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Revitalizing Downtown: The Main Street Approach

Lauren Martinson

I attended the 10th Annual National Town Meeting on Main Street in Nashville, Tennessee, April 28 through May 1, 1996. The conference was sponsored by the National Main Street Center, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development's Main Street Program.

I considered my participation in the conference a quest for knowledge, and upon my arrival I found a fountain of information, case studies and personalities validating a formula for downtown revitalization that has worked miracles time and time again.

According to *Revitalizing Downtown, The Professional's Guide to the Main Street Approach*, the first Main Street project began in 1977. It 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 save historic commercial buildings. Galesburg, Illinois; Madison, Indiana; and Hot Springs, South Dakota, were chosen as pilots for the Main Street program. The National Trust provided each of the communities with an analysis of each downtown's assets, needs and an economic profile. This served as a basis for design improvements and for the economic revitalization strategies that would make it feasible to rehabilitate and rescue the historic downtown buildings. A full time Main Street program manager was provided for each community to serve as an advocate for downtown, coordinate project activities and convince merchants, property owners and city officials to commit funds that would create long-term benefits.

This trio of three-year projects demonstrated the importance of a strong public/private partnership, a committed organization, a full-time program manager, a commitment to good design, quality promotional programs, and a coordinated, incremental process. Hence the birth of the Main Street approach to downtown revitalization.

The Main Street approach is based on four major points:

- **Design** involves improving the downtown's image by enhancing its physical appearance. This includes the appearance of buildings as well as streetlights, window displays, parking areas, signs, walkways, etc.
- **Organization** means building consensus and cooperation among the groups that have a stake in the economic viability of the downtown. These people include bankers, property owners, city and county officials, merchants, chamber of commerce representatives, civic groups, consumers, real estate agents, and local media.
- **Promotion** involves marketing the downtown's unique characteristics to shoppers, investors, new businesses, tourists and others to create a positive perception of the district.
- **Economic** restructuring involves making the existing economic base of the downtown stronger and more diverse. This includes 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.

Throughout the conference, the comprehensive nature of the Main Street approach was praised as the key to its success. By carefully integrating all four areas into a practical downtown management strategy, the Main Street approach produces changes in the downtown's economic base, making it economically productive to put historic properties to use again. The approach has proven itself successful in over 1,200 communities across the United States.

The conference itself offered many opportunities to see these components of the Main Street approach "in action." Economic restructuring was my primary focus during the information sessions because it was the area with which I was least comfortable.

To create a downtown where more dollars go into more cash registers and the intrinsic value of downtown as a whole is increased, the downtown area must be defined in terms of what it is economically, who has vested interests in downtown, what its boundaries are, and what its building and business inventories are. By defining the characteristics of a "good" downtown and a "not so good" downtown, one can define the reasons that an area changes from good to not so good and determine how the area has lost value.

There are four phases to economic restructuring: identification, evaluation, implementation, and management. Identification provides an opportunity to define the target area. Problems plaguing this area and individuals affected by these issues should be identified, and individuals with vested interest in the area should be enlisted as human resources. An inventory of buildings and businesses should then be taken in order to quantify the target area according to characteristics such as land value and tax base. (This will allow the change in these characteristics to be quantified as well!)

The evaluation phase typically lasts from 12 to 18 months and provides an opportunity to define the market place and customer groups of the target area. Customer profiles will indicate customer needs. The trick is then to translate how these needs can represent and become opportunities for current merchants and new businesses. During this phase, design improvements including signage, streetscape, and window display should also be addressed in order to determine the improvements the target area requires or keep the business it has, expand its opportunities, and recruit new ventures.

Business retention, expansion, and recruitment take place during the implementation phase. Opportunities are matched with available facilities, and the economic restructuring process acts as a catalyst for change.

Like implementation, management is an ongoing phase of economic restructuring. It involves the maintenance of current inventories and updated surveys, and tracking the results of the effort. Based upon the status of the results, the effort may need to be redirected, or the process repeated.

What does all this mean for downtown Huntsville? It could mean a great deal. Downtown Huntsville can make a comeback. It will do so because of its uniqueness, and it will take the support of the community to make it happen. The National Main Street program has a proven track record for successfully forming public/private partnerships and guiding the comprehensive transformation necessary for downtown revitalization. Based upon the 1,200-plus examples of Mainstreet member downtown areas that were fading three year ago but now bustle with activity, I cannot help but think that perhaps the National Mainstreet program is on to something—something outstanding. I believe that the potential for our downtown business district is unlimited, and I hope that someday Mainstreet Huntsville will become a reality.