



Main Street RI

A Proposed Grow Smart Rhode Island Initiative

Rhode Island is full of beloved places that serve as the hearts of our communities – main streets, downtowns, and village squares where we run into friends and neighbors, support our local shops and restaurants, and gather to celebrate our many cultural traditions. These historic commercial districts are incubators of opportunity for creative and diverse entrepreneurs, connecting residents and visitors with the unique, interesting identities of our neighborhoods and fueling Rhode Island’s economy.



But these great places don’t happen by accident.

Grow Smart Rhode Island seeks to implement a statewide coordinating Main Street program that will provide centralized organization and support for people around the state who are working to cultivate, enliven, and promote traditional commercial districts. Throughout Rhode Island, many business leaders, government staff and officials, and community groups are already engaged and interested in advancing main street revitalization. However, the current lack of coordination among these stakeholders dilutes the effectiveness and impact of their efforts and investments, and the lack of existing structure means that work is not always occurring where it is needed most. Using the framework long-established by the National Main Street Center, Main Street Rhode Island will draw upon best practices from around the country to help maintain and grow these vibrant and vital community anchors to ensure that all of our businesses are operating in supportive, thriving places.

The time is now to establish a network supporting our main street communities in Rhode Island.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating and disproportionate effects on our main street businesses, and those owned by people of color have suffered the greatest losses. Many of the hardest-hit businesses include those in retail and hospitality, which were directly affected by shutdowns and changes in consumer behavior. However, these are the very businesses that provide Rhode Island’s neighborhoods with the unique sense of place that residents and visitors crave, that make a trip to main street a special community-based experience. Investments in the *places* that support these businesses, and the *people* that support these places, are needed immediately in order to prevent further closures, and federal recovery funds provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build structural social supports that will endure long term.

A relatively small investment in a main street program could have a large impact on Rhode Island’s economy. Main Street programs have been proven to increase business, create jobs, and attract private investment. The National Main Street Center estimates that through their programs, over \$85 billion in private and public reinvestment has been generated, over 150,079 new businesses have opened, 672,333 jobs were created, and 295,348 buildings have been rehabilitated (2019). States with coordinating main street programs average over \$30 of return for every \$1.00 of investment in main street programs, with some, such as Iowa, estimating as much as \$72 in private investment for every \$1.00 in public main street funding. In Rhode Island, a relatively small sum is needed to create the systems that over time will realize these types of gains in our cities and towns.

Grow Smart RI has a 23-year history of convening a wide variety of partners and stakeholders to catalyze action. Building on these existing practices and relationships, Grow Smart RI's Main Street RI program will serve as a hub for communication, collaboration, training, and networking related to main street revitalization. A focused program will harness the power of Rhode Islanders' love of place, directing more efficient progress and taking better advantage of opportunities for funding and recognition. Grow Smart RI is well known as a statewide policy leader and effective advocate for sustainable and equitable economic development and the physical environment that make places great, including connected transit, affordable housing, and complete streets, among others. With our experience and the clear present need, it only makes sense for us to reinvigorate and expand our work through an officially designated Main Street program.

A full list of activities is attached, but the program's primary goals include:

- Streamline statewide communication about main street issues and among stakeholders
- Work with partners to provide opportunities for sharing and learning
- Develop sustainable funding for Main Street RI and local main street groups and projects
- Provide direct technical assistance to interested and under-resourced communities
- Create efficiencies and nurture collaboration in RI's main street & downtown ecosystem
- Advocate for policies, programs and standards that benefit and support healthy main streets

Modeled after the [Connecticut Main Street Center](#), Main Street RI would organize as a statewide coordinating program through the [National Main Street Center](#)'s Main Street America program. Since 1980, the National Main Street Center has been serving as the national association supporting state and local main street programs around the country. Currently there are 43 other state/regional coordinating programs in 40 states and Washington, DC and over 1600 local Main Street organizations. The group's proven and trademarked preservation-based approach to revitalization focuses on four points: organization, economic vitality, design, and promotion. Grow Smart RI staff have been regularly meeting with key staff at the National Main Street Center, who will not only support us in the establishment of the Main Street RI program, but will serve as consultants through the entire first three years of our program. Their expertise will help us set up the program for long term success and sustainability.

The National Main Street Center requires start up coordinating programs to demonstrate three years of funding in order to enter into an agreement for designation and consulting services. Operating as a 3-year pilot, Main Street RI will be led by a full-time program director with part time support from staff at Grow Smart RI along with other professional services provided by consultants. Funds to sub-grant to local programs are included in the budget, which was developed through research into the operations of existing statewide main street programs and the stated needs of the expected participants in Rhode Island. As with other state programs, long-term sustainability of the program is expected to require some ongoing public support along with the development of private supporters; advocacy and fundraising is built into the workplan as the program actively demonstrates its value.

The federal recovery stimulus funds represent an unparalleled opportunity to chart the course of Rhode Island's future. Acknowledging the concern about using one-time funds for bricks and mortar improvements over programs, we argue that over time, establishing a Main Street network will allow more to be accomplished in a more efficient way. By supporting the Rhode Islanders dedicated to making this state the great place that it is, this relatively small investment will have an outsized impact on the state's long-term prosperity. As in business, the seed funding lays the foundation and puts the systems in place to have the long-term effects we all desire: prosperous main streets across Rhode Island.

Main Street RI Goals and Activities

Streamline statewide communication about main street issues and among stakeholders

- Create and maintain a database of interested individuals and organizations, including contact information
- Create and maintain a Main Street RI website; share relevant news and information with a regular E-Newsletter and active presence on social media
- Compile and share local and national case studies as examples of best practices and to cultivate new ideas
- Document and share local success stories, including dissemination of press announcements and preparation of applications for awards when warranted

Work with partners to execute events for stakeholder sharing and learning

- Present a main street symposium and establish a Main Street track at the biennial Grow Smart RI Power of Place Summit, with topics such as development, planning, historic preservation, placemaking, etc.
- Integrate main street topics into Grow Smart RI's training program and expand workshop offerings to include on-site visits and tours and guest speakers from outside the region
- Promote related learning opportunities offered by partners (such as small business development)
- Represent and promote Main Street RI at related local, regional and national professional conferences

Develop sustainable funding for local main street groups and projects

- Distribute funding opportunity announcements and work with communities to suggest possible projects
- Coordinate funding applications for joint projects when it makes sense to do so
- Seek funds to sub-grant to local communities whenever possible
- Work with interested communities in the pursuit of BIDs and to identify other sources of long-term funding

Provide direct technical assistance to interested communities

- Direct and channel efforts to historically under resourced communities, identifying their specific needs, barriers, and possible solutions
- Develop and compile templates, checklists, guides, and other tools and resources
- Start-up administrative support may be offered, including website hosting, grantwriting assistance, etc.
- Work with state agencies to develop and offer main street planning assistance program

Create efficiencies and nurture collaboration in the statewide main street & downtown ecosystem

- Actively facilitate conversations and forge connections between stakeholders; coordinate joint promotions (with Commerce RI and Tourism Councils) and if desired, assist in the procurement of shared services
- Establish statewide calendar for planning purposes
- Pursue statewide main street festival (with Doors Open RI)

Advocate for policies, programs and standards that benefit and support healthy main streets

- Participate in Grow Smart RI advocacy for state and local initiatives that encourage main street and downtown revitalization, such as grants for street trees, tax credits for the redevelopment of historic buildings, and compact development coordinated with transit in densely populated areas
- Cultivate broad understanding of the value of main streets and the roles and potential impacts of main street organizations
- Champion best practices as defined by the National Main Street Center and serve as a designated evaluator for main street organizations seeking national accreditation

Grow capacity of statewide main street program and adapt to address specific local needs

- Establish a Main Street RI steering committee with a regular meeting schedule to set specific goals and track progress
- Conduct topic-specific constituent strategy sessions and a survey to assess needs of wide variety of stakeholders; modify workplan yearly based on feedback and results
- Hold individual meetings with government and community leaders and attend local and regional meetings, both public and professional
- Seek permanent funding from the State of Rhode Island and other sources

Main Street RI - Program Budget (proposed)

Expense	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
Director and other staff	100000	125000	145000	370000
Consultants (NMSC)	50000	50000	50000	150000
Design, translation, other services	10000	6000	5000	21000
Hosting, subscriptions, memberships	1500	2000	2000	5500
Travel (including 2 staff to Nat'l conference)	5000	5000	5000	15000
Supplies/equipment	4500	3000	1500	9000
Advertising/printing/mail	4000	4000	4000	12000
Events - space rental, food/beverage	5000	5000	7500	17500
Grants to local projects	75000	100000	150000	325000
Fiscal agent/admin/overhead	25000	25000	25000	75000
	\$280000	\$325000	\$395000	\$1000000

Key Metrics – 3-Year Pilot

Goal	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Steering Committee	6 meetings	12 meetings	12 meetings
Website	Basic structure within 3 months	Add resource pages and planning calendar	Add blog posts feature
Newsletter	Monthly (150)	Monthly (350)	Monthly (425)
Social Media	1-2 posts/week	2-3 posts/week	3-5 posts/week
Webinars/Workshops	3	6	12
Conferences	Integrated with GSRI Summit and 2 sessions at other conferences	Stand-alone 1-day event and 2 sessions at other conferences	Integrated with GSRI Summit, new awards category added
Events	3 tour(s) geared to municipal staff; support local events	4 tour(s) aligned with conference; support local events	Statewide Main Street festival; support local events
Subgrants	\$75,000	\$100,000	\$150,000
Applications for local projects	2	3	5
Additional fundraising	\$5,000	\$25,000	\$70,000
Municipalities engaged	10	15	20
Organizations/agencies engaged	25	40	60
Individuals engaged (total)	200+	400+	500+
Accredited programs	NA	1	3