

Downtown Project Executive Summary:

The attached report is the result of a summer intern's work to evaluate existing local efforts and identify needs for further work to support Maine's downtowns. Her report gives detailed findings and recommendations, based on eight case study towns: Bath, Damariscotta, Lewiston/Auburn, Lincoln, Norway, Rockland, Saco and Skowhegan. There are many ideas included in the report, but they do not represent policy positions of the State Planning Office, but rather, are ideas intended to stimulate discussion. Alison Worster, an intern employed at the State Planning Office, conducted this study. We owe her many thanks for her diligence and thoughtful work.

Key Findings:

1. Only two state programs focus on downtown revitalization: The Main St. Maine Program provides a technical assistance model for local downtown revitalization; and the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program provides planning and infrastructure grants, façade improvement grants, micro-loan program funds, public facilities grants, and business assistance grants. Some towns have created their own downtown revitalization programs, without state assistance.

2. Strong local leadership and public-private collaboration are the key ingredients for successful downtown revitalization efforts. The need for strong local leadership and involvement of local merchants cannot be emphasized enough. Successful downtown revitalization efforts have both. The Main St. program focuses on leveraging these elements. Additional leadership training would be beneficial to towns who seek to improve their downtown areas.

3. In order to revitalize Maine downtowns, both technical assistance and public infrastructure funding is needed. Upgrading public infrastructure such as lighting, landscaping, roads and parking can draw private investment into downtowns. Hands on technical assistance can help towns secure grant funds, develop promotional events, create traffic and excitement and work to attract new business to their downtowns. Both technical assistance and public infrastructure are essential for revitalizing Maine downtowns.

4. If more towns are to be served or new services added to the Main St. program, new funding will be needed. Main St. Maine is a copyrighted program offered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and administered by the Maine Development Foundation. Currently, nine towns participate in this program. As many as 20 other towns are on a waiting list to join. Additional funding is needed if this program is to be expanded.

5. There is an unmet need for technical assistance to help smaller towns. A program that assists smaller towns to get organized, apply for grants and make decisions about how to improve their downtowns is needed. These towns are either too small to meet the requirements of the Main St. program or don't wish to participate in it. The Maine Downtown Center and the Maine Development Foundation are interested in creating a program to meet this need, if funding can be found to support such an effort. DECD has recently provided CDBG funds to be used for this purpose, but whether the funding is enough to provide the outreach and hands-on assistance that these towns need remains to be seen.

6. A architect and a grant writer would make an enormous difference to towns seeking to revitalize their downtowns. Funding a staff or consulting grant writer and an architect who could serve towns on an as-needed basis would help towns leverage additional funding and generate additional rehab activity across the state. While CDBG applications are user friendly, federal and foundation grants require professional skills to be put together in a way that can compete for funds.

7. The Quality of Place Council should make sure funding for downtowns is included if they make a funding proposal. State funding for downtown revitalization would open the door to additional federal and private investment. Three programs now fund downtown revitalization:

1. The Riverfront Community Development Bond, which funds river restoration and riverfront projects
2. The New Century Community Program, which funds cultural programs and preservation of the historic and cultural built environment
3. The Municipal Investment Trust Fund which funds public infrastructure such as lighting, sidewalks, pocket parks, and parking,

The Council should consider funding existing programs in its funding proposal.

8. A strong advocacy effort to support downtowns is needed. In order to secure federal, state and philanthropic resources, a broad coalition of support is needed. Cultural agencies, developers, municipal governments, downtown merchants, chambers of commerce and volunteers could work together to identify and advocate for funds, and to make regulatory changes to support downtowns. The success of the new historic tax credit and building codes legislation shows that coalition building and hard work can pay off. The fledgling Downtown Coalition is working to build momentum and should consider a broad agenda that includes both funding and regulatory measures that will support downtowns.

On the whole, Maine's downtowns are doing better now than they were ten and twenty years ago. However, there are still empty storefronts and dilapidated buildings in many places that need attention. Increased public support of downtowns would sustain Maine's Quality of Place, and leverage business and philanthropic investment in Maine's downtowns.