

# DOWNTOWN METUCHEN

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# STRATEGIC PLAN

2023 - 2028



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## METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE BOARD & VOLUNTEER TEAMS

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### 2023 BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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### 2022 BOARD OF TRUSTEES

*(Participated in Strategic Plan,  
but no longer on the Board)*

Eric Berger, Former Chair

Moshe Atzbi, Former Board Member

Lynne Mueller, Former Board Member

### VOLUNTEER TEAMS

Organization Team

Promotion Team:

*Communications Project Team*

Design Team:

*Public Art Project Team*

*Storefront Project Team*

Clean & Green Team

Small Business Cultivation Team:

*Tech Project Team*

*Business Recruitment Project Team*

### STAFF

Dawn Mackey, Executive Director

Isaac D. Kremer, Former Executive Director



## WELCOME!

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January 31, 2023

Dear Members, Volunteers, Stakeholders, and Partners:

Since our founding, the Metuchen Downtown Alliance has achieved some major milestones. In 2017, we were recognized as an Affiliate Program by Main Street New Jersey and the National Main Street Center. That connects us with over 1,600 communities nationally doing similar work. This past Fall, MDA was recognized as a semi-finalist for the 2023 Great American Main Street Award. It's the great work of our volunteers implementing the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan that got us here. And now we endeavor to refine our strategies and work plans to continue great achievement over the next five years.

This Strategic Plan represents eight months hard-work and effort on your part - our Members, Volunteers, Stakeholders, and Partners. In particular, we would like to thank:

- Courtenay Mercer and Cailean Kok of Mercer Planning Associates who facilitated and drafted the Strategic Plan;
- The NJ Department of Community Affairs for providing a grant to fund Mercer Planning Associates' work;
- The business and property owners that took time to respond to surveys and participate in focus groups;
- Over 700 community members who responded to surveys and provided their input;
- Metuchen Borough Council and the Metuchen Parking Authority who had the foresight to bring MDA into existence and fund it;
- Strategic partners like the Borough and others that have supported the MDA and who will continue to help achieve our goals for the downtown; and
- The MDA Board of Trustees and our volunteers who led and guided this effort, as well as so many others over the past five years.

This Strategic Plan builds off the success of the past five years and provides a refined road map for the next five. You are the key to the District's future success – our Members, Stakeholders, Volunteers, and Partners. Through shared efforts over the coming years, we continue Metuchen's leadership as one of the best downtowns in New Jersey and America.

Thank you,

Bobbie Fawcett  
*Chair*

Dawn Mackey  
*Executive Director*

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## INTRODUCTION

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Since the Borough of Metuchen established a Special Improvement District (SID) for the downtown in 2015 and adopted the **Main Street Approach™** to organize their work, the Metuchen Downtown Alliance (MDA), its Board of Trustees, volunteers, community partners, and staff have worked hard to enhance the downtown district. The MDA's first Strategic Plan (2017-2022) included Transformation Strategies, Goals, and Projects reflective of an organization in the "catalyst phase" – in other words, a revitalization program in its infancy. Over the past five years, the organization has promoted the downtown's variety of retail shops, restaurants, and service businesses, beautified the District and its businesses, hosted retail events, filled vacancies, and marketed both the downtown and the organization.

The 2023-2028 Strategic Plan is the MDA's expansive vision and preferred future for the downtown over the next five years. As demonstrated through annual reporting, the 2020 benchmarking report, and the recent nod as a 2023 Great American Main Street Award semi-finalist, the MDA has made significant economic gains through public and private sector investments in the District; and thus, has successfully evolved from a catalyst to "growth phase" of revitalization. This 2023-2028 Strategic Plan recognizes the successes of the MDA as guided by the last strategic plan and seeks to capitalize on the experience of its robust volunteer talent to refine and enhance its efforts. The 2023-2028 Strategic Plan is not a wholesale restart of the strategic planning process, rather a refresh and restructuring of the Transformation Strategies, Goals, and Projects to reflect the current and desired future workings of the organization as it continues to grow.

Metuchen's downtown is the historic heart of this central New Jersey community. Downtown Metuchen defines the community's "sense of place" and reflects the Borough's heritage. The **Main Street Approach™** stresses historic preservation as the underlying design principle for the revitalization effort. Main Street efforts nationwide aim to maximize the economic potential of each historic downtown, while preserving its authentic character.

For Metuchen, the volunteer-led Teams are critical to the success of the program and involve a wide variety of stakeholders including residents, business owners, partners, and property owners who make decisions about the future of the downtown. These stakeholders participated in all facets of the research leading up to the creation and subsequent implementations of the MDA's first 2017-2022 Strategic Plan. This plan, informed by many of the same stakeholders, represents the next phase in MDA's organizational growth and development.

Mercer Planning Associates (MPA), a Jersey City-based consulting firm, worked with the MDA as they refined their efforts at commercial district revitalization. MPA worked closely with the current and former MDA Executive Directors and Board of Trustees to develop this Strategic Plan.

The Strategic Plan update was conducted over eight months and included the activities outlined below.

1. MPA *reviewed existing documentation* related to MDA's past strategic planning and implementation efforts, including the SWOT Analysis (2016), Shopper Survey (2016/17), Retail Market Analysis (2017) and benchmarking (2020), Strategic Plan (2017-2022), annual reports (2016 – present), and any other documents. The purpose of this exercise was to understand past motivations and desired outcomes, and to evaluate implementation successes and areas in need

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of improvement, which served as a basis for developing outreach materials and informed strategic planning discussions with the MDA Board of Trustees.

2. An online *Business Survey* was conducted from April 27, 2022 through September 28, 2022. The survey was open to business owners or managers, but only one survey per business was accepted. MDA staff promoted the survey to District businesses via email and at the Member Meeting on May 3, 2022. Ms. Mercer also visited businesses on July 16, 2022 to gather responses using a tablet, or distribute survey flyers where the owner/manager was not available. A total of 75 businesses participated in the survey, representing 27 percent of the MDA's 279 businesses.

To observe changes over time, the survey mirrored the one conducted in association with the *2017 Retail Market Analysis for Downtown Metuchen*. The survey collected information about the businesses and their perceptions about customers and their own performance, as well as their feedback and expectations for both Downtown Metuchen and the MDA.

3. An online *Visitor Survey* was conducted from July 14, 2022 through October 14, 2022, and was launched in conjunction with a *Pop-Up Outreach Kiosk* in Downtown Metuchen on July 15, 2022. The survey received 698 total responses, with an additional 75 respondents answering one of the survey preference questions during the pop-up. Again, the survey questions mirrored those of the 2017 Online Consumer survey to provide a point of comparison. The survey provided information about consumer preferences and perceptions of Downtown Metuchen.
4. MPA conducted a series of *Stakeholder Interviews & Focus Groups* with individuals and organizations that volunteer for and/or work closely with the MDA. Over a period of two months in September and October 2022, MPA met with 31 individuals who provided valuable insights into their perceptions of and interactions with the MDA.
5. The MDA Board of Trustees participated in a *Strategic Planning Workshop* on November 18, 2022. The three-hour workshop led participants through a series of exercises to develop strategies around key topics identified through previous outreach efforts (surveys and stakeholder interviews/focus groups). The items discussed during the workshop formed the basis of recommendations to refine the Transformation Strategies, Goals, and Projects as part of this Strategic Plan.

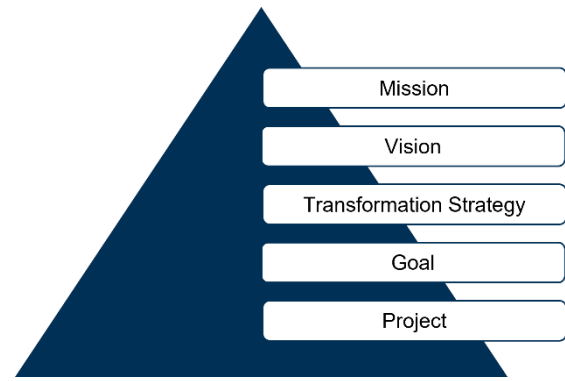
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## WHAT IS A STRATEGIC PLAN?

**Board Source™**, a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to advance the public good by building exceptional nonprofit boards and inspiring board service, defines a Strategic Plan as a written document that defines an organization’s overarching strategies and major areas of work for the next five years to achieve the organization’s mission.

Strategic Plans for nonprofit organizations are created through a process that builds on research to accumulate wisdom about the organization, its environment, and its economic potential. This process involves stakeholders to ensure that the resulting Strategic Plan contains a comprehensive understanding of the organization’s preferred future.

Strategic Plans review or create common organizational planning elements such as the organization’s mission, vision, goals, and actions (projects). We have added to these planning elements, the Transformation Strategies as recommended by the National Main Street Center. We define and review each of these planning elements below.



## WHAT IS THE MAIN STREET APPROACH®?

According to the National Main Street Center, Inc., the **Main Street Approach™** “offers community-based revitalization initiatives with a practical, adaptable framework for downtown transformation that is easily tailored to local conditions. The Main Street Approach helps communities get started with revitalization, and grows with them over time.”

The core of the **Main Street Approach™** are **Transformation Strategies** that articulate “a focused, deliberate path to revitalizing or strengthening a downtown or commercial district’s economy.”<sup>1</sup> Each Transformation Strategy is “grounded by both an understanding of the underlying drivers of the local and regional economy, as well as community feedback and engagement. A Transformation Strategy should describe a market position that the commercial district can successfully fulfill.”<sup>2</sup> A Transformation Strategy Work Plan organizes



*The Main Street Approach™ showing how the Four Points correspond with the four elements of real estate value - Physical, Economic, Social, and Civic.*

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<sup>1</sup> National Main Street Center, *The Main Street Approach: A Comprehensive Guide to Community Transformation, Chicago IL: National Main Street Center, 2017, 8.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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implementation projects around four broad areas, known as the **Four Points**<sup>3</sup> – Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization.

- **ECONOMIC VITALITY** focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies.
- **DESIGN** supports a community’s transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the commercial district apart.
- **PROMOTION** positions the downtown as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community’s unique characteristics.
- **ORGANIZATION** involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

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## MDA PLANNING HIERARCHY

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### MISSION STATEMENT

The Metuchen Downtown Alliance is a volunteer-based, nonprofit dedicated to the management and revitalization of the Metuchen’s downtown business district in partnership with stakeholders, residents, the municipality, and other partners.

### VISION STATEMENT

We envision a welcoming, walkable, and inclusive downtown. Engaging public art, entertainment, and recreation abound throughout our historic and vibrant downtown. All residents and visitors will be brought together by daily and special downtown experiences at destinations, independent businesses, and restaurants featuring personalized customer service.

### 2023 - 2028 TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

Two Transformation Strategies were developed during the 2017-2022 Strategic Planning process after a thorough review of economic and demographic data compiled by the CLUE Group and Heritage Consulting, the Economic Vitality Team recommended two Transformation Strategies. They focused on specific consumer clusters to organize the work of the Board of Trustees and volunteer-led Teams.

Based on feedback from stakeholders and the Board of Trustees, the Family Friendly Transformation Strategy found in the previous plan has been broadened to capture the organization’s current tactics and future aspirations around intentional inclusivity.

#### SMALL BUSINESS CULTIVATION TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY

We will build on Metuchen’s heritage of independent, creative people to cultivate innovative and unique small businesses, entrepreneurs, and artists.

#### INCLUSIVE DESTINATION TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY

Metuchen will be an inclusive regional destination where something fun, new, and exciting is always happening. Downtown will be a place where *all* visitors can find the opportunities, products, activities, and experiences that the region’s diverse population needs and wants.

### GOALS

Goals are the ends towards which the actions are directed and coordinated. Goals are broad outcome statements with an expiration date that deal with the “what” not necessarily “how.” The Transformation Strategies each have specific desired outcomes to achieve by the end of this five-year strategic plan.

### PROJECTS

Projects are specific activities designed to achieve a goal. For Main Street organizations, projects are implemented by Teams and volunteers with support from staff.

### ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

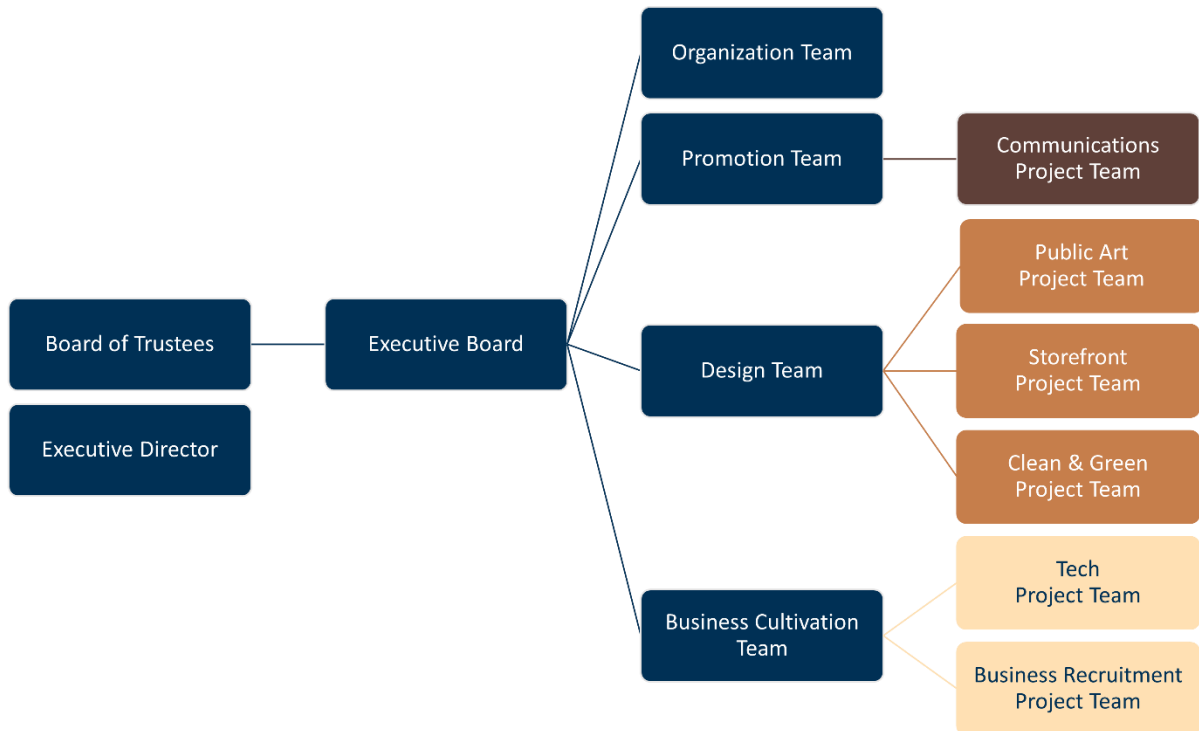
The MDA chose a “Team” and “Project Team” nomenclature (as opposed to “Committee” and “Sub-Committee”) to describe how we choose to organize people around our work through shared purpose.



Every Team and project ties back to a Transformation Strategy and ultimately to the Mission and Vision of the organization.

Whenever the MDA uses the word “Team”, it indicates a designated Team that supports goals and projects tied to one of the four elements of real estate value that correspond to a **Main Street Four-Point Approach™**. MDA Teams and Project Teams, as they stand now and moving forward, are illustrated below. Having a structure like this clearly laid out helps to ensure that we keep ourselves accountable and so every Team and Project ties back to a Main Street Approach point, and ultimately to the Mission and Vision of the organization that the Board of Trustees must uphold as part of its fiduciary duties.

### MDA Organizational Structure



#### ORGANIZATION TEAM (CIVIC)

Organization involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district. Help with managing our sponsorship program, resident campaign program, and other fundraising to support the work of our organization

#### PROMOTION TEAM (SOCIAL)

The Promotion Team does image building and develops marketing materials to entice people to shop, invest, live, and visit downtown. Retail promotions encourage consumer traffic in the downtown and make cash registers ring. Promotion positions the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community’s unique characteristics. Continue the process of turning Metuchen into a convenient regional destination for families and kids where something fun, new, and exciting is always happening. Help activate the

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downtown with all the opportunities, products, activities, and experiences that today's family needs and wants. This includes the Town Plaza, which will become a place for people to gather daily and for extraordinary events.

- *Communications Project Team:* We're working hard to get the message out about Downtown Metuchen through earned and unearned opportunities. Help us find the right mix of tv, print, and other marketing to enhance the image of the downtown.

#### DESIGN TEAM (PHYSICAL)

Design supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the commercial district apart.

- *Public Art Project Team:* Enhance the image of the downtown with new and exciting public art. Assist with implementing the MDA Public Art Policy developed with support from a public arts professional. Contribute to the continuous improvement of the downtown through public art.
- *Storefront Project Team:* Guide businesses through the process of upgrading and improving their storefronts. Assist them with planning and implementation of improvements. Work with MDA, consultants, and the Borough to facilitate best design practices that enhance shopability, visibility, and aesthetics downtown.
- *Clean & Green Project Team:* Make sure the planters are seasonally refreshed, and the streets and sidewalks remain clean and in their top physical condition.

#### BUSINESS CULTIVATION TEAM (ECONOMIC)

Economic vitality focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies. Matching grants complement teamwork, enabling businesses to implement innovations in products and services while reducing capital required and downside risk, and to also make improvements to their storefront, signage, and visual merchandising.

- *Tech Project Team:* Build on Metuchen's heritage of independent, creative people to cultivate innovative and unique small businesses, entrepreneurs, and artists. Examples include business education, advocacy, recruitment/retention, and more. Our Tech Team helps businesses use technology to grow.
- *Business Recruitment Project Team:* Identify potential businesses (permanent and pop-up) that respond to Metuchen's market and speak to the characteristics of creativity and uniqueness.

#### MEETINGS

Just as the Transformation Strategies help us organize our work differently, they also influence the way we run our meetings. A few examples follow:

- Board of Trustees meetings are to be organized around the Teams. At Board meetings, we have an opportunity to report on progress towards goals outlined for each strategy and to coordinate work across the organization.

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- Chairs of the four primary Teams – **Organization, Promotion, Design, and Small Business Cultivation** – may meet to coordinate work across their separate Teams to make sure that it is well integrated.
  - Teams may meet in large groups for a short time and then break out into smaller groups to discuss progress towards specific projects. This allows better coordination of resources and ensures only the key people are in the room at the appropriate times.

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## STRATEGIC PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

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This strategic plan represents the MDA Board of Trustee’s best ideas towards creating a bright future for Downtown Metuchen. The 2023-2028 Strategic Plan recognizes both the successes and shortcomings of the MDA in implementing the last strategic plan; and thus, recommends functional organizational adjustments and refines the Transformation Strategies to better align with the lessons learned and shifting priorities of the organization since 2017.

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION (DEI)

As communities grow more diverse, they are not only celebrating the cultures that make them great, but also implementing intentional actions to support inclusive downtown revitalization.

In New Jersey, minorities and immigrants are the cornerstone of entrepreneurship. For example, while immigrants make up only 22 percent of the state’s population, they represent 47 percent of New Jersey’s “Main Street” businesses.<sup>4</sup> In Metuchen, 29 percent of all business establishments are minority owned.<sup>5</sup> We have observed this pattern in the new businesses that opened in Downtown Metuchen over the past five years.

Not only do the stats support more intentional actions by MDA, but our outreach also demonstrated a desire for an inclusive and culturally minded path forward. According to our visitor survey, the most sought-after restaurants serve international cuisine. While a more qualitative observation, appreciation of the cultural diversity of the community and its businesses and the programming sponsored by MDA was frequently cited by stakeholders in focus group meetings and by survey respondents in open-ended questions and at the pop-up.

Recognizing these observations, this Strategic Plan incorporates intentional diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI) projects. This involves culturally inclusive programming and placemaking to make *all* visitors feel welcome. It also includes projects to attract and retain diverse business owners, and ensure these businesses feel welcomed and supported.

### COMMUNICATIONS

The organization should continue to expand discussions on its core mission, its projects, and its people to relevant stakeholders, volunteers, and Board members.

### EXTERNAL

MDA’s existing social media and promotions activities are helping to attract customers, especially during the holidays, but there is a desire for MDA to take on more communications activities. Some ideas included regular promotional activities (like Small Business Saturday and Nifty Gifty Guide) that draw people to shop downtown, sharing stories about the people that run the businesses downtown, and promoting the businesses to attract new residents.

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<sup>4</sup> *New Jersey Policy Perspective analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) 2016, Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), 5-Year. Data obtained from Fiscal Policy Institute. [https://www.njpp.org/publications/report/immigrant-small-business-ownership-is-a-cornerstone-of-new-jerseys-economy/#\\_edn3](https://www.njpp.org/publications/report/immigrant-small-business-ownership-is-a-cornerstone-of-new-jerseys-economy/#_edn3)*

<sup>5</sup> *United States Census, 2017-2021 ACS 5-year estimates. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/metuchenboroughnewjersey/SBO030217>*

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The MDA does a tremendous job of organizing promotions and events, but some businesses feel disconnected and ill-informed. The MDA can communicate with businesses further in advance about upcoming events and promotion, consider providing more direct guidance about ways businesses can capitalize on events and promotions, and better integrate participating businesses into marketing.

In addition, both the benchmarking report and stakeholders highlighted the need for the MDA to better communicate its mission, projects, and success stories to promote the organization, recognize volunteers, and differentiate itself from other organizations in town.

Most people are suffering from information overload. Different community leaders (and the general public) have different interests in what a successful downtown looks like, or what demonstrates successful downtown management. The key to successfully reaching stakeholders is implementing audience-tailored omnichannel communications efforts early and often, so the MDA's message stays focused on its mission and conveys its work and people effectively.

#### INTERNAL

While the MDA helps alleviate pressure on municipal services in the downtown, there were concerns about organizational operations as they relate to internal communications. First, while there is great appreciation for the role of volunteers, there was anxiety about the MDA's heavy reliance on volunteers as the main point of contact from a transparency, consistency, and continuity standpoint. There is a desire for MDA staff to play a more prominent role in internal coordination and communications to ensure continuity of service.

Stakeholders also expressed a desire for better interaction and communication between the Board of Trustees and volunteer Teams, and among volunteer Teams, particularly related to structure, responsibilities, and programmatic successes. Recommendations include better onboarding, networking opportunities, better communications between Teams and with the Board of Trustees. Teams would also like to learn best practices from one another, and volunteers would like regular updates about major projects, like Imagination Alley, the beer garden, the Forum Theater, etc.

#### ALLOCATING SCARCE RESOURCES

All the projects that the MDA will implement over the next five years through the combination of Board members, staff, Teams, partners, and individual volunteers, projects, must be aligned to achieve at least one of the Transformation Strategies or Goals. If a project does not clearly meet any of the Transformation Strategies or Goals, the project should neither be staffed nor funded, as the organization has a finite number of volunteers and financial resources. This Strategic Plan permits the organization to gracefully say "no" to many worthy projects that volunteers, local government, and property owners bring to the MDA.

#### STAFFING AND VOLUNTEERS

This Strategic Plan sets out a very ambitious growth agenda for the MDA over the next five (5) years. These activities are important and worthy, but the MDA Board of Trustees must reach an agreement about how it will staff them.

#### STAFF

While there is great appreciation for the role of volunteers, there is concern about the MDA's heavy reliance on volunteers as the main point of contact from a transparency, consistency, and continuity

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standpoint. Stakeholders feel that MDA staff should play a more prominent role to manage the MDA's many relationships and make MDA, its mission, and its work more visible.

That said, the current staff cannot take on many more duties, as it is already significantly overstretched. The 2017 – 2022 Strategic Plan recommended hiring one or more additional full or part-time staff or consultants to assure the continued success of the organization's ambitious agenda. While the MDA achieved great things with limited staff resources and immense volunteer contributions, the Board of Trustees and Teams should consider needs around additional staff resources and/or consultants to continue to grow the organization's impact.

### **VOLUNTEERS**

MDA has a truly effective team of volunteers. There is a small, core team that is responsive and effective. That said, there is concern about volunteer burnout, as well as continuity and quality control as volunteers change. The MDA should adopt standard operating procedures to ensure continuity. It is also important to regularly and broadly demonstrate appreciation for the individual volunteers that consistently contribute their time and energy to the organization.

### **ROLE OF WORK PLANS**

Individual work plans for a project are created (as applicable), organized, and reviewed by staff and respective Team/Project Team members. The work plan provides detail on how to implement an effective project. Every work plan contains the following elements: Who (person or partner organization), What, When, How Much Expense, How Much Revenue, Volunteer Hours, Staff Hours, and of course, the Transformation Strategy and/or Strategic Goal(s) met. Work plans can be used to sell sponsorships, or to market the volunteer and collaborative opportunities available to individuals and groups of current or potential stakeholders. Work plans may be helpful to designate funders and show how the strategic plan is being implemented from year to year.

### **CONCLUSION**

This 2023-2028 Strategic Plan for the Metuchen Downtown Alliance illustrates the Board of Trustees' broad vision and hope for the future for downtown Metuchen. The existing mission and vision statements establish the framework for the Strategic Plan, with the main focus of the plan on how the Transformation Strategies and Goals and their respective Work Plans guide all the organization's work over the next five (5) years to further the mission and achieve the vision.

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## SMALL BUSINESS CULTIVATION TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY

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Build on Metuchen’s heritage of independent, creative people to cultivate innovative and unique small businesses, entrepreneurs, and artists.

### ECONOMIC VITALITY

**GOAL:** Prioritize *business retention* through activities that build relationships with and support existing business owners.

**PROJECTS:**

- Host regular meetups with businesses and property owners to 1) provide information and updates about MDA initiatives, and 2) provide an opportunity for MDA members to build productive relationships and partnerships.
- Facilitate opportunities for mentorship and/or collaborative promotions among business owners.
- Create proactive opportunities for regular, direct connections between MDA and business owners, with a particular focus on staff relations.
- Strengthen relationships with current property owners and build relationships with new owners when properties change hands.
- Encourage shop owners to stay open later to create night life in the district. Start small by coordinating one night each week when they are all open past 7:00 PM to meet the needs of customers.
- Help businesses benchmark themselves against industry standards by providing baseline sales-per-square-foot and other metrics for some retail-type businesses (such as groceries, restaurants, drug stores, and others), which can be found online.
- Refine and/or better publicize tech grant program to encourage broader merchant participation in adopting new technologies (e.g., social media, POS, e-commerce, etc.).
- Continue to bring new ideas and innovations to existing businesses that help their businesses and revenues grow.

**GOAL:** Maintain a low vacancy rate and expand business mix to meet consumer demand through intentional and active *business recruitment* initiatives.

**PROJECTS:**

- Conduct a Retail Market Analysis at least every five years to identify business leakages and saturation, which will help inform the business recruitment strategy.
  - Learn more about the shopping preferences, habits, and patterns of relevant age and culture-based demographics through surveys and focus groups. Use this information for promotion and recruitment activities.
  - Consider subscribing to [Placer.ai](https://www.placer.ai) to monitor real time data about consumer habits.
- Regularly review and agree on priority business, product, and service lines based on the most recent Retail Market Analysis and preferences cited in the results of the business and/or visitor surveys and in line with the Transformation Strategies to actively recruit to downtown.

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- Identify and work with property owners and brokers to help ensure that, over time, the district develops compatible business clusters.
  - Create and regularly update a business recruitment package based on recruitment priorities.
    - Include cost of space benchmarking. Leasing data is already collected by the MDA and can be packaged as a resource for businesses and property owners assessing the cost or value of a location.
    - Incorporate other industry and place-based data that will help market the downtown and vacant spaces to new businesses and real estate brokers.
    - Incorporate information about the local approval process, and technical support, promotions, and grant resources available through the MDA.
  - Market the MDA as the ‘go to’ resource with the real estate brokerage and entrepreneurial community for business attraction and business mix management.
    - With each new Retail Market Analysis, create an executive summary and follow up with individual property owners to discuss opportunities.
    - Share the business recruitment package with property owners of vacant or soon to be vacant spaces.
    - “Recruit from within” - encourage successful downtown businesses to expand their stores or open new businesses.
    - Look to existing, successful priority businesses in the region as recruits (they have a proven track record!).
    - Recruit priority businesses through regional colleges, specialized trade schools (e.g., culinary schools), and other economic development partners.
  - Manage new business prospects who call, email, or visit.
  - Create a “welcome packet” of information about Downtown Metuchen, the MDA, and Borough government to help them acclimate to their new environs and neighbors, and make them aware of the programs, incentives, ordinances, and other topics that can support or impact their business operations. Include contact information of relevant individuals and organizations.
  - Work with the Borough to improve communications and/or provide technical assistance to businesses navigating municipal approval processes.
  - Collaborate with the Borough to periodically review zoning and permit requirements to not only allow, but attract and support quality businesses to locate downtown.
  - Encourage prospective and new businesses to incorporate innovation and creativity into their business concept and operations.
  - Connect new businesses with the Tech Project Team for best practices in incorporating new technologies, as well as information about the grant program.
  - Work with partners to identify and help facilitate innovative use of retail spaces, including incubators, makerspace, pop-up shops, co-location, ghost kitchens, etc. Prioritize spaces that foster inclusivity and/or priority business, product, and service lines.
  - Encourage businesses, in partnership with property owners, to incubate other businesses within their store.

**GOAL:** Create a relevant and informed member base through *small business education* initiatives that share information about business management best practices and MDA initiatives.



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## PROJECTS:

- Build relationships with outside organizations that provide technical and financial resources to small businesses. Continue the partnership with the Small Business Development Center at Rutgers University for business owner training and one-on-one consulting. Explore new relationships with United Counties Economic Development Corporation, Community Capital, New Jersey Business Action Center, New Jersey Business & Industry Association, SCORE, etc.
- Host regular workshops/meetups about small business hot topics.
- Host annual open house to review and discuss the results of the MDA Annual Report.
- Provide a written summary of the Transformation Strategies, and host group meetings and/or one-on-one conversations with stakeholders.

**GOAL:** Effectively utilize *tools and incentives* to stimulate and support business development, expansion, and improvement.

## PROJECTS:

- The *2017 Retail Market Analysis and Business Development Strategies* report suggested a variety of tools and incentives, including forgivable loans, crowdfunding, private investment groups, etc. Research recommendations and other potential tools to identify those that make sense for Metuchen, and implement recommended incentive programs accordingly.
  - Implement tools and incentive programs that further the Small Business Cultivation and Inclusive Destination Transformation Strategies. Prioritize those that MDA is strategically positioned, through experience, geography, and/or ingenuity, to obtain supplemental funding from outside sources to maximize impact while minimizing strain on organizational resources.
- Develop a funding strategy for incentive programs from the MDA budget and/or raise funds through grants, advertising, crowdsourcing, etc.
- Regularly review the impact of incentive programs to determine efficacy. If deemed viable, continue to allocate resources and/or seek outside funds to sustain the program. Current incentive programs to be reviewed include:
  - “Metuchen Dollar\$” eGift Card program - if deemed viable, improve promotions to increase business and consumer participation.
  - Sustain and Serve program that partners local food businesses with area shelters, soup kitchens and partners who assist communities in need. If deemed viable, continue to seek funding from NJEDA and/or other sources to sustain the program.
  - A Community Thrives program for projects to support women and minority businesses. If deemed viable, continue to seek funding from Gannett and/or other sources to sustain the program.
  - Other tools and incentives, such as technical assistance, and the blade sign and façade programs, are described under other Goals. The impact of these programs should also be regularly reviewed to determine efficacy.
- Create and regularly update an information toolkit of technical and financial resources available to Metuchen’s small businesses through the MDA, government, non-profit, and other partners.

## DESIGN

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**GOAL:** Attract visitors by *elevating the downtown aesthetic* through beautification and placemaking initiatives.

**PROJECTS:**

- Encourage business and property owners to use the Metuchen Storefront Improvement Program *Design Guidelines* when considering improvements to the interior or exterior their business, and public spaces. Periodically offer workshops to property owners and merchants about how the design guidelines work, encouraging new owners to attend.
- Guide businesses through the process of upgrading and improving their storefronts by assisting them with planning and implementation of improvements and encouraging them to apply for assistance through MDA assistance programs (*assistance currently provided through the MDA Storefront Improvement and Blade Sign grant programs*). In collaboration with the Borough and consultants, facilitate best design practices that enhance shopability, visibility, and aesthetics downtown.
- Enhance the image of the downtown with new and exciting public art. Implement the *MDA Public Art Policy* to contribute to the continuous improvement of the downtown through public art.
- Keep Downtown Metuchen “Clean & Green” by making sure the planters are seasonally refreshed, and the streets and sidewalks remain clean and in their top physical condition.
- Continue to bring new ideas and innovations in beautification and placemaking, including activations of existing and new public spaces, designing a cohesive, yet fun and organic aesthetic for signage and public amenities, installing tactical urbanism demonstration projects that prioritize pedestrian, cyclist, and other active transportation movements, etc.
  - Collaborate with the Borough to implement placemaking activities.
- Research and implement strategies to enhance wayfinding through signage, public art, and other physical installations that provide visitors with information to help them easily navigate the downtown.
- Collaborate with the Borough to implement infrastructure improvements that enhance bicycle and pedestrian safety and improve the public realm for outdoor commerce.
- Collaborate with the Borough to ensure there is adequate and convenient parking available for shoppers, commuters, and downtown workers.
- Continue to liaise with the Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee related to eligibility for individual or district listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

## PROMOTION

**GOAL:** Tell the story of Downtown Metuchen, the MDA, and its merchants through innovative *marketing and promotions* initiatives.

**PROJECTS:**

- Establish standard operating procedures to effectively collaborate with member businesses on promotions and marketing.
  - Establish protocols to collaborate with businesses to ensure they have an opportunity to effectively participate in and capitalize on MDA promotions and events.

- Establish a process for MDA to collect and share members' promotions that supports business development without inundating and overwhelming consumers with content.
- Provide easy to use materials to encourage businesses to share MDA promotions and events through their own communications channels.
- Continue and expand omnichannel and place-based messaging that tells the stories of Downtown Metuchen's merchants.
  - Expand "Meet the Merchant" video program.
  - Investigate opportunities to promote individual and groups of businesses based on favorable attributes, e.g., longevity, quality, service, etc.
- Relay the success stories of the MDA through omnichannel messaging:
  - Continue volunteer awards, but also regularly publicize volunteer appreciation with the broader community.
  - Identify vehicles for promulgating existing data about MDA's successes more effectively, e.g., integrating into newsletter, writing new kinds of editorial content, incorporating data into social media feeds, providing data snapshots to elected leaders, property owners, and other stakeholders, etc.
  - Create press releases, blog posts, website stories, and social media content about ongoing and completed MDA projects and activities.
  - Host openings and celebrations of new tangible projects when completed.
- Maintain the online business directory and consider opportunities to share business information through innovative placemaking, wayfinding, print, and other tangible mediums.
- Continue to innovate, evolve, and expand retail promotions that encourage customers to not only come downtown, but to spend time, explore, and visit multiple merchants, e.g., Small Business Saturday, Nifty Gifty Guide, etc.
- Develop a Media Strategy that:
  - Positions MDA and its businesses to gain exposure through earned media.
  - Strategically make use of paid media as a direct promotion tool and catalyst for earned media, including direct media ad buys, SEO and paid search targets, paid social media, etc.

## ORGANIZATION

**GOAL:** Use *data* to inform storytelling.

### PROJECTS:

- Continue to gather reinvestment statistics for the National Main Street Center and promote this tangible evidence of success through storytelling, graphics, and numbers. *(See Promotion for specific projects.)*
- Regularly assess the inventory of data collected and investigate ways the current data could be more effectively publicized and leveraged. *Is there data that the Alliance collects but does not use? If so, does it still need to be collected? Identify data sets that would help the Alliance track its progress on its Transformation Strategies. Consider where new types of data could better track progress and help to communicate achievements. If some new data sets would have great value for MDA, but constitute a heavy burden for staff, consider engaging a consultant to conduct the research.*

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**GOAL:** Expand *outreach* efforts to build and retain critical relationships that will ensure the MDA's success.

**PROJECTS:**

- Host regular briefings about downtown to borough, state, and federal elected officials.
- Create proactive opportunities for regular, direct connections between MDA leadership (particularly staff) and business owners.
  - Create a summary of upcoming projects, opportunities, and suggestions for member participation and key events in a "Member Portal" accessible on the website.
  - Maintain and further develop the monthly newsletter to keep stakeholders up to date on key initiatives and ensure content remains relevant and central to the mission of the MDA and its work.
- Improve and target communications between internal stakeholders (i.e., staff, Board, Teams, volunteers, etc.).
  - Regularly review and check in with staff and Team/Project Team chairs to ensure alignment of goals and interest in their respective work plans.
  - Host periodic meetings between Teams and Project Teams to understand synergies and opportunities for intra-Team collaboration.

**GOAL:** Maintain and build *human resource capacity* to meet the needs of a "growth phase" revitalization organization.

**PROJECTS:**

- Establish a robust volunteer program to recruit, retain, and recognize even more volunteers to help in the work of MDA.
  - Regularly evaluate volunteer capacity and seek to fill any functional deficiencies inhibiting the MDA from successfully implementing the Transformation Strategies and Goals.
  - Offer quarterly volunteer orientation/training.
- The Nominating Team should identify likely Board of Trustees candidates based on experience, aptitude, and/or interest to fulfill functional capacities that are necessary to implement the Transformation Strategies and Goals.
- Regularly evaluate staff capacity to fulfill operational and strategic projects necessary to maintain and grow the organization. When staffing levels are deemed insufficient, the Board of Trustees should commence discussions about adding staff or consultants, and necessary financial resources needed for compensation.

**GOAL:** *Grow financial resources* to implement the Transformation Strategies and meet the needs of a "growth phase" revitalization organization.

**PROJECTS:**

- Evaluate the efficacy of expanding the Special Improvement District (SID) boundary.
- Develop and regularly update a comprehensive strategy to build non-assessment revenue sources to grow financial capacity to effectively implement the Transformation Strategies and Goals.

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- Prioritize government, foundation, private, and other grant opportunities for which MDA is strategically positioned through experience, geography, and/or ingenuity to successfully procure. Grants should only be sought for work plan projects associated with the Transformation Strategies and Goals, rather than creating new projects to satisfy the requirements/expectations of a particular funder.
  - Set annual goals for local fundraising through advertising and sponsorship opportunities.
  - Set annual goals for Board fundraising.

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## INCLUSIVE DESTINATION TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY

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Metuchen will be an inclusive regional destination that celebrates the cultural diversity of its residents and businesses. Downtown will be a place where something fun, new, and exciting is always happening and *all* visitors can find the opportunities, products, activities, and experiences that the region's diverse population needs and wants.

### ECONOMIC VITALITY

**GOAL:** Support retention and intentional *recruitment of diverse business* types and owners.

**PROJECTS:**

- Build relationships with outside organizations that provide focused technical and financial resources to small business entrepreneurs of diverse backgrounds, e.g., New Jersey Community Capital, Rising Tide Capital, etc.
- Develop a funding strategy for DEI incentive programs from MDA budget and/or raise funds through grants, advertising, crowdsourcing, etc.
  - Consider seeking additional funds to expand the Community Thrives program for projects to support women and minority businesses.
- Develop business recruitment marketing geared toward diverse entrepreneurs.
  - Incorporate industry and place-based data that will help market the downtown and vacant spaces to new businesses and real estate brokers.
  - Evaluate and promote potential clusters that will help expand and solidify downtown Metuchen's reputation as a place offering diverse and inclusive experiences.

**GOAL:** *Revitalize vacant and underutilized properties* to cultivate economic opportunity.

**PROJECTS:**

- Collaborate with the Borough on redevelopment, planning, and zoning initiatives within or adjacent to the District to maximize opportunities for new or expanding businesses, public spaces with placemaking capabilities, connecting potential new residents to the downtown through wayfinding and active transportation options, etc.
- Actively participate as a stakeholder in the Borough's efforts to revitalize the Forum Theater and adjacent properties to create an Arts District in a manner that supports the MDA Transformation Strategies.

**GOAL:** Expand and solidify Downtown Metuchen's *mix of diverse and inclusive merchandise and experiences*.

**PROJECTS:**

- Encourage businesses to add new products and services that appeal to a variety of consumers, particularly in the family-friendly, early career, empty-nester, and/or cultural diversity niches.
- Encourage businesses to add in store workshops, classes, product demonstration, or other experiences that appeal to appropriate target consumers as additional revenue sources for the business owner.

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- Learn more about the shopping preferences, habits, and patterns of relevant age and culture-based demographics through surveys and focus groups. Use this information for assessment of ongoing activities.
  - Conduct a downtown intercept survey to learn about customers who visit downtown Metuchen every three years to detect changes in consumer patterns.

## DESIGN

**GOAL:** Establish *hubs of interest and activity* that encourage visitors to more widely explore the District.

### PROJECTS:

- Continue and expand creative placemaking efforts to create hubs of interest and activity throughout downtown that help draw people to investigate, loiter, shop, eat, and play. *The key is to create "breadcrumbs" that lead visitors through downtown to expose them to more businesses.*
  - Make use of permanent spaces to serve as anchor attractions and destinations, e.g., primary entranceways to the downtown, Arts District, beer garden, public art/murals, etc.
  - Make use of temporary activations to support and enhance promotions and events, e.g., pop-up art installations, sidewalk performers, Instagram pop-ups, etc."
- Work collaboratively with business and property owners to create placemaking destinations with projects like chess tables, temporary play spaces, temporary sculptures, photo areas for social media, etc.

**GOAL:** *Brand the downtown* as an inclusive destination through aesthetic treatments, public art, and other place-based activations.

### PROJECTS:

- Encourage all business owners to animate their window and in-store displays to attract pedestrians.
  - Displays may celebrate the diversity of the business's owners, and/or the broader community in culturally appropriate ways.
- Establish and continually evolve an aesthetic for MDA and Borough-led place-based activities that celebrates Metuchen's diverse heritage and culture. *(Use the Arts & Culture Plan as guidance - see Promotion strategies below.)*

## PROMOTION

**GOAL:** Attract visitors through inclusive *promotional activities*.

### PROJECTS:

- Strategically plan and implement inclusive events that attract visitors, e.g., Spring Bazaar, Lunar New Year, Downtown Breakdancing, Downtown Rumble, etc. *Not every event has to be everything to everyone. Some will cater to specific consumer markets; others will be more broadly appealing. The key is variety.*

- Maintain an on-going calendar of promotional events that is made available to businesses and the public through the website; and in the “Member Portal” where businesses can learn how to capitalize on heightened activity in the area.
- Encourage businesses to stay open, create promotions, and implement other activities that allow them to capitalize on the event by attracting visitors to their stores.
- Strategically plan and implement inclusive retail promotions that attract visitors, e.g., Kids Downtown Takeover, Small Business Saturday, Nifty Gifty Guide, Restaurant Week, consumer scavenger hunts, etc. *Not every promotion has to be everything to everyone. Some will cater to specific consumer markets; others will be more broadly appealing. The key is variety.*
  - Maintain an on-going calendar of promotional events that is made available to businesses and the public through the website; and in the “Member Portal” where businesses can learn how to capitalize on heightened activity in the area.
  - Establish protocols to intentionally collaborate with businesses to ensure they have an opportunity to effectively participate in and capitalize on MDA promotions and events.
- Continue and expand inclusive and diverse programming, highlighting Metuchen as destination.
  - Further develop unique and inclusive programming to educate, engage, and entertain visitors with promotions that showcase the community and its diversity.
  - Create opportunities to establish Metuchen as a diverse and welcoming community attractive to visitors, investors, and business owners.
  - Encourage businesses to stay open, create promotions, and implement other activities that allow them to capitalize on events and promotions by attracting visitors to their stores.
- Continue and expand omnichannel and place-based messaging that tells the stories of Downtown Metuchen as an inclusive destination.
  - Use the "Meet the Merchant" video program to highlight diverse and inclusive merchants and businesses.
  - Investigate opportunities to promote individual and groups of businesses based on priority niche clusters and/or cultural attributes.
  - Position MDA and its businesses to gain exposure as an inclusive destination through earned media.
  - Strategically make use of paid media as a direct promotion tool and catalyst for earned media about Downtown Metuchen as an inclusive destination, including direct media ad buys, SEO and paid search targets, paid social media, etc.

**GOAL:** Capitalize on Metuchen’s rich *arts and cultural assets* to attract visitors and new business.

**PROJECTS:**

- Develop an *Arts & Culture Plan* that identifies visual and performing arts, historic, and cultural heritage assets and provides tangible recommendations to intentionally integrate, enhance, and promote assets as part of the broader downtown revitalization efforts.

**ORGANIZATION**

**GOAL:** Use *data* to inform storytelling.



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PROJECTS:

- Curate reinvestment statistics associated with diversity and inclusiveness, and promote this tangible evidence of success through storytelling, graphics, and numbers. (*See Promotion for specific projects.*)