



MONITOR

TECHNICAL BRIEF

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The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's Main Street Program provides downtown revitalization technical assistance to Virginia communities, using the National Main Street Center's Four Point Approach™ (Organization, Promotion, Design & Economic Restructuring) to comprehensive preservation-based revitalization of historic commercial districts.



Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development
"Partners for Better Communities"

Abingdon, Altavista and Blackstone Earn Virginia Main Street Designation

By Stephen Versen

The Towns of Abingdon, Altavista and Blackstone have earned designated Virginia Main Street (VMS) community status. Governor Timothy Kaine made the announcement in June, stating, "Being designated as a Virginia Main Street community is an important accomplishment."

"These communities should be especially proud of this achievement," stated Louellen Brumgard, who oversees the Main Street program as associate director of the Division of Community Development.

"This was an especially competitive round for Main Street designation. To be selected,

a community's application needed to demonstrate broad-based community support for designation, a readiness to implement the Main Street Four Point Approach™, dedication to historic preservation, and potential for effecting positive change downtown."

"We are happy to say that Abingdon, Altavista, and Blackstone excelled in each of these categories."

Communities not selected this round will automatically receive status as a Virginia Department of Housing and Community

Development (DHCD) Commercial District Affiliate - which provides them access to ongoing VMS trainings, informational resources and networking opportunities.

Further, these communities are being offered on-site work planning or other services by VMS to help the organization build upon the resources and momentum gathered during the application process.

These three new communities, which bring the total number of designated VMS programs to 21, will receive intensive technical assistance from VMS staff and outside consultants to help build the organization, chart its strategy for revitalization, and provide specialized assistance in each of the

four points of the Main Street Approach.

The goal is to help these Main Street programs grow into high-functioning, stable downtown revitalization organizations by the next designation application round scheduled for 2010. Each new community begins their downtown revitalization efforts faced with a unique set of circumstances. Fortunately, one of the greatest strengths of the Main Street Approach is its adaptability to take maximum advantage of local resources and opportunities.



Congratulations to New VMS Communities: Abingdon, Altavista and Blackstone

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New Community Services

The three new communities will receive a raft of intensive services from VMS staff and outside consultants in all four areas of the Main Street Approach. VMS sequences the services to allow each accomplishment to build on the previous one, while at the same time continually building the capacity of the organization to take on bigger and more challenging projects.

The outcome after three years is an organization with proven successes behind them, a clear vision and comprehensive action plan for the future, with sustainable and sufficient resources to make that plan a reality.

The proof of this approach can be seen in the successes currently being enjoyed by the three most recent VMS designees: Luray, Harrisonburg, and South Boston.

Since January of 2004, together these communities have enjoyed more than \$18 million in private investment, \$5.1 million in public investment, seen 154 new business and 416 jobs created. Helping to make all these numbers happen has been the impressive community support demonstrated by over 43,000 of volunteer hours.

Once designated, Main Street communities receive intensive direct services from the VMS staff and key consultants, including: design assistance, façade renderings, training programs for board and committee members, training for the executive director, technical assistance on key projects, capacity building, market analysis and economic restructuring, and other needed services as identified by VMS staff and the community.

The Towns of Abingdon, Altavista and Blackstone worked hard to achieve designation, but they know that now is when the real work begins.

“It takes more than good ideas and good intentions to make downtown the place we want it to be, it takes effort, partnerships and time,”

Chris Johnson, Abingdon main street board president

“It takes more than good ideas and good intentions to make downtown the place we want it to be, it takes effort, partnerships and time,” states Abingdon Main Street Board President Chris Johnson. “We are proud to be part of the Virginia Main Street community and are committed to do the work necessary to make a lasting impact in our downtown.”

Introducing Abingdon

Similar to communities throughout southwest Virginia, the Town of Abingdon experienced an economic decline over the last three decades. The community lost many important downtown buildings over the years to urban renewal and neglect.



Abingdon's Barter Theatre is downtown's cultural anchor.

The town faces unique challenges with a Main Street that stretches for more than a mile with a preponderance of law and professional offices, which has prevented a lively core of restaurants and retail establishments from forming. It is in part this dearth of shopping and evening activities that has spurred the community into action.

Abingdon is fortunate to have several significant assets on which to build, these include the Barter Theatre, Virginia Creeper Trail, Martha Washington Inn, The Crooked Road, and the Virginia Highlands Festival. The organizational structure of the Main Street Approach, with its focus on partnerships and leveraging community assets, will be key in converting these regional draws into economic success downtown.

Introducing Altavista

The Town of Altavista is the smallest of the newly designated communities, with a population of 3,425, and it's getting smaller. The community lost 7 percent of its population between 1990 and 2000.

One of their downtown's most significant challenges is a number of vacant and blighted buildings located in key sections of the district. Compounding this problem is the continued erosion of the community's original economic base. The current lack of a state or federal historic district downtown is preventing the use of rehabilitation tax credits to incentivize their redevelopment.

However, Altavista has a relatively strong downtown retail core, with important anchors like a hardware and grocery store. Also, substantial residential growth in the nearby Lynchburg and Smith Mountain Lake areas is bringing significant market opportunities that downtown, using VMS and other resources, will build upon to encourage greater private investment into its building stock.



The clocktower of Altavista's library is downtown's most recognizable building.

Introducing Blackstone

The Town of Blackstone in southside Virginia had a booming downtown up through the 1950's, thanks in large part to activity at nearby Fort Pickett. With the decline of the army base, and the area's economy in general, Blackstone was left with a relatively solid, but largely vacant building stock.

One of the community's greatest assets is its energy and capacity to make itself better. That being said, the Main Street Approach is a great fit as it helps convert a community's interest and desire to do something about its traditional commercial district into real results for downtown.

Past efforts at improving the downtown district have not had a lasting impact, and with a downtown Community Development Block Grant program in progress, Blackstone wanted to ensure they would continue to build on this important investment. Blackstone will use the Main Street approach to ensure the positive momentum created by projects today will carry on and grow into the future.



Blackstone's Main Street is an outstanding example of late-19th and early-20th century commercial architecture.



Virginia Main Streets and Institutions of Higher Learning: How They Teach Each Other

By Justine Roberts

Small Town – Big Asset

Virginia is well-known for its institutions of higher learning, such as community and four-year colleges and universities. Many of them reside in Virginia Main Street communities.

Nationwide surveys have discovered that students are choosing a college based on more than its offerings alone, they are also considering what the surrounding community provides as well.

This year, Collegia.com developed a College Destination Index (CDI) to provide prospective students and their parents a tool to analyze the quality of community resources surrounding the colleges under consideration.

Using 12 specific and measurable metrics, the CDI analyzes more than 290 U.S. metropolitan areas to “identify those regions which provide a range of resources best suited to the expansive needs of today’s college students.”

The “Town-Gown” relationship between communities and their local colleges or universities has not always been positive. Yet the Main Street communities highlighted in this article understand that developing a strong relationship with local institutions of higher education make downtown a more vibrant and exciting place to live, work, play, and study for everyone in the community.

In 1996, only three Virginia Main Street communities reported that they had established partnerships with local higher learning institutions. In 2006, 16 had or were in the process of creating a partnership with their local college or university. Read on to learn some of the ways Virginia Main

Street communities and their local higher learning institutions are working together.

Main Street Radford, Inc. and Radford University

“We are a community with a positive, can-do attitude,” says Becky Haupt, manager of Main Street Radford, Inc. (MSR) “The whole community views Radford University as an important economic and cultural asset, and new ideas of how the university and the city can work together abound. Communication and commitment to partnerships are at the heart of the success in the ever-evolving and growing relationship between the city, Main Street Radford, and the university.”

Communication

An example of good communication is Radford’s City/University Joint Commission on Public Affairs, which typically meets monthly to discuss issues of mutual concern and upcoming events of interest.

Formed in 1995, this commission has opened channels of communication for a wide variety of community constituencies and fostered a sense of understanding and accessibility.

The agenda always includes reports of upcoming activities such as the

University’s Service Learning Day, Comprehensive Plan updates by the city, and safety preparations for events such as graduation.

This commission is an excellent communication tool because it reflects the various constituencies in the community. The 12 appointed members come from a broad spectrum of leadership roles including public safety, student government, city governance, university administration, university faculty and the business community, including Main Street Radford, Inc.

Through this commission, students and city staff recently created a “Work Plan to Facilitate Positive Interactions between the City of Radford, Radford University, and the Surrounding Community.”

Including university students on the commission has provided them an opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns, and has given them a sense that they also have a stake in the city.

Creative Partnerships

Main Street success does not happen without partnership, and MSR has continuously sought creative ways to work together with the city and the university. This year, MSR partnered with them to lease a vacant downtown lot and develop 51 additional parking spaces.

Each of the three organizations plan to contribute a third of the rent this inaugural year, and the partnership was further enhanced by the additional partnership of Radford Noon Rotary and the university’s Rotaract Club.



Radford students help beautify a downtown parking lot

This April, Main Street staff, university students, and community members joined together to make the new parking lot a beautiful addition to downtown by planting trees and shrubbery.

A School's Philosophy

"Radford University's philosophy has always been that students should attain not only academic scholarship, but also gain practical experience," says Dr. Kathryn Jordan, director of the Experiential Learning Center at Radford University.

In 1999, Jordan established the center to meet this challenge of further building students' knowledge through experience. The center accomplishes this through facilitating internship and service learning opportunities for the students.

To better connect students seeking job opportunities and the employers offering them, Radford University developed an online database that holds project descriptions of the various opportunities for which the students can search and apply. As this program developed, MSR paid personal visits to downtown businesses to let them know about the center and the opportunities it provided.

Telling downtown businesses about the Experiential Learning Center was one thing, MSR took it a step further and showed them. Through regular "Breakfast at Main Street" sessions, local business owners received breakfast while learning more about Radford University's program and how they could utilize it.

They learned ways they could incorporate student interns and volunteers into their businesses by developing project descriptions and timelines for action. As new jobs and projects became available, the university not only added them to the database, but also sent them to students via e-mail.

The outcome has been impressive. Students have gained real-world experience through volunteer service learning and internships, while local businesses received assistance in areas such as business and marketing planning, Web site design and re-design, and special event planning. By proactively working with downtown businesses, MSR has leveraged this initiative to maximize its impact for downtown and the university.

University 100

Radford University offers a unique program for freshman called "University 100." This introductory class, which meets in the relaxed atmosphere of the dorm, is designed to help freshmen get to know each other, their university, and their extended campus of Radford.

Through this class, they participate in Radford community activities that include volunteering at the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, cleaning up city walking trails, washing the windows of the shops along Main Street, and participating in special city events such as face painting and building scarecrows with children at the weekly farmers market.

Through these activities, the students have the chance to forge strong bonds with each other and with the broader community.

So how have all these programs been received?

"We have businesses calling us to ask how they can get involved," said Dr. Jordan.

The students are having fun too. These programs have been so successful that Radford University has now set up a volunteer fair in the fall to showcase all the opportunities available to the students and employers.

A Tale of Two Schools: Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance Partners with James Madison University and Eastern Mennonite University

Another Virginia Main Street community that has encouraged creative partnerships with local institutions of higher learning is the City of Harrisonburg. Here the two local universities, James Madison University (JMU) and Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), have both worked with Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR) to develop programs that introduce and involve their students in downtown revitalization.

The Planning Committee as Incubator

Similar to Radford, HDR formed a committee of school faculty and staff and Harrisonburg citizens. This committee has been the incubator of numerous city-university initiatives such as the Museum and Gallery Walk.

Now run by the Arts Council of the Valley, this event joins together



Breakdancer in downtown Harrisonburg during HDR's Block Party in the 'Burg.

nearly 30 shops and restaurants with museums and galleries downtown and at JMU. Highlighting a variety of local and student artwork, this event showcases photography, oil and watercolor paintings, pottery, textiles, jewelry and more.

In addition, a range of performing arts such as folk, blues, dance and theater troupes provide live entertainment. Assisting the Arts Council of the Valley with this event are HDR, Harrisonburg Visitor and Tourism Services, JMU, and downtown merchants.

Welcoming the Students Back

This September, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance hosts the third annual "Block Party in the 'Burg" to welcome students back to school.

This event features live music, free food, t-shirts, tours of downtown and an outdoor movie. EMU freshman are required to attend this event as one of many ways to learn about what the school considers the entire EMU community, and JMU is providing ambassadors (JMU tour guides) to conduct walking tours of downtown while orientation staff are including the event in their Freshman Orientation Guide.

When strategizing how to market this event successfully to reach the student population, Alexis Morehouse, promotions manager for HDR, discovered that some of the best marketing tools were the cheapest.

Instead of using conventional advertising such as the local newspaper or radio, HDR bought 25,000 virtual fliers on facebook.com that were distributed at the rate of 5,000 per day for five days to JMU and EMU students. This technique only cost \$50.

Morehouse also posted free ads on craigslist.com, a Web site well-known as a great place to buy and sell anything online and is organized by location in the country, as well as on EMU's classified page. This approach showed results immediately - within a matter of hours of posting the event online, her e-mail inbox was flooded with questions about the event.

In addition to online advertising HDR partnered with student groups and school departments to have students hand out paper fliers around campus.

By looking outside the box to reach the student population in Harrisonburg, HDR is poised to hold its largest block party yet.

"It is amazing to watch how all the pieces came together for this event. I think we're going to see much bigger crowds this year and we'll certainly have fun," said Morehouse.

Not only is HDR holding a fun and free student-community event, it is both welcoming and introducing Harrisonburg's newest members to one of its greatest assets: downtown.

Additional Opportunities

Not all Virginia Main Street communities have a major university or college within their boundaries, yet that does not mean that working with a higher education institution is out of the question.

Community colleges, satellite campuses, technical institutes and local secondary schools also offer excellent partnership opportunities. Make the effort to connect with these important community members to discover how Main Street and education institutions can help (and teach) each other.

These schools have the resources and talent to work with Main Street communities. But it is up to the Main Street organizations to take the lead and think creatively about partnerships.

As Richard Florida in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* states, "The University is only one part of this social structure [of creativity]. It is up to communities to put the other pieces in place: both the economic infrastructure and the quality of place to retain the talent the university has attracted."

10 Town-Gown Partnership Ideas:

1. Develop an advisory board that includes local higher learning leaders and former students.
2. Establish an organizational sub-committee focusing on partnerships among community stakeholders, and the students and faculty of local colleges/universities, community colleges, etc.
3. Develop student internship and volunteer opportunities in conjunction with local businesses and community needs.
4. Assist in developing an online database of project, job, and internship opportunities available to students.
5. Establish incentives and new ways to make it easier for students to shop downtown.
6. Develop programs to familiarize freshmen with downtown and the larger community.
7. Think of creative programs and activities that will attract students to learn, work and have fun downtown.
8. Don't forget the parents – develop ways to attract them downtown.
9. Main Street as class project: Colleges and universities are interested in utilizing real life case studies and projects to invigorate classroom learning. Work with professors to form class curriculum around local issues.
10. Get online. Setting up individual Web pages on sites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com for downtown, as well as for individual local businesses, are some of the best ways to advertise to young people.

Artistic Touch to Revitalization Effort

Entitled "Winter in South Boston," local artist P. Ray Cherry has not only captured the warm nostalgia of the wintertime in this Main Street community through his painting, he has committed 25 percent of the proceeds from the sale of these prints to Destination Downtown **South Boston, Inc.** (DDSB). Both the original painting and signed, stretched canvas prints, with a certificate of authenticity are available for purchase.

"I enjoy seeing the historic downtown areas come back to life as I depict in my paintings," states Cherry. "If my work can help that effort, then it is worth my time and talent to help that cause."

Jerry Van Eimeren, Main Street manager for DDSB says, "The painting has created a lot of enthusiasm in just these first few days of display in Town



Hall. The interest has been so great that we are going to create Christmas and note cards featuring the painting."

VMS Communities Celebrate Business Appreciation Week

May 13-19 was Virginia Business Appreciation Week and numerous Main Street communities took the time to celebrate.

People, Places & Happenings

resources & news you can use 

For example, **Luray** invited all local businesses to a "Business Appreciation Dessert Reception." At this creative event, a brief ceremony and ribbon cutting was held, and everyone was congratulated for a job well done with toasts and desserts. The event was a big hit and a great way to recognize the hard work that local businesses contribute everyday to the downtown revitalization effort.

Leesburg, a VMS affiliate community, hosted their sixth annual Business Appreciation Awards Ceremony and Reception during that week in May. Awards distributed included Best New Business Award, Innovation Award, Home-Based Business Award, Heritage Award and others.

According to the Small Business Administration, 60 cents of every dollar spent with a sole proprietorship is retained and re-circulated in the local community. In comparison, only 20 cents of a dollar spent at chain stores is retained, and only 6 cents of every

dollar spent with a big box retailer is retained or re-circulated.

If you are thinking ahead to next year's Business Appreciation Week, visit the Virginia Department of Business Assistance Web site at: <http://www.dba.virginia.gov/events/ideas.asp> for ideas and marketing materials that can make your celebration event even more successful.

People

With Altavista's recent designation as a Virginia Main Street program, **Judy Finch**, executive director of **Altavista on Track**, officially joins the VMS community. Finch has led the organization since September of 2006. Prior to coming on board with Altavista On Track, Judy had spent the previous eight years raising two children and spending increasingly more time as a volunteer in the community.



Judy came to Altavista by way of Philadelphia and then Lynchburg College, where in 1984 she married Rob Finch, whose family has owned a business in Altavista for more than 100 years. Judy brings with her experience as a medical lab manager, as well as, a familiarity with what it takes to own and operate a small business.

Virginia Main Street Monitor is published by the Virginia Main Street program Office of Community Revitalization and Development Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT CALENDAR

October

- 13-14 Virginia Mayors' Institute: James City County, VA (Virginia Municipal League, www.vml.org)
 14-16 2007 VML Annual Conference: James City County, VA (Virginia Municipal League, www.vml.org)
 15-18 Virginia Institute for Economic Development: Blacksburg, VA (VIED, www.cpe.vt.edu/vied/)
 15-19 Strategic Conservation Planning Using the Green Infrastructure Approach: Shepherdstown, WV (The Conservation Fund, www.conservationfund.org)
 24-25 National Conference on the Creative Economy: Fairfax County, VA (Creative Economies, www.creativeeconomies.com)
 26-27 102nd Annual Membership Meeting: Williamsburg, VA (Virginia Retail Merchants Association, www.virginiaretail.org)

November

- 1-2 **Virginia Main Street Managers Retreat: Massanetta Springs**
 1-3 Urban Waterfronts 25 – The Next Wave: Boston, MA (National Trust Main Street Center, www.mainstreet.org)
 5-8 Main Street Basic Training: Washington, D.C. (National Main Street Institute, www.mainstreet.org)
 13-15 Section 106: An Introduction: Washington, D.C. (National Preservation Institute, www.npi.org)
 14-16 2007 Governor's Housing Conference: Roanoke, VA (Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, www.vagovernorshousingconference.com)

December

- 2 Going Green. \$ave Green: Jessup, MD (Green Building Institute, www.greenbuildinginstitute.org)
 5 Virginia Tourism Corporation Orientation Session: Richmond, VA (Virginia Tourism Corporation, (804) 371-8144 or pbozorth@virginia.org)
 6 Entrepreneur Express - Moving Your Business Forward: Southwest, VA (Virginia Dept. of Business Assistance, www.dba.virginia.gov)

January

- 13-16 Innkeepers Trade Show and Conference: Natural Bridge, VA (Mid-Atlantic Innkeepers Trade Show and Conference, <http://midatlanticinnkeepers.com/>)
 21-25 Certification in Professional Main Street Management Institute: Washington, D.C. (National Trust Main Street Center, www.mainstreet.org)