

# DOWNTOWN BRIDGEPORT

## STRATEGIC PLAN REFRESH REPORT

In 2018, the Bridgeport Downtown Special Services District (DSSD) engaged property owners, business owners, leaders of cultural institutions, representatives from local government, residents, and workers in the district in a process to craft a vision statement that would guide the organization toward its image of future success and speak to its values in doing so. The inspirational and challenging statement drafted by those stakeholders was:

*Welcome to Downtown Bridgeport! We are a friendly, eclectic business and residential community flourishing at the intersection of commerce, community, and culture(s).*

At the time, a set of strategies were identified to move the organization toward that vision in light of its identified mission:

*Mission: To promote the preservation and development of the downtown business district; make the area more attractive and accessible; and enhance the public perception of downtown Bridgeport through overseeing and managing its appearance, security, and cleanliness.*

Strategies:

- *We embrace and promote transit-oriented approaches to development in the downtown business district.*
- *We enhance the public perception of downtown Bridgeport.*
- *We use storytelling to highlight our community's strengths and assets.*
- *We leverage partnerships to strengthen and amplify our work.*
- *We include residents, workers, business and property owners, students, local government, and visitors in the work of building our community.*
- *We understand district needs through a qualitative and quantitative approach.*

In the two years between when the strategic plan was established and when the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the region, varying levels of progress were made toward the desired outcomes:

- *Improved appearance and consistent maintenance of district entry points/gateways.*
- *Growing reputation for the recognizable, distinct identity of Downtown Bridgeport and known value proposition.*
- *Increased volume of repeat and new customers at Downtown Bridgeport venues, businesses, and amenities by city residents.*

The 2018 strategic plan underscored the critical, foundational work done by the Downtown Ambassador team to keep the commercial district viable. The daily street cleaning, beautification, and friendly face they bring to Downtown Bridgeport continues to distinguish the neighborhood within the city.

The priorities of the strategic plan paved the way to create Colorful Bridgeport, an integrated marketing and beautification initiative that embraces and celebrates the full spectrum of Downtown – its diversity of people, streets, places, and spaces that make it a place like no other. Colorful Bridgeport focuses on our small businesses, highlights the positive impact they have on the community, and drives new and returning customers to their physical and digital doors. It also aims

to spread color and joy through public art, activations and events with the goals of economic development, distinct identity, positive perception and an improved quality of life for all.

The strategic plan also emphasized the need to work together with community partners so that the organization's desired outcomes might be amplified to the level of noticeable impact. To that end, the Bridgeport DSSD has cultivated relationships through its projects, program committees, and targeted initiatives with over forty partner organizations. The DSSD also looked locally to ensure the success of its efforts. **Since fiscal year 2019, the Bridgeport DSSD has invested \$1,157,304 in nearly 90 locally-based companies, nonprofit organizations, and creatives.**

## STRATEGIC PLAN REFRESH

The Bridgeport DSSD invited stakeholders representing property owners, business owners, residents, office workers, representatives of local governments, and leaders of cultural institutions to advise the DSSD in refreshing its strategic plan. Over the course of three sessions, the Strategic Planning Committee reviewed the vision, strategies, and intended outcomes from [our 2018 plan](#); refined and focused in on the impact areas where the DSSD does its best work; and identified personas, or stakeholder types, we would like to draw into the neighborhood.

**Committee Members:** Lauren Coakley Vincent, Gemeem Davis, Chris DeAngelis, Fred Frassinelli, Lynn Haig, Tricia Hyacinth, David Iassogna, Marcella Kovac, Phil Kuchma, Kathy Maher, Benjamin Obieniu, Tim O'Connor, Julian Pierce, Phil Pires, Takina Pollock Shafer, Mike Roer, Christina Smith, Kim Bianca Williams, and Robbin Zella.

**Session 1**, held in late January and early February, introduced the group to each other, established a set of working agreements or ground rules to guide engagement throughout the process, and reviewed the 2018 plan and define guiding questions for the next steps of the process. The group wrote headlines that envisioned the future when the neighborhood arrived at the vision statement.

**Session 2**, held at the end of February, defined the concept of a persona and the purpose of thinking through key stakeholder groups for the strategic planning process. The group created personas representing business owners, residents, office workers, and visitors, who will add vitality and vibrancy to the Downtown.

**Session 3**, held in late March, combined insights from the previous two sessions to match up our current work with the personas, checked alignment with our vision statement, and defined strategies that will lead to impact. This included identifying areas to change our programmatic work so that it achieves our goals.

## GROUND RULES

We adapted ground rules from the [Equity in Practice guidelines](#) intended to set an agreed upon understanding of how to engage with each other for the shared purpose of this strategic planning process. Our ground rules included:

**Try On:** We will keep an open mind, to better understand the world and one another. We will take those things that "fit" and to leave or file away those things that don't fit.

**Be Aware of Intent & Impact:** In cross-cultural interactions we take risks. We exchange and receive honest feedback about our impact on others. It is possible to be well-intentioned AND still say and do hurtful things.

**Experience Discomfort:** We can feel uncomfortable, but we do not try to rescue one another from the discomfort. We recognize that there is a difference between ‘safety’ and ‘comfort.’ Demonstrate bravery and lean into that discomfort so that we can learn, remain engaged, and move forward together.

**Move up, Move up:** We monitor your own engagement. If you’re speaking loudly and often, move up your listening; and if you are more hesitant to share your voice, move up your verbal participation.

**Safe / Brave Space:** We practice compassion and kindness while taking chances. We show respect in communicating. We assume good intentions when people share ideas and perspectives.

## HEADLINES

“Take the train and hop on canoe,” emphasizes Downtown Bridgeport as the gateway to the great outdoors with canoeing, kayaking, fishing all easily accessible from the neighborhood.

A Netflix documentary is focused on a variety of the neighborhood’s assets, including boutique hotels and new structures for incoming visitors, residents, and entrepreneurs; Bridgeport becoming a destination for public art that uplifts local artists by showcasing their talent; and the place for entrepreneurs to take the first steps to growing their businesses with the support of mentors and resources to reach the next level.

“Frenzied bidding for the last developable property in Downtown Bridgeport” gives the inside scoop on the bidding war to develop the Majestic and Poli theaters. A companion narrative complements the story that Viking Cruises added Bridgeport Harbor to its arrival ports and that Whole Foods opened in Downtown Bridgeport.

CT Post online headline reads, “Explosive growth causes major traffic congestion in Downtown Bridgeport.” The article questions the Downtown’s ability to keep up with infrastructure investments given its rapid growth, as evidenced by traffic congestion. The article includes a tagline that Downtown Bridgeport is “The new place to be in CT,” and includes a quote from Adam Sandler saying, “I used to frequent Greenwich, and now Bridgeport is the place to be” with a photo of him in front of Dunkin Donuts at the corner John and Main Streets.

The story, released as an animated film, focuses on rehabilitating historic architecture, maintaining the unique look of the Downtown, and features the opening of a roller-skating rink. The animated film features historical places and historical people who made history in Bridgeport. The distribution channels are Twitch, Instagram, YouTube, and other digital platforms.

## PERSONAS

Personas are fictionalized characters that can represent different target audiences for your campaigns. They help us understand our users’ needs, experiences, behaviors, and goals, as a means to create a good user experience for our target user group.

### Business Owner

Kayla (Kay) Jones is 28-years-old and identifies as non-binary. Kay’s family is White of European descent and has lived in the area for several generations. They are dedicated members of the Unitarian Church. Kay is single and gives their two energetic Pugs all the love in the world. With a

dual bachelor's degree in Transdisciplinary Design and Business Administration from the Parsons School of Design, Kay is excited to be opening a vintage clothing store and café that will offer a new kind of retail experience in Downtown Bridgeport. A long-time fan of Café Rebelde's line of coffees, they could watch episodes of *The Umbrella Academy* over and over with a cup in hand while snacking on a huevos ranchero stuffed avocado from Leisha's Bakeria. *"I love how in this city I can stand out and be myself. Like Barnum said, 'No one ever made a difference by being like everyone else.'"*

Mary BarNone is in her late 30s and is a single parent to a lovely girl and boy. In their spare time, Mary and the kiddos like to watch the latest sci fi flick. After a few years of college, Mary dove into her entrepreneurial dream of owning an authentic Italian bar/restaurant. She has been running a food business in the city for the last 15 years, and decided to establish her second location in Downtown Bridgeport. She views the neighborhood as an affordable, cleaner, and safer location – a real “step up” from where she started her first business. Mary is strongly motivated by family and friends. She is looking for a stable income, and endeavors to develop a loyal base of returning customers. She gets good feedback on her business from customer interactions and social media. She is looking to grow her business and see it thrive Downtown. She knows that she will be able to reach her growth goals if she can work together with other like businesses in the neighborhood on marketing to bring in a wider audience. A shared marketing platform would help her get to the next level up of bringing people in to enjoy her restaurant.

Worker: Lisa Lawyer is a 25-year-old woman, who recently started working at a local law firm. She is Caucasian, single, and loves her dog. She grew up in the affluent suburb of Trumbull, and has been hearing all the bad things about Bridgeport for as long as she can remember. For lunch she stops into Fruta Juice, and loves to go out with friends to Bodega for tacos after work. The main hesitation she had accepting the associate position at her new firm was whether or not she would be safe walking around at night. It's not about the crime stats, it's about the lack of other people or foot traffic to make her feel safe. Also, there aren't a lot of fun things to do or places to go in her perspective. She typically heads home to Stamford for a night out with friends after work wraps up. Recently she has been thinking about moving to Milford because it is so much more affordable than Stamford.

#### Resident

Alexandra (Tiggy) Jansen is a 43-year-old woman whose family hails from Jamaica, though she was born in the States. Tiggy has been married for 10 years and is boundlessly proud of her two children Jaden (7) and Ella (5). Her Master's of Public Administration from Sacred Heart University is coming in handy, as she was just elected to City Council and aspires to serve as the City's Mayor one day. Tiggy can't get enough of the red velvet waffles from Queen's Delight Café and loves the dynamic duo of Denzel Washington and Julia Roberts in *The Pelican Brief*. *"Bridgeport's best days are ahead of us. With solid leadership in City Hall, we will get there quickly!"*

Delia Rodriguez is a 60-year-old Latinx widow and mom to three grown children, as well as a 13-year-old cat. She loves her darling grandchildren; she is all about family. Delia completed high school and after 45 years in the workforce; she enjoys her retirement with activities like going to the farmers market for cooking ingredients. She frequents the Eisenhower Senior Center and Palace Adult Care center, both on Golden Hill Street. She loves the film *West Side Story* – both the original and the remake. Delia is looking to stay active and social, through volunteering or finding a new companion who likes to enjoy the Downtown nightlife. Her needs are safety and physical accessibility. She gets her information on what's going on from GBLN, and she is looking for more events related to her age group and culture. As an added incentive, she looks for discount cards,

special store hours for the purpose of safety and access. She also wants playful intergenerational activities she can share with her grandchildren in the area.

### Visitor

Emile Puschard recently moved from Detroit to New Haven. He a 43-years-old male of African American descent. He is divorced, and not currently in a relationship but does love his one cat. Emile loves Jamaican food just about as much as he is a fanatical Marvel movies fan. This master's degree holder is deeply motivated by curiosity. He's looking for new adventures, while he explores his new home state. Exhibitions, lectures, poetry, film festivals, books and rare book shops, historic walking tours get him out of the house and exploring. Emile has visited the New Haven arts scene and likes having easy access to New York City. He needs fine dining and a Starbucks Downtown. He'll come Downtown and spend a full day if there are assortment of restaurants, strong retail, regularly programmed art spaces, and good internet access (he looks online for info). If there is an app, that would help him navigate the city and its sites, although he is hearing about Downtown Bridgeport via word of mouth from his co-workers. He wants to learn about the neighborhood, meet new people, and interact with innovative environments. *Emile's favorite quote comes from Mark Twain: "The two most important days of your life are the days you are born and the day you find out why."*

Soccer mom Suzie Pham is married in her late 30s and has two children. Her love for her kiddos is bottomless, and she wants to make the world the best possible place for them. She jams to all of her favorite 90s tunes on Star 99.9 and absolutely loves the [Anna & Raven show](#). Suzie comes to the Downtown if there is a show at one of the cultural venues, or if there is a unique dining and retail experience. She is very much *not* seeking a chain store in the neighborhood. It's not that we don't have what she needs, we just don't MARKET it to her in the right way.

## **MERCHANT SURVEY INSIGHTS**

The DSSD partnered with the Bridgeport Chamber of Commerce and Razul Branch to gather input from Downtown Bridgeport business owners on how we might encourage a friendly and profitable environment for our businesses and their patrons. The aim of the needs assessment was to translate those insights into actionable programs and initiatives that will make the business owner experience a better one. [Download the complete assessment report here.](#)

About the Survey Respondents: A total of 26 Downtown businesses (22% of the total sample size) responded. Most respondents' entity type was an LLC, and they leased their space. 15% of respondents had been in operation less than a year, 58% in business between 1-10 years, and 27% over 10 years in business. In terms of Bridgeport-based employees, 38% of respondents employ 90-100% workers who live in Bridgeport. Most respondents report that their busy hours are Wednesday through Friday from 11:00 a.m. to after 5:00 p.m. The busiest times of year are April – June and October – December. Most respondents advertise through internet, radio, and window displays to customers ages 25-54 that make a range of average income.

### Top Challenges

1. In-town Competition
2. Insufficient Parking
3. Expensive rent
4. Insufficient financing
5. Expensive employee wages or benefits
6. Expensive or unavailable products
7. Difficulty recruiting or retaining employees

### Top Public Safety Concerns

1. Public Drinking/Drunkenness
2. Lack of Police Presence
3. Parking
4. Loitering
5. Panhandling
6. Homeless People
7. Harassment

### Topics for Information or Technical Assistance

1. Advertising or marketing
2. Business market analysis
3. Window displays or interior store design
4. Internet or E-Commerce
5. Business planning
6. Employee hiring or training / Customer service or hospitality
7. Financial management

### Helpful Tools and Resources

1. Advertising or marketing of Downtown Bridgeport as shopping destination
2. Downtown public improvement projects
3. Low interest business loan program
4. Special event coordination (increasing foot traffic, etc.)
5. Free business assistance
6. Networking events (i.e. breakfast/lunch meetings, business after hours)
7. US Small Business Administration (SBA) loan guarantee

### Top businesses desired to have available Downtown

1. Grocery store / farmers market
2. Diner
3. Independent Coffee or Tea Shop
4. Ice Cream Shop
5. Gym / Fitness Studio
6. Amusement / Games
7. Bookstore

### Top community assets desired to have available Downtown

1. Expanded public parking
2. Expanded green space
3. Community gathering space
4. Playgrounds
5. Outdoor seating
6. Bike trail
7. Dog parks

## **GOALS + STRATEGIES**

The goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely statements that deeply consider how the identified program area impacts our personas' experience of and satisfaction with Downtown Bridgeport, how the program area moves us toward the vision, and what partnerships or

resources we will need to have in place to realize them. A strategy is a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim. Each goal statement has a companion set of strategies indicated in blue that will move us toward realizing that goal.

### Clean Team

- Consistently deliver high quality sidewalk and curb line cleaning, trash removal, graffiti and debris removal, sidewalk and tree bed weed removal, and sidewalk power washing in the DSSD's 30 block service area throughout the year.
  - Analyze district needs and program efficacy through a qualitative and quantitative approach.
- Install and maintain colorful, native, drought-resistant pollinator plantings in the 40+ ground planters on Main, State, and Bank Streets, and four beds at the Broad Street Steps in the spring each year.
  - Expand landscaping responsibilities to include tree bed maintenance.
- Offer volunteer opportunities that encourage business owners and workers, residents, students, and visitors to connect and add vibrancy to the Downtown's commercial corridors.

### Public Safety

- Maintain a visible street-level presence that adds to the real and perceived safety of the District.
  - Train the Safety Ambassadors in trauma informed response and customer service.
- Advocate for concerns of business owners and residents, continue to liaise with the police department to creatively keep Downtown safe at times that are high risk.
  - Include residents, workers, business and property owners, and local government in the work of defining community safety issues.
  - Analyze district needs and program efficacy through a qualitative and quantitative approach.
  - Explore a partnership with The Workplace's MaturityWorks program to expand our public safety presence.
  - Advocate for additional lighting installations throughout the neighborhood.
- A safe environment is a clean environment! Always keep in mind that our Clean Team and Public Safety program outcomes are interconnected.

### Marketing

- Enhance the public perception of downtown Bridgeport.
  - Use storytelling to highlight our community's strengths and assets, specifically the anchor destinations and our cultural institutions.
  - Create a clear engagement plan for audiences with critical mass based on our identified personas.
  - Partner with the City of Bridgeport, Bridgeport Regional Business Council, and Neighborhood Revitalization Zones on a larger city-wide campaign where Downtown elements can be leveraged.
  - Analyze district needs and program efficacy through a qualitative and quantitative approach.
- Develop a marketing campaign that allows Downtown businesses to access collaborative advertising opportunities.
  - Create a Downtown ad book and coupon book to be mailed out to the surrounding area.
  - Partner with the City of Bridgeport, Bridgeport Regional Business Council, and Neighborhood Revitalization Zones on a larger city-wide campaign where Downtown elements can be leveraged.

- Look to include area anchors outside of the district (Klein, Mongers, Amphitheatre, etc.)
- Install wayfinding signage or maps throughout the district that encourage visitors and residents to explore different sections.
  - Identify locations, content, and resources to fund installation of wayfinding signage.
  - Explore options for creative lighting that can be used as wayfinding and to enhance safety.
  - Distribute single message print pieces, such as a Downtown dining or shopping guide in courthouse waiting areas, bus and train terminals).

### Placemaking

- Refine Downtown Bridgeport’s distinct identity with a clear value proposition.
  - Embrace and promote transit-oriented approaches to development that provide different ways to help people navigate the neighborhood.
  - Support and advance initiatives that improve walking, biking, skating, and driver-friendly modes of transit to move around.
- Explore connections between public safety and placemaking through the use of McLevy Green.
  - Install functional and creative lighting to enhance the neighborhood’s appeal and identity.
  - Organize or support events that attract city residents to Downtown Bridgeport.
  - Explore expanding activities that promote shared pro-social use of public spaces.
- Focus on redevelopment efforts to activate vacant buildings and parcels in the district.
  - Convene property owners to discuss options for activating vacant spaces.
  - Source installations or pop-up event concepts from local creatives.
  - Partner with local colleges and universities to incorporate students in programming.
- Work with property owners to improve sidewalks, facades, and pocket parks.
  - Analyze district needs and program efficacy through a qualitative and quantitative approach.
  - Convene property owners to discuss problematic sites or blocks.

### Administrative/Leadership

- Expand the organization’s leadership to include residents, business owners, and cultural or educational anchor institutions.
  - Leverage partnerships to strengthen and amplify our work.
  - Include residents, workers, business and property owners, students, local government, and visitors in the work of building our community.
  - Recruit committee members to participate on specific projects.
- Further define the organization’s purpose and values
  - Craft a clear articulation of the DSSD’s organizational values and a statement of purpose to complement the vision and mission statements.
  - Commit to results-based accountability metrics and determine methods to gather the data.
  - Advocate for more mixed use and residential development in the neighborhood.