

# COVID-19 Responses from Maine's Main Streets



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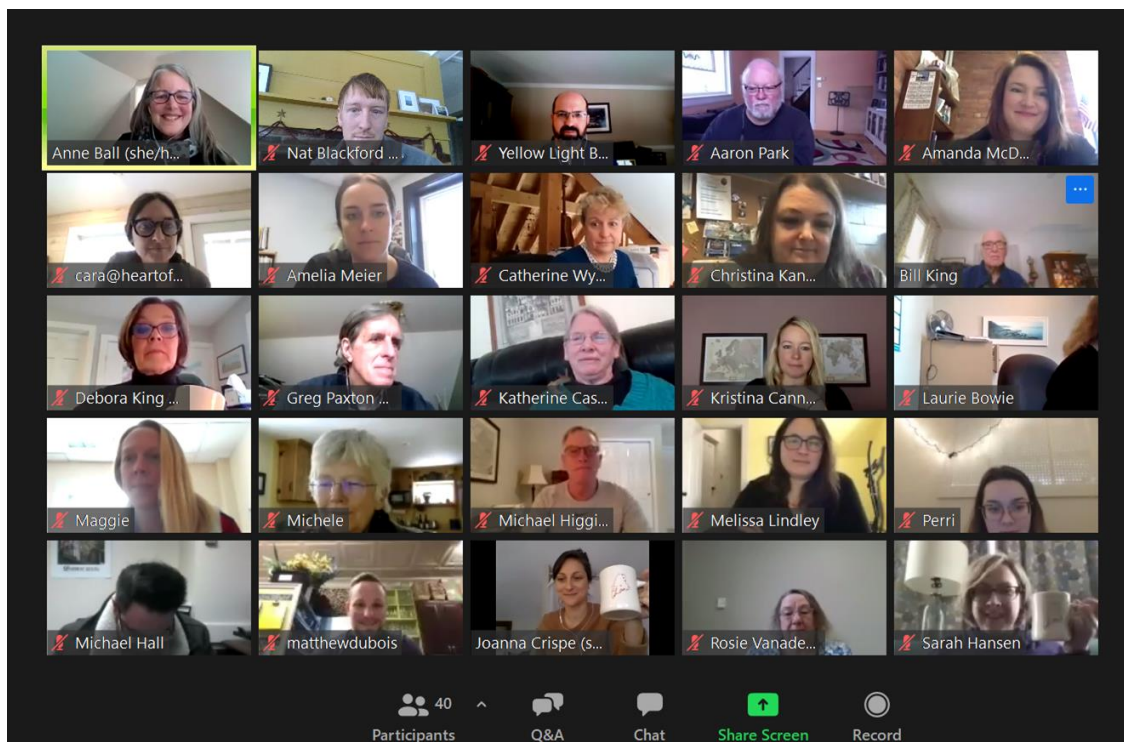
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# Introduction

Spring 2021

On March 12, 2020, Maine recorded its first COVID-19 case. By the end of the month, Maine was under a stay-at-home order that dramatically reshaped life for Maine's residents. MDF's Maine Downtown Center Main Street and Affiliate communities responded to the pandemic in powerful, creative, and innovative ways that built community and resiliency. From short-term small business support, to creating safe reopening and gathering locations, these case studies detail some of the ways that Main Streets and Affiliates rose to the occasion and exemplified both the Main Street America Four Point Approach (economic vitality, design, promotion, and organization) and the pillars of the Main Street Fellows program (resilience, social capital, equity, and welcoming communities). These case studies provide lessons and examples of what makes a successful project and serve as a resource for Maine communities as they meet the challenges ahead.

Nat Blackford  
Main Street Fellow  
Maine Downtown Center



Maine Downtown Center Awards Coffee in January 2021. *Photo Credit: Nat Blackford*



# Case Study Process and Methodology

The MDC team developed these case studies through an iterative process. First, we identified exemplary projects by reviewing materials, webinars, newsletters, and other MDC resources, paying particular attention to projects that exemplified the the Main Street America Four Point Approach and the pillars of the Main Street Fellows program (resilience, social capital, equity, and welcoming communities). We then conducted initial research and determined which projects to develop into case studies.

Projects were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Effectiveness in promoting resilience, building social capital, advancing equity, and creating more welcoming communities (definitions on page 5);
- Diversity of projects types across the Main Street 4 Point Approach (Each case study fits into one of the four points – which is indicated by a graphic in the upper right corner); and
- Geographic diversity.

Once projects were selected, we interviewed relevant Main Street Directors and began drafting the case studies. After several rounds of internal review and editing, we sent the case studies to the Main Street Directors to ensure that the case study properly represented the project. Finally, the case studies were collected and compiled into this report.



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# Definitions

## Main Street Fellows Pillars:

- *Resilience*: the ability to respond to, and bounce back from, external impacts. Resilience can have economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental dimensions. Local resilience is usually addressed through increasing local capacity, resources, social support, and decreasing risks and miscommunications.
- *Social Capital*: the value of social networks and social relationships between people. Research shows that communities with more social capital are more resilient and have better economic, health, and quality of life outcomes.
- *Equity*: “In an equitable society, all residents — regardless of their race, nativity, gender, or zip code — are fully able to participate in the community’s economic vitality, contribute to its readiness for the future, and connect to its assets and resources.” Equity involves outcomes, and is the result of a process that is both diverse and inclusive.
- *Welcoming Community*: a physical location in which newcomers feel valued and their needs are served. It is a place where residents undertake actions that facilitate the integration of newcomers by making a collective effort to make individuals feel valued and included. In a welcoming community, citizens and members feel safe, respected, and comfortable being themselves and expressing all aspects of their identities.

Together, these 4 concepts form the pillars of the Maine Downtown Center’s Main Street Fellow AmeriCorps program. The Main Street Fellows program places fellows in MDC member communities across the state for projects that touch on these concepts.

## Main Street 4 Point Approach\*:

- *Economic Vitality* focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for the scores of entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies.
- *Design* supports a community’s transformation by enhancing the physical and visual elements of downtown while capitalizing on the unique assets that set the commercial district apart.
- *Promotion* positions the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community’s unique characteristics.
- *Organization* involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district.

\*definitions taken from the Main Street America guide titled “The Main Street Approach: A Comprehensive Guide to Community Transformation.”

# Kennebec Valley Downtown Relief Fund: A Lifeline For Local Business

ECONOMIC VITALITY  
DESIGN  
PROMOTION  
ORGANIZATION



Downtown Augusta. *Photo Credit: Dave Dostie*

In the early days of the pandemic, businesses were shutting down and people were staying home. The public health situation changed rapidly but one thing was clear: businesses were in trouble. Government action was on the horizon, but wouldn't come fast enough for many. In Augusta and Gardiner, two Main Streets joined forces to help bridge the gap, developing a grant program for local businesses.

The pandemic hit Augusta and Gardiner abruptly. Over the course of a week, most businesses shut down. These were anticipated to be short-term closures, but given that small businesses often operate on narrow margins and with cash reserves that only cover a month or two, many were panicking. This left them in serious trouble. Without some support, many of the temporary closures could have easily become permanent. Small businesses are vital to main street communities. They bring people downtown, employ local people, support local causes, and make our communities special. Just as importantly, small business owners are our neighbors. Government programs were being developed to support them, but with limited cash reserves many businesses wouldn't be able to hold on until government aid arrived.

To help bridge the gap, Gardiner Main Street and the Augusta Downtown Alliance joined efforts to develop a grant program. Building on past collaboration, they used their own funds - \$4,500 each - to create the Kennebec Valley Downtown Relief Fund (KVDRF). MDC acted as the fiscal agent, holding the funds and conducting some of the administrative work. The fund provided unrestricted flexible grants of up to \$3,000 to local businesses in their downtown districts. Augusta and Gardiner used their funds to leverage additional money from other local organizations, including Kennebec Valley Federal Credit Union, Kennebec Savings Bank, Gardiner Federal Credit Union, Central Maine Power, the Augusta Board of Trade, and the Gardiner Board of Trade. They also received over \$1,500 from individuals in their communities. Together, they raised almost \$50,000 dollars to distribute to local businesses.

From the beginning, the urgency of the need meant that an OK solution now was much better than a perfect solution that came too late. Because of this, the application process evolved over time from a simple, easy-to-create, PDF at the beginning to a more user-friendly online form by the end. The grant criteria covered how dire the need was, how many employees the business had, how many people the business served, what the grant would be used for, and where the business was located. The Main Streets advertised the program through social media, email, existing downtown merchant networks, and individual outreach to businesses. All in all, 21 grants were made, with amounts ranging from \$500 to \$3,000. Recipients included a wide range of businesses, including restaurants, cafes, salons, and retail. Because the grant was flexible, it was used in different ways, with grantees using the money to cover payroll, rent, mortgage payments, and utilities.



Sunset in downtown Gardiner.  
*Photo Credit: Gardiner Main Street*

**“I heard from recipients that they’d have closed if not for the fund.”**

**Michael Hall - Augusta Downtown Alliance**



The program had a narrow goal: to provide immediate relief to local businesses. It accomplished that goal and helped some of the most vulnerable and impacted businesses hold on until government programs arrived. Today, almost all of the businesses are still open, and still on their respective Main Street. The program mobilized the community to support the local businesses that make Gardiner and Augusta special. “I heard from recipients that they’d have closed if not for the fund,” reported Michael Hall, the director of the Augusta Downtown Alliance. The success of the project is a testament to the value of social capital. The two downtown organizations were able to mobilize community networks across multiple stakeholder groups to support vulnerable businesses. The community was strong and flexible enough to meet the challenges it faced, and hold on until more help could arrive.

The project also demonstrated the importance and value of Main Street programs: the relief fund would not have happened without them, and wouldn’t have had the same impact if they hadn’t worked together. Through the Kennebec Valley Downtown Relief Fund, Gardiner Main Street and the Augusta Downtown Alliance brought people and organizations together, put their own money on the line, and demonstrated how relevant they are to their communities.

#### **Resources:**

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Michael Hall

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#### **Key Takeaways**

1. Having Main Streets put their own money (\$4,500 each) on the table showed that they were serious and helped bring in other donations.
2. Making the project happen fast was really important. It would have had less of an impact if it had been implemented several weeks later.
3. The fact that the grant money was unrestricted allowed each grantee to allocate it where it would have the biggest impact.
4. Main Streets can scale up efforts by working together and making projects more attractive to funders.



# “A Billboard For The Downtown” Biddeford’s Midtown Court

ECONOMIC VITALITY

DESIGN

PROMOTION

ORGANIZATION

Design can shape how we experience and interact with the world around us. In Biddeford, the Heart of Biddeford (HOB) used a design solution to address several compounding challenges from the pandemic and create a more welcoming downtown. The first challenge was the lack of events and places for people to safely gather and connect. The second was a need to show the community that downtown Biddeford was safe and open. And third, many Biddeford restaurants didn’t have the space for outdoor dining. HOB met these challenges head on, and led a process that created an open air food court that was accessible to all.



Midtown Court. *Photo Credit: Heart of Biddeford*

The project was catalyzed by restaurants that didn’t have space for outdoor dining. Without a way to support themselves during the pandemic, they were at risk of closing permanently. Because some of the businesses were distilleries and breweries, viable outdoor space would need a permit allowing alcohol consumption. When discussions between some landlords and businesses on new outdoor spaces broke down, Heart of Biddeford stepped forward. They commissioned a local architectural design firm to design an inviting, attractive plan for an outdoor dining space that would be open to all. The visual representation of the design was critical to the project’s success because it helped diverse stakeholders (community members, businesses, landlords, and municipal officials) visualize the space and get on board with the project. They named the space the Midtown Court.

With agreement from the city and the landlord, and funding from the city through the CARES Act, HOB started getting permits, purchasing equipment, marketing, and building the space. The result was a 50 by 25 foot area with seating for 24 people in a private downtown parking area. Because alcohol might be consumed on the premises, a B.Y.O.B permit was needed and the area needed to be staffed (see below for more information). In total, the project had a cost of around \$17,000: \$2,500 for signage and heaters, \$9,500 for seating and other equipment, and \$5,000 to staff it from September to December

The project impacted the community in many ways, some visible, and others less so. First, it created social capital - it brought people closer together. Not only did the Midtown Court create a safe place for people to come together and interact, but the process of implementing the project created new connections between the Heart of Biddeford, municipal staff, the city council, the mills, and local businesses. This increased social capital strengthened Biddeford and made it more resilient and better able to deal with challenges in the future. There were also economic benefits. Businesses near the project reported that there was a direct increase in profits on days when the court was open and staffed. Businesses advertised the space and spread the word, telling customers that they could get takeout and bring it down to the Midtown Court.

### **Key Takeaway: B.Y.O.B Permits**

A B.Y.O.B. permit allows the consumption of alcohol at a function. In order to receive one you need to demonstrate that you can comply with several rules:

- No unaccompanied minors
- No underage drinking
- No excessive drinking
- No violations of other state laws

Practically, this means that the B.Y.O.B. space needs to be staffed when alcohol will be consumed. In Biddeford, the Heart of Biddeford hired people to staff the Midtown Court using municipal CARES Act funding.

To learn more about the B.Y.O.B. permit, consult Maine statute:

[28-A M.R.S. §163. B.Y.O.B. function permit](#)

For a B.Y.O.B Permit, visit the Maine Bureau of Alcoholic Beverages & Lottery Operations:

<https://www.maine.gov/dafs/bablo/>

**“The Midtown Court was a billboard for the downtown. It showed that the downtown was open and there was a COVID-safe way to do things.”**  
**Delilah Poupore - Heart of Biddeford**

Everyone was welcome at the Midtown Court. The space was designed to be ADA accessible and you didn't need to buy something to stop by. There were some restrictions because alcohol was consumed on the premises - when the court was staffed, it was not open to unaccompanied minors. The staff were hired to reflect and involve the community. They chatted with passers-by, answered questions, gave out T-shirts, and were trained to make people feel welcome. Special attention was also paid to making sure that people felt safe, and to ensuring that staff were trained to handle any conflict. Because of all this work, the Midtown Court presented a welcoming and safe space for the community.

### Resources

For more information contact  
Delilah Poupore  
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Or visit [heartofbiddeford.org](http://heartofbiddeford.org)

### Key Takeaways

Staffing the space allowed patrons to consume alcohol on the premises, supporting local distilleries, breweries, and restaurants. This meant that the space was sometimes closed to unaccompanied minors.

Having a design for the space and communicating the particular benefits to each stakeholder through individual conversations helped get everyone on board.





# A Community Comes Together

## #FORTHELOVEOFBATH

ECONOMIC VITALITY

DESIGN

PROMOTION

ORGANIZATION

One of the key challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic has been cultivating and maintaining a sense of community. This sense of community is critical to maintaining the vibrancy and resilience of cities and towns. Main Street Bath met this challenge head on, and used a hashtag contest to bring people together, to bring people downtown, and to remind them of why they love their community.



Downtown Bath. Photo Credit: Nat Blackford

Their hashtag, #FORTHELOVEOFBATH, focused on the “why?” Why...stay safe, why... shop local, and why... be kind. The community's love of Bath provided the focus to get people to support their community's health and economic vitality.

The hashtag contest was simple: individuals and businesses posted on different social media platforms with the hashtag “#FORTHELOVEOFBATH.” Posts could be on any platform that accepts hashtags, or even mailed in on a postcard, but had to fit into the three themes: staying safe, shopping local, and being kind. Each month, Main Street Bath randomly picked a winner, who received goods donated by local businesses.

Over the course of the contest, which lasted from July to October, there were well over 1000 posts using the hashtag. Posts ranged from restaurant and business advertising, to people sharing art, to local wildlife and cityscapes, to posts about lost and found items. The openness of the criteria, and the different platforms involved, meant that more people could participate.

The contest also strengthened the relationship between Main Street Bath and the community. During the contest, Main Street Bath reached out to partner with other organizations like Bath Iron Works and Maine Maritime Museum to increase the reach of the project. They worked with longtime partners in new ways, got new businesses participating in Main Street, and brought in new and younger volunteers. As a result, Main Street Bath has a stronger connection to the community after the contest. This increased engagement has made Bath a more resilient community, better able to bounce back from tough times

The design of the contest was inclusive. It was free, with a low barrier to entry. It was online, but you could participate in other ways by mailing in a postcard or helping to paint a sign. It didn't matter how long you'd lived in Bath, only that you cared about your community. In this way it welcomed new members of the community and supported everyone.

## Resources

For more information contact Amanda McDaniel ([director@visitbath.com](mailto:director@visitbath.com)), or visit [forthe love of bath.com](http://forthe love of bath.com)

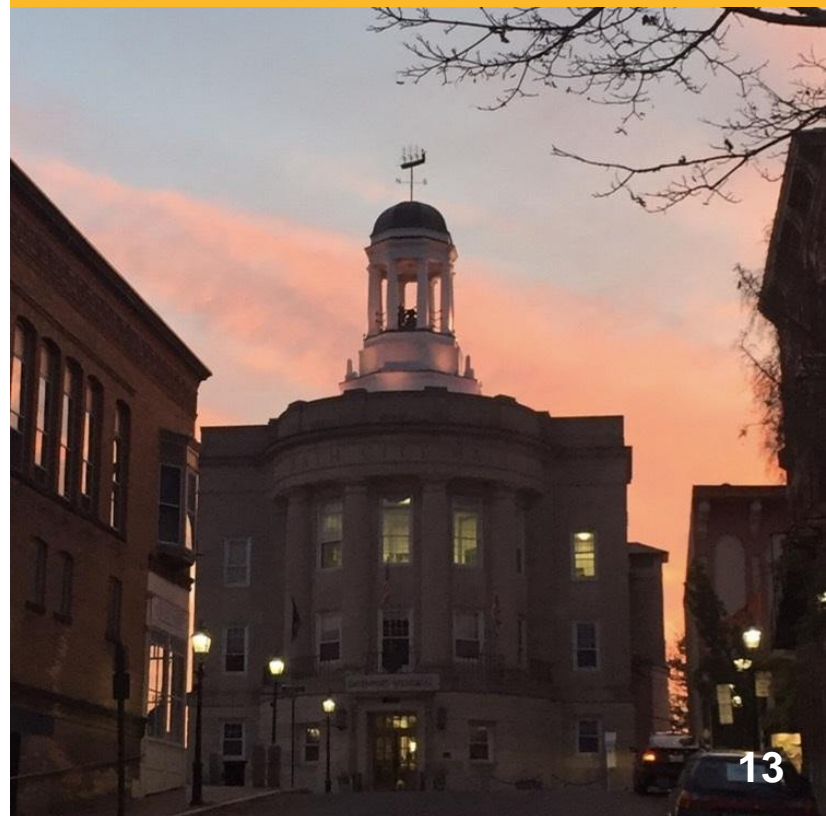


## Impacts

- Brought people downtown to shop at local businesses
- Brought people together around their love of Bath
- Strengthened existing partnerships
- Created new partnerships with local businesses
- Brought in new volunteers
- Built community

## Key Takeaways

It's really important to think about what makes your community unique. What is the community proud of? What gets people excited? This project built on existing community themes that were identified through surveys.



Bath City Hall. Photo Credit: Main Street Bath

# Brewfest to Brew Bags: Skowhegan's Fundraising Pivot

ECONOMIC VITALITY

DESIGN

PROMOTION

ORGANIZATION



Local Maine Brews. *Photo Credit: Main Street Skowhegan*

When the pandemic hit Maine, events across the state were cancelled. Events are important for community building and placemaking and can also be critical opportunities for Main Street communities to fundraise, enabling them to do their important work. One of Main Street Skowhegan's largest events has been the Skowhegan Brewfest. In past years, the Brewfest has brought over 1,300 people to downtown Skowhegan and raised up to \$30,000.

Main Street Skowhegan needed a way to make up some of that funding so that they could continue to support and provide resources to the Skowhegan community. With some initial inspiration from the Kennebec Chamber of Commerce, they decided to recast the Skowhegan Craft Brew Festival as a Skowhegan Craft Brew Bag. People would be able to purchase bags of local beers online and pick them up at the Main Street office.

**“If you’re not able to sustain your organization from a fundraising perspective - you’re kind of out of luck.” Kristina Cannon - Main Street Skowhegan**



To make the new virtual fundraiser happen, they had to overcome several hurdles. First was the licensing involved with selling alcohol. Because of the State of Emergency, the state allowed the Taste Testing permit application, typically used for brew fest, to be used for the brew bag fundraiser. The next challenge was raising some money to run the fundraiser. Many of Main Street Skowhegan's steadfast brew fest sponsors opted to support the brew bag initiative, which provided the funding needed to purchase beer and cider from local breweries as well as cooler bags, ice packs, cheese, crackers, cookies, and other brew bag goodies.

Through their network of existing relationships built during Brewfest, Main Street Skowhegan was able to get 15 breweries to participate. Beer was not donated to the project, but was purchased at an average of \$3 per can. As Kristina Cannon, the Executive Director of Main Street Skowhegan, said: "We tried very hard not to request significant donations from any of our businesses because we recognized that part of our job is to help our businesses. But we did ask them to recognize that this was a fundraiser for us."

Bags were sold for \$75 and each contained 15 beers, tasting glasses, and some local cheese, crackers, and other treats. Sales started in early Augusta and the bags sold out in 10 days. In all, 305 Brew Bags were sold. Main Street Skowhegan had lined up radio ads to advertise the bags, but ended up selling out so quickly that the ads were used to thank the sponsors instead.



Skowhegan Brew Bag. Photo Credit: Main Street Skowhegan

All told (including materials, licensing, insurance, marketing, etc.), the fundraiser cost approximately \$20,000 to run and brought in \$35,000. While this was half of what Main Street Skowhegan had originally projected to raise through the Brewfest, the Brew Bags were an important fundraiser for the organization in 2020.

The event was successful enough that they plan to run a similar event again in 2021. As Kristina said: “If you’re not able to sustain your organization from a fundraising perspective - you’re out of luck.”

## Resources

For more information contact  
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Or visit [mainstreetskowhegan.org](http://mainstreetskowhegan.org)



## Key Takeaways

There were some logistical snags with packing up the brew bags. For the next time, Skowhegan plans to wait until everything has arrived and then pack up all the brew bags at once.

Because the liquor license was adapted to cover the brew bags, there were some additional requirements that they had to follow, such as storing all beer under lock and key. They were also only allowed to distribute brew bags for a limited number of days, so pickups had to be scheduled in advance with purchasers.

Skowhegan also had a live virtual event that was tied into the Brew Bag Fundraiser. They got a band to play some music but they did not have a large audience tune in and would not do it again.

**Gardiner Main Street did a similar fundraising pivot with their annual Brewfest, creating a Swine and Stein Brewfest Bag. For more information contact Melissa Lindley ([melissa@gardinermainstreet.org](mailto:melissa@gardinermainstreet.org))**