



# Sustainable Communities in Appalachia Technical Assistance Program

## The Independence Community Initiative *Downtown Action Plan*

January 22, 2012



*[Inside Cover]*

### **About This Document**

This report is the result of technical assistance provided to the Town of Independence, VA , from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). EPA contractors Renaissance Planning Group and Twaddell Associates provided support for the efforts. For more information contact:

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## 1. Community Story

Independence is a small town of 971 people in Grayson County, very close to the North Carolina border in Southwest Virginia. The region has experienced the loss of manufacturing jobs over the last few decades, particularly in the textile and furniture industries. This has led to increased unemployment and a decline in average income, less downtown activity and increased vacancies. In February 2012 the Town requested technical assistance from the Appalachian Regional Commission and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to help improve the economic and physical conditions of their downtown. Specifically, they were looking for help in two areas:

1. Improve sidewalk connections and conditions from outlying areas into downtown.
2. Design and construct a permanent community park, McKnight Park, with farmers market and stage facilities at the intersection of Highways 21 and 58.

### ***Community Strengths***

*“Independence” spirit!  
Cultural Heritage, Crooked Road.  
Grayson County Musical Heritage.  
The 1908.*

*Close knit, strong community.  
Affordable land and good workforce.  
Proximity to National forest, Grayson  
Highlands State Park, Mount Rogers  
recreational area, and Appalachian Trail.  
Fertile and productive farmland.  
Active farmers market group  
Beautiful landscape and scenery.*

### ***Community Challenges***

*Vacant buildings.  
Buildings in disrepair.  
Declining employment opportunities.  
Condition of downtown sidewalks.  
Downtown activity only during weekdays.  
Signage aesthetics.  
Overhead power lines.  
Galax and Sparta, are retail competitors.*

Improved sidewalks and walkability downtown will add mobility choices for citizens, while increasing the downtown appeal for visitors. Securing a permanent home for the existing farmers’ market at the center of downtown, together with a park and a public stage facility, will have multiple livability benefits. Improved access to fresh, healthy local produce is one clear benefit. Another direct benefit would be to increase overall activity and attractions downtown. Improving the experience for downtown visitors will enhance economic competitiveness by encouraging both locals and visitors to frequent downtown and support other local businesses.

The current farmers’ market site occupies a strategic quadrant of the downtown intersection of Highways 21 and 58 (Main Street and Independence Avenue). The property currently is being called McKnight Park, named after the owner, Fuzzy McKnight, who has allowed the farmers market to operate there for a number of years, and receives tax benefits from the Town in return. Currently the park is a grassy vacant lot, with no park-like amenities. Independence’s identity has been influenced by the presence of cross-roads, and the courthouse and a number of businesses are located at or near this important intersection. However, neither the Town nor the farmers’ market operators own the property on which the farmers’ market is currently held, and therefore are not in a position to control its future.

The farmers’ market, managed by a local non-profit organization, Grayson LandCare, has been in successful operation for six years. The market has operated at this site under the generosity of the current property owners who receive local property tax relief for allowing its

use by the market. The Town and farmers' market management are both increasingly interested in turning this ad hoc relationship into a more permanent community asset with increased potential to add vitality and amenities to the downtown core.

## 2. The Workshop

On October 22-23, 2012, Independence hosted a small team of federal agency staff and private consultants for a workshop focused on the dual initiatives of main street improvement and establishing a permanent downtown farmers' market, park, and stage. Sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the workshop brought together officials from the Town of Independence, Grayson County staff, the farmers' market management, vendors and patrons, downtown business owners, and interested citizens. The two day workshop was designed with sessions that would involve specific stakeholders and target groups that could focus on details, as well as public sessions that were advertised and open for the full community to attend.

The morning of the first day included a walking tour of downtown and the farmers' market site. During the walking tour, the consultants examined conditions for pedestrians and connectivity assessments of Main Street and the core downtown area, as well as the context of the market site location. Working sessions were then held to meet and discuss issues, opportunities, site acquisition and funding strategies for McKnight Park. The group examined initial design concepts created for the site by Hill Studio (2007?) in prior design efforts. The working sessions outlined some key desired design elements and features of a future farmers' market and community park with a performance stage. The group worked to refine the design concepts, and during the



Figure 1- Various images from Downtown Independence.

remainder of day one, urban designers from Renaissance drafted initial concepts for the park. Concurrent with this, working groups further discussed actions, issues, and opportunities to improve the downtown streetscape, walkability and sidewalks. At the conclusion of day one, an overview presentation was given at a public work session. In addition the design concepts draft illustrations were put on the wall and discussed and refined as a group.

On day two, working groups focused on creating an action plan that is presented in section 4 below. This action plan focused on specific actions, as well as roles, responsibilities, to achieve those actions. Also during day two, the consultant team continued to refine a final site design schematic, as well as street level renderings of the future McKnight Park. The renderings for the site included a farmers' market, a community gathering and recreation centerpiece, and a stage for public performances, music and other events. The results of the final site design were then presented at a culminating public open house at lunch on day two. The remainder of day two was spent discussing details of the action plan and next steps, as well as the major themes for marketing the new park and farmers' market. This report, as well as the appendices, document the primary action steps and site design concepts that resulted from these two intensive days of work sessions.

### 3. A Vision of Collaboration: *"The Independence Community Initiative"*

The workshop brought people in the community together who don't normally have meet, and thus served as a catalyst event. The participants recognized the value of having some means to continue the process of collaborating on community improvements efforts in general. There was general agreement amongst workshop participants



Figure 2 - Workshop sessions included small working groups and public sessions to review progress and add feedback.

that it would be helpful to continue the momentum needed to realize the actions identified by the workshop. The workshop participants used the last day of the work session to brainstorm how they work together beyond the workshop itself. They wanted to continue to move this planning effort forward, be prepared to respond to future opportunities that might arise in addition to the immediate projects of the park, and improve walkability downtown. They discussed the pros and cons of establishing another potentially bureaucratic or burdensome organization framework. The group ultimately made the decision that future collaboration would be best achieved by creating a partnership of local government staff and private citizens to move forward on various community improvement initiatives. As a result, the team established ‘The Independence Community Initiative’, and drafted this guiding statement:

***Independence Community Initiative:  
A Park, A Market, A Future***

*The Independence Community Initiative is an informal, voluntary group of citizens, from both the public and private sector, committed to working together on projects that make our town a great place to live and visit. Our present objectives are focused on, but not limited to, creating a permanent McKnight Park, with a farmers’ market and stage facilities, and improving the walkability and experience of visiting our Main Street business and shopping area. We operate by consensus, and we are open to participation of anyone interested in helping.*

The action plan outlined in section 4 serves as the Initiative’s first work plan to achieve their objectives. It was further agreed that developing McKnight Park and improving downtown walkability would not be the only objectives of the Initiative, but that these were only the first set of priority objectives. Once these objectives were accomplished, the initiative could select and focus on a new set of community improvement projects.

The table below is presented as a guide to demonstrate how the overall goals of the workshop support the livability principles developed by the interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities.

Table 1

Livability Principles	Main Street revitalization achieves this by:
Provide more transportation choices. ⇨	Improve the streetscape to be attractive and accessible and improve comfort and safety for all
Promote equitable, affordable housing. ⇨	Preserve the existing buildings, including residential space on their top floors.
Enhance economic competitiveness. ⇨	Work with local businesses to improve downtown.
Support existing communities. ⇨	Focus investment and development on Main Street, which is Independence’s historic core.
Coordinate and leverage federal policies and investment. ⇨	Involve EPA, HUD, ARC, USDA, etc.
Value communities and neighborhoods. ⇨	Highlight the community’s commitment to downtown, its music heritage, and farming legacy in the region.

#### 4. Action Plan

The following goals and actions represent the next steps identified during the workshop event in Independence. The discussions pointed to the need for the Town to leverage local interest and assist in organizing the efforts of the downtown and park/market stakeholders. These actions include lead roles that are shared between the Town, the newly created Independence Community Initiative, representatives of the Market and others. It is anticipated that most of the actions can be accomplished within the next year. While many of the physical improvements described in Section 5 of this report require acquisition of the McKnight Park property, there are many steps that can be accomplished now. These include organizing and mobilizing the Independence Community Initiative, further developing the communication strategy for the park development, and finding the financial resources to make the improvements.

#### Goals and Actions

*Goal 1 Identify people, partnerships, and coordinated activities.*

- **Action 1.1.** Define organization structure, or operating principles of the downtown group, aka *the Independence Community Initiative*.
  - **Lead:** Mayor Reeves and Town Manager Jerry Hughes will oversee the ramp up of the organization and presentation of the Initiative's purpose at the outset. Long term leadership strategies need to emerge thereafter.
  - **Support:** Patrick O'Neil to represent business community of downtown merchants; Elaine Holton, will present information to the



Figure 3 – Mayor Butch Reeves and the consultant team tour the McKnight Park site. Bottom: The 1908 Courthouse building across the street from the site.

County; Rick will represent the farmers' market. Other representatives: Carol Lundgren, Hannah Martin and Dennis Leonard.

- **Action 1.2** Coordinate with the beautification committee to apply a specific focus on identifying and implementing small projects in downtown.
  - **Lead:** Master Gardeners.
  - **Support:** Chestnut Creek School of Arts.
- **Action 1.3** Identify a new events coordinator, to replace the current volunteer position.
  - **Lead:** Independence.
  - **Support:** Independence Community Initiative.

### *Goal 2 Identify site development issues.*

- **Action 2.1.** Identify historical designation constraints.
  - **Lead:** Rick Cavey to be the principal investigator, will look into town zoning, and follow up.
  - **Support:** Jerry Hughes; Elaine Holton; Dennis Leonard.
- **Action 2.2** Conduct site survey.
  - **Lead:** Town (Mayor/Manager) to ask for assistance from surveyors.
  - **Support:** It is anticipated that one of two local surveyors will be able to participate in the project at no or very low cost to the town. Rick Cavey to research public records.
- **Action 2.3** Phase I/Environmental Impacts.
  - **Lead:** Jerry Hughes.
  - **Support:** Elaine Holton to support Jerry Hughes; Jen Horton to follow up with EPA.

### *Goal 3 Expand community ownership of the project and promote it (McKnight Park with farmers' market and stage).*

- **Action 3.1** Develop park site design concepts.
  - **Lead:** EPA team to document workshop and design exercise materials.
  - **Support:** Steering committee reviews and utilizes materials to promote project.
- **Action 3.2** Outreach and integrate the Crooked Road into the park development process.
  - **Lead:** Independence Community Initiative.
  - **Support:** Elaine Holton and Grayson County.
- **Action 3.3** Expand vendor base by 10-15 new vendors.
  - **Lead:** Grayson LandCare/Independence Market.
  - **Support:** Existing vendors; Chestnut Creek School of Arts.
- **Action 3.4** Create a branding strategy and draft marketing materials.
  - **Lead:** Rick Cavey as a part of Independence Community Initiative.
  - **Support:** Town; EPA team to produce draft flyer materials illustrating design and key marketing elements for the Park (see Appendix).

***Goal 4 Accomplish steps that are short term and address any site development roadblocks.***

- **Action 4.1.** Identify and compile opportunities for walkability improvements and constraints of access and parking relative to VDOT rights-of-way at the intersection near McKnight Park.
  - **Lead:** Independence (Jerry Hughes).
  - **Support:** County (Elaine Holton).
- **Action 4.2** Develop program for VDOT property in the southeast quadrant of the intersection.
  - **Lead:** Town (Jerry Hughes) working with VDOT.
  - **Support:** Farmer' market representatives. Many ideas possible for active use of the site.
- **Action 4.4** Develop a long-term operations and management plan for the park. This is a longer term need in terms of details, but a conceptual framework needs to be developed in conjunction with the short term communications strategy.
  - **Lead:** Independence Community Initiative.
  - **Support:** Farmers' Market representatives.

***Goal 5 Capital Campaign***

- **Action 5.1.** Identify grant opportunities and funding resources list.
  - **Lead:** Renaissance/EPA has developed a list as part of this report and included it as an Appendix; Town/Grayson to follow up.
  - **Support:** Independence Community Initiative.
- **Action 5.2** Set up fund account to receive funds.
  - **Lead:** Town (Jerry Hughes); Grayson LandCare (Rick Cavey).
  - **Support:** Independence Community Initiative.

***Goal 6 Acquisition of McKnight Park site property***

- **Action 6.1** Identify property comparisons.
  - **Lead:** Town.
  - **Support:** Town will identify appropriate professional services.
- **Action 6.2.** Town to continue communications with property owner. Next steps include, sending him comparable properties and following up with phone calls to brief him on the status of the park improvement project.
  - **Lead:** Mayor Butch Reeves.
  - **Support:** Property research being done by others as part of other tasks. The town will pursue the prospect of getting an agent to assist in representing the town with the current property owner and negotiating a successful offer on the property.
- **Action 6.3** present concepts to Town Council work with them to garner support for the negotiation phase.
  - **Lead:** Mayor Butch Reeves.
  - **Support:** Jerry Hughes and representatives of the Independence Community Initiative.

## 5. McKnight Park Site Design

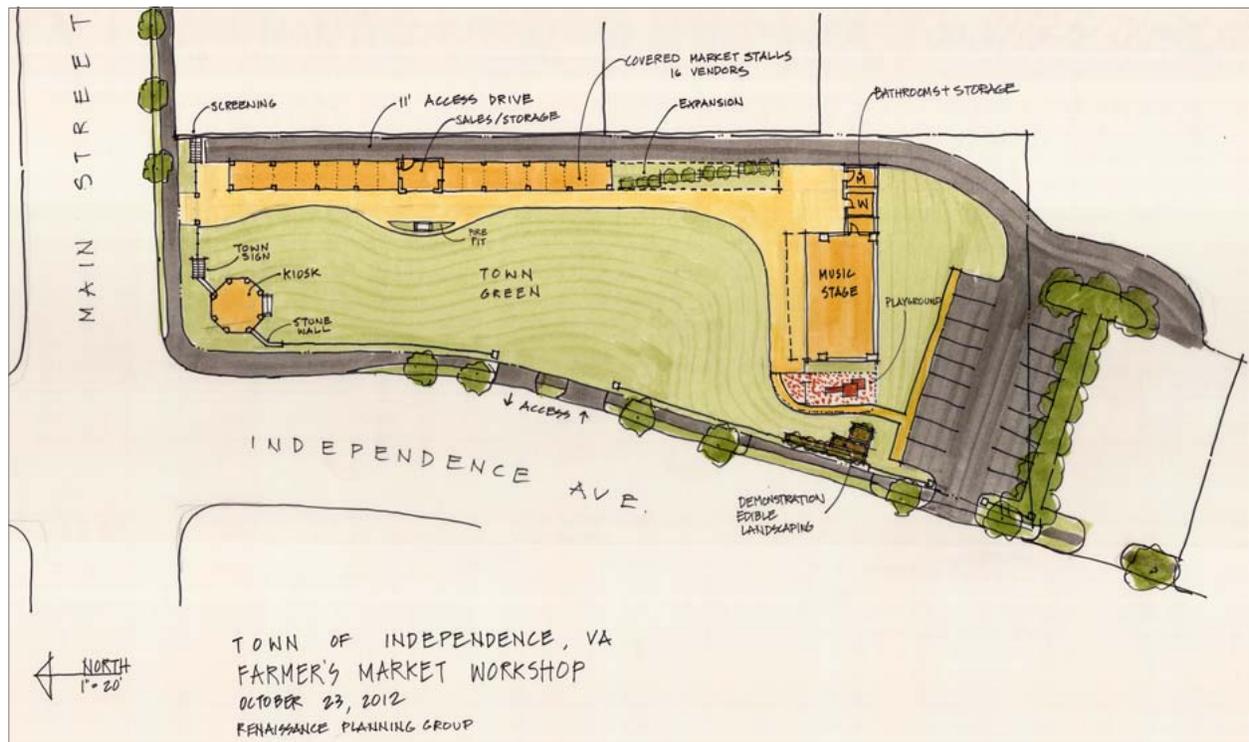


Figure 4 - McKnight Park Site Design

The graphics in this section were created during the two day site visit to Independence. They took shape after a site visit and discussion of a number of concepts for the site. The graphic above illustrates the potential site design for McKnight Park. The vision for the site is to become a permanent, enhanced, attractive, and valued community park at the center of historic downtown Independence. The graphics on this and following pages illustrate the intent of the site design principles. Some key features of this design are:

- **Flexibility** is a centerpiece of the design concept to allow the park to accommodate many uses.
- The design intentionally provides a stable and functional venue for a **farmers' market**, with permanent vendor **stalls** that have **vehicular access from the rear**.
- **Parking** is located at the south end of the site, adjacent to the Library parking.
- A permanent **stage** at the south end faces the Main Street and uses the slope upwards as a **natural amphitheater** for audience viewing.
- Adjacent to the stage is a **playground** facility and public **restrooms**.
- The central, open area of the park serves as the **Town Green**, and would remain unprogrammed for maximum flexibility.
- The corner of Main Street and Independence Avenue is a highly visible part of the site and a signature **kiosk-gazebo** is located there along with signage and a low, artfully done **stone wall** that allows for sitting.

- The whole park is flanked by generous and well landscaped **sidewalks** and **plantings**, with sidewalks both externally and more defined walkways around the vendor stall areas and stage areas.
- Other design elements include a demonstration **edible landscaping** area, a **fire pit**, and an **expansion area** for future vendor stalls to be constructed when needed.



Figure 5 - Panoramic photos of site as viewed from the south, facing north. Independence Avenue is on the left.



Figure 6 - Panoramic photos of site as viewed from the west, facing east down Main Street Street



Figure 7 - Cross section of street frontage of McKnight Park along Independence Avenue, facing east. The kiosk at the northern end and the stage at the southern end provide bookends to the site design, framing the public space and farmers' market activities between them.



Figure 8 – Cross section of street frontage of McKnight Park along Main Street, facing south. Note the architectural styles of the fence, kiosk roof, and other features that are intended to complement the style and architectural elements of the adjacent 1908 Courthouse.

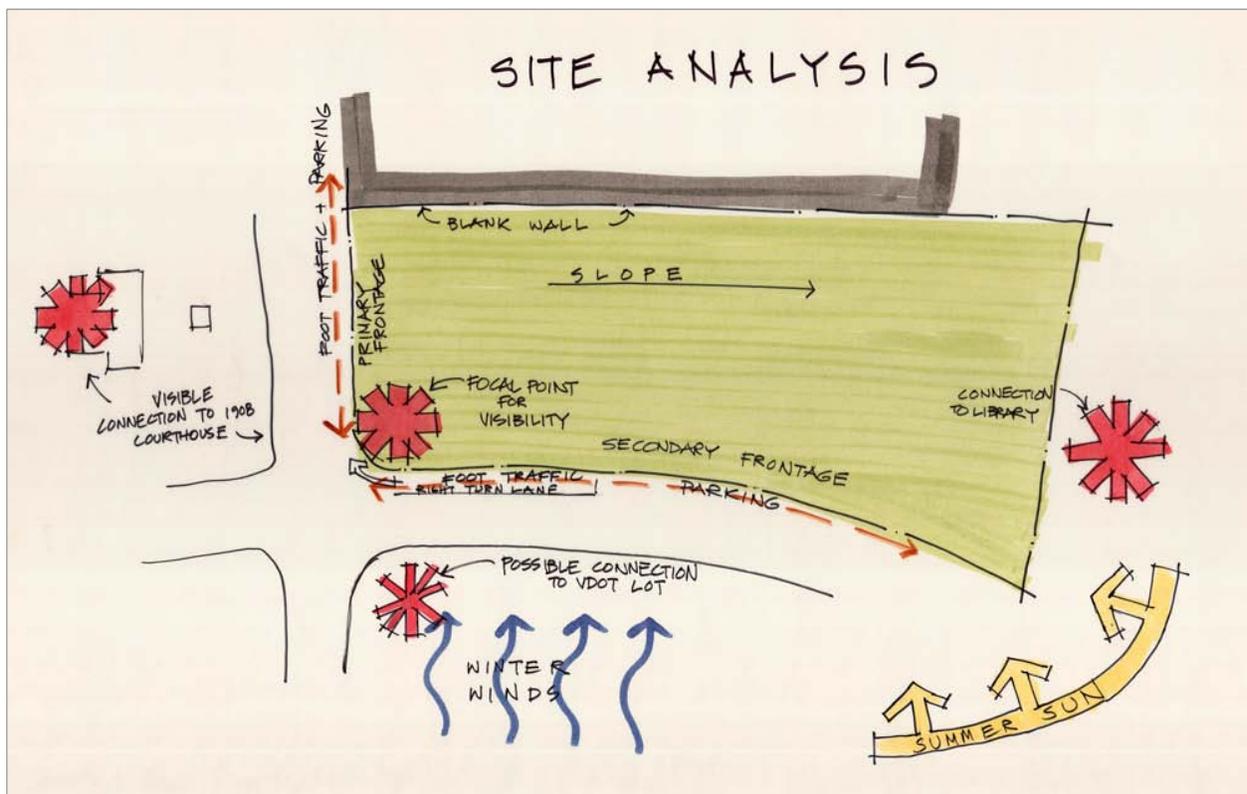


Figure 9 - The above site analysis diagram is a process illustration created early on in the workshop to understand the dynamics at play on the site including slope, wind, sun, and adjacent connections of importance.

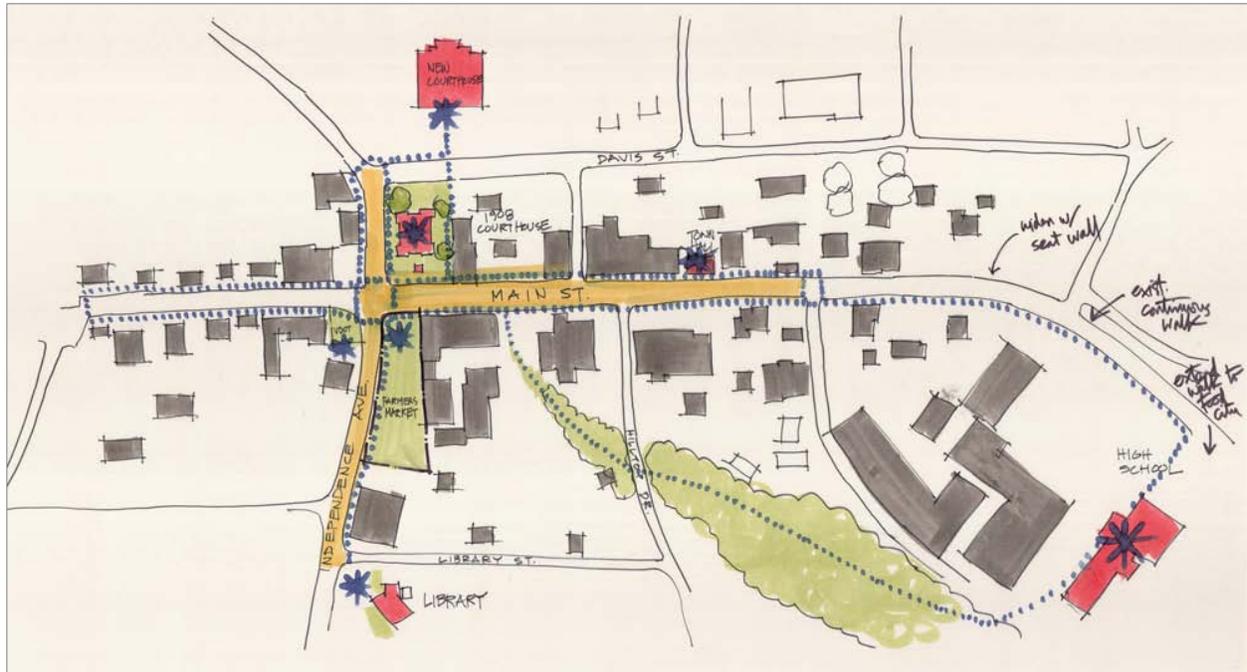


Figure 10 – The above illustration shows the relationship of the site to the downtown area and Main Street. The 58/21 intersection is an anchor of the downtown Main Street corridor, and as such, represents a large opportunity for the town to create and invest in a public space that will improve the experience and increase activities downtown. The blue dots indicate possible pedestrian/sidewalk improvement locations. This illustration was intended as a quick analysis and process diagram to better understand the site's connections to and relationship with the downtown and is not intended as a specific sidewalk improvement diagram.

## 6. Appendices

Appendix A: List of workshop participants

Appendix B: Walkability Assessment Photo Essay

Appendix C: PowerPoint presentation slides – Introduction, Overview, Case Studies, Walkability Tour by Renaissance.

Appendix D: Communication and Branding Strategy: McKnight Park – Independence Commons

Appendix E: Marketing Flyer for Site Design

Appendix F: List of Potential Funding Resources

Appendix G: The Partnership for Sustainable Communities' Rural Resources Guide for Sustainable Rural Communities and other potential funding resources identified for Independence.