

BUILDING ECONOMIC SUCCESS THROUGH NEW INITIATIVES AND PARTNERSHIPS

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The economic success of downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts is essential in the over-all health of communities across the United States. Serving as the city center, those districts often house a variety of uses including municipal offices, religious institutions, retail, restaurants, professional firms, personal services and residential living.

Through new initiatives, Main Street Alabama is working in our designated communities to find the best uses of available spaces and understanding what the market will support – particularly as we move past the pandemic and more entrepreneurs are ready to jump start their businesses.

Through a partnership with Opportunity Alabama (OPAL) and the Business Council of Alabama (BCA), funded through an Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant, Main Street Alabama is providing services to our designated communities during the next 28 months in one of the following areas: small scale production, redevelopment planning or incremental development.

“Working in concert with OPAL and BCA has been a wonderful experience,” said Mary Helmer Wirth, President and State Coordinator, Main Street Alabama. “We are learning from one another and are utilizing the best of each our organizations to move businesses in Alabama forward. We are all stronger for our partnership and are looking forward to working together on current and future projects.”

As of the end of 2021, services were rendered in Montevallo, Woodlawn, Opelika and Florence.



Small Scale Production

Montevallo and Woodlawn received a small-scale production service in October 2021, facilitated by Matt Wagner, Chief Program Officer of the National Main Street Center. As small production finds its home in downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts, it is time communities start reviewing their zoning to allow small scale manufacturing and begin carving out space for those makers, often already working out of their home. Those producers can include everything from bakers, wig makers, brewers, quilters, metal artists and more.

During these visits, Matt met with Main Street staff, volunteers and city officials to discuss avenues to discover regional talent and then toured available spaces to determine what would make a good fit. Matt also had the opportunity to meet with local and regional producers that have already found success working out of a space. These producers discussed the challenges



Opelika residents tour available downtown properties.



Main Street Wetumpka's Small Box Shop, the Tourist Trap, opened in April 2021 in downtown Wetumpka and is serving the needs of the increasing number of tourists visiting the city after the launch of the highly rated HGTV makeover series that featured the city.

they faced and what support was missing in the process. Producers working out of their homes and vending their items at Farmers Markets and other events discussed what is keeping them from taking the leap into a brick and mortar. Matt's final report will provide a framework for those Main Street programs to help build an ecosystem to fill in those missing pieces as they move forward in the cultivation of small-scale producers in their districts.

Redevelopment Planning

The Redevelopment Plan service has been provided to Opelika and Florence thus far. Joe Borgstrom, Principal, Place + Main Advisors, led the team during a three-day exercise that included visiting with property owners with vacancies, learning more about local development initiatives and future growth from city officials and the county economic developers. The community was also invited on a walking tour and asked to express what they'd like to see in those vacant spaces. At the wrap up meeting at the end of the visit, Joe reviews the market trends, including the retail pull and leakage from the district. The final report will include pro formas for those property owners who expressed an interest during the visit as well as direction for redevelopment in the district moving forward.

Incremental Development

Incremental Development is meant to teach individuals how to become their own developers and tackle small scale development projects that can collectively make a significant impact in their community. In December 2020, Main Street Alabama hosted a free webinar with Bernice Radle, owner of Buffalove Development and Little Wheel Restoration Company, that was a good tee up of what can be expected when these services roll out in 2022. A more intensive workshop is planned for the Spring of 2022.

For all those services mentioned above, our partner, Opportunity Alabama, will provide information on capital stacks and how to leverage funding for the projects identified through the process.

Small Box Shops

Another initiative in play is our Small Box Shops. Funded by a matching USDA grant, two storage containers outfitted for retail were placed in Heflin and Wetumpka in 2019. The roughly 100 square foot space is meant to serve as a place for entrepreneurs to test the market before investing in a building.

In Heflin (pop. 3,480), Southern Charms, a home décor boutique, made its debut in the Small Box Shop on Black Friday 2020. A group of women looking to try their hand at retail approached the Main Street program about utilizing the Small Box Shop. This gave the women an opportunity to test their products, and, by the end of the Christmas season, they had outgrown the space. They quickly decided to find a permanent space and invested in a brick and mortar in the district. Their business continues to grow.

“The Small Box Shop was a true blessing to us,” said Sandy Sanders, Southern Charms co-owner. “It gave us an opportunity to explore our inventory and make changes along the way to accommodate the wants of our customers without investing too much. In doing so, our business had grown to a point where we were ready to make a storefront purchase that will fulfill one of our lifelong dreams.”

Just two hours south in Wetumpka, you will find a city that is not just surviving but thriving. *Southern Living* proclaimed it is “Wetumpka’s year to shine,” and Main Street Wetumpka’s Small Box Shop is at the helm. The Tourist Trap opened in April 2021 and is serving the needs of the increasing number of tourists visiting the city after the launch of the highly rated HGTV makeover series that featured Wetumpka.

The success of the Small Box Shops led to another funding round from USDA for units to be placed in Monroeville (pop. 5,878) and Marion (pop. 3,275) before the end of 2021. In preparation of the container placement in Monroeville, the Main Street program along with the local SBDC and Main Street Alabama, launched BUOY, Business Understanding & Ownership for Youth, for ages 15 to 25 to cultivate young entrepreneurs who can transition into the Small Box Shop. Entrepreneurs went through an application process that asked for their business idea and references. The group then completed courses covering topics from legal considerations, accounting best practices, human resources, financing and marketing. Providing these resources gives these future business owners a realistic understanding of what it will take to be successful in Monroeville’s market.

License Plate Program

The last initiative to mention is the Shop Local Support Small license plate program. After receiving an extension, Main Street Alabama now has through January 31, 2022, to secure enough pre-commitments for the car tag to go into production. Funds raised from the pre-commitments will be used for \$500 grants for qualifying small businesses in Alabama. To learn more about the car tag initiative, visit mainstreetalabama.org.

About Main Street Alabama

Main Street Alabama is a private non-profit and state coordinating program of Main Street America that stresses public-private partnerships, broad community engagement and strategies that create jobs, spark new investment, attract visitors and spur growth. Main Street builds on the authentic history, culture and attributes of specific places to bring sustainable change. The National Main Street Four Point Approach™ is an over 40-year model that focuses work in four areas: organization, design, promotion and economic vitality with strategies unique to the community and based on market-based outcomes.

Designated communities include Alexander City, Anniston, Athens, Atmore, Birmingham, Calera, Columbiana, Decatur, Dothan, Elba, Enterprise, Eufaula, Florence, Foley, Fort Payne, Gadsden, Headland, Heflin, Historic 4th Avenue Business District in Birmingham, Marion, Monroeville, Montevallo, Jasper, Opelika, Oxford, Scottsboro, South Huntsville, West Huntsville and Wetumpka. Each Designated community listed above reports their success by tracking their reinvestment statistics. Main Street Alabama’s Designated communities have reported 877 net new businesses, 2,863 net new jobs, \$571,321,812 in private investment, \$94,667,497 in public improvements and 128,567 volunteer hours in their districts collectively since June of 2014.

Main Street programs are locally driven, funded, organized and run. They are independent nonprofits or city agencies located in the community and affiliated with Main Street Alabama and a network of other Main Street organizations within the state. Main Street Alabama hosts new city application workshops in January each year. Communities interested in learning more about the program are encouraged to join the Main Street Alabama Network. More information can be found at mainstreetalabama.org. ■



Trisha Black joined the Main Street Alabama staff as the Field Services Specialist in February 2016 after working as a local Main Street Director for over seven years in Athens, AL. In 2020, she transitioned into the role of Marketing and Communications Manager. During Black’s tenure, Spirit of Athens became a state-designated and nationally accredited Main Street program. Along with dedicated volunteers, Black was the driving force behind several projects emulated both state-wide and nationally including the Athens Saturday Market, a state-certified farmers market, the Athens Grease Festival, an annual community event and fundraiser, and High Cotton Arts, a shared working space for up to 10 artists. Black received the 2014 Main Street Alabama Leadership Award, recognizing her for frequently sharing her knowledge of the Four Point Approach with both communities interested in downtown revitalization and other Main Street programs. In 2020, she earned her Main Street America Revitalization

Professional certification from the National Main Street Center. She is a 1993 graduate of Troy University with a bachelor’s degree in political science and journalism.