

Utilizing Main Street Districts to Encourage Downtown Revitalization

Kimberly D. Anderson

August 2023

Capstone Project, Tennessee Certified Economic Developer

University of Tennessee, Center for Industrial Services

TCED Staff Advisor: Dr. David Kolzow

Capstone Advisor: Kathy Price

Capstone Coordinator: Kathy Barber

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

I.	Introduction.....	3
II.	The Town of Vonore.....	8
III.	The Town of Tellico Plains.....	9
IV.	The City of Madisonville.....	11
V.	The City of Sweetwater.....	14
VI.	Conclusion.....	16
VII.	Resources & References.....	18

I. INTRODUCTION

At the heart of Tennessee's diverse economic landscape lies a creative program with the power to strengthen communities and reshape their destinies. The Tennessee Main Street Program, with its affiliated initiative the Tennessee Downtowns program, stands as a beacon of transformation for cities and towns seeking comprehensive revitalization of their downtown cores (Tennessee Downtowns). Built upon the proven foundation of the National Main Street Center's Four-Point Approach®, these programs serve as a guiding compass for selected downtowns and their dedicated steering committees (Tennessee Downtowns). This project looks to highlight the utilization of the Tennessee Main Street Program to encourage downtown revitalization for economic growth. The scope of this project looks at both Sweetwater and Madisonville as established Tennessee Main Streets, in differing stages of the program; Tellico Plains as a designated Tennessee Downtown, which is the starting point of the Tennessee Main Street Program; and Vonore's hardship of limited to no main street or downtown leverage for these programs.

The mission seems straightforward, to create the quintessential main street communities that each citizen so longingly desires. Imagine the hallmark movies with the Christmas décor and bustling shoppers, the summer fairs with children's laughter and cold melting treats, and other pivotal moments where entire communities rally to support a local cause; the restoration and reformation of these main street districts come from a communal desire to create a haven of memories that connects its citizens directly to economic growth and encourages generations to remain accountable to the development of their hometowns.

The Tennessee Downtowns program, the predecessor to becoming a Tennessee Main Street, orchestrates a holistic regeneration that extends beyond mere aesthetics. It encompasses

economic, cultural, and social spheres. With space in the program being both limited and highly competitive, the Tennessee Downtowns initiative emerges as a rallying point for communities that envision a vibrant future. This program is not just a conduit for change – it is a catalyst for sustainable economic development, nurturing an interaction of innovation, collaboration, and growth. Through an array of meticulously curated activities, including training, site visits, regional workshops, webinars, and technical assistance, the program equips communities with the tools to foster an atmosphere of progress (Tennessee Downtowns). A defining feature of the program is the innovation project grant, demonstrating the program's commitment to turning dreams into tangible reality. As we embark on an exploration of this transformative journey in multiple ways throughout Monroe County, it becomes evident that the Tennessee Downtowns program's significance extends far beyond physical facelifts; it is a testament to the State's unwavering dedication to nurturing thriving, resilient communities.

Participation in the Tennessee Downtowns program is within reach for communities eager to embrace revitalization. The journey begins by delineating a project area encompassing a traditional commercial district rich in heritage, dating back at least half a century. Empowered by a dedicated five-member volunteer steering committee, the heart of the program beats within the spirit of collaboration and learning. A vital catalyst, a designated non-profit 501(c)(3) organization or a forward-thinking city municipality serves as the nurturing ground for the committee's efforts. The pulse of community interest propels this endeavor, fueled by the citizens' shared aspiration for downtown revival. As recognition dawns, both city and county governments acknowledge the downtown's pivotal role, underlining its worth as a community asset. Formal commitment is sealed through the adoption of a resolution by the city government, cementing the community's intent to participate. Grounding this enthusiasm is a demonstrable

economic need, evidenced by factors such as elevated business vacancy rates, paucity of downtown businesses, and signs of disinvestment. An application, a steppingstone into this transformative journey, marks a community's intention to join an upcoming program round. To elevate their pursuit, communities must become "Standard members" of the National Main Street Center, embracing a comprehensive approach that paves the way for prosperous downtown futures. (Tennessee Downtowns)

The Main Street movement has brought about a significant shift in how communities approach the revitalization and management of their downtown areas and neighborhood commercial districts. For decades, this movement has encompassed three essential elements: a proven revitalization strategy, a network of interconnected communities, and a robust national support program. This movement is backed by the National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which plays a pivotal role in its success (Main Street America).

At the heart of the Main Street approach lies the Four-Point Approach, a distinctive and comprehensive economic development tool. This method empowers communities to breathe new life into their downtowns by capitalizing on their unique local assets, ranging from historical and cultural resources to local businesses and community pride. This strategy addresses a wide range of challenges faced by traditional commercial districts. It focuses on four critical areas: Design, which involves enhancing the physical appeal of the downtown through renovations, streetscape improvements, and aesthetic enhancements; Economic Restructuring, which aims to strengthen the local economy by identifying market opportunities, supporting businesses, and diversifying economic foundations; Promotion, which entails creating a positive image through events and

marketing; and Organization, which fosters partnerships and establishes a sustainable non-profit organization to oversee the program locally (Main Street America).

To establish a local Main Street program, communities often form a dedicated non-profit organization. However, the revitalization programs can also be integrated into existing entities like city governments, business associations, or economic development corporations. This collaborative approach requires involvement from both the public and private sectors, uniting downtown stakeholders and representatives from the wider community. Notably, local governments must provide both philosophical and financial backing, while the private sector contributes ideas, expertise, and resources for the program's success. A local non-profit Main Street organization operates under the guidance of a Board of Directors, supported by professional staff and engaged volunteers. The National Main Street Center takes charge of coordinating programs like the Tennessee Main Street program, offering various resources to promote downtown revitalization in the United States (Main Street America).

The Tennessee Main Street Program serves as a valuable resource for communities across the state aiming to rejuvenate and manage their traditional downtown areas. The program was re-established in 2003 by the Tennessee legislature to aid in economic revitalization and development efforts. The Tennessee Main Street Program provides both general information and hands-on technical services to designated local programs that have successfully embraced the Four-Point Approach. Administered by the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, the Tennessee Main Street Program aligns with the well-established downtown revitalization model introduced by the National Main Street Center (Tennessee Main Street).

The process of designation within the Tennessee Main Street Program involves meeting state-level criteria. While accreditation from the National Main Street Center is attainable based

on their Standards of Performance for Recognition, designation within the Tennessee Main Street Program does not automatically guarantee national accreditation. Designated programs must adhere to the standards annually. Community support, effective mission statements, comprehensive work plans grounded in the Four-Point Approach, a preservation ethic, an active board of directors, financial sustainability, and other factors contribute to meeting these standards. Additionally, a critical mass of historically significant buildings within a walkable district and a thorough understanding of the local marketplace are essential (Tennessee Main Street).

In Monroe County, the Tennessee Main Street program has brought various communities to different stages, showcasing the program's true transformative abilities. Sweetwater, a lively downtown gem, has thrived as a Main Street participant for a decade. It is filled with antique shops, boutiques, places to eat, specialty stores, and even historic train cars and Airbnb rentals. The charm of Sweetwater's downtown keeps it bustling, with a high demand for available spaces and now waiting lists for business owner spaces. Madisonville, a more recent Main Street addition, has experienced substantial growth in the last two years. New businesses have sprung up, showing how the program can make a real difference. Recent upgrades to parking have set the stage for more improvements, and upcoming beautification projects promise an even more remarkable transformation on the horizon. Tellico Plains, a small and charming town, relies heavily on tourism for its economy. Becoming a Tennessee Designated Downtown and joining the Tennessee Main Street program is a key to unlocking its fullest potential as a top-tier Tennessee tourist location. On the other hand, Vonore's story is one of adaptation. A lake submersed business district and a new highway redirected what is now the economic center of town, which highlights the dynamic nature of evolution for communities.

II. THE TOWN OF VONORE

Potentially one of the most historically abundant areas within the southeastern United States and most definitely a pivotal economic development for Monroe County, the town of Vonore hosts significant changes dating back to Indigenous cultures. The economic landscape of Vonore, Tennessee underwent a transformative shift with the construction of the Tellico Dam and the subsequent flooding of parts of the region. The completion of the dam marked a significant turning point, bringing both opportunities and challenges to the area's economy. While the flooding led to the displacement of some communities, most prominently the downtown region, and the loss of fertile lands, it also ushered in a new era of hydroelectric power generation and recreational possibilities. The dam's construction undoubtedly created jobs and attracted industries related to energy production, providing a significant boost to the local economy; but this all occurred at the cost of maintaining a centralized and historical main street district. Additionally, the formation of the Tellico Lake reservoir brought about tourism and outdoor recreation, contributing to the emergence of a leisure-driven economy. This economic diversification, influenced by the TVA Tellico Dam project, highlights Vonore's ability to adapt and thrive in the face of transformative changes.

Vonore, despite its unique characteristics, is not positioned as a suitable candidate for the Tennessee Downtowns or Main Street programs due to the absence of a distinct downtown or main street area. The program, which thrives on revitalizing and enhancing existing urban cores, requires a foundation of a well-defined central district that serves as a hub for community activities, commerce, and cultural exchange. In Vonore's case, the absence of such a downtown landscape creates a foundational challenge for the program's implementation. While the town may possess other qualities that make it a valued community, the program's criteria necessitate a

viable core that can be developed and activated to attract both residents and visitors. Therefore, Vonore's current lack of a downtown area renders it an unlikely candidate for participation in the program. Though, by utilizing the critiques and planning attributes of the Main Street program's four areas of emphasis to focus on another topic, such as recreation, the town of Vonore could impact their economic status.

III. THE TOWN OF TELlico PLAINS

The downtown area of Tellico Plains has been grappling with significant challenges, primarily centered around high vacancy rates. This issue has garnered the utmost attention from community leaders, downtown business owners, and town residents. The central section of downtown is characterized by vacant buildings, creating the perception of a deserted town to visitors. This deters them from exploring the area, adversely affecting existing businesses and exacerbating the vacancy problem. The primary culprits behind this situation are the deteriorating structures and outdated infrastructure within the downtown vicinity. The community recognizes these factors as pressing concerns, further emphasizing their importance. The financial strain on building and business owners prevents them from addressing building problems adequately, leading to escalating issues and a declining appeal for potential occupants. Despite the promising presence of the Cherohala Skyway nearby, a potential catalyst for economic growth, the current state of downtown may discourage both investors and prospective residents. This cycle of disinvestment adversely impacts the local economy, prompting some residents to seek employment elsewhere. Hence, these issues stand as top priorities for the community's leadership to prevent the potential demise of the beloved downtown area.

Amid their Tennessee Downtowns program application, Tellico Plains looked to enhance four major factors. Sidewalk improvements to extend the reach of the main street designated areas, making the pedestrian experience even safer and more appealing, encouraging more people to explore the downtown area. The program has also offered resources and guidance for further improving the gazebo, potentially attracting larger events and festivals to downtown Tellico Plains. This could enhance the town's cultural vibrancy and draw more visitors, as seen over the last three years with their annual Trout Festival, which attracts an average of 8,200 visitors to the downtown area (Best). Tellico Plains has also expanded the efforts to enhance the downtown's aesthetics. This includes additional beautification projects beyond just trash cans, creating a more visually pleasing environment and potentially attracting more foot traffic. Finally, the Tellico Plains downtown area has utilized the collaborations brought about creating its steering team and supports to create a comprehensive wayfinding strategy, improving signage and promoting the area's attractions more effectively. This will draw attention to key points of interest and facilitate easier navigation, encouraging more people to explore the downtown area and increase its vitality. Overall, the program's assistance will amplify the impact of these existing efforts, making Tellico Plains' downtown more inviting, engaging, and attractive to both residents and visitors.

The Tennessee Downtowns Program has fueled the efforts to bring local entities together to revitalize the downtown area of Tellico Plains. Tellico Plains envisions a restored downtown characterized by pedestrian-friendly features, including expansive sidewalks, street-facing businesses, and ample amenities for walking and biking. Through the program's emphasis to develop a master plan, the downtown will be designed to attract pedestrians with multiple points of interest while remaining accessible to automobiles. New dining, businesses, and specialty

retail establishments will stimulate job growth, fostering a sense of community engagement. Public art and distinctive architectural elements will enhance the streetscape, while themed building facades and improved infrastructure will create distinct yet cohesive districts. Increased greenery through street trees and plantings will complement the enhancements. Efforts to revitalize dilapidated structures will lead to an 80% occupancy rate for downtown buildings, according to their application for Tennessee Downtowns designation in 2020, stretching beyond aesthetics to include infrastructure improvements as well. Furthermore, balanced retail diversity, including a mix of businesses, eateries, specialty stores, and professional services, will harmonize with existing enterprises without compromising their integrity. Convenient and efficient parking solutions, such as on-street parking and surface lots, will cater to both pedestrians and motorists, promoting the continued prosperity and attractiveness of Tellico Plains' downtown area. Fortunately, guided by the Tennessee Main Street program, the town of Tellico Plains is poised for a promising future, particularly given the valuable insights from neighboring county members who have already successfully navigated this process.

IV. THE CITY OF MADISONVILLE

Madisonville, now a promising participant in the Tennessee Main Street program, stands as an incredible demonstration of the transformative power of the initiative. Embarking on this journey after achieving Tennessee Downtowns status in April of 2020, Madisonville's commitment to revitalization has yielded substantial results. By utilizing the initial grant of \$15,000, the community spearheaded the creation of a dynamic food truck park, skillfully integrating modernity while preserving valuable green spaces—per the program's recommendations. This endeavor exemplifies how strategic vision, community volunteers, and

clearly defined objectives can combine to accomplish remarkable feats. Notably, the project's ultimate completion cost of nearly \$75,000, made possible through generous donations and sponsorships, underscores the enthusiasm and support garnered for local revitalization efforts (Carey). The food truck park has not only breathed new life into Madisonville's downtown area but has also triggered a wider economic resurgence. Within the span of just two years, Madisonville has transitioned from a downtown with a 44% vacancy rate in its shops to one where vacancies have dwindled to less than 15% (Carey). This remarkable turnaround attests to the tangible impact of the Tennessee Downtowns and Main Street program, serving as an inspiring model for how collaborative determination can rejuvenate and invigorate a community's core.

Downtown Madisonville, the freshest addition to Monroe County's Main Street ensemble, stands as a testament to the remarkable successes the program has yielded. July of 2022 marked a pivotal milestone as Madisonville proudly earned its Main Street Accreditation. Coordinated with this achievement, the inception of the Downtown Madisonville Alliance materialized, led by a robust board of directors comprising nineteen dedicated members alongside three ex-officio participants. The alliance became a rallying point, galvanizing a community-wide effort with the robust involvement of over one hundred volunteers throughout the year of 2022. The palpable growth experienced by Madisonville is an outcome rooted in a strategic allocation of resources. The infusion of over \$80,000 in public funds into downtown events played a pivotal role in fostering a vibrant atmosphere that draws in both residents and visitors alike. Remarkably, \$575,000 in grant funding was secured for downtown buildings and businesses, with an additional \$500,000 directed towards the broader revitalization initiative (Carey). These investments have translated into tangible outcomes, as evidenced by the

emergence of eleven new businesses that either opened their doors or migrated to downtown Madisonville. Furthermore, the downtown landscape became a tapestry of vibrant activity with the hosting of more than twenty-six events. This vitality is the direct result of an astounding five hundred volunteer hours that were enthusiastically devoted towards the realization of our Main Street Program's vision. Madisonville's journey exemplifies the remarkable potential of the Main Street framework, where strategic planning, community engagement, and prudent resource allocation yield growth that resonates throughout every corner of the community.

As Madisonville continues to revitalize their main street district, a variety of upcoming opportunities shine optimistically on the community's future. With unwavering determination, Madisonville is capitalizing on the momentum these programs generated, currently seizing five distinct grants and prospects that hold promise for its transformation. A landmark endeavor within Opportunity Appalachia, the restoration of the historic Kefauver Hotel stands tall, lifted by an investor that convened in May. The journey of this iconic building gains further incentive through a \$2,500 Brownfield Grant award, earmarked for a crucial environmental assessment of the hotel. These combined efforts are poised to thrust this historically significant property into the heart of Madisonville's downtown revitalization. The community dreams to also find an ally in a \$50,000 USDA RBDG grant, with its scope encompassing a new Main Street website, a small-scale coffee shop—an aspiration resonating throughout community assessments—and a business incubator office, set to flourish within a forthcoming Welcome Center. The spirit of Madisonville's Farmers Market finds fresh avenues for growth as well, courtesy of a \$1,500 USDA grant earmarked for marketing enhancement, including the installation of new signage. Locally, a prominent employer's generous contribution of \$10,000 underscores the commitment to beautification. Among the stars that shine bright on the horizon are two substantial grants,

collectively totaling an impressive \$1.3 million, poised to galvanize Madisonville's growth (Carey).

As the town navigates its main street journey, challenges inevitably emerge, yet Madisonville's experience with the program illuminates a powerful truth—change can awaken even the most stagnant property owners, rejuvenate neglected structures through volunteer efforts, and overcome daunting environmental hurdles with the wealth of resources at hand. Through the Tennessee Main Street program, Madisonville is not merely overcoming obstacles; it is embracing a blueprint for holistic transformation. The city of Madisonville's success certainly pushes other towns, like Tellico Plains, to rely on neighboring communities for knowledge and support, while adjusting as necessary to stay true to each city's unique personality.

V. THE CITY OF SWEETWATER

The success story of Sweetwater's Main Street is a testimony to the power of dedicated revitalization efforts. Reflecting on a decade of progress, such a defining moment illuminated the profound impact of the program, showcasing the vast transformation that Sweetwater had achieved. From its inception, Sweetwater faced challenges of vacant storefronts, deteriorating historic buildings, and a lack of greenspace. However, a visible transformation occurred, with vacant properties giving way to thriving businesses and a renewed sense of vibrancy. The physical changes through grant funding and community support were undeniable: low vacancy rates, enhanced building exteriors and interiors, and the addition of appealing greenspaces all contributed to the town's revival.

The revitalization's success extended beyond aesthetics. The quantifiable data tells a compelling story. Prior to Main Street certification in 2013, Sweetwater's downtown district saw gross sales tax totaling \$8 million. By 2020, this figure had risen to an impressive \$12 million, underscoring the economic impact of the revitalization efforts. The vacancy rate, which stood at 14% in 2014, had turned into a negative rate of -3.57% in 2022, signifying an influx of diverse businesses and vitality. Private investment surged, totaling over \$4.3 million since 2014, averaging around \$533,000 annually, while public investment amounted to over \$1.3 million, averaging approximately \$157,000 annually. Moreover, the downtown rental rate per square foot nearly doubled from its lowest point, from \$5.43 to \$10, reflecting increased commercial interest and demand. (Morgan)

Key strategies contributed to this success. The program's ability to secure grants and funding, totaling over \$3.5 million, further highlights its strategic approach to revitalization (Morgan). Sweetwater Main Street implemented a rolling grant program for exterior signs and awnings, enhancing the district's visual appeal and charm (Isbill). Monthly Main Street meetings facilitated networking among business owners and kept the community informed about ongoing developments. Festival attendance soared, from 8,200 to over 27,000 attendees, drawing attention to the town's newfound vitality (Morgan). Beyond the economic and physical changes, the success of Sweetwater's Main Street program underscores the collaborative nature of the effort. With most downtown businesses being women/minority-owned, it reflects a diverse and inclusive economic resurgence (Morgan).

In sum, Sweetwater's Main Street program demonstrates how dedicated revitalization efforts, coupled with strategic initiatives and community engagement, can profoundly transform a town. Through physical improvements, economic growth, and fostering a sense of community,

Sweetwater stands as a shining example of the "rising tide floats all boats" adage (Isbill). With over 101,000 volunteer hours accumulated since 2014, Sweetwater Main Street has shone brightly not only at a state level but has been an exemplary program of national status as well (Morgan). A decade of hard work from across all sectors of the community-private business investors, governmental partnerships, and local shopping power-have proven that America's main street will not be left depleted due to malls or online shopping experiences. Sweetwater truly embodies the Tennessee Main Street program's core objectives and can function as a mentor to other towns eager to replicate their success.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Main Street movement, characterized by the Four-Point Approach, has revolutionized community revitalization strategies. The Tennessee Main Street Program exemplifies this approach by providing essential support and resources to local communities striving to rejuvenate their traditional downtowns, fostering economic growth, and preserving historical significance. The transformational journeys of Madisonville, Sweetwater, and Tellico Plains represent the remarkable potential of the Tennessee Main Street program. As my research unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that the program's impact echoes well beyond the confines of our county, providing inspiration to cities throughout the state and nation. This initiative possesses the inherent capacity to spark positive change in any community possessing a substantial downtown region, serving as a foundational bedrock for comprehensive transformation. Beyond its crucial financial backing, the program operates as a basis around which communities rally, collaboratively brainstorm and devise solutions. It offers the essential framework to bridge gaps, unravel obstacles, and foster a sense of togetherness. The

revitalization of Madisonville, Sweetwater, and Tellico Plains evokes a sense of awe due to the tangible achievements and inspires optimism regarding the program's potential to empower all communities striving for renewal. The Tennessee Main Street program illuminates a pathway toward vibrant and enduring futures, reinforcing the notion that with collective dedication and concerted effort, no reasonable objective is beyond reach.

Significantly, the success stories of Madisonville, Sweetwater, and Tellico Plains echo a fundamental truth: the essence of the Tennessee Main Street program is inherently duplicatable. Even in towns like Vonore, where the traditional structures may not align, the foundational elements of this program can be emulated. This principle is applicable not just to specific groups or municipalities, but to any collective entity with a shared vision for community betterment. While program participation extends unique benefits such as training and grant opportunities, its core components remain transferable. The foundation of a successful initiative lies in assembling like-minded individuals driven by a common goal – the betterment of their community. The Tennessee Main Street program serves as a blueprint, not only for enhancing physical landscapes but for cultivating unity and progress in towns across the state, highlighting that the essence of revitalization's economic impact is universally accessible. By defining a collective vision, assessing needs, mobilizing available resources, and setting actionable goals, any community possesses the potential to embark on a transformative journey.

RESOURCES & REFERENCES:

- Best, B. Director of Monroe County Tourism. (2023, August 1). Personal interview.
- Carey, K. Main Street Director for the City of Madisonville. (2023, August 15). Re: Main Street Info [Email].
- Carey, K. Main Street Director for the City of Madisonville. (2023, July 26). Personal interview.
- Downtown Madisonville Alliance. (2023). Annual Report 2022. Downtown Madisonville Alliance.
- Gentry, B. President and CEO of the Monroe County Chamber of Commerce. (2023, August 25). Personal interview.
- Isbill, H. Tourism Director for the City of Sweetwater. (2023, August 25). Re: Sweetwater Mainstreet Info for Capstone Project [Email].
- Main Street America. (n.d.). <https://www.mainstreet.org/home>.
- Morgan, J. City Recorder for the City of Sweetwater. (2023, August 28). Re: Sweetwater Mainstreet Info for Capstone Project [Email].
- City of Tellico Plains. (2023). Little Town With The Big Backyard. Tellico Plains Application for Tennessee Downtowns 2020.
- Tennessee Downtowns, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development. (n.d.). <https://www.tn.gov/ecd/rural-development/tennessee-main-street/tennessee-downtowns.html>.
- Tennessee Main Street, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development. (n.d.). <https://www.tn.gov/ecd/rural-development/tennessee-main-street/tennessee-main-street.html>.