

Downtown Memphis Commission

INNOVATION

Why BUILDDOWNTOWN now? Our plan timing was driven by our efforts to link Memphis to the growing knowledge/creative economy and to prioritize equity to ensure our full community shares the benefits. BUILDDOWNTOWN creates an innovative DMC “Toolkit” that aims to:

Promote Compact Critical Mass: The DMC’s service area covers 6.5 square miles. Focusing the right development in the right place by incentivizing investment directed specifically toward enlivening Main Street and other retail/employment centers—in turn attracting talent, jobs, and investment:

1. Empower the DMC to prioritize PILOTs, TIFs, and other public-private partnerships for projects within a five-minute walk of Main Street and other retail/employment centers.
2. Empower the DMC to buy or control strategic development sites funded initially by parking revenues.
3. Expand DMC and city partnership to engage owners in addressing blight.
4. Strengthen the DMC’s ability to decrease development costs via shared parking.

Promote Equity and Inclusion: Ensure that downtown is everyone’s common ground:

1. Preserve economic diversity by maintaining at least 30% of the housing in every downtown neighborhood as affordable across a full income spectrum.
2. Expand programs that unlock all Memphians’ ability to share in downtown’s success through better jobs and business opportunities.
3. Provide predevelopment grants for women and minority businesses.
4. Increase city and state support for downtown affordability by lobbying to make mixed-income projects more competitive for tax credits, making affordability a key criterion for incentives.

OUTCOME

The DMC began implementing BUILDDOWNTOWN many months before formal approval—and while simultaneously supporting a downtown battered by COVID.

Early outcomes:

- Short-term “wins” to build confidence in the plan:
- Created Retail Tenant Improvement grants to get spaces move-in ready for a tenant.
- Mobility: Created a pilot partnership to provide shared mobility access across downtown.
- Built a neighborhood dog park on a blighted lot. Public space was elevated in recognition that dogs come to the park with people.

Longer-term, larger-scale catalytic change includes:

- Approved \$42M mobility center, which will include a bike commuting station (showers, storage, bikes on demand) and BRT connection together with street fronting retail. It will also provide shared parking to free-up existing surface lots for higher-use development.
- Approved over \$60M in parking and mobility projects in the downtown core, increasing access and promoting a “park-once” philosophy.
- Approved a contract to purchase 100 North Main, a landmark, vacant 529,000SF historic office building together with several nearby historic buildings. The two-acre site will accommodate a mix of uses with housing as the driver. Redevelopment will bring life to a block of Main Street within sight of the new convention center. The existing large parking structure will provide shared parking—freeing up nearby parking lots for development.
- Created a new pre-development fund, which is already been utilized to assist eleven projects, with 72% of those projects belonging to MWBE developers.

Changes to our Development Loan tool made it more attractive to emerging developers, with 60% of the applicants being MWBE developers.

EXECUTION

Phase I invited our greater community to the planning process. We sought input/feedback and found common-ground from our wide stakeholder base. This work was valuable and fully incorporated into the final plan document. However, as work progressed, the DMC recognized the growing importance of developing more robust tools to unlock downtown’s full potential—and value to the region.

Phase II focused on assimilating the input into actionable items. Our plan focused on physical form, emphasizing Memphis’ living culture in transforming Main Street and nearby neighborhoods into lively, competitive places to live, work, play, and innovate while also enhancing downtown as everyone’s neighborhood, one that would draw a diverse—and sometimes divided—region together.

Phase III focused on implementation. The DMC had a strong track record of advancing downtown vitality. But it needed expanded resources for the tasks ahead. The DMC and the consultant team worked with city leaders, and other key stakeholders to develop robust tools and funding mechanisms to support the DMC in leveraging dramatic demographic and economic trends. These trends are making downtowns increasingly central to advancing regional economic competitiveness and building a sense of community in the midst of diversity. The results will pay rich dividends for decades to come.

REPRESENTATION

Our goal for equity/inclusion was two-fold:

- Learn from the full spectrum of the Memphis community with the intent to build city-wide awareness that translates into community-acceptance and the will to move forward.
- Focus on detailed engagement with active representation from all members of Memphis’ community.

Our approach was high-tech—social media marketing to key groups, project website, and wiki mapping—and high touch—going to where the people were and actively recruiting participants. We began with a diverse steering committee and multiple deep-dive stakeholder interviews. We learned as we proceeded—holding informative, interactive events and workshops ranging from post-work brewery gatherings to meeting with the leadership development agency and their students. We set up shop at a regional arts festival, at downtown lunch spots, at MLK day at the National Civil Rights Museum, and basketball games at the FedExForum. We conducted an online survey and mounted displays at libraries throughout Shelby County. Our work touched every zip code in our county and reached into every community within our six-mile CBID.

Design Week served as the culmination of our in-person engagement efforts—focused around a charrette in a vacant Main Street storefront. Subsequent engagement throughout COVID included additional web-based feedback—culminating with webinars to introduce BUILDDOWNTOWN.

REPLICATION

Memphis is a typical mid-tier city. With a professional staff of 10 as primary support, our three-person planning team led outreach efforts. By working closely with community partners (restaurants, civic organizations, arts groups, educators, and sports/entertainment), we were able to reach a broader audience.

Our engagement efforts included feedback options that required varying levels of involvement. This strategy allowed people who weren't necessarily familiar with urban design or planning processes to still feel comfortable giving input and interacting with the process.

During "Feed-Back" sessions held at local restaurants during the lunch hour, we offered \$2 cash in exchange for input. Category headers encouraged participants to tell us what they loved about downtown, and what they wanted more and less of. By offering an easy way for participants to have hands-on involvement with the plan, they were more likely to continue with engagement.

Our ongoing community engagement also included mapping and story-boarding. By leading participants into the work with simple and easily relatable tasks, we mitigated a lot of the natural resistance. We also created an opt-in mailing list for information and plan updates that garnered over 200 subscribers, adding to a total audience of 12,000.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

This project undertook a complex problem - creating a master plan that is flexible enough to be successful throughout inevitable change - in a complicated environment of competing priorities and scarce resources and provided three very simple core ideas as a framework:

- Build up - not out
- Celebrate walkability
- Welcome everyone

The study area, at 6.5 square miles, is one of the largest BID areas in the country. The general context of the BID's area includes a dense urban core; urban neighborhoods; a world-famous entertainment district; largely vacant redevelopment zones; a large medical district; transit corridors; an extensive riverfront; and remnant industrial areas all within the City of Memphis (and its recently adopted Comprehensive Plan) and Shelby County.

This project pulled together the common elements of many relevant plans and initiatives to clarify common goals and target limited funding and opportunistic grant dollars towards investments and programs as appropriate.

The final concise document—spanning fewer than 80 pages—represents this desire for simplicity with a concise format and focus on strategic implementation efforts.

The plan functions like a roadmap - flexible as conditions and priorities change. The big ideas provide value and continuity as we navigate our next normal.