

Case Study: Tactical Urbanism on Main Street

Who:

People living in Newton, North Carolina organized together to form a group, called the Downtown Newton Development Association (DNDA). They wanted to connect with others who cared about the downtown. First, DNDA reached out to involve students from Discovery High School in their work. Then, DNDA connected with Main Street America (MSA), a program founded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to help renew downtown areas. Finally, the group talked with the City of Newton, who would be important in approving changes in the community and environment.

The Battle:

Nearly every American small town has a Main Street. Long ago, “Main Street” was the name given to the major road in any town; the area surrounding it was the downtown. Downtown areas usually included many locally-owned businesses and public buildings. Since the end of the 20th century, Main Streets and downtowns have declined. Now, closed storefronts and empty buildings mark this area of many small towns. Jobs and services supporting everyday life are less available in small towns than bigger cities. These changes affect the health and well-being of people who still live in small towns.

Raise Awareness and Engage Others:

The DNDA worked hard to raise awareness in Newton. First, the group told others about the project by connecting with local high school students, the City of Newton, and MSA. Later, youth leaders built a public board downtown so community members could comment, ask questions and add their ideas about the downtown.



Youth built temporary bike racks to place around the city.

Make Your Plan:

DNDA, with the City of Newton and MSA, decided a “tactical urbanism” project would help bring changes to their downtown area. Tactical urbanism projects use inexpensive and short-term versions of changes to see how people might respond if the changes were permanent. For example, to find out what a street might look like with more trees and plants, a tactical urbanism project might first add fake trees and flower beds to find out what people think first. If people like the changes, more permanent trees and beds can be put in.

Youth were very important in this project. To decide what changes to make, the youth planned to get community members’ opinions with a comment board located downtown. Using the comments on the board and their own ideas, youth decided what to add to the downtown area. They chose to add trees, bike racks, and lights. The youth believed trees would make the air cleaner; bike racks would promote biking and walking; and lights would improve safety at night and during the winter. Then, the youth drew up plans to build temporary bike racks, trees and light poles. DNDA planned to put the temporary structures in place downtown, and local businesses planned events during that time.

Implement Your Plan:

The youth built bike racks, street trees, lighting fixtures, and the public comment board during the summer while they were not in school. The temporary structures were put up downtown for one week in August. Downtown businesses hosted events to bring community members to town.

Evaluate Your Plan:

During the week, youth leaders and DNDA observed community member behavior in the downtown area. The evaluation of how community members interacted with temporary structures led the partners, including the youth, to plan a larger and more permanent effort to beautify their Main Street and downtown.

Used with permission from National Main Street Center; Source info: "Community Spotlight: Newton, North Carolina," (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.mainstreet.org/blogs/national-main-street-center/2018/08/08/community-spotlight-newton-north-carolina>.



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