

Spark Innovation Center Town of Altavista, Virginia



Adaptive Reuse Final Report
Conversion of Vacant Fire Station to Business Incubator
February 2022



Creating an Entrepreneurial Co-worker Space in Downtown Altavista

Historically, the Town of Altavista was a hub of economic activity in Campbell County. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, furniture-making, along with textiles, were the area's manufacturing mainstays, drawing on the region's plentiful natural resources and relatively inexpensive labor supply. Like many localities in the south, the mid-1990s saw a sharp decline in domestic manufacturing jobs as more companies began to outsource to other countries where labor cost was cheaper. The early 2000's saw a dramatic change in these markets as more manufactures moved abroad, outsourcing to other countries where labor was cheaper. By the start of the 21st Century, the Lane Company had shuttered its Altavista facility and the Klopman textile manufacturing facility in Pittsylvania County had closed as well, leaving a hole in the town's economy. Workers left behind were forced to relocate and find jobs in other areas or learn a new skillset to compete for advanced manufacturing jobs in the region.

While seeking ways to address Altavista's relatively high unemployment rate, poverty rate and commuter rates (31.7%), Altavista leaders came to understand that human capital and the entrepreneurial spirit could help spark economic development. There are solid opportunities for small towns to enhance their appeal to both existing and prospective businesses and citizens alike. As modern businesses of all sizes are embracing new models of work, including telecommuting, and working from home, digital technology is transforming everyday life. This project creates a facility that can be leveraged to help attract new business and residents, expand existing businesses, and establish Altavista as an innovative place to call home.

Vision

From the onset, town leadership envisioned a rural business incubator open to small business entrepreneurs. The incubator is a coworking, innovation and makerspace facility, which also has office and meeting room spaces, all offered at market rates. As freelancing has become increasingly popular, in the computer programming, writing, design, IT, marketing, and business consulting industries, providing a space where these freelancers can find office spaces and business resources when needed will enable Altavista to tap into an underutilized economic development tool. The space is marketed toward freelancers and startups, teleworkers, and creators that need makerspace equipment.

Coworking:

Coworking spaces are essentially shared workspaces. They offer affordable office space for those looking to escape the isolation of a home office or coffee shop. These shared workspaces offer a suite of office-like amenities such as hot-desks, private meeting rooms, kitchens, coffee and more. Occupants typically are freelancers, entrepreneurs, start-ups, and small teams who want to take advantage of a flexible space. An advantage of these spaces is the ability to rent out only what is needed versus an entire private office space, which can be costly. Through various membership-based models, costs vary and allow for flexibility, including options for daily or monthly fees. Membership costs may also vary based on whether a desk is shared or dedicated.

Start-ups often appreciate the flexibility of coworking spaces. Coworking spaces do not come with the high costs and commitments of traditional office leases. They also provide the chance for small teams to interact with others in the space often leading to new collaborations and business relationships.

Teleworking:

As more businesses adopt the model of hiring work-from-home employees, teleworking has increased. Companies allow employees to work within a virtual call center in which the organization's representatives are geographically dispersed, rather than being situated at workstations in a building operated by the organization. Virtual call centers leverage VoIP (voice over internet protocol) or cloud-based software. These remote solutions allow workers to be active and effective anywhere there is a reliable internet connection. While teleworking would provide many citizens the opportunity to work by providing the flexibility needed from the traditional 9-5 workday, many Altavista residents cannot take advantage of these types of offerings due to unreliable internet service. In 2009 and 2016, Broadband Assessment Studies were conducted for the town, and the service was determined to be deficient. The study stated that affordable highspeed broadband was the key to future economic growth in Altavista. It encouraged the town to work to make spaces available for Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISP) for improved broadband access.

Creative Lab:

A creative lab is a collaborative workspace for making, learning, exploring, and sharing that uses high tech, low tech, and no tech tools. These spaces are open to adults and entrepreneurs and have a variety of maker equipment including 3-D printers, 2-D printers, and laser cutters. These spaces are also helping to prepare those who need the critical 21st century skills in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). They provide hands-on learning and some skills learned in a makerspace pertain to electronics, 3-D printing, 3-D modeling, coding, robotics and even woodworking. Creative labs are also fostering entrepreneurship and are being utilized as incubators and accelerators for business startups. They allow community members to design, prototype, and manufacture items using tools that would otherwise be inaccessible or affordable.

The town believes that providing the space and tools needed for the creative lab will give residents and businesses an opportunity to collaborate and create sustainable products needed for the 21st century.

Location

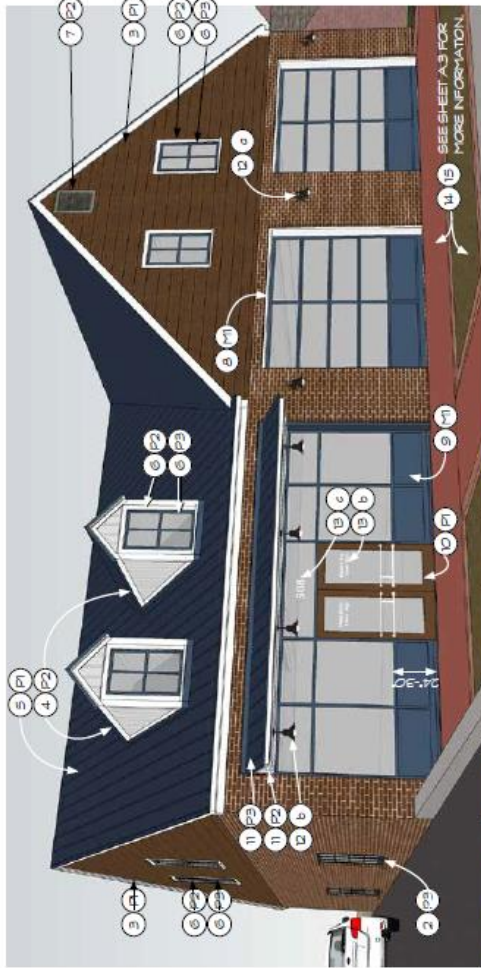
Altavista evaluated the most suitable location for the new center. It decided to repurpose a fire station located at 508 7th Street, which is next to the existing Town Hall. The building is a two-story wood-frame building with a finished floor area of 7,128 sq. ft located in the heart of downtown. The building had been vacant since 2004.



Design Assessment

The town partnered with Altavista On Track (AOT), an accredited member of the Virginia Main Street Program on this development. Their role in the town is to assist with the revitalization of the downtown area, to foster economic development and opportunity, and provide leadership to enhance community identity and pride.

The Virginia Main Street (VMS) program is administered through the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). One program offered by VMS is a design assistance grant where the services of Frazier Associates is procured to assist downtown businesses with a comprehensive approach to revitalizing a building based on its history, unique character, and attributes. The goal is to stimulate a renewed sense of place as an economic development project. AOT applied for assistance on the Towns behalf and Frazier Associates provided the renderings that would be used for the exterior renovations to the fire station.






SOUTHWEST (ALLEY) & SOUTHEAST (7TH ST) FACADES WITH OPTION 'A' STOREFRONT



SOUTHWEST (ALLEY) & SOUTHEAST (7TH ST) FACADES WITH OPTION 'B' STOREFRONT

KEYNOTES:

1. Chemically clean environmental staining from brick. (i.e., from Prosocol Inc. or similar.) Test methods on inconspicuous area first.
2. Repair what appear to be metal casement windows as needed. Replace weatherstripping, scrape, prime and paint.
3. Replace siding on new polyash (example: TruExterior) or fiber cement (example: Hardie) siding, 1" nicks gap siding, smooth or wood grain finish, shown here. Paint over factory applied primer as per manufacturer recommendation. Finish color of rake-board and sealtit trim in contrasting color to match new siding on window dormers.
4. Replace siding on window dormers with new polyash or fiber cement siding in board and batten configuration as shown.
5. Replace asphalt shingle roof with new traditional metal standing seam roof. Finish to closely match metal storefront finish color.
6. Replace second floor double hung windows with new 4-pane casement or 2-over-2 double hung windows. Finish to coordinate with storefront and trim color.
7. Replace lowered vent if in worn condition to match trim color.
8. Replace overhead doors with new glass and metal overhead doors.
9. Replace overhead door with new aluminum storefront.
10. Provide new wood or metal stile & rail door with single glass panel. Coordinate finish color with siding color. Hardware shown is Rockwood Door PU50 PB in brushed aluminum finish, optional.
11. Provide new wood or wood substitute canopy, 36" - 40" deep, with metal roof material and beaded board ceiling.
12. Provide new coordinated exterior lighting package:
 - a. Replace wall-mounted fixtures with new;
 - b. Provide new suspended fixtures;
 - c. Provide new ceiling-mounted fixtures;
 - d. Provide new municipal streetlight, if possible, or similar.
13. Recommended sign package and address for office usage:
 - a. New bracket and sign panel hung from lamp-post;
 - b. New door sign using window film;
 - c. Address numerals applied above main entry door using window film.
14. Consider installing 1' wide or so plant beds along sidewalk and along alley. See attached Parking Lot Landscape Guidelines for creating plant beds in paved locations and list of potential plants for new beds.
15. Concrete paving appears in good condition but information as to steepness of slope was not provided at time of drawing. If fairly level and can allow tables and chairs to sit comfortably, apply decorative concrete coating in color similar to existing brick. If new topping needed to level off slope between buildings, consider stamped concrete in brick power pattern and color.

 FRAZIER ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTURE • COMMUNITY DESIGN • WRITING 211 NORTH HANOVER STREET, SUITE 1000, VA 24601 PHONE: 804.838.4226 FAX: 804.838.4265 www.frazierassociates.com	 VIRGINIA MAIN Street <small>REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY</small>	 AOT <small>Architect On Track</small>	508 7th St. Atavista, Virginia	
			04/09/2020 86002.GG.16	A2 SHEET 2 OF 5

<p>COLOR & MATERIALS CHART</p> <p>Acquire paint chip or material sample for more accurate color or material representation.</p> <p>PAINT: Sherwin Williams paint or equivalent</p> <p>P1 - Siding & Entry Doors: SW 2837 Aurora Brown</p> <p>P2 - Trim: SW 7757 High Reflective White</p> <p>P3 - Roof & Window Sash: Closely match M-1 finish.</p> <p>METAL FINISHES PPG Coatings or similar</p> <p>M-1 - Storefront & Overhead Doors: PPG Regal Blue</p> <p>PPG Charcoal</p>	
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Feasibility Study

The Town of Altavista wanted to determine if this project was viable and a strategic economic investment for the Town. AOT applied for a \$25,000 grant from DHCD to hire a consultant on behalf of the town to conduct a feasibility study on the creation of a business incubator, accelerator, and coworking space.

Summit Design and Engineering Services was contract to work with AOT and the Town's leaders, citizen, and business to determine if the proposed project would meet an identified need. The primary research method for this project was surveying business owners, freelancers, entrepreneurs, remote workers, and craftspeople throughout the region. A secondary research method was interviews with leadership of existing coworking and makerspaces in the region and state, with a small number of interviews from outside of Virginia.

Summit Design assessed the success of similar facilities and found that the facility could support a variety of business and entrepreneurial needs of persons within the town and its periphery. The study found that users of similar facilities are willing to drive 18 – 25 miles to use the amenities offered. Altavista's proposed space and offerings could capture the users who were forced to drive to the City of Lynchburg or the City of Danville to take advantage of such offerings.

The study noted that access to high-speed internet was an ongoing problem that could be addressed by creating an incubator/accelerator/coworking space. In the case of Altavista, the Town has reasonably strong internet service, but the quality of that service drops off dramatically outside of the Town limits and away from the U.S. Route 29 corridor where Altavista is located. With the growing acceptance of occasional teleworking and working entirely at home for an established business or in a business created by the resident, there was an opportunity to reverse the trend of people moving to the cities. With good internet service and access to a coworking space when needed, jobs and residents could be attracted to and retained in this rural and smalltown settings.

An additional opportunity that an incubator/accelerator/coworking space creates for rural and small-town settings, is the opportunity to have a creative and high-tech space that can be used by teenagers and young adults as they explore their career options. Having lost so many young people to the cities in recent decades, small towns need these types of spaces to keep or bring back some of their young adults who tend to be creative and tech savvy.

Finally, in assembling the Altavista Economic Development Strategy Plan (EDSP) in 2019, Camoin Associates interviewed forty (40) persons either individually or in focus groups representing local business and industry, local elected and appointed officials, and local staff involved in economic development. One of the key findings of those interviews is the concern that local small business growth was inhibited by lack of appropriate space. A key opportunity outlined in the EDSP is to "Diversify the economy with small businesses that are driven by local entrepreneurs who want to keep their operations in Altavista." This opportunity was identified because of the repeated history of manufacturers and their jobs coming to and leaving the Altavista market. This emphasis on "home grown" jobs that stay put is a key strategy for economic development in any small town or rural area and a main impetus behind creating incubator, accelerator, and coworking spaces in smaller markets.

Branding

Upon the receipt and payment of the feasibility study, AOT learned that there was a surplus of \$5,000 from the grant award. Virginia DHCD permitted AOT to use the remaining funds on a marketing and branding campaign for the Town of Altavista. During its initial inception phase, the facility was named the Town of Altavista Business Incubator, Accelerator, and Coworking Space (IAC) and given a tag line of “Create.Collaborate.Cowork”. Due to the length of the name, staff nicknamed the facility C³, a play on the tagline, but a formal name was needed.

Staff worked with Simply Branding, a local marketing firm, to develop a name and logo for the center. The Town desired to pay homage to the building’s former use as a fire station and the new use as a collaborative space to spark ideas and partnerships.

The name recommended was Spark Innovation Center. The logo selected was a deconstructed flame with each piece representing one of the words in the center’s tagline.



Funding

At its inception, the Town of Altavista knew that the assessed value of the building could be leveraged as a match when applying for grant funding. The building and land had a combined assessed value of \$158,100.

Town Council demonstrated their commitment to the project by adding it to the Town of Altavista Capital Improvement Program (CIP) and allocated \$200,000 towards the renovation.

Town leaders began speaking with the Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission (TRRC) on potential funding sources for the project. The TRRC is a 28-member body created by the 1999 General Assembly. Its mission is the promotion of economic growth and development in formerly tobacco-dependent communities, using proceeds of the national tobacco settlement. Under its formal model, each tobacco-dependent city and county received a certain allotment of entitled funds. With the support of the Campbell County Board of Supervisors, Altavista applied to use the County’s remaining allotment, which was \$183,406 for the renovation of Spark. The TRRC approved Altavista’s grant application and as part of the award, the Town was required to create a marketing plan and operations manual. This was the first coworking facility that TRRC had funded. Staff at TRRC also assisted the Town by identifying additional funding sources and making partner introductions.

The conversion of the fire station occurred at the height of the pandemic. As business models changed, and employees began to work remotely, there was a concern that the existing

broadband infrastructure was insufficient to meet the new demand. The Town in partnership with Mid-Atlantic Broadband and RiverStreet Networks connected to a fiber network in the alley behind the fire station. This connection allowed the Town to provide the highest speed internet available in Altavista. Town staff worked with RiverStreet Networks to purchase equipment to respond to the needs of remote workers using funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) in the amount of \$54,945.

Altavista was a recipient of a Virginia Brownfields Restoration and Economic Redevelopment Assistance Fund (VBAF) Site Assessment and Planning Grant through the Virginia Economic Development Partnership. (VEDP), which was used to fund testing for asbestos and lead-based paint in the fire station. When contaminants were found, the Town applied for and was awarded a \$50,000 grant to cover the cost of the remediation.

To fund the shortfall in the construction budget, the Town used \$470,000 it had received under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

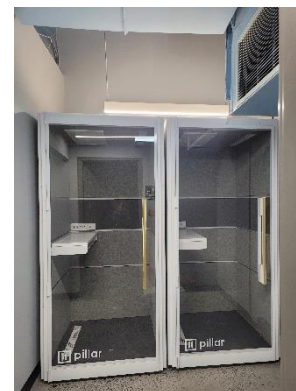
The Town applied for and was awarded \$100,000 from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) under their Rural Business Development Grant to purchase furniture, fixtures, and equipment for the Spark Innovation Center's offices, conference rooms, makerspace, common space, and focus booths.

Amenities:

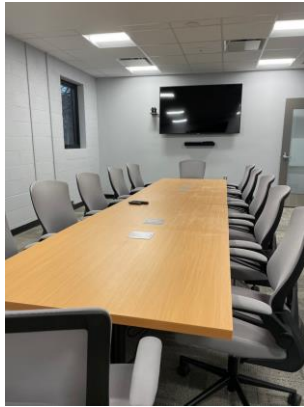
The Spark Innovation Center is a revolutionary coworking and innovation space that has everything an entrepreneur needs to achieve their goals. Using the grant funds awarded by the USDA, the Town was able to fully furnish the space, which opened on February 10, 2023.

Workspaces: There are four (4) fully furnished offices at Spark. Each office has an adjustable electric sit-standing desk, desk chair, two (2) guest chairs, file cabinet, and trash can. Monthly tenants can personalize their offices and add their business name and logo to the glass front using vinyl decals.

Spark also offers 14 independent workstations in the open coworking space for those users who may only need the space for an hour, day, or week.



Meeting Space: The Spark Innovation Center provides meeting space for up to 16 individuals in its conference room. There is an operable partition that allows the conference room to be divided into two 8-person conference rooms with state-of-the-art audiovisual technology.



Creative Lab: Spark Innovation Center offers a Creative Lab with state-of-the-art equipment and technology for novice to advanced creators. The lab offers two (2) Ultimaker 3-D printers, a Muse laser cutter for wood/acrylic engraving and cutting, a Roland SGV-300 large scale printer, and a Max heat press for creating custom t-shirts, tote bags and more.



Perks:

Spark Innovation Center provides 24/7 key fob access to its members. It offers high-speed internet access (500 MBPS), use of the conference room, kitchenette access and complementary coffee, and copier access.

Programing and Deliverables:

The Spark Innovation Center provides resources to individuals and businesses to launch start-ups or expand existing businesses. Staff provides programs that meet the needs of the community, businesses, nonprofit organizations, creatives, and youth.

Program examples include:

- Introduction to the Creative Lab and equipment
- Digital Marketing Strategies for small businesses and entrepreneurs
- Partnerships with K-12 schools and colleges for youth development and mentorship

- Facilitated group trainings led by industry experts
- Monthly on-site access to the Small Business Development Center - Lynchburg Region for confidential and complimentary business advising
- Nonprofit partnerships with area organizations to offer co-hosted events and classes

Next Steps:

The Town of Altavista understands that there is a need for additional office space and desires to renovate the second floor for that use. The Town will continue to pursue grants to provide the capital needed for the renovation.