



Rapid Recovery Program DOWNTOWN DIAGNOSTIC

For more information, visit:

www.mass.gov/info-details/rapid-recovery-plan-rrp-program

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Downtown Recovery in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

FINDINGS FROM THE RAPID
RECOVERY PROGRAM



This report draws on extensive research and analysis conducted by the Commonwealth Department of Housing and Community Development, RRP plan facilitators, RRP business survey consultant, FinePoint Associates, and RRP program advisor, Streetsense.

The Rapid Recovery Program is an initiative of the Baker-Polito Administration.



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 124 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.

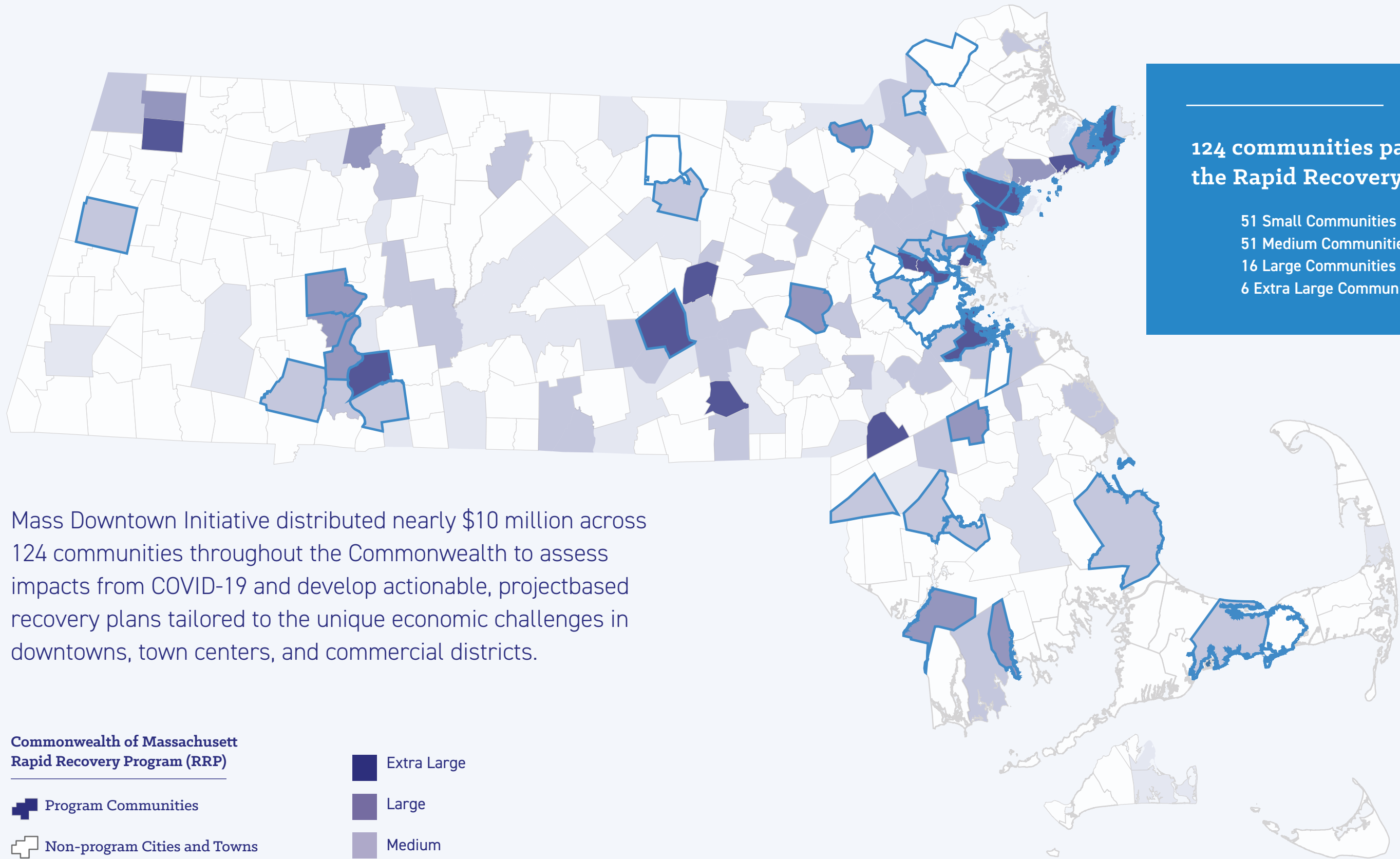
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This report is prepared by RRP Program Advisor, Streetsense.

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124 communities participated in the Rapid Recovery Plan Program

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

Mass Downtown Initiative distributed nearly \$10 million across 124 communities throughout the Commonwealth to assess impacts from COVID-19 and develop actionable, projectbased recovery plans tailored to the unique economic challenges in downtowns, town centers, and commercial districts.

**Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Rapid Recovery Program (RRP)**

- | | |
|--|---|
|  Program Communities |  Extra Large |
|  Non-program Cities and Towns |  Large |
|  CDBG Entitlement Communities |  Medium |
| |  Small |

Acton	Medium
Adams	Medium
Amherst	Medium
Andover	Medium
Arlington	Medium
Ashburnham	Small
Athol	Medium
Attleboro	Medium
Auburn	Medium
Barnstable	Medium
Barre	Small
Bedford	Medium
Belchertown	Medium
Belmont	Medium
Beverly	Large
Blandford	Small
Boylston	Small
Braintree	Medium
Brockton	Large
Brookline	Large
Buckland	Small
Burlington	Medium
Cambridge	Extra Large
Canton	Medium
Chester	Small
Chicopee	Medium
Clinton	Medium
Danvers	Medium
Peabody	Medium
Dartmouth	Medium
Dracut	Small

Dudley	Small
East Longmeadow	Small
Eastham	Small
Easthampton	Large
Easton	Medium
Edgartown	Small
Essex	Small
Fall River	Large
Foxborough	Medium
Framingham	Large
Gloucester	Large
Grafton	Medium
Great Barrington	Small
Greenfield	Large
Halifax	Small
Hanson	Small
Hardwick	Small
Hingham	Medium
Holliston	Small
Holyoke	Large
Hudson	Medium
Hull	Small
Lawrence	Extra Large
Leicester	Medium
Leominster	Medium
Lexington	Medium
Littleton	Medium
Lowell	Large
Lynn	Extra Large
Malden	Large
Manchester-by-the-Sea	Small

Marblehead	Small
Marshfield	Medium
Maynard	Medium
Medfield	Small
Medford	Medium
Mendon	Small
Methuen	Medium
Middleborough	Small
Millbury	Small
Milton	Medium
Monson	Small
Montague	Medium
Natick	Medium
New Bedford	Large
Newburyport	Medium
Newton	Medium
North Adams	Large
North Brookfield	Small
Northampton	Large
Northbridge	Small
Northfield	Small
Norton	Small
Norwood	Medium
Oak Bluffs	Small
Oxford	Small
Pepperell	Small
Pittsfield	Medium
Plymouth	Medium
Princeton	Small
Quincy	Extra Large
Reading	Medium

Revere	Large
Rockland	Medium
Rockport	Small
Salem	Extra Large
Shelburne	Small
Shrewsbury	Medium
South Hadley	Small
Southbridge	Medium
Spencer	Small
Springfield	Medium
Sterling	Small
Stoneham	Medium
Sturbridge	Medium
Sunderland	Small
Taunton	Medium
Tyngsborough	Small
Upton	Small
Uxbridge	Medium
Wakefield	Medium
Walpole	Small
Ware	Small
West Brookfield	Small
West Springfield	Medium
Westborough	Medium
Westfield	Medium
Williamstown	Medium
Wilmington	Small
Winchester	Medium
Woburn	Medium
Worcester	Extra Large
Wrentham	Small

Program
Impacts
To-date

124
Communities

35
Subject Matter
Experts

81
Plan Facilitators

Phase 1
DIAGNOSTIC

8,250

DATA POINTS COLLECTED

3k+

BUSINESS
SURVEY RESPONSES

Phase 2
PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

15

WEBINARS

62

BEST PRACTICE SHEETS

335+

TECHNICAL CONSULTATIONS

Phase 3
FINAL PLAN

124

RRP PLANS

1,000+

SHOVEL-READY
PROJECTS

Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) Program

The Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) Program gave municipalities 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.

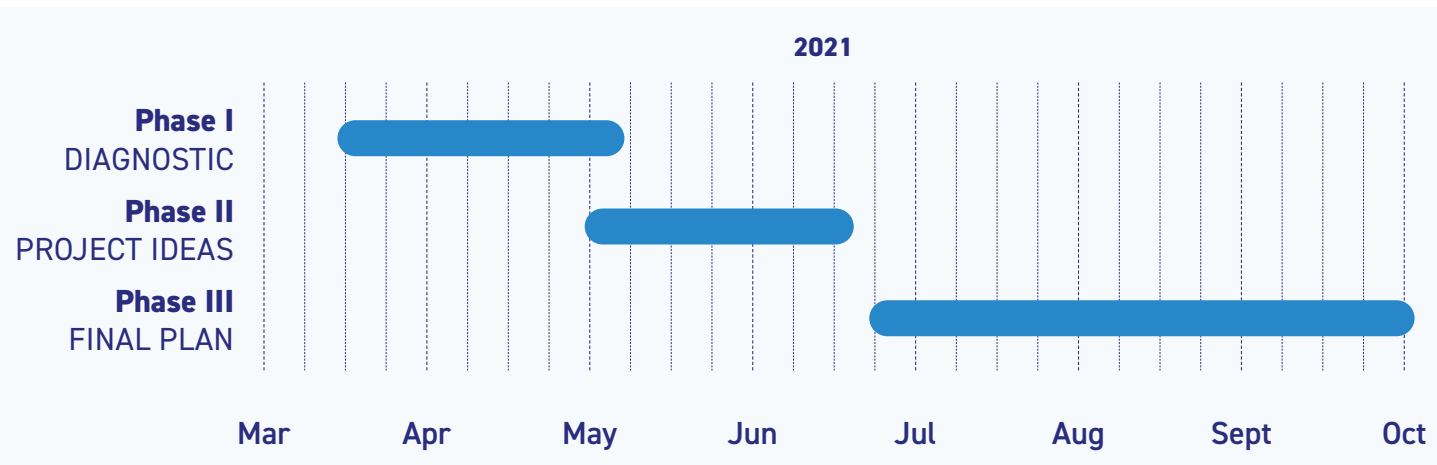
More than a planning effort, the program provided direct technical assistance through Plan Facilitators assigned to each community applicant and through Subject Matter Experts who supported the development of ideas for project recommendations and shared knowledge through best practice webinars and individual/group 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.

Each Rapid Recovery Plan was developed across three phases between February-September 2021, and required all communities, Plan Facilitators and Subject Matter Experts to be agile and adaptable to changing circumstances.

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 funded in part by Citi Community Development.

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.

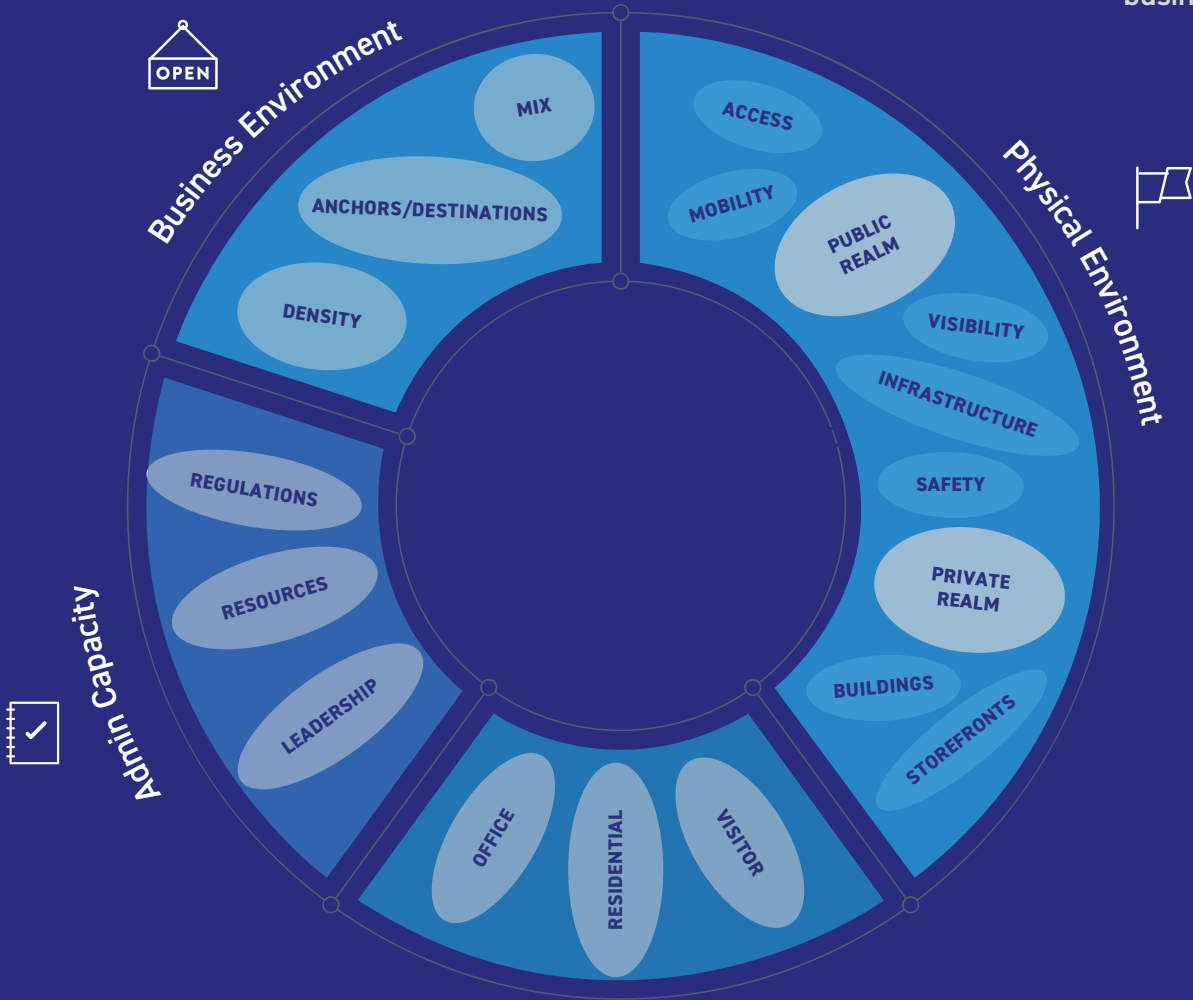


What makes a great downtown?

A great downtown has a density of offerings and a mix of businesses that align closely with dominant customer groups.

A great downtown has a density of offerings and a mix of businesses that align closely with dominant customer groups.

A great downtown is accessible and comfortable to all visitors, and provides heightened visibility for businesses.



A great downtown has strong leadership, sustainable resources, and flexible regulations that enable businesses to succeed.



A great downtown has a stable and diverse customer base that can support businesses year-round.

For more information on the Commercial DNA approach published by the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), access “Preparing a Commercial District Diagnostic”.

RRP Data Collection Methodology

In addition to following the RRP Diagnostic framework, Plan Facilitators and Communities were provided a step-by-step guide for collecting baseline data for the Commonwealth across each of the four key areas of analysis. The RRP baseline data presented in this report will assist the Commonwealth in making data-driven decisions on recovery resource allocation.

Please note, however, that the findings presented in this report are derived strictly from the RRP baseline data set, which consist of data from RRP municipalities and study areas ONLY. The data set includes:

8,250

Data Points

(Collected by RRP Plan Facilitators and Communities across each of the four key areas of analysis, and across a range of public and proprietary data sources including the Census, American Community Survey, MassDOT Traffic Count Database, ESRI Business Analyst Online, CoStar, etc.)

3,000+

Business Survey Responses

(collected by RRP Plan Facilitators and Communities between March-April 2021)

For further information on data collected by RRP, please contact
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Physical Environment

PUBLIC REALM



Wayfinding/Signage

Street Lighting



Roadbed and Crosswalk

Street Trees and Benches

Sidewalk

Guiding Principles

Element

Sidewalks should be wide enough to accommodate both the flow of customers and the flow of retail/dining activity. In addition, sidewalks should be clean and well-maintained to ensure the safety and comfort of pedestrians.

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.

Street lighting improves pedestrian visibility and personal safety, as well as aids in geographic orientation.

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.

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.

More than 75% of sidewalks in the study area are cleaned, well-maintained and accessible to multiple users across different ages and abilities.

Street trees and benches are readily available throughout the study area. They are well-designed, well-maintained, and offer shade and comfort to pedestrians.

More than 75% of the study area utilizes a range of lighting strategies to ensure safety of pedestrians and motorists, as well as highlight the identity and history of an area.

There is a comprehensive and cohesive wayfinding system that offers geographic orientation to pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists. Signage reflects the brand and identity of the area.

Roads are designed to balance the needs of motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians and create a safe environment for all users.

Roads are designed primarily to move motor vehicles across the study area efficiently, with limited crosswalks for pedestrians.

About 50% of sidewalks in the study area are cleaned and well-maintained.

Although street trees and benches are available across the study area, these amenities have not been cleaned or well-maintained, and require improvements.

About 50% of the study area is serviced by street lighting that supports pedestrian visibility and safety.

Wayfinding in the study area is primarily geared towards directing motorists across the study area. There is limited signage to identify key assets and destinations to pedestrians.

More than 25% of sidewalks in the study area pose challenges to the pedestrian experience (including narrow sidewalks and lack of cleanliness/maintenance).

Limited availability of street trees and benches creating uncomfortable pedestrian experience.

Street lighting on the primary street in the study area does not support pedestrian visibility and safety.

Limited to no signage available throughout the study area.

Roads are hazardous to all users.

The study area is not connected by any major roads.

FAIL

There are no sidewalks in the study area.

There are no street trees and benches in the study area.

There is no street lighting in the study area.

There is no wayfinding/signage in the study area.

Key Findings

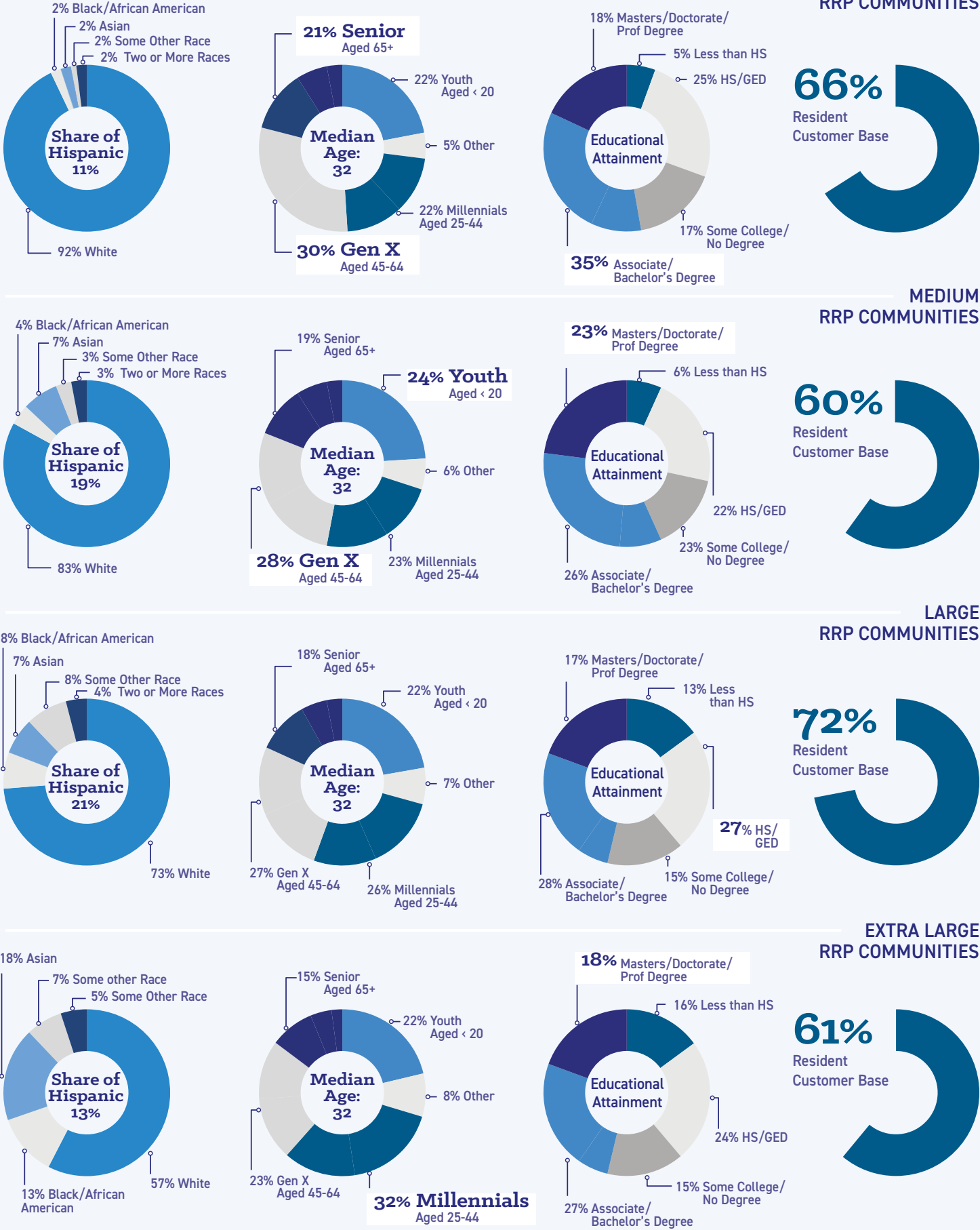




RRP communities serve a diverse customer base. However, in a rapidly changing business climate, businesses in each community must be acutely aware of local demographics and lifestyle preferences in order to better customize merchandise and service offerings to meet the needs of the local customers.



The following reflects data collected at municipal level.

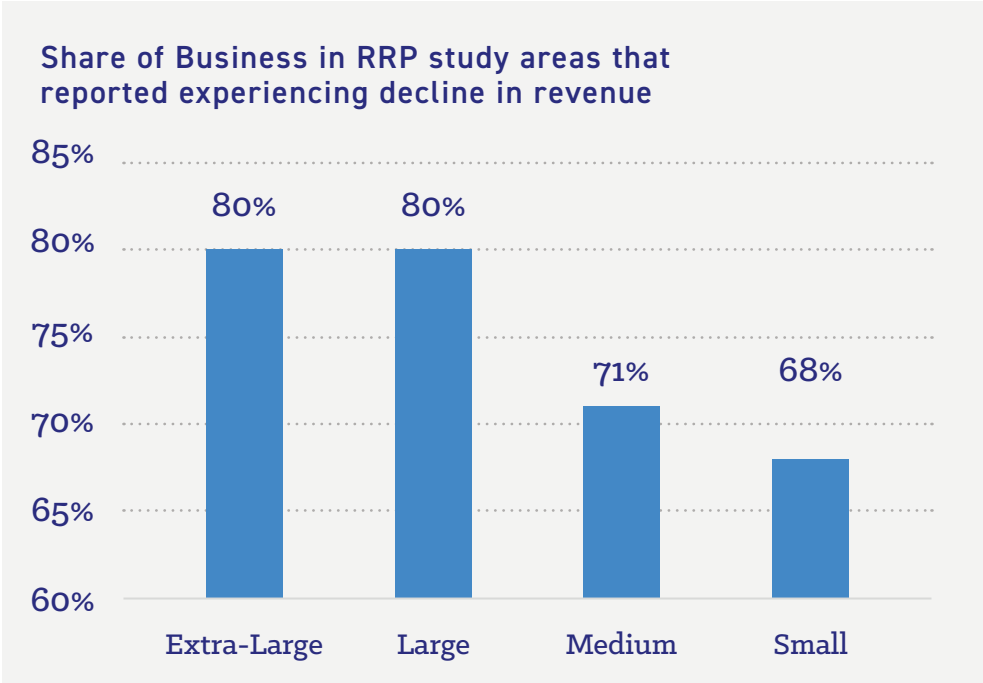




Across different sized communities, businesses reported similar trends in business performance even before COVID. **During the 3 years prior to COVID business reported in the RRP survey that revenues had “stayed the same”.** However, **negative impacts of COVID experienced by businesses in different sized communities varied to some extent.**

Businesses in the **largest communities were most likely to have experienced a decline in revenue** and, inversely, businesses in small communities were least likely to experience a decline in revenue.

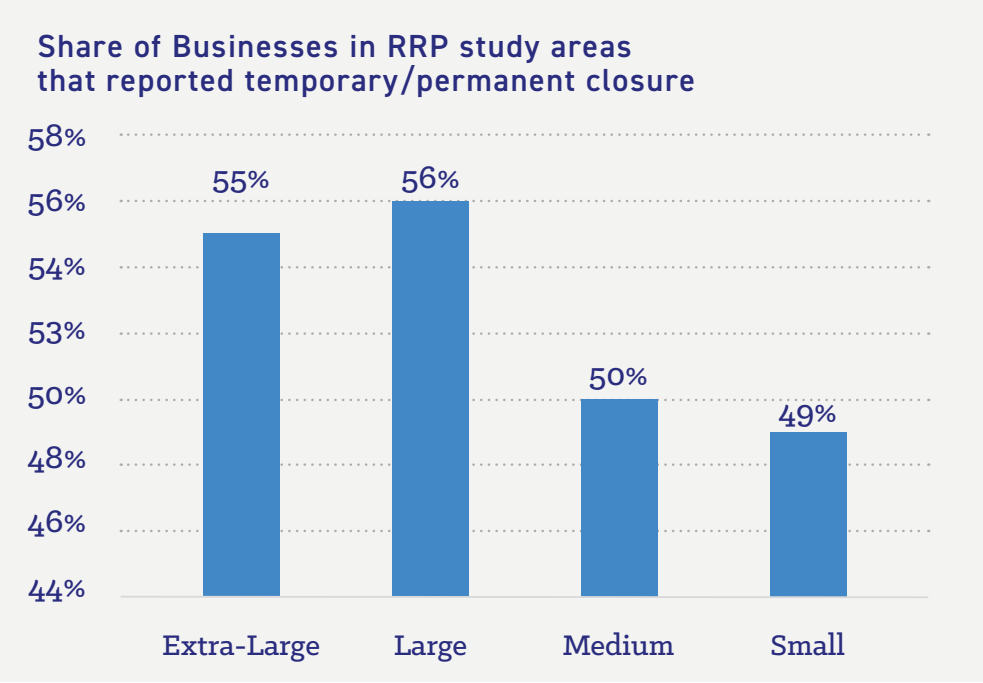
The following reflects survey data collected for each study area.



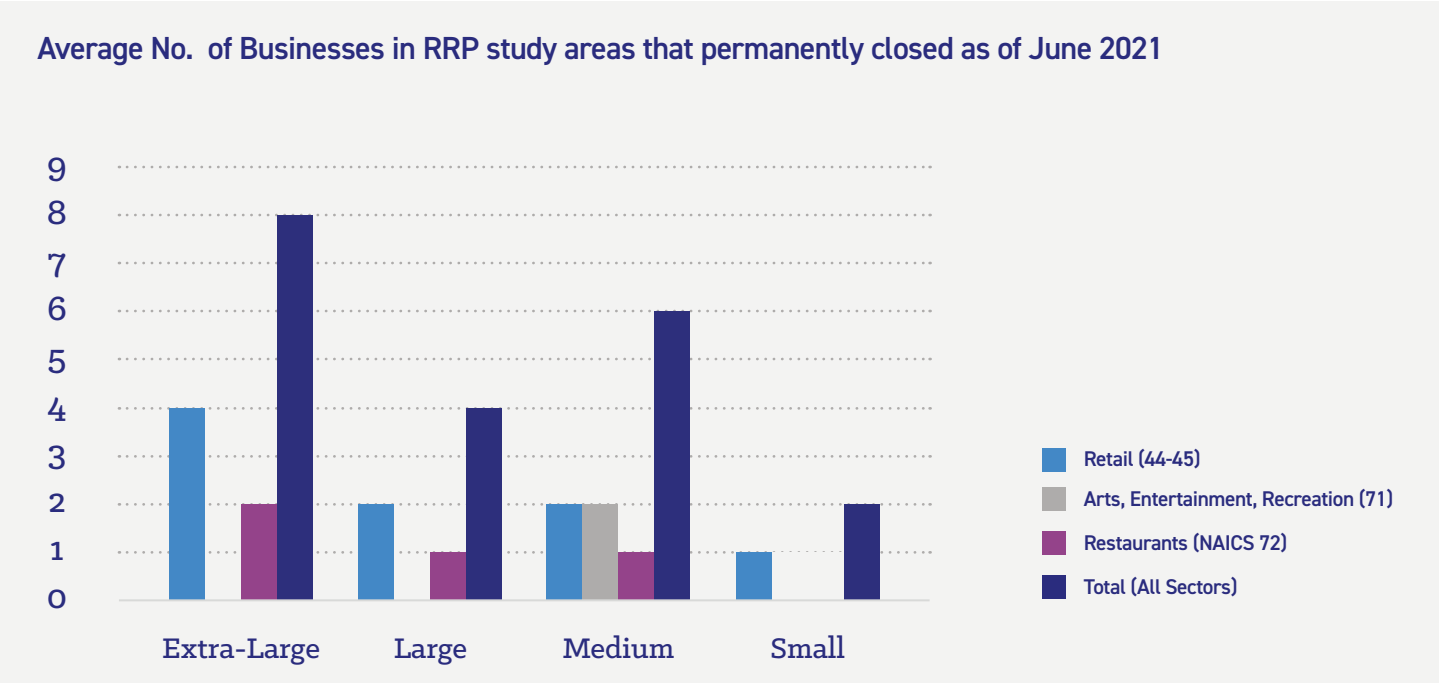
Businesses in Large & Extra Large communities were more likely to have reported decline in revenue, and therefore hardest hit in the pandemic.

As such, businesses in **small communities were also least likely to have temporarily/permanently closed**, aligned with the above reported revenue trends during COVID-19.

However, across the Commonwealth, **about 1 in 2 businesses reported temporary/permanent closures during COVID-19 (see below: 49%-56%).**

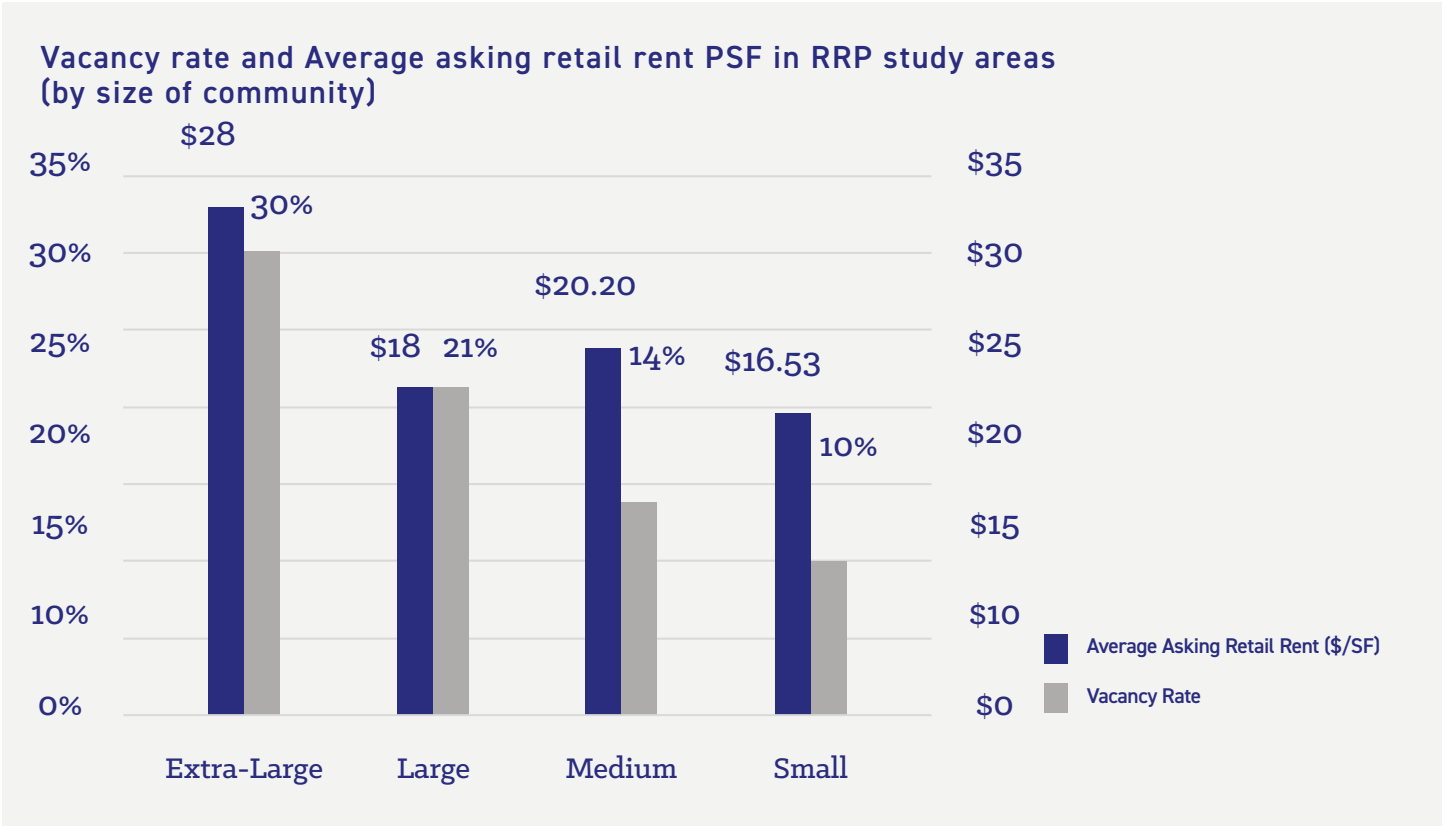


Retail businesses accounted for about 50% of overall business closures.

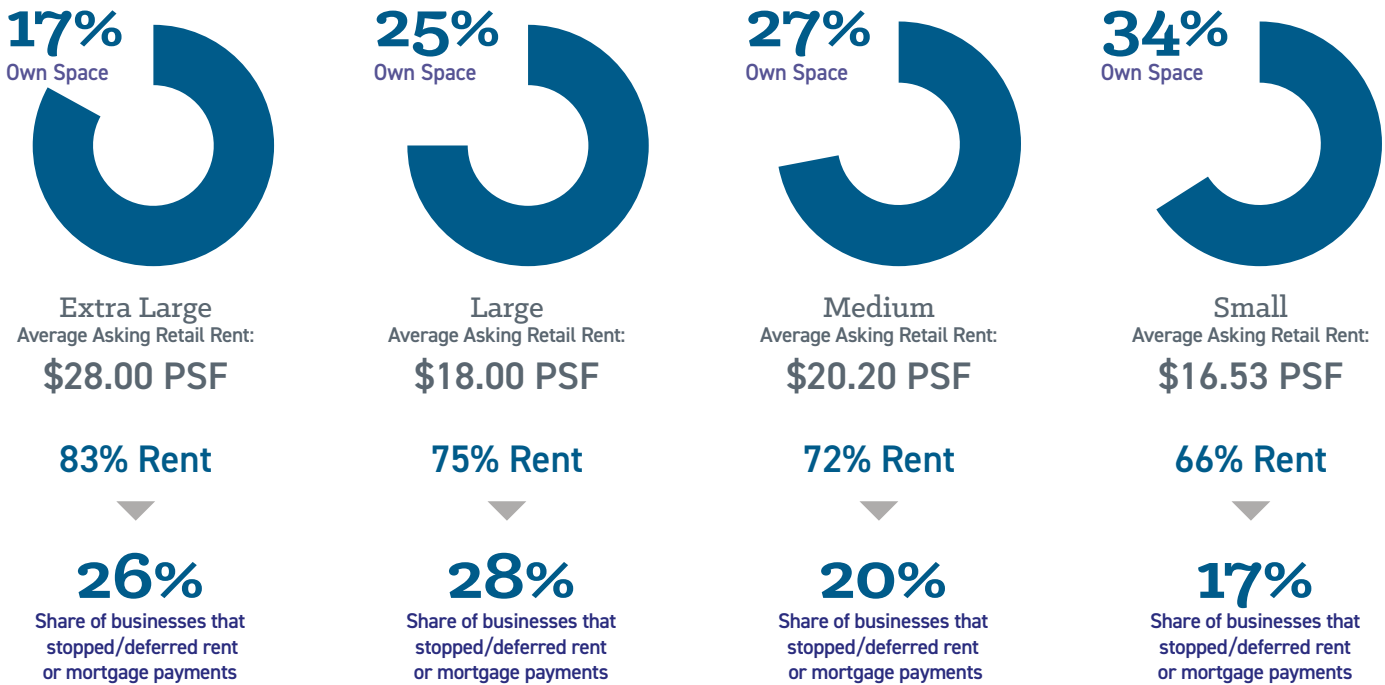




Underlying real estate conditions in our communities directly impact business success. In **larger communities with higher asking rents, cost of doing business is higher** as indicated by higher rates of current storefront vacancy and reported deferred rent/mortgage payments.



Share of businesses that own vs. lease commercial space in RRP study areas





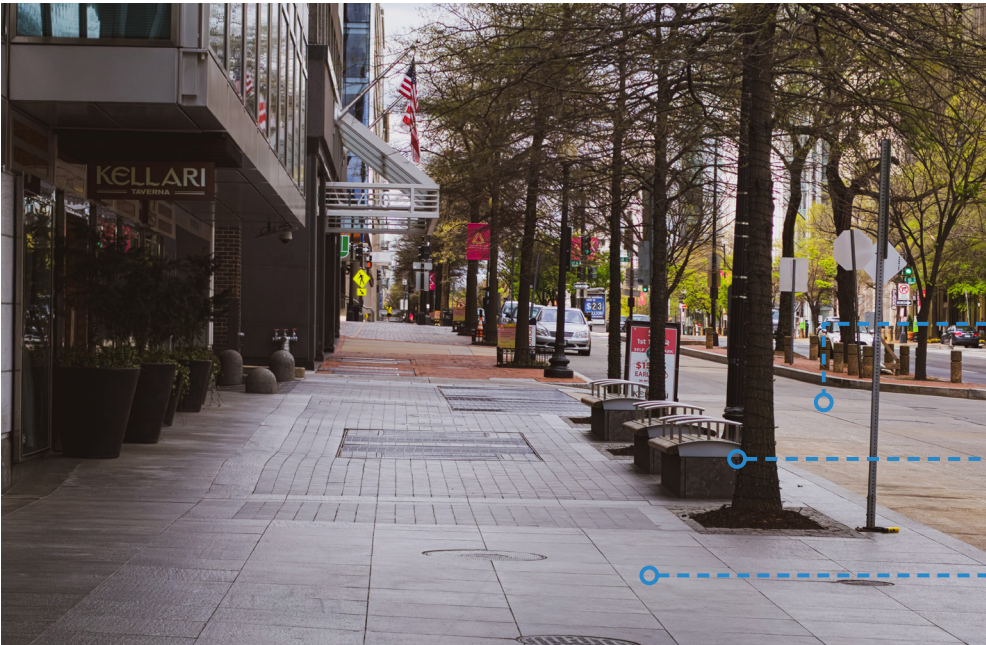
Appearance matters. Past retail industry surveys have shown that customers overwhelmingly cite the cleanliness, and by extension the safety, of a shopping area as a primary component of satisfaction. Any sign of physical decay and disinvestment therefore undermines the performance of downtowns and commercial

Public Realm



Wayfinding/Signage

Street Lighting



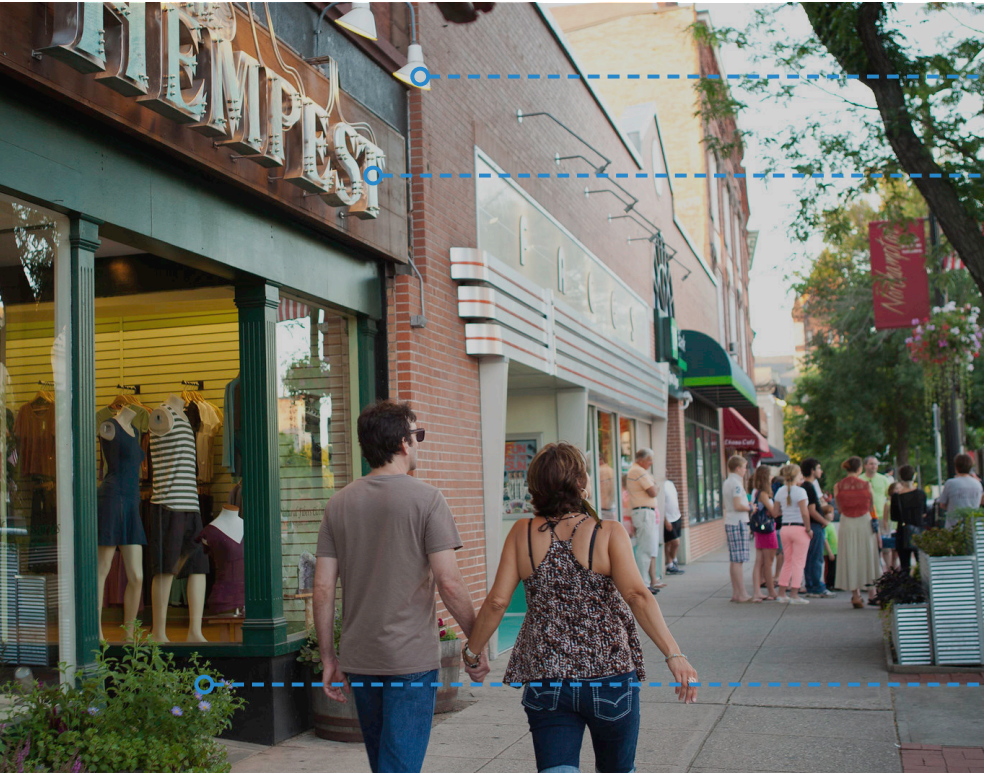
Roadbed and Crosswalk

Street Trees and Benches

Sidewalk

districts. In the assessment of the physical environment, Plan Facilitators closely followed an RRP Data Collection guide ([available online](#)) to conduct a qualitative visual survey of various elements in the public and private realm that impact customer perception.

Private Realm



Lighting

Signage

Outdoor Display



Façade

Awning

Window



Public Realm

Based on expert assessment of physical conditions across each RRP community, **extra large communities** fared poorest in overall conditions of the public and private realms, indicating critical need for improvements to storefronts, streets, sidewalks, and public lighting.

Aligned with this finding, RRP Phase 2 **technical consultations with subject matter experts** were most heavily requested for experts in the public realm – particular with regards to **transportation, infrastructure, streetscape and wayfinding/signage**.



Physical Environment Diagnostic Report Card (Private Realm)

Extra Large RRP Communities		Large RRP Communities		Medium RRP Communities		Small RRP Communities	
D		B		B		B	
Windows	D	Windows	B	Windows	B	Windows	B
Outdoor Display/Dining	D	Outdoor Display/Dining	C	Outdoor Display/Dining	C	Outdoor Display/Dining	C
Storefronts	C	Storefronts	B	Storefronts	B	Storefronts	B
Awnings	D	Awnings	C	Awnings	C	Awnings	D
Store lighting	D	Store lighting	B	Store lighting	B	Store lighting	B
Facades	C	Facades	B	Facades	B	Facades	B

Physical Environment Diagnostic Report Card (Public Realm)

Extra Large RRP Communities		Large RRP Communities		Medium RRP Communities		Small RRP Communities	
D		B+		B		C	
Sidewalk	C	Sidewalk	B	Sidewalk	B	Sidewalk	C
Street Amenities	D	Street Amenities	B	Street Amenities	C	Street Amenities	C
Lighting	C	Lighting	B	Lighting	B	Lighting	C
Wayfinding/Signage	D	Wayfinding/Signage	C	Wayfinding/Signage	C	Wayfinding/Signage	C
Roads	D	Roads	B	Roads	B	Roads	B

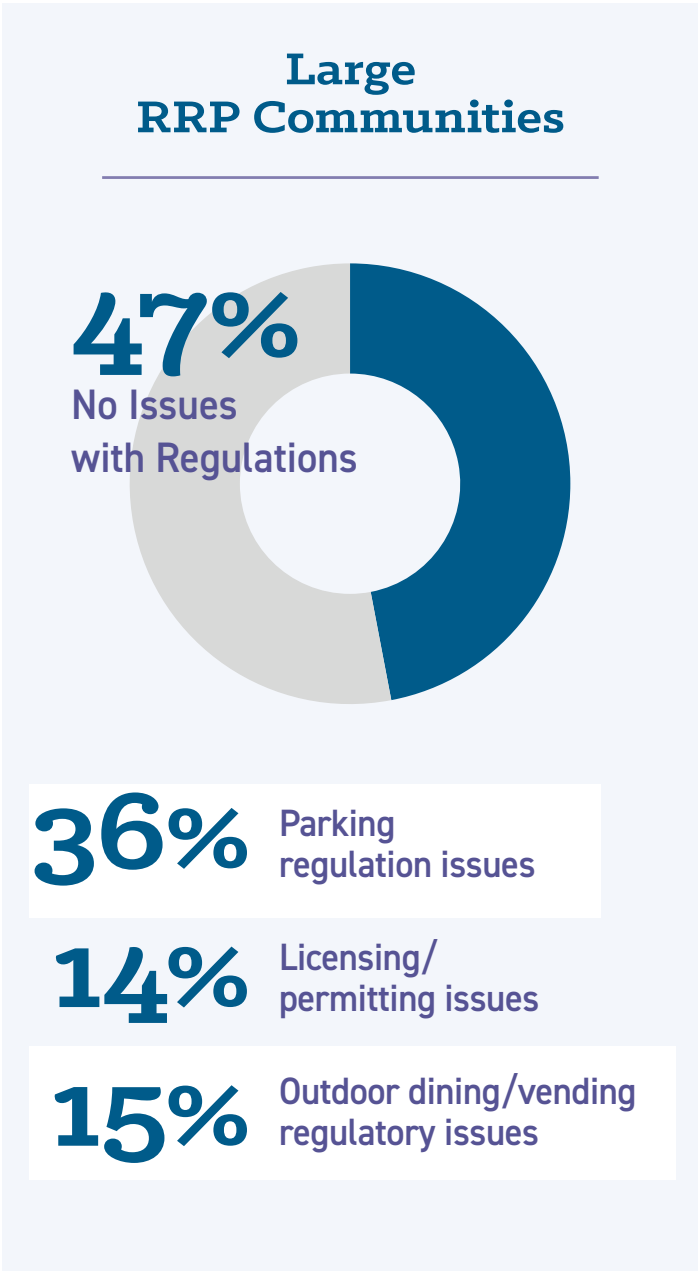
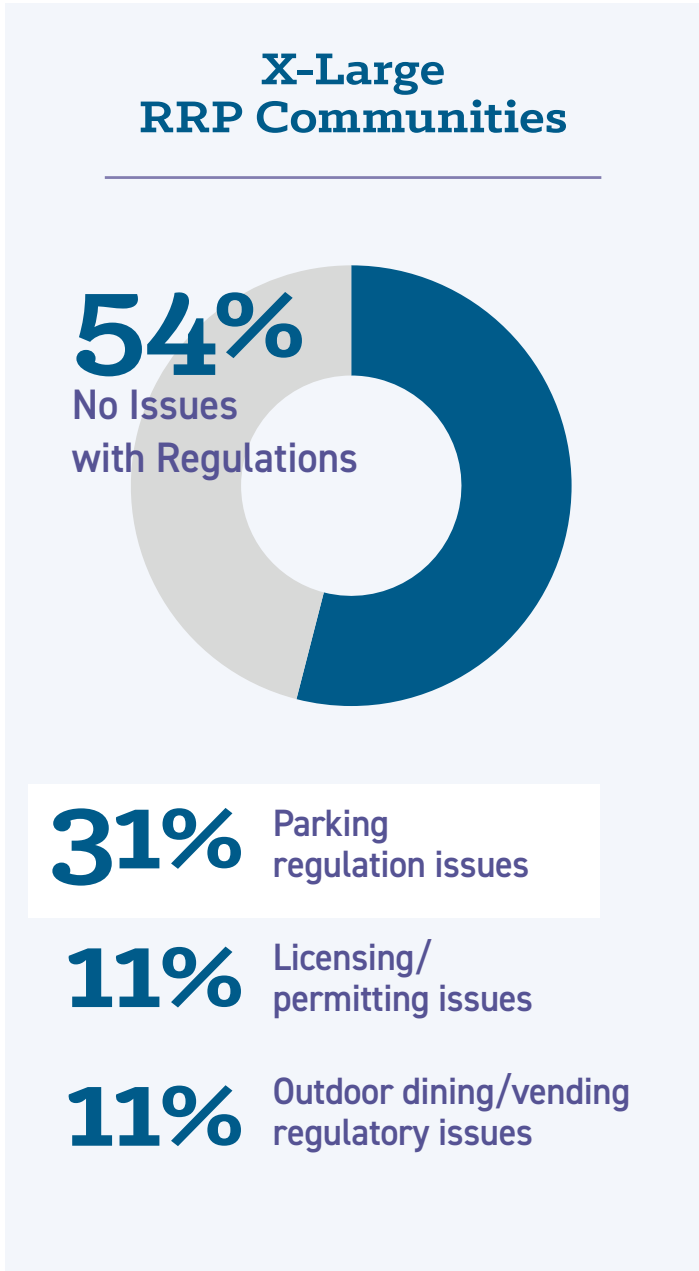


Regulatory Framework and District Management

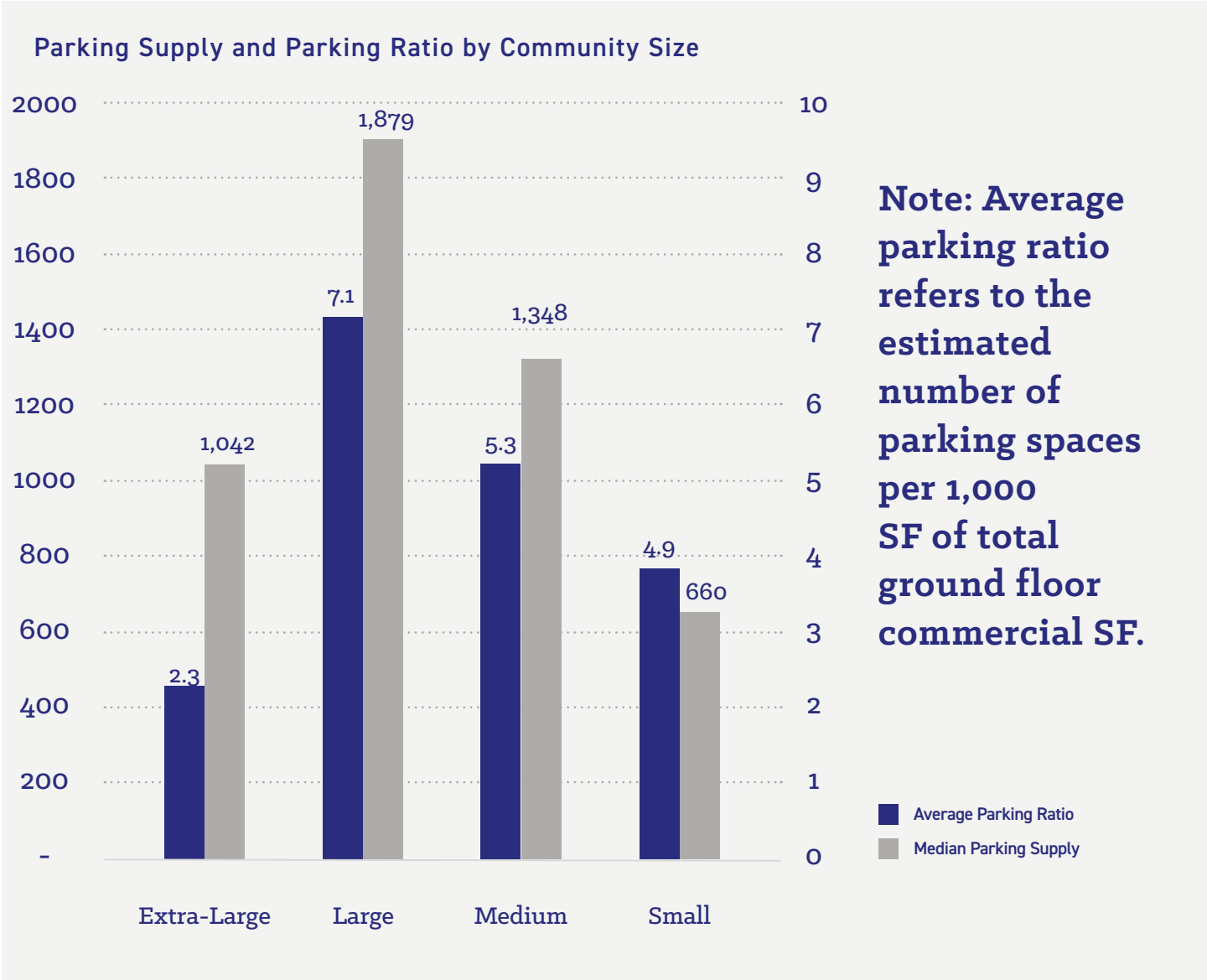
Across the Commonwealth, about 1 in 2 businesses face regulatory obstacles, particularly with parking regulations, signage regulations, and licensing/permitting.

Regulatory obstacles faced by local businesses

- Share of business surveyed that reported no issues with regulations
- Share of businesses surveyed that reported issues with regulations



Despite having the highest median available parking spaces and highest average parking ratios, businesses in ‘Large’ RRP communities reportedly face the highest rates of challenges with parking regulations.



At this time, however, only 1 in 3 ‘Small’ RRP communities has a viable organization managing business district/downtown effort



Ultimately, communities with viable business district organizations will likely be able to sustain various efforts and initiatives over time. These organizations may come in a variety of forms, including but not limited to Community Development Corporations (CDCs), Business

Improvement Districts (BIDs), Parking Management Districts (PMDs), volunteer-based organization, Chambers of Commerce, Regional Tourism Organizations (RTOs), anchor institutions, and other nonprofit and community-based groups.

Has a viable organization
No viable organization

Next Steps: Funding & Implementation





Final plans were created across 124 communities.

The program has made nearly 1,000 project recommendations requiring mixed levels of funding, technical assistance, and resources toward implementation in six major categories.

RRP project recommendations are categorized as follows:

Each recommendation presented in an RRP final plan was developed according to a template rubric designed to align projects with Federal and State funding requirements, including interim guidance issued by the U.S. Treasury related to the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021.



Public Realm

- Transportation & Infrastructure
- Placemaking & Landscaping



Private Realm

- Buildings (Interior & Exterior)
- Storefronts & Displays
- Redevelopment



Tenant Mix

- Small business technical assistance
- Retail recruitment



Revenue & Sales

- Promotion & Marketing
- Branding
- E-commerce



Admin Capacity

- District Management Entity formation
- Zoning, permitting & licensing hurdles



Cultural/Arts

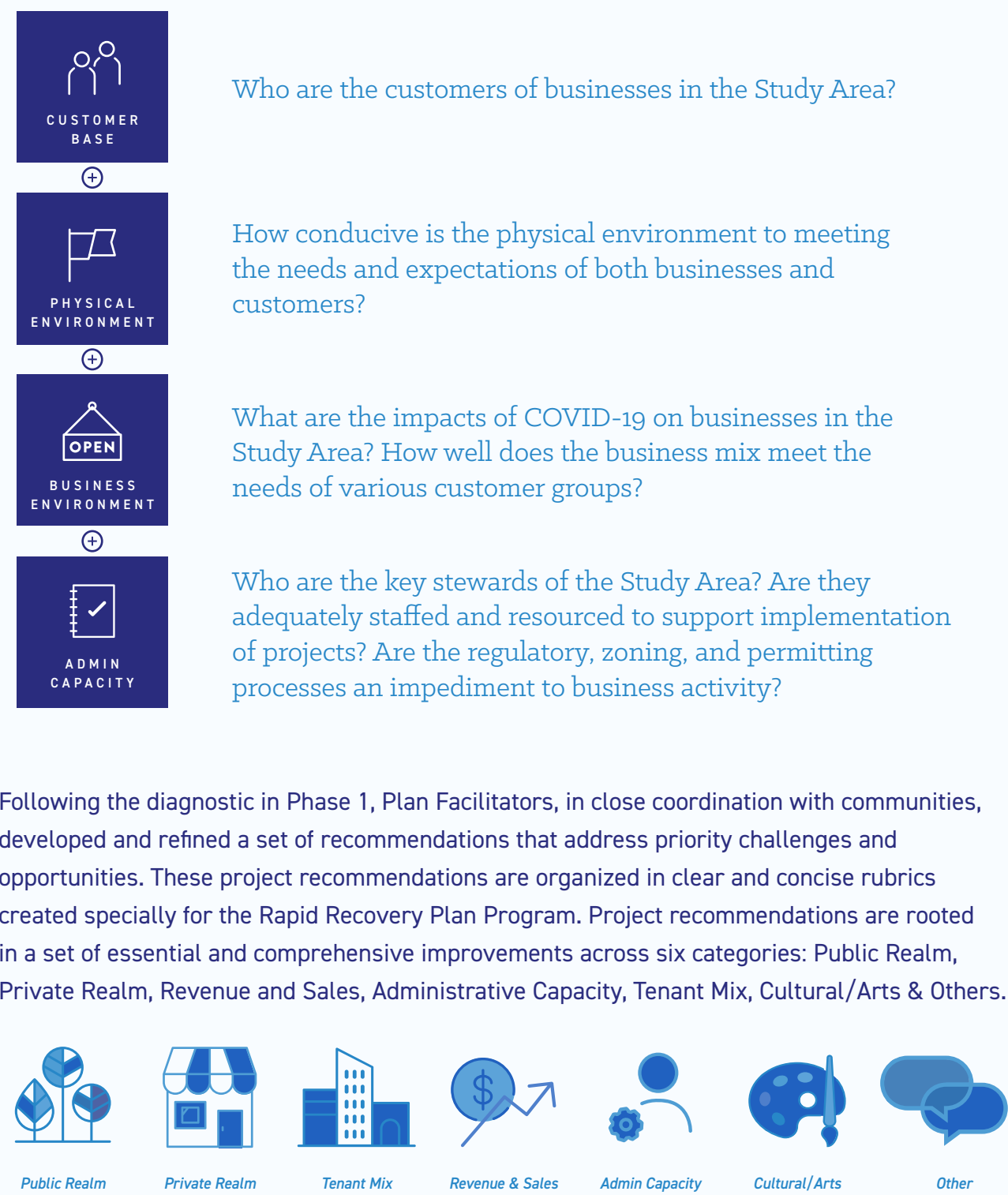
- Strategic interventions led by cultural institutions

RRP Project Recommendation Rubric

Each recommendation presented in an RRP plan will be developed according to a template rubric designed to align projects with Federal and State funding requirements, including interim guidance issued by the U.S. Treasury related to the American Rescue Plan of 2021.

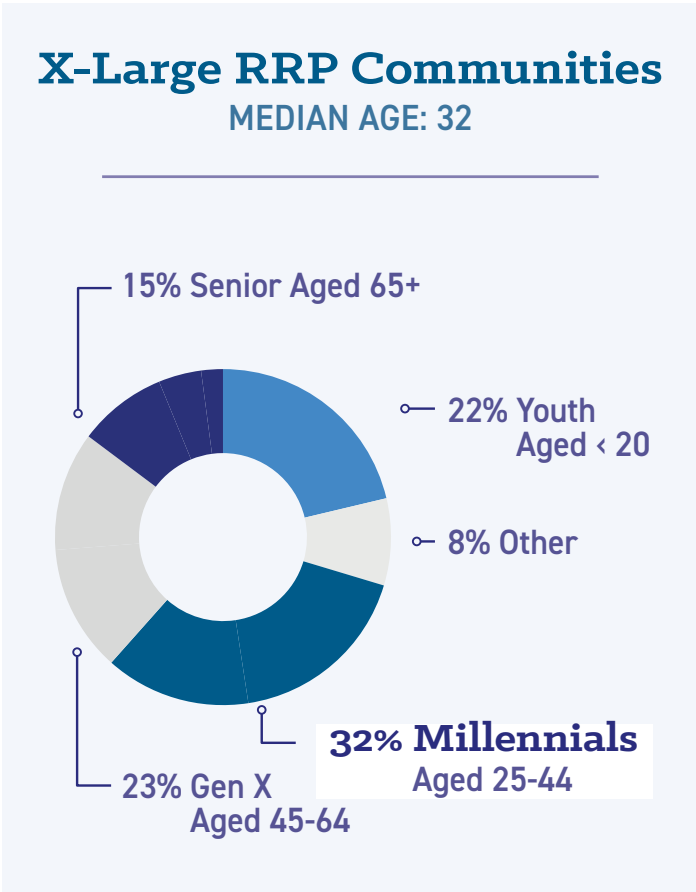
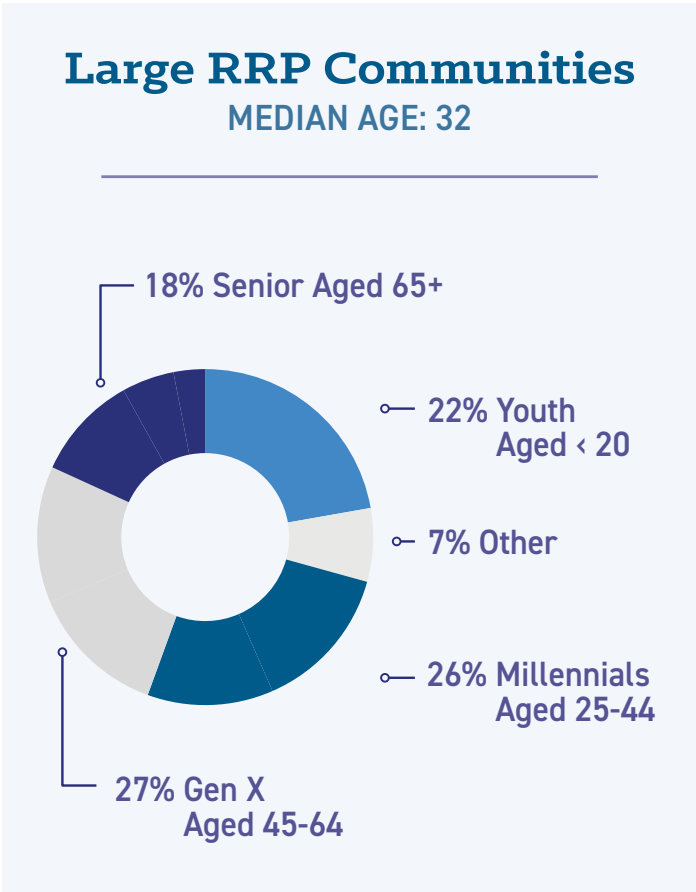
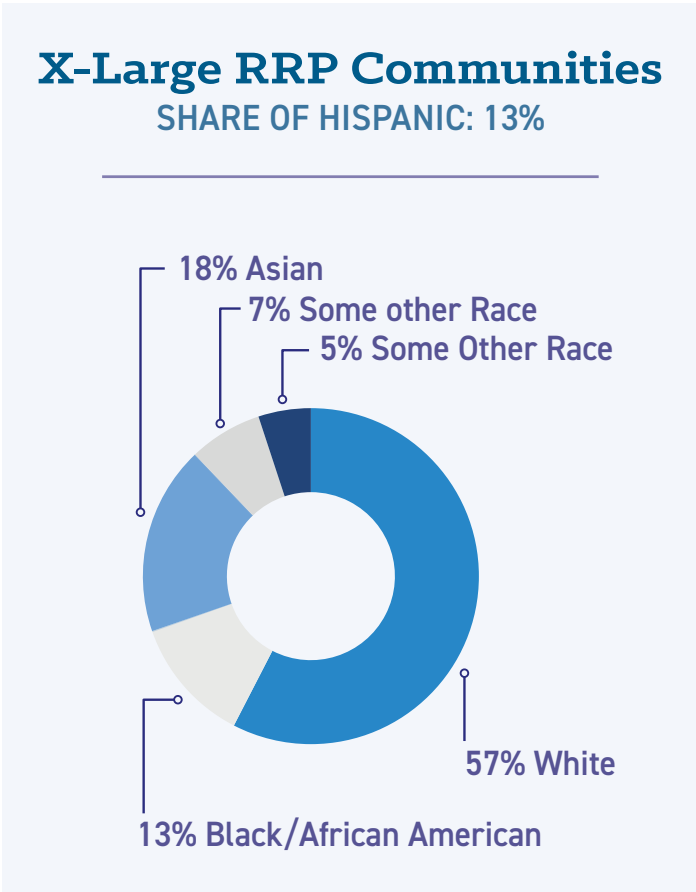
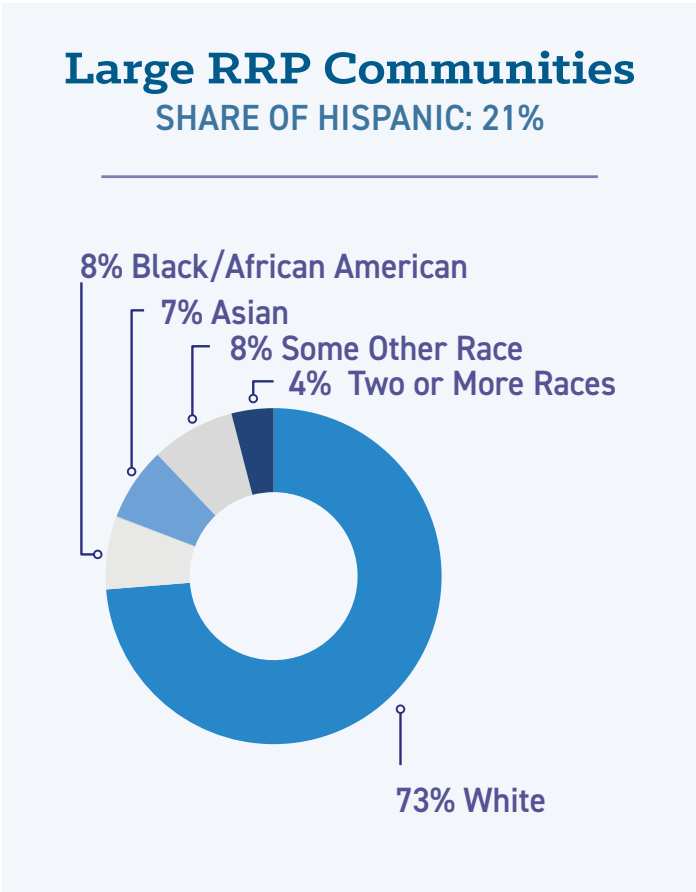
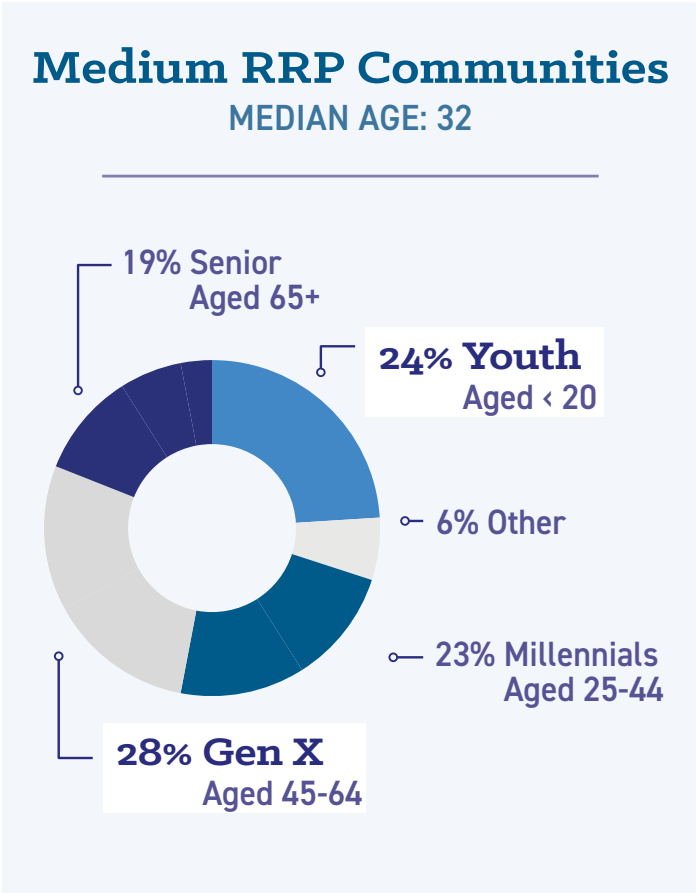
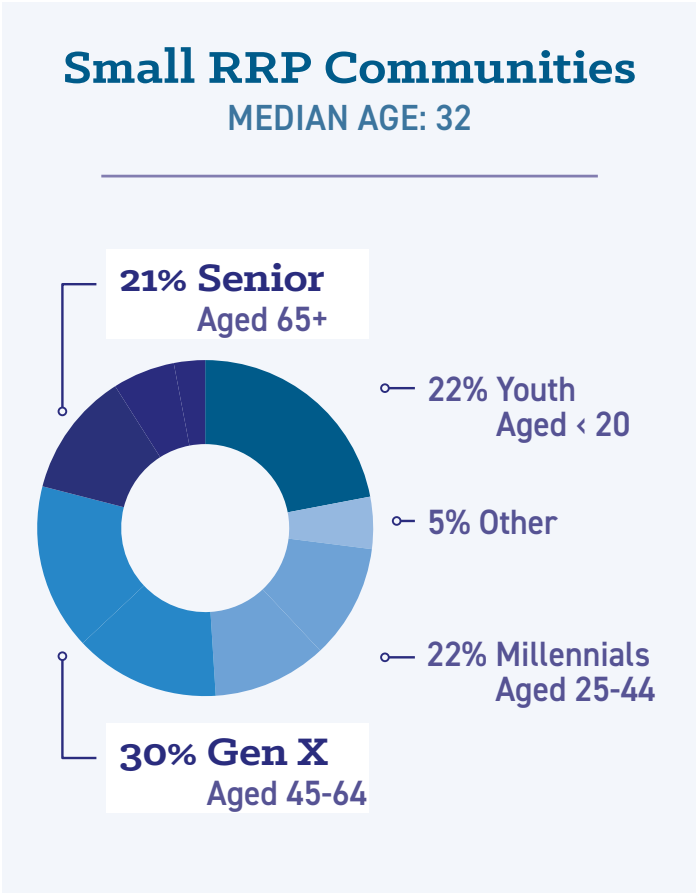
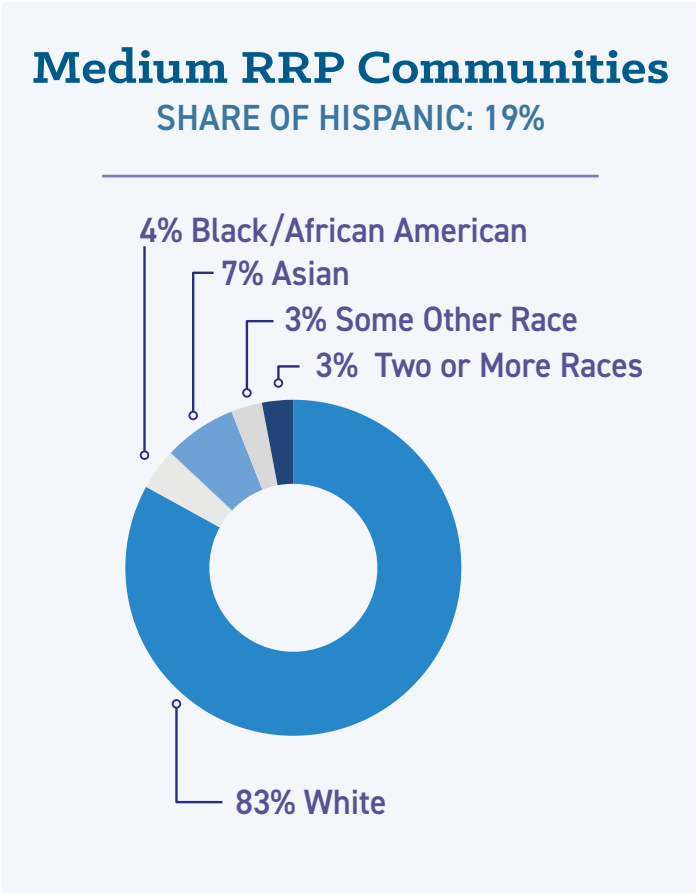
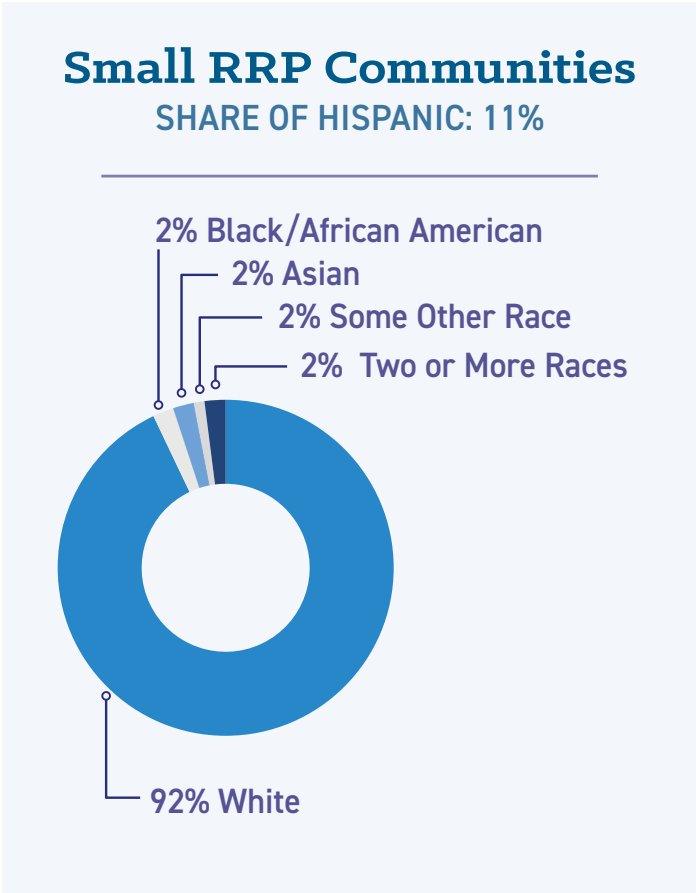
Project Title	An action-oriented statement, e.g., Renovate historic building for restaurant use; Install lighting in public plaza
Category	Public Realm; Private Realm; Tenant Mix; Revenue & Sales; Administrative Capacity; Cultural/Arts; Other
Location/Census Tract	If the project has a defined location for implementation (including a property address, roadway/street, neighborhood), please indicate location here. Please also include the 2020 Census Tract Number.
Origin	Names of all organizations or individuals that contributed to the project idea and who may also serve as project champions If the originating individual or organization and the champion are not one in the same, please list both and indicate where the project idea originated and who will serve as the project champion.
Budget & Potential Sources of Funding	<p>A general timeline of the project including phasing for implementation with milestones and immediate next steps expressed in a number of months. Provide any known or anticipated start and completion dates.</p> <div><div>Low Budget (Under \$50K)</div><div>Medium Budget (\$50K-\$200K)</div><div>High Budget (\$200K+)</div></div>
Timeframe	<p>A general timeline of the project including phasing for implementation with milestones and immediate next steps expressed in a number of months. Provide any known or anticipated start and completion dates.</p> <div><div>Short Term (Less than 5 years)</div><div>Medium Term (5-10 years)</div><div>Long Term (10+ years)</div></div>
Risk	<p>Potential risks and/or potential impediments to successful implementation. This includes but is not limited to political will, existing regulatory restrictions, legal and liability concerns, community interests, site ownership, environmental constraints, or financing limitations.</p> <div><div>Low Risk</div><div>Medium Risk</div><div>High Risk</div></div>
Key Performance Indicators	Performance indicators that might be measured to assess anticipated impacts of the project following implementation – e.g. average daily traffic count, total annual sales receipts, no. of event attendees, total no. of storefront vacancy, no. of units constructed, etc.
Partners & Resources	A summary of public/ non-profit/ and private entities/organizations/ individuals that might be required to implement the project. Please also indicate if there are any committed partners and resources for the project.
Diagnostic/COVID-19 Impacts	Description of how the project responds to the key challenges and opportunities that were identified during the diagnostic phase of this project, in particular, the harmful impacts of COVID-19 and challenges exacerbated by COVID.
Action Items + Process	A concise description of the project including key actions that need to be taken toward implementation, including a list of chronological steps that must be taken to fully implement the project, including any property/ land purchase and transfers, vendor procurement, site clearance/ remediation, training and technical assistance, etc.

Rapid Recovery Plan Diagnostic Framework



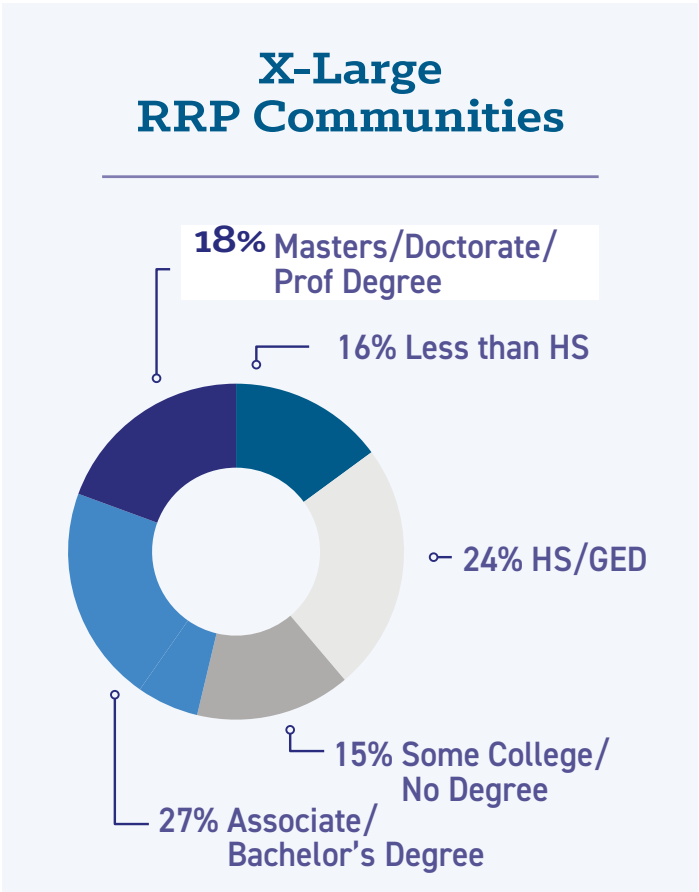
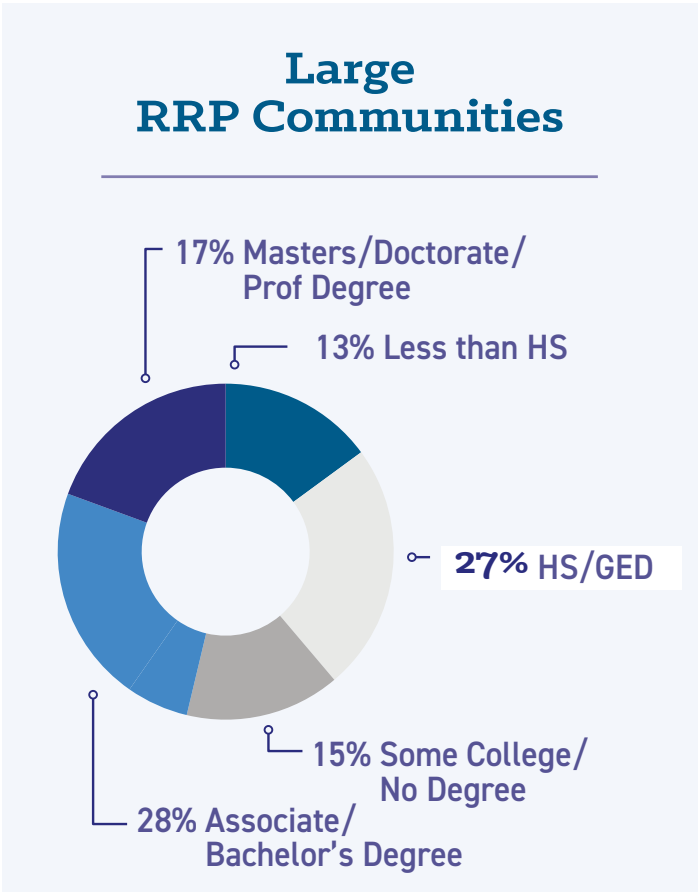
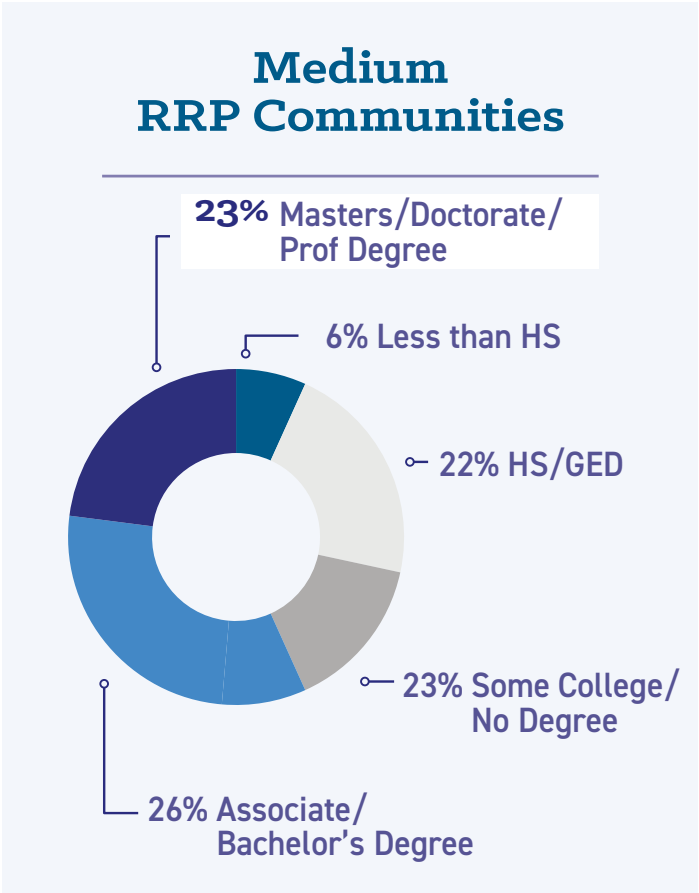
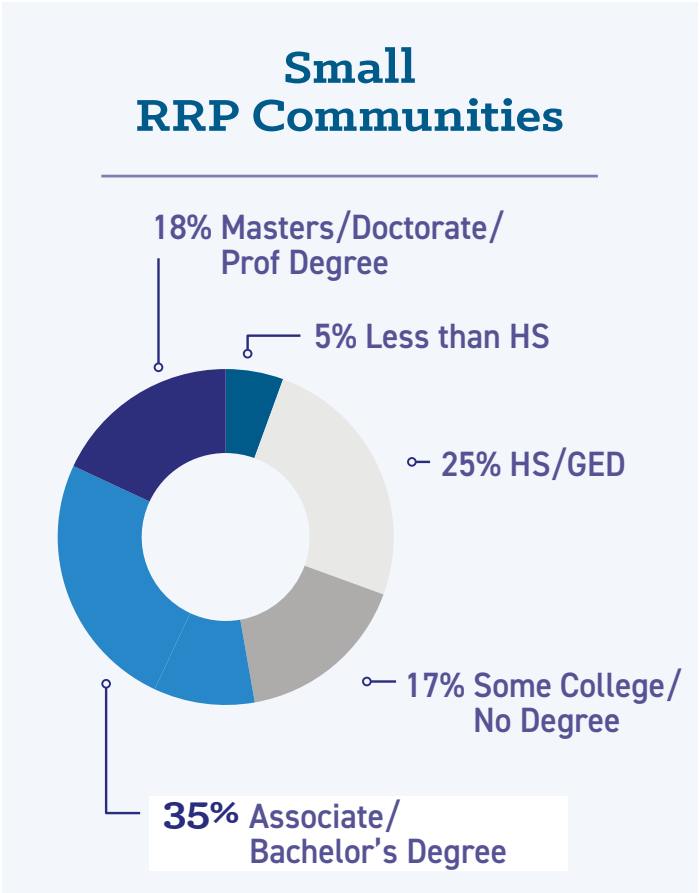
Appendix





The following reflects data collected at municipal level.

Educational Attainment



The following reflects data collected at municipal level.

Resident vs. Worker Customer Base

