

# Illinois Main Street Success Stories

BY WENDY BELL, MANAGER, ILLINOIS MAIN STREET OFFICE OF THE LT. GOVERNOR

Earlier this month (March 1-4) Illinois Main Street hosted the National Main Streets Conference in Chicago. With a theme of “Becoming Main Street 2.0,” the conference united international professionals to discuss downtown revitalization. Eighty-eight educational sessions and tours were offered on a variety of topics including how technology is impacting downtown. The opportunity for Illinois to host the National Conference is considered a pinnacle in the program’s 16-year history.

In 1993 Lt. Governor Bob Kustra’s Rural Affairs Council adopted the Main Street program as a way to assist declining downtowns in smaller communities across the state. Nine communities were accepted through a competitive process and applied the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Four Point Approach™ of Promotion, Design, Economic Restructuring and Organization. State staff provided training in revitalization practices, not-for-profit management, and design elements as well as administering the program to the national standards, providing small grants and acknowledging exceptional achievements by the local programs. In the program’s first five years, almost \$50 million was reinvested by the private sector in Illinois Main Street downtowns.

The number of participating communities quickly grew and consequently the day-to-day budget was transferred to the Dept. of Commerce and Community Affairs during the Ryan administration. Lt. Governor Corrine Wood continued as chairman of the Advisory Council and made programmatic decisions. At the end of his term, Ryan axed the less than \$1 million budget with 15 employees which served over 55 communities. Wood brought daily operations and one employee back to the Lt. Governor’s office while then candidate, Pat Quinn, lobbied for the program’s continuance.

Since Pat Quinn took office in 2003, Illinois Main Street has rebounded to address a broad spectrum of revitalization needs. Because he sits on councils for other initiatives, Quinn has identified issues that connect to Main Street. His activity with the “Green Solutions” initiative, for example, led to the development of Illinois Main Street’s Green Grants for sustainability projects. Cambridge Main Street used a grant to create a rain garden of native plants while Downtown Crystal Lake installed bike amenities at its commuter rail station. PRIDE in Paxton utilized their grant to order solar-powered streetlights for downtown.

Recognizing the need for businesses and consumers to have reliable internet service, five Main Street communities; Quincy, Mt. Vernon, Carbondale, Belleville and Aledo, have received grants to create WiFi connectivity in their downtowns.

Illinois Main Street also realizes that the arts are a huge economic engine and there is increasing interest in arts and

entertainment districts throughout the state. Although a proposal to establish these districts through legislation fell through, Illinois Main Street found other ways to encourage arts development. Last April, Illinois Main Street hosted a free ArtWORKS Symposium for art councils, Main Street programs, artists and other arts-oriented entities to discuss opportunities and existing programs. The room held 125 and every seat was taken. Clearly, this is an area that holds many opportunities.

Understanding that foot traffic creates business, Illinois Main Street worked with Rep. Rich Brauer (R-100, Petersburg), Sen. Larry Bomke (R-50, Springfield) and Sen. Mike Noland (D-22, Elgin) to write HB1355, known as the Downtown Preference Act. The bill, modeled after several other states, requires that the State give preference to historic properties located in historic or central business districts when locating its facilities. By locating state offices in the downtown, restaurants and numerous independent businesses will derive an economic benefit. The bill passed unanimously through all chambers and was signed by the Governor in August 2007.

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## Aledo Main Street was named as one of ten semi-finalists ... for the **Great American Main Street Award**

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Last fall, Illinois Main Street was selected to receive a Rural Community Development Initiative grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The grant will be utilized for specialized assistance to 18 communities located in three clusters in the west, east, and southern part of Illinois. This will include sessions on small business development, affordable housing, and sustainability strategies as well as energy audits and an architectural assessment.

Though its roots are rural, the Main Street program has been utilized in communities of all sizes. Rockford is currently the Main Street community with the largest population while Golconda has the fewest residents. Nearby Hardin County has created a county-wide program with a residency of less than 5,000. On the other end of the spectrum, Main Street is being used in several neighborhoods inside the city of Chicago.

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Success stories abound. Aledo Main Street (population 3,613; Mercer County) was named as one of ten semi-finalists from a national pool of contenders for the Great American Main Street Award this year. One of their achievements has been effectively utilizing modern communication technologies, such as website, podcast, and other Web tools, to promote their program and events. This new communications platform has provided a worldwide electronic presence for their program as well as the entire city. On average, the website experiences approximately 600 visits and 2,000 page views a month. Meanwhile, the three episodes of the Aledo Podcast have been downloaded almost 200 times from the Main Street website, with additional downloads through iTunes and other podcasting clients. In fact, the Aledo Podcast is listed as #98 on the iTunes list of top local audio podcasts. With the increased web presence, Aledo Main Street and local business have begun to market merchandise and event tickets online, thus capitalizing on a previously untapped resource.

The transformation of a historic hotel has also had a positive impact. With the help of business partners, local banks and the City Council, a million-dollar renovation was completed and The Livermore opened April 28, 2008. The Livermore went from a 1-story corner candy store and gift shop to a 9,000 square foot, 3-story fine dining restaurant and retail space. This has created a retail domino effect with 4 businesses opening in downtown Aledo since then.

In Jacksonville (population 19,939; Morgan County), the Main Street program has extended its reach to nearby residences. In 2005, a dilapidated multi-family residence went through foreclosure and was slated for demolition. Faced with the prospect of an unsightly vacant lot, the Farmers State Bank and Trust Company donated the property to Jacksonville Main Street. The JMS board took the opportunity to create a model for rehabilitation by returning the property to single-family use through a series of innovative partnerships. Debris from the site was cleared by a county work-camp crew. Materials and labor were donated by local area business leaders, who also provided on-site training for student workers from Lincoln Land Community College's construction program. Restoration work was done in accordance with the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards in order to gain a state-administered property tax freeze for the new buyer. The property was sold in November, 2008 but

A dilapidated multi-family residence in Jacksonville before renovation



A restored, single-family residence



remains a priceless investment in the community. The Downtown St. Charles Partnership, a Great American Main Street Award winning program, has utilized Main Street methodology for more than a decade to address the needs of a downtown just 45 minutes from Chicago. The commercial district is in the middle of a \$100 million redevelopment project located on seven acres. It includes housing units, ground floor retail, upper-story office and commercial space and parking. St. Charles' Design Committee, which includes



volunteers with engineering and architectural backgrounds as well as city staff, played a major role in the process by exploring design issues that would maintain the architectural integrity of the new buildings and make sure they compliment the downtown's existing look and feel.

Illinois Main Street has a tiered system of services to meet the needs of communities. For those towns just beginning to explore downtown revitalization or working in a non-traditional district, IMS has created the Municipal Member level. This level provides minimal services and has few requirements for local program structure. However, because it does not meet the National Main Street standards, participating programs cannot call themselves "Main Streets." Applications are taken on an ongoing basis and are available on the IMS website.

Towns that wish to become fully affiliated with Main Street must apply to become an Associate Program through a competitive process. The annual application cycle includes an informational workshop on the program, assessment visit to the community by staff, application scoring and vote by the Illinois Main Street Advisory Council. Towns chosen for the honor receive staff support to create the local organization and meet the National Requirements.

Once local programs meet the requirements, they become Designated Main Streets. Designated programs are entitled to a wide array of services and are eligible for recognition during the annual awards program. Illinois Main Street also created a Premier Program status for mature programs that have consistently excelled. Premier Program recognition is evaluated annually and those recognized are expected to act as mentors to new communities and assist with other programmatic training.

Illinois is now the fourth largest statewide Main Street program in the nation and the statistics show success. More than 1,600 businesses have opened or expanded in Main Street downtowns which created more than 6,300 jobs. In today's tough economic climate, the Illinois Main Street program, a proven downtown economic strategy is even more important to the state and its communities.

To learn more about Illinois Main Street, visit: [www.IllinoisMainStreet.org](http://www.IllinoisMainStreet.org).



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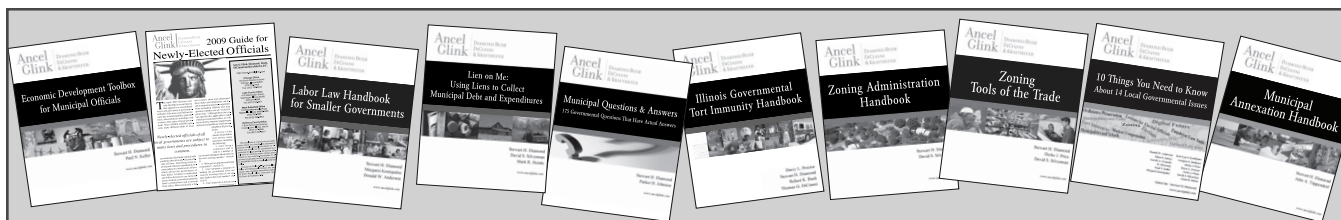


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