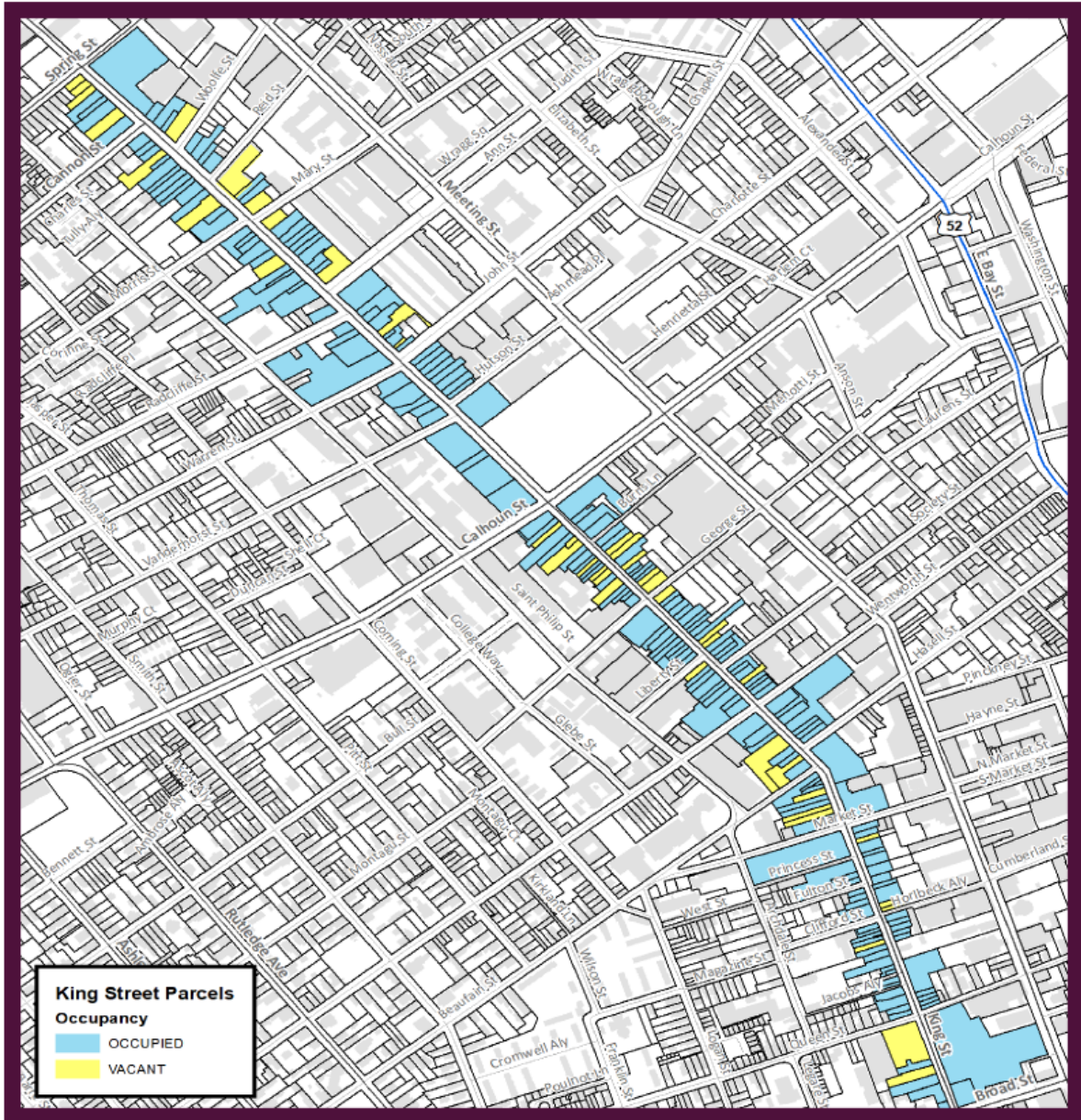




South Carolina



King Street Technical Assistance Report Charleston, SC Spring 2021



ULI SOUTH CAROLINA
205 ½ King St
Charleston, SC 29405
(843) 743-6073
southcarolina@uli.org
www.southcarolina.uli.org
www.uli.org

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Introduction

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) was established in 1936 and has more than 40,000 members from more than 80 countries. ULI is one of America's more respected sources of information and knowledge on urban planning, growth, and development.

ULI is a nonprofit research and educational organization. Its mission is to provide leadership in responsible land-use and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. To encourage an open exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences, ULI membership crosses a variety of backgrounds and professions representing the entire spectrum of land-use and development disciplines in private enterprise and public service. Among the members are developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, public officials, planners, brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, academics and students.

ULI South Carolina is a District Council formed in 2005 to encourage dialogue of land use and planning throughout the state and within each of the three main regions, as well as to provide tools and resources for leadership development. ULI South Carolina was the first statewide District Council to be formed and has since become a national model.

Led by a statewide management committee and executive committees in the Coastal, Midlands and Upstate regions, ULI South Carolina provides a forum through which the state's urban and rural landscapes can be woven together to promote better land use policy and decision making.

The mission of ULI is to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. A fundamental means for putting that mission into action is through ULI South Carolina's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program. This fee-based service provides the market-based expertise of ULI members to cities, developers, and other organizations that need objective analysis and advice on how to solve difficult development problems. TAPs are typically one-and-a-half-day sessions in which multidisciplinary teams of five to eight real estate development professionals tour the site under review, interview local stakeholders, and meet to develop recommendations that are presented publicly at the end of the session and in a follow-up report.

The Charleston Downtown Alliance (CDA) ULI South Carolina was engaged for this TAP by the Charleston Downtown Alliance (CDA) and The Riley Center for Livable Communities at the College of Charleston.

The CDA formed in late 2020 to help advance King Street as a global model of a 21st century Commercial District. The CDA includes representatives from the local community including business owners, landlords, hospitality industry representatives, residents, nonprofit organizations and others who work together to support an area that roughly covers the Charleston King Street Corridor from Spring to Broad Street. A list of current CDA members is included in Appendix A.

The Riley Center for Livable Communities & Community Assistance Program (CAP)

Research and facilitation support for the TAP was provided by the College of Charleston's Joseph P. Riley, Jr. Center for Livable Communities and Community Assistance Program (CAP). The Riley Center, named for Charleston's former Mayor Joseph P. Riley, utilizes College of Charleston's faculty, staff, and students to offer services to the community that promote livability in the Charleston Region. Areas of focus for these services include:

- Nonprofit & local government support,
- Public health & sustainability,
- Public safety
- Education, arts, & culture, and
- Urban design, planning & housing.

The Community Assistance Program, an effort of the College of Charleston's Master of Public Administration Program, focuses more specifically on providing little-to-no cost support for nonprofit and municipal organizations. With services provided almost entirely by graduate research assistants, CAP offers an applied learning experience where students can gain expertise useful for pursuing a career in the public sector. Services offered by the CAP team include:

- Qualitative & quantitative research,
- Data collections,
- Program design, development consulting & evaluation,
- Strategic development & marketing planning,
- Grant research,
- Budgeting & financial management planning,
- Board & volunteer training,
- Facilitation, and
- Organizational assessment & training.

About ULI's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) Program

The Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program is offered by ULI South Carolina to provide local municipalities and community-based nonprofits objective and responsible advice on land-use planning, development and redevelopment issues.

The District Council TAP is a service offered as part of ULI's national Advisory Services program. Since 1947, the Advisory Services program has assisted communities by bringing together real estate, planning and development experts to provide unbiased, pragmatic advice for addressing complex land-use planning and development issues.

The ULI South Carolina TAP program provides similar services to local governments, private developers, community corporations, and many other organizations in South Carolina. Once a project is designated for a TAP, ULI South Carolina's District Council assembles a panel of volunteers with expertise in areas necessary to focus on the sponsor's unique opportunities and challenges.

Because of the District Council members' diverse expertise, a broad array of issues can be evaluated. Members' expertise includes commercial retail, office, industrial, residential, and mixed-land uses in a multiplicity of urban forms.

Under ideal circumstances, a TAP will focus on issues surrounding a particular site or topic impacting a larger study area or jurisdiction. Analysis will typically be organized around defining characteristics and limitations, identifying and assessing community and neighborhood goals, considering alternative land-use strategies in the context of preliminary feasibility analysis, and making recommendations for next steps.

The sponsoring organization is responsible for gathering the background information necessary to understand the project and presenting it to the panel. TAP members typically spend a day and a half developing an understanding of the problem, coming up with recommendations, and presenting those findings and recommendations to the sponsoring organization.

This TAP program aims to inform future planning efforts in the downtown Charleston area – specifically plans to establish a Business Improvement District (BID) and potentially engage a consultant team to develop a Downtown Strategic Plan similar to the Barton Ashman Plan of 1977.

Acknowledgments

ULI South Carolina is grateful to the CDA, the City of Charleston, the Riley Center for Livable Communities and the stakeholders interviewed as part of this process for their commitment to this King Street excellence.

Special Thanks & Program Support

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- Steve Dopp and Gillian Crum at The Francis Marion for donating the meeting space at the Francis Marion Hotel.
- Meg Thompson, Director of Business Services, City of Charleston for assistance in connecting us with various stakeholder groups who were vital to the TAP process.
- Kendra Stewart, Director, Riley Center for Livable Communities, College of Charleston for her leadership throughout the process.
- CDA Members
 - Tommy Hall
 - Lou Hammond
 - Marian Hay
 - Helen Hill
 - William Howle
 - John Keener
 - Kristopher King
 - Roy Neal
 - Rhett Outten
 - Chris Price
 - Michale Shuler
 - Tom Stockdale
 - Marty Wall
 - Doug Warner
 - Anita Zucker

In addition to those above, this TAP would not have been possible without the partnership of the Community Assistance Program at the College of Charleston. Special thanks to CAP Director, Marla Robertson and to Graduate Assistants Charleston Brownell, Ryan Green and Kip Watson for their work on the King Street TAP Briefing Book and their time on-site supporting the TAP.

Other members of the Program Support Team include:

- Amy Barrett, Executive Director, ULI South Carolina
- Charleston Brownell, Graduate Assistant, Riley Center, College of Charleston
- Chelsea Diedrich, Contract Writer
- Ryan Green, Graduate Assistant, Community Assistance Program, College of Charleston
- Robert “Bob” O’Neill, Executive in Residence, Riley Center, College of Charleston
- Marla Robertson, Director, Community Assistance Program, College of Charleston
- Kendra Stewart, Director, Riley Center, College of Charleston
- Natasha Walker, Program Manager, ULI Triangle
- Kip Watson, Graduate Assistant, Riley Center, College of Charleston

Panelists



Robb Brown – President & Founder, Denver Retail Group (DRG)

Robb Brown is a prominent retail strategist who leverages his extensive experience in commercial retail and airport environments to stimulate purposeful community engagement with real estate and improve financial performance. Robb's entrepreneurial intent is refreshed through the lens of the self-coined field of "Social Impact Software" or (SIS) as represented by Guard My Vote. For each project engagement, DRG companies seek to deploy SIS to derive custom citizen segmentation forecasts, performance metrics, and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) benchmarks. The leading authority on

"Social Capital Stack" implementation to drive targeted and monetized involvement of local community members in real estate development.

Robb has 20 years of experience as a retail consultant and commercial real estate professional. In 2008, he founded The Denver Retail Group to advise private equity, real estate investment trusts, and national retail brands on retail acquisitions, leasing, and customer engagement. DRG now has international reach, influencing retail in the U.S. and the U.A.E. DRG's primary focus is on the real estate, retail district management and technology industries. Robb currently lives in Denver, Colorado. He holds a BA in Spanish with concentrations in French and Economics from Bates College. He has also completed executive course work at the Harvard School of Design. He currently mentors young adults, donates time to non-profits, and cherishes time with his family.



Gerald “Jerry” Gordon – Riley Center Fellow | Former CEO, Fairfax County, VA Econ. Dev. Authority

Gerald L. Gordon, Ph.D., is an economist and author, and is the president and chief executive officer of the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority (FCEDA) in Fairfax County, VA, a position he has held since late 1983. In 2016, Virginia Business magazine named Gordon one of its “50 most influential Virginians.” He was named to the same list in 2013, 2014, and 2015. In 2015, Dr. Gordon was honored by International Economic Development Council with the Jeffrey A. Finkle Organizational Leadership Award for a “lasting commitment to the field of economic development.” Gordon previously held

positions with Arlington County, VA and the United States Department of Labor.

Gordon has taught at the University of Maryland, College Park, George Mason University, and Virginia Commonwealth University. He has consulted with city and state governments throughout the United States and internationally. He has also served as a consultant to businesses, non-profit organizations, associations, colleges and universities, various government agencies including the US Navy and the United Nations. Gordon holds a bachelor’s degree from The Citadel, a master’s degree from George Washington University, and a doctorate in International Economics from the Catholic University of America. He is the author of numerous articles on strategic planning, economic development, leadership styles, and other management topics. He has also authored 13 books and contributed opinion pieces to the Washington Post, Forbes, and American City and County.



Matt Kennell – President and CEO, City Center Partnership Columbia, SC

Matt Kennell is a native of Virginia and has worked in urban development and management for 35 years in Florida, Virginia, and South Carolina. Matt's expertise includes city planning, community development, place-making, downtown development, and Business Improvement District Management. He holds an MPA from Florida Atlantic University specializing in Environmental Growth Management.

Since 2002 he has served as the President and CEO of the City Center Partnership in Columbia, SC which provides public space management, economic development, retail recruitment, homeless outreach, public advocacy, and planning for Columbia's Main Street District. During his tenure, there has been almost one billion dollars of investment in the area, which is now buzzing with commerce and crowded with new residents.

Matt loves spending time with his family and beloved Jack Russell Terrier at their tiny downtown condo or at their weekend home on Lake Murray.



**Christopher Lambka – Transportation Planner
Director, Toole Design, Spartanburg Office**

Chris Lambka is the director of Toole Design's Spartanburg, SC office. He has a diverse background in transportation planning and landscape design. Prior to joining Toole Design, Chris worked for the Spartanburg Area Transportation Study as a Special Projects Manager. He has a strong understanding of the transportation planning and implementation process, as well as department of transportation procedures. He is passionate about integrating multimodal transportation, quality urban design, and sensitive landscape solutions into projects that move communities toward more sustainable futures.



Nancy Whitworth – Former Economic Development Director, City of Greenville

Nancy recently retired after a long tenure with the City of Greenville serving as the director of economic and community development, deputy city manager and interim city manager. She was instrumental in establishing public private partnerships resulting in Greenville's successful downtown and city-wide redevelopment. She has been an expert panelist and presenter throughout the country advising communities on entrepreneurial and collaborative approaches to economic and community development.

She received her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Science degrees from Clemson University and serves on the boards of Clemson's Advancement for Real Estate Development and The Rutland Institute for Ethics. Throughout the years she served on numerous boards in the community including the Greenville Chamber of Commerce, Greenville Local Development Corporation, The Innovate Fund and the University Center of Greenville. She is currently on the board of the Community Foundation of Greenville, Prisma Upstate and is a South Carolina Department of Transportation Commissioner.

Nancy has received numerous awards throughout her career including the Order of the Palmetto recognizing her exemplary vision and leadership as well as her achievements in economic development.

She is currently an advisor with OneSpartanburg, Inc. and resides in Greenville with her husband Jeff.

The Assignment

Per the request of the sponsor, Charleston Downtown Alliance (CDA), ULI South Carolina assembled a panel of ULI member experts to participate in a two-and-a-half-day TAP designed to provide strategic advice to the CDA on a variety challenges facing the King Street Commercial District.

These TAP recommendations are intended to inform fast-moving current plans regarding the formation of a Business Improvement District (BID) as well as longer-term goals such as the development and official adoption of a downtown strategic plan. The Riley Center will facilitate the strategic planning process leading to the downtown strategic plan. As envisioned the downtown strategic plan will emphasize community engagement, prioritize inclusivity and incorporate a diverse range of perspectives to identify key issues and inform tactical solutions.

The Issues

Prior to the TAP, the Riley Center outlined a list of issues identified as important topics for discussion during the TAP and as part of the longer-term strategic planning process. These issues are described more fully in the TAP Briefing Book (Appendix B) and are briefly mentioned below:

- Distribution and mix of business types throughout the CBD, specifically related to retail
- Upper-floor usage
- Vacancies within the district
- Attracting diverse businesses and diverse business owners
- Street events and street closures
- Best practices for managing business districts
- Maintenance and upkeep of streetscape
- Providing a safe environment for a wide range of competing transportation methods
- Creating a Business Improvement District

Study Area

While the TAP focused specifically on the King Street Corridor from Spring Street to Broad Street, the Charleston Central Business District (CBD) includes a much wider area. The boundaries of the CBD include Market, Saint Phillip and Meeting Streets all the way to Line Street on the north end of the peninsula down to Broad Street (figure 1).

The CBD is often split into three districts: Upper King, Lower King, and the Market. The area referred to as “Upper King”, between Calhoun Street and Line Street, includes a high concentration of restaurants, retail, and a booming night life scene. “Lower King” from Calhoun Street to Broad Street functions mostly as a retail district and includes fewer bars and restaurants. The “Market” on Market Street is a popular tourist destination with open air shops, restaurants and retail targeted largely for visitors.

Figure 1: Study Area Map



Panel Questions

On February 9, 2021, ULI South Carolina and the College of Charleston's Riley Center collaborated to host a Zoom session with CDA board members and other stakeholders. The objective of the Zoom session was to prioritize four to five questions they wanted the TAP to address. Based on input from this conversation, the key questions for the TAP were as follows:

1. What are the key policy, regulatory, and organizational tools that the CDA, the City of Charleston, and other stakeholders should employ to support a thriving “live, work, play, learn” environment? How can all stakeholders work together to support economic health, encourage more black-owned businesses, curtail vacancies, encourage business retention & expansion, and enhance safety, security, cleanliness, and the beauty of downtown? What strategic measures lay strong foundations for economic stability and vitality that will help us weather financial downturns, market fluctuations, changes in leadership, and other challenges that may be brought forth by a post-pandemic economy?
2. Charleston's Central Business District along the King St corridor offers a distinct and special experience for a variety of residents and visitors. In addition to approximately 35,000 full-time residents, the downtown area also hosts a vibrant nightlife scene, a workforce from a wide range of sectors, and the student bodies of the College of Charleston, Charleston School of Law, the Medical University of South Carolina, and the Citadel. How can the CDA and other stakeholders better understand the diverse, and often divergent, needs of the diverse Charleston community to create a safe and harmonious downtown experience for all?
3. What are key strategies for enhancing the public realm and highlighting Charleston's beautiful historic context? How can the CDA improve wayfinding, traffic flow for all types of users (i.e. pedestrians, bikes, cars, wheelchairs, skateboards, etc.)? Are there parking strategies that could ease bottleneck areas and other circulation challenges?
4. How can King Street's “market position” within the region be communicated to effectively emphasize its importance as the cultural and economic heart of the region?

Key Findings

This section includes the panel recommendations and common themes heard throughout the stakeholder interviews.

Panel Recommendations

During the two-and-a-half-day intensive program, panelists had the privilege of observing stakeholders' passion for King Street and an undeniable commitment to excellence rooted deep within Charleston's culture—a passion shared by the downtown business community, city staff, civic leaders and elected officials. Panelists acknowledged this passion is fundamental, not only for King Street's continued success as a commercial district but vital to sustaining Charleston's reputation as a high-end destination that attracts millions of annual visitors from around the world.

While passion and commitment are huge strengths, panelists also acknowledged that clearer, more frequent and consistent communication between business owners and the city—particularly regarding issues of safety, security and cleanliness—will be an important factor going forward. Given the shared passion for King Street's success, the Panelists are certain this can be accomplished by:

1. Developing metrics and measurements
2. Enhancing safety and security
3. Determining a shared vision
4. Establishing communication protocols
5. Elevating the street experience
6. Prioritizing property management

Key Findings *Continued...*

These six recommendations are described in greater detail below.

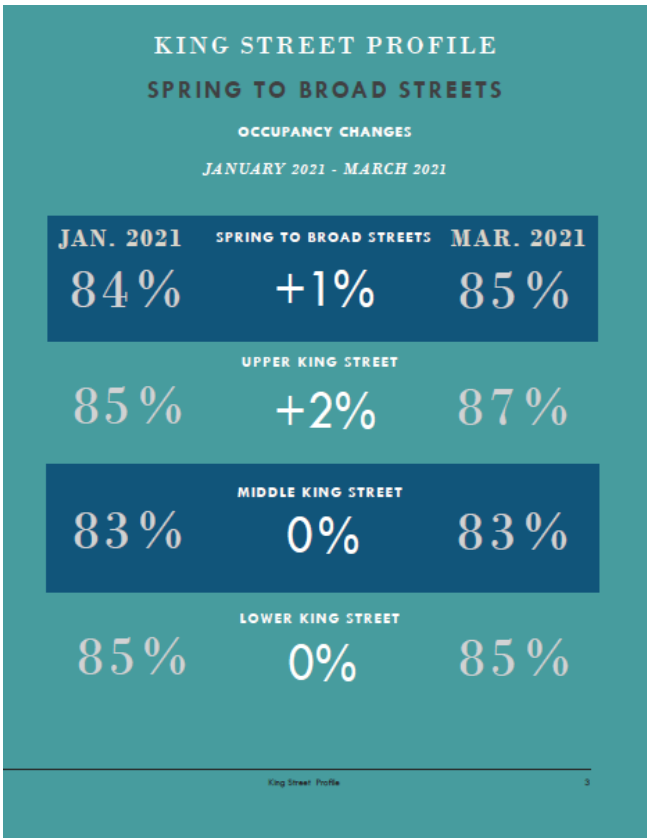
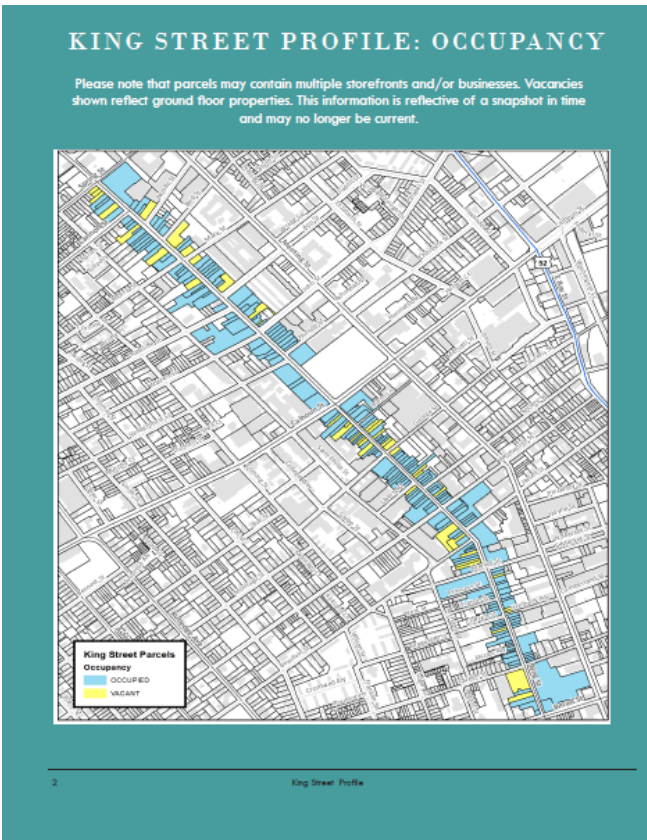
1. ***Develop Metrics & Measurements***

Management guru Peter Drucker famously said, “What gets measured gets managed.” Thus, the first recommendation of the TAP is fundamentally about establishing metrics that provide a snapshot of the overall health and well-being of the King Street Commercial District today and set a baseline against which progress can be measured in the future. Specific metrics and methods recommended include economic impact assessments, crime statistics, market research, and intercept studies.

- **Economic Impact:** The King Street Commercial District makes an outsized contribution to the City and to the region’s tax base. An analysis that quantifies King Street’s impact on the regional economy should help elevate the District’s importance to all citizens of the region—beyond downtown property owners and residents. Understanding the total financial contributions (direct and indirect impacts) that flow from the King Street District will help put into perspective this outsized contribution and underscore the significant importance of a safe and flourishing downtown to the regional economy.
 - *Note – during the TAP, panelists were informed that an economic impact study was underway. Once finalized, we recommend the CDA explore ways to communicate the findings of the study to the region—press releases, one-on-ones with local officials, op-eds, etc. Increasing awareness of King Street’s positive impact on the regional economy will be important for gaining support for future improvements and eventually adopting a BID.*
- **Crime Statistics:** Over the course of the TAP stakeholders voiced a variety of opinions about crime on King Street and expressed varying degrees of concern about diminishing safety and lack of, or reduced, police presence in critical areas. In the absence of consistent reporting, it is difficult to discern if this is perception or reality or a combination of both. Regularly reporting on agreed-upon crime statistics on a consistent basis could help “ground truth” perceptions and establish a baseline for improvement. Working with the Charleston Police Department to identify key metrics related to crime and safety and scheduling regular CDA meetings to review reports would be an important step towards greater understanding of where more help is urgently needed. Greater clarity and transparency will also help restore trust among stakeholders that the city and the police department are listening to concerns.

- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Like perceptions of crime and safety, the panel heard varying degrees of concern about the overall health of King Street retail—from an over-representation of national chain stores to increasingly high vacancy rates and rising rents that threaten to displace local businesses. To identify patterns and trends in King Street retail and real estate, we recommend the CDA identify a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)—including, but not limited to: number of new businesses open, number of businesses closed, vacancy rates, pipeline for new store openings, private dollars invested in new establishments, public dollars investment in infrastructure, etc. These types of KPIs will provide a clear picture of what is happening “on the ground” from month to month.
 - *Note—the City’s Business & Neighborhood Services Division provides an excellent report called The King Street Profile, which may be a collaborative opportunity for the CDA and the city to further develop as new KPIs are identified. See figure 2 below.*
- **Intercept Studies & Consumer Research:** To better understand the motivations of visitors and residents who patron the King Street Commercial District, there are several qualitative and quantitative market research tools at the CDA’s disposal. The panel recommends the CDA consider a variety of consumer research methods including intercept studies and consumer surveys. These consumer research tools will help the CDA better understand current King Street patrons and identify who is (and who is not) served by the current retail offerings. Consumer research tools can identify what the key drivers are for store visits, where else customers are shopping, the number of return visits and loyalty motivations. The results will help the CDA identify areas for improvements to customer/visitor services as well as develop new strategies that lead to a King Street that feels welcoming to all.

FIGURE 2: The Business & Neighborhood Services Division provides an excellent report, The King Street Profile. Augmenting this information with periodic visitor intercept surveys, business owner surveys and peer city comparisons may provide important regular touchstones for assessing and marking improvements.



Metrics and measurements may not be the most exciting aspect of maintaining a healthy and vibrant King Street—but the panel notes that a strategic vision based on sound, insightful, and up-to-date information about the economic impact, real time safety statistics and market conditions will improve the probability of a successful BID and a realistic and impactful Downtown Strategic Plan.

2. *Enhance Safety & Security*

The cornerstone of a great downtown is a clean and safe environment. Stakeholders told the panel that both cleanliness and safety on King Street are tenuous today. In order to make King Street a more positive experience for residents, employers, students and visitors, it is important for safety and security to be high on the priority list. This includes crime management, traffic and pedestrian safety, and public health protocols. The popular nightlife offerings on King Street increase the risk of crime in the area. In combination with the impacts of COVID-19 and notable acts of violence that have taken place in the Central Business District (CBD) over the past decade, there is a perception that King Street is growing more and more unsafe.

The TAP recommends the CDA work with city leaders to increase efforts to lower crime rates on Kings Street, while placing an emphasis on fostering a positive relationship between the community and law enforcement. Concurrently, the City should create data collection programs to track progress in this area to accurately inform the public's perception of safety in their downtown district. As mentioned about in the "Metrics and Measurement" section, regular and more transparent reporting of crime statistics will be an important step towards a greater understanding of where more help is urgently needed and will go a long way toward restoring trust among stakeholders that the city and the police department are listening to concerns.

Yellow Shirts: City Center Partnership's Clean and Safe Ambassadors

So who are those knowledgeable, helpful folks in the yellow shirt s riding and walking around downtown Columbia? They're City Center Partnership's Clean and Safe Ambassadors, but many people just know them as the Yellow Shirts.

The Yellow Shirts help keep things clean and they help keep people safe – and they know a lot about what to see and do in downtown Columbia – and If they seem to be around all hours of the day and night, it's because they are. They work from 7:00 am to 11:30 pm on Sunday – Wednesday and 7:00 am – 1:00 am on Thursday – Saturday.



Figure 3: Ambassador Example: Columbia's City Center Partnership Yellow Shirts

Background: In 2002, City Center Partnership contracted with Block by Block to help implement their Clean & Safe program (Yellow Shirts). The Yellow Shirts have kept the Main Street District clean and safe ever since by providing directions, helping out stalled motorists, giving rides, escorting people, cleaning graffiti and picking up trash, watering the hanging baskets that line Main Street, and much, much more.

In 2019, Yellow Shirts: Logged more than 7,928 hospitality contacts, motorist assists, or safety escorts. A smiling, friendly Yellow Shirt is always ready to provide directions to nearby businesses, attractions or restaurants, a jump-start for a stalled car, or walk an employee to his or her car late at night. Removed nearly 128,373 lbs. of trash from the Main Street District. Beyond the sanitation services the city provides, the Yellow Shirts clean seven days a week from 7:30am to 3:30pm, picking up any trash, bagging it, and hauling it away. The clean team also includes "Rosie," an autonomous all-electric street cleaning machine, believed to be the first in the country.

Provided over 21,590 rides. Anyone in the Main Street District can call the Yellow Shirts from 7:30am to 11pm seven days a week for a ride in "The City Rover," a Honda Odyssey minivan, to any other location in the district.

3. *Determine a Shared Vision*

The most successful downtowns in the world reflect on-going, intentionally collaborative efforts that include both private and public sector leaders and a wide variety of community stakeholders. Defining a shared vision for the King Street Commercial Corridor is the first step in setting that intention and working collaboratively to support King Street excellence. A shared vision will also help the CDA to identify its key roles and primary responsibilities and avoid duplicating responsibilities that reasonably fall within the city government's purview.

A shared vision will also provide a foundation for marketing and communication strategies for consistent messaging about the King Street Commercial District.

Note, consistent messaging does not mean a single vision for a monolithic King Street nor addressing a single target audience. Rather, the TAP recommends the CDA work with business owners and the city to identify a variety of themes or elements within the greater vision that highlight the variety establishments found along the corridor. Developing character segments—i.e. the “Design District”, the “Antique District”, the “Gallery District”, etc.—may support business recruitment efforts that further strengthen the overall vision of a diverse and vibrant King Street.

4. *Establish Communication Protocols*

A consistent theme throughout the TAP was the need for more consistent, deliberate communication between the CDA, the City of Charleston and other stakeholders—businesses, residents, college students and staff, etc.

The panel recommends the CDA take the lead in establishing regular meetings with key stakeholders and city representatives. There is much happening in and around the King Street Commercial District and lines of communication are not immediately clear. Regular meetings, planned in advance (once a month or once a quarter) would provide an important forum for updates and announcements and will certainly benefit the fast-moving BID initiative.

Because minority stakeholders are severely underrepresented among both business owners and current downtown residents, special communication efforts will be necessary to engage a wider range of voices during this process. This work—the creation of a BID and the Downtown Strategic Plan—creates a powerful new opportunity for the CDA to take the lead on creating a more inclusive and welcoming downtown for all residents and visitors. Providing opportunities to hear different perspectives and use this knowledge to promote inclusivity and expand diversity will be critically important as King Street moves forward.

Figure 4: Business Incubator for African American & Women-Owned Businesses

The City of Charleston has made it a priority to address the challenges that many African American and women-owned business face and foster economic empowerment to build an inclusive and equitable community.

To that end, the City of Charleston is committed to supporting African American and women-owned businesses with its first African American & Women-Owned Business Incubator located in downtown Charleston.

The Incubator will be located on the bottom floor of the new James Lewis, Jr. Affordable Housing Complex, which is set to break ground this summer. In partnership, the developer has agreed to deliver the space as a “shell,” the City of Charleston will be responsible for the buildout of the Incubator.

The Incubator will house offices, co-working, and retail space for startup and emerging businesses. Businesses will be able to lease these spaces at reduced/subsidized rents to grow their business. The Incubator will also offer skills training, technical assistance, financial education, and access to financing and resources.

The 7,600 square foot space will house the following:

- Individual offices
- Co-working spaces
- 2 conference rooms for trainings and meetings
- Data center
- Reception area
- Kitchen
- Bathrooms
- Several small retail spaces
- Corner store, which will be an amenity to the surrounding community

Source: Information provided by the City of Charleston Business & Neighborhood Services.

5. *Elevate the Street Experience*

King Street already exists as a vibrant corridor that stays busy with locals and tourists alike. However, panelists heard from stakeholders that there is room to elevate the street experience. Much of this improvement will depend on the management of the space between the buildings.

A variety of transportation methods are used on King Street daily – this includes cars, bicycles, skateboards, horse-drawn carriages, golf carts, and people on foot. It should be a priority of the BID to focus on better management of these competing methods to improve safety and reduce the stress of moving from point A to point B.

Achieving an optimal balance of motorists and pedestrians is a key piece of this recommendation. Strategies include increased focus on flexibility of street space uses, curbside management (i.e. rideshare exchanges, food pick-ups, etc.), promotions & incentives to reduce parking competition, better signage, decreased speed limit, improved walkability, and innovative wayfinding mechanisms.

6. *Prioritize Property Management*

As noted earlier in this report, King Street is currently operating at an 85% occupancy rate. The panel recommends that the City and hired consultant concentrate on a plan to reduce this vacancy rate and identify strategies to productively utilize empty store fronts to improve the aesthetic of the streetscape. Specific suggestions to achieve this include establishing incentives to promote the use of upper stories, development of standards of excellence that all members of the BID must adhere to, and implement improved and consistent code enforcement.

Figure 5: Explore creative ways to activate vacant storefronts with temporary art and even music.



Manhattan's Musical Storefronts program fills vacant spaces with music during the pandemic



The School of the Arts at Purchase College collaborates with the White Plains BID (Business Improvement District) to exhibit Art in Vacant Spaces, an innovative art project in empty storefronts in downtown White Plains



Germantown United Community Development Corporation in Philadelphia, PA solicits proposals for their annual Storefront Activation Program a low-cost, high impact initiative that pairs local artists and makers with neighborhood businesses and property owners to upgrade storefront window displays, and interior spaces visible from the street.

Stakeholder Input: Common Themes

Panelists conducted four rounds of stakeholder interviews on March 8th and 9th. Interviews were held in two locations—the Francis Marion hotel and in the Public Meeting Room at 2 George, the city’s administration building. Each interview was led by one to two panelists and attended by a graduate student from the Riley Center. The objective for each interview was to provide background information, different stakeholder perspectives and new insights into the four key questions to be addressed by the TAP.

The summary of findings from stakeholder input provided in this section is shared in aggregate to protect the anonymity and confidentiality promised to all individuals who partook in this process. Appendix A includes the list of stakeholder interviews.

What We Heard:

As noted earlier in this report, King Street is currently operating at an 85% occupancy rate. The panel recommends that the City and hired consultant concentrate on a plan to reduce this vacancy rate and identify strategies to productively utilize empty store fronts to improve the aesthetic of the streetscape. Specific suggestions to achieve this include establishing incentives to promote the use of upper stories, development of standards of excellence that all members of the BID must adhere to, and implement improved and consistent code enforcement.

- King Street lacks **diversity and inclusivity** in both its business ownership and its consumers. Current business ownership should reflect the diversity seen in the Charleston community. Historically, there was a much greater number of black business owners, which has been in steady decline over the last decade.
- At present the City of Charleston lacks an **economic development** department. Focus on economic development would support initiatives to increase diversity and inclusivity in the Charleston downtown area. Panelists highly recommend economic development to be a service offered in the BID.
- Limited **accessibility** to King Street reduces the appeal for locals to spend time there. There is a desire for reduced parking restrictions and improved transportation systems to make it easier for the community to visit the area.
- Stakeholders have high expectations for **safety and sanitation** standards in the King Street CBD that are currently not being met. Common complaints related to this issue included inadequate lighting and slow response time to outages, as well as poor walkability caused by limited sidewalk space and trip hazards.
- In order to facilitate safety, King Street must determine the best method of enforcement. Conversations were had discussing the use of CBD **ambassadors** rather than increased police presence to create a friendlier environment.
- **Wayfinding** downtown Charleston is challenging and there are few to no resources offering solutions.
- There is a significantly noticeable number of **vacant store fronts** on King Street. These vacancies give the impression a failing economy and detract from the street experience.

- Much of the rental properties on King Street are offered by **absentee landlords** limiting the upkeep of the physical appearance of these spaces.
- There seems to be an increasing population of individuals experiencing **homelessness** in the downtown area. Stakeholders would like to see the City work toward identifying more effective strategies to support those facing this challenge.
- **Rental rates and property values** in the area of interest continue to rise and are unaffordable to the large majority of the Charleston population. This contributes to the high rate of vacant store fronts and limits the diversity of business ownership. There is a desire for financial support and incentives to help local, minority businesses get there start.
- King Street to not be committed to a single **vision** and cohesiveness in the distribution of businesses found along the corridor.
- At present, **King Street lacks a champion**. A district this important to the local and regional economy deserves a “champion” who will pay close attention to King Street and prioritize its vibrancy and livability; a leader to oversee its progress and address challenges. It is important that the BID establishes a new ‘champion’ to make the success of this district their leading objective.

Appendices

Appendix A: [TAP Schedule and Stakeholder Interview Lists](#)

Appendix B: [Briefing Book](#)



South Carolina

ULI SOUTH CAROLINA

205 ½ King St

Charleston, SC 29405

(843) 743-6073

southcarolina@uli.org

www.southcarolina.uli.org

www.uli.org