MAIN STREET AMERICA®

THRIVING COMMUNITIES

TRANSPORTATION TOOLKIT

How local changemakers can turn bold transportation ideas into lasting improvements for people and places

December 2025

Foreword

Our Main Streets are more than roads. They're critical infrastructure that connect us to housing, jobs, goods and services, education, healthcare, and more. Our downtown districts also serve as homes to historic buildings and public institutions, social hubs for traditions and events, and platforms for locally-owned businesses.

Yet we know that transportation projects—often planned and implemented at the regional or state level—can seem inaccessible. As a local leader, it's easy to feel like you don't have a place in transportation planning or the ability to push a project forward. But the reality is that local leaders can be impactful drivers for transportation investments that power real community change.

This toolkit shares the lessons we learned over the past two years as a Lead Capacity Builder for the U.S. Department of Transportation's Thriving Communities Program (TCP). Through the program, we worked closely with 20 rural and tribal communities to advance their transportation and community development goals. During that time, we:

- Conducted 20 on-site transportation assessments, reaching more than 500 stakeholders to understand local priorities and refine individual work plans for each TCP community.
- Provided 14,000 hours of direct technical assistance in community engagement, partnership development, project visioning, grant writing, and more.
- Facilitated 30 virtual and in-person workshops to expand TCP communities' knowledge, understanding, and capability to take on transportation infrastructure work.
- Invested $1.8 million in subgrants—representing $90,000 for each TCP community—to procure professional services and build staff capacity.

Over the course of the program, these TCP communities secured over $8 million in infrastructure funding and managed another $67 million to plan, design, or build projects—with another $11 million in applications still pending. Leaders across every TCP community report greater capacity to align transportation planning with local needs, pursue planning activities, and compete for infrastructure funding.

Because transportation projects require partnerships, our target audience for this publication includes local, tribal, and regional governments, but the content was designed for Main Street leaders who want to be more effective transportation partners. That means leaders who want to transform their communities through transit, placemaking, and economic development initiatives such as traffic calming, streetscape enhancements, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, parking management, and trail development.

Building on this toolkit and related initiatives like the GM on Main Grant Program and Navigating Main Streets as Places, Main Street America will continue to equip communities and states to make transformative investments in Main Streets. Together, we can ensure our communities are more accessible, vibrant, and resilient.

Cover: Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe, Washington.

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U.S. Department of Transportation: Thriving Communities Program

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) established the Thriving Communities Program (TCP) through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2022 to give communities the technical tools and organizational capacity they need to secure funding and deliver impactful infrastructure projects. Administered by the Build America Bureau, TCP is part of USDOT's broader technical assistance efforts. As part of TCP, USDOT created a Main Streets Cohort with 20 rural and tribal communities and selected Main Street America as a lead capacity builder for the cohort. In that role, Main Street America supported these communities' transportation and community development priorities with help from a Capacity Building Team of technical assistance providers:

Lead Capacity Builder

MAIN STREET AMERICA®

Capacity Building Team

CTL ENGINEERING

EQUITICITY POWER + EQUITY

NADO National Association of Development Organizations

Project for Public Spaces

RAILS TO Trails conservancy

RCAP

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Main Street America (Lead)

Main Street America leads a movement committed to strengthening communities through preservation-based economic development in older and historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts. For more than 40 years, Main Street America has provided a practical, adaptable, and impactful framework for community-driven, comprehensive revitalization through the Main Street Approach™. Our network of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, share a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a nonprofit subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. ***For more information, visit mainstreet.org.***

CTL Engineering, Inc.

CTL Engineering, Inc. is a full-service consulting engineering firm. Through TCP, the firm provided extensive technical assistance including environmental screenings, transportation data, roadway design reviews, community engagement, project feasibility and readiness, grant screening, grant writing, and grant management. ***Learn more at ctleng.com.***

Equiticity

Equiticity is a nonprofit organization and racial equity movement born from grassroots research, advocacy, and programming in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. Through TCP, this team provided expertise in inclusive community engagement, offering strategies for encouraging neighborhood participation in transportation planning. Equiticity's work demonstrates the Community Mobility Rituals approach—an innovative, equity-centered model for public engagement. ***Learn more at equiticity.org.***

National Association of Development Organizations

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) promotes regional development strategies, partnerships, and initiatives that strengthen local communities across the country. As part of the TCP Capacity Building Team, NADO provided guidance in forming and sustaining partnerships, working with regional networks, and conducting transportation planning. ***Explore NADO's rural transportation resources at ruraltransportation.org, and learn more about the organization at nado.org***.

Project for Public Spaces

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a cross-disciplinary nonprofit that helps communities unlock public spaces to meet the needs and aspirations of their community members. PPS was the cohort's primary resource for placemaking—an approach to designing and managing public spaces with community input at the center. ***For more information, visit pps.org.***

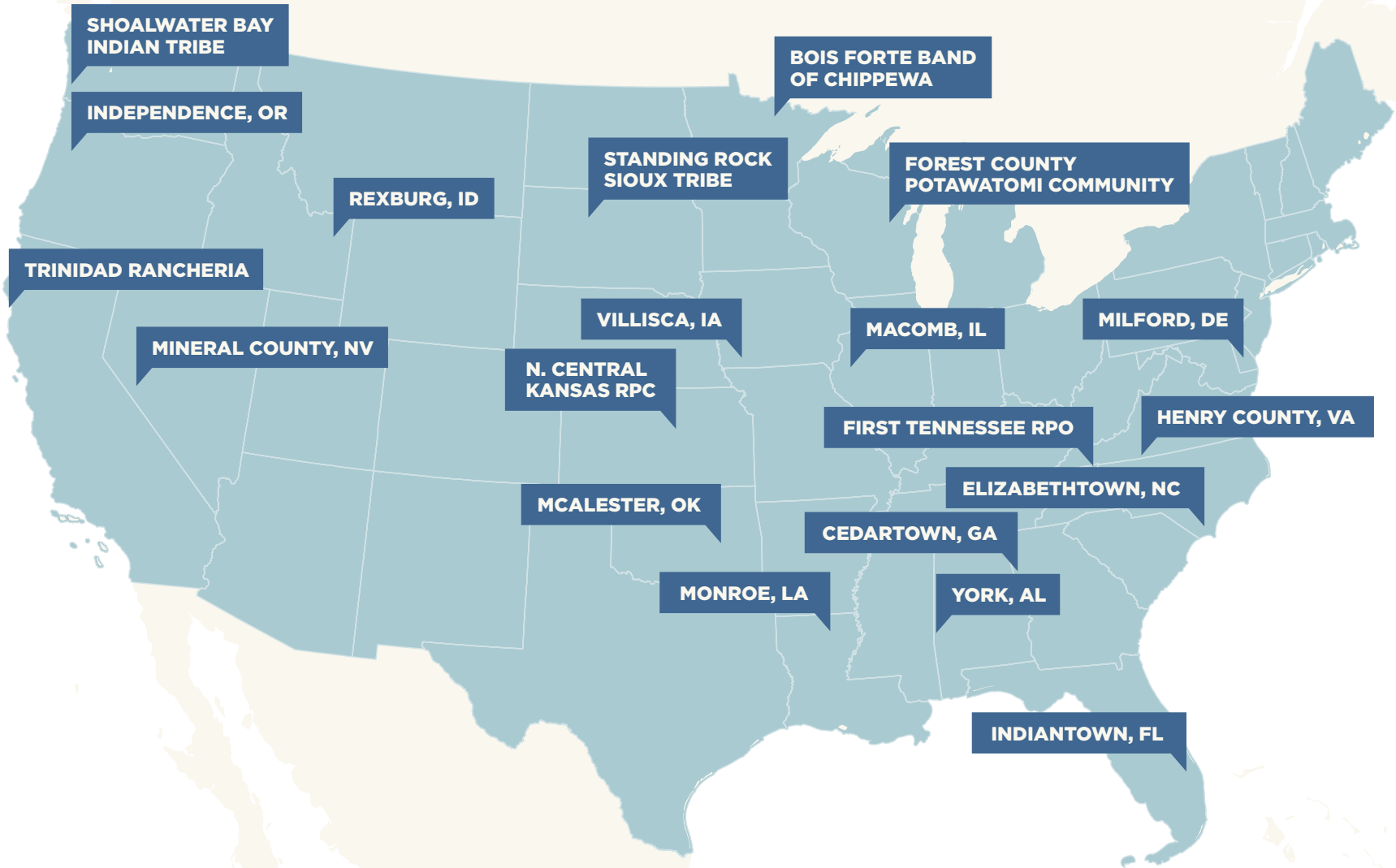
Rails to Trails Conservancy

Rails to Trails Conservancy (RTC) reimagines public spaces to create safe, accessible ways for people to walk, bike, and enjoy the outdoors. Through TCP, RTC supported communities in pursuing trails and multi-modal networks to boost economic development and quality of life. ***Learn more at railstotrails.org.***

Rural Community Assistance Partnership

Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) is a national network of nonprofit partners that provides technical assistance, training, and resources to rural and tribal communities. Through TCP, RCAP's national office collaborated with regional partners—Communities Unlimited, Great Lakes Community Action Partnership, Midwest Assistance Program, Rural Community Assistance Corporation—to help communities with asset management plans, partnership and project development, economic development, and more. ***For more information, visit rcap.org***.

Main Streets Cohort



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Introduction

Do you believe that transportation infrastructure in your community is about far more than just getting from point A to point B? Maybe you've stood on a corner with no crosswalks and worried about pedestrian safety. Or you've overheard neighbors talk about the struggle to get to work, school, or healthcare appointments without a car. Or maybe you've imagined how a regional bicycle trail or an enhanced streetscape could bring new life to your town—drawing visitors and highlighting what makes your community special.

If so, you're not alone. Main Street America worked closely with 20 rural and tribal communities for two years through the U.S. Department of Transportation's Thriving Communities Program (TCP). As part of this work, we surveyed 150 stakeholders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in these diverse communities. Again and again, they shared some of the same transportation concerns:

> Roads that don't support multiple modes of transportation

> Dangerous conditions for pedestrians

> Disconnected or missing sidewalks throughout the community

> Aging and/or poorly maintained infrastructure

Just like leaders of historic districts, towns, and tribal lands across the country, these stakeholders recognize that transportation is critical to connected neighborhoods, economic opportunities, and long-term community health.

Wayfinding helps visitors navigate in Uptown Martinsville, Virginia.

"We hope to be proactive in making our community a great place to live and thrive."

Survey response from Rexburg, Idaho

> “Streets can be more than functionality: They can be a common ground for people to meet, explore, and connect.”
>
> Survey response from Monroe, Louisiana

The City of Monroe and Monroe Main Street cut the ribbon on a new pedestrian-oriented street called Art Alley.

In our survey, participants cited their top transportation priorities loud and clear:

FIXING AGING ROADS through maintenance and repair

MAKING STREETS SAFER for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users

STRENGTHENING PHYSICAL COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS between neighborhoods, jobs, and services

Nowhere are these priorities more pivotal than on Main Street. Our historic downtowns are civic infrastructure that serve as business hubs, social gathering places, and cultural landmarks. They’re also critical transportation arteries—about 75% of accredited Main Street districts are located on streets that are also part of the state or federal highway system, and many double as important public transit routes or rail corridors.

While transportation has long been viewed as a complex, top-down system better left to engineers and other specialists, that’s not the reality. Main Streets and local leaders play an essential role in shaping how transportation supports their communities.

Survey participants prioritized these broader outcomes from transportation investments:

- Increase quality of life for residents
- Provide a better foundation for economic growth
- Improve a sense of community and place
- Gain experience to carry forward to future projects
- Increase connectivity between commuters and workplaces
- Enhance tourism opportunities

“Big things can happen in small towns.”

Survey response from Macomb, Illinois

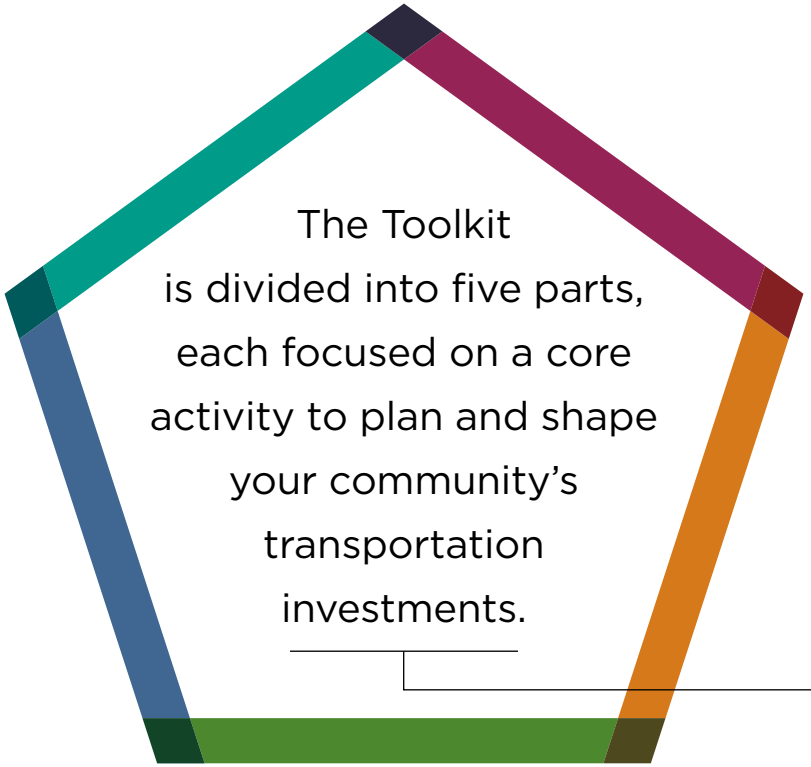
But major transportation projects can be daunting. They require a raft of resources: professional staff with capacity to manage projects, access to specialized knowledge such as finance and engineering, and funding to pay for professional services or grant matches. Rural and tribal communities often face additional challenges such as difficulty attracting specialized workers and overcoming long-standing economic hardships in their region.

That’s why Main Street America, in collaboration with a team of expert partners, developed this Thriving Communities Transportation Toolkit. Drawing on two years of work with rural communities and federally recognized tribes spanning 21 states, the Toolkit is designed to help Main Streets, small towns, and tribes take on transformative transportation projects. It offers practical guidance and tools to build community engagement, foster partnerships, identify and develop projects, and secure infrastructure funding.

Boarding the bus in Independence, Oregon.

Leaders across the Main Street network can use this toolkit to build more effective partnerships with local, regional, and state officials who can help move transportation initiatives forward.

How to Use This Toolkit



Throughout the Toolkit, you'll find clickable links that let you explore topics and resources in greater depth. You'll also see special call-outs woven throughout to inspire your transportation efforts. Callouts include:

THRIVING COMMUNITIES MOMENTS: Real-world examples of how communities in the Thriving Communities Program moved a transportation project forward—what worked, what didn't, and what they learned along the way.

TOOLS: Files, templates, and other resources for putting ideas into practice right away.

PRO TIPS: Snippets of practical advice.

Plus: Access content directly with the Interactive Footer

How to Use This Toolkit

1 DISCOVER OPPORTUNITIES: Learn how to assess your community's infrastructure opportunities and engage community members in the planning so that they feel a sense of ownership. You'll also find tools to help you map, organize, and prioritize potential projects.

2 BUILD A TEAM: Find strategies for creating a coalition of partners and regional collaborators to pursue infrastructure opportunities. This section outlines practical approaches to bring people to the table and keep them engaged.

3 DEVELOP A PROJECT: Learn what it takes to shepherd a project from conception to reality, including how to assess your transportation landscape and what feasibility studies you might need.

4 GET IT FINANCED: Learn how to find—and secure—funding to cover the planning, design, and/or construction of a project. This section includes common sources of funding and tips on how to determine if a project is grant-ready.

5 ACTIVATE & MANAGE INFRASTRUCTURE: Encounter key frameworks for managing and maintaining completed infrastructure projects. This section includes tools for tracking infrastructure conditions and frameworks to ensure that infrastructure is actively being used by the community.

Every transportation project is different, and requires a different set of partners and techniques to push forward. A simple crosswalk and a multi-million dollar bridge take different approaches. Think of this toolkit like a bookshelf, where you can pull down topics to use or share with your partners as you need them.

1 DISCOVER OPPORTUNITIES

Transportation projects can spark more than just new roads and routes—they can transform how people connect to jobs, education, recreation, and each other. But spotting those opportunities isn't always easy. It requires listening to residents, understanding the work that's already been done, and deciding which projects can have the most impact.

This section introduces activities to uncover opportunities and prepare for action. You'll learn how to engage with your community, assess your infrastructure and assets, and map and prioritize potential projects.

Different organizations may take the lead in different activities. But when that's the case, Main Streets still play a critical supporting role—connecting partners, ensuring key voices are included, and helping align projects with community priorities.

Thriving Communities partners tour a site where the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe is creating new infrastructure and housing.

Walk, Ride, and Reimagine Neighborhoods with Community Mobility Rituals

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: EQUITICITY

Community engagement is essential to modern transportation planning, but too often, it feels one-sided. Residents are simply told what transportation project is coming—whether they asked for it or not.

True community engagement goes further. When people see their needs, culture, and ideas reflected in local streets, community spaces, and transit systems, they're more likely to get involved and stay involved. Stronger community ownership ensures that neighborhoods and towns have thoughtful mobility solutions that fit the context and culture of their location.

That's where Community Mobility Rituals (CMRs) come in. CMRs are regularly scheduled, hyperlocal events that revolve around mobility. Part celebration, part education, and part community-building, they personalize transportation systems.

Here's how they work:

+ Residents are invited to walk, bike, ride, or take transit through their neighborhoods alongside trained guides and volunteers.
+ Each route includes storytelling stops where narrators give short talks on topics such as local history, transportation challenges, or place-based visions for change.
+ Along the way, participants are encouraged to identify problems and opportunities to help build a more equitable and accessible transportation system.

Walk, Ride, and Reimagine Neighborhoods with Community Mobility Rituals

Different Forms, Same Goals

CMRs are intentionally flexible. They can be adapted to different communities and ages and might take the form of:

COMMUNITY BICYCLE RIDES: Participants explore their neighborhood by bicycle to observe where infrastructure supports—or hinders—safe cycling. They might identify missing signs, dangerous traffic conditions, or opportunities for bike lane installations or improvements.

NEIGHBORHOOD WALKING TOURS: Participants assess sidewalks, crossings, and other infrastructure to identify issues such as broken sidewalks, poor lighting, or missing curb cuts. These tours highlight obstacles that impact walkability and safety.

PUBLIC TRANSIT EXCURSIONS: Participants ride local transit to evaluate the effectiveness of routes, schedules, and services. These outings can uncover issues such as confusing signage, long wait times, or inaccessible stops.

GROUP SCOOTER ROLLS: Participants test out scooters as a local mode of travel. These rides might reveal obstacles such as unclear regulations or limited scooter parking.

OPEN STREETS EVENTS: Participants experience streets as temporary car-free zones. This helps them imagine alternative uses for public spaces and learn how street design impacts community interaction and movement.

TOOLS

Through TCP, Equiticity developed a comprehensive overview of the Community Mobility Rituals framework, outlining best practices and opportunities for CMRs. The framework includes tools for partnership development, route planning, marketing, volunteer training, and more.

Walk, Ride, and Reimagine Neighborhoods with Community Mobility Rituals

Planning a CMR: Step by Step

A CMR is a powerful framework to bring residents into the heart of transportation planning and prioritizing. These shared experiences help surface insights that otherwise might stay hidden. They help residents better understand transportation issues and suggest potential solutions, turning them into local advocates. Here's how to put a CMR in motion.

Identify local partners

Reach out to community-based organizations that know the neighborhood—local government, schools, health centers, small businesses, walking and cycling groups. Each partner can contribute valuable insights, resources, and reach.

Secure transportation access

Arrange for transit passes and loaner bikes or scooters. Connect with local transportation agencies or related companies that may be able to provide equipment and support.

Design a route

Map out a path that allows for a relaxed pace, includes meaningful stops, and tells a story.

Recruit and train volunteers

Equip volunteers to lead the CMR in a safe, knowledgeable, and enjoyable way.

Prepare narrators and tour scripts

Create scripts and train narrators to explain the significance and historical background of stops on the CMR route. For help, reach out to local historians, planners, or storytellers.

Promote with intention

Choose an enticing name for your CMR and spread the word through local networks, community boards, cultural events, social media, or whichever methods resonate most with your residents. Your partner organizations will also be critical to promoting attendance through their networks.

Make your CMR welcoming

If possible, offer participants snacks and drinks—even better if they come from locally-owned businesses. Food can encourage people to linger at the event, and can address concerns like food insecurity that might prevent people from spending time at your event.

Independence, Oregon

The city of Independence, Oregon—population 10,000—has seen a wave of new residents in recent years, many of them Spanish-speaking agricultural workers who need transportation options.

As the city grows and becomes more diverse, local leaders are envisioning how infrastructure can support a thriving, inclusive community. At the heart of their vision is the Central Talmadge neighborhood. Their hope is to transform the neighborhood into a walkable, bike-friendly, mixed-use city hub.

To support this vision, the city launched the Monmouth-Independence Trolley in 2023. The route connects the two towns and makes multiple stops at important locations in Independence. The trolley was met with huge success, but early stakeholder conversations revealed that many of Independence's Spanish-speaking residents weren't aware of how to use the trolley for their daily routines.

To change that, the city of Independence teamed up with Equiticity through the TCP. Together, they hosted a Community Mobility Ritual (CMR) to bolster support and ridership of the trolley, especially among Spanish-speaking residents. During the CMR, participants learned the trolley's schedule, practiced boarding, and discovered key social services and local institutions along the route.

By literally speaking residents' language and broadening outreach, Independence is laying the groundwork for a more connected future.

Participants board and ride the MI Trolley in Independence, Oregon during a Community Mobility Ritual.

York, Alabama

In York, Alabama—a tight-knit community of 2,500 in the Black Belt region—local leaders are focused on delivering a better quality of life and a revitalized downtown for residents. Recent efforts have included investing in new community facilities and addressing transportation challenges—most notably a railroad line where trains sometimes sit idle for hours at a time, blocking access to the downtown. (An issue they're developing solutions for with help from a $3 million USDOT RAISE grant.)

As part of TCP, Equiticity led a Community Mobility Ritual (CMR) called "Rolling Thunder: Exploring the Beauty of York." The event attracted 75 participants and included support from city representatives, IV Vets, the Coleman Center for the Arts, RAISE Alabama, UWA Black Belt STEM, NASA, and the University of Alabama. The event featured a Veterans Day ceremony, STEM workshops for kids, a community bike ride with donated bicycles and helmets, and an engagement pop-up board that allowed participants to share what matters to them most about their community. The bike route traveled past some of York's most important community assets—parks, schools, healthcare facilities, city hall, murals, and the public library.

While the bike ride was initially meant to teach local youth how to safely travel to the new library and community center, it ended up doing much more—identifying transportation gaps, fostering community pride, and celebrating a collective vision for York's new and improved infrastructure.

Youth and adults in York, Alabama participate in a community bike ride focused on York's most important community assets. Photo Credit: Equiticity

The Power of 10: Mapping Destinations to Create Great Places

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

What makes a region truly special? It comes down to the variety and quality of experiences, services, opportunities, and venues that are close at hand.

Here's one way to look at it: A corner store is good. But a corner store with an outdoor patio, a gazebo, and an ice cream vendor? That's even better. Place a library with children's story times and community book clubs across the street and it's better still. Next, toss a coffee shop, a gas station, a bike trail, and a souvenir shop into the mix. Now you have a place that people would consider not only good, but great.

Take that concept and imagine not just one great place but 10 across a town or county. That's when an area reaches critical mass: a network of destinations that occupies people for hours, not just minutes.

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) calls this concept the Power of 10—a nod to the classic short documentaries, *Powers of Ten*, by Charles and Ray Eames. But the number isn't the important thing—what matters most is offering variety, connectedness, and choice. Or, in other words, places to sit, meet, play, learn, and shop.

The beauty of the Power of 10 framework is its flexibility. A small town may not yet have 10 distinct attractions, but with a few lively gathering spots, cultural or historic landmarks, scenic trails, places to eat or shop, and safe connections between these destinations, it can still succeed. The possibilities expand even more when day trips to other parts of the county or region are considered.

The Power of 10: Mapping Destinations to Create Great Places

Mapping What You Have—And What Could Be

The Power of 10 is not just a theory, it's a hands-on destination mapping exercise. You can use this exercise to identify and evaluate your area's best existing destinations as well as new opportunities.

Here's how to try it:

- Print a large map of your downtown or project area
- Hand out orange and green stickers to community members and stakeholders
- Ask them to put three green stickers on existing great places and three orange stickers on places with untapped potential
- Whether you try this exercise at a public event or with a smaller team of stakeholders, a common pattern typically appears—great places often sit next to places with great potential.

Small Moves, Big Impact

Placemaking improvements don't have to be major undertakings. Small, low-cost touches can quickly elevate an area. Colorful outdoor seating, wayfinding signage, gateway elements, bold landscaping, murals, and even flags and banners can pull destinations together and make them more inviting.

Pair those physical improvements with simple programs—bike repair classes, rental kiosks, nature walks, guided tours—and destinations become even more active and attractive.

It's also important that destinations don't remain isolated. In rural and small-town settings, popular sites are often spread out, reachable only by car on roads without sidewalks or bike lanes. To bring places closer together, consider new trails and linkages, safer crossings, enhanced trailheads, ramps, sidewalks, public art, and improved signage.

Through TCP, workshop participants in McAlester, Oklahoma marked great places and places of potential in the Old Town district.

The Power of 10: Mapping Destinations to Create Great Places

Place Performance Evaluation Workshop

A great way to gather ideas is through PPS' Place Performance Evaluation Workshop, which invites community members and stakeholders to brainstorm ideas, outside and on-site. This process sparks dialogue across differing viewpoints and often surfaces insights that would be missed in a meeting room.

To host a public or stakeholder workshop:

+ Select a meeting place within walking distance to the study sites chosen in a Power of 10 exercise.
+ For public workshops, invite the community through email, social media, mailed postcards, newsletters, or flyers. Spread the word through local churches, sports groups, community centers, or PTAs.
+ Share placemaking principles and relevant case studies or other inspiration. Then, break participants into small groups to walk to a different point of interest. These groups can use the Great Place Attributes Diagram in the Place Game to discuss and evaluate their site for strengths and weaknesses and brainstorm ideas for making these places more active and engaging. Then have the groups return to the meeting place to share key takeaways.

Visioning board in York, Alabama. Photo Credit: Coleman Center for the Arts

PRO TIP *Communities thrive when they offer more than a single attraction. A casino or fairground may draw crowds, but a thriving county or region needs several destinations, close together, that appeal to a variety of people.*

McAlester, Oklahoma

Before the Thriving Communities Program's second visit to McAlester, Oklahoma, Project for Public Spaces (PPS) asked local leaders to engage in a Power of 10 activity, identifying five community destinations that were already great and five with the potential to become standout assets. From the list, they chose one destination for deeper study, examining how it was being used, who was using it, what activities might serve the community, and how it could better connect to other destinations.

This groundwork set the stage for a Place Performance Evaluation Workshop, where community members and partners explored sites in McAlester's Old Town district on foot. Guided by the Place Game, each group assessed their site's strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, a team from the Rails to Trails Conservancy (RTC) mapped out existing and proposed connections for bikes and pedestrians.

While Old Town—McAlester's original downtown—is rich in history and character, it lacks some of the connectivity and activity of the primary downtown. The workshop revealed that targeted improvements—especially at the intersection of Jefferson Highway and Krebs Avenue—could enhance Old Town's unique charm while making it more inviting and safer for pedestrians. Suggested improvements included high-visibility crosswalks, painted sidewalks, colorful corner seating, and a street mural.

By focusing on thoughtful, small improvements, McAlester demonstrates how place-based strategies can advance transportation, economic development, and tourism goals while celebrating the community's heritage and character.

McAlester explored opportunities for enhanced, connected destinations with Main Street America, Project for Public Spaces, and Rails to Trails Conservancy.

Uncover Infrastructure Opportunities Through Place-Based Market Analysis

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: MAIN STREET AMERICA

Across the country, many rural and tribal communities are seeking transformative ways to restore their economies and build long-term financial resilience. One powerful tool that can help guide this transformation? A place-based market analysis.

This kind of analysis identifies a community's unique characteristics in the local and regional marketplace to shape bold growth strategies. In the process, place-based market analyses often reveal gaps in infrastructure that, when addressed, can unlock new opportunities.

But market analysis is more than just data-driven science—it's also an art that builds on a deep understanding of your community's needs and strengths and how it functions as a place where consumers, visitors, locals, small businesses, and organizations converge. Every community has place-based assets, anchors, and consumer markets that contribute to a healthy economy. Leveraging those assets through a targeted economic development strategy requires a thorough understanding of the marketplace.

TOOLS

Main Street America's Art of Market Analysis (Part One, Part Two, Part Three) reveals how a market analysis can be used to identify community transformation strategies and develop work plans. Also check out the accompanying episode of the Main Street Business Insights Podcast.

PRO TIP *Market analysis is an art and a science. Trust your gut instincts and deep understanding of your community just as much as what the numbers and the data tell you.*

Uncover Infrastructure Opportunities Through Place-Based Market Analysis

To create place-based market analyses that inform transformation strategies, Main Street America offers a variety of methods and tools with components such as:

- Asset maps (natural, built, economic, social, civic)
- Demographic trends within a trade area or drive time
- Employment and income trends
- Anonymized, geo-referenced data about visitors
- Psychographic information—data about local consumers' beliefs, values, and behaviors
- Social and economic trends
- Spending trends across industries

When these insights are paired with economic development goals, communities often uncover exciting transportation infrastructure opportunities to support their vision. That could mean:

- Calmer, pedestrian-friendly streets to slow traffic and better support local shopping
- Multipurpose trails that link destinations and attract visitors in search of outdoor recreation
- Safe sidewalks that connect housing to public spaces, services, and jobs
- Roadways, bridges, and rail access that open up new work and housing developments
- Transportation infrastructure designed to reflect local culture and identities
- Gateway markers and wayfinding systems that guide visitors to community assets

Telling the story of these projects, and the social and economic benefits they provide, shows that transportation infrastructure goes far beyond providing mobility. It's about revitalizing communities.

Georgetown, Texas. Photo Credit: Rudy Ximenez

Forest County Potawatomi Community

In northern Wisconsin, the Forest County Potawatomi Community, a federally recognized Tribe, is reimagining what recreation trails can be—not just paths through the woods, but connections to economic and cultural vitality.

Through the Thriving Communities Program (TCP), the Tribe set out to better understand its regional transportation needs and explore a valuable local asset: miles of all-terrain and utility-task vehicle (ATV/UTV) trails. In many parts of Wisconsin, these trails serve as both practical transportation routes and tourism draws.

The Tribe partnered with Main Street America on a place-based market analysis that included:

- Surveying ATV/UTV riders to understand their trail experience preferences
- Uncovering regional business gaps such as rental shops, lodging, and dining
- Analyzing geo-fenced data to track how visitors move between the Tribe's casino resort and nearby towns, identifying potential bicycle, pedestrian, and ATV/UTV trail connections

The analysis revealed that investing in trails would not only satisfy important transportation objectives, but also boost local economic development. The Tribe then used TCP funding to complete a benefit-cost analysis for a key ATV/UTV trail segment.

Their momentum didn't stop there. They also secured a $60,000 grant through the GM on Main Street Grant Program to fund the Në Mnobmadzëwen Myéwés (Pathways to Wellness Mural Project), which transformed a concrete retaining wall into a public art installation along a new pedestrian and bicycle path in Crandon, Wisconsin.

The Forest County Potawatomi Community works with regional towns to enhance a trail network to support both transportation and tourism. Top Photo Credit: Forest County Potawatomi Community

Create a Plans Library to Opens Doors to Infrastructure Funding

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP

"We have all those plans on the shelf, but nothing ever gets done."

You've probably heard something like this before. Too often, valuable plans and strategies end up collecting dust because they're not well organized.

But those "shelf plans" are one of your greatest assets. When you know what's in them, and where to find them, it's much simpler to pursue infrastructure projects and quickly act when the right grant funding opportunity comes along. You can also avoid wasting time and money on work you've already done. Plus, if your organization experiences staff turnover, you can quickly bring new hires up to speed.

Organizing your plans doesn't have to be complicated. A simple templated spreadsheet is enough to build a plans library.

Community Plans Library

Document Title	Date	Key Topics	Link to File
Citywide Comprehensive Plan	2019	Future land use and priority infrastructure projects	OneDrive PDF
Downtown Strategic Plan	2024	Downtown development policies and placemaking priorities	OneDrive PDF
Streetscape Concept for Downtown	2025	Conceptual designs for improvements to Main Street	OneDrive PDF
Trail Master Plan	2025	Conceptual trail corridors	OneDrive PDF

Planning Documents to Keep Close

Which documents should go in your plans library? Consider:

+ Comprehensive or master plans
+ Downtown redevelopment plans
+ Asset management plans
+ Emergency response and disaster plans
+ Environmental assessments/reviews
+ Transportation studies
+ Organizational and financial records
+ Transformation Strategies

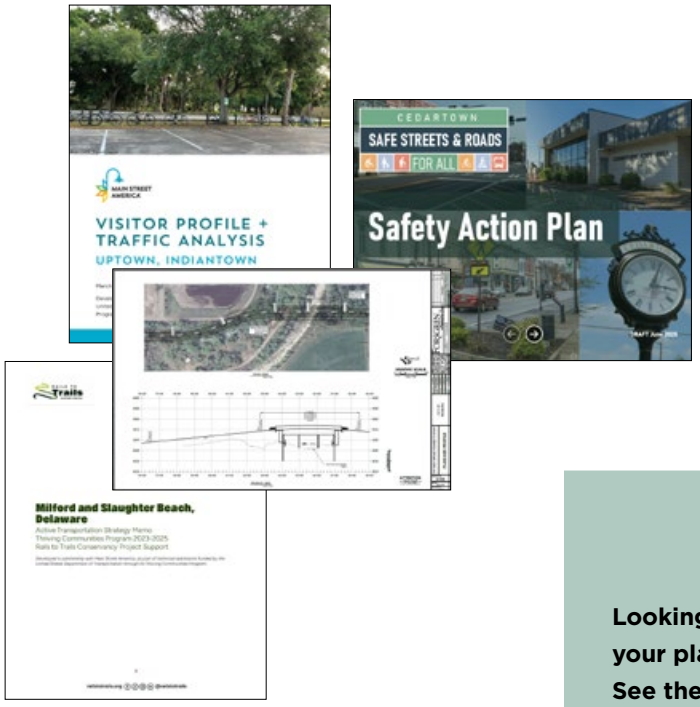
Create a Plans Library to Opens Doors to Infrastructure Funding

Building a Simple System

To keep your library accessible and updated, try these tips:

- Give more than one trusted person access to locations and passwords.
- Digitize paper documents into PDFs and store the locations of both digital and physical copies in your spreadsheet.
- Store all documents in a shared digital folder (private server, Google Drive, Microsoft SharePoint) with proper permissions to protect privacy and security.
- Update major plans at least once a year or after a plan is completed.

By creating a well-organized plans library, you can get your plans off the shelf and into action.



Through the Thriving Communities Program, participating towns and tribes produced plans and studies that can help make their case for infrastructure funding.

TOOLS

Looking for help to get your plans library started? See the Rural Community Assistance Partnership's spreadsheet template.

PRO TIP *Most grant applications require proof that your community needs and supports your proposed project. Good news: You can pull data—traffic counts, community surveys, strategies—directly from existing plans for your grant proposals. When those plans are well-organized, it's a huge time-saver for digging up the data you need.*

Elizabethtown, North Carolina

Elizabethtown, North Carolina, saw the powerful potential in bringing together investments and programs to revitalize New Town—the town's historic African-American neighborhood that was sorely in need of infrastructure upgrades. Determined to make lasting change, town leaders set out to find the opportunities that would have the greatest impact and to ensure that community voices guided the process.

With technical assistance and funding support from the Thriving Communities Program, Elizabethtown created the New Town Task Force of neighborhood stakeholders to shape the Blueprint for Revitalizing New Town. Grounded in meaningful public engagement and research, the plan outlines clear priorities for transportation and infrastructure improvements—laying the groundwork for future funding, design, and construction efforts.

Today, New Town residents have a strong platform to advocate for their community, coordinate with state and federal officials, and secure the resources they need to bring long overdue transportation projects to life.

New Town stakeholders in Elizabethtown, North Carolina, work together to prepare a transportation and infrastructure plan. Photo Credit: Town of Elizabethtown

Use a Project Intake Tool to Track and Prioritize Regional Needs

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Regional planning organizations regularly use project intake tools to keep track of a steady stream of project requests from local governments and other stakeholders. But they're not the only ones who can benefit. Essentially any organization that needs to collect, organize, and prioritize project data—from cities and counties to nonprofits and state agencies—can make use of a project intake tool.

These tools provide a centralized, structured system for collecting project details, determining project readiness, and matching and aligning projects with funding.

How Does a Project Intake Tool Work?

A project intake tool captures project information in the same way, in the same place, to make projects easy to track and compare. These tools can take several forms, including:

A SHARED SPREADSHEET where project leads fill out standardized information

A FILLABLE PDF FORM that collects key details

AN ONLINE SUBMISSION FORM OR PORTAL that stores data in a central database

These tools typically collect information such as:

+ **Project description and scope**—what the project aims to achieve
+ **Lead organization or contact**—who is responsible
+ **Project status or stage**—planning, design, or ready to implement
+ **Funding needs**—whether financial support is required and for what purpose
+ **Partners and stakeholders**—who is involved or affected
+ **Alignment with priorities**—how the project fits with organizational or regional goals

Use a Project Intake Tool to Track and Prioritize Regional Needs

Projects can then be reviewed, scored, and ranked according to project readiness, impact, funding alignment, or strategic importance. And priorities can be reassessed regularly when funding opportunities, project readiness, or regional needs change.

When do project intake tools have the biggest impact? When competing priorities meet limited resources, a reality for organizations of all shapes and sizes.

Salina, Kansas

THRIVING COMMUNITIES MOMENT

North Central Regional Planning Commission

Sometimes the right tool makes all the difference. In Beloit, Kansas, the North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC)—with support from the National Association of Development Organizations—created a simple, but highly valuable, online project intake form. The form allows community leaders to submit project details—scope, partners, status, funding needs—to the planning commission year-round.

With the intake form in place, NCRPC can now see the big picture: which communities are ready to move forward on a project and how to best support their efforts. As a result, they used a subgrant from the Thriving Communities Program to support costs for six communities to prepare preliminary engineering reports (PERs)—one more PER than planned. Now these communities are a step closer to having a shovel-ready project in place.

2 BUILD A TEAM

Transportation projects involve multiple boundaries, budgets, and sectors, and they require collaboration to complete. Success depends on bringing the right people to the table and building trust.

If you represent a local Main Street program, you can play a critical role in planning and advocating for transportation improvements—especially when you partner with your city, county, region, or state.

Here you'll find strategies for creating and sustaining a coalition of transportation partners to make infrastructure ideas a reality.

Trinidad Rancheria staff provide a tour of the Tribe's infrastructure with Main Street America, USDOT, and Thriving Communities Program partners.

Expand and Energize Your Transportation Partner Network

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Transportation projects aren't meant to be solo efforts. These complex projects cross communities, economies, and jurisdictions—impacting everything from housing and jobs to public health. Their success requires a network of partners all working together.

When developing transportation projects, it's natural to lean on trusted partners you've worked with in the past to contribute expertise and resources. But it can also pay off to expand your network.

To identify new partners—or new capabilities within existing partners—ask these questions:

+ Who needs this project to succeed?
+ Who stands to benefit, but didn't request the project?
+ Who has historically been left out of planning conversations?
+ Who might offer skills, insights, or capacity that you haven't tapped yet?

PRO TIP *While transportation projects can seem like a tall order for small, resource-strapped organizations, groups of any size can take the lead to map out a supportive system of partners. Learn more at Main Spotlight: Building Partnerships for Main Street Success.*

Partners of the Trinidad Rancheria spend time in the field touring infrastructure project locations.

Expand and Energize Your Transportation Partner Network

Use a Partner Map to Build and Manage Your Partnerships

To make the most of your partnerships, create a partner map. A partner map is a strategic tool to:

- Store partners' names, contact information, and organizational roles, making it easy to call up information and ensure continuity during staff turnover or leadership changes
- Detail why an organization might be a good fit for certain projects based on motivations such as mission alignment
- List specific contributions that partners provide such as technical support or funding help
- Visualize your partner network and spot any gaps

Revisit and update your partner map regularly to reflect shifts in roles, needs, and opportunities.

Transportation Partner Map

Organization Name	Type	Transportation Roles	Contact
Regional Planning Organization	Support	Provides funding, technical assistance, and planning	Sylvia R.
Local Manufacturing Plant	Demand	Commuters for day and night shifts	John T.
RP Engineers	Transactional	Engineering and construction management for roads	Janet D.
City Planning Department	Support	Has traffic data and prioritizes infrastructure plans	Maggie G.

Define Clear Roles: Who's at the Table?

Along with mapping your partners, it's also a good idea to organize collaborators into categories to clarify expectations and leverage everyone's strengths:

DEMAND PARTNERS: Users for the project such as residents seeking recreation opportunities, commuters traveling to work, and businesses transporting or receiving freight and goods.

TRANSACTIONAL PARTNERS: Those who design, engineer, build or otherwise contribute directly to delivering the project.

SUPPORT PARTNERS: People or groups who help make a project successful such as funders, nonprofits, agencies, and individuals offering financial, legal, or logistical support.

"THE COORDINATOR:" A designated person or persons from the lead organization who maintains partnership relationships and ensures effective communication.

To keep partners engaged, host a partnership roundtable or a site visit so that they can hear and see your vision firsthand. Nurture your relationships by checking in regularly, celebrating small wins together, and sharing credit widely.

TOOLS

Use our Partner Mapping template to track partners in your transportation work. TCP communities have relied on the template to record their partners' motivations, identify actionable roles their partners can play, and craft more detailed letters of support for project proposals.

Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe

Located on Willapa Bay in southwest Washington, the federally recognized Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe (SBIT) provides essential community services, operates local housing, and powers a small-business economy that includes a hotel, casino, retail shops, and a partnership with Shoalwater Seafood. (Learn about the oyster-based business on the Main Street Business Insights podcast.)

But the Tribe's coastal home faces serious threats. The region is at risk from earthquakes and tsunamis, risks that are compounded by accelerating coastal erosion and rising sea levels. Large pieces of Tribal lands have already been washed into the ocean. And the Tribe lacks enough housing for some members to live on the reservation.

Rather than let things get worse, the Tribe acted. SBIT built a berm to slow erosion on the reservation and constructed a state-of-the-art tsunami evacuation tower. The Tribe also secured land uphill from the tsunami zone. SBIT is now managing more than $30 million in grants to master plan and build the first set of homes on this site.

During the first year of the Thriving Communities Program (TCP), SBIT hosted a three-day site visit for partners to witness the site's progress. And with support from Main Street America, Tribe leaders developed a partner map template to identify existing resources, find and fill gaps, and create practices for onboarding new partners and managing existing partners. The site visit is now an annual tradition and SBIT leaders also further nurture these partner relationships with monthly check-ins.

SBIT is now in motion—building not only housing, but a stronger future for the next generation.

Partners complete a partner-mapping exercise and tour a tsunami evacuation tower during Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe's Partnership Gathering.

How to Partner with Your State Department of Transportation

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: CTL ENGINEERING

To take a transportation project from concept to ribbon-cutting, you need to collaborate with transportation agencies. The key? Knowing how they operate.

A great working relationship with state departments of transportation (DOT) and other agencies hinges on five principles:

1. Understanding Local and State Government Differences

State DOTs and local government leaders operate very differently.

State DOTs: Focused on mobility, safety, and efficiency across entire regions, sometimes spanning hundreds of miles. Typically have bigger budgets, more staff, and specialized engineers familiar with federal rules and requirements.

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) or Rural Planning Organizations (RPO): Act as regional coordinators and/or planners. MPOs focus around urban areas while RPOs serve rural ones.

Local governments: Focused closer to home: transportation-related projects that might involve parks, schools, land use, housing, and community development. Budgets and staffing are often more limited and priorities can shift quickly.

2. Learning the Transportation Planning Process

State and regional transportation agencies follow structured, federally mandated processes to decide which transportation projects move forward. Below are the plans that guide their process.

Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP): A 20–30 year plan developed by MPOs, state DOTs, and RPOs that outlines a region's transportation vision and goals.

Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP): Created by State DOTs, this document incorporates all planned statewide transportation projects—typically across a four-year period.

Regional Transportation Improvement Program (RTIP): A short-term slate of projects created by MPOs, in collaboration with other agencies, based on their LRTP and public input.

How to Partner with Your State Department of Transportation

3. Doing Your Homework

Before you reach out to your state DOT, it helps to know certain information ahead of time:

Jurisdiction/Ownership. Learn who owns or controls the roads or facilities involved in your project. Most state DOTs publish maps or databases showing the roads and facilities under their jurisdiction. DOTs are typically divided into regions or districts—find yours on your state DOT's website.

Your DOT's Project Prioritization Process. Every state DOT uses a different process to evaluate, rank, and select projects. You can find these priorities by reading your state's STIP on your state DOT's website.

Project-Specific Information. Gather information such as traffic counts, crash data, safety scores, and local comprehensive and master plans. You can often find this information on your MPO or state DOT's website or in a state GIS database such as North Carolina's NC OneMap.

Bonus Data. You can collect additional data to support your proposal via publicly available audit forms.

+ Road Safety Audit Forms: Includes pedestrian and bicycle counts, speeding vehicles, and peak traffic hours.
+ Complete Streets Audit and Walking Environment Audit: Tools to assess roadway issues and whether conditions meet your community's goals.

The Project Life Cycle

DOT projects move through six stages:

+ **Visioning and Policy**
+ **Long Range Planning and Programming**
+ **Project Development**
+ **Final Design and Right-of-Way**
+ **Construction**
+ **Operations and Maintenance**

Understanding these stages is critical—the earlier you get involved, the more input you'll have over a project. For a full breakdown of each cycle, see the DOT Project Life Cycle Chart.

How to Partner with Your State Department of Transportation

4. Defining the Problem—Not the Solution

You should approach your DOT with a well-documented problem, not a solved project. Why? DOTs generally prefer to use their expertise to work with you to determine the best solution.

To help define your problem, work with your partners to develop a community vision and a purpose and need statement. Your statement should be written with guidance from a planner or engineer.

+ A community vision helps reveal problems and ensure proposed improvements align with community wants. Get community input through surveys, workshops, and other visioning exercises.
+ A purpose and need statement—created during the project development stage—spells out why your project matters. Your statement might address transportation demand, social and economic benefits, and safety issues. For what to include in a statement, see Crafting a Purpose and Need Statement and for tips on writing one, see this resource from the Minnesota Department of Transportation. To view a completed example, see the City of Syracuse, New York's statement for a viaduct project.

5. Partnering for Success

Show your DOT, MPO, or RPO that you have partners—businesses, elected officials, schools, nonprofits—who share your vision. You can do so by submitting letters of support, marketing one-pagers with partner logos, or summaries from stakeholder meetings. A diverse, well-organized coalition of partners demonstrates that your project is backed by broad community support.

Main Street Homer (Louisiana) works with stakeholders and partners to outline a community vision. Photo Credit: Main Street Homer

Louisiana Main Street

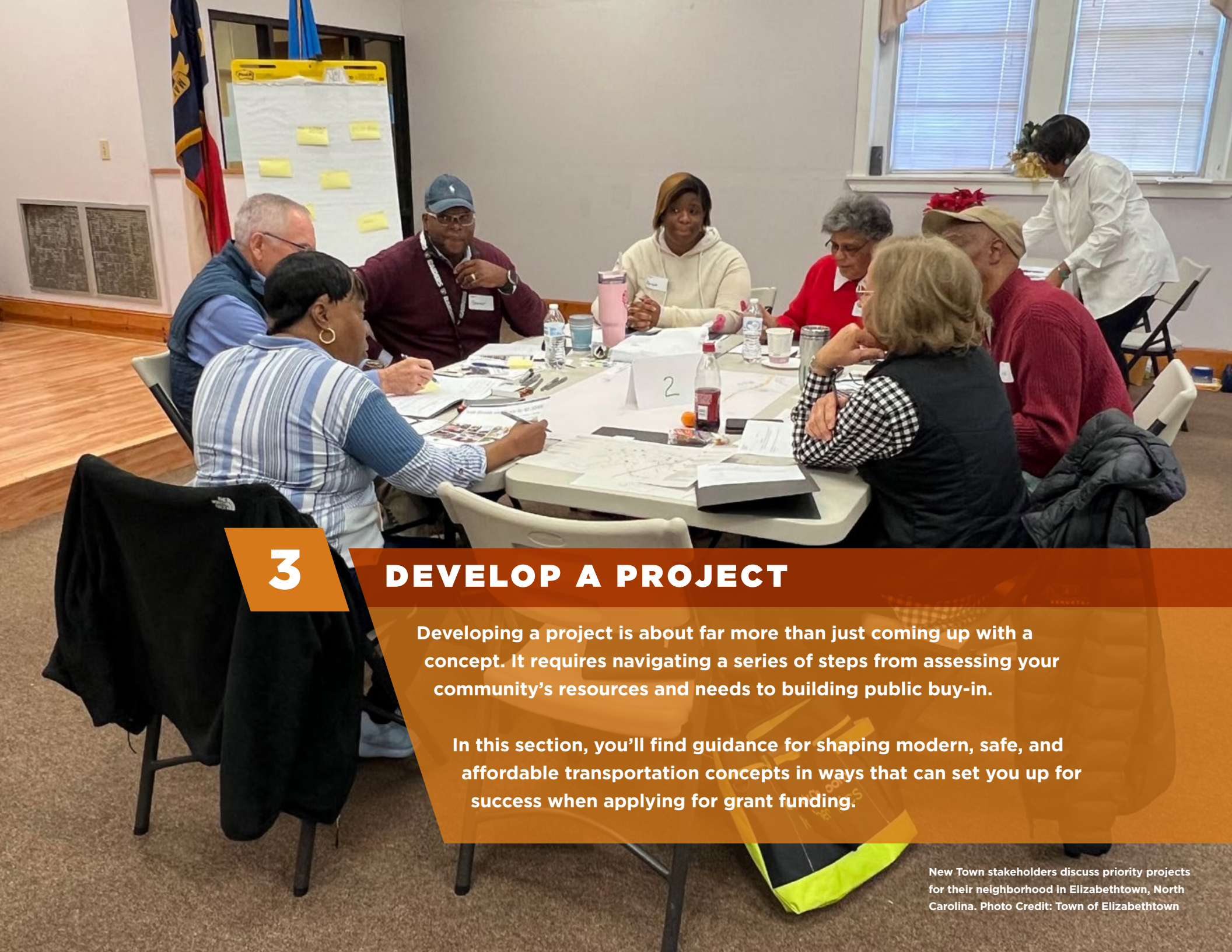
Through USDOT's Thriving Communities Regional Pilot Capacity Builder Program (TCP-R), Louisiana Main Street is part of a team that received $1.9 million to accelerate infrastructure development in six Main Street communities over the next three years. Franklin, Homer, New Roads, Opelousas, St. Martinville, and Winnsboro are six small towns across the state. All six Main Streets face a common challenge and opportunity—a state highway running through their districts.

The partnership is not only strengthening Louisiana Main Street's relationships with state agencies—especially the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD)—but also advancing projects that aim to increase mobility, reduce pollution, and expand affordable transportation options in underserved communities. By working with a cohort of Main Streets together alongside Louisiana Main Street, the DOTD gets better perspective on the common opportunities across towns statewide.

In Homer, for example, heavy logging truck traffic passes directly through the district and courthouse square, raising concerns about safety, noise, and even vibrations that can damage buildings. Through TCP-R, Main Street Homer is playing a key role convening stakeholders and defining a vision for success in collaboration with its local DOTD district office.

At the same time, Louisiana Main Street's leaders' conversations with DOTD are creating a model approach to transportation partnerships that could benefit Main Streets across the state.

Louisiana Main Street and Main Street Homer work together with the state department of transportation to enhance the town's beautiful square. Photo Credit: Louisiana Main Street and Main Street Homer



3 DEVELOP A PROJECT

Developing a project is about far more than just coming up with a concept. It requires navigating a series of steps from assessing your community's resources and needs to building public buy-in.

In this section, you'll find guidance for shaping modern, safe, and affordable transportation concepts in ways that can set you up for success when applying for grant funding.

New Town stakeholders discuss priority projects for their neighborhood in Elizabethtown, North Carolina. Photo Credit: Town of Elizabethtown

People-First Streets: Making Streets Strollable, Bikeable, and Lively

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

For decades, the street was the beating heart of community life—a place where neighbors chatted, kids played, and local businesses thrived. But as cities prioritized cars, streets were widened, speed limits increased, and surface parking spread. That made streets better for cars, but less safe and welcoming for people.

Today, many communities are rethinking that trade-off. People-first streets prioritize pedestrians, cyclists, transit, and community life. They create more walkable and energetic spaces where people can socialize, shop, exercise, and play. Many of these projects start with low-cost, temporary interventions such as paint, planters, or pop-up plazas to show what's possible.

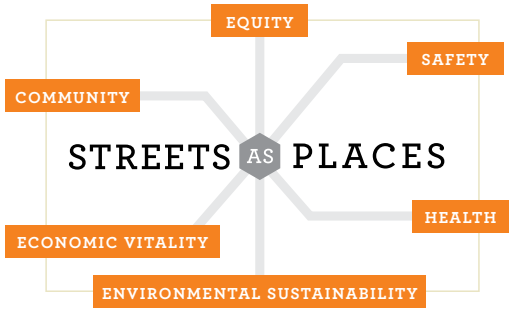
Photo Credit: Historic Valley Junction Foundation

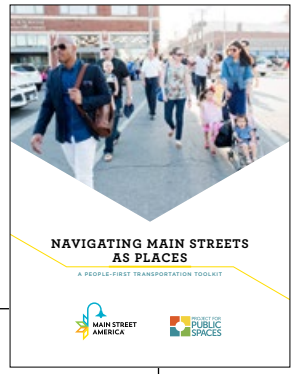
People-First Streets: Making Streets Strollable, Bikeable, and Lively

Project for Public Spaces and Main Street America's "Navigating Main Streets as Places: A People-First Transportation Toolkit" breaks down the why, what, and how of people-first street design:

CHAPTER 1: Explains why transportation matters for Main Streets, and the costs and benefits of people-first vs. vehicle-first streets in six areas—equity, safety, health, economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and community.

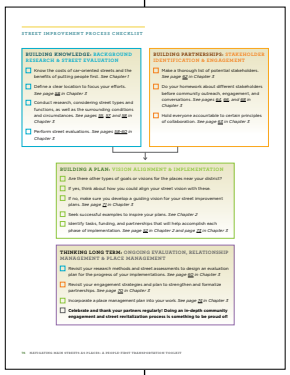
CHAPTER 2: Details how to create people-first streets, including streetscape and pedestrian design, vehicular traffic, and parking. Includes recommendations for physical improvements and programming strategies, with examples of innovative policy solutions and ways to work with a state department of transportation.





CHAPTER 3: Shows how to put the metrics and strategies into action, building better streets through a community-powered placemaking process of research, planning, iterative implementation, management, and partnerships.

Through practical strategies and examples, "The Navigating Main Streets as Places" toolkit shows communities how to turn streets into places where people want to linger longer.



TOOLS

The "Navigating Main Streets as Places: A People-First Transportation Toolkit" includes a Street Improvement Process Checklist to take people-first street projects from development to done.

Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper: Transforming Public Spaces Without the Wait

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

Some transportation projects can take years—or even decades—to move from concept to construction. But recently, there's been a movement toward projects that bring new energy to community spaces faster and easier.

The Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC) approach is a more adaptable alternative to capital-heavy, top-down planning. And many of a town's most authentic and enduring destinations—places that keep people coming back again and again—evolve from small, locally-driven improvements.

Mineral County, Nevada. Photo Credit: Hawthorne Main Street

Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper: Transforming Public Spaces Without the Wait

Reimaging Streets and Public Spaces

Demonstration projects are the backbone of the LQC method. These small-scale, low-cost experiments allow communities to test ideas before making major investments.

Focused on making streets, sidewalks, trails, and rights-of-way more people-centered, the LQC concept reclaims space for retail, services, social activity, and active transportation. Examples include:

- **Temporary public spaces:** Converting paved spaces into temporary outdoor seating, art displays, and other uses that slow driving and increase foot traffic to local stores and destinations
- **Enhanced pedestrian infrastructure:** Adding new or expanded sidewalks, bumpouts, or crosswalks
- **Recreation events:** Hosting gatherings focused on biking, walking, hiking, and other low-impact modes of transportation
- **Lot activation:** Bringing life to vacant lots with food trucks, kiosks, light structures, and temporary events

Even spaces with some activity can feel flat or underutilized. Custom-designed amenities and installations can transform these spaces into dynamic hubs. Consider adding:

- **Inviting furniture:** Eye-catching tables, chairs, umbrellas, and lounge seating that encourage lingering
- **Artistic elements:** Murals, sculptures, window displays, and signage that complement programs and amenities
- **Functional anchors:** Kiosks, carts, pergolas, and shade structures that support markets, performances, and other community gatherings

By combining small interventions and local creativity, LQC helps communities build spaces that are not only used but loved.

Transforming a plaza in Mineral County, Nevada. Photo Credit: Hawthorne Main Street

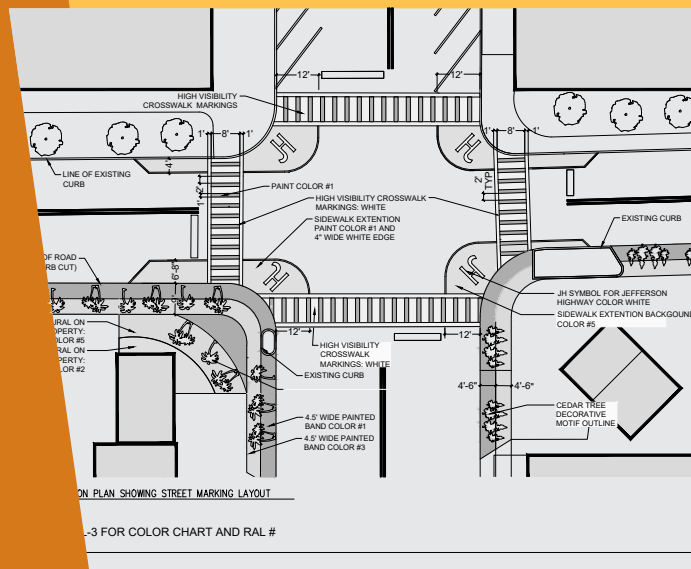
McAlester, Oklahoma

A mile and a half from McAlester's bustling downtown lies the city's Old Town district, an area known for its antique shops, sandstone buildings, and colorful murals.

During a Place Performance Evaluation Workshop, participants identified improvements to better connect Old Town to the downtown and make the area more pedestrian-friendly using Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC) strategies.

The intersection of Jefferson Highway and Krebs Street, the heart of Old Town, became the focus. With support from a Thriving Communities Program sub-grant, McAlester commissioned an eye-catching pavement mural honoring the Jefferson Highway, complemented by highly visible and artistic crosswalks at all four corners. These enhancements have not only created a new landmark, but also narrowed driving lanes and slowed traffic for pedestrian safety.

The impact was immediate. Old Town's busiest interaction is safer, more inviting, and a source of pride for the community. The project also has boosted tourism and cemented a partnership between the the City of McAlester, the Old Town Association, and the Jefferson Highway Association to continue investing in McAlester.



Through TCP, McAlester created a safe, inviting intersection that celebrates Old Town's connection to the historic Jefferson Highway. Photo Credit: City of McAlester

Mineral County, Nevada

In Mineral County, Nevada, Hawthorne Main Street leaders realized their downtown was missing a gathering place for the community to connect. So they jumped into action. After identifying a county-owned site and developing a design concept, Hawthorne Main Street secured a $50,000 grant through Nevada Main Street and the Governor's Office of Economic Development for a new downtown plaza.

The project quickly became a community-wide effort. Mineral County government, volunteers, and local businesses provided materials and labor to transform the new space. Fast forward a year later and Hawthorne Main Street cut the ribbon on the Plaza on Main Street—a central gathering spot that supports the county's goals of providing a safer, more comfortable downtown. Today, the Plaza is host to a children's market, movie nights, and concerts, adding a lively and communal vibe to Main Street. Explore more tools to manage—and reimagine—public spaces.

Hawthorne's vibrant new gathering space is a social hub right on main street. Photo Credit: Louis Rutledge

The Power of Connected Trails

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RAILS TO TRAILS CONSERVANCY

Connected trail networks offer more than recreation—they raise property values, strengthen community identity, and provide safe, low-cost connections to jobs, schools, businesses, parks, and neighboring communities.

Trail networks also fuel local economies by attracting visitors who spend money in area shops, restaurants, and lodging. That's especially true for long-distance and connected systems. As an example, the Great American Rail-Trail, proposed to stretch from Washington D.C. to Washington state, is projected to generate more than $229.4 million in visitor spending and $104 million in labor income a year once complete.

For rural and small towns in particular, these impacts can be transformative—reversing economic decline and brain drain and fostering social connection.

Photo Credit: City of Cedartown

The Power of Connected Trails | Tool: Rails to Trails Conservancy Trail Building Toolbox

Rails to Trails Conservancy's Trail-Building Toolbox provides the steps for creating a vibrant trail in your region. Get the advice and information you need to take your trail project from a vision to a supported, valued community space.

TRAIL TOOLBOX SECTION	SUBTOPICS	DESCRIPTION
Basics	Trail-Building Basics	Key stages from feasibility to funding, construction, and management
	Equitable and Inclusive Trails	Ensuring trails serve diverse communities and remove barriers to access
	Rail-With-Trail	Building alongside active rail lines safely and in compliance with regulations
	Trails and Climate Resilience	Using trails to mitigate climate impacts, support green infrastructure, and provide emergency connectivity
	Trails and Utilities	Co-locating trails with utility corridors for cost savings and partnership benefits
Organizing	Building Community Support	Engaging residents, businesses, and civic groups to champion projects
	Working with Opposition and Neighbors	Listening, addressing concerns, and reducing conflicts
	Engaging Public Agencies and Officials	Securing buy-in from local, state, and federal decision-makers
Acquisition	Corridor Research	Identifying ownership, right-of-way status, and legal considerations
	Railbanking	Preserving corridors for trail use under the federal railbanking program
	How to Railbank	Complete process from engaging the railroad to filing with the Surface Transportation Board
	Working with Railroads	Building relationships and negotiating with rail owners
	Corridor Valuation	Determining fair purchase price or lease value
	Acquisition Strategy	Planning the legal and financial path to secure the corridor
	Environmental Compliance	Meeting environmental review and permitting requirements
Funding	Funding for Multiuse Trails	Overview of local, state, and federal funding sources
	Equitable Investment	Directing resources to underserved communities
	Maintenance Funding	Securing revenue streams for ongoing upkeep
	Federal Funding Tool	Identifying applicable federal grants and programs
	Creative Approaches	Exploring salvage value recovery and utility leases

The Power of Connected Trails | Tool: Rails to Trails Conservancy Trail Building Toolbox

TRAIL TOOLBOX SECTION	SUBTOPICS	DESCRIPTION
Planning	Planning Basics	Core planning principles to align trails with community needs
	Comprehensive Regional Planning	Integrating trails into transportation and land use systems
	Developing in Sensitive Areas	Protecting natural, historic, and cultural resources
	Equitable Planning Practice	Engaging underrepresented voices in decision-making
	Leveraging Data	Using GIS, trail counts, and surveys to guide planning
	Trail Towns	Partnering with communities to spur trail-oriented development
Design	Designing Trails for User Type	Aligning width, grade, and features for specific users
	Accessibility	Meeting ADA standards for universal access
	Surfaces	Choosing materials based on use and maintenance needs
	Signage	Providing wayfinding, safety, and interpretive signs
	Crossings	Designing safe road, railway, and water crossings
	Lighting	Improving safety and usability in low-light conditions
	Trailheads	Providing parking, restrooms, and amenities
Management & Maintenance	Maintenance Basics	Routine and seasonal upkeep for safety and longevity
	Management Basics	Establishing governance and operational responsibilities
	Liability and Insurance	Understanding and mitigating legal risks
	Trail Conflicts	Managing user behavior and resolving disputes
	E-Bikes	Safely integrating electric-assist bicycles
	Programming & Events	Activating trails with community events
	Equitable Programming	Designing activities that welcome diverse users
	User Surveys	Gathering feedback to guide improvements

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Mountain City, Tennessee

Leaders in Mountain City, Tennessee, have long known that trails can drive community development. That's why in 2006, they teamed up with the Johnson County Trail Association to design a county-wide trail network plan, linking dozens of local destinations.

Nearly 20 years later, those plans faced an unexpected test. Hurricane Helene tore through the region in 2024, washing out bridges and eroding many area trails. Local favorites like the Laurel Creek Trail and half of the famous 34-mile Virginia Creeper Trail—a magnet for area tourism—were badly damaged.

From that damage, Mountain City leaders saw opportunity. With support from the Thriving Communities Program and partners across the border in Virginia, they turned their attention to the Iron Mountain Trail. The rugged hiking trail was part of the Appalachian Trail until the 1970s, but had fallen off most hikers' maps in recent years. By restoring the trail—and expanding it to accommodate biking—Johnson County will connect to portions of the Virginia Creeper Trail in Damascus, Virginia, expanding the region's trail network.

The upside for Mountain City is clear: when the project is complete, the city will be a key link in a multi-day trail tourism corridor.

Mountain City stakeholders worked through TCP with Main Street America, Rails to Trails Conservancy, and the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, to assess trail segments and deepen regional partnerships.

Public Transportation Provides Essential Community Connectivity

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Boarding public transit in Independence, Oregon.

Public transportation isn't just a way to get from one place to the next. It also connects people to jobs and services and supports local development. Transit can take many forms:

- Door-to-door transportation requiring advance reservations
- Traditional fixed and flexible routes
- Special-purpose commuter services
- On-demand transportation services

Transportation systems have two major costs: **capital costs**, such as vehicles or buildings, and **operational costs**, which cover planning, operations, and maintenance.

PRO TIP *Thinking about adding or expanding public transit in your community? These resources are a great place to start.*

Federal Transit Administration Formula Grants for Rural Areas

National Rural Transportation Assistance Program

National Association of Development Organizations Rural Transportation

Community Transportation Association of America

Transit Cooperative Research Program

CCAM Technical Assistance Center Community Transportation Provider Map

Public Transportation Provides Essential Community Connectivity

Funding can come from a mix of sources—federal, tribal, state, and local governments, along with private partners or nonprofits. At the federal level, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), part of the U.S. Department of Transportation, is the largest backer for rural public transportation. More than 2,800 agencies across the country receive support from the FTA's Formula Grants for Rural Areas—commonly known as the 5311 program.

Through this program, funds flow to several sources:

- **Public sector entities** (tribal governments, state agencies, regional councils of government, local governments)
- **Independent public agencies or authorities**
- **Private entities** (nonprofits, universities, Area Agencies on Aging, etc.)

No matter who takes the lead, almost all transit services are funded through local and regional partnerships. For example, the FTA 5311 program requires matching funds—typically a 50% match for operations grants, and a 20% match for capital funds or paratransit services.

Lead entities can also seek funding from other sources, such as:

- State or local dollars, often through dedicated transportation taxes
- Earned revenue, including fares, contracts, advertising, or donations
- Other federal programs where transportation is an eligible expense

Pulling together the right mix of grants and match funding isn't always easy, but having strong relationships with legislators, community leaders, and the public is a great way to make it happen. (For more on match funding, see *How to Make Match Requirements Work*.)

Bus system in North Central Kansas.

Independence, Oregon

The Monmouth-Independence (MI) Trolley shows just how transformative a new transit project can be. Launched as a pilot program in 2023, the free trolley connects the small Oregon cities of Independence and Monmouth.

Partially funded with $3 million in American Rescue Plan Act dollars, the trolley makes both planned stops and allows riders to request a stop within three-quarters of a mile of the published route. That flexibility has made the service a lifeline for underserved communities and paratransit riders.

The community's response was overwhelming. In three months, the trolley logged more than 35,000 trips. Today, leaders from the two communities are focused on finding long-term funding to make the MI Trolley a permanent fixture in their towns.

North Central Kansas

In north central Kansas, transportation access is paving the way for equity and opportunity. The North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC) recognized that many residents in the region lacked easy or affordable access to essential services. Through the Thriving Communities Program, NCRPC partnered with OCCK, Inc. to underwrite local transit fares—covering more than 3,400 rides and 300 connecting fares in just six months.

The initiative not only helped residents access jobs, health care, and other vital needs, but also provided valuable data to improve future routes and strengthen NCRPC's public transportation grant applications. What began as a local challenge is now providing strategies to boost the region's mobility and possibility.

Coordinate Above and Below for Safer, More Fundable Projects

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP

Beneath our city streets, sidewalks, highways, and railways, lie thousands of miles of connected systems that power local economies and public health. This underground infrastructure includes water and sewer mains, stormwater pipes, gas lines, electrical conduits, and communication cables.

Although hidden from view, underground utilities are closely tied to surface transportation systems. When they fail—such as during a water main break or a sewer collapse—they can trigger sink holes or costly emergency road repairs.

And when transportation project owners don't coordinate with utility companies, it can lead to delays, budget overruns, and preventable disruptions.

Dig Once, Benefit Twice

In Hoboken, New Jersey, the city synchronized water main replacements with road resurfacing and pedestrian upgrades such as bike lanes, curb cuts, and ADA enhancements. The results speak volumes: Water main breaks plummeted from 34 in 2013 to just 12 in 2022 and the streets are safer and more accessible for people and vehicles.

Complementary and Stacked Infrastructure Planning

Today's best practices recommend combining surface and underground infrastructure projects. Known as "stacking" or "dig once," this approach coordinates road, bridge, or transit improvements with the replacement or repair of buried utilities.

Key benefits:

Cost efficiency: Reduces redundant excavation and labor costs

Minimized disruption: Residents and businesses face a single construction event instead of multiple disturbances

Smarter investments: Focuses resources where both surface and underground systems need attention

Improved resilience: Upgrading underground systems reduces the risk of failures that can damage roads or other surface transportation infrastructure

Federal funding programs increasingly favor integrated infrastructure projects. It's not hard to see why—these projects maximize public funds, lower long-term costs, and strengthen community resilience.

Boost Funding Success Through Project Readiness

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP

Finding funding for infrastructure projects takes more than a good idea. Funders need proof that a project is viable, thoroughly planned, and ready to launch. That means having the right documents in place before applying for funding.

Categories of Documentation

Every funder has their own requirements, but project readiness documentation typically falls into five main categories:

TOOLS

Use USDOT's Project Readiness Checklist to see the approvals, regulations, and milestones you should meet before applying for a federal transportation grant.

1. Financial Documentation

Proves the project is affordable and financially sustainable for both upfront and operational costs.

Detailed Budgets: Breaks down construction, equipment, contingency, and soft costs. Should include a total project estimate (capital and life-cycle).

Funding Strategies: Identifies expected grants, loans, and matching funds

Rate Studies or Revenue Plans: Demonstrates how the project will be paid for over time

Financial Statements or Audits: Show the applicant's financial stability. Typically three years of financial statements or recent audits are required.

2. Environmental Documentation

Demonstrates the project's environmental impact and compliance with federal and state regulations.

Environmental Reviews: Documentation of compliance with state, funder, and National Environmental Policy Act regulations (Categorical Exclusion, Environmental Assessment, or Environmental Impact Statement). May include maps and agency correspondence.

Proof of Public Engagement: Meeting minutes, sign-in sheets

Regulatory Actions: Notices of violations, air/water/soil testing, declarations of hazards

Boost Funding Success Through Project Readiness

3. Engineering/Technical Documentation

Confirms the project is feasible, technically sound, and based on expert recommendations.

Preliminary Engineering Reports (PER) or Feasibility Studies: Describes the need for the project, analyzes alternatives, and recommends a solution

Maps and Site Plans: May be included in the PER

Asset Inventories and/or Asset Management Plans: Especially useful for rehabilitation and upgrade projects

Design Plans and Specs: Conceptual or final, depending on the project stage

4. Legal/Managerial/Administrative Documentation

Confirms the applicant has the legal authority and administrative capability to plan, build, and operate the infrastructure.

Proof of Legal Authority: Charter, enabling legislation, or bylaws

Board Resolutions or Authorizations: Official documentation to pursue funding

Site Controls: Permits (environmental, zoning, construction), deeds, titles, or purchase agreements

Partnership Agreements: Wholesale or interlocal agreements/contracts for multi-jurisdictional projects

Procurement Policies: Must comply with program, state, federal guidelines

5. Additional Planning, Readiness, & Implementation Documentation

Shows the project is ready to move ahead and aligns with broader community or regional plans.

Letters of Support: From community groups, agencies, and legislators

Project Timelines and Management Plans: May be included in the PER

Operations & Maintenance Plans: How the completed project will be staffed, maintained, and funded over its lifespan

Other Relevant Supportive Plans: Comprehensive/master plans, capital improvement plans, emergency response/disaster plans

Why Project Readiness Matters

The more clearly you can show that your infrastructure project is necessary, affordable, legally sound, supported by the community, and ready to start, the more attractive it will be to a potential funder.

4 GET IT FINANCED

One of the hardest parts of getting a transportation project off the ground is figuring out how to pay for it. Typically, communities rely on a mix of grants, loans, technical support, and local contributions to bring projects to life. The challenge is knowing where to start and how to make a funding application stand out.

This section provides tips, tools, and resources to help find funding opportunities, fulfill challenging application requirements, and tell your project's story in a way that connects with funders.

Street enhancements in Independence, Oregon feature bike lanes and a crosswalk with a median refuge island.

Track Funding and Technical Support with a Sources Inventory Tool

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP

Communities of all sizes often rely on outside support to get transportation projects off the ground. That support typically comes in two forms:

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: Consulting services or ongoing expertise such as legal or financial guidance to develop or implement a project.

FUNDING: Grants or loans that allow communities to pay for consulting services, build infrastructure, or operate programs.

These opportunities come from a wide range of sources—government entities, nonprofits, philanthropic groups, and corporations. And each opportunity often has its own eligibility criteria, deadlines, and application requirements.

Cedartown, Georgia.

Track Funding and Technical Support with a Sources Inventory Tool

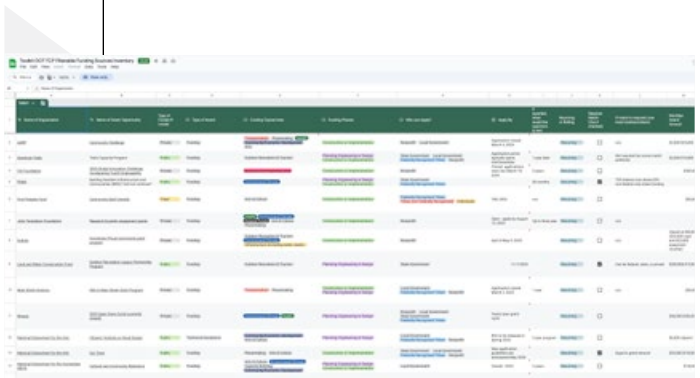
Building a Support Inventory

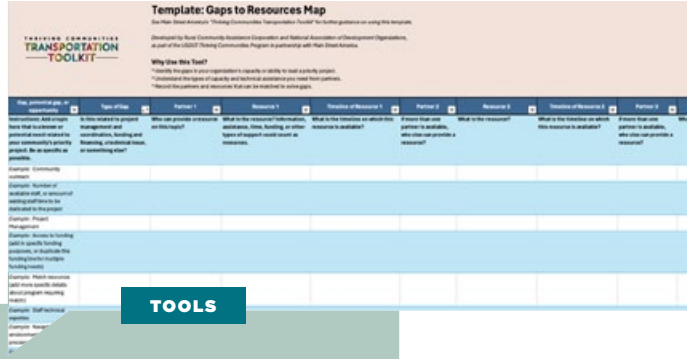
Keeping a centralized database of funding and technical assistance opportunities makes it easier to locate resources and act quickly when you're ready to move a project forward.

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP)'s filterable Funding Sources Inventory tool allows you to organize funding and technical assistance resources in one place.

Here's how to use it:

+ Download a copy of the tool.
+ Read the Instructions tab for a step-by-step guide to using the tool.
+ Check the Main Funding List—a preloaded sheet of more than 40 grant opportunities.
+ Use the [Community] Priority Funding Targets tab to track your community's needs and flag funding opportunities. You can also record funding deadlines, requirements, application dates, and grantor feedback.
+ Explore the Other Grant List and Newsletters to Follow tabs to find additional sources of support.





TOOLS

The Gaps to Resource spreadsheet template can help you document the roles, skills, or resources you're missing in your community, and the partners who have the technical assistance or funding to fill them.

PRO TIP *Reach out to your partner network when seeking funding or technical assistance. Even if your partners can't provide the resources directly, they may know of an organization that can.*

Strike a Strategic Balance of Grants and Loans

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP

Major transportation needs. Limited budgets. That's the reality for many communities working to maintain or improve roads, bridges, and other transportation infrastructure.

To fund these projects, communities typically rely on two forms of funding: **grants** and **loans**. Each option has its pros and cons, and many communities use both to successfully complete a project.

Grants and Loans: The Basics

The major difference between grants and loans is that grants don't have to be repaid and loans do. But there's more to it than that. Here's a look at how these funding methods compare:

FEATURE	GRANTS	LOANS
Repayment & Budget Impact	Lower the overall cost to the community because they don't need to be repaid. However, they may increase construction costs if delays occur while waiting for funds.	Must be repaid over time with interest, but can spread costs across future budgets.
Availability	Limited and competitive—with many more applicants than awards.	More accessible as long as the community can demonstrate repayment ability.
Cash Flow & Timing	Can take months or even years to be awarded. Grants often operate on a reimbursement basis, requiring upfront spending before funds are received.	Provide immediate cash to start construction and can bridge funding gaps until grant awards come through.
Eligibility & Purpose	Often have strict criteria and may be limited to specific goals or project types.	Generally offer broader eligibility, with repayment ability as the main requirement.

Strike a Strategic Balance of Grants and Loans

Why Include Loans in a Funding Strategy?

While loans must be repaid, they can be a smart component of transportation project funding to:

> **FILL FUNDING GAPS.** Loans can provide the missing funding to make the project possible, and even act as the required local match for some grants (see How to Make Match Requirements Work for more).

> **MEET URGENT NEEDS.** If a bridge is failing or a road is unsafe, it might be too risky to wait for grant money. Loans enable communities to act quickly to address critical infrastructure needs.

> **LEVERAGE OTHER FUNDS.** Combining loans with grants and local funding can expand a project's scope or speed up completion.

> **PRESERVE CASH RESERVES.** A low-interest loan with a long repayment period keeps cash available for emergencies or needed upgrades.

For community transportation projects, grants and loans often work best together. Grants keep costs down while loans offer speed and flexibility. The right mix can close funding gaps, accelerate timelines, and deliver the improvements a community needs without breaking the budget.

Independence, Oregon

How to Make Match Requirements Work

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP

Securing grants for local infrastructure—water systems, roads, broadband—can come with a major hurdle: the local match requirement. Many federal and state grant programs require communities to contribute between 10% and 50% of project costs. Fortunately, there are ways to overcome this obstacle.

Tap State Support and Flexible Public Programs

Some states provide matching grant programs or special funds to assist local governments. Others waive match requirements entirely for distressed communities.

Many communities also combine public funds such as Community Development Block Grants with new grants. Often, these can count toward the match when eligibility rules are met.

Reviewing each grant's guidelines is critical. Programs like the U.S. Department of Transportation's Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) sometimes offer match waivers or reduced requirements for rural or disadvantaged communities.

Use In-Kind Contributions

In-kind contributions are an effective way to meet match requirements without cash (be sure to keep detailed records of donations). These contributions can include:

- Donated labor or staff time (county road crews, community volunteers)
- Donated equipment or materials (loaned machinery, surplus supplies from local businesses)
- Land or easements provided by the community

In-kind contributions must be documented at fair-market value and can't be used for multiple grants.

How to Make Match Requirements Work

Build Public-Private and Community Partnerships

Public-private partnerships (P3s) can fill funding gaps when local dollars fall short. Flagstaff, Arizona, secured $11 million from BNSF Railway to match a federal grant for rail crossing and pedestrian upgrades and private companies helped finance Kentucky's rural broadband expansion.

Ask local business owners who would benefit from the project for contributions of funds or materials. Community foundations and regional nonprofits also may provide challenge grants that match locally raised dollars. To learn more about how P3s work, see the CFDA's Public-Private Partnership Finance Resource Center.

Collaborate Regionally

Transportation projects thrive when they are part of a regional vision. Regional efforts—such as a shared water system upgrade, connected trail network, or transit corridor—amplify the impact, spread out the costs, and can make it more likely to win grant funding and in larger amounts. Working through regional entities like planning commissions, economic development districts, or utility cooperatives also can unlock more funding and create efficiencies.

MAIN STREET MOMENT

Mount Vernon, Washington

Mount Vernon, Washington's population has tripled over the decades, but one thing has stayed the same—the size of its library. Determined to create a library that could meet the community's growing needs, local leaders and community members spent years planning, building partnerships, and identifying funding sources. Throughout the process, Mount Vernon Downtown Association played a key role in advocacy, outreach, communication, and message amplification.

Their combined efforts culminated in the Mount Vernon Library Commons: a vibrant community hub that features a library, event facilities, a commercial kitchen incubator, and 276 parking spaces (76 of them for electric vehicles). To pay for the project, the city assembled a diverse mix of local, state, and federal grants and loans. Funding from some agencies was eligible to count as matching funds toward others. With a strategic balance of matching funds, grants, and loans, the end result is a multifunctional facility that addresses both transportation and community needs in downtown Mount Vernon.

How to Make Match Requirements Work

Leverage Local Financing Tools

Though often challenging for smaller communities, local financing tools can generate matching funds:

- **Local option taxes or utility surcharges.** A small sales tax or fee increase can create a healthy funding pool for infrastructure projects.
- **Municipal bonds and low-interest loans.** When combined with grants, bonds or loans can provide match dollars.
- **Special districts.** Business Improvement Districts or Tax Increment Financing districts may be used to raise funding for match requirements.

Many successful grant projects use a "braided" funding approach—combining options like state grants, city tax dollars, bonds, private contributions, in-kind support, and loans. This approach allows communities to meet match requirements that no single funding source could cover alone.

Don't Miss Out on Congressional Funding

Your congressional representatives can help unlock critical federal dollars for local projects. Through Congressionally Directed Spending (Senate) and Community Project Funding (House), also known as earmarks, communities can request funding for projects that meet the criteria of an existing federal program.

To get started:

- If you don't have a relationship with your federal representatives, start building one now.
- Ask to be placed on a CDS/CPF email list to know when funding opportunities arise.
- When requesting funding, complete all required forms and letters of support on time.
- Include a local match when possible to show community buy-in.
- Schedule a follow-up meeting with the congressional office to review your request.
- Stay engaged with the office to keep your request front of mind.

PRO TIP *Engage with your state and congressional representatives with tools from Main Street America and the Percent for Place Coalition. Check out the Main Street Advocacy Toolkit, Guide to Congressional Funding for Local Projects, and State Capital Budgets Primer.*

Blueprint for Grant Writing That Gets Results

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: CTL ENGINEERING

Grant funding doesn't soley reward strong projects—it rewards strong preparation. Successful applicants build capacity, grow partnerships, and gather resources long before the application is due.

Here's a guide to navigating the grant writing process so you're ready to compete for critical grant funding.

Before You Apply: Lay the Groundwork

Think of grant writing not as a one-time push, but as an ongoing strategy. You can increase your chances for success by researching funders, strengthening your partnerships, refining your project's scope, and gathering and organizing data year-round.

TRACK FUNDING CYCLES EARLY AND OFTEN. Register with grantmaking agencies and stay updated on their requirements and the types of projects they prioritize. Grants.gov serves as a central hub for more than 1,000 federal grant programs, while the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) has a list of common sources of transportation funding.

STUDY UP. Review Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs), attend pre-application webinars, and review previous grant-winning projects for ideas on how to make your application more competitive.

CHECK THE FIT. Use what you learn to ask two key questions about your project:

> How well does it align with the selection criteria?

> Can your project be split into logical segments to apply to numerous grants (a multi-pronged funding approach)?

If your project doesn't meet the selection criteria, consider focusing elsewhere. And if you miss a grant deadline, use the time to build momentum—strengthen partnerships, gain political support, invest in grant training—before the next deadline.

Blueprint for Grant Writing That Gets Results

Application Preparation: Get Organized

Once you've identified a suitable funding opportunity, create a schedule with milestones, leaving plenty of time to complete and review your grant application.

Ask for Letters of Support

Request original letters of support from partners—congressional representatives, community leaders, experts, mission-driven organizations—as soon as possible. Provide tailored language prompts to help writers align their letters with the project and selection criteria (see sidebar on letter tips).

Also consider creating a marketing prospectus to share with stakeholders. As an example, see the Blueprint to Revitalize New Town, created through the Thriving Communities Program, a roadmap to the revitalization of an historic Black neighborhood in Elizabethtown, North Carolina.

What Makes a Letter of Support Stand Out?

Strong letters of support show that your project is rooted in real community need and has active support from your partners. Here's how to get the most out of them.

Use the application as a guide. Many Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFO) specify what types of letters to include and where and how to upload them. Even if the grant doesn't require letters of support, they may still be allowed as supplemental materials.

Start early. The sooner you request letters, the better. Many government or institutional partners will need internal approval before providing their letters.

The best letters of support are:

+ **Persuasive.** Reviewers look for letters that demonstrate partnerships, feasibility, and alignment by proving that area agencies, organizations, and other critical parties are on board.
+ **Unique.** Letters should be specific to the project and to the entity providing the letter. Highly templated, generic letters or duplicative letters weaken their impact.
+ **Detailed.** Letter writers should have a good grasp of the ins and outs of the project.

PRO TIP *Gather prospective partners together in person for conversation about how they can support the project. Use the results of Partner Mapping and the Partner Map Template to frame a strong letter of support.*

Blueprint for Grant Writing That Gets Results

Creating the Application: From Story Development to Submittal

Once you've gathered support and created a schedule, it's time to start writing the grant application.

Meeting the NOFO Requirements

The NOFO will be your blueprint for filling out the grant application. Ensure you understand the NOFO directions and follow them exactly.

Compare the grant selection criteria to the details of your project. Identify information gaps, and fill in missing components by:

- **Tweaking the project scope.** Consider adding beneficial features such as native landscaping or stormwater control that align with the grant criteria.
- **Identifying secondary benefits.** Highlight ripple-effect benefits such as faster emergency response times or environmental improvements.
- **Collecting new data.** Deploy a quick public survey or interview a community leader for a specific stat.

If you still can't fill a gap, check the NOFO's evaluation process to determine if the information is necessary to proceed. If it's mandatory, you may need to reevaluate your project readiness.

Story Development

A winning grant proposal doesn't just present a bunch of facts—it tells a compelling, data-driven project story. The goal is to explain to reviewers not only what you plan to do, but why, and why now.

Start with a clear purpose and need statement. Demonstrate:

- What problems the project will address and how it will address them
- How the project aligns with state and community plans

Support your story with credible, recent data. Useful sources might include:

- The United States Census Bureau
- NHTSA Fatality and Injury Reporting System Tool (FIRST)
- Walk Score

Writing the Application

To make your application competitive, it must be clear, relevant, and memorable. To accomplish that:

- Include section headers that mirror the NOFO selection criteria.
- Use active and concise language and the same terminology throughout to avoid confusion.
- Name and describe all landmarks. For example, instead of saying "the nearby park," say, "the nearby Lincoln Park on Penny Avenue."
- Include detailed maps with road names and notable features. Also use visuals such as infographics and charts.

Blueprint for Grant Writing That Gets Results

Project Description

The project description is a brief overview of what you plan to do with the grant funding. Make your description specific and aligned with the grant's goals.

Avoid vague project description language like:

> ***"Improving pedestrian access on Main Street"***

Instead, be descriptive and concrete:

> ***"Constructing 800 linear feet of new sidewalk on Main Street, adding two marked crosswalks at the intersection of Main and Person streets, and installing decorative streetlights every 50 feet."***

Project Readiness

If required, the project readiness section demonstrates that your project is feasible, fundable, and shovel-ready.

In this section, you'll show that you've identified and addressed potential risks and that your project can be completed on schedule and on budget. (See Boost Funding Success Through Project Readiness for what you'll likely need.)

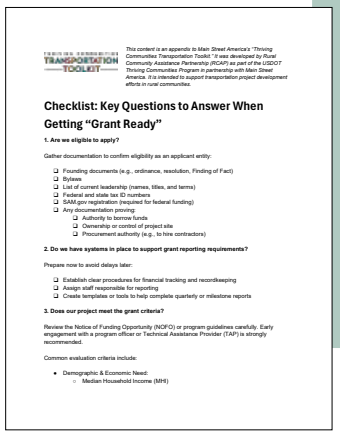
PRO TIP *The Grants Learning Center at Grants.gov provides answers to FAQs, steps on how to apply for a grant, and a blog series on grant writing tips.*

Submission and What Comes After

Before you hit submit, ask multiple stakeholders to review your draft application, including at least one person who is not familiar with the project. Check for typos, formatting errors, and necessary attachments. Submit your application at least 24 to 48 hours before the deadline to allow time to address last-minute issues.

If your application is denied, request a debrief—detailed feedback that can help you improve your application the next time around. Just because your grant isn't chosen the first time doesn't mean you won't be successful on your second or third try.

TOOLS



TRANSPORTATION TOOLKIT

This content is an appendix to Main Street America's "Thriving Communities Transportation Toolkit." It was developed by Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) as part of the USDOT Thriving Communities Program in partnership with Main Street America. It is intended to support transportation project development efforts in rural communities.

Checklist: Key Questions to Answer When Getting "Grant Ready"

1. Are we eligible to apply?

Gather documentation to confirm eligibility as an applicant entity:

- ❑ Founding documents (e.g., ordinance, resolution, Finding of Fact)
- ❑ Bylaws
- ❑ List of current leadership (names, titles, and terms)
- ❑ Federal and state tax ID numbers
- ❑ SAM.gov registration (required for federal funding)
- ❑ Any documentation proving:
  - ❑ Authority to borrow funds
  - ❑ Ownership or control of project site
  - ❑ Procurement authority (e.g., to hire contractors)

2. Do we have systems in place to support grant reporting requirements?

Prepare now to avoid delays later:

- ❑ Establish clear procedures for financial tracking and recordkeeping
- ❑ Assign staff responsible for reporting
- ❑ Create templates or tools to help complete quarterly or milestone reports

3. Does our project meet the grant criteria?

Review the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) or program guidelines carefully. Early engagement with a program officer or Technical Assistance Provider (TAP) is strongly recommended.

Common evaluation criteria include:

- Demographic & Economic Need:
  - Median Household Income (MHI)

Before putting in the work to complete a grant or hitting send on your application, run through the questions in this Grant Ready Checklist.

Benefit-Cost Analysis Made Simple

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

When you're applying for a major grant, three words might send a shiver down your spine: "Benefit-Cost Analysis."

Fortunately, new tools and guidance have made it easier for grant applicants to complete BCAs on their own.

What's in a BCA?

A strong BCA assigns dollar values to a project's expected benefits and costs over its lifetime. BCAs are used to show that a project's benefits outweigh its costs—a justification for the grant.

BENEFITS MIGHT INCLUDE...	COSTS MIGHT INCLUDE...
Reduction in injuries or injury severity	Land acquisition
Reduced travel time	Planning, design, and construction services
Lower operating costs	Materials or equipment
Value of added amenities	Ongoing maintenance and operations
Projected economic development impacts	
Increases in property value	

TOOLS

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) provides step-by-step guidance on how to conduct a BCA as well as an adaptable BCA spreadsheet template.

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) offers a BCA Basic Calculations Worksheet to estimate vehicle miles and calculate project benefits using crash modification factors.

PRO TIP *Even when a Benefit-Cost Analysis isn't required, including one can make your proposal stand out. Grantmakers and funders want to know that their investment will generate a strong return.*

5 ACTIVATE & MANAGE INFRASTRUCTURE

The work on a new streetscape, connected trail, or transit hub isn't over when the construction ends. Next up is ensuring the community is making use of these infrastructure resources and that they're kept in good condition so they support the economy and community pride.

The following section provides tools for managing and maintaining completed infrastructure projects and keeping these new and improved spaces humming with life.

Downtown Florence Main Street, South Carolina. Photo Credit: True Light Photography

The Main Street Approach to Building Vibrant, Connected Communities

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: MAIN STREET AMERICA

Picture this: After putting in the hard work to plan, fund, and construct a project, you're finally cutting the ribbon on your new downtown streetscape, regional trail, or transit hub. Feels great, right? But the work isn't over. Now it's time to ensure the completed project contributes to your community reaching its full potential.

To weave transportation investments into strategies for placemaking and economic vitality, many local leaders turn to the Main Street Approach.™ For nearly 50 years, the Main Street Approach has provided a practical, adaptable framework for making downtown and neighborhood commercial districts more resilient and vibrant.

At the heart of the approach are the Transformation Strategy and the Four Points.

The Main Street Approach to Building Vibrant, Connected Communities

A **Transformation Strategy** sets a focused path for strengthening a downtown or commercial district's economy. Grounded in economic data, local and regional dynamics, and community input, it describes how a community can successfully position itself in the marketplace.

Communities can enact Transformation Strategies through activities that fall under the **Four Points**:

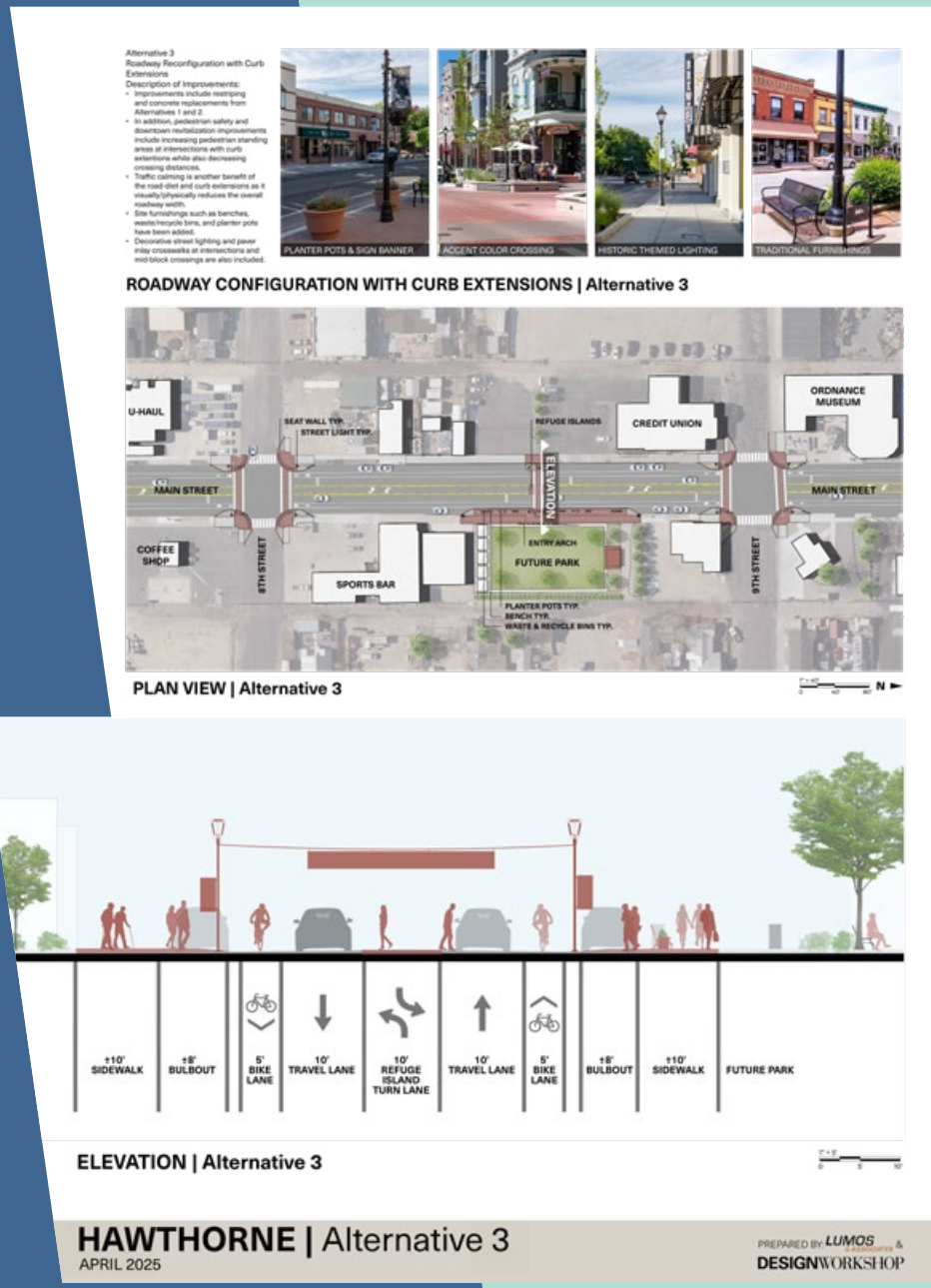
Transportation infrastructure is a powerful piece of this framework, shaping both the Transformation Strategy and the work plans built around it.

Transformations Around the Country

A sidewalk extended, a trail connected, a bike lane added—these projects change the way people move, gather, and experience their communities. With funding support from the Thriving Communities Program, multiple Main Streets are undertaking transportation projects that, through the lens of the Main Street Approach, are strengthening their economies and sense of community.

In Mineral County, Nevada, the newly formed Hawthorne Main Street is reimagining a mile-long stretch of its downtown district. In its current state—with four driving lanes and narrow parallel parking—the corridor isn't friendly to walking, cycling, or shopping. The new plans propose reducing the road to two lanes, adding bike lanes, and reconfiguring business parking. These changes aim to calm traffic, encourage walking and biking, and make it easier for people to visit and shop.

In Henry County, Virginia, officials and collaborators, including Uptown Partnership, used TCP funds to create an active transportation plan focused on human-powered movement—walking, biking, running, or wheelchair use. The plan, themed around outdoor reaction, connects several historic districts through transit and trails, boosting accessibility, and supporting economic growth.



Through TCP, Hawthorne Main Street and Mineral County, Nevada prepared a plan for a more walkable main street. Images Credit: Mineral County, Nevada

Transformations Around the Country

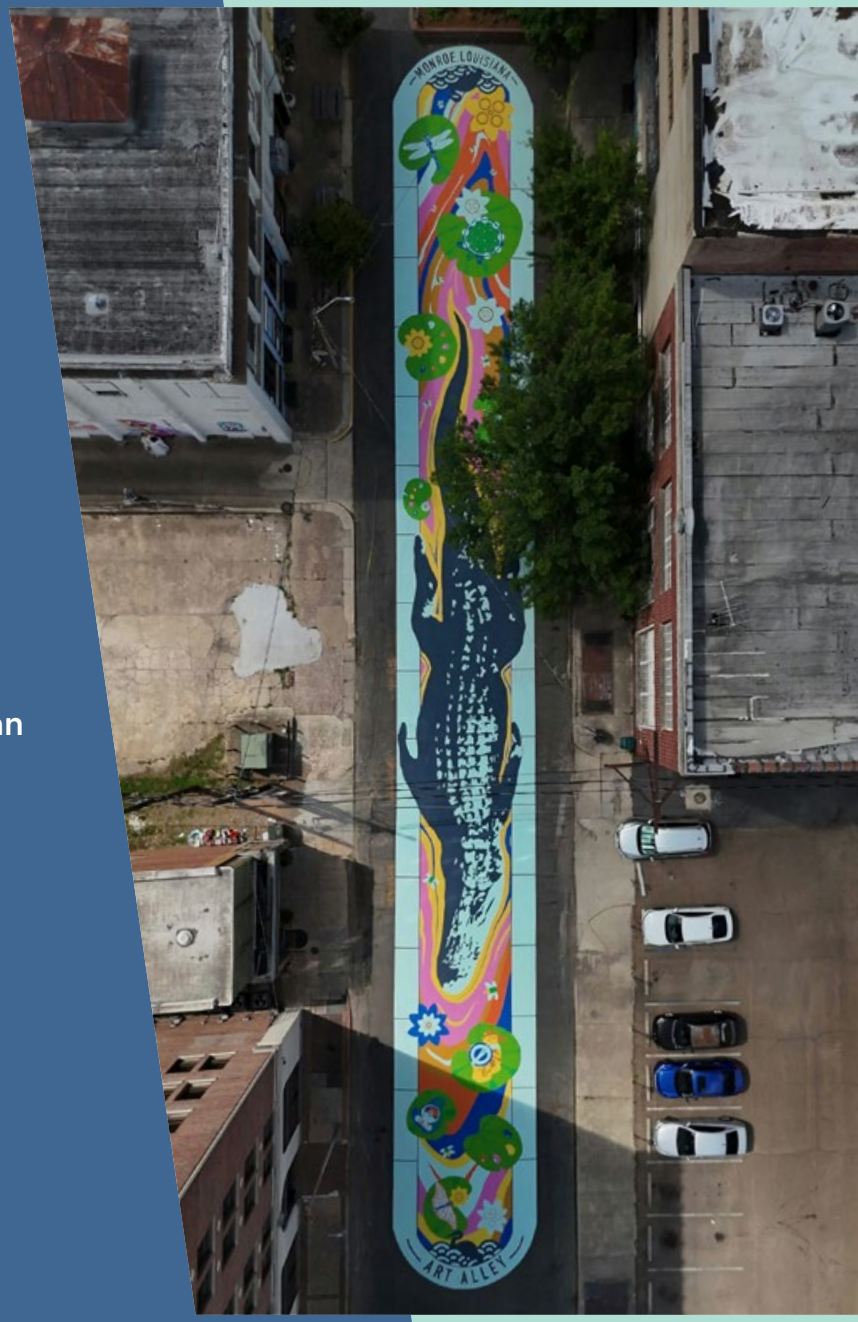
The Downtown Cedartown Association in Cedartown, Georgia, partnered with the city through TCP to focus on pedestrian and bicycle connectivity. They secured a Safe Streets for All grant from USDOT to create a safety action plan, and updated maps of the regional Silver Comet Trail. These plans allowed the city to secure funding to pay for the updates, creating safer streets and stronger connections throughout the downtown.

Monroe Main Street in Monroe, Louisiana, is taking an arts-focused approach to downtown revitalization. With support from TCP, the city is transforming a downtown corridor with vibrant street murals. And not just any murals, but the two largest surface murals in the state. Along with adding beauty, the murals also are making crossings more pedestrian friendly, visibly connecting different parts of the downtown, and fostering community identity.

Together, these Main Street projects show that transportation initiatives do more than move people—they make business districts more accessible, energetic, and resilient.

TOOLS

The Main Street Approach: A Comprehensive Guide to Community Transformation offers step-by-step guidance for revitalizing commercial districts, with insights for both new and seasoned Main Street programs.



Through TCP, Monroe Main Street created two of the largest asphalt surface murals in the state of Louisiana to support safety and revitalization. Photo Credit: City of Monroe

How to Survive and Thrive During Construction

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: MAIN STREET AMERICA

Road closures. Detours. Torn-up sidewalks. Dust and noise. Major construction projects can be a major hassle, disrupting foot and car traffic, business operations, and people's daily routines. That's especially true when the project is centered in or near a commercial district.

As a Main Street program, you have an important role to play in guiding and supporting your community through these impacts.

Before construction begins, identify key stakeholders such as business owners, residents, event organizers, and local elected officials, who will be impacted by the project. Ask them about their concerns and potential solutions. Next, provide a "user view" of the project, highlighting how parking, pedestrian access, deliveries, and events will be affected.

Keep residents, visitors, and business owners informed of closures, detours, and safe alternatives. Communicate updates through local signage, social media, flyers, and the press. And don't just share problems—share progress! Celebrate milestones to keep people excited and engaged.

Finally, support your local businesses through construction challenges via shop local campaigns, temporary parking plans, and special events. By being proactive, you can help businesses not just make it through the construction phase, but come out stronger on the other side.

TOOLS

Check out "How to Survive and Thrive During Construction" to learn more about the Main Street-centered approach to managing construction impacts.

Asset Management Plans Provide Roadmaps to Better Infrastructure

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP

Roads, bridges, and transportation systems aren't just concrete and steel—they're vital connections to jobs, education, healthcare, and recreation. But keeping assets in good shape is no small task, especially when budgets are tight. That's where Asset Management Plans (AMPs) come in.

An AMP is a community's playbook for maintaining, upgrading, and financing infrastructure in the smartest, most cost-effective ways. With a well-designed AMP, communities can stretch their dollars further and stand out when seeking funding.

What's Included in an Asset Management Plan?

AMPs are inventories of a community's infrastructure. They capture the current state of assets, forecast future needs, and identify investments that meet goals and budgets.

Communities can use an AMP to quickly see which assets need attention, how spending will impact infrastructure health over time, and where limited dollars can make the most difference.

Key Components

A quality transportation AMP answers three key questions:

+ What assets do we have?
+ What infrastructure goals do we want to achieve?
+ How will we achieve those goals?

Asset Management Plans Provide Roadmaps to Better Infrastructure

The answers to those questions drive the plan's main elements:

ASSET INVENTORY AND CONDITION: A detailed record of all transportation assets—roads, bridges, transit systems—and their current condition

OBJECTIVES AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES: Clear goals for asset condition, safety, and reliability, along with indicators to monitor progress

PERFORMANCE GAP ANALYSIS: An evaluation of how current conditions compare to desired targets, highlighting priority needs

LIFE-CYCLE PLANNING AND RISK MANAGEMENT: Strategies to reduce long-term costs through timely maintenance, replacement, and risk management

FINANCIAL PLAN: Long-term projections of funding and expenditures, ensuring that proposed actions are financially sustainable

INVESTMENT STRATEGIES: Programs that set the priority for maintenance, rehabilitation, and capital improvements

Why Rural Communities Especially Benefit

Asset management planning is especially important for rural communities, which have aging infrastructure, but fewer tax dollars to pay for updates. AMPs give rural communities a strategy to prioritize projects, protect residents, and make the most of limited funds.

68%

Of U.S. road miles are in rural areas.

Through TCP, McAlester, Oklahoma completed an asset inventory of its sidewalks that documents their condition and the presence of accessibility or safety features. Image Credit: City of McAlester

PRO TIP *Reach out to state departments of transportation, regional transportation organizations, or federal transportation programs for help to create and implement an asset management plan. They can often provide technical support, funding, and plan templates.*

Villisca, Iowa

Villisca, a small rural town in southwest Iowa, has no shortage of aging infrastructure. One recent worry was the state of the town's 3rd Street Bridge. Built in 1939, the bridge was showing its age, but Villisca leaders didn't have the technical expertise to tackle the issue on their own.

That changed in 2023 when the community received support through the Thriving Communities Program (TCP). The program brought in engineers, planners, and economic developers to look at the entire town's infrastructure. Their assessment revealed three big gaps: limited staff capacity, insufficient funding for the bridge, and lack of a formal asset management plan (AMP).

With the help of a $90,000 subgrant, Villisca hired the Southwest Iowa Planning Commission to study the bridge and the town's staffing needs. Then the Midwest Assistance Program (MAP) used the community's digital mapping data to create an inventory and condition assessment of the local infrastructure. MAP's asset management software then pinpointed the most urgent repairs and replacements.

Villisca now has the tools to make smarter, more strategic infrastructure decisions. The AMP also allowed the town to join a countywide grant application for multiple bridge projects—opening the door to as much as $1 million in federal funding.

Villisca is leveraging partnerships and smart management to address gaps caused by aging infrastructure.

Activating Downtown: A Matrix for Everyday Energy and Special Events

CONTRIBUTING WRITER: PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

Beloved and well-utilized streets, trails, and public spaces sustain public support and momentum toward future projects. Successful projects are integrated with the community fabric and demonstrate to future funders that the community is ready to make the most of its investments.

To start shaping that variety, think about how people use—or could use—your district's public spaces. Next, sort those activities into the categories below:

- **Daily Activation:** Simple, self-led uses such as lawn games and pick-up sports. These activities require zero to little management and keep spaces from sitting unused.
- **Weekly Programming:** Activities that people can expect to happen at the same time on the same day every week such as a reading time outside the library every Saturday morning.
- **Seasonal Programming:** Monthly or seasonal events such as live music series, outdoor movie nights, or farmers markets.
- **Special Events:** Events that may happen only once a year, like a big festival, cook-off, or a holiday market.

Photo Credit: City of Monroe

Grouping these activities gives you a better idea of your programming calendar and ways to improve your public spaces. For example, if you offer multiple outdoor concerts, you might want to invest in denser landscaping to act as a sound buffer.

Activating Downtown: A Matrix for Everyday Energy and Special Events

Building a Welcoming Downtown

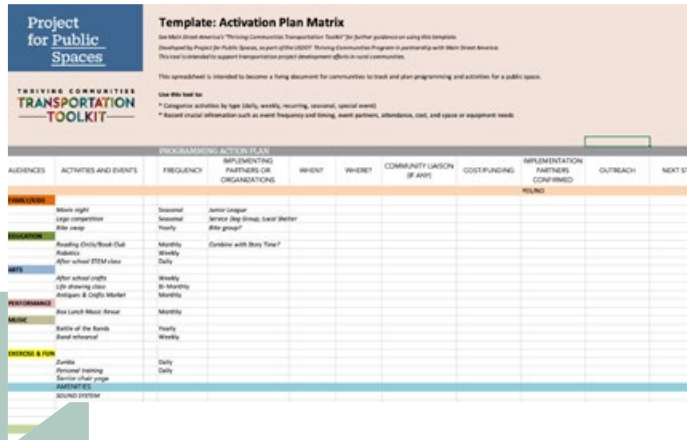
Regular programming encourages residents to visit the downtown—not just during special events, but on ordinary days, too. Short-term improvements and recurring activities can be coordinated with local clubs, businesses, or schools for maximum impact.

Also talk to your community to learn what's missing. Ask, "What would bring you downtown more often?"

Then, track and plan your programming and activities by:

- **Categorizing activities by type (Daily, Weekly, Recurring, Seasonal, Special Event)**
- **Recording crucial information such as event frequency and timing, event partners, attendance, cost, and space and equipment needs**

A good programming calendar starts with a solid foundation of daily activities, followed by weekly programs, monthly and seasonal events, and a sprinkle of special events. This programming pyramid doesn't reflect the importance of activities, but their frequency and number.



TOOLS

Try this Activation Plan Matrix as an easy way to track and plan your programs and events, broken out by topic, frequency, cost, and more.

CONCLUSION & RESOURCES

Transportation is about connection. That's something Main Street communities know well. From new crosswalks to regional trails, transportation projects can transform communities by strengthening economies, honoring cultural identity, and creating more livable, resilient places.

Good news: Main Streets are already leading the way. You're organizing downtown clean-up efforts, connecting businesses to funding, and championing projects that make your districts more walkable and welcoming. This Toolkit can help you take those efforts even further—with strategies to plan smartly, partner broadly, and act with impact.

Because the reality is that many transportation projects require extensive planning, professional expertise, and big budgets. And they can take years to unfold. But the stories in this Toolkit prove that success can come to communities of all sizes with a clear vision, supportive partners, and steady progress.

Cedartown, Georgia

What's Next? The five steps below are reminders of the key strategies in this Toolkit that you can use to guide your next move—one project, one partnership, and one win at a time.

DISCOVER OPPORTUNITIES. Start by reviewing the plans, inventories, and partnerships that already exist in your community. Those "plans sitting on a shelf" likely hold valuable insights and ready-to-go ideas. Keep an open dialogue with residents and local stakeholders to uncover shared priorities. Being prepared means you can act quickly when new opportunities pop up.

BUILD A TEAM. Know your area's key transportation players—from the local cycling club to the state DOT. Invest time in these relationships now; they'll be essential when you need funding or technical help.

DEVELOP A PROJECT. On Main Street, local communities are working on people-first streets, trail networks, public transportation, and much more. Many projects are complex, but you can start with "lighter, quicker, cheaper" improvements to make progress.

GET IT FINANCED. Most successful transportation projects blend support from government, nonprofit, philanthropic, and corporate partners through technical assistance, grants, and loans. Once you've identified a strong project and a matching funding opportunity, go for it. Every application you submit brings your community one step closer to making its vision real.

ACTIVATE & MANAGE INFRASTRUCTURE. The Main Street Approach helps communities make the most of their investments. You can support your cities and businesses through construction, and then bring completed projects to life through programming and partnerships.

The projects and partnerships we invest in today—from pop-up plazas to major streetscape overhauls—are shaping the future of our Main Streets. Building on the foundation of the Thriving Communities Program, Main Street America will continue helping our Local and Coordinating programs plan and pursue these transformative projects.

Together, we'll navigate what's next for transportation on Main Street.

1 DISCOVER OPPORTUNITIES

Community Mobility Rituals Framework
Learn to plan a CMR to engage residents in transportation issues.

Power of 10 Destination Map
Identify and evaluate your best destination and new opportunities.

Place-Based Market Analysis
Learn to assess your assets and identify projects that contribute to a resilient economy.

Plans Library Template
Keep track of existing community plans and documents.

Project Intake Tool
Organize a form for project requests and ideas from stakeholders.

2 BUILD A TEAM

Partner Map Template
Organize and track your partnerships.

DOT Project Life Cycle Chart
Learn the stages of a Department of Transportation project to partner with your state DOT.

3 DEVELOP A PROJECT

People-First Transportation Toolkit
Learn about people-first street design projects.

Street Improvement Process Checklist
Follow the checklist toward your people-first street design project.

Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper Tactics
Consider experiments to test your ideas before making major investments.

Trail Building Toolbox
Follow the advice and steps to create a multi-use trail in your region.

Rural Transit Funding Sources
Learn about typical capital and operational funding for rural transit.

Project Readiness Checklist
Get the right documents in place before pursuing federal funding.

4 GET IT FINANCED

Funding Sources Inventory Tool
Track funding and technical assistance sources relevant to your projects.

Gaps to Resources Template
Track the roles, skills, or resources you're missing alongside the partners who could help.

Guide to Congressional Funding for Local Projects
Learn how communities can unlock congressional funding.

State Capital Budgets Primer
Learn about how your state budget works.

Grant Writing Blueprint
Lay the groundwork for a successful grant application.

Grant Writing Checklist
Follow the checklist to find out what you might need before you apply.

Benefit-Cost Analysis Worksheet
Calculate the basics of a benefit-cost analysis with this spreadsheet.

5 ACTIVATE & MANAGE INFRASTRUCTURE

The Main Street Approach™ Guide
Follow step-by-step guidance to revitalizing commercial districts.

Tips to Survive Construction
Get advice for managing construction impacts.

Asset Management Plans
Keep an inventory of infrastructure conditions to help set maintenance priorities.

Activation Plan Matrix
Plan programs and activities on a daily, weekly, recurring, and seasonal basis.

MAIN STREETS ARE FOR EVERYONE

Learn more at mainstreet.org