



REVIVING

RURAL DOWNTOWNS: A RURAL CALIFORNIA DOWNTOWN PLAYBOOK

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funded by Wells Fargo and led by the California Finance Consortium (CFC), the Reviving Rural Downtowns: A Rural California Downtown Playbook project worked with two communities from each organization's region (eight total), conducted downtown environment scans, and developed a replicable toolkit and training for local champions to move projects from vacancy to vitality.

California Finance Consortium

The California Finance Consortium (CFC) was formalized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation in 2015 by a partnership of rural economic development organizations that had been informally collaborating for the previous 25 years. Two of the member organizations are also CDFIs, and three are designated Economic Development Administration (EDA) regional economic development districts. The four member organizations are:

- 3CORE Economic Development Corporation, headquartered in Chico, CA, and serving Butte, Glenn, and Tehama Counties
- North Edge Economic Development Corporation, headquartered in Arcata, CA, and serving Humboldt, Del Norte, Lake, and Mendocino Counties
- Superior California Economic Development, Inc., headquartered in Redding, CA, and serving Modoc, Shasta, Siskiyou, and Trinity Counties
- Yuba-Sutter Economic Development Corporation, headquartered in Yuba City, CA, and serving Yuba and Sutter Counties

The consortium helps its members deliver well-structured and reasonably priced capital to healthy, growing small and medium-sized businesses in underserved areas by purchasing participations in and assuming equal risk for loans underwritten and approved by member lenders that meet CFC participation guidelines. Consortium members also provide in-house technical assistance and/or connection to other business assistance providers in their communities.

An early grant from Wells Fargo helped founders execute the development phase of the CFC business plan.

Mission Statement

The mission of California Finance Consortium (CFC) is to advance local enterprises in underserved areas, expand the economic output in their communities by linking these enterprises to capital, expertise, education, and other entrepreneurial support services, and to carry on other charitable activities associated with these goals as allowed by law.

Community and Business Development Goals

Collectively, CFC members focus on identifying unmet credit and technical assistance needs in a complex rural geography with diverse populations, and on creating programs, products, and services to meet these needs.

With support from Wells Fargo, the Downtown Revitalization Playbook reflects a collaborative effort to help rural communities strengthen their downtowns, build local leadership capacity, and create opportunities for long-term economic growth and community vitality.

This project was led by the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) with support from Morrison & Company Consulting, Inc.

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) is a 501c4 membership association that represents the interests of regional community and economic development practitioners. Established in 1967, NADO advocates for federal policies and programs that promote equitable community development, economic competitiveness, rural development, economic mobility, and quality of place. NADO represents a national network of more than 500 Regional Development Organizations (RDOs) across the country.



The NADO Research Foundation (NADO RF) is a 501c3 non-profit organization that provides technical assistance, education, research, and training to support and strengthen the national network of Regional Development Organizations (RDOs). Established in 1988, the NADO RF provides thought leadership, conducts research, and produces publications focused on promising practices and innovative approaches that promote regional community development.



Morrison & Company Consulting, Inc. was founded in 2002 and nearly 25 years later, serves a broad range of clients, including for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, industry associations, and city and county jurisdictions nationwide. Morrison provides services across three primary practice areas: Business & Accounting Advisory, Grants, and People Solutions. Key aspects of Morrison's services include feasibility studies; business and strategic planning; outsourced accounting and finance; financial modeling; competitive grant strategy, writing and administration; executive recruitment, organizational development, and strategic facilitation.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PROBLEM - NATIONALLY AND IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Downtowns bring vitality to rural, suburban, and urban communities alike. They serve as central places where people can shop, gather, and connect, fostering a strong sense of community for residents while also creating a welcoming atmosphere for visitors. Beyond their economic role, downtowns are typically the social and cultural heart of a community. They provide spaces for interaction and connection, while also reflecting local history and identity, often holding important historical and cultural significance.

However, maintaining a vibrant downtown can be difficult, especially in rural regions facing challenges such as youth outmigration; the growth of big-box and dollar stores and online shopping; and the need to sustain essential services. Consumers have expectations of being able to buy everything they need in one place. What this looks like in some rural downtowns is vacant storefronts, inadequate signage and wayfinding, lack of activity, and lack of options.

Quality of life in rural communities, however, directly influences business success and overall economic growth. A vibrant downtown or commercial district plays a vital role in this, serving as a hub for entertainment, civic activity, and commerce. It strengthens community identity and pride, fosters connection and cohesion among residents, and creates a strong sense of place. In addition, thriving downtowns can attract visitors, project a positive image that helps draw in investment, and support local economies by creating jobs, encouraging small businesses, generating retail activity, and contributing to property and sales tax revenue.

The Region

This region of northern California, north of Sacramento and bounded by the state of Oregon to the north and the state of Nevada to the east, encompasses 13 counties: Del Norte, Siskiyou, Modoc, Shasta, Trinity, Humboldt, Mendocino, Lake, Glenn, Butte, Sutter, Yuba, and Tehama.

Eight communities were chosen to participate in the project. These included:

1. Corning - Tehama County - pop. 8,260
2. Oroville - Butte County - pop. 20,451
3. Live Oak - Sutter County - pop. 9,558
4. Wheatland - Yuba County - pop. 4,369
5. Garberville - Humboldt County - pop. 1,719
6. Eureka - Humboldt County - pop. 25,304



7. Alturas - Modoc County - pop. 2,626
8. Weaverville - Trinity County - pop. 3,105

The communities vary in population from just under 2,000 to over 25,000. Not all solutions will be appropriate for all these communities.

Process

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) began this work by creating datasheets for properties located in 'focus areas' in the eight communities and filling them with available information, while also offering guidance on how to keep them updated.



NADO team members also conducted interviews with key participants identified by the California Finance Consortium (CFC) members. In addition, NADO team members conducted focus groups in each community with key partners and stakeholders. The results of these focus groups helped to identify the assets as well as the key challenges across the eight communities. These challenges guided the remaining research toward identifying strategies that could effectively address and overcome these barriers. Morrison conducted in-person walking tours of each community; the data that came out of those visits informed specific recommendations for each community.

Key Principles

This research and the recommendations that emerge from it depend on a few key principles for rural downtown revitalization.

1. **Assessment Process.** The first step is assessing not only what the community has but to look critically at what they're currently doing and what those activities and strategies are producing. The process should repeat on a regular basis, by assessing weaknesses, identifying opportunities, and planning for improvements.
2. **Asset-based approach.** Every place has assets and special characteristics that set it apart from others. The wealth creation approach is a useful framing for what constitutes an asset and acknowledges both tangible and intangible assets.
3. **Keeping wealth local.** Communities should consider how their downtown revitalization work supports local wealth of all kinds, building on existing assets, supporting local entrepreneurs, etc. When individuals and businesses spend money locally, it increases the multiplier effect, generating additional economic activity within the community.

4. **Collaboration is key.** Successful downtown revitalization depends on relationships and collaboration. Partners, leadership, and networks are key to planning and achieving shared priorities.
5. **Start small with quick wins.** Incremental downtown revitalization focuses on bottom-up, small-scale investments rather than massive, expensive master plans. It may consider improving walkability, fostering local entrepreneurship, and creating resilient community spaces layer by layer, building momentum through “quick wins.” Starting small is also a way to practice collaborating, so networks and partnerships are built for the larger changes.
6. **Focus on a growth mindset.** Communities can be stuck in a fixed mindset, in which they learn to view their identity as a static situation – “we’ve always been this way.” This keeps them from making progress. It is important for communities to cultivate a growth mindset, treating its potential as something that can be developed through shared effort and collaboration.



Key Assets in the Region: What Makes this Region Special?

Despite differing sizes and geographies, the eight communities share a strong and consistent set of foundational assets. These strengths form the building blocks for revitalization and indicate real potential for long term downtown vitality.

1. Historic Character & Authentic “Bones”
2. Compact, Walkable Downtown Cores
3. Strong Sense of Place & Local Identity
4. Arts, Culture, and Creative Energy
5. Strong Natural & Recreational Assets
6. Existing Events, Festivals & Community Traditions
7. Dedicated Local Leadership & Champions
8. Strategic Regional Location & Access
9. Untapped Buildings & Opportunity Sites

The challenge is not a lack of assets, but rather aligning policy, investment, and activation strategies to unlock them.

Shared Downtown Challenges and Barriers

While each downtown has a unique context, the focus groups revealed remarkably consistent structural challenges. These barriers fall into a small number of recurring themes that shape why revitalization is difficult and what strategies are most likely to work.

1

Vacant, Deteriorating, and Underutilized Buildings

This was the most universal challenge across all communities. Common conditions include:

- Older buildings needing major upgrades (HVAC, roofs, ADA, seismic).
- High rehabilitation costs that far exceed what small businesses can support through rent.
- Buildings used for storage, closed “hobby” uses, or social or institutional functions that generate no foot traffic.
- Passive or absentee ownership, often inherited, held in trusts, or owned by people with no financial pressure to reinvest.

Key barrier: Downtown revitalization is stalled not by lack of ideas, but by lack of site ready space, unwilling owners, and lack of activation.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Assess Vacant and Underutilized Properties
2. Create Supportive Programming and Assistance
3. Bolster Enforcement and Compliance Processes
4. Pursue Creative Methods for Property Activation

2

Misalignment Between Zoning, Policy, and Desired Downtown Use

Many downtowns allow uses that are technically legal but undermine vitality, such as ground floor spaces that are closed to the public, offices (lawyers, government), low traffic uses, social services concentrated in retail cores without complementary activity, or residential or storage uses on prime storefront blocks. What is missing is food, gathering places, and experiences.

At the same time, few communities require or strongly encourage active ground floor uses, regular operating hours, or mixed-use activation (retail + residential above). The result is that downtowns “look like downtowns,” but do not function like them day to day.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Assess the challenges identified by property owners, developers, municipal staff, and other downtown stakeholders.

2. Examine requests for variances, special use permits, and other variations from standard zoning or permitting policy and procedures.
3. Examine the status of connections between local planning efforts and zoning policies.
4. Perform a periodic zoning code audit for timely updates that might reflect changes in the local environment.
5. Maximize the use of enacted enforcement policies and available enforcement actions.

3

Cost and Risk Barriers for Small Businesses

Across all eight communities, key barriers to thriving small business environments include:

- Startup risk is too high for local entrepreneurs.
- Tenant improvement costs are unaffordable without subsidies.
- Rising costs include insurance (especially for older historic buildings), utilities, labor and minimum wage, and/or permitting and compliance.

Additional challenges concern online shopping and informal competition undercutting brick and mortar businesses. Outside of business costs and competition concerns, the communities also highlighted the need for building repairs as the first step for improving small business success. Revitalization cannot be tenant led alone; buildings must be fixed first.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Pop-up Retail
2. Micro-Grants and facade grants
3. Community Benefit District or Business Improvement District Models
4. One-Stop Permitting Centers
5. Fee Waivers or Deferrals
6. Experiential Retail and Community Events

4

Weak Year-Round Demand or Weak Evening and Everyday Activity

All communities struggle with limited local spending capacity and leakage to larger nearby cities. There is strong seasonality in different places. Downtowns feel empty in the evenings. There is a need for activation, especially in the evenings.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Form a Downtown Activation Team
2. Secure Commitments from Businesses
3. Business Integration



5

Overreliance on Events Without Spillover

Events are a strength, but also a limitation. Some events and festivals mentioned by focus group members draw thousands of people. However, vendors are often temporary or external, and visitors often attend the event without entering local shops. Events create visibility, not sustainability, especially when stores are closed outside event days.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Passport Program
2. Extend business hours beyond event days
3. Redesign event layouts to drive movement

6

Limited Visitor Orientation and Marketing

Across multiple towns, visitors are already coming (events, recreation, sports, tourism), but they do not know where to go and what is offered, cannot find businesses easily online, or arrive when downtown is closed. Recreation users may not enter downtown. Highway traffic does not convert to stops. And event attendees do not spend money in downtown stores. Gaps include poor wayfinding, limited online presence, no central “what’s open now” information, and weak storytelling around identity and assets.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Make downtown more accessible
2. Create a strong downtown identity

7

Transportation, Highway, and Infrastructure Barriers

Many communities are bisected by highways or rail lines or both, creating safety issues, poor walkability, and psychological barriers to stopping or crossing. Many communities are also located on major corridors where traffic moves too fast to notice downtown or where people stop only at gas stations or chains near interchanges. There are sidewalk and roadway issues. Parking may be available, but not visible. Even where traffic is heavy, passing through does not equal stopping; downtowns lack compelling reasons to pull people off the road. Signage and wayfinding may be helpful with this.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Assess conditions and areas of greatest concern
2. Evaluate potential solutions of all sizes
3. Experiment with temporary or short-term implementations
4. Build support for larger or longer-term efforts



8

Fragmented Leadership, Capacity, and Ownership

Most communities rely on volunteers, overextended city staff, and small nonprofits or chambers stretched thin with limited activity or authority. There is often no single entity with authority over downtown buildings and the capacity to acquire, rehab, and lease property. There are also failed or incomplete tools, like the Business Improvement District in Garberville. This means there is difficulty coordinating property owners, businesses, city enforcement, programming and marketing. Revitalization efforts are episodic rather than structural.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Assess the network of partners
2. Assess the status of current or past efforts
3. Examine alignment with current needs and goals
4. Initiate or re-initiate efforts based on learnings
5. For a regional hub:
 - a. Identify the host or lead organization of the hub
 - b. Identify large anchors as regional leaders
 - c. Identify mid-size communities as operational hubs
 - d. Identify small communities as tactical strategy hubs

9

Economic Leakage to Nearby Cities

In each community, residents leave town for dining, shopping, entertainment, and services. Nearby larger towns have more options, later hours, and greater critical mass of things to do and see. Small downtowns struggle unless they offer something distinct, not just convenient.

Step by Step Strategies:

1. Assess local market conditions and competing locations
2. Survey consumers and visitors
3. Fill retail and service gaps by supporting existing businesses (retention), working with entrepreneurs, and fostering the local business ecosystem.
4. Strengthen the downtown experience as a community's primary gathering place.
5. Support "Buy Local" campaigns and other efforts to prioritize local institutions
6. Cultivate a unique local identity

WHERE TO START

THE OVERARCHING PROCESS

1



Assess what you have.

In this initial phase, not only should stakeholders be identifying tangible and physical resources like buildings, businesses, infrastructure, and other facilities in the built environment; available equipment, collateral materials, and financial resources; but also, intangible assets, such as human and social capital.

2



Assemble information, documents, and networks.

Needed information may exist in many offices and locations and could require interaction with multiple individuals and groups. Once core information is gathered and disseminated, follow-on support activities can be completed, for example evaluating enforcement policies and outcomes, reviewing zoning ordinances, visually inspecting non-compliant properties, interviewing property owners and business operators, observing activity, analyzing events, conducting surveys, interviewing officials and staff, and reviewing available data.

3



Activate and understand strategies that require low, medium, and high energy.

Once information has been assembled and evaluated, strategies can be formulated for action. Targeted efforts can be organized by the level of effort required from low to medium and high levels of energy needed. The general goal is to begin making incremental changes based on what has been learned to date.

4



Evaluate progress and determine next steps.

As programming is implemented, stakeholders can immediately begin observing the effectiveness and determine whether a scaling up or down of effort is needed, if additional resources are required, if additional partners should be engaged, or if any other noted adjustment would improve performance. Changes to programming can be deployed as soon as possible.

5



Repeat from the beginning to tackle the next challenge.

At this point, the stakeholders will return to a state of assessment and work through the steps again. This is an ongoing and iterative process and maintaining a state of constant gradual improvement is key. Success will depend on the ability of a community to perpetually be in a state of seeking improvement with the will to persist.

NEXT STEPS

Each community has clear next steps. However, there are more communities in these four regions that can benefit from these findings. The tools that are part of this playbook will be useful as other communities start from square one. A reminder of the guiding principles of this work:

- a. **All communities have assets to work with.** The asset inventory allows communities to gauge what types of assets they have to work with. Not all assets are tangible. The eight capitals provide a way to inventory tangible and intangible assets. (“WealthWorks: A Powerful Tool for Thriving Rural Places”) Some of those intangible assets are the people who will help move your downtown forward.
- b. **Partnership is crucial.** While it helps to have a community champion, even an enthusiastic champion, no one can do this alone. Part of inventorying assets is understanding the people, organizations, institutions, and businesses that can help make things happen.
- c. **This is long-term work.** Some strategies are long-term strategies, and some are short and medium-term strategies. Understanding the timeframe of each is critical to managing expectations. A successful downtown plan will have short, medium, and long-term strategies, so that the community can see some progress while it lays the groundwork for the long-term strategies. It can take years to see outcomes on some of the bigger items.
- d. **Start small with quick wins.** Downtown redevelopment is like a marathon. To prepare for the marathon, you need to train with shorter runs. Just like that, downtown development, while putting things in motion for the longer-term strategies, needs to make things happen on smaller strategies, so that the community sees some early wins, building support for the long term. Also, those early quick wins are making downtown more livable one small piece at a time.

These communities have a variety of assets to work with, including proximity to outdoor recreation, historic character, arts and culture, walkable downtown cores, and traditions. The first step is to understand what those assets are and build on them.



THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Not every community has the leadership capacity, expertise, or local champions needed to move this work forward. In those cases, what responsibilities should regional organizations take on, and where can they add the most value? It should be reasonably expected that regional organizations could play a stabilizing role that can withstand the turnover of local political leadership and representatives in stakeholder and non-profit organizations. This continuity can be a critical asset to revitalization efforts.

Regional organizations need to be viewed as part of the equation. Regardless of what individual communities choose to pursue, there is a meaningful role for each organization to play in enabling success. The key is to move beyond general support and define that role with greater specificity and intention.

Potential functions include convening stakeholders, helping communities identify and secure funding, providing training and coaching, building local leadership capacity, facilitating peer-to-peer learning, identifying best practices, coordinating technical assistance, and connecting communities to resources and expertise. In some communities, the role may be to catalyze action; in others, it may be to strengthen existing efforts or temporarily fill capacity gaps. The goal should be to become more deliberate and targeted in these functions, clearly identifying what support communities need and how the regional organizations could provide it. The focus should be on building local capacity, developing leaders, and creating the conditions for communities to sustain progress over time.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Successful downtown revitalization is a journey that requires patience, persistence, and a shared commitment to a long-term vision. Meaningful change rarely happens overnight. Instead, it grows through sustained effort, strong partnerships, and a series of intentional actions that create visible progress and build community excitement. Starting with achievable wins helps generate momentum, strengthen confidence, and encourage broader engagement. By identifying, empowering, and supporting local leaders, organizations, and community champions, communities can build the foundation for lasting success.

As a next step, each community should define what success looks like and develop a realistic path toward achieving that vision. This includes assessing existing strengths, resources, and readiness while identifying opportunities to expand collaboration. Where additional capacity or expertise is needed, communities can engage new partners who bring fresh energy, resources, and perspectives. By building on current assets and fostering strong partnerships, communities can create the momentum needed to achieve meaningful and sustainable downtown revitalization.



REVIVING RURAL DOWNTOWNS: A RURAL CALIFORNIA DOWNTOWN PLAYBOOK

PLAYBOOK INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM - NATIONALLY AND IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Downtowns bring vitality to rural, suburban, and urban communities alike. They serve as central places where people can shop, gather, and connect, fostering a strong sense of community for residents while also creating a welcoming atmosphere for visitors. Beyond their economic role, downtowns are typically the social and cultural heart of a community. They provide spaces for interaction and connection, while also reflecting local history and identity, often holding important historical and cultural significance.

However, maintaining a vibrant downtown can be difficult, especially in rural regions facing challenges such as youth outmigration; the growth of big-box and dollar stores and online shopping; and the need to sustain essential services. Consumers have expectations of being able to buy everything they need in one place. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced this expectation.

What this looks like in some rural downtowns is vacant storefronts, inadequate signage and wayfinding, lack of activity, and lack of options.

Quality of life in rural communities, however, directly influences business success and overall economic growth. A vibrant downtown or commercial district plays a central role in this, serving as a hub for entertainment, civic activity, and commerce. It strengthens community identity and pride, fosters connection and cohesion among residents, and creates a strong sense of place. In addition, thriving downtowns can attract visitors, project a positive image that helps draw in investment, and support local economies by creating jobs, encouraging small businesses, generating retail activity, and contributing to property and sales tax revenue.



If downtown revitalization is undertaken and is successful, benefits will include economic growth, job creation, increased investment, increased property values, enhanced community identity, improved walkability, greater social cohesion, and overall healthier communities.

Not all communities are the same; nor should they work toward the same outcome. Possibilities may be small manufacturing hub, tourism destination, recreation hub, downtown district, university community, innovation corridor, historic arts community, etc.

The Region

This region of northern California, north of Sacramento and bounded by the state of Oregon to the north and the state of Nevada to the east, encompasses 13 counties: Del Norte, Siskiyou, Modoc, Shasta, Trinity, Humboldt, Mendocino, Lake, Glenn, Butte, Sutter, Yuba, and Tehama, with a population of 1,062,599.

Eight communities were chosen to participate in the project. These included:

1. Corning - Tehama County - pop. 8,260
2. Oroville - Butte County - pop. 20,451
3. Live Oak - Sutter County - pop. 9,558
4. Wheatland - Yuba County - pop. 4,369
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6. Eureka - Humboldt County - pop. 25,304
7. Alturas - Modoc County - pop. 2,626
8. Weaverville - Trinity County - pop. 3,105

The communities vary in population from just under 2,000 to over 25,000. Not all solutions will be appropriate for all these communities.



Large Small-City Downtowns (20,000+) - These communities can support multiple anchors, stronger evening economy, and more specialization.

- Eureka (~25,300)
- Oroville (~20,450)

Mid-Sized Small Towns (8,000-10,000) - Can support 1-2 strong anchors, family dining, and regular events, but not full retail depth.

- Live Oak (~9,560)
- Corning (~8,260)

Very Small Towns (2,500–4,500) - Must rely on destination uses, experience, and visitor capture; retail-only strategies will fail.

- Wheatland (~4,370)
- Weaverville (~3,100)
- Alturas (~2,630)

Hamlet / Tourism Node (<2,000) - Downtown success depends almost entirely on tourism conversion, curb appeal, and lodging/dining.

- Garberville (~1,720)

Population size strongly influences what a downtown can support. Successful strategies vary by scale, but all require gathering, food, and activation rather than retail volume alone.

Key Principles

This research and the recommendations that emerge from it depend on a few key principles for rural downtown revitalization.

1. **Assessment Process.** The first step is assessing not only what the community has but to look critically at what they're currently doing and what those activities and strategies are producing. This is a step for the beginning of the process but also on a regular basis to re-assess and determine what challenges remain and how to solve them. The process starts again by assessing weaknesses, identifying opportunities, planning for improvements, etc.
2. **Asset-based approach.** Every place has assets and special characteristics that set it apart from others. This is where communities should start. The wealth creation approach is a useful framing for what constitutes an asset and acknowledges both tangible and intangible assets.



3. **Keeping wealth local.** Communities should consider how their downtown revitalization work supports local wealth of all kinds, building on existing assets, supporting local entrepreneurs, etc. When individuals and businesses spend money locally, it increases the multiplier effect, meaning it generates additional economic activity within the community. Local businesses are more likely to source goods, services, and labor from within the community, creating jobs and further stimulating the local economy; they also tend to reinvest in their communities through donations, sponsorships, and local partnerships.
4. **Collaboration is key.** Local initiative is needed to bring about change in rural downtowns. Without some local ownership and drive, grants and consultants can only go so far. Successful downtown revitalization depends on relationships and collaboration. Partners, leadership and networks are key to planning and achieving shared priorities. Building trust and networks (social capital), creativity and imagination about what's possible (intellectual capital), and community members' and partners' skills (individual capital) are foundational to making progress in downtowns. Collaboration can be across sectors, across communities, across players in the community. Public-private partnerships are key, as neither public nor private entities can bring about change alone. Each partner has unique skills and areas of effectiveness. It's also important to think regionally. Not every community needs to have everything in its downtown. Different communities can offer different opportunities.

Partners to consider:

- a. Retail and service sector business owners
 - b. Property owners
 - c. Chambers of Commerce or other business associations
 - d. Financial institutions
 - e. Consumers
 - f. City and county government
 - g. Media
 - h. Regional development organizations
 - i. Historic societies and historic preservation organizations
 - j. Civic clubs
 - k. Schools
5. **Start small with quick wins.** Incremental downtown revitalization focuses on bottom-up, small-scale investments rather than massive, expensive master plans. It may consider improving walkability, fostering local entrepreneurship, and creating resilient community spaces layer by layer, building momentum through "quick wins." Starting small is also a way to practice collaborating, so networks and partnerships are built for the larger changes. Small changes can help change public attitudes, creating an increased will to invest. Once you've built social and political capital, that capital can



be used to make bigger changes. Bigger strategies take time.

6. **Focus on a growth mindset.** Communities like individuals can be stuck in a fixed mindset, in which they learn to view their identity as a static situation – “we’ve always been this way” or “we aren’t the type of place that does that.” However, this fixed mindset creates a ceiling that keeps communities from making progress. Instead, it’s extremely important for communities to cultivate a growth mindset, treating its potential as something that can be developed through shared effort and collaboration. Challenges are simply opportunities to learn. The question changes from “can we do this?” to “how can we learn to do this?”

Key assets in the region—What makes this region special?

Despite differing sizes and geographies, the eight communities share a strong and consistent set of foundational assets. These strengths form the building blocks for revitalization and indicate real potential for long-term downtown vitality.

1. Historic Character & Authentic “Bones”

- Nearly every downtown has intact historic buildings (early mid-20th century, brick façades, traditional Main Street scale).
- Many downtowns were described as charming, human-scaled, and walkable.
- Several communities have historic districts or overlays, buildings on state or national registers, and/or active historical societies and preservation advocates. Existing identity is linked to gold rush history, agricultural heritage, and arts/cultural legacy.

Authenticity cannot be recreated. These communities already have what many places try and fail to build.

2. Compact, Walkable Downtown Cores

- Downtown activity is often concentrated in 3–6 block cores, which is appropriate for small and mid-sized towns.
- Residential neighborhoods are frequently adjacent to downtowns, supporting walkability/daily use.
- Many communities have already invested in sidewalks, streetscape improvements, traffic calming, and/or bump-outs, lighting, or beautification

Compact form lowers activation costs and makes it easier to focus limited resources for visible impact.



3. Strong Sense of Place & Local Identity

Across the eight communities, participants expressed deep pride in their identity:

- Agricultural heritage and brands (olives, pumpkin farms, ranching)
- Gold-rush and railroad history
- Indigenous and immigrant cultural presence
- Arts, crafts, and maker traditions
- Cultural institutions (theaters, arts centers)
- Historic events/routes
- Outdoor recreation culture
- Small-town, family-oriented identity

Distinct identity is essential for destination-based downtowns and differentiates these places from generic retail centers.

4. Arts, Culture, and Creative Energy

Many communities identified arts and culture as a major asset, including:

- Historic theaters still in use
- Murals and public art
- Active artists and makers
- Cultural festivals and markets
- Arts districts (formal or emerging)
- Arts nonprofits investing directly in downtown buildings
- Youth and adult arts programming

Arts are low-impact, high-visibility uses that activate downtowns before full commercial recovery.

5. Strong Natural & Recreational Assets

Many communities are in proximity to natural and recreational assets, which might include:

- Rivers, lakes, reservoirs, or waterfronts
- Redwood forests and coastlines
- Mountains and wilderness
- Major parks or regional recreation assets, like soccer complexes, pools, and regional parks
- Trails, levees, bike paths, and natural landscapes

Outdoor recreation already brings visitors; downtowns can capture more of that traffic with better connections and services.



6. Existing Events, Festivals & Community Traditions

All communities host well-attended events, including:

- Seasonal festivals
- Parades and holiday celebrations
- Farmers markets or vendor fairs
- Sports tournaments and cultural events

Several events draw thousands to tens of thousands of visitors.

Foot traffic already exists. The opportunity is converting event attendance into everyday downtown use.

7. Dedicated Local Leadership & Champions

Across the eight communities, but not necessarily in each one, there are:

- Passionate City staff and elected officials
- Downtown business associations or chambers
- Nonprofits willing to step in where government capacity is limited
- Individual “champions” investing time, money, or property downtown

Revitalization succeeds where people care. Every community has leaders ready to act if given the right tools.

8. Strategic Regional Location & Access

- Downtowns sit along key corridors including highways (101, 99, 65, interstate proximities) and rail lines. These are opportunities and challenges.
- Many towns are within 30-90 minutes of peer communities, creating opportunities for shared staffing, joint marketing, and regional tourism strategies

No community must do this alone; regional collaboration is both feasible and practical.

9. Untapped Buildings & Opportunity Sites

While vacancy is a challenge, it is also an asset. Many downtown buildings are structurally sound, historically significant, and well-located. Vacant upper floors provide future potential for housing, workspaces, artist studios.

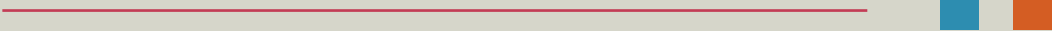
The raw materials for revitalization already exist; they need activation and risk reduction.



CROSS-COMMUNITY ASSET TAKEAWAY

Across the eight communities, the most important shared assets are:

- Authenticity
- Compact downtown form
- Cultural and artistic capacity
- Natural and recreational surroundings
- Community pride and leadership



The **challenge** is *not*
a lack of assets, but rather
ALIGNING POLICY,
INVESTMENT, and
ACTIVATION STRATEGIES
to unlock them.



Shared Downtown Challenges, Barriers, and Strategies

While each downtown has unique context, the focus groups revealed remarkably consistent structural challenges. These barriers fall into a small number of recurring themes that shape why revitalization is difficult and what strategies are most likely to work. Below are each of the challenges and step-by-step strategies for tackling each of the challenges.

The overall process for tackling each challenge follows the following route.

Leaders both public and private working toward downtown redevelopment in rural communities are often faced with the challenge of recovering from past revitalization efforts, resuming efforts that were incomplete, and/or starting anew in situations where a cohesive effort has not materialized. While specific individual actions vary, communities that have been successful seem to follow a particular process. A process that builds a foundation for success can help communities to be proactive rather than reactive, especially when resources (including people and capacity) are limited.

The focus groups and key informant interviews revealed remarkably consistent structural revitalization challenges across the communities. These challenges fall into a small number of recurring themes that shape the remainder of this research effort. Developing and following a process to guide sustained revitalization efforts across an extended time horizon is central to future success. Even the highly successful Main Street Approach championed by Main Street America and the four areas of focus - economic vitality, design, promotion, and

organization - are all dependent on organized committees of volunteers and self-selected leaders who meet regularly to perpetuate the revitalization effort and to sustain the energy needed to achieve long-term goals.

The steps outlined below can be applied to any of the challenges identified by the participating communities and can be especially useful to communities, partners, or individuals who are unsure of where to start.

Assess

Research and guidance from communities around the country engaged in revitalization indicate that assessing the overall environment is a critical first step for establishing or restarting



any revitalization effort. The immediate purpose is to identify assets, resources, roadblocks, results, realizations, and other information that create a basis to form new strategies.

In this initial phase, not only should stakeholders be identifying tangible and physical resources like buildings, businesses, infrastructure, and other facilities in the built environment; available equipment, collateral materials, and financial resources; but also, intangible assets, such as human and social capital. The tangible items are readily identifiable and understandable by anyone participating in a revitalization effort. Broadening the assessment effort to include tangible and intangible assets is critical. WealthWorks is an approach to economic development that encourages participants to take a more expansive approach to building and sustaining wealth in a community. A key component of WealthWorks is eight different 'capitals' that a community can consider when assessing what could contribute to a successful revitalization effort. Those capitals include:

- Individual Capital- skills and health
- Intellectual Capital - specialized knowledge and creativity
- Social Capital - relationships and trust
- Cultural Capital - traditions and customs
- Natural Capital - natural resources, water/land/air
- Built Capital - constructed and information infrastructure of all types
- Political Capital - proximity, influence, and power to influence decision making
- Financial Capital - monetary resources

Of specific interest related to individual and social capital would be a partner mapping exercise. This exercise will help build understanding of who is participating in the effort, what roles they each occupy or could occupy, what their value proposition is for engaging, and most importantly, who is missing. The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) has developed a [partner map template sheet](#) that stakeholders can use to record information on partners, their identified roles, their motivations, and other supporting information. This can be useful if members of the leadership group are likely to change or if leadership may be passed between individuals or organizations. A record such as this can be shared to support continuity through personnel changes.

Going one step further, the WealthWorks approach also offers instruction on how to construct a value chain. A value chain can not only help identify and clarify the roles of stakeholders but can also help build an understanding of demand. The demand examined here can be at the general wealth building and revitalization level, or at the product and service level if desired. The exercises and resources can be adjusted as needed.

It is also important to understand what plans, policies, and community goals are already in place. Most communities have spent time creating plans that outline what they want their future to look like and what priorities matter most. These plans provide a solid foundation for



revitalization efforts because they explain why the work is being done and help build support among partners, property owners, elected officials, and residents.

Referring back to these adopted goals can help keep everyone moving in the same direction and make it easier to explain decisions along the way. This becomes especially important when difficult or unpopular actions are necessary. When actions are tied to community-approved goals and policies, they are easier to justify and defend.

Assemble

The effort to identify and gather the needed information, documents, and partners is being held here as its own step due to the intensity of effort that may be necessary to complete it. Needed information may exist in many offices and locations and could require interaction with multiple individuals and groups to obtain. Stories, explanations, and details from previous or adjacent efforts may reside with individuals that are reluctant to share. Public records may need to be requested. Once core information is gathered and disseminated, follow-on support activities can be completed, for example evaluating enforcement policies and outcomes, reviewing zoning ordinances, visually inspecting non-compliant properties, interviewing property owners and business operators, observing activity, analyzing events, conducting surveys, interviewing officials and staff, and reviewing available data.

Activate

Once information has been assembled and evaluated, strategies can be formulated for action. Targeted efforts can be organized by the level of effort required from low to medium and high levels of energy needed. The general goal at this point is to begin making incremental changes based on what has been learned to date.

Examples of the varying levels of effort are offered below:

- Low energy - vacant window activations, public art displays, vendor pop up events
- Medium energy - vacant space registry, public art, downtown identity, temporary crosswalks/transportation solutions
- High energy - vacant space ordinance, buy local campaigns, permanent crosswalks/transportation solutions



As readers review the subsequent sections of this playbook, strategies relating to each challenge area will be presented in this format according to an estimation of effort required.

Evaluate

As programming is implemented, stakeholders can immediately begin observing the effectiveness and determine whether a scaling up or down of effort is needed, if additional resources are required, if additional partners should be engaged, or if any other noted adjustment would improve performance. Changes to programming can be deployed as soon as possible.

Repeat

At this point, the stakeholders will return to a state of assessment and work through the steps again. This is an ongoing and iterative process and maintaining a state of constant gradual improvement is key. Success will depend on the ability of a community to perpetually be in a state of seeking improvement with the will to persist.





REACTIVATING DOWNTOWN PROPERTIES AND PLACES

REACTIVATING DOWNTOWN

PROPERTIES AND PLACES

Buildings and structures found in traditional downtown areas are critical to the economic success of a community. Their state of use and repair can be a tell-tale sign of the economic health of a community. Where few new structures are being built, maximizing the use of existing downtown spaces is often a central focus for local entities.

Why It Matters

Downtown revitalization is often focused on energizing rural places by repurposing underutilized buildings and creating entrepreneurial opportunities and building spaces where people can connect. When properties are allowed to deteriorate in the most central and visible locations of a community, this sends a negative message to visitors and residents alike. However, the visible effort of repair, redevelopment, and reopening of commercial spaces sends a positive message to visitors and residents.

Small town commercial district impacts from one building sitting empty for one year

SOURCE OF LOSS	AMOUNT LOSS
Advertising revenues to local media	\$3,500
Business profits and owner compensation	\$24,750
Employee payroll	\$16,250
Fees to local attorneys and other professionals	\$1,250
Household income generated elsewhere in the community	\$18,900
Loan demand to local banks for the building	\$51,000
Loan demand to local banks for the business	\$15,000
Local deposits in local banks	\$5,100
Payments to local utility companies	\$5,550
Property management fees	\$750
Property tax revenue to the local government	\$1,500
Rents to the property owner	\$15,000
Sales	\$250,000
Sales tax revenue to state and local government	\$12,500

Source: "Empty buildings in small towns - SaveYour.Town"



Step-by-Step Actions

1

Assess Vacant and Underutilized Properties – A vacant property conditions survey (or windshield survey) can help to visually evaluate exterior property conditions to assess overall condition, occupancy status, and the presence of trash or debris.

This effort organizes basic information that suggests a property may be in violation of zoning regulations and subject to enforcement action or could become a risk to public health and safety. The information assists a municipality in sharing important information with supporting departments and key stakeholders to coordinate action and facilitate collaboration. This type of survey also serves as a baseline for setting priorities and tracking progress over time. Beyond possible enforcement, this is also an opportunity to engage partners in envisioning redevelopment and getting community buy-in for a vacant property strategy.

Partners in this effort can range from municipal staff to students and volunteers.

Create a format to collect information for each property of interest on the condition of structures, land, current use, and any specific concerns. Determine staffing or recruit partners to participate in recording information. Initial review of GIS data, tax records, assessment information, and other public records might assist in this effort.

Start now and then repeat the process every 3-5 years.

This should be a low-cost effort that requires a few hours of staff time to decide how to collect and retain the information collected and to recruit partners. If municipal staff take on the full responsibility of conducting the survey, the dedicated staff time will be higher, although it could be incorporated into future compliance work.

2

Create Supportive Programming and Assistance – Cities can offer “carrots” that make revitalizing properties profitable for property owners and for tenants operating businesses through grants, incentives, tax credits or concessions.

These programs support local action to spur actual investment in downtown properties and businesses with support for start-up, renovation, and operating costs. They can also soften the blow of regulations necessary to mitigate property deterioration.

Municipalities may adopt these programs, sometimes in partnership with chambers of commerce, Main Street organizations, or other entities. Regional planning and economic development organizations can provide support with developing incentive programs and other support.



Common programs include rent discounts, municipal tax abatements, and Tenant Improvement Allowances (TIA) to help businesses. This programming can originate from municipal entities to include property or sales tax incentives (such as freezing property taxes for 5-10 years following a major renovation), expedited permitting processes, fee reductions, utility rate reductions, and grants or loans for façade or other improvements. Density bonuses and adaptive reuse incentives can support changes necessary to make a property economically viable.



Start now to gauge the viability of program options and the level of support from the community and leadership. Adapt models from other communities to determine next steps and create programs in 1-3 years.

Expenses vary by program, but funding for grants, loans, and improvement support might be procured through donations, in-kind contributions, and resources from community foundations or other partners. Freezing taxes for a period of time following a renovation does not directly cost the municipality any new money, and the benefits of reduced vacancy may outweigh the potential difference in tax receipts after an updated assessment.

3

Bolster Enforcement and Compliance Processes – Municipalities are empowered by law to utilize administrative and legal penalties as “sticks” to ensure compliance with ordinances

Enforcement actions are necessary to ensure that existing rules and regulations apply to all areas, including critical downtown areas. When paired with “carrots” such as incentive programs, the challenges of enforcement are reduced.

Municipal leadership makes the decision to adopt any changes to existing regulations or penalties. The work is typically carried out by municipal staff. Outside partners can help to set the tone around compliance by sharing the word about any incentives that match enforcement and by encouraging other activities that enhance community pride. Regional development organizations can provide support with developing an approach to compliance.

Many tools exist to support municipalities’ efforts:

Vacant property registries require owners of vacant properties to register with the municipality creating a central database that speeds up enforcement and departmental coordination in the event of a problem, improves safety for first responders, and enables proactive management of potential issues. These registries often require property



owners, banks, and/or servicers to provide current contact information so that when a violation occurs, a municipality can find the responsible parties.

Vacant building ordinances are paired with registries to require owners to pay reasonable annual fees and adhere to specific maintenance requirements. With escalating penalties for non-compliance, these programs can operate at little to no cost, generate modest revenue, and help preserve neighborhood property values by mitigating the negative impacts of vacancies and foreclosures. When owners ignore their responsibilities, the municipality has clear legal standing to impose fines, issue liens, or pursue receivership.



Nuisance abatement liens allow costs to be billed to property owners if a municipality is forced to step in and clear debris, secure a building, or demolish dangerous structures. If unpaid, these expenses become property liens that can lead to foreclosure.

Vacancy taxes are differential property tax rates: higher taxes for vacant properties than occupied ones. (“Tools and Strategies to Address Vacant Properties”) The intent is to incentivize owners to sell or reoccupy a vacant property rather than letting it remain vacant. For example, [Washington, DC, taxes](#) a building designated as vacant at \$5.00 per \$100 of assessed value (Class 3) and a blighted one at \$10.00 per \$100 of value (Class 4), while an occupied home only pays about \$0.85 per \$100 of value. As a result, a \$500,000 building on the vacant property list owes roughly \$25,000 a year instead of \$4,250.

Property acquisition and redevelopment of neglected or vacant properties can occur through tax foreclosure, eminent domain, or land banking. Regional development organizations can collaborate with local governments and other entities to facilitate redevelopment projects that align with community needs, such as parks, community centers, or affordable housing, or other community uses. A land bank is a public entity that helps transform vacant, abandoned, and distressed properties into productive community assets. Through powers granted by state law, land banks can acquire and manage tax-foreclosed properties, address title and lien issues, and transfer properties to responsible owners in ways that advance local redevelopment and community goals. For more resources about land banks, see [The Land Bank Role](#), [Case Study: Land Banking on Neighborhood Revitalization](#), and [How to Build a Regional Housing Land Bank](#).

Mandatory property management/local assistance has been used by Middletown, NY, and elsewhere to require absentee landlords to either hire professional property managers or provide master keys to on-site tenants. This ensures that properties are



adequately maintained and that tenants have access to necessary services.

Begin to research programs and viability along with considering advocacy for new support and incentive programs. Adopting both “carrots” and “sticks” along the same timeline can make it easier to develop buy-in for a vacant property strategy.

Beyond the current municipal budget, some additional appropriations or redeployment of resources may be required to cover needed staff time, training, limited materials, and other supporting resources that enable public employees to engage in these efforts.

4

Pursue Creative Methods for Property Activation - Vacant downtown building activation is the intentional use of empty commercial, office, industrial, or mixed-use properties to create activity, attract people, support local businesses, and stimulate potential investment.

1. Property activations of any type and duration reduce the negative impacts of vacancy. These activations promote foot traffic and street vitality, improve perceptions of safety, and create opportunities for revenue generation through experimentation in partnership with interested parties.
2. A range of strategies are available. Common short-term activation efforts include:
 - Pop-up retail shops
 - Art galleries and exhibitions
 - Food halls or market spaces
 - Community events and workshops
 - Co-working spaces
 - Seasonal installations
 - Startup incubators

Permanent activations of downtown spaces often include:

- Housing or mixed-use redevelopment
- Office-to-residential conversions
- New retail or restaurant tenants
- Cultural or community facilities
- Innovation hubs or business centers



Work on short- and long-term property activations on a continual basis. Where there are willing owners who have properties that are safe (even if not in ideal condition), begin a low-cost activation as soon as possible.

Expenses vary by activation, but some temporary activations can be very low-cost. For example, partnerships with art-related organizations or schools could allow for vacant window spaces to be activated seasonally with minimal additional costs.

Who to Involve

Municipal staff, regional development organizations, chambers of commerce or other business/tourism organizations, interested residents.

Costs

Most of the costs associated with these strategies are affiliated with municipal staff time, as well as potentially some support by a lawyer. Activation strategies may have some additional but minimal costs.



Case Studies

Vacant Building Ordinance - Webster City, Iowa. While vacant building ordinances may exist in different places, often they are not used. In Webster City, Iowa, the enforcement officer examines the unsafe building and gives notice to the owner. The owner or person in charge of the building or premises has 48 hours to begin repairs or demolish and remove the damaged portions, with 90 days from the date of the notice to complete the work.

Lowell, Massachusetts has a city ordinance to use in ["cracking down on owners of large buildings who deliberately keep them empty and devaluing for years to get tax write-offs."](#) Lowell requires owners to pay an annual vacant property registration fee; to avoid the fee, they can sell or the city will help find tenants, restoration grants or other resources for getting the property active again. ("The Revitalization of Lowell, Mass. - governing.com")

Corning, California enforces specific vacant building ordinances aimed at preventing neighborhood blight, minimizing safety hazards, and covering city monitoring costs. Unoccupied commercial and residential structures are strictly monitored to ensure they do not become a burden to the surrounding community. Specific details of the ordinances:

- **Vacant Building Monitoring Fees:** The city requires building owners to pay a continuous monitoring fee if a structure remains vacant for more than 90 days or is boarded up by city officials.
- **Exemptions:** You can request a fee waiver or exemption if your property has an active building permit and is undergoing diligent renovations, is actively on the market (for sale, lease, or rent), or meets all health and safety codes.
- **Maintenance Requirements:** Owners are legally required to keep the property clean, clear of exterior debris/trash, and free of graffiti. Furthermore, owners must actively prevent unauthorized criminal activity or nuisance behavior on the premises.
- **Code Enforcement:** The city's Building Official, alongside police and fire departments, issues notices of violation and assesses penalties or liens against property owners who fail to correct unsafe conditions.



Yreka and Dunsmuir, California

The experiences of Yreka and Dunsmuir, California, demonstrate how code enforcement can serve as a powerful tool for downtown revitalization when paired with collaboration, incentives, and a focus on voluntary compliance. Rather than relying primarily on penalties, both communities begin with communication and education, resolving most violations through courtesy notices and cooperative engagement.

When enforcement is necessary, administrative citations provide a streamlined process that maintains local control and due process. The cities also complement enforcement with façade improvement grants, community partnerships, and assistance programs that help property owners, particularly vulnerable residents, address violations and improve their properties.

A key lesson from these communities is that successful code enforcement requires a long-term commitment, strong documentation, updated ordinances, and dedicated staffing. Dunsmuir's vacant property registration program and proactive zoning regulations help prevent future issues, while escalating tools such as liens, abatement orders, and demolition authority address chronic problem properties.

Together, these strategies have created a balanced approach that improves property conditions, supports public safety, encourages private investment, and advances broader community revitalization goals. The case study highlights that effective code enforcement is most successful when it is viewed not as a punitive function, but as a strategic community development tool that combines accountability, assistance, and long-range planning.

Downtown Visioning Walks in the Commonwealth Regional Commission of Virginia

The Commonwealth Regional Commission (CRC) is currently running the Building Opportunity on Main Street Program (BOOMS) through the VA Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), Main Street America. CRC received funding from state funders such as the Tobacco Rural Revitalization Commission, DHCD, VA Housing, and Main Street America. Then [CRC hired consultants](#) to go to 15 of their rural towns and walk through 5-6 of the old vacant buildings in the town with the owners, town managers, and the funders. According to Christin Jackson, Executive Director of CRC, "I believe that is the key to going the next step after we get these proformas created for each town."



[Later the same day the town organizes a community walk-through](#) and anyone from the community that wants to join in gets to participate and go look at these 5-6 buildings from the outside and put sticky notes all over the windows as to what they would like to see go into those buildings. The consultants gather that information along with other research on the town as to population trends, sales trends, visits to the town, potential loss in cash going out of the town, etc. The consultants provide a great presentation on day two of the visit to get everyone excited as to what the proforma will be about. In about 60 days after the visit, [they send the towns the proforma](#) with all the gathered information and a game plan of how to get the revitalization started in these buildings and give what funding streams can be used to fund the projects.

A Small-Town Approach to Revitalization: Centerville, South Dakota

Centerville, South Dakota, a community of about 900 residents, adopted a vacant building ordinance to address neglected properties and support downtown revitalization. Jared Hybertson, Executive Director of the Centerville Development Corporation and the city's economic development coordinator, helped develop the ordinance by researching successful models from other communities and adapting them to local needs.

Hybertson emphasizes that a vacant building ordinance is only effective if local leaders are committed to enforcing it. Strong support from the city council, a dedicated code enforcement officer, and a city attorney willing to defend the ordinance are all essential. The city administrator manages communication with property owners, while code enforcement staff monitor property conditions. The ordinance is designed to encourage action rather than punish owners. Once a building is identified as vacant, the owner must register it and bring it into compliance. Enforcement begins with a warning and a conversation about how the city can help. If no progress is made, fees gradually increase through an established schedule.

In a small town where residents often know one another, enforcement can be sensitive. Hybertson describes the city as the "bad cop" responsible for enforcement, while economic development plays the "good cop" role, helping property owners find solutions and, in some cases, purchasing buildings for redevelopment.

Over eight years in place, the ordinance has produced results. Some owners have renovated their properties, while others have chosen to sell because of the



ongoing fees. Enforcement tends to come in waves, however, depending on city leadership and council priorities. Centerville's economic development organization also owns several downtown properties and offers affordable rents to encourage new businesses. The organization continually looks for opportunities to acquire and renovate viable buildings, often taking risks that private investors are unwilling to take. Today, Centerville maintains a vibrant downtown with a grocery store, clinic, bakery, coffee shop, art gallery, sports bar and grill, boutique, salon, auto parts store, mechanic shop, and several newer businesses, including a screen-printing shop, bin store, and tattoo studio.

Funding for enforcement, acquisition, and demolition comes from multiple sources. Vacant building fees are deposited into the city's general fund to offset code enforcement costs. The nonprofit development organization funds property acquisition and redevelopment through grants, property sales, and other revenue sources. Hybertson's position is jointly funded by the city and the nonprofit, allowing him to coordinate economic development and revitalization efforts from City Hall.

To build community awareness, Centerville recently partnered with Deb Brown of Save Your Town for a downtown walk audit that highlighted vacant buildings and redevelopment opportunities. The goal was not to shame property owners but to spark conversations about business opportunities and community improvement.

Jared Hybertson's Advice

1. A vacant building ordinance is only as effective as the city council's willingness to support and enforce it.
2. Designate a code enforcement officer to monitor property conditions and address maintenance issues.
3. Establish a clear communication process, with the city administrator sending notices and working directly with property owners.
4. Use warnings and assistance first; gradually increase fees if compliance does not occur.
5. Ensure the city attorney is prepared to defend the ordinance when challenged.



Appendix A: Vacant Building Registration Form

CITY OF CENTERVILLE VACANT BUILDING REGISTRATION

Purpose of this ordinance and registration:

The purpose of this ordinance is to protect public health, safety and welfare and the overall wellbeing of our community by establishing this program for identification and registration of vacant buildings, determining the responsibilities of owners of vacant buildings and structures, and providing for administration, enforcement and penalties.

The ordinance establishes a registration system where the owner(s) of each vacant building must establish a plan for the continued care and upkeep of these buildings, a timetable for returning the building to commercial use, and/or to set a reasonable sale price or rental price for the building. This does not require that the current owner sell or rent their building, but places an emphasis on putting it back to viable commercial use for the sake of the community.

ALL INFORMATION ON THIS APPLICATION MUST BE COMPLETED

1) New Registration _____ or Renewal _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

2) Property Address: _____

Property Description: _____

Date when building became vacant of commercial business happening in the space:

Current Property Conditions: _____



3) CURRENT PROPERTY OWNER INFORMATION

Full Name of Owner: _____

Current or Former Business Name: _____

Address: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone Numbers: Daytime _____

Evening _____ Cell _____

Owner Mailing Address If Different from above: _____

Email: _____

4) LIST ALL KNOWN LENDERS OR LIEN HOLDERS TIED TO PROPERTY

Lien Holder/Lender Name: _____

Business Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone Numbers: Business _____

Evening _____ Cell _____

5) PROPERTY MANAGER OR LOCAL CONTACT FOR ACCESS TO BUILDING

Name: _____

Business Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone Numbers: Business _____

Evening _____ Cell _____

*The property manager should be a local contact which we can reach regarding building and property maintenance as well as the progress of returning the property to its originally zoned use and occupancy.



Is this property in foreclosure status? YES____ NO____

If yes, date when the mortgage holder acquired the property: _____

If yes, name of previous occupant/owner:_____

Is this property being maintained and secured? (i.e., weekly yard maintenance, no boarded doors/windows, locked and secured, no padlocks, regular snow removal etc. Appears as a normally occupied property.)

YES____ NO____

6) EXPECTED TIME PERIOD FOR VACANCY TO LAST_____

7) PLAN FOR OCCUPANCY / COMPLIANCE / DEMOLITION

Proposed Action Type: Re-Occupancy of Business____ Compliance____ Demolition____

Do you plan to demolish this building? ____ Yes ____ No

If yes, please indicate the date by which demolition will occur: _____

If no, please indicate the timetable and plan for returning the property to appropriate occupancy or use:_____

Estimated Timeline For Necessary Actions & Corrections:

Describe Any Conditions That Need Correction: _____

Brief Description of Proposed Plan to Correct: _____



8) REGISTRATION FEES

For registration fees and fines for vacant properties in the City of Centerville please refer to the separate vacant building fees and fines sheet attached.

The current fee or fine assessed to this property by the City of Centerville is: _____ Based on:

9) EXEMPTION FROM FINES: This property is exempt from vacant building fines for the following reason: (check all that apply)

___ Actively marketed "for rent" at fair market value (must show proof)

___ Property is actively marketed as "for sale" at fair market value (must show proof)

___ A valid compliance plan or redevelopment agreement has been established with City of Centerville

___ Registration fee for current calendar year paid by previous owner

You are being asked for this information pursuant to Centerville Ordinance _____, for the purposes of complying with the Vacant Property registration requirements of Section _____. If you own "Vacant Property," as that term is defined under Centerville Ordinance _____, then you are required to provide registration information and failure to do so is a misdemeanor, may result in a request for injunctive relief, and may result in increased fines under Centerville Ordinance 455.13. The City intends to maintain this information for security purposes, and will attempt to limit its dissemination. However, the City will comply with all mandatory data practices or litigation requests.

Applicant Oath/Signature: I hereby attest to the truth and accuracy of the information contained in this application.

Signature of Owner / Agent _____ Date: _____

Print Name: _____

Please fill out form completely and mail to or drop off at:

Centerville City Hall
741 Main St.
PO Box "C"
Centerville, SD 57014

For City Use Only
Application checked by: _____ Date Approved _____



Appendix B: Vacant Building Ordinance and Fines - Centerville, SD

Registration Fee & Fines

Initial registration & filing fee if building is registered within 30 days of the City declaring a building vacant

- \$50 + inspection fee (inspection fee is waived if no violations are found)
- Inspection fees may vary
- If violations are found the building owner must present a plan to timely address said violations
- If violations are fixed or otherwise remedied to the satisfaction of the inspector within 60 days after issuance of his/her inspection report, all inspection fees are waived
- If the inspector is unavailable or otherwise unable to re-inspect the property, through no fault of the property owner, during the 60 day time period after issuance of the initial inspection report, this time period is tolled until such time a follow-up inspection occurs
- Penalty for subsequent inspections needed if violations are not addressed, \$250 + inspection fee per inspection

Registration & filing fee if building is registered between 30 and 60 days of the City declaring a building vacant

- \$250 + inspection fee
- If violations are found the building owner must present a plan to timely address said violations
- Penalty for subsequent inspections needed if violations are not addressed - \$250 + inspection fee per inspection

Registration & filing fee if building is registered after 60 days of the City declaring a building vacant

- \$500 + inspection fee
- If violations are found the building owner must present a timely plan to address said violations
- Penalty for subsequent inspections needed if violations are not addressed - \$250 + inspection fee inspection

Additional Fines

Penalty for failure to register a building after 60 days of the City declaring it vacant

- \$5 per day until registered
- This fine is in addition to all registration fees, fines, and inspection fees the vacant building's owner would have accrued for not registering the property prior to the 60 day window.



Chronic Vacancy Fine

The owner of a building or property declared vacant by the City, in which the property owner is not actively marketing the property for sale or rent at fair market value will be fined. This fine will increase as the property remains chronically vacant. These fines are in addition to initial registration fees as well as any inspection fees that may incur.

First Year - up to \$1,000

- Imposed in the event of continued vacancy, 365 days after initial determination of vacancy
- \$19.20 per week may be fined until owner is within compliance

Second Year - up to \$2,000

- Imposed in the event of continued vacancy, 730 days after initial determination of vacancy
- \$38.45 per week may be fined until owner is within compliance

Third Year & Annually Thereafter - up to \$3,000

- Imposed in the event of continued vacancy, 1,095 days after initial determination of vacancy
- \$57.69 per week may be fined until owner is within compliance

Appeal of Fines & Fees - \$75 (waived if found to be in compliance)



Appendix C: Vacant Building Ordinance – Dunsmuir, CA

ORDINANCE 565

AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF DUNSMUIR CITY COUNCIL ADDING CHAPTER 9.14, ABANDONED AND DISTRESSED REAL PROPERTY, TO THE DUNSMUIR MUNICIPAL CODE

The City Council of the City of Dunsmuir does ordain as follows :

SECTION I:

Chapter 9.14, Abandoned and Distressed Real Property, is added to the Dunsmuir Municipal Code to read:

Chapter 9.14 - ABANDONED AND DISTRESSED REAL PROPERTY

9.14.010 - Purpose.

Vacant properties are potentially a major source of blight in residential, nonresidential, and mixed-use neighborhoods, particularly when property owners fail to actively manage and maintain them. Abandoned and distressed real properties discourage economic development, retard appreciation of property values, pose potential fire hazards, and can jeopardize neighboring property owners' ability to secure and maintain affordable fire insurance. The purpose of this chapter is to establish uniform and reasonable regulations to prevent the immediate risks and detrimental effects associated with abandoned and distressed real properties.

9.14.020 - Definitions.

As used herein:

"Abandoned" means real property that has been vacant for a period of six consecutive months or longer.

"Accessible" means a building or structure not secured to prevent unauthorized access.

"Distressed" means real property that is abandoned, or if occupied, a property in which at least forty percent of the gross floor area of the principal building or structure is vacant.

"Evidence of vacancy" means any condition that on its own or combined with other conditions present would lead a reasonable person to believe that the building or structure



is vacant. Such conditions include, but are not limited to, overgrown and/or dead vegetation, accumulation of newspapers, circulars, flyers and/or mail, past due utility notices and/or disconnected utilities, accumulation of trash, junk and/or debris, the absence of window coverings, such as curtains, blinds and/or shutters, the absence of furnishings and/or personal items consistent with habitation, and statements by neighbors, passersby, delivery agents, government employees, etc. that the property is vacant.

“Occupied” means only occupancy by a person, persons, or other legal entity(ies) with a legal right to occupy the building or structure. The use of all or a portion of a building or structure for storage is not considered occupied unless that storage is itself a legally established use or is accessory to an on-going legally established use conducted within the building or structure.

“Owner” means any person, partnership, association, corporation, fiduciary or other legal entity having a legal or equitable title or any interest in real property.

“Owner of record” means the legal entity holding recorded title to the real property in question at any point in time when official records are produced by the Siskiyou County recorder’s office.

“Real property” means any improved or unimproved land or portion thereof, situated in the city, including all buildings, structures, and other improvements located on it.

“Vacant” means improved real property in a residential or commercial zoning district, regardless of use, where the principal building or structure is not legally occupied. Vacant does not include a residential property listed for sale or a legally established dwelling that is intermittently occupied provided such residential properties are actively managed and maintained so as to not appear vacant when viewed from neighboring properties and public rights-of-way.

9.14.030 - General requirements.

A. The owner of any abandoned or distressed building, structure, or other real property as defined herein shall within sixty (60) days after the building, structure, or other real property becomes abandoned or distressed or within thirty (30) days after assuming ownership of such abandoned or distressed property, whichever is later, file a registration statement for each such property with the city clerk on forms provided by the city clerk for such purpose. The registration shall remain valid for one year from the date of registration. The owner shall be required to renew the registration annually as long as the building, structure, or other real property remains abandoned or distressed and shall pay a registration or renewal fee as prescribed in this chapter for each abandoned or distressed property registered.



B. The owner shall notify the city clerk within thirty (30) days of any change in the registration information by filing an amended registration statement on a form provided by the city clerk for such purposes.

C. The registration statement shall be deemed prima facie proof of the statements therein in any administrative enforcement proceeding or court proceeding instituted by the city against the owner(s) of the building.

9.14.040 - Registration statement requirements.

A. The registration statement shall include the name, street address, and telephone number of a natural person eighteen years of age or older, designated by the owner(s) as the authorized agent for receiving notices of code violations and for receiving process, in any court proceeding or administrative enforcement proceeding, on behalf of such owner(s) in connection with the enforcement of any applicable code or of this chapter. This person must maintain an office in the state of California or reside within the state of California.

B. The registration statement shall also include the name of the person responsible for maintaining and securing the property so that it is not accessible, if different from the person identified in subsection (A) above.

C. The registration statement shall also include the name, address, and telephone number of the agent authorized to rent the property or the name, address, and telephone number of the listing real estate agent who is authorized to list the property.

D. An owner who is a natural person and who meets the requirements of this section as to location of residence or office may designate him or herself as agent in subsection (A), the person responsible for maintaining and securing the property in subsection (B), and the agent authorized to rent the property in subsection (C).

E. By designating an authorized agent under the provisions of subsection (A) of this section the owner consents to receive any and all notices of Dunsmuir Municipal Code violations concerning the registered abandoned or distressed real property and all process in any court proceeding or administrative enforcement proceeding brought to enforce such code provisions concerning the registered property by service of the notice or process on the authorized agent. Any owner who has designated an authorized agent under the

provisions of this section shall be deemed to consent to the continuation of the agent's designation for the purposes of this section until the owner notifies the city clerk of a change of authorized agent or until the owner files a new annual registration statement. The designation of an authorized agent in no way releases the owner from responsibility or liability under any requirement of this chapter.



9.14.050 - Property inspection.

After filing a registration statement or renewal of a registration statement, and following reasonable notice by the city, the owner of any abandoned or distressed property shall provide access to the city to conduct an exterior and interior inspection of the building or structure to determine compliance with the municipal code.

9.14.060 - Requirements for owners.

The owner of any building, structure, or other real property that has become abandoned or distressed, and any individual(s) maintaining, operating, or collecting rent for any such building or structure that has become abandoned or distressed, shall within thirty (30) days:

A. Secure the building or structure against unauthorized access.

B. Keep the property free of weeds, dry brush, dead vegetation, trash, junk, debris, building materials, discarded personal items, and the accumulation of newspapers, circulars, flyers, notices (except those required by federal, state, or local law), and any other items that give the appearance the property is abandoned.

C. Provide that yards are maintained to the neighborhood standard. As used herein, "neighborhood standard" means the condition of real property that prevails in and through the neighborhood where an abandoned or distressed property is located. When determining the neighborhood standard, no abandoned or distressed property shall be considered.

D. When located in a commercial zoning district, provide that all windows are fully covered with plain paper or display artwork, merchandise offered for sale by another business within the community, or materials provided by a Dunsmuir community non-profit organization.

E. Remove the signage for any previous tenant as required by the Dunsmuir Municipal Code.

F. Repair or rehabilitate the property so it meets all applicable codes adopted by the city for occupancy, or otherwise obtain a permit to demolish the building.

9.14.070 - Fee schedule.

The initial registration fee for each abandoned or distressed property shall be five hundred (500) dollars, but may be reduced to one hundred (100) dollars if the city clerk receives acceptable evidence that the property has been listed for sale or rent at a reasonable price with a licensed real estate agent authorized to sell or lease the property. The fee for the first and every subsequent renewal is five hundred (500) dollars. The city clerk may waive the



fee entirely with acceptable evidence that (1) the property is being utilized for a community benefit, or (2) a building permit has been issued for improvements/repairs that exceed 50 percent of the property value and said improvements/repairs are actively being pursued to the satisfaction of the building official.

9.14.080 - Administration.

The city manager may issue rules and regulations for the administration of the provisions of this chapter.

9.14.090 - Violations and penalties.

A. Violation of this chapter is a strict liability offense. A violation occurs regardless of a violator's intent or knowledge of the violation.

B. Any owner who is not in full compliance with this chapter or of any rules or regulations authorized and issued hereunder shall be subject to penalty as provided for herein and elsewhere in city code.

C. The remedies in this section are cumulative to, and not in place of, other rights and remedies available to the city pursuant to the municipal code. The city attorney or designee may pursue other rights or remedies, including, but not limited to, commencement of a civil or administrative action to abate the condition as a public nuisance.

D. If the city takes administrative action to abate the condition of a property subject to the registration requirement, in addition to, or in lieu of the remedies in this chapter, the following administrative penalties shall apply:

1. Upon being found to be violation of this chapter, each party subject to an abatement order shall pay an administrative penalty of up to one thousand (1,000) dollars.

2. If a violation of this chapter addressed by abatement order has not been abated, cured, remedied or eliminated to the reasonable satisfaction of the city manager by the thirtieth day after the deadline imposed by the city manager, each party subject to said abatement order shall pay a supplemental administrative penalty of up to five thousand (5,000) dollars.

3. If a violation of this chapter addressed by abatement order has not been abated, cured, remedied, or eliminated to the reasonable satisfaction of the city manager by the sixtieth day after the deadline imposed by the city manager, each party subject to said abatement order shall pay a supplemental administrative penalty of up to twenty-five thousand (25,000) dollars.



4. In each instance when a party becomes subject to an administrative penalty specified in this section, the city manager or his/her designee shall issue an order providing written notice of that party's obligation to make payment of said administrative penalty. Each such order shall constitute a debt of the record owner and a special assessment against the subject property, having the same legal status as an order determining cost of abatement of a public nuisance.

5. If a party becomes subject to an administrative penalty when that party is the property's owner of record, or is otherwise responsible as provided under this chapter, that party is not relieved of its obligation to pay the penalty based upon the subsequent sale of the property in question to another.

9.14.100 - Appeal.

Any monetary penalty or other punitive action by the city authorized under this chapter may be appealed by the party against whom it is imposed to the city council, the decision of which shall be final. A request for such an appeal shall be in writing and must be submitted to the city within sixty (60) days after the city manager or his/her designee issues written notice of the imposition of the penalty or other punitive action. Pending the results of the appeal, the appellant shall deposit any monetary penalty with the city clerk, unless the appellant does not have the financial ability to do so.

SECTION II: FINDINGS

A. Because there is not substantial evidence, in light of the whole record before the City that the ordinance would have a significant effect on the environment, the City Council adopts exemptions from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in accordance with CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301, 15306, and 15061 (b)(3).

B. The ordinance is in conformance with all applicable elements and policies of the City of Dunsmuir General Plan and Zoning Ordinance.

SECTION III: CONSTITUTIONALITY: If any section, subsection, sentence, clause, or phrase of this ordinance is, for any reason, held to be unconstitutional, such decision shall not affect the validity of the remaining portions of this ordinance. The City Council hereby declares that it would have passed this ordinance and each section, subsection, sentence, clause, or phrase of this ordinance irrespective of the fact that any one or more of the sections, subsections, sentences, clauses or phrases be declared unconstitutional.

SECTION IV: This ordinance shall become effective thirty (30) days after its passage and shall, within fifteen (15) days after its adoption, be published in the Dunsmuir News, printed and published in Siskiyou County.



IT IS HEREBY CERTIFIED that the foregoing ordinance was duly introduced at a regular meeting of the City of Dunsmuir City Council held on the 6th day of February, 2020, and adopted by the City of Dunsmuir City Council at a regular meeting held on the 20th day of February, 2020, by the following vote:

AYES: Arth, Deutsch, Keisler, Lucchesi

NOES: None

ABSENT: Bryan

ABSTAIN: None

ATTEST: SUMMARY OF ORDINANCE CC-565

OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF DUNSMUIR

Ordinance CC-565 will add Chapter 9.14, Abandoned and Distressed Real Property, to Title 9 of the Dunsmuir Municipal Code to prevent immediate risks and detrimental effects associated with abandoned and distressed real properties in the City of Dunsmuir. The ordinance establishes a registration requirement for abandoned and distressed real properties, which the ordinance defines as properties vacant for a period of six consecutive months or longer or where at least 40 percent of the gross floor area of the principal building or structure is vacant. The ordinance provides exceptions for residential properties listed for sale and legally established dwellings that are intermittently occupied, provided such residential properties are managed and maintained to not appear vacant. The ordinance requires owners of abandoned and distressed properties to

register their abandoned and distressed properties with the City, to secure them against unauthorized entry, to properly maintain them so that they do not appear vacant, to pay an annual registration fee, and to allow the City access to their abandoned and distressed properties for inspection. The ordinance requires that abandoned and distressed properties be repaired, rehabilitated, or demolished. Exceptions are provided. The ordinance establishes penalties for violation of the ordinance, including escalating fines, and a process for appealing penalties and other punitive actions. More specific details regarding the ordinance can be obtained by review of Ordinance CC-565 on file at Dunsmuir City Hall .

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the foregoing Ordinance was introduced at a regular meeting of the City Council of the City of Dunsmuir held on the 6th day of February, 2020 and was passed upon second reading at a regular meeting of the City Council held on the 20th day of February, 2020.



PASSED, APPROVED, AND ADOPTED THIS 20th day of February, 2020 by the following vote:

AYES: Arth, Deutsch, Keisler, Lucchesi

NAYS : None

ABSENT: Bryan

ABSTAIN: None

Attest:



Appendix D: Scripts For Engaging Property Owners

1. Initial Introduction & Asset Mapping

Use this script to introduce yourself, establish a point of contact, and learn about the owner's goals for their building.

Subject: Connecting to support your downtown property / [Building Address]

Email / Letter:

Hi [Owner Name],

I hope you are having a great week. I'm [Your Name], the [Your Title/Economic Development Director] for the City of [City/Town].

As part of our ongoing efforts to support our local business district, I am reaching out to the owners of our key downtown properties. Our goal at the City is to understand your vision for [Building Address], discuss any upcoming plans for the space, and see how we can best support you, whether through streamlining permitting, connecting you with local business tenants, or sharing information on available revitalization grants.

Do you have 10-15 minutes for a brief phone call next week? I would love to hear about what you envision for the property and learn about any challenges you might be facing.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

[Your Title]

[City/Town/Organization]

[Phone Number]

2. Inquiry About Vacancies or Underutilized Space

Use this script when you need to gently address building vacancies and offer the city's recruitment or upper-floor development tools.

Subject: Exploring opportunities for [Building Address]

Email:

Hi [Owner Name],

I am following up to introduce myself as the [Your Title] for the City of [City/Town]. We are currently tracking commercial real estate availability downtown and noticed that your



property at [Building Address] has some [vacant space / unused upper-story space].

We'd love to see these spaces brought to life to help drive foot traffic in our downtown core. The City currently has resources available, such as [mention a program, e.g., a downtown façade improvement grant, a mixed-use development guide, or local tenant matchmaking services].

Could we schedule a brief, casual meeting, either in person at [Coffee Shop/City Hall] or over the phone, to discuss what you might need to get this space occupied?

Best,

[Your Name]

[Your Title]

3. Quick Phone / Voicemail Script

Use this script if you are cold-calling or following up after a previous unanswered email.

Phone Script:

"Hi [Owner Name], this is [Your Name] calling from the City of [City/Town] Economic Development office.

I'm reaching out because we are working with property owners downtown to support our local commercial district and help fill up some of our vacant spaces. I wanted to see what your plans are for [Building Address] and check if there are any city resources or incentives, like our façade grants or tenant referral programs, that could be helpful to you right now.

Do you have a few minutes to chat next [Day of week], or is there a better time to reach you? My direct number is [Your Phone Number]."

4. Following Up on Development / Project Proposals

Use this script to follow up after a site visit or meeting where you discussed specific next steps.

Subject: Following up on our downtown meeting / [Building Address]

Email:

Hi [Owner Name],

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me on [Day of the week]. It was great learning more about your goals for [Building Address].



As we discussed, I have attached a few resources that might be helpful:

[Link/attach local Incentive Guidelines or Grant Applications]

[Link/attach Zoning or Mixed-Use Fact Sheet]

Please let me know if you have any questions about these programs or if you'd like me to connect you with [e.g., the City Planning Department, local contractors, or a commercial real estate broker]. I'm here to act as a resource to help you get this project moving.

Best,

[Your Name]

[Your Title]



ALIGNING POLICY AND ZONING WITH DOWNTOWN VISION

ALIGNING POLICY AND ZONING WITH DOWNTOWN VISION

Zoning is a community's rulebook for land use and development. It determines what types of activities and buildings are allowed in different areas and establishes standards for how properties are developed. When aligned with community goals, zoning can support economic development, downtown revitalization, and long-term community character.

Many downtowns allow uses that are technically legal but undermine economic or social vitality, such as ground floor spaces that are closed to the public, government or legal offices, low traffic uses, social services concentrated in retail cores without complementary activity, or residential or storage uses on prime storefront blocks.

At the same time, few communities require or strongly encourage active ground floor uses, regular operating hours, or mixed-use activation. As a result, downtowns "look like downtowns," but do not *function* like them day to day.

Small communities in northern California are experiencing challenges related to the current use of existing buildings and facilities that undermine the long-term vitality of downtowns, including using storefront facilities for unproductive/unpermitted purposes including storage, living quarters, and office spaces.

Enacted zoning language generally is not the issue. New and emerging projects that push the limits of existing regulations, or properties/projects that change use after permitting or construction can create issues. Administrative and political will is required to identify and properly address these situations.



Why it Matters

Small communities often have a limited number of buildings suitable for commercial use in critical downtown or main street areas. When these facilities are utilized in a manner that defies local policies, the overall business and economic environment suffer. These conditions can cause cascading impacts including chronic vacancy, vandalism, disrepair, and blight. Damage caused to the economic outlook of a community because of these conditions can be challenging to reverse, with the difficulty increasing the longer these conditions are allowed to persist.

Step by Step Actions

The concept of zoning as a public policy creates a framework where a vision for a community's form and function in its built form can be realized. While this may sound simple, the establishment, maintenance, execution, and enforcement of zoning policies is a challenge for communities of all sizes, most significantly small communities. The challenges are not only based on resource considerations (lack of funding, lack of staffing) but also the toll this can take on morale and public sentiment. Despite these challenges, a community that has zoning policies established can use them to nurture a healthy economic environment. It is important to examine the observed and experienced challenges with existing policies first to establish a strategy of 'right sizing' zoning and enforcement programming to meet community goals.

1

Assess the challenges identified by property owners, developers, municipal staff, and other downtown stakeholders. Those parties currently doing or attempting to do business in your downtown area are a valuable source of information. They can speak to their experience of rules and regulations pertaining to all facets of operating their business in their chosen location. This could include crucial information about processes including permitting, fees, review times, submission requirements, as well as more detailed property specific information relating to building codes and physical requirements.

A review of enforcement practices should be included in this early phase as well. If current or past enforcement efforts have been insufficient or ineffective, greater examination should be conducted. Consider the enforcement actions that have been utilized to address non-conforming or illegal uses and assess their effectiveness. Enforcement actions to learn more about include the following:

- a. Notices of violation sent to property owners/operators
- b. Notices of violation posted at offending locations
- c. Active permits suspended, revoked, or cancelled
- d. New permits prohibited
- e. Fines levied
- f. Liens placed

As you review the actions taken, it is also crucial to create and maintain documentation including responses received to notifications, remedial actions taken or observed, payments remitted and any other supporting information to construct a record of the efforts taken to resolve the issue.

2

Examine requests for variances, special use permits, and other variations from standard zoning or permitting policy and procedures. When property owners have challenges meeting existing zoning requirements, they can often seek variances or other forms of temporary or special approval to alleviate these hardships. If requesting parties are regularly seeking variances for similar items (i.e., setbacks, side/rear yard clearances, signage considerations, special uses, etc.), consider seeking revisions through your local legislative body to better reflect the current needs of stakeholders.

3

Examine the status of connections between local planning efforts and zoning policies. Communities engage in comprehensive planning efforts to identify the conditions they would like to see changed in their area and strategize to realize those changes. Often these goals include topics related to improving the local economy through increased employment, the attraction and development of new businesses, and creating an environment where residents can improve their overall quality of life. A zoning policy is one tool a community can deploy in pursuit of those goals and should reflect the desires of the community as shown in community planning. If the community wishes to limit major industrial development, focus development in main street areas, accentuate specific industries or business clusters, all of these can be reflected in appropriately developed zoning policy language.



When a community is applying zoning policies that are not well articulated or that cause impacts that appear uncoordinated with public intention, this can cause issues. Where possible, use existing planning efforts/ documents as the basis for what zoning policy and practice brings the community closer to the desired state. California cities and counties [must adopt General Plans under California State Law that outline the conditions for development of the built environment](#). Communities should use this as an opportunity to make greater connections

between desired community outcomes and goals related to those developments. A small downtown revitalization committee or working group could serve as an advisory body to the local legislative body to increase the value of these more goal-oriented efforts relating to the maximization of land use.

The enforcement of zoning policy creates real life consequences (legal and financial) for individuals based on their actions or inactions against adopted rules

and policies. Administrative staff should be able to articulate the connection between the goals related to the downtown's economic well-being and enforcement actions against property owners/operators. For example, in the Live Oak 2030 General Plan, goal ED-5 states 'Foster growth and expansion among existing businesses in the community as a primary strategy for improving the economic health of the City.' If practical enforcement efforts are not utilized to make sure available and exiting buildings are safe and sufficient for business to locate, it will be impossible to achieve the goal of growing and expanding businesses that could benefit the economic health of the community.

When punitive actions are taken, a reaction is generated, and the basis for the punitive action should be well illustrated and communicated to all parties (participating or not). The goal is not to penalize, but to promote the health, safety, well-being, and success of residents and the community as a whole.



4

Perform a periodic zoning code audit for timely updates that might reflect changes in the local environment. Many communities across the US first adopted zoning policies during the 1960s and 1970s. Often the language of these policies after enactment goes largely unchanged, locking a community into a pattern of growth and development that may not be compatible with current economic conditions and local intentions. For example, zone definitions may include minimum parking requirements for commercial establishments based on square footage and the type of business or may restrict certain types of business signage placements. These zoning codes were often established to guide new construction or new development in a community. Without sufficient revisions to provide considerations more appropriate for rehabilitation or redevelopment, revitalizing existing structures can be made unnecessarily more challenging by placing upon them requirements intended for new construction.

A general review of zoning policies for each participating community found that all had been revised or modified within the past fifteen years, with five communities passing amending ordinances within the past five years. This pace of periodic review is encouraged, with more urgent changes being offered for consideration when raised by partners or stakeholders in the community.

Maximize the use of enacted enforcement policies and available enforcement actions. Enforcement actions against unlawful and unproductive property uses in downtown areas should be applied in an escalating manner as allowed by both municipal regulation and state law. Typically, there are administrative actions that can be undertaken by the municipality as outlined in their zoning ordinance language or other related ordinances. These actions can include revocation of existing permits, denial of future permits, fines, and placement of liens. The menu of available options will vary by community. The authorization for municipalities to levy administrative or financial penalties is based on the language found in [*State of California Government Code 53069.4*](#).

When moving through this process, it is critical to follow the outlined process unique to each community that involves the general sequence of notice of violation, opportunity for response/remediation, review of information, opportunity for hearing, and adjudication. Not following the generally adopted and accepted procedures of due process places the local government at risk of litigation. If these efforts are completed and do not reach the intended outcome, civil litigation is an additional option available for consideration.



External Resources

Zoning and land use development topics are some of the most well-documented areas related to downtown revitalization efforts, as communities have been actively working in this space through a multitude of approaches. Each community will need to determine what level of effort is required to reach their intended goals. The resulting efforts can range from brief strategic updates of policy language or enforcement activity to a complete overhaul of zoning and enforcement ordinances. Some tools include:

- Congress for the New Urbanism released a report in 2018 entitled '[Enabling Better Places - Users' Guide to Zoning Reform](#)' focused on supporting communities in Michigan with zoning code reform efforts. This document guides users through a process of exploring zoning code revision options and provides guidance for distinct areas of interest including main streets, downtowns, and adjacent neighborhoods. For each destination type there are five conceptual groupings of recommendations; streetscape, form, use, frontage, and parking - divided by short-, medium- and long-term strategies.
- In May 2025, the Center for Community Progress released the '[Cleveland Code Enforcement Training Guide - A Strategic Curriculum for Local Practitioners](#).' This

document creates a foundation for effective code enforcement programming. Among the areas covered are topics for initial and ongoing training, field examples, and extensive links to external resources from across the country including webinar recordings, job postings, and other resources that can be utilized as inspiration for local implementation.

- The United States Environmental Protection Agency '[Smart Growth](#)' program offers resources for communities seeking assistance with development and conservation activities that build economic capacity and resilience. Two products focused on zoning were released in 2009 and 2012 respectively entitled '[Essential Smart Growth Fixes for Urban and Suburban Zoning Codes](#)' and '[Essential Smart Growth Fixes for Rural Planning, Zoning, and Development Codes](#).'
- National Zoning Atlas: <https://www.zoningatlas.org/>. California is one of the states with full coverage in the data. There's a tool where you can also search for where you can build certain types of housing. NARC and NADO hosted a webinar with Sara Bronin, the founder, last year: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaR4BpU3NK8>

In the search for best practices, the research team surveyed the NADO membership—over 300 regional development organizations representing over 2,000 counties and 19,000 municipalities. Several members responded with feedback on efforts that had been useful in their communities. Among these responses were several relevant to zoning challenges. A summary of those responses is offered below.

- Members from Minnesota offer a **community charette opportunity** to brainstorm local ideas and generate local buy in. Invite local officials engaged in planning/zoning efforts including city council representatives and planning commission members to build perspective on variances and other issues that commonly arise during development/redevelopment efforts. During these activities, discussions around potential uses and their compatibility with local planning efforts often become evident, providing an opportunity to problem solve before a real issue arises.
- Members from South Carolina outlined the **value of utilizing overlay districts** to permit special uses in specific high value commercial locations. Revisions were made in communities that prohibited first floor residential uses and language limiting storage uses in commercial locations. Discuss whether the use of overlay districts will help solve zoning issues.
- Members from Texas reiterated the **importance of zoning code management as 'routine maintenance' done regularly**, offering five years as a maximum window between review efforts. Implementing this rhythm of review can be challenging to initiate but has paid off for their communities. Information was also shared on the





connected nature of uses in non-downtown areas having impacts community wide and on downtown locations. For example, the extreme growth of smoke shops in the city of Denison led to a city-wide ordinance regulating new vape and smoke shops to limit youth access and control business locations. While the downtown areas were not the cause of this new policy, it did create impacts in the downtown area. Consider the use and practice of code enforcement in your place.

Who to Involve

Zoning policy and enforcement reform is conducted through a legally defined process that varies slightly from community to community. The key parties involved will be the same in each scenario:

- City administration leadership and staff
- City council representatives
- Planning commission members
- Property owners
- Business owners/operators
- Developers

Potential Timeline

Phase 1 - Assess challenges, shortcomings, and pain points. This phase involves assessing the zoning or enforcement challenges that are readily identifiable. A small advisory group of downtown stakeholders could be assembled to gain perspective from parties trying to navigate the existing regulatory environment. Areas to consider could include identified use violations, enforcement actions taken in response, status of ongoing

enforcement cases, document review including variance applications, decision records, and any information that can provide context for the current situation.

Phase 2 - Implement incremental changes and improvements identified during initial assessment. Changes to policies are typically best received when deployed over a period with clear reasoning and guidance from municipal leadership and staff. Improvements to policy language or processes identified in Phase 1 can be incrementally implemented where necessary, working to make tangible progress toward the issues and pain points identified to date.

Phase 3 - Substantial policy review, revision, and adoption (*If necessary*). Following the fact-finding effort and incremental implementation of policy and procedure changes identified, more significant efforts can be considered. This phase could include identifying a third-party consulting partner to assist with developing substantial zoning policy revisions and enforcement procedure recommendations. Along with pure zoning language, this in-depth review could cover additional topics like submission materials, timelines, fees, review periods, and other associated aspects of compliance.

Costs

Costs for these efforts can be minimal if undertaken by municipal staff and local stakeholders. Engaging with consultants for engagement and revision of policy language will incur higher costs. Engaging with outside legal counsel on these matters or any actions related to civil legal proceedings that may follow an exhaustion of administrative enforcement will also incur costs.



Case Study: Code Enforcement as a Tool for Downtown Revitalization

The Cities of Yreka and Dunsmuir, California

Overview

Many rural communities struggle with vacant buildings, deteriorating properties, and limited resources to address blight. While code enforcement is often viewed as a punitive process, the Cities of Yreka and Dunsmuir have developed a more balanced approach that combines compliance, incentives, partnerships, and strategic enforcement.

Drawing on more than 15 years of experience working in rural communities across the Midwest and California, Assistant City Manager Juliana Lucchesi has helped shape code enforcement programs that prioritize community improvement while maintaining fairness and due process.

The Challenge

For many small cities, code enforcement can be difficult to implement effectively. Several challenges commonly arise:

- Municipal codes may be outdated or lack the authority needed to address current issues.
- Enforcement procedures are time-consuming and legally complex.
- Staff capacity is limited.
- Significant upfront investment is required before results are visible.
- Local governments often face pressure to address nuisance properties while avoiding overly punitive actions that alienate residents.

According to Lucchesi, code enforcement should be viewed as a long-term strategy rather than a quick solution. "It's a marathon, not a sprint." Communities should expect to invest several years in building an effective code enforcement program before it becomes fully operational and cost-effective.

A Compliance-First Philosophy

Yreka's code enforcement program begins with a fundamental assumption: most property owners want to comply. Rather than immediately pursuing penalties, the city prioritizes communication and voluntary compliance.



The city's first step is typically a courtesy notice informing the property owner of the issue and requesting corrective action. According to Lucchesi, this approach resolves approximately 80 percent of cases without additional enforcement.

Framing code enforcement around safety and community well-being rather than punishment also helps build public support.

Building an Effective Enforcement Process

Code enforcement cases often involve multiple steps before corrective action can occur:

1. Receive and document a complaint.
2. Obtain legal access for inspection.
3. Conduct a property inspection.
4. Identify and document violations.
5. Prepare notices and supporting documentation.
6. Complete legal review when required.
7. Follow through with compliance monitoring.

Strong documentation is critical throughout the process. In Yreka, staff are trained to maintain detailed records, photographs, inspection notes, and timelines to support future enforcement actions if needed.

Administrative Citations: A Key Tool

Both Yreka and Dunsmuir have found administrative citations to be one of the most effective enforcement tools available. Administrative citations allow local governments to issue fines directly through a city-managed process rather than pursuing violations through the court system.

Typical penalties may include:

- \$100 for an initial violation.
- Escalating daily fines after a compliance deadline passes.
- Additional penalties for repeat violations.

Unlike citations processed through the criminal court system, administrative fines remain with the city rather than being absorbed by court costs. The approach also allows communities to maintain local control while ensuring due process through documented violations, appeal procedures, and hearing processes. For appeals,



Lucchesi recommends using independent hearing officers whenever possible, particularly in small communities where staff and elected officials may have close relationships with property owners.

Partnering Enforcement with Incentives

A key lesson from both communities is that enforcement alone rarely produces long-term success. Dunsmuir has paired enforcement efforts with incentives that encourage property improvements. One example is a façade improvement grant program that helps reduce building rehabilitation costs for property owners.

The city has also worked to remove barriers that prevent owners from making visible improvements, such as repainting deteriorated structures. By coupling enforcement with assistance, communities can improve compliance rates while maintaining goodwill among residents and business owners.

Supporting Vulnerable Property Owners

Many nuisance properties may be owned by elderly, disabled, or low-income residents who lack the resources to address violations. Rather than immediately pursuing penalties, Yreka frequently connects these residents with community support organizations.

Examples include:

- Adult Protective Services (APS)
- Local church volunteer groups
- Community service organizations
- Team Challenge, a rehabilitation program whose participants assist with community improvement projects

These partnerships allow cities to address blight while helping vulnerable residents remain in compliance.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding may also provide resources for qualifying property owners, though communities should review current program guidelines and funding opportunities before pursuing this approach.



Addressing Chronic Problem Properties

For property owners unwilling to cooperate, cities maintain a range of escalating enforcement options. These may include:

- Administrative citations
- Inspection warrants
- Abatement orders
- Demolition orders
- Property liens
- Notices of pendency

In severe cases involving unsafe or abandoned structures, cities may order demolition and recover associated costs through special assessment liens placed on the property.

Lucchesi described examples where demolition costs, permitting expenses, and administrative costs were fully liened against properties. In some instances, owners forfeited the property to the city rather than paying accumulated obligations. In others, liens remained until the property was sold or transferred through tax-default processes.

A Notice of Pendency can provide another effective tool by notifying prospective buyers that unresolved code enforcement violations exist, incentivizing compliance before a transaction can occur.

Proactive Prevention

Yreka and Dunsmuir have also focused on preventing future code issues through updated land-use regulations. For example, Dunsmuir revised portions of its zoning code to require conditional use permits for certain uses, such as storage and secondhand retail operations. Conditional use permits can address operational concerns before they become code enforcement problems. This proactive strategy shifts attention from reacting to violations toward preventing them.

Central to the proactive prevention effort is the utilization of a vacant property registration process. The City of Dunsmuir in 2020 [adopted a resolution](#) establishing a process for registering vacant properties and establishing registration and renewal fees to support the ongoing administration of this effort. The resolution states that within 60 days of vacancy, or 30 days of acquiring a vacant property, registration of the property must be filed with the city clerk. Registration must be renewed annually



for as long as the property is vacant. Most critically, the registration collects contact information for the responsible party in case of any additional code enforcement communications, concerns regarding site security, as well as information for who has authorization to rent or list the property as real estate. Additionally, the resolution requires the property owner to keep the property in a state of general repair and ensure that yards and ancillary areas are maintained to a 'neighborhood standard.' Of particular note, vacant properties in a commercial district must ensure that all windows are fully covered with 'plain paper or display artwork, merchandise offered for sale by another business within the community, or materials provided by a Dunsmuir community non-profit organization.'

Penalties for non-compliance and other infractions are met with administrative penalties and fines ranging from \$1,000 to \$25,000 as specified in the ordinance language.

Building Long-Term Capacity

Successful code enforcement requires sustained investment in people, procedures, and expertise. Yreka's program includes:

- A full-time code enforcement officer
- Administrative leadership support
- Specialized code enforcement legal counsel
- Independent hearing officers for appeals

The cities also utilize the expertise and training resources available through the California Association of Code Enforcement Officers (CACEO), which provides educational programs covering enforcement topics ranging from courtesy notices to eminent domain proceedings.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

The experiences of Yreka and Dunsmuir demonstrate that effective code enforcement is not simply about issuing fines. Instead, it is about creating a framework that encourages property improvement, protects public safety, and supports long-term community revitalization. Key lessons include:

- Lead with compliance rather than punishment.
- Update ordinances before attempting aggressive enforcement.
- Use administrative citations to streamline enforcement and retain local control.



- Combine enforcement with incentives whenever possible.
- Leverage community partnerships to help vulnerable property owners.
- Maintain strong documentation and due process.
- View code enforcement as a long-term revitalization strategy.

For communities seeking to improve downtown conditions, Yreka and Dunsmuir provide a practical example of how code enforcement can serve as both an accountability mechanism and a catalyst for community improvement when paired with strategic investments, partnerships, and a commitment to voluntary compliance.

Establishing Code Enforcement

Having staff resources available to administer code enforcement activities is critical to managing public health and safety risks related to the built environment. Effective code enforcement also ensures that development takes place in a form that meets the community's expectations and advances established goals deriving from planning efforts. As described earlier, the work of code enforcement is methodical in nature and can encompass many areas including building, construction, maintenance, zoning, land use, and environmental concerns among others.

Communities can take a number of approaches to establishing and incorporating code enforcement into municipal service offerings. For any who may be struggling to identify where to start, research indicates three commonly identified approaches:

1. General fund supported - Code enforcement positions are established as stand-alone administrative positions supported by general fund revenues or included in the job duties of relevant adjacent positions. This is most common in small municipalities where fee and fine revenue can only fractionally offset costs and other funds are required and in scenarios where available personnel are limited.
2. Fees supported - In environments where planning and permit activity generates sufficient revenue, code enforcement can be funded substantially or wholly by these funds. This is most common in medium-to-large municipalities. Communities examined as part of this effort generally offer a schedule of building permit fees that vary based on the service performed and the value of the improvements.
3. External contract or partner support - In environments where limited fee and fine revenue are available, municipalities may be able to contract



with other public entities to provide code enforcement services, including county building departments. This approach relieves the municipality of administrative overhead costs but creates a cash requirement for contracting purposes. This approach also requires close communication and coordination between the municipality and the contracting entity.

External funding opportunities for ongoing municipal staff positions are virtually non-existent through state and federal funding sources, not only in California but across the nation. The NADO research team is noting that code enforcement activities are eligible expenses within Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) programming, as outlined in U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – Community Planning and Development, notice [CPD-14-016](#). The memo outlines that communities can incur costs for code enforcement as outlined in [24 CFR 570.202\(c\)](#). The code enforcement activities are described below:

‘Costs incurred for inspection for code violations and enforcement of codes (e.g., salaries and related expenses of code enforcement inspectors and legal proceedings but not including the cost of correcting the violations) in deteriorated or deteriorating areas in which such enforcement, together with the public or private improvement or services to be provided, may be expected to arrest the decline of the area.’

None of the communities participating in the playbook project are CDBG entitlement communities, so any code enforcement related funding proposals would be subject to the [California Department of Housing and Community Development](#) annual program solicitation and application process.

In an effort to gauge the environment for raising funds for code enforcement activities from internally controlled sources like permit fees, the NADO research team accessed ten years (2015 – 2025) of privately owned residential permit data from the [U.S. Census Bureau – Building Permit Survey \(BPS\)](#). Data was collected for all California places and filtered for communities participating in the playbook project. The permit data illustrated here reflects new privately-owned residential construction. While private residential development may not be directly relatable to downtown economic activity as is the core purpose of the playbook, these permits are one mechanism for consideration in raising fee revenue that could be utilized to pay for general code enforcement activity. This data can provide one data point to help assess whether fee revenue may be a realistic source of financial support for the administration of code enforcement activities. Table 1 below illustrates which



counties had member jurisdictions that provided residential permit data during the ten-year observation period.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Butte County	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Humboldt County	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Modoc County								X	X	X	X
Sutter County								X	X	X	X
Tehama County								X	X	X	X
Trinity County								X	X	X	X
Yuba County*								X	X	X	X

Table 1. Residential Construction Permit Data Availability - Place

* Yuba County is included above as having municipalities reporting data; however, this only included Yuba City, not the City of Wheatland.

During the observation period, only Butte and Humboldt Counties had places (cities/ villages) that provided residential permit data for the entire ten-year period. Table 2 illustrates residential permit data for specific jurisdictions and is provided below.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Totals
Oroville	15	15	3	9	72	64	253	226	114	0	63	834
Eureka	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	65	19	46	132	262
Humboldt Co. Unincorporated Areas*	91	139	126	134	296	141	221	166	106	83	121	1,624
Alturas	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	0	0	0	0	0
Live Oak	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	66	18	3	3	90
Corning	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	5	16	21	4	46
Trinity Co.**	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	21	22	21	33	97
Annual Totals	106	154	129	143	368	205	474	549	295	174	356	

Table 2. U.S. Census Bureau, Residential Construction Permit Data, Place Detail

* Humboldt County Unincorporated Areas' is included illustrate locations including Garberville, which is a Census Designated Place and not a municipality.

**Trinity County is included for the same reason, to capture Weaverville.

The values listed for these locations do not indicate permit activity in the specific areas of Garberville and Weaverville only.

¹ City of Eureka Fee & Service Charges FY 25-26: <https://www.eurekaca.gov/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/454>.

Using the City of Eureka as an example, the listed permit fee for a residential property construction with an estimated value of \$100,000 was \$1,847¹ in FY 25-26. Over the 4 years of data available, 262 residential permits were issued. If we conservatively assume that all residential construction permits issued during this time were for properties valued at \$100,000 or less, this scenario could have generated over \$483,000 in total permitting fees, or approximately \$121,000 per year. For the purposes of this exercise, this could be considered to be a minimum level of permit activity and revenue generation needed to support code enforcement and other related administrative activities.

Based on the permit information provided in Figure 2, it could then be reasonably assumed that Oroville, Eureka and Humboldt County (to include Garberville) may have enough sustained residential permit activity to generate revenue that could support some level code enforcement activities and staffing in those locations. Alturas, Live Oak, Corning, Weaverville and Wheatland would likely need to augment residential construction permit revenue with other funds to generate resources able to support code enforcement activities or consider contracting with a third party to provide or enhance these services.



SUPPORTING SMALL BUSINESS GROWTH AND INVESTMENT

SUPPORTING SMALL BUSINESS GROWTH AND INVESTMENT

Across all eight communities, there are real barriers to creating thriving small business environments that go beyond the rise of online shopping. Startup risk is too high for local entrepreneurs. Tenant improvement costs are unaffordable without subsidies. Rising costs from insurance (especially for older historic buildings), utilities, labor and minimum wage, and/or permitting and compliance such as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements.

Outside of business costs and competition concerns, the communities also highlighted the need for building repairs as the first step for improving small business success. Revitalization cannot be tenant-led alone; buildings must often be fixed first.

Why it Matters

A thriving small business community and a supportive business environment are the foundation of a successful downtown. Together, they create jobs, foster community pride, attract investment, and transform downtowns into vibrant centers of economic activity and social connection. When small businesses succeed, the entire community benefits.

Step by Step Actions: Strategies for Growing Main Street Businesses

This section will contain examples of ways to address some of these barriers by supporting and nurturing small businesses, reducing barriers, creating an entrepreneurial environment, etc.



Pop-up Retail

Pop-ups are temporary retail locations that utilize communal spaces or small existing retail venues to briefly sell items and/or provide services. Most often, this approach is used to sell seasonal goods or take advantage of fads/trends. However, pop-up retail can be used by governments and organizations looking to grow small business presence by integrating them into revitalization programming. Pop-up retail can be an effective tool to help budding small businesses take the first step. One of the core challenges of opening a small business is high start-up costs. Pop-up retail directly confronts start-up barriers by reducing the cost and timelines of leases while reducing required inventory.

Example: Ontario, California used the “pop-up” style approach, supplying local business owners with access to short-term rentals in a city-owned commercial space for \$1 a month and free access to utilities/internet.

- 1. Outreach and Relationship Building** - City government departments should spearhead the program in partnership with successful business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs.
- 2. Establish Program Selection Criteria, Goals, and Offerings** - Based on an understanding of the needs of small businesses, program planners can commit to goals achieved through program offerings, like free or low rent, and incorporate these considerations into program selection criteria.
- 3. Identify Funding** - Getting the space ready for opening and maintaining the facility will likely require the bulk of the cost and may require outside funds if the city does not have them available.
- 4. Secure Tenant Space** - The primary offering would be the physical space, and choosing a location that connects to pre-existing business corridors will increase the likelihood of customer traffic.
- 5. Develop and Implement a Call for Proposals / Identify Selection Committee / Review and Select Participating Businesses** - It is likely that more businesses will be interested than the program can immediately support, so crafting a call for proposals like the one [linked here](#) from Ontario can help ensure that tenants fit program goals and meet the needs of new business owners. While receiving proposals, identify a combination of local business owners and economic development practitioners to ensure a range of perspectives are considered when choosing which businesses to host. Participating businesses should fit original program goals and criteria such as expressed need, demonstrated potential, and startup readiness.
- 6. Build Community Engagement** - An engaged community can increase customer foot traffic. Build excitement through an opening day event, strong communication, and dynamic visual tools.
- 7. Maintain Tenant Space** - The host space will require regular physical maintenance and should also consider cost coverage of utilities/services such as water, internet, electricity, office supplies, etc.
- 8. Repeat with new businesses along an established timeline** - Pop-ups are temporary by nature, so the program should identify run length for each proposal period and continue new calls for participating businesses to reach as much of the community as possible.



Key Partners

City government offices, established small businesses, economic development advisors, philanthropic funders, state funders

Costs

Building purchase, construction, renovation, physical maintenance, utilities, internet, supplies, outreach, events, staff capacity

Micro-grants and facade grants

Small business micro-grants are small amounts of money that do not need to be repaid and typically come from government agencies, private philanthropy, or non-profit organizations. Depending on the program and funder, different micro-grant or microenterprise assistance programs will provide varying levels of financial assistance and require varying levels of qualifications. Some of these programs are also known as

“facade grants” and address tenant improvement costs by funding exterior refinishing, equipment and furniture, curb appeal enhancements, and the establishment of outdoor dining areas. Micro-grants are an effective way to combat start-up costs and/or revitalize existing businesses in need of financial assistance. They are typically less competitive, faster to implement, and easier to administer. Facade grants are key to addressing a key barrier from the focus groups: tenant improvement costs.



Example: Manteca, California runs a grant program that supplies funds to small businesses for storefront facade improvements, expansion of outdoor dining areas, ADA compliance upgrades, and enhancing interior tenant spaces to improve the overall customer experience. Additionally, [this database](#) provides resources for micro-grants available in California in 2026.

- 1. Develop Grant Roadmap** - Establish funding timelines, identify funding sources, and begin building selection criteria. This could include stakeholder interviews to clarify local businesses’ financial needs.
- 2. Notice of Funding Opportunity** - Call for applications from businesses, as has been done in Manteca.

Key Partners

City government offices, established small businesses, economic development advisors, philanthropic funders, state funders

Costs

Building purchase, construction, renovation, physical maintenance, utilities, internet, supplies, outreach, events, staff capacity

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- 1. Develop Grant Roadmap** - Establish funding timelines, identify funding sources, and begin building selection criteria. This could include stakeholder interviews to clarify local businesses’ financial needs.
- 2. Notice of Funding Opportunity** - Call for applications from businesses.
- 3. Announce Awardees** - Build excitement and use this as an opportunity for dynamic public engagement by pairing with public events.
- 4. Track Implementation** - Build opportunities to track implementation into grant

reporting requirements and celebrate wins through public highlights/ribbon cuttings.

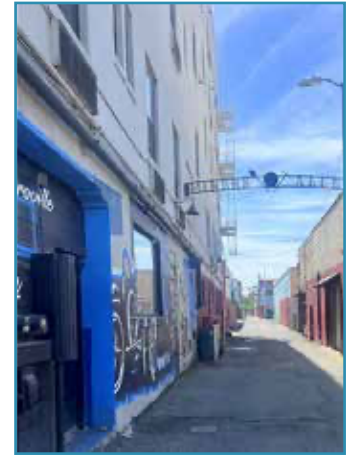
- 5. Program Wrap-Up** - Online or in person event to reflect on successes and gather feedback. As much as possible report on estimated return on investment.

Key Partners

City government offices, potential funders, local business owners, financial advisors

Costs

Grant funds, events, staff capacity



Community Benefit District/Business Improvement District Model

Community Benefit Districts (CBDs) are public-private partnerships within a certain area of a city or county that “[provide services like cleaning, safety, and economic development](#)” to improve neighborhoods and business environment. A Business Improvement District (BID) is like a CBD but can sometimes differ based on who manages it and how funds are collected. City of San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development’s page on CBDs contains a range of reports, 101 information fundamentals, and contact information for communities looking to implement similar models.

CBDs typically function as mechanisms to improve safety and cleanliness in a neighborhood or area. However, funds can also be diverted toward broader economic development goals, such as small business marketing campaigns. The model is a creative way to raise communal funds that aid in achieving shared goals; how those funds are implemented can be as personalized to the community as stakeholders see fit.

Example: There are [12 BIDs in Washington, DC](#) that raise funds through a surcharge on the real property tax liability on small businesses. Each BID is managed by its own non-profit organization made up entirely of business and property owners, who then control how funds are used to improve the district.

[Anne Arundel County, Maryland](#) supports CBDs across the county through services like road and property maintenance, facility improvements, and pest control. [This document](#) includes county codes, charters, and articles that could serve as a governance example if implementing on a county-wide level.

- 1. Consult Successful Models** - Although San Francisco is a much larger city, begin by reaching out to them or other successful CBDs to understand the governance model, funding structure, and management approach.
- 2. Secure Business/Property Owner Buy-In** - Host town halls, webinars, door-knocking, surveys, open office hours, etc. to ensure that potential CBD participants understand and want to use the model.
- 3. Confirm the CBD in City/County Legislation** - Work with local government to write the chartering article, typically built into Business and Tax Regulations Code, that clearly lays out how funds are raised, what body manages fund collection/use, and what the boundaries of the CBD are. This writing process should be collaborative across all potential stakeholders.
- 4. Build the Board** - With business and property owner buy-in and enabling legislation, it's time to launch the non-profit or managing organization that will oversee the funds. Funds should be completely controlled by business/property owners, with the local government supporting administrative tasks.
- 5. Launch your CBD** - Begin collecting funds and working with stakeholders to identify goals and uses.
- 6. CBD Maintenance** - Track funds and uses so that public annual reports can demonstrate the impact of the model and highlight areas needing improvement or change.

Key Partners

City and/or county government, local government maintenance staff, business owners, property owners, other city governments

Costs

Districts across the country report operating CBDs on budgets anywhere between \$250,000 and \$580,000, with some districts surpassing \$1 million. Target CBD budget will depend on each community's size/scale.



One-Stop Permitting Centers

One-stop permitting centers are a single website/web portal for business and property owners to use that consolidate the location of permitting agencies. This simplifies permitting processes, saving business owners time and resources. With the numerous challenges facing small businesses, one way that local governments can ease entrepreneurial burdens is by enabling regulatory ease.

Example: [New Orleans One-Stop](#) is a web portal/app used to search, track, and apply for permits.

- 1. Consult a Web Developer/Service Provider** - This process may require some research, putting out bids, and speaking with providers to get a sense of how what they can offer may meet the needs of your community. It's also possible to use free form tools, spreadsheets, basic municipal web pages, etc.
- 2. Consolidate Permitting Offices** - Complete an internal review of permitting processes, staff, paperwork, and fees to eliminate inefficiencies.
- 3. Launch Your Website** - Create an interface that is friendly and easy to use; pair its launch with community outreach raising awareness of the new system.
- 4. Support Business Owners** - Community members may be unsure about how to use the new system. Create how-to guides, including videos, in addition to public meetings allowing space for questions.
- 5. Track Feedback** - Share regular surveys and calls for feedback to understand if the new system is helping or if changes need to be made.

Key Partners

Web developer, business owners, internal local government staff

Costs

Primary expenses are for website development. Potential additional costs for optional outreach and informational events.

Fee Waivers/Deferrals

[Fee deferrals and fee waiver programs](#) are tools local governments can use to reduce upfront development costs for businesses and property owners. Fee waivers eliminate certain local government fees for eligible projects, while fee deferrals allow fees to be paid later in the development process rather than at permit issuance. This tool reduces upfront



and permitting costs to small businesses, making it easier for businesses and developers to move forward on projects. These programs have been used in many communities to support business retention and expansion and can be focused on specific geographic areas depending on where increased investments are most needed.

Example: [The City of El Centro's Downtown Development Fee Waiver Program](#) waives eligible planning, zoning, permitting, and impact fees for qualifying businesses in downtown El Centro.

[Pierce County, Washington](#) allows eligible applicants to defer payment of certain impact fees and connection charges until later in the development process. The most relevant for small businesses is likely sewer connection charges.

- 1. Identify Specific Goals** - Determine whether the goal is to encourage investment in a specific area, encourage new business development, or retain existing businesses.
- 2. Determine Eligible Fees** - Review development fees; identify which may be appropriate for waiver/ deferral.
- 3. Establish Eligibility Requirements** - Define which projects, businesses, and/or locations qualify. Programs may focus on specific business types or targeted districts to support community priorities.
- 4. Create an Application Process** - Develop a clear procedure and require applications to be submitted alongside other development/permitting applications when appropriate. This process can be built into the "one-stop shop" approach mentioned earlier.
- 5. Establish Deferral Procedures** - If fees are not waived, determine when fees will become due and how local government will secure payment.
- 6. Monitor Program Performance** - Track participation levels, fees waived/deferred, project outcomes.

Key Partners

Economic development staff, planning departments, permitting offices, business and property owners, broader community stakeholders

Costs

Beyond administrative costs, it is valuable to take in considerations for forgone or delayed fee revenue.



Experiential Retail and Community Events

[Experiential retail](#) focuses on creating memorable, in-person experiences that give customers reasons to visit businesses beyond simply purchasing goods. Individual businesses can utilize experiential retail in their shops, while cities can support these efforts through broader arts and culture programming. Community events, arts and cultural programming, pop-up activities, public art, and placemaking initiatives can help turn downtowns and commercial districts into destinations that attract visitors, increase foot traffic, and support local businesses. Linking experiential retail and events with arts and culture programming can further contribute to downtown revitalization by activating public spaces, attracting visitors, and adding beauty.



Online businesses offer convenience, but they cannot replace the social interaction, entertainment, and sense of place that physical downtowns can offer. Community events and experiential retail encourage people to spend more time in commercial districts while strengthening community identity.

Examples: California Cultural Districts can serve as a model. The state process included the following elements:

- Three steps: The review had an open call for letters of intent, site visits for semi-finalists, and an invited finalist application. A peer panel also reviewed the letters of intent.
- Required groundwork: Finalists had to complete at least a preliminary cultural asset survey or inventory. The council emphasized authentic, homegrown assets.
- Term: Each district received the designation for five years.

How each district approached it

[Eureka](#): Eureka built on planning that was already underway. The city planner explained that creating a Cultural Arts District was already a project in the city's arts plan, so they used it as the basis for the state application. The application was a collaboration among the city, Eureka Main Street, and Ink People Center for the Arts. That came after decades of arts-based downtown revitalization, including an earlier local "Cultural Arts Resource District" and the monthly Arts Alive! art walk. That local district grew out of a partnership among the

city's redevelopment agency, the Eureka Art and Culture Commission, the Humboldt Arts Council, Ink People, and Eureka Main Street.

Redding: An arts council led it, with philanthropic and Main Street backing. The Shasta County Arts Council was the lead agency. Redding mapped several areas on both sides of the river as its district. Viva Downtown Redding, a Main Street organization, was also a founding partner.

Truckee: This was a town, chamber, and grassroots effort. The Truckee Chamber of Commerce, the Truckee Public Arts Commission, and the Town of Truckee worked together on the application. The Truckee Arts Alliance, a grassroots group formed in 2015, also played an informal role. The Nevada County Arts Council served as fiscal sponsor for the Alliance. The district's pitch was also distinctive as a rural, high-alpine district. Truckee was one of only four rural designations.

Grass Valley-Nevada City: The Nevada County Arts Council was the central organizer. It is the county's state-local partner with the California Arts Council, by resolution of the Board of Supervisors. It later ran district mini-grants and built a cultural asset map and an economic impact study.

Common ingredients

- A **lead organization**, usually an arts council or a Main Street group, with a cross-sector coalition behind it
- A **defined geographic boundary** with a documented concentration of cultural assets
- **Local government buy-in** from the city or town
- An **existing track record** to point to, such as art walks, planning documents, or prior grants

Key Partners

Business owners, chambers of commerce, downtown associations, art and culture organizations, parks and rec departments, broader community residents

Costs

Costs can vary significantly with these types of initiatives, ranging from the level of involvement the city chooses to take. If you serve primarily as a resource for businesses looking to integrate more programming into daily activities, costs can be low, but investing in physical infrastructure and broader events could increase expenditures.



BUILDING
A CONSISTENTLY
VIBRANT DOWNTOWN

BUILDING A CONSISTENTLY VIBRANT DOWNTOWN

Most downtown areas in the northern California study area are active only during events and/or daytime hours. There is limited or no activity after 6-8 pm, Sundays or Mondays. There are few restaurants that open late, no or few central gathering places, and a lack of reasons to linger or return downtown when programs are not running.

Why it matters

This matters because a downtown area that goes dormant between activities and weekends will struggle to function as a vibrant economic center, causing residents and visitors to leave in search of opportunities outside of their community.

Step by Step Actions

1

Strategy 1: Form a Downtown Activation Team

A Downtown Activation Team brings together key stakeholders to create a shared vision, coordinate resources, and drive initiatives that make downtown a vibrant destination for residents and visitors. By fostering collaboration among businesses, community organizations, property owners, local leaders, and regional development organizations, the team can implement targeted events, marketing efforts, and placemaking projects that increase foot traffic, support economic growth, and enhance the overall downtown experience.

- 1. Recruit Key Stakeholders** - Identify and invite representatives from: city government, Chamber of Commerce, downtown businesses, arts and culture organizations, community groups and volunteers, tourism agencies, and property owners.
- 2. Establish a Team Structure** - Assign leadership roles and responsibilities. Here are a few examples:
 - i. Chair/Coordinator: Oversees implementation
 - ii. Events Lead: Organizes programming and activities
 - iii. Business Outreach Lead: Engages merchants and recruits participation
 - iv. Marketing Lead: Promotes events and downtown activities
 - v. Design & Beautification Lead: Focuses on signage, public spaces, and placemaking
- 3. Develop a Shared Vision and Set 90-Day Goals** - Define what success looks like, Desired downtown atmosphere, Target audiences (residents, visitors, families, young professionals). Examples: Recruit 15 businesses for extended hours, launch one

recurring event, increase downtown foot traffic by 10%, or create a downtown social media campaign.

4. **Meet Regularly** - Hold monthly activation meetings. Review attendance, sales data, and feedback. Adjust strategies based on results.



2

Strategy 2: Secure commitments from businesses

Securing commitments from downtown businesses is essential to creating a consistent and engaging visitor experience that encourages people to stay longer, shop more, and return frequently. By building a network of participating businesses, coordinating extended hours and promotions, and demonstrating measurable results, the community can generate increased foot traffic, strengthen local commerce, and establish downtown as a vibrant destination.

1. **Create a Business Participation Program** - Develop a simple commitment package:
 - Stay open until 7-9 p.m. one designated day each week
 - Participate in downtown promotions
 - Display event signage
2. **Conduct Personal Business Visits:** Activation team members should:
 - Visit each downtown business
 - Explain benefits of increased foot traffic
 - Address concerns about staffing and costs
 - Gather ideas from business owners
3. **Start with Early Adopters:** Recruit a core group of enthusiastic businesses first:
 - Aim for 10-15 participating businesses
 - Publicize their commitment to encourage others
4. **Establish a Consistent Weekly Event** - Examples: Thursday Night Downtown, Friday Night on Main Street, Saturday on the Square:
5. **Promote Participating Businesses** - Create:
 - Maps listing participating businesses
 - Social media spotlights
 - Window decals identifying "Downtown After Hours" partners
6. **Track Results** - Collect customer counts, sales data (if businesses are willing), visitor feedback, event attendance figures and use positive results to recruit additional businesses.

3 Strategy 3: Business Integration

Business integration helps ensure that downtown events directly benefit existing businesses by intentionally connecting vendors, activities, and visitors to local storefronts. By creating partnerships, encouraging in-store experiences, and incentivizing exploration throughout downtown, this strategy increases customer engagement, boosts sales opportunities, and strengthens the overall economic impact of community events.

- 1. Redesign Event Vendor Rules** - Require that vendors partner with a downtown business, set up in front of an assigned storefront, and drive visitors toward permanent businesses.
- 2. Assign Vendors Strategically:** Match vendors with businesses that complement their products. Examples:
 - Food vendor near specialty retail
 - Artisan vendor near gift shop
 - Music performance near a restaurant patio
- 3. Create In-Store Experiences:** Encourage businesses to offer: Product demonstrations, tastings, pop-up exhibits, live art or music, make-and-take activities.
- 4. Develop Event Passports** - Create a visitor challenge:
 - Visit five participating businesses
 - Collect stamps
 - Enter a prize drawing.
- 5. Incentivize Purchases** - Examples could include event-night discounts, downtown gift card giveaways, spend-and-win promotions, and business-to-business coupons.
- 6. Measure Participation:** Track number of businesses participating, vendor-business partnerships, passport completions, sales increases, and repeat attendance.

Who to involve

Identify and invite representatives from: city government, Chamber of Commerce, downtown businesses, arts and culture organizations, community groups and volunteers, tourism agencies, and property owners.



Potential Timeline

Phase 1: Organize and Build Support – Form a Downtown Activation Team, meet with downtown businesses and discuss goals, recruit businesses to stay open one evening per week, select a recurring event night.

Phase 2: Launch and Activate – Launch marketing campaign, require vendors to partner with downtown businesses, organize in-store activities, hold first downtown after-hours event

Phase 3: Sustain and Expand – Continue monthly events and promotions, evaluate results and expand participation



Success Measures

- 10-15 businesses participating
- One recurring downtown event each month
- More businesses open after 6 p.m.
- Increased foot traffic and sales
- More residents and visitors spending time downtown after events

Costs

This strategy includes costs associated with marketing and branding efforts, business outreach and recruitment, signage and promotional materials, including banners and window decals, as well as entertainment and cultural activities designed to support project objectives.

Possible Funding Sources

Anchor Sponsorship: The presenting sponsor, providing core financial support to produce the event series.

Organizational Support: An entity that contributes funding, staffing, and coordination as part of its downtown revitalization mission.

Local Business Participation: Vendor fees and booth participation, extended hours and promotions that reinforce the event's success.

Public Sector Support (Indirect Funding): A city supports such events by managing street closures and infrastructure and providing public safety & event coordination.

Case Study: Fridays After Five – Paducah, KY

Fridays After Five is a free, recurring summer concert series and street activation program in downtown Paducah, Kentucky. They held weekly along Broadway Street and the riverfront, which transformed downtown into a family-friendly block party featuring live music, vendors, and community activities.

This program is focused on weekly live music performances (multiple stages and bands), temporary street closures to prioritize pedestrians, food vendors, markets, and local business participation, and family-friendly programming, including a kids' zone and activities.

Project Partners

- Paducah Main Street: Lead organizer and program manager
- First National Bank (FNB): Presenting sponsor and primary financial supporter
- City of Paducah: Provides logistical support (street closures, public safety, permitting)
- Local businesses, restaurants, and vendors: Extend hours, set up booths, and benefit from increased traffic
- Performers and community organizations: Provide entertainment and programming.



TURNING EVENTS INTO LASTING ECONOMIC IMPACT

TURNING EVENTS INTO LASTING ECONOMIC IMPACT

Community events attract large crowds and generate awareness, but they are not consistently translating into sustained economic benefits for downtown businesses. Visitors, sometimes thousands, often attend the event itself, interact primarily with temporary vendors, and leave without shopping, dining, or engaging with local businesses in the downtown. As a result, downtown activity and spending decline significantly once the event ends.

Why it Matters

Events can attract thousands of visitors, but if attendees do not engage with local businesses, the community misses opportunities to generate lasting economic benefits, build repeat customers, and create a vibrant downtown beyond event days.

Step by Step Actions

1

Strategy 1: Passport program

A downtown passport program is a shop-local promotional campaign where visitors collect physical stamps or digital check-ins on a card or app by visiting participating local stores and restaurants. Completing the passport enters participants into drawings for grand prizes, cash, or gift baskets, driving foot traffic to small businesses.

- 1. Business Recruitment** - Recruit 10-20 downtown businesses to participate.
- 2. Create Passport Card and System** - Create a simple passport card requiring visitors to visit 5-7 businesses and collect a stamp, sticker, or checkmark.
- 3. Assemble Incentives** - Offer incentives such as: free drink, raffle entry, downtown gift card, event ticket, local merchandise.
- 4. Launch and Promote Program** - Launch the program during a festival, market, art walk, or downtown event. Promote the passport through social media, event materials, business storefronts, and community websites. Encourage visitors to explore multiple businesses by creating suggested routes or themes.
- 5. Collect Passports and Award Prizes** - Collect completed passports and award prizes. Promote through social media, websites, etc.
- 6. Track Results and Adjust and Expand as Needed** - Track participation by monitoring: passports distributed, passports completed, participating businesses, and customer feedback. Adjust and expand the program based on results.

2

Strategy 2: Extend business hours beyond event days

Another strategy is to encourage small downtown businesses to extend their business hours beyond event days. This could be done seasonally and/or by choosing one day a week during which downtown businesses stay open later than normal. This could also be done in conjunction with a downtown art walk, showcasing local artists and local businesses.



- 1. Identify Peak Visitor Periods** - Review visitor patterns, event schedules, tourism seasons, and busy weekdays to determine when extended hours will have the greatest impact.
- 2. Recruit Participating Businesses and Establish Consistent Extended Hours** - Secure commitments from a core group of downtown businesses willing to participate in an 8-12-week or seasonal pilot program. Select a specific day and time (e.g., Thursdays until 8 p.m.) and encourage all participating businesses to follow the same schedule, staying open later on those days.
- 3. Create a Unified Brand, Support Businesses in Using it, and Promote** - Develop a simple message such as "Open Late Thursdays," "Downtown After Hours," or "Shop Local After 5." Offer shared marketing and promotion, small grants or incentives (if available), window decals and promotional materials, and technical assistance. Promotion could be done through social media, community websites, email newsletters, local media, event promotions, and downtown signage.
- 4. Add Small Activation Activities** - Encourage businesses to offer specials and discounts, live music, product demonstrations, tastings, and family-friendly activities.
- 5. Monitor Participation and Evaluate Results** - Track the number of participating businesses, customer traffic, sales increases, and visitor feedback. At the end of the 8-12 weeks, review business feedback and performance data to determine whether to continue, expand, or modify the program.

3

Strategy 3: Redesign event layouts to drive movement

Redesigning event layouts to encourage movement helps distribute visitors throughout downtown, ensuring that more businesses, attractions, and public spaces benefit from event traffic. By strategically placing activities across multiple locations, creating clear walking routes, and incentivizing exploration, communities can increase visitor engagement, boost business visibility, and create a more dynamic and connected downtown experience.

- 1. Map the Event Area** - Identify all event spaces, downtown businesses, attractions, parking areas, and pedestrian routes. Determine where crowding typically occurs.
- 2. Identify Anchor Destinations and Distribute Activities** - Select key businesses, community spaces, or attractions that can serve as activity hubs throughout downtown. Spread entertainment, vendors, food, children's activities, and performances across multiple blocks rather than concentrating them in one location. Partner with businesses to host live music, artist demonstrations, tastings, pop-up exhibits, and family activities.
- 3. Develop a Downtown Activity Map, Create Walking Loops and Install Wayfinding Signage** - Design clearly marked routes that connect all event areas and lead visitors past retail businesses, restaurants, and attractions. Use signs and banners such as "Continue Inside," "Next Stop -->," "More Activities This Way," or "Explore Downtown." Provide printed and digital maps showing activity locations, business locations, walking routes, and points of interest.
- 4. Connect Vendors to Businesses** - Place vendors near storefronts or require partnerships with businesses to encourage shared customer traffic.
- 5. Promote Exploration Incentives** - Add scavenger hunts, passports, raffles, or prize drawings that encourage visits to multiple locations.
- 6. Monitor Visitor Movement** - Observe foot traffic patterns and gather feedback from businesses and attendees to identify areas for improvement.

Who to Involve

Identify and invite representatives from:

- City government
- Chamber of Commerce
- Downtown business owners
- Arts and culture organizations
- Community groups and volunteers
- Tourism representatives
- Event organizers
- Local sponsors, and property owners



- Economic Development Organizations
- Community organizations and volunteers
- Downtown Retailers, restaurants, breweries, and service providers
- Festival vendors and food trucks



Potential Timeline

Phase 1 - Recruit businesses, establish partnerships, create branding, design passport program, establish extended-hours pilot, map event layouts.

Phase 2 - Launch passport program, implement extended-hours pilot, test redesigned event layouts, and collect performance data.

Phase 3 - Evaluate performance, modify programs, recruit additional participants, expand successful activities.

Phase 4 - Continue successful strategies, conduct annual review, establish next year goals and budget.

Costs

These strategies include costs associated with staff time, promotional materials, social media advertising, prizes and incentives, temporary wayfinding signage and event layout planning and design.



ENHANCING VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND DESTINATION AWARENESS

ENHANCING VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND DESTINATION AWARENESS

Across multiple towns, visitors are already coming for events, recreation, sports, and tourism, but they do not always know where to go or what's offered in the downtown, cannot find local businesses' websites easily online, and/or arrive when downtown businesses are closed. Visitors come to the community, but many are not being converted into downtown customers because they cannot easily find information about businesses, attractions, events, or business operating hours. Recreation users may not enter downtown before or after their recreational activities. Highway traffic may not be converted to downtown stops. And event attendees may not spend money in downtown stores. Gaps include poor wayfinding, limited online presence, no central "what's open now" information, and weak storytelling around downtown identity and assets.

While downtown has many valuable assets, they are not connected through a compelling and consistent story, limiting its ability to differentiate itself, build a stronger sense of place, and attract investment and engagement.

As a result, communities are missing opportunities to capture visitor spending and encourage repeat visits.

Why it Matters

Visitors are already coming to the community, but without clear information, wayfinding, and promotion, many do not visit downtown businesses, resulting in lost revenue, fewer repeat visits, and missed opportunities to showcase the community's unique assets and identity.

Step by Step Actions

1

Strategy 1: Make downtown more accessible

Making downtown more accessible helps remove barriers that prevent residents and visitors from fully exploring and enjoying the community. By improving signage, parking visibility, wayfinding, maps, and online information, communities can create a more welcoming and user-friendly experience that increases visitation, supports local businesses, and encourages people to spend more time downtown.

- 1. Evaluate Visitor Experience** - Walk through downtown as a first-time visitor and identify areas where people may have difficulty finding parking, businesses, attractions, restrooms, or event locations. Inventory downtown businesses, hours of operation, website presence, etc.

2. Identify Key Destinations - Create a list of destinations that should be highlighted, such as:

- Downtown businesses
- Restaurants and cafés
- Public parking lots
- Parks and trails
- Event venues
- Public restrooms
- Historic and cultural attractions

3. Develop a Wayfinding Plan - Determine where visitors need directional guidance and map out locations for:

- Gateway signs
- Directional signs
- Parking signs
- Information kiosks
- Walking route markers



4. Install Gateway Signage - Place welcoming signs at major entrances to downtown to clearly indicate arrival and establish a strong community identity.

5. Add Directional Signs - Install clear, easy-to-read signs directing visitors to downtown businesses, parking areas, attractions, parks and trails, and public facilities.

6. Improve Parking Visibility - Clearly mark public parking areas and provide signs directing visitors from parking lots to downtown destinations.

7. Visitor Maps - Develop printable downtown maps, digital maps on the community website, mobile-friendly versions, and maps showing businesses, attractions, parking, and walking routes.

8. Install "You Are Here" Kiosks - Place information boards with downtown maps in high-traffic locations such as downtown squares, trailheads, parks, event venues, and visitor centers.

9. Create Walking Connections - Use sidewalk markings, banners, decals, or pedestrian signs to guide visitors between attractions, parking areas, and downtown businesses.

10. Improve Online Mapping and Presence - Work with businesses to:

- Verify Google Maps listings
- Verify Apple Maps listings
- Update hours of operation
- Add photos and website links

- Correct business addresses and contact information
- Update business websites.

11. Promote Downtown Navigation Tools - Share maps and visitor information through community websites, tourism websites, social media, event promotions, and QR codes placed throughout downtown.

12. Monitor and Update - Review signage, maps, and online listings regularly to ensure they remain accurate and useful.

2

Strategy 2: Create a strong downtown identity

Creating a strong downtown identity helps distinguish the community from competing destinations and gives residents and visitors a clear sense of what makes the area unique and memorable. By developing a cohesive brand, incorporating local arts and culture, and consistently showcasing community assets, downtown can build greater community pride, attract visitors, support local businesses, and create a recognizable sense of place that drives long-term economic vitality.



1. Identify What Makes Downtown Unique - Gather input from residents, business owners, community leaders, and visitors to identify the community's distinctive assets and character. Consider features such as:

- Arts and culture
- Historic buildings
- Outdoor recreation
- Waterfront amenities
- Local food and agriculture
- Entertainment and events

2. Define a Downtown Brand - Develop a clear and memorable identity that reflects the community's strengths. Examples include but are not limited to: Arts District, Historic Main Street, River Town, Outdoor Adventure Hub, and Cultural Destination.

3. Develop a Visual Identity and Brand and Promote it Consistently - Create a consistent look and feel for downtown that includes logo or icon, color palette, fonts and design standards, signage styles, and marketing materials. Use the downtown brand across websites, social media, advertising, tourism materials, event promotions, and signage and maps.

4. Incorporate Public Art - Install public art that reflects the community's identity,

such as murals, sculptures, painted utility boxes, artistic benches, and interactive art installations.

- 5. Enhance Signage with Creative Design** - Use artist-designed signs and wayfinding elements that reinforce the brand while helping visitors navigate downtown. Examples include decorative directional signs, artistic street banners, branded gateway signs, and creative district markers.
- 6. Encourage Business Participation** - Work with downtown businesses to align storefronts with the overall brand by improving window displays, adding coordinated signage, enhancing façades, incorporating local themes and artwork, and providing design guidance and small incentives when possible.
- 7. Highlight Local Assets** - Identify and promote assets that support the downtown brand, such as trails and outdoor recreation, historic sites, local restaurants and food experiences, public art, community events, unique shops and attractions. Ensure these assets are featured in marketing materials and visitor information.
- 8. Create Artistic Orientation Features** - Help visitors explore downtown through creative placemaking elements such as art-themed maps, artist-designed kiosks, walking tour markers, public art trails, and storytelling panels that share local history and culture.
- 9. Integrate the Brand into Events** - Incorporate the downtown identity into festivals, markets, concerts, and community events through consistent branding, themed activities, local artists and performers, and storytelling about community assets.
- 10. Engage the Community** - Encourage residents, artists, businesses, and community groups to contribute ideas and participate in projects that reinforce the downtown identity.
- 11. Evaluate and Refine** - Regularly gather feedback from visitors and stakeholders to determine which branding elements are most effective and adjust as needed.

Who to involve

- City Government
- Chamber of Commerce
- Tourism and Visitors bureau
- Downtown business owners
- Downtown Association
- Parks and Rec
- GIS and Mapping Partners
- Art and cultural organizations



- Historical society and heritage organizations
- Community organizations and volunteers

Potential Timeline

Phase 1: Assess and Plan - Evaluate the visitor experience, inventory key destinations and amenities, define downtown identity, and develop a wayfinding and branding plan.

Phase 2: Design and Prepare - Design signage, maps, kiosks, walking routes, branding materials, public art concepts, and storefront enhancement approaches.

Phase 3: Launch, Promote and Refine - Install signs, kiosks, maps, walking markers, and public art; launch the branding campaign; promote downtown attractions; gather feedback and update materials as needed.

Costs

These strategies include costs associated with producing digital maps, parking signs, basic directional signs, and business listing updates, as well as community engagement, marketing materials, and website & social media integration.



Case Study: Greenville Downtown Redevelopment (Greenville, KY)

Greenville, Kentucky's downtown redevelopment, often described through "façades, festivals, and footpaths," is a comprehensive revitalization effort that transformed a declining Main Street into a vibrant economic and community hub. The initiative combined streetscape improvements, façade restoration, and recurring events to reenergize downtown and attract residents and visitors.

- Façade improvements to restore historic downtown buildings
- Public realm upgrades (sidewalks, lighting, planters, signage)
- Festival and event programming (e.g., concerts, arts festivals)
- Pedestrian and recreation investments, including trails and a nearby nature park

Project partners

- City of Greenville (Mayor & City Administration): Led vision, local coordination, and implementation
- Greenville Tourism Commission: Funded events, façade programs, and downtown activities
- Pennyriple Area Development District (PADD): Provided grant writing, planning, and technical assistance
- City Council: Supported policy and funding decisions
- Local businesses and residents: Participated in façade improvements and community initiatives
- Kentucky League of Cities: Advised on funding mechanisms and local tax strategy



IMPROVING CONNECTIVITY, ACCESS, AND MOBILITY

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

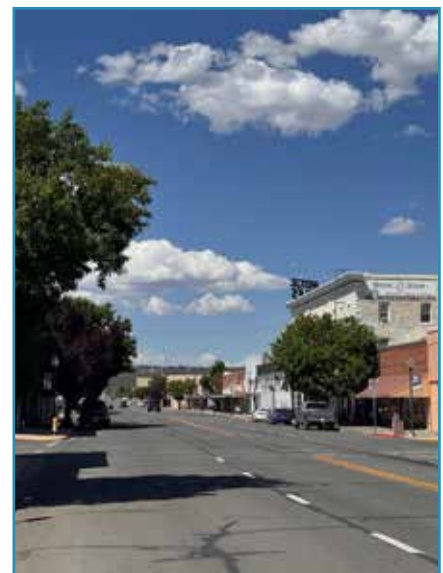
- 1. Assess Conditions and Areas of Greatest Concern** - Understanding the patterns of travel for visitors and residents between their points of origin and destination can help build an understanding of what improvements may be most impactful. Identifying barriers, crossings, and other impediments that 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).





STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Efforts to revitalize rural communities are vital undertakings that require vision, energy, enthusiasm, resources, and persistence to actualize. Often these endeavors can span years, bridging political terms and budget cycles. Identifying individuals and organizations willing to participate in and sustain these efforts to produce the results desired by residents and stakeholders is a significant challenge identified by communities in rural northern California.

Stakeholders regularly stated that most communities in northern California rely on volunteers, overextended city staff, small nonprofits, or chambers of commerce for leadership on many issues. Often these organizations are working with extremely limited resources and possess limited authority to effect change. There is often no single entity with jurisdiction over downtown buildings and real estate that also has the capacity to acquire, remediate, rehabilitate, and repurpose property. Respondents identified stalled or incomplete tools, like the Business Improvement District in Garberville, as examples of ongoing challenges resulting from fragmented leadership. Taken together, these create issues for coordinating property owners, businesses, city officials, support programming, and marketing. The result is revitalization efforts that are episodic rather than structural.

Why It Matters

Fragmented leadership and limited capacity are one of the root structural barriers to downtown revitalization efforts. Even good ideas fail without someone empowered to execute them. Without the structure in place to nurture these efforts, change is unlikely to happen.

Step by Step Actions

Items identified below are for the host or participant community to consider.

- 1. Assess the Network of Partners** – Take note of the organizations and individuals currently participating in any revitalization efforts. Document their participation, what qualities and resources they bring, what limitations they exhibit, and what each party seeks to gain from their participation (their value proposition – what’s in it for them?). With this information in hand, ask ‘who’s missing?’ A partner mapping exercise is recommended as one approach to building an effective cohort of partners. More information on this is available in the full report and [a tool for assessing partners can be found at this link](#).
- 2. Assess the Status of Current or Past Efforts** – Revitalization efforts can be daunting, often leading to sporadic phases of effort. Building a record of what has been

attempted, completed, accomplished, and/or abandoned will help stakeholders understand where to start or pick up activities. Documentation is critical; this will help address perceptions about past efforts and adjust expectations for future approaches.

- 3. Examine Alignment with Current Needs and Goals** – Conditions within communities evolve over time, and the focus of redevelopment activities should be adjusted accordingly. Following the assessment of partners and efforts, adjustments can be made to ensure that current or future activities closely align with identified conditions.
- 4. Initiate or Re-Initiate Efforts Based on Learnings** – With the information and experience gained from assessing partners, efforts, and alignment, meaningful progress toward updated revitalization efforts can begin. There are many options at this point: two possibilities include proceeding with local partners and resources if deemed sufficient; if not, communities could work together in a more regional effort making use of shared resources and joint endeavors.

Additional steps identified below are intended for situations where a community may be too small to sustain an individual revitalization effort but could effectively contribute to and be part of a regional approach. One possibility is a “hub and spoke” model with local coordinators and shared regional support through local and/or regional economic development organizations. Additional details are provided in the full report.

- 5. Identify the Host/Lead Organization of the Hub** – This organization would provide overall administrative and coordination support, including some combination of grant writing, real estate strategy, legal support, financing tools, and data support – essentially backbone support. Potential hosts could include a regional development organization or a regional non-profit organization. The hub organization could have staff dedicated to this effort based on funding availability.
- 6. Identify Larger Anchors as Regional Leaders** – Identified regional anchors could pilot stronger program tools (property acquisition programs, revolving loan funds, development partnerships), provide “proof of concept” models, and mentor smaller communities. Communities like Eureka and Oroville may be appropriate as regional anchors.
- 7. Identify Mid-size Communities as Operational Hubs** – Mid-size operational hubs could maintain their own active downtown programs, leading business recruitment and retention, piloting vacant property registries and small incentive programs, while serving as connectors between rural and anchor communities. Corning and Live Oak might be appropriate as mid-sized operational hubs.



8. Identify Small Communities as Tactical Strategy Hubs – Smaller communities (Wheatland, Weaverville, Alturas, and Garberville) could focus on a few simple but high impact activities. This could include identifying a small number of priority buildings in the downtown focus area for additional study, as well as short term activation (popups, food events, art), ownership guidance programming, and strategic reuse training. The smallest communities are likely to benefit from managing only the most visible properties.

According to Cheryal Hills, Executive Director of Region Five Development Commission, “consider the foundation of good downtown revitalization FIRST... get your social and political capital established. Start convening people... ask for partners to take on new roles like hosting quarterly property owner, business owners AND elected officials togetheryou’d be surprised how well this works.”

For these eight communities and other small, rural communities in California, the solution is not to build eight separate systems; it’s to build:

A shared regional backbone + simple local leadership + focused property action.

That combination is what turns fragmentation into coordination, limited capacity into shared strength, and episodic wins into sustained revitalization.

Who to Involve

As described above, the cast of participants is likely to evolve as assessment efforts progress. A general initial configuration is offered here.

- City/town manager or planner
- Regional development organization (RPA, COG, EDD, etc.)
- Local banker/lender
- Property owners
- Business owners/operators
- Contractor or developer
- Nonprofit representative
- Chamber of Commerce
- Main Street organization
- Community/family foundations
- Interested stakeholders and residents



Potential Timeline

Phase 1 - Complete the assessment of partner network and assessment of current/past revitalization efforts. Examine the alignment of efforts against the goals and expectations of the community and the various stakeholders. Communicate with new partners that will be initiated into the effort and educate all parties on the objectives, goals, partners, and resources engaged in the revitalization effort.

Phase 2 - Following the re-establishment of the partner network and enjoining new organizations and resources, begin incremental programming as determined. This is likely to include contacting all impacted property owners, beginning short-term pop-up events including window activations, as well as open space tours and other informational activities. If feasible, launch small incentive and support programs like mini-grants, permitting improvements, and other items under local control.

Phase 3 - In the scenario where a regional model is appropriate, this may be the earliest point at which it could be initiated. This would provide ample opportunity for individual communities to assess their status and gauge participation. At this point, the roles and responsibilities could be defined and distributed/assigned appropriately.

If continuing the individual community approach, at this phase funding programs could be deployed, and key properties could be advanced for additional study or acquisition.

Costs

Building the organizational capacity needed to advance downtown revitalization requires more than a single funding source. Communities should pursue a capital stack that combines local government contributions, public grants, private and philanthropic investment, and, over time, earned revenue streams to create a sustainable funding model for staffing, technical assistance, project development, and regional coordination. By layering these resources, communities can reduce reliance on any one source, leverage additional investment, and establish the long-term capacity needed to move projects from planning to implementation. In a regional hub model, this approach allows participating communities to share costs while benefiting from dedicated expertise, stronger grant competitiveness, and a coordinated strategy that can attract larger public and private investments over time.



In the scenario where an individual community is supporting a solo effort not tied to a larger regional hub, the costs are minimal. Most of the work identified can be undertaken by municipal staff, volunteers, or representatives from regional organizations. In some instances, it has proven useful to contract with an outside facilitator to guide the historical fact-finding and debriefing of past efforts (regardless of success or status).

In the regional hub scenario, total costs could be higher, with smaller amounts required from participating communities. While these costs are likely to be higher, the overall level of involvement and service will be correspondingly higher.

To fund a Regional Support Hub, here are some ideas:

A. Core Funding (Base Operations)

Core funding would include 1-2 staff positions regionally.

- Local government contributions - Each city contributes small annual amount, scaled by population (e.g., \$5k-\$25k/year)
- EDD/COG funding - Reallocate or expand economic development funds
- Membership model - Chambers, nonprofits contribute small dues

B. Public Grants (Primary Growth Funding)

These fund programs + expansion. Focus on:

- CA Department of Housing & Community Development (HCD)
- CA Economic Development / Community Revitalization programs
- Federal:
 - » EDA (Economic Development Administration)
 - » USDA Rural Development
 - » CDBG (Community Development Block Grants)

Use hub as grant aggregator: One application --> multiple towns benefit

C. Private & Philanthropic Funding

Especially important in Northern California are regional foundations, community foundations, Bank CRA (Community Reinvestment Act) funding, and corporate sponsors (utilities, agriculture, timber, healthcare).

Private and philanthropic investment plays a critical role in advancing downtown initiatives by supplementing limited public resources and helping catalyze projects



that strengthen the downtown's vitality. These partnerships not only expand the resources available to implement community-driven improvements but also demonstrate confidence in downtown's future and help bring transformative ideas to life

D. Earned Revenue (Longer-Term)

Once established, the hub can generate income through grant administration fees, development consulting, loan fund interest, and property transactions where applicable.

Case Study: Wallowa County

The Wallowa County Rural Regional Main Street (WCRRMS) program is a collaborative effort that supports multiple small rural towns. Rather than requiring each town to maintain a traditional Main Street program, WCRRMS allows for shared administration, coordination, technical support, training and resources through the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce as the hub. Each community has a local Main Street committee responsible for projects outlined in its strategic plan and an annual work plan.

Benefits to rural communities include access to regional staff to support local projects and help address shared needs across the region; opportunities for collaboration with neighboring towns on shared programming, resources, and common interests (regional calendar, regional marketing/promotion, etc.), grant writing support and grant management assistance; sharing of best practices, resources and support with neighboring communities; access to Main Street specific resources grants, learning opportunities and publications; support with measuring progress and sharing outcomes; and development of a strategic action plan and shared vision for downtown.



Case Study: Eastern Kentucky

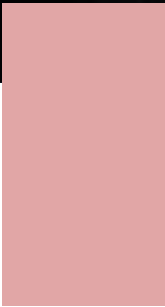
In Hazard, Kentucky, there is a strong city-county partnership that has aligned local leaders around a shared vision for downtown revitalization. Their collaboration has included shared resources, such as a downtown coordinator, and joint redevelopment efforts that have helped transform Main Street. From 2018 to 2024, the area welcomed 73 new businesses, supported by two major adaptive-reuse projects: the former Grand Hotel site, now an outdoor community gathering space, and the old bus station, which has been converted into ArtStation.

In Manchester, the organization “1 Clay County” has brought together leaders from multiple sectors to advance community development beyond the scope of local government. The group has pursued a strategy that combines downtown improvements with river access, outdoor recreation, and tourism development, helping connect the town to statewide attractions such as the Kentucky Bourbon Trail and Kentucky Coffee Trail. Both communities emphasized that a strong civic identity, cross-sector collaboration, and active public participation are essential for changing perceptions and driving long-term revitalization.





CAPTURING MORE LOCAL SPENDING AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY



CAPTURING MORE LOCAL SPENDING AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Economic leakage occurs when residents spend money outside their community, often in larger nearby cities or online. For small downtowns, reducing leakage to other markets requires making it easier and more attractive for residents to shop and spend money locally.

During interviews, local stakeholders identified that residents leave town for dining, shopping, entertainment, and services. Nearby larger towns have more options, later hours, and more of a critical mass of things to do and see.

Small downtowns generally struggle for success unless they offer something distinct, not just convenient.

Why It Matters

When residents spend money outside their community, local businesses and the downtown district lose sales, jobs, and tax revenues. These losses are not only felt through direct business impacts but are reflected in municipal services and other downstream areas that are supported through overall economic activity.

Step-by-Step Actions

1

Assess Local Market Conditions, Competing Locations, and Existing Network of Partners

- Working with partners like regional planning organizations or higher education institutions to access and examine available market demographics and economic information can be key to understanding the existing market environment. Gaining a greater perspective of the consumer market, income levels, travel patterns, business establishments, and related information can help shape strategies for addressing shortcomings in the downtown environment.

It is also critical at this point to analyze the network of partners and stakeholders who have historically participated in downtown efforts and who will remain engaged going forward.

2

Understand the Needs of Consumers and Visitors

- Market information accessed in the prior step will provide context on consumer preference (sales made, income generated, etc.) but surveying consumers directly for interests and desires not served in the local market can be revealing. The survey effort can be undertaken by a variety of means including in person, in writing, online, mail in, or other methods that can be supported by local officials and stakeholders. Results from any survey and information gathering efforts should be reviewed in tandem with the market information gathered in step one above.

Local consumers should be included in this effort as they are the primary customer base, and their repeat business forms the critical demand that will shape the market.

Consumer market research can be time-consuming and expensive. Talking to aggregators of demand (those intermediaries between actual consumers and producers) or anchor institutions are other options. For example, if a community is attractive to bicyclists, talking to bike clubs or outdoor clubs may be less time-consuming than talking to many individuals. Talk to anchor institutions that connect directly with consumers (hospitals, schools, colleges/universities, senior communities, or other large organizations).

3

Fill Retail and Service Gaps by Supporting Existing Businesses (Retention), Working with Entrepreneurs, and Fostering the Local Business Ecosystem - Providing support

to existing businesses striving to succeed in the local environment should be a top priority. Utilizing the information gathered from the informational assessment and surveying will provide business recruitment strategies to fill identified gaps. If additional supportive services such as loan programs, small grants, or business incubation are desired, exploration of these solutions could begin at this point. Identifying available retail spaces suitable for short-term use or activation can also take place.

4

Strengthen the Downtown Experience as a Community's Primary Gathering Place -

People often choose nearby cities for the overall experience, not just additional product availability. Residents are less likely to drive to a neighboring community if their local downtown area offers attractive public spaces and regular activities. Improvement efforts here are generally broader and include considerations like streetscape, lighting, and public spaces - with special value placed on outdoor seating, public art, and gathering spaces. Connections with anchor institutions like libraries, public markets, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, arts and cultural facilities should be emphasized where possible.

5

Support 'Buy Local' Campaigns and Other Efforts to Prioritize Local Institutions

- Efforts to promote, prioritize, and support local vendors and institutions in the downtown area can take place at any point and should be ongoing and perpetual. At this phase, more sophisticated efforts including local gift-card or certificate currency style programs could be conceptualized for consideration. Local business directories and other promotional materials could also be considered.

6

Cultivate a Unique Local Identity - This is an exercise that is likely to be perpetual

in the ongoing revitalization effort. This would be the point where a comprehensive review of efforts and their results could lead to the establishment of a theme or identity unique to the community. This could lead to the generation of branding materials, the generation of events relevant to the theme, focused marketing and advertising, as well as unique products and experiences aimed at capitalizing on the shared area of focus.

Who to Involve

- City/town manager or planner
- Economic development district or regional development organization
- Local banker/lender
- Contractor or developer
- Nonprofit representative
- Chamber of Commerce
- Main Street organization
- Community/family foundations

Potential Timeline

Phase 1 - Complete the assessments and data examinations for local market conditions. These will form the base of information that will support the ongoing effort and next steps. Provide immediate and ongoing support to existing business owners and operators in the downtown area to maximize both business and customer retention.

Phase 2 - Use the results of assessment and survey information to begin the identification and recruitment of businesses that could fill identified market gaps. Deploy any support programs that might benefit existing businesses, property owners, and prospective business operators evaluating opportunities in your community. This could include loan and grant programs, permitting improvements, business incubation and related support services, or any other resources that will benefit the local economic environment. Launch 'buy local' campaigns and other marketing efforts that highlight revitalization efforts and intentions to grow the local retail market.

Phase 3 - With assessment, analysis, outreach, and promotion well initiated and underway, identify themes around which to build an identifiable and unique local identity. Continue efforts that promote business support and retention, marketing and promotion, as well as supportive resource programming to entice new entrants to the local market.

Costs

Many of the items outlined here are intended to be completed by local stakeholders, municipal staff, or representatives of regional organizations as part of their ongoing work.

Research efforts involving regional development organizations or educational



FUNDING SUPPORT DISCUSSION:

HOW TO PAY FOR DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION EFFORTS

Many of the strategies mentioned in the Playbook can be undertaken with existing staff and resources. However, there are strategies that will go beyond existing capacity and resources. Key to funding these efforts is partnering with regional development organizations that are able to help secure competitive funding, prepare applications, and manage procurement, playing a critical role in accessing federal and state resources.

Funding options can be divided into a few categories:

- **Federal funding** - typically around transportation (Federal Highway, Transportation Enhancement, Safe Routes to School, etc.) or Land and Water Conservation funding. Other possibilities are:
 - Economic Development Administration (EDA)
 - U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development
 - Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)
- **State funding** - see California specific opportunities below. Some transportation strategies are funded through the state Department of Transportation as part of available funding and assistance programs
- **Local funding** - Restaurant and hotel taxes, tourism revenues, local donations and in-kind contributions
- **In kind** - Municipalities can support strategies like events by managing street closures and infrastructure and providing public safety and event coordination
- **Foundation and private funding** - Especially important in Northern California are regional foundations, community foundations, and corporate sponsors (utilities, agriculture, timber, healthcare)
- **Business investment and sponsorship** - This involves sponsoring events or programs, providing core financial support. It can also mean vendor fees and booth participation, extended hours and promotions that reinforce event and other downtown strategies
- **Membership model** - this can be used for supporting leadership and capacity, or it can be used for other strategies
- **Earned Revenue** (Longer-term) - If the region considers the hub and spoke model of leadership, once established, the hub can generate income through grant administration fees, development consulting, loan fund interest, and property transactions where applicable
- **Grassroots Approaches** - Involving Rotary, other service clubs, or local fundraising

One of the strongest approaches in downtown revitalization is to braid multiple funding



sources together, rather than relying on a single grant. Below are examples organized by funding strategy. For example, In the Greenville, Kentucky, case study above, the following sources were used:

- State and federal grants: Over five years, more than \$1.6 million was raised for redevelopment, streetscape, and recreational improvements from grants such as Kentucky's Transportation Enhancement Program, the Safe Routes to School Program, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, plus Tourism Commission revenue and resident donations.
- Local tax revenue: A restaurant and hotel tax funded a Tourism Commission and brought in around \$275,000 a year, paying for façade work, festivals, and the summer music series. Park funding: The nature park drew on local donations plus the Recreational Trails program and the Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- Technical support: The Pennyriple Area Development District helped the city seek funding, prepare grant applications, and handle procurement.

FEDERAL FUNDING

Economic Development Administration (EDA)

EDA does not have a stand-alone downtown revitalization program. Downtown projects are funded through its general economic development programs, mainly Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance, and have to be framed around jobs and economic resilience.

Main funding routes

- Public Works (Assistance Listing 11.300): This helps distressed communities revitalize, expand, and upgrade physical infrastructure. It can fund land acquisition or development and infrastructure investments needed to establish or expand industrial or commercial enterprises. Streetscapes, utilities, and facilities can fit when tied to business attraction, expansion, and job retention.
- Economic Adjustment Assistance (EAA, 11.307): This covers technical, planning, and public works and infrastructure projects in regions experiencing adverse economic change. Past uses have included business incubators and accelerators, revolving loan funds, workforce development, and regional strategic planning. That makes it a better fit for non-construction and capacity-building work.
- Planning and Local Technical Assistance: EDA's core programs also include these.

EDA's Public Works and EAA programs run through one combined notice, and awards were expected to range from \$600,000 to \$5 million for Public Works and \$150,000 to \$2.5 million for EAA.



Match requirements

- Standard rate: Generally, EDA's investment rate will be 50 percent, but EDA may fund up to 80 percent of total project costs based on distress criteria the relative needs of the region. A \$2 million project would need about \$1 million in local match at 50%, or about \$400,000 at 80%.
- In-kind match is accepted, but cash match improves the competitiveness of the project. Other federal funds can count only if authorized by statute.
- Tribal exception: Federally recognized Tribal applicants may have the match waived.

Eligibility conditions that matter for downtown work

- Applicants: States, counties, cities and other political subdivisions, tribes, and Economic Development District organizations are eligible, along with higher education institutions. Individuals and for-profit entities are not. Nonprofits are also listed among eligible applicants.
- Economic distress: Applicants must meet distress criteria, such as unemployment at least one percentage point above the national average, per capita income at or below 80% of the national average, or an EDA-determined "special need." Those criteria also set the federal share, so a community's data affects how much match it owes.
- Strategy alignment: Projects must be consistent with the region's current Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) or an equivalent EDA-accepted strategy, and must align with EDA's investment priorities.

EDA-supported Economic Development Districts have helped communities fund downtown planning, brownfield redevelopment, infrastructure improvements, and implementation projects tied to economic development goals.

USDA Rural Development

These are the USDA Rural Development funding sources most commonly used for downtown and commercial property activation:

- Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG): Supports small business technical assistance, training, and economic development planning. It's a good fit for incubators, business support, and pop-up or microenterprise programs.
- Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP): Funds microloans and technical assistance for very small businesses through intermediaries. It suits microenterprise development.
- Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program: Finances essential community buildings and facilities, such as a renovated civic or cultural space.
- Intermediary Relending Program (IRP): Provides low-interest loans to intermediaries, who relend to local businesses and community development projects. It suits a local revolving loan fund.



- Business & Industry (B&I) Loan Guarantees: Backs commercial lender financing for rural businesses, including real estate and equipment.
- Rural Economic Development Loan & Grant (REDLG): Provides zero-interest loans to local utilities, who pass them through to fund local economic development projects.

Rural Development eligibility often depends on population thresholds, and program availability and funding levels change.

Community Development Block Grants

CDBG is a flexible program that can be used for many different community needs. A few examples related to downtown development include:

- Roslindale Village (Boston, Massachusetts) – Main Street organizations have used CDBG funding for façade improvements, public facility improvements, and infrastructure projects that strengthen commercial districts.
- Small Communities in Iowa – Iowa’s Downtown Revitalization Fund uses federal CDBG dollars to finance façade rehabilitation and streetscape improvements in downtown districts.

Transportation Funding

Federal funding from a few different federal transportation programs, such as the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program, have been used to support downtown revitalization work in many Main Street communities nationwide. These can be especially effective when paired with other revitalization strategies. Transportation grants have commonly funded:

- Streetscape improvements
- Sidewalks
- Crosswalks
- Bicycle facilities
- Wayfinding signage
- Safety improvements

STATE FUNDING

State Economic Development / Main Street Programs

California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) Community Development Block Grant (CDBG, state small cities)

- This is the biggest flexible source for non-entitlement cities and counties. The 2025 NOFA made about \$27 million in federal funds available for housing, economic opportunity, and infrastructure, mainly benefiting low- and moderate-income people.



- Eligible uses include public facilities like sidewalks and parks, infrastructure, and economic development programs such as microenterprise assistance. Planning and technical assistance for economic development is also eligible.
- At least 70% of funds must benefit low- and moderate-income households.
- The last cycle's applications closed in spring 2026, with awards signed in September 2026. Check HCD for the next NOFA.
- Program income is another route. Mendocino County, for example, got approval to use \$407,000 of CDBG program income for microenterprise technical assistance.

Statewide Park Development and Community Revitalization Program (SPP), Round 5

- About \$190 million, funded by the Proposition 4 climate bond, for new or renovated parks in underserved and climate-vulnerable communities. It fits downtown plazas and pocket parks.
- Applications are due December 17, 2026. Cities, counties, districts, JPAs, and nonprofits can apply; no match is required.

Caltrans Sustainable Transportation Planning Grants

- These fund planning, not construction. The FY 2026-27 awards included downtown-focused plans such as the Downtown Loomis Corridor Revitalization Plan at \$350,000 and a Grass Valley Trolley Trail multimodal connection. The grants are a way to build a pipeline for later capital funding.

Extreme Heat and Community Resilience Program

- The "Advanced Transformative Infrastructure" tier funds \$3 million to \$4.5 million with no match, which could cover shade, greening, and cooling in downtown streetscapes.
- Cities must partner with a community-based organization or public academic institution.

California Arts Council

- For arts-led activation, the 2026 cycle offered General Operating Support up to \$30,000, Arts and Youth and Impact Projects up to \$25,000 each, and State-Local Partners up to \$75,000 for local arts agencies. That cycle closed May 12, 2026, with grants running October 2026 to September 2027.
- Newly designated cultural districts in the 2025 round received a \$10,000 two-year stipend, per the guidelines.

Examples from Other States

Minnesota Main Street Economic Revitalization Program

- State funding through DEED has supported redevelopment, renovation, and repair of downtown commercial properties in St. Cloud and other communities.



Iowa Downtown Revitalization Fund

- State-administered grants support downtown façade and streetscape work, leveraging federal and local matching funds.

Texas Downtown Revitalization Program

- State-administered downtown grants fund infrastructure improvements in traditional downtown districts, including streetscapes and utilities.

LOCAL FUNDING

Financing

IBank Infrastructure State Revolving Fund (ISRF)

- Low-cost direct loans of \$1 million to \$65 million, with fixed rates and terms up to 30 years, to local governments and public-agency-sponsored nonprofits.
- Eligible projects include economic development facilities, street improvements, and parks, with applications accepted continuously.
- Repayment can come from the general fund, property assessments, Mello-Roos, special taxes, or other recurring revenue IBank accepts.
- The \$1 million minimum can be a barrier for very small towns.

Tax-increment tools

- Since redevelopment agencies were dissolved, three main replacements exist: Enhanced Infrastructure Financing Districts (EIFDs), Community Revitalization and Investment Authorities (CRIAs), and Infrastructure and Revitalization Financing Districts.
- Unlike old redevelopment, other taxing entities must agree to contribute their increment.
- CRIAs are modeled on former redevelopment powers but focus on disadvantaged communities and former military bases. No public vote is required to establish one.
- Recent legislation has changed the rules, including 2024 amendments to EIFD law, so check current law before advising a client.

Other Resources

The options below work differently from the grant and loan programs above, and none is a direct source of money for a city. However, they could be tools for local partners or for business and property owners.

California Competes Tax Credit (GO-Biz)

- What it is: A negotiated, non-refundable state income tax credit for businesses that want to locate in California or stay and grow here. It is not a municipal funding source,



but it can be part of a business-attraction pitch.

- Size and timing: About \$819.8 million is available for FY 2026-27. The remaining windows are January 4-25, 2027 (\$250 million) and March 1-15, 2027 (\$219.8 million plus any unallocated amounts). The July 2026 window has closed.
- Eligibility: Businesses of any size can apply, with no application fee. Awards are competitive. GO-Biz considers factors such as jobs created or retained, compensation, and unemployment and poverty at the site, then negotiates the deal for committee approval.
- Limits: Because it's non-refundable, it only helps a business that owes California income tax.

Main Street Model and Property and Business improvement Districts

Main Street is a framework and support network, not a grant program. It organizes revitalization around four points: promotion, economic vitality, organization, and design. In California, the California Main Street Alliance coordinates it, and the National Main Street Center has administered the statewide program since 2018.

The Property and Business Improvement District Law of 1994 lets cities form districts that levy assessments to pay for improvements and activities that benefit the properties and businesses inside them.

- Property owners petition the city, a management district plan is developed, and owners vote by ballot weighted in proportion to their proposed assessment. A district needs more than 50% of weighted ballots returned in support.
- Terms are limited. One district plan cites a five-year initial term, and Old Pasadena's renewal runs ten years.
- This is the usual way to fund ongoing downtown maintenance, marketing, and events. It's also how Main Street organizations often get stable local funding.

Historic preservation incentives

- Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit: 20% of qualifying rehabilitation costs for certified historic structures, with a separate 10% credit for older non-historic buildings. A building must be listed in the National Register of Historic Places to qualify. The National Park Service administers it with California's Office of Historic Preservation.
- Mills Act: Property tax relief for owners of qualified historic properties who commit to restoring and maintaining them. Local governments choose whether to offer it, and owners apply through the city. Riverside's application window, for example, runs January 1 to May 31.
- California State Historical Building Code: Provides flexibility in meeting code requirements for historic buildings. This is often a cost saver for downtown rehabilitation.
- Certified Local Government (CLG) grants: The state Office of Historic Preservation lists these among its funding options for qualified local governments.



Hotel and Restaurant Taxes / Tourism Revenues

Tourism-generated revenues from hotel and restaurant taxes provide a dedicated funding source for downtown improvements. By investing in public amenities, redevelopment projects, and destination marketing, communities can enhance the downtown environment, support economic growth, and attract additional visitors and private investment.

In Greenville, Kentucky, a citizen-supported restaurant and hotel tax created a Tourism Commission, which has become one of the best examples of local tourism revenue supporting downtown revitalization. Its revenue has funded:

- Downtown façade improvements
- Festivals and concerts
- The “Saturdays on the Square” music series

Fort Worth, Texas, has also adopted tourism-related taxation:

- Hotel tax-supported financing has been used to support district improvements and cultural initiatives that strengthen downtown visitor activity.

In-Kind Municipal Support

Municipal in-kind support contributes to downtown revitalization by providing staff time, public works services, equipment, facility use, and logistical assistance for community events and improvement projects. These contributions help reduce costs, enhance event success, and create vibrant downtown experiences that attract residents, visitors, and businesses.

In Main Street programs nationally, municipalities often contribute:

- Police and public safety
- Street closures
- Barricades
- Permitting
- Public works support
- Event coordination

These contributions reduce program costs and make recurring downtown events financially feasible. This is an important way municipalities can offer support for event-based downtown revitalization strategies.



Foundation and Private Funding

Community Foundations

Community foundations are regularly cited as important partners in rural downtown projects alongside public funding sources. Community foundations in this region include:

- **Humboldt Area Foundation** – with programs in Humboldt Health Foundation, Native Cultures Fund, Redwood CORE Fund, Klamath River Fund, and Trinity Trust
- **Community Foundation of the North State** – serves the people of Shasta, Siskiyou and Tehama counties through 180 different funds.
- **North Valley Community Foundation** – North Valley holds funds around community development, education, housing, arts and culture, environment, health and wellness, among others.

Community foundations frequently provide:

- Matching funds
- Façade grants
- Downtown placemaking support
- Community event funding
- Leadership capacity building

Corporate and Utility Sponsorships

Main Street organizations nationwide receive funding from area businesses.

- Utility companies, hospitals, banks, agricultural businesses, and regional employers often provide annual sponsorships for downtown programs and events. Sponsorships are considered a core revenue source for many successful Main Street organizations.

Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) Funding, through bank partnerships in Main Street programs, are a common revitalization funding source identified by Main Street America:

- Banks frequently support façade programs, revolving loan funds, entrepreneurship programs, and downtown events through CRA investments and sponsorships.

Business Investment and Sponsorship

In downtown Huntingburg, Indiana:

- Destination Huntingburg created a structured annual sponsorship campaign where businesses support downtown initiatives through a single sponsorship program.
- Businesses provide financial support for promotions, events, and downtown programming.

In Thibodaux, Louisiana:

- Downtown sponsors support events through a coordinated “single-ask” sponsorship model, simplifying participation and increasing business investment.



Membership Models

Many successful Main Street organizations around the U.S. rely on:

- Business memberships
- Individual memberships
- Community supporter levels
- Leadership-circle donors

These memberships fund staff, organizational capacity, promotions, and advocacy efforts.

Earned Revenue

Several types of regional organizations such as regional economic development districts, nonprofit development corporations, and other nonprofits related to downtown revitalization, generate revenue through:

- Grant administration fees
- Revolving loan fund interest
- Development consulting
- Project management services
- Real estate development activities

Grassroots and Civic Club Approaches

Rotary, service clubs, and local fundraising were important to Greenville, Kentucky, and many NADO case-study communities featured in this Playbook:

- Downtown improvements were supported by civic organizations, local fundraising campaigns, volunteers, and community leadership groups.
- Local volunteer leadership was a critical component alongside formal funding programs.



Particularly Relevant Models for Rural Northern California

1. Greenville, Kentucky: hotel/restaurant tax + events + façade improvements.
2. Iowa Downtown Revitalization Fund communities: CDBG + local match + façade and streetscape projects.
3. Main Street organizations such as Huntingburg, Indiana: business sponsorships + memberships + grants + municipal support.

These examples demonstrate how small and rural communities successfully combine public, private, philanthropic, and grassroots funding to sustain downtown revitalization efforts over time.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Practical funding strategy for a rural downtown revitalization initiative that blends short-term startup funding with long-term sustainability.

Goal: Create a diversified funding model that supports

- Downtown events and promotion
- Business development
- Beautification and placemaking
- Streetscape and infrastructure improvements
- Organizational capacity and leadership
- Long-term economic development

A healthy rural downtown should avoid dependence on a single funding source. A typical target is:

FUNDING SOURCE	SHARE OF BUDGET
Federal or state grants	40%
Local government support	20%
Business sponsorships & memberships	15%
Foundations and philanthropy	15%
Earned revenue	5%
Grassroots fundraising	5%

Phase 1: Launch and Capacity Building (Years 1-2)

Organizational Funding - Establish a downtown association, Main Street organization, or regional "hub" entity.

Funding sources:

- Local government contribution
- Community foundation seed grant
- Membership campaign
- Founding business sponsors

Example uses:

- Coordinator salary
- Grant writing
- Volunteer coordination
- Marketing
- Event management





Phase 2: Infrastructure and Physical Improvements

Grant funding or financing from a variety of federal, state sources, philanthropic partners, or others can fund infrastructure projects that enhance downtown. Whether large or small, these projects represent progress in downtown revitalization and can spark further change.

Using sources of federal and state grant funding, communities can pursue projects that leverage transportation, other infrastructure, and economic development goals.

Projects could include:

- Sidewalks
- Wayfinding
- Streetscape improvements
- Crosswalks
- Bike facilities

Potential federal transportation funding programs may be:

- Safe Routes to School
- Active Transportation Programs
- Transportation Alternatives
- Highway enhancement programs

Economic Development Administration (EDA) may fund downtown projects including:

- Business incubators
- Broadband
- Commercial building rehabilitation
- Downtown redevelopment

These activities could be funded through EDA programs such as:

- Public Works (Assistance Listing 11.300)
- Economic Adjustment Assistance (EAA, 11.307)
- Planning and Local Technical Assistance

These USDA Rural Development funding sources are most commonly used for downtown and commercial property activation:

- Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG)
- Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP)
- Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program
- Intermediary Relending Program (IRP)
- Business & Industry (B&I) Loan Guarantees:
- Rural Economic Development Loan & Grant (REDLG)

State funding programs to consider, depending on the downtown activation strategies selected, include:

- California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) Community Development Block Grant (CDBG, state small cities)
- Statewide Park Development and Community Revitalization Program (SPP), Round 5
- Caltrans Sustainable Transportation Planning Grants
- Extreme Heat and Community Resilience Program
- California Arts Council

Rural downtown projects can be attractive to foundations because they produce visible community benefits. Potential philanthropic partners may include:

- Community foundations
- Utility foundations
- Agricultural industry foundations
- Regional foundations
- Hospital foundations
- Corporate giving programs

These partners might be interested in funding projects that are not necessarily well suited to other grant funding:

- Public art
- Placemaking
- Small business assistance
- Match for federal or state infrastructure grants
- Parks
- Leadership development
- Downtown activation

Financing options, tax credits, and other types of incentive of support the feasibility of specific partner activities should also be considered. These could include:

- IBank Infrastructure State Revolving Fund (ISRF)
- Tax-increment tools
- California Competes Tax Credit (GO-Biz)
- Main Street Model and Property and Business Improvement Districts (PBIDs)
- Historic preservation incentives

Phase 3: Event and Tourism Funding

Events create foot traffic downtown and demonstrate early wins. Successful events can generate tourism-related revenue. Options include:

- Lodging tax allocation
- Tourism Improvement District
- Restaurant tax allocation
- Visitor bureau partnership

Event Examples:

- Farmers markets
- Holiday festivals
- Wine and food events
- Summer concert series
- Art walks



Phase 4: Business and Community Investment

As the downtown revitalization process continues, downtown businesses, community residents, and other supporters become funding partners in projects and ongoing programming.

This investment often occurs through sponsorship programs and event participation fees. These are focused on particular opportunities that are important to downtown, such as events or a capital project, and the sponsor levels and fees can be scaled up or down depending on the size of the initiative or visibility for sponsors. Investment can also occur through membership fees in the Main Street organization, Chamber of Commerce, or other entity that has taken on a lead role in downtown revitalization. Civic organizations may be interested in supporting the downtown revitalization efforts, as well.

Sponsorship Program

Benefits for sponsors can include:

- Event recognition
- Website advertising
- Banner placement
- Social media promotion

SAMPLE SPONSOR LEVEL	SAMPLE ANNUAL CONTRIBUTION
Platinum	\$10,000
Gold	\$5,000
Silver	\$2,500
Bronze	\$1,000

Event Participation Fees

Examples:

- Vendor booths
- Farmers market stalls
- Festival participation fees

Memberships in Main Street organizations and program efforts build both revenue and community ownership. Contribution levels for organization membership should be scaled



SAMPLE INDIVIDUAL MEMBER LEVELS	SAMPLE BUSINESS MEMBER LEVELS
Student: \$25	Small Business: \$250
Individual: \$50	Medium Business: \$500
Family: \$100	Major Employer: \$1,000+
SAMPLE MEMBER BENEFITS	
Voting rights	
Promotional opportunities	
Event discounts	
Newsletter features	

to encourage community buy-in in support of the organization's mission.

Civic organizations that might invest in downtown efforts include:

- Rotary
- Lions Club
- Soroptimists
- Chamber of Commerce
- Historical societies

Community campaigns that may align with civic organization interests include:

- Downtown flower baskets
- Holiday lights
- Bench sponsorships
- Tree sponsorships
- Brick campaigns

Phase 5: Long-Term Earned Revenue (Years 5+)

As organizations and their downtown revitalization efforts mature, they reduce their reliance on grants. Potential revenue streams benefitting downtown efforts can be:

- Grant administration fees
- Development services
 - Downtown planning
 - Grant writing
 - Business assistance



Revolving Loan Funds represent another opportunity for revenue. Organizations can use foundation and grant capital to create local lending programs. All CFC members have existing revolving loan funds (RLFs), and these could also be managed to support their local governments.

Property development, where feasible, can consist of the steps:

- Acquire strategic downtown properties
- Renovate vacant buildings
- Generate lease income

As a potential target, organizations might strive toward covering 10-20% of its annual operating budget from earned revenue.



Recommended Rural Downtown Formula

The most successful rural downtowns typically use a mix of sources, such as:

- Federal and state grants for capital projects
- Local government support for coordination and basic operations
- Business sponsorships for events
- Foundation funding for innovation and placemaking
- Memberships and grassroots fundraising for community ownership
- Earned revenue for long-term sustainability

This creates a resilient funding structure that can survive shifts in grant cycles, local politics, or economic conditions while steadily improving the downtown district.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA **RURAL DOWNTOWN** FUNDING STRATEGY CASES

Redding: Foundation + Main Street + Public Investment

Funding Sources

- McConnell Foundation investments and grants
- City of Redding infrastructure investment
- Main Street organization fundraising and sponsorships
- Community Foundation of the North State support
- Business and property owner participation

What They Funded

- Downtown placemaking
- Building revitalization
- Bike and pedestrian infrastructure
- Public events
- Small business support
- Activation of underutilized properties

Why It's Relevant

This is one of the strongest examples of a regional foundation serving as an anchor investor in downtown revitalization, supplementing public infrastructure investments and Main Street programming. The McConnell Foundation has directly invested in downtown properties and public spaces as part of a long-term community vitality strategy.



The accompanying Main Street organization, Viva Downtown Redding, relies on a combination of foundation grants, events, sponsorships, and partnerships to support downtown activation.

Transferable lesson: In Northern California, community foundations often play a role that other regions fill with redevelopment agencies.

Truckee: Tourism Revenue + CDBG + Public-Private Partnerships

Funding Sources

- Community Development Block Grants
- Tourism-related revenues
- Business Improvement District assessments
- Local government investment
- Private redevelopment

What They Funded

- Riverfront revitalization
- Trails and pedestrian connections
- Public spaces
- Downtown redevelopment planning



Why It's Relevant

Truckee's Downtown River Revitalization Strategy was partially funded through a Community Development Block Grant and was designed to create conditions for both public improvements and private investment. Today, Truckee also benefits from a Tourism Business Improvement District (TBID) model that channels visitor-generated revenues into economic development, destination management, and downtown promotion.

Transferable lesson: Rural gateway communities can leverage tourism dollars to support downtown improvements and ongoing programming.

Humboldt County Communities: Transportation Grants as Downtown Revitalization

Funding Sources

- Caltrans Sustainable Transportation Planning Grants
- Active Transportation Program funding
- Tribal partnerships
- Regional transportation agencies

What They Funded

- Safe Routes to School
- Main Street safety improvements
- Pedestrian enhancements
- Bicycle infrastructure
- Connectivity to tribal lands

Why It's Relevant

The Loleta planning effort in Humboldt County is a good example of transportation funding being used as a community development tool, focusing on Main Street access, safety, and downtown connectivity.



Transferable lesson: Transportation grants can often fund downtown improvements that would otherwise be difficult to finance through economic development programs.



Rio Dell and Other Rural North Coast Communities: Clean California Grants

Funding Sources

- Clean California Local Grants
- Caltrans funding
- Local matching funds
- Volunteer and municipal support

What They Funded

- Gateway beautification
- Trail development
- Public art
- Cleanup projects
- Community placemaking

Why It's Relevant

Several rural North Coast communities have used Clean California funding to improve gateways, trail connections, and public spaces.

Transferable lesson: Clean California is often an accessible source of funding for visible downtown improvements, especially in smaller communities.

California Main Street Communities

Across California, Main Street Communities typically use a blended model consisting of:

- City support
- Memberships
- Business sponsorships
- Event revenue
- Foundation grants
- State and federal grants

The California Main Street program specifically promotes public-private partnerships and grassroots revitalization of historic commercial districts.

Examples often include communities such as:

- Redding
- Woodland
- Placerville
- Sonora
- Red Bluff
- Oroville
- Grass Valley/Nevada City (though organized somewhat differently)

These communities commonly combine local sponsorships, grants, and public investment rather than relying on one major funding source.





MEASURING SUCCESS

Downtown revitalization work takes time and patience. Impacts may not be seen immediately. It's still important to measure success. Some possible metrics for downtown development are below:

- Amount of public and private investment
- Changes in property values
- Sales tax revenue
- Hotel or lodging occupancy rate
- Business mix
- Number of attendees at downtown events.
- Vacancy rate: Commercial buildings
- Vacancy rate: Residential buildings
- Percentage of streets with sidewalks



WHERE TO START

QUICK WINS BY COMMUNITY

Each of the eight focus communities in this project have some low-cost, high-impact actions that can feasibly be done within 6-12 months.

Corning - Focus on food/ag-driven downtown identity

- Olive/ag-themed retail pop-ups
- Fill 2-3 storefronts with local producers
- Branded "shop local agriculture" campaign

Oroville - Catalyst redevelopment and visibility

- Identify 3 "problem properties" and attempt direct intervention.
- Launch façade mini grant program.
- Downtown talking tour and development tour

Live Oak - Stabilize local-serving retail

- Tenant matchmaking (local services)
- Small business recruitment (cafes, essentials)
- Window activation for 4-6 vacancies

Wheatland - Activation and foot traffic

- Monthly street event or night market
- Temporary vendor stalls in empty storefronts
- Partner with regional events (concert traffic spillover)

Garberville - Arts and culture and tourism.

- Artist-in-residence storefronts
- Pop-up galleries
- Seasonal tourism-driven retail activations

Eureka - Regional leader and redevelopment.

- Pilot redevelopment financing tools
- Launch adaptive reuse project (housing and retail)
- Share templates/tools with smaller towns



Alturas – Essential services and downtown hub

- Recruit 1-2 missing essential businesses
- Use vacant spaces for multi-use (retail and service)
- Improve signage and basic storefront cleanup

Weaverville – Heritage tourism

- Historic-themed storefront activations
- Weekend market or maker events
- Package vacant spaces as “tourism-ready retail”

Cross-Cutting Quick Wins for all Towns

1. “Empty buildings tour” – huge success in other small towns.
2. Free branded “for lease” signage
3. Clean and decorate storefront windows
4. Assign volunteer key holder for showings
5. Public vacancy list (simple but powerful)



NEXT STEPS

Each community has clear next steps. However, there are more communities in these four California Finance Consortium (CFC) regions that can benefit from these findings.

CFC's four member organizations are:

- 3CORE Economic Development Corporation, headquartered in Chico, CA, and serving Butte, Glenn, and Tehama Counties
- North Edge Economic Development Corporation, headquartered in Arcata, CA, and serving Humboldt, Del Norte, Lake, and Mendocino Counties
- Superior California Economic Development, Inc., headquartered in Redding, CA, and serving Modoc, Shasta, Siskiyou, and Trinity Counties
- Yuba-Sutter Economic Development Corporation, headquartered in Yuba City, CA, and serving Yuba and Sutter Counties.

The tools that are part of this playbook will be useful as other communities start from square one (what assets do we have to work with).

As a reminder, the guiding principles of this work to support locally rooted, downtown revitalization, are:

- **All communities have assets to work with.** The asset inventory allows communities to gauge what types of assets they must work with. Not all assets are tangible. The eight capitals provide a way to inventory tangible and intangible assets. ("WealthWorks: A Powerful Tool for Thriving Rural Places") Some of those intangible assets are the people who will help move your downtown forward.
- **Partnership is crucial.** While it helps to have a community champion, even an enthusiastic champion, no one can do this alone. Part of inventorying assets is understanding the people, organizations, institutions and businesses that can help make things happen.





- **This is long-term work.** Some strategies are long-term strategies, and some are short and medium-term strategies. Understanding the timeframe of each is critical to managing expectations. A successful downtown plan will have short, medium and long-term strategies, so that the community can see some progress while it waits for the long-term strategies to play out. It can take years to see outcomes on some of the bigger items.
- **Start small with quick wins.** Downtown redevelopment is like a marathon. To prepare for the marathon, you need to train with shorter runs. Just like that, downtown development, while putting things in motion for the longer-term strategies, needs to make things happen on smaller strategies, so that the community sees some early wins, building support for the long term. Also, those early quick wins are making downtown more livable one small piece at a time.

These communities have a variety of assets to work with, including proximity to outdoor recreation, historic character, arts and culture, walkable downtown cores, and traditions. The first step is to understand what those assets are and build on them.

THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Not every community has the leadership capacity, expertise, or local champions needed to move this work forward. In those cases, what responsibilities should regional organizations take on, and where can they add the most value? It should be reasonably expected that regional organizations could play a stabilizing role that can withstand the turnover of local political leadership and representatives in stakeholder and non-profit organizations. This continuity can be a critical asset to revitalization efforts.

Regional organizations need to be viewed as part of the equation. Regardless of what individual communities choose to pursue, there is a meaningful role for each organization to play in enabling success. The key is to move beyond general support and define that role with greater specificity and intention.

Potential functions include convening stakeholders, helping communities identify and secure funding, providing training and coaching, building local leadership capacity, facilitating peer-to-peer learning, identifying best practices, coordinating technical assistance, and

connecting communities to resources and expertise. In some communities, the role may be to catalyze action; in others, it may be to strengthen existing efforts or temporarily fill capacity gaps.

The goal should be to become more deliberate and targeted in these functions, clearly identifying what support communities need and how the regional organizations could provide it. The focus should be on building local capacity, developing leaders, and creating the conditions for communities to sustain progress over time.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Successful downtown revitalization is a journey that requires patience, persistence, and a shared commitment to a long-term vision. Meaningful change rarely happens overnight. Instead, it grows through sustained effort, strong partnerships, and a series of intentional actions that create visible progress and build community excitement.

Starting with achievable wins helps generate momentum, strengthen confidence, and encourage broader engagement. By identifying, empowering, and supporting local leaders, organizations, and community champions, communities can build the foundation for lasting success.

As a next step, each community should define what success looks like and develop a realistic path toward achieving that vision. This includes assessing existing strengths, resources, and readiness while identifying opportunities to expand collaboration. Where additional capacity or expertise is needed, communities can engage new partners who bring fresh energy, resources, and perspectives.

By building on current assets and fostering strong partnerships, communities can create the momentum needed to achieve meaningful and sustainable downtown revitalization.





APPENDIX: THE PROCESS

The Team

The team for this work was the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) with on-the-ground assistance from Morrison Consulting. NADO is a 501c4 membership association that represents the interests of regional community and economic development practitioners. ("About NADO - NADO") Established in 1967, NADO advocates for federal policies and programs that promote equitable community development, economic competitiveness, rural development, economic mobility, and quality of place. NADO represents a national network of more than 500 Regional Development Organizations (RDOs) across the country.

Founded in 2002 and based in Chico, CA, Morrison today offers a team of professionals in three service areas: Business & Accounting Advisory, People Solutions, and Grants related to food, agriculture, and energy.

In addition, the larger project team included members of NADO and Morrison, as well as representatives from the four regional development organizations engaged in this work:

- 3Core
- NorthEdge Financing
- Superior California Economic Development
- Yuba-Sutter Economic Development

What We Did

Data Sheets

Data sheets were developed in an effort to create a basic property inventory tool that does not depend on specific software or ongoing licensing fees tied to subscription based services. Should either of these be desired in the future, the data contained in the sheets can be transferred by the community users.

Data fields found in the Main Street America (MSA) Building Opportunities on Main Street (BOOMS) property management program were used as inspiration for the information held here. Additional questions and data fields were added at the request of regional stakeholders during the initial phases of this project.

Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups

NADO reached out to conduct key informant interviews with each of the four regional development organizations to talk about their perspectives on the downtowns in their regions. They also helped to schedule and invite community leaders to the focus groups. One focus group was done with each community. Questions were asked about the community and downtown's key assets, challenges and barriers, missing elements, etc.

On-the-Ground Downtown Visits

Morrison worked with each regional development organization to schedule walking tours of each of the downtowns with key community leaders. These tours helped to ground-truth some of the findings from the focus groups.



