

FHWA's Livable Communities Case Study Series

How a Port City Transformed its Downtown—Lewiston, Idaho

Challenge— Managing High Freight Traffic Volumes to help stimulate Downtown Redevelopment

Lewiston is a small city facing big transportation challenges. Situated at the confluence of the Clearwater and Snake rivers, Lewiston, Idaho hosts an inland port through which goods are transported by barge and ship between Lewiston and the Pacific Ocean via the Columbia River. This results in large volumes of freight that move through Lewiston on public roads by tractor trailers and trains. While the port contributes heavily to the economic stability of the area, heavy industrial land uses that generate truck traffic as well as active freight rail lines in and around the city make the development of amenities that support a higher quality of life, such as bicycle and pedestrian facilities, more challenging to implement. Under these constraints the City's overall livability goal was to create a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, urban atmosphere that connects the heart of downtown Lewiston to the Snake and Clearwater Rivers.

For many years U.S. Route 12 passed directly through Lewiston's downtown via Main Street, but it was moved to Levee Bypass, a road just north of Main Street, in the mid-1970s. This alleviated much of the through traffic downtown, but residents speculate that this caused businesses to leave the area, which reduced activity and investment. Construction of the bypass road created a barrier between downtown and the Snake and Clearwater Rivers, but it also created an opportunity for a more pedestrian-friendly downtown environment. This is evident today with renovations of several existing buildings, and the addition of new businesses in downtown Lewiston.

Lewiston has a strong blue-collar economy that includes retail, professional, and service jobs as well as a hospital, college, and medical insurance company. It is somewhat isolated from other cities and towns in the region as it is situated in a deep river valley accessible only by US 12 to West, one bridge to the North, and an airport with limited service to the South. These circumstances can make it difficult to attract developers and investors. As such, the city primarily funds many of its revitalization projects and often goes to great lengths to gain community support to implement livability-focused projects. The City is making progress in convincing residents that investing in amenities such as benches, pedestrian scaled lighting, bike lanes, or historical markers, will increase foot traffic for local businesses and improve the quality of life.

Solution—Establishing a Downtown Improvement Organization and Implementing Context Sensitive Strategies

The city is developing strategies to manage freight traffic, revitalize the downtown, and rally community support to fund and implement livability-focused projects. For the past five years, Lewiston has made improvements throughout the city by linking and implementing planning initiatives with community related livability goals at the project level.

In 2008 a group of downtown stakeholders formed Beautiful Downtown Lewiston (BDL), non-profit downtown revitalization organization, in partnership with the City of Lewiston. BDL follows the Main Street Four Point Approach®, a program of the National Main Street Center focused on preservation-based economic development. BDL is funded through optional annual dues paid by downtown businesses, contributions from the City of

Creating more livable communities through transportation choices



Lewiston community programs fund, and special event income. Lewiston hired a full-time manager to run BDL, which is an important requirement for any organization following the Main Street Approach. The manager coordinates volunteers and serves as a liaison between the downtown business community and the local government.

Many of the projects that BDL's Design Committee have completed in the last several years, such as a pedestrian crosswalk awareness program and installation of pianos on downtown sidewalks have helped to improve public spaces. The City of Lewiston and the Urban Renewal Agency have partnered to deliver impactful improvement projects that involved major infrastructure and utility coordination. When the First Street and Fifth Street corridors were rebuilt in 2012, BDL managed the public arts component of the project and provided funding for and management of new welcome banners. BDL has also added new bicycle racks in several downtown locations. Amidst both major street improvements and incremental changes to the downtown streetscape, BDL has successfully managed to gain a wealth of public input and ongoing communication with the downtown business community.

Lewiston has successfully implemented Complete Streets projects, but there is still more to be accomplished. Most Lewiston residents are more accustomed to travelling by car than by bicycle or on foot. While this makes it more challenging to introduce bicycle and pedestrian facilities, the city is using comprehensive outreach strategies to educate residents on benefits of such projects. The city has taken a unique approach to implementing a Complete Streets project that would narrow traffic lanes, build a bike lane, and add speed bumps to reduce traffic volumes and speeds, in a corridor that serves several schools and a Veterans home. Lewiston city leaders closed streets within the project area to vehicles and hosted a block party to gather local residents and explain how the redesign would slow vehicle traffic, add more walking and bicycling space, and improve safety. Planners drew the proposed features in chalk, so participants could see exactly where the changes would take place. To ensure they reached all affected residents and users in the immediate vicinity, the planning team went door-to-door to discuss key concepts and answer questions.

Conclusion—Implementing Incremental Changes and Educating Residents Reinvigorates Main Street

Lewiston is a prime example of how implementing small and incremental changes in context to community goals can result in large and lasting benefits for communities. The BDL's support of local businesses and the city's livability goals has improved communications between residents and the city, bolstering support for livability-focused planning strategies. Implementing context sensitive strategies to meet the unique needs and challenges that Lewiston faces has helped the small, rural city revitalize its downtown and keep jobs and residents in the area. By ensuring stakeholders in Lewiston are educated about the benefits that placemaking principles, Complete Streets projects, and the Main Street Approach can have for the community, the city has reinvigorated its downtown and improved the quality of life for residents throughout the region.

Federal Highway Administration: www.fhwa.dot.gov/livability
Partnership for Sustainable Communities: www.sustainablecommunities.gov/

