

Downtown Marketing and Development

By Barry Cassidy

Know When it is Time to Leave

Main Street Managers move quite a bit from job to job. In most cases the main street job is a short-term job. Obstacles to people succeeding, hostile environments and some times just a lack of talent on the part of the main street manager makes it necessary for people to move on to another job.

Turn over is one of the biggest problems for main street programs to overcome. Just as someone gets used to a person they seem to be leaving to go to a new job for one reason or another. I have had 5 main street jobs and each time there was a reason to leave whether it was a salary issue or direction of the program. It is always hard to leave a job especially when the community put all of their hopes in dreams in succeeding in the revitalization.

When you look at the towns around I know that Pottstown had a few managers in my memory. I remember in the early years when Chris Witmer was the Main Street manager and then I also my good friend Sam Loth was in Pottstown for a while after he was in Tyrone for a few years. Downingtown had a few, and I was the second manager in Phoenixville. The downtown management field is pretty fluid. The part that people in the towns do not realize is that we all pretty much know each other. We hear stories about towns and we share our successes and miseries on a pretty regular basis.

Most times a Main Street Manager needs to be above the petty politics and press ahead with the agenda set forth by the board. In some cases it is internal board dissatisfaction with the manager. Recently in Newtown veteran Manager Chris Ortwein was let go because the board thought they needed more commercial real estate development experience. Of course it was a commercial realtor on the board that thought that and convinced the rest of the board that it was time for a change.

In many cases Main Street Managers are not well paid and that leads to turnover. Main Street communities attempting to cut corners on salary normally have a lot of turnover. People feel that they are working for nothing after a while and they tend to feel it is time to leave. The amount of hours and dedication one must put into a main street job is staggering. I put a average of 50 to 55 hours a week just to complete the basic tasks, which are daunting in terms of time.

The key to leaving a main street position for a manager is to leave a clear road map as to where you are in the programmatic process. I always call it a road map as it gives all the specifics and details of what needs to be done in the near term and outlines all of the potential problems for the main street in the future.

I remember taking my first main street job in Lock Haven and being the third manager in three years. The first manager left a huge file cabinet full of files and the second manager left me 2 files with one sheet of paper in each file. It was not a specific road map but it

told me who was who in the town and who to watch out for on certain issues. It was valuable but I would have rather had something more programmatically oriented.

Recently I resigned my position in Phoenixville as the Main Street Manager. I had a pretty good run there with the repositioning of the downtown and a number of grants secured for the borough. I enjoyed my time there for the most part.

There are things that one can never account for or change. Local politics can sometimes be very good and sometimes be very bad. I guess that I have seen a little of both in Phoenixville. Decisions have been made that sometimes boggled my mind and some very astute and decisive decisions.

My decision to quit was based upon a selection of the former Borough Manager Anthony DiGirolomo to serve on the parking authority board that impacted me in a more personal way than others. I suppose most people in Phoenixville point to me as the person that exposed his difficulties in completing his assigned functions, which lead to his dismissal.

In my world there is a need to be technically correct. The inability to file audits in a timely manner or a correct manner will limit my effectiveness and make my efforts useless. The inability to understand the concept of “encumbered funds” from tax year to tax year is critical depending upon my ability to complete projects because most of the projects can not be completed in one year. I will not work with people who are consistently technically incorrect.

So when at next meeting the fired borough manager was named to the parking authority board, of which I was the director, at 7:54 PM, I resigned at 7:58 PM via text. I wanted no part of the impending fiasco. I have been there and have done that, no need to repeat that conflict.

During my tenure in Phoenixville we had two good years followed by two bad years and then finally followed by two good years under Mr. Wagner. It seemed to me that two more bad years were going to follow and I do not have the time or inclination to proceed in a position that would provide frustration and diminished results. I thought that my accomplishments in Phoenixville spoke for themselves and there should have been a sensitivity to appointing someone I got fired just 2 short years ago, but politics change and people forget what it was like in Phoenixville 6 years ago. All I had to withhold was my talent...so that is what I did.

I immediately composed a state of the Main Street document that I presented to the borough administration with an outline of all of the programs, both borough and peripheral, and proceeded to meet two times to ensure that the continuity survived my departure.

When I left Downingtown they filed my report and during the preparations for the Kardon Park litigation it surfaced again. The attorney for the borough said it was exactly what he was looking for to present the situation during my period of employment. It was a succinct appraisal of the project.

It is the absolute responsibility of the profession that is hired to make sure the scenario in Downingtown is repeated by giving an adequate snapshot of current progress and a road map for the future, so even when 10 years later if the document is needed that it provides a relevant perspective.

In my case I will not be going far. I accepted a position guiding the development of the Phoenix Steel Site the 120-acre brownfield located next to the downtown and was once considered the savior of the downtown before we revitalized it through the Main Street process.