

DC Vibrant Retail Streets Toolkit & Implementation

2015



Overview

The DC Vibrant Retail Streets Toolkit, developed by the DC Office of Planning and Streetsense, evaluates the essential elements of outstanding retail areas and offers a customizable toolbox of programs and implementation steps that allows users to measure, gauge and spark retail vibrancy.

As the District's retail economy continues to evolve and grow, retail streets in DC's neighborhoods face a variety of issues and opportunities. The Toolkit is designed to build on retailers' renewed interest in urban markets as well as the growing number of people who choose the city's walkable, bike-friendly, transit-rich neighborhoods to shop and access services.

Components

This study offers a set of tools that can be used by retailers, business and merchants' associations, government agencies, and community groups to address and resolve specific issues affecting DC's retail districts. Toolkit users undertake a diagnostic assessment of retail street vibrancy and are then offered direction and next steps for establishing a more vibrant street.

The toolkit incorporates research on best practices and innovative approaches to managing successful commercial districts. The study also offers guidance on key issues such as retailers' site location considerations and decision making processes.

Key Takeaways

Analysis revealed that vibrant retail streets typically share a number of important attributes, including:

- **Managed** by an active merchants' or non-profit organization
- **Retail-appropriate** spaces including transparent storefronts and adequate sidewalks
- **Mix** of tenants, usually focusing on a single retail category such as fashion or food and beverage
- **Safety**, as perceived by shoppers and pedestrians
- **Championed** by the private and/or public sectors
- **Anchored** by a civic or cultural feature that attracts people for non-commercial reasons
- **Walkable**, as part of a walkable community supported by pedestrian-oriented residents
- **Unified** by a common character, often historical in nature, helping create a cohesive district

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Diagnostic

The Toolkit allows neighborhoods to assess and diagnose their starting point on an eight-step 'retail vibrancy scale' and offers solutions for helping retail areas progress on the scale and achieve more vibrancy.



Implementation

OP piloted the implementation of the DC Vibrant Retail Toolkit in a total of 11 diverse neighborhoods across the city. The first phase was a pilot initiative in Anacostia and Congress Heights, and the second phase was the roll-out to nine neighborhoods across the city through a competitive process. The second phase neighborhoods were: Rhode Island Avenue NE, Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, Central 14th Street, Brightwood, Deanwood, Fairlawn/Penn Ave SE, Golden Triangle, and Van Ness (UDC area).

Toolkit neighborhoods participated in a technical assistance program, which included an intensive workshop and follow-up assistance. The program focused on:

- Understanding retail economics (**'Retail 101'**)
- Communicating this understanding (**'Train the Translator'**)
- Identifying a reality-based approach to tackling retail issues within communities (**'Implementation'**)

Retail teams identified and customized solutions for each neighborhood's specific issues and opportunities. Follow-up assistance and products included a safe streets audit, a business buy-in program, a broker outreach strategy, visualizations of activated retail streets, and guidance on transforming an underutilized space into a commercial kitchen.

The toolkit is allowing OP to have a very different conversation with retail stakeholders that is grounded in education about retail realities, championed by neighborhoods, and geared towards realistic implementation. OP is currently applying the toolkit to the following areas: Columbia Heights, Lower Georgia Avenue, Kennedy Street, Downtown Ward 7, Bellevue, Dupont Circle, Fort Totten and North Capitol Street.

Additional Information

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