

Business and Resident Perceptions of Improvements and Renovations
Implemented Through the Village of Hamburg Main Street Program

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Abstract

The New York Main Street Program, which is based on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Program, began in 2004 and has awarded over sixty-four million dollars of funding to more than one hundred and forty-five communities across the state (Homes and Community Renewal, 2011). The principle objectives behind these grants are to help businesses become more productive and competitive, revitalize properties, keep property values respectable, encourage enhancement and development of certain areas, and create an awareness of the needs of current taxpayers and homeowners (VOH, 2006). The Village of Hamburg, NY, is one of many local municipalities that had been experiencing severe disinvestment within the central business district. This research project surveyed residents and businesses, within the village, to gauge their perceptions regarding the implementation of and completion of the Main Street Program. This program is geared towards boosting economic growth and a sense of community within an area in need. Based on a review of literature surrounding these types of community improvements and revitalization projects there does not appear to be any type of evaluation survey completed with regards to approval or disapproval among the affected businesses and residents within these communities. The results of this study will assist the VOH in assessing future program planning within the community.

Research Question

How do the Village of Hamburg residents and businesses perceive the outcomes and importance of the Main Street Program?

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the perceived impact following the New York State Main Street (NYMS) grant funding that was awarded to the Village of Hamburg (VOH), for four consecutive years starting in 2006. This evaluation was completed through the use of a survey distributed to residents and businesses within the VOH to assess their perceptions regarding the changes, or lack of changes, that have occurred since the implementation of the Main Street Program.

Framework

The VOH was one of many local towns experiencing severe disinvestment with regards to the village center's commercial and residential properties. Through conversations with the current administrators the VOH wanted to assist the community in their reinvestment and renovation efforts while also revitalizing the traditional village center and community atmosphere. The questions used in the survey stemmed from the specific outcomes and improvements listed in each of the four applications submitted by the VOH.

Significance & Justification

The time and money spent by those involved in the Main Street Program (MSP) was expected to have a positive impact on the VOH but there have been no definitive studies completed that considered these outcomes. Each grant awarded had stipulations in place regarding the renovations and rehabilitation to be accomplished within a two year period

(NYSHTFC, 2009). During this time there does not appear to be any type of evaluation survey completed with regards to the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the businesses and residents within the community. The VOH conducted a consumer survey in 2008, which was administered to residents, and collected information regarding retail and restaurant preferences to assist in the appeal of the local businesses (Village of Hamburg, 2009). Another survey was distributed recently to the businesses that participated in the program collecting information regarding funding received, out-of-pocket costs, employee information before and after the MSP, and what type of impact this program had on their business (Village of Hamburg, 2012).

The main purpose of this research was to gauge the impact of the MSP, an inquiry brought to the researcher by the VOH. Due to the lack of a preexisting tool a survey was created and with this we were able to attain the perceptions of residents and businesses, regarding levels of agreement and importance of the MSP outcomes (Appendix B). This research may also prove useful to other researchers who are studying the community's perception of MSP in small towns and villages that have participated in the NYMS or are interested in doing so.

Review of Literature

In order to “create a more distinct village center” the VOH viewed the NYMS grant as a way to give the community a jump start while also making way to improve the economy and sense of community (Village of Hamburg, 2006). To better understand the goals and objectives the VOH proposed during this project other studies and literature surrounding this type of program was researched. Also considered are the national programs that spearheaded the state and local Main Street movements and the history of how this concept came about.

Prior to World War II the village and town centers were primarily located on the “Main Streets” across America and acted as the commercial hub for that area (NTFHP, 2012).

According to Beatley (2001), the idea of a sense of place is something that sets us apart from most other countries. After the war the building of the interstate highways was taking place which made the move out to the suburbs more accessible and reshaped the way American's lived (NTFHP, 2012).

The New Urbanism movement began in 1981, considered by some as the “reconceptualization of the American Dream”, and aimed to bring back the traditional walk-able and mixed-use community designs (Anderson, 2008 & Shibley, 1998, p. 1). The main ambition of New Urbanism, which is one of the fundamental factors surrounding the NYMS, is to restore communities that have been affected by suburban sprawl while also diversifying the population, conserving the natural resources, and preserving the history of each area (Shibley, 1998).

Another element of the NYMS are Smart Growth guidelines, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2011) explains as being any or all of the following: promoting mixed land uses, compact building designs, creating walkable neighborhoods, fostering a sense of community, preserving open and natural spaces, strengthening the development of existing communities, creating a variety of transportation options, keeping the cost of development fair and consistent, and encouraging all members of the community to be involved in these decisions.

The studies completed over the last few decades, regarding communities and neighborhoods across the United States, have provided a basis to the variety of ways a researcher can analyze this area of interest. In an article titled “Putting the past to work for the future” (Facca, A.E. & Aldrich, J.W., 2011) the authors discuss the idea that history and cultural development are intertwined making the preservation of history within a community a necessity for its growth and success. These authors believe that heritage is a contributing factor to the economy of the area and provides the community with a sense of place and meaning.

The measurability of the Main Street Programs has been studied in several different ways and methods including an applied research project completed by Schneider-Cowan (2007) which studied the guidelines that the Main Street programs define. This type of study used document analysis and direct observation of the changes and effects it had in the town/village, where the VOH study was more concerned with public feedback.

Others study's that measure the Main Street program researched specific areas within the goals and objectives defined by the program. Wiles (2000) performed an initial evaluation of the needs of a town to determine what type of retail the local population desired, with regards to not only the types of shops but also the atmosphere that the historic district offers. Another approach, which concentrates on positively affecting and bettering a community, is known as the Responsive Participatory Redesign (RPR) method (Fung, 2001). Instead of relying on planners, construction workers, and architects, the author believes that the RPR reacts to what the community is saying and not just one developer.

The principle idea behind the NYMS grants is to help businesses become more productive and competitive, revitalize properties, keep property values respectable, encourage enhancement and development of certain areas, and create an awareness of the needs of current taxpayers and homeowners (VOH, 2006). The goal of promoting economic development for businesses and affordable housing was encouraged through the desire to increase employment opportunities along with job retention and creation, while also improving pedestrian food traffic to these businesses and homes (VOH, 2006).

Definition of Terms

- *Economic Growth*: Reinvestment in a community that has spurred economic advancement through the revitalization of the following: increased mixed-use businesses, decrease number of vacant store-fronts, the promotion of retail and service sector businesses, retention and creation of jobs, and the availability and quality of affordable housing (VOH Application, 2009, Homes & Community Renewal, 2011).
- *Sense of Community*: A sense of pride a resident has within their community from such things as the “enhancement of the character of a small, quiet, walkable community” which maintains its cohesiveness and ambience (VOH Application, 2009).
- *Level of Agreement*: The rating, on a scale of Very Low to Very High, that a respondent gives on the survey with regards to their perception level of a change that was expected to occur following the implementation of the Main Street Program (i.e. Increased opportunity for new businesses, to what level do they agree or disagree with this statement).
- *Level of Importance*: The rating, on a scale of Very Low to Very High, that a respondent gives on the survey with regards to their perception of how significant each outcome statement is to their community (i.e. Increased opportunity for new businesses, to what level do they feel that this is an important outcome).
- *Main Street Program (MSP)*: Grant funding through the New York State Main Street program, which upon approved application will award funding towards the rehabilitation and revitalization of towns and villages across the state.
- *Village Center*: Refers to the “downtown” area within a village or town.
- *Perception*: Perception refers to the participant’s opinions, thoughts, and knowledge

regarding the changes and importance of the Main Street Program outcomes.

- *Community*: The residents and businesses within the Village of Hamburg.
- *Resident*: Any person that owns or operates a business within the Village of Hamburg or they reside within the Village of Hamburg and either rent or own a house or apartment.

Population & Sample

The population of this study is made up of the residents and businesses within the Village of Hamburg, NY. The resident sample is based upon the “First Ring Neighborhoods” within two blocks of the impact area, surrounding the properties that participated in the Main Street Program, and equals around six percent of the total population within the village (estimated at 9,398 in the 2011 census) (see Figure 2) (United States Census Bureau, 2012). This sample method was chosen because of the proximity of the residents to the renovation and rehabilitation that has occurred during the program implementation. The businesses sampled are based upon the email lists of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce (HCC) and the Village Business Advisory Council (VBAC).

Data Collection Method

The type of data that this study collected was descriptive statistics regarding perceptions. The data was collected through a likert scale survey electronically administered through SurveyMonkey.com (SurveyMonkey.com, LLC, 2012). Potential respondents found out about the survey by one or more of the following distribution methods: came across the information and survey link on VOH website, received an email from the HCC or the VBAC, read the article published in the Hamburg Sun, and/or received a flyer delivered to their residence.

The survey information and link were posted on the VOH website homepage for 3 weeks. The VBAC sent an email out to their 30 members and the HCC emailed its 600 members, these

emails included a brief write-up about the study and included a link to the survey. The flyers were distributed by seven local Junior Firefighters who hand-delivered the material door-to-door to every household, around 600 VOH residents, within the “First Ring Neighborhoods” (Figure 1 & 2). In order to notify the residents about this study, and the delivery of the flyers, an ad was published in the Hamburg Sun.

Human Rights Protection

This study utilized an anonymous electronic survey (SurveyMonkey.com, LLC, 2012). Request to participate was structured as a cover letter explaining the nature and purpose of this study (see Appendix A). The letter also ensured the participants anonymity and provided contact information in the case of any questions or concerns respondents may have had. The choice to respond was considered implied consent and was explained to the respondents in the letter.

Through the use of SurveyMonkey.com the anonymity of the respondents was preserved by ensuring that the email storage and IP address collection was disabled at the time the survey is created. SurveyMonkey.com, LLC confirms that their website is privacy protected and secure (2012).

Tools

The online survey consisted of thirteen perception questions regarding expected changes following the implementation of the MSP. The survey was the same for both the businesses and residents and took between five-ten minutes to complete. The respondents were asked to rate each outcome statement in two ways, one by their level of agreement to the change and the second by rating that statement on how important it is to the community. These outcome statements stemmed from the expected outcomes described by the VOH in each of the four MSP applications they were awarded. There were additional questions that asked the respondents for

information regarding their participation in the Main Street Program along with demographic information such as age, gender, and whether they are a resident and/or business owner within the VOH.

Results

There were 1250 potential respondents, this included both residents and businesses, and a total of 169 responses to the survey were collected (a 13% response rate). Of these respondents 77.5% reside within the VOH, 9.5% own a business within the VOH, and 13% reported as being non-residents of the VOH. The median age range of the respondents was between 46-55, and a total of 55% were female and 45% male.

The ad in the Hamburg Sun reached the most respondents, at 48%. There were 31% of respondents that reported having received a flyer at their residence, and 21% received an email from either the HCC or the VBAC. However, 54 respondents reported as finding out about the survey through another method, the majority of these commented on reading about it in another news source, and 47 respondents skipped this question altogether.

Each of the thirteen perception questions have been broken down into percentages of the respondent's level of agreement and importance (see Figure 3-15). Overall, the respondents reported generally medium to high levels of agreement to the outcome statements and the majority of these were reported as being high to very high with regards to the level of importance.

There was an option for additional comments and 54% of the respondents left 157 types of responses, which was broken down into three categories: positive, negative, and recommendations/requests (see Table 1). The three categories were broken down even further with regards to specifics, such as comments made about the MSP, Rte 62, perceptions about the

look or aesthetics within the VOH, and general comments. Comments regarding positive perceptions of the VOH equaled 34%, out of the total responses, and 21% regarding the renovations and changes made to the VOH. Of the 16% of negative comments given half of those were of general disapproval or a complaint regarding the projects. There were also recommendations and requests made by respondents, 10% of these regarded issues surrounding streetscapes and lighting issues.

Summary

The process of rebuilding “Main Streets” is a relatively young concept and the VOH study created a new measurement design for other communities to gauge the impact of their constituents following MSP implementation.

Through the collection of local resident and business perceptions regarding outcomes that are geared towards improving a sense of community and enhancing economic growth we were able to gauge opinions of those most affected by this program. The findings from this study further demonstrate that the time, money, and effort given towards these types of community revitalization and redevelopment projects have the positive impact expected and outlined in the NYMS guidelines (NYSGTFC, 2009). This study collected descriptive statistics from a sample of residents and businesses to answer the research question; how do the Village of Hamburg residents and businesses perceive the outcomes and importance of the Main Street Program? The results indicate that the residents and businesses that responded perceive the changes and improvements positively and as having high levels of importance within their community.

Of the four planned methods of survey distribution the ad placed in the Hamburg Sun was the most successful method of distributing information to potential respondents, equaling

48% of respondents (see Figure 16). The residents made up the vast majority of respondents to this study, at 78%, and overall they reported extremely positively to all perception questions, both to the level of agreement and importance. Although the majority of these residents did not directly benefit from the MSP grant funding the results of this survey indicate that they have witnessed the changes and improvements and agree that they were important steps to improving their community. For example, 89% of respondents highly to very highly agree that improvement to the appearance of properties has occurred and 93% reported this as being important (see Figure 8).

Comments left by respondents are another leading indicator that the MSP was successful in accomplishing the goals and objectives. More than 84% of the open ended responses were positive remarks regarding the following; renovations, aesthetics, community pride, and quality of life within the VOH following the implementation of the MSP (see Table 1). Pride within the community and a personal sense of belonging were among the highest ranking perceptions, being greatly improved and very important (see Table 14 & 15).

A limitation of this study was in reaching the largest sample of residents and businesses within the VOH. Through the use of SurveyMonkey.com not all prospective participants had access to the Internet to complete the online survey (SurveyMonkey.com, LLC, 2012). The use of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce and the Village Business Advisory Council mailing lists only provided contact information for those that pay the dues towards the group, and not all businesses are a part of this organization and therefore were not a part of this sample. The email notifications sent to the businesses, with regards to the survey information, may have also ended up in spam/junk mail folders. With regards to the VOH resident's, this project focused on the "First Ring Neighborhoods", those residing within two blocks of the impact areas, and therefore

limits the generalizability of the results (see Figure 2).

The outcomes of renovation and rehabilitation to a distressed community have been found to positively add and improve the livelihood of those that live, work, and play there. Through the collection of this data from residents and businesses, located closest to the impacted area, the perception data gathered will add to the VOH's insight regarding what their constituents find important and what changes they have observed since the implementation of the MSP. With this data the VOH will be able to better determine future program planning within the community.

Although not an objective of this study it may prove beneficial to complete a more in-depth statistical analysis of each individual item on the survey. Future researchers could take any of the perception questions and research more specifically about the outcomes, such as the increase of foot traffic within the village or study the property values prior to the MSP and after the implementation. Another recommendation for future researchers would be to explore an improved method of distribution to the businesses within the village with a goal of increasing response rate.

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