



COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS RAPID RECOVERY PLANNING PROGRAM

SUMMARY

Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with support of Streetsense

INNOVATION

The Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) program was designed to quickly and equitably distribute federal resources (within nine months) to develop local downtown plans that address the impacts of COVID-19 on business districts. The program was intended to serve diverse communities, including rural, urban, small, extra-large, in preparation for subsequent recovery funding sources (federal, state, or local) that would become available in the latter half of 2021.

The program created what we believe to be the first of its kind – massive in scale, downtown in its focus, and data-driven at its core. We invented a standardized grading system for data collection and distributed a business survey instrument to small businesses in every participation community. The data collection methodology enabled the Commonwealth to aggregate data and support cross-comparative analysis. One notable element of the planning effort was to understand where BIDs had been formed in the state and align those with our findings on COVID impacts. We wanted to highlight opportunities for business improvement district formation as a long-term pandemic recovery strategy and we sought to understand and highlight the discrepancies between resiliency and recovery in communities WITH BIDs versus those WITHOUT BIDs.

The data collected is now publicly accessed through an interactive Tableau dashboard and may be updated in the future by communities (with the help of the RRP data collection guide) to assess any changes/progress.

OUTCOME

The program resulted in the creation of 124 Rapid Recovery Plans for downtowns/town centers/commercial districts of various types (rural/urban) and sizes (small/medium/large/extra-large), across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The plans, which feature nearly 1,000 'shovel-ready' project recommendations, are guiding documents for local and state leaders to determine appropriate COVID-recovery resource and funding allocations in the near term.

Plan facilitators gathered data and insights that amounted to over 8,250 data points and 3,000+ business survey responses. This RRP data set helps clearly illustrate the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses and the state of conditions in the state's downtowns and commercial districts. The Commonwealth is now equipped with data that points directly to business performance before and during COVID, priority areas of improvements in the physical environment, as well as critical regulatory and capacity challenges that must be addressed by state and local leaders.

The program has also established a robust suite of educational resources and tools that are available online and free of charge. These resources provide technical information and best practices to downtown practitioners and the general public in a range of topics, including Public Realm, Private Realm, Sales & Revenue, Tenant Mix, Cultural/Arts, and Administrative Capacity. In total, the program produced 15 subject matter expert webinars, 62 best practice sheets (across six compendiums), and 335+ technical consultations.

EXECUTION

The RRP program was designed in eight weeks (Nov 2020-January 2021) following a \$10 million infusion of federal funds to the Mass Downtown Initiative. Emmy Hahn, Director of the Mass Downtown Initiative, enlisted the support of Streetsense's Public Non-Profit Solutions team to design the program, which included determining everything from resource allocation, the types of technical assistance that would be provided, the format and topics for web-based training, printed resources, and internal communications tools (a dedicated Slack channel was established for all Plan Facilitators and Subject Matter Experts.)

After a call was issued for communities and plan facilitators in December 2020, 124 communities were selected and paired with 81 plan facilitators (i.e., planning consultants with demonstrated downtown planning expertise) who had been selected through a competitive selection process.

In addition, the RRP team developed a program brand identity that would be used across all program materials – from letterheads to presentation templates and final plan templates.

REPRESENTATION

The RRP program was designed with equity in mind. Early on, the team developed community categories that would enable a rational allocation of resources and manage differences in capacity between ‘small’, ‘medium’, ‘large’, and ‘extra-large’ communities. These designations were defined based on population sizes, commercial district sizes, and density of businesses within the district – which typically correlated with the level of urbanization. As the size of communities increased, a larger share of the budget and technical consultations were allocated. In addition, the number of project recommendations expected to emerge from the planning process increased as the community size increased, under the presumption that larger communities would have more capacity (i.e. staffing and resources) to advance multiple projects and priorities following the planning effort.

The program was also designed as a community-driven process. In Phase 1, plan facilitators and communities worked closely to distribute business surveys (in multiple languages) that would gather feedback on business performance. Over 3,000+ survey responses were collected across all types of communities participating in RRP. In Phase 2, communities and plan facilitators came together to build consensus on a set of early project ideas before developing final project recommendations and plans.

REPLICATION

The multi-jurisdictional planning approach that was applied across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts can easily be scaled down at various levels, depending on budget and need. Core program components that can be replicated include the program design (the distribution of resources via plan facilitators and subject matter experts), the Diagnostic framework and data collection guide, and the final plan recommendation rubric.

In fact, various elements of the RRP program have already been applied at the regional- level in Puerto Rico. As part of the Foundation for Puerto Rico (FPR)’s comprehensive economic recovery program to build long-term visitor economy resiliency, Bottom-Up Destination Recovery Initiative, Streetsense developed six destination plans outlining a set of strategies to grow spending from both local and off-island visitors and to extend visitor stays.

Each of the six destination plans developed for Puerto Rico were rooted in a diagnostic that followed the Commercial DNA framework, and also featured actionable projects that followed a project rubric/template that ensured all recommendations were place-specific and had identified next steps, potential risks, funding levels/resources, key implementation partners, and likely timelines.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

One of the program’s early challenges was determining how to equitably allocate resources and define expectations for both participating communities and plan facilitators. The decision was made to develop a community categorization that would enable rational allocation of resources and manage differences in capacity between small, medium, large and extra-large communities. These designations were defined based on population sizes and the business density of commercial districts. The number of projects expected to emerge from the planning process increased as the community size increased, under the presumption that larger communities would have more capacity – in the form of staffing and resources – to advance multiple projects and priorities following the planning effort.

The team also recognized that there would likely be great variation in skillsets and topical expertise among plan facilitators and a concerted effort needed to be made to ensure that every community was able to receive additional technical support (e.g., environmental engineering, transportation, urban design, placemaking, branding, marketing, and equity) from subject matter experts, as required. The program subsequently engaged 35 subject matter experts who were available for consultations (1-on-1 or cohort group meetings) to support the further refinement of project recommendations.