

The future of our downtowns

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) February 3, 2023



The recently concluded winter 2023 meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors focused on the many challenges facing the country's large and medium-sized cities. Many of the concerns were those directly related to the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic dislocations.

With city leaders gathered in Washington, D.C., the Brookings Institution organized a webinar titled "Governing the Post-Pandemic City." Hosted by Brookings' interim President Amy Liu, the panel included as speakers Mayor Justin Bibb of Cleveland and Mayor Bruce Harrell of Seattle. In their discussion, I heard the recognition by these leaders that cities – and particularly their downtowns — are not going back to their pre-pandemic status as the public health threat lessens.

Too many changes have taken place that will not simply be reversed. The most substantial change has been the adoption of telework or hybrid arrangements that make it unnecessary for many to commute to their downtown office space on a daily basis. The ripple effects of that reality are extensive, especially in cities such as Seattle, San Francisco and San Jose where the tech economy is dominant and reliance on remote work is extensive. Those ripple effects are also felt in Baltimore, where a recent estimate has the downtown office vacancy rate at 24 percent.

The mayors discussed how to chart a new course for their cities, realizing that even if local economies have rebounded some over the past three years, they are not going back to "normal." The reduced number of office workers has meant that local eateries, coffee shops and a variety of mom-and-pop stores have gone out of business. Vacant storefronts generate their own set of problems, with growing concerns about crime and homelessness. One Seattle resident who attended the Brookings event described walking along the sidewalk in a favorite part of his downtown only to be blocked by a homeless encampment.

The mayors described how they are trying to grapple with these issues humanely, while addressing attendant matters, such as the lack of affordable housing and the heightened need for a range of social services including mental health care. They also spoke of the challenges of equitable policing, even as they deal with declining numbers in their police forces (down around 400 officers in the case of Seattle).

All of these issues call for new funding, even as local real estate and sales tax revenues may have declined as a result of the pandemic.

While noting these challenges, the mayors were happy to report that several infusions of federal dollars, especially the American Rescue Plan, have been a lifeline for their local economies. But, they also recognized, these ARPA dollars do not represent a continuous source of funding and that they have to be deployed strategically.

In the case of Cleveland, Mayor Bibb indicated he is eyeing 2,000 vacant acres along the Lake Erie shoreline as an area to invest in and to create amenities both for local residents and potential future visitors. (Of course, waterfront development is a strategy that Baltimore embarked on starting in the 1960s and continues today – witness the reimagined and revitalized Rash Field.)

Indeed, this idea of creating amenities for a downtown neighborhood seen in a new light is a recurrent theme across cities. The downtown of the future, with reduced occupied office space, will likely see more conversions of office buildings to residential use where that is physically and economically feasible. With that will come other elements of a desirable residential neighborhood — local parks and parklets, some streets permanently dedicated to outdoor dining, more opportunities for arts and culture. And, if this newly imagined downtown neighborhood really blossoms, there will be a need for new schools and childcare centers.

The Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, with the support of its business and community partners, has been engaged in a process of reimagining downtown, focusing on what it regards as the core of downtown, specifically Charles Center, Inner Harbor and the Bromo District. The partnership's Blueprint Process has engaged consultants and has been conducting detailed surveys.

In particular, officials report on their website as working on "a block-by-block analysis of the 106 blocks of the Downtown Management Authority Area to get a better idea of the real state of retail, land use, vacancy, and quality of streetscaping." Along with that granular detail, they hope to secure a variety of suggestions for future land use decisions, financial arrangements and best practices in placemaking for the neighborhood known as Downtown Baltimore.

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