

DELIVERING OUTCOMES FOR COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY: COLLABORATIVE WORK PLANNING UNDERPINS LONG-TERM LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS **FRESNO, CALIFORNIA**

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

- 2008 Mayor Ashley Swearingin elected
- 2008 Average Household Income: \$60,677
- 2011 Unemployment Rate: 18%
- Population: 496,080 (fifth-largest city in CA)
- Economic hub of Fresno County and CA's San Joaquin Valley

THE CHALLENGE

Following decades of economic distress in Fresno, the Mayor set out to attract private investment and spur development in order to revitalize the city's neighborhoods and downtown. During the recession, it had become apparent that growth far from the city center was neither fiscally, nor environmentally sustainable. Servicing new communities on the suburban edge had grown costlier as tax revenues dried up. The Mayor's strategy for revitalization called for the reconstruction of Fresno's historic Main Street, which had been converted into a pedestrian mall in the 1960s. The Fulton Pedestrian Mall was closed to vehicular traffic, and since the conversion, the downtown area had experienced a consistent decline.

The Fulton Pedestrian Mall was located in Fresno's most densely built part of downtown, but was still one of Fresno's most economically underperforming areas—performing at just six percent of its economic potential. The Mayor and her team viewed the reconstruction of the Fulton Pedestrian Mall as the lynchpin to downtown revitalization but did not know where to begin in initiating this ambitious project or where to find the estimated \$20 million it would cost.

PARTNERS

- City of Fresno Mayor's Office
- Various City Departments
- Downtown Fresno Partnership (Business Improvement District)
- American Architectural Foundation's Sustainable Cities Design Academy (SCDA)
- Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2)—Fresno team
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
- General Services Administration (GSA)
- Small Business Administration (SBA)

EXERCISE

The City of Fresno believed that strong downtowns have strong main streets that enhance the economy, sense of place and quality of life. The Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2)–Fresno team also strongly supported the city’s goal to reconnect this 18-square-block area to the downtown street grid and, along with numerous cross streets, reconfigure these corridors as Complete Streets that would be reopened to vehicular traffic as well as expanded to accommodate wide sidewalks and bike lanes. Albeit a longer-range development, the city was also selected to serve as one of the few anchor stations supporting California’s development of high-speed intercity passenger rail, a very high profile, \$68 billion investment statewide. The SC2–Fresno team also worked with the city to ensure that other federal resources complemented the city’s downtown investments. In your assigned small groups, please discuss:

- What is the first thing you would do to understand the community’s needs?
- What are the current challenges and anticipated barriers? What approach can you take to overcome them?
- What federal agencies and resources should come into play?
- What would be important to support long-term sustainability of the project outcomes? What could be recommended as broader policy or program changes across the government?

ACTUAL STEPS TAKEN

1. Collaboratively developing a work plan: The federal SC2–Fresno team worked with its local Fresno partners over the first few months to build relationships and understand the local vision, priorities, and challenges. During this time, the team worked with its local partners to jointly develop an annual work plan. The collaboration efforts and the final work plan were both critical to putting the effort on solid footing. The process helped educate federal team members about Fresno, and the local partners about federal resources. The work plan development process established key relationships, reduced uncertainty and managed expectations. The SC2–Fresno work plan set the goals for the engagement, as well as the specific actions federal agencies and local partners would take to meet those goals. The plan formed the foundation of the partnership going forward, and while it continued to evolve, it served as a guidepost to measure progress and the relevance of new ideas, opportunities and challenges as they arose throughout the team’s two-year commitment.
2. Defining the scope of revitalization and engaging the community: The SC2–Fresno team began by dedicating time to “be on the ground” with the Mayor and her team, meeting regularly with city staff and organizing a community meeting open to the public with more than 70 key stakeholders in attendance. The team spent a substantial amount of time in the initial months of the project listening, and learning the lay of the land. This was an essential step in developing strong relationships with the local partners as well as understanding the priorities, challenges and opportunities associated with the revitalization of downtown Fresno.
3. Garnering technical assistance for local partners: The SC2–Fresno team identified non-federal resources for the City of Fresno and provided key technical assistance to develop a project that was selected by the American Architectural Foundation’s Sustainable Cities Design Academy

(SCDA). The SCDA provided an all-expenses-paid leadership development and technical assistance three-day workshop in April 2012 for a public-private project team from Fresno. The Fresno team focused on developing the Mariposa Corridor, a cross street that included a public plaza at the center of downtown's Fulton Pedestrian Mall, which will eventually connect the proposed high-speed rail station with the Mall and a planned downtown Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) station. The Fresno team consisted of representatives from Fresno's Downtown and Community Revitalization Department, the Department of Public Works, the County Economic Opportunities Commission and a private developer with ownership and development interests in the project area. Team members from the EPA participated in the workshop in an unofficial capacity to provide additional technical assistance. Several ideas were generated and embraced by the project team related to enhancing plazas, improving lighting, extending urban design themes throughout the immediate area to create a cohesive design motif, programming events and engaging the arts community. Numerous short- and long-term strategies for developing the corridor were proposed. The outcomes of the SCDA formed the basis of the city's successful application to the National Endowment for the Arts for a \$250,000 Our Town grant to support further design development, and have also informed the city's high-speed rail station area plan, BRT planning, and the final designs for the redevelopment of Fulton Street. This experience provided the city and its local partners a starting point and an initial vision that would guide the development of the much larger Fulton Street Reconstruction Project.

4. **Leveraging technical assistance:** The SC2–Fresno team provided critical technical assistance over the course of several years to the city on the development of the Fulton Pedestrian Mall revitalization project. They also facilitated the environmental review and historical preservation coordination between the city and the State of California's Transportation Department. The FHWA team members worked with the city to identify DOT's Transportation, Community, and System Preservation (TCSP) grant program as a resource the city should pursue for start-up funding for its downtown transformation. In August 2012, DOT announced it would provide \$1 million to Fresno through the TCSP program for the pre-construction phase, which included preliminary engineering and environmental review. This funding was the initial catalyst for the transformation of downtown that was to come.
5. **Breaking down silos:** Multiple federal and local investments were simultaneously made in Fresno across agencies and city offices. The California High-Speed Rail (HSR) investment had already been connected to the downtown revitalization project by the proximity of the rail station to the new Fulton Street area. However, the HSR would not arrive for many more years, and in the meantime, the new plans for the city's first DOT-funded bus rapid transit (BRT) line had not taken into account the city's goals for the downtown project. The city was working in silos of its own and not creating the best plan to merge the downtown revitalization and the BRT station. The SC2–Fresno team and the Mayor's office got involved to maximize the BRT planning so that the BRT line supported both the future high-speed rail and Fulton Street projects. Ultimately, the alignment of the BRT line was moved to come within a block of the Fulton Pedestrian Mall, and three blocks of the proposed HSR station, maximizing the outcomes of all three projects. At the same time, several federal agencies were looking for new rental lease agreements. The SC2–Fresno team was able to engage GSA, highlighting previous Executive Orders and agency guidance on supporting local economic development goals and

central business districts, and worked together to ensure that the new leases supported the downtown revitalization.

6. Ongoing engagement for continuous improvement: The SC2–Fresno team committed to a long-term engagement model. The team worked for more than two years to provide technical assistance to Fresno, build its capacity to develop a viable Fulton Street Reconstruction Project, and make the project competitive for additional federal funding. The SC2–Fresno team committed itself to working alongside the City of Fresno to determine how to overcome barriers and implement next steps as identified by several targeted technical assistance resources. In addition, DOT provided direct technical assistance and critical feedback to Fresno on its DOT grant applications that were not initially selected for funding. The earlier TCSP award would assist in laying groundwork for planning that supported reconstruction of the Fulton Street area. In 2013, DOT awarded the city a \$15.9 million Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) on its second attempt. This TIGER grant was a key milestone that represented the hard work that the City of Fresno and the SC2–Fresno team had done to advance the city’s goals in the areas of transportation, land-use, downtown revitalization and economic development.

UNIQUE OUTCOMES

- The City of Fresno’s TIGER grant funding was augmented by more than \$4 million in local funding and will be used to reconnect the 18-square-block street grid known as the Fulton Pedestrian Mall. On March 3, 2016, the city broke ground on the Fulton Pedestrian Mall Reconstruction Project. The project has already resulted in tens of millions of dollars in new private investment in the downtown core.
- The pedestrian mall improvements will help make the City of Fresno more livable and serve several modes of transportation, such as automobile, pedestrian, bicycle and public transit. The project will also ensure that the street grid surrounding the future high-speed rail station and BRT line provides access to the station while supporting community and economic development in downtown Fresno’s core.
- The SC2–Fresno team worked closely with GSA and several federal agencies to ensure the federal government was leading by example and exploring downtown federal office locations as leases expired. As a result of the extra attention paid to locating offices in Fresno’s Central Business District, the following outcomes were achieved:
 1. In December 2012, the Social Security Administration began its 15-year lease in the Fulton Pedestrian Mall, which created an influx of about 4,300 patrons per month in the heart of the city’s historical downtown district. The new lease supports the city’s long-term vision for revitalizing downtown and its neighborhoods into a vibrant and sustainable place to live and work. The building’s modernization plan provided for extensive upgrades to the interior and exterior of the building, significantly restoring its character and incorporating energy efficiencies. The renovated building will help reshape and revitalize the local business area.
 2. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) moved to its new office in downtown Fresno to the Fulton Pedestrian Mall in May 2014. The federal lease allowed approximately 65 employees to move into a building that had been vacant for three years.

The new lease location will maintain the USCIS as an anchor tenant in the Fulton Pedestrian Mall for the next 10-15 years. In addition, USCIS and GSA worked with the landlord to design an environmentally sustainable office space that is projected to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for interior design and construction.

- The federal SC2 team worked with the City of Fresno, the Downtown Fresno Partnership (the “BID”) and local economic development organizations to target downtown businesses including those in strategic sectors like food processing. The U.S. Small Business Administration’s (SBA) *e200 Emerging Leaders Initiative* came to Fresno for 17 promising, local, small businesses to take a nationally acclaimed executive style “mini-MBA” program to spur business growth and development.
- The SC2–Fresno team supported the city’s bold step of reversing decades of unsustainable outward growth into some of the world’s most productive agricultural land and directing it back toward the city center. The EPA team members provided intense technical assistance to the city as it finalized its General Plan Update. For example, EPA funded and managed a \$100,000 technical assistance contract to support the city’s implementation strategies for its ambitious General Plan Update—particularly strategies to finance and implement infrastructure and services needed to support increased infill development. The contract supported a task force of state and national experts who convened in Fresno for a series of three meetings in 2013 to advise the city on innovative strategies for implementing infill development. A final report then provided concrete recommendations to enable the city to implement its new General Plan, and those recommendations have helped make many of the new private infill development investments in downtown Fresno possible.
- The Urban and Regional Policy Program of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and Mayor Ashley Swearengin launched the first SC2 Boot Camp in Fresno, California. This two-day workshop promoted several of the city’s economic development initiatives, and explored ways to build civic capacity, engage and connect stakeholders and to encourage innovative thinking around community revitalization strategies.
- SC2 leveraged the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) resources to enter into two technical assistance contracts to strengthen the local capacity of homeless housing and service providers. HHS completed a comprehensive assessment of the Fresno area homeless housing and services systems, which laid the foundation for additional interagency coordination and resources with HUD and the Interagency Council on Homelessness.
- The unemployment rate that was 18% in 2011 fell to 9% by 2015.

UNIFYING THEMES

- **Start by listening:** By kicking off their engagement listening to the city’s goals, building relationships with key stakeholders, and identifying low-barrier-to-entry technical assistance, the team was able to craft a work plan that had deep buy-in from all stakeholders and form a comprehensive guidepost for progress.
- **Don’t show up with your own solutions:** The federal government will be a stronger partner for communities if we first understand their needs and then creatively apply our resources to find solutions. This is a fundamental change in approach. In a community-based approach, the

needs and priorities identified by a community will drive the actions federal agencies will take to improve on-the-ground results.

- Look for creative ways to maximize federal investments: The Fresno team caught two big opportunities to maximize complementary federal investments that could have missed each other—a Bus Rapid Transit plan that would have missed the High-Speed Rail station, and GSA leases for federal office space that could have detracted from, rather than supported, other federal investments in the downtown revitalization area. Reaching out to fellow feds across agencies beyond traditional partnerships can help ensure that federal investments are aligned to support local goals.
- Develop lasting partnerships: Even as one project ends and the next begins, the federal SC2 team in Fresno has been able to develop lasting partnerships to support ongoing work across the region.

FEATURED HIGH-VALUE RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITIES

- Department of Transportation's Transportation, Community, and System Preservation TCSP and TIGER Grant Programs (<https://www.transportation.gov/tiger> and <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/tcsp/>)
- Executive Order on Space shared with GSA (<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/101580>)
- Three-month work plan
- White paper to engage small businesses (EPA)
- American Architectural Foundation's Sustainable Cities Design Academy (SCDA) design charrette (<http://www.archfoundation.org/category/center-for-design-the-city/sustainable-cities-design-academy/>)
- EPA's Smart Growth Implementation Assistance Program (<https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/smart-growth-implementation-assistance>)

LINKS PICTURES NEWSCLIPS/WORKING PAPERS

Mayor Swearengen at groundbreaking of Fulton Pedestrian Mall: <http://cmac.tv/show/?id=2765>