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## Local News

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### Main Street Community - City's downtown gets boost with state designation

By Kristen Swing  
Press Staff Writer  
[kswing@johnsoncitypress.com](mailto:kswing@johnsoncitypress.com)

The state of Tennessee is telling Johnson City residents what many of them already know: The city's downtown district is ready for revitalization.

Tennessee's Main Street Program, a statewide and national program that focuses on assisting downtown districts grow and evolve, has designated Johnson City's downtown as a Main Street Community.



Tennessee's Main Street Program is a statewide and national program that focuses on assisting downtown districts, like downtown Johnson City, grow and evolve. (Lee Talbert / Johnson City Press)

"This is such a huge deal for us," said Bridgett Roberts, the executive director of the Johnson City Development Authority. "There are 15 communities total across the state that will be certified."

Tennessee's Main Street Program, which was previously cut and then reinstated in 2003, recertified approximately a dozen Tennessee cities last year that had been designated Main Street Communities prior to the program being cut.

Now, the program is certifying a few new cities to join the re-established Main Street Communities.

Downtown Johnson City will be one of only three or four areas to be certified as a 2005 Main Street Community.

"It's a program that we've been going after since August," Roberts

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said.

The program, which focuses on a four-point approach to downtown revitalization, was a perfect match for downtown Johnson City, Roberts said.

“The JCDA has been here since 1989 and has been practicing this four-point approach since then, but never quite organized it under this method,” she said. “We stepped forward and said, ‘Hey, we’re here and we’ve always been here, but we’ve just never applied to be a Main Street Community.’”

The four-point approach includes organizing the downtown area so that revitalization is a total community effort, promoting the downtown district to attract customers and investors, designing the downtown area so that its physical appearance sets it apart from other portions of the city, and addressing the economic climate of the downtown district.

The designation as a Main Street Community will allow more community cooperation in revamping the downtown area, Roberts said.

“We were moving in the right direction before this, but we weren’t truly moving together. Each hand wasn’t really talking to the other, everybody was kind of doing their own thing,” Roberts said. “Now, we’re all working together and not running in different directions.”

While the new designation does not directly bring any money to the city, the recognition as a Main Street Community may help to indirectly bring in more funds.

“We will be able to attract people from the outside into this area for development purposes,” Roberts said. “It provides an incentive for someone to come down here, because once you get here, we’re going to work to make your business grow.”

Likewise, other designations and grant money will be positively affected by the Main Street recognition, Roberts noted.

For Roberts, the community collaboration aspect of the designation is enough to make being a Main Street Community worthwhile.

“Everybody has a piece of this and everybody has a part to play,” Roberts said. “It’s a slow process and we’ve got to be patient. But each step gets you there, and as long as we’re all marching to the same beat, we’ll get there quicker.”

The program also requires the city to monitor statistics for downtown, helping leaders like Roberts to see what needs improvement.

With the designation, Johnson City will be joining Tennessee cities including Collierville, Columbia, Greeneville and Murfreesboro, all of which were re-established as Main Street Communities last year.

**Kingsport, which was previously a Main Street Community but did not initially get re-established as one last year, will also be certified as a 2005 Main Street Community.**

**“It’s exciting for us regionally because Kingsport is also coming on with us,” Roberts noted.**

**The Main Street Community designations have not been announced officially, Roberts said.**

**“I’ve been told by the state coordinator that we are going to be certified. She’s got her list of 15 communities and we’re on there,” she said. “I have confidence in letting the word out, but the official press release will come out in May.”**

**Melinda Keifer, director of the Community Development Division with the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development is the state’s Main Street Program coordinator, but was unavailable for comment Wednesday evening.**

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Johnson City Press  
204 W.Main St.  
Johnson City, Tennessee 37605  
423.929.3111

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