2018

Analysis of the Economic Development of Statesboro, Georgia's Blue Mile: A Structural Approach for Diversification

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An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Economics

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ABSTRACT

The Blue Mile has become a center for Statesboro's Economic Development *plan of business diversification and downtown revitalization. Downtown revitalization is important not only to existing businesses but also to expanding the property tax base. The gauging of revitalization and diversification in the field of community development has been overlooked in favor of qualitative generalizations.* Burayidi's Scorecard *is used as a basis to establish a standard for the structural analysis tests conducted to measure business diversification.*

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December 2018
Department of Economics
University Honors Program

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Dr. Tony Barilla for his support through this project. The completion of this project would not have been possible without his support and words cannot express how thankful I have been to have had his help as a mentor throughout the process.

I also need to thank the Honors Program for having such a wonderful support structure in place to push students to succeed. This community, their expectations of excellence, and complete support throughout the entire process was a guiding light. I was pleasantly surprised and more thankful than I could ever say to have the Honors Program community, one of the most supportive and wonderful group of people I have ever had the opportunity to meet.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support, their expectations, and their unrelenting love. I wouldn’t be who I am today without them am thankful every day for their faith in my abilities and especially for how they push me to excel.

Introduction

An increase in urban sprawl, or decentralized growth away from city centers, has led many communities to lose their core downtown. Population shifts brought about the rise of large retailers in box stores and suburban malls, directing consumers away from downtowns and into these new fringe districts. These districts, however, did not replace the traditional gathering places located in downtowns that promoted community growth. As Kunstler (1994) argued, they developed a “nowhere syndrome” promoting anonymity between consumers with retailers and consumers with other consumers. This deterioration of community ties forces communities to lose their unique identities and endure negative economic consequences.

Many cities without a healthy downtown typically find it difficult to attract new businesses, residents, and companies. The majority of Main Street and downtown businesses are traditionally small. Large retailers cannot fit in these space constraints, endure the lack of parking, and therefore would rather go to the edges of town (Mehta, 2011). These small businesses cannot support themselves without increasing their consumer base; however, the lack of a downtown and the inherent lack of identity to the city results in a lack of a strong pull factor for potential residents. New businesses tend to increase the number of jobs, overall household income, and result in many other long-term benefits.

The lost identity of the downtown region can be reclaimed by attracting new businesses. Companies that hold multiple locations (i.e. separate manufacturing and distribution centers) are separate from the general business center. These companies tend to employ more people and promote overall growth in a city. Operational expansions force companies to use a variety of metrics when determining new locations. Companies need easy transportation of goods, fulfillment of site requirements, and a readily available workforce. City selection is also based on community characteristics and economic incentives which can also be found in multiple locations, creating competition among communities to accentuate their differences (which is difficult unless a city identity is clearly defined).

Defining a Successful Downtown

Central business districts have been established in most cities. The districts are traditionally centered on a courthouse and comprised of small local businesses with the general principle of the downtown acting as a hub for culture, shopping, and community events. Community ties and identities are often built primarily based on how cities were organized around these districts. A successful downtown results in the strengthening of the community and creates more economic activity and growth (Kitsinger, 2013).

Retail development, also called the Main Street Approach, is the traditional method used to determine the health of a downtown. Oftentimes, cities will attempt to organize downtown support, promotion, design improvements, and restructure the economy in an effort to increase downtown sidewalk traffic. The vagueness of this approach is a significant reason why so few metrics for downtown growth and success exist. Most cities do not formally record data on their downtown area because of the lack of direction on collecting statistics (i.e. what statistics should or should not be collected). The few cities that have begun to collect data typically do not use a standard system making it almost impossible to compare downtowns. This creates a difficulty for researchers in finding patterns to define successful downtowns since cities cannot be simultaneously studied.

Burayidi's (2013) method is an objective indicator of a downtown's success. In addition to retail development, he reviewed various strategies, place-making initiatives, and institutions. His scorecard has been used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a downtown while standardizing it enough to allow comparison between other downtowns.[1] The DDA – (Destination Development Association 2017) uses a larger scope that creates a list of 20 items their successful downtowns have in common. Their grading system is based on how many of these elements a downtown possesses and is widely applicable, solving the benchmarking issue of various development points.[2] The DDA's grading scale evaluates the position of a downtown in its implementation of a development plan rather than assessing how successful the development of the current downtown is. The DDA does not include, in their 20 items, tangible criteria but instead discusses success when a downtown has at least a 97% business occupancy rate with leases at or above the average city "market rate."

Downtown growth becomes easier to define using a combination of methods from sociology, economics, urban planning and other disciplines. A review of the current literature reveals ten key indicators: retail development, housing, organization and partnerships, downtown traffic generators, preservation and rehabilitation, immigration and diversity, multi-functionality, design, branding and promotion, and finance,

[1] Burayidi's 14 city sample can arguably be too small to verify his benchmarks.
[2] Most of their indicators are steps in plan implementation

employment and demographics (Edwards 2013). This review synthesizes many quantitative and qualitative measures for each indicator.[3]

Diversification

A consensus reached in downtown-development literature is the need for business diversification; unfortunately, current measures of this are very theoretical and lack the applicability that cities require. Measures have been applied to gauge whether an area is diverse by reviewing the geographic concentration of industries when applying any entropy equations (Hackbart 1975). Entropy equations are typically applied to countries and regions, and most measures do not inform which sectors need to grow in order to promote diversity.[4] When areas have only one primary industry, interpretations become straight-forward, but the interpretation becomes complicated when areas have multiple industries or business sectors.

The Clark-Fisher (1939) model, also known as the structural analysis / three-sector model, measures development based on employment diversification. Three categories of business sectors are defined: raw materials, manufacturing, and service. Each person is counted and then used as a percentage of total area employment. These percentages are then compared to one another and ranked allowing researchers to compare areas with each other and track development.

[3] The lack of significant benchmarks in most areas creates some difficulties.
[4] Entropy equations indicate the existence or degree of business diversity

Statesboro, Georgia

Statesboro, Georgia had a 2017 population of 31,000[5] covers 13.5 square miles and has evolved into a hub of economic activity. The city has 2933 businesses[6] within the city limits, but many major employers have declined to locate its manufacturing plants, distribution centers, and warehouse locations in Statesboro-proper. A potential reason for this phenomenon could easily be the lack of development in the downtown area. Companies make locational decisions based on a city's identity, holding all else constant between cities. Statesboro's identity is tied to the deterioration of its downtown, so much so, that in 2012 this deterioration was identified by the Statesboro-Bulloch Chamber of Commerce and planning began to halt and reverse this situation.

Statesboro's downtown central business district resides along the four major roads that intersect by the corner of the Bulloch County Courthouse. These four roads are all conveniently named Main- North, South, East, and West. North-South Main falls along US Highway 301 and runs from the outside of town to the courthouse (N Main), along the edge of Georgia Southern campus, and ends at US Highway 301 Bypass (S Main). East-West Main lies along Georgia Highway 24 and both exhaust into Statesboro residential areas.

Georgia Southern University students became a prime target for the redevelopment of downtown. In addition to being along South Main, Georgia Southern increases the population and traffic of Statesboro by 70% when school is in session

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[5] Statesboro is similar to 96% of the other cities in the United States with a population under 50,000 ("Number of U.S. Cities, Towns, Villages by Population Size 2015")
[6] "Meet the Communities"

during the fall and spring semesters (Georgia Southern University 2017). Downtown Statesboro has failed to capture this explosion of economic activity, but other parts of the city have successfully attracted popular name-recognized stores. The Blue Mile Community Revitalization Plan reported, "one-third of student respondents report have never visited downtown, while another third visit only once a month." Approximately 25,000 consumers from Georgia Southern University's student population could help support downtown businesses and redevelop the Statesboro identity.

The South Main Revitalization Committee was formed in 2012 to bolster the concentration of businesses and lots along South Main, market South Main businesses to Georgia Southern students, and focus efforts of revitalization on the mile between the courthouse and the edge of Georgia Southern campus, a.k.a. "The Blue Mile". Their plan was designed to: (1) reclaim the corridor as a safe and desirable place to live, (2) regain its economic health, and (3) restore its identity as the vibrant commercial and artistic hub of our 9-county area[7]. These plans originally were geared for the entirety of the downtown area and little improvement was seen. The city's entrance into America's Best Communities competition in 2015 began the concentrated focus of development on The Blue Mile with set goals and projects. These goals follow the pattern of previous Main Street revitalization strategies emphasizing building support for downtown, promotion, design improvements, and economic restructuring.

[7] "About the Blue Mile"

Methods

Successful diversification, though difficult to define, is one of the most necessary goals for city improvement. Most models either focus on whether a downtown is diverse in general or on qualitative evaluations, making it difficult to set recognizable goals or to know when these goals are accomplished. Standardized benchmarking is the simplest, cheapest, and quickest structural analysis tool that can be used to evaluate downtowns.

Usable and applicable models for structural composition need to first define the specific tasks and procedures used. Cities need to start gathering employment data for region specific parts of their community, the aggregated approach doesn't work for specific areas. The disaggregated demands make the typical basis for the Clark-Fisher model almost impossible to obtain in many cases. Alternatively, using the actual number of businesses can be substituted given that most businesses downtown are inherently small due to building constraints and do not typically employ very many people.

The small physical area of downtown forces a restructuring of the traditional three-sector model. Since raw materials and manufacturing are not expected to be in central business districts, these sectors can be eliminated from the model and substituted with other sectors that isolate the aspects of the original service sector. This separation addresses the diversification goal in a concrete way, dividing the service sector into six industries of retail, service, food and drink, financial, hospitality, and non-business, all reported percentage distributions are based on qualitative measures from the conventional wisdom. Retail will then be defined as businesses that sell material products excluding foodstuffs. Service is defined as businesses that receive money from customers for non-material value, such as hair salons, photography, storage, legal and others. The food and drink sector is comprised of any business selling food including eating establishments, delis, wine stores, and other foodstuffs. Financial includes accounting, banking, and insurance. Hospitality is made up of hotels and inns. Non-business will then be defined as buildings that are not used to attract street traffic, like government buildings, offices, residential, religious and others.

Benchmarking these sectors is based on the downtown development literature discussed earlier. Retail should be the main driving factor of a downtown's economic engine, simply because it allows a city to regularly collect sales taxes. Much like a mall, a concentration of specialty shops downtown encourages consumers to browse through multiple stores in one visit rather than making a singular trip for a singular store. Mullin (2003) observed that in larger cities, and cities in the process of downtown revitalization, more retail businesses and fewer personal service businesses became indicative of growth. Retail benchmarks of at least 40% would increase foot traffic and should be a reasonable long-term goal along with diminishing the service portion of downtown to a benchmark of 10%. Although this would be difficult to accomplish it would ultimately lead to more growth potential. Some businesses classified as services provide entertainment, such as theaters, galleries, and other activities, which draw large numbers of potential customers into a downtown and increase the cultural aspects of the area. The conventional wisdom prescribes that entertainment should constitute at least 50% of the service sector.

The availability of food and drink is another major consumer magnet by encouraging people to spend more time downtown. The convenience of foodstuffs allows people to take a quick break before continuing their shopping, similar to mall food courts.

An increase in the variety and number of shops is an important factor for surrounding businesses to increase sales. A 20% allowance of the market to be held by the food and drink sector creates an opportunity for this. Traditional sit-down restaurants that are open-air or are open later also help draw people downtown, especially in conjunction with entertainment venues, as a typical “date night.” Best estimates are that approximately 40% of this sector should be classified as restaurants.

The financial sector includes banks, accounting firms, and insurance groups. Historically many banks are located in the center of town, and they contribute to the city’s identity; however, financial services such as accounting, and insurance should follow the same standard as other personal services and should eventually be moved to non-main streets. Best estimates are that a city should limit this sector to between 5-10%.

The hospitality sector is one that typically limits itself. Growth in this sector is dependent on having an increase in tourists. In small towns, historic inns are frequently located on the main streets, but newer hospitality businesses typically open elsewhere based on space limitations. A 5% estimate is reasonable for this sector’s market share.

Downtowns are typically centered on governmental buildings. These building constitute the essential non-business sector. The space they utilize cannot be used or replaced with other businesses that fall into the sectoral approach. Downtown religious buildings are also integral to the historic and cultural identity of cities, making them incredibly difficult to relocate. Residual housing provides a living population downtown which is important to attract businesses and keep crime low, but unfortunately this comes at the cost of additional business space. Historically many people have owned residences on main city streets. This creates a need to evaluate any potential relocations on a case by case basis. One way to increase business space is to convert street level spaces into storefronts and have leave the upper levels as residence lofts. Office buildings, on the other hand, could be eliminated from main streets and easily be moved to side streets without impacting their own, or other, business. The non-business market share should be kept as low as possible, but due to the high concentration of necessary buildings the goal should be at most 18%.

Vacant lots, although not a part of market share, are highly influential to new businesses, potential residents, and to general foot traffic. A small number of vacancies allows new businesses to enter the market, while too many discourages growth, because potential new businesses might be led to believe the downtown is unprofitable. Vacant lots may cause potential residents to fear increases in crime while fostering a dislike for the generally decrepit exteriors that are associated with high vacancy rates. Development taskforces should strive to reduce vacancies to 3% or lower and follow the DDA success indicator of a 97% occupancy rate. New business endeavors that fill current vacancies allows stronger markets to grow and the others to diminish.

Evaluation

Statesboro's downtown and Blue Mile is analyzed with the goal of evaluating the diversity of downtown businesses while determining the success of development strategies. Table 1 presents the October 2018 allocation of building space in downtown Statesboro. The table directly counts each individual business and classifies it according to the above-stated criteria. Entertainment, restaurant, and bank classifications are subsets of their sector (service, food and drink, and financial) and therefore are counted as part of the sector in addition to individually.

Table 1: Sectors by the Numbers

Sector	South Main*	North Main	East Main	West Main	Total Downtown
Retail	12	5	3	8	28
Service	18	1	19	9	47
Entertainment**	0	0	4	2	6
Food and Drink	19	0	2	3	24
Restaurant***	10	0	1	1	12
Financial	9	4	6	0	19
Bank****	3	1	0	0	4
Hospitality	8	0	0	0	8
Non-Business	15	12	6	0	33
Total	81	22	36	20	159
Vacant	16	2	1	1	20
Total Including Vacancies	97	24	37	21	179

*South Main is the Blue Mile
** Entertainment is a subset of Service and is included in the counts for the sector
*** Restaurant is a subset of Food and Drink and is included in the counts for the sector
**** Bank is a subset of Financial and is included in the counts for the sector

Table 2 reports the market share of each sector as calculated from Table 1 as Number of Businesses in a Sector divided by the Total Number of Businesses multiplied by 100 which gives the percentage that an individual sector holds on each street and then in total. The three subsets are calculated by Number of Businesses in an individual Subset divided by the Number of Businesses in a Sector which gives the percentage each subset holds of the given sector.[8]

[8] These are the percentages that will be compared to the standard and included on the Diversification Scorecard

Table 2: Sectors by Market Share

Sector	South Main*	North Main	East Main	West Main	Total Downtown
Retail	15%	23%	8%	40%	18%
Service	22%	5%	53%	45%	30%
Entertainment**	0%	0%	21%	22%	13%
Food and Drink	23%	0%	6%	15%	15%
Restaurant***	53%	0%	50%	33%	50%
Financial	11%	18%	17%	0%	12%
Bank****	33%	25%	0%	0%	21%
Hospitality	10%	0%	0%	0%	5%
Non-Business	19%	55%	17%	0%	21%

*South Main is the Blue Mile
** Entertainment is a subset of Service and is included in the counts for the sector
*** Restaurant is a subset of Food and Drink and is included in the counts for the sector
**** Bank is a subset of Financial and is included in the counts for the sector

Table 3 reports the percentage of vacancies per street and the percentage of vacancies for the total area. This provides more context than the general market percentages (Table 2) because these numbers can look inflated if there is high vacancy, such as the numbers for South Main/Blue Mile which have decreased by roughly 3% in this table. The calculation uses numbers from Table 1 as Number of Businesses in a Sector divided by the Total Including Vacancies. The percentage that each subset makes up is not affected by vacancies, so it is not recalculated or included in this table.

Table 3: Sectors by Building Occupation

Sector	South Main*	North Main	East Main	West Main	Total Downtown
Retail	12%	21%	8%	38%	16%
Service	19%	4%	51%	43%	26%
Food and Drink	20%	0%	5%	14%	13%
Financial	9%	17%	16%	0%	11%
Hospitality	8%	0%	0%	0%	4%
Non-Business	15%	50%	16%	0%	18%
Vacant	16%	8%	3%	5%	11%

*South Main is the Blue Mile

Table 4 clearly reveals which sectors and areas need improvement, however, meeting the criteria doesn't necessarily mean a healthy downtown. There are various ways to manipulate percentages that would not be beneficial to a downtown in the long-run, which is why this scorecard needs to be looked at in perspective. For example, market percentages may appear higher or lower than normal due to increases or decreases in vacancies. To reiterate, a few vacancies are good because it means new businesses can come in, however, too many vacancies or a high turnover of businesses is an indicator of non-profitability to potential businesses. The Blue Mile has a 16% vacancy rate, far exceeding the goal of 3%, and the overall downtown's vacancy rate is 11%.

Table 4: Diversification Scorecard

Sector	Blue Mile	Downtown	Goal
Retail	15%	18%	at least 40%
Service	22%	30%	around 10%
Entertainment*	0%	13%	50% of the sector
Food and Drink	23%	15%	20%
Restaurant**	53%	50%	at least 40% of the sector
Financial	11%	12%	5-10%
Banks***	33%	21%	100% of the sector
Hospitality	10%	5%	5%
Non-Business	19%	21%	less than 18%
Vacancy Rate	11%	16%	Less than 3%

* Entertainment is a subset of Service and is included in the counts for the sector
** Restaurant is a subset of Food and Drink and is included in the counts for the sector
*** Bank is a subset of Financial and is included in the counts for the sector

The retail sector, as reported in Table 4, falls significantly below than the goal of 40% on both the Blue Mile and Downtown (18% and 15% respectively), but the numbers could be increased by filling the current vacancies with retail businesses and transitioning services locations to retail locations.

The service sector for both the Blue Mile (30% service sector share) and the downtown (22% share) is large, but each area has a high number of salons and attorneys. Since these businesses are typically single stop locations for consumers, these should eventually be encouraged to move to side streets or other parts of town. If and when these businesses move, the overall service sector in the downtown will shrink and a portion of the void could be replaced by the entertainment sector increasing its share from its current 13%. The Blue Mile currently has no entertainment type establishments which could be simply remedied by filling some of the vacant lots on the street.

The food and drink sector is currently expanding on the Blue Mile (now up to 23%). The rest of downtown, however, lacks these type of businesses (15%). The percentage of sit-down restaurants is approximately half of both sectors, exceeding the minimum goal of 40%. The major problem here for Statesboro is the lack of variety in the price-point of restaurants. Almost all restaurants have a $10-$20 dinner price point per person, which prevents “upscale” dining. Statesboro, previously had one downtown restaurant that filled this niche, but closed possibly due to the lack of other forms of late night activities for people to enjoy which aids in drawing sufficient crowds for business survival. Statesboro also lacks an effective marketing plan needed for either current or future businesses attempting to achieve sustainable growth.

Financial institutions are close to the range that a city should strive for but are still relatively high (11% and 12%). In addition to this, most of the sector is made up of accounting and insurance firms. These firms are dual financial and service sector businesses but should be treated like services. Customers seeking to go to these places do not typically go shopping in other businesses within the same trip, so they should be phased to side streets.[9]

Hospitality, as discussed before, tends to self-regulate, evident by the fact that these establishments on the Blue Mile tend to be closer to Georgia Southern. 10% of the Blue Mile market and 5% of the overall downtown market are hospitality related. There is sectoral growth but it has been occurring in other Statesboro locations, which is a problem for downtown because of the deteriorating façade of the downtown locations. The city needs to encourage these businesses to take the advantage of the incentives already in place by the Statesboro Development Authority, so they can retain business and improve the look of the Blue Mile.

Small improvements can be made to decrease the non-business share of market locations. The Blue Mile (19%) and the downtown (21%) are close to the desired goal. However, non-business buildings are, for the most part, immovable. While standalone houses could be used both for residential or commercial use, some apartments are purely residential buildings. Many other communities have successfully converted the bottom-floors of some buildings into business spaces while keeping living spaces on the floors above. If the Blue Mile could make the conversion of residences and make room for more businesses, apartment values would increase by location. Table 3 reveals that both the Blue Mile and downtown fall at or under the 18% goal if vacancies are accounted for. This means that if current vacancies are filled, there is no requirement to make these

[9] This will allow the banks to take up a larger portion of this sector, but it is unlikely to see any of these firms getting relocated, any time soon.

changes. However, making these improvements and increasing the number of businesses able to occupy downtown is beneficial in the long-run.

Overall, the diversification of businesses in Statesboro's downtown needs to improve. Specifically, service businesses, including financial services, should be encouraged to move to other locations as other non-service businesses express interest in the location. The most pressing current issue, for both the Blue Mile and the downtown area, is vacancies. The city needs to find a way to attract new businesses to fill these locations, especially focusing on retail. The best way to track if the current strategies are working is to do another similar survey and see if any improvements are noticeable, or if the numbers remain constant.

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