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CONTACT: Kristen Bujold, Siren | 517.404.7539 | kristen@sirenstrategy.co

ROYAL OAK DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY EARNS NATIONAL REVITALIZATION AWARD

CHICAGO (April 2021) – The Downtown Development Authority in Royal Oak, Michigan is one of six winners of the Main Street Forward Awards, which recognize communities that have shown exemplary recovery and resilience efforts amid the multiple crises of 2020. Selected by a national jury of economic development experts, Royal Oak’s Downtown Development Authority (DDA) is being honored for its two-pronged approach to supporting and stimulating the local economy during the pandemic.

“When COVID-19 threatened Royal Oak’s thriving business district, the DDA quickly shifted its resources to help. Not only did they help businesses through direct assistance, but they also established an innovative program to generate consumer demand,” said Main Street America’s President and CEO Patrice Frey. “Through the Downtown Dollars gift card initiative, the DDA attracted new shoppers to downtown Royal Oak, helped build customer loyalty, and brought the community together.”

Located just a few miles north of Detroit, Royal Oak is a vibrant destination for entertainment, dining, and shopping. Under normal circumstances, Royal Oak’s downtown is bustling with people—yet its urban density and reliance on foot traffic made the pandemic’s impacts that much more challenging. When stay-at-home orders were enacted in March 2020, it was clear that the impact could be devastating to the local economy, resulting in business closures and long-term job losses. Just as important, the threat to small businesses also represented a threat to the community’s character—and to the future of Royal Oak as a destination for visitors and entrepreneurs.

Faced with this challenge, the DDA took immediate action to establish the Rebound Royal Oak Program, funded with the \$2 million proceeds from a 2018 land sale. As its first initiative in the program, the DDA offered small business assistance grants to restaurants, retailers, salons, entertainment venues, and cafes. All told, 92 businesses applied for the program—and all 92 were approved for funding, accounting for nearly \$1.1 million in total. Grants were disbursed in installments for businesses, who could count on a monthly check from the DDA through the early summer of 2020.

While direct assistance helped prevent the local economy from collapsing, the DDA also stimulated demand by subsidizing consumer spending through Royal Oak Downtown Dollars. Funded by an initial \$400,000 allocation from Rebound Royal Oak, the DDA sent free \$20 e-gift cards to the first 20,000 Royal Oak residents and consumers that signed up for its e-newsletter. The cards can be redeemed at more than 70 locations in downtown Royal Oak, including restaurants, cafes, retailers, entertainment venues, and salons.

Downtown Dollars not only helped local shops stay open, but it also generated more business. In fact, Mathew Abraham, owner of Rail & Anchor, saw sales spike 20% year-over-year in July. People from throughout southeastern Michigan began visiting Royal Oak to redeem their gift

cards, as the program built customer loyalty, solidified relationships between shoppers and local brands, and strengthened a sense of community.

“The business recovery program established by the Downtown Development Authority is the most impactful project we have ever implemented, and we are honored to be recognized by Main Street America,” said Sean Kammer, downtown manager for Royal Oak. “The grants and the Downtown Dollars program are helping to make sure all businesses are successful, and that Downtown Royal Oak continues to evolve into the future. We have heard from so many that these programs saved their business, and it’s amazing to see what can be accomplished when a community comes together.”

The Downtown Dollars program was such a success that it continued into the holiday season, with a match for anyone who purchased cards online. Downtown Royal Oak consumers can still purchase Downtown Dollars gift cards by visiting visitroyaloak.com.

“We are proud of the quick response and progressive efforts of the Royal Oak Downtown Development Authority,” said John Bry, Coordinator for the Main Street Oakland County program. “The leadership of the DDA serves as a model and inspiration for the other Main Street Oakland County communities and downtowns everywhere in times of crisis. The proactive approach and vision implemented by downtown Royal Oak resulted in many businesses being saved or extended critical lifelines impacted by the pandemic. The Royal Oak DDA has clearly demonstrated a Main Street Forward mentality, and the vital economic development role Main Street communities everywhere play in their communities.”

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ABOUT THE MAIN STREET FORWARD AWARDS

Main Street America, a program of the National Main Street Center, has historically selected the country's best examples of comprehensive commercial district revitalization each year. Given the events of 2020—including the converging impacts of COVID-19, a national and local reckoning related to racial justice and equity, and cascading climate crises—Main Street America decided to take a different approach to this round of awards. To recognize the inspiring tenacity and creativity Main Street programs have demonstrated over the past year, we introduced the Main Street Forward Awards, which honor six communities that serve as examples for the network—and for the country at large—of the power and perseverance of Main Street.

ABOUT MAIN STREET AMERICA

Main Street America has been helping revitalize older and historic commercial districts for 40 years. Today it is a network of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, Inc., a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. For more information, visit mainstreet.org.

ABOUT ROYAL OAK DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

The Downtown Development Authority’s mission is to promote economic growth and revitalization in downtown Royal Oak. The DDA accomplishes this mission by improving and maintaining an inviting and user-friendly infrastructure, marketing Downtown Royal Oak to consumers and businesses, and encouraging preservation of Royal Oak's downtown. For more information, visit <https://www.romi.gov/399/Downtown-Development-Authority>.