

7. Main Street Revitalization

Fact Sheet



This smart growth tool can be used in urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Many towns in the Hartford region have old town centers in varying degrees of economic health. While some are attractive and popular places, other town centers have been plagued with vacant storefronts and disinvestment.

Why Have So Many Main Street Areas Become Run Down?

Traditional Main Street areas throughout the Hartford region have had a difficult time competing with auto-oriented commercial development in suburban areas. Strip-style commercial corridors, regional shopping malls, and big-box "power centers" are successful for many reasons. They have recognizable chain stores, large-scale shopping formats that provide a wide selection of goods, drive-through services, large movie theaters, large family restaurants, and most importantly, abundant parking and easy access for vehicles.

By way of comparison, Main Street areas tend to offer unique and small-format spaces, which are generally unappealing to modern-day chain retailers, and they tend to be constrained in terms of parking and vehicular access. Most people living in the Hartford region nowadays are auto-dependent, and they tend to do their shopping in locations with the best automobile access and parking.

Why Re-invest in Main Street?

If suburban commercial sites are so successful, why should local municipality spend time and money attempting to revitalize the old town center? Many Main Street areas still have numerous businesses, residents, and employees, all of whom would directly benefit from improvements to the area. The town as a whole would benefit from the increased tax revenues from a revitalized commercial area. Most importantly, a Main Street area is usually the historical, cultural, civic and geographic center of the community, and improvements to the town center can bolster the town's pride, image, and residential property values.

From a "smart growth" perspective, town centers are "sustainable" growth centers. With higher-density development and a mix of commercial and residential uses, town centers provide a greater variety of housing types and more opportunities for walking, biking, and transit


use. They are an alternative to the forces that fuel low-density suburban sprawl. A revitalized town center can attract new investment that adheres to a compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented format.

There has never been a better time to engage in economic revitalization efforts in historic town centers. Old Main Streets are being revitalized nationwide, and some modern retailers see old Main Street areas as the “new frontier” of retailing. Oriented to pedestrians and specialty shopping, these businesses capitalize on the character value and foot traffic of Main Street. They tap into the market that seeks an alternative to mall shopping.

What Are the Chances of Success?

Many communities have been able to turn around their traditional Main Street areas. Downtown West Hartford, which initially could not compete with the West Farms Mall, managed to renew itself through a multi-faceted revitalization program. West Hartford has been successful because it has managed to build off of the unique attributes that distinguish it from suburban commercial sites: historic architecture, a traditional "Main Street" ambiance, a safe and pleasant walking environment, and unique non-chain stores. Importantly, West Hartford Center has a unique parking scheme that makes access convenient. Similar initiatives are currently being undertaken in Windsor Center and Downtown Rockville (Town of Vernon).

Toolbox

 **Economic Development for Main Street Shops.** A market niche for Main Street stores needs to be identified and built upon. A “market niche” is a collection of stores, services, restaurants, and attractions that follow a theme and appeal to a segment of a potential customer base. Through an identifiable market niche, the Main Street area can become known and marketed based on a certain type of shopping, service, or experience. If a Main Street area is undergoing intense competition from an adjacent commercial strip or shopping mall,



Before



After



The key to economic development for a Main Street is to identify and develop a market niche. Easton, PA could not compete with strip commercial areas and the Phillipsburg Mall. But with new cultural anchors, historic preservation, and pedestrian-friendly design, it has become a specialty shopping destination for the region. (Source: APPS, Inc.).

Before



After

Low-cost facade and signage improvements can go a long way toward creating an upscale ambiance. These before and after photographs from Corning, NY show what a remarkable transformation can be achieved. (Source: Norman Mintz, who was the Main Street manager for Corning).

the market niche should intentionally provide a different selection of stores and merchandise that cannot be found in those conventional suburban locations. By providing unique, eclectic, non-chain stores, Main Street can become an refreshing alternative to standard suburban shopping



Cultural Attractions. Libraries, museums, concert halls, theaters, and other similar facilities provide unique cultural experiences. Such cultural institutions can serve as magnets for a town center. People who patronize them can be enticed to visit nearby shops and restaurants. To be effective, cultural attractions should be located and designed in such a way that they encourage their patrons to explore the town center on foot.



Coordinated Parking. Many of the sites in a traditional town center lack on-site parking lots or have only a handful of private spaces. In many cases, the private parking lots and spaces are inefficiently laid out and used, and better coordination could yield more spaces and better serve customers. Shared parking agreements between adjacent uses, or preferably, the creation of a parking management district can help coordinate parking and make parking more convenient for the town center as a whole. (See Chapter 8 for more information on shared parking and parking management districts).



Improvements to Streets and Public Spaces. Decorative paving, antique street lighting, street trees, benches, landscaping, coordinated street furniture (bike racks, trash receptacles, traffic lights, news stands, kiosks), flags, and banners can all be used to make sidewalks and plazas look and feel more safe, attractive, and lively. Plazas could also provide an opportunity for the siting of public art, fountains, or other similar features that provide visual interest and create a sense of place.




Park Improvements. Small parks in or around Main Street provide places for visitors to rest in the middle of a shopping trip, as well as place for outdoor craft fairs, art shows, farmers' markets, or other events. Visually, parks balance out the built-up character of the rest of the town center. Park improvements (focusing on pedestrian access, overall maintenance, and landscaping) can improve the image of the town center and draw more visitors.





Façade Improvement Program. Façade improvements can help create a more inviting look that entices people to explore


the shops and attractions along Main Street. A façade improvement program can provide grants and tax incentives to promote façade cleaning, door and window replacement and repair, enlarged windows, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and installation of awnings and planters.

Keys to Success

 **Appeal to tourists, artists, and students.** Tourists include local residents who want a fun shopping experience, as well as out-of-towners. Tourists seek out places with character, charm and authenticity. Artists and students typically seek out alternatives to what they consider "boring" suburban commercial shopping experiences. Such demographic groups are usually more interested and willing to explore non-chain specialty stores and restaurants in a pedestrian-friendly, historic environment. They also create a new image for the center as a destination.

 **Adopt contextual zoning provisions.** Many town centers have a compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented pattern of development. Buildings line the sidewalks along Main Street, with shops, restaurants, and civic uses on the ground level, and offices or residences on the upper floors. On the surrounding side streets, there may be a mix of stores, offices, apartments, houses, and parks, all built in a compact, walkable format. Land use and bulk regulations in the zoning code should be tailored to the town center environment, such that new buildings fit into the traditional context.

 **Prohibit auto-oriented uses and development patterns.** If auto-oriented uses or development patterns are encroaching upon the traditional Main Street area, such uses should be explicitly prohibited. This suggests that gas stations, car washes, car sales lots, drive-through banks and restaurants, and other similar uses should be prohibited. In addition, front-yard parking and large free-standing signs often associated with such uses would be out of character with the rest of the town center and should be prohibited along Main Street and adjacent side streets.

 **Adopt zoning requirements for pedestrian-friendly design.** The facades and front-yards of buildings facing those sidewalks and plazas must be pedestrian-friendly. Display win-



Before

Streetscape improvements can improve the walkability as well as the ambiance of a Main Street area. Chapel Street in New Haven, CT has been transformed into a popular destination for Yale students, downtown workers, and local residents. (Source: Project for Public Spaces, Inc.)



After

dows should provide visual interest and views into stores; entryways should be so oriented that they allow pedestrians to enter the building from the sidewalk; awnings should provide cover from inclement weather. Parking should not be located in the front yard, and space in front of the store window could be given over to outdoor dining or landscaping.



Promote higher-density housing and professional offices along and around Main Street. Housing and professional offices clustered along and around Main Street creates a local market for shops and restaurants. In addition, such clustered development would fit into the higher-density setting of downtown, adding to the character and charm of the area.



Promote historic preservation. Town centers are often full of historic buildings, many of which have distinctive architectural features, such as decorative masonry, stained glass windows, carved doorways or window frames, and so on. The historic character of an old town center is one of its greatest economic assets, as it distinguishes the town center from a suburban commercial site, creating a unique experience. Buildings that are historically or architecturally significant should be preserved and restored.



Establish a Special Services District or a Main Street Program. A Special Services District (SSD) can provide practical services, like trash collection and disposal and security, on a day to day basis. As importantly, the SSD can provide planning and coordinating functions. It can solicit new business and

How Can the State Help?



Develop tourism in the Hartford region. Specialty shopping and restaurants are the most obvious candidates for market niches in a town center, but such uses have a limited market potential without tourists. The State should work with local government to promote tourism throughout the region. Within driving distance of two major metropolitan centers — New York City and Boston — the natural beauty, historic character, and cultural and recreational opportunities of the Hartford area could draw daytrippers and weekenders. Planned and proposed projects in the Hartford region, such as Adrian's Landing, Rentschler Field, and the Hartford-Springfield historic corridor, provide new opportunities to draw visitors. Traditional Main Street areas could then tap into this tourism market.



Tailor highway standards to the traditional Main Street environment. Many rural villages, such as historic Suffield, have State highways running through their Main Street areas. The State Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) should consider allowing narrower road widths, sharper turning radii, and traffic calming devices in a village environment. Under ISTEA and TEA-21 legislation, the federal government strongly supports initiatives for multi-modal transportation and pedestrian and bicycle improvements. Protecting the pedestrian environment in a town center through flexible roadways standards would be consistent with the spirit of federal legislation.



Facilitate Joint establishment of SSDs and Village Districts. Although SSDs and Village Districts serve slightly different ends, they are related. SSDs and Village Districts could be jointly established, so that their boundaries are the same, and efforts are coordinated. Improvements undertaken by the SSD should be compatible with design regulations adopted by the local municipalities, and vice versa, design regulations should reflect the intentions that business leaders have for the area. The SSD should closely be involved in the process of determining the design regulations and procedures to be adopted.

For More Information

1. Connecticut Main Street Center, Hartford, CT. Phone: (860) 280-2337, <www.ctmainstreet.org>.
2. Congress for the New Urbanism, San Francisco, CA. Phone: (415) 495-2255, <www.cnu.org>.
3. National Main Street Center, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, DC. Phone: (202) 588-6219, <www.mainst.org>.
4. New Hampshire Main Street Center, Concord, NH. Phone: (603) 223-9942, <www.nhcdfa.org/mainstreet.html>.
5. Project for Public Spaces, New York, NY. Phone: (212) 620-5660, <www.pps.org>.

See also, Detailed Technical Analysis on Main Street Revitalization, available through CRCOG.

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