

Collaboration the key to downtown revitalization

By Josh Markham,

For decades, major social and economic factors worked together to negatively impact the commercial viability of downtown areas. Across America the signs of this shift are still apparent. Boarded windows, neglected buildings, and overgrown community spaces are common sights. However, all is not lost for the American downtown. Many Arkansas cities have recognized the importance of a thriving downtown to their economic future. As a result, they have successfully implemented programs to revitalize their downtowns.

While downtowns across America have experienced steady decline, the importance of a vibrant downtown is evident on many levels.

“We have seen time and time again that when economic developers are bringing industrial prospects to a community, the first area they want to see is the downtown,” Main Street Arkansas Assistant Director Samantha Evans said. “It’s a signal to investors that their investment in the community will be protected if they see a viable downtown.”

The economic importance of a successful downtown extends beyond business recruitment. A thriving downtown is an important recruitment tool for students, physicians, and faculty members, Evans noted. Young professionals view quality of place as an important factor when considering relocating to a community; as a result, a well developed downtown is a major selling point.

Many Arkansas cities are turning to Main Street Arkansas for assistance with revitalization efforts. One such city is Siloam Springs. Main Street Siloam Springs started in 1985, and changes have been incremental; however, by 2008, development had plateaued. According to Meredith Bergstrom, Main Street Siloam Springs Executive Director, “The downtown retail presence was strong, but downtown was lacking people.” This noticeable absence needed to change, and Siloam Springs’ downtown has benefited from taking a deliberate approach to development and planning over the past few years. The result: more than \$10 million in private investment in downtown and over 20 new businesses.



A thriving downtown gives residents a reason to celebrate their city. During Siloam Springs’ annual Dog Day of Summer Festival, dogs and their people take to the streets of the city’s revitalized downtown.

This turnaround for Siloam Springs' downtown was a slow process. The first step began with a single private investment. A local entrepreneur renovated a downtown commercial space to include a café with apartment living space on the second story. The impact was immediately noticeable.

"This development brought people, and people brought other investors," Bergstrom said. "Within three years, 10 other businesses followed."

After this initial private investment showed success, Main Street Siloam Springs shifted its focus from simply hosting events to trying to be a purposeful economic engine to support the growth occurring from private investment in downtown.

"Main Street Siloam Springs attempted to build a vision for downtown," Bergstrom said. Working with the National Main Street Center and Main Street Arkansas enabled Bergstrom to see the connections between a long term vision, historic preservation, and an economically successful downtown. These three goals came together in the form of a master plan for Siloam Springs. This document outlined goals toward growing the connectivity of the trail system to downtown Siloam Springs and increasing beautification efforts linking downtown with surrounding natural assets and parks.

Collaboration was the key to the creation of this vision. City officials, the local Chamber of Commerce, and local businesses all played crucial roles in completing the master plan. After six months of public participation, and 18 months of work, the Downtown & Connectivity Master Plan was complete.

Implementing aspects of this master plan are currently underway. New local small businesses in the downtown are an important goal for economic growth in downtown Siloam Springs, and local banks have stepped up to assist. Five area banks are developing a loan consortium to assist with financing the implementation of the downtown master plan.

The road to completing this master plan was not always smooth. Major financial challenges were an obvious obstacle to many changes. Working with Main Street Arkansas provided access to grant funds to help with areas that private investment could not. However, even when private investors showed interest in developing a new business, zoning and code issues proved to be a new challenge. Old codes related to parking requirements and mixed used housing would have made development impossible in downtown. Working to revise these zoning issues through the Master Plan gave private investors the confidence that the city was ready to support them.

Downtown Siloam Springs is just one example of an Arkansas city recognizing the economic importance of a

vibrant downtown area. According to Samantha Evans, designated Main Street districts in Arkansas have seen over \$1,846,989 in public/private investment in 2015 leading to 140 façade renovations, building rehabilitations, and new downtown construction projects.

Successful downtown development can begin many different ways. Evans noted that taking inventory of vacant or underused buildings can be the first step toward downtown mixed-use projects. Hosting community visioning sessions or developing a matching grant program for local downtown merchants are also viable initial projects. Regardless of where a community starts, Meredith Bergstrom has some advice for success: "Collaborate. Get all the players involved. Solidify your vision. Be inclusive. Be diverse. And educate others about the importance of your work."



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