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Rochester begins a downtown makeover

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Written by Courtney Denison
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These days, downtown Rochester looks a little sleepy. Beautiful historic buildings that have seen better days line the streets, and there don't seem to be many people out and about. It's a far cry from the vibrant, bustling downtowns of nearby Dover and Portsmouth, where people window shop and sip coffee at Breaking New Grounds or Café on the Corner. However, Rochester is about to step up its game.

The city of 30,000 is the latest community to join the New Hampshire Main Street Program, a statewide organization designed to revitalize economically depressed downtown areas. The news was announced at the organization's tenth anniversary conference, held in Portsmouth on Oct. 25.

The town took its first step toward this goal in 2005, when a group of citizens formed CORE (Community Organization for Rochester Enhancement) to build partnerships between city officials, business owners and townspeople. CORE President Gary Dworkin says that Rochester has a bright future.

"We're an old community and the fourth largest in the state. We've got a good and solid history and a good infrastructure, and yet Rochester has been arguably a secret," Dworkin says.

"We don't want major changes," Dworkin continues. "We love the community, and we want to make it look as good as we can. I'd like it to be a more energized version of what it is now, to make Rochester a prime destination."

Development of a river walk on the Cocheco River could enhance residential and commercial growth. Also on the table are more art galleries, restaurants, boutiques and other venues that might entice people to spend the day in Rochester.

For the past year, CORE has raised over \$100,000 for the first year of the Main Street effort. The program requires each community to raise \$300,000 altogether, in

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order to keep the program afloat for the first three years. An estimated \$60,000 to \$70,000 in start-up costs includes hiring a full-time executive director.

The Main Street program helps businesses redesign their storefronts and use better marketing techniques for their products to compete with corporate chains on the outskirts of town. "Implementing a Main Street program is really about the entire community, not just the businesses in the downtown area," says Kathy LaPlante, director of the New Hampshire Main Street Program, which formed in 1996. Twenty N.H. communities are enrolled. Locally, Dover joined in 1999 and Somersworth in 2002.

The program is part of the National Trust Main Street Center, which has helped to rejuvenate over 1,200 communities nationwide since 1977. Historic preservation and new economic development are essential to the effort, and Main Street's solution is to empower residents to address these problems through developing the unique parts of their communities, such as interesting architecture, locally owned businesses and a downtown culture that is pedestrian friendly.

CORE vice president Gerry Gilbert would like to see downtown Rochester become a meeting place once more. "We have the opportunity to marry historic aspects of the community with modern amenities," he says.

The Main Street Program aims to build community through a four-point approach that's adjusted for each town, bringing citizens, business owners, and government officials together to work for the common goal. Promotion of the downtown is handled as a single commercial area, much like the way a shopping mall is advertised as a one-stop destination. The design of the area itself, including everything from buildings to pedestrian areas to window displays, must be given careful thought. Economic restructuring preserves historical buildings and adapts downtowns to other uses, such as residences, offices and recreational areas.

However, the four-point approach is neither a quick fix nor a cure-all. Once a community joins the program, it permanently becomes a Main Street Community. "Healthy and vibrant downtowns require a lot of management," LaPlante says. "Everything must work cohesively. It's sort of like setting up a Chamber of Commerce."

The first New Hampshire towns that became part of the program were Littleton and Milford in 1996. Both communities have earned the Great American Main Street Award, a nationwide award given to outstanding examples of revitalized communities.

"People say they can tell which communities are participating," LaPlante says. "Once people start seeing property improved, more business owners want to get involved. It's a domino effect and people begin to gain confidence in their community."

Rochester was the only applicant to the program last year, largely due to a change in the application process. "We used to bring communities in on a competitive basis, but now we want to bring them into the program when they're ready. This year we

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had five or six communities attend the application workshop. Communities are at different levels, and the others weren't quite as far along as Rochester," LaPlante says.

Dworkin says Rochester's inclusion in the program will allow the city to receive the services it needs to go to the next level. "There will be far more dynamic regional marketing and promotional enhancement of the region," Dworkin says.

Dover Main Street Executive Director Michael Provost agrees that the strength of being a Main Street community is the vast amount of networking options. "There's training available for volunteers and workshops for business owners," he says.

Main Street's most recent project in Dover is the restoration of the façade of Harvey's Bakery so it matches other buildings on Central Avenue's "Merchant's Row." The implementation of a successful gift certificate program also encourages shopping in the downtown area, particularly around the holidays. With improved public areas and more trees and flowers being planted every year, Dover is making a name for its own downtown community, similar to what Rochester hopes to do in the coming years.

Dworkin recognizes that CORE can't fight the building of malls and other corporate ventures on the outskirts of the city. Rather, partnering with those industries may be the key to revitalizing downtown. "We have a major base in downtown Rochester and we can't allow it to be neglected," he says.

Gilbert predicts that the areas around Routes 111, 125 and 108 will continue to develop with large commercial enterprises like shopping centers.

"The Main Street Program will allow us to serve both ends of the spectrum to make a better community for everyone," he says.

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