

MainStreetNews

THE MONTHLY PERIODICAL of THE NATIONAL TRUST'S NATIONAL MAIN STREET CENTER®

Building Support for Main Street: Membership Drives

by Sheri Stuart



"Should we or shouldn't we?"

That seems to be the question facing many new and established Main Street programs when considering whether to implement a membership campaign. On the plus side, a membership campaign can boost the program's funding base, give stakeholders an opportunity to invest in something in which they believe, and build financial stability by spreading the sources of funding.

In This Issue

National Trust Creates Community Revitalization Department

Headed by Stanley Lowe, a nationally recognized expert on the revitalization of historic neighborhoods, the new department will house the National Main Street Center and Community Partners, two of the Trust's most successful programs. Meet our new vice president and read an inspiring message from Senior Vice President Peter Brink as he hands over the helm after 11 years of working with the Main Street Center and its nationwide network of cities, towns, and states.....12 & 15

Parking, Parking, Parking

Creative parking solutions are cropping up from coast to coast. See how Boston's Allston Village is providing parking for evening visitors and find out how Bellevue, Wash., is combating its downtown parking crunch through innovative leasing programs.....8

Upstairs Downtown

See how Noblesville, Ind., is marketing upper-floor space in such widely diverse buildings as a former church, a milling company's warehouse, and a former Order of Red Men Cherokee Lodge.....9

The Last Picture Show

Remember Saturday matinees at the movie house on main street? Well, memories are all that's left of many downtown theaters. Find out why historic movie theaters are struggling and what can be done to save them.....10

Main Street Basic Training

New to the Main Street Approach? Come to Washington, D.C., November 5-8, 2001 and learn the basics of the Main Street revitalization from the leader in the field for more than 20 years....16

MAIN STREET



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Concerns linger, however, about potential conflicts with other local organizations, such as chambers of commerce, which also depend on membership for funding. In addition, as Main Street programs are community-driven, there may be a perception that a membership drive will exclude some stakeholders, especially those who contribute time rather than money. Each program will need to decide whether the benefits outweigh the costs. In general, all of these concerns can be addressed through a well-coordinated and well-planned funding drive that seeks to involve all community members. Some suggest that it is better to call the membership drive an "investment campaign" or "contributors drive." Whatever it is termed, many communities have found that a funding drive offers an excellent opportunity to communicate directly with stakeholders about accomplishments and future plans and is thus worth the effort for that reason alone.

Campaign Elements

When fund raising for Main Street, you must establish a compelling reason for people to give. People will donate because they like the cause, they like the people involved, or because someone told them they should. The job for the membership committee is to supply one or more of these reasons to businesses or individuals who are possible contributors to Main Street.

All fund-raising efforts, whether city solicitation, sponsorship request, or the annual membership campaign, need to begin with completed, detailed work plans. Completed work plans not only will tell you how much money you need to raise, but will serve as a tool for your solicitations. It is much more powerful to ask people to contribute to specific revitalization projects than to the program's administration and overhead.

Take, for example, the work plans required by the Kansas Main Street Program. The state requires communities to include in their work plans a column that delineates how much staff time, if any, is required for specific tasks to implement an activity. This helps the program determine the true cost of undertaking each activity and apportions that cost by

category rather than attributing it to administration. Work plans should be completed by the committee members responsible for implementing each activity. It is the responsibility of the board of directors to establish fund-raising goals based on each committee's budget request as described in the work plans, along with other funding needs for that year.

Once you determine how much you need to raise through the membership drive, it is time to put together the team that will oversee the effort. Select an organized person who enjoys fund raising—yes, those people do exist in every community!—to spearhead the drive. Remember it is *not* the responsibility of the program manager to solicit funds—that is too much like asking for their own salary. It is the responsibility of staff, however, to supply background information and help coordinate the effort.

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Assemble a team

Many communities have found it effective to assemble teams of four and organize a friendly competition to keep the task entertaining for the volunteers who participate. Select an overall theme for the year's campaign and give the teams names that reflect the theme.

Before starting the membership drive, provide training for the teams. Every team member should feel comfortable answering a variety of questions about the program. Some communities prepare training materials and provide a brief introduction to Main Street over pizza and root beer. To help the teams prepare for the questions they'll encounter, organize a role-playing exercise where members take turns playing either the solicitor of funds or the potential donor. Type out a list of potential questions to get the exercise started:

- Why should I give money—how does the program benefit me?
- How much money are you trying to raise?



STUDIO WEST

In Libertyville, Ill., businesses that contribute to the Main Street program are promoted in a variety of ways. Mickey Finn's Brewery (above) is highlighted in bold in flyers and brochures (see cover and pg. 6) produced by MainStreet Libertyville.

What Goes in a Membership Brochure

- Brief explanation of the local, state, and national main street programs
- Mission statement
- Program highlights
- Goals
- Committees
- Funding sources
- Logo/quality graphics
- Who is involved
- Description of membership categories
- Benefits of membership
- Contact information



Campaign Volunteers Need:

- The membership packet
- Sample questions and answer sheets about the program
- A “how to” crib sheet
- A deadline
- An incentive
- Instructions on how, when, where to turn in forms and money
- Recognition

- How much do establishments similar to mine give?
 - I can’t afford what you want. Is my contribution tax deductible?
- Be creative so you prepare your volunteers for hitting the streets.

Prepare a schedule

As a team, determine the best time for the campaign. Using a calendar, fill in projects and activities, such as training dates, scheduled events, other funding campaigns, mailings, or any other program activity that might conflict with the pledge drive. Next add major community events, such as elections, county fairs, and other activities that capture the public’s interest. Finally, jot down the dates when other organizations, such as the United Way, conduct their annual campaigns. After looking at the overall picture, select a time of year for the campaign that minimizes any potential community or program conflict. In choosing dates, make sure you set deadlines for the entire campaign, including the production of support materials and follow-up.

Make a list of potential donors

Make a list of all previous and potential members. Set aside the names of individuals or groups that will be asked to contribute as major donors; they should be contacted before the membership drive begins, not as part of the regular campaign. Determine who else should be asked. Look for potential gaps in your list by reviewing and refining the definition of stakeholders. Have you targeted households, for example? Other community organizations? What about downtown employees? Alumni? Look beyond downtown business and property owners. List the reasons why these “stakeholders” should be interested in downtown, how Main Street benefits them, and why they should contribute. Be as specific as you can (e.g. a better community through special events, higher profits, good public relations, etc.).

Set a target amount to be raised from each contributor. Some communities separate general community membership categories from the business contributors. Others determine in advance how much they are going to request from specific individuals, groups, and business and property owners.

Prepare an information packet

Assemble an information packet that campaign volunteers can use as a solicitation tool. At a minimum, the packet should contain a simple, well-designed brochure that describes the program’s accomplishments and the benefits of membership. Benefits can be organized by general category. For example, the Main Street effort can benefit property owners by strengthening property values, supplying resources for building renovations, etc. Benefits for business owners might include enhancing the downtown business climate or providing assistance with store design, visual merchandising, and/or marketing. For residents, the program’s appeal could be community pride in sponsoring a special event or simply enjoying the benefits of a beautiful, revitalized downtown. Use photos to illustrate the range of activities the program coordinates; and, if possible, ask well-respected donors to provide testimonials describing what Main Street has done and why they contribute. The packet should also include the work plans for the coming year, as well as a program budget that lists income and expenses by activity.

Launch the campaign

Launch and manage the fund-raising campaign. Give campaign volunteers specific assignments and deadlines (who to ask, how much, etc.). Limit the number of calls each solicitor is *required*



to make. Whenever possible, volunteers should call on their peers. Some may prefer to work in teams, while others may choose to work individually.

Develop a campaign schedule with weekly meetings, at which the teams must report their progress. To keep volunteers interested and make the campaign fun, use these “check-in” meetings to hand out prizes for the

top individual and team fund raisers for the week and to those who’ve met their targets.

Before the campaign starts, send out press kits to get the publicity rolling. Explain what the Main Street program is; why you are conducting a membership drive; your timeline; program goals, objectives and mission statement; past accomplishments; financial goals; dollars in hand; and anything else you think is important to the campaign. Photos of team members turning in their checks to kick off the campaign are good image builders. The media should be invited to the kick-off and to the celebration at the end of the campaign.

Recognize contributors and volunteers

A system for acknowledging gifts helps ensure appropriate recognition. The type of acknowledgement can vary by category of giving. The following is one system:

- \$50 or less—an acknowledgement letter signed by the president and mailed within 48 hours, along with additional program information;
- \$51 to \$100—a letter, plus special listing in the annual report;

- \$100 to \$500—all of the above, plus tickets to a popular Main Street event.

The key is to determine what is right for your community and to have plans in place well before you launch the campaign.

At the end of the campaign, celebrate and thank the volunteers. Recognize all of the effort that went into the campaign and the importance of each person's contribution of time and energy to sustain the organization. Host a party (Thanks with Franks?), list everyone's names in the newsletter, write an article for the newspaper—choose a variety of techniques to recognize the endeavor.

Ideas for successful campaigns are endless. Use the following ideas from other Main Street programs to update your membership campaigns.



Ardmore, Oklahoma: Telephone Blitz

Taking Ardmore Main Street's membership campaign from a respectable net income of \$24,000 in 1996 to a current net of \$50,000 required re-shaping an arduous six-month process into a two-day telephone blitz full of fun and excitement. Not only has income increased, but the number of individual members has grown from 82 to 250 during the same time period, and business memberships have increased from 40 percent to 80 percent.

While the campaign itself lasts only two days, planning begins five months in advance. Four strong team captains are selected; each is then responsible for recruiting a six-member team. Team members may or may not currently be involved with the

Ardmore Main Street's two-day telephone blitz has doubled the income of the program's membership campaign—from \$24,000 in 1996 to \$50,000—and increased the number of individual Main Street members in this Oklahoma town from 82 to 250.



Media coverage of Ardmore's membership campaign highlights all of the "great things happening downtown" as a result of the Main Street program.

program. All team members attend a joint 30-minute "101 Main Street training" so that everyone leaves with a basic understanding of the program. The volunteers also receive 8-tab binders containing "Everything you wanted to know about Main Street but were afraid to ask"—information on the Main Street Four-Point Approach, board members, and past and future uses of funding, as well as the mechanics of phone solicitation.

Newspaper coverage sets the stage, both before and after the campaign, with articles on the purpose of Ardmore Main Street, the program's accomplishments, and a list of work plan items. Some volunteers refer to this information when they make their calls—"Say, I'm sure you saw the article yesterday in the paper about all the great things happening downtown...."

The actual campaign takes place in the Main Street office. A temporary phone bank is set up courtesy of a local cellular phone company which donates the use of six phones plus free access and air time. Each team member brings a list of contacts, while the Main Street program provides lists of members, businesses, and chamber of commerce businesses. Major contributors (over \$1,000) are not contacted at this time, as they are part of an advance solicitation drive handled by board members.

The local radio station provides hourly updates of the phone drive, complete with "Man on the Spot" interviews with program manager Bill Hightower and sounds of bells ringing, balloons popping, and people laughing in the background as they

make their calls. As pledges are received, an assigned "team runner" goes out to collect the checks and place balloons on contributors' doors.

Oklahoma Gas and Electric contributed funds to provide financial incentives for the callers, who received up to \$100 each if they pledged a certain number of new members. Many of these recipients donated their rewards to the Main Street program, requesting instead that their names be inscribed on bricks for the historic depot renovation project. The inscribed bricks were also used as an incentive to persuade donors to increase pledges to the next higher category of contribution. The program accepts Visa or Master Card—with approximately 25-30 percent of the pledges paid in this manner. The winning team received a catered gourmet meal provided by a board member (an item that went for \$2,000 at Ardmore's Chocolate Festival Silent Auction!).



Forest Park, Illinois: "We Work for You"

In January 2001, the Forest Park Main Street Redevelopment Association launched its annual membership campaign, "We Work for You," which ended March 30, 2001. The strategy behind the campaign was to encourage people to "hire/rehire" rather than to "join/rejoin" the organization.

Building on this theme, the association created a program "resume," complete with a work objective, statement of experience, assets, programs and projects, recognition and references—

just as you would expect to find in any employment resume. This resume can also serve as a short case statement for other fund-raising efforts.

To accompany the resume, a Main Street volunteer professionally designed a brochure (at no cost to the program) that describes the organization, explains its services and its mission, shows how Main Street is funded, gives reasons why membership is important, lists membership benefits, and provides an application form. The brochure and resume, along with testimonials from eight current members and a return envelope, were mailed out to more than 600 current and potential Main Street members. A local bank paid for the mailing of the first 300 membership packets, which Main Street volunteers assembled. Six weeks into the campaign, a second letter was mailed, followed up by phone calls from board members. All of the membership materials, which were designed to convey the simple style and tone of the organization, are also available on the program's website, <http://forestparkmainstreet.org.90.uslive.net>

The campaign increased the program's membership base 65 percent compared to this time last year. More than 200 pledges by new and renewing members were received in the two-and-a-half-month period, representing substantial progress toward the overall goal of 300 members (139 pledges were received last year during the same time period). Over 76 percent of

the program's membership renewed their pledges during the campaign. And, for the first time in the program's history, residential members outnumber business members (113 to 108). According to Nancy Svoboda, co-chair of the Organization Committee, which is overseeing the campaign, the membership program is an "ideal way to bring businesses, residents, and nonprofit organizations into the revitalization process."

The membership brochure and materials were used as a way to make joining the program simple. By showing how the organization is useful to them personally and to the community as a whole, the "We Work for You" campaign encourages members to continue their participation. Frequent contact through other mailings, events, and publicity enhanced the effectiveness of the brochure and resume throughout the campaign.

South Orange, New Jersey: Reaching Out to Residents

When South Orange, New Jersey, set out to build community-wide support for its revitalization effort in 1995, volunteers rolled up their sleeves and picked up the phones. Setting a target of 10 percent of the community's approximately 5,000 households, Main Street South Orange almost reached its goal by attracting 450 new members.



The campaign took place over a two-month period and included a saturation mailing of the program's annual report printed on 11-x-17-inch paper and folded into four informational panels. Main Street followed up this mailing with a membership letter that was sent out with an enclosed post-paid envelope and card designating level of membership.

Using a reverse directory (a telephone directory organized by address rather than alphabetical name listing), volunteers contacted households in their immediate neighborhoods, greeting each person they reached with "Hi, I am a volunteer and neighbor..." After the phone call, the volunteer immediately sent out another letter, again with a post-paid envelope, to reinforce the new member's commitment.

At the end of the campaign, Main Street South Orange took out a half-page ad (provided by the newspaper at a discounted rate) that listed all new household members by level of donation; for those who did not want to be named, there was an "anonymous" category. Contributions ranged from \$5 to \$500, with \$50 being the average.

During its initial telephone membership drive in 1995, Main Street South Orange learned that phone calls to prospective members took much longer than expected. Now the program uses a staggered direct mail campaign that includes the program's annual report, a membership response card (below) and post-paid envelope, and a postcard picturing a Main Street activity (above) to attract new members.



Main Street needs your support to continue our work. Please consider contributing toward Main Street. Choose an amount with which you are comfortable.

And if you are a member now, it is time to renew your annual membership!

All contributions are tax deductible.

_____ \$125 Renewal
_____ \$ 80 Patron
_____ \$ 60 Member
_____ Other \$ _____

Name _____

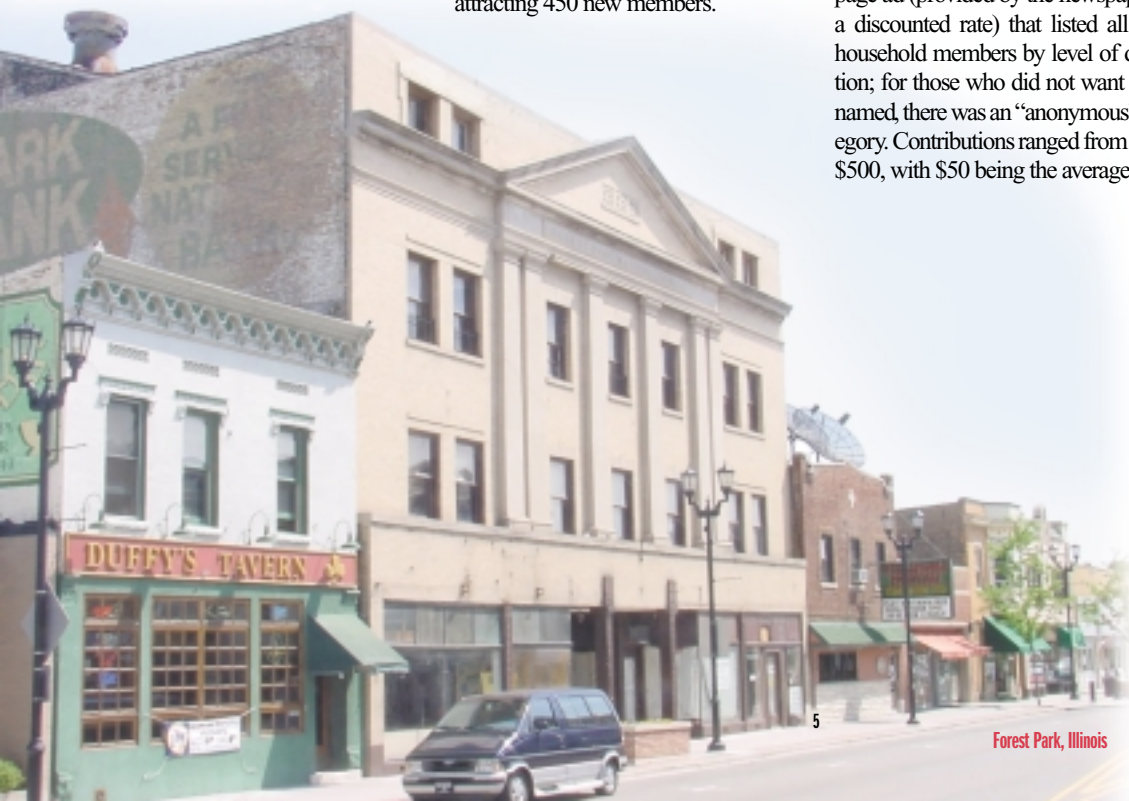
Address _____

Telephone (H) _____

Telephone (F) _____

Make checks payable to:
Main Street South Orange, Inc.
P.O. Box 687
South Orange, NJ 07079
90730 763-6899

Please volunteer. Turn this card over to see what would be right for you.



One of the lessons the program learned during the 1995 telephone campaign was that each call took much longer than anticipated. Volunteers were expected to make 20 phone calls per hour, instead they were able to only make five to six. Consequently, they were only able to reach 1,000 households instead of the targeted 5,000. Since then, the Main Street program has developed an effective household bulk mailing process. In November, a copy of the annual report is mailed to all households in town. In the spring, Main Street South Orange sends out another bulk membership mailing, complete with information on program accomplishments, upcoming plans, a post-paid envelope, etc. Within six weeks, an "invoice" reminder is mailed to all previous supporters who have not responded to the bulk mailing. A postcard picturing one of Main Street's activities, such as the streetscape project, is sent to other potential contributors in August or September. Depending on the response, an additional bulk mailing may be done in the fall. To date, the program has maintained an average of nearly 400 household memberships through this effort.

Libertyville, Illinois: Dual Drive

MainStreet Libertyville has adopted a dual approach for its membership drive.

"Like tending a garden, the job of managing our beautiful downtown will always require that MainStreet be in place."

So states the cover letter for Mainstreet Libertyville's residential membership campaign, which raises \$20,000 though a current roster of 480 members. An excellent data base helps the program track memberships, as well as volunteer hours, and enables it to mail monthly statements linked to the expiration date of each person's membership. As a result, the program has a steady income stream throughout the year. The renewal notice and cover letter cite the last contribution given, the date received, and membership category. In addition, the notice specifies a requested contribution level for the current year. Accompanying the notice is a beautifully designed brochure that describes the program and membership levels with lots of photos of the program's activities. To make payment easier, Mainstreet Libertyville accepts both checks and credit cards.

Responding to members who said they would have contributed more last year if asked, the program has redesigned its dues structure for this year's drive. New categories range from \$40 to \$1,000 (previously \$25 to \$100). As premiums or incentives, the program ties contributions to items that further promote the program. For example, coupons for merchandise at downtown businesses, Main Street golf shirts, and tickets to the extremely popular Oktoberfest are some of the incentives given to contributors. Each incentive helps promote the revitalization effort in a different way: tickets to Oktoberfest help build foot-traffic for the program's major fund raiser (which raised a net of \$60,500 last year); the shirts create program awareness; and coupons generate traffic for downtown businesses.

A similar cover letter and renewal notice is sent to downtown businesses. The letter gives examples of the benefits of continued support—from the twice weekly sweep of sidewalks from May to Thanksgiving to 52 days of events that attract over 40,000 visitors annually to cooperative advertising programs.

In addition to the letter campaign, MainStreet Libertyville also has developed new 2-in-1 Corporate Membership/Sponsorship Packages ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000. A detailed information packet describing all the major events coordinated by the program, coupled with the sponsorship opportunities, was produced. Events include Preservation Week, Vintage Car Show, Farmer's Market, Out to Lunch, Out to Supper, Harvest-Fest, Trick or Treat, and Dickens of a Holiday. This spring, the packets were mailed to more than 800 businesses. Businesses can participate by choosing one of the package levels or simply by selecting the individual event sponsorships they would like to support. The business owner fills out a one-page form indicating his or her sponsorship preference and mails or faxes it to MainStreet Libertyville's office.

Lessons Learned

Are there common elements or lessons to be learned from these successful campaigns? You bet! Here's a list of some of the key features to remember as you plan your membership drive:

- **Emphasize the human element.** Document how changes that affect people's lives have occurred through the program's activities—through promotional events, volunteer opportunities, and number of jobs created.
- **Document support.** Collect year-round testimonials and examples of

Membership renewal letters to downtown businesses cite the benefits of belonging to MainStreet Libertyville. They include cooperative advertising programs, brochures that promote downtown shopping and services (left), and twice weekly downtown cleanups that help keep the district sparkling.



GRANTS:

Where to Get Them, How to Use Them

Membership drives are a good way to bring in a steady stream of unrestricted funding for your organization, funds that can be used to pay for staff and other administrative costs. Grants, on the other hand, are better allocated to specific projects, such as restoring a historic building. One of the best sources of information about grants available for a wide variety of projects is the Foundation Center.

The Foundation Center

The Foundation Center is the foremost authority of up-to-date information on private philanthropy in the United States. It is an independent, national service organization established by foundations in 1956. The Center's mission is to foster public understanding of foundation and corporate giving by:

- maintaining a comprehensive data base;

- providing free educational programs and fee-for-service training;
- maintaining a web site; and
- tracking trends in foundation growth and giving.

Libraries

As part of the center's mission, it offers information and expert reference services to the public through five Foundation Center libraries (Atlanta, Cleveland, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.) and 200 cooperating collections across the country. The libraries provide free public access to a unique collection of materials on philanthropy. Librarians are on hand to show you how to use Center publications and other print and electronic sources to conduct funding research.

Publications

The Center's more than 50 titles on philanthropic giving and other nonprofit topics can be accessed at the libraries or purchased. Publications include *FC Search: The Foundation Center's Database on CD-ROM*, *The Foundation Directory*, and other directories, guides, and reports.

Educational Programs

The Center offers free and fee-based educational programs at all five of its offices. Topics include grant-seeking basics, programs on corporate giving, effective use of online resources, introduction to *FC Search*, proposal writing, grant seeking for individuals, full-day seminars on proposal writing, grant seeking on the web, and fee-based programs aimed at developing fund-raising skills.



Membership

The Associates Program is a membership program offering toll-free telephone and email reference, document delivery, research, and other assistance. The program is intended for larger nonprofits that need frequent access to current information on funders.

The headquarters of The Foundation Center is located at 79 Fifth Avenue/16th Street; New York, N.Y. 10003-3076; (212) 620-4230. Visit its web site at www.fdncenter.org.

how your program and commercial district has been recognized by others, including citations, awards, and grants.

- **Break the rules.** In Ardmore, for example, volunteers don't have to be members of Main Street when recruited by the team captain to help with the drive—although after the training session, they do usually sign up!
- **Different approaches work for different communities.** It is important to develop a strategy that will be fun and interesting for your pool of volunteers.

- **Frequent contact.** One-on-one meetings, bulk mailings, internet, phone calls—use all the tools available to communicate your message and keep people informed about the revitalization effort.
- **Tie projects together.** Develop incentives that encourage participation in other activities or that incorporate different funding strategies.
- **Produce quality materials for your membership drive.** Whenever possible, incorporate photos and other images of the program's projects and activities into brochures, press kits, etc. Remember a picture is worth a thousand words.

- **Set a definite start and end date for the drive.** To prevent volunteer burnout and sustain momentum, choose as short a time period as will get the job done for you.
- **Go beyond the obvious.** Expand your membership campaign to include household and corporate members, as well as other categories that may be appropriate to your community.
- **Make it easy to give.** Enclose post-paid envelopes with letter solicitations, accept credit cards, send people to collect contributions, think of all the ways you can simplify the actual giving process. 🌸

Sheri Stuart is a program associate with the National Trust's Main Street Center. Many thanks to the following program managers who provided information for the case studies in this article: Bill Hightower, Ardmore Main Street Authority; Carolyn Dellutri, MainStreet Libertyville, Inc.; Dan Korman, Forest Park Main Street Redevelopment Association; and Nancy Adams Shippy, Main Street South Orange.



To encourage businesses to sponsor Main Street activities, such as Oktoberfest (left), MainStreet Libertyville has developed Corporate Membership/ Sponsorship packages ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000. Business owners can select one of the package levels or simply choose the individual events they would like to support.

