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Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social, and economic conditions downtown

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ATTRACTION

Downtown district restructures, reimagines branding and events

In Plainfield, NJ (est. pop. 54,515), the downtown organization has been reimagining its name, its image, and its mission. In a move aimed to make the group's role clearer to the public, the Plainfield Special Improvement District renamed itself Downtown Plainfield.

And the organization decided not to stop there — Downtown Plainfield realized that its faded branding no longer captured the spirit of what Plainfield was becoming. Abel Gomez, executive director of Downtown Plainfield, says the

organization's color scheme featured harsh hues, including the sort of red you'd see on a stop sign.

"It was a very dated brand and logo," Gomez says. "The impetus for rebranding was that we were becoming a new organization ourselves, and we wanted to reflect that in our imagery and iconography."

As Downtown Plainfield focused on recruiting new businesses, upgrading public spaces, and hosting new events, Gomez also pushed for a new look and feel for the brand.

(Continued on page 3)

ECONOMIC GROWTH

Cities look for ways to bring back corner stores

In modern America, buying groceries and other everyday items all but requires a trip to a big-box store. But a century ago, urban neighborhoods were filled with corner stores within walking distance of residents.

Planners in cities such as Louisville, KY (est. pop. 622,981), Seattle, WA (est. pop. 755,078), and Spokane, WA (est. pop. 229,447), are trying to bring back corner stores.

"Prior to zoning, corner stores existed everywhere," Joel Dock, the planning manager in Louisville, tells *Planning* magazine. "That's what made a neighborhood a good neighborhood."

Corner stores often occupied quirky structures, and they played an important role in the fabric of a neighborhood, says Patrick Piuma, director of the Urban Design Studio at the University of Louisville.

(Continued on page 6)

One downtown decides to undo back-in parking, others embrace it

In theory, back-in angled parking is a safer way to park. Motorists are able to pull straight out of their spots while looking out at traffic, lessening the chances of hitting a pedestrian, cyclist, or another vehicle.

In practice, though, back-in angle parking is just annoying to many motorists. While one downtown is abandoning its back-in parking, others are giving the tactic a try.



Street signs in Billings, MT, guide drivers.

When Billings, MT (est. pop. 120,874), began converting downtown one-way streets into two-way roads in 2021, the city also installed back-in, diagonal parking. However, motorists never liked the parking style, and the back-in spaces are being replaced with parallel and front-in, angle spaces.

Mehmet Casey, development director for the Downtown Billings Alliance, told the *Billings Gazette* that despite extensive efforts to educate local drivers about back-in parking over the past few years, the spaces continued to cause problems. And motorists just don't like them.

However, in Richmond, VA (est. pop. 229,247), back-in angle parking is being introduced in more corners of the city, according to Axios. In addition to safety improvements, back-in parking can also create more overall spaces compared to parallel parking — but safety is the main reason Richmond is adding back-in spaces, Paige Hairston, a spokesperson for the city's public works department, tells Axios.

In Bloomington, IN (est. pop. 74,028), meanwhile, back-in angle parking has been introduced to a block of East 6th Street that experienced eight backing crashes from 2018 to 2024.

"This change is all about giving drivers a clear view when leaving a parking spot, removing the need to back blindly into oncoming traffic," said Ryan Robling, planning services

manager for Bloomington's Planning and Transportation Department. "By reversing into a space, drivers can see approaching cars, cyclists, and pedestrians when they pull out, reducing risks of crashes."

That's the case for back-in angled parking. But the concept hasn't taken off because there is also a case against the practice.

Bryant Ficek of Spack Consulting spells out the pros and cons of back-in angled parking:

Advantages:

- Drivers have a better view of traffic, both vehicles and bicycles, when exiting the parking space into the travel lane.
- Eliminates the difficulty drivers have when backing into moving traffic.
- Puts the trunk or back of the vehicle next to the sidewalk for safer loading and unloading.
- Positions drivers and passengers, particularly children, to enter or exit the vehicle toward the sidewalk with the doors shielding people from moving traffic
- Arguably easier to back into an angled space than a parallel space.
- Fewer crashes, particularly those between exiting vehicles and bicyclists.

Disadvantages:

- Steep learning curve similar to the experience of introducing roundabouts.
- Drivers not knowing exactly when to stop when backing, resulting in the vehicle overhanging the sidewalk or hitting landscaping or other amenities.
- Potential congestion with the initial stopping and backing maneuver, like parallel parking.
- Danger of drivers from the opposing traffic lane pulling across the road and entering the spot nose-first. **DIX**

Downtown district restructures, reimagines branding and events — Continued from page 1

Downtown Plainfield partnered with ESME Collective, led by designer Andrés Jimenéz, to bring this vision to life. Jimenéz and downtown leaders strolled the streets of Downtown Plainfield multiple times. They soaked up the architecture, colors, energy, and cultural rhythm of the neighborhood.

After that research, Jimenéz presented five conceptual logos, each offering a distinctive interpretation of the district's identity. The Downtown Plainfield Board engaged in an in-depth review process, moving through several rounds of elimination and refinement. The final logo that emerged is dark blue and a soft gold.

New branding guidelines ensure that the messaging is consistent across digital media, signage, and printed materials.

The branding work cost about \$3,500, which Gomez considers a bargain.

"Everybody's always asking to save a dime, so they never brought in anybody good to redo the branding," he said. "There is a subconscious activity that is going on with these logos. A more polished brand, a more polished look and colors, definitely affect how you're perceived, even if people don't understand why."

New focus on cleanliness, streetscapes, and events

In addition to the refreshed logo and name, Downtown Plainfield is also adopting a more robust approach to such efforts as cleaning streets, sprucing up streetscapes, and hosting events.

"All those things weren't being done before," Gomez says. "Plainfield was one of those cities that was a gem and then kind of decayed over the years. Now there is an effort to revitalize."

In one experiment, Downtown Plainfield will host a 5-kilometer road race on Small Business Saturday, the event created to bring shoppers to local merchants on Thanksgiving weekend.

"Trying to get people downtown for Small

Business Saturday seems to be a losing proposition," Gomez says. "Most consumers don't care about Small Business Saturday. You can put up all the signage that you want, but nobody really cares. So I tried to work the problem backwards: Let me try to get them here for something else."

His idea was a 5K race known as the Jingle Dash.

"Everybody will get little bells on their shoes," Gomez said.

He's counting on the avidity of runners, who are more than willing to show up for road races.

"Those guys will go everywhere," Gomez said.

Downtown Plainfield hired an organization to promote and organize the event, and Gomez hopes 300-500 runners will pay entry fees of \$30 to \$35.

"Their families and friends come to support them," he said. "If that's the case, I have 1,000 to 1,500 people coming into the space between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m."

Small Business Saturday in Downtown Plainfield will also include a Winter Fest with music, ice carving, and people dressed as Santa Claus and the Grinch. A Winter Market will feature vendors that don't compete with downtown merchants.

Gomez expects the entire event to cost \$10,000 to \$20,000.

"We hope to recoup most of that, if not all of it, from the race and sponsors," he says.

Contact: Abel Gomez,
[Downtown Plainfield](mailto:Abel@DowntownPlainfield.com),
732-200-7375. **DIX**

"Trying to get people downtown for Small Business Saturday seems to be a losing proposition."



The Downtown Plainfield logo is easily adapted to street poles and other uses.

ATTRACTION

Pickleball comes to downtown



Simple set-up for Louisville Downtown Pickleball Street Fest.

Pickleball, that racquet sport once favored by retirees in the Sun Belt, has gone mainstream. Now, the sport is played by people of all ages. And competitions air on ESPN.

Downtown leaders know a good trend when they see one, and they're embracing it.

In Louisville, KY (est. pop. 622,981), the Louisville Downtown Partnership hosted its second annual Louisville Downtown Pickleball Street Fest. Sponsored by Angel's Envy Distillery, the event converted East Main Street into an outdoor venue featuring 12 courts for competitive tournaments and open play opportunities. There were also food trucks, cocktails and beer, and live music.

"The Pickleball Street Fest builds on LDP's commitment to activating public spaces through creative programming," says Rebecca Fleischaker, executive director of Louisville Downtown Partnership. "By transforming our streets into active recreational spaces, we're showcasing downtown Louisville as a place where community, competition, and celebration come together in the heart of our city."

The 2025 event drew 54 teams of two people each. The event included celebrity

matches, open play, and a multi-ranking round-robin tournament hosted by Goodbounce Pickleball Yard, a nearby entertainment complex with pickleball courts. Registration cost \$10 to \$35 per player.

The event cost about \$15,000 to host. Expense items included bleachers, street closing, and a DJ. That cost was covered through sponsorships.

The organization plans to host the event again in 2026, perhaps expanding the length of the street closure from one block to two.

In addition to the annual Downtown Pickleball Street Fest, the Louisville Downtown Partnership manages Baird Urban Sports Park on West Main Street. That facility contains two pickleball courts and a wiffle ball field which are open to the public six days a week.

Downtown Seattle, WA (est. pop. 755,078), for its part, hosts annual Pickleball for All events on summer weekends. The activations are hosted by the Seattle Parks Foundation, Seattle Metro Pickleball Association, and Amazon.

The event includes temporary courts, paddles and balls, and music and other activities.

And in Tampa, FL, the waterfront destination Sparkman Wharf hosted a four-day pickleball event.

The event featured beginners' sessions, professional instructors, and equipment. Four courts were provided by Addict Pickleball, an online vendor, along with paddles and balls. **DIX**

PATHWAYS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Food truck parks pop up in downtowns

Across the country, downtowns in small and mid-sized cities are setting up dedicated spaces for food trucks to operate. The initiatives typically are spearheaded by private operators, with city officials figuring out how

to straddle an obvious paradox — food trucks are mobile and temporary, while food truck parks are fixed and permanent.

In Fulshear, TX (est. pop. 26,986), plans to launch a food truck park downtown were

working their way through city government in July. The downtown project would feature a 4,500-square-foot building designed to service multiple food trucks parked on-site, *Covering Katy News* reports.

Food truck parks are permitted as a specific use within Fulshear's Downtown District, requiring review by both the planning board and City Council.

"Staff believe that this proposed use is in line with the efforts to revitalize Fulshear's core downtown and will complement other local businesses in the immediate area," a city memo said.

The project calls for paving a drive aisle for food truck access, improving the city-owned north-south alley east of the property, and potentially adding parallel parking. The developer also plans to install a water cistern that complies with low-impact development regulations under the city's Coordinated Development Ordinance.

City staff worked with the applicant to develop site plans and building elevations that meet downtown district regulations, and the city memo says the Fulshear food truck park proposal complies with all requirements for landscaping, signage, lighting, elevation design, and setbacks without seeking waivers.

The operator of the Fulshear food truck park intends to sell alcohol within the building, if the state approves a Texas liquor license.

In Frankfort, MI (est. pop. 1,158), a food truck park is located on Main Street adjacent to the Betsie Valley Trail.

The six food trucks operating at the park for the 2025 summer season include a taco truck, an eatery offering Cajun food, another offering biscuits and gravy, a barbecue spot, and one with gluten-free, vegetarian fare.

The park, known as Menus on Main, uses Facebook to share menus, and to promote deals and seasonal specials.

Despite a promising location, the food truck park got off to a slow start.

"I saw plenty of parking, a connection to the Betsie Valley Trail, and an opportunity for locals, contractors, the elderly, bikers, and anybody else who would like to join us," owner Scott Bradley told the *News Advocate*. "It was a spot where people could dip in and dip out for lunch — get something quick."

In addition to food trucks, Menus on Main includes picnic tables, a covered pavilion, and outdoor lighting.

Some food truck parks are far more elaborate. In Cape Coral, FL (est. pop. 224,452), the Slipaway Food Truck Park & Marina required a hefty investment.

"We went from probably a \$5 million project with the land and everything to over a \$20 million project," property owner Jeff Miloff told *Gulfshore Business*. "We added the ship store. We added fuel. We wanted to look like a very high-end place and not a typical food truck park. We wanted to do it right. So, when you come over the bridge, it's a statement. People were expecting a food truck park. Instead, you can see it's a lot more."

Each food truck in Cape Coral agrees to a six-month lease that can be voided if sales falter. There are 200 on-site parking spaces and valet parking during the weekends. **DIX**



The upscale Slipaway Food Truck Park & Marina.

Cities look for ways to bring back corner stores — Continued from page 1



Unused corner store in Louisville, KY.

Piuma led a project that mapped and documented dozens of historic store locations in Louisville.

Efforts to legalize and expand corner stores have taken off in recent years in Seattle. The city is seeking to include corner stores in its larger comprehensive plan, [One Seattle](#), which will be voted on by city councilmembers later

this year. These initiatives seek to reverse successive zoning and building codes that have rendered such projects not feasible and made it almost a requirement for neighborhood residents to have a car to get groceries.

Corner stores “support a lot of great things that we also support, like compact growth, transportation options, socializing with neighbors and friends, and even food security, if it includes healthy options,” Lisa Pool, a planner and public policy consultant at the Municipal Research and Services Center in Seattle, told *Planning* magazine. “When the pandemic hit, even more people realized the

value in these smaller, closer opportunities to meet our daily needs.”

Planners in the U.S. are looking elsewhere for inspiration. In Germany, for instance, various building types are allowed in residential neighborhoods, allowing local retail to thrive. But in the U.S., small shops and cafes are generally barred from residential neighborhoods.

A small-scale grocery store needs an estimated 1,000 nearby households to support the business.

Cities look to historic locations

Spokane, WA, helped launch the move to restore neighborhood retail in 2017 with a code change that legalized historic locations, despite conflicting contemporary regulatory barriers.

To blunt public concern about the disruption caused by stores in residential areas, Spokane started with a focus on legacy locations — those familiar corner stores that had been part of neighborhoods for decades. From there, Spokane is looking to slowly add more corner stores.

In Seattle, proposed legislation would let businesses operate in new or legacy spots only in specific types of residential zones. The city aims to recreate commuting patterns from decades ago.

“People would get off these trolley lines and visit the store on their way home,” architectural historian Becky Wong told KUOW radio. “That’s a perfect, perfect example of when we used to not be so reliant on cars to go to supermarkets.”

Taking a similar approach, in 2022 Louisville allowed childcare centers to use any corner lot that had once been used non-residentially, opening dozens of new potential locations for these essential businesses.

“We know we need to look at ways to make those corners more vital,” Dock told *Planning* magazine. “We’ve done little things here and there, but to do what we want to do with corners is going to be a big initiative.”

DIX

“We know we need to look at ways to make those corners more vital.”

Small city relies on grants to encourage corner stores

The city of Auburn, ME (est. pop. 23,790), launched the [Auburn Neighborhood Corner Store](#) program in 2023. The city offered grants to existing businesses to upgrade store infrastructure and to entrepreneurs opening new businesses. To be eligible, stores were required to generate at least half of their revenue from grocery sales.

When the program launched, Auburn Mayor Jason Levesque said that the program grew from a comprehensive review of city zoning laws and an analysis of what makes neighborhoods vibrant.

Attracting residents with cash and other incentives

Traditional economic development strategies focus on wooing corporations: the larger the better. But it makes more sense to focus on homegrown businesses, says Matthew Wagner, vice president of revitalization programs at the National Main Street Center.

“It’s really about shifting our economic development focus to one of cultivating human capital rather than business recruitment,” Wagner says. “If we focus on creating great places and providing opportunities for our local residents to launch new businesses, that will have a much greater return on investment for our communities.”

A small but growing number of cities are taking this advice to heart and offering incentives to encourage individuals to relocate. [MakeMyMove.com](https://www.makemymove.com/) currently lists 106 communities with active relocation programs. Here are three examples:

- Baltimore, MD, is home to the [Buying into Baltimore](#) program, which offers \$5,000 in down-payment and closing costs to homebuyers. This program is unique in its very hands-on approach. Interested home buyers have access to regularly scheduled neighborhood trolley tours and educational sessions which provide information and resources on homebuying. Participants in this program are primarily local residents who are looking to move to homeownership in the city center.

- Columbus, GA, is working to attract out-of-state residents with remote jobs. The [Move to Meaningful](#) program offers \$5,000 cash for relocation and has a strong focus on integrating newcomers into the community. Some of the many benefits of the Move to Meaningful program include an annual



Neodesha, KS, bills itself as a small town with a big promise.

movers outing, monthly meet ups with other movers, a Columbus experience package with tickets to sports and cultural events, membership in the chamber of commerce, and more.

- Unlike many other relocation programs [Explore the Heart](#) in Neodesha, KS, does not offer cash for relocation. Instead, the town of just 2,196 offers a range of incentives such as waiving state income tax through 2026 along with property tax rebates on exterior home improvements, and help with day care for working parents. The program also includes access to existing perks, including student loan repayment assistance up to \$15,000 and free college tuition through the Neodesha Promise scholarship program.

- Other cities are working to attract residents with special talents such as teachers, police, and healthcare workers. Muskegon, MI, is offering up to \$15,000 to teachers. Nurses who move to Arcadia, CA, can earn signing bonuses of up to \$40,000. And police officers moving to Roseville, MN, receive a \$10,000 signing bonus. **DIX**

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Restaurants get boost during construction

When a downtown streetscape project disrupted much of downtown Wheeling, WV, a simple punch card promotion made a big difference.

The city provided a relief package that included a temporary tax break and lost revenue replacement for eligible businesses. Then a local company stepped in and created Conquer the Cones to support downtown eateries.

Thirteen restaurants participated. People who dined at six or more restaurants were entered

into a drawing for a chance to win \$1,000.

The program was such a success that it was expanded to include additional sponsors each providing a \$1,000 quarterly prize. Overall the program ran for six consecutive quarters.

"Everybody wants a thriving beautiful downtown, and we are going in that direction, but we need to help out our community," says Chris Bucon, co-owner of Paree Insurance. "So, it's pretty



simple: Come down, eat downtown, get a chance to win \$1,000."

GRANT WATCH

Grants support legacy restaurants

Stephen Reeve runs New York Café in Ketchikan, Alaska — the state's longest operating restaurant. It was built more than 120 years ago by adventurer Tony Ohashi.

This legacy business received funds from the Backing Historic Small Restaurants grant program in 2024. Grant funds were used to restore the restaurant's facade and document its 120 year history.

Backing Historic Small Restaurants is a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and is supported by American Express. The program helps small and independent restaurants preserve their histories while celebrating their cuisine and supporting the local economies.

To be eligible, restaurants must meet the following criteria:

- Is a small/independently owned restaurant located in a historic or older building or neighborhood.

- Contributes to the history and/or identity of its surrounding community or neighborhood.

- Tells a story about cuisine and community in America, highlighting historic food traditions and culinary heritage.

- Has a compelling and inspiring historical narrative or cultural significance.

- Has been disproportionately impacted by economic challenges, disasters, or other hardships.

In 2024, 50 small restaurants each received

\$50,000 grants. Many of the 2024 grant recipients included businesses that are family owned or have been operating for generations.

Applications for the next round of grants will open in May 2026.



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Incentives for real estate agents

In downtown Skokie, IL, real estate brokers can earn a bonus for facilitating leases or sales of commercial space for restaurants or retail businesses. The bonus program offers up to \$5,000, contingent on leases lasting at least five years and occupancy for six months, with the bonus not exceeding 5 percent of the lease value.

Wine Walk gets visitors over the threshold

After nearly a decade, the Wine Walk in Renton, WA, continues to draw wine lovers and to promote local wineries and merchants.

Mini tasting stations are set up inside a wide variety of retail locations. "This gives people an opportunity, without any pressure, to enter these businesses and hopefully go back again later," says the event organizer.

Tickets are \$40 in advance and \$50 at the event. Admission includes eight one-ounce drink tokens, a map of the tasting locations, a souvenir wine glass, and an event wristband.

Fitness trail passes through downtown

Fulton, NY, boasts two bridges that cross the Oswego River. The county's Impact program, which focuses on the prevention of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke, partnered with a local group interested in creating recreational

trails. Together they developed a 1.8-mile trail which takes walkers across the bridges and past many downtown businesses and historical sites.

The trail was launched with a community walk and fitness challenge. Participants were encouraged to walk the trail 14 times for a total of 24 miles and then post their success on social media.

Historic signs light up downtown

In 2018 Bill Whitlow restored the old broken neon sign outside of his restaurant. The impact was unmistakable. "Our business probably went up 20 percent the second we put that sign up," Whitlow says. "It was so recognizable, and we saw an immediate impact the next day."

To replicate that impact and help other Covington, KY, businesses breathe new life into their vintage signs, the city's Economic Development Department created the [Historic Electric Signage Program](#), a forgivable loan avail-



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Downtown Development Center

36 Midvale Road, Suite 2E
Mountain Lakes, NJ 07046

Phone: (973) 265-2300 • Fax: (973) 402-6056

Email: info@DowntownDevelopment.com

Website: DowntownDevelopment.com

Editor

Jeff Ostrowski, ext. 110

jostrowski@DowntownDevelopment.com

Technical Editor

Laurence A. Alexander

Customer Service

Mary Pagliaroli, ext. 101

mpagliaroli@DowntownDevelopment.com

Reprints and Permissions

Michael DeWitt, ext. 107

mjdewitt@DowntownDevelopment.com

Publisher

Margaret DeWitt, ext. 106

msdewitt@DowntownDevelopment.com

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NAME

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FIRM/ORGANIZATION

ADDRESS

CITY STATE ZIP

PHONE

EMAIL N15

MAIL: 36 Midvale Road, Suite 2E
Mountain Lakes, NJ 07046
FAX: (973) 402-6056
PHONE: (973) 265-2300
EMAIL: info@DowntownDevelopment.com

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able in the city's commercial areas, including downtown.

Covington Economic Development Director Tom West says he had long suspected that Covington's many historic electric signs held the potential to enhance downtown's nighttime aesthetic and spur business. "Whether it's neon, incandescent, or LED lighting on signs, they bring an electricity (pun intended) to the streetscape at night," West says. "The older signs are authentic reminders of our past and the revitalization of those lighted elements speaks to the vibrant future we are building."

The city is also encouraging economic development with a [rent subsidy](#) program for new businesses and a [facade improvement](#) forgivable loan program.

City updates incentive program

The Columbia Gateway Urban Renewal Agency in Dalles, OR, has funding available for building and property owners who are improving, rehabilitating, or developing eligible properties in the city's Gateway/ Downtown Urban Renewal Area.

In May, the city announced [updates to its incentive program](#). The changes make it easier to apply, expand the range of eligible projects, offer new incentives to support housing development, and place greater emphasis on projects that deliver measurable community benefits.

Shade, Wi-Fi, and lights create inviting space

It is easier than ever to beat the heat in Raleigh, NC. Thirteen large umbrellas give much-needed shade in downtown's City Plaza. On most days, lightweight cafe tables and chairs sit beneath the umbrellas. But for concerts and other events, everything can be moved.

"During the hot weather months, the lack of shade on the plaza has been a deterrent," says Ken Bowers, deputy director of the city's planning and development department. "And we're hoping that now that we have these shade structures being deployed, that people will come down and enjoy the shade and enjoy lunch or whatever, down on the plaza."

In addition to the umbrellas, the city recently launched free Wi-Fi in the plaza and the Downtown Raleigh Alliance is raising funds to add LED lights to nearby trees.



Parking lot evolves over time

The City of Guthrie, OK, is moving ahead with the conversion of a downtown parking lot into a multi-use green space and gathering place. In recent years, the city-owned parking lot was often used by food trucks, local vendors, and community events.

This natural shift in how the space was used is reflected in the

new plan that calls for removing the parking surface and adding gravel walks, an activity lawn, new trees, and sod. Food trucks will be allowed to park along one side of the park.

"Pocket Parks are very beneficial for downtown communities, especially when they are already surrounded by pavement, parking, and buildings," Shawnda Rooney, director of economic development, told city council members. **DIX**