



Jacksonville Main Street History

The heart of our community had become vulnerable to deterioration and blight because of Urban Renewal's failure. Many downtown buildings had deteriorated over the years and were in danger of demolition. Realizing that the loss of such historic structures would remove the charm and historic character from the heart of our community, Jacksonville Main Street was founded to create programs and activities aimed at revitalizing and rejuvenating downtown to re-establish the downtown as a healthy, vibrant, and economically secure center of commerce and social activities.

In June 1998, Dr. Lawrence Bryan led a group of concerned citizens determined to save the heart of Jacksonville from further blight to start the organization. On July 30, a town meeting held at MacMurray College publicly introduced the Main Street program to over 200 residents in attendance, many of whom saw the Main Street Four Point Approach as a perfect fit for this effort and signed on to help in the revitalization effort.

Jacksonville Main Street was officially chartered in November 1998 and designated a 501(c)3 charity in April 1999. Armed with dedicated volunteers and a motivated Board of Directors that included representation from City government and other related organizations, Jacksonville Main Street set to work "Changing Downtown, Together" with the objective to promote preservation, rehabilitation, and re-establish the commercial, civic, and residential structures in our traditional business district. The group charted its course with small steps and do-able projects crafted towards their mission of enhancing the perception, quality of life and long term economic health of the entire Jacksonville Community through a coordinated and sustained effort to revitalize the city's downtown district. As part of the State and National Main Street Program, Jacksonville Main Street still follows their Four Point Approach and Main Street philosophy of preservation based economic revitalization blended with continually updated Transformational Strategies.

The Main Street approach differs from previous downtown revitalization attempts in Jacksonville in that it emphasizes:

- A self-help approach. Although no direct funding is available from the state, the primary benefit is via membership in the national organization with direct technical assistance and access to a nation-wide network of other Main Street communities.
- A strong emphasis on broad-based support and ownership in the program;
- Assistance in developing community partnership and collaboration (to eliminate the dependence on a small circle of major players.)

Since 1999, Jacksonville Main Street volunteers have tackled tough challenges and compiled an impressive list of accomplishments through advocacy and partnership. The Organization was named one of Illinois' Premier Main Street Programs from 2005-2009. Jacksonville Main Street set a high standard of excellence in work that has earned it 48 nominations for Illinois Main Street Awards and 37 Lt. Governor's Awards in Excellence in Downtown Revitalization. The program has achieved National Accreditation annually since 2003. In 2006, Jacksonville Main Street was named a finalist in the Great American Main Street Awards, winning this elite national designation in 2012, and won a 2007 Governor's Hometown Award. In 2008 and 2015, the Organization also claimed prestigious Richard Driehaus Awards for Preservation Advocacy from Landmarks Illinois, the highest preservation honor in Illinois. In 2022, Jacksonville Main Street was named Non-profit Organization of the Year by the Jacksonville Area Chamber of Commerce. In addition to

accolades, Jacksonville Main Street has made a real difference in improving the economic condition for downtown and the entire community through its projects and advocacy.

Besides earning credit and publicity for outstanding volunteer efforts, the resulting effect is nearly \$68 million in public/private reinvestment downtown since 1999. More than two dozen new or expanded businesses have created over 150 new jobs within the District. Increased property values have funded the local TIF program to assist with more development and enabling local funding for restoration of the downtown streets. Jacksonville Main Street's partnerships, education, and advocacy work also helped with a variety of local projects:

- lobbied the City for Canopy Removal, inspiring over 20 façade improvement projects
- backed City efforts to secure over \$16 million in grant funds for projects that restored traffic flow around the historic square and enhanced entrance routes into the District
- advanced the concept of square restoration and gained public support for the project with the purchase and demolition of the first quadrant building
- raised over \$16,000 for new lighting and preservation-based improvements to the City's iconic Civil War monument
- assisted with land acquisition for Downtown Commons, a low-income housing project just north of the downtown area
- administered the City's \$100,000 Façade Improvement Grant Program, which led to over \$750,000 in building upgrades
- helped develop Looking for Lincoln wayside exhibits and the Voices of Jacksonville audio tour to promote heritage tourism
- restored a dilapidated house and inspired more than \$70,000 in private reinvestments as part of a neighborhood revitalization program
- installed an information kiosk, Civil War cannon, and Big Eli benches to the park and created 12 heritage-based murals to highlight local history, beautify, and attract more visitors downtown
- partnered with other agencies for tourism marketing campaigns, to secure grants for preservation efforts, and for increased business assistance programs
- encouraged upper story downtown residential development and increased positive perceptions of downtown safety and desirability
- published free guides and resource listings to promote downtown businesses, incentive programs, and investment opportunities
- loaned over \$140,000 through JEZDC's Low Interest Loan Program, leveraging more than \$300,000 in building improvements and business enhancements
- advertised available properties through tours and online marketing to reduce downtown building vacancy rates from 27% to less than 5%
- helped with Labor Temple restoration efforts, worth over \$300,000
- provided local design assistance and accessed professional preservation design advice from state architects for over 20 different projects
- offered training opportunities for volunteers through conference attendance, workshops, and statewide networking
- produced dozens of events and promoted another two dozen activities that bring tens of thousands of people downtown
- increased awareness for preservation, incentives, and downtown issues through public relations, and educational campaigns, including newsletters, school-partnerships, workshops, web site, and presentations
- brought state and national recognition to Jacksonville through marketing, magazine articles, and press coverage of award-winning projects