



★ H Street Main Street

WASHINGTON, D.C.

SNAPSHOT:

Community: Urban neighborhood

Size: 22 blocks

City population: 601,723
(entire District of Columbia)

Operating budget: \$400,000 (public funding 50%; private funding 50%)

Tax status: 501(c)3

IMPACT:

Business mix:

Retail: 34

Restaurants: 64

Service businesses: 82

Offices: 42

Arts and entertainment: 12

Public reinvestment: \$97 million

Private reinvestment: \$43.4 million

Net new businesses: 140

Net new jobs: 1,579

Building rehabs: 189

New buildings: 6

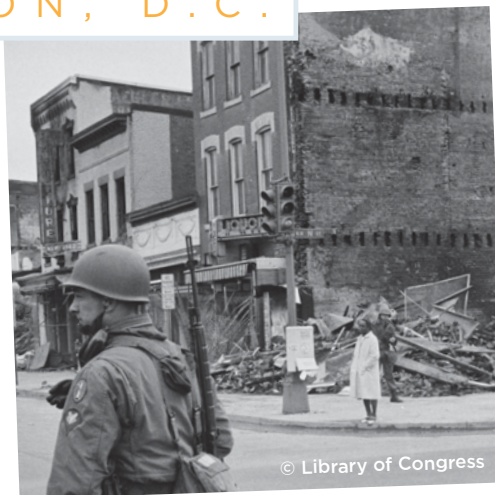
Housing units added: 1,332

Vacancy rate when program began in 2002: 30%

Current vacancy rate: 10%

H Street appeared on the radar screens of many Washingtonians with the revival of the 1938 Atlas Theater. Shuttered for years and masked by a patina of graffiti, the icon's marquee was relit in 2005 and the theater's reopening was a sign that H Street's time had come. But the story behind H Street's revival transcends a single project; rather, the community's heritage has been its catalyst.

H Street, historically an African-American community, welcomed shoppers and entrepreneurs excluded from other neighborhoods



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during segregation. Residents built a community based on tolerance. The doors of the Atlas were open to individuals of any color and diverse residents of all ethnicities joined together in trying to integrate their schools.

But the harmony of the neighborhood was disrupted in the 1960s. Abandonment as families headed to the suburbs and the violent riots of 1968 that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., saw the community dragged down into a period of high crime and urban decay. Any change that greeted the street was through demolition.

In the mid-1990s, however, a renewed interest in urban living brought in pioneering new residents who fixed up the homes. An active business group, the H Street Merchants and Professionals Association, was building momentum, and community members were gathering in each other's homes to discuss possibilities for the area's revival. The DC Office of Planning gave shape to those informal conversations through a community visioning effort, which became the mission of the newly established H Street Main Street (HSMS) program in 2002.

HSMS has charted new territory in urban revitalization by finding a way to engage



TOP LEFT and ABOVE: Shuttered for years, the 1938 Atlas Theater was rehabbed in 2003 and now houses resident theatrical and dance companies. The theater also hosts many touring shows and locally-produced shows. Today, the Atlas is used almost every night with a full schedule of resident and touring productions. On Saturday mornings, neighborhood children take ballet lessons at the Joy of Motion Dance Studio.

MIDDLE: In 1968, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., riots erupted throughout the H Street area and the neighborhood suffered abandonment and decay as residents and businesses fled to the suburbs.

volunteers to carry out its work. Standing committees have been replaced by various ad hoc committees dedicated to specific projects. For example, the H Street Festival Committee has 20 volunteers who help produce the signature event, and the Communications Committee keeps the website updated and the Twitter account tweeting. Interested in engaging youth and tech-savvy professionals, Main Street developed a flexible volunteer structure more conducive to participation and retention. Virtual meetings supplement group meetings, and volunteers assume responsibilities for completing entire projects, which they can add to their resumes.

"Our bold dream of a localized, self-sufficient community was born on a fire-charred street where empty buildings and cracked



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A renewed interest in urban living in the 1990s brought pioneering residents who fixed up homes in the H Street district, and an active business and professional group began discussing a vision for the area's revival, which became the mission of H Street Main Street when it was established in 2002.



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H Street Main Street's dream of a thriving, self-sufficient community has been realized over the past decade as entrepreneurs and developers reclaimed 300,000 square feet, reducing the vacancy rate from 30 to 10 percent. More than 140 businesses have opened, bringing with them more than 1,500 new jobs.

sidewalks had loomed for a lifetime," says Anwar Saleem, executive director of HSMS. That dream is being realized as entrepreneurs and developers have reclaimed 300,000 square feet in the last 10 years, reducing the vacancy rate from 30 to 10 percent. One hundred and forty businesses have opened, bringing with them more than 1,500 new jobs.

What was once a thriving commercial district gave way to liquor stores before being taken over by beauty salons. More recently, a wave of new bars, nightclubs, and restaurants have filled some vacancies, causing H Street Main Street to face the need to balance retail with entertainment use and new entrepreneurs with established business owners.

Around the time the Atlas reopened, the community worked with the city to establish an overlay district that promoted density, upper-floor reuse, rehabilitation of existing buildings, and compatible design sensitive to the area's historic character. The corridor is divided into three sections: a housing cluster, neighborhood-serving retail, and arts and entertainment businesses.

Building the Brand

From the beginning, H Street Main Street identified its strongest assets as its history, its historic charm and pedestrian scale, its multicultural and multiracial demographics, and its local businesses—specifically its niche as a corridor filled with African American-owned businesses. Before the influx of new residents and entrepreneurs, conversations were already taking place about gentrification and awareness of that issue was high.

Preserving the community's aesthetics is being achieved largely through outreach and education, one-on-one conversations with neighborhood stakeholders, and fund

raising to seed façade and sign improvements. The results: H Street Community Development Corporation, which had demolished several blocks of the corridor for infill and office buildings, no longer promotes aggressive demolition and has become a strong partner of HSMS. Property and business owners are also enthusiastic about making building improvements.

In 2007, the Main Street program created a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district that generates \$100,000 to fund grants to business owners, while three other funding sources contribute to a façade grant program. Only one source requires a matching contribution, and depending on need, HSMS will work with small business owners to find other resources to help cover the match.

Small business owners are using this money to spruce up their buildings from the inside-out. They've improved their façades, signs, lighting, and merchandising; and they have removed their roll-down security grates, sending a strong signal to the neighborhood that the district's not only strong and thriving but that it is safe as well.

"Security grates don't belong in a community six blocks from the nation's Capitol," says Saleem, who educates business owners on the importance of good design and finding security alternatives. "Grates don't really provide much security; if someone really wants to get into your building, they'll find a way."



© H Street Main Street

Carolyn Thomas shows off some of the clothing she sells in her new location. In 2008, Carolyn opened a women's clothing store four blocks away from this shop. She moved to a larger storefront with a larger display window this year. H Street Main Street provided a no-interest loan through a partnership with Washington Area Community Investment Fund and \$85,000 in grant funding so Carolyn could rehabilitate the new store.

He encourages businesses owners to remove their grates or use ones that occlude less than 20 percent of the storefront so they can still showcase the building and business when closed. Applicants who propose removing grates are given a higher priority when applying for grants.

An important complement to the business makeovers is the improved look of the street. HSMS was awarded a \$100,000 two-year matching grant from the DC Department of Transportation to create and run the H Street Clean Team. In collaboration with

names printed on the banners for a year of advertising, and the cost was based on a sliding scale to give small businesses a shot at claiming visibility.

Advertisements on busses, bus shelters, and local newspapers reflect the neighborhood image, promoting the wide variety of things to see, do, buy, eat, and drink at H Street establishments. Local media talk shows and newspaper articles have been following H Street's success and progress over the years, garnering much local and

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the Gospel Rescue Ministry/Ready to Work program, clean and safe "ambassadors" work five days a week to keep up appearances and add a presence on the street that encourages greater tourism and retail foot traffic. Corporate and local business partners and sponsors contributed funds to help HSMS match the grant.

It is important to HSMS that the district be more than a bar scene, so it reflects its other amenities, supported by the three overlay district sections, in its branding. Lining H Street are 47 streetlamp banners that promote the "Central Retail District," "Urban Living District," and the "Arts & Entertainment District." Businesses were invited to get their

national media attention for the program and the district's evolution.

In 2012, *USA Today* named the corridor one of "10 Great Places to Explore Urban Neighborhoods" and *Forbes* magazine listed H Street as number six on its list of "America's Hippest Neighborhoods." After the *Forbes* announcement, Miles Gray, managing partner at Smith Commons Dining Room & Public House, said his establishment "felt an immediate wave of new business and publicity," and a short while later, President Obama hosted his last campaign dinner there.

"This type of press is a frequent occurrence, largely due to the amount of time and organization that H Street Main Street has put



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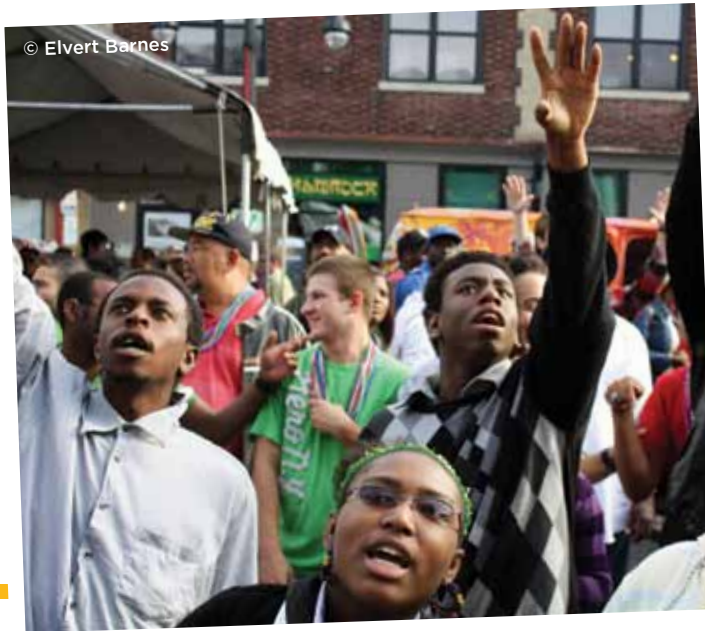
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Kenfe Belay approached H Street Main Street in 2005 about opening a coffee shop and was introduced to the owner of this vacant building (above). A grant from H Street Main Street enabled Kenfe to restore the storefront and install an iconic sign in the shape of an Ethiopian coffee pot, as a nod to Kenfe's home country (top).

into public relations, community outreach, and social media, which directly benefit the neighborhood," says Gray. He points out that long before Smith Commons opened, the city was buzzing about the construction of a streetcar line, the H Street Festival, local arts initiatives, and the diverse integration of business development with the existing residential presence. "Since we opened in 2010, H Street Main Street and the foundation it laid has been integral to the success of our business."

Rather than developing a series of events, H Street Main Street channels its energy into a single, important signature event—the annual H Street Music Festival & Bazaar. After the organization inherited the festival, it took a hiatus to rework the event. The festival was redesigned to cement H Street's brand as a funky district. Participants enjoy outdoor art exhibits, live music, dance performances, games, health screenings, ethnic food, a tattoo competition, and fashion shows. The festival has grown from welcoming 5,000 visitors to 75,000.

Not only does it bring people to the street, the event also supports Main Street's economic development work. Volunteers recruit vendors based upon their interest in opening a brick-and-mortar storefront, which has already led to five new business openings and a waiting list of 15 entrepreneurs looking for space on H Street.



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One of H Street Main Street's crowning achievements has been working with 63 young people through the DC Summer Youth Employment Project for the past five years. In this photo, youth visit Taste of Jamaica. Rehabbed in 2003, it was one of the first restaurants on H Street to feature sit-down dining.

Another way HSMS is connecting the community to its businesses is through its Summer Youth Program. Teenagers are placed in local businesses to gain a meaningful work experience. The full program offers classes, in financial literacy, for example, and EZ tax certification. Saleem takes a special interest in mentoring the teens and teaching them life skills. Last summer, he took them to their first white table cloth restaurant to demonstrate how to behave gracefully and taught them the importance of shopping locally.

Shareef Abdul-Malik, a graduate of the program who is now minoring in community development in college, credits his Summer Youth experience as giving him “a purpose for living.”

“I became inspired, and subsequently, due to the proper exposure of positive practices, I’m currently a junior at Howard University,” says Abdul-Malik.

Some of the program participants went on to become HSMS volunteers. “Working with H Street Main Street during the summer helped me become a leader. By the end of the first summer, I was supervising the other summer workers,” he says. “The two years I spent as a summer youth worker were so rewarding that I have become a volunteer for the H Street Festival.”

Supporting Business Development

There are three ways that HSMS is creating opportunities to improve business and investment opportunities in the corridor:

- Strengthening existing businesses;
- Recruiting new businesses, and
- Working with developers on projects that align with the revitalization goals and district image.

Existing businesses have been the heart and soul of H Street and the Main Street program is committed to them. H Street has been enduring a few years of major street construction as the city builds a streetcar line to connect the neighborhood with surrounding districts. HSMS not only advocated to bring the streetcar to H Street but also acts as the liaison between the city and the needs of the community during the disruptive construction.

Façade and business improvement grants help established business owners keep pace with newcomers. After restaurant owner Meseret Bekele received a façade improvement grant, he noted “the improvement has helped Ethiopic Restaurant see a drastic increase in sales and revenue. At this time of economic hardship, [the grant helped] Ethiopic with additional job creation and the ability to compete with other new establishments.”

Creating a level playing field has always been important to HSMS. For example, while historic preservation is a tenet of its work, the organization supported an overlay district rather than creating a historic district. Saleem says that getting a district designation would impose too many harsh rules on small businesses that might not have enough money to comply. The overlay district, financial incentives, education, and reiterating the common goal that everyone benefits if the district looks good help achieve historic preservation goals without putting a burden on anyone.

“We wanted to find a way to adjust the zoning and planning rules in a way that lets us find things we can agree on. We included the community in the process and proved that when you have inclusion, you create a dialog where all people can see that everyone shares things in common,” says Saleem. “Gentrification has been given a bad name.

When prices go up and rents go up, that’s a sign of success to a certain degree. We do what we can to maintain the community but as property values rise, they open up opportunities. We lead the dialog by talking about how everyone can do better and then find ways to achieve that.”

A variety of professional development workshops have been offered on topics ranging from marketing to customer relations to credit awareness. Working with the Washington Area Community Investment Fund, a series of “Loan Days” helped connect merchants with small business loan providers, and other workshops help strengthen business owners.

In 2012, the H Street Retail Summit was organized to showcase the corridor’s retailers and connect developers with local entrepreneurs. It created networking and educational opportunities and featured speakers from the DC Department of Small and Local Business Development, as well as area real estate professionals. New retail market information and pending district projects were discussed.

“For small business owners like me, this was a tremendous opportunity for networking, community education, and support, as well as business development between the public and private sectors,” says Gray of Smith Commons.

HSMS also works with property owners to rehab previously unused portions of their



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LEFT: Ads on busses and bus shelters promote the wide variety of things to see, do, buy, eat, and drink at H Street establishments. RIGHT: Named one of "America's Hippest Neighborhoods" by Forbes magazine, H Street offers a sizzling nightlife, with great music venues like the HR-57 Center for the Preservation of Jazz & Blues.

buildings, navigate the permitting process, and ultimately find tenants for the new space that's created. Partnerships with groups like the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and innovative recruitment efforts through events and "pop up" retailing also generate leads.

Saleem says the organization tells the neighborhood's African-American history in everything it does so it can generate enthusiasm among African-American entrepreneurs to locate on H Street. HSMS also works one-on-one with African-American residents and leaders to teach them about the opportunities for becoming an entrepreneur. "Street time" inside the businesses also works.

"Many prospects will talk to existing business owners first and because the owners know us, they will refer the prospects to H Street," says Saleem. "For example, strong relationships with the businesses ensure that we know when a restaurant manager is ready to open her own restaurant."



H Street Main Street not only advocated to bring a streetcar to H Street but also acts as the liaison between the city and the needs of the community to mitigate the disruption of the construction.

"We included the community in the process and proved that when you have inclusion, you create a dialog where all people can see that everyone shares things in common." Anwar Saleem

In 2010, the DC Office of Planning opened a pop-up shop called Temporium at a vacant, government-owned property on H Street. The Temporium featured more than 20 local artists, designers, and musicians and attracted 1,600 customers during the month it was open. HSMS promoted the pop-up shop but also coordinated other promotions with H Street businesses to drive foot traffic to them, as well.

"H Street Main Street was instrumental in helping prepare the site for reuse, managing day-to-day activities, and supporting local artists and retailers," says Harriet Tregoning, director of the Office of Planning. "This successful event became the model for

subsequent Temporiiums in other DC neighborhoods over the past two years."

The change in the vitality of the community,

the supportive business environment, and the potential of the coming streetcar line have captured the attention of a dozen developers, and several multimillion dollar mixed-use projects are now in the works.

Saleem and HSMS meet with developers to discuss appropriate projects and the ways the needs of the community can be balanced with the developer's priorities. Stuart Investment Companies, for example, had plans to develop a gas station and convenience store at the corner of H Street and 3rd. HSMS approached the company to find a higher use that would fully redevelop the site. The group successfully launched



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The Ethiopic Restaurant opened in 2008, but the storefront was enclosed with bricks. Despite good reviews, customers were turned away by the dark façade. H Street Main Street's Design Committee recognized the value of the historic architecture and the potential of this building. It provided design assistance and funding to restore a transparent storefront and rehab the entire façade. The new design premiered in 2011 and in the past 18 months, Ethiopic has seen a 50% increase in revenue.



RIGHT: H Street Main Street worked with the developer of a valuable corner property to find a use that would benefit the community. The developer launched a farmers market and conducted a survey that showed residents would support a full-service grocery store. BELOW: In 2012, the first H Street Retail Summit showcased local retailers and matched them with developers. The summit also provided information about pending projects and new retail trends.



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a farmers market and conducted a survey that showed 7,500 community members would support a full-service grocery store. With that solid data from the neighborhood customer base, the developer reconsidered the project and proceeded instead with a \$75 million mixed-use project with housing, retail, and a Giant grocery store.

In other instances, Saleem meets with area developers to offer project ideas and market information that might spur their interest in doing projects in the H Street corridor. HSMS provides as much support as possible—from permitting to community outreach—to make the right projects happen.

“Once you have a few good examples of ... working with other developers, where you can show that your community has a plan and the right project to meet community need and maximize the developer’s potential, the relationships start to flourish and developers want to work with you,” says Saleem. “I started by listening. Don’t shout people down. Listen to them, be patient, and explain what the community needs and how they can meet that need.”

“As a community leader and advocate of smart growth and revitalization of the historic corridor, Anwar has been instrumental to the great success of our building and integration into the neighborhood,”

says Tracey Thomm, development executive for Clark Realty Capital, developer of the Flats at Atlas, a 257-unit, luxury residential project. They worked together to introduce the project to the community and achieve the best design—including placement of retail, pedestrian entrances, and appropriate building characteristics.

“As real estate developers, we always hope that a strong and influential advocate for change emerges in the community, particularly in neighborhoods like the H Street corridor where revitalization can only happen with the joint and coordinated efforts of the private and public sectors,” says Thomm.

Another developer, Insight Property Group, is bringing a \$165 million redevelopment project to 2.25 acres in the heart of the corridor. The project will create more than 450 housing units and 70,000 square feet of commercial space.

Trenton Smith, a representative of the company, feels H Street Main Street has been an incredible guide for this project. “H Street Main Street’s support of small business has created the kind of vibrant environment that we target for new investment,” he says, also noting his appreciation for the district’s cultural, racial, and economic diversity and the ability of those qualities to attract visitors to the area.

H Street stores no longer hide behind thick security grates. Hipster bars sit next to hardware stores as this resurging district meets the needs of residents as much as the nightlife revelers who come to the Rock and Roll Hotel (top), and the thousands of visitors who flock to the H Street festival (above). H Street’s future is shining indeed.

A Model Main Street

Business is no longer conducted behind bullet-proof glass. Hipster bars, a mid-century modern furnishings store, and a pet boutique sit next to a pharmacy, hair-braiding salon, and a hardware store. There are dance studios, art galleries, and performing arts spaces. You can buy a fedora or a new pair of jeans, go to the cleaners, or take your dog to the vet. H Street is successfully meeting the needs of its residents as much as the nightlife revelers who include patrons from the suburbs.

H Street is still serving the local community. As Cristina Amoruso, coordinator for DC Main Streets, says, “a number of long-time residents still remain, and their neighborhood still belongs to them.”

Andrea L. Dono is the former manager of research and training for the National Trust Main Street Center. As a freelancer, she continues to support Main Streets by providing technical assistance to local communities, speaking at conferences, and blogging at <http://citythrive.blogspot.com>.