



San Francisco



Downtown Vacaville Revitalization

Technical Assistance Panel

Vacaville, California
August 12-13, 2024



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About ULI

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 45,000 real estate and land use professionals dedicated to advancing ULI's mission of shaping the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide.

ULI's interdisciplinary membership of professionals from private enterprise and the public sector represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, ULI has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions, including over 2,100 members in ULI San Francisco (sf.uli.org).

About ULI TAPs

The ULI San Francisco Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program is an extension of the national ULI Advisory Services Program (ASP). ULI's advisory services panels provide strategic advice to clients (public agencies, nonprofit organizations, or nonprofit developers) on complex land use and real estate development issues. The program links clients to the knowledge and experience of ULI and its membership.

Since 1947, ULI has harnessed the technical expertise of its members to help communities solve difficult land use, development, and redevelopment challenges. Since 1982, ULI San Francisco has adapted this model for use at the local level, delivering 51 TAPs.

TAPs include extensive preliminary briefings followed by an intensive two-day, in-person working session in the client's community. A detailed briefing package and guided discussion are provided by the client to each TAP panelist in advance of each working session. In these sessions, ULI's expert panelists tour the study area, interview stakeholders, and address a set of questions proposed by the client about a specific development issue or policy barrier within a defined geographic area. The product of these sessions is a final presentation and report, which presents highlights of the panel's responses to the client's questions, as well as a diverse set of ideas and suggestions.

Learn more at:

sf.uli.org/get-involved/technical-assistance-panels/

Abbreviations

BID	Business Improvement District
CEQA	California Environmental Quality Act
DTSP	Downtown Specific Plan
DVBID	Downtown Vacaville Business Improvement District
PBID	Property and Business Improvement District
TAP	Technical Assistance Panel
URM	Unreinforced Masonry

Vacaville Technical Assistance Panel

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- Roy Stockton, Councilmember – District 1
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- Sarah Chapman, Councilmember – District 4
- Jason Roberts, Councilmember – District 5
- Jeanette Wylie, Councilmember – District 6





Contents

- Executive Summary 1**
- TAP Assignment 4**
- Downtown Vacaville Context..... 9**
- Stakeholder Contribution & SWOT Analysis 14**
- Recommendations 19**
 - Historic Buildings and Unreinforced Masonry Approach 21
 - Retail Revitalization, Placemaking, and Streetscapes 23
 - Housing Solutions..... 27
 - Downtown Marketing and Vibrancy 29
- About the Panel 32**
- Reference Materials..... 36**



Executive Summary

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The revitalization of Downtown Vacaville is a key initiative aimed at transforming the historic, walkable core into a more vibrant and economically sustainable district. Guided by the 2022 Downtown Specific Plan (DTSP), this effort seeks to attract new tenants, revitalize historic buildings, support infill development, enhance public spaces, and address infrastructure needs. Since the adoption of the DTSP, the City has invested nearly \$7 million in improvement projects, primarily focusing on underground infrastructure to support future growth. The City is planning to invest an additional \$1 million on various public realm improvements. Despite these efforts, revitalization largely depends upon private property owners, who face challenges in upgrading aging buildings, particularly the unreinforced masonry (URM) structures that are prominent in and define the character of the downtown area.

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) was convened to offer recommendations on how Vacaville can overcome these challenges and further unlock the potential of its downtown. The panel identified several key and interconnected areas for improvement, including addressing seismic safety for URM buildings, developing and integrating retail strategies, creating housing opportunities, enhancing placemaking efforts, and strengthening marketing and vibrancy strategies. The panel's analysis highlighted the importance of focusing on the downtown's existing strengths, such as its historic character, walkability, and lively community event scene.

The revitalization of Downtown Vacaville requires addressing the safety concerns posed by URM buildings and the related zoning or building code issues that preclude or challenge more active uses. The City of Vacaville recently adopted an ordinance that allows more flexibility with seismic retrofitting of URM buildings, but the costs associated with upgrades have raised concerns among property owners. To address some of these concerns, the ULI TAP recommends prioritizing URM upgrades through a cost-sharing program for structural



assessments, which would categorize buildings by life safety risk and provide estimates for retrofitting costs. Additional incentives, such as the Mills Act for property tax relief and federal or state historic rehabilitation tax credits, can further ease the financial burden on property owners. By leveraging these tools, Vacaville can ensure the preservation of its historic buildings, enhance public safety, and generate new market potential.

Placemaking and streetscape improvements are essential to creating a more inviting and active downtown environment. Downtown Vacaville can benefit more from focused improvements rather than expansion as suggested in the DTSP. The panel advises concentrating investments in the historic core along Main Street by enhancing the pedestrian experience through additional tree planting, improved lighting, and wayfinding. There are also opportunities to transform the Town Square and Merchant Street into dynamic community hubs with pop-up events, dining districts, and public art installations. These enhancements would encourage residents and visitors to spend more time downtown, fostering economic growth and social engagement.

Well-established neighborhoods surrounding the downtown can support revitalization efforts, particularly if efforts are made to improve the physical and community connections between these areas. New housing development can also play a supporting role in downtown revitalization but must be carefully tailored to the market. While small, mixed-use infill projects are financially difficult due to the high costs of structured parking and low rental rates, larger developments just outside the historic core offer a more feasible solution. The panel recommends lowering density requirements to support townhouse production while directing higher-density projects, like workforce apartments, to greenfield sites outside of the downtown area. These strategies will allow Vacaville to meet its housing goals while enhancing the vibrancy of its downtown.

To further boost downtown vibrancy, Vacaville needs a robust and fully resourced marketing strategy centered on promoting local businesses and events. The panel suggests increasing funding for the Business Improvement District (BID), strengthening partnerships with local

organizations, and implementing creative branding and wayfinding tactics. A coordinated effort to promote downtown as a destination, supported by a “Shop Local” campaign, would help attract more foot traffic, raise community pride, and drive long-term success.

Overall, the revitalization of Downtown Vacaville requires a strategic balance of addressing immediate infrastructure and safety concerns while fostering long-term growth through creative placemaking, improved visitor experience, housing development, and targeted marketing efforts. By leveraging its historic charm and capitalizing on its potential as a vibrant community hub, Vacaville can transform its downtown into a thriving destination. Although the cost of many building upgrades may currently exceed the overall property value, there is much that can be done to move the needle and strengthen Downtown Vacaville to create better market conditions. Success will depend upon the coordinated efforts of the City, property owners, and stakeholders to implement the recommended improvements in phases, ensuring that Downtown Vacaville remains a lively and integrated part of the community for years to come.



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TAP Assignment



Key Challenges

Adopted in February 2022, the Downtown Specific Plan (DTSP) aims to unlock Downtown Vacaville’s full potential as a vibrant and walkable mixed-use destination where people live, work, shop, and play—a downtown with a great history and a great future. The DTSP is comprehensive, incorporating a Connectivity and Streetscape Plan to better connect Downtown Vacaville with surrounding neighborhoods, downtown specific zoning districts and development standards, and an innovative “development prototype” program that streamlines downtown projects that comply with objective standards.

Since adoption of the DTSP in 2022, the City has invested nearly \$7 million in improvement projects in the 130+ year-

old downtown. Most of the projects improved underground infrastructure (sewer and water conveyance) to ensure that the future intensification of downtown properties can be supported by public infrastructure. The City is currently implementing a new set of projects for a total of \$1 million, including storefront improvement grants, additional park gateway improvements, mural grants, merchant directional signs, and a lighting study. While all of these public projects are promising, the future of Downtown Vacaville largely rests in the care of existing property owners and their interest and capacity to improve their private properties to bring in more active tenants and achieve the goal of making Downtown Vacaville an attractive destination.



Over the past year, the Community Development Department has been working with property owners and tenants to bring new desirable uses into several existing underutilized older buildings. Examples of recent permit applications include converting a vacant retail space to a food and beverage use (tea shop) and the expansion of an existing wine bar. Through this process, the City became aware of additional challenges for new businesses in Downtown Vacaville due to the cost and logistics associated with modifying buildings to accommodate the different types of uses.

Specifically, owners of unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings are required to invest in costly seismic, infrastructural, and restroom upgrades in order to intensify their uses as desired in the DTSP. Downtown's concentration of 20 URM buildings, which are primarily located along Main Street, will all require some combination of reinforcement or remodeling to bring the structures into compliance. Prior to December 2023, the City's Building Code required URMs to meet the same standards as if they were being built new. These strict code requirements did not recognize that older buildings have unique issues and that there are alternative, less expensive methods to achieve seismic safety.

To address these challenges, in December 2023, the City Council introduced an ordinance that adopts Appendix A of the California Building Code's guidelines for seismic strengthening and earthquake hazard and risk reduction into the Vacaville Building Code. The City engaged the ULI TAP to assist in identifying additional opportunities to address URM issues as part of a broader downtown revitalization effort. Specifically, the City asked the TAP to address the key questions listed on the following page.



Source: TAP Briefing Book, City of Vacaville, August 2024

Key Questions

1. What will it take to spur existing property owners to upgrade their existing buildings to bring in more active uses including infill residential? What can the City do to support this? What can other key partners do to support private property improvement efforts?
2. What are the most cost-effective approaches to seismically strengthening buildings Downtown that are considered URMs? If there are multiple URMs adjacent to each other, are there design approaches that would tackle the seismic work in a more collective and cost-effective fashion?
3. For non-URMs that would require significant modifications to facilitate introduction of new uses (such as food and beverage uses on the ground floor, residential uses on upper floors), what are the most cost-effective strategies to make these projects feasible?



Panel & Process

The TAP panel was composed of real estate and land use professionals with expertise in the public sector, urban design, real estate development, economic development, land use, and historic preservation. As background, the panelists were provided with a City-developed comprehensive briefing booklet to inform and assist with addressing the key panel questions.

The first full day of the TAP on Monday, August 12, 2024, began with a briefing by Erin Morris, the City of Vacaville Director of Community Development, followed by a tour of Downtown Vacaville led by City staff. The tour highlighted key opportunity sites in and around downtown, and provided the panelists with firsthand experience of walking the Vacaville historic core to gain a better understanding of its condition and character.

For the remainder of the first morning, the panelists interviewed a number of key stakeholders from the city and community. The insight gained from the interviews fed directly into a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis exercise, which established the framework upon which the panelists would formulate recommendations.

The second day of the workshop on Tuesday, August 13, 2024, was dedicated to further refinement and synthesis of the panelists' ideas, as each drew from their own professional experience to provide a comprehensive set of recommendations. At the conclusion of the second day, the panelists presented their findings at a public and live-streamed Special City Council Study Session; attendees included the Mayor, Vice Mayor, Council members, city staff, and the stakeholders who had been interviewed the previous day.



Downtown Vacaville Context



Centrally located between the San Francisco Bay Area, Wine Country, and the greater Sacramento region, the City of Vacaville is situated in an ideal location to attract a diverse population of both residents and visitors. With a population of over 100,000 people, Vacaville is the third-largest city in Solano County; the City has grown by over 10% since 2010 and is anticipated to grow by an additional 10% in the next 10 years (Vacaville General Plan, 2015).

Located in the heart of Vacaville, the downtown covers an approximately 10-block by 10-block area with a distinctive, small-town historic character. The area includes a diverse array of amenities and activities that draw people to visit, set up businesses, and take up residence.

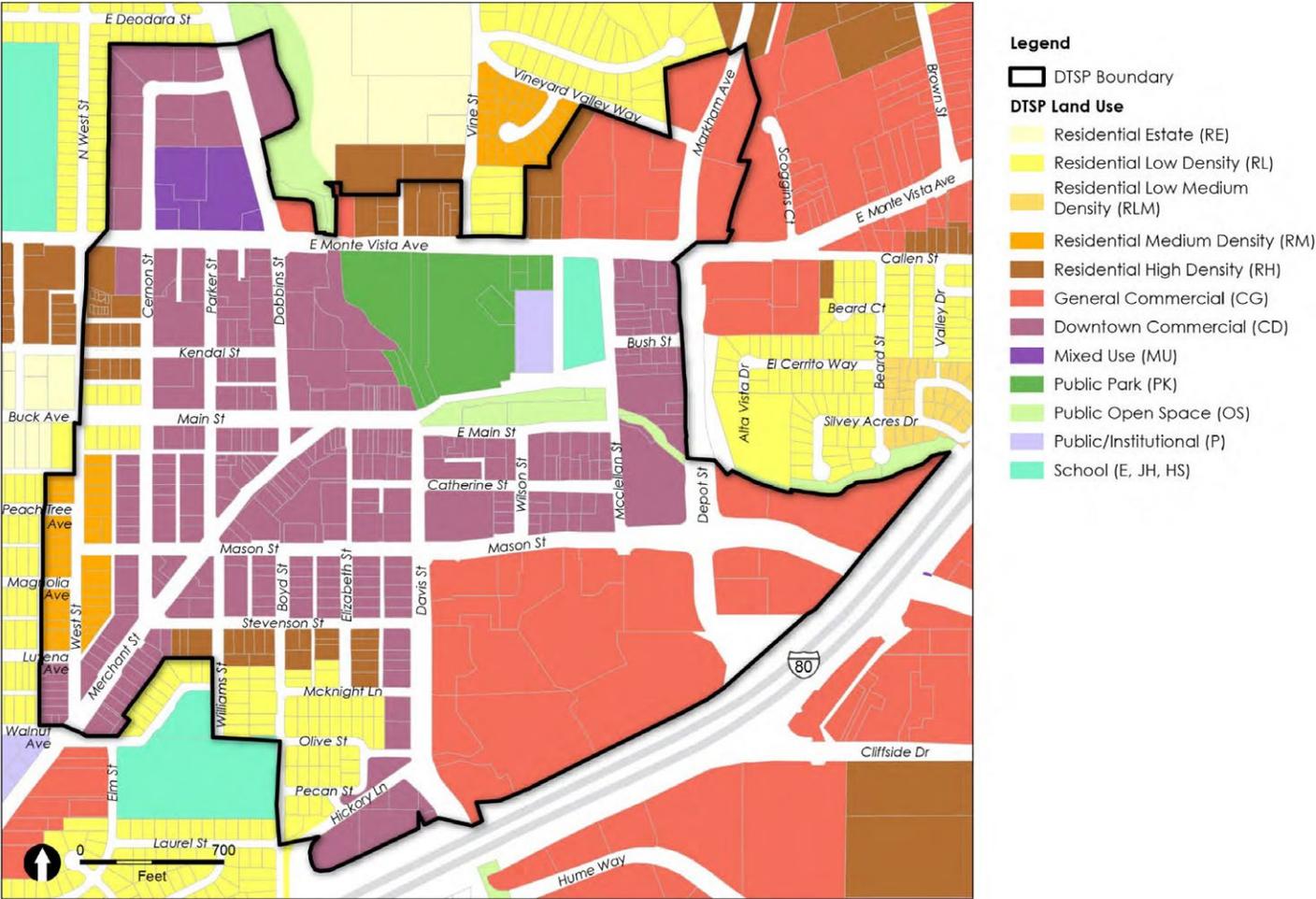


Figure 4.2.1-1: Vacaville Downtown Specific Plan Land Uses
 Source: Vacaville Downtown Specific Plan, 2022

Assets, amenities, and organizations within Downtown Vacaville include:

Civic & Education: The downtown area includes key community-wide amenities that draw people for daytime visits, including the Town Square Library, the McBride Senior Center, and the U.S. Post Office branch. In addition, a number of schools are located within or close to the downtown area, including Buckingham Collegiate Charter Academy, Blake Austin College, Vacaville High School, and Kairos Public School.

Recreation: Located on the northern edge of the downtown area, Andrews Park offers open space, playgrounds, and trails for both nearby residents and visitors; this includes the Ulatis Creek, which is a key focal point for the park. Indoor recreation is offered at various gyms and facilities throughout downtown, including the George Duke Sports Center located in Andrews Park and the Recreation Vacaville Ice Sports Center located on the eastern side of downtown.

Theater & Music: The downtown area has a number of theaters, including Brenden Theater—Vacaville’s primary movie theater—along Davis Street and various live performance stages, such as Theatre DeVille, J&S Performing Arts Center, and Starbound Theatre. Opportunities for buying, listening to, or learning music are available at School of Rock, the Young Artists Conservatory of Music, or Tweed Hut Music Store.

Hotel: On the edge of downtown close to the Interstate 80 (I-80) corridor, the recently remodeled 83-room Sonesta Essential Vacaville hotel provides rooms for Vacaville visitors.

Retail & Office: Notable retail outlets and office developments include the Vista Crossings shopping center, Mason Street Centre, Sutter Health Medical Plaza, and the former CVS site. The Depot Station Shopping Center is also located just outside the downtown area.



Food & Restaurants: Downtown Vacaville is home to a number of restaurants, many of which are concentrated along Main Street and Merchant Street. Many restaurants are also located in Downtown's two commercial shopping centers: Mason Street Centre and Vista Crossings.

Transit: The Vacaville Transit Plaza is located on the northwestern edge of downtown and is the area's main transit hub servicing three bus routes.

Parking: The City operates 13 public parking lots in the downtown, providing over 850 off-street parking spaces, as well as the Hickory Park & Ride Lot on the southern side of downtown. Almost every street in the downtown area also has on-street parking available. A recent study from 2024 indicated that downtown parking lots occupancy rates peak at 50% between 5 pm to 9 pm.

Lighting: The City is currently taking preliminary steps towards developing a lighting study of Downtown Vacaville. The purpose of the study is to evaluate existing lighting conditions, determine any lighting deficiencies, and identify priority lighting projects to increase the use of parking lots and other public spaces after dark.

Streetscapes: Downtown Vacaville's streetscape has a number of fundamental strengths in its existing form with wide and well-maintained sidewalks, areas for outdoor dining, convenient pull-in parking, and mature street trees. The key focus area along Main Street has an 80-foot-wide right-of-way, which is a comfortable width for a highly walkable, flexible, and usable downtown area.



Events: The Vacaville Parks and Recreation Department holds various events in Downtown Vacaville every year, including the CreekWalk Concert Series in Andrews Park and events for Easter, Fourth of July, and Christmas. The Downtown Vacaville Business Improvement District (DVBID) also hosts events such as a weekly outdoor music series in the Town Square and a weekly farmers market at Creekwalk Plaza in Andrews Park.

Housing: Downtown Vacaville’s housing stock is reflective of the rest of Vacaville, with 76% of all housing units being single-family homes. Multifamily housing within the area consists of smaller housing units, such as duplexes, triplexes, and quadplexes. Downtown’s housing stock is also notably older than the rest of Vacaville, with approximately 34% of homes being built between 1950 and 1959, which contributes to the area’s historic character but also presents challenges for upkeep, repair, and renovation.

Residential sale prices and rental rates in the downtown area tend to be lower than those in the city and region, making the downtown area a more affordable housing submarket. That said, the majority of downtown housing is affordable only for moderate and above-moderate households, highlighting the need for additional housing that is affordable for low-income households. In addition, the high proportion of Vacaville residents aged 15 to 35 (28%) indicate the need for rental units, accessory dwelling units, and entry-level homebuyer opportunities, including condominiums, townhomes, and smaller single-family homes.

Compared to other areas in Vacaville, Downtown Vacaville does not have many new entitled residential projects, with the exception of 700 PARC on Main Street, a proposed mixed-use development spread across three sites located in the East Main District. When completed, the project will add 81 new townhomes and 4,000 square feet of new commercial space to downtown with a mix of affordability levels.

Organizations: The advocacy, activation, and improvement of Downtown Vacaville is guided by a number of organizations. The DVBID is a nonprofit business-based assessment district whose mission is to activate Downtown Vacaville. DVBID is composed of various members who seek to beautify and support Downtown through key activities such as downtown events. The Vacaville Chamber of Commerce is a membership organization representing over 500 businesses and seeks to improve the overall business climate in the community through advocacy, networking, education, and promotion. The Vacaville Heritage Council and Solano County Historical Society are nonprofit organizations dedicated to preserving Solano County history.

Source: TAP Briefing Book, City of Vacaville, August 2024





Stakeholder Contribution & SWOT Analysis

Stakeholder Contribution

To better understand the political, business, and social context of Downtown Vacaville, the TAP panelists conducted interviews in small breakout rooms with key stakeholders invited by city staff. The participants in these conversations included city officials, downtown organizations and advocates, design professionals, URM property owners and tenants, other property owners,

business owners, residential developers, and Vacaville youth advocates. These interviewees offered a range of backgrounds with unique insights on URM redevelopment and occupation, the public realm, downtown programming and activation, and the City's property review and approval process.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

- **Blake Borchers**, URM Tenant (The Main Grape)
- **Don Burrus**, Director of Economic Development, City of Vacaville
- **John Carli**, Mayor, City of Vacaville
- **Crystal Carlyn**, URM Property Owner (344, 355, and 354 Main Street)
- **Kevin Chavez-Derreza**, Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition
- **Samantha Clevenger**, Program Manager (Metrovation Retail Resources)
- **Louie DeBartolo**, Business Owner (DeBartolo & Co. Fine Jewelers)
- **Elissa DeCaro**, Vacaville Heritage Council
- **Debbie Egidio**, Chamber of Commerce
- **Rafael Espinoza**, Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition
- **Christine Firstenberg**, Retail Specialist (Metrovation Retail Resources)
- **John Goodwin**, URM Property Owner (344, 355, and 354 Main Street)
- **David Knecht**, URM Property Owner (500 Main Street)
- **Shea McGuire**, URM Property Owner (548 Main Street)
- **Erin Morris**, Director of Community Development, City of Vacaville
- **Miguel Moya**, Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition
- **Mike Paris**, Blackpine Communities (700 PARC on Main)
- **Traci Perry**, Real Estate Broker (Spectrum Properties)
- **Tom Phillippi**, Design Professional (PEI Engineering)
- **Tina Pittman**, URM Tenant (Celeste Tea Shop, 520 Main Street)
- **Kathleen Ramos**, Downtown Advocate (Stumbaugh Realty Advisors)
- **Tom Rapisarda**, Property Owner (Tom Rapisarda Real Estate)
- **Barry Rico**, URM Property Owner (318 Main Street A-D)
- **Greg Ritchie**, Downtown Business Owner and City Councilmember (District 2)
- **Doug Rodgers**, Vacaville Heritage Council
- **Mary Ann Rollison**, Real Estate Broker (Summit Properties)
- **Frank Schembri**, URM Property Owner (520 Main Street)
- **Mary Schembri**, URM Property Owner (520 Main Street)
- **Marianna Schiavone**, Downtown Advocate (LaBorgata Italian Deli)
- **Michael Silva**, City Councilmember (District 3)
- **Leslie Silver**, Downtown Vacaville BID
- **Morne Van Stade**, Property Owner (Journey Downtown)

SWOT Analysis

Based on background information provided by the City, the site tour, stakeholder interviews, and independent research, the TAP panelists performed a SWOT analysis to summarize the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing Downtown Vacaville. This strategic planning exercise considers both internal and external factors, and lays the groundwork for developing recommendations.

Strengths

Weaknesses

Opportunities

Threats



Strengths

Vacaville's biggest strengths come from its historic character and hometown atmosphere, lending to an authentic, unique setting. It hosts a right-sized commercial district, highly walkable street fabric along with a town square that serves as a central focal point. These urban conditions create the ability for Vacaville to support a vibrant downtown event scene.

Vacaville has many stakeholders who want to see the downtown area grow and succeed. This sentiment is also clearly supported by the City of Vacaville, with its robust investment into downtown planning and infrastructural improvements, which set the stage for the panel's recommendations.



Weaknesses

Downtown Vacaville faces a number of challenges with creating a vibrant downtown – something that many cities have struggled with in the aftermath of the pandemic. In general, the downtown area feels disconnected from much of Vacaville's more recent development and lacks clear visibility. A major factor contributing to this situation is the Downtown's relationship with the Interstate 80 (I-80) corridor, which bifurcates the City and does not clearly lead people downtown.

Additionally, the Downtown lacks an adequate number of destination tenants to draw residents and visitors, and the current mix of uses has little appeal for families and young people. The perception of a lack of parking or parking safety may also be a deterrent for visiting the Downtown.

Finally, the uncertain and time-consuming process for code compliance for existing buildings, plus the difficult entitlement environment, is negatively affecting potential investment into revitalizing Downtown Vacaville.



Opportunities

Moving forward, Vacaville has a number of opportunities for creating a vibrant downtown area. The City's overall demographics are shifting in a direction that will spur investment and support a more varied tenant mix. With a growing population that is becoming more diverse, younger, and wealthier, these characteristics translate into expressed interest in unique and authentic experiences.

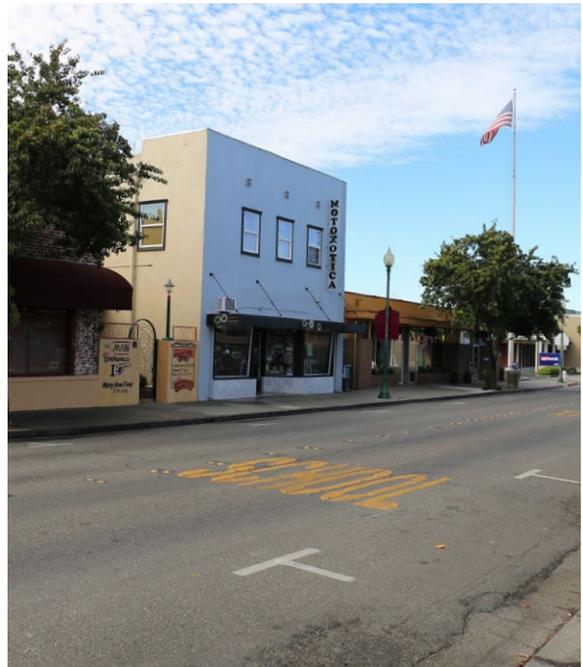
Compared to other areas of Vacaville, the historic downtown area is already able to accommodate unique experiences for visitors. Moreover, an improved wayfinding and access system for visitors—along with bicycle infrastructure—helps to not only support the movement of people through downtown but also adds activity and differentiates it from other shopping developments. The abundance of outdoor areas—including patios, sidewalks, Andrews Park, and the town square—offers many possibilities for outdoor activation.

In terms of revitalizing the downtown buildings, ideas for an “ambassador” program to shepherd applicants through the permitting and approval process in the Planning and Building departments can help to build trust and partnership with the community. In addition, new incentive programs, such as the Storefront Grant Pilot, can also provide welcome resources.



Threats

For all of these opportunities, there are a number of threats that Vacaville should be tracking. Broader economic trends make new development in the downtown area difficult to finance and bring to fruition. Residential units are generally easier to develop outside of the downtown area (see Housing Element site), and there is competition from nearby cities that are growing and competing for commercial tenants. Other leasing impediments include impact fees, tenant improvement (TI) costs, and infrastructure deficits (e.g., electrical capacity). This results in a context where the combination of investment risk, time to develop, and general costs creates a development equation that does not work in most cases. All of these threats create a feeling of the City of Vacaville being “stuck” and risk-averse in countering this challenging context. Moreover, staff can feel disempowered to make decisions in this environment.



Recommendations



The revitalization of Downtown Vacaville requires a strategic, multi-faceted approach that addresses both immediate and long-term needs. The following recommendations are designed to guide the city and its stakeholders toward creating a vibrant, economically sustainable downtown. These strategies focus on preserving the unique historic character of the area, enhancing public spaces, increasing housing opportunities, and bolstering marketing and vibrancy efforts for Downtown Vacaville.



Historic Buildings and Unreinforced Masonry Approach

Downtown Vacaville boasts a rich history that is reflected in its built environment. Designated as part of the Downtown Historic Preservation Overlay District in 1972, this area contains about 30 buildings that have been officially recognized as historic resources, which significantly contribute to the architectural and cultural fabric of the city. These structures not only add character and charm to Downtown, but their historic status can also serve as a unique economic asset that can be leveraged for funding and code relief opportunities. Preserving this historic integrity is a key objective for the City, as it enhances the overall appeal of Downtown, making it more attractive to residents, visitors, and investors alike.

One of the most pressing issues in the downtown area is the presence of Unreinforced Masonry (URM) buildings, a subset of the historic structures. According to the Downtown Specific Plan (DTSP) Safety Element, Vacaville is in a seismically active region, with soil types that may not respond well during an earthquake. The City recently adopted an ordinance that allows more flexibility for seismic retrofitting of Downtown Vacaville’s 20 URM buildings, but the cost of these upgrades has left many property owners concerned. These concerns are valid, as the income generated from current rental rates in Downtown Vacaville may not be sufficient to cover the significant costs associated with seismic retrofitting. However, this ordinance has requirements that have been adopted across California and it is not something unique that has been imposed on Vacaville.



Source: TAP Briefing Book, City of Vacaville, August 2024

To address this key issue, there are various strategies and incentives to encourage the retrofitting and preservation of these historic buildings. A critical first step is to create a cost-sharing initiative—among property owners with or without City support—to conduct a Tier 1 structural assessment for all URM properties. This could be a two- to three-day assessment, led by a structural engineer with experience in historic preservation and construction costs, to identify the necessary structural reinforcements for seismic safety and categorize buildings on a scale of 1 to 5 based on their life safety risk. This process could also include a high-level conceptual cost estimate for each building and identify the most vulnerable buildings, ensuring limited resources could be prioritized effectively.

Once these structural assessments are completed, various financial incentives and funding opportunities could be implemented to ease the burden on historic property owners. For example, adopting the Mills Act Program could provide property tax relief to owners who invest in seismic and other necessary upgrades to their historic buildings. The program would initially target URM buildings and eventually all historic buildings in the Downtown that might need expensive code upgrades. The Mills Act, already used in many California cities, has proven to be a powerful tool for encouraging private investment in historic preservation. Furthermore, URM buildings in Downtown Vacaville may qualify for federal or state Historic Rehabilitation tax credits, which can provide a direct tax credit equal to 20% of the rehabilitation project’s hard and soft costs.

Finally, property owners should also be advised that historic buildings are able to use the California State Historical Building Code to provide code relief, especially for requirements that are triggered by a change of use. This exception has been challenging and confusing for property owners to fully understand. Therefore, it is recommended that the City train and designate a “historic preservation ambassador” to help property owners navigate this complex regulatory environment, ensuring that more projects move forward.

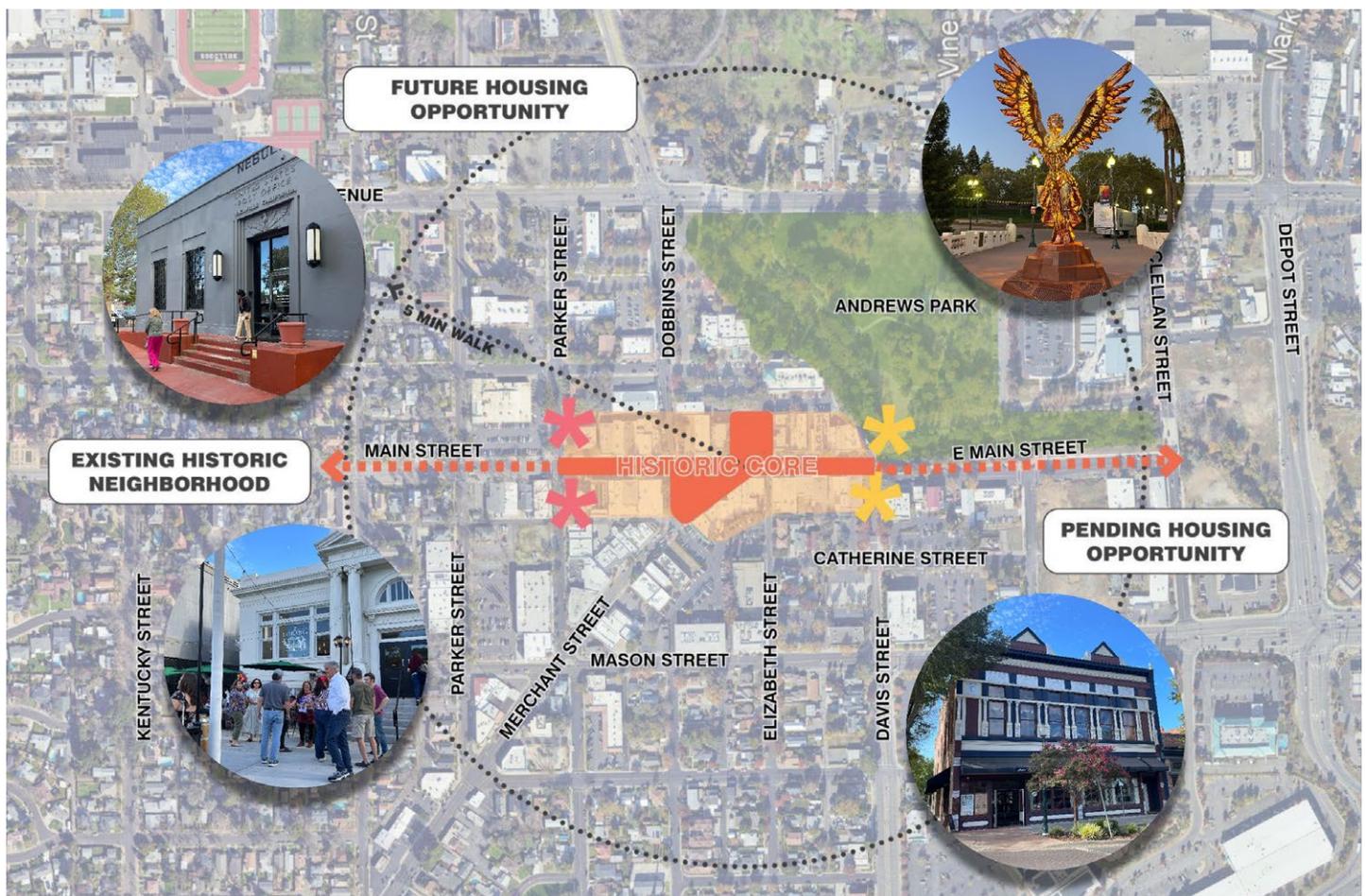
Overall, it is recommended that these URM upgrades should be prioritized as an economic development approach based on historic preservation strategy that both enhances Vacaville’s unique historic character and catalyzes investment in the revitalization of the Downtown. Numerous economic analyses and studies conclude that preserved historic buildings generate more income than comparable businesses housed in more nondescript buildings.

What is the Mills Act?

The Mills Act is “state law, established in 1976, [that] provides for a property tax reduction for owners of qualifying historic properties who agree to comply with certain preservation restrictions and use the property tax savings to help offset the costs to restore, rehabilitate, and maintain their historic resource according to the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the California Historical Building Code*. The Mills Act allows historic property owners to restore their historic buildings; obligate future owners to the maintenance and care of the property; and may provide significant property tax savings to the property owner, particularly to smaller, single-family homeowners” (San Francisco Planning Department, 2014).

Retail Revitalization, Placemaking, and Streetscapes

The revitalization of Downtown Vacaville hinges on enhancing the public realm, with a particular focus on strategic placemaking investments in the existing historic core rather than expanding the downtown area. By concentrating public space enhancements in areas with active businesses and public life potential—such as Main Street’s retail core, Merchant Street’s dining district, the downtown square, and the adjacent Andrews Park—the city can create a “next-level” visitor experience that encourages people to linger and explore the downtown. A dynamic downtown incorporates a range of different types of experiences and activities within a condensed area, each distinct in its own way while connecting the district as a whole.





The Street: Weave into Existing Fabric

A primary focus should be on improving the pedestrian experience. However, rather than completely reimagining the streetscape, Vacaville should enhance its existing street assets. The historic facades, mature trees, and comfortable street widths provide strong “bones” for a vibrant downtown experience.

A variety of strategic improvements could significantly improve pedestrian comfort and encourage visitors to spend more time downtown. One of the key challenges identified by the panel is the wide spacing of trees along streets, which limits shade and reduces thermal comfort during warmer months. By infilling gaps with additional trees, Downtown Vacaville can offer a cooler and more inviting outdoor retail environment for pedestrians. This

not only improves comfort and reduces urban heat island effects, but also establishes a succession strategy for the city’s aging trees, ensuring the streetscape remains vibrant and green for future generations. In tandem with tree planting, upgrading sidewalk paving materials over time would further improve the aesthetic and functional appeal of the area. Enhanced lighting and wayfinding, especially around parking areas, are also crucial for ensuring that both visitors and locals feel safe and well-oriented as they navigate downtown. Finally, centralizing pedestrian and bike furnishings—like benches, bike racks, and public art installations—around gathering areas would foster a more cohesive, pedestrian-friendly environment. The overall goal of this approach is to elevate the entire public realm to support both business activity and community engagement.

A key focus of this streetscape approach should be the Main Street corridor. This central artery of downtown is the perfect length for a retail district, approximately 1,000 feet, making it highly walkable, and ideal for placemaking investments. As much as possible, ground-level uses in this district should be focused on dining, fashion or boutique stores, entertainment, or other active retail uses that engage the public realm; supporting uses for the downtown, such as offices, real estate, or financial services could be located just outside this two-block area. The corridor is also conveniently situated between an existing historic neighborhood on the west end and a pending housing opportunity on the east end, making it a prime location for downtown connection and growth.



The Paseo: Dining District by Design

A particularly exciting opportunity for placemaking lies in transforming the end of Merchant Street into a distinct dining district. This concept, already suggested in the Downtown Specific Plan, involves reclaiming the former street and framing it with destination dining spots, such as the Heritage House Café and the historic Triangle Building. The proposed design within the 200-foot long by 60-foot wide right-of-way area capitalizes on the human-scaled character of the historic fabric to create a community hub paseo and vibrant gateway to Main Street. This approach would offer a more intimate, pedestrian-focused experience compared to the larger Town Square and provide yet another reason for people to visit and engage with Downtown Vacaville.

The Town Square: Community Center

The Town Square is well-positioned to act as a vital, more formal community center in Downtown Vacaville. Its potential can be enhanced through flexible and functional strategies in both the short and long terms. In the near term, pop-up installations like vendor stalls or public art could activate the space, drawing a more diverse crowd and complementing existing businesses. Over time, the square could be redesigned to include permanent infrastructure, such as kiosks and improved lighting, making it better suited for larger events and gatherings. Ideally, the kiosks should expand the retail offerings at the square to increase activity throughout the day and attract a broader group of users. Crucially, the square should foster a strong connection with Main Street and the nearby dining district, creating a cohesive, vibrant downtown experience. This interconnectedness will help attract more visitors and residents, increasing the Downtown's vibrancy and appeal.

The Park: Citywide Gathering

Andrews Park is a valuable asset for Downtown Vacaville, offering expansive space for large-scale events that can attract significant foot traffic to the area. To maximize its potential as a community hub, events at the park should be closely coordinated with downtown merchants, extending activation into the Town Square and Merchant Street Paseo. This would encourage visitors and locals to explore and engage with the downtown beyond the park itself, boosting local business activity. Additionally, there is an opportunity to activate the portion of the park on the opposite side of the park's pedestrian bridge through thoughtful design and programming. Installing features like bocce ball courts or a larger stage with sound and performance capabilities could draw more people to nearby shops, creating a stronger connection between the park and the downtown core.



The Boutique Hotel: Local Hospitality

A boutique hotel on Davis Street that offers guests an immersive downtown experience could help draw tourism, support local restaurants, and diversify Vacaville's current uniformly suburban hospitality offerings. Redeveloping one of the under-utilized outer public parking lots, such as Lot 13, into a hotel could add vitality without negatively impacting existing shops and restaurants.



The Setting: Parking, Lighting, and Security

Parking is an important part of the arrival experience for downtown visitors. Street parking within visible range of storefronts, sidewalks, and street traffic has a welcoming feeling and offers a greater sense of security than the parking supply hidden behind buildings. It is important that access routes to these street parking areas be well-marked with wayfinding. Most importantly, these spaces should feel safe with possible surveillance or a security presence. These improvements will make the Downtown more attractive to use after dark, which is a critical strategy to support restaurants and entertainment venues.



Housing Solutions

Housing will play a supporting role in revitalizing Downtown Vacaville and accommodating the growing Vacaville population. In many ways, existing housing in well-established neighborhoods surrounding the downtown area is a valuable asset to support revitalization efforts, as it is already in close proximity and potentially only needs efforts to improve physical and community connections to the downtown. The success of any new developments will depend upon their location and format. While the introduction of residential units within the downtown core is ideal for creating a more vibrant, active environment, it is important to ensure that housing projects align with market realities and do not replace the historic core's fine-grain, small-lot development pattern.

Currently, small, high-density, mixed-use infill projects, while appealing for their ability to integrate retail and residential uses in urban cores, face significant challenges in terms of financing and parking. These types of projects often require structured parking, which is not only expensive but also difficult to accommodate on smaller parcels. Moreover, financial feasibility of housing projects in Downtown Vacaville is constrained by the City's relatively low rental rates of \$2 to \$3 per square foot compared to other nearby cities; rent must approach \$5 per square foot to be feasible.



Various solutions could be pursued to address this constraint and bring much-needed residential units to the downtown without relying on a series of overly complex or costly small-scale projects. For example, consolidating larger parcels in the two to three blocks just outside the historic core—such as the CVS site and adjacent properties—could allow for more flexible housing production by giving greater options for unit types and parking solutions.

In addition, townhouse developments, which can be built at a lower density and cost, offer a more feasible solution. Market estimates for Vacaville indicate that the cost of construction for a vertical mixed-use development is over \$250 more per square foot than the expected value; in contrast, townhouse developments are estimated to deliver a value \$90 greater than the cost of construction per square foot. To support the production of townhomes, the City may need to consider lowering density requirements in the downtown area, and specifically the CVS site. This would allow developers to build projects that are both financially and logistically achievable, like the much-anticipated 700 PARC project. The City should also consider raising awareness amongst homebuilders of the robust incentives for housing production that are already in its DTSP; these include streamlined design review and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) processing for qualified projects and the absence of inclusionary affordable housing requirements.

While downtown housing is important for generating foot traffic and local activity, it is essential to balance these efforts with broader housing strategies across the city. Larger greenfield sites, particularly east of the freeway, provide a more cost-effective solution for delivering the 2,595 homes required in the next eight years as part of the state-certified Vacaville Housing Element. As these are typically larger sites, they offer more flexibility to use wood for structures and allow for self-parking, both of which allow for the production of housing at a lower cost.

By focusing lower-density, single-family detached homes and traditional higher-density projects like workforce apartments in these areas, Vacaville can meet its housing needs while allowing the Downtown to develop more organically through higher-density, smaller-scale residential projects, ranging from bungalows to Victorian-style homes. This approach will help to diversify the housing stock and the mix of incomes and demographics, all of which is necessary to create a lively and sustainable downtown community.

Ultimately, Downtown Vacaville’s housing strategy should focus on creating a blend of housing types that align with both market conditions and the character of the district. By taking a downtown housing strategy that further aligns with the city-wide housing strategy, the City can create an approach that both fosters its Downtown while meeting broader housing goals.



Downtown Marketing and Vibrancy

Creating a vibrant Downtown Vacaville is as much about strategic marketing as it is about physical revitalization. Driving foot traffic to downtown is key to boosting its vibrancy, which can be accomplished by various mechanisms, strategies, and campaigns.

There's a need to bolster the existing Business Improvement District (BID) to enhance the City's capacity for marketing and programming. Currently, the BID operates on a budget of less than \$200,000, which is insufficient to meet the needs of a growing downtown. By increasing the BID's funding, potentially to double its current amount, the City can expand its downtown programming, improve coordination among stakeholders, and more effectively promote the area as a destination for both residents and visitors. Although the timing does not appear right for a Property and Business Improvement District (PBID), this opportunity should be periodically evaluated.

The City should also work to strengthen existing partnerships with key downtown marketing organizations and stakeholders, such as Visit Vacaville, Vacaville Chamber of Commerce, and the Downtown Vacaville Business Improvement District (DVBID). This begins by building stronger lines of communication among the City, the organizations, and downtown business and property owners. Regularly scheduled downtown stakeholder meetings would help to create a more collaborative atmosphere. These meetings could be supplemented with initiatives like business walks or online surveys to gather feedback from merchants. An additional essential aspect of marketing Downtown Vacaville is ensuring that events and activities are well-publicized and reach a broad audience. One recommendation is to develop a centralized events calendar that includes all downtown organizations and venues, helping to avoid scheduling conflicts and maximizing community participation.



Building upon an existing successful framework, the City should expand support for public art and cultural programs and continue popular festivals and events that already draw people to the area. This approach can be strengthened with additional unique events that celebrate community culture and history. This strategy can help Vacaville differentiate itself from neighboring cities and provide unique experiences for residents and visitors alike.

Wayfinding and branding will also play a crucial role in shaping Downtown Vacaville's identity and visitor experience. Creative and fun signage can guide visitors between key areas, encouraging them to explore more of the district and boosting the visibility of businesses. By soliciting more community engagement in the development of these materials, wayfinding and signage can incorporate unique artistic graphics and branded elements that reflect Downtown Vacaville's character. As part of this approach, grassroots marketing tactics, such as engaging local artisans to design branding elements like banners, bike racks, and trash cans, would foster a sense of community ownership and visibility. Local organizations could also be tapped to support these efforts; for example, partner with the Heritage Council to implement QR codes for historic markers throughout the Downtown to provide additional interaction and education. Such creative approaches would not only beautify Downtown but also reflect its unique character, drawing in visitors who are looking for more than the typical suburban shopping experience.

To boost community pride in Vacaville and the downtown area, the City and stakeholders could also support a "Shop Local" campaign with a focus on buying locally and recirculating economic activity within the community. To boost this campaign, invite influencers to campaign events and host travel writer familiarization (FAM) tours. This initiative would not only strengthen Downtown businesses but also educate residents on how their spending contributes directly to the growth and vitality of the local economy.

Ultimately, the long-term success of Downtown Vacaville hinges on consistent, creative marketing efforts that reflect its historic charm and growing vibrancy. By leveraging BID resources, strengthening existing partnerships, expanding arts and cultural programming, and focusing on creative wayfinding and branding, the City can create a dynamic downtown that attracts both businesses and people, contributing to its ongoing revitalization.



Phased Targeted Actions

By implementing these targeted actions in phases—short-term, mid-term, and long-term—Vacaville can adopt an achievable roadmap that ensures its Downtown becomes a thriving destination for residents, visitors, and businesses alike.

	Short-Term: Launch in the Next Year	Mid-Term: 2-5 Years	Long-Term: 5+ Years
Historic Buildings and Unreinforced Masonry Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Designate a “historic preservation ambassador” to help property owners navigate the complex regulatory environment, ensuring more projects move forward; □ Launch a cost-sharing initiative for a URM structural assessment focused on seismic needs to help prioritize and develop a coordinated action plan; □ Study and educate stakeholders on the State Historical Building Code benefits; and □ Analyze adopting the Mills Act Program for possible incentives to invest in the rehabilitation of URM buildings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Incentivize historic revitalization with the Storefront Grant Pilot □ Seek grant funding for targeted improvements; □ Institute a Mills Act Program; and □ Implement URM upgrades. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Deploy an economic development-based historic preservation strategy to preserve historic character and encourage reinvestment; and □ Continue facade, code, and URM improvement programs.
Retail Revitalization, Placemaking, and Streetscapes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Focus investment on improving the quality of existing public spaces supporting existing shops and restaurants rather than expanding the retail district north; □ Enhance the streetscape by adding trees, bike parking, and furnishing amenities; □ Create pop-ups in the Town Square; and □ Address perception that off-street City parking lots are not well-lit or safe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Align lighting study area to match with BID geographical boundaries for simplicity of implementation; and □ Strengthen the dining district with the Merchant Street Paseo. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Update Town Square design with permanent kiosks, lighting, and event infrastructure; □ Upgrade Main Street sidewalks and intersection crossings; and □ Promote development of a boutique hotel on Davis Street.
Housing Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Focus campaigns on connecting existing neighborhoods to Downtown; and □ Promote the 700 PARC investment to show that Downtown investment is achievable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Market the DTSP’s robust housing incentive package; and □ Consider a density reduction on CVS site to 15 dwelling units/acre. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Seek opportunities to assemble larger sites as vibrancy increases the downtown area (e.g., the next PARC-like investment or the larger CVS site).
Downtown Marketing and Vibrancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Create a “Shop Local” campaign, invite influencers, and host travel writer familiarization (FAM) tours; □ Partner with the Heritage Council to implement QR codes for historic markers throughout the Downtown to provide additional interaction and education; □ Continue art programming throughout the Downtown; □ Identify potential BID funding streams to build more capacity for programming and marketing; and □ Strengthen coordination and communication amongst stakeholders to build trust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Implement experiential wayfinding and historic core branding; □ Reconsider formation of a PBID; and □ Utilize city databases to improve communication and outreach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Create a Downtown Vacaville champion program; and □ Continue expansion of BID “best practice” programming.



Kelly Kline
TAP Co-chair
Associate Vice President of Local Government Affairs, Stanford University

Kelly Kline has dedicated her career to working for and with the public sector in Silicon Valley during transformative years for the region. She has helped to create public-private partnerships that enhance the Bay Area's innovation ecosystem, sustainable urban development, and solutions to civic challenges.

As the Associate Vice President of Local Government Affairs at Stanford, Kelly serves as a key connection between the university and legislative policy makers across multiple cities and two counties. Stanford's leadership on housing, transportation, childcare, and climate change make it an engaged stakeholder and thought partner throughout the region.

Kelly has served in lead economic development roles in San José, Fremont and Cupertino. Downtown revitalization has been a particular area of focus including planning for transformational mixed-use projects, small business support, and public space programming.

Kelly earned a BA in Journalism and Political Science, as well as a MPA from San José State University. A dedicated urbanist, she lives in Downtown San José with her family and is an avid long-distance runner. Among her favorite volunteer activities is serving as a student facilitator for ULI's Urban Plan program.



Ryan Call
TAP Co-chair
Partner, Urban Field Studio

With over 20 years of experience in planning and architectural design, Ryan has developed a particular expertise in master planning mixed-use urban communities with a focus on vibrant retail districts and public spaces. His primary interest lies in the strategic aspects of the design and development process where he has worked on a variety of projects from neighborhood shopping centers to regional shopping centers, to mixed-use multi-block districts. His presentation expertise has proven key to the success of many projects, especially during the critical public process and approvals phases. Ryan enjoys volunteering his time with ULI's Urban Plan program at Piedmont High School, and coaching sailing with the Richmond Yacht Club Junior Program.



A. Don Capobres
TAP Panelist
Principal, Harmonie Park Development

With over 30 years of real estate development experience, Don is well-versed in every aspect of the industry in both the private and public sectors. My broad range of responsibilities has included such high-profile positions such as representing U.S. real estate development interests of Grosvenor, an international property group, and acting as a project manager for a public agency in the City of San Francisco. Don brings a unique combination of political savvy, interpersonal skills, and understanding of real estate investment fundamentals to each project he works on. As a well-respected community leader and business partner, Don's passion for transformative urban placemaking pairs with his expertise in rental/for-sale residential, retail and hospitality, making him an exceptional choice for any team who strives for innovative solutions and progressive thinking.



Tracey Flaningam
TAP Panelist
Partner, Community Strong Strategies, LLC

As a partner with Community Strong Strategies, an economic development and community engagement consulting firm based in Northern CA, Tracey brings over 25+ years of expertise, with an emphasis on business attraction, expansion, and retention efforts. She is known for her innovative approach in comprehensive marketing, programmatic, and placemaking strategies. She also is recognized for her strategic planning skills as well as her capacity building mentorship. Tracey currently works with multiple nonprofit organizations, where she spearheads collaboration and engagement amongst partners.



Mariana Ricker
TAP Panelist
Associate, SWA Group

Mariana has been with SWA San Francisco since 2016 and became an Associate in 2018. While in school, she received her bachelor's degree in landscape architecture with minors in sustainable design and conservation resource studies. Mariana is passionate about California landscapes and emphasizes the importance of site-specific, sustainable landscape design. She enjoys working in urban settings that engage diverse user groups and activate spaces essential to civic life.

In her work as a licensed landscape architect, Mariana seeks to create memorable experiences, connect people to the environment, and provide elegant solutions to accomplish the project vision. At SWA, she works on a wide range of projects, from community parks to district-scale urban development and planning around the Bay Area and beyond. Mariana is committed to climate action and advancing sustainability efforts within her project work and professionally. Additionally, she is an active ULI member, serving as Vice Chair for the local Technical Assistance for Communities (TA4C) committee, and holding a position on the national Sustainable Development Council.



Danielle Surdin-O'Leary
TAP Panelist
Director of Entitlements and Local Partnerships,
Prologis

Prologis is the leader in logistics real estate and is the world's largest Industrial Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT), with over 2.8% of the world's GDP flowing through Prologis distribution centers annually. Danielle's role focuses on assisting capital deployment teams in monitoring land-use regulations, zoning changes impacting warehouse development. Danielle joined the Prologis Government Affairs team in 2022, after a 20-year career in the public sector.

Her experience includes serving in executive level economic development roles with Bay Area cities. Her expertise includes outreach and public policy development; marketing and brand development; building relationships with city, county, and state elected officials. Danielle holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration, with a minor in Communications from Concordia University, Irvine.



H Ruth Todd, FAIA, AICP
TAP Panelist
Principal and Board Chair, Page & Turnbull, Inc.

Ruth Todd, FAIA, is an architect and planner and Board Chair of Page & Turnbull, with offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Jose. Page & Turnbull was established in 1973 and was one of the first architecture firms in California to dedicate its practice to historic preservation and is among the longest practicing such firms in the country.

In her daily work, Ruth promotes a comprehensive vision of how historic structures can activate neighborhoods and enrich daily experience. A nationally recognized thought leader, Ruth has led cultural and historic resource surveys and master plans across the United States that have catalyzed economic development and forged stronger communities. Her preservation plan for Charleston, South Carolina won broad acclaim as an exemplar and a National Preservation Honor Award for preserving one of the world's most beautiful and historic cities during a period of significant growth pressures. Ruth has been responsible for many award-winning adaptive reuse projects throughout California.

In every phase of Ruth's career, she has worked at the intersection of architecture, preservation, sustainability, and urban design. She began her career as a Main Street Architect, providing designs and training to property owners of historic buildings in downtowns in South Carolina and in 37 cities throughout California. Prior to joining Page & Turnbull, Ruth was responsible for enhancing the historic character of the Frederick Law Olmsted designed campus as Stanford University's Associate University Architect.



Alison Ecker, AICP
TAP Writer
Associate Principal, SWA Group

Alison joined SWA in 2018 after graduating with dual Master of Landscape Architecture and Master of City Planning degrees from the University of California, Berkeley. She became an Associate in 2020 and an Associate Principal in 2023. While at SWA, she has led various large-scale planning and entitlement projects for public open space systems as well as research, hospital, residential, and resort campuses, particularly in Northern California. Her experience navigating these challenging and complex projects—particularly in relationship to wildfire—led to a series of SWA-led wildfire design innovation research efforts and collaborations. Alison is an American Institute of Certified Planner (AICP) and an active member of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) as well as the Urban Land Institute (ULI).

Reference Materials:

- [City of Vacaville Downtown Specific Plan](#)
- [City of Vacaville General Plan](#)
- TAP Briefing Book, City of Vacaville, August 2024

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