

2 STARTING A PROGRAM

THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIZATION

Organization is the key to a successful commercial district revitalization program. A strong, viable organization provides the stability necessary to build and sustain long-term revitalization. Developing a management program that is well structured, well funded, and committed to the future is the only way to sustain the revitalization effort. For these reasons, the National Trust Main Street Center believes establishing a sound organizational base for the commercial district should be a primary goal of a revitalization program.

In its most basic form, a successful Main Street program should have the following characteristics:

- Widespread community support for the commercial district revitalization process from both public and private sectors.
- Vision and mission statements that reflect current conditions in the district and community as well as goals.
- Comprehensive work plan based on the Main Street approach.
- Commitment to preserving and reusing the district's historic and unique assets.
- Active board of directors and committees.
- Adequate operating budget and dependable sources of funding.



Paid, professional management staff.

Program of ongoing training for staff and volunteers.

Method of documenting and reporting key statistics and accomplishments.

Membership in the National Main Street Network and affiliation with a statewide, citywide, or regional Main Street coordinating program, if one exists.

IDENTIFYING THE PARTICIPANTS

The revitalization program must involve groups and individuals throughout the community in order to be successful. Revitalizing a commercial district requires the cooperation and commitment of a broad-based coalition of public and private groups: businesses, civic groups, local government, financial institutions, residents, religious and educational institutions, and many others.

The program must also mobilize a large number of volunteers and partner organizations to implement activities and build financial and advocacy support. Different groups have different interests in the commercial district. And, while each may have a particular focus, all groups ultimately share the common goal of revitalizing the commercial district. By helping various groups see that they share a similar vision, the program can foster the cooperation and support it needs from the community. Furthermore, by identifying each organization's greatest strengths, the Main Street program can help focus that group's energy in the areas where it can contribute best.

Groups that typically participate in successful commercial district revitalization programs include:

Merchants

Retailers have a vested interest in the success of a revitalization program. An improved commercial district offers greater opportunity for business growth and expansion, a broader customer base, and less financial risk for store owners. Merchants tend to be most interested in (and the most valuable contributors to) promotional activities. Convincing retailers to participate in revitalization activities is sometimes difficult but well worth the effort.

Property owners

Because they literally own pieces of the commercial district, property owners have a direct interest in the revitalization program's success and often become active participants. While absentee owners may show little or no interest in the program, they should be kept informed about the progress of the revitalization program and continually invited to take part in its activities.

Professionals and service businesses

A thriving commercial district offers as many benefits for these businesses as for retailers. They have access to a ready-made customer base from area employees; they have increased exposure to other potential clients as more people begin to shop or live in the district; and they have a pedestrian-friendly location filled with nearby amenities such as government offices, banks, and other institutions. If persuaded to participate in the revitalization effort, these partners can offer valuable services and expertise.

Historic preservation organizations

The local historic preservation nonprofit organization or commission is often one of Main Street's instant allies. One goal of the Main Street program is to retain the traditional and historic buildings located in the commercial district, which typically fits the mission of preservation groups. Be sure to engage neighborhood or citywide historic preservation organizations in your Main Street effort. They can bring information about preservation practices, programs, and incentives and are typically knowledgeable about the district's history and heritage.

Financial institutions

Local financial institutions benefit from a revitalized commercial district in many ways, from making new business loans to being able to attract new industry to the community. Banks can support the revitalization program by helping package loans, taking part in interest buy-down and other financial incentive programs, providing leadership, and seeking innovative ways to stimulate economic development. Many financial institutions also find that participating in the local revitalization program helps satisfy their directives under the Community Reinvestment Act.

Business associations

Business organizations, such as a chamber of commerce, are important players in many business district revitalization programs because of their interest in the community's commercial development. These groups work with Main Street programs by advocating for business interests, expanding businesses, recruiting new ones, and sharing information resources. Remember, though, that chambers are often concerned with communitywide development and that focusing too much on one commercial district over others can create a conflict with its direct mission.

Businesses outside the commercial district

The revitalization program's benefits extend beyond the commercial district itself. Businesses outside the district can profit in a variety of ways: increased visitor traffic to the community; additional amenities for employees; increased business through a healthier overall economy; more dollars circulating longer; and improved municipal services throughout the community. One way to convince these business owners to participate is to offer them cross promotional opportunities.

Residents

In many ways, it is the residents of the community who have the most to gain from a revitalized commercial district that offers goods and services that meet their needs. A revitalized Main Street offers conveniences and amenities, creates new jobs nearby, and often boosts residential property values. There may be many residents who do not belong to an existing community organization but who would be interested in helping make the commercial district—and the community at large—a more lively and livable place.

City and county government

Government has a vested interest in keeping Main Street vital to preserve the tax base, maintain infrastructure, and build political support. Without the support and involvement of local government, it is doubtful that a revitalization program will achieve long-lasting success. Municipal and county governments can provide the revitalization effort with financial and informational resources, technical skills, and leadership. Because local government plays a major role in directing the community's economic growth and other policies, it must be an active participant in restructuring the commercial district's economic base and developing innovative solutions for the district's issues.

Community organizations

By taking part in the revitalization effort, service clubs, civic groups, and other organizations can improve the community's quality of life and make the commercial district a more pleasant, vibrant place for their activities and members. Civic clubs, church groups, historical societies, arts organizations, and senior citizens groups can supply volunteers who will bring valuable expertise to the revitalization program. Frequently, Main Street projects coincide with the mission and activities of other organizations.

Regional planning commissions and economic development agencies

These groups can provide market data and other technical information about the commercial district's trade area. They can also help the Main Street program identify resources and establish relationships with regional, state, and national economic development agencies.

Schools

By involving schools, colleges, and universities in the revitalization effort, the Main Street program can reach a segment of the community—young people—that may not be familiar with the commercial district. Working with the revitalization effort can help young people develop leadership skills and business concepts and become positive contributors to the community. By using their academic skills in a “real world” environment, students can help the revitalization program implement programs and activities, which in turn creates an exciting district that offers more things for young people to do.

Media

A thriving Main Street translates to more advertising dollars for local media, in addition to generating more news. Commercial district revitalization creates new jobs, generates new investments, and brings more money into the community—all newsworthy activities. In addition to publicizing the local program’s successes, media can provide information about local market characteristics to help the Main Street program find better ways to meet consumer needs.

Industry

Local industries welcome opportunities to improve the community’s quality of life because it makes it easier to recruit new employees. They may also sponsor specific events or programs. For example, “Pretzel Fest” in Bluffton, Indiana, celebrated the community’s two pretzel factories.

Religious institutions

Many religious institutions are located in commercial districts. These institutions generally try to keep the area around their buildings safe and welcoming. Additionally, many religious institutions are becoming

active in economic development and job creation activities that benefit their parishioners, making them great Main Street partners. They often can be relied on to gather large numbers of volunteers to support a cause.

SELECTING AN ORGANIZATION

While a Main Street program can be housed in any number of agencies or organizations, one of the most common and successful ways is to establish an independent, private organization whose express purpose is revitalization of the commercial district. As a separate organization, the Main Street program can:

Bring together public and private interests in an objective environment unhampered by the constraints of local politics.

Establish an agenda exclusively for revitalization of the commercial district.

Maintain a clear focus on issues that affect the district.

Serve as a visible symbol of renewal, new activity, and a new future for the commercial district.

Take the time to evaluate all of the available organizational options and choose the one that works best in your community.

A new organization

Establishing a new nonprofit organization to implement the Main Street program is often the best option. A new organization is frequently able to accomplish things that an existing group with an established agenda cannot. A new organization can set up a board with a broad-based constituency, clearly define an independent mission, create new goals, and infuse a fresh spirit of change into the community. And, a new group can forge all of the principles of a successful revitalization organization into a working unit.