Rapid Recovery Plan

2021

Town of Leicester

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Massachusetts
RAPID RECOVERY PLANS

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RAPID RECOVERY PLANS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF
HOUSING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Local Rapid Recovery Planning (RRP) program is a key part of the Baker-Polito Administration's Partnerships for Recovery Plan, the strategy established to help communities stabilize and grow the Massachusetts economy as a result of the economic impacts brought on by COVID-19. The plan invests $774 million in efforts to get people back to work, support small businesses, foster innovation, revitalize downtowns, and keep people in stable housing.

In addition to the planning program, recovery efforts include a Small Business Relief Program administered by the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation. This program, which concluded in May 2021, provided more than $687.2 million to over 15,000 businesses across the Commonwealth, with a focus on businesses located in Gateway Cities, among demographic priorities, or operating in sectors most impacted by the pandemic. Cities, towns, and non-profit entities are using Regional Pilot Project Grant Program funding for recovery solutions that seek to activate vacant storefronts, support regional supply chain resiliency, and create small business support networks. To promote recovery in the tourism industry and support the ongoing My Local MA marketing initiative encouraging residents to support their local economies by shopping, dining and staying local, another $1.6 million in grants were awarded through the new Travel and Tourism Recovery Grant Pilot Program. Through April 2021, MassDOT's Shared Streets and Spaces Grant Program has invested $26.4 million in municipal Shared Streets projects to support public health, safe mobility, and renewed commerce.

In support of the overall recovery strategy, the Administration made $9.5 million in awards for 125 communities to create Local Rapid Recovery Plans, through the MA Downtown Initiative Program. These plans address the impacts of COVID-19 on local downtowns and small businesses by partnering with Plan Facilitators and Subject Matter Experts to pursue locally-driven, actionable strategies.

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Acknowledgements

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Jeannie Hebert

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Sarah Miller and the members of the Economic Development Committee

Leicester Historical Commission

Joe Lennerton and Jason Grimshaw

Leicester Office of Development and Inspector Services/Town Planner

Michelle Buck

Leicester Select Board

John Shocik

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125 communities participated in the Rapid Recovery Plan Program

52 Small Communities
51 Medium Communities
16 Large Communities
6 Extra Large Communities

Mass Downtown Initiative distributed nearly $10 million across 125 communities throughout the Commonwealth to assess impacts from COVID-19 and develop actionable, project-based recovery plans tailored to the unique economic challenges in downtowns, town centers, and commercial districts.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Rapid Recovery Planning Program

● Program Communities
○ Non-Participating Towns and Cities
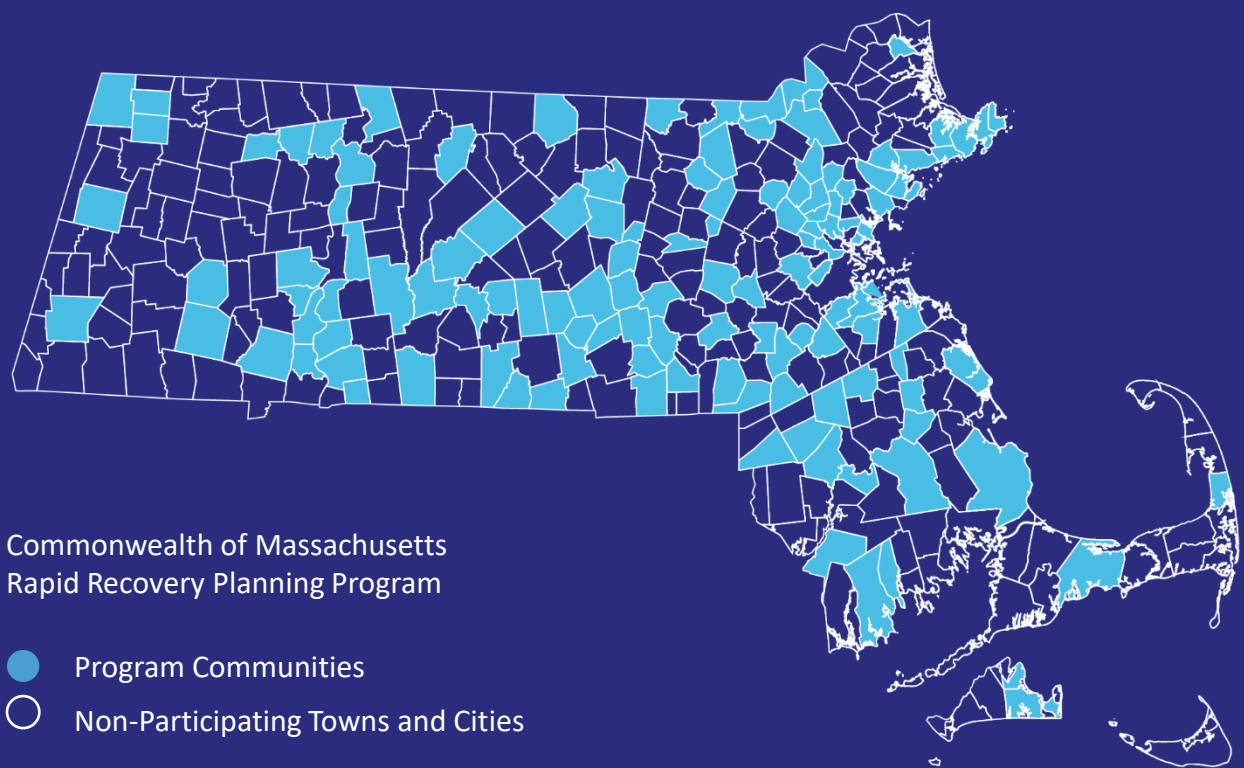
Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) Program

The Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) Program is intended to provide every municipality in Massachusetts the opportunity to develop actionable, project-based recovery plans tailored to the unique economic challenges and COVID-19 related impacts to downtowns, town centers, and commercial areas across the commonwealth.

The program provided technical assistance through Plan Facilitators assigned to each community applicant (e.g., city, town, or nonprofit entity) and Subject Matter Experts who supported the development of ideas for project recommendations and shared knowledge through best practice webinars and individual consultations.

Communities and Plan Facilitators were partnered through the program to assess COVID-19 impacts, convene community partners to solicit project ideas and provide feedback, and develop project recommendations. The following plan summarizes key findings from the diagnostic phase of the program and includes a range of priority project recommendations for the community.

Each Rapid Recovery Plan was developed across three phases between February-August 2021. Phase 1 - Diagnostic, Phase 2- Project Recommendations, Phase 3 - Plan.
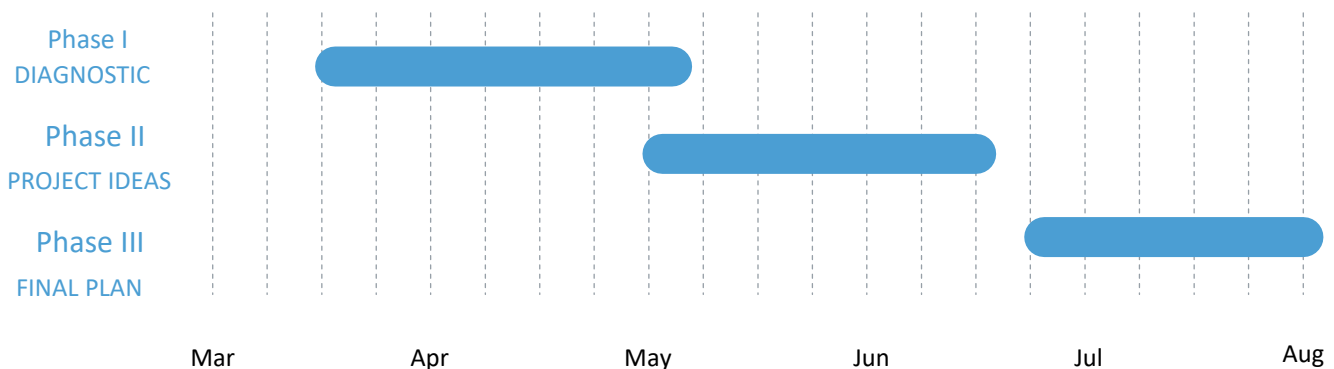
In Phase 1: Diagnostic, Plan Facilitators utilized the Rapid Recovery Plan Diagnostic Framework that was adapted from the award-winning Commercial DNA approach as published by the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) in "Preparing a Commercial District Diagnostic", and authored by Larisa Ortiz, Managing Director, Streetsense (RRP Program Advisor).

The framework was designed to ensure methodical diagnosis of challenges and opportunities in each community, and to identify strategies and projects that aligned with the interests and priorities of each community. The framework looks at four areas of analysis: Physical Environment, Business Environment, Market Information, and Administrative Capacity - each equipped with guiding questions to direct research conducted by Plan Facilitators.

Rapid Recovery Plan Diagnostic Framework

CUSTOMER BASE

Who are the customers of businesses in the Study Area?

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

How conducive is the physical environment to meeting the needs and expectations of both businesses and customers?

BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

What are the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses in the Study Area? How well does the business mix meet the needs of various customer groups?

ADMIN CAPACITY
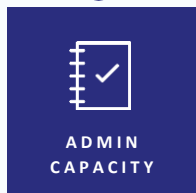
Who are the key stewards of the Study Area? Are they adequately staffed and resourced to support implementation of projects? Are the regulatory, zoning, and permitting processes an impediment to business activity?

Following the diagnostic in Phase 1, Plan Facilitators, in close coordination with communities, developed and refined a set of recommendations that address priority challenges and opportunities. These project recommendations are organized in clear and concise rubrics created specially for the Rapid Recovery Plan Program. Project recommendations are rooted in a set of essential and comprehensive improvements across six categories: Public Realm, Private Realm, Revenue and Sales, Administrative Capacity, Tenant Mix, Cultural/Arts & Others.

| Public Realm | Private Realm | Tenant Mix | Revenue/Sales | Admin Capacity | Cultural/Arts | Other |

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

## An Active Community with Historic Charm

The Town of Leicester is a medium-sized community located in Worcester County, Massachusetts. Leicester was incorporated in 1713 and maintains the historic charm of a small New England community. The community celebrates the Town's history; key to this is their role in the Revolutionary War and Civil War. A militia company consisting of minutemen--the very term coined in Leicester--marched to Lexington and Concord to help defeat the British. Leicester's impact in the Revolutionary War transitioned to an impact on the Massachusetts economy. Beginning as a rural, agricultural town, it then began to grow as an industrial hub consisting of grist, fulling, and sawmills. Industrialization expanded in town and larger scale mills produced hand cards and textile tools. Industry in town began to fade and became a memory underscored by the remnants of the mills and pride of a storied history.

It is home to multiple historical sites, including the various farms, mills, and taverns, the Congregation Church, the Leicester Unitarian Church, and Town Commons. Its history rooted in agriculture and industry serves as a backdrop to the current economy. Route 9 weaves through Town Center, connecting the region to Worcester. The Town serves the broad interest of its residents and the region through an economic foundation built on its people, quality of life, and commitment to a prospering community. COVID-19 challenged this foundation. Shifts in business commuting, layoffs, and the resulting reduction in customer traffic undermined the business outlook and remain as challenges for the post-pandemic recovery.

Town Gazebo. Source: Town of Leicester

Leicester Study Area
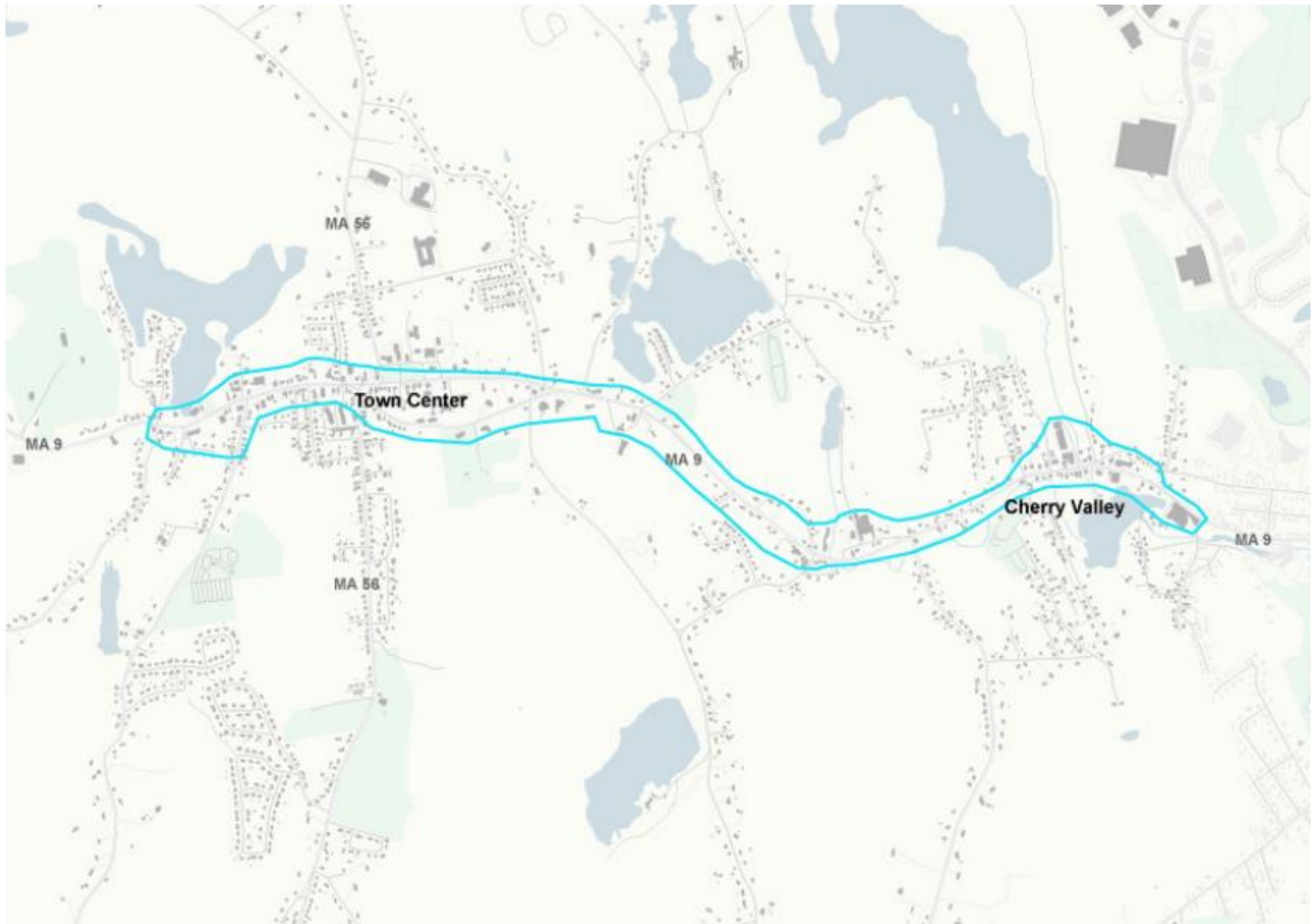
Leicester Study Area. Source: ESRI Shapefiles, U.S. Census Bureau

The Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) focused on a Study Area within the community. The Study Area consists of the portions of Route 9, yet largely defined by Town Center and Cherry Valley commercial nodes. The major thoroughfare in the Study Area is Route 9 that serves both local and regional traffic and contains the majority of businesses. Just off Route 9, local streets host many of Leicester's administrative, residential, natural, historical, and architectural highlights, including Town Commons and Smiths Pond. The Study Area includes a range of land uses, such as the Town Center and Cherry Valley business nodes, an Architectural District, and residential zoning on the periphery. Approximately 605 people reside in the Study Area, representing only 5.35% of Leicester's total population.[1]

The Study Area's location creates several competitive advantages, as it is intersected by major transportation routes. State Route 9 bisects the Study Area providing commuters access through Town Center. The Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) connects Leicester to Worcester in 40 minutes. Once in Worcester, the Framingham/Worcester line connects to Boston every hour. The array of transit options underscore the viability of Leicester as a regional economic hub. Yet, alternative modes of transport for local trips are generally lacking in the Study Area.

Economic development interventions will require respect for the local context; through reinforcing the strengths of the Town Center, Town Commons, and Cherry Valley, and by addressing the opportunities for improvement, project recommendations for economic recovery will inspire long-term growth. An inclusive approach is required to achieve this goal. By leveraging the skills, knowledge, and commitment of an already active local constituency, economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 will involve all communities represented in Leicester.

Pandemic in a Small Town

Since March 2020, Leicester has recorded a total of 1,342 cases, representing 11.7% of the population. The case rate for Leicester is lower than that of Worcester County (10.6%) or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (11.8%). Most of the cases recorded in Town have been recorded for individuals between the ages of 20 and 49.[2]

During the pandemic's onset, Leicester Public Schools, government offices, and businesses closed. Much of the local workforce lost employment or worked from home, decreasing time frequenting businesses. In addition, closed schools and childcare facilities created burdens on parents and guardians that limited their ability to work. The number of individuals on unemployment insurance benefits increased. According to the local business survey, businesses were impacted by reduced operating hours and a decline in revenue and customer traffic.

In preparing for economic recovery due to the impacts of COVID-19, the Town will need to consider the varying impacts COVID-19 has had on businesses and the community, existing capacities that can be leveraged to support recovery, and a strategic approach to economic development in Leicester.

Economic Recovery Depends on Addressing Infrastructure and Access, Streamlining Regulations, and Building Community

The diagnostic phase of the RRP program identified core drivers of community impact and accompanying areas of opportunity for economic recovery. These themes were identified through an analysis of Town reports and documents, 12 key informant interviews, over 20 baseline data points, 15 site visit data points, and 20 responses to the statewide business survey. The Town's economic recovery is rooted in four themes to support existing businesses and attract new ones. The Project Recommendation section will address these themes as an opportunity for growth and use them to drive economic recovery, as outlined in the figure below. More details regarding this research and analysis phase can be found in the Diagnostic section and the Appendix.
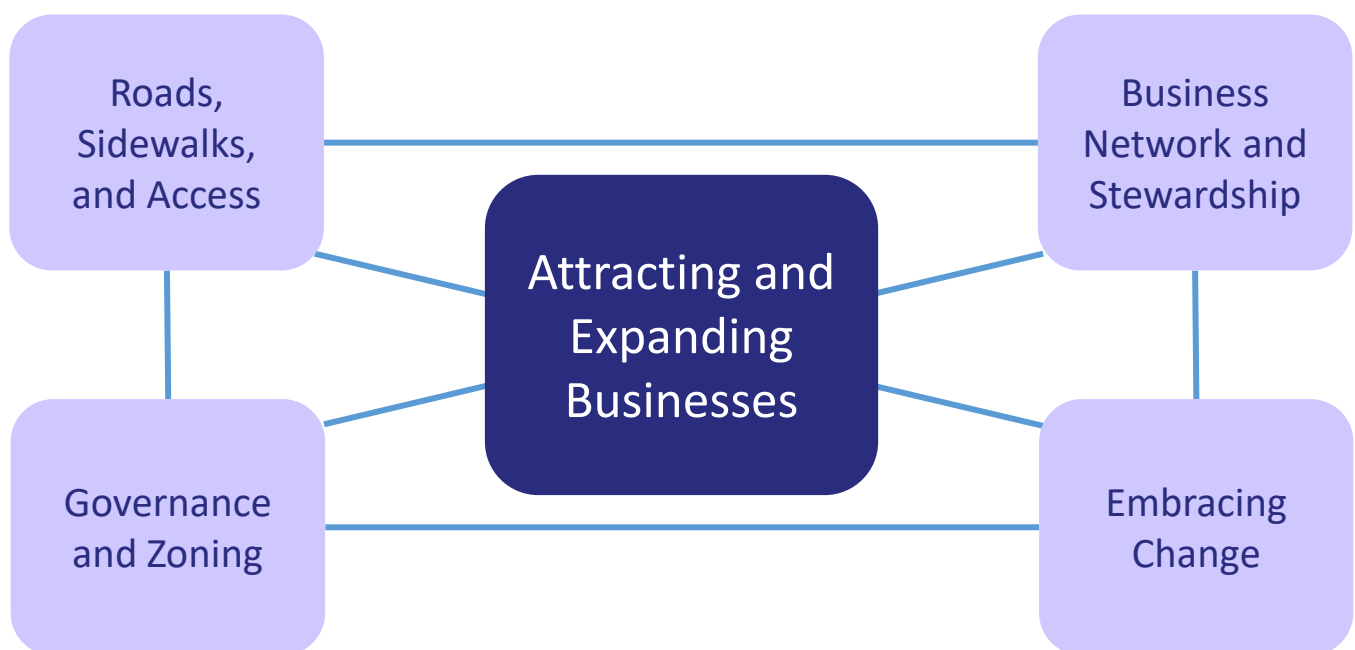
Key Components of Successful Economic Recovery in Leicester

Diagnostic

Key Findings

Deep-Rooted Community with Regional Attractions

CUSTOMER BASE

The success of Leicester's businesses is dependent on the local customer base. The Town attracts a diverse set of customers, locally and regionally, that interact with the businesses and local amenities. The Town is a family-oriented, bedroom community. The age demographics signify an older population with a high proportion of school-aged children, which is reinforced by the statistics that more than a third of households are occupied by families. In addition to the family character, the community displays deep roots and a sense of pride, given high levels of residents who have lived in Leicester for an extended period of time. However, the community also attracts residents from the region. The labor force in Leicester is primarily composed of individuals who commute to work outside of the Town's limits through Route 9 and similar throughways. Leicester aims to attract and capture regional commuters by showcasing the amenities offered further off the State highway.

Local Amenities Beyond Route 9

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The historic and charming Town Commons located in Leicester is a treasure for the community. The proximity to historically, architecturally, and culturally significant structures, provide a comfortable and inviting pedestrian environment. Yet, these amenities are hidden from the high-speed and heavily-trafficked State highway. Route 9 is critical for the economic success of the community, but as a physical asset, it inhibits pedestrian accessibility. Balancing the benefits of Route 9 with the opportunities of walkable vibrant streets and commercial nodes is a priority for the economic success in the Study Area.

Commercial Nodes with a Mix of Offerings

BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Leicester's economy is diverse and growing. Town Center offers a range of retail, neighborhood convenience, professional services, food services, and other low-intensity business activities that support the local and regional market. Cherry Valley accommodates higher-intensity uses and office spaces. The entrepreneurial spirit of the community is also apparent given the extent of at-home businesses. Leicester's economic success is incumbent on continuing to draw in new businesses that serve residents and commuters using Route 9.

Local Commitment, Regional Support

ADMIN CAPACITY

The Town of Leicester has multiple departments and boards dedicated to supporting economic recovery and personnel who can support funding grant applications. This effort is led by the Economic Development Committee consisting of Town staff and community members committed to seeing the Town prosper. Locally, community organizations support the quality of life in Town by creating networks to support the youth, financially disadvantaged, elderly, and the business community. Additionally, the Town's economy is supported by various regional partners and community organizations, including two chambers of commerce and a regional planning commission. These entities will be key supporters in the implementation and maintenance of the RRP projects.

Highlights from the Physical Environment

PRIVATE REALM

Leicester's Town Center is the focal point for the business environment. In addition to the variety of business offerings, economic growth is dependent on building and storefront quality. The RRP site visit scorecard included an assessment of the Study Area's storefronts. Storefronts' windows, outdoor displays, facades, and signage were inspected, as high-quality storefronts attract and retain a customer base.

In Leicester, the quality of storefronts varies. Many storefronts have clear windows, vibrant signage, and attractive facades that communicate the businesses' commercial offerings and attract customers. Other storefronts have crowded windows, minimal signage, and deteriorated exteriors that do not adequately reflect the quality offerings provided by the businesses inside. The main challenge with storefronts in the Town Center and Cherry Valley is that they are positioned along Route 9. Therefore, the majority of customers passing the establishment will be driving. Businesses have positioned their storefronts to attract and accommodate vehicular traffic. Buildings are set back from Route 9 and have front parking. In this context, clear storefronts and attractive signage are secondary to pole signs, electronic message signs, and illuminated signs. Businesses in the Study Area have an assortment of signs that line Route 9. While these storefront types cater to cars, they can overlook the comfort of pedestrians and the opportunity a cohesive shopping experience provides.

Once in the heart of Town Center, where Route 9 traffic is regulated by a stoplight and crosswalks, the private realm gradually opens up to pedestrians. These businesses still need parking lots to attract the high traffic volume passing by, yet because the Town Center is close to the historic Town Commons, the storefronts provide a more attractive presentation for pedestrians.

ELEMENT	GUIDING PRINCIPLES	EXISTING CONDITIONS
Storefront Windows	Storefronts that maintain a minimum of 70% transparency ensure clear lines of sight between the business and the sidewalk to enhance attractiveness of storefront, as well as improve safety for the business, customers, and pedestrians.	More than 25% of storefronts have windows with limited transparency.
Outdoor Displays	Attractive window displays and spillover retail/restaurant activity on sidewalks or adjacent parking spaces can help contribute to overall district vibrancy.	More than 25% of storefronts have spillover merchandise displays and outdoor dining that pose challenges to the pedestrian experience.
Signage	Signage can help customers identify the location of storefronts and businesses from a distance. Signage should also reflect the visual brand and identity of tenants to help attract new customers.	More than 25% of storefronts have signage that does not communicate the names of businesses or types of products/services being offered.
Facade	Storefronts that use high-quality and durable building materials, as well as paint and color to differentiate from other businesses, can dramatically improve the appearance of the commercial district to potential customers.	More than 25% of properties require significant building façades improvements, including power washing, painting, and structural enhancements.
Lighting	Storefront interior lighting after business hours help enliven the corridor and boost security on the street.	More than 25% of storefronts do not have lighting.

Source: Site Visit Assessment

MOBILITY PRIORITIES

Like most central Massachusetts communities, residents primarily rely on personal vehicles for transportation. In addition to the rates of car ownership and commuter patterns, zoning by-law parking requirements and local road network characteristics reinforce this trend. Route 9 is the linkage for the region but a challenge for any other modes of transportation. The highway produces high traffic volume and accompanying pedestrian safety concerns. Crosswalks intermittently connect sidewalks along the highway, but there are faded crosswalk markings and limited rectangular rapid flashing beacons (RRFB). Sidewalks are not present on both sides of Route 9 in the Study Area. Prioritizing pedestrian infrastructure such as RRFBs, high visibility markings, and enhanced lighting can inspire more pedestrian activity along the road. The heavy car traffic in the downtown area additionally increases parking demands. As noted earlier, many businesses offer parking for customers. However, there is no central parking location or accessible on-street parking along Route 9 or near the Town Commons to accommodate customers who want to walk around the area. Wayfinding signage is a gap in the public realm and can help inspire more economic activity by mitigating parking challenges; signage can direct vehicles to available parking and inform customers of the duration and location of off-street parking.

INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

Leicester has three existing water districts that serve the community, which include Cherry Valley/Rochdale Water District, Hillcrest Water District, and the Leicester Water Supply District. The districts are separately administered and have their own water service facilities. A majority of vacant, developable land has no water service, precluding any new development on those prime parcels. Additionally, the sewer system is equally fragmented and does not service developable land. The challenge is two-fold. First, multiple, independent water and sewer districts limit long-term planning because the interests of the district may not align with the overall community's interests. Implementing a centralized water and sewer district will support creating a long-term vision for where infrastructure can and should serve, thus enabling residential and commercial expansion in those locations. Second, some districts are in debt and have continued to raise fees to unaffordable levels for the community. Resolving the water and sewer challenges in the community can decrease the burden of utilities for the existing residents and help to spur more economic growth in the community.

CAR OWNERSHIP RATES

Leicester	96.5%
Worcester	82.5%
Massachusetts	89.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Commute to Work by Type
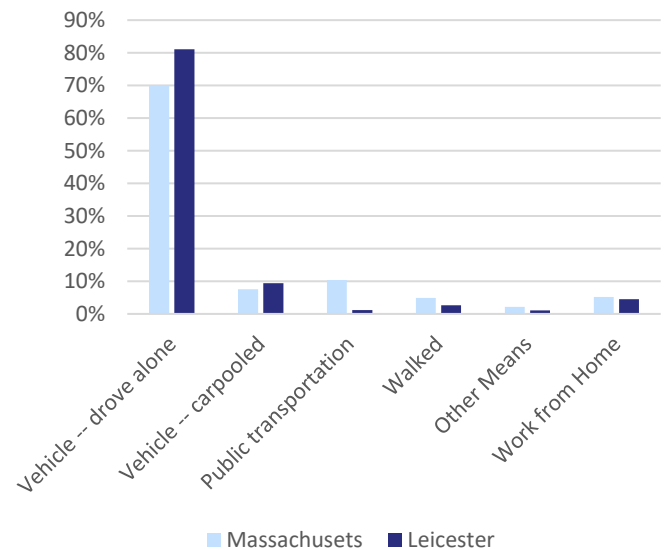
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

COMFORT FOR PEDESTRIANS

The RRP site visit scorecard assessed the conditions of Leicester's mobility infrastructure. The quality of sidewalks, crosswalks, pedestrian amenities, lighting, wayfinding, and roadbeds was evaluated to inform the Study's economic recovery solutions. Physical improvements to the public realm are an essential component of recovery, as corridors with accessible public amenities will attract and retain a customer base.

The quality of the public realm varies throughout the Study Area. Town Commons affords pedestrians a lush tree canopy, benches, street lighting, and sidewalks. Town Center has wide sidewalks and crosswalks that enable pedestrian access yet lacks street furniture and street trees. However, along Route 9 the availability of these public amenities becomes sparse. Overall, pedestrian amenities are modest throughout the Study Area. Benches, trash cans, shade, water, and other engaging amenities would offer pedestrians respite from walking and work to retain potential customers directly near commercial uses.

ELEMENT	GUIDING PRINCIPLES	EXISTING CONDITIONS
Sidewalk	Sidewalks should be wide enough to accommodate both the flow of customers and spillover retail/dining activity. In addition, sidewalks should be clean and well-maintained to ensure the safety and comfort of pedestrians.	More than 25% of sidewalks in the Study Area pose challenges to the pedestrian experience (including narrow sidewalks and lack of cleanliness and maintenance).
Street Trees and Benches	Sidewalks should facilitate a variety of activities, including resting, people-watching and socializing. Street trees and benches are key amenities that support such activities and should be made available without disrupting the flow of pedestrians.	Limited availability of street trees and benches creating an uncomfortable pedestrian experience.
Lighting	Street lighting improves pedestrian visibility and personal safety, as well as aids in geographic orientation.	Street lighting on the primary street in the Study Area does not support pedestrian visibility and safety.
Wayfinding	A wayfinding system supports overall accessibility of a commercial district. It benefits pedestrians and bicyclists and directs motorists to park and walk. Without clear visual cues, customers may find it difficult to park or may be less aware of local offerings.	Limited to no signage available throughout the Study Area.
Roadbed and Crosswalk	Roads should be well maintained to ensure safety of drivers and pedestrians. Crosswalks that are unsafe or inconvenient to customers may undermine accessibility between stores and overall shopper experience.	Roads are designed primarily to move motor vehicles across the Study Area efficiently, with limited crosswalks for pedestrians.

Source: Site Visit Assessment

Highlights from the Business Environment

COMMERCIAL NODES

Town Center and Cherry Valley represent the commercial nodes in the Study Area. These two districts also serve as the economic hubs for the community. The zoning and physical environment shape the business offerings existing within these nodes. The Town Center provides retail, neighborhood convenience, professional services, food services, and other low-intensity business activities that support the local and regional market. These businesses are suitable for creating a vibrant commercial core that is accessible by multiple modes of transportation. Establishing connections to the businesses and attracting complementary businesses will only further support the growth of the Town Center. Cherry Valley hosts commercial uses of higher intensity such as equipment services, manufacturing, storage, moving, waste management, and studio space. The uses in Cherry Valley do not promote a vibrant, walkable commercial center. Coupling the economic growth of Cherry Valley and the Town Center will support a diversified economy that can ensure long-term recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

VACANT AND UNDERUTILIZED STOREFRONTS

COVID-19 caused extensive business closures throughout the Commonwealth. During the RRP site visit in April of 2021, the plan facilitators conducted a vacant storefronts audit in the Study Area. The audit recorded a storefront vacancy rate of 6% in Leicester. Vacant storefronts create a less engaging shopping experience and threaten the vitality of neighboring businesses. While vacancies impose a blight on the community, they also offer an array of opportunities. Leicester can attract businesses that satisfy local and regional needs, support entrepreneurs with available space, or match the arts community with inexpensive space.

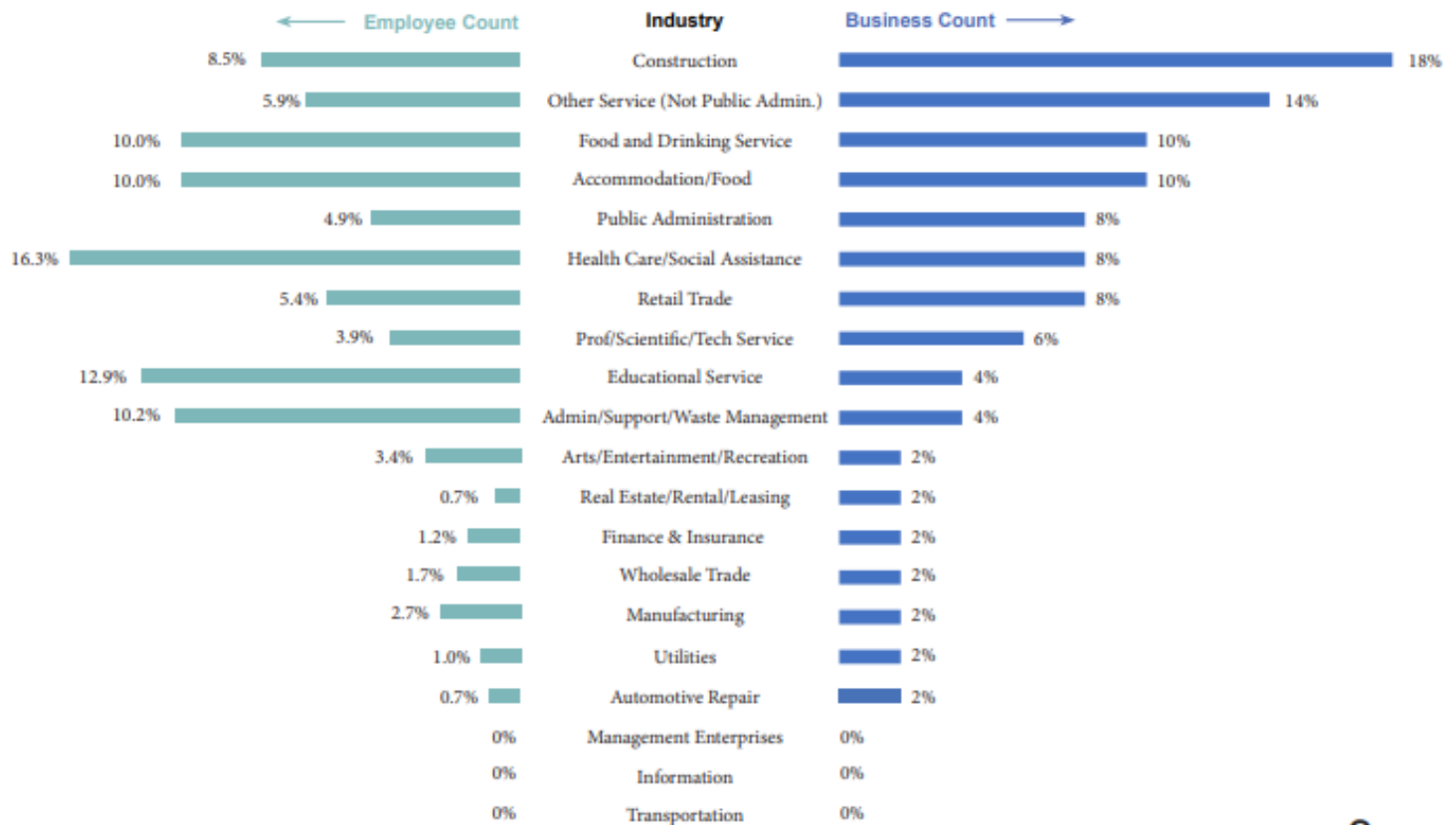*Leicester Town Center facing Southeast. Source: LoopNet*

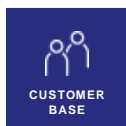*Main commercial parcel in Cherry Valley. Source: Rubric Commercial*

Vacant storefront in Town Center. Source: Hagerty Consulting

TENANT MIX

Leicester's economy is supported by a number of industries. In the Town, retail trade, accommodation and food services, and health care and social assistance are the dominant industries. While the water and sewer system in the community poses challenges to economic growth, the numerous districts create many jobs in the administrative support and waste management and remediation services industry, which reflects 13.8% of employer establishments. The Study Area provides a different business landscape. Construction and public administration are heavily represented in Cherry Valley and the Town Center, respectively. The closing of Becker College further impacts the tenant mix in Leicester. Educational services in the Study Area had a 12.9% share of employees.[3] Losing Becker College as a source of employment reduces the amount of customers in Leicester and the opportunity to attract labor. Stakeholders also mentioned a thriving at-home business environment in the community. By linking traditional brick and mortar establishments with the existing entrepreneurial spirit present in the community, Leicester can continue to diversify their industry landscape.

Employee Count	Industry	Business Count
8.5%	Construction	18%
5.9%	Other Service (Not Public Admin.)	14%
10.0%	Food and Drinking Service	10%
10.0%	Accommodation/Food	10%
4.9%	Public Administration	8%
16.3%	Health Care/Social Assistance	8%
5.4%	Retail Trade	8%
3.9%	Prof/Scientific/Tech Service	6%
12.9%	Educational Service	4%
10.2%	Admin/Support/Waste Management	4%
3.4%	Arts/Entertainment/Recreation	2%
0.7%	Real Estate/Rental/Leasing	2%
1.2%	Finance & Insurance	2%
1.7%	Wholesale Trade	2%
2.7%	Manufacturing	2%
1.0%	Utilities	2%
0.7%	Automotive Repair	2%
0%	Management Enterprises	0%
0%	Information	0%
0%	Transportation	0%

Business and Employee Proportions in the Study Area. Source: ESRI, August 2020

Highlights from the Customer Base

DEMOGRAPHICS OF LEICESTER

The Town of Leicester has a total population of 11,306 people, which has increased 3% since 2010, and the average population density is 440 persons per square mile. The Study Area selected for the RRP has approximately 605 residents and a population density of 1,775 persons per square mile. The median age of Leicester residents is 40 years old. The residents of Leicester have a broad educational attainment profile. Over 91.6% of residents have a high school degree and over 30.7% of residents have a bachelor's degree. These rates nearly reflect the distribution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (i.e., 90.8% and 43.7%, respectively). The residents of Leicester primarily identify as white (89.4%) and a significant portion of the population (17.7%) is greater than 65 years of age. The graph below shows the distribution of identified races and ethnicities in the Town and Study Area.

Only 6.5% of the current Leicester residents had relocated to the Town since 2018, most of whom were previously residents of another jurisdiction within Worcester County. The percentage of people living in Leicester who were born in Massachusetts (78.6%) is much higher than the average for the State (60.3%). The limited migration of people into Leicester and the high level of Massachusetts locals living in the community highlight the strong local roots and the deep connection people have with the community.[4]

HOUSING

There are approximately 4,070 households in Leicester with a current occupancy rate of housing units of 93.9%, which is greater than the rate for the Commonwealth of MA, and approximately 77.1% of residents own their homes. Of households who are renters, approximately 24.9% of households are experiencing rent burden (i.e., spend 30% or more of their income on rent). The strong ownership rate and a lower rate of rent burden individuals position Leicester well as a stable community to support economic growth.[5]

Race and Ethnicity in Leicester

- White
- Black
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian
- Other Race
- Two or More Races
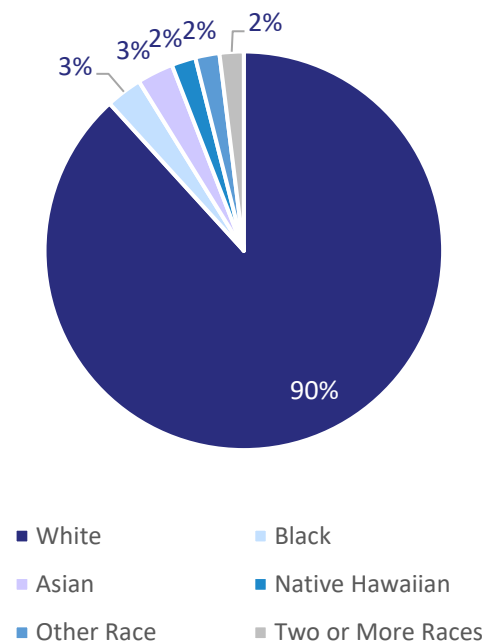
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Educational Attainment in Leicester

- 12th Grade or Less
- High School Graduate
- Some College, No Degree
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate or Professional Degree
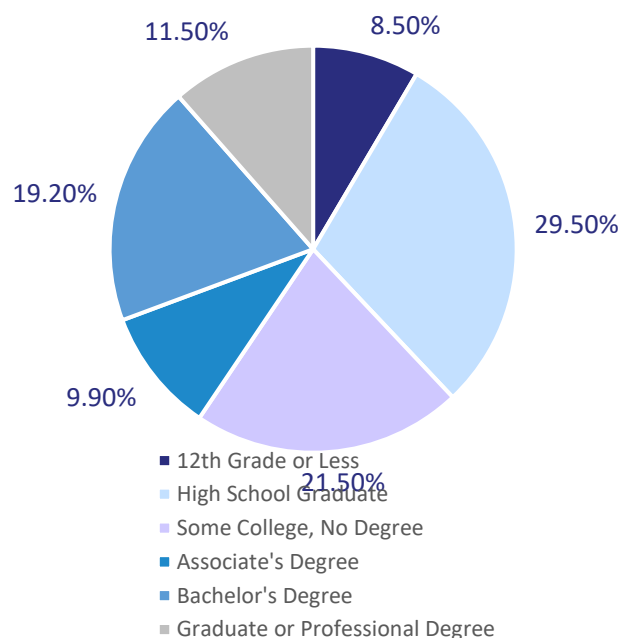
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

4. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates
5. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates

TRANSPORTATION ACCESS

Most residents in Leicester drive to work, with the primary mode of commuting as driving their own vehicle (77%). Over 96% of Leicester households own a personal vehicle, which is greater than the rate for Massachusetts (87.6%) and the country (82.5%). Over the past five years, Leicester has experienced significant changes in the method of commuting. The use of public transportation has increased 50%, walking has increased 116%, and transportation by other means (e.g., bicycle, carpooling) has increased by 450%. Aligning future growth with these commuting trends can help improve the economic landscape of the community and promote local sustainability goals.

Leicester is a commuter Town, whether individuals commute into or out of Town for work. Over 28.1% of local employees commute to Leicester from neighboring towns, whereas 65.9% of employees live in Leicester and work elsewhere in the region. The commuting behavior of the customer base likely changed during COVID-19, as more individuals work from home, and businesses will need to adapt to this altered behavior. The economic success of the community is dependent on these two customer groups, and interventions to ensure consumer spending stays in Leicester throughout the day are critical.[6]

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

As of 2019, the current employment rate of Leicester residents was 68.6%. This rate is 4.6% greater than Massachusetts's rate and has increased by nearly 5.4% since 2014. The median household income is $88,505, well above the national average of $62,834, and the Town's poverty rate is approximately 4.3%. Given the known impacts of COVID-19 on the economy around the country, the rates of unemployment increased significantly during early 2020, and have steadily decreased since summer 2020. Yet, the strong foundation of Leicester's economic landscape defined by employment and income prior to the pandemic positions the community to quickly recover from the impacts.

The most prominent industries in Leicester, based on their employee share, are educational services and health care and social assistance (29.5%), retail trade (11.3%), arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services (8.6%), manufacturing (8%), and construction (8%). The most significant changes in industry in the past five years are in the professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services (42.9% increase), wholesale trade (29.6% increase), and agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining (-66.7% decrease).[7]

TOP INDUSTRIES BY EMPLOYMENT

1. Educational services, and health care and social assistance
2. Retail trade
3. Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services
4. Manufacturing
5. Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Unemployment Rate during COVID-19
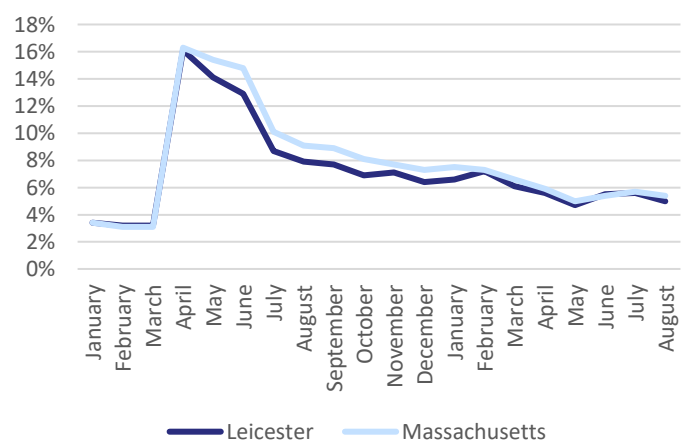
Unemployment Rates. Source: Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, Labor Market Information.

6. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates
7. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates

Highlights from Administrative Capacity

DEDICATED TOWN LEADERSHIP

The Town of Leicester maintains multiple departments and boards that support economic growth, including the Economic Development Committee (EDC), Planning Department and Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Building Commission. Economic development has strong support from all levels of local government and is comprised of community members. These dedicated staff members and volunteers have led economic recovery efforts in Leicester and are key stakeholders for the success of the RRP. Additionally, the Town is in the process of restructuring the EDC and clarifying the committee's vision and purview. The aim of the restructuring effort is to define Leicester's community economic development strategy and plan broader engagement with the Leicester civic and business communities.

FISCAL RESOURCES AND GRANTS MANAGEMENT

The Town of Leicester's annual operating budget is approximately $120 million, with a dedicated budget for economic development efforts. Additionally, the Town recently received an allocation from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to support COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The Town maintains personnel skilled in grant writing who can support applications to access funding needed to implement the projects outlined in this Plan. Local businesses have indicated an interest in financial support to recover from the impacts of COVID-19. In the business survey, over 38% of respondents expressed an interest in financing opportunities that may be used for business improvements.

Town Hall taken for Town Commons, Source: Hagerty Consulting

Zoning Map of Leicester. Source: Town Website

REGULATORY AND ZONING FRAMEWORK

Leicester's Town Center is defined by three zoning districts. The historic Town Common and the former Becker College area are in the R2 Zone. South Main Street (Route 9) from Pleasant Street stretching to the Worcester border is in the B District. Land adjacent to Route 9 East of Pleasant Street is in the central business district. In addition, the Town recently adopted an Architectural Conservation District which covers the historic Town Common and the former Becker College area. This overlay district aims to preserve the historic character of Town Commons while ensuring flexibility in commercial uses.

Leicester's zoning strategy focuses on preserving the historic look of the Town Common area while allowing commercial sprawl along the rest of the corridor. This strategy precludes the opportunity to develop a walkable Town Center by restricting commercial use in the Town Common area. Challenges with zoning are experienced by the community; 75% of business survey respondents noted that changes to zoning and other local regulations are of some importance for the community's recovery from COVID-19. With a growing demand for walkable downtowns and the rise of ecommerce, Leicester has an opportunity to update zoning regulations by concentrating development in centers and restricting it in outlying areas.

STRONG REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Leicester is a member of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce (BVCOC), groups dedicated to advocating for and supporting businesses in Central Massachusetts. The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce services 35 communities and provides advocacy and support for these businesses by offering networking events, free professional and business training, business support programs (e.g., women in business, sustainability), and marketing and advertising opportunities. BVCOC Chamber of Commerce, which services over 11 communities in the Blackstone Valley and focuses on local community engagement, networking and advertising, and advocacy. These Chambers' leadership is felt throughout the region, but for small businesses with networking, resource support, and technical assistance.

Additionally, Leicester is a member of the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC), a planning body for the Central MA region. CMRPC writes plans to prepare for and address regional issues, including transportation access, land use, community development, and homeland security. They also offer economic development planning and support services, including:

- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS);
- Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis;
- Zoning by-law review;
- Storefront and facade improvement programs; and
- Wayfinding and signage analysis.

There are many organizations in Leicester that are dedicated to supporting the community by addressing various challenges. A sample of these organizations is included in the graphic below, as categorized by regional resources, other Town resources, civic groups, and cultural institutions. These entities will be key supporters in the implementation and maintenance of the RRP projects. They can also help address any barriers to community engagement by establishing trust as community leaders and leveraging their networks to encourage residents to participate.

REGIONAL RESOURCES

Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce

Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission

CIVIC GROUPS

Rotary Club of Leicester

Leicester Lions Club

Leicester Historical Society

Hearts for Heat

Leicester Food Pantry

Greenville Baptist Church Food Pantry

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Leicester Public Library

First Congregation Church

Leicester Unitarian Church

Friends of Swan Tavern

Examples of Community Organizations that support Leicester

Project Recommendations

Create a Pedestrian Walking Loop

Category		Public Realm
Location		Town Center and Town Commons (Census Tract 7351)
Origin		CMRPC
Budget		Low to Medium Budget ($50,000-$200,000)
Timeframe		Short to Medium Term (1-10 years)
Risk		Moderate Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Number of pedestrians using the path; Number of additions to the path (e.g., historical sites, businesses); Increased level of social media engagement with concurrent pedestrian loop branding increase of reported business income compared to 2019 levels
Partners & Resources		Parks and Recreation Committee, CMRPC, Rotary Club, Lions Club, Public Works, Planning Department

Walking loop in downtown to foster more pedestrian and cyclist activity. Source: Google

Funding (continued)

- Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Shared Streets and Spaces Grant Program
  - Accepting new applications beginning January 2022
  - Grants range from $5k to $200k
- MassWorks Infrastructure Program
- Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI) Technical Assistance Grant
- T-Mobile Hometown Grant Program
- ARPA Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Grant
- Local public funds
- Local private funds

Partners and Resources (continued)

- Office of Development and Inspectional Services
- Historical Commission
- Property Owners
- Schools
- Council on Aging
- Leicester Public Library
- Arts Council
- Chapter 90 Program
- Recreational Trails Program
- Mass Community Preservation Act for towns that have adopted a Community Preservation Fund
- Trust for Public Land
- Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)
- Mass Cultural Council Funding
- Complete Streets Funding
- Safe Routes to Schools
- Surface Transportation Block Grant Program
- Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program

Risk (continued)

- The costs may pose a risk to completing the project, depending on the scale of the pedestrian loop. Creating new trails and activating spaces along the pedestrian loop will require contractors and technical assistance increasing the overall cost.
- There is a perception that improvements in pedestrian infrastructure will not lead to improvements in the economic recovery of Leicester. A lack of community buy-in for the pedestrian loop may limit the overall use of the path and the long-term economic and social outcomes of the project.
- Creating a comprehensive pedestrian loop that engages aspects of the business community, recreation, leisure, and all demographics requires coordination with various property owners that may stall project delivery and outcome.

Pedestrian promenade in Paris taking over streets for walking, lounging, activities, and art. Source: Paris is Beautiful City Guide

Diagnostic

Leicester is a highway community defined by Route 9. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the transportation behaviors of residents and led the Town to reassess mobility networks in the community. In 2020, Leicester experienced a 31% increase in bicycle activity and a 24.8% increase in pedestrian activity. Leicester will create safe and engaging routes to support the increase in pedestrian and bicycle activity in the downtown area.

Leicester's business survey respondents noted a decrease in customer foot traffic during COVID; 47% of respondents had fewer on-site customers in February of 2021 than before COVID-19. More than 60% of business survey respondents expressed the importance of improving streetscapes, sidewalks, and public spaces throughout the community. Key informant interviews with Leicester stakeholders displayed a broad need for improvements in mobility options outside of traditional car uses. The pedestrian walkway will promote mobility in the Town Center and increase access to surrounding businesses, historical sites, and local amenities.

Action Item

This project will develop a Leicester Pedestrian Loop to connect public amenities, recreation, businesses, public transportation, and historically/culturally significant areas. The most likely location of the loop will connect the Town Common, Paxton Street, and Becker College area. Linking Leicester amenities through a safe, engaging walking loop will support Leicester's environmental, conservation, economic, and public health goals. The Leicester Pedestrian Loop will serve pedestrians and cyclists in the community while creating public spaces that provide areas for recreation and leisure.

Initially, the Leicester Pedestrian Loop will begin as a pilot program to support defining the route, critical public spaces, opportunities for engagement, and partnerships to ensure the long-term vision of a pedestrian loop aligns with the community's goals. The pedestrian loop will begin with temporary materials such as plastic wayfinding signage, sidewalk paint, temporary event spaces, and art installations. Upon evaluating its success, the pedestrian loop amenities will grow into a more permanent fixture of Leicester. After implementing a pilot program and evaluating the success, Leicester will begin a feasibility study to identify technical aspects and phasing approaches.

Process (continued)

Phase 1: Pilot Program
Planning and Design
- Establish a Steering Committee of dedicated Town staff and community members to serve as a guiding body for the pedestrian loop.
- Identify key partnerships in the community to address stakeholder and community engagement processes, specifically entities that will benefit from the pedestrian loop.
- Conduct a public outreach campaign to confirm amenities to be located along the path and gain community buy-in. Public outrage can be performed through surveys, meetings, and key informant interviews with identified partners.
- Identify potential pedestrian loop routes, through surveys or pedestrian counts, based on existing walking routes and popular connections.
- Create a database of existing public amenities like sidewalks, benches, street poles, grass areas, trails, and art installations that will support a quick-build pedestrian loop.
- Identify key locations to include in the pedestrian walkway that support access and connectivity to business, nature, and public amenities.
- Create an evaluation procedure to understand the baseline conditions of pedestrian and bicycle mobility in Leicester from the perspectives of the businesses and overall community prior to the implementation of the pedestrian loop. After installation, evaluation procedures will help identify the success of the pedestrian loop, as well as insights for expansion and updates.
- Create a marketing campaign to brand and promote the pedestrian loop. Include a physical and digital campaign to draw in users from within and outside Leicester.
    - Physical Marketing: Display flyers and posters highlighting details of the pedestrian loop in key areas throughout Leicester (businesses in the Town Center, churches, libraries, schools, and other community gathering spaces).
    - Digital Marketing: Advertise details of the pedestrian loop on local Facebook groups, Town's social media, Town's website, CMRPC website and social media, Worcester Chamber of Commerce website and social media, BVCOC website and social media, and other digital tourism resources.
    - Social Media: Identify unique ways for users to engage with the pedestrian loop, including hashtags, photo contests, scavenger hunts, and art installations to promote the trail through user engagement.
- Consider opening the pedestrian loop with a public event to increase turnout/use and marketing.

Installation
- Create a sign and material typology to establish design standards, specific uses, type of material, and information required for the signage. Having the count of signs and designs established will support identifying material needs, costs, and locations for the signs.
- Determine the materials needed to align with the final pedestrian loop pilot program. Materials will include printed signs (weatherproof), zip-ties, drills, paint, and cones.
- Identify businesses in the community that can support the development and printing of the signage, provision of materials, and overall implementation.
- Create a volunteer group based on the partnership group to support the installation of the pedestrian loop.
- Locate and procure a funding source for temporary signs and materials.

Evaluation
- With the Steering Committee, design a monitoring and evaluation process for general maintenance and visioning next steps.
- Monitoring procedures should include a mechanism for assessing and reporting the conditions of the signs and the steps to replace or fix damaged materials.
- Evaluation procedures should include mechanisms for counting the number of pedestrians and bicycles using the path and surveying the community on the impact of the pedestrian loop after installation.

Process (continued)

Phase 2: Formal Pedestrian Walking Loop

Planning and Development
- Use the insights from the pilot program to create a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a feasibility study. The feasibility study will identify critical information for constructing a pedestrian loop, and may include information on traffic studies, environmental review, conservation challenges, stormwater drainage, and existing conditions.
- Include considerations in the pedestrian loop that align with Leicester's municipality vulnerability preparedness program, such as:
    - Tree canopy and green space to reduce urban heat island effect
    - Green infrastructure for stormwater management
- Identify locations for public space improvements along the pedestrian loop. Public space improvements should create opportunities for all demographics (aging, youth, recreation, leisure, education). Public space improvements may include:
    - Exercise equipment
    - Playground and youth activation
    - Benches and shade for leisure or bird/nature watching
    - Bike Racks
    - Planters
    - Art Installations
    - Historic educational signage
    - Interactive installations to educate on conservation, recycling, or water maintenance.
- Identify opportunities for the pedestrian loop to integrate with Leicester's natural environment by assessing opportunities to align with existing trails in Leicester and expanding/creating new recreational nature trails in the community.
- Coordinate with DPW to develop landscaping, lighting, and amenities plans to ensure correct price quotes and locations for waste receptacles, information kiosks, water fountains, shade structures, benches, and other materials.
- Create a property owner outreach plan to identify key parcels needed for the pedestrian loop and decide on potential land acquisition methods (fee simple purchase, easement, license agreement, leases, eminent domain).
- Use assessor data to understand the interaction between the proposed route and the parcel information.
- Coordinate with CMRPC to identify regional and local trails that can be integrated into the pedestrian loop for future expansions and connections.
- Create a marketing campaign to brand and promote the pedestrian loop.

Installation
- Coordinate with DPW to support the construction aspects of the pedestrian loop.
- Aligning the pedestrian loop with efforts in the Complete Streets Prioritization Plan.
- Drafting construction plans for drainage, limits of work, traffic plans, intersection treatments, environmental considerations, and construction specifications, and cost estimates.
- Process necessary permits and right of way certificates for the pedestrian loop construction.
- Create an RFP and bidding process to select a contractor for the project.

Evaluation
- Develop a maintenance plan through the Steering Committee to identify roles and responsibilities for maintaining the pedestrian loop.
- Assign the role of path operations to DPW or another viable entity to oversee repaving, striping, patching, and snow clearance to ensure operability of the path.
- Assign the role of landscaping to DPW or another viable entity to oversee mowing, clearing, and planting along the path.
- Assign the role of landscaping to DPW or another viable entity to oversee the functioning of amenities through repair and replacement.
- Implement evaluation procedures to assess path usage by counting the number of pedestrians and bicycles using the path and surveying the community on the impact of the pedestrian loop after installation.
- Implement digital evaluation procedures to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement with the digital marketing of the pedestrian loop.

Legend
- Pilot Route
- Possible Extensions

Goal: Create a privatley-owned, public space on Sargent Pond for the community to access.

Types of Interventions: Create a sidewalk, seating area, and dock on Saregent Pond so the community can fish and relax while celebrating Leicester's natural amenity.

Additional Measures: Leicester will need to negotiate an arrangement with the owners of the land through a lease agreement.

Goal: Activate underutilized space in Town Center to create areas for customers to rest.

Types of Interventions: Provide community seating and other furniture so pedestrians can rest, eat, or conversate in an area near local businesses.

Additional Measures: Promote the area as a "Rest Stop" off Route 9. Think of ways to seperate the sace from Route 9 to reduce noise and promote safety.

Goal: Create opportunnities for recreation in outdoor areas for all ages.

Types of Interventions: Public exercise equipment to inspire healthy lifestyles in the community without a cost. Also incorporate playground equipment so parents and guardians can take children with them to exercise.

Additional Measures: Incorporate signage to educate people on healthy living.

Goal: Activate underutilized space near the senior center for aging populations.

Types of Interventions: Communcal seating to foster conversation and accomodate events/dialogues. Inclusion of books and magazines to provide activies.

Additional Measures: Integrate playground amenities to create space for children and have an area active for a diverse age group.

Sample Pedestrian Walking Loop for Leicester. Sources: Google Maps, 2019. Nathan Bowe/Tribune. Landscape Forms. AARP Public Spaces.

Create an Outdoor Dining Strategy and Toolkit

Category		Public Realm
Location		Town Center and Town Commons (Census Tract 7351)
Origin		Economic Development Committee
Budget		Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe		Short Term (Less than 5 years)
Risk		Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Restaurant and retail business retention rates; The number of new outdoor dining and/or retail spots created; The number of new businesses that open and are in business one year and two years out
Partners & Resources		BVCOC; State Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission (ABCC); Local artists/arts and cultural organizations; Fire Chief; Building Commissioner; Board of Health; Department of Public Works (DPW); MA Restaurant Association

Budget (continued)

Costs are low and include dedicated municipal staff time or consultant time to decide what is needed (using RRP Outdoor Dining and Retail Toolkit) and take action to make decisions, instigate necessary changes, and provide clear and concise guidelines and requirements to businesses. Additional costs include improvements to online permitting capabilities, marketing the program to businesses, instituting a bulk purchasing program, or other program elements.

Funding Sources:

- MassDOT Shared Streets and Spaces Grant Program
  - Accepting new applications beginning January 2022
  - Grants range from $5k to $200k
- MassDOT Complete Streets Funding Program
- Urban Agenda Grant Program
- MDI Technical Assistance Grant
- Community Change Grant
- Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation Grants and Loans
- SBA Restaurant Revitalization Fund
- Sponsorships from Local Businesses

Outdoor dining space with planters as barrier to buffer from pedestrian traffic. Source: Google

Timeframe (continued)

The timeframe may vary depending on whether a Leicester's program will be temporary or permanent, with temporary changes likely being faster to implement. The timeframe for permanent changes will also depend on the continuation or termination of the temporary loosening of State permitting requirements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Phasing Recommendations:
- Weeks 1 – 4: Needs assessment, create a task force or working group.
- Weeks 5 – 8: Research information on focus areas for the program (look at examples in the attached Toolkit).
- Weeks 9 – 12: Research information (e.g., costs incurred by Leicester, bulk purchasing capability), write up draft regulations, prepare educational materials and presentations for relevant boards, commissions, the public, and businesses, and conduct outreach.
- Weeks 13 – 24 (or longer): Institute changes, obtain agreement on concepts, bylaw votes.

Risks (continued)

Risks are low for this project and include building political will, weighing the cost vs. benefit of the program, and any financial costs the municipality wishes to incur to support businesses (e.g., lower permit fees, covering the cost of bulk purchases, consultant fees).

Some risks in the program are outside of Leicester's purview. ABCC regulations on liquor and licensing is dependent on the State and may impact the outdoor dining regulations in the long term. The Massachusetts Package Store Association has been reluctant to support the expansion of liquor licenses to outdoor servicing, creating another bottleneck.

Additionally, any permanent installations must comply with Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) regulations for accessibility. This may increase the cost of the program and make it less flexible. Please see the RRP Outdoor Dining and Retail Toolkit.

Utilize extra space (i.e., parklets) for outdoor dining use. Source: Public Realm Compendium

Outdoor Dining/Retail Toolkit created for the RRP Program. The toolkit can be found in the Appendix.

Diagnostic

With restrictions on indoor dining during the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants shifted to takeout and outdoor dining to remain in business. The state temporarily loosened several permitting requirements for outdoor dining, and many municipalities streamlined their local permitting processes and removed fees to make it easier for businesses to implement quickly. Leicester implemented a process for approving outdoor dining installations. However, some stakeholders interviewed mentioned that not all restaurants benefited from Leicester's outdoor dining strategy. Some restaurants could not engage in outdoor dining because they either could not find space, obtain materials, understand requirements, or interface with the Town. In the business survey, respondents acknowledged that improved outdoor dining opportunities are necessary for recovering from COVID-19; 80% of business survey respondents said that more opportunities for outdoor dining are at some level of importance.

As the pandemic continues, businesses need certainty in terms of the consistency of temporary bylaws and other regulations so that they can make investments in construction, equipment, and furniture for outdoor dining and retail. In addition, more permanent measures will allow for a closer look at impacts on the public realm. Simplifying outdoor dining requirements and permitting, providing clear regulations and shortened review and permitting timelines, and assistance with design and other outdoor dining/retail elements will ensure that businesses get the support they need to stay open. Clear outdoor dining/retail design requirements will also help create the best possible public realm and commercial district experience to assist all businesses in the Study Area.

Action Item

The RRP Outdoor Dining/Retail Toolkit is a resource to assist Leicester with understanding how they can facilitate the creation and ongoing success of outdoor dining and/or retail in their community. The kit offers project examples from other communities and space guidelines that adhere to good design practices and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. Leicester can provide a specific business toolkit for restaurants and retail to help guide businesses on outdoor dining/retail design, permitting, and construction requirements.

Work begins with assessing the current state of outdoor dining and/or retail programs. The process should include a Task Force or Working Group composed of the public sector (e.g., Town Planner, DPW, Board of Health, Fire Department, Police Department) and the private sector (e.g., restaurateurs, business owners, and civic advocates) to help assess work and move the process along.

Process

Phase 1: Initial Assessment

- Conduct an internal needs assessment by reviewing the Toolkit.
- Conduct an internal meeting with the planner, DPW, transportation, public health, and others to discuss the current state of outdoor dining and/or retail and collect feedback on the effectiveness and challenges with the current status.
- Get feedback from businesses about their needs and feedback on how any current program is going (what works/what doesn't) using one or more of the following:
    - Conduct focus group(s)
    - Issue online survey
    - Conduct a larger meeting
- From internal meetings and business surveys, identify focus areas for making a permanent program.
- Create a Task Force or Working Group representative of the focus areas for your Outdoor Dining/Retail program. Suggested members include:
    - Planner or Economic Development staff, DPW, parks, health dept, transportation
    - Business district representatives (BVCOC, MA Restaurant Association)
    - Business representatives
- Set an overall schedule for this project and regular meeting dates.
- Create a presentation template to use during the project including:
    - History of what Leicester has done to support outdoor dining/retail during the pandemic
    - The rationale for current efforts

Outdoor **dining with planters and plastic barriers to buffer pedestrian crossing. Source: Chicago Tribune**

Process (continued)

Phase 2: Analysis

- Review Toolkit and research info on focus areas for the program. Develop draft guidance for each focus area and list pros and cons.
- Assess Leicester's existing temporary outdoor dining/retail program, looking for gaps based on business feedback from Phase 1, the *RRP Outdoor Dining/Retail Toolkit*, and sample policies from other communities (e.g., Brookline).
    - Create a summary of findings and possible to share with internal (i.e., municipal stakeholders) for feedback.
    - Create a series of recommendations from these case examples and best practices for inclusion in Leicester's updated policy.
    - Syndicate recommendations with internal staff and business stakeholders, incorporating their input.
- Create a "skeleton" policy that highlights the key elements of the program based on the comparison of the toolkit and feedback from stakeholders.
- Conduct public meetings to get feedback on draft ideas.

Phase 3: Draft Requirements

- Revise program elements as necessary based on feedback.
- Write up draft regulations and requirements.
- Prepare educational materials/presentations for boards/commissions/public/businesses.
- Conduct outreach.

Phase 4: Regulatory Changes

- Utilizing the information collected during Phases 1 - 3, identify any additional regulatory changes required to support outdoor dining.
- Confirm language regarding bylaw changes.
- In accordance with Town procedures, propose and pass targeted amendments to the outdoor dining regulations.

Best Practice: Increase Outdoor Dining and Safe Bike/Pedestrian Connections
Amherst, MA

The project focused on a group of solutions that, together, facilitated socially-distanced outdoor dining and extended business activity into the evening and cooler months, increased space for those walking and biking in downtown, and enhanced the experience of transit riders during the colder months. The key project elements included: installing expanded on-street dining areas and designated rideshare/pick-up areas by removing on-street parking; adding propane heating towers for diners; preservation of bicycle facilities by removing a turn lane; adding detectable warning surfaces for crosswalk ramps; adding new picnic tables in the Town Common; adding new pedestrian-scale streetlights; and installing heated bus shelters at two downtown stops.

Create a Vision Plan and Conduct Zoning Updates

Category		Public Realm
Location		Town Commons
Origin		Zoning Board of Appeals; Planning Department
Budget		Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe		Short Term (Less than 5 years). The timeframe for adopting zoning changes depends largely on the adoption process, so it may vary widely.
Risk		High Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Number of zoning changes passed; Dollars of investment in the area after adoption; increases in revenue to local businesses; increases in tax revenue, local perceptions of appropriateness of development in the area
Partners & Resources		Planning Board, Building/Code Enforcement, Code and Health Department. Town Administrator

Budget (continued)

- The budget may vary widely, approximately $20,000 to $100,000 depending on the scope established through the planning process. The key variables of budget include:
- Level of community engagement
- Complexity of proposed changes (e.g., how many topics are regulated, level of detail)
- Complexity and amount of graphics required
- Coordination requirements among various parties to ensure standards meet local needs
- Number of zoning bylaw revisions required

Funding Sources:

- Massachusetts Historical Commission Survey and Planning Grant Program
- Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund
- T-Mobile Hometown Grant
- 2021 ARPA Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation

Risk

The obstacles that may pose a risk to the implementation of this project include physical limitations in the Study Area (e.g., excessive curb cuts) and lack of community consensus about need for zoning changes and value of regulations.

Diagnostic

The diagnostic phase identified examples of zoning regulations that hinder development in the Town Commons. In the business survey, 39% of respondents mentioned zoning regulations as an obstacle to business operations. In addition, the Town recently adopted an Architectural Conservation District, which covers the historic Town Commons and the former Becker College area, potentially further restricting business uses. The Architectural Conservation District adds a layer of architectural design review and requires the adoption of design guidelines that have not yet been written. Overall, Leicester's zoning strategy appears to focus on preserving the historical look of the Town Commons area while allowing commercial sprawl along the rest of the corridor. This approach runs counter to the economic growth best practices, which emphasize concentrating development in centers and restricting it in outlying areas.

Form-based codes aim to balance the preservation (or creation) of a unique sense of place with the flexibility to enable communities to respond to broader housing and economic trends. Form-based codes will increase flexibility for land uses, streamline permitting, improve predictability for applicants, and ensure that changes to properties enhance local character. In addition, updating zoning will allow Leicester an opportunity to account for flexibility in defining long-term economic recovery goals.

All communities in Leicester felt the impacts of COVID-19 on the Town; however, Becker College, the Town Commons focal point, was especially impacted and closed in 2021. Leicester recently purchased land from Becker College. Key informants noted this change as an economic loss for the Town, as many students were patrons of local businesses and brought vitality to the Town Commons. However, this change also presents Leicester with an opportunity to re-envision the future of the Town Commons, in alignment with the historic preservation efforts and recovery from COVID-19. A planning effort that establishes a community vision for the area that is rooted in enacting tangible zoning changes will support Leicester's economic vitality and development.

Action Item

Leicester's vision plan and zoning changes will entail two major sequential components: develop a Vision Plan with robust community outreach and utilize the Vision Plan to drive zoning changes. Creating the Vision Plan will engage community members in reimagining the Town Commons area and setting community goals for recovery from COVID-19 and overall growth. It provides community members with something concrete to respond to by illustrating how zoning will impact an area and provides a blueprint for zoning changes that have established community support. The Vision Plan would lay out the most desirable configuration of the former Becker College land, how to integrate that into the existing fabric of the Town center, potential streetscape and open space improvements, and potential changes to existing properties that would enable properties to adjust to shifting needs while maintaining the fundamental character of a New England village.

The regulatory changes should ensure that properties are used to meet market demands for housing, commercial use, or mixed-use while maintaining the area's historic New England character, improving pedestrian and bicycle access, and fostering a unique sense of place. At a minimum, the regulatory changes can include adopting design guidelines that are required to implement the recently adopted Architectural Conservation District. Further, the regulatory changes may enable:

- Greater flexibility of use in the Town Commons area, particularly in properties previously occupied by Becker College
- More flexible parking requirements
- Standards for pedestrian-friendly site design

In doing so, the Town may consider implementing a form-based code to implement the vision established by the Vision Plan. The form-based code would guide the development of the area by balancing the preservation of a unique sense of place and the flexibility for the community to change over time in response to broader housing and economic trends.

Process

Phase 1: Vision Plan

Establish the Planning Process
- Define the boundaries of the Study Area.
- Establish a steering committee who will lead the planning process and implementation efforts.
- Establish a working group composed of individuals with a variety of perspectives (e.g., business owners, environmental activists, historical preservationists, community members). These individuals should be trusted stakeholders who can represent a certain community and speak to their needs and values.
- Collect and review all relevant topographic surveys, Global Information System (GIS) data, publicly available and proprietary data, previous reports, and other materials relevant to the project area.

Conduct Community Outreach
- Hold public town halls for property owners, residents, business owners, and developers to voice their opinions on the vision for the Town Commons.
- Conduct roundtable discussions with the working group to discuss how zoning is or is not working for the downtown area.
- Prepare a detailed survey and analysis of existing conditions, including dimension of streets and sidewalks, architecture, use patterns, and materials as appropriate to the scope of the effort.
- Prepare an analysis of trends and likely future conditions, based on zoning, demographics, real estate market, and business conditions.

Develop the Plan
- Utilize the information collected through the outreach process to establish and/or verify the community's overall vision for the future of the area. This vision will likely include components of preservation, adaptation, or transformation.
- Develop and visualize alternatives for redesign and redevelopment of the public realm within this larger physical, economic, social, and environmental context.
- Verify how the vision relates to the public and private realms, including functional and aesthetic goals, pedestrian connections, and complete street concepts.
- Develop a Vision Plan that illustrates this community vision and zoning requirements.
    - Assess and build public awareness of the market potential of the area. Include questions such as:
        - What does the market need—small apartments, townhouses, single-family houses, Class A office space, low-cost commercial space, light industrial space?
        - What are the rents or selling prices in the area and how do those compare to the cost of construction?
- Hold a public and stakeholder review period and incorporate edits into the final plan.

Define the boundaries of the vision plan region (i.e., Downtown). Source: Best Practice Compendiums

Process (continued)

Phase 2: Plan Implementation and Zoning Changes

Design an Implementation Plan
- Determine the best approach to enabling the goals established by the Vision Plan, which may include:
    - Adopting a new district with form-based standards
    - Adopting a form-based overlay district
    - Incorporating form-based standards throughout the existing code
- Determine key topics to be regulated and associated standards. At a minimum, establish maximum front setbacks, building massing standards including the height and orientation of buildings fronting streets and public spaces, a front entrance requirement, standards for ground-floor uses, minimum transparency on the ground floor, and standards for pedestrian friendly off-street parking.

Zoning Efforts
- Draft the code at the level of detail needed to establish a clear and predictable process of design and review, balanced with the specific community's capacity to manage that process and the ability of the real estate market to support the desired vision.
    - Form-based codes are generally more budget intensive and require more time spent on education, graphic production, and an agreed upon vision for the zoning district or districts.
    - Develop a vision for the zoning districts by holding several community workshops and physical planning/urban design work. This step typically costs a minimum of $25,000, and often more.
    - Coordinate with CMRPC to receive funding from the Commonwealth to provide technical assistance to member communities. Usually, the regional planning agency issues a solicitation to municipalities for projects. In 2021, CMRPC's priorities for this program were aligned with area planning or zoning changes in Leicester center. In 2021, CMRPC required a 5% in-kind match from the municipality.
    - Match the project scope with the capabilities of the available staff at the regional planning agency. Determine if CMRPC has staff that are experienced with traditional zoning and design guidelines.
- Test the code with the Working Group on a range of sites and determine how it meets the desired outcomes. Revise the code as needed from stakeholder input.
- Once developing a tested code, hold a public meeting to receive any needed feedback. Utilize clear graphics to help illustrate what the regulatory changes will and will not do.
- Follow Town procedures for implementing regulatory changes.

Leicester Town Meeting during COVID-19, highlighting community involvement. Source: Meridia Interactive Solutions

Create a Shared Streets Pilot Program

Category	Public Realm
Location	Town Center and Town Commons (Census Tract7351)
Origin	Planning Department, EDC, DPW
Budget	Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe	Short Term (less than 5 years)
Risk	Medium Risk
Key Performance Indicators	Observed increase in the use of nearby municipal parking; Increase in pedestrian/bicycle traffic; Increase in traffic in nearby round floor businesses
Partners & Resources	Highway Department, Leicester Fire Department, Leicester Police Department, Leicester Building Department, Planning Department, Town Council, Rotary Club of Leicester, Local Businesses and artists

Budget (continued)

Budget estimate is approximate to a project that requires an engineering design consultant and low-impact construction.

- MassDOT's "Shared Streets and Spaces" Grant Program
  - Accepting new applications beginning January 2022
  - Grants range from $5k to $200k
- ARPA funding
- Regional Economic Development Organization (REDO) Grant
  - Deadline to apply is September 30, 2022
- MassWorks Infrastructure Program
- Local public funds
- Local private funds

Risks (continued)

- The project may not get buy-in from the ownership of underutilized spaces identified for conversion (e.g., easements and accessibility).
- Allowing for bikes along Route 9 is a safety concern.
- The width of streets for emergency vehicles, as defined by Leicester's Fire Department, may limit the eligible spaces for shared streets.
- Some residents and businesses may not want to lose parking spaces.

Diagnostic

Implement a shared streets program to increase pedestrian and cyclist mobility. Source: Google

Improving Leicester's pedestrian and cyclist environment is essential to the community's recovery from COVID-19. Stakeholder interviews highlighted that Route 9 traffic influences mobility decisions in the community. The current pedestrian environment is uninviting and encourages auto-centric, single-stop shopping. Additionally, COVID-19 has changed commuter characteristics. According to MassDOT's mobility dashboard data, Leicester experienced a 24.8% increase in pedestrian activity and a 31% increase in bicycle use since 2019. By creating a more accommodating Town Center for pedestrians, Leicester can help its business community adapt to the changing behavior of the customer base.

Many of Leicester's planning documents further emphasize the importance of increasing pedestrian mobility. The Complete Streets Prioritization Plan, the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Plan, and the Town Commons Complete Streets Grant emphasize interventions to increase pedestrian/bicycle access in Leicester. Business survey respondents reinforce Leicester's desire to improve mobility. Approximately 70% of respondents mentioned that improvements in streetscapes, sidewalks, safety, and cleanliness are essential for economic recovery.

Action Item
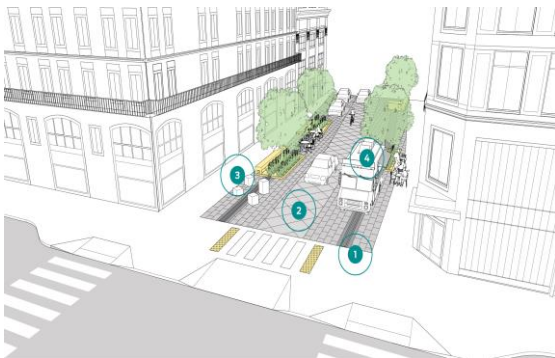
Rendering of a shared street with parklets and seating area. Source: Google

This project will develop a temporary and permanent shared streets program on Main St. near the Town Commons to create pedestrian-centered streets with amenities including seating, shade, and parklets. The project will align with the Complete Streets Prioritization Plan Item 7: Shared use path construction and bike lane on Old Main Street. While Item 7 has a 2024 start date, the pilot program will create community buy-in and additional funding, potentially expediting the complete streets program. It is anticipated that the improvements will increase pedestrian traffic by creating a comfortable environment that will drive people to ground-floor commercial businesses and Leicester amenities (i.e., Town Commons and adjacent historical buildings). The demonstration will include a pre-and post-implementation study, wayfinding signage, and the installation of pedestrian/bicycle infrastructure currently underrepresented in the community.

Process

Phase 1: Analyze the Study Area

- Establish a steering committee consisting of representatives from the DPW, Economic Development Committee, the Building Department, the Planning Department, and a business representative. Determine roles and responsibilities of the group. Suggested roles include:
    - DPW: Procurement of materials, implementation and maintenance (e.g., set-up, take-down, snow removal strategy, weather protection, repair and replacement) of the pilot program, and technical expertise.
    - EDC: Community and stakeholder outreach lead, as well as general coordinator and the monitoring and evaluation entity.
    - Building: Technical expertise on any temporary or permanent structures; advise on any zoning relief or permits required.
    - Planning: Design of the program including pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure layout and locations, material selection, and sketch plans/alternative treatments.
- Propose a general concept plan of the shared streets strategy. This concept plan will guide the overall visioning process with the community to finalize the strategy.
    - Share this initial concept plan with business stakeholders in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project to get their feedback and make any recommended changes.
    - Share the initial concept plan at Town-sponsored events and meetings to get feedback from other departments on processes/requirements outside of the core planning group's expertise.
- Conduct a study of the pedestrian environment in the vicinity of the to establish existing conditions and to study existing parking, cycling, and pedestrian patterns. This assessment can be conducted by a Town staff member following best practices established by the Federal Highway Administration. Elements of the study include:
    - Pedestrian/Bicycle: audit of all pedestrian and bike infrastructure in the Town Center to determine gaps in amenities (e.g., benches, trash cans, art installations, bus shelters, crosswalks, bike lanes). Additionally, conduct the pedestrian count and survey to observe traffic, pain points, wait times, and other information from the community.
    - Automobile: Conduct a car count and survey to observe traffic, pain points, wait times, and other information concerning traffic flow in the Study Area (e.g., annual average daily traffic [AADT]).
- Store information in a spreadsheet and transfer the data to GIS to serve as a database/map of the existing conditions.
- Create a community engagement strategy to gain perspectives of the stakeholders in Leicester. This can be done by creating a survey to disseminate to the community (within and outside the Study Area because all will access the Town Center), a set of 2-3 public meetings or workshops. If using a survey method, consider using digital and physical survey formats to increase reach. Example questions are below:
    - What is your current comfort level with walking/biking in Leicester?
    - What is the main deterrent from walking/biking more often?
    - What type of amenities would inspire you to walk/bike Leicester?
    - Would [amenity] encourage you to walk/bike to Town Center more than driving?
- Translate the findings from the public engagement process into key decisions for the mobility strategy and present the findings to the public and municipal staff.
- Create a Pilot Program Improvement Plan that lists the performance indicators, means of collection, and mode of analysis to ensure the successes of the program are based on empirics.
- Coordinate with the DPW to conduct a speed study before implementation. Add the study's analysis into the Pilot Program Improvement Plan.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES	MEANS OF CAPTURE	MODE OF ANALYSIS	OWNER
Traffic Speed	Speed Study	Before and After	DPW
Pedestrian Count	On-Site Survey/Hand Count	Before and After	Planning
Public Perception	Online Perception Survey, Open Meetings, Workshops, or Interviews	Before and After Qualitative Study	EDC

Process (continued)

Phase 2: Design and Implement a Pilot Program

- Determine the type of materials needed for the pilot program. Items may include plastic jersey barriers, planters, haystacks, trash cans, tables, chairs, bike racks, bike locks, temporary bike lanes (cones and caution tape), temporary speed humps, paint, and decorations.
    - Leverage expertise from the Building Department, DPW,
    - Decide the responsible party for procuring specific materials. Coordinate with private and nonprofit entities to determine what materials can be leased or donated.
    - Coordinate with the Leicester Arts Council and other arts organizations to coordinate installations and/or painting some of the materials and locations.
    - Coordinate with DPW to determine storage requirements for the pilot program's materials. Identify if any publicly-owned storage facility or general land can be used to store the equipment. If no public option is available, determine if a lease agreement with a private entity to use a facility or land for storage.
- Design the layout of the Shared Streets Pilot Program, ensuring that plans align with ADA accessibility, emergency vehicle access, and traffic engineering standards. Leverage expertise from the steering committee in this decision-making. Align all location decisions with Project 1: Pedestrian Loop so that the two interventions can work in tandem to support the overall pedestrian experience in the community.
- Determine the location of the pilot program. Suggested pilot program locations include Main St. and Paxton St., both near Town Commons, as these locations are proximate to Town Center and can inspire better connections to the commercial district. Additionally, the location decision should be informed by Phase 1's pedestrian/cyclist study and the community engagement process.
- Once the space of the pilot program is selected, determine the location of public realm infrastructure that can attract and retain pedestrians and cyclists. Items to implement may include benches, tables, umbrellas, planters, street gardens, art installations, water fountains, bicycle lock stations, and trash and recycling stations. Again, this selection process should be informed by the community outreach and existing conditions survey conducted in Phase 1.

Shared Streets program in Chicago, IL. Source: Chicago Sun Times

Process (continued)

Phase 2: Design and Implement a Pilot Program

- Coordinate with regional bicycle groups and shops to discuss opportunities for partnership. Engagement with these entities may include donating bicycle tools, providing maintenance and tune-ups at specific times during the day, and overall bicycle advocacy. Determine if a specific location should be assigned for bike support.
- Redesign the street locations to create a share-streets layout. Widths of rights-of-way will determine the final design, but the following widths are suggested: 15' parklet, 3' bike lane, 3' buffer
- Identify locations for parklets. Many of the streets within the Study Area and off of Route 9 have limited on-street parking, which limits available space for parklets. However, parklets can be designed to fit on closed streets and buffer zones between the street and sidewalk. Parklets can be designed to accommodate and support different groups in the community. Differing parklet uses may require specific materials. All parklet designs should be inspected by the Leicester Fire Department to ensure public safety. Potential parklet uses may include:
    - Rain Garden. Materials include soil, plants, liners, and other natural materials to help absorb water, cool temperatures, clean the air, promote biodiversity, and beautify neighborhoods.
    - Greenhouses. Materials include a plastic overhead sheet, soil, plants, liners, and other natural materials.
    - Playground for children. Materials include Astroturf, sandbox, outdoor play furniture, and children sized public furniture.
    - Outdoor library for leisure, conversation, programming, and book club. Materials may include books, shelving, seating, and podium. If this option is selected, consider partnering with the Leicester Public Library.
    - Bicycle Maintenance Station operated by a local business. Materials may include trash and recycling for bicycle material.
    - Arts Hub for displaying and practicing various art forms. Materials may be provided by local artists. The Town may need to operate trash and recycling.
    - General parklet. Materials include street furniture, green infrastructure.

Shared Streets program in Massachusetts. Source: Mass.gov

Process

Phase 3: Design and Implement a Permanent Program

- Coordinate with the steering committee to conduct a post-pilot program evaluation. Using the data collected from the studies, surveys, and interviews, and any additional data collected by businesses and transit agencies, develop a post-pilot picture to share with the community, municipal staff, and MassDOT as a means to transition the pilot program into a long-term, capital project.
    - Coordinate with other municipalities or the private business environment to determine if the materials bought for the program will be sold or donated to a specific entity. Additionally, Leicester can continue to store the materials to use for pilot programs at different locations in the community.
- Decide on how to transition the pilot program into an enduring mobility strategy. Prioritize interventions that will become permanent and determine their scheduling. It is suggested to implement interventions that require fewer funds and coordination with the state, such as public furniture and art installations.
- Part of the effort includes conducting a broader study to create a long-range mobility plan (e.g., connecting Town Center with Cherry Valley, Rochdale, schools, and recreational assets through circulation plans for bikes and pedestrians). Discuss the long-term vision with the Planning Department and DPW to ensure the transition aligns with the Complete Street Prioritization Plan and Project 1: Pedestrian Loop.
- Determine the extent of the capital improvements and whether they require a Traffic Management Plan. The Traffic Management Plan will ensure proper flow of traffic through the construction area, as to not disrupt the Town Center business and commuter activity.
- Discuss redesigning the program for other locations in Leicester.

Shared Streets program in Cambridge, MA. Source: Town of Cambridge

Implement a Vacant Storefronts Program

Category		Private Realm
Location		Town Center and Cherry Valley
Origin		Economic Development Committee
Budget		Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe		Short Term (Less than 5 years)
Risk		Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Number of vacant ground floor spaces occupied by temporary or permanent businesses; Number of events held in certain vacant spaces (exterior or interior) to activate Main Street; Number of participants at events at vacant ground floor spaces
Partners & Resources		Planning Department, Planning Board (if zoning changes are needed); EDC; Property Owners; Leicester Arts Council; Artists; Leicester High School Art Club (organizers of holiday annual craft fair); Leicester High School Art Club

Activate vacant storefronts through temporary art installations and/or temporary "pop-ups". Source: Google

Budget (continued)

Costs will include:

- Staff time to recruit users, manage the program application, and coordinate with property owners, businesses, and the arts community (estimated 40 hours over one month)
- Marketing to highlight storefront program through social media, banners, and other mediums (sidewalk signs, electronic signs, and flyers) $1,000
- Manager for pop-up events and space activation. This manager could be an existing person overseeing town festivals and fairs or someone may be identified who can take on this specific project work but also work on events and activation throughout the Study Area. For this project, assume 5-7 events at $800 - $1000 per event fee. $4,000 - $7,000 approximately
- Insurance costs if Town decides to take a blanket policy for spaces
- Materials used for the activation of the storefronts. $1500 - $5,000
    - Arts activation: frames, wires, canvas, printing, lighting, and placards
    - Business activation: signage, tables, lighting, and other specific items to support retail or professional services
    - Event/meeting space: chairs, tables, and lighting

Funding Sources include:

- Leicester Arts Council (MCC Local Cultural Council)
- Discover Central Massachusetts (for marketing)
- MassDevelopment Technical Assistance
- Mass Cultural Council
- MA Community One Stop for Growth
- MassDevelopment Commonwealth Places

Creating short term business activations in vacant spaces will help businesses use their temporary spaces as a gateway to establishing a more permanent space within their communities. Source: Google

Timeframe (continued)

Vacant storefronts can contribute to a lack of vibrancy in the Town's main centers. Source: Best Practices Compendiums

Program can be up and running in 6 months:

- Months 1-3: contact landlords/property managers; assemble sample guidelines (lease, indemnity agreement), develop options for parking lots and outdoor activation; identify funding sources; identify potential local partners for arts/cultural/food temporary uses including parking lots on weekends.
- Months 2-3: Identify potential tenants; apply for funding including Leicester Arts Council grant (funding cycle will determine availability of money).
- Month 4-6: Recruit tenants; plan events or use of parking lots to create activity and raise visibility of spaces. Identify party responsible for planning and executing pop-up and cultural events/activities at vacant ground floor properties.
- After 6 months: Continue with above. If temporary uses are not found, shift focus to permanent businesses and/or working with property owners to help them consider selling properties. Additionally, begin the evaluation process of the program.

Risk (continued)

Art installations can be utilized to fill window spaces in empty storefronts. Source: Private Realm Compendiums

Temporary programs can be difficult because of concerns about circumventing zoning, landlord concerns regarding the lease and maintenance of spaces, and overall resident concerns about changes in the community and potential opportunities for outsiders to alter the character of the community. The Town Center and Cherry Valley require almost all activities to have a permit creating a protracted process that is not conducive to the fast turnaround time necessary for the temporary use of space. The permitting process may also be particularly challenging to navigate for informal users or business entities. Temporary uses may require zoning changes which would delay implementation and create uncertainty. Additionally, Leicester signage bylaws may limit the type of marketing and promotion necessary for the temporary spaces.

Landlords may worry about liability if something happens in their space (must be covered in the lease/use agreement; getting temporary tenants out if they have a long-term tenant; uses that are not consistent with their image or their goals for long-term tenants.) There is a challenge with determining who covers the cost of operating the space during the short-term lease (landlord or tenant) and if there is a possibility if the Town can subsidize the costs.

Diagnostic

COVID-19 caused many business closures, expanding the number of vacant spaces that existed prior to the pandemic. Vacant storefronts pose many challenges to the community, including disrupting the character of the district and potentially creating eyesores for customers. When marketing vacancies, landlords traditionally market the commercial space through window signs or advertisements, which further clutter the appearance of the district. The Town Commons is the economic heart of the community that serves customers throughout the region, and Leicester will consider creative solutions to reimagining vacant space and attracting customers to the commercial center.

The availability of vacant space can be used to attract new businesses and diversify the tenant mix of Leicester. Business owners have emphasized a desire to attract new businesses, as 85% of the business survey respondents indicated that recruiting/attracting new business is important for the Town. Leicester currently operates at a 6% storefront vacancy rate. Coupling a temporary use program for vacant spaces and unused parking lots with a public art/cultural strategy for these spaces can attract customers to Town Center and increase vibrancy in support of business recovery.

Action Item

The program aims to activate vacant storefronts through a combination of temporary art installations, temporary "pop-ups" for local entrepreneurs, and renderings of possible uses in windows. Establishing a vacant storefronts program in Leicester addresses two challenges identified in the community: firstly, it increases the aesthetic appeal of the neighborhoods within the Study Area and, secondly, it creates an opportunity for businesses, artists, and civic organizations to utilize neglected and available spaces at a discount. By creating opportunities to showcase the creativity and entrepreneurship of the community, Leicester will increase in diversity of tenant mix, increase business offerings, and promote stability in the commercial rental market. These opportunities align with the goals of COVID recovery: increasing business opportunities to attract new customers, retaining those customers in a comfortable pedestrian setting, and continuing to grow the business community in Leicester.

Process

Phase 1: Program Design

- Organize a Working Group for a Vacant Storefront Program including Town Planner, local real estate brokers, one or two property owners, Economic Development Committee, and the BVCOC. Establish administrative protocols for effectively communicating and coordinating work plans, budget, legal documents, marketing material, survey information, and all other relevant materials, such as Google Drive, Dropbox, or SharePoint. Additional partners may include;
    - Business owner(s) (particularly of adjacent properties)
    - Large employers in the Town, including Walmart, Hanover Insurance, AbbVie, Waters, and various banks
    - One or two major property owners
    - Area artists
    - Leicester Arts Council
- Identify a Project Lead for the program. The lead oversees the entire process, establishes roles and responsibilities, and finalizes the timeline and budget. The Project Lead can be a member of the Working Group, an engaged local, an artist, or any other dedicated individual for promoting the program.
    - Using the details in this project recommendation, the lead will create a succinct PPT presentation with overall goals, vacant ground floor locations, information on Working Group, timeline, and budget. Include expected benefits for commercial areas and for the community.
- Conduct an audit of existing storefront vacancies to create a database of available spaces for the Vacant Storefronts Program.
- Develop a storefront typology using assessor data to create categories for storefront types. The categories should group storefronts based on window space, size of the storefront, and additional information to support coordinating the space with the activation use. Potential typologies may include:
    - Larger Industrial: Without windows or typical storefront or office configuration, these spaces present possibilities for any alternative use that requires rough space, large spaces, or light industrial-type space. Uses could include maker space, light manufacturing, rough black box-type performance or rehearsal space, and possibly artist workshops depending on the ability to retrofit the space for natural lighting. These uses will likely require zoning changes.
    - Isolated Small Storefronts: These storefronts are usually surrounded by residential structures and wooded land. Because of their isolated location and small size, these spaces need a destination business, such as a craft or quilt shop, model shop or game shop, that will draw from regional enthusiasts.
    - Town Center Storefronts: These properties have the potential to be a pop-up location for arts and making uses or co-working space. Parking lots, if applicable, could be a food truck destination on weekends, creating a unique spot in the Town Center for a hub of activity. Tables, chairs, and planters in front of the buildings, as well as perhaps a parking pavement mural, could create greater potential for the re-use of adjacent ground floor space. The location of this space near the Town Common provides other opportunities to link interior uses and activities and parking lot use with events and fairs on the Town Common (harvest festival, craft fair).
- Determine target market for temporary uses and align those uses with the storefront typology. Potential uses may include retail, art spaces, test kitchens, professional services, event space, local crafts, and art galleries.
- Create a Storefronts Landlords Database that tracks ownership of storefronts, contact information, and status of involvement in the program.
- Consult landlords on the development of a guidance document for the use of the space, including types of materials used, extent of allowing alterations, location of installations, and expectations for demobilizing the space. Discuss potential translation needs for non-English speakers and access and functional needs populations.
- Collect all necessary documentation that may be needed to ensure legal and contractual compliance
    - Lease Indemnity Agreement: Ensures that tenants are not held responsible for personal injury or property damage on the leased property.
    - Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Town and property owners focused on use of outdoor spaces for events and activation, including seating areas, food trucks, pavement murals, and weekend fairs. Provide property owners with boiler plate temporary tenant agreement for their review, editing, and use, as desired.
    - Insurance: Provides coverage to the tenant for personal injury or property damage on the leased property.

Process (continued)

Phase 2: Outreach and Coordination

- Draft a Vacant Storefronts Program outreach information document or flyer for potential users and landlords. Discuss potential translation needs for non-English speakers and access and functional needs populations.
  - User Outreach Document: Detail the vision of the program to potential users, including businesses, entrepreneurs, artists, and civic organizations about the opportunity of the program, types of spaces, legal information, financial information, and additional requirements for eligibility. Incorporate best-practice examples for reference.
  - Property owner Outreach Document: Detail the vision of the program to property owners including the potential benefits the program will have on the community, possibility of future tenants, marketing of the space, and other additional selling points. Incorporate best-practice examples for reference.
- Begin a Landlord Outreach Campaign and reach out to landlords through cold calls, e-mails, and online and print publications (guidance document).
  - Using Town Assessor data, contact vacant ground floor building and property owners/managers with information on the project (PDF of PPT) and requests for participation in the project (or invite them to participate in an informational zoom meeting with other property owners). Ask property owners what their plans are, their needs, and their questions/concerns about the project. Be clear about the Town's "ask" and outline how liability and length of tenancy are to be addressed (often a sticking point for property owners).
- Coordinate with Town agencies to streamline permit and approval processes for storefront improvements and alterations (Building Commission and Fire Department process for qualifying a space).
- Negotiate reduced pricing from private construction and trade companies to assist with improvements in exchange for publicity and marketing at the storefronts.

Best Practice: Pop-Ups in the Retail Mix
Adams, MA

The project will attract small businesses to Adams that address local's day-to-day needs and provide amenities for visitors who are there to explore the region. To accomplish this, the project will build on local boosterism and capture residents' pride while identifying new and under-represented voices the Town may not have previously engaged. Years of disinvestment have led many to give up hope on Adams' potential to provide good local jobs. By bringing positive attention to Adams, the project hopes to re-inspire residents challenged by poverty. Pop-up stores, while unfamiliar, can build a following, so long as residents take an active role in choosing those selected and see their success as providing benefits to neighbors.

Process (continued)

Phase 3: Program Implementation

- Design the Vacant Storefronts Pilot Program. Establish a timeframe for the pilot program, the number of participants and type of uses, the locations of the storefronts, the duration of occupancy, the matchmaking process, and the marketing of the program.
- Begin a Vacant Storefronts Marketing Campaign by using the guidance documents, local media, other press releases, social media, and the Town's website to communicate the program.
- Align the Vacant Storefronts Program with the Project 8: Hold Recurring Town Events to ensure increased foot traffic and publicity. Market the pop-ups or installations as "pop-up nights."
- Use "pop-up nights" as opportunities to gather feedback about the program to support marketing materials, identify gaps in retail and business services, evaluate overall impacts, and decide on next steps for identifying new commercial tenants.
- Determine opportunities to transition from pilot program into something more long term. Consider making pop-ups permanent tenants and provide the entrepreneurs the technical assistance needed to make the transition.
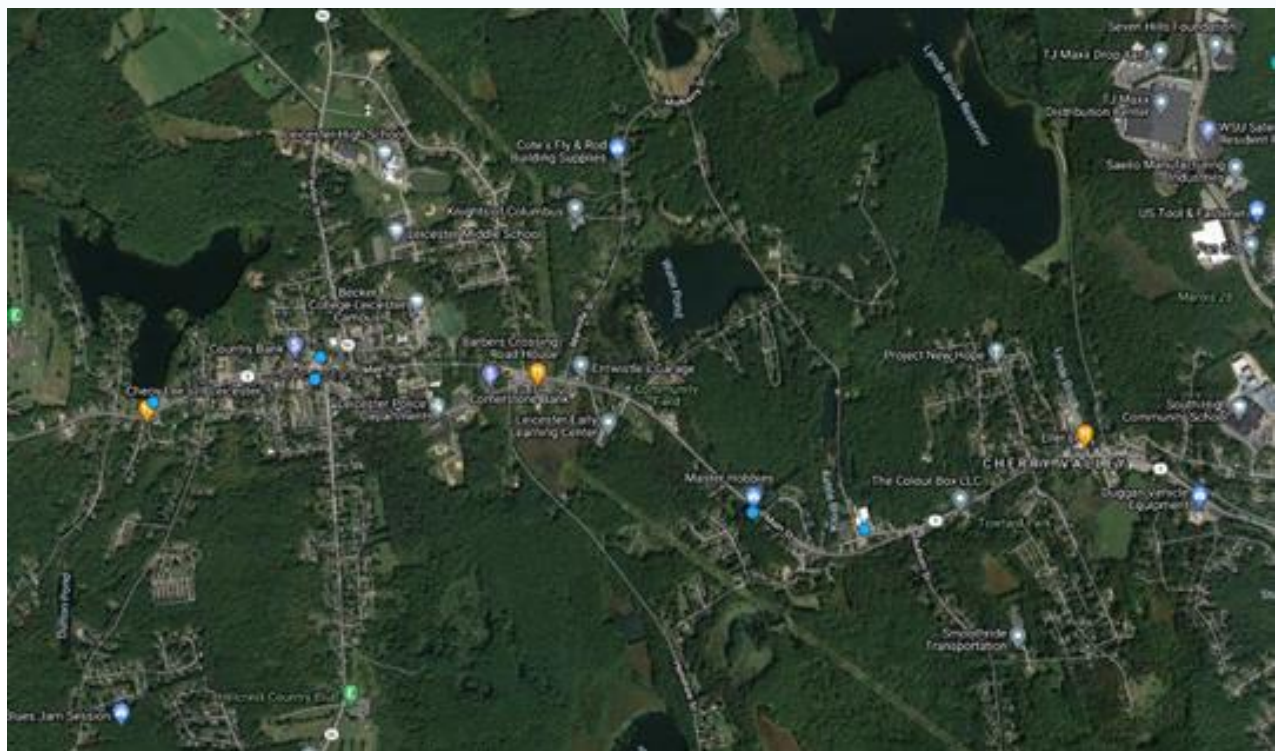
The blue dots represent the five vacant ground floor spaces in the Study Area. These properties are spread across two miles on Main Street. Source: Google Maps

Launch a Branding Campaign

Category		Revenue and Sales
Location		Town of Leicester
Origin		Leicester EDC
Budget		Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe		Short Term (Less than 5 years)
Risk		Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Number of businesses, community organizations, and community members that participate in offering insight and feedback; Number of businesses that participate in the voluntary adoption of the new Town brand and style; Public and business owner satisfaction with changes (information to be collected via surveys)
Partners & Resources		Planning Board, EDC, Historical Commission, Arts Council, Friends of Swan Tavern Historical Commission, Rotary Club

Budget (continued)

Total cost may range from $15,000-$50,000, depending on the services contracted by an external consultant. Items in this budget will likely include:

- Brand Strategy: $5-10k
- Stakeholder Engagement (i.e., interviews): $5-15k
- Public Engagement (e.g., online or in-person survey): $10-20k
- Logo/Brand Design: $15-25k
- City/Town Seal Design: $15-25k
- Brand extension (i.e., supporting visuals): $10-20k
- Print or Digital Collateral: $5-50k
- Brand Guide: $5-20k

Funding Sources:

- EDA Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Grant
- MDI Technical Assistance Grant
- Community Planning Grant Program

Risk (continued)

Community buy-in is a critical aspect in adopting a brand that communicates the values of various communities within Leicester. Similarly, stakeholders may not all share the same vision for the Town branding. Additionally, updating the Town branding will require coordination through all departments and within the community, straining the capacity of the Town and its financial resources.

Diagnostic

Leicester Welcome Sign. Source: Google

The Town of Leicester experienced a decrease in business activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 70% of business survey respondents indicated that they had experienced a reduction in revenue, and 56% of respondents experienced a decrease in customers compared to 2019 levels. To recover successfully from COVID-19, Leicester will need to retain existing businesses and customers and attract new ones. Establishing a cohesive Town brand will help local businesses attract a larger audience and support overall economic recovery.

Route 9, a major highway that drivers use to get to and from Worcester, bisects the Study Area. Leicester's position as a highway community contributes to the Town often being overlooked. Additionally, key community stakeholders identified a lack of cohesive Leicester branding. One stakeholder stated that "commuters do not know what Leicester offers beyond the convenience stores on Route 9."

The business survey demonstrated a clear desire for developing marketing strategies for the commercial district, as 90% of survey respondents emphasized the importance of developing strategies that promote business growth and retention. Additionally, 85% of survey respondents demonstrated an interest in the recruitment of new businesses. This branding campaign will increase Leicester's visibility and act as a catalyst for further economic development.

Action Item

A branding campaign will highlight the Town's history.
Source: Google

A branding campaign will create a rejuvenated and cohesive Town identity that will highlight the Town of Leicester's history and best offerings. This effort will align with ongoing efforts to re-establish an emphasis on historical aspects of the Town Center, including the renovations made to the Swan Tavern. Establishing a "One Leicester" branding campaign will help local businesses attract a larger audience and aid economic recovery. The branding campaign will build off the existing strengths of the community and will include the following aspects:

- Centralized Town message and brand;
- Thorough review of the current branding and marketing;
- Outreach and feedback from key stakeholders to Identify best practices and areas for improvement; and
- Comprehensive marketing strategy aimed towards the Town's target audience.

Process

Phase 1: Audit of Current Branding

- Identify Town staff and community members who will be responsible for leading the rebranding effort.
- Organize a committee of Town stakeholders to oversee the development and implementation of each phase of the branding campaign program.
  - The committee will determine if the Town of Leicester will enlist the help of a third-party marketing and advertising agency for Phase 3 or if the Town will take ownership of the initiative itself. The timeframe and budget will be adjusted accordingly if a third-party firm will be involved in the branding efforts.
- Carry out a comprehensive internal assessment of current Town branding. The purpose of this audit will be to highlight existing strengths, best practices, and areas for improvement.
  - The assessment will also highlight current available Town resources and infrastructure (e.g., parks and recreation).
  - The internal assessment will evaluate the Town website, street signs, and any other existing structures and programs put in place for business expansion and economic development.

Phase 2: Community Outreach

- Conduct outreach to members of the community to identify Leicester's offerings to highlight in the branding campaign.
- Conduct interviews with business owners, Town staff, and local organizations to understand and identify key existing Town offerings that are to be highlighted in the new campaign. Interviews should also be utilized to understand areas the type of change community members would want to see. Sample questions might include:
  - What is your favorite thing to do in Leicester?
  - What is your favorite part about Leicester?
  - What changes would you suggest to improve the Town of Leicester's business district for residents, pedestrians, and shoppers?
  - What additional types of businesses would you like to see in Leicester?
- Conduct initial outreach to cultural councils, historical councils, and local civic organizations to garner involvement. Outreach can be conducted through public surveys or door-to-door advertising, and/or round-table meetings.
- As applicable, hold one (or a series) of round-table meetings amongst group representatives for continued joint coordination.
- Survey key community members to understand what Town offerings are important to highlight, what additional resources may need to be developed (e.g., grant application guides), and the most accessible format for the information.

Update signage that contains Town name and logos. Source: Leicester

Process

Phase 3: Develop Branding and Marketing

- Using information and feedback collected from community members and key stakeholders, develop a vision and centralized message for the Town's branding campaign.
    - Integrate findings and the Town's main objectives to create a cohesive Town brand.
- Identify possible marketing approaches and identify the most feasible approach for the Town. Initial marketing approaches may consist of displaying banners, flyers, and posters in public spaces.
    - Target additional marketing efforts to utilize dormant public spaces and open downtown areas.
- Align Town branding with the comprehensive wayfinding system and other projects as applicable.
- Conduct research on existing bylaws and any regulations pertaining to the display of banners and posters in public spaces. Identify which permits (if any) are needed for displaying marketing materials.
    - Coordinate with Town agencies to expedite the permitting and approval process for banners, flyers, posters, and other signage.
    - Identify any potential legal constraints that may interfere with the approval and marketing processes.
- Conduct research on existing regulations and potential sign improvements for signage along Route 9.
- Based on the data collected from interviews with various organizations and community members, develop and implement a pilot branding program that addresses the concerns voiced during these interviews.
    - Initial branding and marketing of the program can be done by updating the Town website and displaying new signage around the Town of Leicester.
- Hold a stakeholder review period to collect feedback on the pilot branding program. During the feedback period, identify best practices and areas for improvement.
- Design and implement a marketing campaign to foster greater involvement from members of the Town.
    - Newly established Town brand can be marketed to members of the community through banners, posters, and flyers around town.
    - Marketing towards businesses and business owners can be conducted.
- Based on success (or lack thereof) of current marketing efforts, consider utilizing additional marketing platforms and avenues. This could include social media campaigns, community newsletters, and advertisements on the Town website.
    - Identify a party responsible for maintaining and updating the digital platforms on a regular basis to ensure that the most up to date information is available.
- Evaluate any growth/decline in businesses and business retention to study the effectiveness of the Town's branding. If needed, re-evaluate the brand and message, and tailor towards the current needs of the Town.

Collaboration between Town stakeholders s crucial in developing the new Town Branding. Source: Best Practice Compendiums

Create an Economic Development Committee Strategic Plan

Category		Administrative Capacity
Location		Town Center and Town Commons (Census Tract 7351)
Origin		Leicester Economic Development Committee, CMRPC
Budget		Low Budget ($50,000) if done internally using Town budget and Medium Budget ($50,000-$200,000) if contracting external consultants to facilitate plan development.
Timeframe		Short Term (Less than 5 years)
Risk		Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Percent increase of business growth; Percent increase of business retention; Percent increase of business
Partners & Resources		EDC, Town Planner, CMRPC, BVCOC, Town Leicester Select of Board

Funding (continued)

Funding Sources:

- CMRPC Planning Services
- Community Planning Grant Program
- Community One Stop for Growth
- ARPA Economic Adjustment Assistance

Risk (continued)

Stakeholders agree this is a needed and high-priority project. Potential risks that may impact the project include limited engagement from Town Staff and the Town Council and the high rate of turnover for EDC members.

Public-facing Economic Development Strategic Plan outlining strategies and goals of the EDC. Source: Tualatin Oregon

Action Item

Project Components

The EDC Strategic Plan will serve as a foundation for the role of the EDC in the Town and provide guidance as to the activities/projects under their purview. While the EDC may have focus areas for specific communities, they will service the entire Town. The EDC Strategic Plan should include the following key aspects:

• Mission statement for the EDC;
• Goals that will drive efforts towards economic diversification, infrastructure & mobility, support for businesses, and workforce development;
• Projects the EDC will undertake that will meet established goals;
• Data relevant to economic growth, including demographic data of Leicester businesses and customer base, an analysis of future market trends, and public input;
• EDC roles and responsibilities, including those of the EDC as a whole, EDC members and specific positions (e.g., EDC Chair), Town staff liaisons, and regional representatives (e.g., CMRPC, BVCOC); and
• EDC operational procedures, including member turnover procedures and guidance for plan maintenance.

The projects outlined in the EDC Strategic Plan may expand upon the vacant storefronts, online business directory, recurring Town events, and branding campaign RRP projects.

EDC Vision

The most important components of the EDC Strategic Plan is a mission statement and goals. The mission statement will drive the EDC towards a specific vision for economic development in Leicester. A sample mission statement is included below. The EDC goals propose specific, measurable objectives that push towards the mission statement for economic development. The goals should also be action-oriented and direct the EDC's activities. Projects undertaken by the EDC should directly correlate to one or more economic development goals. Sample goals that the EDC may adopt are included below.

Leicester EDC Mission Statement

The Leicester EDC works proactively to promote, encourage, and facilitate the development of responsible and properly planned commercial and industrial growth within the community in order to expand and strengthen the local economy and diversify the community's tax base and give the residents more opportunities to live, work, and thrive in an economically forward-looking and financially strong community.

Leicester EDC Goals

Proactively promote and encourage the development, redevelopment, expansion and retention of Leicester's downtown, commercial, and industrial tax base.

Support existing businesses and encourage businesses to remain in Leicester, and if feasible, to expand operations.

Pursue grants with other departments as appropriate.

Market Leicester as a business-friendly community.

Streamline permitting.

Develop centralized informational sources regarding business opportunities for commercial/industrial real estate options including tax incentives that are revenue positive.

Process
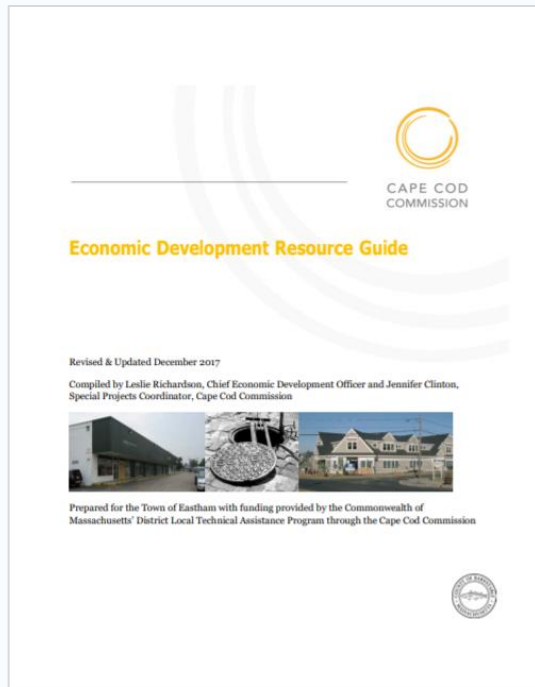
Economic Development Resource Guide to support local communities begin their own EDCs. Source: Cape Cod Commission

The creation of a regional workforce development board to provide oversight and guide the vision of the EDC. Source: Boston PIC

Phase 1: Establish the Planning Process

- Identify Town staff and/or third-party consultants who will be responsible for driving the development of the Plan.
- Identify key community stakeholders, including business owners and community members, who have an insight on economic development in Leicester and will be engaged during the planning process.
- Should the EDC Strategic Plan development align with the update of the Town of Leicester's Master Plan, consider additional planning process milestones that may need to be added (e.g., public review periods, stakeholder group composition).

Phase 2: Develop the Plan

- Conduct an internal audit of applicable Town planning documents, economic development and business support activities from Town and region, past EDC activities, and efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and any existing goals and efforts of the Committee to incorporate into the Plan.
- Collect data relevant to economic growth (e.g., demographics, future market trends). This information may be available in various other plans or formats (e.g., Workforce Development Plan).
- Develop a survey to collect feedback from the business community regarding the needs and vision for economic development.
- Conduct interviews with Town staff, current and past EDC members, regional organizations, and key community leaders to understand the role the EDC should play in economic development and any core goals they should establish.
- Hold a public forum (e.g., Town Hall, webinar, online survey) to collect additional input regarding the needs and vision for economic development.
- Develop a draft Strategic Plan, starting with the mission statement and economic development goals.
- Hold a stakeholder review period to collect feedback and insight on the draft Strategic Plan.
- Finalize and adopt the EDC Strategic Plan.

Phase 3: Maintenance

- On an annual basis, review the Strategic Plan to note project progress and any needed changes or additions to operation procedures.
- Every five years, conduct a full-plan review and update process to align the Plan with any changes in priorities and goals.
- When the Town of Leicester's Master Plan is updated, utilize the EDC Strategic Plan as a guide for the economic development section. Update the EDC Strategic Plan to align with the updated Master Plan as needed.

Establish an Online-Based Permitting Process

Category		Administrative Capacity
Location		Town of Leicester
Origin		Town Planner/ Director of Inspectional Services
Budget		Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe		Medium Timeframe (5-10 years)
Risk		Medium Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Decreased average time for permit processing; Decreased staff time required per permit; Increased number of permits accepted and processed on an annual basis
Partners & Resources		Planning Board, Building/Code Enforcement; Code and Health Department

Risk (continued)

This project will require collaboration among departments as well as sensitivity to the technical limitations of small businesses and residents. The Town will need an ongoing and comprehensive effort to improve the permitting process, not just a new piece of software. The cost of initial and operating funds will determine the viability of the project.

Expedite licensing and permitting for outdoor dining so that businesses do not face obstacles in normal operations. Source: Best Practice Compendiums

Diagnostic

The limitations on in-person interactions as imposed by COVID-19 highlighted the need for digital systems to support business permitting and licensing. Community stakeholders cited challenges with the permitting process. One stakeholder told a story about a few business owners who had to apply for permits twice because their files were lost during staff turnover. Town staff members have similarly noted that the current process requires too many "one stops," extended wait times, and the issue that multiple departments cannot work on a permit simultaneously. Additionally, nearly 20% of business survey respondents indicated that current permitting processes are obstacles to their business operation. However, many community stakeholders commended Leicester for quickly adapting to provide digital resources to communicate COVID-19 information and requirements. The Town has previously identified permitting and licensing as a challenge and are looking to build upon a recently conducted Study by implementing a streamlined process.

Action Item

Establishing and maintaining an online-based permitting process will require a thoughtful and incremental approach. Town staff involved in permitting will need to coordinate to determine key goals and objectives for this effort. The project implementation will require a thorough review of existing processes, setting a clear and well-managed workflow of the permitting process, and utilizing a phased implementation plan to determine what level of online permitting is feasible and required. In this project effort, the Town will decide whether to utilize an internal online process (e.g., sharing documents via Microsoft Office software) or an external vendor software. When determining the most appropriate software to use, Leicester should consider the following questions:

- What are the current process issues? How would a new process or system address these challenges? Let the challenges and identified solutions drive the complexity needed for the system.
- What type of end-user experiences (e.g., community members applying for permits) do you want the process to have? How does an internal or external system meet these goals?
- What are the upfront and annual subscription costs of the external vendor?
- How would your data be managed by the external vendor and is it easily transferable to an internal system?
- Who is going to upkeep the program? If you need a specialist, consider the cost of expanding a staffer's role.
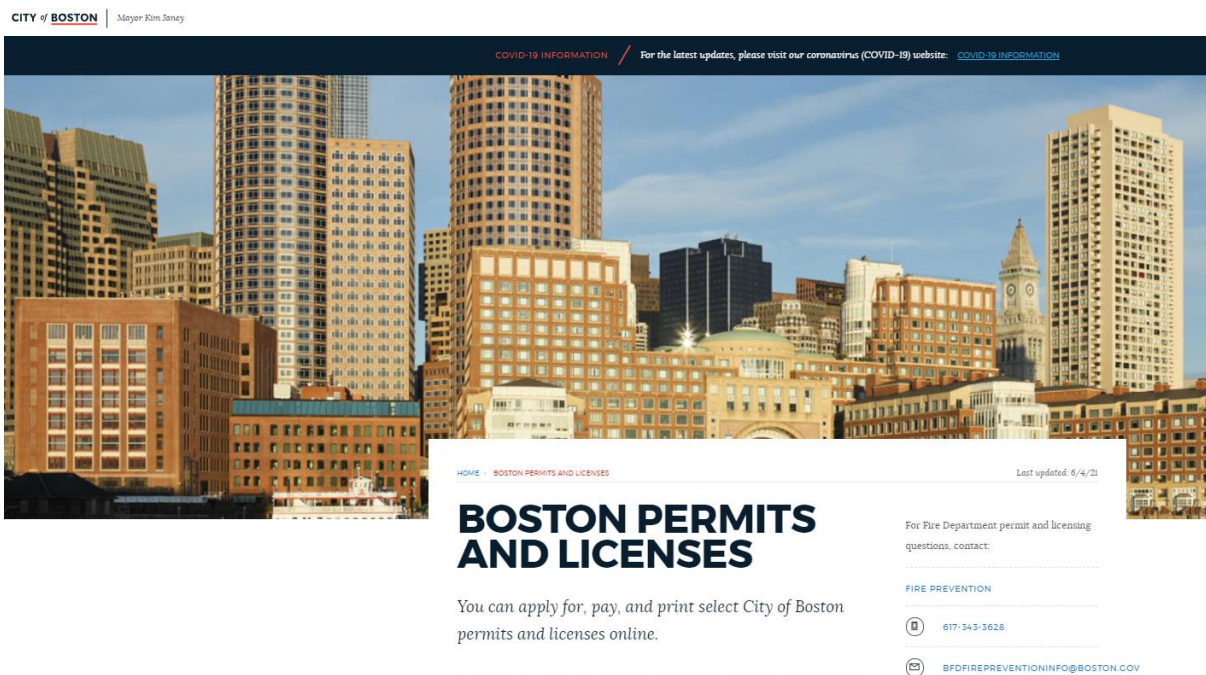
Example of online permitting system from Boston, MA. Source: Google

Action Item

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- What are the current process issues? How would a new process or system address these challenges? Let the challenges and identified solutions drive the complexity needed for the system.

- What type of end-user experiences (e.g., community members applying for permits) do you want the process to have? How does an internal or external system meet these goals?

- What are the upfront and annual subscription costs of the external vendor?
- How would your data be managed by the external vendor and is it easily transferable to an internal system?

- Who is going to upkeep the program? If you need a specialist, consider the cost of expanding the role of an existing staffer.

Process

Phase 1: Establish the Planning Process

- Identify a Town staff member with necessary expertise and who can allocate adequate time to the project to serve as the project manager.
- Convene a working group of departments involved in permitting and licensing.
- Determine what outcomes the working group specifically seeks to accomplish with the project, what additional desirable outcomes exist, and any other key considerations for the project (e.g., risks, budget, timeline).
- Identify additional local stakeholders whose experiences and needs factor into this project.
- Create a short list of achievable, desirable outcomes.

Phase 2: Develop the Plan

- Identify particularly efficient sections of the process, as well as single points of failure (SPOFs) that may lead to process stops or slowdowns.
- Conduct interviews with the working group to understand their role in the process and any suggestions they may have to make it more efficient.
- Develop the current and proposed workflows, identifying department requirements (e.g., this process requires two weeks to complete), assigning responsibility by position and not name, and selecting back-up positions to complete tasks (e.g., another department staffer who can sign off on a process should the head of the department be unavailable), where possible.
- Socialize the internal workflow with Town Staff to ensure the process aligns with department-specific priorities.

Phase 3: Maintenance

- Create a catalog of potential vendors that could provide the intended service and communities that have utilized their services. Outline their product options and any pricing information.
- Research internal IT capacity at the Town level to determine if providing an in-house product is an option. Determine if funding additional staffing capacity, if needed, is likely to be cost-competitive with vendors.
- Determine whether to issue an RFP/Request for Quote (RFQ) or develop an in-house product.
  - If an RFP/RFQ will be issued, outline selection criteria based on the desirable outcomes for the project.
  - If selecting an in-house option, maintain the ability to pivot towards an RFP/RFQ if adequate talent and capacity cannot be obtained within budget constraints.
- Select a product vendor considering cost, capacity, and intended outcomes.
  - If an RFP/RFQ was issued, convene a selection committee (likely a subset of the working group) to choose a vendor.
  - Be conscious of what the vendor is offering and for what cost.

Phase 4: Develop and Implement the System

- Develop the product system and accompanying materials, which may include a formalized workflow and Standard Operating Procedures.
- Invite a few Town staff members to beta-test the system. Conduct an exercise to test the process in sections.
- Invite a few external users to beta-test the system. Conduct a larger scale exercise to test the systems holistic capabilities, with all necessary Town staff involved to manage the process and understand its capabilities.
- Collect user feedback, both internal and external, to determine how well the system meets the project goals. Make adjustments as needed.
- Launch the external-facing system.

Phase 5: Evaluation and Maintenance

- Maintain a working group to manage implementation, collect and adjudicate feedback, and make systems changes.
- Develop a system to assess product effectiveness from an external and internal perspective.
- On a quarterly basis, review the system feedback to note any needed changes to the process and make system adjustments accordingly. Continue to evaluate project effectiveness on original criteria.
- On an annual basis, comprehensively review the system with an internal team to evaluate effectiveness of the system and make system adjustments accordingly.

Create an Online Business Directory

Category		Administrative Capacity
Location		Town of Leicester
Origin		CMRPC
Budget		Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe		Short Term (Less than 5 years)
Risk		Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Monthly active users (MAU); Daily page visits (homepage); Monthly page visits (for each business page)
Partners & Resources		EDC; BVCOC and CMRPC; Town Administrator and Department Staff; Business Owners; Community Organizations (i.e., Rotary Club); Web Developer(s), Business Directory Experts

Budget (continued)

Cost includes ~$20k for technical assistance to develop and/or host the platform; program upkeep may require EDC staff time and/or IT staff time.

Funding Sources:

- Community Compact IT Grant Program
- Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD) Regional Pilot Project Grant Program
- Economic Development Administration (EDA) Competitive Travel and Tourism Grants
- ARPA Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Grant

Risks (continued)

The risks are political and financial.

- First, politically, there is limited municipal capacity to oversee, implement, and maintain the directory, and a paid role may be required to ensure the directory's success. Oversight of the directory is crucial to ensure information is up to date and verified.

- Additionally, the directory should complement the work done by the BVCOC. There is a risk that the directory may be redundant to some services provided by the Chamber.

- The directory requires hiring a software vendor to establish the website, creating a cost risk.

- Finally, the directory is at risk of being redundant to larger web-services like Google and Amazon.

Diagnostic

The Town may use a similar model for creating their own repositories. Source: Massachusetts State Online Business Directory

The impacts of COVID-19 on local businesses have spurred communities to focus on ways to "Buy Local" and support businesses in their communities. The EDC has previously conducted marketing efforts to "Buy Local," which have successfully supported businesses, but these campaigns have not been conducted since the onset of COVID-19. For residents to patronize these local businesses, they need to know what businesses exist regardless of a Buy Local Campaign. Key informants noted that neither the Leicester Business Association nor the EDC has a comprehensive list of contact information for local businesses.

The business survey highlighted a desire to increase access to shared marketing opportunities. Over 90% of respondents expressed interest in shared marketing/advertising assistance. Additionally, Leicester is home to many unique businesses that operate out of homes and rely on online advertising for marketing. A centralized business directory would enable business marketing opportunities and allow community members to find local businesses to support.

Action Item

Listings on online business directories will improve businesses' visibility in the local community. Source: City Local Pro

This project will create an Online Business Directory for the Town of Leicester to provide a resource for the business community's growth, retention, and expansion. The Online Business Directory will serve as a central hub for aspects related to the business community. The information included in the repository will detail hours of operation, descriptions, contact information, website links, active promotions, calendars, and other information to help connect people to the business, civic organizations to businesses, and businesses to each other. The directory will also serve as an analytical tool for the Town to help diversify tenant mix, market Leicester to outside businesses, and provide other metrics to ensure the health of Leicester's economy.

Process

Phase 1: Planning and Design

- Create a Steering Committee to plan, design, and oversee the implementation of the Online Business Directory. Organizations should represent the interests of the Town, businesses, community, and property owners.
- Identify a viable organization to serve as the lead coordinator for the implementation. The role of the lead includes overseeing coordination with a software vendor for development, administration, and transition vendor role to staff, volunteer, or organization.
- Create a stakeholder engagement process to coordinate with the business community and understand how the business directory can serve their specific needs. Business engagement will ensure the content within the directory meets their needs and that businesses have bought into the process and will engage in the offerings.
- Establish a community discussion/presentation to detail the project, describe the implementation, and get feedback from potential participants.
- Determine the administrative roles for maintaining the Online Business Directory post-implementation. Internships and volunteer options provide an opportunity to engage Leicester's youth and develop their skill sets.
- Design the site's home page.
    - Calendars: Contains Information on scheduled events, meetings, promotions, and other relevant information.
    - Business Spotlight: A page meant to highlight a particular business or industry in Leicester through a formal selection process.
    - Promotions Pages: Curates all the current promotions offered in Leicester. Promotions can be specific to one business or through cross-marketing strategies.
    - Social media Collage: Contains a collage of the social media accounts of Leicester businesses to provide a visual representation of the business community and an engaging section within the home page.
- Design the site's website tabs.
    - Directory: A complete database of all active businesses in the community. Includes filtering options for industry, minority and women-owned businesses, hours of operation, location, or products.
    - Business Profiles: Contains a business page with business description, contact information (phone, email), address, hours of operation, social media links, active promotions, partnerships, and product information.
    - Contact: Provides the contact information for the organization/staff/volunteer that is maintaining the website so businesses and customers can obtain more information or solicit ideas.
    - Identify what business information needs to be collected when joining the directory. Create a simple survey or form on the EDC website so that businesses can efficiently submit and update their Information. Determination of what type of information to collect from businesses.
    - Name, Address, Contact Information, associations, services/products offered.
- Include room for customer feedback/experience at each business – potential line of communication between businesses and customers.
- Determine how the Online Business Directory can integrate with other RRP projects, such as the Town Events and Branding Campaign.

Process

Phase 2: Implementation

- Conduct outreach to the private sector, government, philanthropy, and the general community to get financial support for the project.
- Create an RFP for a software vendor for the creation of the website.
- Design a concurrent marketing campaign to attract potential users from the business and customer community.
    - Marketing to Businesses:
        - Door-to-door advertising directly to the businesses.
        - Interested and participating businesses as advocates and ambassadors to promote the directory.
    - Marketing to Customers:
        - Flyer campaign in residential areas and adjacent communities (include QR codes that can provide people with more information).
        - Flyer in participating businesses detailing the offerings of the directory (include QR codes that can provide people with more information).
        - Shop local campaigns to promote sustainable, equitable, and community-oriented purchasing behavior.
        - Social media to highlight promotions and services.
        - Testimonials form key stakeholders In the community.
- Additional ways to drive traffic to the online business directory (e.g., search engine optimization, social media marketing, email marketing, paid ads).

Phase 3: Maintenance

- Create a Maintenance Document that details the lead role, critical responsibilities, and demobilizing/onboarding procedures for the individual or organization responsible for keeping the directory current and up to date.
- Check social media pages daily to consistently update on the directory.
- Reach out to businesses weekly to understand updates in operations, promotions, or other relevant information.
- Provide passwords and administrative information for maintaining the website.
- Investigate the analytics of the directory to strategize marketing and outreach processes weekly.
- Create a coordinating strategy to ensure consistent engagement with the business community to communicate updates and address issues.
- Utilize website analytics and work with businesses to identify gaps in information, opportunities for new features, and other aspects to increase traffic and ensure usability.
- Collect data on the project's progress and integrate it with other community communications to keep customers and businesses engaged and informed about the community's efforts to strengthen the local economy and support businesses.

Hold Recurring Town Events

Category		Arts and Culture
Location		Town Center and Town Commons (Census Tract 7351)
Origin		Town Administrator
Budget		Low Budget (Less than $50,000)
Timeframe		Short Term (Less than 5 years)
Risk		Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators		Number of attendees at recurring Town events; Number of businesses and vendors that participate in the events; Percentage increase of business revenue (estimate)
Partners & Resources		EDC, Town Administrator, BVCOC; Rotary Club of Leicester; Leicester Planning Board; Leicester Arts Council; Leicester Cultural Council; Friends of Swan Tavern Historical Commission; Community members and individuals belonging to the artistic community (i.e., musicians, artists)

Budget (continued)

Likely to be little to no cost to the municipality outside of staff time for planning and implementation.
*
        Funding Sources:
* Mass Cultural Council Local Cultural Council Grants
* T-Mobile Hometown Grants
* MassDOT Shared Streets and Spaces Grant Program
    * Accepting new applications beginning January 2022
    * Grants range from $5k to $200k
* Urban Agenda Grant Program
* MDI Technical Assistance Grant
* Community Change Grant
* Corporate Giving and Donations

Risk (continued)

* Potential risks that may impact the project include limited engagement and buy-in from stakeholders, vendors, and the overall community.
* Permitting and other regulatory risks may impact the success of this project.
* Safety and health concerns may arise regarding proper food permitting and pedestrian and vehicle traffic coordination.
* Funding may be required for program implementation after planning is complete. Funding source(s) may be limited depending on the scalability of the program and events.

Diagnostic

Recurring Town events like Night Markets can attract both community members and local businesses. Source: Google

Leicester's business community experienced reduced operating hours, decreased revenue, and business closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the business survey, 71% of businesses reported less revenue in 2020 than they did the year prior, and revenue declined 25% or more for 59% of those surveyed. Additionally, the site visit conducted in April showed that Leicester had a 5.9% storefront vacancy rate. Identifying creative ways to drive increased traffic to Leicester is essential for growing the local economy.

When asked about strategies to attract and retain customers in the business survey, 80% of businesses listed "more cultural events or activities to bring people into the district" as important. Similarly, community stakeholders noted the lack of attractions that draw people into the community. One stakeholder expressed that current community events (e.g., Music on the Green) attract individuals to Town, but "local businesses do not leverage the events, and the events are few and far between." Recovering the economic losses caused by COVID-19 requires attracting and retaining potential customers into the Town through consistent activation of spaces.

Action Item

Utilize public spaces such as parks for recurring Town events. Source: Google

This project will create a recurring Town events program to attract a local and regional customer base to Leicester. The event program will activate underutilized spaces throughout the community by offering the services of businesses, community groups, and other local institutions. Additionally, by increasing the exposure of established businesses, burgeoning entrepreneurs, artists, performers, musicians, and other creative individuals, Leicester can provide a space to increase the exposure of these stakeholders while offering a new perspective of what the downtown can offer the community. The long-term potential of the recurring Town events program is to provide businesses an opportunity to increase exposure, increase community cohesion, and activate public spaces in the Town.

Process

Phase 1: Establish the Planning Process

- Identify Town staff who will be responsible for overseeing the process of developing a Recurring Town Events Program. The planning committee should put in place a structure for planning and implementing the program. The committee should align on program goals, roles and responsibilities of each member, implementation process, and event details (e.g., frequency, location, timing).
- Identify key community stakeholders who could provide different perspectives on how community involvement in the Town can be rejuvenated. Survey the arts community, specific cultural communities, businesses and entrepreneurs, and landlords to gain their perspective on the stagnant community events in Leicester, how they can support the program, and what success looks like to them. Questions to ask may include:
    - What factors do you believe are contributing to the disconnect between local businesses and organizations and the rest of the community?
    - What types of events would you like to see held in Leicester?
    - What types of businesses and/or services would you like to see highlighted more within the community?
- Based on feedback gathered from stakeholders and community members, identify potential locations and types of events for the Town to host. Potential events include Art and Music Showcases (e.g., Concert on the Commons), Farmers Market and Night Markets, Food and Beverage Competitions, and Retail and Small Business Showcases.
- Review current Town regulations on street and sidewalk closures, food distribution permits, capacity and safety constraints, and any other requirements associated with establishing an outdoor event in a public space.
    - Discuss an expedited and singular permitting process for the recurring Town events by coordinating with municipal agencies on specific requirements.
- Conduct outreach to the identified businesses and organizations to garner participation in the identified recurring Town events.
- Create a "Vendor Information Guide" that outlines the following for potential vendors.

Framers' markets are an example of a recurring Town event. Source: Google

Process (continued)

Phase 2: Implementation and Marketing

- Create a Google Survey to invite vendors to sign-up for the identified recurring Town events and detail their requirements and services/products offered. The survey should translate into a database to support scheduling, marketing and promotions, and ensuring even access to the events. If interest is high, consider expanding the scope of the event.
- Create a resources database to identify implementation resource needs (e.g., additional material needs for Town events include signage, safety) and who is providing each item. If resources are required, the planning committee can use funds to obtain certain resources. Additionally, identify the storage needs for the resources.
- Develop a marketing strategy to attract vendors and promote the Town event(s) to Leicester and regional communities.
    - Flyer Campaign: Create and distribute flyers that detail the program's vision, strategy, and desired outcomes to the vendors.
    - Poster Distribution: Create and display posters on local business storefronts that advertise event details (e.g., location, time, vendors).
    - Community-Wide Marketing: Leverage local news and media outlets to communicate event details and overall program vision.
    - Identify ways to promote vendors during the Town events (e.g., coupon program, cross-marketing, aligning complementary vendors next to each other).

Phase 3: Iterate and Scale

- Create and distribute surveys that target both vendors and community members to understand the strengths of the program and any areas for improvement.
- Determined scalability of the program:
    - Potential vendors to recruit for future events.
    - Identify additional locations.
    - Identify additional partners for future collaboration; expand to regional partners and event coordination.
- Align the Recurring Town Events Program with Project 10: Branding Campaign.
    - Use updated Leicester branding to promote and brand the Recurring Town Events.
- As available, reference the framework for similar Recurring Town Events program in neighboring towns to apply any pertaining best practices and lessons learned.
- On an annual basis and as significant changes occur, review the Recurring Town Events Program Guidelines to note progress, changes in need, and report any relevant impacts on local businesses.
- Every five years, conduct a full review of the Recurring Town Events Program and make any necessary updates to ensure that the program aligns with changes in priorities and goals.

Appendix

Appendix A. Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
AADT	Annual Average Daily Traffic
ABCC	Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
ARPA	American Rescue Plan Act
BVCOC	Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce
CEDS	Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
CMRPC	Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
DCR	Department of Conservation and Recreation
DHCD	MA Department of Housing and Community Development
DPW	Department of Public Works
EDA	U.S. Economic Development Administration
EDC	Economic Development Committee
GIS	Global Information System
MAAB	Massachusetts Architectural Access Board
MassDOT	Massachusetts Department of Transportation
MDI	Massachusetts Downtown Initiative
MOBD	Massachusetts Office of Business Development
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MVP	Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness
RFP	Request for Proposal
RFQ	Request for Quote
RRFB	Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons
RRP	Rapid Recovery Plan
SPOF	Single Points of Failure

Appendix B. Data Profile

Leicester Data Appendix

Study Area Boundary
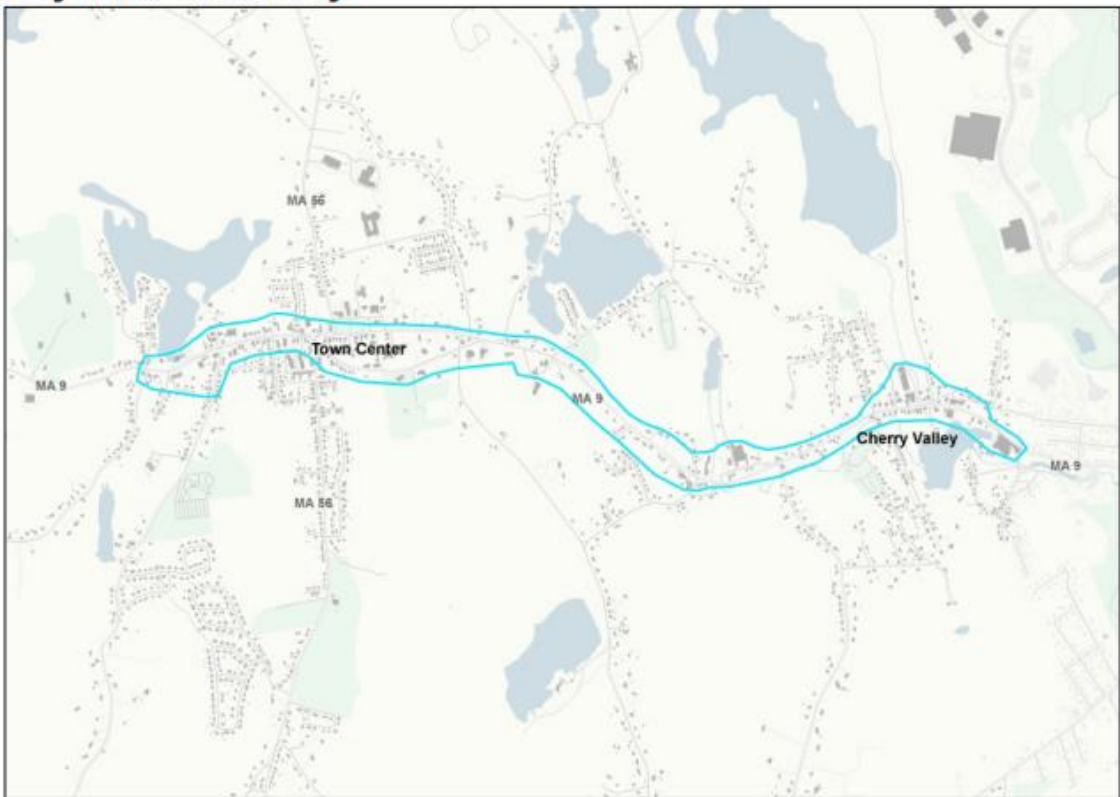
Area Demographics

Total Population

605	Study Area
11,306	Leicester
185,143	Worcester
6,850,553	Massachusetts

Population Density (per sq. mile)

1,775	Study Area
440	Leicester
233	Worcester
885	Massachusetts

Average Household Size

2.69	Study Area
2.65	Leicester
2.47	Worcester
2.51	Massachusetts

Commute Type

28.1%	Work in Leicester, Live Elsewhere
6.0%	Live & Work in Leicester
65.9%	Live in Leicester, Work Elsewhere

Car Ownership

N/A	Study Area
96.5%	Leicester
82.5%	Worcester
87.6%	Massachusetts

Commute to Work

Data Sources: : ESRI, August 2017. US Census Bureau, 2014-2019 American Community Survey. 2018 OntheMap Application.

1

Area Demographics

Race and Ethnicity

	Study Area	Leicester	Worcester	MA
Hispanic or Latino	6.6%	6.2%	21.9%	11.8%
White Alone	89.9%	89.4	69.2%	78.1%
Black or African American Alone	2.8%	3.3%	13.3%	7.6%
Asian Alone	2.5%	2.6%	7.4%	6.6%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native alone	0.2%	0.3%	0.6%	0.2%
Two or More Races	2.5%	2.3%	4.0%	3.3%

Educational Attainment

	Study Area	Leicester	Worcester	MA
12th Grade or Less	7.9%	8.5%	13.7%	8.7%
High School Graduate	32.8%	29.5%	30.7%	23.9%
Some College, No Degree	19.2%	21.5%	17%	15%
Associate's Degree	10.1%	9.9%	7.8%	7.4%
Bachelor's Degree	12.6%	19.2%	19.8%	24.7%
Graduate or Professional Degree	17.5	11.5%	11%	20.3%

Population by Age

	Study Area	Leicester	Worcester	MA
Under 5	3.6%	4.5%	5.0%	5.3%
5-14 Years	10.1%	11.8%	10.4%	16.4%
15-24 Years	19.2%	12.3%	18.9%	13.8
25-44 Years	22.8%	24.8%	27.8%	26.4%
45-64 Years	25.3%	28.9%	24.2%	27.3%
65+ Years	19%	17.7%	13.6%	16.4%

Median Age

39.6	**Study Area**
41.9	**Leicester**
2.47	Worcester
2.51	Massachusetts

Foreign-Born Population

N/A	**Study Area**
5.9%	**Leicester**
21.8%	Worcester
17.3%	Massachusetts

Income

Median Household Income

$71,824	**Study Area**
$76,154	**Leicester**
$57,092	Worcester
$85,843	Massachusetts

Pop. Below Poverty Line

NA	**Study Area**
4.3%	**Leicester**
11.7%	Worcester
6.0%	Massachusetts

Health

Public Coverage

28.4%	**Leicester**
36.3%	Massachusetts

Private Coverage

81.3%	**Leicester**
74.2%	Massachusetts

Leicester's Change in Health Insurance Coverage

Employment

Labor Force and Unemployment Rates

COVID Unemployment

Historical Rates

Data Sources: US Census Bureau, 2014-2019 American Community Survey.

2

Business Landscape

Retail Leakage

← Leakage   0   Surplus →

Category	Value
General Merchandise	53.8 (surplus)
Other Motor Vehicles	6.3
Beer/Wine/Liquor	6.9
Retail Trade	29.6
Total Retail	30.8
Restaurants/Other Eating Places	38.9
Food Services & Drinking Places	42.9
Food & Beverage Stores	53.9
Grocery Stores	61.1
Miscellaneous Store Retailers	63.6
Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers	81.4
Automobile Dealers	93.5
Special Food Services	100
Clothing Stores	100
Clothing/Accessories Stores	100
Health & Personal Care	100
Specialty Food Stores	100
Auto Parts/Accessor/Tire Stores	100
Drinking Places-Alcohol	100

Retail leakage and surplus are the differences between estimated spending by local residents on retail goods and estimated sales by local retail businesses. *The higher the number, the more an industry is overstaurated (surplus) or underserved (leakage).*

+100 - Total Surplus
- 100 - Total Leakage

Retail leakage occurs when consumer demand exceeds retail supply in a designated trade area. *On the chart,* a negative value indicates **leakage of retail sales** and represents net consumer spending that is being captured by retailers outside of the trade area.

Retail surplus occurs when retail supply exceeds consumer demand in a designated trade area. *On the chart,* a positive value indicates a **surplus of retail sales** and may signify a market where retailers are drawing customers from outside the trade area.

Types of Businesses in Study Area

Employee Count ←	Industry	Business Count →
8.5%	Construction	18%
5.9%	Other Service (Not Public Admin.)	14%
10.0%	Food and Drinking Service	10%
10.0%	Accommodation/Food	10%
4.9%	Public Administration	8%
16.3%	Health Care/Social Assistance	8%
5.4%	Retail Trade	8%
3.9%	Prof/Scientific/Tech Service	6%
12.9%	Educational Service	4%
10.2%	Admin/Support/Waste Management	4%
3.4%	Arts/Entertainment/Recreation	2%
0.7%	Real Estate/Rental/Leasing	2%
1.2%	Finance & Insurance	2%
1.7%	Wholesale Trade	2%
2.7%	Manufacturing	2%
1.0%	Utilities	2%
0.7%	Automotive Repair	2%
0%	Management Enterprises	0%
0%	Information	0%
0%	Transportation	0%

Data Sources: : ESRI, August 2017.

3

Appendix C. Business Survey

Business Survey Results - Data Tables

Community Where Targeted Downtown or Commercial District is Located

1. Please select the community where your business is located.

Leicester	21

Business Characteristics & Satisfaction with Commercial Area

2. Including yourself, how many people did your business employ prior to COVID (February 2020), including both full-time and part-time?

1	2	10%
2 to 5	6	29%
6 to 10	7	33%
11 to 20	4	19%
21 to 50	2	10%
More than 50	0	0%
Total	21	100%

3. Does your business own or rent the space where it operates?

Own	13	62%
Rent	8	38%
Total	21	100%

4. During the 3 years prior to COVID, had your business revenue . . .?

Increased	12	57%
Decreased	2	10%
Stayed about the Same	4	19%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	3	14%
Total	21	100%

5. Please select the category that best fits your business.

Retail (NAICS 44-45)	4	19%
Food Service (restaurants, bars), Accommodation (NAICS 72)	4	19%
Personal Service (hair, skin, nails, dry cleaning) (NAICS 81)	0	0%
Professional Scientific, Technical, Legal (NAICS 54)	1	5%
Finance, Insurance (NAICS 52)	1	5%
Healthcare (medical, dental, other health practitioners) (NAICS 62)	1	5%
Arts, Entertainment, Recreation, Fitness (NAICS 71)	2	10%
Non-Profit, Community Services	3	14%
Other	5	24%
Total	21	100%

6. Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of the Downtown or Commercial District where your business is located.

Condition of public spaces, streets, sidewalks

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	3	14%
Neutral	7	33%
Satisfied	9	43%
Very Satisfied	2	10%
Total	21	100%

Condition of Private Buildings, Facades, Storefronts, Signage

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	3	14%
Neutral	10	48%
Satisfied	7	33%
Very Satisfied	1	5%
Total	21	100%

Access for Customers & Employees

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	4	19%
Neutral	8	38%
Satisfied	8	38%
Very Satisfied	1	5%
Total	21	100%

Safety and Comfort of Customers & Employees

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	1	5%
Neutral	7	33%
Satisfied	12	57%
Very Satisfied	1	5%
Total	21	100%

Proximity to Complementary Businesses or Uses

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	2	10%
Neutral	8	38%
Satisfied	10	48%
Very Satisfied	1	5%
Total	21	100%

7. Do any local regulations (not related to COVID) pose an obstacle to your business operation?

Licensing or permitting regulations	3	14%
Signage regulations	4	19%
Parking regulations	2	10%
Outdoor dining or selling regulations	0	0%
Allowed uses, change of use or other zoning regulations	7	33%
Historic District regulations	1	5%
Other regulations (not related to COVID)	1	5%
None - No Issues with regulations	12	57%

Impacts of COVID

8. Did your business experience any of the following due to COVID? Select All that apply.

Decline in revenue	12	57%
Employee layoff	4	19%
Reduced operating hours/capacity	12	57%
Business closure (temporary or permanent)	8	38%
Stopped/deferred rent or mortgage payments	3	14%
Incurred expense to implement safety measures	11	52%
Established alternative mode to sell and deliver products (on-line platforms, delivery, etc.)	9	43%
None of the Above	3	14%

9. How did your 2020 business revenue compare to your 2019 revenue?

Increased compared to 2019	3	14%
Stayed about the same as 2019	2	10%
Decreased 1 – 24% compared to 2019	2	10%
Decreased 25 – 49% compared to 2019	5	24%
Decreased 75 - 100% compared to 2019	1	5%
Decreased 50 – 74% compared to 2019	4	19%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	4	19%
Total	21	100%

10. Please estimate how the number of customers that physically came to your business in January and February 2021 compares to before COVID.

More customers than before COVID	2	10%
About the same number as before COVID	6	29%
1 – 24% less customers than before COVID	3	14%
25 – 49% less customers than before COVID	3	14%
50 – 74% less customers than before COVID	1	5%
75 – 100% less customers than before COVID	3	14%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	3	14%
Total	21	100%

11. At the current time, what is the status of your business operation?

Operating at full capacity	10	48%
Operating at reduced hours/capacity due to COVID	10	48%
Temporarily closed due to COVID	0	0%
Permanently closed due to COVID	1	5%
Total	21	100%

Strategies for Supporting Businesses and Improving the Commercial District

12. A few approaches to address Physical Environment, Atmosphere and Access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important are each of the following strategies?

Renovation of Storefronts/Building Facades

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	15%
Of Little Importance or Need	3	15%
Moderately Important	8	40%
Important	4	20%
Very Important	2	10%
Total	20	100%

Improvement/Development of Public Spaces & Seating Areas

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	15%
Of Little Importance or Need	4	20%
Moderately Important	3	15%
Important	10	50%
Very Important	0	0%
Total	20	100%

Improvement of Streetscape & Sidewalks

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	15%
Of Little Importance or Need	3	15%
Moderately Important	4	20%
Important	9	45%
Very Important	1	5%
Total	20	100%

Improvements in Safety and/or Cleanliness

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	14%
Of Little Importance or Need	4	19%
Moderately Important	4	19%
Important	7	33%
Very Important	3	14%
Total	21	100%

Changes in Public Parking Availability, Management or Policies

Unimportant/Not Needed	4	20%
Of Little Importance or Need	7	35%
Moderately Important	4	20%
Important	3	15%
Very Important	2	10%
Total	20	100%

Amenity Improvements for Public Transit Users and/or Bike Riders

Unimportant/Not Needed	4	20%
Of Little Importance or Need	4	20%
Moderately Important	8	40%
Important	3	15%
Very Important	1	5%
Total	20	100%

13. A few approaches to address Attraction and Retention of Customers and Businesses in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important are each of the following strategies?

More Cultural Events/Activities to Bring People into the District

Unimportant/Not Needed	2	10%
Of Little Importance or Need	2	10%
Moderately Important	4	20%
Important	9	45%
Very Important	3	15%
Total	20	100%

More Opportunities for Outdoor Dining and Selling

Unimportant/Not Needed	2	10%
Of Little Importance or Need	2	10%
Moderately Important	6	30%
Important	7	35%
Very Important	3	15%
Total	20	100%

Implementing Marketing Strategies for the Commercial District

Unimportant/Not Needed	1	5%
Of Little Importance or Need	1	5%
Moderately Important	7	35%
Important	6	30%
Very Important	5	25%
Total	20	100%

Recruitment Programs to Attract Additional Businesses

Unimportant/Not Needed	2	10%
Of Little Importance or Need	1	5%
Moderately Important	3	15%
Important	8	40%
Very Important	6	30%
Total	20	100%

Changes to Zoning or Other Local Regulations (not related to COVID)

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	15%
Of Little Importance or Need	2	10%
Moderately Important	7	35%
Important	3	15%
Very Important	5	25%
Total	20	100%

Creation of a District Management Entity (Business Improvement District or other organization)

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	14%
Of Little Importance or Need	2	10%
Moderately Important	4	19%
Important	9	43%
Very Important	3	14%
Total	21	100%

14. Are you interested in receiving assistance for your business in any of the following areas? Select All that Apply.

Setting up an online store or other online selling channel	4	19%
Creating new services such as delivery	2	10%
Participating in shared marketing/advertising	7	33%
Low-cost financing for storefront/façade improvements	4	19%
Low-cost financing for purchasing property in the commercial district	4	19%
Training on the use of social media	6	29%
None of the above	7	33%

Appendix D. Phase I Stakeholder Meeting

Local Rapid Recovery Planning Program:
Phase I Stakeholder Meeting

Town of Leicester, Massachusetts

May 6, 2021

HAGERTY

Project Team Introductions

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Local Rapid Recovery Planning Program: Community Kick-off Meeting | 2

Local Rapid Recovery Plan Program

- The Local Rapid Recovery Plan (LRRP) Program supports the economic and development needs of communities as they recover from the impacts of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).
- LRRP Objectives:
  - Collect primary data to measure COVID-19 impacts on the local business community.
  - Develop actionable projects that reflect COVID-19 recovery needs, community priorities, available resources, and local implementation capacity.
  - Finalize a rapid recovery plan that meets the short-term and long-term economic recovery goals of the community.

PROJECT STATUS UPDATES

FINDINGS FROM PHASE I

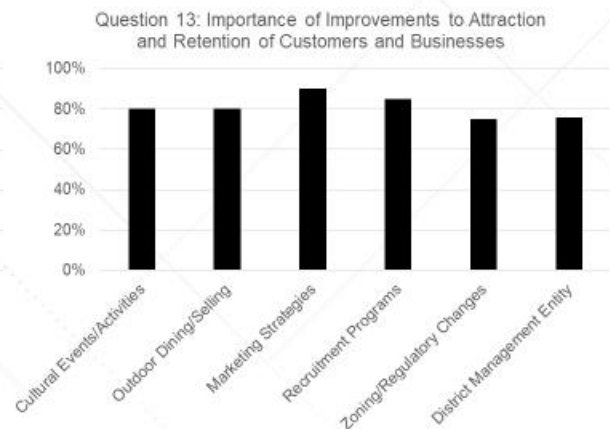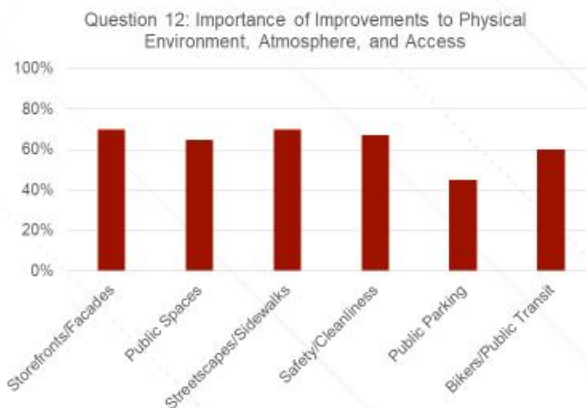### TRANSITIONING TO PHASE II

Project Status Updates

Our data collection included:

- Reviewing 10+ Town Documents
- Interviewing 12 Key Informants
- 20+ Baseline Data Points
- 15 Site Visit Data Points
- 20 Responses to Statewide Business Survey

Business Survey: Key Findings

Businesses were impacted in various ways by COVID-19, but the most common impact was a decline in revenue (60% of respondents).

Question 12: Importance of Improvements to Physical Environment, Atmosphere, and Access

Question 13: Importance of Improvements to Attraction and Retention of Customers and Businesses

PROJECT STATUS UPDATES

FINDINGS FROM PHASE I

TRANSITIONING TO PHASE II

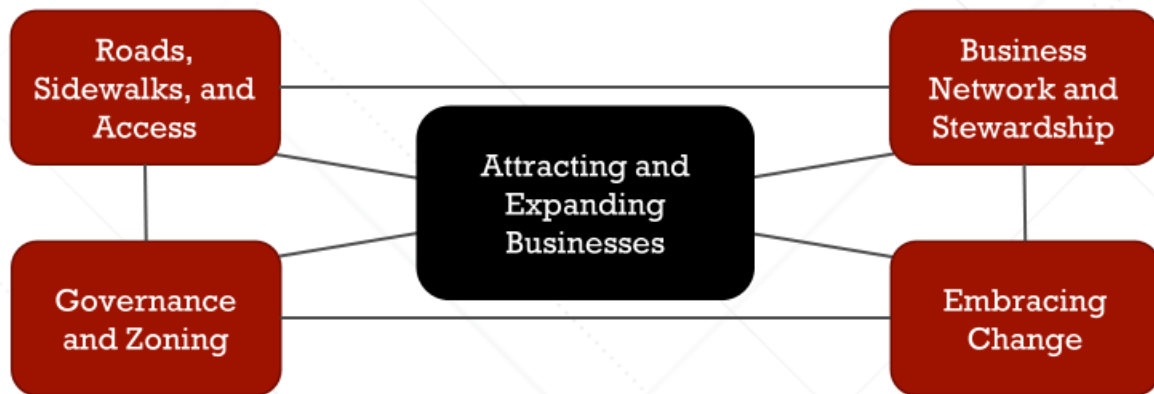## Drivers of Community Impact

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

Business Network and Stewardship

Attracting and Expanding Businesses

Governance and Zoning

Embracing Change

Drivers of Community Impact

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

Governance and Zoning

Attracting and Expanding Businesses

Business Network and Stewardship

Embracing Change

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

- Walkability and Pedestrian Access
- Pedestrian and Bike Infrastructure
- Incentives for Drivers to Stop
- Wayfinding

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

Governance and Zoning

Business Networking and Stewardship

Embracing Change

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

- **Walkability and Pedestrian Access**
- Pedestrian and Bike Infrastructure
- Incentives for Drivers to Stop
- Wayfinding

"Complete streets and walkability are really important… the Town can look to regional best practices for the impact of these projects"

Key Informant Interviews, Documentation Review

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

- Walkability and Pedestrian Access
- **Pedestrian and Bike Infrastructure**
- Incentives for Drivers to Stop
- Wayfinding

"70% of survey respondents stated that **improvements to sidewalks moderately to very important.**"

Business Survey

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

- Walkability and Pedestrian Access
- Pedestrian and Bike Infrastructure
- **Incentives for Drivers to Stop**
- Wayfinding

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access

- Walkability and Pedestrian Access
- Pedestrian and Bike Infrastructure
- Incentives for Drivers to Stop
- **Wayfinding**

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Governance and Zoning

- Build upon COVID-19 Best Practices
- Streamline Business Procedures
- Zoning and Development Regulations

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Governance and Zoning

- **Build upon COVID-19 Best Practices**
- Streamline Business Procedures
- Zoning and Development Regulations

"During COVID-19, the Town government evolved to have a more significant online presence and manage documentation electronically. This helped streamline many processes more businesses."

Key Informant Interviews, Town Website

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Governance and Zoning

- Build upon COVID-19 Best Practices
- **Streamline Business Procedures**
- Zoning and Development Regulations

"Business-related processes are tedious and deter new businesses from moving to Leicester."

Key Informant Interviews, Documentation Review, Business Survey
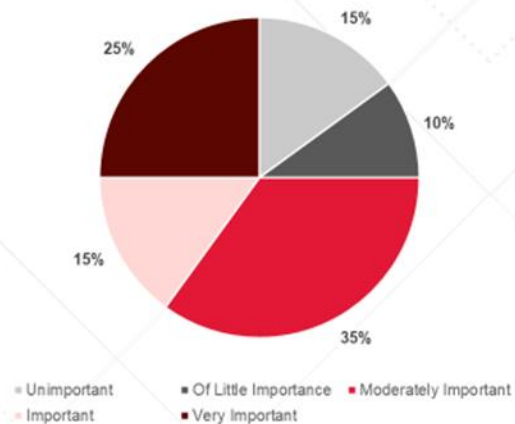
| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

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Governance and Zoning

- Build upon COVID-19 Best Practices
- Streamline Business Procedures
- **Zoning and Development Regulations**

Importance of Changes to Zoning and Other Local Regulations

- Unimportant
- Of Little Importance
- Moderately Important
- Important
- Very Important

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

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Business Networking and Stewardship

- Steward for Local Business Community
- Regional Coordination Opportunities
- Events to Engage Businesses
- Promote Existing Businesses

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | **Business Networking and Stewardship** | Embracing Change |

Business Networking and Stewardship

- **Steward for Local Business Community**
- Regional Coordination Opportunities
- Events to Engage Businesses
- Promote Existing Businesses

> The Economic Development Committee and Leicester Business Association have the opportunity to direct the type of engagement and support they offer local businesses.
>
> *Key Informant Interviews*

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | **Business Networking and Stewardship** | Embracing Change |

Business Networking and Stewardship

- Steward for Local Business Community
- **Regional Coordination Opportunities**
- Events to Engage Businesses
- Promote Existing Businesses

"Local businesses could be more connected to regional efforts (e.g., Worcester Chamber of Commerce, Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce) and leverage the regional network."

Key Informant Interviews

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Business Networking and Stewardship

- Steward for Local Business Community
- Regional Coordination Opportunities
- **Events to Engage Businesses**
- Promote Existing Businesses

Prior to COVID-19, the EDC had hosted networking business nights and events leveraging the town government. Similar events create opportunity to draw in customers, connect the community, and expand business lines.

Key Informant Interviews

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Business Networking and Stewardship

- Steward for Local Business Community
- Regional Coordination Opportunities
- Events to Engage Businesses
- **Promote Existing Businesses**

90% of survey respondents expressed that implementing marketing strategies for the commercial district is moderately to very important.

Business Survey, Key Informant Interviews

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change

Embracing Change

- Opportunities for Engagement
- Create Community Buy-in
- Build upon Existing Activities

Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | **Embracing Change**

Embracing Change

- **Opportunities for Engagement**
- Create Community Buy-in
- Build upon Existing Activities

Allowing community members to more easily access Town Hall Meetings and other community meetings has increased civic engagement in the community.

Key Informant Interviews

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Embracing Change

- Opportunities for Engagement
- **Create Community Buy-in**
- Build upon Existing Activities

"There is a divide in residents' view of development, meaning half of the community is for change and the other half often pushes against it."

Key Informant Interviews, Business Surveys

| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

Embracing Change

- Opportunities for Engagement
- Create Community Buy-in
- **Build upon Existing Activities**

Leverage community engagement efforts for existing Town plans and community activities (e.g., Swan Tavern).

Key Informant Interviews

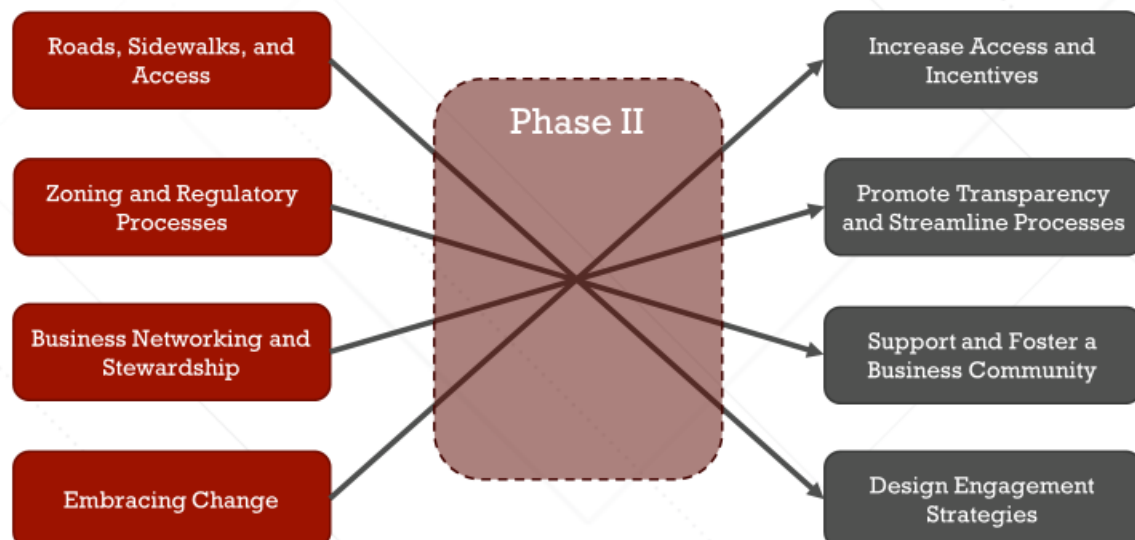| Roads, Sidewalks, and Access | Governance and Zoning | Business Networking and Stewardship | Embracing Change |

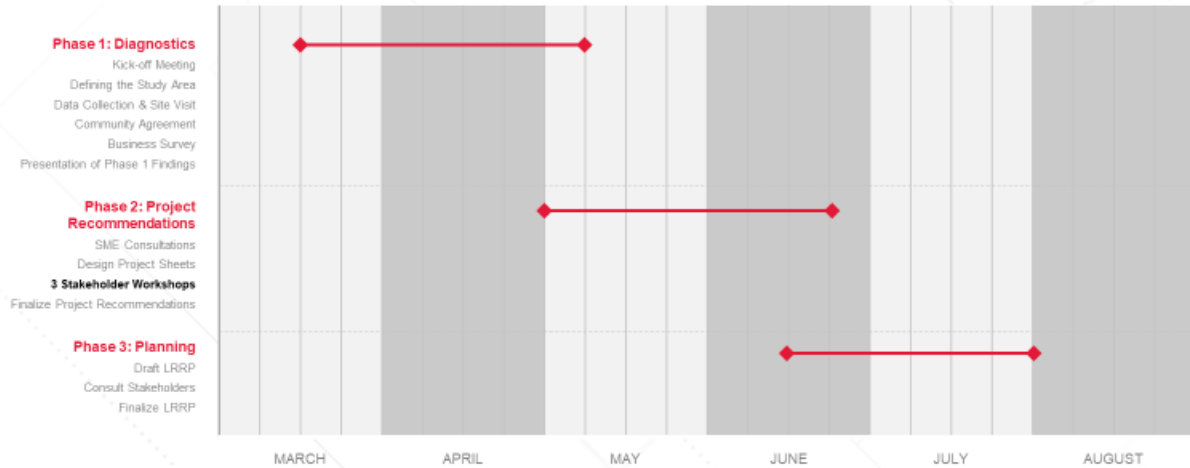# Do these conclusions accurately represent Leicester?

Data to Project Analysis

Project Timeline and Milestones

Appendix E. Outdoor Dining Toolkit

Rapid Recovery Plan

Outdoor Dining/Retail Community Toolkit

A guide for communities seeking to assist business owners in creating outdoor dining and retail options

September 2021

dhcd
Massachusetts
RAPID RECOVERY PLANS
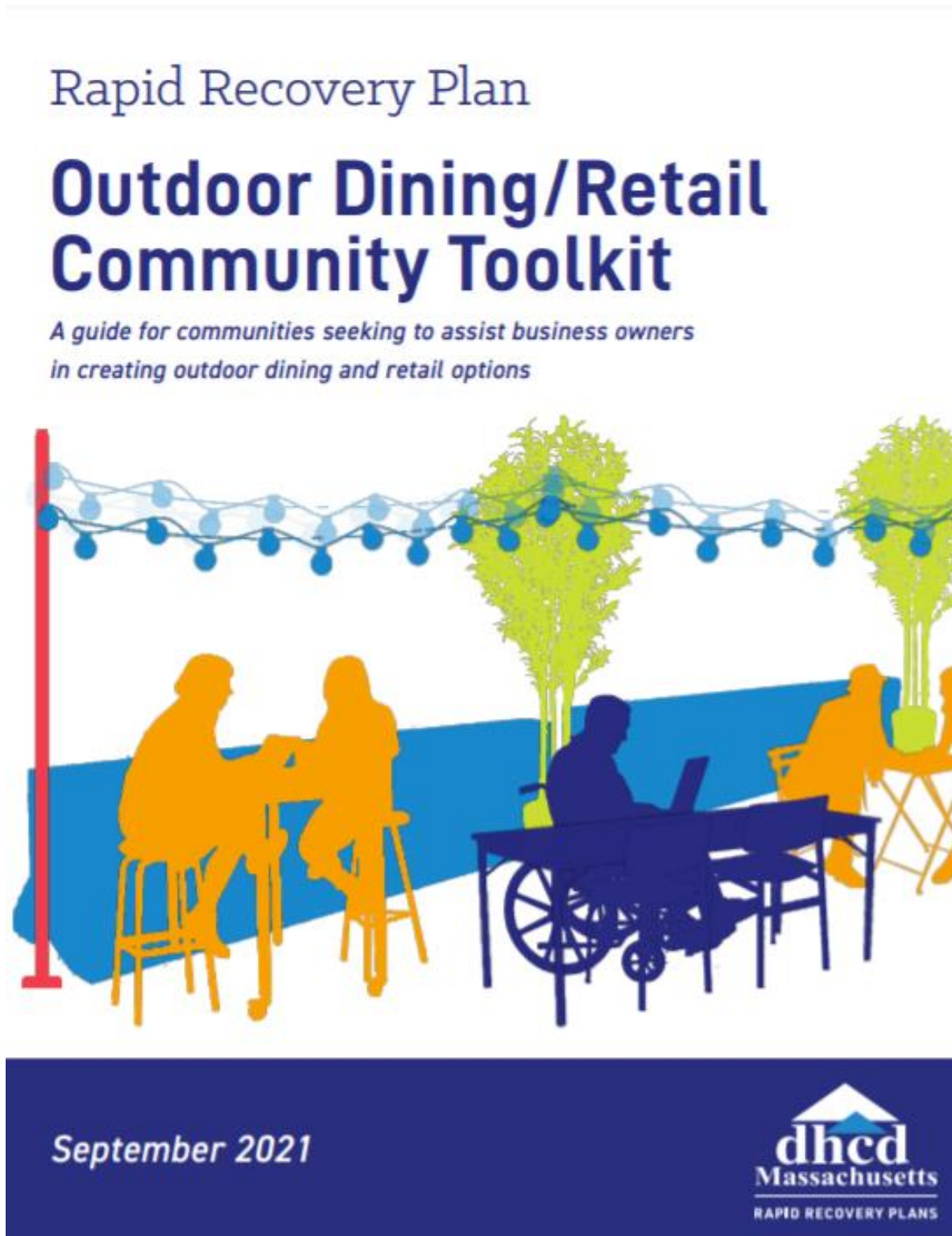
The Outdoor Dining Toolkit Retail/Community Toolkit is provided as an attachment to this document.