

## Breaking Down Silos

By Larisa Ortiz and Nur Asri, AICP

### LESSONS IN MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL DOWNTOWN PLANNING

This article covers an emerging planning methodology and diagnostic tool used to generate multi-faceted, data-driven strategies for place-based revitalization efforts. We will consider three applied case studies, including programs led by the City of New York and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as well as in Puerto Rico, where the Foundation for Puerto Rico led planning efforts funded by the U.S. Department of Commerce as part of larger Long-Term Disaster Recovery investments. This article discusses the application of the methodological approach in each place and explores program design and strategies for replicability and scalability in a variety of contexts, from neighborhood corridors to small and large cities, to entire regions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Even before the pandemic, the nation's downtowns and business districts were at the mercy of immutable forces and changing shopping habits. During the pandemic, the situation became more acute. Forced shutdowns led 75% of American consumers to try new shopping methods.<sup>1</sup> And while e-commerce as a portion of total retail trade has declined since the height of the pandemic, the ability to leverage online sales remains a powerful tool in the recovery toolbox. Additionally, the pandemic upended workers' relationships to their physical offices.

Remote and hybrid work solutions have given many office workers newfound flexibility in where they live, while simultaneously resulting in a near existential crisis for many office-dominant downtown environments. As a result, public sector entities are now charged, like never before, with helping America's downtowns and commercial districts not only recover from the pandemic but prepare for a new normal.

The federal infusion of economic recovery assistance offers an unprecedented opportunity to help small businesses directly. But it also offers the often-overlooked opportunity to ensure that the commercial districts in which businesses reside receive the necessary investment and adopt the policies and regulatory frameworks that will "future proof" these important places for economic activity now and into the future. This article outlines a reproducible and scalable example of a recovery planning effort that is focused on developing both community-driven and data-informed strategies, and that can be applied across multiple downtowns, commercial areas and town centers within states, counties, and regions.

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## CASE STUDY: RAPID RECOVERY PROGRAM (RRP)

In October 2020, Emmy Hahn, Director of the Mass Downtown Initiative (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development), received a \$10 million infusion of federal funds (through the CARES Act State Local Fiscal Recovery Fund) to help downtowns and commercial districts with COVID recovery.

The Mass Downtown Initiative, a statewide program with an annual budget of about \$300,000 and a full-time staff of one, was presented with an unprecedented opportunity to strategically support the near-term recovery and long-term planning of the state's most critical economic clusters. The expenditure of the federal funds, however, was guided by a few parameters: a) funds needed to be disbursed by June 30, 2020 (later extended to Dec 31, 2021), b) funds could not be distributed directly to communities, but rather to pre-qualified consultants/vendors, and c) resources needed to be made available to every municipality in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In order to design a unique program that would quickly and widely distribute the technical support that communities critically needed, while meet-

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## LESSONS IN MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL DOWNTOWN PLANNING

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ing federal funding guidelines, Hahn enlisted the support of Streetsense's Public Non-Profit Solutions Team. In just under eight weeks, the Project Team designed a robust program of direct support and technical assistance to support COVID recovery planning efforts across the state, now widely known as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Rapid Recovery Program (RRP).

## DESIGNING AN EQUITABLE PLANNING PROGRAM

The RRP team quickly defined a series of objectives to guide the program design, including:

- 1) **Conducting a comprehensive diagnostic of downtowns** (of various sizes/scales and mix) across the commonwealth to better understand both COVID-related and other persistent challenges that stand in the way of short- and long-term economic recovery;
- 2) **Building community knowledge of critical downtown challenges** by using data collected through the diagnostic to achieve consensus for a set of market-informed interventions (including capital investments, policies and programs) that may be implemented with subsequent recovery funding sources (federal, state, or local); and
- 3) **Using state-wide primary and secondary data on COVID impacts** (collected across every participating downtown) to assess the overall health and condition of the commonwealth's commercial districts – and that may inform state policy and program improvements.

Lessons Learned were also incorporated from the New York Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI), now in its fifth year. DRI awards \$10 million to support implementation in competitively selected communities following a comprehensive planning effort. For more on New York State's Downtown Revitalization Initiative, go to <https://www.ny.gov/programs/downtown-revitalization-initiative>.

### The Challenges

One of the first challenges was determining how to equitably allocate resources and define expectations for both participating communities and the Plan Facilitators who would be preparing the Rapid Recovery Plans. The Project Team developed a community categorization that would enable a rational allocation of resources and manage differences in capacity between small, medium, large, and extra-large communities. These designations were defined based on population sizes, downtown/commercial district sizes, and total number of businesses within the district. The number of projects expected to emerge from the planning process increased as the community size increased, under the presumption that larger communities would have more capacity – in the form of staffing and resources – to advance multiple projects and priorities following the planning effort. (Table 1)

**TABLE 1: RESOURCE ALLOCATION**

Program Resource Allocation	Small	Medium	Large	Extra Large
<b>Budget</b>	\$30,000	\$60,000	\$90,000	\$120,000
<b>Min. No. of Expected Project Recommendations</b>	5+	10+	12+	15+
<b>Example Communities</b>	Marblehead South Hadley	Barnstable- Hyannis Pittsfield	Easthampton Lowell	Cambridge Worcester

After the commonwealth issued call for communities and Plan Facilitators, 124 communities were paired with 81 Plan Facilitators (i.e., planning consultants with demonstrated downtown planning expertise) who had been selected through a competitive selection process.

Early on, the Project Team recognized that there would likely be great variation in skillsets and topical expertise (e.g., environmental engineering, transportation and infrastructure, urban design and placemaking, branding and marketing, and equity) among Plan Facilitators and a concerted effort needed to be made to ensure that every community was able to receive additional technical support from subject matter experts, as required. The program subsequently engaged 35 Subject Matter Experts who were available for consultations (one-on-one or cohort group meetings) to support further refinement of project recommendations.

## STANDARDIZING DATA COLLECTION ACROSS 124 COMMUNITIES

In order to ensure the diagnostic for each participating community was conducted in a similar manner by all Plan Facilitators, and that the data collected could be seamlessly aggregated and analyzed in a meaningful way for the commonwealth, the RRP team developed a set of training modules, data collection guides and templates, and established a simple grading tool for public realm assessments.

These data collection tools were informed by an overarching Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) diagnostic framework derived from the Commercial DNA approach authored by Streetsense Managing Director Larisa Ortiz and published by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, with funding in part by Citi Community Development.



**FIGURE 1:** The Rapid Recovery Plan diagnostic framework was adapted from the Commercial DNA approach as published by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation in "Preparing a Commercial District Diagnostic," funded in part by Citi Community Development.

A planning effort spanning 124 communities, with the support of 81 Plan Facilitators and 35 Subject Matter Experts, required ongoing communication, training, consultation, and re-iteration. The high rate of coordination that needed to occur within a short amount of time meant that several avenues of communication also needed to be made accessible to all stakeholders involved.

The framework consists of four core components: Physical Environment, Business Environment, Consumer Base, and Administrative Capacity. (Figure 1)

In addition to baseline indicators in each category, Plan Facilitators were also given the flexibility to apply additional analyses and methodologies beyond the required baseline data to answer a set of guiding questions:

#### Physical Environment

- How conducive is the physical environment to meeting the needs and expectations of both businesses and customers?
- What are major challenges and opportunities across the public realm, private realm, and with respect to the ease of access and overall visibility of the district?

#### Market Information

- Who are the customers of businesses in the study area and what are their lifestyle preferences?
- Is there an opportunity in the Study Area to meet the needs of any customer group?

#### Business Environment

- What are the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses in the Study Area?
- Is there a unique anchor/destination and/or business mix in the Study Area that is driving the local economy?
- How well does the business mix meet the needs of various customer groups?

#### Administrative Capacity

- Who are the key stewards of the Study Area? Are they adequately staffed and resourced to support implementation of projects?
- Are the regulatory, zoning, and permitting processes an impediment to business activity? Why or why not?
- If lacking a downtown management/stewardship entity, is a discussion needed on district management?

These guiding questions offered Plan Facilitators insight into program objectives sufficient to enable further customization and enhancement of the baseline program framework.

## RAPID RECOVERY PLANNING IN PRACTICE

### Phase 0 – Program Brand, Training, and Communication

A planning effort spanning 124 communities, with the support of 81 Plan Facilitators and 35 Subject Matter Experts, required ongoing communication, training, consultation, and re-iteration. The high rate of coordination that needed to occur within a short amount of time meant that several avenues of communication also needed to be made accessible to all stakeholders involved.

As such, the RRP team established the following:

- **Weekly direct email program updates** that went out to both participating community representatives and Plan Facilitators. These e-mails typically included submission deadline alerts, upcoming webinar events/training modules, links to program guides and FAQs, and updates on any live/active applications for related commonwealth funding or resource programs.
- **A Rapid Recovery Program Slack workspace**, with channels dedicated to Plan Facilitator discussions and Subject Matter Expert discussions. This alternative communication channel was established to help consultants collaborate, share techniques/methodologies, and troubleshoot any data collection or technical issues in real-time.
- **Live/Recorded training webinars that were made publicly available.** Topics ranged from how to follow the RRP diagnostic approach, how to collect baseline data, and topical sessions by Subject Matter Experts such as “Branding and Wayfinding,” “Economic Equity,” and “Storefront Improvements.”

In addition, the RRP team developed a program brand identity that would be used across all program materials – from letterheads to presentation templates and final plan templates. A coherent brand identity (including program logo, fonts, graphic elements, and color palette) enabled all stakeholders involved (and even the public) to quickly identify information related to the program. (Figure 2)

### Phase 1 – Diagnostic

In the first phase of RRP, Plan Facilitators gathered data and insights, following the data collection methodologies established by the commonwealth. The common-



**FIGURE 2:** 124 Rapid Recovery Plans were developed by 81 different Plan Facilitators, with the help of a single visual brand identity.

wealth also developed an on-line business survey, distributed by each community and Plan Facilitator, to gather additional feedback on business concerns and needs. At the conclusion of Phase 1, Plan Facilitators were required to submit their data to the commonwealth via an online portal and begin synthesizing findings from the diagnostic that would begin to inform the development of project recommendations in subsequent phases of work.

Over 3,000 business survey responses were collected by RRP communities between March-April 2021

### Phase 2 – Project Ideas

In the second phase of RRP, communities and Plan Facilitators came together to build consensus on a set of early project ideas that not only responded to key challenges and opportunities that emerged from the diagnostic but that also had clear nexus with COVID-19 impacts – a core requirement of ongoing federal funding applications.

Plan Facilitators were provided access to a variety of tools to help generate and refine projects ideas and determine overall project feasibility. Tools included best practice compendiums, informational webinars, and one-on-one consultations led by Subject Matter Experts across each of the six project categories – “Public Realm,” “Private Realm,” “Tenant Mix,” “Revenue & Sales,” “Admin Capacity,” and “Cultural/Arts.” (Figure 3)



**FIGURE 3:** Project categorization enabled a deeper understanding of how funding needs aligned with public, private and philanthropic funding sources.

15 topic webinars, 86 best practices compiled, and 335+ technical consultations

identified next steps, potential risks, funding levels/resources, key implementation partners, and likely timelines. In addition, the rubric required each project to demonstrate clear alignment with COVID impacts and diagnostic findings and data, as required by federal and state funding (based on interim guidance issued by the U.S. Treasury related to the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)). Ultimately, the rubric intends to position communities as “funding-ready” in anticipation of ARPA resource allocations.

With final project recommendations developed, Plan Facilitators packaged all 124 RRP Plans utilizing a standardized plan template that reflected the program’s brand identity. Each final plan includes a summary of Phase 1 diagnostic findings and all project recommendations from Phase 3.

### Post-Planning and Implementation

Now that 124 RRP plans have been developed, the real work has only just started. The path toward implementation of over 1,000+ project recommendations across all RRP communities is continually being paved by the RRP team. In December 2021, the program expanded its scope to include funding resource technical consultations and developing a set of “How-To” tactical guides in key areas of need that emerged during the program, including “Outdoor Dining,” “District Branding,” “District Marketing,” “Wayfinding,” “Storefront Sign & Façade,” “Technology for Retail,” “Equity,” and “Hospitality & Tourism.” The Funding Resource Team helped over 80 RRP communities identify available resources for up to 160 project recommendations from the final RRP plans and the tactical toolkits offer step-by-step instructions for communities that are ready to begin implementation of projects.

Today, project recommendations developed through the RRP program continue to gain traction with community leaders seeking to identify projects for pandemic recovery funding, particularly for small businesses.

The aggregate estimated cost of project recommendations in the final RRP plans is \$157+ million (across 124 communities).

## PROGRAM IMPACTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

### *The power of a visual brand identity to communicate with various stakeholders*

Visual brands are often underestimated tools in the public sector when in fact they can help build recognition for public programs and initiatives. With the support of Streetsense’s in-house brand studio, a brand package was developed for the Rapid Recovery Program which included program logos, color palettes, fonts, imagery and graphic elements, that would be used across all program collateral. The single visual identity meant that templates could also be developed for use by 81 different Plan Facilitators/consultants without compromising cohesiveness across program documentation and final plans. (Figure 4)

In addition, the expression of the brand across all program materials also gave the Rapid Recovery Program a higher level of legitimacy (particularly among policy-makers at the commonwealth) and made it highly visible to media outlets. In addition to features in local press, the program brand has also been highly effective in communications with philanthropic funders in the region.



**FIGURE 4:** The Rapid Recovery Plan brand identity and templates developed by consultant Streetsense ensure visual cohesiveness across all materials and plans developed as part of the program.

Most importantly, the structured, informative, and efficient language of the brand also helped ensure program materials were readable and visually stimulating for the general public audience that may be less familiar with the subject at hand.

***124 communities have clear direction and place-based projects to support downtown economic recovery***

The commonwealth Rapid Recovery Plan program has provided the framework and approach to develop over 1,100+ project recommendations for communities of varying types – urban, suburban, rural – and sizes – small, medium, large, extra-large – across the state. This scale of planning is unprecedented but most timely. It has equipped these communities with a consensus-driven blueprint for investment and action in the years to come following the pandemic and that will hopefully enable downtowns to future-proof against any other potential disaster events.

***Leaders are now armed with “state-wide” data to make smarter policy and funding decisions***

In the first phase of RRP, over 8,250 baseline data points were collected, in addition to 3,000+ survey responses. The standardized data collected by Plan Facilitators and participating communities (with the help of data collection guides, templates, and tools) helps clearly illustrate the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses and the state of conditions in the real estate market, public realm, private realm, and organizational capacity in some of the state’s largest economic clusters – downtowns and commercial districts.

The commonwealth is now equipped with data that points directly to business performance before and during COVID.

- According to the RRP business survey responses, during the three years prior to COVID, businesses across different sized communities reported that revenues had largely “stayed the same.” However, the negative impacts experienced during the pandemic varied among differently sized communities. In fact, businesses in the largest RRP communities were most

likely to have experienced a decline in revenue and, inversely, businesses in small communities were least likely to experience a decline in revenue. Unsurprisingly, businesses in small communities were therefore also least likely to have temporarily or permanently closed in the pandemic.

- Underlying real estate conditions were also shown to directly impact business success in different communities across the state. In larger communities with higher rents, the cost of doing business is higher as indicated by higher rates of current storefront vacancies and reported deferred rent/mortgage payments. In fact, during the pandemic, about 26-28% of businesses reportedly stopped/deferred rent or mortgage payments.

The commonwealth also has data that shows the critical need for improvements in the physical environment. Appearance matters and past retail industry surveys have shown that customers overwhelmingly cite the cleanliness, and by extension the safety, of a shopping area as a primary component of satisfaction.

- Extra-large communities, it turns out, fared poorest in overall conditions of the public and private realms (based on the visual site survey assessments conducted by Plan Facilitators using the RRP Data Collection Guide), indicating a critical need for improvements to storefronts, streets, sidewalks, and public lighting in these communities. This data was reinforced in Phase 2 of RRP, where “public realm” subject matter expert consultations were most in demand, particularly on topics related to transportation, infrastructure, streetscape and wayfinding/signage.

There is now also state-wide data that indicates critical action needed from both state and local leaders to address regulatory obstacles and downtown/commercial district management capacities.

- Across the commonwealth, about one in two businesses shared in their survey responses that they faced regulatory obstacles, particularly with parking regulations, signage regulations, and licensing/permitting. In addition, despite having the highest

median available parking spaces and highest average parking ratios, businesses in “Large” RRP communities reportedly faced the highest rates of challenges with meeting parking regulations.

- Only one in three “Small” RRP communities have a viable organization managing business district/downtown effort. Without additional resources to build/expand capacity and teams in these communities, small communities will remain at a disadvantage without the staffing and capacity to sustain recovery efforts and economic development initiatives over the long-term.

While the commonwealth’s RRP program is an example of how a state can lead a multi-jurisdictional planning effort, the examples below offer insight into how the program framework has been applied at both the regional and neighborhood levels.

### SCALING THE MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL PLANNING APPROACH UP OR DOWN

The multi-jurisdictional planning approach applied across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has also been modified to reflect a wide variety of on-the-ground circumstances and budget constraints, including jurisdictions of smaller or larger scale, from neighborhoods to entire regions, as demonstrated below.

#### Regional Level: Puerto Rico Destination Plans (2021 IEDC Gold Award recipient)

Following Hurricane Maria, the Foundation for Puerto Rico (FPR) established a comprehensive economic recovery program known as the Bottom-Up Destination Recovery Initiative to distribute resources to various regions and to build long-term visitor economy resiliency plans for six regions across the Island. One component of the multi-faceted program was the development of community-driven Destination Plans. Led by Streetsense, six plans outlined a set of strategies to grow spending from both local and off-island visitors and to extend visitor stays.

With federal funding from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration, FPR and Streetsense leveraged the Commercial DNA diagnostic framework to determine gaps (challenges or opportunities) in the Physical Environment, Business Environment (Tourism Attractions/Assets, Tourism-supporting businesses), Visitor Profile + Market Demand, and Administrative Capacity.

Unlike the Rapid Recovery Program in Massachusetts, the diagnostic was conducted with support of field teams who were embedded in the community for a six-month period, during which they lived and worked among the local community. The team prepared comprehensive asset lists and a SWOT analysis, while engaging local businesses, residents, and managers of cultural and natural assets. In addition, to ensure project recommendations that landed in the final plan were also heavily influenced by stakeholder input, local consultants Inversión Cultural organized an open call for tourism project recommendations in each region. This enabled stakeholders to



**FIGURE 5:** In Isabela, major, but often overlooked, tourism asset Guajataca Tunnel received funding for the installation of wayfinding signage and basic clean-up of the attraction. Thirty-three new businesses have since reopened near the asset to leverage spending from new visitors.

submit and incubate project ideas that would help grow spending from both local and off-island visitors. Each plan included tactical project recommendations that were vetted by the local community. (Figure 5)

#### City Level: City of New York (2018 IDA Downtown Achievement Award recipient)

In 2014, former Mayor Bill de Blasio released his HousingNY Plan to build and preserve 200,000 units of affordable housing over the next ten years, which included an emphasis on community development that strives to strengthen neighborhoods through holistic, equitable, and inclusive mixed-use development. In order to simultaneously grow and support neighborhood-serving commercial districts and their small businesses, the NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) created the Neighborhood 360 program to deliver comprehensive commercial revitalization services and community-based organization capacity building resources to neighborhoods facing rapid change.

SBS, with financial and technical support from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, commissioned the creation of a research tool that would enable the diagnosis of commercial district needs and challenges that could inform funding and resource allocation across the city’s business districts. The tool, entitled the Commercial District Needs Assessment (CDNA), has since been deployed to assess community challenges and identify priority investments in 26 commercial districts in all five boroughs of the city.

Data and findings from the CDNA are used to make the case for public and private investment and SBS has oriented its competitive commercial district grants programs to fund non-profit organizations to address key findings identified in the assessment. One such example is the Bay Street CDNA, which helped demonstrate the district’s readiness for participation in New York State’s competitive Downtown Revitalization Initiative (Figure 6). Following the completion of the Bay Street CDNA, Staten Island won the state’s coveted \$10 million award. Additionally, a long-term commitment to the CDNA approach has also been embedded in the city’s OneNYC

plan as a recommended long-term resilient neighborhood planning strategy.

### WORKING ACROSS JURISDICTIONAL LINES TO MAKE A BIGGER IMPACT

While individual downtown or commercial district planning and recovery efforts are important to identifying unique qualities and market conditions, there is often greater value in planning alongside peers and working together with a common framework and approach. Too frequently, the tendency in downtown planning has been for individual downtown communities to develop discrete plans that occur in geographic vacuums, which has often meant that downtown organizations have ended up competing among themselves for limited resources. This piecemeal approach also fails to recognize how the economic vitality of downtowns in any given region are in fact connected and, especially for visitors, seen as a collective whole.

By facilitating economic planning and recovery efforts across jurisdictional lines, public sector partners will be able to better benchmark themselves against peer communities/competitive markets and begin to identify shared challenges and opportunities that will require policy and investment strategies at the county- or state-level.



#### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Charm, T., 2022. The great consumer shift: Ten charts that show how US shopping behavior is changing. [online] Available at: <<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Marketing%20and%20Sales/Our%20Insights/The%20great%20consumer%20shift/ten-charts-show-how-us-shopping-behavior-is-changing.pdf>> [Accessed 17 January 2022].



**FIGURE 6:** The Bay Street Commercial DNA was used to support Staten Island’s application to New York State’s Downtown Revitalization Initiative, a \$10 million award provided to downtowns to develop a strategic investment plan and implement key catalytic projects that advance the community’s vision for revitalization.

#### RESOURCES

- Commonwealth of Massachusetts Rapid Recovery Plan program website: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/rapid-recovery-plan-rrp-program>
- Rapid Recovery Plan program data dashboard: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/rapid-recovery-plan-rrp-dashboard>
- Rapid Recovery Plan program report: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/rrp-final-diagnostic-report/download>
- LISC “Preparing a Commercial District Diagnostic:” [https://www.lisc.org/media/filer\\_public/ec/6c/ec6c7d26-cc91-4c2d-910f-e459ea1a1d4d/cdna\\_manual\\_022720\\_1.pdf](https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/ec/6c/ec6c7d26-cc91-4c2d-910f-e459ea1a1d4d/cdna_manual_022720_1.pdf)
- City of New York Commercial District Needs Assessments: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/sbs/neighborhoods/commercial-district-needs-assessments.page>

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