



New Media, New Advocacy:

Washington State Main Street Program Saved by Facebook Campaign

By Andrea L. Dono

Like finding coal in their Christmas stockings, three weeks before the new year, the Main Street revitalization community learned that Washington Governor Chris Gregoire's proposed budget would cut funding for the Washington State Main Street Program (WSMSP). The program had already been jeopardized during the 2009 budgeting process when its funds were slashed by 75 percent – leaving only one staff member to support more than 90 community revitalization programs. Zeroing out the budget this year would be its demise – leaving Washington Main Street communities in a lurch.



GIFT
gallery

VENUE





With no choice but to mobilize at the speed of light, the leaders of the local Main Street programs rallied quickly to assess the situation. Because the Washington State Main Street Program is housed in the state government, it is barred from lobbying on its own behalf, so the task fell to the Main Street communities to save the program. In a whirlwind of grassroots advocacy and a nonstop social media blitz, their efforts proved successful when the Main Street Bill passed the House in February and the Senate on March 2.

“The organizing effort behind the scenes was crazy,” says Timothy Bishop, executive director of the Ellensburg Downtown Association and a member of the advocacy team. “We had to create an action plan between Christmas and New Year’s. We had to contact our legislators during that critical holiday week and get a bill introduced in the House literally the first day of the session to save the program.”

Because March 11, 2010, was the last day of the Washington State legislative session, the group couldn’t wait until the first of the year to start an advocacy campaign; they had to act immediately. The leaders of the 11 local certified programs (Bainbridge Island, Chelan, Ellensburg, Kennewick, Mount Vernon, Olympia, Port Angeles, Port Townsend, Puyallup, Walla Walla, and Wenatchee) held their first conference call on December 28 to create their plan.

They assessed the key players, identified partners, built e-mail lists, created a Facebook advocacy page, and called their elected officials to see whose support they had and whose support they needed. They also made contact with their partners – the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation; the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Mary Thompson, a National Trust board member; and surprise partners, like the Association of Washington Businesses.

Formulating the Strategy

On the policy side, advocates were determined to get a bill introduced in both the Senate and the House on the opening day of the legislative session. Securing bipartisan support was an important goal, too. Representative Dean Takko (D) from the 19th district introduced House Bill 2704, co-sponsored by Representative Bill Hinkle (R) from the 13th district, on January 11th. By week’s end, Senator Steve Hobbs (D) from the 44th district had introduced

Senate Companion Bill 6507 with co-sponsor Senator Janéa Holmquist (R) from the 13th district.


The bill, which passed with a 91 to 7 vote in the House and a unanimous vote in the Senate, moved the Washington State Main Street Program into the state’s Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP). Formerly housed in the Department of Commerce, there was a disconnect between the department and the Main Street program, says Bishop.

“Most of our state economic development programs focus on providing grants for big projects like foreign trade or working with large corporations, like Boeing,” says Bishop. “The Main Street program is not a grant-making program. It offers technical resources and training to create jobs and stabilize local economies.” Explaining that the state program is a better fit in the DAHP, he points out that the department has the support of the state historic preservation officer and the capacity to manage the program more efficiently.

Allyson Brooks, Ph.D., Washington’s state historic preservation officer, calls the move a natural fit. “A lot of Main Street programs are housed in historic preservation offices. Historic preservation is economic development and there is a synchronicity between what Main Street does and what [DAHP] does – particularly with the historic tax credit incentive.”

Cumulatively since 1991, Washington’s local Main Street districts have generated more than \$413 million in new private sector investment, 11,810 new jobs, and 3,721 new and expanded businesses. What’s more, every \$370 invested by the state into the WSMSP has yielded one new job in a local Main Street district. Every \$1 invested by the state into the WSMSP has also yielded an average of \$96 in private investment in a local Main Street district.

Statistics like these, as well as statistics from the individual communities and personal stories, were sent to legislators and constituents as quickly as possible. The Facebook page helped the advocacy team achieve this outreach. Team leaders encouraged people in their networks to become a fan of “Supporting Main Street in Washington State.” They were up front



The Washington advocacy team created a press release template that explained the state program’s services and provided space for local communities to add their own quotes and successes. The downtown association in Ellensburg, Wash., (below) noted that it had 20 new businesses open downtown in 2009 despite the economic downturn and credited much of its success to the support of the state program.



about this being an advocacy page and for fans to look for calls to action, talking points, and updates.

The viral nature of social media helped the local advocates grow a network of 500 supporters by January 13 – a number that exceeded 850 six weeks later. Facebook proved to be an important tool for reaching and engaging communities beyond the 11 designated Main Street programs. Because these “affiliate programs” do not necessarily have a formal Main Street organization or even a staff member or key contact, including them in the organizing process would have been difficult if not for social media.

This was particularly important because when the advocacy team looked at the map to find strong local Main Street programs in key legislative districts, they realized it didn’t match up well. The Facebook fans in those key affiliate communities were critical in reaching out to residents who could contact key legislators.




Washington State's social media campaign served as an advocacy tool that mobilized a grassroots network throughout the state. Main Street supporters also wrote letters, made phone calls, and attended a legislative reception in Olympia to plead their case. Legislators such as Representative Sam Hunt (D) [above left] and Senator Janéa Holmquist (R) [in blue, above right] met with Washington Main Street managers (top).

Getting the Messaging Right

Leaders of the advocacy team quickly posted press releases and talking points on Facebook with action alerts calling upon fans throughout the state to contact their representatives. They desperately needed to show elected officials that the Washington State Main Street Program serves more than 11 certified communities; it is a resource for 90 programs in 85 communities.

The terrific speed of their advocacy efforts was matched only by their deliberate

messaging strategy. “We worked with the Washington State Historic Trust and the National Trust Main Street Center to get the messaging right,” explains Bishop. “We worked together to draft a press release that got the tonality right. We wanted to grab people’s attention and spur them to action but we didn’t want to cause a negative reaction.”

An early press release template created a unified message for all advocates to use. It discussed the issue, explained the Washington State Main Street Program’s services,

defended its impact through statewide reinvestment statistics, and provided space for local programs to add their own quotes and successes in investment and job creation.

For example, the Ellensburg Downtown Association, which became a Main Street town in 2007, credited its success to the strong support of the state program. “We’ve had 20 new businesses open in our downtown in 2009 despite the economic downturn, and our first new business of 2010 opened in the first week of January,” says Association President Mary Young-Ness.



Since 1991, Washington State's Main Street communities, including Port Townsend (above left) and Bainbridge Island (above), have generated more than \$413 million in private reinvestment.

“We understand the need to balance the state budget against mounting deficits, but eliminating an economic development program that’s demonstrated this level of success, just doesn’t make sense when we’re talking about the need to grow our economy.”

This strategy worked. Local newscasts, local newspapers, and community blogs across the state picked up the story. Advocates tracked media coverage by posting every media mention on the Facebook page. The message was consistent (verbatim, even, in some cases) in these stories: Main Street revitalization in Washington is effective and saving the state program is necessary.

It is important to note that Facebook was an advocacy tool for informing and mobilizing a grassroots network. The resulting phone calls and letters from constituents allowed supporters to tell their elected officials what Main Street means to them. In her letter to her senator, a small business owner in Port Townsend, Jane Champion, shared her experience as president of the local Main Street program.

“I quickly realized the critical importance of the state Main Street program’s role in helping us maintain, strengthen, and revitalize our distinct physical, economic, historical, and cultural characteristics,” she said. “Our community, and in particular, our wonderful historic district, depends on a healthy, thriving local economy and the state Main Street program has provided invaluable attention and resources toward these ongoing efforts.”

The Power of Social Networking

Bishop believes it is a misconception that targeting large regional or state newspapers is more important than reaching the smaller local papers. He feels politicians read the local rags to get a feel for their constituents and, thus, they can have a greater impact.

If legislators missed a story in the news, they could find it on the Facebook page,

just to rant because that is not the image we wanted the Facebook page to convey. It isn’t a place for an anti-tax rant; you are here to learn about the program and advance the cause.”

The advocacy team used the Facebook page to house the movement’s history and background information as well as to provide calls to action. In this vein, it is a simple tool for reporters to use because they can go to one place to find out everything that is happening. Many members

“It’s the nature of social media that people wear their causes like a badge, and they share them with their friends,” says Bishop.

which has a handful of elected officials as fans as well as two dozen legislative aides. Some of these people comment on posts to the wall. (One wall posting from Senator Craig Pridemore, “Since I’m a member of this group, you can also lobby me here. <smiley face>”)

“This made us watch the tone of what we posted to the page,” says Bishop. “From an administrative standpoint, we had to block a few users who were there

of the media are fans of the page or are fans of the pages of the local programs. Social media is making public relations and getting media coverage easier than ever. When local Main Street programs or Main Street supporters change their statuses about the advocacy effort or “tweet” (on Twitter) updates about the Main Street bills, members of the media see it instantly.

“It’s the nature of social media that people wear their causes like a badge, and they

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Using New Media to Save Old Buildings

When the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) learned that federal funding for Preserve America and Save America's Treasures (SAT) was threatened, the organization sprang into quick action. Representatives from each department gathered to discuss strategy, and a task force was formed to lead the grassroots and "grasstops" (political term that means engaging elected officials instead of grassroots voters).

A frenzy of fact-finding and research helped identify key members of Congress and provide compelling arguments to get their support as well as that of the public. Some number-crunching, for example, revealed that Save America's Treasures grants have created well over 16,000 private-sector jobs in the past 11 years, spurred economic and community revitalization, and leveraged more than \$377 million in public and private matching funds, at a cost of less than \$14,000 per job. Yet the administration's 2011 budget proposes to eliminate all funding for this program. More than 200 SAT projects took place in Main Street communities and more than 200 Main Street towns overlap with Preserve America communities.

The NTHP launched a national grassroots campaign to raise public awareness and support for these critical programs and urge Congress to restore their funding. The campaign creativity combined traditional grassroots organizing with social and traditional media networking. For Lobby Day in March, for example, hundreds of preservation activists visited Washington, D.C., to encourage their elected officials to support preservation funding, while hundreds more spread the urgency of this national threat to preservation through Facebook and Twitter. To date, thousands of messages have been exchanged on social networking sites; and people all across the country are joining the viral campaign to secure funding for Save America's Treasures, Preserve America, and National Heritage Areas.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's social media gurus created a special interactive advocacy campaign website that had all the facts and calls to action in one place. A visitor to the website can learn the back story, read case studies that showcase projects and places that have benefited from the threatened programs, watch a video about SAT, send an e-mail to Congress, and access a social media toolkit.

The toolkit allowed the National Trust to extend its reach beyond its current network of members and supporters by making it easy for anyone to spread the word on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr. When you click on the Facebook icon, for instance, you can easily become a fan of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, share the campaign video on your profile



wall, or select from a variety of messages – such as “1,100 projects preserved and 16,000 jobs created – we can't lose Save America's Treasures. Check out this video and visit <http://bit.ly/savetreasures> to find out what you can do to help” – to post on your own wall. The status updates the National Trust wrote on its own wall sparked a dialog among fans but also gave the organization a chance to dispel myths and share facts to educate the public.

The website also teaches people how to use Twitter, including the use of hashtags (#) which Tweeters use to connect their 140-character-long messages to those that other people post on the same topic. This not only builds an online movement and makes people feel connected; it also helps the National Trust track what people are saying about the topic and analyze the success of the campaign.

The Twitter-content webpage links visitors to their congressional representatives so they can tweet their elected officials directly. Dozens of sample Tweets are available for people to use. Some examples: “Would you send Rosa Parks' bus to the landfill? <http://bit.ly/wouldnt>; #saveourtreasures”; and “Save America's Treasures = \$377 million in matching grants. Why is #congress cutting it? <http://bit.ly/savetreasures> #saveourtreasures.”

The viral nature of social media meant that these messages and, much to the National Trust's delight, new messages created by people who wanted to tweet about their own SAT project or Preserve America community bounced around the Internet for months.

It was very exciting to watch preservationists of all ages become involved in the social media campaign. It not only helped get the word out and build support for these programs in Congress; it also engaged people in new ways and exposed the National Trust for Historic Preservation to a new audience. How this campaign will affect the NTHP's membership and whether the programs will be saved are yet to be determined. But right now, the process of getting to those points has been both innovative and exciting.

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share them with their friends,” says Bishop. Their friends see each time another friend comments on a posting, which might interest them in the cause as well. The one-click ability for people to repost items also helps expose new people to the advocacy effort every day. Bishop says they know people’s friends are learning about the Main Street bill because when someone from a new community becomes a fan, they see dozens of new people from the same community join the page.

“The way the local advocates have been using Facebook to get their message across and to connect with state legislators has been stunning,” says Brooks. “It is a force that is bringing people together. I started using Facebook to connect with friends from 30 years ago and am amazed by its ability to improve real-time communication and to get people’s attention. With e-mails, you just read them. But with Facebook, you make a social connection and it has made all the difference.”

The advocacy team is concerned about sustaining their social media momentum; they realize there are only so many times they can reach out to their networks before they start seeing diminishing returns and burnout. They try to balance quick updates and congratulations for each victory with requests to do something.

“It’s about communicating enough so people feel they are in the loop and then mobilizing them when we need a call to action,” Bishop says. “We’re using all the tools we learned at last year’s National Main Street Conference, which focused on social media, to set up social media networks and opportunities – and it seems to be working. When we send out calls to actions, legislators say the response is almost immediate. When I call them to see if we are on track, they tell us they received 300 e-mails. We literally had the House bill’s sponsor say on the floor that he has never received this many e-mails supporting a single bill.”

The Flexibility of Social Networking

Politics is often a numbers game, so empowering a large network of everyday citizens is an important resource for advocacy efforts. The advocacy effort has supporters all across the state, not just in one community. But timeliness is also a consideration.

The local Washington Main Street

programs had to fight last year for their state program and had already laid some groundwork for building relationships with their legislators. While they didn’t know if and when their program would be in trouble again, they knew they should be inviting officials to their business opening celebrations and keeping them informed about successes and their concerns. When they needed to shift gears into crisis mode, they were ready.

The lesson learned here? “Start early and don’t wait to respond to crisis. You need to have the relationships in place and the capacity to act quickly,” says Bishop. “You have to be organized but still flexible to respond quickly.” The advocates also packed economic ammo – the dollar signs and statistics their revitalization programs have been collecting since the day they incorporated to show their effectiveness.

“If we had started the dialog about what Main Street is and what we do on the first day of the session, we never would have been able to get the bill drafted and presented so quickly,” says Bishop. “We had to get in and out of committees quickly to be voted on by the end of the session. The cut off for the Senate’s Ways and Means was Monday, February 28. We would have missed our opportunity.”

He explains that the advocacy team might find out at 4:30 p.m. that there was a

hearing the next day at 8 a.m. They relied on Facebook and Twitter to mobilize their supporters by the next morning. Then they might not hear anything for days. During that time they could plan for possible next steps and then wait for the next legislative action to determine *their* next move.

For example, the Saturday during President’s Day weekend, the Main Street Bill made it out of the House Rules Committee and was scheduled for a House vote on Monday. A Facebook call to action was posted immediately asking people to call their representatives before the vote. And people did. The bill passed the House in a vote of 91 to 7, and headed to the Senate. The next call to action: now contact your senators. On Tuesday, March 2, the Senate passed the Main Street bill with unanimous support.

While the advocacy process and its wins thus far have proven to be amazing successes, the budget for the program remains uncertain in light of the state’s \$2.5 billion deficit, but the advocacy team won’t give up during the closing days of the 2010 legislative session.

“Passing this bill is important but voting on the budget is the last thing legislature does,” says Bishop. “When the gavel drops, we either have a budget for Main Street or we don’t.”



Flanked by Main Street supporters, Washington Governor Christine Gregoire (center) signs the Main Street bill transferring the Washington Main Street Program to the Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation.