

**TESTIMONY OF**

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**Submitted to  
Senate of Pennsylvania  
Senate Urban Affairs & Housing Committee  
Regarding the future of the Main Street and Elm Street Programs in Pennsylvania**

**May 16, 2013**

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Senate Urban Affairs & Housing Committee. It is an honor to be able to address you in my hometown and especially to lead you on a tour through the streets of historic Jim Thorpe. Being able to see the results of one of Pennsylvania's first Main Street efforts prior to your hearing on the future of the Main Street and Elm Street Programs in Pennsylvania is a great way to set the stage for today's proceedings. I would like to especially acknowledge Chairman Argall who has been a great champion of the Commonwealth's downtowns and neighborhoods

Let me start by admitting a bias. I love Main Streets. I love the architecture, the scale of the buildings, the folks who live and work on Main Streets. I love how each main street has its unique calling card. Some have a spectacular natural setting, most have friendly folks who reside and work along them, and all of them are the town centers where our great state got its start and hold a special place in our collective memories.

I got into the Main Street business back when it was a burgeoning movement. In fact some towns and cities were still doing urban renewal. As a student at Penn State I was bit by the preservation bug... it made environmental sense to me. While doing an internship in Kemmerer, Wyoming at a two-county planning agency I saw the small town I lived in decimated by a wrecking ball in the name of progress. I didn't get it.... long-time businesses were pushed out to make way for the new. The four story brick Victorians with their intricate storefronts that housed a jeweler, outfitter, restaurant and theater were torn down to make way for a series of faceless one-story shoppes. That's spelled S-H-O-P-P-E-S. I learned a lesson during the summer of 1979 that I've carried with me ever since.

The Main Street Approach to downtown revitalization does make sense. Our downtowns are the traditional center of community life. Most towns can't afford to construct buildings such as were built at the turn of the last century. Main Streets change and with that change their character and uniqueness are forged. The Main Streets that survive and thrive are the ones where the building owners and tenants understand that there's no such thing as standing still. Doing

nothing is the same as going backward. Forward movement is necessary if a Main Street is expected to survive.

During the course of my career, I've had the unique opportunity of being one of the Commonwealth's first a Main Street Managers, a consultant to developing Main Street projects for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a designer of regional revitalization efforts effecting Luzerne, Carbon, Lehigh and Bucks Counties, as well as a Main Street resident and merchant. The result of this collective experience is a pragmatic view of downtown revitalization – in particular the Main Street Program.

The knowledge and understanding gained from 30 plus years experience takes the form of lessons learned.

### **Lesson #1: It's about commitment**

The total outlay of state funding to Jim Thorpe for its Main Street program was \$75,000 over the course of three years. This funding from Governor Thornburgh's office was stretched to fund the program for five years. The outlay paid for the manager, office space, secretary, incentives for façade improvements, seed money for architectural design services, promotions, and consultant service for five years. In 2013 dollars this adds up to \$199,500 or \$39,900 per year. What Jim Thorpe had in 1981 and continues to have today are people who are dedicated to this place. The organizational foundation was laid by residents as well as relocated entrepreneurs. Private property owners who lived and worked here invested in their buildings. The incentives provided by the Commonwealth were a small carrot to encourage the initial local investment that was made by private property owners decades ago. Since that time the improvements you see in Jim Thorpe are largely self-funded.

### **Lesson #2: There has to be *a there* there.**

The commercial buildings you see in downtown Jim Thorpe today are the same ones that existed in 1981 and, with the exception of a redevelopment project that demolished much of Susquehanna Street (Route 209); it's the same downtown center and county seat that existed 100 years prior. Some downtowns have lost too much of their community fabric via demolition, long-term neglect and misguided improvements. Unfortunately, not every main street can be a successful "Main Street"

### **Lesson #3: The concepts are good!**

Main Street's four-point approach is a good one. Many successful downtown revitalization initiatives utilize the elements of organization, promotion, economic restructuring, and design.

As a result new life has been breathed into districts across Pennsylvania and the nation. The National Main Street Center does not provide direct funding to participating communities. It delivers the technical expertise local communities need to succeed. As state funding becomes less available, the answer to future program sustainability may lie in bringing the Pennsylvania program more in line with the rest of the nation. Tapping into, and becoming more closely involved with our counterparts throughout America can help develop a more comprehensive, technical assistance approach to Main Street revitalization. Ours is now a mature program. Revisiting the originators of the highly successful movement may be overdue.

#### **Lesson #4: Throw away the cookie cutter.**

Downtowns are much like snowflakes, no two are alike. Each has its own image, history and circumstances. Forcing a community to comply with strict criteria in order to comply with state regulations may make great sense for the funding agency but it is often inordinately time-consuming and ineffective for local partners. With communities now more attuned to nearby resources (parks, trails, music venues, heritage parks, regional cultural, historic landmarks, etc) a more nimble approach may be advisable. With the right leadership, the four-points and eight guiding principles (comprehensive, incremental, self-help, partnerships, existing assets, quality, change and implementation) of the Main Street approach can provide the tools each community needs to be able to direct its own program through consensus building. The results will be slower to take root but longer lasting and more sustainable.

All too often Pennsylvania Main Street programs fold after three or four years because self-sustaining skills were not attained by community leaders. When financial support for the program comes from the local entities that have a stake in the downtown: city government, merchants, businesses, and the public they tend to be more successful. Local initiatives that commit both organizationally and financially ultimately care more about the success of the program, and result in healthier, more successful downtown districts.

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