

## Insights from Main Street/Chamber Mergers

The following experiences were pulled from Main Street America's online networking platform, [The Point](#). The following is not intended to serve as advice from OCRA or Indiana Main Street, but rather, from your fellow Main Street professionals.

- *Here in Nebraska, the communities that lean toward these combination organizations tend to be our small and rural communities (typically between 1,000 and 6,000 in population) where if you added another organization to the community it would simply not work and eventually the Main Street program dies. Even if you try and keep Main Street its own separate thing within the combined organization, it dies. It's much easier and more successful if the Main Street Approach and principles are applied throughout the combined organization even though a typical Chamber serves the whole community and not just downtown exclusively. With the new Approach, this organizational structure erases the boundaries and becomes less of a tension point. I'm not challenged by this concept, but the community can't seem to wrap their heads around it. I can't get figure out how to help them understand that it's ok, in their town, to apply Main Street everywhere and to their whole organization, that it doesn't have to be a separate entity within the entity. The general concept that it is OK to have a combined organization because of the size of their community; seems to be lost on them because they see the need community-wide for their organization and not just downtown. I've got to get them past all that so they see the bigger picture and that downtown is part of their work but it doesn't have to be their 100% focus.*

Elizabeth Chase, Executive Director  
Nebraska Main Street Network, Inc.

- *Wellington has both organizations that are run by separate boards with separate membership and it has been the cause of some significant jealousy/strife between our organizations. Our program is funded by the Town of Wellington, but the Chamber relies solely on membership to sustain their program. I proposed to our board the elimination of our membership (not a huge profit loss) and partnering with the Chamber for business support/sponsorship opportunities, etc. However, this was not as well-received as I had hoped. The Board was concerned about loss of individual identity for our program and being confused as the Chamber...*

Kallie Cooper, Executive Director  
Wellington Main Street Program

- *The Town of Angier Main Street Program is only about a year old, and is town sponsored. The Chamber has been in place here for over 40 years. They do the Christmas Parade, the Christmas tree lighting Ceremony, and the largest ongoing (40 year) festival, the Crepe Myrtle Festival. The relationship between the Town and the Chamber was not a great one when I first arrived. I made a focused effort to get to know the Chamber staff and let them know that I wished to improve on that. I help the Chamber promote and advertise, and they help me. We work great together and there is no jealousy. Their staff and board understand that what is good for one is good for us both and I have become very good friends with*

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*them. There are those within the Town elected government body that are not happy about it but I can tell you that I am, and I know that having this great working relationship is helping the Town and especially the downtown. The Main Street Program is built on community involvement and this is a great example of how inclusion of everyone in the community and cooperation within the community really does work.*

Christy Adkins, Town of Angier

- *My program has only been up and running for a little over four months, so this program is very new to our city. And as I am sure we all know, anything new is often met with resistance! I am also currently funded by the city and they are funded through membership. Right now, there are issues with our relationship since it's viewed as competition. So the advice I am giving to you (and to myself) is just to continue to build that relationship. Ignore the nay sayers and be the party of yes! Try to befriend some of their board members. Make it clear what your mission is and what their mission is. While we have somewhat similar interests, Main Streets and Chambers are different. I think once that is made clear to both organizations and your community, confusion and talk of "competition" will die out. Competition implies that there is a winner and loser, and in my opinion, if one organization loses, then that means our downtown/main street loses. So improving on your relationship with the chamber will definitely help with that! And as far as your program membership goes, maybe try a "friends of main street" program rather than a membership. That might differentiate the two organizations. And I don't think partnering is bad! I plan to partner with them for a few events, but it is important to have your own identity and own events. You want to make sure people know that you are separate but complimentary programs.*

Faith Allen, MA, Director

Downtown Ponchatoula Revitalization Program

- *Most economic development organizations (Main Street, Chamber, City, County, Housing, Historic Preservation, Tourism...) have mutual interests. And professional managers and directors of these organizations know that budgets are too limited, manpower is thin and life is too short to squabble over territory. To be effective, you must partner. Partnerships create a multiplier effect. ie. Our Main Street program does not have a revolving fund. We partner with the Historic Salisbury Foundation and City Housing Commission to buy, sell and trade properties that are in downtown. We don't have our own Prospectus to promote Opportunity Zones, but Main Street added to and promotes the Economic Development Corporations Prospectus, because the Zones overlap parts of our downtown.*

*As such, the most successful ED organizations go out of their way to look for mutual partnerships while finding a way to maintain their own identity and mission. They stand alone, constantly promoting their mission, objectives and identity while they work together to mutually benefit each other. In other words, unless you are partnering on a project, keep your distance and don't blur the lines of your mission. The identity of your organization depends on it.*

Michael S Young, Vice President

Downtown Graphics Network, Inc.

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- *The City of Dunn has the Main Street program, the Chamber, and Tourism. We have established an excellent working relationship. I have only been in my position a year and the directors of those other two entities help me greatly. We have overlapping areas and we work together to promote those items which we share, knowing that we have our own priorities. I am going to present to my board to join the Chamber of Commerce to receive the benefits of membership. One thing that has helped is knowing which group does what and how they work together. Their boards are more established; so it has been easy to refer to their guidelines. We also have a Small Business Center incubator so the four of us all work together for Dunn! I would say have a meeting with a representative from the Chamber and see how the two organizations can work together and good luck.*

Tasha McDowell

Downtown dunn development corp.

- *We have a strong working relationship with Chamber, CVB, and EDC here, precisely for many reasons Michael Young listed. In fact, it was the Chamber and EDC that helped form our Main Street 20 years ago. We serve ex-officio on each other's boards, partner on projects of all kinds, pass leads to one another, support each other's activities, and make joint presentations to City council. We even meet monthly together with the mayor for development meetings, so we are all aware of what is going on and can better partner for greater results. Sure we "compete" for local donations with the Chamber, but also with MANY other non-profit, locally-funded organizations. Ideally there shouldn't be competition since everyone should see and value the differences of each agency, that is if egos are really in check. Honestly, sometimes I do get jealous of the loyalty everyone has to the long-standing Chamber but I also get jealous of CVB's tax funding, and EDC's level of corporate donations, but that's on me to get over and it really isn't a jealousy of any organization as much as a general frustration. Ultimately, it is each organization's responsibility to make sure people understand their roles and not feel the need to pick either-or in terms of support, but support both/all. It has been proposed a few times for us to merge with the Chamber - usually by people newer to the community, but once the differences are pointed out, proponents quickly change their tune and yes, we all want to maintain our individual identities that reflect our different roles and missions. We have done joint fundraisers with other non-profits (one because of a bequeath request), our CVB has held fundraisers for our projects that align with their mission, and the Chamber has helped with promoting certain projects and we all share in planning fundraisers for each (because of board involvement), I think that ongoing joint fundraising campaigns would be confusing to the public. In fact, I don't do a lot of fundraising for Rotary or other organizations that I belong to because people do get confused as to who you are raising money for each time. (The idea of all of us sharing space along with city and possibly county development offices has merit, but it has just never worked out or been a high priority.) At the end of the day, we all realize that the work is about what is good for our community as a whole, not a competition. We strive to be seen as a team that works together for the greater good of the community.*

Judy Tighe, Executive Director

Jacksonville Main Street

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- *In my 15 years I've been in situations with great and horrible partnerships with the Chamber. Here's what I've learned: If you want your community to thrive you need to find a way for Main Street, chamber, tourism, history, art, city, merchants association, and other groups to all work together to make your City great. There's no better place to bring all these groups together than Main Street. One of our most important callings is to build a consensus on how to build a better community. I let people know that I want to be the best Main Street we can be and they need to be the best Chamber (etc.) they can be. Maybe you need to develop a "Transformation Strategy" for your community or maybe each organization needs to focus on its mission and have a shared vision.*

Wayne Carter, Executive Director  
MainStreet DeLand Association

- *I served in a town as the director for both a separate Chamber and Main Street and a community where they chose to combine. I can say that both have their headaches. Overall, I think a combined organization is easier because it can send one message, one group out to collect money, one group to utilize volunteers, etc. Granted, there will be things that both entities will likely have to shed from their current plate, but those are usually easy to find. Additionally, and this is where the problem tends to lie from what I've seen, you need to recruit Board members as Main Street Board members. When I was in a community that was a Chamber-Main Street, the Board members tended to have a Chamber focus because that's what people understood better. They only did Main Street stuff when they had to do so. Sometimes it's in the recruitment more than the organizations that actually merge.*

Derek Lumsden  
Jones County Economic Development

- *Today, Sheboygan Falls is one of Wisconsin's successful Chamber-Main Streets, an organization model made possible when the larger business community recognizes that the health of the downtown center reflects overall economic opportunity. Sheboygan Falls has won more than 40 statewide Main Street awards in virtually every category offered. The program is especially recognized for its well-preserved historic architecture and successful community-wide partnerships designed to engage the City, business community, civic organizations and residents to preserve and promote a strong and vibrant local community while retaining its quintessential small town charm.*

Errin Welty, downtown development account manager  
[WEDC](#)

## Indiana Example

- *In 2015, the Kosciusko Chamber and the Warsaw Community Development Corp (WCDC - our Main St organization) completed a merger. This merger in name only, allowed for joint representation on both boards and allowed the Pres & CEO of the Chamber to be the ED of WCDC, while keeping the unique tax*

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*status of both organizations. The advantages of having a merged organization are tremendous. We are able to co-promote activities and place making initiatives, creating a greater quality of place and life for our residents. Also, this merger reduced redundancy and improved efficiency, in programming, communication, and community development. Having an entire staff of individuals working on the betterment of our community, simultaneously focused on the downtown and county at large, has been a huge success.*

Rob Parker, President & CEO  
Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce