

MAIN STREET APPROACH HANDBOOK

ECONOMIC VITALITY

DESIGN

PROMOTION

ORGANIZATION



THE 1772 FOUNDATION



MAIN STREET  
AMERICA®

**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, Inc., a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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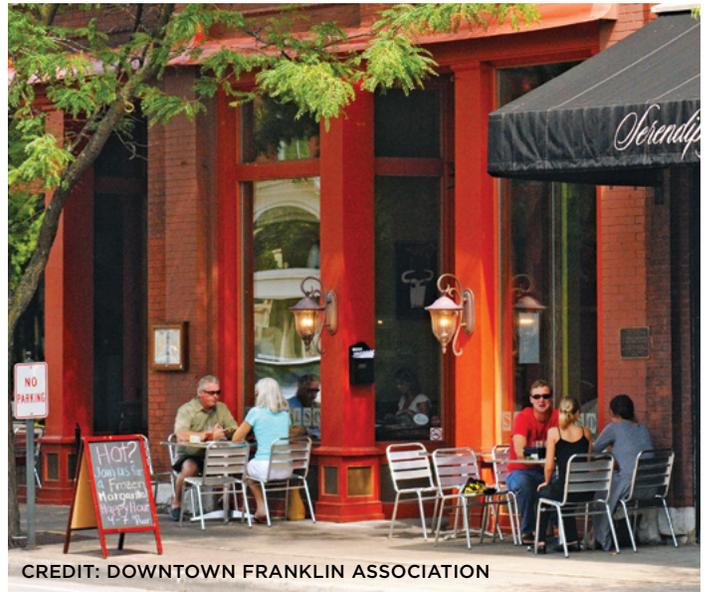
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## INTRODUCTION

Imagine a visitor seeing your downtown for the first time. Walking down Main Street, the visitor takes in the streetscape—families strolling the sidewalk, public art in full view, a bus stopping to drop-off passengers, and appealing storefronts drawing in customers. To many, these elements may seem commonplace; but in fact, each represents a design choice and reflects a strategy to make Main Street an inviting destination.



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Design gives a community a sense of rootedness and place. The physical characteristics of a Main Street—the older and historic structures that make up the built environment, the infrastructure that facilitates the flow of people, the public spaces that serve as community gathering spots—all contribute to what attracts people to a place, inviting them to visit, set up shop, or call it home.

How do communities achieve quality design? The answer is in the people themselves. When a community puts people first, good design follows.

People-centered design ensures that the physical elements of a place reflect the needs and desires of the community. It takes into account how people access a place—how individuals get around, whether it is accessible, and who feels welcome—and shapes the design around the answers to those questions. The process is deliberative and incremental and results in a downtown that enhances overall quality of life.

**This guide is intended to help Main Street directors and community leaders implement a people-centered design process.** It explores the range of issues that impact the physical characteristics of a downtown and provides you with a roadmap for navigating the set of choices involved in implementing holistic design principles to ensure they complement the overall strategy for your downtown.

Since 1980, the National Main Street has published several design guides and resources that are useful for Main Street and local community organization leaders. While this updated handbook contains evergreen information presented in some of those guides, it is designed to reflect our refreshed Main Street Approach and present a more holistic view of design as it connects to comprehensive community transformation. To view past NMSC publications, please visit our digital [Resource Center](#).

## THE MAIN STREET APPROACH

For decades, locally-driven Main Street efforts have harnessed the power of community and leveraged existing assets to create sustainable economic transformation. At the heart of each of these efforts is the Main Street Approach, a time-tested framework that is unique in the field of community revitalization—it is comprehensive in scope, community-led, and connects practitioners to a powerful nationwide network.

The Main Street Approach is rooted in the maxim that great places don't happen by chance. Main Streets succeed because people, projects, and resources are aligned around place-specific strategies. Known as Transformation Strategies, these strategies are generated through meaningful community engagement and informed by analysis of the district's market position. They serve as a guide and help to ground everything a Main Street does.



**Transformation Strategies are implemented through comprehensive work in four broad areas, known as the Four Points:**

**ECONOMIC VITALITY** focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for the scores of entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies.

**DESIGN** supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual elements of downtown while capitalizing on the unique assets that set the commercial district apart.

**PROMOTION** positions the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community's unique characteristics.

**ORGANIZATION** involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district.

An effective Transformation Strategy serves a particular customer segment, responds to an underserved market demand, or creates a differentiated destination. What that looks like in practice is as different as the communities themselves. Some Main Streets have distinguished themselves as entrepreneurship centers, others are focused on creating family-friendly destinations, while others still are known as destinations for foodies. Every community has a distinct set of assets—physical, cultural, historical, natural, etc.—that makes them unique.



This handbook explores the broad range of issues that impact the physical characteristics of a downtown, and helps to 'connect the dots' between design and comprehensive community transformation.

## SECTION 1: COMMERCIAL DISTRICT PLANNING AND DESIGN

Developing or adopting a comprehensive, long-term vision for a Main Street district is essential to setting a positive course for future development and investment. Good commercial district planning empowers Main Street leaders to be intentional in how they approach design issues, including short- and long-term physical improvements, preservation of older and historic buildings, mixed-use infill development, and changes to zoning codes.

While the local municipality and its planning commission usually lead the development and adoption of a commercial district master plan, Main Street leaders play a key role in the commercial district planning process, serving as advocates for all members of the public. By engaging in this process, you can ensure that the approach to design considerations connects directly to your organization's strategy for community transformation, and takes into account the needs and desires of all community members.

Participating on a planning task force or advisory group also offers a valuable opportunity for Main Street directors to work with other local leaders and develop consensus building skills. You will often get to work with local

### Streets as Places

Project for Public Spaces, a world leader in the field of placemaking, created Streets as Places, a concept and set of resources and actions that encourage people to see streets as public spaces for people. In other words, streets are not solely transporting people and goods; they play a vital role in animating the social and economic life of communities. "It's about communities owning and reclaiming their streets, participating in civic life, and having a direct impact on how their public spaces look, function, and feel." [Learn more.](#)

municipal staff and stakeholders—such as the local city council or legislature, historic preservation commission, planning and economic development staff, planning commission, zoning board of appeals, and/or zoning administrators—all relationships that can support your revitalization projects and initiatives.

This section will explore several key themes associated with commercial district planning and design, including:

- // Designing for the Whole Community
- // Commercial District Master Planning
- // Zoning Basics
- // Public Improvements
- // Managing Traffic
- // Understanding Parking

### DESIGNING FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

Downtown is for everybody, and Main Street leaders should advocate for quality design that makes it easier for everyone to access and enjoy their districts. Here are a few quick strategies to keep in mind during the planning and implementation process:

- // **Intentional community engagement is crucial.** The importance of thoughtful and sincere community engagement cannot be overstated.
- // **Groups of people are not monolithic.** In other words, not all millennials (or boomers, or aging people, or children, etc.) will have the same opinion about a specific project. You cannot assume that because the one 23-year-old at last night's public meeting likes the new water fountain, that all millennials in town will also like it.



CREDIT: DOWNTOWN THOMASVILLE

**Design measures that accommodate the needs of certain people often accommodate the needs of most.**

Making a street safer for a slower-moving person also makes it safer for an able-bodied office worker or a parent pushing a stroller to cross an intersection.

- New development can affect housing affordability.** Main Street leaders strive to make commercial districts economically successful, but when promoting any new development, it is crucial to plan against the displacement of current residents, should the new development cause rents to rise.

### INTERGENERATIONAL DESIGN

According to a report from the [Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies](#), by 2035 one-third of American households will be led by someone over the age of 65. A related national trend is grandparents raising grandchildren—[Grandfamilies.org](#) found that over 10% of American children under the age of 18 live with a grandparent or other non-parent relatives.

A growing number of these older households as well as millennials are moving to and working in downtowns and older neighborhood commercial districts. As described by numerous experts and studies, including PGL’s [Older, Smaller, Better](#) report, this is in large part due to the walkability and the access to a variety of amenities inherent to an older commercial district’s design.

Greater age diversity in our downtowns means that Main Street leaders and other professionals involved in community development, local government officials, local hospitals, and developers need to support

changes in housing and community design to meet the shifting needs of our populace. They can look to the growing number of creative approaches to achieve more equitable communities for everyone—from children to millennials to boomers and the aging. Here are a few notable examples:

- AARP’s Livable Communities program** is one of the most robust and multi-faceted resources a community can look to for guidance on how to make their spaces more equitable, healthy, and vibrant. This program offers community action grants, walkability audit toolkits, and the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities, a network of nearly 200 communities across the country who are dedicated to intergenerational and equitable design and development.
- Gil Penalosa’s innovative **8 80 concept** is that “if everything we do in our public spaces is great for an 8 year old and an 80 year old, then it will be great for all people.”
- KaBoom!** gives children—and adults—opportunities for active play. They not only provide playground set kits, they also offer community grants and other technical services resources.

*Check out additional research and information in the [Section Resources](#).*

## ACCESSIBLE DESIGN

Main Street leaders work to ensure that everyone in their communities can access and enjoy the downtown or neighborhood commercial district. By understanding and encouraging compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Main Street leaders are using design to create more inclusive and equitable places.

While most people think of ADA as being focused primarily on providing building access to people with disabilities, it actually covers a much wider range of design-related elements, including signage, curbs, sidewalks, and street crossings.

The Federal Highway Administration's [Accessible Sidewalks and Street Crossings](#) offers tips on everything from how to design for different abilities to the legal framework of ADA. Another helpful resource includes the [ADA Accessibility Guidelines \(ADAAG\)](#), which gives specific design guidance on making streets and public spaces more accessible to people with disabilities people.

*See Section 2 for more information on the Americans with Disabilities Act.*

## HOMELESSNESS AND DESIGN

Homelessness is a complex social problem, with no easy solutions. Main Street organizations and other local development groups are not responsible for “fixing” homelessness, but they have a role to play as important players in the civic life a community. If this issue affects your Main Street, work with other community leaders and residents to create a uniform policy that considers the needs of the individuals experiencing homelessness, and the needs of the businesses, shoppers, and other residents of the district. Actions to consider include:

- Working with local social service agencies, local mental health organizations, public libraries, and other organizations and agencies that address homelessness whenever engaging in a commercial design or public improvement planning process.
- Getting to know the homeless people in your community so you can understand their situations, connect them to local organizations, and potentially

engage them in public space projects. See the [American Library Association's resource guide](#) on homeless engagement.

- Discouraging aggressive or hostile architecture like metal spikes or walls. This type of design solution can be inhumane and ineffective in addressing the greater issues. [Learn more.](#)
- Encouraging your local government and local social service agencies to work with your local university's architecture department to explore more humane, portable sleeping solutions. Check out [Homes for Hope](#) for inspiration.

*Read more on homelessness and design in the [Section Resources](#).*

## CLEAN AND SAFE DESIGN

Many downtowns and neighborhood business districts have suffered years of disinvestment. During that time, area residents and workers can grow to believe that either “there is nothing do there,” or worse, that “it is dangerous there.”

To address these concerns—whether real or perceived—you can take a few steps to ensure everyone feels that your district is safe and inviting:

- Look at reported crime and police statistics to determine your crime issues. Compare your crime statistics with those of nearby areas and see how your district measures up to other business districts and neighborhoods.
- Survey business owners, residents, and visitors to determine their clean and safe concerns.
- Conduct a visual assessment of the district to identify specific problem areas with a team of volunteers, preferably including police officers and other city representatives. See the [Section Resources](#) for a helpful audit worksheet.
- Document your survey and on-site assessment findings with pictures, statistics, public comments, and other information to set a baseline.

## Clean

Community residents will often come to Main Street leaders to address issues related to cleanliness. When organizing any kind of cleanliness initiative, be sure to:

- // Clarify which responsibilities belong to the municipality;
- // Clarify which responsibilities belong to business and property owners;
- // Work with other existing programs addressing safety and cleanliness; and
- // Empower business owners.

## Safe

**Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design**, or CPTED (pronounced “sep-ted”) is a multidisciplinary approach to reducing opportunities for crime and disorderly behavior by changing the physical environment. Good design as it relates to storefronts, sidewalks, public spaces, etc., increases perceptions of safety and creates an environment that encourages positive social interaction. You’ll find a helpful checklist appendix in the [Section Resources](#), but here are some specific suggestions on how to put CPTED to work in your district:

**WINDOWS.** The space from approximately a person’s knees and above should be clear so people can see in and out of businesses. Consider implementing design guidelines that limit the percentage of covered window space to 15 percent and encourage merchants to remove bars covering their windows by offering incentives.

**LANDSCAPING.** Use landscaping, such as shrubs, planters, and trees, instead of fences, to guide people to entrances and exits. Neglected landscaping not only indicates a lack of concern and/or ownership, it also creates hiding spaces.

**FENCING.** In situations where fencing is necessary, avoid solid fencing, so passers-by can see what is going on behind the fence. Wrought iron or picket fences are more aesthetically pleasing than chain link fences.

**LIGHTING.** Ornamental and pedestrian-scale lighting on buildings helps illuminate heads and shoulders and move people out of the shadows. Replace burned-out bulbs immediately and don’t forget to light parking lots.

**COLORS.** Old, peeling paint should be removed as quickly as possible. When repainting building exteriors, choose colors that are light and bright with good reflectivity.

## COMMERCIAL DISTRICT MASTER PLANNING

A community’s municipal planning commission or a planning commission/citizen task force team usually directs the development of the commercial district master plan. As the Main Street leader in your community, you should participate in a task force if one is formed or, at the very least, serve as a technical resource provider and advisor to the planning commission and the municipality.

## MASTER PLANNING 101

Assembling a master plan typically consists of the following steps:

- 1. Assessing conditions.** Assessing current physical and market conditions is a critical step for almost all small-scale and multi-element master plans. This includes assessing the economic base and physical condition of buildings, streets, sidewalks, and public spaces, as well as completing land-use and building inventories, traffic and transportation system studies, and a demographic analysis.
- 2. Visioning process and statement.** This is the central goal that the subsequent recommendations reflect. Visioning processes are crucial for engaging community stakeholders and building consensus. Main Street leaders should offer to lead visioning processes and workshops with the support of the municipal planning commission.
- 3. Developing future projections/scenarios.** This step predicts future scenarios (i.e. new residential or retail development) for the commercial district based on the conditions assessment and includes strategizing different responses to these future scenarios.
- 4. Developing planning goals and strategies.** The accepted planning solutions become the master plan's goals, which are general statements of what the district should become and are connected to the overall vision. Objectives and strategies are then devised to accomplish the identified goals, which is the last step before preparing a draft planning document.
- 5. Producing the final plan.** Prior to final production, public sessions should be held to solicit comments and revise the draft. Once public feedback is received and incorporated, the plan can be adopted by the task force, the planning commission, and the city or village council. Once it is adopted as an official city document, elected officials and planning staff are obligated to follow and implement the recommendations. The adopted plan is meant to evolve with the community, so it can be amended if needed, as long as the amendments still reflect the original vision.

## An Assessment Framework for Practitioners

In 2014, the New York City Department of Small Business Services engaged the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) to develop a tool for assessing the health of local commercial districts. The resulting “Commercial DNA Framework,” developed by consultant Larisa Ortiz, outlines four key areas that drive a comprehensive commercial district assessment:

**Physical conditions** as they relate to the conditions of the public realm—the streets, sidewalks and public spaces, the private realm—privately owned buildings and properties, and access such as transportation infrastructure, that is so critical to attracting customers;

**Business conditions** as they relate to nodes of business density, existing tenant mix and the real estate environment—all of which help assess the relative health of the district and determine the size of the district’s trade area;

**Market demand** to determine both size and scale of both the residential and non-residential (i.e. employee and visitor) customer base; and

**Administrative capacity** that considers not just the organizational and leadership capacity to advance downtown initiatives, but also the underlying regulatory and policy frameworks that define and drive downtown investment.

See the framework developed for the City of New York in the [Section Resources](#).

### “COMMERCIAL DNA” FRAMEWORK

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT	MARKET DATA & DEMOGRAPHICS	ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY
Public realm	Retail density	Residential demand	Leadership
Private realm	Tenant mix	Non-Residential demand	Organizational capacity
Access/visibility	Business conditions	Employees	Regulatory framework
		Visitors	Funding sources
		Students	Partners

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## Master Planning Timeline

The scope and cost of commercial district master plans vary based on specific local needs, relevant issues, and available funding. A rural mountain community may not need an expensive, multi-chapter master plan, while a more populated neighborhood district in a large Midwest city may need multiple chapters to address more complex planning issues. No matter what the local needs and issues are, there are several planning approaches a community can take to meet them most appropriately.

### MARKET ASSESSMENT

**Timeline: 2-4 months**

#### What is usually produced?

A summary of market conditions, with identification of key retail market opportunities and demand estimates of unmet residential and visitor spending. This can sometimes precede and inform community visioning.

**What is involved?** The collection of census-based residential demographics and characteristics, as well as employee data and visitor data.

#### Why do it this way?

Starting with an understanding of the market can help ensure that community visioning is firmly rooted in a solid understanding of market conditions and based on an understanding of what kinds of activities and businesses can and can't be supported by the market.

### COMMUNITY VISIONING PROCESS

**Timeline: 2-6 months**

#### What is usually produced?

A vision statement with detailed descriptions of recommended revitalization strategies and action steps.

**What is involved?** Public workshops and charrettes to solicit maximum public participation.

**Why do it this way?** A community vision process is usually undertaken in response to development opportunities or development threats. To take advantage of an opportunity or to stand up to a development threat, a community needs consensus among stakeholders regarding short and long-term community planning goals and revitalization strategies.

### SMALL-SCALE MASTER PLAN

**Timeline: 6-12 months**

#### What is usually produced?

A 1-3 chapter document with a visioning component and a focus on physical design issues rather than more complex market analyses or studies.

**What is involved?** Stakeholder meetings, public workshops, and specialists' expertise on specific issues.

**Why do it this way?** To address specific planning issues and focus on specific revitalization efforts. Examples include new streetscaping and road improvements, public space enhancements, maintenance of the historic building stock, business development, and design guidelines.

### FULL-SCALE, MULTI-ELEMENT MASTER PLAN

**Timeline: One year+**

#### What is usually produced?

A 3+ chapter document including items such as design guidelines, market analysis, development proformas, transportation and parking, streetscape improvements, facilities and open space planning.

**What is involved?** Stakeholder meetings, public workshops, specialists' expertise on specific issues, market analyses, and studies.

**Why do it this way?** To undertake multiple issues at the same time with a comprehensive multi-year action plan. This planning process is most frequently used by communities with large commercial districts that are experiencing multiple planning and revitalization issues.

## MAKING YOUR MASTER PLAN EFFECTIVE

To ensure the master plan's short- and long-term effectiveness, it is important to keep a few things in mind:

- /// **The commercial district plan, the community comprehensive plan, and the zoning code should be fully aligned.** Often, the commercial district plan is only a section or a chapter of the community comprehensive plan. As the Main Street leader, you should make sure that the comprehensive plan considers the long-term economic health of the downtown or neighborhood business district, even in the sections about areas outside of the Main Street district. The zoning code also needs to reflect the goals of both the district plan and comprehensive plan.
- /// **Be intentional when engaging the public in the planning process.** Public participation is crucial to building consensus and ensuring the long-term success of a master plan. Take time to plan public engagements to reach the greatest variety of community stakeholders. In addition to meetings, consider engaging the public in the use of survey tools to evaluate elements you want to include/ investigate in the master plan. Use online and in-person communication to spread the word and hold your workshops at different times in different locations to make it easier for people from throughout the community to attend.
- /// **Ensure good design.** Zoning overlays, historic district designations, and design guidelines are necessary components of a master plan to encourage proper rehabilitation of historic buildings, sensitive design, and appropriate new developments. For a master plan to be most effective, your community's zoning code needs to be in alignment with the master plan goals.
- /// **Advocate for historic preservation as an economic development policy.** The economic impact of historic preservation is becoming more commonly understood, and there are myriad studies that demonstrate that impact. Be sure to advocate for historic preservation as an important economic development policy, particularly if your town has vacant or underused older and historic buildings that can be converted into income-producing properties or housing.

- /// **Do not replicate plans of other communities.** While other communities' plans can be instructive regarding public engagement strategies and best practices, your commercial district master plan should be tailored to meet your community's unique needs, conditions, and vision.
- /// **Make plans for vacant land.** As the Main Street leader, you should always be considering the potential future development of vacant and underutilized land in the downtown district will benefit the economic, social, and environmental health of the district.
- /// **Ensure your planning vision is rooted in solid economic rationale.** Make sure you understand the trends in your market and the ways in which your residential, workforce, and visitor population are spending their money, time, and resources. This information should directly inform the kind of economic activity you envision as part of your downtown master plan.
- /// **Promote small-scale manufacturing.** Advocate that your community's zoning ordinance include small-scale manufacturing in commercial buildings. For example, bakeries and breweries could use the non-shop space to produce their wares.
- /// **Prioritize people over cars.** Whenever possible, new infill development should be designed to promote pedestrian traffic and circulation.
- /// **Parking isn't everything.** Advocate for a combination of on-street, rear-yard, off-site, and shared parking options to improve circulation and make traffic patterns safer.



## BENEFITS OF MASTER PLANS

- // **Master plans can help sustain the economic vitality of your commercial district.** A good master plan can explore ways to accommodate growth and new economic uses on Main Street before inappropriate infill or sprawl development threaten to undermine your community's cohesion.
- // **Master plans can guide future physical improvements.** By including guidelines for a wide range of potential physical improvements, your community can create a consistent and unified approach to maintaining and improving the various physical elements of the downtown (and beyond).
- // **Master plans can help create new economic opportunities and spur new investment.** Engaging with other local stakeholders in this planning process will help you develop a more complete understanding of potential economic development strategies available. Including these strategies for addressing business recruitment and retention, appropriate new land uses, and incentives and finance mechanisms that encourage reinvestment, lays the groundwork for your community's continued economic success.
- // **The master planning process can identify elements of the zoning code and land-use regulations that may need to be updated.**



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## COMMERCIAL DISTRICT ZONING

As a Main Street leader, a basic understanding of zoning laws and land use regulations is essential in your work as an advocate for quality design in preservation, infill, and new development projects in your downtown or neighborhood commercial district. Being familiar with your community's existing zoning laws empowers you to examine the ways your municipality can revise local ordinances to support quality design and economic vitality on Main Street.

### ZONING 101

Zoning regulates the types of land uses and the form of development allowed within a defined area. Within the context of Main Street, zoning regulations should allow a range of land uses like retailing, offices, and entertainment venues.

Zoning ordinances and processes vary state-by-state, as every state has enabling laws that determine the types of zoning local communities can exercise. Furthermore, a state's ability to develop, revise, or adopt new zoning regulations depends on whether it is a home-rule state, which makes it easier to adopt or revise new zoning regulations. Understanding your state's enabling legislation and its home-rule status will help you determine what zoning regulations may be created or revised.

### What zoning regulations do to support quality design:

- // Permit a variety of uses on upper floors, like housing and small-scale manufacturing.
- // Require active uses on the ground floor, which prevents retail gaps and supports retail concentration in key downtown areas.
- // Encourage signage that is pedestrian-oriented and human-scale.
- // Control the shape and density of new buildings and other development.
- // Control parking requirements to make preservation projects and transit-oriented development more feasible.
- // Govern building setback, rear, and side-lot requirements.
- // Set requirements for minimum lot coverage and floor area ratios (F.A.R.)

## Zoning Terminology

### Permitted uses:

allowed uses within a zoning area or district as of right.

**Conditional uses:** uses within a district that are permitted only if approved by the planning commission and the village or city council.

**Nonconforming uses:** building uses that exist prior to the passage of the original or amended zoning ordinance and do not conform to its provisions.

**Variances:** tool that grants an exception from zoning rules, usually only granted when some aspect of the property cannot be used for the purposes that are zoned.

**Floor area ratio (F.A.R.):** gross floor area of a building/area of the lot. F.A.R. is useful when the value of land is significant enough to warrant a more intensive use of property beyond two or three stories.

**Zero-lot line:** when a building rests directly on the lot line rather than being set back from the street. Zero-lot-line zoning is vitally important for Main Street districts, as buildings need to be located at the front of their lots to encourage pedestrian circulation.

Check out the zoning glossary in the [Section Resources](#) for information on types of zoning.

### Zoning regulations do NOT:

- Regulate design and architectural style in and of itself. That role is covered by design guidelines, described in Section 2.
- Outright ban any locally unwanted land uses (LULUs), such as adult entertainment businesses, check cashing establishments, liquor stores, etc. *Note: though zoning cannot ban LULUs, it can regulate where LULUs are located.*
- Replace comprehensive master plans.

## MAIN STREET-FRIENDLY ZONING

### First-Floor and Upper-Story Uses

As a Main Street leader, one of your primary goals is to reduce vacancy rates in your district's buildings by recruiting and retaining businesses and residential tenants. Zoning codes regulate what kinds of uses are permitted in buildings, so it is important that you are familiar with your current zoning code and advocate for more Main Street-friendly regulations. Here are some helpful tips to keep in mind:

- Zoning codes typically include a "table of uses" that define what uses are allowed under zoning. Review this table carefully. It is helpful to remember that "retail" is a very broad category and that the table will provide details on what kinds of retail uses are and aren't allowed.
- Retail is changing, so a flexible zoning code that permits more varied uses is essential for a Main Street district's long-term economic viability. For example, a small, local brewery may require first-floor space for production and retail operation, and upper-story space for production and housing. A code that permits flexible use on different floors could attract that small, local brewery (or another business with similar needs) to locate in your district.
- Rehabilitation of your district's historic buildings is crucial to its continued vitality, and zoning that allows for different types of uses increases your ability to recruit a greater variety of business types and development interests.
- Updating zoning codes to allow upper-story uses not previously permitted, such as housing and light industry, benefits the economic and social vitality of a Main Street. More people living and producing in the Main Street district ensures more economic growth and sustainability.

- Flexible zoning does not automatically turn a commercial district into a free-for-all. Main Street and other community leaders should create recruitment plans to help create an ideal downtown business mix.
- Zoning alone will not attract new businesses, and it should never be a substitute for the good business development practices advocated for by Main Street leaders.

### Parking

Parking standards in zoning ordinances can sometimes present a roadblock to new development and quality design. While more and more downtowns are removing parking requirements entirely, others are looking at ways to right size the requirements to reflect the efficiencies that come with shared parking in downtown mixed-use environments. Lower ratios and requirements, in some cases less than 2 spots per 1,000 square feet of retail, are increasingly common.

## PUBLIC IMPROVEMENTS

Public improvements are projects in downtown or neighborhood commercial districts that enhance quality of life through the maintenance and upgrading of physical features. Public improvements include all infrastructure and streetscape elements, from lampposts and benches, to wayfinding and pedestrian amenities.

Public improvement projects offer opportunities for Main Street leaders to engage the public and local business owners in improving the appearance, sociability, and functionality of a district. Further, public improvements create an opportunity for Main Street leaders to work with the local government to ensure local history, architectural diversity, population, current uses, and future uses are considered before, during, and after project implementation.

### PLANNING PUBLIC IMPROVEMENTS

While most municipalities' departments of transportation will make the final decisions about design, product selection, budget, and contracting for public improvements, it is essential for you, as the Main Street leader, to be involved from the start to make sure that improvements will benefit the commercial district—even if you have to ask to be included.



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With some public improvements, major investments are necessary and are governed by the ability to finance them. Others may not require a long, painstaking planning processes and can be implemented with very little resources. Regardless of the length or intensity of your project's planning process, there are several elements to consider:

### Inventory

One of the first things you should do in planning a public improvement is to take an inventory of the various elements of your public spaces (including your streets!), noting their condition, types of use, and economic and social impact on your commercial district. In addition to an inventory, review your district's master plan, previous project plans, and studies conducted on your public spaces, such as such as pedestrian and/or traffic counts and parking usage, to ensure you build on previous work and recommendations.

### Design Considerations

Most public improvement projects involve your district's buildings, streets, parks, and squares, so it is essential that you make sure that the design, size, and scope of the project are compatible with existing elements and follow any applicable design guidelines. If the public improvement involves a space where people gather, be sure to include accessibility improvements recommended by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and provide comfortable and consistently placed seating.

*See Section 2 for more information on design guidelines and ADA.*

## Funding and Resources

Don't let a price tag keep you from pursuing a project. Public improvements can be implemented incrementally and funding for different stages can come from different sources, including:

### Public Funding

- // Bond issues
- // General revenue funds or tax levy dollars
- // Special taxing districts that levy a tax on the property owners who most directly benefit
- // Tax-increment financing (TIF), in which future increases in tax revenue are allocated to pay for improvements
- // In some states, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) can use some of their revenue to secure bonds
- // Special sales or food and lodging taxes
- // Federal grants and loans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Transportation, U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Federal Highway Administration, etc.

### Private Funding

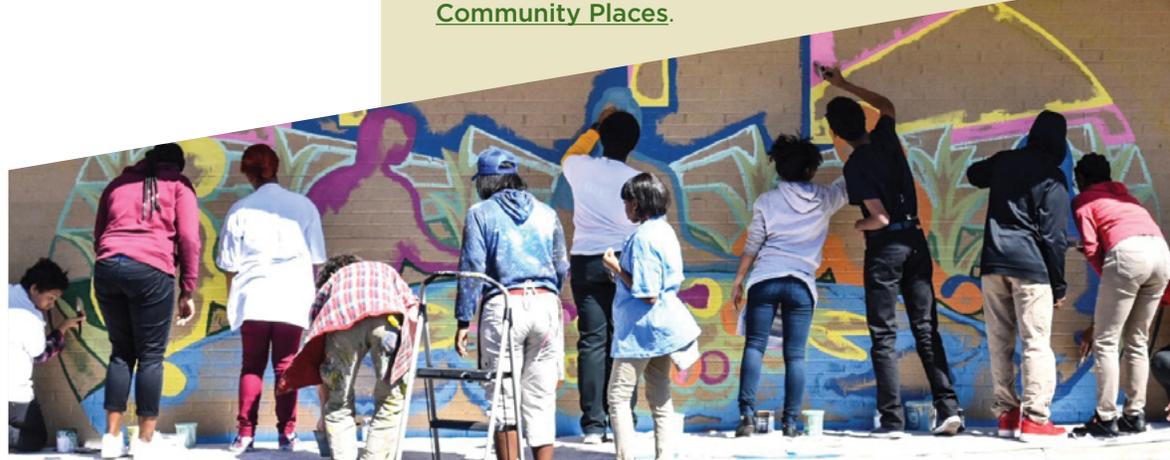
- // Foundation grants
- // Donations for the purchase of items such as pavers, benches, or public art
- // Crowdfunding
- // In-kind donations like paint, lumber, or time

## Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper

Always remember: you can improve public spaces on small budgets and short timelines. In fact, it can be beneficial to try a prototype of a project before making anything permanent. The [Project for Public Spaces](#), a world leader in the field of placemaking, refers to this iterative approach as [Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper](#) (LQC)—as in less onerous, less time-consuming, and less expensive. An easy, quick project like installing moveable furniture in an underused public space can immediately activate a former dead zone in a commercial district with very little investment or risk. Other examples of LQC projects include, but not limited to:

- // Programmed pocket parks
- // Pop-up shops in vacant storefronts
- // Paint-by-number murals
- // Mobile museums
- // Painted utility boxes
- // Creative bike racks

LQCs work when clustered together or connected to other public spaces. For instance, if your LQC project involves a splash pad, consider putting it near a playground or open space next to a library and bringing in refreshment carts or trucks on certain days of the week. These clusters of activity will work in tandem for a more successful activation. PPS calls this “Triangulation” and offers a succinct explanation on the concept in their [Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Places](#).



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## Public Engagement

One of your roles as Main Street leader is to advocate that your downtown is for everyone—from the aging to schoolchildren to business owners to social service workers. With a public improvement project, it is vital that every member of the public is offered the opportunity to contribute and be heard.

Some useful public engagement methods include:

- // Holding a visioning meeting about your community's public spaces without having a specific public improvement project in mind. The public's preferences and interests can help prioritize which projects should come first.
- // If there is a design element involved, as with public murals or street banners, call for public voting, with places for community members to vote online and in-person at your Main Street office.
- // Pair a longer-term plan with a project to recruit volunteers and spur interest in the longer-term project planning.
- // Hold meetings and workshops outside of office spaces like the local coffee shop or the town square.
- // Incentivize attendance with coupons to local businesses or reduced rates for local events.

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## Engaging through Fundraising

With crowdfunding, project leaders work with web platforms like [ioby](#) or [Patronicity](#) to host a fundraising page illustrating the need for a public improvement project. The project leaders then reach out to community members to ask for donations toward the project. No donation is too small, and donors literally “buy-in” to the project. The crowdfunding process is a great community engagement tool, helping rally local residents around public improvements.

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## Collaboration

In addition to engaging the public, Main Street leaders need the support of municipal staff to get public improvement projects done, so again, building and maintaining strong working relationships is crucial. But don't wait to have a reason to engage with them! You can set up regular meetings or ask them to take a tour of the Main Street district with you any time.

And don't forget: during public improvement planning and implementation you also work as a liaison among construction companies, utilities, residents, and business/property owners to ensure timely communication and build trust.

## Programming

With all of the effort your community is putting into public improvements, you want to make sure people use and enjoy the new and upgraded features. Build in weekly or monthly programming like public games, live performances, movie nights, or food trucks to get people to the new and improved spaces. Vary dates and times and make the programming location accessible so that more members of your community can take part.

## Maintenance

Maintenance of the physical elements of your downtown or neighborhood commercial district is the unsung hero of successful public improvements. Before adding new public improvement elements to the district, correct problems with existing infrastructure. And, when assembling a public improvement plan, make sure to include a maintenance plan that outlines responsible parties and timelines.

## STREETSCAPE IMPROVEMENTS

Quality streetscape design considers local history, architectural diversity, population, current uses, and future uses. While most municipalities' departments of transportation will make the final decisions about design, product selection, budget, and contracting for streetscape improvements, it is essential for you, as the Main Street leader, to be involved from the start to make sure that improvements will benefit the commercial district. For example, amenities like benches, lampposts, and trash receptacles, all offer opportunities for cohesive and consistent design that bring the Main Street experience together.

Key streetscape amenities to consider for your district include:

- // **Lampposts**—Engineers will be responsible for making sure all wattage and illumination requirements are met, but you can play an important role in advocating for lighting features that are historically appropriate, have a cohesive design, and are pedestrian-scale. [See here](#) for more information.
- // **Planters or hanging baskets**—A maintenance plan is necessary to keep plants thriving and beautiful. The maintenance plan should identify an agency or volunteer group who will plant and water flowers on a set schedule.
- // **Banners**—Make sure the design of banners is consistent with your Main Street brand and the overall design vision for the commercial district. Check with the public works department on the process and regulations for hanging and changing banners. To create an opportunity for public engagement, consider installing temporary banners designed locally or voted on by community members.
- // **Benches**—Bench design should not only complement your district's general look and feel, but provide resting places for people in your commercial district while they socialize or wait. Bench placement is as important as design—locate them at regular intervals in places where people will feel comfortable sitting on them, i.e., not next to a trash can.
- // **Movable chairs**—Comfortable and thoughtfully placed seating encourages visitors in your district to stop and stay a while. Movable chairs are generally inexpensive and make it easy for people to create impromptu gathering places.
- // **Trash receptacles**—Again, consider placement as much as design. If people have to walk more than half a block to throw away trash, most will not do it. Trash bags should be simple for sanitation workers to remove, yet be secure and resistant to vandalism and wind.
- // **Trees**—Consult a professional trained in regional horticulture or urban forestry when planting trees. Design considerations for tree selection include ensuring that it does not block the view of storefronts and signs, provides sufficient shade, and has a small root system to prevent damage to the sidewalk, curb, and underground utilities.
- // **Other shade**—In spaces with fewer trees, consider shade canopies and retractable umbrellas for tables to let visitors adapt the spaces to the weather.
- // **Water features**—Fountains, sculptures, and other water features can add interesting and engaging visual elements in a public space.
- // **Charging stations and public WiFi**—Offering free charging stations and free WiFi is a good way to get people to come and spend time in your community's public spaces. Many retailers also offer such amenities to draw customers inside.

The University of Oklahoma's Institute for Quality Communities has created a number of different studies on street design, walkability, accessibility, and parking. Check out their [projects webpage](#) to see some great local examples.

Major Infrastructure improvements, including updated sewer systems, underground electrical, broadband or Wi-Fi that are on the City or State’s wish list, may initially seem outside of a Main Street’s organization’s scope of work, but in fact, coupling these major infrastructure investments with streetscape improvements is often a good way to advance revitalization efforts.

## WAYFINDING

Wayfinding signage is a great tool to lead people to the district and its various amenities and attractions as well as to local trails and bikeways. Unlike street signs on roads and highways, wayfinding systems are designed to convey a sense of place that reflects a community’s character. Coordinating wayfinding signs with banners and other design elements unifies the appearance of the entire district and creates an overall positive first impression.

Wayfinding systems start with gateways, which are markers at community entrances designed to show visitors that they’ve arrived at a distinct place. Gateway treatments can be simple or elaborate in design with pillars, arches, art, or even statues.

Recreating a newcomer’s tour will help you decide which assets, parking areas, and attractions should be highlighted, where the most confusing areas in your community are, and which streets will take visitors back to main roads or highways.

## Activating Public Spaces

Public space activation offers Main Street leaders and community members opportunities to test out different engagement methods and think about how to use various elements of the physical environment they may not have previously considered, like utility boxes or bike racks. With any public space activation projects, even the iterative and flexible Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper-type projects, Main Street leaders should continue to incorporate good design practice.

**Public murals.** Consider where to place them and what construction and art materials are involved. For example, don’t paint unpainted brick. If nailing a canvas or poster to a brick wall, drive the nails through the mortar joints, not the brick.

**Alleys.** Instead of painting unpainted brick in the alleys, consider painting rear doors, bollards, concrete barriers, or dumpsters.

**Water features.** Make sure any water feature you install also has proper drainage and a maintenance plan to prevent mold.

**Graffiti.** The [National Park Service’s Technical Preservation Brief #38](#) provides extensive information about preventing unlawful graffiti and removing it from historic masonry. The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s article “[These Walls Talk: The Role of Urban Murals and Graffiti in Historic Preservation](#),” offers insight on culturally significant graffiti and historic buildings.

### Wayfinding Design Best Practices and Tips:

- Use design consistent with your Main Street branding and architecture.
- Locate signs at every major intersection and at other logical points throughout the district.
- Use historical markers and interpretive signs to communicate a sense of place and generate activity on the street.
- Within the boundaries of your community, use trailblazer or directional signs help point pedestrians and drivers to Main Street, parking, public transportation, public restrooms, the visitor's center, library, and other attractions or anchors.
- Use arrows, icons, and symbols to help visitors get around more easily.
- Post signs near alleys to indicate parking or for alley-facing storefronts.
- Place signs meant to be viewed from vehicles at least 20 yards before the intersection and use lettering that can be read from a distance.
  - Have one inch of letter height for every 40 feet of desired readability. *Please note: This is the general rule of thumb but refer to your community lettering guidelines.*
- If you would like to try temporary wayfinding signage, consider tools like [Walk Your City](#) signs or the Walkonomics app—while you are fundraising and planning a more permanent wayfinding solution.
- Use larger fonts on signs directed at drivers and smaller fonts with time distances for pedestrians.
- Wayfinding can include ground-level directional signage too—consider chalk arrows or painted animal tracks to serve as further guidance for pedestrians.
- If you are planning permanent wayfinding signage, work with a local graphic designer to choose a clean, clear, and uniform design that represents your town or district.
- Engage your community with a public vote of the design options.
- Consult the [Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices](#) published by the Federal Highway Administration for some helpful tips and guidelines.
- When installing signs, make sure they won't be blocked by parked cars or any streetscape amenities, such as flower baskets.

### Trail-Oriented Development

Wayfinding can help bring people traffic from local trails and bikeways into your downtown, where they may shop, eat, and play. Check out the [Trail Town Program](#)<sup>®</sup>, which was one of the first initiatives to investigate the economic opportunity trails provide to downtowns, and Headwaters Economics's [library of studies](#) demonstrating the economic impact of trails in downtowns all over the country.



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## MANAGING TRAFFIC

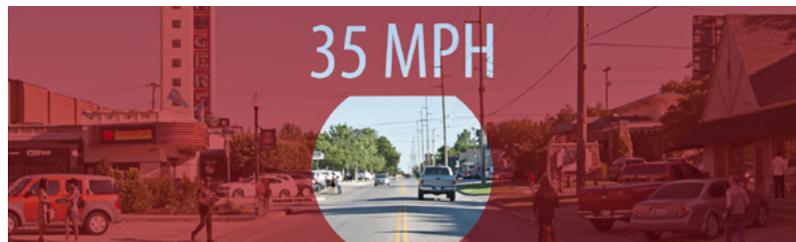
Traffic affects not only the physical appearance of a community but also its economic vitality and the safety of its residents. Heavy, fast car traffic creates an unappealing, unattractive, and dangerous environment for current and potential residents, visitors, and business owners, who may avoid locating their stores there. By understanding issues related to traffic and the growing library of potential solutions, Main Street leaders can help advocate for safe and comfortable streets for everyone, whether they are walking, driving, biking, or riding the bus or train.

### TWO-WAY STREET CONVERSIONS

Converting one-way streets to two-way streets is often a good option to investigate for communities looking to reduce the speed of traffic downtown and improve business sales and customer traffic, as they offer better visibility of businesses and easier accessibility to them. In addition, two-way streets are typically safer and can reduce collisions between cars and bikes and pedestrians.

When investigating whether a two-way conversion is right for your Main Street, you should consider:

- // **Street jurisdiction.** The rigor and complexity of the two-way street conversion process depends on the entity who operates the street—whether it is federal, state, or local.
- // **Street width and lane use.** Two-way operation requires a minimum width of 24 feet. If there is parallel parking on both sides of the street, the required width may be 36 to 38 feet; and with angle parking on both sides, the width expands to 64 to 68 feet (not counting turn lanes).
- // **Daily and peak-hour traffic.** Knowing the amount of traffic, both daily and during peak hours, will help determine where and if the conversion is right for your Main Street district and where traffic can be diverted.



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- // **Adjacent building use.** Streets lined predominantly with retail stores are usually prime candidates for conversion, as two-way streets make accessing them easier for shoppers. Also, parking garages, decks, or lots may require redesign and reconstruction of their entrances and exits to accommodate the new traffic flow.
- // **Pedestrian activity.** Areas in which pedestrian traffic volume is less than 200 to 300 people/hour will probably experience minimal benefits. Pedestrian studies that include existing counts of activity on sidewalks can help determine whether a conversion will benefit the district.
- // **Levels of congestion.** Congestion affects intersection wait times and vehicular speeds/pedestrian safety.
- // **The regional transportation network.** Conversions may depend on the way the proposed streets fit within the regional roadway network. Studies should be conducted to determine how much of the traffic flow is “through” and how much is local.

## ROAD RECONFIGURATION

Though it may not be obvious, road reconfiguration often has a greater physical and economic impact than even sidewalk improvements. Street reconfiguration and lane reduction projects can create a much more attractive and safe environment for people to stop and stay a while in your district. Street reconfiguration projects can be simple or elaborate—ranging from curb extensions to on-street parking.

When determining which road reconfiguration is right for your community, you can test out a few options using temporary bump-outs or bollards.

### Complete Streets

Complete Streets is an approach to street and traffic design that integrates people and place in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of our transportation networks. This helps to ensure streets are safe for people of all ages and abilities, balance the needs of different modes, and support local land uses, economies, cultures, and natural environments. First developed by a coalition of organizations and agencies, complete streets recommendations have been integrated into the work of leading transportation experts. For more information, check out the following websites:

[Smart Growth America](#)

[Transportation for America](#)

[American Planning Association](#)

[U.S. Department of Transportation](#)

[U.S. Federal Highway Administration](#)

Once you determine which approach works best, you can present this information to those who can fund a permanent solution (usually a municipal partner).

Road reconfiguration impacts include:

- /// **Traffic calming:** Slowing vehicular speeds will make streets safer for everyone, especially pedestrians and bicyclists. Check out the [National Association of City Transportation Officials \(NACTO\)'s Urban Bikeway Design Guide](#) for guidance on the specifics of traffic calming.
- /// **Upgraded land use.** By providing more on-street parking, the municipality doesn't have to tear down buildings to create tax-exempt municipal parking lots.
- /// **Less Pollution.** Creating a downtown that better accommodates pedestrians and bicyclists reduces the negative environmental impact that results from motorized vehicles.

Want to experiment in creating your own street design? Check out [Streetmix](#), an interactive tool that allows users to experiment with lane widths, street design, and more.



## UNDERSTANDING PARKING

Parking is often a primary concern for Main Street leaders as it impacts how easy it is for community members and visitors come and stay in our downtowns. Although Main Street organizations typically have no control or authority to change the parking system, which is usually managed by the municipality or private companies, they play an important role in advocating for the parking system that best supports the Main Street district. By understanding how to analyze the parking system and knowing which parking policies and designs will maximize the efficiency of parking systems and improve customer convenience, you will be able to advise the municipality and improve public perception about parking.

### PARKING SUPPLY

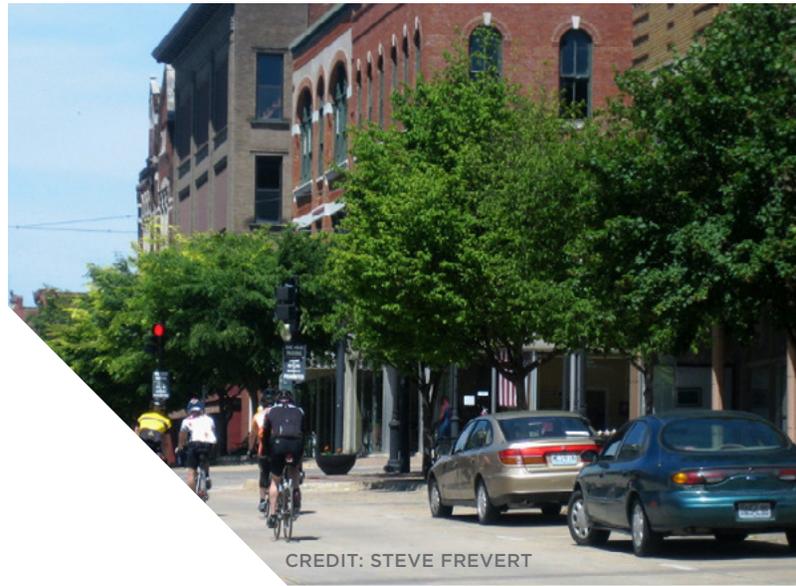
Simply put, parking supply is the number of parking spaces available daily for business district users. Builders and developers calculate parking supply by comparing the number of parking spaces to commercial floor space (gross floor area, or GFA), though different commercial settings have different parking supply ratios: regional shopping malls provide 5.0 to 7.0 spaces per 1,000 GFA, commercial strips provide 4.0 to 5.0 spaces per 1,000 GFA, and older business districts supply 2.0 to 3.0 spaces per 1,000 GFA\*. In practice, denser areas can usually use lower ratios. In mixed-use neighborhood commercial districts, retail developers often use a 2.0 (or lower) to 1,000 GFA.

*\*These ratios are based on the Institute for Transit Engineers (ITE) requirements calculated for suburban places, so they are not often the most applicable to Main Street-type districts.*

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Numerous studies have shown that downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts need far fewer parking spots than other commercial areas, such as malls and commercial strips. Check out [this parking study](#) from Oklahoma City and other parking study examples in the [Section Resources](#).

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### THE POWER OF PARKING STUDIES

As a Main Street leader, you may hear complaints about the type, supply, and location of parking in your district. A parking study can help you understand the realities of these issues to best address the community's concerns and to solve any actual parking problem. Specifically, a parking study can help you:

- // Quantify the actual supply and demand in your district.
- // Determine parking demand and behavior.
- // Project future parking demand.
- // Create new tools for your Main Street program, such as an accurate base map of land uses, building inventory, parking, and street circulation.
- // Survey the community's thoughts and priorities for the district, in addition to parking.
- // Identify weak demand areas and evaluate which underused lots may be good locations for compatible infill or greenspace projects.

## Methodology of a Parking Study

Parking studies can be informal and abbreviated or longer-term and more involved. Either your organization or your municipality—or both!—can lead the study. No matter the length, formality, or leadership, all parking studies should generally follow this methodology:

- Mapping
- Data collection
- Survey and analysis of parking behavior
- Survey and analysis of parkers' thoughts and concerns about the district and parking
- Anticipated future development
- Analysis of land use in relation to current and future goals
- Recommendations
- Management strategy for implementing recommendations

## THE FUTURE OF PARKING

As more people choose environmentally-friendly transportation options such as biking, walking, and public transit, and as more shoppers choose online or small business retailers over malls for their shopping needs, communities are rethinking parking policies across the country.

Some examples of policy change concepts include:

- // Making the minimum parking requirement the maximum requirement;
- // Abolishing parking minimums and leaving the creation of parking facilities up to developers;
- // Making developers reduce auto uses by specific percentages; and
- // Supporting mixed-use—including infill development, higher densities that are appropriate to the downtown, rather than suburban environment.

**For additional information, research, and articles on *Commercial District Planning and Design*, please visit the [Section Resources](#).**

## The Economic Cost of Excessive Parking

Excessive parking, demonstrated when a parking lot has too many continuously empty parking spaces and/or is underutilized during business hours, indicates that your Main Street district's land is not being used efficiently and not valued as much as it could be. Knowing the existing parking ratio will help in determining whether or not your community has excessive parking. See the [Section Resources](#) for videos and resources explaining the high cost of free parking.

The quality and condition of the buildings in your downtown or neighborhood commercial district matter. The built environment not only visually communicates community character, vitality, and culture, but directly impacts the economic viability of your district.

While architecture and design can seem like a realm best left to specialists, Main Street leaders have a crucial role to play in guiding decisions that impact the physical appearance of a district. You should be equipped with the basics on building architecture and design so that you can successfully advocate for the continued use of older and historic building stock, set high, consistent standards for rehabilitations and new construction projects, and understand the historic preservation tools and incentives available.

This section covers a number of topic related to building architecture and design, including:

- // Building Rehabilitation
- // Taming Teardowns
- // Historic Preservation Tools and Incentives

## BUILDING REHABILITATION

Many communities use [The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties](#) as the starting point for guiding Main Street building design. The Standards offer four distinct approaches to the treatment of historic properties:

**PRESERVATION:** using measures necessary to “sustain the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property.” Properties are stabilized, with sensitive treatment of bringing buildings up to code and upgrading systems. Ongoing maintenance is a priority.

**REHABILITATION:** making repairs, alterations, and additions that allow for the continued use of a property while still preserving historic, cultural, or architectural elements. Often called “adaptive reuse” or “adaptive use,” rehabilitation is the approach most often used in older and historic commercial districts as it is a practical way to make commercial buildings economically productive again.

**RESTORATION:** removing elements, as well as making repairs or reconstructing important missing elements, to depict a property as it appeared during a particular period of time.

**RECONSTRUCTION:** replicating a non-surviving historic structure as it appeared at a particular time.

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**Making the Case:** There are environmental, social, and economic benefits of rehabilitating buildings. See Section 3 for succinct messaging, talking points, and relevant research to support your efforts to advocate for building reuse.

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At a minimum, Main Street leaders should be familiar with [The Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#) so that you can offer advice to building owners and advocate for quality design in your district. Building rehabilitation efforts include everything from relatively inexpensive repainting or new signage to more complex and expensive projects like repairing windows or rebuilding cornices. The Standards are to be applied in a reasonable manner, taking into consideration economic and technical feasibility.

1. A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.
2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.
3. Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.

4. Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historical significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a historic property shall be preserved.
6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials.
7. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.
8. Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

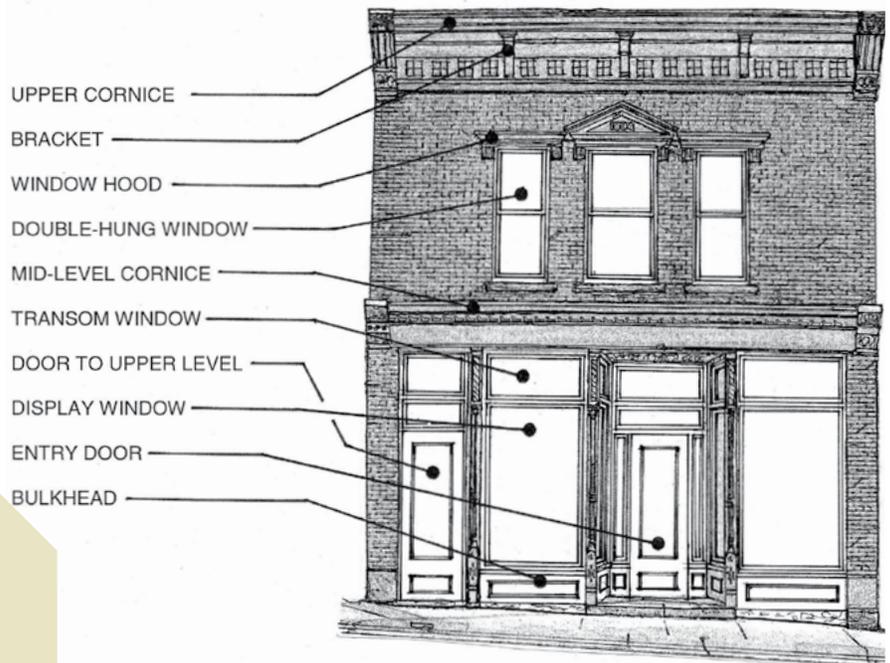
Main Street leaders should also be very familiar with the [Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines](#) when undertaking any rehabilitation or new construction project. See next page for more details.

Although architectural styles and their elements differ from building to building, and from region to region, most buildings were originally constructed with similar elements and divided into similar segments: the storefront, the upper facade, and the cornice. These elements work together to create a total composition, providing each building with a distinct identity and contributing to the corridor's overall sense of place and character. Understanding the various elements of older and historic building facades is essential to ensuring they are properly rehabilitated and maintained.

For guidance, check out the [National Park Service/ Technical Preservation Service's Preservation Briefs](#). Covering preservation topics from repointing mortar joints to paint problems to rehabilitating historic storefronts, the briefs offer practical guidance to help building owners accomplish the most appropriate treatment for their buildings.

**GET TO KNOW: Main Street Architects and Designers**

Architects and design professionals in the Main Street America Network have had a professional networking group for many years, where colleagues ask questions and share their work and best practices. This group of experts bring decades of experience to bear, so they are an excellent group to connect to regarding general Main Street design questions.



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## ACCESSIBILITY AND THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

Prior to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, most states and building codes had accessibility provisions, but those rules only applied when construction was initiated by an owner.

With ADA, owners of existing buildings that are occupied by “public accommodations”—any business that provides goods and services to the public—have an obligation to make their buildings more accessible whenever it is “readily achievable,” meaning, without much difficulty or expense.

According to the [Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines \(ADAAG\)](#), work usually considered readily achievable includes: lowering paper towel dispensers in restrooms, installing offset hinges to make doorways wider, replacing door knobs with lever handles, installing ramps, and other minor modifications. Both ADA and building code provisions that regulate accessible design features, dimensions, and standards are virtually the same, but ADA is enforced by the U.S. Department of Justice and can be applied retroactively.

While new construction must fully comply, there is some flexibility for older and historic buildings. If standard ADAAG requirements cannot be met without harming the historic elements, minimal requirements can be met. By working with people with disabilities as well as with preservation professionals, engineers, and building inspectors, the property owner can identify modifications that will create the greatest accessibility while maintaining the building’s historic integrity.

ADA covers a wide range of design-related elements, including signage, shelving and counter heights, handle design, turnstiles, and more. See the [2010 ADA Design Standards](#), and the [ADA Guide for Small Business](#) for more details.

Business or property owners can update their buildings to be more ADA compliant by:

- Completing and continually updating a checklist that identifies ADA-related deficiencies in a building and laying out a plan for making readily achievable corrections. Download the ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal [here](#).
- Consulting community members for simple ways the store layout can be shifted to accommodate greater maneuverability.

- Providing alternative means to access goods and services (curb service, home delivery, etc.).
- Keeping the path of travel in stores or hallways free of obstacles or clutter.
- Educating employees about ADA regulations and what to do if a person with disabilities needs assistance.

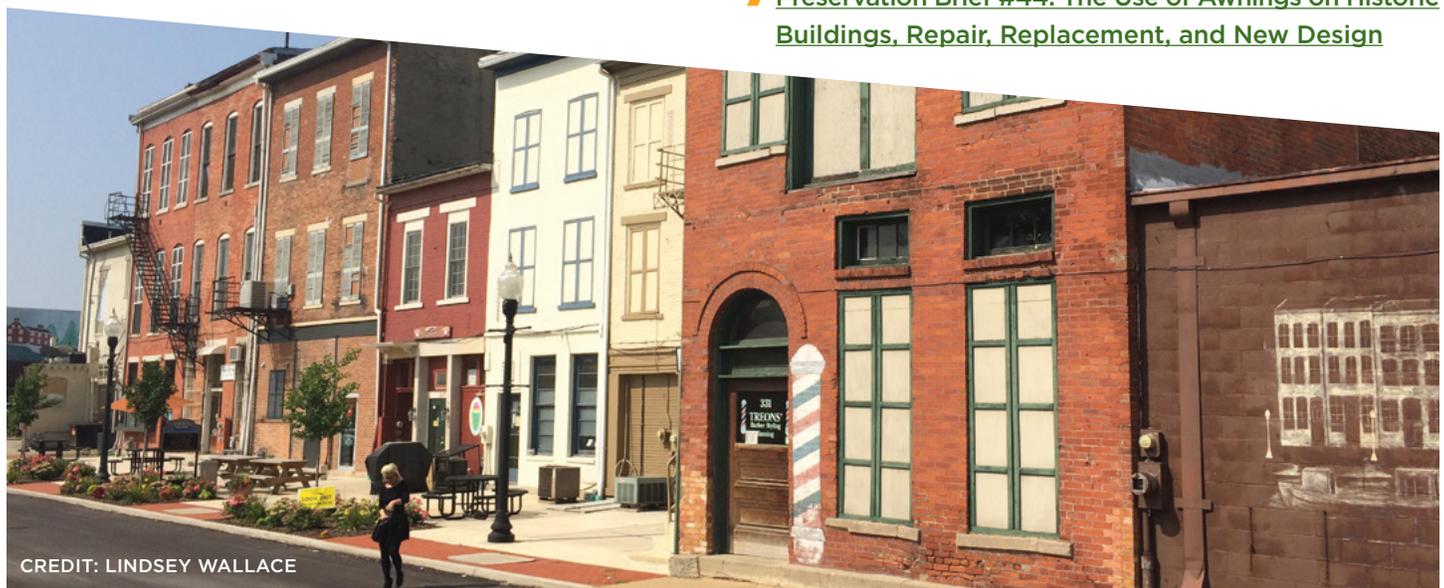
## ALLEYS AND REAR ENTRANCES

The alley-side and rear entrances of buildings are often forgotten aspects of building improvements, but as much consideration should be given to the appearance of these areas as to the storefront. Unlike the front façade, however, visual improvements here can often be done at a lower cost.

Cleaning and/or painting the walls, adding lighting, replacing the entry doors, adding a simple awning, and installing attractive enclosures that conceal dumpsters, meters, and condensing units make a world of a difference. Some business owners take it one step further by creating outdoor patios or using landscaping to create safe and inviting entrances for their customers.

Alley improvements frequently become necessary during streetscape construction projects. More often than not, the front entrances to businesses are temporarily inaccessible. This could be devastating for businesses unless alternative entrances are provided. In other cases, if a front entrance is raised or has steps, rear entrances can often be retrofitted to create an accessible route into the building.

Alleys also often provide on-site parking for the building's tenants or customers. This extra parking can be an important asset to the entire district so these areas should be well lit at night and wayfinding signage should clearly indicate the type of parking (private or customer) and direct the driver to the lots.



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## SIGNS AND AWNINGS

Signs on Main Street project an image of the buildings, businesses, and the district as a whole. Signs must reflect the character of the business they represent, fit in with the building to which they are attached, and be compatible in scale, quality, and design with the other signs in the district. To ensure quality sign design on your Main Street, your sign ordinance should regulate size, location, height, width, quantity, and type of sign allowed. It should also include permit requirements, appeal procedures, and descriptions of what needs to be done with non-conforming, deteriorated, or abandoned signs. However, sign ordinances may not dictate content, since this is protected by the First Amendment.

For useful resources on signage, awnings, and more, check out:

- /// [The American Sign Museum](#)
- /// [Keeping Up Appearances \(1995\)](#)
- /// [Preservation Brief #25: The Preservation of Historic Signs](#)
- /// [Preservation Brief #44: The Use of Awnings on Historic Buildings, Repair, Replacement, and New Design](#)

## Sign Types

In general, signs should have a simple design and limited information so they are easy to read. The following are examples of appropriate sign types for Main Street:

**HISTORIC SIGNS:** These original signs should be restored and preserved when possible. Many sign manufacturers have the capabilities to perform such restorations. CREDIT: MAIN STREET PINESDALE

**WALL MURALS AND GHOST SIGNS:** Ghost signs are painted advertising signs located on the side walls of historic buildings. Whenever possible, these signs should either be preserved in their current state or restored to their original splendor. CREDIT: JOHN WARD

**PROJECTING SIGNS:** Also known as blade or shingle signs, these two-sided signs are often made of hand-painted, medium-density overlay (MDO) plywood; wood; foam; or metal. Typically, they are mounted at least seven feet above the sidewalk, and project out three to four feet from the facade. Both projecting and flush-mounted signs are usually lit externally by separate light fixtures, such as gooseneck lights. These are the easiest signs for pedestrians to see on a street. CREDIT: LINDSEY WALLACE

**FLUSH-MOUNTED SIGNS:** These signs are attached to or painted directly on the wall, canopy, or cornice. They are often made of hand-painted MDO plywood, sandblasted or carved wood, sandblasted or carved foam, raised letters, or metal. Size and placement are crucial for this type of sign—they should not conceal important building elements. This sign type is the easiest to see from directly across the street. CREDIT: LINDSEY WALLACE

**FREESTANDING SIGNS:** This sign type is often located on the fringes of downtown or at gas stations where there isn't a zero setback. These signs should not be the pole-mounted signs seen along highways, but should be scaled for pedestrians. They are often made of MDO plywood, wood, or brick and/or stone columns surrounded by landscaping. CREDIT: JOHN A. KINNAIRD



**WINDOW SIGNS:** There are two main types of window signs: window lettering painted or applied directly to the interior side of the glass and interior-hung signs. Both are appropriate, but neither should take up more than 25 to 30 percent of the glass area, which allows shoppers to see inside. This sign type is highly effective in attracting the attention of pedestrians. CREDIT: NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION



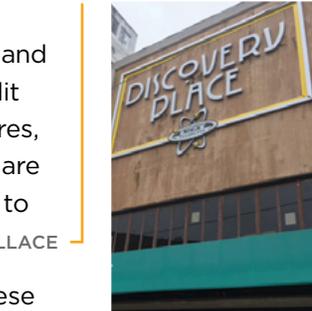
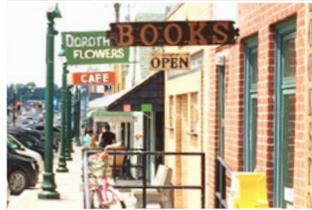
**NEON SIGNS:** Neon signs add light and vibrancy to the street at night. Both exterior-mounted neon signs and neon signs placed inside windows can be used. Neon window signs should not take up more than 25 to 30 percent of the window area. CREDIT: CAMELLIA DIGITAL



**BANNERS:** Most communities include banners, frequently on lampposts, as part of their streetscape improvements, but banners can also be used as signs. CREDIT: CHARLESTON EAST END MAIN STREET



**SANDWICH BOARDS:** This sign type is a portable freestanding sign and can effectively capture the attention of pedestrians. They should be custom made and reflect the character of the business. Their placement should not interfere with pedestrian traffic. CREDIT: DOWNTOWN FRANKLIN ASSOCIATION



In most cases, the following types of signs are considered inappropriate in Main Street contexts:

- // **Internally lit signs:** Internally lit signs are discouraged because the plastic and aluminum materials used in this type of sign do not blend well with the natural building materials of historic buildings.
- // **Oversized signs:** Signs should never conceal architectural elements; they should fit within logical spaces on a building and match the proportions of the building's elements.
- // **Reader boards/electronic signs:** With the exception of theater marquees, reader boards on signs, when allowed, should be limited to no more than 20 percent of the total sign area, including the sign structure.
- // **Flashing signs:** Signs on Main Street should be compatible with each other; none should stand out over the rest. To maintain a level of continuity, flashing signs are discouraged.

## TAMING TEARDOWNS

There are many reasons why some property owners neglect the continued care of their historic buildings—perhaps they don't understand proper maintenance or how inappropriate changes negatively affect the entire district. As the Main Street leader, you must communicate the importance of proper building maintenance and care so that the district's building stock lasts for generations to come.

Building maintenance and improvements are necessary for more than aesthetic reasons:

- // They protect the building from deteriorating and failing over time;
- // They deal with problems, like leaks or loose roof tiles, before they become catastrophic and expensive; and
- // They prevent the loss of value that comes when a building deteriorates.

How can communities help encourage maintenance?

- // Create minimum maintenance ordinances to ensure that buildings are maintained to at least a minimal degree;

- // Allow a portion of any preservation incentive to be used for maintenance issues or code compliance;
- // Include proper maintenance and repair techniques in their design guidelines so building owners will know the most appropriate methods and avoid the damaging ones;
- // Make it clear to building owners that if a building is neglected for too long, the city may deem it unsafe and call for its demolition at the owner's expense; and
- // Allow for more flexibility in zoning regulations if an owner of a historic building invests in capital improvements and creates a maintenance agreement in the district IF major capital improvements and an approved maintenance plan are developed and committed to.

While sometimes necessary, building demolition is damaging to the streetscape, and an irreversible action. Once gone, a historic building can never be replaced, and it leaves a hole in the urban fabric. Therefore, demolition should be a last resort for situations where the building has suffered irreparable structural damage and is a legitimate safety concern. Similarly, demolition of a historic building solely to make way for a parking lot is rarely, if ever, a legitimate reason.

When historic buildings in your community are threatened with demolition, preservation advocates, such as Main Street organizations, need to spring into action. Very often, a demolition threat takes people by surprise, creating a "preservation emergency." Before emergencies arise, however, Main Street leaders and preservation advocates should:

- // Organize;
- // Know the local process for obtaining a demolition permit and who makes those decisions;
- // Know about local ordinances that may or may not allow demolition;
- // Educate local elected officials regularly on the value of preservation;
- // Compile information on local historic resources so when threatened, you can prove their significance; and

- Investigate whether or not your community would benefit from a demolition by neglect ordinance. These types of ordinances make it possible for a city to enforce maintenance requirements on derelict properties or, in some cases, seize them through eminent domain. See the [Section Resources](#) for examples.

When dealing with a preservation emergency, Main Street leaders can use additional tactics to advocate for positive outcomes:

- Alert the media;
- Start a petition;
- Track the issue online through blogs;
- Write editorials for local media;
- Meet with the party threatening the property to explore alternatives;
- Lead a public tour of the property to raise awareness about its importance to the district; and
- Seek a suitable new economic use for the building by either recruiting a new tenant or helping an existing business expand.

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION TOOLS AND INCENTIVES

Historic preservation has always been at the heart of what Main Street programs do – it helps set the Main Street Approach apart from other revitalization frameworks, drives economic activity, and celebrates elements that make communities special. As a Main Street leader, you should learn what local resources already exist in your community to support preservation and quality design, whether it be a sign ordinance or local historic preservation commission, as well as understand what state and federal preservation tools and incentives could apply to projects in your community. Learning what exists and what is needed helps you plan next steps, avoid duplication, tap into the experience and expertise of other groups, and avoid stepping on any toes.

### Get to Know: State Historic Preservation Offices

The state historic preservation office (SHPO) is a state governmental function created by the United States federal government in 1966 under Section 101 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). Your state's SHPO is your primary go-to for information on federal and state preservation tools and incentives. The National Conference of State Historic Preservation Offices maintains an [online, state-by-state directory](#) for easy searching.



CREDIT: HERITAGE OHIO



CREDIT: MAIN STREET IOWA

The following are the most common tools, programs, and incentives that can help Main Street programs protect irreplaceable assets:

### DESIGN GUIDELINES

Local design guidelines are essential in your district because they create a blueprint for all future developments and improvements. They are a “one-stop” shop for property owners, contractors, carpenters, sign manufacturers, and other trades people who may not have experience rehabbing buildings or designing appropriate signs for historic commercial districts.

Design guidelines should include:

- // A map of the district;
- // Local building styles;
- // Pertinent local ordinances;
- // Pertinent local and state building codes;
- // Local permit procedures;
- // Local design review process;
- // All local incentives and application processes;
- // Contact information for the state historic preservation office, local preservation commission, and your Main Street organization; and
- // Contact information for building inspectors, code officials, bankers, contractors, etc.



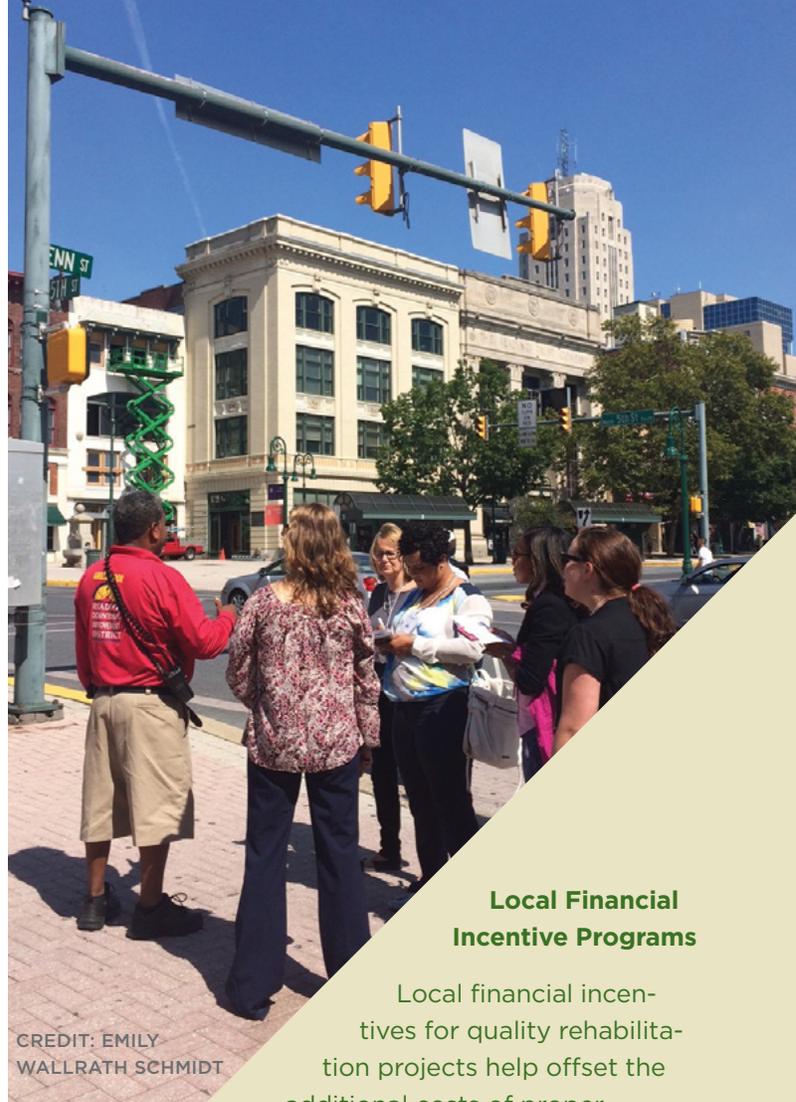
The Secretary of Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties serves as an excellent resource for state and local preservation leaders as they create their own design guidelines.

On their own, guidelines are not legally binding, but you can strengthen them in a couple ways:

- // Incorporate them into local historic preservation or landmarks ordinance, a sign ordinance, and any other local land-use ordinance or overlay zoning requirements, so that any building permit issued will be required to follow them.
- // Incorporate them as required review for any project seeking support from financial incentive programs.

Design guidelines walk a fine line—they should not be too stringent (property owners may bristle by “being told what to do,” or find the guidelines too complicated to follow), nor should they be so general that they lack the ability to guide decision-making. You also need to make sure to enforce the design standards. Inappropriate design changes in the district can negatively affect property and/or resale values of buildings and possibly hinder a property owner’s ability to attract or retain quality tenants. Low-quality or poor design changes can also disrupt the appearance of the entire district, and thus its ability to attract potential shoppers, tenants, visitors, and investors.

To help your design committee succeed with its work, consult with preservation design experts whenever possible. These experts can include the National Main Street Center, Main Street architects and design specialists, State Historic Preservation Office staff members, or local architectural firms with experience in historic preservation and design. Perhaps most importantly, keep in mind that design guidelines are living documents. They should be reviewed annually and revised when needed by a design review board made up of local stakeholders.



CREDIT: EMILY WALLRATH SCHMIDT

### Local Financial Incentive Programs

Local financial incentives for quality rehabilitation projects help offset the additional costs of proper restoration versus sub-par alterations, and thus act as a “carrot” to encourage proper design. For these financial programs to be effective, the proposed project must be approved by the design review board before it receives any of the incentives. Two common financial incentives Main Street leaders often help develop are:

— **Loan pools**, such as façade improvement loan programs and building improvement loan programs. A façade improvement loan program is used for façade renovations, signage, etc., while building improvement loan program is frequently used for building maintenance, code compliance, interior renovations, structural repairs, etc.

— **Grant programs**. Typically, these are 50-50 matching grants for improvements such as façade renovations, signs, awnings, etc. Grant programs generally range from \$500 to \$5,000 or more per project. The money for these programs often comes from various fund-raising efforts, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, and private foundations.

## INAPPROPRIATE ALTERATIONS

When guidelines are not followed, the design committees of a Main Street organization must deal with inappropriate alterations, which come in many forms. In general, these are alterations that either spoil the overall composition of the building or destroy or conceal historic building elements.

### COMMON INAPPROPRIATE ALTERATIONS INCLUDE:

**Concealing historic materials.** This is a common repair mistake that negatively alters the overall character of the building and can be damaging as well. If structural issues are not addressed, they can lead to bigger problems that could jeopardize the entire building and become a safety issue.

**Replacing historic materials unnecessarily.** The golden rule for historic building elements is to repair rather than replace them whenever possible. Repairing the original element usually costs less and results in a longer lasting and higher quality product. Upper-floor windows are a perfect example. Most historic windows were made of wood, which is relatively easy and straightforward to repair, even when drastically deteriorated. Wood frames have a much better insulating value than vinyl or metal—when air leakage occurs, it is usually the caulking and glazing that need repair, not the window itself. And for upper-story windows, one of the best ways to improve the insulating value is to install either interior or exterior storm windows. Often, these steps will give the original window an equal or greater insulating value than any new window.

**Incompatible replacement elements.** When historic building elements like windows, siding, masonry, trim, cornices, etc., are replaced, the new elements should be compatible to the original in size, profile, material, or quality. When historic elements are deteriorated beyond repair, the replacement should duplicate the original in all aspects.

**Cleaning of historic materials.** As a general rule, all elements should be cleaned using the gentlest means possible. This means no sandblasting or high-pressure water blasting, which damage historic building elements. For proper cleaning techniques, refer to the [National Park Service's Technical Preservation Brief #1 and #6](#).

**Color.** Because color is usually reversible, allow property owners to choose their building colors. It should not be the role of a Main Street leader to dictate a color scheme; rather, you could offer guidance on appropriate color selection.

**Paint.** While color guidelines can be flexible, certain considerations should be given with actual paint. Most importantly, previously unpainted masonry should be left unpainted. If used, paint should complement the historic building materials (brick, stone, and wood).



ALWAYS TRY TO REPAIR  
RATHER THAN REPLACE  
HISTORIC WINDOWS.



SHERIDAN, WYOMING'S HISTORIC MAIN STREET DISTRICT IS HOME TO OVER 30 BUILDINGS ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER.  
CREDIT: SHERIDAN TRAVEL AND TOURISM

## DESIGN REVIEW

Design review is often the last step in assuring that building renovations, new construction, and signs adhere to your design standards. If a design is approved, a Certificate of Appropriateness is issued and forwarded to the local building inspector or the entity providing the funds, depending on who requires the review. If the plans are not approved, the applicant must make any necessary changes and resubmit the proposal.

Many communities defer design review responsibility to the local Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). An HPC is created through a historic preservation or landmarks ordinance and its members are appointed by the chief elected official of the municipality. Ideally, someone from your Main Street organization should be on the HPC and vice versa, so that your Main Street organization and other local preservation leaders are on the same page for design review in your district. Assisting applicants presents a fantastic opportunity for you as the Main Street leader to facilitate the process and increase the willingness of developers and property owners to invest in the district. Becoming a one-stop information source and acting as a liaison with municipal offices will also help build support for your organization.

## Preservation Ordinances:

Preservation ordinances formalize the processes of identifying, designating, preserving, and protecting a community's historic resources through design review when potential renovations or rehabilitations arise. A typical historic preservation or landmark ordinance includes:

- A statement of purpose;
- Description of the make-up, powers and duties of the historic preservation commission;
- Criteria and procedures for designating historic properties or landmarks;
- Procedures and guidelines for regulating alterations and demolitions to designated properties;
- Methods of enforcement; and
- Provisions for recognizing and marking designated properties and landmarks.

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Per the National Park Service (NPS), the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) is the official list of the nation's historic places worth of preservation. Authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, NRHP is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America's historic and archaeological resources. Entries are officially nominated by the SHPO and submitted to the NPS. Nomination forms are prepared by local citizens, building owners, historic preservation consultants, or by the SHPO itself.

### There are four types of National Register listings:

- /// **Individually listed property:** This type of listing is “important” in American history, culture, archaeology, or architecture. For instance, the building may represent a unique architectural style, or it may have been the site of an important event or the home of a significant resident.
- /// **National historic district:** Historic districts are geographically definable areas that possess a significant concentration of sites or properties united aesthetically by design or past events. In order to be established, historic districts need the approval of property owners within the district; if more than 50% of the owners object, they can block the listing. Your Main Street district may also be a national historic district listed in the NRHP.

### Certified Local Government Certification

A common certification sought by Main Street leaders, Certified Local Government (CLG) certification by the SHPO and the NPS recognizes that your community meets certain criteria for historic preservation tools and activities.

A CLG community is eligible to apply for Preservation Fund Subgrants, and can formally comment on National Register nominations before they are sent to the SHPO. The Preservation Fund Subgrants typically range from \$2,000 to \$8,000 and are reimbursable, contingent upon proof they were used for approved activities. The subgrants can be used to pay for architectural/historical surveys, National Register nominations, educational activities, comprehensive planning, and administration of preservation programs.

Eligibility criteria, application tips, and further detail can be found on the [National Park Service website](#).

- /// **National landmark designation:** This type of listing is reserved for buildings, sites, structures, and objects of national significance to American history or culture. All National Historic Landmarks are included in the National Register, and examples range from Pearl Harbor to Mount Vernon.
- /// **Multiple property submission:** This type of listing groups properties that share a common theme. A multiple property submission (MPS) must satisfy certain basic criteria for the group of properties to be included in the NRHP. Every MPS must have a Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPD), which establishes the basis of eligibility for related properties. Properties nominated as part of an MPS can be submitted simultaneously or over time.

### Benefits of the NRHP listing include:

- /// **Protection of investment.** Historic districts listed in the NRHP tend to thrive economically after the designation, see Section 3 for more information.
- /// **Incentives.** Owners of individually listed or contributing buildings may be eligible for state and federal rehabilitation tax credits, tax deductions for easement donations, and property tax abatements for the rehabilitation of their buildings. Federal and individual state requirements vary.

## THE FEDERAL HISTORIC TAX CREDIT

Since 1976, the National Park Service (NPS) has administered the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credit (HTC) program in partnership with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and state Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO). These tax incentives attract new private investment to the historic cores of cities and towns across the U.S., and also generate jobs, enhance property values, and provide additional property tax revenues for local governments.

Through this program, abandoned, underused, and deteriorated properties have been restored to life in a manner that maintains their historic character. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's federal HTC resource page compiles multiple resources that demonstrate the transformative impact the HTC has had in downtowns and commercial districts across the country. [Learn more.](#)

### Fast facts about the HTC:

- // The amount of credit available under this program equals 20% of the qualifying expenses of your rehabilitation.
- // The tax credit is only available to properties that will be used for a business or other income-producing purpose, and a "substantial" amount must be spent rehabilitating the historic building.
- // The building needs to be certified as a historic structure by the NPS, aka listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
- // The SHPO or NPS must review and certify that the proposed rehabilitation project adheres to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards
  - // Many states offer an additional tax credit, usually between 10-20%. [Go here](#) to see if your state offers an additional tax credit.
  - // More important details can be found on the [NPS' Technical Preservation Services website.](#)

### // Grants.

The owners of individually listed or contributing buildings may be eligible for certain public or private preservation grants.

Anyone in your community interested in pursuing this tax credit should contact your state's SHPO well in advance of the project so that the SHPO can give advice on the project design and scope and help guide the applicant through the process. There is a three-part application process, and the first and second parts should be submitted preferably at least 60 days before the rehabilitation is due to begin. See details on that process [here](#).

- // **Protection of property.** Listing provides limited protection from adverse effects by federally funded, licensed, or assisted projects, such as demolition for a federal highway project. On its own, listing in the National Register cannot usually prevent a building from being torn down or altered inappropriately; nor does the NRHP listing itself require a building owner to get design review and approval of renovations to the building, unless the threat of demolition or inappropriate renovations comes from a federally-affiliated program.\*

\*These protections come with local register listings, which usually require review and approval from the local preservation commissions. The exceptions are school districts that receive federal funds, or city, county, and state governments (unless covered by a state preservation law) that obtain federal permits, funds, or licenses for a project.

[Learn more about how properties get listed in the NRHP, including eligibility, guidelines, and process details.](#)

## STATE REGISTERS OF HISTORIC PLACES

Most states maintain a state register of historic places that, for the most part, mimics the NRHP. Listing in these registers does not restrict the building owner from demolishing or altering the building (unless covered by a state preservation law), but does provide limited protection from adverse effects by state funded, licensed, or assisted projects, such as demolition for a state highway project.

## LOCAL DESIGNATION

Local historic designation and local landmarks or preservation ordinances provide the best protection for historic resources and regulate what can be done to historic buildings, including demolition. Typically, the task of designating local historic districts or properties falls to the local Historic Preservation Commission.

### Research Resources

Every historic designation requires a well-researched nomination that demonstrates a property's historic significance. While you may not be the person doing research for these nominations, it is useful for you to understand what resources are available to help make the case for your older and historic building's significance.

**SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAPS** are primarily used to track a building's footprint, materials, and siting over time. They can be found online at the Library of Congress, county clerk's offices, town halls, libraries, and local historical societies.

**HISTORIC PHOTOS** demonstrate the building's changes over time, as well as any historically significant events that took place or people who lived there. Sources for historic photos vary, but historical societies, local universities, libraries, town halls, etc. usually have caches available for research.

**PROPERTY RECORDS/DEEDS** help create a chain of title for the historic property, showing who owned it and when. County clerk and deeds offices are excellent sources for this information.

**TELEPHONE DIRECTORIES** show who lived in a property and when. Local historical societies and libraries often have these available for research.

**ARCADIA PUBLISHING HISTORY BOOKS** are useful snapshots of communities across the country, usually written by local historians and academics, featuring collections of old photographs and other visuals.

## Preservation Revolving Funds

Used by preservation organizations to save or rehabilitate historic properties, preservation revolving funds are initially seeded with assets in the form of capital or property and can then take the form of an acquisition or loan. They are replenished with monies from the sale of properties or repayment of loans in order to continue acquiring more endangered historic properties.

Strategically deployed, these funds extend beyond preservation and become a comprehensive community revitalization tool. According to the Savannah College of Art and Design's ***Revolving Fund Impact Report*** that examined the economic impact of 20 preservation funds across the country, nearly 5 million square feet of usable space has been saved and reactivated since these funds began—generating more than \$3 million in property tax revenue.

**For additional information, research, and articles on *Building Architecture and Design*, please visit the [Section Resources](#).**

## ADDITIONAL TOOLS TO CONSIDER

### Adaptive Reuse Ordinances

In 1997, the State of New Jersey created the first [Rehabilitation Subcode](#). This code helps guide technical requirements for appropriate adaptive use of older and historic buildings in the state.

Between 1999-2003, Los Angeles adopted an adaptive reuse ordinance, which has helped demonstrate how historic preservation can be a strong economic development tool. The ordinance itself encourages rehabilitation of older and historic buildings by not subjecting adaptive use projects to the same zoning and code requirements that apply to new construction. Read more about the ordinance and local case studies [here](#).

### U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Brownfields Program

[According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#), *a brownfield is a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.*

[EPA's Brownfields Program](#) helps communities redevelop these sites by providing direct funding for brownfields assessment, cleanup, revolving loans, and environmental job training.

For Main Street districts, a brownfield—like a former mill or factory site—offers a great deal of economic potential if dealt with appropriately. The EPA's Brownfields Program offers funding and technical assistance to transform your underdeveloped or hazardous sites into income-producing properties. [Read more about brownfields information near you.](#)



**Rehabilitating older and historic buildings is the ultimate form of recycling.**

When buildings are demolished and hauled to the landfill, they lose their embodied energy, which is the total energy required for the extraction, processing, manufacture and delivery of materials to the building site. Further, new construction is almost always more energy intensive than building rehabilitation even when built with recycled materials and energy efficient features.

**Energy efficient retrofits of older and historic commercial buildings can save business owners money.**

The Preservation Green Lab’s 2013 study [Realizing the Energy Efficiency Potential of Small Buildings](#), found that profitable investments in energy conservation could generate \$30 billion in annual cost savings, improving the financial performance of millions of small businesses throughout the United States.

Profitable energy efficient retrofits can run the gamut from simple behavioral changes to larger-scale system retrofits.

Examples of energy-saving retrofits include:

- // Removing non-historic dropped ceilings and fixed-pane windows to allow the building to function as originally designed.
- // Restoring or rehabilitating light-and-air controlling features like over-door transoms, ceiling fans, and awnings.

**America Saves**

In 2013, the Preservation Green Lab (PGL) received a U.S. Department of Energy grant to create America Saves, a three-year research and development project of the energy savings potential of small older and historic commercial buildings. PGL partnered with the National Main Street Center and other partners to test the project in Main Street communities across the country. Check out this [online toolkit](#) to learn details about their findings.

- // Adding storm windows to maintain original windows and maximize energy savings.
- // Insulating perimeter walls and attics, and sealing up the building to reduce drafts.

See the [Section Resources](#) for additional low-cost and no-cost tips from the America Saves team on how business owners can save money and energy.

**The Greenest Building**

In 2012, the Preservation Green Lab of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, released [The Greenest Building: Quantifying the Environmental Value of Building](#)

[Reuse](#), a comprehensive study examining the environmental impacts of new construction and building reuse. Assessing seven different building types in four climate zones, the study found that in almost every case, the reuse of existing buildings results in fewer environmental impacts over their life spans compared to demolition and new construction. Conserving buildings avoids the environmental impacts associated with new construction, prevents demolition waste from entering landfills, and reduces sprawl by encouraging the revitalization of our existing communities. Further, historic buildings are often much more energy efficient than more contemporary buildings due to siting considerations and materials.

**Compact historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts use land more efficiently than their sprawling counterparts.**

According to the [U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED rating system for neighborhood development](#), compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods like Main Street districts provide many important environmental benefits.

Compact neighborhoods use land and infrastructure efficiently, preventing the loss of wildlife habitat and farmland and reducing the demand to extend basic services such as water, power, roads, and sewers to areas beyond downtown. Similarly, the denser nature of historic commercial districts and their typically multi-storied buildings result in lower utility costs and less demand for fossil-fuel-dependent power, light, and heat. Compact neighborhoods also reduce car-dependency due to their greater connectivity and design features such as sidewalks, trees, inviting facades, and small setbacks that encourage pedestrian activity.

**Advocating for Green Streetscapes**

Trees, plants, and green spaces aren’t just nice features to have, they are essential to the environmental sustainability of your downtown. They increase air quality, reduce rainwater runoff, and prevent and mitigate heat island effects.

**ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF QUALITY DESIGN**

For Main Street leaders, communicating how quality design positively impacts the economic vitality of a commercial district is often the most persuasive argument. The economic benefits of quality design have been studied, quantified, and proven on several fronts, including (but not limited to): direct investment, job creation, business recruitment and retention, and increased retail foot traffic.

**DIRECT INVESTMENT**

Since 1980, the National Main Street Center has been collecting statistics on [the economic benefits of Main Street programs across the country](#). Between 1980 and 2017:

- // \$74.73 billion have been reinvested;
- // 276,790 buildings have been rehabilitated;
- // 614,716 jobs have been created (net); and
- // 138,303 businesses have started (net).

Further, preservation projects result in direct investment into downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts as indicated by the incredible success of the Federal Historic Tax Credit (HTC). According to the National Trust of Historic Preservation, the HTC program has:

- // Created more than 2.4 million well-paying local jobs;
- // Leveraged \$131.8 billion in private investment in our communities;
- // Used \$25.2 billion in tax credits to generate more than \$29.8 billion in federal tax revenue; and
- // Preserved more than 42,293 buildings.



CREDIT: ANWAR SALEEM

## BUSINESS RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

In 2013, [the U.S. Small Business Administration \(SBA\) reported](#) that there were 28.8 million small businesses in the United States and that small businesses employ 48% percent of America's private-sector work force. Historic commercial districts are ideal physical locations for these small businesses, new entrepreneurs, and business incubators because they offer smaller storefront spaces that fit well with small business' size and affordability needs. This is true in rural communities as well as urban districts. According to the 2016 PlaceEconomics/NYC Landmarks Conservancy report [Historic Preservation: at The Core of a Dynamic New York City](#), jobs at small firms and start-up firms constitute a greater share of employment in historic districts than New York City as a whole.

A Main Street leader can help recruit and retain small businesses by advocating for quality building rehabilitations and ongoing maintenance. Transformational building rehabilitations often attract long-term tenants and additional customers, and encourage previously uninterested building owners to make changes or continue building maintenance in order to remain competitive.

Main Street leaders should also focus on quality streetscape improvements. Increasingly, business owners are deciding where to set up shop based on factors like quality of life and neighborhood appeal. Attractive districts that have quality, cohesive design elements send a strong signal to prospective business owners that the community has long-term economic potential. Likewise, Main Street leaders should engage existing business owners in design-related projects to cultivate their buy-in and feelings of ownership over the physical look of their district.

.....

No building is an island—its value is affected by its surroundings

.....

## INCREASED RETAIL FOOT TRAFFIC

As we explored in Section 1, well-designed streets slow down traffic and attract drivers to stop and stay in a downtown or neighborhood commercial district. Well-designed streets also encourage people to walk, bike, and/or take public transit, which also increases the amount of shopping. A 2016 study by [Community Builders and Colorado Department of Local Affairs](#) found that shoppers arriving by foot or bike spent 8.5%-25% more in local business districts than those arriving by car. See their [one-pager](#) for more important statistics.

## SOCIAL BENEFITS OF QUALITY DESIGN

Main Street is about creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, and visit. In other words, our work is about increasing the quality of life for people who live in our communities and making sure that visitors feel welcome and stay awhile. The physical elements of our downtowns impact connectivity, culture, and health, and it is an essential part of a Main Street leader's work to understand and promote the positive ways design affects our social well-being.

### CONNECTIVITY

Pedestrian-oriented communities like downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts promote social interaction and community building, which facilitate the bonds and personal relationships that are at the heart of fostering social sustainability.

Quality design supports connectivity by:

- /// Inviting intentional public engagement in planning processes and design selection with the goal of securing continued public buy-in and support.
- /// Engaging community volunteers in community placemaking projects.
- /// Fostering entrepreneurial growth and innovation through locating businesses in close proximity to one another.
- /// Encouraging neighborly interaction through public spaces and recreational areas.



CREDIT: DONNA LANGLEY

## CULTURE

Protecting a district's unique attributes, architecture, and history is integral to social sustainability. By maintaining and appropriately repurposing the original built fabric of communities and integrating unique cultural attributes in public art and district branding, a downtown or neighborhood commercial district preserves and celebrates its unique identity. Better yet, these tenets of quality design help create great places for community members to be proud of.

Quality design supports cultural identity in the following ways:

- // Preserving and appropriately rehabilitating historic and older buildings maintains the original built fabric and distinctive architecture of a commercial district.
- // Referencing a district's specific cultural attributes in public art projects and district branding (i.e. street banners and district logos) contributes to a sense of unique community identity.
- // Preservation and continued maintenance of older and historic buildings can reduce crime, especially building-specific crime like arson and property damage.
- // Preservation and adaptive use projects often require the specialized skills of traditional tradespeople like carpenters, bricklayers, and stonemasons.

## HEALTH

[Research from the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization](#) showed that a person's physical environment (ex. where a person lives) has a greater impact on their overall health than biology, behaviors, or health care. Where you live affects your access to healthy food and green space, your ability to walk or bike, and your opportunity to connect with other people.

Quality design supports healthy living in the following ways:

- // Dense, contained blocks support walkability.
- // Trailheads and other green spaces link people to nature and outdoor activities.
- // Parks and tree-lined streets can help reduce air pollution and air temperatures.

**For additional information, research, and articles on *Making the Case for Quality Design*, please visit the [Section Resources](#).**

Successful downtown revitalization requires laser-focused strategy, inclusive and sustained community engagement, and meaningful impact measurement. **The Main Street America technical services team—with decades of combined experience in the broad range of issues that impact Main Streets—can provide your program with the support you need to put those principles into practice.**



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## Our technical services team is here to help

We provide one-on-one coaching, tailored webinar training, and in-community engagements that will equip your organization with a framework for assessing your needs, identifying local assets, developing transformation strategies, and getting your community on the path to long-term prosperity.

Specific areas of expertise include:

- :: Comprehensive Main Street Approach planning and implementation**
- :: Advancing economic opportunity in urban commercial districts**
- :: Leadership development training**
- :: Fundraising, planning, and organizational assessment**
- :: Entrepreneurial ecosystem development**
- :: Design and placemaking guidance**
- :: And much more!**

Whether your program is getting off the ground or you are looking to take your revitalization effort to the next level, our team is here for you.

*Over the past 14 years, Michigan Main Street has been collaborating with the National Main Street Center as a key partner in the development of our program and services. The support from the leadership and field staff at the Center has helped elevate the Michigan Main Street program to what it has become.*

**LAURA KRIZOV,**  
Coordinator, Michigan Main  
Street Center, MEDC

**For more information, please contact Matt Wagner at [mwagner@savingplaces.org](mailto:mwagner@savingplaces.org).**

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