



Reviving Rural Downtowns: A Rural California Downtown Revitalization Playbook - Training Materials

Agenda

4 hours, but individual exercises could be used as needed.

- | | |
|----------|--|
| 9 am | Welcome, introductions/icebreakers, objectives, agenda review |
| 9:15 am | Asset Inventory – Either use asset inventory tool or SWOT to understand assets and gaps in your community. Debrief. |
| 9:45 am | Partnerships – network map – Develop a map of existing and potential partners and their strengths and value propositions for engaging in downtown revitalization activities. Debrief. |
| 10:15 am | What makes our community unique? Understanding demand - Target audiences/value propositions. Simple brand/identity statement. Event or campaign ideas. |
| 10:45 am | Revitalization Blueprint – Identify target visitors/customers, key downtown assets, priority improvements, economic drivers, quick wins vs. long-term projects. |
| 11:15 am | Role playing – small business owner, property owner, code enforcement, town officials, etc. |
| 12:15 pm | Implementation roadmap builder – timeline and responsibility matrix, 90-day quick wins, 1-year actions, 3-5 year projects. Roles. |
| 12:45 pm | Evaluate and next steps |
| 1 pm | Adjourn |

Reviving Rural Downtowns: A Rural California Downtown Revitalization Playbook - Training Script

Be sure to invite a wide variety of stakeholders related to downtown – local government, county government, regional development organizations, businesses, champions, institutions, investors, funders, etc.

4 hours, but individual exercises could be used as needed.

9 am Welcome, introductions/icebreakers, objectives, agenda review

Welcome to this downtown revitalization training for TOWN. Our objectives for today are:

- To get to know each other.
- To understand the assets and partnerships that can be brought to bear on downtown revitalization.
- To create a downtown plan and blueprint for action.

Review agenda.

Introductions and icebreaker – name, role, favorite thing about TOWN.

9:15 am Asset Inventory – Either use asset inventory tool or SWOT to understand assets and gaps in your community. Debrief.

We start this process by understanding what we have to work with. What are this town's assets? When we think about assets, we think about them across eight capitals – built (infrastructure), natural (natural resources), financial, individual (skills and health), intellectual (creativity and imagination)), social (trust and networks), cultural (traditions and arts/culture), and political (voice and power).

9:45 am Partnerships – network map – Develop a map of existing and potential partners and their strengths and value propositions for engaging in downtown revitalization activities. Debrief.

Downtown revitalization is a team sport. So, who is part of our team? We want to identify our partners, the strength of our relationships, and the value propositions for engaging. What's in it for each of our partners individually, beyond the common interest of having a vibrant downtown.

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|----------|---|
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Worksheet: Asset Inventory

Use the below tool to inventory your region's assets. Consider all the region's assets that are in good condition. Be especially mindful of any underutilized assets that may be made useful.

	The Capitals	Definitions	What do we have?
	Individual	Skills, understanding, physical health and mental wellness in a region's people	
	Intellectual	Knowledge, resourcefulness, creativity and innovation in a region's people, institutions, organizations and sectors.	
	Social	Trust, relationships and networks in a region's population.	
	Cultural	Traditions, customs, ways of doing, and world views in a region's population.	
	Natural	Natural resources—for example, water, land, air, plants and animals—in a region's places.	
	Built	Constructed infrastructure—for example, buildings, sewer systems, broadband, roads—in a region's places.	
	Political	Goodwill, influence and power that people, organizations and institutions in the region can exercise in decision-making.	
	Financial	Monetary resources available in the region for investment in the region.	

Tool: Downtown Revitalization Network Map

How it works

Place **Downtown Revitalization** in the center and map organizations around it by role. Either a sheet of letter paper or a flipchart sheet. Possibilities include:

- Regional Tourism
- Property Owners
- Chamber of Commerce
- Arts Groups
- Community
- Schools/College
- City Staff
- Businesses
- Nonprofits
- Transit
- County
- Economic Development
- Regional development organization/Economic Development District

Categories to consider:

Core Circle <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Downtown businesses• Property owners• City government	Supporting Circle <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chamber• Tourism bureau• Economic development partners	Community Circle <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Residents• Schools• Nonprofits• Arts groups
Investment Circle <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Banks• Foundations• Developers	Access Circle <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transit• Public works• Transportation agencies	Market Circle <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visitors• Regional customers• Nearby employers

Map Connections

Show lines to show connections/relationships between players. Then draw lines indicating:

- Existing relationships (solid lines)
- Weak relationships (dashed lines)
- Missing but needed relationships (no lines)

Questions to Ask

Participants identify:

1. Who is present?
2. Who is connected?
3. Who is missing?
4. Who should lead?
5. Who has influence but isn't engaged?
6. Which relationship would have the biggest impact if strengthened?

Deliverable

At the end, each community leaves with:

Top 3 champions - Organizations already driving revitalization

Top 3 missing partners - Stakeholders that need to be engaged

Top 3 priority relationships - Connections to strengthen over the next year

The network map helps communities diagnose gaps and identify who needs to work together to move projects forward toward a shared downtown revitalization goal. Who is completely missing?

Worksheet: Community Identity Canvas

Step 1: What Makes Us Unique?

Places:

People:

Experiences:

Step 2: Target Audience: Who Are We Trying to Reach?

Who?

What are they looking for?

What would make them stop here?

Step 3: Brand Positioning Statement (What Do We Want to Be Known For?)

Formula

For _____ (Who)

Our downtown is the place to _____ (Experience)

Because we offer _____ (Differentiator)

Example

Agritourism Community

For regional visitors,
our downtown is the place to experience
California's agricultural heritage,
because we connect local farms, food, and small-town charm.

Recreation Gateway

For outdoor enthusiasts,
our downtown is the place to start
and end your adventure,
because it offers authentic local businesses and easy access to recreation.

Step 4: Event and Campaign Generator: What Brings the Brand Alive?

Now connect identity to action.

Worksheet

OUR IDENTITY

YEAR-ROUND EXPERIENCES

1.

2.

3.

EVENTS

1.

2.

MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

1.

2.

Example

Identity

Agricultural Heritage Downtown

Events

Harvest Festival

Farm-to-Table Fridays

Maker's Market

Campaigns

Meet Your Farmer

Grown Here, Made Here

Spend Local Saturday

Downtown Revitalization Blueprint

How do we create a downtown that is economically resilient, socially vibrant, and attractive to residents, businesses, and visitors?

Community Assets	Target Users	Downtown Identity
		
Economy Drivers	Business Ecosystem	Housing and People
		
Infrastructure and Public Realm	Partners and Champions	Funding and Investment
		
Activation and Programming	Success Metrics	
		

Downtown Revitalization Blueprint - Consider the below examples and questions as you complete the worksheet.

1. Community Assets - What strengths already exist?		
Examples Historic buildings Walkable streets Waterfronts, parks, trails Existing businesses	Local institutions Arts and cultural organizations Festivals and events Housing stock Civic leadership	Questions What draws people downtown today? What assets are underutilized? What makes this place unique?
		
2. Target Users - Who are we trying to serve?		
Examples Local residents Workers Business owners Tourists	Students Retirees Young professionals Families	Questions Who uses downtown now? Who do we want to attract? Who is missing?
		
3. Downtown Experience - What experience do we want people to have?		
Examples Authentic Walkable Family-friendly Entrepreneurial	Arts-focused Food-centered Historic Outdoor recreation hub	Questions What should visitors say after spending a day downtown? What identity do we want to reinforce?
		
4. Economic Drivers – What generates local wealth?		
Examples Retail Restaurants Tourism Professional services	Remote workers Small manufacturers Food systems businesses Creative economy Events	Questions Which sectors are growing? Which sectors fit our strengths? Where does revenue come from?
		
5. Business Ecosystem – What businesses are needed?		
Existing Businesses Current strengths	Missing Businesses Desired retail Food and beverage Services Entertainment	Questions What businesses support one another? What gaps reduce foot traffic? What business clusters could emerge?
		

6. Housing & Population – Who lives downtown?		
Consider		Questions
Housing supply	Mixed-use development	Are there enough residents to support businesses?
Affordability	Workforce housing	Can people live, work, and shop downtown?
		
7. Public Realm & Infrastructure – What physical investments are needed?		
Examples		Questions
Streetscape improvements	Broadband	Where are the barriers to activity?
Sidewalks	Parks and public spaces	What improvements yield the greatest impact?
Lighting	Wayfinding	
Parking	Transit	
8. Partnerships & Champions – who helps make this happen?		
Examples		Questions
Economic development organizations	Property owners	Who has resources?
Chamber of Commerce	Developers	Who has influence?
Main Street programs	Nonprofits	Who has implementation capacity?
	Schools and colleges	
9. Investment & Funding – How will revitalization be financed?		
Examples		Questions
Public grants	Philanthropy	What projects are investment-ready?
Tax credits	Revolving loan funds	What funding sources align with local goals?
Private investment	Crowdfunding	
	TIF districts	
10. Activation & Programming – How do we bring people downtown now?		
Examples		Questions
Farmers markets	Outdoor dining	What creates recurring visitation?
Festivals	Art walks	How can temporary activities test future investments?
Live music	Pop-up shops	
	Food truck events	
11. Measures of Success – How will we know we're making progress?		
Economic		Questions
New businesses	Resident satisfaction	What can we measure annually?
Jobs created	Volunteer engagement	What outcomes indicate long-term resilience?
Private investment	Physical	
Commercial occupancy	Building rehabilitation	
Social	Housing units added	
Event attendance	Streetscape improvements	

From Ideas to Action - Implementation Roadmap Builder

Tool: Downtown Action Roadmap Builder

Purpose

Move from:

"We need more activity downtown."

To: "Here's what we're doing in the next 90 days, who's leading it, and what comes next."

Step 1: Select a Priority Goal

Each community chooses **one challenge** to focus on.

Examples:

- Activate vacant storefronts
- Improve wayfinding
- Increase evening activity
- Recruit new businesses
- Reduce economic leakage
- Improve downtown branding

Worksheet: Selecting a Priority Goal

PRIORITY GOAL

Why is this important?

What would success look like in 5 years?

Step 2: Build the Timeline

Three Horizons Framework

Horizon 1 — Quick Wins (0-90 Days)	Horizon 2 — Momentum Builders (3-12 Months)	Horizon 3 — Transformation Projects (3-5 Years)
<p>Ask: What can we start with existing resources?</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Business owner roundtable• Pop-up event• Temporary signage• Vacancy inventory• Social media campaign• Downtown clean-up day	<p>Ask: What requires planning, partnerships, or funding?</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Façade grant program• Wayfinding plan• Business recruitment strategy• Merchant association• Brand development• Seasonal programming calendar	<p>Ask: What would fundamentally change downtown?</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adaptive reuse project• Streetscape improvements• New housing downtown• Public plaza• Mixed-use redevelopment• Downtown management district

Worksheet: Roadmap Template

Horizon 1 — Quick Wins (0-90 Days)	Horizon 2 — Momentum Builders (3-12 Months)	Horizon 3 — Transformation Projects (3-5 Years)
<p>Ask: What can we start with existing resources?</p>	<p>Ask: What requires planning, partnerships, or funding?</p>	<p>Ask: What would fundamentally change downtown?</p>

Step 3: Responsibility Matrix

Many plans fail because nobody knows who owns the work. Use a simplified matrix.

Stakeholder Categories

- City
- Chamber/Main Street Organization
- Businesses
- Property Owners
- Nonprofits
- Tourism Organization
- County/Regional Partners

Matrix Template

Action	Lead	Partners
Vacancy inventory	City	Chamber
Pop-up retail program	Chamber	Property owners
Wayfinding signage	City	Tourism bureau
Business recruitment	Chamber	Property owners
Streetscape project	City	County

Facilitation Prompt

Ask: If the city disappeared tomorrow, who would still advance this project?

This helps reduce overreliance on local government.

Worksheet: Responsibility Matrix

Action	Lead	Partners

Step 4: Capacity Check

Before finalizing, test feasibility.

Traffic Light Exercise

Participants place each action in one category.

- ☒ Ready
- ☐ Needs resources
- ☒ Major barriers

Worksheet: Capacity Check – This exposes unrealistic plans early.

<p>ACTION</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Status:</p> <p>☐ Ready</p> <p>☐ Needs Resources</p> <p>☐ Major Barrier</p> <p>Barrier:</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>ACTION</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Status:</p> <p>☐ Ready</p> <p>☐ Needs Resources</p> <p>☐ Major Barrier</p> <p>Barrier:</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>ACTION</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Status:</p> <p>☐ Ready</p> <p>☐ Needs Resources</p> <p>☐ Major Barrier</p> <p>Barrier:</p> <p>_____</p>
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Worksheet: Step 5: Identify a Champion

Every action needs a person, not just an organization.

PROJECT

CHAMPION

FIRST MEETING DATE

NEXT STEPS

Worksheet: Step 6: Commitment Ladder

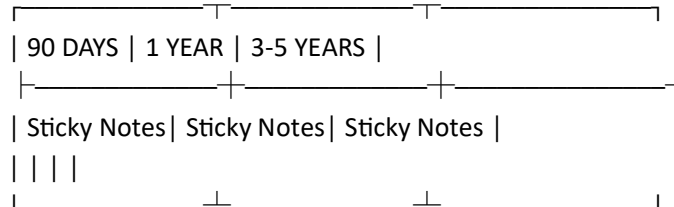
Have participants narrow everything to three commitments.

Final Deliverable

<p>OUR TOP 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>1.</p> <p>Owner:</p> <p>Start Date:</p>	<p>OUR TOP 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>2.</p> <p>Owner:</p> <p>Start Date:</p>	<p>OUR TOP 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>3.</p> <p>Owner:</p> <p>Start Date:</p>
<p>ACTION</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Status:</p> <p>☐ Ready</p> <p>☐ Needs Resources</p> <p>☐ Major Barrier</p> <p>Barrier:</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>ACTION</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Status:</p> <p>☐ Ready</p> <p>☐ Needs Resources</p> <p>☐ Major Barrier</p> <p>Barrier:</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>ACTION</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Status:</p> <p>☐ Ready</p> <p>☐ Needs Resources</p> <p>☐ Major Barrier</p> <p>Barrier:</p> <p>_____</p>

Workshop Version: Roadmap Wall

Create a large wall with three columns.



Participants place actions in the appropriate timeframe.

Then add a second row underneath:

OWNER

City

Chamber

Business

Property Owner

Nonprofit

Regional Partner

Show more lines

This visually reveals when:

- Everything is assigned to the city
- Nobody owns a critical action
- Too many projects are happening at once

Debrief Questions

1. Which actions create momentum fastest?
2. Which actions unlock other projects?
3. Which projects require new partnerships?
4. What can happen without additional funding?
5. What is the single most important action for the next 90 days?

Bonus Exercise: "Domino Prioritization"

After building the roadmap, ask:

Which one action would make the biggest difference if completed successfully?

Circle that project as the **Keystone Action**.

Examples:

- Creating a downtown organization
- Completing a vacancy inventory
- Launching a façade grant program
- Developing a downtown brand

Many communities discover they don't need 20 initiatives; they need 1–2 foundational actions that make everything else easier. This is often the most valuable takeaway from the roadmap exercise.

Exercise: Role-Playing – The Downtown Champion Conversation

One of the biggest barriers to downtown revitalization is that local champions often know what should happen but don't know how to have productive conversations with property owners and business owners.

The goal is not to "sell" someone on a project. The goal is to learn how to:

- Build relationships
- Understand motivations
- Identify barriers
- Find shared interests
- Create a next step

Time: 45–60 minutes

Group Size: 3 people

- Champion
- Property/Business Owner
- Observer

Rotate roles so everyone practices.

Learning Objectives

Participants will practice:

- Asking good questions
- Active listening
- Handling skepticism
- Identifying incentives and opportunities
- Moving from conversation to action

Scenario 1: Vacant Property Owner

Background

A downtown building has been vacant for three years. The owner lives in another city. The building needs repairs. The community wants more businesses downtown.

Property Owner Brief (Secret Card)

You tell the participant playing the owner:

- You inherited this building.
- You don't have time to manage it.
- You've had bad experiences with tenants.
- You don't trust the city.
- You're worried about renovation costs.
- You might be open to ideas if the risk is low.

Champion Goal

Learn:

- Why the property is vacant
- What barriers exist
- Whether there is interest in activation

Do NOT:

- Criticize the owner
- Demand action
- Assume they are unwilling

Roleplay Prompt

The conversation starts with:

"Thanks for taking the time to meet. I'd love to learn more about your experience as a downtown property owner."

Debrief Questions

For the Champion:

- What did you learn?
- What assumptions were wrong?

For the Owner:

- When did you feel listened to?
- When did you become defensive?

For Observer:

- What questions generated useful information?

Scenario 2: Skeptical Small Business Owner

Background

The downtown organization is planning a new event series. A business owner has participated before and doesn't see value.

Business Owner Brief

- You've operated for 12 years.
- You're tired of meetings.
- Events bring crowds but few customers.
- You're struggling with staffing.
- You don't believe downtown leaders understand your reality.

Champion Goal

Understand:

- Why previous efforts failed
- What support would help
- What success looks like for the owner

Challenge

The Champion cannot immediately pitch the event. They must spend at least 5 minutes understanding concerns.

Observer Checklist

Did the Champion:

- Ask open-ended questions?
- Avoid jumping to solutions?
- Explore root causes?
- Summarize what they heard?
- Define a next step?

Scenario 3: Opportunity Conversation

Background

A successful local entrepreneur is thinking about opening a second location.

Entrepreneur Brief

- You like the community.
- You're interested but uncertain.
- You've heard vacant downtown spaces are expensive.
- You aren't sure there's enough foot traffic.

Champion Goal

Explore possibilities without overselling.

Find:

- What information is needed
- What barriers exist
- What partners could help

Tool: Curiosity Question Cards

Give Champions a stack of cards. Instead of persuading, they must begin with questions.

Questions for Property Owners

- What do you see as the future of this property?
- What challenges have made it difficult to lease?
- What would make investment feel less risky?
- What support would be helpful?
- What would have to happen for you to consider a new tenant?

Questions for Businesses

- What keeps customers coming back?
- What challenges are affecting your business?
- What would make downtown more successful for you?
- What types of customers are you trying to attract?
- What would make participation worthwhile?

The Listening Challenge

Halfway through the roleplay, stop and require the Champion to summarize.

Prompt: "Before we talk about solutions, tell me what you heard."

The Champion must summarize the owner's concerns without proposing fixes.

This is often the hardest part and the most valuable skill.

Worksheet: Conversation-to-Action Worksheet

After the roleplay, complete:

What I Learned

Key Interests

Potential Opportunities

Small Next Step

Advanced Version: Negotiation Simulation

Create a table with four roles:

- Property owner
- Business owner
- City representative
- Downtown champion

Challenge:

A vacant storefront on Main Street needs a new use. Each participant receives different interests and constraints. The group has 20 minutes to reach agreement on:

- A potential use
- Who does what
- A next action

This helps participants realize that revitalization is often less about funding and more about aligning different motivations.

Key Facilitator Debrief

Ask participants:

"What did the owner actually want?"

Many trainees answer with things like:

- A grant
- More customers
- Better events

But often the real answers are:

- Trust
- Less risk
- Clear communication
- Predictability
- A single point of contact

That realization usually leads to a much more effective approach to building long-term downtown champions and partnerships.

Worksheet: Vacant Space Prioritization

Score each building 1-5 on the criteria below (1=poor, 5=excellent). Multiply by the weight, sum for a total score. Rank buildings high to low; top scores are your “start here” list.

Criteria	Building 1	Building 2	Building 3	Building 4	Building 5	Building 6	Building 7
Structural condition							
Location/visibility							
Ownership clarity							
Rehab cost vs. value							
Market demand for likely use							
Proximity to other active buildings							
Available incentives							
Public safety/blight complaints							
Max Possible Score = 85							

How to use it:

1. Walk or drive the target buildings and score each one across the 8 criteria.
2. Multiple each score by its weight, then total.
3. Sort buildings by total score, descending.
4. Buildings in the top 20% are your “first wave;” good ROI on time and money, likely to build momentum and support for tackling harder cases later.

5. Re-run the scoring every 12-18 months, since ownership status, cost estimates, and incentive availability change.

Notes on weighting

Structural condition, location, and ownership clarity carry the most weight because they're often the biggest deal-breakers or accelerants; a beautiful building with no clear owner can stall for years.

Adjust weights to match local priorities (e.g., if housing shortage is the top political priority, weight "market demand" higher).