

Seven Keys to Main Street Success

Remarks by Kennedy Smith*

At the 2004 National Main Street Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, keynote speaker Kennedy Smith, departing director of the National Trust's Main Street Center, discussed seven keys to success for Main Street districts in the years ahead. Smith has been Director of the Center for 13 years and has been instrumental in using historic preservation as a tool for community revitalization. Her insights are valuable to most all communities including those not directly affiliated with the Main Street Program.

Seven Keys To Success

I think there are seven keys to guiding our districts through the next decade:

First, we need to strengthen our planning and land-use laws so that "rural" is really rural, and "urban" is really urban and the sprawl between the two of them is controlled better or, better yet, is never built.

If you don't have these three things in place right now, I hope you'll work on them.

- A retail size cap ordinance;
- A Main Street-friendly comprehensive plan; and
- Financial incentives for Main Street investment.

One of the best local policies I've heard of comes from Buckingham, Pennsylvania, which passed a 1991 zoning ordinance that limits stores to 35,000 square feet and requires the developer to submit a market analysis proving that there is market demand for the facility. Entities that own buildings that are larger than 10,000 square feet and vacant for more than 12 months have to demolish or adaptively reuse the building.

New Mexico is a good training ground for this "smart growth" ethic. It has the longest urban history in the country-1,000 years-and our oldest urban planning code, the "Law of the Indies," enacted by the Spanish in the 16th century.

Albuquerque has an impressive planned growth strategy. Adopted by the city to guide future growth, it places a high premium on directing development to existing neighborhoods, putting historic buildings to new uses, and offering incentives to create mixed-use neighborhoods.

Second, we need to create an environment that cultivates and supports innovative new businesses. We need to offer training, peer-to-peer mentoring, seed capital, financing and the market research needed to help independent businesses get established and grow on Main Street.

Third, we need 24/7 districts-and that means we need housing. We need eyes on the street-people keeping an eye and ear on what's happening 24 hours a day, seven days a week and we need neighborhood-serving retail businesses to meet their basic consumer needs. Fortunately, the new federal Main Street/HOPE VI program, which will probably be available in communities under 50,000 so that they can create affordable housing in existing buildings-like upper floor spaces above storefronts.

Fourth, we need to think beyond retail. Unlike a shopping mall, where 100 percent of the space is devoted to retail businesses-and that's good. The rest of the space is employed for housing, offices, government functions, entertainment, religion and increasingly, small-scale industries.



These activities give Main Street districts economic buoyancy and market diversity-and their employees become customers of community-serving retail businesses on the ground floor.

Whether its an otherwise traditional retailer who finds a niche market on line and becomes, in essence, a wholesaler, or a manufacturer whose customers are almost exclusively non-local, the small manufactures locating in Main Street districts have been an important part of their economic rebound over the past five or six years and will become increasingly important in the years ahead.

Fifth, entertainment needs to be a stronger component of Main Streets-whether its a theater, a spontaneous street performance, or a farmers market. People are starved for things to do besides watching television and going shopping. We need to give them a comfortable place to go and read, browse, see a show, take part in a festival, or visit with friends in a coffeehouse.

Sixth, we need to place greater emphasis on the environment. Our national habit of building new commercial buildings and tearing down older ones is wreaking havoc not only on Main Street's economy, but also on the environment. Each year, for example, the U.S. buries about 33 million tons of wood-related construction and demolition debris in landfills. This makes up almost half of all the material in sold-waste landfills in this country. As microorganisms decompose this wood, it releases 5 million tons of carbon in the form of methane gas. This is equivalent to the yearly emissions of 3,736,000 passenger cars.

We've learned to recycle newspapers, glass and aluminum cans-so, why don't we make it our highest priority to reuse historic buildings? Maybe we can persuade people who don't care much about a district's history, or about the higher economic value of locally owned businesses that it makes good environmental sense to reuse existing buildings before building new ones.

Seventh and last, we need to place greater emphasis on history. America's history was made on its Main Streets-celebrations, protests and festivals. Our Main Streets are the place where our civil rights remain intact-*not* at shopping malls, where decades of case law have concluded that malls are private enterprises and that free speech could be a risk to the success of those private enterprises, thereby dissuading customers from shopping there. So, the malls give us sanitized environments-and Main Streets give us real places and real experiences.

As threatening to Main Streets as discount superstores might be, the biggest threat yet might come from new town centers, which look a bit like older, historic town centers but have worked out all the kinks, like providing free parking and building mandatory store hours into the leases. These sanitized centers are becoming enormously popular. Time will tell how people will interpret the value of these new town centers, managed like shopping malls but looking like Main Streets and if they'll measure up to the real thing.

**Smith is the outgoing Director of National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. She is a principal with Community Land Use and Economics (CLUE) Group, LLC and executive director of the League of Historic American Theaters.*

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