Situated just 30 miles south of Nashville and less than an hour’s drive from the Alabama state line, Columbia serves as an economic and cultural hub for the South Central Tennessee Region. The county seat of Maury County, Columbia is home to close to 35,000 people living along the Duck River. Columbia serves as the regional hub for health care, higher education, banking, retail, and entertainment.

Between 2000 and 2010 Columbia had one of the slowest growth rates in Tennessee and the highest unemployment rate of any city of its size in the state. That decade’s economic downturn was hard on Columbia, with a loss in manufacturing jobs that created hardships for the city. In recent years, Columbia has also had trouble attracting new residents and has seen a rapid loss of the vital millennial generation, generally recognized as anyone born between 1980 and 2000, which many recognize to be key assets in attracting local investments and maintaining a vibrant economy.

But that is now turning around due to coordinated, successful public and private partnership efforts. In response to these economic development and livability issues, Columbia leaders took action and built upon successful downtown and neighborhood revitalization efforts begun in the early 1980s through comprehensive planning and implementation actions.

The Columbia Main Street Program, established in 1982, has played a large role in focusing downtown reinvestment, emphasizing organization, design, and economic restructuring that has created the Downtown Commercial Historic Central Business District that Columbia enjoys today. Columbia Main Street, the City of Columbia, and other community partners have parlayed visioning, planning, and implementation funding through the City of Columbia, Tennessee Department of Transportation, and local funding to build out streetscape connections that undergird historic and tourism resources and downtown businesses.

In 2007 Columbia, along with Maury County, Spring Hill, and Mount Pleasant, received technical assistance as one of Cumberland Region Tomorrow’s (CRT) first Quality Growth Toolbox Pilot Communities and began a joint comprehensive planning effort through local government contributions and Rural Development RBEG grant funding. In 2008, with the help of CRT, city officials created and adopted the new Columbia Comprehensive Plan that has been a major catalyst in moving Columbia’s downtown reinvestment, housing and neighborhood revitalization, and corridor redevelopment goals forward.

Midway through the development of the comprehensive plan, Columbia leaders saw an opportunity to contribute additional funds to piggyback a housing and neighborhood revitalization plan for Columbia’s contiguous historic neighborhoods onto the comprehensive plan, which identified housing and
neighborhood areas in critical need of revitalization. That forethought by Columbia officials allowed the city to apply for and receive a $519,000 HUD Neighborhood Stabilization Grant for their first priority neighborhood of East Columbia next to the Downtown Commercial Business District. As part of this grant, the City of Columbia reorganized its housing authority as the Columbia Housing and Redevelopment Corporation (CHRC) that has been an effective implementing partner. This restructuring has allowed the city and the expanded housing and redevelopment agency to purchase abandoned properties in distressed neighborhoods and rebuild new, affordable homes in their place. The reorganization of the housing authority also allows the city to utilize a broader array of redevelopment tools, including Tax Increment Financing, and capture several HUD Community Block Grants. Columbia has also synergized these efforts with citizen-led organizations like People Helping People and local Habitat for Humanity efforts. CHRC has received national awards for its approach to housing and neighborhood revitalization, and it actively pursues revitalization city-wide. The City of Columbia and CHRC have created a successful collaborative model for addressing neighborhood revitalization, infill development, and creating housing choices and opportunity through effective Columbia Comprehensive Plan implementation.

Benefits of Downtown Revitalization

Revitalization protects the existing tax base—Private investment in banks, businesses, and commercial property and public investment in streets, sidewalks, and water and sewer lines are protected and enhanced.

Revitalization provides an incubator for new business—A viable downtown offers opportunities and incentives for the new entrepreneurs such as lower rent and technical assistance.

Revitalization helps attract industrial development—Downtown reflects the overall image a community projects to potential investors. An invigorated downtown makes a very positive statement about the whole community.

Revitalization provides a point of focus and stability—A vibrant downtown gives the whole community and region a sense of pride and positive self-image. It also serves as an anchor that holds the community together and provides the stability necessary for economic growth.

KEY FACTS: Columbia, Tennessee
Population: 34,681 (2010 Census)
Project Description: comprehensive plan, main street reinvestment, neighborhood revitalization
Partners: Cumberland Region Tomorrow, Columbia Housing and Redevelopment Corporation, Tennessee Main Street Program, City of Columbia

Economic Development Professionals in front of the Maury County Courthouse (Source: Validity Magazine)

Source: National Main Street Program—National Trust for Historic Preservation