

Chapter 9: DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENTS

The 1983 Master Plan ends with a chapter entitled “Downtown Improvements”. The introduction began as follows:

This chapter focuses on Center Ossipee. Special attention is given to this part of Ossipee because it has special problems. The village has been in a gradual state of decline for the past 25-30 years. Center Ossipee also retains primary importance as the town center, because it contains the Town Hall, a Fire Station, Library, Post Office, Churches, a few commercial buildings, and one of the town’s largest residential concentrations.

Center Ossipee has been in a widely perceived state of decline. The railroad stopped operating in 1973; the highway was relocated out of the village in 1972; the IGA moved from the village to the Indian Mound Shopping Center in 1958. Small businesses have gradually disappeared from the village.

Twenty years later another program to address downtown improvements has begun, the Ossipee Main Street Program. The new plan contains many of the features of the earlier one. Both programs focused on the central location with a residential concentration. Current thinking in town planning stresses the need for a mixed use of residential and commercial in the village. Both programs focused on making the area more attractive with landscaping for residents and people coming into the center of town. They both stress the importance of parking space and a green space or park in the target area. Both center on preserving the historic character of the town. The earlier plan also called for more housing that people could afford. Emphasis on building a feeling of community by hosting activities in the area was considered to be important in both programs.

There are also significant differences between the two approaches. The earlier attempt was a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), so it was not necessary to raise money to start. It also meant that there was a definite ending time when the grant was over. In the Main Street Program, people in the community know that the process is ongoing. It will never be completely finished. A disadvantage of the Main Street Program is that by the time the volunteers raise the necessary money through pledges, they are already tired out.

The sketch of the earlier plan showed movement of some of the buildings around a central square. This is not a feature of the present plan, although routing the traffic one-way in the center as they did in the earlier plan seems to merit consideration.

Two years ago members of the Ossipee Economic Development Committee investigated whether the Main Street Program would meet the needs of Center Ossipee. They learned what the program was all about and decided to see how the community felt about it. Leaders of the New Hampshire Main Street Program presented a number of informational meetings to the community. They required certain numbers of attendees to demonstrate support for the program. The local newspaper was very supportive, covering meetings and featuring articles. Citizens attending the meetings were interested and enthused, so a core group of people, calling themselves the Ossipee Revitalization Group, was formed.

Their first task was to complete the lengthy application process to become part of the New Hampshire Main Street Program, along with 18 other communities, which have already become part of the program. This application is designed to lead the group into identifying specific needs, mapping and studying the target area, and meeting the budget requirements. Getting the pledges for the amount necessary to run the program for three years proved to be the most difficult part of the process.

OSSIPEE VISION STATEMENT

Center Ossipee was a vibrant railhead that supported manufacturing, retail business and public services. The Center Ossipee Main Street target area will again serve as the heart of the community where people come together to enjoy the convenience and friendliness of hometown businesses, local services, specialty and convenience shopping, and unique recreational and cultural activities. The variety of neighborhood homes and businesses will reflect residents' respect for historical preservation, while addressing the practical needs of the present. Enhanced by Ossipee Lake and the Ossipee Mountains, the Main Street area will offer a pleasant walk for residents and visitors, including those who stay at the many campgrounds in our town. Our goal is to maintain the friendly atmosphere, and at the same time, promote a positive spirit, and foster diversity to include young and old, year-round and summer residents for a lifetime.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The New Hampshire Main Street Center was established as an agency of the Community Development Finance Authority (CDFA) in March 1996. The New Hampshire Main Street Center has a Board of Directors that set policy and establish priorities for the program. In conjunction with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Center, the New Hampshire Main Street Center provides technical assistance and support to New Hampshire communities. There are currently 1,787 communities in over 40 states using this program nationwide.

THE MAIN STREET APPROACH

The program goals of the Main Street Approach are to encourage economic development, within the context of historic preservation that is appropriate to today's marketplace. This entails a return to community self-reliance, empowerment, and rebuilding of commercial districts based on traditional assets, unique architecture, personal service, local ownership, and a sense of community. These are the goals identified by the people who responded to the Master Plan Survey several years ago.

The Main Street approach is incremental and will not produce wholesale immediate change. If long-term revitalization is to succeed, it requires special attention to every aspect of downtown, a process that takes time and requires leadership and local capacity building. Both the public and the private sectors of the community must be involved and committed for the local program to succeed.

MAIN STREET'S FOUR POINT, EIGHT-PRINCIPLE APPROACH

The four areas of concern in Main Street methodology are organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. **Organization**

The Main Street approach involves the entire community. Merchants, property owners, local government officials, residents, and civic leaders must agree to support the common goals and join together to fund and support the local program for the long term. The Ossipee Revitalization Group and the local program director are key players. A local Program Director is necessary to act as an advocate for the downtown and coordinate individuals and groups to ensure that all are working together. Volunteer involvement is essential.

Promotion

The promotion of the downtown as a single unified commercial area will help attract people and strengthen Main Street's role. An aggressive promotion and marketing campaign will include special events and business promotions. In order to thrive, the downtown must improve both its self-image and the image it projects.

Design

Good design is essential; it should utilize and enhance those elements of quality design that remain in each building. Good design includes promotional literature, store window displays, public improvements, and street amenities.

Economic Restructuring

Economic restructuring seeks to restore elements the downtown has lost over the past few decades. Careful market and economic analysis increases economic strength by diversifying the present mix and attracting new functions, such as office, recreation, services, and residential uses. Economic Restructuring includes business retention and recruitment, effective merchandising techniques, encouraging reuse of upper stories, and better use of recreational assets.

EIGHT PRINCIPLES

Comprehensive

An ongoing series of initiatives is vital to build community support and lasting progress.

Incremental Small projects demonstrate that things are happening. They also provide skills and confidence for more complex tasks. Small changes can make a big difference.

Self-help

The NH Main Street Center provides valuable direction and technical assistance, but local leadership brings long-term success by fostering and demonstrating community building, entrepreneurship and commitment.

Public/Private partnership

Both local government and private sector need to fund the program.

Identifying and capitalizing on existing assets

Recognize and make best use of local assets.

Quality

Quality must be the goal of every aspect of the program.

Change

Changing attitudes and habits is essential. Changing perceptions and practices will help sustain revitalization.

Action-oriented

Frequent visible changes reinforce the perception of positive change. Small but dramatic improvements remind everyone that revitalization is underway.

BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE NEW HAMPSHIRE MAIN STREET PROGRAM

- Help establish non-profit status, set up local office, and adopt by-laws
- Assistance in hiring program director and new director orientation
- MS starter kits
- Develop mission and vision statements
- Roles and responsibility training
- MS 101 and 201 training
- Development of first year work plan
- Resource team visits
- Annual training sessions
- Program director meetings and retreats
- On-site assistance and telephone conversations
- Discounts and scholarships
- Public relations and Business contacts
- Membership in National Main Street Center
- Board president meetings
- Program assessment
- Scholarship to the National Certification Institute in Washington, DC
- Specific technical assistance visits
- Access to NHMS resource library and files

The National and NH Main Street Programs do not provide any financial help to the town. Their contribution is experience and expertise in community revitalization. Part of the funding for the program must come from the town government. At the annual town meetings in March 2005 and 2006, voters passed warrant articles for \$5,000 for the Main Street Program.

Individuals and businesses were also asked to make pledges for three years to ensure that the program would be able to continue. Pledges were divided into three categories: businesses and property owners in the target area, other businesses, and concerned citizens. The New Hampshire Main Street Program allowed Ossipee several extensions of time to raise the minimum amount of money required and meet the minimum budget amounts. This money is necessary for the program, which is designed to be coordinated by a part-time paid director selected and hired by Ossipee. This person coordinates the work of the community volunteers and is a liaison to the New Hampshire Program. It also requires that Ossipee equip and run an office in the target area, so Main Street has a physical presence in the town.

In January 2005 Ossipee was accepted into the New Hampshire Main Street Program with the other 18 communities who are currently part of the Program. Many have been members for a number of years and can demonstrate considerable success in their revitalization work. Ossipee automatically becomes part of the national Main Street Program.

In January 2006, the Ossipee Revitalization Group (ORG) began their first full year of operation. A Board of Directors was set up, officers elected, and by-laws adopted. The full ORG Board meets once a month and the meeting is open to the public. Minutes of these meetings are available on the website, as is other pertinent information. Each of the four committees, Organization, Design, Promotion, and Economic Restructuring, gives a report of their monthly activities. Each committee contains at least two or three board members and a number of volunteers. Many people in the community have volunteered so far, and new volunteers are very welcome at any time. The ORG is listed with the State of New Hampshire as a non-profit group and has filed the first year's report. The group has obtained 501(c)(3) status with the IRS. Most of the money pledged for the Main Street Program for 2005 was collected; some of the 2006 pledges are uncollected as of this writing. Other fundraisers include the sale of T-shirts, ornaments and other items that feature the distinctive Ossipee Main Street logo.

ORG hired a part-time Main Street program director in June 2005. Allison Lodge, a recent UNH graduate with a degree in community development, helped get the Main Street Program established. In August 2005 NH Main Street leaders assisted each of the four committees to develop work plans with major projects and activities for the next few years. Upon Allison's departure for a fulltime Main Street directorship out of state Sarah Millette was hired in August 2006 to lead the program. Sarah is an executive human resources director experienced in both non-profit and corporate organizations as well as volunteer-based groups. She has office hours four days a week in a temporary location above the old Independent building at 10 Moultonville Road.

Much of the initial Main Street Committee work has focused on building community awareness of the Main Street Program and positive feelings about events in Center Ossipee village. During Ossipee Old Home Week at the July 4 parade in 2005 and 2006 the Main Street float took first prize in their category, reflecting many hours of volunteer design and labor to highlight the unique contributions of Ossipee history. The 2005 float which the Promotions Committee organized featured a snowmobile from the 1920s close to the original "first ever" snowmobile built in Ossipee in 1924. The 2006 float led by the Design Committee was a reduced-size replica of the still-standing Purina grain elevator beside the railroad tracks only candy, instead of grain, spilled out to grinning parade-watchers.

Some awareness-building Main Street events in 2005-2006 were also fundraisers: the Rubber Ducky race along the Beech River; Dunking booth; Turkey Shoot; Model-T Snowmobile Rally; Santa food drive, etc.

Spearheaded by the Design Committee, Main Street efforts to create green space in Center Ossipee were supported at the March 2006 Town Meeting where voters approved \$65,000 to buy 3 adjoining lots for a park as well as the vacant Dube and Murphy Building at Moultonville Road and Dore Streets (which will house a permanent Main Street office). A "Barbecue in the Park" in August 2006 celebrated this "landmark in progress" and helped raise funds to create the park. Ground preparation has included removal of concrete from the site long used by teens for skateboarding. Town highway workers volunteered their labor after-hours to remove the asphalt pavement. Volunteers have scraped the building for painting to make it winter-ready. A green park with parking space should be ready when warm weather arrives in 2007. Fundraisers for the Park, like the Fall 2006 Sock Hop, will continue.

There are beginnings of real economic development. The Ossipee Economic Fair in March 2006, hosted by the Economic Restructuring Committee, brought 18 small-business lenders and experts to Town Hall so local entrepreneurs could learn about grants and programs that could help them create or expand their business. The popular event resulted in financial assistance for several Ossipee residents, and the event will be held yearly.

A walk through Center Ossipee reveals considerable new private investment. From tasteful renovation into apartments of the old Tri-County office building, to restoration of the historic Mountain View Railroad station restaurant, to construction of new apartments at Main and Huckins Street, there is substantial evidence of village rejuvenation. Private owner improvements are fostered by the Main Street Program as much as possible, just as those visible improvements enable Main Street to spark additional village vitality that benefits residents, businesses and services and the Town as a whole.

With Ossipee Main Street support, Public Service of New Hampshire intends to install new attractive, energy-efficient streetlights in all three villages. From planting flowers to purchasing trash barrels a number of small steps are planned to improve the look of the village. In the future it is planned to have a façade grant program to help owners who wish to improve the appearance of their building by repaying a small percentage of their costs. Linking property owners to organizations that make revolving loans to small businesses, especially start-ups, is another important approach to revitalization. A future resource library in the permanent Main Street office will also aid residents who want help in improving their property.

Main Street is also working with the Recreation Department to provide recreational space for young people now that a park will replace the former skateboard area. Some suggestions are to locate a permanent skateboard area behind the Police Station or a three-season one in the ice rink by Town Hall.

There are a number of important goals that will take time and money to accomplish. Sidewalks and crosswalks are a necessity, for people to safely walk around town. Two of the new or renovated apartment buildings have agreed to put sidewalks across their property. Unfortunately, many of the buildings are too close to the road for sidewalks or use that area for parking. There may be a way to use the railroad track as part of a walking path. Many people in Center Ossipee look forward to a time when the trains will return. A preliminary study done by the state indicated that it would cost over thirteen million to get the track from Ossipee to Conway in working order. This seems like a lot of money, but with the cost of gasoline going up, it may assume a higher priority. Along the Beech River to Route 16B is the proposed path of a river walk, ending at picnic tables across the dam from the Shutter Mill.

In the 1983 Master Plan there were five pages of recommendations to revitalize Center Ossipee. Many of these are also part of the Center Ossipee Main Street Program. Here is a list of the important similarities from the 1983 Plan.

TRAFFIC/PARKING

- Construction of sidewalks and crosswalks in areas with pedestrian traffic
- Small perimeter parking lots
- Construction of a path system
- Maintain the railroad right-of-way for future use

DESIGN/LANDSCAPING

- Develop a sign motif
- Trees and flowering plants should be planted
- Traditional two-story, frame building design should be retained

ACTIVITIES

- Art shows
- Photo exhibits
- Children's fair
- Annual foot race
- Outdoor concerts
- Auctions

USE OF BUILDINGS/NEW BUSINESSES

- Construct a focal point, such as a gazebo
- Increase the use and visibility of existing businesses
- Include medical and professional services
- Fully utilize second stories
- Encourage a bed and breakfast
- Pursue a second elderly housing project

REGULATION

- Present zoning encourages revitalization

MANAGEMENT/COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT/PUBLICITY

- Clear management process and dedicated participants
- Form an Ossipee improvement corporation
- Include merchants/property owners, a banker, selectman, member of the Chamber of Commerce, Planning Board member
- Limited number of directors, broad general membership
- Develop an information plaza or common sign off Route 16
- Distribute maps of the area
- Create themes of progress (What used to be, we want to be, in Ossipee)
- Display pictures of historic Center Ossipee
- Explore tax credits and sources of revolving loan funds

The most important thing for citizens and ORG members to remember is that it took many years for Center Ossipee village to slide downhill and it will be a tough long uphill climb to re-establish Center Ossipee village as a place where we all want to spend time.

Implementation Recommendations:

- Encourage a mixed use of residential and commercial uses in the village.
- Create a park in the village area with additional parking.
- Foster a feeling of community by staging events in the community for residents and nonresidents.
- Involve public and private sectors of the community to fund and support the local program.
- Work with other organizations to maximize the effect of volunteers in a small community.
- Encourage and train volunteers for the Main Street Program with its four point, eight principle approach.
- Realize that this is an incremental program that will take place over a period of years.
- Promote quality design.
- Focus on elements of economic restructuring.
- Encourage the construction of sidewalks and crosswalks where there is pedestrian traffic.