

OPERATION FACELIFT: DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION GOES REGIONAL IN SOUTHERN IDAHO

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Big city versus rural community is often easily differentiated – not only by population, of course – but by their downtowns. Major cities have the real estate, clientele and traffic to provide opportunities for a wide variety of commerce, dining opportunities and night life. Rural communities frequently find their downtowns struggling for commerce and customers. Real estate and surrounding areas can be rundown and former tenants can outnumber current tenants.

History explains part of the reason for the degeneration of rural downtowns. In the 50's and 60's, downtown industries left for bigger cities while retailers left for big city malls. Over the decades, thousands of downtowns nationwide were effectively closed for business.

The result has been an ongoing battle by small communities to draw businesses to locate downtown while at the same time, looking for finances to support efforts to clean and build up downtown areas.

Several southern Idaho communities have faced similar challenges. Many downtowns across the region have not seen main-street revitalization for some 50 or 60 years. This made for very depressed downtowns throughout southern Idaho.

The First Step: Just Do It

Over a decade ago, southern Idaho business leaders initiated a concerted, long-term effort toward economic development, marketing and local business support in area communities. In the last year, southern Idaho has placed a special emphasis on identifying ways to revitalize the region's rural downtowns. Most regional economic development professionals and city leaders determined that downtown façade improvements were a critical first step toward downtown revitalization. Just getting downtown area's cleaned up, painted, and spruced up with landscaping would bring a new look to the downtown and generate community pride.

Southern Idaho Economic Development (SIEDO) developed a region-wide downtown revitalization effort – “Operation Facelift. New Look. New Attitude. New Business.” – to provide the focal point for rural “main street” improvement projects.

With the assistance of Southern Idaho Rural Development (SIRD), *Operation Facelift* was presented to several rural communities to solicit and encourage participation in this first-time effort.



“Our goal in developing *Operation Facelift* was to create a region-wide downtown revitalization project that would help improve downtown areas, build community pride and encourage downtown activity,” said Jan Rogers, executive director of SIEDO. “It needed to be an effort that could continue every year in order to have the greatest impact on our communities. While 11 communities around the region signed on for this first round, we anticipate a significant increase next year thanks to this year's success,” she said.

Getting It Right the First Time

Funding for *Operation Facelift* became one of the most critical factors that would drive community participation and the future life of the project. It would have to come through private sector donations. Communities were contacted, sold on Operation Facelift, and project teams representing a wide swath of the community were secured.

“In order to build a community-wide program, we needed the buy-in of the majority of community residents and

groups,” explained Larry Hall, director of SIRD. “Once communities were on board, it was time to hit the phones to secure financial support. Assistance came in the form of cash and supplies such as lumber, paint, building materials and cleaning items. The local television station also kicked in \$1,000 for the most improved project in each community to run a local ad,” Hall said. SIEDO and Idaho National Lab provided the initial seed money to launch funding.

All Around Success

In June 2011, the week-long *Operation Facelift* effort went regional, with 11 rural southern Idaho communities and 38 businesses participating to clean up, paint and give their downtown's a new look. The programs success was substantial.

“Participation in Operation Facelift has truly ‘uplifted’ our community with many additional businesses getting involved to improve their own buildings,” said Jake Tolman, project facilitator for the City of Kimberly. “Area residents were encouraged to clean up their properties while volunteers and youth came out in droves to help in this successful week-long effort,” Tolman said.

And, *Facelift's* residual impact was unexpected. “While our short-term goal was downtown spruce-up, we also hoped to generate a buzz to lift rural downtown's attitudes and potentially drive business there,” SIEDO's Rogers explained. “Since the event, we have found that participating communities have a more positive attitude about their downtown area, volunteers demonstrated an interest in helping their community while many other businesses took their own initiative to make improvements to the outside of their buildings, even weeks after the project concluded. We're encouraged by the residual impact made to our downtowns after this community-building project,” she said.

Southern Idaho's *Operation Facelift* will continue to be a valuable tool toward rural downtown revitalization on a broad, regional scale. 🏡