



Summary Report from the Start Up Team Visit to Lisbon Falls

Presented to the Lisbon Downtown Revitalization Committee,
Rosie Bradley, Town of Lisbon

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Healthy, thriving downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts are assets to communities endeavoring to sustain or grow their local economy and create or retain jobs.

INTRODUCTION

The Maine Downtown Center (MDC) is a program of the Maine Development Foundation (MDF). MDF believes that vibrant downtowns can be an economic engine of growth; can serve as an attractant to young people, creative economic ventures, retirees and diverse populations; and can mitigate costly sprawling land use development patterns. The MDC helps communities throughout the state revitalize their downtown economy, preserve and enhance appearance, and boost the image of their traditional business districts using a range of services and assistance.

We utilize the successful **Main Street Four-Point Approach®** developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Main Street Center as its foundation for assistance. This approach emphasizes economic development within the context of historic preservation and is based on principles of self-determination and direct community participation. The Main Street Approach focuses on four key areas of revitalization which are worked simultaneously:

- **Organization.** Involving all constituencies having an interest in downtown revitalization and management of both human and financial resources. Organization helps everyone work towards the same goals and maximizes involvement of public and private leaders within the community;
- **Design.** Implementing projects that improve the appearance and functionality of downtown buildings and physical environment. Design enhances a district's appearance and pedestrian amenities while preserving its historic features;
- **Promotion.** Creating programs that market your downtown to potential and existing customers, producing special events and festivals, and promulgating a positive image of downtown. Promotion brings people back downtown by helping to attract visitors, shoppers, and investors; and
- **Economic Restructuring.** Studying your community's economy and market opportunities and using the information to develop programs that strengthen and expand existing businesses and aid in recruiting new businesses to downtown. Economic restructuring stimulates business development and helps strengthen the district's economic base.

The comprehensive approach has long been proven an effective methodology for revitalizing traditional, pedestrian-oriented commercial districts in your downtown. In essence, the Main Street Four-Point Approach® stresses grassroots involvement in the revitalization process where the community works beyond just the downtown stakeholders, to develop a compelling vision for your downtown.

Each Main Street program is locally driven, responds to locally identified priorities, and is locally funded. The Maine Downtown Center is committed to be a partner in this essential revitalization process for the long term.

OVERVIEW OF THE MAINE DOWNTOWN NETWORK

As part of a three-tier approach to downtown revitalization in Maine, the MDC has launched the **Maine Downtown Network**, an affiliate to our successful Main Street Maine program and Downtown Institute. The Maine Downtown Network (MDN) program provides a range of services and assistance to meet a variety of community commitment and readiness levels with technical support through its staff and other experienced consultants.

The MDN is for communities just starting a downtown revitalization effort and/or for those hoping to achieve Main Street Maine status. MDN services help communities build an appropriate organizational and funding base for a comprehensive downtown or neighborhood commercial district revitalization program. Participation as a MDN community does not guarantee selection as a future designated Main Street Maine community, although it will help communities strengthen their revitalization efforts.

MDN communities are required to:

1. Understand, commit to and follow the Main Street Four-Point Approach® to downtown revitalization (Organization, Design, Promotion and Economic Restructuring) established by the National Trust Main Street Center and promoted by the Maine Downtown Center.
2. Maintain and report on quantitative measures of success, specifically volunteer hours and re-investment statistics and share these with the MDC Program Manager at least twice annually or as requested.
3. Develop and/or maintain a volunteer board, including representatives of downtown business entities, the greater community and local government, to oversee the continuing development of the local downtown revitalization program for the terms of this agreement.
4. Engage staff, committee and/or board members and volunteers in ongoing training offered by the Maine Downtown Center. Travel expenses for such training shall be paid by the Local Program, unless otherwise provided by the MDC. Discounted registration will be made available to MDN Local Program participants to attend Downtown Institute sessions and the annual Maine Downtown Conference.
5. Share lessons learned from their experience as a MDN Local Program and share documents and products with the MDC and other communities in instances where sharing will not compromise the work of the Local Program.
6. The Local Program will illustrate the acknowledgement of the receipt of the MDC's services by crediting its participation, and as a beneficiary of, the MDN program through the appropriate methods (i.e., website, printed acknowledgement in public notices, press releases, project signs, publications, verbal recognition at public meeting, etc.)
7. Pay an annual participation fee based on population.

The MDC will provide these additional services to MDN communities:

1. Designate a MDC Program Manager to act as liaison with the MDN Local Program and to facilitate communications between the Local Program, the Maine Downtown Center, other Maine communities and the National Trust Main Street Center where appropriate.
2. Organize and conduct an initial Start-Up Visit whereby the MDC Program Manager and members of the MDC Advisory Board, Senior Advisors and selected consultants will visit the MDN Local Program to conduct an informal needs assessment and offer initial observations to help organize the Downtown program.
3. Organize and conduct a Year One Organizational Visit to assist the MDN Local Program in developing a start-up checklist, work plan creation and fund raising strategies.
4. Organize and conduct a Year Two Organizational Visit identifying progress and provide suggestions for moving forward.
5. Conduct training for board members and/or committee members, MDN Local Program Managers (where appropriate), and community volunteers, providing intensive and comprehensive training on the content and methodology of the Main Street Program at the local level.
6. Provide resource and consultant information to the MDN Local Program in topic areas specifically related to organization, design, promotion and economic restructuring.
7. Assist in the selection of a Downtown Manager, if appropriate, and provide orientation and training at the MDC office.
8. Provide for the MDN Local Program's membership in the National Trust Main Street Center for two years during the term of the agreement.
9. In general, facilitate learning among Maine Downtown Network and Maine Street Maine communities and the general public.
10. Post success stories and testimonials from the MDN Local Program on the MDC website and share links to the National Trust Main Street Center and other state coordinating programs.

In summary, the Maine Downtown Network is what you make of it. Tap into the energy! Consider yourself part of a growing family of historically rich, civic minded, volunteer-driven cities and towns in Maine – with passionate people committed to protecting and enhancing their special sense of place and courageous enough to invest the energy necessary to convert their vision of a vibrant downtown to reality. Now let's get to work!

THE START UP VISIT

In July 2009, a group of enthusiastic downtown supporters representing both the public and private sectors and clad in “I ♥ Lisbon” t-shirts met with the Maine Downtown Center’s team. Our discussion focused on past efforts, current activities and future visions. A walking tour took the group through downtown Lisbon Falls and into key businesses and buildings. We returned to the Community Center for lunch and to share immediate observations and discuss next steps as a Maine Downtown Network community. This report captures comments, ideas and suggestions from the team for consideration as you begin to work toward the Main Street model for downtown revitalization, incorporating the four points discussed previously.



Organization Observations and Suggestions for Lisbon

- Continue to grow and broaden the Downtown Revitalization Committee, including residents with a focus on gender balance and involvement from the “silent minority/majority.” Concurrently, examine the pros and cons of forming yourself into a separate 501(c)3 nonprofit organization or decide upon a nonprofit partner who can serve as your host.
- Make sure no one feels left out. Find the champions – the advocates – for downtown and bring them in! Invite key players like Downeast Energy, Androscoggin Bank and others to join committees or serve on the Board, perhaps moving into a position of officer. Partner with the Green Thumb Gang, Lisbon Historical Society, the Moxie Festival organizers and other established groups and organizations.

- Continue your broad participatory public visioning process to focus on the “heart” of your community - your downtown. Identify and promote your unique history and culture and talk it up! Create a real buzz! Ask “what’s missing from downtown?” Remind residents of the importance of downtown to community pride, your sense of place and your economy. Continue to use this process your educational outreach; reach into your schools and churches.
- Host a few key social events to introduce your downtown program and bring the citizens together. Conduct a Business after Hours event (Bath Main Street provides an excellent example) or Business Roundtable and encourage people to talk and brainstorm.
- Kick your fund raising efforts into a higher gear. Your “I ♥ Lisbon” campaign is an excellent start – ramp it up! Now is the time to obtain multiple year pledges of support. Remember: the number of supporters, especially during your start-up phase, is as important, if not more, as the dollars given.
- More events – ethnic celebrations with diversity – draw people and leave a lasting memory of your uniqueness.
- Find interesting and short term jobs for volunteers – give them lots of recognition, verbally and in writing.
- Obtain lots of publicity for what you are doing! Launch a dedicated webpage and learn the benefits of social marketing.

Design Observations and Suggestions for Lisbon

- Inventory every building downtown, working with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, to determine if any are individually eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Understand and educate the community of the benefits of listing in the National Register, specifically regarding tax credits (federal and state). Begin with the gateway Kennebec Fruit Company building which is a local landmark. Investigate other incentives and protection mechanisms for locally-significant buildings.





- Façade Improvement Grants should be researched to help several business/commercial property owners (Mike’s Flooring, Kennebec Fruit Building, TD Bank North, etc.) The entire street would benefit if the Post Office looked alive! A number of small, inexpensive design improvements would add color and interest to this rather bland building.



- Consider sponsoring murals on some large blank walls (not original masonry.)
- Protect the historic “ghost” signs – these are memorable visual assets of your past.
- Main Street needs flowers in planters already there or in window boxes or whiskey barrels that sit on the side walk. Hang baskets from lamp posts. Start small, look for opportunities for flowers that add life and color to downtown, and add each year.
- Main Street needs flags or banners - preferably flags as they move in the breeze and create a sense of life. Encourage businesses to display downtown logo “brand” flags. Replace worn, dirty or town flags and banners – keep them fresh.



- Main Street needs better and more signage regarding businesses, way finding, parking, points of interest and historic buildings. The Art Gallery needs to be connected to the downtown by signs, etc. Carefully research and install interpretive plaques or signs in key locations downtown.
- Awnings would add a great deal of aesthetic appeal. A very effective, simple and low-cost way to bring business/property owners into the fold is to fund, in whole or in part, awnings(s) for their building.
- Connect downtown Lisbon Falls to the river trail along the Androscoggin. Your stretch of this river just adjacent to downtown is a tremendous “green” asset!

Promotions Observations and Suggestions for Lisbon



- Begin a year-long schedule of promotions/events to encourage and invite people to come downtown – four is a good place to start. Summer is already covered with Moxie Days and you’re adding a Harvest Festival. Now add Christmas and then think spring – May is National Preservation Month. As with all the suggestions offered here, tap into the resources of the MDC and your fellow network communities – they have success stories, suggestions and tips to share.
- The Christmas season needs downtown decorating – perhaps a window decorating contest lots of lights on Main Street and events such as Santa’s visit, kids parade/walk, caroling, free cider in all the stores, etc. Use your imagination.
- Consider a heritage-based event, like “So You Think You Know Lisbon” with historic images, costumed tour guides downtown and a fun evening.
- A fall event might include a costume parade; the costume shop could be a major sponsor as well as getting some other businesses involved.
- Create and produce a brochure to direct people to what is in your downtown, start simple and then expand. This not only promotes, it also creates interest and shows that you are active and passionate about the future of your downtown.
- Use empty windows for displays, historic photos and art work of children.

Economic Restructuring Observations and Suggestions for Lisbon



- Celebrate and support your four destination stores anchors: The Sausage Kitchen, Desjardin's Costumes, and The Art Gallery and Glass Works.
- Investigate all opportunities to redevelop the historic Worumbo Mills complex. Unfortunately, the factory store has recently closed and moved to Brunswick.
- Free WiFi downtown will attract a new, diverse clientele.
- Form (or find) a Farmer's Market for downtown, and study ways to cross promote with downtown businesses.
- Try to recruit a natural food market or a small niche specialty market for the downtown they would support the sausage man, etc. Think "clustering."
- Try to recruit a coffee shop or café – possibly combined with a used book store (great examples are in Rockland and Bucksport) or connected with your library.
- Do workshops for the local businesses led by the University Extension, other merchants or residents with specialties and a willingness to share. (The Tangles salon owners could do a great workshop on window displays!)
- Do a simple intercept survey on the street to see what residents use the downtown for and need.
- Work with town's Economic Development specialist to thoroughly study your existing building stock: What are the boundaries of your downtown district? How many square feet do you have downtown? How much is vacant and why? Are your upper floors used mostly for storage? Is there an opportunity to joint venture on a shared elevator? Do you have a parking study? What about rear access to funky, underused retail spaces in lower levels? Get to know your strengths and weaknesses and be prepared to go after businesses you need.

In conclusion, we hope the ideas and observations in this report will help strengthen and stimulate your efforts to revitalize the HEART of your community! Good luck!

Senior Advisor Bill King visited Lisbon Falls on July 11, 2009 during Moxie Days, and also offers these observations:

Suggestions for steps to support downtown Lisbon Falls:

1. They need a downtown grocery store- either an AGA/IGA or Natural Foods
2. A Beer/Wine/ cheese store would complement the sausage man
3. A Book store (since downtown independent bookstores are up and coming would be a draw) – perhaps the Library could do one like Bath’s
4. A Farmer’s Market in downtown is a must
5. Signage is needed to draw people up Main Street to the Art Gallery
6. An additional Eatery/café (perhaps combined with the book store)
7. Flowers and banners would bring life and a sense of TLC to the streets
8. Intercept surveys needed ASAP to see what the residents need in downtown
9. Better promotions than just Moxie Days – better joint marketing of the Gallery

Assets:

1. Active local historical society
2. Three historic buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places
3. VERY walkable community with close residential neighborhoods
4. Good housing stock
5. A large outlying residential community that needs to become active
6. Three great specialty anchors.
 - a. The Sausage Kitchen – good retail business with wholesale complement. The town assisted with building improvements. A very encouraging attitude!
 - b. Desjardin’s Costumes – a real destination specialty retailer.
 - c. The Art Gallery and Glass Works – A remarkable adaptive use of an old church. The interior design of this old church is just great as is the use of its space for display of product. They do need to get more people to them and to Lisbon Falls.

Challenges:

1. The outlying area is ripe for commercial sprawl and time is of the essence!
2. Focus growth downtown before it goes to malls
3. How to connect the three Lisbon villages without diluting the effort on “Main Street”
4. How to use the river as an asset?
5. Trolley/transit system to bring residents to services