

## Online Chapter

# Getting Started: Establishing a Main Street Program

By Teresa Lynch

**Before tackling design, promotion, or economic development activities, a revitalization program must first get organized.**

Grassroots organizing starts with articulating common goals and the steps necessary for achieving them, and disseminating this information to the widest audience possible. You will need to build momentum for the revitalization effort among community stakeholders to create public support and involve enough people to get broad-based participation.

Once you have support, you can formally begin to structure an organization. That formal structure will include establishing effective bylaws and articles of incorporation, developing partnerships with other organizations, fund raising to support the program's operation, and hiring staff to manage program activities. By formalizing the structure for your Main Street organization, you will be putting an official mechanism in place to start the revitalization process and establish your group of stakeholders as the leaders of the effort.

This chapter will look at organization as it pertains both to the formal Main Street organization and the grassroots organizing that takes place as a revitalization program begins. The following chapters will then explore the four point methodology to give you a working knowledge of the wide breadth of Main Street revitalization. While this chapter provides an overview of how to start a Main Street program, experienced Main Street practitioners or those joining a new program can benefit from a review of coalition building, volunteer and staff roles and responsibilities, getting public support, and the phases of Main Street revitalization.



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## Getting Broad-based Support

You can't lead a community-wide, volunteer-driven effort without the support of others. Broad-based support and public/private partnerships form the foundation of a commercial district revitalization program. Building support among a variety of public- and private-sector stakeholder groups is essential because these people can serve as future volunteers, members, financial contributors, donors of in-kind services, advocates, event participants, and customers.

### Private-sector support

As the core group of individuals begins to establish the Main Street program, it must first identify people who have a vested interest in revitalizing the commercial district. Involving a broad range of interests in the process will show various constituencies that they share a common goal. See the sidebar below for a list of typical private-sector stakeholders who participate in Main Street programs.

Each of these constituent groups might have a motivation other than supporting an initiative that will benefit the collective good. Gain their support by explaining how your effort will benefit them and meet their needs or goals. For example, appeal to corporations by explaining that community revitalization results a high quality of life for employees and ensures that the district will have variety of amenities. Win over property owners by emphasizing the revitalization program's ability to stabilize or raise property values.

Your program will need to work in partnership with community groups that could include chambers of commerce, tourism bureaus, and business improvement districts, among others. Partners can collaborate on common objectives, especially when your missions dovetail with each other, and share the workload on Main Street initiatives and projects.

### Public-sector support

It is essential that philosophical and financial support for the commercial revitalization effort comes from both the private and public sectors. Local governmental bodies—city, town, village, or county—are essential partners in the process. Each of these governmental entities benefits from an effective Main Street organization dedicated to creating a vibrant commercial district and responding to the community's economic and social needs. Without the support and involvement of local government, it is doubtful that any revitalization program will achieve long-lasting success.

Municipal and county governments can provide your Main Street program with financial and informational resources, technical skills, and leadership. Because the local government plays a major role in directing the community's economic growth and other policies, it must be an active participant in restructuring the commercial district's economic base and developing innovative solutions for the district's issues. Local government agencies can become strong partners of Main Street with their ability to offer public services such as closing streets and providing an increased police presence during events, working with your organization to streamline permitting processes, and providing other business-friendly policies to support your business recruitment efforts.

- Just as individuals and private groups benefit from supporting your Main Street program, there are many ways in which a commercial revitalization organization can assist a local government:
- Increased sales and improved properties lead to an expanded tax base.
- Main Street volunteers facilitate projects that the local government might otherwise have to assume.
- Many Main Street programs initiate and

## Which Stakeholders Typically Get Involved with Main Street Organizations?

- Merchants and business owners;
- Property owners;
- Professionals and service providers;
- Historic preservation organizations;
- Financial institutions;
- Business associations;
- Civic groups;
- Businesses outside the commercial district;
- Major corporations/industries;
- Residents;
- Community organizations;
- Regional planning commissions;
- Schools;
- Media; and
- Religious institutions.



photo credit: Robert Francis

**Network with the staff or volunteers from other Main Street programs in your state, city, or region; it will help you get a grasp on regional issues and politics as well as build a base of support.**

even manage infrastructure improvements and streetscape enhancement projects.

- ◉ Main Street volunteers can build consensus in the community for major public improvement projects championed by local government officials.
- ◉ An improved economic environment encourages existing businesses to expand and new businesses to locate in the district, thus helping local government reduce sprawl and implement smart growth policies.

## Setting Up the Organization

Once your organization has identified stakeholders and partners, the development of a formal revitalization organization begins. It starts with a step-by-step implementation process that continues until your Main Street program is fully functioning.

Depending on the pace of the volunteer effort, expect this process to take at least 12 months. Don't rush this process. Investing time to educate the community about Main Street; build broad-based support; and establish an effective, representative board and committee structure will pay off in the creation of a sustainable Main Street organization.

### Establish a steering committee

The steering committee should be composed of individuals committed to moving the Main Street effort through its initial phases. No more than 13 people need to be included. Committee members can also represent more than one sector—e.g. a resident in the historic district might also be a business or property owner, or a member of a civic association might also serve on city council. These steering committee members need to be “working members” who have the time and the interest in starting up an organization.

### Educate yourselves

The steering committee must have a thorough understanding of the Main Street Four-Point Approach®. Throughout the year, the National Trust Main Street Center and the coordinating Main Street programs provide many training opportunities as well as offer a variety of publications and other resources that teach you about the methodology and its application. Steering committee members should be able to speak knowledgeably about how a Main Street organization will function in your community so they can convince others to lend their support, volunteer time, and/or money.

### Define geographic boundaries

Your revitalization program's target area should include the “natural” boundaries of the downtown or neighborhood commercial district—generally this is the area that has been recognized as the historic or “traditional” commercial core. It is important to work within a defined geographic district; the purpose is not to exclude anyone, but to demonstrate change in a concentrated area.

### Establish a preliminary operating budget

The Main Street program budget should include allocations for programmatic operating expenses, such as staff salary and benefits, office expenses, insurance, travel for conferences, training expenses, as well as funds allocated for specific committee activities.

### Choose an organization to house your program

Generally, a Main Street program's best option is to create a new, standalone organization rather than housing the

program within another entity. The public will understand how your work or mission differs from other community organizations and agencies. Such an arrangement gives you autonomy and indicates to the community that your group will be solely focused on becoming the commercial district's champion. Also, you will be better poised to focus equally on all four points of the Main Street approach rather than the point emphasized by the entity that houses your program. For example, if your program is housed in a chamber of commerce, you might be compelled to focus on economic restructuring work.

There have been plenty of instances where a new Main Street program has been successfully housed in city government or an existing nonprofit organization, such as a business association or economic development corporation. There are advantages and disadvantage to each situation. For example, being housed within a city agency would probably afford your staff members insurance and other benefits. However, the status of your program could be jeopardized with each new administration. See the National Trust Main Street Center's Main Street Board Members Handbook for more details on this topic.

### Reach out to others

Be sure to keep the community apprised of your progress during this early organizational development stage. Make presentations to civic groups and other associations in the community to inform them about the program, distribute copies of your newsletter and brochures, and enlist their support. Hold at least two public meetings, which should be well advertised and held at a variety of convenient times to facilitate maximum attendance. Identify and personally invite key stakeholders—individuals whose support is critical to the success of your Main Street program.

Develop a simple brochure so you have a take-away item to distribute during meetings and events—it helps build your credibility and can be used as a fund-raising tool. Your brochure should describe your program's goals, structure, the Main Street approach, the services you will offer, a map of the Main Street district, an explanation of who benefits from the revitalization, as well as some future projects.

In addition to a brochure, send timely news and updates to people through a print and/or electronic newsletter. Another way to keep people in the loop is through a continuously updated website.

Keep the media informed, too. Offer to write a column for your local media and provide press releases and story ideas, interviews, and informal conversations to keep Main Street on the radar screens of media representatives.

### Begin securing funds

Set up a structure for contributions and other revenue streams to fund your operational budget. Funding should come from a variety of public and private sources so that your Main Street program will not be threatened if any one source dries up.

### Draft articles of incorporation and bylaws

Designate one or two members of the steering committee to carry out this task. It is generally recommended that a Main Street program be organized as a 501 (c)3 to reflect its status as a nonprofit, community-based organization that has a charitable or educational purpose and does not generally engage in lobbying. Briefly, with this status your organization will be exempt from paying property taxes in most states and will be eligible for foundation or federal grant support. Another tax-exempt category is 501(c)4; these groups are generally dedicated to promoting social welfare and are not restricted from lobbying; they generally are not eligible for foundation or federal grant support. A 501(c)6 organization is similar to a (c)4 organization, except that it usually promotes a common business interest.

An attorney should be retained to guide the incorporation process and develop bylaws. If your community is in a state, city, county, or region with an official Main Street coordinating program, contact it for samples of bylaws that have been used by designated Main Street communities. While examples from other Main Street communities will certainly be helpful, you must tailor your bylaws to reflect your organization's needs; don't simply copy the examples.

### Find appropriate office location

Look for space in a prominent area of the commercial district to set up a welcoming Main Street office—preferably in an upper story so that first-floor space can be reserved for commercial uses, unless your district has a high first-floor vacancy rate. Avoid housing your office in a governmental building—that can create the perception that Main Street is a government program. The commercial revitalization effort needs to be perceived as a private, community-based program with a mission that is distinct from the government and from other local community organizations; your office location will communicate your organization's independence. Ideally, the Main Street office will contain work space for the staff, house a resource library for volunteers and the public, and provide space for board and committee meetings.



## Setting up an advisory board

As a general rule, the National Trust Main Street Center does not recommend establishing an advisory board to support the board of directors. It can prove to be cumbersome and create confusion among the general public, which may assume that members of the advisory board are speaking for the organization. In some circumstances, however, an advisory board may work to the advantage of the Main Street program. All situations differ—whether in small communities or large. If the political climate or the community culture indicates that the support of community leaders or individuals with particular expertise can best be accessed by their serving on an advisory board—and if these individuals can mobilize resources that the board of directors may not be able to generate—then flexibility is in order and an advisory board can certainly be set up.

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## Board of Directors

As the bylaws are being drafted, set up a governing body for your organization. The steering committee will have been active for several months, making it possible to identify committee members who would make effective board members. As with the steering committee, the board should be broad based, representing many sectors of the community; members should be selected for their skills, connections, and the knowledge they can bring to the organization. When establishing the board, ask members to serve one, two, and three-year terms so they don't all rotate off the board at the same time. Some organizations ask board members to pick a term out of a hat; and people who get a one-year term can always renew. In any given year, one-third of the board's membership should be up for renewal. All board members should be prepared to commit to four to 10 hours a month outside of meetings.

While the composition of the board can be an outgrowth of the steering committee, some members may need to be added or replaced to ensure the desired composition of the board. Try not to exceed 13 voting members, however, as large boards are unwieldy. There will be plenty of opportunities for individuals to serve as members of a committee or as project volunteers if they are not able to give the kind of time and effort necessary to serve on the board.

Your organization might invite a variety of ex-officio board members to sit at the Main Street table by virtue of the position they hold with a group, organization, or office, such as with local government. They should participate in the board meetings, often as non-voting participants, when there is an opportunity to discuss how their organizations' projects can intersect with, or support, Main Street's activities.

## Roles and Responsibilities

Board members are charged with policy administration, finances, public relations, setting program direction and evaluation, fund raising, leadership, short-term and long-term planning, and managing personnel. Board tasks



include meeting legal obligations, administering bylaws, authorizing an annual audit, ensuring the organization has sufficient revenue to meet objectives, serving as advocates of preservation-based economic development, reviewing and approving the annual budget and work plans and setting program goals and giving direction to committees. The board is also responsible for hiring and evaluating the executive director, recruiting new board members, and approving personnel administration policies. Each board member should serve as a committee chair, board officer, or active committee member, and should not give more than four to 10 hours a month outside of meetings.

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## The Executive Director

A new Main Street program can only hire an executive director once the organization's board, committee structure, and work plans are in place and after the program has developed a fund-raising plan that will generate revenue to cover operational expenses. This position should be filled only when program funding has been secured and will be available for at least three years.

A selection committee should convene to solicit applicants for the executive director position, reviewing resumes, interview candidates, and recommend candidates to the full board. As funding allows, the program would benefit from part-time support staff as well as a full-time executive director. Some mature Main Street organizations have a variety of other staff members, such as special event coordinators or real estate development specialists.

## Roles and Responsibilities

One could be glib and suggest that an executive director can “walk on water.” Still, it is true that a Main Street executive director must do it all—he or she must be adept at managing and assisting in the implementation of a comprehensive work plan that covers every aspect of a volunteer-driven commercial district revitalization process. The director must be able to communicate well, be proficient in basic computer skills, be a self starter, be able to multi-task and delegate, and be energetic and thick skinned.

The executive director's job includes:

## Retaining an Executive Director

If your organization has had the good fortune to hire an executive director who performs the job with aplomb, it is important that the board value that person and show that his or her services are appreciated. There are several job-supporting elements that should be put in place to assure that a good executive director is well treated and that his or her services are fairly and regularly evaluated—and rewarded. The board can use the following tips to help the program retain an effective executive director:

- Assure that the executive director has access to and financial support for professional development.
- Provide adequate health insurance.
- As much as possible, reward the executive director with a pay increase.
- If hours of work are an issue, see how they can be adjusted to accommodate the executive director's needs.
- Be sure that the job description is accurate and that expectations and responsibilities are clear.
- Establish key benchmarks in an annual performance plan so that projects and goals, as well as skill-building objectives, are specified.
- Provide daily guidance (if needed) from the board president, through phone or e-mail contact.
- Schedule weekly or bi-weekly meetings between the board president and executive director so that they stay informed about each other's activities.
- Provide feedback through the board president to let the director know if he or she is on the right track.
- Offer praise throughout the year to keep the director motivated.
- Conduct performance reviews at regular intervals after the director is first hired, and yearly thereafter.

Remember that the executive director does not interact just with the board and committee members; he or she is in daily contact with the greater community as well. Board members shouldn't judge their employee solely on internal relationships. They should keep their ears to the ground and talk with people in the community to find out how the executive director is doing. If the majority of responses through evaluation and community feedback are positive, do everything you can to keep your director.

- Coordinating activities of committees and volunteers;
- Facilitating work planning;
- Supporting and upholding decisions made by the board;
- Handling public relations for the program;
- Working with business and property owners (getting out of the office and interacting with people in the district regularly);
- Handling administrative tasks with the officers of the board;
- Building coalitions with local officials, chamber of commerce, and other entities;
- Educating stakeholders on the importance of the Main Street Four-Point Approach™;
- Volunteer motivation, development, and management;
- Regularly communicating with the board president and other staff members;
- Attending all board and committee meetings, as well as city council and other relevant public meetings; and
- Providing technical assistance.

New executive directors hired to run a newly established Main Street program should add these tasks to their priority list:

- Create a volunteer orientation and training program;
- Set up databases for organizing information;
- Help set up the office, if this hasn't already been done yet.
- Think of the first projects to get the new program started;
- Assemble the Main Street resource library; and
- Help set up all the committees and assist them in the process of creating detailed written work plans. Make sure each committee has a chair and vice-chair. Set up regular meeting times.

What shouldn't the executive director do? The Main Street director should never sign his or her own paycheck, manage accounting (that's the treasurer's responsibility), write the newsletter, raise funds (because this essentially would be soliciting funds to pay his or her own salary), voice public opinions on revitalization issues that are inconsistent with the views of the board, or take minutes

of the board or committee meetings. Overall, it is important for the entire organization to understand that everyone must actively volunteer for the program to succeed. If the executive director is charged with implementing projects and running many aspects of the organization, when this person leaves, the program will dissolve.

In short, the executive director is the face of the Main Street organization through daily interactions on the street. He or she represents the organization throughout the community and the state, and even nationally.

A Main Street executive director must be willing to work flexible hours and put in about 40 to 60 hours a week to get everything done. The director often has to meet with merchants early in the morning; get together with board members late in the evening; and work on nights and weekends when festivals and other special events take place.

A new executive director of an established program up will need to be brought up to speed about the commercial district and its stakeholders and be introduced to the community. The director will want to have lunch or coffee with each board member and committee chair as well as meet with local stakeholders, including major funders, each district business owner, the police commander, important public officials, and representatives of key partners, as well as network with other local and regional economic development professionals.

### Full-time and Part-time Positions

The best staffing option is to hire a full-time executive director employed directly by your organization. Some Main Street programs, often ones in small towns with fewer than 5,000 people, have part-time directors. Such a scenario generally is not recommended because the intensive job responsibilities may burn out a part-time director fairly quickly.

Another scenario that occurs is when the local government pays the salary of the executive director, but expects that person to handle two distinct jobs—manage the Main Street program and perform a government job, such as economic development or city planning. While this arrangement can strengthen the Main Street organization's partnership with the municipality and give the program access to funds, supplies, and even benefits for employees, there are some drawbacks. First of all, the executive director will have to manage his or her time in a way that does both jobs justice. Stakeholders may get confused about the individual's role in the community. In most cases, Main Street will be housed within governmental offices—thus removing the director from regular contact with the very people he or she should be working with on a daily basis. Consequently, the public may have difficulty seeing Main Street as an independent, community-based organization.

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## Establishing Committees

Committee members have important roles to play, too. Committees are responsible for developing and implementing projects that fall within the Main Street four points. As with the board, committee members should be recruited



for their skills and interests. Consider all of the stakeholder groups that you identified earlier while developing your program and discuss volunteer opportunities with them. It is a usual practice for a committee chair to also be a board member, which helps facilitate organizational communication and transfer the board's vision to the committees.

Most Main Street programs set up four standing committees—design, promotion, economic restructuring, and organization. Most Main Street organizations name their working committees after the four points, but in truth, you can use any name. For example, the organization committee could be called the “outreach committee” because its responsibilities can be seen as reaching into people's minds (through public relations), into their hearts (through volunteer development), and into their wallets (through the fund-raising plan).

Some communities have created five standing committees in order to deal with a major issue, such as parking. In general, however, it is better to set up a subcommittee that reports to one of the standing committees. A parking subcommittee would then be under the purview of the design committee. However, there is no need to create subcommittees to deal with the responsibilities assigned to each committee. For example, there shouldn't be a membership subcommittee, because that is clearly a task of the organization committee. When your program matures, there will be times when additional free-standing committees may be necessary. In such cases, your organization needs to be flexible and make decisions based the program's best interests.

### Committee Members' Roles and Responsibilities

Typically, volunteers should be expected to attend committee meetings and work about three to five hours a month outside of meetings. You should provide an orientation session to teach them about your program and the Main Street approach. More intensive basic Main Street training is offered by the National Trust Main Street Center and the Main Street coordinating programs' throughout the year.

Each of the four standing committees will:

- Meet regularly;
- Develop work plans;
- Implement projects;
- Report to the board; and
- Keep records and meeting minutes.

Each committee member should:

- Commit to at least one year of service;
- Attend training sessions;
- Learn the Main Street approach;
- Help recruit and orient new members;
- Take responsibility for projects;
- Represent the organization positively to the public; and
- Support the organization's activities.

Every project a committee undertakes will have some connection to another committee's work. Thus, it's essential to keep the lines of communication open particularly between committee chairs and board members so the left hand knows what the right hand is about to do. On certain projects, however, two or three committees might work together; developing the district's business and building inventory, for example, is a joint design and economic restructuring committee project.

The following list outlines the areas of work for each of the four standing committees and describes typical first-year activities and projects:

Responsibilities of the Organization Committee:

- Public relations;
- Volunteer development; and
- Fund raising (planning and assistance in implementation).

Typical first-year activities/projects:

- Training and education on topics pertinent to the committee;
- Committee work plan;
- Newsletter;
- Website;
- Main Street organizational brochure;

- Public meetings;
- Volunteer orientations and trainings;
- Fund-raising plan (membership and annual fund-raising event) and development of fund-raising materials; and
- Logo development (with design and promotion committees).

Responsibilities of the Design Committee:

- Design education and technical assistance;
- Building and sign improvements;
- Design review;
- Public spaces; and
- Zoning and planning.

Typical first-year activities/projects:

- Training and education on topics pertinent to the committee;
- Committee work plan;
- Building inventory (in conjunction with economic restructuring committee);
- On-site merchant/property owner visits to educate and encourage design improvements;
- Workshops (storefront rehab/visual merchandising/rehab tax credits);
- Improvement incentives (grants/loans/and professional design assistance);
- Public improvements (Clean-up day, planting flowers-producing small, but meaningful visual changes);
- Codes/ordinances review; and
- Logo development (with organization and promotion committee).

Responsibilities of the Promotion Committee:

- Image development;
- Retail promotions;
- Special events; and
- Marketing strategy.

Typical first-year activities/projects:

- Training and education on topics pertinent to the committee;
- Committee work plan;
- Promotion calendar;
- Business directory;
- Image-building campaign;
- Holiday lighting/decorations and promotions;
- Strategic retail event;
- Retail tie-in to an existing special event; and
- Logo development (with organization and design committees).

Responsibilities of the Economic Restructuring Committee:

- Data collection and market research;
- Assistance and incentives for business and property development;
- Business retention and recruitment;
- Identifying market position; and
- Property development.

Typical first-year activities/projects:

- Training and education on topics pertinent to the committee;
- Committee work plan;
- Data collection (market studies, existing plans, demographic information);
- Building and business survey (in conjunction with design committee);
- Commercial district base map;
- Business owner and customer surveys;
- Financial incentives for business and property development; and
- Monitoring of Main Street's economic progress (re-habs, private investment, new jobs, new businesses).

## Keeping committees on track

When the board reviews committee work plans, it must make sure that each committee sticks to its own responsibilities and does not assume another's work. For example, there sometimes are misconceptions that the promotion committee, which is responsible for developing an image for the district, should be leading some of the organization committee's public relations activities, such as producing newsletters and creating the website.

An area that is particularly confusing for the organization committee is fund raising. The organization committee is only responsible for creating a fund-raising plan (approved, of course, by the board) that seeks to generate revenue from varied activities such as membership development, fund-raising events, sale of Main Street products, etc. The organization committee is also responsible for overseeing the production of fund-raising materials so that each of the activities can occur. Although the executive director generally assists in developing the fund-raising plan and materials, the board as a whole is responsible for fund raising. It must take the lead in soliciting donations and memberships and seeking public funding.

The role of the program's executive director is to help manage and coordinate each committee's work, not take responsibility for implementing committee projects and activities. While the executive director will offer advice on revitalization issues and will participate in the planning and many aspects of implementation, committee members must understand that they make the projects happen and complete work plan objectives. While the executive director can help with committee projects, tasks must be delegated to volunteers, not staff.

So, how does that work? For example, if the promotion committee is producing an event, those volunteers are responsible for taking the lead in organizing and running the event. The executive director can help coordinate the production of promotional materials. Or if the organization committee is starting a fund-raising campaign, those members raise the funds, but they can ask the director to help coordinate the campaign and communicate with volunteers.

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## Getting Started

Now that you have an idea of how to set up a Main Street organization, you can start provide your committee members and board members with basic Main Street Four-Point Approach training and distribute guidance materials to get your volunteers started. See [PreservationBooks.org](http://PreservationBooks.org) for committee and board member handbooks that will help them become oriented to their new positions in your Main Street program.