

By Emily Zebel, Pennsylvania Downtown Center

# Navigating a Path Forward: Building Community Resilience from the Ground Up

“Twenty years ago, myself and a small group of residents recognized that Columbia Borough [Lancaster County] was dying,” said Mayor Leo Lutz in September 2021. Behind him, his borough was anything but in decline with families riding by on bikes and a line of eager ice cream enthusiasts wrapped around the corner of Cookies and Cream, a bike trailside pit stop that ties the river park to the gateway of the downtown business district.

“We had lost our hospital. Our biggest manufacturer had left. Things were going downhill in a hurry.”

It’s a story that’s familiar to other communities across Pennsylvania. Toeing the brink of apathy and decline, the state’s boroughs have weathered seismic shifts.

In spite of such challenges, there are communities that have managed to pivot and invest in their people while working to build a great place, creating a ripple effect that pays dividends long after the initial investment, showing how growth, prosperity, and inclusion can be goals for meaningful economic development.



## Taking Stock

Municipalities that have internalized the formula for successful revitalization support diverse, durable local economies and value their quality of life, understanding that forming human connections – through social interactions and business development – plays a significant role in positive outcomes. When a community puts people first, good design follows.

“Before I took on the role, I sat down with my grandfather, who was a former mayor,” Lutz said. “What he said stuck with me: The future of Columbia lies in its past.”

So a group of citizens started at the town center and looked at what made Columbia great years ago – the river, the railroad, the people, and a large inventory of historic downtown buildings.

Those early meetings of passionate residents and business owners have continued. The group became a web of resilience that has remained intact and has served as a collaborative, regenerative system, even in the face of setbacks and opposition.

## Challenges Met

Though some adversities now look different than those decades ago – the Great Depression and the proliferation of shopping malls and sprawl – the challenges they pose are no less potent, but PA’s Main Streets are surprisingly resilient when supported by a community-based strategic backbone.

Across the Commonwealth, officials, residents, and business owners sprang into action to meet the com-



plications of COVID, helping those who needed it to navigate Paycheck Protection Program applications, working with municipalities to create safe outdoor dining and shopping spaces, coaching small business owners through online storefront options, and celebrating one another in spite of the isolation.

If anything, it was through the lockdown, the importance of downtowns and similar civic centers became clearer. Humans long to be together, to share holidays, celebrations, and take pride in their community.

This pride of place proved to be immeasurable and vital to a community's health, weathering setbacks, like those still rippling out from the pandemic, and finding new ways forward.

## Moving Forward

"Try to envision what it's going to be like 10 years from today. If it's failing today, what's going to make it better 10 years from now?" Lutz said.

One way to address these issues is the Main Street Approach to revitalizing downtowns and central business districts through transformation strategies that articulate a focused, deliberate path towards strengthening the local economy and aligning the community with that strong sense of identity.

The process is comprehensive and the work is incremental, organized around the full spectrum of interrelated issues that affect commercial districts, instead of just focusing on one or two problems. It all begins with meaningful community engagement.

In the Commonwealth, the PA Downtown Center (PDC) is part of a powerful, grassroots network consisting of 45 coordinating Main Street programs and over 1,600 neighborhoods and communities across the country committed to creating high-quality places and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development.

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## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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PDC serves as the statewide educational and technical service provider, in partnership with the PA Department of Community & Economic Development, working to engage local community leaders and volunteers, and educate them to advance the sense of place, quality of life, and economic vitality of the PA's downtowns, traditional neighborhood business districts, and nearby residential areas.

"We've been a Main Street community for over 20 years," said Naomi Naylor, executive director of Quakertown Alive!, Quakertown Borough, Bucks County, and long standing member of PDC. "Our history unfolds with getting lots of support from the chamber and the borough, and crafting a strategic plan that was responsive to making our downtown vibrant. We aligned with our borough's goals to get support, and that engagement, combined with the education and networking received through PDC's network, was key."

### Transformation Strategies

Transformation strategies guide revitalization programs' work to reimagine and renew the heart of a community, both as an overarching concept and a hands-on approach. It's not a silver bullet/one-size-fits-all fix, but a collaborative process that supports a program's ongoing evolution.

Implemented through four broad areas, known as the Four Points, these strategies include:

- Economic vitality,
- Design,
- Promotion, and
- Organization.

**Economic vitality.** This focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic tools to assist business recruitment and retention, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies.

**Design.** This supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the commercial district apart.

**Promotion.** This positions the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community's unique assets.

**Organization.** This involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district.

Main Street is a distinct place where people want to be and is one path toward recovery and re-energizing commerce and community.

Naylor remarked, "I've had many people reach out to me that are not part of Main Street or of PDC, because they see how we've grown over the past 20 years and they want that for their own town."

The fault lines opened up by the challenges posed by the pandemic have and will continue to affect the future of PA's municipalities. By consistently working from a defined strategy that actively engages business owners and residents, any borough can create an economically and socially robust community.

To learn more about the Main Street Approach, visit [padowntown.org](http://padowntown.org). 



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Zebel returned to the PA Downtown Center after several years of freelance work as a designer, photographer, and videographer. Her work has received numerous awards and she has worked with outdoor recreation companies.

Her passion for mission-driven, non-profit work includes conservation efforts with the AmeriCorps VISTA program, leadership with the Sierra Club's Inspiring Connections Outdoors program, and serving on the advisory board with the PA Interscholastic Cycling League. Zebel is at [emilyzebel@padowntown.org](mailto:emilyzebel@padowntown.org) or 717-233-4675 EXT. 114.