

Request for Proposals: The What's Next Cohort

Project Overview

For nearly 50 years, Main Street America has equipped communities with the proven Four-Point Approach to revitalization. For many seasoned practitioners, however, the question has become: **What comes next after mastering the framework? How should our work evolve? How do the four points evolve?**

The What's Next Cohort is a three-month, virtual, collaborative learning experience launching in June 2026 for approximately 70 advanced Main Street leaders. Designed to move beyond fundamentals, the cohort will tackle pressing challenges facing mature Main Street programs - such as displacement, housing shortages, disaster recovery, economic integrity, disinvestment, and succession planning - while embedding solutions within the Four-Point framework.

Participants will engage in weekly facilitated sessions and structured group work that emphasize collaboration, peer learning, and applied practice. The experience will culminate in actionable deliverables co-created by participants, along with a "What's Next Toolkit" to inform the future of Main Street America's work and provide practical resources and direction to the broader network.

Organization Background

The Main Street program was founded over 40 years ago to counter the serious threat facing thousands of downtowns and commercial corridors. Changes in the underlying economy had seemed to make it all but inevitable that shopping malls and big box retailers were the way of the future and downtowns and small businesses a thing of the past. Thanks to the vision of Main Street's founders, they knew that the demise of downtowns and small businesses was not a foregone conclusion. They put together a framework, known today as the Main Street Approach, that offers a roadmap for locally owned, locally driven prosperity. State by state, city by city, they organized and helped plant the beginnings of a nationwide movement of local programs dedicated to implementing the approach.

Today, thousands of communities have used the Main Street Approach to transform their economies, leverage local leadership and improve overall quality of life. What started as what many believed to be a quaint idea has blossomed into one of the most effective economic development tools out there. Currently, the network spans more than 1,200 neighborhoods and downtowns, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through place-based economic development. Main Street America is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Headquartered in Chicago, with a staff of over 50 distributed across the US, MSA is the national face of the Main Street movement.

In Winter 2023, we announced the pause of the former Main Street America Institute, launched in 2015 to meet the professional development needs of the Main Street Movement. After a long period dedicated to listening, gathering feedback, and content and product development, we launched the Main Street America Academy in July 2025. This vision was shaped in collaboration with our network. Integrated and built into the Main Street America website, the Academy is not just a platform, but an entirely new approach to providing professional development opportunities. Already on track to surpass the number of Main Streeters engaged with the former MSAI over 8 years in just a few months, The Academy is the go-to destination for learning experiences that are practical, engaging, and built to grow with our Main Street Leaders. Whether they're new to the field or decades into their journey, the Academy offers a curated learning experience built for Main Street changemakers.

We know that providing a variety of learning experiences and formats on the Academy is crucial to meeting the full range of needs of our Main Street leaders. The What's Next Cohort represents our continued commitment to expanding the capacity of those we serve and ensuring the Academy provides robust, dynamic learning experiences that truly move both our Movement and those within forward. Learn more about the Main Street America Academy, and sign up, here: academy.mainstreet.org

Project Purpose

The Main Street America Academy is committed to delivering high-quality learning experiences that are practical, engaging, and rooted in the realities of today's Main Street leaders. With the What's Next Cohort, our team seeks to push beyond introductory training and provide seasoned practitioners with a space to reflect, collaborate, and innovate together.

Our purpose in seeking a facilitation partner is to:

- Design a dynamic learning arc that balances structure with flexibility, ensuring participants stay engaged while still having the freedom to shape their group projects.
- Foster peer-to-peer relationships that will outlast the cohort, strengthening the connective tissue of the Main Street network.
- Elevate project-based learning, ensuring each small group creates tangible tools, frameworks, or resources that directly address the challenges their communities face.
- Amplify participant voices, capturing their insights and lived experience to inform the Academy's future offerings and contribute to the national conversation about Main Street's evolution.
- Produce lasting impact through the development of the "What's Next Toolkit," a resource that will extend the value of the cohort to the entire network.

Ultimately, the Academy team views this cohort as a catalyst for innovation and renewal within the Main Street movement - one that equips leaders to not only meet today's challenges, but to shape the future of Main Street revitalization for years to come.

Scope of Work

The selected consultant, group, or organization will serve as the facilitation and design partner for the What's Next Cohort, a **three-month virtual learning experience** running from June 2026 to August 2026. The consultant will work closely with the Main Street America Academy team to design, deliver, and document a high-quality program that prioritizes learner engagement, peer connection, and project-based outcomes.

The Scope of Work includes the following responsibilities:

1. Program Design & Onboarding (March–May 2026)

- Collaborate with Academy staff to finalize the overall cohort learning arc and weekly session objectives.
- Develop a digital workbook and templates to guide small groups in completing weekly assignments and deliverables.
- Recommend and set up digital engagement tools (e.g., Zoom, Miro, Google Suite, other digital tools and workspaces).
- Participate in pre-cohort orientation and planning calls.
- Support Academy team in preparing onboarding communications and logistics for participants, especially related to the application and selection process.
- Organize selected applicants into groups based on shared interest, community similarities, and patterns of work.

Deliverables:

- Finalized weekly session design and facilitation plan
- Digital workbook and templates (checklists, handouts, exercises, outlines)
- Facilitator guide and participant orientation materials

2. Cohort Facilitation (June–August 2026)

- Facilitate 12 weekly, 2-hour live sessions (~24 total hours), balancing large-group convenings with breakout group facilitation.
- Incorporate dynamic, interactive activities (storytelling, peer interviews, design thinking methods, systems mapping, etc.) to foster connection and engagement.
- Guide participants in moving from exploration → problem definition → ideation → prototyping → resource development → presentation.

- Manage pacing and momentum to maintain participant energy and retention throughout the experience.
- Support up to 14 small groups in completing weekly group assignments, ensuring each group progresses toward a final project.

Deliverables:

- 12 live facilitated sessions (recordings provided for participants)
- Weekly session plans and supporting slides/materials
- Ongoing group coaching and check-ins to provide additional support and ensure progress

3. Group Project Support

- Ensure each group identifies a focus challenge and develops a prototype project (e.g., toolkit, pilot program, campaign, or framework) aligned to the Four-Point Approach.
- Provide tools and templates for ideation, case study documentation, stakeholder mapping, and solution design.
- Facilitate peer feedback sessions using structured protocols (e.g., “Keep, Tweak, Drop”).
- Support groups in preparing final presentations of their projects to the full cohort.

Deliverables:

- Documentation of group work (case study scans, empathy maps, problem statements, prototypes)

4. Culmination & Documentation (August–October 2026)

- Facilitate the final presentation and celebration session at the close of the cohort.
- Provide a comprehensive synthesis of participant outputs, including project summaries, lessons learned, and key insights.
- Collaborate with Academy team to shape the “What’s Next Toolkit”, ensuring group deliverables are polished, organized, and usable by the broader Main Street network.
- Participate in one debrief session with Academy staff to evaluate successes and identify improvements for future cohorts.

Deliverables:

- Synthesis report summarizing cohort experience, outputs, and recommendations for continued engagement and progress
- Draft content support for the “What’s Next Toolkit” (organized, edited group projects + insights)
- Final handoff of all templates, resources, and materials

Timeframe

March–May 2026: Design Cohort, Participant Selection, and Onboarding

June–August 2026: Cohort delivery (12 live sessions + support group work)

September–October 2026: Documentation and toolkit development

Project Goals

The What’s Next Cohort is designed to provide advanced Main Street leaders with a high-impact, collaborative learning experience that pushes beyond foundational revitalization work. Grounded in the Main Street America Academy’s values of engagement, applied practice, and peer connection, the cohort will give participants the tools, relationships, and actionable strategies they need to address the complex challenges facing mature Main Street programs. These goals reflect both the participant experience and the broader value this cohort will bring to the national network:

1. Deepen Leadership Capacity

Equip advanced practitioners with frameworks, strategies, and tools to address evolving challenges such as displacement, housing, disaster recovery, disinvestment, succession planning, and economic resilience (these are examples).

2. Foster Peer-to-Peer Connection and Collaboration

Build meaningful relationships among participants that strengthen the Main Street network, providing opportunities for mutual support, shared learning, and collective problem-solving.

3. Generate Tangible, Project-Based Outcomes

Guide small groups to co-create practical prototypes - such as toolkits, campaigns, or frameworks - that directly respond to real-world challenges and can be applied both locally and nationally.

4. Capture and Amplify Collective Insights

Document participant experiences, solutions, and lessons learned to inform the “What’s Next Toolkit”, extending the cohort’s value beyond the participants to the wider Main Street network.

5. Advance the Evolution of the Main Street Movement

Position the cohort as a catalyst for innovation, helping seasoned leaders reimagine the Four-Point Approach in today’s context and shape the future direction of the Main Street movement.

Budget

The budget available for paying for this project is \$25,000.

Proposal Timeline:

- RFP (request for proposals) distributed October 2025
- **Deadline for RFP responses – December 15, 2025**
- Presentation (by invitation) – January to early February 2026
- Selection of provider – March 2026

Basis of Award

MSA will be evaluating the RFP submissions on the following criteria. Within relevant areas of your submission, we recommend you explicitly respond to the areas below:

Experience and Expertise (25%)

- Demonstrated success designing and facilitating virtual learning cohorts or comparable applied learning programs.
- Evidence of experience in adult learning methodologies, experiential and project-based education, and peer-to-peer engagement.
- Familiarity with topics relevant to community development, nonprofit capacity building, or place-based revitalization, including the Main Street Approach (preferred but not required).

Approach and Methodology (25%)

- Quality, clarity, and creativity of the proposed approach to cohort facilitation.
- Integration of dynamic learning strategies (interactive activities, design thinking, storytelling, small-group engagement).
- Demonstrated ability to ensure learner retention and sustained engagement throughout the three-month cohort.
- Plans for supporting participants in creating tangible group deliverables.

Project Management and Capacity (20%)

- Ability to meet deadlines and manage a structured, time-bound program (June–August 2026).
- Proposed team composition, roles, and responsibilities.
- Capacity to coordinate with MSA staff and adapt as needed based on participant or program feedback.

Deliverables and Outcomes (15%)

- Strength of plan to support final group projects and the synthesis of outputs into a usable “What’s Next Toolkit.”

- Clear vision for producing resources that extend beyond the cohort and benefit the broader Main Street network.

Values Alignment (10%)

- Evidence of an inclusive facilitation style that ensures diverse voices are heard, respected, and integrated.
- Experience or strategies to ensure accessibility in virtual settings (e.g., plain language, captioning, platform usability, no red text).

Cost Effectiveness (5%)

- Proposed budget is clear, transparent, and within the outlined budget amount.
- Demonstrates strong value for investment without compromising quality.

MSA Contact:

Please submit proposals directly to Tasha Sams, Director of Education, tsams@mainstreet.org