

## COMMERCIAL DISTRICT DESIGN: COVID-19 RESPONSE AND MANAGEMENT

**Open Streets** are programs and initiatives that temporarily open streets to people by closing them to cars and trucks. Based on Bogotá’s [Ciclovía program](#), open (or “slow”) streets programs also repurpose alleys, parking lots and spaces, and other car-oriented public space for alternative use. They can be deployed in commercial districts, residential areas, or created to better connect the two. From big cities to rural towns, communities around the world have initiated these types of programs to encourage walking, biking, and rolling, support age-friendly and intergenerational events, slow automobile traffic to increase personal safety, strengthen commercial districts, and/or create space for activities such as dining, retail, and group exercise. In 2010, Street Plans and 880 Cities launched [The Open Streets Project](#) as a central place house for case studies, tips, and best practices.



### Benefits

Open streets programs and the walkable places they create can offer myriad benefits for communities of all sizes, and particularly in commercial districts. When open streets lead to more walking, biking, and rolling, they can improve public health and safety, economic activity, progress towards environmental goals, and overall strength of communities. These benefits can only be achieved with intentional, continued community engagement to ensure the all community members—[particularly those most adversely affected](#)—share a role in the program goals and development.

#### Public Health and Safety

- Reduced vehicular traffic and physically safer places to walk and bike
- Expanded participation in physical activity
- Enhanced amenities for pedestrians

#### Economic Impact

- Increased visitation and spending in the district
- New opportunities for small businesses, nonprofits, artists, and makers to connect with potential customers (e.g. curbside delivery and pick-up, expanded spaces for more customers)
- Retention of current residents and attraction of new residents

#### Community Building

- Expanded opportunities for social gathering
- Sense of social cohesion and ownership of public space
- Public trust built from community engagement

#### Environment

- Reduced climate impact
- Improved air quality and reduction of debris and chemical matter
- Cooler surface temperatures

**Further reading:** [Navigating Main Streets as Places](#) by MSA and Project for Public Spaces provides supporting research on the benefits of open streets.

## Considerations for Success

When planning or implementing any initiative it is crucial to prioritize a community's unique needs, size, population demographics, topography, stakeholders, and funding opportunities. An open streets project in San Francisco (pop. 883,300), for example, will look very different than a project in a town like Perryville, Kentucky (pop. 721).

The programmatic framework for open streets efforts can take several different forms, depending on the end goal. The traditional open streets program (based on the Ciclovía model) focuses on an event-based approach which invites biking, walking and rolling on otherwise-car-dominated streets, and places group health at its core. Recent adaptations have applied open streets concepts more broadly—for example, with “slow streets”—that form safe, people-first public spaces that prioritize pedestrians over cars. In so doing, these streets allow people to safely gather, shop, or move through on foot or on wheels.

**Whatever the purpose, local leaders planning open streets initiatives should prioritize several considerations:**

- **Strive for inclusive community engagement.**

Open streets programs need not take years of planning, but even with “quick build” programs, local leaders should prioritize intentional community engagement over the desire to “just get it done.” For open streets programs to truly serve all residents, every community member needs to feel welcomed, included, and [have their safety protected](#) in order to actually use the newly created spaces. This is particularly true in communities comprised largely of Black, Brown, and low-income residents where [traffic fatalities occur at a disproportionate rate](#)—and yet transportation planning practice has often left them out of the decision making.

- **Build a cross-sector planning team.** Open streets programs change the function of spaces adjacent to businesses, churches and other locations that serve the public. Changes to the use of streets and sidewalks also require consultation with (likely) several agencies and organizations (such as Main Street organizations and business improvement districts). Therefore, it is essential that open streets organizers engage local leaders, business owners, fellow community representatives, and the appropriate agencies (e.g. Departments of Transportation, Planning, Public Works, Parks and Recreation) in a multi-stakeholder team to effectively plan and execute the project. *Continued on page 3 >*

**Further reading:** See MSA's [Community Engagement for Main Street Transformation](#) for tips and best practices on how to engage your community.

Survey community members within and beyond the commercial district to ask them what they think about the idea and how the program can make them feel welcomed and safe. Be sure to incorporate the viewpoints of business owners whose parking and delivery access may be impacted. Then, during and after implementation, seek feedback on the experiences of all – residents, businesses, local leaders—to determine if any adjustments need to be made.



(c) Louisville Images

*Cyclists in downtown Louisville, Ky.*

## Considerations for Success *(continued)*

- **Determine the timeframe.** When launching an open streets program, local leaders need to determine the timeframe and scheduling for their projects. Some open streets programs are structured as one-time events, while others occur weekly within a months-long season. Knowing the timeframe will help determine which partners should be included in the cross-sector team and help shape the community engagement strategy.
- **Determine goals for the initiative.** To help frame the initiatives' activities, partners, and evaluative metrics, local leaders should plan out their primary goals. Is the open streets program meant to stimulate the local economy, create an opportunity for community engagement, demonstrate the benefits of walking, biking, and rolling, and/or test out a design intervention? Is it a combination of goals? Determining your goals can help local leaders design the program and help focus on what elements are important to evaluate and measure.
- **Identify the location.** Whether the open streets program will take place in a commercial district, residential area, or both, consider the location and approach that can best achieve the program goals. For example, many rural downtown commercial districts are located on primary transportation arteries, such as state highways. Closing the entire street to cars for multiple days per month may hinder much-needed vehicular access to, and through, the community. In this case, consider closing sections of the street—or one or more lanes—rather than the full street to allow for continued passage (albeit at a safer, slower speed). Remember, it is ok to start small, test success, and expand accordingly.
- **Evaluate the impact.** Be sure to build in measurable metrics and a plan to evaluate the program against the established goals—especially if the open streets event was planned as a demonstration in pursuit of longer-term change. This [Open Streets Initiative: Measuring Success toolkit](#) offers recommendations for how to do that.

**Further reading:** AARP Livable Communities' [How to Host a Ciclovía or Open Streets Program](#) and [Pop-Up Placemaking Tool Kit](#) offer step-by-step recommendations for launching an open streets program.

## Adaptations for COVID-19 Recovery

Depending on the community, state, and the stage of COVID-19 response and management, social distancing or limiting patrons in places of businesses may be required. To adhere to these guidelines while also ensuring that businesses can increase the amount of sales they need to stay afloat, local leaders around the world are looking to open streets initiatives as a way to revitalize economies safely.

Most widely reported are big cities like [Tampa](#), New York City, and most recently [Chicago](#), which have launched new or expanded existing open streets pilot programs to engage different neighborhoods, test the concept, and measure impact to determine if/how to expand. However, smaller communities such as [Rockland, Maine](#), are also launching open streets initiatives, closing down Main Streets to allow merchants to sell outside as a way to recoup some of the losses from COVID-19.

To support open streets initiatives, local leaders may want to also consider relaxing regulations on a temporary basis. In addition to creating increased physical space (and management plans for egress and ingress), small businesses may benefit from simpler permitting processes, relaxed regulations and zoning, and ability to sell high-profit items (such as alcohol) more easily. For example, in states with mostly rural communities like Nebraska and Vermont [regulations around the sale of alcohol](#) are being amended to generate more economic opportunities for businesses. When paired with open streets programs, these types of regulation relaxation can offer more streams of revenue to help bars and restaurants ease back into operation more safely.

## Examples

### Hendersonville, North Carolina

[Hendersonville](#) (pop. 14,000) took an iterative approach to launching their open streets initiative, focusing on community engagement and feedback to determine whether their program could be longer-term. They held a “trial” over Memorial Day weekend 2020, where their Main Street was closed to cars and trucks but open to pedestrians, diners, and shoppers.



*Hendersonville, N.C. launched an open streets program this spring.*

[Historic Downtown Hendersonville](#) then surveyed community members about their experiences. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, prompting the city to extend the open streets program to two weekends per month through the end of the summer. Read more about [the city’s ongoing traffic calming efforts](#) through the use of serpentine street design.

### Springfield, Illinois

To support the safety and economic opportunity for their downtown businesses, [Downtown Springfield, Inc. \(DSI\)](#) prioritized community engagement to provide their city leaders with data. They hosted hour-long Zoom calls with tenants on each of their downtown blocks, including retail, bar, restaurant, and service to propose a joint plan for converting parking and areas of the streets to accommodate socially distanced outdoor seating, using concrete jersey barriers and aluminum fencing to delineate the new spaces.

Importantly, their plan also included recommendations for traffic flow for curbside delivery and pickup, so that the converted parking spaces would not limit that option for restaurants and customers. And to ensure timeliness and ease of implementation, they also proposed waiving permitting fees and relaxing streetscape regulations. DSI submitted the plan to the Mayor and the Department of Public Works, and within 24 hours, the city began making nearly all the requested changes. These streetscape and parking adjustments will be just the first step toward COVID-19 adaptation. They will observe and test the use, sense of safety, and economic impact from these interventions to determine what changes to their streetscape could be made permanent.



*Springfield, Illinois implemented streetscape and parking adaptations to address the economic impacts of COVID-19.*

## Further Reading

### Benefits

- **Community Building:** *Beyond Fitness: The Social Benefits of Open Streets*, *Open Streets Guide* (2011), *Livable Communities Take to the Streets*, Project for Public Spaces' *Case for Healthy Places*, and *Navigating Main Streets as Places* online resource library sections for [Equity](#) and [Community](#).
- **Economic Impact:** *Journal of Transport & Health study* (2015), *The Economic Power of Walkability in Metro Areas*, *Open Streets Guide* (2011), and *Navigating Main Streets as Places* online resource library section for [Economic Vitality](#).
- **Environment:** EPA's *Benefits of a Green Street*, *The Environmental Impact of Roads*, and *Navigating Main Streets as Places* online resource library sections for [Environmental Sustainability](#).
- **Public Health and Safety:** *Dangerous by Design* (2020), *Safe Streetsí Are Not Safe for Black Lives*, *Open Streets Guide* (2011), *County Health Rankings: Open Streets*, *Can Streets Make Us Healthy? Open Streets Can*, and *Navigating Main Streets as Places* online resource library sections for [Health](#) and [Safety](#).

### General

- *Evaluating Transportation Equity: Guidance for Incorporating Distributional Impacts in Transportation Planning*, Victoria Transportation Institute
- *Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery*, National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO)
- *Ten Ways to Embrace Open Streets in Your City*, Project for Public Spaces

## Contact us

For more information or for more guidance on how to implement an open streets program, reach out to:

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**About the Series:** Produced in collaboration between Main Street America and AARP Livable Communities, *Commercial District Design: COVID-19 Response and Management* is a series of design-centered briefs developed to equip community leaders with safe, equitable, age-friendly strategies to support economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

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