

## “I MISS MAYBERRY:” REVITALIZING AMERICA’S RURAL DOWNTOWNS

*Jacob R. Lofgren\**

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### I. WELCOME TO MAYBERRY

“Sometimes it feels like this world is spinning faster, [t]han it did in the old days.”<sup>1</sup> This frustrating reality opens the Rascal Flatts song, “Mayberry,” which positively reflects back on life in a small town.<sup>2</sup> In many respects, the “Mayberry” lyrics express the frustrations of this nation, as our traditional downtowns have deteriorated over the past five decades.<sup>3</sup> The same sentiment is reflected in the lyrics of James Taylor’s song, “Our Town,” which aptly states “[m]ain street isn’t main street anymore.”<sup>4</sup> Many Americans, in their own way and for their own reasons, want to preserve the opportunity to walk down a busy sidewalk and pop into one of many small boutiques, specialty stores, bakeries or coffee shops, all the while taking the time to enjoy a conversation with a neigh-

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\* J.D., Drake University School of Law, 2008.

1. RASCAL FLATTS, MAYBERRY (Lyric Street Records 2002).

2. *See id.*

3. *See, e.g.*, Kennedy Smith, *The Road Ahead*, 208 MAIN STREET NEWS 8 (2004), available at <http://mainstreet.org/MediaLibrary/June-July2004TheRoadAhead.pdf>.

4. JAMES TAYLOR, OUR TOWN (Disney Records 2006).

bor. However, with the growth of suburban, amenity-packed, quick-stop shopping, it is an experience that seems to be declining.<sup>5</sup>

The effect of the shift to discount retailers and strip malls has been especially noticeable and dramatic in rural America where downtown “main streets” used to be the crux of not only economic activity, but community interaction.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, “[m]ain [s]treets are wonderfully resilient places” that can be reinvented to accommodate any number of business enterprises, from those we traditionally expect, to more modern internet cafes and electronics shops.<sup>7</sup> When downtowns are carefully monitored, managed, and maintained, rural America can easily prevent the decay of the main street tradition and, in many cases, actually reinvigorate the areas into vibrant hotspots of activity.<sup>8</sup> In many small towns, strong revitalization programs have created increases in “[s]ales . . . , property values, occupancy rates, rents,” and – most importantly – downtown shoppers and visitors.<sup>9</sup>

This note will detail the critical importance of protecting “small town” America through downtown revitalization projects. In doing so, the note will focus on the impact of the projects on rural America and proceed as follows: (1) provide a working definition of “rural” area; (2) examine why it is critical to preserve rural downtowns; (3) introduce several of the options available to assist in the preservation of rural downtowns, including: (a) the National Main Street Center approach to downtown revitalization, (b) the funding options available through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and (c) the use of agriculture to assist in attracting visitors into rural downtowns; and (4) an outline of a variety of rural downtown revitalization success stories.

## II. IT’S ALL ABOUT “SMALL TOWNS:” RURAL AREAS & URBAN CLUSTERS

Rural areas have always been a “vital and changing part” of our nation’s landscape and economic capacities.<sup>10</sup> However, defining what exactly constitutes

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5. Lisa Hechesky, *Return to Main Street: An Assessment of the Main Street Revitalization Program 3-4* (May 2005) (unpublished M.A. thesis, Marshall University) (on file with the author).

6. See Jackie Vieh, Op-Ed., *Strong Downtown Areas Crucial to Communities*, INSIDE TUCSON BUS., Apr. 20, 1998.

7. Smith, *supra* note 3, at 8.

8. *See id.*

9. *Id.*; see generally Hechesky, *supra* note 5, at 5-6 (highlighting the National Trust pilot program and subsequent successful revitalizations).

10. ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE, USDA, AIB BULL. NO. 710, UNDERSTANDING RURAL AMERICA (1995), available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aib710>.

a rural area is far greater task than one might initially imagine given the place rural areas occupy in our national culture.<sup>11</sup> One reason for this difficulty is that:

[p]eople know when they are rural, but such perception does not satisfy demographers, policymakers, or educational researchers. After all, difficult policy decisions have to be made and resources have to be allocated on some quantifiable basis. Numbers, however, miss the essence of what it means to be rural, and seldom satisfy those on the receiving end of the definition.<sup>12</sup>

The USDA reinforces this by stating, “[m]any people have definitions for the term rural, but seldom are these rural definitions in agreement. For some, rural is a subjective state of mind. For others, rural is an objective quantitative measure.”<sup>13</sup>

The subjective element noted by the USDA is an essential factor to remember when quantitatively defining “rural area.” Rural areas can often be better measured in the subjective terms described above; and, while empirical data does provide firm ground from which to build an initial understanding of what constitutes a rural area, it should not create an inflexible boundary on the understanding of what is “rural.”<sup>14</sup>

In creating a quantifiable measurement, the USDA points to a number of sources that identify a particular empirical definition of rural.<sup>15</sup> One of the sources is the United States General Accounting Office (GAO), which focuses primarily on first defining metro/urban areas, which then, by exclusion, creates a category of nonmetro/rural areas.<sup>16</sup> Building on this approach, the U.S. Census Bureau provided a somewhat clearer definition of rural areas.<sup>17</sup> The Census Bureau definition concluded that rural areas “consist[] of all territory, population,

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11. BETTY ROSE D. RIOS, ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION AND SMALL SCHOOLS, “RURAL” – A CONCEPT BEYOND DEFINITION? (1988), available at <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-929/concept.htm>.

12. *Id.*

13. USDA, NAT’L AGRIC. LIBRARY, What is Rural?, [http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/what\\_is\\_rural.htm](http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/what_is_rural.htm) (last visited July 24, 2008) [hereinafter What is Rural?].

14. See generally VALERIE DU PLESSIS, ET AL., STATISTICS CANADA, AGRIC. DIV., DEFINITIONS OF “RURAL” 30-33 (2002), available at <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/21-601-MIE/2002061/21-601-MIE2002061.pdf>. While the definitions of rural discussed were created within the Canadian context, the practical point emphasized by the authors holds true here. The authors indicate that the definition of rural can shift and change according to the purpose for which it is created and used. Therefore, whatever definition is used must be viewed within the context of the situation.

15. What is Rural?, *supra* note 13.

16. U.S. GEN. ACCOUNTING OFFICE, GAO/RCED-93-40FS, RURAL DEVELOPMENT: PROFILE OF RURAL AREAS 26 (1993), available at <http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat6/149199.pdf>.

17. U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, CENSUS 2000 URBAN AND RURAL CLASSIFICATION, [http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua\\_2k.html](http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html).

and housing units located outside of [urban areas or urban clusters].<sup>18</sup> Further, according to the Census Bureau, “rural areas comprise open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents [while] [u]rban areas comprise larger places [with a population of at least 50,000] and densely settled areas around them.”<sup>19</sup> According to data from the 2000 Census, nonmetro America comprises 2,052 counties, contains seventy-five percent of the nation’s land, and is home to seventeen percent (49.2 million) of the U.S. population.<sup>20</sup> Areas where the population is greater than 2,500 and less than 50,000 are considered “urban clusters” by the Census Bureau.<sup>21</sup> “This delineation of built-up territory around small towns and cities [was] new for the 2000 census.”<sup>22</sup> According to the 2000 census, “11 percent of the U.S. population lived in 3,158 urban clusters.”<sup>23</sup>

For the purposes of this note, rural will include not only those areas specifically considered as rural by the USDA, but also the many small towns that are currently included within the urban cluster category created for the 2000 census.<sup>24</sup> In this capacity, the term rural, as used here, will be defined not solely based on the empirical data, but also on the subjective mindset of people living within America’s many small towns and counties that thrive largely upon the nearby agricultural economy – whether farming or enterprises related to farming.<sup>25</sup>

The quaint town of Rensselaer, Indiana provides an excellent example of the type of small town community that this note will consider as rural.<sup>26</sup> With slightly over 5,000 citizens, Rensselaer “enjoys a small community atmosphere [that also] supports new growth opportunities.”<sup>27</sup> Rensselaer also serves as the seat of Jasper County, Indiana, a county where over twenty-five percent of the employment is either directly or indirectly related to the nearby agricultural

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18. *Id.*

19. USDA, ECON. RESEARCH SERV., MEASURING RURALITY: WHAT IS RURAL?, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/rurality/WhatIsRural/> (last visited July 24, 2008) [hereinafter MEASURING RURALITY].

20. *Id.*; USDA, ECON. RESEARCH SERV., MEASURING RURALITY: NEW DEFINITIONS IN 2003, <http://ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/NewDefinitions/> (last visited July 24, 2008) [hereinafter NEW DEFINITIONS].

21. MEASURING RURALITY, *supra* note 19.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *See id.*

25. *See* What is Rural?, *supra* note 13.

26. *See* City of Rensselaer, Indiana, Community Profile, <http://www.cityofrensellaer.in.com/news/profile.html> (last visited July 24, 2008) (hereinafter Community Profile).

27. *Id.*

economy.<sup>28</sup> More important for purposes of this note, however, are Rensselaer's current efforts aimed at the revitalization and reinvigoration of its historic downtown.<sup>29</sup>

### III. DISCOUNT RETAILERS AND ONE-STOP SHOPPING

#### A. *Why Preserve Downtown?*

The rapid expansion of strip malls and discount retailers over the past two decades has drastically changed the shopping experience.<sup>30</sup> People can be in and out of one "big box" store having purchased groceries, clothing, school supplies, and other essential needs in one sweep, which begs the question: why should towns and residents have any concern about the decline of the traditional downtown when it is accompanied by such an apparent increase in convenience?

There is no "one" right answer to this question and, in fact, there are many different perspectives as to why preserving rural downtowns is so critical.<sup>31</sup> One answer is that rural downtowns have a fundamental importance beyond providing shopping.<sup>32</sup> The National Main Street Center asserts, "[y]our downtown or traditional commercial district is the most visible indicator of community pride, along with its economic and social health. It is either an asset or a liability in the effort to recruit new residents, new businesses and industries, retirees, tourists, and others to your community and to keep those you already have."<sup>33</sup>

On top of its vital importance to "community pride," the downtown is essential as a representation of the community's history and development. The architecture and design of the commercial district is the most prominent expression of the town's background, beginnings, and development.<sup>34</sup> Finally, preservation and revitalization of local downtowns can provide across the board benefits to merchants, local governments, property owners, schools, and any number

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28. *Id.*; Saint Joseph's College, Rensselaer Market Analysis 2004, sec. 2.0 at 4 (May 23, 2004) (unpublished B.A. market analysis)(on file with Professor Michael J. Oakes, Saint Joseph's College), available at <http://www.saintjoe.edu/rma/>.

29. See Main Street Rensselaer, Indiana, Another Summer on its Way. . . , <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/msr/index.html> (last visited August 9, 2008).

30. Terry Lawhead, *A Comprehensive Strategy for Rural Downtowns*, 13 *ECON. DEV. REV.* 75, 75 (1995); SUZANNE G. DANE, *MAIN STREET SUCCESS STORIES 2* (National Trust for Historic Preservation 1997).

31. See generally Lawhead, *supra* note 30.

32. See, e.g., Vieh, *supra* note 16; National Main Street Center, *Why Revitalize?*, <http://mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=2000&section=16> (last visited July 24, 2008) [hereinafter *Why Revitalize?*].

33. *Why Revitalize?*, *supra* note 32; see, e.g., Vieh, *supra* note 6.

34. *Why Revitalize?*, *supra* note 32.

of other parties who rely on tax dollars or community vitality to ensure the success of their organization.<sup>35</sup> The National Main Street Center goes further to outline twelve specific reasons why main streets remain important to communities, despite the existence of large malls and discount shopping centers:

(1) Commercial districts are prominent employment centers[;] (2) The commercial district is a reflection of community[;] (3) Main Street represents a significant portion of the tax base[;] (4) The traditional commercial district is an ideal location for independent businesses[, which supports local businesses, families, and community projects, rather than sending resources out-of-town;] (5) Main Street is the historic core of the community[;] (6) A historic commercial district is often a tourist attraction[;] (7) A vital Main Street area reduces sprawl[;] (8) A healthy Main Street core protects property values[;] (9) The commercial district offers convenience; (10) The district is usually a government center; (11) Main Street provides an important civic forum, where members of the community can congregate[; and] (12) The commercial district represents a huge public and private investment.<sup>36</sup>

Rensselaer presents a perfect example of a downtown that does in fact exhibit a number of these characteristics. Among other factors, Rensselaer is the seat of the county government and features an ornate and historic courthouse serving the focal point of the downtown area.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the downtown is made up of a wide variety of privately owned small businesses, reinforcing the notion of local money staying local.<sup>38</sup>

Revitalizing rural downtowns and “main streets” also provides a number of immeasurable benefits, including: (1) creating places of innovation; (2) ensuring that a time-tested bastion of civil liberties is protected; and (3) serving as “the ultimate form of recycling.”<sup>39</sup> First, they foster innovation by allowing an opportunity for new ideas and products to flourish in reaction to the individual community.<sup>40</sup> Large chain retailers, on the other hand, have the same products with the same ingredients and the same packaging at every location.<sup>41</sup> Second, downtowns have been, and continue to be, the best place to stand on the corner and

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35. See National Main Street Center, *Who Benefits from a Revitalized Commercial District?*, <http://mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=1939> (last visited August 9, 2008).

36. National Trust Main Street Center, *Why are Main Streets Important?*, <http://mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=1927> (last visited August 9, 2008).

37. Community Profile, *supra* note 26; Indiana Courts, *Online Tour of Jasper County Courthouse*, <http://www.in.gov/judiciary/ipix/jasper/> (last visited August 9, 2008) (featuring an interactive online tour of the Jasper County Courthouse that allows the viewer to see both the courthouse and portions of the downtown area).

38. See Saint Joseph’s College, *supra* note 28, at sec. 3.0, 1.

39. Smith, *supra* note 3, at 9.

40. *Id.*

41. *Id.*

convey your message to dozens upon dozens of open ears.<sup>42</sup> With the growth of shopping centers and strip malls, this bastion of civil liberties erodes as private owners place restrictions upon citizen-shoppers: preventing them from speaking, distributing information, or conducting other similar activities.<sup>43</sup> Finally, securing new tenants for existing buildings on main street and fostering relationships with existing tenants is “the ultimate form of recycling.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than building new structures miles away along the strip, existing structures are refurbished and reused, which reduces the wasteful use of resources to build when existing structures remain vacant.<sup>45</sup> The goals described above result not only in downtown revitalization, but in some senses a rebirth of the community where they occur.<sup>46</sup> A combination of methods and ideas are available to successfully revitalize a small town main street.

#### IV. REVITALIZATION: THE NATIONAL MAIN STREET CENTER APPROACH

“The challenge in revitalizing a rural downtown is that numerous small businesses are owned by an assortment of different individuals, all of whom have different strategies for success as well as often dramatically different rates of success.”<sup>47</sup> For a successful overhaul of an entire downtown, revitalization requires creativity, flexibility, and coalition building to meld these individual ideas together to form a single cohesive plan.<sup>48</sup> For this reason, the National Trust for Historic Preservation created the Main Street Program with the goal of “develop[ing] a comprehensive revitalization strategy that would encourage economic development within the context of historic preservation.”<sup>49</sup>

The all-encompassing benefits that can result from a downtown revitalization provide just one reason why rural downtown revitalization requires the involvement of all residents and merchants through the use of the “democratic process.”<sup>50</sup> Participation of the entire community is the key to any successful

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42. *Id.*

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

45. *Id.*

46. *See id.*

47. Lawhead, *supra* note 30.

48. *Id.*

49. *Id.*

50. *See* Robert E. Chambers & Randall S. Clemons, *Leadership and Community Revitalization*, 8 *ECON. DEV. REV.* 29 (1990).

redevelopment program and is needed to create a community vision – “a detailed description of what people want their community to be in [10], 15, or 20 years.”<sup>51</sup>

In many instances, this “community vision” can encompass a combination of a variety of approaches to revitalizing the downtown. One such approach is that created by the National Main Street Center,<sup>52</sup> which has been repeatedly synthesized and analyzed by a variety of individuals.<sup>53</sup> The Four Point Approach created by the Main Street Organization includes: (1) organization; (2) promotion; (3) design; and (4) economic restructuring.<sup>54</sup> Organization involves building the appropriate coalitions of local citizens with asserted interests to achieve the stated goals of the local “Main Street” organization.<sup>55</sup> Promotion requires the development of clear, concise, and effective methods of marketing the downtown’s unique characteristics to both residents and tourists.<sup>56</sup> Design focuses on the infrastructure of the downtown, finding areas that are in need of an enhanced physical appearance or repair, including parking, lighting, signage, and other often overlooked aspects that are vital to the success of a downtown.<sup>57</sup> Economic restructuring is the most detailed aspect of the program and requires that the organization assist local businesses in the development of comprehensive strategic plans to ensure the vitality and growth of existing downtown businesses.<sup>58</sup> For the Four Point Approach to be successful, specific steps must be taken, such as: (1) ensuring strong local leadership; (2) finding and strengthening anchor businesses in the downtown; and (3) providing “counseling strategies” on effective business management.<sup>59</sup>

Rural downtowns applying the Main Street Four Point Approach must also keep in mind the “time-tested” Eight Guiding Principles, which ensure the

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51. *Id.*; Janet Ayres, *Essential Elements of Strategic Vision*, in COMMUNITY STRATEGIC VISIONING PROGRAMS 33 (Norman Walzer ed., 1996).

52. The National Main Street Center is a program developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. See National Main Street Center, Homepage, [www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx](http://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx) (last visited August 9, 2008).

53. See generally Main Street Rensselaer, About Main Street Rensselaer, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/msr/about.html> (last visited July 24, 2008); see also Lawhead, *supra* note 30 at 76.

54. DANE, *supra* note 30, at 3-5; National Main Street Center, The Main Street Four Points, <http://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=47&section=2> (last visited July 24, 2008). The Four Point Approach is a trademark of the National Main Street Center.

55. JOAN FITZGERALD & NANCEY GREEN LEIGH, *ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION: CASES AND STRATEGIES FOR CITY AND SUBURB* 134-35 (SAGE Publications, Inc. 2002); DANE, *supra* note 30, at 4-5.

56. DANE, *supra* note 30, at 4-5; FITZGERALD & LEIGH, *supra* note 55, at 136-37.

57. FITZGERALD & LEIGH, *supra* note 55, at 135-36; DANE, *supra* note 30, at 5.

58. FITZGERALD & LEIGH, *supra* note 55, at 134-35; DANE, *supra* note 30, at 4-5.

59. Lawhead, *supra* note 30, at 76-80; see FITZGERALD & LEIGH, *supra* note 55, at 134-35; see generally DANE, *supra* note 30, at 3-5.



successful application of the approach.<sup>60</sup> The Eight Principles both reinforce and build on the Four Points requiring that local Main Street organizations create a strategy that: (1) is comprehensive and does not focus in scope on a single issue; (2) is incremental and seeks success at a realistic pace; (3) is self-help oriented and recognizes the importance of local control and involvement; (4) builds strong partnerships between the public and private sector to achieve common goals; (5) recognizes and utilizes the downtown's unique existing assets; (6) contains individual projects within the revitalization scheme that emphasize quality and not quantity; (7) works continually to change the public perception of downtown and to adjust the attitudes of skeptics who believe that Main Street cannot be turned around; and (8) is implemented in such a manner as to emphasize the results and make the results visible so as to create public awareness and confidence in the program.<sup>61</sup>

A cursory inspection of Rensselaer, Indiana's revitalization efforts again provides an excellent example to other rural communities as a practical application and effectiveness of the National Main Street approach.<sup>62</sup> While Rensselaer is, in many senses, still in the initial phases of the revitalization process, it has made significant progress by following the Four Point Approach.<sup>63</sup> The "organization" aspect of the Main Street Approach was preliminarily achieved in Rensselaer by creating a board composed of members representing various parts of the community including a city council member, local business leaders, and faculty members from the local college.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, the organization openly accepts volunteers from the community to provide assistance on any of the activities associated with the downtown revitalization project.<sup>65</sup>

With regard to promotion, Rensselaer developed a website specifically dedicated to advertising its Main Street organization and their activities.<sup>66</sup> The website links serve the dual purpose of promoting the positive efforts of the Main

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60. DANE, *supra* note 30, at 6-9; see National Main Street Center, Eight Principles of Success, <http://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=2358&section=2> (last visited August 9, 2008).

61. *Id.*

62. See Another Great Summer on its Way..., *supra* note 29.

63. See About Main Street Rensselaer, *supra* note 53.

64. Main Street Rensselaer, Main Street Rensselaer Board, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/msr/board.html> (last visited August 9, 2008). The board is composed of nine members with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Applying the Main Street approach, it is expected that the board members will work to build further coalitions within the community and particularly throughout the downtown to achieve permanent success in the downtown revitalization process.

65. Main Street Rensselaer, Looking for a Reason to Volunteer? How About: *We Need You!*, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/msr/volunteer.html> (last visited August 9, 2008).

66. Another Summer on its Way..., *supra* note 29.

Street organization, and drawing attention to large variety of unique opportunities available downtown.<sup>67</sup> By providing a list of downtown events and creating a link to a local “Visitor’s Guide” detailing all of the tourist activities in the area, the Main Street Rensselaer organization has taken the first step to effectively promoting itself to both residents and tourists.<sup>68</sup>

Rensselaer’s noted efforts with regard to National Main Street’s Four Point Approach indicate that it has taken the first steps on the path to achieving success within the revitalization program. However, all small towns adopting the National Main Street Approach, including Rensselaer, must remember that “[m]ain [s]treet probably didn’t deteriorate overnight and it won’t be revitalized quickly either. Using the Main Street Approach is hard work, but it can substantially improve the health of your commercial district by giving you an effective framework for your revitalization efforts.”<sup>69</sup>

#### V. BEYOND PURE AGRICULTURE: USDA FUNDING OF REVITALIZATION

The Main Street approach alone can be a good starting point for revitalization, but it can also be part of a larger effort on the part of America’s small towns and rural areas. The federal government offers a number of funding opportunities aimed directly at assisting rural communities with development and revitalization.<sup>70</sup> The USDA, an agency traditionally pictured as focused solely on fostering the improvement of “pure agriculture,” has a number of programs intended to foster community and economic development in rural areas.<sup>71</sup>

The Office of Community Development, which operates as a branch of the USDA, administers a number of rural community development programs as part of the USDA’s overall strategy to improve rural communities.<sup>72</sup> Similar to the Main Street Approach, the goal of each program is to create “self-sustaining, long-term economic and community development in rural areas.”<sup>73</sup> The programs focus on the ability of every small-rural town to achieve these goals by following a well-designed and complete plan that is developed by local leaders and implemented at the local level.<sup>74</sup> As with the Main Street Approach, the

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67. *See id.*

68. *Id.*; Visit Rensselaer, Homepage, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/> (last visited August 9, 2008).

69. Why Revitalize?, *supra* note 32.

70. *See, e.g.*, USDA Rural Development, Office of Community Development, <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/wa/ocd.htm> (last visit August 9, 2008).

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. *See id.*

USDA programs are only effective where local players become involved in the development process to create partnerships between the private, public, and non-profit entities.<sup>75</sup>

The USDA has a seemingly boundless list of funding programs available for rural development, which either in-whole or in-part fund revitalization.<sup>76</sup> The programs and grants have been used on any number of projects intended to improve rural communities and reinvigorate deteriorating towns.<sup>77</sup> Among these programs are Rural Business Opportunities Grants, which are used mostly to fund economic projects, and Community Facilities Loans and Grants, which are used primarily to fund infrastructure improvements.<sup>78</sup> According to the USDA website, the purpose of the Rural Business Opportunity Grants are “to promote[] sustainable economic development in rural communities with exceptional needs[.]”<sup>79</sup> This is accomplished by making grants available to pay costs of providing economic planning for rural communities, technical assistance for rural businesses, or training for rural entrepreneurs or economic development officials.<sup>80</sup> Such grants are available to small towns and rural areas with less than 50,000 inhabitants and typically have a maximum value of \$50,000.<sup>81</sup> Community Facilities Loans and Grants, on the other hand, “may be used to construct, enlarge, or improve community facilities for health care, public safety, and public services” in towns with less than 20,000 citizens.<sup>82</sup> Individually or in cooperation, USDA grants can lead to remarkable success in downtown revitalization projects.<sup>83</sup>

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75. *Id.*

76. See USDA Nat'l Agric. Lib., Funding Resources, [http://ric.nal.usda.gov/nal\\_web/ric/ffd.php](http://ric.nal.usda.gov/nal_web/ric/ffd.php) (last visited August 9, 2008). The USDA's Rural Information Center website provides a search engine linked to an exhaustive list of government grants and funding programs available to rural communities via the federal government. The list is expansive and includes grants connected not only to the Department of Agricultural, but other branches of the government, including the Departments of Commerce, Labor, Energy, and others.

77. See, e.g., Xiao Zhang, *McVile, N.D., Lands USDA Grant to Build Community Café*, GRAND FORKS HERALD, Sept. 4, 2003; see Elizabeth Campbell, *Federal Grant Could Help Rejuvenate Joshua, Texas*, FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM, June 6, 2004.

78. USDA Rural Development, Rural Business Opportunity Grants (RBOG), <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/busp/rbog.htm> (last visited August 9, 2008); USDA Rural Development, Community Facilities Loans and Grants, <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rd/pubs/pa1557.htm> (last visited August 9, 2008).

79. USDA Rural Development, Rural Business Opportunity Grants (RBOG), <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/busp/rbog.htm> (last visited August 9, 2008).

80. See *id.* (listing eligible projects for which monies may be used).

81. *Id.*

82. USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Loans and Grants, <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rd/pubs/pa1557.htm> (last visited August 9, 2008).

83. See also Campbell, *supra* note 77.

The small town of Joshua, Texas, provides an excellent example of the utility of a USDA Rural Business Opportunity.<sup>84</sup> In June of 2004, Joshua applied for a \$50,000 grant that was to be used in evaluating what could be done to improve the city's faltering downtown area, which consisted of deteriorating buildings, vacant lots, and scattered businesses.<sup>85</sup> Joshua's vision was "a downtown in which people can shop in boutiques and walk from their apartments to a coffee shop or restaurant."<sup>86</sup> The overall goal was to revitalize the downtown back to its early vitality before many businesses left the main street area to highway locations.<sup>87</sup> With the \$50,000 USDA grant, the city would evaluate several aspects of the downtown, including "land ownership and uses, infrastructure needs, demographics, and traffic flow" and determine how best to "face-lift" the downtown area.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, USDA grants have twice provided significant assistance to McVile, North Dakota. In 2002, the city used a grant of over \$85,000 to purchase and renovate a building so a local business could expand its operations.<sup>89</sup> More recently, in September of 2003, McVile received a grant of nearly \$375,000.<sup>90</sup> With a population hovering around 500, McVile is what one might describe as the traditional small town.<sup>91</sup> McVile houses the county's hospital, clinic, and nursing home.<sup>92</sup> McVile also has an elementary school, a golf course, and several small, local businesses on Main Street.<sup>93</sup> Serving as the hub of activity for the surrounding small towns, the city seemed to have several amenities, but lacked a café.<sup>94</sup> In an effort to improve Main Street and fill this need, the city applied for and received the USDA grant, which was used to build the café.<sup>95</sup>

Returning again to Rensselaer, Indiana, government grants have also been used in the revitalization efforts of its downtown.<sup>96</sup> While Rensselaer did not receive its grant directly through the USDA, they did receive a \$50,000 grant from the Department of Commerce which will be used in essentially the same capacity.<sup>97</sup> Further, Rensselaer received a \$1,000,000 transportation enhance-

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84. *Id.*

85. *Id.*

86. *Id.*

87. *Id.*

88. *Id.*

89. Zhang, *supra* note 77.

90. *Id.*

91. *Id.*

92. *Id.*

93. *Id.*

94. *Id.*

95. *Id.*

96. Another Great Summer on its Way. . . , *supra* note 29.

97. About Main Street Rensselaer, *supra* note 53.

ment grant which will be used to conduct an environmental study.<sup>98</sup> The grant monies were sought and received with the assistance of the Rensselaer Main Street Organization and will be used to assist in the revitalization of downtown infrastructure and in the creation of improved downtown façades.<sup>99</sup>

While not the traditional view of “government spending,” federal government loans and grants, especially those offered through the USDA, provide much needed opportunities for communities to revitalize and/or improve their downtown areas. As Renae Arneson, the McVillage City Auditor, noted, “[c]ommunities need to take advantage of the programs out there to make the community viable.”<sup>100</sup>

## VI. REMEMBER YOUR ROOTS

### A. Utilizing Small Town Heritage and Economy

In combination with a strong Main Street program and seeking government grants, an eye toward creating a friendly and unique tourist destination can be another way of attracting increased visitor foot traffic to rural downtown areas.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, the USDA offers an extensive list of resources available with ideas and suggestions on creating a strong backbone for tourism in small towns and communities.<sup>102</sup> A cursory inspection of the resources can easily lead to dozens of ideas on building a tourist industry.<sup>103</sup> Among the USDA sources are the suggestions offered by the Missouri Department of Agriculture.<sup>104</sup> That department indicates that “[a]gritourism is a growing industry in the United States [that] presents a number of opportunities.”<sup>105</sup> The ideas suggested include corn mazes, bed and breakfast operations, “u-pick your own” operations, and road side

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98. *Id.*; Another Great Summer on its Way. . ., *supra* note 29.

99. About Main Street Rensselaer, *supra* note 53; Another Great Summer on its Way. . ., *supra* note 29.

100. Zhang, *supra* note 77.

101. *See, e.g., America the Creative*, *ECONOMIST*, Dec. 23, 2006, at 41 (noting use of small town folklore and traditions to draw in tourists); Samira Jafari, *History Calls Tourists to Rural Towns*, *EWOS NEWS*, Sept. 7, 2007 (noting increase in tourist travel to small, rural towns because of increased showcasing of art, history and cultural exhibits).

102. USDA Nat'l Agric. Library, Community Development Resources: Tourism, [http://ric.nal.usda.gov/nal\\_display/index.php?info\\_center=5&tax\\_level=2&tax\\_subject=211&topic\\_id=169](http://ric.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=5&tax_level=2&tax_subject=211&topic_id=169) (last visited August 9, 2008).

103. *Id.*

104. *Id.*; Mo. Dep't of Agric., Ag. Business Development: Agritourism, <http://www.mda.mo.gov/AgBusiness/resources/agritourism.htm> (last visited August 9, 2008) [hereinafter Agritourism].

105. Agritourism, *supra* note 104.

stands, which all attract visitors wanting the “real rural experience” into rural communities.<sup>106</sup> On a grander scale, rural downtowns can capitalize on these activities by promoting the “agri-tourism” that draws foot traffic into the community.<sup>107</sup>

As tourism officials have noted, “a growing number of rural counties and small towns that are struggling economically are showcasing their history and culture through folk art projects, historic museums, and festivals . . .”<sup>108</sup> This turn to tourism is not without its benefits. “Sixty-two percent of U.S. adults, or 87 million, have taken a trip to a small town or village within the past three years[,]” which means an increase in tourist dollars.<sup>109</sup>

Rensselaer, Indiana again provides a striking example of tying the agricultural roots of the community and rural culture into the downtown revitalization.<sup>110</sup> Among other activities, Rensselaer offers a farmer’s market in its downtown area where local farmers are able to sell their products to consumers, while at the same time attracting additional foot traffic into the downtown area.<sup>111</sup> On a larger and more modern scale, Rensselaer proudly promotes the nearby Fair Oaks Farms Dairy Adventure where tourists see the inner workings and everyday operation of a modern dairy farm.<sup>112</sup>

In the past year Rensselaer also offered a number of downtown festivals, including the “Taste of Rensselaer” and “Oktoberfest” festivals, where visitors and residents sampled foods from a variety of vendors in the downtown area while experiencing the culture and community downtown had to offer.<sup>113</sup> The most notable of Rensselaer’s downtown festivals, however, is the annual Little Cousin Jasper Festival, which is held in the center of downtown on the Courthouse Square.<sup>114</sup> Little Cousin Jasper not only provides a carnival-esque atmosphere, but attracts visitors from the surrounding communities into the downtown area, building an awareness of the various downtown retailers and businesses.<sup>115</sup>

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106. *Id.*

107. *See generally* Jafari, *supra* note 101.

108. *Id.*

109. *Id.*

110. *See* VisitRensselaer.com, Events & Festivals, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/events.html> (last visited August 9, 2008); *see also* VisitRensselaer.com, Homepage, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com> (last visited August 9, 2008).

111. *See* Events & Festivals, *supra* note 110; *see also* Homepage, *supra* note 110.

112. *See* Visit Rensselaer, Things To Do, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/do.html> (last visited August 9, 2008); Fair Oaks Farms, <http://www.fofarms.com/> (last visited August 9, 2008).

113. Events & Festivals, *supra* note 110; *see* Another Great Summer on its Way. . ., *supra* note 29.

114. Events & Festivals, *supra* note 110.

115. *See id.*; *see generally* Another Great Summer on its Way. . ., *supra* note 29.

Rensselaer is not alone in seeking to use its downtown festivals and events as a method by which to attract tourists.<sup>116</sup> In Conrad, Iowa, the Black Dirt Days celebrate the “rich, fertile land around Conrad[,]” which forms the backbone of the town’s agricultural economy, with a variety of activities related to the agricultural economy, including the sale of “Black Dirt Cake” and playing cow patty bingo.<sup>117</sup> Marshfield, Wisconsin promotes its downtown with Dairy fest, a “salute to the local dairy industry.”<sup>118</sup> In Charles Town, West Virginia, the Harvest Days Celebration, celebrating the harvest season and the beginning of autumn, is used to attract visitors from around the area into the downtown to enjoy a variety of festivities.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, in Tuscola, Illinois, the annual Tuscola Harvest Homecoming brings increased foot traffic into the downtown by celebrating the harvest season with a variety of activities and entertainment.<sup>120</sup>

Additionally, promoting rural downtowns as “quaint little tourist destinations with specialty shops, gifts, antiques, and ice cream” can be an effective method by which to draw shoppers and visitors when discount retailers and chain stores have reduced local business.<sup>121</sup> The promotion of unique venues and shops is perhaps the easiest of the steps that can be taken by a rural downtown. Rensselaer provides a short list of “A Few Special Places” that visitors may want to browse that are unique to the town, including Busy Bee, a local ice cream shop, Clauss Bakery and Café, featuring made fresh pastries, and, TJ’s Unfinished Furniture, offering fine furniture and other services.<sup>122</sup> Just by creating such a list, Rensselaer has given tourists a reason to “check out” their downtown.

Examples of unique festivals and downtown attractions are endless, but the purpose for promoting both is clear. Tying the agricultural economy and heritage of a rural community into downtown events, festivals, and activities can create an atmosphere of excitement and entertainment that will attract both citizens and visitors into the downtown, thereby increasing the visibility of “main street” businesses and establishments.<sup>123</sup>

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116. See generally AMANDA B. WEST, *MAIN STREET FESTIVALS: TRADITIONAL AND UNIQUE EVENTS ON AMERICA’S MAIN STREETS* xi-xii (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998).

117. *Id.* at 119.

118. *Id.* at 138.

119. *Id.* at 23.

120. *Id.* at 110.

121. Mike Kilen, Op-Ed., *Neighbors’ Dreams in Small Town Iowa*, D.M. REG., Nov. 26, 2006, at 6.

122. VisitRensselaer.com, Things to Do, <http://www.visitrenselaer.com/do.html> (last visited August 9, 2008).

123. See generally WEST, *supra* note 116, at xi-xii.

## VII. IT WORKS: RURAL REVITALIZATION SUCCESS STORIES

National Main Street, government grants, agricultural tourism, and unique attractions all play their part in the revitalization and preservation of America's rural downtowns. A combination of these programs and processes can lead to great successes if small towns remain committed to reinvigorating and/or reinventing themselves. Dozens of success stories are available to show the potential that can be found in downtown revitalization.<sup>124</sup> Kingwood, Virginia, recently celebrated the tenth year of its Main Street program.<sup>125</sup> When the organization was founded in 1996, investment in the downtown was slightly over \$60,000, but ten years later investment topped \$9.5 million.<sup>126</sup> As the Kingwood Main Street director stated, "This is small town, rural U.S., and this is what Main Street can do for you[.]"<sup>127</sup>

In addition to stories like Kingwood, which are frequently reported in local press across the country, the National Main Street Center published a book listing over forty success stories supplemented frequently by current successes posted on the center's webpage.<sup>128</sup> One such story occurred in Burlington, Iowa where the local Main Street organization worked to spark eight renovation projects, 248 façade rehab projects, and over twelve million dollars of public and private investment into the downtown.<sup>129</sup> The organization was able to save a number of historic buildings and put them to modern use, including turning an old buggy factory into a modern police station and transforming an 1860s Methodist Episcopal Church into a workshop and gift shop.<sup>130</sup> Additionally, the Main Street organization was able to fill vacancies in the pedestrian mall that was nearly empty at the time of the organizations inception.<sup>131</sup>

Libertyville, Illinois is another sterling example of the potential provided by a strong local Main Street Organization.<sup>132</sup> Located between Milwaukee and Chicago, downtown Libertyville was historically a major stopping point for trav-

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124. See generally DANE, *supra* note 30, at 3; National Trust Main Street Center, Success of the Main Street Approach, <http://mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=55&section=2> (last visited August 9, 2008).

125. Kathy Plum, *Main Street Kingwood Celebrates 10 years: Program Promotes Economic Growth, Livability of City*, DOMINION POST, June 24, 2006.

126. *Id.*

127. *Id.*

128. See DANE, *supra* note 30, at 3; see generally National Trust Main Street Center, Success of the Main Street Approach, <http://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=55&section=2> (last visited August 9, 2008).

129. DANE, *supra* note 30, at 32-33.

130. *Id.* at 33.

131. *Id.* at 34.

132. See *id.* at 92-93.



elers between the two cities and “the center of regional farm-to-market commerce,” but that changed with the growth of the interstate highway system.<sup>133</sup> Libertyville’s downtown was dying, but in 1989 following the Main Street model, the city was able to turn its downtown around.<sup>134</sup> With nearly thirteen million dollars in investment, “38 businesses [were] added or expanded, netting 367 new jobs,” which nearly eradicated all of the vacancies in the once dismal downtown.<sup>135</sup> Main Street Libertyville, which is built upon a network of local business owners and residents, now works closely with the city government to make decisions effecting the redevelopment and revitalization to ensure the continued growth of the area.<sup>136</sup>

Charles City, Iowa is another example of a city that has reinvigorated its downtown using a variety of methods and resources.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, it has twice been a semi-finalist for the “Great American Main Street Award,” which recognizes its accomplishments in revitalizing the downtown area.<sup>138</sup> Charles City boasts a profound history and a number of notable attractions, including the childhood home of Carrie Lane Chapman Catt, who founded the League of Women Voters, and Garden Court Park.<sup>139</sup> Further, the downtown area uses a nearby, unique suspension bridge to attract visitors into the area.<sup>140</sup> One could go on and on about Charles City’s unique downtown in large part due to the advertising efforts of their downtown organization, which has published an extensive booklet outlining the unique features, shops, and activities in the downtown area.<sup>141</sup> It is a superb example of the successes to be had with a strong revitalization effort.

Returning to Rensselaer’s situation, it is too soon to know if the Main Street program coupled with government grants will pay off, but all signs seem to indicate that the city and its residents are taking progressive steps toward achieving successes similar to those in the above examples.<sup>142</sup> It is this goal that drove the creation of Main Street Rensselaer and continues to motivate its members.

While all of the successful projects are too innumerable to mention here, it is clear that the redevelopment and revitalization of America’s downtowns is

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133. *Id.* at 92.

134. *See id.* at 92-93.

135. *See id.* at 93.

136. *Id.* at 93.

137. *See* Charles City Area Chamber of Commerce, *Charles City: America’s Hometown* 6-7 October 2006 (Charles City Press & GateHouse Media 2006).

138. *Id.*

139. *Id.* at 10.

140. *Id.*

141. *See generally id.*

142. *See* Another Great Summer on its Way. . . , *supra* note 29.

not an unachievable goal.<sup>143</sup> With diligence, cooperation, and willingness, small town main streets can reassert themselves as the vibrant centers of community life that once characterized them.<sup>144</sup>

#### VIII. RURAL REVITALIZATION: MAYBERRY CAN AND WILL SURVIVE

As the numerous success stories indicate, America's rural downtowns can and will survive if the community's residents and business leaders work to create a strong and effective plan to revitalize the area. Indeed, small towns across America have seen revitalization programs increase sales, property values, occupancy rates, rents, and downtown foot traffic.<sup>145</sup> Any combination of Main Street organizations, government grants, community leadership, and promotion of local festivals and unique features can lead to a renewed sense of pride in the downtown and a revitalization of the traditional main street mentality. Where Mayberry was once dying, it has seen a rebirth.<sup>146</sup>

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143. See generally DANE, *supra* note 30; National Trust Main Street Center, Success of the Main Street Approach, <http://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=55&section=2> (last visited August 9, 2008).

144. See, e.g., Smith, *supra* note 3, at 8-9.

145. See *id.* at 8; see also Hechesky, *supra* note 5, at sec. 2.0-sec. 3.0.

146. See generally Smith, *supra* note 3, at 8.