

III. Market Overview

A. Demographic & Economic Information

Within the Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton MSA is a population of approximately 625,000. The City of Wilkes-Barre, according to the 2000 United States Census, has a population of approximately 43,120. In recent years, the population has declined. The following is a summary of demographic and economic statistics for Wilkes-Barre. All information is based on 2000 Census information unless otherwise stated. Additional demographic and economic information is found in the residential, office and retail sections of this Report.

Population

- The 2000 population of Wilkes-Barre included 92.3% white persons, 5.1% black persons, 0.8% Asian persons, 1.6% persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, and 0.5% other.
- The median age of residents in Wilkes-Barre in 2000 was 38.8 years, with 20.6% of the population age 65 or older.
- There were 17,961 households, with an average size of 2.20.
- The average family size was 2.96.
- Approximately 77% of residents in 2000 had a high school diploma, with 13% having a college degree.

Income

- The median family income in Wilkes-Barre was \$36,630. The median family income for the Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton MSA was \$43,606, while the median family income for Pennsylvania was \$49,184.
- The median Wilkes-Barre household income was \$26,711, compared with \$34,161 for the Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton MSA, and \$40,106 in Pennsylvania.
- The average per capita income in Wilkes-Barre was \$15,050, with an average per capita income of \$18,229 for the Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton MSA and \$20,880 in Pennsylvania.
- The number of Wilkes-Barre families living at the poverty level in 2000 was 12.1%, with 13.5% of those 65 and over living at the poverty level. In the Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton MSA, 7.6% of families were living at poverty level, and 7.8% of families in Pennsylvania.

Demographic Comparison - Downtown Wilkes Barre and City of Wilkes Barre

	<u>2002 Population</u>	<u>Projected 2007 Population</u>	<u>2002 Median Age</u>	<u>2002 Median Household Income</u>	<u>2002 Average Disposable Income</u>	<u>2002 Per Capita Income</u>
Downtown Wilkes Barre	3,979	4,033	39.6	\$18,759	\$24,184	\$12,696
City of Wilkes Barre	44,079	41,698	40.3	\$29,155	\$33,134	\$16,380

* All demographic data based on ScanUS and U.S. Census Bureau data.

Economy

- The Wilkes-Barre unemployment rate was 4.9% in 2000, compared with 3.3% for Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton MSA, and 3.5% for Pennsylvania.
- Major employers in the area are in the government, manufacturing, retail trade and service, health care, legal and education sectors. Large employers include Commonwealth Telephone Enterprises, Wyoming Valley Health Care Systems, Veterans Administration Medical Center, Penn State Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center, Social Security Administration, Sallie Mae, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of NEPA, PNC Bank, and Techneglas.
- A 1997 real estate survey taken by the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business & Industry showed that approximately 16.2% of office space and 1% of industrial space in the area was vacant.

B. Business Climate

“Business climate” is generally defined as the level of support for businesses present in a community, level of customer service, as well as how ‘friendly’ the community is viewed by outsiders. The focus groups identified many business climate–related problems, as well as suggestions for change that would vastly improve the business climate in Wilkes-Barre.

The focus group discussions and interviews conducted by the consulting team clearly indicated that residents and businesses feel that the City of Wilkes-Barre Administration is not customer service oriented, does not go out of its way to help and promote either local businesses or those looking to locate in the City. Both residents and businesses are attracted to places that provide them security, convenience, efficiency, comfort and welcome. They avoid those that do not.

The lack of infrastructure maintenance and capital improvements was also indicated as major concerns. Other issues identified include:

- Lack of leadership in the City.
- Existence of significant controversy and politics within the City.
- A negative, declining image of Downtown.
- Limited assistance or guidance provided to businesses by the City bureaucracy.
- Businesses viewed as a burden by the City.
- Limited cooperation, coordination and assistance between Wilkes-Barre businesses.
- No business retention/growth program.
- Safety concerns (lack of lighting, inadequate police presence, increased crime).
- City regulatory/approval process does not promote flexible, quality development.
- Taxes structure - cost versus benefit and return.

Following are some suggestions for change that will create a positive business climate and present the Downtown in a better position:

- Develop strong, harmonious leadership for the City.
- Promote a strong image of Downtown as a location for residents and businesses – engage in positive marketing.

- Emphasize the positive aspects of Downtown - cultural activities, Farmer’s Market, restaurants, and special events and programs – as part of the marketing strategy.
- Work with local media to create and disseminate positive stories and accomplishments regarding the Downtown. A systematic approach to provide and produce these stories is vital to the enhancement of the Downtown’s image and to change its current negative reputation.
- Adopt a business friendly and customer service oriented approach. Every City department should adopt this ideal.
- Bring together all stakeholders to create a better Downtown.
- Streamline the approval process - create a “one stop shop” for governmental approvals. Designate an Ombudsperson to support and assist businesses.
- Evaluate existing zoning ordinances, and amend them if necessary to ensure that it provides development flexibility while creating buildings that are compatible with the historic qualities and pedestrian scale of the Downtown.
- Create a mentor/peer program for new businesses, institutions, and residents.
- Promote small business technical assistance available through Wilkes University and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
- Develop City Economic Development Programs to support and grow existing businesses while attracting new opportunities to the Downtown.
- Revise the City’s Keystone Opportunity Zone designations that maximize the benefits of sites for new development.
- Evaluate the services provided by the City. The current tax structure provides a significant disincentive to economic development, as well as investment in home ownership. Tax rates cannot be lower without evaluating service inefficiencies or the increase in revenues (more businesses, residents, and spending).

The biggest barrier to revitalizing downtown Wilkes-Barre is the current business climate. The issues perceived by the residents and business community must be addressed. A positive business climate is crucial—without it the City will continue to decline.

C. Infrastructure

LPC completed an analysis of the infrastructure currently located in Downtown as well as the various related programs and projects, both existing and proposed. Wilkes-Barre is fortunate to have a very pedestrian-friendly, walkable Downtown. The mixed uses along the streets, the scale and size of the street system, and the interesting and diverse architecture offered in part by the presence of a great variety of historic buildings—all of these factors create the positive feel of a village. Public Square and the proximity of the Susquehanna River to Downtown are important contributors to this feeling. Access to a water features is often key to the success of a place.

Many communities all over the country are trying to recreate the type of infrastructure and charm that Downtown already has in place. New Towns and Neotraditional Neighborhood Developments are popping up all over the country. By making maintenance and improvement of its infrastructure a priority, Downtown Wilkes-Barre can wield a significant advantage over other venues in the market and region.

Analysis and Assessment

Susquehanna River

There are major concerns about the level of pollution in the Susquehanna River, which restricts the River's use for recreational purposes. Efforts to clean up the River have begun, however. In 2002, Representative Paul Kanjorski obtained a \$900,000 federal grant to separate some of Wilkes-Barre's combined sanitary and storm sewers. Because the two types of sewers are combined, in times of heavy rainfall, raw sanitary sewage outfalls directly into the River. According to the Wyoming Valley Sanitary Authority, there are approximately 50 combined sewer outflows in the Valley; 12 of these create up to 85% of the sanitary sewage pollution, and 6 are in Wilkes-Barre.

Public Square

Public Square is often described as underutilized and undermaintained. The Square has minimal level of improvement since its redesign after the 1972 Flood. The existing design, including the landscaping, water feature, lighting and furniture, needs to be evaluated and enhanced. The pedestrian and vehicular circulation associated with the Square should also be reviewed. In addition, the lack of maintenance of the Square needs to be addressed.



Street Lights

During 1999, several of the light poles installed in 1972 as part of the City's redevelopment after Tropical Storm Agnes fell over, their flush-mounted bases degraded by water and road salt. Lights fell at Public Square, in front of the Osterhout Free Library, in front of M&T Bank, in front of Top of the Slope Ski and Rental Shop on South Main Street, in front of Boscov's, and on East Market Street. Pennoni Associates was hired to design a new lighting plan, involving rewiring and replacement of the 180 existing poles with 149 staggered light posts selected to be similar to poles that were used Downtown in the 1920s.

The first phase of the plan, including East Market Street, Public Square, and the second block of South Main Street, was scheduled to begin in early summer of 2002, with all three phases of the plan to be completed by the end of the year. However, as of Fall 2002, no work on the replacement plan had been started, leaving fallen or removed poles replaced by temporary lighting shown in the picture to the right.



Streetscape

Much of the Downtown streetscape that exists today dates to the improvements made after the 1972 Flood. The canopy, sidewalks, and street furniture including trash cans and benches are in below average shape and are poorly maintained. Several areas of sidewalks, especially in the core, are in dangerous condition.

As shown in the picture to the right, in several places the existing canopy obstructs views of the architecture and retail windows of many buildings. The canopy has proven to be difficult to keep clean and maintain over the years. However, it has provided protection from the elements during bad weather.



Street Trees

Wilkes-Barre is fortunate to have the many trees that grace its streets. Several areas of Downtown contain intact stands of street trees that are in good shape as shown in the picture to the right. Many of these stands are located on the campuses of King's College and Wilkes University. It seems in many areas of Downtown, the individual business and homeowners maintain the street trees located on their property. Several focus group comments centered on the City's lack of maintenance related to street trees, especially in the core of Downtown and on public property.



Signage

The existing street signage system can be improved. Currently, there exists a lack of directional and wayfinding signage for Downtown's major attractions and cultural facilities. Welcome signage identifying the Downtown or its gateway elements are non-existent.

Street Paving/Curbs

Many of the streets located Downtown are in need of repaving and repair. Several have significant potholes as a result of the winter weather. The city reports that several larger roads in Downtown are planned to repaved in 2003, including Coal Street, Public Square, part of South Main Street, and part of Wilkes-Barre Boulevard.

As shown in the picture to the right, many streets lack crosswalk markings due to wear.



Programs and Projects

There are important programs and projects related to Downtown's infrastructure that either are already in place or are proposed. The following is a summary of those programs and projects:

Clean and Green Program

The Clean and Green Program was inaugurated by DCP in November 2001. The Program's mission is to beautify the Downtown area through daily cleaning of the infrastructure, and the planting of trees and flowers. The area initially included in the Program is bounded by River Street, Pennsylvania Avenue, Union Street and Northampton Street.

The Program provides a service that was very much needed because of a lack of attention to cleaning and maintenance by the City. The Program has made a significant improvement in the level of cleanliness of Downtown.



Coal Street Connector Road

The proposed widening and reconstruction of Coal Street from the intersection of Route 315/Highland Boulevard to Wilkes-Barre Boulevard, and the construction of a new roadway from Wilkes-Barre Boulevard to Union Street, may begin later this year. The City is waiting for necessary documents from the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission and the Federal Highway Administration. The new road will connect I-81, Exit 146 directly to Downtown Wilkes-Barre.

The proposed changes will create a new entrance to the Downtown area adjacent to King's College main entrance. A unique opportunity will be presented by the Coal Street improvements to make the new entrance a true gateway, something that has been missing from Downtown up to now. Features should be included in the design that will clearly indicate to travelers that they have arrived and are welcome.

King's College Pedestrian Mall

The College has received zoning, planning commission, and final City Council approval to create a cul-de-sac on North Franklin Street and a pedestrian mall between Union and Jackson Streets. The plan was conceived to enhance student safety as well as beautify the campus. Designed by Quad III, the mall is planned to be paved with bricks and landscaped, and act as an extension of Kirby Park along the riverfront.

Susquehanna River Landing

This proposed project will incorporate public improvements to the Susquehanna River waterfront and Kirby Park, including plazas, promenades, and an inflatable dam and marina to support boating/sailing. The Irem Temple Mosque will be renovated to allow for a museum, regional and cultural exhibits, café, retail, and public gathering spaces, tying Downtown directly to the waterfront. The project is anticipated to cost an estimated \$60 million. The County recently approved its portion of funding for this project.

A study to identify the specific program needs for the Irem Temple Mosque portion of the project is scheduled to be completed Summer 2003. Construction is anticipated to begin during 2005, and the opening of the Landing is scheduled for 2007.



Intermodal Center

The planned Intermodal Center is to be an integrated transportation center located less than one block from Public Square. The ground floor of the Center will be an all-weather Transit Pavilion acting as a local mass-transit hub, with facilities for intercity buses, paratransit, taxis and cyclist commuters. The three floors above the Transit Pavilion have been designated for parking for commuters and transit users. A public safety facility has also been included in the plan, as has a daycare facility and a restaurant. The Intermodal Center is expected to reduce traffic congestion, remove all buses from Public Square, and increase safety Downtown. The project will be federally funded.

Passenger Rail System/Train Station

During June 2000, the U.S. Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee approved funding to include service to Wilkes-Barre in a study regarding the reestablishment of passenger (and freight) rail service between Northeastern Pennsylvania and New York. The existing train station, located at Wilkes-Barre Boulevard and Market Street, is the obvious place for the service to terminate. The station is the former Central Railroad of New Jersey train station.



Conclusions

Combining LPC's analysis of Downtown's infrastructure with comments by Downtown residents and businesses, the following infrastructure findings have been reached:

- Downtown is very walkable and pedestrian-friendly.
- Mixed uses along the street and historic architecture provide visual interest and create the feel of a small town.
- A significant amount of public open space and parkland is located within the Downtown. However, there are poor linkages between those spaces and the Susquehanna River. The River is limited in use by pollution and access issues.
- Infrastructure grant and funding opportunities are not pursued by City administration.
- Lack of cleanliness (improvement since DCP Clean & Green Program began).
- The City has no local historic district guidelines and/or protections in place at this time.
- Downtown's canopy, sidewalks, and street furniture are in below-average condition and are poorly maintained. Street lights have failed and have not been replaced.
- There is a lack of directional and wayfinding signage in Downtown.
- Public spaces such as Public Square, the River Common, and Kirby Park create unique opportunities for Downtown. However, Public Square is underutilized, and all these parks are poorly maintained with minimal improvements since they were redesigned after the 1972 flood.

The following opportunities exist to improve and enhance Downtown infrastructure:

- The Susquehanna River Landing scheduled to open in 2007 will tie Downtown to the riverfront and provide recreational and cultural attractions. If pollution and access issues are properly addressed, the Susquehanna River could be an important feature of Downtown, and provide important recreational opportunities.
- Continue and expand efforts to tie the center of Downtown to the waterfront, to regional trails, and other open/public spaces.
- A revised master plan and maintenance program for Public Square would ensure this important open space takes on its full functionality and value for Downtown. Create a year round and or seasonal draw for Public Square such as an ice rink.
- Provide banners to highlight each of the cultural institutions and major events (this was previously done on a limited basis).
- The Clean and Green Program inaugurated in November 2001 has vastly improved the level of cleanliness in Downtown.
- The planned changes to Coal Street will create a new entrance to Downtown adjacent to King's College's main entrance, which will offer a unique opportunity for the creation of a true gateway to Downtown from the east.
- Study the proposed location of the Intermodal Center – consider a location adjacent to the former train station.
- Create design guidelines. Try a Conservation Overlay approach, which can provide greater flexibility and standards for the redevelopment of existing structures.
- Using the Main Street Program as a basis, develop a commercial façade/ building rehab program. Tie grant funds/low interest revolving loans to guidelines.
- Investigate the creation of local historic district guidelines. Emphasize the economic development value of historic preservation.
- Create a Streetscape Improvement Program – concentrate on simple, easy improvements. The canopy, sidewalks and street furniture should be evaluated, and replaced and enhanced as necessary to create a comfortable pedestrian experience and reveal more of Downtown's architecture and retail windows. A new lighting plan will enhance Downtown's image and functionality.
- A wayfinding signage program should be implemented to direct users of Downtown to major attractions, cultural facilities, and parking, as well as create a sense of identity in Wilkes-Barre's core.
- Design special lighting for landmark buildings and structures, following the example of the Market Street Bridge, Saint Stephen's Pro-Cathedral, Saint Nicholas Church, and others. Consider special events spotlights at the major gateways to the Downtown, Public Square, and the River to emphasize Downtown's central location in the region.

D. Downtown Market Strengths

- Centrally located in the Scranton - Wilkes-Barre - Hazleton Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).
- 625,000+ people in the MSA,
310,000+ within a 20-minute drive of Downtown,
85,000+ people within 3 miles of Downtown.
- Thriving institutions – 76 located directly Downtown – including three colleges and universities with a total of 6,500 students.
- Region’s largest employment center - 12,000 employees.
- 4,000 residents live in Downtown.
- Significant infrastructure in place including Public Square and the Susquehanna Riverfront.
- Mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly community with interesting architecture.
- Seat of Luzerne County Government.
- In-place public transportation system.
- Average commute less than 15 minutes.
- Affordable office and retail rental and operational costs.
- High quality of life/low cost of living.
- Strong community commitment to Downtown.