

Main Street Revitalization

Frequently Asked Questions



At the heart of many communities across Ohio, you can find thriving and busy main streets. These spaces serve as important cultural hubs that community members rely on, and are vital as they provide people access to businesses, restaurants, shops, and open public spaces to gather, walk, bike, and more.

Revitalizing main streets and the downtown areas they travel through can provide many benefits to communities, like attracting visitors, improving economic growth, expanding cultural engagement, and increasing public health and wellbeing. Ready for your community to achieve these benefits? Explore this fact sheet to consider some questions, factors, and resources to help you and your community to get started.

When beginning a revitalization process, a good place to start is to understand your community and their needs:

- What does your community want?
- What do you want visitors to know?
- What is your community's history and heritage?
- What are the demographics of your community?
- How do people feel about community spaces?¹

Why invest in the revitalization of main streets in small towns?

Over the years, small and rural communities have struggled to maintain their main streets and downtowns. Many factors have played a role in the decline of these spaces, such as small business competing with large and online retailers, population loss,² a decline in small family farms, the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty rates, and more.

Main streets play a vital role in serving household needs, providing jobs, and serving as cultural centers where the community comes together to eat, shop, and socialize. These cultural centers have helped establish and sustain a rural area or a small town's community and pride.³

Vibrant main streets have the potential to generate economic development and create jobs. Between 2015 and 2019, U.S. towns with populations of 25,000 or less invested more than \$20 billion in public and private funds into their downtowns and created more than 28,000 new businesses. During that time frame, businesses created over 106,000 full-time and roughly 25,000 part-time jobs.⁴

What can a revitalized main street look like?

There are a variety of ways to revitalize a small town or a rural area's main street. These improvements should be accessible, attractive, and inviting for people to shop, eat, and socialize. The features of a vibrant main street area include businesses that serve daily needs and attract customers during daytime, evening, and weekend hours, like retail stores, restaurants and cafes, and grocers. Other features include:

- **Active transportation infrastructure.** Sidewalks, crosswalks, and pedestrian signals help make walking safe and accessible. It's important to ensure accessibility, including Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant design and adequate unobstructed sidewalk width (without obstructions like sandwich boards, signs, or tables) to allow safe passage for people using mobility aids or traveling with strollers. Bicycle infrastructure helps ensure that bicyclists feel comfortable while traveling and navigating through your main street or downtown. These can be supplemented by providing bike parking, bikes for rent, bike maps/wayfinding, signage, and more. Communities should plan for walking, biking, and public transportation routes that connect and travel through a downtown or main street in convenient, comfortable, and accessible locations for people of all abilities. Wayfinding signage can help signify to people that they are not only wanted and prioritized in the space but there are opportunities for them to explore, learn, shop, eat, and socialize.

¹ Van Duyne, W. (2019). "Rebuilding Main Street in Rural America: How to Engage Support, Find Funding and Build a Stronger Community." Main Street America. <https://www.mainstreet.org/blogs/national-main-street-center/2019/10/16/rebuilding-main-street-in-rural-america-how-to-eng>

² State of Ohio (2023). State of Ohio Populations Projection Report 2023. <https://devresearch.ohio.gov/files/research/P6001.pdf>

³ Capitol Region Council of Governments (2002). "Main Street Revitalization: Fact Sheet." https://crcog.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Ch07_FactSheet_Main-Street.pdf

⁴ Simon, Ruth (2020). "America's Main Street Revival Goes Into Reverse, Cutting a Small-Town Lifeline." The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-main-street-revival-goes-into-reverse-cutting-a-small-town-lifeline-11601833783>

- Traffic calming.** Many small towns are adjacent to highways or state routes that have high volumes of traffic and high speeds. These roads may run through a downtown or form a community's main street. Traffic calming, or physical measures that encourage vehicles to slow down or choose an alternative route, can increase the feeling of comfort and safety for people using the downtown area. Traffic calming can improve safety for all road users and can increase visibility of local businesses and shops for people in vehicles when they travel at reduced speeds. Approaches can include reducing the number of vehicle lanes, adding curb extensions or median islands to narrow the space, vertical deflection such as speed tables, and more.
- Public art and placemaking.** Murals, colorful roadway design, and other public art promote and enhance a community's natural and cultural environments, while also creating a visually appealing streetscape that people are excited to be in. Gateway features or welcome signs can let people know they are entering a community space.
- Landscaping and Lighting.** Trees along the sidewalk shade pedestrians and improve the area's appearance. Placing planters along the street is a low-cost way to create immediate visual interest and demonstrate the community's commitment toward improving downtown. Lighting improves the visibility and safety of the street and draws attention to nearby businesses and attractions. Lighting should be scaled to light the pedestrian space, not just the roadway. Banners and other decorative features attached to light posts can highlight events and different aspects of the community.
- Public Spaces.** Public spaces are areas such as parks, plazas, and town squares that are open to the public. Within these spaces, there's vast opportunity for outdoor seating, sidewalk cafes, fountains, and more. Public spaces should draw people in, be located in accessible and important locations, and be surrounded by a variety of features like plants, flowers, trees, walkways, and monuments.⁵ Some communities also host "Open Streets" or other events in which a main roadway is closed to vehicle traffic and "opened" as a community space for eating, drinking, and gathering. The community may invite mobile food vendors, host concerts, or encourage patrons to visit local businesses. This approach can increase pedestrian traffic to businesses, help establish an outdoor social space in the community, and bring new vitality to an area.



Active transportation. Credit: State of Ohio



Traffic calming. Credit: © Toole Design Group LLC



Public art and placemaking. Credit: © Toole Design Group LLC



Public spaces. Credit: © Toole Design Group LLC

5 Karras, J (2014). "The 5 Features of Great Public Spaces." Urban Scale. <https://urbanscale.com/blog/5-features-great-public-spaces/>



How does active transportation like walking and biking support economic development and revitalization?

Having safe and easy access to downtowns by walking or biking can lead to the increase of small business revenue, help boost revenue from sales tax, and lead to the development of more jobs.⁶ Bicyclists and pedestrians are more likely to make frequent trips to local businesses, outspending drivers over the course of a month.⁷

Active transportation also poses less stress on an area's infrastructure and built environment. Active transportation infrastructure involves less labor and has a lower cost to maintain than motor vehicle infrastructure.⁸ In addition, having the choice to use walking and biking for transportation can save families money on the costs of owning and operating a vehicle.

When people can easily access an area's downtown or main street, it can also support the development of new industries and revenue streams such as travel and tourism, arts and culture, and professional services.⁹ Walkable and bikeable communities can also attract people to move into a community. National surveys show that for 79% of people, being within walking distance to common destinations in a community is among the most important factors when deciding where to live.¹⁰

What kind of land use approaches can support revitalization?

The types, density, and design of buildings on a main street can support or detract from its revitalization. Luckily, many Ohio small towns developed before the automobile became dominant and may already have a layout that was built for people on foot. This supportive development pattern can benefit revitalization efforts. Some methods to consider:

- **Mixed-use development** combines residential, commercial, cultural, and sometimes light industrial uses into a single building or area, like a city block. These types of developments attract people and encourage them to remain in an area for a long period of time as they have the potential to offer places to live, eat, shop, and work. When ground floor uses include people-oriented spaces, such as retail, restaurants, and coffee shops, they are also more pedestrian-friendly than traditional development patterns and shorten the distances people need to travel between uses. Mixed use buildings could be required in a zoning code or encouraged through incentives.
- **Retrofitting** is the process of transforming buildings to comply with modern technology and infrastructure standards. Benefits include preserving local architecture, character, and history, reducing labor and material needs, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving an area's net value, reducing energy cost, and increasing productivity.¹¹ By retrofitting historic buildings to modern uses, small towns can retain their unique character and identity while adapting to current needs.
- **A zoning overlay** adds additional rules on top of existing zoning in a specific area. This means that there can be additional requirements for mixed uses, or requirements for aesthetics and form (like building heights, design or sign standards, ornate details, etc.). By implementing a zoning overlay for an area, you can establish more intentional outcomes over building changes in your downtown or main street's appearance. This could also be implemented through the adoption of design guidelines or standards for a specific area.

Visit the Creating Healthy Communities [webpage on land use interventions](#) for more information.



A walkable mixed-use main street in Marietta, OH
Credit: © Toole Design Group LLC

6 Steuteville, R (2021). "Ten economic benefits of walkable places." Public Square. <https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2021/08/18/ten-economic-benefits-walkable-places>

7 Badger, E. (2012). "Cyclists and Pedestrians Can End Up Spending More Each Month Than Driver." CityLab Transportation. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-12-05/cyclists-and-pedestrians-can-end-up-spending-more-each-month-than-drivers>

8 Cumberland Area Economic Development Corporation (2022). "How Small Businesses Impact Their Communities." <https://cumberlandbusiness.com/news/how-small-businesses-impact-their-communities/>

9 Starner, R. (2019). "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Small Towns." Site Selection Magazine. <https://siteselection.com/trustbelt/the-7-habits-of-highly-effective-small-towns.cfm>

10 National Association of Realtors. National Community and Transportation Preferences Survey. <https://cdn.nar.realtor/sites/default/files/documents/2023-community-and-transportation-preferences-survey-slides-06-20-2023.pdf>

11 C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (2020). "The Multiple Benefits of Deep Retrofits: A toolkit for cities." <https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/The-Multiple-Benefits-of-Deep-Retrofits-A-toolkit-for-cities>



Revitalization Examples

Many Ohio communities have successfully invested in the revitalization of their downtowns and main streets. These efforts are often led by non-profit or community development organizations that lead public art and streetscape projects, organize community events, or procure and redevelop real estate. Many are members of the Ohio Main Street Program from Heritage Ohio.

Main Street Vermilion

In Northern Ohio, [Main Street Vermilion](#) promotes downtown economic and business development, historic preservation, community revitalization, beautification, and tourism. Through their Public Art Vermillion project, a steering committee of local artists, community members, and leaders created a public art master plan and installed 15 murals based on historic postcards from Vermilion. The murals can be viewed as a walking tour through the downtown and eastern corridor of town. Current efforts include adding a sculpture to the Main Street Park and Beach and creating a holiday sculpture out of fishing buoys.

Main Street Portsmouth

[Main Street Portsmouth](#) focuses on the development and preservation of the historic Boneyfiddle district and the surrounding downtown area. Their revitalization process includes beautification, event management, grant writing and giving, business development, and communication. Their beautification team has also provided seating for



Repurposed public space in Portsmouth, OH
Credit: Main Street Portsmouth

pedestrians and repurposed a historic building façade to create a public courtyard space. The organization also works with the city to sponsor a building improvement grant to promote exterior building improvements in the Downtown Improvement District. A minimum of \$25,000 is awarded annually to improve structural integrity, longevity, and physical appearance of downtown buildings.

Xenia – Detroit Street Traffic Calming and Separated Bike Lane

In [Xenia](#), Detroit St/US 68 is one of the main routes through town and is home to many local businesses and government offices. It is also part of the Little Miami Scenic Trail and Ohio to Erie Trail. In 2017, the city worked with the Ohio Department of Transportation to implement a "road diet" or lane reduction on the street for four blocks, a process through which they converted two existing vehicle travel lanes into a two-way separated bicycle lane on the west side, along with curb extensions, pedestrian refuge island with flashing beacon, and bike racks. The reduction in lane width helps slow vehicle traffic through this business district. The bike lane provides a more comfortable connection between the off-road portions of the trail and encourages bicyclists to visit downtown businesses on their way through town, rather than seeking a less trafficked route bypassing the business district.



Detroit Street separated bike lane, Xenia, OH
Credit: © Toole Design Group LLC



What funding opportunities are available for main street revitalization?

Below are a variety of potential funding resources to help your community's revitalization efforts. Applications are generally available annually.

- **T-Mobile Hometown Grant** - awards up to \$50,000 in 100 towns annually to build, rebuild, or refresh community spaces to help foster local connections.
- **AARP Community Challenge** - provides small grants to fund "quick-action" projects that can help communities become more livable for people of all ages. Areas of focus include creating vibrant public spaces, delivering a range of transportation and mobility options, and other community improvements.
- **America Walks Community Change Grant** - awards \$1,500 in community stipends for projects related to creating healthy, active, inclusive, accessible, and engaged places to live, work, and play.
- **National Association of Realtors Placemaking Grant** - funds state and local REALTOR® association projects that create new, outdoor public spaces and destinations in a community on unused or underused sites.
- **Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) Grant** - helps non-profit housing and community development organizations, low-income rural communities and federally recognized tribes support housing, community facilities, and community and economic development projects in rural areas.
- **Our Town** - the National Endowment for the Arts creative placemaking grants program; supports activities that integrate arts, culture, and design into local efforts that strengthen communities.

Where can I learn more?

- **Heritage Ohio**. Through the Ohio Main Street Program, Heritage Ohio is a Main Street America™ Coordinating Program. The Main Street America™ network consists of well over 1,200 community-based organizations and over 40 city, state, and regional Coordinating Programs working together to create vibrant, people-centered places to live, work, and play. United by a commitment to revitalizing historic downtowns and commercial districts, Main Street America™ communities represent small rural towns to busy urban corridors, and everything in between. They also provide services such as a downtown assessment to assist in developing a downtown revitalization program.
- **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – Smart Growth in Small Towns and Rural Communities**. This webpage from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency includes general resources on how to implement smart growth strategies to help rural communities achieve their goals for growth and development while maintaining their distinctive rural character.
- **Smart Growth America – (Re)Building Downtown A Guidebook for Revitalization**. This guide serves as a resource for local elected officials who want to re-invigorate and strengthen neighborhood centers of economy, culture, and history through a smart growth approach to development.
- **The Rural Blog - How can small cities succeed at revitalization? Here are ideas from a study of three communities**. This five-part policy paper helps defy stereotypes surrounding small cities to help showcase small-town America and discuss examples of local strategies for sustainable growth in three small cities (Wheeling, West Virginia; Laramie, Wyoming; and Emporia, Kansas) and surrounding rural areas.
- **U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Library – Downtown Revitalization**. This webpage from the U.S. Department of Agriculture provides a variety of information including planning tools, case studies, funding sources, contacts, and revitalizations strategies for rural communities.

