



# MAIN STREET AS A DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION STRATEGY IN ILLINOIS

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The Main Street Four Point Approach® is a program designed to help communities revitalize their traditional downtowns. The program, administered by the National Main Street Center, a non-profit subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is based on state level coordinating offices that work with local non-profit organizations. These organizations implement revitalization efforts in each of four points considered essential to long term success including:

- » Promotion
- » Organization
- » Design
- » Economic Restructuring

The State of Illinois has participated in the Main Street program for more than 20 years and currently 41 Illinois communities have local Main Street (MS) organizations. These organizations have succeeded in attracting new businesses, increasing employment and generating reinvestment in their downtowns. In 2012, the average Illinois Main Street downtown created 12 FTE jobs and opened five new businesses while reporting nearly \$1 million in private investment.

While successful, funding for the Illinois Main Street program (IMS) declined in recent years, resulting in cuts to services for local organizations. The National Main Street Center placed the state coordinating program on probation in 2010 pending improved service to the local organizations. In 2013 IMS contracted with Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) to assist in strengthening the program. CGS was asked to:

- » Determine the current status of Illinois Main Street local organizations
- » Recommend actions to improve local services
- » Develop new resources for local organizations including a training program and an online toolbox
- » Increase exposure for the Main Street initiatives

The findings and recommendations from these efforts are presented in this report.

*Produced by:*

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please go to [www.cgs.niu.edu](http://www.cgs.niu.edu)

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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*Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development*

## LOCAL MAIN STREET ORGANIZATIONS

CGS surveyed the 42 executive directors of the local MS programs in Illinois during the summer and fall of 2013. Thirty responded (71.4%) and reported on the operation of their local organizations, the services provided to downtown businesses, their assessment of services provided by the IMS program, additional training and assistance needs, and the overall status of their downtowns.

Local MS organizations have an executive director who is usually the only paid staff and represents the organization to the community. Executive director positions are often full-time (61.1%) but many organizations have part-time directors. Most executive directors are college educated with promotion, event planning and marketing skills and expertise. While compensation varies by organization, the median salary is \$41,000 with over one third (35.5%) in the position fewer than two years.

While budget size varies widely, most local MS programs are financially stable. Financial support comes from special districts, city governments and downtown businesses, among other sources. Nevertheless, limited financial resources are an obstacle to more effective programming at the local level.

Main Street districts are mainly business districts, and as such, are a significant source of employment and revenue for cities. Retail continues to be the most dominant use and businesses, especially small retailers, rely on MS organizations for marketing and technical assistance.

Promotions are the dominant activity for local Main Street organizations but Organization and Design were also a focus in most organizations. This is in keeping with the retail activity in their districts and reflects the skills of the executive directors. Organizations focused less on Economic Restructuring, with slightly more than half of local organizations completing a project in this area (51.9%). Smaller organizations (budgets under \$60,000) were less likely than larger organizations to engage in Economic Restructuring projects.

Local organizations differ in the tools available to serve their downtowns. Larger organizations (budgets over \$60,000) are likely to utilize a variety of tools including visitor guides, business directories, multiple social media platforms and business start-up guides. Fewer small organizations use these tools. When executive directors were asked about data bases they maintained, there was little difference between large and small organizations indicating that IMS may find some areas where technical assistance needs vary by the size, while in other areas, size is not a factor.

While Main Street districts are dominated by retail activities, residential and industrial uses are components of many downtowns and can provide the customers for the retailers and other businesses. Fewer than half (45.8%) of organizations reported efforts to strengthen non-retail uses. Survey data suggests a potential to strengthen Main Street districts by focusing more efforts on non-retail uses.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH IMS

MS executive directors look to IMS for technical assistance that will make their local programs more effective. When asked to prioritize the four points by training needs, executive directors ranked Economic Restructuring first (63.0%). Past training by IMS most often focused on Organization, with lesser emphasis

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on Economic Restructuring, Promotion and Design. IMS has an opportunity to redirect training to more closely meet the needs of executive directors and has offered several successful programs on these issues.

Executive directors reported that they prefer training to be more accessible by minimizing travel time and offering flexibility to accommodate board members and volunteers. Training could be held regionally, eliminating the need for overnight stays and training events for volunteers and local business owners could be delivered via webinar. Other formats, such as collaboration with other organizations or Main Street programs in neighboring states, and/or combining distance learning with on-site presentations are also possibilities being considered.

Local MS organizations receive technical assistance from sources other than IMS training. Information is disseminated via email, state and national websites, conference calls, and contact with experts and state staff. Technical assistance could be expanded with additional funding and a larger IMS staff.

Many state coordinating programs provide an online toolbox for use by local organizations. IMS could do this as well with Illinois' toolbox incorporating best practices of other states as well as unique tools that meet Illinois' needs. Executive directors requested that the toolbox contain contact information for resources located elsewhere as well as downloadable documents ranging from conference materials and templates for directories to marketing materials and volunteer guidebooks. An Illinois toolbox would assist smaller and lower budget organizations by providing resources not otherwise available to them.

Limited financial resources were cited as a significant obstacle to expanding the effectiveness of local MS programs. Other states have examples of grant programs that could be adapted for use in Illinois. Even small grants are of significant help to local organizations and could also increase the perceived value of participating in the MS program.

Many states have tiered Main Street programs allowing communities to participate as their resources and abilities permit. A tiered system or exploratory program are ways IMS could offer participation to communities with smaller budgets and staff than are eligible under the current requirements.

## OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Based on the survey results, discussions with the executive directors at the 2013 IMS State Conference, research on programs offered in other states, and best practices of IMS local organizations, following are options for future directions of IMS.

1. **Form a Statewide Steering Committee:** Executive directors requested more opportunities to participate in planning the activities and services offered by IMS. A steering committee will provide a vehicle for increased participation.
2. **Broaden the Financial Support Base:** Lack of financial resources is an obstacle to increasing the effectiveness of the local organizations. IMS can review experiences in other states for examples of financial support.
3. **Form Alliances with Support Organizations:** If IMS is to grow and meet requests by cities for services, it must maximize use of the resources available. Collaboration with other agencies and public or private organizations will enable IMS to offer programs that might not otherwise be possible.

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4. **Create an Exploratory Community Program:** Many communities are interested in starting Main Street organizations. An exploratory program would allow them to learn more about the Main Street Approach and allow IMS to grow the program in a manageable way.
5. **Establish a Credentialing Program:** A credentialing program can increase capacity by providing executive directors with recognition of their expertise and provide a focus for training options.
6. **Share Best Practices in MS Organizations:** Executive directors can share best practices through social media, a website, training sessions, community exchanges and other ways. This is a low cost way to bring new information to local organizations.
7. **Deliver Services on the IMS Website:** IMS can deliver more assistance to local organizations by using the internet as effectively as possible. Local organizations can access unique tools that they cannot find elsewhere along with links to resources currently available on other sites.
8. **Develop Training Responsive to Local MS Organization Needs:** Executive directors want to play a greater role in selecting training topics and formats. Interest is greatest in Economic Restructuring as a topic. A format that minimizes travel distance and time away from home would encourage attendance by executive directors as well as volunteers and local business owners.

## IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS

Many of these suggestions are already being considered and implemented. IMS is offering a new series of Economic Restructuring workshops. The workshops are held in multiple locations eliminating the need for overnight stays. The new training program has been enthusiastically received, with combined attendance of nearly 200 people at the first three events and positive feedback on evaluations. In addition to MS executive directors, the locations and topics have attracted MS board members, volunteers, downtown business owners and others interested in downtown revitalization.

The new training program is creating the basis for future collaboration with other organizations. Members of other groups interested in downtown revitalization have been invited to attend the workshops. Representatives from the Wisconsin and Missouri Main Street programs, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, the American Planning Association, and local and county government officials and staff are bringing their perspectives to IMS events. This not only sets the stage for collaborating on future efforts, it also increases visibility for IMS and fulfills MS executive directors' desire to participate in the larger economic development discussion.

A new webpage is being developed. This page will provide information requested by executive directors such as a calendar of events, conference materials, marketing materials, guidebooks, templates and contact information. Additional meetings are scheduled to further refine the toolbox.

Downtowns have the ability to unite the historic, social and economic characteristics of a community. The Main Street Four Point Approach has been successfully used to revitalize Illinois downtowns in the past. Illinois Main Street has demonstrated its ability to strengthen its program by improving the training and technical assistance offered, and is considering structural changes, creating new vehicles to work more closely with local executive directors, and collaborating with allied organizations. The past successes of local MS organizations and growing interest in the program provide a basis for expanded support of the Main Street program in Illinois.

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