

Article published on newPA.com
Volume 5; Issue 4
June 22, 2010

Remaking Main Street

With three years of the Main Street program in its rearview mirror, Danville, Montour County, and the Danville Business Alliance see nothing but a smooth road ahead.

To date, the Danville Main Street Program has yielded excellent job creation numbers and new business starts, as well as façade improvements, formal planning, a mural project and significant partnerships.

According to Jim Wilson, who, as the Danville Business Alliance's executive director, manages the Main Street program, the commercial façade restorations were a critical component in the borough's successes.

As part of the Main Street program, Danville, like any other community that qualifies, is allotted a \$30,000 grant each year from DCED for façade improvements of commercial buildings within the Main Street district. After guidelines for eligible buildings are met and approved by Danville Borough Council and DCED, the work begins. Danville's Main Street program provides reimbursements for half of the cost of the improvements, up to \$5,000 per business. In its first year, eight different buildings were part of the program, which also provides funding for administrative costs.

"We committed more than \$28,000 to renovations," Wilson says. "But the total cost of the façade renovations was \$70,000." The renovations included everything from painting to installing new windows or awnings, or a combination of all three."

Since starting renovation efforts, Wilson says 12 additional businesses have moved into downtown Danville; the largest is a new office building for nearby Geisinger Health System, which relocated 100-plus Geisinger administrative employees downtown.

"Within an 18-month window, a dozen new stores and businesses will have opened," says Wilson. "The Geisinger office has increased downtown foot traffic and revenue for local businesses, bringing a larger customer base."

Wilson says new businesses opened because each saw an opportunity to fill a niche.

"There are a wide range of services represented, including a bakery, a brew pub, a pharmacy, a sewing shop, just to name a few," Wilson says. "With the new businesses and our basic services, Danville is one of the most walkable towns in the central Susquehanna Valley."

In another Main Street-related development, Danville has been collaborating with the Penn State landscape architecture department to create a downtown master plan. Wilson says Danville is seeking funding to begin implementing the plan.

“It focuses on what we call the Mill Street Corridor, as well as developing the riverfront to make it a nice recreational way, as part of a trails and parks system,” he says. “They will be integrated with downtown and other trails.”

Although the downtown master plan is distinct from the Main Street program, Wilson says they are connected.

“The Main Street and master plan are on parallel tracks, but connected,” he says. “We kept DCED apprised all along. Plus, we had a recent meeting with regional planners to hopefully start funding this in the fiscal year.”

Another Danville Business Alliance-driven project is a huge river-themed mural that presides over the Susquehanna River near River Front Park. Community volunteers helped in the effort, and a second mural is planned. Plans for further development and expansion of the park are also in the works.

Overall, the Main Street program will be worth \$295,000 over its five-year period to Danville, and Wilson says it’s obvious that without DCED grant money, the borough would not be enjoying its resurgence.

“We’ve seen a lot of positive changes over the past three years, and while they are not all due to Main Street and the Danville Business Alliance, I believe we have succeeded in cultivating a climate that appeals to the businesses already here or coming here,” he says.

Wilson adds that more than \$10 million has been invested or reinvested in the downtown business district through a combination of projects, and 130 new jobs have been added as well.

“With help from the state of Pennsylvania and its Main Street program, we have transformed Danville into a progressive, forward-moving community that is very pro-business. This will only continue to enhance and transform the local environment.”