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Jim Thorpe PA

Honorable Senators, Representatives committee staff and guests, I'd thank you for the opportunity to testify as President of Tamaqua Borough Council, a small community of 7,000 not far from here in Schuylkill County. I am proud to speak on behalf of our residents, our Council Members, our Borough staff and the hundreds of volunteers and professionals that work hard on Main Street and other revitalization efforts in Tamaqua.

I'd also like to thank Jim Thorpe for hosting this hearing. Tamaqua and Jim Thorpe share a history, a geologic heritage and a future as 19th century towns that continue to reinvent ourselves without losing what makes us unique. I can tell you that Tamaquans often look to our neighbors to the east here in Jim Thorpe as we marvel at the progress revitalizing this main street and we model the techniques and strategies that were pioneered here.

When growing up in Tamaqua, the old timers would talk about the good old days. When there were plenty of jobs with the railroad and the coal companies, when the downtown was bustling on a Saturday night with shoppers, movies and excitement. They would talk about Tamaqua like was a place that was far far away in both time and vitality.

Well I grew up in Tamaqua during the 1980s and I can tell you I don't remember any good old days. When I was graduating from the head start program, Tamaqua had double digit unemployment and the Tamaqua railroad station at the heart of our community was abandoned and falling apart.

By the time I was part of the free-school lunch program in elementary school, Tamaqua tore down an entire block of our downtown because it was blighted and falling down. The downtown theater where I saw "Stars Wars" literally collapsed—eventually taking down the unemployment office with it. Even the local newspaper and my neighborhood school collapsed and were torn down.

When I was in high school in the late 80s, was it any wonder that teachers, parents, grandparents and friends were telling yet another generation—including me—to get out of Tamaqua , get a good education and make something of yourself. Someone not from Tamaqua actually wrote a letter to the editor saying that Tamaqua is a dirty, ugly town and that they hate having to drive through it and they really can't understand how anyone could live there. After declining since the 1920s, it's no wonder Tamaqua lost

half of its population had 25% unemployment in the 1950s and is another unknown and forgotten community in a long list of rural and urban communities and neighborhoods that are no longer desirable places to live or do business.

When I graduated from Princeton in 1995 and returned to Tamaqua, my own family scoffed and said I was out of my mind. The community, like so many others, when faced with major socio-economic forces that are beyond local control was doing what many others do—we were fighting amongst ourselves, protecting organizational turf, scratching our heads or blaming the economy.

It was at that point that Tamaqua, having hit rock bottom, began to change. We found help from partners like the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, and the Department of Community & Economic Development, DCA at the time, Tamaqua realized that what was happening to Tamaqua was not unique. Not only were other rural communities going through what we were going through, but also that the challenges we face in a densely populated community of 7,000 people are startling similar to what urban neighborhoods face.

As part of a 'visioning' process, we asked our community what it wanted to be in 10 or 20 years. Overwhelmingly people said they wanted the downtown improved—remember Tamaqua's downtown was literally falling apart. Some even went so far as to say "We want to revitalize like Jim Thorpe."

So, we looked at what Jim Thorpe did. That brought us to the Main Street Program but also to the Main Street Approach.

Pennsylvania's DCED Main Street program—even as it evolved through the years—provides clarity – so we can understand our issues and opportunities and the regional and national context of our economy. It provides a structure – the Main Street Four Point Approach © and the program guidelines. It provides a network so we can learn from others and share what we learn. And it provides funding for targeted investments, staff and training.

So Tamaqua used Main Street principles and focused on our core intersection—the Five Points and we built Depot Square Park, invested in pedestrian-friendly improvements, targeted tax incentives, supported business—new and existing, invested in parking, we expanded festivals, events and the arts to attract people to the downtown and most notably, we restored Tamaqua's #1 Landmark, the Tamaqua Railroad Station. And when we had the opportunity to expand that success into the South Ward Neighborhood using the Elm Street Program we did that and began the long process of revitalizing that neighborhood.

We sent our volunteers and our Main Street Manager to the PA Downtown Center's training and conferences and we learned from other Main Street communities. And we took advantage of PA's Main Street funding to leverage millions of dollars of private investment into our Main Street District.

Senators & Representatives, Main Street is great because you don't have to be a professional economic developer to understand the Four Point Approach. 1) Invest in your core area and historic structures—in Tamaqua this means fixing up buildings using our façade program; 2) understand and restructure your local economy—in Tamaqua this means attracting high tech medical jobs at a new downtown medical center; 3) promote your assets and image—in Tamaqua this means walking tours, summer concerts and events; and 4) create a sustainable effort to do it—in Tamaqua this means a long-term collaborative effort between the Borough, the Chamber of Commerce, non-profit organizations and residents.

There are people who don't think that it works. Even in Tamaqua there were doubters--every year at budget time we discuss and debate whether to continue to invest local tax dollars in a Main Street effort. We continue to do so because it works. Today our Main Street plan includes the re-use of upper floors and the creation of live-work space for artists and entrepreneurs. Main Street can and does work—you saw it today in Jim Thorpe and I see it every day in the Tamaqua.

The Tamaqua I grew up in was clearly declining and falling apart. We still have our problems, but there is a new generation of Tamaquans growing up in a town where people have their wedding or prom photos taken at Depot Square Park and you can sit downtown at the train station and enjoy an outdoor concert.

That next generation will need the tools of the Main Street program—the funding, the expertise, the thought leadership--to adapt to a constantly changing economy. After all, Tamaqua's Main Street district includes classic businesses that are community staples like *The Chili Dog*, *Charles X. Block's Men's Store*, *M&S Hardware*, the *Tamaqua Diner* and *Klingaman's Office Products*.

These businesses have been joined by businesses that reflect trends in technology, lifestyles and diversity. A business that uses technology is *Atlas Steel*, a structural steel design company located on a second floor downtown that uses draftsmen and technology to design buildings all over the world. And there's DnA Bikes, a bicycle repair and retail shop that is capitalizing on outdoor enthusiasts and a greater demand for healthy lifestyles. Another business that uses technology without compromising that "Main Street" customer relationship is *Emma's Friends Soaps & Lotions* whose customers are incredibly loyal regardless of whether they are walk-in or internet customers. Today's businesses are more ethnically diverse like *J&J Convenience*

Store, a delightful bilingual store featuring ethnic groceries and goods that reflect the diversification of the community. People are also coming downtown as a lifestyle choice. We are seeing a neo-classical Main Street phenomenon where people are living where they work—this is not the “live above your store” model from days gone by, but rather a “live in your studio” model where professional artists choose to work and reside in a large downtown building that serves as their home and their studio.

All of these trends offer exciting opportunities for Tamaqua and other Main Street communities and the Main Street program gives us the tools, resources and knowledge we need to evolve and revitalize. The future of Main Street is bright for those places that are attractive, welcoming and economically connected. For places like Tamaqua, we will continue to use the Main Street Program to stay on or ahead of these curves.

I commend this committee for hearing and learning about what the Main Street Program is doing on the ground in our communities. There are many “Tamaquas” in Pennsylvania. I ask that this committee work with your colleagues in the General Assembly and the Administration to give that next generation of Tamaquans the tools to continue to improve using the Main Street Program, expertise, structure and funding.

Thank you.