

**Paducah Renaissance Alliance
Observations and Recommendations
By Bill McLeod
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In the last twelve months, the PRA Board has gone through significant transition, adding six new board members. Main Street training by the Kentucky Heritage Council took place within the first month of forming the new board. After six months, it became clear that the mission needed to be revisited. Stakeholder surveys revealed that attention needed to be placed on the retention and recruitment of retail businesses and artists. This spring, the Executive Committee held a workshop with committee chairs, and another workshop was held with the full Board to develop a comprehensive vision for the district and guide for the coming year's program of work. The bottom-up model for mission and goal setting was quite an ordeal for the Board, but they are now well on their way to creating a stronger and more effective organization.

The Perfect Storm

An ice storm hit the region this past winter, shutting down the area for two weeks. To add to that, the loss of the riverboat tour industry this year has dealt a hard blow to the smaller downtown businesses and galleries that rely on tourism dollars. In recent months, the convention center and adjacent hotel closed and is looking for a new owner. And the City of Paducah projected a budget deficit and cut their budget – eliminating two experienced PRA staff. In essence, there is now more work for fewer staff; community expectations are high and the strain on staff and volunteers is visible.

An Outside Assessment

An economic downturn is a good time to plan for the upswing. While no organization is perfect, there are some things that could be undertaken to yield tremendous results to improve the merger of two organizations and the three adjoining areas of Paducah. Below are some observations made over a three day visit interviewing 84 people in groups and one-on-one, and the accompanying recommendations.

Community Engagement and Perception

Organizational Transparency

1. A website – to pro-actively get the word out about the fledgling organization, an effort must be made to educate stakeholders about PRA. From hearing so much misinformation about PRA over three days, it is vital that accessible, “passive information” be made available to everyone seeking it out: residents, retailers, artists, office workers, donors, volunteers, and visitors. The website for this merged organization is under development and should be launched in the new fiscal year. This new website must be a priority. The site needs to be a portal for marketing Paducah's retail and arts, but also an outlet for stakeholders for this newly formed alliance – including mission statement, list of board members, committee work plans, volunteer needs, donation needs, committee meeting dates, etc. The current web addresses (paducahmainstreet.com and paducaharts.com) should be

retained to redirect traffic to the new site, ideally ending in an “.org,” denoting that this new organization is not a for profit entity revitalizing or promoting Paducah. Additionally, PRA should purchase the same website name, but ending with “.com”, to redirect traffic to the main site ending in “.org” to capture all the web site hits meant for PRA.

2. A newsletter – hard copy and electronic – is needed to provide “active information” by placing news into constituents’ hands. A newsletter can simply be a two-page document created quarterly to inform merchants, property owners, residents, artists, and other stakeholders (but not tourists) of the goings on of the organization. Newsletters should be hand delivered to merchants to spend a few moments building relationships. The newsletter should also be mailed to upper floor commercial tenants, property owners, and members; handed out at meetings, stuffed in mailboxes; and stacks left in coffee shops, restaurants, and other places where locals frequent. The benefit of a printed newsletter is that it shows stakeholders what you are working on, it documents your successes, and it showcases a calendar of events, committee meetings, and board meeting dates – restoring confidence that this new organization is doing tangible tasks and is open to community input. The newsletter will give PRA more credibility than ever imagined. As time and budget allows, the newsletter can be expanded to four pages and be designed and printed professionally.

To span the digital divide, an electronic newsletter is a must, and one currently is available monthly. While there is no substitute for talking to a merchant and bringing them something valuable, like a flier or newsletter, more and more people use email to stay informed. This form of communication can also track your readership rate if using a broadcast email service that bypasses spam filters, such as Convio or Constant Contact. A sign-up button can easily be placed on the homepage of the new website to build the email list. If a freestanding electronic newsletter is too much work at first, adding a few paragraphs to the I-List e-newsletter should be sufficient to get the word out that Paducah Renaissance Alliance is “meeting and doing”.

3. Organizational chart – The organizational chart should contain the Four Point Approach, visually framing the concept that each committee supports a common mission. This should reflect a bottom-up approach that empowers its members to join in forming solutions to their challenges as they relate to the organization’s stated mission. A brief explanation as to how members and non-members can be a vital part of the growth and development of the district should also be included. Fundamentally, the Board develops the vision and keeps the organization focused on its mission, and the committees serve as the manpower behind the program of work. Staff helps facilitate committees to execute the program of work.

LowerTown is Maturing

LowerTown has been criticized that galleries and working artist studios are not open often enough. If tourists are to have a quality experience, return next year, and tell their friends it is worth the visit – galleries and studios must be open. In the short term, artists and studios must be open every Saturday and Sunday. If this is not feasible for every artist, here are some suggestions.

- Create an artist phone tree so when someone walks in the door, a gallery can call the neighboring gallery/studio to tell him or her that there is someone interested in paintings,

jewelry, ceramics, etc. If no one answers, call the next nearby gallery/studio and direct the customer down the street.

- If you have the time, walk the visitor over to the next gallery or studio.
- Give each neighboring gallery/studio keys to the neighboring gallery/studio to open up neighboring shops to improve the core number of galleries a visitor can see.
- If an artist cannot be open on Sundays, then hire a part-time minimum wage worker or use a volunteer to staff the gallery/studio.
- Do everything possible to reopen the Texaco Center on Saturdays and Sundays – using volunteers if you must. Once inside the Texaco Center, volunteer staff should direct visitors to open galleries using a take-away map and call ahead to give artists and sales staff advanced warning.

Once Saturdays and Sundays are established as the best shopping days, additional days can be added, such as Fridays and Thursdays. The end goal is to have galleries and studios open six days a week by the time the economy is on the rebound.

Downtown Retail

Because people are traveling less extravagantly, taking shorter trips, day trips and weekend get-aways are now the norm. Retailers need to be open on Saturdays and Sundays to appeal to visitors. Many shops and restaurants are currently not open on Sunday despite the fact that Sundays are one of the most profitable days of the week. If shop owners cannot staff their stores on Sundays, hire part-time laborers paid minimum wage or find volunteers. Give the Sunday volunteers a name like the “Open Sundays Brigade,” or a catchy title to make volunteers feel like it is a short-term campaign that will end once the economy improves.

While retail niches, such as restaurants, antiques, or the arts, are an important identity for a community, no retail area should offer just one category. All shopping areas need to have a mix of retailers to be truly successful because people have diverse interests and needs. Downtown has a good mix of theaters, museums, retail shops, restaurants, antiques stores, and galleries. Continue on this path and include a few more services, such as a day spa, yoga studio, drug store, etc. Broadway will continue to fill in its retail spaces – driving retail up to the 600 block and 700 block of Broadway. LowerTown has galleries and working artists, but it needs more restaurants and services to make it a more comprehensive destination to meet the needs of all visitors.

Be sure to save first floor space for “walk in and make a purchase” businesses – retail shops, restaurants, and services. Some large offices occupy the first floor in Downtown. Encourage offices to move to upper floors where rents tend to be lower, which is attractive to many offices that don’t rely on walk-in business. Some offices own their buildings, so lower rents may not be an incentive. In that case, take the time to sell your vision and ask an office owner if the first floor can be vacated for retail use and have the office occupy the upper floors. Sometimes having a conversation with a building owner is all that is needed for your vision to come to fruition to create a dense retail environment. Offices and housing units may have to shuffle locations to accommodate first floor retail space, sending offices to the upper floors, which means housing may have to go around the corner or flank the prime retail area.

If none exists currently, create an arts and retail overlay for Broadway and key streets in LowerTown, such as for 6th Street and 7th Street, to encourage retail density – reserving all first floor space for retail shops (including galleries), restaurants, and services. As the economy picks up, rents on the first floor will rise, and the stage will be set for success.

LowerTown currently has one coffee shop. Work with successful small business owners in McCracken County to expand their businesses to LowerTown with a second location for a restaurant, retail shop, or service. Since local businesses know the area, it will be a realistic sale, and since they are currently in business, you can experience their business model and how well run the establishment is – reducing the risk of failure.

A word of caution: retail is dynamic and always changing. Department stores hurt small stores 130 years ago. Catalog sales hurt local stores 100 years ago. Enclosed shopping malls hurt downtowns 30 years ago. Big box stores hurt several retail categories 10 years ago. People are now shopping online like never before, which means three retail categories should not be pursued: antiques – because of eBay; books – because of Amazon; and recorded music – because of iTunes. If you can anticipate the impact of retail trends, Downtown and LowerTown will thrive.

Connecting Downtown and LowerTown

As an outsider, Downtown and LowerTown seem to be the same area – just a few blocks up or down and an interesting walk to explore the unique flavor of Paducah’s historic commercial buildings and houses. Both Downtown and LowerTown contain retail and lots of art and arts-related businesses. Below are some suggestions to connect Downtown and LowerTown.

- *Retail is the best way* to connect Downtown to LowerTown since retailers are diverse and open five to seven days a week. Expand the offerings as the economy improves to connect Broadway to 6th and 7th Street with a contiguous line of shops, restaurants, and services.
- To reinforce the connection between the two, create directional signs that point the way to “More Arts” and “LowerTown Arts District” and “Riverwalk” and “Historic Broadway.”
- Public art, such as sculpture, light art, neon, murals, tiles, etc. can be used to connect the way from one neighborhood to another. Public art can provide “gateways” and beacons of interest drawing eyes down the street to explore the next installation.
- Events can also connect LowerTown to Downtown for a time. Consider expanding the number of blocks included in the Downtown After Dinner.

Organization Recommendations

Staffing

Today both the PRA and RDA boards utilize the same three city employees to fulfill their respective missions. The PRA Board of Directors consists of 13 members, plus additional committees organized by the comprehensive Main Street Four-Point Approach: Design, Organization, Promotion, and Economic Restructuring. PRA is part of the Kentucky Main Street program, affiliated with the Kentucky Heritage Council, and a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The RDA board consists of seven members, one being the Chairman of

PRA. The Executive Director of PRA and RDA also serves as assigned staff of the Convention Center Board and serves as a City Department Head reporting to the City Manager, Mayor, and City Commission in regards to hotel, and all other economic development initiatives in the Renaissance District.

Concerns were shared regarding a continually expanding workload and lack of resources in terms of staff. After viewing PRA's Year in Review, there are numerous event-related activities and fundraisers. With the loss of both event planners and the administrative assistant, current staff is stretched too thin covering both administrative and event positions, the ever expanding job assignments due to merger and additional non-agency work.. It is easy to see why Paducah values its Downtown and LowerTown events. They are great community events, and there is strong demand that they be retained, but events are just a piece of the pie – not the whole pizza – and they eat up staff resources. Paducah is a great city because it is a nice place to live, work, shop, dine, and visit – and if you happen upon it – catch an event. With the small staff that exists currently, it is not practical to think that the core mission of retention and recruitment of two distinct districts, marketing, promotions, plus developing the riverfront and hotel/convention center *and* numerous large-scale events can all be accomplished. Accordingly, either the program of work has to be reduced or the staffing changed. An administrative person must be hired to divert the daily chores of office reception and bookkeeping that keeps the professional staff off of core mission. Contracted event planning should be implemented on a case-by-case basis. Event planning by the staff can be an all-consuming process with festivals taking a minimum of several months to plan and execute. *The addition of more staff to manage all boards, committees, volunteers, bookkeeping, and fundraising events is essential.*

Fundraising Recommendations

Paducah Renaissance Alliance is fortunate to have the full support of City Hall, which is now providing 85% of all funding. While this is a big commitment from the City, and a relief to those who scrambled for years to pay staff's salary, with it comes some potential problems. City Hall can treat this nonprofit less independently and more as an instrument of the City – tasking staff to work on projects not in PRA's work plan. And the Board of Directors may feel they are not truly charged with directing the organization.

In these tough economic times, fundraising is a challenge for nonprofits across the nation. It may be the ideal time to reevaluate the number and effectiveness of fundraisers: membership drive, sponsorships, brick sales, buttons, galas, and the like. What seemed like a good idea two years ago may be a drain on staff and volunteers – and paradoxically the bank account.

The Organization Committee seems eager to accomplish the membership drive, and with some good planning, it will be successful since merchants, property owners, residents, artists and other are committed to the success of Paducah and the new organization charged with doing so much. Since Paducah Renaissance Alliance does not have a voting membership with benefits, the “membership campaign” could be re-titled “fundraising campaign.”

Committee Recommendations

It is evident that some people don't believe in the comprehensive Main Street Four-Point Approach to community revitalization, and that volunteer committees take more work than they

are worth. However, a comprehensive approach based on shopping mall management needs to be applied to Downtown and LowerTown: management organization, design standards, marketing and events, and economic analysis (sounds like the Main Street Four Points!). The Four-Point Approach is flexible – so add a committee if you need to or re-title one if you want. There is no substitute for community input to provide advice, take ownership, and allay fears that an organization is doing good things. Events that require thousands of man-hours would not be possible without a strong, engaged volunteer base. For those reasons, a volunteer driven program is needed – with staff leading the charge with the aid of strong committee chairs and Board of Directors. Some typical tasks for the four committees are below.

- 1. Organization:** fundraising, grant writing, website, press releases about the organization, newsletter, volunteer development, print advertising about the organization, membership
- 2. Design:** sign guidelines, façade guidelines, façade grants, historic preservation, merchandising, window displays, decorating contests, streetscape, landscaping, banners
- 3. Economic Restructuring:** business retention, expansion, and recruitment, contacts with merchants and property owners, demographics study, retail market analysis, consulting with businesses and artists
- 4. Promotion:** retail events (late night sales, Downtown After Dinner), special events (Barbeque Festival, LowerTown Arts Festival), and image events (walking tours, home tours), press releases about events, print advertising about the events. (A word of caution about promotional events – they eat up a huge amount of time that few people realize. Keep the number of events to no more than four a year, and then reevaluate a year later to see if one should be dropped or if a fifth event is possible with funding, sponsors, staff and volunteers.)

Staff is getting up to speed organizing committee meetings with committee chairs. Some committees are meeting at times that are not optimal for volunteers, and hours are being adjusted. Poll other committee members to find out if morning, noon, or evening meetings are best to improve attendance.

Work plans have been written by staff in the past or were penned a few years ago. Every year, before the end of the fiscal year, committee members should evaluate what items on the work plan need to be discarded and what new items the committee can realistically take on. New committees tend to overreach their capacity, but usually well-working committees can accomplish three large tasks a year. New committees or low-functioning committees tend to rely on staff to complete 80% of the work, where building committees complete about 50% of the work plan. The highest functioning committees can complete 80% or higher of their work plan, which is a delight for staff – and the ultimate goal for the organization.

It may take two to three years to rebuild all committees functioning on the highest level, but you can get there if you select the right members, choose the right meeting time, best number of meetings (sometimes electronic meetings and conference calls work too!), reward volunteers as appropriate, and have committee members draft their work plans and keep the vision for district in mind. All these little things together motivate volunteers to come back next month, roll up their sleeves, and do what they say they will do – relieving staff of their onerous tasks and empowering the community.

The Arts

Paducah is a town of only 27,000 people, but with a tremendous variety of arts: fine arts, decorative arts, quilts, performing arts, film festival, and literary arts. There are so many opportunities for artists and art lovers in this town that it is hard to get an immediate grasp on everything available.

In the past, staff convened Artists Roundtables and Business Owner Meeting. Staff sees the value in this, but more employees are needed to coordinate brainstorming, acting like an arts alliance, convening meetings, gathering information about all the arts organizations, artists, museums, theaters, and arts festivals to produce an arts directory.

Some artists complained that they were promised the world if they relocated to Paducah. Others complained that tourists are not coming like they used to. Nevertheless, reality has set in, the economy is down, and nonessential items, such as luxury goods, high-end restaurants, and the arts are suffering. At this point, artists have to *hustle* to make a living or pursue other avenues of income, such as working a full-time job and pursuing their muse part time. Some ideas to augment sales are below.

- Gathering mailing addresses to advertise your events at your studio or gallery – every gallery and shop should be gathering addresses of customers to email and mail postcards for the next event, gallery opening, sale, etc. Share lists with similar artists.
- Include your event in the I-List email
- Ebay.com – 43,000 items for sale listed in nine distinct art categories
- ETSY.com – a place to buy and sell arts and crafts; 39,000 items for sale in 12 distinct art categories
- Art dealers – establish relationships with art dealers around the country to carry your works
- Art gallery openings in other markets – try a different market to show your latest work
- Art festivals – travel around the country on weekends to sell your creations
- Setting up your own website – buy a domain name, pay for a web design, then sell through the site, market the site to a large mailing list or use print advertising to drive traffic to it

For about eight years, the City focused on recruiting artists and art galleries through their successful and innovative Artist Relocation Program. This succeeded in attracting 70 or so working artists and galleries to LowerTown and Downtown Paducah. In the current economy it may become more difficult to attract new retailers and artists. Continued emphasis needs to be placed on marketing current retail and artists as well as attracting new retailers and artists. You have to anticipate attrition, which is inevitable.

Incentives

There are a number of generous incentives available to retailers and artists looking to open in Downtown and LowerTown. The Retail Fence offers a forgivable loan to businesses spending up to \$500,000 (building, renovation, and inventory). Direct Marketing Grants offer a 1:1

matching grant up to \$5000 to spend on marketing a business. A façade loan program offers up to \$20,000 for historic façade restoration. There are state tax credits available to buildings located in a National Register District. The Artist Relocation Program now offers forgivable loans for new artists, galleries, and restaurants moving to LowerTown. With so many incentives, it is a wonder why more artists and retailers are not breaking down the doors of PRA. Advertise these great incentives on the website, in the newsletter, and in freestanding flyers to get the word out to existing artists, retailers, and prospective businesses.

A Dedicated Community

Retail areas are always evolving – during the good times, restaurants with their high profit margins push out retail shops that cannot afford to pay the higher rents. When times are bad, retail shops close because people cut back on discretionary spending, but bar tabs soar. Like the rest of the nation, the City of Paducah is clearly experiencing a downward cycle towards the end of a growth phase where fine restaurants, shops, and galleries were becoming established and artists were moving in.

No organizational merger is easy, and expanding the boundaries by merging two neighborhoods can be taxing on resources, to say the least. By hiring more staff to support all that PRA is doing, expectations can be met. If not possible in this fiscal year, people will understand that during this trying economic cycle that some tasks and events will have to be put on hold.

Paducah is a beautiful, special place with a fantastic building stock, beautiful river, supportive banks, National Quilt Museum, live and film theaters, a symphony orchestra, retail shops, outstanding restaurants, art galleries and studios. Well-funded incentives are available for retailers and artists. Citizens are engaged and genuinely love their town. City officials and employees are dedicated and care about Paducah immensely. PRA staff is an energetic team of dedicated professionals. Volunteers are enthusiastic and committed for the long haul. The act alone of bringing in consultants from time to time to evaluate the community and give their opinions shows a high level of sophistication on behalf of all of Paducah's players. With persistence, management and with the right number of staff, PRA and Downtown, LowerTown, and the Riverfront will be united and successful..

McLeod BIO

Bill McLeod is the Executive Director of the Mount Vernon Triangle Community Improvement District, a small BID providing clean and safe services, as well as economic development to this neighborhood east of Mount Vernon Square in Washington DC. Prior to that, he was the Executive Director of Barracks Row Main Street revitalizing 8th Street, SE – attracting more than 50 new restaurants and retailers, winning the 2005 Great American Main Street Awards. Before that, Bill was a Senior Program Associate for the National Trust Main Street Center where he organized a professional certification program, awards programs, and fundraised. Mr. McLeod is an avid volunteer when he is not working, and he helps the DC Film Festival and the Woodrow Wilson House. He earned a B.A. in Sociology from Houghton College in Houghton, NY.

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Paducah's Recent History

In 1982, a regional shopping mall opened up on the edge of Paducah, drawing shoppers away from Downtown. Then two Super Wal-Mart stores and other big box stores opened, further enabling shoppers to spend their money outside of Downtown.

On April 25, 1991, the American Quilter's Society located its museum in Downtown Paducah. Each spring, quilt enthusiasts from all over the world flock to Paducah for the Society's annual event. The Quilt Show is one of Paducah's largest events, drawing significant revenue through tourism. The museum was honored in May 2008 when the Congressional designation as The National Quilt Museum of the United States was bestowed upon the museum. This designation brings additional visibility and has increased the number of visitors, which averages 40,000 visitors per year from around the country and more than 25 countries.

Paducah Main Street, Inc. was a 501(c) (3) organization that started in 1989 by citizens and then Mayor Gerry Montgomery concerned about the decline of Downtown Paducah. In August 2000, Paducah's Artist Relocation Program began. Houses that needed rehabilitation were offered to artists for as little as one dollar in the hopes that they would relocate to Paducah's historic LowerTown area – prompting a repopulation of that area. Incentives were offered, such as 100% financing through a local bank. The program has become a national model for attracting artists to revitalize a residential neighborhood, and has been awarded the Governor's Award in the Arts, The Kentucky Chapter of the American Planning Association Distinguished Planning Award, The American Planning Association National Planning Award, and most recently Kentucky League of Cities' Enterprise Cities Award. Today, 25 blocks of LowerTown are listed in the

National Register of Historic Places. Currently there are over 50 artists living, working and creating in the 25 square blocks of LowerTown. Most artists utilize live/work spaces, some with gallery hours.

Paducah Renaissance Alliance History

In March 2008, Tom Barnett, City Planning Director and creator of the Artist Relocation Program, and Carol Gault, the Main Street Manager, left their jobs – leaving both projects vulnerable. About that time, the city recommended to combine the existing Artist Relocation Program and Paducah Main Street. At the time, Steve Doolittle was working as the city’s Downtown Development Director, and Monica Bilak was working in the city’s Planning Department as the Artist Relocation Coordinator. With over 20 years of experience in city and county government, Steve Doolittle was offered the position of PRA Executive Director. Mr. Doolittle also worked with the city Planning Department when Mayor Gerry Montgomery began focusing her efforts on Downtown initiatives. He was also instrumental in the development of the Downtown incentive program known as the Retail Fence and in the recruitment of the program’s first business, Hooper’s Outdoor Center. Two employees from the Main Street organization remained, one as events coordinator and an administrative assistant. Other staff include Monica Bilak, a former Main Street business member and business owner in the LowerTown Arts District. Ms. Bilak has been a part of the Artist Relocation Program since 2002. She began working for the city as the Artist Relocation Coordinator in 2007. Jessica Perkins was hired as the marketing director in the fall of 2008, three months after the new organization was established. She has over ten years experience in marketing and tourism.

The city recommendation included the formation of a second board called the Riverfront Development Authority (RDA). This board would serve in a similar development role as PRA, but with budgetary authority, and tasked with large-scale development projects, such as restoring a hotel, master planning, and funding any TIF projects that might develop.