

**Assessment Report  
for  
Upham's Corner  
Main Street Program  
Dorchester (Boston), Massachusetts  
October 26-27, 1995**

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## Acknowledgments

The purpose of the National Main Street Center® assessment visit is to develop a preliminary analysis of the current conditions in a community, according to the Main Street four-point approach™ to commercial district revitalization. This report, prepared by the National Main Street Center® (NMSC) in Washington, D.C., represents the findings and conclusions of a community assessment visit to the commercial district of Upham's Corner, Boston, Massachusetts, conducted on October 26-27, 1995.

The assessment visit was conducted by Joshua Bloom, program associate of the National Main Street Center, and Barbara Swanda, state coordinator for Main Street New Jersey (MSNJ).

Mr. Bloom serves as the Center's primary staff person for Boston Main Streets, the nation's first multi-district, citywide Main Street program. Before joining the staff of the Main Street Center, Mr. Bloom served as executive director of Main Street South Orange in South Orange, New Jersey. He received his bachelor's degree from Columbia University in New York and his master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. His thesis, "The Banking Crisis and Cultural Resources," appeared in the Fall 1994 issue of *Preservation Forum*.

Barbara Swanda oversees the delivery of technical assistance, training and other services to New Jersey's 12 designated Main Street municipalities. Ms. Swanda, a native of New Jersey, was previously assistant state coordinator for the Main Street Arkansas program and, prior to that, executive director of a nonprofit community leadership development organization in Little Rock, Arkansas. Ms. Swanda has a bachelor's degree in the history of art and architecture from The Pennsylvania State University and has done graduate work in near-eastern archaeology at Drew University in New Jersey.

Working closely with Kathy Kottaridis, senior program manager for Boston Main Streets (BMS), and Emily Haber, program manager for BMS, the NMSC and BMS team reviewed pertinent materials before and after their visit to Upham's Corner. During the two days on-site, the team toured the district and the community; conducted interviews with individuals and groups who have a stake in the future of the commercial center; led a public forum to discuss the Main Street approach and its applicability to this neighborhood of Dorchester; and conducted a brief wrap-up session with the Upham's Corner Main Street organizing committee. The conclusions and recommendations presented in this report are based on the information gathered during those activities.

The NMSC and BMS team wish to thank *everyone* who participated in the interviews and public presentations, with special thanks to the following people and organizations for their help and hospitality during the assessment visit:

Bob Haas  
Jeanne Du Bois  
Carolina Corea  
Carlos DePina  
Ben Fin

Gerry Gardino  
Ed Grimes  
Mary Gunn  
Andre Medina  
Beatrice Nathan  
Dot Pierson  
Mark Salzburg  
David Silverman



## Executive Summary

The purpose of the Main Street assessment visit to Upham's Corner was to assess the community's strengths and weaknesses as they apply to grassroots, preservation-based commercial district revitalization. This report identifies those assets and liabilities, then outlines how community leaders can proceed with establishing a Main Street revitalization program in this center of Dorchester.

Upham's Corner is a commercial district full of architectural character and economic opportunity. The grand, curvilinear building facades of Columbia Road lend the commercial district a visual identity and an air of importance. They mark the beginning, middle, and end of the district and, at the same time, create a density of commercial activity.

The Strand Theatre deserves special mention as a model restoration and re-use of a large and ornate performance space. It continues to bring new audiences to Upham's Corner and enhances visitors' perceptions of the neighborhood.

Several businesses in Upham's Corner, particularly America's Foodbasket and L & M Bargain Store, are strong and ready to expand. They not only bring destination shoppers to the district, but promote Upham's Corner through cable television advertising and direct mail. The bank branches also contribute a lot to the economic activity on the street.

The Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation (DBEDC) has been a highly effective community development corporation. It has a history of successful real estate development and rehabilitation projects and has been a collaborative partner with the City of Boston on many occasions. DBEDC's in-house Main Street expertise—in the person of Jeanne Du Bois, who has worked on the Roslindale Main Street program for years—will also serve Upham's Corner well. In addition, Upham's Corner Main Street's corporate buddy, LISC, has unparalleled expertise in community initiated real estate development and the community development corporations which do that work.

At the same time, Upham's Corner's is experiencing some real threats: Crime and drug dealing are pervasive, and the good policing which exists is only effective *when it is present*. Large historic buildings also have a downside—they are expensive to rehabilitate. And, scattered among the strong businesses are too many marginal enterprises that don't know who their customers are. A well-run Main Street program can make progress on all of Upham's Corner's issues. Our concerns are *organizational* in nature.

Leaders of Upham's Corner Main Street must first educate the community. There is a profound lack of knowledge about Main Street in the business and residential community. Main Street must diversify its ranks by including more people of different backgrounds and positions in the Dorchester community. Then leaders must make a commitment to *do Main Street*. Few people we met had weighed, in their own minds, the nature and level of their commitment to this new organization.

Our job is to report what we learned during our visit and suggest "next steps." Therefore, this report contains praise, but it also contains criticism. We hope its observations and recommendations prove useful.

## Introduction

Two critical questions form the framework for every National Main Street Center® assessment visit. The first question is WHETHER a community should organize a local Main Street program. The second is HOW the local program should be structured and funded.

*The community SHOULD organize a local Main Street program only when certain conditions exist:*

- **When there is a bona fide need for commercial district revitalization.** Main Street is intended to be a public-private partnership. Representatives from both sides must (1) admit that the district needs help; (2) agree to cooperate with each other; and (3) agree to follow the Main Street structure. The Main Street approach does not work well in communities where leadership is complacent or unwilling to adhere to a proven structure for commercial revitalization.
- **When the program has some chance of success.** Older commercial areas are resilient, but some will never be revived. In those cases where the vast majority of the jobs, retailing and service sector activity, and major civic functions have already left the district, the NMSC does not hold out much hope for success.
- **When the core group of people organizing the revitalization effort understands and agrees with the basic principles of the Main Street program.** These principles are itemized on the following pages; statements below help summarize them:
  - The Main Street program is incremental. Older commercial districts deteriorate over time and the Center has discovered that they are revitalized the same way: slowly, through a series of small, well-planned steps.
  - Commercial districts are complicated. They need attention in several different areas. Main Street acknowledges this complexity through its comprehensive four-point approach™: **Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Restructuring.**
  - Federal and state programs are uncertain sources of assistance. Local Main Street programs must develop local leadership committed to self-reliance. In the experience of the NMSC, communities that raise funds from local sources have a higher probability of success than communities that rely on “other people’s money.”



- Every older commercial district has problems. It is not the nature or number of the problems that makes the community “unique.” Rather, it is the act of identifying and building on existing assets that distinguishes one community from another and makes the difference between success and failure.
- Both the public and private sectors *must be at the table if commercial district revitalization is to be successful*. Although the Main Street effort is often initiated by one or the other, it is critical that both sectors “sign on” to the effort early in its development.
- There must be a universal commitment to quality. Commercial revitalization cannot occur if any part of the district is allowed to perform or be perceived as second-rate. Quality does not mean “upscale.” Quality means a business district that serves its customers and a Main Street program whose efforts meet or exceed the community’s standards of achievement.
- Commercial revitalization requires *change*. Much of the Main Street approach involves changing local habits and attitudes, beginning with those of the Main Street leadership. Communities—and leaders—who are not ready for change should not embark on Main Street revitalization.
- Main Street is *action-oriented*. Local leaders have a right—and an obligation—to make things happen. While many successful Main Street programs do not have consensus about the direction of their efforts at the beginning, they all move to a place and an organizational system that endorses action. Without well-planned activities that move the organization toward the goals established by its leaders, Main Street cannot survive.

The Main Street approach is inherently practical and based on common sense. And the success of Main Street is based on the quality of local leadership, the characteristics that make the community unique and the willingness of the community to come together around a common goal—the revitalization of the commercial core. It is these features that are explored during a Main Street assessment visit. And it is these features that will dictate the potential for Main Street revitalization in Upham’s Corner.

### **The Main Street Approach and the Eight Principles**

The National Main Street Center® is a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Created by a Congressional Charter in 1949, the National Trust is a leading advocate of historic preservation in the United States. The preservation movement involves more than saving historic buildings. Economic growth, urban revitalization, and the creation of new jobs are all issues the National Trust addresses through the rehabilitation of historic resources.

The National Main Street Center (NMSC) was established by the National Trust in 1980, and since then has worked in 40 states and Puerto Rico, with some 1,100 communities participating in the revitalization of traditional downtown and neighborhood commercial areas. Through these efforts, 102,000 net new jobs have been created, \$5.1 billion has been reinvested in Main Street commercial districts, and communities have built strong organizations to revitalize their commercial districts. The National Main Street Center also sponsors the National Main Street Network™, a professional membership program for organizations interested in commercial revitalization. It produces publications, newsletters, and special reports on revitalization and preservation issues and serves as a clearinghouse for information on community redevelopment issues. The NMSC accomplishes its mission through the Main Street four-point approach™.

### ***The Four Point Approach***

**Design** takes advantage of the visual opportunities inherent in Upham's Corner by directing attention to the improvement of all its physical elements: public and private buildings, storefronts, signs, public spaces, landscaping, merchandising, window displays, parking, and traffic circulation. Its aim is to stress the importance of design quality in all of these areas, to educate people about design quality, and to expedite improvements in the district.

**Promotion** takes many forms, but the aim is to rekindle community pride in the commercial area and change people's attitudes from *negative* to *positive*. Promotion increases sales through special retail events, brings new audiences to the district for festivals and celebrations, and builds the district's image through marketing campaigns. All of these activities serve to attract shoppers, but they equally serve to attract investors, developers, and new businesses.

**Economic Restructuring** strengthens Upham's Corner's existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding existing businesses to provide a balanced commercial mix, by converting unused or underutilized space into productive property, and by sharpening the competitiveness and merchandising skills of the district's business people.

**Organization** establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in the Upham's Corner commercial core. This will allow the Main Street revitalization program to provide effective, ongoing management and advocacy of the district. Diverse groups from the public and private sectors (city government, banks, merchants, and merchant organizations, civic associations, property owners, community leaders, and others) must work together to maintain a successful program.

### ***The Eight Principles of Main Street***

While the Main Street approach provides the format for successful revitalization, implementation of the four-point approach is based on eight principles that pertain to all areas of the revitalization effort:



**Comprehensive.** Commercial district revitalization is a complex process and cannot be accomplished through a single project. For successful and lasting results, a comprehensive approach must be used. Simply stated, *comprehensive* means working on all four points simultaneously.

**Incremental.** Small projects and simple activities lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the revitalization process and help develop skills so that more complex problems can be addressed and more ambitious projects undertaken. Starting with small projects creates progress and momentum at the same time.

**Self-help.** Local leaders must have the desire and the will to make the project successful. The National Main Street Center® provides direction, ideas, and training; but continued and long-term success depends upon the involvement and commitment of the community.

**Public/Private Partnership.** Both the public and private sectors have a vital interest in the economic health and physical stability of the district. Each sector has a role to play, and each must understand the other's strengths and limitations so that an effective partnership can be forged.

**Identifying and Capitalizing on Existing Assets.** Business districts must capitalize on the assets that make them unique. Every district has unique qualities—like distinctive buildings and human scale that give people a sense of belonging, or businesses that have become local institutions. Main Street cannot create new landmarks or institutions; existing local assets must serve as the foundation for all aspects of the revitalization program.

**Quality.** Quality must be emphasized in every aspect of the revitalization program. This applies equally to each element of the program, from storefront design to promotional campaigns to educational programs.

**Change.** Changes in attitude and practice are necessary to improve current economic conditions. Public support for change will build as the program grows. "We want to be what we used to be" doesn't work in commercial district revitalization. *Change* is certain; Main Street seeks to manage and direct that change.

**Implementation-Oriented.** Activity creates confidence in the program and ever greater levels of participation. Frequent, visible changes are a reminder that the revitalization effort is under way. Small projects at the beginning of the program pave the way for larger activities as the revitalization effort matures.



## Strengths and Issues

In order to provide an objective evaluation of the potential for Main Street commercial revitalization in Upham's Corner, it is important to assess the characteristics of the community that strengthen or support revitalization as well as those issues that may threaten the potential for success. The following sections describe the strengths and issues that the assessment team observed during its two-day visit.

### Strengths

#### *Design and Physical Assets*

The physical quality of the community—and particularly the commercial district itself—can contribute or detract greatly from the revitalization effort. The design of the district does not begin and end with its commercial buildings, but rather includes the streetscape, traffic patterns, natural setting, and other visual “cues” that give a place its identity. Listed below are some of the physical assets identified during the assessment visit to Upham's Corner.

- Upham's Corner has several grand commercial buildings that define the entry points and center of the business district. These buildings are dramatically revealed as one approaches the district on Columbia Road.
- An architectural gem, the Strand Theatre, serves as a model for rehabilitation and re-use of this unique building type which, once abandoned, often becomes a “white elephant.”
- Columbia Road is a major artery of the city, making Upham's Corner the “downtown” of Dorchester and linking the district to other Boston neighborhoods and the Expressway.
- There is a preservation ethic in Upham's Corner. Dorchester Bay EDC has not only rehabilitated housing in the neighborhood, but has completed a high-quality renovation of the historic commercial building that houses its offices.
- Upham's Corner has architectural integrity, even in the older buildings that have not been rehabilitated. In most cases this is because the owners haven't had enough money to “re-muddle” them.
- Even without access to the City's rail transit system, Upham's Corner remains a district for pedestrians. The sidewalks in the area of Dudley Street and Columbia Road are filled with shoppers; some of whom come from the surrounding neighborhood and some who drive to shop at destination businesses.

- Residential areas adjacent to the district are filled with spectacular Victorian houses, some of which have been restored, and many of which are well-maintained.
- Attractive apartment buildings line Columbia Road south of the district, adding to the density of the residential areas and enhancing the diversity of housing types in the neighborhood.

#### *Economic Assets*

How Upham's Corner currently performs economically discloses a great deal about its potential for commercial revitalization. Listed below are some of the district's primary economic assets.

- Upham's Corner hosts several destination businesses, including America's Foodbasket and L & M Bargain Store, which attract customers from all parts of the City and even from Greater Boston's suburbs. These stores in particular have successfully diversified the retail economy in the district, which had lost some of its furniture stores.
- The rehabilitation of the 1,400-seat Strand Theatre put Upham's Corner on Boston's cultural map by offering professional performing arts programming year-round. In addition to becoming a well-known destination that attracts both traditional theater-goers and new ethnic markets, the Strand has lengthened the district's effective operating hours. This activity brings both increased safety and the potential for complementary businesses.
- There is much money to be made by merchants who meet the neighborhood's needs. Proof of this lies not only in the enormous success of America's Foodbasket and L & M Bargain Store, but also in the Payless Shoe Source, which claimed that last year it earned the third-highest profits of all Payless stores in New England.
- The Dorchester Bay EDC is already addressing local business needs for available capital through its Small Business Assistance program. The EDC is not just providing loans, but, through Beatrice Nathan, is helping to educate and guide people who are opening new businesses in Dorchester.
- The Dorchester Bay EDC brings its track record of success and its knowledge and understanding of real estate development issues to the Upham's Corner revitalization effort.
- The district is well-served by three full-service bank branches. Citizen's Bank, which occupies a historic former bank headquarters building, is a visual landmark in Upham's Corner with its Art Deco facade and large, stainless steel rotating clock.
- Citizen's Bank has created a neighborhood advisory board to make sure it is meeting the needs of Dorchester's residential and business communities.



- At least two businesses in Upham's Corner are ready to open second stores in other locations. Their success indicates how neighborhood commercial districts continue to be the place where entrepreneurs get their start and demonstrates how Upham's Corner in particular has fostered the growth of new businesses.
- The Upham's Corner Health Center, which handles thousands of patient visits each year, is an important institutional and economic anchor for the neighborhood.
- The furniture niche remains, to an extent, on Hancock and Dudley Streets. It is still possible to comparison shop in Upham's Corner for some "big-ticket" home furnishings.

#### *Organizational Assets*

A community's ability to come together in a collaborative atmosphere is essential for successful Main Street revitalization. Upham's Corner has demonstrated its ability to do this in several ways:

- The Dorchester Bay EDC, which led the Main Street application process in Upham's Corner, has a long history of accomplishment, particularly in the renovation and development of low- and moderate-income housing throughout Dorchester.
- Jeanne Du Bois's experience in particular is an asset. She has years of experience working on the Roslindale Main Street program.
- Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) plans to be Upham's Corner's "corporate buddy." This is an asset in at least two important ways: it provides operational money for the Main Street program during its four-year start-up phase and it brings LISC's nationwide experience in community development to the revitalization effort in Upham's Corner.
- The leaders of the Main Street application process succeeded in getting pledges of support that exceed the matching commitment required by the City. The pledges came from a variety of constituents, including 20 small donations from residents.
- The pair of "beat cops" in Upham's Corner is well-known in the neighborhood, well-liked, and, during their shift, highly effective at routing out drug dealers.
- The Dorchester Bay EDC has committed office space, support services, and payroll management to the new Main Street program.
- The Upham's Corner Board of Trade meets regularly and provides a forum for business people to communicate with each other and learn about progress in neighborhood policing efforts and the Main Street initiative.

- Dorchester Bay EDC is working to unite the Dorchester community and improve the neighborhood's image in many ways, including its sponsorship of the Upham's Corner Multicultural Street Festival.
- We met a number of individuals in the business, residential, performing arts, and service institutions. These people offer a wide range of skills and interests and they can be enlisted in the Main Street effort, they will bring diverse representation and expertise to the table.
- The Bond Street Community Center provides the Upham's Corner community with important youth services. It should be a good Main Street partner.
- The citywide Main Street program itself is an asset to Upham's Corner because it will improve communication between the neighborhood and city departments, and it will serve as a vehicle for Upham's Corner Main Street to coordinate its efforts with policing, capital improvements, and other City initiatives.

## **Issues Threatening Revitalization**

### *Design*

- The grand architecture of Upham's Corner is as much a liability as an asset. Multi-story buildings are expensive to renovate and difficult to reuse profitably.
- Columbia Road as a major City thoroughfare is also an asset and a liability. Because there are no parallel routes, through-traffic clogs the streets at peak travel times. The problem is made worse by double-parking around the Strand Theatre and Bank of Boston.
- The parking lot behind America's Foodbasket is poorly designed, unsafe, and a concealed haven for illegal activity.

### *Organization*

- Almost no one in the business or residential communities, other than a few key people involved in the effort, has any idea that Upham's Corner is forming a Main Street program. They don't know what Main Street is or how the revitalization program will work.
- Most of the pledges for financial support have not been collected. No one has taken responsibility for calling them in and continuing the fund-raising work.

- The proposed location for the Main Street office—in the Pierce building, behind a “buzzed” gate and a locked door and up four flights of stairs—is neither visible, nor accessible.

#### *Economic Restructuring*

- In the midst of thriving businesses like America’s Foodbasket, L & M Bargain Store, Payless, and others are an assortment of merchants who are asleep at the wheel. These business owners do not know who their customers are, offer a poor selection of merchandise, and project an unfriendly attitude.
- Some of the businesses in Upham’s Corner are clearly fronts for drug dealing.
- Many merchants are burnt out, ready to retire, disinterested, or otherwise apathetic. They are stuck in an entitlement “gimme” mode, rather than having a self-help attitude.



## Observations

Over the course of two days in Upham's Corner, we made a number of observations about how the district functions and how Main Street is being received. We also noted some potential pitfalls that the new organization should try to avoid. Some of these are described below:

- ***Upham's Corner Main Street needs new blood.*** Those who have led the Upham's Corner Main Street proposal-writing and organizational development tasks on the DBEDC and the Board of Trade have done an admirable job, but appear a little burnt out from the process. Oftentimes, the people who *start* a new project or organization are not the ones who want to manage it. These individuals deserve credit for all they have done, and they deserve a reprieve as Main Street moves into its next phase—a phase that will also require a lot of grassroots community organizing.

In addition, Upham's Corner should take advantage of the fact that Main Street is new that it is and finally here (after disappointing attempts over the last decade to form a local program based on the Roslindale model). Organizers should do everything they can to ensure that leadership is diverse and representative of the community, that the organization will be entrepreneurial and innovative, and that it is not *perceived from the outside* as being run by "a bunch of insiders." We believe program organizers should make a concerted effort now to broaden the corps of people involved.

In light of the fact that many customers and residents of Upham's Corner are Spanish-speaking, we would like to underscore a point that was made to us in several meetings: Upham's Corner Main Street program should have a Spanish-speaking component. A number of Main Street programs around the country have actively encouraged multi-lingual participation through simple, common-sense solutions like board representation, bilingual newsletters, and special community meetings aimed at different cultures.

- ***There is a lack of knowledge about the Main Street program.*** Most people in the business community have never heard of Main Street, and the community meeting revealed a similar lack of knowledge in the residential community. It is hard to build the necessary financial support, an effective Main Street board, and a core of active volunteers when the public is unaware of the program. The lack of recognition we received in our "drop-by" exploration of Upham's Corner indicates an urgent need for education and outreach to every constituency in the community.
- ***There is a pervasive idea that residents aren't interested or aren't available.*** It's simply not true. One concerned resident called the National Trust offices the day before the assessment; he wanted to know what the community meeting was about and why no one knew how to get involved in Main Street. Residents *are* available and interested in almost every neighborhood where the NMSC works. It's the job of Main Street leaders to reach

these people and convince them that a healthy commercial center is important to their quality of life. Many residents are available to do the *work* of Main Street as well: Young parents who are home with their children, people who work at home, and people with flexible work schedules are frequently the most industrious Main Street volunteers.

- ***The word “program” has a bad reputation in Upham’s Corner.*** As innovative as the citywide Boston Main Streets program is, it has an unavoidable liability—the imprint of “The City.” As we walked the streets of Upham’s Corner and spoke with business owners, many people lost interest at the mere mention of the word “program”—the garage doors closed before our eyes.

That puts Upham’s Corner Main Street in an awkward position: It needs (and must acknowledge) the City’s strong support, which will serve the district well. At the same time, it must communicate to the *business community* the locally organized, locally managed, locally supported principles of the Main Street approach. The solution is more complex than semantics alone, but when Upham’s Corner gets to the point of choosing a formal name for Main Street, we suggest that it leave the word “program” out of its official title.

- ***Visible, on-the-street Main Street offices make the community-organizing part of the revitalization effort a lot easier.*** We agree—the offer of office space in the Dorchester EDC offices has some clear advantages: It’s free, it has all the comforts of a fully functioning office at hand (telephone, copier, fax, furniture), and it provides access to professional colleagues engaged in related community development work. But it also has an important detraction: *It is not visible from the street.*

A Main Street office on the street naturally attracts attention. People come to think of it as the “business district’s community center.” Passers-by stop in to see what the fuss is all about; board members come by to pick up messages and mail and to chat with the manager. And, even more important, visibility is the best way to build the ranks of volunteers.

- ***Pretend the City Main Street money doesn’t exist.*** We suggest that Main Street’s leaders make a concerted effort to dispel the notion that Main Street is a *grant*. Forget, for the moment, that Main Street designation comes with any financial support. Think of Main Street as: a *tool* and a *process*. That’s what it is. All Main Street programs need money to get things done, but the most important money comes from the *community*, which is investing, literally and symbolically in the future of its commercial center.

The Public Facilities Department’s establishment of the Upham’s Corner Neighborhood Enterprise District in 1991 had a systemic flaw: it did not require matching financial support from the community. This arrangement raises a potential “red flag” as Upham’s Corner begins to establish its Main Street program. The business community is not accustomed to sharing the financial burden of a business development program or a Main Street manager’s salary.



- ***Why are some of the most successful businesses only paying \$30 to be a member of the Board of Trade?*** If Main Street is going to raise meaningful amounts of money from the business community, it will need to break with the Board of Trade's tradition of charging a flat membership rate for all businesses. It is a fundamental principle of fund-raising that one must identify funders, assess their ability to contribute, and then make personalized pitches to them. Main Street can create some basic categories of membership with modest fees; however, it must then supplement those standard fees with an organized, targeted fund raising campaign.
- ***If the Board of Trade becomes the Main Street organization, is there still a need for a merchants-only forum?*** We don't know—that's for the business community to answer. The Board of Trade has served as a place where business people can network with each other and discuss their particular concerns. Most of those concerns can be addressed by a Main Street organization, but it will not provide the peer-to-peer social environment. If the business community wants a peer forum, it must decide whether that forum should be formal or informal and, if a formal organization is chosen, who should lead it.
- ***Physical changes on the street will be imperative for neighborhood buy-in.*** Facade improvements are among the most visible of Main Street's projects. The Boston Main Street neighborhoods will receive \$100,000 each (over four years) to use as physical improvement incentive grants. We believe that such fix-up projects will be critical to the success of Upham's Corner in Main Street's first year of operation. They will give Main Street visibility and credibility as the entire community starts to see positive change. Wait long enough, however, to implement a quality facade program. To assure the quality of the facade grant program and its results, Main Street will need a design committee that has agreed on its priorities, a well-publicized competitive application process, and a Main Street manager.
- ***The "design police" tactic can backfire.*** We agree that many examples of bad signs, facades, and window displays can be found in Upham's Corner. However, Main Street works best by building collaborative relationships, offering design assistance, and providing incentives to invest in design improvements. Main Street typically has no enforcement authority, and we would argue that "policing" design changes is a poor way to win friends. In fact, it can be counterproductive, working against the organizational development that must be done to build political and financial support.
- ***Some businesses are advertising in creative ways.*** It is unusual to have two independent, family-run businesses advertising regularly on local radio and television. The advertising campaigns of America's Foodbasket and L & M Bargain use a combination of Spanish-speaking and Cape Verdean cable television stations, radio, and direct mail. They both find print media to be ineffective for their markets. The investment of these businesses is adding value to the entire Upham's Corner district: they are promoting the district regionally as a place to shop. Potentially, Main Street can piggyback on any special

promotions or sales these two businesses advertise. In addition, these merchants are thinking strategically about the kinds of new businesses that would complement their stores and fit logically into the district's economy.

- ***The Strand Theatre and its audiences are just waiting for complementary businesses.*** While there is potential for the development of businesses that would serve the evening, theatre-going audiences, business recruitment is one of the last pieces to fall into place in Main Street revitalization programs. This is logical because so many building blocks must be laid first. Main Street can make a start now by gathering information that could help an entrepreneur decide whether to open up a restaurant to serve theatre-goers. Surveying Strand patrons for potential demand would be a good start.
- ***The split in police district boundaries is confusing.*** The Upham's Corner commercial district falls into policing Areas B and C. A portion of the district lies within the highly effective "Safe Neighborhood Initiative" of Dorchester. We did not have the opportunity to meet with representatives of the police department during the assessment visit and therefore do not know if the community finds the division as confusing as we do. What we can say is this: Although Main Street is not a crime prevention or anti-drug program, it must be *comprehensive* if it is to be effective. To make sure policing is a coordinated part of the revitalization agenda, Upham's Corner Main Street should create a formal communications link with the responsible police divisions.
- ***Don't create a Business Improvement District (BID) yet.*** BIDs must develop out of a "bottom-up" process. City councils rarely approve these districts if the business community is not the group driving the initiative. Main Street won't win many friends if it tries to pass what will be *perceived as* a new tax in the organization's first year of operation.

BIDs are one way to create a solid funding mechanism for a revitalization effort, but they are not a panacea. Because no one has to *work* to raise the money, program leaders and participants can easily become complacent. *Nothing builds a sense of ownership like having to go out and ask for money to support a cause you believe in.*

In addition to the above cautions, BID legislation in Massachusetts was just approved by the state legislature in 1995, and it has some quirks that make it different from the enabling legislation in other states. The Massachusetts law has an "opt-out" provision allowing property owners to declare at the outset (or at a later date, if they show financial hardship) that they do not wish to pay into, or receive benefits from, the improvement district's organization.



## Recommendations

The "Observations" section of this report records some of the things we learned in our two days in Upham's Corner. Some of our comments concern projects that will not come up for a while. The tasks at this stage of the program's development are mundane, but important.

The community's goal is to create a *locally organized*, soundly funded, action-oriented Main Street program that will serve as the clearinghouse for all resources as they relate to the commercial district. It should be the place where the *neighborhood*—both residents and business owners—reaches consensus on its goals for the commercial district's future. What follows is a description of the first steps in that process: **Creating a Formal Upham's Corner Main Street Organization.**

Creating a new organization is difficult and time consuming work, but the pay-off is long-lasting. Those Main Street programs that make an early investment in recruiting volunteers and building consensus around the organization's goals and objectives are the programs that succeed over time.

- Step One:* Identify the group and individuals who need to be "at the table" to lead the new Main Street organization. By its own description the Main Street group present at the assessment visit was not the group committed to moving the revitalization effort ahead. Nor was it broadly representative of the Dorchester and Upham's Corner community. Since then, we understand that several key members of the business community have stepped back from their commitments to sit on the Main Street board. Spend part of a Main Street committee meeting discussing who is *not at the table but should be*.
- Step Two:* Formalize the membership of the steering committee. To really get going, Main Street will need a core group of people prepared to commit the time and effort necessary to move the organization through its start-up tasks. They are not making a commitment for life—they must simply be willing to reach into the Dorchester community to educate constituencies and seek out diverse participants and potential leaders.
- Step Three:* Develop a core group of spokespeople. The steering committee must educate itself so individuals can speak informally about the general goals and characteristics of a Main Street organization and specifically about how it will function in Upham's Corner. The steering committee should assign itself "homework" by asking everyone read the *Main Street Board Member's Handbook* and the first several chapters of *Revitalizing Downtown*, especially pages 1-24.
- Step Four:* In addition to giving regular Main Street updates at Board of Trade meetings, make arrangements to speak about Main Street at four neighborhood meetings in



*the next four months.* These do not have to be meetings convened by the Main Street steering committee. Rather, the committee should arrange for one of its members to be an invited guest speaker at the regular meetings of neighborhood associations.

At these meetings, spend a few minutes explaining the four points of Main Street to the group. Then discuss some of the eight principles, including *comprehensive, incremental, and self-help*. Then give people an opportunity to express their dreams, expectations, and fears of Main Street. Keep in mind:

- Main Street is *community initiated*—it is a tool to help communities implement their own vision and plans to improve their commercial centers.
- Main Street is not just for business owners—everyone has a stake in Upham’s Corner.
- Commercial district revitalization requires a *long-term* commitment. The most successful Main Street programs start with small, visible, “do-able” projects and move on to tackle more complex problems over time.

Keep a record of the ideas expressed at these meetings so they can be incorporated into the work plan. Also, keep a sign-in sheet so you can develop a pool of potential Main Street volunteers and committee members.

*Step Five:* Specify the roles that existing organizations will play in the Main Street effort, particularly the Dorchester Bay EDC. At the public meeting at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, several people raised concerns about that Main Street would duplicate the efforts of an existing community organizations. The following image of “bricks and mortar” might help explain Main Street’s role in relation to other community groups:

In a small town where there are few existing organizations, Main Street must serve as the bricks and the mortar—implementing both the individual projects (the “bricks”) and the comprehensive plan (the “mortar”) tying the projects together.

In an active urban neighborhood, Main Street may only be the mortar: Main Street serves as the place where other organizations’ projects—those that are directly related to the *commercial district*—fit together under an overall plan of work. If bricks are missing—for example, if no one else is running a facade improvement grant program or helping merchants with merchandising—Main Street takes on that work. If the bricks already exist, Main Street links them together.

*Step Six:* Re-organize the Board of Trade as the Main Street program and formalize the structure. Write Main Street’s articles of incorporation and by-laws and begin

drafting the 501(c)3 application for IRS recognition as a charitable organization. An attorney should be retained to assist the steering committee with these tasks. And if it does not already have one, the steering committee will need to open a checking account for the new organization.

In general, the NMSC advises exactly what Upham's Corner proposes to do: Set up Main Street as a new, independent, 501(c)3 corporation. An organization with no baggage is usually best able to bring residents and business people together to work on commercial district revitalization.

To write the by-laws, we suggest setting up an *ad hoc* committee to do it in a couple of weeks. The NMSC can provide examples from other organizations, but don't simply copy them—Upham's Corner Main Street will have to live with and abide by these provisions.

*Step Seven:* *Select the Board of Directors for the Main Street effort.* Once the articles and by-laws are written, the steering committee can nominate people to serve on the board. Candidates should bring a range of needed skills to the board and should recognize that Main Street boards not only set policy; they *implement it*. Potential board members should read the *Main Street Board Member's Handbook* before accepting a nomination.

Because the organization does not have a membership base at this point, the steering committee will have to elect the first board. Boards of 12 or fewer tend to be the most agile and action oriented. The NMSC recommends that the committee identify at least two candidates for each board position and then vote among themselves. The NMSC also recommends that the by-laws establish the following: during the first term of the Board, a portion (usually one-third) of the members serve for only one year, with an equal portion serving two- and three-year terms. These staggered terms allow new leaders to cycle in at the end of the first year, when Main Street will be gaining recognition and acceptance. After the first three-year cycle, all elected terms should be for three years. This way, new members can be brought on each year. Staggered terms are a good way to build leadership skills while reducing potential cynicism that the Main Street board is a bunch of "insiders."

*We recommend the board not form standing committees* until it has hired a manager and created its work plan. Committees that are formed too early often fall apart because the new organization has not established its leadership or agreed upon its vision.

*Step Eight:* *Review the organization's proposed budget and call in pledges.* Now is the time to collect any local pledges that are still outstanding. Boards fear fund-raising more than any other activity; yet it is necessary if the organization is to proceed with its program of work. The Boston Main Streets program was designed to disburse funding to neighborhood Main Street organizations on a *reimbursement*



*basis*. Therefore, in order to hire a manager, Upham's Corner Main Street must have money in the bank.

Over the next four years, local Main Street programs in Boston will have to assume a greater share of their operating and project-related expenses. Keep in mind that, regardless of the amount, the most important contributions come from residents, small business owners, and grassroots efforts. In fall, 1996, the NMSC will offer a workshop in Main Street fund-raising techniques to help local organizations strengthen and diversify their funding sources.

Funds should be pledged for multiple years, with a three-year pledge being optimal. Members of the board of directors, as well as the steering committee, should actively participate in raising funds for the program. *Fund-raising is the responsibility of leadership*—staff is an ineffective fund raiser because the effort will be seen as an attempt to secure his or her own salary.

*Step Nine:* *Form a hiring committee.* This committee should consist of three (no more than four) individuals who will review resumes, interview applicants, and recommend a candidate to the board of directors. The committee should be small, but diverse. It should include people of different backgrounds (ethnicity, gender, etc.) and constituencies (resident, merchant, etc.)

The hiring process should take place at the same time as the work planning in *Step Ten*. The order is important: The community creates the vision and the agenda; Main Street leadership hires a staff person to help implement it. Creating the agenda builds ownership, but the board will want to hire staff as soon thereafter as possible so the organization does not lose steam.

*DO NOT HIRE* a manager until Main Street leaders have formed a board, completed the formal incorporation tasks, and raised funds or the individuals doing the hiring could be vulnerable to liability issues.

*Step Ten:* *The NMSC will work with Upham's Corner Main Street to produce a detailed work plan for the organization.* A detailed work plan often determines the success of a new Main Street program, just as the lack of a work plan often predicts failure. The board of directors should schedule this technical assistance through Boston Main Streets when it feels the service would be most useful (probably spring, 1996). The NMSC will use the setting of a community meeting to help Upham's Corner Main Street articulate its vision, identify priorities, and outline a well-rounded, comprehensive plan based on the Main Street four points. A good work plan identifies the *cost, responsible individual, and due date* for each item.

The work plan will be Main Street's road map for the next 18 months, and it will serve at least four other important purposes: It will help the board refine its draft budget for the organization because it will know what each activity will cost; it will help the board in hiring a manager because leaders will know what skills to look for (and the manager will know what he or she is getting into); it will hold the *organization* accountable to the community to accomplish what it said it

would do; and, finally, the work plan will serve as an excellent fund-raising tool as projects get checked off and Main Street builds a track record in Upham's Corner. *All board and committee members should have a copy of the work plan so each person will understand how his or her work fits into the whole organization.*

*Step Eleven: Secure office space.* We realize this task has already been accomplished. In the "Observations" section, we noted the importance of a Main Street office's visibility. There is potential here for creativity: signs can help; maybe one of the banks would donate some lobby space where the Main Street manager could spend part of each day.

*Step Twelve: Make staff decisions.* Paid professional staff does not single-handedly "do" Main Street, but is essential in guiding the work of the board and volunteers. Boston Main Streets is supplementing the cost of hiring a manager for the four start-up years of the Main Street program in Upham's Corner. Although the *Main Street Board Members' Handbook* describes the manager's role and desired qualities and characteristics, there is no one specific set of experiences or education that qualifies an individual for the job.

The Main Street manager must be a good communicator who can build collaborative relationships with a broad range of individuals in the business, residential, institutional, and governmental communities. Because commercial district revitalization involves such a wide range of projects, the manager must be able to divide his or her attention among the organization's many activities.

Hire someone with experience, but don't hire someone who is *overqualified*. The job requires a willingness—a *desire*—to work with and manage volunteers. Main Street is not staff-driven; it is staff-managed. There is too much work for one person to do it all. Someone who is burnt out on community organizing or who wants to sit at a desk all day will not be effective or happy as a Main Street manager.

*Should the manager be someone from within the community or outside it?* Both backgrounds have advantages and disadvantages. Most notably, managers who are hired from within the community have the advantage of knowing the turf, the players, and the history. At the same time, they often come with established allies and enemies. Outsiders lack this familiarity, but they bring to the neighborhood a fresh perspective with fewer preconceived ideas of what is possible. They have no long-standing detractors, but they have to work hard to meet people and build relationships.

Emily Haber, from the Boston Main Streets (BMS) office, should be present at interviews of any candidates you are considering for the manager's position. In addition, Josh Bloom, from the National Main Street Center, will be available to sit in. Both Emily and Josh can answer questions candidates may have about the nature of the work. BMS and the NMSC will offer their opinions



on candidates' strengths and weaknesses, but the Upham's Corner Main Street board must make the final hiring decision.

## Conclusion

Upham's Corner has more going for it than most of the commercial districts the National Main Street Center works with. As noted throughout this report, its buildings, businesses, neighborhood organizations, and institutions are all impressive. Still, for Main Street to work, the community must do some "heavy lifting" on the organizational end for Main Street to work.

The first issue is public education. Holding public information meetings or attending scheduled neighborhood meetings to explain Main Street will be necessary to build the financial and volunteer support Upham's Corner Main Street must have to succeed.

The people leading the Main Street effort in Upham's Corner have the experience to organize an effective program. They understand the *comprehensive* strategy of Main Street and the *incremental* nature of the work. To their credit, none of the people we encountered in our visit are focused on a single, "big-fix" project.

What we worry about most is that the program will jump the gun. We heard most people express great eagerness to hire a Main Street. If a staff person is brought before the board and the organization has not coalesced and reached a consensus about its mission, the program will be off to a weak start and could unravel.

These start-up steps are never easy, and the truth is that the work only gets harder. The results of that work, however, should be their own reward.