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A Strategy for Neighborhood Commercial Corridors

Our neighborhood business districts are a critical component of the City's economy. We need to bring all the resources we have to bear to keep these places vibrant.

Unfortunately, the signs of a weakened economy are easily found throughout our city. Storefront lights are being turned out and hand-written signs taped up on windows like "thank you for the 39 years of support, but we have decided to close our doors" are popping up around the city. There is no question that small business owners are struggling to survive.

In the past, economic recessions have been industry based, but today we face a broader and more unpredictable storm. There are countless factors at work that create challenges for small business owners - and by providing hands-on assistance to the mostly immigrant-owned small businesses in the neighborhood - the local economy of the commercial corridor improved and new businesses moved in.

Not all of San Francisco's neighborhoods have had thriving commercial districts, even in good times. The Neighborhood Market Place Initiative (NMI), our office's partnership with the nonprofit Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) around commercial corridor stabilization and revitalization, was started in 2002 on Mission Street in the Excelsior to address vacancies and related challenges. We found that by addressing the issues of safety, cleanliness, and physical conditions - and by providing hands-on assistance to the mostly immigrant-owned small businesses in the neighborhood - the local economy of the commercial corridor improved and new businesses moved in.

The basic framework for the program is that a diverse group of neighborhood stakeholders come together to determine their vision and goals for their commercial corridor, and then LISC, the City, and sometimes other funders make a modest grant to pay for a "commercial corridor manager" whose job is to be the central point of contact among merchants, property owners, community groups, residents, and the City - all of whom have a role in making the vision a reality. Specific activities undertaken by the corridor manager and neighborhood volunteers may include street festivals, graffiti abatement and beautification projects, merchant outreach and education, streetscape improvements, promotional campaigns and business attraction. Our office acts as a liaison among the relevant City agencies and assists with business attraction.

Through our experience in the Excelsior it was evident that we could no longer ignore the needs of the other depressed commercial districts throughout the city. Leland Avenue in Visitacion Valley and Third Street in the Bayview soon were added to the program, as were San Bruno Avenue in the Portola and Ocean Avenue in the OMI. In each of these neighborhoods, community residents, business owners, and various community leaders joined together to develop an action plan, then rolled up their sleeves and immersed themselves in the day to day work of improving their community one tree at a time, one storefront at a time, and one block at a time.

Five years ago Leland Avenue was a dormant commercial strip that had long suffered due to the closure of the Schlage Lock Factory. The everyday foot traffic that once supported a thriving commercial district was long gone. Businesses closed one by one and the district was dormant until a group of community leaders decided that change was needed. Today you will see a bustling locally owned grocery store, families on Sunday at the neighborhood wash and dry, people coming and going regularly from Joe Leland Cafe, a coffee shop that was started by one of the leaders involved in the revitalization efforts. The changes that have occurred on Leland Avenue are testimony to the success of NMI.

While Bayview, to this day, continues to face challenges with crime, drugs, and the other effects of poverty, if you take a moment to discover what Third Street has to offer today you will find immense changes. In the past year, more than half a dozen new retail businesses opened up, almost all of them owned by

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Leland Avenue Before



Casa Lopez: One of NMI's early successes on Leland Avenue

local African-American women. The vacancy rate was cut in half. The new, positive energy is palpable along Third, particularly at Art94124, a new community-owned gallery next to the also new Javavalencia Cafe.

NMI's success in these commercial corridors has evolved to what today includes nine commercial corridors. And despite the challenges of this economy, we are seeing increased sales tax revenue, decreasing vacancies, expanding businesses and growing civic engagement in the neighborhoods we have targeted through the program.

The premise of the program is that it takes a village to improve, stabilize and maintain our neighborhood commercial districts. Merchants and neighborhood activists alone cannot do it; the City alone cannot do it. It requires a collective effort. This framework can be a model for turning other now-struggling neighborhood business districts around.

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