

MAIN STREET® DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENT HOW-TO GUIDE

Successful communities recognize the importance of their “Main Street”, or downtowns, which often serves as the cultural, social, and economic center for communities. However, many cities and towns struggle to keep their main streets and downtowns viable and thriving.

There are many strategies and tools available to help communities with their revitalization efforts to enhance downtowns and revive them including a Main Street® Downtown Assessment.

Several REALTOR® Associations have partnered with others in their own communities to plan and organize a Main Street® Downtown Assessment, which was funded by NAR’s Smart Growth Grant.

Your Association may want to take on this strategy to do the same in your community. This “how-to” guide will give you an overview of a Main Street® Downtown Assessment and let you know what you need to do to prepare for one.



What is a Main Street® Downtown Assessment?

A Main Street® Downtown Assessment (Downtown Assessment) provides an on-site analysis of the challenges, issues and opportunities in a community that has made a decision to initiate the revitalization of its downtown or commercial district.

A Downtown Assessment focuses on the challenges and objectives cited by the community, and its needs, because every community has issues that are unique from other communities. However, some common issues this strategy has helped to address are as follows:

- Reduction of the number of vacancies in downtown commercial buildings
- Rehab and re-use of historic, underutilized, and vacant buildings
- Bringing new businesses and amenities to a downtown
- Dealing with brownfields sites (i.e., vacant gas stations)
- Creation of green or open spaces and destinations in a community and/or connecting these spaces (i.e. a riverfront) to a downtown

More:

- Our Main Street® Success Story: [Opelika, AL, a Main Street® community](#)
- REALTORS® Main Street® Downtown Assessment Makes the News: [Carbon County Association of REALTORS® Receives Grant](#)
- REALTORS® Main Street® Downtown Assessment Success Story: [Medina County \(OH\) REALTORS® Help Bring Dying Main Street of Seville Back to Life.](#)



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The Downtown Assessment uses the [Main Street Four Point Approach®](#), a strategy that encompasses communities organizing themselves for success; improving the design of their neighborhoods; promoting their districts, and enhancing their economic base, to transform a downtown. This strategy was instituted by the National Main Street Center



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more than 35 years ago and has been successfully implement in commercial district and downtown revitalizations in both rural and urban settings across the Country.

This method leverages local assets—from cultural or architectural heritage

to local enterprises and community pride—to enhance a community and strengthen its sense of place. It helps communities get started with revitalization and grows with them over time. The four points of the Main Street® approach work together to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort.

Main Street Four Point Approach®

A community can hire a Main Street® Specialist to implement the Main Street Four Point Approach® during the Downtown Assessment. The Four Point Approach incorporates the following points into a long-term revitalization strategy.

1. Economic Vitality

Strengthens a downtown's existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding existing businesses to provide a balanced commercial mix; converting unused or underutilized space into productive property; sharpening the competitiveness and merchandising skills of downtown business people; and attracting new businesses that the market can support.

[Howell, MI, transformed their downtown district](#) into a cultural destination through community-driven economic development efforts. Despite a challenging regional



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economic environment, downtown Howell now has a vacancy rate of just 1.2 percent and is home to a diverse mix of businesses that foster a strong sense of place to attract and keep people downtown. Through extensive engagement with local partners and the City, and strategic business recruitment, downtown now boasts a diverse mix of businesses featuring unique retail, dining establishments, and service industries. Anchored by entertaining destinations like the new local brewery Aberrant Ales, entrepreneurial attractions like the Frontal Lobe co-working space, and cultural institutions like the Howell Opera House and Howell Movie Theatre, downtown is once again a destination.

2. Design

Enhances the physical and visual assets inherent in a downtown by directing attention to all its physical elements such as public and private buildings, storefronts, signs, public spaces, landscaping, merchandising/window displays, and entranceways. The goal is to stress the importance of design quality in all these areas, to educate people about design quality, and to expedite the physical and visual improvements downtown.



[Covington, KY](#), transformed their downtown district by embracing street art and creative placemaking to compliment the design elements of the historic architecture. Covington took advantage of its beautiful Italianate brick buildings which are now home to an influx of new independent businesses and serve as downtown residential units where many stores' upper floors are being renovated into urban lofts. The town now boasts 27 pieces of public art throughout downtown, most are in previously unused space, including a four-story mural painted by Brooklyn artist Faile that spans two buildings. To fuel art activities, the organization also redesigned a vacant parking lot into a designated space for public art and performance. Renaissance Covington also hosts an annual urban art festival, Art Off Pike, to showcase local and regional art.

3. Promotion

Positions the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community's unique characteristics. Promotion, which can take many forms, seeks to improve retail sales, events and festivals and to create a public image of a downtown that is attractive to investors, developers, new businesses, community residents, homebuyers and visitors.

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[Opelousas, LA developed a branding campaign](#) – “perfectly seasoned” – to build community pride around an agreed upon set of images and phrases. “A city must have a unified, professional image if it wants to build local businesses and attract others,” said Tripp Muldrow with Arnett & Muldrow. The campaign kicked off with street banners going up at the city’s tourism center. The banners feature a stylized “O” for Opelousas, accented with an accordion, a fleu-de-lis, a spice shaker and a fiddle. The accents were chosen to highlight the city’s culture, history, food and music – all set off with the

slogan “perfectly seasoned.” The new tagline can be applied to everything from perfectly seasoned education to perfectly seasoned food. The hope is that not only the city, but other groups, festivals and merchants, will join in the promotion effort.

4. Organization

Involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district. This will allow a dedicated group of volunteers to develop a program of work that utilizes the Main Street Four Point Approach® in its efforts to revitalize the downtown district. Diverse groups from the public and private sectors must work together to create and maintain a successful program.

The [Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard Merchants and Business Association](#) is a great example of how collaborative efforts between individuals, businesses and nonprofits can help a neighborhood previously plagued with disinvestment transform into a vibrant community for all. The Association was established in 1995 to advance the boulevard’s revitalization efforts. The whole community rallied together to revive the boulevard. The corridor has evolved from empty and blighted structures to bustling activity. 32 new

businesses have opened, 176 jobs were added and more than \$83 million in private and public funds has been invested in the district for rehabilitation, new construction, historic preservation and infrastructure improvements. Recently, a \$1.9 million streetscape project was completed in the district after many years of advocacy from the community.



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Main Street® Downtown Assessment Services and Recommendations

A Downtown Assessment is conducted by a Main Street® Specialist trained in the Main Street Four Point Approach® and experienced in delivering Main Street® Downtown Assessments. NAR staff can provide you with the name of a Main Street® Specialist.

The Downtown Assessment services are usually conducted in a three-step process:

1. Review of Background Materials and Pre-Visit Discussions

The Main Street® Specialist will request information on the community's issues and challenges as well as data relative to business and property conditions within the downtown commercial district so that the information can be reviewed before an on-site visit. The Specialist will lead pre-visit discussions, via conference calls and emails, to discuss the issues, gather information and set the agenda for the on-site visit.

2. On-site Visit

The Main Street® Specialist will conduct a two-day on-site visit to the community that can include the following:

- Tour of the downtown commercial district and the surrounding environs.
- Meetings with a broad range of constituents from both the public and private sectors.
- Confidential interviews with key stakeholders.
- A short verbal report of findings at the close of the visit to the project coordinator and members of the stakeholder core group.

3. Comprehensive Report

Within six (6) weeks following the on-site visit, a written report (of approximately 20-30 pages) based on examination of the background materials, meetings and interviews, tour findings, and on-site evaluation of the downtown commercial district will be produced. The report can include the following:

- Analysis of the downtown commercial district's strengths and weaknesses and the issues affecting the revitalization of the community's downtown district.
- Evaluation of methods for enhancing any existing revitalization efforts.
- Recommendations to expand organizational capacity so that downtown revitalization projects and activities can be managed and produce successful outcomes.
- Recommendations for strategies that are responsive to the challenges confronting the district.
- Action plan that serves as a blueprint for revitalization activities and outlines strategies for addressing issues and challenges.

Recommendations in the report can address a variety of activities to implement to produce outcomes:

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► Encourage Business Development

- Develop economic development strategies that would assist existing businesses, encourage entrepreneurial development and attract new businesses that are responsive to the needs of the local community and to new markets that may be available.
- Identify business development opportunities that are responsive to local community residents as well as visitors, and that better serve the needs of any major employers in the region.
- Identify programs and incentives to strengthen and expand existing businesses and aid in the recruitment of new businesses.

► Expand Property Development

- Implement design improvements for commercial buildings and enhancements to downtown's public spaces to encourage property and business development to attract more customers to the downtown district by creating a physically attractive environment.
- Identify mixed-use opportunities and adaptive re-use potential in vacant or underutilized buildings.
- Recognize housing potential in the downtown district (i.e., upper story residential redevelopment).
- Remove barriers to property development and increase incentives for responsible property development.
- Define physical improvements to commercial buildings and enhancements to a downtown's public spaces that encourage property/business development and attract more customers to the downtown district.

► Market the District

- A marketing plan that would promote a positive image of the community; increase promotional activities within the downtown district; and provide community-focused events that appeal to the community's diverse population.
- Devise a marketing plan that changes negative perceptions and accentuates the positive aspects of the downtown district.
- Increase social/cultural/entertainment venues and activities downtown to attract a broad and diverse constituency, particularly focusing on ways to bring new markets into the downtown district.

► Increase Organizational Capacity

- Detail best practices and resources to encourage participation in volunteer downtown revitalization efforts.
- Facilitate a broad consensus of key stakeholders, residents, developers, employees, town officials and institutional partners on future development priorities and strategies that will provide input to the town's comprehensive plan, as well as specific project plans.

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Preparing for the Downtown Assessment

A local Project Coordinator and members of a Stakeholder Core Group will organize, manage, and coordinate the activities in preparation for, and as part of, the Main Street® Specialist's on-site visit. The Core Group can then work together, and with other partners, to implement the recommendations in the report.

Here are some of the steps to undertake to prepare for the Downtown Assessment and on-site visit.



- ▶ Appoint a Project Coordinator. The Main Street® Specialist's main point of contact will be with the individual who has been designated as the project coordinator. The person selected will coordinate all the planning and activities associated with the Downtown Assessment. This person can be someone from the REALTOR® Association, City or a community organization.
- ▶ Select and invite downtown stakeholders to form the Stakeholder Core Group. Members could include the REALTOR® Association executive director and/or leadership; someone from a community organization active in the community, a representative from the local chamber of commerce and/or a downtown business association, a representative from the city government, key downtown business/property owners, individuals who are involved in beautification/historic preservation activities, and residents.
 - Members of the Stakeholder Core Group will participate in the tour and will meet with the Main Street® Specialist the first day to get the group's input on the issues affecting downtown revitalization that they would like to have addressed.
 - Note: having someone from the City (mayor, council or staff person) on the Stakeholder Core Group is required if the Downtown Assessment is funded by NAR.
- ▶ Define present conditions, issues, challenges, and opportunities that exist within the downtown district, and any revitalization efforts underway to date, to discuss with the Main Street® Specialist before the on-site visit.
- ▶ Gather information for the Main Street® Specialist to review prior to the visit. Some of the information that will be requested includes:
 - Information on the largest employers in the region
 - Design studies
 - Recent market/demographic/feasibility studies
 - Downtown improvement planning studies
 - Relevant sections of downtown zoning ordinances and building codes
 - Downtown maps showing building outlines, store locations and parking locations
 - Community map (noting location of nearby commercial centers and other significant features)
 - List of downtown businesses and brief description of each
 - List of downtown promotions

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- ▶ Develop the agenda for the on-site visit with the Main Street® Specialist.
(See *Sample Agenda* on following page.)
- ▶ Determine the area to tour the first day of the on-site visit.
- ▶ Secure a facility for the meetings and interviews.
 - The facility needs to provide enough space for meetings with the Stakeholder Core Group and key constituent groups, and interviews with individuals
 - Get sponsors to provide food and beverages if applicable
 - Arrange for supplies and materials needed by the Main Street® Specialist (i.e. white board/flip chart, markers, maps, etc.)
- ▶ Contact individual and organizations for interviews and set up times. Some of the individuals and groups that the Main Street® Specialist will want to talk with may include:
 - Town mayor and councilpersons
 - Key merchants, other business owners
 - Downtown business association leadership
 - Chamber executive/tourism director
 - Major property owner(s)
 - Major banker(s)
 - Community development director/ other integral town staff
 - Historical society/preservation group members
 - REALTORS®
 - Arts and cultural organizational representatives
 - Design review commission
 - Civic/community organizations
 - Religious institutions
 - Educational institutions
 - Major institutional/corporate/ industrial employers
 - Media representatives (management – not sales staff)
 - Developers
 - Community residents
- ▶ Arrange logistics for the Main Street® Specialist: transportation to community and to/from airport/train station; transportation to/from hotel, meetings and interviews; hotel accommodations.
- ▶ Market and promote the Downtown Assessment and on-site visit.
- ▶ Disseminate the findings of the report. This may involve presenting the report to the Stakeholder Core Group and discussing how to get the word out to the media and community.
- ▶ Determine a strategy to implement the recommendations in the report.

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Main Street® Downtown Assessment Sample Agenda

► **DAY ONE:** Tour of the downtown and area.

Meet with the Project Coordinator and Stakeholder Core Group.



2:00 p.m.	Main Street® Specialist arrives and meets with Project Coordinator and Stakeholder Core Group leaders.
2:15-5:15 p.m.	Guided walking tour of downtown district with stops in downtown businesses, at recently completed/proposed development projects, and to any sites in the downtown that are of significance to the revitalization of the district. A driving tour of the environs will also be conducted to include residential neighborhoods and nearby commercial centers/industrial sites.
6:00-7:30 p.m.	Meeting with Stakeholder Core Group to get the group's input on the issues affecting downtown revitalization that they would like to have addressed.

► **DAY TWO:** Meetings with stakeholder representatives/organizations such as, but not limited to, the ones noted below.

8:30-9:30 a.m.	Meeting with downtown business owners.
10:00-10:45 a.m.	Meeting with commercial property owners/developers/REALTORS®.
11:00-12:00 p.m.	Meeting with representatives of major corporations/manufacturing companies that employ community residents.
12:15-2:00 p.m.	Luncheon meeting with Town, County, Regional elected officials.
2:00-2:45 p.m.	Meeting with Town, County, Regional governmental staff.
3:00-4:00 p.m.	Meeting with representatives of educational institutions in the community.
4:15-5:15 p.m.	Meeting with representatives of civic, community, art/cultural organizations.
6:00-6:45 p.m.	Meeting with residents particularly with those who live in neighborhoods that adjoin the downtown commercial district.

► **DAY THREE**

9:00-1:00 p.m.	Main Street® Specialist reviews issues and formulates findings.
1:00-2:00 p.m.	Wrap-up meeting with Stakeholder Core Group to report out key findings.
2:30 p.m.	Main Street® Specialist departs community.