



MAIN STREET ORGANIZATIONS
CAN HELP MOVE COMMUNITIES
VISIONS FOR THEIR
DOWNTOWNS FORWARD, AS
HAS BEEN THE CASE IN...

OWOSSO

Narrative by John Hankerd, business owner, and Sue Osika, City of Owosso Mayor Pro Tem, and Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

"My name is John Hankerd and I came to Owosso when I was 18 years old to go to college. I wasn't from that far away, but at 18 years old, I wanted to get out of the house. Baker College had some dorms here, so I enrolled...and then fell in love with the town.

I also fell in love with a girl that I met in class, my wife, and I never left.

Right after college, I opened a little gift shop with my parents, which was a miserable failure. We ended up going into bankruptcy, but it was five years of the best learning experiences I've ever had in my life. At the time, it was quite heart wrenching to lose everything, but I learned way more than I learned in college. From there, I went out into the world and worked at corporate jobs for many years, then came back to Owosso to open a screen printing and embroidery business.

When I came back, which was 20-some years ago, I joined the DDA. Like every business owner, the first thing you think about is, 'How can I get involved in the community?' and at that time, the DDA was the only form of organization we had for our downtown.

Starting off there I was on a committee, then eventually the board. We used to have a volunteer luncheon or dinner once a year and we'd always bring in a guest speaker. That particular year, we brought in somebody from Michigan Main Street. They talked about this Main Street program and at that point I had never really even heard of it.

It sparked enough interest that we put a committee together to look into what it could do for us in Owosso. We also went to Clare and heard a presentation from their community about what Main Street does and how it was different from the DDA that we had.

I was used to government meetings, but at that presentation in Clare, there weren't any government people there at all: it was all community members who were volunteers and business owners. That really made me think that Main Street had something better than what we were doing.

From that point, we had to put together a presentation of why we thought we should be a Main Street community because they don't just let you say, 'We want to be a Main Street' and they say, 'Okay, here you go. Here's the book.' So we put together this big presentation with a lot of our community members and after that, we were accepted.



As a downtown business owner being here for 20 years, you notice when somebody new walks in. I talk to everybody, and the people that are from out of town are just amazed at how nice Owosso is, whether they've been to Curwood Castle or rode the train. People who aren't from here tend to see so much more than we see as residents.

The other day, I parked in one block and had to walk to another and I saw several people I knew along the way. To me, to revitalize is to go back to where people can park and walk to all the little specialty businesses that we have and interact with people they meet. My wife, who was born and raised here, says that used to be the thing to do on a Saturday: go downtown, park somewhere, and walk in you go to all these places. When I first came to Owosso, I didn't feel that, but we're starting to feel that again.

We have a parking lot right behind this building. At the one end of that, we put in a little park. It's got a water fountain and all these benches in it. This was done a little while ago, but that park now has people using it all the time. My store was directly kitty corner from it, so I could look out the front of my store anytime and see people there. The kids would be splashing their hands in the water fountain and there were always people there.

On any afternoon, we have an ice cream shop that's just a block away and people will sit there and have their ice cream. We show movies on the side of the building once in a while and we will fill up that park. It's just a great place for people to hang out and it's right in the center of our downtown.

My daughter has a few rentals right on the edge of downtown, and every time she's had an opening in one of her spaces, she's had over 100 applications for that one space. People want to be downtown. Even though she's not right downtown, she's right on the edge and people ask if she has anything closer to downtown. They like that convenience, so any housing we can put downtown, it'll be filled so we're really pushing that. We want people living in and using our downtown."

—John Hankerd, business owner



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Social Districts

"The social district works well, even in the wintertime. It's just a few blocks where someone can get a special cup to drink and walk around the main part of our downtown. We put it to use as well: we did our glow parade there. In our Main Street Plaza, we put up our Christmas tree. Santa Claus comes there the day after Thanksgiving and we have 1000s of people standing in the Main Street plaza.

But the social district was a change for people to adjust to. There will always be people who say, 'This is not good for our town. This is not the way to go.' But as a business owner downtown, when my street closes every single Saturday morning for the Farmers Market, it brings in a lot of people who might otherwise go to the grocery store out east of town to get their produce. Creating an opportunity for them to get fresh grown produce downtown brings them here, and businesses and the rest of the community benefit.

When the street closes, people can't drive and park in front of my store, so yes, there might be a bit of an inconvenience in that my customers can't park exactly where they want to. But for the community as a whole, it's a huge positive.

It's important to not just think about what's good for yourself as a business owner, but to think about what's good for the community. That's only going to help your bottom line and help get you more customers in the door."

—John Hankerd, business owner

What Do You Want to See in the Future?

"The direction we're heading in Owosso is really good between the development and promotion of things that we do downtown, and we see that trend continuing. There are so many new people here it's hard to say exactly what the future looks like, but luckily, we are a Main Street community and with all of our work plans and other things to keep us moving in the direction that we all want to go.

One of the things you see is a limited number of buildings that are open or available, but we see that moving 'up', too. We have to expand into those second and third floors to continue giving people places to live and operate businesses.

In our five-year vision, we see downtown Owosso being very vibrant. We want to keep the robust events to draw people in and be the place where people go for their entertainment.

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All our store owners are going to be doing well with full restaurants downtown and people from other communities sharing in and supporting what we have.”

—Sue Osika, Mayor Pro Tem, Owosso

Organization

“Most of all, the Main Street model helped us create a structured organization. Now, when a new business owner comes in asking to be involved, we’ve got opportunities for them to serve in the ways they want. Are they interested in promotional events? Are they interested in volunteering or recruiting volunteers for others? Are they into business development? Whatever their interest as a business owner, we can plug them into that with Main Street. Then having work plans in place helps give direction and make things happen.

The whole structure of Main Street is what really made the difference, and you don’t have to be a business owner to be involved in making the community better. For example, we have people with young families seeing the importance of having a great place to raise their children: they help out because they want to raise their kids in a place where people care about their town.”

- John Hankerd, business owner and Sue Osika, Mayor Pro Tem, Owosso





Michigan Main Street Story Series



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