

DOWNTOWN TEAM SERIES #1



Downtown Teams in the Kentucky Promise Zone: A closer look at regional efforts to revitalize downtowns

The Downtown Team Series “Downtown Teams in the Kentucky Promise Zone” summarizes the composition of nine downtown revitalization teams, briefly describes the roles of member types, and presents an archetypal team informed by the experiences of the Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone. In subsequent resources in this series you will find more information about the specific roles and interests of team members as well as a number of scenarios highlighting the unique skills and abilities provided by team members to accomplish collective goals.

Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.

– Andrew Carnegie

Downtown Revitalization takes more than a single person's best intentions. It requires a collective effort involving many people working towards mutual goals. More times than not, the process starts with a single person investing their time, attempting to address the issue they've identified as the most important. Any process can begin with an individual's vision for change, but cultivating shared ownership and positive results requires a deeper commitment and understanding of the connections between your community's assets, challenges, and vision for the future.

In many ways a downtown revitalization team is similar to an ecosystem or investment portfolio – the more diverse the better. Diversity among downtown team members refers to the inclusion of people with different experiences and backgrounds. The varying perspectives of team members results in a more diverse set of solutions to ultimately draw upon. From this diverse set of stakeholder ideas, we see a collective intelligence emerge that helps deliver a more robust plan for their downtown revitalization efforts.

We have found the following elements important to the success of a downtown revitalization effort:

a diverse team of committed participants; a commitment to the work above individual ideas; and an understanding of the importance of shared commitments and (perhaps more importantly), a sense of accountability to the revitalization effort.

In the fall of 2016 the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK), the Kentucky Small Business Development Center (KSBDC) and the Department of Landscape Architecture, in partnership with the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky and the Kentucky Main Street Program launched an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funded downtown revitalization project in the Kentucky Promise Zone. The Kentucky Promise Zone represents eight counties in eastern Kentucky that have been severely impacted by the transitioning energy and extractive economy.

This process was predicated on the strategic deployment of technical assistance by the before mentioned partners as dictated by local need and priority. At the heart of this project, the downtown team needs to have the relationships, the leadership capacity, and the sense of urgency to create positive results.

A review of Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone reveals a high frequency of local government involvement. Every team included or involved local government (i.e. Mayor) or the municipal staff in some fashion. For some this meant the mayor was personally involved championing the efforts to the broader the public, while in other cases select staff were involved as proxies for local government. Occasionally, departments like public works were engaged in the process because the specific efforts fell within their departmental purview. While all county fiscal court offices supported the project in the development phases, only a third of the teams included active representation of the county fiscal court or judge executive outside of their fiscal support or grant administration. The high frequency of local government involvement on the Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone could be interpreted to suggest these offices are 'the starting place' to

activate great ideas but a word of caution – many, if not most, local governments are more likely to support a new project or idea after demonstrated, broad based and undeniable public support or tangible results and impacts are documented.

The second most prevalent downtown team member or organizational member was the local **Chamber of Commerce** or Main Street Merchants Association. A merchants association provides local business a collective voice. Nearly all of the Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone identified this constituent as a team member. It is fairly easy to see how positive impacts of well executed downtown revitalization efforts should interest local business owners invested in downtown, in particular if their local business could be impacted.

The extractive economy has waned and the region's natural assets are being viewed more and more often as critical pieces to future economies based on tourism and visitor experiences. **Tourism organizations** are present and active in a number of revitalization efforts. Increasingly downtowns are being considered the gateways to our surrounding natural assets and connected to the broader visitor experience. As a result of this growing trend, most of the Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone included representation from their local, county or regional tourism office.

A critical piece for two-thirds of Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone was **a paid staff member to drive and provide leadership for the community's downtown revitalization process**. This person was often tasked with coordinating and facilitating the course of action as well as communicating and accounting for resultant impacts. This position can come in a variety of forms, but most often in the Promise Zone it was the executive director of a Kentucky Main Street affiliate or a municipal downtown manager unaffiliated with the national or state Main Street Program.

A slight majority of Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone incorporated **local or regional nonprofits**. These nonprofits were both local and regionally focused representing varied interests in the arts, trails, local food, environment, or economic development. The most prevalent nonprofit type represented on one-third of Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone were local or county Trail Town Committees that had previously organized to seek state Trail Town certification.

An often underutilized community asset, **county extension agents**, were present in nearly half of the Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone. Much like nonprofits, extension agents, often have a particular programmatic focus area. Cooperative Extension serves as a resource link to the state Land Grant University, and extension educators can often connect university knowledge and resources to local issues. One of the most visible community assets highlighted by a current or previous connection with cooperative extension was the Farmers Market. Farmers Markets, or the organization responsible for its operation, were represented on one-third of Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone. Farmers markets represent the intersection of agriculture and business activity, while generating downtown traffic at their daytime markets.

Local history and cultural heritage is often an observable asset in downtowns because the history is embedded among the built environment. The built environment tells the story of the community and the people carry forward the culture. As both cultural and historical assets find their way into the overall downtown visitor experience, so does their representation as members on Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone. One-third of teams included their local historic society or cultural heritage organization.

The reality that local tax bases are constricting is impacting local government's ability to make critical infrastructure investments making each expenditure more calculated. With constrained financial resources many communities are thinking about alternative sources of monies to invest in community development projects. A growing strategy to capture local wealth for current and future reinvestment has been the creation of **local foundations and philanthropic organizations**. One-third of Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone included representation of their local or community foundations with all active members being affiliated with Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky.

A number of other team members rounded off Downtown Teams in the Promise Zone. These remaining member types are by and large reflective of local assets or specific project types that call on the insights of particular experiences. Additionally, teams included members representing their public library, economic development authorities, local college or university, senior citizen service providers, local banking, housing or judicial services.

