

# Maybe Your Downtown Needs a Report Card

**Bert Winterbottom**

**O**ver the past quarter of a century, most local governments, large and small, have undertaken planning for their downtowns. Many localities have been successful, while others have written plans that have languished on the shelf.

Using a report card to assist in the planning process is an approach particularly well suited to the needs of small and medium-sized communities. This kind of objective, outside review can confirm success, verify and refine development objectives, foster mid-course corrections in plans and programs, and reenergize public and private leadership.

## **What Is a Report Card Assessment?**

Report cards traditionally have been used to measure the progress of students in educational systems. In the school-and-student relationship, the criteria used to gauge performance are fairly formal and rigid. A major objective is to share with the student his or her progress at a particular point and to identify areas in which performance can be enhanced.

Slightly modified, the traditional report card approach to

**The Report Card Process Is Short-term and Strategic. It Focuses on Current Issues, Problems, and Accomplishments.**

measuring progress and making mid-course adjustments has a valid application to downtown revitalization projects and organizations. The report card assessment often is a critical component of the traditional process of strategic planning. It is sometimes called a strategic assessment, strategic audit, status report, or peer review. Whatever it is called, a report card can be an important management tool for public officials, elected leaders, and private organizations concerned with a community's downtown.

The report card process is short-term and strategic. It focuses on current issues and problems, as well as accomplishments. As shown in the accompanying diagram, the process includes four, relatively brief steps: (1) listening/ recording/learning, (2) processing, (3) sharing, and (4) taking action. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that report cards can encourage change by identifying opportunities, solving problems, and producing sharply focused recommendations for planning and action.

### Report Card Case Studies

Localities that have approached downtown planning using the report card process include Corning, New York, with two report cards in the past six years; Pueblo, Colorado; Macon, Georgia; and Greenville, South Carolina.

The objective set by each locality varies from that of a report card making mid-course corrections and reenergizing community leadership (Corning); to confirmation by peer review of a major plan before implementing it (Pueblo); to a status report designed to confirm community, public, and private leadership support for a planning initiative (Macon); to a more complex and comprehensive strategic assessment (Greenville).

The costs for these products have ranged from just under \$10,000 for a simple report card assessment, to \$25,000 for a more sophisticated strategic planning process.

**"The report card brought Corning's public and private leadership together to deal with important issues affecting the future viability of the in-town area. It dealt directly and fairly with one of the community's failures—its inability to implement plans for a new conference center at the Radisson Hotel. The missing ingredients were proactive leadership and funding support from the city government. We needed to hear this! [We were given] an illustrative example of the role the city should play to contribute to the economic vitality of the city, as well as of the region."**

*Suzanne Kennedy, city manager, Corning, New York*

### Corning, New York: First Report Card

Corning's first report card was prepared in May 1990 and completed in July of the same year.

Corning is a small town with a population of approximately 12,000 located in the sparsely populated Southern Tier region of the state of New York. While the area has seen relatively little growth, it is headquarters to Corning, Inc., and the home of the Corning Glass Center, New York's third largest tourist attraction.

In 1990, Corning Intown Futures, Inc., the public/private organization responsible for downtown planning in Corning, decided to undertake a report card assessment. The community had successfully implemented the Intown I plan in 1982 and created the more ambitious Intown II plan in 1988.

The community was enthusiastic about the 1988 plan and implemented a great deal of it between 1988 and 1990. In 1990, however, malaise set in. The public and private leaders were tired, and there was frustration over where priorities lay and what should be next on the implementation agenda. The concept of a report card appealed to

those who wanted to conduct a candid evaluation of Corning's new and revised priorities.

The first report card was prepared over a six-week period at a cost of just under \$10,000. The final product, a brief report, contained four sections: plan implementation progress, current development issues, high-priority issues, and input for the Intown Corning Action Agenda.

The report card gave the community high marks for implementing 12 major projects in the 1988 plan, plus an additional \$18.7 million in other in-town projects not included in the plan, for a total of \$63.1 million. In spite of the remarkable implementation success of the Intown II plan, there was concern about the future and what should be done next.

The assessment identified 39 issues under five broad headings: leadership, public fiscal policy and management, public services and facilities, property and development, and tourism. The 39 issues were reduced to nine specific recommendations as input for the Intown Corning Action Agenda.

Since 1990, four recommendations, as described here, have been acted upon with dramatic results.

**"The report card process has been important for downtown Greenville and particularly for the city's administrative staff. The process itself reaffirmed decisions of the past and set challenges for the future. The private sector was actively involved in the process through meetings and interviews, and we anticipate a high degree of support for the recommendations. There is a new sense of direction, and Greenville's staff is much more focused than we were at the beginning of the process."**

*Aubrey Watts, city manager, Greenville, South Carolina*

**Public Fiscal Policy and Management Strategy.** A recommendation to develop a fiscal policy and management strategy led to the appointment of a private sector task force to evaluate policy and management needs. The task force report persuaded Corning's city council that it needed to adopt the council-manager form of government, and Corning's first city manager, Suzanne Kennedy, was appointed in June 1995.

**A Visionary New Look at Tourism Development.** It was recommended that the Corning Glass Center be enhanced as an attraction of national and international significance. A regional tourism strategy was prepared, and in 1995, Corning, Inc., invested \$50 million in the project.

**Graphic Identification Package.** Such a package, when it has been implemented, will give image and design guidance for informational and directional signage leading to and around Corning.

**Short-Term Parking Strategy.** The report card suggested that meters on Market Street be removed and that

two hours of free parking be enforced. So far, the council has mandated the two hours of free parking, with appropriate enforcement.

### **Corning's Second Report Card**

While a great deal of progress had been made since the 1990 assessment, the board of Intown Futures again felt the need to refocus, and a second assessment was begun in March 1996 and finished in May 1996.

A number of negative changes had occurred, including a modest downturn in the economy; corporate changes and downsizing at Corning, Inc.; and the introduction of almost 600,000 square feet of new, big-box retail space near a mall 12 miles away.

At the same time, Corning, Inc., was making plans for revitalizing and expanding its Glass Center to include a re-configuration of its retail offerings. Intown Market Street merchants viewed this idea as potentially harming their businesses, so growing dissension arose between the merchants and the Glass Center.

The board of Intown Futures decided that the second report card assessment would differ from the first in that it

would be more diagnostic. It would try to look carefully at the underlying causes of the decline on Market Street and would make recommendations for addressing these issues.

### **Scope of Work**

Modeled after the first report card, the second one involved a careful review of reports, plans, and newspaper articles published before a site visit, which, along with a three-day work session, included a walking tour of the Intown neighborhood and informal discussions with retailers and others. The final product was an 18-page report with sections on progress made since 1990; a situation analysis; the current Intown Futures agenda; "The Challenge of April 2000: A New Agenda"; and "Action Agenda: Next Steps."

### **Findings and Recommendations**

The period of 1991 to 1996 saw 29 major projects implemented in the city and 20 in the Intown area, with the 20 Intown projects alone representing an investment of just over \$69 million in five years. Another measure of success was an assessment of the high-priority issues identified in the 1990 report card. Five high-priority issues had been dealt with aggressively; four had been partially addressed; and five had not been dealt with at all.

Overall, the community rated high in its ability to deal with implementation. The report card, however, suggested that one major challenge facing the community was not project-oriented: the perceived loss of the community spirit, cooperation, communication, and civic will that had always been a part of Corning.

Counterbalancing the negative findings was the announced revitalization plan for investing approximately \$60 million over five years in the Corning Glass Center, to result in a grand opening in April 2000. The report card

egged one question. In April 2000, the eyes of the world would be on Corning, New York. Would it be ready to welcome visitors to Corning and to reap the promotional and economic benefits of international publicity and guests from around the world?

The 1996 report card called for an action plan whose specific steps included convening in-town stakeholder leaders (action completed); creating and empowering a Corning Action 2000 Task Force (action completed); starting an immediate action program involving nine high-priority initiatives (several initiatives are just beginning); and working on an Intown III planning process (action in progress).

The report card roused new interest in Intown Corning. It helped city officials and citizens to get organized and become focused on the action agenda. In four months, the community became reenergized and is working to achieve both short- and long-term initiatives designed to make Corning a model for other localities.

**“The downtown revitalization project was successful because it was a citizen-driven project. The peer review process provided the citizens, the city government, and the staff with the mechanism for all parties to come to the table on a community-based project.”**

*Lewis A. Quigley, city manager, Pueblo, Colorado*

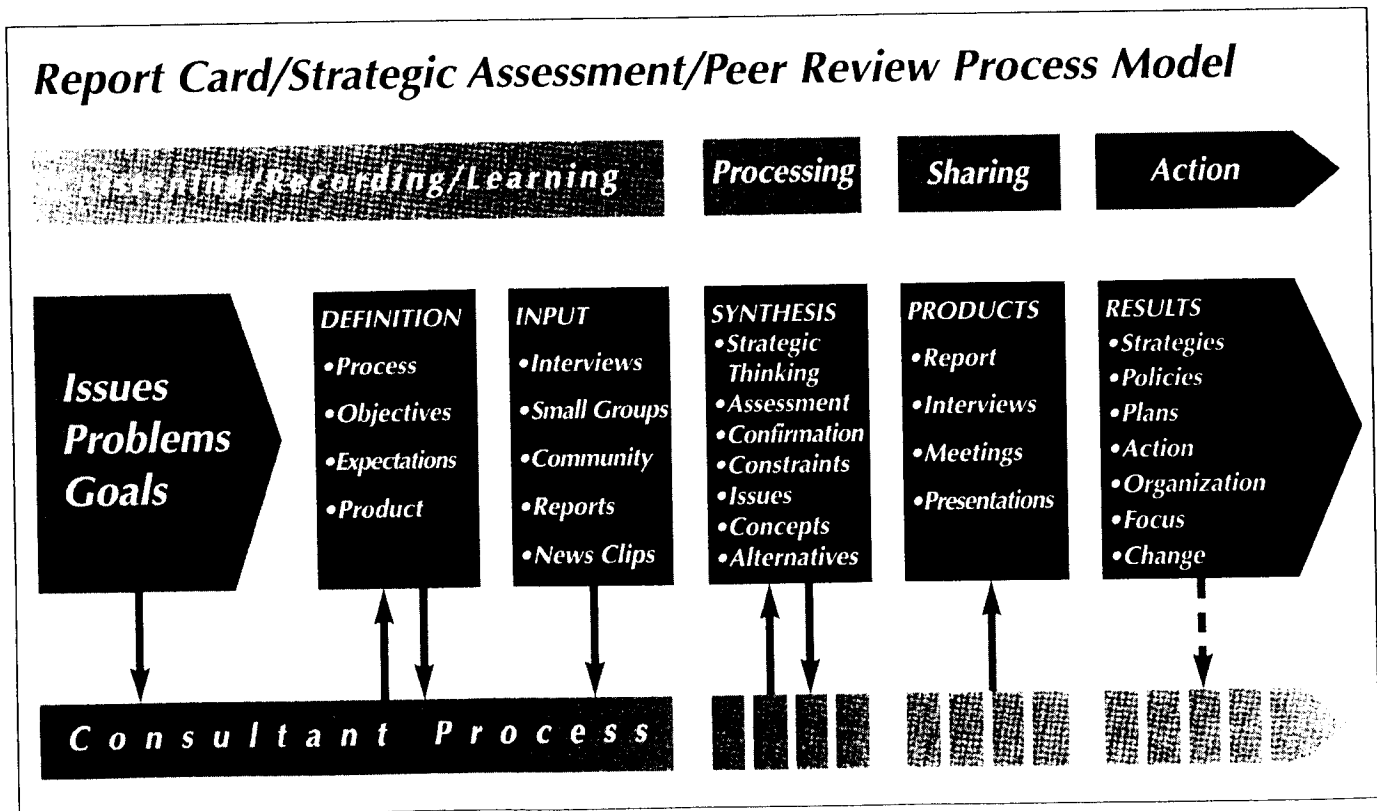
**Peer Review for Downtown Pueblo, Colorado**

Standing 40 miles south of Colorado Springs, Pueblo is a community of 100,000 with a traditional manufacturing economy. Tourism is being looked upon as a means of diversifying the economy and building on the strengths of the historic downtown.

A peer review process undertaken in November 1994 and presented in Jan-

uary 1995 had as its goal to provide a critical, objective, and outside review of the work undertaken in planning for tourism development. While the review considered all of the downtown, the focus was on the proposed Historic Arkansas Riverwalk Project (HARP), a bold effort designed to create an unusual and authentic place in the heart of downtown Pueblo by reopening the river channel running through it.

The process involved a review of resource materials provided by the city; 18





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leadership interviews conducted during a three-day site visit; downtown planning and tourism briefings; and the preparation of a brief report summarizing the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the peer review process. A SWOT analysis listed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing downtown Pueblo.

The key finding of the peer review was that Pueblo had undertaken a valid planning process for HARP. The review recommended that the project should be carried to the next phase, with detailed development plans designed to build a great public environment and a chance for substantial private, urban development.

Other recommendations suggested that the project deal for the downtown hotel and civic conference center be consummated and the project built in a timely fashion, with all supporting infrastructure required to make it a success. Completion of the Union Avenue Historic District also was endorsed, as well as a number of secondary recommendations intended to bring about a concentration and critical mass, to encourage residents to use the downtown, and to enhance the overall image of the downtown.

In 1995, a referendum was held on a \$12.85 million bond issue for implementing the river project. The referendum passed by a favorable margin, and the project now is under way, with completion scheduled for April 1998. The convention center should open in May 1997, and a hotel project has been approved and will begin construction in April 1997.

## **Downtown Macon, Georgia**

Macon, located in central Georgia approximately 80 miles south of Atlanta, has a population of 106,000. The executive director of The Peyton Anderson Foundation, a local philanthropic trust, was concerned about the future of Macon's downtown. The foundation was called upon to support and fund

projects in the downtown, but the director could not see how individual projects would work together. She believed that there was a need for an overall downtown plan.

The status report process conducted in July 1996 involved a three-day site visit to evaluate the situation, to interview local public and private leaders, and to prepare a brief status report. The consultant team returned in 30 days to present the findings to a group of downtown stakeholders. Following are some of the more important findings:

- The Ocmulgee River represents a tremendous, untapped resource in Macon's downtown that needs to be explored.
- The Medical Center of Central Georgia is a major employment and economic force in the downtown and can play a big role in the future of the area.
- Downtown has other strengths to build on: a compact structure with many historic and architecturally significant buildings, a growing employment base, and attractive boulevard parks.

During the status report process, a group of public and private leaders decided to start a new organization to coordinate the downtown initiative and to call that organization the NewTown Macon Board. The group reviewed the status report, and three recommendations for action were implemented:

1. Create a new "umbrella" organization to direct and coordinate downtown planning and action.
2. Undertake an economic development strategy and plan for the downtown.
3. Take on an immediate action project early in the process.

## **Downtown Greenville, South Carolina**

Greenville is located in the economically dynamic Piedmont Crescent region of the Carolinas. During the past decade,

**"The status report process took place over a condensed time span, and the consultant was able to meet individually and in small groups with more than 30 people in a three-day period. The result was a brief, hard-nosed, factual report on the status of downtown Macon today. It provides guidance for us to get organized and plan for the future of our downtown."**

*Juanita Jordan, executive director,  
The Peyton Anderson Foundation, Macon, Georgia*

Greenville has developed one of America's most successful downtown Main Streets.

The regeneration process began in 1982 with the development of the Greenville Hyatt Regency Hotel and Convention Center at the northern end of Main Street. At about the same time, two new corporate office buildings were built nearby. In 1991, the Peace Performing Arts Center was developed on a historic site at the southern end of Main Street, on the Reedy River.

In recent years, the northern blocks of Main Street have seen a resurgence of retail activity and a proliferation of high-quality restaurants, pubs, microbreweries, and entertainment venues. Most recently, the city has developed a new West End Market Place that provides retail, food, beverage, and entertainment outlets. And finally, a 17,000-seat arena is under construction.

As City Manager Aubrey Watts observed, "There was a need to carefully assess recent progress, assure that we were doing the right things, and maintain the momentum in the years ahead."

The Greenville report card process was budgeted at approximately \$25,000. It included a detailed site assessment, backed up with approximately 25 leadership interviews and the preparation of

a comprehensive report card giving specific recommendations as to the next steps required to keep downtown revitalization on a successful track.

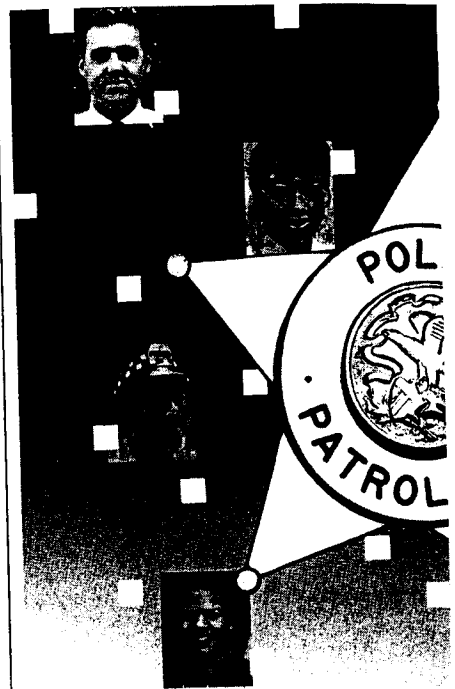
The report card process identified "21 Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century," with some of the more important challenges being:

- Developing downtown Greenville's new and enhanced "personality."
- Preparing a downtown master plan.
- Realizing that downtown housing is an essential ingredient of success.
- Proving that retail uses can work in the downtown.

The report card concluded with recommendations and an action agenda. Two key recommendations were (1) to adopt the "Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century" as the high-priority program to be implemented during the next five years, and (2) to use the report card as a vehicle for building an enhanced working relationship between public and private downtown stakeholders.

### **Experience Gained**

Some insights into the report card assessment process have been garnered through the case studies presented in this article and other studies prepared by the author.



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**RFP's Welcome**

**"P**ueblo's planning department requested a peer review of the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk Project and the Central Pueblo Framework Plan at the critical juncture between planning and implementation. We are a small department without the resources to hire full-time program specialists. . . . The peer review process proved to be a cost-effective means of providing the independent assurance needed within the community to begin this major redevelopment effort."

*Jim Munch, city planner, Pueblo, Colorado*

Overall, the report card process is a quick, relatively inexpensive way to assess progress, or the lack of it, objectively; to make mid-course program and investment corrections; to create a new focus; to energize leadership; and to set new planning and implementation agendas. It also is an objective means of testing ideas, confirming plans before implementation, and providing a comfortable level of peer review.

But the local government must need this kind of assessment, and a legitimate purpose must be identified. The process

can be called almost anything, as long as its purpose is clear. Some local governments need a report card, while others may need a strategic assessment, strategic audit, status report, or peer review.

The process should be brief (four to five weeks), intensive, inclusive, reasoned, unbiased, and honest. Finally, any report card is most useful when acted upon in a timely fashion. **PM**

*Bert Winterbottom is a principal with LDR International, Inc., Columbia, Maryland.*

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