



# Growing

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## YOUR VOLUNTEER

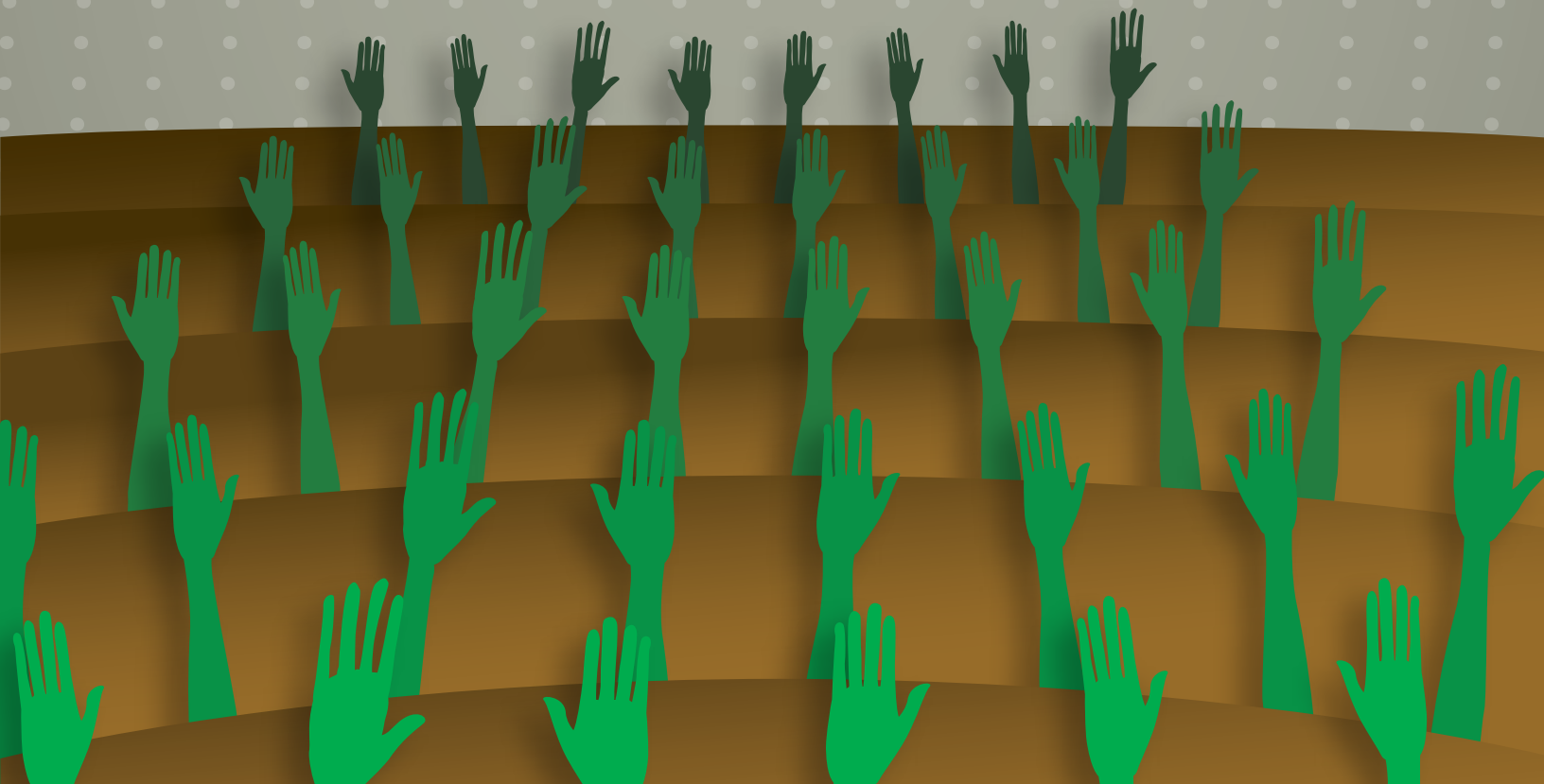
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# PROGRAM:

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ANOTHER FOUR POINT APPROACH

By Todd Noon, Executive Director, Main Street Vineland



*A view of Landis Avenue in Vineland, N.J. Each year, Main Street Vineland volunteers donate thousands of hours of their time to help revitalize this much-loved downtown.*



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Main Streeters don't need to be sold on the value and importance of four-point programs. For more than three decades, the Main Street Four-Point Approach® to downtown revitalization has proven to be an effective tool for bringing new, sustainable life to commercial districts across the nation.

There are more than 2,000 local programs in the Main Street family, and just like typical families, the siblings can be as different from each other as a downtown is to a mall. Here in rural Cumberland County, New Jersey, we have three Main Street programs. We manage to get along well, but we don't look alike, we don't act alike, and we don't sound alike — despite the fact we share the same Main Street DNA. And this is true across the country. But although every Main Street program differs from another in some way, we have one thing in common: we all rely on volunteers to get the job done.

As budgets tighten and everyone is expected to do more with less, Main Street programs are poised to become the Blanche DuBois of the revitalization world, depending (even more) on the “kindness of strangers” or, in our case, volunteers to help us rebuild

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our commercial districts. That means we need to take a fresh look at our volunteer programs and develop effective strategies to bring in new volunteers, keep them interested and thank them — many times over — for the work they do.

In recognition of the critical role that volunteers play in our organization, Main Street Vineland has created its own successful four-point plan for growing our volunteer program. This approach focuses on the obvious components of recruitment, retention, and recognition; but we have added a piece that has made our volunteer program not just effective, but sustainable over several years: sponsorship.

Our plan is inexpensive, easy to implement and, best of all, simple to duplicate in just about any community.

### POINT 1: FIND A SPONSOR FOR YOUR VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

Whether we love it or hate it, selling sponsorships for special events is something most of us have grown accustomed to doing. Those who have been doing it for some time have likely developed the skill to place value on the different components of an

event and then craft a sponsorship package that helps underwrite the cost. It's a smart — and often necessary — way to maximize whatever program dollars your Main Street might have. In Vineland, we have taken this sponsorship model and applied it to our volunteer program, and what a difference it has made in our ability to grow our base of community-minded people who want their downtown to succeed.

In developing this idea, our Organization Committee first identified what we wanted our volunteer program to be. We put together a “blue sky” list of all the things we believed would make people *want* to volunteer for Main Street Vineland. Some

of the committee members talked about other organizations they belonged to and what they liked or disliked about those volunteer programs. Others talked about what drew them to Main Street Vineland. In short, it was an old-fashioned brain-storming session that produced not only an outline of our new volunteer program, but also a vision for building widespread community support for the revitalization of our downtown.

But while it was essential to know what we wanted our volunteer program to be, we also knew that without the money to fund it, we were little more than a bunch of well-intentioned dreamers. Recognizing that our operating budget simply could not pay for all that we wanted to do, we began to think differently. That's when we decided to find someone to sponsor our volunteer program, just as we do for special events.

In thinking about who the sponsor might be, we listed all of the usual suspects: small businesses, larger corporations, regional utilities, and so on. None of them seemed to be the right fit.

A few years ago, a new bank — Capital Bank of New Jersey — formed in Vineland and opened several branches around the city. As part of its marketing strategy, Capital Bank placed print and billboard ads that featured a picture of a staff member, an investor, a board member, or a customer, along with brief text that said the person in the picture was local and that she or he was affiliated with Capital Bank. The purpose of these ads was to demonstrate that Capital Bank itself was local and that individuals in the community — who may very well be friends, family, or neighbors — were placing their trust in Capital Bank. To us, a partnership between our community-oriented



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***A family of Main Street Vineland volunteers beautify the western gateway to downtown Vineland during the annual Fall Clean-Up Day. Having projects that the entire family can work on together enhances your ability to attract new volunteers.***

Main Street program and the community-oriented Capital Bank made perfect sense. All we had to do was convince the bank.

We created a sponsorship proposal for Capital Bank (see sidebar “6 Steps to a Winning Volunteer Program Sponsorship Package on pg. 11), met with its decision makers to present our case, and ultimately came away with a multi-year agreement with the bank to fund our volunteer program in full.

Since that time, the partnership with Capital Bank has proven mutually beneficial. For Main Street Vineland, we are able to fund every component of our “blue sky” program of recruitment, retention, and recognition without taking dollars away from other important projects, such as special events, business recruitment, or monthly newsletters. In turn, Capital Bank has received an excellent return on its investment, with its name and logo appearing on all volunteer t-shirts and awards, participation in volunteer events throughout the year, and much more.

“We believe our sponsorship of the volunteer program has provided a meaningful benefit to our city’s downtown,” notes

Cosmo A. Giovinazzi IV, vice president/Cumberland County market manager for Capital Bank. “And Main Street Vineland has done a very good job of making sure that Capital Bank has received recognition for its contribution. It has been a perfect fit, providing another way we can support local businesses while also complementing our image as Vineland’s community bank.”

By sponsoring our volunteer program each year, Capital Bank has invested about the same amount that it might have spent to sponsor a one-day event, yet they receive benefits throughout the year. Volunteer program sponsorship is a truly cost-effective way for businesses to maximize their advertising and marketing dollars while giving your Main Street program the resources it needs to carry out its important work.

## POINT 2: RECRUIT YOUR VOLUNTEERS

Several years ago, I was at a seminar on fund raising. The speaker said that he wanted to begin with a demonstration, so he walked over to a lady sitting in the front row and asked if she would give him a dollar bill that he could use for his demonstration. The

lady fished through her handbag, found a dollar and handed it over to the speaker who then asked her, “Why did you just give me a dollar?” The lady, somewhat confused, replied, “Because you asked me to.”

The speaker then thanked the lady for the dollar and handed it back to her. The point of that demonstration, the speaker noted, was to illustrate that the number one reason why people don’t give — whether it’s their money, their time, or something else — is because they are never asked. That’s an important lesson to learn.

Asking local businesses or organizations for money to sponsor an event or project is something most of us do frequently. But how often do we come right out and ask people whom we don’t know to give us their time? It’s easy to pass around a volunteer sign-up sheet at a meeting; those people are already volunteers and we know them. The key to growing your volunteer program is reaching out and bringing in *new* volunteers by asking them to join you. Your goal is to create relationships. Main Street Vineland does this often, and in a variety of ways.



Each month, we publish a newsletter in a local newspaper (see example at right). In addition to highlighting one volunteer, we list the days and times that each of our four volunteer committees meet. Yet perhaps the most important and effective component of the newsletter is the “Want Ad” section, where we advertise a particular volunteer job that we need filled. We explain what the job is and how to apply for it. We have advertised such jobs as an archivist (someone to go through old news clippings and sort them), a beautification helper (someone to help pick up litter during the day), and just about any other job you can imagine. We always find a volunteer, usually someone we’ve never heard from before, to do the job — all because we *asked*.

I write a weekly column for a local paper in which I discuss all the great things happening in downtown Vineland. Typically, I dedicate one column each month to a volunteer-related topic. I may discuss how many volunteer hours have been donated to Main Street Vineland so far this year, or I might highlight upcoming volunteer opportunities. The key is to provide regular information about our volunteer program and tell people how they can become a part of it. This reinforces to the community that we are an active, worthwhile organization that deserves their valuable time.

The unique thing we do — and one that came out of our “blue sky” brainstorming session — is our annual VINE (Volunteer Information and Networking Event). Our largest volunteer recruitment effort of the year, VINE is a community-wide open house where anyone can come and find out all about Main Street Vineland: what we do in the community and the critical role volunteers play in making things happen. To advertise the event, we place notices in local newspapers, send e-mail invitations, promote it in our monthly newsletter — whatever we can do to spread the word and invite people to come.

The program for VINE is short and simple. Light refreshments are offered in the beginning (which is why we usually hold the event in the rented banquet room of a downtown restaurant), followed by a PowerPoint presentation about Main Street Vineland and the work we do. We keep this presentation relatively brief and fun by showing that downtown revitalization and being a Main Street volunteer are similar to blind dating.

After the program, we encourage attendees to visit tables where each of our four committee chairs displays information

about ongoing projects and talks with prospective volunteers. The chairs are armed with volunteer registration forms for interested people to fill out. When a person fills out the form, he or she receives a small gift of thanks, such as a canvas bag or a travel mug, for signing up as a volunteer. The entire program runs about 90 minutes and it is truly incredible how effective it is. For our first VINE a few years ago, we had more than 80 people RSVP for the event, and many of those who came that evening still volunteer for our organization today.

A key point to remember is that the cost of this event does not come from our general operating budget. Everything — from the banquet room rental to the food, from the placement of invitation ads to the thank-you gifts — is covered by the sponsorship we receive each year from Capital Bank.

### POINT 3: RETAIN YOUR VOLUNTEERS

If volunteer recruitment is about creating relationships, volunteer retention is all about building those relationships.

Each year, a significant number of people volunteer their time and talents to various organizations, but many of those same people are lost simply because the group they had volunteered for — which, no doubt, includes Main Street programs — had no idea how to keep them. That is the sad reality.

Without a doubt, volunteer retention is one of the most overlooked aspects of any comprehensive volunteer program, yet it is absolutely critical to the long-term health of a Main Street organization. While volunteer attrition is unavoidable, we can certainly take steps to minimize it. Retaining your volunteers should involve a four-pronged approach:

- Make them feel welcome in the beginning;
- Keep them happy;
- Keep them informed; and
- Give them work that best matches their interests or skills.

In Vineland, our retention efforts are simple but effective and, as noted above, we start by making them feel welcome. Whether they complete a volunteer registration form at one of our VINEs or in our office, all new volunteers receive a letter from me welcoming them to Main Street Vineland and highlighting some of the many things our volunteers do over the course of a year. This letter also informs them that they will



**Above: Main Street Vineland's monthly "Downtown Update" is printed in a local paper and delivered to more than 20,000 households in Vineland. Note the volunteer-related aspects of the newsletter: the Volunteer Spotlight, the "Want Ad" section, and the notice of when and where volunteer committees meet.**

**Below: The annual Main Street Vineland Volunteer Recognition Brunch is held every year in April. One person is named the Main Street Vineland/Capital Bank Volunteer of the Year and receives a trophy and a trip to the National Main Streets Conference.**



© Main Street Vineland



**Main Street Vineland volunteers working and enjoying one of the community's summer festivals.**

**Volunteers Rosemary Gregg (left) and Gary Holloway (right) show off t-shirts and travel mugs purchased with sponsorship funding from Capital Bank of New Jersey.**



be receiving a phone call from our Volunteer Subcommittee chair to discuss their interests and ways we can use their talents.

Importantly, though, we emphasize that their work with our organization is “an opportunity to make new friends, reconnect with old ones, and have plenty of fun — all while making a real, positive difference in downtown Vineland.” There is no doubt that the work our volunteers do is vital to the success of the revitalization effort, but we don’t want them to view their work with us as a job. If they see their participation as an enjoyable experience shared with friends, they are more likely to be happy, long-term volunteers.

Once you have happy volunteers, your job is to then keep them happy. Thankfully, it’s not so difficult to do. In fact, everything you need to know about keeping volunteers happy you probably learned in kindergarten: treat them the way you would want to be treated yourself. A few of the ideal ways to treat your volunteers include:

- Give them meaningful work to do.
- When they arrive to work on a project, thank them.
- Be sure to explain the job to them. Few things kill enthusiasm faster than unclear goals or expectations.
- Ask for their opinions about the work they are doing. Create a climate where the views of volunteers and the sharing of ideas are encouraged. If your volunteers are engaged, they are more than just happy — they are true stakeholders.
- Offer them coffee, water, or other beverages while they are working for you.
- Thank them when they’ve completed their work.
- Take time to learn about them personally. Talk to them about their spouses, children, careers, and interests.
- If volunteers will be working several hours at a special event, give them time to use the restroom, grab a bite to eat, or simply walk around and enjoy the festival. A written schedule of all event-related jobs, the duration of each job, and built-in break times is a tremendous help in running a smooth event *and* keeping volunteers happy.
- Occasionally, send hand-written notes to your volunteers to show your appreciation for what they do.
- Respect their time. Holding meetings that are so long or so poorly run that volunteers would rather eat glass than attend does not make for happy volunteers. Preparing an agenda and sticking to it help ensure that meetings are both efficient and productive.





Keeping volunteers informed is easy as well, and the information you provide should have both a “big picture” focus and a local perspective. For “big picture” information, Main Street Vineland gives all volunteers access to the National Trust Main Street Center’s members-only online content (<http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/>) where they can read articles about downtown revitalization, learn about available resources, and more. This has been a great way for our volunteers to see that they are part of a larger movement, make a connection to the National Trust, and gain insight about ways other communities are meeting challenges. Additionally, if I read any magazine or newspaper articles that I think might be of interest to a volunteer, I make sure to send a copy along.

To provide volunteers with specific information about downtown Vineland, we send them a regular e-newsletter entitled the “Vineland Volunteer Voice.” The newsletter offers information about volunteer opportunities and upcoming events; shines a spotlight on a particular volunteer; provides insider information (when we had a new welcome sign made for the downtown, we showed it to our volunteers first, via this e-newsletter); includes year-to-date statistics on volunteer hours donated and the value, in real dollars, of those hours; and more.

To further keep our volunteers informed about Main Street Vineland’s activities, we send them meeting reminders for each of our four committees, along with the minutes for them to review. This way, even if they cannot attend a meeting, they know what the committees are doing. Moreover, Main Street New Jersey generously allows us to send our volunteers to free training sessions that they offer for each of the Main Street four points.

Finally, to effectively retain volunteers, make sure you give them work they want to do. On your volunteer recruitment form, ask what kind of work the applicant is interested in doing. Your Main Street program should also have written job descriptions for any projects that need to be done so that you can clearly identify the skill set needed to complete the job. This will make it easy for prospective volunteers to determine if they are interested in doing the work.

Keep in mind that you may have a volunteer whose background and abilities do not match exactly what you had intended for a particular job, like an attorney who wants to get involved in public beautification projects.

Similarly, someone may have a set of skills that you need for a job, but may not be interested in using them as a volunteer, such as an accountant who has no interest in helping to set up your latest version of accounting software. Never assume what a volunteer wants to do, and never dictate what a volunteer should do. Remember that volunteering for your Main Street should be service that makes the individual happy.

them already. As mentioned earlier, thanking volunteers for their work, sending them hand-written notes of appreciation, and spotlighting them and their work in printed and e-newsletters are all good methods of recognition, and you should continue doing them. But some things should be a bit more special.

For example, as mentioned earlier, each month we print a newsletter in our local

## Never assume what a volunteer wants to do, and never dictate what a volunteer should do.

### POINT 4: RECOGNIZE YOUR VOLUNTEERS

Everyone deserves and needs recognition for a job well done. Acknowledging your volunteers in a meaningful and memorable way should be frequent and fun. In the world of fund raising, it is said that you should thank your donors privately, publicly, and in front of their peers. It should be no different in the world of Main Street.

Effective recognition takes many forms, and your Main Street program should employ a wide variety over the course of a year. If you are actively working to retain volunteers, you are most likely recognizing

newspaper. Among other things, the newsletter always highlights one of our volunteers (see example on pg. 7). This “Volunteer Spotlight” features a picture of the volunteer, some personal information, and a quote that explains why he or she enjoys volunteering for Main Street Vineland. It is an easy, regular, and highly visible way to show our appreciation for those who donate their valuable time to our organization.

Also consider organizing a volunteer recognition event. Main Street Vineland holds an annual brunch on a Saturday morning in April (not so coincidentally, National Volunteer Week is in April). Typically, we rent space in a downtown restaurant

#### ENGAGE

*Students from a local school volunteer their time to create and set up a window display for a downtown merchant.*



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© Su Voz

***Students from a local school volunteer their Saturday morning to help Main Street Vineland plant flowers throughout the downtown. Typically, about 50 students, their parents, and school personnel lend a hand each spring and fall.***



© Main Street Vineland

***To execute our annual Holiday Parade in November, dozens of volunteers donate more than 300 hours of their time over nearly 11 months. Here, a few of those volunteers gather after the parade to celebrate another successful event.***

and provide food and beverages for the attendees. Invitations are e-mailed to our volunteer database well ahead of time and we ask that they RSVP so we know how many to expect.

Each year at the brunch, volunteers receive a certificate of recognition from the Main Street Vineland board of directors as well as from the mayor. We also ask the city council to pass a ceremonial resolution honoring all Main Street Vineland volunteers for the services they provide to the city. The highlight of the event, however, is the awards ceremony.

During this ceremony, we honor a number of people with joke awards — usually underscoring something funny they did during the previous year. On a more serious note, we also hand out awards to those who have earned the President's Volunteer Service Award (visit [www.presidentialserviceawards.gov](http://www.presidentialserviceawards.gov) for more information about how your Main Street program can become a Certifying Organization).

Additionally, we have special awards to honor one outstanding volunteer from each of the four Main Street committees. These honorees are nominated in confidence by the chair of each committee. The ceremony culminates with the presentation of the Main Street Vineland/Capital Bank Volunteer of

the Year Award. The volunteer receives a one-of-a-kind trophy with her or his name on it, as well as a trip to the National Main Streets Conference (courtesy of Main Street New Jersey, which provides its member programs with a number of complimentary registrations).

All of this sounds pretty expensive, doesn't it? Well, it's not. The entire cost of our annual volunteer recognition brunch is covered by a portion of the Capital Bank of New Jersey's sponsorship investment. In fact, everything I have written about in this article that has a dollar figure associated with it is paid for by Capital Bank's sponsorship. That is why finding the right partner to help fund your volunteer program is so critical: you can create and maintain an effective volunteer program without taking funds away from other critical projects.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of our Main Street programs. In Vineland, we rely on ours to plan special events, meet with business owners, plant flowers, pick up litter, raise funds, conduct meetings, take photographs, pour beer and wine, sit as targets in a dunk tank, write grants, do data entry, make connections in the community, conduct business surveys, and just about anything else you can imagine. I am certain this is no different in any other city or town.

Main Street programs aren't the only organizations that need volunteers. Countless other organizations across the nation depend on volunteers to do much of their heavy lifting. The competition for volunteer services is daunting, and the work of volunteers in the Main Street world is too important, too voluminous, and too broad in scope for a program not to have a well-crafted plan to get and retain quality volunteers. In short, developing a comprehensive volunteer program should be a primary goal for your Main Street organization.

There is no one-size-fits-all blueprint that will work in every community, but there are key components that every effective volunteer program should have:

- a strategy to recruit volunteers;
- a strategy to retain them once they've been recruited;
- a strategy to recognize them for their work;
- and, perhaps most importantly, someone to fund it all.

Once you have all of these components in place, how they operate in your community will be limited only by your specific needs and by your creativity.

Todd has been working as a Main Street professional for the past four years. Previously, he created and oversaw programs that won two straight New Jersey Governor's Awards for Excellence in Tourism (2006 and 2007). Recognizing that most of his downtown merchants closed during special events, Todd and the volunteers of his Economic Restructuring Committee have developed and implemented a successful plan that helps businesses tie in to downtown events; and he presented a session on this topic at the 2010 National Main Streets Conference and at Main Street training programs in several states. In addition to speaking to local business groups, Todd often presents to entrepreneurs at seminars organized by the Small Business Development Center, where he has provided information on how to increase word-of-mouth advertising and how to make businesses stand out from their competition. Todd is a 2007 graduate of the Downtown Revitalization and Management Institute in Trenton, New Jersey.

# Six Steps to a Winning Volunteer Program Sponsorship Package

By Todd Noon

- 1. Recognize that your Main Street program has real value to the right sponsor.** Too often, Main Streets underestimate their value in the sponsorship marketplace. If you have a website that people visit, your program has monetary value. If you publish a weekly or monthly newsletter, your program has monetary value. If you use social media to communicate with stakeholders and volunteers, your program has monetary value. Realizing that there is a value to almost everything that makes up your Main Street is critical to ensure that you do not undersell your program when seeking sponsors or negotiating the investment.
- 2. Determine the elements you want your volunteer program to have.** This is your “blue sky” opportunity. Get together a group of your volunteers and let them brainstorm the kind of program they would like. In terms of recruitment, will a large recruitment event work well for your Main Street, or will an ad campaign be more effective? Should you do both? For retention, do you want to purchase customized note cards that you can occasionally send to volunteers? For recognition, what kind of event do you want — a breakfast, a dinner, something else? When you’re creating a “blue sky” world, no suggestion is too crazy, no idea is too unworkable.

Once you have created the framework for your volunteer program, determine the cost associated with each component, then add everything up. This total is the “price” you will be asking prospective sponsors to pay for supporting your program.
- 3. Identify potential sponsors. Now it’s time to do your homework.** Take a look around your community at businesses and organizations that might make good sponsors. Are any companies advertising themselves as being “community-minded”? Do you have any current event sponsors that might be interested in sponsoring your volunteer program? Are there any event sponsors from years past that might be looking for a new opportunity that would yield positive PR all year-round? Are there businesses with which one of your Main Street board members or volunteers has a close relationship?
- 4. Create a customized sponsorship package for each potential sponsor.** Your packages should represent a fair return on the investment level you are seeking. Benefits that you may want to offer a sponsor include: announcing the sponsorship at a press conference that you organize; printing the sponsor’s name and logo on all volunteer-related materials, such as training kits, t-shirts, and awards; providing free space at your outdoor events during the group’s sponsorship period; printing a feature article in a weekly or monthly newsletter; and linking their website to yours. Remember that everything your Main Street program does has a monetary value. Get creative with your offerings. Write multi-year proposals — who wants to seek sponsorships every year? Always under-promise and over-deliver.
- 5. Meet with potential sponsors.** Make appointments to speak personally with prospective sponsors. Bring copies of your sponsorship package. Make your pitch and be fearless. Present the sponsorship as an opportunity to invest in the community and in the people who are working to improve your town’s quality of life. Listen to concerns. Be willing to revise your sponsorship package if necessary, but do not undervalue it.
- 6. Make it official, then work to retain your sponsor and recognize their generosity.** After you and your sponsor have agreed to the terms, make it official by signing an agreement. Sponsors are no different than the volunteers you are asking them to sponsor. They want to know that you appreciate their generosity and they want you to recognize it. Do it. Do it as often as you can and in as many ways as you can. It demonstrates that your Main Street is a great partner, which will certainly be remembered when it comes time to renew the agreement.

