

# Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs



*Testimony on*

*The Future of Main Street and Elm Street Programs*

*Senate Urban Affairs & Housing Committee*

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Good Afternoon Chairman Argall, Chairman Brewster, and members of the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee. The Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs is a nonprofit, nonpartisan local government association comprised of over 900 boroughs and over 10,000 elected and appointed borough officials. For the past 100 years, PSAB has helped shape the laws that govern boroughs and municipal officials across the state. We look forward to the next century of service to our members and working with the General Assembly on a host of important issues.

My name is Sharon Davis. I have been a Main Street Manager for just over five years. “My” Main Street program is unique in that it was one of the first regional programs designated by PA DCED. A regional program involves multiple boroughs. “My” program is the Borough Business Revitalization Program (BBRP). The BBRP has seven participating boroughs. Alburtis, Catasauqua and Coopersburg are in Lehigh County, Bangor, Bath, Hellertown and Pen Argyl are in Northampton County. I coordinate/manage the program in Catasauqua, Bangor, Bath and Pen Argyl. Our Program was a designated by the PA DCED and received five year administrative funding from 2005 through 2010. We have also been accredited by the National Main Street Center for the past 4 years.

I work in four boroughs, each with different assets and different challenges. When you visit Bath, you will see and feel the “sense of place” that is Bath.. ...the same with Catasauqua, Bangor and Pen Argyl. In all of these boroughs, by following the Main Street 4 point approach, we have helped each one to build on their unique heritage, culture and physical assets. Every borough has seen new businesses open and vacant buildings successfully adapted for new uses. Perhaps most satisfying were the three historically significant buildings (two located in Bath and one in Bangor) that had sat vacant and blighted for so long that it seemed the only solution to dealing with them was to have them demolished. Today, each of these buildings is still standing and each has been either totally rehabilitated or is in the process of rehabilitation. I truly believe that the Community Vision espoused by the Main Street Program was the catalyst to bring together all the parties – building owners, borough codes enforcement, Main Street façade grants- needed to save these buildings, all of which now house new businesses and upper floor residences.

As referenced above, the façade program funded by DCED, has been a catalyst. In the course of our Program, we secured three rounds of façade funding. 112 façade projects were completed. \$316,000 of state funding was invested, leveraging an estimated \$559,000 in private funding. And, this public/private partnership worked exactly as we hoped. Many property owners, upon seeing their neighboring building looking nice and new, invested all private dollars into improving their own buildings. In Bangor, we have been able to continue the façade grant program utilizing all private donations. We have received \$30,000 from the State Farm Insurance Company towards the Bangor façade program.

In addition to the façade program, the Main Street grass roots approach has fostered a “can do” attitude among our stakeholders, resulting in major projects that link the boroughs to regional assets. Examples of these include:

**Bangor** : Bangor has traditionally been the center of commerce and conversation in the Slate Belt region of Northampton County. Building on that legacy, we are in the process of achieving national historic district designation (Currently in the Review Process at PHMC), around which we are promoting our

town to heritage tourists and new investors. We are building on our town's rich tradition of skilled crafters and artisans through a partnership with our local non-profit arts center, Totts Gap Arts Institute (TGAI). Working with TGAI, we have developed the Heritage Mural Education Program. The mural education program involves young artists from our community in the process of installing murals throughout our historic district. Our mural program differs from many in that the students are involved at every step bringing the murals to life. Students work with our local heritage society to research the era being depicted in the mural; assist with design, learn how to transfer the design onto the large wall and execute the painting of the mural. Our initial Heritage Mural, completed last summer, has generated state-wide media recognition and has attracted visitors to our downtown. Besides helping to promote Bangor to the outside world, the mural program has had a transformative effect on the people who live and work in Bangor – they are truly seeing Bangor through a fresh set of eyes with appreciation for our history and architecture.

**Bath:** Bath is at the receiving end of the next portion of the Nor-Bath Trail, a rails to trails project. In preparation to become a Trail Town, our program worked to erect a gazebo and public rest room facility in our borough park closest to the planned trail. When the walkers and bicyclists come, they will find a friendly park where they can sit, picnic, wash up and enjoy the natural beauty of the nearby Monocacy creek. This park is also the location of our Bath Farmers Market. An initiative of our Main Street program, the Bath Farmers Market is entering its fifth year. The Farmers Market provides access to fresh food locally produced on our nearby farms. The Bath Farmers Market is a participant in the Lehigh Valley Buy Fresh Buy Local program.

**Catasauqua:** Catasauqua is the next town over from Whitehall Township, home of shopping malls, strip centers and big box retailers. Our focus has been on emphasizing the difference between us and them. We have an eclectic mix of trendy thrift and consignment shops and a volunteer base interested in art and ecology. Drawing on that base, we have developed a painted fire hydrant program that encourages local residents of all ages to bring out their inner artist. In keeping with our green theme, we are the first community in the Lehigh Valley to choose solar powered pedestrian lights. We are working on plans for community butterfly and bluebird gardens.

**Pen Argyl:** Pen Argyl is the newest participant in the Program, having joined in 2010. Like most older towns, we had lost our traditional retail businesses and many of our downtown buildings were vacant. Our Program helped to facilitate a new vision for Pen Argyl to attract professional medical offices affiliated with the hospital clinics located 2 miles away on Route 33. In the past 2 years several of our most prominent but vacant buildings have found new use as professional offices. We are capitalizing on the commuting employees of these businesses by marketing our local businesses to them; ie, our shoe repair shop, post office, dry cleaner, eateries and day care centers. “No need to make several stops on your way to work, Pen Argyl has it all within walking distance.” We have also created a unique walking path. The “Wisdom Walk” is a series of painted sidewalks containing inspirational quotes. “Healthy for the Body and Mind,” the Wisdom Walk has attracted walkers from around the region and has become an interactive class room for local students.

Attached to this testimony are letters from the borough managers of Bangor, Bath, Catasauqua and Pen Argyl, attesting to the value of the Main Street Program. Because boroughs do not have economic development departments or redevelopment authorities, I think you will find that most borough managers

view the Main Street Program as their economic development department. We are regularly asked to work with the borough on parking management issues, zoning and planning issues. Our program provides a link to the regional Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation and Discover Lehigh Valley, the regional convention and visitors bureau.

Like all of us, our boroughs have to make difficult choices at budget time. I am truly honored that all of “my” BBRP boroughs have continually chosen to fund our Main Street Program. By investing in this Program they are making a long term investment in their future and in the economic health of the region.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today. Thank you for the support you have given to Main Street programs over the years.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for your time and I’d be happy to answer any questions the committee may have

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