



## Summary Report from the Start Up Team Visit to Augusta

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Presented to the Augusta Economic Development Department  
Dan Nichols, City of Augusta

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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

Only July 28, 2009, a group of enthusiastic downtown supporters representing both the public and private sectors met during lunch with the Maine Downtown Center's team. Our discussion focused on past efforts, current activities and future visions. The walking tour took the group riverside and into key businesses and buildings on Water Street. We returned 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.



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### ORGANIZATION OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR AUGUSTA

Effective downtown revitalization efforts require the energy, leadership, vision and passion of an organized, engaged and diverse group of downtown supporters. The lack of such a group in downtown Augusta is the most pressing issue to resolve should the community wish to elevate its historic downtown commercial district to the prominence it rightly deserves. We see this issue as the #1 priority for downtown Augusta.

Prior attempts, such as the Heart of Augusta and the Riverfront Business Group, have not been sustainable a variety of reasons. The City, to its credit and through its Economic Development and Public Works Departments, Parking District, local Historic Preservation Commission and staffing of Old Fort Western, has contributed greatly to the overall appearance of downtown. The private sector, however, is missing from the leadership mix. The Capital Riverfront Improvement District (CRID), staffed by Ed Cervone at the Maine Development Foundation, may be able to provide leadership and direction – possibly even vision – to rally a strong core group of dedicated outspoken advocates whose priority is to

promote downtown Augusta. Should the Colonial Theater Board of Directors gain momentum, friends and funds in such capacity to rehabilitate the 1913 theater, this project has the potential to spark interest from the creative community.

Greg Paxton, Executive Director, Maine Preservation and member of the MDC Advisory Council member suggests the following:

“Engage the Augusta civic leadership. The City’s commitment is clear, but other civic leaders who do not have a stake in downtown must be persuaded by the Mayor and others influential leaders to come on a board to help lead the effort. City government should step back from the leadership and become facilitators and implementers. When the City provides all the answers, no one else is motivated to get involved.

“A revitalization plan for downtown is essential. There seem to be a lot of pieces in stakeholder’s minds, but there is not a sense of priorities and responsibility. There needs to be consensus and clarity on priorities, and assignment of responsibilities. Less talk - more focus. Development of this plan will require stakeholders, civic leaders and knowledgeable outsiders. There is enough money and City buy-in to downtown revitalization to engage an experienced classic Main Street Resource Team, and it is essential this occur quickly while the Mayor and thus City is engaged.”

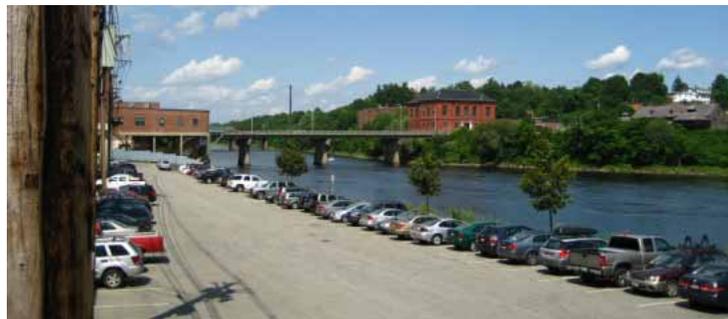
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## DESIGN OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR AUGUSTA

Comments from Denis Lachman, Lachman Architects & Planners, MDC Design Consultant:

**Capitalize on the capitol’s greatest asset - the river.** Explore ways that CRID can and will work together with Main (Water) Street for mutual success. Understand the river as an economic engine for Main Street, rather than just a recreational opportunity parallel to it. What an opportunity to leverage and not miss!!

**Improve physical links between Water Street and the water.** Improve existing connections first to be easily identified, safe, convenient and welcoming for pedestrians. There is much opportunity for improvement at existing connections. Develop a bold graphic that identifies connections to the water. Explore as many other physical connections as possible and design them to be easily identified, safe, convenient etc.



**Improve the Rivers edge.** Short term – move cars back so people can enjoy the edge. This is simple – move the curb and re-stripe. Long term – replace/reconfigure river edge parking for much higher and better uses that attract people, create a brand and generate revenue.

**Leverage other rivers edge opportunities.** Connect seamlessly, conveniently and safely to the other existing or planned trails, marinas etc. Develop a bold graphic that identifies paths, trails, loops etc. Does the river trail extend to Mill Park? Can someone bicycle from Hallowell to shop at the Farmers Market at Mill Park?

**Make buildings attractive that face the river.** Many see Augusta only from the bridges and this “unattractive back” to the river is all they see or know. Make this block the “face of Augusta”, not its rear end.

**Explore Federal multi-modal funds for a cross river pedestrian bridge.** This can tie into river’s edge paths on both sides to create a loop or figure 8. Many towns have done this. Jog the loop then end up at a café! This will help stimulate residential interest in downtown.

**Pursue a strategic, rather than random approach to projects and improvements.**



For example – “somebody suggested a curb extension, sounds like a good idea, let’s put it here, or maybe on the other side of the street together with angled parking.” It is far wiser to proceed with a more comprehensive, coordinated approach. For example – what is the goal? Is a curb extension the best approach? What are the lateral (sometimes unintended) consequences? What about other considerations, such as how can and will a curb extension also contribute to improved connection to the riverfronts, widening sidewalks for increased use, which side gets better sun, the negative impact of angled head in parking, etc. Another

example – rather than pop in a park because there is some unused area, consider a green space plan. What are the intended uses? Can the design foster some new unexpected use?

**Build upon existing plans, where they exist.** For example, if connections have been studied and proposed in the past, start there. Do they need updating, coordination with other plans, an implementation strategy? Use already expended resources and so as to not re-invent the wheel.

Greg Paxton suggests the following:

“I agree that, despite the flooding, the back side needs to be enhanced. In Augusta, Georgia, for example, and on the Mississippi and elsewhere towns have been protected by dikes. This does have the negative of blocking the view from ground level, but the buildings are so much higher. Seeking major funding for a project along the four or so block area behind downtown could open up a lot of possibilities on the building backsides. Are there federal funds that could be applied for to achieve this? This would be a good stimulus piece, plus it would attract attention as the project was developed.”

Rochelle Bohm, Field Representative, Maine Preservation/National Trust for Historic Preservation comments as follows:



“I see the revitalization of downtown Augusta as a tree with a strong base (a wonderfully built downtown) and endless opportunity for growth or branching out. Augusta has an incredible selection of buildings to work with. We talked about building lodging space. There are so many large, vacant buildings downtown that could be rehabilitated into several different lodging facilities or combined into one space. It will take a developer with imagination and one willing to work within the current codes, but it would be unique to Augusta's built environment and landscape.

“The building stock could also be rehabilitated to house college students (lofts) or for housing the elderly. If the elevator issue can be dealt with, building senior apartments might work well. This could lead to the need for certain downtown services, such as grocery, pharmacy, and a variety of eating establishments.

“Embracing the buildings should be the focus. Find a way to work with area schools and teachers to create lessons based around the history and architecture of Augusta. There is always little to no public money to encourage this. There is the ability to recognize teachers who go the extra mile to develop these lessons or units. Maybe it would be a good activity for a local summer camp; definitely an idea to partner with Old Fort Western, the Augusta HPC and the Kennebec County Historical Society.

“One way to connect the riverfront with downtown is to retain the few open spaces to enhance the greenscape. This idea, and every concept or idea offered by the group, deserves consideration and exploration. An individual idea may not develop fully on its own. We may find that it is an important part of another branch on the tree.”

Shannon Haines, MDC Advisory Council member and Executive Director of Waterville Main Street suggests the following:

“Embrace those beautiful buildings! Maybe I just have building envy, but I think that Augusta has some of the most remarkable, beautiful buildings I have seen in a Maine downtown. The strange thing is that I worked for the state for five years, have lived in the area my entire life and I never really noticed them before. While the Museum in the Streets is a good step, Augusta should consider other ways to build pride in its buildings – consider holding a scavenger hunt, creating a monthly downtown building trivia contest, developing a coloring book based on the downtown architecture.”



The team strongly urges the City to strengthen its existing historic preservation ordinance to require compliance not merely as “advisory” and to adopt the proposed demolition delay provisions that have been pending for over a year. We also urge that the City investigate the necessary steps to achieve federal Certified Local Government status by contacting the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and invest in professional training for the members of the Augusta Historic Preservation Commission. We also urge the City’s economic development staff to understand and promote the use of historic tax credits as a stimulus to redevelop the large number of underused buildings downtown.

## PROMOTIONS OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR AUGUSTA

### “A Capital Opportunity!”

Branding downtown Augusta is vitally important to instill a sense of place and local pride while highlighting the character-defining aspects that make downtown Augusta uniquely distinctive. This summer the Mayor Katz led an effort to develop a new logo and slogan for the city: Augusta – A Capital Opportunity! Since a full roll-out of the logo has not occurred (we understand the City’s website is currently being redesigned) this may be a good time to investigate how the logo resonates with downtown businesses.

The logo brand representative of the City’s history and culture should be used everywhere, especially on public signs including wayfinding, directional, entry gateways, facility identification and city entry monuments. These signs, combined with other design amenities, will help create an appealing environment for residents and visitors and are produced in sustainable materials for durability and easy maintenance

Comments from Shannon Haines:

“Create the spark! Right now Augusta’s downtown plans seem very top-down. Downtown Augusta needs to embrace the grass roots approach of the Main Street program to create a buzz and start building some community pride and ownership. Only when area residents and employees begin embracing the downtown will that spark really ignite some of the business recruitment efforts and other planned initiatives. It takes a long time to overcome negative perceptions, but if Waterville and Biddeford can do it...

“Create a signature event focused on bringing people to downtown, building pride in the waterfront, the businesses and buildings, and creating a sense of community. Be sure to tie in with Old Fort Western!”

The entire MDC team unanimously suggested that Augusta develop a major regional festival that uses Water Street and the Kennebec River and every link between the two.

We also urge you to work with Old Fort Western to market both sides of the river’s heritage and play up your new Museum in the Streets trail of history. This is an excellent opportunity to engage volunteers of all ages and interests in downtown, and help build the base of support Augusta needs to move forward in a Main Street model of downtown revitalization.

Through your association with the Maine Downtown Center, you have resources available to you through the National Main Street Center’s members-only section online. You will find a substantial amount of practical advice, innovative ideas and guidance to help you develop a solid promotion strategy for downtown Augusta. We encourage you to take advantage of our low-cost Downtown Institute sessions offered six times a year – right here in Augusta.

## ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR AUGUSTA



The new Farmers Market at Mill Park, on North Water Street at the site of the former Edwards Mill, is a wonderful addition to downtown. The large the new pavilion, paved parking and Museum in the Streets interpretive signs have the potential to attract multitudes while promoting locally grown food and healthy living. Its location north of the railroad overpass, however, prevents it from being seen from downtown Water Street, requiring directional signage at key downtown access points. Some downtown workers may consider the Farmers Market too far to walk, especially when returning loaded with produce. This seasonal amenity should be widely promoted to residents and Augusta's large worker base - and cross-marketed with downtown businesses.

Additionally, it makes great sense to work with your largest existing market. Find ways to capitalize on the thousands of state employees within walking distance of downtown. One suggestion is to investigate whether the State will allow Augusta to survey all employees with a simple 10 question electronic form designed to determine what would entice people to downtown and what prevents them from coming now. The information should then be used to address the issues. Perhaps CRID can be the link to conducting the survey.

Greg Paxton comments:

“Establishing residents is essential. Market downtown Augusta to artists, students and young singles - three groups who will pioneer and endure hardship and unfinished spaces. Their engagement helps build the reputation of the place as “on the way up” or even “cool,” “in,” or “rad” place to be. This approach would provide an automatic market for businesses, with the proviso that residents spend 3-5 times as much as a worker in downtown. State workers are a captive market but tend to not contribute much to downtowns. Lunch may be about it, though a “lunch and learn” series could help start to build a buzz.

“Marketing the historic tax credits is another strategy to stimulate downtown development - by contacting real estate-oriented new owners, encouraging residential development, getting a few smaller projects started at the same time and marketing downtown as a whole during the process.

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**We applaud Augusta for becoming a Maine Downtown Network community and look forward to working with you in the future.**

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