

O&A

Main Street's Role

Backfilling Empty Buildings in Your Downtown





retail strategies

FAQ'S

In this Q&A article, our Downtown Strategies team provides guidance to Main Street Directors in backfilling empty buildings and discuss the process for working hand-in-hand with city leaders to advance the downtown community.

TIPS FROM DOWNTOWN EXPERTS

Main Street's Role: Backfilling Empty Buildings in Your Downtown



Q&A with Jenn Gregory, Elliott Cook, and Jeremy Murdock



Jeremy Murdock
community development specialist



Elliott Cook
director of real estate



Jenn Gregory
president

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Q1

In your experience, what are some common challenges that rural downtowns face when trying to attract and retain businesses, and how can these challenges be addressed?

A1

Jeremy Murdock: The most common challenges we see in rural downtowns are related to difficulties with properties due to absentee property owners, downtown space that is used as storage, and property owners that have not upgraded or modernized their spaces. Spaces that are not move-in ready, or storefronts that are occupied by service providers (think attorneys or title companies) are also common challenges.

A common short-term strategy for addressing these issues is to take steps to activate these underutilized storefronts. This could include converting a boarded-up storefront into a public art opportunity or placing local artwork in vacant and underutilized storefronts. Find any way to divert attention away from the problem and toward something positive for the overall downtown.

Elliott Cook: A way to address vacancies is with pop-up shops. Like staging a house – show the potential of the space. Show a potential retail and restaurant operator what the downtown market is like.

JM: Incentives like façade grants or building stabilization grants can also help with vacancies. These programs require funding, but they are effective strategies for nudging property owners into action. Big hurdles like sprinkler systems and roof costs can be offset by building stabilization grants.

Ultimately, Main Street organizations need to share the story of their downtown and make it seem like an active, vibrant space. Make your “product” – your downtown – look as desirable as possible. This can be accomplished through social media and other outlets, and by constantly programming activities to bring people downtown.

EC: One thing not to forget is the site selection component. Try to pair an appropriate retailer or entrepreneur with the property that makes the most sense. This is something that Main Street directors can work on with local entrepreneurs or the city’s community development / economic development team.



Q2



Q2

Can you provide examples of what successful Main Street Directors in rural downtown revitalization do for their community and the key factors contributing to their success?

A2

Jenn Gregory: The prime Main Street role is building and maintaining relationships. We provide our downtown clients with a Property Inventory Guide and that's a good starting point for a Main Street Director. It provides guidance on what data to collect on properties throughout the downtown.

A successful Main Street Director understands when a boutique or restaurant might be closing

and starts to make phone calls to potential replacement tenants before there is a vacancy. Ultimately a property owner really wants a tenant to pay rent each month, but it's important for the Main Street director to be a connector to bring in the right types of business downtown.

Lastly, a key factor in a successful Main Street director is creating an atmosphere in which business entrepreneurs want to be. In national retail, retail follows rooftops. In downtown retail, businesses follow people.

EC: It's the Main Street Director's job to focus on how the downtown looks and feels. Typically they are waiting or focusing on the big anchor project. Directors should focus on the built environment – cleanliness, design, and streetscapes. It's an investment, but retail and restaurant owners expect that of the downtown.



Q3

What creative and effective strategies can be implemented to attract new businesses and fill vacant storefronts in a rural downtown?

Q&A

Q3

A3

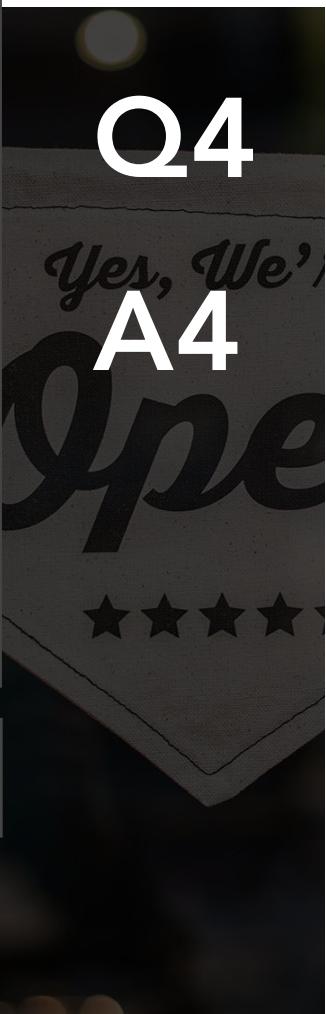
EC: The most effective thing a Main Street director can do is proactively market vacant spaces. This means identifying what vacancies are available, knowing what type of asset that is, working with the property owner to generate grassroots awareness to potential tenants in town and out of town.

Many times, Main Street directors don't want to market a property because they aren't a broker or don't want to interfere with a private property owner, but they can still generate interest as part of their role within downtown.

JG: Sandersville, Georgia, hosts an Upstairs Tour in vacant upper floor spaces and other downtown properties where they serve wine and cheese to showcase the space. They invite developers, entrepreneurs, and business owners to the event. Similar to how a residential real estate agent would host an Open House, the Main Street organization can host something like this. This is a great way to showcase opportunity versus just a vacancy.

EC: Great Bend, Kansas has a Loft Project grant program to offset the costs associated with the buildup of upper-floor housing. The incentive program was created to stimulate capital investment in the downtown core area and address housing shortages.



A black and white photograph of a storefront window. The window has a dark frame. Inside, a sign is visible with the text "Q4", "Yes, We're", "A4", "Open", and five stars at the bottom. A horizontal line extends from the "Q4" text on the left to a white rectangular box containing the text "Q4" on the right.

Q&A

Q4

What are some common mistakes Main Street directors make?

EC: It's a difficult job, but some Main Street directors aren't willing to actively advocate for code enforcement when it comes to blighted buildings or absentee property owners. It can be uncomfortable to do but it's needed.

JG: Not taking an active role in policy advocacy. It's in their best interest to advocate for policy that is business development and business retention friendly.

JM: They spend so much time focusing on the problem property owners instead of their downtown allies. Main Street directors should focus on people that want to be proactive or move the train forward. Focus on opportunities and people that want to help rather than the negative issues.

JG: Similarly, downtown practitioners tend to focus on the large square footage vacancies. Focus on the ones that are in good condition and ready to fill. Backfilling the vacant theater on the downtown square can take a long time.

A lot of Main Street directors say they aren't in the real estate business, but they are. Even though you aren't a real estate broker or transacting, being a connector is 100% the job of Main Street.

EC: As it pertains to Main Street, it is a function of economic development. Trying to fill vacancies while retaining and supporting existing business makes a successful Main Street director.

If your downtown has similar challenges, we can help!



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Schedule time to meet
with our team of Downtown Experts.

Redevelopment doesn't happen overnight, but Downtown Strategies' approach has been implemented in 25 states. We can do the same for your downtown.

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