Lower Georgia Avenue Main Street

Year-end Review
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Year-End Review Methodology

As part of the funding agreement with the Department of Small and Local Business Development’s DC Main Streets program, Bill McLeod from Historic Dupont Circle Main Streets was retained by District Bridges to conduct a year-end review of the first year of Lower Georgia Avenue Main Streets operations.

This report is a synthesis of history, theory, accomplishments, and best practices to aid Lower Georgia Avenue Main Street’s growth in the near future, based on the perspective of Bill McLeod and his 26 years of experience in the Main Street field nationally and working in three neighborhoods in Washington DC. Eleven stakeholders were interviewed, the website was reviewed, annual meeting attended, and the work plans and budgets reviewed.

Interviewees:
1. Jennifer Kuiper, Neighborhood Director
2. Brianne Dornbush, Executive Director
3. YaVonne Boyd, Chair of District Bridges
4. Liz Ferguson, Vice Chair of District Bridges
5. Cedric Diakabana, Co-founder of Georgia Avenue Business Alliance (GABA)
6. Darren Jones, President of Pleasant Plains Civic Association
7. Jeremy Gifford, Owner of DC Reynolds
8. Matt McFarland, President of Georgia Avenue Thrive
9. Maybelle Bennett, Director of the Community Association of External Affairs, Howard University
10. Pablo Sanchez, Owner of Walls of Books
11. Drew Schneider, Founding Editor of Petworth News

Main Street Four-Point Approach

The National Main Street Center is a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Created by a Congressional Charter in 1949, the National Trust is a leading advocate of historic preservation in the United States. Today, the preservation movement involves more than just saving historic buildings; economic growth, urban revitalization, and the creation of new jobs are all issues the National Trust addresses through the rehabilitation of historic structures.

Established by the National Trust in 1980, the National Main Street Center (NMSC) has worked in 44 states and Puerto Rico. The NMSC offers a professional membership program for organizations involved in commercial district revitalization. It produces publications, newsletters, and special reports on revitalization and preservation issues and serves as a clearinghouse for information on community redevelopment issues. The NMSC accomplishes its
mission through the Main Street Four-Point Approach: design, organization, promotion, and economic vitality.

**Design** takes advantage of the visual opportunities by directing attention to all of its physical elements: public and private buildings, storefronts, signs, public spaces, landscaping, merchandising, displays, and promotional materials. Its aim is to stress the importance of design quality in all of these areas, to educate people about design quality, and to expedite improvements downtown.

**Promotion** takes many forms, but the goal is to create a positive image in order to rekindle community pride and improve retail sales events and festivals and to create a positive public image in order to attract investors, developers, build healthier merchants, and attract new businesses.

**Economic Vitality** strengthens existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding existing businesses to provide a balanced commercial mix, converting unused or underutilized space into productive property, sharpening the competitiveness and merchandising skills of business people, and attracting new businesses that the market can support.

**Organization** establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in the community. This will allow the Main Street revitalization program to provide effective, ongoing management and advocacy of downtown. Diverse groups from the public and private sectors (local government, bankers, merchants, property owners, community leaders, and others) must work together to create and maintain a successful organization.

While the Main Street Four-Point Approach provides the format for successful revitalization, implementing it is based on eight principles that pertain to all areas of the revitalization effort: **comprehensive, incremental, self-help, public-private partnerships, capitalizing on existing assets, quality, change, and implementation oriented**.

Downtown revitalization is a complex process that cannot be accomplished through a single project. For successful, long-term revitalization, a comprehensive approach must be used.

An incremental approach starts with achievable activities that build toward achieving longer-term and more ambitious goals. Small projects and simple activities lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the revitalization process and help to develop skills so that more complex problems can be addressed and more ambitious projects undertaken.
Local leaders must have the desire and will to make the project successful. The NMSC provides direction, ideas, and training; but continued and long-term success depends upon the involvement and commitment of the community with an orientation toward self-help.

Both the public and private sectors have a vital interest in the economic health and physical viability of a Main Street. Each sector has a role to play, and each must understand the other’s strengths and limitations so that an effective partnership can be forged.

Retail corridors must capitalize on the assets that make them unique. Every neighborhood commercial district has unique qualities, like distinctive buildings and businesses, which give people a sense of place. These local assets can serve as the foundation for many projects that an organization undertakes.

Quality must be emphasized in every aspect of the revitalization program. This applies equally to each element of the program, from storefront design to promotional campaigns to educational programs to a healthy board and committees.

Changes in attitude and practice are necessary to improve current economic conditions. Public support for change will build as the program achieves its goals and moves forward onto larger projects.

Activity creates confidence in the program and ever-greater levels of participation. Frequent, visible changes are a reminder that the revitalization effort is under way. Small projects at the beginning of the program pave the way for larger and more complex activities as the revitalization effort matures.

**District Bridges’ History**

District Bridges was born out of a grassroots community initiative, known as the Columbia Heights Day Initiative, which created the Columbia Heights Day Festival in 2005. After ten years of successful festivals, the newly developed board of directors set out to build an organization that served the community beyond just a one day festival. In 2015, Brianne Dornbush was hired as the first executive director, and through her leadership the organization laid the foundation to manage the Columbia Heights/Mount Pleasant Main Street grant from the Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD) in 2016. As a result of adding Mount Pleasant to its community focus, CHI rebranded to become District Bridges. In 2017, District Bridges was awarded a second Main Street grant from DSLBD to serve Lower Georgia Avenue (Lower Georgia Avenue Main Street – LGAMS)
District Bridges’ goal is to invest in community and support local businesses. They do this through a variety of strategic initiatives including broad based community events, direct community engagement and relationship development, small business assessments and technical assistance, and cross-sector collaboration and network development.

**Board of Directors**
Collectively District Bridges’ board represents a broad spectrum of expertise in community development, organizational management and leadership, business experience and community representation. Three of the board members have served in an executive capacity in both the public and private sector. Additionally, all the members of the board are residents in the communities they serve.

Over the last three years, the board of directors has guided District Bridges in developing strategic programming that supports the small local businesses in the community, laying the groundwork for the robust technical assistance they now deliver through the two Main Street grants awarded by DSLBD in consecutive years.

**Neighborhood Strategy Councils**
In addition to the Executive Board, there are three Neighborhood Strategy Councils (NSCs) that are responsible for developing the annual work-plan priorities and long-term strategy of the Main Street programs District Bridges manages. The NSCs are made up of diverse community stakeholder representatives that help the programs collect valuable information from stakeholders groups and report out activities and priorities to ensure broad-based community support and engagement.
Observations & Recommendations
Since District Bridges was awarded the Main Street grant for Lower Georgia Avenue Main Street in October 2017, the organization and staff have made a priority to mend relationships and build bridges where sore feelings may have lingered from non-awarded groups. For the first year, this is outstanding. The foundation of a successful organization relies on partnerships, trust, transparency, and outreach. The outcome of all this high-touch relationship building is hard to quantify on paper, but the result is effusive and evident.

Under Lower Georgia Avenue Main Street, three neighborhoods on the Georgia Avenue commercial corridor have come together: Park View, Pleasant Plains, and Petworth. While this corridor along Georgia Avenue is very long and hard to manage with its three distinct nodes, LGAMS is doing an outstanding job of providing value: capacity building, marketing and events, and technical assistance.

Organization
LGAMS is off to a great start building a strong advisory council, referred to as Neighborhood Strategy Council (NSC). The foundation has been firmly laid, and now the organization needs to move into maintaining volunteers, committees, and advisory board (NSC). This may sound easier than start up, but enthusiasm drops off – so it is actually more challenging as the organization matures. Some people will leave because they like startups. Others will move on because they see transparency and achievement. And others still will step down when they realize how much work is actually required of them. Identify those who are willing to show up and roll up their sleeves to stick around for the long haul.

LGAMS needs to pivot to ramping up programs and capturing these successes. Again and again during the interview process, people commented on all the outstanding outreach, bridge buildings, and bringing people together. Now that this is well under way, use that time and energy to implement new and bigger programs. The Council is meeting monthly and getting up to speed. As things settle and everyone gets used to the work plan process, budget cycle, and project management after one year, the Council will start to perform as a more cohesive body, meetings will become shorter, and comments will be more strategic.

Committees may be old fashioned, but they also work for a lot of people, especially those who want to connect with their neighbors or who like to be change agents. Launch some task forces (Action Teams have been started) to work on discreet projects first, and if they work well, convert them to standing committees. Once the committee process is formalized, it will become an excellent pipeline for the Councils and the District Bridges Board of Directors. I cannot emphasize enough the benefits of promoting excellent volunteers to the NSCs. The process can
be cumbersome to start, but the benefits can foster a healthy organization – worth all the thought behind it.

Defining boundaries between the Board of Directors of District Bridges and the Neighborhood Strategy Council for LGAMS will become supremely important as the months roll on. You may want to consider revising your bylaws to clarify roles to empower your Councils to act like a board, which will increase donations and retain volunteers. If you don’t carve out roles, the Councils may flounder in time. Now a warning, if the District Bridges board meddles with the budget and work plan of LGAMS, the Council is doomed. Sustained giving and attendance will be the truest test to the success of this balanced relationship.

Burn out in this job is real. And I worry about how many hours Jennifer Kuiper is working. Jennifer has 1000 bosses: Board of Directors, the LGAMS Neighborhood Strategy Council, merchants, politicians, and volunteers. With so many emails, calls, and conversations coming from so many different players, you need to protect Jennifer’s time. Not everything can be done. Enthusiasm is great, but you will have to shield your director from the flood of ideas, projects, and tasks that come her way.

**To improve NSC meetings:**
1. Meet monthly
2. Add new members once a year, ideally before work planning and budgeting starts
3. Promote task volunteers, Action Team volunteers, and committee members to the NSC
4. Set an agenda a few days in advance and email it to members, along with minutes, financial statements, etc.
5. Have members report on what has been done over the last month
6. Reserve brainstorming for once a year – when work planning
7. Have the secretary record great ideas throughout the year to bring up during work planning
8. Meetings are reporting meetings on how the work plan and budget are unfolding throughout the year
9. Convert idea meetings to reporting meetings by jump starting volunteer tasks, Action Teams, and committee meetings

*You will know when you are succeeding when meetings become shorter and members stay on topic.*

**Promotion**
Seven events plus monthly First Friday promotions have been organized this first year, which is outstanding for a new organization. Movie nights were well received and excellent for
community credibility. The Chili Cook-off was popular, and restaurants are anxious to participate again. Supporting existing events by providing volunteers, sponsorship dollars, permitting, staff time, marketing, and stability can be very valuable. Celebrate Petworth, Park Morton Soca Fest, Cultural DC Art Installation, and First Friday were organized this way. Continue to support other organizations’ events and take on one new event that needs more staff time to bring it to the next level. Now a warning: four big events per year is a lot; aim for one big event and three medium events. Take time to reflect about which events take the most work or have the biggest bang, and keep a balanced list: consider Return on Investment (ROI).

Think strategically about which events to keep, expand, take over, and drop. Consider the market segment you are promoting and who you are trying to attract: restaurants, retail, services, residents, pet owners, office workers? Some events are more work than they are worth. Others are good at bringing residents together, but don’t benefit the businesses. Some take in a lot of money compared to the time required to organize them – so keep those. Not everything can be done, and events are very time consuming. With limited time, money, and energy, consider which events can you drop or pass off.

As you balance out events, consider three distinct types:
1. Retail Events: Dog Days, Turkey Sale, Midnight Madness
2. Image Events: Heritage Trail, Retail Passport, First Friday
3. Special Events: Street Festival, Holiday Market, Taste of Georgia

Branding of Georgia Avenue should be explored now. Branding is complex and cannot be ignored. If LGAMS does not brand Georgia Avenue, the businesses, institutions, and residents will brand it for you. Consider rolling out a banner program, trashcan logos, public art program, and other new physical branding elements (including landmark signs, long-time businesses, institutions, heritage trial, and streetscape). And then promote these elements through the newsletter, social media, press releases, Councilmember’s office, etc.

H Street Main Street worked with DDOT to install metal banners during its streetscape some ten years ago. While metal banners are maintenance free, they are still there year after year. In time, everything becomes invisible. Fabric banners that can be changed each year or seasonally should not be ruled out to keep George Avenue looking fresh. And you should budget $1000 per pole for fabric banners: design, fabrication, hardware, permitting, and installation (and staff time!).

Branding is tricky. Georgia Avenue is changing so quickly. Long-time residents may still have the perception that lower Georgia offers little and is unsafe. New residents explore without reservation. So, when is it the best time to market and brand Lower George Avenue? There is no best time. You could wait until a few more buildings are completed or a streetscape is
finished. But a brand will take on a life of its own – with our without you. So, start branding what you have now. Branding images could be institutions, noted residents, beloved businesses, architecture, or aspirational images of what you want Georgia Avenue to become. Branding slogans are endless, and could be controversial, so start from the ground up and have the NSC vote on pithy slogans (My Georgia Avenue!), neighborhoods (Park View on Georgia), action words (Dining!).

**Economic Vitality**

LGAMS is doing a great job with business outreach, business assessments, grants, and offering technical assistance to improve operations. Continue to work with the Great Streets program, and pair it with education. The Historic Preservation Office of the Office of Planning has a number of design guidelines for commercial buildings already available on their website.

Visit: [https://planning.dc.gov/page/design-guidelines](https://planning.dc.gov/page/design-guidelines)

The Great Streets grant offers $50,000 for interior and/or exterior upgrades for a small businesses, which can make a big difference. Also, SB Works offers a matching façade grant, funded by the Department of Housing & Community Development. LGAMS staff is marketing these grants to merchants and even helping some businesses write the proposals. Bravo!

*Commercial gentrification means displacing long-time businesses*, and it has become a challenge on Georgia Avenue. Change is coming and merchants need to be ready to pay higher rents, property taxes, and other fees. Continue to work with merchants to shore up business profitability, change the product mix to cater to new demographics, and assist with crunching numbers. Sometime the best way to retain a business is to find them a better lease around the corner or help them buy a building to stabilize costs. Sometime locking in a lease for the next 10 years is the best you can do. But the message has to be “change is coming so you need to be ready,” whatever that might mean, case by case.

Retail consultants that visit merchants one-on-one can have a huge impact on understanding business trends, marketing, and profitability. Continue to bring in experts to consult, and then capture the essence of their message through an article in a newsletter, podcast, or on a web page. Getting merchants to show up for a class is tough; better to send a consultant into a store for an hour.

Continue with business assessments and respond to the greatest needs. And be sure to celebrate your successes with a ribbon cutting or grand re-opening with the owner and ANC Commissioner and Councilmember.
Design
The design emphasis for LGAMS has been a secondary concern for the first year. That is fine while the organization ramps up performance, and when businesses are ready. Once business assessments have been completed and the back of the house is in order, signs, windows, facades and displays need to be improved. These are visual cues to the public that Georgia Avenue is changing, which will send a signal to new consumers that businesses are thriving and the area is growing. Over time, you will change the perceptions of long-time residents.

Education is key to design success, especially when you can pair it with grant money (think the stick and the carrot). This can be achieved through simple guidelines covering historic preservation, signs, facades, landscaping, retail displays, etc. Have a taskforce take on the simplest subject first and create a two-page flier with lots of images to distribute to merchants to foster better design. Every year, tackle a new subject, growing ever more complex. Be sure to upload all the fact sheets to your website as a resource, accessible to merchants whenever they want them.

Public space needs to be improved, which includes parks, light poles, benches (when ready), trees and tree boxes, sidewalks, and road. Tomorrow, go to DDOT to meet with the director, Jeff Marootian, jeff.marootian@dc.gov, and ask him for a streetscape for Georgia Avenue. This will take four years to design and build, but you must start the process today. The total cost will be $30 million or more, if you include three neighborhoods (the formula was $1 million per block).

Streetscape Process:
1. Determine if you need a cosmetic streetscape or infrastructure plus cosmetic streetscape
2. Ask DDOT for a streetscape so they can put Georgia Avenue in the queue
3. Reach out to the ANC and public input
4. Preliminary design: 30%, 60%, and 90% of the design completed for public review and comment
5. Funding through DDOT and Federal Highway Administration
6. Contract is awarded to builder
7. Ground breaking
8. Construction could take 18 months to three years
9. Manage merchants through construction process
10. Ribbon Cutting with DDOT and the Councilmember

Conclusion
While this corridor along Georgia Avenue is very long and hard to manage with its diverse character, LGAMS is doing an outstanding job of providing value: capacity building, marketing and events, technical assistance, and grant funding. Lower Georgia Avenue Main Street has had
an astounding first year: beautiful office space, establishing trust, creating a functioning
Council, business assessments, and community survey. So many foundational elements have
been established that year two is well positioned to be transformational for the community.

Not all things are possible because of the limits of time, money, and energy. Sadly, ideas are
unlimited. Have staff and the Neighborhood Strategy Council think strategically about what to
start, stop, keep, and grow — and success will materialize. Fundraising through sponsorships will
increase over the next few years. Donations from developers who will see you as a player will
step up. Foundations will see the need and award grants to the right cause creating change.

As technical assistance continues and messaging to merchants is delivered quietly behind the
scenes, façade and sign grants need to roll out to improve the corridor. And “keeping up with the
Joneses” will unfold as one business will make changes without any technical or financial
assistance because of what his or her neighbor has done.

To capture successes, tell your story as often as possible. Write a 30-second elevator speech for
Neighborhood Strategy Council members. Publicize everything you are doing in press releases.
Send out a print and electronic newsletters. And launch that website, linked to District Bridges.

Lower George Avenue Main Street has achieved so much this first year, and the next year looks
even brighter. Protect your outstanding director from idea overload. Focus your time, think
strategically, and become grounded in a balanced budget, and FY19 will be transformational.