A Qualitative Analysis on the Feasibility of Implementing Elements of the Main Street Approach for the City of Mason, Ohio

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A Qualitative Analysis on the Feasibility of Implementing Elements of the Main Street Approach for the City of Mason, Ohio

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Graduate Capstone Project
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Spring 2018
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Executive Summary

The City of Mason is a thriving community of roughly 30,000 residents to the Northeast of Cincinnati, Ohio. Mason is projected to see continued and significant growth, in terms of both population and development, over the years to come. In 2010, the City of Mason released a Comprehensive Plan that detailed input from a variety of stakeholders and a list of priorities and goals to implement over the course of the plan’s projected 15- to 20- year lifetime. The priorities and goals proposed in the plan have varying timelines projected for completion and differ in nature for each different department within the city. The City of Mason anticipates doing an update on the existing plan within the next few years, to ensure it is still relevant and up-to-date concerning the community’s needs.

Within the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, there was a reoccurring theme regarding the community’s needs for continued improvement and development for the City of Mason: downtown revitalization. Currently, the City of Mason has a downtown that includes a downtown plaza and a number of businesses, including retailers, restaurants, and churches, among many others. In the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, there were specific—but flexible—guidelines proposed for design efforts for Mason. In Chapter 8, Section 8.2 Community Core Sub-Area of the plan, the following key guidelines were recommended:

- Locate various buildings near Main Street (US-RT 42), to ensure closeness to the downtown area. By doing this, an image will in turn be created for the downtown area that is identifiable by community members (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”). Furthermore, there should be sufficient space for streetscape elements, parking lot screening, and pedestrian amenities (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”).
• Create pedestrian pathways that connect the residences and business district to both plazas and greenway areas (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”). Different amenities should be considered for implementation, including benches, fountains, and kiosks, to offer gathering spaces and increase interest to pedestrian spaces (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”).

• Develop focal points that reinforce the previously discussed downtown identity and discontinue vistas into downtown along particular streets (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”). Furthermore, this guideline includes two specific recommendations:
  o Continue enhancing and stimulating the existing plaza located at Main Street and Mason Road, through public art components and active retail uses in nearby buildings (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”).
  o Redevelop the four corners of the Main Street/Mason-Montgomery Road intersection with multi-story buildings, and integrate a smaller plaza containing either a water feature or some form of public art (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”).

• Encourage and support higher density housing in the downtown area through the Charter amendment (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”).
Introduction

The traditional downtown area in the City of Mason is outlined in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan as being alongside Main Street. Despite the inclusion of some areas of improvement and focus for the downtown area in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, the list does not encompass all of the possibilities available for the City of Mason to consider. Specific and purposeful guidelines for design should be considered for continued development and effective revitalization efforts in downtown Mason. Downtown revitalization efforts must consider and emphasize an inclusive combination of interests, topics, and needs that are specific to the place and people located in the given community. There are cities across the nation who have partnered with Main Street America, to successfully join the Main Street Movement and integrate the Main Street Approach in their communities.

Main Street America is a program of the National Main Street Center, and strives to, “…revitalize older and historic commercial districts to build vibrant neighborhoods and thriving economies” (“Main Street America”). The program creates partnerships with either leaders and/or organizations at the local, city, state, and/or national level (“Main Street America”). Main Street America has a collaborative and comprehensive approach, that is specific to place and inspired by people (“Main Street America”). The City of Mason could consider utilizing elements of the Main Street Approach in their own downtown revitalization efforts. This report provides an analysis of potential elements and programs to be considered, and serves to:

- Conduct an organizational analysis of the various stakeholders who could play a role in downtown revitalization efforts, and review any existing documents or materials regarding downtown revitalization plans;
• Assess the current situation of the downtown area in Mason through a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, based on the 2010 Comprehensive Plan and existing businesses;

• Create a logic model based on the findings from the literature and SWOT analysis, and provide potential recommendations for the City of Mason.

Literature Review

Should cities across the United States today continue to make investments for further development in their Downtown areas? Is there evidence that supports the viability and sustainability of Downtown revitalization? Are Main Street Programs necessary or profitable for local communities? Below, I review literature on the history of downtown redevelopment efforts and assess possible strategies for downtown revitalization.

Assessment of Downtown Redevelopment

There have been various policies and projects implemented over more recent years across the United States, all in an effort to attract individuals and businesses back downtown (Faulk 2006). Revitalizing downtowns has become a focus and area of interest in many cities over the last few decades. With these efforts, though, has come criticism from many suburbanites. The unique history and evolution of downtown districts, the existing literature on strategies and recommendations for stakeholders to utilize during the implementation of revitalization efforts, and the current revitalization efforts in cities across the United States are all critical components to understanding the significance, controversy, process, and practice of downtown revitalization.
In the past, downtowns gained a reputation from many suburbanites as inconvenient, unsafe, and even outdated places (Robertson 1995). The evolution of downtown districts across America has not been confined within a particular period of time. Downtown districts evolved alongside numerous technological advances and socioeconomic trends (Robertson 1995). Downtown districts reached their pinnacle in the early 20th century, when there were high levels of pedestrian traffic and when mass transit was largely used. At this point in time, downtowns were hubs of highly concentrated movement and activity (Robertson 1995). Since the 1920s, when downtown districts were at their peak, there has been a significant decline in what is known as the American downtown (Robertson 1995). Decentralization and the growth of suburban areas across the country have both impacted the decline in downtown districts, and have also impacted the functionality of these areas.

Since the influence of and activity within downtown districts has significantly declined over time, many scholars have compiled sets of strategies and recommendations for stakeholders considering revitalization efforts. Robertson outlined seven major strategies for downtown redevelopment. These strategies include transportation enhancement, pedestrianization, waterfront development, indoor shopping centers, office development, historic preservation, and special activity generators (Robertson 1995). Robertson defines each of these seven strategies in detail, and highlights the potential costs and benefits to each in depth.

Pedestrianization is critical to the success of a downtown because most potential visitors of a downtown define its image based on the amount of pedestrian traffic observed. If a downtown area lacks sufficient pedestrian traffic, it will be perceived as dull and lifeless by the very individuals who should ideally be utilizing it. The planning tactics to improve the issue of pedestrianization identified by Robertson that have primarily been used in cities thus far included
extending sidewalks to accommodate foot traffic, developing more and improving existing
sitting areas, and enhancing the issue of security and safety (Robertson 1995). Although other
options were explored, like building pedestrian malls or skywalks, they are beyond the scope of
this project and will not be further explored here.

Indoor shopping centers are another potential strategy for cities to improve their
downtowns. However, there are many factors to be considered when exploring the option of
creating an indoor shopping center in a downtown. Typically, the development of shopping
centers in downtowns are constricted with limited free parking and increased land costs
(Robertson 1995). Nonetheless, there were two individuals—Victor Gruen and James Rouse—who
were critical to the development, design, and creation of indoor shopping centers in
downtowns. These two key figures saw great success in multiple projects they designed and
implemented focused on indoor shopping centers in downtowns. Due to the success stories of
these two figures, there were more than 100 enclosed retail centers built from the 1970s through
the 1980s (Robertson 1995). One critical element of these enclosed malls that impacts
revitalization efforts, is that its design must blend with surrounding streets (Robertson 1995).
Along with the potentially positive benefits, it is imperative that the potential harm and negative
effects also be considered, such as the decline in retail destinations located in downtowns and the
decline in shopping malls across the country.

Another strategy that is critical to revitalization and redevelopment efforts in most
downtowns is historic preservation. Unlike the indoor shopping centers previously discussed,
historic preservation allows for communities to highlight and preserve the existing unique
architecture and aesthetic of their downtowns. Robertson highlights two primary preservation
projects that typically occur in larger cities, festival marketplaces and special historic districts
Robertson 1995). More applicable to this study, though, Robertson also highlights the importance of the Main Street Approach in smaller cities. The Main Street Approach encompasses four main elements, which are further defined and explored later in a different section, including: “organization of downtown interests and groups, promotion, design that enhances visual qualities and historic architecture, and economic restructuring and diversification” (Robertson 1995). Elements of the Main Street Approach have been implemented in numerous cities across the country through different programming efforts. These programming efforts have proven the possibility of downtown revitalization by utilizing components of the Main Street Approach.

Waterfront development is another major strategy discussed, but is bound by the geographical makeup of each different downtown. For the purpose of this study, the primary waterfront opportunity in Mason would have to include the implementation of some sort of water feature within a park, or something of similar nature. Office development is another strategy discussed by Robertson that is likely relevant and applicable in this context. Office development contributes to downtown revitalization by creating office spaces that serve as ‘feeders’ to surrounding stores and restaurants (Robertson 1995). Unfortunately, like many other issues with other strategies, there has been an overbuilding of these office spaces in many cities across the country. This overbuilding of downtown offices has had multiple negative side effects, from a decline in property values to a decreased tax base for the city (Robertson 1995). Due to the overbuilding of office spaces in downtowns, that space now has to be reimagined and renovated to better accommodate the community’s needs.

Special activity generators are another strategy explored by Robertson, and can include stadiums, convention centers, and arenas (Robertson 1995). Although special activity generators
are important in many cities, they are harder to implement in smaller cities. With that being said, they are not entirely relevant or applicable to this study given their broad and extensive nature. The final strategy that Robertson emphasizes is transportation enhancement, and it is critical to downtown revitalization efforts. Some of the major concerns with transportation include accessing and reaching downtown areas, which could include traffic congestion, concerns with safety, parking concerns, and travel time (Robertson 1995). The primary concern for many city’s downtown development, though, has consistently been parking. There are a variety of options for cities to implement to help solve this problem, but ultimately downtowns have to find a balance of accommodating automobiles while also accommodating pedestrian traffic (Robertson 1995).

These strategies were compiled after assessing the status and situation of downtowns across the country at the end of the century. These seven strategies put forth by Robertson are still cited and utilized in cities across the United States today working on downtown revitalization. There has been further research done in more recent years on the steps involved with downtown revitalization, which is explored in the next section.

**Practicing Downtown Revitalization**

As previously stated, there have been multiple policies and projects implemented to attract individuals and businesses back downtown (Faulk 2006). Despite the success of many of these policies and projects in some cities, it does not necessarily allow for adoption and application in other cities without proper modifications first. Another significant consideration of downtown revitalization efforts, specifically regarding large or major changes proposed, is the actual focus and implementation of said changes. Faulk states that, “The focus should be on incremental changes that ‘add to the long-evolving, existing strengths, instead of replacing
them’” (Faulk 2006). These types of incremental changes could prove much more useful and impactful for a downtown, and could continue to support and encourage existing structures already in place or in business.

Results from a national survey distributed to numerous non-suburban cities regarding downtown revitalization strategies, which given the population parameters identified match the population of the city in this study (25,000 to 50,000 people), discerned various issues facing downtown areas (Faulk 2006). These problems facing downtowns included, “Attracting new development, attracting people on evenings and weekends, competition from discount stores and malls, vacant space, and parking” (Faulk 2006). These top five concerns facing non-suburban cities are critical, and there were case studies of a similar nature conducted that presented valuable feedback on dealing with and coping with many of these problems.

The results of the case studies created guidance, ultimately for cities of any size, to consider when implementing policies and projects. First, downtown initiatives should focus on local funding sources, allowing community members to feel ownership of the process (Faulk 2006). Second, there should be continued efforts towards creating a sense of place in the downtown area, furthering the promotion of economic and physical renewal (Faulk 2006). Third, there should be an emphasis on assessing and evaluating existing programs, to ensure the productivity and effectiveness of said programs (Faulk 2006). Fourth, numerous constituencies should be involved in the revitalization efforts, from government officials, to residents, to business owners (Faulk 2006). Fifth, a vision for the downtown area should be developed, that extends over a long-term period of time (Faulk 2006). Finally, research should be conducted on other communities to assess the environment and programs implemented that could be of use or
relevant to their own revitalization efforts (Faulk 2006). These are all important considerations to make when implementing new policies and procedures into a downtown.

Unfortunately, many cities who have initiated revitalization efforts have not assessed the impacts of changes implemented. Faulk mentions six measures from other relevant literature to consider, which include, “Changes in tax base, real property investment, office space occupancy, number of businesses, population density, residential population by income, and employment by industry classification” (Faulk 2006). Although this information could be useful in assessing the impact of revitalization efforts, it is not easy information to attain for many downtowns. Furthermore, most research previously conducted and conclusions made have been based on small sample sizes.

Revitalization efforts are typically slow moving, and occur through incremental changes as previously stated. As Faulk argues, there are multiple factors that are necessary in areas that have started the revitalization process. These include, “Public-private-nonprofit partnerships, intervention of local government, proactive policies at the state and local levels, and continued leadership” (Faulk 2006). Faulk concludes that development and implementation of both minor and major projects are critical to successful downtown revitalization efforts (Faulk 2006). Despite many of the challenges, there are also benefits to being a small city within a metropolitan area. Some of which include the closeness to the main city, generally lower rents and real estate prices, less prevalent crime and crowding, and the benefit of having urban amenities in close range (Faulk 2006). Ultimately, it is the organization of interests that is most critical to implement downtown revitalization efforts.
Main Street America

Main Street America aims to construct vibrant neighborhoods and create thriving economies through the revitalization of aged and historic commercial districts (“Main Street America”). There are thousands of diverse individuals, organizations, volunteers, and local leaders across the country who make up the composition of the program. The Main Street Movement began out of the acknowledgement that communities are only as strong as their core. Shockingly, even in an era when people gave up hope regarding commercial and cultural viability of downtown areas, and when shopping malls, suburbs, and large chain retailers were dominating, the Main Street Movement continued to gain recognition and support (“Main Street America”). Through the partnerships made, the Main Street Approach has proven impactful for many communities today.

The Main Street Approach is a framework utilized for community-driven and comprehensive revitalization, which has been tested over time (“Main Street America”). It serves to transform economies, leverage local leadership, and improve the quality of life for all (“Main Street America”). The Main Street Approach is tailored specifically to each different community—their individual needs, environment, conditions—making the recommendations and opportunities for downtown transformation entirely place and people based. The Main Street Approach is based on Transformation Strategies, which are created and organized around the Four Points: Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization (“Main Street America”).

According to Main Street America, “A Transformation Strategy articulates a focused, deliberate path to revitalizing or strengthening a downtown or commercial district’s economy” (“Main Street America”). These strategies are shown in Figure 1 below, and are meant to serve as a guiding force in downtown revitalization efforts for communities. Transformation Strategies
are required to be grounded in a concrete understanding of local and regional market data, and continuous and comprehensive community involvement and engagement (“Main Street America”). Transformation Strategies that are effective encompass one of three main purposes: (1) serving a specific customer segment, (2) responding to an underserved market demand, or (3) creating a distinguished destination (“Main Street America”).

**Figure 1: What Are Transformation Strategies?, Main Street America**

As previously mentioned, Transformation Strategies are organized around the Four Points: Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization. The Four Points are outlined in Figure 2 below, and are the four main areas that the Main Street Approach emphasizes through the Transformation Strategies created for each different community. Each of the Four Points serves a specific purpose in the development and creation of different Transformation Strategies. The Four Points are further defined in a later section in this report, specifically in correlation to the analyses conducted on the City of Mason. There are also potential improvements to the Four Points in the Main Street Approach that are explored below, that could be useful and impactful for the City of Mason to consider in their initiatives implemented in the future.
Figure 2: *What Are the Four Points?*, Main Street America

![Diagram showing four points of economic vitality, design, community transformation, organization, promotion, and leadership and strong organizational capacity.]


Case Studies

**Case Study #1: “Can Small-City Downtowns Remain Viable? A National Study of Development Issues and Strategies”** – Kent A. Robertson

In 1999, a report was released including a two-part research study of downtown development initiatives in cities with populations of 25,000-50,000 across the United States (Robertson 1999). The first part of the study included a survey that was sent out to 108 cities inquiring about the strengths, challenges, and successes—among many others—they faced in downtown development initiatives. Robertson ensured that these cities were within the desired population range, were considered freestanding cities (not a suburb of a larger city), and were cities that had a traditional downtown (Robertson 1999). The second part of the study included five specific case studies of various cities, each of which were one of the 57 cities that completed the first part of the study. Robertson selected five cities that were representative of the identified strengths, challenges, and successes of the total sample, and were varied in terms of geographical...
location. During this second part of the study, each city was visited for multiple days to conduct interviews with local stakeholders, to be able to directly observe the downtown, and to create an account of land use for comparison purposes (Robertson 1999).

In the survey, Robertson included 13 potential problems from relevant literature that could impact downtown development initiatives. The problems identified were as follows: (1) “attracting new development,” (2) “attracting people downtown evenings/weekends,” (3) “competition from discount stores and/or suburban malls,” (4) “vacant/underused retail space,” (5) “parking,” (6) “shortage of suitable housing,” (7) “image,” (8) “vacant/underuse office space,” (9) “preservation of older buildings,” (10) “unattractive building facades,” (11) “crime (real or perceived),” (12) “traffic circulation/congestion,” and (13) “organization/cooperation of downtown interests” (Robertson 1999). Out of the above problems, the top three included the challenge with attracting new development downtown, the struggle with attracting pedestrians on weekends and during evenings downtown, and the issue with suburban malls and discount stores creating much more competition against retail destinations in downtown (Robertson 1999).

Tables 1 & 2: “Can Small-City Downtowns Remain Viable?,” Kent A. Robertson

According to the ranking scale provided and defined by Robertson, all 13 of the issues had a mean rating defined as at least a minor problem in the sample. With that being said, that majority of respondents also signified that the vitality of their downtown was greater in 1995 than it was ten years prior (Robertson 1999). Based on the problems indicated above, Robertson highlighted multiple policy implications that should be considered. First, the public/private partnership is crucial to the success of a downtown but successful development stems from the collaboration of both an active downtown association and a committed city government (Robertson 1999). Second, downtowns are most successful when they offer a variety of events, activities, and functions (Robertson 1999). This further supports the notion that downtowns considering redevelopment should heavily focus on the areas in which they are lacking and if there is a need to fill those gaps. Third, it is imperative that downtowns working towards redevelopment build on existing assets (Robertson 1999). Finally, the creation of a sense of place that is specific to that community, and reflective of the history, culture, and heritage of the community, is necessary (Robertson 1999).

Case Study #2: “The Main Street Approach to Downtown Development: An Examination of the Four-Point Program” – Kent A. Robertson

There are not many sources of literature or research on the implementation of the Main Street Approach in communities across the nation, despite the approach’s widespread utilization. In 2004, a study was conducted that involved a survey of numerous different downtowns on how each applied elements of the Four Points discussed above in their communities (Robertson 2004). In order to implement the Four Point Approach successfully, there are multiple guiding principles that the National Main Street Center has identified to consider. First, each and every
one of the four points outlined must be integrated in unison due to the comprehensive nature of the Main Street Approach (Robertson 2004). Second, it is imperative that there be strong connections between the public and private sectors to allow for downtown revitalization as mentioned above (Robertson 2004). Third, the implementation of the Main Street Approach requires a full-time Main Street Manager to ensure the approach is being utilized effectively (Robertson 2004). Finally, the approach cannot be applied to each city in the same way, and each individual city is responsible for identifying and utilizing their own assets (Robertson 2004).

Robertson explored multiple research questions in the study through a survey with responses from Main Street Managers in 100 cities across 15 different states (Robertson 2004). The survey had a 40% response rate, and upon completion of the analysis of the survey results Robertson selected four of the cities for individual city visits. In the survey, Robertson asked for an estimation of the amount of effort and time spent to each of the four points—organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring (economic vitality)—in percent form. Promotion was the most commonly ranked point that cities across the entire range of populations dedicated the largest percentage of effort and time to (Robertson 2004). In Table 3 below, multiple promotion strategies are highlighted based on their effectiveness in the cities surveyed.

**Table 3:** “The Main Street Approach to Downtown Development,” Kent A. Robertson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Sample Cities Using (N = 40)</th>
<th>Effectiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special Events/Festivals</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown Brochure</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown Concerts</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Advertising</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Website</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown Products (i.e., mugs)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic Walking Tour</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Promotion Strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>3.52</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Survey respondents rated strategy effectiveness on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being the most effective.

Based on the survey results shown in Table 3 above, the more effective promotion strategy was special events and festivals, with an overall 4.28 rating of effectiveness on a 1-5 scale (Robertson 2004). To aid in promotional efforts, some cities have also created a website, which has proven especially important in the communities that have a strong tourism downtown economy (Robertson 2004). Although promotion was ranked the most commonly used point in the Four-Point Approach, design was also a critical strategy in most respondent cities. Robertson noted, “Landscaping (i.e., street trees, planters, flowers) and enhanced infrastructure (i.e., sidewalks, street lights) not only improve the aesthetics of downtown, but they also make it much more desirable for a person to spend more time walking downtown, a key to a strong sense of place” (Robertson 2004). This further emphasizes the argument that design and planning professionals should be able to understand the components of the Main Street Approach. City planners are especially important to this approach, due to a variety of reasons.

These individuals have the necessary background and expertise that allow them to aid the Main Street Program in accomplishing multiple goals. For example, waterfront development, creation of design ordinances, adaptive reuse, supply of sufficient parking, and even develop an environment conducive to pedestrians (Robertson 2004). Robertson also highlighted the possibility for these city planners to be integral in devising imaginative zoning ordinances appropriate for that particular location’s needs. For example, some may restrict the development of chain stores downtown and encourage more local independent services and retailing through restrictions on square footage or even a requirement for a diversification of businesses (Robertson 2004). Overall, Robertson reinforced the necessity for these key stakeholders—representing both public and private sectors—to fully understand the Four Point Approach.
Research Design

This study serves to analyze and assess the downtown revitalization efforts that have taken place in the city of Mason, Ohio since the 2010 Comprehensive Plan was released. The City of Mason has multiple committees of Council within the local government, that each focus on different issues impacting the City. One of these committees, the Downtown Committee, reviews issues facing the city’s downtown area and from that makes recommendations to the full council. The research questions that will be addressed through this project include:

- What downtown revitalization ideas, goals, plans, priorities, and/or projects were pertinent and included in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan? Which of those, if any, have come to fruition since the release of the plan?
- Has the City explored the option of implementing a Main Street Program? What is the feasibility of implementing a Main Street Program in the City?
- Are there similar cities who have implemented a Main Street Program? What were their successes and struggles in doing so?

The actual measurement and analysis of each of these research questions is expanded on below, separated into sections based on each different question.

Analysis and Findings

There were two different analyses conducted: a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and a logic model. The purpose for each different analysis is provided below in each corresponding section.
Downtown Revitalization Efforts

In order to best understand the structure of the City of Mason, I will conduct an organizational analysis. By doing an organizational analysis first, there will be a clear depiction of the different entities within the local government structure who may already—or could potentially in the future—have an active involvement in downtown initiatives. Furthermore, the Mason Deerfield Chamber of Commerce (MADE Chamber) will be included in this portion of the analysis because of their involvement and importance to Mason’s downtown. Based on the results of this analysis, general recommendations will be provided for the City to consider moving forward, specifically regarding the involvement and collaboration of various stakeholders in downtown revitalization efforts. This organizational analysis could be useful in better understanding the potential roles of these individuals moving forward.

Organizational Analysis

The City of Mason has a council/manager system of government. The City Council is the entity who hires the City Manager, who is primarily responsible with directing the operations of city government and executing policies authorized by Council. The legislative body of Mason includes a Mayor and six Council members who are elected at-large in a non-partisan capacity to serve 4-year terms in office, limited to two consecutive terms. The Mayor is a member of the Council and serves as Executive Head of Council, and a Vice Mayor is selected by the Council to perform the responsibilities of the Mayor in his or her absence. Mason City Council consists of the following individuals: Mayor Victor Kidd, Vice-Mayor Barbara Berry-Spaeth, Ashley Chance, Kathy Grossman, Diana K. Nelson, Mike Gilb, and T.J. Honerlaw. The unique
combination of a council/manager form of government has particular benefits for the City of Mason.

Below the Mason City Council on the organizational chart is Eric Hansen, City Manager, Kendra Taylor, Executive Assistant to the City Manager, and Jennifer Heft, Assistant City Manager, among many others. By utilizing this form of government, the City of Mason is able to have both solid political leadership through the elected officials, and solid managerial experience through the appointed City Manager. The Mayor and City Council serve as the leaders and policymakers elected to symbolize the community and to focus on policy issues that are receptive to citizens’ needs and wishes—such as those identified in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan previously discussed. The City Manager contributes policy assistance and ensures that the community in its entirety is being adequately served. Since the City Manager is directly responsible for the day-to-day operations of the City, there are multiple different department heads who fall directly under them on the organizational chart.

For the purpose of this organizational analysis, some departments have been omitted due to an irrelevance to downtown revitalization efforts. The departments that are most relevant are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below. Each of the department heads shown below report directly to the City Manager, and are specifically responsible for fulfilling the mission and duties of their departments alone. Although there is no specific department focused solely on the downtown in Mason, there are multiple who have the potential to play a role in future efforts.
Figure 3: Organizational Chart for the City of Mason, Departments of Parks and Recreation, Public Utilities, Public Works, and Engineering and Building, updated November 9, 2017

Source: Provided to the author via email from the City of Mason Assistant City Manager, Jennifer Heft.

Figure 4: Organizational Chart for the City of Mason, Departments of Economic Development and Finance, updated November 9, 2017

Source: Provided to the author via email from the City of Mason Assistant City Manager, Jennifer Heft.
The City of Mason has 12 committees of Council that are focused on a variety of issues impacting the community, and each is comprised of multiple representatives from City Council. There is a Downtown Committee, and the following individuals serve on that committee: Councilmember Ashley Chance (Committee Chair), Vice-Mayor Barbara Berry-Spaeth, and Councilmember Kathy Grossmann. These committees are meant to serve as an opportunity for councilmembers to further research issues facing Mason, and in turn pose ideas and/or recommendations to the full council from their findings. Based on conversations the author had with the Assistant City Manager, there are currently no formal agendas or meeting minutes created or tracked for the Downtown Committee.

The Mason Deerfield Chamber of Commerce—abbreviated in the rest of this paper as MADE Chamber—is a critical entity in the City of Mason, and is especially critical to the downtown. The MADE Chamber’s vision is as follows: “The Chamber will be the lead collaborator and catalyst organization that ensures the Mason-Deerfield area is a vibrant place to visit, live, and do business” (“Mason Deerfield Chamber of Commerce”). Their mission is to continue evolving the interests of local businesses, and to continue making an effort to create and maintain a great place to live, work, visit, play, and invest in Mason Deerfield (“Mason Deerfield Chamber of Commerce”). The MADE Chamber has four key values: vision, passion, excellence, and family (“Mason Deerfield Chamber of Commerce”). Finally, the MADE Chamber is comprised of four staff members and a 13-member 2018 Board of Directors.

The MADE Chamber released a 2017 Annual Report, which highlights the current position and situation of the organization. Currently, there are a total of 567 businesses who are represented as members of the MADE Chamber (“2017 Annual Report”). Out of those over 500 members, over 55% of them identify the Mason-Deerfield area as home (“2018 Opportunities
The different business categories that form the majority of the MADE Chamber’s membership are shown in Figure 5 below. There were three guiding principles outlined in the report: (1) “Grow your business with marketing, cost saving benefits, and establishing quality connections,” (2) “Sharpen your skills with professional and business development opportunities,” and (3) “Connect with the community, volunteer, and work together to enhance the region” (“2017 Annual Report”). There were also five Chamber goals that were included in the report, which included membership engagement, advocacy for business interests, development of talent and workforce, economic catalyst, and chamber operational excellence (“2017 Annual Report”). Although the MADE Chamber is much broader in scope and space than Mason’s downtown alone, it is still useful to understand the background of the organization.

Figure 5: Membership: by the Numbers, “2017 Annual Report,” MADE Chamber

Feasibility of Implementing a Main Street Program

When measuring the feasibility of implementing a new program within the City, there must first be a thorough analysis conducted to understand the existing conditions facing that given location. This analysis will include and highlight the needs that were identified by community members, specifically from the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, and whether or not those needs have been realized since. It is evident that not all needs will be realized from every community member, but it is still useful to measure which of those needs have gone without notice since first being brought to the City’s attention. More formally, this section will include a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). This SWOT analysis will be conducted specifically regarding the City of Mason’s downtown and the various factors impacting it and affecting it. It will allow the City to better understand the current conditions of the downtown, to be equipped to make responsible and impactful decisions moving forward.

SWOT Analysis

To better understand the current environment in the City of Mason, a SWOT analysis has been conducted below. The findings serve as a framework for the recommendations offered for the City, in terms of downtown revitalization efforts and the possibility of implementing elements of the Main Street Approach in the future.

Strengths

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Warren County—which encompasses the City of Mason—ranked third out of the 88 total counties in the state of Ohio for total increase in population from April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). Historically, the City
of Mason did not see a major increase in population until after its incorporation in 1971 (“City of Mason, Ohio”). Since Mason was incorporated, it now covers 18 square miles, has a population of over 30,000, and is home to roughly 500 businesses (“City of Mason, Ohio”). The amount of growth and development that the City of Mason has seen since 1971 has been incredible, and it has contributed to Mason being viewed as one of the most desirable cities to live in and/or work in around the Cincinnati metropolitan area.

The City of Mason’s traditional downtown area was previously defined in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan as being alongside Main Street. In Figure 6 below, the MADE Chamber outlined existing shopping destinations, dining destinations, and other local businesses and organizations that are chamber members, all located in downtown Mason. It is clear that the area defined as downtown in Figure 6 extends beyond the area defined in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan. However, it provides a valuable depiction of the businesses and organizations located and operated in downtown Mason. It also specifically highlights the businesses which are MADE Chamber members in downtown. Downtown Mason has a decent number of existing businesses that are still in operation, which allows for a great starting point in downtown revitalization efforts. Although the recruitment of new businesses is still incredibly important to the continued success of downtown Mason, having an existing group of diverse businesses is an advantage. The City of Mason should continue collaborating with the MADE Chamber to build relationships with the downtown business owners, and they should also communicate with one another their needs, goals, and visions they each have in creating and sustaining a successful downtown.
The City of Mason has also initiated efforts in more recent years to hold events in downtown for the local community. According to the Assistant City Manager, Jennifer Heft, the City of Mason has purchased additional property in the downtown in an effort to increase activities and events hosted there. One of the primary goals of the purchase of this property has been to increase pedestrian traffic to the downtown. The City of Mason initiated efforts last summer by partnering with a newer downtown business to host a Community Block Party. Those efforts are being continued this year because the City of Mason will be hosting Friday night concerts downtown in the months of June and July. According to Jennifer Heft, the City of
Mason has already seen numerous private developments in downtown Mason this year, and the hope is that trend will continue into the future.

**Weaknesses**

Beyond the work of the MADE Chamber, there is not another entity in downtown Mason dedicated specifically to downtown efforts. As previously mentioned, there is a Downtown Committee formed by three members of the City Council. According to communication the author had with Assistant City Manager, Jennifer Heft, the Downtown Committee does not currently track meeting agendas or minutes, and only meets on an as needed basis. The only way to track the efforts of the Downtown Committee are through the recorded meeting minutes of full Council meetings. This is a potential concern for the community members or leaders who may want to play a role in downtown revitalization efforts, because it is unclear what work or research has already been done by the Downtown Committee. Furthermore, there are typically numerous City employees who handle or are involved in dealing with issues or matters relating to downtown Mason. This not only hindered the effectiveness of the organizational analysis conducted above, but it also creates a challenge for the creation of strategic collaborations among key stakeholders in the city because of the unclear roles of individuals.

According to Jennifer Heft, there was previously an effort to revitalize downtown Mason roughly 15 years ago. There was a City employee at the time who collaborated with the MADE Chamber and surrounding businesses to attempt to gain consensus on initiatives related to downtown Mason. Unfortunately, hardly any consensus was achieved which ultimately led the City to pay for placing overhead utilities underground, lighting, street trees, planters, minimal street parking, and the development of the center plaza. The lack of consensus hindered the
developments that were desired and proposed by those leading the efforts, and since then the
efforts towards downtown revitalization have been scattered, much more specific, and
incremental in nature. Although this incremental approach can be beneficial, this history
emphasizes one of the biggest challenges for the City of Mason. The lack of buy-in from existing
downtown businesses caused a halt to proposed plans previously. With there still being no main
entity or organization focused on downtown revitalization, it makes collaborations among key
stakeholders that much more challenging—due to a lack of a shared vision and mission.

Opportunities

The City of Mason could explore a number of development strategies, which could
continue to be integrated in the planning processes for the future. Robertson highlighted sixteen
different development strategies, and the cities participating in the survey—which was
previously discussed in the ‘Case Studies’ section of this paper—highlighted the strategies they
planned to implement in the next five years. Of the strategies that were most often ranked near
the top of the list were historic preservation, downtown housing, waterfront development,
nightlife/entertainment, and new office development (Robertson 1999). The City of Mason
should explore the possibility of implementing new initiatives within these strategies based on
the existing needs and desires of the local community.

One of the priorities identified in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan by the City of Mason
was an increase in downtown housing options. More specifically, a design guideline was
outlined for the community core sub-area of Mason to promote higher density housing in the
downtown through the Charter amendment (“2010 Comprehensive Plan”). Increasing downtown
housing comes with many potentially positive spillover effects on other strategies previously
discussed. The most common impact of increasing downtown housing is that it typically also increases the volume of traffic downtown and extends such traffic downtown into evenings and weekends. This was an issue in many cities in the surveys previously analyzed, and it could be an opportunity for the City of Mason to consider in future plans. Furthermore, another design recommendation and priority was outlined for downtown Mason. In many of the discussions from the Downtown Committee mentioned in the City Council’s meeting minutes from the past year, finding a source of shading for the downtown plaza was important. Adding shading to the plaza would not only increase the aesthetics but would ideally increase pedestrianization due to the plaza’s new appeal as well. Adding shading to the center plaza should continue to be an emphasis for the City of Mason, especially given the potential increase in pedestrian traffic that could come with the addition.

According to Jennifer Heft, the MADE Chamber has been very successful in building consensus for businesses in downtown Mason, and also in helping improve relationships and communication with the City. Based on Figure 6 above, there are many businesses and organizations located in downtown Mason who are not MADE Chamber members. This could be due to a financial constraint in affording membership costs, or any other number of reasons. Nonetheless, the three shopping destinations and the 13 dining destinations who are not currently MADE Chamber members should be explored as potential new members in the future. By recruiting these businesses and organizations as potential new members of the chamber, it could increase the collaboration and solidarity in the community, and allow for a shared vision to be created through their affiliation. On the contrary, if these groups still choose to not become members of the MADE Chamber after the attempt is made, then a potential survey should be considered regarding the possible creation of a Main Street Program. If a survey was distributed
to downtown businesses, especially those who are not currently MADE Chamber members, it would allow for a better understanding of why they are not members, what their needs are, and if they would be interested in being affiliated and involved with a Main Street Program.

**Threats**

Creating and implementing an independent Main Street Program in the City of Mason could come with corresponding threats. Main Street Programs are often nonprofit organizations, and are also typically membership organizations. As Faulk stated, “Perhaps the biggest challenge for this form of downtown organization is that as membership organizations, they do not have a dedicated source of funding” (Faulk 2006). In studies conducted in other cities, evidence has shown that many businesses choose to opt not to become a member of the applicable organization(s) for a variety of reasons. Of those reasons, though, this lack of participation and commitment to these organizations is attributed most to the free-rider problem (Faulk 2006). This could also be a potential threat in the City of Mason if the surrounding businesses are going to reap the benefits from various events or activities that occur within the downtown regardless of their official membership in the organization. In deciding to implement a Main Street Program in the City of Mason, the long-term sustainability of the program—through sufficient and secured funding, community membership and active participation, and ample buy-in from a variety of stakeholders—must be openly and honestly evaluated first.
City Comparisons

Although there is not significant information available on the implementation process of Main Street Programs in similar cities across the state of Ohio, there is information available regarding what programs and/or events are offered and available within some cities. Based on comparing the City of Mason to the studies previously conducted an analysis will be completed, and useful findings will be compiled that may be relevant to the City of Mason. From the findings of the city comparisons, a logic model will be developed for the City of Mason that will identify potential next steps or considerations to make moving forward. This logic model will identify many components and factors to consider throughout the hypothetical and/or potential implementation process of various elements of the Main Street Approach within the City of Mason.

Logic Model

In Figure 7 below is the logic model that was developed using findings from city comparisons, specifically made in the ‘Case Studies’ section of this paper. The logic model serves as a set of recommendations for the City of Mason to consider moving forward in their downtown revitalization efforts. The logic model is not an all-inclusive list of the options available to the City of Mason, but instead a starting point for organized, collaborative efforts.
Figure 7: Logic Model, Possible Implementation of Main Street Approach in the City of Mason

Logic Model: Possible Implementation of the Main Street Approach in the City of Mason, OH

Utilization of the Four Point Approach to Address the Following Issues:
- Attracting New Development
- Attracting Pedestrians Downtown
  - Specifically on Weekends/Evenings
- Increase Downtown Housing

Inputs:
- City Government
- City Administration
- MADE Chamber of Commerce
- Local Businesses
- Community Members
- Volunteers
- Financial Resources
- Marketing/Promotional Materials
- Time

Objectives:
- Decrease the amount of underused or vacant buildings in downtown.
- Increase the amount of activity in the downtown.
- Increase the amount of downtown housing that is available.
- Assess the wants and needs for the utilization of the downtown from stakeholders.
- Establish and define a comprehensive long-term vision for downtown Mason.

Activity: Assess and take inventory of all available buildings. Contact the appropriate owner to inquire about alternate use.

Activity: Explore new programming opportunities for periods of time currently underutilized. Continue to trial new events and conduct proper assessment of each event upon its completion.

Activity: Conduct an assessment of available property and/or land for development in downtown. Continue to assess current zoning ordinances that may impact new development.

Activity: Create and distribute a survey to local community members inquiring about their vision for the downtown. Ask specific questions geared towards better understanding their programming (i.e. special events/festivals) desires for the downtown.

Activity: Based on the analysis of the survey’s findings above, conduct a collaborative meeting where all key stakeholders are present and complete a brainstorming session on the possible vision.

Outcomes:
- Successfully improve relationships and create collaborations among all of the key stakeholders who have an impact on downtown Mason.
  - Successfully assess the wants and needs of downtown businesses and community members.
  - Provide a foundation for the possible implementation and creation of a permanent Main Street Program.
  - Improve the opportunities and programming in downtown Mason for a healthy, sustainable future.

Source: Created and developed by the author, utilizing key findings and highlights of the studies included.
Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this study that should be acknowledged when reading through the analysis. First, the study conducted included only minimal input from the City of Mason due to a general lack of appropriate and necessary documentation of efforts. The City of Mason outlined priorities and goals in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan for the downtown, but those efforts could not and were not fully measured or accounted for in this study. That is largely due to the lack of accessible documentation of efforts, specifically for smaller changes that have taken place in downtown Mason. Second, there was not a formal survey distributed in the City of Mason to accurately identify the wants and needs of the community and businesses today. This is important to note because the last extensive planning process that attained feedback from local community members happened prior to 2010, during the creation of the 2010 Comprehensive Plan. Issues and concerns facing local communities, and especially local businesses, are constantly evolving. Recognizing this lack of information in reviewing the results of this analysis is an important consideration to make while evaluating the findings.

Conclusion

The National Main Street Center has proven successful since its establishment in 1980, and that is proven through the over $74 billion that has been reinvested in Main Street communities, the 138,303 new businesses that have started, the 276,790 rehabilitated buildings across the nation, and the 614,716 jobs that have been created (“Main Street America”). Since its inception in 1980, though, the National Main Street Center has been faced with many new factors to consider—especially in more recent years—to remain relevant and successful in the
years to come. Downtowns today must address many new challenges, such as adjusting to climate change, meeting demand for affordable housing, encouraging new development that focuses on transit, and responding to retail competition stemming from the availability of online shopping (White 2016). Furthermore, there is an overwhelming number of both baby boomers and millennials who are deciding to live in urban areas, particularly those that have an energetic, traditional downtown (White 2016). All of these factors must be considered in unison, when choosing to implement elements of the Main Street Approach.

Deciding which components of the Main Street Approach are best to implement for the City of Mason will largely require input and evaluation from existing local leadership. The Main Street Approach is not a one size fits all approach, and downtown revitalization efforts must be unique to each individual city. After reviewing the relevant literature on downtown revitalization efforts, and assessing the context of the City of Mason, this report provides a model for the City to consider moving forward. This analysis is not all-encompassing, but merely an introduction to the consideration of implementing elements of the Main Street Approach.
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