development, especially for diverse and disadvantaged community groups (Louis et al., 2022). While there is strong evidence that expanding the town-gown partnership can increase connection and engagement between municipalities and colleges, direct investment from external parties is not guaranteed. While the town-gown partnership has the potential to attract businesses that cater to the college market and stimulate economic activity, the direct influence of the town-gown partnership on external investment may be modest in the short term. Therefore, the likelihood to increase external investment for the town-gown partnership is assessed as low.

CRITERION #2: COST-EFFECTIVENESS: MEDIUM

Cost

The establishment of town-gown committees and advisory groups is anticipated to incur several costs. Personnel expenses for the Town-Gown Advisory Board and UVA Wise Incubator Manager are estimated at \$50,000 annually, while administrative and operational expenses amount to \$20,000 per year. Non-personnel costs include \$15,000 for marketing and promotion, \$3,500 for event planning, \$8,000 for event costs, \$7,000 for training and development, \$500,000 for construction costs, \$100,000 for equipment and furnishings, and \$50,000 for program costs. These estimates were derived from discussions with my client, referencing salary information from UVA Wise, and utilizing cost estimators from the Occupational Outlook Handbook by the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics and from the Cost Estimation Office at the Virginia Department of Transportation. The total estimated costs for establishing town-gown committees and advisory groups, along with developing a UVA Wise multi-use business incubator and classroom space, amount to \$753,500.

Effectiveness

Collaborative marketing campaigns and events led by the town-gown advisory committee, targeting both college students and local residents, are projected to yield further gains. A conservative estimate from my client suggests that these efforts could lead to a 8 to 10% increase in downtown district sales, translating to an additional \$943,200 in retail sales volume over the course of a year. The development of a UVA Wise Multi-Use Business Incubator and Classroom Space in downtown Wise holds promise for fostering entrepreneurship and innovation. Assuming the incubator attracts two new businesses within its inaugural year, each with a conservative average annual revenue of \$100,000. With an estimated \$200,000 in additional revenue generated by these new businesses, downtown retailers stand to benefit substantially. Furthermore, the provision of business support services within the incubator, such as mentorship programs and access to funding opportunities, is expected to further bolster sales growth for existing businesses. Together, these two initiatives combined to a projected total increase in downtown district sales would be approximately \$1,143,200, or 10.91% of total downtown district retail sales.

Cost Effectiveness: Medium

The cost-effectiveness analysis for the town-gown committees and advisory groups initiative and the UVA Wise multi-use business incubator and classroom space development in downtown Wise yields a benefit/cost ratio of approximately 1.52. This calculation is based on the combined projected cost of \$753,500 and the estimated increase in downtown district sales of \$1,143,200 per year. These findings suggest that the initiatives represent a valuable investment in fostering community unity, supporting entrepreneurship, and driving retail sales growth. Therefore, cost effectiveness is assessed as medium.

CRITERION #3: ADMINISTRATIVE FEASIBILITY: HIGH

The town-gown relationship between UVA Wise and the Town of Wise is already ongoing. Various community organizations host events at the college, town residents are invited to the college's varsity games, and regularly attend student-focused cultural events, including art exhibitions, theater productions, and music events. Expanding this initiative would take place alongside the growing engagement between town stakeholders and the college through the newly launched economic development authority. Increased programming would be planned over the course of the rest of this academic year preparing for the return of students in the fall of 2024. This initiative would involve increased activities in both the downtown area of Wise and at the UVA Wise campus. Fundamentally, this policy solution to unite and benefit both the college and the town is based on community engagement. Because town-gown relations often have been strained, many universities have reacted to the difficulties by "isolating the university from the surrounding community," in effect eliminating the need to manage the town-gown relationship (Bruning et al, 2006, p. 128). This policy alternative focuses on breaking any real or inferred separation between the parties, promoting unity, shared resources, and sense of an intertwined destiny. Representatives from UVA Wise actively participating and taking a leadership role in the newly formed Town of Wise Economic Development Authority is a promising sign that both parties are looking seriously at their existing partnership.

The administrative feasibility of the Town-Gown Partnership initiative is rated as "4" and high due to several key factors. Firstly, the initiative builds upon an already established relationship between UVA Wise and the Town of Wise, with existing collaboration evident through various community events and engagements. This foundation facilitates the seamless integration of expanded programming and activities, leveraging existing networks and resources. Furthermore, the involvement of the newly launched economic development authority signals a commitment from both parties to prioritize and drive the initiative forward.

CRITERION #4: SUSTAINABILITY: MEDIUM

Strengthening the partnership between the Town of Wise and UVA Wise has the potential to foster a vibrant college town identity, which could endure over many decades. A robust town-gown partnership may be more resilient to changing economic and social conditions, as collaboration between the two entities can adapt to address emerging challenges. This alternative offers the opportunity for sustained economic growth by leveraging the resources and expertise of both the town and the university to address long-term development goals. The town's economic development strategic plan highlights how significant progress has already been accomplished by the Town of Wise to develop robust and strategic economic plans, all of which include a primary or secondary focus on

growing the connection between Wise and UVA Wise (Town of Wise, 2022). The town recognizes that it is at a crossroads, where it can sit back and watch the local economy continue to decline, or chart a new path to the future that will lead to population growth, economic vitality and an exceptional quality of life for its residents and members of the college community.

The sustainability of strengthening the partnership between the Town of Wise and UVA Wise is assessed as medium due to potential challenges associated with rising costs over time. While the collaboration between the town and the university holds promise for fostering a vibrant college town identity and driving sustained economic growth, there are considerations regarding the long-term financial implications. As economic and social conditions evolve, there may be increasing demands on resources and investments required to maintain and expand the partnership. Additionally, as the partnership matures and expands, there may be escalating costs associated with infrastructure development, program implementation, and ongoing collaboration efforts.

ALTERNATIVE #3: INCREASING DOWNTOWN ACCESS VIA PEDESTRIAN- FRIENDLY INFRASTRUCTURE

CRITERION #1 — LIKELIHOOD TO INCREASE EXTERNAL INVESTMENT: MEDIUM

Implementing infrastructure improvements, such as expanded sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes, along with enhanced lighting and landscaping, has the potential to significantly enhance walkability and attract more people to explore downtown areas on foot. Research suggests that such enhancements can lead to revitalized local economies, generating increased revenue, fostering the establishment of new businesses, creating job opportunities, and boosting property values (Kipcakli, 2023; Quednau, 2018). Studies have highlighted the positive impacts of improved bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure on sales and employment in sectors such as retail and food services (Dill, 2019). Economic impact studies indicate that investments in bicycling and walking projects result in the creation of 8 to 12 jobs per \$1 million spent, surpassing the job creation potential of general transportation projects (Garrett-Peltier, 2011). Additionally, investments in quality public spaces, particularly in downtown areas, have been associated with increased land and property values,

including values related to retail, housing, and residential rentals (Kok & Love, 2021). Considering these findings, the likelihood of the proposed infrastructure improvements attracting external investment is assessed as medium.

CRITERION #2: COST-EFFECTIVENESS: LOW

Cost

The total estimated cost for this pedestrian-friendly infrastructure initiative in Wise amounts to \$1,055,000, covering various expenses such as design and planning fees, construction management, administrative support, legal counsel, personnel training, construction materials, land acquisition, permitting and regulatory fees, technology and software expenses, environmental impact assessment, financing costs, legal fees, transportation and travel expenses, public education and awareness campaigns, and contingency funds. These costs are essential for implementing the proposed infrastructure improvements and ensuring the success of the initiative in enhancing downtown accessibility and promoting economic revitalization in Wise. Cost estimates were made in consultation with my client and through reference to the Occupational Outlook Handbook by the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics and from the Cost Estimation Office at the Virginia Department of Transportation.

Effectiveness

Currently, foot traffic from the college to the downtown area in Wise is relatively modest, as discussed by my client, primarily consisting of students and faculty members commuting between the two locations. Given the limited pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, many individuals may opt for alternative modes of transportation, such as driving or biking, leading to minimal pedestrian activity along these routes. However, with the implementation of new infrastructure designed to enhance downtown access, we can anticipate a significant uptick in foot traffic traversing between the college campus and downtown Wise. The improved walkability and safety features, including widened sidewalks, designated crosswalks, and enhanced lighting, are expected to attract more students, faculty, and staff to explore downtown amenities and patronize local businesses. Moreover, the revitalized downtown area is likely to draw greater interest from community members residing in Wise and surrounding areas, further increasing pedestrian activity and fostering a sense of connectivity between the college and the broader community.

Quantifying Projected Impact

Element 1. Estimating Increased Student Access to Downtown District

Current Number of Students Visiting Downtown Weekly:

- Current UVA Wise Enrollment: 2,021 students (UVA Wise, 2024).
- Approximate Percentage Currently Visiting Downtown Weekly: 15%.
- Current Number of Students Visiting Downtown Weekly: $2,021 * 0.15 = 303$ students.

Estimated Number of Students Visiting Downtown Weekly with Pedestrian Friendly Infrastructure

- Estimated Number of Students Visiting Downtown Weekly: $2,021 * 0.195 = 394$ students. Based on conservative assumption by my client of a 30% increase due to the enhancements, making it 19.5% of students.

Summary: Increase in Number of Students Visiting Downtown Weekly: $394 - 303 = 91$ students.

Total Potential Increase in Retail Sales Volume:

- Increase in Number of Students * Average Spend Rate per Student per Visit:
- $91 \text{ students} * \$25 = \$2,275$ per week
- Annual increase = Weekly increase * Number of weeks in a year
- Annual increase = $\$2,275 * 52$
- Annual increase = $\$118,300$

Element 2. Attracting New Businesses

The introduction of pedestrian-friendly enhancements linking the downtown district to the UVA Wise campus is expected to attract new businesses, capitalizing on heightened student access.

Anticipating this trend, my client conservatively estimates the arrival of two new businesses, each generating \$100,000 in retail volume annually. These assumptions stem from the projected surge in student foot traffic, signaling a symbiotic relationship between enhanced accessibility and business expansion. While exact figures may vary based on market dynamics and consumer behavior, these baseline assumptions suggest a tangible increase in total retail volume, contributing to the economic vitality of downtown Wise and fostering sustainable growth over the long term. Therefore, under these assumptions, implementing pedestrian-friendly infrastructure in downtown Wise could potentially lead to an estimated \$318,000 increase in retail sales volume over the course of a year.

Cost Effectiveness

The cost-effectiveness analysis for the pedestrian-friendly enhancements linking downtown Wise to the UVA Wise campus comes to a benefit/cost ratio of approximately .30. This calculation is based on the projected cost of \$1,055,000 and the estimated increase in downtown retail sales of \$318,000 per year. These findings demonstrate that the enhancements represent a lower cost-effective investment when compared to the other discussed policy alternatives. Therefore, cost effectiveness is assessed as low.

CRITERION #3: ADMINISTRATIVE FEASIBILITY: LOW

UVA Wise has always been a significant asset for the Wise community. Despite wanting to be recognized more for it, Wise has never been able to fully embrace being a true college town. The physical separation between the two has had long-term economic effects on the town and remains a key economic growth opportunity, and driving reason for this missed opportunity. In its 2022 Economic Development Strategic Plan, the Town of Wise repeatedly describes challenges stemming from the lack of physical connectivity between the downtown area of Wise and the college (Town of Wise, 2022). This place emphasizes a key economic goal being that Wise will become a true ‘college town’ rather than a town with a college. Part of this opportunity is to physically connect downtown Wise to the college along East Main and Park Avenue, key roads that lead up to UVA Wise. Connections could include streetscape, sidewalks, bike lanes—all pedestrian friendly infrastructure that would enhance the visual and functional link between the town and the college. Further, the strategic plan identifies how this would help with the recruitment of businesses that are relevant to the college market (Town of Wise, 2022).

Assessing the administrative feasibility of the policy alternative aimed at enhancing downtown access through pedestrian-friendly infrastructure in Wise reveals a solid foundation for implementation. The strategic focus on physical connectivity between the downtown area and UVA Wise, as outlined in the Town of Wise’s 2022 Economic Development Strategic Plan, underscores the commitment to addressing long-standing challenges. Identified as a key economic goal, the plan emphasizes the transformation of Wise into a true college town. The proposed infrastructure improvements, concentrated along East Main and Park Avenue, present a tangible opportunity to bridge the gap between the town and the college campus. The collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders, including the Town of Wise, UVA Wise, transportation agencies, local businesses, residents, and regional entities, signifies a concerted effort to realize this vision. With active involvement from various parties and a strategic roadmap outlined in the economic development plan, the policy alternative demonstrates promising administrative feasibility. However, this path of road requires sidewalk extension, additional land acquisition, and represents a costly venture for the town to undertake. My client has openly stated that the town and college have long discussed completing this project, especially as the town completed a downtown-focused sidewalk revitalization project in 2021. Because of the significant costs and numerous stakeholders involved feasibility is ranked as “2” and low.

CRITERION #4: SUSTAINABILITY: HIGH

Improving transportation access between UVA Wise and downtown Wise presents an opportunity to solidify the town's identity as a college town and foster sustained economic growth. By addressing transportation access challenges, the initiative aims to enhance connectivity and promote continued engagement between the college and the community. The potential for lasting economic benefits, coupled with the resilience of improved transportation infrastructure to changing conditions, underscores the sustainability of the proposed enhancement. While initial investments may be significant, the long-term advantages of improved access are expected to justify the costs and contribute to the enduring vitality of the initiative and maintenance costs over time will be outweighed by the increased flow of pedestrians between the college and downtown district. Therefore, the sustainability of the pedestrian-friendly infrastructure is assessed as high.

OUTCOMES MATRIX

The following outcomes matrix highlights the performance of each of the three proposed policy alternatives on the four evaluative criteria. From this matrix, we can see that the Downtown Façade Improvement Program scores highly on three out of the four criteria, with a high likelihood to increase external investment, high cost-effectiveness, and high administrative feasibility. The Town-Gown Partnership alternative performs well in terms of administrative feasibility and sustainability, but ranks low in its potential to increase external investment in the short term. Lastly, the Pedestrian-Friendly Infrastructure alternative shows promise in its sustainability, but faces challenges in cost-effectiveness and administrative feasibility. This comparative analysis provides a clear overview of the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative, enabling decision-makers to identify the most promising approach or combination of approaches to achieve the Town of Wise's revitalization goals and strengthen its partnership with UVA Wise.

Criteria	Alternative 1. Administering a Downtown Façade Improvement Program	Alternative 2. Expanding the Town-Gown Partnership	Alternative 3. Increasing Downtown Access via Pedestrian-Friendly Infrastructure
Likelihood to Increase External Investment	High	Low	Medium
Cost Effectiveness	15.72	1.52	0.30
Administrative Feasibility	High	High	Low
Sustainability	Medium	Medium	High



RECOMMENDATION

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Based on the analysis of various policy alternatives aimed at enhancing the economic vitality of downtown Wise, it is recommended that the town pursue a combination of Alternative 1: Administering a Downtown Façade Improvement Program and program elements from Alternative 2: Expanding the Town-Gown Partnership. The façade improvement program scored high on likelihood to increase external investment, cost effectiveness, and administrative feasibility. Research indicates these programs attract private sector investment, increase property values, and generate positive spillover effects (Gibson et al., 2021; Department of Housing and Community Development, 2015). The estimated 15% boost in retail sales volume indicates a promising return on investment. Past implementation also demonstrates high administrative feasibility. While sustainability was rated medium due to potential upkeep challenges, combining this alternative with expanded town-gown collaboration can address this. Specifically, I suggest integrating joint marketing efforts and events from the town-gown committees and advisory groups from Alternative 2 into the façade improvement initiative. Collaborative campaigns targeting students and residents can magnify the program's economic impact. Events bringing people downtown will expose more patrons to aesthetic improvements and promote local businesses. This blended approach leverages the strengths of each option to maximize outcomes.

The town-gown partnership was rated low for increasing external investment in the short term but scored high on administrative feasibility and sustainability. Integrating collaborative events and marketing expands engagement and amplifies the façade program's benefits. It also fosters enduring ties between UVA Wise and Wise. In contrast, the pedestrian infrastructure option received lower scores overall. Its high price tag and need for substantial coordination with regional stakeholders make it less administratively feasible presently. Its connectivity benefits can instead be realized gradually through the façade and partnership initiatives.

In summary, blending the façade improvement program with expanded town-gown events and marketing best meets the criteria and Wise's goals. It balances short-term investment and impact with sustainable gains from deeper university-community collaboration. By pursuing this blended approach, Wise can cost-effectively enhance downtown vibrancy while further building an enduring college town identity.



IMPLEMENTATION

IMPLEMENTATION

Build a Strong Foundation and Engage Stakeholders

To successfully revitalize downtown Wise and strengthen the town's partnership with UVA Wise, the Town of Wise Administration must adopt a comprehensive and strategic approach to implementation. This begins with building a strong foundation and engaging stakeholders. By establishing a dedicated implementation team, developing a project charter, and creating a stakeholder engagement plan, the administration can ensure that all relevant parties are involved and committed to the revitalization efforts (Murtagh, 2020; Project Management Institute, 2017; Bryson, 2004; Massey et al., 2014). Collaboration between the town and UVA Wise is crucial, and forming town-gown committees and advisory groups, as well as developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU), will help align goals and responsibilities (Massey et al., 2014; Bruning et al., 2006).

Design and Launch the Façade Improvement Program

With a strong foundation in place, the Town of Wise Administration can focus on designing and launching the Façade Improvement Program. Researching successful programs in other cities (Ryan et al., 2015; Facca-Miess & Joy, 2015) will inform the development of guidelines, application processes, and selection criteria tailored to Wise's unique needs (Gibson et al., 2021). Securing funding sources and establishing a program budget (Faulk, 2006) will be essential, as will creating marketing materials and conducting targeted outreach to property owners and businesses in the historic downtown district.

Implement Façade Improvements and Execute Town-Gown Initiatives

As the Façade Improvement Program is implemented, the Town of Wise Administration should simultaneously execute town-gown initiatives. Collaborative marketing campaigns (Massey et al., 2014) and community events engaging both town residents and UVA Wise students and faculty (Bruning et al., 2006) will help promote the revitalized downtown district and foster a sense of unity. These initiatives can include adjunct faculty programs, internships, joint events, and shared facility usage, creating a synergistic relationship where the strengths of both entities complement each other (Massey et al., 2014; ICMA, 2014).

Expanding on the successful practices identified in the literature review, the Town of Wise Administration can work with UVA Wise to establish adjunct faculty and class speaker programs, providing students with real-world insights and perspectives (ICMA, 2014). Government and business management internships can also be developed, offering students valuable experience while helping the town attract and retain talent (ICMA, 2014).

Exploring the development of a business incubator or shared workspace (Facca-Miess & Joy, 2015) can further strengthen the town-gown partnership and support local entrepreneurship. This initiative can draw inspiration from successful collaborations like the San Jose University library project (Chenoweth, 2017), where the city and university shared expenses and secured state grants to refurbish an existing library, making it accessible to both the public and students. By tailoring these strategies to the specific needs and resources of Wise and UVA Wise, the Town of Wise Administration can create a long-term, mutually beneficial partnership that contributes to the social, economic, and cultural vitality of the community (Massey et al., 2014).

As the façade improvements and town-gown initiatives progress, it is essential to monitor and evaluate their impact on the local economy and community. Tracking metrics such as job creation, business growth, property values, and foot traffic in the downtown area (Gibson et al., 2021; Dill, 2019; Department of Housing and Community Development, 2015) will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the revitalization efforts. Regularly assessing and adjusting these initiatives based on data-driven insights will ensure that the Town of Wise Administration remains agile and responsive to the evolving needs of the community.

Evaluate Progress and Gather Feedback

To gauge the success of these initiatives and inform future decision-making, the Town of Wise Administration must establish key performance indicators (KPIs) and regularly collect and analyze data on economic activity, property values, and community engagement (Main Street America, 2020; Faulk, 2006). Surveys and focus groups will provide valuable feedback from stakeholders and help assess the impact of the revitalization efforts (ICMA, 2014). Finally, ensuring the long-term sustainability of these initiatives is crucial. Developing a long-term funding strategy that explores diverse sources such as grants, partnerships, and revenue-generating activities (Department of Housing & Community Development, 2015) will help maintain the momentum of the revitalization efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, revitalizing downtown Wise into a vibrant college town demands a holistic approach, engaging stakeholders and mitigating risks with a clear roadmap. Combining a façade improvement program with an expanded town-gown partnership harnesses the strengths of key players like the town administration, property owners, businesses, UVA Wise, and residents. Successful execution hinges on navigating diverse perspectives, forging alliances, and adopting proven strategies from similar endeavors.

A scenic landscape featuring a multi-lane highway bridge curving through a lush green valley. The bridge has several cars driving on it. In the foreground, there are tall green grasses and wildflowers. The background shows rolling green hills and mountains under a bright blue sky filled with large, white, fluffy clouds.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Cost Effectiveness Figures

Figure #1. Alternatives and Variable Costs

Figure #1. Alternatives and Variable Costs		
Alternative #1: Administering a Downtown Façade Improvement Program		
Cost Element		
Personnel Costs	Amount (\$)	Notes
Virginia Main Street Program Administrative Costs	\$30,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Non-Personnel Costs	Amount (\$)	Notes
Funds for 50% Matching Grants	\$70,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Summary	\$100,000	
Alternative #2: Expanding the Town-Gown Partnership		
Cost Element		
Personnel Costs	Amount (\$)	Notes
Town-Gown Advisory Board and UVA Wise Incubator Manager	\$50,000	(Gov Salaries, 2024)
Administrative and Operational Expenses	\$20,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Non-Personnel Costs	Amount (\$)	Notes
Marketing and Promotion	\$15,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Event Planning	\$3,500	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Event Costs	\$8,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Training and Development	\$7,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Construction Costs	\$500,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Equipment and Furnishings	\$100,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Program Costs	\$50,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Summary	\$753,500	
Alternative #3: Increasing Downtown Access via Pedestrian Infrastructure		
Cost Element		
Personnel Costs	Amount (\$)	Notes
Design and Planning Fees	\$50,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Construction Management	\$40,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Administrative Support	\$20,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024)
Legal Counsel	\$30,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Personnel Training	\$25,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024)
Non-Personnel Costs	Amount (\$)	Notes
Construction Materials	\$600,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Land Acquisition/Easement Expenses	\$100,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Permitting and Regulatory Fees	\$20,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024)
Technology and Software Expenses	\$30,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Environmental Impact Assessment	\$50,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Financing Costs	\$50,000	Figure provided by the Town of Wise
Legal Fees	\$30,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024)
Transportation and Travel Expenses	\$10,000	(Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2024); (Virginia Department of Transportation, 2023)
Summary	\$1,055,000	

Figure #2. Effectiveness Measure

Figure #2. Effectiveness Measure	
Alternative #1: Administering a Downtown Façade Improvement Program	
Projected Increase to Total Retail Sales Volume in Dollars	Projected Increase to Total Retail Sales Volume as Percentage
\$1,572,000	15% projected increase
Alternative #2: Expanding the Town-Gown Partnership	
Projected Increase to Total Retail Sales Volume in Dollars	Projected Increase to Total Retail Sales Volume as Percentage
\$1,143,200	10.91% projected increase
Alternative #3: Increasing Downtown Access via Pedestrian Infrastructure	
Projected Increase to Total Retail Sales Volume in Dollars	Projected Increase to Total Retail Sales Volume as Percentage
\$318,000	3.03% projected increase

Figure #3. Cost-Effectiveness Ratio

Figure #3. Cost-Effectiveness Ratio				
Alternative	Cost of Alternative	Projected Increase in Downtown Sales Revenue Volume	Projected Increase in Downtown Sales Revenue Volume as Percent	Cost Effectiveness Ratio
Alternative #1: Administering a Downtown Façade Improvement Program	\$100,000	\$1,572,000	15%	15.72
Alternative #2: Expanding the Town-Gown Partnership	\$753,500	\$1,143,200	10.91%	1.517186463
Alternative #3: Increasing Downtown Access via Pedestrian Infrastructure	\$1,055,000	\$318,000	3.03%	0.301421801

Appendix 2. Stakeholder Involvement and Roles in Policy Implementation

Moving forward with implementing the recommended policy initiatives will require the involvement and coordination of several key stakeholders:

- *The Town of Wise Administration* will play a leadership role, overseeing the administration of the façade improvement grant program, coordinating with the Virginia Main Street Program, and collaborating closely with UVA Wise to plan and execute joint marketing efforts and community events under the expanded town-gown partnership.
- *The Town of Wise Economic Development Authority* will provide vital support functions, assisting in reviewing grant applications, providing administrative support, and potentially serving as a liaison between the town and UVA Wise for town-gown initiatives.
- *Property Owners and Businesses in the Historic Downtown District* will be critical participants, applying for façade grants, undertaking building renovations, and providing feedback on initiatives impacting the downtown area (Gibson et al., 2021).
- *UVA Wise Administration, Faculty, and Students* represent a key partner for strengthening town-gown ties. University representatives should collaborate on developing campaigns, events, potential business incubators, and advisory committees involving students (Massey et al., 2014).
- *Local Residents and the Wider Community* will be essential for providing feedback, attending events, and supporting local businesses to ensure the initiatives' success (Bruning et al., 2006).
- *The Virginia Main Street Program and Other Regional Stakeholders (businesses, nonprofits, economic development agencies)* can offer guidance, resources, and potential partnership opportunities (Department of Housing & Community Development, 2015).

Appendix 2. Stakeholder Perspectives and Potential Responses

The Town of Wise Administration is highly supportive, as the initiatives align with economic goals. However, concerns about costs may arise. Clearly communicating expected benefits, return on investment, and evidence from successful cases can mitigate resistance (Gibson et al., 2021). Strong leadership ensuring effective coordination and transparent decision-making will be crucial (Faulk, 2006).

Property Owners and Businesses may have mixed perspectives. While many will support enhancing aesthetics and foot traffic, some may resist due to financial commitments or construction disruptions. Clearly outlining grant details, involvement in planning, and emphasizing long-term benefits like increased property values and customer base can address concerns (Mulligan, 2020). Collaborative leadership focused on trust-building and shared ownership is key to implementing community-wide initiatives, especially involving diverse university, community, and administration stakeholders (ICMA, 2014).

UVA Wise Representatives will likely be supportive but may have concerns about diverting resources from academics or impacting campus life. Emphasizing mutual benefits like improved quality of life, learning opportunities, and talent attraction/retention can mitigate resistance (Massey et al., 2014). Inclusive leadership involving the university community in planning is essential (Bruning et al., 2006).

Appendix 3. Worst-Case Scenario Analysis and Risk Mitigation

Potential risks include:

- Lack of participation in façade grant program: Conduct targeted outreach, simplify application processes, and consider adjusting matching requirements to increase participation (Mulligan, 2020).
- Town-gown initiatives fail to gain traction: Ensure sustained commitment from leadership, continuous stakeholder engagement, and adaptive programming based on feedback (Bruning et al., 2006).
- Cost overruns or funding shortfalls: Implement rigorous budgeting, explore diverse funding sources, and establish contingency plans for cost-saving measures.
- Conflicts between stakeholder groups: Establish clear communication channels, facilitate open dialogue, and identify mutually beneficial solutions (Massey et al., 2014).
- Changes in leadership/priorities at partner organizations: Cultivate broad-based support, regularly reaffirm shared goals, and maintain flexibility to adapt initiatives as needed.



UVA BATTEN