

## PRESIDENT'S *Note*

Recently, my colleague Debra Wise recounted to me that when she started her career at the National Main Street Center in 1986, she was hesitant about trying to explain her work to friends and family. As she detailed the Center's efforts to save declining downtowns, she was often greeted with nervous laughter and puzzled looks. It's not an exaggeration to say that when Main Street was founded nearly 40 years ago, many regarded the Center's work to support downtowns to be outdated and well, just uncool. Why fight the tides of "progress" — malls, office parks and big boxes to save those decaying old town centers?'

Some four decades later, folks aren't laughing. Main Streets are enjoying a resurgence that few could have imagined when the Main Street America Network began its work. Today, people are voting with their feet, seeking out places that are distinct and rich in character, and filled with locally-owned retail and restaurants that provide unique experiences. In short, they're coming back home to Main Street.

Yet, our work is far from over—and in fact, it's even more important today than it was 40 years ago. Fundamental changes in the economy have reshaped communities, whether rural, urban, or everything in between. Main Streeters are now broadening their focus beyond the core essentials of renewing the symbolic heart of their community, preserving history, and creating an attractive place for local residents and visitors to shop. They are pivoting to concentrate on positioning their communities to be competitive in a fast-shifting economy.

In smaller towns, where long-standing manufacturing or other major local employers have often shuttered, it's the efforts of local Main Street directors — working hand in hand with civic leaders and the business community—who are at the vanguard of renewing stagnating local economies. In hot urban markets, where

many neighborhoods have been left behind and remain stymied after decades long disinvestment, it's local commercial districts leaders who are champions of neighborhood change that will create economic opportunity for local residents.

How do they do it? Whether working in a town of 1,000 or a city of 3 million, Main Street leaders are bound by the knowledge that local economic transformation happens by generating growth from within the community. In short, these Main Streeters are part of a long legacy of American Bootstrappers. Rather than waiting for the day when a large employer will decide to locate in their town and reverse their community's decline, these leaders are rolling up their sleeves and engaging with their neighbors to create opportunity together.

They focus on figuring out how they can best support existing businesses and help them grow over time. Always forward thinking, they look to the local community as a wealth of new entrepreneurial creativity to cultivate and develop. They help lower the barrier to entry for business starts-ups by offering training for new entrepreneurs, low-interest loans, and small grants. At the same time, they understand that a strong economic base is dependent upon a strong residential market to activate and sustain these places. This includes working along private and public partners that are committed to creating inclusive, accessible communities that provide residents with access to a range of jobs, education, businesses, and housing options.

All of us at the National Main Street Center are honored to work in support of this inspiring and dedicated group of local economic revitalization professionals.



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This year, we are embarking on a journey to better connect and support the creative and “can-do” spirit of the Main Street America Network. This spring, we will be introducing The Point, an online digital networking platform that will make it easier than ever for our nationwide network to engage and share resources with one another. Part knowledge center, part relationship hub, we hope you’ll find that The Point will not only help support you in the work you do every day, but strengthen the Network and movement as a whole.

Look for more details in the coming months. We’ll see you at The Point!



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## EDITOR'S *Note*

As I write this, I’m working from a cafe. It’s an independent café, owned by a 30-something female entrepreneur, located in a former silk mill that also happens to host weekly yoga sessions and feature local artists’ works for sale. It’s where I go to not only enjoy delicious food and coffee but to be around my neighbors and feel grounded in my community. This is a typical Main Street experience—one that I’m sure everyone reading this can relate to and it’s what we’ve all been working to protect for nearly four decades. Yet, what’s different is that innovative, small businesses like this are no longer the outlier or seen as a noble experiment. Local establishments that offer unique experiences are on the rise, competing successfully against large chains because that’s what people are demanding.

On the pages that follow, I invite you to explore and celebrate the power of small — how small businesses, small-scale development, and small steps are leading to big things. As Becky McCray discusses in her article “The Future of Retail” (page 38), small business is poised to win big in the new economy as consumer preferences shift away from large impersonal, big-box retail. In “Seeing Small” (page 48), Jim Heid and

Samantha Beckerman explain why small-scale development is even gaining the attention of the historically unyielding finance and real estate industries, who traditionally saw this type of development as a credit risk. Yet, there are still very real barriers and threats that Main Street is up against. It is our responsibility to keep the momentum moving forward by making our voices heard and honing our skills needed to navigate the complex role of a Main Street leader. Check out “Advocacy in Motion” by Renee Kuhlman and “Leading Main Street” by Norma Ramirez de Miess, on how to do just that.

But first, please join me in celebrating all the work that we have accomplished together over the past year. From our impressive reinvestment statistics (page 8), to the Partners in Preservation: Main Streets campaign (page 12), to the launch of UrbanMain (page 28), it’s been quite a year.



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