Preservation as the Movement of Yes
The Four Point Refresh: Improving on Main Street’s Successful Model

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The Main Street approach has been a successful model for commercial district revitalization since its beginnings more than 30 years ago. Initially launched in 1977 as a three-year demonstration project by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Main Street initiative sought to explain why so many downtowns were dying—identify the factors affecting downtowns’ health—and to develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy to save historic commercial buildings. After the project’s success, the National Main Street Center (NMSC) was established in 1980 to share the newly created preservation-based revitalization framework throughout the nation. Since then, the center has become an independent subsidiary of the National Trust and continues to thrive. It now leads a network of more than 1,100 Main Street communities and affiliates practicing revitalization at the local level and 45 state-, county- and city-level Coordinating Programs that oversee and provide technical services to those communities. The strength and success of this network is clear: since the program’s beginnings, more than $61 billion has been reinvested into Main Street communities, 120,510 new businesses have opened, and 251,838 buildings have been rehabilitated.

Indeed, what sets the Main Street approach apart from other revitalization efforts is the powerful network: the unique combination of grassroots dedication to comprehensively improving quality of life at the local level; the integral support and expertise provided by Coordinating Programs at the city, county and state levels; and the leadership and direction from the NMSC. By being so responsive to and supportive of local communities for so many years, the Main Street program may be one of the best examples of preservation as a “Movement of Yes.” Changes are now underway to make the program even more effective and accessible.
THE FOUR POINT APPROACH
From the start, the Four Point Approach has provided the framework for this work, serving to organize the activities of Main Street programs and shape the way they help communities tackle their most challenging revitalization and historic preservation needs. The four main areas of work are Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Vitality (formerly called Economic Restructuring).

- **Organization** provides structure to the initiative and establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in the commercial district.
- **Promotion** focuses on creating a positive image, and building excitement for the community.
- **Design** aims to get Main Street into top physical shape and create a safe, inviting environment for shoppers, workers and visitors while preserving a place’s historic character.
- **Economic Vitality** strengthens the community’s existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base.

Taken together, these four points complement each other, helping Main Street programs leverage local assets and build a sustainable community revitalization effort.

CHANGING TIMES, BASIC PRINCIPLES
The community development field has changed dramatically over the past three-and-a-half decades. The challenges that must be addressed in downtowns today include meeting demand for affordable housing, promoting transit-oriented development, adapting to climate change, responding to competition from online retailing, and more. Additionally, the demographic make-up of communities is changing. Today, millennials and baby boomers are overwhelmingly choosing to live in urban areas, especially those with vibrant, traditional downtowns, rather than in exurbia.

Some of these challenges and changes call for new planning approaches. Yet, in many ways, new trends in planning, development
and preservation continue to build off principles that those in the Main Street network have long understood: that revitalization must be inclusive and representative of the community, that a place’s distinctive characteristics and historic buildings are its greatest assets, and that fostering a strong local-business environment creates enormous rewards.

**FOUR POINT REFRESH TASK FORCE**

To ensure the continued success of the Main Street model in revitalizing older and historic business districts, the NMSC’s board of directors appointed a Four Point Refresh Task Force to oversee the renewal of the center’s signature revitalization framework. The task force is being led by Main Street veteran and NMSC board member Mary Thompson and is working with community revitalization experts Kennedy Smith and Josh Bloom of the **Community Land Use and Economics (CLUE) Group** and in partnership with the network of Main Street Coordinating Programs. The purpose of the Four Point Refresh is to obtain a clear picture of the most common challenges facing older and historic downtowns and business districts, how different audiences use and perceive the Four Point Approach, and how this approach should evolve to better meet the needs of the Main Street network and the revitalization field.

The Refresh research found that the Four Point Approach remains strong and relevant. However, while the Four Points are meant to serve as a set of guidelines or framework leading to the ultimate goal of community revitalization, the nature of the Four Point Approach encourages users to be overly concerned with the process itself, sometimes at the expense of developing a long-term vision and strategic focus on outcomes. Additionally, many Main Street programs tend to devote too much time and effort to those components of the Main Street approach with which they may feel most comfortable and on which they can have the most visible impact in a short period of time—most often, Design and Promotion. As a result, many programs report that they struggle to be recognized as serious revitalization organizations and reach key revitalization benchmarks.

The task force also received feedback from surveys and focus groups that many organizations and communities outside of the
Main Street network are interested in the Main Street approach but see it as being “not for them.” Some perceive the Main Street program as being too rigid, requiring a very specific kind of organizational model that does not fit their existing structure. Others have the misconception that Main Street is only for small towns.

**THE REFRESHED FOUR POINTS**

Based on feedback, and with direction from the Four Point Refresh Task Force, the NMSC will focus its efforts on implementing an updated framework, with the goal of making the Main Street approach work better for those already using it, and more accessible for those not yet involved. This is not a dramatic rewrite of the principles that have worked well for so many Main Street practitioners over the years but a renewed focus on holistic transformation and rigorous outcome measurement.

As has been the case in the past, Main Street programs will be encouraged to engage a wide range of local stakeholders in developing a vision of success for their downtown or neighborhood commercial districts. Main Street communities will then be urged to develop cross-cutting “Community Transformation Strategies” that are connected to meaningful, long-term change. Progress will be measured in a variety of ways, including through economic metrics and qualitative assessment. Under the refreshed Main Street model, Community Transformation Strategies will become the focus of a Main Street program’s work. After community visioning processes and upfront assessments of local needs, the Main Street program or host organization will commit to two or three transformation strategies and organize its work around those strategies (as opposed to organizing people, funding and time around the Four Points). These strategies will be rooted in a thorough understanding of the district’s existing assets and economic potential. This will require a shift in focus for many communities (though some, we understand, are already operating this way), as well as in the way coordinators and the center conduct training and assessments.
For example, if a Main Street program decides that enabling local residents to “age in place” is a critical element of its community vision, the organization would develop a series of Community Transformation Strategies to promote that goal. A short-term strategy could be to implement a special senior discount at cooperating businesses. A longer-term strategy could be to partner with other advocacy groups and the department of transportation to encourage transit-oriented development in the district. Implementation of these strategies would be carried out through work that aligns with the Four Points.

In fact, the Four Points remain critical to the Main Street approach. The most significant changes to the Four Points themselves will be in the form of a more flexible leadership structure. Instead of organizing people, funding and time around the Four Points, committees, groups of volunteers or ad hoc work groups may be formed to engage the community around the Community Transformation Strategies. We believe this evolution is imperative, as the way people organize themselves has changed significantly in recent years, and the Main Street approach must reflect this reality. Communities are welcome to maintain their four-committee structures if that is their preference. However, the center will no longer advise this as a best practice, as this model can result in the silo-ing of revitalization activities, potentially impeding community progress.

Additionally, the NMSC will introduce updated names for the Four Points. In particular, we heard again and again that “Economic Restructuring” is a term with little resonance outside of the Main Street network, and is often confusing even for those working in a Main Street program. Yet Economic Restructuring has always implied more than traditional “economic development.” Going forward, the term “Economic Vitality” will replace “Economic Restructuring,” and we think it will help demystify this point and speak to the great economic development and entrepreneurship opportunities on Main Street.

**WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?**

In many ways, the Four Points have evolved organically over time; some communities report that they are already using a more
flexibly structured, outcome-based approach to the Four Points. Still, making significant changes to what is already a hugely successful approach will take time and great care. Thanks to generous support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, we are launching several demonstration projects over the next 12 months to refine our proposed improvements to the Four Points. These demonstration projects, announced earlier this fall, will be in the following Knight Cities: Biloxi, Mississippi; Detroit; Gary, Indiana; Lexington, Kentucky; Miami; Milledgeville, Georgia; and Philadelphia. Additionally, the center is partnering with the Colorado Main Street program to pilot the new approach in three of its highest-performing towns: Brush, Lake City and Steamboat Springs.

Throughout the implementation of the demonstration projects, we will provide updates on key findings from the participating communities through social media and Main Street Weekly.

Going forward, these changes will exemplify what it means for preservation to be a “Movement of Yes.” The refreshed Main Street Approach will provide Main Street communities with an enhanced set of tools with which to do their work, helping them generate increased economic impact while preserving the historic structures and community character that make their districts special. FJ

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FOUR POINT REFRESH TASK FORCE
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**TAKEAWAY**
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