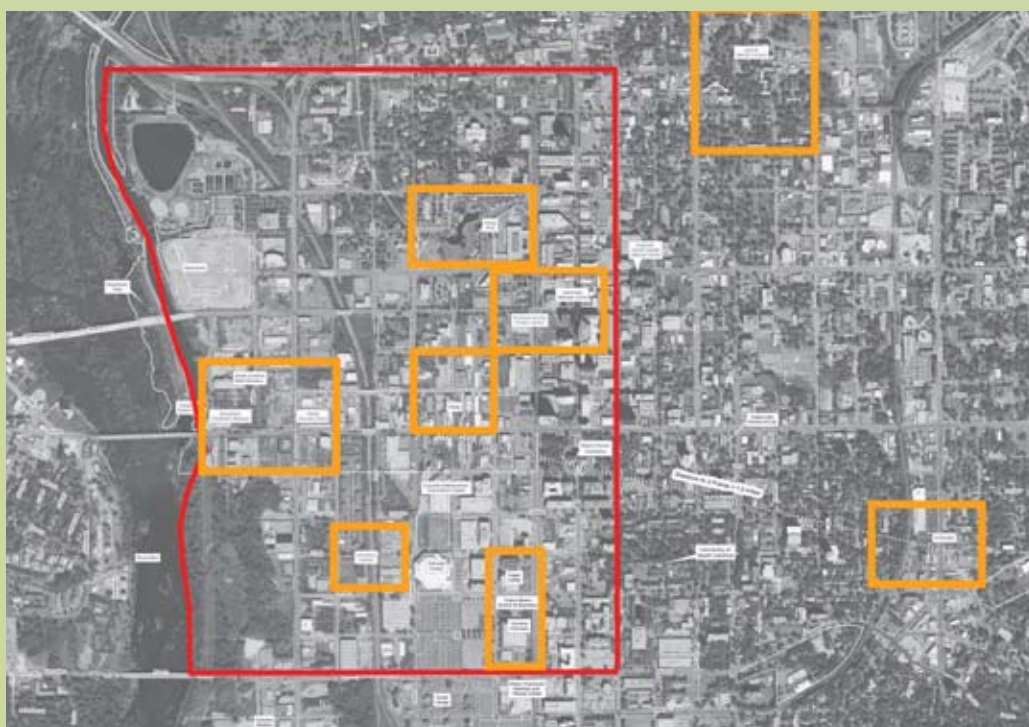


# TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL



COLUMBIA CONNECTIVITY:  
LINKING MAIN STREET AND THE VISTA  
COLUMBIA, SC

09.26.11 - 09.27.11

## ULI – THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) was established in 1936 and has over 30,000 members from more than 95 countries. It is one of America's most respected sources of information and knowledge on urban planning, growth and development. ULI is a nonprofit research and education organization. Its mission is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. To encourage an open exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences, ULI membership represents the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service. Among its members there are developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, planners, public officials, brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, academics, students and librarians.

## ULI SOUTH CAROLINA

In local communities, ULI District Councils bring together a variety of stakeholders to find solutions and build consensus around land use and development challenges. The ULI South Carolina District Council was formed in 2005 to encourage dialogue on land use and planning throughout this state and with each of the three main regions (Upstate, Midlands, Coastal), and to provide tools and resources, leadership development, and a forum through which the state can become better connected. The District Council is led by an Executive Committee with statewide and regional representation, as well as steering committees within each region that focus on the development of membership, sponsorship, programs and Young Leader initiatives. With some 500 members, ULI South Carolina is committed to bringing together leaders from across the fields of real estate and land use policy to exchange best practices and serve community needs.

### *DIVERSE EXPERTISE*

*DEVELOPERS*

*MARKET ANALYST*

*ARCHITECT & URBAN DESIGNER*

*ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
MANAGER*

*TRANSPORTATION PLANNER*

## HOW DO TAPs WORK?

Sponsors request the services of a TAP with regard to a specific issue that can be addressed by a panel of experts in one or two days. The local District Council assists the sponsor in refining the scope of the assignment and convenes a panel of volunteers from the ULI membership base to provide objective, multi-disciplinary advice. The sponsor works within the ULI guidelines to provide background information to ULI panelists prior to the panel's convening. When convened, members of the TAP view the subject site, hear from public and private stakeholders, and then deliberate on the assigned issues before making recommendations. At the conclusion of its work, the panel presents an oral report to stakeholders, that is followed by a written report within four to six weeks.

## COLUMBIA CONNECTIVITY TAP SPONSOR

The Congaree Coalition is the sponsor for the Columbia Connectivity TAP. The Coalition is a newly created partnership of the City of Columbia, the City of West Columbia and their respective development corporations in which they are collaborating on a \$1 million initiative funded by a United States Environmental Protection Agency from the (EPA) Brownfields Assessment Grant. Together, they are establishing a market-driven redevelopment strategy to help transform brownfield sites in the city center and other districts back into productive use. The Coalition allocated funds from the EPA Assessment Grant to sponsor this ULI TAP in order to receive unbiased urban planning recommendations on how to address the issues of connectivity and walkability in the downtown area of Columbia.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND

The study area for the Columbia Connectivity TAP consists of four somewhat adjoining districts that are helping downtown Columbia become an increasingly desirable place to live, work and play. They are:

- The Main Street commercial district that is considered Columbia's city center;
- The Vista, a former warehouse district that is now a vibrant arts, dining and entertainment hub;
- The urban campus of the University of South Carolina (USC); and
- Innovista, the new master planned research and innovation district being spearheaded by USC.

However, connectivity is difficult between and within these areas – particularly for pedestrians and cyclists – due to a number of reasons including wide thoroughfares, development densities and land uses, and the lack of coordinated effort among the various levels of government, district leaders and citizens groups. This is keeping each district and the city as a whole from achieving their full social and economic potential.

### THE PANEL'S ASSIGNMENT

The mission of this ULI TAP was to provide the Congaree Coalition, its' sponsor, with recommendations for improving the connections between Main Street, the University of South Carolina campus, the Innovista, and the Vista to support the successful revitalization of downtown Columbia and make the corridors more accessible to pedestrian and bike traffic.

The TAP prepared its recommendations based on its review of briefing materials, a debriefing with the TAP sponsor, a tour of the study area, a town hall meeting inviting public input, interviews conducted with stakeholders and panel deliberations which included reaching consensus on key opportunities, constraints and recommendations.

### SUMMARY OF MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel made two broad sets of recommendations that responded to the problem statement and specific questions raised by the TAP sponsor. They focus on the following:

- Urban planning and zoning – Forge bonds for a connected Columbia, make the Vista a vibrant area that attracts young professionals; and
- Transportation and movement – Repurpose Assembly Street to facilitate multimodal use and neighborhood connections, develop a strategy to link Main Street and the Vista – such as improving the area where Assembly and Gervais Streets come together, not only in terms of connectivity and safety, but as an iconic destination that defines the heart of downtown Columbia.

The panel also stressed to the TAP sponsor and members of the community who attended the presentation the importance of the City taking a leadership role, creating a long-term strategic implementation plan and taking action on short term priorities in order to forge a connected and unified Columbia.



## BACKGROUND ON THE COLUMBIA CONNECTIVITY TAP

### THE STUDY AREA

The area under study in this TAP is located in downtown Columbia, the state capital of South Carolina, an unmistakably Southern and forward-thinking city that is promoted as "Famously Hot." The city is situated in the center of the state at the convergence of three interstate highways (I-77, I-26 and I-20) and three rivers (the Congaree, the Saluda and the Broad). Its metropolitan area has a population of over 700,000, several colleges and universities, award-winning hospital systems and diverse and charming neighborhoods. Part of the larger geographic area known as the Midlands, Columbia is approximately two hours' drive both eastward to the Atlantic Coast and westward to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The study area consists of four significant downtown districts generally defined as follows:

- **Main Street** – The Main Street commercial district, considered Columbia's city center, is a nine-block long area that runs along both sides of Main Street from Gervais Street and the State House Complex at its southern edge to Elmwood Street at its northern boundary and that has become home to a mix of office, retail and food and beverage establishments as well as civic institutions and residential apartments;
- **The Vista** – After a long period of decline, this former warehouse precinct has been successfully restored and rebranded as an arts, dining and entertainment district that is centered primarily along a six-block stretch of Gervais Street that runs from Assembly Street at its eastern edge westwards to Huger Street towards the Congaree River;
- **USC Campus** – Not formally delineated, the main campus of the University of South Carolina covers nearly 360 acres of downtown Columbia immediately to the southeast of the State House Complex and is bounded roughly by Pendleton Street to the north, Rosewood Drive to the south, Pickens Street to the east and across Assembly Street to Gadsden Street to the west; and
- **Innovista** – This 500-acre master planned, live and work, research and innovation district being spearheaded by the University of South Carolina overlaps with and extends west of the existing campus from Assembly Street all the way to the Congaree River and runs north-south from the Vista district across Blossom Street to Catawba Street.

The commercial district that centers on Main Street immediately north of the State House Complex is considered to be Columbia's downtown City Center. It is home to a diverse and growing number of businesses, including banks, law firms and real estate companies, as well as restaurants, nightspots and retail establishments. It also boasts a number of civic, entertainment and tourism venues such as the Richland County Public Library, Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia City Ballet, the Nickelodeon Theatre, the Columbia Marriott and the Sheraton Hotel in the Historic Palmetto Building. Main Street itself is also experiencing residential redevelopment, with such properties as 1520 Main, the Tapps Building, and the Barringer Building recently renovated and providing scarce opportunities for living downtown. Festivals are now also held here throughout the year, such as the Main Street Marketplace. Main Street is quickly becoming a more vibrant part of the city as its condos, new restaurants and nightlife hot spots attract youthful new residents.

Stretching up from the banks of the Congaree River along Gervais Street towards the State House Complex and downtown business district, the Congaree Vista began as an important cotton warehouse district and commercial railroad terminal that went into decline by the late 1970s. Today, it is experiencing a rebirth as an arts, dining and entertainment district that promotes itself as decidedly different and completely unique, attracting locals and visitors to its more than 45 restaurants and bars, 60 art galleries and specialty shops and a growing number of professional offices and service establishments. The arrival of a Publix Market, occupying the renovated historic South Carolina State Dispensary warehouse near Huger Street and the Congaree River, has spurred urban residential



*Main Street at turn of 20th Century*



*Bird eye view of the Vista*



*3D master plan of USC*



*Illustrative plan of Innovista*

development nearby, a previous rarity. Nearby are two attractions, the South Carolina State Museum and the South Carolina Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum. At the Vista's southern boundary are Columbia's two newest civic developments – the Colonial Life Arena and the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. District hotels include Hilton Columbia Center, Hampton Inn Downtown Historic District and Spring Hill Suites Columbia Downtown.

Chartered in 1801 as South Carolina College, the University of South Carolina's main campus has grown from one building on its historic, picturesque and welcoming Horseshoe to over 155 facilities on more than 358 acres in downtown Columbia that accommodate 14 degree-granting colleges and schools and more than 350 undergraduate and graduate courses of study taught by a full-time faculty of close to 1,600 to an enrollment of over 29,000 students. Programs range from liberal arts and sciences to business, law, medicine and other professional studies. Over 6,500 degrees were awarded to the graduating class of 2010 and an estimated 250,000 alumni live in the Columbia area today. USC is a proud member of the Southeastern Conference and the home of the Fighting Gamecocks, attracting as many as 80,000 spectators on game day. Today, it is building its reputation as a cutting-edge research institution.

The University, with the support of local and state governments, is expanding its campus westward toward the Congaree River to develop a 500-acre research and innovation district known as Innovista that is intended to elevate its standing as an urban research university to one of national repute and serve as an economic development catalyst to attract and create technology-intensive, knowledge-based businesses and high-paying jobs to the region and state. This new multi-million dollar live and work community will not only support its research initiatives in nanotechnology, health sciences, Future Fuels™, the environment, and information technologies but also become a destination for innovation, creativity, entertainment and culture. Its research facilities will form part of an urban community that has been master planned by Sasaki Associates with potential for 8 million square feet of space that will also include 3,000 residences, retail and restaurants, 47 acres of greenspace and a signature Waterfront Park. USC's new riverfront baseball stadium already opened there in 2009 and development of Innovista's signature research blocks – the Horizon Center and Discovery Plaza – and the new Darla Moore School of Business are now underway. Several civic facilities already exist in the district, including the Koger Center for the Arts, Colonial Life Arena and the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. The Innovista is also in close proximity to the restaurants, bars and art galleries of the Vista district and additional green spaces and river access.

The collective energy and investment being committed to each of these areas is largely responsible for the rebirth of downtown Columbia as an increasingly desirable place to live, work and play.

### POOR CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN THE DISTRICTS

Vehicular access to each of the four districts within the study area from outlying areas is appropriate, with several points of entry to and access through downtown Columbia. Assembly Street, a six-lane thoroughfare (with parallel parking on both outer sides), runs north-south through the entire downtown area and has more than enough capacity to accommodate vehicular traffic traveling in these directions. Gervais Street, a four-lane road, runs east-west through downtown and also has sufficient capacity to accommodate vehicular demand. There are also several other designated routes to serve downtown-bound and through traffic.

However, these two major transportation corridors separate the four otherwise adjoining and proximate districts from each other. In addition, Gervais Street runs through the middle of the Vista. Given their wide widths, limited medians (if any), light signalization that is oriented toward vehicular flow and traffic following or exceeding posted speed limits, it is difficult and dangerous for pedestrians to cross them to access another district or, in the case of the Vista, to move within a district. They are also dangerous for cyclists to travel along as they have not been designed to accommodate them. Addressing any roadway concerns is further complicated by the mix of ownership of these and other streets in the

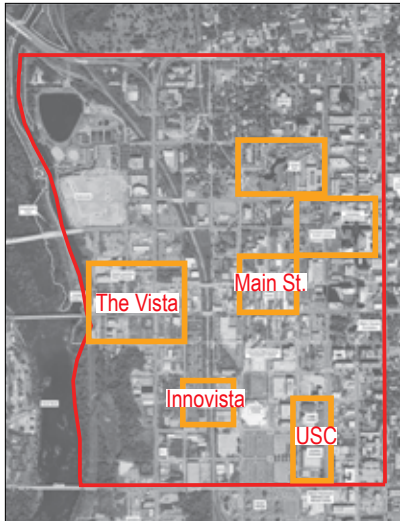


Diagram of study area identifies four (4) key areas of activity to be connected.

vicinity, with Assembly, Gervais and others under the authority of the SC Department of Transportation which has not consistently implemented complete street standards to accommodate non-vehicular traffic.

Other factors also contribute to the poor connectivity between and within these districts. There are abundant surface parking lots that, although more visible and preferred by many over nearby parking garages, consume large and valuable parcels of land at key locations (e.g., the northwest and southwest corners of Gervais and Assembly, and further south along Assembly near USC), thereby limiting land use development and density. They also create zones of potential concern for personal safety due to lack of activity. The current rarity of residential space in the area also restricts activity and contributes to safety concerns. The public bus system is underfunded and has a limited market, with USC operating its own closed system. Sidewalks are disjointed along many streets and difficult to navigate. Furthermore, the area is not very hospitable for pedestrians in the hot summer months as tree cover, landscaping and parks are lacking in many areas.

Pedestrian flow is important and increased density is needed to support redevelopment in the area. Some efforts are being made to address the connectivity issues. For example, pedicabs operate within the Vista, two fuel cell vans are planned to take passengers between some of the busier districts during



*During a town-hall style meeting city officials, residents, and business owners had the opportunity to express their concerns and priorities to the panel*



*Mayor Steve Benjamin of Columbia participated in the discussion and voiced his support of the study*

*The mission of the ULI TAP was to provide Congaree Coalition with recommendations in two areas:*

*Appropriate design strategies*

*Potential planning to encourage downtown revitalization*





*TAP panelists toured the site with representatives from CTC Public Benefit Corporation and the Congaree Coalition*

limited hours of service and a greenway is proposed for an abandoned railroad right of way near the Vista. But there are no significant or comprehensive planning mechanisms in place other than an outdated zoning ordinance and many proposals appear to be just that – proposals, without government approval or financial commitment.

### **COLUMBIA CONNECTIVITY TAP PANELISTS**

The Congaree Coalition requested a ULI Technical Assistance Panel in order to receive unbiased urban planning recommendations on how to address the issues of connectivity and walkability in the downtown area of Columbia.

Eight panelists were selected to participate in the Columbia Connectivity TAP due to their relevant and diverse areas of expertise. Identified on the inside back cover of this report, they include developers, a real estate investor, a market analyst, an architect, an urban planning and design consultant, an economic development expert and a transportation planner. Each is a member of the Urban Land Institute.

### **QUESTIONS POSED TO THE PANEL**

Three strategic questions were posed to the panel by the sponsor with respect to the TAP study area. They are listed below and the panel's responses can be found as part of the TAP recommendations provided later in this report.

1. How do you unite the downtown and USC (east of Assembly) with the Vista and Innovista (west of Assembly)?
2. How do you unite the Vista which is on both sides of Gervais?
3. How do you improve the walkability between these areas?

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The mission of this ULI TAP was to provide Congaree Coalition with recommendations for improving the connection between Main Street, the University of South Carolina campus, the Innovista, and the Vista to support the successful revitalization of downtown Columbia and make the corridors more accessible to pedestrian and bike traffic.



## PANEL PROCESS

The Columbia Connectivity TAP process consisted of ten steps:

### SITUATION ANALYSIS

The Congaree Coalition originally asked ULI South Carolina to conduct a TAP to address connectivity issues between and within the Vista and Main Street areas, specifically along six intersections on Gervais and Assembly Streets, to support their sustainable redevelopment. However, after meeting with City representatives to discuss these issues and examining the broader context, the Congaree Coalition and ULI South Carolina staff also observed the existence of significant disconnects between major area redevelopment and transit efforts and of substantial acreage dedicated to surface parking which, with minimal residential development in the area, raised concerns about activity and security in the area. As a result, it was recommended that the ULI TAP be broadened to address the wider connectivity and walkability issues of four key districts in the downtown area, not only Main Street and the Vista but also the nearby University of South Carolina campus and the new Innovista redevelopment area.

### TAP PANEL SELECTION

The ULI South Carolina District Council considered the revised goals for the TAP and selected panelists who had the expertise most tailored to addressing the issues raised. The TAP sponsor then approved the selected team of panelists.

### REVIEW OF BRIEFING MATERIALS

Prior to arriving in Columbia, the TAP panelists received and reviewed a comprehensive set of pre-meeting briefing materials on maps, plans and other supporting documentation relating to the TAP study area that had been assembled by ULI SC and the TAP sponsors. The materials included numerous maps and plans of the study area and environs pointing out natural features, major developments, infrastructure and zoning, among other characteristics; Census and transportation-related data; City zoning, planning and design guidelines applicable to the study area; drawings, renderings, concept and master plans related to specific improvements proposed within the study area; and links to associated websites.

### SPONSOR DEBRIEFING

The TAP panelists first assembled at the Hilton Hotel in downtown Columbia in the early afternoon of Monday, September 26th to receive a summary presentation from the TAP sponsor, raise questions and make requests for clarification from their review of the briefing materials. The TAP sponsor was represented by Fred Delk, Executive Director of Columbia Development Corporation. Also assisting with the presentation were John Fellows, Urban Design Planner with the City of Columbia, and Gail Jeter and Brian Kvam, Brownfields Specialists at Concurrent Technologies Corporation (CTC, the consulting firm managing the Brownfields Assessment Grant for Columbia).

### TOUR OF STUDY AREA AND ENVIRONS

Immediately following the sponsor debriefing, the TAP panelists toured the Columbia Connectivity study area and its immediate environs by mini bus and on foot. Time was spent examining the four districts of concern – downtown Main Street, the USC campus, the Vista and Innovista, considering how connectivity and walkability within and between them are particularly difficult, and identifying key factors contributing to this disconnect and possible opportunities to rectify the situation. The lack of public transit in the area was also observed.

### TOWN HALL MEETING

The TAP panelists attended a town hall meeting at City Hall on Monday evening. After the TAP sponsors and panelists briefly introduced themselves and informed the audience of their mandate and areas of expertise, the public meeting was opened to the floor to allow the public to express their views and provide suggestions on improving the connection between the downtown areas under study. The primary objective of the town hall meeting was to provide the panelists with the opportunity to hear from a wide range of community leaders, including elected and appointed officials, business owners and active members of the community.

## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Early the following morning, the panelists held interviews with community leaders representing all points of view in meeting rooms at the offices of Edens & Avant at 1221 Main Street in downtown Columbia. The purpose of these meetings was to get as complete a picture of the problem statement as possible in order for the best recommendations to be made. A total of 15 interviews, each averaging 30 minutes in duration, were conducted in five parallel streams. Every effort was made to assign at least two panelists to each stakeholder and match them according to stakeholder concern and panelist area of expertise. A list of the key stakeholders who were granted individual interviews is provided near the end of this report.

## PANEL DELIBERATIONS

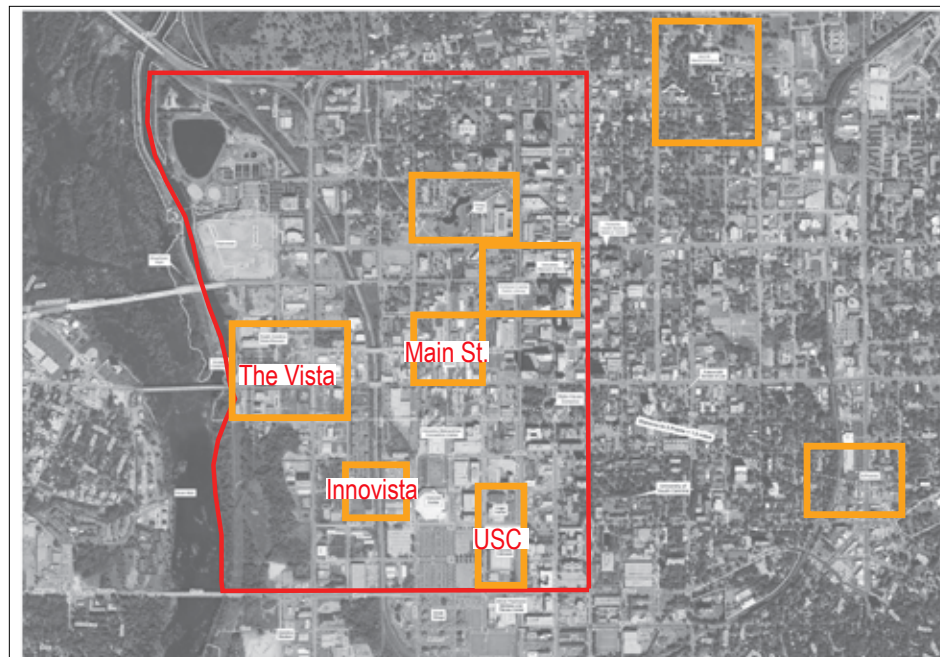
The panelists held two working sessions, the first on Monday evening following the town hall meeting and the second immediately after the stakeholder interviews concluded Tuesday morning. During these sessions the panelists reviewed the significant findings drawn from the previous tasks, addressed the focus areas, identified opportunities and challenges, defined guiding principles, developed recommendations and prepared a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted their key findings, assumptions and recommendations.

## PUBLIC PRESENTATION

The panelists presented their PowerPoint presentation of findings and recommendations at 4:00PM on Tuesday, September 27th in an open session to the TAP sponsors, community stakeholders and interested public in a meeting room made available at Edens & Avant. They then took questions and comments from the audience. Closing remarks were made by Daisy Kathleen Curry, Brownfield Project Manager (Region 4) from the Environmental Protection Agency.

## REPORT PREPARATION AND RELEASE

The TAP, under the leadership of the ULI South Carolina District Council, prepared this report on its conclusions and recommendations. It presented the report to the sponsors in December 2011.



*Diagram of study area identifies eight (8) key areas of activity to be connected. The primary areas of study are within the red outline.*

## FOUNDATION FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

To set the foundation for recommending improvements to connectivity and walkability between Main Street, the Vista, the University of South Carolina campus and the Innovista, the TAP members first came to consensus on several assumptions. These related to taking into account the concerns of the community and the TAP's own observations and identified opportunities and challenges. The TAP then determined that two specific focus areas arose from the questions and problem statement posed to them by the TAP sponsor and around which their recommendations would be developed.

### PUBLIC INPUT

The key messages TAP members received from members of the public who spoke at the town hall meeting and stakeholders with whom they met for the TAP were:

- Columbia is a city of neighborhood islands that are stranded from each other ... Likewise, Columbia is a city of committees with no connecting group.
- There is no comprehensive long-term strategy or plan to get behind for downtown Columbia ... At the same time, there are too many small plans and not enough action.
- Columbia is a capital city ... And the most international city in the state.
- Columbia is a political city where everyone thinks they are in charge ... It needs to be a 21st Century sustainable city that sets an example for the state.
- Columbia has great urban moments ... But not a great urban fabric.
- Assembly, Gervais, Taylor and Elmwood (Streets and Avenue) are psychological moats ... Yet the intersection of Gervais and Assembly Streets is "the 100% corner" of the state.
- Now is the first time that there is "a good vibe" downtown ... And "One Columbia" is the common goal!

### TAP TEAM OBSERVATIONS

Additional observations made by the TAP members upon reviewing the background materials, visiting the study area, hearing from the public and stakeholders were:

- There is a lack of physical connectivity between neighborhoods, cultural and historical assets ... that is accompanied by a lack of civic connections among groups and leadership.
- Not only are there a significant number of community members who wish to participate in the process to improve connectivity in downtown Columbia ... But those who spoke provided a depth of commentary that revealed how well groups are informed.
- Columbia may be the most over-parked city in the state ... despite a perception by many that parking supply is insufficient downtown.
- The current density of development and the limited number of residential units downtown is inadequate to achieve the levels of activity, urbanism and connectivity that are desired.
- Safety for all ages and in all circumstances must be an overriding priority in creating connectivity for downtown Columbia.



*Existing road configurations exceed requirements for traffic counts*



*Pedestrian conditions along Assembly Street can be dangerous and hostile*



*Many parking garages in downtown Columbia are underutilized*

## OPPORTUNITIES

The strategies recommended and ultimately pursued to improve connectivity and walkability in downtown Columbia should take advantage of the following potential opportunities identified by the TAP panelists:

- **Right-of-way width of Assembly Street** – Although the width of Assembly currently creates a barrier to pedestrian movement across it, it also provides the space that permits a variety of multi-modal solutions. This is also possible since existing and projected vehicular demand on Assembly could continue to be accommodated on Assembly and on alternative arterials with such multi-modal enhancements. The City is considering applying to the State Infrastructure Bank for funds to help carry out a preferred solution.
- **Excess parking supply and location** – The numerous surface parking lots found largely in the Vista and Innovista areas, coupled with the existing and planned supply of parking garages, offer opportunities for district densification and expansion, introduction of new land uses and improvements to connectivity. Given the prime location of many of these lots and minimal site preparation required, they could be made appealing to developers if constraints such as zoning and ownership were addressed.
- **Large employment base** – Three of the four districts in the study area already have a notable employment base and, over time, that of the fourth, the Innovista, could surpass each if not all of the others. Together, these largely daytime occupants of the city center provide a steady market for the various commercial and entertainment enterprises operating in each district.
- **Abundance of regional assets** – Downtown Columbia is the seat of State Government and the address for many public and private institutions that serve residents and businesses from the City, region and State. It is also the home of the University of South Carolina and of many civic facilities and attractions that appeal to area residents and visitors alike. Beyond the city center there are additional attractions that draw visitors to the area. Every opportunity, including improving connectivity, should be made to encourage people to extend their stay or visit beyond their original purpose so that they can have a memorable experience enjoying what Columbia has to offer as well as spread the good word and contribute to the area's economic and social prosperity.
- **Long-term and growing institutional presence** – The three levels of government and USC are well-established and committed institutions in the city center. Even though some State government departments have relocated operations outside of the downtown area, they have retained their facilities and their operations could be reconsolidated downtown when economically advantageous. Perhaps more significant are the institutions, research centers and associated enterprises that will be making their home in the Innovista. The investments they will be making and their need for synergistic opportunities will also ensure their long term presence in and commitment to the area.
- **Retention of USC graduates** – With over 6,500 degrees awarded each year on the main campus of USC, there is an opportunity to retain this young, well-educated population in the area as they enter the workforce by providing employment, urban living and entertainment opportunities in downtown Columbia. Their long-term presence would not only generate additional demand for area businesses and amenities but add vitality and involvement in community and urban affairs.



*Three Rivers Greenway opens up access to the Broad, Saluda, and Congaree Rivers in Columbia, West Columbia, and Cayce*



*The Columbia Convention Center is the premier conference and event space in the state, attracting tens of thousands of conference attendees each year*



## CHALLENGES

At the same time, the panel identified these significant challenges that, though difficult to overcome, need to be addressed as part of the set of solutions required to improve connectivity in downtown Columbia and its four study area districts:

- Limited planning powers and outdated Euclidian zoning ordinances** – The Central Midlands Council of Governments (COG) was responsible for planning in downtown Columbia prior to establishment of the City's Planning Department 20 or so years ago. However, the new department has since functioned more as a review body than a planning authority. The Planning Department has the capacity to expand its role and responsibilities in terms of staff expertise, but it is understood that planning initiatives have traditionally been politically driven and that funding resources are limited. This is compounded by the fact that the City's current Euclidian zoning ordinance was first adopted in 1972 and is outdated. There is a Complete Streets zoning resolution but no ordinance. The City was denied a recent grant application to update and reexamine the zoning. These updates should remain a priority for Columbia as they consider the future allocation of funding.
- Fragmented ownership of roads and parcels** – Inspection of maps of the ownership patterns of streets and parcels in downtown Columbia reveals that their ownership is fragmented. Assembly, Gervais and several other significant streets in the vicinity are State-owned under the jurisdiction of the SC Department of Transportation. This presents a challenge as the DOT does not yet implement complete street standards to accommodate non-vehicular traffic as standard practice. Parcels of land lying within and between the districts are owned by a variety of public and private entities and many are small in size, making land assembly for redevelopment difficult. This is especially applicable to many of the surface parking lots that pose particular problems for connectivity and walkability, yet at the same time provide opportunities to address these issues.
- Disconnected 'urban moments' and public open space** – Each of the commercial, entertainment, educational and mixed-use districts has a nature and momentum of its own. Public open space is also being gradually introduced in isolated pockets. Although many of these 'urban moments' are in close proximity to each other, physical connections are limited and area residents, students and visitors cannot easily navigate on foot from one location to another to enjoy their collective offerings.
- Lack of focus and coordination for redevelopment** – There are three levels of government (City, County and State) – not to mention the University of South Carolina – owning land, operating from offices as well as planning and implementing development and redevelopment initiatives in the study area districts and elsewhere downtown. Private landholders and active citizens groups also have plans for their land and that in the public domain. While their efforts and investment are welcomed to improve the economic and social vitality of downtown Columbia, there is a corresponding need to focus and coordinate their planning objectives, strategies and actions in order to establish priorities, allocate limited resources, create synergies and ensure their individual and collective success. Yet, this is a challenge to bring about in a city that has not traditionally operated in this fashion.
- Inadequate redevelopment incentives and financing strategies** – The City has a development corporation, one that is part of the Congaree Coalition sponsoring this TAP, and it has been working on a number of commercial and residential development projects in the four districts and elsewhere in the City. While special tax districts have been created, federal stimulus funds have been received and innovative approaches are being pursued (such as the City's façade program and public private partnerships for projects in the Vista), mention has been made that existing redevelopment incentives and financing strategies are inadequate. This should be examined and potential approaches identified, developed and put in place to rectify the situation.



*This map of Columbia shows the distribution of street ownership between the city, state, and private entities*



*This map of Columbia shows the concentration of development efforts from the turn of the 20th century to the present*

**Columbia Highlights and Accolades:**

*2nd "Most Livable Community" for mid-sized cities – Partners for Livable Communities, 2006*

*17th in business climate – Forbes Magazine, 2008*

*14th strongest city in the U.S. – Business Week, "Forty Strongest U.S. Metros"*

*36th out of 200 Best-Performing Large Cities in the U.S. – Milliken Institute, "Best Performing Cities", 2008*

*One of the nation's ten most affordable cities – U.S. News & World Report, 2009*

*Top ten "most creative" cities – Richard Florida's "Rise of the Creative Class", 2006*

*Columbia MSA "Ranked a 5-star Logistics Metro" – Expansion Magazine, 2008*

**SPECIFIC FOCUS AREAS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

The two specific focus areas that arose for the TAP panelists from the questions and problem statement posed to them by the TAP sponsor and around which their recommendations were developed are:

- Urban land use and zoning solutions that could create a direction to weave the various areas of the City together and create an evolutionary plan to densify and transfer parking acreage to development capacity. The major development and land use issue that sits at the intersection of the University and State planning and its impact on City vitality and its land use planning; and
- Various transportation resources and a potential strategy to integrate and create better economics and increase usage as well as a link to pedestrian and bike systems. Market dynamics and drivers that would need to be present to support recommendations made by the TAP.

## PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel made two broad sets of recommendations that responded to the problem statement and specific questions raised by the TAP sponsor and built upon the foundation for recommendations established by the TAP members. They relate to:

- Connectivity Strategies, and
- Design Concepts.

Each recommendation was also based on the fundamental understanding that:

- “Connectivity” has physical, policy-oriented and social dimensions, and
- “Walkability” implies that “multi-modal” means of travel are made available.

## CONNECTIVITY STRATEGIES

The connectivity strategies recommended by the panel are three-fold:

- Develop conscious east-west connections between distinct and complementary neighborhoods,
- Improve north-south connections within the Vista, and
- Address area-wide considerations.

### Develop conscious east-west connections between distinct and complementary neighborhoods

There are a number of ways in which east-west connections can be improved to make it easier for pedestrians, cyclists and public transit users to move from one distinct yet complementary district to another, and primarily from one side of Assembly Street to the other. They include:

- **Improve the streetscape and area amenities** – Introduce treatments to the streetscapes, and primarily that of Assembly Street, such as ‘road diets’ that physically modify vehicle lanes, medians and sidewalks and are intended to reduce vehicle travel speeds and accommodate multiple modes of travel. Complement them with better sidewalks, crosswalks and timing of traffic signal and pedestrian crossing lights. Provide shading, landscaping, bus shelters and street furniture to help accommodate and define the multi-modal mix of area users. Steer vehicles into using alternate arterial routes available other than Assembly Street. Assembly Street can accommodate these ‘complete streets’ strategies as vehicular counts are well below capacity levels.
- **Introduce multimodal, multi-destination transportation options** – Explore opportunities to institute consolidated, expanded and/or complementary public transit services from among the entities already providing public transit or soon planning to do so in the downtown area. Offer a variety of forms and ensure that they access multiple destinations on routes and timetables that are not only synchronized but also reflect current, future and desired travel patterns. Possibilities include modifying the route and allowing public access to USC’s new Circular as well as extending USC’s bike and car share program to the Vista district.

*Key elements of the implementation strategies for east-west connections are:*

*Improve the streetscape and area amenities*

*Introduce multimodal, multi-destination transportation options*

*Create a civic icon at the key intersection of Gervais and Assembly Streets*

*Celebrate the diversity of each ‘urban moment’*

*Develop citywide ownership of city center initiatives*

**Key elements of the implementation strategies for north-south connections are:**

*Introduce a 'road diet' from the bridge over the Congaree River to Assembly Street*

*Improve north-south streetscapes*

*Incorporate Lincoln Street into USC's Circular route*

*Build on DOT and Federal initiatives of sustainability and livability principles*

- **Create a civic icon at the key intersection of Gervais and Assembly Streets** – The locational significance, physical size and need for safety improvements for the intersection of Assembly and Gervais Streets provide a compelling opportunity to create a civic icon there that serves as a central destination from which the surrounding downtown area and its districts can be viewed and physically accessed. If the iconic improvement at the Assembly-Gervais intersection rises physically above the intersection, it could include a pedestrian crossover that provides direct connectivity between the Main Street and Vista districts that are each east and west of Assembly Street. Other major improvements could be introduced elsewhere along Assembly Street to enhance the entire corridor, such as the return of a downtown Farmers' Market to North Assembly and inclusion of public amenities near the new Darla Moore School of Business being developed by USC on South Assembly. Together, these projects could help Assembly Street become the grand boulevard it is entitled to be.
- **Celebrate the diversity of each 'urban moment'** – Celebrate the diverse and distinct flavor of each of downtown Columbia's urban districts. Yet, at the same time, weave them together into a rich 'urban mosaic' by improving the physical and social connections between them. In this way, visitors, workers and residents of one district will be encouraged to visit another and enjoy a variety of 'urban moments'.
- **Develop citywide ownership of city center initiatives** – Have the City take the reins in advancing city center initiatives and securing the united support from proponents of the various neighborhood-oriented endeavors for the signature projects proposed for downtown Columbia. In this way, priorities can be addressed, synergies developed and momentum achieved that benefit all.

### Improve north-south connections within the Vista

With the major arterial of Gervais Street running east-west through the middle of the Vista district, it is difficult for pedestrians to move between its northern and southern sections. Yet, the desire to do so is strong since art, retail and entertainment establishments not only line both sides of Gervais but reach a few blocks beyond. The proximity of the Convention Center immediately south of the district also draws visitors who wish to enjoy the venues on both sides of Gervais Street. The four following measures are recommended to make this possible in a safer and more inviting manner:

- **Introduce a 'road diet' from the bridge over the Congaree River to Assembly Street** – Introduce similar roadway treatments to those recommended for Assembly Street for the length of Gervais from the Gervais Street Bridge to Gervais' intersection with Assembly Street. However, given the different mix and density of land uses along Gervais Street as compared with Assembly Street and since Gervais currently expands and contracts from four to six lanes in width along this section, the recommended approach is slightly different. It is to reduce the width of Gervais Street to four lanes for its entire length and convert the outer lanes in the segments currently with six lanes to street parking mid-block and to turning lanes at key intersections. This will serve to slow down yet continue to move vehicular traffic and increase safety for pedestrians wishing to cross Gervais Street. Gervais Street can also accommodate these changes as vehicular counts are below capacity levels.
- **Improve north-south streetscapes** – The art, entertainment and retail offerings and planned developments and land uses on each side of (and a few blocks back from) Gervais Street differ from each other, with professional offices and multi-family residential developments being introduced to the north along and near Lady Street and civic uses to the south. Tying these uses and areas together can be a challenge. Streetscape improvements on the north-south streets



within the district are one way, as has been done on Lincoln Street (and Lady Street, which is an east-west street). They should be extended to other north-south streets in the Vista to create a cohesive and inviting street fabric that draws people deeper into the district.

- **Incorporate Lincoln Street into USC's Circular route** – If planning still permits, consideration should be given to incorporating the Vista, as well as the Convention Center and the Colonial Life Arena to its south, into USC's new Circular transit route. Lincoln Street might be particularly well suited to accommodating this form of public transit.
- **Build on DOT and Federal initiatives of sustainability and livability principles** – Contrary to popular belief, the SC Department of Transportation, which has jurisdiction over Gervais Street, is amenable to working to find 'complete streets' solutions that better serve all modes of travel. In fact, the DOT is already implementing federal policies relating to 'complete streets' and employing mechanisms that leverage federal funds with local funds elsewhere in the state. It is also in the process of developing a guide with policies and information on how to access funds for streetscaping. It is therefore recommended that senior officials from the City of Columbia approach senior staff in the head office of the DOT to make improvements to Gervais that will improve connectivity and walkability within the Vista.

### Address area-wide considerations

Area-wide strategies should also be employed to improve connectivity between the districts and throughout downtown Columbia. Four such recommendations are:

- **Optimize parking solutions** – Parking in downtown Columbia should be optimized through a mix of solutions including flexible parking garage design, modified parking behavior, balanced parking supply and demand and parking management (e.g., time, pricing, etc.). A definitive move to eliminate surface parking lots on prime land (e.g., abutting sidewalks) is strongly recommended, and it should be accompanied by strategies to make better use of and generate more revenue from existing, underutilized parking garages (e.g., State Capitol's underground garage after business hours) before additional parking facilities are considered as the city densifies. Parking behavior can be modified by ensuring safety and instituting competitive and incentive-based pricing structures that both respond to and modify utilization levels and patterns. This can be accompanied by other parking management solutions that address operating hours. When demand is justified for additional parking garages, flexible designs should be adopted that wrap other uses around their exteriors such as retail, bike storage. Whenever possible, they should be situated mid-block on infill sites to support redevelopment and densification objectives.
- **Marketing and way-finding** – There are valid concerns among area pedestrians and cyclists for their safety when they navigate area streets and crossings. Along with the physical street improvements proposed, public awareness campaigns should be conducted advising drivers to slow down, be more careful and respect the rights of those using other modes of travel as well as encouraging them to get out of their vehicles, make use of public transit and enjoy the city on foot. These marketing efforts should be accompanied by improved wayfinding and signage directing drivers to parking garages and their entrances, as poor visibility is currently contributing to the perception of an undersupply of parking. The City has been making progress in this regard and should continue to do so as immediate improvements can easily be achieved.
- **Introduce form-based codes** – Form-based codes are a dynamic land use planning tool that should be considered for downtown Columbia. With respect to parking, they have the capacity to address the particular needs of a specific context. For example, in the commercial zone of USC where there is an apparent oversupply of parking and lack of shared parking, under a form-

#### *Key elements of the implementation strategies for area-wide considerations:*

*Optimize parking solutions*

*Marketing and way-finding*

*Introduce form-based codes*

*Dramatically increase residential density*

based code, parking supply requirements could reflect utilization patterns and shared facilities among area developments generating parking demand. In this way, private parking for individual establishments would be reduced and valuable land would be freed up for higher forms of use.

- **Dramatically increase residential density** – Opportunities to reside in downtown Columbia are severely limited, with only a few recent developments (and redevelopments) largely in the Vista and along Main Street, not counting the University's new student housing and its plans for the Innovista district. Residential densities permitted downtown should be dramatically increased so that the City can become home to the full spectrum of society from graduating students and other young professionals to retirees and, in turn, become a more vibrant full-time city.

#### **A Moment in Time ...**

Making the recommended improvements to Assembly and Gervais Streets – and where they intersect – is much more than just solving a safety and connection problem. It is an opportunity to turn it into an iconic place at the heart of downtown Columbia that brings together the seat of State Government with the City's historic center and its areas experiencing rebirth and growth not to mention the City's downtown workers, residents and visitors. This achievement can be a galvanizing moment in the history of the city, one with wide-reaching benefits. It can be your moment. But, to succeed, you need to take action now ... not just continue to plan.

## **Make it happen!**

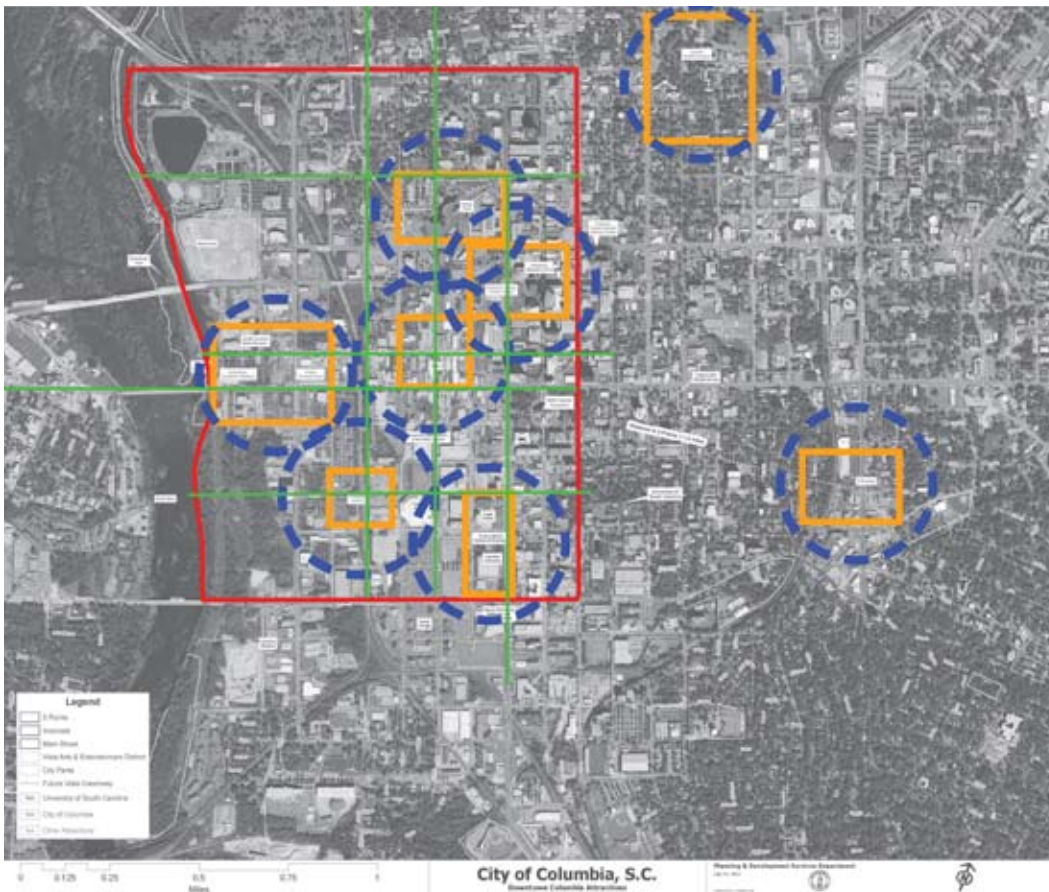
## DESIGN CONCEPTS

The design concepts put forth by the panel focus on the following:

- Establish neighborhood connections, and
- Repurpose Assembly Street.

### Establish neighborhood connections

It is opportune that the four study area districts are in many cases within five-minute/1/2-mile walking distances from each other. The panel recommends taking advantage of their proximity, with neighborhood connections first established by expanding the boundaries of each district so that they physically adjoin their neighboring districts. This expansion should certainly apply to the Main Street and Vista districts where redevelopment momentum is already underway. As both are formal redevelopment areas, the agency responsible for them should have authority to realize these expansions. In addition, since the City has control over its water and sewer infrastructure, it can introduce mechanisms to encourage redevelopment. In any event, target areas and funding should be prioritized, with vision plans developed for each of the enlarged districts within the downtown Columbia study area.



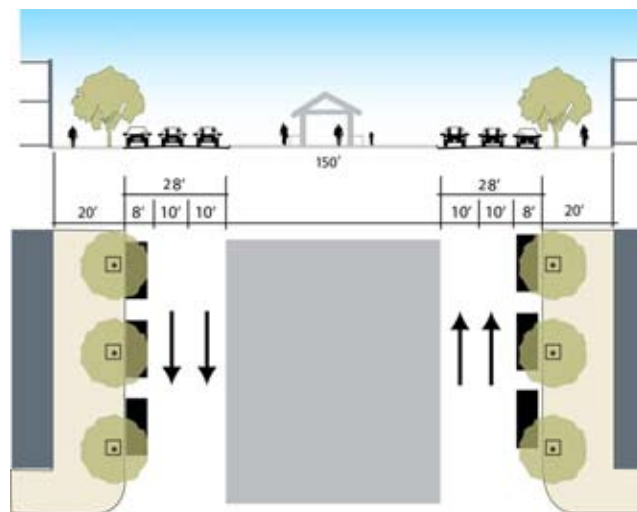
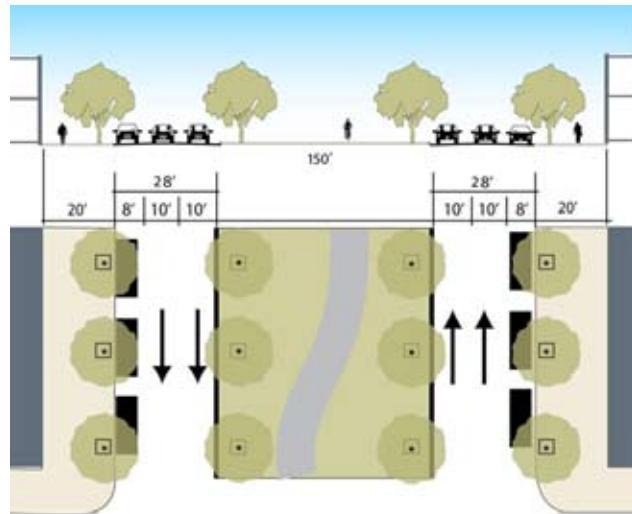
## Repurpose Assembly Street

As the most prominent of the north-south streets in downtown Columbia, Assembly Street has the capacity and is well situated to be repurposed to facilitate both multimodal use and neighborhood connections. Its wide width provides an opportunity to create a linear park along its center median that has a variety of passive and active uses along its length. Think of the High Line in New York City, and other examples elsewhere.

Assembly Street can also accommodate 'big ideas'. This is especially true at the intersection of Assembly and Gervais Streets, which in many ways is the 'true center' of the State with the State Capital building situated at its southeast corner. Other drawcards that could be introduced along its length include (the return of) a farmer's market, a paved plaza, a new park, even a water feature. An iconic statement can be made through design, use of water and other physical means.



Existing conditions along Assembly Street





## CLOSING REMARKS

In closing, the panel commends the Congaree Coalition, the City of Columbia and its citizenry for their determination to make downtown Columbia a preferred place to live, work and play. It also considers it imperative to emphasize that the City take the lead in working with area stakeholders to address its physical, political and social connectivity issues.

The panel's overriding recommendations can perhaps best be summarized as follows:

- Forge bonds for a connected Columbia,
- Repurpose Assembly Street to facilitate multimodal use and neighborhood connections,
- Make the Vista a vibrant area that attracts young professionals, and
- Develop a strategy to link Main Street and the Vista.

And, the key takeaways that the panel hopes the City, its leaders and citizenry, and readers of this report will take to heart as fundamental elements of success are:

- Empower, engage and connect leaders,
- Have the City take charge of its future and forge long-term partnerships with the County, State and the University of South Carolina,
- Prioritize recommendations and take action on 'low hanging fruit' first, and
- Create a long-term strategic implementation plan to forge a connected and unified Columbia.

## STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

Panel members met with several community leaders during the morning of Tuesday, September 27th to hear their perspectives on how best to improve connectivity and walkability in downtown Columbia. Individuals with whom they met are listed in alphabetical order below.

**Steve Benjamin**

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City of Columbia*

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*Traffic Engineer  
City of Columbia*

**John Fellows**

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**Krista Hampton**

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**Derrick Huggins**

*Transportation Director  
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Greater Columbia Chamber of  
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**Matt Kennel**

*President and CEO  
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**Gretchen Lambert and Sarah  
Ludzers**

*Board President and Executive Director  
Congaree Vista Guild*

**Mark C. Lester, P.E.**

*Director of Planning and Environmental  
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**Ryan Nevius**

*Executive Director  
Sustainable Midlands*

**Dr. Harris Pastides**

*President  
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**Tom Prioreschi**

*Developer  
Capitol Places*

**Tom Quasney**

*Associate Vice President for Facilities  
University of South Carolina*

**Jackie Reynolds**

*NBSC (Main Street Office)*

**Irene Dumas Tyson**

*Director of Planning  
The Boudreaux Group  
Columbia's Urban Core Public Input  
Process Study*

**Cynthia Young**

*Real Property Services  
SC Budget and Control Board*

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