



COMMUNITY PROFILE: Livermore, California

Walk along First Street in this northern California city and it's impossible to believe the historic downtown was practically dead a few decades ago. Restaurants, bars and specialty shops now line the main thoroughfare, and residents fill outdoor cafes sampling new menus and drinking local wine and beer. Families play around a series of splashing fountains or stroll sidewalks brimming with flowers and heavily planted with double lines of trees. The neighborhood is authentic, dynamic and flourishing.

Livermore Downtown, Inc.

Organization Founded: 1986

City Population: 89,115

Public and Private Reinvestment:
\$101 million

Downtown Vacancy Rate: 2%

Buildings Rehabilitated: 40+

“Thirty years ago there was a four-lane highway slicing like a gash through our historic district,” says Rachael Snedecor, Executive Director of Livermore Downtown, Inc., the local Main Street America program. “There was little to draw you here, and you did a ‘Hail Mary’ before running for the crosswalk.” **But today? Downtown is the place to go.**

*“There’s life and commerce filling the street and you never know what new businesses you’ll discover en route to the movie theater or the performing arts center. When visitors tell us they had to park several blocks away and walk, I say, ‘That’s fantastic!’ **We don’t have a parking problem in Livermore; we have a walking problem—there’s just too much to see.**”*

Located about 45 miles east of San Francisco at the edge of California’s Central Valley, Livermore prospered in the 19th century as a key point on the railroad line from Oakland to Sacramento, and as a provisioning stop for the thousands of miners rushing north in search of gold. In the 20th century, the city swelled with the addition of a naval air station, and later became home to two national laboratories dedicated to advancing science and insuring the nation’s security.

Unfortunately, as the city grew beyond its historic core, the downtown suffered, supplanted by neighborhood shopping centers and big box stores located out near the freeway.

City officials formed a redevelopment agency in the early 1980s and tried to implement modest physical improvements, but nothing seemed to stem the tide. “There was steady disinvestment in downtown,” according to City Manager Marc Roberts. “It was clearly dying.”

The key to Livermore’s turnaround was a remarkable community-wide effort championed by local officials and supported by the Main Street America program (one of the first certified in the state) that convened residents, property owners, investors and developers for five listening sessions with consultants who heard what the stakeholders wanted downtown. And what they wanted was more: more retail, more restaurants and more activity.

The consultants then helped the community understand which of these businesses would thrive: not large retail outlets selling staple goods, but specialty businesses where shoppers were encouraged to look and feel and touch the merchandise. They also recommended multiple, unusual options for dining and entertainment, and the creation of housing that would generate additional activity and replace some of the city’s underperforming retail space. That fundamental framework—both innovative and flexible—is what turned downtown Livermore around.

“I can’t say enough about having experts who worked directly with the city and the residents,” Snedecor says. “If you don’t listen to the strong voice of existing business and property owners, and their opinions are not solicited and collected, you can lose the character of your

DOWNTOWN LIVERMORE OFFERS A VIBRANT RETAIL AND RESTAURANT SCENE WITH PLENTY OF OUTDOOR COMMUNITY GATHERING SPACES TO ENJOY.

community. They're the ones who understand the property challenges and historic building challenges. Without their voices, our vision of revitalization couldn't have worked."

Longtime Livermore resident Sherry Nigg is one of those property owners. Sherry and her husband Danny grew up here and remember first shopping downtown, then watching as suburban sprawl slowly took over, and finally seeing practically all the downtown retail activity grind to a halt. Inspired by the listening sessions, they decided to invest in the once-vibrant historic center because they saw that Livermore could rebuild a vigorous retail environment. "Things started slowly," she admits, "but then they began to gather momentum and we got to see firsthand the difference that revitalization can make...We had city officials and property owners working together and everyone getting in the trenches together to build our new future."

Today, Nigg and her husband own five buildings in downtown Livermore. A new, two-story structure with a bank, a real estate complex and medical offices; another building they constructed on an empty car lot that now houses a fitness studio, mortgage company and chiropractor's office; a historic bank building that is home to a French bakery and wine bar; and two other properties. "We stuck to the principals of good design...of encouraging shoppers and patrons to slow down and experience life on the street. And thanks to our downtown association, I can honestly say that businesses work hand-in-hand to promote each other."

For start-ups and newer businesses in need of resources and advice, there's The Switch, an incubator and co-working space for entrepreneurs, tech developers and creatives. Innovators at The Switch like to say, 'Whatever you are working to launch in Livermore, there's likely someone here who can help.'

City Manager Roberts noted that Livermore enjoyed several advantages when it embarked on intensive revitalization. The community is close to both San Francisco and Silicon Valley, so property values are strong and the local



income level is high. There was also an impressive level of commitment from planning officials who worked with state transportation authorities to re-route Highway 84—the behemoth that once slashed across downtown. In its place is a two-lane street flanked by rows of diagonal parking, white trellises covered with wisteria and thoughtfully planted curb extensions that calm traffic and reduce the length of crosswalks. "Having a nonprofit partner like Livermore Downtown, Inc. was fundamental to our success," he says. "We in government did a lot of work on the hard stuff (architecture, concrete, new trees) and the downtown association did a lot of work on the soft stuff (reworking business practices, encouraging merchants to stay open, training them how to display product and re-train sales staff.) Rachael Snedecor and the Main Street [America] program trained dozens of small businesses and created a vibe here that is remarkable."



So, is the city's experience replicable? Can other mid-sized cities reinvent themselves using this example as a model? "Absolutely," he says. The key is an appreciation for the historic foundation you already have and all the opportunities it provides. The transformation of Livermore could not have happened without a historic downtown to revitalize...That backdrop of authenticity gave everything we changed an immediate sense of gravitas."

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Nearly 30 years after the launch of Livermore's Main Street America program, the work continues. Rachael Snedecor is focused on attracting more development and investment, and on guaranteeing a healthy, sustainable downtown. "I challenge you to resist the appeal of First Street today," she says. "Outdoor dining is full, parents are having conversations while their kids play nearby, there's life on the sidewalks with some folks dressed up for theater and others in jeans heading to a movie. It's a diverse place filled with unique experiences and Livermore Downtown Inc. is here to make sure it continues to move forward."

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