



Overview of National Main Streets/National Trust for Historic Preservation

West Roxbury Main Streets is one of twenty Boston Main Street organizations. All organizations are independent 501(c)3 organizations, but all organizations are independent contractors with the City of Boston and work closely with the Office of Economic Development. (See below for more information on this relationship).

The Main Street model came to Boston through (then) City Councilor Tom Menino, who brought the program to the City level when he became the Mayor. Roslindale Village became the first urban Main Street in 1983. West Roxbury Main Streets was established in 2001.

The model was originally created in rural America, designed to protect the downtown business districts of small towns from the threat of strip malls, etc. The model was significantly adapted to the urban business districts when it was brought to Boston, and West Roxbury Main Streets, as you will read below, has further adopted the model to the specific context of West Roxbury's commercial business district.

What happened to America's Main Streets

Before World War II, Main Street was the community's primary commercial hub. Downtown buildings usually had several tenants -- typically a ground-floor retailer, and frequently, several upper-floor offices or apartments; together, these tenants provided enough rent for property owners to keep their buildings in good condition. The presence of the post office, library, banks and local government offices added to the steady flow of people downtown. Not only was Main Street the center of its social life; people thronged in the streets on Saturday nights to meet friends, see a movie and window-shop.

In the past 40 years, America's downtowns have changed drastically. The creation of the interstate highway system and subsequent growth of suburban communities transformed the ways in which Americans live, work and spend leisure time. With improved transportation routes, people found it easier to travel longer distances to work or shop. Roads that once connected neighborhoods to downtown now carried residents to outlying shopping strips and regional malls. Throughout the nation, in town after town, the story repeated itself. Downtown businesses closed or moved to the mall, shoppers dwindled, property values and sales tax revenues dropped. Some downtowns sank under the weight of their own apathy. Neglected buildings, boarded-up storefronts and empty, trash-strewn streets gradually reinforced the public's perception that nothing was happening downtown, that nothing was worth saving there. People forgot how important their downtown and its historic commercial buildings were in reflecting their community's unique heritage.

In many communities, downtown merchants and property owners tried to halt this spiral of decline by imitating their competition -- the shopping mall. Their attempts to modernize downtown took the forms of pedestrian malls, covering traditional building fronts with aluminum slipcovers, and attaching huge, oversized signs on their buildings to attract attention. These well-meaning but usually ineffective methods did not stabilize downtown's decline, mostly because they did not address the fundamental problem -- which businesses did not change when the market did, and that people did not see the downtown as a destination for shopping any more. With the economic boom of the 1990s, Main Street also saw increased development occurring outside traditional areas, and the issue of "sprawl" with its uncontrolled growth and cookie cutter architecture that reflected neither a sense of place nor a sense of pride, and became an issue that most communities contend with today.

Facing these issues, over 1,600 communities have adopted the Main Street approach in the past 25 years to look again at Main Street, their heart of the community, to save its historic buildings, to revive its commercial core, to strengthen business, to control community-eroding sprawl, and keep a sense of place and community life in America.

Over the past 30 years, the Main Street movement has transformed the way communities think about the revitalization and management of their downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts. Cities and towns across the nation have come to see that a prosperous sustainable community is only as healthy as its core.