

Revitalization focus of meeting

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'Communities can be shaped by choice, or they can be shaped by chance. We can keep on accepting the kind of communities we get, or we can start creating the kind of communities we want.'

**Richard Moe, former president, National Trust for
Historic Preservation**

Main Street presentation

ASHTON/ST. ANTHONY — Residents, professionals and consultants took time out of their busy schedules this week to attend informational presentations about the National Main Street Center program (NMSC) on Tuesday evening in St. Anthony, and all day Wednesday in Ashton.

The seminars were made possible by the four-county Housing and Urban Development grant (HUD) that is being administered by Fremont County.

What is the scope of opportunity?

The NMSC is a private, non-profit organization that works with smaller communities across the country to help them preserve, restore and develop their historic buildings and culture. The program also helps cities learn how to fund raise, and take advantage of opportunities to enhance existing resources or structures to attract tourism and investors.

NMSC senior program officer Kathy La Plante made the trip to both locations to speak directly to attendees about ideas, success stories of other communities and to discuss options with the locals.

In both St. Anthony and Ashton, La Plante provided a bevy of ways participating communities used single events to creative fund raising practices to increase awareness and pride in each community.

La Plante said she has been part of the NMSC for 25 years. She's helped 23 communities begin programs across the country, and said she's been working out of her home office with the NMSC center for eight years.

She often hears community members tell stories of what they used to be. La Plante encourages these individuals to get away from clinging to the past, and instead come up with creative ways to reinvent themselves in the future.

“It’s really built on empowering local support and really renewing our downtowns,” she said. “Let’s figure out what the next life and the next success is going to be.”

Reinventing the wheel in each community isn’t necessary or expected. She said “rip off and duplicate” is a favorite phrase of those who participate in the program. Learning about what has worked in other communities to try out in your own is definitely an important part of the process, said La Plante.

She said the gains of participating in the NMSC program can be felt on a number of different levels, but the biggest benefactor is the municipality.

“The city benefits the most because it’s going to help increase the tax base, it’s going to create more jobs. It’s going to create that housing development that needs to happen and bring in new businesses.”

Rehabilitation of old and vacant buildings is a big part of the process toward recreating a downtown. La Plante said when work needs to be done on an existing building, local vendors are going to get the first call.

“When you have locally owned businesses about 65-75 cents of every dollar they take in stays in circulation in your community. We need more locally owned businesses.”

In Ashton on Wednesday, after a tour of downtown and lunch at the newly restored Five 11 Main restaurant, participants returned to discuss comments, questions and concerns about what it would take to become part of the NMSC program.

Ashton resident Garth Blanchard pointed out that Ashton needs to expand its customer base before being concerned with the appearance of buildings.

“We can talk about doing a lot of different things with the buildings and those sorts of things, but if there aren’t customers there, we won’t be able to make it,” Blanchard said.

He then provided some suggestions about how to expand the customer base. One option for Ashton would be to attempt to draw more of the traffic into Ashton’s city center that’s headed toward Yellowstone, and also trying to create more options for patrons to shop locally.

La Plante said social media can provide marketing help via promotional efforts on Facebook and Twitter.

A budding success story down the street

Tuesday's meeting in downtown St. Anthony was kicked off by Doug Self of Driggs.

Self spoke to the curious and skeptical audience members about what the City of Driggs has learned after aggressively pursuing revitalization efforts for over a decade.

Self is the Community Development Director in Driggs. He said they researched and observed what other NMSC communities were doing, and used the program as a model to draw ideas from.

A severe fire on Feb. 10, 2003 created momentum for community members and officials of Driggs to turn their tragedy into hope and progress by taking action toward rebuilding their city. They have focused their efforts on the center of downtown, and expanded outward by patiently executing plans and completing projects.

They also created a vision to follow which ultimately keeps them focused toward attaining their goal of creating a "beautiful and vibrant" downtown.

He said the two most important elements in being successful on projects are collaboration and funding. One of his first tasks was to write a grant for a National Endowment for the Arts "Your Town" grant, which he received, and that helped "get the ball rolling."

"It's important to take that first step and bring people together to develop a vision and common language for solutions," Self said.

He stressed the progress seen in the pictures of the slideshow he showed to the audience came from working together and getting as many aspects of the community involved as possible.

The Downtown Driggs Community Association, Teton Arts Council, Teton Valley Foundation, Teton Valley Chamber of Commerce, and Teton Valley Business Development Center were all identified as resources already available to the city of Driggs that could partner in collaborative efforts on projects.

Sources of funding were made available through a local option sales tax, or resort tax, which was a half percent on sales tax, the Driggs Urban Renewal Agency's creation of a revenue allocation district for tax incremental financing, and state and federal grants.

"The Driggs Urban Renewal Agency is a major funding source for us," Self Said. "That was created just before a significant new development with the Broulim's shopping center. That's really key—without some kind of step up that's going to increase the value of property in the district, there's no real way to get that revenue going."

He said they use the funds created by the Urban Renewal Agency to go out to leverage millions of dollars in matching funds and additional grants.

What does participation look like?

Jerry Miller is the Economic Development Specialist for Idaho Department of Commerce in Boise. He is also the Main Street Coordinator.

Miller said the Idaho program officially began in spring of 2013. He said they are a “licensee” of the NMSC which means that communities that wish to become part of the NMSC program must follow specific “protocols, guidelines and criteria” as well as sign a “memorandum of understanding” which underscores specifics of what is expected of a Main Street community.

He gave two examples, in addition to Driggs, of communities that were selected to participate in the NMSC Idaho program: Nampa and Lewiston.

Old Town Pocatello is not an official member of the program, but is looked at as a great example of revitalization success in Idaho.

Miller said all of the communities he mentioned had existing downtown improvement programs prior to applying for NMSC membership.

“The mission of our program is to assist Idaho communities to achieve the National Main Street Standards and hopefully one day become a Main Street nationally accredited community.”

According to the Main Street FAQs, if a city is not ready to apply for designation, individuals who are interested can encourage their local leaders in city government to apply the NMSC approach to what they are currently doing.

There are also case studies available for view in the resource section of the website.
www.preservationnation.org/main-street.