

TITLE	Planning for the Future of New York City Commercial Districts
APPLICANTS	NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) Neighborhood Development Division (NDD), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) NYC, Larisa Ortiz Associates (LOA)
AWARD CATEGORY	Planning

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio released his *HousingNY Plan* to build and preserve 200,000 units of affordable housing over the next ten years. An important component of this Plan is an emphasis on community development that strives to strengthen neighborhoods through holistic, equitable, and inclusive mixed-use development. In order to simultaneously grow and support neighborhood-serving commercial districts and their small businesses, the NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) created the Neighborhood 360° program (N360°) to deliver comprehensive commercial revitalization services and community based organization (CBO) capacity building resources to neighborhoods facing rapid change.

Prior to the announcement of the housing plan, SBS’ commercial revitalization approach focused heavily on providing small, federally funded CDBG grants of \$20k-30k to CBOs to improve commercial corridors. While impactful, these one year commitments did not focus on long-term sustainability and offered limited personnel expenses for existing staff to execute projects. In order to work towards achieving our goal of increasing community wealth, strengthening locally-owned small businesses, and improving the quality of life in under-resourced commercial districts, a shift in our strategy and approach was necessary.

EXECUTION

In order to begin the deployment of what is now known as N360°, SBS developed a strategic public-private partnership with LISC NYC and Citi Community Development, aided by technical assistance from Larisa Ortiz Associates, to develop an assessment tool and analytical framework — a “Commercial District Needs Assessment” (CDNA) — that would help SBS to engage community partners in evaluating existing conditions and identifying needs of a commercial district. Findings from the CDNA called attention to the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of a commercial district and laid the groundwork for the development of plans and projects to address the identified needs.

Simultaneously, SBS sought the establishment of a new NYC Rule for Commercial Revitalization. By defining a new administrative rule via “Rule Definition” - a type of law that is proposed and adopted by a City agency through the City Administrative Procedure Act (CAPA) - SBS would have the ability to accomplish the following:

- 1) Establish a citywide grant program that empowers local solutions and interventions to commercial districts that had completed sufficient planning and needs identification, and
- 2) Provide a permanent City rule to govern allocation of both Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and City Tax Levy (CTL) funds for commercial revitalization projects across NYC.

With the adoption of this new City rule, SBS was able to publicly launch the Neighborhood 360° program to identify, develop, and launch commercial revitalization projects in partnership with local stakeholders. SBS also partnered with LISC NYC and Citi Community Development to provide additional resources and technical assistance to select CBOs through the Commercial Corridor Challenge. Through proactive planning and targeted investments, the Neighborhood 360° program supports projects that strengthen and revitalize the streets, small businesses, and community-based organizations that anchor New York City neighborhoods. Through this program, competitive grants totaling up to \$500,000 per neighborhood per year were made available with a funding commitment of up to 3.5 years. In addition to program expenses, personnel funding for at least one full-time staff member dedicated to managing the program was also provided.

REPRESENTATION

Representation is a critical factor that informed the program structure and how the work would be executed. SBS’s goal for N360 was to help commercial districts, and the CBOs that serve them, mitigate rapid economic change by providing place-based economic development services through organizational capacity building. We envisioned CBOs playing a

lead and proactive role in the planning, development, and advocacy for commercial revitalization within their respective neighborhoods.

These N360° partner organizations would be able demonstrate established, time-tested relationships with local stakeholders in targeted neighborhoods, identify local opportunities and challenges through community consensus building, and collaboratively implement timely services and programs that serve local businesses and residents alike. Through this level of capacity building, data development, and community-based knowledge, we seek to further equip CBOs to independently carry out services beyond the life cycle of the N360 grant.

OUTCOME

As a result, programs and services that were made possible through N360° include but are not limited to: business attraction and retention initiatives, merchant organizing and outreach, business improvement district (BID) formation activities, area-wide marketing and branding, public programming and events, supplemental maintenance, public space activation, streetscape and storefront design planning, non-profit financial management, strategic planning, business data collection, assistance with navigating government, business development, as well as jobseeker recruitment and training. Outcomes and impacts are tracked using a robust metric survey that is collected on a quarterly basis. In addition, through SBS' strategic partnership with LISC NYC and Citi Community Development, CBOs were able to access additional flexible funding and technical assistance to conduct early action projects like storefront improvements, wayfinding campaigns and vendor markets, while also collecting data through pedestrian counts and trend surveys.

REPLICATION

The Commercial District Needs Assessment (CDNA) as a framework is a foundational component of the Neighborhood 360° program. The CDNA tool guides New York City CBOs through the process of gathering and evaluating information to determine the existing conditions and specific needs of commercial districts. The assessment helps community stakeholders identify appropriate strategic interventions that can improve the conditions of their local commercial districts and ensure that they can effectively meet the needs of local residents, merchants, and visitors. In addition, data and findings from the CDNA can be used to showcase the commercial district's unique character, demonstrate priority needs, and make a case for public and private investment. Upon completion of the CDNA, users will be equipped to:

- Identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities of the commercial district
- Engage the community for additional feedback and buy-in
- Prioritize needed investments, programming, and services
- Advocate to government agencies and elected officials
- Explore and apply for funding opportunities

The framework for the original CDNA was developed by Larisa Ortiz in partnership with LISC NYC and was based on over two decades of work in the field of commercial district management and revitalization. With support from LISC NYC and Citi Community Development, the CDNA was further adapted and refined by SBS.

SUSTAINABILITY

Our approach to integrating sustainable practices throughout this grant program is through the development of organizational capacity. We seek to bolster a CBO's ability to engage with stakeholders, as well as leverage their expertise to create place-based solutions to issues that afflict their commercial districts. To ensure that N360° commercial districts continue to thrive beyond the grant lifecycle, we have sought to lay a strong foundation of tools and expertise within our partner CBOs, and will continue to help elevate their voices, hone their skills, and build a pipeline of talent in the neighborhood development field.