

# A Manual for Small Downtowns<sup>1</sup>

Martin Shields  
Tracey Farrigan  
The Pennsylvania State University

## Summary

Many small Pennsylvania downtowns are struggling. In many places, boarded buildings and empty storefronts now dominate once prosperous streets. Seeking to reverse years of decline, a number of communities are thinking about initiating a downtown revitalization programs.

Revitalizing downtown means strengthening the social, physical and economic value of a community's traditional central business district. The primary goal of revitalization efforts is to improve the livability and quality of life in a community by expanding and attracting employment, shopping and social activities.

This manual is designed to help small town revitalization efforts. Building on several basic principles, the manual provides small Pennsylvania communities with a menu of low-cost tools and strategies that they can adopt as they try to revitalize their central business districts. The manual is organized to address the fundamental aspects of a successful downtown program:

- Organization
- Planning
- Implementation and Mobilizing Resources
- Promotion
- Evaluation

The first chapters focus on organizing revitalization efforts. Because this manual is for small town with limited financial resources, we emphasize the importance of volunteerism and coalition building. In general, communities are encouraged to form a downtown organization and institute a board of directors.

The manual then addresses the revitalization planning process. Four basic components of the planning process are reviewed: assessing current conditions, developing a vision for downtown, identifying strategies and developing an action plan, mobilizing resources, and evaluating and updating the program.

Next, low-cost strategies that communities can tailor to their individual needs are identified. Focuses are 1) improving downtown's appearance, 2) strengthening

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local businesses, 3) identifying new opportunities, and 4) obtaining outside assistance. The manual develops a simple approach to each of these aspects.

Sometimes, examples can help as much as instructional materials. The manual provides three cases studies of small communities in Pennsylvania that have successfully revitalized their downtowns. Here, we offer a description of the program, talk about organizational structure, and look at some of the obstacles and strategies adopted to overcome impediments.

Next, we provide a list of resources that small communities can draw upon as they undertake the revitalization process. These include state, federal and non-profit organizations and agencies.

Finally, the manual contains an appendix of materials that communities can use to evaluate their current situation, identify new opportunities and promote their efforts.

In many ways, healthy downtowns represent healthy communities. With revitalization, downtowns can once again serve prominent and important roles within their communities.