

Codman Square Neighborhood Business District

Recommendations for Discussion with Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation

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Prototype Recommendations Urban Action Lab Spring 2021

Research Conducted in partnership with Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation and the Sasaki Foundation

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Corcoran Center Urban Action Lab developed recommendations during the 2020-2021 academic year as part of an ongoing project to strengthen the Codman Square Business District. Students and professors from the Corcoran Center for Real Estate and Urban Action researched several forms to ensure the proposals for economic development considered legitimate neighborhood input and reflected neighborhood data.

These methods of study included interviews with local businesses, an anonymous residential survey, a vacancy analysis, and several meetings with local community-based organizations. Realizing the strengths and potential opportunities for growth and development, the research team seeks to reinforce strengths and build on opportunities that are generated from expressed community interests.

With *design thinking and emergent strategy* at the core of the project, these recommendations are representative of ideas that are low cost, implementable across a short time window, and test ideas/concepts that can be improved and scaled as practical.

The recommendations were initially presented to Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation (CSNDC) as recommendations prescribed for various stakeholders in Codman Square:

1. Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation
2. City of Boston
3. Real Estate Community / Developers

These same recommendations have been recast as activities that can be undertaken by CSNDC in the short term. Research efforts highlighted several strengths and areas for opportunity in the community. The residential survey shows that residents shop in the business district two to three times per week. However, the commercial opportunities do not satisfy most residents.

The interviews with local businesspeople and the survey respondents indicated an interest in more dining options, especially sit-down options, or a place to convene and converse with others (e.g., coffee shops).¹ The vacancy analysis demonstrated that restaurants that had previously been occupied or had never opened remained closed. Certain types of dining, such as sit-down restaurants, taverns, cafes, and pubs, offer food options that reflect the cultures represented in Codman Square and the time of day and type of activity that reflects the interests of the neighborhood. For example, a sit-down restaurant that serves traditional Caribbean cuisine

¹ This result is consistent with the findings of the team's vacancy analysis Door to Door Vacancy Analysis conducted March 9, 2021

should do well in Codman Square. One of the key findings from presenting the survey results to community-based organizations was that community members want to empower those in the surrounding community, especially BIPOC residents, to own businesses. Thus, we aim to focus our proposal on strengthening the tools and capacity of current residents rather than searching for tenants in the larger community.

WHAT IS A PROTOTYPE?

A prototype is a pilot or a test. In the case of economic development, it is a program that can be implemented as a concept of an idea that has greater potential with more time and resources. It is a way of exploring what works, not just what is efficient, and helps determine what is applicable and relevant to the specific details of the intervention. Prototypes provide an opportunity to explore what works and what is responsive and acceptable in a given context. Through prototyping and reinforcing projects that demonstrate incremental success, programs can be implemented.

All of the recommendations depend on being responsive to the business and residential community. The economic development prototypes here focus on a response to the needs of the neighborhood and businesses and include interventions that fall into three categories: Business Support Organization, Support Entrepreneurship, and Placemaking.

PROTOTYPE RECOMMENDATIONS

BUSINESS SUPPORT ORGANIZATION - “Mobilize the Business District”

Central to a plan to mobilize actions to improve the Codman Square Business district is developing a business working group supported by business owners. The strategy to implement the prototypes outlined here is dependent on reinforcing a plan that emerges from business and residents.

1) Mobilize a group of business leaders that are willing to initiate actions to strengthen business in the district.

This organization can serve as a point of focus for Codman Square Business District needs and communicating the Business District “Point of View” to the city and state. This effort could be managed by Codman Square but could also be managed and advanced with an independent organization focused 100% on business development in the Codman Square Business District. This organization could potentially be the host of all of the following recommendations depending on the evolving strategy of Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation.

2) Prepare a “Buy in Codman” initiative that informs the city of business and product availability in the Codman Square Primary Trade Area. Present all Codman Square businesses to relevant City of Boston departments that engage in procurement activities.

In keeping with recent analysis that reveals that less than 3% of City of Boston procurement went to businesses run by People of Color, this initiative can support and advance the city’s interest in supporting local businesses.

3) Support existing businesses in the Codman Square Business District by beautifying shopping areas. This can be accomplished in the short term by developing a team that is dedicated to ongoing cleaning in the Codman Square Business District.

The short-term actions for cleaning and maintenance include developing a “Clean Team” that could be implemented with youth this summer. This initiative can also be advanced by issuing a specific request to the Department of Public Works to increase the Level of Effort (LOE) in the Codman Square Business District as directed by the newly-formed business community leadership group. Codman could also benefit from voluntary placement of trees and planters. The Clean Team employed this summer could work in partnership with Boston Public Works to add planters.

SUPPORT ENTREPRENEURSHIP - “Encourage homegrown businesses”

One of the underlying sentiments through all business interviews and resident responses is respect for community businesses, locally-owned businesses, and Black-owned businesses. The following prototype recommendations are particularly responsive to these goals.

- 1) Encourage and incentivize local entrepreneurial development by providing regular entrepreneurship workshops. Develop a sustained plan for entrepreneurial mentorship.**

Identify an expert partner with a program and a track record of sustained entrepreneurial development and coordinate a space and regular meetings. This regular workshop should take place in the business district and in partnership with business district owners and managers.

- 2) Develop a restaurant incubator to help bridge the growth of food businesses created at home or in a shared kitchen to a more formalized business model.**

Food services comprise the employment of nearly 24% of the jobs of the entire district. Caribbean food is a specialty for the neighborhood. Assisting food service businesses with pathways to more formal operations is a straightforward means of expanding successful and locally-valued businesses.

Codman Square residents and community members have expressed their interest in an increased presence of sit-down restaurants, specific preferences towards healthy options, and a cafe or culturally rich cuisine. The combination of the residents’ expectations for a new dining location, the Caribbean cuisine in the neighborhood, and the high percentage of food service workers in the community, points to the potential for innovation and business creation.

PLACEMAKING - “Give them a reason to stay.”

The Codman Square Business District has a specific culture that businesses and residents wish to preserve. The research points to the community’s interest in preserving and advancing The Codman Square Business District as a vital walkable shopping area with amenities that strengthen the shopping experience. This initiative falls into three categories: 1) cleaning and maintenance, 2) programming and 3) longer term planning for the public realm.

- 1) Increased use of existing outdoor space by creating places for people to meet, congregate, and eat. This can be accomplished by placing a small number of picnic tables in a public park to provide space for people to meet.**

When asked in the resident survey what the pros were to shopping in Codman Square, the options chosen least were “open space and public amenities” and “a nice shopping environment”. Creating more active public spaces will contribute to this feeling.

- 2) Coordinate a regular street closing event that creates a pedestrian mall on a dedicated weekday night or weekend time.**

One of the most successful local annual events in the district is the Summer Caribbean festival. Developing a means of engaging the community more frequently with similar events will create better connection with the community and a more vibrant business district. By creating a regular event that brings walkers and shoppers into the community, new customers identify restaurants and shops that they can frequent on non-festival (pedestrian mall) days. A regular, closed-street event would shut down a section of Washington Street one day a week during warm months, ideally on a regular day beginning in May or June and ending after September, and would encourage pedestrians to come to Codman and shop and dine locally. This could be done between Kenwood and Rosedale. This section has a variety of restaurants and shops that would benefit from the increased foot traffic of a pedestrian mall. These would serve as a point of interest, drawing curious passersby to the pedestrian mall, and giving residents a place to sit and eat food picked up from a local restaurant.

- 3) Develop a planning initiative to 1) develop a set of voluntary guidelines for storefronts for the Codman Square Business District and 2) develop a streetscape and greening vision that advances public safety and walking with the defined purpose of increasing pedestrian use and access to Codman Square Business District.**

Resident survey respondents identified top priorities such as “storefront improvements” and “public space improvements and outdoor seating areas.” To cultivate the vibrant business district that business district owners and residents seek, landlords and business owners should be engaged to develop design guidelines for storefronts and a planning initiative that focuses on streetscape and greening of the district. This could focus allocation of funds to upgrade storefronts with metal grates and attractive signage.

CONCLUSION:

In order to address the interests of business district managers, owners, and residents, our team proposes this series of Economic Development Prototypes as a starting point for small-scale interactions that have the potential to grow and expand into high-impact, long-term interventions.

None of the recommendations are extraordinary or departures from what has been successful in other business districts. The recommendations acknowledge that there is great value in the existing Business District and that there are assets upon which to strengthen the vibrancy of the Business District. In all cases, these recommendations are grounded in input from business and resident stakeholders.

The primary and most impactful recommendation is for the mobilization of a business district support organization. If such an organization was mobilized with dedicated business owners and managers, this organization will have the authority and credibility to accomplish all of the recommended prototypes. Through this entity, focus can be placed on needed interventions that are driven by a common understanding of the district needs.

Each of the recommended prototypes has great potential for expansion and growth. The Corcoran Center will continue to support and advance the efforts of the evolution of Economic Development in the short term through the Corcoran Center Internship program and the long term through ongoing research and partnership.

GRATITUDE

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