

Mini-D.C.'s: A small-city boom revitalizes downtowns once left for dead

By [John Woodrow Cox](#)

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Drew Murphy stepped out of his law office on a recent Thursday afternoon, walked two blocks south to pick up chicken salad and, four blocks later, entered his brick rowhouse to share lunch with his wife. He seldom drives because he doesn't have to. He can walk in 11 minutes to his favorite upscale restaurant, eight to his favorite wine bar and four to his favorite park to play with their dog, Henry.

Murphy, 31, lives the quintessential life of a [young, successful professional](#) in the District — except that he lives nowhere near the District. His walkable world is in downtown Frederick, Md., a thriving city 45 miles from the nation's capital with one-tenth of the population.

Many of the same forces fueling Washington's renaissance are driving a small-city boom regionally and nationally. From the historic cities of Alexandria, Annapolis and Leesburg to the newer Metro-centric communities of Bethesda and Clarendon, [the desire to live within walking distance](#) of restaurants, bars, theaters and parks has revitalized once-withering downtowns, according to demographers and real estate experts.

Elsewhere, examples of the boom abound: Evanston outside Chicago, Pasadena outside Los Angeles, West Palm Beach outside Miami, said Christopher B. Leinberger, a George Washington University business professor who has studied the trend for years.

In the Washington region, few places have benefited more from the phenomenon than [downtown Frederick](#), where a flourishing restaurant, bar and art scene has transformed the 18th century county seat into a mini-D.C. In the past five years, the city has added 40 businesses to its eclectic downtown, Frederick officials say, and demand for houses in the most walkable parts of the city has pushed up median home prices.

Still, a mini-D.C. is not D.C.

Big housing complexes, large retailers and especially plentiful job opportunities are often scarce in small cities. The regulations that mandate architectural preservation in historic downtowns can also make development difficult or cost-prohibitive.

The long-term prosperity of downtown Frederick and similar places will likely depend on a steady influx of people just like Murphy and his wife, Meghan, a 27-year-old clinical social worker.

They used to live in the heart of Baltimore, but he grew up in Frederick County and wanted to move back. When a law firm made him an offer last year, she was reluctant. “I’m not ready for cornfields just yet,” she told him. So they rented a restored downtown rowhouse.

“We’re kind of still keeping what we had in Baltimore,” she said, between bites of chicken salad. “Just with a small-town feel.”

‘It’s amazing’

A man with a bushy beard and arms sleeved in tattoos held a folded stack of receipts. Chris Ritchie, 44, had just returned to Frederick after a week of buying antiques for his five-month-old home furnishings store, Smokestack Studios, when a fellow downtown business owner stopped in to say hello. He ticked off the new clients that had recently offered him work: an upscale restaurant, a local nonprofit group, two salons.

“Holy cow,” she said.

“Yeah,” he told her. “It’s amazing.”

Ritchie, who has two decades of experience in the furniture industry, searched from North Carolina to Pennsylvania for a spot to open his store. He sells everything from \$100 original Swiss Army canvas backpacks to \$2,600 high-grade leather sofas designed after Babe Ruth’s baseball glove.

“I was literally driving my car through Frederick,” he recalled, “and I said, ‘This is it.’ ”

Next door to Ritchie’s 4,000-square-foot studio is Brewer’s Alley, which is owned by Phil Bowers, whose family in Frederick goes back at least six generations. Bowers, who also operates four other restaurants in town, remembers an age not long ago when Ritchie would have just kept driving.

“You know,” Bowers said, “timing is everything.”

The history of Frederick’s downtown sounds much like that of many others. It served for two centuries as the community’s bustling commercial center until cars triggered an exodus to the suburbs. A nearby mall lured away four of the downtown’s anchor retailers, while interstates to Washington and Baltimore siphoned off jobs and remaining shopping dollars.

“The very asset that made it successful originally — that it was walkable — became a disadvantage in the late 20th century when everybody wanted to drive everywhere,” Leinberger said. “Now that very asset is what’s bringing it back.”

In Alexandria, the small-city boom has been underway for years and continues to transform a downtown brimming with historic buildings, bars, restaurants and retail shops that are a short drive or Metro ride from Washington.

Between 2000 and 2012, rent rates in the Old Town area nearly doubled, and median home prices rose to almost \$700,000. In the next three to five years, according to the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership, about 5,700 new housing units (mostly rentals) will be built within walking distance of the downtown area.

Though easy access to Washington is a huge asset, a number of small downtowns are still prospering without it.

Gwen Pangle owns a real estate company 40 miles from the District in [downtown Leesburg](#) and has lived in Loudoun County since the late '70s.

“I can remember a time actually when IHOP was the only restaurant Leesburg would support,” she said. “Everything else that came here would close.”

The downtown — where President John Quincy Adams and former president James Monroe once escorted the Marquis de Lafayette during his grand tour of the United States — now hosts more than two-dozen eateries. Homes sell for more than twice what they did in the late 1990s.

A 2013 poll by the Urban Land Institute helps illustrate why. [Millennials](#) — who along with [empty-nesters](#) are leading the movement back to cities large and small — place a premium on walkability and distance to work and school. The survey of 1,200 adults also found a shift in taste across all generations, with more than half saying they would prefer to live near a mix of shops, restaurants and offices.

But that doesn't mean everyone wants to move to big cities, said David Versel, senior research associate at the George Mason University Center for Regional Analysis. Many people prefer smaller downtowns, where they can remain close to family and avoid big-city housing prices, congestion, crime and sometimes troubled public schools.

Liz Sizemore, 26, so enjoys living in downtown [Fredericksburg, Va.](#), that she takes a 90-minute train ride to and from Washington four days a week to her job as a gift shop manager.

“I love D.C., but I thrive in smaller towns,” she said. “It's worth it.”

'More job opportunities'

By day, Frederick's downtown streets are neither big-city loud nor sleepy-town quiet. Slow-shuffling tourists take photos on the bridges over Carroll Creek as coffee-carrying millennials maneuver past sidewalk signs that advertise lunch specials and spa treatments, tattoos and yoga.

By night, available street-side parking is sparse, especially on performance nights at the Weinberg Center for the Arts. At [Volt](#), the [Tasting Room](#) and [Firestone's Culinary Tavern](#), tables are packed and bottles are emptied. The bars crowd with drinkers.

“It’s the best of D.C. or Baltimore or New York without the hassle,” said Valerie Hartman, who moved here with her husband, John, after raising their three children in a larger suburban house.

With demand strong, downtown homes that used to stay on the market for three months now typically go in one, said Sue Collins, who has been selling real estate in Frederick since 2001. In that time, she has also seen the city’s population grow by more than 25 percent to 67,000. Her daughter, Sarah, 26, who also sells real estate, just returned to Frederick — and rented an apartment downtown — after living in Baltimore and Phoenix.

But even its biggest boosters acknowledge that Frederick faces challenges. It lacks a grocery store or much new housing. In all cities, large and small, it remains unclear whether millennials will stick around to raise their children. Some in Frederick are trying, but many others won’t, including downtown devotees Drew and Meghan Murphy, who recently broke ground on a suburban home that they think will better suit a family.

And then there’s jobs.

Just 6,500 people work downtown, though that’s 1,500 more than a decade ago. City officials hope the area’s first hotel and conference center, tentatively scheduled to open in 2017, will provide an additional boost.

“Over time, we’re going to have the types of jobs that people are looking for,” said Richard Griffin, director of economic development. “It just doesn’t happen immediately.”

Alyssa Molina and Gloria Majchrzak, both 22, emerged from a Mexican restaurant near the creek on a recent evening. They both grew up in the area and said they have long imagined living and working in downtown Frederick.

Molina has even picked out a dream home near Baker Park. It has a garden and a white exterior and Victorian architecture. Majchrzak, a manager at a Target 40 miles away, pointed to a second-floor apartment above a now-closed deli: “I would love to have that.”

“Now that we’ve revitalized downtown,” Molina said, “there needs to be more job opportunities.”

Instead, she plans to start her career in New York City. Majchrzak intends to move to downtown Baltimore.

 **Comments**

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