

DART REPORT

Downtown Assessment Resource Team Visit



Ashtabula *October 28-29, 2008*

846 ½ East Main Street ♦ Columbus, Ohio ♦ 43205 ♦ 614.258.6200

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Introduction

Heritage Ohio's Downtown Assessment Resource Team spent one and a half days (October 28 & 29) in the City of Ashtabula to assess the district's revitalization needs and opportunities. The assessment process had several functions:

- To identify some of the commercial district's major challenges, opportunities, and needs;
- To provide community members with information about the Main Street approach to commercial district revitalization;
- To learn whether the Main Street Approach is an appropriate strategy for the City of Ashtabula; and
- To determine Ashtabula's readiness and potential to embrace the Main Street program.

The team formed its comments, observations and recommendations based on documents, personal interviews, meetings with community leaders, walking and driving tours through the Ashtabula commercial district, and the team's own experience in working with programs and community development corporations throughout the state of Ohio.

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National Main Street Center

The National Main Street Center (NMSC) is a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (National Trust). Created by a Congressional Charter in 1949, the National Trust is a nonprofit organization with over 275,000 members. As a leading advocate of historic preservation in the United States, the National Trust is committed to saving America's diverse historic environments and to preserving and revitalizing the livability of communities nationwide. Economic growth, urban revitalization, and the creation of new jobs are all issues the National Trust addresses through the rehabilitation of historic resources.

Established in 1980 by the National Trust, the NMSC helps communities of all sizes to revitalize their downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts. More than 1,900 towns and cities in 43 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico have participated in Main Street's comprehensive commercial revitalization program. During this time, approximately \$31.5 billion has been reinvested in Main Street commercial districts, creating 331,417 net new jobs, 72,387 net new businesses, and spurring more than 178,727 building rehabilitation projects. Participating communities have leveraged more than \$28.31 in new investment for every dollar used to support the local revitalization effort – a reinvestment ratio that makes the Main Street program one of the most successful economic development strategies in the nation. The NMSC also sponsors the National Main Street Network™, a professional membership program for organizations interested in commercial revitalization. It produces publications, newsletters and special reports on revitalization and preservation issues and serves as a clearinghouse for information on community development issues. The NMSC accomplishes its mission through the Main Street Four-Point Approach™.

The Main Street Program assists local partners to plan and implement a comprehensive revitalization strategy for their commercial districts. The foundation of the “Four Point” or “Main Street Approach” to downtown revitalization is preservation: using those elements of quality that have survived as assets upon which we can build a lasting, positive physical and emotional image for everyone who uses downtown. Historic Preservation is used as an economic development tool. It capitalizes on over-looked and underutilized assets, encourages imagination, sharpening of entrepreneurial skills and strong participation by the private sector.

The Four-Point Approach

The four point methodology works to create a total image for the community: Providing the retail/professional area with its necessary market niche, creating a cohesive visual identity unique to the community, and nurturing a cultural ambiance associated with the community's location, appearance, and way of life. The Main Street Approach gradually builds on existing resources and fosters improved community leadership and support on behalf of the central business district for the long term.

- **Organization** is the building of consensus and cooperation between the groups that play a role in the downtown. Many individuals and organizations in the community have a stake in the economic viability of the downtown.
- **Design** involves improving the downtown's image by improving its physical appearance – not just the appearance of buildings, but also of window displays, parking areas, signs, sidewalks, streetscapes, landscaping and all other elements that convey a visual message about the downtown.
- **Promotion** involves marketing the downtown's unique characteristics to shoppers, investors, new businesses, tourists, and others. Effective promotion creates a positive image of the downtown through retail promotional activity, special events and heritage tourism.
- **Economic Restructuring** involves strengthening the existing economic base of the downtown while diversifying it. Economic Restructuring activities include helping existing downtown businesses expand, recruiting new businesses, providing a balanced mix, converting unused space into productive property, and sharpening the competitiveness of downtown merchants.

The Eight Principles of Main Street

While the Main Street approach provides the format for successful revitalization, implementation of the four-point approach is based on eight principles that pertain to all areas of the revitalization effort:

1. **Comprehensive.** Commercial district revitalization is a complex process and cannot be accomplished through a single project. For successful and lasting results, a comprehensive approach must be used. Simply stated, *comprehensive* means working on all four points simultaneously.
2. **Incremental.** Small projects and simple activities lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the revitalization process and help develop skills so that more complex problems can be addressed and more ambitious projects undertaken. Starting with small projects creates progress and momentum.
3. **Self-help.** Local leaders must have the desire and the will to make the project successful. The Heritage Ohio provides direction, ideas and training; but continued and long-term success depends upon the involvement and commitment of the community.
4. **Public/Private Partnerships.** Both the public and private sectors have a vital interest in the economic health and physical stability of the district. Each sector has a role to play, and each must understand the other's strengths and limitations so that an effective partnership can be forged.
5. **Identifying and Capitalizing on Existing Assets.** Business districts must capitalize on the assets that make them unique. Every district has unique qualities – like distinctive buildings and human scale that give people a sense of belonging or businesses that have become local institutions. Main Street cannot create new landmarks or institutions; existing local assets must serve as the foundation for all aspects of the revitalization program.
6. **Quality.** Quality must be emphasized in every aspect of the revitalization program. This applies equally to each element of the program, from storefront design to promotional campaigns to educational programs.
7. **Change.** Changes in attitude and practice are necessary to improve current economic conditions. Public support for change will build as the program grows.
8. **Implementation-Oriented.** Activity creates confidence in the program and greater levels of participation. Frequent, visible changes are a reminder that the revitalization process is under way. Small projects at the beginning of the program pave the way for larger activities as the revitalization effort matures.

Heritage Ohio, Inc.

Heritage Ohio is a non-profit corporation organized to encourage redevelopment, and improvement of Ohio through its historic resources.

Heritage Ohio is the state-coordinating program for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Main Street" program in the State of Ohio. Incorporated as Downtown Ohio, Inc. in 1989, Heritage Ohio membership in has increased to include over six hundred (600) individuals, families, cities, organizations, consultants, and downtown development professionals throughout the State of Ohio. Heritage Ohio became the statewide partner with the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2000. The Board is dedicated to a statewide downtown revitalization program, and continues to work toward assisting self-motivated communities of all sizes. Heritage Ohio provides technical assistance, training, and networking in all facets of historic preservation and downtown development.

The Board of Trustees for Heritage Ohio is composed of twenty-one members, including ex-officio members from the Ohio Department of Development, Ohio Historic Preservation Office, National Trust Advisors and a municipal government. They represent a broad-based group of downtown professionals from small, medium and large cities throughout the State.

Heritage Ohio is a member of the International Downtown Association (IDA) and the National Main Street Network. Heritage Ohio also links its technical assistance services with the Ohio Department of Development (ODOD) in two ways. First, in working with the Office of Housing and Community Partnerships (OHCP) to develop fundable downtown-related projects in those communities interested in applying for the Downtown Revitalization Competitive Grant Program, Economic Development Loan Program, local Economic Development Revolving Loan Funds, and the Home Program. Secondly, acting as a conduit for other ODOD programs and resources and as an advocate for downtown revitalization issues related to ODOD.

Members have the opportunity to share knowledge, common experiences, and problems concerning management, planning and development in downtown areas. Heritage Ohio holds conferences and trainings annually across the state. Conferences focus on up-to-date downtown revitalization techniques and feature presentations from regional and/or nationally known speakers. A wide variety of downtown issues have been explored, including such topics as: competing with Wal-Mart; Special Improvement Districts; architectural design standards; parking; dealing with "white elephants"; and retail recruitment. Heritage Ohio members also receive reduced rates for conference registration and *Windows*, an informational newsletter.

Ohio Main Street Program

Established in 1997, the Ohio Main Street Program, administered by Heritage Ohio, is dedicated to empowering each community within the state to maintain, strengthen and revitalize the unique physical, economic, historical and cultural characteristics of its own downtown or city center.

Each year the Ohio Main Street Program selects communities on a competitive basis to become official state Ohio Main Street programs. These communities will receive technical support and training needed to restore their Main Street to centers of community activity and commerce.

Communities selected to participate in the Ohio Main Street Program will receive technical assistance, including:

- Volunteer and program manager training
- Advanced training on specific Downtown issues, such as marketing and promotion, business recruitment, volunteer development, market analysis, design, historic preservation and fundraising.
- On-site visits to help each community develop its strengths and plan for success
- Materials such as manuals and presentations
- Linkages to other national and state Main Street communities
- Opportunity to apply for Ohio Main Street grant program

Benefits of the Main Street Program include:

- Protecting and strengthening the existing tax base
- Increasing sales and returning revenues to the community
- Creating a positive community image
- Creating visually appealing and functional buildings
- Attracting new businesses
- Developing new housing opportunities in historic buildings
- Creating new jobs
- Increasing investment in the downtown
- Preservation of historic resources

ORGANIZATION

Observations

- ADDA is a great place to start with the community's revitalization efforts.
- Too much time and energy is spent debating Bridge Street vs. Main Avenue
- City of Ashtabula officials give every indication that they are willing to participate and be a partner in the efforts to revitalize downtown.
- The revitalization efforts up to this point have been the concern of only a few property owners and business owners and not the greater community.
- The organization lacks a strategic plan.
- The community seems ready for someone to take the lead on the revitalization effort.
- There is a lack of volunteers and volunteer opportunities.

Recommendations

- ADDA is a suitable vehicle for continuing downtown's revitalization efforts. The organization should consider a restructuring of the board of directors and strive to bring in new leadership representing all facets of the community.
- This organization and/or the city should consider joining Heritage Ohio as a "Network Member" to take advantage of benefits and education, while the program grows.
- Four Main Street committees need to be established, and committee chairs appointed. All committees will need to look for volunteers to fill committees. DART participants, local property owners and business owners would be the best place to start in staffing these committees. Also ask committee members to bring others they feel may be interested. This should be done whether or not Ashtabula plans to pursue Main Street designation.
- Consider holding a work-planning session so that each committee is coordinating their goals. Utilize the mini-visioning session held at the DART visit to formulate the beginning of goals and objectives to prioritize issues.
- Consult Heritage Ohio's Board Member Handbook for board, committee, officers, and staff job descriptions. Also utilize examples of bylaws and begin to formulate the organizational plan that will work in Ashtabula. Make sure all community interests and entities are involved at the board or board of advisor levels. Invite representatives from the city to sit on various committees that involve their work and interests. It will be much easier to work with them as you are planning, than finding out you are duplicating efforts at a later date.
- Seek out new people to get involved. The DART visit indicated a lack of involvement from younger generations. Young professionals should be utilized in the revitalization efforts. They are going to be the future leaders of your community and have more energy to give to the cause.

Fundraising

- The full board may need to be involved in the development of the initial funding strategy. Then it should be turned over to the Organization Committee to implement.

- Create a fundraising package, which includes: mission; committee structure and short and long term goals; board members; chronology of activities; DART visit summary; current budget, and three year budget.
- Preferred revitalization program funding mix is do-able in Ashtabula (1/3-1/3-1/3). As a long range goal: first third from the City of Ashtabula and perhaps Ashtabula County, the second third from membership, corporate sponsorship and donations, and the final third from foundations, grants, fundraising events and merchandise sales.
- Ask donors for a multi-year commitment or multi-year gifts (3 years). The Mayor may consider co-signing the corporate and foundation letters of request.
- Seek out community and family foundations, such as the Ashtabula Foundation, that may support this effort, invite them to sit on advisory board, ask for multi-year donations.
- Identify corporate donors; assign teams to visit and present fundraising package. Ask for multi-year financial support. Ashtabula has several stakeholders in or surrounding the district. These entities need to be involved both financially and as board members/committee members to ensure stability, partnership opportunities and cooperation/collaboration.
- Help identify corporate sponsors for any major Promotions Committee events (and indeed all other committee projects). The fundraising committee ‘controls’ these solicitations too, but acts in partnership with committee needs. Get all of the solicitation done in one visit to businesses, not multiple each year.
- Put membership-structure in place that pulls together all merchants, building owners, individuals...get marketing volunteers to establish strategy for attracting members. *Do not* confuse major donor support with membership campaign.
- You may want to consider some type of joint membership program with existing organizations, so that all organizations can be stronger. Contact Main Street Orville to find out how they, as a new organization have succeeded with a joint program. (Contact information can be found on Heritage Ohio’s website: www.heritageohio.org)
- Establish a recognition and thank you program for all solicitation appointments (funded or not) and all pledges and gifts.
- Keep those who declined solicitation visits or donation opportunities well informed, they may say yes next time, as you prove yourselves through this establishment phase.

Communications & Accountability

- The distinction needs to be clear that the Organization Committee communicates about the organization. The promotion committee communicates about downtown events and activities.
- Make sure you have correct contact information for all building and business owners. Decide what type of information and frequency you plan to communicate with them, and follow through. Plan to keep news flowing to the community, whether it’s about a building rehab, an upcoming event, new businesses, or exceptional volunteer stories. Plan to keep the organization in the news; take advantage of all media opportunities.

- How will you communicate with donors, merchants, members, and the community at large? Newsletter; E-news, web site, press releases to media?
- Consider establishing an on-going newspaper column to engage and educate the public.
- Provide a press/photo opportunity with each of your donors: perhaps at the \$500 or above giving level.
- A communications strategy with regional partners such as the Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development, Convention and Visitors Bureau should be developed.
- Establish an annual meeting to recognize progress.
- Plan to write an annual report to communicate with stakeholders.

Resource Management

- Office Space may be donated. Determine how to furnish and equip an office. You do have vacant commercial space that might be donated towards an office. This may be another opportunity to partner with your large stakeholders. They also have the ability to donate equipment, phone and Internet services, and employee/student assistance. The larger stakeholders might consider loaning expertise from their professional staff in a variety of applications.

Staff

- Ashtabula does not currently have a paid manager in place to focus on the commercial district. The identification and placement of a part-time manager may provide the needed catalyst to coordinate activities while funding is secured to pay for this position.
- Set a goal date for hiring a paid manager. Determine the amount of money needed to make that step.
- Write a job description and set personnel policies prior to hiring. These are available from Heritage Ohio.

Volunteer Management

- Board development; analyze strength and weaknesses of board, recruit new members as needed. There are excellent examples of board analysis, available from Heritage Ohio.
- Prepare recruitment and training materials for board.
- Determine how best to recruit, assign, train, and recognize initial volunteers who will populate committees.
- Begin a system to log volunteer hours. The current federal dollar value of a volunteer hour is \$19.51; this can be used to show the value of volunteer commitment.

Budget/Financial Reporting

- With executive committee and committee chairs, the Treasurer should draw-up a one-year and three-year budget. Set realistic goals as to where you want this organization to grow.

- Determination should be made what style of financial reports will be presented and on what frequency to the board.
- Procedures for expending funds should be in the form of a written policy.
- Make sure your organization is prepared to file appropriate papers with the Ohio Secretary of State and Attorney General's office.
- Make sure that if your revenue is over \$25,000, your organization is filing 990 forms with the IRS.
- Finally, Have Fun! What you are doing should be personally rewarding, as you act and plan on a vision for Ashtabula's future.

PROMOTION

Recommendations

NOTE: Ashtabula has two distinct downtown districts: Main Avenue and Bridge Street. The districts are separated by over a mile in distance and are not connected. The Heritage Ohio DART Visit focused on one district, Main Avenue, and for the purpose of this report, the findings will be noted for Main Avenue. However, the recommendations should be applied to both districts.

Image Development

- This category is basically the art of good public relations, which consists of everything from personal contacts to top quality graphics.
- An image campaign will help to create an identity/theme for Downtown Ashtabula, so that there isn't any question that you have 'arrived' in the business district. This can be achieved through physical improvements, consistent use of logo design and graphics.
- To develop a comprehensive promotional strategy that will be effective in the long-term and that will address the many target market opportunities in Ashtabula, an updated comprehensive market analysis should be completed for the district by the economic restructuring committee.
- Downtown Ashtabula needs a dedicated web site, which shows pictures, highlights businesses or business owners, shows available space (including photos), events, restaurants, etc. The only web presence for downtown was on the city's web site. There is also nothing specific about downtown listed on the Chamber web site.
- Promotional packages developed by this committee should be used for all four points of the main street approach. For example, they can be used for fundraising, business recruitment and tourism.
- The ADDA logo/identity should be publicized heavily and used in all marketing materials, signs and way finding, banners, and event materials. Business owners should be encouraged to use the 'downtown logo' in all of their advertising to promote a unique and cohesive district.
- Consider selling hats, t-shirts, and other advertising specialties with the downtown logo, or as give-a-ways at events.
- Make sure that the logo is utilized in all web sites that have links to the new downtown web site, including the Chamber and the City of Ashtabula. Also link these community web sites to the downtown site. Or consider one community website that incorporates any/all of these entities to show unity.
- Develop a shopping and dining guide which also has a map of the district and a list of all the members of the ADDA to help visitors find businesses and services located in the district. When completed, this brochure can be distributed to the Ohio Department of Transportation to help promote the district statewide. Ideally, this brochure would include both the Main Avenue and Bridge Street businesses.
- Develop a "Shop Local" campaign to help increase the foot traffic in the downtown district.
- Be sure to include a mission statement on all printed materials to remind the public of what you are working toward.

Retail Events

- Retail events work to stimulate the local economy by promoting merchants, goods and services.

- Due to competition with the greater Cleveland Ohio/Erie Pennsylvania economies, identify what is unique and special about downtown Ashtabula's goods and services. For instance, a series of press releases that personalize the business owners, workers, servers, and patrons. Give your customer service a personality. Real people sell downtowns.
- The business people of downtown Ashtabula must have knowledge of each other's products and services before they can work together to cross-promote.
- Arrange morning or afternoon tours of different businesses each month. Ashtabula cannot sell the concept of personalized service, if businesses owners do not have a sense of the downtown market in its entirety.
- Evaluate the holidays. Plan in advance the holidays you will promote and how you plan to celebrate.
- Be sure to start with good lead-time in regard to holiday promotion, so that local businesses owners can fit their business promotion into the theme of the downtown.
- Businesses should be open when the customers are available. If there is a downtown event, the individual businesses must take this opportunity to advertise that their hours complement the event and suggest how their patrons can take advantage of their products.
- Whether online or on paper, they have to convey the advantages, quality and services that businesses provide in downtown that are distinguishable from the strip mall or big box.
- Web links are critical in today's economy. It is a first impression point for potential customers. The downtown revitalization group could contract professional services from a web developer as a group.
- Help retailers and businesses consider how the "experience economy" can be translated to their store.
- Remember the five senses in setting the mood for the customer's experience. Touch, sight, smell, taste and sound.
- Work with the design committee so that display windows have a "WOW" factor, which entices consumers during retail events.
- Parking was identified as the number one challenge in downtown Ashtabula. Business owners should work with their clients, so they know where the most convenient parking is available. Additionally, they should keep their employees out of their customer's parking spots.
- Counteract slow sale periods with retail promotional events for increased return.
- Develop a public relations concept(s) to keep the public informed about upcoming events. This could be a bi-monthly newsletter distributed electronically, scheduled (periodic) press releases about upcoming events, or public service announcements on the public access radio and television stations.

Special Events

- Ashtabula should develop more special events in the downtown to attract more foot traffic. Some suggestions are a Farmers Market (not on the same days as the Bridge Street Farmer's Market), concerts, holiday promotions, etc. Look to other Ohio Main Street programs for ideas. Always evaluate each event so that the time and money spent produce maximum results.
- Create an eighteen-month calendar, so that business owners can coordinate their own promotion and product order with those events.
- It is very important for downtown Ashtabula to feature local restaurants at every event.

- During special events, business people should participate with a theme, so that their business seems like a part of the bigger event.
- Special events bring people downtown. It is still the business owner's responsibility to bring them in the door.
- Encourage community groups of all types to use the downtown as a staging ground for their events.
- The downtown revitalization group does not need to run to ALL special events. Rather, it encourages the downtown as the center of community events.
- Ideas for outside group events: high school homecoming parade, car show, Gus Macker basketball tournament, etc.

Heritage Tourism

- Heritage Tourism is traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past.
- Key points: save your heritage, share it with others, and reap the economic benefits of tourism.
- Take advantage of the Ashtabula County Region. Many of the strengths listed in the Strengths and Weaknesses exercise are located in other destinations. Promote yourself as the regional hub.
- Once again, the local restaurants can be promoted as the practical landing place after, before or during other heritage tourism excursions.
- Cross-promote your downtown for the visitors at the heritage sites in your region. It's a simple as putting your brochure at the information table. A common sense idea that is often not taken advantage of by historic downtown districts.
- Heritage tourists are more demanding of historical integrity. Sell Ashtabula's historic district.
- Develop a walking tour guide that complements this demographic.

ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING

Observations

- The Ashtabula district benefits from a growing residential population and its proximity to Cleveland. This creates demand for business owners and a chance to capitalize on a much larger market.
- The district has experienced some additional vacancy recently as the economy has lagged, but first floor vacancy in the core downtown district isn't that bad.
- Perhaps a focus group could be convened to understand the challenges to starting a business in Ashtabula, work with the city to streamline the process, make sure it is truly supportive, not perceived as hurdles.
- Know your businesses, know their concerns and challenges, and make sure the target market is understood.

Recommendations

Market Analysis

- A market analysis needs to be completed for the district. You will need to pay particular attention to the leakage of consumer purchasing to other markets. Leakage analysis points to potential retail and business opportunities for future development.
- Use the University of Wisconsin's site for Market Analysis, considered one of the best resources in the country. <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/index.cfm>
- Conduct a series of information gathering surveys including a zip code survey and intercept surveys to get a better understanding of district users.
- The community should give careful consideration to what the right mix of business might be for the commercial district.
- Use the market analysis to identify what other opportunities exist, your ER teams should begin to work with existing businesses to see if they have the ability to expand product or services into those markets, or whether there is a need to recruit a new business.
- It is important that a comprehensive analysis of space—its use, how much is filled and vacant, price per square foot, ownership, lease terms, location, etc.—is compiled into a data base. This information is necessary for understanding the economics of your downtown. It also means that the downtown organization is prepared when opportunities for business retention, recruitment and expansion occur.

Business Retention, Recruitment and Expansion

- Retention of businesses that fit the desired mix in the commercial area should be given a high priority. It is important to work with existing businesses to strengthen their bottom line. This may include a better diversity of products, improved customer service, creative merchandising and physical improvements to the exterior and interior details of the establishments. These are the details that set Ashtabula apart from other retail establishments in outlying strip centers and regional shopping environments.
- In Main Street keep in mind, retention first, expansion second, recruitment third. If the environment is not "secure" new businesses should not and will not locate here.
- An ER team should be conversing with downtown businesses about their health and what can be done to help them stay viable.

- Create networking opportunities for the businesses perhaps by way of monthly, informal coffee get-togethers before the business day begins, so that they get to know each other, and the services offered. Cross promotion is also a retention tool.
- Work with regional colleges and your Small Business Development Center to bring educational resources to individuals operating businesses in the district and to help with some of the data gathering, analysis and strategies.
- The program should consider incentives such as revolving loan funds, grants and tax abatements. These tools encourage rehabilitation and re-use of historic structures. Working with the design committee to educate downtown property owners on the preservation toolbox is essential. Making sure they are aware of all tax credits, easements and other financing tools will help them realize their goals as well as yours.
- A business-clustering plan should be developed.

Upper Floor Development

- Identify if there are any code/zoning issues that hinder developing upper floor residential housing. Support what works, work on the roadblocks.
- Many communities have upper floor tours to familiarize the community with the spaces available. It is a growing market, be pro-active about creating the residential/commercial community.

DESIGN

Observations

- Downtown Ashtabula stakeholders have a great opportunity to improve their streetscape's appeal. The streetlights have already been done, as well as the relocation of wires from the main thoroughfare.
- Downtown anchor buildings are currently underutilized/vacant and in real danger of being lost if feasible redevelopment plans are not explored
- Along these lines, downtown Ashtabula has some absolute "undiscovered" gems such as the theater building that, once properly rehabilitated, would help to position the district as a downtown destination.
- The park area at Walnut Boulevard and West First Street, though not located within the boundaries of the central business district, is currently underutilized and could potentially be enhanced to capture more tourist traffic
- Individual properties in Ashtabula are listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP); however, there is currently no downtown district NRHP listing
- The mix of residential buildings with commercial buildings is a distinguishing characteristic of the community (the small town atmosphere was identified as important). Without overlay zoning to protect these structures, they may be lost to development.
- There is no formal design review in place to protect the architectural importance of historic downtown buildings.
- Small and modest sized buildings are important components of the downtown streetscape.
- Any infill construction should be compatible to existing construction (lot setback, buildings scale, and rhythm).
- Ashtabula County benefits from a rich tourist base while downtown Ashtabula receives a disproportionately diminished share of the tourist revenue of the county; however, downtown Ashtabula has the seeds, from a design perspective, to capitalize on capturing more tourist dollars.
- Signage focused on downtown Ashtabula could accomplish critical goals: helping to convey an attractive gateway to visitors/tourists, directing visitors into the downtown, helping visitors find appropriate public parking.

Recommendations

Education and Technical Assistance

- Protect the historic assets Ashtabula is so fortunate to have. Once historic buildings are lost they can never be replaced. In almost every instance what is seen as a suitable replacement is far inferior to the existing structure. What makes downtown Ashtabula unique is its historic buildings and authentic feel and that must be protected to revitalize.
- Work to educate building owners and tenants about appropriate design for their buildings. Flood the community with historic images so that everyone knows how the buildings were meant to look.
- Have clear lines of communication with building owners, so that partnerships are built based on mutually rewarding goals.
- Though Design Guidelines or an Architectural Review Ordinance is not Ashtabula's first priority, educating for the future can start now; reach out to property owners, realtors, contractors, and building supply outlets, on web sites and with librarians.
- However, in the near future Ashtabula may want to apply for another CDBG downtown grant and a local design review ordinance will need to be in place as part of the grant's eligibility requirements.
- Make sure building owners, architects and contractors are familiar with both the federal 10% and 20% rehabilitation tax credit programs of which their buildings might be able to take advantage.

- The program should keep tabs on the state 25% tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic properties, and should maintain contact with its state representative and senator to promote its continued use. Although future funding of the Ohio Historic Preservation Tax Credit is not assured, a new round of applications for rehabilitation projects will be opened in 2009. A fully funded state tax credit could be a boon to districts such as downtown Ashtabula to jump-start preservation efforts.
- Creating an architectural scavenger hunt can involve families and create renewed appreciation for the architecture in Ashtabula.
- Brochures created for architectural walking tours can be used by residents and tourists, these also support that renewed appreciation of area's architecture.

Private Improvements

- The Main Street program can probably have the greatest impact on improving the appearance of downtown Ashtabula buildings by encouraging business and property owners to make upgrades and by providing information regarding cost-effective improvements.
- Work with area financial institutions to build the best packages for redevelopment funding, and communicate these opportunities to building owners.
- Given the current economy, it will be much more difficult to entice out-of-town developers to fix downtown Ashtabula's problem buildings. However, demolishing your anchor buildings will seriously hamper your future efforts to market your downtown as a singular tourist destination. Look to your community leaders to become the re-developers of your downtown. An emerging trend has been for local CICs and LLCs to take on downtown redevelopment projects of vacant & underutilized buildings.
- Stakeholders should explore with the Ohio Historic Preservation Office the eligibility of placing downtown Ashtabula on the National Register of Historic Places. As building owners commit to investing in the rehabilitation and upgrade of their buildings, tax credit incentives at both the federal and state levels will help defray expenses.

Public Improvements

- In the future, when an ordinance is in place, petition the city to have the Ashtabula Main Avenue Commercial District designated as a local historic district, and to become a CLG (Certified Local Government). Local historic district designation will provide protection against incompatible alterations or demolitions, and may make it easier to recruit preservation-minded developers in the future.
- The municipal government and ADDA should work closely together to explore the possibility of securing Tier II funding from the Ohio Department of Development (the CDBG downtown grant mentioned above) to assist with streetscape and building improvements. Numerous Main Street communities have tapped into this fund multiple times to leverage private investment while improving the look and safety of their downtown district.
- Although the Main Street program will not have direct control over zoning and urban design overlay decisions, the Main Street program should closely monitor the city's review of any Main Avenue projects and actively advocate for the district's needs and concerns.

Streetscape

- Start this year and next with flowers, banners, graduate into investment in appropriate street furniture.
- Public art should be integrated into the streetscape, partner with the schools to create a program. And allow families to participate making their mark in Ashtabula.

- Kiosks, particularly at the trailhead of the Western Reserve Greenway, can orient visitors, and hopefully bring them into town. Kiosk content can include a calendar of events, a downtown map showing store names, types, and locations, and historical content promoting Ashtabula's past. Cyclists may return to take advantage of what the City of Ashtabula has to offer.

Beautification

- Volunteers can help with clean up days and creating an ethic that prioritizes cleanliness. Evaluate problem areas and brainstorm on solutions
- Work with business to provide support for the best window presentation to market their goods and services, any vacant windows should be filled with creative and interesting displays.
- Heritage Tourists want to experience authentic history and to reconnect and learn from the past. Downtown Ashtabula has the potential to position itself better as the heart of a quaint Lake Erie port town. Its historic, authentic building stock has the potential to better serve tourists and residents, and if its historic design qualities are better promoted, downtown stakeholders should reap the rewards of increased use and visitation to the downtown.

Visioning

DART participants talked about Ashtabula, what was valued and what their wishes for the future would be. The list was configured under the 4- point approach to Main Street, so that volunteers could begin creating work plans, to make these wishes reality.

Ashtabula Mission/Role

- Bring public and private sector together
- Get community involved in events
- Generate new financial opportunities (grants, fundraisers, etc.)
- Develop an image and marketing plan
- Develop upper stories for residential
- Strengthen business through education
- Understand true identity - develop common theme
- Bring all groups and people together for a cohesive revitalization effort
- Be a community organizer
- Become a unified voice for downtown
- Create a building and business inventory
- Develop community awareness of downtown and downtown organizations
- Create shared vision and buy-in
- Communicate to the whole community, not just business or property owners
- Strategic and short term and long term planning
- Visit other communities
- Other entities become vocal and visible
- Bring together new partners
- Focus energy and efforts
- Identify assets
- Become district watchdog
- Shop local
- Develop new events
- Fill store fronts

Vision for Downtown

- Uniform
- Clean
- Quality retail and customer service
- Variety of shops
- Green space
- Safe
- Walkable
- Develop brand
- Visually appealing
- Unique
- Mixed use
- Sense of history
- High quality
- Downtown housing
- Friendly and inviting
- Accessible
- Community pride
- Specialty shops
- Parking
- Family friendly
- Common theme for all seasons
- Ambience
- Vibrant day and night
- Identify parking
- Youth involvement

Strategic Work Plan

- **Board**
 - **1 year**
 - Develop strategic plan
 - Raise money to support program
 - Recruit committee members
 - Develop partnerships
 - Organize community
 - Be a unified voice for downtown

- **Organization committee**
 - **1 year**
 - Bring public and private sector together
 - Develop fundraisers
 - Recruit volunteers
 - Develop new partnerships
 - Create newsletter

- **Design committee**
 - **1 year**
 - Remove islands and dimples
 - Repair parking deck
 - Educate merchants about parking
 - Bike racks
 - Signage package
 - Create historic district and design guidelines
 - Downtown visual plan
 - Enforceable legislation for storefront exteriors (to clean up)

 - **5 year**
 - Renovate Carlisle and Hotel
 - Connecting WR bike trail, completing walkway to lighthouse, additional access to water

- **ER Committee**
 - **1 year**
 - Start-up guide to starting a biz downtown (permits, etc)
 - Gain control of vacant buildings
 - Take ownership of hotel & Carlisle

- Increase visibility of law enforcement
 - Attract anchor retail tenant
 - Code enforcement
 - Entrepreneur development
- **5 year**
 - Filling all vacancies (storefronts & upper floors)
- **Promotions Committee**
 - **1 year**
 - Determine downtown theme
 - Create downtown image and promote
 - Determine target audience
 - Develop event series
 - Shop local campaign