



A program of the MAINE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

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## Summary Report from the Start Up Team Visit BELFAST

October 2010

Presented to Lorraine Brown, Director, Our Town Belfast

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**Healthy, thriving downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts are  
assets to communities endeavoring to sustain or grow their local  
economy and create or retain jobs.**

## INTRODUCTION

The Maine Downtown Center (MDC) is a program of the Maine Development Foundation (MDF). MDF believes that vibrant downtowns can be an economic engine of growth; can serve as an attractant to young people, creative economic ventures, retirees and diverse populations; and can mitigate costly sprawling land use development patterns. The MDC helps communities throughout the state revitalize their downtown economy, preserve and enhance appearance, and boost the image of their traditional business districts using a range of services and assistance.

We utilize the successful **Main Street Four-Point Approach**® developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Main Street Center as its foundation for assistance. This approach emphasizes economic development within the context of historic preservation and is based on principles of self-determination and direct community participation. The Main Street Four-Point Approach® focuses on four key areas of revitalization which are worked simultaneously:

- **Organization.** Involving all constituencies having an interest in downtown revitalization and management of both human and financial resources. Organization helps everyone work towards the same goals and maximizes involvement of public and private leaders within the community.
- **Design.** Implementing projects that improve the appearance and functionality of downtown buildings and physical environment. Design enhances a district's appearance and pedestrian amenities while preserving its historic features.
- **Promotion.** Creating programs that market your downtown to potential and existing customers, producing special events and festivals, and promulgating a positive image of downtown. Promotion brings people back downtown by helping to attract visitors, shoppers, and investors.
- **Economic Restructuring.** Studying your community's economy and market opportunities and using the information to develop programs that strengthen and expand existing businesses and aid in recruiting new businesses to downtown. Economic restructuring stimulates business development and helps strengthen the district's economic base.

This comprehensive approach has long been proven an effective methodology for revitalizing traditional, pedestrian-oriented commercial districts in your downtown. In essence, the Main Street Four-Point Approach® stresses grassroots involvement in the revitalization process where the community works beyond just the downtown stakeholders, to develop a compelling vision for your downtown.

Each Main Street program is locally driven, responds to locally identified priorities, and is locally funded. The MDC is committed to be a partner in this essential revitalization process for the long term.

## OVERVIEW OF THE MAINE DOWNTOWN NETWORK

As part of a three-tier approach to downtown revitalization in Maine, the MDC launched the **Maine Downtown Network** in 2009 as an affiliate to our successful Main Street Maine program and Downtown Institute. The Maine Downtown Network (MDN) program provides a range of services and assistance to meet a variety of community commitment and readiness levels with technical support through its staff and other experienced consultants.

The MDN is for communities just starting a downtown revitalization effort and/or for those hoping to achieve Main Street Maine status. MDN services help communities build an appropriate organizational and funding base for a comprehensive downtown or neighborhood commercial district revitalization program. Participation as a MDN community does not guarantee selection as a future designated Main Street Maine community, although it will help communities strengthen their revitalization efforts.

### **MDN communities are required to:**

1. Understand, commit to and follow the Main Street Four-Point Approach® to downtown revitalization (Organization, Design, Promotion and Economic Restructuring) established by the National Trust Main Street Center and promoted by the Maine Downtown Center, for a minimum of two years.
2. Maintain and report on quantitative measures of success, specifically volunteer hours and re-investment statistics, and share these with the MDC Program Manager at least twice annually or as requested.
3. Develop and/or maintain a volunteer board, including representatives of downtown business entities, the greater community and local government, to oversee the continuing development of the local downtown revitalization program for the terms of this agreement.
4. Engage staff, committee and/or board members and volunteers in ongoing training offered by the MDC. Travel expenses for such training shall be paid by the local program unless otherwise provided by the MDC. Discounted registration will be made available to MDN local program participants to attend Downtown Institute sessions and the annual Maine Downtown Conference.
5. Share lessons learned from their experience as a MDN local program and share documents and products with the MDC and other communities in instances where sharing will not compromise the work of the local program.
6. The local program will illustrate the acknowledgement of the receipt of the MDC's services by crediting its participation and, as a beneficiary of, the MDN program through the appropriate methods (i.e., website, printed acknowledgement in public notices, press releases, project signs, publications, verbal recognition at public meetings, etc.)
7. Pay an annual participation fee to MDC based on population.

**The MDC will provide these additional services to MDN communities:**

1. Designate a MDC Program Manager to act as liaison with the MDN local program and to facilitate communications between the local program, the Maine Downtown Center, other Maine communities and the National Trust Main Street Center where appropriate.
2. Organize and conduct an initial Start-Up Visit whereby the MDC Program Manager and members of the MDC Advisory Board, Senior Advisors and selected consultants will visit the MDN Local Program to conduct an informal needs assessment and offer initial observations to help organize the Downtown program.
3. Organize and conduct a Year One Organizational Visit to assist the MDN local program in developing a start-up checklist, work plan creation and fund raising strategies.
4. Organize and conduct a Year Two Organizational Visit identifying progress and provide suggestions for moving forward.
5. Conduct training for board members and/or committee members, MDN local program managers (where appropriate), and community volunteers, providing intensive and comprehensive training on the content and methodology of the Main Street program at the local level.
6. Provide resource and consultant information to the MDN local program in topic areas specifically related to organization, design, promotion and economic restructuring.
7. Assist in the selection of a Downtown Manager, if appropriate, and provide orientation and training at the MDC office.
8. Provide for the MDN local program's membership in the National Trust Main Street Center for two years during the term of the agreement.
9. In general, facilitate learning among Maine Downtown Network and Maine Street Maine communities and the general public.
10. Post success stories and testimonials from the MDN local program on the MDC website and share links to the National Trust Main Street Center and other state coordinating programs.

In summary, the Maine Downtown Network is what you make of it. Tap into the energy! Consider yourself part of a growing family of historically rich, civic minded, volunteer-driven cities and towns in Maine. Join forces with passionate people committed to protecting and enhancing their special sense of place and courageous enough to invest the energy necessary to convert their vision of a vibrant downtown to reality. Now let's get to work!

## THE START UP VISIT

In August 2010, a group of enthusiastic downtown supporters representing both the public and private sectors met with the Maine Downtown Center's team. Our discussion focused on past efforts, current activities and future visions. We began with an orientation meeting which was followed by a *thorough* walking tour which took the group into key businesses and buildings, and to the waterfront. We returned for lunch at the library to share immediate observations and discuss next steps as a Maine Downtown Network community – leading, we hope, to your future status as a Main Street Maine community. While much of this report will underscore what you may already know, our intent with this report is to share comments, ideas and suggestions from the team for consideration as you continue to work in the Main Street model for downtown revitalization, incorporating the Four Points discussed previously.



*The Start Up Visit Team! Report photos provided by Roxanne Eflin, Program Manager, Maine Downtown Center*

## ORGANIZATION OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR BELFAST

Effective downtown revitalization efforts require the energy, leadership, vision and passion of an organized, engaged and diverse group of downtown supporters. You are fortunate to have such a group, spearheaded by Our Town Belfast. Through this organization, you are already putting into place a solid Main Street program, and we are cheering you on! Your paid director, Lorraine Brown, is an enthusiastic and capable champion, supported by many. As MDC Senior Advisor Bill King says "It's all together for success!"

As you already know, but cannot be stated too often, your leadership as advocates for downtown is vitally important to help solidify support from not just the business community, but municipal staff, elected officials and residents. All of these individuals and groups have a role in the future of your commercial core and it is important that each of them understand how the Main Street approach works. A balanced three-way partnership between the merchants/property owners, municipality and the residents is critically important for sustainable success. The Chamber of Commerce, specifically Janet Dutson, appears to be very supportive as well as nonprofits like the Maine Farmland Trust, businesses and residents.

We were impressed with the level and enthusiasm of municipal support, as demonstrated by town planner, Wayne Marshall and Tom Kittredge, the Economic Development Director. Local government needs to position itself as a partner (and sometimes facilitator and implementer), encouraging the leadership roles to be served by the private sector.

A caution raised by one of the MDC team members who noted: “Turnout for the visit was fantastic, but there was not a lot of dialogue or back-and-forth between all participants. The group should be careful to make sure that everyone has equal say in Our Town and is encouraged to participate and vocalize.” It is important for other civic and education leaders who do not yet have a stake in downtown to be persuaded to get involved with the effort. An inventory of other organizations active in Belfast is important to find leadership, new volunteers and supporters. The list should include the officers and board members, downtown projects and goals. Then develop a communications strategy to connect with them and *ask* for their participation. So often, people simply are not asked.

Your mission statement captures the spirit of the community and will help entice others to join: “Our Town Belfast is a vibrantly inclusive social, arts and cultural effort that initiates and supports community and creative sustainability in downtown Belfast.” Well done!

The delegation of tasks into committees organized along the Four Point Approach is necessary and effective in order to keep the movement pulsing forward and prevent individual burn-out. As with many of our participating communities, often the Committee Chair, Board President or paid Executive Director does much of the heavy lifting because they do it so well! We encourage balance within the leadership to spread both the enthusiasm and work throughout the committees and staff. This balanced leadership ethic will help groom others to smoothly pick up the pace when, and if, your top leaders wish to step back from their respective roles.

We strongly encourage the key individuals involved in the downtown effort to receive training in historic preservation in order to fully understand the essential role that historic preservation, and the accompanying incentives, plays in economic development. Currently in Maine, historic preservation projects are leading the real estate development and housing sectors. Including people within your committee or organization with a background in historic redevelopment, architecture and design is strongly recommended.

A current Downtown Revitalization Plan is required in order for your community to be eligible for matching grant funding through the new Community for Maine’s Future

program, expect to be launched this fall. This is the ideal opportunity to make sure your plan is current and supportive of your mission and vision.

### **Additional Organization Activities to Pursue**

Web presence is crucial: it must be easily found via search engines, easy to navigate and comprehensive. Your [www.Belfastdowntown.com](http://www.Belfastdowntown.com) webpage is handsome, but confusing since it says “Belfast Downtown Business Group.” The public will wonder who is Our Town Belfast? There is no link on the Belfast Area Chamber of Commerce’s home page and only through a bit of navigation deeper into their website are you found. (Their website is superb.) There is also no link on the Town’s homepage or even a mention about downtown Belfast in any context! You do have a fun, lively and informative Facebook presence, but this is not enough. Work is needed here, as you are formalizing your organizational structure and public image. We do ask that you state you are a Maine Downtown Network Community and link the MDC’s website to yours. Please also utilize our Maine Downtown Center logo to indicate our partnership.

Public relations about your revitalization efforts should be constant – in the press, on public access television and in educational presentations by your members. Your downtown brand logo and slogan statement should be widely used by merchants and businesses throughout your downtown to continually reinforce the message and image. If you haven’t done so, you should create a PowerPoint presentation for your board members and committee volunteers to take into the schools to educate and inspire teachers and students (K-12) and, subsequently, their entire families.

Fundraising is an ongoing challenge and opportunity. We encourage all our participating communities to “think in threes” for income sources: 1/3 from the Town, 1/3 from downtown businesses and property owners and 1/3 from the residents and special events. A balanced fundraising plan is important to help spread the ownership and prevent a setback should any one source be cut or curtailed. Establish your budget from bottom to top/top to bottom –build a funding pyramid and work it. Remember that fundraising is NOT merely a paid staff task. All members of the Board of committee must be involved *in some way* to secure funding. This is a team effort, with most of the heavy lifting done by the Board. Staff’s primary role is to provide the logistic support, which is a large, critical task. Remember to inventory your assets and successes - and use these as a marketing tool. A number of small gifts are as important as your top gifts when building your base of support. Remember to thank every donor in writing within 48 hours after their gift is received.

We urge you to develop a positive presence at Town Council meetings and invite one of them to serve on your Board or a committee, perhaps as an official liaison. It is useful to rotate the spokesperson role at Council meetings in order to show the many faces of downtown and develop speaker leadership.

Have some fun times together, preferably after hours, at several different businesses. The Bath Business Barometer is an excellent model, resulting in team building.

We encourage you to take advantage of the training and networking opportunities made available by the Maine Downtown Center, including the Downtown Institute – six sessions

held throughout the year in Augusta on a variety of topics specific to the Main Street Four Point Approach®. We strongly believe that an informed and well organized group, comprised of downtown retailers and business owners, local residents, nonprofit organizations and municipal government, has the singular ability to elevate downtown Belfast to the prominence it rightly deserves.

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## DESIGN OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR BELFAST



*Downtown Belfast is among the most architecturally distinctive commercial districts in Maine. Celebrate your strong sense of place and protect your unique economic asset.*



The overarching slogan for the Main Street program is “economic development within the context of historic preservation.” Historic buildings provide the distinctive setting for downtown revitalization and, when combined with a beautiful natural setting, are a community’s greatest economic development assets. Your good historic building stock is relatively intact, with the exception of a few storefronts that have been significantly modified over time. While many people do, it is important for the entire community to recognize the quality of these irreplaceable buildings, their character-defining value, and their potential to leverage the benefits of incentives such as the federal and state historic tax credits to restore and preserve them well into the future.

Historic preservation is a proven economic development tool and will significantly raise the level of revitalization here to the status it deserves.



Infill development that is compatible with the historic fabric creates attractive places for people and art, as part of your creative economy/local crafts niche. You always want to be ahead of and in control of what new development will look like. It is strongly recommended and a valuable exercise to examine and compare and revise all the plans, design guidelines and ordinances affecting downtown to ensure compatibility with your vision for the future.



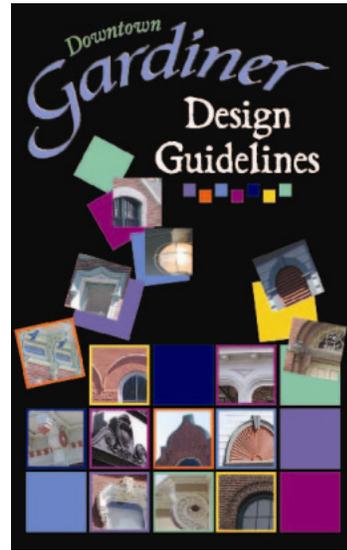
*Downtown has a number of opportunities for façade improvements (left.)  
The new Police Station (right) is a strong example of compatible infill design.*

We encourage you to invest the time to inventory and analyze each building for its current condition and future potential. Work in partnership with the ER committee and the Town. If you have not collected and organized all the historic photos you can of your downtown buildings, engage the partnership of your local historical society, high school history department and anyone interested in helping. This treasure trove of historic data should be utilized to assist property owners, your Design Committee and the Town (Planning Board and future Historic Preservation Commission) in making façade design decisions. Your leadership in these efforts is imperative.

Integrated redevelopment that preserves and enhances significant structures (of which there are many) and street character is an essential goal of this program. Structures should not only be compatible with the character of the surroundings, but also be oriented with a store front facing the street with buildings abutting the sidewalk. The Design Committee should advocate for certain uses to not be allowed in the downtown section of Main Street, such as first floor residential. The Design Committee and the Economic Restructuring Committee

need to actively advocate for a “downtown first!” approach when the community is considering relocating public and civic institutions.

Most often, changes over time detract from the original design integrity – we see many examples of this erosion in downtowns across Maine, including Belfast. Small changes and improvements can make a significant difference and will begin to build energy and similar interest by building owners up and down the street. *The Secretary of the Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Buildings* offers practical, common sense advice to building owners and contractors. Base your design decisions upon those historic photos you gathered or find clues in the building. You will begin to accomplish two things: 1) restore the authentic appearance of these character-defining buildings and/or 2) rehabilitate buildings with design sensitivity to original design principles and the neighboring context.



*Owners most often wish to do “the right thing” for their historic buildings.  
Help them by providing information, training and good guidance.*

If you have not done so already, we encourage you to develop simple design guidelines for downtown buildings. Check out Gardiner Main Street’s efforts here – their publication is posted on their website. A fresh coat of paint and some simple maintenance are easy opportunities for volunteers to pitch in to make an immediate difference. Design guidelines serve to inform, educate and encourage good design alterations that are sympathetic and compatible to the downtown context. They also inform good building stewardship practices and should discuss ways to incorporate savvy “Green Downtown” energy efficiency methods while retaining historic building fabric. The Design committee should work with the Planning Board to develop design guidelines for downtown integrating redevelopment that preserves and enhances significant structures (of which there are many) and street character. Significant historic buildings, of which there are a number, should - at the very least – have their own binding design standards to appropriately and sympathetically guide new construction and architectural modifications that will occur downtown.

You should consider strengthening your local regulations regarding historic preservation with the intent of accommodating growth while preserving the unique historic qualities of

downtown Belfast. Include minimum maintenance provisions for significant historic resources. The MDC has numerous examples of how this is accomplished in communities across Maine, which can begin as simply as advisory review of all plans for any building over 50 years old located within your downtown district. Demolition should always be the absolute last resort as it results in gutting the heart of your community of its heritage and distinct character thereby jeopardizing your strong position in the regional marketplace as a community with heart and heritage. Historic buildings need proper rehabilitation to correct deferred maintenance and/or unsympathetic changes that have occurred over time – *your advocacy and education efforts are essential here.*

The Town needs to look into making incremental improvements per the Gateway One approach. This is a statewide quality of place issue. It is more important than ever for downtown Belfast to pay serious attention to the role of design in attracting redevelopment. Raising your standards to a higher level to reflect the quality and diversity of your significant historic architecture will help attract redevelopment. In order to achieve this, effective design guidelines, review and enforcement are critical and will increase property values, pride and activity on many levels. The failure to do this is actually holding back the ability of the downtown district to thrive to its full potential.

There is likely a perception that traffic moves through Main Street faster than it should and it makes it difficult for pedestrians to cross the street. Traffic cones, signs, or decorative barrels could also be used at key crossings to bring attention to pedestrian safety and help slow traffic.



Parking is generally considered a challenge in nearly every downtown. It was difficult to find in downtown Belfast. Improved directional signs are needed to guide drivers to the designated public parking areas – in number, placement and overall design, which should reflect the high design quality found in business signage throughout downtown Belfast.

We did not review any current parking studies during our team visit, though we heard that parking is considered by many to be “a problem.” This often stems from employees parking in the front of businesses, an issue that the employer can and should control and model good parking behavior. A comprehensive parking study is the obvious first step, to analyze all parking opportunities and flex-time parking alternatives. Finally, as in all “Main Street” corridors, avoid having auto related uses including drive-through windows and curb cuts that disrupt the feeling, perception and reality of a pedestrian-friendly corridor.

Design is not about buildings alone. This component of the Four Points addresses everything visible – plantings, street furniture, bike racks, banners and flags, public art, trash and recycling receptacles, lighting, storefront windows – even in-store merchandising. A cohesive and quality design appearance – with individual creativity - is what you are aiming for. This will help project a solid sense of business, caring and cooperation downtown.



***Downtown Belfast is loaded with irresistibly-photogenic signage. Keep it up!***  
*Signage is always an essential aspect of good design. Periodically evaluate your sign ordinance and enforcement policies to see if both are still working for you.*



*"Your kinetic and interactive public art is awesome!" – MDC team member*



*The Downtown Garden Club has an eye toward the aesthetic and on-going maintenance.*

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**Additional design comments and suggestions from  
Shannon Haines, MDC Advisor/Executive Director, Waterville Main Street**

- Amazing business signs in Downtown Belfast! Fabulous storefront displays and merchandising. The Museum in the Streets and public art are wonderful additions to the streetscape.
- Mandatory Design Review Guidelines are a wonderful tool for protecting the existing historic building stock, which is truly one of Belfast’s strongest assets.
- The five-way intersection at the head of Downtown is *very* confusing for visitors. Some way-finding signage would be very helpful here and could be used to direct visitors to the working waterfront, library, and other community assets.
- There are several “green spaces” in Downtown that could be enhanced and better highlighted. The Coastal Walkway plans are very exciting and, if actualized, will be a huge asset to the community and – with proper signage – a great way to connect the Downtown to the waterfront.
- The Garden Club is an excellent partner for landscaping projects; develop that relationship even further and perhaps more formally through a written agreement.

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**PROMOTIONS OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR BELFAST**

Through your association with the Maine Downtown Center, you have truly vast resources available to you through the National Main Street Center’s members-only section online. You will find a substantial amount of practical advice, innovative ideas and guidance to help you continue to refine a solid promotion strategy for downtown Belfast. Our goal is to help you increase the “feet on the street!”

We encourage you to continue sharing your branding image and urge everyone to use this widely – by merchants, partner organizations, the Town, etc. – and everywhere, on websites, banners, shopping bags, marketing materials and public signs including way-finding, directional, entry gateways, facility identification and town entry monuments. (For a PowerPoint on Promotions, Marketing and Branding, presented through the Downtown Institute, visit the MDC website at [mdf.org/SessionVResourceList.php](http://mdf.org/SessionVResourceList.php).)

“Signature” events are *vital*ly important. Make sure that your organization is included as co-host or co-sponsor on all events downtown, like the Art Walks, Belfast Poetry and Art Festival, the Free Range Music Festival and Harbor Fest.

Remember, also, the importance of retail events which serve triple duty: 1) they bring shoppers to downtown, 2) they get shoppers inside stores spending money, and 3) they can galvanize merchants to your downtown mission, vision and efforts. We did not see a Downtown Map & Guide or business directory, though perhaps one exists. Many of our participating Main Street Maine and Maine Downtown Network communities have created annual signature retail events that have become extremely successful. If you don’t already, you should try an “Early Bird” sale as a retail promotion for the first day of hunting season; details are available through the Maine Downtown Center. These events are easy, fun, successful and are great media photo opportunities! Please share your success stories with the MDC for posting on our website.

Promoting “heritage retailing” is becoming increasingly effective for downtown retail districts and celebrates Maine’s creative community. According to the National Main Street Center, heritage retailing is “the term for buying local and providing those purchasing opportunities to visitors and community residents alike.” Buying local can be implemented on a variety of scales from large to small, and one of its many positive aspects is that any community or individual can participate. Buying goods made locally keeps revenue in your community and, if these products reflect the history or character of your community, they will play an important role in your development of a heritage retailing strategy. Use your collective media buying power to promote your unique position in the regional marketplace.

Sister Cities are another good way to connect merchants and residents to communities with some connection to Belfast. You don’t have to have just one. Not only does this encourage international heritage tourism and school connections, but it provides good publicity and good will between communities.

Take the lead to build pride in your built environment. Find opportunities to work with your schools, historical society, library and private teaching facilities (all ages) to create lesson plans centered on the substantial history and significant historic architecture of Belfast. The Design and Promotions Committee might consider working together on projects such as:



- creating an architectural scavenger hunt downtown
- developing a monthly downtown building trivia contest
- printing a coloring book based on historic downtown and residential architecture

Remember: Promotion needs to attract people; good design will hold them. Work with the Design Committee to ensure that the surroundings – the sense of place, the quality of place – will bring them back again, perhaps even longer.

## ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR BELFAST

Also known as Business Development and Recruitment, the Economic Restructuring efforts for any downtown – Belfast’s notwithstanding – takes time, patience, vision and heart. We all agree that the downtown should be a mixed-use pedestrian-friendly place that preserves its historical integrity, is environmentally sustainable, socially diverse, and unique/authentic. But how do we get there?

Belfast’s Main Street appears economically healthy, and aren’t you fortunate! Yet retaining and strengthening downtown’s position in the marketplace is a never-ending challenge. It’s straightforward: people need a reason to come downtown. Reinforcing downtown as the community’s gathering place - the cultural, commercial, civic heart of the region - is the mission of the Maine Downtown Center and, we expect, yours.



Colburns is a treasured  
destination business!



*The Start Up Visit Team met with business owners and mingled with downtown customers*

The historic buildings, unique character and cultural attractions contribute to the area’s success in attracting “creative class” businesses. Your organization in partnership with the Town needs to ensure that the public and private sectors of downtown continue to create a vibrant and livable mixed-use environment that builds on your sense of place. Your commercial core needs to be viewed as a place that supports and expresses the creative and innovative energy of its human capital, and a place that attracts and welcomes all members of the community. “Quality of Place” is featured in the recently published *Making Maine Work* report as one of the top investment imperatives in our state. And downtown Belfast is well ahead of the curve in understanding and supporting downtown’s role in this aspect.

Marketing the historic tax credits is another strategy to stimulate downtown development - by contacting real estate-oriented new owners, encouraging residential development, getting a few smaller projects started at the same time and marketing downtown as a whole during

the process. A thorough understanding of every historic building (over 50 years old) is necessary to effectively market preservation-based incentive tools to potential developers. For more information on this, visit the MDC online Resource Library ([www.mdf.org](http://www.mdf.org)) on this, contact Mike Johnson at the Maine Historic Preservation Commission (287-2132) or Greg Paxton at Maine Preservation (775-3652.)

Business retention and recruitment requires the work of downtown ambassadors. Package your amenities and assets and go after the businesses you lack to further strengthen downtown Belfast in the regional marketplace. A good book to read and share is "Niche Strategies for Downtown Revitalization" by N. David Milder. Check first in your local bookstore or buy it through [www.downtowndevelopment.com](http://www.downtowndevelopment.com). "Niche Strategies" shows readers how downtown areas can grow and prosper by focusing their efforts on specific groups of customers or of goods and services.

Properly designed surveys, of which there are many for downtowns, are vitally important tools to provide a basic understanding of your downtown in the regional marketplace. This is energy well spent, within reason and budget; however, it is important for a variety of reasons to not simply turn this over to paid consultants and students to accomplish. Your ER committee, perhaps bolstered with students and other volunteers, needs to roll up its sleeves and dive in – after receiving training on how to best approach people for information. This is where professional guidance can channel, champion and help you analyze your efforts. An example worth investigating is the ROMEO (Retired Old Men Eating Out) group in Bath, who enjoy conducting a variety of surveys.

Once your basic surveys are conducted and analyzed, you should consider conducting a residential survey. As you well know, many residents rarely or never come downtown. It will be very beneficial to discover what would change their lack of interest in downtown.

We understand that some market analysis has been done. You should review the results of that analysis and convene a meeting of as many of the business owners on the street as will participate (along with the owners/leasing agents of the vacant space). Test with them the recommendations coming out of the existing data. Is it valid? Will these types of businesses support or deter from the existing business mix? What types of businesses are missing from the list? Use this discussion to identify the two or three types of business that would best enhance what is currently present. Within each of the types explore (1) if there is anyone in town who might develop such a business; (2) if there are similar businesses elsewhere in Maine or New England who might consider an additional location.

If you move to option (2) above, be very specific. Name the business. Research the business: owner's name(s), size of store, population served, how long in business, etc. Using what you know about these businesses, and data about Belfast demographics, traffic patterns, and the available space, compile an information package to leave with the prospective business owner(s). Call ahead and set up a time to meet. Send someone who represents the assets of Belfast well and who understands why this would be a good fit. Talk through the materials and leave copies with them. Send a thank you letter being sure to include contact information. Follow up in a couple of days. Follow up in a week. Send a summary of the key advantages to a Belfast location. Follow up in two weeks. Add them (with permission) to your database for e-news that goes out. Follow up every two-three

weeks for as long as there is space available and they haven't told you to "go away". If the space rents, let them know and tell them that you hope there will be another opportunity, because you truly believe they would be such a good fit.

To address this issue, and enhance engagement of more business owners in the downtown, efforts should be made to strengthen the relationship between businesses, promoting an atmosphere of teamwork and cooperative spirit. You should hold regular meetings of all downtown businesses. Every meeting should have an agenda and the topic should be announced well in advance (as well as posted on your website and Facebook page). Some meetings might be a combination of presentation and roundtable discussion, but every meeting should include sufficient time for a roundtable to encourage dialog among the businesses. Agenda topics can be decided by the group, but might include topics such as:

- Effective window displays
- Whether and how to utilize "social media" such as Facebook or Twitter
- Working with the Town to improve parking, street cleaning or other issues of concern
- Sources of financing
- Hours of operation
- Upcoming events and promotions

By distributing and collecting an evaluation of every meeting, a space can be provided on the evaluation form asking for suggestions for future meeting topics. This would allow a business owner to ask for a sensitive topic to be addressed without having to reveal that the issue is of unique concern to them.

Business openings and expansions should be big events with ribbon cuttings, food, press releases, photo-ops, etc. Take any and every opportunity to promote good things happening downtown! Think about entities that are successful in pushing an agenda or message. They are successful because they have access to a communication source and they know how to craft a public relations message (or spin) to help obtain the reaction they want. To achieve the most sizzle, the ER and Organization committee will want to join forces.



Access to local food is very good, thanks to the famous Belfast Co-Op Store. Local food is an increasingly important economic anchor for downtowns in Maine and should be further expanded and cross marketed with other businesses and events.

Most downtowns, to be vibrant and economically successful, need a mix of ground floor retail and services with offices and apartments above. Belfast is fortunate, as very few vacancies currently exist at the storefront level. We were less clear whether your upper floors are occupied, and how many people actually live right downtown. The retail/restaurant/office/arts/civic mix appears strong. Downtown Belfast has many destination businesses and restaurants. Think clustering: Keep your eyes open to complimentary businesses and their locations.



The downtown district extends to the harbor, which has great redevelopment potential. The planned trail, linking the bridge around to Harbor Park, will enhance Belfast's sense of place and historic character, rooting downtown to its working waterfront and maritime heritage.

Utilize your new connections to the Maine Downtown Center's resources (staff, Advisory Council, Senior Advisors, website, annual conference, Downtown Institute and the 21 other participating Main Street Maine and Maine Downtown Center communities.) Also, take advantage of your membership with the National Trust Main Street Center and tap into their vast online resources and listserve.

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**Other observations from MDC Start Up Visit team members:**

- There are a few vacancies here and there, but for the most part the first floor occupancy rate is very strong. There seem to be a couple of very strong clusters in Downtown, including restaurants and arts related businesses.
- Belfast has challenges with vacancies on their upper floors. Our Town Belfast should work with the MDC to develop case studies to illustrate the challenges and communicate them to the legislature/state agencies.
- Key Bank has opted not to develop their upper floors because they don't want to deal with being a landlord. Perhaps the Key Bank manager in Belfast should be in touch with the manager in Waterville, where they have a significant and beneficial upper floor tenant.

- Master Planning = Smart Future Development!
- There is no venue large enough to function as a performing arts venue where bigger live music acts, plays, etc. can be hosted. Work with the City to explore options for developing such a venue.
- The second floors appear full yet the third and fourth floors need help. The code requirements make upper floor development expensive. Getting good ground floor space in top physical and accessible shape takes solid funding, so much so that there tends to be a lack of funds to invest at the same level in the upper floors. When demand improves for upper floors rehabilitation should become more cost effective for the property owner.
- Belfast has removed restrictions requiring landlords to provide so many parking spaces for upper floor tenants.
- While your business mix appears strong, another signature/destination restaurant or two might help. The Coyote Moon dress shop with 14 customers at noontime was impressive as was the hotel in the middle of Main Street with \$400 per night rooms.
- Downtown residential appears is weak but coming. The back side of Main Street on the south side with stairs and balconies for upper floors is quite unique. There are very walkable neighborhoods although the steep hillside is a slight deterrent.



**We applaud Our Town Belfast and your downtown community for your leadership in becoming a Maine Downtown Network community.**

**We look forward to our continued relationship with you!**