

BUILDING & STRENGTHENING ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY





The essence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem is its people and the culture of trust and collaboration that allows them to interact successfully.

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PURPOSE

Through the support of the USDA, Downtown Colorado, Inc. (DCI) is providing technical assistance to businesses and communities to strengthen local community economic development strategies, leadership networks, entrepreneur ecosystem building, and the creation of a rural business and property incubator program. DCI's three-pronged approach is to:

1. Build stronger local teams of entrepreneurs focused on economic vitality and revitalization.
2. Identify and promote entrepreneurial opportunities in the commercial core.
3. Facilitate cohesive public-private networks to drive investment in entrepreneurial efforts.

Prepared by BRIAN CORRIGAN in partnership with DOWNTOWN COLORADO, INC with funding generously provided by USDA RURAL DEVELOPMENT.

CONNECTING PRIVATE BUSINESS, THE PUBLIC REALM & COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Data shows that 74% of customers prefer experiences over things and stuff. Businesses and entrepreneurs must provide delight when crafting the customer experience, moving beyond just solving a customer's pain. The delight can become a competitive advantage.

But the experience doesn't stop at the door of the business. Business districts play an important role in crafting delight for customers, too. Entrepreneurs, business owners, and district stakeholders must work together to create experiences that are unique to that place. Districts can implement placemaking strategies as a strategic tool for engaging, attracting and keeping customers coming back. The more inclusive and community-led, the more significant the outcome. Engaging the public as co-creators of projects transforms customers from passive consumers into project champions, increasing word-of-mouth advertising and storytelling opportunities. Vacant storefronts, empty lots, lamp posts, blank walls, picnic tables are opportunities to spotlight creative thinking while developing entrepreneurial ideas and talent.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This document contains six sections: CULTURE, TIPS, ROADMAP, CHECKLIST, PROTOTYPE & TOOLKIT. The culture section outlines best practices related to building entrepreneurial ecosystems where all ideas, businesses, and people can participate. The tip section offers knowledge intended to support community building through implementing public realm placemaking prototypes. The roadmap section offers timelines for tasks. The checklist section is an easy-to-follow guide for how to achieve this work. The prototype is a placemaking project that will be used to demonstrate how to link public space enhancements with entrepreneurial ecosystem building. And finally, the toolkit provides ready-to-use assets to connect entrepreneurial efforts, public realm enhancements, and community stakeholders.



CULTURE // ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

To transform ideas into businesses, communities need to nourish and nurture a healthy environment for their people. Below are seven recommendations on where to start. Of course, this is just the beginning and meant to create a community-wide dialogue around what's needed to realize people's fullest and most complete potential.

PROBLEMS ARE OPPORTUNITIES

Communities have problems to fix. They are much easier to recognize and much harder to solve. However, this is an opportunity to enlist the community as social entrepreneurs to tackle the challenges while creating new businesses and jobs. Right now is the time to bring new solutions into city hall. Unite the community by reframing problems into untapped potential while unlocking new wealth. As the saying goes, turn lemons into lemonade. And make sure that within this process, every person has an opportunity to participate.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Jim Dator, an influential futurist, famously said, "Any useful statement about the future should at first seem ridiculous." We need to understand that the thinking that created our current problems won't make the necessary solutions. Ideas and people who are not in the conversation need to be brought in and permitted to problem-solve and test solutions through an iterative process.

BEGIN WITH YES

Fear typically drives our reaction to say no. "It's never been done that way before!" "It won't work!" These are common responses to unfamiliar solutions or creative problem-solving. As a community looking to grow its talent, it's beneficial to start with yes and then figure out how to make it happen to create a win-win result. It's more work; however, it has the potential for exponential return.



MAKE IT EASY

Entrepreneurship and building your business are hard enough. Systems, policies, procedures, and permitting should not make it harder. Town officials should examine where friction occurs, slowing or stopping potential ideas from turning into businesses. This work needs to be in partnership with the community to identify issues and develop co-designed solutions, ensuring that future energy is spent on building businesses and jobs.

**ANTICIPATE SUCCESS**

A mistake you don't want to make is not preparing for success, whether it's a person, business, or community. Negative stories about gentrification revolve around this issue. Communities don't anticipate success, the investments, and long-time residents can miss out on wealth-building opportunities. To be better prepared, communities need to think about what type of business models create opportunities for all people to benefit through community discussions in every neighborhood. When the investments happen, everyone is ready.

CONTENT AS COMMUNITY STORYTELLING

Communities need heroes, and something to rally behind that reflects the local culture. To develop content that authentically represents the community, position the problem as the supervillain, and the people spearheading the work to create solutions as the superheroes. Invest

in journalism covering this hero's journey and use it as your storytelling content. Distribute the stories through the media, both in print and digital forms.

CELEBRATE WINS & FAILURES

Heroes stumble. They fall. Sometimes they're temporarily defeated. What's important is getting back up to fight the good fight. Communities should recognize the full experience of what it means to make something happen. The hardships and struggles are just as significant as the successes and the wins.

THE MANTRA

Celebrate wins, spotlight failures, encourage grit, support resiliency, be collaborative, nurture creativity, and most importantly, say YES.

TIPS // PLACEMAKING PROTOTYPES & PUBLIC SPACE ENHANCEMENTS

Prototype projects are used to set an example, spark entrepreneurial ideas and provide permission to the community. At first, residents may not fully understand that they have the power to shape their spaces or bring their ideas to life. Prototype projects demonstrate possibility, starting a dialogue that then inspires action. Below are five tips on how to achieve this outcome.

START EARLY

Collaboration among diverse stakeholders and the coordinated communication/sales efforts require time. Prototype projects can be conceived, executed, and delivered in about three to four months. Understand that this will be a messy process that won't result in perfection; however, it'll give you an understanding of how to do it better next time. That's the point. After the prototype stage, you can develop a more protracted process for the next iteration. We suggest a six-month minimum moving forward on that process to ensure enough time is allowed for building working partnerships among all the stakeholders and develop the needed resources and assets.

LESS IS MORE

To maximize collaboration among businesses and delight among participants, we suggest creating a simple story that drives the prototyped experience. However, please don't make it so simple that it rids all tension between stakeholders or participants. Tension can be a binding force. We also suggest that each touchpoint communicates one main idea from the narrative and, when encountered sequentially, creates a storybook-like experience. To align and maximize sales potential, we recommend that the story idea reinforces the collaborating stakeholder business offerings.



RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

Business districts with established relationships with and between their local retailers produced the most successful project outcomes. Within these districts, stakeholders are more likely to convert players into customers and exhibit a more coordinated effort, creating a better overall project experience. The established relationships also helped to attract and engage more players through coordinated communication efforts. When working in places without these organizational structures, we recommend the project stakeholders invest enough time to develop the relationships.

CO-DESIGN THE EXPERIENCE

Having skin in the game establishes a deep connection to the project, transforming participants into champions while strengthening the community's social connectedness. From the storefront activations to the experiential business offerings, providing entry points for community input and creativity develops a stronger bond and buy-in. We suggest future iterations prioritize engagement strategies that build community and stakeholder onramps for all people. We see this as a powerful tool to unlock overlooked and hidden potential.



CREATE MULTIPLE TOUCH POINTS

Meeting the community and customers where they are is essential to building authentic relationships and trust. Each project location brings a uniqueness of a place that ultimately determines whether the community or customer will engage. Deeply understanding how time, communications, and environmental factors contribute to customer attraction is essential to maximize project participation and sales. We suggest creating a low barrier to participation to begin and when buy-in occurs, creating more one-on-one opportunities for customer and community interaction.



ROADMAP // TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO BUSINESSES

PHASE ONE // 1 MONTH

The purpose of Phase One is to develop the opportunity for entrepreneurs to submit their business ideas. It can be specific to a certain type of problem within the community or it can be general. When designing the call, don't include any unnecessary barriers for participation.

- **DEVELOP THE CALL**
 - Define the opportunity, criteria & prize
 - Enlist partners & stakeholders
 - Develop the required questions (see toolbox)
 - Create the website for the intake of ideas

PHASE TWO // 2 – 3 MONTHS

The purpose of Phase Two is to engage the community in submitting ideas and inviting feedback. Be sure to enlist people who submit ideas to promote their submissions. If they are able to rally a crowd around their business idea, chances are they'll be able to convert that energy into real support once the business is launched.

- **OPEN THE CALL**
 - Launch the website
- **GATHER IDEAS**
 - Invite entrepreneurs to submit ideas
- **PROMOTE, ENGAGE & COMMENT**
 - Invite the community to vote on ideas & share feedback
 - Start PR & Marketing strategy
- **SELECT FINALISTS**
 - Work with stakeholders to pick winners

PHASE THREE // 3 – 6 MONTHS

The purpose of Phase Three is to then become the intermediary between the business idea and the property owner where the business can be located.

- **MATCH IDEAS WITH SPACES & RESOURCES**
 - Connect winning ideas with landlords
 - Develop and sign the contract and lease terms (see toolbox)
 - Provide entrepreneurs with business resource menu
- **LAUNCH BUSINESSES**

PHASE FOUR // 1 MONTH

The purpose of Phase Four is to learn from the process and make improvements where you can on the next iteration. Be sure to share learnings and transform problems into opportunities.

- SUSTAIN, LEARN & REPEAT
 - Gather community input
 - Convene stakeholders for project followup

CHECKLIST // TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO BUSINESSES

1. Develop the call
2. Open the call
3. Gather ideas
4. Promote, engage and comment
5. Select finalists
6. Match ideas with spaces & resources
7. Launch businesses
8. Sustain, learn & repeat



ROADMAP // TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO PUBLIC SPACE ENHANCEMENTS

PHASE ONE // 1 MONTH

The purpose of Phase One is to develop the opportunity for the community to submit their ideas for public space enhancements. It can be specific to a certain type of problem within the public realm or it can be general. When designing the call, don't include any unnecessary barriers for participation.

- **DEVELOP THE CALL**
 - Define the opportunity, criteria, budget & prize
 - Enlist partners & stakeholders
 - Develop the required questions (see toolbox)
 - Create the website for the intake of ideas

PHASE TWO // 2 – 3 MONTHS

The purpose of Phase Two is to engage the community in submitting ideas and inviting feedback. Be sure to enlist people who submit ideas to promote their submissions. If they are able to rally a crowd around their idea, chances are it'll be well received by the community when launched.

- **OPEN THE CALL**
 - Launch the website
- **GATHER IDEAS**
 - Invite the community to submit ideas
- **PROMOTE, ENGAGE & COMMENT**
 - Invite the community to vote on ideas & share feedback
 - Start PR & Marketing strategy
- **SELECT FINALISTS**
 - Work with stakeholders to pick winners

PHASE THREE // 3 – 6 MONTHS

The purpose of Phase Three is to then become the intermediary between the idea for the public space enhancement and the space where the enhancement will happen.

- **MATCH IDEAS WITH SPACES & RESOURCES**
 - Connect winning ideas with space
 - Develop and sign the contract
 - Assist with permitting
- **LAUNCH IDEA**

PHASE FOUR // 1 MONTH

The purpose of Phase Four is to learn from the process and make improvements where you can on the next iteration. Be sure to share learnings and transform problems into opportunities.

- **SUSTAIN, LEARN & REPEAT**
 - Gather community input
 - Convene stakeholders for project followup

CHECKLIST // TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO PUBLIC SPACE ENHANCEMENTS

1. Develop the call
2. Open the call
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6. Match ideas with spaces & resources
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8. Sustain, learn and repeat

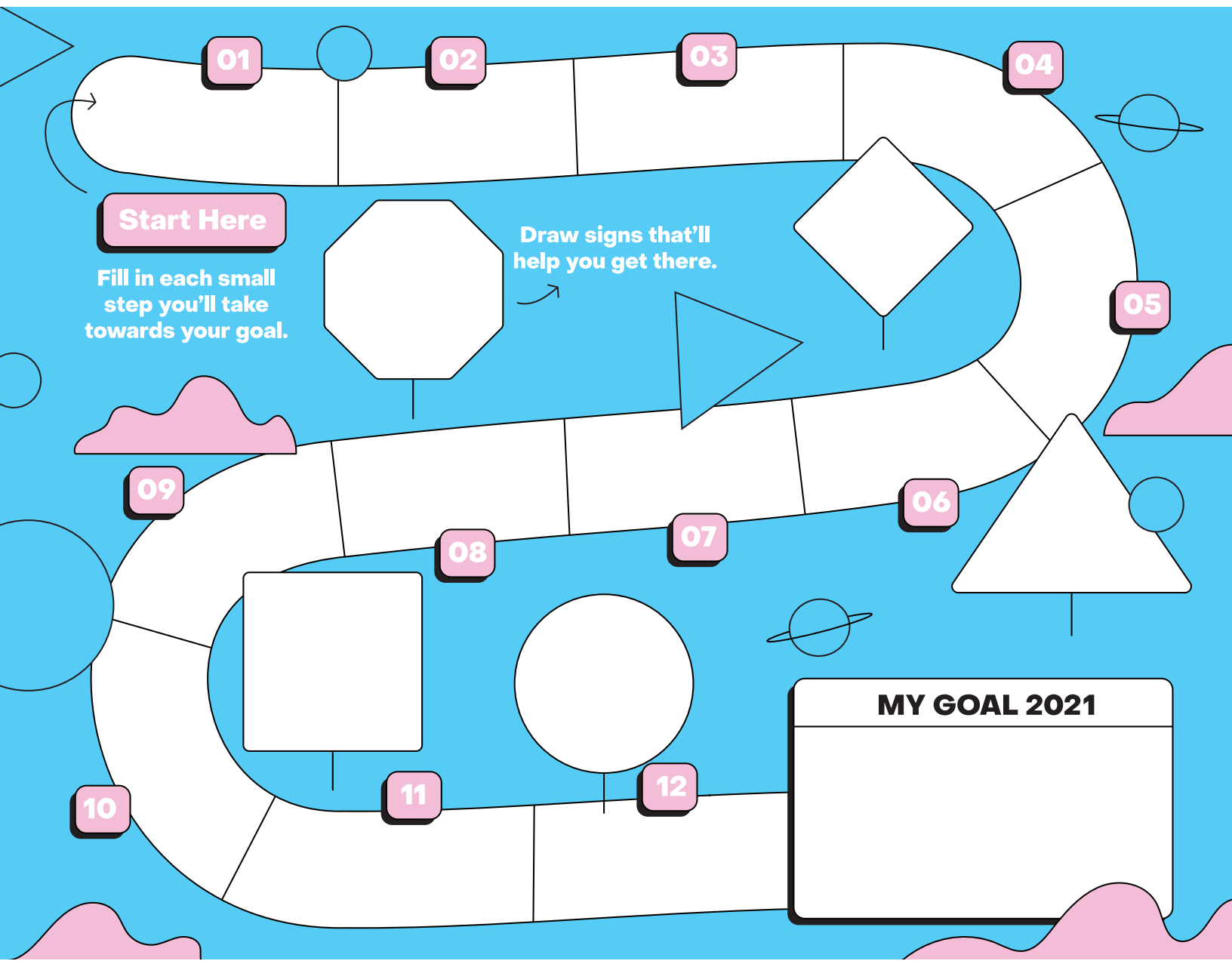


PROTOTYPE // PLACEMAKING PROJECT

YESWAY CANDO: WAY FINDING FOR FINDING WAYS

Have you ever noticed that almost every street sign tells you what you can't do? Stop. One Way Only. No Parking. YESway CANdo is a creative placemaking initiative supporting people in what they can do. The project reimagines the street sign as a guidepost for our pursuits, encouraging us to overcome any obstacles, celebrate the wins and find fun along the way.

This project is a guide, demonstrating how ecosystem building and public space enhancements are layered to support entrepreneurial activity. Each way finding sign communicates a positive value or behavior that supports a healthy business and community environment. The signs are meant to be displayed in public space just like other traditional street signs.





SMALL STEPS TO THE DREAM

Divide and conquer. Remembering that the minute-to-minute commitment, the small steps taken consistently over time, is how we get to where we want to go.



LIVE IN YOUR FINGERPRINT

We are born with a competitive advantage: our fingerprint. When we live in what makes us unique and different, we offer value that no one can quite replicate; making us the perfect fit for where we belong.



DO THINGS THAT SCARE YOU

Going after what we really want usually creates the scariest thoughts. Our minds disguising them as being unrealistic, crazy and/or impractical. The thought of failure is enough to stop us in our tracks. If you find the next steps safely taking you out of your comfort zone, more than likely, you're on the right path.



PET YOUR PET

Research shows that touch between a human and a dog can have therapeutic benefits for both species. In humans petting a dog can trigger the release of oxytocin, lower your heart rate and reduce blood pressure.



DANCE IT OUT

No explanation needed for this one. Just dance! ;)

TOOLBOX // SAMPLE QUESTIONS // CALL FOR BUSINESS IDEAS

1. What is your business idea?
2. What is the problem and/or opportunity that you're working to solve?
3. What type of value will you create for your community/customers?
4. Who are your customers?
5. What type of space do you need for your idea?
6. Who is on your team and what is their experience/credentials?
7. What type of resources do you need to transform you idea into a business?
8. What are potential roadblocks you may encounter? How do you overcome them?



TOOLBOX // SAMPLE QUESTIONS // CALL FOR PUBLIC SPACE ENHANCEMENT IDEAS

1. What is the vision for your creative placemaking project?
2. What is the problem and/or opportunity that you're working to solve?
3. What does success look like for your project?
4. When do you know you have succeeded?
5. What is the geographic area?
6. Who are your project partners and how do they benefit from the initiative?
7. How do ideas from your partners get implemented?
8. How does your project attract people from the greater community to participate?
9. How do you leverage generational, racial and socioeconomic differences to create equitable outcomes?
10. What are your project's roadblocks? How do you overcome them?
11. What is your role in contributing to the project's success?



CLOSING

Jump-starting entrepreneurial activity while enhancing the public realm through placemaking prototypes can seem like a heavy lift; however, the outcomes and benefits become multipliers for your community's development. Dividing the work among stakeholders and scheduling the activities in phases creates manageable and doable tasks. It's important to remember that the process of creation is a powerful community-building tool and needs to be an inclusive and open process to unlock and realize its full potential. The more people involved translates into better business outcomes. It's also important to note the quest for perfection can derail any project. Allow for mistakes and prioritize the course correction. This mentality creates a welcoming and open culture, helping to grow a supportive and collaborative entrepreneurial environment.

