

# Revitalizing Central Cities Main Streets, and Small Towns

Moderator: **Deborah Meyer DeWan**, Riverfront Communities Program Director, Scenic Hudson, Inc.;  
Panel Members: **Judith Calogero**, Deputy Commissioner for Community Development,  
New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal;  
**Scott Heyl**, Executive Director, Preservation League of New York State;  
**Norman Mintz**, Main Street Consultant, "Mr. Main Street";  
**Sally Ball**, Coastal Division, New York State Department of State

"The architectural variety, history and unique characteristics of our cities and downtown areas provide a special sense of place and of home for all of us. New York communities also see their downtowns as an opportunity for future growth, keeping existing developed areas economically vibrant and environmentally healthy and breathing life into abandoned downtown areas."

- *Quality Communities Task Force Report*

*Moderator*

## **Deborah Meyer DeWan**

Riverfront Communities Program Director,  
Scenic Hudson, Inc.



Ms. DeWan represents Scenic Hudson, a nonprofit organization involved in supporting the approximately 82 riverfront communities up and down the Hudson River Valley in one way or another, either to support the greenway effort, support local planning, promote sound planning and open space or to protect the Hudson River's important resources. In introducing the session, Ms. DeWan emphasized that "central cities, main streets and small towns have served as a very strong backbone of New York state's vitality."

**Scott Heyl**  
Executive Director,  
Preservation League of New York State

Mr. Heyl began by making the connection between historic preservation and smart growth. He said, “if you want to save open space, and you want to protect farmland, and you want to change this incredible dependence on the automobile which takes far too much of the quality out of our lives, but at the same time ... you want to create economic vitality and economic activity... that needs to be directed somewhere... it needs to be directed back into our existing built environment; our existing communities, our existing towns, and that’s historic preservation.”

According to Mr. Heyl, historic preservation constitutes a demand-side approach to smart growth and tools to preserve open space only reduce the supply of land that can be developed, they do not address the use of that land. In explaining this he says, “the economic revitalization of historic commercial districts reduces the demand for yet another strip center. The restoration of an empty 1920’s office building reduces the demand for another glass building or an office park.” According to Mr. Heyl, without demand-side strategies, the success of supply-side strategies will be limited.

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Mr. Heyl detailed the many smart growth benefits to historic preservation including:

- Historic buildings are in places where infrastructure already exists.
- No new land is consumed when historic buildings are rehabilitated.
- Vacant and under-utilized buildings brought back to life are also brought back as a tax generating asset for the community.
- Historic buildings often exist on or close



to public transportation routes. New activity in these spaces inherently reinforce the viability of public transportation.

- A prominent characteristic of historic downtowns, villages and hamlets are that both residential and commercial activities are in these areas, which encourages people to drive less and walk more.
- Eighty-five percent of all new jobs in America are created by small businesses, which need affordable rent that can be provided by older and historic buildings. Business districts are more successful and sustainable when they contain a diverse business mix, which requires a diverse range of rental rates.
- As a general rule, new construction is 50% labor and 50% materials, whereas rehabilitating an existing building is 60 to 70% labor, which means more dollars staying in the local community.
- Rehabilitation of older neighborhoods brings jobs to where the people already are, therefore relieving traffic congestion.
- Reinvigorating historic neighborhoods reinforces existing community schools, which help create a sense of neighborhood and connectiveness.
- Historic preservation helps to create a diversity of housing sizes and a richness in styles which attracts a diversity of human beings. In terms of the Quality Communities Task Force Report’s recommendations, Mr. Heyl pointed to the governor’s

budget which contains an historic homeowners tax credit which would give a direct rebate or refund on your New York state income tax if you live in and restore a National Register eligible property.

In conclusion, Mr. Heyl said, “We won’t be growing smart regardless of how well new communities are planned until we stop abandoning our existing assets. And that’s what I meant when I said reinvesting in our downtowns and our villages is recycling in the biggest way and it absolutely is the smart thing to do.”

**Sally Ball**  
Coastal Division,  
New York State Department of State

According to Ms. Ball, one of the most interesting things the Task Force heard from the participants at the round table discussion on quality communities held throughout the state was their widespread interest in revitalizing downtowns and traditional main street shopping areas. Ms. Ball said, “The combination of unique architecture, walkable streets, and old-fashioned amenities is proving to be a strong attraction for bringing both people and new businesses back downtown.”



Ms. Ball summarized the four task force revitalization recommendations as: 1) enhancing Governor Pataki’s Waterfront or Main Street Initiative; 2) preserving historic buildings through tax incentives; 3) supporting neighborhood schools as strong community centers; and 4) supporting the creation of community-based visions for downtown redevelopment. Ms. Ball then discussed each of the recommendations, with comments on the programs already underway and some possible directions for future initiatives.

- 1) The Main Street Initiative. Ms. Ball highlighted several current examples of how the state is working with local governments to create new opportunities for growth in developed communities. The Albany Plan calls for consolidating state government agencies in three new office buildings in downtown Albany to make downtown more attractive for pedestrians and constructing a pedestrian bridge to reconnect downtown with the waterfront. In the City of Niagara Falls, Governor Pataki recently created the USA Niagara Development Corporation to promote economic development by preparing a comprehensive plan that the city can use to promote revitalization using tourism as the basis.

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- 2) Historic Preservation. According to Ms. Ball, initiatives underway include revising the state’s building code to encourage rehabilitation of buildings and providing tax incentives for homeowners to rehabilitate historic buildings and city centers. Ms. Ball said, “Governor Pataki’s budget includes a proposal for historic home ownership assistance tax credits that would provide an income tax credit or rebate of 15 percent or 25 percent for qualified rehabilitation costs for homes that are either listed on the State or National

Register or fall within an historic district.”

- 3) **Neighborhood Schools:** Ms. Ball said, “This recommendation recognizes that if we don’t have strong neighborhood schools, we can’t have strong downtowns.” According to Ms. Ball schools can have a great impact on downtowns and can either serve as true community centers or “as barriers that separate communities and drain away resources from town centers to sprawling tracts on the outskirts.”
- 4) **The Vision.** According to Ms. Ball, the Task Force found that communities that were most successful in revitalizing their downtowns had three shared distinct qualities, which are: a) the creation of a coherent vision for the future; b) the ability to implement a consensus-based action; and c) the capacity to sustain the initial momentum and enthusiasm over time. According to Ms. Ball, to implement this recommendation, given the

limited state resources to help 1,600 communities, the task force felt the expertise of New York’s academic institutions, not-for-profit organizations, and the business community would be key.

Initially the Department of State will be working with SUNY and a number of central New York communities on a pilot community-based visioning process. Ms. Ball described the pilot process as one in which SUNY will work with citizens and local governments in the spring of 2001 to develop conceptual plans to present to the state agencies most affected by these community plans and concepts so that they can respond to the ideas and help the community decide what’s most feasible. Then, over the summer, SUNY will provide technical assistance to the communities to advance those feasible components of their initial concepts to ready them to partner with state agencies on implementation. According to Ms. Ball, the state welcomes any and all suggestions on this pilot program.

## Judith Calogero

Deputy Commissioner for Community Development, New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal

Ms. Calogero discussed the critical initiatives that the Division of Housing is pursuing that are consistent with the Quality Communities Task Force Report’s recommendations. According to Ms. Calogero the Division of Housing has historically been involved in the creation and assistance of affordable housing on behalf of low-income people. This has included some 35,000 units of housing so far in Governor Pataki’s term of office. Ms. Calogero said, “We’re aware, as important as that work is, that there’s more to community renewal and community development than financing housing, and we have started to move out beyond that effort.”

Ms. Calogero highlighted four critically important ways in which they are doing that:



“...there’s more to community renewal and community development than financing housing.”

1) When developing housing, they are working to address the needs of the community, and asking the developers of affordable housing across New York to make sure that their projects are consistent with the overall plan or strategy of that community. According to Ms. Calogero, by doing so, they are no longer just building or rehabilitating housing, but making the connections with state infrastructure projects, or something led by the local community, like a downtown renewal plan.

2) Through the Rural and Neighborhood Preservation Programs, they have encouraged the over 240 nonprofit corporations that work on their behalf in rural, suburban and urban areas all across the state to break out of solely working on housing activities and to take on community renewal activities. Examples Ms. Calogero cited included the Troy Rehabilitation Improvement Program and the Technical Assistance Program (TAP). These programs work with the colleges in Troy who are looking to improve their marketability through a comprehensive vision of the downtown area, a vision aimed at reducing crime and preserving historic buildings.

Similarly, the Division of Housing partnered with the Munson Williams Museum in Utica, which was looking to improve their attendance, by funding a nonprofit corporation called Grow West. Grow West is working on making improvements to the neighborhood in terms of streetscape, lighting, signage, as well as to the housing. According to Ms. Calogero, these types of initiatives will “improve the likelihood that housing will remain affordable and stay there in good condition for a number of years into the future.”

3) The third critical area was creating programs that would help to address some quality of life issues and community

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renewal issues in rural areas. The Adirondack North Country Community Enhancement Program and the Rural Community Revitalization Program, which covers the rest of the state, had about \$2.5 million to distribute to local governments and nonprofit corporations to do a single project. The focus, according to Ms. Calogero, was to fund highly visible improvements that were relatively inexpensive and that no other funding was available for. Examples she gave were removing junk from communities or something that was distracting or taking away from the appearance of a community, like a facade repair program, a municipal park improvement, sidewalk repairs, or signage. They found that these smaller projects could make people excited about their community again and spur other improvements as well.

4) The fourth critical area they are working on with the Preservation League of New York State is an application they submitted to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to further New York's Rural Main Street Initiative. If funded, according to Ms. Calogero, it would enable the Division of Housing to provide technical assistance to 15 to 30 rural main street areas to help create a vision for their main street that fits for their community.

In addition to these four crucial areas, Ms. Calogero, concluded by saying that they are also hoping to bring some of these programs to the next level and work with for-profit businesses on similar programs focusing on some employer-assisted housing in New York, which addresses community renewal as well.

**Norman Mintz**  
Main Street Consultant,  
"Mr. Main Street"

Mr. Mintz began by highlighting the role that the New York Main Street Alliance and the Preservation League have played in advocating for a Main Street Program in New York state, which according to Mr. Mintz is one of the only states that really does not have a formal Main Street Program. He hopes to see a Main Street Program come out of the quality communities process to help smaller main streets and villages around the state.

According to Mr. Mintz, the crucial factor for main streets that needs to be addressed is implementation. He said, "It's wonderful to have all this support, but it's another thing to use that support correctly and to rally both the private sector and the public sector behind you so you can get the job done." He believes the timing and momentum for main streets is shifting in a very positive direction as more and more officials are understanding their importance and increasingly successful case studies can be pointed to for encouragement. He said, "more and more people are realizing that it can happen in their downtown."



According to Mr. Mintz, while people may be getting tired of shopping malls, they are not going to stop shopping there, but nevertheless they are starting to see main streets as an alternative, full of vibrant small businesses and independent non-chain types of stores. He also said, "people also start realizing that Main Street is a reflection of their own life. It also helps their property values, tax values, and so forth." He has also found large public support for smart growth, which he thinks, while they may not fully understand, they are generally equating with supporting main streets as a way to stop sprawl and keep taxes low.

"...more and more, people are realizing that it can happen in their downtown."

At this juncture in time, Mr. Mintz feels it is important to start understanding the need for increased assistance to the people and organizations that are making the main street projects happen. He gave several examples on this need which were:

- 1) Corning, New York. According to Mr. Mintz, Corning represents the importance of sustainability in a main street revitalization program. Despite the successes of Corning's program, after 25 years they still have challenges and need the support of organizations, both in the private and public sectors, to keep making things happen.
- 2) Jamestown, New York. According to Mr. Mintz, Jamestown has terrific potential for tourism and downtown revitalization, however they still need an umbrella organization and assistance from the state to pull it all together.
- 3) Delaware County. Mr. Mintz points out that while the numerous small hamlets may look beautiful and charming, they are still in need of help, which is mostly unavailable except for the tremendous efforts of the Catskill Center in helping these communities to understand the importance of sustainable growth for main street.