



## National Main Street Center

a subsidiary of the  
National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

### **The Main Street Approach**

Over the past 35 years, the National Main Street Center has led the development of a national network of over 2,000 historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts – what we refer to as Main Streets - all united by these communities' tireless dedication to create vibrant, people-centered places to live, work, and play. The people who make up the Main Street network are passionate advocates, dedicated volunteers, influential stakeholders, and community organizers who work every day to turn the tide in their communities - catalyzing reinvestment, creating jobs, and fostering pride of place.

Main Street-style transformation is a combination of art and science: communities first need to learn about the local economy, its primary drivers, and its regional context (the science), but they also need to convey that special sense of place through storytelling, preserving the older and historic structures that set it apart, broad and inclusive civic engagement, and marketing (the art). To support this powerful network, the National Main Street Center has a revitalization framework – the Main Street Approach - that helps communities leverage both the art and science of downtown revitalization to create a better quality of life for all.

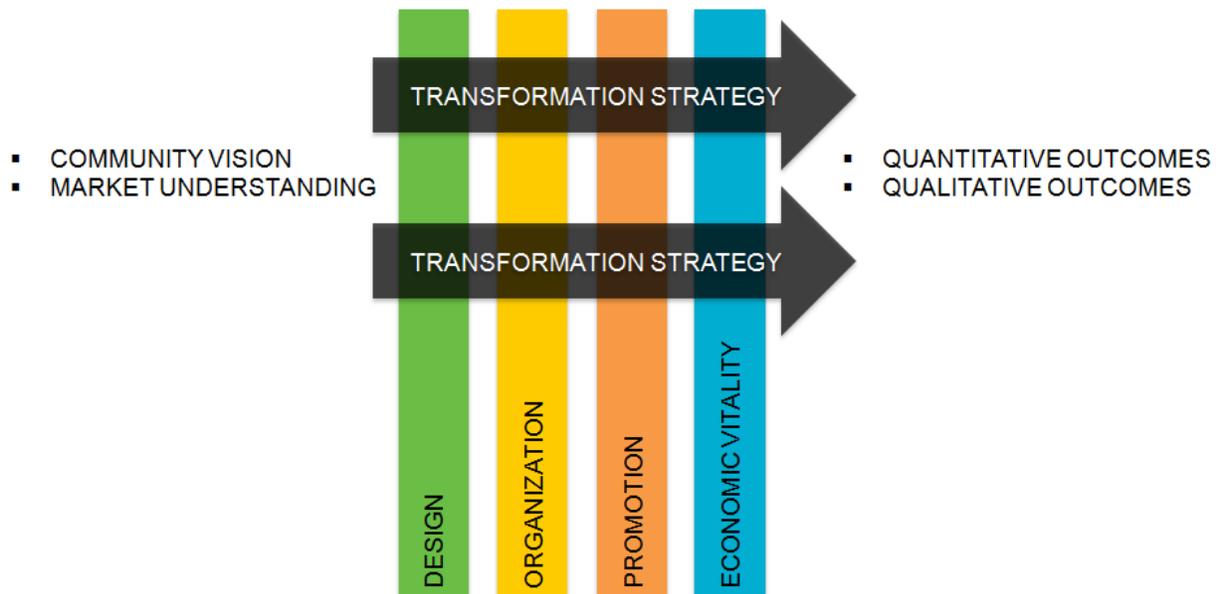
The Main Street Approach is most effective in places where community residents have a strong emotional, social, and civic connection and are motivated to get involved and make a difference. This approach works where existing assets – such as older and historic buildings and local independent businesses – can be leveraged. It encourages communities to take steps to enact long term change, while also implementing short term, inexpensive and placed-based activities that attract people to the commercial core and create a sense of enthusiasm and momentum about their community. Throughout the country, both small-city downtowns and urban neighborhoods are renewing their community centers with Main Street methodology.

Ultimately, the result of these community-driven efforts are places with strong social cohesion and economic opportunity; they are places that support and sustain innovation and opportunity; places where people of diverse perspectives and backgrounds come together to shape the future.

### **The Refreshed Main Street Approach**

The refreshed Main Street Approach is a common-sense, strategy driven framework that guides community-based revitalization efforts. The Main Street Approach harnesses the social, economic, physical, and cultural assets that set a place apart, and ultimately leads to tangible outcomes that benefit the entire community.

It's helpful to think of the new Main Street Approach consisting of three tightly integrated components: community vision and market understanding (the inputs), transformation strategy (implemented using the Four Points), and impact and measurement (the outcomes).



### **Identify the Community Vision for Success**

The Main Street Approach begins with creating a vision for success on Main Street that is rooted in a solid understanding of the market realities of the district, and is informed by broad community engagement. Main Street promotes a community-driven process that brings diverse stakeholders from all sectors together, inviting them to be proactive participants in the revitalization process. This essential component provides a foundation for outlining the community's own identity, expectations, and ideals while confirming real and perceived perceptions, needs and opportunities. It also ensures that the vision is a true reflection of the diversity of the community.

Some communities may decide they want to become regional arts and culture hubs, others may want to become innovation districts, and others may want to focus on creating a supportive environment for minority-owned businesses. Still others may decide they want simply to be able to offer better retail and services to local residents. Whatever the vision, the goal is holistic transformation of Main Street, accompanied by rigorous outcome measurement to demonstrate results.

### **Create Community Transformation Strategies**

A vision of success alone is not enough. Communities must work together to identify key strategies, known as **Community Transformation Strategies** that will provide a clear sense of priorities and direction for the revitalization efforts. Typically communities will find two to three Community Transformation Strategies are needed to help reach a community vision. These strategies will focus on both long and short-term actions that will move a community closer to achieving its goals.

For example, if a Main Street decides that “aging in place” is a critical element of its community vision, the organization would develop a series of Community Transformation Strategies to help realize that vision. A short-term strategy could be to implement a special senior discount at cooperating businesses. A longer-term strategy could be to partner with other advocacy groups and the Department of Transportation to encourage Transit Oriented Development in the district.

Implementation of these strategies is carried out through work that aligns with the four key areas Main Streets have been using as a guiding framework for over 35 years: Economic Vitality, Promotion, Design, and Organization, known collectively as the Main Street Four Points.

### **Economic Vitality**

Revitalizing a downtown or neighborhood commercial district requires focusing on the underlying Economic Vitality of the district. This work is rooted in a commitment to making the most of a community’s unique sense of place and existing historic assets, harnessing local economic opportunity and creating a supportive business environment for small business owners and the growing scores of entrepreneurs, innovators, and localists alike. With the nation-wide growing interest in living downtown, supporting downtown housing is also a key element of building Economic Vitality.

### **Design**

A focus on Design supports a community’s transformation by enhancing the physical elements of downtown while capitalizing on the unique assets that set the commercial district apart. Main Streets enhance their appeal to residents and visitors alike with attention to public space through the creation of pedestrian friendly streets, inclusion of public art in unexpected areas, visual merchandising, adaptive reuse of older and historic buildings, more efficiently-designed buildings, transit oriented development, and much more.

### **Promotion**

Promoting Main Street takes many forms, but the ultimate goal is to position the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and the hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community's unique characteristics. This can be done through highlighting cultural traditions, celebrating and preserving important architecture and history, encouraging local businesses to market cooperatively, offering coordinated specials and sales, and hosting special events aimed at changing perceptions of the district and communicating to residents, investors, businesses, and property-owners that this place is special.

### **Organization**

A strong organizational foundation is key for a sustainable Main Street revitalization effort. This can take many forms, from a standalone non-profit organization, to a special assessment district, to a program housed in a municipality or existing community development entity. Regardless of the organizational type, the focus is on ensuring that all organizational resources (partners, funding, volunteers, etc.) are mobilized to effectively implement the Community Transformative Strategies.

### **Impact and Measurement**

To succeed, Main Street must show visible results that can only come from completing projects – both shorter and longer-term activities that add up to meaningful change. Activities aligned with shorter-term strategies focus on highly visible changes that are a reminder that the revitalization effort is under way and succeeding, helping to secure buy-in from community members and rallying volunteers. Placemaking strategies – those actions which focus on what can be achieved “lighter, quicker, and cheaper” are particularly effective and important in energizing the community and demonstrating short-term progress.

While shorter-term, highly visible activities are critical to Main Street's success, communities must also sustain focus on implementation of longer-term projects and activities that are the building blocks for substantial change over time. Identifying milestones for these longer-term projects can be important in creating a sense of forward momentum and reinforcing to the community the need for sustained focus on revitalization efforts.

Additionally, Main Streets must forge cross-sector and non-traditional partnerships in order to achieve long-term success. One of Main Street's greatest strengths has always been as convener, and as the horizons of the community revitalization field broaden to include more players from the housing, social justice, employment, sustainability, real estate fields, and more, this role is more important than ever.

Main Street programs occupy a central place in their communities, acting as “community quarterbacks” by creating a forum for bringing together diverse stakeholders.

Coinciding with implementation is an equally important focus on measuring progress and results. Healthy Main Streets are built on a commitment to measure outcomes. We live in a time where public resources are scarce, and competition for private resources is fierce. Main Streets must be able to demonstrate the wise use of resources, which translates to real change on the ground: new jobs added to a Main Street, new businesses open, buildings redeveloped, and numerous other metrics of success. The National Main Street Center, together with our network of over 45 Main Street Coordinating Partners, works to make measuring results on Main Street easier and accurate.

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