

PATH-FINDER CONSULTING, LTD

Recommendations for Camden County Community Center
City of Woodbine, Georgia



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Recommendations for increasing the Camden County Community Center's potential benefit to the cultural and economic growth of the City of Woodbine, Georgia.



Prepared for:

The City of Woodbine, Georgia as part of the
Wood + Partners Landscape Architects, Land Planners Master Plan

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Camden County Community Center



Purpose:

The purpose of this segment of the Woodbine Comprehensive City-Wide Master Plan is to focus on the Camden County Community Center located in the historic Woodbine School. The intent is to provide recommendations directed to increasing the Center's potential benefit to the cultural and economic growth of the City of Woodbine.

History

The Woodbine School is located within the Camden County Courthouse complex one block from the town center and less than one quarter mile from the Water Front Park on the Santilla River in Woodbine, Georgia. Within the complex reside the county government offices and the Bryan-Lang Historical Library that houses rich collections of records available for historical and genealogical research.



The design of the Woodbine School, constructed in 1926, was one common for the time period and region. The schools built at that time had a basic interior floor plan with various elevations available to individualize their

community appearance. According to Mr. Daren Harper, Director of the Bryan-Lang Historical Library, there are few schools remaining in the region with a like elevation.

The building was in continuous use as a school until 1992 when a new elementary facility was built off Spur 25 just south of the city. The school was then used as the community center for Camden County until, in the mid 90's, it was deemed too hazardous because of nonconformity with the current building code requirements. The building was slated for demolition until a group of concerned citizens organized the "Old School Renovation Committee" with the stated purpose: "To preserve, protect, interpret and manage the Historic Woodbine School, also known as the Camden Community Center." It is in very good condition considering how long ago it was closed. The volunteers from the committee have taken great pains to keep the building in a condition that has allowed them to conduct fund raising activities in order to continue renovations. Much more in the way of renovations is needed to allow the building to reach its full potential.

Through grants, donations, and other fundraising activities the building was brought to code between 1999 and 2000 and is now listed as a contributing resource in the National Historic District of Woodbine. Both of these factors are potential sources/resources for future fundraising. For example, the positive relationship between the Old School Renovation Committee and the Camden County Government leaders was rewarded by their inclusion in a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) referendum providing \$750,000.00 for initial renovation costs.

Across the front of the building there are six regular size classrooms and four smaller spaces approximately one half the size of a classroom for office space and storage. The building is centered on a 130-seat auditorium with a raised stage. In back of the stage there are three spaces, two are classroom size and one is about two thirds classroom size. These spaces are used for dressing rooms and stage production workrooms.



Currently the center offers acoustical bluegrass and gospel music on Friday evenings and country music on Saturday evenings. In addition, two of the classrooms are used to provide food for the audience and one room is used as a thrift store. Sales from both of these sources provide resources for renovation and maintenance. One space has been used for the office of Concerted Services, Inc., a job placement service.



In addition to the main building there is a cafeteria in an adjacent building that can be used for various meetings, luncheons, dinners and other special events. The kitchen itself is in need of major renovation, however the dining area of the hall is usable.



What is the Camden County Community Center's place in the community?

This question is one that must be answered before any renovations are made or programs developed. The current stated purpose (To preserve, protect interpret and manage the Historic Woodbine School) gives direction to what is being done with the building but does not lend itself to what is commonly understood as a community center nationally.

The Old School Renovation Committee and the City of Woodbine community would be well served to combine energy and talent to develop a vision and mission clearly identifying the center as having historical and cultural significance that can directly add value to the community as a part of the master goal of making Woodbine "The Jewel of Camden County".

By expanding the involvement, the workload on individual volunteers will be reduced thereby controlling the burnout factor that is common when there is only a small group of volunteers who take on the major workload. The expansion will allow for the development of various committees to share the increased workload as the center takes on organizational structure and programming. Expanding the participation will also bring the center and community to a better understanding of the center's value and will be communicated throughout the community.

Who are the Camden Community Center's Audiences?

One of the major tasks of the committee in the initial strategic planning process is the identification of the Center's audience. The vision, mission and audience identification are a package that will bring focus to future planning sessions. A review of the City of Woodbine and surrounding county demographics will identify the various ethnic, racial, religious and economic makeup in the immediate area.

There was some interest in developing the community center along the lines of the Sautee Nacoochee Community Center in Sautee Nacoochee, Georgia near the major tourist attraction of Helen, Georgia. This community center is housed in a restored rural schoolhouse and boasts a theater, gallery, art studio, museum, environmental studies room and conference facilities. Programs are designed to address a broad level of interest for both locals and visitors.

Recommendation:

- 1) *Review the make up of the current Board and make adjustments accordingly to take advantage of the talents in the community.*
- 2) *Establish Program, Facility, Publicity and Membership Committees assuring that they are representative of the interests of the community.*
- 3) *Engage a facilitator to assist in the strategic planning process. The facilitator will keep the process moving, keep the groups focused, act as a sounding board for individual ideas, be objective and help in clarifying issues. The facilitator will also provide drafts and the final documents for committee approval.*
- 4) *Develop a vision or dream of what the organization is ultimately **to be** in Woodbine.*

- 5) *Review the various models of successful and growing community centers such as the Sautee Nacoohee Community Center near Helen, Georgia, in order to develop a clear mission.*
- 6) *Develop a specific mission which clearly states what the organization seeks **to accomplish** with its audience. Even if the current mission is retained, it should be revisited by a larger more representative group.*
- 7) *Develop a set of values or core beliefs for the organization that identifies it as a community center unique to Woodbine that will act as the foundation for future decisions.*
- 8) *Develop a specific set of goals and objectives based on the vision, mission and values that will guide future growth for the community center.*
- 9) *Develop specific action plans and action teams to complete each of the tasks.*
- 10) *Set timelines and follow the plans as agreed upon while monitoring the progress. Without these steps the likelihood of success is diminished greatly. Plans not followed are wasted time, energy and dollars.*
- 11) *Hire an executive director for the organization either full or part time to maintain continuity and pace of progress after the long range planning is completed.*

What should local government agencies do to increase the likelihood of success both in protecting the center's structure and providing financial support to the center?

One of the goals is to complete the renovation of the structure for some usable purpose. In order to accomplish this goal a sizable amount of money must be generated which presents a significant challenge. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this goal is to establish the center as a non-profit, 501 (c) 3 organization under the federal tax code. In addition there are ways to leverage dollars through the City of Woodbine that would not be available for a basic non-profit organization. The city government has access to additional types of grants. The combination of non-profit and city oversight gives added strength when writing grants to organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts, The Georgia Arts Council, and The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, as well as foundations and corporations. Many of these organizations provide seed money that can be leveraged into larger sums for programs and renovations.

Local organizations such as Camden Arts and The Three Sisters project provide opportunities for partnerships that would bring additional credibility to the organization in its search for grant funding. In a July 2003 Arts Camden report David Rainer, Chairman of the County Commissioners, expressed his support and suggested that Arts Camden submit a resolution to the County to apply for a grant. He also suggested Arts Camden look at the old Woodbine School. This is a specific reference to a potential partnership that would benefit both organizations. Partnerships are what granting organizations look for as a good investment of their dollars.

The Renovation Committee, currently in charge of the building, has a lease on it that apparently could be terminated with notice at any time. Control of the building is critical to its future. The most advantageous way to control the situation is to have a well thought out plan and then gain full ownership of the property.

Recommendations:

- 1) *The City of Woodbine should formally request that Camden County donate the structure and the property upon which it rests to the City of Woodbine for the purpose of establishing a community center based on the vision, mission, goal and objectives established by the committee.*
- 2) *The City of Woodbine should provide oversight for the Center operations and assist in establishing it as a 501 (c) 3 organization for both tax and fund raising purposes.*

What has the community said about the Camden Community Center?

In June of 2005 seven focus groups, one public input session and interviews with city council and management were conducted to discuss the needs and desires of the community regarding the direction of the Comprehensive City-Wide Master Plan. The makeup of these groups was designed to insure that each facet of the community was represented in the discussion of Woodbine's future. They met June 21-23, 2005 in the Council Chambers.

The general consensus was that the community center is an asset, however it is currently underutilized. The suggestions resulting from the many discussion groups clustered around programming in the areas of the **Arts, Education, Social Services and Business.**

Arts: The performing arts, a current mainstay of the center's fund raising efforts, could be expanded to include stage productions of various types and classic black and white period films. It was suggested that the demonstration of

visual art and craft instruction would also increase participation in the center. There are classrooms available for production as well as a gallery. From a review of a large number of websites, community centers tend to look toward the arts as a major theme to draw participants and provide a source of regular income, followed by community recreational services and various educational and social services.

Education: With regard to education, Dr. Will Harden, Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations, stated that the Woodbine Elementary School students scored above the state average on the achievement tests with no particular weaknesses at this point. An additional focus could be a General Education Diploma (GED) program for those adults who, for whatever reason, were not able to complete their education earlier in their lives. Included in this type of program were pre-GED literacy activities including lending libraries housed in the center with books contributed by the community.

In many community centers there are also opportunities for instruction based on social interests such as languages, history, travel, finance, computers, retirement options, food, health and physical activities.

It was also suggested that the center be made available for enrichment activities particularly related to the science of the Satilla River and the historic town. Its proximity to the river and the availability of classroom space would make such activities attractive to not only Woodbine Elementary School but the Camden County School District in general. The center would provide a central place to bring together any number of issues that appear to be divided by 8th, 9th and 10th Streets.

Social Services: If the goal is to bring the community together with a true community center, then social services may be a drawing force to the facility. Health, counseling, and job services could be made available at the center as they are in many current centers. If not direct services, a clearing house for those in need of direction could be housed at the center. The Cornelia Jackson Center provides additional opportunities to partner and bring the community together and share in resources and services.

There was a discussion of the availability of recreational opportunities for the teen population in the City of Woodbine. Athletic fields are nearby, however the high school as a recreation site is some distance away. This is an issue that needs to be investigated and discussed further with the teen population of the city. Either the cafeteria area or classrooms could be adapted as a teen center.

Business: There is the old cafeteria adjacent to the center proper which lends itself to things like business meetings, training sessions and job fairs. Since the City of Woodbine is the Camden County seat there should be numerous opportunities in partnership with the county to use the facility; for instance for

newly started businesses. During their incubation stage small businesses are looking for low overhead office spaces. The rooms in the center could be made available at a reasonable fee until the businesses are on their feet and can afford better space.

Currently there is space being utilized as a Thrift Store to generate income. This revenue stream is worthy of review. Currently the store is open only during concert hours. As the organization moves forward, consideration should be made to making the Thrift Store a significant part of the business plan.

Recommendations:

- 1) Listen to the community.
- 2) Conduct a broad based survey of the community to determine desired activities.
- 3) Establish a task group to analyze the survey results and make recommendations that meet the community's desires and match the mission of the center.
- 4) Establish a task group for each of the areas of interest for the purpose of educating themselves and then the public on what opportunities are available.
- 5) Review programming at the Cornelia Jackson Center which would allow partnerships and more effective use of facilities and programs across the community.
- 6) Research other community centers in the region and nationally to establish the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which they have encountered in order to increase your success.
- 7) Continue to do what is working and bringing in funds such as the weekend music programs.
- 8) Do not rebuild the old theater near the end of the city but focus on generating funding for the renovation and updating of the current auditorium for both stage and film presentations.
- 9) Review the operation of Thrift Stores in the region from the standpoint of their management, products, merchandising, pricing and profit in order to find the best practice before making a decision about keeping the store open or extending hours.

What should we do with the building structure?

Comments from the focus groups ran from renovating the building, to bringing it up to code and returning it to its original historic appearance, to making it larger to accommodate much larger events such as the Charleston, South Carolina's Spoletto Festival.

Planning a renovation is a problem solving activity. Architects solve problems but the first and most important hurdle is to clearly define the problem. In this instance the problem should be defined in the strategic planning and program planning activities. To begin renovation prior to that planning would not be beneficial to the community. Such planning and problem solving is critical to keeping the focus.

Recommendations:

- 1) Renovations should be based on the vision and mission of the center.
- 2) From the historic point of view, the building would benefit from being restored to as close to original as possible with an eye toward making it an historical site.
- 3) Enclose the walkway between the main building with the cafeteria building to provide easy and weather safe access.
- 4) Review the recommendations developed by D. Stuart Mill in his January 12, 2005 report.
- 5) Develop the property around the building as a park to be used as a preparation point for Santilla River experiences and other outdoor activities.
- 6) Engage an architect to develop plans based on the strategic plan for the center so the environment fits the vision.

The potential for the community center is very promising; however it cannot be all things to all people. This question must be answered before starting into a full fledged project. There must be a commitment from all of the stakeholders in order to have success. The single most important task that must be completed is the strategic plan, for without the plan, the direction is not clear. As Yogi Berra once said, "If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else." Someplace else can mean a loss of energy, participation, time and money. The facilitator can assist in keeping things on track from the beginning. The dollars spent here will pay interest in the long run.

The second most critical task is to follow through with the plan developed in the strategic planning process. The commitment to follow through is the key to success. Direction should only be changed if the vision, mission or objective has changed, otherwise keep to the plan. Consistency of effort and focus get the most positive results. The other issues fall into place with a good plan.

What are the next steps to completing a realistic plan of action?

1. Request that the Community Center and land be dedicated to the City of Woodbine for restoration and preservation.
2. Engage a consultant to assist with the visioning process for the programming of the community center and the directing of the following studies:

Program:

- a. How will the community center organization be structured and how will this structure be put into action?
- b. What areas of program focus will be explored?
- c. Once a program is identified, what details need to be determined?
- d. How will the programs be implemented?
- e. What grant programs will be explored based on the program focus?
- f. How will the grant applications be completed and managed?
- g. What other financial resources are identifiable and available that fit the community center criteria?

Structure:

- a. Professional assessment of the structures and general facilities.
- b. Assessments to include the mechanical, electrical, plumbing and other systems.
- c. Cost estimates based on proposed use and current conditions.

Capitol Programs:

- a. Estimates for general operations of at least five years
- b. Cost estimates for a maintenance program for at least five years.

RESOURCES

1. Arts Camden Website www.crookeddrivers.org
2. Camden Arts Centre www.camdenartscentre.org
3. City of Woodbine “A Great Place to Visit - A Better Place to Live” Brochure
4. City of Woodbine “Woodbine means-“ Brochure
5. Crooked Rivers Website crookeddrivers.org
6. Focus Group responses from:
 - a.) Water Front and River Walk Homeowners
 - b.) Downtown Development Authority, Downtown/Courthouse
 - c.) Area Property Owners, PSC Rep.,
 - d.) Public meeting summary
 - e.) Camden County Board of Education, School Renovation committee and other school related committees
 - f.) Recreation, Cultural Resources and Arts Council
 - g.) Kick-Off Meeting minutes
7. Georgia Secretary of State Grant Program www.rules.sos.state.ga.us
8. Georgia Council of the Arts www.gaarts.org
9. Miller, D. Stuart, “Camden County Community Center Recommendations for Facility Renovation and Program Development”
10. Old School Renovation Committee Brochure
11. Sauntee Nacoochee Community Association www.sauteenacoochee.org
12. School Matters www.schoolmatters.com
13. VSA Arts of Georgia www.VSArtsGA.org