2010 GREAT AMERICAN MAIN STREET AWARDS

BY ANDREA L. DONO AND LINDA S. GLISSON

Columbus, Mississippi
Lee’s Summit, Missouri

SELECTED BY A NATIONWIDE JURY OF FIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EXPERTS, EACH OF THE WINNERS HAS PROVEN THAT INCREMENTAL PROGRESS – AND PERSISTENCE – PAYS OFF, CREATING ECONOMIC VITALITY, A UNIQUE SENSE OF PLACE, AND A GREATER COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY BY ALL OF ITS RESIDENTS. HERE ARE THE 2010 WINNERS.

Representatives of the five 2010 Great American Main Street Awards® winners at the National Main Streets Conference in Oklahoma City. From left to right: Monica Bilak, Paducah, Ky.; Amber Murphree Brislin, Columbus, Miss.; Vera Sansalone, Fairmont, W.Va., Cristina Sheppard-Decius; Ferndale, Mich.; Steve Tominia, Lee’s Summit, Missouri.
PADUCAH, Kentucky

“WE WANT YOU!”

That's the call Paducah, Kentucky, sent out to artists around the world as it launched its Artist Relocation Program 10 years ago.

Back in the 1980s, Paducah's Lower-Town district was a drug-infested, dangerous eyesore – 20 square blocks dotted with potentially beautiful but dilapidated historic buildings, a district no one wanted to drive through. As the new century dawned, however, so did a new vision for this small Kentucky city on the banks of the Ohio River.

Paducah has reinvented itself as a “creative community.” Using the arts as a revitalization strategy by offering lucrative financial incentives, Paducah has attracted more than 70 artists who've restored homes and opened galleries in LowerTown, the downtown's residential neighborhood. Meanwhile, the downtown itself has gained 234 new businesses and 1,000 new jobs.

PADUCAH'S RENAISSANCE

When Paducah Main Street was born in 1989, nothing had been done in the downtown area for more than 40 years. The district was both dirty and dangerous, with the highest vacancy rate and, worse, the highest crime rate in the region. Yet a strong core of neighborhood residents and downtown property owners believed the downtown could be an economically viable part of the city. While downtown buildings had fallen into disrepair because of absentee or negligent landlords, they were still standing! The city's earlier disinterest meant that most of downtown's historic buildings had survived the “tear it down and build a mall” mentality of the 1960s and '70s.

Paducah Main Street focused on developing and marketing the downtown as a whole. To retain and build a compatible business mix, the Main Street program created a targeted recruitment program and a strong package of incentives, many centered on the downtown's historic real estate. City-owned historic buildings can be purchased for as little as $1 by qualifying investors; and a façade loan program funded by the city and administered by Paducah Main Street encourages property owners to restore their buildings to their original design. Funds are awarded on a matching basis at 0 percent interest for five years and must be used to restore the façade of a historic property in the delineated historic zone.

Targeted incentives are used to recruit desirable businesses downtown. When Hooper's, a local sporting goods retailer, outgrew its store, Paducah Main Street set out to bring the business downtown. Hooper's needed a large retail space and the downtown needed an anchor store to attract shoppers to the area. Of the buildings offered, Hooper's settled on a 12,000-square-foot building, with a half-block historic façade. The building needed a complete rehab, but with the right incentives, Hooper's owners were up for the challenge. Incentives included the building conveyer, façade loans, a partially forgivable upgrade loan, matching marketing funds, and marketing initiatives for the retailer.

While recruiting new businesses is essential to a thriving downtown, maintaining existing businesses is equally vital. With that in mind, Paducah Main Street launched a membership-participation incentive program in which members can offer their services at a discount to other members and to new businesses that contribute to the success of the downtown. Two Main Street members teamed up with Paducah Main Street for this initiative: Porter Paints gives other members a 30 percent discount on purchases, while Hannan Supply offers 50 percent discounts on electrical equipment.

Along with preserving downtown's historic buildings, Paducah Main Street knew that it needed to create an inviting atmosphere for shoppers, workers, residents, and visitors. To this end, work started on developing attractive walks, seasonal landscaping, alluring window displays, and public art. With no available funding, Paducah Main Street turned to private sources and sponsorships as well as innovative fund-raising initiatives to finance these projects.

One of the organization's most successful fund raisers was the “Buy-a-Brick” program. Areas of sidewalk were designated as commemorative walks. Nearly 600 people bought bricks, raising enough money to pave four city blocks with wide brick sidewalks and install garden areas. The sidewalk gardens are maintained by local garden clubs and private citizens, as are most of the commemorative park benches and public art sculptures in the district.

NEW LIFE FOR LOWER TOWN

Launched in August 2000, Paducah's “Artist Relocation Program” has brought new life to LowerTown, attracting artists to live and work in the beautiful Victorian homes that line the streets of what was once the city's most affluent neighborhood. Many of the homes have been completely renovated, new infill construction has taken place, and several galleries have opened, dramatically boosting the city's quality of life.
The narrowing of Nine Mile Road and the addition of new streetscape amenities have improved pedestrian safety and brought new life to downtown Ferndale as shoppers, residents, and visitors enjoy strolling through the district.

Ten years ago, before the Ferndale Downtown Development Authority (DDA) got started, this Detroit suburb grappled with a high vacancy rate and hearing people laugh at the “Fashionable Ferndale” moniker. These days, no one is laughing and downtown Ferndale is living by the four Fs by being friendly, fabulous, funky, and fashionable. In every respect, the district is hitting the mark – even the organization’s business cards are cool.

A core group of activists weren’t quite ready to call it quits. They formed the Downtown Development Authority in 1980 and change began to skyrocket after its acceptance into Main Street Oakland County in 2001. Creative Class-types were lured to affordable Ferndale and began to reveal the beautiful 1920s architecture hiding underneath the grit and vinyl siding. The narrowing of Nine Mile Road and new streetscape amenities improved pedestrian safety and gave the downtown a fresh, vibrant look. Entrepreneurs caught wind of this activity and enthusiastically contributed to plummeting vacancy rates that fell from 30 to 6 percent!

Putting a quirky twist on events helped to win over the general public. The Ferndale DDA is responsible for the “Pimp Your Pot” beautification contest, the region’s largest LGBT festival, dog-friendly shopping events, and the new “Do-It-Yourself” Street Festival.

The community’s commitment to sustainability makes it a model that leaves others green with envy. Downtown bike racks, more street trees, public recycling containers, and a Green Week awareness promotion and plans for LED street lights, rainwater collection, and public transit reflect Ferndale’s forward thinking.

Not to let a national recession slow it down, Ferndale has seen more than $23 million in reinvestment, and the opening of 40+ new businesses in the last year and a half. Bubbling up from the array of businesses and events and the diverse and creative community, as locals put it, there’s always something happening on “The Nine.”

“National Quilt Museum alone attracts 5,000 visitors to its workshops, encouraging creative visitor experiences and bringing sales revenue to small businesses in the area. Equally important, new institutions such as the Paducah School of the Arts, located in a rehabbed downtown building, are providing new opportunities for residents and enhancing the community’s image as a strong arts destination.

Riverfront development, funded in part by a Preserve America grant, and major festivals, like the LowerTown Art and Music Festival, Barbeque on the River, and the Paducah Summer Festival, are attracting more visitors and more investment as Paducah’s downtown continues its journey from the crime-ridden place you avoid to the historically hip place you want to be.
SUPPORTING BUSINESSES

The successes of the Ferndale DDA have trickled down to its local partners, too. For example, the Ferndale Chamber of Commerce reports a 12.5 percent growth. “We have attracted businesses from outside of Ferndale to join our Chamber because they want to be part of a friendly, energetic, and creative community,” says Jennifer Roosenberg, the Chamber’s executive director. “Also, as a licensed real estate broker, I can attest that despite Michigan’s troubling economy, Ferndale’s real estate values have decreased less than surrounding areas due to its desirable downtown.”

The stats and stories supporting the notion that Ferndale is a hot market continue to roll in. From 2007 to 2008, the city saw a 299 percent increase of private and public development, which substantially feeds a growing tax base for Oakland County. Ferndale DDA has been working hard to keep downtown booming. It not only has brought in $1 million in grants for revitalization projects, but it convinced the owner of Rosie O’Grady’s to expand its business downtown and to invest more than $3 million to redevelop a building for its new, bigger location. Now that’s smart growth.

The president of Rosie’s, Brian Kramer, points out that the DDA was integral in site selection, dealing with zoning issues, and greening the rehab project. The DDA reimbursed the owner $15,000 for demonstrating how a sensitive restoration project could be done with a 3,000-square foot addition.

Thankful for such a great experience, Kramer says he is looking forward to his second Ferndale restaurant project – Cantina Diablo’s. “Our businesses have benefitted from the revitalization of downtown Ferndale by increased foot traffic and positive press – Ferndale is always in the newspaper for something positive.”

The FerndaleFirst shop local campaign rewards customers with unique and local finds. The pocket-sized Downtown Business Guide is fun to flip through to see the wide variety of what’s in town. You can find an interesting community organization to join, a vintage clothing shop to browse, a bar to sip a martini, and dozens of places to put on your errands list. A fold-out map outlines the districts and even points out parking.

To foster the entrepreneurial spirit, the DDA created an entrepreneurs network and provides consultations for start ups with the Chamber. The DDA connects landlords with successful tenants and assists new business owners to write solid business plans before they sign a lease. The group has influenced reduced permit fees, worked with the city to craft policies that better serve business owners’ needs for events hosted downtown, and improved sidewalk café and sandwich board ordinances – anything that can make being a business owner in Ferndale easier.

LOOKING GOOD

The downtown’s park-and-walk design makes it easy to stroll and discover everything the district has to offer. Pedestrian-oriented amenities include widened crosswalks, crosswalk timers, and beautification elements. Interpretive signage helps tell the story.

Ferndale by the Numbers

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Website: http://www.downtownferndale.com/
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/pages/Downtown-Ferndale/80390601237?ref=nf
Twitter: ferndaledda

Street life in downtown Ferndale is vibrant and active. Kids love this rocking horse located outside a locally owned vintage shop.
of the area’s history, and a new Ferndale Heritage Tourism Wayfinding program will bring consistent and exciting branded signage to the district.

Designing a vibrant district not only improves the quality of life for local people; it also serves to catch the eye of new business owners. In fact, one law firm was looking for an affordable place to open its firm that was not just walkable, but filled with dining, shopping, and banking amenities. Foley & Mansfield found the historic 1915 K-12 Ferndale school and transformed it into an office space where employees enjoy coming to work. Ferndale not only benefitted from saving a historic building, but it gained a charitable partner that jumped right into supporting the downtown and its events. Another way Foley & Mansfield has proven to be an excellent partner and neighbor is when it transferred ownership of a rundown alleyway to the city. Together with the DDA, the city nabbed a Michigan grant and transformed the eyesore into a pedestrian area lined with brick pavers, planters, trees, and alfresco dining spots.

The DDA works tirelessly to help local businesses succeed and to create new opportunities for investors. For example, the DDA’s help in getting brownfield status and the Michigan Single Business Tax Credit made the Lofts on 9 development possible. The $9 million project has brought stylish lofts and ground-floor retail to the community.

**NO ONE LEFT BEHIND**

“I am in love with Ferndale!” says Jacki Smith, partner of the Candle Wick Shop. She points out that every week she meets new customers who moved to the area because of the open and supportive attitude of the community. “I am surrounded with a unique diversity that I have found nowhere else in Michigan, or even the country,” she says. “The acceptance of all races, religions, and sexual orientation is the rule and not the exception in Ferndale.”

Cristina Sheppard-Decius, the executive director for Ferndale DDA, wrote an online article for mainstreet.org about her community’s inclusiveness and pointed out that there is a high percentage of LGBT-owned businesses, but that only a small percentage of the downtown’s 400 businesses cater specifically to that community. And other businesses that generally appeal to the mass market embrace the diversity and produce events specifically for their LGBT clientele. But regardless, she says that all businesses welcome everyone into their establishments and treat them with respect.

Sheppard-Decius explains that one of the reasons why her community is credited for being particularly LGBT friendly is because members of that community are involved at every level of community activism. “This is where I see the difference between communities that are gay-friendly and those like Ferndale that show gay pride 365 days a year,” she writes. “We have shed our shells, blinders, and labels so we can open our hearts and minds to the endless possibilities of working as a single, harmonious community.”

The Ferndale DDA doesn’t just support local businesses. It also helps local nonprofits. At many events and festivals, nonprofits can showcase themselves for free, and at other events, they get the spotlight. The annual crafts show pitted nonprofit against nonprofit in the Warm-hearted Cookie Challenge that placed organizations inside shops and cafes as they competed to sell the most home-baked cookies. From inclusion to an exciting nightlife, Ferndale is a model for others to follow—a sentiment with which the Michigan Governor concurs. “Downtown Ferndale is a beacon of hope in this challenging economy and … a prime example for cities across Michigan desiring to revitalize their own downtowns.”

**Governor Jennifer Granholm**

**In 2008, the Do-It-Yourself Street Fair debuted, attracting huge crowds who came to hear local music, sample micro-brews, and buy local art.**
A vibrant part of downtown Columbus’s great nightlife, Huck’s Place is a family restaurant that opened in 2008 in this beautifully renovated JC Penney building.

**DOWNTOWN AND “THE LIVIN’ IS EASY”**

So easy in fact that Columbus, Mississippi, leads the state in downtown housing with nearly 150 upper-floor apartments. Quaint lofts and luxurious penthouses have replaced empty attics; and once-boarded-up windows now reflect a downtown brimming with activity. Much of the credit goes to Main Street Columbus, which helped redefine a tired, declining district through ordinances that allow mixed uses and upper-story living.

**PRESERVING A SENSE OF PLACE**

Graced with distinctive historic architecture ranging from the 1830s to the early 1900s, Columbus has also embraced a strong preservation ethic. In 1985, when the program started, vacant storefronts abounded and many historic buildings faced demolition. Over the past two decades, Main Street Columbus has worked with property owners and government officials to revise city ordinances, develop design guidelines, and encourage the use of historic tax incentives. Today, 98 of the commercial district’s buildings have been rehabbed, many through the use of the federal historic tax credit.

The first rehabilitation projects downtown involved plans for ground-floor retail, with apartments above. Working with Main Street Columbus, the owners of the buildings got city ordinances changed to allow upper-floor housing, which has become a major downtown attraction.

“Occupancy in downtown apartments is high,” says Ruth Taylor Berry, a downtown building owner. “Vacancies don’t last long. People enjoy living downtown now because there is a feeling of excitement and anticipation of more good things to come. Main Street Columbus has been and continues to be the driving impetus that propels these successes.”

To showcase building improvements, Main Street Columbus worked with private citizens and city and county officials to restore the town’s historic clock and install historic street and entrance signs. New benches, light poles, and banners have also added to downtown’s ambience. Main Street’s design committee continues to play an active role by developing a downtown beautification plan that includes seasonal plantings, watering systems, tree plantings, and park and recreational development.

Property owners have also made a strong commitment to help downtown look its best. When a small alley needed to be improved due to construction of a parking lot after a fire destroyed several downtown buildings, property owners stepped in to help. They donated their alley property to the city, which made a walkway with landscaping and new lighting. The telephone company placed its lines underground and the gas company replaced its main line as well. The result created a welcoming environment for pedestrians as well as enhancing downtown’s appearance.

Thanks to the strong work and partnerships of the Main Street program, downtown remains the central gathering place for the community. All city and county municipal buildings are located downtown; the local television station relocated to the district and renovated an old department store; and the Mississippi University for Women is a cornerstone of the downtown.

**A SURGING ECONOMY**

By creating a methodical plan to keep all governmental offices downtown, Main Street Columbus has been successful in recruiting law firms, investment companies, and other businesses that work closely with the city and county. Through Main Street Columbus’s strong partnerships with the city and Lowndes County, the downtown has also benefited from the area’s increased local industrial development.

To retain current businesses and entice potential entrepreneurs, Main Street Columbus has compiled a building inventory, published a shopping and dining guide, created numerous retail promotions, and conducted parking and traffic timing studies. The organization has also developed a strong relationship with absentee property owners, resulting in a low inventory of such properties.
The Mississippi Coffeehouse, conveniently located on Main Street, is a community gathering place as well as a stop for hundreds of Columbus residents and workers every morning.

Through customer and business surveys, Main Street Columbus has built a strong case for recruitment and retention of retail businesses. The downtown has successfully retained many downtown restaurants and, over the past two years, has seen nearly $7 million invested in downtown properties, with 60 other activities that have attracted visitors to Columbus for the past 14 years and earned the city recognition from the Southeast Tourism Society for the last decade. More than an award-winning entertainment venue, the Market Street Festival has raised more than $500,000 for revitalization projects.

“In today’s world where sustainability, renewal, and reduction of sprawl are tossed around as concepts, Main Street Columbus is transforming these ideas into reality.”

Todd Gale, Manager, Columbus Light and Water

To keep people coming downtown all year round, Columbus also offers Noon Tunes, Afternoon Tunes, a Sounds of Summer Concert series, a Wassail Fest, and seasonal downtown open houses, as well as a New Year’s Eve Block Party. And for food lovers, there’s the six-month-long Mississippi Certified Farmer’s Market, located in a renovated historic facility with more than 50 vendors selling the freshest local produce.

This full calendar of events is also helping boost downtown business. “During these events, we always have a packed house,” says restaurant owner John Bean, “They bring in new customers for us and increase our repeat business…. Columbus Main Street is known as a destination; therefore, our restaurant is known as a destination.”

The new two-and-a-half-mile Riverwalk invites residents and visitors to stroll from downtown to the Tombigbee River and the National Register-listed Old Columbus Bridge, which originally pivoted to permit steamboats to pass through. The area also features a riverside park with staging for outdoor events, and a proposed soccer complex and nature parks are in the works.

All this and more keeps Columbians involved, active, and spending their money in their hometown. But downtown Columbus is more than just a commercial district. It’s more than just a neighborhood. It’s a community and a “shining star” among Mississippi Main Streets.

A SHINING SOUTHERN STAR

Named a 2008 Dozen Distinctive Destination by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, this shining Southern city annually welcomes more than 40,000 visitors to its award-winning Market Street Festival, which spreads over 12 city blocks and has more than 400 volunteers and 70 local sponsors.

The two-day festival welcomes talents from all over the country, including more than 250 arts, crafts, and food vendors; six entertainment stages; 20 musical acts; and more than

new investors continuing to seek opportunities in the district.

Looking back two decades, the change in downtown’s economy has been remarkable: “In the 1980s, you couldn’t give away a downtown building,” says real estate professional and Main Street Board President Brad Belue. “Today, there are only a few remaining and investors are willing to pay top dollar for them.”

:: Columbus by the Numbers ::

| Population | 25,944 |
| Date revitalization program started | 1985 |
| Net number of new jobs | 827 |
| Net number of new businesses | 175 |
| Number of building rehabilitations | 98 |
| Number of new buildings | 2 |
| Vacancy rate when the program began | 21% |
| Vacancy rate today | 11% |
| Dollar amount of public investment | $6,671,347 |
| Dollar amount of private investment | $31,782,273 |

Website: http://www.columbusmainstreet.com
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/MarketStreetFestival

“In today’s world where sustainability, renewal, and reduction of sprawl are tossed around as concepts, Main Street Columbus is transforming these ideas into reality.”

Todd Gale, Manager, Columbus Light and Water
Walk down the streets of downtown Lee’s Summit and you’ll see the power of 20 years of Main Street in action.

The strength of this Missouri town’s Main Street program comes from its partnerships. As Lee’s Summit grew from a sleepy town to a booming suburban metropolis of nearly 100,000, city officials, business owners, and residents struggled to strike a balance between the “old” and the “new.”

**CITY AT A CROSSROADS**

When Downtown Lee’s Summit Main Street was formed in 1989, 19 buildings were vacant and many businesses were closing up shop. Sprawl and the dazzle of new strip centers tarnished downtown’s appeal as investors turned away from declining properties and buildings covered with metal façades. Downtown was truly at a crossroads.

Committed to saving their downtown, stakeholders went to the city with a common voice and suggested they team up to develop a revitalization plan. The Vision of the Heart master plan was born, and Downtown Lee’s Summit Main Street (DLSMS) was formed.

Main Street immediately forged a strong partnership with the city and rallied support for downtown improvements.

Completed in 1993, the Vision of the Heart master plan provides a comprehensive strategy for downtown economic growth, with guidelines for land use and business recruitment and retention. Using the master plan as a guide, the city offers economic incentives to encourage adaptive re-use and redevelopment of underutilized property and to achieve the desired business mix.

The city issues Requests for Proposals on sites deemed underutilized. Proposals are accepted based on how well they adhere to the master plan and follow preservation principles. DLSMS works closely with the city to encourage appropriate projects and educate investors about historic tax credits and other available incentives.

DLSMS and downtown merchants also rallied support for a citywide bond issue to fund a new streetscape. Passed with an overwhelming 68 percent approval, the $13.5 million project replaced antiquated utilities and added wider sidewalks, trees, and pedestrian street lighting. The city reinforced this commitment by building a new $18 million City Hall and public parking garage. Even during construction, excitement over the new public investment spurred private spending as 20 new businesses opened amidst the jackhammers and bulldozers.

Thanks to the strong teamwork between the city and DLSMS, the downtown currently enjoys an 87 percent occupancy rate, while sales tax revenue has risen nearly 600 percent over the past 10 years. Public and private investment is at an all-time high, with $44.8 million in public and $20.6 million in private investment since 1989. With an estimated 450,000 square feet of commercial space, the downtown core now serves as the city’s government, specialty retail, and religious center.

Despite aggressive commercial development on the outskirts of town, the downtown’s real estate market remains healthy, with high occupancy levels and escalating property values.

“Downtown is a reflection of how a community sees itself,” says James A. Devine, president of the Lee’s Summit Economic Development Council. “One of my roles is to bring investment into Lee’s Summit. A thriving downtown district like the one we enjoy is an important selling point in my recruitment tool box.”

**DIGGIN.IT DOWNTOWN**

“Downtown Lee’s Summit Main Street transforms challenges into opportunities,” says DLSMS Board Member Drayton W. Riley.

Nothing illustrates that more than Main Street program’s activities during the 18-month streetscape construction. Through a comprehensive online, advertising, and image campaign, along with weekly merchants meetings, Downtown Lee’s Summit Main Street’s “diggin. it” initiative kept the public and the business community informed about the streetscape’s progress.

DLSMS also teamed up with the Lee’s Summit Arts Council to create “Art Detour,” a series of temporary public art installations to
draw people downtown during the streetscape construction. Postcards and opening ceremonies invited townsfolk to come downtown and view each new piece. The partnership between the arts council and DLSMS eventually led to the downtown’s first permanent public art sculpture, Kids at Heart, designed by renowned sculptor Kwan Wu.

Another construction-related project, “DUMPsters in Bloom,” again illustrates the ability of DLSMS to build strong, productive partnerships. The Main Street organization joined forces with the Beautification Commission and high school art students to beautify downtown alleyways and make them more appealing passageways during the streetscape construction. Downtown merchants, the city, the waste disposal company, and local teens embraced the idea. With artistic direction from a downtown merchant and artist, the students designed floral themes and then painted them on the dumpsters. To this day, beautiful floral-painted dumpsters adorn the downtown’s alleyways!

**“IT ALL STARTS HERE”**

With all the exciting changes happening downtown, DLSMS realized it needed to promote its new image with a fresh, high-energy marketing campaign.

“It All Starts Here” was developed as a simple yet compelling brand that could be easily incorporated into all marketing materials and events. The image was designed as a cutting-edge visual that reflects a new era and a new attitude downtown.

Embracing the image, the DLSMS Promotion Committee has integrated the brand into all of its activities, from planning new events such as a Chocolate Crawl to encourage Valentine’s Day shopping to revamping an old festival to reflect the new downtown. All marketing materials have been overhauled and new channels such as Facebook and Twitter deliver Downtown Lee’s Summit’s message: “You can go shopping anywhere but for unique shopping ‘It All Starts Here.’”

All DLSMS events are promoted and supported by the Chamber of Commerce, which also works with Main Street to provide hospitality training. The Parks Department assists with summer concerts and the beautification of downtown green spaces, and a local foundation provided a grant to launch a WiFi program in the downtown core. DLSMS also partners with nearby schools to offer students part-time jobs and internships.

“While it has not been an easy or quick journey, the original vision of the DLSMS organizers has become a reality. It’s hard to remember the once-depressed area we had 20 years ago as the downtown district is now a premier destination.”

Lee’s Summit businessman Shane Ledford

**FAIRMONT, west virginia**

Fairmont, West Virginia, dubbed “The Friendly City,” offers miles of hiking trails, museums, and a quaint riverside downtown. Its restored 1920s “Million Dollar” High Level Bridge, which is listed in the National Register, today serves as a bold monumental gateway representing the fortitude of local residents.

Fairmont has a history deeply rooted in various industries, from coal and oil to glass and brick. Its resources are reflected in its unique, decorative architectural design. The city thrived during the mid-1800s through 1950 but then fell onto hard times.

When Main Street Fairmont got its start in 1993, the community was reeling from a high unemployment rate, a mass exodus of major employers, and a 15 percent drop in population. The deteriorating condition of the local economy and infrastructure eventually led to the closure of the historic bridge, which effectively cut off the east and west sides of the city.
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The downtown’s revitalization story revolves around making connections. One of the most prominent connections is the reuniting of the east and west sides of the city. Program volunteers led a campaign that cinched the bridge’s $24 million rehabilitation. Local business owner Karen Gribben says they took the fight all the way to Washington, D.C., and it was worth it because “it served as a healing link between our severed downtown.” This structure, one of the earliest reinforced-concrete arch bridges, now serves as a powerful gateway into the downtown.

To tackle the southside community, the Economic Restructuring Committee received year-long community development and revitalization training thanks to participation in a new program of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh (FHLB-Pittsburgh). Volunteers began documenting properties and taking on a demonstration site.

The owner of 205 Fairmont Avenue gave a percentage of the building to Main Street Fairmont, and the group embarked on a rehabilitation that showcased the possibilities of leveraging grants and tax credits. A grant from the State Historic Preservation Office provided funds to install a new roof on the building, as well as to fund rehabilitation work on two other historic buildings and add preservation easements into deed restrictions. The Main Street organization helped find a tenant for the new building, bringing an arts center to Fairmont. Additional initiatives with the FHLB-Pittsburgh include a $600,000 project to create affordable housing on the upper floors of historic buildings.

This FHLB-Pittsburgh project sparked a partnership with the Fairmont Community Development Partnership (FCDP) and the formation of a new umbrella group dedicated to promoting Fairmont Southside. The reinvigorated Southside area, together with a downtown-wide, color-coded wayfinding system, will create an effective and attractive community gateway. The gateway connector will welcome residents and newcomers and point them to the different neighborhoods in the downtown area. Transportation Enhancement grant money paid for the second phase of the downtown’s streetscaping project, adding brick pavers and ADA ramps.

“The FCDP recently purchased the historic YMCA building to protect it from unscrupulous developers. We are hoping to restore the early 20th century building to its previous splendor,” says Robert Gribben, FCDP’s executive director. “Main Street Fairmont and FCDP worked together to create a report on this building – bringing together information about the historic, architectural, and development potential of the building. The report was also used for a successful grant application to the SHPO office that Main Street Fairmont volunteers wrote on our behalf.”

Since Main Street Fairmont was selected as one of the “Main Street in 3D” communities, it will be using Google SketchUp™ to create a 3D model of the interior and exterior of the building to help generate development interest.

Another important catalyst project is Veteran’s Square, which turned a series of abandoned structures into 64,000 square feet of retail and commercial space as well as public space that pays homage to the area’s veterans. The facility has brought the West Virginia Small Business Development Center and 100 jobs affiliated with the West Virginia High Tech Consortium to the downtown, as well as giving Fairmont State University a spot in the district.

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Downtown business and property owners are enjoying the many resources available to them through Main Street West Virginia. Leveraging West Virginia Main Street’s design services, downtown has seen 15 façade rehabilitations in the last five years and its façade and sign grant program has distributed $40,000 for improvements.

Partnerships with the Small Business Development Center, Fairmont State University, and the Chamber of Commerce create a variety of small business workshops on topics ranging from marketing to Gen Y customers to storefront window design. In working with the FHLB-Pittsburgh, the organization promotes the Banking on Business program, which helps small business owners acquire start up and expansion funds.

The organization’s commitment to the community has had a big impact in retaining local businesses. Louis Spatafore, the owner of Friendly Furniture Galleries, says that before the Main Street program started, “I had seriously considered relocating. The condition of downtown was dismal at best and the city had no positive vision for the future.” He saw that the organization was going to accomplish its goals and had the clear support of stakeholders.

The owner of the independent pharmacy and gift shop thanks Main Street Fairmont for keeping it competitive when two chain competitors located just outside downtown’s limits. “We were able to enhance our storefront with large display windows and signage, while keeping our historic building...
community efforts. Main Street Fairmont credits its partnership cultivation with increasing its operating budget by almost 100 percent in the last four years and maintaining a 2:3 public/private funding ratio.

By attending city council and county commission meetings, the Organization Committee members have solidified their relationship with the local government. These relationships have helped build a strong preservation ethic in the community. Since his first resource team visit, Main Street West Virginia’s Michael Gioulis points out that Fairmont now “has a concerned and active county commission that is taking a proactive role in preserving the significant county courthouse.” There have been many private rehabilitations, he adds, “that meet or exceed accepted historic preservation standards, including tax credit projects.”

Volunteers represent merchant concerns at Parking Authority meetings and work with the economic development departments of the city and county to attract investors and developers. To prepare volunteers to handle this important work, Main Street Fairmont has created a handbook describing the duties and expectations for board members and volunteers.

In an effort to connect the community to its Italian immigrant heritage, the program produces its annual Feast of Seven Fishes Festival, inspired by an Italian religious event. This Italian food and heritage festival will put Main Street Fairmont on the map when a cinematic version of a graphic novel that shares the name of the street fair is released later this year.

“When members of Main Street Fairmont’s board approached me about starting a December street festival inspired by the Feast, I was immediately enthusiastic,” says author Robert Tinnell. “What I was not prepared for, however, was just how successful the event would become. It is gratifying beyond words to see the festival’s healing effects on the downtown area as well as its reputation as a living embodiment of cultural preservation.”

This event has even attracted the attention of the Food Network. There’s a cooking school, homemade wine and Italian cookie-baking contests, music, dancing, fish, and even a religious mass. Attendance continues to bump up, with 7,000 visitors coming last year, and a retail promotion angle has shopkeepers reporting sales increases of 200 percent.

Main Street Fairmont also uses technology to embrace its heritage. Funded by a Preserve America grant, podcasts will capture oral histories and stories associated with the town’s coal mining past, the downtown, and the North Central West Virginia region. The organization wants to use its history not only to bring residents and visitors downtown but also to promote heritage tourism and collaborate with other historic preservation and revitalization-minded efforts in the region.

Today, the population is on the rise, businesses are back, and Fairmont’s optimism and pride has been restored. After 30 years of decline and 17 years of revitalization work, Fairmont’s population is growing again and the connections being made to and within the downtown are growing stronger every day.

compatible with the downtown,” says Jonathan Rider of Rider Pharmacy, which has been downtown since 1967. He adds that design assistance helped them solve rising damp problems with the building and also helped them improve its appearance with appropriate historic colors.

Main Street Fairmont’s partnership list runs long, as the organization understands collaboration is essential to its sustainability. The city offers financial support for the organization’s operating budget, the Convention and Visitors Bureau and regional media outlets provide free promotion, the public works department offers manpower, and a variety of area nonprofits provide volunteers and assistance with joint

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<td>Population</td>
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Website: http://www.mainstreetfairmont.org/
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/msairmont

Serenity Café is one of more than 80 new businesses that have opened in downtown Fairmont. It celebrated its one-year anniversary in August 2009.