Congratulations, Vineland, Millville and Bridgeton and their “Main Street” programs!

Because of these cities’ tenacity, determination and even passion for their mission to improve their downtown areas, the Cultural & Heritage Commission will present each with its prestigious “Encore” award on May 26 at Bally’s in Atlantic City. The award is given through the South Jersey Cultural Alliance to organizations nominated by members of the Alliance.

Those three largest cities in Cumberland County have shared not only proximity to each other but also a condition common to many small communities throughout the nation: a severe decline of their downtown areas as a result of the sudden development of the shopping mall. The decline has been painfully visible to those who once enjoyed the luxury of finding everything they needed on their town’s main thoroughfare. Stores closed, never to be replaced. Streets became victims of blight and neglect. People who once flocked to the downtown now avoided it, fearful of the changed environment.

But in recent years the trend has been slowly turning. Millville established its arts district. Bridgeton revitalized its reputation as a historic destination. Vineland is in the throes of establishing a “restaurant row,” a farmers’ market, and, after many years of zero activity, opening a renovated Landis Theater, now known as the Landis Theater Performing Arts Center.

What is Main Street New Jersey?

It’s a state-sponsored program administered through New Jersey’s Department of Community Affairs. It provides selected communities with technical assistance and training to revitalize historic downtowns. Roy Kaneshiki, chairman of the Cumberland Cultural & Heritage Commission, said, “The Main Street approach of heritage preservation and cultural programming has proven itself as a critical incubator of revitalization and development.”

Here’s a brief look at what each of the three Cumberland County “Main Streets” are doing to promote their downtowns:

Vineland

Vineland Downtown Improvement District/Main Street Vineland Executive Director Todd Noon reports that in the past three years, 51 new businesses were created in downtown Vineland with 107
new jobs. Seventy-one downtown businesses were enrolled in the façade program to brighten their storefronts and more than $16.6 million in public and private funds was reinvested in downtown Vineland.

In addition, the Landis Theater will re-open this spring after 23 years of neglect and disuse following its closing. It will showcase professional performers and productions as well as serve as a venue for local performing artists.

Another major addition to the downtown will be a 30,000-square-foot Landis Marketplace featuring Amish vendors of seafood, fresh and specialty foods. It will occupy the space on Landis Avenue formerly known as “99 Cent Dreams” and Newberry’s before that.

The Director is also proud of the many successful special events throughout the year such as the Seafood Festival, the Ribs-n-Chili Cook-off, the Cruise Down Memory Lane and the Holiday Parade.

Main Street Vineland has three full-time staffers and close to 100 volunteers. Noon commented, “Receiving the award is certainly an honor for Main Street Vineland, and one of which we are extremely proud. The Board of Directors, staff and volunteers of Main Street Vineland all believe in the work we do and the positive changes we’re making in the downtown as a result of that work.”

Millville

This small city put itself on the map about 10 years ago with the development of an arts district that has drawn artists from various parts of the country to set up shop in an arts-friendly environment. According to Marianne Lods, Main Street/Millville Development Corp. Executive Director, 14 pioneer artists launched the arts district theme, about the same time the Riverfront Renaissance Center for the Arts was renovated and opened in April 2001. “It was and is the keystone of the Glasstown Arts District,” said Lods.

She added that real estate values have doubled over the last several years as the Main Street organization stepped up an advertising and marketing campaign to help businesses and reinforce the branding of Millville as an arts destination.

A major project that has been in the works for a long time is set for its final phase: the restoration of the Levoy Theatre, a former movie house like Vineland’s Landis Theater. The Levoy, a longtime fixture on High Street, soon will see new life as a performing arts center.

Another project is the “Wayfinding Signage Program,” a series of signs posted at key points throughout the city and beyond that point the way to attractions such as Wheaton Arts, the N.J. Motorsports Park and the Millville Army Airfield Museum as well as public places such as City Hall and the Library. It was a three-year project of the Design Committee, Lods said, facilitated by a successful grant application written by Richard Jones, Assistant City Engineer.

The Director, who runs a staff of two with about 75 volunteers, said, “The revitalization of Millville’s downtown has been ongoing for 10 years and has been a labor of love. On behalf of the Board of Directors, City of Millville leaders and professional staff, the entrepreneurs and business owners and numerous volunteers, I am honored to receive the Paul Aiken Encore Award.”

Bridgeton

This city holds the distinction of having the oldest Main Street community in the state (established in 1990) as well as its largest historic district. It is also one of the largest historic districts in the country, said Executive Director Carola Hartley, with more than 2,200 qualifying properties. It is also a member of the National Main Street program.

Recent successful projects include the annual Cinco De Mayo Cultural Fest, held in May; the Bridgeton Outdoor Market at the Riverfront, from June to August; and the annual Christmas parade in November. Upcoming in June is a garden party celebration to benefit the Historic Nail House Museum, and a crab fest on Aug. 28 as part of the Cohansey River Fest.

Other major projects in the planning stages include a pocket park on the corner of Commerce and Laurel Streets, a co-op kitchen that will serve food-related businesses, and a Culinary District downtown.

Hartley is the sole full-time staff member but is assisted by more than 100 volunteers. She said, “It’s an honor to receive the Encore Award. We at Main Street Bridgeton are working very hard to promote heritage tourism. We feel we’re going in the right direction.”