

2011

GREAT AMERICAN MAIN STREET AWARD PROFILE:

Fort Pierce, Florida

BY ANDREA L. DONO



People call the waters along the eastern shore of Florida, “Treasure Coast,” after a sunken Spanish fleet, but the real treasure is downtown Fort Pierce.

Twenty-three years ago, Main Street Fort Pierce (MSFP) began transforming a blighted Enterprise Zone into a tropical oasis filled with rehabbed 1920s buildings, new street trees (palms, of course), and waterfront trails. Incremental change turned people into believers when the program acted as a developer and rehabbed an eyesore, Old City Hall, and the community’s threatened Sunrise Theater in 1995.

After years of persuasion, the owner finally sold the shuttered 1925 silent movie house to Main Street Fort Pierce, which renovated it, doubled its size, and turned it over to the city debt free. The organization had many hurdles to jump as the five-year, \$13.5 million project experienced setbacks from two major hurricanes, but was ultimately rewarded for its hard work with an American Institute of Architects award and countless patrons who have been enjoying performances like Russian ballets and B.B. King since the theater opened in 2006—and spending money with other businesses nearby. The theater also gave the program a good reason to persuade business owners to start staying open after 5:00 p.m.—especially to capture theater-goers’ patronage on show nights.

John Ward, with the Fort Pierce Redevelopment Agency, called this a Herculean undertaking that resulted in a “cultural cornerstone for the community and a true economic engine that has spun off financial benefits for every merchant downtown.” The Sunrise Theater is now a regional destination that annually attracts 50,000 people. John Wilkes, the theater’s executive director, surveyed the audience and found 40 percent of the people who attended performances had never been to Fort Pierce before. He also shared that the economic spin-off from the theater is 10 times the amount spent on tickets; the \$13 million in ticket sales has generated an economic impact of \$8-10 million.



Sunrise Theater, before and after

Early Main Street projects like the Sunrise Theater, Ward says, established a historic preservation ethic for the entire city. By the time the program finished its third rehab project, several other building owners had embarked on their own rehabs throughout the downtown, sparking local residents to take renewed pride in their homes.

While Fort Pierce is a major retirement destination and sunny wintertime stop for northern “snow birds,” the Main Street program and its partners are working hard to create a livable community year round

The group has done a great job of engaging volunteers, new and long-time residents alike. A core group of 75 volunteers help drive the Main Street program, and thousands of volunteer hours are clocked in each year. When retiree Suzie Smith moved to the downtown, she quickly found that all the fun events and exciting projects were somehow associated with the Main Street program. Pretty soon she started volunteering for Plein Air, a three-day extravaganza that invites creative types to paint historic buildings and the riverfront, and then moved up the ranks to play a bigger role in the organization.

STRATEGIC REVITALIZATION

When looking at Main Street’s timeline, you can see that the community’s renaissance was a well-thought out affair. Studies, plans, and public input contributed to a measured, strategic approach to smart revitalization—a true model for all Main Street communities. Many attribute today’s bustling downtown to a charrette led by Main Street Fort Pierce in 1995; the event drew 300 participants eager to chart the downtown’s course.

“It was a watershed event for the city and Main Street,” says Michael Busha, executive director of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, the nonprofit group with which the Main Street program worked on the planning process. “[They] produced a Citizens’ Master Plan for Revitalization that has been used by Main Street as a blueprint for transforming a dying downtown area and its surrounding neighborhoods into a vibrant, world-class destination.”

Forging ahead with the resulting master plan and new ordinances and codes that helped protect historic assets, Main Street Fort Pierce was determined to make down-

town a great place to live and do business. The next step was looking at opportunities. Partnering with the city, MSFP commissioned a strategic marketing plan that led to the opening of an astonishing 60 businesses in six months!

Excitement continues to build with new projects, such as the first residential development since downtown’s 1920s hey-day. In 1999, the organization conducted a market analysis on housing development potential to see if becoming a small, urban village “where residents can have an urban experience in a small-town setting” was realistic.

Within an eight-mile radius of downtown there are 37,000 employees. The researcher was able to get 26 percent of the 3,000 workers surveyed to share their housing and shopping preferences. The survey showed high interest in downtown living. The downtown was seen as appealing to several different target groups—not just empty nesters and second-home buyers, but also artists, downtown business owners, and boat owners who want to be close to the marina. The survey results gave a green light for adding various new housing units to the downtown.



Winter Lights Walk



New downtown residences

PAVING THE WAY

MSFP has completed \$15 million in restoration and new construction projects. The restoration of the Sunrise was truly a shining star, but the Main Street program also rehabbed the historic Platts Backus House for its office and public space. One interesting aspect of this \$600,000 project is its use of multiple funding sources. The organization matched a \$50,000 grant from the Florida Historic Preservation Division and a \$350,000 grant from the Fort Pierce Redevelopment Agency with several public and private donations from the National City Foundation, the St. Lucie Medical Center, Nunno Builders, a fund raiser at Archie's

Seabreeze Restaurant, and a group of Realtors. In-kind support, such as the police department offering to paint the building and others donating professional architectural services, made this project happen.

Many say it was the organization's restoration of Old City Hall, which created a much-needed events space downtown, that helped make believers out of naysayers. The City Hall rehab inspired the city to jump in with projects like replacing the 80-year-old streets, burying utilities, and repairing broken sidewalks. A library, public art, visitors center, and other amenities were added downtown.

The changes in Ft. Pierce have gone a long way to attract private-sector activity. For example, during an arts event,

three dilapidated but history rich buildings caught the eye of Philip Steel, an artist and architect who was encouraged to buy the property with a developer and launch into extensive rehab work.

"Business owners like us would not have considered this investment and move were it not for the accomplishments of Main Street Fort Pierce," says Steel. Both partners moved their offices into two of the spaces in Hill House, which is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A gallery and a museum space offering a tribute to Harry Hill, the artist after whom the building is named, are slated for the remaining spaces.

MSFP created a business clustering plan based on the marketing plan to help businesses determine the most appropriate locations so they could benefit from being near compatible businesses. When small business owners approach them, Main Street Fort Pierce can offer consumer-informed guidance about how to position their businesses so they can be as successful as possible. For example, when the owner of Brewer's Café first thought she'd open a sandwich shop, she was told that need was already being met, but that a coffee shop would satisfy an unmet need.

REINVESTMENT STATISTICS

Year established:	1988
Net number of new jobs:	404
Net number of new businesses:	88
Number of building rehabilitations:	136
Number of new buildings:	17
Vacancy rate when the program began:	40%
Vacancy rate today:	8%
Dollar amount of public investment:	\$14,575,000.00
Dollar amount of private investment:	\$25,020,000.00
Number of housing units:	176



Platts Backus House rehab

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- Philip Steel, an artist and architect



Fort Pierce festival



Waterfront at night

Entrepreneurs interested in opening a business downtown can go to MSFP—a one-stop shop that directs them to all of the agencies and departments that must approve their plans. The program also has a referral system with the Small Business Development Center and the Small Business Administration.

SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE

The future not only looks bright for Fort Pierce, it's looking pretty green as well. St. Lucie County and the City of Fort Pierce are working to become a national model for energy efficiency with the creation of the nation's first Green District. Working with the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the city will establish an energy efficiency zone downtown to benchmark building performance and experiment with ways to reduce energy usage.

Another cool sustainability project, the “Extreme Yard Makeover,” a collaborative effort involving the South Florida Water Management District and several community partners, transformed the Platts Backus House garden into a native-plant showcase demonstration site to teach visitors and residents about water conservation techniques. A seminar series ran in conjunction with the garden project to teach residents how to use these concepts in their own yards and reduce stormwater runoff.

In 1995, Fort Pierce was in such a state of decline that leadership didn't attend the community meetings that the Main Street program led. That meeting resulted in the city's master plan, which is still being followed today. A new streetscape, new zoning and codes, and a renewed enthusiasm among all stakeholders yielded a completely different downtown. It was no longer that scary place people avoided at night but a gorgeous waterfront Main Street with a new spirit and steady stream of events and artistic energy.

Fort Pierce Main Street's story is one of measured, strategic planning. Its success results from its strong leadership and willingness to be a catalyst and its ability to make informed decisions that bring it closer to its revitalization goals instead of simply moving from one project to the next. Bouncing back from two hurricanes in 2004, the Sunrise City has proven it is both a shining and resilient gem on the Treasure Coast.

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