



## Edenton's Main Street Program: What comes next

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Staff Writer

Early in Edenton's history, its Main Street, Broad Street, signified the prosperity and progress of the town. A once hustling and bustling center of economic and local governmental activity, Edenton's "Main Street" cuts through downtown and ends at the waterfront. Throughout the history of small-town America, Main Streets have always been a gauge of American prosperity in general and the place where communities came together.

Nowadays, Broad Street is an example of one of America's greatest and most cherished symbols of the past and of the cohesiveness of small-town community life. It represents the good old days - a slower time before huge faceless commercial centers and strip malls. Edenton's "Main Street" is a place where early history, traditional values and architecture are well-preserved in order to maintain this important community legacy.

North Carolina's Department of Commerce recognizes the importance of preserving this important part of American history and in response created the Main Street Program. The program is a 23-year old comprehensive revitalization process designed to improve all aspects of the downtown, producing both intangible and tangible benefits by

- \* improving economic management,
- \* strengthening public,
- \* recruiting new businesses,
- \* rehabilitating buildings and
- \* expanding parking.

This year Edenton was one of four communities designated to participate in the Main Street Program. The other cities chosen were Eden, Forest City, and Marion. The program will help Edenton revitalize its downtown area.

### THE FIRST YEAR

"For any newly designated Main Street Community," says Belinda Washlesky, former director of the Perquiman's Main Street Program, "the first year is like laying the infrastructure in a new city. It's the groundwork on which everything else is built and it is truly a very exciting time for anyone who chooses to get involved, i.e., downtown business and property owners; town and county officials; tourism, historic, economic develop-

ment, and other organizations, residents, etc."

Washlesky has been instrumental in Edenton being included in the program which includes 46 communities. She worked on Edenton's application with town officials and is a veteran of the program. "One thing that I feel is very important to mention and something that often gets confused," says Washlesky, "is that the North Carolina Main Street Program does not come with money or any kind of financial assistance; this is a program that is supported locally."

### COMPONENT ONE

The first thing that has to happen to get Edenton's Main Street Program started is that a director has to be hired. Secondly, a board of directors is put in place to help with the organization and guidance of the program. Next, comes "Picture Downtown" and a "Vision Forum."

Says Washlesky, "During 'Picture Downtown' the director will solicit volunteers to assist in taking photos of various sites and structures in the downtown Main Street Program area of things that they like, dislike, or think needs improvement. Participants are kept anonymous although this activity creates a lot of excitement. These pictures are then arranged on poster boards and presented at a public "Vision Forum." The public is, once again, invited to participate by signing up, in advance to attend the "Vision Forum" where the head of the NC Main Street Program, Rodney Swink, will come and lead us through a fascinating session, including a breakout of focus groups."

Finally, the process culminates with a "Vision Statement" in which the director sets up the Main Street office and records, meets downtown business and property owners and develops a data base of their contact information. Economic restructuring tasks, like meeting with potential new business owners, are carried out.



Broad Street has historically been the center of community and economic life in Edenton. Pictured here is J.H. McMullan, the mayor, signalling the beginning of the Peanut Rolling Contest for the 1938 Peanut Festival. (PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORIC EDENTON STATE HISTORIC SITE)

### COMPONENT TWO

The second component of the first year in the program is the "Reconnaissance Visit." Rodney Swink, the director of the Main Street Program will come to Edenton to meet with the board and director to assess the town's progress and to offer advice.

There will also be a "Resource Team Week." The Main Street manager and Swink will assemble a team of professionals from all across the state to do research, hold confidential interviews, and visit restaurants and businesses. Says Washlesky, "This group will consist of an expert in Organization, Design, Promotions, and Economic Restructuring. They all come to Edenton. The Main Street director will be very busy assisting in this process before, during, and after. The week

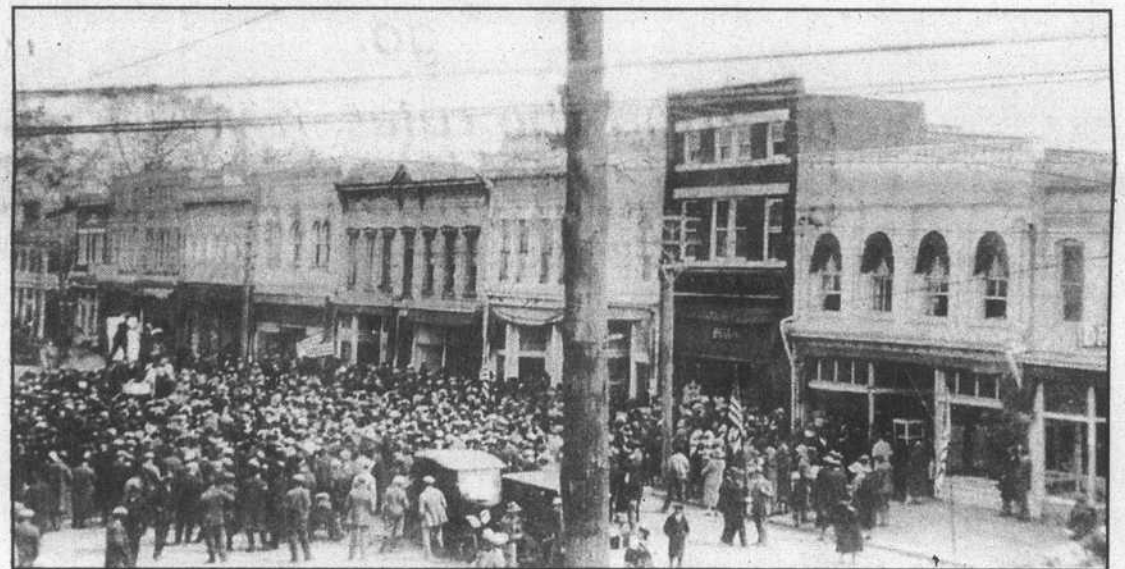
will culminate in a big public forum where the findings will be present in a very entertaining and informative manner. All information will be typed into a written document and can be used as a strategic plan for the Edenton Main Street Program."

After the first year, the NC Main Street Program will continue to work closely with the Edenton Main Street

program. This relationship will include holding Main Street Managers training meetings twice a year, granting awards for completed projects to give recognition to towns and the major projects they have accomplished.

Washlesky adds, "From this day forward, any person, organization, entity, etc., that refers to Edenton in a brochure, magazine article, press release, or any other verbal or written communication, should use the new North Carolina Main Street designation to their advantage. That is, more and more, tourists, people looking to relocate, etc. are starting to look for towns that have been selected into the Main Street Program. All reference to Edenton should say something like, "Edenton, a North Carolina Main Street Community" or "Edenton, designated a North Carolina Main Street Town in 2003," etc., when referring to the town. This is particularly important as brochures or other publications are up for reprint; this new jewel in our crown needs to be emphasized and used to its fullest potential."

With the commitment of the community and downtown businesses, the revitalization of downtown will help improve Chowan County's economy by creating more jobs and drawing in more tourist dollars. The program has proven extremely beneficial to other towns and given the continued level of community involvement in Edenton, it should prove a huge success.



Throughout American history, Main Streets have been symbols of progress and prosperity. In this 1927 photo of a Broad Street drawing for a free automobile, the electric light pole is displayed prominently in the center of the street. (PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORIC EDENTON STATE HISTORIC SITE)

## Hertford's example can help guide Edenton's plans

BY TAMIKA SPRUILL  
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All throughout North Carolina many community leaders and public officials are working to bring vitality back to their main street areas. Many towns are practicing the Main Street approach through the North Carolina Main Street Program. Since its beginning in 1980 North Carolina Main Street communities have seen over \$540 million of new investment and gained 8,400 new jobs in their downtown areas. Edenton has joined the ranks of other North Carolina communities by being selected this spring to participate in the Main Street Program. What can Edenton expect as it ventures into this new and exciting opportunity? Neighboring town Hertford, already a Main Street Community serves as a shining example.

"When we were selected in 2000 we made a three year commitment to the actively participate in the program," states Wendy Jewett, Ex-

ecutive Director of Historic Hertford, Inc.

The North Carolina Main Street Center (NCMSC) does not provide funding for the towns but it does give services in program guidance, technical assistance, and training. It also serves as a valuable network that gives communities access to other in-state programs.

"The support of the NCMSC helps engage the town in the Main Street Process. The support given will be tailored to the town's specific needs," Jewett adds. "The Center is in Raleigh and is very accessible by e-mail or telephone."

The Main Street approach is based on four elements: organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring. Downtown Hertford has seen a lot of progress in these areas since it was inducted in the program. In terms of economic development thirty jobs were created and four new businesses were added to the downtown area. Public investment has totaled \$403,776; private investment has brought in \$370,380 for a grand total investment of \$774,076.

In the design domain eight storefronts were redone and five buildings were renovated.

"The Program engages the community in the process," Jewett states. "The streets are cleaner and shop owners are keeping their areas neat too." Hertford Mayor Sid Eley also agrees with the positive impact The Main Street Program has had on the community.

"It's really sparked an interest in the revitalization of the downtown district," Eley says. "Twelve years ago there were at least seven vacant store fronts downtown. Now there are

none."

Hertford is working on several projects through the Program. The principal one being the Tea-21 project which is in conjunction with the Department of Transportation and Historic Preservation. This streetlight enhancement project will put streetlights in the downtown area and in the Historic S Bridge area. The project will have underground wiring and decorative paving. The Tea-21 Project has received \$900,000 in funds from various committed sources.

Another in progress project is applying for non-profit organization status. For the first three years the Main Street Program has operated through a department of the town of Hertford. The program is now operating through Historic Hertford, Inc. in the Hertford Visitor Center. The Visitor Center was donated by individuals and renovated through a grant.

Future endeavors include the fabrication of Historic Gateway signs, creating a new downtown parking plan and establishing a fundraising committee.

The biggest future enterprise is the possibility of establishing a countywide Blueway Greenway plan.

"We have several historic districts and Hertford and Winfall are historic towns. Our vision is to link all the historic sites to a trail sys-



The Hertford Visitor Center was donated and renovated through the Main Street Program.

tem," Jewett says.

An application has been submitted to the National Park Service and if accepted the Blueway Greenway plan will be an Eco-tourism engine. It will compose a trail system throughout the county that pedestrians and bicyclists can use. The trail will also have a kayaking and canoeing component.

As seen through Hertford, downtown Edenton can expect great things from the Main Street Program. There have been over 1,900 renovated buildings and more than 4,400 new business start-ups. The North Carolina Main Street Program is operated through the North Carolina Department of Commerce under the auspice of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. For more information visit the website at [www.dca.commerce.state.nc.us](http://www.dca.commerce.state.nc.us).



The Perquimans River Bridge is slated to obtain lights as part of the streetlight enhancement project.