

What is Main Street?

In the past 40 years, America's downtown business districts have changed dramatically. The creation of the interstate highway system and subsequent growth of suburban communities transformed the ways in which Americans live, work, and spend their leisure time. As a result of improved transportation routes, people found it easier to travel longer distances to work or to shop. Roads that once connected neighborhoods to downtown now carried residents to outlying strip malls and shopping centers. Downtown businesses closed or moved to the mall, shoppers disappeared, property values and sales tax revenues dropped. Some downtown business districts failed due to apathy. Neglected buildings, boarded-up storefronts and empty, trash filled streets gradually reinforced the public's perception that nothing was happening downtown and that nothing was worth saving there.

In many communities, merchants and property owners tried to halt the decline of the downtown by imitating the shopping malls that were taking away their business. They covered traditional commercial buildings in aluminum or plywood panels and hung garish, oversized signs onto upper-floor facades. Some communities even closed off the entire downtown to vehicular traffic in attempts to create pedestrian environments conducive to shopping. This contributed to further decline because it isolated downtown from consumers even more. Invariably these changes damaged the historic architectural fabric of the downtown, eroding the community's heritage and dissolving the unique character of downtown. The need to revitalize downtown commercial districts is clear. A healthy, viable downtown is crucial to the heritage, economic health, and civic pride of a community.

Concerned about continuing threats to traditional commercial architecture in economically weak downtown business districts across America, the National Trust for Historic Preservation launched the Main Street Project. A three-year demonstration project was begun in 1977 to study the reasons downtown business districts were dying and to identify the many factors that have an impact on downtown health. Three communities were chosen to participate in the study: Galesburg, Illinois, Madison, Indiana, and Hot Springs, South Dakota. During the demonstration program, the groundwork for the Main Street Approach to downtown revitalization was established. What became clear over the three years was the importance of a strong public-private partnership, a committed organization, a full-time program manager, a commitment to good design, quality promotional programs, and a coordinated, incremental process.

The National Main Street Center was established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1980 to share the successes of the three pilot communities with other communities throughout the United States. They have helped business districts across the country- build strong downtown economic development programs through historic preservation. The National Main Street Center provides on-site technical assistance to communities of all sizes, sponsors workshops and conferences, and publishes training materials. In 2000, the National Main Street Center celebrated it's 20th Anniversary at National Town Meeting in Boston, Massachusetts.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Main Street Center's parent organization, is the only national, private nonprofit organization chartered by Congress. The Trust is responsible for encouraging public participation in the preservation of sites, buildings, and objects significant in American history and culture.