

# Is Your Downtown Revitalization on Track?



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### Introduction

Downtowns are the traditional and cultural centers of our communities and have weathered many changes throughout the last century. Once thriving retail and civic centers, many have been adversely affected by transportation investments, retail patterns, and living standards. Since the 1960s, downtowns are in competition with suburban shopping centers, malls, discount centers, and more recently, e-commerce. Despite these challenges, downtowns remain the centers of urbanized areas and reflect the image of our communities.

A thriving downtown is synonymous with a healthy community. To assess the health of downtown retail districts, DVRPC published, *Revitalizing Suburban Downtown Retail Districts*, which compiled information about 71 suburban downtown retail districts in an effort to learn what elements were common among successful older suburban retail districts. Short- and long-term strategies were then developed to help local officials revive these districts and further their economic development goals. This 2013 report outlined the research undertaken and the process to develop the recommended retail strategies. Understanding why retailers choose particular locations and what factors local officials may be able to influence are critical to maintaining a competitive edge in the retail market. An important element of the study included municipal actions that may be undertaken such as tracking revitalization activities.

This tool was designed to assist all communities, downtown organizations, and nonprofits to begin or enhance their tracking process. This revitalization tool provides an organized method of collecting quantitative statistics, such as census data and traffic counts, as well as qualitative data, such as pedestrian amenities. The core of this tool is periodic measurement of reinvestment taking place within the retail district or downtown.

The Revitalization Tracker tool includes five worksheets:

(A) **Retail Plan and Measures**: an explanation of what the retail plan is and which elements are important to the downtown retail district;

(B) **Revitalization Assessment Form**: an interactive spreadsheet—the actual "tool";

(C) **Census Data Lookup**: an outline of the needed census information, methods, and sources;

(D) **Event Data**: a spreadsheet to track event information; and

(E) **Retail District Inventory**: a spreadsheet to inventory all properties in the downtown district.

Some of the above measurements require quarterly oversight, such as volunteer hours or Average Annual Daily Traffic counts (AADTs), while others require only a yearly update, such as salaries or WalkScore®.

### How to Use the Revitalization Tracker

#### Step 1: Download the Excel Spreadsheet

The tracker is provided as a downloadable Excel spreadsheet. The person using this tool should save a copy of this spreadsheet to their local computer and then close out of the DVRPC webpage. The main worksheets of the tracker are the Revitalization Assessment Form (Worksheet B) and Census Data Lookup (Worksheet C).

#### Step 2. Refer to *Revitalizing Suburban Downtown Retail Districts* study

The tracker spreadsheet calculates the 41 revitalization measures. **Before using this spreadsheet, please refer to DVRPC's 2013 study, *Revitalizing Suburban Downtown Retail Districts*, for important information about the tool's intended use, assumptions, data sources, and calculation methods.** Continue to read through the remainder of this worksheet.

#### Step 3: Complete the Revitalization Assessment Form (Worksheet B)

The Revitalization Assessment Form asks a series of questions in the purple **Assessment Form** tab of this spreadsheet. The user should provide an answer in the red box for each of the 41 revitalization measures. The Revitalization Assessment Form provides columns for information to be collected on a quarterly basis. The revitalization measures refer to quantitative and qualitative characteristics important to downtown success. The measures on the form are discussed further in the *Revitalizing Suburban Downtown Retail Districts* study. Each measure provides a reliable source for the requested information.

#### Step 4: Complete the Census Data Lookup (Worksheet C)

The Census Data Lookup asks information about key revitalization demographics in the blue **Census Data** tab of this spreadsheet. The first question asks the person using this tool to collect the census blocks for the area that is being assessed and tracked. The remaining questions ask for information on the total population, age distribution, educational attainment, median household income, daytime population, and diversity. Each of the questions provides a source and census link to find the information. In some cases, a method on how to calculate the information is provided, specifically for daytime population. Questions 2–6 provide a sample of what and how the requested census information will look like. Because the American Community Survey (ACS) data is updated every five years, this information only needs to be acquired at the beginning of your analysis, with the understanding that sociodemographics do not change over a short period of time.

In some instances, the retail district being assessed will have more than one census block. If this pertains to your community, the user should look up the data for each of the census blocks individually. The Census Data worksheet allows you to insert columns so you may keep track of each census block separately. A summation of each of the census blocks for each question will provide the answer to the question that is asked.

#### **Step 5: Complete the Event Data (Worksheet D)**

One of the key elements of a successful downtown is having regularly scheduled programs either weekly, monthly, or yearly. Keeping track of the success or failure of events should be monitored. An **Event Data Worksheet (D)** has been created to start dissecting the various elements of events. Not only is it important to track revenue, but officials should also understand trends in attendance, costs, vendor participation, and expenditures. Tracking events can be done at any time, before or after the Revitalization Assessment Form. However, note that there is a question about event attendance in the Organizational Capacity Section of the Revitalization Assessment Form.

#### **Step 6: Complete the Retail District Inventory (Worksheet E)**

A thorough diagnostic assessment of the existing retail environment is important to truly understand its future potential. Clearly understanding what is already in place will allow the users of this tool to focus their resources for specific needs. Keeping an inventory may seem like a small task, but it is critical. A **Retail District Inventory (Worksheet E)** is provided with columns for elements related to the retail environment. The retail inventory should be done before the revitalization assessment and should be updated at least on a yearly basis.

#### **What Should I Know Before I Get Started?**

The assessment form asks several different types of questions.

Some of the questions are subjective in nature and depend on the experience, knowledge, and judgment of the person using the tool. These questions require familiarity with the planning and political context. Community planners or other actively involved stakeholders should use their informed judgment in answering these questions. Other users may consult their local planning department to discuss the best way to answer these questions.

However, a majority of the questions are objective and depend on using the correct data source to find the answer. The tool uses readily available data from local sources, municipal records, or the U.S. Census for most measures, but some Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis may be required. The Revitalization Assessment Form provides general instructions with each question to guide the user on how to answer each question.

#### **Using the Data Findings**

The Revitalization Tracker worksheets provide a template for organizing the results in a format for sharing with elected officials, the public, developers, and other interested stakeholders. The person using the tool must think critically about the results to develop and revisit the goals and objectives for the revitalization strategy. The data provided in the worksheets can also be made into graphs or charts for easier analysis, easily available in Excel.

#### **Sources**

The following resources were consulted as part of this tracker web tool.

U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates 2010–2014; *Revitalizing Suburban Downtown Retail Districts*, DVRPC, 2013; Vibrant Streets Toolkit, [www.vibrantstreets.com](http://www.vibrantstreets.com); City of Des Moines Performance Measurement Program, [www.dmgov.org/Departments/CityManager/pages/performancemetrics.aspx](http://www.dmgov.org/Departments/CityManager/pages/performancemetrics.aspx); *20 Ingredients of an Outstanding Destination*, Destination Development International, [www.destinationdevelopment.com](http://www.destinationdevelopment.com); *Drivers of Commercial Corridor Success: Lessons for Increasing Retail Performance*, Econsult, October 2010 (PowerPoint); *Downtown Success Indicators: A Review of the Literature*, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Illinois extension, August 2014, p.1-38.; Kimmel, Chad Ph.D., and Shoening, Joel Ph.D., Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, *An Evaluation of Pennsylvania's Main Street Programs*, October 2011.

#### **Disclaimer**

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#### **Title VI Statement**

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