

NC MAIN STREET PROGRAM OVERVIEW



North Carolina
MAIN STREET



**NC DEPARTMENT
of COMMERCE**
RURAL ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT

NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center
ncmainstreetandplanning.com

⇒ The Main Street Program

August 2025

“Main Street is economic development within the context of historic preservation.”

Main Street America, founded in 1980 as the National Main Street Center (NMSC), a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, developed the Main Street Approach™, which offers community-based revitalization initiatives with a practical, adaptable framework for downtown transformation that is easily tailored to local conditions. **Main Street is economic development within the context of historic preservation.** The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center (MS&RP Center) is licensed by Main Street America and charged by the North Carolina Department of Commerce to administer the Main Street program throughout the state.

⇒ The Main Street Approach

The Main Street Approach is centered around **Economic Development Strategies** that are transformational for downtown. An economic development strategy articulates a focused, deliberate path to revitalizing or strengthening a downtown or commercial district's economy. Each strategy is implemented through activities in the four broad areas of work represented by the **Main Street Four Points: Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization.**



EV

ECONOMIC VITALITY focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies. Economic Vitality in the Main Street Approach™ is about building a strong economic foundation by nurturing local businesses, attracting new investment, and ensuring long-term sustainability and program participation. **There are six basic areas of focus for Economic Vitality:**

1. *Economic Assets and Market Understanding*

- Conduct market analysis.
- Identify existing assets, including natural and cultural assets, businesses, workforce, property, and institutions.
- Recognize and leverage the district's competitive advantages.

2. *Business Retention, Expansion, and Recruitment*

- Support and strengthen existing businesses.
- Encourage business expansion and attract new, complementary enterprises.
- Fill vacant or underused properties with economically productive uses.

3. *Varied and Sustainable Economic Strategies*

- Encourage a mix of retail, service, dining, professional, governmental, small-scale manufacturing, cultural, and residential uses.
- Promote economic accessibility to support all entrepreneurs.
- Foster innovation and flexible strategies that adapt to changing market conditions.

4. *Property Development and Investment*

- Support the redevelopment or adaptive reuse of historic and underutilized properties.
- Encourage investment in physical improvements that enhance commercial activity.
- Leverage public and private funding to support revitalization.
- Support small-scale developers and property owners through access to resources, training, and mentorship.
- Promote investment opportunities to advance vision-aligned economic growth in the district.

5. *Entrepreneurship and Workforce Development*

- Support local entrepreneurs and start-ups through access to resources, training, and mentorship.
- Partner with educational institutions and workforce programs to align job training with business needs.

6. *Strategic Planning and Measurement*

- Develop a consensus-based vision to serve as the foundation for the Main Street strategic plan.
- Identify and pursue economic development strategies grounded in data and community input that will transform downtown.
- Measure progress through statistical data and adjust approaches as needed.

D

DESIGN supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the commercial district apart. Design emphasizes historic preservation and people-centered design to create an inviting and functional downtown district. Design in the Main Street America Approach™ is about creating a beautiful, functional, and authentic environment that honors the district's heritage, enhances the user experience, and supports vibrant economic and social activity. **There are seven basic areas of focus for Design:**

1. *Historic Preservation and Rehabilitation*

- Preserve and rehabilitate historic buildings to maintain architectural integrity and community heritage.
- Encourage adaptive reuse of historic structures for mixed-use development.
- Provide guidance and incentives for property owners to undertake appropriate rehabilitation and maintenance of buildings in keeping with the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties](#).

2. *Streetscape and Public Space Improvements*

- Improve sidewalks, lighting, signage, landscaping, crosswalks, urban trails, and street furniture to create a safe, attractive, and walkable environment.
- Activate public spaces through art, seating, shade, and programming to encourage pedestrian activity, social interaction, and enhanced civic pride.
- Promote environmentally sustainable design practices.

3. *Façade Improvements*

- Support property and business owners in enhancing storefronts, in keeping with the architecture of each building, to be more inviting and consistent with the historic character of the district.
- Implement design guidelines to ensure cohesive and historically appropriate aesthetics.
- Use tools like façade grant programs to encourage investment in visual improvements.

4. *Wayfinding and Signage*

- Develop a clear, consistent system of pedestrian and vehicular wayfinding signs to help visitors navigate the district.
- Encourage creative and appropriately scaled signage for businesses that contributes to the overall character of the streetscape.

5. *Design Education and Technical Assistance*

- Communicate the value of good design and historic preservation.
- Offer design assistance to business and property owners for renovations, signage, and building improvements.

6. *Downtown Maintenance*

- Ensure that the district is clean, well-lit, and regularly maintained.
- Address issues like graffiti, trash, or deferred building maintenance that detract from the district's appeal.

7. *Placemaking and Identity Building*

- Use design to reinforce a sense of place and highlight the unique identity of the district.
- Incorporate local art, culture, and storytelling into the built environment.

P

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, history, culture, and defining features. Promotion in the Main Street Approach™ is about creating a strong and positive image of the district that builds pride, drives economic activity, and keeps people coming back. It is storytelling with purpose - connecting people to place through branding, events, and strategic marketing. **There are seven basic areas of focus for Promotion:**

1. **Brand Development and Identity**

- Create and communicate a clear, consistent brand that reflects the district's unique history, culture, and character.
- Use branding to differentiate the district from others and to build a strong emotional connection with target audiences.
- Ensure visual consistency in all marketing materials, signage, and digital presence.

2. **Marketing and Advertising**

- Develop strategic, vision-focused marketing campaigns to promote the district, its events, and its assets.
- Use a variety of traditional and nontraditional media to reach local and regional audiences.
- Highlight unique offerings, such as independent retailers, culinary variety, events, and historic attractions.

3. **Special Events and Festivals**

- Plan and execute authentic, asset-based community heritage, special holiday, and social events that draw people into the district.
- Build and foster strategic partnerships to enhance events and festivals coordinated by the Main Street Organization and its community partners.

4. **Retail Promotions and Business Support**

- Coordinate cooperative, cross, and niche promotional events.
- Support business owners with marketing ideas and collaborative campaigns that benefit multiple merchants.

5. **Storytelling and Community Engagement**

- Tell the story of the district, its history, people, and progress, through traditional and nontraditional means of communication with a positive, professional, and unified brand voice.
- Engage residents and stakeholders as ambassadors for the district's image and identity.
- Celebrate community milestones and highlight local success stories.

6. **Partnership Building**

- Collaborate with local businesses, tourism agencies, arts organizations, and media outlets to expand promotional reach.
- Leverage partnerships to pool resources and amplify the district's message and vision.

7. **Evaluation and Strategy**

- Track promotions through metrics like event attendance, business sales, foot traffic, social media engagement, and increased interest in business opportunities within the district.
- Adjust strategies based on feedback and outcomes to continually improve promotional effectiveness.

⇒ The Main Street Four Points: Organization

O

ORGANIZATION involves creating a strong foundation for a revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district. Organization in the Main Street Approach™ is about developing a well-managed, community-driven, and financially sustainable Main Street Program. **There are seven basic areas of focus for Organization:**

1. Strategic Planning and Performance Measurement

- Create and regularly update an asset-based strategic economic development plan aligned with community goals, a consensus-based vision, and the Main Street Approach™.
- Use data and performance metrics to track progress, evaluate impact, make informed decisions, and communicate results to stakeholders to build confidence and support.

2. Leadership and Governance

- Develop a strong organizational structure (quasi-public-private partnership, city department, or non-profit), with clearly defined roles.
- Recruit an engaged and committed board of directors or advisory committee that provides strategic direction, expertise, and oversight.
- Foster transparent leadership that reflects the downtown district and the broader community.

3. Volunteer Development, Management, and Engagement

- Recruit, train, and retain volunteers to support all aspects of the Main Street effort.
- Create meaningful, results-based roles and opportunities for community members to contribute time, skills, and passion for the work.
- Recognize and celebrate volunteer contributions to build commitment and ownership to the program.

4. Community Involvement and Stakeholder Engagement

- Build broad-based community support by engaging residents, business owners, property owners, civic groups, and institutions of varying backgrounds and skillsets.
- Facilitate communication and transparency, ensuring stakeholders feel informed and involved in revitalization efforts.
- Use community input to shape priorities and strategies, to foster a shared vision for downtown.

5. Financial Management

- Develop a varied funding base, including tax districts, public funding, grants, sponsorships, donations, membership programs, and earned income.
- Practice sound financial management, with clear budgeting, reporting, and accountability.
- Ensure financial sustainability for long-term programming and operations.

6. Branding and Communication

- Promote the Main Street organization as a trusted and professional leader in economic development and downtown revitalization.
- Use consistent and professional messaging to build credibility and awareness of the Main Street program's mission, goals, and achievements as an economic development organization.

7. Partnership and Collaboration

- Build strong partnerships with local, state, and federal government, chambers of commerce, schools, nonprofits, and regional planning entities.
- Leverage partnerships to align efforts, share resources, and amplify the impact of revitalization work.

⇒ Main Street's Eight Guiding Principles

Eight guiding principles have emerged as equally critical as the Four Points to Main Street's success. Main Street is:

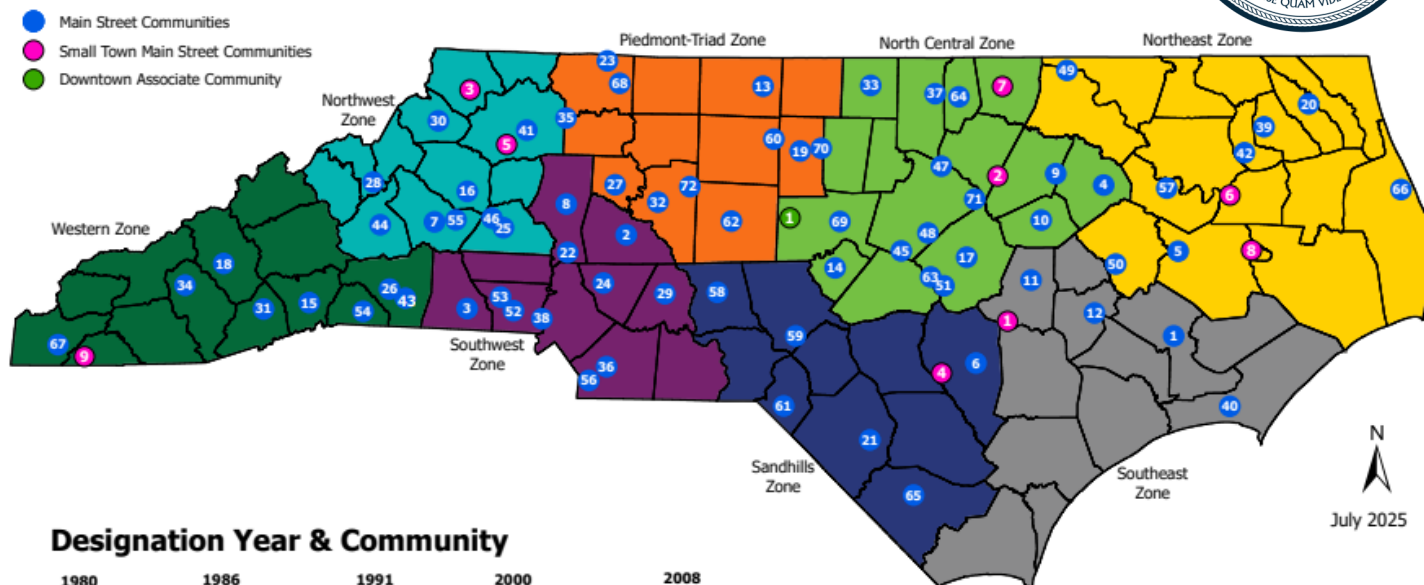
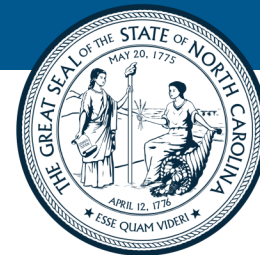
<u>Comprehensive</u>	All four points of Main Street are implemented.
<u>Incremental</u>	Successful revitalization programs begin with basic, simple activities that demonstrate that “new things are happening” in the commercial district. This incremental change leads to much longer lasting and dramatic positive change in the Main Street area.
<u>Self-Help</u>	No one else will save your Main Street. Local leaders must have the will and desire to mobilize local resources and talent.
<u>Partnerships</u>	Both the public and private sectors have a vital interest in the district and must work together to achieve the common goals of Main Street's revitalization.
<u>Asset-Based</u>	Business districts must capitalize on the assets that make them unique. Every district has unique qualities like distinctive buildings and a human scale that give people a sense of belonging.
<u>Quality</u>	Emphasize quality in every aspect of the revitalization program. This applies to all elements of the process—from storefront designs and promotional campaigns to educational programs.
<u>Change</u>	Skeptics turn into believers, and attitudes on Main Street will turn around. A carefully planned Main Street program will help shift public perceptions and practices to support and sustain the revitalization process.
<u>Implementation</u>	To succeed, Main Street must show visible results that comes from completing projects. Frequent, visible changes are a reminder that the revitalization effort is underway and succeeding. Small projects at the beginning of the program pave the way for larger ones as the revitalization effort matures.

⇒ The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center

The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center works in regions, counties, cities, towns, downtown districts, and in designated North Carolina Main Street communities to inspire placemaking through building asset-based economic development strategies that achieve measurable results, such as investment, business growth, and jobs.

Three downtown revitalization programs are offered through the MS&RP Center: the Main Street program, which began in 1980; the Small Town Main Street program, which began in 2003; and the Downtown Associate Community program, which began in 2015 and serves as a stepping-stone for Main Street designation. There are 82 communities in these three programs, all following the Main Street America program.

⇒ North Carolina Main Street & Small Town Main Street Communities



Designation Year & Community

1980	1986	1991	2000	2008	2015	2018	2023
1 New Bern	15 Hendersonville	27 Mocksville	38 Belmont	3 West Jefferson	50 Ayden (STMS 2006-2015)	60 Elon	70 Mebane
2 Salisbury	16 Lenoir	28 Spruce Pine	39 Hertford	4 Roseboro	51 Benson (STMS 2008-2015)	61 Laurinburg	71 Zebulon
3 Shelby	17 Smithfield	1993	40 Morehead City	2009	52 Bessemer City (STMS 2011-2015)	2020	2025
4 Tarboro	18 Waynesville	29 Albemarle	41 North Wilkesboro	48 Garner	53 Cherryville (STMS 2012-2015)	62 Asheboro	72 Thomasville
5 Washington	19 Burlington	30 Boone	2003	49 Roanoke Rapids	54 Tryon (STMS 2007-2015)	63 Dunn	1 Siler City
1982	20 Elizabeth City	31 Brevard	42 Edenton	5 Wilkesboro	55 Valdese (STMS 2013-2015)	64 Henderson	
6 Clinton	21 Lumberton	32 Lexington	43 Forest City	2010	56 Waxhaw (STMS 2009-2015)	2021	
7 Morganton	22 Mooresville	1995	44 Marion	6 Plymouth	57 Williamston (STMS 2003-2015)	65 Whiteville	
8 Statesville	23 Mount Airy	33 Roxboro	45 Fuquay-Varina	2011	2016	2022	
9 Rocky Mount	24 Concord	34 Sylva	1 Mount Olive	7 Warrenton	58 Troy (STMS 2010-2016)	66 Manteo	
10 Wilson	1990	1998	2004	2013	2017	67 Murphy	
1984	25 Newton	35 Elkin	2 Spring Hope	8 Belhaven	59 Aberdeen	68 Pilot Mountain	
11 Goldsboro	26 Rutherfordton	36 Monroe	2006	9 Hayesville		69 Pittsboro (STMS 2011-2022)	
12 Kinston		37 Oxford	46 Hickory				
13 Reidsville			47 Wake Forest				
14 Sanford							

⇒ The Impact: NC Main Street Program Community Statistics (Fiscal Year 2024-25)

In FY 24-25, NC Main Street & Small Town Main Street communities collectively saw a large increase in full-time and part-time jobs from the previous year, and the largest number of volunteer hours in the program's history, representing a dedication from North Carolinians to invest in their communities.

\$499,463,628
PUBLIC/PRIVATE INVESTMENT

274
BUILDINGS REHABILITATED

342
FAÇADE IMPROVEMENTS


269
NET GAIN BUSINESSES


1,863
NET GAIN FTE & PTE JOBS


108,791
VOLUNTEER HOURS
Valued at \$3,591,191


⇒ Services Offered by the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center

The NC Main Street team provides services to designated Main Street communities in four broad areas:

-  **Strategic Economic Development Planning** for Downtown
 - ⇒ Asset Mapping
 - ⇒ Market Data, Demographic Profiles, and Business & User Surveys
 - ⇒ Visioning, Economic Development Strategies, Goals and Objectives
 - ⇒ Implementation Planning Including Actions, Tasks, Budgeting, and Partners

-  **Technical Assistance** for Program & Project Development
 - ⇒ Best Practices for Main Street Program Management
 - ⇒ Downtown Redevelopment Project Guidance
 - ⇒ Statewide Data & Surveys
 - ⇒ Marketing through the [Main to Main Trail](#)

-  **Training & Education** for Staff, Volunteers, Small Businesses, and Developers
 - ⇒ NC Main Street Conference
 - ⇒ Main Street Basic Best Practices and Advanced Level Training
 - ⇒ Small-Scale Development and Historic Tax Credits
 - ⇒ Destination Development and Storytelling
 - ⇒ Webinars and Publications
 - ⇒ Main Street Awards and Champions Recognition

-  **Grants** for Downtown Revitalization
 - ⇒ Rural Transformation Grant Fund
 - ⇒ Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant Program

⇒ More Information

[Main Street America](#)

[NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center | NC Commerce](#) – Official N.C. Commerce Website

[NC Main Street & Rural Planning](#) – Main Street & Rural Planning Training Website

[NC Main to Main Trail](#) – Main to Main Trail Marketing Website

[NC Main Street Program](#) – NC Main Street Facebook Page

[NC Main Street & Rural Planning 2024 Annual Report](#)

[40 Years of Main Street Impact Report – \(2020\)](#)