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New Jersey Needs Its Downtowns. Here's How To Strengthen Them.

By Peter Kasabach
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New Jersey has [some great downtowns](#). From [Englewood](#) to [Asbury Park](#) to [Glassboro](#), they are vibrant places with active street life, a variety of amenities in close proximity, a range of housing choices within easy reach, and, in many cases, access to transit. And demand for these places is growing.

However, we haven't always valued our downtowns. Development patterns in the 1980s focused on cheaply available land on which new, low-density construction could be built, connected by highways and through roads but far from our centers of commerce. In the process, homes got separated from jobs, shops and schools, and major roads and malls drew business away from downtowns. And we didn't realize at the time what we were sacrificing.

The good news is, Governor Phil Murphy and Lt. Governor Sheila Oliver announced last month that [funding would be restored to the Department of Community Affairs' Main Street New Jersey downtown revitalization program](#). It turns out downtowns play a significant role in local economies. People walk around and linger in a great downtown, shopping and dining and feeding the local economy. [Employers want to locate in downtown areas](#) to make it easier to recruit and retain a great workforce. And more and more people want to live in a great downtown, whether it's [a recent college graduate beginning her career who needs an affordable first apartment](#), or empty-nesters who want to stay in the same community, but with less house and more destinations they can reach without a car.

As [demand for downtowns grows](#), resources to revitalize these districts must grow too. Many of our downtowns are confronting limited access to jobs, or a shortage of some housing types, or a nearby highway siphoning off local business. But there are things these communities can do to capitalize on renewed demand. They just need the right tools to get started.

That's why [restarting the Main Street New Jersey program at its original funding level of \\$500,000](#), which Gov. Murphy has included in his budget, is critical. The program provides training and technical assistance to local officials and downtown managers to enable them to build a robust management organization; improve the design of their downtowns; find opportunities for economic expansion; and promote their downtowns to potential businesses, residents and visitors.

According to a [media release from then-Gov. Christie's office](#) lauding the accomplishments of the Main Street program, in 2011 the program attracted more than \$123.5 million in public and private investment and created more than 500 new jobs, and every state dollar invested in New Jersey's Main Streets in 2011 yielded \$227 in economic benefit. That's \$113 million in return on the original \$500,000 investment, a compelling argument for funding the program in full.

We encourage our state Legislature to keep the Main Street program in the budget. Should any legislators be skeptical, they need look no further than the [Borough of Somerville](#), the second Main Street community in the state. Rick St. Pierre, the current chairman of the [Downtown Somerville Alliance](#), says the Main Street program has enabled the borough to create, maintain and market the kind of public-realm quality and consistency that attracts private development. Greater density of development, he says, provides more financial resources for the borough, and generates higher property values not just on Main Street but in the neighborhoods surrounding it. "A strong Main Street feeds the resident community," he says. "A weak Main Street does not."

Reinstating the Main Street program is an excellent first step. The program can then be leveraged even more by revisiting its structure and the services it offers, and by coordinating complementary state financing and incentive programs. [Pennsylvania](#) offers an interesting model for program structure that allows staff to build public- and private-sector partnerships, attract new funds, and generate increased support for participating downtowns.

Great downtowns have a lot in common, but each reflects the distinctive character of the community, relies on a unique set of strengths, and occupies a different place on the path to revitalization. A strong state Main Street program will help local leaders leverage downtown assets in order to turn them into great local places and, equally important, magnets for growth and prosperity.

Peter Kasabach is the executive director of New Jersey Future, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that promotes policies for sustainable growth and development in New Jersey.