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MAIN STREET PRINCIPLES ALIVE IN ROWLESBURG!

Looking for something different over the Columbus Day weekend, my husband Larry and I set out for the West Virginia Chestnut Festival in tiny Rowlesburg, West Virginia (pop. 584). Designated one of West Virginia Main Street's "On Trac" communities—and promoted by the West Virginia Department of Commerce as one of the state's "small gems"—the town offers more, and has accomplished more, than many communities 20 times its size.

Situated on the banks of the Cheat River with an abundance of natural recreation offerings, the town has definitely capitalized on its **existing assets**. And that means much more than white water rafting. Rowlesburg is known for its festivals and its Civil War and railroad history, with a lot to see and experience. The River City Arts Festival over Memorial Day weekend offers a wide range of live music, art, poetry, and theater, including many offerings from local and regional artists. The annual Labor Day festival includes tours to Cannon Hill, the community's historic Civil War site, as well as a famous Ox Roast.

But back to the Chestnut Festival, which is built around one of the town's—and region's—indigenous assets, the American chestnut tree. The West Virginia Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation embraces a mission to "restore the American chestnut tree to our eastern woodlands to benefit our environment, our wildlife, and our society." (Note the similarity to the National Main Street Center's preservation mission . . . albeit wildlife, maybe not so much.)

The Chestnut Festival was a marvelous event, with scientific lectures (yes, more than I ever wanted to know about chestnut breeding), chestnut tastings, and vendors promoting chestnut products. The highlight was the gala banquet, which included the Chestnut-Vino Novello Ritual and the crowning of Mr. and Mrs. Chestnut. The festival is just one more way to leverage the community's assets, a concept Dr. Joseph Nassif, a D.C.-based dentist and Rowlesburg native, understood when he launched the event in 2008. He returns each year to chair the event and remains active in Rowlesburg's revitalization efforts, along with other members of the Nassif family.

"Principles" are those underlying, unchanging laws or assumptions that provide the linchpin and support the framework for sustainability, success, and growth. For the past 30 years, we have focused primarily on the successful Main Street Four Point Approach®—which represents the critical strategies for commercial district revitalization success. We've also focused appropriately on the tactics of the local Main Street work plan. But as we approach a newly reimagined Main Street movement and National Main Street Center in 2013, it's important to revisit the **Eight Guiding Principles** that are immutable and will continue to guide Main Street for years to come. The achievements in Rowlesburg embody all of these.

The Rowlesburg Revitalization Committee (RRC), the all-volunteer group that spearheads much of the progress in town, understands the **comprehensive** approach needed to be successful. While promotional activities like festivals are an important strategy for bringing visitors to town, the committee's activities also encompass all four points of Main Street. The **self-help** ethic is highly visible—exemplified by people like Gloria Dean, one of RRC's many volunteers, who tends the Main Street Garden every morning before opening her retail shop across the street. It's also very obviously a **public-private partnership**, with civic pride evident in the well-maintained Rowlesburg City Park adjacent to downtown.

But no project in Rowlesburg exemplifies how to move from vision into **implementation** more than the preservation and reuse of the historic Rowlesburg School. Now the Szilagy Center for the Arts, the old school houses the River City Café, a World War II Museum, an arts studio, a sports museum, and more. The 25,000-square-foot structure, built in 1910, served grades one through twelve and graduated 74 classes until it was closed in 1986 due to declining enrollment and consolidation, a typical problem in many small towns.



But the solution in Rowlesburg has been anything but typical. Receiving the building as a gift in 2008, the Rowlesburg Revitalization Committee adopted an **incremental** approach, taking one small step at a time to raise funds, make needed repairs and system upgrades, and attract new, economically viable uses for the space.

Each of the Szilagy Center's new uses helps build a sense of community for residents and provide a richer experience for tourists and visitors. One of the most impressive and highest **quality** uses is the World War II Museum, which features exhibits to rival anything in the Smithsonian. Jef Verswyvel, with help from Maggie Deweirtd, designed the settings for his many WW II figures in authentic military uniforms. This first-class museum includes war memorabilia, medals, arms, photographs, war posters, and much more. And Maggie brings the figures alive with stories of local residents whose heroic efforts are depicted there.

Change is inevitable. Rowlesburg is no longer the town it was when the old school bustled with 12 grades of students. But the town has embraced and managed the changes to achieve positive, forward-looking results. It's a great example for us all as we welcome the new year.

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