

Jacksonville Main Street History



The heart of our community had become vulnerable to deterioration and blight because of Urban Renewal's failure. Many buildings in the downtown area had deteriorated over the years and were in danger of demolition. Realizing that the loss of such historic structures would remove the charm and historic character from the heart of our community, Jacksonville Main Street was founded to create programs and activities aimed at revitalizing and rejuvenating downtown to re-establish the downtown as a healthy, vibrant and economically secure center of commerce and social activities. The organization seeks to promote preservation, rehabilitation and to re-establish the commercial, civic and residential structures in our traditional business district.

In June of 1998, Dr. Lawrence Bryan led a group of concerned citizens and stakeholders determined to save the heart of our community from further blight to start the organization. On July 30, a town meeting to publicly introduce the Main Street program was held at MacMurray College with over 200 residents in attendance, many of whom saw the Main Street Four Point Approach as a perfect fit for this effort and signed up to assist in the revitalization effort. Jacksonville Main Street was officially designated in November 1999. Armed with dedicated volunteers and a motivated Board of Directors that included representation from City government and other related organizations, Jacksonville Main Street set to work "Changing Downtown, Together." The group charted its course with small steps and do-able projects crafted towards their mission of enhancing the perception, quality of life and long term economic health of the entire Jacksonville Community through a coordinated and sustained effort to revitalize the city's downtown district. As part of the State and National Main Street Program, Jacksonville Main Street follows their Four Point Approach and Main Street philosophy of preservation based economic revitalization.

The Main Street approach differs from previous downtown revitalization attempts in Jacksonville in that it emphasizes:

1. **A self-help approach.** Although no direct funding is available from the state, the primary benefit is via membership in the national organization with direct technical assistance and access to a nation-wide network of other Main Street communities. This technical assistance is a value to the community which is estimated at approximately \$25,000/yr;
2. A strong emphasis on **broad-based support and ownership** in the program;
3. Assistance in developing **community partnership and collaboration** (to eliminate the dependence on a small circle of major players).

Since then, Jacksonville Main Street volunteers have tackled tough challenges and compiled an impressive list of accomplishments through advocacy and partnership. The Organization was named one of Illinois' Premier Main Street Programs from 2005-2009. Jacksonville Main Street has set a high standard of excellence in work that has earned it 48 nominations for Illinois Main Street Awards and 34 Lt. Governor's Awards in Excellence in Downtown Revitalization. The program has achieved National Accreditation annually since 2004. In 2006, Jacksonville Main Street was named a finalist in the Great American Main Street Awards, winning this elite designation in 2012, and won a Governor's Hometown Award in 2007. In 2008 and 2015, the organization also claimed prestigious Richard Driehaus Awards for Preservation Advocacy from Landmarks Illinois, the highest preservation honor in Illinois. In addition to the accolades, Jacksonville Main Street has helped make a real difference in improving the economic condition for downtown and the entire community through its projects and advocacy.

Besides earning credit and publicity for outstanding volunteer efforts, the resulting effect is nearly \$40 million in private reinvestment in downtown building improvements in just over 17 years, adding over 200 net new jobs and creating more than 35 business expansions. Property values have risen, pouring funds into the regional TIF District to assist with more development and enabling local funding for restoration of the downtown streets. Jacksonville Main Street's partnerships, education, and advocacy work has helped with a variety of local projects:

- advocated the square restoration concept with Canopy Removal and the first quadrant building purchase and demolition, earning public support for the 3-phase, 6-year project
- invested over \$10,000 in preservation-based improvements to the City's iconic Civil War monument
- supported City efforts to secure over \$6 million in Federal funds that restored traffic flow and parking around the historic square and reopened North and South Main access to the square
- helped acquire land for Downtown Commons, a low-income housing project just north of downtown
- restored a dilapidated house and sparked more than \$65,000 in private reinvestments as part of an award-winning neighborhood revitalization program called the New Life Project (the Pink Palace)
- implemented a signage grant program to assist businesses with \$5,000 in grants distributed
- partnered with other agencies on tourism marketing campaigns, grant-funded preservation efforts, and increased business assistance and recruiting programs
- helped foster heritage tourism with development of Looking for Lincoln wayside exhibits, Voices of Jacksonville audio tours, returning the Civil War cannon to the square, Charters of Freedom Monument installation, and created 10 heritage based Wall Dog murals
- encouraged upper story residential development with Spacewalks and incentive workshops
- published tear-off maps, guides, and resource listings to promote downtown businesses, incentive programs, and investment opportunities
- loaned over \$230,000 through JEZDC's Low Interest Loan Program, garnering more than \$480,000 in building improvements and business enhancements
- advertised available properties through open houses and media to reduce downtown building vacancy rates from 27% in 1999 to less than 5%
- administered the City's \$100,000 Façade Improvement Grant Program, which gleaned over \$750,000 in building upgrades with 30 façade improvement projects on the square within 10 years
- helped leverage grant funds to assist with the \$350,000 Labor Temple restoration
- accessed professional preservation and design advice from Illinois Historic Preservation Agency architects for over 24 different building projects and provided local design support to dozens more
- offered volunteer training and networking opportunities at conferences, workshops, and webinars
- support the Morgan-Scott CEO program to train new young entrepreneurs for our community
- purchased over \$20,000 in holiday decorations, street banners, and wayfinding street signs
- supplied more than \$10,000 in planters, benches, and trees for district
- contracted an event coordinator to help produce over 30 JMS annual events, including a weekly Farmers Market, a 10-week summer concert series, and promote dozens of other activities that bring thousands of people downtown
- increased awareness for preservation, incentives, and downtown issues through public relations, and educational campaigns, including newsletters, school-partnerships, workshops, web site, social media, community project participation, and presentations
- brought state, national, and international recognition to Jacksonville through marketing, magazine articles, and press coverage of award-winning projects
- installed free Wi-Fi on the square and cameras for marketing and security, increasing positive perceptions of downtown safety and desirability
- developed a forgivable loan program to defray planning costs for large building improvements