



Final Report and Recommendations to City of Thomasville, North Carolina Downtown Strong Working Group

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Master of Public Affairs Program
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
BACKGROUND.....	2
Downtown Strong.....	2
Tasks Assigned to UNCG	3
MAIN STREET.....	4
Downtown Revitalization.....	4
Main Street Program	6
RESEARCH	8
Methodology	8
Characteristics of the Cities	8
FINDINGS.....	10
Organizational Structure.....	10
Role of Existing Nonprofit	11
Main Street Program	12
Committee System.....	13
City Support.....	15
Downtown Director.....	16
Municipal Service District	17
RECOMMENDATIONS	18
The Role of PACE.....	18
Structure.	18
Main Street	18
Downtown Director	19
Municipal Service District	19
CONCLUSION	20
REFERENCES	21

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background. Throughout 2019 the City of Thomasville has been working toward launching a new downtown revitalization initiative. They asked our team from the UNCG Master of Public Affairs program for help in determining: **what kind of downtown development organization could best implement the downtown plan, what role PACE should play, and whether Thomasville should enter the Main Street program.**

Research. The MPA team conducted in-depth interviews with the downtown directors of seventeen other small Main Street cities. We obtained information about their history, legal structure, degree of city support, the directors' attitude toward the Main Street program and Four-Point approach, and profiles of the downtown directors and of the downtowns themselves.

Findings. The team's key findings: the popularity and effectiveness of the quasi-public-private organizational structure, the important role played in other cities by preexisting downtown nonprofit entities like PACE, the strong support for Main Street held by directors and the essential services the Main Street program provides, the workings of the Main Street committee system, and the backgrounds of the downtown directors and the roles they play in their downtown organizations.

Recommendations. Based on our findings, the MPA team offer these recommendations: **invite PACE to assume the key role in the downtown organization, select the quasi-public-private structure option, pursue Main Street accreditation, hire a downtown director, and consider levying an MSD tax.**

MPA TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS





BACKGROUND

Downtown Strong. “Downtowns are the heartbeat of rural North Carolina,” said Secretary of Commerce Anthony Copeland in March, 2019, on announcing the selection of Thomasville to participate in Downtown Strong. Thomasville and twenty-three other North Carolina cities and towns located in Tier 1 and Tier 2 counties made up the first round of selections in a new initiative of the NC Main Street

“Downtowns are the heartbeat of rural North Carolina.”

& Rural Planning Center, the office of the Department of Commerce charged with the administration of the Main Street program in North Carolina. Each city received assistance and expert advice aimed at recruiting

new businesses, creating jobs, spurring investment, and revitalizing their downtowns.

Beginning in the early spring of 2019 Thomasville convened a series of planning events under the direction of Assistant City Manager Michael Brandt and Department of Commerce Downtown Economic Development Specialist Diane Young. These included an “Opportunity Assessment” enumerating downtown Thomasville’s opportunities, obstacles, liabilities and assets; a tour of the community; a priority-setting retreat attended by key stakeholders; and a series of community interest meetings convened throughout the spring with members of the community in attendance. These community members became known as the “Downtown Strong Working Group.”

Two key action steps emerged from the Downtown Strong process.

Two key action steps emerged, to proceed on parallel tracks. On one track, architect David Gall was engaged to create a so-called “Downtown Toolbox” consisting of a set of voluntary design guidelines for rehabilitating and renovating downtown buildings. On the other track, the Downtown Strong Working Group set out to study the feasibility of entering the Main Street process and



the different options for downtown organizational structures that could be utilized. The instructions specified that the organization, or committee, should be inclusive of a wide cross-section of the community to guide future downtown revitalization efforts.

Tasks Assigned to UNCG. The City Manager's office then applied to the Master of Public Affairs Program of the University of North Carolina Greensboro for assistance with the downtown organization track. Four MPA candidates were assigned to the project, whose task was to support the decision-making process of the Downtown Strong Working Group with research, analysis and recommendations.

**Thomasville
asked three
questions:**

1. What organizational structure is best suited to Thomasville's downtown organization?
2. Should PACE, the longtime independent downtown development organization and a key participant in the

Downtown Strong Working Group, assume the role of downtown organization?

3. Should Thomasville seek affiliation and accreditation in the Main Street program.

To help answer these and related questions, the MPA team undertook to inquire into the experience of Main Street cities around North Carolina, with the objective of discovering best practices in Main Street administration – what's working, and of those things that are working, which could profitably be applied to the circumstances of Thomasville.

The MPA team's objective was to discover best practices in the administration of the Main Street approach in cities around North Carolina.



MAIN STREET

Downtown Revitalization. This section will review some of the important academic work relevant to small city downtown revitalization. Their findings relate directly to cities like Thomasville.

Small cities seeking downtown revitalization have advantages (Robertson, 2001). Their scale is human-sized. There is less crime and traffic congestion. The absence of a dominant banking, governmental or stadium institution leaves local actors free to build a distinctive local environment. Retailers tend to be independent. Residential districts are within walking distance. Historic structures have a better chance of survival.

Large city downtown development can be dominated by business elites and key downtown anchor institutions, and mayors seeking business growth and trophy projects meant to attract higher levels of downtown consumption (Strom and Kirstein, 2015). The absence of the strong mayor and the

dominant institutions typically found in bigger cities can open the way in places like Thomasville for individual actors from activist and entrepreneurial backgrounds to build a more independent-minded, creative and livable downtown landscape characterized by small-scale renovation projects that support rather than undermine a sense of place and authenticity.

The small-city differences translate into a specialized approach to downtown revitalization. Robertson (2001) offers several key principles of downtown development that have obvious application to Thomasville's downtown initiative:

- have an active and well-organized downtown association composed of representatives of private stakeholders and city government, with a strong volunteer base and a full-time downtown director
- develop a vision for downtown shared by all the main stakeholders
- don't rely on retail alone but encourage the diversity of function among restaurants, churches, cultural attractions and city government
- take advantage of the history, evolution and memory embodied in the city's old buildings, parks and streets
- make downtown pedestrian-friendly, with attention to sidewalks, benches, landscaping and reducing traffic and traffic speeds
- establish design guidelines, whether voluntary or by ordinance

- don't over-emphasize parking: attractive places, not parking spaces, attract people to downtown.

But small cities struggle with limited assets available for development, citizens reluctant to authorize big investments, and the lack of a forum for reconciling differing visions. Some development challenges are decades in the making: dilapidated and declining places left in the wake of historic deindustrialization (Depriest-Hricko and Prytherch, 2013). Decentralization of business, retail, entertainment and residential activities enabled by highways and automobiles gave rise to patterns of disinvestment. Affluent ex-city dwellers now living in outlying places lost their reasons to go downtown, leaving behind an obsolete urban core characterized by vacant and abandoned offices and storefronts (Robertson, 1999). This is the image, in some cases more accurate than in others, that the small-city downtown revitalization project confronts.

One particular problem of downtown revitalization deserves special mention

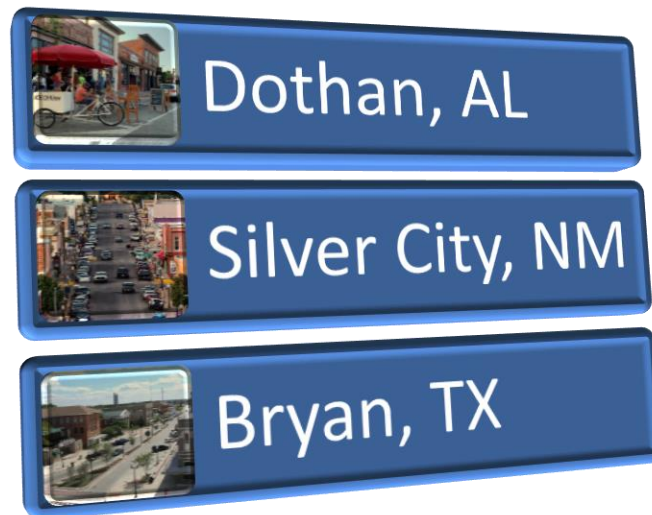
because it's seen so frequently: "identifying viable uses for vacant or underutilized space" (Faulk (2006, 632). With traditional downtown functions largely obsolete, and many kinds of projects such as office buildings and indoor shopping centers usually feasible only in bigger cities, it isn't always clear what new uses these vacant and often dilapidated buildings can be put to. And for uses that are identified, the financing may be hard to obtain or current owners may be unwilling to sell or rehabilitate. And even if this hurdle is cleared, revitalization might be painfully slow, taking decades of incremental work on one building, one sidewalk,

sometimes not much more than one residential unit at a time.

Yet downtowns are still the primary gathering centers of small cities, and cities like

Thomasville can pursue downtown revitalization in ways that are practical and attainable.

Case studies described in the literature bear this out. The city of Dothan, Alabama undertook a successful program of public investment carried out



through a strong partnership between a nonprofit organization that had been conducting downtown streetscape projects for years, and a city manager with an innovative attitude and substantial support in the community (Haque, 2001). Silver City, New Mexico, a very small city with a downtown in decline, joined Main Street and gained access to resources and expertise that it didn't have in-house. By upgrading its sidewalks and promoting its strengths in arts and culture, it drove downtown vacancy from 40 to 13 percent (Read, 2012). Bryan, Texas, a larger small city, turned around its downtown with a comprehensive strategy that included streetscapes, parks, historic preservation, business incentives, special events and more (Guisti and Marachin, 2016).

As part of the Downtown Strong effort, Thomasville has gone far in identifying assets on which it can build. Historic buildings, parks, the fountain, the farmers market, even the train tracks can be assets that attract citizens and visitors and help distinguish Thomasville from other places.

Given the significant amount of resources needed to pursue downtown development seriously, to conduct the sort of strategic planning and marshal the sort of public and private commitment to economic development necessary to mount a credible effort, many small cities have turned to Main Street

to provide guidance and lend credibility and support.

Main Street Program. While Thomasville retains the option “to prosper on their own,” in the words of the Downtown Strong award, the Downtown Working Group instructed the MPA team to focus on the other option, in which Thomasville would seek to become affiliated with the NC Main Street program.



Main Street America is a program of the National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It is a preservation-based economic development and community revitalization framework utilized by over 2,200 small and medium-sized cities and towns. Main Street communities are encouraged to follow the “Main Street Approach” – a transformation strategy implemented through comprehensive work in four broad areas, known as the Four Points: economic vitality, design, promotion and organization.

Cities new to Main Street often spend a good deal of time deciding how they

want to establish their structure because it is the foundation for how decisions will be carried out. Without a strong foundation, downtown development can falter. With this project Thomasville is taking an important step in this direction but it will be under no illusion that the next steps will be easy. While the success rate of Main Street cities is high, the experience of

some cities has shown there are pitfalls: the shortfall of financial resources, the inadaptability of the program structure to meet changing community needs, and unrealistic expectations that can lead to disappointment.

The next sections of this report will help guide Thomasville through some of the action steps that will, if done right, increase their chances of success.



RESEARCH

Methodology. Between September and November, 2019, the MPA team conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seventeen directors of North Carolina Main Street-accredited downtown programs. Question format, though flexible, was tailored to elicit information relevant to these research objectives:

Nine key areas of inquiry:

- History of the city's downtown organization and of its affiliation with the Main Street program
- The legal structure of the organization, whether an independent non-profit organization, a city department, or a hybrid
- The degree of city government support for the downtown initiative and the forms it takes
- Where the organization is an independent nonprofit or a hybrid, a profile of its board of directors
- The four-point committees, who serves on them, how well they work

- The director's attitude toward the Main Street program, whether favorable or unfavorable
- General profile of the city's downtown, its successes and problems, its past and future projects
- General profile of the directors themselves, their background, what qualities they think serves a downtown director well, their tenure in the job
- Assessment of city residents' interest in downtown revitalization

Characteristics of the Cities. Of the sixty-four accredited Main Street cities in North Carolina, we selected seventeen according to two criteria only: their population size was roughly similar to that of Thomasville, with the selection continuing into successively larger and smaller cities; and their downtown directors agreed to be interviewed. We disregarded all other factors, including what type of organizational structure they used and all demographic information.

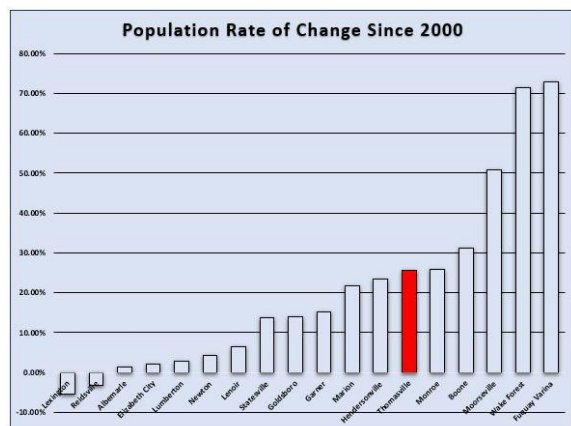
The cities included in the study are listed here:

CITY	POP.	DOWNTOWN DIRECTOR	STRUCTURE	MSD
Albemarle	15,903	Joy Almond	Quasi-PP	YES
Boone	19,562	Lane Moody	Quasi-PP	YES
Elizabeth City	17,558	Deborah Malenfant	Quasi-PP	YES
Fuquay Varina	29,200	Dawn Russell	City Department	NO
Garner	30,502	Mari Howe	Quasi-PP	NO

Goldsboro	34,234	Julie Metz	Quasi-PP	YES
Hendersonville	14,107	Lew Holloway	Quasi-PP	YES
Lenoir	17,938	Leon Steele	City Department	YES
Lexington	18,917	Rebekah McGee	Quasi-PP	YES
Lumberton	20,840	Connie Russ	Quasi-PP	YES
Marion	36,065	Freddie Kilgough	501(c)(3)	NO
Monroe	35,311	Matthew Black	City Department	YES
Mooreville	38,341	Kim Atkins	501(c)(3)	YES
Newton	13,129	Shannon Johnson	Quasi-PP	NO
Reidsville	14,013	Missy Matthews	Quasi-PP	YES
Statesville	27,041	Marin Tomlin	501(c)(3)	YES
Wake Forest	44,046	Lisa Hayes	Quasi-PP	YES

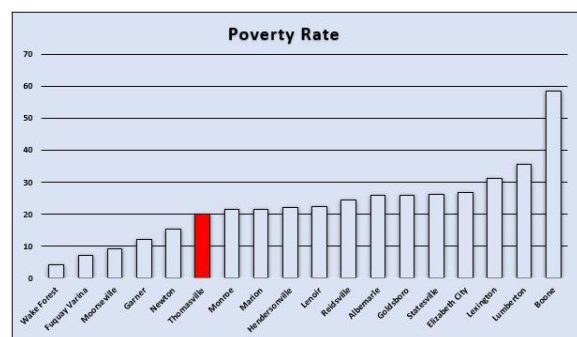
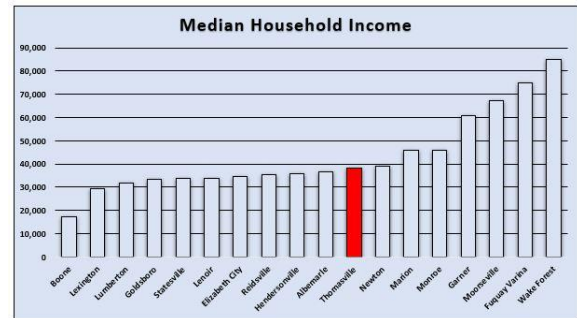
With the cities selected, we then examined them as a sample, to see how they compared to Thomasville in terms of several economic and demographic indicators.

The rate of change of population from 2000 to the present indicates whether the city is experiencing fast- or slow-growth or even negative growth:

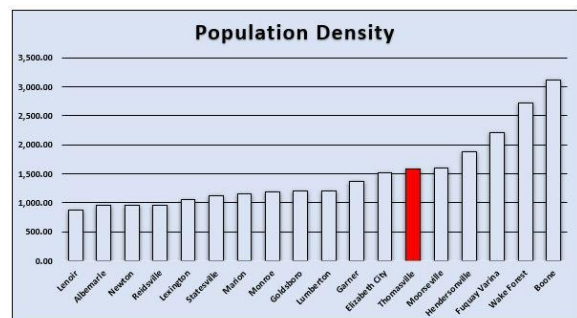


Median household income and poverty rate together provide an

indicator of relative affluence of the seventeen cities:



Density provides a general indicator of where the city falls on a spectrum of urban versus rural:



The cities in the sample show significant variability in these broad indicators. While not a probability sample it does have some features that can be provisionally described as representative, with Thomasville consistently in the high mid-range of each of these groupings.



FINDINGS

Organizational Structure. The Downtown Strong Working Group asked which form of entity organization would be best suited to Thomasville’s downtown organization. Main Street cities typically use one of these three options:

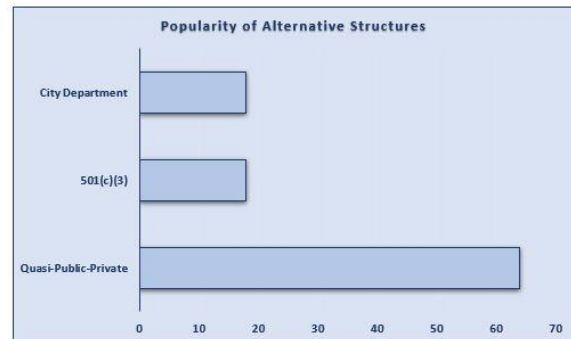
Three organizational options:

1. City department
2. Independent nonprofit entity, usually an organization exempt from taxation under IRC Section 501(c)(3)
3. A “quasi-public-private” structure.

The “quasi-public-private” structure (an informal denomination commonly used in the Main Street community) typically consists of an independent 501(c)(3) entity and a city office or department, linked together by a downtown director who serves simultaneously as executive director of the 501(c)(3) and

the city’s downtown director, occupies an office in city hall or other city building and receives a salary and benefits as a city employee.

The quasi-public-private structure is the one most-often selected by the cities



in our sample, with 501(c)(3) and city department tied for second place.

KEY FINDING:

Interviewees were notably enthusiastic about the quasi-public-private approach

The quasi-public-private structure is popular and becoming more so.

One experienced downtown director called it a “marriage,” saying the structure itself forges a partnership between the private sector and city government. The dual role of the director fosters this cooperation. Another credible and knowledgeable downtown director pointed out that this puts the downtown director “inside the tent.” This director suggested this option is becoming even more popular, predicting that more Main Street cities will convert from other structures to adopt the quasi-public-private option. The view that

the structure itself contributes to the close cooperation between the parties and promotes long-term stability of the organization, was widespread.

Those who have studied the success of downtown revitalization programs in

North Carolina have cited the need for close cooperation between organizations and institutions involved. The close cooperation and city support encouraged by the quasi-public-private structure promotes stability and allows for efficiency through sharing of resources.

KEY FINDING:

The need to pay fringe benefits to the director can drive the choice of structure

Along with these important organizational reasons for the effectiveness of the quasi-public-private form was another, more mundane explanation: it allowed the director to receive fringe benefits that the nonprofit entity could not provide. This can be advantageous for the recruitment and retention of a well-qualified director. Two directors said the matter of pay and benefits was the driving force for adopting the quasi-public-private form.



The advantages of other structures were also pointed out. One downtown manager favored the independent 501(c)(3) option on the basis that a city government staff person is limited in their freedom of action, being con-

strained by city government policies, hierarchies and relationships. By contrast, the Board or staff of an independent nonprofit entity, even when committed to cooperation, isn't subject to the direction of city officials.

Role of Existing Nonprofit. A

second, corollary question posed by the Downtown Strong Working Group was about PACE: should it assume the role of downtown organization. Both the quasi-public-private form and the 501(c)(3) form are nonprofit entities. Thomasville recognizes that rather than create a new nonprofit entity, they could use and build upon the one they already have.

PACE
group
inc.
THOMASVILLE

PEOPLE ACHIEVING COMMUNITY ENHANCEMENT

The PACE Group, Inc. is a North Carolina nonprofit corporation formed in

1996. (“PACE” stands for “people achieving community enhancement.”) It has among its members some of Thomasville’s most knowledgeable and committed downtown activists, who have been a leading force for façade rehabilitation, public art and streetscape improvements. They have built substantial expertise, access to private funding, and a strong pool of volunteers.

KEY FINDING:

Most quasi-public-private agencies were built on preexisting non-profit organizations

The MPA team found that of the eleven cities using the quasi-public-private structure, eight, or 73%, started

with a preexisting nonprofit with a track record and stock of expertise, fundraising ability and volunteer base.

Main Street Program. We asked the downtown directors for their opinion of the Main Street program.

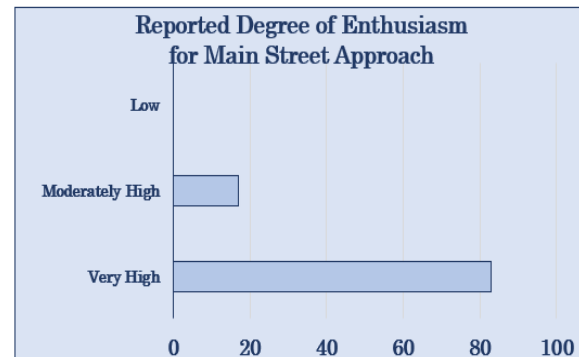
KEY FINDING:

Main Street members strongly support the Main Street program.

The response was strong: the directors as a group are very supportive of the Main Street approach. Of those responding

to this question, 83% were rated as having very high enthusiasm, with 17% rated moderately high, and none reporting low or no enthusiasm. This is in spite of the numerous reporting

and administrative requirements that could well have dampened their enthusiasm.



They pointed to a number of features and benefits. Most often cited was the quality to which the MPA team gave the name “road map.” The Four-Point system is highly structured. A small city downtown working group may be fortunate to have a lot of ideas, a deep bench of volunteers, strong support from government and community stakeholders, and a long list of projects that need attention – but implementation can be chaotic, with participants pulling in opposite directions. The Main Street committee system imposes discipline on the process, helping to “strike a balance” between different aspects of downtown work. The road map “keeps everyone on the same page” and “weeds out personal agendas.” It’s a set of best practices, a “recipe for success,” in the words of one director, making it unnecessary for a one-person downtown office in a small city to “reinvent the wheel.” It helps the them to develop a “consistent message grounded in something credible.”

An equally important feature to the road map is the wealth of resources made available to downtown directors.

The Four-Point system helps cities develop a “consistent message grounded in something credible.”

In cities as small as Thomasville, the staff of the downtown organization may be small and inexperienced.

KEY FINDING:
Main Street members have access to three big sources of expertise.

The Main Street system gives the downtown directors access to:

- the network of sixty-four other Main Street directors
- the staff of the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center
- an extensive training program provided by the Center

The directors all cited these as among the most important features of the program.

North Carolina was one of six states to have participated in Main Street from its inception. Early participants helped to test its theories and refine its strategies, resulting in today’s wealth of resources and knowledge. One director said access to the statewide director

email forum enabled them to field in 24 hours questions or tasks they otherwise lacked the knowledge or experience to handle on their own.

There are caveats. The advantages must be weighed against the burdens and costs. One director said the sheer quantity of material and resources coming from Main Street, though of vital assistance to their city, sometimes seems to

come at them “like a fire hose.” Moreover, as described in the following section, the committee

system that Main Street cities are required to comply with has, in some directors’ views, notable drawbacks.

Committee System. The Four-Point approach at the core of the Main Street system requires participating cities to administer their downtown initiatives through four permanent standing committees charged with the administration of all downtown activities: organization, promotion, design and economic vitality. This approach is exactly what directors expressed support for, but when it comes to actual committee operations, a few misgivings

“The success of our downtown is due to the Main Street program.”

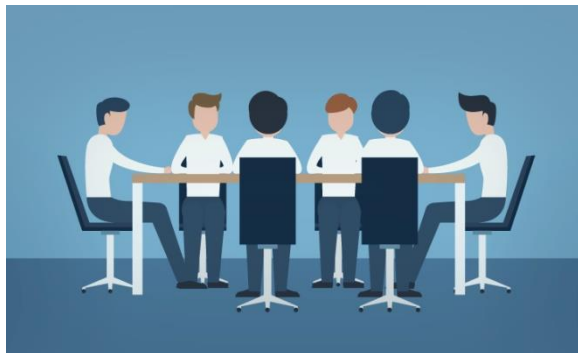
were reported. We asked downtown directors to assess their satisfaction with the committee system. Is it working? Are there enough people to staff the committees? Are they the right people?

KEY FINDING:

Approval of the committee system is widespread, but volunteer recruitment is getting harder to do.

All directors responding to this question expressed approval. Two were unqualified in their approval, one say-

ing that each committee consistently has ten to fifteen members, drawn from a variety of downtown stakeholders, who can do things the staff cannot do. Another comment was similar, reporting a good mix of stakeholders represented – from board members, citizen volunteers, business owners and downtown residents capable of carrying on the work of the organization.



At the same time, several directors said the committees put pressure on the volunteer base. The more expert-driven work done by the design and economic vitality committees is particularly hard for some cities to keep staffed. One

director said that for this reason they value stability in the leadership highly, while finding it difficult to maintain.

EVERYBODY'S DAY FESTIVAL



But in some cities the committees are finding it difficult to recruit and retain even rank and file, non-expert volunteers.

“People don’t like the word ‘committee,’” one director told the MPA team, and staying for the year or two that committee

appointments typically last is a promise not all volunteers want to make. Another

“Volunteerism has changed dramatically over the last 30 years.”

director said, “volunteerism has changed dramatically over the last thirty years.” They would like to see downtown development moving toward project teams rather than standing committees, oriented toward specific goals and with results that are capable of evaluation; and they think the state-level Main Street staff are listening to these kinds of concerns.

City Support. The MPA team has made “city support” a distinct subject of our research. It is not easily defined, much less measured, yet it remains a critical ingredient of downtown organization efforts. So much downtown work is done by private actors, but downtown is a public realm. Any promotional event, any construction or rehabilitation, any streetscape improvement, can be done only with the city’s approval and often only with its financial support. Support can be strong or weak, and can implicate the setting of agendas, the lines of communication, and the distribution of political power.

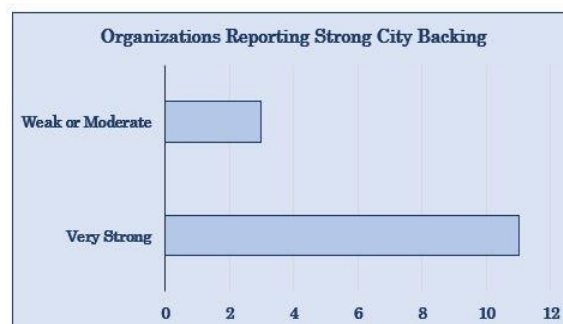
KEY FINDING:

City support comes in many forms: funding, in-kind services, salary and benefits, city officials sitting on the nonprofit board, shared vision.

Downtown directors described to the MPA team the support they receive – or don’t receive – in its variety of forms: direct funding; funding through the

Municipal Service District; access to parks, sanitation and other in-kind city services to support events; discounting of utility bills; making available to the director office space, salary and benefits, and direct access to department heads; participation of city officials on the nonprofit board; sharing of the same vision for downtown by city officials and the nonprofit board; public and private stakeholders pulling in the

same direction; and alignment of the parties’ financial and political interests.



Of the downtown directors answering this question, eleven reported very strong city backing, while three reported weak or moderate city backing.

Support can flow from the structure. In the quasi-public-private structure, city support is strengthened by the “marriage” between the nonprofit and the downtown development office. But the independent 501(c)(3) option, while not “building in” support structurally in the same way, certainly doesn’t exclude city support, so long as the nonprofit and the city have the necessary relationships, lines of communication and political alignment. In any case the Main Street city holds the accreditation, so the city will be called upon to support the project financially and procedurally.

Weak support can be manifested in various ways, too. One director, working under a “city department” structure, told the MPA team that until recently, downtown development simply wasn’t a top policy priority for the city

government. Another said that past financial malfeasance in the downtown organization had set back political support for a time. In another case, the downtown initiative had been the subject of a long-term factional fight, between older residents interested only in special events, and a younger leadership with a more comprehensive vision of economic development.

Downtown Director. The Main Street program requires accredited Main Street cities to have a full-time paid director. Our questions were centered on the directors' position in the organizational structure, their backgrounds and areas of expertise, and their tenure in the job.

KEY FINDING:
The director is the linchpin in the quasi-public-private structure.

In the quasi-public-private structure, the director can be the linchpin bridging the public and private partners. The director holds offices in both, is often the only paid or only full-time downtown staff, and is the key point of accountability for all downtown work.

Ten of the eleven cases using a quasi-public-private structure featured directors with offices in city hall and receiving city salary and benefits. Of all seventeen directors, twelve were in that category.

KEY FINDING:
Main Street directors have to learn on the job how to do downtown development.

In small cities the directors come from diverse backgrounds, including holders of other town staff positions, downtown businesses owners, a small business developer, a development director for a school, a journalist, a banker, a landscape architect. An element of amateurism was evident, making more important the training provided by the state-level Main Street Center – a point emphasized by several directors interviewed.

Tenure in the job is an important factor in defining what makes a successful downtown director. The directors interviewed had years in office

A newly-hired downtown director should “be ready to spend five years building relationships.”

ranging from one to thirty, with an average of 8.2 years. Longevity is a real asset, because the best directors are those who know the players are. One long-serving director told us that a newly-hired downtown director should “be ready to spend five years building relationships.”

KEY FINDING:

The director can be weakened when the downtown organization is sidelined.

One director told the MPA team that the downtown organization was sidelined to handle only “events,”

but other city staff handled rehabilitation and other development projects. Another described a city that had scaled back its ambitions for downtown, leaving the director with “only so much to do.” A third described a strong downtown organization, but one dominated by the city manager with the director relegated to a less responsible role in downtown affairs.

Municipal Service District. Although it has not up to now levied a tax, Thomasville has established a Municipal Service District in the downtown area. For this reason, the MPA team included questions about which cities have MSDs, what level of tax they have

imposed, and how they’ve allocated revenues raised through the MSD. Eleven of the cities have Municipal Service Districts. All eleven have levied property taxes through the MSD. Tax rates range from 8½¢ to 28¢ per hundred-dollar value of property, for an average rate of 19¢ per hundred. Annual revenues raised ranged from \$26,000 to \$250,000, for an average raised of \$80,100.

All of the MSDs studied use the revenues raised for purposes related to downtown development, either directly to pay costs of the downtown organization or to fund downtown projects. Revenue allocations included payment of operations and administration of the downtown organization; payment of the director’s salary; funding streetscape projects, façade improvements or window restorations; and funding “downtown economic development.”

Thomasville MSD





RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon our research and our discussions with Thomasville stakeholder representatives, we make the following recommendations for further action.

The Role of PACE. We recommend that PACE assume the key role in the downtown organization. In the course of our research we found that many successful downtown programs began with an already existing nonprofit entity that had done downtown development for years and was the repository of expertise, volunteer commitment and access to private funding. This proved a solid foundation for a new and more ambitious downtown organization.

Structure. We recommend that Thomasville adopt the “quasi-public-private” option for its new downtown organizational structure. We found this to be used more commonly than others, and it’s becoming more so, with instances of city programs shifting from other structures to it. It has these features:

- the downtown organization is composed of an independent nonprofit and a city department
- with a downtown director who is simultaneously the director of the nonprofit and the city’s downtown development department head
- paid by the city and receiving benefits
- with an office in city hall and access to the department heads

We point out that other structures can work well, too, but regardless of the structure chosen, city support for the downtown initiative is vital. That means a shared vision, support for the goals, support for the director, a share of the funding, the stakeholders pulling in the same direction and sustained political commitment.

Main Street. We recommend the Thomasville downtown organization seek full accreditation to the Main Street program.

Among our study subjects we found a large majority of enthusiastic support for and dedication to the Main Street system. Some said the program could not succeed otherwise. It is a “recipe for success.” It “imposes discipline,” a “road map,” “weeds out personal agendas,” “strikes a balance between different aspects of the work.”

The directors benefit greatly from the guidance, shared expertise, and camaraderie of the Main Street directors and the high-quality state-level staff.

Main street provides essential training to directors who often have little background in Main Street and downtown development practice. Main Street provides needed resources, grants and other funding, and consults on design matters.

Downtown Director. We recommend the city appoint a dedicated full-time paid downtown director.

Should the Main Street approach be adopted, this will be required. But we support it because we found that often the downtown director is the linchpin holding the downtown stakeholders together. A downtown organization binds together diverse participants with varied interests who need a structure, a program, and a director to focus them and to provide a point of accountability. The directors we interviewed have markedly different professional training and backgrounds, but the best ones share some qualities: they're good at building relationships and

partnerships, they stay long enough to become effective, they're passionate, innovative and entrepreneurial.

Municipal Service District. We recommend the city consider levying a property tax under the Municipal Service District, to build support from the downtown business community and to contribute a portion of the funding for downtown development.

In general, matters of municipal finance and political feasibility were outside of our remit. However, we include this comment regarding the MSD because our research showed that for all of the cities that have established an MSD, it proved an appropriate mechanism for funding downtown initiatives. The MSD can be a way of cultivating the support of the downtown property owners, and also reassuring property owners in other neighborhoods that they won't bear the whole burden of downtown development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PACE assumes key role in downtown organization
2. Quasi-public-private structure option adopted
3. Main Street accreditation pursued
4. Downtown director hired
5. MSD tax considered for downtown funding



CONCLUSION

We close with a comment on the work of the Downtown Strong Working Group. The MPA team joined the process already initiated by the Working Group several months before, and we were immediately impressed by the broad support and hard work being offered by city officials and interested citizens from across the spectrum of Thomasville life. In our walking tours through the streets of downtown Thomasville we were impressed by the improvements made over the years, by the many downtown amenities, and by the excellent old two-story building stock which is widely agreed to have “good bones” and a great future. We acknowledge the dedication and seriousness with which Thomasville has approached their next steps toward downtown revitalization. We are grateful to have had this opportunity to be a part of it.

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