



# Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

## *Management*

### **Better boards begin with better nominating committees**

“I’ve been working with Main Street organizations for 18 years, as a state coordinator and as a consultant,” says Donna Ann Harris, principal of Heritage Consulting Inc. “What I’ve been finding is that the board is so critical to the success of a Main Street organization, and they get so caught up in the day-to-day work of the organization that they don’t really spend a lot of time thinking about who is going to carry that work forward. I’ve seen very few Main Street organizations that have a really effective nominating committee process.”

The nominating committee is the only committee that is concerned with the future of a downtown organization. “Every other committee deals with the present, meaning the committee work,” says Harris. “The executive committee also deals with the here and now. But it’s really the hopes and aspirations of the future that is, or at least should be, bound up in the nominating committee work.”

Rather than forming or reactivating a nominating committee when the downtown group’s annual meeting is looming, Harris recommends an ongoing nominating committee that meets quarterly, and has opportunities throughout the year to scout for the types of board members needed for next year, and the year after that, aligning those needs with the organization’s strategic plan.

“I always think this is a great committee for the immediate past president to be on, primarily because that person hopefully has been with the organization for a number of years, as a board member, a committee member, perhaps as a volun-

teer, and so has wisdom about the organization, and also might have the time because they are not engaged in the day-to-day stuff of the organization,” says Harris. It’s also good to have a liaison to the local government on the nominating committee, especially if that downtown/municipal relationship needs to be cultivated. “And it’s really great to have the organization’s vice president, particularly if they are not assumed to be the next president,” she says.

Round out the nominating committee with one or two members of the organization’s other committees with an eye toward cultivating them for future board seats. It’s also helpful to have a mix of people with long-standing relationships with the community and the downtown organization, and people newly involved, so that the board can benefit from those different perspectives, Harris says.

#### **An informed committee provides stronger nominees**

To be effective, the nominating committee must have the right information. “They need the strategic plan, if there is one, and every committee’s work plan,” says Harris. In this way, they can better align potential board nominees’ skill sets to the goals of the downtown organization.

“Also, this nominating committee really has a great opportunity to deal with the future diversity of the board, and at every level, meaning age, ethnicity, whether a person is new in town or their family has lived there for generations, and a good

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mix of men and women, though most boards have a good mix already,” Harris says.

Nominating committee members also have to be people comfortable with asking some fairly direct questions of potential nominees, such as, “do they have the ability and desire to make a financial contribution to the organization, and do they have the time to really do what needs to be done,” says Harris. “And this is a very critical juncture when nominating committee members are approaching potential nominees, to make it clear that a Main Street board is a working and governing board, not just a resume builder.”

To seek out likely prospects for board seats, the nominating committee members should talk to the mayor or a trusted city councilor, and to their organization’s current events chair, “who knows who their star performers are and who are the most highly involved people with the organization,” Harris says. “Do this because you want to promote from within. And also talk to the local merchants. It may be a big stretch because they are so busy already, but to ignore them is a big mistake.”

### **Refining the board member search**

The types of board nominees to seek out will vary by how mature the downtown organization is, Harris says.

**Stage one.** “The types of people that you’re going to look for as a start-up organization are vastly different than for a 20-year-old organization. For a start-up, you’re looking for people that have the time, and interest in what is just a really great idea, because it hasn’t done anything yet,” she says, noting that the inclusive nature of a downtown organization’s board allows merchants, downtown property owners, volunteers, residents, and people who don’t have a direct link with the downtown but who want to see improvements move forward to get involved. “It’s a very open group, but you do have to have some merchant representation, some property owner representation, and some type of liaison with the local government.”

**Stage two.** By the time a downtown organization is five or six years old, it has had board members cycle through, and it’s time to think about who’s going to replace the founding members. “I would hope that a high number of quality volunteers that have served the organization will be at the ready, because those people are critical for the future,” Harris says. “They already know what Main Street does and can provide a good future direction.”

**Stage three.** As downtown organizations mature and begin to take on more complicated activities, such as implementing a BID, purchasing key real estate, or working on the business recruitment front with national chains that require more detailed information, “you’re going to really have to be identifying potential board members that may have special skills,” says Harris. Potential board members might be members of the local economic development commission’s board, for example. “You want to establish a much closer relationship with them because they can provide you with the information you need for business recruitment purposes,” she says.

Other skilled potential board members to consider include business attorneys, or board members from local community development agencies. “Your organization may realize that your partnerships have to be significantly expanded, and it’s ideal if you can get these people to serve on committees before being placed on your board. It’s much preferable to promote from your committees than to have somebody with no Main Street background,” says Harris.

Potential board members should be asked if they are passionate about the work, whether they have much time, what other boards they serve on, whether or not they are willing to make their own financial contribution to the organization, whether they have the ability to ask that of others, and whether they are willing to make the commitment to attend board meetings on a regular basis. “Sometimes, those are hard questions to ask,” notes Harris.

She also recommends that potential board members be given every document that would be put into the hands of a new board member. "Give them the bylaws, financial statements, board list, and executive director's job description in advance, so that they have a very good picture before they agree to be nominated," Harris says. "I think it's a mistake not to share that level of detail, instead of having them come on board and then be surprised."

Once potential nominees have gone through the process, been vetted, seen all

the organizational information and gained an understanding of what the organization is about, "hopefully there will be more candidates than slots," Harris says. "So the nominating committee will bring a slate to the board for discussion before these folks are nominated. Then, finally, as they are nominated, they need to have orientations and board training, at least every other year, on the roles and responsibilities of board members."

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