



Downtown Washington, Inc., (DWI) received the "Greatest Achievement Award" at the 2010 Missouri Main Street Conference for its work in saving the Old Main Post Office, which now houses the offices of DWI while retaining its postal functions. The grand opening of the Post Office in 2011 was attended by local and state officials.



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Washington, Missouri A Model of Action and Advocacy



To watch the Main Street spirit in action in Washington, Missouri, you should first look at how mindfully the city treats its old buildings. When the U.S. Postal Service decided to cease postal operations in downtown Washington in 2008, the fate of the historic building looked bleak. A handsome red brick building with arched windows and a neo-Classical pedimented entryway, the Old Main Post Office has been beloved by Washingtonians since it was built in 1922.

So Downtown Washington, Inc., (DWI) stepped in. Working with its sister organization, the Historic Washington Foundation (HWF), DWI bought the post office. Tax credits and grants, including the \$10,000 Johanna Favrot grant awarded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, were applied toward restoring the entire exterior and interior of the building, using the original blueprints as reference. To raise additional funds, DWI's Organization Committee threw a Post Office Bash during the Fourth of July celebrations in 2010, with fireworks on the riverside at twilight. The event raised close to \$12,000 for the renovations.

Today, the Old Main Post Office houses DWI and HWF offices, along with many local businesses—all while retaining its postal functions. DWI received approval from the USPS to run a contract postal unit in the building, and it has trained every one of its employees to work the postal counter. In downtown Washington, you can mail gift packages to friends and family all over the world with the help of the city's dedicated Main Street staff.

Of Cabins and Civic Centers

Unlike many of the nation's Main Streets, downtown Washington never suffered a period of major economic decline in the middle of the 20th century. Its stability was actually one of the reasons why Washington was selected as one of its five pilot communities by the Missouri Main Street Connection in 1989.

Nonetheless, stability did not make Washington complacent. From the beginning, DWI has been hard at work protecting the



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In 2009, DWI launched a Sign and Awning Matching Grant fund that covers up to half the cost of historically appropriate signs for downtown businesses.

downtown's architectural heritage and putting old buildings to new uses. DWI's first project after adopting the Main Street approach was the renovation of the city's oldest standing structure, the Log Cabin. Built in 1834, it gained a second life as the home of DWI's offices. With the offices moving to the Old Main Post Office in 2010, plans are now under way to refit the cabin once again, now for an Artist-in-Residence Program.



Downtown Washington's large roster of special events, headlined by the Fine Art Fair & Winefest, bring in more than \$65,000 a year.

Having saved the city's oldest building, DWI turned to its second oldest—the Frederick Bleckman building. DWI purchased and renovated the 1856 structure, constructing a 12,000 sq. ft. pavilion around the building and installing outdoor electrical and water services. In 2007, it was unveiled as the new Main Street Civic Center. Washington's outdoor farmers market, meeting and office spaces, and upper-floor apartments are now sheltered beneath its welcoming green roof. These new facilities add another level of public engagement to Washington's downtown, and are greatly enjoyed by residents and visitors alike.

And the city's preservation efforts don't end there. The Calvin Opera House on Elm Street is a downtown cinema treasure, built in 1909 with a stage, screen, and seating capacity of 900. DWI wants to buy the building, which has passed through many hands and is falling into disrepair, and return it to its original use. Another project close to the everyday life of the community is the hope of preserving the building that housed Droege's Supermarket. Washington's own neighborhood grocery store, Droege's was established by the son of a German immigrant in 1867, and closed in 2011 due to competition from chain stores.

Along with big building overhauls, Downtown Washington, Inc., also pays attention to details of design at the ground

level. DWI's Design Committee helped the city write its Design Guidelines in the early 1990s, and again in 2009 when they were revamped. The committee was also heavily involved with the Jefferson Streetscape Project, which remodeled the intersections, repaired sidewalks, and expanded green space. Plans to improve Washington's Main, Elm, and Front Streets are currently under way.

The Design Committee also provides invaluable services to local businesses, such as free façade renderings that show property owners what can be done to beautify their buildings. In 2009, DWI introduced a Sign and Awning Matching Grant fund, which covers up to 50 percent of the total cost of design and construction for historically appropriate signs in downtown locations. These grants encourage local merchants to enhance the appearance and consistency of their signs.

As Missouri Senator Brian Nieves puts it, "Downtown Washington has surpassed all expectations by consistently achieving more than seemingly possible in the restoration and promotion of its historic sites." Indeed, in its many landmark renovation projects, Washington is a constant inspiration to downtown property owners all over Missouri.

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Nowhere Else But Washington

But it takes more than clean streets and beautiful old buildings to make a Main Street come alive—you also need a reason for people to come. Well, DWI has that covered, too. In the last 30 years, 56 new businesses have opened downtown, welcome additions to those that have served Washingtonians for decades. They include antique stores, art galleries, riverfront restaurants and taverns, and even a brewing company.

DWI's efforts are the reason why Kimberly Lutz, owner of The Fudge Shoppe, can say, "there is nowhere else I would rather have started my business than in downtown Washington. When you walk through our streets, you can feel the heritage and community that so many other places are missing."



Left: Having saved the historic post office and the city's oldest standing building, the Log Cabin, DWI has now turned its sights to the 1909 Calvin Opera House. DWI hopes to buy the downtown landmark and return it to its original use.



Above: Held in Washington's 1854 Busch Brewery, the October Murder Mystery Dinner incorporated the building's history into the event, giving participants a glimpse into the brewery's colorful past.

DWI organizes many training programs to help small business owners compete with big-box retailers and chain stores. In 2009, a trainer from the University of Missouri Extension offered a seminar in Washington called “How to Start a Business,” which equipped budding entrepreneurs with the essential planning and technical skills needed to run a small business. Recognizing the need to bring small business owners up to speed in the age of Facebook and Twitter, DWI has held several social media training sessions for Washington merchants.

Membership also plays a key role in the Main Street program’s success. DWI’s Gift Certificate Program is now 20 years old, and is a service offered free of charge to all member organizations. Members of the public can order personalized gift certificates from DWI and use them in participating businesses, which are then reimbursed for the full amount of the certificate. In 2010, the program was responsible for nearly \$60,000 of spending in downtown businesses.

Over the past 30 years, DWI has also developed a phenomenal roster of special events that draw people downtown in droves and bring in more than \$65,000 a year. They include the Chili Cook-Off, the Main Street BBQ & Bluesfest, and the Fine Art Fair & Winefest. One particularly innovative event that makes historic preservation relevant is the October Murder Mystery Dinner. Held in Washington’s local Busch Brewery, which was built in 1854, the event incorporated the building’s history into the narrative, giving participants a peek into its colorful past.

Volunteerism and Community

All of these events and initiatives would not have been possible, however, without the enthusiasm of Washington’s residents and their willingness to volunteer their time for their community. Long-time resident Raymond H. Frankenberg II boasts that “Washington’s highest values are volunteerism and community.” The personal relationships built on these values form a solid foundation for the continued growth of the downtown.



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Service organizations like the Washington Lions Club and the Washington Jaycees play key roles in downtown activities, contributing much-needed manpower and funds. The former group donated money to install street signs downtown, upgrade electric facilities in key event areas, and even replace worn-out trash cans in the shopping district. Within DWI itself, each of its Four Point committees runs its own volunteer recruitment campaign for daily operations and special events, which are always very well subscribed.

Another long-term resident, Julie Scannell, testifies to the strong community spirit in Washington. “People here give generously of their time and energy,” says Scannell. “In Washington, everyone knows that if you show up, you’ll be part of something significant!”

Thanks to the generosity of its volunteers, Washington was one of the first towns to be named a DREAM Community in 2006, was designated a Preserve America Community in 2008, and won Missouri Main Street Connections’ Greatest Achievement Award in 2010.

In the future, building on the many arts-related events held in Washington, DWI hopes to form an Arts Council and to designate downtown as a Fine Arts District. The people of Washington have the creativity and drive to make their city a place where the arts will flourish. One up-and-coming young Washingtonian is Bulgarian-born photographer Slava Bowman.

Motivated only by her love for downtown Washington, Slava sets out each morning to explore a new corner of her city with her

camera. She interviews residents and business owners about local history, captures breathtaking natural vistas and stately old buildings in her viewfinder, and posts her findings on her blog, Re-Discover Washington. Through her eyes, she promises to “take you where you have been curious to go, but never ventured to.” With young artists like Slava in town, it is no wonder that Washington, Missouri, is one of our Great American Main Streets.

Washington by the Numbers

Main Street began:	1989
Population:	13,939
Net new jobs:	383
Net new businesses:	56
Building rehabs:	40
New buildings:	7
Vacancy rate when Main Street began:	15%
Vacancy rate now:	20%
Public investment:	\$27,450,000
Private investment:	\$47,100,000

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