

180,000 VISITS TO DOWNTOWN

MARCH 2, 2020

120,000 VISITS TO DOWNTOWN

DOWNTOWN COVID-19 RECOVERY BRIEF

IOWA CITY DOWNTOWN DISTRICT

MARCH 2021

60,000 VISITS TO DOWNTOWN

MARCH 23, 2020

APRIL 13, 2020

MAY 4, 2020

0 VISITS TO DOWNTOWN

INTRODUCTION

This Downtown COVID-19 Recovery brief provides initial insight to recovery actions from the coronavirus pandemic for the Iowa City Downtown District's board and area leadership to consider for 2021. Even as the immediate consequences of the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 continue to unfold, it is apparent that behavioral changes that stem from the pandemic may radically alter the way people gather, interact, shop and dine in the coming years. This brief attempts to address some of what we've observed locally and offer opportunities to reposition our past plans to allow for better future outcomes.

This brief also acknowledges the important social justice movement of 2020 sparked by the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police and the need for national, state and local reforms to address systemic racism. As we strive to recover from COVID-19, having a lens for social equity and what it means to feel "safe" as recovery actions are identified will be a critical component of recovering better together.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The Iowa City area has already experienced close to a year (as of March 13, 2020) of extreme disruption and we assume that a full vaccination roll-out will provide resumption of most economic activity in the coming year. The downtown economy will likely rebound in stages as the health crisis stabilizes, with potential slides and setbacks. Because our economy is highly dependent on the University of Iowa, the largest employer in the area, and downtown is located immediately adjacent to this institution, our market is inherently linked with the University's path forward on what will be the new normal for higher education.

The following are other generalized assumptions from the International Downtown Association (IDA) as context to this brief:

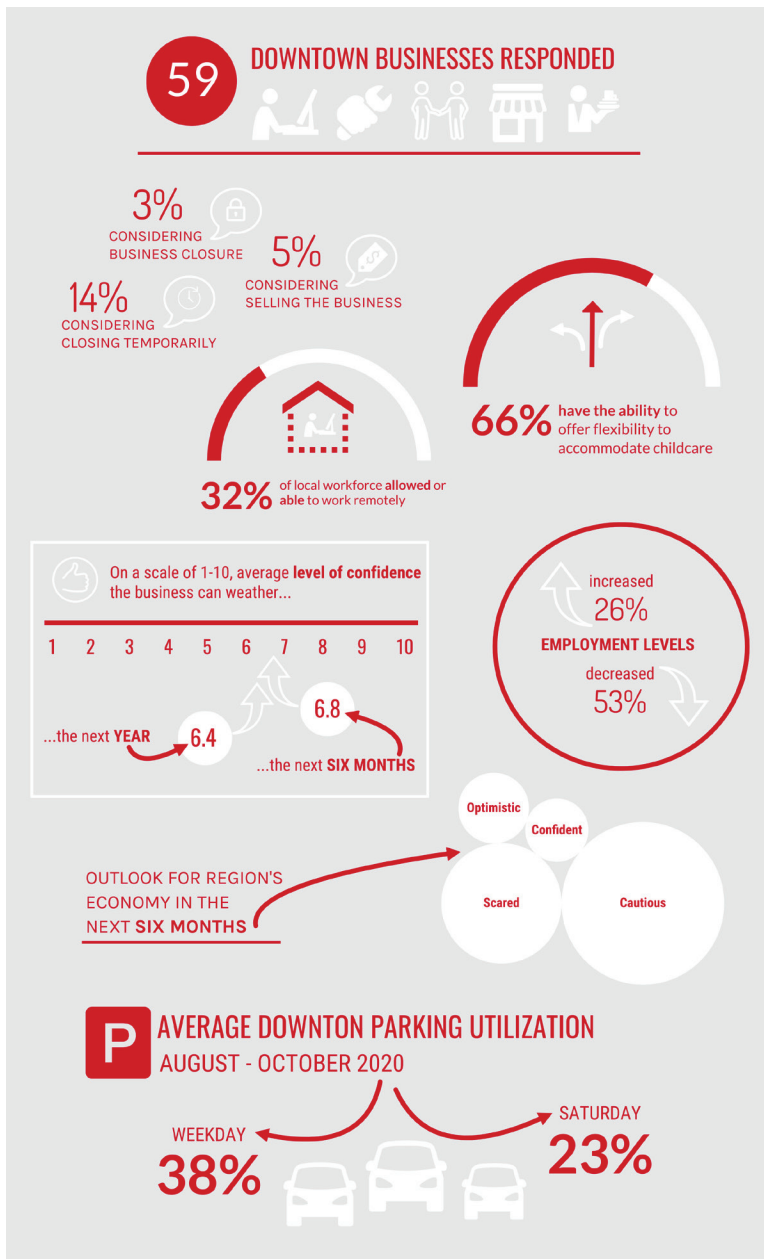
Background trends in demographics and lifestyles remain positive for downtowns in the long-term, yet the pandemic could create and/or accelerate permanent shifts in many sectors (i.e. hospitality, retail, commercial real estate).

Additional opportunities for companies and the UI to reduce overhead costs by working remotely remain significant unknowns. It's highly likely that while the economy will return, there may a significant over supply of built space for second story commercial downtown with this trend.

The pandemic spotlights economic and racial inequities, resulting in increased pressure for policy and programmatic responses at all levels of government and for organizations like the ICDD.

Place management organizations like the ICDD and economic development and civic partners across the country are pivoting resources, skills and approaches to remain viable and support long term rebuilding.

PROJECT BETTER TOGETHER



DOWNTOWN IMPACTS

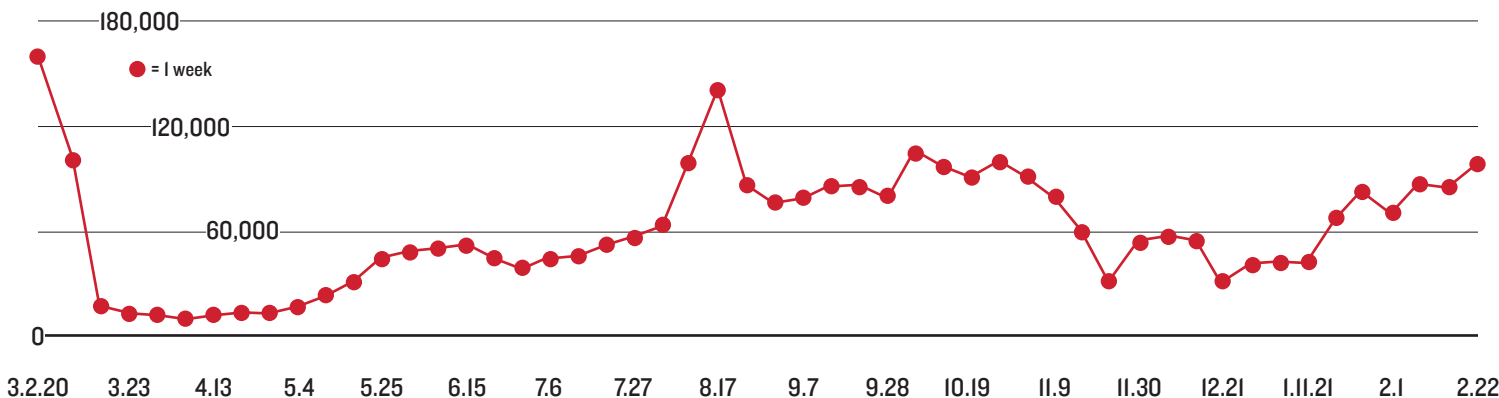
The localized impacts of COVID-19 on downtown Iowa City have been collected at various points throughout 2020, the last survey of which collected business perception information and data November 2020.

Downtown Iowa City is but one critical component of a larger economic ecosystem. The ICDD has been a cornerstone to the Project Better Together (PBT) regional recovery initiative to support broader Johnson County recovery that also impacts the downtown area. PBT was founded and driven by the ICDD, the Iowa City Area Business Partnership, Think Iowa City, and the Iowa City Area Development (ICAD) Group.

To date, the PBT steering committee has been instrumental in building relationships across institutional sectors to support direct spending to small retail businesses, Black, Indigineous, People of Color (BIPOC) and immigrant grants, identified the need to address critical broadband infrastructure needs, coalesced around housing and food security, and established NESTS (Nurturing Every Student Together Safely) for return to learn education support. PBT will continue to tackle regional issues as they arise and the downtown will be well served by participating in those integrated efforts.

For purposes of this brief, however, the ICDD will focus its role on localized downtown considerations and best methods to steward Self Supporting Municipal Improvement District (SSMID) resources to support small businesses, cultural venues, and property owners through the COVID impact and recovery.

ESTIMATED NO. OF VISITS TO DOWNTOWN



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT & INPUT

The ICDD hosts, partners to support, and / or attends a number of monthly/weekly forums where staff receive input that have been taken into account for the content of this brief, including:

- ICDD Board of Directors
- Downtown Retail caucus
- Downtown Restaurant & Bar Forum
- Northside Neighborhood Caucus
- ICDD Legislative Committee
- City of Iowa City Council Meetings
- Partnership for Alcohol Safety
- Iowa City Area Business Partnership
- Iowa City Downtown Arts Alliance
- FilmScene Board of Directors
- Project Better Together (Regional recovery steering committee)

In addition, the ICDD hosted 4 small group meetings intended to target specific topics deemed high priority for the ICDD's 2021 work plan and are the centralized themes of potential ICDD recovery actions. Attendees participated by remote zoom or in place on September 29 and 30, 2020 and included ICDD board members, City of Iowa City leadership, and area stakeholders and addressed the following emerging recovery themes:

1. Improving a **business friendly environment** to retain those currently struggling and to attract businesses to fill downtown vacancies.
2. Improving **downtown as a destination** to address the threat of urban areas losing general appeal related to health and safety issues.
3. **Improving inclusivity** to address feedback from people of color not feeling welcome downtown.
4. **Reimagining downtown safety.**

Additional input should be sought as the initiatives take shape. While many of the ideas and concepts that came from these meetings are strong, not all were carried forward. ICDD staff used professional opinion to weigh this input against:

- our **mission and role** in the community,
- the organization's **existing resources**,
- **staff time** to manage initiatives, and
- **expertise** that would be needed to result in quality outcomes.

ICDD RECOVERY INITIATIVES

WELCOME

I.0 WELCOME: STRENGTHEN INCLUSIVITY

CELEBRATE EXISTING BUSINESS OWNERS OF COLOR.

- Prioritize engagement with existing Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and immigrant business owners to better understand their needs, barriers, and how to support them.
- Review ICDD marketing campaigns, public art, and other ICDD programs to ensure our approach includes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles.
- Survey / outreach to downtown businesses through ICDD Board and block captains.

ADVOCATE FOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR BLACK, INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE OF COLOR (BIPOC) AND IMMIGRANT-OWNED BUSINESSES.

This dialogue has begun and is being led by the Iowa City Area Business Partnership and Iowa City Area Development Group (ICAD). Advocate to financial institutions to support programs currently under development. Invite these businesses to review our vacant spaces.

INVITE ARTS PROGRAMMING FROM PEOPLE OF COLOR.

Support the Iowa City Downtown Arts Alliance and the “Arts Access Initiative” survey that extends into the Iowa City Community School District and across Johnson County. The survey will engage a diverse population on arts programming to provide understanding on how to improve inclusive and diverse arts programming.

Supporting our local cultural venues with this information is a great first step to invite diverse programming to a more diverse audience.

MEANINGFULLY SUPPORT A SOUTH DISTRICT SSMID.

Connect and share marketing, events, advocacy, and placemaking best practices with the promising entity. Model a meaningful partnership and explore methods to grow collectively.

REIMAGINING SAFETY.

Advocate for continuation of ICPD Officer Liaison and financially support that position. Community policing has worked downtown and should stay consistent. Support the City of Iowa City in their path to reimagining community policing in every neighborhood of the City.

Advocate for City support of additional study of downtown nightlife to guide further ICDD policing investments. We need additional data and analysis from the ICPD to help improve safety in the later evening and prevent violence downtown. Work with partners like Rape Victim Advocacy Program to promote “Raise the Bar” programs and campaigns, including easy methods to report dangerous or discriminatory behavior. RVAP has support from downtown bars to provide training to their employees and with additional financial support, could make a larger impact.

Connect the new Street Team conducting outreach to downtown individuals experiencing crisis or homelessness with business leaders and resources to ensure their work has successful outcomes.



PHOTO BY JOHN MILLER

ICDD RECOVERY INITIATIVES



2.0 SHAPE: STRENGTHEN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

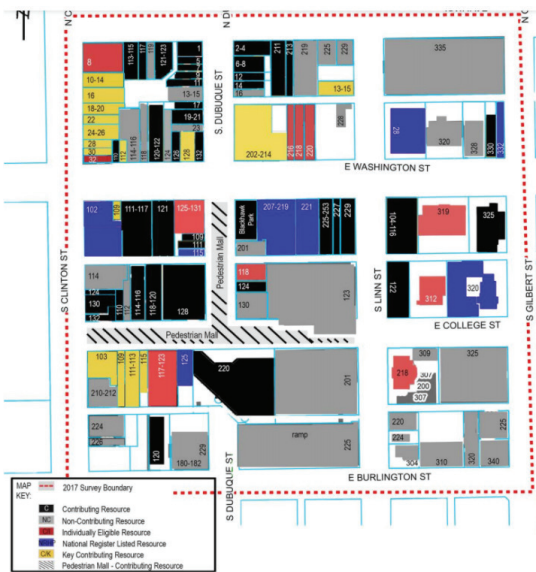


RESTAURANT SUPPORT.

Work with the City and Partnership for Alcohol Safety to explore ways to allow downtown restaurants to stay open until 2am with full services, or other ways to stay competitive with other areas of Johnson County.

TAX RELIEF FOR HISTORIC PROPERTIES.

Advocate for opportunities for downtown properties to reduce their tax burden by exploring tax rebates with local historic preservation projects or other public benefits. Buildings located in business/cultural/historic districts could be exempt from property tax increases. Or commercial property assessments could be reduced for buildings located in local business/cultural/historic districts.



PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN OLDER PROPERTIES.

- Advocate to the City for facade improvement funding City-wide.
- Provide financial support to organization with dedicated plans to improve space for both new and marginalized businesses and entrepreneurs (see “Strengthen Retail Recruitment” on the next page).

PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN NEW BUSINESS.

- Advocate to the City and County to provide financial support to ICAD and the Iowa City Business Partnership for BIPOC and independent business start up programs.

ICDD RECOVERY INITIATIVES, CONTINUED



2.0 SHAPE: STRENGTHEN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT



STRENGTHEN RETAIL RECRUITMENT.

Address new and upcoming vacancies by doubling down on recruitment efforts to protect our local downtown culture.

Develop a formal system for retail attraction with a “network” of local expertise. Establish outreach, a tour, pop up support, and mentoring to new interests. Share benefits of ICDD support, including:

- **New business start-up grants** to soft-goods retailers that meet retail strategy priorities. Offer \$15,000 in start up and/or build out costs for signed leases. 2 per year @ \$30,000. Advertise.
- **Year-round free soft-goods retail delivery.** Purchase or lease vehicle(s) to support a continuation of this service.
- **eCommerce support via a Downtown Iowa City eMarket website** to sell gift items and market downtown vendors. Expand into gift registries.
- **Enhance ICDD Gift Card.** Due to the increased demand, work to enhance the ICDD gift card with additional paid advertising to ensure customers are redeeming cards. Research opportunities to offer digital gift cards in addition to physical cards.
- **Highlight vacancies through public art.** Work with Public Space One to develop program. See Draw. *
- **Create a local Iowa City Store*** Manage and subsidize a local Iowa City store to that would provide space for emerging retail entrepreneurs like local farmers market vendors. Allows for content creation of ways the ICDD can promote / celebrate Iowa City entrepreneurial retail efforts while adding a retail store to strengthen the cluster. *Not currently budgeted.

ICDD RECOVERY INITIATIVES

DRAW

3.0 DRAW: STRENGTHEN DESTINATION

INVEST IN A FOUR-SEASON ENVIRONMENT.

Create a flexible, four-season environment to further business and cultural resiliency.

- **Open for Winter.** Advocate for code changes to support flexible year-round sidewalk cafes, street cafes, and open eating on the pedestrian mall.
 1. **Review case studies of other winter cities** for managing weather and alcohol. Kick off integrated planning process with City to review and modify local cafe ordinances. Explore opportunities for a public fire pit.
 2. **Lead the design and resourcing** of flexible, common winter cafe / weatherization opportunities for sidewalk cafes and parklets. Explore the use of a pre-approved cafe “kit of parts” for sale.
 3. **Partner on County-wide programming opportunities** to encourage winter programming throughout Johnson County and on special winter promotions with Think Iowa City.

- **Reimagine Dubuque Street.** Review the planned 2022 Dubuque Street construction plans for possible change. As people start choosing walking and biking over cars after the pandemic and are interested in more space in the public right of way, explore reimaging Dubuque Street. Focus on a flexible design that allows easy transition of the street during special events and **winter**. Consider automated unique ambient lighting, bollards, sustainable features, infrastructure for outdoor heating, reduced curbs, extended cafe opportunities and flexible parking and loading. Allow for the street to connect with an improved, resurfaced “arts” alley. Explore opportunities for amenities built within the street that could allow for active skating, bocce ball, or curling. Position this streetscape project for future Vision Iowa or Enhance Iowa funding for placemaking projects.

- **Create a flexible event street on the Northside.** Add experiential lighting and furniture to encourage shopping and dining throughout the year as needed on N. Linn Street. Similar to Dubuque Street, review opportunities for Vision Iowa or Enhance Iowa funding.

- **Excite through significant winter public arts draw** in partnership with City, local hotel, and University sponsors and partners. A public art installation is planned for July 2021 this summer and if successful, could be planned for winter. Would require local partnerships to support the winter public art endeavor.

- Advocate for City investment in **more Downtown lighting**.

PUBLIC ART.

Work with Public Space One to develop a program to highlight vacancies and expand projection on downtown buildings.

ACTIVATE THE UI PENTACREST.

Partner with UI Urban & Regional Planning to develop class work around opportunities to activate the University of Iowa Pentacrest to respond to possible trends of people seeking more open space post-pandemic. Suggestions include establishing a permit opportunity for the yard; encouraging student programming that connects with downtown businesses; and organic use. Other opportunities include wrapping and uplighting trees, upright and line Pentacrest buildings with lights, allow additional projection art, and program winter activities. The ICDD would be a supporting client of the UI class.

