



Main Street RI

A 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 centers 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.

In 2024, Grow Smart Rhode Island introduced a statewide coordinating Main Street program, a hub and managed network 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 lack of coordination among these stakeholders has diluted the effectiveness and impact of their efforts and investments, and the lack of existing structure has meant that work is not always occurring where it is needed most. Aligning with the framework long-established by Main Street America, the organization leading this national movement since 1980, Main Street RI draws upon best practices from around the country to build capacity at the local level to maintain and grow these vibrant and vital community anchors, ensuring 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.

Rhode Island’s traditional commercial districts face many challenges: a rise in online shopping, remote work, car-centric sprawl, the COVID-19 shutdowns, effects of climate change, and now disruption from the Washington Bridge closure. However, our Main Street areas represent some of Rhode Island’s greatest assets, and the businesses located in these neighborhoods help create the unique sense of place that residents and visitors crave – where “talent” wants to live and thus companies want to locate. Meanwhile, Americans are more isolated, lonely and politically polarized than ever before. A state Main Street program supports the local efforts so they can more effectively and consistently improve their districts as high-functioning places that support their small businesses and bring their communities together.

A relatively small investment in a statewide coordinating Main Street program could have a large impact on Rhode Island’s economy. Main Street programs have been proven to increase business activity, create jobs, and attract private investment. Main Street America has calculated that since its founding, over \$101 billion in private and public reinvestment has been generated, over 168,693 new businesses have opened, 746,897 jobs were created, and 325,119 buildings have been rehabilitated (2023). States with coordinating Main Street programs average approximately \$30 of return for every \$1.00 of investment, 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 revenue gains for our state and our cities and towns.

Grow Smart RI has a 26-year history of convening diverse partners and stakeholders to catalyze a more vibrant, healthy and vibrant communities for all. 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 other vital placemaking components. With our experience and the clear present need, it only makes sense for us to reinvigorate and expand our work through an official Main Street program designated by and aligned with the nationwide expertise of Main Street America.

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

- Streamline and enhance statewide communication about Main Street issues and practices
- Work with partners to provide opportunities for sharing and learning
- Develop sustainable funding for Main Street groups and projects at the state and local levels
- 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 healthy Main Streets

Modeled after the [Connecticut Main Street Center](#), Main Street RI will organize as a statewide coordinating program through [Main Street America](#). Since 1980, the Main Street America has been serving as the national association supporting state and local Main Street programs around the country. Currently there are 46 other state/regional coordinating programs in 41 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 Main Street America staff, who will not only support us in the establishment of the Main Street RI program, but will serve as consultants through the first three years of our program. Their expertise will help us set up the program for long term success and sustainability.

Main Street America requires start-up coordinating programs to demonstrate three years of funding in order to enter into an agreement for formal 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 proposed 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.

A coordinating Main Street program represents an unparalleled opportunity to chart the course of Rhode Island's future. Acknowledging the concern about new programs in a time of budgetary constraints, we argue that over time, establishing a Main Street network will allow more revitalization to be accomplished in a more efficient way. By supporting a large network of 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: opportunity-rich 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 an annual Main Street conference and establish a Main Street track at the biennial 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 a 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
- Collect, track and analyze data related to RI's Main Street districts (vacancies, demographics, etc.)
- Establish statewide calendar for planning purposes
- Pursue statewide Main Street festival (with Doors Open RI or others)

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 Main Street America 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 – Proposed Annual Budget Scenarios

Expense	Limited Part Time (Current - 2025)	Robust Part Time	Committed Full Time
Director (with benefits)	\$40,000 (PT)	\$60,000 (PT+)	\$90,000 (FT)
Other staff	\$20,000	\$40,000	\$60,000
Consulting (Main Street America)	\$0	\$50,000	\$50,000
Services - Design, Video, Translation, etc.	\$1,000	\$10,000	\$12,500
Education (conferences, subscriptions)	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$5,000
Supplies	\$500	\$1,000	\$1,500
Events	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$7,500
Marketing (printing, mail, website, etc.)	\$1,000	\$1,500	\$3,500
Sub grants to local efforts	\$0	\$50,000	\$75,000
TOTAL	\$70,000	\$225,000	\$305,000

2025 Program Income

Source	Amount	Usage
RI Commerce	\$23,000	Data Collection, Roundtable and Network programs
RI Energy	\$20,000	Communications and Unconference event
RI Department of Health	\$5,000	Roundtable Programs & associated communications
Grow Smart RI General Operating Funds	\$15,000	Administration, outreach, advocacy, and fundraising
Event Sponsorships	\$7,000	Unconference (projected)
TOTAL	\$70,000	

Key Metrics – 3-Year Pilot Committed Full Time

Goal	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Network Meetings	6 meetings	8 meetings	10 meetings
Website	10 Resource Pages	Expand resource pages, add articles	Add planning calendar
Monthly Newsletter	900 subscribers	1200 subscribers	1800 subscribers
Social Media	1-2 posts/week	2-3 posts/week	3-5 posts/week
Webinars	11	11	11
Conferences	Fall Unconference	Fall Unconference and 2 workshops at Summit	Fall Unconference
Other Events	3 tour(s) geared to municipal staff; support local events	4 tour(s); support local events	Statewide Main Street festival; support local events
Applications for local projects	2	3	5
Additional fundraising	\$15,000	\$25,000	\$75,000
Municipalities engaged	10	15	20
Organizations/agencies engaged	25	37	50
Individuals engaged (total)	400+	500+	1000+
Accredited programs	NA	1	3