From Vacancy to Vitality: Bringing California's Downtown Revitalization Playbook to Life

Ryan Richardson, SCED
Bret Allphin, NADO
Melissa Levy, NADO

NADO Research Foundation

Wells Fargo Foundation

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.

3CORE

FINANCING • MENTORING • PERSPECTIVE

NORTH EDGE

YSEDC

YUBA-SUTTER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

SUPERIOR California ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

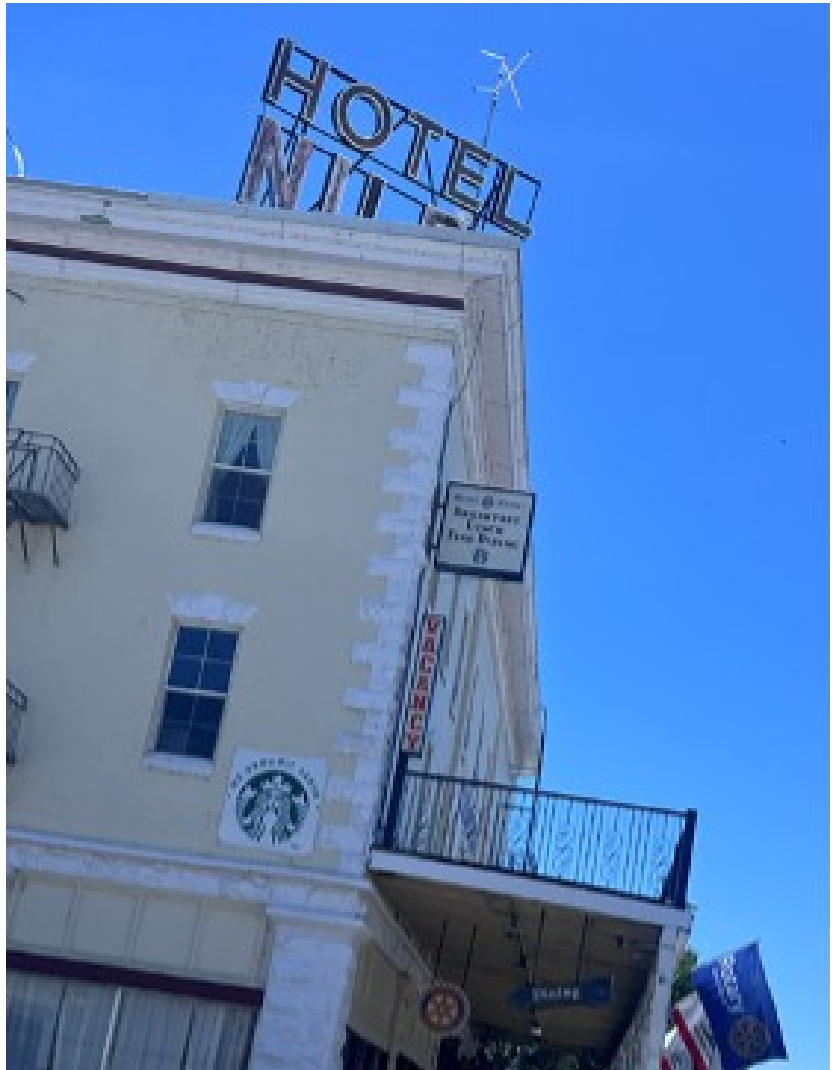
Core Objectives

Remove barriers that prevent local governments from taking action on vacant or blighted downtown properties.

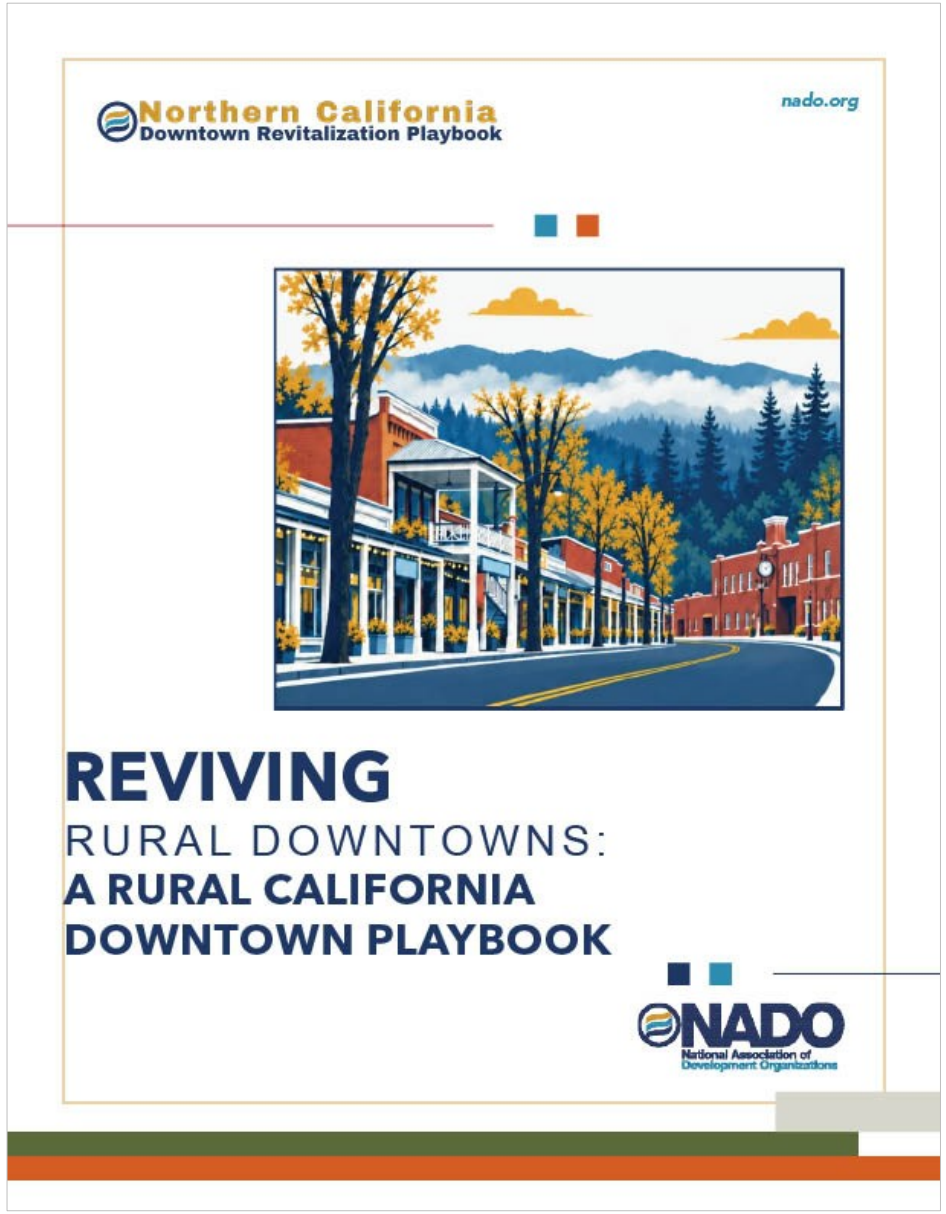
Provide actionable tools (policies, scripts, templates, and incentives) that cities and counties can immediately apply.

Train local champions who can sustain revitalization momentum beyond the project's duration.

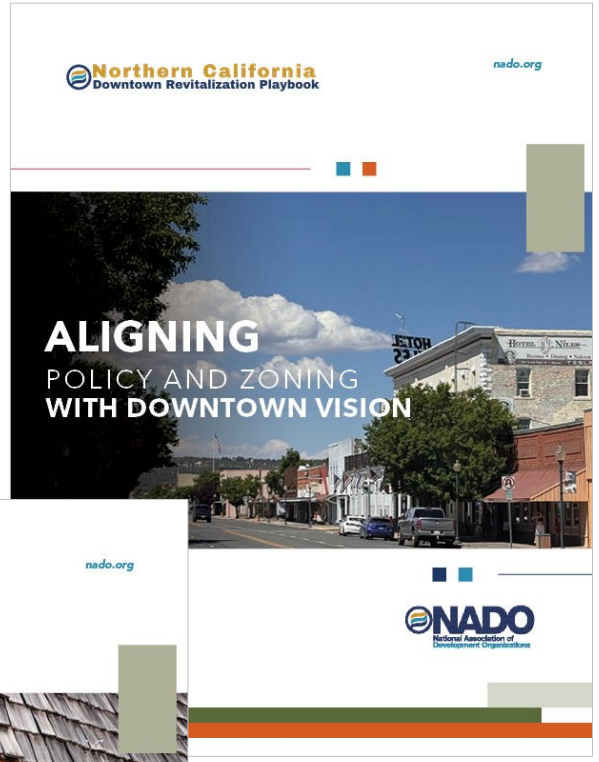
How We Got Here

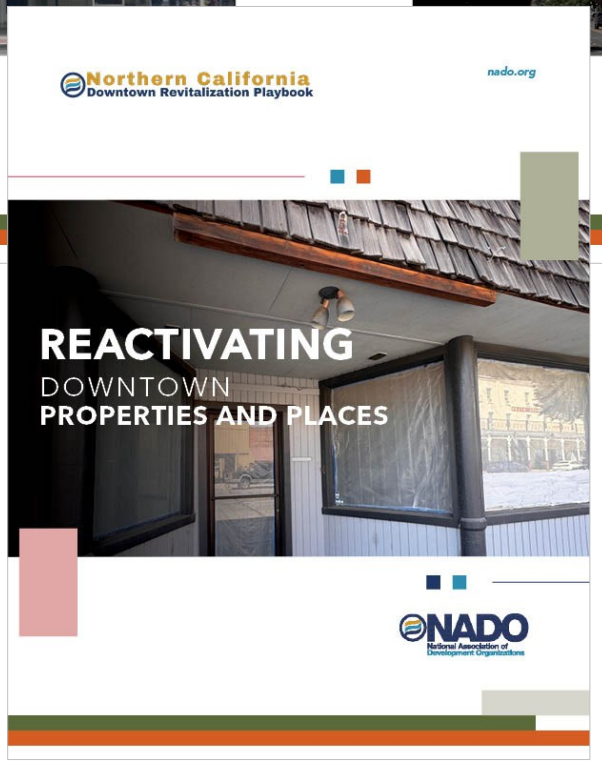


- Stakeholder interviews and focus groups
- Downtown property/building inventories and data collection
- In-person downtown assessments
- Research of strategies, tools, and comparable approaches


Northern California
Downtown Revitalization Playbook
nado.org
REVIVING
RURAL DOWNTOWNS:
A RURAL CALIFORNIA
DOWNTOWN PLAYBOOK
NADO
National Association of Development Organizations

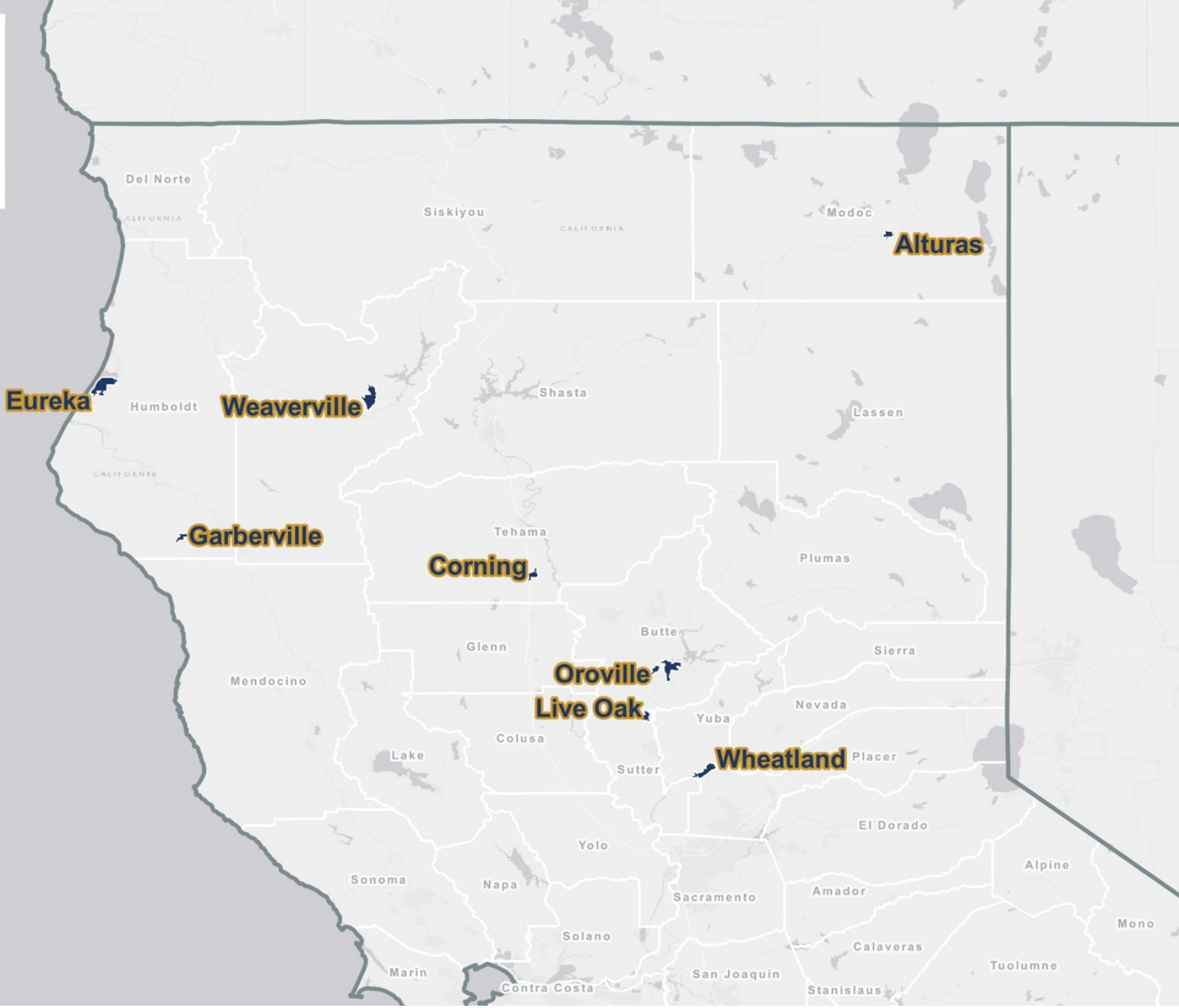
Northern California
Downtown Revitalization Playbook
nado.org
SUPPORTING
SMALL BUSINESS GROWTH
AND INVESTMENT


Northern California
Downtown Revitalization Playbook
nado.org
ALIGNING
POLICY AND ZONING
WITH DOWNTOWN VISION
NADO
National Association of Development Organizations


Northern California
Downtown Revitalization Playbook
nado.org
REACTIVATING
DOWNTOWN
PROPERTIES AND PLACES
NADO
National Association of Development Organizations

Our Focus Areas

Community	County	Population
Alturas	*Modoc*	2,626
Corning	*Tehama*	8,260
Eureka	*Humboldt*	25,304
Garberville	*Humboldt*	1,719
Live Oak	*Sutter*	9,558
Oroville	*Butte*	20,451
Weaverville	*Trinity*	3,105
Wheatland	*Yuba*	4,369



Focus Area

- Each community identified specific focus areas
- Corridor or small multi-block locations
- Primary locations for supporting actions and assistance

Data Collection and Inventory

- Goal was to parallel the MSA BOOMS tracker format, to facilitate future information transfer.
- Parcel level data collection.
- Information that will be available for future update and use.

Basic Identification, Use and Productivity, Classifications, Characteristics, On-Site Features Some items will require local assistance. Some items may be unknown and unknowable!

Datasheet Example

Focus Groups - Questions

- Assets/strengths in the downtown
- Barriers/challenges
- Businesses, services, spaces needed
- Downtowns you admire… what is different?
- Who is downtown serving or not serving?
- What would success look like to you in five years? How would you know revitalization worked?
- What do you think would help with downtown revitalization?

Focus Groups - Assets

Across the eight communities

Historic Character & Authentic ‘Bones’

Compact, Walkable Downtown Cores

Strong Sense of Place & Identity

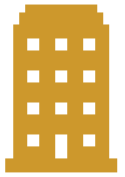
Arts, Culture & Creative Energy

Parks, Waterfronts & Outdoor Rec.

Events, Festivals & Traditions

Leaders & Champions

Strategic Location & Access



Buildings & Opportunity Sites

Focus Groups – Key Challenges

Across the eight communities.

- Vacant, deteriorating & underutilized buildings
- Misalignment between zoning, policy, & desired downtown use.
- Cost & risk barriers for small businesses
- Weak evening & everyday activity
- Transportation, highway & physical barriers
- Overreliance on events without spillover
- Fragmented leadership, capacity, & ownership
- Limited visitor orientation & marketing
- Economic leakage to nearby cities

Key Principles

1. Asset-based approach
2. Keeping wealth local
3. Collaboration is key.
4. Start small with quick wins
5. Focus on a growth mindset.

Reactivating Downtown Properties and Places

- Assess Vacant and Underutilized Properties
- Create Supportive Programming and Assistance
- Bolster Enforcement and Compliance Processes
- Pursue Creative Methods for Property Activation

Aligning Policy and Zoning with Downtown Vision

01

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

02

Examine requests for variances, special use permits, and other variations from standard zoning or permitting policy and procedures.

03

Examine the status of connections between local planning efforts and zoning policies.

04

Perform a periodic zoning code audit for timely updates that might reflect changes in the local environment.

05

Maximize the use of enacted enforcement policies and available enforcement actions.

Supporting Small Business Growth and Investment

- Pop-up Retail
- Micro-Grants and facade grants
- Community Benefit District or Business Improvement District Models
- One-Stop Permitting Centers
- Fee Waivers or Deferrals
- Experiential Retail and Community Events

Building a Consistently Vibrant Downtown

Form a Downtown Activation Team

Secure Commitments from Businesses

Business Integration

Turning Events into Lasting Economic Impact

- Passport Program
- Extend business hours beyond event days
- Redesign event layouts to drive movement

Enhancing Visitor Experience and Destination Awareness

Make downtown more accessible

Create a strong downtown identity

Improving Connectivity, Access, and Mobility

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

Partnerships, Capacity, Community Leadership

- Assess the network of partners
- Assess the status of current or past efforts
- Examine alignment with current needs and goals.
- Initiate or re-initiate efforts based on learnings.
- Form a regional hub
- Identify the host or lead organization of the hub.
- Identify large anchors as regional leaders.
- Identify mid-size communities as operational hubs.
- Identify small communities as tactical strategy hubs.

Assess

Partner Network

Past Efforts

Alignment with Needs and Goals

Anchors, Hosts, Hubs

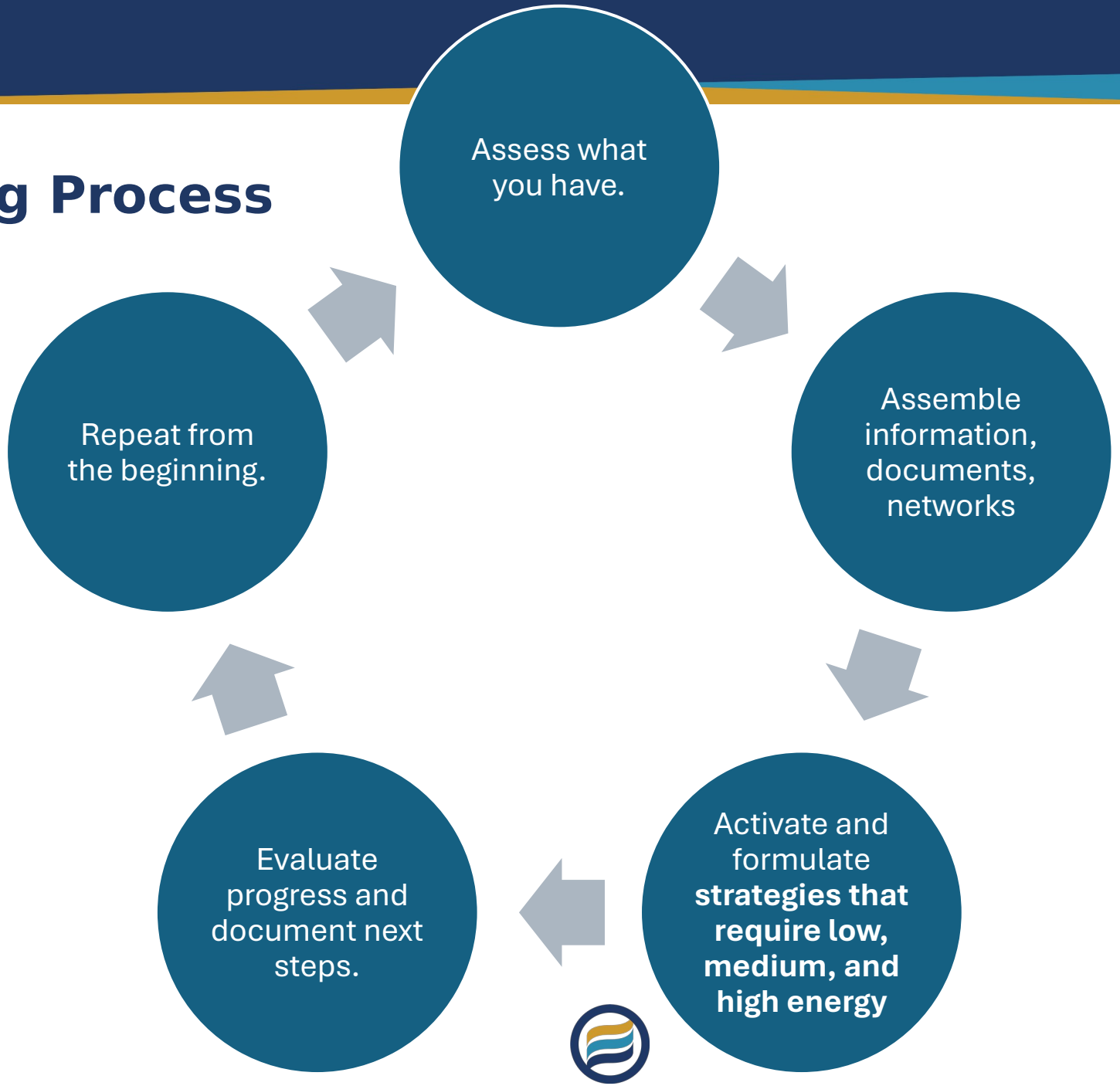
Overall Regional Hub

Regional Leader

Local Spending and Economic Opportunity

1. Assess local market conditions and competing locations
2. Survey consumers and visitors
3. Fill retail and service gaps where possible with existing businesses and local orgs
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

Overarching Process



How to Use the Playbook

- Assess the challenges.
- Understand capacity.
- Identify key partners to engage.
- Understand low, medium and high-energy strategies for each challenge.
- Identify low hanging fruit – what are some simple, no or low cost actions to take to show early progress and build momentum.
- Choose strategies at each level.
- Map out a plan.

Ryan Richardson, *Executive Director*

ryan@scedd.org

Nikki Espinosa, *Program Specialist*

nikki@scedd.org

www.sced.org

NADO Research Foundation

122 C Street, NW, Suite 830 | Washington, DC 20001
202.921.4440 | nado.org

Melissa Levy
Wealth Creation Specialist
mlevy@nado.org

Bret Allphin
Associate Director
ballphin@nado.org