

CORE VALUES

By Kim A. O'Connell



With increasing frequency, small-town preservation principles are being applied to urban revitalization.

A hundred years ago, Franklin, Tenn., was a small country town that still bore reminders of the Civil War battle that took place there in November 1864. Complete with churches and plantation houses, Franklin was determined to preserve its down-home charm, even as the construction of Interstate 65 brought it headlong into the latter half of the 20th century. By the 1980s, however, the historic city was in serious danger of being swallowed up by Nashville, less than 20 miles away.

Fearing their big-city neighbor would consume the community, local officials sprang into action. In 1984, the city became an official National Main Street Town, after applying for and receiving designation from the National Main Street Center, established in 1980 by the Washington-based National Trust for Historic Preservation. Under the Main Street program,



By the early 1980s, more than 10 percent of Franklin, Tenn.'s central area was vacant, and its Main Street (inset) lacked vitality and charm. Today, economic reinvestment has brought a vibrant mix of local, regional and national chains to Franklin's Main Street commercial district.



which grew out of an experiment in three small Midwest cities, historic preservation and downtown development are used as an economic driver and an antidote to suburban sprawl.

Today, Franklin serves as a model of how a city can revitalize its urban core and maintain its unique character, while boosting the local economy and preparing for growth. Government officials have crafted plans that work together to preserve and enhance the city's downtown area, while establishing public-private partnerships with nonprofit groups and local residents.

Using a four-pronged approach that includes design, economic restructuring, promotion and organization, 1,800 communities in 42 states also have adopted the Main Street program. Efforts range from small-town projects and county programs to larger efforts in such metropolises as Boston, Baltimore, Washington and Milwaukee. Although it is just one method that cities employ for urban revitalization, the Main



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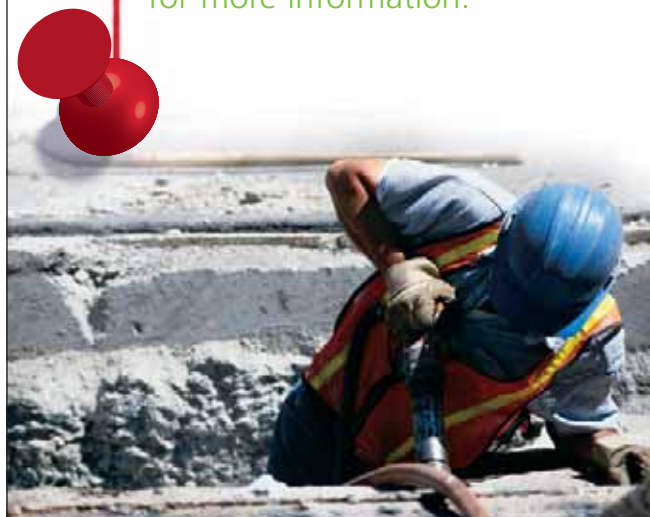
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Street approach has had tangible results by focusing both public and private resources on targeted areas.

A future for Franklin

The Main Street idea has paid off for Franklin. In 2004, the city's downtown hosted the world premiere of "Friday Night Lights," and this fall Cameron Crowe's "Elizabethtown" had a premiere there as well. That is just one example of the success of the city's urban revitalization program, says Franklin's City Administrator Jay Johnson.

Although the city's population more than tripled between 1980 and 2000 and now stands at about 42,000, the central Franklin area had grown at a slower pace. With about 10 percent of the central area vacant, and the core city housing more lower-income residents than surrounding areas, Franklin was in danger of losing more than its identity. Suburban development around Franklin exacerbated the problem, siphoning away dollars and development from the core area.

"We began to experience a lot of growth as a suburban area to Nashville," Johnson says. "A lot of people saw the charm and uniqueness of downtown Franklin and helped form the debate on how to preserve and enhance it. No matter where you live in the community, there seems to be a real attachment to the physical downtown of Franklin, or 'the Square,' as we call it."

In the 1980s, approximately \$3 million in both public and private funds was invested to improve facades and add trees, parking, lighting and new businesses to the Square — an effort that continues today. In 1995, Franklin received a Great American Main Street award from the National Trust for its revitalization efforts.

Revitalizing economics

Downtown revitalization benefits local governments in many ways. In addition to increasing the sales and property tax base, revitalized urban areas protect property values and public investment in local infrastructure and can reduce the cost of providing city services.

For example, through the end of 2004, the 25-year-old National Main Street Center program based in Washington had resulted in more than \$23 billion in physical improvements from both public and private sources, representing an average reinvestment of \$12.4 million per community. More than 100,000 building rehabilitations have been funded, and revitalized neighborhoods and downtowns have resulted in a net gain of 67,000 businesses and more than 308,000 jobs. Finally, for every dollar used to operate the local Main Street program, municipalities have generated nearly \$27 in reinvestment dollars from other sources.

Paso Robles, Calif., for example, has leveraged both public and private dollars to undergo a dramatic rebirth. By the 1980s, suburban sprawl had diverted money away from its downtown area. A fire had damaged the city's historic hotel, and the town square was lined with vacant storefronts.

Since the inception of the Paso Robles Main Street program in 1987, however, the city has witnessed a total of 209 private-sector building improvement projects, valued at almost \$14 million. From 1993 to 2003, 99 new businesses opened, representing nearly \$36 million dollars in combined public and private reinvestment.

When a 2003 earthquake damaged or destroyed 82 historic downtown buildings, the city applied its Main Street experience toward rebuilding. "They had brought about rebirth of their community once," says National Trust President Richard Moe, "and they were equipped to do it again."

— Kim A. O'Connell



Through the efforts of Franklin, Tenn., officials and private organizations, the intersection at Fourth and Main Street has been transformed from drab (top) to attractive (bottom). In the 1980s, more than \$3 million was invested to rehabilitate historic storefronts and add street trees, lighting and banners.

In recent years, city planners have worked with residents, consultants and local groups to craft plans that focus on land use, urban redevelopment and historic preservation. Goals include keeping important government functions downtown, such as the new judicial center and parking structures, both designed in a traditional style that mimics the historic square, and maintaining the city's character through a series of festivals. "The festivals help create the ambience of downtown," Johnson says. "We've used it to attract people to come back."

Franklin's downtown renaissance has raised other concerns for city officials, however. As the retail shops become more successful, rents are increasing. "There has been a gradual evolution from local ownership of almost everything downtown to several national or regional chains," Johnson says. "The success of the retail has caused the rents to rise, so you have the challenge of the small business person's ability to pay the rents compared to a national or regional chain. One business will go out and another will come in, so some of your marketing can be difficult as well."

The city hopes to develop policies, ordinances and building codes that continue to encourage downtown rehabilitation and development. One goal is to fill the upper floors of down-



Ten years ago, the historic buildings along Boston's Dana Avenue were nondescript and underdeveloped (top), but the city's 19-district Main Street program has helped renovate them, and public and private dollars have been fostered toward economic redevelopment.

town buildings with residential units to ensure that the downtown area remains active, even into the evening. "We want to level the playing field for historic buildings and infill in historic districts when compared to new greenfield development," says Shanon Wasielewski, Franklin's preservation planner. "We also want to capitalize on the wealth of historic resources through increased heritage tourism and better way-finding, promotion and interpretation of city-owned resources."

City officials also plan to keep an eye on the continuing growth of the region. "The mayor and I both serve on a number of regional planning organizations, and we are very aware of our role within the region," Johnson says.

Boston commons

The Main Street concept also is working well in the large and diverse communities of Boston, which became the first citywide participant in the program in the mid-1990s. Today, Boston's program spreads across 19 business districts, with each district receiving technical assistance and training from the city's six full-time employees working in its Boston Main Streets office. Using a funding package from the city that includes Community Development Block Grants, each district can hire an executive director and secure matching private funds for redevelopment. In addition, the city provides local districts with design assistance from local architecture firms, which are contracted through the city's Office of Business Development.

The seeds of the citywide program were planted in 1983, when Mayor Thomas Menino, then serving on the City Council, launched a Main Street initiative in Boston's Roslindale Village neighborhood, which had become rundown and under-



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used. Using the Main Street framework, local merchants, business owners and residents created a nonprofit organization to manage revitalization efforts. In three years, the neighborhood had benefited from more than \$5 million in investments.

By 1995, when Menino had become mayor, he worked with the National Trust to establish the nation's first multi-district Main Street program. Following a citywide competition, 10 neighborhood commercial districts were designated as Boston Main Streets that year, with four more selected in 1997 and four more in 1999, in addition to Roslindale.

Since the program's inception, Boston Main Streets has charted significant results, including a net increase of 540 new businesses and more than 3,600 new jobs, 443 storefront improvement projects and total physical improvement grants of more than \$1.2 million, which have been further leveraged to bring in more than \$9.1 million in private investment.

"For the amount of money we provide to these programs, you get a lot of bang for your buck," says Boston Main Streets Director Emily Haber. "Each district had challenges — some were stable and vibrant and wanted to be better, and some had suffered from disinvestment. Today, there is a level of vibrancy in our commercial districts that just wasn't there 10 years ago."

The perennial challenges, Haber says, are recruiting volunteers and fundraising. But the city is working to keep business owners, volunteers and residents interested in the Main Street program. This year, for example, the city created the Boston Main Streets Foundation. Because each local Main Street district might have only one employee, the foundation's role is to seek funds from national, regional or local foundations and companies, which can be distributed among districts.

Milwaukee's best

In February, Milwaukee followed Boston's lead by launching a citywide approach to urban revitalization by adopting the Main Street program in four districts. Main Street Milwaukee is operated through a public-private partnership between the Milwaukee Department of City Development (DCD) and the Milwaukee office of the New York-based Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). Milwaukee DCD coordinates the program and oversees the management and designation of the districts, while LISC uses funds and resources raised from private organizations to provide the designated districts with consulting, grants and technical assistance.

Each Main Street Milwaukee district receives \$70,000 yearly for three years in Community Development Block Grants to offset the cost of the district's operations and projects. The yearly grant must be matched by at least \$10,000 in private funds, to be raised by the districts themselves. Each Main Street Milwaukee district also receives \$70,000 worth of technical assistance administered by LISC each year for three years.

Nicole Robben, director of the Main Street Milwaukee program, says that she appreciates the fact that Main Street works from the ground up. "With Main Street, you are concentrating resources and you're building capacity [within each district]," she says. "We wanted to see how that would work in our central-city neighborhoods."

Two years ago, the city held a series of workshops to determine how city residents and businesses viewed urban revitalization and the Main Street program. Participants emphasized the need for a coordinated approach to neighborhood economic development, technical assistance to small businesses to encourage entrepreneurship, and a public-private partnership



Milwaukee has divided its revitalization program into four districts, including Silver City (top) and North 27th Street (bottom), that each have a distinct character. Main Street Milwaukee is operated through a partnership between the city and the private Local Initiatives Support Corp.

between DCD and LISC, Robben says.

"We wanted that hands-on, community-driven effort," she adds. "Our Main Street is a partnership between us, the city and the private corporation LISC. They bring in dollar to dollar what we bring in with public dollars."

Each designated district — Burleigh Street, West National Avenue, Lincoln Avenue, and North 27th Street — has a distinct urban character and a diverse population. Before being designated as Main Street districts, the low- to moderate-income neighborhoods were each centered on commercial strips that had vacant or underused buildings. They all needed an economic booster shot, as well as some old-fashioned cleanup and renovation.

To that end, over the next three years, each Main Street district will create four committees focusing on design, organization, promotion and economic restructuring. "Design is going to improve the physical environment of the street, organization is going to continue to bring people to the table, promotion is going to work on promoting those assets, and economic restructuring is going to make sure that the businesses that come in are the businesses the districts want," Robben says.

Looking ahead, Robben has secured the pro bono assistance of four local architectural firms to help the districts with their redevelopment efforts. "There's a purpose to this program, and the private sector is very excited about it," Robben says. "The end result will be revitalized commercial districts where we feel safe and comfortable. This program allows us to accomplish those kinds of things."

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