



Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

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Preservation

Rehabbing historic buildings seen as key to economic development in this small downtown

Through tools as diverse as eminent domain and anonymous donations, a compact downtown in western Maine has saved four architecturally important buildings and returned them to productive use. Like many downtown programs, the key to success for downtown Norway (est. pop. 4,760), was to build consensus for historic preservation as an economic development tool.

To do this, the downtown association partnered with the town manager to produce three forums focused on endangered historic buildings on downtown's main street. All four buildings were "in a passive existence, and incredibly threatened," says Andrea Burns, board president of the Norway Downtown Association. "All four are now in an active state, in very different ways," she says (for details, see page 6).

Through a public education campaign, the Association has helped people see the connection between preservation and economic development. Now, the rehabilitation of buildings great and small, is seen as key to revitalizing this exceptionally compact and intact but architecturally threatened downtown.

Chock full of historic buildings, challenged by neglect

Downtown Norway has an affordable building stock with good bones, excellent

quality of life, and strong creative economy potential thanks to its natural recreational amenities and well-kept architecture.

"Our downtown is very compact. We have more historic buildings contributing to our historic district than any other small town in Maine. We have an intact main street that really is quite incredible," says Burns.

The downtown is headed at its east end by Lake Pennessewassee, a recreation area, and at its west end by Route 26, a picturesque state highway that leads from Portland to Canada. Not being located on a major interstate has been both good and bad for the downtown. On the positive side, its main street has been able to keep the character of its late 1800s brick mills and factories, with only one franchise convenience store interrupting the stream of wonderful old buildings.

On the other hand, in the neighborhoods around downtown, "many beautiful old homes are blighted due to Section 8 housing," Burns says. In the close-in neighborhoods as well as downtown, many building owners, with little economic incentive to reinvest, have not maintained their properties well.

"With every forum, we had the best people in the state delivering what they could bring to the process."

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Series of forums drew attention to threatened historic buildings

Preservation is economic development. That idea was championed in a Norway Downtown board meeting keynote to commu-

nity leaders by Roxanne Eflin, then executive director of Maine Preservation and now principal of Preservation Planning Associates. “She really set the stage for preservation being a way to ignite economic development.

Four buildings in disrepair receive new attention, activity

Unlike many small towns with similar histories, the period buildings of Norway, ME, have remained relatively intact. Most were built immediately after a devastating fire in 1894. Downtown Norway was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1998.

The following four buildings were the subject of a series of public forums led by the town manager and Norway Downtown. Before the forums, all four of the buildings had been insufficiently maintained or worse, and all but one had been seriously threatened. Since the public education process, each has received attention ranging from a new lease on life to better use by downtown.

- **Norway Opera House, 1894.** Distinctive clock tower and Romanesque arch define this enduring symbol of Norway. The second floor Grand Ballroom was used for training drills by the 133rd infantry in both World Wars. An out-of-state owner let the opera house fall into disrepair.

“One select board member has given \$200,000 towards the purchase of the Norway Opera House, and because of this, we are able to proceed with eminent domain in taking the opera house. That’s in the process now,” says Andrea Burns, board president, Norway Downtown Association.

- **Evan’s Cummings House, 1855.** Remodeled 1885-1892. Locally known as the “Gingerbread House,” this unique structure has fallen into deep disrepair. A carriage barn in back of the house features a turntable, eliminating the need to back a car out.

“That house had been abandoned and abused by a newspaper owner here. New newspaper owners have taken that business over, and were going to demolish the Gingerbread House, which is on their property. We’ve been able to be instrumental in finding an anonymous donor who gave \$100,000 towards

its being moved onto a small piece of property with three owners (the town, state, and newspaper owners),” she says.

- **Odd Fellows Block, 1894 1st floor, 1911 2nd floor.** Demonstrates the role that fraternal orders played in establishing businesses on downtown Norway’s main street. The second floor once housed the district court room and law offices, while the ground floor storefront has been home to a fancy goods store, a Ben Franklin Store in the 1930s, and a Wilson Dollar Store in the 1950s.

“This had been owned by the bank by default, and was sold to a private owner, who used some Community Development Block Grant money that was attached to its purchase. He has rehabilitated the back of this brick building, and redone the facade, so that Main Street no longer has a 1950s-look facade on it. It’s now a decent and appropriate facade,” she says.

- **Norway Grange Hall, 1909.** In 1918, the member-run Grange building was used as an emergency hospital during the flu epidemic. For many years, the Grange sponsored dances, suppers, minstrel shows, sales, and auctions to raise funds. These activities enabled the organization to pay off all debt on the building in 1940. In 2002, the Grange and Oxford Hills Music & Performing Arts Association signed an agreement allowing the community theater group to use the building. Funds derived from this arrangement provide financial assistance to help Grange members with maintenance and upkeep.

“The Norway Grange was not in jeopardy so much as it needed some attention. It has been painted and refurbished, and Norway Downtown has initiated a fall Saturday Market at the Grange, which has been a really wonderful and appropriate use for that building,” Burns says.

That in fact, preservation is economic development,” Burns says.

From that board meeting, the town manager was moved to work with Norway Downtown to develop the series of public forums discussing opportunities for key threatened buildings. The forums were surprisingly well attended. Even during a tornado warning about 120 people showed up at the Norway Grange Hall.

“This was unprecedented in this area to have that kind of involvement on a topic like this. With every forum, we had the best people in the state delivering what they could bring to the process. And when I looked out over the audience, it was a mixture of the selectmen, planning board, summer people whose hearts and souls are with their Maine escape, and year-long residents,” she says.

For the town selectmen and members of the planning board, who had seen downtown’s historic buildings as liabilities rather than assets, these forums were a real awakening.

“All along, we have worked with the town, reporting to the select board, and doing everything we can on this effort for downtown’s threatened historic buildings, which we look at as our part of downtown’s economic restructuring.”

Advocating for ordinances to protect historic district

Downtown Norway’s leadership is now calling for ordinances to protect downtown’s historic district and the architectural integrity of the main street. Currently, there is no protection at all, outside of shore land zoning along the lakefront.

While the strides made in recent years in building the town’s political and economic will for preservation have generated remarkable progress, more permanent change in the

law is needed to keep downtown intact for generations to come.

“I think part of our charge here, our mandate, is to prove to our citizens and residents that this is needed. I think we’re on that tipping point of going one way or another,” Burns says.

For its advocacy to work, Norway Downtown will need to convince people of how preserving the historic downtown benefits everyone by way of economic development opportunity.

“All these buildings have the potential of either supporting the creative economy or piggybacking upon it,” she says. The buildings provide interesting spaces for a wide variety of restaurants and other uses that serve residents as well as attract visitors, and create jobs that attract new residents.

Or as an editorial piece in the January 10 *Maine Sunday Telegram* argues, “Maine can create jobs with its quality of place.” The status quo, the paper writes, “assumes economic development and conservation are at odds with each other, when really they should be sharing a common goal.”

That op-ed was written in support of a bill coming back before the state legislature this session, “An Act to Create Regional Quality of Place Investment Strategies,” which would help foster development on the local level that begins by identifying existing assets on which to build.

“Keep plugging, keep plugging. Don’t give up,” Burns advises. “It gets harder but better as you make inroads to rehabilitating a building or for that matter a town.

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Leadership is now calling for ordinances to protect downtown’s historic district.