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## THE MAIN STREET REFRESH: LESSONS LEARNED



**KNIGHT  
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**National Trust for  
Historic Preservation®**

**Main Street America™ has been helping to revitalize older and historic commercial districts since the late 1970s.** Today, it is a movement consisting of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development.

Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

*The Main Street Approach: A Guide to Comprehensive Commercial District Transformation* was co-written with Kennedy Smith and Josh Bloom of Community Land Use + Economics Group.

This guide was shaped by input from the National Main Street Center (NMSC) board-appointed Four Point Refresh Task Force. The Task Force was led by Main Street veteran and NMSC Board Member Mary Thompson.

#### **FOUR POINT REFRESH TASK FORCE**

**MARY THOMPSON** Task Force Chair, Member of NMSC Board of Directors

**BARBARA SIDWAY** Founding NMSC Board of Directors Chair

**JANE JENKINS** Downtown Oklahoma City, Inc.

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The Main Street Approach has been a successful model for commercial district revitalization since its creation as an initiative of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the late 1970s. Since that time, thousands of community-based organizations, utilizing the Main Street Approach as a roadmap, have transformed their communities by focusing comprehensively on the health and vitality of their downtowns or commercial districts. At a time when many had given up on downtown, the Main Street program helped communities leverage their existing assets, rally volunteers, and revive flagging economies.



While the Main Street Approach has proven itself to be effective in cities and towns of all sizes since that time, the community development field has changed dramatically over the course of the past four decades. In many ways, new trends in planning, development, and preservation build off principles that those in the Main Street network have long understood: that revitalization must be inclusive and representative of the community, that a place's distinctive characteristics and older and historic buildings are its greatest assets, and that fostering a strong local business environment creates enormous dividends for the entire community.

In order to ensure the continued success of the Main Street model in revitalizing older and historic business districts, the National Main Street Center's Board of Directors appointed a Four Point Refresh Task Force to oversee the renewal of the Center's signature revitalization framework. The Task Force was led by Main Street veteran and NMSC Board Member Mary Thompson and worked with community revitalization experts Kennedy Smith and Josh Bloom of the Community Land Use and Economics (CLUE) Group and in partnership with the staff from the National Main Street Center and network of Main Street America Coordinating Programs to update the Four Point Approach.

**The new Main Street paradigm, unveiled in "beta" form in 2015, brings important modifications to the original Main Street Approach:**

- /// The Four Points**—Design, Organization, Promotion, and Economic Vitality (formerly Economic Restructuring)—remain central to the Main Street approach, but the framework is more flexible, allowing for a variety of organizational models depending on what delivers the best results.
- /// Though still preservation-based, the work needs to be driven by a solid understanding of local and regional market dynamics.**
- /// Community engagement is front and center.** The exercise of sustained and inclusive outreach to residents, stakeholders, and partner organizations to develop a vision for the downtown district is fundamental to a revitalization effort's long-term success.
- /// The direction of a Main Street program is guided by Transformation Strategies**—economically-supportable statements around which the program develops its action plans. Transformation Strategies incrementally create positive change in a district's economy, and are implemented through simultaneous activity across the Four Points.



A Transformation Strategy is a statement of economic direction that, over the course of several years, brings about positive, intentional change in a commercial district's economy. Some Transformation Strategies focus on creating or expanding a specific type of business (i.e. Outdoor Recreation, Arts, Entertainment, etc.), while others focus on better meeting the needs of certain types of customers or other groups (College Students, District Workers and Residents, Families, etc.)



To test and learn from the new model, the Center received a grant and support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and invited applications from Knight-eligible cities that wished to serve as pilots in a year-long demonstration project. Seven pilot sites were selected to participate:

**Detroit, MI:** Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood (city pop. 677,000)

**Biloxi, MS:** Downtown (city pop. 45,000)

**Gary, IN:** Downtown (city pop. 77,000)

**Lexington, KY:** North Limestone neighborhood (city/county pop. 314,000)

**Miami, FL:** Little Haiti neighborhood (city pop. 440,000)

**Milledgeville, GA:** Downtown (city pop. 19,000)

**Philadelphia, PA:** Tacony neighborhood (city pop. 1.6 million)

Shortly after the Knight pilots were selected, the 712 Initiative in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Michigan Main Street, a program of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, and Colorado Main Street, a program of the state's Department of Local Affairs, provided funding to include additional cities in the pilot:

**Council Bluffs, IA** (city pop. 61,060)

**Saline, MI** (city pop. 9,000)

**Grand Haven, MI** (city pop. 10,900)

**Boyne City, MI** (city pop. 3,700)

**Brush, CO** (city pop. 5,500)

**Lake City, CO** (city pop. 408)

**Steamboat Springs, CO** (city pop. 12,000)

Three of the Knight-funded pilots—Biloxi, Milledgeville and Tacony, Philadelphia—had existing Main Street America programs in place. The other cities and districts were new to Main Street. (Detroit's Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood had some experience with the Main Street program in the past.) The three Colorado cities and three Michigan cities had active Main Street programs.

The NMSC, along with its consultant, the Community Land Use and Economics Group, worked with each of the pilots for approximately a year, which included two site visits and monthly coaching calls. Early learnings from the Knight funded pilots were incorporated into the engagements in Colorado, Michigan, and Council Bluffs and thus timing and frequency of interactions varied.



## Here's what we learned:

### Changes to the Main Street Approach were more intuitive for new (or non-Main Street) revitalization programs

Non-Main Street organizations readily understood the Transformation Strategy approach. It made sense to them. For example, the North Limestone Community Development Corporation (NoLi) in Lexington, which had previously been largely focused on housing development, intuitively incorporated Transformation Strategies into their organization-wide work plans and used the approach to broaden the scope of NoLi's work. Some existing Main Street America programs found it hard to break from a model they knew well—Four Points embedded in four committees—and think instead about aligning the work around a strategy.



LEXINGTON, KY. CREDIT: KATHY LAPLANTE

## NORTH LIMESTONE TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY: CONVENIENCE GOODS & SERVICES FOR RESIDENTS

Create a business district where local residents can purchase goods and services for day-to-day needs.

### ECONOMIC VITALITY

#### Current activities:

1. Interviews with neighborhood businesses regarding how to grow
2. Night Market—especially business spin-offs to become bricks & mortar in neighborhood.
3. Establishing market in the Greyhound Building—e.g., multi-tenant public market
4. Customer/resident surveys (400 people) regarding wants/needs

#### Potential activities:

1. Develop tools/program to help Night Market vendors transition to permanent store
2. Business development pipeline: e.g., Assist cottage/home-based business to Greyhound Building market

### DESIGN

#### Current activities:

1. Small-scale live-work housing
2. Rehab of properties for commercial use (food; Broomwagon/cafes; bookstore)—primarily market-driven.
3. Clean-up programs
4. Stormwater remediation
5. New sidewalks
6. "Walk Your City" wayfinding
7. Planting street trees
8. Interior store design services offered to businesses (CDC staff)

#### Potential activities:

1. Facade improvement incentives
2. Two-way street conversion
3. Pedestrian access at intersections
4. Improved wayfinding

### PROMOTION

#### Current activities:

1. Night Market
2. Neighborhood business map
3. Branding (e.g., NoLi logo stickers)
4. Individual businesses are doing their own events/marketing

#### Potential activities:

1. Update business map
2. Promote businesses in the neighborhood in a more coordinated way
3. Better promotion of neighborhood businesses to neighborhood residents (E.g., work with businesses to offer specific resident-oriented promotions)

### ORGANIZATION

#### Current activities:

1. Ad hoc meetings with local business owners
2. Newsletter (CDC)

#### Potential activities and needs:

1. Additional staff person for economic development and business coordination
2. Re-activate neighborhood business association

A sample transformation strategy-based work plan from Lexington, Ky.

### **It took some repetition. It took some repetition.**

It usually took two or three explanations of the new model—in meetings and/or coaching calls—for local leaders to “get” the Transformation Strategy approach. In the process, we learned better ways of teaching it. For most organizations, the concept of aligning all (or most) programs and tactics around a strategy was new and a bit foreign. There were occasional misfires: for example, confusing some recurring, administrative, or organizational activities with a Transformation Strategy. We found that understanding increased over time, especially in grasping how the Transformation Strategies should guide work throughout the organization, regardless of committee structure.

### **Strategies help you say “No.”**

Several executive directors reported that, after adopting Transformation Strategies, they found it easier to say “No” to new ideas or projects that might happen come across their desks. The Transformation Strategies helped them stay focused and allowed them to give a rational reason for passing over unrelated suggestions. We worked with all the pilots to hone their work plans and eliminate activities that did not advance their Transformation Strategies. It also made it easier to gradually stop doing things that were no longer working or were off-strategy, particularly time intensive promotional events.

### **Differentiate, where possible.**

To streamline the process of choosing Transformation Strategies, we developed “Catalyst Strategies”—or, ready-made Transformation Strategies. We found that many communities gravitated to two Catalyst Strategies, “Convenience Goods and Services” and “District Workers and Residents.” These strategies hold appeal because they represent many of the day-to-day needs that residents and workers like to see. Yet not every downtown or commercial district can thrive by focusing on convenience-based shopping. So in several cases, we worked with the pilot cities to articulate a more specific or differentiated strategy.



### **Selecting Transformation Strategies relies on the combined inputs of market research and broad community engagement. Intuition and commonsense also go a long way!**

For each of the pilots, we presented a range of readily-available market information with the idea that the data would help to illuminate the most appropriate Transformation Strategies. We kept the data reports basic so any community could obtain similar information for a few hundred dollars or less. Reports included demographic updates and trends, sales leakages and surpluses, and a business inventory and cluster analysis.

We also distributed a public survey and a leadership survey in each city to identify challenges, opportunities, community attitudes, and impressions of the commercial district. We found that the survey was integral to the process: market data alone were not a sufficient basis for selecting Transformation Strategies.

The market and survey data was a useful starting point, but often did not point to a particular Transformation Strategy. The best Transformation Strategies usually emerged after tours and interviews with local leaders. For example, Tacony, Philadelphia, selected a “Family-Friendly, Family-Serving” strategy, even though demographic reports do not indicate the presence of large families. Two new charter schools are set to open in Tacony and local leaders hope the schools will attract families to move to the neighborhood. In addition, the Tacony neighborhood has a century-old deed restriction prohibiting alcohol, making the commercial district more viable for family-friendly restaurants and retail.

GRAND HAVEN, MI. CREDIT: MICHIGAN MUNICIPAL LEAGUE





## **Effective Selection of Transformation Strategies is aided by outside support.**

One of the learning objectives in working with the pilots was to develop a self-help framework so any community could gather its own data and select its own Transformation Strategies. In practice, we found the pilots required outside consultation and guidance over a period of several weeks or more. The outside perspective also helped to confirm that the agreed Transformation Strategy was, in fact, a *strategy* (and not, for example, a single project or an administrative function). NMSC will provide additional resource guides and webinars to assist in a self-help selection-process, but outside technical assistance directly from a Coordinating Program or the National Main Street Center may be needed for many programs.

## **Many of the pilot communities adopted customized Transformation Strategies—or *adapted* one or more of the Catalyst Strategies.**

We recognized that the set of ready-made Catalyst Strategies would not cover all situations, nor was that an appropriate approach for all downtowns and districts. They were intended to be examples that could fit a wide range of situations. Many communities have other unique circumstances, such as a particular demographic segment or trend, or a specialized business cluster not addressed by any of the Catalyst Strategies. This was the case in about half of the pilot cities, where we developed customized Transformation Strategies. Examples of customized strategies included a “Tech-based Entrepreneurship” strategy in Saline, Mich., and an “Agricultural Heritage” strategy in Brush, Colo. (a modification of an agriculture-related Catalyst Strategy).

WASHINGTON, D.C. CREDIT: SHAW MAIN STREETS



## **For most situations, one or two Transformation Strategies is the right number.**

More than three strategies is typically too many to manage and can distract a small organization from a focused approach. Some communities applied strategies geographically, as in Steamboat Springs, Colo., which is using its Transformation Strategies to grow three different areas (or nodes) of downtown: restaurants and entertainment, specialty retail, and health and wellness.

## **Board “buy-In” on Transformation Strategies is key.**

The board must buy into the idea of using the new Transformation Strategy approach and must understand the reasoning for selecting their strategies. Ideally, several options and rationales for Transformation Strategies should be presented to the board with a preferred or recommended option. The board is ultimately responsible for ensuring that budgets and work planning activities align with the Transformation Strategies. They also have the difficult job of either phasing out or passing along to other organizations those activities that don’t support the Transformation Strategies.

## **Staff “buy-In” is essential**

In most cases, staff leadership was instrumental in adopting the Transformation Strategy approach and in executing the transition to the new paradigm. In a few cases, staff did not fully commit or fully understand the new approach and the strategies did not take root.

## **The Transformation Strategy itself is not the external messaging.**

We met unexpected resistance to a few of the Transformation Strategies we recommended—even

where the Strategies were rationally good fits for the districts involved. Two examples were creating an “Elder-Friendly” district and establishing an “Agricultural Economy.” Both communities felt the names had negative connotations.



LEFT: MUSIC IN THE PARK. CREDIT: DOWNTOWN LEE'S SUMMIT

ABOVE: ARTWALK. CREDIT: MAIN STREET OTTUMWA

We learned two things from this experience: First, a community can use any name it wishes for a strategy—but don't use euphemisms or board members and collaborators won't understand the goal. Second, the Transformation Strategy—which must be understood within the organization and among its partners—may not be the desired public messaging. The Transformation Strategy is the road map; the messaging conveys how a district wants the public to view it.

**If the four committee structure works for your organization, stick with it. If you find they pose structural challenges, or do not lend themselves to Transformation Strategy implementation, other models proved effective during the pilot.**

We found existing Main Street programs to be apprehensive about reconfiguring their standing committees, especially if things were running smoothly. (Some of the pilot cities had existing committees, often organized around projects or around the Four Points.) If a committee structure was working, we generally advised the pilot communities to leave things in place.

In places where there were not existing committees or where a new work structure was needed, we worked with the pilots to reorganize their *board meetings* around their Transformation Strategies—regardless of which committee, staff or task force was working on a project. So, the central agenda item becomes the Transformation Strategy (or Strategies), and committees, staff or task forces/project teams report on progress or forward-looking plans. Over time, a board might choose

to rethink how the committees related to the Transformation Strategies. Reorganizing how information is presented and discussed at the board meetings can help everyone—staff and board—start to shift their perspective to the strategic level.

**Organizing by project is different from organizing by strategy.**

Some of the pilots with existing Main Street programs were already using a project-based committee structure. For example, a community with a large fall festival had established a dedicated festival committee, independent from other promotional programming. Ad hoc or standing committees can be useful for managing large projects—but employing Transformation Strategies means evaluating and modifying the fall festival so it supports the commercial district's target customer and the district's strategic economic direction. We found we had to emphasize that using project-based committees is different from using Transformation Strategies.

**Longtime Main Street communities have done all the easy stuff. Transformation Strategies offer a path for tackling the hard stuff.**

Most of the pilots with existing Main Street programs had already successfully executed façade improvements and a variety of beautification projects and special events. But they struggled with more complex challenges, like real estate development. With a clear economic rationale and direction, the Transformation Strategies are helping these communities tackle both



baseline, fundamental revitalization activities as well as complex problems. A clear, integrated strategy helps align funding and other resources, and allows programs to tackle problems that have resisted a traditional, ad hoc approach.

**The new approach often requires working more closely with other organizations.**

For some of the pilots, the Transformation Strategy approach, with its broad outlook, has meant forging new partnerships and collaborative systems. In Steamboat Springs, Colo., for example, the Main Street America program is working more closely with the local arts council to incorporate arts throughout downtown and integrate the arts across Steamboat's Transformation Strategies. In Lexington, the NoLi CDC is collaborating with the Blue Grass Community Foundation and a historic African American theater in new ways. NoLi started using Slack, a team-collaboration app, to make it easier for people in different organizations to work on Transformation Strategies together.

**Many pilot communities began to tweak or reimagine existing events or marketing programs to align with their strategies.**

We anticipated—and confirmed—that communities could keep much of what was on their existing work plans by making some strategy-driven adjustments. For example, Brush, Colo., is incorporating agriculture-related activities into their “Oktoberfest” event so it supports their “Agricultural Heritage” Transformation Strategy.



LAKE CITY, CO. CREDIT: COLORADO MAIN STREET

