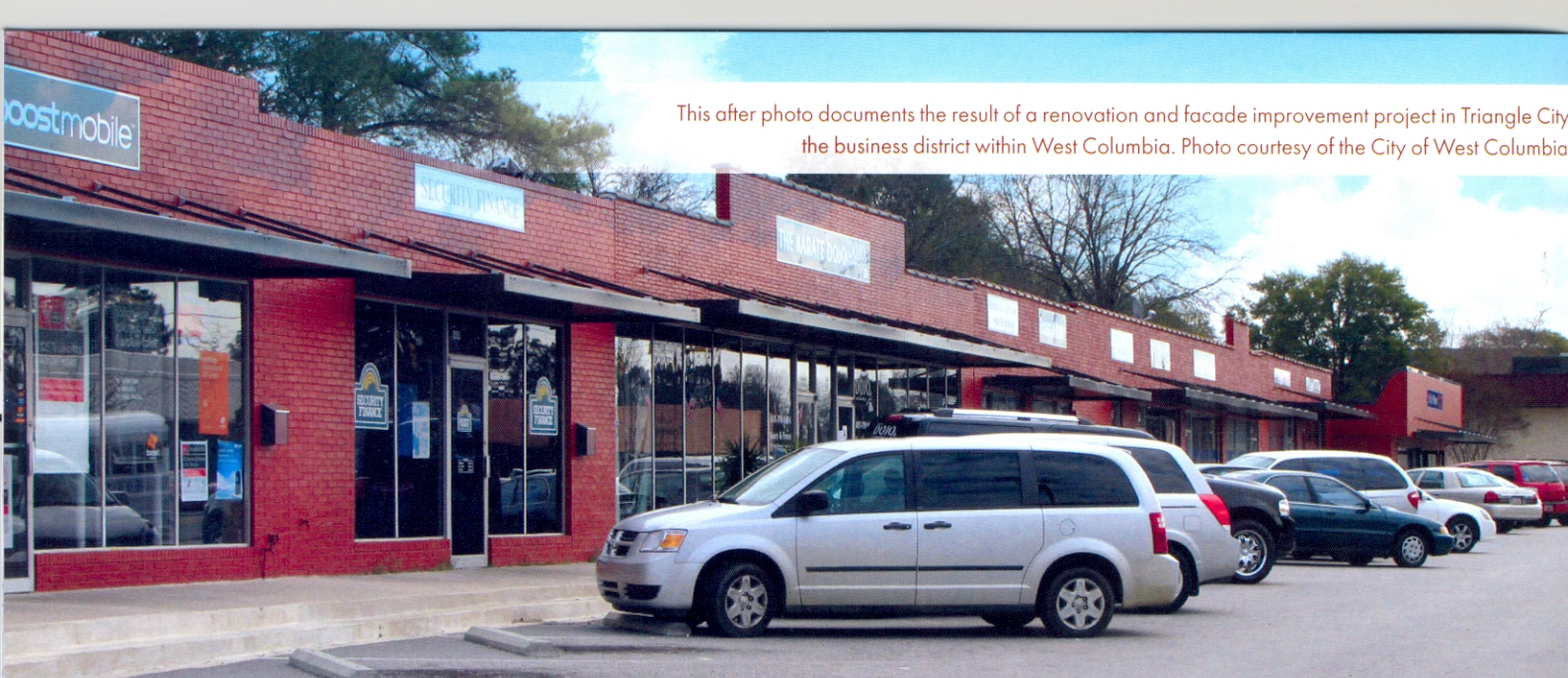


This after photo documents the result of a renovation and facade improvement project in Triangle City, the business district within West Columbia. Photo courtesy of the City of West Columbia.



Cities improve AGING INFRASTRUCTURE to promote *economic development*

In the small town of Wagener, the aging water and sewer infrastructure have led to massive leaks on Main Street. Underground asbestos pipes – which are obsolete these days – have had several breaks in the past few years. One area of town near the high school had no fire hydrants. Officials feared that if the school ever caught fire, they would have to run a hose from town to extinguish the flames.

But the town has received more than \$600,000 in funds over the past year from the federal Community Development Block Grant program, ensuring that Wagener will be able to improve its water system along two major roads in town, and clean up contamination and remove an eyesore by tearing down a vacant gas station.

With the city's budget already stretched thin, "we could not possibly repair our sewer and water systems with what we have," said Wagener Mayor Michael Miller.

Wagener repairs leaks regularly, but after paying for the equipment, tests, lab fees and chemicals that are

necessary to stay in compliance with DHEC, OSHA, and EPA regulations, there is not enough money left to make replacements, said Public Works Director Jamie Preacher.

"All we can do is patch and pray," Preacher said. "There are a lot of unseen costs in operating a public works department, and without the grants from CDBG, municipalities cannot repair their infrastructure."

Community Development Block Grants, a program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development since the mid-1970s, fund local projects like affordable housing, anti-poverty programs, and infrastructure development. Proposed CDBG projects must benefit a majority of low-to-moderate income people, prevent blight or meet an urgent health need. Just last year, South Carolina communities of all sizes received more than \$50 million through CDBG to support local development projects.

In countless cities and towns, CDBG funds provide the infrastructure improvements that are a catalyst for economic development.

Façade and renovation projects funded by CDBG grants have brought new life to the business district in West Columbia, according to Mayor Bobby Horton.

West Columbia recently completed the second phase of a renovation and façade improvement project in a two-block area of Triangle City, which has been the city's business district since the 1940s, said Economic Development Director Donna Smith. The work has had a positive aesthetic impact on the area and has sparked economic revitalization, she said.

The city also has received preliminary approval of a water line improvement project for one of the oldest districts in the city. The current water lines are small and rusted which cause continuous breaks and do not accommodate fire hydrants. The project proposes upgrading the lines and adding three hydrants, Smith said.

The façade and renovation projects would not have been undertaken without CDBG funding. Both have promoted new and increased business in the Triangle City portion of West Columbia. These projects have resulted

in private businesses upgrading and improving their facilities, bringing growth and jobs to that area, Horton said. Some water and sewer projects in very low income portions of the city would have taken years to complete, if at all. CDBG funding is critical to provide similar improvements in economically disadvantaged areas of the city.

The City of Georgetown already is seeing the results of its work completed using CDBG funds. The historic seaport city has received \$3.5 million in CDBG the last two years for streetscape and drainage improvements. Those upgrades have spurred residential growth, with commercial expected to follow, according to City Administrator Chris Eldridge.

“We have 26 homes slated for construction and four Habitat houses,” Eldridge said. “Once the stormwater project is completed it will make our Highway 17 corridor more attractive to commercial development due to lessened flooding risk.”

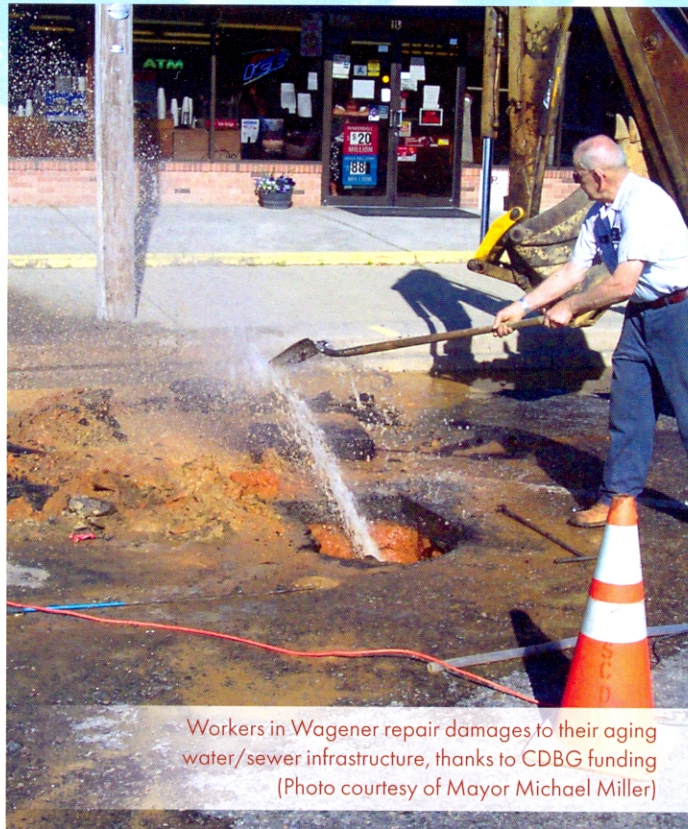
Eldridge noted that the work also is generating jobs, with around 30-40 people working on the stormwater project on a daily basis.

The grants also are important to small towns like Harleyville, which has a population of 654.

In 2004, the town began an overhaul of its water system, which originally had been installed during the 1960s. Harleyville was awarded a total of \$1 million for its water project, according to Clerk/Treasurer Amanda Childers. In addition, the town has been awarded more than \$250,000 in CDBG funds to rehab two of its sewer pump stations.

“These CDBG projects have been vitally important for our city,” Childers said. “The ability to keep our utility systems updated allows us to provide services to new businesses. Without this funding, our aging system would very likely have been unable to support our current population much less any new growth.”

Funding is always an issue in a small town, and projects could not be completed without



Workers in Wagener repair damages to their aging water/sewer infrastructure, thanks to CDBG funding (Photo courtesy of Mayor Michael Miller)



The historic seaport city of Georgetown has received \$3.5 million in CDBG funds for streetscape and drainage improvements. (Photo courtesy of the City of Georgetown)

the grant money, said Mayor Charles Ackerman. Yet without such updates, development options are limited.

“We’re trying to prepare for a combination of residential and business growth,” Ackerman said.

The Town of Port Royal has used CDBG funds for several sewer upgrades in low-to-moderate income areas, and was awarded a planning grant that allowed the town to identify where its septic systems were failing. Funds also helped the town begin the process of creating a capital improvements plan to identify those areas most desperately in need of sewer due to potential impacts on critical areas nearby.

“For the town it is about improving the quality of our residents’ lives and preserving our adjacent critical water bodies that could be impaired due to failing septic systems,” said Town Manager Van Willis.

Without CDBG funds, Port Royal does not have the resources to make the significant sewer improvements necessary in its low-income areas, Willis said. The town is considering applying for another CDBG through the Village Renaissance program to address the impact of the economy on the downtown area and to help improve the prospects for selling its closed and blighted port.

“As a traditionally blue-collar community, under the current constraints of legislation governing taxation, it would be absolutely impossible to take these projects on financially,” Van Willis added.

This article is reprinted from the Cities Mean Business magazine Summer 2011 issue. For a copy of the magazine, visit www.masc.sc (keyword: CMB).