





## INTRODUCTION

Sheri Stuart, State Coordinator, Oregon Main Street (OMS), conducted the Community Assessment Visit for the Saint Helens Economic Development Corporation during July to August, 2020. The purpose of this visit was to:

- Educate local leaders and stakeholders about the Main Street Approach™ and keys to success.
- Assess the community's capacity to continue at the Exploring Downtown level of Oregon Main Street and ability to implement the Main Street Approach™.
- Identify key issues and opportunities for achieving the goals and objectives.
- Provide recommendations for specific activities focused on priorities related to the Main Street Four-Point Approach™ that harnesses energy around key opportunities and immediate application/success.

## PROCESS

The community assessment process included:

- Broad based community engagement through an on-line survey – 126 responses were received.
- Board of directors' on-line survey – 7 responses were received.
- One-on-one phone conversations based on lists provided by SHEDCO and the City of St. Helens – 16 conversations were conducted ranging from 30 to 60 minutes and phone messages were left for an additional 11 contacts.
- Summary report for SHEDCO that includes observations and recommendations for moving forward with downtown revitalization efforts.

## HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

The observations and recommendations presented in this report are intended to serve as a guide for SHEDCO to continue participation in the Main Street Track of the Oregon Main Street Network and for shaping the group's annual scope of work for roughly the next 12 to 24 months. While not all of the recommendations may be appropriate at this time, they are intended to provide the community with a platform from which to discuss issues, future direction, and operational and project improvements identified during the assessment process.

For those recommendations which the community wants to undertake, consider:

- Who should take the lead?
- What partnerships can be developed to implement the recommendation(s)?
- What human and financial resources are needed to execute the recommendation(s)?
- What is the appropriate and realistic timeline for implementation?

Where needed, develop written implementation plans ("work plans") that spell out how each project or activity will be accomplished. Finally, continue to use the services of Oregon Main Street, particularly those recommended in the report. OMS staff is available on request to assist with the continued development of the organizational structure as well as identification of downtown activities.

Thank you to all who shared their thoughts and comments to assist in preparing this report. In particular, heartfelt appreciation is extended to all the board members for your service to SHEDCO and to the community of St. Helens.

## OVERVIEW

Oregon Main Street (OMS) works with communities to develop local comprehensive downtown revitalization strategies based on the methodology developed by Main Street America™. The Main Street Approach™ is a common-sense, strategy-driven framework that guides downtown revitalization efforts. Building off four decades of success, this model harnesses the social, economic, physical, and cultural assets that set a place apart. The ultimate goal is to realize tangible outcomes, such as job creation, small business development, private/ public investment, and building rehabilitations which benefit the entire community. The success of the Main Street Approach™ is based on its comprehensive nature. By fully integrating four points into a practical downtown management strategy, a local program will produce fundamental changes in a community's economic base:

**Organization** involves building a Main Street™ framework to support successful revitalization efforts by ensuring adequate people and financial resources are available to implement projects and activities.

**Promotion** creates excitement downtown. Street festivals, parades, retail events, and image development campaigns are some of the ways Main Street™ encourages customer traffic. Promotion involves marketing an enticing image to shoppers, investors, and visitors.

**Design** enhances the attractiveness of the business district. Historic building rehabilitation, street and alley clean-up, colorful banners, landscaping, and lighting all improve the physical image of the downtown as a quality place to shop, work, walk, invest in, and live.

**Economic Vitality** involves analyzing current market forces to develop long-term solutions. Recruiting new businesses, creatively converting unused space for new uses, and sharpening the competitiveness of Main Street's traditional merchants are examples of economic restructuring activities.

The beauty of the Main Street Approach™ is that it provides the structure for communities to develop your own strategies based on your own local assets and priorities. OMS helps communities implement this Approach based on a Tiered structure unique to our state. The Main Street Track, including the Exploring Downtown, Transforming Downtown, and Performing Main Street levels, is for communities who are actively implementing the Main Street Approach™. SHEDCO is currently at the Exploring Downtown level. As part of the community assessment process, OMS staff looked at how SHEDCO is doing in implementing the Main Street Approach™ and whether it continues to be the right structure for St. Helens.

Based on all the sources of information we reviewed, the Main Street structure is a good match for St. Helens. Fundamentally, community members want to see a beautiful, revitalized downtown and uptown (Houlton) that respects the town's history, heritage, and character while offering a mix of businesses that meet local needs but are also enticing to visitors. The Main Street structure can help the community achieve this vision, however, there are some fundamental challenges facing SHEDCO that are hampering the ability to make significant progress. The following report outlines some of the challenges and a pathway for moving forward.

## OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are key observations and recommendations gleaned from the surveys and interviews and presented through the Main Street Four Point Approach™.

### BOARD

The board is responsible for guiding the organization and its efforts to make a difference. The board is entrusted by the community and the government to ensure that the organization pursues its mission, is compliant with all federal, state, and local requirements, and implements activities with accountability and transparency. In an all-volunteer organization like SHECCO, the board has greater responsibility in overseeing day to day operations compared to an organization that has staff.

### BOARD OBSERVATIONS

- St. Helens has participated in the Oregon Main Street Network for ten years. During that time, SHEDCO has retained dedicated individuals who believe in strengthening and enhancing the historic commercial areas of St. Helens. However, this number has waxed and waned over the years. From the most recent SHEDCO annual reports available on the Oregon Department of Justice website, there were the following number of board members by year:
  - 2015 - 3 (Al Petersen, Chair; Amanda Normine, Vice Chair; and Gretchen Williams, Treasurer)
  - 2016 - 6 (Al, Chair; Amanda, Vice Chair; Gretchen, Treasurer; Edna Dunton; Judy Thompson)
  - 2017 - 5 (Al, Chair; Amanda, Vice Chair; Destinee Ryder, Secretary; Brenda Stoddard, Treasurer; Douglas Boyes)
  - 2018 – 5 (Al, Chair; Amanda, Vice Chair; Destinee, Secretary; Brenda, Treasurer; Douglas)
  - 2019 – 3 (Al, Chair; Amanda, Vice Chair; Brenda, Treasurer)
  - 2020 – 7 \* from the email distribution list it appears this is the current number
- Two board members have served continuously for at least six years with Al serving as chair since 2015 and Amanda serving as vice chair starting in 2014 according to the reports on the DOJ and the Oregon Secretary of State website. This is contrary to what we recommend as best practices for main street organizations. We typically recommend 2 years maximum in these capacities to ensure that people see opportunities for new leaders to join and a total of 6 years for board members.
- There are varying views about the effectiveness of SHEDCO. 56% of the survey respondents who are familiar with SHEDCO rated the organization as somewhat to not effective. Even board members only rated the organization on average a five (on a one to ten scale with scores from three to seven). And, board members were only able to list a very few things as accomplishments including the Oregon Main Street Revitalization Grant and the Business Plan Competition (although there apparently were issues with most recent round). And, as noted in some of the board and community surveys, respondents either:
  - Don't know about SHEDCO,
  - View SHEDCO as a small group of people trying to do good things but hampered by a lack of resources, or
  - View SHEDCO as an ineffective organization.
- Perceived lack of transparency is an issue leading people to assume the worst about how SHEDCO is operating. This includes lack of appropriate notice for meetings to accessibility of information. This

could be simply that there are not enough people to have an effective communication strategy in place.

- Relationships with other organizations and the City of St. Helens has weakened rather than getting stronger over the years. The state of the relationship with the City is particularly troubling. It is difficult enough to implement a main street process with a positive partnership between the public and private sector. It's near impossible without that partnership both financially and philosophically.
- There is continued frustration expressed by board members about the lack of direct stakeholder involvement. I tried to figure out why there is this lack of participation and heard varying things from:
  - Perception that it is part of the city,
  - Didn't know about the organization,
  - Lack of time,
  - Didn't know when meetings were, or
  - Being treated poorly when individuals did attend meetings.
- Lack of a cohesive vision and clear goals and objectives. As one person stated, "I've attended their meetings and, as a group, they lack forward momentum. Their goals and directives are not always clear and their focus is often inconsistent with their directives."
- With all that said, almost universally people said that there is a need for an organization like SHEDCO to address the needs, challenges, and opportunities impacting the historic commercial areas of St. Helens.

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## BOARD RECOMMENDATIONS

I sincerely appreciate all the time, energy, and creativity all the board members have given on behalf of SHEDCO. You are doing this out of your own sense of commitment to St. Helens on your own time. It is hard to give so much without the recognition that could and should come with this sustained effort. With that said, I believe the pathway forward for continued participation in the Main Street Track of the Oregon Main Street Network is as follows:

It is time to focus on the future not on past differences. There is a real need to bring groups together, especially for the City of St. Helens and SHEDCO to forge a working partnership. This is absolutely critical to realize the full potential of the main street methodology that served St. Helens well at the start of the effort ten years ago. This will best be accomplished through a written MOU and will include a reconstitution of SHEDCO. The MOU should include:

1. Re-structure the board. A nominating committee with representatives mutually agreed upon by SHEDCO and the City should be formed composed of city representatives, partner organizations, former SHEDCO board members, and SHEDCO members. Board members already serving continuously for six years or more should not be considered for new board positions. Other current board members are encouraged to apply for a position via an application process. The target should be for nine board members. Initial terms should be staggered to get in a three-year rotation. This may necessitate an update to the SHEDCO bylaws. In addition, the bylaws should have term limits added back in.
2. Forge an agreement for funding support by the City to help pay for at least a part-time executive director position. As part of quarterly request for funds, SHEDCO will provide current financial information, minutes of board meetings, and a current roster of board members.

3. Provision for city position on hiring committee for an executive director. OMS has a handbook on the hiring process and is available to serve on the hiring committee.
4. Community-based development of goals and objectives led by the SHEDCO board. Assistance is available from OMS.

The timeline to accomplish the above to remain at the Exploring Downtown level:

Within three months:	MOU
Within six months:	Restructure the board Funding support from city
Within nine months:	Hire an executive director
Within one year:	New goals and action items identified

The following breakdown by the Main Street Four-Points™ is pertinent both for a re-constituted organization or if SHEDCO decides to forge forward either as an Associate level community or independent of the OMS Network.

## ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE

The organization component of the Main Street Approach™ lays the foundation to support a successful revitalization effort by ensuring adequate people and financial resources are available to implement approved projects and activities. In the event there isn't a separate Organization Committee, these tasks fall on the board so it is incumbent on the board to invest the energy in developing this committee. Specifically, the Organization Committee is responsible for:

- Communication strategies to create awareness of the overall revitalization effort and promote the purpose and activities of the program.
- Volunteer and leadership development, including recruitment, training and recognition.
- Developing an overall fundraising plan.
- Fiscal oversights to ensure appropriate policies are in place and required reporting is completed.

## ORGANIZATION OBSERVATIONS

- Previously, SHEDCO had access to staff support through a RARE or VISTA participant funded and managed by the City. This provided a level of continuity in communication efforts and volunteer support. Without that support, SHEDCO hasn't been able to maintain a consistent communication strategy. This is creating an issue for SHEDCO because there isn't anyone who is responsible for ensuring there is adequate notice of meetings, event engagement, resources available, or accomplishments. So, things like keeping your website up to date or your Facebook page active are following to the wayside.
- Volunteer and leadership development are a significant challenge for SHEDCO. At one time, SHEDCO was at the forefront of developing a quality volunteer training program with great examples of committee development material. Now, there are simply too few people trying to do the work the board would like to accomplish. Periodically task forces or subgroups have formed to tackle a specific project, but this isn't a cohesive effort. Rather than growing over the years, volunteers have dwindled and are just now being rekindled. With that said, with the right messaging, there are a variety of volunteer opportunities people are willing to help with including beautification and clean-up (top response in the community survey by far), painting, historic preservation, collaboration/organization, pop-up venue for local artists and craftspeople, or events.

- Funding continues to be an issue for the organization. According to the annual reports filed with the Department of Justice, revenue and fund balances for the most recent years on record are:

	Revenue	Fund Balances
2015	\$26,659	\$36,756
2016	\$12,720	\$22,787
2017	\$14,310	\$10,317
2018	\$12,516	\$16,185
2019	\$ 2,854	\$30,285

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## ORGANIZATION RECOMMENDATIONS

### DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

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This can be as simple as picking three to four tools that you will use consistently to invite people to be involved both with time and money, keep people updated on what you are working on, who is on the board and committees, meeting times, and documents that should be shared for transparency. As an all-volunteer organization this should be at a minimum:

- Up to date Website with board listing, committee and board meeting times, volunteer and donation opportunities, and organizational documents for transparency. Here's a good example of board listing from the Downtown Roseburg Association - <https://www.downtownroseburgassociation.org/who-we-are/>
- Active Facebook page with postings scheduled for two to three times per week
- Face time with business and property owners
- Up to date email list of all the business and building owners, supporters, and other key organizations

### DEVELOP YOUR VOLUNTEER STRATEGY

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Volunteer development involves a strategy for recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers. There were a number of people on the survey who indicated an interest in learning more about the Main Street Approach™. There were additional folks that indicated they were interested in volunteering for specific types of projects and activities if given the opportunity. There might be a variety of reasons SHEDCO is engaging with people but fundamentally people need to feel that they are contributing to a cause they believe in and that they are valued. Feeling valued includes timely communication, being treated with respect, and given the resources needed to succeed. SHEDCO has the materials developed by your first VISTA volunteer to train and engage with volunteers. The re-organization can be the catalyst to energize a whole new volunteer base.

### DIVERSIFY YOUR FUNDING STREAMS

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The board also needs to work on diversifying the funding sources. Main Street organizations are funded through business and property owner contributions, local government support, fundraising events, major donor contributions, project specific fundraising, and, to a lesser extent, grants. What this could look like for general (non-project specific):

- Local Government Match @ \$25,000 = \$25,000
- 1 major donor @ \$5,000 = \$ 5,000
- 5 major donors @ \$2,500 = \$12,500
- 5 major donors @ \$1,000 = \$ 5,000
- 5 property owners @ \$500 = \$ 2,500
- 10 property owners @ \$250 = \$ 2,500
- 20 business owners @ \$100 = \$ 2,000

- 25 business owners @ \$50 = \$ 1,250
- 25 community members @\$20 = \$ 500
- Fundraiser = \$ 2,500
- = \$58,750

## PROMOTION COMMITTEE

Promotion helps generate interest, excitement, and investment in downtown. Fundamentally, promotional efforts are economic development in the sense of creating an environment conducive to generating business within the district, but they also fulfill an important function in building a sense of community. Typically, downtown revitalization programs using the Main Street Approach™ work in three broad areas of promotional activity, each with a specific purpose to promote the downtown business district as a center of neighborhood activity – a great place to live, work, shop, eat, invest, and recreate:

- **Special events** give people a reason to come to the business district and create a sense of liveliness activity.
- **Image building** activities enhance the positive aspects of the district and minimize the negatives.
- **Retail or business-generating** activities should generate business as a direct result of activities.

## PROMOTION OBSERVATIONS

- SHEDCO has periodically been active with events and activities from things like Elf on the Shelf to helping with 4<sup>th</sup> of July fundraising. Some of these activities have been well received. Others, like efforts to participate in Halloweentown had issues in terms of implementation.
- Marketing activities again have both folks that think they are nice and others that don't feel like they highlight the intended business as much as they should. Overall, many interviewees stated the need for better marketing of the districts including signage from the highway.
- One of the things mentioned in the community survey was to see more on-going events throughout the year rather than concentrated during Halloweentown (and many survey respondents and phone interviewees had strong opinions about Halloweentown including the suggestion to reduce to a much shorter timespan but that is outside SHEDCO's role). Some of the suggestions include walking tours, amateur entertainers, maritime events, Lewis & Clark history, and a farmers' market.
- There were suggestions on the need to help businesses to recover from the impacts of closures related to Covid-19 like closing streets to allow restaurant use. At the same time, there were suggestions about the need for better marketing of safety measures.

## PROMOTION RECOMMENDATIONS

### CAPITALIZE ON SMALL TOWN CHARM THROUGH MARKETING AND STORYTELLING

- Interview business owners and community members and post their stories on-line and use in other marketing efforts.
- Share info at the plaza and area parks on the businesses in the area if permissible – tell their story. Maybe have a rotating display talking about the business owners.

### CREATE A SERIES OF EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES AT THE PLAZA

- When it is safe to do so again, the plaza is a perfect venue to stage small-scale, family oriented activities that survey respondents would like to see. SHEDCO's role would be to schedule other community groups to take a week to host an activity. It could be as simple as family game night where people bring their favorite board game to share to more music, art, or food activities.

## OTHER PROMOTION IDEAS

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- The 2015 program evaluation report for SHEDCO contains other ideas such as a Bike Friendly program and marketing business clusters.

## DESIGN

This component of the Main Street Four-Point Approach™ helps improve the physical environment of the district by renovating buildings, constructing compatible new ones, improving signage and merchandise displays, creating attractive and usable public spaces, and ensuring that planning and zoning regulations support Main Street® revitalization. The Design Committee plays a key role in shaping the physical image of downtown as a place attractive to shoppers, investors, business owners, and visitors. To succeed, this committee must:

- Educate others about good design.
- Provide good design advice.
- Plan Main Street's development.
- Enhance public spaces.
- Motivate others to make changes through incentives and targeting key projects.

## DESIGN OBSERVATIONS

- The history, heritage, and historic character of St. Helens downtown and Houlton district is highly valued by community members. Many in the on-line survey mentioned this is an important asset that could and should be leveraged to build community pride and also attract visitors. And, folks have appreciated the recent improvements in the district.
- People like to see some of the recent investment in properties like Jane Williams Keller Williams Realty building, Molly's Market, and The Pub. With that said, one of the top issues impacting downtown are what the community perceives as dilapidated buildings and deferred maintenance, especially the number of building vacancies. Building vacancies was the number one issue by far (59.52%) identified by survey respondents.
- People also wanted to see improved beautification, streetscape amenities, and general clean-up. These types of activities are some of the ways people are willing to volunteer their time and energy.
- Many mentioned the need to move forward with plans for the Riverwalk while retaining public access. This is out of SHEDCO's direct responsibility but there is a support role that could be played if there were a working relationship with the City.

## DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

### IMPROVING VISUAL LOOK OF VACANT SPACES

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- There are a few visible locations that are vacant or underutilized in the districts. One way to minimize the impression of vacant spaces is to have art and history in the windows. I think this was tried in the past but is worth pursuing again. This is a great activity to pursue with other partners.
- The other opportunity is to clean-up the vacant spaces and allow displays that promote area businesses. At a minimum, signage should be in vacant spaces that say, “this space isn’t empty, it is full of opportunity” and then list the types of businesses you feel would be a good fit for St. Helens working in cooperation with the Economic Vitality Committee.

## CLEAN-UP AND MAINTENANCE

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- Identify projects for community clean-up days. This can be paint days, cleaning up litter, washing dirty windows on vacant buildings, etc.
- Share information on how to maintain historic buildings – what to look for and appropriate techniques. La Grande hosted a workshop on this topic with great success attracting building owners, contractors, realtors, and potential investors – you could contact them for an agenda or work with the Preservation program at Clatsop Community College in Astoria. This type of project is a good fit for National Trust Preservation Grants which are open three times per year.

## PLACEMAKING

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- Placemaking type projects are an opportunity to expand the perception of main street beyond a couple blocks to side streets. Undertake some “lighter, quicker, cheaper” placemaking activities to help downtown and the Houlton districts feel more vibrant. Some examples are pop-up art projects that engage children and local artists.
- Other things can be longer term like art banner projects or temporary art displays like Klamath Falls Piano Project. Community members donated old but functional pianos and artists painted them. These types of projects might be a good candidate for the Oregon Arts Commission “Arts Build Communities” grant program.
- One idea from the surveys is to do a walking tour with historic markers. People mentioned a lot of interesting area history that can be interpreted and there might be grant opportunities to support this effort through the Oregon Heritage Grant, through Oregon Cultural Trust grant, or through AARP’s Placemaking grants.



## ECONOMIC VITALITY

This component of the Main Street Four-Point Approach™ concentrates on strengthening the district’s existing economic base while finding ways to expand its economy and introduce compatible new uses. The Economic Restructuring Committee has the job of:

- Identifying new market opportunities.
- Strengthening existing businesses and recruiting new ones.
- Finding new uses for historic commercial buildings.
- Stimulating investment in property.

## ECONOMIC VITALITY OBSERVATIONS

- Building vacancies was the number one issue by far (59.52%) identified by survey respondents. Many identified rental rates as one of the barriers for new businesses to open. And, some believe that some ground floor commercial space is being used for unpermitted residential use.
- There is concern regarding the overall business mix. In the survey store variety (46.83%) and selection of quality goods/services (42.86%) were other top issues – many would like to see a variety of new businesses, but also helping existing businesses succeed. In addition, store hours (30.19%), and potential business closure related to Covid-19 (27.78%) rounded out the top issues.
- The most recent Business Plan Competition should have been a huge win for SHEDCO. Instead, it is a negative because people don't know why the food cart was selected (and some aren't even sure who won), why the business hasn't opened, who was involved in the process, etc.
- Some upper floor housing is being developed or improved but some survey respondents felt there are opportunities for more.
- There is a need to identify incentives and other assistance to help new businesses open and to encourage and support building improvements.

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## ECONOMIC VITALITY RECOMMENDATIONS

### BUSINESS ASSISTANCE

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- SHEDCO needs to provide current and accurate information to help businesses be responsive during COVID pandemic, including access to available financial incentives and information on safety measures.
- Research more the issue surrounding store hours – some of the things in the survey were inconsistent and inconvenient hours. Before making any recommendations on how to improve, this needs to be studied a little more to understand why the hours are what they are, when it would be better for consumers, and how hours might be adjusted based on that data.
- Connect businesses with learning opportunities through area partners or provide training through webinars. A series of free webinars is available from Roger Brooks, Destination Development Association which some communities like Milton-Freewater have taken advantage of. Here's a link to their webinar list: <https://www.destinationdevelopment.org/cpages/webinars>

### FILLING VACANT SPACES

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- Conduct a business cluster analysis to identify business mix strengths and opportunities. OMS has information on this type of process – it is a fun and engaging activity for the Economic Vitality Committee.
- Many noted there are more vacancies than folks would like to see in the downtown. There are a variety of short-term strategies that can activate these spaces such as encouraging or coordinating pop-up businesses. This serves a couple purposes. Home-based or new businesses can test out the market before making a heavy investment or commitment. And, it brings more activity to the street which helps existing businesses. Hillsboro tried out this concept over the holiday season with a space they called "Temporarium." It was very popular with the both the businesses and residents. Some of the top types of businesses survey respondents said they would like to see include:



