



Photo Credit: Davies Associates Landscape Architects

Small Town Main Streets

Robert Galston

As places that are attractive to both people and investment, small town downtowns have a number of advantages over downtowns of larger cities



Photo Credit: Saskatchewan History Online

Figure 1: Main Streets remain an essential part of a town's economy and identity

The commercial main street is often a special place in a small town, and are a significant part of where a town derives its image from. Here are found many of the town's oldest and most significant buildings, and provides an appealing sense of place. Owing to their dense concentration of commercial floorspace, successful main streets are also strong economic performers for a town. Ones that are not healthy are lost opportunities for property tax-generated revenue, and for jobs and other economic benefits.

As places that are attractive to both people and investment, small town downtowns have a number of advantages over downtowns of larger cities: buildings are on a pedestrian scale - neither massive highrises or suburban sprawl; there is less segregation of uses; it is more accessible to all residents of town, and thus will often have more affinity between the downtown and the rest of town. Still, many small town main streets struggle against rural population decline, and the rise of big box centres in larger towns.

Four-Point Approach

The Four-Point Approach is widely cited as the key to revitalizing small city and town's downtowns. The four points are:

1. Organization - creating a group focused on improving main street
2. Design - facilitate good design practices to enhance the town's built environment
3. Economic Development - encouraging economic development through incentives
4. Marketing and Promotion - promoting a positive image of the area

Michael Burayidi, *Resilient Downtowns*

For Michael Burayidi, the Four-Point Approach is necessary, is not sufficient, particularly for small city downtowns. Burayidi's research on small towns and city downtowns are most successful when they are able to



Figure 2: Centre Street in Bath, Maine

Photo Credit: Wikipedia

1. Attract baby boomers looking at urban living
2. actively attract recent immigrants
3. link heritage preservation to heritage tourism
4. keep their civic and cultural buildings downtown.

Burayidi points out that living in a small town with walkable amenities is increasingly popular among retirees, who are looking to live in communities with many amenities, but also have lower taxes and a “small-town feel.”

Before

Bath, Maine

In the 1980s, Bath (population 8,500) rejected an ambitious to convert its main street into an open-air shopping mall, and instead focused on beautification efforts, and offering small incentives to small businesses willing to open in town. These efforts have not stemmed the development of big box stores near Bath, but it has created a unique concentration of specialty and general stores. With this retail concentration and charming scale, Bath attracts many visitors from as far away as Boston.

Woodbine, Iowa

Between 2000 and 2010, Woodbine lost more than 10% of its population. Since then, Woodbine (population 1,500) has enjoyed an economic upswing, with more than a dozen new businesses opening up in the the town.

To make this happen, Woodbine began improvements to its main street in 2008, and has seen more than \$9 million in private and public funds invested in its commercial centre. Some 36 buildings have been either been built or renovated. A facade improvement program saw the traditional architectural charms of historical buildings restored or enhanced.

More than just new construction and improvements to historical buildings by making them more energy efficient, the upper floors of the buildings on Woodbine’s main street have become rehabilitated as residential units, Since 2011, more than 30 new residential units have created in Woodbine’s old

Since 2011, more than 30 new residential units have created in Woodbine’s old commercial buildings



After



Photo Credit: Town of Woodbine

Figure 3: An historic building on Woodbine’s main street, before and after facade improvements in 2011



Figure 4: The restored Windsor Movie Theatre, Hampton, Iowa

Photo Credit: Cinematreasure.org

TIFs have led to \$25,000 annually going toward facade improvements, signage, and streetscraping on the town's main streets.

commercial buildings. Most of these have attracted older residents, from the town, which has seen single family homes formerly occupied by seniors put on the market and available to the growing number of families moving to Woodbine.

Hampton, Iowa

Hampton has a population of just over 4,000, and since 1991 has seen more than 100 buildings upgraded through the Hampton Main Street Program. Tax-increment financing (TIF) have led to \$25,000 annually going toward facade improvements, signage, and streetscraping on the town's main streets. In total, more than \$1.2-million has been spent on improvements in Hampton.

The Hampton Main Street Program also spearheaded the restoration of the town's old movie theatre. Re-opening in 1999, it continues to operate as a first-run movie theatre under a non-profit organization.



Figure 5: Main Street in Oberlin, Ohio

Final Thoughts

Downtown main streets in small towns have many attractive features.

Some are thriving centres, while others have experienced sustained periods of decline while still having the "good bones" of a strong and walkable town centre.

A small town's main street, or town centre has the potential to attract aging cohorts by having a strong concentration of retail services, as well as public buildings (post office, public library). Creating apartment dwellings, as Woodbine has done, has given new housing options for aging residents, as well as increased the customer base for local businesses. This availability of services is enhanced by a pleasant pedestrian environment, through facade improvements and building's interface with the street, as well as through improvements to the street, such as sidewalks, planters, banners, public seating.

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