A flexible, community-driven process to preserve the heritage value of historic downtowns and promote vibrant, sustainable communities...
The Alberta Main Street Program provides financial and technical assistance toward the rehabilitation of historic commercial building façades. Since its inception in 1987, the program has helped villages, towns and cities across the province strengthen the historic character and commercial vitality of their main streets.

An initiative of the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation and Alberta Community Development's Heritage Resource Management Branch, the program uses the Four Point Approach, a comprehensive strategy combining building conservation grants and professional architectural expertise with resources and initiatives in organization, marketing and economic development.

The program offers a flexible, community-driven process that preserves the heritage value of historic downtowns and promotes vibrant, sustainable communities.

- A comprehensive approach with proven effectiveness in sustainable heritage preservation and downtown revitalization
- Cost-shared funding for historic building conservation, façade rehabilitation and project implementation
- Technical resources covering all aspects of project implementation, including manuals and expertise from program staff and planning and preservation advisors of the Heritage Resource Management Branch
- A province-wide community network providing opportunities to share expertise with other municipalities and to participate in heritage and marketing initiatives
- Access to Canada's Historic Places Initiative through Alberta's Municipal Heritage Partnership Program, a provincial initiative supporting municipal efforts to identify, protect and preserve local historic places.

The Alberta Main Street Program
Conservation strategies for historic commercial areas
The Four Point Approach

The four point approach is a proven strategy in which each component contributes to successful long-term heritage preservation and downtown renewal. Pioneered by the U.S. National Trust for Historic Preservation and adopted by Heritage Canada, the approach is based on the principle that sustainable heritage conservation and economic revitalization go hand-in-hand.

**Strong local organization** engages community participation and builds collaborative relationships that are the foundation for revitalization. A full-time Main Street coordinator and an advisory board of local volunteers work together with other local groups to coordinate efforts toward achieving the community’s goals.

**Professional design assistance** ensures that local historic resources are treated appropriately and cost-effectively. A project architect guides physical improvements in signs, awnings, and façade rehabilitation projects. Main Street projects also develop design guidelines to encourage heritage conservation and good maintenance practices and promote new development that enhances the historic area.

**Marketing initiatives** use the character of an authentic, rehabilitated historic downtown to build a consistent and positive image of the main street area. Special events and coordinated retail promotions promote the downtown’s unique appeal as a shopping environment, as a focal point of community life, and as an opportunity for business investment.

**Economic development** occurs as previously vacant old buildings are transformed into attractive, usable commercial space and send a positive message of downtown renewal to investors and the public. The Main Street process provides strategies to retain and strengthen existing businesses, attract new businesses and diversify the local economy, and to integrate downtown revitalization into community-wide economic development activities.

Main street revitalization requires a holistic approach that includes economic renewal, aesthetic improvements, and the rejuvenation of community and social life.
Community Benefits

Restoring Main Streets yields both direct and indirect benefits to the entire community that range from the obvious physical improvements to downtown building facades and streetscapes to economic renewal and a strengthened sense of local identity, community pride and spirit of cooperation.

Physical benefits result from significant, cost-effective investment in restoring and upgrading the functionality of downtown buildings and in reinstating their architectural character as emblems of community history and identity. Building revitalization can, in turn, prompt additional investment in downtown public improvements such as street furniture, sidewalks and signs through partnerships between the municipal government, property owners and local business associations.

Economic returns take the form of increased downtown pedestrian activity and tourism encouraged by a unique and appealing shopping experience within a coordinated and sensitively designed environment. Program-assisted workshops on merchandising, marketing, and customer service strengthen existing businesses, while the overall improved appeal and viability of the main street area attracts a variety of new businesses. The results are a reduction of downtown vacancy rates, increased business revenues, and an increase in property values.

Social benefits include a renewed vision for the community and downtown; a reinvigorated sense of local identity, pride and accomplishment through cooperation in the main street initiative; and a fresh appreciation of local heritage through community tours, interpretive plaques and the restored heritage buildings themselves. Cultural and community events, festivals, parades, and contests bring vitality to the downtown and reestablish the main street as a focus of community social and economic life.

“The downtown community has benefitted immensely from the program. People realize the value in rehabilitating their facades.”

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The program offers four project categories or initiatives tailored to community needs according to population. Main Street projects are three-year partnerships with the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation with the possibility of applying for extensions. Many projects continue for five years or more.

Small Town Initiatives are designed for communities of populations between 3,000 and 50,000. The program provides up to $24,000 annually to assist in the employment of a project coordinator; up to $60,000 annually toward building façade rehabilitation; and up to $35,000 in discretionary funds for community visioning and planning activities, the development of design guidelines, economic development projects and other activities.

Village and Hamlet Initiatives enable communities of fewer than 3,000 residents to undertake a Main Street project. These initiatives receive up to $24,000 toward the employment of a project coordinator; up to $45,000 annually for building façade rehabilitation; and up to $30,000 in discretionary funds.

Urban District Initiatives are intended for historic districts within larger municipalities and allow up to $24,000 annually for the hiring of a project coordinator; up to $75,000 annually for building façade rehabilitation; and up to $35,000 in discretionary funds.

Regional Initiatives are offered on a trial basis to partnerships of small towns, villages and hamlets wishing to undertake a Main Street project in a county, improvement district or special area. This initiative provides up to $24,000 annually toward a project coordinator; up to $75,000 annually toward building façade rehabilitation; and up to $35,000 in discretionary funds.

“The program’s impact in a rural centre makes it one of the strongest economic change agents available to municipalities.”
**Project Funding**

The program contributes cost-shared funding toward coordinator salaries, building façade rehabilitation and enhancement, project planning, and project-related activities in organization, marketing and economic development. These contributions consist of lottery funds provided by the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation.

**Coordinator salary subsidies** assist each community in hiring a qualified Main Street coordinator. The local partner organization, which may be a municipal government, Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ) or other organization, contributes half of the coordinator’s salary plus employee benefits and a small travel allowance to enable the coordinator to attend quarterly program meetings.

**Building funds** support rehabilitation work on historic façades within the main street area. Historic buildings are usually fifty or more years old, have a high degree of physical integrity, and visibly contribute to the area’s heritage character. This rehabilitation work is carried out in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada. A smaller share of building funds supports business signs and façade enhancements that are intended to strengthen the overall architectural character of the historic area. These “bricks and mortar” funds are provided on a matching basis to building and business owners. A portion of these funds is also used to retain a professional architect for each Main Street project whose design and preservation expertise is provided at no cost to the community or building and business owners.

**Discretionary funds** assist with marketing, economic development and other projects identified by the project community that support the Main Street initiative and lie within broad program guidelines. These activities may include the preparation of downtown tour brochures and interpretive signs for historic buildings, the development of downtown marketing programs, and the organization of local business development workshops. A portion of discretionary funds is also used for Main Street project planning activities, described below.

**Planning funds** enable each project community to organize a series of public consultation sessions and design workshops within six months of starting the Main Street initiative. These Visioning and Resource Team sessions result in a detailed plan for each Main Street project. Planning funds are also used to prepare a final project report and architectural guidelines for the main street area.
How The Process Works

The program has refined a flexible approach that communities adapt to their needs and resources. Within the framework of the Four Point Approach, Main Street projects generally proceed according to a distinct series of steps, from project start-up to setting out long-term strategies for heritage conservation and economic sustainability.

Getting Started

Signing the Agreements. Each new project community signs two agreements with the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation. The Program Agreement establishes the financial and other terms of the partnership. In the Preservation–Development Agreement, communities agree to develop design guidelines for the main street area to maintain its historic character as a legacy for future generations.

Hiring a Project Coordinator. Using program guidance and funding, communities hire a project coordinator to facilitate the implementation of the Main Street process in the community. The coordinator has a wide range of responsibilities and is often described as the “glue” that brings together diverse project activities in design, marketing, organization and economic development.

Forming an Advisory Board. A local Main Street advisory board of residents, building and business owners, municipal councillors and other volunteers represents varied community interests in the running of the project. The advisory board is the decision-making authority responsible for implementing project activities and plans with the coordinator’s assistance.

“The support network and access to other funding makes a total package that really works.”

Opening the Project Office. Communities establish a project office on main street where it reflects the project’s role as part of the business community and is accessible and visible within the downtown. This office space is sometimes shared with other business organizations to facilitate collaboration and reduce costs.

Retaining a Project Architect. The advisory board selects and hires a qualified architect with experience in historic building conservation to prepare designs and working drawings for façade rehabilitation projects. The architect
The Main Street Process

works in consultation with property owners, the coordinator, and the board. Main Street projects use program building funds to provide the project architect’s services at no cost to owners.

“Main Street is about the community. The program provides the tools, expertise and framework communities mold to work for them.”

Visioning and Resource Team Sessions. Early in the process, new projects hold a series of open house activities, design workshops and strategic planning sessions. Known as the Visioning and Resource Team sessions, this process engages the community, builds public awareness and project support, recruits volunteers and produces a detailed strategy tailored to the resources and requirements of each Main Street project.

Project Activities

Building Rehabilitation. Façade rehabilitation and enhancement projects are a highly anticipated and visible part of the Main Street process. Most building funds are allocated to historic buildings, while a smaller portion supports enhancement projects on other façades within the main street area. These projects are undertaken by owners with cost-shared program funding for construction work. Building projects significantly improve the character and appeal of the main street area.

Signs and Awnings. Main Street projects also provide design assistance and funding toward business signs, traditional retractable awnings, lighting and, occasionally, murals to promote and enhance the historic character of the area. Sign projects are an effective and affordable way for new and existing businesses to participate in the program.

Marketing and Economic Development. Main Street projects often initiate, organize or assist in retail promotions, community events, and a wide variety of marketing and economic development activities. Often undertaken in collaboration with community groups, these initiatives help reestablish the downtown as a centre of activity, generate sales, project a positive image of the main street, and integrate downtown business development into community-wide economic growth strategies. The cooperative networks that emerge through such activities also contribute to the long-term viability of downtown organizations and initiatives.
Design Guidelines. With the help of a template developed by the program, project communities prepare design guidelines for the downtown that provide advice in the appropriate maintenance and treatment of historic buildings and encourage compatible new downtown development. Design guidelines are an important project legacy and a planning tool that municipalities are encouraged to adopt as part of their land use bylaws.

Project Extensions. As the momentum of the local Main Street initiative builds, main street projects often apply for project extensions beyond the initial three-year contract. In this way, communities can maintain an active partnership with the program for many years.

Wrap-Up and Beyond

When Main Street projects do conclude, the work of organization, marketing, economic development and design must continue, and the wrap-up process provides a series of steps to integrate project activities into the long-term organization and functioning of the community.

Wrap-up activities include the preparation of detailed building project documentation, a survey of public opinion on project impacts, and a focus group session where members of the community assess the project’s achievements and set future directions. With this information, the coordinator prepares a final report that summarizes the project’s activities and sets out priorities and strategies for continuing the Main Street project’s legacy in the community.

“The program had an incredible impact on our town. The immediate difference in the storefronts echoed a much deeper and more resonant change in the mentality of the people.”
Is your community eligible?

The program is open to communities within Alberta. While the program’s framework is highly adaptable to local needs and resources, communities that satisfy the conditions below are more likely to be successful in applying to the program and implementing the Main Street approach.

1. **Does your community have a recognizable historic main street?** The Alberta Main Street Program is designed to help municipalities preserve significant concentrations of historic commercial buildings. These are considered to be clusters of at least fifteen buildings that are fifty or more years old, have strong historic character, and retain a substantial portion of historic building fabric. Historic buildings must comprise at least sixty percent of the potential main street area.

2. **Is there broad-based community support to undertake a Main Street project?** Main Street projects are multi-level partnerships that rely on support from municipal government, business organizations and the public. Downtown businesses and property owners’ support and willingness to commit funds to building rehabilitation is vital to achieving a meaningful project impact.

3. **Is the downtown economically viable?** A core of businesses in the traditional commercial area that is not dominated by shopping malls or highway commercial areas provides an economic base essential to the rejuvenation and survival of the main street area and the local heritage it embodies.

4. **Are you committed to implementing the Four Point Approach?** Communities must be willing and able to hire a project coordinator and to match the coordinator salary subsidy contributed by the program. The coordinator is an indispensable part of the process and is responsible for facilitating the project’s wide-ranging activities. Communities also agree to work with a project architect, using program funds provided for that purpose, to ensure the appropriate and cost-effective treatment of historic resources in the main street area.

5. **Communities must agree to undertake project planning sessions.** New project communities undertake two comprehensive planning sessions, a Visioning and Resource Team session, to gather public input, build consensus, and set out a blueprint for implementing the Four Point Approach in the community. These planning activities set the Main Street approach apart from initiatives that focus solely on physical enhancement and are key contributors to projects’ success.

6. **Can you provide a project office on main street?** Experience shows that a prominent downtown location for the Main Street office gives the project visibility and accessibility to the public and business community. Office rent and operating expenses are the responsibility of the project community.

7. **Is there local fundraising capability?** The ability to generate additional funds and volunteer interest in project-related activities broadens support, builds local capacity for a sustainable long-term initiative, and greatly extends community resources in matching the contributions of the Main Street Program and other grant programs.
The application process

The program office notifies urban municipalities province-wide when resources are available to support new Main Street projects. Program applicants are usually municipal governments or local business organizations such as Chambers of Commerce or Business Revitalization Zones.

To become a Main Street project community, applicants prepare and submit a completed application form accompanied by detailed information on the community and the historic main street area. The Alberta Historical Resources Foundation selects new Main Street project communities from among the applicants on the recommendations of the program office.

Application packages are available through the program office and web site. In addition to the form itself, a formal program application includes the following:

- Community map
- Downtown map indicating building footprints
- Photographs and list of historic properties in the downtown
- Five-year summary of downtown building permits
- Inventory of downtown businesses and property owners
- Five-year summary of public and private-sector downtown programs
- Council resolution and vote in support of undertaking a Main Street project in partnership with the program
- Endorsements from businesses, organizations, residents and key players
- Letters from at least twelve building owners expressing interest in the building rehabilitation program
- A copy of the current Municipal Development Plan, Land Use Bylaw, and other documents related to downtown development

If your community is interested in applying to the program or would like more information on how the Main Street process might work in your downtown, please visit our web sites or contact the program office.
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