



★ Ocean Springs Main Street

MISSISSIPPI

SNAPSHOT:

| |
|---|
| Community: Rural downtown |
| Nearest city: New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama |
| Size: 100 blocks |
| Population: 17,472 |
| Operating budget: \$300,000 (public funding 30%, private funding 70%) |
| Tax status: 501(c)6 |

IMPACT:

| |
|---|
| Business mix: |
| Retail: 109 |
| Restaurants: 36 |
| Service businesses: 26 |
| Offices: 47 |
| Arts and entertainment: 42 |
| Public reinvestment: \$407 million |
| Private reinvestment: \$116 million |
| Net new businesses: 319 |
| Net new jobs: 1216 |
| Building rehabs: 196 |
| New buildings: 23 |
| Housing units added: 320 |
| Vacancy rate when program began in 1990: 80% |
| Current vacancy rate: 0% |

The coastal town of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, may be off the beaten path, but it has become known as a culinary destination with an artsy vibe and nonstop events. Block after block, a canopy of majestic 300-year-old oak trees shades attractions like sculptures and murals, art galleries, arts and craft shops, ethnic restaurants, and churches dating back to the 1800s.

Throughout the year, tourists and locals enjoy the town’s charms, cottage-style shops, and pathways peppered with public art connecting to the sandy shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Lovelace Drug’s neon sign glows outside, beckoning people to order a milkshake at the same soda fountain counter where Elvis Presley once sat. The Tato-Nut Donut shop, where the specialty treat is made with potato flour, has been family-owned and operated since the 1960s. It’s no wonder Ocean Springs has been named one of the 50 Best Small Towns in America and profiled as a hot travel destination by the *Washington Post* and *Southern Living* magazine.

The vibrancy of downtown Ocean Springs today makes it hard to imagine that it once was a ghost town. The community’s long history dates back to its founding in 1699 as

a French Louisiana outpost. But over time, it was forgotten. In the 1980s, the population hovered around 2,000 and the vacancy rate hit 80 percent. The economy was stagnating when the Main Street program began in 1990. Slow and steady change took place, with each new business that opened and each new bench added to the street.

The Main Street program was originally housed in city government but found that wasn’t a perfect fit. The program then shifted to the Chamber of Commerce/Tourism Bureau and now all three entities use the Main Street Four-Point Approach® as the overarching community development strategy.

“Financially, each organization could not exist separately nor be successful. In a small town this structure is beneficial,” says Cynthia Sutton, events coordinator/public relations manager for the Ocean Springs Chamber-Main



© Ben Muldrow

Tato-nut doughnuts, where the tasty treat is made with potato flour, is one of the two original businesses that were in the district when Ocean Springs Main Street began in 1990.



Street-Tourism Bureau. “We have one staff, one board, and one budget that all incorporate the ‘four points.’ It’s part of everything we do all around town.”

The organization has four standing committees and rotating task forces that carry out the work planned during annual board retreats. The volunteer work is supported by strong involvement and leadership from paid staff who say they run the revitalization program like a business. Its leaders believe that its organizational model helps break down “silos” that could result from the traditional Main Street committee structure. Members of the Main Street program believe events are the “gateway” for engaging volunteers and the hook that captures people’s interest.

Branding through the Arts

Events are also the organization’s strategy for building its brand. This “beach-y” Southern tourism destination and seafood mecca has a strong, cohesive brand built around the arts.

More than 30 years ago, Ocean Springs launched the Peter Anderson Arts & Crafts Festival to celebrate the artist who opened a

master pottery business in the community back in the 1920s. What began as a few vendors in a parking lot has grown each year in size, activity, and attendance. Today, the festival draws more than 120,000 people from several states and fills two days with arts, music, and food. The festival has set high standards for the vendors and artists selected for its juried art show.

With a year-round staff member dedicated to managing the festival and close attention to high quality, this community event has grown into the region’s premier festival and received many state awards. A recent economic impact study drives home the impact the festival has had on the local economy (see “Measuring the Economic Impact of Special Events,” in the May/June 2012 issue of *Main Street Now*.) The study found that the event brings \$22 million to the area. The Main Street program used this data to show the power of Main Street and its events and, in the process, landed a major sponsor—Blue Moon Brewing Company—which has been a boon to the Ocean Springs Chamber-Main Street-Tourism Bureau fund raising, too.

As the festival grew, more events were added to the calendar, turning August into “festival season.” The visibility these events bring to downtown has piqued the interest of entrepreneurs, so much so, that the

downtown has a zero-percent vacancy.

More than a hundred restaurants have opened in Ocean Springs, with a cluster of 32 in the downtown alone. The town’s restaurants generate more than \$1 million in revenue each year. Some readers might recognize the name “Shed Barbeque and Blues Joint.” It has been featured on The Food Network’s *Diners Drive-Ins and Dives* show and on *Live! With Regis and Kelly*, among other outlets. The Food Network has been visiting other Ocean Springs establishments lately, too.

Ocean Springs Main Street has been leveraging downtown’s reputation as a major foodie destination by adding food-focused festivals like the Taste of Ocean Springs; the Red, White & Blueberry Festival; and Feast of Flavors that celebrates seasonal fall foods. The program soon will be revamping a website devoted to Ocean Springs’ culinary niche to build its online marketing efforts.

Everywhere you look downtown, you see the arts. Creativity is in the air and in the stores. Enticed by the Peter Anderson Festival and the concentration of artists living in Ocean Springs, artists come here to open up studios and shops. From blown glass to handmade housewares to fine art, an arts enthusiast can find lots of one-of-a-kind treasures.



© Cynthia Sutton

LEFT: Ocean Springs has become a major foodie destination, with a cluster of more than 30 restaurants downtown. The Government Street Grocery Restaurant was one of the first to open.

BELOW: Visitors to Lovelace Drugs can treat themselves to a milkshake at the store’s original soda fountain where Elvis Presley used to hang out when he summured in Ocean Springs.



© Ben Muldrow

Public art is pervasive, too. Public Art in Ocean Springs is a joint effort involving the Ocean Springs Chamber of Commerce, Historic Ocean Springs Association, the city, and the Jackson County Supervisors. Together they are placing works by nationally prominent sculptors throughout the town and will unveil their fifth installment this year.

Art even turns up on bridges leading to the community. The Biloxi Bay Bridge was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Partners worked with the Mississippi Department of Transportation to rebuild

it—but now it includes 12-foot-wide walking and biking paths and locally made bronze plaques designed by area artists placed every tenth of a mile. In 2008, the concrete walls beneath the bridge were adorned with a mosaic mural, also designed by an area artist.

Boosting the Local Economy

Investments made in infrastructure, historic buildings, and local businesses are vitally important to building the downtown's economy and protecting its heritage.

Events are Ocean Springs Main Street's strategy for building its brand. This "beach-y" Southern tourism destination and seafood mecca has a strong, cohesive brand built around the arts.



© Cynthia Sutton

ABOVE and BELOW: The Peter Anderson Arts & Crafts Festival brings more than 120,000 visitors to this community of 17,000 each year, and generates more than 30 million dollars in tax revenues. The festival sets high standards for its vendors and for the artists selected for its juried art show.

One such investment—rehabbing the 1927 historic high school—has had a huge impact on the downtown. Although it became a Mississippi Landmark in 1998 and was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999, the school had been dormant and was slated for demolition. The roof had been badly damaged during Hurricane Katrina, but the community wasn't ready to see it go.

Ocean Springs Main Street took the first step by getting it listed on the state's most endangered list and building momentum for its rebirth. The Friends of the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center of Arts and Education helped oversee the major renovation. Funds were pulled together from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the Mississippi Arts Commission,

the Jackson County Board of Supervisors, and the City of Ocean Springs as well as from local residents and organizations. The overwhelming support saved a landmark that reopened as a downtown cultural center, known as "The Mary C.," for short. The center supports the visual and performing arts, music, and culinary arts by providing classes and performing space.

What had once been a depressed section of Government Street has turned into an area of opportunity anchored by the Mary C. Its executive director points out that a void in this part of downtown has been filled.

"This once-depressed section has become a vibrant area where visitors and residents ride their bikes, walking is commonplace, and restaurants and retailers attract shoppers and diners from all over the region," says Bryant G Whelan, the center's executive director. "In one week alone, more than a thousand school children tromped through the same halls their parents roamed when they were in school. It would be hard to imagine the Ocean Springs community and how it might look without the Mary C. If Ocean Springs Main Street had not taken the first and important step of saving our building from demolition, this dream would not have become a reality."

Recovering from Disaster

Ocean Springs Main Street also played a pivotal role in the community's recovery from the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. All of the downtown business owners lost their homes and were living in their businesses. The downtown mostly held up from the wind and rain but it was without power, telephone service, or water.

Ocean Springs Main Street became the



© Cynthia Sutton



© Cynthia Sutton

ABOVE: Using an economic impact study that showed the revenue-generating power of Main Street and its events, Ocean Springs landed a major sponsor, Blue Moon Brewing Company, for the Peter Anderson Festival.



Public art is pervasive throughout the downtown. Ocean Springs Main Street is spearheading a multi-year public art project: 24 spaces have been reserved and 10 original pieces have already been placed in the district.

© Ben Muldrow



Ocean Springs has been leveraging its reputation as a major culinary tourism destination by adding "foodie" festivals, such as the Red, White & Blueberry Festival, which is held each year on the weekend closest to the Fourth of July.

© Cynthia Sutton

Everywhere you look downtown, you see the arts. Creativity is in the air, on the streets, and in the stores, bringing artists to Ocean Springs to set up shop and enticing visitors looking for one-of-a-kind treasures, from handmade housewares to fine art.



Local artist Stig Marccuson spends time with his children as he draws in downtown Ocean Springs. This is a common scene in the district, which attracts many artists who come to the community to open shops and studios.

© Cynthia Sutton



© Ben Muldrow

Renovation of the 1927 high school, a Mississippi and National Register landmark, was the first big "win" for Ocean Springs Main Street. The building now houses the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center, which supports the visual, performing, and culinary arts.



© Cynthia Sutton

Reinforcing Ocean Springs as a major destination for those interested not only in enjoying but also learning the culinary arts is the Viking cooking school, located downtown in the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center.



With shops like the Hillyer House art gallery (above), which relocated to Ocean Springs after Hurricane Katrina, it's no wonder the town has been named one of the 50 Best Small Towns in America and profiled as a hot travel destination by the Washington Post and Southern Living.

clearinghouse for information and a symbol of hope. The organization's strong track record of leadership gave it an important voice in informing the recovery and guiding downtown construction. Main Street led strong advocacy efforts to earmark federal Community Development Block Grant recovery funds not just for its downtown, but for all Gulf Coast towns. Margaret Miller, the Main Street manager, joined others to lobby hard for historic downtowns to be recognized and supported.

A resilient attitude and state and federal money, along with support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and caring Main Street programs throughout the nation, helped the community bounce back. Recovery money was channeled into façade improvement grants and streetscape enhancements that helped Ocean Springs emerge even stronger.

Ocean Springs Main Street administered a façade grant of more than \$20,000 to help about a dozen small business owners make improvements to their facades, landscaping, awnings, and signs. Many restaurateurs used the funds to build outdoor dining patios. The recovery effort after Hurricane Katrina eventually led to more than \$10 million in public and private investment and the opening of 30 new restaurants—many of which

contribute to the patio dining atmosphere.

Business owners from other communities have discovered new opportunities in Ocean Springs and relocated there. One success story involves downtown's very own "white elephant" building—a 1930s hardware store vacant since 1960—and business owners from Pass Christian, Mississippi. For years they had been courted to open a second location in Ocean Springs.

"After Hurricane Katrina, our home and business in Pass Christian were completely wiped away, along with virtually everything else in town," says Paige Riley, owner of the Hillyer House art gallery and gift shop. "As we looked to rebuild, the decision to relocate to Ocean Springs was one of the easiest we made. We opened the weekend of the Peter Anderson Festival ... and in the seven years since that weekend, we have never looked back. The entire community welcomed us with open arms and has continued to show that support over the years."

The downtown streetscape received an influx of investment and improvements during a two-year, \$4.6 million streetscape project. Utilities were buried, new streetlights and wayfinding signs were installed, drainage was improved, and sidewalks were made more pedestrian friendly and accessible for

people with disabilities.

But just as Ocean Springs was bouncing back, the BP Oil Spill made news. Media portrayed coastal towns as closed and Main Street jumped into action to counter those claims and show the nation that tourism in the community was alive and well and that Ocean Springs was open for business.

Ocean Springs Main Street supported businesses by sending out weekly emails with updates and assistance information. Its newsletter offered money-saving tips, and its ongoing surveys measured how businesses were affected by the oil spill. But most of all, Main Street heavily promoted its summer festivals and told people it was safe to visit.

From Ghost Town to Tourist Mecca

This small town has seen a staggering amount of investment—\$407 million in public investment and \$116 million in private monies. In the last year alone there have been nine business expansions, and a host of exciting projects are coming up, including a boutique hotel opening near the Mary C and new infill that will include 12 restaurants and new retail space. Charter Bank, a small community institution, is building a \$3 million branch this year.



© Ben Muldrow



© Ben Muldrow

TOP LEFT: Downtown has become a prime location for housing as Ocean Springs has grown from a sleepy village of 2,000 to a bustling town of 17,000. One of the newest housing developments was created from Katrina cottages and offers one to three bedroom units.

TOP RIGHT: Downtown Ocean Springs hosts a wide variety of arts-related businesses, arts programming at the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center, cultural events, and public art, all of which reinforce the community's authentic brand.

RIGHT: At the end of the day, Ocean Springs is not only a great arts town, it's a relaxing vacation spot as well. The beach is an easy walk from the center of downtown, just right for a pleasant afternoon rest after a day of local shopping!



© Ben Muldrow



What once was a sleepy village of 2,000 has grown into a bustling town that is now home to 17,000 people. Upper-floor housing, new infill, and single-family bungalows offer a variety of living options with more than 300 housing units added since the Main Street program has been in action.

"The downtown has attracted hundreds of residents, which has been a catalyst for residential development," says Mark P. Loughman, director of environmental affairs and resource strategy for Mississippi Power. "Until a few years ago, we had never had any of our company executives living in Ocean Springs. Today our company

president and several other executives who could live anywhere along the Mississippi Gulf Coast have made their homes in Ocean Springs."

Cultural tourism has been at the heart and soul of the revitalization of Ocean Springs. The arts economy flourishes in this downtown and the wide variety of arts-related businesses, cultural events, arts programming at the Mary C and public art all reinforce the community's authentic brand.

The town has been so successful, in fact, that Miller was recently recognized by the Mississippi Tourism Association with a Tourism Hall of Fame Award. Accolades come

from partners and local business owners who agree that Miller and her colleagues are the driving force behind the community's success.

"This program has demonstrated time and again its commitment to a long-term downtown revitalization effort in conjunction with strong public-private partnerships and the leadership needed to ensure a viable downtown revitalization effort," says Bob Wilson, executive director of the Mississippi Main Street Association. From ghost town to a travel destination, Ocean Springs shows that perseverance can help downtown weather any storm and emerge stronger than before.