**Interested in Assessing Your Downtown?**

If you are interested in bringing vibrancy to your main street, conducting an assessment is a great way to get started. An assessment allows you to gather preliminary data about your main street and quickly identify key assets and opportunities for improvement. Following the pandemic, main street likely looks and feels different. Conducting an assessment is the first step in moving forward towards rebuilding and recovery.

### Step 1
Form a group of diverse volunteers to conduct the assessment. Consider a range of different people: all ages, all income levels, long-time residents, newcomers, business owners, municipal staff, etc.

### Step 2
Define your downtown and determine the study area of your assessment.

### Step 3
Choose a date to conduct your assessment. Your downtown may look different depending on the day of the week, time of year and the weather.

### Step 4
Conduct the assessment. You will need a notebook, pen, and a list of the characteristics. Walk through your downtown, making notes and taking photos of what stands out. This is not an inventory of all of the characteristics present, but rather a highlight of what is excellent (assets), what could use some improvement or what is missing (opportunities). As you walk through your downtown, consider how people are interacting with the characteristics. For example, are there children playing in the parks? Are there people patronizing the restaurants? Are the sidewalks and trails being utilized?

### Step 5
Share your findings. Gather your group together and discuss your observations.

### Step 6
Take action. Looking at the list of assets and opportunities, make a list of possible projects. Consider what assets the assessment highlighted, and how to build upon those. Similarly, identify opportunities where something can be improved, like a great location for a mural, a need for more frequent trash pickup, or adding color to main street through landscaping. Make a list of possible projects and prioritize which project to work on first.

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**Community Assessment by Walking**

Community assessment by walking around is a basic way to understand your community, downtown or neighborhood. It includes walking or driving around and recording your observations.

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**Main Street**

Main street is the heart of your community. Your downtown serves as a place to enjoy a meal, connect with friends and neighbors, browse local shops, enjoy community art and conduct business. A vibrant downtown businesses that contribute to the economy, opportunities for people to connect and represents your history and culture. Main streets that are working to rebuild after the pandemic will likely be experiencing loss of businesses and vacant buildings. Despite these challenges, there are still ways to bring activity and vibrancy to your downtown. People value having a downtown that is walkable, well maintained and visually appealing.

**What Contributes to Vibrancy?**

The following characteristics describe the components of what makes a downtown vibrant for a resident, visitor or business owner. It is important to have a mix of these characteristics. A downtown with lots of great businesses but inadequate seating lacks vibrancy because there is no place for people to stop, rest and connect with others. Similarly, a downtown with a beautiful streetscape cannot be vibrant without community art, businesses or something to draw people to the downtown. Main streets with a limited number of businesses may focus on leveraging characteristics such as community art, seating, parks, landscaping, and displays and signage to bring vibrancy and encourage people to visit the downtown.

**Identifying Assets and Opportunities for Improvement on Main Street**

Asset-based community development is an approach that focuses on identifying community assets rather than only focusing on community needs. Identifying assets helps community members determine what resources may be leveraged or built upon to reach shared goals. There are a variety of assets that may be mapped in a community, including people, community services, organizations, businesses and physical structures. While all of these types of assets are important for main street revitalization, this guide focuses on identifying assets as and opportunities for improvement that exist in the built environment.

The characteristics of a vibrant downtown are adapted from First Impressions programs in multiple states and are informed by the National Civic League’s Civic Index. While these characteristics are based on the built environment, it is important to also assess how people are interacting in a downtown. People are a critical piece of a vibrant downtown, whether they are taking a walk on main street, playing in the park, patronizing businesses or enjoying community art. A main street that lacks activity and people, no matter how beautiful its buildings or infrastructure, will not feel like a place you would like to spend your time.
The following characteristics are key to a vibrant downtown:

**Businesses**
A variety of businesses provides reason for people to visit your downtown, whether they are residents, employees or visitors. Vibrant downtowns have a diversity of businesses that attract people, like restaurants, coffee shops, breweries, retail stores, fitness facilities, or financial institutions. Businesses should have visually appealing facades and storefronts, including attractive signage, well-maintained exteriors and window displays that draw the customer in. Beyond visual appeal, it is important that employees are friendly and welcoming to patrons.

**Downtown Entrance**
Simply put, the downtown entrance should indicate to visitors and residents that they are in the downtown. The entrance is often the first impression of your downtown, and should be well marked and welcoming to visitors and residents. Downtown entrances should have a visible sign and may be adorned with flowers, plaques or statues. Points of interest to the downtown which helps residents and visitors learn about who you are as a community.

**Natural Feature**
Natural features include streams, rivers, lakes, mountains, community forests. These provide opportunities for swimming, hiking, biking, walking, paddling or enjoying the view. With the help of marketing and signage you can draw people to your main street from natural areas. Ideally, there are natural features in proximity or connected to your downtown.

**Community Art**
Community art brings vibrancy to your main street in a variety of ways. This includes murals and temporary installations like sidewalk chalk art or artwork hung in vacant storefronts. These are interesting for people to look at and can help disguise vacant buildings. Performance arts like street performers, musicians, and concerts in the downtown area also draw people in, providing a sense of activity even if main street has fewer businesses. Lively painted pianos and percussion walls provide interactive community art. Community art displays show that the community takes pride and cares about main street.

**Displays & Signage**
Plentiful and visually attractive displays and signage help residents and visitors navigate your downtown. Informational signage includes wayfinding signs, parking signs, and municipal signs. Signage should be well-placed and cohesive. There may be a bulletin board or kiosk that informs people of upcoming events in your downtown which helps residents and visitors learn about who you are as a community.

**Landscaping**
Landscaping contributes to the visual appeal of your main street, from hanging baskets of flowers on lighting, to planters outside of storefronts, to well-maintained grass and trees along the sidewalks. Beautiful landscaping shows that main street is well taken care of and that there is civic pride. Plants and colorful flowers brighten and bring interest to the downtown area.

**Lighting**
Lighting is important on your main street as its presence contributes to a feeling of safety and security. There should be adequate, well-maintained lighting along the streets and sidewalks, parking lots, and parking garages.

**Parks**
Parks provide a place to sit, visit and gather with others. People may use the park for exercise, walk their dog or simply enjoy the outdoors. Larger parks may serve as location for concerts, festivals, sports and community activities. Smaller pocket parks provide relief from buildings and add green space to the main street.

**Points of Interest**
These add interest to your downtown and attract residents and visitors to the downtown to learn about your community’s history and culture. This category includes museums, unique architecture, historic homes and buildings, monuments, memorials, statues and plaques. Points of interest help tell the story of your community.

**Sidewalks, Crosswalks & Trails**
A vibrant downtown is walkable, with well-maintained sidewalks and crosswalks that are accessible to people with different abilities. Ideally, there are nearby trails that are connected to your downtown. Pedestrians should feel like the downtown is cohesive and that there are connections between businesses and other points of interest. People should feel safe to walk in your main street area.

**Streets & Transportation**
Your downtown should also have well-maintained streets, accessible to motorists and bicyclists. There should be bike lanes and bike racks. Ideally, there should also be a variety of transportation options, like taxis, ridesharing, and public buses. Main street requires adequate parking, which may include street parking, public and private lots and garages.

**Public Facility**
Public facilities are important to citizen life. Many of these are located on your main street, and include the town or city hall, police/fire station, post office, library, and schools. Public facilities serve as places where community members interact and conduct business. Other facilities may serve as gathering spaces and locations for activities and events, like the school or library.

**Seating**
Seating is important to a vibrant downtown as it provides a place for people to rest, gather, and connect. People might come visit the downtown just to watch or observe. Seating is not limited to typical park benches, but includes outdoor dining, stoops, lawns, courtyards, chairs, and anywhere people gather to sit. Benches and permanent fixtures should be located in attractive areas where people naturally want to sit.

**Waste & Recycling**
Adequate and well-placed waste and recycling receptacles help keep your downtown clean, contributing to an attractive main street. Waste and recycling receptacles should be emptied regularly.