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Main Street program offers a lot to Portland

Patrick Reagan

In my position of Downtown Development Authority Director/ Main Street Manager I get asked an amazing number of questions, but none is better than this: "What does Main Street do for businesses?" The answer? "Plenty." For example, throughout the year, Portland Main Street provides many business training seminars and workshops, local grants, promotional opportunities, and downtown events, all in an effort to help downtown businesses thrive in this struggling Michigan economy.

First, Portland Main Street offers free training sessions year round on a variety of business-related topics for all business owners and potential business owners in the Portland area. For instance, through a partnership with the Michigan Small Business and Technology Development Center (MI-SBTDC), we have offered trainings on working with the Small Business Administration; finding small business financing; ideas for small business marketing; business-plan writing, human-resource solutions for small businesses; small-business retail merchandising, and understanding the fundamentals of business legal issues. On top of what we currently offer, we have planned more workshops focused on helping small businesses utilize social media and websites. Our goal is to help Portland businesses remain strong, vital, and prosperous.

Second, Portland Main Street offers businesses low-cost advertising opportunities. For example, this year we have worked with our partners at WION (92.7 FM and 1430 AM) in Ionia to produce a cooperative radio advertising campaign for downtown Portland businesses. Twenty Portland Main Street district businesses have taken part this year, with their ads running until Aug. 31. Our Promotions and Marketing Committee also produced a downtown brochure in 2010. This brochure is available at many different hotels and businesses throughout the area and was designed to inform residents and visitors of all the great events and opportunities that are available in our downtown. The P&M Committee also hosts the annual Portland Pay Day promotion - this event is a great "shop local" campaign that has kept over \$100,000 in Portland over the last two years.

Third, we offer two exciting grants for Portland Main Street-district building and business owners. Our local façade grant is a 50/50 matching reimbursement grant based on historic façade rehabilitation for approved projects up to \$5,000.

We also offer a "Local Sign Incentive Grant" to downtown business owners. This is another 50/50 matching grant that reimburses approved projects for up to \$1,000, based on creative business-sign projects and plans. Again, these grants are offered to help our downtown businesses succeed and to continue improving the aesthetic appeal of downtown Portland.

Finally, in an effort to bring more people to downtown Portland, we hold many exciting events. Our annual "Block Party" each May, our "Oktoberfest," our "Wine the Walk," and the annual "HolidayFest on the Grand" are all organized and held to promote the downtown area.

During these events, Portland Main Street encourages business owners to take an active part in these celebrations! Some businesses actively sponsor the events. some business owners volunteer. and

celebration. Some businesses actively sponsor the events, some business owners volunteer, and others simply offer discounts or specials.

The best part about all Main Street events and programs is that they are produced, organized, and run by Portland business owners and residents! Portland Main Street is by no means a "one person show" - we had over 90 volunteers put in over 1,600 volunteer hours from July 2010 to July 2011 alone.

So, the next time someone asks you, "What does Portland Main Street do for downtown businesses?" feel free to answer, "A lot!"

The goal of the Portland Main Street program is to actively revitalize Portland's vibrant, charming, and unique downtown into a gathering place-one that uses broad-based community support to (1) provide opportunities to entrepreneurs; (2) sustain a strong economic foundation for the region; and (3) safeguard history, tradition, and a sense of community for residents and visitors.

For more information visit the Portland Main Street website at www.portlandmainstreet.org or call the Portland Main Street offices at (517) 647-5027.

Patrick Reagan is the Main Street manager and Downtown Development Authority director for the City of Portland
