

Reviving Main Street:

Two New England Case Studies

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In the age of shopping malls, discount super stores, and Internet storefronts, the traditional downtown shopping area may be making its way back. Centrally located and filled with historic architecture and public spaces, downtown commercial districts are being re-identified as valuable neighborhood assets, and across the country efforts are underway to reconstruct town centers. At the forefront of this commercial district comeback is the National Trust's Main Street program.

Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the Main Street program supports local efforts to transform anemic town centers into healthy, sustainable commercial districts. Established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation,¹ the Main Street program has combined economic development and historic preservation to create a revitalization strategy that addresses the physical, social, and economic components of a retail district. Today, more than 1,700 communities





Roslindale Village

use the Main Street model, working to create unique downtown centers that serve the needs of local residents. The strategy seems to be working. Since 1980, Main Street communities have generated more than \$17 billion worth of downtown investment, and over 60,000 new businesses have opened in Main Street commercial districts across the country.

Close to home, 95 New England communities are part of the national Main Street network. Main Street efforts are evident throughout the region. In Waterville, Maine, new yellow awnings recently brightened up Silver Street. Nard's Appliance Shop in Somersworth, New Hampshire, has been spruced up with a pleasing green façade, Victorian molding, and a new gold-lettered sign. In Middletown, Connecticut, five new stores have filled vacancies on Main Street, and more than 60 teenagers were seen cleaning up the town center in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Applying the four major principles of the Main Street strategy—design, organization, promotion, and economic restructuring (see page 9)—many New England communities are successfully rebuilding their town centers. Importantly, the model is working in communities of all shapes and sizes, thanks to its emphasis on locally driven change.

Local Emphasis

The national Main Street strategy maintains that local communities are better equipped than anyone else to assess their needs and address their problems. Thus, while the national organization provides a conceptual framework for downtown revitalization, the “nuts and bolts” are up to each

individual community. Each Main Street organization must identify its own challenges and strengths and determine how to best apply the Main Street model in its own community. This local approach ensures that solutions arise directly from community residents, businesses, and other local stakeholders, not only increasing the program's effectiveness, but also raising community participation and buy-in—elements needed for long-term success.

“Main Street works because it is ‘self-help,’” says Boston Mayor Thomas Menino. “It is not about government coming in and

telling you what to do. Cities are there to lend our neighborhoods a helping hand, but each group does all the work.”

The work includes garnering needed financial and human resources. The National Trust does not provide any funding to local groups, and each Main Street organization is responsible for its own financial stability. This financial autonomy is considered a linchpin of the Main Street program's success. By raising support locally, each Main Street organization establishes a base of investors from the community. With a vested interest, these individuals are more likely to support events, shop downtown, and take other steps to ensure the success of their Main Street districts. “When it's your own money and time on the line, you work hard to make it worthwhile,” says Ruth Taylor, executive director of the Main Street organization in Littleton, New Hampshire.

Communities across the country are recognizing the value of their traditional town center.

With all of the efforts being driven at the local level, revitalization can be a slow process. “It doesn't happen overnight,” says Emily Haber, director of the Boston Main Streets program. “It takes much longer than you expect it to take.” As such, the Main Street strategy stresses an action-oriented approach that produces continuous improvements—even if changes are relatively small. Over time, these positive changes lead to major results.

¹Founded in 1949, the National Trust for Historic Preservation is a private nonprofit organization committed to preserving the nation's historic places and revitalizing its communities.

The region's Main Street communities believe it is worth investing for the long-haul. "A downtown is the heart of your community," says Taylor. "You can't recreate it, so you have to make sure you don't lose it."

The experiences of two New England Main Street communities—the urban capital of Boston, Massachusetts, and the small town of Littleton, New Hampshire—provide case studies of how the Main Street model is being adapted locally to revive the downtown hearts of the region's communities.

Boston, Massachusetts **Coping with the Rise of the Suburbs**

When the national Main Street program was formed 25 years ago, the nation's urban cores had been losing population for decades. Throughout the 1900s, transportation innovations ferried families out of the cities and into a new suburbia. In the 1950s, the automobile and interstate highway system opened the door to affordable suburban housing, spurring a mass migration of post-World War II baby-booming families. In the second half of the decade, the nation's suburban population doubled, and by 2000, one-half of all Americans lived in metropolitan area suburbs. Not surprisingly, the exodus left many urban retailers struggling, especially in smaller neighborhood commercial districts.

The story is a familiar one for Roslindale Village. Located in the southwest corner of the city of Boston, Massachusetts, Roslindale was a vibrant middle-class neighborhood for the first half of the 20th century. The streetcar and railroad both stopped in the "square," picking up residents of this tree-lined community and transporting them to high-paying jobs in downtown Boston. The village center was picturesque, sporting a wide array of family-owned shops and restaurants.

But in the late 1960s and 1970s, Roslindale's streetscape dramatically deteriorated. As suburbanization heated up, the Dedham Mall opened in 1968 outside the city, enticing area shoppers and landing a blow to Roslindale retailers. In 1974, the situation worsened after a U.S. District Court ordered the city of Boston to integrate

its public schools. A controversial busing plan was implemented, generating turmoil among many city residents. Unhappy citizens left the city in droves, and Roslindale's population declined significantly. Low enrollment forced the high school to close, and a similar fate befell many retailers. On the square, the Parke Snow department store became a vacant lot. Liggett's drug store went out of business, and the neighborhood's supermarket and bank both closed. By the end of the decade, the once idyllic neighborhood was characterized by vacancies, vandalism, and crime.

Roslindale Village and the surrounding neighborhood were in need of help. Fortunately, Thomas Menino, city councilor at the time, now Boston mayor, had a plan. Menino had recently learned about the Main Street revitalization strategy at a conference for public officials, and he believed the model could help turn around Roslindale. "I

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knew that a healthy commercial district is the nucleus of a strong neighborhood,” says Menino, “and I believed that by revitalizing Roslindale's business community, we could improve the lives of our residents.”

In 1985, Roslindale Village became one of the first urban Main Street programs. The community formed the nonprofit Roslindale Village Main Street organization and began to implement the Main Street four-point approach:





Washington Street, South End

Design: Tired storefront façades and unattractive signs were replaced with updated, inviting designs, and several historic buildings were renovated to preserve the unique character of the district.

Organization: To gain the support of the community's stakeholders, a board of directors was established, drawing members from the community's residents, small business owners, and local government officials.

Promotion: Community events were organized, including a tree-lighting ceremony, window display contests, and a two-day international festival. These activities brought people into Roslindale Village, generating customers for local businesses, building pride among residents, and increasing overall awareness of the neighborhood.

Economic restructuring: To create a vibrant business community, Roslindale Village Main Street worked with existing businesses in the square, helping them to clean up storefronts, expand where feasible, and adjust product mix to

better meet the needs of local consumers. The organization conducted market research to identify opportunities for new businesses and undertook recruitment efforts to fill Roslindale's vacant storefronts.

Within the first three years, Roslindale Village Main Street had made major strides. Twenty-nine new businesses had opened. Seventy façade improvements had been made. Forty-three buildings had been rehabbed, and nearly \$5 million in private investment had been brought into the community. Two decades later, in 2005, the Roslindale Village renaissance is in full swing. Described as "hip" and "trendy," the village now boasts five notable restaurants, three literary book stores, and a smattering of swank boutiques. Over one thousand people patronize the square's shops and eateries each day, and despite this success, almost all of the businesses remain locally owned.

Taking Main Streets City-wide

With Roslindale's success, newly elected Mayor Menino decided to expand the Main Street program to the city's other struggling commercial districts. In 1995, Boston created the first urban multi-district Main Street program, establishing an innovative model that other cities, including Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., would eventually follow. Today, in its tenth year, Boston Main Streets provides financial support and resources to 19 independent Main Street communities throughout the city.

"The ultimate goal of Boston Main Streets is to establish healthy, thriving commercial districts," say Emily Haber, director of Boston Main Streets. "Ninety percent of the businesses in the city's neighborhoods are locally owned, and they are a vital part of our economy. Boston Main Streets wants to support them as best we can."

Each of Boston's Main Street communities receives \$270,000 in start-up funding from Boston Main Streets. The money, allocated over four years, helps to pay for a full-time executive director, market research, promotional events, and technical assistance. Additionally, this money goes

Roslindale Village Main Street was one of the first urban Main Street programs.

toward physical improvement grants that help to fund public works projects and needed façade upgrades for retailers. After the initial four years, the city continues to provide operating funding to help sustain Main Street efforts.

In addition to funding, Boston Main Streets supports its members in each of the four Main Street areas:

- To assist design efforts, the city retains two architects and a graphic designer. To date, these professionals have worked with over 533 small business owners to create attractive building designs and storefronts.

- Boston Main Streets builds the organizational capacity of its member communities by hiring experts to help them develop and manage their boards of directors. The city also hosts networking events that acquaint stakeholders from the various neighborhoods with one another. “We have a tremendous capacity for sharing information across districts,” says Haber. “The directors of each Main Street district meet together every other month, and the meetings are always productive. For instance, one director will say, ‘I’ve got a guy who wants to open a bakery, but we don’t have any room for him.’ Usually, another district will have the space.”

- Boston Main Streets highlights all of its member communities through city-wide promotional campaigns. For example, the city developed a “Shopping on Main Street” card in conjunction with local retailers that offers discounts at over 300 Main Street shops throughout the city.

- Finally, on the economic restructuring side, the city provides market-research training and consulting services to help communities determine who shops in their districts and why. These efforts have helped communities boost sales at existing businesses and recruit new retailers to their districts.

While most of the new businesses are locally owned, a few chain stores have also opened up in member districts. According to Haber, “Some neighborhoods are very interested in having national chains. They view having a Starbucks as a sign of success and economic rebound. They feel that these businesses lend creditability to the neighborhood. Others don’t want chains at all. Boston Main Streets is interested in helping each district obtain the best mix of businesses for the neighborhood.”

Boston Main Streets created its own fifth principle—technology. Observing a need for greater technical sophistication among the city’s Main Street businesses, Boston Main Streets launched a series of technology-focused initiatives with the assistance of Verizon and the Boston Foundation. They partnered with TechBoston, an outgrowth of the Boston Public Schools’ computer science department, to pair knowledgeable student interns with local retailers in a program that helps businesses develop web pages. This year, they are conducting a survey of small business owners to determine their current technological capabilities. Additionally, the city is working to set up a wireless Internet network in the West Roxbury Main Street district.

Boston Main Streets is making a difference in the city’s neighborhoods. Since 1995, nearly 500 new businesses have set up shop in Main Street districts, new jobs have been created each year, and physical improvements and public events are making the city’s neighborhoods more desirable places to be. The success illustrates the value of having the public and private sectors work together for commercial district revitalization. “Thanks to the Boston Main Streets program, our small business districts are better today than they were ten years ago,” says Mayor Menino. “And these Main Street businesses are creating jobs and economic opportunities in the city.”

Banking on Small Businesses

The region’s banks have played a vital role in Main Street revitalization in New England. Boston Main Streets has a “corporate buddy program” that links up each of the Main Street organizations with a major business sponsor. These corporate buddies provide financial support, expertise, and other resources to their partner communities, helping to build their organizational capacity and sophistication. Notably, of the 17 corporate buddies involved in Boston Main Streets, nine are financial institutions. In Littleton, the banking community is also a major supporter of the Main Street effort. Each of the town’s banks donates \$1,000 annually to the program, making the town’s financial sector one of the largest funders of Littleton Main Street.

“Banks are invested in Main Streets because it makes good business sense for them. It is win-win for everyone,” says Boston Mayor Thomas Menino.

In fact, financial institutions derive several benefits from their involvement in commercial district revitalization. First, supporting local Main Streets is good corporate citizenship and enables banks to demonstrate their commitment to the community. Additionally, this support qualifies for credit under the Community Reinvestment Act, helping banks to reach their federal regulation requirements. The most enticing draw, however, is the opportunity to build relationships with local small businesses.

“Banks are developing relationships with small businesses through the Main Street program, and, as a result, they are finding that they can expand lending and increase deposits in these communities,” says Emily Haber, director of Boston Main Streets. Moreover, by supporting Main Street efforts, banks are supporting the long-term health of local businesses, a vital customer base.

Tom Kennedy, senior vice president and CRA manager for Sovereign Bank, concurs, “We are delighted to participate as the Corporate Buddy for East Boston Main Streets. Not only is the program having a very positive impact on East Boston, but it is helping to strengthen the community’s small businesses—the lifeblood of our business.”



Littleton, New Hampshire Surviving the Decline of Manufacturing

Just 150 miles northwest of Boston, the cozy White Mountain town of Littleton, New Hampshire, feels light years away; yet the Main Street model has also been successful in sparking this community's downtown revitalization. Once considered "the most prosperous village in Northern New Hampshire," Littleton was an important manufacturing center in New England in the 1800s, producing every-

thing from gloves to the famed stereoscope. The town's industrial success quickly gave rise to an active commercial center. By 1787, Main Street had already been staked out with a saw mill, a grist mill, and a general store. By 1820, a hotel and post office had joined them, and by end of the 19th century, Main Street supported over 30 stores.

located here. Combined with the industrial park, these institutions employ several thousand people who come to Littleton to work each day. These workers represented a sizable consumer base that could support a Main Street effort." In 1997, the Littleton Main Street organization was formed and began applying the Main Street approach. A board of directors was formed, an executive director was hired, and the organization began raising money for its efforts. The community was responsive, and in less than one week, nearly \$400,000 was raised—enough to fund the program for three years. The organization used a portion of its annual budget to fund matching grants for façade improvements to spruce up the "look and feel" of downtown. Another share

went to programming efforts to entice people to spend time downtown. Weekly dance lessons began filling the evenings at the historic opera house, and window display contests drew attention to Main Street storefronts. A final portion of

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The town's success continued into the early 20th century. However, in the 1950s, Littleton became a one-industry town: shoes. For the next 20 years, the town's economic hopes were pinned on the footwear industry, and when shoe manufacturing moved overseas in the 1970s, Littleton suffered. In 1979, the last shoe plant in Littleton closed, putting 700 people out of work. The town's economy stagnated, and once booming Main Street began to deteriorate. To counteract the declining trend, town leaders aggressively pursued various economic development initiatives, including building an industrial park for small-scale manufacturers. Despite these efforts, revitalization was slow in coming, and by 1992, 17 storefronts sat vacant on Main Street.

That year, however, the owner of a Littleton furniture shop visited her parents in North Carolina. During her visit, she happened to learn about the Main Street program and the success it was having in her parent's town. Excited that a similar approach might work in Littleton, she pitched the Main Street model to town leaders and other business owners. The idea was well received.

"We knew that the Main Street concept could work in downtown Littleton," says Ruth Taylor, executive director of Littleton Main Street. "With Littleton still being a regional center, the hospital and social security offices are



Littleton, New Hampshire

the budget was devoted to market research and other efforts to strategically understand the local needs of consumers.

“More than anything, we worked to generate good will—to let retailers know that there is someone out there who cares about them and to let residents know that downtown Littleton is changing,” says Taylor. The efforts have made a difference. Today, only one storefront remains vacant on Main Street, and Taylor points to the generosity of contributions as a solid indicator of the community’s support for the program. Moreover, the town’s achievements have been nationally recognized. In 2003, Littleton was named a Great American Main Street by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Big Box Threat

In 2000, Littleton’s shops faced a new challenge. Wal-Mart built a new store on Meadow Street, mere miles from the downtown commercial district. The retail giant offered lower prices and one-stop shopping, and Littleton retailers feared that they would be unable to compete. To map out a survival strategy, a busload of Littleton business owners drove to Bath, Maine, to talk with Bath’s Main Street business owners who had faced a similar situation two years earlier and were still thriving.

“What they learned is that you can’t compete with Wal-Mart. Not on price,” says Taylor. “Rather, they discovered that they would have to offer their customers products and services that Wal-Mart didn’t have.”

The retailers returned to Littleton with lessons in hand and began making strategic adjustments to their business plans. Northern Lights Music used to sell small electronics.

The Four-Point Approach to Main Street Revitalization

1. Design:

Enhance the physical appearance of the commercial district by rehabilitating historic buildings, encouraging supportive new construction, developing sensitive design management systems, and promoting long-term planning.

2. Organization:

Build consensus and cooperation among the many groups and individuals that have a role in the revitalization process.

3. Promotion:

Market the traditional commercial district’s assets to customers, potential investors, new businesses, local citizens, and visitors.

4. Economic Restructuring:

Strengthen the district’s existing economic base while finding ways to expand it to meet new opportunities—and challenges—from outlying development.

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However, the store’s selection of TVs, VCRs, and radios was now available at Wal-Mart at significantly lower prices. Owner Dan Salomon knew that he had to change his business model if he was going to survive. Returning to his love of music, he refashioned the store as a high-end musical instrument boutique. Today, he sells the widest selection of guitars in the region and carries instruments from all over the world, filling a market niche and drawing customers from as far as Massachusetts and Maine. Following similar logic, The Village Book Store decided to cut back in its departments that were in direct

competition with Wal-Mart. Instead, the shop beefed up its selection of educational and high-end toys, and positioned itself as an entertainment destination by hosting book readings and other events. Finally, it strengthened its commitment to employing a knowledgeable sales staff to offer customers outstanding service. When Wal-Mart first opened, Littleton’s small businesses saw sales dip, but the changes helped its retailers to rebound.

The town knows that it is only a matter of time before other discount retailers enter the Littleton market. With price wars being an ineffective strategy, Littleton Main Street is working hard to beat new competitors on quality. An attractive, new pedestrian foot bridge was built last spring, offering access to an outdoor farmers market in the summer. Street and sidewalk improvements are being implemented in 2006, and efforts to improve the quality of storefront design are ongoing. “We want to give shoppers something different. Instead of wondering what mall they are in, we want them to enjoy a unique experience in downtown Littleton,” says Taylor.