

BOSTON MAIN STREETS
Revitalizing Boston's Neighborhood Business Districts

Center for Urban Development Studies
Graduate School of Design
Harvard University

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BOSTON MAIN STREETS

In 1995, Mayor Thomas M. Menino created Boston Main Streets, the first urban, multi district Main Streets program in the nation. Boston Main Streets provides funding and technical assistance to nineteen neighborhood-based Main Street districts throughout the City of Boston. The Boston Main Street program focuses its effort on providing merchants and community residents with the tools for their historic commercial districts to compete in today's market. The Main Streets program helps the local districts capitalize on their unique cultural and historical assets while focusing on the community's economic development needs. Examples include small business recruitment, business retention and addressing competition from shopping malls and discount retailers.

The Boston Main Streets program serves as a national model to urban areas seeking to revitalize neighborhood commercial districts. The program is a unit of the Office of Business Development (OBD)- Boston's Business Resource. The OBD provides quality services and resources to entrepreneurs, business owners and neighborhood business districts to help businesses expand, redesign storefronts, create jobs and play a vital role in their local community's and the City's economy. OBD is a division of the City of Boston's Department of Neighborhood Development.

History of Boston Main Streets

In 1983, then Boston City Councilor Thomas M. Menino brought the Main Street program to Boston's Roslindale neighborhood. At the time, Roslindale suffered from disinvestment and a deteriorated building stock. Using the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street model, Roslindale merchants, owners, city officials and residents built an organization and workplan to reverse their prospects. By its third year, the volunteer -driven organization saw amazing results: 73 facade changes, 43 commercial building renovations, 29 business gains and 132 net new jobs, totaling in an investment of more than \$5 million.

In 1995, newly elected Mayor Thomas Menino challenged the National Trust for Historic Preservation to expand its National Main Street model to Boston. This is the first intensive urban use of this highly successful 20-year old model for commercial district revitalization in the nation. Ten neighborhood commercial districts were designated as Boston Main Street programs in 1995 following a city-wide competition. Four districts were selected in 1997 and four more in 1999. Roslindale Village continues as a mature program today.

Program Operations

Each district receives technical assistance and intensive training in the Main Street approach from the City of Boston Main Streets office and the National Main Street Center as well as a funding package from the City of Boston for six years. In turn, each Main Street organization hires a full time Executive Director, raises matching funds,

incorporates its organization and implements its programs according to an annual work plan.

Boston Main Streets districts follow a four-point comprehensive approach that creates and sustains the district's image focusing on:

1. Community organization,
2. Promotion,
3. Design
4. Economic restructuring.

Specific Main Street activities and operations include storefront improvement grants, public enhancements, local promotional and fund-raising events such as road races, parades, auctions, multi-cultural festivals and holiday shopping events that strategically aim to enhance the image of the business district and attract consumers. Using the Main Street four-point approach, district staff and volunteers draw upon the skills and experience of the local stakeholders to revitalize the district.

Main Street districts represent a framework utilizing many different tools for neighborhood economic development. Dudley Square Main Street, for example, has successfully steered \$10.5 million of Empowerment Zone resources toward redevelopment of four abandoned commercial buildings into retail and office space.

Program Funding

The City of Boston commits a significant portion of its federal Community Development Block Grant funds to the Boston Main Streets program. In addition, the City of Boston commits six full time staff to assist the local districts in many aspects of their programs. Local districts also have access to city architects, design staff, transportation planners and technical assistance specialists.

The Boston Main Streets program is designed as a self-help program. The initial four-year funding decreases year to year with the goal that, in the fourth year, the local Main Street districts will be self-sustaining. Although originally a four year commitment, BMS has provided two years of additional funds for salary, promotion and physical improvements to sustain the momentum the local districts have built over their first four years. The funding is broken down into basic categories: Program Manager ,Program Assistant Salary, Physical Improvements (Public & Private), and Technical Assistance Promotion.

In addition, Boston Main Streets provides local districts with design assistance from local architecture firms in the form of Design Hours. The contracts with the architecture firms are administered by the Office of Business Development Design Services Unit.

Boston Main Streets also provides workshops and training through contracts with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and other consultants.

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The Corporate Buddy Program

Boston Main Street districts are teamed up with a Corporate Buddy. The Corporate Buddy is a large business or corporation that contributes \$10,000 each year for four years towards operational expenses. More importantly, the Corporate Buddy provides access to technical resources such as printing, marketing assistance, and volunteer projects

Boston Main Street Statistics

The nineteen Main Street districts continue to mature and develop into solid volunteer-based organizations with realistic strategies and action-oriented programs. Quantitatively, the results are impressive. The following statistics have been compiled by monthly district reports from 1995 to 1999:

- Net new and expanded businesses: 313
- Net new jobs: 2,326
- Volunteer hours invested: 46,579
- Completed storefront projects: 120
- Businesses receiving design assistance: 363
- Total grants to building improvements: \$346,955

Qualitatively, the overall goal of the Boston Main Streets program is to improve the quality of life in Boston's neighborhoods. The vitality of a neighborhood's business district is critical to the health of the neighborhood as a whole and for that reason all sectors of the community are involved with each Main Street organization. Stakeholders include residents who typically represent the consumer to business and property owners, public and private institutions, community development corporations and merchant associations.

Lessons Learned

For Boston, the need to strengthen the commercial and community center of each neighborhood supports several economic development goals: jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for Boston residents; commercial districts that are the social heart of the community; unique neighborhood commercial districts that attract prospective investment; and an understanding that the commercial core of each neighborhood is vital to the residential community and vice-versa.