

Investing in Rural Downtowns: What role are EDDs playing?

Downtowns are what typically give rural, suburban and urban areas life, providing a place to shop, socialize and connect with others, creating a sense of community for residents, but also making visitors feel welcome. Maintaining a strong downtown core can be challenging especially for rural regions struggling with outmigration of youth and others, an increase in big box stores and dollar stores, and the provision of necessary services. Downtowns are also typically the social centers of towns, offering spaces in which to connect with others, while also often holding historical and cultural significance in the area.

This resource explores the content of the Thriving Downtowns investment playbook, translating the most meaningful content for EDDs, while showcasing how EDDs are playing roles in downtown revitalization in their regions. This resource is offered through the NADO Research Foundation's Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP).

HOW EDDS ARE SUPPORTING DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) are engaging in downtown revitalization in their regions in a variety of ways. Naturally, as regional organizations, EDDs are not always focused on one community. However, their work with communities follows a variety of pathways, including main street planning, brownfields redevelopment, facilitation, funding and implementation.

DOWNTOWN PLANNING

Many EDDs engage with their communities through downtown planning or placemaking. "Placemaking is centered around observing, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work, and play in a particular space in order to understand their needs and aspirations for that space and for their community as a whole." EDDs' work on main street planning can take many forms. Read stories from Virginia, New York, Florida, Alabama, and Iowa.



TAKEAWAYS

01 INVENTORYING

A key starting point for downtown revitalization efforts is inventorying what the community has – its readiness factors including:

- Community assets
- Built infrastructure
- Economic ecosystem
- Natural environment
- Local government and civic structures

02 PATHWAY TO REVITALIZATION

The pathway to revitalization moves from planning activities through predevelopment, to a go/no go decision, into development and into ongoing management and administration of the property. EDDs typically aren't developers or managers, but they may fit into the Planning and/or Predevelopment activities, assisting with planning, community outreach, funding, prefeasibility and feasibility studies.

03 ROLE OF EDDS

While it may be surprising that regional organizations are playing important roles in individual communities, EDDs have the expertise and a broader regional view. EDDs are contributing to downtown redevelopment in a variety of ways that make sense given their strengths, including planning, brownfields assessment and redevelopment, placemaking, facilitation, funding and implementation. This, like much of what EDDs do, requires collaboration with communities and state and federal agencies.

BROWNFIELDS

A brownfield is a property for which expansion, redevelopment or reuse is complicated by the presence, or potential presence, of hazardous substances, pollutants or contaminants. Brownfields are often present in downtowns and need to be assessed, and sometimes remediated, before they can be redeveloped. With EPA funding, EDDs can support their communities in cleaning up these potentially contaminated properties and readying them for redevelopment. Learn more about Bear Paw Development Commission's brownfields program in Montana and Region IV Development Association in Idaho.

FACILITATION

EDDs are connectors, building social (trust and networks) and political capital (voice and power), by bringing communities, businesses and institutions together. Facilitating discussion around downtown development is a key role for EDDs. Learn more about EDDs focused on facilitation in support of downtown development: Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (NE) and Houston Galveston Area Council (TX).

FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Once the plans have been developed, the brownfields have been cleaned up and the networks have been established, it's time for implementation. Many EDDs assist their communities with the funding required helping put together the capital stacks to make these projects happen. Read stories about East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (WI) and Area 15 Regional Planning Commission (IA).

EDD-PRODUCED RESOURCES

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) are developing their own downtown revitalization resources for their own communities, including the few mentioned below. EDDs who are interested in downtown revitalization may find these resources useful as sources for inspiration or elements that might be easy to adapt or adopt in their own places. Learn more about Buckeye Hills Regional Council's (OH) Downtown Revitalization Guidebook, Houston Galveston Area Council's (TX) Bringing Back Main Street: A Guide for Downtown Revitalization, and Lake Champlain/Lake George Regional Planning Board's (NY) Main Street Toolkit.

