

Draft Edgewood Road Gateway Plan

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Adopted on

The center of Bessemer City is located about two miles north of Interstate I-85. From this major highway, there are two primary corridors that lead into downtown. The more eastern exit off the interstate is Gastonia Highway (#274). Currently being widened from two to four lanes for much of its length, the highway passes through the Gastonia city limits before entering Bessemer City, and consequently, is out of our City's jurisdiction and control. Regardless, it currently has limited appeal as a gateway, as it is lined with retail developments and industrial properties that are often in poor condition.

The second exit off I-85 is slightly further from Charlotte, NC, the region's largest city. Completely within Bessemer City limits, the Edgewood Road Gateway Corridor is a two-mile, two-lane highway leading from I-85 to downtown. The corridor changes names three times along the way. From south to north, the road is named Edgewood Road, Athenia Place and Alabama Avenue. But for the purposes of this plan, the corridor will be referred to as the Edgewood Road Gateway, and will also include the section of 12th Street between Alabama and Virginia Avenues, which directs traffic into the center of downtown and further helps to link the two sides of the railroad tracks.

The potential of Edgewood Road as both an entry corridor and catalyst for economic development cannot be overstated. In part, this is because it has experienced only limited development to date. Unlike many gateway corridors, Edgewood Road has NOT been degraded by national franchisers and their ubiquitous signs. Instead, it has remained rural, lined primarily with single family homes, a cemetery, a handful of churches, the entrance to Southridge Business Park and a few locally owned

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Local Codes/ Design Guidelines**

Undertake Strategic Interventions

Establish a Green Buffer

**Design & Install
a Wayfinding Program**

businesses. The only strip development is located at the exit ramp from I-85. Here there are two gas stations. One is vacant and in disrepair. The other seems successful, although its appearance is lacking, primarily from the clutter caused by too many signs, most of them temporary. There is also a motel and restaurant, but both of these are set back from the road and have very little visual impact on the corridor.

Consequently, the challenge for Bessemer City is not so much about rebuilding or correcting Edgewood Road, but rather guiding new development so that it is consistent with the City's goals. The Gateway Plan (GP) builds upon four of the eight Key Values identified in the City's Strategic Vision Plan: *having well-maintained properties, maintaining small town character, a thriving central business district, and support for a broad business base.*

The entry corridor provides an opportunity for the City to introduce its sense of pride, its desire to grow and improve, and its expectation of having *well-maintained properties*. It is where potential business/industrial owners are first introduced to the City and where they form their first impressions. Certainly, potential business owners care first about both visibility and ease of access. But they also want to see some evidence that their investment would be matched by the local community. If the corridor is populated with failing businesses, homes, yards or public right-of-ways in disrepair, or simply too many asphalt parking lots, then it is hard to attract newcomers to the City, or communicate a sense of rebuilding and redevelopment. In this case, appearances matter. What a community and its gateway looks like is directly linked to its economic development. From a planning perspective, it is clear that public expenditures serve as a catalyst for private investment. Consequently, to continue to attract and build *support for a broad business base*, the City must take an active role in guiding development along the corridor that leads to the center of town.

Further, Edgewood Road sets the stage for the redevelopment of Bessemer City's downtown. The Small Area Plan for Downtown, undertaken concurrently with this plan, makes specific recommendations for the area's physical and economic redevelopment. But those plans for a *thriving central business district* will have limited viability, if the size of the consumer base

does not increase. To *maintain small town character*, local retailers and merchants need to be supported. Providing easy and attractive access to them is the City's responsibility.

The purpose of the Edgewood Road Gateway Plan is to help guide the development of the corridor so that it supports the City's goal for economic development and the residents' quality of life. To do so, the recommendations contained herein are focused on four specific initiatives highlighted in the blue blocks on the first page of this Plan, and described further throughout the document.

Strengthen and Reinforce Local Codes/ Design Guidelines

There are three ways for City leaders to develop the corridor. They can directly pay for development, they can incentivize and/or partner with other public or private entities to do the same, or they can require better development through regulation. This later initiative is sometimes disconcerting to some, as residents worry that additional regulations will deter new development from happening. In fact, the opposite is true. What developers value is a quick and transparent approval process. They expect to follow a set of rules, and want adjoining property owners to do the same, so as to support the value of their own investment. In many instances, land use regulations add very little to the cost of construction, but they protect the value of a developer's investment.

In Bessemer City, the following guidelines are recommended as part of the Gateway Plan. Some are already cited in the Bessemer City Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) that was adopted by the City August 13, 2007 and simply reiterated here. Others would require strengthening of existing ordinances. Most of these regulations will be further refined when Design Guidelines are written in the next phase of the project.

Control Signs

Signs in the city's gateway corridor should be limited in size. Temporary signs should be limited in number if not prohibited entirely. Given the speed of traffic, and the familiarity residents have of the location of shops,

services and restaurants, there is simply no need for large, lit signs. Instead, signs should modestly enhance the architecture rather than overwhelm it.

New signs are easy to control with more stringent regulations. Code enforcement should be increased for abandoned signs or those in poor condition, and fines should be collected until the signs are repaired or removed. Temporary signs, especially those applied to windows, should be prohibited.

Limit Franchise Architecture

Bessemer City's small town character is largely dependent on locally owned shops and restaurants and the absence of franchise architecture. National retailers tend to homogenize communities, making them look too much like one another. Bessemer City does NOT have this problem, and measures should be taken to protect the City's character by controlling franchise architecture. Rather than disallowing fast food restaurants and national retailers, the City should require any who chose to locate in the city, to do so in such a way that respects the rural character of the gateway corridor. Franchise colors should be limited, signs should be undersized, and parking should be located to the rear and the side of the building.

Prohibit Chain Link/ Barbed Wire Fencing

Walls and fencing should be allowed as necessary components along the gateway corridor. However, they should suit their location. Chain link and barbed wire are utilitarian products. Chain link is certainly suitable for bounding a rear yard, but not a more public front along the City's primary gateway. Barbed wire is a far more aggressive material, intended to deter unwanted and probably unlawful entry. Given the affordability of electronic monitoring, there is little need for barbed wire in a city. It conveys a fear of crime and suggests a lack of safety, two perspectives that are deterrents to the city's redevelopment. Barbed wire should be prohibited along the corridor.

As with signs, new fencing is easy to control through regulation. The City's Façade Improvement Grant should be expanded to include the removal of chain link/ barbed wire fencing in downtown.

Screen Dumpsters

Dumpsters are a necessary component of doing business. They should not, however, be visible from the City's gateway corridor. All dumpsters should be screened. Like signs and fencing, that is an easy regulation to enforce with a new business. Support for screening older dumpsters should be included in the City's Façade Improvement Grant Program.

Limit and Separate Paving, Driveways and Parking Areas

In some areas of downtown, parking lots bleed into the street creating both an unsafe and unsightly condition. Drivers can turn into the parking lot at any location, rather than be limited in their approach by a driveway. Pedestrians have no place to safely walk as neither a sidewalk or planting strip is present for their protection.

To address this problem, the width of driveways should be limited and planting strips with sidewalks should be required to separate pedestrians from streets and parking lots. To further preclude this condition, parking areas should be located behind or beside buildings.

Undertake Strategic Interventions

Edgewood Road should be considered a corridor that links a series of places. As such, its design should vary along its length to reflect the neighborhood through which it passes. Interventions should be made at strategic places along it to either enhance existing conditions, or improve areas that are unsightly or in disrepair. In an age of limited municipal resources, it is important that City leaders be very strategic about future investments. Each expenditure should be made with an eye towards the City's economic development and the citizens' well being. To accomplish these goals, the City should undertake small, specific interventions, that when combined and completed, would add up to a cohesive plan for the City's gateway corridor. The SAP contains recommendations for these interventions, and many are illustrated with "before" and "after images" to help residents better envision the impact of the proposed changes. The interventions are sequentially listed below from south to north, not per any other priority.

Create a Threshold off I-85

When exiting I-85 onto Edgewood Road, the entrance to the City is marked only by a standard highway sign, sited on a sloping, grassy planting strip. The sign sits in the foreground of two highway oriented businesses: a gas station and a restaurant/motel, both marked by high signs on poles, even though the establishments are highly visible from the street. (Figure 1)

Ideally, the signs for these businesses would be limited in number and lowered off of the poles. In exchange, the City could offer to pay for their advertisement on the blue merchant signs on I-85.

On the western corner of the exit is an abandoned and declining gas station. While the gas tanks have been removed, the decaying pavement and building create an unfortunate sight at the City's front door. The City should continue to work with the owner of the gas station to demolish the building and remove the asphalt paving from the site. If an agreement cannot be reached, the city should erect a six-foot high, temporary wood fence in front of the property to limit views into the site.

To create a more welcoming, colorful and meaningful threshold into Bessemer City, plant a wide strip of wildflowers on both sides of the road and a locate a new welcome sign within the field. Add flowering trees behind the sign to draw emphasis to the City sign over the



Figure 1. Existing entry

power lines along the road. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) has an extensive highway wildflower program and can offer expertise in and funding for flower selection and maintenance, as well as guidelines for tree planting and species selection along highways. NCDOT can also offer advice on the likelihood of widening Edgewood Road from two to four lanes to accommodate the increasing number of trucks traveling to Southridge Business Park. In public meetings, residents thought this widening would eventually be needed and urged the addition of the wildflowers, and sign to be done with this longer term perspective. (Figure 2)

Mark Business/Industrial Growth Area

The Southridge Business Park has the potential to evolve into a regionally significant center for business and industry. Currently, its presence in Bessemer City is understated. Improving the signage of the park is important, but so is marking its significant acreage in the city.

As the Southridge Business Park expands and extends west across Edgewood Road, require the developer to mark the length of the property with a row of planted trees. Marking the Park in this manner will distinguish it from the surrounding farmland and replace the informal hedgerow that now exists.

New development within the Park should also follow more stringent guidelines, making access to them more



Figure 2. New threshold

pedestrian/bicycle friendly. Rather than being located on the rear of the site, new buildings should be located closer to the front and parking/loading should be located to the rear or side of the building. These patterns would be more consistent with how the city's original industrial buildings were arranged. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Southridge extension across Edgewood Road

Link Bessemer City to the Southridge Business Park

As the home of manufacturing facilities for Hunter Douglas and Dole Foods, Southridge Business Park is one of Bessemer City's assets. But the link between the City and the business park is unclear. The first welcome sign is located well past the entrance to the park, making it appear as if Southridge is not located within the City limits. Further, both signs are only minimally landscaped, and consequently lacking in the importance they should convey. (Figure 4)

Bessemer City should link its own branding to Southridge by expanding the business park's sign to include the City logo. Rather than having a separate welcome sign, relocate it to the I-85/ Edgewood Road intersection and add the Bessemer City logo to the Southridge sign. Repeat the wildflower theme introduced at the I-85 exit, and add additional landscaping around the sign. Install a strip of differentiated paving to mark the entrance to the City and business park from Edgewood Road, and to support traffic calming at the intersection. Add a crosswalk once the Southridge Parkway is expanded to the west of Edgewood Road and develop guidelines that require the extension to include sidewalks, bike lanes and extensive landscaping. (Figure 5)

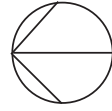


Figure 4. Existing Southridge sign



Figure 5. Sign with added linkage to the city

- 7 Turn Traffic at 12th Street
- 6 Link & Locate Community Assets
- 5 Complete the Pear Tree Allele
- 4 Develop Five Points
- 3 Link Bessemer City to Southridge
- 2 Mark Business/Industrial Growth Area
- 1 Threshold



Build a Traffic Circle at Five Points

The Five Points area at Athenia, Georgia and 6th Streets marks the edge of the city's historic mill district with a confusing, unsafe and overly asphalted intersection. Build a traffic circle with a green center to ease and calm traffic flow, decrease the amount of pavement and signify the more historic boundary of the City. (Figure 6)



Figure 6. New traffic circle at Five Points

Complete the Pear Tree Allele

A beautiful line of pear trees is planted between Edgewood Road and the walking track at First Wesleyan Church. They are one of the City's green and memorable assets. Unfortunately, a chain link fence topped with barbed wire lines the other side of the street, as do unsightly power lines and poles. These elements surround an old mill sited so close to Edgewood Road that it seems to extend into the road's right-of-way. As the gates into the fenced area are almost always open, and only a few trucks are typically parking on the large asphalt lot, it seems as if the fence has become obsolete. Regardless, its negative visual impact diminishes the positive potential of the trees across the street. (Figure 7)

The fence should be removed, and a line of trees matching the spacing and shape of the existing pear trees should be planted in its place. Doing so would create a colonnade or allele along Edgewood Road, enhancing and expanding one of the City's green assets, while also diminishing the scale of the power lines and poles that line the road. (Figure 8)

In public meetings, local residents supported the idea of completing the allele, but questioned the use of pear trees given their fragility. There was also concern expressed about the location of the trees in the right-of-way and under the power lines. Both are concerns that should be addressed when species selection is made. To assist in that the decision making, the city should refer to NC-DOT's document *Guidelines for Planting within Highway Right-of-Way*.

Link and Locate Community Assets

There is no directional signage when approaching the City's downtown core. Nor is there any sense of arrival. The intersection of Eighth Street and Edgewood Road offers the opportunity to begin that approach, and introduce directional signage, noting where the City's assets are located. Specifically, the signs should list and provide directions to the city ball fields, the water park, Downtown and East Downtown, the Historic District and Whetstone Mountain. So as to be anchored in the intersection, the sign should be backed by new tree planting and accessible via new sidewalks. Stamped and painted asphalt crosswalks should be introduced in this location as well, to mark the pedestrian oriented character of the downtown core. (Figure 9)



Figure 9. Eighth Street and Edgewood Road



Figure 7. Existing Pear Tree Allele



Figure 8. Allele with improvements

Turn Traffic at 12th Street

Bessemer City's downtown has always been separated by railroad tracks. But the two sides were linked in part, by a depot located between Virginia and Pennsylvania, and a green park space or wide planting strip running the length of 12th Street. It is unclear as to when the green space was removed, but it appears on the Sanborn Insurance Maps dated 1939.

The Small Area Plan for Downtown Bessemer City calls for the reestablishment and replanting of this once scenic link between the two sides of the track. With this re-emphasizing, 12th Street will become the corridor of choice for bringing traffic into the downtown core and through the retail areas on both Virginia and Pennsylvania Avenues.

But for that to occur, traffic will need to be turned off of the Edgewood Road corridor onto 12th Street. Currently, that intersection is no more significant than any other leading into the City, and will require improvement. (Figure 10)

Sidewalks and crosswalks should be added to the intersections, as should wayfinding signage identifying the location of the City's assets. When the mill is redeveloped, additional landscaping should be required, as well as more openings and transparency on the facades that face the gateway corridor. (Figure 11)



Figure 10. Current Intersection

Establish a Green Landscape Buffer

Edgewood Road is a very green corridor, primarily because so little has been built along it. Further, for much of its length, there is a fairly wide right-of-way or building setback requirement that is in place and has been enforced. These existing setbacks should be maintained if not increased. In undeveloped areas, setbacks should be 100' from the edge of paving. In this area, small signs could be located along with appropriate landscaping. Buildings, parking areas and fences should be prohibited within the setback.

In more developed areas, where a setback has already been established, the City should reinforce the corridor by designating the setback line as a "build-to" line. However, when possible, carports, parking areas and garages, should be located behind this line and preferably beside the building.



Figure 11. Improved Intersection

Design & Install a Wayfinding Program

Bessemer City is a town with a wealth of community assets. Many are recreational, while others are scenic. All are a bit difficult to find without local knowledge.

There are a significant number of welcome signs located on all of the roads leading into the City. Unfortunately, they lack a shared aesthetic, and provide no information about the location of the City's assets.

Consequently, the City needs a wayfinding program that helps both residents and visitors find their way around town and to the City's assets. This Gateway Plan recommends locating three new signs and enhancing a fourth. Each would be linked through a coordinated style package. (Figure 12)



Figure 12. Signage

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Edgewood Road Gateway Plan

The Gateway Plan for Bessemer City is the fourth of a six-phase community planning process. The recommendations contained in the Plan are based upon the Strategic Vision Plan, Marketing Study and Land Use Plan developed by the city and adopted by City Council in 2009. Each plan was developed with extensive public input involving a local Steering Committee, public meetings, and online through Wikiplanning™. The feedback was very positive with widespread support expressed for the Gateway Plan.

The Community Planning Process in general and the Gateway Plan in particular seek to illustrate the city leaders' and local residents' desire to more actively guide growth and redevelopment in their community. With this illustrated vision for the future of Bessemer City, they hope to partner with the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), Norfolk Southern Railroad and local industries to undertake mutually beneficial improvements to the City's infrastructure and downtown core.

Towards that end, it is important to coordinate the development of Edgewood Road with the plans for the Garden Parkway. While still in progress, there have been questions raised about the how the two roads would relate to each other, and if one road can be accessed from the other. Most importantly, Edgewood Road needs to remain open to I-85. But the gateway corridor also needs to be accessed from the Garden Parkway in order to assure that the City gains the greatest economic impact from its construction.

Bessemer City Community Planning 2008-2009:

01 Strategic Vision Plan

Where does Bessemer City want to go?

02 Market Study

Can we get there?

03 Land Use Plan

Where should different land uses go?

04 Gateways & Downtown Plans

How can we improve downtown and the paths leading to it?

05 Design Guidelines

What should growth look like?

06 Implementation Plan

How to get started...