

Historic Downtown Main Streets

Strategies for Compatible Streetscape Design

This brochure is a companion piece to the recently published *Main Street: When a Highway Runs Through It*. Its purpose is to encourage the design of streetscape and traffic calming projects that are compatible with the historic character of Oregon's downtowns. It includes photographs and brief discussions of character-defining features of historic downtowns; the physical changes that have occurred over time; recommendations on how to analyze a town's needs; and strategies for developing compatible streetscape design. It also includes graphically enhanced photos simulating various street-scape design scenarios, rules regarding federally-funded projects, and a list of contacts and resources.



Lebanon, Main Street, c.1915 (Lebanon Historical Society)

DOWNTOWN IS A UNIQUE PLACE

Whatever the condition or current use of the historic downtown in a typical Oregon city, it is likely to remain the heart of the community; the place most people think of when they refer to a town. Because the historic buildings and their setting remain as physical evidence of the past, they help recall special events and colorful stories of the town. Visitors or newer residents, who may not know the town's history, also experience a sense of the past as they experience downtown's historic character.

The most obvious features in a historic downtown are the buildings themselves. They define the character of the downtown by their physical presence and help give a community

a sense of identity, stability and history. Although few people could describe the architectural differences between an 1880, 1900 or 1920 building, almost anyone can recognize that they were constructed at different times and that they reflect the era of their origin.

Another, less obvious character-defining feature of a historic downtown is the streetscape. The streetscape incorporates the space between the buildings, which includes the streets and pedestrian walkways, and helps complete the unique physical appearance of each town. The historic streetscape is bordered by buildings that closely adjoin each other, face the street, and are flush with the sidewalk. This

space creates a sense of enclosure and makes the streetscape an "outdoor room." Just as people enjoy visiting and shopping inside the historic downtown buildings, they also appreciate the quality of this big public "room" as a space ideally suited to community activity.

Because historic downtowns have their own unique collection and combination of buildings and public spaces, they are recognizable as distinct places. They have far greater potential to provide a memorable experience than an anonymous "any town" shopping center or strip mall. When allowed to convey its historic character and accumulated patina, a downtown tells the unique story of its community.

DOWNTOWNS EVOLVE

Evolution and change are natural processes. Rather than remaining frozen in one era, towns have adapted to new technology and people's needs. Historic photographs reveal changes in the buildings of a downtown over the years as they have been constructed and altered using different styles and materials. Historic photographs also reveal that changes occurred on the streets and pedestrian walkways of a town center. In fact, the modes of transportation and the solutions developed to deal with these systems appear to have been one of the most frequent, and evident, forces of downtown change.

During the mid to late 19th Century, Oregon town centers typically started with one-story wooden buildings facing graded dirt streets with wooden sidewalks. Horses, wagons, and foot traffic were the primary modes of transportation. As downtowns grew and developed, brick multi-story structures were built and trolleys and trains became more common. Streets also improved, with surface treatments and concrete sidewalks added for pedestrian convenience. With the advent of the auto age, streets were more routinely paved, pedestrian-scaled electric street lights were added, and traffic increased markedly. By the post World War II years, the automobile took precedence over the pedestrian and increased mobility allowed businesses to locate outside of the historic core of the city. By the 1960s, suburbs and strip development had drastically changed the way people lived. Today's downtowns reflect all these influences on their development.

Opportunities

In many communities time has taken its toll on some historic main streets and incompatible changes may have damaged, altered or hidden the beauty and/or relevance of these downtowns. However, there is a growing awareness of the significant role this core area plays in a town's economic vitality and livability. Many opportunities exist to inject new life and energy into this unique part of a city. Today's trend is to restore the historic core by rehabilitating the old buildings and making the downtown more pedestrian friendly. An important component of these efforts is the restoration and rehabilitation of historic buildings, principally the responsibility of the individual owners. The treatment of streets, sidewalks, crosswalks, streetlights, traffic signals, bus stops, bike lanes, parking, etc., is another part of many revitalization efforts, and more a matter of public involvement. This brochure, while keeping buildings in mind, concentrates on the public part of a historic downtown by focusing on streetscape projects.

Top to Bottom: Evolution of Corvallis, c.1900 (O.H.S.), c.1915 (O.H.S.), c.1930 (O.H.S.), 1994 (Jim Norman)



(Note: It is recommended that communities contact federal, state and local governments to find out about the programs that encourage the preservation of historic buildings. Additional information about techniques and financial incentives for rehabilitating buildings may be obtained from organizations such as the National Park Service, the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and private preservation organizations (refer to the Contacts and Resources section for additional information.)

Other Considerations

A streetscape project is only one part of any effort to increase downtown activity. The key to the success of any downtown plan is to tailor it to meet the needs of the individual town and not haphazardly apply trendy modern interventions. The process needs to combine economic improvement by filling storefronts with quality businesses and restoring the physical appearance of the town. It also requires a good balance and coordination of public and private invest-

ment so that the town redevelops holistically. (See the National Trust Main Street program for more details. Please refer to the Contacts and Resources section).

CAREFULLY ANALYZE THE DOWNTOWN'S NEEDS

If historic character is important and the community is looking at a downtown streetscape project, there are two key questions to address at the earliest stages of planning: What is the ultimate goal of this project, and what are the character-defining historic qualities of this downtown? These questions are important because many of today's popular streetscape "improvements" – curb extensions, alternative paving materials, wholesale introduction of street trees, sidewalk widening, etc. – can compromise a downtown's historic character.

Efforts to restore the vitality of a main street can change its visual qualities for better or worse, depending on the tactics used and the effort involved. If done without consideration for the

historic fabric of the downtown, these changes can detract from the uniqueness and setting by diminishing its authenticity and sense of place. This usually results in a sanitized or cookie-cutter look that ironically makes a town look just like other newly-revitalized towns.

Traffic Calming and Pedestrian Walkways

The goal of every streetscape project should be to improve the safety and physical accessibility of its streets and pedestrian paths for the entire population. Streetscape projects should taken into account the elderly, the very young, the disabled, and those in wheelchairs or pushing strollers. Features that improve the pedestrian's ability to cross the street may be viewed as positive changes for a historic downtown, as slower traffic and increased pedestrian activity are vital to businesses located on main street. Sidewalks should be wide enough to accommodate people walking side by side and past others; people standing, talking, or browsing; and street accessories

CHARACTERISTICS OF A DOWNTOWN DISTRICT ELIGIBLE FOR NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES DESIGNATION

Does the downtown core area:

- Remain the heart of the town?
- Have a concentration of buildings located on the "Main" street that are fifty years old or older?
- Have buildings with a high degree of integrity (original materials and design) that would be recognizable by the people who built them or used them fifty, or more, years ago?
- Have one, or more, architecturally significant historic building?
- Serve as a viable social and commercial center?

If the answer is YES to most of the questions, the downtown is probably eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a district. Under this program a downtown district is worthy of special considerations and programs for retaining its cherished historic character.



Sidewalks: Historic photographs indicate that the first downtown sidewalks were constructed of wood planks. In the 1910s, durable concrete sidewalks replaced wooden ones. Some of these later sidewalks have been repaired and altered though the years. Many are now being replaced and/or widened to improve their look and functionality.

Lebanon, c.1900 (Lebanon Historical Society)

Crosswalks: Historic photographs indicate that early crosswalks were just worn paths crossing dirt roads. Once the streets were paved, simple lines marked most pedestrian crossings. Various stripping patterns and/or materials are now being used to make crosswalks more visible to drivers.

Jacksonville, c.1905 (Oregon Historical Society)



Curb Extensions: Historic photographs indicate that many towns had walkways with platforms that extended from the intersection corners to keep pedestrians out of the mud and dust. While the current trend of adding curb extensions, or bulb-outs, is to increase pedestrian safety and convenience in crossing, they serve a different function. However, there are visual similarities. Curb extensions can change the spatial relationship of the street and sidewalk, are costly, and may not be the best option for smaller towns.

Salem, c.1905 (Salem Public Library)



Pedestrian-scaled Street Lighting, LaGrande, c.1922 (Oregon Historical Society)



Trees, Nyssa, c.1905

such as light poles, hydrants, benches, etc. (For more information on sidewalk design, refer to the *Oregon Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan*.)

There are numerous ways to let drivers know they are entering an area with pedestrian activity, such as retaining on-street parking and/or accentuating the pedestrian space through decorative street lighting, banners, etc., where appropriate. Solutions such as retiming traffic signals, which requires approval from the state or city traffic engineer, and better enforcement of speed limits, can also help promote safe pedestrian movement. Additional, more contemporary solutions include increasing the visibility of crosswalks to alert drivers they are approaching a pedestrian area, adding curb extensions, and/or striping bike lanes to visually narrow the appearance of the roadway.

Pedestrian walkways are often the focus of streetscape projects. As historic photos reveal, these walkways have typically been very simply designed and built. Recent traffic studies suggest that a good way to change peoples' driving patterns is to alter the look of the streetscape. However, the introduction of new features should be carefully considered to ensure that the overall effect compliments, and does not detract from, the historic character of the community. Experience across the

country suggests that the use of brick pavers, cobblestones or colored concrete for pedestrian walkways is not recommended. These materials wear poorly, are difficult to maintain, create an uneven surface which is difficult for people with disabilities to use, and change the historic integrity of downtown.

Streetscape Elements

Elements such as pedestrian-scale street lights, trees, street furniture, and awnings can help people experience downtown in a positive way if the design is kept simple and in scale with other historic elements.

Street Lighting

Historic photographs indicate that early downtown lighting consisted of small bulbs hung above intersections by wires connected to tall wooden poles. By the 1920s, after concrete sidewalks were added and roads were paved, many towns added decorative streetlights. Usually by the 1950s, the old light fixtures were replaced with brighter lights placed on tall "cobrahead" poles to provide more illumination for automobiles.

The trend now is to return to pedestrian-scaled decorative lighting to improve pedestrian safety and add ambiance to the street. Use of historic light fixtures is recommended if they can be accurately documented through old photographs or records.

If there is no evidence that the town had decorative light fixtures, contemporary fixtures that are compatible in scale, design and color are recommended.

Trees

A review of historic photographs shows trees were planted in a number of downtowns, then removed when streets were paved. Sometimes trees were replanted during the City Beautiful Movement (1910s) and/or in the urban forestry movement that began in the 1970s. Most people appreciate trees because they provide a sense of protection from the elements and automobiles and because they soften the urban environment.

However, trees can hide one of the most important features of a downtown — the buildings. They are also a maintenance consideration for both the city and downtown property owners. Consequently, if trees are to be part of the streetscape, it is recommended that they be carefully placed so as not to obscure significant architectural features, awnings or signs. Trees do not need to be placed in evenly spaced rows along the street in order to be effective. (For more information on street trees, see ODDA's *Urban Street Tree Handbook*.)

Tree species should be chosen carefully, taking into consideration



Awnings, Albany c.1910, Oregon Historical Society

their mature size, shape, canopy density, and the amount of space available on the site. Sidewalk width must be considered when siting street trees to prevent constricting the pedestrian walkway.

If trees were not part of the original character of a downtown, awnings may be a more suitable solution. It may be more appropriate to plant trees in front of parking lots or other areas without street-edge building facades.

Street Furniture and Features

Historic photographs do not show many examples of street furniture, although benches were commonly placed in front of buildings. If there is no historic evidence of street furniture, the use of contemporary furnishings that recall historic styles, without imitating them, are recommended. Period furnishings create a false emphasis on one favored era. Placement of street furnishings should not obstruct pedestrian walkways.

Existing features such as fountains, clocks, dates and names stamped in concrete, and sidewalk glass block basement vaults should be retained because they contribute to the interest and identity of downtown.

Awnings

Old photographs show awnings have been used extensively over the years. They serve as a transition between the building, sidewalk, and street, helping visually unite them. Awnings shelter pedestrians, reduce glare, and can conserve energy. Today's canvas awnings can disguise, in a relatively inexpensive manner, incompatible building alterations and can provide both additional color and store identification.

Fixed aluminum canopies, and awnings simulating mansard roofs and umbrellas are generally incompatible with older commercial buildings. If awnings are added, choose those that look traditional and are constructed of soft canvas or vinyl materials rather than wood, metal or plastic. Make sure awnings are installed without damaging the building or visually impairing distinctive architectural features.



Bench, Union, c.1905 (Main Street, Northeastern Oregon)

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL STREETScape PROJECTS IN A HISTORIC DOWNTOWN

- Look at historic photographs to see how the town evolved. What did it look like at the turn of the century, in the 1920s and in 1950? Research is the key activity that leads to preserving the authentic character of a town.
- Observe the town today. What historic features remain? What needs to be improved to make it more vital and economically successful?
- Allow the town's own character to show through by minimizing additions or new features. Maintain or retain historic features and authentic design elements.
- Work in concert with local citizens, community leaders, professional planners, preservationists, traffic engineers, and economic development specialists to create a vision that builds upon the best of the past as a solid foundation for the future.
- Meet current safety, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and construction and highway standards, or seek exceptions allowed for historic places.
- Keep the design simple. Do not apply elements that are overly busy and detract from the original features. Use high quality contemporary design for new elements, not "fake" historic designs.

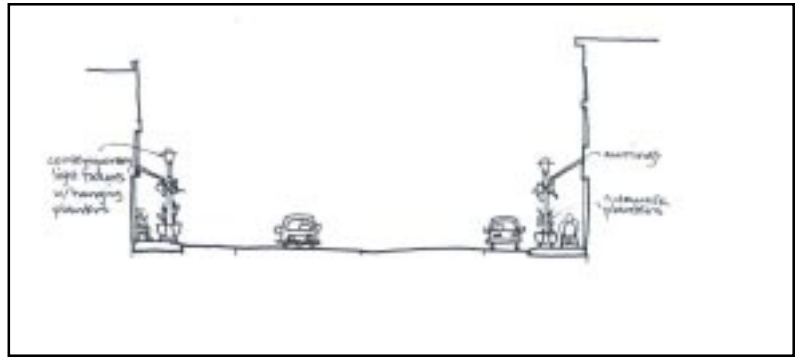


Lakeview, 1998 (This photo was used as a basis for the graphic simulations on pages 8 and 9.)

DESIGN SCENARIOS

The following graphically enhanced photos are presented to demonstrate a few of the possible options for streetscape design. Lakeview was used as it represents a small Oregon town with a potential historic district. The scenarios range from few changes (Scenario 1) to more significant impacts (Scenario 4). They address, to differing degrees, the questions presented earlier in this brochure: What is the goal of this project, and what are the character-defining historic qualities of this downtown?

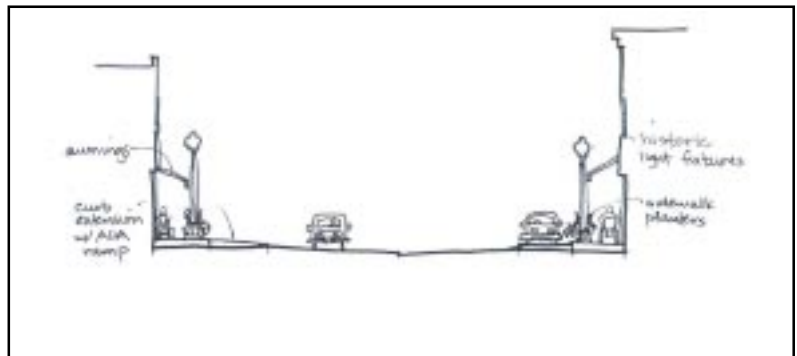
Scenario 1 Elements - Sidewalk width unchanged; scored concrete pattern in sidewalk; historic glass block basement vaults remain; one planter and trash receptacle at each corner; ADA ramps; contemporary light fixtures (6 per block); hanging planters with flowers on light posts; awnings; benches..



Scenario 1 is an option that improves the pedestrian experience while having the *least* impact to the historic character of the community. The sidewalk and street widths have not been changed, thereby retaining the spatial relationship of the street to the sidewalk and buildings. The selected light fixtures are more contemporary in design, and do not give a false sense of history. They are appropriate when there is no evidence they existed during the historic period. The use of hanging baskets provides color and softens the urban street without obscuring the views of the historic buildings. The street planters, trash receptacles, and benches are simply detailed. They are not permanent features and have little impact on the historic character of the street. Awnings have been added to illustrate how they can enhance the pedestrian experience.

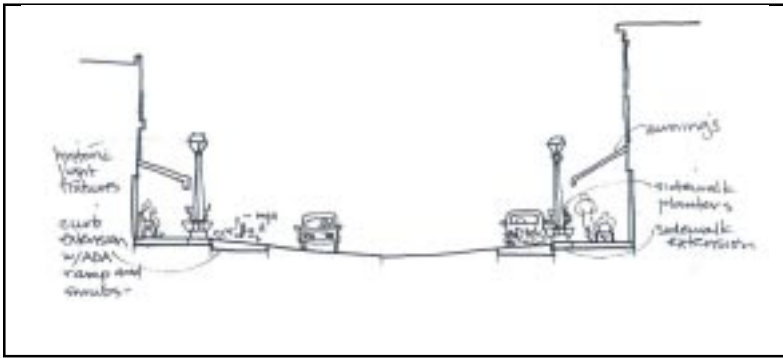


Scenario 2 Elements - Sidewalk width unchanged; scored concrete pattern in sidewalks; historic glass block basement vaults remain; curb extensions at each corner, with original sidewalk edge distinguished from curb extension through a change in concrete treatment; ADA ramps; two planters and trash receptacles at each corner; historic light fixtures (6 per block); awnings, benches.



In Scenario 2, a few non-historic features have been added to the streetscape. Curb extensions have been introduced at the intersections, altering the spatial relationship of the street to the sidewalk and buildings. However, the alteration has been mitigated by demarcating the original sidewalk edge through a distinction in the surface treatment of the concrete. The light fixtures with the “acorn” globe were chosen for this scenario to illustrate how a historic fixture that is often used in downtown streetscape projects appears in a town such as Lakeview.

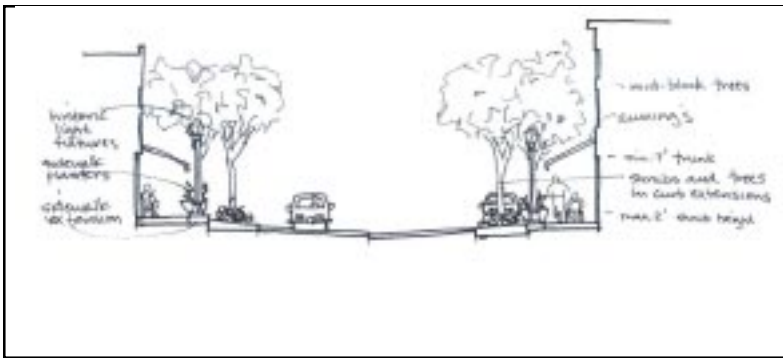




Scenario 3 Elements - Sidewalk width increased; scored concrete pattern in sidewalks; historic glass block basement vaults remain; curb extensions at each corner, with original sidewalk edge distinguished from curb extension through a change in concrete treatment; shrubs in curb extensions; ADA ramps; two planters and trash receptacles at each corner; historic light fixtures (6 per block); awnings, benches.



In Scenario 3, the number of additional features along the block have been increased as the emphasis is on pedestrian pathways. In this instance, the sidewalk width has been increased, and curb extensions (same demarcation in concrete detailing as in Scenario 2) with planted areas have been added, visually emphasizing the corners. The light fixture design is loosely based upon a historic photo of a pre-1900 street light; an extra fixture has been added along each side of the street. An additional awning on the right side building emphasizes the effect this type of element provides as a transitional space.



Scenario 4 Elements - Sidewalk width increased; scored concrete pattern in sidewalks; historic glass block basement vaults remain; curb extensions at each corner, with original sidewalk edge distinguished from curb extension through a change in concrete treatment; shrubs in curb extension; ADA ramps; two planters and trash receptacles at each corner; historic light fixtures (6 per block); awnings, benches; trees, six per block.



Scenario 4 is the result of a full-scale streetscape enhancement project with the addition of street trees to Scenario 3. Historic photos did reveal that some randomly-placed trees were located in the commercial downtown district during the historic period, with the majority being located in Lakeview's town square. The enhanced pedestrian design has been severely altered from the original street design.

CONCLUSION: It is up to each community to determine to what extent they wish to "revitalize" the streets of their downtown. The intent of this brochure is to encourage each community to look seriously at what they want out of a streetscape project, then to carefully select those items that best meet those needs while retaining each town's own unique sense of place.

Documentation Needed if Federal Funds Are Used In A National Register Eligible Downtown

If National Register eligible historic resources are to be impacted by a federally-funded transportation project (including displacement, right-of-way acquisition, street enhancements such as curb extensions, bike paths, and intersection improvements), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires that determinations of eligibility (DOE) for the National Register be prepared for the historic resources. The DOE is a brief report with a physical description, historic significance, boundaries, map, and photographs that is submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for concurrence.

If there will be an effect to a historic resource determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, a Finding of Effect Report on the historic resource must be prepared (Section 106 report). Any alteration within the boundaries of the resource must be evaluated, including effects to structures, streets, sidewalks, trees, rockwork, fences, and landscaping. An alteration to any feature that contributes to the eligibility of the property is considered an effect to the historic property under Section 106. For highway related projects that include enhancements, ODOT cultural resources staff and SHPO must coordinate and concur on the level of effect. Effect levels under Section 106 include: "no effect," "no adverse effect," and "adverse effect."

In the event the level of effect is determined to be "adverse" under Section 106, (i.e. alters a characteristic which contributes to the eligibility of the historic resource for the National Register) mitigation efforts, and in some cases, Section 4(f) documentation, are required. Mitigation efforts that would minimize harm and/or photographic recordation of the historic resource are required in the event of a finding of adverse effect. The mitigation efforts are coordinated between ODOT and the SHPO, and are formalized in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which the SHPO, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), ODOT, and a local jurisdiction must sign if one is involved in the project funding. The photographic recordation usually includes archival photographs taken by a professional photographer using the Historic American Building Survey standards (HABS).

Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act requires the evaluation of

alternatives, which would avoid effects to the resource. However, street projects that encourage pedestrian activities, are not required for vehicular use, are consistent with current local and state transportation plans, do not remove historic features, remain under local jurisdiction, and are reversible, do not constitute a "constructive use" and would not require Section 4(f) documentation.

The above reports (DOE, Section 106 Finding of Effect, Section 4(f) evaluation, MOA and HABS recordation), plus the coordination with the appropriate agencies (ODOT, SHPO, FHWA, ACHP (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation), and local jurisdiction), normally requires several (six to ten) months of preparation and must involve qualified cultural professionals experienced with regulatory laws. Consultants must coordinate with ODOT's Cultural Resources Specialists on all phases of work before contacting the SHPO. All regulatory documents and reports must be transmitted under ODOT letterhead.

If the process and reports required by the laws are not completed correctly, FHWA will not allocate funds for the project. Inadequate or untimely coordination of cultural resource issues can cause a project to be delayed or modified.

Contacts and Resources

Rosalind Keeney (986-5814) or Julie Osborne (986-3810); ODOT, Cultural Resources Specialists, Environmental Services, www.odot.state.or.us/eshtm/cult; Oregon's Bicycle & Pedestrian Program; Michael Ronkin (986-3555); www.odot.state.or.us/techserv/bikewalk Traffic Management Section; 986-3568 www.odot.state.or.us/tstrafmgtpublic/contact.htm

Dept. of Land Conservation and Development, Transportation and Growth Management Program; Pamela Kambur (373-0050, x. 228); www.lcd.state.or.us/

State Historic Preservation Office, (503) 378-4168; arcweb.sos.state.or.us/shpo/shpoabout.html

Federal Laws/Regulations Relating to Cultural Resources, www.cr.nps.gov/linklaws.htm

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/tax/rehabstandards.htm

Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives, www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/tax/brochure1.htm

36 CFR Part 800 - Protection of Historic Properties, www.achp.gov/regs.html

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, www.cr.nps.gov/local-law/nhpa1966.htm

Oregon Downtown Development Assoc., P.O. Box 2912, Salem, OR 97308 Info@odda.org; www.odda.org 503-587-0574 (phone) 503-587-0580 (fax)

Preservation Organizations, www.historichome.com/Organizations/organizations.htm

Norman, James. Oregon Main Street. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1994.

Main Street ... when a highway runs through it: A Handbook for Oregon Communities. 11/99. Contact: Pamela Kambur, DLCD (503-373-0050, ext. 286)

Highway Design Manual
Kent Belleque at ODOT (503-986-3536)

Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts, www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/briefs/brief11.htm

Kentucky Streetscape Design Guidelines for Historic Commercial Districts
Sponsored by the Kentucky Heritage Council in collaboration with the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet and the Renaissance. February 1999.

Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities. United States Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board. (202) 653-7834 v/TDD (202) 653-7863 FAX

Barbara, Ruth Bailey. Main Street Northeastern Oregon. Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1982.

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