

The Main Street Program has lost funding, what now?

By Barry Cassidy

Many towns lose funding for the main street program after a number of years in the program. Budget cuts in state sources and local commercial development funding can make public commercial reinvestment dollars scarce. Some towns are left only with remnants of a main street program because of funding difficulties.

If your town is faced with this kind of situation, there is a need to assess what was “right” and “wrong” with the program before it expires. The “right things” will need to be carried on in a consistent manner. When this happens the “organization” point of the main street 4 point approach (design, economic restructuring, promotion & organization) needs to develop a transition of leadership in certain events and activities if the main street program cannot provide those services for the downtown.

Successful events and programs are hard to give up for an organization but sometimes without the manpower to conduct a successful event. It may be better to give up the event to another organization rather than half way try an event and have it fail. If the committee structure of an organization is strong, the promotion committee will be able to take on the event. It is not always the case that the committee structure is strong and it is not always the case that they have been previously involved and know what to do.

Business development is a difficult thing to replace when there is not a main street program. In many cases, the local Chamber of Commerce is regional and cannot focus exclusively on the downtown. The chamber is the main point of contact for many of the incoming calls and can serve a valuable service if they are willing to work with the local economic restructuring/business development committee.

There are real estate brokers that try to fill the spaces and can step in to keep the information flowing to those seeking to relocate or locate in a downtown. In order to make the brokers more effective it will be necessary to share some of the promotional literature with them in order to get the downtown message out. Again, this approach is fragmented because real estate brokers represent many properties throughout the area and do not concentrate on one area of downtown.

The combined effort of working with a remaining organization and the real estate community can pay some real benefits if you have the right people on the committee who can interpret the leads as well as their needs and turn them into viable tenants for the downtown.

Design functions can be transferred to a historic architectural review board if there is one in existence. If there is no historic board in existence, it might be time to create one on the borough or the city level to enable the concept of historic design in the downtown to remain constant. This may be the hardest point to maintain because of the fact there needs to be some incentive...even if it is only feel good...to retain the historic image of the downtown. If the committee has spent 5 years promoting and facilitating historic restoration projects in the downtown and utilized that as part of a marketing scheme, there will be a need to continue that scheme.

If there is not an oversight or at least a force pushing for the correct kind of rehabilitation when investors rehabilitate a building all may be lost from the past efforts and another kind of marketing scheme must be developed. Is it possible to do that? Maybe...Maybe not. If all of your marketing materials were developed through the main street program and the main street program no longer exists who is developing the plan outlined in the material you are giving to the chamber of commerce and the real estate brokers?

The hallmark of a good main street program is the organization committee that keeps most of the committees on line and develops a support mechanism for the political initiatives necessary to accomplish the goals and objectives of the program.

The reality of the situation sometimes is that the main street manager did all the work and the committees were nothing more than a formality to reinforce and support the work of the manager. The manager had most of the stuff in his or her head and the organization is lost without the staff support. This happens, it happens all the time, a strong manager is a blessing and a curse.

Years of letting someone have free reign will bring doom and gloom on your town when changing managers or ending a program. If you do not take particular care when the programmatic staffing is ending, it could come back to bite you when you try to switch to a committee structure. If the end of the program is in sight and it is inevitable, a beefing up of the committee structure and the active engagement of the committee is imperative. If that is not done, at the end of the program you will have fond memories and a potential for someone else to build upon in the years to come.

Ending a main street program is not the end of the world but it could definitely be a setback if the proper planning is not accomplished before the program ends.