

The Ohio Main Street Program

By Carole Kariuki

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Background

Bowling Green, Ohio, was founded in 1833. The city's early growth was greatly influenced by the prosperous oil boom era of the late 1800s. It is a friendly Northwest Ohio community, rich in history with a diverse retail and industrial base. The historical architecture is evident today in downtown Bowling Green. The city is located on Interstate 75 and serves as the county seat for Wood County. It has a charter form of government, which provides for an elected mayor and a fulltime appointed municipal administrator. There is a city council composed of seven members. The mission statement of Bowling Green is currently being reviewed.

Sandusky, Ohio, was platted in 1818 and was incorporated in 1824. Sandusky is the county seat of Erie County and is located on the southern shores of Lake Erie. Sandusky is accessible by the Ohio Turnpike at three exits, and by many major highways, such as State Route 250, Route 2, Route 6, and Route 4. Sandusky grew because of its central location between Detroit and Pittsburgh, regionally, as well as its central location between Cleveland and Toledo. Historically, Sandusky Bay was a shipping mecca, with many railroads linking farms and quarries. Sandusky was known for its' ship building, fishing, and ice cutting. Sandusky Docks were the departure point for many runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad, escaping by boat to Canada. Sandusky's mission is *"to achieve the highest quality of life for our community, through fiscal economic development efforts, the delivery of world-class public service, and the promotion of open communication for all."* Sandusky has a council/manager form of government with seven members. The mayor is selected by the council to serve in the official capacity. Sandusky is a premiere vacation destination with 22 miles of coastal shoreline. Annual visitors top six million, with over three million visiting Cedar Point, and another three million enjoying other amenities, such as the lakefront parks and islands.

Bowling Green City Schools are part of a district covering 156 square miles. The system operates a senior and junior high school and six elementary schools. School enrollment dropped by 154 pupils in the past 10 years but dollars generated by business and industry helped keep the city schools financially sound. The Sentinel Tribune, a daily newspaper, serves the Bowling Green area along with a radio station, WFOB, which has a studio in the city. Many organizations are found in the city including social and civic clubs, like the Lions Club, and fraternal organizations. Wood County Hospital located in the city is a fully accredited professional hospital with 132 beds. The residents attend and support more than 40 churches. Bowling Green State University is the biggest employer followed by the hospital and Cooper Engineered Products. Bowling Green has a population of 29, 636 according to the 2000 census. Wood County Airport is situated at the outskirts of Bowling Green State University and is a private airport.

On March 30, 2003, Sandusky City Schools had 4,103 students in all grade levels. The school district covers 114.9 miles. Educational opportunities are bountiful in the region. Within a 60 mile radius of Sandusky, several institutions of higher learning provide two-year technical courses, master's degree programs, and certifications for adult education. They are Bowling Green State University, Firelands College, Terra Technical College, Lorain County Community College, Heidelberg College, Tiffin University, Ashland College, University of Toledo, Baldwin-Wallace College, Cleveland State University, Case Western Reserve, John Carroll University, and The Erie, Huron, Ottawa Vocational Education, known as EHOVE. Sandusky has one local paper, the Sandusky Register; and one regional paper, The Journal; a Free Press publication; and a radio station, which broadcasts two stations, WLEC, AM, and WCPZ, FM. While there is not a television station located within the city, major news events, announcements, and city commission meetings are broadcast on Channel 27. The Griffin Airport is located at the outskirts of town.

Sandusky has many social groups, including Big Brothers-Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Club, Catholic Charities, Safe Harbor, The Sandusky Jaycees, and many groups focused on senior citizens and veteran services. Sandusky has 69 local churches within the Sandusky phone exchange designation. Sandusky's physical and mental health care needs are served by Firelands Regional Medical Center, which has 211 beds. The hospital is the largest employer located within the city limits, with 1,850 employees, followed by the Sandusky City Schools with 625 employees. Cedar Point employs 425 year round, with another 4,500 employed seasonally. Sandusky's population is 27,844 in a 2000 Census, with over 110,000 residents within a 15 mile area. The median age is 36.2.

Some of the points of interests in Bowling Green are the Wood County Historical Museum. It was erected in 1868. Since the late 1890's, the court house is a majestic symbol of Wood County's judicial system. The main street is highlighted by store fronts that date back to the 1800s. West Wooster Street has exquisitely designed homes built because of the oil boom and are enlisted on the National Register of Historic Places. Nestled among trees on Clough Street is a windmill stack and today, it is rented as apartments. Other interesting sites are the Woodland Towne Centre, the Wood County Public Library, and the Symphony Orchestra, and 110 acres of recreational parks.

The Bowling Green Community Foundation, Inc. makes grants to non profit organizations annually. The Brownfield's Economic Development Initiative (BEDI) is one of the key competitive grant programs that are administered to stimulate and promote economic and community development activities under section 108(q) of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. The emphasis of the grant is redevelopment of brownfield's sites. The recipients have used the funds: 1) to economic development projects to increase economic opportunities for low and moderate income persons, and 2) to stimulate and retain businesses and jobs or that would otherwise lead to economic revitalizations. Funds available through the rural housing and economic development program are for capacity building and support for innovative housing and economic development activities. The loan guarantee provisions of the community development block grant programs (CDBG) are paired with Economic Development Initiative or Brownfields Economic Development Initiatives grants, under HUD, to pay predevelopment costs of a section 108 funded project. The City of Bowling Green currently administers five housing programs aimed at assisting low and moderate income households.

The Ohio Main Street Program

Main Street is not a project or a grant but a process based upon an implementation strategy for locally initiated goals and objectives. Being a Main Street community means implementing a comprehensive economic revitalization effort which is based upon:

1. Organization- building partnerships to create a consistent economic development and revitalization strategy.
2. Promotion- re-establish the community's image as a compelling place for shoppers, investors and visitors
3. Design- enhancing the visual quality and image of the community, in not only store fronts but also the rear of the buildings and the landscape
4. Economic restructuring- strengthening the existing economic assets of the business district while diversifying its' economic base.

The overall goals of the National and Ohio Main Street communities certification program are:

1. To provide national, state and local visibility to Main Street programs
2. To provide national and state standards for performance for Main Street programs
3. To provide realistic goals and a tangible incentive for local Main Street programs which do not yet meet the criteria for national or state recognition. A community must re-qualify each year in order to maintain its' status as a certified National or Ohio Main Street Community.

The National Main Street Center began in 1980. The purpose of a Main Street program is to encourage and support the revitalization of downtowns as centers of community activity and commerce. A strong viable organization provides the stability necessary to build and maintain a long term effort. Developing an organized management program that is well funded, structured and committed to the future is the only way to make revitalization last.

The local Main Street program must involve groups and individuals from throughout the community in order to be successful. Downtown revitalization requires the cooperation and commitment of a broad-based coalition of businesses, civic groups, local governments, financial institutions and consumers. Some of the potential members are merchants, property owners, chamber of commerce, financial institutions, civic clubs, historic societies and historic preservation organizations, consumers, city and county government, regional planning commissions and council of government, schools, and the media. It also involves mobilizing a large number of volunteers to implement activities, but it must have the support and involvement of both the public and private sectors.

10 Criteria for National and Ohio Main Street Designation

1. Broad based community support for the commercial district revitalization process with strong support from both the public and private sectors
2. Vision and mission statements relevant to community conditions and to the local Main Street program's organizational stage.
3. Comprehensive Main Street work plan
4. Historic preservation ethic
5. Active governing body and working committee
6. Adequate operating budget
7. Paid professional program manager
8. Program of on going training for staff and volunteers
9. Reporting of key statistics
10. Current member of the Downtown Ohio, Inc. and the National Main Street Network

The services available to communities that are selected are:

1. Volunteer and program manager training
2. Advanced training on specific downtown issues: marketing, volunteer development, historical preservation.
3. Onsite visits to help develop strengths and plan for success
4. An overall value of the services in the first year is over \$ 20,000

Main Street: Bowling Green and Sandusky

Bowling Green Main Street program mission statement is to *"improve, preserve, and promote downtown Bowling Green commercial, cultural, and social center for Bowling Green and Wood County."* When Bowling Green joined the total cost was \$ 5,000 for 3 years, but it was raised last year to \$ 6,000, which is what Sandusky paid. Bowling Green had good support of both the public and private entities, as well as the fact that it has a special improvement district (SID), according to Pauline Eaton, the Director of Downtown Revitalization of Downtown Ohio, Inc.

"Sandusky is a very impressive place! The architecture is really the star there. They have so much of their original fabric left in tact, which is a big plus. But, I think also the fact that they need so much help gave the selection committee the feeling that they could make a good success story if we are able to help them. Also, Sandusky is a highly visible location with Cedar Point and the fact that they have Lake Erie at their front door makes them very unique. It is also a challenge that they have so many buildings, although they have many design challenges and there are so many vacancies! They have all the necessary "bones" but they need help with not just encouragement, but they need to learn how to use the tools available and they need the organizational structure to coordinate the efforts. Also, we held their DART visit in September and there were over 70 people in attendance. That is a huge crowd! It was very evident that the public was very interested in seeing something done. We hope that that translated into buying-in and actual people willing to roll up their sleeves and go to work. There was also significant representation from the city government. We felt this would be critical in the success/ failure of the project." (Pauline Eaton, Ohio Main Street Program, 3/23/03).

Challenges Identified at Individual Business Plan Workshop

Bowling Green:

1. Business Recruitment
2. Retention/Expansion
3. Show results of Main Street Program
4. Getting Involvement from Stakeholder
5. Balance Between Business and Property Owner Agendas
6. Increase Property Values
7. Policy, Procedures

8. By- laws- Articles
9. Volunteerism
10. Available Space
11. Design Improvements for Building Facades
12. Design Guidelines
13. Signage
14. Parking
15. New events (special events, retail activities)
16. Overall Promotion / Image
17. Funding
18. Ensuring Government Stays in Downtown
19. Business mix
20. Long term school issue
21. proving success of SID for renewal
22. clean- sweep

Sandusky:

1. Building improvements
2. Multiple owners
3. Financially stretched landlords
4. Climate
5. Perception of crime
6. Spotted blighted areas
7. Getting visitors into the downtown
8. Signage
9. Overnight accommodations in the D.T.
10. Residential living opportunities
11. High number of renters
12. Drugs/activities
13. Accessibility
14. Off route to Cedar Point
15. Apathy from businesses
16. Attitudes
17. Office all close at 4-5:00 PM
18. Parking management
19. Government needs to stay in D.T.
20. Lack of concentration of businesses
21. Open dialog on issues
22. Destination businesses
23. Year round businesses
24. Understanding and working with city, commissioners, and administrators
25. Transitioning from Merchant Association to Main Street Program
26. Increase buy-in for Main Street Program
27. Creating a sense of place
28. Becoming alive
29. Cleanliness, litter control
30. Screening trash containers
31. Volunteerism
32. Community pride & self-image
33. Realistic expectations
34. Common/shared vision
35. Improved business mix
36. Viable new businesses
37. Succession planning
38. Comprehensive incentive plan
39. Business startup assistance
40. Communication
41. Promotion & advertisement

42. ADA accessible

Results of Bowling Green's downtown businesses survey (paraphrased)

Question 1: "how has the main street designation impacted your business?"

1. No impact
2. Definitely positive
3. Working together with Earlene
4. More eye appeal/ more attractive
5. Brighter with new lighting
6. Seems to be safer in the evenings to walk the streets
7. More traffic day & night
8. More checks from out of town
9. Long 9 year process, but worth it
10. Needed key downtown promoters
11. Long-term positive
12. Now have someone to sweep & shovel sidewalks, clean curbs, and maintain flowers
13. Only a \$1 a day investment
14. City of BG and M.S. Program was front page news daily for months
15. Infrastructure improvements were frustrating but worth it
16. Heritage 2000 was tough on customer base
17. Struggle mentally in going through the process
18. "Big boxes" ruin the price structure for everyone
19. Customers expect the downtown stores to carry every item, in every color
20. No instant gratification
21. People now feel safe and comfortable
22. Towns people are still biggest customers with 80% or more, college students 15-40% depending on the business
23. Evening business expected to continue to increase
24. Seeing a reverse trend now, with south end of town now experiencing closures as 7 national chains have moved out. (May be a problem that they misread the demographic information when developing)
25. Greater number of walkers
26. Parking lots improved in back of stores
27. Underground wiring, and lighting makes the back lots look nice
28. Dumpsters are all enclosed with these and trash containers all alike
29. Many naysayer have turned around- originally 70% for project, 30% against
30. More restaurants, such as Skyline Chili and Panera Breads, are a big draw
31. Each business pays its fair share of the project
32. Only 2 businesses currently vacant
33. Deplorable hotel now "adaptive reuse" in developing professional apartments
34. Many new businesses and 2nd floor apartments
35. For 2 years, infrastructure was major inconvenience, but some people were actually drawn downtown to see construction, had to open side and backdoors,
36. Sidewalks, decorative crosswalks, and lighting were big impact
37. As a property owner, this is an investment in your business
38. Improvements are contagious- 10-12 businesses painted and fixed-up
39. Project much needed, as survival or death of business expected
40. Can't survive on university traffic alone
41. Must create a special niche and special orders
42. Eyesores of behind the businesses are gone
43. Customers are encouraged to use backdoors

Question 2: "what would you like to see done in the future?"

1. Long-term maintenance
2. Window washing
3. Continue assessment (SID) to keep progress ongoing
4. Must involve citizens, businesses, and politicians ongoing

5. Must work together with other businesses on sales, events, hours, etc.
6. Progress will go downhill fast without ongoing focus
7. Keep up the dedication
8. Develop a BGSU shuttle bus to downtown, currently only Kroger and Woodland Towne Center
9. Address the ongoing parking problem
10. More public transportation
11. Coordinate business hours as businesses need to realize that 50% after 5PM
12. Cleaner streets
13. More aggressive parking solution, as ticketing is not enough
14. More art fairs, music festivals, quarterly event
15. Expense just passed on from owners to merchants, more needs done in retention of businesses
16. Need more short term focus, too
17. Other cities who need to remove trees, should not cut all down at one time, esp. when they are all in bloom
18. Need to assess integrity of infrastructure before undertaking such a project

Results of Sandusky's downtown businesses survey (paraphrased)

Question 1: "Are you aware that Sandusky has been designated a Main Street community?"

All respondents said "yes" except one

Question 2: "What would you like to see done in the future?"

1. Become a viable business center
2. Family place
3. Enjoyment place
4. Museums
5. Continue advertising collaboratively
6. Director of the program to be full time and not part-time
7. Everybody having space on a large billboard
8. Main street developer to visit them once a month
9. Want the water front developed
10. Large direction signs for the downtown and hotels like for cedar point
11. Local people to support local businesses not franchise
12. Owners to fix up upstairs as apartments for living in
13. Don't spend more money on the newsletter its not meant for that
14. The main street memberships should be the same or an explanation for the different levels received
15. More tax breaks for land lords
16. Make the downtown more attractive and competitive to online and catalog shopping
17. City to come up with a system to give them tax breaks for improvements and not raise property taxes
18. City commission have to refocus their thinking
19. Downtown is no longer a retail place and will never go back to what it used to be. Its more of a financial district
20. In the past there have been empty promises and expectations might be too big

Suggestions

Key differences that could have significant impact on the success of the Main Street Program

1. Form of government
2. Bowling Green had a special project going on, Heritage 2000, before the Main Street Program
3. Bowling Green is an entitlement community
4. Bowling Green has government buildings in the downtown- specifically the city building and the police department
5. Downtown Bowling Green can be driven through, whereas Downtown Sandusky is only accessible from three sides, as Columbus Avenue terminates at the bay
6. BG has 17,000 college students within 4 blocks from the downtown

7. Sandusky has potential of 6 million tourist within the region in the summer
8. Bowling Green hosts the Black Arts Swamp Festival each September drawing 30,000 visitors in 3 days
9. Bowling Green has enlisted the aid of many students to assist in projects
10. Bowling Green went through more than a year of needed infrastructure improvements before the Main Street program.
11. Bowling Green's North Towne Center has taken an innovative approach in that a wing has become a weekend youth destination, drawing 400-500 youth between Thursday and Sunday P.M. (Skate boarding, movies, paint ball, rollerblading...) bringing in potential shoppers
12. Bowling Green's competition is only 20 minutes away (Toledo). Sandusky is seen as the competition for the rural area, as Elyria is 40 minutes away, and Cleveland and Toledo are both an hour away
13. Bowling Green downtown occupancy rate is 97%, and currently, Sandusky's rate is currently unavailable
14. Bowling Green has a separate grants department and Sandusky has to go outside in order to submit some grants.

Other factors for consideration

Bowling Green:

1. Address ongoing parking concerns
2. Review survey results
3. Encourage clustering of businesses
4. Encourage collaborative advertising
5. Prioritize retention visits
6. Encourage posting business hours
7. Acknowledge the success of the past and give direction for the future
8. Encourage opening of the backdoors – helps with parking
9. Add entrance and exit point signage for the city
10. Increase art and music festivals

Sandusky:

1. Tour and network other main street cities
2. Review survey results
3. Encourage clustering of businesses
4. Encourage collaborative advertising
5. Prioritize retention visits
6. Encourage posting business hours
7. Acknowledge the process is lengthy
8. Develop an identity
9. Strengthen public-private partnerships
10. Public acknowledgement of small successes

Contacts

In Bowling Green, we talked to Mayor John Quinn, Main Street Director, Earlene Kilpatrick, the Woodland Towne Centre Manager, Beth Genson, Suzanne Clark and Susan Clanton from the Bowling Green Community Development Foundation. We also made numerous calls to different department heads from both cities.

In Sandusky, we talked to City Mayor Frank Valli, City Manager Gerry Lechner, Economic Development Specialist Mike Will, Downtown Development Manager Susan Pike, and Mark Litten, the executive director of Greater Erie County Marketing Group (GEM). Mr. Neil Grey of Sandusky Mall was unavailable due to an infrastructure problem.

Main Street success cities

1. Canada

Communities suffered a nationwide building shortage in the 1940s, caused in part by a two decade long construction slow down. To encourage building, the federal government undertook a development program that created suburbs, which in turn created its' own shopping venues. This devastated the downtowns. In 1979, Heritage Canada launched Main Street Canada and developed the approach to prosper downtowns, both economically and environmentally. Some of the cities that benefited from the program are: Fort Macleod, Alta., which has a revitalized downtown center, attracting unprecedented numbers of tourists; Shediac, New Brunswick, which has seen new businesses open and total sales receipts go up; St. John's, New Foundland, with many historic buildings brought back to life.; Cambridge, Ontario, saw a skyrocket of downtown jobs; Matane, Quebec, had a 30% jump in the local business association.

2. United states

a. *Galion*: Community improvement projects, led by the Main Street Galion program and the Chamber of Commerce, offers residents a better picture of themselves. The community has improved its parks and infrastructure. Property owners have used grants to spruce up and update downtown buildings and total private investment in the downtown area is about \$10 million. This has resulted in this small north central Ohio city staying ahead of the curve in development, job retention and expansion.

b. *Wooster*: The community had established a \$1,175,000 loan fund dedicated to the restoration of the downtown. A finance committee was formed between all financial institutions for the purpose of supporting the Main Street program. The group worked with the Kent State University Architectural graduate students to compile a written history and design guidelines. Many programs were implemented: 1) visible banners at all entrance and exit points within the region, 2) specific discount days for groups, such as Teacher Appreciation Days, Senior Appreciation Days, All American Kids Days, etc, 3) a matching fund from area manufacturing to support Main Street, 4) Christmas lighting included candles in all 2nd, and 3rd floor windows, vacant or not, 5) project models to depict present situation and future potential, 6) clarified building codes to expedite process, 7) implemented 10% discount cards for students, residents, and groups visiting area, and coupon books handed out at major intersections for one day of downtown discount shopping, 8) received 24 concrete planters and recruited social clubs and groups to maintain these, 9) produced a holiday video commercial of downtown offerings, 10) purchase a nine 2'x 4' directional signage to be placed at the highways and city entrances and exit points, 11) property owners approved a \$1million assessment on property for long-term improvements, 12) individual, group, and organization groups could purchase bricks that were installed and displayed as part of the project (over \$43,000 raised 1987-1993), 13) raffled off small replica gazebos at annual festivals, 14) cooperative media blitzes, with shared cost in order in radio, newspaper advertisements, 15) created 3 hour prime parking spaces to stimulate longer shopping, eating enjoyment, 16) packaged information into "Welcome Wooster" booklet, with coupons, placed in all hotel/motel rooms, tour stops, chambers, and visitors bureaus, 17) reviewed vendor licensing ordinance to accommodate visitors needs, 18) created animated "Window Wonderland" displays in all storefronts, as these were bought at a group rate, 19) created a parking deck, 20) brought in new events, such as "Great American Bicycle Adventure", Art-train, "Wooster fest", Ice Sculpture Fest, Pop Orchestras, Pictures with the Easter Bunny, Fiddle fest, "Oldies but Goodies Bands", "The Sounds of Sousa" "Dollar Days", "Nostalgia Good Days", "Curbside Sales", etc., 21) had a public information kiosk in public square, 22) strolling officers at peak hours, evenings, events, etc., 23) postcards produced of downtown points of interests, 24) mailed welcome booklets to all new city arrivals, and welcoming groups to assist in accommodations, 25) placed advertisements and articles in national and state magazines, 26) cooperated with Cinema10 to advertise 3 times each show during previews to stimulate interest to groups gathered outside downtown locations, 27) implemented an application process for business closings, with advance notice to assistance through knowledge before the fact, 28) divided the downtown into quadrants, so as to centralize focus, to develop a sense of belonging to a smaller group, like northwest quadrant, southwest, etc., with quadrant captains identified, 29) from 1987-2000, \$50 million was reinvested in public/private partnerships and 30) "First Friday" were implemented to coordinate evening shopping hours.

c. *Other cities implemented*: 1) Loft-type apartments to reverse property value declines, 2) green space program to improve vacant lots, front yards, and street scrapes, with interns coordinating cleanup in focused neighborhoods, 3) outdoor retail displays, 4) perpendicular storefront signage 5) public restroom facilities, 6) convenient way finding signage, 7) critical mass with visitor-oriented retail, dining and lodging, 8) pocket parks, 9) downtown theme development, 10) long-term, 10-15 year strategic planning, 11) bike friendly access, bike lanes, and racks, 12) decorative sidewalks, improved quality of life issues, 13) electricity, gas, water, and sewer incentives offered by the city departments, 14) increased public/private partnerships, 15) knowledge of current resources, current users of downtown, potential markets, and competing communities, 16) inventory, catalog, and develop website of available commercial property,

similar to industrial websites, 17) unmet needs survey, 18) assistance to local businesses to improve current business practices through smart management, 19) fight urban sprawl with regional approach, 20) aggressive marketing, 21) developing a sense of identity, 22) monitoring land banking by real estate investors, 23) technical assistance for code compliance 24) letter campaigns, 25) Mother's and Father's Day Celebrations, 26) training and business recruitment and retention fairs, 27) focus on historical, physical, economical, and cultural aspects to build upon, 28) one-on-one visitations with businesses, and 29) touring other M.S. cities to communicate with those businesses involved.