

Rebuild America and Main Street: Partners in Preservation

Rebuild America partnerships in West Virginia, North Carolina and Mississippi have gotten a running start in the launch of their partnerships by affiliating with established Main Street programs in their communities. Founded in 1980 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Main Street strives to revitalize and stimulate community economic development through historic preservation. The Main Street program has been active in redevelopment efforts involving some 1,400 communities across the nation.

Main Street and Rebuild America share a lot of common ground. Both are community-based programs that stress community reinvestment as a means of stimulating economic development and job creation. Both cast a wide net in developing a broad base of support from the business community, local government and nonprofit groups. Both strive to leverage resources to implement improvement programs. And both bring strengths to the table that can benefit the other. For example, with an established Main Street program, the groundwork has been laid and a number of important relationships are already in place. An affiliating Rebuild America program can substantially reduce its start-up time by working within the existing framework of a Main Street program.

Getting a Head Start

“When a Rebuild America partnership links up with a Main Street program, it has a tremendous head start,” says **Judy Dyer**,

Rebuild America program representative with the Energy Efficiency Program of the **West Virginia**

Development Office (WVDO). Dyer should know. Since its inception last July, the WVDO partnership has helped pair six Main Street programs with new Rebuild America partnerships. All of the partnerships have significantly reduced their start-up time through their association with Main Street, she says.

“Rebuild America adds another piece to the pie for Main Street,” she says. “Main Street is involved in a lot of exterior design, but has a learning curve with energy efficiency. Bringing Rebuild America into the picture allows a holistic look at the opportunities available for improving a building while retaining its original character. It’s a win-win situation for the building owner and everyone involved.”

The WVDO partnership has been working exclusively with Main Street programs to spawn Rebuild America partnerships. The state of Mississippi is following a similar course with the launch of **Rebuild Mississippi**. Led by **Wes Miller** of the Mississippi Department of Economic and Community Development, Rebuild Mississippi intends to develop Rebuild America partnerships that tie into Main Street communities in that state.

A History with Main Street

Shelby, NC was among the first five communities in the country to join Main Street 19 years ago. The Uptown Shelby Association operates the town’s Main Street program and, for the past three years, its **Rebuild Shelby** partnership. **Ted Alexander** is at the helm of both.

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The focus of Shelby's Main Street effort is a 22-block area within the central business district and includes a large portion of Central Shelby, a historic district on the National Register. The Main Street program has stimulated a \$20 million private reinvestment in buildings in the Shelby historic district. Rebuild Shelby subsequently has introduced energy-efficient features to many of these buildings. Alexander says that Rebuild Shelby, which includes the entire town and county, is an important vehicle for extending community improvement beyond the Main Street boundaries.

"Rebuild Shelby is a program that can benefit the whole community," Alexander says. "We want to be able to work with everyone."

Facing the Challenges

Both Alexander and Dyer agree that performing energy retrofits in historic Main Street districts is not without its challenges.

"There needs to be a balance between making energy improvements and preserving the character of historic buildings," Alexander notes. "Something that is energy efficient may detract from the building."

For this reason, Rebuild Shelby advocates repair and retention of existing windows in historic buildings, over replacement.

"We try to be sensitive and not recommend improvements that will compromise the character of a building," says Dyer. "We work with the Main Street West Virginia design consultant to ensure the historic integrity of buildings."

How Main Street Works

Designated Main Street communities go through a lengthy approval process with the state offices and must be able to commit financial and human resources for at least three years prior to approval, says Dyer. Eligible communities have a designated downtown and a core area within that district.

Main Street communities must secure their own funding, draw participation and resources from many community sectors, develop a plan, prepare a case study, and establish these four committees: design; organization; promotion; and economic restructuring. Main Street state offices help with organization and provide technical assistance. The program tracks the amount of public and private reinvestment, the number of buildings improved, and the number of jobs and businesses created and lost.

"A Main Street designation is very prestigious – it signals a level of commitment and priority," notes Dyer. "Like Rebuild America

partnerships, it's an initiative created cooperatively that reflects the coordination of business and governments."



Rebuild Ripley Main Street team convenes to hammer out an action plan. Program Manager Marsha Geyer (standing) leads discussion. Seated from left: Ollie Harvey, Mayor of Ripley; Tom Armstead, Ripley City Treasurer; Fred Clark, City National Bank; and Moni Landis, Main Street Ripley co-chair.

Main Street-Rebuild America Connections

Just how quickly do Main Street-Rebuild America pairings progress? A look at developments in West Virginia provides some clues. The Main Street-Rebuild America partnerships, which were created during the past one to 10 months, are in varying stages of evolution. WVDO, which provides free building engineering analyses to partnerships, has been on a fast track, performing analyses on 500,000 square feet of buildings targeted by Main Street-Rebuild partnerships during the past six months.

Rebuild Main Street Morgantown is in the midst of its first retrofit: The 87,000 square-foot Hotel Morgan is a turn-of-the-century building on the National Register. **Rebuild Preston-Main Street Kingwood** and **Rebuild Main Street Ripley** have completed action plans and have arranged low-interest loans with local banks to finance retrofitting. **Rebuild Main Street Philippi** and the above-mentioned partnerships are involved in building audits. **Rebuild Main Street Beckley** held an Earth Day luncheon in April as its partnership formation event. And **Rebuild Main Street Bluefield** was launched in April and is planning a June 23 partnership formation event.

In the coming months, Dyer will turn her attention toward the other 10 Main Street partnerships in West Virginia. She plans to provide training to West Virginia partnerships so they can perform engineering analyses in-house to help ensure the continuation of the program and move the partnerships toward self sustainability.

"We believe success occurs when the community takes ownership and pride in the Main Street-Rebuild America initiative," says Dyer. "We assist by providing support, but they make it happen."

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