



Ripley, Tennessee Courthouse Square  
(Source: Brent Moore)

## Courthouse Square Revitalization

*Ripley, Tennessee*

★ **Best Practices Case Study**

**A**n hour north of Memphis, near the Arkansas state line, sits the small town of Ripley, Tennessee. The county seat of Lauderdale County, Ripley is home to the Lauderdale County Tomato Festival, a 30 year tradition that highlights the role the crop has had on the community.

In recent years the recession and depressed economy severely impacted Ripley and Lauderdale County. Many of Ripley's industries and local businesses closed their doors, leaving many residents without a job. Ripley has had an unemployment rate that is significantly higher than the national average.

Downtowns can play an important role in a community's efforts to boost the local economy and improve a town's quality-of-life. These commercial cores usually account for as much as 30 percent of a community's jobs and 40 percent of its tax base. Downtown is also a community's crossroads – a place in the hearts and minds of residents that evoke strong emotions and help define a community's identity. In 2011 Ripley became a member city of the Tennessee Main Street Program, a coordinating partner of the National Main Street Center, to gain resources and technical assistance for downtown redevelopment. By aligning its downtown redevelopment with the strategies and beliefs of the National Main Street Center's "Main Street Approach to Downtown Revitalization," Ripley developed a comprehensive downtown revitalization plan that includes a return to community self-reliance, local empowerment, and the rebuilding of traditional business districts based on unique assets (see sidebar). Ripley

has emphasized its distinctive architecture, pedestrian-friendly environments, and local ownership as assets in the redevelopment process.

With a high unemployment rate and stagnate economy, the city and the Ripley Downtown Development Corporation also needed a catalyst to spur development and job growth in the area, which came in the form of a new state program, the Courthouse Square Revitalization Pilot Project Act. Chosen as one of six county seats with a population of 120,000 people or less, Ripley created a designated downtown and tourism zone around the county courthouse that was to be redeveloped. Through this program the state returns around five percent of the sales tax generated in this specified zone to Ripley to fund the redevelopment process. Each new business in the zone increases available funding so the program also helps to encourage new businesses to locate in the downtown area. The zone includes the court square area, the property around the courthouse, and Washington Street from court square to Kellar Street. Ripley also received \$2.95 million from the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) for repairing and improving streets and sidewalks and a \$35,000 USDA Rural Development Grant for general funding of the project.

The redevelopment process was divided into three phases, with the completion of the entire project scheduled to end in 2023. Phase I, completed in 2010, emphasized sustainable design strategies, and the impact it's made on the health of the community is evident. Ripley's court square is now more pedestrian-friendly due to recently implemented traffic calming

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Lauderdale County Courthouse (Source: Brent Moore)

techniques. Traffic signals that once allowed vehicles to enter the square without stopping were changed to stop signs. Traffic lanes were narrowed and trees and other landscape improvements were added. Some walkways were widened into plazas with plenty of seating to encourage people to congregate and socialize. These plazas and all areas of the square are now connected with extra-wide crosswalks to make it easy and inviting for pedestrians to stroll and shop without feeling the need to get in a car and drive. The new streetlights in the revitalization area complement the 1930s era courthouse and direct light down for pedestrian safety while reducing night sky light pollution. The lighting in the courthouse is 75 percent more efficient than the previous lighting. Increasing the landscaped areas and reducing impervious paving has reduced the amount of stormwater entering the drainage system and helps to recharge the local aquifer.

Phase I also included the renovation of the Lauderdale County Courthouse. The Art Deco style building, which was erected during the 1930's by WPA, is a cultural icon for the area and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The renovation included replacing old windows with energy-efficient ones and updating the HVAC system. These changes have made the building more energy efficient, ultimately reducing the courthouse's energy consumption by 35%.

Phase II will focus on the other areas of the downtown zone, improving the streetscape along Washington Street from the court square to Kellar Street. Phase III of the downtown revitalization plan will include adding a rail museum, children's park, and a skate park to the downtown district. A six-mile walking trail loop will also be created to link the downtown area with the park.

**KEY FACTS:** Ripley, Tennessee

**Population:** 8,445 (2010 Census)

**Project Description:** historic preservation, rural economic development, leveraged implementation funding

**Partners:** Tennessee Main Street Program, Ripley Downtown Development Corporation, Tennessee Dept. of Transportation, United States Dept. of Agriculture Rural Development, City of Ripley and Lauderdale County

## National Main Street Program

Established in 1980 as a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Main Street Program works with a nationwide network of communities to encourage preservation-based economic revitalization, and has participated in the renewal of more than 2,000 older commercial districts during its 30-year history. Main Street offers a revitalization framework appropriate for communities of all types, including commercial districts in urban neighborhoods, rural towns, and smaller and mid-sized cities. Working in conjunction with a state-city-, or county-wide Main Street Coordinating Program, or directly with the National Main Street Center, local Main Street programs plan and implement projects that create more vibrant and healthy commercial districts.

### The Four Points of the National Main Street Program:

**Organization:** Organization establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in the commercial district.

**Promotion:** Promotion takes many forms, but the goal is to create a positive image that will rekindle community pride and improve consumer and investor confidence in the commercial district.

**Design:** Design means getting Main Street into top physical shape and creating a safe, inviting environment for shoppers, workers, and visitors. It takes advantage of the visual opportunities inherent in a commercial district by directing attention to all of its physical elements: public and private buildings, storefronts, signs, public spaces, parking areas, street furniture, public art, landscaping, merchandising, window displays, and promotional materials.

**Economic Restructuring:** Economic restructuring strengthens a community's existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding successful businesses to provide a balanced commercial mix, sharpening the competitiveness and merchandising skills of business owners, and attracting new businesses that the market can support.



National Main Street Center

a subsidiary of the  
National Trust for Historic Preservation

Source: National Main Street Program—National Trust for Historic Preservation



Committed to the future of rural communities.

