

The Rochester Downtown Development Authority

M I C H I G A N

SNAPSHOT:

- Community:** Suburban downtown
- Nearest City:** Detroit
- Size:** 6 blocks
- Population:** 12,793
- Operating Budget:** \$1.5 million (public funding 60%; private funding 40%)
- Tax Status:** Governmental agency

IMPACT:

- Business mix:**
- Retail:** 119
- Restaurants:** 41
- Service businesses:** 126
- Offices:** 125
- Arts and entertainment:** 6
- Public reinvestment:** \$43.3 million
- Private reinvestment:** \$53.6 million
- Net new businesses:** 132
- Net new jobs:** 2,352
- Building rehabs:** 46
- New buildings:** 12
- Housing units added:** 114
- Vacancy rate when program began in 2000:** 38%
- Current vacancy rate:** 4%

Nestled along the Clinton River and Paint Creek, this Michigan community has a natural beauty accentuated by parks, trails, and distinctive historic charm. There are 350 shops, dining establishments, and service providers as well as a farmers market that make downtown *the* local shopping destination.

Once a hopping mill town with strong commerce, Rochester fell into decline in the 1970s when the mill economy was replaced by a mall economy. The retail vacancy rate hit 29 percent and office vacancies soared to 57 percent.

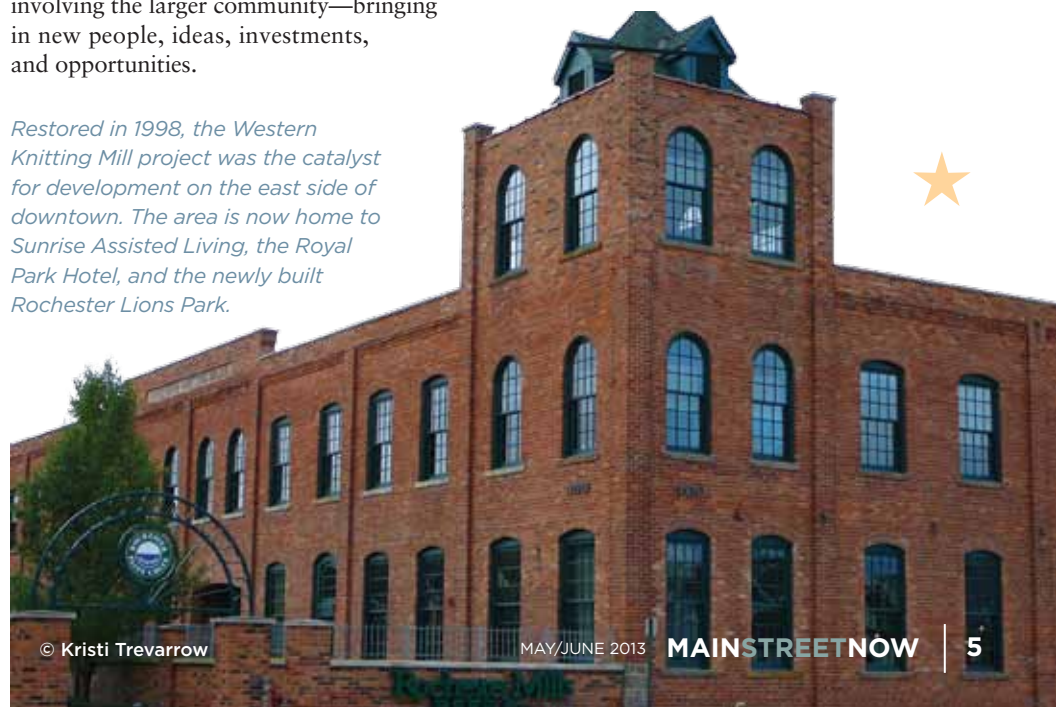
But the City of Rochester wasn't ready to give up. It decided to invest in downtown rather than abandoning it. In 1983, the city formed the Rochester Downtown Development Authority (DDA), giving the organization the job of making physical improvements and offering façade grants to whip the downtown's appearance into shape. The building rehabs and growing events calendar drew attention to the downtown. Within a few years, a strong cluster of restaurants lined the streets, which organically increased foot traffic and created an environment attractive to retailers.

Successes were adding up, but it wasn't until 2000, when Main Street Oakland County was established and the DDA adopted the Main Street Approach® that downtown took off. The district's revitalization no longer rested on the shoulders of a few board members and city officials; instead, the DDA gained a framework for involving the larger community—bringing in new people, ideas, investments, and opportunities.

The Rochester DDA undertook a \$500,000 rehabilitation project to restore the historic railroad bridge for use as a pedestrian bridge over Paint Creek to allow direct access from the Royal Park Hotel to the downtown.

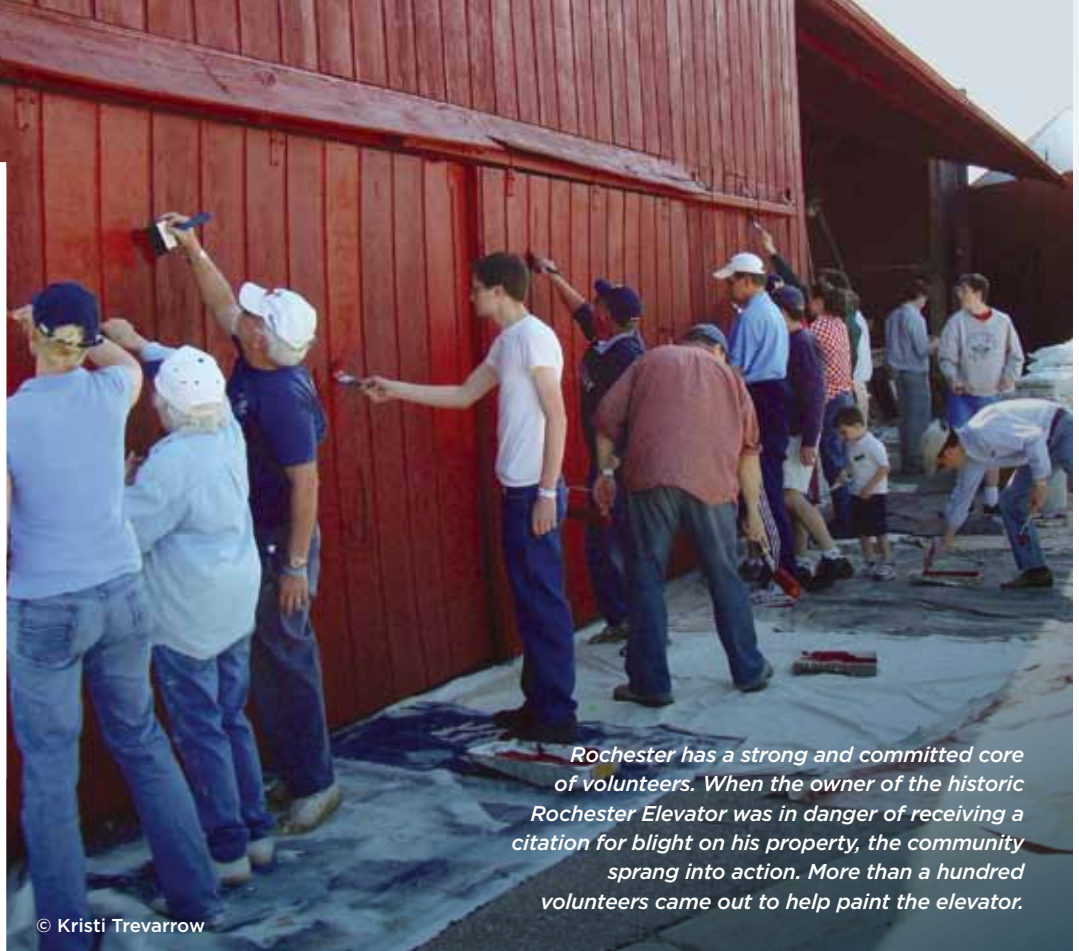
Each standing committee is staffed with seven to 19 volunteers—the number of members is determined by the work plan and scope of work. Volunteer engagement requirements are flexible and offer a variety of tasks and responsibility levels to fit the schedules and interests of those who want to be involved. The organization has secured diversified, sustainable funding through its Tax-Increment Financing (TIF) district, along with capital campaigns, a membership program, sponsorships, and grants. The DDA also established a Principal Shopping District (PSD) that levies a special assessment on property owners to fund downtown marketing.

Restored in 1998, the Western Knitting Mill project was the catalyst for development on the east side of downtown. The area is now home to Sunrise Assisted Living, the Royal Park Hotel, and the newly built Rochester Lions Park.





© Kristi Trevarrow



© Kristi Trevarrow

Rochester has a strong and committed core of volunteers. When the owner of the historic Rochester Elevator was in danger of receiving a citation for blight on his property, the community sprang into action. More than a hundred volunteers came out to help paint the elevator.

"Our organization is only as good as the volunteers who support us!" says DDA Director Kristi Trevarrow. "We host an annual Volunteer Appreciation Party and present our coveted Volunteer of the Year Award."

Enthusiastic participation comes from the business community, which makes up 60 percent of the organization's volunteers. Other board members and volunteers include residents, property owners, nonprofits, the chamber of commerce, developers and real estate professionals, and elected officials. Rochester cultivates its leaders through the committee structure, nurturing volunteers from the ground up and growing their responsibilities and knowledge base before appointing them to the board.

Cooperation among committees on joint projects and initiatives that reinforce each other's work helps break down organizational "silos." Each committee is chaired by a board member who shares updates at board meetings to build solid internal communication and opportunities for collaboration. For instance, the goal of creating a culture that supports small businesses is shared among all committees. The Business Development Committee will host workshops, gather market information, and develop incentives, while the Promotions Committee plans strategic marketing messages and supporting events.

Another example is a joint committee project that will bring a "Splash Pad" to an underused part of downtown. Land was donated to the DDA so it can build a free park featuring outdoor water sprinklers where

families can cool off during the summers. The Site Development (Design) Committee is handling site selection, engineering, design, and project estimates while the Organization Committee focuses on raising the funds necessary to make the project a reality. DDA Executive Director Kristi Trevarrow says that allowing two committees to work on the same project seems to be one of the best ways to let volunteers do what they are good at for the overall success of the project.

With a strong Main Street program at the helm, active and engaged volunteers, and a supportive city, Rochester today is a thriving suburb of Detroit, seeing a 20 percent increase in population in the last decade, according to the 2010 Census, when other municipalities were shrinking. To date, the revitalization effort has brought almost \$100 million in reinvestment to the downtown and plenty of new projects are on the way.

Building the Brand

Much of the DDA's energy focuses on opportunities for discovery. Events, social media, and image campaigns all highlight treasures you can find in this family-friendly small town, including food, history, and unique merchandise.

For visitors, a charming historic downtown awaits. They can enjoy gardens and trails along waterways for biking, walking, and

even cross-country skiing. They can also discover independent businesses, outdoor dining, and 100 days of events throughout the year. Of course, these amenities are attractive to local folks as well and contribute to their quality of life as well as a growing demand for housing. Two loft condominium infill projects are completely full and downtown's first apartment building is on the drawing board.

"Downtown Rochester has given my family a sense of community that is difficult to find in today's suburbia and vast shopping malls," says Thomas Wiggins, a local resident who moved his family from Chicago to Rochester after being impressed by the diversity of shops, people, and amenities.

When residents began requesting more eco-friendly options, the DDA formed a Green City Committee that responded with a downtown business recycling program, green living seminars at the farmers market, an electric car charging station, and more.

The DDA and its partners have been steadily making physical improvements to enhance the built environment and send the message that downtown is good for investment. Projects that include building a pocket park and extending the Paint Creek Trail to offer 8.5 miles of recreational space and a downtown river walk are results of effective public-private partnerships.

RIGHT: Even though everyone told us outdoor dining on Main Street would be impossible because we are on a state highway, says Trevarrow, the DDA and the city worked with the Michigan Department of Transportation to create outdoor dining opportunities for downtown businesses. This is a huge economic driver for downtown during the warmer months.

MIDDLE: When residents began requesting green-friendly technology, the city responded by putting electric car-charging stations in two locations downtown, using a grant from DTE Energy.

BOTTOM: Bikers, runners, and dog walkers alike enjoy the trail system that runs through downtown Rochester. In the foreground is Rotary Park, donated to the DDA by the Rochester Rotary Club.



© Mitch Warde



© Kristi Trevarrow



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Aerial view of Main Street after the concrete was removed during the massive \$7.6 million streetscape project. During this phase of the “Main Street Makeover,” a three-block section of the street was closed for 65 days. To give pedestrians access to businesses, a six-foot sidewalk along Main Street was maintained at all times during construction.

© Kristi Trevarrow



During the streetscape construction, the Rochester DDA took the opportunity to celebrate the community's past. Historic finds, such as these vintage soda bottles, were put on display so residents could enjoy a glimpse into the past.

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“Main Street Makeover”

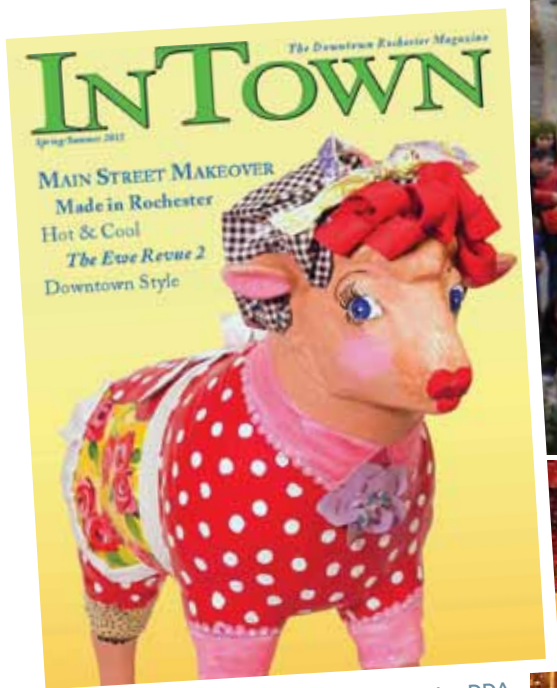
Downtown recently concluded a massive \$7.6 million streetscape overhaul, but the special twist was dubbing it the “Main Street Makeover,” which put a positive spin on several disruptive months. Parking was free, events continued, cash mobs showered businesses with attention, and social media sustained enthusiasm and promoted businesses and specials. As new water lines, pavement, LED streetlights, bike racks, traffic lights, and landscaping enhancements transformed Main Street, many businesses reported their strongest sales ever. In the next few years, the Makeover will expand to the rest of the downtown.

Excitement about the downtown's new look was generated by finding things that are old. When the digging started, pieces of Rochester's history were uncovered. The original brick street, an old burial ground, and a town well that were once buried were rediscovered. Horseshoes, bottles, buttons, newspaper ads, and other items were dusted off, then put on display and featured on Facebook. The DDA tried to keep everyone positive and looking forward to the changes. The original bricks were sold in a fundraiser that gave people a piece of their history.

“I was so positive that the recent seven months of construction would ensure Rochester's economic success that I took the risk of relocating The Funky Frog Children's Resale Boutique to Main Street and expanding my business in the middle of construction,” says shop owner Renee Perkins. “After three and a half months in my new Main Street location, I am not disappointed! My business has grown.”

Upgrading the streetscape was a major design effort that helped reinforce the downtown's image.

Perkins's shop was among 12 businesses that opened during the construction (only four closed). As the Makeover was taking place, locals rallied to support their downtown and developed a deeper love for their community. Photos of milestones and completed parts of the project were celebrated along the way. Christine Walden Hughes, a downtown property owner, said it helped turn “Rochester fans into die-hards,” creating even stronger community bonds.



© Rochester DDA

In Town, Rochester's bi-annual downtown magazine, is mailed to 50,000 homes and offers a comprehensive listing of upcoming events, business openings, and seasonal activities, along with beautiful photos that showcase what customers can find downtown.

Marketing Rochester's Image

Upgrading the streetscape was a major design effort that helped reinforce downtown's image. The community brand is communicated through vigorous marketing efforts, too. Downtown Rochester has a strong social media presence—from Twitter to Facebook to Pinterest—that keeps its online community informed and excited about the community's progress, upcoming events, new businesses, and product highlights and specials from featured shops and cafes around town.

The DDA uses funds from the PSD to fuel a holiday television campaign; cooperative print and broadcast advertising program; and a twice-yearly, full-color magazine and business directory. The *In-Town Magazine* is mailed to 50,000 homes and is filled with upcoming events, business openings, seasonal produce at the farmers market, and tons of gorgeous photos showcasing what customers can find downtown—from the Almond Encrusted French Toast with Berry Compote at the Downtown Café to artistic salt and pepper shakers.

"The events calendar strikes a strong balance between image-raising activities and register-ringing events to provide a variety of



© Mitch Warde



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Hosting 100 days of events a year, Rochester has "one of the finest promotions ... programs in the country," says Main Street Oakland County Coordinator Bob Donahue. *TOP:*The grand finale to Rochester's Halloween Celebration is a popular parade led by the Rochester fire and police departments. *ABOVE:* Launched in 2005, Rochester's signature event, the Big, Bright Light Show, has grown from 500,000 LED holiday lights to 1.5 million. The month-long display brings more than a million people to downtown Rochester, Michigan, each year.

participation opportunities that appeal to retailers, restaurants, and service businesses," says Trevarrow.

The DDA sends out an informational packet to business owners several times a year to share details about upcoming events. Businesses have numerous opportunities to get involved by volunteering, sponsoring, or advertising at events. As Elizabeth Aprea, owner of Moon River Soap Company, says, "The fact that all businesses are treated equal makes us feel respected."

The DDA works with partners to create activity such as Movies in the Moonlight, the Fire & Ice Festival, and the "Ewe Revue"—a series of Hollywood-themed public art in the form of sheep. But Rochester's signature event, the Big, Bright Light Show, takes center stage. A class act, this promotion was initially designed simply to increase holiday sales, but the 1.5 million lights draping the down-

town buildings has morphed into the largest holiday light display in the Midwest and now attracts a million visitors. Ablaze with holiday spirit, the street is filled with people who walk shoulder-to-shoulder to gaze at beautifully lit buildings and, more importantly, to pop into shops along the way.

This is placemaking at its finest: an event that is now in its seventh year builds community identity while also serving as one of the DDA's strongest business recruitment and retention tools. During its first year, the event generated a 29 percent increase in sales and businesses are still reporting a 15 percent bump.

"The [Rochester] DDA has developed one of, if not the, finest promotions and marketing programs in the country," says Bob Donahue, program coordinator of Main Street Oakland County. "Broad-based and creative, each year they outdo themselves. In fact, the DDA is a shining star in the state."



Supporting Business Development

Entrepreneurs choose Rochester because the DDA becomes their partner in building success. The Business Development Committee uses market demand to recruit new businesses, and DDA staff members take road trips with the city's economic development officer to other towns in search of businesses that might be interested in a second location.

Monthly events and quarterly professional development seminars help strengthen business skills and a variety of matching grants make improvements financially feasible. Some businesses like the Rochester Ballroom have specifically chosen to locate downtown because of the small-business support. The constant, cohesive marketing and strong brand make the downtown an attractive place for entrepreneurs.

A variety of grants are available for signs; lighting; and façade improvements, where priority is given to historic preservation projects. During the Makeover, rear entrance enhancement grants helped make alternative entrances functional and attractive for customer use.

Social media has always been a strength of the DDA and training local businesses on how to leverage those tools became a major priority.

"Once we dipped our toe in the Facebook pool, it became clear that we could use it effectively but our reach would be exponentially greater if we got our merchants involved," says Trevarrow. A Facebook workshop turned into "Facebook Fridays" where business owners could get one-on-one consultations.

"After that initial campaign, 35 businesses began actively using the social media tool. Four years later, our Facebook Fridays help businesses develop their overall social media strategies and include using Twitter and Pinterest," says Trevarrow. "More than a

hundred of our businesses are now actively using social media."

When the new owner of The Funky Frog bought the struggling business a few years ago, she was trying to get it back on track with only a shoestring budget. Because her resale shop sold one-of-a-kind items, print advertising risked promoting goods that might be sold before the ad hit. The DDA coached her in using Facebook to post photos of new arrivals and take requests from customers to hold items. The strategy turned out to be so successful that she has turned the business around and even hired staff.

Along those lines, the Business Makeover Program, the DDA's newest initiative, channels attention, assistance, and resources

door for new development. The DDA has acquired several parcels of land, which it has been using as parking lots while it works with developers to identify mixed-use projects that will fit the downtown and continue to move the community and its vision forward.

A Model Main Street

Main Street communities, inside Michigan and beyond, have been looking to the Rochester DDA and Trevarrow for years. Trevarrow demonstrates leadership for the entire Main Street network and has generously shared her lessons learned, insights, and triumphs in conference sessions, a continuing column in *Main Street Now*, and

The intangible changes in Rochester—its improved quality of life and heightened pride in downtown—are met with the visible successes that have spread through the community and beyond.

to "at-risk" businesses to help them before they are forced to close.

Trevarrow says that even if she doesn't hear a rumor that a business is closing, it's pretty easy to see the signs. "They stop coming to meetings, no longer participate in events, don't change their window displays, don't order new merchandise," she says. "I approach a business and ask how it is doing and get a feel for the issues and how we can help. I'd rather have that hard conversation than lose a business without an opportunity to offer assistance."

The work of the DDA is paying off: the downtown has a 4 percent vacancy rate and boasts more than 2,300 net new jobs and 132 net new businesses. As success mounts, demand for additional downtown housing and retail is increasing, which is opening the

through her blog. She embodies the spirit that we are all in this together and when all Main Streets throughout the nation improve, everyone benefits.

The intangible changes in Rochester—its improved quality of life and heightened pride in downtown has become a Michigan success story—are met with the visible successes that spread through the community and beyond.

"Today's Downtown Rochester is a picture-perfect district that has held onto its heritage and prepared for the future," says Hughes. "I have always been proud to own a building here, but now I am secure in my ownership and happy to know that my investment is on solid ground. Best of all, the place where I meet my friends, raised my children, live my life—my hometown—is thriving."

The Rochester DDA works with businesses to ensure their success, offering professional development seminars and a variety of matching grants. Thanks to the DDA's recruitment and marketing efforts, the downtown attracts shoppers of all ages.



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★ Ocean Springs Main Street

MISSISSIPPI

SNAPSHOT:

- Community:** Rural downtown
- Nearest city:** New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama
- Size:** 100 blocks
- Population:** 17,472
- Operating budget:** \$300,000
(public funding 30%, private funding 70%)
- Tax status:** 501(c)6

IMPACT:

- Business mix:**
 - Retail:** 109
 - Restaurants:** 36
 - Service businesses:** 26
 - Offices:** 47
 - Arts and entertainment:** 42
- Public reinvestment:** \$407 million
- Private reinvestment:** \$116 million
- Net new businesses:** 319
- Net new jobs:** 1216
- Building rehabs:** 196
- New buildings:** 23
- Housing units added:** 320
- Vacancy rate when program began in 1990:** 80%
- Current vacancy rate:** 0%

The coastal town of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, may be off the beaten path, but it has become known as a culinary destination with an artsy vibe and nonstop events. Block after block, a canopy of majestic 300-year-old oak trees shades attractions like sculptures and murals, art galleries, arts and craft shops, ethnic restaurants, and churches dating back to the 1800s.

Throughout the year, tourists and locals enjoy the town’s charms, cottage-style shops, and pathways peppered with public art connecting to the sandy shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Lovelace Drug’s neon sign glows outside, beckoning people to order a milkshake at the same soda fountain counter where Elvis Presley once sat. The Tato-Nut Donut shop, where the specialty treat is made with potato flour, has been family-owned and operated since the 1960s. It’s no wonder Ocean Springs has been named one of the 50 Best Small Towns in America and profiled as a hot travel destination by the *Washington Post* and *Southern Living* magazine.

The vibrancy of downtown Ocean Springs today makes it hard to imagine that it once was a ghost town. The community’s long history dates back to its founding in 1699 as

a French Louisiana outpost. But over time, it was forgotten. In the 1980s, the population hovered around 2,000 and the vacancy rate hit 80 percent. The economy was stagnating when the Main Street program began in 1990. Slow and steady change took place, with each new business that opened and each new bench added to the street.

The Main Street program was originally housed in city government but found that wasn’t a perfect fit. The program then shifted to the Chamber of Commerce/Tourism Bureau and now all three entities use the Main Street Four-Point Approach® as the overarching community development strategy.

“Financially, each organization could not exist separately nor be successful. In a small town this structure is beneficial,” says Cynthia Sutton, events coordinator/public relations manager for the Ocean Springs Chamber-Main



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Tato-nut doughnuts, where the tasty treat is made with potato flour, is one of the two original businesses that were in the district when Ocean Springs Main Street began in 1990.



Street-Tourism Bureau. “We have one staff, one board, and one budget that all incorporate the ‘four points.’ It’s part of everything we do all around town.”

The organization has four standing committees and rotating task forces that carry out the work planned during annual board retreats. The volunteer work is supported by strong involvement and leadership from paid staff who say they run the revitalization program like a business. Its leaders believe that its organizational model helps break down “silos” that could result from the traditional Main Street committee structure. Members of the Main Street program believe events are the “gateway” for engaging volunteers and the hook that captures people’s interest.

Branding through the Arts

Events are also the organization’s strategy for building its brand. This “beach-y” Southern tourism destination and seafood mecca has a strong, cohesive brand built around the arts.

More than 30 years ago, Ocean Springs launched the Peter Anderson Arts & Crafts Festival to celebrate the artist who opened a

master pottery business in the community back in the 1920s. What began as a few vendors in a parking lot has grown each year in size, activity, and attendance. Today, the festival draws more than 120,000 people from several states and fills two days with arts, music, and food. The festival has set high standards for the vendors and artists selected for its juried art show.

With a year-round staff member dedicated to managing the festival and close attention to high quality, this community event has grown into the region’s premier festival and received many state awards. A recent economic impact study drives home the impact the festival has had on the local economy (see “Measuring the Economic Impact of Special Events,” in the May/June 2012 issue of *Main Street Now*.) The study found that the event brings \$22 million to the area. The Main Street program used this data to show the power of Main Street and its events and, in the process, landed a major sponsor—Blue Moon Brewing Company—which has been a boon to the Ocean Springs Chamber-Main Street-Tourism Bureau fund raising, too.

As the festival grew, more events were added to the calendar, turning August into “festival season.” The visibility these events bring to downtown has piqued the interest of entrepreneurs, so much so, that the

downtown has a zero-percent vacancy.

More than a hundred restaurants have opened in Ocean Springs, with a cluster of 32 in the downtown alone. The town’s restaurants generate more than \$1 million in revenue each year. Some readers might recognize the name “Shed Barbeque and Blues Joint.” It has been featured on The Food Network’s *Diners Drive-Ins and Dives* show and on *Live! With Regis and Kelly*, among other outlets. The Food Network has been visiting other Ocean Springs establishments lately, too.

Ocean Springs Main Street has been leveraging downtown’s reputation as a major foodie destination by adding food-focused festivals like the Taste of Ocean Springs; the Red, White & Blueberry Festival; and Feast of Flavors that celebrates seasonal fall foods. The program soon will be revamping a website devoted to Ocean Springs’ culinary niche to build its online marketing efforts.

Everywhere you look downtown, you see the arts. Creativity is in the air and in the stores. Enticed by the Peter Anderson Festival and the concentration of artists living in Ocean Springs, artists come here to open up studios and shops. From blown glass to handmade housewares to fine art, an arts enthusiast can find lots of one-of-a-kind treasures.



© Cynthia Sutton

LEFT: Ocean Springs has become a major foodie destination, with a cluster of more than 30 restaurants downtown. The Government Street Grocery Restaurant was one of the first to open.

BELOW: Visitors to Lovelace Drugs can treat themselves to a milkshake at the store’s original soda fountain where Elvis Presley used to hang out when he summured in Ocean Springs.



© Ben Muldrow

Public art is pervasive, too. Public Art in Ocean Springs is a joint effort involving the Ocean Springs Chamber of Commerce, Historic Ocean Springs Association, the city, and the Jackson County Supervisors. Together they are placing works by nationally prominent sculptors throughout the town and will unveil their fifth installment this year.

Art even turns up on bridges leading to the community. The Biloxi Bay Bridge was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Partners worked with the Mississippi Department of Transportation to rebuild

it—but now it includes 12-foot-wide walking and biking paths and locally made bronze plaques designed by area artists placed every tenth of a mile. In 2008, the concrete walls beneath the bridge were adorned with a mosaic mural, also designed by an area artist.

Boosting the Local Economy

Investments made in infrastructure, historic buildings, and local businesses are vitally important to building the downtown's economy and protecting its heritage.

Events are Ocean Springs Main Street's strategy for building its brand. This "beach-y" Southern tourism destination and seafood mecca has a strong, cohesive brand built around the arts.



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ABOVE and BELOW: The Peter Anderson Arts & Crafts Festival brings more than 120,000 visitors to this community of 17,000 each year, and generates more than 30 million dollars in tax revenues. The festival sets high standards for its vendors and for the artists selected for its juried art show.

One such investment—rehabbing the 1927 historic high school—has had a huge impact on the downtown. Although it became a Mississippi Landmark in 1998 and was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999, the school had been dormant and was slated for demolition. The roof had been badly damaged during Hurricane Katrina, but the community wasn't ready to see it go.

Ocean Springs Main Street took the first step by getting it listed on the state's most endangered list and building momentum for its rebirth. The Friends of the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center of Arts and Education helped oversee the major renovation. Funds were pulled together from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the Mississippi Arts Commission,

the Jackson County Board of Supervisors, and the City of Ocean Springs as well as from local residents and organizations. The overwhelming support saved a landmark that reopened as a downtown cultural center, known as "The Mary C.," for short. The center supports the visual and performing arts, music, and culinary arts by providing classes and performing space.

What had once been a depressed section of Government Street has turned into an area of opportunity anchored by the Mary C. Its executive director points out that a void in this part of downtown has been filled.

"This once-depressed section has become a vibrant area where visitors and residents ride their bikes, walking is commonplace, and restaurants and retailers attract shoppers and diners from all over the region," says Bryant G Whelan, the center's executive director. "In one week alone, more than a thousand school children tromped through the same halls their parents roamed when they were in school. It would be hard to imagine the Ocean Springs community and how it might look without the Mary C. If Ocean Springs Main Street had not taken the first and important step of saving our building from demolition, this dream would not have become a reality."

Recovering from Disaster

Ocean Springs Main Street also played a pivotal role in the community's recovery from the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. All of the downtown business owners lost their homes and were living in their businesses. The downtown mostly held up from the wind and rain but it was without power, telephone service, or water.

Ocean Springs Main Street became the



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ABOVE: Using an economic impact study that showed the revenue-generating power of Main Street and its events, Ocean Springs landed a major sponsor, Blue Moon Brewing Company, for the Peter Anderson Festival.



Public art is pervasive throughout the downtown. Ocean Springs Main Street is spearheading a multi-year public art project: 24 spaces have been reserved and 10 original pieces have already been placed in the district.

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Ocean Springs has been leveraging its reputation as a major culinary tourism destination by adding "foodie" festivals, such as the Red, White & Blueberry Festival, which is held each year on the weekend closest to the Fourth of July.

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Everywhere you look downtown, you see the arts. Creativity is in the air, on the streets, and in the stores, bringing artists to Ocean Springs to set up shop and enticing visitors looking for one-of-a-kind treasures, from handmade housewares to fine art.



Local artist Stig Marccuson spends time with his children as he draws in downtown Ocean Springs. This is a common scene in the district, which attracts many artists who come to the community to open shops and studios.

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Renovation of the 1927 high school, a Mississippi and National Register landmark, was the first big "win" for Ocean Springs Main Street. The building now houses the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center, which supports the visual, performing, and culinary arts.



© Cynthia Sutton

Reinforcing Ocean Springs as a major destination for those interested not only in enjoying but also learning the culinary arts is the Viking cooking school, located downtown in the Mary C. O’Keefe Cultural Center.



With shops like the Hillyer House art gallery (above), which relocated to Ocean Springs after Hurricane Katrina, it’s no wonder the town has been named one of the 50 Best Small Towns in America and profiled as a hot travel destination by the Washington Post and Southern Living.

clearinghouse for information and a symbol of hope. The organization’s strong track record of leadership gave it an important voice in informing the recovery and guiding downtown construction. Main Street led strong advocacy efforts to earmark federal Community Development Block Grant recovery funds not just for its downtown, but for all Gulf Coast towns. Margaret Miller, the Main Street manager, joined others to lobby hard for historic downtowns to be recognized and supported.

A resilient attitude and state and federal money, along with support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and caring Main Street programs throughout the nation, helped the community bounce back. Recovery money was channeled into façade improvement grants and streetscape enhancements that helped Ocean Springs emerge even stronger.

Ocean Springs Main Street administered a façade grant of more than \$20,000 to help about a dozen small business owners make improvements to their facades, landscaping, awnings, and signs. Many restaurateurs used the funds to build outdoor dining patios. The recovery effort after Hurricane Katrina eventually led to more than \$10 million in public and private investment and the opening of 30 new restaurants—many of which

contribute to the patio dining atmosphere.

Business owners from other communities have discovered new opportunities in Ocean Springs and relocated there. One success story involves downtown’s very own “white elephant” building—a 1930s hardware store vacant since 1960—and business owners from Pass Christian, Mississippi. For years they had been courted to open a second location in Ocean Springs.

“After Hurricane Katrina, our home and business in Pass Christian were completely wiped away, along with virtually everything else in town,” says Paige Riley, owner of the Hillyer House art gallery and gift shop. “As we looked to rebuild, the decision to relocate to Ocean Springs was one of the easiest we made. We opened the weekend of the Peter Anderson Festival ... and in the seven years since that weekend, we have never looked back. The entire community welcomed us with open arms and has continued to show that support over the years.”

The downtown streetscape received an influx of investment and improvements during a two-year, \$4.6 million streetscape project. Utilities were buried, new streetlights and wayfinding signs were installed, drainage was improved, and sidewalks were made more pedestrian friendly and accessible for

people with disabilities.

But just as Ocean Springs was bouncing back, the BP Oil Spill made news. Media portrayed coastal towns as closed and Main Street jumped into action to counter those claims and show the nation that tourism in the community was alive and well and that Ocean Springs was open for business.

Ocean Springs Main Street supported businesses by sending out weekly emails with updates and assistance information. Its newsletter offered money-saving tips, and its ongoing surveys measured how businesses were affected by the oil spill. But most of all, Main Street heavily promoted its summer festivals and told people it was safe to visit.

From Ghost Town to Tourist Mecca

This small town has seen a staggering amount of investment—\$407 million in public investment and \$116 million in private monies. In the last year alone there have been nine business expansions, and a host of exciting projects are coming up, including a boutique hotel opening near the Mary C and new infill that will include 12 restaurants and new retail space. Charter Bank, a small community institution, is building a \$3 million branch this year.



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TOP LEFT: Downtown has become a prime location for housing as Ocean Springs has grown from a sleepy village of 2,000 to a bustling town of 17,000. One of the newest housing developments was created from Katrina cottages and offers one to three bedroom units.

TOP RIGHT: Downtown Ocean Springs hosts a wide variety of arts-related businesses, arts programming at the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center, cultural events, and public art, all of which reinforce the community's authentic brand.

RIGHT: At the end of the day, Ocean Springs is not only a great arts town, it's a relaxing vacation spot as well. The beach is an easy walk from the center of downtown, just right for a pleasant afternoon rest after a day of local shopping!



© Ben Muldrow



What once was a sleepy village of 2,000 has grown into a bustling town that is now home to 17,000 people. Upper-floor housing, new infill, and single-family bungalows offer a variety of living options with more than 300 housing units added since the Main Street program has been in action.

"The downtown has attracted hundreds of residents, which has been a catalyst for residential development," says Mark P. Loughman, director of environmental affairs and resource strategy for Mississippi Power. "Until a few years ago, we had never had any of our company executives living in Ocean Springs. Today our company

president and several other executives who could live anywhere along the Mississippi Gulf Coast have made their homes in Ocean Springs."

Cultural tourism has been at the heart and soul of the revitalization of Ocean Springs. The arts economy flourishes in this downtown and the wide variety of arts-related businesses, cultural events, arts programming at the Mary C and public art all reinforce the community's authentic brand.

The town has been so successful, in fact, that Miller was recently recognized by the Mississippi Tourism Association with a Tourism Hall of Fame Award. Accolades come

from partners and local business owners who agree that Miller and her colleagues are the driving force behind the community's success.

"This program has demonstrated time and again its commitment to a long-term downtown revitalization effort in conjunction with strong public-private partnerships and the leadership needed to ensure a viable downtown revitalization effort," says Bob Wilson, executive director of the Mississippi Main Street Association. From ghost town to a travel destination, Ocean Springs shows that perseverance can help downtown weather any storm and emerge stronger than before.