



COMMUNITY PROFILE: Washington, Missouri

Ask Mayor Sandy Lucy why the historic heart of her hometown on the Missouri River is thriving and she'll answer immediately: "This is a community where we stand up and get the job done. When we decided to promote and celebrate downtown, and make it a magnet for merchants and visitors, Main Street America showed us the way—and our citizens showed up to make success a reality."

Downtown Washington, Inc.

Organization Founded: **1989**

City Population: **14,061**

Public and Private Reinvestment:
\$64.8 million

Net Gain in Businesses: **112**

Net Gain in Jobs: **435**

The results are remarkable. Today, Washington has more than 500 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, a dynamic Main Street organization that works seamlessly with city government and the Chamber of Commerce to promote continued growth, restaurants and galleries filling the town's historic brick buildings, and a boom in residential construction that has produced renovated apartments in Washington's signature century-old brick buildings as well as new town homes rising from the site of a one-time industrial plant overlooking the river.

"Part of our success is always thinking out of the box," says Bridgette Kelch, executive director of Downtown Washington, Inc., an Accredited Main Street America community. ***"Our board members are not frightened about trying new ideas. They seek new opportunities."***

Efforts to enhance the vitality of Washington's historic downtown date to the early 1970s, when local merchants united to address the troubling growth of shopping complexes to the south. By 1989, Washington had become one of five Missouri towns selected as a pilot community for the newly formed Missouri Main Street Program. And in the years that followed, Downtown Washington, Inc. helped to re-shape the layout and aesthetic of the downtown district, and partnered with the city to renovate Main Street and actively promote downtown retailers. Then they really moved outside the box.

"Despite a variety of promising initiatives we had underway, we just weren't seeing the kind of investment that we hoped for," Bridgette Kelch remembers. "So we did something unusual: We took out loans—a scary thing for any Main Street organization—and actually purchased historic buildings...Then we started revitalizing them ourselves."

First came the town's oldest standing structure, an 1835 log building that was donated by local residents and renovated by volunteers over the course of four years. Downtown Washington, Inc. moved into the restored cabin and made it their office. In 2005, they learned that an 1856 building a few blocks away was slated for demolition. This time they purchased the building in coordination with the city and the Chamber of Commerce, and initiated a comprehensive rehabilitation program that included the removal of unsympathetic additions and the installation of a covered pavilion protecting three sides of the building. In 2006, Washington's new Farmers' Market Pavilion opened there, quickly emerging as a popular market and sought-after event space. A few years later the upper floors were converted into revenue-producing residential units.

At about the same time Kelch heard rumblings about the future of the Old Post Office. A downtown landmark since 1922, the building was much-admired and well-used by residents working downtown, but the Postal Service soon declared its intention to shutter the building and move operations to a new facility at the edge of town. "The first thing I thought was, 'There are 700 post office boxes that

DOWNTOWN WASHINGTON, INC. CELEBRATES THEIR 2012 GREAT AMERICAN MAIN STREET AWARD. BOTTOM: THE WASHINGTON FARMERS' MARKET PAVILION HOUSES SOUGHT-AFTER EVENT SPACE AND UPPER FLOOR HOUSING.

people here check every day,” Kelch remembers, “We can’t afford to lose that volume of foot traffic downtown.” So she approached the Postal Service and offered to buy the building and let the postal service continue operations inside. “They told us ‘We don’t want to run a post office downtown but you can.’ We didn’t even know that was possible! But we said, ‘It’s a deal.’”

Downtown Washington, Inc. purchased their third building in 2009 and invested \$650,000 in renovations. Today, they operate the structure as a Contract Postal Unit providing nearly all the services of a traditional post office with one added benefit: a percentage of all transactions stay downtown fostering further growth and reinvestment. “This would have been the first government entity to leave downtown,” Kelch explains, “and we just couldn’t stand by and let that happen.”

Apart from Washingtonians’ willingness to invest and volunteer, Kelch points to several reasons for creative revitalization. First is the city’s intact historic infrastructure. The red brick buildings that fill the city’s blocks are “an identifier for our area,” she says. They differentiate Washington from other communities and serve as a draw for tourists who visit the extensive network of nearby wineries then return to shop and dine downtown.

She also points to Main Street America, its conferences and training programs. “Main Street gives us credibility,” she says. “We are naturally competitive here, and we want to learn what our peers are doing: what works elsewhere, what path should we follow?” After Downtown Washington, Inc. won the coveted Great American Main Street Award from Main Street America in 2012, board members immediately asked, “What’s next? What more can we do?” All board members now attend at least one Main Street training per calendar year, which further encourages their commitment and education: “It’s not just me coming back from a National Main Street Conference and sharing great information,” Kelch says. “Now our board members and volunteers go themselves, speak with



peers in other parts of the country and share their insights about what Main Street America can accomplish.”

“Thanks to Main Street training, we’ve also established ourselves as the authority for local revitalization efforts,” Kelch says. “We walk the walk telling potential investors what we have done and what has worked. We can say, ‘This is what happened when we dug into our building... You should plan on budgeting a contingency. Or, we can provide needed resources and connect new buyers with other property owners who have opened stores and restaurants and can share their own experiences.’”

Finally, Kelch advises to never underestimate the power and capacity of enthusiastic residents. Thanks to a constantly changing calendar of events, Washington’s downtown has become a powerful draw for shoppers, diners, farmers and tourists. They choose to return because there are always new reasons to return.

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*“When my husband and I moved downtown nearly 30 years ago,” Mayor Lucy recalls, “people were clamoring to get out. Old timers told us we were throwing money away and that downtown was just going to fall into the river one day. **But now, because of our Main Street America connection, because of our volunteers and investors, we’ve convinced our citizens that this place matters. As a community, we view our history with a whole new respect. As I tell people at City Hall, ‘The world belongs to those who show up. And any one of us can effect change if we just stick with it.’”***

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