North Star Legacy Communities: A Florida Treasure

eTools Technical Manual

eChamber of Commerce Website and Economic Opportunity Database

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The eTools component of the project translates outreach and asset mapping activities into tangible outcomes. The eTools team focused on producing two deliverables: an eChamber of Commerce website, and an Economic Opportunity Database. These tools seek to engage all members of the community using interactive media. The eChamber of Commerce website and the Economic Opportunity Database were envisioned to support Legacy Communities' commercial activity by providing an electronic platform for information-sharing and collaboration.

The website and database offer a unique opportunity, being the first of its kind to highlight Black-owned businesses and community assets in this area. The asset-based framework also captures information on informal businesses outside the realm of formal business activity. Effective use of these tools will create opportunities to increase commercial activity and strengthen local economic resilience.

Website

Creating a website requires buy-in from key stakeholders in the community. These stakeholders must be included at critical stages of the website development, including conceptualization stage, content identification and organization, and testing. The following steps identify the main phases of the website development employed for the project.

Step 1: Identify the aim and goals of the website

Ideally, the purpose of the website is to support the overarching aims of the project. After identifying the aim of the website, specific goals are defined for the website which translates into tangible website features.

In our case, the website was designed to serve as an electronic Chamber of Commerce that linked Legacy Community interests and marketed its resources through e-commerce and tourism. To achieve this aim, the website was designed with three main goals:

1. provide an electronic medium to document Legacy Community assets;
2. facilitate members' self-identification of assets and resources in these communities; and
3. serve as a collaborative platform for community stakeholders.

Step 2: Determine website content and organization

Based on the goals identified in the first step, we determined the overall content we wanted incorporated into the website. Organization of this content can be done in a functional manner, as presented in the website goals, or it can incorporate a specific methodological classification applied during the project.

The content required for our project's website was based on the goals identified in the first step **(Figure 1)**.

Figure 1. Content identified for website

The site map in **Figure 2** shows how the content was organized. This site map reflects a functional classification and the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) methodological classification applied to this project. The ABCD approach promotes sustainable development by building on the assets that already exist within the community. The website structure was made up of three main parts, based on the project goals: project deliverables, asset showcase, and collaborative features.

(i) Project Deliverables

It was important to our team that users had direct access to our project deliverables from the Home Page. The *About Us* tab, located at the top right-hand corner in the main navigation menu, includes two subsections: *About Legacy Communities* and *The Research Process*. *About Legacy Communities* includes a basic description of Legacy Communities within our area of study and the assets found in each one. *The Research Process* page includes all project deliverables, including the map book, final project document, the engagement process video, and the website instructional guide, photo gallery, and the economic opportunity database.

(ii) Asset Showcase (Navigation tiles on Home Page & at bottom of main page)

The asset showcase section was organized based on the ABCD classification. This part of the website is a prominent feature on the Home Page and it grouped deliverables into the following categories: individuals and communities (*Our Stories*), associations (*Our Circles*), physical places (*Our Places*), institutions (*Our Partners*) and local economy (*Our Markets*). **Table 1** below details how the ABCD methodology was adapted for the website.

ABCD Asset Framework	Name of Webpage	Content
Individuals	Our Stories	Individual Profiles Community Profiles
Physical Spaces	Our Places	Story Map Places database
Associations	Our Circles	Association database
Institutions	Our Partners	Institutions Database
Local Economy	Our Markets	Local Economy Database Tool & Resources

Table 1. Application of ABCD Methodology for the Website Content

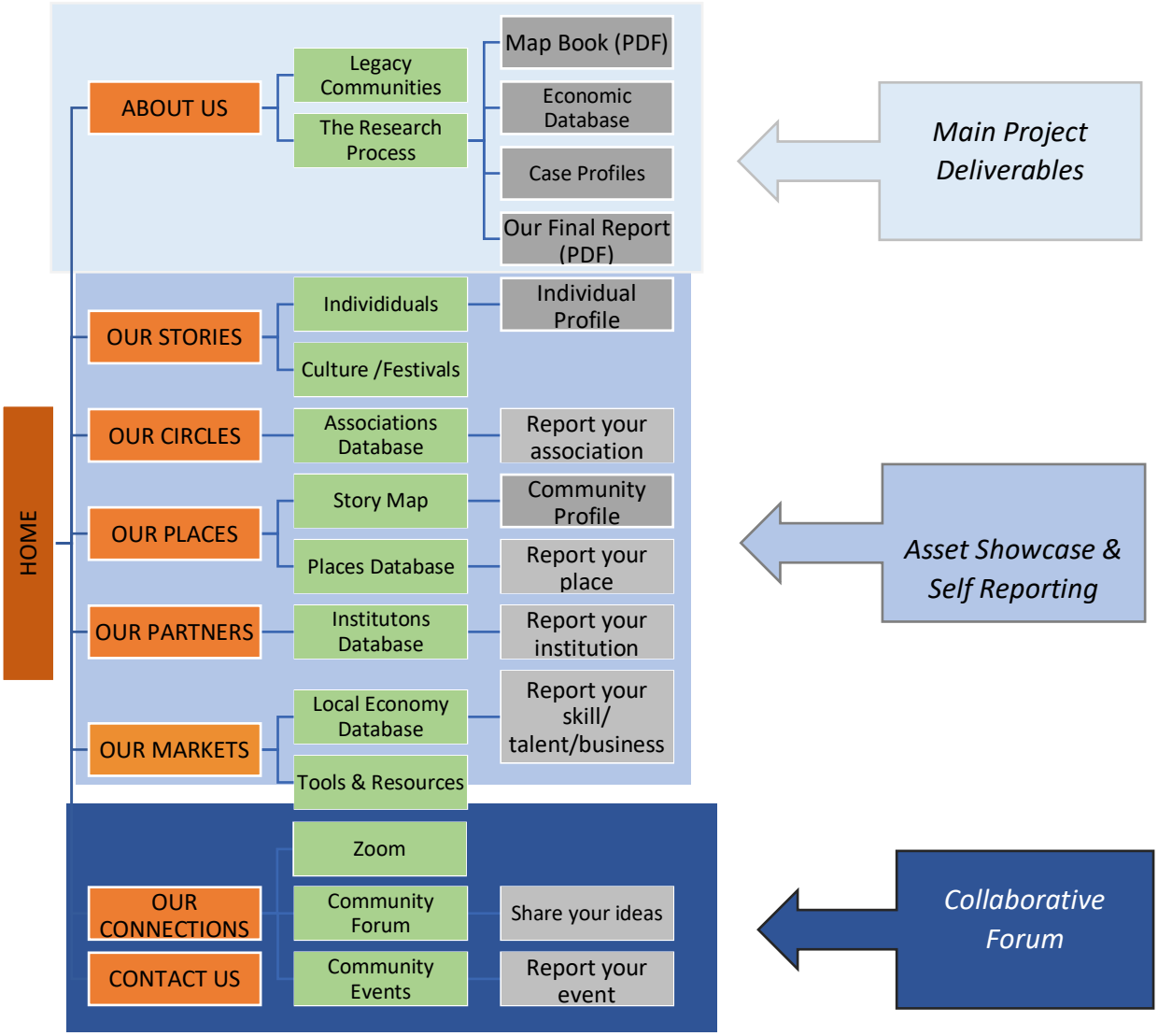

Figure 2. Site Map for Website

(iii) Collaborative Features

Collaborative features were placed under *Our Connections* page, accessible from the *Home Page*. These features include an online collaborative forum and community calendar of events. The collaborative forum ideally is continuously moderated to enhance community development and reduce instances of possible virtual abuse. The community calendar of events will be coordinated by the website administrator as the community will be able to contact the website host to include their events on the calendar.

Step 3: Selection of Host and Website Builder

Two main factors that need to be considered when choosing the website builder are the ease of use and design flexibility. If the website will eventually be transferred over to a second or third party, the ease of transferring the website to another manager must also be considered when looking at the continuation of the project. The choice of widgets will also be determined by the website's goals. For example, we selected plug-ins for a community forum, geographic database, and overall ease of web design.

In our case, our team decided that the WordPress website building platform offered the most design flexibility and ease of all the site designers currently on market. Due to HostGator's ease of data transference, we ultimately decided to select HostGator's WordPress hosting package. This package provided access to WordPress's site builder platform as well as ease in constructing the the site from the back end. Because our team knew we were going to transfer the website data over to a separate entity for future management, data transference was important to us when selecting the host. HostGator included other features within the package site, such as licensing of the URL and SSL management.

Once the WordPress package was obtained, we followed instructions provided by HostGator and WordPress to set up the website. After this step, we installed several plug-ins, including Yoast SEO, Jetpack, Elementor, Akismet Anti-Spam, PHP Compatibility Checker, and others. From there, we began building the website using Elementor, a click-and-drag page builder selected because of its simple functionality and flexibility with CSS coding. Post content was checked for readability and SEO using Yoast SEO. The GeoDirectory plugin was chosen to support the online database and act as a crowdsourcing platform.

Step 4: Website Creation

Adequate time must be budgeted for the website creation phase. Choice of design elements and colors should match the overall theme of the project. The site must be easy to navigate. In addition, the needs of different audiences must be taken into account – including community members that wants to learn more, commercial enterprises researching about business

opportunities, or the general public wanting to explore these communities online. Finally, the site must be accessible. This can be done by ensuring that users know exactly where links are directing them (hyperlinking the name instead of the word “here”), making tabs and interactive sections obvious, and writing in alternative texts for photos (so site readers will read aloud a photo description for those with visual disabilities).

Step 5: Testing and Finalization

Ideally, a user-group should be identified for testing the website. This user group should be made up of potential users, including technical and non-technical persons. From the technical group, representatives should be identified from the local authorities, such as a regional planning council, city managers, Chamber of Commerce, tourism development office, and available experts who are familiar with web design or database management. Non-technical users include community members, associations, and persons not affiliated with the project or community.

A simple feedback survey should be designed to obtain comments and prioritize revisions to the website.

Step 6: Website Launch and Promotion

The launch of the website should engage key community stakeholders and residents. A presentation accompanied with promotional materials should be distributed to the group and placed in easily accessible areas.

Economic Opportunity Database

The Economic Opportunity Database seeks to provide a real-time inventory of community assets. The database is essentially a master list that includes all community assets that we have identified during the research process. The process of creating an economic opportunity database can be leveraged to promote community collaboration. The asset identification phase can only be successful when the community actively participates in the process. Further, the level of community inclusion increases with the recognition of residents' gifts and skills that contribute to the development of their community.

At the macro level, the database is expected to improve the community's marketability. The database will allow consumers to easily search for goods and services offered in the community. While commercial enterprises will be able to develop tours and source products from assets available in the community.

Step 1: Conceptualize the database framework

The conceptualization stage identifies the methodological approach for structuring the database. Different communities may seek to highlight various features of an asset depending on the nature of the community. At the end of this phase, one must identify the fields that will be incorporated into the database and the overall structure of the database.

In our case, we initially reviewed examples of typical Chamber of Commerce member directories. In addition to basic entity information, we also identified other features that would assist us in building out the database framework.

The geographical and asset classifications were identified as two priority features of the database. In addition to these factors, basic contact information is required for all records. **Figure 3** provides an outline of the structure of the database and the fields associated with each component.

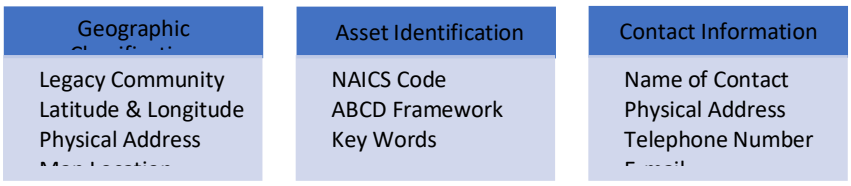

Figure 3. Database structure and required data fields

(i) Geographic Component

Twenty-one Legacy Communities were identified in Jackson County, each varying in population size and level of economic activity. Hence, it was important to differentiate the resources available in each community and to pinpoint exactly where each asset can be found. Further, a mapping feature also provides visual context for each asset. To capture this information, the following fields were included in the database for each record:

- Legacy Community Name
- Geographic Coordinates (i.e. latitude/longitude)
- Physical Address
- Map Locator

(ii) Asset Classification

Asset classifications were based on two different methodologies: The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) and the ABCD framework. Both classification methodologies were necessary for capturing different aspects of community activities. Key words, such as non-profit, religions organization, and historical preservation, are an additional feature which provides the ability to identify resources through other unique details.

NAICS coding provides standardized definitions for the range of economic activity. This allows policymakers to better understand the level of diversification and specialization of economic sectors in these communities. Such information can assist in devising economic development strategies for the communities. Assets were classified at the 4-digit NAICS level in order to obtain sufficient details about the nature of economic resources.

In contrast, the ABCD classification is appropriate for communities that are characterized by a significant level of informal activities. A typical example of this are home-making skills, such as baking, sewing, and child-care. This type of classification provides increased flexibility to classify assets that are not always viewed as traditional commercial enterprise. We aim to identify these activities which are usually not accounted for in formal business activity. Capturing this type of asset information in a comprehensive format makes it easier for individuals and businesses to identify available resources within these communities. **Figure 4** shows how the main ABCD asset types were further subdivided into more detailed classifications to best capture cultural assets and skill sets which we include in our database.

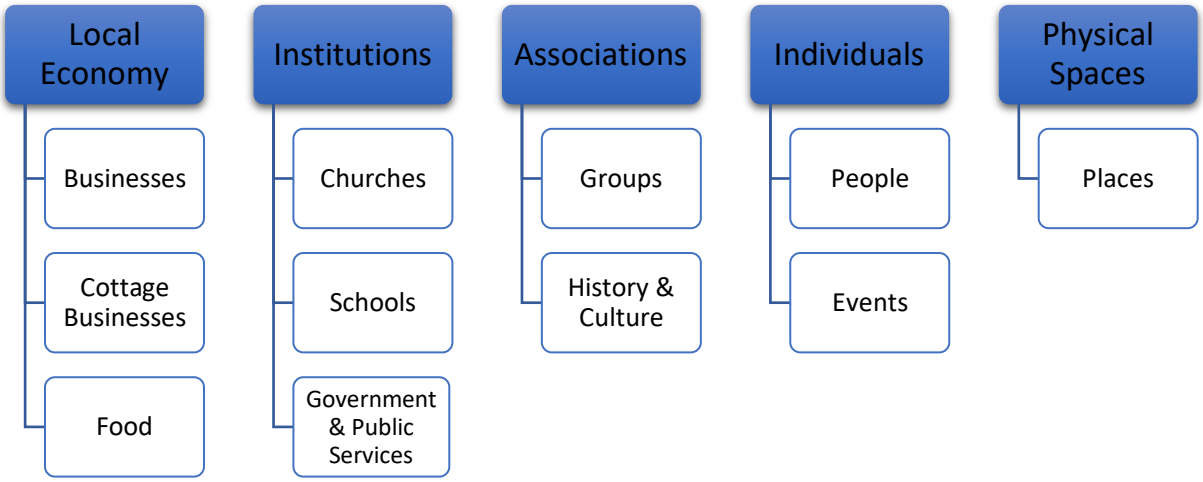

Figure 4. Categorization of Community Assets based on ABCD Framework

Asset Type Classifications	Definition
Businesses	Formal businesses that operate in a commercial building.
Cottage Businesses	Informal businesses that sell services, materials, and/or food.
Food	Businesses or formal entities that provide food to the Legacy Communities.
Churches	Churches identified in the community that Legacy Community members attend, or that help to strengthen the community in some capacity.
Schools	Historical and/or current entities that provide education and training to community members.
Government & Public Services	Government entities or public entities that provide public services.
Groups	Community groups formed for a joint purpose.
History & Culture	Individuals or groups who provide knowledge, gifts, cultural resources to the community.
People	Individual community members (who have a consent form) who provide informal gifts, skills, capacities, and knowledge to the community.
Events	Informal and formal gatherings by Legacy Community members.
Places	Includes different types of physical spaces that are used by the community.

Table 2. Definitions of Asset Type Classifications based on the ABCD Methodology

Step 2: Identifying software requirements

This step required the identification of tools required for each stage of the database creation process, from data capture to output display. The choice of tools for data capturing must take into account the need for standardizing information collected as well as the ease of use by data collectors. Electronic forms, such as *Google Forms* or *MS Access*, may provide the most efficient way for automating the data capturing process. However, data collectors may prefer to use paper forms when in the field prior to data entry. The database outputs are best disseminated online. However, the type of interface used to display the database will be largely determined by the project team.

Figure 5 provides an initial outline of the dataflow process used when creating the database. In our case, Google Forms were initially chosen for data entry because surveys were simple to create and were automatically linked with Google Sheets. However, obtaining asset information through crowdsourcing became impossible because of the pandemic. Therefore, we relied heavily on secondary sources of information as outlined in Step 3 and updated the Google spreadsheet directly.

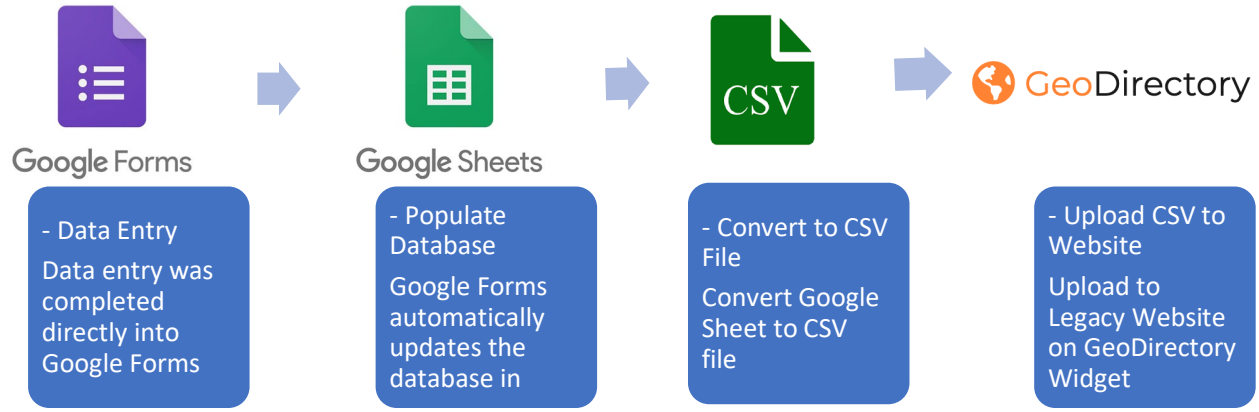

Figure 5. Process Flow from Data Entry to Final dissemination

GeoDirectory was chosen as the website database interface because of its mapping features and its compatibility with WordPress. It can be easily operated by both website hosts and users, and it incorporates the following features that we wanted. The web application data is:

- **legible**
- **inclusive** (because it shows all entries and can be used by people of different computer skill sets),
- **simple** (the data is not visually overwhelming)
- **visual** (it converts hard data into a visual product),
- **interactive** (users can search specific assets, they can interact with the assets by the online map or master list, and they can rate and save assets on the website),
- **informative** (it showcases asset-specific information).

It was also important to accurately define the categories in the *GeoDirectory* plugin in order to consistently and accurately catalogue the entries. The goal of the asset features is to make the community assets known and accessible to those within and outside of Legacy Communities. We also created subcategories and correlating symbols. **Tables 3** shows the icons that were chosen to identify the various database categories in the *GeoDirectory* App.

One of the default features of the *GeoDirectory* application was the starts and hearts rating system. However, after reading the literature on technology and community engagement best practices, it was decided to replace this system with a comment feature to foster user engagement.

We realized we needed to learn how to use a website widget to integrate the Google Sheet into the website. We consulted an expert and learned that the Google Sheet is converted to an *Excel* Sheet, then it is converted to a *CSV* File with corresponding web language columns. The *CSV* File is required to upload large quantities of data into the plugin. Once all of the Master Database assets are collected, the completed database's *CSV* file is uploaded and integrated into the final product. Further customization of the *GeoDirectory* plugin will ensure the final display is visually appealing and useful.

Asset Type Classification	Map Symbol
Businesses	
Cottage Businesses	
Food	
Churches	
Schools	
Government & Public Services	
Groups	
History & Culture	
People	
Events	
Places	

Table 3. Map Symbols used to represent the various asset type classifications

Step 3: Engage in data collection

Devise an outreach campaign to undertake comprehensive data collection efforts. Outreach should also be supplemented by a list of existing information sources such as community websites, existing literature, and periodicals. Identification of key informants is another critical step in the data collection process. Key informants also add legitimacy to the project given their status within the community, which in turn increases community participation. Further, their intimate knowledge of the community provides insights that are not readily apparent to outsiders.

In our case, assets were identified after speaking to community members via phone and in-person interviews. In addition, secondary sources were very important due to the Covid-19 travel restrictions. These sources included:

- reports from site visits
- existing literature on Jackson County
- internet searches (including social media sites like Facebook),
- documentation from the pre-grant research team

Step 4: Database Testing

Potential user groups need to be identified and asked to provide feedback on three main areas: the ease of use of the database, its relevance and applicability, and overall accessibility. Ideally, this user group will be provided with a general introduction to the database and given time to explore it and provide feedback.

Ideally, a short survey should be designed to document the feedback.

Step 5: Database Launch & Promotion

The finalized database should be presented to community stakeholders, including those with an interest in economic development. If the database is included in the website launch, it should be highlighted as a distinct feature of the website.