

Kentucky Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project

Executive Summary
January 2021

PROJECT FUNDING:
POWER Grant Award 2017 - 2020



Appalachian
Regional
Commission



The Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) emerged as a college level unit within the University of Kentucky's College of Agriculture, Food and Environment in 2010. The College administration recognized the need for both an internal source of professional development and instruction for students and county Extension agents, as well as an external outreach mechanism for Kentucky communities with programming and research that focused on community and economic development.

CEDIK's programming has dramatically expanded to the evolving nature of places and economies as well as recognizing the intricacies of economic development. The Kentucky Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project is an example of this evolution, exploring how quality and intentional design and planning initiatives can create a more economically resilient downtown.

Learn more about other CEDIK initiatives at cedik.ca.uky.edu

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Front cover image
Downtown
Whitesburg,
Kentucky



Introduction

In 2017, the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) launched a three year, Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) grant as part of the POWER (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization) Initiative. This grant funded a Downtown Revitalization Project in Kentucky's eight Promise Zone counties. These eight counties are Bell, Clay, Harlan, Knox, Leslie, Letcher, Perry and Whitley. Within these counties twelve downtowns signed up to be a part of this project.

Within the broad scope of this downtown revitalization project, CEDIK offered a wide range of programs and technical assistance, along with networking opportunities to address the unique challenges each community faces in regards to their respective downtowns. Every community was able to select services to best meet their needs. CEDIK also facilitated quarterly convenings to allow participating communities to share ideas, strategies and information vital to successful revitalization efforts in the region. Communities that participated in this project were then able to access grant money to fund projects in their downtowns in order to successfully move from a planning phase into direct action.

BACKGROUND

In early 2014 the Southeast Kentucky Promise Zone received its federal distinction, and Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation asked CEDIK to conduct a strategic planning effort in the eight county region. The effort included community forums for youth and adults in each county. The county public forums held informed the Promise Zone's regional strategic plan.

This downtown revitalization project proposed to intersect with the Southeast Kentucky Promise Zone strategic plan in the following ways: collaborative partnerships, multi-jurisdictional project impact, and economic and workforce development integration.

above image
Downtown
Barboursville,
Kentucky

Project Partners and Roles

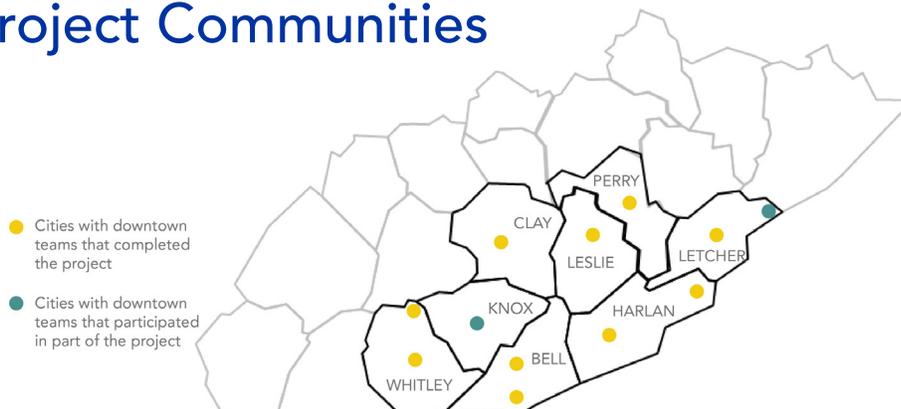
The Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) serves as the lead technical assistance provider for this project. CEDIK is an integrated engagement and research center housed within the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment at the University of Kentucky. CEDIK faculty focus on economic development, empowering communities and leaders, and community design through a partnership with the Landscape Architecture department. In addition, there are full-time staff dedicated economic development, community design, leadership development, community health and arts engagement. <https://cedik.ca.uky.edu/>

Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation's (KHIC) mission is to provide and retain employment opportunities in Southeastern Kentucky through sound financial investments and the provision of managerial assistance. KHIC coordinates, devises, implements, and promotes community, economic, and social development efforts within their twenty-two county footprint. KHIC was instrumental in the creation of the Kentucky Promise Zone and continued to serve as the lead entity providing dedicated staff and capacity to development efforts in the Kentucky Promise Zone. <https://www.khic.org/> and <http://www.kypromisezone.com/>

The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky (FAKY) is the only accredited community foundation serving Southeastern Kentucky. FAKY attracts and invests resources in communities across Southeastern Kentucky that support community building, capacity building and locally controlled endowment building. Since its founding in 2006, FAKY has been extremely successful in building a platform for community-controlled philanthropy through the development of local community foundations and attracting new investment in and for communities. FAKY directly supported the creation of the new regional Upper Cumberland Community Foundation and executed grant agreements with each community providing fiduciary oversights. <https://www.appalachianky.org/>

The Kentucky Main Street Program, housed within the Kentucky Heritage Council, is the state affiliate of the National Main Street of America and supports communities utilizing a four point approach that focuses on organizations, promotion, design and economic vitality. The Kentucky Main Street program coordinates a statewide network of downtowns and grassroots leaders through the state and provided support to their network affiliates and others participating in the Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project. <https://heritage.ky.gov/community/main-street/Pages/overview.aspx>

Project Communities





Downtown Revitalization Project Coordinator

The Downtown Revitalization Project Coordinator, hired by CEDIK as part of this effort, played a vital role and was responsible for a number of essential functions foundational to the implementation of this project. The primary purpose of the coordinator was to serve as the principal contact for the eight county region providing coordination, information, technical assistance and strategic support to partner organizations and downtown stakeholders. This role often included strategic communications, team coaching, mentoring and facilitation at various scales.

The coordinator served as a clearinghouse for regional information on downtown revitalization and monitored the fiscal, physical and attitudinal shifts taking place within stakeholders and downtowns more generally as a result of revitalization efforts. This was accomplished with frequent contact with downtown stakeholder teams and organizational partners using periodic visits, meetings, training sessions, technical assistance delivery and a monthly newsletter developed specifically for downtown stakeholders. These efforts often culminated at regional convenings when the region's stakeholders came together.

The coordinator acted as a liaison between technical assistance providers, coordinating the delivery of programs, trainings and workshops to stakeholder teams as needed or requested. The coordinator developed and oversaw the application and review processes for two series of community grants and was responsible for creating the review rubric, building a review team, gathering reviewer feedback, providing direct comments to applicants and ultimately providing coaching and technical assistance throughout the implementation effort.

above image
Shane Barton,
Downtown
Revitalization
Coordinator

Why Invest in Downtowns?

Downtowns have a significant intrinsic value that is not easily replicated in new developments. The historic density and concentration of assets, people and businesses make downtowns natural hubs for jobs and tax revenue. Downtowns illuminate and showcase a community's culture and provide insights on its historic identity. Healthy and productive downtowns also have the opportunity to generate a high tax revenue per acre due to their mix and density of uses. Downtowns can be more economically productive and as a result investments in downtown have the potential to generate great returns. Over time, downtowns have proven to be quite resilient because of the entanglement of built assets, ingrained memories and diversity of uses.

Downtowns are for everyone and often its vibrancy is associated with the density of small businesses and the foot traffic supporting them. Investment in revitalization can create jobs, increase property values, improve quality of life and attract new visitors and residents. Downtowns are also important investments for industrial attraction because beyond an available and talented labor pool, good schools, housing and infrastructure, sites are selected based on the overall quality of life for employees and a downtown's cultural and recreational amenities contribute to this equation. Industries want to locate in unique and authentic places where employees can be happy and healthy.

Downtown investments are as diverse as downtowns themselves. For example investments can be made in accessibility, public art, building facades or parks and green spaces, but they all serve a unique purpose while collectively contributing to the vibrancy and value of downtown. Parks and green spaces are vital in providing a good quality of life, promoting health and wellness, and contributing to economic growth but are rarely considered as important as infrastructure like water, sewage and electricity serving the community's basic needs.

below image
Downtown
Barbourville,
Kentucky.



Project Process

The process offered to all 12 southeast Kentucky communities was straightforward. Community teams were offered a menu of **technical assistance opportunities** (outlined below) to jump start interest as well as establish a shared understanding of the downtown. Networking opportunities were offered at **quarterly convenings** to allow community teams to share within the region their ideas, successes and challenges in their efforts. Community teams that engaged with the technical assistance offered through CEDIK were then invited to **apply for funding** for mini-grants to explore a relevant effort to revitalize their downtown. Upon completion of the mini-grants, community teams were invited to apply for more substantial implementation grant assistance to continue their revitalization efforts.

OUTLINE OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES



FIRST IMPRESSIONS PROGRAM

This program coordinates anonymous visits to the community by professionals in community and economic development, small business owners, community leaders and more. Analysis includes detailed feedback from internet search engines, social media platforms, and in-person experiences. Visitors document their experience and interactions with community members.



BUSINESS RETENTION & EXPANSION PROGRAM

This is a facilitated community-based program that engages communities to examine the local business environment through surveys and interviews with local business owners, interpret the information collected, and purposefully plan to strengthen the ability to understand local business needs and positively respond.



COMMUNITY DESIGN PROJECT ASSISTANCE

Community design promotes change to the built environment from the neighborhood to regional scale, and aims to meet community needs through participatory decision-making at all levels. Project types vary from summer college intern teams creating comprehensive downtown plans, UK studio semester projects, strategic planning facilitation and Chalk and Talk program facilitation at community events.



MINI-GRANT ASSISTANCE

Mini-grants acted as catalytic projects providing pathways for broader community engagement and collaboration. Projects were often a result of information learned from the First Impressions Program.



IMPLEMENTATION GRANT ASSISTANCE

Stakeholder teams accessed larger implementation grants as more programs were deployed and after a more firm vision had been established of the necessary strategies required to move revitalization efforts forward. All applications were reviewed by CEDIK, Kentucky Main Street Program, Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky (FAKY) and others utilizing a regional committee. FAKY executed agreements with each community and provided fiduciary responsibility.

Project Outcomes

BELL COUNTY, KENTUCKY MIDDLESBORO & PINEVILLE

In addition to developing a collaborative relationship between and among partners in Middlesboro and Pineville, where historically coordinated efforts had not taken place, both communities made investments in coordinated wayfinding and large scale murals.



CLAY COUNTY, KENTUCKY MANCHESTER

In addition to the creation of a new parklet welcoming downtown visitors, downtown stakeholders partnered to develop their new downtown plan outlining future opportunities for design inspired revitalization efforts. This new plan represents the City of Manchester's first ever downtown plan and was unanimously adopted by the city council.



HARLAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY HARLAN CITY & TRI-CITIES (CUMBERLAND, BENHAM, & LYNCH)

In addition to the women-led Mountain Women Mean Business conference in fall 2018, stakeholders in Harlan County focused attention on vacant and abandoned buildings in their downtowns. A building inventory and follow up programming led to reduction of vacancy rates in Harlan city's downtown area. Over a 15 month period, they were able to cut vacancy rates nearly in half.



LESLIE COUNTY, KENTUCKY HYDEN

In addition to a community garden, pedestrian infrastructure and new public art, Hyden downtown stakeholders launched a week long community revitalization kickoff event series. The series provided dedicated space for youth listening sessions resulting in new youth representatives being invited to join several boards ensuring their voices are considered in organizational decision making in the future.



LETCHER COUNTY, KENTUCKY

JENKINS & WHITESBURG

In addition to new wayfinding and walkability improvements, downtown Whitesburg stakeholders partnered with their local watershed organization to develop the only effort addressing stormwater and water quality impacts by installing green infrastructure downtown. Their new rain garden acts to help slow rain water infiltration as a functional demonstration and educational site.



PERRY COUNTY, KENTUCKY

HAZARD

In addition to investments in organizational capacity supporting a number of local engagement events and being a mentor to other communities redeveloping buildings, downtown stakeholders in Perry County have developed new wayfinding and a high impact large scale mural showcasing the history of Hazard located at the entrance to downtown from the adjacent bypass.



WHITLEY COUNTY, KENTUCKY

CORBIN & WILLIAMSBURG

In addition to new wayfinding finding signage being designed, produced, permitted and installed, downtown stakeholders launched an inaugural festival, transforming an underutilized and threatened green space into a public asset. This led to new investments in pedestrian accommodations and business investments in adjacent properties. This space activation has been reliant on the organizational capacity of an emerging new community group called Why Whitley and the relationships they have curated throughout the process.



Reports to Communities

While this Executive Summary is intended to provide an overview of the project, in-depth reports were also prepared for the seven counties listed here. Access the reports online: <http://cedik.ca.uky.edu/seky-downtowns>



Public-Private Partnerships

The reliance on public funds to support long-term economic development is not a winning strategy and CEDIK considered these POWER funds as an effort to re-energize long term solutions in the region. Part of the overall strategy is to amplify the impacts of public private partnerships and local foundations.

The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky (FAKY), based in Hazard, Kentucky has been instrumental in providing philanthropic leadership throughout the region. In addition to supporting the creation of a new regional affiliated fund they have continued to build local capacity, facilitate community collaborations and bring attention to charitable giving.

One recent example this capacity creating impacts is the new, regional, community fund called the Upper Cumberland Community Foundation (UCCF). UCCF was created in partnership with the Kentucky Promise Zone coordinator, and aims to transform eastern Kentucky through charitable giving, community involvement and strategic partnerships by investing in community assets throughout Kentucky's Upper Cumberland counties of Bell, Clay, Knox and Whitley.

Local philanthropic organizations like FAKY and its affiliated funds like the UCCF, the Leslie County Community Foundation and the Perry County Community Foundation will continue to play an important role building local capacity, fostering local collaborations and creating place based solutions to community and economic development challenges.

*above image
Railroad crossing
in Jenkins,
Kentucky.*

Summary of Public Realm Improvements

	Middlesboro (Bell)	Pineville (Bell)	Manchester (Clay)	Harlan City (Harlan)	Tri-Cities (Harlan)	Hyden (Leslie)	Whitesburg (Letcher)	Hazard (Perry)	Corbin (Whitley)	Williamsburg (Whitley)
Improved walkability of downtown area through sidewalk, curb, or other pedestrian infrastructure improvements	Direct project support	Direct project support								
Improved wayfinding of downtown area by designing or placing signage at key locations	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support	Direct project support	Direct project support				
Added or designed new public space or greenspace to downtown area	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support	Direct project support
Added new public art, including murals , in downtown area	Direct project support	Direct project support	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support
Held new events designed to gather residents and visitors in downtown area for cultural reasons	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support
Held new events designed to gather residents and visitors in downtown area for small business support reasons	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support
Expanded outdoor seating for downtown area restaurants	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support
Improved the downtown area through beautification projects , such as plantings, cleaning, painting	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support	Direct project support	Tangential or inspired local action	Tangential or inspired local action	Direct project support
Utilized Chalk and Talk, or other efforts, to engage the public about public design and the public realm	Direct project support	Direct project support								



Render of proposed public space improvements for Jenkins, Kentucky.

Looking Forward

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of project (2017-20) local stakeholders, partners, technical assistance providers and communities at large have engaged in and with their downtowns in new ways. We have learned from each other, built collaborative partnerships, explored other downtowns, successfully developed and implemented projects, ignited new ideas, developed new skills, built the skills of others and endured a global pandemic together. These accomplishments represent a launch point for more sustained downtown revitalization efforts in the future.

LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND CAPACITY

The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has shown that local leadership, shared ownership, and broad capacity can create positive results but requires a deep commitment and understanding between stakeholders, and about their community's assets, challenges, and visions for the future.

Communities with dedicated, paid staff, responsible for downtown revitalization efforts (however narrow or broadly defined) often demonstrated greater overall capacity. A critical piece for many downtown teams in the Promise Zone was a paid staff member to drive, coordinate and provide leadership for the community's downtown revitalization process. Please see CEDIK's [Downtown Team Series](#) for more insights and details gathered from working with teams in the Promise Zone, including a full description of the practices and roles often associated with a paid downtown coordinator.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Work to create or develop a dedicated funding source for a paid staff member devoted to supporting coordination and providing local leadership and continuity to downtown revitalization efforts.
2. Continue to seek out opportunities to build the skills, abilities and leadership capacity of elected officials, community volunteers, business owners and downtown stakeholders to address current and future challenges.

LOCAL FOUNDATIONS AND PHILANTHROPIC CAPACITY

At the onset of the pandemic local nonprofits and philanthropic organizations were the first organizational responses. In the Kentucky Promise Zone, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky took a leadership role, in partnership with the Appalachian Impact Fund, CEDIK and Invest 606 to create the Eastern Kentucky Downtown Business Stimulus Fund. This fund leveraged existing assets, relationships and donations to respond to the direct needs of local businesses. Communities with existing foundations also created their own hyper local responses to support businesses, often taking the shape of a stimulus fund or mini grant program.

The Eastern Kentucky Downtown Business Stimulus Fund provided 153 grants, ranging from \$600 to \$3,000. In total, \$385,400 went to business owners (60% female) in 23 counties representing a mix of restaurants, unique retail, attractions, personal services and others businesses active in the broader downtown and tourism ecosystem. The fund received over 550 applications requesting more than 1.5 million dollars.

Communities with existing local philanthropic leadership, capacity and available assets accessed financial support more quickly than communities without existing relationships with philanthropic organizations.



RECOMMENDATION

1. Continue developing local (or regional) philanthropic programs or organizations to build local knowledge, leadership, capacity and interests to serve local needs with local giving and investment.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

The arc of this project has shown that our ability to come together and work towards revitalizing our downtowns is often built upon relationships – both existing and those we build. The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has helped build and establish new relationships within downtowns, counties and among the region. At the heart of the project was an intentional effort to create a regional network of stakeholders using a series of facilitated convenings to learn together, collaborate on efforts, share ideas, and champion each other’s hard work. Even public policies were shared among the network inspiring their implementation in other communities. At quarterly convenings we cultivated space for skills building (team and personal). Stakeholders shared, more often than not, that the networking opportunities and relationship building components that took place during the convenings had the most impact.

These networking opportunities led some communities to adapt similar programs or policies they heard from others. Stakeholders shared they now feel more comfortable speaking in public as a result of presenting to the regional network and how they felt valued being asked to share insights with other communities. Others noted they were empowered to learn about the mutual challenges faced, while affirming new commitments to regionalism and collaboration within their counties and in the larger region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to embrace regional efforts, collaborations and shared ownership (within counties and the region) focusing on mutual interests, assets, capacity to address shared challenges.
2. Seek out opportunities to join regional networks, collaborations or initiatives that provide relationship building opportunities with other stakeholders seeking solutions to shared challenges.

*above image
new community
message boards
in Middlesboro,
Kentucky.*

COVID-19 Impacts

The most dramatic and impactful issue encountered during this project revolves around the unprecedented COVID-19 global health pandemic. The challenges have been substantial; some of these impacts may have been mere inconveniences and others life altering. It has meant working virtually from home, not working at all, travel and crowd restrictions, canceled events and community engagement opportunities, supply chain disruptions, economic uncertainty, job insecurity, increased commitments at home with youth or elders, virtual learning, shifting shopping patterns, and dealing with the reality of death and losses in our families and communities. The last year has been incredibly taxing on individuals, families, communities, and society.

BROADBAND

While physical distancing and other public health practices have been encouraged we have not lost the need to stay connected. This has largely meant outreach, engagement, organizing and simply maintaining interpersonal relationships has shifted to virtual platforms. Not only have we seen the ways we connect change in real time but we are collectively shaping how we use technology moving forward. Addressing broadband access, while important to the work of this project, was not a central focus of this grant's activities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the issue to the forefront.

OUTDOOR SPACES AND THE PUBLIC REALM

During lockdown phases and subsequent periods of increased public restrictions and precautions, including social distancing, or limited indoor capacity, the ability to simply go outside and get some fresh air had never felt so important to many. In seeking refuge from the pandemic, outdoor spaces didn't feel like mere amenities, but rather critical infrastructure to escape and recharge.

Many parks, green spaces, and trail systems have experienced increases in local use. Neighborhood and downtown sidewalks also became critical for outdoor recreation. Stakeholders noted that as car traffic decreased, pedestrian sidewalk traffic increased.

When given the opportunity to invest philanthropic funds to address COVID related economic recovery (Healthy Downtowns Initiative), two thirds of the participating Promise Zone communities prioritized investments in the public realm and public spaces. Stakeholders responsible for a community garden and outdoor classroom (planned pre-pandemic) noted it has had a bigger impact now than originally anticipated, attributing their observation to residents simply needing a place to go because they have been in their homes more than ever. Investment in increased access to outdoor spaces promotes both public health and economic development.

LOCAL MATTERS

It has never been so evident that communities are passionate about their local businesses. As economic uncertainty loomed over every community, one of the most encouraging responses were collective actions/programs to support local business enterprises. Never before has the idea of supporting local, generating local tax dollars, and keeping businesses open been so prioritized and championed. We have seen the creation of take out bingo cards, gift card incentive programs, initiatives to feed front line health workers by local businesses, transitioning outdoor spaces to the serve the needs of no longer accessible indoor spaces and much more.



What's Next?

DOWNTOWN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

The Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project has documented in this plan that revitalization efforts are multifaceted and complicated at times. It makes sense, given the development histories and existing infrastructure in the region's downtowns that reimagining their uses can come with challenges. Sustained revitalization impacts will require moving beyond the successes of this project (visioning, planning, skill and relationship building, assessments, design solutions, prioritization and implementing projects) to thinking about our collective efforts contributing to a broader investment landscape and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Perhaps the most significant challenge faced in the built environment during the Promise Zone Downtown Revitalization Project were the physical constraints and limitations of downtown buildings. Nearly every community has at least one building, however large or small, that presents a real challenge with tangible and varying obstacles. While downtown buildings are iconic they are also difficult to restore and maintain once they have fallen into disrepair. The reality is many Kentucky Promise Zone downtowns are burdened with underutilized or abandoned structures, and transitioning these spaces will require outside private capital investments.

REVITALIZE, REINVEST, REDEVELOP APPALACHIA (R3) INITIATIVE

The R3 Initiative takes a four-step approach to readying communities for investment and building markets for multiple forms of capital absorption. These steps include: city-wide planning that engages a diverse set of stakeholders, identification of tangible catalytic projects, deployment of early-stage impact investment capital to amplify the competitiveness for outside capital investment, followed by deployment of later-stage traditional capital to complete projects. In order to concentrate investments into the hardest-to-serve communities there is an underlying need to supplement the existing investment ecosystem that R3 aims to address.

*above image
new gathering
space created
in Whitesburg,
Kentucky.*

