



# Main Street Tourism

Photo Credit: Visit Hillsborough

Matt  
Gowdar

For many small towns, Main Street is the historical and cultural centre of the community. Successfully leveraging a main street’s potential assets to attract tourists can diversify and grow local economies, while enhancing a sense of place and appealing to people of **all ages** (EPA, 2015).

There is no single approach to main street revitalization that is suitable for all communities. However, breaking down the stories of small towns who have achieved impressive results through the redevelopment of tourist-friendly main streets can teach others important lessons about strategy and process.

## Successful Programs and Organizations

Since 1977, the National Main Street Program has helped revitalize over 2000 downtowns in the United States, through consulting services and grants, and is viewed as extremely successful. Its “4 Points” transformation strategy combines specific **design** guidelines for buildings, **organization** of stakeholders, **promotion** of downtown as a vibrant space, and **economic restructuring** into a cohesive program. Local governments and other organizations have adopted this influential model, particularly in small communities (Bradbury, 2014).

The National Trust for Canada operates a similar Main Street program, focusing on both the preservation of historic buildings and economic/social revitalization. Inconsistent funding has lessened the success of this initiative, but some **provincial governments have periodically stepped in to fill the gap** when needed (National Trust for Canada, 2021; Plaine, 2007).

Partnering with outside organizations for funding and support is valuable for smaller communities with limited resources as well. **Positive results from these initiatives tend to be greater in small towns.** A study of Iowa’s Main Street program found that towns with populations under 5000 who participated saw more visitors from other communities shopping and more businesses opening proportionally compared to larger towns and cities (Bradbury, 2014).

**Positive results from these initiatives tend to be greater in small towns**



Photo Credit: National Main Street Centre

Figure 1: Mainstreet America’s 4 Point approach is one of the most influential programs for downtown revitalization

## Leveraging Assets

Every small town has heritage, cultural, or environmental features which could be used as a focal points for generating tourism. **Main streets and downtowns often possess the highest concentration of these kinds of resources** (Burayidi, 2013).



Photo Credit: Visit Hillsborough

Figure 2: A street festival in downtown Hillsborough, NC



Photo Credit: Visit Clarksdale

Figure 3: One of many historic buildings with connections to blues culture in Clarksdale, MS

Hillsborough, North Carolina (population approximately 5000 people) made heritage tourism the centre of its revitalization efforts during the 1990s. The town is home to numerous historical buildings dating back to the 18th century, including many along its Main Street, and was an important area during the American revolution. **The promotion of heritage-based tourism, partnered with new cultural events, helped make Hillsborough known as a unique destination** (NCGrowth, 2020). Perth, Ontario (population ≈6000) was the first town to participate in the Canadian Main Street program. The town’s award-winning efforts to preserve its historic structures made it more attractive for businesses as well as tourists (Plaine, 2007).

Clarksdale, Mississippi (population ≈17,000) has become a hot destination through its reputation as the birthplace of blues music. Cultural tourism attracts music enthusiasts from across the world, and over 60 buildings in Clarksdale’s revitalized historic downtown now have a connection to blues culture (Henshall, 2012).

**Main streets can also benefit from the leveraging of exterior assets.** Nearby attractions, parks, and natural areas can bring visitors into communities, which benefits restaurants and the hospitality sector. For example, Etowah, Tennessee (population ≈3600) uses a nearby historic rail line to attract visitors to its downtown commercial corridor (EPA, 2015; Henshall, 2012; NCGrowth, 2019).

## Results and Outcomes

Often, downtown revitalization projects are motivated by economic interests. Tourism dollars represent an additional revenue stream for local businesses who may be struggling to make ends meet (Shields & Farrigan, n.d.). Hillsborough saw visitor spending in the town increase by nearly 30% between 1997 and 2005 as a result of its revitalization program (NCGrowth, 2020). Tourists spend 5 times as much as local residents on arts and cultural activities, according to data collected in Paducah, Kentucky (population ≈80,000) (EPA, 2015). However, depending solely on tourism to sustain a small community can carry significant risk. Dillsboro, North Carolina, lost 50% of its businesses following the closure of its prominent heritage railway, a steep loss for a town of less than 300 residents (Ha, 2014).

**Over 60 buildings in Clarksdale’s historic downtown have a connection to blues culture**



Photo Credit: 365 Atlanta Traveller

Figure 3: Etowah, TN takes advantage of its scenic rail line to draw visitors to downtown

Figure 4: Perth, Ontario has created a unique community identity based around preserved stone buildings

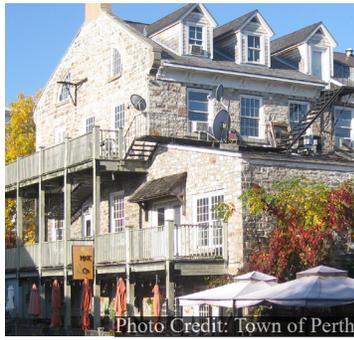


Photo Credit: Town of Perth

Figure 5: Placemaking is key to making communities both liveable and attractive to outsiders



Photo Credit: Visit Clarksdale

**Small towns can build distinct identities around key elements, such as historical sites**

The benefits of main street revitalization can go even deeper by fostering a sense of place. **Small towns can build distinct identities around key elements, such as historical sites or blues music, and these place-making efforts can boost civic pride.** Ultimately, this makes the communities better places to live for residents of all ages, as well as attractive to outside visitors (Burayidi, 2013; EPA, 2015).

### Age-Friendly Dimensions

There are plenty of opportunities to incorporate age-friendly principles into the revitalization of downtowns and main streets. *Global Age-Friendly Cities*, a document created by the World Health Organization (2007), identifies civic and social participation as key aspects to making urban areas optimized for seniors. **Main street revitalization programs depend heavily on local volunteers and “champions”** to drive them forward, especially in smaller towns with fewer resources (Henshall, 2019). Main Street Iowa data shows that small towns generated twice as many volunteer hours from their residents in the service of revitalization projects compared to larger cities (Bradbury, 2014). **This provides seniors with opportunities to contribute to the growth of their communities,** especially given their unique historical knowledge. Additionally, historical and cultural amenities are likely to attract interest from a wide range of age groups, fostering inter-generational connections.



Photo Credit: National Main Street Centre

Figure 6: Revitalization efforts give community members of all ages the opportunity to contribute

### Final Thoughts

Using tourism as a driver to improve small town main streets helps create more vibrant, complete communities for people of all ages. Key points on this topic to remember are:

- Support and funding from outside organizations can be invaluable
- Every community, no matter how small, has assets which can be leveraged to attract tourists downtown
- Placemaking and economic benefits go hand in hand
- Revitalization projects give seniors the chance to actively participate in the development of their communities

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