MAIN STREET AMERICA®

AARP® Real Possibilities

COMMERCIAL DISTRICT DESIGN: COVID-19 RESPONSE AND MANAGEMENT

Commercial district infrastructure is the set of basic physical and organizational facilities that support a district's operation. It includes major infrastructure such as roads, lighting, and water/sewer—as well as other smaller-scale infrastructure elements and amenities, such as sanitation, internet access and furniture. The quality of infrastructure and amenities is not only important to a district's basic functioning, but also has a direct impact on whether it is a great *place*. In recent years, entrepreneurs and employers alike are increasingly prioritizing *place* in their decisions on where to locate. Studies like Smart Growth America's *Core Values: Why American Companies Are Moving Downtown* show that companies and small business owners increasingly give precedence to place factors like walkability and proximity to amenities over other traditional factors. In other words, basic, serviceable infrastructure is no longer enough to be competitive.

This brief will focus on three small-scale infrastructure elements that bolster the creation of great places, particularly in this time of COVID-19 response and management: digital enhancement (e.g. wifi and broadband), sanitation stations (e.g. handwashing and hand sanitizer stations), and moveable furniture (e.g. tables and chairs).

Benefits

Though Main Street commercial districts generally offer many of the qualities and amenities that attract small businesses and employers, there are infrastructure elements that can dramatically increase their performance from an economic, health, and community perspective —especially now in this time of COVID-19 response and management.

Main Street America's April 2020 report *The Impact of COVID-19 on Small Businesses* showed that nearly two-thirds of the 6,000 small businesses surveyed across the country had no online sales component—a concerning percentage during a time where businesses are already seeing unprecedented declines in their bottom lines. Enhanced digital infrastructure—particularly in rural communities—can be the lifeline that makes this sales platform possible, enabling owners to diversify their business (and its revenue stream) while also attracting and supporting remote workers.

Similarly, sanitation stations and moveable furniture generate additional health, safety and community-building benefits for small businesses and area residents, especially in areas where social events may be planned. By advocating for these three amenities, local leaders, community advocates, and Main Street managers can help their communities realize greater economic, health and safety, and social benefits. >
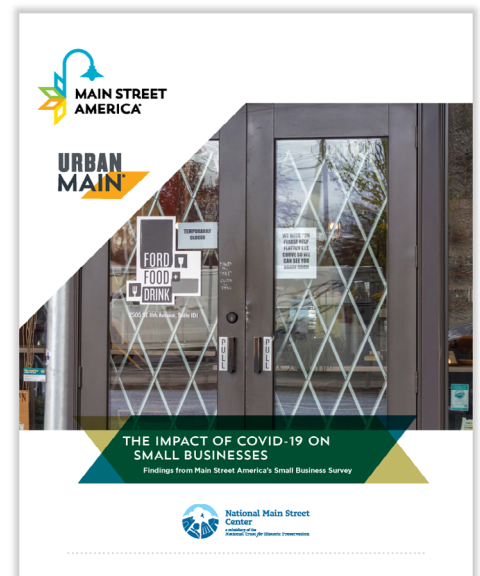
Economic Impact

- Digital enhancement: revenue stream diversification and business sustainability
- Digital enhancement: attracts remote workforce, bringing new industry and people into the community
- Sanitation stations and moveable furniture: creates physically safe spaces for more customers

Health and Safety

- Digital enhancement: increases access to quality healthcare
- Sanitation stations: encourages adherence to public safety guidelines while in the commercial district and makes personal hygiene supplies available for people experiencing homelessness
- Moveable furniture: allows for increased social distancing and places to rest for diners, customers, visitors, and residents

Community Building

- Digital enhancement: can increase access to education, although as COVID-19 has laid bare, many Americans face equity and access gaps with regard to distance learning.
- Sanitation stations and moveable furniture: creates the necessary sense of safety for residents and visitors in the district
- All: support the development of great places that attract and maintain entrepreneurs and employers

A sign next to a hand sanitizing station in Cape Charles, Virginia, reminds people how to keep their town healthy. (c) Kim Zamorski

Considerations for Success

When considering taking steps to add or improve high speed internet access, sanitation stations, and moveable furniture, there are overarching considerations for success that local leaders should prioritize:

• **Strive for inclusive community engagement.** As with open streets initiatives (#1) and parklets and pedlets (Brief #2), community engagement should be a primary consideration with infrastructure initiatives. Using online tools or safely distanced intercept surveys, learn from as many local businesses and community members as you can to determine what community needs are and what challenges exist. Pull together the data you gathered to make a case to decision-makers for the infrastructure enhancements.

• **Consider the** "**Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper**" **approach.** Sanitation stations and moveable furniture are two infrastructure initiatives that could potentially be achieved through a Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC) approach. This approach, popularized by placemaking leaders Project for Public Spaces, encourages inexpensive, quickly implemented projects that can help local leaders test and iterate an idea to determine its usefulness and impact. This

LQC approach lends itself well to potentially temporary solutions, such as sanitation stations, as well as unfixed infrastructure, such as moveable furniture. Implementing these quickly allows local leaders to try out different locations for the infrastructure and gather feedback from users on their experiences.

• **Build a cross-sector team.** For these infrastructure initiatives, building partnerships and a multi-sector team will be key. For a more complex project like broadband and wifi enhancement, work with small business owners and other local employers, any internet provider companies that serve your area —plus your community's Public Health officials, emergency management officials, Departments of Public Works, Planning, and Economic Development. For the more easily implementable projects, work directly with the small business owners to help determine placement and equipment.

Considerations for Success *(continued)*

•   **Identify diverse, adequate funding.** For infrastructure projects like these, there are several potential sources of funding to consider. LQC projects lend themselves very well to crowdfunding, where local leaders can use general platforms (e.g. GoFundMe) or specialized platforms (e.g. ioby) to engage the public to help contribute funds. AARP's Community Challenge grants fund "quick-action" projects that can help communities become more livable for people of all ages.

To fund enhanced digital infrastructure, consider federal or state funds. If your city has existing incentives for design-related projects (e.g. façade improvements or streetscapes), work with your municipal leaders to determine whether those can be expanded to include digital infrastructure, even temporarily. These incentives could also be further expanded to also support LQC projects.

•   **Include infrastructure amenities in other projects.** As local leaders consider larger scale strategies, such as open streets or parklet/pedlet programs, take time to consider what infrastructure elements can be included so that several goals can be accomplished at once. Open streets and parklet/pedlet programs create physical space, but it is moveable furniture that makes those spaces useable for customers and people seeking places to rest. Make it simpler to achieve multiple goals at once by considering infrastructure needs with every design-related initiative.

•   **Evaluate the impact.** Whether taking the LQC or longer-term implementation approach, local leaders should make sure they are planning to evaluate the impacts of the infrastructure improvements. Survey customers and residents about the placement of moveable furniture and sanitation stations, and check in with small business owners as they build their e-commerce platforms or connect to the wifi and broadband. Whenever possible, quantify what kind of economic impact is able to be achieved as a result of the enhancement, whether in terms of sales revenue, jobs created, or sales tax generated.

> **For more guidance on getting started**, see AARP's *Pop-Up Placemaking Tool Kit*, the Federal Communications Commission's Getting Connected to Broadband, and Streetsblog USA's profile on a grassroots campaign for creating handwashing stations.

Adaptations for COVID-19

Infrastructure improvements significantly contribute to making commercial districts great places. For local leaders seeking to best position their community for COVID-19 response, these improvements are likely to be more important than ever. This brief focuses specifically on digital enhancements, sanitation stations, and moveable furniture because these three elements respond to evolving expectations about health and safety in public space, can be implemented quickly, and can accomplish multiple goals at once.

Efforts that expand access to high-speed internet through digital enhancements make it easier for small businesses to access and create e-commerce platforms. These not only diversify their potential revenue streams during this time of crisis, which is key to a business' survival, but also set them up for more sustainable economic impact over time. In addition, these digital enhancements ensure that employees working in office jobs will be able to work from home when needed. Beyond COVID-19 impacts, expanded access to high-speed internet makes it possible for more remote workers to locate to a community, potentially attracting industry and new residents to the community.

Sanitation stations placed in the commercial district encourages adherence to public safety guidelines, and >

makes personal hygiene supplies available to people experiencing homelessness. These can be placed throughout the district relatively quickly and located (and easily relocated) where the need is greatest.

Moveable furniture gives customers, visitors, and residents places to sit and maintain social distance. They augment open streets and parklet programs by adding amenities to engage the public. They contribute to a more age-friendly, intergenerational approach, wherein seating is offered for those need or want it, inviting more people to safely enjoy public spaces.

> **Did you know?** Journalist and urban planner William H. Whyte proposed the concept of moveable chairs in the late 1970s to transform an underutilized, troubled park in Manhattan. Wildly successful, this project is credited with influencing hundreds of cities across the nation to install movable chairs in their public spaces. Learn more.

Example

Nampa, Idaho (pop. 96,250)

To expand downtown outdoor seating, the City of Nampa and its business owners developed a creative public/private partnership. The Idaho Department of Commerce's recent Nampa Downtown Assessment identified outdoor dining as a desired downtown amenity. Because of its concentration of businesses, a quarter-block of downtown seemed like the ideal location for this outdoor seating, but current sidewalk widths and state laws prohibiting open alcoholic containers in designated pedestrian pathways make it impossible for the businesses in this downtown block to build outdoor seating sections.

In response, the City plans to implement a streetscape project to extend the sidewalk and repurpose nine existing parking spaces in order to create additional space for outdoor seating that complies with existing laws. This sidewalk and seating extension will be an enhancement to to Nampa's Outdoor Dining program, which allows businesses to lease parking spaces for extended seating adjacent to their establishments. To make the process easier for businesses to participate in the program in the wake of COVID-19, Nampa City Council is waiving all permit costs related to outdoor dining.

To help fund the project, and to encourage business owners' participation, the City is requesting that adjacent business owners contribute 10% of the project cost as an investment. Local grant and loan funds are also being made available to the business owners to use toward this investment. Though this streetscape expansion was planned pre-COVID-19, its importance to downtown economic development and personal safety has only increased. Construction is set to begin in phases in early fall 2020.
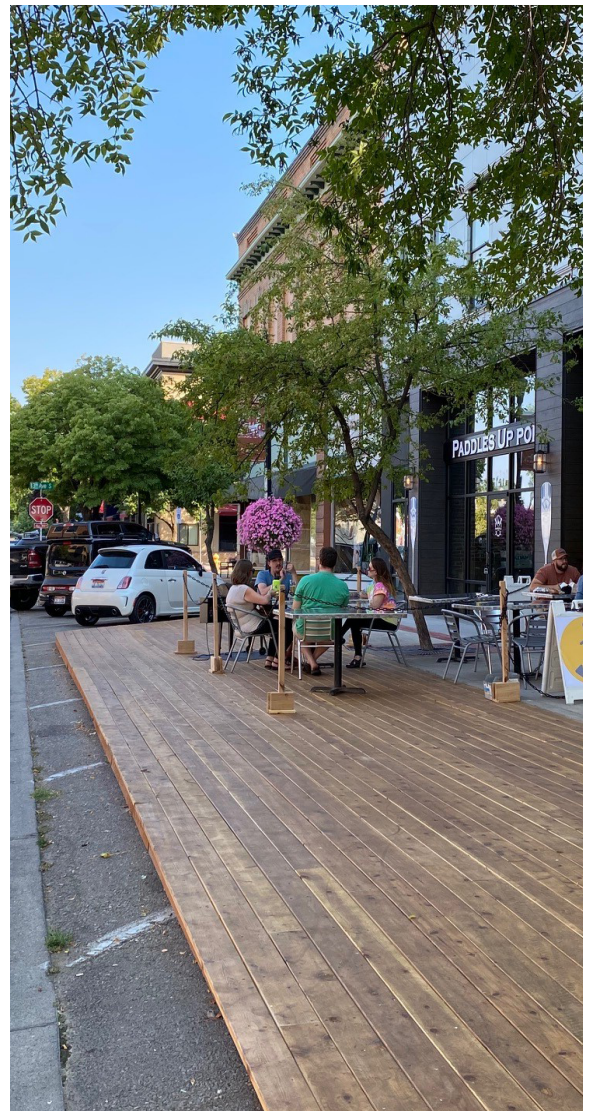
Repurposed parking spaces in Nampa, Idaho (c) Jay Snyder

Further Reading

Benefits

- Community Building: *The Importance of Being Moveable* and *How COVID-19 Could Redesign Our World*

- Economic Impact: *Coresight Research's consumer psyche survey*, *Small Business Benefits of Rural Broadband*, *The Impact of Broadband Speed and Price on Small Business*, *Big Impacts, Small Towns*, and the *Appalachian Regional Commission's Telecommunications and Technology Projects*.

- Health and Safety: *CDC's Telehealth Guidance*, *Three Ways Digital Transformation Shapes Rural Quality of Life*, *Convention Center Helps Build Sanitation Stations to Combat COVID-19*, and *How can the houseless fight the coronavirus?*

General

- *Homelessness & Public Space During Covid-19: Seven Takeaways*, Project for Public Spaces

- *Map to Prosperity*, Center for Rural Affairs

- *Mitigating the Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Rural Areas* (webinar), Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking at Brookings.

Contact us

For more information or for more guidance on how to implement an open streets program, reach out to:

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About the Series: Produced in collaboration between Main Street America and AARP Livable Communities, *Commercial District Design: COVID-19 Response and Management* is a series of design-centered briefs developed to equip community leaders with safe, equitable, age-friendly strategies to support economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.