

MAIN STREET AMERICA

Board Handbook

A practical guide to the board's role, responsibilities, and community impact.



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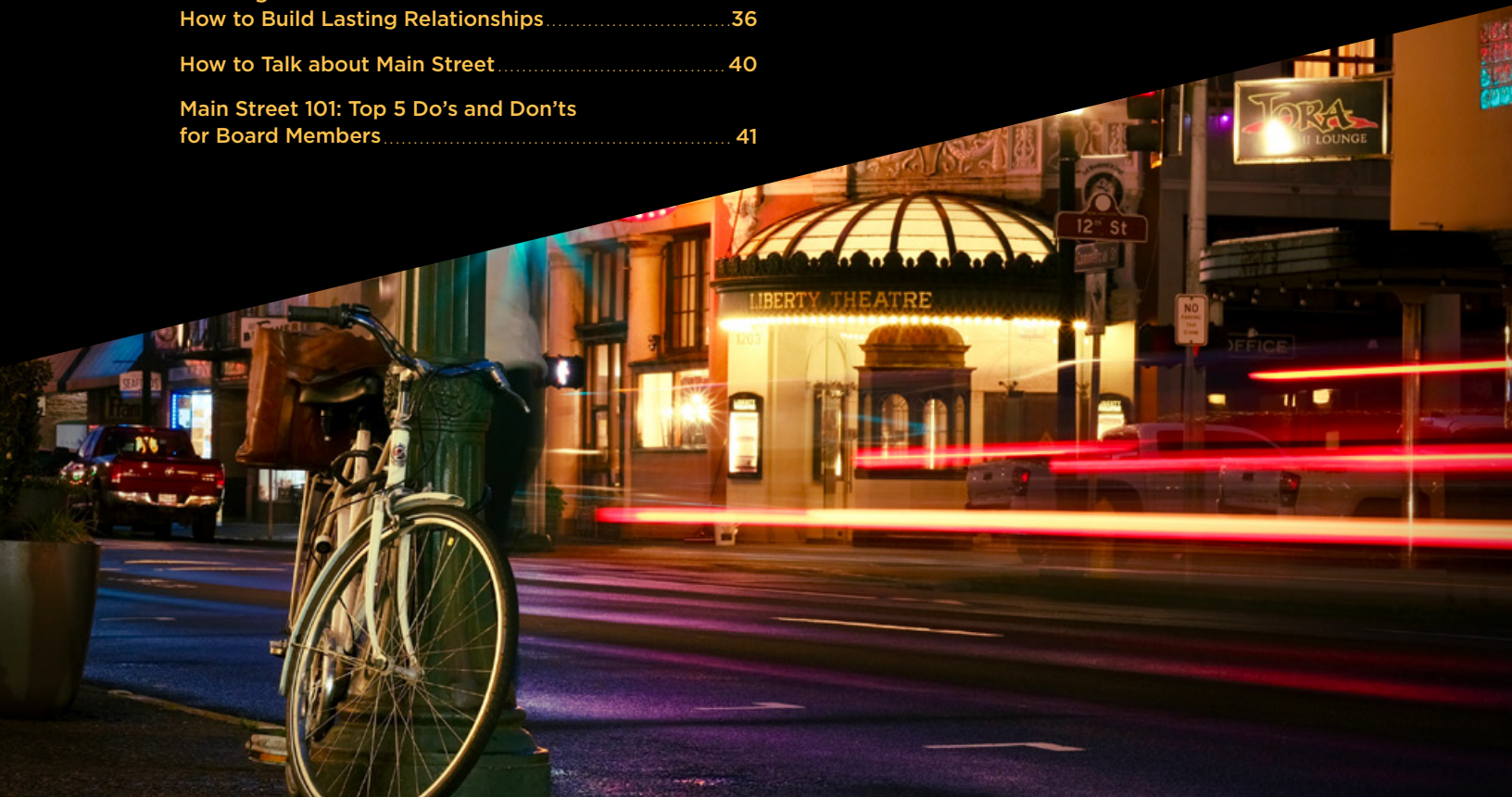
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Special Thanks: *This handbook is made stronger by the collective work of our national network of Main Street Coordinating Programs and local leaders, whose tools, resources, and on-the-ground experience helped shape its content.*

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How to Use This Handbook

Welcome to your Main Street Board Member Handbook. This handbook is designed to give you a clear, practical foundation for understanding the Main Street program and your role within it. Think of it as a reference, training tool, and a plan for action—all in one. The guidance is meant to be flexible, offering support for your board work rather than dictating it.



Who Is This Handbook For?

NEW BOARD MEMBERS: To learn your responsibilities and how to get started. Use this handbook alongside the Board Member Quick Start Checklist in this section to guide your first 30 days as a board member.

EXISTING MEMBERS: To refresh your knowledge, guide decisions, mentor others, and to stay updated on Main Street policies and procedures.

BOARD LEADERS: To support meetings, onboarding, strategic planning, and management.

What You'll Find

This handbook is focused both on the Main Street big picture and the information you need to do your day-to-day board work. You can read it cover-to-cover or reference individual sections as questions come up, such as how to handle a potential conflict of interest or what to expect from serving on a committee.

The handbook is divided into five sections:

- + **Understanding Main Street:** An overview of Main Street America's guiding principles, history, and structure.
- + **Board Member Fundamentals:** A look at board member expectations, time commitments, and how to engage with partners and staff with an overview of board members' legal, financial, and operational duties.
- + **Policies & Procedures:** Important Main Street policies such as how meetings are structured or how to safely retain documents.
- + **Our Local Program:** Some of the most important components of our local Main Street program: core values, staff roles, work plans, and transformation strategies.
- + **Tools & Resources:** Templates, training recommendations, a glossary, and FAQs.

LOOK FOR SPECIAL CALLOUTS

Throughout the handbook, you'll also see callouts designed to give you more information or advice on a topic.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHTS

Templates, sample documents, and tools.

PRO TIPS

Quick, actionable guidance from seasoned Main Street members.

UPDATING THE HANDBOOK

As the board and program evolve, so will this guide. Your feedback is welcome to keep it practical and useful.

Your First 30 Days as a Main Street Board Member: Quick Start Checklist

WEEK 1: GET ORIENTED

Review Key Documents

- ___ Read the mission and vision statement of your Main Street program
- ___ Learn the program's current Transformation Strategy(ies), if applicable
- ___ Review the bylaws and articles of incorporation
- ___ Go through the most recent board meeting minutes
- ___ Familiarize yourself with the current budget and financial reports

Meet with Key People

- ___ Schedule a meeting with the board chair to understand expectations
- ___ Meet with the executive director or Main Street staff to discuss ongoing projects and priorities
- ___ Get in touch with your committee chair (if applicable) to understand the committee's current work

WEEK 2: UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE

Know Your Board Responsibilities

- ___ Understand the board's role in approving budgets, setting priorities, and monitoring financial health
- ___ Learn the expectations for attendance, participation, and committee work
- ___ Review the conflict of interest policy and ethics guidelines
- ___ Understand how decisions are made and communicated within the board

Understand Fundraising and Financial Oversight

- ___ Review the funding mix and fundraising strategies in place for the program
- ___ Familiarize yourself with the roles board members play in fundraising (whether through donations, advocacy, or sponsorships)
- ___ Get an overview of financial oversight responsibilities (reviewing reports, asking questions, ensuring financial health)

WEEK 3: GET INVOLVED

Attend Your First Board Meeting

- ___ Come prepared to discuss budget priorities, upcoming events, or strategic planning
- ___ Take notes on key decisions, and ask questions about things you don't understand
- ___ Observe the meeting flow to get a sense of how decisions are made

Understand Your Committee Role (if applicable)

- ___ Attend the committee meeting you are assigned to (or set up an introductory meeting with the chair)
- ___ Review the committee's goals and work plan for the year
- ___ Ask about any immediate action items or projects you will help with

WEEK 4: CONTRIBUTE AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Meet Fellow Board Members

- ___ Build relationships with fellow board members—ask about their experiences, what works, and how you can contribute
- ___ Seek advice from long-term members on what's worked well and where improvements could be made

Contribute to Fundraising Efforts

- ___ Help brainstorm fundraising ideas or events you can contribute to
- ___ Begin making personal connections to potential donors, sponsors, or partners
- ___ If you feel comfortable, make a meaningful personal donation or pledge your support to a specific fundraising effort

Review Ongoing Programs and Projects

- ___ Get up to speed on any large-scale projects or initiatives the board is currently focused on (e.g., downtown revitalization, promotional campaigns)
- ___ Identify one or two areas where you can contribute your skills or experience

BY DAY 30, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

- Explain Main Street's mission, vision, and Transformation Strategy(ies) to others
- Understand your board's expectations for attendance and involvement
- Know the current financial status of Main Street and the priorities for the year
- Identify your role within the board and your committee
- Begin contributing meaningfully to fundraising or resource development efforts
- Build a network of relationships within your board and the broader community

Understanding Main Street

Serving effectively as a board member starts with understanding how Main Street America began, how it works today, and where your leadership plays an important role.

The organization is supported by a national, state, and local network with shared standards and guiding principles. At the heart of our work is the Main Street Approach™—a set of strategies that guides Main Street priorities, decisions, and values.



The Main Street Approach especially thrives in communities with strong emotional, social, and civic ties and assets like historic buildings, walkable streets, and independent businesses.

A Brief History of Main Street America

For more than four decades, Main Street America has been at the center of a national movement to revitalize historic downtowns, strengthen local economies, and foster vibrant, inclusive communities. Today, the organization is one of the most respected economic and community development networks in the country—uniting thousands of Main Streets, commercial districts, and neighborhood corridors around a shared commitment to place-based transformation.

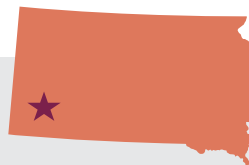
Main Street America’s origin story begins with a pressing need. The rise of shopping malls in the 1950s and big-box stores in the 1960s had a profound—and devastating—impact on traditional downtowns. By the mid-1970s, once-bustling Main Streets were dotted with empty storefronts and crumbling infrastructure. Suburban growth, highway expansion, and disinvestment in historic business districts only deepened the decline.

As Main Streets struggled and historic buildings were lost, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) recognized the need for a national strategy that combined historic preservation with economic revitalization. In 1977, the Trust launched the Main Street Project to test new strategies for preserving and reviving American downtowns.

THREE MIDWESTERN COMMUNITIES WERE CHOSEN AS PILOT SITES:



GALESBURG, ILLINOIS
population: 38,000



HOT SPRINGS, SOUTH DAKOTA
population: 5,000



MADISON, INDIANA
population: 13,000

*Main Street was built on a bold idea:
downtowns could thrive not by imitating suburban models, but by embracing
their unique character, heritage, and role as community anchors.*



A state partner model was tested in six states adapting the Main Street Approach to local needs and providing training and direction.

After three years, each pilot community saw remarkable turnarounds. Working closely with local leaders, the Trust documented lessons learned and developed a framework for downtowns across the country to follow. This became the foundation of what is now known as the Main Street Approach, focused on economic vitality, design, promotion, and organization.

The pilot's success led the Trust to establish the National Main Street Center® in 1980, bringing the Main Street Approach to communities nationwide. To expand further, the Trust tested a state partner model in Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas. There, state-level coordinators adapted the Main Street Approach to local needs and provided ongoing training and direction to local programs.

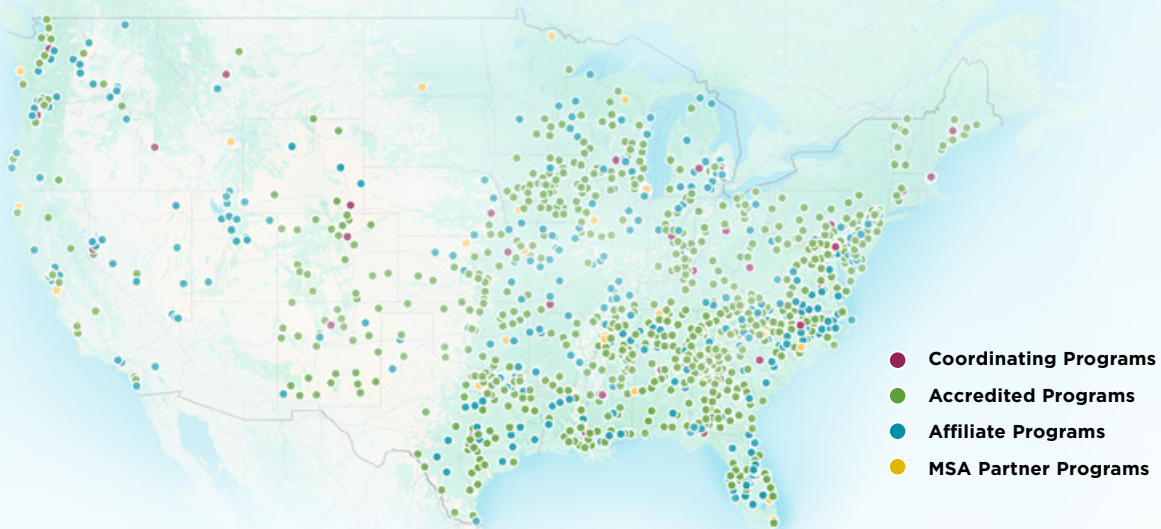
Over the next three decades, Main Street America continued to expand. Millions of volunteer hours were mobilized. Thousands of small businesses were launched or supported. And billions of dollars in public and private investment helped restore buildings, improve streetscapes, and strengthen local economies.

A New Chapter

In July 2013, the National Main Street Center became an independent subsidiary, a move that expanded Main Street’s leadership and resources. Two years later, the organization rebranded as Main Street America. Along with the name change came a bold new strategic plan and numerous new programs to expand Main Street’s reach, impact, and position as a leading voice of place-based economic development and community preservation.



Main Street America’s network of Coordinating Programs now includes 47 programs at the state, county and city levels and many other regional partnerships serving more than 1,600 communities.



MAIN STREET BY THE NUMBERS*

\$115B in local reinvestment	345,000 buildings rehabilitated	815,000 new jobs	181,000 new businesses
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Every **\$1 INVESTED** in a Main Street program generates an average of **\$21.73 IN NEW INVESTMENT**

From its origins as a preservation-driven experiment to its role today as a national leader in community revitalization, Main Street America is a testament to what’s possible when people come together to invest in the places they love.

* Cumulative numbers are based on reporting between 1980-2024. The reinvestment ratio is based on metrics gathered from 1,275 designated Main Street communities in 2024.

What is the Main Street America Network?

Main Street America has supported more than 2,000 programs since its founding. And every Main Street in the network, whether in a big city or a small town, agrees to practice certain values:

- + **Local leadership:** Community voices leading community change
- + **Inclusive economic development:** Opportunities that lift everyone
- + **Historic preservation:** Honoring the past while building the future
- + **Vibrant, community-centered places:** Creating districts that draw people back again and again

Within the network, you'll find three types of members:

- + Local Main Street programs like yours
- + Coordinating Programs, usually at the state, county, or regional level, that directly support local Main Street programs
- + Allied members, such as preservation groups, consultants, and economic development partners

Main Street America serves as the backbone, providing support, recognition, and direction, but local communities do the heavy lifting.



+65,000

The number of staff, board members, and volunteers who bring Main Street to life.

Being a part of the Main Street network is about sharing energy, ideas, and wins. As a board member, that might mean attending training webinars, taking national surveys, applying for grants, or meeting with other members who are facing similar challenges.

What the Main Street Network Offers You

As a board member of a designated Main Street program, you are eligible for a paid membership. That means you'll have access to special resources and tools to help you succeed, including:

- + The Main Street [Knowledge Hub](#) and full digital library with resource guides, training materials, templates (sample work plans, outreach forms) and more
- + Main Street Weekly, a regular newsletter on new trends and stories from the field
- + Main Street America's exclusive online networking platform with members, leaders, and experts
- + Free online training opportunities from webinars to workshops
- + Members-only rates at the annual Main Street Now Conference and the Main Street America Academy

(For more member benefits, see [here](#).)



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Stuck on a question about how to get something done? There's a good chance you'll find the answer in [Main Street America's resource library](#).



Coordinators: Your State and Regional Partners

Most states or regions that have a Main Street network also have a Coordinating Program. Your Coordinating Program is your local program's go-to guide for information and resources. Coordinators help you stay on track with goals and designation standards and provide you with resources like:

- + Training, workshops, and technical support
- + Networking opportunities with other Main Street programs and experts
- + Funding opportunities like grant programs
- + Guidance on the Main Street Approach

**LOOKING FOR YOUR
LOCAL COORDINATOR?**

Visit our [Coordinating Programs](#).

Board members should also build a relationship with Coordinating Program staff. Invite them to board meetings or community events, ask them for advice, and share your successes and challenges.

The Local Level: Where Change Happens

Your local Main Street is where ideas become projects and plans become progress. That's true whether your program is helping a business open, rehabbing a historic building, or organizing a district cleanup day.

Main Street boards are working boards. You won't just attend meetings; you might also chair committees, write grants, meet with donors, and speak about your Main Street work at public events.

Some Main Street programs have paid staff; others run solely on volunteers. Either way, strong board leadership is important. You help set the direction for your Main Street and move projects forward.



What is Designation?

Every Main Street program in the MSA network is a member, but not every member is designated. Designation is a national recognition that means your program meets Main Street America's highest standards of excellence. It's a way of saying: "We're serious about our downtown—and we're doing the work the right way."

Designation is both a badge of honor and a guidepost. It shows your program is credible and effective, while giving your staff and board clear goals to work toward.

To become designated, programs are evaluated on Main Street America's [Community Evaluation Standards](#). Generally that means:

- + Having a strong, active board of directors
- + Maintaining a clear work plan and budget
- + High community engagement and volunteerism
- + Commitment to the Main Street Approach
- + Evidence of impact and progress

Your Coordinating Program reviews your Main Street's performance and recommends your program to MSA for designation. Main Street America will evaluate your assessment and award designation at the Accredited or Affiliate level. Designation needs to be renewed every year, a duty handled by your Coordinator.

Designation and the Board

National designation is a sign that your Main Street program is thriving. As a board member, you play a big part in making that happen. Here's how you will contribute:

- + **Setting the vision:** Deciding goals and projects for the district
- + **Overseeing finances:** Approving the budget and monitoring fundraising and spending
- + **Governing:** Serving on committees and recruiting new leaders
- + **Supporting and advocating:** Telling your program's story and sharing the great work you're doing



WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ACCREDITED PROGRAM, AN AFFILIATE PROGRAM, AND A MEMBER?

Think of membership in Main Street America as a journey—one with milestones celebrating progress and growth:

ACCREDITED PROGRAMS

meet all the national standards, are publicly recognized every year, proudly display the “Accredited Main Street America” logo, and often qualify for additional funding and opportunities.

AFFILIATE PROGRAMS

are actively working toward Accreditation or are a strong volunteer-led organization without staff, but haven't met all the standards yet. Affiliates enjoy access to resources, training, and the support they need to reach the next level.

GENERAL MEMBERS

may be new, less active, or not ready to seek designation yet. They're still a part of the network and benefit from connections, resources, and community. They can also still apply Main Street principles even if they're not pursuing designation.

> 2/3

More than two-thirds of Main Street America's programs are fully accredited.

The Main Street Approach: Overview of the Four Points

As a board member, you'll hear this phrase often: The Main Street Approach. It's the practical, adaptable, and community-based framework that helps Main Street programs transform their downtowns.

The approach combines science—understanding local market data and customer trends—with art—telling your community's story, marketing unique assets, and preserving historic character.

In the following section, we'll take a closer look at the Main Street Approach and how it guides revitalization work across communities of all sizes. For those interested in going deeper, Main Street America offers a comprehensive learning series on the Main Street America Academy—[Focus on the Four Points](#)—which provides additional context, training, and practical application of the Approach through real-world examples and expert guidance.

Focus on the Four Points

About

Dive into the Four Points of the Main Street Approach. Whether you're new to Main Street or looking to deepen your impact, this series offers guidance you can act on right away. Start with the Point most relevant to your work—or complete the full series to see how the Four Points connect.

Explore the Focus on the Four Points learning experiences and their courses below, where you'll hear directly from Main Street leaders, explore real-world examples from across the network, and access tools, templates, and other resources to support your work.

Courses are arranged in a suggested sequence, but may be taken in any order.

THE MAIN STREET APPROACH

Main Street work is powerful, but it can also feel overwhelming. Whether your board heard you the moment or reconnecting with the basics, this short course will give you the grounding you need to move forward with purpose. You'll explore how the Main Street Approach works, what the Four Points mean, and how transformation strategies help communities thrive. More importantly, you'll begin to see how your leadership fits into the bigger picture of community revitalization. This course is designed for anyone in the Main Street network—city directors, new staff board members, or local partners.

FOUNDATIONS: THE MAIN STREET APPROACH

Get grounded in the Main Street Approach—see how your leadership fits into the bigger picture.

ORGANIZATION

A thriving Main Street starts with a strong foundation—and that foundation is built through Organization. This course explores how Main Street leaders strengthen their programs by focusing on people, funding, and partnerships. From building effective committees to creating sustainable funding strategies, the Organization point of the Main Street Approach helps everything that follows.

In this module, you'll hear from Jackie Seibert, Director of Network Clarity at Main Street America, as she shares practical insights drawn from her years of working with local programs across the country. Whether you're a seasoned executive director or just getting started, this learning experience is designed to help you build momentum and reduce the frustration of starting from scratch.

Through interactive exercises, real-world examples, and practical resources, you'll walk away with actionable strategies to support your Main Street efforts.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

A resilient local economy doesn't happen by accident. It takes strategy, partnerships, and deep knowledge of your district's strengths and opportunities. This course will give you the knowledge, tools, and confidence to strengthen the economic foundation of your community—fostering business growth, preserving local businesses, and local investment. Take local leadership initiatives to the next level, and create a vibrant economic ecosystem to action.

In this module, you'll hear from Jim Carberry, Senior Program Officer for Economic Vitality at Main Street America, as he shares his insights on how to work with Main Street programs nationwide, combining practical experience with deep policy knowledge. This five-course learning experience is designed to help you connect, learn, and create a vibrant, community-driven growth.

With hands-on exercises, actionable resources, and actionable guidance, you'll walk away ready to support local entrepreneurship, align economic goals with community needs, and lead revitalization efforts with clarity and confidence.

DESIGN

Design is more than decoration. It's how people move, gather, explore, and connect in your district. This course explores how the design point of the Main Street Approach shapes identity, honors history, and lays the groundwork for future growth from demographics and signage to preservation and accessibility, design influences both how a place looks and how it works.

In this module, you'll hear from Lisa Mullins Thompson, Senior Program Officer at Main Street America, as she shares her insights from years of collaborating with local leaders to turn design challenges into opportunities. This five-course learning experience will help you assess your district's needs, collaborate on practical solutions, and communicate your design ideas with clarity and purpose.

Through case studies, scenario-based practices, and planning tools, you'll build the skills to lead with intention, advocate with confidence, and shape a district that reflects your community's unique character.

INTRODUCTION TO DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Design shapes how people experience a place, connect with their surroundings, and feel a sense of belonging. Make that connection, it's a strategy and the way to a district's identity, reputation, and future success.

DESIGN: HISTORIC PRESERVATION BASICS

History's promise is more than maintaining old buildings—it's about safeguarding the unique cultural and historical experience the district offers.

DESIGN: ASSESSING COMMUNITY ASSETS

Clarify vision and priorities. Make time to connect with stakeholders and bringing the vision to life doesn't stop at a sustainable plan.

COMMUNICATING IMPLEMENTING

Real-world change isn't just about the end goal—it's about the relationships and a representative on stage.

PROMOTION

Every Main Street has a story—and Promotion is how you tell it. This course explores how Main Street leaders use Promotion to bring people together, build pride of place, and highlight what makes their districts unique. From campaigns and content to events and partnerships, the Promotion point of the Main Street Approach connects your audience to your work and your vision.

In this module, you'll hear from Jonathan Stone, Program Officer at Main Street America. The practices and approaches he's grounded in his work with Main Street programs across the country and shared for real-life successes in communities. This course learning experience will help you design promotional efforts that reflect your local identity and gain investment and build momentum for revitalization.

Through interactive exercises, customizable templates, and practical tools, you'll gain strategies to

Components of the Main Street Approach

The Main Street Approach is built around three interconnected parts. You can use these parts to set goals, guide your decisions, and take action.

1 COMMUNITY VISION + MARKET UNDERSTANDING

A strong Main Street starts with a shared vision. Your Main Street's vision is based on facts about your community—market mix, customer demographics, building conditions—and its identity and values. The vision should be created in close partnership with the community through surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions. That ensures voices from different backgrounds and perspectives are heard.

Texas' Pilot Point Main Street's Vision:

By preserving historic architecture, expanding local business opportunities, and enhancing pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, Downtown will emerge as a regional destination that balances heritage with progress.

2 TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

With a vision in place, the next step is to develop Transformation Strategies. These are paths—typically two to three at a time—that Main Street leaders follow to accomplish their vision. Unlike long-range goals or plans, Transformation Strategies should be achievable in three years or less to keep up with trends and changing community needs. Transformation Strategies come to life through activities that fall under the Four Points (see next page).

Pilot Point Main Street's Transformation Strategies include:

DOWNTOWN CORE REDESIGN: Create a dynamic and historically preserved destination, improving public spaces, storefronts, and gathering areas.

RECREATION TOURISM: Leverage Pilot Point's proximity to Ray Roberts Lake State Park and equestrian culture to attract outdoor enthusiasts and visitors.

3 IMPLEMENTATION AND MEASUREMENT

With strategies decided, it's time to act. This means identifying needed resources—funding, programming, partners—and setting up ways to measure success.

Quick-Start Strategies

No need to start from scratch—Main Street America offers nearly 20 ready-to-use and adaptable **Catalyst Strategies**. Topics include Family Friendly, College Towns, Elder and Aging-in-Place, Agriculture Center, Knowledge Economy, and Entertainment and Nightlife.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

For help identifying, choosing, and putting into motion a Transformation Strategy, see Main Street America's [Community Transformation Strategies Workbook](#).

The Four Points Explained

Transformation Strategies are carried out through the Four Points—key areas that Main Streets have used to guide their work for more than 45 years:

ECONOMIC VITALITY: Focuses on funding and financial tools to help new and existing businesses, jumpstart property development, and nurture entrepreneurs and innovators.

DESIGN: Improves the look, feel, and function of downtown districts, highlighting assets that set the community apart.

PROMOTION: Positions the downtown as the heart of the community through special events, marketing materials, and storytelling.

ORGANIZATION: Builds partnerships, develops local leaders, and expands resources to support a local Main Street’s revitalization work.



Guiding Principles

Along with the Four Points, you can also use the following Guiding Principles to make decisions. These principles are based on decades of lessons learned from Main Street work.

COMPREHENSIVE. No single effort—whether a major infrastructure project or a brandname retailer coming to town—can revitalize Main Street on its own. To make lasting change, you need to take actions across all Four Points.

INCREMENTAL. Start with simple, highly visible activities that show new things are happening. Think along the lines of a community mural or a pop-up event—activities that draw people downtown and build excitement. As community confidence grows, your Main Street can take on more complex projects.

SELF-DIRECTED. Main Streets thrive when local leaders take ownership with their time and effort. As a board member, you'll also help rally local residents and business owners to donate their resources, talent, and time.

PARTNERSHIP-BASED. Public and private sectors both play vital roles. Success comes when each recognizes the other's strengths and limitations to work together toward common goals.

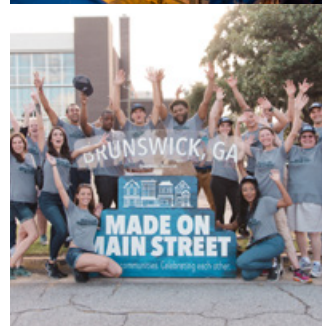
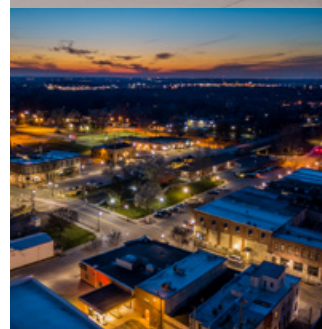
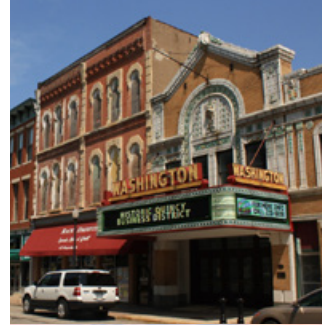
ASSET-DRIVEN. Every district has special qualities—historic buildings, walkable streets, cultural traditions—that sets it apart. These local assets should be the foundation for all revitalization efforts.

QUALITY. Whether it's storefront improvements, events, or informational sessions, well-executed, high-quality projects inspire pride and confidence.

CHANGE AWARE. Revitalization is as much about changing attitudes as it is about physical improvements. Change may be slow, but once people start getting on board, momentum builds.

IMPLEMENTATION-FOCUSED. When people can see positive change happening around them, they know progress is real and they want to get involved.

The Main Street Approach isn't just about restoring historic buildings or boosting businesses, it's about creating vibrant places that communities imagine and build together.



Board Member Fundamentals



Strong Main Street programs depend on strong board leadership. This section outlines what it means to serve effectively as a board member—from fulfilling financial duties and committee roles to working well with staff, partners, and fellow volunteers. Whether you're new to the board or stepping into a leadership role, these basics will help you lead with confidence.





Board Governance Basics: Building a Foundation for Main Street Success

Strong Main Streets are based on good governance, which is the way that organizations make decisions, set priorities, and ensure accountability. As a board member, your governance role will include setting the direction for your Main Street and ensuring the organization stays true to its mission.

In the Main Street world, board members' governance plays a special role: balancing big-picture vision with a passion for hands-on community revitalization. That balance can be tricky, especially for smaller programs with limited staff. But when governance is kept front and center, Main Streets don't just deliver projects—they create lasting impact.

HOW DOES THE BOARD GOVERN?

Your Main Street board works as a team, and your team has three main duties:

- + **Direction:** Protecting the mission of your organization and steering it in the right direction by setting guidelines.
- + **Oversight:** Monitoring the actions, finances, and ethics of the organization.
- + **Resources:** Ensuring the organization has everything it needs to operate and fulfill its mission, including financing, volunteers, staff, and community support.

A well-functioning board builds community trust, makes informed decisions, and provides stability.

BOARD STRUCTURE

Main Street boards come in all shapes and sizes, but most boards share a few things in common.

Size and Composition

Most Main Streets have nine to 15 board members—small enough to make decisions easily, but big enough to include a variety of viewpoints. Strong boards intentionally recruit members with different skills—finance, marketing, community development, design—and representation from business owners, residents, nonprofit leaders, and local officials.

Diversity and Inclusion

A healthy board mirrors its community. Consider board members of different races, ages, genders, and economic backgrounds. When voices from across the district are represented, the board makes better, more inclusive decisions.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

To see if your board of directors reflects the makeup of your community, check out Main Street America's [Board of Directors Demographics Matrix](#).

Terms and Rotation

Board member terms usually last two or three years and are staggered so that the board is a mix of new and experienced members. Many Main Streets limit board members to serving only two or three terms in a row.



OFFICER ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Every board has officers—official leadership roles that keep the board organized and accountable.

ROLE	MAIN FOCUS	KEY DUTIES
Chair/President	Leadership, strategy, governance	Sets meeting agendas, keeps discussions on track, serves as the main partner for the executive director.
Vice Chair	Leadership and support	Fills in for the chair, leads committees or projects, prepares for taking on the chair role.
Treasurer	Financial oversight	Reviews budgets, financial reports, and audits to ensure financial accountability. Helps the board understand the organization's numbers.
Secretary	Records and compliance	Keeps records of board meetings, ensuring that minutes are accurate and decisions documented. Might oversee compliance with filing requirements.

Some boards also include:

- + A past chair, for continuity
- + Committee chairs to lead groups or projects
- + At-large members (those without official board titles or roles) for flexibility



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

To learn more about governance and the makeup of a Main Street board, see the sample [Board Members Roles and Responsibilities list](#).

What matters most is that everyone knows their role and how their piece supports the whole.



BYLAWS OVERVIEW

Bylaws are your board’s rules. They spell out how directors are elected, how officers are chosen, how long terms last, and how meetings are run.

Key Elements

Typical bylaws include:

- + Board size and structure
- + Officer roles and responsibilities
- + Term lengths and limits
- + Election and appointment processes
- + Quorum requirements (minimum number of members needed to hold a vote)
- + Committee structure
- + Conflict of interest policies



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

For a real-world example, see the [bylaws from Rome Main Street in Georgia](#).

Keeping Bylaws Current

Bylaws should be reviewed at least every three to five years. They may need to be updated as the organization grows, adds staff, or shifts focus. Outdated bylaws can create confusion or even legal issues.

Accessibility

All board members should have a copy of the bylaws and a “plain language” summary of what they mean.

OVERSIGHT VS. WORKING BOARD MODELS

Not all boards operate the same way, and that’s OK. Main Street programs usually fall somewhere between oversight boards and working boards.

OVERSIGHT BOARDS

More focused on governance—strategic direction, financial accountability, and policy decisions. They rely on staff to carry out the day-to-day work. This model is common in larger, more established Main Street programs with paid staff.

WORKING BOARDS

More involved in hands-on tasks: chairing events, managing volunteers, handling communications. This model is common in newer or smaller programs without full-time staff.

HYBRID BOARDS

Many boards are a mix of working and oversight. A Main Street might have paid staff but still rely on board members to lead key projects or events.

The important thing is to know which hat you’re wearing: oversight or working. For example, if board members spend most of their time running events, governance may suffer.

WHAT IT MEANS TO SERVE ON A MAIN STREET COMMITTEE

Main Street thrives on teamwork—and committees are where a lot of that teamwork happens. The board sets the direction and strategy, and committee members roll up their sleeves to turn ideas into action.

Whether you're planning festivals, transforming storefronts, or building partnerships, committee work is your chance to shape the community you care about.

PRO TIP *Not sure which committee is the right fit? Pick one that matches your interests, skills, and knowledge.*

Participating in Projects and Committees

Every Main Street board member is expected to serve on at least one committee or project team. This keeps you connected to the daily revitalization work, and it strengthens the bond between the board and the committees.

As a member of a board committee, you'll be expected to:

- + Contribute ideas, skills, and/or connections
- + Help implement the annual work plan
- + Stay on track with the committee's yearly goals and ensure the committee work matches your program's mission and goals
- + Bring updates, feedback, and concerns to the full board
- + Keep the committee chair informed about progress and problems
- + Document actions, time volunteered, and lessons learned

TIME COMMITMENT

Expect to spend about 3-5 hours per month on committee work in addition to regular board duties.

Committee leads or chairs have additional responsibilities, like running meetings, developing agendas, and reporting to the executive director and board president.

You don't have to lead a committee—just be an active, reliable member. It's also a good idea to have co-leads for committees or teams. One leader can train another, creating a pipeline of future leaders and a smooth handoff for the work plan.

PRO TIP *If you're the board vice president, try to attend at least one meeting of each committee. It's a great way to fully understand what your Main Street program does and to prepare for the president's role.*



Board Liaisons

Each committee should have a board liaison. A liaison's main job is to act as a link between the board and the committee. Liaisons don't have to be the committee chair, but they're responsible for:

- + Attending committee meetings
- + Helping create meeting agendas
- + Ensuring committee activities align with work plan goals and economic transformation strategies
- + Keeping the board informed about committee progress
- + Troubleshooting problems or needs
- + Supporting fundraising or budget goals
- + Helping recruit and recognize volunteers

Committee Structure and Purpose

Most Main Street programs are organized around the Main Street Approach. This chart offers a look at the traditional committee structure, which can be adapted to fit your Main Street's unique needs, as well as ideas for the types of people and groups you might invite to serve on these committees. Keep in mind that a wide range of people can contribute to your committee's success.

COMMITTEE	FOCUS	GOOD FIT FOR
 DESIGN	Improving the look, feel, and function of the district—building facades, streetscape, beautification, signage, and historic preservation	People: Architects, designers, city planners, property owners, local artists, accessibility advocates, preservationists Groups: Trade or technical schools (construction, design, landscaping programs); local arts councils; garden clubs; disability access groups; historic preservation societies
 ORGANIZATION	Handles capacity building, fundraising, volunteer recruitment, communications, and board development	People: Connectors, HR professionals, accountants, nonprofit leaders, community organizers, retired executives, civic-minded professionals Groups: Chambers of commerce, alumni associations, faith-based organizations, LGBTQ+ groups, corporate volunteer programs, service clubs (Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions)
 PROMOTION	Markets the district as a destination to shop, dine, visit, and live. Develops events, branding, storytelling, and communications.	People: Creatives, event planners, marketers, PR pros, local influencers, photographers, and marketing or media teachers or students Groups: Cultural centers, museums, performing arts groups, tourism bureaus, professional associations, chambers of commerce
 ECONOMIC VITALITY	Supports businesses and entrepreneurship and works with property owners on real estate and development issues	People: Business owners, bankers, realtors, developers, financial experts, retired entrepreneurs, small business mentors Groups: Business schools, farmers markets, chambers of commerce, small business development centers

Some Main Street boards also create **short-term task forces** for projects like a holiday market. They help attract volunteers who want shorter time commitments.

THINK OUTSIDE THE SIGN-UP SHEET: CREATIVE WAYS TO RECRUIT COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND OTHER VOLUNTEERS

Getting volunteers for committees or other Main Street activities doesn't have to mean waiting for people to raise their hands. Here are a few proactive ways to bring new energy into your Main Street program.

Host Volunteer Happy Hours. Partner with a local brewery or café and invite residents for a casual information session about how to get involved.

Tap into student projects. Offer class credit opportunities for marketing, art, or business students to contribute to real Main Street initiatives. For example, ask graphic design students to create signage mockups or business students to help with Business Retention and Engagement surveys.

Create micro-volunteer roles. Offer one-off volunteer options such as set-up or photography for a specific event.

Invite families and intergenerational teams. Encourage parent-child duos or grandparents and grandkids to take on simple beautification or event roles.

Ask local and large employers. Many companies offer paid volunteer time to their employees—reach out to get a volunteer pipeline started.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

For tips on structuring and making committees successful, see [Creating Sustainable Committees](#).

Tips for Successful Committees

The most engaging and productive committees follow a few simple tips:

DON'T HAVE A WORK PLAN? Create one! Committee work plans should match the board's strategic goals.

USE AGENDAS TO KEEP MEETINGS EFFICIENT AND FOCUSED. Include time estimates for each agenda item.

BE FLEXIBLE—PROJECTS SOMETIMES CHANGE. Recognize that timelines and priorities can shift, and be willing to pivot.

CELEBRATE WINS, EVEN SMALL ONES. Suggest a short “good news” moment at the beginning or end of the meeting.

INVITE NEW MEMBERS, IDEAS, AND ENERGY. Strong committees include a mix of voices—downtown business owners, residents, professionals, and volunteers. Keep a running list of potential committee members or other volunteers you come across.

SCHEDULE A REGULAR TIME WHEN ALL COMMITTEES CAN MEET TO UPDATE EACH OTHER. Hearing other committee updates can help you spot areas to work together or make your committee stronger.

Being on a committee is one of the most rewarding parts of Main Street work. So sign up, stay engaged, and help your Main Street thrive.

FROM WORKING TO OVERSIGHT

As Main Street programs grow, many transition from a working board to an oversight board. This requires taking specific actions: spelling out staff versus board responsibilities, updating bylaws, and shifting the board's mindset from “doers” to “directors.”

HABITS OF A STRONG BOARD

Good governance comes down to good habits. Healthy boards:

Take time to reflect.

Annual self-assessments, surveys, or retreats help boards consider what's working and what could be improved.

Clarify roles.

Using clear job descriptions for officers and directors reduces confusion.

Commit to inclusion.

Equity and representation should be built into governance practices, from recruitment to decision-making.

Ensure transparency.

Sharing financial reports regularly and explaining them in simple language helps the board make good decisions and build trust in the community.

Encourage learning.

Providing ongoing training, hosting guest speakers, or sharing resources from Main Street America benefits the organization and the entire community.

How to Hire and Manage an Executive Director

Executive directors are the heart and public face of your Main Street program. Executive directors don't just manage—they connect people, energize volunteers, and build trust across the district.

That's why it's so important to [hire well](#) and manage and support an executive director smartly. Below is a practical guide for how to do just that.

What the Executive Director Does

Executive directors lead daily operations and turn board decisions into action. Their work touches every part of the Main Street Approach.

Important duties include:

- + Finding resources for your Main Street
- + Coordinating volunteers and committees
- + Managing events, marketing, and outreach
- + Building relationships with city staff, property owners, and local businesses
- + Supporting historic preservation and economic development efforts

What to Look for in an Executive Director

The right executive director is different for every Main Street, but successful executive directors often share these qualities:

CREATIVE AND ADAPTABLE: Comfortable juggling event planning, budgets, and community engagement

ORGANIZED: Can manage multiple projects and deadlines

STRONG COMMUNICATOR: Able to build trust, motivate volunteers, and represent the program publicly

COMMUNITY-SAVVY: Understands local culture and works well with people from different backgrounds and viewpoints

PRO TIP *Don't get stuck waiting for the perfect résumé. Focus on candidates with people skills, adaptability, and fit with Main Street values.*

STEPS TO HIRE A MAIN STREET EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

1. FORM A SELECTION COMMITTEE

Create a hiring group with board members, community stakeholders, and someone with hiring experience.

2. DEVELOP A JOB DESCRIPTION

Outline executive director responsibilities across all Four Points. Use input from staff, outgoing executive directors, or resources from your Coordinating Program. (See a [sample executive director job description](#).)

3. OFFER A FAIR PACKAGE

The executive director role is a demanding one. Ensure salary and benefits reflect the workload. Consider offering flexible hours and remote work options.

4. ADVERTISE THE POSITION

Post the job widely—Main Street America networks, planning associations, nonprofit job boards, and local channels.

5. DECIDE ON AN EVALUATION METHOD

Use a simple scoring system to rate résumés and candidate interviews.

6. SCREEN AND INTERVIEW

First-round: Focus on experience, volunteer management, and understanding of Main Street

Second-round: Dive into problem-solving, innovation, and real-world responses

7. CHECK REFERENCES

Ask a candidate's references about leadership style and reliability.

8. MAKE A SELECTION

Rank finalists and reach an agreement. The board approves the final choice and makes the job offer.

9. FINALIZE THE HIRE

Negotiate terms and prepare a written employment agreement with job duties and compensation.

10. ANNOUNCE THE HIRE

Tell other candidates the position is filled. Introduce your new executive director to the community—consider hosting a welcome event.

Executive Directors By the Numbers

More than 400 Main Street leaders weighed in on [Main Street America's 2025 Director's Survey](#). Here's what they had to say about their role.

2025 DIRECTOR'S SURVEY

Time commitment:

43 HOURS

The median executive director works 43 hours each week

Juggling Roles:

39%

of executive directors have a second paying job

Compensation Satisfaction:

2/3

of executive directors who earn more than \$70,000 a year, plus benefits, say they are well compensated.

THE SUPPORT EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS WANT MOST FOR THEIR MAIN STREET:

61%

Grant opportunities

41%

Access to local data

37%

Educational resources

HOW TO MANAGE A MAIN STREET EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Hiring is just the beginning. Supporting your executive director (ED) well is where the real partnership begins. Your board can build a strong relationship with the executive director through clear expectations, regular communication, and helpful feedback. Here are some tips to make that happen:

- + The board president is the ED's boss. Bring concerns or major work requests to the president first.
- + Leave room for the ED to lead. While the board makes many important decisions, the ED should be empowered to use their expertise and judgment to guide the organization's daily work.
- + Remember that much of the ED's work happens out in the community, not at a desk.
- + The board president should meet regularly with the ED to review progress, plan meeting agendas, and address issues.
- + Work together on the yearly plan, which guides the work of the ED, volunteers, and committees.
- + Maintain an employee handbook and review it every two years.
- + The board president should give the ED an annual performance review based on input from the entire board.
- + Encourage the ED to take time off after big projects or events.
- + Avoid contacting the ED late at night or on weekends.

When the Main Street board and executive director act as true partners, the work is easier, projects launch faster, and community confidence grows.



Financial Responsibilities for Board Members

Executive directors handle the day-to-day money matters—paying bills, tracking expenses, managing budgets. The board’s role is to look at the bigger picture and ask: How can we keep our Main Street financially healthy for the long term?

You don’t need to be a financial pro to do that. Asking good questions and staying curious goes a long way. Here’s how you can support your Main Street’s financial health.

4 Financial Questions Every Board Member Should Ask

WHAT DO WE OWN, AND WHAT DO WE OWE?

Think about bank accounts, equipment, supplies, and any debt.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO RUN OUR MAIN STREET?

Look beyond the basics. Consider costs for staff, events, programming, insurance, and other ongoing expenses.

ARE THERE RESTRICTIONS ON CERTAIN FUNDING?

Some grants and donations come with rules. Know which dollars can only be spent on specific projects.

HOW ARE WE PROTECTING OUR MONEY, PROPERTY, AND REPUTATION?

Review your Main Street’s policies, insurance coverage, and financial practices. Smart habits help prevent problems before they start.

HOW BOARD MEMBERS HELP: A FINANCIAL TO-DO LIST

As a board member, here's how you can take care of your Main Street's finances:

Build the Budget

Work with staff and the board to develop and approve the annual budget. Your aim is to ensure your Main Street has enough money to do the most important work.

Review Reports

Read monthly financial reports. Look for gaps or surprises. If something isn't clear, ask the board president, treasurer, or a staff member.

Strengthen Policies

As a team, you'll make and adapt rules for how your Main Street handles finances, memberships, partnerships, and sponsorships. (See a sample [Financial Policies Guide](#).)

Fundraise and Give

Help find funding or in-kind donations. Also, make your own annual contribution to show leadership and commitment.

Prepare for the Unexpected

Make sure your Main Street has an emergency fund—ideally three to six months of operating expenses.

Lead with Honesty

Follow ethics and conflict-of-interest policies.

FINANCIAL DOCS THAT TELL YOUR MAIN STREET'S MONEY STORY

For the clearest picture of your Main Street's finances, look to these three documents:

- 1. Balance sheet:** What your Main Street owes (debts) and owns (assets) on a specific date.
- 2. Income statement:** Also called a profit and loss statement, it tracks income and expenses during a set period, such as a fiscal quarter.
- 3. IRS Form 990:** The annual, publicly available tax form that nonprofits file with the IRS.

Leadership, Succession, and Long-Term Stability

Financial sustainability is closely tied to leadership stability. Strong boards plan ahead for leadership transitions and avoid relying on a small number of people to carry institutional knowledge or fundraising relationships.

Board members are expected to be willing to lead when asked, whether as officers, committee chairs, or project leaders. Leadership development happens year-round through committee work, mentorship, and intentional cultivation of new leaders.

Term limits and officer succession planning help prevent burnout and ensure continuity. Many Main Street programs also benefit from keeping former board members involved through advisory roles, advocacy, or special projects. Leadership does not end when a board term ends.

Wearing your “Main Street hat” means representing the organization positively and consistently—before, during, and after board service.

FUNDING, FUNDRAISING, AND FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

A strong Main Street program does not happen by accident. It is built—and sustained—through shared responsibility for funding, clear priorities, and active leadership from the board. While staff manage daily operations, the board is ultimately responsible for ensuring the organization has the financial resources it needs to carry out its mission, meet designation standards, and remain stable over time.

Funding is not just about raising money. It is about making intentional choices that align resources with the community’s vision for downtown. This includes setting priorities, approving budgets, supporting fundraising, and monitoring financial health. When boards fully understand and embrace this role, Main Street programs are better positioned to weather leadership changes, funding shifts, and economic uncertainty.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR FUNDING

In a Main Street program, funding responsibility is shared across the board, committees, and staff—but it is not equal or interchangeable. Each group plays a distinct role, and confusion about these roles often leads to frustration or burnout.

The board of directors carries overall fiscal responsibility for the program. This means the board approves the budget, ensures alignment between the work plan and available resources, and monitors financial health throughout the year. The board also plays a leadership role in fund development by setting expectations, modeling commitment, and opening doors to relationships and opportunities that staff alone may not be able to access.

The organization committee typically leads structured fundraising efforts. This often includes partnership or membership campaigns, sponsorship development, and fundraising events. The committee focuses on planning, coordination, and execution—but it does not “own” fundraising on behalf of the entire board.

Other committees also contribute to funding success. Committees focused on promotion, design, or economic vitality often help identify sponsors, secure in-kind donations, or connect projects to funding opportunities. Supporting fundraising is part of supporting the organization as a whole.

Staff provide essential leadership, coordination, and management of financial resources. They track income and expenses, maintain financial records, support fundraising efforts, and help translate board priorities into actionable budgets. However, staff cannot—and should not—be expected to fundraise alone. A sustainable Main Street program depends on active board participation and shared accountability.

UNDERSTANDING AND MAINTAINING A BALANCED FUNDING MIX

Financial sustainability depends on diversity. Programs that rely too heavily on one funding source—whether public funding, a single event, or one major donor—are vulnerable to sudden changes beyond their control.

As a best practice, strong Main Street programs aim for a balanced mix of funding sources. While exact percentages vary by community, this often includes:

- + Public funding from city, county, or state sources
- + Contributions from the business district, such as businesses, property owners, or utilities
- + Community support from residents, foundations, civic organizations, and businesses outside downtown
- + Earned income from events, activities, festivals, or merchandise

The board should regularly review where funding comes from and ask important questions: Are funding sources diversified? Are any sources unstable or uncertain? Does the current mix support long-term goals, or only short-term needs? These conversations help boards plan proactively rather than reactively.

THE BOARD'S ROLE IN FUNDRAISING

Fundraising is often misunderstood as asking for money. In reality, fundraising is about building relationships, telling the Main Street story, and creating opportunities for people to invest in downtown's future.

Every board member is expected to support fundraising in ways that match their skills, comfort level, and networks. This does not mean everyone must directly solicit donations. It does mean everyone contributes in meaningful ways.

Board members support fundraising by:

- + Sharing why they serve on the board and why Main Street matters to them
- + Advocating for public funding and community investment
- + Introducing staff or board leaders to potential donors or sponsors
- + Helping set up meetings or make warm introductions
- + Thanking donors, sponsors, and partners personally
- + Sharing Main Street's funding goals through personal networks or social media
- + Identifying in-kind donations or cost-saving opportunities
- + Giving an annual gift that is personally meaningful

These actions build trust, visibility, and credibility over time. When board members are engaged and visible champions, fundraising becomes easier and more effective.

BUDGET OVERSIGHT AND ALIGNMENT

The budget is more than a financial document—it is a reflection of priorities. The board's role is to ensure the budget aligns with the mission, vision, and work plan of the organization.

Each year, the board reviews and approves the annual budget before the start of the fiscal year. This includes understanding major revenue sources, anticipated expenses, and any financial risks. Board members are expected to ask thoughtful questions and seek clarity, not to micromanage line items.

Throughout the year, the board reviews financial reports to monitor progress and identify trends. This includes paying attention to cash flow, reserves, and whether spending aligns with approved priorities. When significant changes occur, the board may approve budget amendments to ensure transparency and accountability.



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CITY-LED AND HYBRID PROGRAMS

In city-led or hybrid Main Street programs, funding and governance structures may be more complex. Public funding may come with restrictions, reporting requirements, or political considerations. Staff may be employed by a city or parent organization rather than the board.

Even in these cases, the board remains responsible for advocating for resources, ensuring alignment between priorities and funding, and coordinating closely with staff and city partners. Clear communication and shared expectations are essential to meeting designation standards and maintaining public trust.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Funding challenges are one of the most common reasons Main Street programs struggle or fail. Boards that fully understand and embrace their role in funding—beyond approving budgets—create stronger, more resilient organizations.

When boards lead with clarity, shared responsibility, and long-term thinking, Main Street programs are better positioned to deliver meaningful results for downtown and the community as a whole.

Working with Partners: How to Build Lasting Relationships

Behind every Main Street success is a successful collaboration. Part of your work as a board member will be to build trust and shared responsibility with partners such as business owners, elected officials, nonprofits, and residents. These relationships held expand what your program can do and help ensure your efforts are supported by the community.

WHO ARE YOUR PARTNERS?

No two Main Streets are alike—and neither are their partners. The examples below show some of the people and organizations you might work with, but think of them as a starting point, not a checklist. Add or subtract from the list to build the partnership network that works best for your Main Street.

PARTNER TYPE	SAMPLE ROLES	CONTRIBUTION
Local government officials	Mayors, council members, planning departments, city staff	Help shape policy, provide funding, and streamline permits
Civic institutions	Libraries, schools, parks, neighborhood associations, tenant advisory boards	Serve as community outreach or programming partners
Community organizations & nonprofits	Historical societies, food pantries, youth groups, mental health and housing organizations, local foundations	Offer local knowledge and networks
Faith-based and cultural groups	Churches, mosques, synagogues, interfaith councils, cultural associations, arts and performance groups	Build trust and engagement, especially in diverse areas
Residents	Homeowners, renters, youth, seniors, parents	Provide ideas and accountability to shared goals
Small business and property owners	Business owners and employees, landlords, chambers of commerce	Contribute experience, investments, ideas
Financial and economic development institutions	Local banks, credit unions, small business development centers	Provide funding and technical assistance



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Use the [Outreach Strategy Template](#) to track existing and potential partners and to plan outreach efforts.

HOW TO BUILD TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

Partnership building doesn't have to be complicated. Often, it's the small, steady actions that strengthen partnerships the most.

Listen first

Before suggesting a new event, policy, or project, take time to understand what your Main Street's partners care about. Listening—especially to voices that have historically been left out—leads to better and more inclusive solutions.

Build collaboration

Don't just tell people about a project—involve them. Main Street revitalization works best when residents, officials, and business owners co-create plans or share decisions. Examples include:

- + Inviting residents and business owners to help plan an event or join a committee
- + Hosting walk audits with partners to evaluate the safety, accessibility, and pedestrian-friendliness of your district
- + Asking local students to design posters, surveys, or logos for a campaign

Show up regularly

Relationships grow when people know they can count on you. Be a familiar face at meetings—even ones where you're not directly involved. Keep partners in the loop about Main Street happenings through emails, newsletters, and social media posts. Always follow up on conversations and promises.

Include diverse perspectives

If you're pulling together a committee or a meeting, think about who isn't at the table yet. Reach out to younger residents, non-English speakers, or those without formal titles.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

To learn more about identifying and strengthening partnerships, see the [Community Building and Partnerships guide](#) from Colorado Main Street.

HANDLING CONFLICT

Main Streets and their partners don't have to agree on everything. Handled well, working through differences of opinion can actually strengthen your partnerships. Here are a few things that can help:

- + **Clarify roles.** Spell out who is responsible for what to prevent confusion, overstepping, or wasted effort.
- + **Return to shared goals.** When discussions are getting off track, go back to the community plan or vision statement. These items are a reminder of what you all have in common—wanting what's best for the community.
- + **Focus on problem solving.** Instead of assigning blame, assign tasks. As an example, if a streetscape project has stalled, work with your partners to focus on what's holding up the work—funding, permitting, bandwidth—and then assign actions to move each piece forward.

The goal isn't to agree with your Main Street partners immediately, but to make progress together.

HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE MAIN STREET ADVOCATE

What is advocacy?

Very simply, it means taking action for a cause—something Main Street programs do every day. Here's what that might look like: educating city officials to make zoning changes, asking state legislators for funding, or sharing your story with the media.

Every Main Street board should set advocacy goals for their Main Street. Your goals may focus on:

- + Securing local government funding to support a local Main Street
- + Calling for policy or regulation changes to move projects forward
- + Advancing goals related to a Transformation Strategy

Some Main Streets also take part in statewide or federal issues. They might join Capitol Day events or invite legislators to tour their districts to see progress firsthand.

FROM SIDEWALKS TO SHARED VISION: PHOEBUS PARTNERSHIP WALKS THE BLOCK

When the Phoebus Partnership, an affiliate Main Street program in Hampton, Virginia, wanted to strengthen ties with city leaders, they didn't hold a meeting—they invited leaders to take a walk.

Phoebus Partnership members led city council and planning department members on a 0.9-mile Walk the Block event through the newly designated Advancing Virginia Main Street District in the historic Phoebus neighborhood. Along the way, they stopped at some of the district's greatest hits: the waterfront park, the thriving arts and cultural district, and the theater that hosts the Partnership-supported summer movie series.

As they walked, city leaders chatted with local business owners and learned about upcoming district projects. The event ended at a neighborhood restaurant for lunch, networking, and relationship building.

By swapping a sit-down meeting for a walk, city leaders gained a firsthand look at how Main Street-connected organizations are influencing the neighborhood's progress and possibilities.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

[Main Street America's Policy Agenda](#) is a great starting point to help your board create advocacy goals.

Turning Goals Into Action

Once your advocacy goals are clear, it's time to put them into motion. Advocacy actions—the steps your Main Street takes to meet its advocacy goals—come in many forms:

Education <i>Host a public workshop to show how downtown revitalization supports local businesses.</i>	Research <i>Compile data on vacant properties or downtown foot traffic to include in a funding request.</i>	Relationship building <i>Meet with elected officials, business owners, or partners to build trust.</i>	Media outreach <i>Write letters to the editor or press releases in support of a proposed bill or to share a Main Street win.</i>	Organizing <i>Mobilize community members around a shared issue, like making downtown more pedestrian-friendly.</i>	Lobbying <i>Ask legislators to provide historic preservation incentives.</i>
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RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Lobbying means directly asking a decision-maker to take a specific action. Lobbying is allowed by 501(c)(3) organizations, but you must follow IRS guidelines. For more details, see [5 Tips for Nonprofit Lobbying and Avoiding Political Campaign Intervention](#).

WORKING TOGETHER AS ADVOCATES

Being an effective advocate takes teamwork between the Main Street board and staff. As a board member, you can:

BE A GRASSTOPS LEADER. Grasstops advocacy means using your influence with community leaders to make connections, raise awareness of your Main Street, and advance your mission.

SHARE RESPONSIBILITY. Advocacy should be shared between staff, volunteers, board members, and partners. Assign roles within the board: Who works with elected officials? Who talks to the media? When assignments are clear, it lightens the staff's load and helps make the work happen.

KNOW YOUR ORGANIZATION. Have a short story and a great statistic about your Main Street ready to share. A memorable example goes a long way in making the case. (See the next section for tips.)

How to Talk About Main Street

Every time you talk about your Main Street, you're advocating for your program. Whether that's to a neighbor, a business owner, or a city council member, those moments can inspire support for your organization. That's why it's so important to share clear, consistent messaging about what your Main Street does and why it matters.

Two of the best tools to help you do this are an **elevator pitch** and **talking points**.

ELEVATOR PITCH

An elevator pitch is a 30- to 60-second statement that sums up your Main Street's mission and vision. It creates consistency in how board members, staff, volunteers, and partners introduce the program to other people.

Every Main Street should have its own elevator pitch. Here is a sample:

Example: [Organization name] is dedicated to shaping a vibrant and resilient city center. We work to strengthen and nurture the culture, health, economic diversity, and sustainability of our district. We believe in a shared vision of a downtown that is dense, livable, and uniquely reflective of the people who call it home.

TALKING POINTS

Talking points are short, persuasive statements that share key messages about your Main Street and its advocacy goals. These points should be used by board members, staff, and partners so that everyone is "singing from the same songbook."

Talking points should be specific to your local Main Street, but there are a few qualities that all good talking points share. They:

- + **State a clear goal.** Example: Main Street Springfield is seeking a \$25,000 increase in county funding for our operating budget in the next fiscal year.
- + **Are supported by data.** Example: Since 2020, new businesses within Main Street Springfield's service area have increased by 10%. This growth has created more demand for Main Street support services and community beautification.
- + **Tell a story to show impact.** Example: With Main Street Springfield's support, the owner of Gale's Flower Shop expanded her shop, renovated her storefront, and increased sales by 25%.
- + **Connect to larger community concerns.** Example: For every public dollar invested, Main Street Springfield leverages \$20 of private investment. Supporting Main Street Springfield is a fiscally responsible way to grow the local tax base.

Knowing how to talk about your Main Street in a persuasive way can help your organization gain not just resources, but also real community support.

Main Street 101: Top 5 Do's and Don'ts for Board Members

In this section, you discovered how Main Street boards are structured and the role you play as a board member. As you step into your role, don't worry that you need to know everything at once—learning over time is part of the process. The following do's and don'ts highlight a few of the most important takeaways to keep in mind. You'll also receive plenty of support and guidance from the entire Main Street network. But to help you start off with confidence, here are a few do's and don'ts to keep in mind.

Do:

COME PREPARED Set aside time each month to read agendas, background materials, and financial reports before a meeting. Write down any thoughts or questions. That allows meetings to focus on discussion and decision-making—not catching up on the basics.

ENGAGE ACTIVELY Attend monthly meetings and help out on a committee, task force, or project. It's a great way to build relationships and deepen your connection to your Main Street.

SUPPORT FINANCIAL OVERSIGHT As a board member, you share responsibility for your Main Street's finances. Review financial reports carefully and ask questions if something doesn't make sense.

PROMOTE MAIN STREET Have a short speech or 30-second “pitch” ready to explain why Main Street matters. Share it with your friends, family, and business contacts, and invite them to get involved. (See How To Talk About Main Street in this section for tips.)

MAINTAIN UNITY Respectful debate is welcome during meetings, but once a decision is made, the board should speak as one voice to the community.

Do Not:

MISS MEETINGS WITHOUT NOTICE Let the board president and executive director know if you can't make a meeting. That way, your absence doesn't potentially hold up progress.

SHARE INCOMPLETE OR PRIVATE INFORMATION If you're unsure whether it's OK to talk about something publicly, ask the executive director or board president.

SPREAD NEGATIVITY Concerns about staff, volunteers, or partners should be shared privately with leadership—not on social media or in public conversations.

EXPECT THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR TO RAISE ALL THE MONEY Fundraising is a shared responsibility. Your board should ensure your Main Street has enough resources—including money for staffing.

TAKE ON TOO MUCH Be realistic about how much time and energy you can commit to the board. It's better to serve on one committee and give it your best rather than join several and stretch yourself too thin.

Main Street's Most Important Policies and Procedures

As a board member, you play an important role in building community trust in your Main Street. One way to do that is to follow guidelines that help Main Street leaders make smart and fair decisions.

In this section, you'll learn about the policies and procedures that all Main Street board members, staff, and volunteers should know in order to:

- + Avoid conflicts of interest
- + Participate in Main Street meetings through Robert's Rules of Order (Simplified)
- + Handle and protect sensitive documents
- + Manage risk and comply with relevant laws
- + Follow a Code of Conduct that reflects Main Street values



Conflict of Interest Policy

WHY IT MATTERS

Conflict of interest rules help board members, staff, and volunteers make decisions focused on what's best for Main Street.

WHAT IT MEANS

For the board, a conflict of interest happens when an issue before the board could personally or financially benefit you, a family member, or your business. For example, it would be a conflict if the board is considering hiring a company you or a close family member owns.

- + Board members must complete and sign a [Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form](#) every year or when a new conflict arises.
- + Disclosed conflicts are reviewed by the board chair or a committee.
- + In most cases, the member with the conflict steps out of the room during related discussions or votes.
- + The board keeps records of disclosures and the steps taken to address them.

HOW YOU HELP

- + When in doubt, ask about a potential conflict.
- + Submit your disclosure form on time and keep it up to date.
- + Step aside for discussions or votes where you have a conflict.
- + Let the board president and executive director know right away if a new conflict comes up.

Once conflicts of interest are handled clearly, the next step is ensuring the board's process is just as clear. Good meeting procedures protect fairness, keep discussions productive, and help decisions stick—especially when topics are complex or emotions run high.

Board Meeting Procedures

WHY IT MATTERS

Well-run meetings respect people's time and lead to clear, fair decisions.

WHAT IT MEANS

Most Main Streets use a simplified version of Robert's Rules of Order to guide discussion, debate, and voting. A typical meeting follows this format:

CALL TO ORDER: The board chair starts the meeting on time.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: Board members approve the notes from the last meeting. You can ask questions or suggest changes if something seems inaccurate.

REPORTS: Leaders and committee chairs share updates.

OLD BUSINESS: The board completes any unfinished items from the last meeting.

NEW BUSINESS: Members discuss and decide on new topics.

ADJOURNMENT: The chair closes the meeting when business is complete.

HOW YOU HELP

- + Learn your board's process for when members can speak.
- + Keep comments and questions brief—around two to three minutes—so there's time for everyone to participate.
- + Only discuss items on the agenda; bring up other topics under New Business.
- + To propose a decision, say "I move we..." and then wait for a board member to second it.
- + After discussion on a topic ends, the board votes—usually by saying "aye" or "nay."
- + The board chair counts the votes and announces whether the motion passed or failed.

Meetings are where decisions are made. Document practices are how those decisions—and the information behind them—stay protected over time. Next, we'll cover how to handle records responsibly so the organization remains trustworthy, compliant, and secure.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

See a sample of a [Board Meeting Agenda](#) and a [blank Board Meeting Template](#).

Document Retention and Confidentiality

WHY IT MATTERS

Handling documents and confidential information the right way protects your Main Street's reputation and relationships, and can help prevent issues like identity theft and fraud.

WHAT IT MEANS

All Main Street board members, staff, and volunteers must protect confidential or sensitive information. Certain documents must also be kept for a specific amount of time before being destroyed.

Sensitive information can include:

- + **Financial data:** Budgets, bank statements, financial reports, tax returns
- + **Personnel records:** Job and volunteer applications, performance reviews, Social Security numbers
- + **Strategic plans:** Work plans, annual operating plans
- + **Donor information:** Contact details, credit card numbers, campaign reports, pledge agreements

HOW YOU HELP

FOLLOW THE DOCUMENT RETENTION SCHEDULE: Check your city and state's laws, but general timelines are:

- + **Financial Records:** 7 years
- + **Financial Statements (year-end):** Permanent
- + **Board/Committee Minutes:** Permanent
- + **Contracts & Legal Documents:** Life of contract + 7 years
- + **Personnel Records:** Employment + 7 years
- + **General Administrative Documents:** 3 years

DISPOSE SECURELY: Shred paper records and permanently delete digital files. Keep a log of each item you destroy, when it was destroyed, and how.

LIMIT ACCESS: Only share sensitive documents with people who need to see them.

STORE SAFELY: Use strong, unique passwords and lock physical filing cabinets or drawers.

Protecting information is one part of protecting the organization. The next layer is risk: planning ahead for the financial, legal, and safety issues that can disrupt a program if they're ignored. Risk management isn't about fear—it's about readiness.

Risk Management and Legal Considerations

WHY IT MATTERS

Spotting and managing risks early helps protect your Main Street's assets, reputation, and mission.

WHAT IT MEANS

Risk management means identifying potential threats to your Main Street's people, funding, property, or reputation—and taking steps to reduce those risks.

HOW YOU HELP

COMPLIANCE: Make sure Main Street's policies and practices meet federal, state, and local laws.

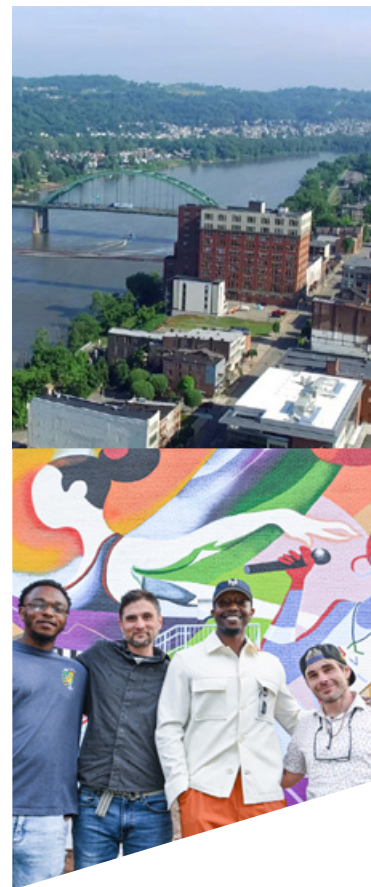
INSURANCE: Confirm your Main Street carries the right coverage—usually general liability, directors and officers (D&O), and property insurance. Consider buying your own cyber insurance if you store sensitive information on your computer. Your insurance agent can help you select the best policy.

CONTRACTS & AGREEMENTS: Review all contracts carefully before approving them.

HEALTH & SAFETY: Follow safety protocols for Main Street events and keep emergency plans updated.

FINANCIAL OVERSIGHT: Use internal controls and clear accounting practices to prevent fraud or errors. Review finance reports closely and hire an outside firm to conduct a yearly audit.

INCIDENT REPORTING: Report potential legal, financial, or reputational issues to the executive director and fill out an incident report.



Code of Conduct

WHY IT MATTERS

A strong Code of Conduct promotes honesty, professionalism, and respect, and helps create a welcoming, inclusive Main Street culture. (See a sample [Code of Conduct and Main Street ethics policy](#).)

WHAT IT MEANS

All board members, staff, and volunteers are expected to act in ways that reflect the values and mission of Main Street.

HOW YOU HELP

INTEGRITY AND ETHICS: Put the organization's interests first and disclose conflicts of interest right away.

RESPECTFUL BEHAVIOR: Treat people with dignity and kindness—Main Streets are for everyone.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Protect private information and share it only with permission.

COMPLIANCE: Follow your Main Street's policies and local, state, and federal laws.

PROFESSIONALISM: Represent Main Street positively and follow through on your commitments.

REPORTING CONCERNS: Quickly report unethical behavior or policy violations to the executive director.

Enforcement

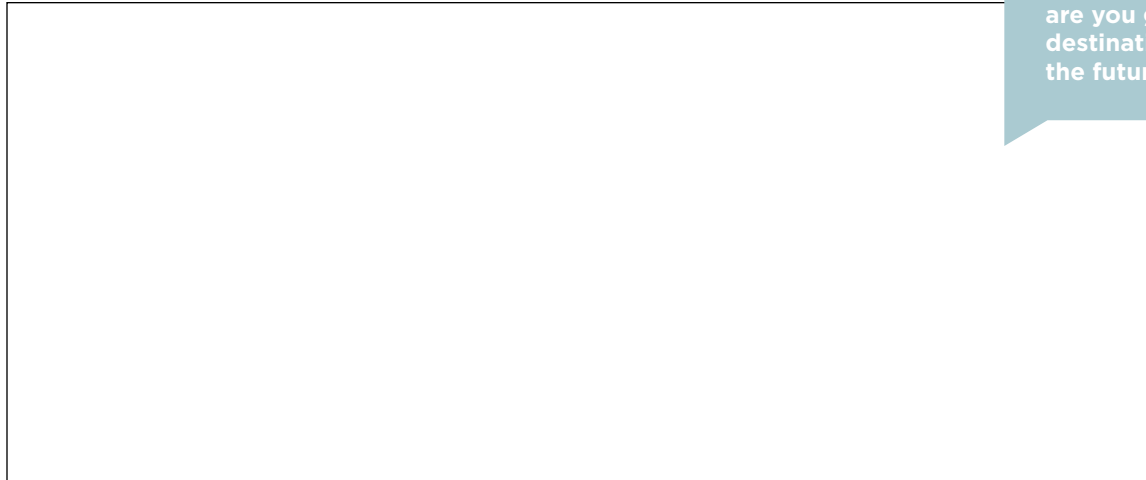
All misconduct reports are taken seriously and handled with confidentiality and fairness. Violating the Code of Conduct can lead to removal from the board, termination of employment, or the end of volunteer service.

Our Local Program



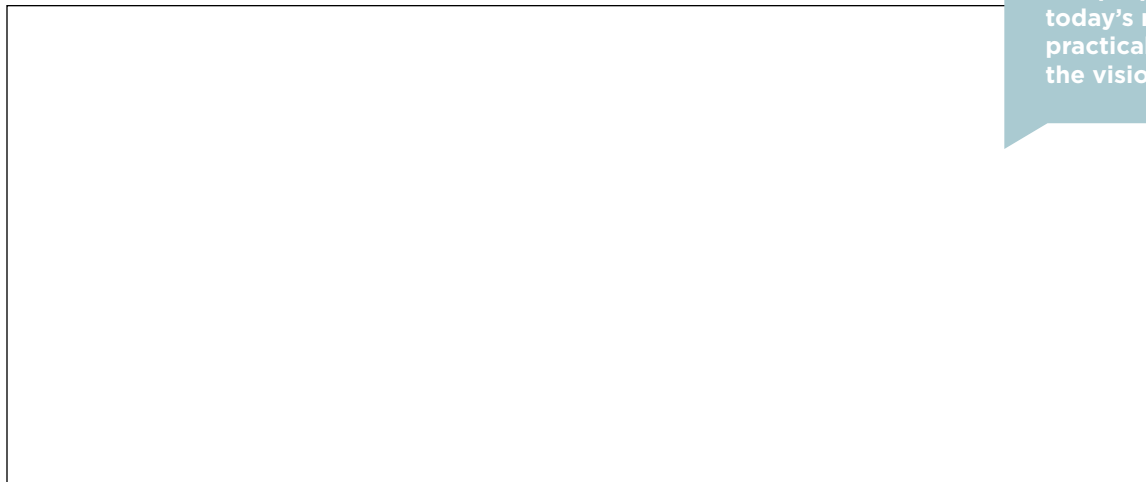
Now that you have the national context—how the Main Street network works and the principles that guide it—the next step is to see what that looks like here at home. Every Main Street program shares a common framework, but each community brings its own history, priorities, partners, and opportunities. In the next section, you'll find the essential details of our local program so you can lead with confidence, consistency, and a clear understanding of what we're working toward together.

VISION



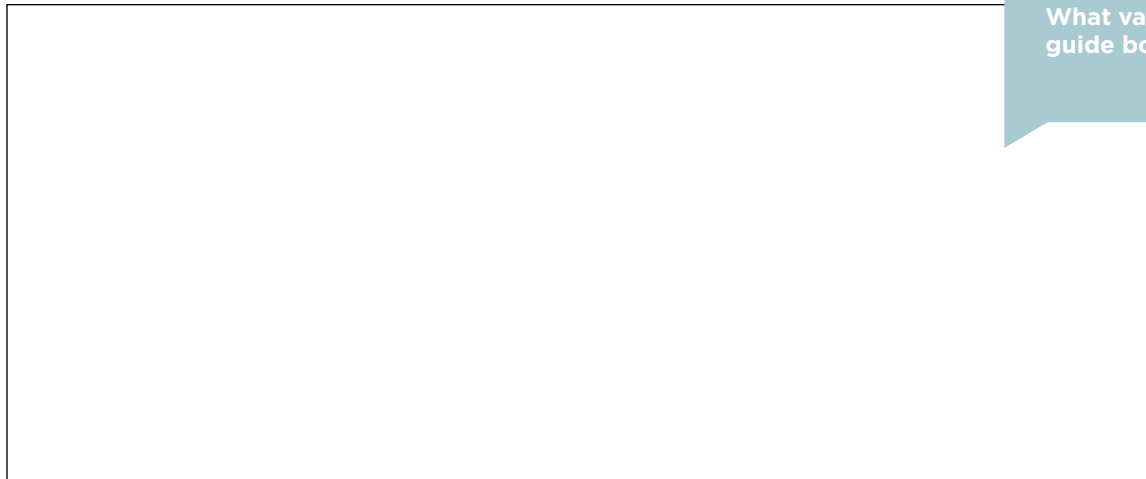
The big picture—where are you going, the ultimate destination that guides the future.

MISSION



The purpose—what is today's roadmap outlining practical steps to achieve the vision.

CORE VALUES



What values and ethics guide board decisions?

STRATEGIC PLAN SNAPSHOT

Does your organization follow a larger strategic plan, or is there a city/master plan that guides downtown work?

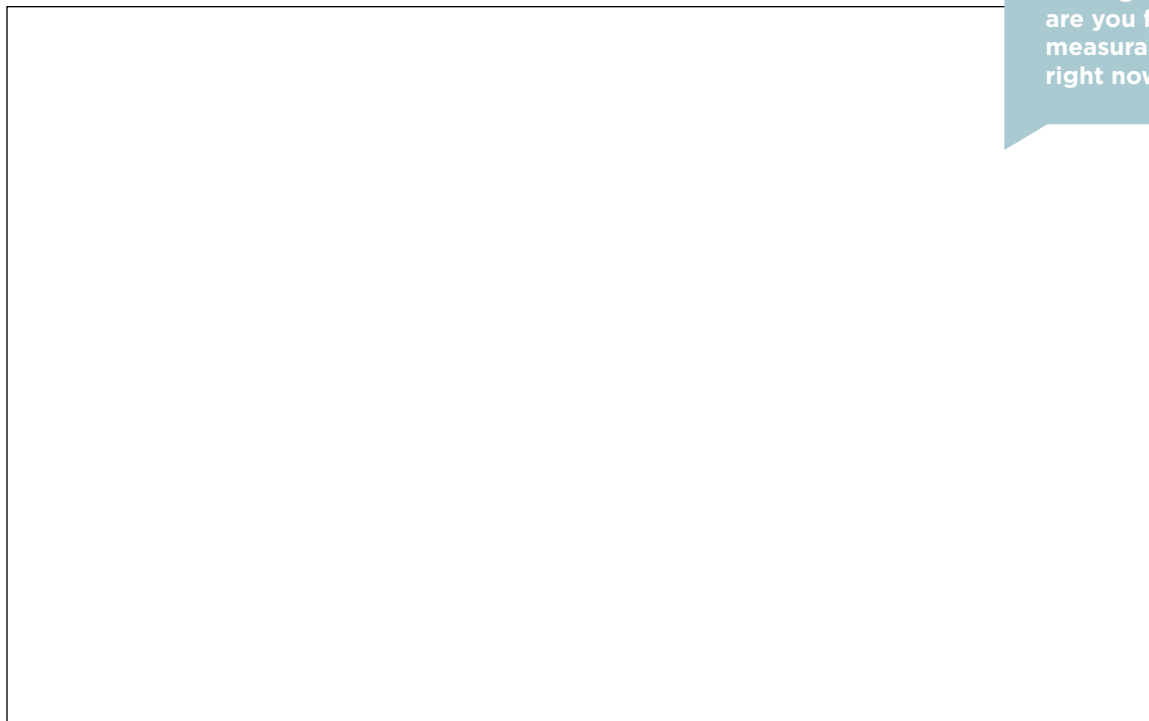


MAIN STREET TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES



What are your 3-5 year transformation strategies, based on market and community data?

CURRENT PRIORITIES



What goals or objectives are you focused on making measurable progress on right now?

ANNUAL WORK PLAN AND COMMITTEE INTEGRATION

What projects and activities are you implementing this year to advance your goals and strategies?

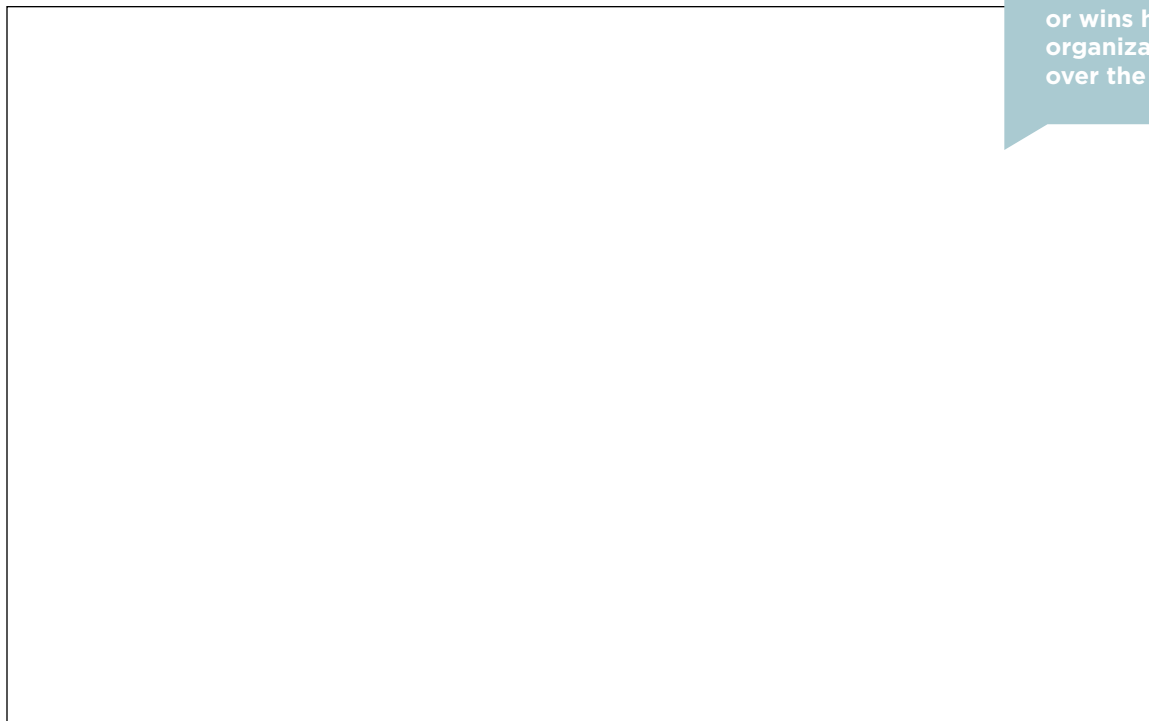


HISTORY



When was your organization founded, and how has it evolved over time?

MILESTONES



What major initiatives or wins has your organization achieved over the years?

PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS



What awards or public recognition has your organization received?

KEY METRICS

Business Stats	Volunteer Hours	Reinvestment Ratio

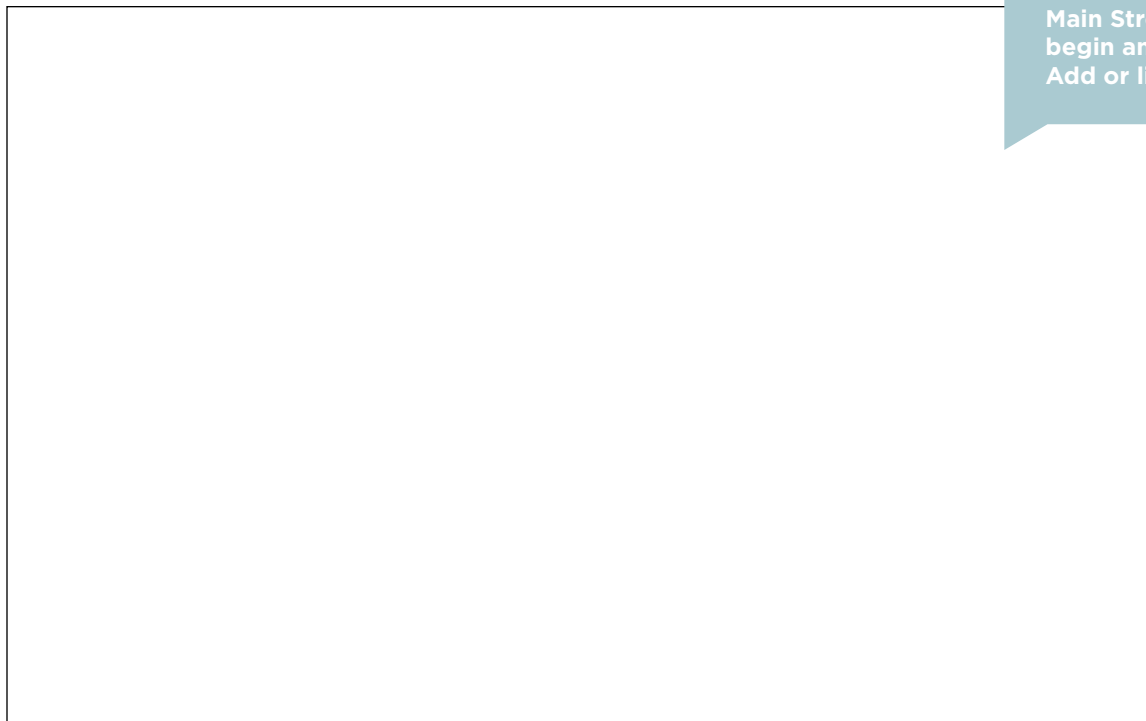
What are the top takeaways from your most recent revitalization statistics?

ASSETS



What assets does your organization own or manage?

MAP OF THE MAIN STREET DISTRICT



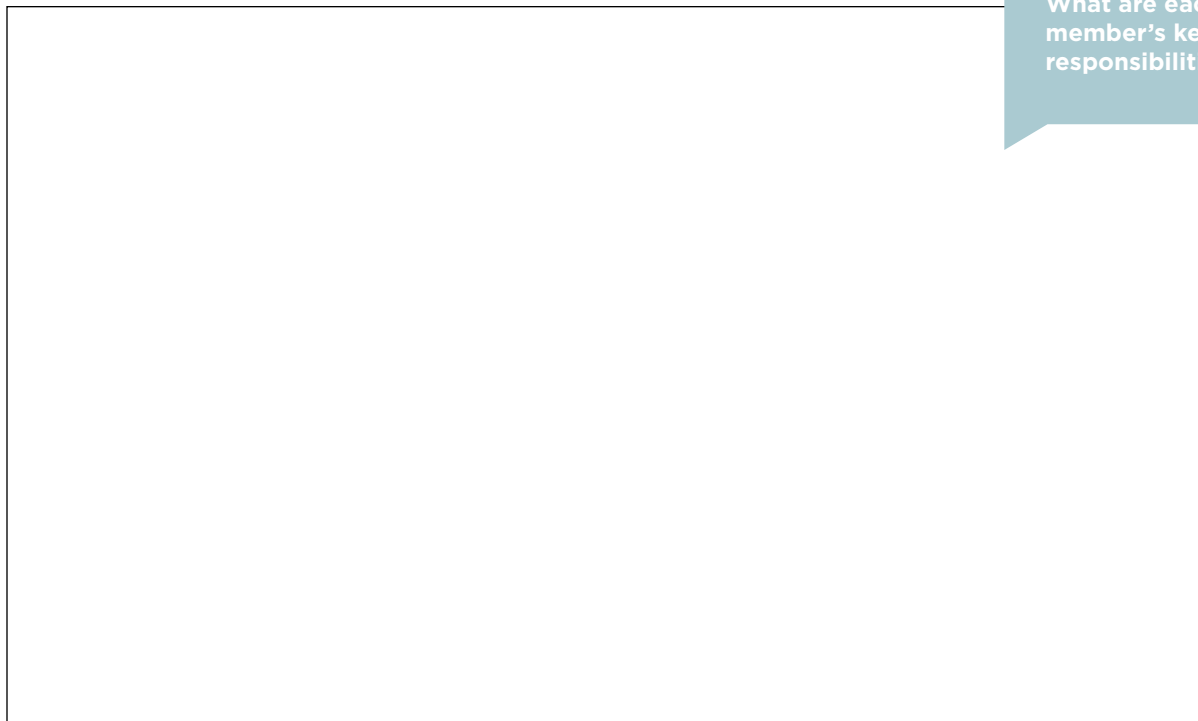
Where does your Main Street district begin and end?
Add or link to a map.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



What is your organization's structure and reporting lines?

STAFF ROLES



What are each staff member's key responsibilities?

BOARD ROSTER INCLUDING CONTACT INFORMATION

NAME	PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL ADDRESS	
NAME	PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL ADDRESS	
NAME	PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL ADDRESS	
NAME	PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL ADDRESS	
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NAME	PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL ADDRESS	

Who is on the board, and how can members contact each other?

COORDINATING PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Who is your Coordinating Program, and what key trainings, deadlines, or touchpoints should you know?

Top Tools and Resources

In this section, you'll find practical tips, reference materials, and learning opportunities to support your Main Street work and level up your skills.

Main Street America Toolkits and Webinars

Main Street America's online [Knowledge Hub](#) offers a wide range of toolkits, guides, and webinars to help board members, staff, and volunteers manage and revitalize their communities. Topics include strategic planning, financial management, volunteer engagement, and community partnerships.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND: How to Measure Your Downtown's Impact (video); Community Transformation Strategies Workbook; Annual Budget (sample document); Main Street Approach Toolkit, and much more.



The Main Street America Academy

The [Main Street America Academy](#) is the organization's one-stop destination for learning and professional growth. Create a profile to access free classes, resources, and tools.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND: In-person workshops as well as self-led and instructor-led courses



Main Street America Training and Events

To grow your skills and build connections, take part in trainings and events offered by Main Street America and other partners:



MAIN STREET NOW CONFERENCE: This is the gathering every Main Streeter has on their calendar. The annual conference features workshops, networking, and expert-led sessions.

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION WORKSHOP: A deep dive into Main Street’s transformation strategies, with a strong focus on community and market data analysis.

STATE OR REGIONAL MAIN STREET TRAINING:

Many Main Street coordinating partners offer excellent local learning opportunities.

FIELD SERVICES TEAM: MSA provides services through a variety of vehicles, which can be customized to meet your needs. Whether its strategic planning support, district assessment services, or economic development strategy implementation—we have the expertise to help make your community’s vision a reality.



“Another Main Street America conference in the books. I walked away inspired, encouraged, and hopeful. To be in a room with so many people who work so hard to help our small towns and small businesses thrive was empowering.”

— CharlesTown Now member

Glossary of Terms

This glossary will help you speak Main Street's language. You'll find terms and acronyms that come up often in board work. Use the glossary as a quick reference to keep communication clear and consistent.

15 KEY TERMS EVERY MAIN STREET BOARD MEMBER SHOULD KNOW

1. Main Street Approach

A proven, community-driven framework focused on economic vitality, design, promotion, and organization to strengthen downtowns and commercial districts.

2. Four Points™

The core principles of the Main Street Approach—Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization—which guide all Main Street activities and strategies.

3. Economic Vitality

A Main Street focus area that builds a strong economic base by supporting existing businesses, attracting new ones, and creating a healthy mix of uses downtown.

4. Design

A focus area centered on enhancing the look and feel of a downtown through historic preservation, building improvements, public spaces, and streetscape projects.

5. Promotion

A focus area that shapes a positive image of Main Street commercial districts through marketing, events, and storytelling. The goal is to attract residents, visitors, and investment.

6. Organization

A focus area that strengthens leadership, partnerships, and funding to ensure the program's long-term sustainability.

7. Board Governance

How a board of directors fulfills its role to guide a Main Street program's mission, strategy, finances, and accountability.

8. Fiduciary Responsibility

The legal and ethical duty of board members to act in the organization's best interests, especially when it comes to financial decisions, accountability, and oversight.

9. Conflict of Interest

When a board member's personal or professional interests could improperly influence Main Street decisions.

10. Work Plan

A detailed plan that spells out activities, responsible parties, timelines, and resources to carry out Main Street strategies. Work plans connect board decisions to day-to-day action.

11. Transformation Strategy

A market-driven approach that identifies a district's unique strengths and opportunities to guide revitalization and growth.

12. Historic Preservation

The practice of protecting, adapting, and celebrating historic buildings and places. Preservation often defines a Main Street district's identity and economic success.

13. Stakeholders

People and groups who are invested in a Main Street program's success—including residents, businesses, property owners, civic leaders, and partner organizations.

14. Volunteers

Community members who donate their time, skills, and energy to support Main Street programs. They often serve on committees, help with events, or provide professional expertise.

15. Designation

Recognition by Main Street America® that a local program meets established performance standards. Designation signals program quality and credibility.

20 ACRONYMS EVERY MAIN STREET BOARD MEMBER SHOULD KNOW

MSA Main Street America®

The national organization that supports a network of local Main Street programs, Coordinating Programs, and partners across the country.

CP Coordinating Program

A state, regional, or city-level Main Street program that provides training, technical assistance, and leadership for local Main Street communities.

EV Economic Vitality

One of the Four Points™ of the Main Street Approach, focused on strengthening a downtown's economic base and supporting local businesses.

NMSC National Main Street Center

The former name of Main Street America, sometimes still used. (The brand is now exclusively Main Street America®/MSA.)

MSARP Main Street America Revitalization Professional

A professional credential that recognizes national expertise in the Main Street Approach and leadership in community revitalization.

ROI Return on Investment

A way to measure the value gained from a project, program, etc., compared to the resources spent. Often used to show Main Street's economic and social impact.

EDO Economic Development Organization

A partner agency or nonprofit focused on advancing regional economic growth.

PPP Public-Private Partnership

A collaboration between government, businesses, and nonprofits that combine resources and expertise to achieve revitalization goals.

SWOT Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

A planning tool for understanding internal and external factors that shape a Main Street program's strategies and decisions.

IRS Internal Revenue Service

The federal agency that regulates nonprofit status, including 501(c)(3) organizations.

501(C)(3)

An IRS tax-exempt designation for nonprofits, including many Main Streets.

RFP Request for Proposals

A formal call for bids or applications, often issued by governments or funders.

KPI Key Performance Indicator

A measurable value that shows how well a program or organization is meeting its goals.

LOI Letter of Intent

A short, early statement of interest submitted to a funder before submitting a full grant proposal.

CDC Community Development Corporation

A nonprofit that supports economic development, housing, and revitalization in underserved areas.

CRA Community Reinvestment Act

A federal law that requires banks to meet the credit needs of all communities, including in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods.

SBA Small Business Administration

A U.S. federal agency that supports small businesses through loans, training, and resources— often a key partner for Main Streets.

CDBG Community Development Block Grant

A federal funding program administered by Housing and Urban Development to support community development and revitalization projects.

TIF Tax Increment Financing

A local public financing tool that uses future tax revenue increases to pay for current improvements in designated districts.

HTC Historic Tax Credit

A federal program that provides tax incentives to rehabilitate historic, income-producing buildings. Many states also offer matching tax credits.

FAQ: What New Board Members Ask

Use the questions below to help get comfortable in your role and actively contribute to your Main Street's mission.

GETTING ORIENTED

- + What are my responsibilities as a board member?
- + How often do meetings occur, and what is expected of me at meetings?
- + What policies should I be familiar with as a board member?
- + Who can I contact if I have questions or need support?

UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATION

- + What is our mission, and how does our current work align with it?
- + What are our top priorities this year, and how were they determined?
- + How does our local Main Street program fit within the national Main Street America network?

BOARD-STAFF RELATIONSHIP

- + How does the board support (but not manage) the executive director or program director?
- + What decisions require board approval, and what decisions are handled by staff?
- + How should concerns or ideas be raised between meetings?

COMMITTEES AND ENGAGEMENT

- + What committees exist, and how do they support the organization's goals?
- + What level of involvement is expected outside of regular board meetings?
- + How can I best use my skills, experience, or networks to support the organization?

FINANCIAL AND FIDUCIARY OVERSIGHT

- + How is the organization funded, and what are our primary revenue sources?
- + What financial reports should I review regularly?
- + How does the board ensure financial accountability and long-term sustainability?

MAIN STREETS ARE FOR EVERYONE

Learn more at mainstreet.org