

DOWNTOWN
METUCHEN

explore · experience · enjoy

2022

ANNUAL

REPORT



METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE
2022 BOARD & VOLUNTEER TEAMS

2022 BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Eric Berger, Former Chair
Bobbie Theivakumaran, Vice Chair
Stuart Schooler, Treasurer
Jay Muldoon, Secretary
 Moshe Atzbi
 Diana Callinan
 Daniel Cea
 Jason Delia
 Jenny Lai
Jace C. McColley
Lynne Mueller
 Amar Singh
 Gary Tilbor

VOLUNTEER TEAMS

Organization Team
Promotion Team
Communications Team
Design Team:
Public Art Team
Storefront Team
Clean & Green Team
Innovation Team:
Tech Team
Business Recruitment Team
STAFF
Dawn Mackey, Executive Director
Isaac D. Kremer, Former Executive Director

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METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE MISSION AND VISION

MISSION STATEMENT

The Metuchen Downtown Alliance is a volunteer-based, nonprofit downtown management corporation dedicated to the management and revitalization of the designated Metuchen business district (the District) in partnership with stakeholders, residents, municipal government, 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.

AS ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, AUGUST 11, 2017.

WELCOME!

January 16, 2023

Dear Stakeholders,

As the new executive director, I have only had the privilege of serving the MDA since October 24 th, 2022. In that short time I have been profoundly in awe of the unparalleled level of commitment from the volunteers who serve on the board, An organization this young, with only one employee could never have achieved the level of success it has without the passion and generosity of it's teams coupled with the support of the community, the stakeholders, and the Borough. I am so thankful to each of you.

In September, the MDA was nominated for the Great American Main Street Award. This achievement is a reflection of the efforts of the past 6 years. I would like to give credit to my predecessor, Isaac Kremer, for his steadfast focus on the transformation strategies, the Main Street approach, and for submitting an application for consideration which well captured the work you have all done. Only 2 New Jersey towns have ever achieved this honor, and the nomination alone is worthy of celebrating and highlighting as a means of attracting businesses, elevating the brand ,and drawing new diners and shoppers to the district. We will discuss the value the nomination adds and encourage all members to have a plan in place for a possible win.

Metuchen has caught the eye of several other notables. New Jersey Best is currently planning the ‘ Best Destination Town in New Jersey,” 2024 issue, and we are under consideration along with 4 other towns. They will be watching us this year.

In late December we secretly learned that American Girl’s Doll of the year was to be released on the 29th and she would be a South Asian 12 year old whose hometown is Metuchen. We immediately recognized the value a global brand could bring to us and pivoted our New Year’s celebration to include Bollywood Dancers and Duhl drummers to honor Kavi’s heritage. Another volunteer raced to the city to pick up Kavi, who was the star of the party - hundreds of people took photos with her.

We will plan a year’s worth of promotions but remain agile to capitalize on opportunities when they are gifted to us. The American Girl story resulted in over 60 media moments from TV news on air coverage, to the cover of the Star Ledger, with the story being picked up by CNN and even the Kentucky Tribune.

A month ago we didn’t know Kavi existed, but this year we will celebrate with a Town-wide Tea Party, and specials throughout the district that will bring fans to the borough and a panel discussion with the author in the fall.

We await the announcement of the winner of the GAMSA in Boston at the end of March. The energy is contagious and as we move into the year with our newly refreshed strategic plan, and collaborative relationship with the Borough, 2023 is brimming with potential and opportunity and I can not wait to work with all of you to see what we can do together.

With excitement and gratitude,

Dawn
Executive Director

Mackey

HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2022



Marketing the Downtown



Facts about the Main Street Award

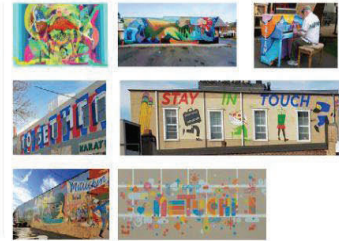
The Metuchen Downtown Alliance is an accredited member of Main Street America

The MDA submitted the work of the past six years as consideration for the award.

We are one of 8 semifinalists. The award will be decided in March 2023.

It has been awarded to outstanding Downtowns across America since 1995

Art around our Downtown



1000s of volunteer hours keep the MDA running



Storefront Grant



Family Friendly Events



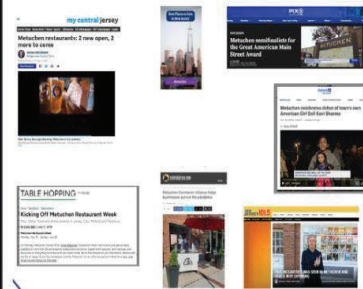
Events highlighting diversity, equity, and inclusion; drives new visitors



In the past 6 years the vacancy rate went from 22% to 4%



Metuchen in the news



The Metuchen Town Plaza has space for community events



127 in-store promotions Ring the Register



STRATEGIC PLAN REFRESH

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

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.

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 and Innovation Strategy has been renamed for clarity.

BUSINESS CULTIVATION 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.

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GRANTS

NJ EDA SUSTAIN AND SERVE GRANT

Launched by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) in December 2020, Sustain & Serve NJ has provided eligible entities with grants to purchase meals from New Jersey-based restaurants that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 and distribute the meals for free to the community.

Source: <https://www.njeda.com/sustain-and-serve/>

MDA Volunteers worked with local restaurants as well as the First Presbyterian Food Pantry and together delivered nearly 20k meals to families and students who are facing food insecurity while generating \$390,000 of revenue.

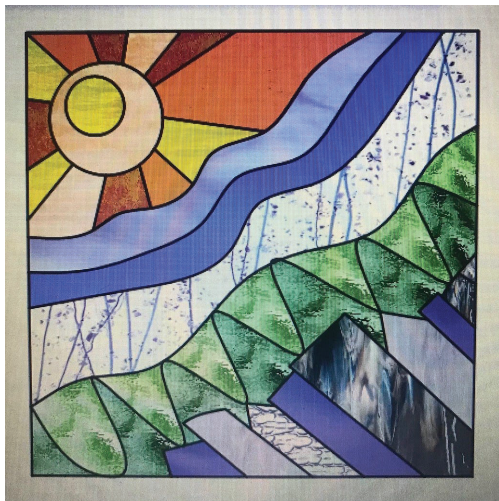
“Sustain & Serve NJ has the ability to transform lives — both by bolstering the restaurant industry and bringing nourishment to New Jerseyans in a respectful and dignified manner,” Tara Colton, executive vice president of economic security at the EDA.



AARP COMMUNITY CHALLENGE GRANT

Leveraging a \$9,500 grant from AARP and assistance from the Borough, the MDA and its volunteers a new gathering space has been created and offers two new benches, a place to come enjoy conversation and the newly installed mosaic artwork described in detail below.

MSNJ Grant in the amount of \$75,000. helped fund a Strategic Plan Refresh, a consultant who created a report on how to activate public space and many storefront improvements



“ Our Shining Borough”

PUBLIC ART

"CHILDHOOD MEMORIES" BY RAUL AYALA

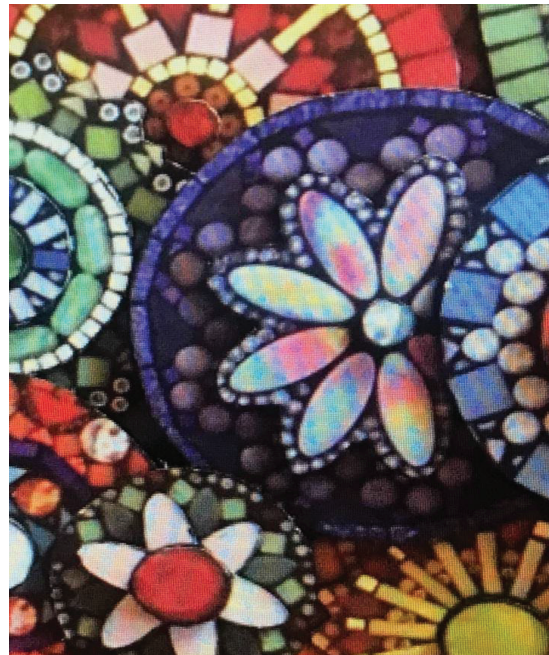
Childhood Memories was installed on the wall of Angie's Cafe at 275 Amboy Ave. Angie's Cafe is a restaurant and bakery opened in 2016 by Angie and Edgar Quinonez, both from the Dominican Republic. They have been working with the MDA on plans for a mural to go on the east wall as part of other building improvements planned for the site. Artist and educator Raúl Ayala and his students from the Rutgers Mason Gross School of Fine Arts have been commissioned to design and install a mural for the café wall. Ayala is an experienced mural artist from Ecuador whose work features themes related to social justice, memory, immigration, and resilience.



The mural is about remembering the joy and innocence of youth, and is intended to bring a sense of playfulness and a welcoming experience to the space where it will be installed. The central Flamboyant Tree image symbolizes the Dominican Republic and the universal themes of life, growth, strength, connection and support. The approximate 210 square foot mural was executed on parachute cloth with acrylic paints off site with the Mason Gross students, and installed in spring 2022 with NovaGel (strong polymer gel)—a mural-making technique widely used in other cities.

COMMISSIONED "OUR SHINING BOROUGH" BY DONNA SLEVIN

A 4 x 4 Mosaic will be installed on top of an outdoor concrete table. The piece was started in December 2022 by Glass artist Donna Slevin with a projected completion date of Feb 2023. The table is the centerpiece of the 'Conversation Corner' located at New Street and Center Street in between 2 new benches and planters. The project was made possible by a generous Community Challenge grant from AARP, the MDA and the Borough.



PROMOTIONS

Each promotion looks to have a tie-in with local, bricks and mortar businesses as a way for visitors to explore, experience and enjoy Metuchen. These walking wallets are a key to the success of our principles around ringing the registers without programming and helping visitors explore businesses in the area.



COMMUNICATIONS

Page reach: Number of times any MDA content from our page was seen.

Facebook: 195,334 (up 90.7% from 2021)

Instagram: 37,854 (up 133.4%)

Page visits: Number of times people chose to come to our MDA page

Facebook: 14,981 (up 80.6%)

Instagram: 9,027 (up 128%)

New people liking or following our MDA page

Facebook: 740 (up 30.5%)

Instagram: 570 (not available)

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RIBBON CUTTINGS

Tribos

Cinnaholic

Lotus River Studio

Bowery Arts Collective

Akihi

Che Pizza

Soul Bowls

Clicks and Bricks

Party on Pearl

AwesomeYo

Hatch 44

Bowery Art Collective

Torino (New ownership)

New Businesses - East Hana Sushi, Pita Creperie & Grill, Om Pharmacy, King's Strength & Fitness

BUDGET

Revenue			
	SID Contribution		\$250,000
	Borough Contribution		75,000
	Contributions		5,000
	Grants		<u>25,000</u>
	Total Revenue		\$355,000
Expenses			
	Program Services		
	Education and Tech		10,000
	Placemaking (Public Art, Planters)		20,000
	Storefront Grant Fund		45,000
	Merchant Videos		10,500
	Street Improvement and Maintenance & holiday lights		55,000
	Promotions and Advertising		46,884
	Communications		<u>13,700</u>
		Total Program Expenses	\$201,084
	General and Administrative		
	Salary		\$78,000
	Payroll tax expense		6,000
	Contract Services		23,000
	Offices		2,000
	Rent		11,100
	Utilities		2,400
	Depreciation		361
	Travel and Meetings		6,000
	Insurance		2,605
	Dues and Membership & Licenses		500
	Volunteer Training		1,500
	Website Costs		700
	Administrative Overhead (contingency)		<u>2,000</u>
		Total General and Administrative	\$136,166
	Addition to Reserve		\$17,750
	Total Expenses + Reserve Addition		\$355,000
	Budget Surplus / Deficit		\$0