

# Missouri Main Street Connection

## Community Empowerment Grant Program

*An Overview for the Willard, Missouri Board of Aldermen*

May 2026

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### What Is Missouri Main Street Connection?

Missouri Main Street Connection (MMSC) is a statewide nonprofit organization that helps Missouri communities revitalize their historic downtown commercial districts. It operates under the nationally recognized Main Street Approach™, a framework developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation that has been employed across the United States since 1980.

MMSC is partially funded by the Missouri Department of Economic Development, and its programs are available to any Missouri community with a traditional downtown district — regardless of size or whether the street is actually called “Main Street.”

### The Community Empowerment Grant (CEG): How It Works

The Community Empowerment Grant is MMSC’s signature program for communities ready to begin the revitalization journey. Here is what the Board should understand at a glance:

<b>Structure</b>	A two-year service grant — not a cash award. MMSC provides hands-on expert services, training, and “over-the-shoulder” guidance directly to the community.
<b>Match</b>	A 70/30 matching service grant. MMSC contributes 70% of the service value; the local community is responsible for 30%.
<b>Availability</b>	Only 10 grant awards are offered per year in 2026, across four application rounds. Slots are competitive.
<b>Who Must Attend</b>	All applicants must have a city representative AND a community member or nonprofit sector representative attend one of the free CEG Workshops in Jefferson City before applying. No commitment is required to attend.

### What the Two Years of Services Include:

- Formation of a locally-led 501(c)(3) nonprofit Main Street organization
- Town Hall facilitation and community input sessions

- Training in the four-point Main Street Approach™ (Organization, Promotion, Design, Economic Vitality)
- Demographic and market analysis using ESRI data
- Custom Transformation Strategy based on the community’s unique assets and goals
- Branding, façade renderings, and design guidance
- Fundraising and action planning education
- Ongoing consultation with MMSC staff throughout the grant period

## Is Willard a Candidate?

Willard has several characteristics that align well with the CEG program’s intent and eligibility:

Factor	Willard’s Profile	CEG Alignment
Population	Approx. 6,500 (2024 Census estimate)	Small cities are common grantees
Growth Trend	Population has grown over 6% since the 2020 Census	Signals demand for downtown investment
Downtown	Historic commercial core along Jackson St. / Frisco rail corridor	Requires a traditional downtown district
City Plan	2019 Comprehensive Plan created a mixed-use downtown zoning district	Demonstrates planning readiness
Government	Board of Aldermen — city can support, while a nonprofit leads the program	MMSC recommends nonprofit-led model

*MMSC has stated directly that it is not the size of the community that matters — real change is possible when energized leaders involve the community in the planning and implementation process.*

## Missouri Communities Like Willard: What the CEG Has Done

The following are Missouri communities that have participated in the CEG program. All details below are drawn from MMSC’s own published reports and press releases.

### Auxvasse, MO — Reversing Decline After a Highway Bypass

Auxvasse is a small central Missouri community that received the CEG in May 2024. After a highway bypass in the 1990s redirected through traffic and triggered disinvestment, community stakeholders formed a new Main Street organization called One Auxvasse. MMSC’s team worked with community members and used ESRI demographic data to develop an economic strategy focused on attracting customers during evenings and weekends — the times data showed residents were home and looking for open businesses and activities. This specific, data-driven focus gave the organization clear direction on when to plan events and what kinds of businesses to recruit.

## **Mound City, MO — From CEG to Affiliate Tier**

Mound City used the CEG to launch Main Street Mound City, a volunteer-based economic development organization. Working from their CEG Transformation Strategy, the community pursued two concrete projects: revitalizing a historic downtown bank building and creating a scenic byway to attract regional visitors and bring cohesion to the area's assets. Mound City has since completed the full CEG program and graduated to Affiliate Tier status in the Missouri Main Street tier structure — a meaningful milestone representing a sustainable, functioning Main Street organization.

## **Stanberry, MO — Fundraising That Exceeded Its Goal**

Stanberry Main Street received a “Multi-Generational” Transformation Strategy from MMSC, reflecting the community's diverse age mix and a goal to create programming and amenities that engage residents across all age groups. Their Annual Giving Campaign, launched on July 4, 2024, exceeded its \$25,000 fundraising goal — raising \$27,000 in three months. The money will fund Facade Improvement Grants for local downtown businesses. A signature element of the campaign was the option to donate \$18.79, a tribute to the year Stanberry was founded. Stanberry Main Street received MMSC's Best New Awareness Campaign, Affiliate Tier Award for this effort.

## **Aurora, MO — Southwest Missouri School Partnership**

Aurora Downtown Project received the CEG in late 2023 and was awarded a “Multi-Generational” Transformation Strategy. During their Town Hall, community members established a goal to involve the local school district in downtown development, and the organization began working toward that partnership through efforts such as Downtown Clean-up Days. MMSC also provided Aurora with branding, renderings, and targeted beautification recommendations to create a welcoming environment for its diverse community — including specific guidance on pigeon management in historic downtown buildings. This is the kind of community-driven specificity the CEG process produces.

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## **The City's Role: Support Without Leading**

MMSC does not recommend that a city government run a Main Street program directly. The model works best as a locally-led nonprofit, which provides:

- Greater community buy-in and grassroots energy
- Ability to apply for additional grants (many require nonprofit status)
- Clear separation between economic development advocacy and municipal government

The city's most effective role is one of partner and supporter — providing encouragement, possibly contributing toward the local 30% match, and helping identify civic leaders to form a founding board.

## **Suggested Next Steps for the City of Willard**

- Express interest publicly. A resolution of support from the Board of Aldermen sends a strong signal to the community and to MMSC.

- Attend a free CEG Workshop. Upcoming 2026 dates are June 10 and October 7, 10am–12pm, Governor Office Building, Jefferson City. Free to attend; no commitment required. Note: both a city representative and a community or nonprofit representative must attend.
- Contact MMSC directly. Ben White is MMSC’s Senior Program Specialist for the CEG program and can speak to Willard’s specific eligibility.
- Identify community champions. The program’s success depends on passionate local volunteers willing to serve on a founding board — not on city staff doing the work.

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**Missouri Main Street Connection**

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