

The Manteo Way of Building – November 2004

Implementing an innovative plan of community change, citizens, students, and elected officials work to recapture the enchantment of their beloved waterfront town.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

In recent years, residents of North Carolina's coastal cities and towns have witnessed unprecedented growth. And while locals like to extend a welcome to newcomers, they recognize that sometimes things can get a bit dicey. Residents want their community to retain its character and ambience but also desire convenience and affordable goods and services. Is there a way to welcome new neighbors and still maintain the character of the community? Folks in Manteo are finding a way to do just that.

Manteo's waterfront resembles a quaint maritime village, replete with a marina, a replica of a British sailing vessel, a lighthouse replica, a boardwalk, cafés and bistros, several inns, and numerous boutiques and shops. Residents and visitors can stroll, shop, and eat while enjoying a close-up view of Shallowbag Bay. It looks like it's been in place a good long time — but it hasn't.

Twenty-five years ago, instead of waterfront condos and shopping, massive aboveground fuel storage tanks lined the waterfront. Where sailboats now fill the town docks, fuel tankers off-loaded their product. Where a charming inn now provides accommodations for visitors, an abandoned warehouse once stood. And, while a replica of the Roanoke Marshes Lighthouse now rests on pilings at a town pier, a water treatment plant once held that position. Then something remarkable took place. The community of Manteo decided to make some changes — and they did so by bringing people together to rebuild and preserve their community.

Plan of action

John Wilson's family had been in Manteo since the mid-1800s. He graduated from North Carolina State University in 1975 and accepted a position with a Washington, D.C., architectural firm. When he returned for a visit in 1979, he took stock of his town and found it in a condition of disarray. Manteo had the highest tax rate in the state. Businesses were leaving. Storefronts were boarded up. The town was dangerously close to losing its charter. Wilson decided to stay and run for mayor. He won.

In 1981, three years before the town's 400th anniversary as an English settlement, Wilson had an epiphany. He reached out to Dr. Randy Hester, a former classmate at NCSU and a fellow graduate from the University's School of Design. He found Hester working with the mayor of Aurora, Grace Bonner, on a building plan for her town. Wilson and Hester made contact and formulated a plan.

Hester was taken by Wilson's passion for Manteo. "He loved the place," Hester says. "He wanted the town to recapture the spirit he experienced as a child playing on its bustling docks." Hester went to work. "I outlined a holistic community development process, no

mere ‘pretty park.’ The town board approved my idea, and I moved my offices to Manteo.”

It turned out to be one of the most studied town planning models in the country — the Manteo Way of Building.

Hester’s model was groundbreaking because it brought together students and faculty from NCSU’s School of Design, along with residents and elected officials in Manteo. The idea was to involve the community in the evolution of the community. “People’s opinions would matter,” Wilson says.

At the end of the year-long research project, which involved having faculty and students spend extended periods of time living in Manteo, the planning team came up with a proposal that was embraced by the community. What was needed then was money — and lots of it.

State Representative Charles Evans, Mayor Wilson, Town Planner Robin Reavis, Governor James Hunt, Senator Marc Basnight, and actor Andy Griffith went to the Capital to plead their case. Evans introduced legislation that created the Roanoke Island Commission. Griffith sat on America’s 400th Anniversary Commission. Wilson says Griffith “was always supporting funding for our plan.” The well-known actor even narrated a slide show at the Capitol to show the need for support. The efforts paid off: \$26 million was secured by grants and contributions.

With funding in place, Manteo went to work. The 20-year plan laid out specific goals — and remarkably, almost every goal was met. They included: restoration of buildings, construction of Roanoke Island Festival Park, a revitalized waterfront (including town docks and shops), the Elizabeth II sailing vessel, bike paths, boardwalks, and affordable senior housing.

The overwhelming success of the plan may have surprised planning professionals across the country, but it surprised no one in Manteo. “We had patience and perseverance,” Wilson says. The results speak for themselves.

Success begets success

“I hear people speak about how much they enjoy downtown Manteo,” says Kermit Skinner, town manager. “It makes me very proud of the town’s accomplishments.” Skinner also says word got around on the plan’s success. “Twenty years later, we still get requests for copies of the original plan.”

When the 20-year plan expired, however, the community realized it needed a new plan with a revised focus. “The first plan was to rebuild,” says Bill Parker, Manteo planning and zoning board chairman. “Based on the growth we experienced, we felt we needed a plan that focused on growth over the next 20 years.”

The community recognized the need for a plan by simply driving over the causeway bridge to the Outer Banks. “I had people come up to me and tell me they didn’t want Manteo to look like Route 12 on the Outer Banks,” Parker says.

Before long, residents didn’t even have to drive “over the bridge” to see signs of commercial sprawl. Parking lots and strip-style businesses began sprouting up along the U.S. Highway 64 corridor in Manteo.

Manteo turned to NCSU once again. Although Dr. Hester had taken a position at the University of California at Berkley, he again stepped up to participate in the new plan. Hester, along with David Stein, planning specialist at NCSU, and Achva Benzinberg Stein, chair of landscape architecture at the School of Design (and a number of other faculty, along with a new squadron of students) sat down to map out the new strategies. Faculty and students again packed up their cars with luggage, laptops, calculators, and notebooks, and headed east to Manteo.

One of the more interesting aspects of the approach to both the original and 2002 plans by the NCSU team was the integration of students into the Manteo community for periods of time. Students spent three days every other week in Manteo, living with local families. The students conducted research, including an in-depth survey, while blending into the Manteo culture to learn how best to preserve while allowing growth.

The first step was to determine what residents valued most about their community. Areas addressed by the survey included: “sacred places” (structures or spaces that would remain in place), increased traffic, parking, affordable housing, and quality businesses (residents wanted low prices but not “big box” chain stores). The survey provided some interesting data — along with a large response. “Forty percent of Manteo’s population responded,” says David Stein. “That number is remarkable. Typically, a survey of this nature sees a much lower number.” Citizens of Manteo wanted their voices heard.

The survey also showed that residents are willing to compromise on commercial development. They’ll accept needed businesses — if they’re designed and built in a way that holds true to the “spirit” of Manteo.

David Stein says one of the reasons for the success of Manteo’s planning process was the town’s desire, from the beginning, to give value to the opinions of the community. “When you can get a high number of people from the community involved in the planning process, you end up with a much higher number of people buying into the plan,” he says. But it didn’t start off that way.

“At our first presentation, a lot of people were skeptical — as are most people when faced with dealing with making choices that may alter their community,” David Stein says. “At my final presentation, however, something very special happened. It was almost like a love fest.” Residents, after going through the entire process, were excited with the results.

The current task for Manteo is to persuade developers to see their community in the same manner as residents. “We hope when developers see how much the people of Manteo

care about preserving the essence of their community, they'll do what they can to be a welcome addition to the town," David Stein says.

The new 20-year plan addresses many issues such as inviting landscaping, home design and size, green spaces, views, streets, parks, continuity of architecture, density, affordable housing, traffic, history, the arts, and commercial development.

Proposals for future development include: a new College of the Albemarle campus (with student and faculty housing), a new residential single-family/condo/hotel waterfront development, reconfiguring traffic patterns on U.S. Highway 64 and the U.S. Highway 64/264 junction, and neighborhood design. The community of Manteo got together and laid out some specific ideas of how they'd like to see their community grow while retaining its character. And they were part of the process all along the way.

One resident who was a part of the process all along the way is Andy Griffith. He's been an active member of the Manteo community for many years. Over that period, he's walked the downtown streets and seen what's taken place, and he's proud of the remarkable recovery of his beloved community. "If people don't believe it," Griffith says, "they can come on down here to Manteo and take a look."

Can the Manteo Way of Building be applied to other communities — ever larger, inland sites? "Absolutely," says David Stein. "The Manteo Way of Building is a philosophy — one that draws a community together to plan for the future of the community. That principle can work anywhere."

Bryan A. Oesterreich teaches English at Beaufort County Community College and East Carolina University.