

Downtown Marketing and Development

Organizational Relationships

Many times downtown Main Street Boards delegate some of the nuts and bolts of the revitalization to committees. Committees could include economic development, design, and promotion. Some Main Street Boards are creative and have an inter-group committee to interact with other agencies. Committees are where the work gets done and the community input is secured.

In addition to the Main Street Board in many cases there is a merchant's organization, a Chamber of Commerce and an Economic Development Organization that operate in the same town. Some of these groups are membership organizations and, in the past, were forced to become regional to become sustainable. There are times where the groups come in conflict over turf and mission. For the most part, towns I have worked in the organizational relationships have been harmonious. It is always important that the revitalization committee establish a "target area" with geographic boundaries that are easily distinguishable and let everyone know that they exist.

The Main Street Board normally represents a broad spectrum of the town. Members from the ancillary groups are sometimes appointed to represent their organization on the board. I do not think that is the right approach because it puts the employee "Main Street Manager" in a difficult position. People should be appointed because of their love of the town or desire to see it prosper, not because they represent an organization. I find that, especially in small towns, it is not hard to find cross representation when you check at the final count because in most cases it is all the same people.

Start up revitalization committees also should avoid putting other agencies staff on the Main Street board because these staff people are the manager's peers, people they have to work with everyday. There have been many occasions when I heard from Main Street Managers that the member of an organization is problematic and there was nothing that could be done because that person was on the Main Street board. Towns should give the manager a chance to compete without having their hands tied.

The promotion committee sometimes plans general promotions while the merchant organizations will concentrate more on retail promotions. Promotions geared to bringing people to the street to buy. Main Street Committee promotions are geared more toward bringing the masses to the street and that may or may not bring in business for the merchants. In other words, a Christmas Promotion that features a Christmas Parade will bring many people into a town. Whether they spend money in the stores while they attend the parade festivities remains to be seen. Creating the fine line between general town promotions and sales promotions is often difficult to define and often harder to explain to the merchants. "How does that help me?" is a common response from the business people when you ask them to participate through taking out an ad or having a small reception in their store.

Design committees are equally difficult to integrate into the flow of existing structure of the town. In many cases the town will have a Historical Architectural Review Board

(HARB) that may or may not have the same ideas as the design committee. Main Street projects normally have some façade incentive grants that they can give to store or business owners to fix up their buildings or put up a new sign. What is acceptable to the committee may not be acceptable to the HARB. This should be avoided at all costs. Picture this, a storeowner wants to put up a new sign and he gets the okay from the design committee and then proceeds to HARB. HARB does not like the sign and sends them tells them to come back with a better design. The storeowner is now trapped in a time warp while he waits to meet with the committee who then will revise and have the owner go back to the HARB...30, 60, 90 days before the sign is erected. The best thing to do is have the HARB be the design committee because it is less cumbersome and does not give the impression that good design is hard to achieve.

Main Street Programs often are started in communities that have ongoing economic development activities. In the case of rural communities many of the economic development agencies are countywide agencies and may or may not care about the revitalization effort. There even may be a different vision for the town. It is best to meet with the economic development agency early on in the process and articulate what the vision and the goals are for the Main Street program. It is also wise to keep the economic development people privy to your development activities because they may have funding for a project that you have on the drawing board.

All of these committees and agencies demand a lot of levels of coordination and programmatic integration. Sometimes there are differences of opinion and the Main Street Manager needs to manage conflict as it emerges. No one wants conflict with the merchant organization, the Chamber of Commerce or the local economic development agency, but it happens. When it happens the Main Street Manager may not know how the board will treat it, based on the composition of the board. There are times that, if the main street manager is hired from out of town, the existing relationships with people board members know and trust may outweigh the loyalty to the board.

Conflict is a part of the business in Main Street development. When you implement change you step on people's toes or, worse yet, move forward with a plan that will garner institutional resistance. That is what makes it so hard to revitalize, there are many moving pieces that may want different and conflicting things. If you compromise on everything you may never accomplish anything. If you challenge consistently you may lose your job.

I have found the best way to work is to keep everyone informed, incorporate ideas and derive consensus. Streamlining the processes could make the process more user friendly and easy to understand, even when it is not. Through this method you will either eliminate conflict or draw it to you. At that point you will need to make a decision concerning the importance of the issue and whether you are willing to compromise to make it work.

I feel that people sometimes believe I have too much conflict in the way I conduct myself. I believe in the system of planning, executing the plan and then evaluating the plan. I also like to stick to the plan once the plan is properly vetted and consensus is determined. Sticking to the plan is where the conflict happens. In some cases someone

from another agency did not take time to participate in the planning process or did not care until it affected them institutionally and those actions result in conflict. Depending upon the how “strong” the respective staff people or boards are conflict could reach the point where it becomes public. Public conflict is really not good for anyone, but sometimes it does bring the issue to a resolve one way or the other because no one likes a war of words. If the Main Street Manager is always in conflict he or she will lose their job because their job is to bring consensus not conflict.

Many of you read about me being in perpetual conflict here in Phoenixville. It is just a perception because I am actually deriving consensus and sometimes that gets noisy.