

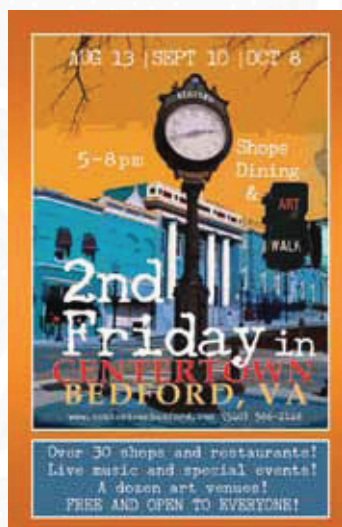


# Bold Dominion:

## Virginia's Quarter-Century Communities Lengthen Their Strides

By Douglas Jackson, Virginia Main Street

During its 25 years as a Main Street community, Bedford, Virginia, has provided its historic district with careful stewardship. Well-tended storefronts speak to the pride of merchants and property owners. On one street, there's a new mural, while another boasts a new wayfinding sign. Improvements are incremental and ongoing.





*Far left: Located near Bedford, Smith Mountain Lake attracts many visitors who come to the downtown for the farmers' market and weekend events.  
Left: Staunton, Virginia, streetscape*

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The narrow streets of this county seat slope with the hills of the Blue Ridge, and looking out at them, Bedford Main Street President Ginger Bell appears thoughtful. “The work’s never done,” she says. “Even if we achieve our mission, we’ll have to maintain it,” the antiques dealer adds with a smile. “That’s the nature of our work.”

Simply stated, determination like that can serve a Main Street program well, and in the land affectionately nicknamed “Old Dominion” for its loyalty to England in the 1600s, that steadfastness might be part of the culture in Virginia communities. But the Main Street Four-Point Approach® is also about challenging current conditions and conventional economic development strategies, and that can feel a bit riskier.

## In the end, you’ve got to deliver

Bedford’s weekend events enliven the farmers’ market and a small central plaza, attracting residents and visitors who hike the Peaks of Otter, tour the National D-Day Memorial, and relax at nearby Smith Mountain Lake. Yet Dan Plattus, Bedford Main Street program manager, has had to work hard to encourage business owners to

keep stores open during the hours convenient for most shoppers. “We’re in their stores on a regular basis,” says Plattus. “Lately it seems like every day.”

Bedford is one of only three designated communities that have participated in the Virginia Main Street program since it was established in 1985. Unsurprisingly, the city experienced both highs and lows during that time, and a stretch in early 2009 spent without a paid program manager created a gap during which the merchants and some longstanding board members disinvested.

The organization restructured a year ago and now it’s working hard to prove again that the Main Street Approach – when done right – works. The merchant community is a primary stakeholder group in downtown districts, and given that most Bedford businesses are sole proprietorships, the group of busy entrepreneurs can be difficult to bring together, much less *act* together.

Yet on a recent Friday night, 30 out of 36 retail and restaurant merchants, responding to the requests of board members and program staff, stayed open late as part of a *Second Fridays* after-hours event (see sidebar *Dan’s Tips* on page 18 to encourage your business owners to stay open late, too).

“Getting that participation was something to celebrate,” says Bell. “It took a lot of repeated communication and a little risk. First we had to stick our neck out a little and assure folks that yes, this would work. Merchants invested both time and money in the effort. Then we had to get aggressive with our marketing to make it happen.”

Billboard advertising of the district on an adjacent state highway, radio, and print advertising for the event, and cooperative print advertising of the merchants are bringing new visitors to town and store owners have responded to the new energy. At the second monthly event, 29 stores stayed open.

## Creating a place of opportunity

Six counties to the east, the city of Franklin pursues the Main Street Approach in a very different setting. The hills have flattened in a long stretch toward the sandy coast, and from the edge of town, the Blackwater River provides a quick link to North Carolina’s Albemarle Sound and the Atlantic Ocean. Until recently, this was paper country; in April, the International Paper Company closed a plant that employed 1,100 people.



# Dan's Tips: Working with Merchants to Extend Store Hours

## *Put personal energy and enthusiasm behind the effort.*

Many efforts die at the idea stage, perhaps adding to a pile of empty promises. To engage merchants effectively, you have to have a sense of commitment. When a district tries something new, you don't just stick your neck out a little, you thrust it out there. Business owners have to know that you're going to do everything in your power to make it happen and make it succeed.

## *Engage merchant leaders up front.*

Ask a few opinion makers to sign up early. Encourage them to talk to others, and let them know you'll be dropping their names when encouraging others. It's an important way they can demonstrate their leadership.

## *Commit to a series.*

Build a reliability factor into the strategy. By committing to do our extended hours on every second Friday for at least six months, we were able to advertise them all at once and give some time for word of mouth to spread.

## *Spread news from store to store.*

Because all of the merchants are in the stores during the main part of the event, it's important that someone walk through the district and touch base with each merchant. It helps build excitement and share what's happening out on the streets.

## *Measure the outcome of activities.*

Survey both merchants and visitors from the start. Find out what attracted visitors and how businesses fared. A raffle helps encourage visitors to answer questions.

## *Tweak it.*

Use the survey information to make changes from event to event. It will improve outcomes and demonstrate commitment to the event's success.

## *Celebrate at closing time.*

Arrange for a restaurant to host a special event for visitors to the district and merchants. This helps reinforce the community-building aspect of the event.

**By Dan Plattus, Bedford Main Street Manager**

The lifeblood of the community throughout the 20th century, the mill employed more than 3,000 people in the late 1990s. That's a lot of jobs in a community of just over 8,000 people.

People in Franklin aren't the type to wave white flags, having rebuilt in the last decade after a devastating flood caused by Hurricane Floyd. The river crested at historic heights and put downtown Franklin awash.

Rebuilding a job base means a new approach, according to Downtown Franklin Association, Inc., Board Member Nancy Parrish. "We've been living in the shadow of the paper mill in more ways than one," says Parrish. "With the mill and the jobs that came with it, there was a welcome stability. Losing that, we recognize that our future looks much different than our past, so, like a lot of places in the country, we're trying to renew a sense of entrepreneurship. We see our role now as helping the community make that cultural shift."

Parrish is the small business development manager for the town's business incubator, which is housed in a historic four-story brick building built in 1907 as a buggy factory. After subsequent uses for screen door and window manufacturing and peanut storage, the building is now home to 28 emerging companies, and of the seven companies that have graduated from the space, three have opened downtown Franklin locations. "Our goal now," says Parrish, "is to focus on micro-entrepreneurs – the skilled workers who have an idea or hobby that they're passionate about and willing to do the hard work that it takes to start a business."

In July, Virginia Main Street convened the statewide network in Franklin for a focused look at strategies to create a vibrant marketplace downtown. The event, *Cultivating an Entrepreneurial Downtown*, brought together the knowledge of the 21 designated Virginia Main Street communities and representatives of many of the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's 75 commercial district affiliates. National Trust Main Street Center economic restructuring expert Todd Barman challenged participants to consider how they attract not just businesses but entrepreneurs.

"To attract entrepreneurs and investors to your district you need to sell them on their ability to become part of a successful place," Barman told the group. "The bottom line is that they will need to become confident in their ability to make money and earn

*Bedford Main Street President Ginger Bell and Main Street Manager Dan Plattus have worked hard to get downtown merchants to extend their business hours.*







*The people of Franklin, Va., are a sturdy breed. It's been 10 years since Hurricane Floyd flooded the community with more than 10 feet of water. Residents rebuilt their town but are now facing another crisis, with the loss of a plant that employed 1,000 people.*

## Online Resources to Support Micro-Enterprises

Many communities have access to resource organizations that provide loans, training, and technical assistance to very small businesses. Employing between one and five full-time workers in equivalent positions, businesses in this category are identified as micro-enterprises. For more information on micro-enterprise development strategies, check out the following organizations:

- Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO): [www.aeoworks.org](http://www.aeoworks.org).
- Virginia Microenterprise Network (VMN): [www.vamicro.org](http://www.vamicro.org).
- Center for Rural Entrepreneurship: [www.ruraleship.org](http://www.ruraleship.org).

a return on their investment. Providing a compelling vision of a fully functioning future marketplace will help. Engaging everyone in working toward that shared vision is what Main Street programs do."

Virginia Main Street Coordinator Jeff Sadler believes that the renewed focus on the entrepreneur is timely. "The community-based groups leading Main Street efforts tend to get pigeon holed, most typically as event producers," Sadler says, "but there's an important aspect to their efforts that should be encouraging entrepreneurial and investment activity."

In Franklin that effort is taking shape in the form of a collaborative strategy to provide technical assistance, training, and a micro-loan fund for the town and surrounding Southampton County. The strategy is funded in part with a small planning grant from the Virginia Enterprise Initiative

(VEI). The state-funded program supports organizations that provide training, technical assistance, and loans to businesses with one to five employees. Like Virginia's Main Street program, it is housed within the Department of Housing and Community Development and managed by Sadler, who has restructured the program in the past year to extend its support to very small businesses seeking locations in Main Street communities.

While Franklin's efforts to foster a culture of entrepreneurship are still developing, an engaged and talkative crowd at the weekly summer concert down by the river stands as testimony to commitment to the place. "It's our community, our home," says resident and Downtown Franklin, Inc., Executive Director Dan Howe, "and it's a city worth investing in."

*Through a small business incubator managed by Main Street Board Member Nancy Parrish (bottom) and located in a former buggy factory (below), Franklin is focusing on "micro-entrepreneurs" to revive its economy. The incubator is home to 28 emerging companies.*







*Dedicated as Virginia's first pedestrian mall in 1974, the Loudoun Street Mall in Winchester, Va., spans four city blocks at the center of a 45-block historic district.*



*The Union Jack Pub, located in a restored 1878 Victorian cast-iron building, is one of the businesses helping to create a vibrant, mixed-use district along the Loudoun Street Mall.*

## Sample Recommendations from the Winchester Downtown Living report

1. Maximize the use of existing tax incentives as well as other incentives, such as loans and public/private partnerships.
2. Improve the perceived security and safety of both the primary and secondary areas through community policing, lighting improvements, and public relations outreach.
3. Prepare a general schematic/concept plan for the focus area that identifies opportunities for the desired types of development on specific parcels.
4. For underutilized publicly owned properties and larger institutional properties like downtown church parking lots, prepare detailed plans that establish specific incentives for potential development scenarios.
5. Create a sense of place or an identity for the Old Town Neighborhood District. Express community identity and provide for community social life in the public realm through beautification, street art, pocket parks, and unique styles of lighting and signage. Sidewalks must effectively become the living rooms of the neighborhood.

## Renewing the mix on the mall

For Winchester, a city of 26,000 at the top of the Shenandoah Valley, new district energy comes in the form of a coordinated strategy to promote the development of housing along one of the nation's few remaining pedestrian malls.

The Loudoun Street Mall, dedicated as Virginia's first pedestrian mall in 1974, spans four city blocks at the center of a 45-block historic district and incorporates four lots that have centered the town since the early 1700s.

The mall project replaced a problematic stormwater drainage system, ending the flooding of downtown stores, and incorporated aesthetic improvements, including the removal of overhead wires and signs. Ten years of planning and stakeholder engagement culminated in the addition of landscaping and street furniture to create Virginia's first pedestrian mall.

"Just like other pedestrian malls across the country, ours has struggled over the years," says Old Town Development Board President Kimberly Sowers, "but in the past five years, we've started to see some remarkable successes. While taking cars off the street may have been a way of segregating uses, the reintroduction of housing on the Loudoun Street Mall can be seen as a way of mixing it up again. We're facilitating a true mixed-use district. For Winchester, now it's not a question of cars or no cars, but of a vibrant 24-hour community with a mix

of uses or just more of the same struggles. To do nothing would be to go backward in the revitalization of our downtown."

The Old Town Development Board (OTDB) – the city's Main Street program – supported recent amendments to the city's zoning ordinance and residential density standards to encourage housing development in and around the downtown area. "Removing the barrier of the cumbersome conditional use permit that used to be required for any housing development on the mall was a major step in encouraging property owners to consider residential development," says OTDB Executive Director Karen Helm. Helm contributed to the city's fall 2009 report, *Promoting Residential Living in Downtown Winchester*, which identified additional challenges and recommendations to be addressed (see the *Sample Recommendations sidebar* at left).

Despite the national economic downturn, the market is responding to Winchester's push for downtown housing. Two of the mall's key historic landmark buildings have been rehabbed to accommodate second- and third-floor upscale housing. Constructed more than 130 years ago, the Weaver and Lovett buildings have been vacant or under-utilized for at least 40 years. Collectively, their rehabilitation has added 13 architecturally unique apartments, each with modern amenities, to downtown living.

In addition to historic luxury residences, Winchester has welcomed new construction that complements the mall's historic structures.





*Many buildings along the Loudoun Street Mall are being rehabbed to accommodate second- and third-floor upscale housing. The renovation of two century-old buildings on the mall has added 13 architecturally unique apartments to the downtown.*

One infill residential project offers fully furnished single-bedroom units on short-term leases, with a target market of business people moving to the area.

Students will be moving in as well. The next project slated for the mall is the rehabilitation of a historic hardware store building that has been empty since 1993. Shenandoah University will purchase the building, oversee the historic tax credit project, and house up to 35 adult students. “This will bring a vibrant, young population downtown,” says Winchester City Council President Jeff Buettner. “And that hopefully is the catalyst that brings about filling up some of our empty storefronts along the pedestrian mall.”

Helm says that the ongoing effort is just part of a larger strategy. In addition to removing residential development barriers and painting a picture of the kind of development the community wants to see, Winchester has converted surrounding one-way streets to two lanes of traffic after 40 years of hurrying people along. “Now we’re focused on being more inviting,” says Helm. “It means good things for the district, and it’s a responsibility. We’re attracting investors and residents with the promise of a high quality of life in a downtown setting.”

## A measure of maturity

Collectively, these three communities have 75 years of experience pursuing the Main Street Approach. Does that make it easier? Well, yes and no, says Sadler. “Main Street

**“Virginia has a very collaborative network—there are no trade secrets. They share ideas, policies, and details of how they get things done.”**

## Virginia Main Street at a Glance

Established ..... 1985

Designated communities ..... 21

### Cumulative Statistics

Created, retained, and expanded

businesses to date: ..... 4,926

Jobs to date: ..... 14,389

Volunteer hours since 1997: ..... 615,206

Rehabilitation projects ..... 6,183

Private sector investment in current dollars ..... \$638.5 million

Public investment ..... \$287.5 million



is an ongoing stewardship of these special places. Each of these communities has celebrated some big accomplishments. But periodically, every community relaxes the pace and rides on its momentum. Naturally, when they get to that comfortable plateau, they take smaller steps.”

Even a program that’s been around for a quarter of a century has to do a reality check when progress stalls. They have to ask: what are we accomplishing? What could we do to really advance the health of the district? In a very real sense, what’s the next big leap?

In Bedford, the answer is a full-press grassroots merchant re-engagement effort. In Franklin, the community is rallying around the potential of entrepreneurship, coordinating a strategic approach to provide training and capital to former plant workers. And a community vision for upper-story housing in Winchester promises a revitalization of the state’s oldest pedestrian mall.

The Virginia Main Street state coordinating team sees its role as one of encouragement, and that supportive push comes in a couple of different ways. “We do a lot just by providing a space for the program managers and board members to learn from each other,” says staff member Kyle Meyer. “Virginia has a very collaborative network – there are no trade secrets. They share ideas, policies, and details of how they get things done.”

The second way, Sadler says, is in the designation process. “The National Trust Main Street Center has provided a model, and it’s actually our job to hold the communities to it,” says Sadler. “This year, we broke down the designation criteria and created a scoring matrix so that the process is more transparent. We use it now as a communication tool to have open discussions with community leaders so they can see how they might take their own next big step. We weren’t sure how folks would take it, but there is great power in opening conversation with critical thinking.”

When opportunity allows, Sadler also works to line up incentive resources for these more aggressive strategies. “We try to provide incentives for the programs to think big and develop an extraordinary project with additional resources from our agency (the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development) or others.” This spring Virginia Main Street gave seven designated communities competitively awarded Downtown Improvement Grants – \$2,500 in recognition of Virginia Main Street’s 25th anniversary.

Some of the bigger steps made by other Virginia communities have been strategic responses to the particular challenges of today’s economy – something almost every community faces. Rocky Mount addressed the economic downturn with a town-funded shop-local incentive called “5 on Us,” in

which a five-dollar discount voucher could be used on purchases of \$25 or more at participating local merchants. Staunton strategically encouraged street performers and musicians both as part of formal programs and by making the community more open to them as a way to create energy in the district. And Harrisonburg developed a business retention team to provide hands-on, short-term technical assistance to struggling and fledgling entrepreneurs.

Of course, these districts continue their traditional events, façade programs, and community-building activities. But trying to accomplish more, especially after pursuing revitalization strategies for two and a half decades, means taking longer strides and more risks. And that’s just what mature programs do. Baby steps – or simply carrying out the same activities year after year – can only get you so far.

*Doug Jackson lives and writes in Roanoke, Virginia. A member of the Virginia Main Street staff, he enjoys working with program managers and community volunteers throughout the commonwealth, all doing their part to enhance their unique places in the world.*

## Additional Information and Resources from Virginia Main Street:

**Virginia Main Street Website:** [www.dhcd.virginia.gov/mainstreet](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/mainstreet)

Visit the website for more information on the Virginia Main Street program:

- Program Design
- Training Archives
- 2009 *Annual Report*
- Virginia Main Street Driving Tour
- *Virginia Main Street Monitor* Technical Brief

**Virginia Main Street Blog:** [www.dhcdvms.wordpress.com](http://www.dhcdvms.wordpress.com)

Visit the Virginia Main Street Blog for the latest updates on downtown entrepreneurship and strategies employed in Virginia Main Street communities, as well as links to program websites of all 21 communities. Subscribe to the blog or sign up for an RSS feed for consistent and frequent updates.



*Virginia Main Street staffers Kyle Meyer (left) and Doug Jackson (right) pose before the Virginia Main Street sign in Abingdon, Va.*



# 25 *Top Virginia Main Street Destinations*



## **Three national landmark showplaces**

- Barter Theater, Abingdon
- Lincoln Theater, Marion
- Blackfriar's Playhouse, Staunton

## **Five top spots for arts and crafts**

- William King Museum, Abingdon
- Fire House Gallery and Shop, Berryville
- The Center for the Arts of Greater Manassas at the Candy Factory
- Virginia Quilt Museum, Harrisonburg
- The Prizery, South Boston

## **Six historical highlights**

- Schwartz Tavern, Blackstone
- A.P. Hill Boyhood Home, Culpeper
- James Madison Museum, Orange
- Waynesboro Heritage Museum
- Old Jail Museum, Warrenton
- Bedford City and County Museum

## **Five historic hotels for a night's rest**

- Martha Washington Hotel and Spa, Abingdon
- Mimslyn Inn, Luray
- George Washington Hotel, Winchester
- Stonewall Jackson Hotel, Staunton
- General Francis Marion Hotel, Marion

## **Four riverfront parks**

- English Park, Altavista
- Barrett's Landing Riverfront Park, Franklin
- Radford's Bisset Park
- Lynchburg's James River Heritage Trail Riverwalk

## **Two standout claims**

- The Big Chair, Martinsville
- Gateway to the Crooked Road, Rocky Mount

## **And one to grow on!**

- Farmer's Markets

[www.dhcd.virginia.gov/mainstreet](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/mainstreet)