

News from Dover (Delaware)

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In the last issue of the Newsletter, I mentioned the link which has been set up between IMPACT and the 'Main Street' programmes in America, which are highly successful revitalisation programmes for 800 small towns in 34 states. Amongst these is the programme for Dover, Kent County, Delaware.

This former state capital (similar in size to our Dover) has some outstanding 18th century squares and impressive civic buildings and open spaces. Much of the shopping, however, is on the edge of town and the Main Street Project has had its work cut out encouraging private business to lead the revitalisation effort downtown.

We have much to learn from each other, and have been fascinated to see how our programmes have developed along similar lines – even to the extent of four very similar work areas which both Main Street and Kent's Town Centre Management Programmes have identified as needing to be addressed and kept in balance. The Delaware work areas, and their equivalent in the town centre management programme IMPACT is developing jointly with our partners in Dover, are:

- a Design (equivalent to our working groups on Development, but with a greater emphasis on presentation and display within the shops themselves).
- b Promotion (very similar to our work on image promotion, joint retail marketing and special events).
- c Economic Restructuring (which we have tended to call Business Support, involving recruitment and help for small businesses, training and customer care).
- d Organisation (normally locally-led not-for-profit companies, jointly funded by the public and private sector involving a large number of volunteers and backed up by training – similar to some development trusts in Britain).

Although there are of course tremendous cultural, development and legislative differences between American and British towns, the broad issues that we face in our town centres are very similar. There is certainly the same concern for keeping the town centre alive, not just as a retailing focus but also as the heart of the community.

In the absence of a planning system as strong as ours, American cities have been identified by "the great suburban build-out", but downtowns have not only

34 refused to die but also developed sophisticated techniques (such as Main Street) to respond to what might have been seen as overwhelming market forces. Historic town centres (however you measure that history) represent years of investment not only in property and business but also in social and civic life, and in a sense of identity.

What drives the Main Street partnerships are common concerns not only for a sustainable economic future for the downtown area but also for its important rôle in day-to-day social life and civic pride. In our UK experience, we have found such issues strike a common chord. One reason why "Main Street" programmes have pit together successful local partnerships is that Americans, with their own eyes, have seen the alternative. In the words of a vividly written book called "The Geography of Nowhere" by James Kunstler, "We created a nation of scary places and became a nation of scary people".

Nan Hagen, manager of the Dover, Delaware, Main Street programme, has kindly provided us with an update which illustrates how focused voluntary effort is playing its part.

"The new year promises to be a busy one. We had our Annual Meeting last week and elected a new Board Chairman of Main Street, Dover. His name is Terry Jackson and he is a local architect. We also elected officers and announced the appointment of two new board members. The annual meeting was packed with people, many more than we expected and we are continuing to gather community support.

We held an orientation session for new volunteers in January and were pleased with the results. Eight new volunteers attended, were familiarized with the Main Street Approach, and all are now signed up to be on a committee.

On Twelfth Night, we held a fund-raiser for Main Street Dover in the home of our Mayor. Over ninety people paid \$30 each to attend and we cleared \$1400. This event proved to be a great way to raise money because it was not labor intensive.

Our Design Committee is holding one more focus group, this time with downtown employees and shoppers, in an attempt to reach conclusions about our "perceived" parking problem. This focus group is a follow up on recommendations made by a parking consultant who visited Dover last August. Soon we'll make our final recommendations to the City Council and to the Parking Authority. This committee is also working on a plan to beautify Governor's Avenue (one of our main downtown streets) and we are in the process of awarding small grants to downtown businesses within the area with which to improve their buildings. In addition, we are planning a workshop in April for merchants. The subjects will be visual merchandising, store layout and traffic flow. We have found a designer based in Philadelphia who will facilitate this workshop. >

Our Economic Restructuring Committee is working on a low interest loan pool. Criteria have been developed by a sub-committee of local bankers and we are waiting to see if each of the six local banks will make financial commitments. 35

Our Promotion Committee is working on:

- *Developing a Downtown farmers' market*
- *Old Dover Days (a two-day colonial celebration)*
- *Fourth Annual Duck Derby (we rent rubber ducks for \$5 each on the fourth of July, the ducks are released over the dam on the river and the first one through the finish gate wins a great prize)*
- *A food booth at the Delmarva (our peninsular consisting of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia) chicken festival which will draw about 40,000 tourists. Last, but not least, our Organisation Committee is resting after doing a wonderful job on Twelfth Night, the Annual Meeting, newsletters, etc. This committee is concerned about stable financing for our program so the National Main Street Center will provide a fund-raising consultant in the near future to help us with long-range planning for fund-raising".* ◊

A Small Town in Germany

Our environmental efforts may be encouraged by a glance at how Civic Type activity is also alive and well in Germany where, as here, it depends on the vision and energy of the concerned few.

Last Autumn, from Heidelberg, we visited a large village/small town, Ladenburg. It is one of the size and architectural merit of our Cotswold villages. It is in the rich vineyard area but the modern vertical vineyards, with mechanised cultivators replacing the old terracing had led to a flight from the land. Not developers, but the Mayor (what you can do with Parish Status!) and an energetic doctor gave the lead. They saw the potential of beauty and value. The Germans greatly value half-timbered houses but many of the then empty houses in Ladenburg had been hacked about, stuccoed or rendered over. One by one they were cleaned and restored, with the timber frames exposed. Persuasion, pressure and, occasionally, financial help were used and the village is alive again, and a very desirable place to live in.

It was also pleasing to see how the centres of Heidelberg and Würzburg, both university towns, had been completely pedestrianised – Würzburg quite recently. At the same time we were reading in the English papers that students in Oxford were blockading Magdalen bridge, in protest at the traffic in High Street, and Cambridge was seeking to ban bicycles from the City centre.

E.L.W.