



MAIN STREET
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COMMUNITY PROFILE: H Street, Washington, D.C.

The resurgence of H Street, a storied community that grew up in the 19th century just blocks from the U.S. Capitol, all but defies belief. It's a tale of resilience in the face of violence, a testament to the power of persistence when government and the private sector (and neighbors) say "Nothing can be done," and a story of revitalization on a scale few could have imagined even 15 years ago.

H Street Northeast is hot again, and virtually no one thought that could happen.

Anwar Saleem, the executive director of H Street Main Street, grew up in this neighborhood. In the 1950s, he says, you could do anything or buy anything you wanted along the 1.5-mile strip that flows east toward the Anacostia River. You could go to the movies, buy sheet music or instruments at one of the locally owned music shops, purchase a week's worth of groceries or find the coolest clothes and furniture and jewelry in town. "It was a mecca for African-Americans."

But in 1968, when Saleem was in the seventh grade, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated and H Street, along with other neighborhood commercial districts across the country, exploded. "Fires started. We saw people looting. The blaze at the jewelry store grew so hot that beams inside glowed red for days." The scope of destruction citywide was devastating: At least a dozen people perished and more than 1,100 buildings in the District were damaged or destroyed.

For months, then years, then decades, recovery on H Street seemed impossible. Empty lots pockmarked the neighborhood and entire store fronts were gone. "In the '70s and '80s vacancy and destruction made us a playpen for crime," Saleem remembers, "and we had a drug epidemic on these streets with crack and murders and all the rest. You didn't walk through H Street in those years—you ran."

So what changed? Main Street America.

H Street Main Street

Organization Founded: **2002**

City Population: **693,972**

Public Investment: **\$311 million**

Private Investment: **\$2.5 billion**

Net Gain in Businesses: **423**

Net Gain in Jobs: **5,300**

Buildings Rehabilitated: **244**

"I started looking at national Main Street programs and solutions, and I thought, 'H Street could do that. H Street can do that right here.'" True, there weren't too many urban models but Saleem says Main Street America "had the bones in place to take us where we wanted to go. We just needed to duplicate that structure and create something that worked for our people here."

In 2002, with the support of a new mayor, the neighborhood became an official Main Street America program dedicated to working with private and local partners to encourage and support small business growth and revitalization. For the first time in more than 30 years local property owners and entrepreneurs saw a glimmer of hope.

After completing a comprehensive plan, H Street Main Street hired homeless and formerly incarcerated residents to clean the streets, calling them "The Clean Team." The streetscape started looking better. Then local business owners began working with elected officials to repair sidewalks and improve basic services such as trash collection. When government officials floated the idea of using H Street as the pilot location for a new streetcar line—the first in the District in more than 50 years—Saleem and other property owners offered support. "I said gas prices are going up, car prices are going up, parking is getting

DUE TO THE EFFORTS OF H STREET MAIN STREET, HUNDREDS OF NEW BUSINESSES HAVE OPENED IN THE DISTRICT OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES.

more expensive...a streetcar will work here and we can dig up the streets just once and get tracks, new utility lines, new water lines, street lighting, trees and flower beds at no cost to local consumers.”

They also inaugurated a summer youth program, hiring 15 young people the first year and training them in financial literacy and customer service before placing them in businesses for four weeks. “We knew that if young people in the community got involved—the same young people who walk up and down these streets and once saw devastation—they would be its protectors.” Saleem says the program has exceeded expectations, and will train a class of 85 young people this year alone.

H Street Main Street then reached outward, promoting the potential of the neighborhood to prospective investors, encouraging them to see changes firsthand and move in while space was affordable. A new street festival was a key part of that effort. It started as a simple block party with several hundred guests. As the neighborhood grew—each year since 2002 at least 25 new businesses have moved in—the festival swelled in size and impact. Today more than 150,000 people attend the annual get-together. Recent economic development numbers are equally impressive: Since its founding, H Street Main Street has attracted more than 400 new businesses (including two large grocery stores) and more than 5,000 new jobs to the community.



Angela Rosser, who opened her State Farm insurance agency here 15 years ago, has seen the effect of change first hand. “When I moved into the area other business owners thought I was crazy—it was just so challenging,” she recalls. “We had boarded-up buildings, not a lot of retail activity, nothing that would attract the typical small business owner.” But Rosser comes from Detroit and appreciates the untapped potential of underserved communities. “My intention from the start was to make a difference. As a business owner and a resident I could give back and help the economic base in D.C.” Rosser’s was one of the businesses that grew the summer youth program, accepting students for summer jobs and providing them with training and income.

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“I take my hat off to H Street Main Street,” she says. “They’ve led the effort, often against the odds, to bring businesses and residents back, and today’s ‘H Street Vibe’ is something special. Not long ago this transformation would have been absolutely unthinkable.”
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