

Maine Town & City

The magazine of the Maine Municipal Association

APRIL 2019

Downtown Deal

Revitalizing core areas
seen as challenge
that must be met

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Route 1 series: Presque Isle
Mediation over litigation
State of volunteerism

Not always easy, but downtown development continues apace

From Norway to Bath to Augusta, downtown revitalization is recognized as paramount to a community's economic self-image and historic identity.

By Stephanie Bouchard

With its clock tower dominating the sky, the Norway Opera House has been the iconic center of the town's historic downtown since the late 1800s. In 1894, a fire all but eradicated the original 1882 wood structure. The community rebuilt it in brick.

In the years that followed, the opera house played host to businesses, graduations, dancing and theater programs – even traveling shows – but by the turn of the 21st Century, it was a serious mess on the verge of collapse. Thanks to the efforts of Norway Downtown, though, the building was not only saved, but is today once again the thriving center of the downtown.

Norway Downtown, a nonprofit focused on revitalizing the community's downtown, was then taking part in the Main Street America program originated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as a staffed program. Today, it is an unstaffed, all-volunteer affiliate program.

The Main Street America program, which is coordinated in Maine through the Maine Development Foundation's Downtown Center, was created in 1980 to bolster and revitalize historic downtowns struggling in the face of economic activity moving out of downtowns.

It is through the Main Street America program and the Maine Development Foundation that many downtowns in Maine, like Norway's, have found new life.

As the Norway Opera House teetered on the edge, Norway's downtown, too, was wobbling. It was no longer the center of community life



Aerial view of downtown Augusta. (Photo courtesy of Augusta Downtown Alliance)

and economic activity. Downtown buildings fell into disrepair, or were left vacant. It wasn't a place where many people wanted to be.

That didn't mean, however, that community members didn't care.

With its roof collapsing, water damage and failing walls, the Norway Opera House was in danger. Maine Preservation, a nonprofit focused on preserving historic places statewide, put it on its Most Endangered Historic Places list in 2003.

Norway Downtown organized focus groups and meetings with community members to determine whether residents wanted to save the building, which was privately owned by someone living out-of-state.

Save it

Out of those meetings came a clear message: The opera house should be saved. Negotiations to buy the opera house fell through, but via a vote at annual town meeting, the town regained the building through eminent domain and the nonprofit Norway Opera House Corporation was formed.

Today, the opera house has been

stabilized, its mechanical systems updated, and its ground floor is fully renovated and rented out. A fundraising campaign to restore the theater on the second floor begins this spring, said Scott Berk, co-chair of Norway Downtown and vice president of the Norway Operate House Coalition.

"I give a lot of credit to Norway Downtown," he said. Berk owns Café Nomad and co-owns Fiber and Vine, two businesses located on Main Street. Since he opened his café in 2007, he has seen the positive impact of Norway Downtown's efforts. The high turnover that plagued Main Street properties has evaporated, he said, and all commercial space that is rentable on Main Street is rented.

By focusing on historic preservation and making the downtown environment visually appealing, the organization has created a space where people want to come, he said.

"People really want to be a part of the community, and you can't build community around strip malls and parking lots. You need this intact, dense downtown so people can come and they can see each other and they

Stephanie Bouchard is a freelance writer from Bath and regular contributor to *Maine Town & City*, stephanie@stephaniebouchard.net.

can hang out and they can drink coffee or have a beer and plan and meet each other. Once you can get that sort of momentum going, it sort of builds on itself," Berk said.

Mari Eosco, the former executive director of Main Street Bath and current chair of Bath's city council, agrees. "You can get anything out of the Main Street program," she said. "It's what a community makes out of it."

Bath: A pioneer

Main Street Bath was one of the first Main Street America programs in Maine and in 2012 received national recognition for its downtown revitalization efforts.

Not having the geography necessary to accommodate big box stores and shopping malls meant that these businesses were not being constructed in the city, and that Bath wasn't seeing any revenue from the retail businesses that were opening in neighboring Brunswick and Topsham.

As Main Street Bath got up and running, it rallied the community to revision itself and make its downtown a "third place" – a term urban planners use to describe the places where people spend time other than where they live ("first place") and where they work ("second place").

The organization created community events, worked on beautification projects, provided resources for businesses, promoted the city and its downtown and educated residents on



Renovated opera house in downtown Norway. (Photo courtesy of Norway Downtown)

the importance of shopping locally.

"What I see the Main Street program able to do is, by using volun-

teers, get citizens involved with the different aspects of downtown," she said. "And ultimately, what that's do-

Helping your employees
save for their futures
is one of the best moves
you can make!

Simple ✓
Convenient ✓
High Quality ✓
Low-Cost ✓

**MAINE
START**

MaineSTART is the Defined
Contribution program from Maine
Public Employees Retirement
System (MainePERS).

Contact: Gary Emery
Tel: 207-512-3116

E-mail: Gary.Emery@mainepers.org

www.mainestart.org



An integrated team of geospatial, engineering, and natural resource consultants.
Sewall partners with clients to create practical, sustainable solutions.

James W. Sewall Company President George N. Campbell, Jr.



is pleased to announce the acquisition of

Maine Traffic Resources

and welcomes

Diane M. Morabito, P.E., PTOE

as Sewall's new

Vice President of Traffic Engineering

**Maine
Traffic
Resources**

*Increasing Sewall's capacity to serve states, communities, businesses,
and developers with their traffic resource needs.*

diane@mainetrafficresources.com (207) 817-5440 40 Forest Falls Ave. Suite 2, Yarmouth, ME 04096

ing is creating a thriving third place.”

Once a place with many vacancies, downtown Bath today has few, if any, empty storefronts and has a mix of businesses and community activities that attract people downtown all year long.

Part of what makes Main Street programs successful for a community is being a good partner and a connector, said Michael Hall, the executive director of Augusta Downtown Alliance, a staffed nonprofit organization of the Main Street America program.

Augusta's effort

Like in Norway and Bath, Augusta's downtown district had its struggles. Once home to large department stores, many of the historic buildings on Water Street, the heart of downtown, were converted to offices spaces in the 1980s and '90s when retailers moved to shopping malls. As businesses left those converted spaces, vacancies began building up and Water Street, once a bustling hub, looked ragged.

Through creative partnerships, the Augusta Downtown Alliance has helped to turn things around downtown. “We act as a sort of microscopic version of (an) economic development (department) for the downtown area,” said Hall.

The organization has helped to identify what sorts of businesses, and what mix of businesses, the community wants and needs and has actively recruited those businesses to move

into the downtown.

In recent years, the organization has been successful in getting new restaurants and bars, hair salons and fitness studios, retail, and professional services businesses to open and operate downtown. Hall is trying to recruit bakeries and deli/sandwich shops.

The Augusta Downtown Alliance also created a partnership program called the Tipping Point Initiative with the city of Augusta and Kennebec Savings Bank. The program offers grants and no-interest small business

loans to help businesses convert downtown buildings or make building improvements. The alliance offers grants to businesses for exterior signage and awnings.

The alliance also connects with businesses and organizations outside the downtown area. To celebrate Halloween last year, the organization hosted a street festival on Water Street. Hall expected 700 people to attend. Almost 4,000 thronged Water Street.

To make the event the success it



Maine Municipal Association

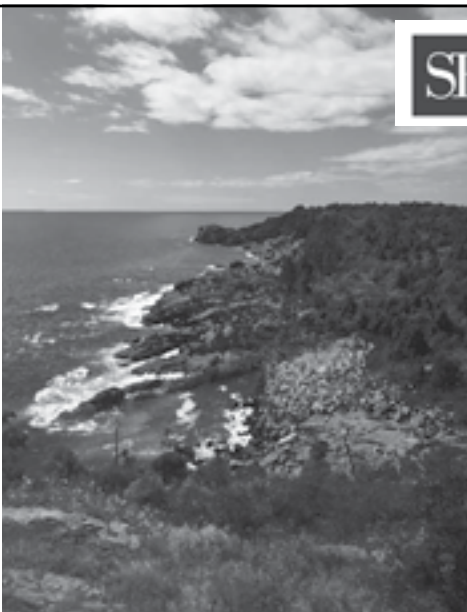
www.memun.org

ONLINE COURSES AVAILABLE

Two of Maine Municipal Association's most popular courses – **Social Media Dos and Don'ts** and **Moderating Town Meetings** – are now available in the Member Area of our website, www.memun.org.

If you need help setting up login credentials to access the Member Center, please contact us at: resourcecenter@memun.org or, call Carol Weigelt or Ben Thomas at: 1-800-452-8786.

60 Community Dr., Augusta, ME 04330 • 207-623-8428



SoltanBassSmith LLC
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

Whether needing advice with land use, code enforcement, charter and ordinance development, tax, municipal liability, litigation or governmental affairs matters, Soltan Bass Smith LLC's professionals provide premium services to our municipal, business and other clients without the premium pricing of larger Maine firms.

Contact Ben Smith today at 621-6300.

96 State Street -- Augusta, Maine -- soltanbass.com

was, the alliance partnered with Central Church and home improvement retailer Lowe's. Neither the church nor Lowe's is located in the downtown. "You have a lot of people, even if they're not downtown, (who) want to be involved with the downtown."

Many challenges

It may sound like all sunshine and rainbows for the towns and cities participating in the Main Street America program, but, as the directors and former directors of these programs will tell you, there are challenges.

Getting the right mix of people is one, said Hall. An organization that's all landlords or all municipal officials or all residents or all businesses won't be effective. What's needed for success is a good mix so the responsibility is spread around and a variety of perspectives and ideas and skill sets can be tapped.

Success, believe it or not, can be a double-edge sword, said Mari Eosco of Bath. It can be a challenge to get new residents or new business owners to understand the value Main Street programs have for their communities because they don't have the knowledge of what it used to be like there before the Main Street program revitalized things.

Coming up with funding is also a challenge for some.

Norway Downtown, for example, found it too much of a burden to come up with the resources to continue to support a staffed organization. Converting to an all-volunteer organization, though, has worked out, said Scott Berk.

"Generally, (it) works for us because we are a smaller community and we often don't need the same level of resources that, maybe, a larger community does."

Which brings up another point: There are many ways communities can benefit from the Main Street America program, even if they are not a part of the official program.

While the Maine Development Foundation's Downtown Center serves as the state's coordinator of the Main Street America program, it also is a resource for all cities and towns across the state – with or without a downtown – that want to think creatively about economic development and foster a vibrant community.

"There's a lot of transferable best practices about engaging people in conversations and (creating) a vision for a community," said Anne Ball, program director of the Downtown

Center.

Check out MDF's website, <http://mdf.org>, for ideas and resources for your community, or contact Ball at 512-4906 or at aball@mdf.org. ■

MMA Personnel Services and On-site Consulting Services

MMA Personnel Services offers a wide range of specialized on-site consulting services for our municipal and associate members. Personnel management and labor relations expertise is available for direct assistance or general inquiries through a toll-free telephone line. Direct on-site assistance is available in the following areas:

Labor Relations — Representation of the municipality in labor negotiations, mediation, arbitration and grievance processes.

Executive Search — Assistance with the recruitment of a new city or town manager, department head and/or senior management position.

Training — On-site training in a variety of topics.

Testing — Entry level police and fire testing.

For more information on all Personnel Services programs, or general personnel management information, contact David Barrett, Director of Personnel Services and Labor Relations at 1-800-452-8786.

For more information visit the MMA website:
www.memun.org

ELECTIONS, ELECTIONS, ELECTIONS HAS YOUR TOWN HAD ITS ELECTION?

**DID YOU LET MMA KNOW,
SO WE CAN UPDATE OUR DATABASE?
NO ELECTION, BUT YOU HAVE CHANGES: LET US KNOW!**

DATABASE IS UPDATED DAILY

Call Val or Kimberly: 1-800-452-8786 or 207-623-8428

Email: PersonifyRequests@memun.org