Developing Strategic Action Plans for Downtown Revitalization

Main Street programs help communities rebuild and preserve economic vitality in their historic and older downtowns and neighborhood commercial centers. One of the essential tasks main street organizations undertake is developing an action plan with a clear sense of priorities and direction for the revitalization effort. The *strategic* action plan takes a fresh view of the “four points” of the Main Street Approach. In this view, the “four points” of the Main Street Approach – design, promotion, organization and economic vitality – are integrated. The transformation strategies the revitalization program adopts cut across all four areas. This gives the program balance and ensures that activities in each part of the organization are tightly integrated with all other parts.

# The development of a strategic action plan serves several purposes:

* Establishes a community vision for success that is rooted in an understanding of the market realities of the district.
* Engages the community in establishing a community-wide agenda for downtown revitalization.
* Manages the wide range of activities an organization wants to accomplish through comprehensive, simultaneous activity in the Four Points.
* Develops a timetable and budget for activities.
* Explains the organization’s purpose and its activities to the public.
* Helps demonstrate the impact and measurement of both qualitative and quantitative outcomes of the organization’s success.

# Process

1. Assemble the team

Identify who will participate in the process to create the action plan. At a minimum, this should be the full board of directors. Others you might choose to have participate in the process include other key stakeholders, committee chairs if they don’t serve on the board, or other partners in downtown revitalization.

1. Assess your district

Take a critical look at the assets and liabilities of your district. This includes the physical assets/liabilities including the character and condition of the building stock as well as other assets/liabilities like a high degree of community volunteerism or lack of community pride. Some of the activities to undertake in assessing the district include:

* 1. Have board members complete a board member survey. Have committees do the same.
  2. Have the team form small groups to complete an assets and liabilities checklist – this is an exercise that is best done as a walk-through of the district.
  3. Review any recent plans, market studies, or other reports as applicable.
  4. Host small group listening sessions and run through a series of questions about assets, opportunities, issues, and liabilities. Ask the groups to identify the top 5 qualities the district will have in the future – how will it look, feel, function?
  5. Conduct an inventory of businesses and buildings. What goods and services are offered? What clusters do you naturally have emerging? What are the gaps?
  6. Identify all existing events that take place in the district or that attract a large audience to the community.

1. Look for consistency in the top assets, issues, liabilities, and opportunities identified in the process of assessing your district.

Cull out the most frequently mentioned assets/opportunities and liabilities/challenges from the reports, listening sessions, and surveys. This might be “our historic building stock,” or it might be “too many vacant spaces,” or it might be “upper-floor residential opportunities,” etc.

1. Write the top assets/opportunities and liabilities/challenges on flip-charts in preparation for a work session with the team.
2. Develop a draft vision statement for review at the work session.
3. Bring the team together for a work session. At the work session, review and discuss the information gleaned from the assessment.
   1. Review and fine tune the draft vision statement for the district.
   2. Prioritize the top assets/opportunities and liabilities/challenges.
   3. Using this information, identify the top 2-3 strategies you will focus on over the next three to five years. These strategies should help provide focus to the revitalization effort and be based on achieving the vision.
   4. Develop specific objectives for each strategy – what steps do you need to take to achieve the strategy?
4. Share the action plan with committees.
   1. Committees need to look at opportunities to integrate the action plan into their scope of work by identifying specific projects and activities to meet the objectives for each strategy.
5. Identify Partners

Identify partnerships with other groups to maximize success. Working with others expands the community focus of the strategic plan and the revitalization effort.

* 1. Make a list of every single community organization, agency, club and constituency that might conceivably be involved in the revitalization of your commercial district. The list should go beyond the “usual suspects” and encompass every public agency, civic group, school organization, religious group, business association and development authority imaginable. Consider informal groups as well – social clubs, retirement homes, high school clubs, etc.
  2. Next, think about each of these groups and their respective goals. Try to think of a potential link between each group’s activities and the revitalization of the commercial district. What activities, expertise or resources do they have? What are their objectives and constituencies?

1. Share the action plan with potential partners.

Identify areas partners will assist with implementing the plan.

1. Follow-up

Once the action plan is developed, host a public meeting to share the results. You may choose to also solicit information to refine the plan, but not to change or alter it dramatically. Use this as an opportunity to get community support for downtown revitalization and to engage community members in helping to implement the plan. Periodically review the plan at board meetings to ensure you stay focused and that committees are moving forward with projects and activities that are achieving your priorities.

# Example

Here’s an example of how to use the Four Points to develop activities to meet an overarching strategy.

## Strategy: Increase the number of downtown residents.

### Sample Activities:

#### Design:

* Work with property owners to create upper-floor apartments and condominiums for district workers and others interested in living in the district.
* Create public gathering spaces.
* Change storefront displays at least monthly. The people who live and work near the district see its window displays almost every day. Keeping window displays fresh helps keep them engaged.
* Ensure the sidewalks are attractive, appealing, safe, and well-maintained.

#### Organization:

* Include one or more of the district residents on the board of directors and in committees.
* Build partnerships with neighborhood associations.
* Organize mixers for residents to meet each other and interact with business owners.

Promotion:

* Offer a concierge type service for downtown residents.
* Offer customer loyalty program.
* Have a “welcome to downtown” gift packet for downtown residents.

#### Economic Vitality:

* Add needed product lines to existing businesses that appeal to downtown residents.
* Connect property owners with incentives to help convert unused or underused space into upper-floor residential.

#### Measuring Progress

* Track of the number of new residential units developed and the amount of reinvestment.
* Track the number of residents downtown.
* Periodically survey residents to learn about attitudes and perceptions about the district, current shopping habits, additional products and services they would like to buy within the district, demographic characteristics of the residents participating in the survey.
* Ask businesses to keep an informal tally of the number of residents who shop there and how much they spend…are the numbers increasing?
* Choose random spots in the district and count the number of people who walk by during the 30 minutes before most businesses open, during the lunch hour, and during the 30 minutes after most businesses close. Do this at least twice a year. Are the numbers increasing?