

# Resurfacing Main Street

## Downtown Revival Under The Main Street Program

The Main Street Program was initiated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to assist small towns in revitalizing their downtowns. It began as a demonstration project in 1977 with three towns: Galesburg, Illinois; Madison, Indiana; and Hot Springs, South Dakota. The pilot project was supported mainly by corporation and foundation grants.

In 1980, the National Main Street Center was established with grants from six federal agencies: the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Economic Development Administration, the Department of Transportation, the Small Business Administration, the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

That same year the program was expanded to include five towns in each of six states. North Carolina was one of the six states selected. North Carolina towns chosen to be part of the national program were Tarboro, Washington, Salisbury, New Bern and Shelby.

The program in North Carolina is administered by the Division of Community Assistance in the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development. A staff of three professionals offers training and technical assistance to

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participating towns. The General Assembly passed a bill in 1980 appropriating \$50,000 to the Main Street Program which was equally divided among the five original communities, but this was the only direct financial assistance the state has provided.

In 1982, the program in North Carolina was expanded to include five additional towns: Rocky Mount, Wilson, Clinton, Morganton and Statesville. The state's commitment to the selected towns runs for three years; the towns are then expected to continue the program on their own. It is anticipated that five additional towns will be designated in late 1984.

The thrust of the program is economic revitalization through historic preservation. The method of the program is self-help. It

depends on local leadership for its success. The four components of the program are economic restructuring, administration, design and marketing. To qualify for Main Street designation a town must have a population of less than 50,000, a full-time downtown manager, an existing downtown organization with both public and private support, and an historically significant central business district.

### Tarboro

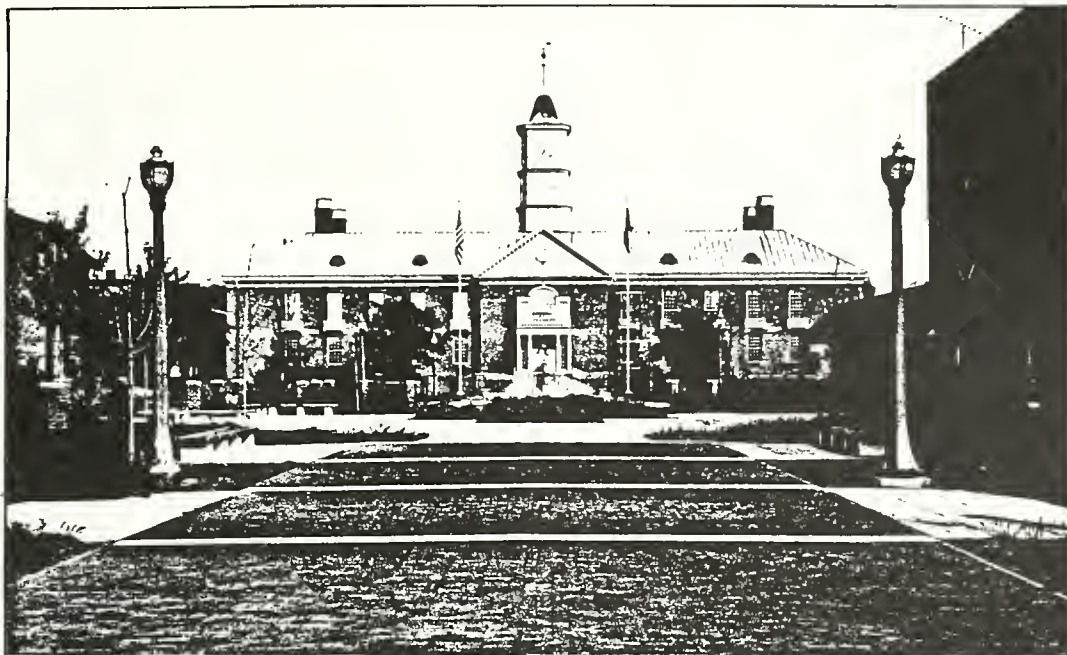
Tarboro is very proud of its 200 year history and well aware of its charm. The town developed in a grid form from a plan which included two public commons. Stately old homes line the Main Street leading to downtown where the center is marked by the Court House. Tarboro enjoys a progressive local government which has succeeded in preserving the historic character of the town, while moving it into the 21st century by attracting a wide range of state and federal grants.

In 1978, the town government initiated the downtown revitalization process by hiring the firm of Zuchelli, Hunter and Associates to prepare a market study. In May 1980, Tarboro received a \$2.7 million Urban Development Action Grant to buy property in the downtown for renovation and resale.

Tarboro was one of the first North Carolina towns selected for the Main Street Program. A strong commitment to historic preservation and a proven downtown revitalization program were instrumental to its success. The town planning department's adequate staffing and funding also contributed to the city's attractiveness for Main Street assistance. The planning department was able to assign Phil Guy to direct the Main Street Program.

A Downtown Revitalization Advisory Committee assists the Main Street efforts. It is a twelve-member board composed of council members and advisory board members. Requests for financial assistance from the Main Street Program must be approved by this committee.

*Beverly Kawalec has served on the Chapel Hill Town Council for seven years, and is a recent graduate of the Department of City and Regional Planning at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*



*Courthouse Square in Tarboro used Main Street Program funds for pedestrian development.*

Rocky Mount, Wilson and Greenville are within 30 miles of Tarboro. Because of the proximity of these larger towns, Tarboro has never maintained a strong commercial center. Instead, Tarboro residents tend to shop in one of the other towns.

The emphasis which Tarboro placed on economic revitalization allowed the staff to focus on the design and organizational aspects of the Main Street Program. Unfortunately, promotion has yet to receive much attention. A Downtown Action Association was formed only this year to organize citizens in the downtown decision-making process.

To date, Tarboro's design accomplishments have been impressive. Thirty-three facade renovations have been completed. The town employed an architect to provide design assistance to interested businesses. As one of the charter members of the Main Street Program, Tarboro received \$10,000 in state funds. With this money, an assistance program was established to provide grants of up to \$500 for facade renovations. UDAG money was also used to provide low interest loans for facade renovations. To date, storefront renovations have involved over \$235,000 in downtown improvements; property owners have contributed \$223,000 of this outlay.

The Main Street Program has played a significant role in Tarboro's downtown revitalization program. With the Main Street program's administrative support and financial assistance, the town completed Courthouse Square -- a large courtyard with a pool, benches and landscaping; streets, sidewalks and parking lots have been rebuilt; and a park is under development along

the Tar River. The most significant change in the downtown is the recent development of a 225 person retirement center. The facility filled a formerly blighted commercial block. Through the creative efforts of Tarboro's private and public sectors, the town has been able to consolidate local, state and federal revitalization monies with remarkable success.

#### Rocky Mount

Rocky Mount was designated a Main Street Town in 1982. Before that time, the Central City Revitalization Corporation served as the principal agency promoting downtown redevelopment. In its lifetime, the staff completed a historic building survey and designed preservation and economic development strategies to encourage the downtown's growth. Due to a lack of financial support, however, it dissolved in the late 1970s. With the loss of the Central City Revitalization Corporation, the Town Council approached the Redevelopment Commission to spearhead the new downtown effort. In an effort to insure its political acceptability, the Redevelopment Commission was restructured to include two new members who would represent downtown interests.

The Revitalization Commission held a series of public meetings to define the goals and objectives and set priorities for their efforts. From these meetings, the town chose to prepare a downtown comprehensive plan. Barton Ashman Associates were contracted to complete this project. Barton Ashman worked with Bob Leary, a planning consultant, and Gene Merrit, director of Wilmington's Downtown Area Revitalization Ef-



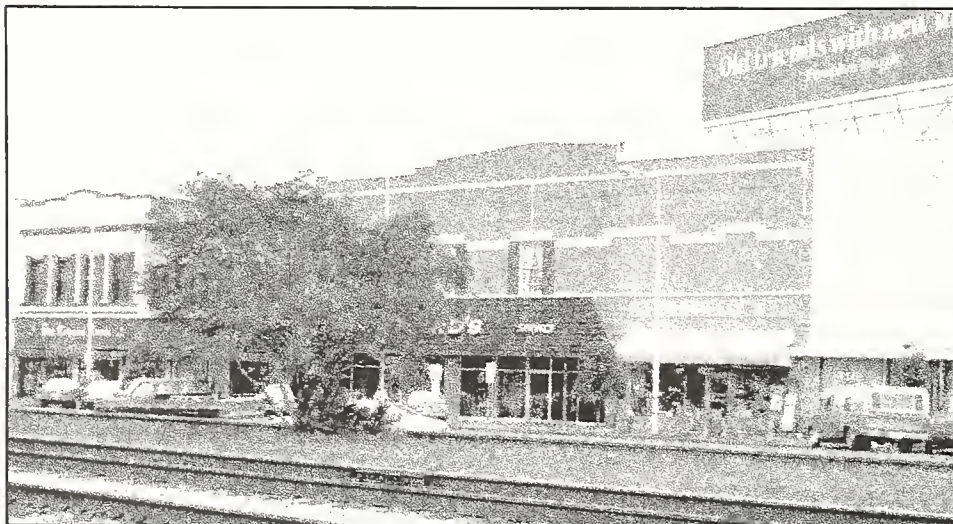
fort, to write the plan. The plan is currently under review by the Redevelopment Commission. After their approval, it will go to the council for adoption and inclusion in the town's comprehensive plan.

When the opportunity came in 1981 for Rocky Mount to apply for Main Street designation, the town was well prepared in terms of its administrative and financial capacity to fulfill the program objectives. Jack Steelman, a member of the town planning staff, was assigned to work with downtown redevelopment proponents.

The Main Street Program in Rocky Mount has received generous financial support from private interests. The Rocky Mount Junior Guild, a local women's club, contributed \$5000 for the Facade Restoration Grant and Loan Program. Under the provisions of this program, downtown businesses will receive \$500 or a twenty-five percent cost subsidy for facade renovations, whichever is less. Supplementing the Junior Guild's program, a local bank has established a \$50,000 loan pool to provide funds for downtown renovations at 3 percentage points below current interest rates.

Two redevelopment projects have attracted strong interest and pride among downtown development interests. A new municipal building has contributed to the architectural rejuvenation of the area. It also provided new open space and parking opportunities one block from Main Street. Station Square is a \$3.5 million office and retail complex which occupies a previously blighted block. The town assisted the development with a \$400,000 grant for construction of a parking lot adjacent to the project.

Rocky Mount continues to make progress in its revitalization efforts. The projects described above are only a small part of the town's anticipated growth program.



*Facade restoration in Rocky Mount*

# CATO



*Department store facade renovation in Wilson*

## Wilson

Wilson is the county seat of Wilson County. As one of the county's two cities, Wilson has long been the hub of commercial activity for the region. It is the site of the home office of Branch Banking and Trust Company.

In 1980, Wilson had a population of 34,424. During the 1970-1980 period, the town witnessed an influx of industrial development. In spite of this growth, the downtown faltered. The first floor vacancy rate reached unparalleled levels (18 percent). "Main Street", or in this case, Nash Street, was clearly in trouble.

The Heart of Wilson Association has functioned as the city's downtown development organization for many years. It is supported by member dues and employs a part-time consultant. In its first attempt to gain Main Street designation, Wilson failed. This failure spurred the City Council and the Heart of Wilson organization into action. Through their joint efforts, a municipal service tax district was proposed to fund a downtown development administrator. The Heart of Wilson Association contacted every

downtown property owner and found a majority in favor of its creation. A district was formed soon thereafter.

With this show of support from the businesses, the government prepared its agenda for downtown revitalization. On July 1, 1981, the Downtown Redevelopment Association was formed with an initial budget of \$60,000; \$20,000 raised from the municipal service tax district, \$20,000 from the county's general fund, and \$20,000 from the town's general fund.

The first action of the Downtown Redevelopment Association was to hire Greg Walker, a city planner, as director. When Wilson applied to the Main Street Program in the second round of the selection process, the town was easily accepted.

The Main Street Program in Wilson emphasizes economic restructuring. The program is seen as one part of a broad economic redevelopment program. In conjunction with the Main Street activities, the town established a \$1 million loan pool to assist businesses in the downtown redevelopment area.

The Downtown Redevelopment Association designated \$5,000 from its own \$60,000 budget for use as incentive grants in the Main Street Program. The Association will give a business \$500 or 20 percent of the cost of the renovation, whichever is less, for facade renovations.

The town's first Main Street grant assisted the construction of a new aluminum panel facade for an auto parts company. Another Main Street grant went to Cato's Clothing Store for a new stucco facade. A third grant allowed a hair dressing salon to purchase plants and furniture for its front office area. It was argued that the greenery would enhance the street-level image of the building and thereby improve the attractiveness of the downtown retail center.

Wilson does not have a strong architectural preservation commitment. It does have a Historic Properties Commission, however, and is in the process of conducting a study which will qualify the downtown to be designated a National Historic District. If successful, the designation will make downtown businesses eligible for a 25 percent federal tax credit on renovations.

In addition to financial assistance programs, downtown marketing efforts have also played an important role in the Main Street

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OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, THE  
FIRST FLOOR VACANCY RATE DECLINED 14  
PERCENT TO A RATE OF 4 PERCENT VACANCY

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Program. A street festival called "Saturday on the Town" was held last spring. The Heart of Wilson Association also sponsors a downtown Fourth of July parade each year to promote the visibility and vitality of the commercial core.

Wilson has begun to realize positive results from its redevelopment efforts. Over the past two years, the first floor vacancy rate declined 14 percent to a rate of 4 percent vacancy for all available first floor retail area. The county purchased a former bank building to renovate for offices. Branch Banking and



Trust is developing a major new addition to its downtown office building. A new furniture store has also recently located downtown. Clearly, as part of a larger economic development strategy, the Main Street Program has assisted the broad revitalization efforts of Wilson.

#### Conclusions

A primary objective of the Main Street Program is economic revitalization. The various strategies and policies associated with the program are means for achieving this objective. In addition to design, administration and marketing components of the Main Street Program, other means of achieving downtown revitalization include:





*A little greenery garnished this Wilson facade.*

- public/private cooperation
- knowledge of financial tools and marketing and recruiting techniques
- strong leadership
- public support

The Main Street Program recognizes and encourages pursuit of a wide range of revitalization strategies it acknowledges the importance of strong leadership and public support in its requirements for a full-time downtown manager and an existing downtown organization. The program demands public/private cooperation. Participation in the program, moreover, provides city agencies with an information network; it encourages sharing of financial and marketing strategies employed by towns of similar character and capacity.

Paradoxically, the Main Street Program can only be employed when a revitalization effort is well underway. If a town qualifies for Main Street designation, it has probably already succeeded in establishing a revitalization program. Clearly, if a town understands how to establish a revitalization program, it can get help from the state. But what of the towns that need help to establish a program? This is an elementary, but most important, issue confronting the Main Street policy-makers.

The fundamental measure of a useful revitalization program is its ability to create and retain jobs and housing. The means for achieving these goals include a knowledge of redevelopment finance options, marketing, and recruiting skills. The ability to achieve public/private cooperation is also essential. The state needs to provide assistance in these areas through its downtown program. The Main Street Program has shown that attention to design alone is not enough. Towns have a need for more basic and more extensive revitalization assistance. ⊕

## ECU Education, *Continued from page 33*

have earned graduate degrees in planning or a related field. These men and women are an increasingly valuable resource for job leads and suggestions for curriculum improvements.

Finally, the continued growth of the ECU planning program may ultimately lead to accreditation by the American Planning Association. This would fulfill the North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Planners 1973 Statement on Planning Education..... "NCAIP should provide strong support to develop at least one bachelor's program in planning at a university in the state that fully meets AIP accreditation standards." ⊕

A piece by Donald A. Krueckeberg in the Winter 1984 issue of Journal of Planning Education and Research is relevant to Hankins and Stephenson's discourse on undergraduate planning education.

Krueckeberg's paper, "Planning and the New Depression in the Social Sciences", examines the growth of planning education over the past 30 years in institutions of higher education in the United States that peaked in 1975. Current projections of the number of planning graduate students relative to the total pool of graduate students indicates a serious decline in the number of planning students.

In the face of this enrollment decline, Krueckeberg suggests that planning educators dig deeper: educate a more productive planner for the society and economy in which we now live; one who offers a higher quality of services at a lower cost.

One "sacred tenet" of planning education that may be an obstacle to this approach, according to Krueckeberg, is that "professional planning education, correctly done, belongs mainly at the graduate level." This position has long been justified either by argument that planning education represents advanced training in a field or by the argument that it requires a platform of liberal education on which to build. In fact, however, most graduate students in planning have little or no prior education in the field and we teach them accordingly. Furthermore, a liberal education is not the national baccalaureate norm, either for students entering graduate planning schools or most other fields. Krueckeberg concludes that "the assumptions are simply false.....I believe this all implies a shift from an educational system dominated by graduate studies to one which gives major importance to undergraduate professional training."