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THE MAIN STREET APPROACH: A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION



Main Street America™ has been helping to revitalize older and historic commercial districts since the late 1970s. Today, it is a movement consisting of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The Main Street Approach: A Guide to Comprehensive Commercial District Transformation was co-written with Kennedy Smith and Josh Bloom of Community Land Use + Economics Group.

This guide was shaped by input from the National Main Street Center (NMSC) board-appointed Four Point Refresh Task Force. The Task Force was led by Main Street veteran and NMSC Board Member Mary Thompson.

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For centuries, Main Streets have been the cultural, historic, economic, civic, and emotional hearts of our towns and cities. Forming at the center of a city or neighborhood, a community’s Main Street brings together a complex amalgam of uses, creating an economically self-sustaining ecosystem of retail and wholesale businesses, personal and professional services, government, entertainment, dining, industry, worship, lodging, and public assembly.

With the advent of shopping centers and regional shopping malls in the post-WWII era, then the advent of big box superstores several decades later, Main Streets lost their economic strength as a glut of commercial space flooded the marketplace, and residents moved further out from city centers and neighborhood districts.

But Main Streets don’t become great places again by accident. Revitalization almost always requires years of work, and maintaining the positive changes made is an ongoing responsibility. Just as shopping mall management companies don’t stop improving a mall’s tenant mix, maintaining the facility, or marketing the mall once it is initially leased up, managing a downtown or neighborhood commercial district involves ongoing and strategic effort to constantly adapt to changes in the marketplace.

What follows is a resource guide to creating or enhancing a sustainable commercial district revitalization effort using the Main Street Approach®, with resources and guidance for new and seasoned Main Street programs alike. The guide begins with the fundamentals of the Main Street Approach, then takes an in-depth look at Transformation Strategies—the centerpiece of a Main Street program’s work—and how Main Street programs can better align their work around district-specific strategies. From there, the guide will provide direction on how to best structure your program to meet your needs, how to measure progress, and outline some common keys to long-term success.

In recent decades, many downtowns and neighborhood commercial corridors have gradually regained economic ground, and new and old generations alike now actively seek out the unique spaces, economic vibrancy, and cultural interaction that older and traditional commercial districts offer.

THE MAIN STREET APPROACH

THE MAIN STREET PROJECT AND THE NATIONAL MAIN STREET CENTER

CREDIT: ED MCMAHON

In 1977, the National Trust for Historic Preservation launched a three-year pilot project in three Midwestern communities to explore ways to stimulate economic development in older and historic downtowns and to leverage the value of Main Street’s historic buildings. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a nonprofit organization that works to save America’s historic places, was alarmed that shopping malls and sprawl development were diverting retail sales from downtowns, resulting in a downward spiral of disinvestment as businesses failed, buildings fell into disrepair, and investment shifted to the suburbs.



The participants in the three-year pilot project found that the key to revitalizing an older downtown was to approach the district’s problems and opportunities in a comprehensive manner, working simultaneously in four broad areas that the pilot project’s staff called the “Four Points”:

ECONOMIC VITALITY focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for the scores of entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies.

DESIGN supports a community’s transformation by enhancing the physical and visual elements of downtown while capitalizing on the unique assets that set the commercial district apart.

PROMOTION positions the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community’s unique characteristics.

ORGANIZATION involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district.



In addition to the Four Points, a set of guiding principles helps provide direction and focus on developing strategy, choosing activities, and communicating the revitalization initiative's purpose:

Asset-based: Every Main Street district has assets on which it can begin building its revitalization initiative. Many Main Streets have distinctive historic buildings that create a strong visual identity for the district, for example, and many have at least a handful of successful businesses that can serve as springboards for adding new products, services, businesses, and activities to the district. Other assets might include concentrations of district workers or residents, proximity to a major attraction, access to a major highway, the availability of certain types of buildings, the presence of a college or university, or strong entrepreneurial traditions. And, every Main Street district's history is rooted to that of its community, offering a rich narrative for the district's continuing evolution.

Comprehensive: All the factors that affect a downtown's health are tightly interrelated. Consequently, its revitalization strategies must address challenges and opportunities comprehensively, with simultaneous activity in each of the Four Points described above.

Incremental: Successful, sustained revitalization begins with a series of small actions that taken together, can lead to catalytic change. As public confidence in the district grows and the revitalization initiative's participants hone their skills, the initiative is gradually able to tackle more complicated challenges.

Implementation-focused: Transforming the economy of an older commercial district takes time, and the enormity of the challenge can sometimes seem overwhelming. Breaking these transformations down into small, achievable activities makes the process manageable. And, by demonstrating frequent, visible progress, the revitalization initiative gradually builds and strengthens community support.

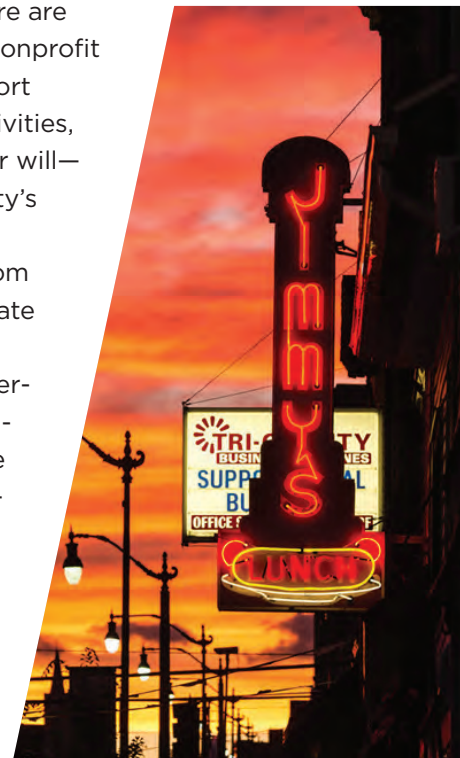
Quality: Historically, Main Streets were built with high-quality materials and design, reflecting community pride. The district's revitalization initiative should emphasize high quality in all aspects of its work—in building rehabilitation, new construction, urban design, marketing activities, storefront window displays and in-store displays, public signs, public

amenities, and much more. Poor quality reinforces negative public images of the district. "High quality" does not mean "high price"; it involves careful planning and execution.

Changing attitudes: After witnessing years of negative changes, many people have lost hope that their community's Main Street can become a healthy, vibrant place again. Some have never experienced a vibrant Main Street and have difficulty envisioning what it might be like. But as small, positive changes start taking place and as the revitalization initiative consistently meets its goals, public attitudes begin changing, too. In fact, of all the things needed to strengthen a Main Street district, perhaps the most important one is shifting public attitudes about the district from negative to positive.

Partnerships: Neither the public or private sector can single-handedly revitalize a commercial district. Both sectors have substantial investment in the district, both have vested interests in the district's long-term success—and both have specific skills and resources needed for its revitalization. Partnerships must also be inclusive, engaging the entire community in envisioning the district's future and benefiting from its success.

Self-directed: While there are some government and nonprofit resources that can support certain revitalization activities, no outside entity can—or will—revitalize your community's commercial district. Only local leadership, from both the public and private sectors, can save Main Street. Strong local leadership not only builds community confidence in the district and its revitalization, but it also helps attract outside interest, helping assure outside funders and assistance providers that their potential investments of time and money will be well spent.



CREDIT: CHRIS ADVAL

As a result of the pilot project, the National Trust for Historic Preservation created the National Main Street Center in 1980 to make the Main Street Approach available to communities throughout the nation. Since that time, more than 2,000 towns and cities of all sizes—from small towns like Bonaparte, Iowa, and Port Gibson, Mississippi, to urban neighborhoods like Boston’s Chinatown and San Diego’s North Park—have participated in the program. Together, this vast network of community-based revitalization programs used the Main Street Approach to transform their downtown economies, rally volunteers, and celebrate their historic character. With billions of dollars reinvested, and hundreds of thousands of buildings rehabbed, jobs created, and new business opened, it is no exaggeration to say that Main Street programs—with the Main Street Approach in hand—have played a critical role in the revival of America’s downtowns over the last several decades.

THE MAIN STREET REFRESH

When it was initially launched in 1980, the National Main Street Center recommended that communities participating in the Main Street program create a new, free-standing nonprofit organization, supported by both the public and private sectors, to oversee the local Main Street revitalization initiative. Furthermore each new organization should create four standing committees—one for each of the Four Points—to implement program activities. Over time, this structure became the norm (and, in many places, became a requirement for participation in some states’, counties’, or cities’ Main Street Coordinating Programs). There are variations—some programs are housed in local government, for example, and some are funded exclusively by the public or private sector. But virtually all local Main Street programs created four standing committees.

In 2015, the National Main Street Center (NMSC), in partnership with the Community Land Use + Economics (CLUE) Group, conducted an in-depth examination of how well the communities taking part in the Main Street program were doing in reaching their goals. The examination involved input from hundreds of revitalization practitioners in communities of all sizes and in all parts of the US.

Through this process, the NMSC and CLUE Group found that, while most local Main Street organizations were successful in building basic revitalization skills, in forming public/private partnerships for revitalization activity, and in mobilizing volunteers, many of them were struggling to reach more challenging benchmarks like developing upper-floor housing units, recruiting new businesses, and identifying and eliminating barriers that impede a district’s economic growth.

We also found that many organizations were spending a disproportionate amount of time on promotional events. In part, it appeared that organizations were doing so because promotional events had become an important source of their operating income. But, at the same time, the emphasis on promotion created the misperception that Main Street organizations were primarily concerned with promotion—not with economic development or historic preservation, both of which are bedrocks of the Main Street program. And we found that, in many communities, the four standing committees were developing work plans independently from those of the other committees. While the activities the committees chose were generally positive activities, they were not necessarily focused or aligned on the same goals.

MAIN STREET REFRESH MAJOR FINDINGS

The Main Street Approach works best when it’s seen as a framework guiding revitalization work—not a prescriptive structure.

To be most effective, revitalization programs need to prioritize strategy and outcomes over process.

Organizational flexibility can be an asset, allowing for nimble shifts in strategy and a more tactical focus on economic development related activities.

Inclusive community engagement is a fundamental building block to a successful revitalization effort. Main Street-style revitalization looks different in every community and district, and is a reflection of the input, wisdom, and perspective of local leaders, business owners, and residents.

As a result of its findings, the National Main Street Center made three key changes in the Main Street Approach:

- 1. Emphasis on Transformation Strategies:** In the past, the National Main Street Center and most statewide, county, regional, and citywide Main Street America Coordinating Programs recommended organizing revitalization work according to the Four Points. This is still the case, but primary emphasis has now shifted towards the development of one to three Transformation Strategies—generated through meaningful community engagement and informed by an analysis of the district’s market position—that will guide revitalization work. Each Transformation Strategy is implemented through activities in the four broad areas of work represented by the Four Points.
- 2. Flexible organizational framework:** Previously, the National Main Street Center and most Coordinating Programs encouraged or required communities participating in the Main Street program to create four standing committees corresponding to the Four Points. With the Refresh, participating communities can organize their revitalization work in many different ways, which can include continuing with the four standing committee structure. However, newly organized programs or programs that already use four standing committees may modify their organizational structure, depending on their needs, the availability of partner organizations, or other factors. Depending on local context and needs, this could lead to a more staff driven approach, or a work structure formed around project teams, external partnerships, or ad-hoc task forces.
- 3. Periodic re-examination:** While periodic evaluation of program progress has always been an important part of the Main Street Approach, it is now an integral and essential tool for measuring the progress of the revitalization initiative’s Transformation Strategies and for fine-tuning its strategies to build on successes and pursue new challenges. This emphasis on periodic re-examination reinforces the Main Street program’s commitment to demonstrating impact. Revitalization organizations operate in an environment in which public resources are scarce and competition for private resources is fierce. Programs must be able to demonstrate the wise use of resources, which translates to real results on the ground.



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TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

A **Transformation Strategy** articulates a focused, deliberate path to revitalizing or strengthening a downtown or commercial district's economy. Grounded by both an understanding of the underlying drivers of the local and regional economy, as well as community feedback and engagement, a Transformation Strategy should describe a market position that the commercial district can successfully fulfill.

An effective Transformation Strategy serves a particular customer segment, responds to an underserved market demand, or creates a differentiated destination.

Simply stated, a **Transformation Strategy** is a comprehensive strategy that guides the direction of the revitalization initiative and, over time, transforms the district. Each Transformation Strategy has several important characteristics:

- // It is rooted in the community's vision for the district.
- // It is based on a solid analysis and understanding of the district's economy and its best economic opportunities.
- // It is comprehensive, in that it is implemented through a broad range of activities that span the four broad areas of work represented by the Four Points.
- // It is measurable, making it possible to track progress.
- // It provides guidance for program activities for a two- to five-year period, after which the revitalization program should examine progress and make adjustments, as needed.

In general, a revitalization organization should work with one or two Transformation Strategies at a time. In some exceptional circumstances, it might consider tackling three Transformation Strategies—but more than three would be challenging.



WHAT ARE “CATALYST STRATEGIES”?

A Catalyst Strategy is an off-the-shelf Transformation Strategy. It defines an economic focus or niche, describes the customers or types of businesses that are necessary to support it, and suggests initial projects for getting started. The Catalyst Strategy paints a narrative of what a district might look like if it succeeds in building a focused economy. To support the roll-out of the new Main Street model, the NMSC has developed a set of Catalyst Strategies that communities may choose to use as a starting point. You are not limited to the Catalyst Strategies; it is very possible that you will need to define a customized Transformation Strategy for your district.

The Catalyst Strategies may at first sound somewhat generic—and they are. They're designed to be adaptable to a variety of places and circumstances and then can be refined and customized over time, as you gain deeper understanding of your local and regional market and as you assess your success in achieving your goals. A Catalyst Strategy is a place to start, and the Four Points provide a framework for putting the strategies into action. Using one or more of the Catalyst Strategies can save you time, whether you are just getting started in your revitalization work or you are seeking to bring more structure and economic focus to your current work.

The ready-made Catalyst Strategies fall into two broad types: those that are focused on a specific customer segment and those that are focused on an industry, product, or service segment. Some of the Catalyst Strategies available for you to adopt or customize include:



CUSTOMER-BASED STRATEGIES

Workers and Residents
 Elder-Friendly and Aging-In-Place
 Family-Friendly and Family-Serving
 Millennials, Hipsters and Young Adults

INDUSTRY, PRODUCT, OR SERVICE-BASED STRATEGIES

Tourists and Tourism	Entertainment and Nightlife	Furnishings
Agricultural Center	Environmentally-Friendly Products and Services	Health and Wellness
Apparel	Ethnic Specialties	Knowledge Economy
Arts (performing and visual)	Food	Manufacturing
College Town	Furniture and Home	Military Installations
Convenience Goods and Services		Sporting, Recreation, and the Outdoors

Even though they are ready-to-use, the same Catalyst Strategy won't look the same in any two places. An "Arts" strategy may reflect traditional fine arts in one place and graffiti art in another. Or an "Ethnic Specialties" district may reflect Latino businesses and culture in one place and African American businesses and culture in another.

HOW DO WE SELECT A STRATEGY?

We recommend starting with one or two Catalyst Strategies and refining them as your work progresses. But how do you choose among the options? Most of the strategies build on a local strength or opportunity, such as a cluster of businesses in a particular sector, an important local or visitor demographic, or a key business or institution. Even a single business that is well-known and functions as a destination can provide an anchor around which you can build a strategy.

You may be faced with challenges like:

- /// A concerning number of empty storefronts or a significant empty institutional building
- /// Competition from chains, big-box stores, and online retailers
- /// Shopper complaints like, "There's no place to buy socks downtown."

These challenges in themselves are usually not the basis for a strategy. They are too narrow and tailored around weaknesses in the market. Rather, a successful strategy builds on an inherent strength or characteristic that can be nurtured and grown. Some Catalyst Strategies simply may not fit your circumstances (if you don't have a college or military installation nearby, then the College Town and Military Installation strategies are not for you). Others you may decide are not a good fit for other reasons. It's best not to use the available Catalyst Strategies as a "wish list."



CREDIT: MICHIGAN MAIN STREET

Selecting a strategy is a process that includes intuition, quantitative analysis, and public engagement. Here is a practical approach to tackling these aspects and settling on the strategy or strategies that best fit your circumstances.

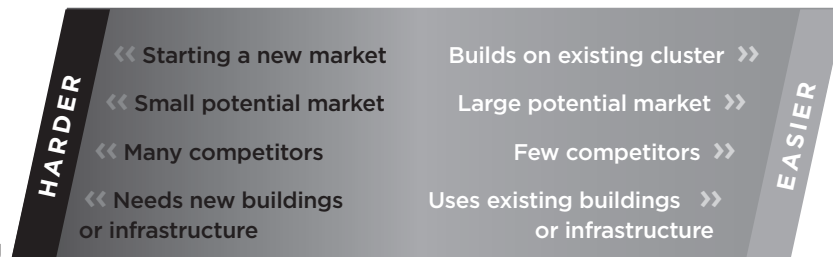
Ask each person to answer the following qualitative questions—based on what he or she already knows—to help assess the fit and feasibility of the strategies you are considering. For each strategy you are considering, answer the questions by making a mark along the arrow scale. The purpose of this exercise is to “take the temperature” of the fit, rather than to definitively adopt (or eliminate) any one Catalyst Strategy. Once everyone on your leadership team has done this initial screening independently, bring everyone together to discuss the results.

1. Conduct outreach. At an early stage, the Main Street program needs to engage key downtown stakeholders as well as the broader community. While community engagement can be hard work, it is a fundamental first step in securing buy-in from community members, and will result in a set of strategies that truly reflect the vision of the community.

At the most basic level, community engagement around Transformation Strategies assesses basic attitudes about the downtown or neighborhood district. Consider your Main Street-district stakeholders. Depending on your community, it will likely include local leaders, business owners, students, visitors, new residents, long-term residents, and more. You will want to find out what attracts them to the district; what’s missing from the mix; and who are the competitors. Try and get a sense for what kind of Main Street they’d like to see, and how they think the community should get there. Use the information gathered to provide further insight into your district’s strengths, weaknesses, and market opportunities. See the accompanying resource guide, *Community Engagement for Main Street Transformation* for more resources on this subject.

2. Initial screening. We assume you know your downtown or commercial district very well—you know the businesses and you have an intuitive sense of who comes there. You may already have an idea of what the market-driven strategy should be. We suggest you and your leadership team look through the list of Catalyst Strategies independently. Have each person make a list of three to five strategies that appear, at a glance, to be possibilities.

TEMPERATURE SCALES: WHAT STRATEGIES ARE A GOOD FIT?



The “temperature scales” should help bring some focus to your discussions and sorting of potential Catalyst Strategies. Do your ratings help you to eliminate any of the strategies? Do any strategies rise to the top? Has your list of possible strategies grown longer? Are there strategies you believe you need further information to be able to assess?

Note that even if some of your answers fall on the left side of the scale, that alone may not take it off the table. But it may mean that you will have to work harder to overcome significant barriers. For the Catalyst Strategies still under consideration, start to make lists of things you want to investigate further.

3. Light market analysis. Without getting bogged down in a full market analysis, examining some relevant data

is important and relatively easy to do. You can use market data to reassess your list of potential strategies and the winnowing process will often become clearer. As with the qualitative screening questions (above), demographic and spending reports provide additional layers of information to help you further evaluate your potential strategies. And, like the screening questions, the market data typically provides context rather than binary “yes/no” answers. See the sidebar **Where To Go For Information**.

4. Business inventory assessment. Next, look at your current business mix to see if you have economic clusters or strengths (or unrealized opportunities) that support one or more of the strategies you are considering. You may have a business inventory already, or you can go out and collect one. For larger districts, you can purchase a list of current businesses from data providers like *infoUSA* (which can be accessed at salesgenie.com). A purchased list will capture all businesses (not just those visible on the ground floors), but should be checked for accuracy by observation on the street.

5. Confirm your selected strategies. Your selected strategies should align with your best market opportunities, but they also need to align with your community’s aspirations. It is generally not practical (or even desirable) to hold a public referendum on your Transformation Strategies, but you should create opportunities to solicit public input to confirm the strategies. To do this, consider using one or more of the following tools:

Community meetings. Hold a public meeting to present the Transformation Strategies, or ask to be included on the agendas of other community groups (such as civic associations, public service organizations, churches, etc.) where you can present the strategies under consideration.

Online surveys. Circulate a survey with a list of strategies under consideration, along with a short description of each. Ask respondents to rate on a scale of one to five how closely each strategy meets the respondent’s vision for the commercial district.

Web and social media. Post the strategies to your organization’s Facebook page and your website, with a link to a survey.

Focus groups. Hold several focus groups to solicit feedback on the draft strategies.

The idea is not to take a “vote,” but rather to determine how your community sees itself and the future of

WHERE TO GO FOR INFORMATION

Sources for demographic and consumer segmentation information include the Census of Population and the American Community Survey (both at census.gov), ESRI, and several other sources.

You will need to define your assumed trade area. (This can be changed or refined in the future.) Trade area could be your zip code, city, or county. Or it could be the area within a certain radius or drive time.

Look for demographic benchmarks and trends and look for key areas of sales capture and leakage. Note that, with the exception of the Census, the data in these reports are generally estimates. Reports for very small geographies are less reliable than larger geographies, as they tend to magnify errors in the data.

With some basic data in hand, you can begin to answer questions like the following—and understand how the data support (or do not support) the Transformation Strategies you are considering:

What is the median age? What does it say about the life stage of households in your area? How does it align with the customer profile for your potential strategies?

What is the median household income? How does it align with your potential strategies?

What is the racial and ethnic mix? How is it changing?

What are the educational attainment rates?

What is the average household size? Does this align with your potential strategies? How might it affect the potential for residential development or the type of residential product offered?

What are the demographic trends? Is the population expected grow or shrink? Is the population aging or are younger households moving in?



its commercial district, and see if it can align with the strategies that make the most economic sense. There may be cases where the strategies that make sense economically do not initially fit the public's vision. In these cases, you may have to tweak the strategy, or you may want to undertake further outreach and engagement efforts to ensure that all stakeholders understand why the proposed direction will lead to the best foreseeable outcomes.

There are many benefits to aligning your Transformation Strategies with the boarder community and stakeholders. Even for those members of the community not totally convinced by the selections, having the opportunity to participate will increase the likelihood that they will be supportive in the long-run.

WHAT AREA SHOULD YOU USE FOR MARKET DATA?

You will probably want to look at several geographic areas to see differences in market data. The size of the area will depend on whether your commercial district or downtown is in an urban, suburban, or rural environment. For most places, it makes sense to look at demographic and economic data for the city as a whole first. (For urban neighborhoods, start with the neighborhood boundaries.) You may also choose to look at demographic and economic data for additional trade areas that you can define, such as radii or drive-time areas from a central intersection.

- ▶ In addition to varying by urban or rural context, trade areas are also influenced by physical boundaries and barriers, such as rivers, mountains, and highways.
- ▶ Note that trade areas vary by Transformation Strategy: A strategy focused on *Downtown Workers* has a much smaller trade area than a *Home Furnishings* strategy.
- ▶ Strategies focused on tourism are usually not well-suited to analysis of nearby geographic areas, unless the tourist draw relates to a regional market. Instead, you may want to gather information about visitors by interviewing related businesses, surveying and interviewing visitors themselves, or reviewing any collected market data from the local/ regional tourist bureaus.

HOW MANY STRATEGIES? AND ARE THEY PERMANENT?

For most commercial districts—whether a downtown, central business district, or a neighborhood business district—you should plan to choose one or two Transformation Strategies. The strategies you choose should be compatible with each other (so they can coexist in the same area at the same time). In some cases they may be complementary (e.g., a daytime strategy paired with an evening strategy). Choosing more than two strategies makes it harder to maintain a rigorous focus on a deliberate direction.

There may occasionally be cases where it makes sense to pursue more than two Transformation Strategies. For example, a larger downtown might have several specialized districts. Or a very long, linear commercial street might have several distinct nodes, each with a different physical format (e.g., pedestrian versus auto-oriented) or a different market. In these cases, each neighborhood or sub-district might warrant its own strategy.

If you select more than one Transformation Strategy, you should also take stock of whether you have the capacity (within your own organization and your partners) to advance the strategies effectively.

The strategies you select are not permanent. Think of them as two-to-five year plans. The nature of retail and

entertainment continues to shift, and commercial districts evolve as consumer preferences and needs evolve. Ten years from now, some strategies may have become long-term trends and others passing fads. This further suggests the need for metrics that allow for both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the strategies to demonstrate after each year that you are truly moving the needle on the revitalization process.

CUSTOMIZING THE STRATEGIES

The Catalyst Strategies are designed to be adaptable to different markets. Each Catalyst Strategy can be targeted toward a price or style segment. For example, the “Home Furniture and Home Furnishings” strategy could take any of several forms: used-merchandise stores (e.g., Goodwill); more trendy vintage and consignment stores; new, mid-priced furniture and housewares; or high-end designer furniture and furnishings. Similarly, “Entertainment and Nightlife” could range from local taverns to special-occasion restaurants.

The Catalyst Strategies can be customized around a population segment. For example, *Ethnic Specialties* could be adapted to a district with virtually any ethnic identity—from the Chinatown district in downtown Boston, to the Arab American-focused East Downtown Dearborn business district in Michigan, to Leimert Park’s African American Cultural Village in Los Angeles.

A word of warning about a couple Catalyst Strategies.

You may also notice that two of the Catalyst Strategies are similar: “Convenience Goods and Services” and “District Workers and Residents.” Both of these strategies are geared toward people in or near your commercial district who make convenience-related purchases. (The former describes product-based strategy; the latter describes a customer-based strategy.) These are the most popular Catalyst Strategies because many communities desire a locally-serving business district. However, these strategies can also present challenges because they are price-competitive and they are not differentiated.

For example, with pharmacy purchases, a customer is likely to go to a chain drug store—and the customer is likely to go to the chain drug store nearest to where she lives or works. She is not likely to travel to a less convenient drug store to make a routine purchase. Along with this lack of differentiation, traditional independent retailers may not be able to compete on pricing with

chain or online retailers. For these reasons, we encourage you to consider all of the available Catalyst Strategies—and any customized strategies that may fit your particular circumstances—before settling on either of the convenience-oriented strategies. A differentiated strategy that attracts people from beyond your immediate area may be more effective.

VISION, MISSION, GOALS, TACTICS... AND TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES?

Once established, Transformation Strategies become an integral component of your organization’s overall structure and strategic orientation. Together with your mission, vision, goals, and tactics, they provide a framework for communicating your downtown’s competitive positioning, aligning and leveraging partner activities, prioritizing your work, and maximizing your organization’s financial and human resources and capacity.

These terms can be a bit confusing, and they are sometimes inadvertently used interchangeably. But each has a distinct purpose:

The organization’s **vision** describes how the community envisions the district will look, feel, and function at some point in the future when the district has reached its full potential and has achieved the transformations the community desires. An organization’s vision is usually translated into a vision statement that can help establish its principles and set long-term direction.

A **mission statement** explains why the revitalization initiative exists. It puts the vision statement into more concrete terms—what the program will do, and why it’s going to do it. Fundamentally, all revitalization programs exist to improve the economic health and cultural vibrancy of their commercial districts for the benefit of the community, with an emphasis on doing so by preserving and celebrating the district’s historic assets. That’s the mission.

Goals help to focus a program on the outcome it hopes to achieve by fulfilling its mission. Goals refer to specific, measurable results, and generally are tied to a timeline. For example, a revitalization program might have a goal of increasing the district’s overall occupancy rate to 95 percent in five years, or a goal of doubling the number of retail businesses that cater to families with young children by 2025.

Tactics describe the specific actions the organization will take to reach each of its goals. For example, if

one of the revitalization initiative's goals is to increase the availability of downtown housing by 25 percent, tactics might include gathering information about the district's upper-floor spaces, gaining support from property owners, eliminating red tape that might deter property owners from converting unused or under-used space to apartments, and/or creating some financial incentives to encourage property owners to convert space to apartments.

Most revitalization organizations have developed vision statements, mission statements, goals, and tactics. What is missing is the link between how organizations get from their mission and vision statement to achieving goals—and that's where Transformation Strategies come in. **Transformation Strategies provide clear guidance for how communities will fulfill their vision, advance their mission, strategically focus their tactics, and achieve their goals.** Ultimately, Transformation Strategies help ensure that activities in each of the Four Points are focused on the same outcomes.

HOW TO ALIGN YOUR WORK AROUND TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

Aligning a program's capacity and resources around selected Transformation Strategies is a critical component in ensuring long-term commitment from stakeholders, and ultimately, in achieving success. Here is a suggested process for ensuring buy-in at the leadership level and for gaining tactical alignment at the implementation level:

Step 1: Hold a dedicated board meeting to go over the proposed Transformation Strategies and vote on one to two that will guide your work. This is critical for a number of reasons. The board is ultimately responsible for setting the budget, as well as for approving the organization's annual work plan. Without support for the Transformation Strategies, it makes it far too easy for leadership and volunteers to get distracted by projects or activities that may be interesting, but are off-strategy.

Revitalization organizations do not have unlimited resources and capacity, and there will be difficult moments during the work planning process in which decisions will need to be made to discontinue certain activities. Strong, committed, laser-focused leadership is required by the board to establish and maintain focus on the Transformation Strategies.

Step 2: Hold a larger meeting of all the committees (if you have them), staff, or work groups prior to work planning to review the selected Transformation Strategies and collectively discuss how each group or individual views itself as contributing to its implementation. It is important to remind people that:

- // This is a transition, and it is not anticipated that you are to abandon everything you've been doing in pursuit of Transformation Strategies. Fully aligning your work plan around strategies is likely to take some time.
- // It is important for your organization to cultivate and advance opportunities that support its Transformation Strategy. However, there will undoubtedly be opportunities that do not directly align with your effort, but are still have merit. For example, if you have selected an "Arts and Entertainment" Transformation Strategy and a great bridal boutique is interested in setting up shop, there is no reason to dissuade them from opening downtown. They can still contribute to the overall revitalization process.

Step 3: As you facilitate the work planning process, remember that you should develop activities that advance the selected Transformation Strategies and fall under each of the Four Points. Here are some key questions to consider:

- // What current activities are you undertaking within the Four Points that already align well with the Transformation Strategies?
- // What other groups/organizations are conducting activities/programming that might align with the Transformation Strategies?
- // What activities are both underperforming and are off-strategy that can be discontinued?
- // Are there new priority activities that should be added within each of the Four Points that help to further advance the Transformation Strategies?

Step 4: After these questions have been addressed, committees and/or project teams can meet separately and begin to outline the more tactical elements of the strategy, including staffing, budget needs, timelines, and how to measure its success.

An example of a Transformation Strategy-aligned work plan:

An example of a Transformation Strategy-aligned work plan

BRUSH! TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY: AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

In agricultural communities, an “Agricultural Economy” strategy focuses on better meeting residents’ shopping, service, and entertainment needs and on finding new uses for vacant downtown buildings.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

Current activities:

1. Marketing seminars for businesses (not ag-specific)

Potential activities:

1. Add/recruit: work apparel; farm-to-table restaurant; local/organic soaps, etc.
2. Partner w/ extension service to do ag-related business seminars
3. Attract vendors from Oktoberfest
4. Homegrown Brush store
5. Incentive to move businesses downtown
6. Crowdfund a building purchase
7. Pop-up w Brush/local product in Main Street storefront?

DESIGN

Current activities:

1. Storefront incentives
2. Clean-up (April)
3. Downtown flowerpots

Potential activities:

1. Walking tour: tie to Ag
2. Public art “hoof-prints” to mark walking tour
3. Display historic photos of downtown bldgs in storefronts
4. Display ag-related artifacts from museum in storefront windows
5. Streetscape incorporating ag images
6. Public art: Mural? Sculpture? (Ag images)
7. Community garden

PROMOTION

Current activities:

1. Antique Tractor Show
2. Ag Appreciation Dinner
3. Cust. Appreciation BBQ
4. Pickers Market
5. Bull Riding event
6. Brush Rodeo
7. Oktoberfest

Potential activities:

1. Farm to Table dinner on-street, in downtown
2. Farmers Market
3. Christmas/Holiday promo (tie to ag)
4. Sugarbeet bowling contest

ORGANIZATION

Current activities:

1. FFA at Ag Appreciation Dinner
2. Library partnerships
3. Stakeholders: Morgan Community College, Hospital

Potential activities and needs:

1. Junior Main Street
2. Connect to Cattleman's Association
3. Livestock Exchange

CREDIT: MAIN STREET OTTUMWA



TIPS ON WORK PLANNING

Let’s assume that, based on market research and community input, a revitalization organization chooses two Transformation Strategies to guide its work over the next five years, and that one of these Transformation Strategies is to make the Main Street district a vibrant arts and entertainment district. To do so, some elements of a work plan might include:

- /// Attracting artists to live and work in the district
- /// Rehabilitating a historic theatre and reactivating it for live performances, film exhibition, and public assembly
- /// Enlivening public spaces throughout the district
- /// Expanding the number and variety of restaurants in the district

Note that each of these activities should align with the Four Points. For example, the first activity—attracting artists to live and work in the district—might involve work such as:

- // Developing ongoing partnerships with local and regional arts organizations
- // Identifying spaces that might work well for studio and art exhibition space
- // Consistently promoting the district’s position as a regional arts and entertainment center in order to change public perceptions of the district
- // Involving artists in urban planning activities
- // Developing, promoting, and managing incentive programs to encourage property owners to create studio and live/work spaces for artists
- // Bringing arts and entertainment into public spaces
- // Marketing the district’s arts and entertainment offerings to the public—and, specifically, to the target markets identified through the revitalization organization’s market research

Some of these activities might fall squarely within one purview of the Four Points. But many of them are likely to include work that straddle two or more points. For instance, achieving the objective of bringing arts and entertainment into public spaces might involve such activities as:

- // Creating a wayfinding system for the district that reflects the district’s emphasis on arts and entertainment [an activity that falls into the Design category]
- // Retooling the current promotional calendar by creating some new arts-focused events, removing events that do not specifically reinforce this Transformation Strategy, and shifting marketing emphasis towards the target markets identified in the revitalization program’s market research [Promotion]
- // Providing storefront window display space for area artists [Design, Promotion, and Organization]
- // Obtaining municipal approval for sidewalk dining and vending [Design, Organization]
- // Working with business owners to create outdoor dining and vending opportunities [Economic Vitality]

In this way, the Transformation Strategies help ensure that changes are comprehensive—and that the entire organization, and its partners, are focused on a unified agenda for the district’s revitalization.

ORGANIZING AROUND TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

Since its inception, the National Main Street Center and most Main Street America Coordinating Programs encouraged or required communities participating in the Main Street program to create four standing committees corresponding to the Four Points. With the refresh of the Main Street Approach, the National Main Street Center encourages participating communities to organize their revitalization work in the way that best fits the needs of the community.

IF YOUR DISTRICT IS ALREADY USING THE MAIN STREET APPROACH

When implementing the refreshed Main Street Approach, existing Main Street programs will need to make an essential decision about how to structure their work. If your community currently has four standing committees—one for each of the Four Points—and this is working well for your organization, there is no need to change the structure. Instead, you might simply begin organizing the agendas for your program’s board meetings around the Transformation Strategies so that the strategies become the central organizing elements of each meeting. If, however, you find that having four standing committees is not working particularly well, this is the time to make adjustments.

Some programs may find that the standard four committee model results in a “silo” effect, in which each of the four committees develops its own work plans and implements projects independently of one another. The individual committees may all be working on worthy projects, and be highly effective in their own right, but if they are not used to working collaboratively it will be very difficult to advance Transformation Strategies.



CREDIT: COLORADO MAIN STREET

The questions below can help you and your stakeholders decide whether it may be appropriate to retain your committees, or whether a new organizational structure is needed.

- // Is the work load between the committees well balanced?
- // Is each committee meeting its objectives?
- // Are there any skills or areas of expertise that would help the organization implement its Transformation Strategies but that are not currently present within the committees?
- // Are there any organizations or agencies in the community or region whose goals overlap with those of the revitalization program and/or that have skills or expertise that could help the revitalization program with its Transformation Strategies?
- // Would partnering with another organization on one or more areas of work boost the revitalization organization's effectiveness in meeting its goals?

What might this look like in practice? Lake City DIRT (Downtown Improvement and Revitalization Team) operates in a small Colorado mountain town. They struggled maintaining four committees and ultimately found that having project task forces improved volunteer participation. Monthly committee meetings were wearing down volunteers, but organizing around Transformation Strategies and the refreshed Main Street Approach has brought more partners, more interest, and has inspired the community.

As outlined earlier, the board took the lead on identifying their Transformation Strategies, including an arts-focused strategy. Lake City DIRT held a public meeting where partners including the town, county, local arts center, and chamber of commerce, as well as community volunteers, identified their roles and project interests.

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 Several ideas for initiatives that advance the arts strategy, and align with the Four Points, have been adopted and/or are being considered for the future, including:

- ▶ **Programming at the local art center in the summer [Promotion and Economic Vitality]**
- ▶ **Installing public art [Design and Organization]**
- ▶ **Walking tours of art studios [Promotion and Economic Vitality]**
- ▶ **Art booths at the Wine Festival [Organization and Promotion]**
- ▶ **“Made in Lake City” [Promotion and Economic Vitality]**
- ▶ **Everybody’s an Artist, a maker space for artists of all genres [Economic Vitality]**

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 The Main Street program leads a number of these initiatives, but the chamber, local arts groups, town, and county also share responsibilities. They brainstorm together and jointly assume projects, ensuring that all Four Points are covered, and that their collective work is driving towards the Transformation Strategy. Once work plans have been developed, the partners seek volunteers to work on individual projects. Lake City DIRT has found that this is a much easier way to engage volunteers who are not required to attend monthly meetings but can focus on the projects that are of most interest to them.

This approach to organizing a Main Street effort can streamline workflow and make it easier to engage volunteers, but maintaining open lines of communication is key. Email works in Lake City, but other communities use online programs like BaseCamp, Slack and Google. These programs allow for multiple people to update project statuses and are available for anyone to check for updates as projects progress.

IF YOU ARE NEW TO THE MAIN STREET PROGRAM

A key element of any effort to revitalize downtown involves choosing a way to organize and effectively implement and manage Transformation Strategies, and the organizations' revitalization initiative more generally. In some instances, an existing organization or agency might launch the revitalization initiative. Or an existing entity might assume the lead role in a revitalization agenda supported by a coalition of organizations and agencies, with each entity tasked with specific portions of the revitalization agenda, according to its expertise. In other instances, it might be better to create a new organization, giving the revitalization initiative a clean slate, free of negative perceptions that some members of the community might have of existing organizations.

The following questions can help you explore whether to house the revitalization initiative within an existing organization or agency or whether to create a new organization:

- /// Is there an existing organization or agency whose mission is consistent with that of the Main Street program and that has the capacity to manage the revitalization initiative? If so, is that organization perceived positively by the public?
- /// Would having a new organization, with no previous agenda or supporters (or critics) help attract a broader coalition of participants? Or would the community feel reassured by the experience and track record of an existing organization or agency?

- /// Would an existing organization have or hire a staff person whose primary job is dedicated to the revitalization of the district?

For a list of some of the types of organizations using the Main Street Approach, see “What type of organization?” below.

WHAT TYPE OF ORGANIZATION?

Almost any type of organization can adopt and use the Main Street Approach to revitalize and manage a commercial district. Organizations using the Main Street Approach include:

Traditional Main Street organizations: Almost 2,000 cities and towns have created Main Street organizations over the past several decades. While their configuration has varied slightly from place to place, most share these characteristics:

- /// They receive programmatic and financial support from both the public and private sectors.
- /// They are managed by a board of directors that includes representation from a wide range of stakeholders (property owners, business owners, local government, etc.).
- /// They have paid, professional staff.
- /// They are usually nonprofits (designated as 501(c)3 organizations by the Internal Revenue Service), although some are housed in local government organizations (such as local planning/community development departments) and a few are housed in private-sector organizations (such as local historic preservation organizations, chambers of commerce, etc.).



CREDIT:MISSOURI MAIN STREET

Special assessment districts: Special assessment districts are created by property owners (or, in some cases, by business owners) who voluntarily agree to pay an annual assessment in order to fund certain district revitalization or management activities. Most states have legislation enabling the creation of special assessment districts, although the names used for the special assessment districts vary from state to state (business improvement districts, self-supporting municipal improvement districts, business improvement areas, community improvement districts, and special service areas, to name a few).

There are scores of local Main Street programs that use the organizational structure of a traditional Main Street organization and that fund part or all of their activities with revenue from a special assessment district. And, there are some traditional special assessment district associations that use the Main Street Approach to organize their work.

Community development corporations: Community development corporations (CDCs) typically focus on developing affordable housing, particularly in economically distressed or underserved neighborhoods. But a growing number of CDCs also help develop and strengthen businesses. Having a strong commercial district helps provide jobs and essential services to neighborhood residents.

The boards of directors and staff of CDCs usually have significant experience with real estate development and finance, particularly with regard to housing development. Their property development skills can be invaluable in financing the rehabilitation of older and historic buildings and construction of new, infill mixed-use buildings, including using federal and state tax credits.

Redevelopment agencies: Redevelopment agencies are responsible for reversing blight and decay in areas designated by local government. Once established, a redevelopment agency undertakes a variety of projects to improve the area, such as upgrading infrastructure, preserving historic buildings, and stimulating business and property development.

The activities redevelopment agencies can do, and the tools they can use to do them, are determined by state

legislation. In most places, redevelopment agencies generate money for their improvement activities through Tax Increment Financing¹. Most also receive direct allocations from their municipal government, and some earn administrative fees and receive other types of funding. Some have the ability to exercise eminent domain.

Downtown development authorities: A few states have enacted legislation that permits towns and cities to create downtown development authorities. In essence, these function like redevelopment agencies, but with a specific focus on downtown development.

City hall: Scores of downtown revitalization programs, including many Main Street programs, are housed in city government offices—usually in city planning offices, departments of community development, or as freestanding city agencies or departments.

Chambers of commerce: Chambers of commerce provide a variety of services to their member businesses, help promote the community, and encourage new business growth and development.

Historic preservation organizations: A few of the most successful Main Street programs in the US were launched by local historic preservation organizations.

A NOTE ON PARTNERSHIPS

Regardless of the type of organization leading the revitalization effort, it's essential to identify all the partner organizations who share in the vision for a more vibrant downtown or neighborhood district and can play a role in project implementation. Those partners may include: universities and colleges, local or statewide foundations, chambers of commerce, economic development entities, local civic organizations, neighborhood associations, business groups, and more. Once the board and staff have identified the Transformation Strategies, the next step is to bring key partners together to discuss how their work can or will help fulfill the strategies. Brainstorming new projects and adjusting existing projects in conjunction with partners will help the downtown or commercial district achieve revitalization goals more quickly. Work plans developed by each entity can be shared and quarterly meetings held where updates are provided.

¹ Tax Increment Financing is a tool for financing current public improvements in a designated district with future property tax revenues from the district. It might be easier to explain TIF an example: Let's say that there is an un-rehabilitated building in your district that currently has an assessed value of \$50,000, and the city's commercial property tax rate is one percent. The property owner, then, currently pays \$500 in property tax annually (\$50,000 x 1 percent). If the property owner rehabilitates the building and, after rehabilitation, it has an assessed value of \$250,000, the city would normally collect an additional \$2,000 in property tax (\$200,000 of new value x 1 percent). If the building is in a Tax Increment Financing district, though, the city could dedicate that new increment of property tax revenue for improvements within the district.

SECRET TO SUCCESS: A FULL TIME DIRECTOR

A downtown revitalization effort is best served by having a full-time position that is charged with focusing on Main Street-related work. While Main Street revitalization relies on the contributions of volunteers, an active and engaged board, and community-wide partnerships, the role of Executive Director or program manager is critical. This is challenging, time consuming (and of course, rewarding!) work. Having an individual who is dedicated full-time to the effort ensures that someone will be responsible for coordinating efforts among staff, partners, and volunteers. In larger cities and neighborhood commercial districts, programs will often rely more heavily on staff to implement projects, so additional support including marketing and PR staff, economic development professionals, and grant administrators are particularly helpful.

SOME NOTES ON THE EVOLUTION OF REVITALIZATION PROGRAMS

Successful revitalization programs generally go through three distinct phases of activity over time:

A catalyst phase, in which the revitalization program gets started. The revitalization program's early goals usually focus on initial challenges and on gathering information—and, since the program has no track record yet, on building fiscal and volunteer support to sustain the program in its initial years. During these years, the revitalization program learns basic revitalization skills, builds partnerships, and begins conducting market research and gathering community input in order to shape the program's long-term vision and to choose Transformation Strategies. The revitalization program is generally ready to move to its next phase when it has reached four benchmarks:

- /// Its leaders have developed a good understanding of the district's role within the regional economy.
- /// The initiative is generally perceived as credible and effective within the community.
- /// The program's participants are beginning to plan and act strategically, rather than dealing primarily with immediate needs and problems.
- /// The initiative's leaders have found a way to effectively guide and manage design changes within the district.

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If you participated in the Main Street Program before the Main Street Refresh in 2015-2016, you will also find that some of the jargon has changed a bit. For instance:

The Main Street Four-Point Approach is now simply called the Main Street Approach.

The Main Street Approach now refers not just to the Four Points but also to the process of choosing Transformation Strategies and measuring progress in achieving these transformations.

Economic Restructuring is now called Economic Vitality.

.....

A growth phase, in which the revitalization program puts the skills and tools it has developed to work on more complex challenges. During a program's growth phase, communities experience significant growth in economic gains with investment by the public and private sectors with a new-found confidence in the downtown/district. As the initiative reaches its next transition, the district typically has an overall occupancy rate of 90-95 percent and at least 80 percent of the buildings that needed physical improvements have been rehabilitated.

A management phase, in which the program maintains the positive changes that have taken place over an extended period of time and continually fine-tunes the program's activities to adapt to changes in the marketplace.

A revitalization program's organizational needs are likely to differ at different points in its evolution. For example, your program's participants might find that having a standing committee for each of the Four Points works well during its catalyst phase, but that it might be more effective to turn certain activities over to another organization during its growth phase in order to provide specialized assistance to businesses or property owners or to increase the volume of work it is able to do. You might find that the program needs different types of board members and other types of

volunteers—and potentially different types of staff—at different points in its evolution. For example, some volunteers excel at launching new initiatives and might make ideal leaders in the revitalization program’s catalyst phase, but they might not be as interested in or skilled at managing activities during the program’s growth phase.

WHO DOES WHAT?

Regardless of the type of organization using the Main Street Approach, or whether or your organization is new to Main Street or a long-time veteran of the program, the organization’s leadership must focus on both fiduciary and strategic responsibilities.

Its fiduciary responsibilities include:

- /// **Financial management:** This includes ongoing record keeping; conducting and publishing annual audits; filing local, state, and federal tax reports; managing endowed and special purpose funds; and all other aspects of the program’s fiscal health.
- /// **Resource development:** Raising money should never be the sole responsibility of the organization’s professional staff. The staff is responsible for executing the Transformation Strategies the organization’s leadership has chosen, but the program’s leaders are responsible for raising the resources needed to do so.
- /// **Personnel management:** This includes managing both staff and key volunteer positions.

Its strategic responsibilities include:

- /// **Strategy and work plan development:** Each Transformation Strategy could benefit from one or more people serving as a sort of conductor, ensuring that the organization makes steady progress in moving the Transformation Strategy forward and that the work of each committee and organizational partner reinforces that strategy.
- /// **Partnerships:** Much of the work needed to revitalize older and historic business districts can be done by or in partnership with existing organizations and agencies. For example, public space improvements might be implemented by a local department of public works, retail marketing might be coordinated with a merchants’ or business association, and

business development might be assisted by a regional economic or industrial development agency.

- /// **Expertise in the Four Points:** Each revitalization organization needs volunteers and partners with expertise in one of the four areas of work represented by the Four Points:



- /// **Economic Vitality:** The Economic Vitality team is responsible for improving the economic performance of the district. Its responsibilities include helping existing businesses better meet the needs of customers and expand their sales, developing and attracting new businesses, ensuring that adequate capital is available to support business and property development, and creating and managing tools and incentives to encourage and support business and property development. Economic Vitality team members might include people with expertise in business management, real estate development, finance, or economic development.

- /// **Design:** The Design team is responsible for implementing all the aspects of the Transformation Strategy that involve physical and visual components, including building rehabilitation, infill development, public spaces, signs, window displays, logos, transportation, and parking. Design team members might include people with expertise in architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, product design, graphics, visual merchandising, historic preservation, and civil engineering, as well as people with a strong appreciation for an understanding of the physical characteristics that help make an older or historic commercial district work well.

Promotion: The Promotion team is responsible for marketing the district to area residents, district workers, visitors, investors, and others. Its responsibilities include planning and implementing three specific types of promotional programming:

- /// Special events and festivals
- /// Business and retail promotional activities
- /// Image-building activities

Promotion team members might include people with expertise in marketing, advertising, event planning, website design, graphics, public relations, and retail management. Special events and festivals also simply need lots of volunteers to help staff and ensure smooth implementation. These events offer a great opportunity to involve school groups, civic organizations, social clubs, and other civic-minded organizations.

Organization: The Organization team is responsible for ensuring that the revitalization program has the financial resources, volunteers, and partnerships it needs to accomplish its mission and to successfully implement each Transformation Strategy.

Organization team members might include people with expertise in business management, public and/or media relations, fundraising, organizational development, project management, or leadership.

- /// **Evaluation:** The revitalization initiative should gather baseline data about the district's economic condition and about its cultural and historic assets, plus baseline information about how the public perceives the district. It should develop tangible, quantifiable targets for each of its Transformation Strategies and use these targets to periodically evaluate the revitalization initiative's progress.

A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT VOLUNTEERS

As you organize your Main Street program (or refine and refresh your program, if it's already up and running), give some consideration to the types of volunteers and partners you will need to carry out your work. In addition to thinking about the specific skills needed, also think about the individual strengths and personal preferences of your staff and volunteers and match them with the tasks the organization needs to do. A few things in particular to keep in mind:

- /// **Starters and sustainers:** Some people are good at starting projects—but they lose interest before finishing them. Often, the people who launch Main Street programs bring lots of enthusiasm to the revitalization initiative, but they lose energy after several years and turn their attention to new challenges. This is perfectly normal. Fortunately, some people are better at managing and sustaining projects than at launching them. As your Main Street program approaches major transition points, be sure to engage new volunteers who can sustain and expand the revitalization initiative. And, keep the “starters” involved by assigning them to new projects.

- /// **Achievers and affiliators:** Some people excel at working independently on tasks—and they may be frustrated working in groups. Other people, however, may sign up for a task specifically because they want to be with other people. Organizations that rely on volunteer efforts need both types of people, for different types of tasks.

- /// **Power brokers:** Organizations also need people with the power to make certain things happen, like using their connections to raise money, pass an ordinance, or arrange for a high-profile speaker at an event. Many revitalization organizations invite these people to join their boards of directors. Unfortunately, many power brokers don't like to attend meetings. While they can provide the organization with resources and prestige, power brokers might not be the best people to manage the day-to-day and strategic responsibilities of the Main Street program. They might best serve in an advisory capacity or on specific projects with defined beginning and end points.



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MEASURING PROGRESS

For several decades, most local organizations actively participating in the Main Street program have tracked certain types of changes in their districts on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis. While the specific information gathered varies slightly from place to place, the basic data collected by most participating organizations includes:

- Building rehabilitation projects:** The numbers of buildings rehabilitated and the approximate cost of rehabilitation projects. This tally should include small improvement projects (e.g., new signs or awnings) as well as larger-scale building rehabilitation projects.
- New construction:** The number of new buildings built within the district and the approximate cost of construction.
- Public improvements projects:** The number, type, and approximate cost of public improvements projects, such as street and sidewalk improvements, utility upgrades, public parks, greenscaping, and signage.
- Business openings, closings, and expansions:** The net number of businesses that have opened, expanded, or closed, and the associated changes in net numbers of jobs created or lost within the district.
- Volunteer time:** The number of volunteer hours committed to the revitalization process.
- Housing units:** The number of new housing units created within the district, minus any that have been converted to non-housing uses.

These are all important characteristics to measure. In addition, there are other characteristics that can help measure the district's economic health. These include:

- Property valuation:** Changes in property valuation from year to year provide tangible evidence of the district's economic improvement. Local taxing authorities typically develop estimates of property value for the purpose of assessing property taxes—but these assessed values are not the same as the appraised value of a building, which estimates the market value of a building based on comparisons with the prices for which comparable buildings in the area have recently sold. In order to use apples-to-apples comparisons from year to year, use an online service that estimates current real estate market values.



- Use of various tools and incentives:** Financing tools help support building rehabilitation and new construction, as well as business development. Incentives offer some special enticement, such as grants, preferential loan terms, or deferred loan repayment, to encourage business and property development. Some of the financing tools and incentives that rehabilitation projects often use include federal and/or state historic rehabilitation tax credits, federal Community Development Block Grants, federal New Markets and sustainable energy tax credits, dedicated local loan programs, local property tax deferral or abatement, or one or more of many other types of financing tools and incentives. Tracking how often each of the available tools and incentives is used, and the volume of projects they support, will help your program understand which tools are most effective and most needed to help meet the program's goals.
- Rent levels:** Information about the rent levels that the district's commercial and residential property owners charge can usually be obtained from realtors and from the property owners themselves—and, of course, from the tenants. Be sure to also gather information about what services (if any) are included in the rent and about whether there are any important variables in the rent charged so that you are comparing apples to apples. For example, in a “triple net” lease (sometimes abbreviated “NNN”, the tenant is responsible for paying for real estate taxes, property insurance, and property maintenance, in addition

to the base rent amount the landlord charges. In “percentage” leases, a property owner charges a base rent amount plus a percentage of the commercial tenant’s gross sales.

Occupancy levels and building use: Local government can provide information about the tenancy of buildings within the district, but this information is sometimes incomplete and should be verified by an annual door-to-door survey. Use the North American Industry Classification System two-digit codes to classify business entities (including government and nonprofit entities). For non-business entities, such as housing units and vacant spaces, simply note the number of units.

Retail sales: Changes in retail sales levels from year to year are usually a very good indicator of the district’s changing economic condition—but, for a variety of reasons, it is very difficult to obtain accurate information about retail sales for commercial districts. A local government typically collects retail sales taxes from businesses within its jurisdictions on behalf of the state government, but it has no motivation to divide sales by district or shopping center. Even in instances in which a local government could, theoretically, extract information on retail sales taxes collected from a particular district, doing so could risk the confidentiality of data from businesses in store categories with only one or two stores. Some states do not charge retail sales taxes at all, in which case no data is available. Some retail sales are not taxable (e.g., some states do not impose sales tax on items such as food or school supplies). And, unfortunately some businesses do not reliably report their total sales; this is particularly true in stores in which customers often pay in cash, rather than by credit card, such as restaurants, convenience stores, and hair/nail salons.

Metrics Aligned Around Transformation Strategies

In addition to these general measurements of the economic condition of a district, the revitalization initiative should also collect baseline data and track changes specific to the Transformation Strategies it adopts. Depending on the Transformation Strategy, these measurements might include characteristics like:

Number of people attending promotional events related to each of the district’s Transformation Strategies

Number of square feet of retail space devoted to products relevant to the Transformation Strategies

Number of new SKUs³ added by the district’s businesses to adapt their merchandise mix to support one of the district’s Transformation Strategies

Fortunately, there are several potential workarounds. Businesses might be willing to report overall changes in gross sales from year to the revitalization initiative (not in dollars, but in percentages). Similarly, accounting firms with retail business customers might be willing to report annual changes (again, in percentages, not dollars) for their customers, as a group, to the revitalization initiative. Or, the revitalization initiative can obtain retail sales estimates for the district, by business category, from a private-sector geospatial data company, such as ESRI or Claritas. These estimates are based on algorithms that predict changes from data from the US Census² published every five years.

Public perceptions of the district: Information on how the public perceives the district might be gathered through a community survey or through focus groups. Be sure to ask a core group of identical questions each time the survey and/or focus groups are conducted.

² The US Census Bureau conducts an Economic Census every five years, publishing aggregate data for towns, cities, and counties on retail sales and sales in other types of businesses (service, industry, wholesale, etc.). It also publishes a report on sales taking place in “nonemployer” businesses, meaning businesses with no paid employees; this category includes many “mom and pop” businesses whose owners pay themselves a draw from profits, rather than paying themselves salaries.

³ A “Stock Keeping Unit”, or SKU, is a unique number identifying each individual retail product offered for sale in a business. There is no standard practice for assigning SKUs; most manufacturers or wholesalers assign SKUs to the merchandise they sell, and store owners can choose to use these SKUs or to develop their own SKUs. SKUs are usually expressed as barcodes, with different digits of the encoded number providing information on the product’s manufacturer, description, size, color, version number, and/or other distinguishing characteristics.

SUCCESS

There are literally thousands of small actions needed to successfully revitalize a Main Street commercial district. But, no program is likely to succeed long-term without these:

/// **Commit to the long run:** Lasting change doesn't happen overnight; transforming the economy of a Main Street district takes years, with small changes gradually growing into larger ones. This includes an understanding from the public sector that ongoing investment/financial support in managing a downtown organization is necessary.

Keep a tight focus on transformation: **It is very easy to get distracted** by ideas that, while creative, do not advance the revitalization initiative's Transformation Strategies. Use your Transformation Strategies as litmus tests for the activities to which the revitalization initiative should make a commitment, rejecting or postponing ideas that are not likely to help you achieve your program's goals.

/// **Break transformation down into small steps:**

Implementing a Transformation Strategy can seem like an enormous challenge until it is broken down into small, discreet steps that can be easily implemented by an individual, organization, or agency in a relatively short period of time.

/// **Don't be distracted by seemingly insurmountable problems:** Every Main Street district has at least one seemingly insurmountable problem—a prominent vacancy; a group of dilapidated buildings; a dominant, uncooperative property owner; a burdensome ordinance; or any of an almost endless list of challenges. As distracting as these challenges can be, try to focus instead on the many activities the revitalization initiative can do. As the initiative builds momentum, it will also gradually build the capacity to tackle the district's toughest problems.

/// **Build active support and involvement from both the public and private sectors:** Both sectors have unique resources, skills, and vantage points that are essential to revitalization. To achieve sustained success, both sectors must be actively involved in the revitalization initiative from the very start, and that involvement must be continued over time.



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/// **Remain organizationally flexible:** In many communities, the organizational structure that local Main Street programs have traditionally created—four standing committees, each corresponding to one of the Four Points—will work fine. But, be open to different organizational models that might work better for your community, both at the beginning of the revitalization initiative and over time, as it evolves.

/// **Push through tough challenges:** Almost all successful revitalization initiatives hit plateaus as they meet their earlier goals and look ahead to larger revitalization challenges. When your initiative hits a plateau, it may seem tempting to cycle back and repeat some of the program's earlier tasks. Resist the temptation to do so. Instead, examine the larger challenges facing the district; identify the new skills, resources, and partnerships needed to tackle them; and outline a plan to push forward.

Ultimately, Main Street revitalization is hard work, but can yield truly transformational results. And fortunately, no community needs to go through it alone. The Main Street Approach has worked successfully in older commercial districts in hundreds of towns and cities, facing every type of challenge imaginable. Tap into the strength of Main Street America—the national network of Main Street revitalization programs—to learn about what has worked, what hasn't, and why.

Finally, take a leap of faith! The single biggest obstacle to successfully transforming a Main Street district is skepticism. When people have faith that revitalization will succeed, it almost always does.

FAQ

We have an existing Main Street organization, with a standing committee for each of the Four Points. Do we need to change our organizational structure?

No. If having four standing committees is working well for your organization, there is certainly no need to change it. Rather than reconfiguring your committees, for example, you might consider reconfiguring your board meeting agenda around your Transformation Strategies so that the strategies become the central organizing element of each meeting. You may also have your committees hold an annual work plan session together and have the committee chairs meet quarterly to update each other on progress.

I've heard that the Main Street program is a three-year process. Is that correct?

No. The Main Street program began as a demonstration project implemented by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Midwest Regional Office in three Midwestern communities. The demonstration project lasted for three years (from 1977-1980), and that's probably where this misperception began.

Managing a downtown or neighborhood commercial center is an ongoing process. In the early years, the management organization usually focuses on revitalization. Once the district is economically vibrant again, the organization can shift its focus to maintaining the positive changes and ensuring that the district stays ahead of emerging trends. But, just as shopping malls and neighborhood districts always need a management group in place to help fill vacancies, keep buildings and public spaces in good condition, and market the district.

I heard we have to create a separate nonprofit organization for our Main Street program. Is that true? What if we want to do this within another sort of organization, like a city government agency or a chamber of commerce?

Historically, most local Main Street programs have been organized as freestanding nonprofit organizations, with partner organizations represented on the programs' boards of directors and committees. Organizing a new Main Street program as a freestanding entity offers the benefit of a clean start for the district's revitalization efforts, with no organizational baggage and with a fresh look at the possibilities for the district's future.

However, there are plenty of successful exceptions. For example, if there is an existing organization or agency that is widely perceived within the region to be a competent, successful leader, and if it has the capacity to house the revitalization initiative, it might be an excellent candidate to host a Main Street organization. And/or, as the local Main Street program evolves, it might find that spinning off one or more parts of its work to other organizations or agencies—or even absorbing or merging with another organization—might boost its effectiveness. The important thing is for the revitalization initiative to focus on one to three Transformation Strategies for the district that involve activities in all Four Points of the Main Street Approach.

Our organization conducted a market analysis two years ago. Could that be helpful to us in choosing Transformation Strategies?

Yes. There might be some information you will need to update, like the district's business inventory and the region's demographic characteristics, but a market analysis less than two or three years old will usually provide a good foundation of demographic information and information about retail sales patterns.

What if someone comes up with a great idea that doesn't really advance one of our Transformation Strategies?

Steve Jobs, the legendary co-founder of Apple, once said "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully." It might be difficult to turn away good ideas that do not advance one of your revitalization program's Transformation Strategies, but maintaining a tight focus on those strategies is very important. Explore ways to tweak ideas so that they might fit into the new revitalization agenda, and always encourage the community to contribute ideas.

What is a Catalyst Strategy and how is it different from a Transformation Strategy?

A Catalyst Strategy is an off-the-shelf Transformation Strategy that can apply to a wide range of places. Think of the Catalyst Strategies as a starter set of

Transformation Strategies. You can choose among them based on appropriateness to your situation, and you can customize them or define your own Transformation Strategies over time.

Aren't these strategies kind of generic?

Yes, the Catalyst Strategies are meant to be generic. But they are implemented based on your own community's particular market characteristics. And you can refine the strategies to make them fit your needs.

How is this different from the "old" Main Street program?

In the "old" Main Street, the Four Points (represented by four committees) were the organizing principle, thus while presenting a solid basis to focus your work comprehensively, it did not necessarily promote work based on a competitive market advantage or position for the downtown/district.

In the new Main Street, Transformation Strategies are the organizing principle and the organizational format is flexible. The old Main Street tended to create committee silos where projects happened in an ad hoc fashion. In the new model, the activities in the Four Points should stem directly from and be aligned with the Transformation Strategy.

How will we be sure we picked the right strategies?

You should choose your initial Transformation Strategies based on some basic market research and community engagement, including:

- // Understanding of your area's demographic composition and any known population trends;
- // Sales leakage analysis, to understand where household spending is going;
- // Business inventory assessment, to identify clusters, strengths, and weaknesses by industry or sector; and
- // Community feedback, shopping habits and attitudes.

Any Transformation Strategy should pass the "common sense test" and a good place to start is to answer the screening questions described in this document.

Do the strategies ever change?

Yes. Strategies are intended to be long-range but not permanent. Markets shift, demographics change over time, and the dynamics of retail, entertainment, manufacturing, office, and housing uses are constantly evolving. You should plan to revisit and confirm your Transformation Strategies every three to five years, or sooner if there is a significant development or shift in the local economy.

A strategic approach is fine, but what if our problem is that we have a lot of vacancies?

A Transformation Strategy should help to rebuild the local economy and fill vacancies in a rational, supportable way. It should be a rallying point that owners of vacant properties should also support. In this way, the Transformation Strategy can bring more order to business development and reduce the number of under-capitalized businesses that open and then quickly close.

What if I have a lot of independent-minded property and business owners? Will they support a Transformation Strategy?

Traditional business districts lack uniform ownership and management, so it has always been a challenge to get everyone moving toward the same goal. Still, it is more likely that independent operators will support a strategy that is rational and economically grounded. Even if only some independent operators become advocates for the strategy, that is a step in the right direction. (A tip: Enlisting them in the strategy-development process will make them more likely to support the agreed direction.)