



BELL COUNTY
Downtown Revitalization
Project Summary
2020

Community & Economic
Development Initiative of Kentucky

 College of Agriculture,
Food and Environment

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[Cover Image]

View of Bell County from the
Cumberland Gap National Park

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PROJECT INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In 2017, the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) launched a three year, Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) grant from the POWER (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization) Initiative. This grant funded a Downtown Revitalization Project in Kentucky's eight Promise Zone counties. These eight counties are Bell, Clay, Harlan, Knox, Leslie, Letcher, Perry and Whitley. Within these eight counties, twelve downtowns signed up to be a part of this project, including Corbin and Williamsburg, Kentucky.

Within the broad scope of this downtown revitalization project, CEDIK offered a wide range of programs and technical assistance, along with networking opportunities to address the unique challenges each community faces in regards to their respective downtowns. Every community was able to select services to best meet their needs. CEDIK also facilitated quarterly convenings to allow participating communities to share ideas, strategies and information vital to successful revitalization efforts in the region. Communities that participated in this project were then able to access grant money to fund projects in their downtowns in order to successfully move from a planning phase into direct action.



Historic Church in Downtown Middlesboro

WHAT IS CEDIK?

The Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) emerged as a college level unit within the University of Kentucky's College of Agriculture, Food and Environment (CAFE) in 2010. The CAFE administration recognized the need for both an internal source of professional development and instruction for students and county Extension agents, as well as an external outreach mechanism for Kentucky communities with programming and research that focused on community and economic development. CEDIK's programming has dramatically expanded to meet the evolving nature of places and economies, as well as recognizing the intricacies of economic development. This Whitley County Downtown Revitalization Project Summary is an example of this evolution, exploring how quality and intentional design and planning initiatives can create a more economically resilient downtown.

CEDIK'S GOALS

- Provide research and information that supports community and economic development.
- Build the leadership and organizational capacity of peoples and communities.
- Support community decision-making and collaborative initiatives.
- Facilitate partnerships and networks that enable communities to thrive economically, physically and socially.
- Sustain CEDIK's organizational capacity to efficiently and effectively accomplish its mission and vision.

IMPORTANCE OF DOWNTOWNS

Downtowns are iconic and powerful symbols for a city and often contain the most culturally relevant landmarks, distinctive features and unique neighborhoods in a city. Given that most downtowns are generally the oldest part of a city, they offer rare insights into their city's past, present and potential future.

Following de-industrialization and the growth of suburban development in the middle of the last century, many cities across the country forgot about their downtowns. During this period private investment in downtowns stagnated while it increased dramatically on the outskirts of cities. This happened throughout the western world, from Glasgow, Kentucky to Glasgow, Scotland. In Whitley County, this manifested in the suburban style of development often found adjacent to Interstate 75. Here, national big box retailers and



[Image]
New mural in downtown Middlesboro

fast food restaurants opened, drawing the businesses and services that were once a staple of 'going to town' out into the periphery. This reduced foot traffic and the critical mass necessary to support a vibrant and economically resilient downtown and drove future development to the car-centric periphery. Consequently, new developments featured national retail stores rather than the locally based and owned stores that tend to be staples of downtowns. While these new stores offered much needed jobs it often came at the expense of the local downtown landscape and economy.

PRIORITIZING DOWNTOWN

Downtowns are complex places. Physically they are often the oldest part of a city, making redevelopment of infrastructure and buildings challenging. Culturally, many people have memories of 'going to town' and what the downtown looked like when it was bustling, influencing their perception of what the downtown should be in the future. Additionally, downtowns are where most civic, judicial and medical services are located. Each of the elements that have historically represented the important role and function of a downtown are discussed below.

CIVIC

Civic spaces in downtowns bring people together and nurture the larger community. Civic spaces are more than the aesthetic center of the town where public events take place; they allow cultural, economic and social exchanges to occur. Consequently, downtowns that do not have a civic space tend to feel less connected to area residents. As a result, communities without civic spaces are most likely to experience decline in the various forms of community health & wellness (socially, economically, culturally, and environmentally.)

RELIGION AND CULTURE

Vibrant downtowns foster the exchange of religion and culture through various daily interactions and public activities (farmers markets, festivals, etc). As a long-term result, people are more likely to stay connected, develop broader relationships and adopt healthy practices as they integrate other people's culture and/or religion into their everyday life.

MEDICAL

A prospering city and downtown will likely attract new residents, and with the increased residents, the demand for larger hospitals and other medical services will increase to meet demand. New medical facilities to meet the demands of patients will create jobs encouraging medical professionals to move into or stay in the area.

COMMERCIAL/SHOPPING

Downtown spaces are where people are most likely going to be throughout the day. Shops will emerge in the area to meet the public's increased demand for goods and services, leading to higher profits and increased job opportunities.

ENTERTAINMENT

Downtown areas have a civic center where public activities for entertainment can occur. After many successful functions in the area, locals will brainstorm more events to have in the civic center of the downtown area.

SOCIAL

The social aspects of downtown can consist of a town hall, cafe/ diner and even parks/plazas. Some events can also create social atmospheres, like festivals. These areas bring people together for socialization.

RESIDENTIAL

As the downtown renaissance occurs in communities across the country, people will be more likely to move downtown because it is close to their place of employment and in proximity to a variety of resources. This has led to a higher demand for residential spaces in downtown areas, which is a key component of a vibrant and walkable communities

FINANCIAL

Downtowns are historically where a city's central financial hub is located, serving the community as well as local government. These financial services play a key part in the welfare and longevity of the broader community.

EMPLOYMENT

High population densities typically found in thriving downtown areas attract businesses. As a result, there will be an increased demand for workers to meet the growing needs of residents.

EDUCATIONAL

Downtown areas allow people from various backgrounds to engage with each other on a special level. For children, this creates friendly, hands-on learning opportunities to discover other cultures in their community. This socialization can also foster place identity and community connection.

[Image Right]
Inside photo of a building in
downtown Pineville being renovated

WHY INVEST IN DOWNTOWN?

Downtowns have a significant intrinsic value not easily replicated in new developments. The historic density and concentration of assets, people and businesses make downtowns natural hubs for jobs and tax revenue. Downtowns illuminate and showcase a community's culture and provide insights on its historic identity. Healthy and productive downtowns also have the opportunity to generate a high tax revenue per acre due to the mix and density of their use. Downtowns can be notably economically productive and as a result investments in downtown have the potential to generate great returns. Over time, downtowns have proven to be quite resilient because of the entanglement of built assets, ingrained memories and diversity of uses.



Downtowns are for everyone and often their vibrancy is associated with the density of small businesses and the foot traffic supporting them. Investment in revitalization can create jobs, increase property values, improve quality of life and attract new visitors and residents. Downtowns are also important investments for industrial attraction. Many sites are selected based on the quality of life for employees and a downtown's cultural and recreational amenities - not just labor, schools, housing and infrastructure. Industries want to be located in unique and authentic places where employees can be happy and healthy.

Downtown investments are as diverse as downtowns themselves. For example, investments can be made in accessibility, public art, building facades or parks and green spaces (to suggest a few) but they all serve a unique purpose while collectively contributing to the vibrancy and value of downtown.



Parks and green spaces are vital in providing a good quality of life, promoting health and wellness, and contributing to economic growth even though they are rarely considered as important as infrastructure that serves community needs like water, sewage and electricity.

Downtowns are multifaceted systems and the investments we make to support revitalization efforts are increasingly broad as well. There is no singular way to measure downtown revitalization success over time. Rather, we suggest a broad set of indicators similar to the 2014 University of Illinois Extension 'Downtown Success Indicators' found in the appendix. This publication was used to provide insights on how to begin broadening how we measure revitalization progress. The provided indicators and metrics increase our understanding of, and measure the success of, downtown investments.

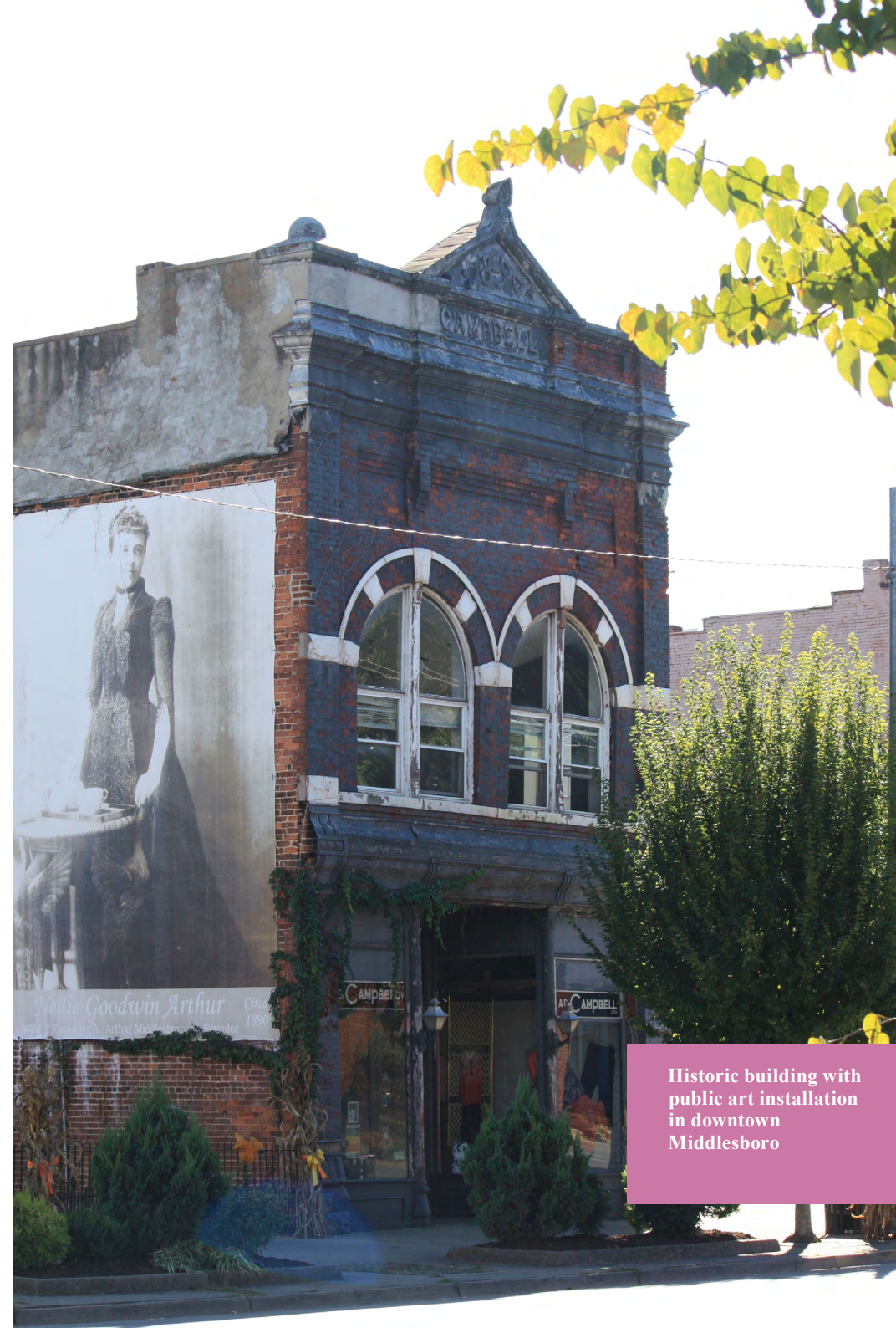


BUSINESS RETENTION & EXPANSION

WHAT IS BUSINESS RETENTION & EXPANSION?

BRE is a facilitated community-based program that engages communities to examine the local business environment, interpret the information collected and purposefully plan to strengthen the ability to understand and positively respond to local business needs. BRE participants organize a planning committee, identify local business participants, conduct interviews and respond to opportunities that result from the interviews. CEDIK supports communities throughout the process, including developing the interview guide, analyzing the results of the interviews, writing the final reports and helping to present the results to the greater community.

The BRE Program worked closely with Main Street Pineville board members and Director Jacob Roan in 2017 to reach out to business owners and managers. This process provided insights on business operator perspectives on the local business environment in Pineville.



Historic building with
public art installation
in downtown
Middlesboro

BRE PROCESS

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The Main Street Pineville board representatives interviewed 16 businesses in Pineville, Kentucky. The surveys were completed by the business owners, assistant vp, general manager or other representative in charge to best reflect the needs of the establishment. Businesses ranged in size, service and years of operation from “less than 2” to more than 100.

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

In the five years prior to the BRE, 56% of the businesses had introduced new products and services and 31% anticipated new products and services over the coming two years. Emerging technology was not anticipated to impact future products and services at that time.

MARKET & INDUSTRY

A majority of the respondents reported that total company sales were stable. Primary competitors are local businesses for 81% of the surveyed businesses. Over three-fourths of the businesses sold products or services or advertised over the internet.

GROWTH POTENTIAL

Most Pineville business respondents didn’t anticipate opportunities for business growth over the next three years. Thirteen of sixteen (81%) of the respondents indicated that they do not have plans to expand their business in the next three years. Barriers to growth included low local wages, poor economic conditions in general and population declines.

WORKFORCE

The availability, quality, stability, turnover, longevity and reliability of workers were generally rated fair. Fifty percent require a high school diploma for employees and 25% had employees in positions that require a college degree.

COMMUNITY

Nearly 70% of respondents in this survey rated Kentucky, and Pineville specifically as a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ place to do business. From a business point of view, strong leadership, city government and the quality of the natural environment received highly favorable ratings as strengths for doing business in Pineville. Low wages, convenience of parking and perceptions of homeless community members were noted as areas for improvement.

[Image Right]
Historic Bell Theater in
downtown Pineville



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the findings of the survey, leaders identified four areas for recommendations for the city to consider regarding the local business climate:

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

56% of respondents reported they have introduced new products and services in the past five years and 75% indicated they use social media, such as Facebook, to advertise. Because of the potential for Internet growth in sales and advertising, we recommend Pineville explore expanded training and awareness of how to effectively use social media and websites for advertising. Consideration of marketing alliances should be explored.

GROWTH POTENTIAL

The majority of businesses surveyed (88%) report a stable workforce, and do not have plans to expand their businesses in the next three years. Growth barriers include local economies and conditions. That said, potential does exist for Pineville to support online expansion and new business enterprises. Several businesses surveyed indicated an interest in additional downtown dining options. Main Street Pineville could lead exploration on how to alleviate any barriers that may exist to new dining startups in Pineville.

WORKFORCE

Concerns were raised about worker availability in the area. The community should investigate additional programs or services that address the strengthening of capacity of the available worker base. This might include trainings through the high school, colleges or by working with other business development programs. While the majority of surveyed businesses rated workers in Pineville as fair,

a significant number of businesses (81%) also identified childcare access as an issue. Main Street Pineville could explore how to encourage organizational collaborations or childcare business startups in Pineville.

COMMUNITY

Respondents considered the community and state as very good places to do business. Parking access was considered a concern. The Main Street Director should have discussions with the city and county officials about parking issues. The Main Street Director should continue to promote the positive attributes of doing business in this area and consider initiatives on how to educate/assist businesses with new state and/or local regulations. The presence of the homeless shelter downtown is an issue that the Main Street Director could work on with city officials by exploring ideas that will shift unintended consequences for businesses located nearby.

[Image Right]
Cumberland Ave. in
downtown Pineville

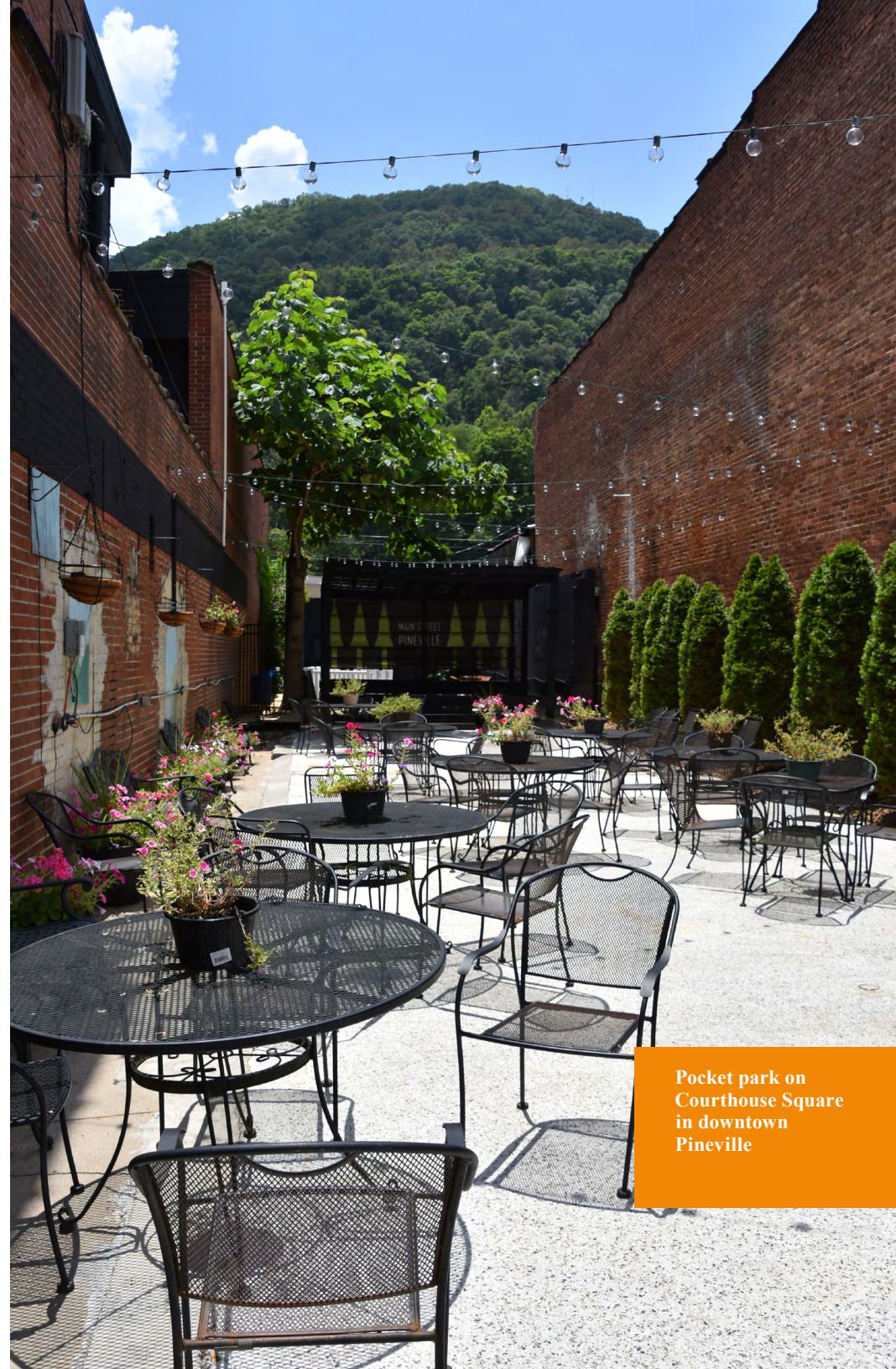


FIRST IMPRESSIONS

WHAT IS FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

First Impressions is a structured assessment program that enables communities to learn about the first impression they convey to outsiders. It offers a fresh perspective on the appearance, services and infrastructure of each community. Volunteer teams undertake unannounced, one-day visits, record their observations, and give constructive feedback to the community. Their photos and responses are then compiled and presented back to the community by a CEDIK representative. In addition, the program offers suggestions and resources to address the areas identified for potential improvement. The knowledge gained through this program is intended to serve as a basis for community action.

First Impressions was developed by Andy Lewis, University of Wisconsin Extension Associate Professor, and James Schneider, Grant County (WI) Economic Development Director. CEDIK has adapted the First Impressions Program to meet the needs of Kentucky communities.



Pocket park on Courthouse Square in downtown Pineville

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OVERVIEW

This program coordinates anonymous visits to the community by professionals in community and economic development, small business owners, community leaders and more, depending upon the specific community assessment needs. Analysis includes detailed feedback from internet search engines, social Media platforms and in-person experiences. Assessors document Their experience and interactions with community members.

PROCESS

Visits to Bell County were conducted by 11 assessors on both weekdays and weekends to capture a variety of activity within the community. The Bell First Impressions assessors consisted of small business owners, young professionals, traveling retirees and community development professionals. Overall, conditions were favorable for visiting and exploring the roads, small communities, parks and businesses within Bell County. While quotations in this report should not be considered exhaustive, they do provide a valuable snapshot of a visitor's perspective in Bell County from a variety of ages, life experiences and interests.

WEB PRESENCE

The team began their research on the internet, exploring the county's websites and social media presence. Reviews for official sites indicated that sites were fresh, fun and had upcoming events listed in Pineville. However, when navigating throughout the official sites, many links were expired or outdated and gave the impression that these sites were not regularly maintained. Reviewers felt the community could review and audit these pages in order to better promote the community.

Reviewers discovered that both Pineville and Middlesboro had active, lively Facebook pages. These pages seemed to highlight the Cumberland Gap National Park, restaurants in the areas and local merchants and attractions. Overall, reviewers discovered that Facebook was the most up-to-date and consistent source of information. Many reviewers recommended embedding the Facebook feed into the official tourism and city websites to easily generate new content for the websites that already exist.

Assessors discovered that while there are several standalone websites for both Pineville and Middlesboro, the sites did not link to each other in order to increase traffic to all. By analyzing keyword search terms and linking official sites together, all websites will benefit from increased traffic.



COMMUNITY VISITS

Visitors determined that the county is strong with tourism attractions such as Pine Mountain State Park, the Levitt Amp Concert Series and the Bell Theatre. Interactions with local residents were positive and friendly. Assessors loved the way Pineville had a downtown “square” with attractive streetscapes. Assessors noticed that Pineville had strong signage for the main entrances and had invested in landscaping in the area. Overall, it was clear that buildings had been recently renovated and efforts had been made to creatively fill buildings that were still vacant. Visitors noticed benches, ‘shop local’ signage and many events advertised at the Bell Theatre: all giving the impression of an active, lively downtown.

Visitors spent their time at Flocoe coffee shop, the Pine Mountain State Park Lodge, Gem Cakes and Sauced. Overall, assessors valued the walkability of the area, the obvious community spirit and pride and the natural history of the area and celebration of Middlesboro’s meteor crater and mountains. Assessors encouraged the community to continue with marketing pushes, increasing social media and web presence and continuing the momentum of building renovations around the square to attract new, creative businesses.



[Top Right Image]
Clear Creek in Bell
County

[Middle Right Image]
Wayfinding sign along
the Middlesboro Canal

[Bottom Right Image]
Cumberland Gap is an
international tourist
destination

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the feedback compiled from visits to Bell County, the following suggestions are recommended for future opportunities:

Audit existing websites for function

- Some websites had good form and function, but others were outdated, with broken links and expired licenses. Conduct a web audit and remove or repair sites that are no longer functioning to highlight Pineville's assets, as well as focus on social media and web marketing opportunities.

Draw passers-by from 25E into Downtown

- There is heavy traffic on 25E, but drivers have little signal that there is an active, vibrant square just off the highway. Find ways to draw visitors into town to spend an afternoon and money in the new businesses in the area.

Develop a plan for landscape and streetscapes

- Fall decorations had high reviews, but visitors outside the fall window felt there could be more streetscapes and landscape efforts in the town. Identify ways to make community entrances and side streets reflect the newly refreshed feel of the historic square area.

SUMMARY OF EFFORTS

After compiling the information into a full-length report, a CEDIK representative presented the findings to Bell County stakeholders in Pineville in June of 2018. Stakeholders in attendance included elected officials, chamber members, tourism professionals, news media and community volunteers. After reviewing the Community Assessment Report, attendees then participated in a CEDIK facilitated community forum to identify action items and priorities to act upon, based on the information received. As a result, the City of Pineville audited their web presence, focused on clear wayfinding and walkability assessments, and developed objectives for downtown improvements

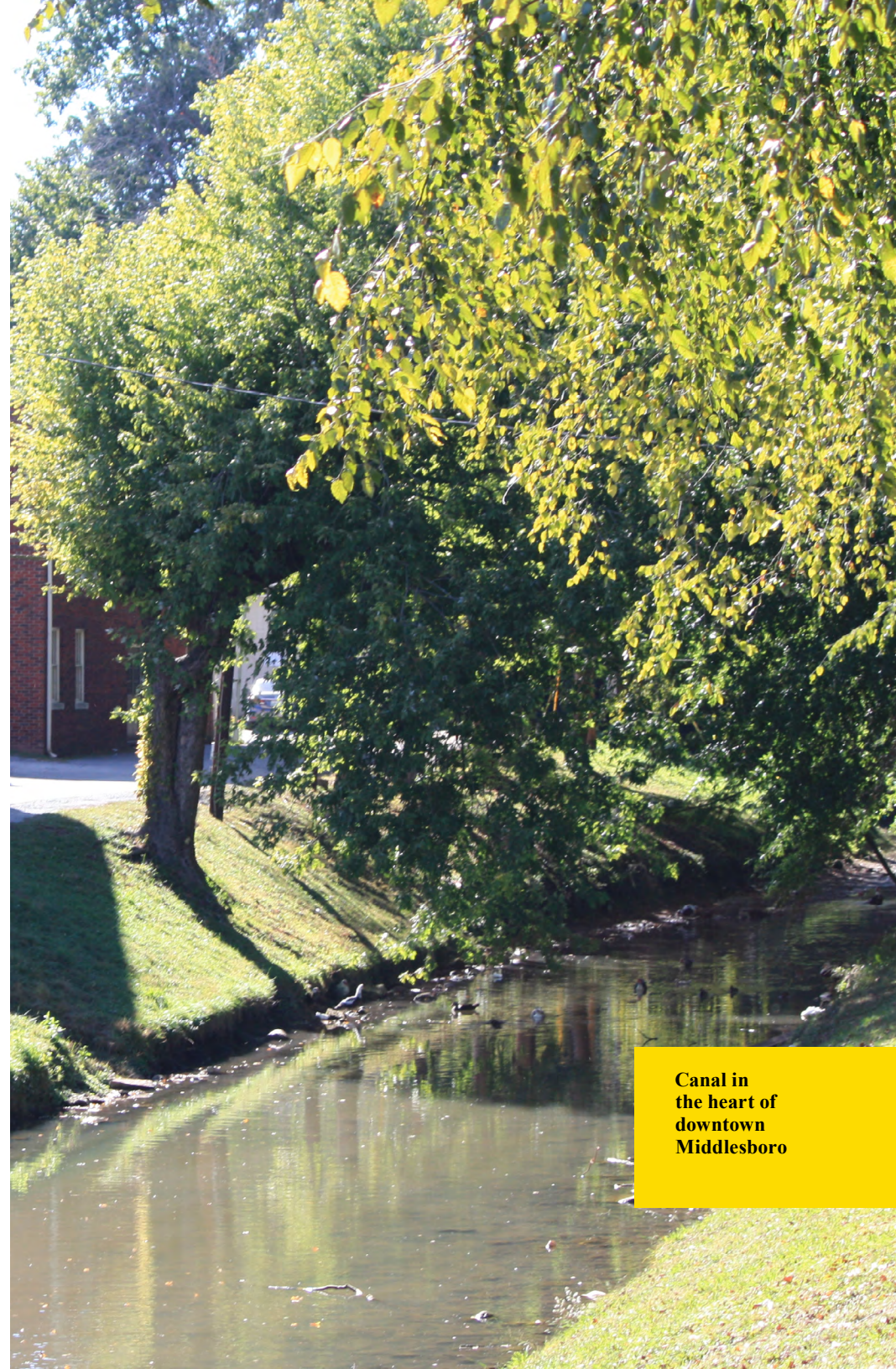


[Image]
View of Middlesboro from
Cumberland Gap National Park

STAKEHOLDER NETWORKING

COMING TOGETHER

Downtown revitalization takes more than a single person's best intentions. It requires a collective effort involving many people working towards mutual goals. More times than not, the process starts with a single person or organization investing their time and attempting to address an issue they've identified as the most important. Any process can begin with an individual vision for change, but cultivating shared ownership and positive results requires a deeper commitment and understanding of the connections between the community's assets, challenges and vision for the future. This deep connection and understanding is at the heart of downtown stakeholder networking.



Canal in the heart of downtown Middlesboro

DOWNTOWN STAKEHOLDER TEAM

Each participating community in the Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization project was led by a local stakeholder team representing active organizations and the downtown's diverse constituency. The varying perspectives of team members resulted in more diverse solutions being drawn upon. Teams were composed of representatives from local government, chambers of commerce, Main Street organizations, local business owners, tourism organizations, downtown managers/staff, historical societies, county extension agents, community foundations, health departments, local colleges, financial institutions and issues focused nonprofits.

Quarterly convenings provided a dedicated space and time for downtown stakeholders to come together to share, collaborate and inspire each other. These rotating meetings were hosted in different communities as a way to showcase local efforts



and bring attention to the stakeholder's collective and shared interests. Convenings often included concurrent sessions providing technical assistance on topics like walkability, hosting film productions, historic preservation, data analysis/collection (intercept survey methods), grant writing and more, but also provided dedicated space for local updates and sharing.



REGIONAL CONVENINGS

Convenings included panels composed of local partners, spotlight presentations on local efforts and exercises aimed at illuminating shared regional assets and visions. These networking opportunities facilitated the cross sector pollination of ideas and in many cases led to communities adopting similar programs they heard others share. For example, nearly every community was inspired by Pineville’s local development incentive programs, Harlan’s inventory and reinvestment program for vacant or underutilized buildings and Williamsburg’s inspiring story of the River Fog Park enhancements and subsequent local festival planned in its space.



[Image]
Panel presentation of local business owners at a regional convening in Pineville

REGIONAL CONVENINGS IN BELL COUNTY

On Tuesday, June 19th, Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization partners and stakeholders came together for the spring 2018 convening hosted by CEDIK and the City of Pineville’s Kentucky Main Street program. The day’s events took place inside the Bell Theater on the historic courthouse square in Pineville, Kentucky. The convening provided a space for nearly 50 attendees, representing 12 downtowns, and all eight Promise Zone counties, to come together and share ideas, strategies and information they identified as vital to successful revitalization efforts in the region.

Teams created and presented community change maps, sharing where they thought they were in the process. This practice not only helped frame future actions for each team but reinforced that each community was in a different place, in their own process. Topics discussed included creating a sense of urgency, building the coalition, creating shared visions, engagement, communication, celebration, etc. Following this was a reflective exercise to gauge general readiness for substantial building projects. The afternoon was dominated by a panel discussion about buildings, brownfields, renovation and re-investment. The panel included a local city attorney/developer, a brownfield consultant and two relatively new entrepreneurs who had recently added landlord or building owner to their resumes.

In March of 2019 Bell County hosted their second Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization stakeholder convening, but this time in Middlesboro, Kentucky, at the newly constructed Southeast Community and Technical College Middlesboro Educational Alliance Center. The day began with the release of the much anticipated Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Community Implementation

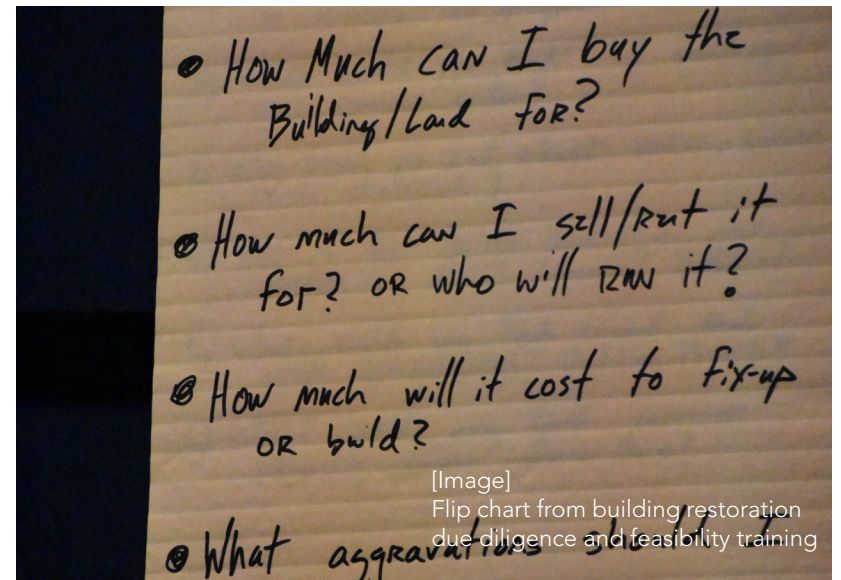
Grant Program RFP, followed by a discussion about the grant details. Alison Davis, CEDIK Executive Director, provided an applied grant writing workshop that covered a review of why proposals often fail, the components of an effective proposal, utilizing logic models to evaluate proposed ideas, crafting a budget and identifying additional funding opportunities. The workshop allowed local stakeholder teams to draft proposal ideas following a logic model as well as explore goals, activities and timelines on a provided template.

Keeping within the tradition of hosting a lunch program, Colby Kirk of ONE Harlan County shared the story of their effort to identify and market available vacant buildings in Harlan County. Colby discussed the partnership with Harlan Tourism and others .to specifically address and map the 15 vacant buildings in the city of Harlan. Colby explained how the clustering of vacancy gives the perception of mass vacancy, when in fact there were simply a few clustered vacant spaces on the same block. Colby shared the letter and short survey that was sent to each building owner (identified using PVA data).

The afternoon featured an interactive, applied engagement train-the-trainer exercise. The process involved four rounds of individual exercises, followed by multiple group rounds where individually proposed ideas for downtown projects were revised and refined, until there were two proposals reflecting the general consensus of the room. The round robin activity infused problem-solving, creativity, innovations, group consensus and a bit of persuasive pitching. The final idea developed by the room featured a regional arts program showcasing the significant creative and arts contributions being made in each downtown, coupled with a training program to support the creation of murals and other vibrant and reflective public art and expression



[Image]
The Manchester Summer Intern Cohort present their midterm findings at the convening in Pineville



[Image]
Flip chart from building restoration due diligence and feasibility training

DOWNTOWN INVESTMENTS

ABOUT

Participating Promise Zone downtown stakeholder teams that utilized available programing like the First Impressions Program, Business Retention and Expansion Program and community design planning were eligible to apply for funding to implement at least one strategy from their downtown revitalization planning efforts. Communities accessed two cycles of grant funding to support implementation.

The first was a mini grant to initiate efforts often illuminated by the First Impressions report. These early mini grants acted as catalytic projects providing pathways for broader community engagement and collaboration. Stakeholder teams accessed larger implementation grants as more programs were deployed, and after a clear vision, were created with the necessary strategies required to move revitalization efforts forward. All applications were reviewed by a regional committee composed of individuals from CEDIK, Kentucky Main Street Program and Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky. The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky executed agreements with each community and provided fiduciary responsibility.



Photo of mural in downtown Middlesboro being installed

PUBLIC – PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The reliance on public funds to support long-term economic development is not a winning strategy and we considered these POWER funds as an effort to re-energize long-term solutions in the region. Part of our overall strategy is to amplify the impacts of public-private partnerships and local foundations. The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, based in Hazard, Kentucky, has been instrumental in providing philanthropic leadership throughout the region. In addition to supporting the creation of a number of affiliated funds, they have continued to build local capacity and facilitate community collaborations and charitable giving.

One recent example of this collaborative capacity, in partnership with the Kentucky Promise Zone coordinator, is the new, regional community fund called the Upper Cumberland Community Foundation (UCCF). UCCF aims to transform eastern Kentucky through charitable giving, community involvement and strategic partnerships by investing in community assets throughout Kentucky's Upper Cumberland counties of Bell, Clay, Knox and Whitley. Local philanthropic organizations like the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky and its affiliated funds like the UCCF will continue to play an important role fostering local collaborations to address place-based community and economic development challenges.

MINI GRANTS - MIDDLESBORO

Middlesboro Main Street program, in partnership with Bell County Tourism, received funds to purchase and install new community message boards in high traffic areas downtown. This effort provided a centralized physical location to share information about upcoming events and sites of interest for residents and visitors.

OUTCOMES

Citizens and visitors are more knowledgeable about downtown opportunities.

- A series of community message boards were installed in downtown Middlesboro have been a great resource for community members and tourists. The largest, a three panel board, is located adjacent to the sidewalk outside the Levitt Stage at Fountain Square. This site receives the highest amount of foot traffic, especially, when events take place downtown. A single panel message board is located at the entrance of the city parking lot adjacent to the Canal Walk as you enter downtown from the lot. This site is also a high traffic area during events like the Fall Festival, Levitt Amp Concert Series, Wing Fling, etc. The boards are updated with new maps, brochures and event fliers.
- In a recent intercept survey, 60% of respondents noted they had noticed the message boards and stopped to survey their content. Several businesses have noted it is not uncommon to see individuals or groups in front of the message boards several times a day.
- An extensive annual event calendar showcasing Bell County Tourism, Middlesboro Main Street, The Bell County Chamber of Commerce and Main Street Pineville activities was developed to help coordinate scheduling amongst multiple partners, in addition to fostering collective promotion of Bell County events.

IMPLEMENTATION GRANT - PINEVILLE AND MIDDLESBORO

Middlesboro Main Street, Bell County Tourism, the cities of Pineville and Middlesboro and Main Street Pineville collaborated and prioritized creative placemaking in downtown Middlesboro and Pineville. Collectively, they completed several key aesthetic improvements in their downtowns, including new signage and banners on Hwy 25E directing folks downtown, the installation of two murals developed using public engagement and new signage directing visitors to parking areas and other points of interest.

OUTCOMES

New High Impact Murals

- Two new large murals were designed utilizing public feedback gathered at a series of workshops hosted by local partners in both Middlesboro and Pineville. Members of Middlesboro's City Council, Historical Preservation Commission and Middlesboro Main Street's design committee identified five unique images that showcase the history and culture of Middlesboro and worked with artists, Greetings Tour, to design a vintage postcard themed mural for downtown. In Pineville, local partners met at the Bell Theater to plan a community designed, paint-by-numbers, mural to engage the public in the installation process.

Downtown Wayfinding Signs and Entryway Banners

- New signage was developed to showcase and acknowledge the historic nature of Bell County's downtowns. These signs were designed to inform travelers about the presence of each historic downtown as well as provide insights on the attractions or opportunities offered in each. This process sparked conversations about signage continuity, and as a result, partners

are now discussing future efforts to extend the same "theme" throughout downtown.

Increased Community Engagement in Downtown Revitalization

- The engagement processes utilized to develop and plan the installation of two downtown murals created public excitement and energized overall interests in downtown revitalization. Both communities hosted multiple opportunities for engagement and the response from the public was overwhelmingly supportive. New ideas have been sparked and new partners have joined downtown revitalization efforts. For example, several additional murals are being developed and new and existing businesses and building owners are stepping forward with interests in having murals painted on their buildings.



PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

ABOUT

Over the course of the project (2017-20) local stakeholders, partners, technical assistance providers and communities at large have engaged in and with their downtowns in new ways. We have learned from each other, built collaborative partnerships, explored other downtowns, successfully developed and implemented projects, ignited new ideas, developed new skills, built the skills of others and endured a global pandemic together. However, these accomplishments only represent a launch point for more sustained downtown revitalization efforts in the future. The collective lessons learned, established practices and challenges illuminated can provide the foundation for future downtown revitalization efforts.



Classic
mountain scene
in south eastern
Kentucky

LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND CAPACITY

Downtown revitalization takes more than a single person's best intentions and requires a collective effort working towards mutual goals. The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has shown that local leadership, shared ownership, and broad capacity create positive results but requires a deep commitment and understanding between downtown stakeholders, and about community assets, challenges, and visions for the future.

Understandably, every community is different in regards to skills, abilities, interests, assets and existing investments in downtown revitalization. With so much occupying the development landscape it is understandable why this may be the case. As such, the timeline and delivery of technical assistance programs was not linear or prescriptive but rather delivered as requested, allowing community stakeholders to commit to only what they felt was feasible and impactful. For example, not every community committed to the Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Program because it required a substantial time commitment. As a result, communities may have missed out on the relationship building with local business owners noted as an unexpected outcome by communities that participated in the BRE program. Local capacity is foundational to future efforts.

Communities with dedicated, paid staff, responsible for downtown revitalization efforts (however narrow or broadly defined) often demonstrated greater overall capacity. A critical piece for many downtown teams in the Promise Zone was a paid staff member to drive, coordinate and provide leadership for the community's downtown revitalization process. Practices often associated with paid downtown coordinators that provide capacity to development efforts were observed:

- Project coordination and acting as liaison between multiple parties.
- Data collection to measure and document project impacts.
- Promotion of downtown activities, opportunities, programs and events.
- Often tasked with grant writing and administration.
- If affiliated with the Kentucky Main Street, the main street manager has programmatic commitment to support enhanced urban design & placemaking efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Work to create or develop a dedicated funding source for a paid staff member devoted to supporting coordination and providing local leadership and continuity to downtown revitalization efforts.
2. Continue to seek out opportunities to build the skills, abilities and leadership capacity of elected officials, community volunteers, business owners and downtown stakeholders to address current and future challenges.



LOCAL FOUNDATIONS AND PHILANTHROPIC CAPACITY

At the onset of the pandemic, some of the first organizational responses emerged from local nonprofits and philanthropic organizations. In the Kentucky Promise Zone, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky took a leadership role, in partnership with the Appalachian Impact Fund, CEDIK and Invest 606 to create the Eastern Kentucky Downtown Business Stimulus Fund. This fund leveraged existing assets, relationships and donations to respond directly to local businesses. Communities with existing foundations also created their own hyper-local responses to support businesses, often taking the shape of a stimulus fund or mini grant program.

The Eastern Kentucky Downtown Business Stimulus Fund provided 153 grants, ranging from \$600 to \$3000. In total, \$385,400 went to business owners (60% female) in 23 counties representing a mix of restaurants, unique retail, attractions, personal services and other businesses active in the broader downtown and tourism ecosystem. The fund received over 550 applications requesting more than \$1.5 million dollars.

Communities with existing local philanthropic leadership, capacity and available assets accessed financial support more quickly than communities without existing relationships with philanthropic organizations. Communities without this specialized capacity were relegated to navigate the often confusing assortment of federal assistance programs and loan products available for COVID-19 relief.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Continue developing local (or regional) philanthropic programs or organizations to build local knowledge, leadership, capacity and interests to serve needs with local giving and investment.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

The arc of this project has shown that our ability to come together and work towards revitalizing our downtowns is often built upon relationships – both existing and those we build. The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has helped build and establish new relationships within downtowns, counties and among the region. At the heart of the project was an intentional effort to create a regional network of stakeholders using a series of facilitated convenings to learn together, collaborate on efforts, share ideas and support each other's efforts. Even public policies were shared among the network inspiring their implementation in other communities. For example, communities have learned about and later adopted downtown business development incentive programs and nuisance code enforcement updates to address underutilized, vacant, abandoned or dangerous properties as well as litter. The relationships and information shared has inspired and supported a number of innovative regional downtown revitalization strategies.

At quarterly convenings, attendees cultivated space for skills building (team and personal). Stakeholders shared, more often than not, that the networking opportunities and relationship building components that took place during the convenings were most impactful. In focus group conversations with downtown stakeholders, many noted the convenings as among the most impactful elements outside of the First Impressions Program and community design projects.

These networking opportunities facilitated pollination of ideas and in many cases led communities to adapting similar programs or policies they heard shared by others. Stakeholders shared they now feel more comfortable speaking in public as a result of presenting to the regional network and providing updates and that they felt

valued being asked to share insights with other communities. Some shared they were empowered to learn there were mutual challenges faced in other communities ultimately helping them solve issues together, while others shared a new commitment to regionalism and collaboration within their own counties and in the region at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to embrace regional efforts, collaborations and shared ownership (within counties and the region) focusing on mutual interests, assets and capacity to address shared challenges.
2. Seek out opportunities to join regional networks, collaborations or initiatives that provide relationship building opportunities with other stakeholders seeking solutions to shared challenges.

COVID-19

The most dramatic and impactful issue encountered during this project revolves around the unprecedented COVID-19 global health pandemic. The challenges have been substantial, however what we have learned about ourselves and our communities has also been substantial. We have been forced to confront our values and reevaluate priorities. As we consider what is next after the pandemic it is important to reflect on the impacts and observations from this time. For some these impacts may have been mere inconveniences and for others life altering. It has meant working virtually from home, not working at all, travel and crowd restrictions, canceled events and community engagement opportunities, supply chain disruptions, economic uncertainty, job insecurity, increased commitments at home with youth or elders, virtual learning, shifting shopping patterns and dealing with the reality of death and losses in our families and communities. The last year has been incredibly taxing on individuals, families, communities and society.

BROADBAND

While physical distancing and other public health practices have been encouraged we have not lost the need to stay connected. This has largely meant outreach, engagement, organizing and simply maintaining interpersonal relationships has shifted to virtual platforms. Not only have we seen the ways we connect change in real time but we are collectively shaping how we use technology moving forward. While virtual spaces are limited by internet connectivity it is important to note that virtual spaces have been more accessible to some. For example, individuals who traditionally work during meetings have been able to join remotely, and for others it has meant not choosing between childcare and attending a meeting. However challenges still persist in terms of access to broadband internet. It is important to note that mobile phone ownership has increased connectivity options. In May of 2019, the Pew Research Center reported that 44 percent of adults in households with incomes below \$30,000 do not have broadband but 71% own smart phones.

Addressing broadband access, while important to the work of this project, was not a central focus. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed the issue to the forefront, and this section would be incomplete without providing recommendations focusing on broadband access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to close the digital divide by prioritizing the reduction of barriers to broadband access and costs associated with realizing the 'last mile.'
2. Continue to develop mobile friendly alternatives to desktop web interfaces and the infrastructure supporting its networks.
3. Continue to hold internet service providers accountable for

services (including upload and download speeds) they have committed to when contracted to provide broadband products.

OUTDOOR SPACES AND THE PUBLIC REALM

COVID-19 has left no place unaffected. Its impacts have reached every rural, urban and suburban community whether they have the infrastructure or capacity to deal with these new challenges or not. The connectivity between people and places has perhaps never mattered more or at least been more obvious. The connections between the physical, social, civic and financial capacity of yesterday is the foundation for our resilience and recovery today.

During lockdown phases and subsequent periods of increased public restrictions and precautions, including social distancing, or limited indoor capacity, the ability to go outside and get some fresh air never felt so important. Parks and outdoor spaces have always been known to offer benefits related to physical and mental health, community relationship building and habitat protection. In seeking refuge from the pandemic, outdoor spaces have been elevated from mere amenities to critical infrastructure needed for escape and recharging.

It has been well documented throughout the pandemic that more people sought out outdoor spaces. Many parks, green spaces, and trail systems have experienced increases in local use. At times, high visitation strained the capacity of local parks and resulted in modified restrictions on the numbers of users at a time, the activities available and in some cases temporary closures. These moments of access inspired many people to explore their neighborhood for outdoor recreation. Many communities throughout the region noted that as car traffic decreased, pedestrian traffic increased. This was most

notable in downtowns and adjacent neighborhoods. When given the opportunity to invest philanthropic funds targeted at supporting COVID related economic recovery as part of the Healthy Downtowns Initiative, two thirds of the participating Promise Zone communities prioritized investments in the public realm and public spaces. The stakeholders responsible for a community garden and outdoor classroom (planned pre-pandemic) noted that it had a larger impact now than they originally anticipated. They attributed their observation to more residents simply needing a place to go because they have been in their homes more than ever. Each example highlights a real investment in increasing access to outdoor spaces by promoting both public health and economic development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prioritize investments in pedestrian infrastructure that promote increasing accessibility, connectivity and improved access to sidewalks, walking, hiking and biking trails and nearby water resources.
2. Determine the impact of decreased car traffic on downtown streets and businesses and consider the conversion and redesign of currently underutilized parking, alleys or even roads as outdoor seating and dining to support local businesses.
3. Consider prioritizing future investments in accessible pedestrian infrastructure, maintaining aging infrastructure and designing new public spaces that serve the needs of people above cars.
4. Prioritize flexible or multi-use outdoor learning environments and experiences that provide access to COVID safe, family-friendly extracurricular activities, bridging the need for respite from virtual learning and opportunities to enjoy and receive the benefits of being outdoors.

LOCAL MATTERS

It has never been so evident that communities are passionate about their local businesses. As economic uncertainty loomed over every community, one of the most resounding responses were collective actions/programs to support local business enterprises. Never before has the idea of supporting local, generating local tax dollars and keeping businesses open been so prioritized and championed. We have seen the creation of take-out bingo cards, gift card incentive programs, initiatives to feed front line health workers by local businesses, transitioning outdoor spaces to serve the needs of local restaurants with no longer accessible indoor spaces.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to develop programs that promote, bring attention to, and ultimately contribute to the success of local businesses and enterprises.
2. Consider developing a local first campaign, building off of the collective support shown during the pandemic and the collective sacrifices made by many front line retail workers.

WHAT'S NEXT?

DOWNTOWN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has documented that revitalization efforts are multifaceted and complicated at times because of all the moving parts. It makes sense, given the development histories and existing infrastructure in the region's downtowns, that reimagining their uses can come with challenges. Sustained revitalization will require moving beyond the successes of this project (visioning, planning, skill relationship building, assessments, design solutions, prioritization and implementing

projects) to thinking about how our collective efforts will contribute to a broader investment landscape and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

A September 2020 study by the National Main Street organization, in partnership with the Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking, investigated the impacts that being located in a downtown core had on an establishment's ability to mitigate negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in both urban and rural downtowns. In nearly every example, small businesses in older, established commercial corridors, downtowns and Main Streets proved more likely to leverage their physical location (in proximity to other businesses, resources and amenities that) in ways that mitigated COVID-19 impacts more than businesses in other locations. The affirmation that businesses located in downtowns have generally been more resilient during the pandemic speaks directly to the built environment underpinning a community's resilience more broadly.

Perhaps the most significant and insurmountable challenge faced in the built environment during the Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project were the physical constraints and limitations presented by the realities of downtown buildings. Nearly every community has at least one building, however large or small, that presents a real challenge with tangible and varying obstacles. While downtown buildings are iconic they are also difficult to restore and maintain once they have fallen into disrepair. The reality is many Kentucky Promise Zone downtowns are burdened with underutilized or abandoned structures, and transitioning these spaces will require outside private capital investments beyond what is traditionally available in grant supported efforts. The next iteration of CEDIK's downtown revitalization to address just this question is the recently funded ARC POWER grant to launch The ReVitalize, ReInvest, ReDevelop Appalachia (R3) Initiative.

THE REVITALIZE, REINVEST, REDEVELOP APPALACHIA (R3) INITIATIVE

R3 is a strategic partnership between the Appalachian Impact Fund at the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky and the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) at the University of Kentucky to revitalize southeastern Kentucky's downtowns, support entrepreneurial ecosystems and promising sectors and begin readying our communities for new investment. By creating comprehensive downtown revitalization plans oriented towards supporting entrepreneurs in the downtown ecosystem, building the capacity of local leaders and attracting new private investments, the R3 initiative will help infuse much needed outside capital into our downtowns.

The R3 Initiative takes a four-step approach to readying communities for investment and building markets for multiple forms of capital absorption. These steps include: city-wide planning that engages a diverse set of stakeholders, identification of tangible catalytic projects, deployment of early-stage impact investment capital to amplify the competitiveness for outside capital investment, followed by deployment of later-stage traditional capital to complete projects. In order to concentrate investments into the hardest-to-serve communities there is an underlying need to supplement the existing investment ecosystem that R3 aims to address.

CEDIK is fulfilling a vital need at the front-end of this progression to build local capacity that enables inclusive and comprehensive planning, helping communities determine the necessary and impactful revitalization projects in their own downtowns. The R3 Initiative will help build the Appalachian Impact Fund's existing social impact investment fund with investment capital targeted for

the implementation of catalytic downtown revitalization projects. These investments will be used for downtown revitalization projects that present entrepreneurial opportunities that can: improve infrastructure and the built environment, start and grow small businesses, retain and attract families, draw in visitors for extended stays across the region and attract additional private investment.

[Image Top]
View at Pine Mountain
Settlement School

[Image Bottom]
Kentucky historic
marker



INDICATORS OF DOWNTOWN SUCCESS

A number of broad indicators were introduced using the 2014 University of Illinois Extension 'Downtown Success Indicators' publication to provide insights on how to begin measuring revitalization progress. CEDIK references these indicators in its own work to gain perspective and evaluate the relative successes of investments to downtowns. While broad, all the following indicators focus on a need to get people downtown for unique experiences not easily replicated in suburban development. The following represents a summary of indicators to consider in tracking downtown revitalization investments and metrics.

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and University of Illinois Extension. "Downtown Success Indicators: A Review of Literature." August 2014. <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/resilientdowntowns/files/2016/06/59491.pdf>



Clear Creek in
Bell County

DOWNTOWN RETAIL

Downtown Retail has long been understood as an indicator of downtown health and vibrancy. Retail activity attracts a daytime population, contributes to the local tax base and increases to sidewalk activity.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of all retail businesses located downtown
- Increase in retail businesses downtown over a time period
- Occupancy rate and longevity of businesses
- Daytime population
- Business mix

DOWNTOWN HOUSING

Downtown Housing and residents provide a 24 hour customer base for downtown businesses and associated amenities. Downtowns provide unique housing opportunities for a number of target populations.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of city's population residing downtown
- Increase in downtown housing units over a time period
- Surrounding market rate of residential neighborhoods
- Regulatory framework supporting downtown housing

ORGANIZATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Organizations and Partnerships are critical to the implementation of downtown revitalization efforts. They play active leadership roles while bringing a variety of stakeholders together to develop the community's long term vision.

Suggested Measures:

- Active partnerships and coalitions
- Downtown development authority (or organizational support)
- Downtown centric plan
- Community involvement/engagement (affection from citizenry)

DOWNTOWN TRAFFIC GENERATORS

Downtown Traffic Generators come in a variety of forms but ultimately aim to attract people downtown. These assets, when leveraged, provide a competitive advantage. Traffic generators can be both man-made, like a university, or natural, like a waterfront.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of the city's civic and cultural uses located downtown
- Access to natural amenities (or waterfront development or parks)
- Arts and entertainment amenities
- Educational establishments
- Civic or judicial buildings

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Preservation and Rehabilitation of structures neglected by the retail exodus to the periphery protect the identity of unique places not replicable in the suburbs. Historic preservation helps define the character of place and encourages investment in neglected and underutilized buildings.

Suggested Measures:

- Proportion of city's registered historic structures located downtown
- Number of hotel/motel rooms per 1,000 central city residents
- Rehabilitation and Historic preservation initiatives
- Heritage tourism programs and sites

IMMIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

Immigration and Diversity are relatively new indicators of downtown success. Looking at diversity provides insights into a community's openness to a diverse population that includes non-traditional families, LGBTQIA+ and immigrants of varying faiths and ethnicities.

Suggested Measures:

- Percentage of foreign born population in the city
- Percentage of non-white population in the city
- Civic leaders' attitude toward diverse populations

MIXED USES

Multi-functionality refers to the historic roles downtown have played over time as destinations for shopping, services, employment, housing and culture. Successful downtowns offer a variety of interwoven opportunities that serve to attract people at various times of the day.

Suggested Measures:

- Variety of land uses downtown
- Mixed use development featuring housing, office use or conference/meeting space

DESIGN AND PLANNING

Downtown Design can improve the quality of life of residents and functionality of the built environment. Successful downtowns have clear boundaries and entrances - you should know when you have arrived. The sense of place is a cumulative expression of a multitude of downtown design elements.

Suggested Measures:

- Clear boundary and entrances
- Design guidelines
- Bike/pedestrian friendliness
- Public spaces
- Streetscape and facade improvement programs
- Accessibility and connectivity

BRANDING AND MARKETING

Branding and Promotion are marketing strategies deployed to reach larger audiences and disseminate information about downtown programs, opportunities and vision. Successful downtowns use marketing strategies to let residents and tourists know about the unique experiences their downtowns offer.

Suggested Measures:

- Special events
- Marketing initiatives

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Downtown Finance, employment and demographic data provide insights on long term changes.

Suggested Measures:

- Change in assessed value of property
- Change in real property investment
- Change in downtown employment by sector
- Percentage increase in rental value
- Income of downtown residents
- Crime known to police per 1000 residents
- Downtown labor force

COUNTY DATA PROFILES

CEDIK's research team has created and maintains updated data profiles for stakeholders to use, relevant to the community. These data profiles provide insights on a number of valuable metrics and can support various decision making processes. To access the most recent data profiles for your community please visit <https://cedik.ca.uky.edu/CountyDataProfiles>

After selecting the appropriate profile type simply click on your county name using the dropdown menu. These data profiles are compiled from data gathered from federal, state and local databases and are updated as new information becomes available.

County Budget Profile

- Population Estimates
- Total Tax Revenues
- Change in Population
- Change in Revenues
- Change in Spending
- County Revenue Sources
- Weather Related Disaster Indicators

Economic Profile

- Employment (top industries and location quotient)
- Labor Force
- Commute Times
- Median Household Income
- Poverty %
- Unemployment Rate
- Personal Income

Housing Profile

- Total Housing Units
- Owner Occupied Units
- Renter Occupied Units
- Homeowner Vacancy
- Renter Vacancy
- Housing Stock Age
- Housing Characteristics (mortgage rent, taxes, cost burden, etc.)
- Commuting Patterns

Retail Profile

- Retail Employment and Pull Factors
- Percent Change in Retail Employment and Sales
- Retail Earnings and Employee Age

Small Business Profile

- Total Jobs (Gains and Losses)
- Sales per Business & Employee
- Top Employment Industries
- Small Business Types
- Self-Employment

Workforce Profile

- Workforce by Education and Gender
- Commuting Patterns
- Employment by Occupation
- Earnings

