



Downtown Salem, N.J., which is listed in the state, local, and national historic registers, possesses many architectural treasures.

Urban Blight (SCRUB), to convince the owner to remove the billboard.

The two organizations approached Chen to discuss how proper signs and building improvements could have a huge impact on his business. “We said, ‘let’s leverage the investment you already made in buying the building so we can enhance the appearance of the community, change the clientele base, and improve security through better lighting,’” says Trent.

She explained that PEC could provide \$50,000 to rehabilitate the façade and remove the billboard in addition to managing the project so Chen could focus on his business. A SCRUB volunteer lawyer helped Chen deal with his recently renewed contract with the billboard’s owner, Clear Channel. Apparently, rainwater dripping from the billboard created slippery conditions, which left Clear open to slip-and-fall lawsuits.

The billboard was taken down, paint was removed, the brick was cleaned and repaired, and a beautiful façade was revealed – one that most community members had never seen because

the billboard had blocked it for an entire generation!

“It was a great challenge for us to convince a business owner to take such a big step, especially when he didn’t think changing his building’s appearance could so positively impact his business and the corridor,” says Trent. “Shedding light on the opportunities for leveraging new investment and taking away owners’ fears goes a long way in making these projects move forward.”

**Educational Tour: Philadelphia Main Streets.** Learn more about these and many other projects in the eight neighborhood business districts as well as hear about other inspiring projects on Lancaster Avenue in the educational session “Lancaster Avenue, a Diverse Urban Community.”

### MAIN STREET AS DEVELOPER: SALEM, NEW JERSEY

While attending the National Main Streets Conference in 2001, members of New Jersey’s Stand Up For Salem (SUFS) received some serious inspiration. While attending a session about

a Main Street program in a tiny Missouri town that acquired and rehabbed about half of its downtown buildings, SUFS’s Executive Director Chris Davenport thought Salem could become a developer, too.

“We figured, when we first started in 1999, we didn’t know anything about Main Street,” he says. “We thought we would be cheerleading the town into doing better...but just like we had to learn about Main Street we had to learn about real estate too.”

Salem, New Jersey, a small town with a population of 6,000 near both Wilmington, Delaware, and the Philadelphia metropolitan area, was ready to do something about its high vacancy rate and numerous white elephant buildings. The district, which is listed in the state, local, and national historic registers, was incorporated in 1675 and possesses many architectural treasures. But, though the buildings were true diamonds in the rough, the private sector simply wasn’t taking on any rehabilitation projects.

SUFS worked with Main Street New Jersey to conduct a real estate assessment with Donovan Rypkema, a nation-

ally known champion for “community initiated development” projects. Rypkema pointed out all of the positive reasons for SUFS to get into real estate: there was a strong board and staff; it would be an important component of the downtown revitalization strategy; it could have a positive long-term impact; it would address a major issue; and if not Main Street – then who?

Since its inception, SUFS has worked with the city, cultivating a partnership that has strengthened over time. “The pivotal moment for us was when we convinced a few council members to get out of Salem and join us in ‘getting religion’ at the national meeting,” says Davenport.

City officials participated in the real estate assessment and realized that a proven step-by-step process for nonprofit development exists – community initiated development. The city appointed the Main Street organization as the official redeveloper of municipally owned vacant properties. Since SUFS agreed to take on the Finlaw Building, one of the

worst white elephants in town, the local government figured it had nothing to lose. The Main Street organization not only had a vision but the authority and support to get started.

The group used a planning firm to take it through a master planning process (using funds

apartment rental applications were accepted in 2007.

SUFS has created a real estate fund by selling properties it has acquired to private developers, by obtaining grants, by splitting developer fees, and by charging property management fees.



The Main Street program in Salem, N.J., is tackling community initiated development, overseeing the conversion of a major white elephant, the Finlaw Building, into offices with a 200-car parking garage.

donated by SUFS chairman) and incorporated a separate nonprofit for development purposes. But just as the project started to take off, the Finlaw Building's roof collapsed. Funds had to be used immediately to stabilize the structure. It took months before the community decided to save the façade and demolish and rebuild the rest of the building.

By 2004, the master plan was complete and was used to entice developers to take on projects downtown. One developer who wanted to build apartments for senior citizens was steered to Main Street and the Salem Senior Village project – a 64-unit apartment complex that would be eligible for state income tax credits – was born. In 2005, the Main Street program hired a project manager to oversee construction while the organization focused on other Main Street work. Construction began in 2006 and

The developer of the Senior Villages sold \$10 million in tax credits to banks in order to secure enough capital to get the project off the ground. So far, SUFS has acquired all of its buildings through donations, but the organization keeps its eye on auctions as well.

A ground-breaking ceremony was held in 2006 for the Finlaw Building, which is being converted into offices with a 200-car parking garage. "We are fairly conservative in that we don't ask the city to turn property over to us on speculation," says Davenport.

**Educational Tour: Making it Happen: On-site Hard Hat Real Estate Development Tour.** Come check out Salem projects for yourself. SUFS will be leading hard-hat tours during the conference to share lessons learned and provide an opportunity for questions with volunteers, city officials, and project managers who helped make these projects happen.

## GLASSTOWN ARTS DISTRICT: MILLVILLE, NEW JERSEY

At its annual awards program last September, the Millville Development Corporation (the umbrella organization for Main Street Millville) recognized the many contributors to the downtown's rebirth as a vibrant arts destination. These creative folks named each award after a song, which played in the background as the recipient was announced. Thanks to dedicated individuals and partners, Millville, New Jersey, has numerous accomplishments and people of which to sing their praises.

Situated 35 miles from Philadelphia, Millville was one of the places where the early American glassmaking tradition got its start. Rich in silica sand and trees (for fuel), this area of southern New Jersey was a great location to set up factories and furnaces. Not only would glassmaking become an important industry for communities like Millville, it would also lead to a burgeoning art tradition. Glassblowers made art glass during their breaks and free time, thus steeping southern New Jersey in a rich artisan heritage.

This heritage is a critical element of Millville's revitalization strategy. Just two miles from downtown, the WheatonArts and Cultural Center annually attracts nearly 80,000 visitors who come to learn about the history and craft of American glassmaking.

The Millville Development Corporation (MDC), a nonprofit organization that began focusing on a revitalization plan in 1994, worked with the WheatonArts and Cultural Center to explore the idea of turning Millville into an arts destination. MDC had already hired consulting firms to investigate the feasibility of attracting people who live within a 90-minute drive area from the highway. In the late 1990s, MDC determined that if Mill-

ville could capture 1 percent of drive-by traffic, then it could be a successful downtown.

The idea of using the Cultural Center's existing arts attraction grew into developing the downtown into the Glasstown Arts District. Using WheatonArt's mailing list, MDC sent a survey to 2,000 artists in the Mid-Atlantic region asking if they would be interested if Millville created an arts-supportive community with live-work spaces. They received an overwhelming 20 percent response rate, with most responses favoring the idea.

Millville set to work developing the Glasstown Arts District. MDC, the city, and WheatonArts facilitated a focus group and held meetings to build consensus and explore ways to turn this plan into reality. In August 1999, they held a public meeting that was advertised heavily throughout southern New Jersey and the Philadelphia area. They summarized information gathered through the focus groups and surveys and discussed the possibility of the city buying buildings downtown to create a public arts center. The meeting was standing room only and the consensus for the project was a resounding yes. The city commissioners soon after voted to purchase three downtown buildings and proceed with the arts center.

