

# When is a road more than just a road?

## Route 419: Place making and the art of leveraging

**L**OCAL GOVERNMENTS HAVE long relied on tax breaks, grants, and other incentives to lure industry to their communities to create jobs and increase the local tax base. Alongside such “deal making,” more and more localities are now adding another economic development tool: “place making.” Like those other incentives, however, place making can be expensive. In fact, it can be very expensive depending on what needs to be done to turn a place into an economic development asset. Moreover, the return on investment can take years, if not decades, to materialize, all of which makes it even more difficult to identify and commit funds to the project.

Still the benefits of place making are expansive, with aesthetic, social and economic dividends for the entire community that can go far beyond the cost of the initial investment.

So, how to do “place making” with limited resources? In Roanoke County, we have learned that leveraging – taking a (relatively) small investment and turning it into a much larger investment – is essential. With our series of “Reimagine” projects, this is exactly what we are doing.

### Route 419: Reimagining a Town Center

From its early days in the 1970s, the 1.1-mile Route 419 corridor has served as the County’s premiere shopping and business district – its unofficial “downtown.” In its current form, however, the area suffers from a limited availability of easily developable land, a near complete dependence on automobiles to bring in business, traffic congestion, outdated buildings, multiple store vacancies, and an overall lack of planned new investment.

Its assets include a prime location with proximity to Interstate 581, the growing Virginia Tech-Carilion healthcare/research/educational complex, and the City of Roanoke with its population of educated, high income earners. Furthermore, although topographic challenges have dissuaded past developers, there is plenty of undeveloped property for those willing to meet those challenges.

In short, the 390-acre area on Route 419 and I-581 is ripe for







redevelopment into a higher-density, pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly town center where people will want to live, work, play, and shop. Such a town center would bolster the local economy by attracting a skilled, diverse, and creative workforce. Its appeal would also extend to empty nesters, families, and individuals who desire the same amenities.

To enable such redevelopment, the County of Roanoke launched “Reimagine 419” in 2016. Under this banner, Roanoke County’s Economic Development and Community Development departments (working with outside consultants) conducted comprehensive analyses of the residential, retail, and food/drink markets. This analysis showed potential for 150,000 square feet of new retail development and a strong demand for multi-family housing.

Additionally, the same groups mounted a huge citizen-engagement effort and marketing campaign. This included regular updates (7,000 households and businesses contacted via mail and email), a video Public Service Announcement, an online education and input

portal, stakeholder interviews, place-making workshops, and community presentations. All this input was used to create the 419 Town Center Plan which was formally adopted and incorporated it into the County’s comprehensive plan in July 2019.

The 419 Town Center Plan rests on five key principles:

1. **Harness the power of location and market strengths** through choices in housing, retail, entertainment, and office space.
2. **Create an authentic place** through mixed public/private/civic uses, elements unique to the Roanoke Valley, landscaping, and public green space.
3. **Improve connectivity** through safer/better access for cars and transit, sidewalks, improved street crossings, and separated multi-purpose paths.



4. **Celebrate nature** through green infrastructure, greenways, bike trails, and health-oriented businesses and amenities.
5. **Promote a sense of community and inclusion** through choices aimed at younger residents and families, a diverse mix of retail and cultural choices, celebration of history, and tourism promotion.

## From planning to acting

Crafting and adopting a bold plan is one thing. Bringing it to fruition is another. This will, of course, take time and the involvement of many stakeholders – both public and private. It will also require leveraging resources from partner agencies.

The first step is to make the public investments needed to enable private investment. To create offices, apartments, restaurants, and shops the appropriate infrastructure – streets, sidewalks, bus stops, and pathways to serve them – must be in place. Also needed are the zoning and design codes to allow their construction. But patience will see the project through. Construction is slated to begin on the first project mid-2020 and finish on the last in 2026.

## Transportation projects build the foundation; leveraging makes it possible

As the foundation for the new town center, three key transportation projects are funded and scheduled: 1) street improvements, sidewalks, and bus stops on 419 itself; 2) extension of a key cross street to allow for development of multi-family housing; and 3) a diverging-diamond interchange at I-581 and Route 419 to improve traffic flow and safety at this central intersection.

Total costs of the projects will be nearly \$30M. Of that, only \$1.4M will come from the County; the remainder will be funded by State and Federal programs – a more than 20-to-1 leverage!

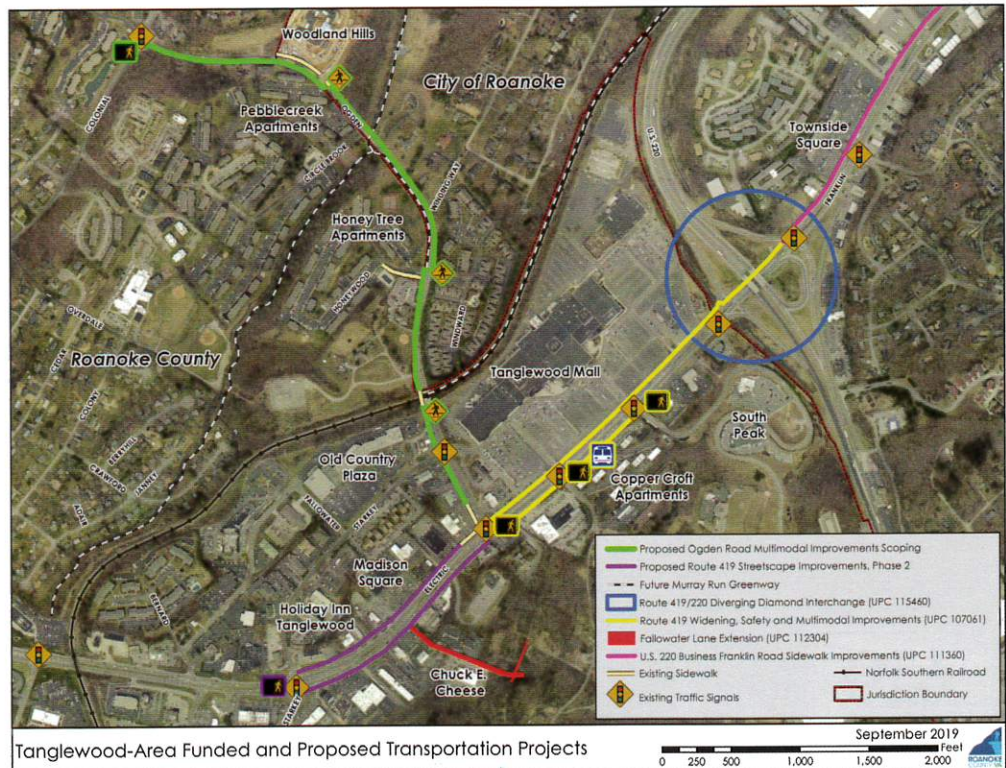
To accomplish this bit of funding magic, County staff worked closely with key partners from the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Roanoke Valley Transportation Planning Organization to complete five funding applications.

As hoped for, the investment of time, effort and public dollars is being bolstered by private investment. Carilion Clinic recently leased 150,000 square feet of space in the largely vacant Tanglewood Mall in the heart of the 419 Town Center. Once renovated, the space will be home to more than a dozen outpatient practices of Carilion Children's (as well as other clinical services) which will bring in more than 500 employees and patient trips per day.


Having this strong private partner anchoring the mall – drawing patients and their families from a wide region – will serve as a catalyst for future development of restaurants, retail, and other commercial enterprises, with several currently underway.

## Replicating the effort

The 419 area is only the beginning. County staff are replicating the “Reimagine” process to jumpstart redevelopment in two other key commercial districts in Roanoke County with the Reimagine Oak Grove and Hollins area plans, again starting with transportation and multi-modal improvement projects currently underway. Meanwhile, the County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department is supporting the County's economic development efforts on the development of Explore Park – the County's 1,000 acre outdoor destination attraction with hiking trails, river frontage, cabins, zip-lines and a craft brew pub – as well as the completion of the Roanoke River Greenway, 31 miles of scenic hike and bike trails following the river throughout the County and surrounding jurisdictions. Like the 419 Town Center, all of these places will become economic development assets – making Roanoke County, and the region, a more attractive place for businesses, families and individuals.



## Leveraging is key

None of this would be possible if the County had to foot the entire bill. By working closely with State and Federal programs and representatives (as well as investors and key stakeholders who provided valuable input), Roanoke County has managed to turn \$2.5 million of its own funding into more than \$125 million from State and Federal sources for a wide variety of transportation and recreation infrastructure improvements across the County. And if all goes according to plan, that public funding will itself leverage even more private investment, wages and taxes paid – making Roanoke County a premier place to live, work and play. 

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