

ADVOCACY IN MOTION

By Renee Kuhlman

Every day, Main Street directors and their boards advocate for their districts, their local businesses, and their programs. As a result, Main Streeters have developed great advocacy skills as well as trusted relationships with officials at all levels of government. Renee Kuhlman, Director of Policy Outreach, Government Relations and Policy, at the National Trust for Historic Preservation offers examples of where advocacy for Main Street has recently made a difference as well as resources on how to get involved.





Local New Mexico MainStreet directors gather in Santa Fe for their Winter Quarterly and advocate as a coalition at the state capital. Credit: Gary Cascio

Why advocate and lobby for Main Street? Main Street America organizations have many interests that are impacted by government policies—whether it’s ensuring funding for programming (appropriations), incentives for encouraging reuse, or legal protections for historic districts. For these reasons and more, it is beneficial for Main Street stakeholders to undertake advocacy and lobbying activities.

Likewise, the accomplishments of Main Street America programs are of great interest to policy decision-makers. Because the work of Main Street helps create local jobs, gets historic buildings put back into productive use, and encourages new businesses to relocate downtown, legislators want to understand both how the program works and how they can be supportive.

By informing officials about what’s happening in the commercial district, Main Street America programs provide officials with three key things: data, ideas, and connections to their constituents. The impressive national reinvestment statistics—\$70.25 billion reinvested, 584,422 jobs created, 268,053 buildings rehabilitated, and 132,092 new businesses started since 1980—are exactly the kind of

data that legislators look for when deciding where to invest citizens’ money and their time. Main Street revitalization efforts are also a source of inspiration for legislators as they look for creative yet concrete ideas that they can implement in their districts. Finally, Main Streeters provide legislators with connections to people that are actively trying to improve their communities. For these three reasons, legislators see Main Street directors and their boards as a valuable resource.

Renee Kuhlman is the Director of Policy Outreach for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Since 2004, she has been assisting legislators and advocates across the country with the adoption, expansion, and protection of state historic tax credit programs. Renee has also conducted advocacy training workshops, written several articles, blogs and briefs on advocacy, and participated in dozens of local, state, and federal advocacy campaigns.

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How Main Streets Are Organizing

Today, many states have an informal network of Main Street America organizations that work together on state and federal issues. Some states, like New Mexico, have a formal alliance. Whether formal or informal, working together is extremely impactful. “Advocacy is additive,” says Tom Cassidy, Vice President of Government Relations at the National Trust. The broader and more diverse the coalition, the stronger it will be perceived by government officials.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING

ADVOCACY can include anything from relationship-building activities, such as educating decision makers, informing the public, gaining support for Main Street, to activities designed to bring about a specific change in policy.

LOBBYING is a subset of advocacy activities involving efforts to influence legislation. Specific laws govern lobbying by nonprofit organizations, so it is important to understand what constitutes lobbying and ensure that your program does not run afoul of these limitations.

Source: *Lobbying and Political Action: What is Permissible by 501(c)3 Organizations*, a chapter from the **Advocacy Training Manual** produced by the National Trust for Historic Preservation

From their perspective, Main Street America organizations see their officials as key to unlocking sources of revenue, to protecting the district’s historic resources, and a way to jumpstart local rehabilitation projects by offering local, state, and federal incentives. Although local Main Street efforts have historically been strongly connected to mayors, many programs have proactively worked to strengthen ties with their federal and state officials. Because the saying “all politics is local” is true, this increased advocacy effort pays great dividends to the national Main Street and preservation movements.



Nevada Coordinator Jean Barrette and NMSC Senior Program Officer and Director of Coordinating Program Services Kathy La Plante joined Gardnerville Executive Director Debbi Lehr for a community celebration. Left to right: Debbi Lehr, Jean Barrette, and Kathy La Plante

MAIN STREET ADVOCACY AT THE STATE LEVEL

The Creation of the Nevada Main Street Program

Dr. Heidi Swank, Nevada Assemblywoman and Executive Director of the Nevada Preservation Foundation, was immediately impressed by Main Street's strong record of creating jobs and revitalizing communities across the country after learning about the program through a colleague. Realizing that her state could greatly benefit from such a program, she introduced Assembly Bill 417 to create the Nevada Main Street Program within the Office of Economic Development.

An advocacy coalition that included the Nevada League of Cities and Municipalities, the Nevada Association of Counties, and cities like Sparks, Wells, Reno, and Las Vegas, joined her effort to build support for the program. By writing letters, testifying at hearings, speaking to media outlets, sharing the national reinvestment statistics, and success stories from local Main Street programs in Nevada and elsewhere, Assemblywoman Swank and the advocacy coalition built enormous support for the program.

Their efforts were worth it. On June 8, 2017, the Nevada Main Street Coordinating Program was approved by Governor Sandoval and \$350,000 for the operation and grants to local programs was set aside for the program. Assemblywoman Swank is working now to introduce a state Historic Tax Credit (HTC) to help

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Celebrating Gardnerville

In January 2018, Main Street Gardnerville was announced as Nevada Main Street's first official program. Originally founded in 2008, Gardnerville is looking forward to the benefits of having the support that a statewide coordinating program offers.

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give the property owners of historic buildings yet another revitalization tool. The newly-minted Main Street communities will have their first advocacy opportunity during upcoming legislative session when the state HTC is introduced.

Missouri's State Senators Tout Main Street

Educating a new governor about the benefits of Main Street is hard enough, but it's even more challenging when your state is "in the red" and facing a budget shortfall. Luckily, the Missouri Main Street Connection (MMSMC) and the state's Main Street directors were up to the challenge.

Realizing they needed increased support and visibility for Main Street, eight local directors worked with their state senators to host "Town Hall Meetings" in their communities. The legislators took the lead and sent out invitations to events. Held in cities ranging in size from St. Louis to a community with a population of 2,000, the "Town Hall" toolkit provided by MMSMC ensured that all were a success.

During each event, the Senator spoke first, followed by Main Street representatives who shared information about federal, state, and local tools that could be used to help revitalize communities. Senators also invited representatives from the Missouri Department of Economic Development to participate. The diversity of speakers helped attract a diverse audience of residents, business owners, and government officials.

The community meetings have been a hit with all parties! Senators enjoyed hosting because it was a way for them to offer a tool (Main Street) while connecting with their constituents. Main Street enjoyed the opportunity to interact more closely with their legislators while building support locally for their program.

In 2017, despite extreme budget cuts elsewhere, MMSMC received the same appropriation (\$200,000) for downtown revitalization services in Missouri Main Street communities as it had in the past.

Communicating Successes in Missouri

Representatives from MMSC and local Main Street communities annually travel to the state capital, Jefferson City. During visits with legislators, they showcase the work they are accomplishing in Missouri's historic downtowns and share the impact local Main Street organizations have had on the state's economy. Legislators also receive a handout that summarizes the reinvestment statistics.

Later that same day, MMSC hosts legislators at a two-hour reception to celebrate the achievements of Missouri Main Street communities. The reception gives state legislators a wonderful opportunity to personally congratulate the Revitalization Award winners previously announced during the Missouri Main Street Conference.



Mayor Sandy Lucy of Washington, Mo., accepting the Award for Outstanding Public Official in 2014. Credit: Missouri Main Street

Wisconsin Lt. Governor Takes Main Street to the Media

To bring attention to the impact of the state's program, Governor Scott Walker proudly proclaimed August 22, 2017, as Wisconsin Main Street Day. On that day, Lt. Governor Rebecca Kleefisch, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Deputy Secretary Braun, and staff of the Wisconsin Main Street program attended 12 public events in Main Streets and Connect Communities across the state.

Remarkably, Wisconsin Main Street Day was planned within a period of three months from start to finish. In addition to his proclamation, Governor Walker shot a video officially declaring August 22 as Wisconsin Main Street Day, issued an official press release and media advisory, and provided a press release template for local communities. The preparation clearly was worth it because Wisconsin Main Street Day generated 80 stories statewide, including coverage on 10 different television stations. Public relations staff estimate they raised awareness with a total of 6.93 million people and that the total event had a total publicity value of \$40K.

Wisconsin Main Street Day was so successful, organizers are already hard at work planning the next one scheduled for 2018! They envision expanding the event to include a toolkit so that every Main Street community can find a way to celebrate the day.

Awards Recognize and Encourage Others to be Supportive

Healthy cooperation with local government is crucial for Main Street programs, which is why Missouri Main Street Connection, Inc. offers the annual Outstanding Public Official Award. In the past five years, two mayors and three community development directors have been recognized. Awards of this nature allow Main Streets to both recognize the contributions of individual public officials and encourage others in similar positions to be supportive of their own Main Streets.

Downtown Fond du Lac Kicks off Renovation

The Downtown Fond du Lac Partnership hosted one of the 12 events on Wisconsin Main Street Day and used it as an opportunity to kick off the renovation of Hotel Retlaw. The landmark hotel received \$26 million dollars through the use of state and federal historic tax credits for the makeover.



Amy Hansen, director of the Downtown Fond du Lac Partnership, and State Sen. Dan Feyen (R-Fond du Lac) at the Fond du Lac event on August 22. Amy also invited Fond du Lac City Council President Karyn Merkel, State Representative Jeremy Theisfeldt and Craig Molitor, President of the Fond du Lac Convention and Visitors Bureau, to make remarks recognizing not just the upcoming renovation of the Retlaw Hotel, but all the businesses that create the heart of the Fond du Lac Main Street. Credit: Wisconsin Main Street

MAIN STREET ADVOCACY AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

Main Street Goes to Washington, D.C.

One of the ways that local directors advocate for Main Street’s priorities is to visit their legislators at their offices in Washington, D.C. This spring, Malcolm Johnstone, executive director of West Chester BID, and Ray Scriber, the director of Louisiana Main Street, visited Capitol Hill to educate Pennsylvania and Louisiana legislators about deferred maintenance in our national parks. The officials valued learning about how the lack of maintenance negatively impacts those Main Streets that serve as gateways to our nation’s parks and possible solutions that could be implemented.

Malcolm Johnstone proudly carried the bronze Great American Main Street Award (GAMSA) to 11 Pennsylvania congressional offices. He explained why West Chester had won the award and how important tourism in the Brandywine Valley was to his community. Johnstone and other Pennsylvanians met personally with Congressman Costello, who represents West Chester.

In nine meetings with congressional offices, Scriber shared examples of how Main Street economies from New Orleans to Natchitoches are positively impacted by their proximity to national parks. While visiting, he was proud to see the book *Main Streets of Louisiana* in Congressman Higgins’ (R-LA) reception area. Scriber sent each of the Louisiana’s congressional offices a copy of the book when it was published back in 2012, and was glad to see that the Congressman showed off the state’s historic downtowns to visitors.



GAMSA winner Malcolm Johnstone of the West Chester BID met with Congressman Costello to request funding for deferred maintenance in national parks, like nearby Valley Forge National Historical Park. Left to right: Renee Kuhlman, Paul Steinke, Rep. Ryan Costello (R-PA), Malcolm Johnstone, Brenda Barrett and Jay Zeiler. Credit: Brenda Barrett



Both Scriber and Johnstone delivered a national sign-on letter with the signatures of 135 Main Street organizations requesting co-sponsorship of the National Park Service (NPS) Legacy Act S. 751/H.R. 2584 to their members of Congress. The bill would create a reliable, dedicated federal funding source to address the deferred maintenance backlog, thereby allowing the public to continue to visit our nation's parks and support the communities and businesses that rely on them as economic engines.

During a meeting with preservationists seeking his co-sponsorship of the National Park Service Legacy Act, Representative Ralph Abraham (R-LA) expressed his enthusiastic support for Main Street communities, including those that serve as gateways to national parks. Left to right: Christine Luthy, Fairleigh Jackson, Representative Abraham, Ray Scriber, Renee Kuhlman and Rick Normand.

LOBBYING IS PERMISSIBLE FOR 501(C)3 ORGANIZATIONS

Contrary to what many people believe, tax-exempt organizations under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code can lobby without losing their tax-exempt status, but must adhere to specified limitations. If an organization elects to participate under the safe harbor provisions of the tax code, it must file Form 5768 with the Internal Revenue Service and include the following types of expenditures as contributing to the calculated limit:

- ⚡ Employee compensation, based on the percentage of time devoted to lobbying.
- ⚡ Costs associated with communication intended to influence legislation—printing, postage, telephone calls, etc. This must also include the staff and facility costs to prepare lobbying communications and materials.
- ⚡ Overhead expenses proportionate to the percentage of an employee's time spent lobbying.
- ⚡ Payment to another organization to do lobbying on its behalf.

An organization that chooses not file with the IRS can still lobby, but only if lobbying does not constitute a substantial part of the activities of the organization. There is no definition for “substantial,” thus the organization should be cautious and consult an attorney.

What Activities Constitute Lobbying?

- ⚡ “Lobbying” activities are those that seek to influence specific legislation. Any action by Congress, state legislature, local council, or similar governing body, or by the public in a referendum, initiative, constitutional amendment, or similar procedure is considered “legislation.”
- ⚡ An “action” refers to the introduction, amendment, enactment, defeat, or repeal of acts, bills, resolutions, or similar items.
- ⚡ “Influencing” is deemed to be “(a) any attempt ... to affect the opinions of the general public or any segment thereof, and (b) any attempt ... to communicate with any member or employee of a legislative body, or with any government official or employee who may participate in the formulation of the legislation.”

Source: *Lobbying and Political Action: What is Permissible by 501(c)3 Organizations*, a chapter from the **Advocacy Training Manual** produced by the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Determined Advocacy Preserves the Historic Tax Credit

The successful effort to retain the Historic Tax Credit (HTC) was made possible in large part by Main Street representatives. In person and through emails, calls and social media, Main Street leaders informed their members of Congress that they needed the federal Historic Tax Credit to redevelop historic commercial buildings in their communities.

For example, Representatives from Mississippi Heritage and the Water Valley Main Street program helped get every member of the state's congressional delegation to co-sponsor the Historic Tax Credit Improvement Act. Others organized visits to their Main Streets for their members of Congress. Michael Sothan, director of Beatrice Main Street in Nebraska, showed downtown properties that were about to be rehabilitated with the HTC to Rep. Adrian Smith, who sits on the Ways and Means Committee. Likewise, Heritage Ohio organized site visits for eight congressional offices. These one-on-one visits helped secure 13 of Ohio's

15-member congressional delegation as co-sponsors of the Historic Tax Credit Improvement Act as well as the support of Senator Portman. Because of their exemplary advocacy work, Heritage Ohio was awarded the 2017 John H. Chafee Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement in Public Policy by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

When tax reform moved into high gear, Main Streets all across the country went into overdrive. For example, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Wisconsin Main Street directors helped get their mayors to sign on to statewide letters—22 mayors, 27 mayors, 56 mayors and 74 mayors signed on, respectively. In Iowa, 33 Main Street directors signed a group letter requesting their members of Congress ensure the retention of the HTC.

Over the summer, hundreds of Main Streets added their own organizations to a national sign-on letter and helped get a total of 1,487 businesses and organizations to ask for the retention of the credit. The letter was then shared electronically with 1,400 congressional staffers.



Heritage Ohio was awarded the 2017 John H. Chafee Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement in Public Policy by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Credit: David Keith Photography

The advocacy worked!

One-on-one visits helped secure 13 of Ohio's 15-member congressional delegation as co-sponsors of the Historic Tax Credit Improvement Act. Left to Right: Representative Michael Turner (R-OH), Amanda Terrell, Ohio Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, and Joyce Barrett, Executive Director of Heritage Ohio.



Congress has once again concluded that it is critically

important to protect our nation's historic buildings. The Historic Tax Credit, made permanent in the tax code in 1986, will remain in the revamped tax code with some modifications. Most notably, after implementation of a transition period, the credit will now be claimed over a five-year period.

Because of Main Street advocacy, there are strong congressional supporters in the House and Senate that are committed to historic preservation, economic development, and the Historic Tax Credit.

Focus On: New Mexico Advocacy

Recognizing their similar objectives and goals, New Mexico MainStreet works together with the New Mexico Resiliency Alliance and the New Mexico Coalition of Main Street Communities on legislative issues. Lisa Pellegrino-Spear, Executive Director of Clovis MainStreet, shared the following “lessons learned” from their work together.



CLOVIS, NEW MEXICO

Q: What do you think is the most effective advocacy tool that your group uses?

A: Our greatest advocacy tool is our local stories of success and/or challenges our individual communities face. The stories that come from the communities that the legislator represents—and calls home—are the stories that they remember. We can have as much marketing materials as we can print but nothing makes an impact like a story about their own community from the local director who has an established rapport!

Face-to-face meetings during the session make a great impact. Our legislators are generally away from home for weeks at a time during the session and seeing a visitor from home—even if only for a brief minute—makes a big impression. The gesture shows that you care about the bill they are putting forth and that you are passionate about Main Street’s priorities.

Q: How do you decide legislative priorities?

A: We look for suggestions from our members, our partners, lobbyists, past and current legislators, as well as state and community leaders. In most cases if a legislator is working on a bill that would benefit your Main Street district, they will reach out to you. We want all our members to tell us about these bills or “works in progress” so we can provide support early on.

Each year we discuss together the most crucial needs to retain the support for the state program and strive to have a cohesive message. However, we each may find a few different priorities that meet the needs of our own members and so we develop our own individual legislative approach for those.

Q: How do you lobby?

A: Our advocacy is only as strong as the support we have from our members. Every year we host two advocacy trainings for our members, retain a lobbyist, and develop materials for our members to utilize when visiting with their legislators.

We meet once a year for a lobby day at the state capital and host a meeting before hand to review our priorities. If possible, we try to facilitate meetings for our members with bill sponsors to further educate our members on the bills’ details. These meetings also provide the legislators with firsthand experience on how their bills may affect our communities.

Our vice president sends out a weekly or daily email update from our lobbyist during the legislative session to keep our members updated on any bill movement

Our advocacy is only as strong as the support we have from our members.

and budget changes. Our executive board encourages members to create a rapport with their legislators. To facilitate this relationship-building, we annually host a booth at the legislator reception at the beginning of the session.

Our executive board members spend additional days at the capital, attending hearings and meeting with legislators prior to the session. They do this to raise awareness of our requests and to share Main Street successes that have occurred because of the state's support of the program.

We keep a list of the legislators and which Main Streets they represent, so newer directors can familiarize themselves with their local legislators. We send out greeting cards to all the legislators during the holidays and communicate throughout the year with each legislator about the bills that our members support.

Q: If you could tell another state group considering organizing like you have, what tips or do's and don'ts would you share?

A: I think the number one tip is training! Not knowing how to speak to a legislator is the number one fear we try to overcome and is why some organizations or executive directors do not take action. Legislators have chosen to do what they do because they care about the future of your community. They are just regular people and neighbors trying to make a difference.

Second, it is really important to have a dedicated executive board and to get input from all sides of the state.

Finally, don't give up! It takes time to build relationships and time to learn how the legislature works. You always need to ask questions and find someone to help you understand it!

Q: What's the biggest "win" your group has had?

A: Our group itself. Rebuilding our organization, gaining interest in the mission and creating a desire to make change happen. I think each year we can weigh our successes as a group and what challenges we need to work on for the upcoming session but the most difficult mission is creating a team that is willing to work at making the effort and commitment to stick with it even when you have a year with small wins.

But this past year we had a huge win. We helped retain the budget for our state program in a year when nearly all of the state programs were cut and unspent capital funds were clawed back to cover deficits. With our partners, we made a big enough impression that our program was spared!

The New Mexico Resiliency Alliance, a 501c3 tax-exempt organization, was established to support sustainable community revitalization initiatives in New Mexico communities.

The New Mexico Coalition of MainStreet Communities is a non-profit organization designed to support economic development and historic preservation of their communities as well as the Arts and Culture districts and the Frontier Communities Initiative.

Our greatest advocacy tool is our local stories of success and/or challenges our individual communities face.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EDUCATING AND LOBBYING

EDUCATING IS:

Sharing nonpartisan analysis, study, or research with the public or elected officials;

Responding to requests for technical assistance or advice from a governmental body;

Examinations of problems that do not express a view about specific legislation and have a call to action.

DIRECT LOBBYING is when an organization attempts to influence specific legislation by sharing its view on the legislation with a member of a legislative body or a government employee who helps formulate the legislation.

GRASSROOTS LOBBYING is any communication with the public about a specific legislative proposal that expresses a view on the legislation's merits and encourages contact with decision-makers.

Iowa Sends a Strong Message to Congress

In October, 33 Iowa Main Streets came together to sign a joint letter asking Members of the Iowa congressional delegation to protect the federal Historic Tax Credit (HTC) during tax reform. Sarah Grunewaldt, Executive Director of Washington Main Street, and Abby Huff M.F.A., Executive Director of the Story City Greater Chamber Connection, developed the letter with Preservation Iowa's President Joshua Moe, AIA, NCARB. The letter sent a strong message to Congress that the majority of Iowa's Main Streets support the federal Historic Tax Credit. As a result, Senator Grassley (R-IA) supported a key amendment proposed by Senator Cassidy (R-LA) in the Senate Finance Committee in November 2017.

USING STATISTICS AND STORYTELLING AS ADVOCACY TOOLS

While helpful to benchmark a program's progress, reinvestment statistics can also be an advocacy tool. First, they help establish Main Street as a credible economic development approach with officials. Second, because legislators are eager to learn new ways to create jobs in their community, the numbers can act as a "hook" to get them interested in your proposal. Third, presenting the statistics over a range of time (e.g., in past three years, we've grown the number of businesses by 50 percent), helps decisionmakers quickly grasp the trends and make decisions. Finally, evidence-based proposals are more readily accepted by lawmakers.

A narrative in the form of "talking points" using statistics can also help the official understand either the problem or the proposed solution, and illustrate how the statistics relate to each other. For example, "The national network of over 1,000 Main Street America programs reached a ten-year high for community reinvestment. In 2016, these communities reinvested \$4.65 billion from public and private sources, created 5,616 new businesses, 27,462 new jobs, and rehabilitated 8,042 buildings." shows how investing in Main Street leads to positive outcomes. Because some people are

visual learners, try to share reinvestment statistics in an infographic as well. See figure to the right.

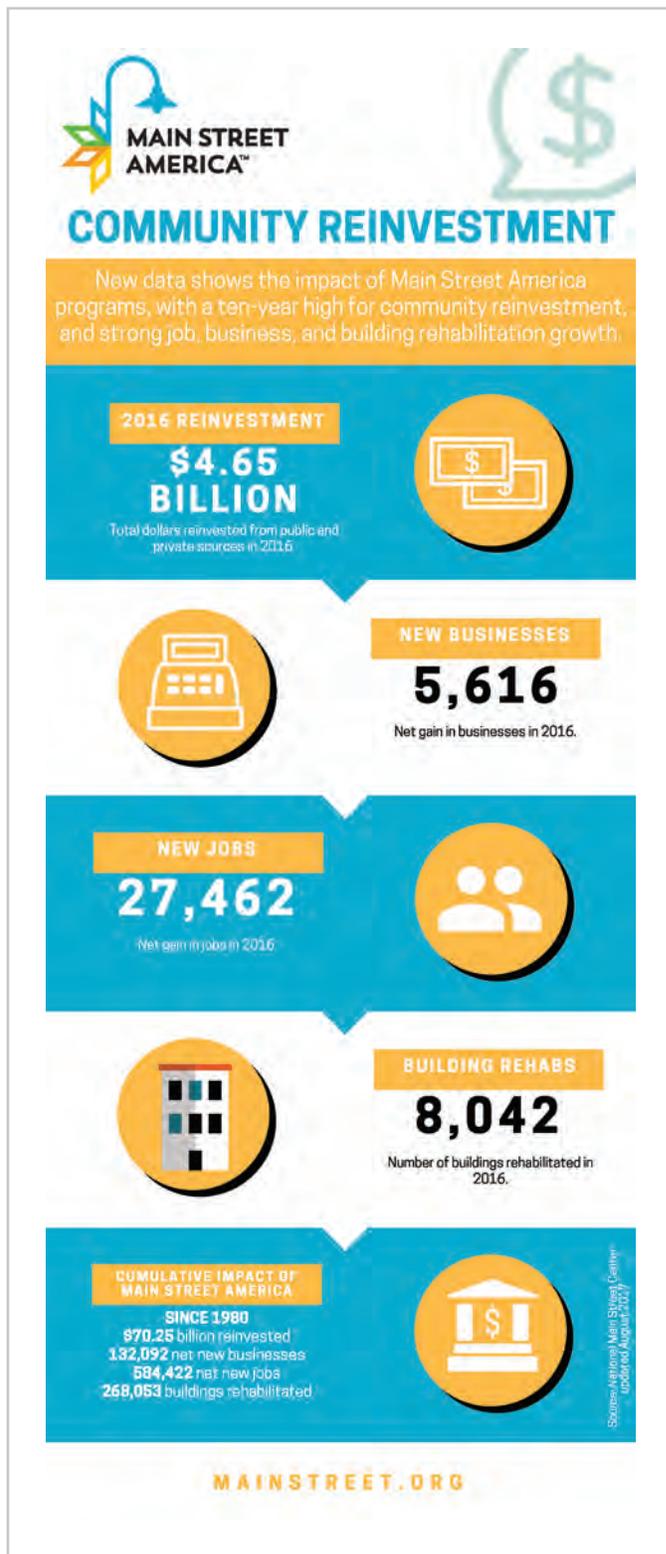
All politics is local and that is true when presenting Main Street's statistics. Legislators are interested in "their" numbers. State officials want to see the aggregate data for their state, mayors want to see data for their city, and U.S. Representatives want to see the data compiled for their legislative district. Take time to compile the data in a way that reflects political boundaries.

Because it's human nature to be competitive, show a comparison of reinvestment statistics from other communities or states when pitching a new program that's worked elsewhere.

Narratives do not need to be long to be effective. For example:

- ∴ "The City of Keota, Iowa, which has no Historic Tax Credit (HTC) projects to date, passed a resolution calling on Congress to retain the HTC." Translates in the legislators' minds to..."they are a community of under 1,500 people and believe this tool will help make a difference in their revitalization efforts."
- ∴ "We have the mayor of Steele City, Nebraska, with a population of 60 as well as the mayor of Lincoln with 300,000 people on a national mayor's letter asking Congress to retain the Historic Tax Credit." Translates to..."This incentive works in both large cities and small towns."

Finally, while impressive on their own, statistics also need to be personalized. Illustrative pictures and a personal anecdote bring to life each statistic presented (e.g., the renovated loft apartments encouraged the owner to open a business on the same block.)



YOUR VOICE MATTERS

This year, Main Street voices were heard loud and clear. Energetic and continuous advocacy by Main Street organizations, their mayors and other supporters helped Congress decide to retain the Historic Tax Credit in our nation's tax code when other credits were reduced or eliminated. Main Street's activism also helped ensure continuing appropriations for state Main Street programs in tight state budgets and has proven that "when Main Street talks, legislators listen."