

PROVEN TRANSFORMATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR OHIO'S COMMUNITIES, POST COVID-19



Step 1: Developing a Vision for the Future, Implementation Plan, & the Civic Infrastructure to see it through

To develop a community vision, local governments should engage in an inclusive public planning process to ensure it is reflective of the entire community's desires and needs. Cities should work to ensure all sectors—public, private, philanthropic, and non-profit—buy into the shared vision and are willing to take action to support it. Communities should also prioritize creating a plan for implementation of the vision, a guide that outlines which entities can be responsible for working towards specific goals; who can act as an implementation coordinator; who has the capital or access to the resources needed to see activities through, etc.

Developing an implementation plan can also help identify where the community has gaps in its capabilities. If needed, the city can build the necessary civic infrastructure to achieve its goals by creating a “network of organizations, resources, and engaged citizens who not only help the community function but mobilize in times of crisis or opportunity.” Thriving cities have strong leadership in the public, private, philanthropic, and non-profit sectors, and their leaders are willing to “own the problem” of the community's revitalization.

Based on GOPC's research, smaller cities in Ohio, perhaps more so than their larger counterparts, can be very sensitive to having the right people in the right positions. Strong leadership is not always enough to counteract major forces like deindustrialization, but it can help significantly in righting the ship—making strong leadership critical in a post COVID-19 era.

Step 2: Proven Transformation Strategies for Early Implementation, Post COVID-19

With a shared, multi-sector vision and a strong plan for implementation, a community is poised for success and ready to start working towards its goals. While all goals will not be attainable right away, there are some strategies a city can include in their implementation plan that can start early and still be transformational. Some of those early transformational strategies are below:

1. Take a “networked” approach to governance
2. Adopt an explicit “downtown-first” attitude
3. Deploy complementary strategies that strengthen local businesses and address generational poverty
4. Prioritize projects in central areas that are walkable and served by transit
5. Focus on stabilizing existing, “tipping point” neighborhoods that are close to rebounding
6. Market the community's unique assets and use placemaking as an economic development strategy
7. Leverage and attract key demographics
8. Encourage sustainable development and growth

1

Take a “networked” approach to governance — attract, retain, and network local leaders that act strategically and realistically

Attracting, retaining, and networking local leaders who are already acting strategically and realistically is a strategy that cities can implement early. Strong, local leaders have the potential to be more impactful when they work together; communities should strive to facilitate those partnerships amongst them and take a “networked” approach to governance. This strategy “integrates the external capacities of organizations and individuals with government. In this sense, smart governments pull in the knowledge and experience of citizens to inform decision making and work with external actors to create value.” ([Scott, 2017](#))

Communities should work collaboratively across departments and sectors to come up with new ideas and techniques and to eliminate any existing silos. When needed, cities can also focus on attracting

outside candidates for important community and economic development roles—recognizing that the expertise required to transform the community cannot always be homegrown. Additionally, communities should develop a future-focused mindset, acknowledge the city’s current conditions, and stop doing things “the old way,” if there are more efficient and effective processes.

Specific actions where cities can utilize outside parties include: working with philanthropy to fund capacity building programs that train young leaders (like the [Knight Foundation](#) with [Torchbearers](#) in Akron) and those that recruit new leaders (like [EnFocus](#) in South Bend, Indiana). Cities can also utilize philanthropic organizations’ convening power to refocus leaders from various unrelated sectors on local challenges.

2

Adopt an explicit “downtown-first” attitude — target the urban core and strengthen it to serve the region

Another early transformational strategy: communities can adopt an explicit “downtown-first” attitude. Urban cores are the hearts of our communities, and the healthiest cities are built around downtowns that serve as an economic and cultural core for their entire region. To strengthen city centers, local governments can start to facilitate and support cross-sectoral downtown planning efforts, through their funding and convening power. Cities can also support efforts to rebrand downtown as a safe, fun place to live and visit. This strategy begins to build the market

conditions that are attractive to key demographics and private sector investment. Places like Toledo and Albany, New York are examples of communities with vibrant downtowns that draw people in from all over. [Levitt Pavilion](#) in Dayton shows how multiple sectors can work together to attract people into the city’s core, which strengthens the area as a whole while also helping each partner pursue its mission. Additionally, the [CORE Fund](#) in Hamilton is an example of how different sectors worked together to incentivize additional investment in the city’s downtown.

3

Deploy complementary strategies that strengthen local businesses while also addressing generational poverty

Cities can, early on, focus efforts related to local businesses on strategies that also address generational poverty to be more transformational. A community will truly rebound when both new talent are attracted to the area, and current residents are being invested in by the city. Generational poverty and joblessness are problems that plague many of Ohio’s communities, but few are addressing these challenges head-on. An attitude change is required; cities need to own their issues and focus on how to most effectively solve their most significant problems to build an equitable, attractive place to live and work.

In Cincinnati, [Beacon of Hope Business Alliance](#) shows how city government, social services, and a for-profit company can work together to benefit both local businesses in search of talent and those who were formerly incarcerated and now searching for employment. [Makerfest](#), a “reverse job fair” serving the Greater Lima Region, is an example of how to advance education and workforce development by facilitating an opportunity for the county’s high school students to show off their skills and be recognized by local employers, colleges, and universities.

4

Prioritize projects in central areas that are walkable and served by transit — areas that are friendlier to those without a car

Communities can also be transformational early when they prioritize projects located in central areas; places that are walkable and served by transit provide more opportunity for all residents, even those without a car. Cities should consider smart growth principles in their decision-making because those principles recognize the connection between development and quality of life. Cities can develop policies and practices, early on, that encourage sustainable development where buildings are closer to each other; neighborhoods are walkable; streets have strong connections among destinations, and there is a mix of housing types and transportation options. This type of development is a desirable alternative to conventional suburban development, where buildings sit farther away from each other; neighborhoods are designed primarily for

driving; street systems are less connected with longer distances between destinations, and there are fewer public transportation options. Additionally, these areas are less desirable to key demographics and less accessible for carless residents.

Community leaders across the country are becoming less satisfied with the economic, environmental, and community outcomes of business-as-usual development. Now is the time for cities to support more walkable, central environments with transportation options for both their quality of life and fiscal benefits. [Aspen Place](#), in Cleveland, is an example of a development that leverages access to high-quality transit, while also providing critical affordable housing options.

5

Focus on stabilizing existing, “tipping point” neighborhoods that are close to rebounding and ensure they remain a place where all residents can thrive

Cities can also be transformational early by focusing on stabilizing existing, “tipping point” neighborhoods that are close to rebounding. Many of Ohio’s smaller towns are experiencing challenges with neighborhood disinvestment, and the scale of the problem is often more significant than a single neighborhood or one strategy. Cities, like Cleveland and Youngstown, are focusing their limited resources on “tipping point” neighborhoods and working with philanthropy to jump-start these places’ recovery. When revitalization starts to happen, it becomes essential to consider how the city will maintain socioeconomically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods; communities should fold this into all housing-focused discussions to ensure

the community remains a place where all residents can thrive. Cities and philanthropic organizations can invest directly in housing rehabilitation or support organizations working in “tipping point” neighborhoods like CDCs or CDFIs (like [The Wean Foundation](#) with [Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation](#)). Community leaders can also work to convene diverse stakeholders to tackle neighborhood challenges in a comprehensive way (like in Slavic Village where [Cleveland Neighborhood Progress](#) is active). Additionally, cities and organizations can pair their housing investments with other community development initiatives.

6

Leverage and attract key demographics by catering to what the market seeks

Communities can strategize early to leverage and attract key demographics in and to their area. Townships, primarily suburban and ex-urban townships, have received many residents that moved out of the county’s largest city. Still, new market trends suggest that there is a renewed interest in urban and urban-esque living and amenities. Communities should be responsive to changes in desires; it is especially important for retaining and attracting Baby Boomers, Millennials, and immigrants. As seniors age, driving may become more difficult or

even unfeasible. Walkable, urban environments help ensure older generations remain and thrive in the communities they love. Millennials and immigrants, both significant contributors to the local economy, are also less interested in suburban-style communities; mixed-use neighborhoods can help attract these key demographics. Clinton County has responded to their older residents’ needs by developing an [age-friendly initiative](#), becoming active with AARP, and hiring planning and mobility talent with backgrounds and expertise in age-friendly work.

7

Market the community's unique assets and use placemaking as an economic development strategy

Early transformational strategies also include leveraging and marketing the community's unique assets and utilizing placemaking as an economic development strategy. Ohio's towns have "great bones," including beautiful historic buildings, unique cultural assets, and existing infrastructure that can be improved upon, rather than creating new. Our smaller and mid-size cities have a desirable "small-town feel" and sense of community. That lifestyle, paired with affordable housing prices, is attractive and should be marketed. Additionally, many of our communities have existing neighborhoods that are inherently walkable with an excess of land that is ripe for redevelopment. These assets are very beneficial

now that people are placing a higher value on areas with accessible mobility options.

In Akron, the city is focusing on creating a unique feel with amenities that they know people want. Cities can, early on, bring "placemaking" thought-leaders to their community to discuss how other places have created vibrant urban spaces. They can support demonstration projects that show what streetscaping investments could look like (e.g., [Better Block Foundation](#)). They can also work with local foundations to help these types of efforts (like with Lorain and the [Nord Family Foundation](#), which supports local Main Street programs).

8

Encourage sustainable development and growth that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own

Lastly, cities can start encouraging sustainable development, which means they promote projects that meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. In Ohio, communities should work towards building urban, suburban, and rural communities with a variety of housing and transportation choices that are near jobs, shops, and schools. More compact development will put existing capacity to work, lower infrastructure costs per capita, and help ensure what is existing is maintained before repairs get expensive.

There are a variety of pros for encouraging smart development and growth, including financial ones. [Smart Growth America](#) (SGA), a non-profit focused on sustainable community growth, looked at 17 studies from across the country that compared sustainable

growth development with conventional suburban development. SGA's survey concluded that smart growth development saves an average of 38 percent on upfront costs for new construction of roads, sewers, water lines, and other infrastructure. Many studies have concluded that this number can be as high as 50 percent.

Additionally, SGA reports sustainable growth development saves taxpayers, on average, ten percent for ongoing city services—like police, fire, and ambulances because these service providers have a shorter distance to travel when helping residents. The non-profit also determined it generates ten times more tax revenue per acre than conventional suburban development—further making the business case for sustainable development.



Greater Ohio Policy Center is a non-profit, non-partisan organization with a mission to improve Ohio's communities through smart growth strategies and research. Our vision is a revitalized Ohio. We undertake original research and analysis, develop pragmatic policy recommendations and advocacy strategies, and deploy our convening power to meet the needs of Ohio's local change-makers. We operate statewide.

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