Northern California
Downtown Revitalization Playbook

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IMPROVING
CONNECTIVITY, ACCESS, AND MOBILITY

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IMPROVING CONNECTIVITY, ACCESS, **AND MOBILITY**

Many communities are located along major transportation corridors that once brought people, commerce, and economic activity directly through downtown. Over time, however, infrastructure that historically supported prosperity has increasingly become a barrier. Stakeholders in the participating northern California communities described highways, rail lines, and major roadways that divide downtowns from surrounding neighborhoods, parks, waterfronts, and commercial areas. These conditions create safety concerns, limit connectivity and accessibility, and weaken the sense of a cohesive downtown environment. Even where crossings exist, residents and visitors may perceive them as inconvenient, unsafe, or unwelcoming.

Proximity to transportation infrastructure does not necessarily translate into economic benefit. In many communities, traffic moves too quickly to notice downtown businesses, while travelers often stop only at convenience-oriented services clustered near highway interchanges. Compounding these challenges are infrastructure constraints, including limited water and sewer capacity, insufficient parking, and gaps in pedestrian facilities such as sidewalks. Together, these barriers reduce downtown visibility, accessibility, and investment potential, preventing these districts from fully realizing their economic and community value.

Why it Matters

For downtown revitalization efforts to succeed, communities must shift their focus from simply accommodating traffic to converting pass-through traffic into visitors, while simultaneously reconnecting areas that have been divided by transportation infrastructure. In addition, communities must adopt safety approaches that create a more accessible environment and deal with the existing challenges and shortcomings.

Step by Step Actions

1. **Assess Conditions and Areas of Greatest Concern** – Understanding the patterns of travel for visitors and residents between their points of origin and destination can help build an understanding of what improvements may be most impactful. Identifying barriers, crossings, and other impediments that impact local business locations (current or prospective) will help generate potential solutions while amassing a record of the challenges. Information to be gathered can include photos and descriptions, and any other supporting information including crash incident reports, police reports, and statements from individuals regarding close calls or other instances of concern.

2. **Evaluate Potential Solutions of all Sizes** - Solutions to the identified challenges are likely to be incremental and will evolve over time. While it may be immediately impossible to remove or remediate a major road or railway, a meaningful start could include efforts to establish additional signage, crossing markings, and visual guidance for pedestrians and non-motorists. A listing of potential approaches and identified countermeasures are available on this page.

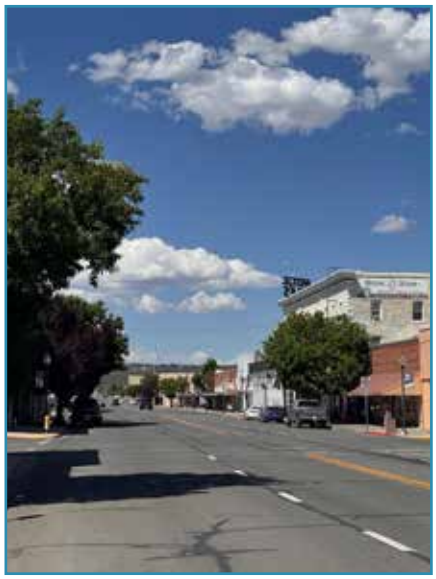
3. **Experiment with Temporary or Short-Term Implementations** – Communities can often work with local stakeholders and transportation officials to experiment with low or no-cost approaches to accessibility improvements. This can include temporary crosswalks, bulb outs, bike lanes, signage, lane reductions, and similar concepts. These temporary improvements can help test larger efforts prior to making permanent changes or seeking significant project funding.

4. **Build Support for Larger or Longer-Term Efforts** – Communities have experienced great success with improvement efforts including road diets, lane narrowing, gateway treatments, intersection modifications, enhanced signals and lighting, and driver information signs. These often solve the connectivity and accessibility challenges but require longer term planning and project development efforts as well as elevated levels of resources including matching funds.

Who to Involve:

Key partners may evolve as the intensity of the effort increases based on the interventions identified.

- Residents accessing critical areas
- Visitors (where possible)
- Transportation officials (DOT, etc.)
- Property owners
- Business operators
- Public safety officials
- Municipal officials – development offices, planners, city councilors, mayors
- Chambers of commerce
- Main Street organizations



Potential Timeline

Phase 1 – Collect assessment information regarding locations of concern for both residents and visitors in critical business areas. Information can be gathered on existing, underutilized, or potential locations. Stories illustrating concern or missed opportunities can be especially impactful.

Phase 2 – After evaluating assessment information, determine if any short-term or temporary improvements can be deployed. If larger interventions are required, begin utilizing collected information to build a project profile on suggested improvements. Begin socializing these concepts with local leadership and transportation officials.

Phase 3 – Evaluate short-term and temporary improvements and determine which should become permanent. Embark on these longer-term initiatives.

Costs

Many of the initial assessment efforts are intended to be undertaken by municipal staff or volunteers, so out-of-pocket costs should be minimal or non-existent.

Temporary demonstration projects or pop-up efforts are intended to be completed at an extremely low cost, optimally $1,000 or less.

For larger interventions, cost will likely be determined in partnership with state Department of Transportation (DOT) officials as part of available funding and assistance programs. General cost information on studied countermeasures can be accessed through the Federal Highway Administration and are generally categorized into three categories: low cost – up to $5,000 (signage, markings, removal of obstacles); medium cost - $5,000 to $50,000 (signals, beacons, control system adjustments); and high cost – greater than $50,000 (construction, reconstruction, demolition, surface treatments).