



February 10, 2016

RE: Main Street Initiatives Funding, DECD

**Officers**

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Dear Senator Bye, Representative Santiago and Members of the Conservation & Development Subcommittee,

Thank you all for your service during this challenging budget cycle, for your past support of our work and for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding Governor Malloy's proposed FY17 Budget.

I am writing today to advocate for restoration of funds to the Main Street Initiatives line item within DECD. Our organization, the Westville Village Renaissance Alliance (WVRA), relies on these funds for nearly 50% of both our overall operating budget and our economic revitalization programs in the Westville Village Main Street District in New Haven. Elimination of funding would have a significantly negative impact on our efforts to foster and sustain economic revitalization, community engagement and cultural vitality in the commercial hub of Westville Village and the surrounding neighborhoods of New Haven.

Founded as a grass-roots group of small business owners, residents and artists in 1999 with a focus on revitalizing a much-blighted neighborhood commercial district, WVRA is now a designated Connecticut Main Street program with a strong track record of success via our coordination of economic recovery, maintenance, physical planning, arts and cultural programming, and marketing and promotional efforts in the district.

Over the past five years, our programs have leveraged DECD funding to reap the following reinvestments in the district:

- \$3.9 mil. in private construction and renovations, including façade work and energy efficiency upgrades, keeping local contractors at work and boosting property values;
- \$1.6 mil. in public improvements, including traffic-calming, sidewalk reconstruction, pedestrian signals and public parking upgrades, improving walkability, and accessibility for residents, visitors and businesses alike;
- A net gain of 14 new businesses, over 50 full-time jobs, and 400 part-time jobs;
- Over 90 public events, a year-round effort that has attracted over 70,000 visitors;
- 9,700 volunteer hours in service of our programs; and
- Additional funding and support from over 250 individual, business and institutional members and partners.

Despite this success, and a healthy and growing base of over 75 small businesses and over 1,000 full and part-time jobs, we are at a critical juncture in our efforts. We are in the middle of a year-long comprehensive planning & zoning reform effort for the Main Street district, a crucial step towards guiding a sustainable and place-based approach to our long-term

economic revitalization and physical development. The plan would integrate and lay out a shared vision for the protection and enhancement of existing historic and natural resources, appropriately-scaled mixed-use development, Complete Streets (i.e. improvements to walkability, bike-ability and transit access), streetscaping, parks and greenway development, green infrastructure for storm-water management, and utility upgrades.

The comp plan is a key part of our recovery efforts from a five-alarm fire in 2014 that destroyed one of our local restaurants, Delaney's, which had been a long-time economic, social and physical anchor of the district. Over 30 full-time jobs were lost, 10 residents displaced and the heart of a neighborhood destroyed. While we have succeeded in assisting all of the affected individuals, the district's current zoning structure is insufficient to successfully redevelop this site – and another half dozen un- and under-developed sites in the district. Hence, there is a crucial need to update them in order to attract economically feasible projects throughout the district while maintaining a stock of affordable housing.

Moving forward, coordination of this planning effort, improvements to walkability via three traffic-calming projects in the next year, an effort to expand our funding base through the creation of a self-taxing special services district (SSD), and the many other moving pieces of comprehensive and sustainable downtown revitalization all require intense management and strong partnerships. This is a role that we are experienced, effective, and efficient at – and uniquely positioned to conduct – and we ask that you support our continuation of this work through the Main Street Initiatives funding.

WVRA staff, volunteers, partners and other stakeholders have made noticeable gains over the past few years, but there is so much more to accomplish to ensure a healthy, safe and economically vibrant Westville Village and west side of New Haven.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Chris Heitmann". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Chris Heitmann  
Executive Director