

# *A Vision Assessment of Independence, Virginia*



July 10, 2006

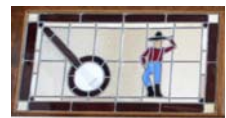
Prepared for  
The Town of Independence, Virginia

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## **1.0 Introduction**

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This report is the result of a brief but in-depth study of Independence, Virginia that took place on June 6, 2006. The study involved meetings with the management team, a community tour, a public meeting, and a thorough review of documents compiled by the Independence community.

The purpose of the strategic visioning session was to review the past, present and future of downtown Independence, assess its current economic state, its challenges and opportunities, and draft a vision statement for the future of downtown. This vision will guide future planning efforts and will serve as the cornerstone of the ongoing downtown revitalization effort. The work session represents Phase II of the multi-phased Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) downtown revitalization process. The vision created in Phase II will lead Independence into Phase III, an economic restructuring plan which will lay the foundation for revitalization, and ultimately to Phase IV, the implementation of specific projects necessary to realize the initial vision outlined in this report.

The report below is divided into four key sections including:

- ▶ Review of the **background information** supplied by the community as well as reconnaissance conducted by Arnett Muldrow & Associates.
- ▶ The results of all of the **public input** compiled during the vision sessions including the public meeting held the evening of June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005.
- ▶ A draft **vision statement** for downtown based on public perceptions on the future of downtown.
- ▶ **Next steps** in the downtown revitalization process.

Arnett Muldrow wishes to thank the Independence community for its warm hospitality during our brief stay in town.



## **2.0 Background Review**

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The Town of Independence has been working on its downtown revitalization process since September of 2004. All of Phase I and Phase II tasks have now been completed and the community is ready to move into the economic restructuring and planning phase. These tasks are well documented and too numerous to list here, but those of primary importance to the visioning process are listed below.

A project **management team** was formed consisting of representatives from the architectural review board, merchants, business owners, Town Council, Grayson County, Growing Grayson, community banking, Independence residents, and the Town of Independence. The well-rounded project team has been leading the planning process and Brian Reed of the MRPDC has been serving as project manager.

The Town of Independence has been accepted as an affiliate member of the **Virginia Main Street** program. This designation will prove to be extremely beneficial to the overall revitalization process. Independence will be plugged into the Main Street program including all of its training and networking opportunities. Perhaps more importantly, the Town will have the opportunity to build its revitalization strategies around four-point Main Street method. The four tenets of the Main Street method (*Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Restructuring*) are the basis of a tried and true comprehensive revitalization strategy for downtowns. The vision statements in section four of this report are directly based on the Main Street points.

Independence has completed a **building inventory** in downtown including a listing of each building, its use, total square footage, and its occupancy. The original inventory completed in December of 2004 will need to be continually updated throughout the revitalization process and beyond. During the economic restructuring phase, the availability of retail, office and housing space in downtown will help to detail specific development opportunities to explore during revitalization. The inventory will ultimately help the Town and any other economic development agency market property to businesses that match the goals of the revitalization strategy.

A **downtown business survey** was distributed to over forty businesses providing data on usage, tenure, general market characteristics, marketing methods of individual businesses, and parking needs in downtown. The respondents were also asked to identify and rate issues and needs in downtown related to the business environment. In general, business owners felt that downtown Independence offers a friendly and safe shopping environment with a high quality of goods and services. The quality of special events and festivals also ranked high. On the other hand, businesses felt that the variety of goods and services, availability and convenience of parking, and the variety of dining options leave a great deal to be desired. Some other needs recognized as being of the highest priority by the businesses include creating a business directory of downtown businesses, informational and wayfinding signage, and the need to market the area's tourism opportunities. Creating green space and an area for outdoor activity also scored high.



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The town has started a **website** for its residents and visitors ([www.independenceva.com](http://www.independenceva.com)). This website is serving as an information portal for residents as well as an outlet to market tourism opportunities in the region. It includes facts and historic information on Independence and mountain music, as well as a comprehensive business directory of retailers, service businesses, and offices in the Independence community. The website is currently under development.

The **Crooked Road Trail** celebrating Virginia's music heritage passes through downtown Independence as it winds its way across the Blue Ridge towards the coalfields in the far southwestern portion of the State. The trail has been promoted heavily since its inception in the Spring of 2004 resulting in an increase in tourism in the portion of rural Virginia. While Independence has the ability to capitalize on this increased tourism base, it also creates more of a need for continued downtown revitalization as more visitors come through town.



### 3.0 Public Input

On the evening June 6, 2006, a public meeting was held in downtown Independence to discuss the community's vision for its downtown. The meeting was widely advertised through the Independence website, newspaper and word of mouth. In all, twenty-three citizens came out to help prescribe the future of downtown.

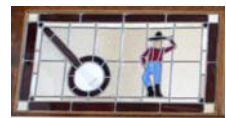
The facilitated meeting was designed to solicit responses from the community-at-large as to what makes Independence a special place to live, work, or visit. It also sought to get general citizens' perceptions on the current state of downtown and their future vision of the community. The audience was asked a series of questions during the hour long meeting. Each answer given by a participant during the meeting was recorded on a flip chart. At the end of the meeting, each person was given three red dots and asked to place them on three of the items that he or she felt strongly about. Each person was also given a single blue dot to place on the single most important item from his or her individual perspective. The results of the visioning session are listed below. Answers have been sorted in the tables based off of the number of *red* dots an item received.

This following question was asked simply to warm of the crowd and get them thinking about the elements of a successful downtown environment.

<b><i>What are other communities you like, and why?</i></b>	●	●
<b>Wytheville</b> has tree-lined streets	1	1
<b>Damascus</b> has a "cute" and "charming" downtown		
<b>Floyd</b> has interesting and unique shopping		
<b>South Port, NC</b> has a variety of shops and restaurants		
<b>Sparta, NC</b> has diverse retail offerings		
<b>Mt. Airy, NC</b> has pedestrian friendly streets in its downtown. They have preserved their buildings, designed a walkable streetscape, and have a planned vision for their future.		
<b>Abingdon</b> is a "pretty" community & has done a good job of protecting its history		

The next question was meant to determine imagery citizens would associate with Independence.

<b><i>If you were to design a Postcard for Independence, what image or idea would you include?</i></b>	●	●
Grayson County's Musical Heritage and how it has evolved through generations of artists.	6	2
The 1908 Courthouse	1	
Handmade crafts found in the local area.	1	
A Log Cabin		



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Fishing on the New River		
<b>Postcard...continued</b>		
The new fiber network and technology		1
Something that conveys the town's friendliness – a citizen waving at passer-bys		
Independence as a historical “crossroads”		

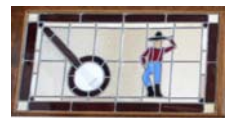
<b>What are surprising and interesting stories about Independence that folks outside the community would not know about?</b>
Story of Kate Sage
Bourne Family and the Davis Bourne Inn
The story of the man who rode into town shot the sheriff at the 1908 and how the townspeople helped him get away.
Peachbottom Falls
Park
Independence's multigenerational military history

Participants were asked to be more creative, stating how they would describe the community in a tag line. This begins to address both the good and bad things about the community.

<b>If you could write a new slogan for Independence, what would it be?</b>
“Independence – It's what we do.” – referring to the independent nature of the citizenry.
“Like herding cats” – referring to getting things done in the community
“Paradise” – particularly as it would relate to a retiree
“Quaint mountain town with technology - progressing into the 21st century”
“Yesterday and tomorrow, both here today”
“Real people. Real place.”
“Repair, don't replace” – specifically referring to the trend of tearing down historic structures in the town.

The group was then specifically asked about downtown, and the key issues threatening its vitality.

<b>What is your key frustration about downtown Independence?</b>	●	●
Overhead power lines	3	
Vacant buildings and their presentation. Should not be advertised as "for rent" but rather "this space could be yours" aimed at artists, local crafts etc.	3	
The condition of downtown sidewalks	2	1
Downtown becomes a “ghost town” on weekends. No shops are open	2	1
There is a similar “ghost town” atmosphere in the evenings. Need to create an environment for both day and <i>night</i> business’	1	
Afternoon and weekend events	1	
Shop hours aren't conducive to when most people can shop – early evenings & weekends	1	
Need group insurance for downtown businesses owners and employees	1	1
Signage aesthetics	1	



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Traffic speeding through town		
<b>Key Frustrations...continued</b>	●	●
There is a lack of services in the community eg tailor, laundry, etc.		
We need more business and retail services like in Sparta		1
Availability of business funding sources		2
Locals shop elsewhere instead of supporting community		
Lack and condition of parking		
Lack of variety of attractive restaurants		

Citizens were asked to express their future and long term vision of downtown Independence.

<b>Describe your vision of what downtown Independence will become in ten years?</b>	●	●
Create pedestrian movement and activity through street furniture, sidewalk planters, and an overall cohesive and planned downtown landscape	8	4
Would like to see a downtown farmers market or “green market”	5	1
“Deadbeat” and absentee landlords should be required to change their ways	4	
Business owners and community leaders will work together to achieve the common vision	4	3
Downtown should be quaint, but also vibrant, alive with activity.	1	
Historic and older buildings will be restored and no longer vacant	1	
Need to clean up the center of downtown while also filling in “gaps” – vacant and underutilized areas of downtown.	1	1
A city park will be located in Independence	1	
We will see ongoing and regular weekly events in downtown creating an active environment		
The area will develop as a wine country		
We will have a community event kiosk to distribute information and promote downtown activity		

The final question related more to an immediate vision for downtown Independence. Often in a planning process, a community will want to select initial projects that will have the highest impact, yet be easier to implement. This will build momentum and support for the remainder of the planning process.

<b>If you could change one thing in the first year of revitalization, what would that be?</b>	●	●
Downtown stores will be open & active	4	
Code enforcement will be stepped up	2	
We will beautify our downtown with flowers and trees	1	
We need to encourage our youth to get involved with the revitalization process	1	
We will have evening events		
Overhead power lines will be taken down		
New services such as lamp fixtures and quilt shop		1



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It can be seen from the tables above that the majority of the “ranked” items related to physical improvements and new amenities creating and active and vibrant downtown. Others that ranked high related to Independence’s and Grayson County’s heritage and the preservation of downtown’s historic resources. Of the blue dots, matters which were the single most important item to the individual participants, those that ranked the highest are listed below. Incidentally, all of the items which scored the highest fall directly into the four-point Main Street methodology for downtown revitalization

### **DESIGN**

- ▶ Creating pedestrian movement and activity through street furniture, sidewalk planters, and an overall cohesive and planned downtown landscape (4);
- ▶ Improving sidewalks (1);
- ▶ Clean up the center of downtown while also filling in “gaps” – vacant and underutilized areas of downtown (1)

### **ORGANIZATION**

- ▶ Business owners and community leaders must work together to achieve the vision. IE – public-private partnering to achieve a common goal. (3)

### **PROMOTION**

- ▶ Grayson County’s Musical Heritage and how it has been passed down and evolved through generations of artists (2). Specifically, how this heritage must be promoted through programs like the Crooked Road Trail, but also to the local community so that the heritage is not ultimately lost.
- ▶ Technology and the new fiber network (1). Promoting downtown Independence as a location for new business

### **ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING**

- ▶ Availability of business funding sources (2). Identifying opportunities for and developing business development and retention programs and strategies
- ▶ Creating a group insurance program for businesses (1).
- ▶ Expand business and retail services creating more of a variety in downtown (1).



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Much of the one-on-one discussions in the community, as well as the public meeting, focused on how the community historically developed, the current state of downtown, and what economic factors have contributed to its present situation. Also, the overall vision of the downtown including assessing the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges were covered during the one-day work session. Many of these conclusions were mentioned above, but others – as well as observations from the consultant team, are covered below.

### *Economic Decline*

The Town of Independence has experienced a loss of over 600 industrial jobs over the past 10 years. Many of the closed businesses were in the textile industry, but also included the downsizing of Nautilus and other industries. There is still an industrial presence in Independence, but its impact to the overall economy could continue to decrease. Independence will always be challenged with its position in a region where other communities have much better access to I-77 (Hillsville & Galax) and I-81(Wytheville).

The downtown business environment has also seen an economic downturn with its vacant properties and loss of downtown business. This is due to loss of jobs as well as the creation of commercial nodes that have developed closer to Galax and I-77. Galax and Wytheville with larger retail developments will continue to pull shoppers from the Independence area. Similarly, nearby downtowns of Sparta, Damascus, and Galax puts Independence in the center of competitive market of quaint downtowns.

### *Physical Conditions*

Downtown Independence has numerous businesses in various states of disrepair. Individual interviewees and citizens cited the substandard condition of some of the buildings in the downtown core. They also recounted a trend of what they considered the demolition of historic downtown buildings without any regard for or investigations into their preservation or adaptive reuse. Other physical improvement issues that were common threads included overhead power lines, the condition of downtown sidewalks, and the general need for the beautification of downtown Independence. Off-street parking resources do exist in downtown, but they are not improved nor are they signed. With the exception of the courthouse square, downtown Independence does not have any tree cover, street trees, or other landscaping. Preserved buildings, attractive streetscape, accessible parking, and pedestrian amenities create an environment that is conducive to the types of retail establishments that can be supported in downtowns.

### *Isolation*

Independence is somewhat isolated within the region. I-77 is 25 miles to the east in adjacent Carroll County. I-81 is 31 miles to the north in Wytheville. To the north and west are the Mount Rogers Recreation Area, the Jefferson National Forest, and mountainous terrain. To the south is the North Carolina State line. All of these isolate Independence from the regional market – which not only affects the ability to recruit industry and business, but also presents a challenge to attracting visitor and tourism traffic.



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### *Centrally located*

While Independence is somewhat secluded, it does exist in the center of the larger Blue Ridge region and historically served as a crossroads through southwest Virginia. Highway 58 leads visitors from the Interstate 77 corridor through Grayson County and continuing along the Highlands Parkway towards Damascus and then Abingdon. Highway 21 carries travelers along a scenic corridor from western North Carolina, through Independence and up to Interstate 81. Independence's position in the center of a region rich in natural and recreational resources (local, state, and national) provides tremendous opportunity for the community to promote and develop itself as a "base camp" for tourism.

### *Mountain Heritage*

Beginning with the naming of the town and its association with the debate that created the county seat for Grayson, Independence has a unique history. The "old time" music history of the community is well documented and its location along the Crooked Road places it in the heart of the music heritage trail. Uncle Wade Ward, an old time pioneer is from Independence, and the venue that he and other mountain musicians played still exists in the heart of downtown. The music has remained strong in the region having been passed down through generations and even among young people. While the music heritage has endured time, there is a need to document and record this history for future generations.

"The 1908", as the locals refer to the beautifully preserved Richardsonian Romanesque courthouse, presents Grayson County's heritage with historic documents, artifacts, and the Visitor's center. It also details the area's musical and craft history including pottery, painting, woodwork, and furniture making. The 1908 is a great "one-stop" shop for visitors and locals alike to learn of the culture and people that call Grayson County and Independence their home.

### *Retirement*

The Independence area is becoming more and more attractive for retirees and empty nesters looking to live their lives at a slower pace in a natural and bucolic setting. In fact, only four of the over twenty citizens who participated in the public meeting called themselves natives to the community.

### *Tourism*

Recreation, mountain heritage, and music history are all incredibly important to the region and its tourism base. Whether it is the 1908, Grayson Highlands State Park, the Appalachian Trail, or the various music venues in Independence, Galax, and the remainder of Grayson County – none of these resources function independently, but rather are part of a larger unit. It is imperative that Independence works with other agencies (County, State, other municipalities) to market the regional aspects of tourism for the benefit of everyone.



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### *Technology*

Independence has recently completed the infrastructure for a Fiber Optic Network which will provide broadband internet and data service to Grayson County for the first time. Like railroads were to manufacturing, broadband infrastructure is critical to economic development in the changing economy. High speed access is integral into today's small businesses, consulting firms, retailers, tourism, and even manufacturing.

### *Organization*

For the revitalization of downtown, implementation cannot fall on the Town of Independence alone. Other stakeholder groups and organizations must buy into the larger vision and take a lead role in specific tasks. In Independence, there are several groups who will ultimately share the burden of implementing the downtown plan including, among others, the Historical Review Board, the Uptown group, the Independence special events committee, and Grayson County Department of Tourism.



## **4.0 Downtown Vision**

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All of the background information, stakeholder interviews, and public meetings can be pulled together to form the following vision for downtown Independence:

*Downtown Independence will become a quaint, pedestrian friendly city center with diverse retail and cultural offerings for both visitors and residents alike.*

*The downtown streetscape will be enhanced to create a dynamic shopping, dining and business environment. Pedestrian elements such as street trees, plantings, and street furniture will help to “activate” the sidewalk creating a walkable setting. Vacant buildings will become occupied and historic buildings will be restored or adaptively reused. Public and private improvements will create a new sense of place in downtown Independence.*

*Downtown Independence will become a “base camp” for tourism and recreation activity in Grayson County and the region. Independence will promote itself as the center of the Blue Ridge region attracting tourists to stay in local hotels and bed & breakfasts, dine in local restaurants - all while enjoying regional tourism attractions such as the Grayson Highlands State Park. Independence’s musical traditions will be promoted through the Crooked Road Trail as well as local festivals and events. Independence will celebrate its mountain heritage through interpreting its culture not only to visitors, but also to local residents, creating a continued sense of community pride and ongoing appreciation for its history.*

*The Town of Independence will focus on the recruitment of new business creating a healthy mix of retail, service businesses, and office uses in downtown. A variety of new restaurants and shops will open offering expanded hours and creating day and evening activity in downtown. Economic development and revitalization of the downtown will be based on true opportunities, market indicators, and trends. Independence will have 100% occupancy on at least the first floors of downtown buildings, ultimately creating business and residential opportunities on upper floors. Business development and retention programs will be established through local agencies to insure that existing and future businesses will continue to be successful. The high tech fiber optic infrastructure will be promoted to recruit diverse businesses and make downtown Independence once again the center of the economy life for the community.*

*The revitalization of downtown Independence will be the result of a collaborative effort of a number of economic development entities. Local government agencies, business associations, public/private organizations will have clearly define tasks and benchmarks. Tourism, heritage resources, and recreational tasks will be organized and implemented focusing on the region, recognizing Independence’s place in the larger context.*



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*Downtown Independence will restore its vitality as the economic and cultural center of Grayson County, diversify its economy by cultivating a strong tourism industry - all while enhancing the quality of life of the residents who call Independence home.*

### **5.0 Next Steps**

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Upon completion of the visioning process, Independence will have satisfied all requirements and completed Phase II of the multi-phased DHCD process. The next step will be to reconvene the management team in a facilitated work session to review the downtown vision outlined in the previous section and determine if any changes or revisions need to be made. Once the vision has been finalized, Independence can go forward with the development of the Planning Grant Proposal to secure funding for Phase III of the downtown process.

Phase III consists of completing an Economic Restructuring Plan for downtown that will serve as the basis for future changes in downtown. The components of this plan will be determined by the Town, but would likely include:

- ▶ A retail market study that would define Independence's local, regional, visitor customer markets;
- ▶ A market analysis that will identify opportunities for new retail, housing, or business opportunities
- ▶ A business development strategy detailing recruitment and retention programs for new and existing businesses
- ▶ A branding strategy that will develop marketing concepts and a consistent brand including logos, tag lines, advertisements, brochures, banners, as well as way-finding signage – focusing on expanding the customer base for downtown
- ▶ A physical analysis that will identify opportunities for development and improvements, building off of the visioning and market analyses, and detailing a list of potential physical improvement projects that could be planned and completed during the next phase

Ultimately, Independence will move to Phase IV where it can pursue funding for design assistance and capital projects such as façade improvements, streetscape, infrastructure, or other projects identified during the previous phase.