

Portland Revitalization, Inc. (PRIDE) Annual Report for 2003

Vision and Goals

PRIDE is about to begin its fourth year as a Connecticut Main Street program and its eighth year as a volunteer organization. Early on the group, together with a number of citizens, worked out a vision statement that remains unchanged.

“In the future,” the vision statement reads, “downtown Portland will offer a friendly, small town charm in an attractive, bright, convenient, safe, inclusive and welcoming atmosphere that provides a positive first impression of the community. Downtown will serve as a destination for families and others through its variety of interesting and convenient shops, restaurants and services.”

“The downtown will be clean, well-maintained and friendly to pedestrians, featuring a town green where activities can be held and the community can gather. The physical environment will include landscaping, a median, underground utilities, and improved parking.”

“People will be able to enjoy and admire the history of the town through its maintained historic architecture, historic tour, and quarry and shipbuilding museums. The quarry and the riverfront will be linked and well-utilized for recreation.”

“New businesses will help to add economic vitality and a broader tax base. Stores will be full and the business mix will be improved. Portland businesses and attractions will be marketed to encourage tourists to enjoy Portland’s amenities.”

“All of this will have been achieved through a coordinated plan, adequate funding, and cooperation and participation from a variety of constituents.”

But a vision is not reality and we still need to work to make our vision completely real. We have had help.

One of our greatest needs was adequate funding. The Town of Portland was willing to help, but the town’s support was not enough to provide for the full time director we were required to have or to work on many of our projects.

A number of companies and individuals agreed to make four year commitments to support PRIDE. Our Pledge Partners include: Standard Knapp, Liberty Bank, St. Clements Foundation, St. Francis Behavioral Health Center, Perry Portland Associates, Quarry Ridge Golf Course, Halloran & Sage, Peterson Oil Company, Thomas & Belinda Stoto, Curley Real Estate, Nancy & Tom Mueller, SM Anastas & Associates, American Express Financial Advisers, Susan & John Decina, Karen & Bruce Tyler. Although not a Pledge Partner, we were also gratified by the support of TriTown Foods.

With our financial base in place, we needed to find other groups whose goals were consistent with our own. Many of those groups were parts of town government. In particular we enjoyed our cooperation with the Economic Development Commission, the planning department, youth services, middle school staff and public works department. Other groups also had an interest in the development of Main Street, and we happy to work with the Brownstone Quorum, Portland Historical Society, Pine Ledge Nursery, the town's various garden clubs and the Zion Lutheran Church Youth Group.

Cooperation and broad based financial support are key elements of the Main Street program, because PRIDE can not create the kind of Main Street we all want by ourselves.

With financial support, cooperation from other groups and our own group of volunteers, we began to identify projects that would improve Main Street. These projects mostly fall into two categories: beautification and revitalization.

Results: Beautification

These changes took place gradually. PRIDE and others worked to make them successful. We have made a good deal of progress, but more work is needed for us to achieve the goals we have set. Consider this list of results:

1. The small triangles on the Arrigoni Bridge ramp are planted and maintained by the town grounds crew.
2. The abandoned and run down house just past the ramp is gone.
3. The abandoned used car lot is now a thriving ExxonMobil station with attractive landscaping and a brownstone wall.
4. The Dunkin Donuts Shop across Main Street also added outside seating and a brownstone wall when it added a drive through lane.
5. Several businesses on the west side of Main Street next to Dunkin Donuts were power washed. We also added flower boxes.
6. Pride Ledge agreed to plant and maintain the triangle at the corner of Main and Marlborough Streets. The result is attractive plantings all year.
7. The Coffee Pot building is in the process of being repainted.
8. Brooks Drugs put up a welcome to Portland sign and also added a brownstone wall with appropriate landscaping.
9. We added and maintain a number of planters along Main Street and encourage Main Street businesses to add their own planters and landscaping. The Brownstone Garden Club strongly supports us in this effort.
10. Liberty Bank made extensive repairs to the outside of it building and will add more plantings when the building next to it is removed next year.
11. The new Buck Foreman building has been renovated by the town. The police department added an attractive new sign
12. The Portland Country Market was repainted and the owners added some attractive plantings.
13. The town garage behind the police station was repainted. A new mural depicting the Portland Fair has been completed and will be attached next spring. PRIDE

was also able to convince town officials that the space next to the garage was not a good site for the motor vehicle impound lot. The site of the proposed impound lot will be a playscape for young children.

14. PRIDE is coordinating and encouraging Main Street businesses to put up holiday decorations.
15. There are “Portland” banners the length of the Main Street business district. We plan a second set of seasonal banners for next year.

Results: Revitalization

1. When we began our work the vacancy rate in the Main Street business district was 26%. Now it is 10% and we are confident it will be 5-8% by the end of next year. Some of the new business owners tell us that PRIDE is the reason they moved to Main Street. That is flattering, of course, and we are glad they are saying it. We continue to strive to create an atmosphere of success on Main Street. The two newest businesses on Main Street, Great Wall Chinese Restaurant and Brownstone Recycling Shoppe, are both doing well.
2. We want people to visit downtown, so we put on a number of events that would attract people to Main Street. Movies on the Green, Arts on the Green and most recently, Shakespeare on the Green. These events have moderate but growing attendance, so we plan to continue them. Combined with the Economic Development Commission’s farmers market, there are more reasons to come to Main Street.
3. Halloween on Main Street has been our most successful promotion. The idea was to get children and their parents to visit businesses they might not otherwise visit. As with our other events, it started small, but has grown rapidly. We now get complaints, but “good” complaints. Merchants off Main Street complain that they were not included in the event and want in. We will be happy to oblige.
4. The Excellence Club is made up of non competing Main Street businesses who meet monthly to consider common problems and work on common solutions. A business consultant guides them.
5. Working with the Portland Middle School Staff, we have created the Portland Junior Main Street program including the *Main Street Times*, the Wright Brothers and Sisters Society and Hands Helping Hands. Since the Middle School has a major presence on Main Street, we want to get the staff and children involved. In that way it is possible for students to develop job related skills.
6. It is difficult to determine how many businesses stayed on Main Street that might have gone elsewhere. The dropping vacancy rate is indicative of that success, of course, but ultimately it is just a feeling. Portland’s Main Street is a better place to do business.

Other Projects

1. The auction started out as a fund raiser for PRIDE and continues to be a fund raiser. Yet the award winning event is more than that. It has become a community event where people come to have a good time and to see and be seen. Every

- candidate for the Board of Selectmen, for example, was at this year's auction. Our profit was about \$15,000, the highest amount ever.
2. We have created a slide show on Main Street and improved it several times. We are available to make our Main Street presentation to any interested civic group. Parts of it are now on our web page.
 3. We have created a recognition program for our supporters. While we have always sent thank you notes, we have created a "booster" decal for all our supporters that they may display in their business windows or on their vehicles.
 4. Lastly, the PRIDE Welcome Sign has become a community bulletin board. If you want to know what's happening in Portland, check the sign.

Future Projects and Goals

Here are the projects for the near future. The town is planning a change in the streetscape from the bridge to Marlborough Street over the next several years, so we will concentrate on Main Street north from Marlborough Street and on building improvements. Here are some of the things we have in mind.

1. The sidewalks on Main Street are in very poor shape, particularly on the west side. We are looking for money now to replace them. With any luck that will happen in 2004.
2. Main Street continues to look dingy. We want to find a way to have the street and sidewalks swept on a regular basis and have the plantings pruned and weeded.
3. Portland's plan of development should be updated and widely publicized.
4. We will review Portland's zoning regulations with regard to facades and signage and make suggestions for improvement in those regulations.
5. As streetscape changes progress up Main Street, we will offer suggestions on ways to improve lighting, signage, vehicle control and parking.
6. There should be an entrance to the quarries from Main Street. Town owned property behind the Portland Country Market is an ideal location, so we will work to that end.
7. We will begin the process of better organizing parking from the post office to Arvid Road and doing some landscape work as well.
8. We will add landscaping to the Main Street side of the Portland Middle School tennis courts.
9. We want the town to grow, but we have to manage that growth. We hope to work with the Conservation Commission on the "Smart Growth" concept to preserve Portland's assets while ensuring planned growth.
10. We want to hold a "Healthy Youth/Healthy Community" training program in Portland for school staff and town officials so that we might engage our youth in positive ways to work for their community.

Change

According to the National Main Street Program, there are several indicators that a local Main Street program is ready for the growth stage.

1. At least 70% of the buildings needing rehabilitation have been renovated. We have reached that percentage, though the exceptions are highly visible. We should get to 90% renovated in 2005.
2. The ground floor vacancy rate is 5-8%. We are at 10% now and will get to 5-8% in 2004.
3. The upper floor vacancy rate does not exceed 20%. That has never been a problem. Almost all apartments are occupied all the time.
4. Public awareness of the commercial district's importance is high. We still have work to do here. The public now knows about the commercial district, but does not seem to be clear on the tax advantages and shopping advantages of Main Street.
5. PRIDE has made tangible headway overcoming the regulatory, financial and perception barriers concerning full use of Main Street. We have made progress in this regard, but have not been completely successful. Many citizens and town officials still do not realize that we all own Main Street.

Over the next year PRIDE itself will be going through change. Seven members of the board, including all four officers, are leaving the board. The change is required by PRIDE's bylaws which limit members to six years in office. While there are a large number of qualified individuals able to replace board members who are leaving, the new board will be relatively inexperienced.

On a personal note, I have enjoyed my years on PRIDE's board of directors and plan to join its design committee to work on that committee's projects. Please join me and volunteer for the committee of your choice.

Bruce Tyler, President