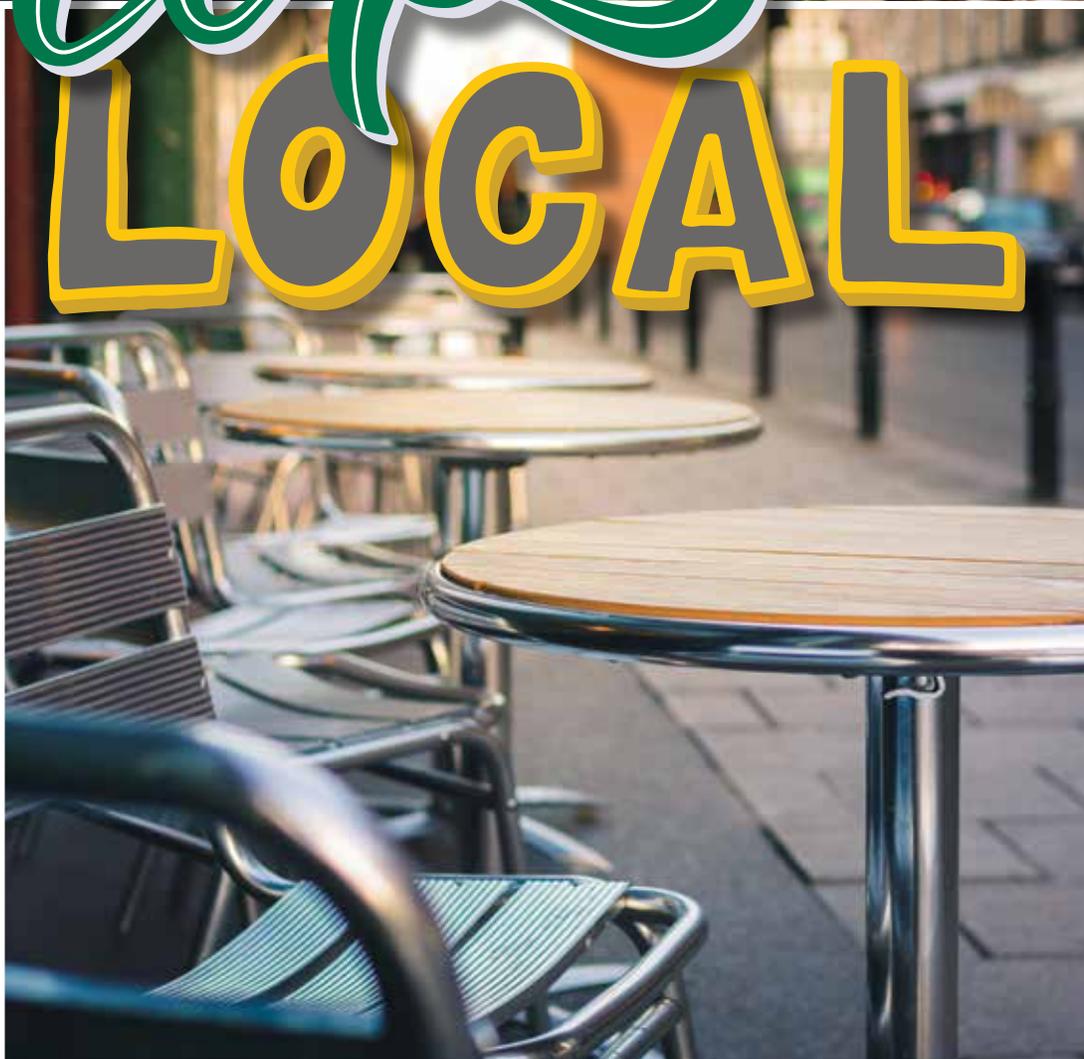




Come in
WE'RE
OPEN



Shop LOCAL





Supporting Our Downtowns in Times of Crisis – and Everyday

In times of crisis, there is something each one of us can do to work toward a solution. As individuals, we all have a role – whether it's helping a neighbor in need, making a contribution to the local food pantry, or supporting and promoting your favorite small businesses.

As non-profit organizations and local governments, the role is evolving, as we are expected to instantly learn new programs and regulations. Some of these activities are short term and the impact is seen immediately, while others take planning and require longer-term implementation. Any of these ideas could lead to strategies to mitigate vacancies and bring economic activity to your town.

Buy Local, Buy Often

Most important is to support local businesses. You can order take-out or purchase online gift cards to use later at your favorite café, pub, or retail establishment as holiday gifts for family, friends, and employees.

Also, before you order your office supplies, books, uniforms, etc., from a national chain, consider purchasing from a local retailer or supplier.

If you need a new website, look to your local graphic designer, marketing, or website development agencies, and support them.

Encourage businesses to support one another as the potential impact of local business-to-business support is often overlooked.

Develop Business-Friendly Principles

Is your zoning compatible with the kind of businesses and business district that you want in your borough? Many revitalization strategies focus on creating or enhancing third places – our first place is home, our second place is work, and our third places are where we come together.

Third places can be barber shops, farmers markets, coffee shops, the corner pub, and even libraries. Assess your downtown to see if there are vacant lots or side alleys that could be transformed into vibrant public spaces with murals and string lights to create venues for outdoor concerts, family movie

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nights, other community events, or just a quiet place where one can catch up with an old friend or make a new one?

We will need to be responsive to continued and ongoing modified social distancing, but at the same time, make sure that we as communities are creating places to be social.

Does your borough encourage outdoor sidewalk tables, or have a café ordinance? Think of ways you can safely extend businesses out to sidewalks or side lots. Or even create dedicated PARK(ing) spaces in front of businesses – temporary extensions of their business onto the street in protected and decorated parking spaces in front of buildings.

At least in the short term, it is important to think of creative strategies to help create more space for businesses and in turn more space for customers.

Is parking considered an issue? In most of our communities, there are plenty of parking spaces, but there may be a need to create a parking education campaign, such as directional signs & maps, kiosks, etc., or an enforcement strategy. Parking meters are designed to create a flow of short-term convenient parking, where parking lots or garages are generally used for longer-term parking needs.

Consider a do-it-yourself parking assessment to determine if the current parking options could be transformed to better serve the community, with low-cost solutions. There are often “found” parking spaces behind buildings that can be better utilized.

In the short term, consider waiving parking fees and fines to encourage customers to come back downtown, and in the long term, consider eliminating parking minimums and coordinate efforts

to create shared parking options with churches, funeral homes, or other partners. Often, county planners or local college students can often assist with such efforts.

Better yet, identify ways to make your downtowns and neighborhoods more bicycle and walker friendly. Providing these options, not only decreases the need for parking, but the benefits of walking and biking as healthy alternatives add a wellness component that is beneficial at every age.

Ensure Long-Term Success

In addition to compatible codes and zoning, are there other components that are discouraging local businesses from locating or expanding in your downtown? Is your permitting simple and accessible? Do prospective new business owners know what they need to do to start a business in your community?

If you have an established revitalization organization or Main Street program, partner with them to create a Doing Business in Your Downtown guide (online and in print). Make sure local and regional partners know of this guide and promote it to local, county, and regional economic development organizations, chambers, and real estate agents. If you're looking for examples, explore Hanover Borough, York County, Wilkesburg Borough, Allegheny County, and



Lansdowne Borough, Delaware County as good options.

Consider partnering with your Main Street program to provide incentives for new and expanding businesses, and partner with your Elm Street program to provide incentives for down-payment assistance for new homeowners and those residents who need a little extra for home maintenance.

Do you or your partner organizations offer any financial or technical assistance for new or existing businesses?

Many Main Street and Elm Street programs offer façade improvement grants as an extra incentive to locate or stay in the community.

Other communities offer tax abatement or tax incentive programs, in addition to revolving loans or mini-grants for new or expanding businesses.

Any of these efforts can give your community a competitive advantage and make a difference when new prospects are deciding where to locate.

Welcome Start-Up Businesses

Over the next few months and years the greatest need for support to start-up businesses. As businesses are closing and people are losing their jobs, there could be an upswing in entrepreneurial development.

Does your community have a co-working space, idea lab, community kitchen incubator, or business incubator or accelerator? Working with your local property owners, colleges and universities, and your local revitalization organizations to develop both the physical space and the technical support could be vital in the growth and development of your community's economic health.

Examples of community-based programs can be found in the City of Hazleton, Luzerne County, and the City of Erie, Erie County, as well as in many communities through connections with their colleges and universities.

Celebrate Your Town

Don't forget to celebrate what makes you a unique and authentic Pennsylvania town. Host walking tours of historic, cultural, or heritage sites in your community, 5K runs, or First Fridays – in person or virtually. Every borough has something unique to share.

Support Your Local Main Street and Elm Street Programs

Local Main Street and Elm Street programs are the convener and coordinator that unite the private, public, and non-profit sectors in our communities. Now, more than ever the roles these local programs play need to be recognized, as they act with

ingenuity and resourcefulness – of innovative partnerships and creative solutions.

This is our time to reinvent what the future holds in our communities, and our Main Street and Elm Street programs are leading the effort.

If your local municipality isn't already supporting your local programs, please consider assisting them with direct funding and in-kind support. The services they provide are critical to our recovery as a community and as a society.



About the author: Julie Fitzpatrick is the executive director of the Pennsylvania

Downtown Center (PDC), the only statewide non-profit dedicated solely to the revitalization of the Commonwealth's core communities. Primarily through utilization of the Main Street Approach™, and in partnership with Main Street America and the PA Department of Community and Economic Development's Keystone Communities Main Street and Elm Street programs, PDC provides outreach, technical assistance, and educational services in order to assist communities in revitalizing their Main Street/central business districts and surrounding Elm Street/residential neighborhoods. Learn more about PDC at www.padowntown.org. 