



Remarks delivered by Mickey Howley at the White House Convening on Rural Placemaking, November 17, 2015

Water Valley, Mississippi is an old railroad town on the Hill County of North Mississippi. Three thousand five hundred people live there. It is in Yalobusha County, Yalobusha is a Choctaw world for tadpole, so perhaps the place was always destined to be small. Water Valley is what we call a bantam town, towns under 5,000 people. In Mississippi alone there are 250 towns or communities this size, about a tenth of the state population lives in them. But I can tell you, like people, these small towns are all different. Like people there is much they have in common, but these places are like individuals, they are different from one another.

I'm going to talk about a project Water Valley Main Street did seven years ago, what we have done since, and how that all figures in to the collective work we do.

In October 2008, working with the Appalachian Regional Commission with their small grant Appalachian Community Learning Project, we picked a project that focused on the back entrances or the backs of 23 downtown buildings. We called it "Better Back Street" and the idea was to clean up a two-block long commercial back street that was pure urban grunge. So in four weekends with a group of 30, many teenagers, on both private and public property, we cleaned, scrubbed, painted. We planted shrubs and trees and painted signs for businesses. It was a basic beatification project, quick, easy, dramatic, and needed. But it did more than that. It was a signifier that the then new Main Street program would take visible action and have lasting effect and drive momentum. It blurred the lines between private and public spaces, because downtown is for everybody. But most importantly, working with the ARC, we built a team that developed real capacity to do things. It wasn't really about the \$3,000 grant, but the time and effort to build community level talent. The ARC calls these people "sparkplugs," it became a team that went on to bring real economic impact and real results to downtown Water Valley.

In the last seven years, and remember Water Valley is 3,500 people with a four-block long downtown, this team has been instrumental in bringing 88 new jobs to downtown. Adding 26 new businesses. Fixing buildings and I don't just mean façade jobs, but major renovations in 29 buildings. Adding 14 upper floor apartments. In that new business mix we've added four new restaurants, three art galleries, one grocery store, one doctor's office and one brewery. If you ever want to make your job as a Main Street director real sweet, get a brewery on your Main Street.

Here some other things we did, but hard to put a number on, a National Register of Historic Place district for downtown with 80 contributing buildings. Water Valley has and is the Creative Economy poster town for Mississippi, and we stopped Walmart from moving to town.

On the way we've had some great press, a section cover and three-page article in *The New York Times* about who is doing the work, the *Wall Street Journal* says to visit, *Preservation Magazine* talked about the grittiness of the effort and *Food & Wine* called us a Best Little Food Town. That press is nice, local folks like best that we were featured in *Southern Living* and *Garden and Gun*.

The impact has been incremental and steady but made downtown socially vibrant and economical robust. Know that even in very small towns, downtown is essential. But in all this work, we have a solid belief, a shared philosophy that drives what we do. I think you must have that, all of us. That philosophy shows you the path to take in this work.

To paraphrase poet William Butler Yeats, if the center cannot hold, things fall apart. We keep the center together. For all of us. We must have a strong core, a strong downtown for the whole town to be that great "good place."

And we have a belief that what we need to do the job, what we need is already here. I mean the hard assets in the buildings and built space and the soft assets, if you will, in the people already living here. We rethink everything and find we have more than we imagined. Former Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour said, "Mississippi needs to get up off its assets." I think we have in Water Valley.

We're not stand-alone. No town is. We do work with others. We've worked with four government agencies and three universities. And they have been a great help, but we find that they sometimes don't know what the others are doing. It is not a major problem, but it is significant and there is some duplication. I ask you to learn about and talk to others who do similar work. Those conversations will benefit small towns.

I'd like to end with a quote from Coulter Fussell. She's a smart young woman who owns one of the art galleries in town. And she sees real creative freedom and obtainable opportunity in all these small towns. At a Smart Growth conference two years ago Coulter said, "If you're willing to work hard, to sweat, to have the patience of Job, the forgotten small town can be the new frontier."

Thank you.