

Downtown Marketing and Development

By barry cassidy

Planning for a Main Street Manager in a new Fiscal Reality

When government money becomes tight, as it has in recently, requests for funding need to be more competitive. The key to submitting a reasonable application relies on doing your homework on the front end. There cannot be any loose ends and there cannot be any holes in the funding application.

The key to a competitive application is a good plan. How are good plans developed? They are developed through stakeholder participation and talent. Many times, I am asked to help a town get some money for a project or an idea and I run into the same problem... not a strong plan.

Downtowns are developed through consensus and not necessarily through a consultant's report. People on the ground close to the issues normally have the landscape down solidly. It is through merchant and property owner participation and vetting of the idea that the strongest way to develop a plan.

The new funding sources developed by the new administration will enable communities to develop plans for sustainability and development. It has been a given in the past that in order to have a downtown program that there is a need to become part of the Main Street program and hire a manager and the like. It will soon become apparent to all that some of the downtowns in Pennsylvania really do not have the resources to run a program without state help.

It is time to locally get out your thinking caps and determine what is the best way to fund your downtown revitalization. If the money is not there to fund a full time staff a town should ask themselves, "how do we want to proceed?" Perhaps a part time staff is the answer or maybe even reaching out to another community to share staff. These are decisions that have to be made by the community. Only the local stakeholders know if it is appropriate to work with another community or if they can afford to fund a position.

What is the wave of the future? I believe that many of the inept downtown managers will fall by the wayside as towns are more involved with their own local funding and revitalization boards will take more care in the personnel selection process. In the rural areas, there will be some hiring of a local that has somehow relocated from another area and wants to help or a lifelong resident that has recently graduated from college that do not demand a high salary. However, I believe this may end up being the first step toward regionalism.

A regional approach to downtown development is not all that bad. There were some initial attempts to have a regional program early on during the main street run and those efforts have increased over recent years. If towns could pool their money, a reasonable

person can be hired to take over the downtown effort. Regional efforts enable towns to share personnel in downtown development and have a professionally guided effort.

If there is, a regional effort there probably should be a common board of directors and each community should contribute to a common account but keep the fund raising in the local community. If it is planned this way, if one participating municipality secures a project grant the admin (15%) of the project can be allotted to the project and a sub recipient agreement can be assigned to the inter-municipal group.

For example, town X gets a grant for \$500,000 to fix up the streetscape and there could be a 15% admin on those dollars. Those dollars (\$75,000) could then hire the downtown manager to oversee the project and “buy time” from the joint municipal main street organization. At that time the community could then “back out” their locally raised dollars and save them for another physical project or let the account for the administrative funding grow and be used in years to come.

In order to do funding scenarios like the one I outlined above there is a need for a solid plan. Not only an organizational plan but also a revitalization plan. It really needs to be an all encompassing to reflect the current reality. A plainly worded statement with some goals, objectives and a clearly and simply stated economic development strategy would be a good first step for each community.

The playing field has changed, the rules for engagement with the Commonwealth has changed but the problems encountered by downtowns not only across Pennsylvania but America remain the same. The local stakeholders can only derive issues relating to the course of action. As a consultant, I could come in and say “you know folks you need X, Y and Z”. The locals, the people on the ground, need to examine the advice and say “we like X and we like Z but if we try Y there are these constraints that will cause a problem for us”.

If there is a regional effort, stakeholders would want to avoid having people from one town dictating to another town the established priorities. A common board to oversee the program should have a local downtown advisory committee to make the decisions for the town.

Finally, there is a perception that people with experience in revitalizing downtowns are all knowledgeable concerning the process. This is not always the case with many political hacks dominating the landscape, especially now in time of budget cutbacks. A revitalization group should look to hire someone who is knowledgeable in a number of aspects including helping to maintain the plan and revise when necessary. Now is not the time for continuous turnover but instead the time for a new beginning with concrete underpinnings forged in the new reality of the day.