



DOWNTOWN FAR ROCKAWAY

Comprehensive, Collaborative,
Community-Driven Commercial Revitalization

April
2018





careers
businesses
neighborhoods

The NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) helps unlock economic potential and create economic security for all New Yorkers by connecting New Yorkers to good jobs, creating stronger businesses, and building thriving neighborhoods across the five boroughs.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Executive Summary	4
II.	Introduction	6
III.	Neighborhood Context	8
IV.	Commercial Revitalization Assets and Challenges	12
V.	Commercial Revitalization Best Practices	16
	A. Business Retention and Attraction	19
	B. Commercial District Improvements and Maintenance	22
	C. Public Space Programming	25
	D. Merchant and Stakeholder Organizing and Support	27
VI.	Call to Action	30

DOWNTOWN FAR ROCKAWAY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Change is coming to Downtown Far Rockaway. For decades the community has fostered fertile conditions for new investment - despite considerable challenges. Long-term residents, business owners and other key stakeholders have expressed both the challenges of and possible solutions for new development and revitalization in the downtown commercial district. This report describes the area's many assets, such as dedicated small business owners and active community institutions. These are the backbone of Downtown Far Rockaway: they make equitable commercial revitalization possible and position the community to make the most of a recent rezoning that paves the way for high density development and over \$126

million in public investments for affordable housing, public space and neighborhood services.

The recommendations offered here are tools both the City and Rockaway community groups can leverage to strengthen local small businesses and make Downtown Far Rockaway a vibrant commercial corridor that serves local needs. While the future of Downtown Far Rockaway is uncertain, it is clear that equitable development that preserves small businesses and caters to long-time residents as well as newcomers will require comprehensive community-driven planning and collaborative action.

COMMERCIAL REVITALIZATION GOALS



BUSINESS RETENTION AND ATTRACTION

1. Implement multi-pronged business retention strategies
2. Foster a pipeline for local small business owners
3. Bolster efforts to hire locally by connecting area businesses and residents
4. Attract new and innovative businesses to Downtown Far Rockaway



PUBLIC SPACE PROGRAMMING

1. Showcase local vendors while activating and maintaining public spaces
2. Increase arts, cultural and inter-generational programming



COMMERCIAL DISTRICT IMPROVEMENTS & MAINTENANCE

1. Create a cohesive, recognizable and pedestrian-friendly environment
2. Improve cleanliness and increase safety



MERCHANT AND STAKEHOLDER ORGANIZING AND SUPPORT

1. Strengthen Rockaway East Merchants Association (REMA)
2. Create a comprehensive marketing strategy for the commercial district, highlighting local business owners
3. Strengthen existing and develop new cross-sectoral partnerships



New Investments
Legend:
■ Residential
■ Commercial
■ Open Space
■ Public Facility



New Commercial Development



Renovated Queens Public Library



New Public Plazas

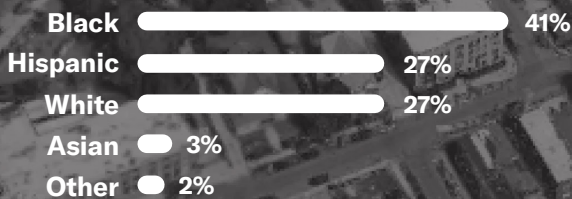
NEIGHBORHOOD SNAPSHOT

Total Population
54,264

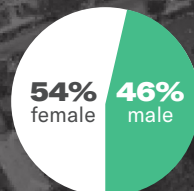
Life Expectancy
75.5 years

Median Household Income
\$44,094

Race / Ethnicity



Gender





SBS-funded storefront improvements on the Smith Building.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rockaways is a study in contrasts – from summer beach bungalows in Breezy Point to highly concentrated public housing in Arverne and Edgemere; from the hustle and bustle of Rockaway Beach to the relative desolation of Beach Channel Drive. It is one of New York City’s neighborhoods most vulnerable to climate change and, at the same time, the site of recent, concentrated public investment and new zoning for high density residential development.¹

Given the growing, peninsula-wide need for goods and services and the citywide demand for development opportunities, Downtown Far Rockaway is well positioned to accommodate growth while addressing long-standing local needs for jobs, improved and expanded retail, small business support, public space improvements and overall social resiliency. In 2016, the Downtown Far Rockaway Working Group – a coalition of state and local elected officials, business owners, non-profit leaders and other critical community stakeholders – developed a plan for the comprehensive revitalization of the neighborhood, the Downtown Far Rockaway Roadmap for Action. In September 2017, the City approved an area-wide rezoning as part

of a comprehensive neighborhood plan that is based, at least in part, on the Roadmap. The rezoning is expected to bring over \$126 million in new City investment to the neighborhood, including affordable housing, transportation improvements, new public plazas and workforce development programs, among other neighborhood services.

This long-term plan for Downtown Far Rockaway is expected to stimulate the local economy by attracting more businesses, workers and shoppers to the area. The City estimates that the approved rezoning will pave the way for the development of approximately 164,600 square feet of retail space and more than 3,100 apartments, which will house over 8,000 new residents.² To ensure inclusive and equitable revitalization, this projected infusion of new people and businesses must be coupled with strategic interventions by the City to bolster existing physical and social assets and tackle long-standing neighborhood challenges that have hampered growth.

CHANGE IS COMING

Downtown Far Rockaway (DTFR) stands on the eastern edge of the Rockaway peninsula, directly adjacent to the Queens mainland. It is the only area on the entire peninsula outside of the 100-year floodplain. While it was not as devastated as the rest of the Rockaways by Superstorm Sandy in 2012, Downtown Far Rockaway sustained damage that took a toll on the local economy.

Historically a vibrant tourist destination, residential community, and commercial core of the peninsula, Far Rockaway has suffered from disinvestment and decline for the past several decades. Today, the community boasts a dedicated core of small businesses organized under the Rockaway East Merchants Association (REMA) umbrella. Key neighborhood institutions have long-served the community including Rockaway Development and Revitalization Corporation (RDRC), the Addabbo Family Health Center and the local branch of the Queens Library, to name a few. Multiple faith-based organizations are also deeply involved in the community and reflect the diverse makeup of Downtown Far Rockaway.

At the same time, like many low-income neighborhoods in New York City, Downtown Far Rockaway faces substantive challenges. A history of disinvestment, destructive development policies and a lack of comprehensive planning have long hindered vibrant neighborhood growth. In the 1950s, a fire caused the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) Rockaway Beach Branch, a rail line that connected the Montauk, Atlantic and Far Rockaway branches, to shut down. During this time, urban renewal policies razed whole neighborhoods to make way for public housing in the peninsula – close to 10,000 residents concentrated in 60 buildings³ within a four-mile stretch. Inadequate public transportation makes it hard for Rockaways residents to get to jobs in Manhattan or mainland Queens, insufficient social services are a barrier to maintaining health and well-being, and sparse retail outlets, including few full-service grocery stores, force suboptimal shopping choices.

It is, however, a new day in Downtown Far Rockaway. Substantial City investments in housing, transportation and open space, paired with significant zoning changes, open the door to growth and development. The challenge will be to ensure that long-time residents and small business owners enjoy the benefits of renewed investment in their neighborhood.

A comprehensive, community-driven, collaborative approach will be key to advancing the commercial revitalization goals of Rockaway residents, workers, business owners, and the Downtown Far Rockaway Working Group. Equitable economic development is within reach – it is up to the City and the community to work intentionally, innovatively and, most importantly, together to achieve it.

This report lays out ingredients for commercial revitalization success that take stock of Downtown Far Rockaway's assets and challenges. The following chapter sets the stage for the revitalization of Downtown Far Rockaway. It delves into the complex history of the community, takes a closer look at current residents and provides an overview of the built environment. Chapter III focuses on community assets – essential levers for equitable economic development – and anticipated challenges as the neighborhood grows and changes. Chapter IV lays out the key ingredients for comprehensive commercial revitalization in four broad buckets:

- Business Retention and Attraction,
- Commercial District Improvements and Maintenance,
- Public Space Programming and
- Merchant and Stakeholder Organizing and Support.

Featured in this chapter are commercial district case studies – inspiring models that demonstrate how other NYC neighborhoods have tackled revitalization challenges. Finally, we close with a call to action for Downtown Far Rockaway's strong and diverse network of stakeholders to lead the way forward to a comprehensive, collaborative, community-driven commercial revitalization.



Shops along Beach 20th Street.

II. NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

HISTORY

During the early 1900s, new rail access brought more New Yorkers to the Rockaway Peninsula than ever before, quickly transforming it into what became known as New York City's "playground." The seaside community was an escape from city life with its beaches, resorts and amusement parks. Breezy Point provided beach bungalows where vacationers spent their summers, while Arverne drew year-round residents with its beachfront accommodations.

The Rockaways continued its shift into a residential community well into the mid-20th century, but not without substantial challenges to its growth. In 1950, a fire destroyed train service to the peninsula, leaving the area inaccessible to those without cars.⁴ Although rail access was eventually restored and integrated into the city subway system, by that time, New Yorkers, like the rest of America, owned more cars and had access to more highways to reach other recreation options. New attractions such as the New York Aquarium

in Coney Island and Jones Beach State Park in Long Island competed with the Rockaways for vacationers and daytrippers alike. Additionally, urban renewal tore apart the peninsula's communities as neighborhoods were razed to make way for large clusters of public housing.

In 2012, the Rockaways confronted a new challenge: climate change. A barrier island well within the 100-year floodplain, the Rockaways didn't stand a chance as Superstorm Sandy battered the peninsula with thirty-foot offshore waves while flood levels inland rose to over 6 feet.⁵ Rockaway residents were left without heat, hot water, electricity and cell phone service for weeks, some for months. Completely cut off from the mainland, community-based organizations banded together to ensure that families had food, seniors were safe and community members knew that they were not alone.

Although downtown Far Rockaway physically was less devastated by Sandy due to its

higher elevation, the local economy still took a substantial hit. The neighborhood suffered blackouts, job loss and insufficient supplies, making it impossible for local businesses to reopen for an extended time. Today, reconstruction and rehabilitation of homes, businesses and infrastructure are near complete.⁶ However, Far Rockaway must continue to strengthen both its physical and social resilience in order to confront the unpredictable but inevitable effects of climate change.

PEOPLE

A majority of Far Rockaway's almost 54,000 residents identify as African American (41%), while just over a quarter are Hispanic or Latino (27%) and another quarter are White (27%). The median household income of \$44,000 is 20 percent lower than New York City's (\$55,000).⁷ At over 8 percent, unemployment in Far Rockaway is more than double that of the City (3.9%). About 23 percent of Far Rockaway residents live below the poverty line, compared to under 20 percent of residents citywide.⁸ Together with the rest of the peninsula, Far Rockaway residents have the 55th (out of 59) lowest life expectancy in New York City at just under 76 years. That means that Rockaways residents, on average, live almost 10 fewer years than residents of the Financial District. Sixteen percent of peninsula residents do not have health insurance, 9 percent went without needed medical care and almost 12 percent receive late or no prenatal care during pregnancy.⁹

PLACES

Far Rockaway is a majority rental community accessible by different modes of transit. Three-quarters of the neighborhood's households are renters, of which 5 percent – some 10,500 residents – live in public housing.¹⁰ Residents are served by a strong network of community facilities, including large institutions such as the Queens Public Library; community development and social service organizations such as RDRC in the heart of downtown Far Rockaway, as well as Ocean Bay CDC, CAMBA and Rockaway Waterfront Alliance further down the peninsula; multiple faith-based organizations such as First Church of God and the Jewish Community Council; and health institutions like the Addabbo Family Health Center and St. John's Episcopal Hospital.

The neighborhood is linked to the region through public transit. It is the southern terminus of MTA's A Line and the western terminus of the LIRR Far Rockaway Branch. Multiple bus routes connect the area to the rest of the peninsula, Midtown Manhattan, and neighboring Nassau County. There is also bus service that links residents to the NYC Ferry Rockaway route. However, the average commute time of 53 minutes is the longest in the city.¹¹ Far Rockaway's rich social network and robust, though slow, transit infrastructure stand in contrast to the vacant lots scattered throughout the commercial district, as well as a lack of quality public open space.

Hurricane Sandy damage on the New York City Subway's Rockaway Line (A train). Source: MTA (flickr:<https://flickr.kr/p/dpxEmN>)



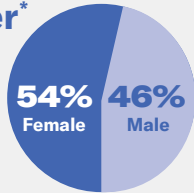
NEIGHBORHOOD SNAPSHOT

DEMOGRAPHICS

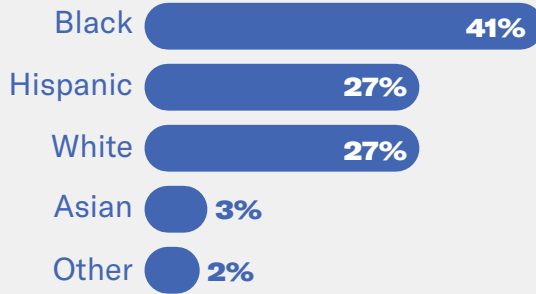
Total Population*

54,264

Gender*



Race / Ethnicity*



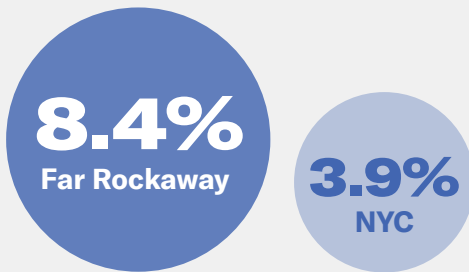
Median Household Income*

\$44,094 Far Rockaway **\$55,191** NYC

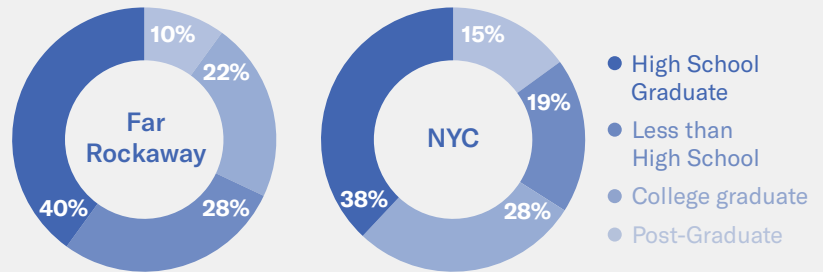
Poverty Rate*

22.8% Far Rockaway **19.9%** NYC

Unemployment Rate*



Educational Attainment*



HEALTH

Public Health in the Rockaway Peninsula†

79% of Rockaway Peninsula residents self reported health as 'excellent,' 'very good' or 'good'

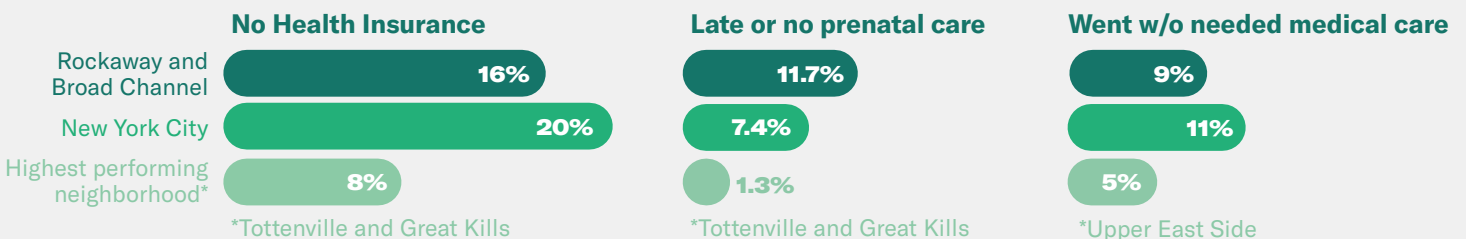


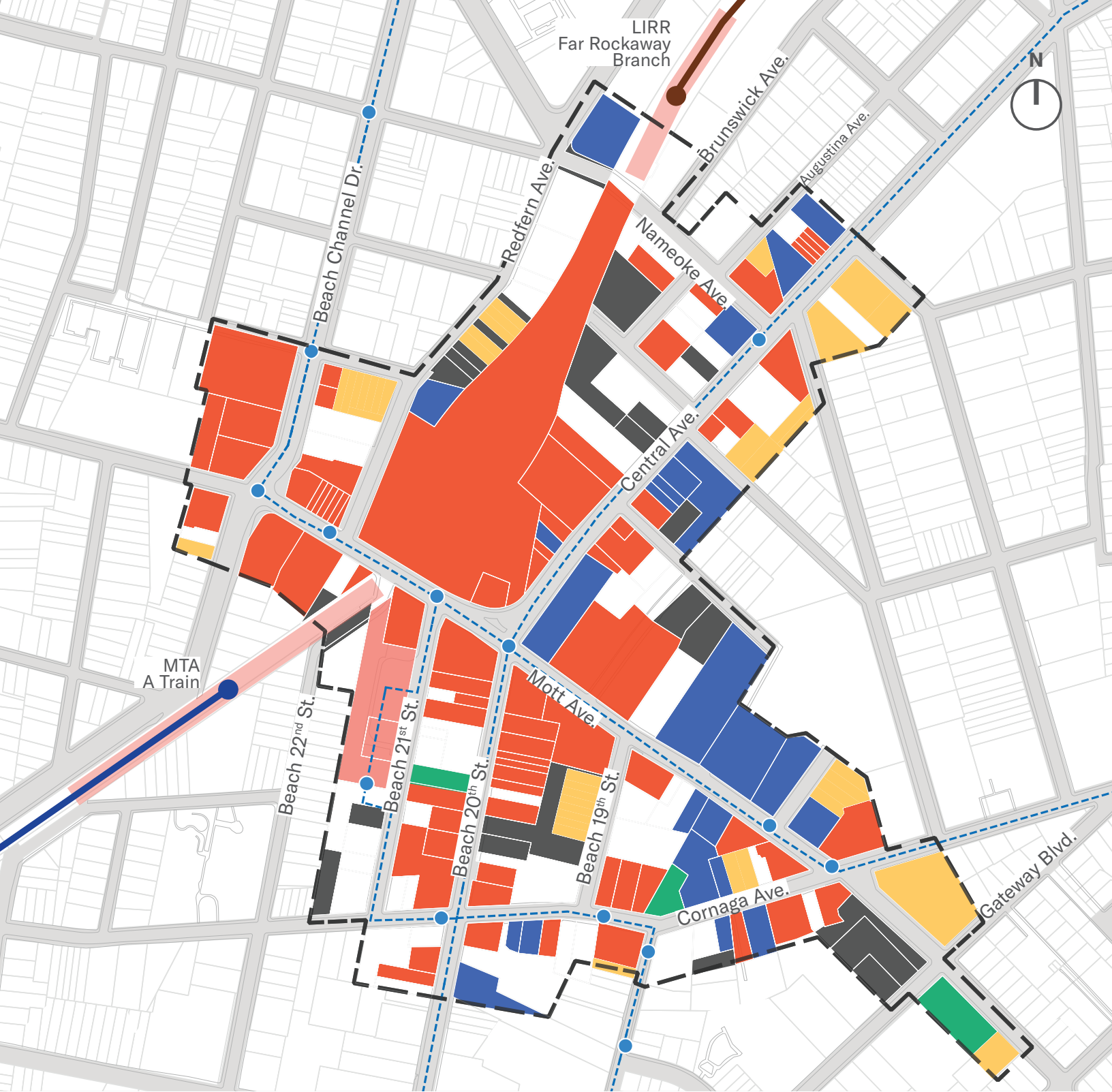
compared to **92%** on the Upper East Side



Life Expectancy

Access to Healthcare in the Rockaway Peninsula†





MAP 1: DOWNTOWN FAR ROCKAWAY EXISTING LAND USE

- DTFR Boundary
- Commercial
- Residential
- Public facilities
- Open space
- Transportation
- Vacant lots
- MTA A Train
- LIRR Far Rockaway Branch
- Bus stops
- Bus lines

Data sources:
 MapPLUTO 17v1.1 &
 DTFR Final
 Environmental
 Impact Statement



Shops along Mott Avenue.

III. COMMERCIAL REVITALIZATION ASSETS AND CHALLENGES

At its prime in the first half of the twentieth century, Downtown Far Rockaway was known as “The Village,” and served as the town center for the entire Rockaway Peninsula. It was replete with shops, movie theaters, restaurants, a bank and civic and religious organizations. As the only land-based entry into the Rockaways, the area was a vibrant and bustling point of connection for cars, buses, trains and commuter rail. Downtown Far Rockaway’s commercial center began to suffer in the 1950s, catalyzed by the discontinuation of the LIRR commuter rail service to Brooklyn, white flight as a result of redlining and relocation of low-income families into the area coupled with an overall disinvestment in urban areas by federal and city governments.¹² The core of Downtown Far Rockaway, once a bustling inter-modal commercial hub, was replaced by a large, one-story shopping center and sizeable parking lot. The new development removed a sense of a town center and greatly reduced

foot traffic and vibrancy in downtown Far Rockaway.

Currently, several first- and second-generation small businesses operate along Central Avenue, Mott Avenue and Beach 20th Streets including a mix of fast food outlets, services and small-scale consumer retail. Given that the area is crowded with retail, there are fewer consumers than one would expect due to poor pedestrian infrastructure, a streetscape that lacks in quality and an inconsistent wayfinding system. A 2015 retail analysis conducted by JGSC Group estimated that the nearly 60,000 residents living within a 1-mile radius of Downtown Far Rockaway have spending power of \$411 million per year on retail goods and services, a whopping 70 percent of which is spent outside the district. Of that 70 percent (\$290 million), \$25 million is spent on dining alone.¹³ A survey of more than 300 residents conducted by RDRC in

2017 revealed that district residents would like to have more local, family friendly restaurants and healthy food options. Additionally, perceptions that the area is unsafe and unclean keep residents from patronizing the businesses that currently populate the downtown district.¹⁴ Local residents identified familiarity, proximity and access to transit as the top assets of the district. Far Rockaway locals expressed a willingness to spend more time and money in their downtown district if it were cleaner, more attractive and offered a greater diversity of retail offerings. Relatively low-cost interventions such as streetscape improvements, seating, local art, supplemental sanitation measures and signage can make the area vibrant and consumer friendly, as well as tap into the neighborhood's existing consumer spending power, drawing residents back to the downtown.

PLANNED DEVELOPMENT AND INVESTMENTS

Following the devastating aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, the entire Rockaway Peninsula is showing signs of an economic renaissance. Spurred by the city's new ferry service, a rebuilt boardwalk and a rezoning in Downtown Far Rockaway, the peninsula is seeing unprecedented rates of residential and commercial development. The median home sales price on the peninsula dropped by approximately 40 percent right after the storm — from almost \$360,000 in the fall of 2012 to \$207,000 in the spring of 2013. By the five-year anniversary of Sandy, sale prices bounced back and the area saw the largest building boom of any of the city's flood-zone neighborhoods.¹⁵ Commercial sales are still below average and new businesses are few and far between in the area.¹⁶ Despite a surplus of available space, new businesses are not opening in the area, by and large.¹⁷

Helping facilitate the economic growth of the peninsula, the City of New York has committed a number of investments in Far Rockaway (Map 2). The Department of Housing Preservation and Development is building 100% affordable housing on public land to help existing residents stay in their community. The Economic Development Corporation is looking to

increase transit access to Far Rockaway by extending the local NYC ferry route east of its current terminus at Beach 108th Street. The Department of Transportation (DOT) is increasing the open space downtown by creating two new plazas: one connecting the Far Rockaway subway station to Beach 21st Street south of Mott Avenue and another plaza north of the side street between Central and Redfern Avenues that will be flanked by ground floor retail.¹⁸ DOT is also increasing the number of street trees, adding public seating and striving to create a safer pedestrian experience overall as part of an urban design and streetscape construction plan.¹⁹

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Rockaways rezoning is designed to make room for some 165,000 square feet of retail space and more than 3,100 apartments housing about 8,000 new residents. New development will be coupled with improved public spaces, a \$30 million library and streetscape and pedestrian improvements. These new developments serve as opportunities for revitalization. At the same time, the challenge will be to ensure that long-time residents and businesses are not displaced as a result of renewed interest and investment in their neighborhood.

In dozens of neighborhoods across New York City, historic small business corridors are feeling the pressure of gentrification and consequent rising rents.²⁰ Improved conditions, better services and new, wealthier residents in a neighborhood can provide a much needed injection of capital to long-time businesses. That said, small businesses also face the looming threat of significant and sudden increases in commercial rents, the loss of long-time patrons who have been priced out of their homes and the new, competing businesses that cater to the new consumer base. Small businesses in these areas need resources to transform these challenges into opportunities. Needed supports include grants or low-interest loans for minor indoor or outdoor capital improvements, and adaptive marketing and inventory strategies that cater to both long-time residents and newcomers.

The changing context offers the opportunity for small businesses, community-based organizations and neighborhood institutions to work together to preserve and strengthen the cultural identity of Far Rockaway. Examples of successful cross-sectoral partnerships in other neighborhoods include:

- **Creative and collaborative public space programming** such as cultural performances in parks and plazas, like those illustrated in “*Corona Plaza es Para Todos*,” documenting 10 years of collaborative plaza programming by the Queens Museum and a wide variety of community groups;²¹
- **High impact and low cost physical improvements** such as street furniture, plantings and short- and long-term art installations like Transform/Restore: Brownsville, a series of youth-led public murals; and²²
- **Neighborhood-wide public relations campaigns** – signage that communicates the breadth of local offerings, welcomes new community members and expresses local solidarity, like the We Mean Business East New York poster campaign.²³

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

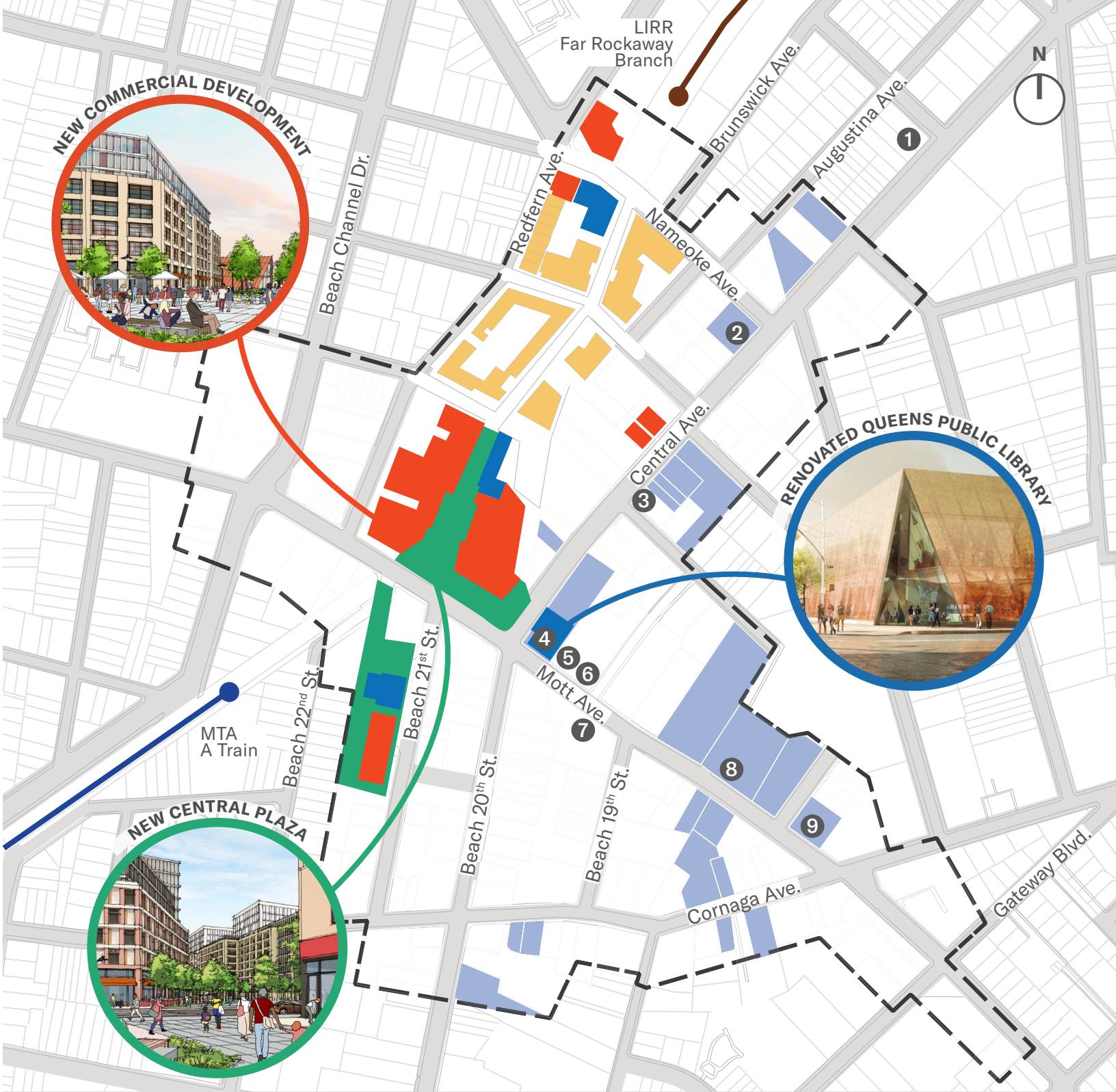
The Rockaway peninsula is rich in civic, religious and cultural organizations. These are groups that have deep roots in the community, with specialized knowledge of the Rockaway residents they have long served. The small business community has much to gain by strengthening existing and developing new relationships with these key players in local community life. Together, they can ensure a comprehensive, community-driven approach to the commercial revitalization of Downtown Far Rockaway.

Successful commercial revitalization efforts are the result of partnerships between multiple stakeholders in a community, working collectively to create a welcoming and locally-based identity, support system and programs. For example, in Central Brooklyn, the Flatbush Development Corporation works closely with several local partners and small businesses to host a

series of events and programs including the annual Flatbush Frolic, Eat and Shop Your Heart Out Cortelyou, Newkirk Block Party, community forums and multi-issue Town Halls. The success of these events is based in large part on the participation of a diverse mix of residents, businesses, local government, service providers, faith-based organizations and local arts organizations.²⁴

The Downtown Far Rockaway Working Group’s Roadmap for Action underscores the need for a cross-sectoral, collaborative approach for commercial revitalization.²⁵ Downtown Far Rockaway counts a core group of diverse institutional anchors among its most precious assets (Map 2). They include St. John’s Hospital, the only hospital in the peninsula and the area’s largest employer, Addabo Family Health Center and the Queens Library. Faith-based organizations have been active participants in planning for commercial revitalization including the First Church of God, Church of the Nazarene and the Jewish Community Council of the Rockaway Peninsula. Long-standing non-profit service providers, community development and cultural organizations include the Rockaway Development and Revitalization Corporation, the Rockaway Youth Task Force, Ocean Bay Community Development Corporation, Urban Upbound, Rockaway Waterfront Alliance and Rockaway Artists Alliance. Community-based advocates include the Redfern Houses Tenants Association and the Far Rockaway branch of the NAACP. Each of these partners can bring their skills, specialized knowledge and their constituency to develop and support a multi-faceted and creative approach to downtown revitalization.

An effective ecosystem of diverse partners requires dedicated time and staffing to coalesce an inclusive vision, identify, secure and deploy resources and provide on-the-ground, day-to-day support. While no one entity can provide all of the support required for truly inclusive and vibrant commercial revitalization, a dedicated downtown manager coupled with stronger cross-sectoral partnerships and collaboration can bring much needed focus to tie together disparate efforts and bring diverse actors to the table in order to address long-standing community need, accommodate growth and ensure small business success.



MAP 2: PUBLIC FACILITIES + NEW INVESTMENT

--- DTFR Boundary

New Investments:

- Commercial
- Residential
- Public facilities
- Open space
- Existing public facilities

- ① Addabbo Family Health Center
- ② Church of the Nazarene
- ③ Jewish Community Council
- ④ Queens Public Library
- ⑤ RDRS
- ⑥ Rockaway Youth Task Force
- ⑦ Urban Upbound
- ⑧ USPS Post Office
- ⑨ NYPD

Additional community facilities beyond map boundary:

- First Church of God
- NAACP Far Rockaway Chapter
- Redfern Houses Tenants Association
- St. Johns Hospital

Data sources:
MapPLUTO 17v1.1 &
DTFR Final
Environmental
Impact Statement



Storefront improvements funded by SBS along Mott Avenue.

IV. COMMERCIAL REVITALIZATION BEST PRACTICES

Given the history of disinvestment and destructive planning policy in Far Rockaway, it is critical that as development and reinvestment accelerate, long-term residents benefit from new community improvements. In order to do that, those long-term residents must continue to play a central role in planning for an equitable future.

A collaborative planning approach brings together the collective resources of government and the local community to encourage growth while supporting long-time residents and the businesses that serve them. It is inclusive and proactive. It identifies local needs and builds the capacity of local stakeholders by encouraging civic participation. It engenders a sense of long-term stewardship in participants and a sense that the community is “what we make of it” - together. Collaboration requires

transparency and accountability – all participants, decision makers in particular, must be willing and able to work together. The approach must be both transactional (rooted in reality, bounded by regulations and limited resources) and transformational (making room for aspiration and inspiration).

This report provides concrete and implementable goals and recommendations that can help foster a ground-up, collaborative approach for commercial revitalization in Downtown Far Rockaway.

Goals and recommendations are organized into four themes:

1. Business Retention and Attraction
2. Commercial District Improvements and Maintenance
3. Public Space Programming
4. Merchant and Stakeholder Organizing and Support

Each area is supplemented with case studies and best practices from other NYC neighborhoods for inspiration and lessons learned.

Shoppers in a 2017 REMA Merchant's Fair. Source: *The Wave*



Storefronts in Downtown Far Rockaway.





CASE STUDY:
PEFMA
Brooklyn, New York

Formed in 2014, the goal of the Parkside Empire Flatbush Avenue Merchants Association (PEFMA) is to unite the merchants and residents on Flatbush Avenue between Parkside and Empire while promoting and supporting their businesses. PEFMA – located in Brooklyn’s ‘Little Caribbean’ neighborhood – counts among its members many long-standing Caribbean and minority-owned businesses, currently under threat of displacement by rapidly rising rents as a result of gentrification.

For PEFMA, commercial revitalization is a multi-faceted endeavor. From bringing attention to and providing support for local businesses, to lifting the voices of local merchants and residents at the state and local levels, to providing popular education to the community at large, PEFMA works to unify the community, preserve neighborhood culture and advance local economic development.

To accomplish this broad remit, PEFMA teamed up with IMPACCT Brooklyn, a community development corporation that has been working to strengthen central Brooklyn neighborhoods through community organizing, economic development and affordable housing for the past 50 years. PEFMA and IMPACCT have brought local small businesses together, raising a unified voice that advocates for local businesses and the interests of neighborhood residents.

In four years, PEFMA has:

- Created a visual identity, local shopping guide and directory;
- Hosted well-attended annual community events such as the Summer Street Fair, Small Business Saturday and Rolling Up the Gates Storefront Stroll;
- Partnered with local cultural organizations to co-sponsor public plaza programming;
- Secured new trash cans along the corridor; and
- Organized holiday lighting along the corridor.

Collectively, these efforts have unified local merchants and strengthened a sense of place in the neighborhood. Paired with these kinds of outward facing strategies are in-depth business supports provided by IMPACCT.

PEFMA’s comprehensive approach to commercial revitalization – one that takes into account the importance of merchant visibility and unity as well as their day-to-day operational needs, that includes residents as key agents of change and that takes on education and advocacy as vital components of strong neighborhood alliances – ensures that the merchants’ association (the whole) is greater than the sum of its parts (individual merchants), setting up the association, its members and its neighbors for sustained success.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN: A comprehensive approach to commercial revitalization that includes unity, education and advocacy goals, as well as more traditional economic ones, is well-suited to serve the many and changing needs of local businesses and residents as neighborhoods undergo development and change.

A. BUSINESS RETENTION AND ATTRACTION

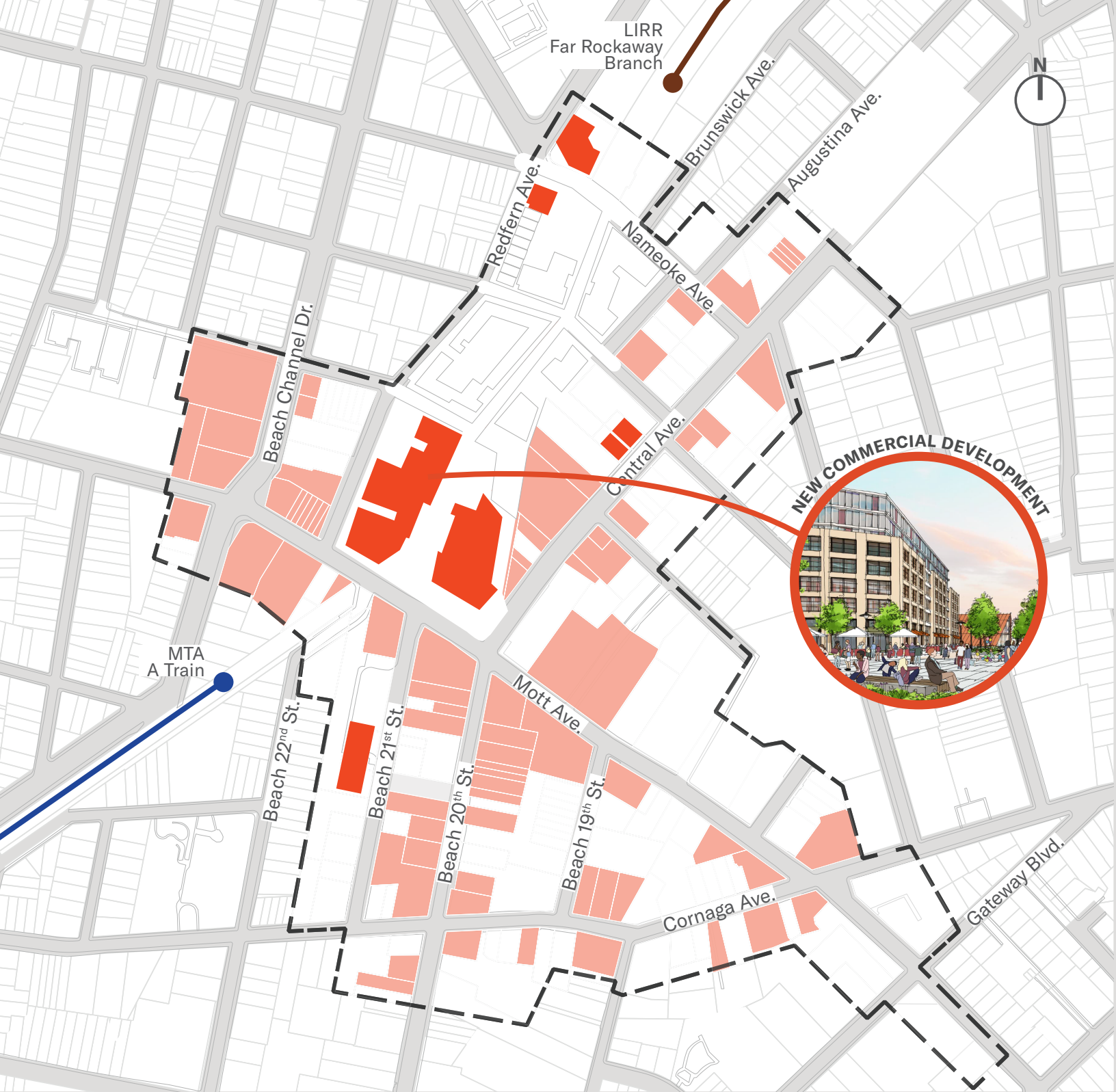
The influx of new commercial space – an anticipated 164,600 gross square feet as a result of the recent rezoning²⁶ (Map 3) – has the power to dramatically reshape downtown Far Rockaway. The question is: for whose benefit? Data show that Rockaway residents have money to spend and that they are eager to spend it close to home. Effective revitalization strategies will leverage new investments to benefit existing businesses and encourage new businesses that are responsive to the needs of both long-time residents and newcomers.

All of the new retail space should benefit not just consumers but also local entrepreneurs. A recent survey conducted by Ocean Bay CDC demonstrated that the Rockaways are awash with budding business owners operating both formal and informal businesses out of church basements, parking lots and public housing apartments. The new, concentrated development offers the opportunity for existing small businesses to expand their footprint, and for nascent entrepreneurs to get the space, training and support they need to make their economic dreams a reality.

Finally, a comprehensive revitalization strategy considers workers as well as owners. Given the transportation challenges of the peninsula, an abundance of new commercial space can mean shorter commutes for Rockaway workers and, as a result, better quality of life. The infrastructure for a Rockaway resident-to-worker pipeline for new and existing businesses exists – it will take a coordinated effort to ensure that it succeeds.



Far Rockaway residents in a 2016 community discussion.



MAP 3: NEW + EXISTING COMMERCIAL LAND USE

- New Commercial
- Existing Commercial

Data sources:
 MapPLUTO 17v1.1 &
 DTFR Final
 Environmental
 Impact Statement

GOALS

1. Implement multi-pronged business retention strategies

- Support existing businesses through SBS's free legal services and other business outreach efforts.²⁷
- Provide site relocation assistance for businesses that may be displaced by new development.
- Support area M/WBEs²⁸ and other local businesses with access to capital, commercial lease negotiations, succession planning, communications, digital and analog marketing strategies, storefront improvement assistance and other identified needs.
- Provide training to local businesses on improved visual merchandising and marketing through print, digital and social media channels.

2. Foster a pipeline for local small business owners

- Partner with community organizations, faith-based institutions and social service providers to identify local residents interested in entrepreneurship and support them in scaling up their home-based or freelance businesses.²⁹

3. Bolster efforts to hire locally by connecting area businesses and residents³⁰

- Partner with local high schools and youth organizations to host a summer youth employment fair matching local youth to area small businesses for part-time employment.
- Fund a network coordinator in every community district to strengthen the pipeline between local businesses and residents and improve collaboration among workforce development providers.³¹
- Leverage publicly available government data to connect resources and local workforce programs proactively to existing and new local businesses.³²

4. Attract new and innovative businesses to Downtown Far Rockaway

- Survey consumers and conduct a local retail analysis to identify needs in order to create a targeted approach to attract and retain businesses to Downtown Far Rockaway.
- Explore and establish a business incubation space in Far Rockaway to support area businesses.³³ A focus on health care technology can help leverage local health institutions as potential partners.
- Use vacant space and storefronts to host seasonal pop-up markets featuring local businesses from other parts of the Rockaways, as well as new entrepreneurs.
- Identify and attract one or more new civic anchor institution(s) to increase workforce development opportunities and foot traffic in Downtown Far Rockaway.

For example, a CUNY satellite program at a local high school can focus on health care and/or civil service and connect graduates to local jobs in these sectors. A similar model is the H.E.R.O. (Health, Education, and Research Occupations) High School in the Bronx where students graduate with an associate's degree in nursing or community health.

B. COMMERCIAL DISTRICT IMPROVEMENTS AND MAINTENANCE

A downtown district is the face of local business: it has the power to attract consumers, strengthen neighborhood identity and activate public space to foster a flourishing, functioning and safe place for local residents to do business, gather and build community.

A 2016 RDRC survey of over 200 storefronts and façades found that only 10 percent were in good condition, 30 percent fair and 60 percent needed signage replacement and repairs to the façade.³⁴ While SBS and RDRC addressed many of these concerns through a storefront improvement program during the same year, the district needs to identify new opportunities to benefit more businesses.

The same survey also points to the negative perceptions of Downtown Far Rockaway's cleanliness and safety. According to more than 300 consumer respondents, the district is seen as characterless, barren, unsafe and unclean.³⁵ Local businesses and stakeholders can address this by coordinating with the local police department and advocating for improvements from local elected officials and agencies.



Before (left) and after (right) 2017 SBS-funded storefront improvements on the Smith Building.



Improved storefronts funded by SBS. Sutphin Boulevard, Queens.

GOALS

1. Create a cohesive, recognizable and pedestrian-friendly environment

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build on DOT streetscape improvements by working with local businesses to create a stewardship and maintenance plan for new street trees and furniture.
- Explore locations to implement DOT Street Seats program in Downtown Far Rockaway.
- Work with local businesses to determine opportunities, based on funding available and existing conditions, for additional storefront improvements.
- Aligned with a broader branding and marketing strategy, implement unified street signage and banners along the district's main corridors to create a coherent identity for Downtown Far Rockaway's commercial core.
- Advocate for funding for corridor-wide physical improvements through local Council Members, participatory budgeting, SBS and other sources.

2. Improve cleanliness and increase safety

- Create and implement a district-wide maintenance and operations plan with support and input from local businesses and support from Community Board, local elected officials and anchor institutions.
- Organize a recurring community clean-up date in partnership with youth organizations, St. John's Hospital and faith based organizations.
- Designate a small business liaison to coordinate with the local police precinct's community affairs office and neighborhood coordination officers (NCOs) to address community concerns.
- Work with small businesses to identify and implement additional streetscape improvements such as new trash cans, lighting and benches.

Community event held in Corona Plaza. Source: Queens Museum.



CASE STUDY:

CORONA PLAZA

Corona, Queens

Corona Plaza used to be surrounded by an underused service road between 104th and National Streets off Roosevelt Avenue. The adjacent park area was similarly underutilized. Commercial establishments were blocked by illegally parked moving trucks hindering access for potential customers. Despite the inactivity of its surroundings, regular programming including neighborhood events and a weekly farmers market were held at the Plaza.³⁶

The nearby Queens Museum began programming this underutilized space in 2005. This helped organize local business owners and neighborhood leaders including the Corona Community Action Network, a local group of business owners, Queens Economic Development Corporation and Queens Community Board 4.

These regular events helped spur the local community to action – residents advocated

for the service road to be incorporated into the plaza to better accommodate well-attended programming. In 2012, DOT suspended nearby traffic, transforming the area into a pedestrian plaza featuring temporary paving, tables, seating and free wifi. The Museum, in turn, intensified its programming to feature more local performers, cultural groups and workshops – including participatory planning charrettes for a new plaza design.³⁷

In 2017, local Councilmember Julissa Ferreras Copeland secured \$5.6 million of city capital funding to permanently improve Corona plaza, including new lighting, bike racks, seating and a performance space.³⁸ When it is completed in Spring 2018, the plaza's physical space will complement the rich, locally driven programming and businesses that have made the Plaza a true community

WHAT WE CAN LEARN: Strong partnerships between community stakeholders and a cultural institution helped create public space programming that reflects the community, creates vibrancy, draws visitors and strengthens local businesses.

C. PUBLIC SPACE PROGRAMMING

Public open space, accessible to everyone in the neighborhood, is the heart of downtown areas across the city. For a commercial district, well designed and strategically activated open spaces can increase foot traffic, improve the visibility of local businesses and contribute to a unique and vibrant identity for the area.

Currently, Downtown Far Rockaway is served by one plaza that connects Beach 21st and Beach 20th streets south of Mott Avenue. To increase the amount of open space, the City is investing in two new plazas and a park in the community (Map 4):

- **A plaza connecting the Far Rockaway MTA station to Beach 21st Street,**
- **A plaza north of Mott Avenue between Central and Redfern Avenues to be lined with commercial storefronts and**
- **A park at the north corner of Augustina and Nameoke Avenues.**

With this new investment, stakeholders must ensure that new and existing spaces are activated with programming that can both bolster the local economy and reflect Far Rockaway’s multi-cultural character.

GOALS

1. Showcase local vendors while activating and maintaining public spaces

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Study potential to establish a weekly farmers market in the Downtown area.
- In existing and proposed plazas, establish a market where local vendors who may or may not have business licenses can participate.
- Ensure that new and existing public spaces are included in the creation of a district-wide sanitation, maintenance and operations plan.

2. Increase arts, cultural and inter-generational programming

- Explore and create additional partnerships with city- and borough-wide arts and culture organizations to host pop-up concerts, events or festivals in conjunction with Queens Public Library or other institutions in Downtown Far Rockaway.

For example, the Brooklyn Public Library co-produces Theater of War productions and hosts free performances in its facilities. Another model is Public Theater’s Mobile Unit that extends its programming to communities across New York City at no cost to audiences.
- Work with community-based and faith-based organizations and schools to develop multi-generational programming that serves the diverse interests of the community.³⁹
- Explore opportunities to infuse art created by local artists or youth into Downtown Far Rockaway’s commercial corridors.
- Collaborate with NYC Department of Cultural Affairs to expand arts and cultural programs in Downtown Far Rockaway.
- Provide technical assistance and support to neighborhood plaza managers to connect and partner with local cultural organizations and artists for performances and programs.⁴⁰



MAP 4: NEW + EXISTING COMMERCIAL AND OPEN SPACE

- DTFR Boundary
- New Commercial
- Existing Commercial
- New Open Space
- Existing Open Space

Data sources:
 MapPLUTO 17v1.1 &
 DTFR Final
 Environmental
 Impact Statement

D. MERCHANT AND STAKEHOLDER ORGANIZING AND SUPPORT

The Rockaway Development and Revitalization Corporation, in collaboration with New York City Councilmember Donovan Richards and NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS), has been actively organizing local businesses along Beach 20th Street, Central, Mott and Cornaga Avenues into the Rockaway East Merchants Association (REMA). Cross-sectoral local partnerships and multiple support systems are critically important to having an organized and effective merchant group.

The following goals and recommendations underscore the need for deeper partnerships and technical support so that REMA can advocate with a stronger voice on behalf of merchants on neighborhood issues; help catalyze additional city and private support for local businesses; and have more autonomy and agency in assessing and responding to local needs. Additionally, ensuring that a broad cross-section of stakeholders including faith-based organizations, resident leaders and neighborhood institutions can further strengthen REMA. These actions, along with a dedicated district manager, will contribute to a more robust and cohesive merchants association working in concert with neighborhood-wide revitalization efforts.



Far Rockaway residents in a 2016 community discussion.

GOALS

1. Strengthen Rockaway East Merchants Association (REMA)

- Hire a district manager for Downtown Far Rockaway.
 - Fund capacity building of REMA including staff to help identify organizational, additional programming and local business needs.
 - Formalize, document and recruit members for leadership and committee roles for merchant association to ensure long term stability and autonomy of REMA.
 - Continue to publicize and host regular meetings with local business owners.
 - Host a regular series of meet-and-greet sessions, fundraisers and workshops addressing topics of high need for area small businesses.
-

2. Create a comprehensive marketing strategy for the commercial district, highlighting local business owners

- Create a logo and graphic identify for the neighborhood.
 - Create and distribute a local merchant guide.
 - Support REMA in expanding, publicizing and hosting a series of annual events such as Small Business Saturdays, Shop Local events and Summer Festival.
 - Maintain and update a social media presence for REMA and publicize through local outlets and organizations.
 - Publicize local small business offerings with area anchor institutions by providing a small business directory and one-time discounts to new employees as part of orientation packages.
 - Connect small businesses to area schools and parent associations to offer gift certificates or incentives for fundraising/annual events in return for publicity.
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3. Strengthen existing and develop new cross-sectoral partnerships

- Encourage REMA to play a lead role in conducting a full commercial district needs assessment (CDNA) and share results with local businesses for feedback and prioritization of needs and actions.
- Build REMA's capacity to engage with city agencies, elected officials and other stakeholders for commercial corridor and business needs.
- Facilitate regular meet-and-greets between REMA and Downtown Far Rockaway Working Group.
- Represent local small business needs and voices in Community Board meetings, neighborhood-wide planning efforts and local infrastructure development processes.
- Ensure that local small businesses are part of the Department of Cultural Affairs' three-year arts and culture Building Community Capacity process in the peninsula.



CASE STUDY:

BELMONT AVENUE

Brownsville, Brooklyn

In the 1950s and 1960s, large swaths of Brownsville were demolished to make room for an unprecedented concentration of public housing. The Federal Housing Authority's redlining practice encouraged the area's white population to leave for the suburbs, while African Americans and Latinos filled the newly constructed, segregated public housing. Public and private disinvestment followed, resulting in inadequate services and infrastructure that stunted the local economy leaving storefronts empty.⁴¹

Today, Brownsville has the sixth highest poverty rate of New York City's 59 community districts. It is primarily a community of color with 75 percent African American and 20 percent Latino residents and has a median income (\$25,000) less than half of the city's.⁴² At 74 years, Brownsville has the lowest life expectancy in all of the city.⁴³

Community groups and residents, aware of the damage done by decades of disinvestment and wary of renewed interest by real estate developers, have organized a community-led revitalization of a historic commercial corridor. While the main commercial corridor is Pitkin Avenue, Belmont Avenue has been gaining attention as a catalyst of economic development. A comprehensive revitalization project seeks to transform this critical street with a history of antagonism into a thriving business district that is welcoming and accessible to consumers and entrepreneurs alike.

As a result of perseverance and dedication, several new businesses have opened on Belmont in the past few years. 3 Black Cats Café and Cakery, owned by three sisters born and raised in Brownsville, is a "Cafe with Purpose" that aims to achieve both personal and community financial success. In addition to hosting community events in its large storefront, it also offers budding entrepreneurs a co-working space, mentorship and seed funding in partnership with the Dream Big Foundation.

Other innovative spaces on Belmont include the Brownsville Community Culinary Center, a table-service restaurant that offers healthy and affordable meals, a culinary training program for residents and a community gathering space. Down the street, Made in Brownsville is a creative agency that teaches marketable design skills to area youth, while providing design services to private clients citywide. Finally, the Brownsville Community Justice Center is set to open a neighborhood incubator, giving young entrepreneurs a storefront space to showcase and grow their businesses. These community-based small businesses are only a few examples of how Brownsville residents are transforming Belmont Avenue into a corridor of innovation, inspiration, economic mobility and neighborhood pride.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN: Community-led commercial revitalization results in a quadruple bottom line: 1) innovative and exciting economic models that combine financial success and community development; 2) goods and services that long-time residents want and need; 3) economic mobility for local entrepreneurs and their staff/trainees; 4) community-wide pride of place and neighborhood solidarity.



SBS-funded storefront improvement of Eazy Locks.

V. CALL TO ACTION

The renewed investments in Downtown Far Rockaway present an opportunity to create a truly inclusive and equitable path toward the district's revitalization. For over a decade, long-time residents and businesses, despite considerable challenges, have been active in fostering the fertile conditions for these investments including by voicing their needs for the improvement of their commercial district. Successful revitalization will be measured by how well poised the businesses and residents of Far Rockaway are to benefit from the influx of new assets in their neighborhood.

To this end, this document lays out thematic, concrete and achievable first steps for a comprehensive, collaborative and community-driven revitalization of Downtown Far Rockaway. These recommendations require Far Rockaway's ecosystem of diverse partners – business owners, residents, workers, faith-based groups, community-based organizations and local institutions – to work together in achieving equitable economic development.

While no one entity can provide all the support required for truly inclusive and vibrant commercial revitalization, a dedicated downtown manager coupled with stronger cross-sectoral partnerships and collaboration can bring much needed focus to tie disparate pieces together and bring diverse actors to the table toward addressing long-standing community need, accommodating growth and ensuring small business success.

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