

## SC Urban Land Institute Sustainable Leadership Summit

### Introduction to the TAP Toolkit Workshop 9.20.12

Good evening. I'm Pat Dilger and I own an urban design firm in Greenville, Overstreet Studio.

I was already a young grandmother when I received my masters in architecture in 1999. And, I can tell you that being a grandmother gives you an entirely different perspective on life. Your dreams are more about your grandchildren and the world they will inherit... about the quality of their community on every different scale... from neighborhood to region to our place in the world. So I feel very lucky to be a part of this initiative to improve the quality of our home.

I'm going to introduce you to our workshop, but first I'd like to tell you a little story to illustrate how we got here.

I have lived in South Carolina for 30 years. I know Greenville inside out. I know my beaten paths to the mountains and to the coast. I know Charleston and Columbia, but my exposure to rural SC was extremely limited, until I arrived in St. George for our ULI TAP in 2009.

Like most of our rural towns, St George is a place that time forgot, a little bit dusty and quiet. But underneath the shutters, their Main Street buildings have all of the charm and character you could imagine for a sleepy Southern town.

Our TAP team was charged with coming up with a strategy for revitalizing downtown St. George. But in order to visualize the renovated buildings, we really needed to first visualize the economic engine that might be reflected in the awnings and windows and street life.

So let's dream about an economic engine for a moment. After all, this is the really big elephant in the room.

It is a very common and natural dream to hope that a high tech, clean industry will come to your community to jumpstart your economy by taking advantage of your well trained workforce and your small town, family oriented quality of life. This would be an awesome economic engine and I think it is really important to keep this vision alive.

As a state, we can feed this vision by prioritizing education that will prepare our children to compete in the global economy in energy research, aeronautics, automotive engineering, and biotechnology... to name a few of our target clusters. But this process will take some time.

In the meantime, while we nurture this goal, our rural communities can capitalize on some low hanging fruit: the amazing assets in our own backyard.

The SC Tourism Cluster accounts for over 20% of our state GDP. Traditionally, we have focused primarily on golf and beach resorts. But we have a growing legion of hikers, paddlers, cyclists, photographers, and naturalists who are out there discovering the hidden beauties of our state.

And here is a good example. I stayed for a week on Edisto Island this month and spent only one hour on the beach. Instead, I spent my time kayaking through the marshland, enjoying the egrets, surrounded by jumping fish, planning my day by the tides. It doesn't get much better than this.

Like most of our TAP communities, St. George has some amazing natural assets of its own. The nearby Beidler Forest is an incredibly beautiful 16,000 acre black water creek system, where you can hike or paddle. John Audubon himself stayed in St George to study the wide variety of birdlife there. The Edisto River is a short drive away, offering paddlers access to a 58 mile canoe and kayak trail.

So when we sketched a revitalized Main Street for St. George, we visualized an Indigo Outfitter Shop with canoes leaning against the façade and backpackers and cyclists on the sidewalk. We sketched St. George Inn, a bed and breakfast with an Audubon Café and a Heritage Bookshop on the street level.

This new kind of tourism, some low hanging fruit already in place, could begin to act as an economic engine.

St. George, which is less than 3 square miles in area, is surrounded by beautiful farmland, another piece of the Tourism cluster. When we think of agro-tourism most people think of farm tours. But real value agriculture provides to tourism is wide open green space, organized by its own beautiful geometry, in a thousand shades of emerald and chartreuse.

Now, Agriculture itself is still a fairly strong industry cluster in our state, also accounting for more than 20% of our state GDP. Because our farms are mostly small, less than 100 acres, we are uniquely poised to become leaders in the emerging local and sustainable foods movement. This is because it is much easier for small farmers to adapt to the public demand for safe, fresh, local foods, than it is for the large corporate farms to modify their techniques. Many of our farmers are aging, but if you spend any time at the farmers markets you know that the young farmers are passionate about a new future for farming. And they are working hard behind the scenes to strengthen this important cluster, producing safer foods, expanding processing and distribution, reaching out to new markets.

The agriculture community is strong in St. George, so our sketch of the revitalized Main Street also included a Local Foods Market and Café... along with an outdoor Saturday Farmers Market on a key corner, completing a model for combining the agriculture and tourism clusters.

Now, this is not a new model. People spend thousands of dollars to travel across the ocean, to ride bikes or drive through the farmland of Tuscany, to stay in charming towns, to sample the local food and culture. But once you get off the main roads and into the farmland, South Carolina is every bit as beautiful as Tuscany.

Just imagine if you could ride your bike from our mountains to our coast, weaving through the back roads past farms and forests, staying in a bed and breakfast and enjoying local foods in charming small towns along the way!

This could create a mini economic engine of its own to help drive and sustain the revitalization of our rural towns. Remember that together tourism and agriculture already account for almost half of our GDP. They are already a strong economic engine for our state.

This kind of revitalization is one of the most effective recruiting tools for attracting the dream economic engines like technology and clean industry. I've met so many people who move to Greenville simply because they fell in love with our charming and vibrant downtown.

So we proposed this concept to St. George... 75 eager leaders and residents... and they loved it! We talked about our own community's success with public private partnerships. We shared funding sources and planning processes, housing strategies and marketing techniques, infrastructure plans and economic development models.

We planted all of the right seeds, but nothing came up. And nothing came up.

So this was a big problem in St. George. And our studies have shown that it was a problem in every other town we worked with across the state. Good seeds were planted, but very little progress has been made.

So, what can we do NOW to help the dreams grow?

These seven major focus areas... Economic Development, Housing, Private/Public Leadership, Master Planning & Community Development, Funding Mechanisms, Public Infrastructure, and Communications & Marketing... each one of these pressing issues requires complex strategies to implement. Learning how to deal with South Carolina DOT alone could require a college level class, just to get trees and parking and two lanes on Main Street.

What we really need is a Toolkit of Resources tailored for each of these challenges; a web based educational series to share specific resources to address these issues. This online format will help us connect with more communities and it will make it easier for our alumni to stay engaged in a meaningful way.

We have an amazing array of talents and skills and experience in this room and we thank you for offering so much of your valuable time and energy. We know you are at your best when you are sharing ideas and solving problems.

So, tomorrow we would like to divide you into groups to brainstorm our Webinar Series. Each group will take one of the seven focus areas, identify the five major challenges within your focus area, create a clear objective for a webinar for each, outline the content, and suggest speakers and resources.

The resulting TAP Toolkit will be an excellent resource to implement the vision, to keep the focus, to help the dreams grow. We hope this Toolkit of Resources will jumpstart the revitalization process for our rural communities.

But if the vision is to be sustained, we need a strong economic engine to drive it. I don't think we can wait for technology clusters to drive the economy and invigorate our small towns.

I don't think our government has the resources to sustain our communities while we wait for this to happen.

I think... and this is a grandmother as much as an urban designer talking.... I think we need to capitalize on the incredible assets we already have: the natural beauty of our countryside, our family farms, the culture and spirit of our people. These are values very much in the forefront across our country right now.

We can capitalize on these assets to develop a statewide strategy, using every resource in our new Toolkit to integrate our tourism and agriculture clusters in a new way.

Now, I don't think this will magically happen one small town at a time. It will require a shared vision, maybe starting with towns along our existing Heritage Corridor to create a model.

This new economic engine could then begin to drive our rural economy, setting the stage for a Tuscany of America, while we go about the business of educating our children for the new global economy.

I believe this is a sustainable dream for our grandchildren... and the best recruitment tool ever.

To borrow Hayne Hipp's timely challenge: "So, what are you going to do about it?"