

Main Street Matters

SMALL TOWN GRIT

A tradition of partnerships and persistence in downtown Dayton

By Marcene Hendrickson, Board Member, Dayton Development Task Force

In the early 1980s, Dayton was dying. Farming practices were changing with machinery replacing laborers, and the city's largest employer, Seneca Foods, had dramatically decreased its workforce. The ripple was felt in Dayton's historic downtown district—businesses closed, local bank deposits were down, and buildings were neglected. The people of Dayton realized something needed to be done.

The Chamber of Commerce director called a town meeting, which almost 300 people attended. Ideas were shared, and the group tried to focus on establishing goals—economic development, historic preservation, beauty, or just a nicer place to live? We determined that we did not want to become a “theme” town but rather be true to who we were: a historic downtown.

We began with small projects so that we could develop enthusiasm among our citizens. One of the first projects was the old flour mill on Main Street. We got permission from the owners to clean up and

landscape the weedy lot, and one Saturday, we invited volunteers to arrive early with shovels and trucks. By nightfall, we had a park. We were overjoyed at this initial success, but problems arose: who would pay the water bill and who would mow the grass? Eventually, Frontier Federal Bank (now Banner Bank) bought the park. We had learned lesson number one: never start a project without a long-term maintenance plan in place.

Learning from our first project, we determined that accountability and ongoing partnerships were crucial, so we formed a nonprofit, which we named the Dayton Development Task Force. Next, we needed a commitment of local support and formed a LID (Local Improvement District) through which building owners taxed themselves based on square footage.

With the nonprofit organized and support from stakeholders secured, we pursued grants for additional funding and embarked on several major downtown projects.



Left: Aerial view of downtown Dayton, surrounded by farmland.

Opposite above: The Columbia County Courthouse, the oldest county courthouse in Washington State.

Opposite below: The Liberty Theater lighting up downtown Dayton.

In partnership with the City of Dayton, we helped transform our streetscape through paving our formerly crowned asphalt highway in concrete, burying storm drains, and adding sidewalks, street lights, trees, and street furniture.

A volunteer Courthouse Committee formed to support the rehabilitation of the Columbia County Courthouse, in partnership with the County, which utilized the Historic County Courthouse Rehabilitation Grant program and brought the oldest courthouse in the state of Washington back to its original splendor.



Closed since 1965, the Liberty Theater's roof had leaked for 10 years, causing the floor to rot. The community decided to restore the theater, and, after it opened in 2001, to provide additional support in the form of volunteer work on the building next door to help the theater expand a few years later. Today, we not only have live productions and musicals, we also screen current and classic films, showcase children's programs, and hold meetings in the space.

Our work has been long and sometimes difficult. Task Force volunteers have joined us with a variety of talents, including artists, construction people, investors, and leaders. They have been ordinary citizens taking a chance. While we have varied in our personal motivation and highest priorities—from economic development to social events to historic preservation—by working together, we have made strides in all these points. Our work continues! 🍷

The Dayton Development Task Force joined the Washington State Main Street Program in 2013. The organization is a designated Washington Main Street Community.