



Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social and economic conditions downtown

ECONOMIC GROWTH

To bring back economic activity, hurricane-battered downtown broadens focus

As Hurricane Florence loomed in September 2018, downtown leaders in Wilmington, NC (est. pop. 122,610), had plenty of time to prepare. Downtown Wilmington Inc. canceled a commercial property showcase and collected cell phone numbers from downtown merchants. Workers took down street banners, removed hanging flower baskets, and scoured the downtown district for trash can lids, recycling receptacles, and other potential projectiles.

“We saw it coming for a week,” recalls Ed Wolverton, president of Wilmington Downtown Inc.

Perhaps the most ominous sign for Wilmington was the arrival of Jim Cantore, The Weather Channel’s storm-chasing meteorologist. Mercifully, the storm was downgraded from Category 4 to Category 1 strength before it struck the Carolina coast.

Less mercifully, Florence sat atop Wilmington for several days and dumped two feet of rain. After the storm passed, water from upriver flooded downtown Wilmington.

While there was little in the way of physical devastation in downtown Wilmington, activity plummeted. The district was dead for days, then for weeks. Across its impact zone, Florence caused more than \$20 billion in damage, leaving behind power outages and flooding.

“Our merchants were immediately saying, ‘We don’t have customers,’” Wolverton recalls.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper declared a state of emergency, and he came to Wilmington to tour flood damage. Wolverton had a different goal in mind: He asked the governor to tell people that downtown was open for business.

Wolverton also put out the message via Facebook and through the downtown website.

“Our merchants were immediately saying, ‘We don’t have customers.’”

Still, business was slow to come back. So Downtown Wilmington spearheaded four weeks of concerts and other events. Local bars, restaurants, and media companies sponsored the lineup of

events dubbed Over Flo — as in “over Florence,” or given all the rain dropped by the storm, “overflow.” Each week during October, the downtown organization hosted some sort of event tied to Hurricane Florence.

The events aimed to raise money for downtown nonprofits by selling hats, T-shirts, and stickers.

One free concert drew 1,000 people and raised \$23,000, Wolverton says. Recipients of the Over Flo fundraisers included



www.DowntownDevelopment.com

Reprinted from the February 2020 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange*
© 2020 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved.

the Salvation Army and a regional food bank.

A local artist designed a logo for the Over Flo events. Organizers launched an Over Flo page on Facebook.

Downtown merchants created promotions such as Foodies Over Flo appetizers for \$5 with a portion of the sales donated to the campaign.

Other merchants created bracelets, artwork, and other special items for the campaign.

“We crafted our message to tie together several of our economic sectors: Music Over Flo, Arts Over Flo, Shops Over Flo, and Food and Beverage Over Flo,” Wolverton says.

As the events proved successful at both raising money and conveying Wolverton’s message, he

broadened the project’s horizons. Over Flo expanded to include a benefit concert by Willie Nelson’s son at a venue outside of downtown, and a golf tournament.

“We started doing things well beyond our geographic comfort zone and well beyond our organizational comfort zone,” Wolverton says.

In all, Over Flo events raised more than \$137,000 — and they forcefully conveyed the message that downtown Wilmington had survived the storm intact.

On the downside, Wolverton says, hosting weekly daylong events was grueling.

“You have to be on the entire time,” Wolverton says. “It’s hard physically and mentally.”

Contact: Ed Wolverton, Downtown Wilmington, 910-763-7349. **DIX**

Downtown Idea Exchange

36 Midvale Road, Mountain Lakes, NJ 07046

Telephone: (973) 265-2300 • Fax: (973) 402-6056 • Email: info@DowntownDevelopment.com • Website: www.DowntownDevelopment.com

Downtown Idea Exchange is published monthly by Alexander Communications Group, Inc.



© 2020 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Alexander Communications Group.