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MainStreet Program Makes Strides in Artesia

By Rich Williams, New Mexico MainStreet Director and State Arts and Cultural District Coordinator, New Mexico Economic Development Department

Artesia is a southeastern New Mexico town named for the artesian aquifer on which the area's early agricultural industry was based. Today Artesia's 10,700 residents are drawing on the city's history as they work with the Artesia MainStreet program to remake the town's downtown.

Artesia MainStreet is part of the New Mexico MainStreet Program, a grassroots economic development program of the New Mexico Economic Development Department. The state Legislature launched the program in 1985 to help communities remake older commercial neighborhoods as economically viable business environments while preserving local cultural and historical resources.

The program currently serves 23 affiliated MainStreet projects and six state-authorized Arts and Cultural Districts statewide.

In the late 1970s, the National Trust for Historic Preservation developed the consensus-building approach used by MainStreet participants to wed economic development and historic preservation. Community volunteers are the engines of each program, but MainStreet Program directors contribute resources, education, training and technical services as needed.

It's the Water

Artesia MainStreet began as a grassroots effort in 1997 to revitalize the appearance and spirit of the town's dilapidated downtown area, according to program manager Rebecca Prendergast, who serves as a liaison between the public and the state program. Volunteers began hosting activities to draw the community's attention to downtown as a destination place and began working with landscape architects and engineers to create a master plan for downtown rehabilitation.

In 1998, the Artesia City Council approved the master plan, empowering Artesia MainStreet to incorporate as a nonprofit to spearhead downtown renovation and encourage merchant and community unity.

"We envision Artesia Main Street as an economically active and energetic historic downtown where — because of its attractive, clean, shaded, pedestrian-friendly, small-town atmosphere —

people will want to live, visit, shop and work,” Prendergast said. “I would like to see more retail business downtown, and I believe we are making incremental growth toward a more even business mix. We have some great ‘anchor’ businesses that have remained and chosen to remain in the downtown area for decades, and I see the trend of quality retail businesses continuing to grow.”

Public/Private Partners

Artesia MainStreet, Inc. has raised more than \$6 million — 70 percent from private sources — for capital improvement projects since its inception. It’s had a hand in renovating the façade of a vintage movie theater and worked with engineers and landscape architects to renovate Heritage Walkway and Plaza and the city’s Main Street.

“Our public/private partnership takes public dollars and leverages them with private resources to create a bigger impact overall,” Prendergast said. “There are projects that a private organization can tackle much easier than a public entity, and I think that the city of Artesia and Artesia MainStreet recognize the strength in that relationship. One step at a time is how our program has grown, and that is how the downtown has improved.”

Since 1985, thousands of jobs have been created and millions of dollars in private funds have been invested in New Mexico’s communities through the MainStreet Program. For information about past and present projects, visit www.nmmainstreet.org/.

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