

Rebuilding Main Street

In Northern New Mexico, one rural town is rediscovering its 'heart'

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FARMINGTON, N.M. – Tara Churchill spent hours as a child peering through the window of her family's lumber store out onto Main Street.

For many years, she watched as the center of her community churned with activity.

Shoppers ambled along the sidewalks each day, and the store's floorboards would creak as customers stepped through the front door. In the late afternoons, as shadows stretched aslant the town's low buildings, workers returning from nearby oil fields and coal factories would pass the window on their way to dinner and drinks at eateries as old as Farmington itself.

But commercial development spread eastward, businesses closed or moved away, the sidewalks emptied and by the time Churchill was a teenager, Main Street had become just another road.

"There were always a lot of ups and downs in the economy," Churchill said, "but then it kind of just roller-coastered down. We all feel like we've been in that big bottom, and we're hoping that we'll see the ups pretty soon."

Similar stories are told in many small towns throughout the rural American West, where once-prosperous communities built on natural resource extraction boomed, busted and boomed again – until one bust gave way to an all-but-unpredictable, indefinite downturn.

Activity in downtown Farmington had always risen and fallen on the fickle behavior of the area's primary coal, oil and natural gas industries. So, too, did the other parts of town. But with a high concentration of small businesses, Main Street always seemed to get hit the hardest.

Farmington has joined other neighboring Northern New Mexico towns, like Hobbs, Questa and Ratón, which all now wrestle with a similar question: How does a community built on doing one thing well foster economic change and tenable growth?

After years of discussion and planning, this small San Juan Basin community is beginning to form an answer of its own.

Central to that response are two national revitalization programs: the Metropolitan Redevelopment Area (MRA) and Main Street America initiatives. Both are aimed at breathing new life into blighted rural and urban areas across the United States. As of this year, 21 communities in New Mexico have become accredited Main Street America programs. Over the past six years, they have generated a collective 1,063 building restorations, 752 new businesses, 3,271 new jobs and more than \$85 million in private reinvestment.

Taos isn't on the list, but town officials say they are paying close attention to the progress other New Mexico towns are making, while continuing to focus on homegrown redevelopment initiatives, such as the recent "Strong at Heart" business development project. "What we face is a difference in what people think is the right type of growth for Taos," said town of Taos Senior Planner John Miller. "There are two different visions for what growth should look like. We have to answer the question, 'How do we find the right mix?'" In Farmington, projects made possible through the MRA and Main Street America are beginning to produce measurable economic growth, in part, through tools that allow a town greater ability to answer the same question Taos faces. Progress is slow – but for a town that spent nearly a century watching its downtown area fall into disrepair, administrators and some optimistic business owners consider every step toward revitalization a victory, even if each is only a small glimmer of what's to come.

Now with a population just exceeding 45,000 people, officials and business owners are continuing to work in tandem to transform their economy – starting with Main Street, once the "heart" of the community, as Churchill recalled.

Some things always change

In the mid-1860s, Farmington began to form at the junction of three rivers in San Juan County – the San Juan, the Animas and the La Plata. The town was incorporated in 1901, and seven years later, Churchill's great-grandfather opened the lumber store at the east end of Main Street. Not far away, Churchill's great-grandfather on her mother's side worked as a mason, constructing many of the other buildings that form the blocks that flank Main Street today.

In the 1920s, oil, gas and coal prospectors started investing in the fields that lie beyond the broken mesa that circumscribes Farmington's southern boundary. The town's population grew from 500 to more than 3,000 people, and a standard gauge railroad was built to connect the area to other regions of the Southwest and Southern Colorado.

By the mid-20th century, Farmington's population had increased to more than 35,000 residents, most of whom were employed in high-paying jobs in the energy industry. "The place was full with oilfield workers and boilermakers and union workers busy building power plants," said Dr. John McNeill, who sits on Farmington's MRA development board. "The place was just boomin'."

That growth spurred new and rapid investment in commercial developments, designed to surround the town's central district concentrically, further isolating Main Street and the small businesses that operated along its 4-mile stretch. Hastening the historic district's fading importance to the local economy was the expansion of Main Street from two lanes of traffic to four, making it a kind of thoroughfare to access the newer developments.

But Farmington's reliance on petroleum, coal and natural gas quickly exposed its economy to the cyclical nature of the energy industry; following the first big swings, there were some who saw the need to diversify. To a minority, that meant supporting small businesses, which, in turn, meant supporting Main Street.

"The first study to try and change Main Street back to two lanes – or to improve Main Street – was done in the 1960s," said McNeill. "But for many years, the town suffered from analysis paralysis."

Keith Barbeau, manager of the Courtyard by Marriott hotel on the east end of Farmington, said that one reason for this was that the downturns only seemed to last long enough to start a conversation about redevelopment, but would never last long enough to finish it.

In recent years, however, Farmington has found itself with the time it needs.

It's likely no coincidence that the first discussions started during the same decade that former President Lyndon B. Johnson approved the Metropolitan Redevelopment Act, which designated federal grants for urban and rural renewal projects in 1966. But even after riding out major bust periods, notably the 1970s energy crisis, those talks were again tabled in favor of further commercial development on the outskirts of town. The Animas Valley Mall, for example, was constructed in the late 1980s and houses major franchise retailers, like Sears, Dillard's and J.C. Penney. The mall is – and continues to be – a powerful economic engine for the area, driving up gross receipts tax collections as thousands from the Four Corners region flock to the shopping center on weekends and during the holidays.

Meanwhile, small businesses along Main Street languished.

Some closed under the pressure of new and fierce competition from franchises that could ride out downturns in the local economy as they could not, and in 1995, after nearly a century in business, the old lumber store closed down. “The signs for the town's first Home Depot started showing up,” Churchill said.

By the mid-1990s, driving from outside Farmington through the historic district was like traveling through a museum that had closed down, its exhibits faded and decrepit with age. As downtown coordinator and Farmington native Michael Bulloch recently put it, Main Street had become like a “hallway.”

Yet, in that same decade, the conversation surrounding revitalization restarted with a new philosophy. “We started to think of how we could make Main Street a destination, not just a way to get from point A to B,” Bulloch said.

First steps on a long road

In 1996, Farmington joined Main Street America, which the town learned could provide resources to assist underdeveloped or abating areas in creating a vision for redevelopment. It was the first material step officials had taken toward improving Main Street in nearly a century.

In 2005, Farmington doubled down on its efforts by applying for an MRA. Its application was accepted in 2007, designating a nearly 700-acre area in and around downtown for redevelopment. The MRA allowed the municipality to form public partnerships with private businesses to provide certain incentives, waive fees and assist in bringing spaces up to code – such as for the installation of ramps required by the Americans with Disabilities Act or meeting fire codes. Town governments can also help with visual improvements to buildings. Taken together, the upfront cost these tools might save a new business can range in the tens of thousands of dollars.

For example, a recent storefront refacing initiative refreshed the appearance of facades at several Main Street stores, including Brown's Shoe Fit, a business of 50 years located near downtown's central intersection, a cost that would have otherwise been absorbed by small-business owners in the area.

Studio 116, an art gallery and workspace run by local artist and entrepreneur Karen Ellsbury, will be receiving MRA assistance on two fronts. “The town helped me get a matching grant from Renewable New Mexico,” she said, “so we will be putting in a patio area by the end of the year.” The town is also helping her to install ramps to make her store ADA compliant.

A comprehensive infrastructural improvement plan is also in the works, Planning Manager Cynthia Lopez said, which the town is calling "Complete Streets." Its objective is to overhaul Main Street by repaving and narrowing the roadway, adding traffic lights and roundabouts to slow vehicles and encourage foot traffic. A 20-foot-high town clock has been installed on the south side of one of Main Street's blocks, the first of many planned improvements. Administrators have erected a sign welcoming visitors on another.

In coming months, workers will be coming in to tear out and replace old water lines. Farmington intends to streamline the process for new businesses to access the system by adding water stub-outs. "They normally have to tap into the lines and then rebuild the sidewalk," Shana Reeves, director of communication and quality performance for the town of Farmington, said. "All of those things are extra costs that are hard for a small business to be able to justify."

Their objective is to create value for everyone with a stake in the community.

Initially, Farmington rolled its revitalization programs under an organization called the Farmington Downtown Association. Since then, however, it has administered projects directly through town government in conjunction with its MRA board. According to Reeves, Farmington is the only municipality in the state to take on the brunt of the responsibility for the programs.

But it's a double-edged sword.

"The benefit is that we have the support of community development and public works," she said. "The mayor and council are directly involved, instead of having a board member have to reach out to them to articulate their vision and goals." At least one downside, however, is that without being a nonprofit itself, the town is restricted from accessing certain grants.

Other interested municipalities, she added, most often want to know how revitalization programs are funded.

Farmington's method was to refinance a series of bonds and earmark \$500,000 in gross receipts tax each fiscal year. Town officials have also implemented tax increment financing on property taxes that fall within the area of the MRA, which sets a benchmark, beyond which additional tax revenues are set aside for revitalization projects. They expect this subsidy to generate almost \$220,000 every year for the next 20 years.

The town is also looking to improve the areas surrounding Main Street.

Officials have developed a walkway along the Animas River in recent years, which connects to other parks and activities within the Animas District. Town administrators also said they have started talking about diversifying into the outdoor recreational industries. "We're trying to bring the supportive industries into our metro redevelopment area in the Animas District," Lopez said. The area contains several unused industrial lots and buildings, which they hope can be easily converted to manufacture products like mountain bikes, climbing gear and other outdoor equipment that could potentially be tested in Farmington's rugged surroundings.

But after years of what some have seen as neglect worsened by investment in developments that compete directly with small businesses, some in the Main Street area are not entirely convinced that the town will follow through on its long-talked-of plans – or that the changes will be as grand as advertised.

Benumbed business

In 2014, when the oil market began to decline, no business in Farmington was left unscathed. “When ConocoPhillips left, we lost 6,000 people in San Juan County over two years,” Churchill said. “And when you take out that many people that have a really good income, it hits the town pretty hard.”

Bob Beckley moved to Farmington 25 years ago with a plan to launch a microbrewery in an old historic building at the corner of Main Street and Orchard Avenue. He was in the midst of one of a few expansions to his business during the recent downturn. But he and his business partner persevered. They now operate three shops tied to their flagship Three Rivers Eatery & Brewhouse, including a pizzeria, a taproom and a “brewstillery,” which Beckley said is one of the first in the nation. The three stores take up most of the block.

Beckley’s original intention was to continue to expand, but after years of meeting what he said were increasingly restrictive code requirements, he’d had enough. “It’s really difficult because there’re so many hoops to jump through nowadays,” he said, “whereas 20 years ago, when we were starting a business, we got to make our own decisions.”

He’s cautiously optimistic that the MRA will help to alleviate some of his and other business owners’ frustrations in this regard. He’s also hoping that the town can succeed in attracting new businesses to fill empty commercial spaces, which have become an eyesore. On his way into work every morning, he sees several, and when his customers leave his corner bar, they see an unmarked storefront with mirrored windows and a peeling sign hanging above the street that reads “The Bargain Shop.”

One block to the northwest, Dan Sheesley, owner of Brown’s Shoe Fit, also says that unused spaces are a problem. “We’re struggling to get traffic down here,” Brown said. “We’re lucky because we’re an anchor store. We’ve been down here for 50 years. We have a large parking lot behind us. We have a new storefront with good signage and visibility. We’re one of the fortunate ones, but I know many of the smaller, newer businesses are struggling to make any kind of permanent staying power down here.”

Following the Great Recession in 2009, many small businesses along Main Street closed down, their former locations now empty spaces that many believe are driving foot traffic away to the newer developments on Farmington’s east side.

Business owners seem to be frustrated that promised changes along Main Street are not coming as quickly as they would like. Meanwhile, town administrators tap their fingers on annual reports, which they say tell a story of quantifiable, if gradual improvements.

Since 2003, the town has recorded 95 new business openings, 22 business expansions, 76 building rehabilitations and nearly \$3 million in private reinvestment along Main Street.

According to town projections, those numbers should continue to rise over the next 20 years. The report did not include, however, how many of those new businesses had closed in the same period.

For those still struggling to stay in business along Main Street, the changes are painstakingly slow, and while some continue to wait, others are making their own moves to bring life back to the area.

Op art

In 1999, Churchill was working as a teller at First National Bank. One day, her mother, Bev Taylor, called her and proposed that they convert the old abandoned lumber store into an art studio. She said they could rent out spaces to artists around Farmington. They could do something that could enliven their corner of downtown.

Exhausted with the grind of counting cash and processing checks, Churchill agreed, and they carved out nine spaces in the building. Word quickly spread, and artists started coming in from around Farmington. Artwork soon covered the walls, where nuts, bolts and brackets once hung. Passersby started stopping on the sidewalk to look in the storefront window again, and so Churchill and Taylor reopened the doors. They put up a sign out front that read, “Artifacts Gallery.”

Today, they have 16 artists creating original works six days out of the week, and more than 50 are represented in the once-empty space.

They kept going.

On Oct. 14, they opened a café in the rear of the building in an old cold storage space that once held ceiling-high stacks of lumber. Here, Churchill makes homemade baked goods and serves coffee. She often moves back and forth – from the bakery to the gallery at the front of the store – where handmade ceramics sit in the light from the window.

Through the glass is a view of Main Street that’s beginning to change, but still isn’t the one she remembers – at least not yet.

“We’ve formed a community of business owners down here who really want to see downtown come back to life,” Churchill said. “We’ve all started communicating together, and with us all working together, I feel like we might be able to change the situation.”



Tara Churchill rearranges some ceramic artwork at Artifacts Gallery, which is housed at the location of her family’s old lumber store in downtown Farmington, New Mexico – an area that has been designated as a Metropolitan Redevelopment Area and accredited through the Main Street America program.

John Miller



Bob Beckley, co-owner of Three Rivers Eatery & Brewhouse, a “brewstillery” and pizzeria, raises his glass as he discusses his frustrations and hopes for Farmington’s recent foray into the Metropolitan Redevelopment Area and Main Street America programs – revitalization efforts that are just beginning to show results.

John Miller

Editor’s note:

A common narrative threads through the rural U.S. – what hits the country’s economy hard hits the rural areas even harder. In recent decades, changes in the mining and agriculture industries have resulted in falling employment.

In New Mexico, where more than a third of counties are predominantly rural, that reality has become especially urgent. Although agricultural jobs in the state are actually growing, the overall unemployment rate as of August was 6.3 percent, placing it 49th out of 50 states. It’s unclear what the economic future holds.

But not everything is grim. In New Mexico and elsewhere, rural areas are finding creative ways to build their economies or keep them from declining, with mixed results. Today, we are launching a project to examine these responses and see what New Mexico communities can learn from each other. Called “State of Change,” the project is a collaboration of 10 newsrooms from across New Mexico: KNME, KUNM, Santa Fe New Mexican, The Taos News, Koahnic Broadcasting, Carlsbad Current-Argus, Gallup Independent, KRWG, New Mexico In Depth and NMpolitics.net. High Country News and Solutions Journalism Network are providing support; funding comes from the LOR Foundation.

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