

## The Main Street Approach

Downtown revitalization is based on four points:

**Organization** - Building consensus and cooperation between groups that play roles in the life of a downtown. Many individuals and organizations have a stake in the economic viability of the downtown, including:

- City and County officials
- Local industries
- Civic groups
- Schools
- Real estate agents
- Utilities
- Downtown residents
- Bankers
- Property owners
- Merchants
- Historical societies
- Consumers
- Local media
- Chamber reps
- Professionals

**Design** - Involves improving downtown's image by enhancing its physical appearance - not just that of buildings, but also:

- Streetlights
- Parking areas
- Sidewalks
- Window displays
- Signs
- Promotional materials

and all other elements that convey a visual message about what downtown is and what it has to offer.

**Promotion** - Involves marketing downtown's unique characteristics and conveying a positive image to local and near residents, shoppers, investors, new businesses, tourists, and others. Activities include special events and ongoing programs to build positive perceptions of the downtown area.

**Economic Restructuring** - Also known as Business Development, economic restructuring means strengthening the existing economic base of the downtown while diversifying it. Economic restructuring activities include helping existing downtown businesses expand, recruiting new businesses to provide a balanced mix, converting unused space into productive property and sharpening the competitiveness of downtown merchants.

The key to the success of the Main Street approach is its comprehensive nature. By carefully integrating all four areas into a practical downtown management strategy, the Main Street approach produces fundamental changes in the downtown's economic base.

## **The Main Street Approach to Downtown Revitalization**

In the past 40 years, America's downtowns have changed drastically. The creation of the interstate highway system and subsequent growth of suburban communities transformed the ways in which Americans live, work, and spend leisure time. With improved transportation routes, people found it easier to travel longer distances to work or shop. Roads that once connected neighborhoods to downtown now carried residents to outlying shopping strips and regional malls. Throughout the nation, in town after town, the story repeated itself. Downtown businesses closed or moved to the mall, shoppers disappeared, property values and sales tax revenues dropped. Some downtowns sank under the weight of their own apathy. Neglected buildings, boarded-up storefronts, and empty, trash-strewn streets gradually reinforced the public's perception that nothing was happening downtown, that nothing was worth saving there.

In many communities, downtown merchants and property owners tried to halt the spiral of decline by imitating their competition - the shopping mall. They covered traditional commercial buildings in aluminum, plywood, or multicolored panels and tacked garish, oversized signs onto upper-floor facades. Some communities tried to reverse the decline with even more expensive and permanent methods: closing off the entire downtown to vehicular traffic in attempts to create pedestrian environments conducive to shopping. In most cases, though, these well-meaning (but usually ineffective) efforts did not stabilize downtown sales or *property* values. Instead, they reinforced the decline by isolating the downtown from consumers even more.

The need to revitalize downtown commercial districts is clear. A healthy, viable downtown is crucial to the economic health and civic pride of the entire community for several reasons. A healthy downtown retains and creates jobs. A healthy downtown also means a stronger tax base; long-term revitalization establishes capable businesses that use public services and provide tax revenues for the community. A revitalized downtown increases the community's options for goods and services, whether for basic staples like clothing, food, and professional services or for less traditional functions such as housing or entertainment. Finally, revitalized downtowns are symbols of community caring and a high quality of life, factors that influence corporate decisions to locate to a community.

### The Main Street Project

In 1977, concerned about continuing threats to traditional commercial architecture in economically sluggish downtowns across America, the national Trust for Historic Preservation launched the Main Street Project. The three-year demonstration project was designed to study the reasons downtowns were dying, identify the many factors that have an impact on downtown health and, finally, develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy that would encourage economic development within the context of historic preservation

#### *Introduction 1*

### *National Main Street Center*

In a regional competition among 70 towns, three pilot communities, ranging in size from 5,000 to 38,000 people were chosen for the project: Galesburg, Ill., Madison, Ind., and Hot Springs, S.D. The National Trust assisted the three communities by providing an analysis of each downtown's assets and needs. These architectural and economic profiles, which were conducted by consultants under the direction of the Trust, served as the basis for economic revitalization strategies and design improvements. With a grant from the manufacturing firm Bird and Son, the Trust hired a full-time Main Street project manager for each community. The project manager's role was to serve as an advocate for the downtown, coordinate *project* activities and convince merchants, property owners, and city officials to commit funds now for long-term benefits later. In effect, the three project managers served as catalysts for change.

During the demonstration program, the groundwork for the Main Street approach to downtown revitalization was established. What became clear over the three years was the importance of a strong public-private partnership, a committed organization, a fulltime project manager, a commitment to good design, quality promotional programs, and a coordinated, incremental approach to economic development. By almost any standard of measurement, business improved in all three downtowns during the Main Street Project. Seven new businesses opened in Hot Springs, six in Madison, and thirty in Galesburg. Sales tax revenues increased by 25 percent in Hot Springs, while the downtown occupancy rate in Galesburg rose to 95 percent. Moreover, for every dollar spent on managing the local Main Street Project. \$11 was invested by private businesses in rehabilitation and adaptive-use projects.

### National Main Street Center: The First Six States

The National Main Street Center (NMSC) was established by the National Trust in 1980 to share the successes of Hot Springs, Madison and Galesburg with communities throughout the country. The Center, located in the Trust's Washington, D.C. headquarters, was initially supported by several federal agencies, including the Department of Housing and Urban Development, National Endowment for the Arts, Department of Transportation, Economic Development Administration, Small Business Administration and Farmer's Home Administration. The Trust's Midwest Regional Office became the NMSC staff.

In collaboration with the International Downtown Executives' Association (IDEA), the Trust designed a second demonstration program. Although many components were the same as in the original pilot project, some changes were made to the Trust's relationship with communities. First the NMSC would provide assistance to communities through state Main Street programs, each headed by a state coordinator. This would help stated develop networks through which to mobilize resources, share experiences and transfer lessons to other communities. Additionally, the communities involved in the second demonstration program would be responsible for hiring their own staff, which would make the local project managers better advocates for their downtowns.

### *Introduction 2*

### *National Main Street Center*

In the spring of 1980, the Trust announced a competition to select six states to participate in the demonstration program. With the assistance of IDEA and the Council of State Community Affairs Agencies, the NMSC selected Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas from the 38 states that submitted applications. In turn, each of the six states chose five towns to serve as its initial Main Street network.

The state demonstration program concluded in late 1983 with impressive results. Twenty of the communities formed new downtown organizations, while eight towns substantially strengthened existing groups. Twenty-eight of the towns established low-interest loan pools or other incentive programs to stimulate facade renovation and building rehabilitation projects, resulting in more than 650 new facades and nearly 600 rehabilitations - with a total investment of more than \$64 million. There were 1,050 business starts, with business failures less than half of that figure. Many of the communities also developed and implemented formal business recruitment programs and programs designed to attract developers and investors.

### Expansion of the national Main Street Center

In 1984, the National Main Street Center expanded its family of states involved in downtown revitalization. By 1988, this coalition had grown to include 29 states and more than 400 communities.

To make the Main Street approach available to an even wider audience, the national Main Street Center organized the country's first national video conference focusing on the downtown. In September 1984, the five-hour, live television broadcast linked more than 26,000 people in 450 towns across the country to learn how Main Street works. After the broadcast, the NMSC produced a series of how-to videotapes and user guides on several key revitalization issues. The National Endowment sponsored the videotape series and videoconference for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Rural Development Policy.

In a further effort to bring the Main Street approach to more people, the Center founded the National Main Street Network in the spring of 1985. This membership program is designed to offer those involved in downtown revitalization access to the information, knowledge and experiences of their colleagues throughout the country. Member communities receive the monthly newsletter Main Street News, which focuses on the stories, issues and concepts affecting downtown revitalization. Information is also shared in the Network through a telephone "hotline" for technical advice and referrals on issues of fast-breaking local concern.

*Introduction 3*  
*National Main Street Center*

The NMSC launched a third demonstration program early in 1985, this time working with communities with populations of more than 50,000. Eight cities were chosen to participate in the Urban Demonstration Program, with four programs focusing on downtown commercial districts and four focusing on neighborhood commercial districts. The Urban Demonstration Program concluded in 1988.

In September 1986, more than 500 local Main Street program leaders and others interested in downtown revitalization attended the first Main Street National Town Meeting, held in Winston-Salem, N.C. Due to its success, the National Town Meeting has become an annual conference.

### The Main Street Approach

The Main Street approach to downtown revitalization is based on four points:

- Design involves improving the downtown's image by enhancing its physical appearance - not just that of buildings, but also *of street* lights, window displays, parking areas, signs, sidewalks, promotional materials, and all other elements that convey a visual message about what the downtown is and what it has to offer.
- Organization means building consensus and cooperation between the groups that play roles in the downtown. Many individuals and organizations in the community have a stake in the economic viability of the downtown, including:
  - Bankers
  - Property owners
  - City and county officials
  - Merchants
  - Downtown residents
  - Professionals
  - Chamber of Commerce representatives
  - Local industries
  - Civic groups
  - Historical societies
  - Schools
  - Consumers
  - Real estate agents
  - Local media

Promotion involves marketing the downtown's unique characteristics to shoppers, investors, new businesses, tourists, and others. Effective promotion creates a positive image *of* the downtown through retail promotional activity, special events and ongoing programs to build positive perceptions *of* the district.

- Economic Restructuring means strengthening the existing economic base *of* the downtown while diversifying it. Economic restructuring activities include helping the existing downtown businesses expand, recruiting new businesses to provide a

balanced mix, converting unused space into productive property and sharpening the competitiveness of downtown merchants.

The key to the success of the Main Street approach is its comprehensive nature. By carefully integrating all four areas into a practical downtown management strategy, the Main Street approach produces fundamental changes in the downtown's economic base.

The Main Street approach also relies on eight principles:

1. The Main Street approach is a comprehensive approach to downtown revitalization. Unlike many approaches to downtown revitalization that have been tried in the past, the Main Street approach is comprehensive, addressing all the areas in which action must take place. Only one aspect of revitalization - design has been addressed by most downtown programs, such as those in which entire blocks of downtown building facades were covered with aluminum slipcovers, where false historical themes were adopted and applied artificially to the fronts of buildings, or in which portions of the downtown were demolished in hopes of attracting a developer to build something new. Design improvements alone will not bring about meaningful change; effective marketing, a strong organizational base and solid economic development strategies are all necessary to reverse the cycle of decay from which many downtowns suffer.
2. The Main Street approach relies on quality. Downtown architecture tells the history of the community. Traditional commercial buildings reflect the pride past generations felt for their communities. These buildings embody quality in construction, craft and style that cannot be replicated today - and which no shopping center can really imitate. The quality inherent in its commercial architecture and in the services offered by its businesses make the downtown unique in the marketplace and give it many marketing advantages. The projects undertaken by the local Main Street program should reflect this high level of quality to reinforce the downtown's special characteristics.
3. A public-private partnership is needed to make meaningful, long-term downtown revitalization possible. To make a downtown revitalization program successful, both public and private entities must be involved, as neither can bring about change alone. Each sector has unique skills and particular areas in which it works most effectively; combining the talents of both groups brings together all the skills necessary for revitalization to occur in a unified program.
4. The Main Street program involves changing attitudes. The economic changes experienced by downtown commercial areas in recent decades have made shoppers and investors skeptical about the downtown's ability *to* regain economic viability. Changing attitudes - demonstrating that positive change is taking place downtown - is central *to* a successful downtown revitalization program.

5. The Main Street program focuses on existing assets. Each community is unique, and each downtown has special characteristics that set it apart from all others. By creating a strong revitalization effort based on the downtown's unique assets, each local Main Street program creates an organizational structure that builds on its own specific opportunities. In this way, the Main Street program is adaptable.
6. Main Street is a self-help program. Without the will to succeed and the desire to work hard to bring about change, no downtown revitalization program will be successful. Grant programs can help fund pieces of the work plan and outside consultants can provide guidance, but without local initiative, the Main Street approach will not work.
7. The Main Street approach is incremental in nature. Downtown commercial areas did not lose their economic strength overnight; it happened over a period of years, with a number of small declines gradually leading to a severe downward spiral. Improvement must be gradual, too. Cataclysmic changes, like those brought about by urban renewal's large-scale land clearance programs and massive infusions of funds to build pedestrian malls, have rarely created long-term downtown economic growth.

The Main Street approach relies on a series of small improvements that begin to change public attitude about the downtown, making the area's investment climate more favorable. Gradually, the small changes build to larger ones as the local revitalization organization gains strength and becomes efficient in mobilizing *resources* for downtown revival.

8. The Main Street program is implementation oriented. By identifying and prioritizing the major issues that downtown must confront, revitalization organizations can develop work programs that break down the large issues into smaller tasks. Then, by developing a strong network of volunteer support, Main Street programs build organizational structures capable of achieving the quantifiable tasks mapped out in the work plans.

### **What Makes a Local Main Street Program Successful?**

Not all local Main Street programs have been successful in creating meaningful long term change. Without exception, local programs that have failed have done so for one or more of the following reasons:

- Failure to make a three-year commitment to the Main Street program. All the changes necessary to restore downtown's economic viability will not just happen in three years; in fact, in that time they will probably just have begun to take place. But a commitment to participate in the program *for* three years is essential. Based on the NMSC's experiences with communities across the country, it takes a minimum of three years for

a local Main Street program's organizational structure to become self-sufficient and firmly rooted in the community.

- Failure to work in all four points of the Main Street approach. The Main Street approach is comprehensive, with activity in one area reinforcing activity in the other three. Programs that have concentrated on just one point have seen limited success in that area - but, without support from the other areas, have been unable to build on that success to create long-lasting positive change.
- Failure to establish a true public-private partnership. Both sectors must be involved as full partners for the Main Street program to be successful.
- Failure to hire a full-time project manager. The project manager helps the board develop and implement policy and serves as the coordinator for the network of volunteer activity that makes the program successful. Without full-time coordination, local Main Street programs are not able to sustain long-term growth.

### The Importance of a Comprehensive Approach

Real estate appraisal theory holds that, for a commodity to have value, it must have four elements: scarcity, purchasing power, desire (for the object) and utility. If a commodity has these qualities, it has value. These criteria do not exist in a vacuum, though; social, political, economic, and physical forces affect them. Value, therefore, is not a fixed state - it fluctuates within the market.

If a downtown has lost value through declining sales (desire), market erosion (purchasing power), lack of maintenance, traffic and parking (utility) and the proliferation of other commercial centers (scarcity), it makes sense that, through the following steps, it can create an image of value again.

- Create better access, public improvements and building maintenance (design)
- Target the most appropriate markets for promoting the downtown and the goods and services it offers (promotion)
- Strengthen existing businesses while recruiting new ones (economic restructuring)
- Bring together the groups necessary to make change happen (organization)
- Capitalize on the unique historic assets that create a scarce commodity

The image created through the Main Street program's comprehensive approach reinforces a sense of scarcity (the historic area), purchasing power (of the entire market area), desire (of people to show and invest in the downtown) and utility (access, design of buildings and public improvements). Through a Main Street program, the downtown's image will again become one of worth and value in the marketplace - the essence of economic revitalization.

