

Erin Barnes' Opening Plenary Remarks

2024 Main Street Now Conference

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Thank you all for being here. It's great to see so many Main Streeters in one place! I'm so lucky to be here with all of you, and incredibly grateful to be invited to lead this beautiful movement in this moment, here in this beautiful city.

I've been in my role for eight months now and in many ways I'm still learning what this job is all about, but I've been so impressed by the warm welcome I've gotten from everyone, and the invitations to visit your communities and see the work of this great movement up close. I figure if I can visit two Main Streets each month, it will only take me 125 years to visit all of the Main Streets in the network. So, if y'all know any fountains of youth, let me know!

I also feel incredibly grateful to be standing on the shoulders of some real giants in the Main Street Movement. It's a great honor to build on the legacy of Mary Means, Kennedy Smith, Doug Loescher, Patrice Frey, and Hannah White—and knowing they're all just a phone call away has made my job so much easier. This truly is a movement of collaboration, of people working together to lift up each other's great ideas.

As I dig into the history a little bit, the thing that strikes me most is that Main Streets—as real places we know and love, and as an idea that's so central to how we now think of our communities—was once this total experiment. It was this little movement of saving old places and old buildings and infusing them with new energy and love. And it was up against this huge tidal wave of where the urban planning establishment was going: Malls. Suburban office parks. And of course, surface parking lots as far as the eye could see. This was all against the backdrop of a slow-rolling disaster of disinvestment, white flight, and urban renewal.

Against the pull of this enormous tide, we had to make our own way. With support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and under the leadership of Mary Means, we started with three Main Streets in the late 1970s—shout out to Tom Moriarity in the room!—then quickly grew from there. People loved Main Streets from the beginning. Sometimes all the economic data, sociology, and urban planning theory are no match for simply being in a place and feeling that magic for yourself.

Because it turns out what people want the most is not acres and acres of free parking, but *particularity*, that special brand of weirdness that you can only find in a specific place. People want to be surprised and use their senses to learn something new. People want to taste the local ice cream, hear young people playing instruments on a street corner, see the bright colors of a mural showing the proud, and sometimes difficult, history of a place. People want identity, fun, and a little bit of chaos. And people want to see other people, too—that sense of togetherness that happens when everyone is discovering something new at the same time.

Great Main Streets take a lot of work, as you all know better than I do, **but we're not fragile**. 2020 was proof of how hard things can get, and each year since has been a testament to how we can

bounce back when we work together and take a thoughtful inclusive approach to saving, preserving, and building places that are welcoming for all. Main Street America has proven our role in supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs through programs like Breaking Barriers to Business and Equitable Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, aimed at equipping historically disinvested communities with support to help their entrepreneurs thrive. We've shown we can weather disasters caused by climate change, and help each other adapt to our new normal, as Montpelier, Vermont, or Marion, Iowa.

And we don't have to fight to prove our worth anymore. We have the facts. The value of this program is self-evident in the jobs it provides: 2.6 million Americans are employed in Main Street districts; that's roughly the same number of Americans who work for Amazon and Walmart combined. In the revenue it generates for our 175,000 small businesses. In the overall economic impact, literally billions invested in the past 40 years. More impressive, we have changed people's minds to reconsider our downtowns and districts as great places to live. Nearly 2 million Americans now live in a Main Street district, and that number continues to grow.

This is the power of great places. You can take a stroll down Main Street, ice cream in hand, being delighted by the sights and sounds and surprises, and feel the power of this Movement behind you.

So it's up to us to decide what we want to do with this power, this legacy of hard work that's been given to us to carry forward. I take this responsibility seriously, and I've been thinking a lot about how best to steward this Movement into a future of very real challenges. And for me there are a few aspirations I'd like to name. I hope you'll come find me over the next few days and tell me what you'd add to this list!

NUMBER ONE—and most important aspiration for myself and this Movement—is to stay humble and learn. If there's one thing that we can expect, it's that the unexpected will happen sooner or later. Whether it's something disruptive like a natural disaster, or a new kind of technology, or a major political shift, or just that everyone decides they no longer want craft beer and they only want artisanal bubble gum, there will always be someone who anticipates the shift, sees it coming, and gets it right. There will always be new ways of doing things. Let's not get so locked into our expertise that we lose sight of this. Instead, **let's keep our eyes and ears and hearts open.**

NUMBER TWO **Invite others to the table who might not otherwise volunteer but might be sitting on some truly great ideas.** Think about who might have been excluded in the past and do the work of bridging that divide with genuine curiosity. Main Streets are a product of deliberate co-creation that's rooted in listening and trust. *We can only create inclusive places that are welcoming FOR everyone when we create them WITH everyone.*

NUMBER THREE: Think beyond the ways we usually see ourselves—as engines of local economic development, historic preservation, and small business support—**and start thinking of ourselves in new ways that communicate the complexity of our work.** We are healers against the epidemic of loneliness, *and* we are first responders on the front lines of climate emergencies like extreme heat, tornadoes and floods, *and* we are drivers of a new civic infrastructure of connectedness that's centered on place, *and* we are choreographers, *and* we are storytellers, *and* we are designers of public space. The list goes on.

NUMBER FOUR: Welcome newcomers, and I mean *truly* welcome *all* newcomers. This means local and regional tourists, and it means young professionals and families who are relocating to our communities. But even more it means new immigrants and migrants who come to our communities to work in the service sector, or in our agricultural fields and packing plants. Take the time to get to know these newcomers as people, ask them about their traditions and their favorite foods, and ask them what ideas they have for the place they now call home. These newcomers bring with them a tremendous amount of entrepreneurial spirit. Ask them what they need to help start a business—it just might become your favorite place on your main street!

NUMBER FIVE: Be thoughtful and honest with each other about the intended and unintended ways in which our work shapes our communities. If something didn't work out as planned, be bold in naming it and be proactive in how we can be better next time. We're all learning together, and we can learn a lot from each other. And share ideas and opportunities around how we can expand our reach. We have great tools in our toolbox. So how can we apply them toward affordable housing? Toward workforce development? Toward inclusive processes? There's so much expertise in this room and in our movement. Let's unlock it together and see what else we can grow.

I want to lift up one of my favorite recent Main Street stories, the story of the downtown revitalization project in Ruston, Louisiana, because I think this is a project that embodies a lot of where our Movement can go in the coming years; its inclusivity and creativity in thinking about and building on its community's unique assets.

Twenty years ago, Ruston was faced with many of the challenges of disinvestment that many of our Main Streets have faced. When the opportunity arose in 2010 for a revitalization project, community leaders, business owners, and government officials worked together to create something that would serve residents and visitors and bring a new vitality to the area.

Ruston's leaders quickly realized that one of the most important perspectives in this reimagining of the district was going to come from the students and staff at the Louisiana School for the Blind, which was the major institution within the district. In early conversations some of the students had a lot of frustration with how difficult it was to navigate the district and were also worried that a months-long construction project would make it much worse and effectively exclude them.

Rather than see the students' needs as a constraint, the Main Street team recognized that this was an *asset*, an opportunity to access a unique perspective that could show how the district could be built to benefit everyone. Because it turns out making your sidewalks smooth and wide, your blocks intuitive to navigate, and slowing down car traffic makes everyone safer and creates a more welcoming environment for visitors of all abilities.

And the students' input didn't just help create the finished design—the construction was actually phased so in most places the sidewalk improvements would be easily navigable during construction and would be completed first. This meant that the students wouldn't feel excluded from their downtown even while it was under construction. In fact, this increased access during construction would make it so nobody would feel excluded.

I love this story because planners talk about the “curb cut effect,” that is if we design streets and cities to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, everyone benefits. And in order to even see the perspective of those we're building for, we need to truly treat them as partners in design, trust their

experiences, and see their contributions not as a *constraint* but as an *asset* that will benefit everyone!

I won't go on much longer because I know this will be a packed few days and we have a lot more conversations to get to. I'm excited to have them with you! Please come talk to me in the coming days. Help me get a jump on this 125 year-long journey I'm on to learn about every single main street! Tell me what's on your mind and what you would add to my draft list of aspirations. Tell me about your job, and about your community. Tell me what you love about this work, and tell me what the hardest part is.

I hope over the next few days you get a chance to recharge, reconnect with friends and peers in our movement, meet people you've never met, learn something new, and leave energized and inspired. I can't wait to meet more of you, and to dig into our work together!