

Main Street Movement Revitalizes Its Approach

By Graham Copeland

A NEW FOCUS ON ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN OUR DOWNTOWNS

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main street movement

REVITALIZES ITS APPROACH

By Graham Copeland

When the National Trust for Historic Preservation created the renowned Main Street downtown revitalization program in 1980, the overall condition of towns and cities across America was very different than it is today. Now more than 35 years later, in an effort to stay relevant and current, the leaders at the National Main Street Center have turned their sights inward to self-evaluate their processes and revitalize their well-established *Main Street Four Point Approach*®.

The result is what the National Main Street Center (NMSC) calls a “refresh” of the existing formula, which retains the parts with proven success and re-focuses efforts on new action-based strategies. The retooling also offers greater organizational flexibility and casts a wider net, reaching out to likeminded revitalization groups. The result will be Main Street programs’ greater focus on creating economics-based improvements to downtowns, designed to stimulate positive changes that sustain the test of time.

Inspired by The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Main Street founders developed a methodology for downtown revitalization with the preservation of existing buildings at its core. They also infused a focus on urban design and local cultural assets, and a community-based, volunteer-driven approach to planning and implementing revitalization initiatives in the participating downtowns.

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Credit: Adrienne Blank, Building a Better Boyertown

Local talent performing live bluegrass music at the Pick Fest celebration in downtown Boyertown, PA.

THE ROOTS

The Main Street movement, today with about 1,100 participating communities across the country, was born as a response to the troubling nationwide trends of the 1950s and 1960s: large-scale disinvestment, blight, and population loss in many of America’s downtown centers. Its founders at the National Trust for Historic Preservation also were reacting to the federal urban renewal programs of the era, controversial for their widespread demolition of older buildings and sometimes entire city neighborhoods.

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The photos in this article depict revitalization work in various downtowns. Some of these places have applied the Main Street approach – in Boyertown, West Chester, Easton, Lansdowne, and Carlisle, PA.

The Four Point Approach was designed to be a holistic formula, to be adapted uniquely to each Main Street community. This approach was comprised of four broad categories of revitalization activities: Design, Economic Restructuring, Organization, and Promotion. Individual Main Street programs are usually organized with the committees and programming formed according to each of these four “points.”

Examples of typical Main Street projects under the original Four Point Approach include:

Design	Improvements to streetscapes and other public spaces, commercial property façade grant programs, historic building rehabilitation
Economic Restructuring	Business attraction and retention, market research, business inventories, zoning and land use
Organization	Board development and governance, fundraising, finances, website development, communications
Promotion	Festivals and retail events, image development programs, cooperative advertising campaigns

To facilitate the distribution of resources and spread the Main Street gospel across the land, the National Trust established coordinating programs at the state, regional, and sometimes city levels. These coordinating programs are housed within government agencies and affiliated nonprofits. For their downstream local Main Street organizations, they conduct training and individual program designations, distribute funding when available, and provide technical support to prospective and existing downtown revitalization programs. In 2013, the National Trust formed the National Main Street Center as a separate subsidiary to better focus on its core mission.

TIME FOR AN UPDATE

Fortunately today, urban renewal has been replaced with New Urbanism; and suburban sprawl is being countered by Smart Growth. Reinvestment is surging in many of our cities and town centers, and people are moving back downtown. However, this progress has occurred unevenly across the country, and many of our urban places still face significant challenges.

Other major trends impacting the Main Street movement since its birth 35 years ago include: the dominance of big box stores and the emergence of online retailers, the growth of affordable housing markets, Americans’ changing preferences in the ways they volunteer their time and donate their money, and the greater ability of people to collaborate on revitalization projects - enabled by technology and the internet.

Add to these external conditions the declining number of Main Street communities nationwide and a leadership change at NMSC with Patrice Frey appointed as the new president /CEO in May 2013. Frey had previously

served at the National Trust as director of sustainability, where she managed the programs to promote revitalization and greening of older and historic buildings; so her appointment to lead the National Main Street Center was a natural progression, and the timing was right to reevaluate the program.

“We need to recreate the Main Street institution,” says Mary Thompson, chair of NMSC’s Four Point Refresh Task Force, which was formed in June 2014. “We thought the movement had drifted away from its primary purpose. The ... Four Point Approach had not been reviewed in 35 years, and it needed to be updated. Were the assumptions still correct?”

One response to this question comes from Nick Kalogeresis, vice president of the Lakota Group, who previously as an NMSC staff “road warrior,” conducted field assessments for 10 years. “It’s a good methodology, especially for design and economic restructuring, to get people on the same page and encourage the reuse of historic buildings,” he says.

“When all of the parts are working together, it binds the community together. When all of the parts are not working together, it’s not as effective. The board, the Main Street manager, support from the municipality – need to all work. The city has to buy in.” However, says Kalogeresis, “Cities don’t provide enough support, resources, and training, and are not interested in capacity building, but rather, [they focus on] ‘how do we facilitate the next real estate development?’ ”

THE RESEARCH

So in 2014 the NMSC board took to evaluating their Main Street methodology, its overall impacts, and the broader market perceptions of the model. For help, they turned to the CLUE Group, comprised of two National Main Street veterans, Kennedy Smith and Josh Bloom, to research the state of the movement and make recommendations for change. Smith and Bloom conducted focus groups and surveyed people from several hundred com-



Renovated public plaza on East Passyunk Avenue, a revitalized dining hub in Philadelphia.

Credit: Graham Copeland



Victorian storefront with beautifully restored façade in Carlisle, PA.

munities – “Main Streeters” - staffers, board members, other volunteers, and municipal officials – as well as non-participants.

“There are now fewer Main Street communities than there were a decade ago,” says Smith, who served as director for the Main Street Center for 14 years. “Some have succeeded and have since disbanded,” but that is the exception. “Others are no longer active. Competition for state funding has been an issue.”

The economic downturn of 2007-2008 resulted in the reduction of state funding, with budgets slashed for Main Street coordinating programs and their downstream local revitalization groups. That made hiring experienced staffers difficult. On a positive note, Main Street budgets have been replenished in Minnesota, Colorado, Michigan, Montana, and Wyoming, over the past five to six years.

The biggest challenge for Main Street managers is fundraising, but the good news is that locals are becoming savvier on funding. Fifteen percent of those surveyed are using tax increment financing and business improvement districts as finance tools, compared to four to five percent 15 years ago. This represents a move in the right direction, but perhaps not enough. “The economic downturn has stopped BID formation in its tracks,” says Thompson. “However, the NMSC board is very interested in this.”

The research findings also confirmed that in general, Main Street programs were “top-heavy on promotion, to the detriment of economic development,” according to Thompson. “Main Street programs became the promotion/event departments for the cities.” Main Streeters are trained to gain quick wins – grabbing the “low-hanging fruit” – to build needed momentum for their fledgling revitalization efforts. Community events generate this immediate visibility. But that short-term focus can detract from working toward bigger, important issues, Thompson says. “Investors didn’t think of Main Street programs seriously, seeing the organizations as not having capacity.”

Additional research results showed that the prescribed organizational structures that grew out of the Four Point Approach were too rigid, leading to siloed behavior by

the committees and a lack of accomplishment of the intended outcomes.

Further feedback from Main Street managers, according to Smith, was “They had mastered the four areas but were not sure how to get to the next level, to address more significant challenges. Strategy and organizational discipline were lacking, even with some of the mature organizations. The programs need to move past the organizational structure and towards economic transformation.”

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

After evaluating the research data, NMSC’s Four Point Refresh Task Force members and their consultants mulled changes to the approach. The group decided upon the refresh, rather than an abandonment of the proven model, applied in so many places, over so many years.

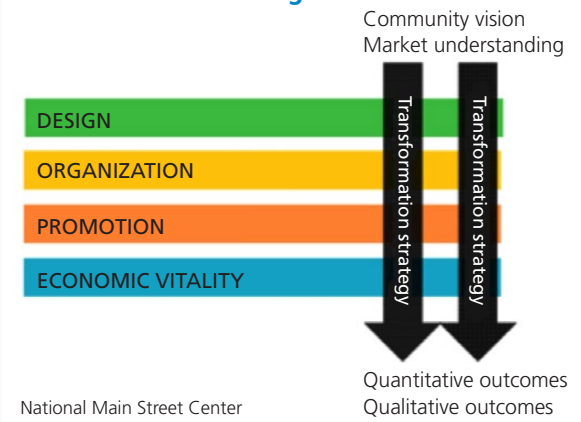
“This is not a wholesale change, but a refocusing,” said Matt Wagner, vice president of Revitalization Programs at the National Main Street Center. “We want to ensure that the process is not overly prescriptive. Main Street programs are giving input into the overall approach to the refresh.”

So the Task Force devised a plan for local Main Street programs to become more market-driven, identifying several strategic objectives based on their communities’ economic realities. They now call for programs to concentrate on those few big issues by organizing their all-too-scarce resources around action-based agendas.

Replacing the traditional organization of people, projects, and budgets according to the Four Points, the new approach will encourage the Main Street programs to develop new Community Transformation Strategies, designed to bring about significant and sustained changes in the local communities.

According to Patrice Frey, NMSC’s president, these transformational strategies are designed to guide the direction of downtown revitalization initiatives, to bring about the substantive transformation of local economies. The approach is designed to be “based on an understanding of the district’s economic performance and opportunities, and reflective of the broader community” – in keeping with the grass-roots, inclusive tradition.

Transformation Strategies



Existing Main Street organizations will be encouraged to create these new Community Transformation Strategies by re-evaluating their overall objectives via strategic planning and visioning, economic development goal-setting, and market research.

Transformation strategies will be implemented through all Four Points, coordinated to achieve common strategic outcomes.

One Main Street organization may, for example, focus on developing an arts district, based on its evaluation of opportunity and potential economic benefits. Another group may develop a Community Transformation Strategy to leverage its concentration of daytime employees located in their downtown district. Such a holistic, coordinated strategy could encompass the Four Points: e.g. – new convenience-driven retailers could be recruited to accommodate the local workforce (Economic Vitality – now replacing your grandfather’s Economic Revitalization Committee); daytime events or happy hours could focus on the office workers (Promotion); bike to work and walk to work programming and infrastructure could be created (Design); and communications tools could be developed to better reach the office workers as a target audience (Organization).

Some examples of Transformation Strategies presented by Patrice Frey at a recent state downtown conference fall into two topical categories: customer-based and product-based:

Customer-based Strategies	Product-based Strategies
Downtown workers and/or residents	Arts
College students	Entertainment/nightlife
Tourists	Furniture/furnishings
Military installations	Professional services
Family-friendly, family serving	Health + wellness
Millennials	Sports + recreation
Elderly	Ethnic specialties
	Apparel
	Agriculture
	Education
	Green products
	Convenience
	Manufacturing
	Food



Credit: Easton Farmers Market

Opening day at the Farmers Market on Centre Square, Easton, PA.

ORGANIZATIONAL SHIFTS

Existing Main Street organizations will be encouraged to create these new Community Transformation Strategies by re-evaluating their overall objectives via strategic planning and visioning, economic development goal-setting, and market research. A renewed focus on the measurement of outcomes and a re-evaluation every two to five years at the local program level will be encouraged. Implementing such a shift may require training, new talent (volunteer or contracted), and/or refocusing of people and resources from the traditional committees.

For new Main Street groups or those existing but not previously-designated, any committees and strategic initiatives would no longer need to fit into the previously-prescribed Four Point structure.

While some Main Street organizations have taken a disciplined approach to strategic planning over their lifespans, others will need to adopt new practices. Certain groups may need to do some “closet cleaning,” according to Wagner, after creating their new strategy. Existing projects no longer considered strategic may be transitioned to other community partners, while others may need to be eliminated. Wagner referenced certain promotional events as an example. “People appreciate that the new focus is on economic impact that will give districts a competitive advantage.”

However, Main Street groups will not be asked to abandon their current committee structures, if they are operating well. NMSC’s website states: “How you structure your organization remains up to you. We do not recommend a strict four-committee structure, because in practice, we find that this often results in a “silo-ization” of work. But, if your committee structure works for your community, you do not need to change it . . .”

“If it works, stick with it,” says Wagner. “The importance is being more comprehensive and moving the needle on economic development.”

By promoting this new organizational flexibility, the NMSC hopes to create a broader appeal to other exist-

ing groups that are already involved in revitalization and placemaking. City agencies and community development corporations, for example, might be more interested now that the approach accommodates existing organizational structures, budgets, and staffing models.

IMPLEMENTING THE FOUR POINT REFRESH

NMSC staff, supported by the CLUE Group, is now finalizing demonstration projects in ten cities to further develop the new approach, with grant funding provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Colorado Department of Local Affairs. These participating programs were selected based on a competitive application process – seven are located in cities in which Knight Ridder's legacy media businesses had a presence, plus three are in Colorado downtown communities. The selected groups also represent a mix of urban and rural, older and newer Main Street programs plus non-participating organizations, municipalities, CDCs and other nonprofits.

Refresh Demonstration Cities

Biloxi, MS
 Detroit, MI
 Gary, IN
 Lexington, KY
 Miami, FL
 Milledgeville, GA
 Philadelphia, PA
 Brush, Lake City, and Steamboat Springs, CO

In Philadelphia, Tacony Community Development Corporation was selected to participate, as a non-Main Street organization. Their Community Transformation Strategy consists of business recruitment to fill vacant retail properties in the Tacony neighborhood, based on market research that identified unmet local consumers' needs. The NMSC team and CLUE Group conducted a



Downtown organizations celebrate local entrepreneurs with events and marketing assistance in downtown West Chester, PA.

site visit on February 4 – 5, 2016 to meet with the board, conduct a quick assessment and provide market research data, identifying demographic changes and related gaps between local retail supply and demand.

The assessment team's research identified two clusters of business categories: neighborhood convenience and family-friendly. They conducted "market analysis lite" and created a playbook to help the group fill the market gaps. This will involve Tacony CDC building several new, related programs: working with existing businesses to help them cater to these consumer groups, recruiting new businesses in these targeted categories, and developing a district-wide promotional strategy with messaging designed to appeal to families.

"We will be able to present a more cohesive message, and the project will fit into a more cohesive strategy," said Alex Balloon, Tacony CDC's manager. This project implementation work is ongoing.

The ten demonstration project groups now are completing their beta stages – each has defined its Community Transformation Strategies, with implementation occurring through the work planning process. Beyond that, NMSC's nationwide rollout of the changes is happening over time. To support this transition, they provided seminar-based training at the "Main Street Now" national conference in Milwaukee, in May 2015, and are creating a series of online training materials, articles, and briefs. NMSC will soon release documents summarizing the demonstration projects, and Catalyst Transformation Strategies – descriptions of the several dozen strategies that work best and most often.

With this new approach, NMSC also recognizes that a number of organizations have already adapted their models to meet market realities. Jef Buehler, New Jersey state coordinator, says "change happens so fast in New Jersey, [real estate] development happens so fast, and we have to keep up to get our arms around it. We put economic value on top 15 years ago, with market-based solutions. Historic preservation is done with an end goal of creating economic value." For example, Main Street New Jersey's training program includes market-based workshops such



Outdoor dining at ByWard Market in Ottawa, ON. This downtown district is managed by a Business Improvement Area, which is not a Main Street organization designated by NMSC.



Growers and their goods at the farmers market in Lansdowne, PA, add vitality to the community.

as developing financial pro-formas to redevelop historic downtown buildings, and how to use economics of place to guide design.

Mary Thompson, the Task Force chair, understands that “innovation happens at the grassroots level. We needed to tap into that and share it at the national level... We’re just catching up at NMSC.”

FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

This new focus of the Main Street revitalization movement presents opportunities to economic development practitioners in several ways. First, for members of exist-

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ing organizations such as municipal government agencies and CDCs that earlier had considered the Main Street model as too rigid, this may be the right time to take another look, based on the new organizational flexibility. Second, economic developers who operate in communities with existing Main Street organizations may want to consider aligning their efforts to achieve common goals. For example, lenders that see the value in the Community Transformation Strategies identified by Main Street groups in their markets can seek out and exploit the synergies of projects that align with the downtown revitalization strategy. And finally, the opportunity may exist to help craft such a strategy by joining the Economic Vitality Committee of a Main Street program in their favorite downtown. Hometown talent is always needed, and the timing is now propitious.

Many Main Streeters and others interested in downtown revitalization across the country are watching these pivotal changes with great anticipation. A new Main Street program may be coming soon to a town near you.



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