

## RESTORE Fresno: Exploring a Possible Corridor Revitalization Strategy



### The Importance of Major Street Commercial Corridors

Fresno’s major street commercial corridors tie the community together. They are the paths that we travel to get from neighborhood to neighborhood or, where freeways aren’t available, to get across the entire city. Visitors from other areas may never wander into local residential streets, and their entire impression of a district may be gained from passing through major street corridors. Sometimes our corridors leave a good impression; often, they don’t. Corridors can connect residential areas, but in many cases they create barriers. They can be centers of vibrant commerce, but many are struggling with high vacancies and low sales. The RESTORE Fresno program can help to revitalize them.

The RESTORE Fresno initiative calls for a three-pronged approach to improving our community: Citywide, Residential, and Commercial. Citywide initiatives addressing issues such as homelessness are underway. Residential needs are being successfully addressed by the Neighborhood Revitalization Team (NRT). Presently, there is interest in addressing the commercial aspect of RESTORE Fresno.

To that end, this paper has been created to explore the possible creation of a Corridor Revitalization program and, ultimately, a Corridor Revitalization Team (CRT). The revitalization of Fresno’s major street commercial corridors can improve quality of life, enhance our civic image, expand economic opportunities, provide new lifestyle choices for those who seek them, increase transit ridership, and improve the City’s tax base.

## The Definition of a Corridor

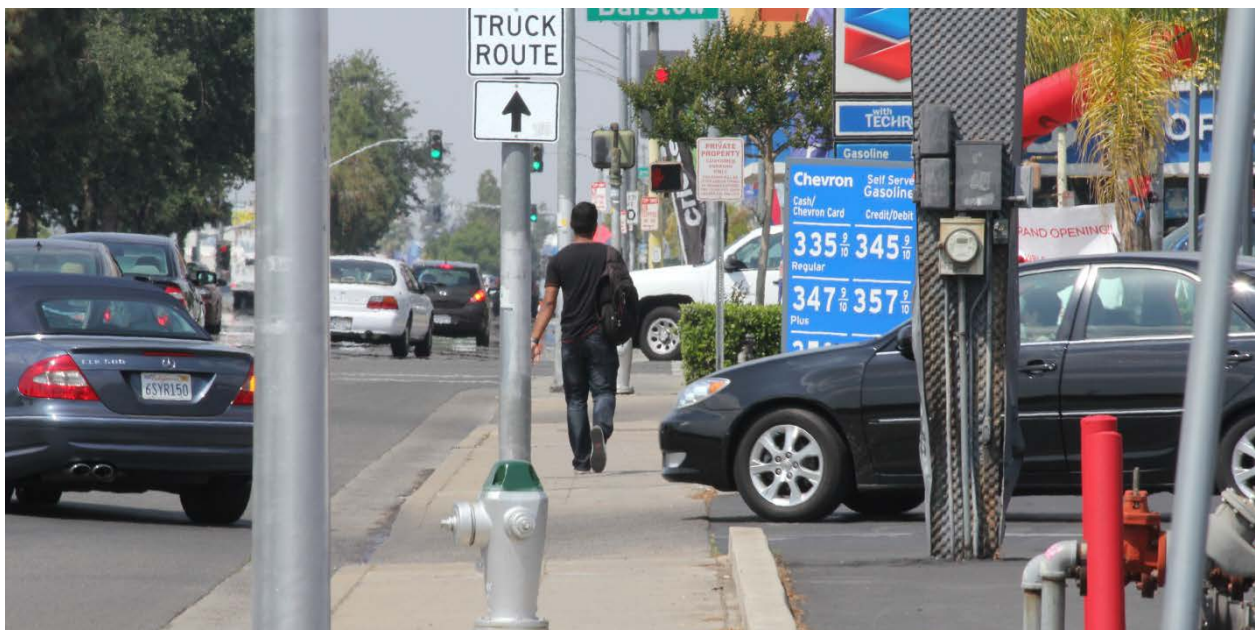
A corridor, for the purposes of RESTORE Fresno, should be defined as a linear area along a major street which has the following three characteristics, or the potential to develop them:

- **Commercial Activity.** While there may also be residential, civic, and office uses along the corridor, it should have a strong retail commercial presence. Retail corridors have the greatest need for revitalization, and also offer the greatest potential for beautification.
- **A Discernable Identity.** The corridor should be large enough to matter, but small enough to function as a unit. It should have its own identity, or at least have the potential to develop its own identity over time. An identity helps to anchor a corridor with local residential areas; identity is also crucial in marketing corridor businesses to people who live outside of the area.
- **The Spine of a Residential Neighborhood.** The corridor should serve as the spine of adjacent residential areas, or at least have the potential to do so. This will ultimately help the retail uses on the corridor be more successful, and it will also strengthen the adjacent residential areas.

## The Unique Nature of Corridor Revitalization

With neighborhoods in need of revitalization, the problems stem primarily from disinvestment, dilapidated structures, poor property management, and concentrations of poverty. However, the primary physical building blocks of a neighborhood—such as streets, sidewalks, houses, apartments—are usually in place. They may be in poor condition, but they are usually there. The solution is focused, therefore, on capacity building through educating and organizing residents, assisting owner occupants when programs are available, business development programs, and using code enforcement to get neglectful landlords to bring their property up to standards.

Most of the commercial corridors in need of revitalization also suffer from disinvestment, dilapidated structures, and poor property management. However, this is often compounded by the fact that they



*The Blackstone Avenue corridor.*

don't even have the basic physical building blocks needed for success. In many cases the design of the street is counterproductive to retail success. Buildings often are located poorly on their site and have facades which offer poor visibility and access. Parking areas are often harsh and uninviting due to a lack of landscaping and tree cover. Signage clutter creates an unappealing environment that encourages drivers to pass through as quickly as possible rather than stopping to explore. The pedestrian environment is uncomfortable at best, dangerous at worst. This makes walking and riding transit challenging and unappealing and denies businesses of potential customers using those modes of transportation.

These design challenges are exacerbated by local and national economic factors—brick and mortar retail is contracting, and yet is generally overbuilt in Fresno. Meanwhile, corridors in need of revitalization often serve residential trade areas that do not have enough households with enough disposable income to support the amount of retail space that we have constructed over the preceding decades.

Therefore—in addition to code enforcement, capacity building, and property owner assistance programs—corridors often require City investment in street improvements as well as private sector investment in new development.

### **Corridor Revitalization Cycle**

In residential areas, the Neighborhood Revitalization Team has developed a Neighborhood Revitalization Cycle. This has been very successful, and it serves as an excellent starting point for developing a cycle for commercial corridor revitalization. Based on the NRT model and lessons learned from ongoing commercial revitalization work in Downtown, the Tower District, and the Blackstone Avenue corridor, the following is an outline for a potential Corridor Revitalization Cycle.

**Step 1: Assessment.** Early in the process, research should be conducted to help the corridor revitalization staff understand the condition of the corridor, its needs, and its strengths. Data collected should include, but not be limited to the following:



*The Broadway corridor in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle.*



- Retail sales.
- Lease rates.
- Vacancy rates.
- Retail sq. ft. vs. trade area population/income.
- Condition of properties.
- Resident surveys.
- Boardings/alightings and nearby transit stops.

**Step 2: Quick Wins.** In order to establish credibility with investors, property owners, merchants, and residents, and to gain momentum for later stages of the revitalization process, low cost/high benefit improvements that could be implemented very quickly should be identified. Ideally, these would be prioritized by property owners and other stakeholders. Examples may include:

- Fill potholes.
- Fix cracked sidewalks.
- Repair broken lights.
- Trim trees.
- Add trees to empty wells.
- Clean up illegal dumping.
- Graffiti team sweep.
- Conduct an initial Code Enforcement sweep and get voluntary compliance with easiest items.
- Report homeless encampments to proper authorities and service providers.

**Step 3: Capacity Building.** To ensure long-term success, property owners, merchants, and residents need to be active participants in the revitalization of the corridor. Corridor Revitalization staff can help them build the capacity for effective involvement in many ways, such as:

- Educate merchants and property owners on the roles of various City Departments, and how to use FresGo to address problems.



*The Ventura/Kings Canyon corridor in Southeast Fresno.*

- Connect merchants with SCORE and other small business training opportunities.
- Identify leaders or potential leaders among the merchants and property owners.
- Identify non-profits, churches, and other civic organizations that can be partners.
- Establish a property-based improvement district (PBID), merchants association, or other organization which can pool the resources of merchants and property owners, promote the corridor, and collectively lobby for its needs.
- Continue to pursue voluntary compliance of minor to moderate Municipal Code violations.

**Step 4: Cultivate an Identity.** Broadway in New York is widely known as the world’s premier theater district. Columbus Avenue in San Francisco is known as the heart of that city’s Italian-American community. 6<sup>th</sup> Street in Austin is renowned for its blues clubs. The most successful corridors have a strong identity, and cultivating an identity will be important. Tactics for achieving that may include:

- Research the history of the area for clues about an authentic identity—what was its original niche? Who founded/subdivided the area?
- Identify a potential name and branding strategy.
- Identify a potential market niche such as night life, catering to students from a nearby high school, or businesses related to a demographic group that is strongly represented in the area.
- Identify an event or events which could draw people to the area, familiarize them with area businesses, and generate affection for the corridor.

**Step 5: Placemaking.** Successful commercial corridors tend to be nice places to walk, and often feature public spaces such as plazas. Most of Fresno’s struggling major street commercial corridors lack these features, however. While funds for grand, permanent changes may not be available in the near term,

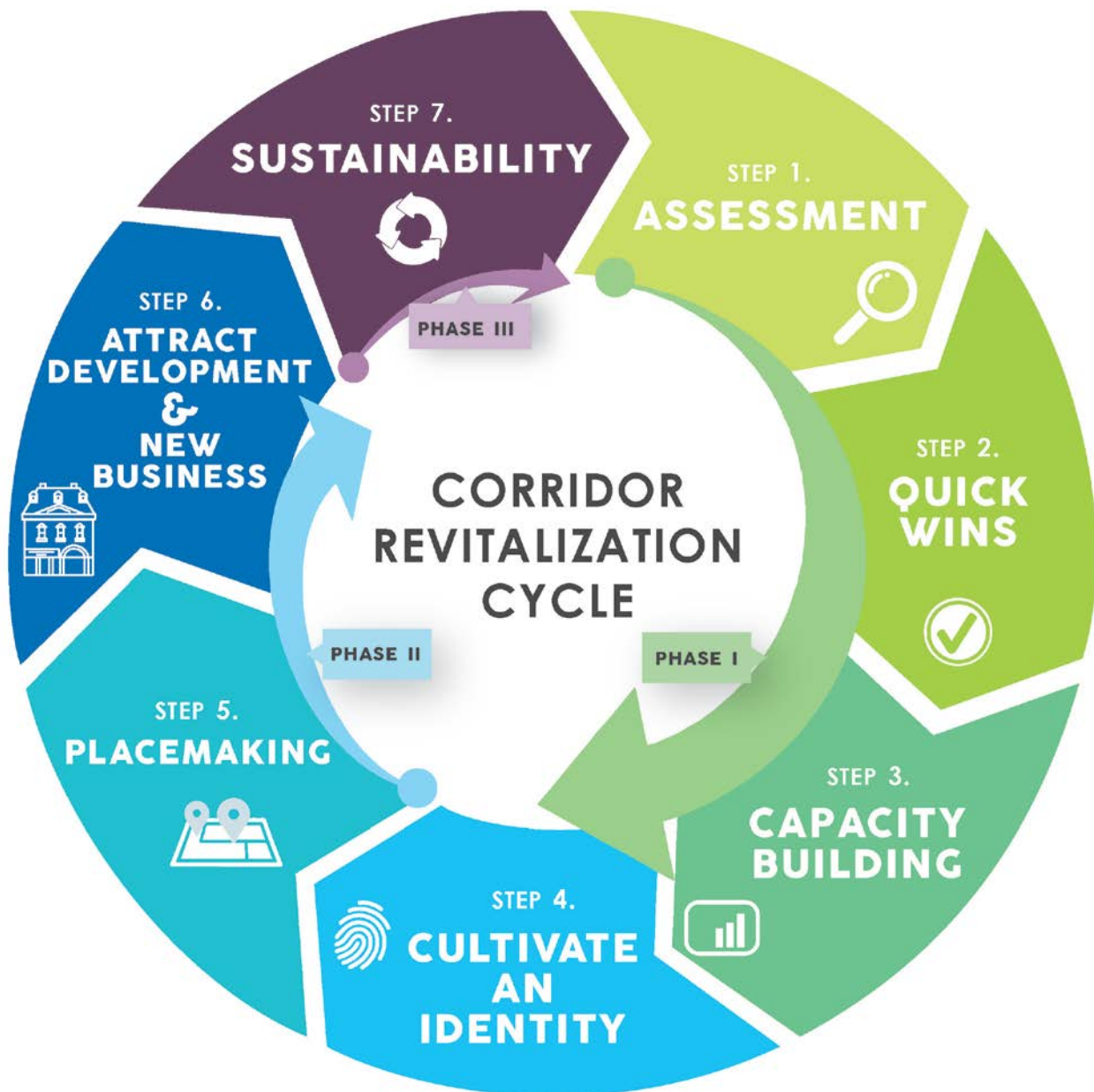


*Quick and inexpensive placemaking can be achieved through “Tactical Urbanism” techniques, such as these used in Seattle.*

there are improvements that can be made in a fairly quick and inexpensive fashion that will improve the public significantly through techniques known as *Tactical Urbanism*. To develop the most practical and effective strategy, the Corridor Revitalization staff should explore possibilities such as the following:

- Identify easy-to-implement solutions to improve pedestrian, bike, and transit access.
- Identify low cost traffic calming options.
- Identify potential plazas (temporary or permanent) or other public spaces.
- Identify potential grants to fund placemaking improvements.
- Create a façade improvement program.
- Begin issuing citations to remaining Code violations.

**Step 6: Attract Development and New Businesses.** Many of Fresno’s corridors feature many vacant or underutilized parcels. In many cases, new buildings will ultimately need to be constructed, but this is a





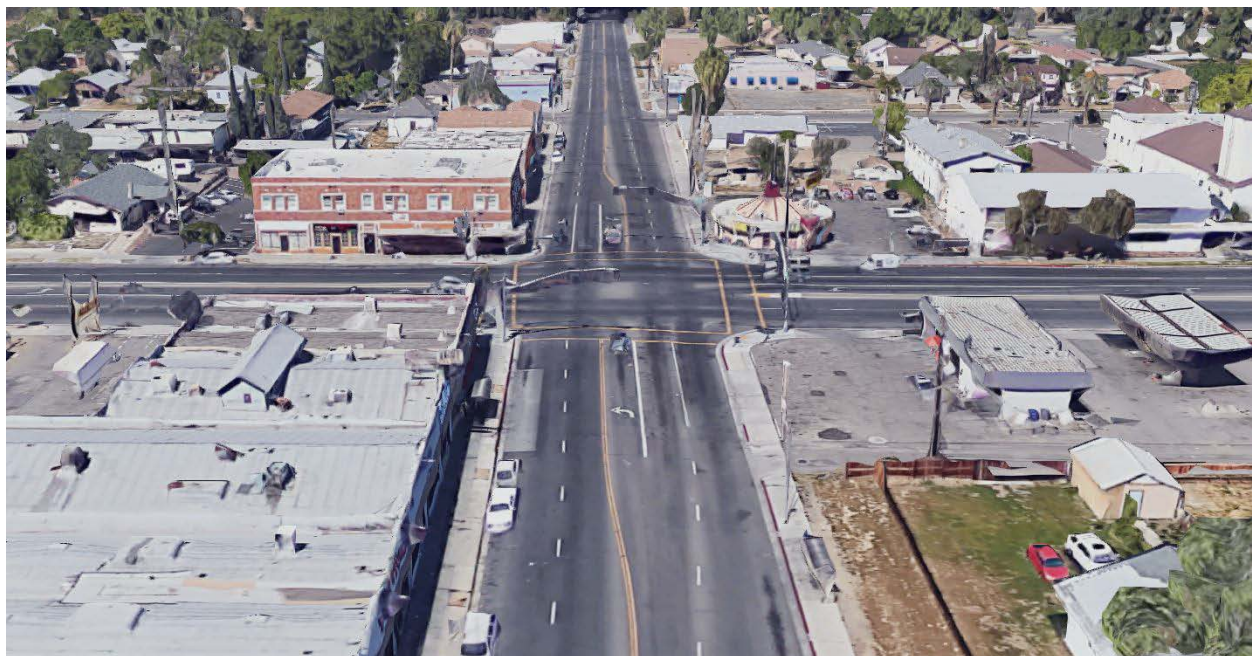
challenging prospect when current market rents do not support new construction. Underutilized buildings need new tenants, but with a contracting retail sector, new types of uses may need to be identified for spaces formerly occupied by stores. Corridor Revitalization staff can get this important process started by taking actions such as these:

- Identify unfilled market sectors such as groceries, drug stores, restaurants, personal services, or entertainment and potential tenants that could fulfill these needs.
- Identify other uses for vacant/underutilized structures such as a public market, civic uses, a community center, or housing.
- Work with banks and the Banker’s Collaborative to make them comfortable with financing innovative projects in the area.
- Find developers willing to take on a catalytic project in the area.
- Work with commercial brokers on properties that are for sale.
- Identify potential P3 (public-private partnership) projects along the corridor or surrounding area.
- Work with developers on potential grants when available and applicable.

**Step 7: Sustainability.** Once a corridor is stabilized and on a path to success, the most intense work of the Corridor Revitalization team will be done. However, if attention is completely taken away, the corridor may begin to slip backwards. Therefore, the final state of the Corridor Revitalization Cycle will include periodic monitoring of economic indicators, occasionally checking in with key stakeholders, monitoring Municipal Code compliance and issuing warnings or citations as needed, and making team members available for support as needed.

## **Staffing**

To effectively revitalize our corridors, dedicated staff will be a necessity. This is not an objective that can be achieved by trying to fit it into existing staff’s workloads. It is a lofty goal, and it will require resources.



*The Fresno Street corridor at Belmont Avenue.*

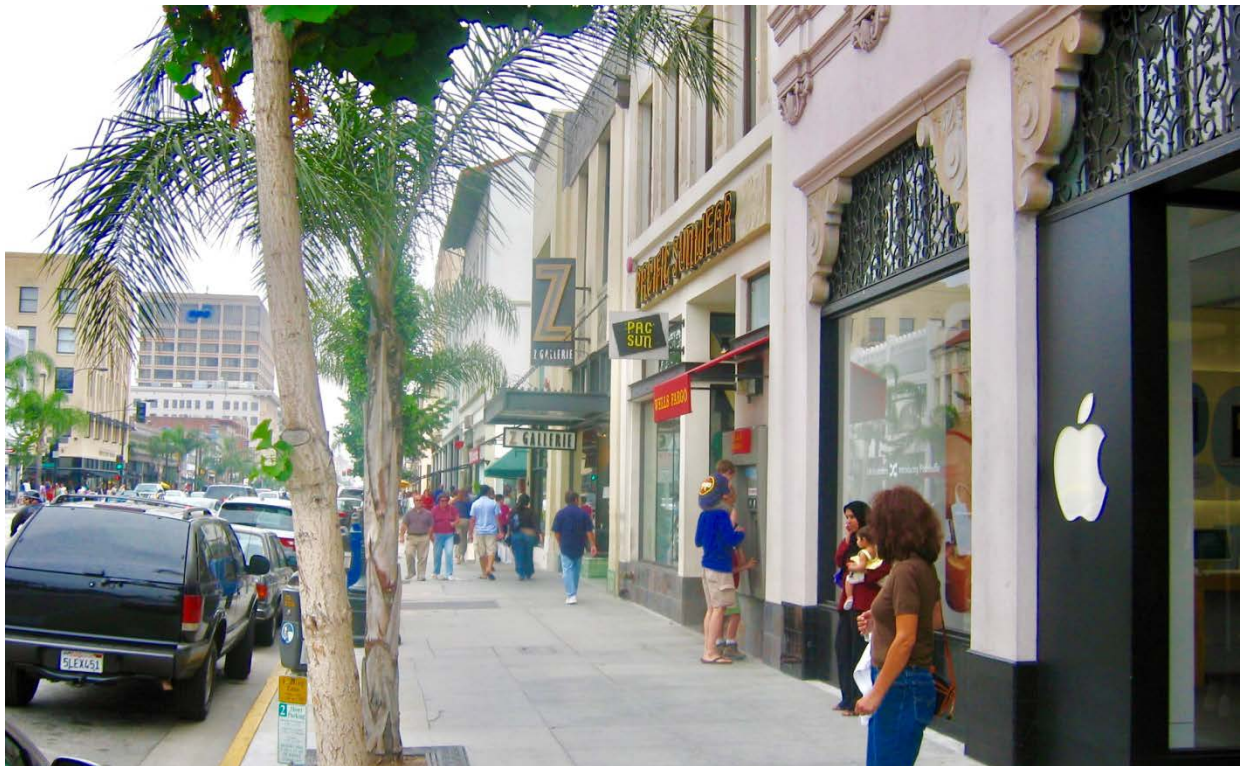
There are three possible levels of staffing that could be applied:

**Level 1: One Person.** One full-time person will be the minimum staffing required to make meaningful progress. The Development and Resource Management (DARM) Department has recently hired an Economic Development Coordinator to begin this work.

The coordinator will organize the program and drive it forward, but will need to collaborate extensively with other parts of the organization to maximize the program's effectiveness. The relationship with Code Enforcement will possibly be the most important. Identifying the most problematic Code violations, working collaboratively with willing owners to correct these problems, and then issuing citations for the remaining problems will be crucial in many corridors. The coordinator will also occasionally collaborate with Long Range Planning for placemaking assistance, Current Planning to facilitate quick approval of development projects which achieve the goals of the program, Public Works for roadway issues, and consultants for specialized market analysis or design matters.

To maximize the impact of a single staff member, their focus should be limited to two corridor segments at any given time. It may also be advantageous to choose corridors which overlap with other City initiatives such as Bus Rapid Transit, streetscape improvements, or NRT focus neighborhoods. Three years should be allotted to complete steps 1 through 6 of the Corridor Revitalization cycle.

**Level 2: One Team.** If the goal is to approach the speed and broad reach of the NRT program, then a full team of 4 people including a supervisor will be allow more corridor to move through the steps of the Corridor Revitalization Cycle as quickly and thoroughly as possible. If a full Corridor Revitalization Team is assembled, its composition will be very important. Various skill sets will be needed to achieve the



*The Colorado Boulevard corridor in Pasadena.*



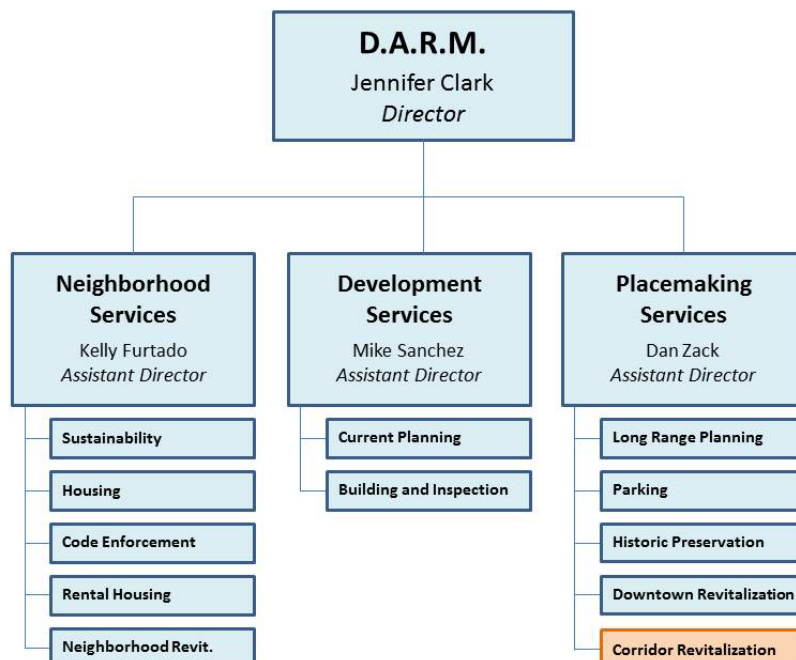
goals of the program, such as:

- *Urban Planning/Design.* To achieve the placemaking and development goals of the CRT, someone who possesses a city planning or urban design background will be valuable.
- *Public Relations/Outreach.* Someone on the team should also be experienced in public outreach and public relations, as well, as this will be crucial to working with businesses and residents in the area, rallying them to the cause, and getting them to contribute useful ideas. This skill set would also be useful to coming up with a marketing and branding strategy for the corridors.
- *Real Estate/Economics.* Someone with a knowledge of real estate and economics would also be important, since understanding rents, vacancies, market absorption, and development proformas will help property owners to understand the highest and best uses of their properties.
- *Code Enforcement.* Finally, code enforcement will be an important element of corridor revitalization. While it may be possible to coordinate with the Code Enforcement division, ideally there would be a person on the team who is able to cite negligent property owners and merchants who will not meet minimum standards voluntarily.

A full team could potentially address four corridor segments at a time, and may be able to complete the revitalization cycle to as little as two years.

**Level 3: Multiple Teams.** Eventually, as has been the case with Neighborhood Revitalization, additional teams could be formed in order to approach multiple corridors simultaneously. If the program is successful, and if resources are available, this may be the preference of this administration or a future administration. If a broader approach is ultimately chosen, a manager would be needed to coordinate the entire program. A possible structure and stages of expansion for the CRT program is shown below.

The new Economic Development Coordinator for corridor revitalization is overseen by the DARM Assistant Director for Placemaking Services, due to the similarities to work done in Downtown Revitalization and Long Range Planning. If a full Corridor Revitalization Team is formed, it could fit well into the Placemaking unit, as well.



## Partners

While having a Corridor Revitalization Team of skilled, dedicated City staff will be important, it will also be essential for that team to partner and collaborate with other City departments and outside organizations. This has been important to NRT's success on the residential side of RESTORE Fresno, and it will be just as important in the commercial arena. Departments and organizations that the CRT may collaborate with include:

- City of Fresno Departments and Divisions
  - Development and Resource Management
    - Historic Preservation
    - Parking
    - Long Range Planning/GIS
    - Code Enforcement
    - Neighborhood Revitalization Team
    - Housing
  - Public Works
    - Streets
    - Graffiti
  - Public Utilities
    - Solid Waste
  - Police
  - Finance (sales tax data)
- Outside Organizations
  - Banks and the Mayor's Bankers Collaborative.
  - Commercial brokers.
  - The SCORE program of the Small Business Administration.
  - Non-profits, churches, and other civic organizations.



*The Tulare Street corridor near Roosevelt High School.*



## Potential Corridors for CRT Work

With its ½-mile grid of major streets, Fresno has commercial corridors which touch every corner of the city. However, Fresno’s rapid outward growth pattern has left many of the older corridor segments in a state of decline, and the recent national contraction of retail activity has exacerbated this problem. Thus, there are many candidates for this program.

In order to be large enough to be meaningful, but small enough to be manageable, corridor segments addressed for revitalization should probably be at least ¼ mile long, but not more than 1 mile long. They should generally have a major intersection, public space, landmark, or anchor institution near the center of the segment as a focal point. Listed below are several candidates for this program.

Corridor	Segment	Neighborhood	Notes
Blackstone Avenue	Floradora to Clinton	Fresno City College area	Fresno City College is a big strength. New Mixed use zoning is in place, some potential infill projects are in the pipeline, and streetscape improvements are being designed through grants from COG and Caltrans. The Better Blackstone Association is also educating and organizing property owners, merchants, and residents. BRT has improved transit greatly.
	Fedora to Griffith	Fort Miller	
	Santa Ana to San Jose	Centered on Shaw Avenue	
Belmont Avenue	Weber to 180	Lowell and South Tower	Many lots are vacant and there aren't many good buildings to work with. The economics are challenging here. However, highway access is good, Richard's Prime Rib is a widely known restaurant, and a revitalizing Lowell neighborhood contribute to success.
	180 to Diana	Yokomi	
	Diana to 41	Yokomi and Jefferson	There are some attractive mixed use buildings in this area which could serve as a focal point and contribute to the corridor's identity.
Fresno Street	McKenzie to SR 180		
Tulare Avenue	Cedar to Barton	Roosevelt High	Good building stock, proximity to high school, and some interesting businesses are strengths to build on.
Olive Avenue	Echo to Van Ness	Tower District	Challenges exist, but this area has many strengths, including good buildings, some flagship tenants, some streetscape improvements, a merchants association, and a strong identity. It needs less help than other areas, but it may be a good place to start as the CRT system is tested and perfected.
	Thorne to Echo		
Fulton Street	Alhambra to SR 180		
Van Ness Avenue	Floradora to Home		

Corridor	Segment	Neighborhood	Notes
Ventura Street / Kings Canyon Road	5 <sup>th</sup> to 10 <sup>th</sup>	Winchell	New Mixed use zoning is in place and some streetscape improvements have been conceptualized. BRT has improved transit greatly. The Fairgrounds create bursts of activity at some times, and then create dullness at other times.
	Cedar to Chestnut	Fairgrounds	
Shaw Avenue	Channing to Forkner	Centered on West Avenue	Retail is struggling in this area, but surrounding residential areas have fairly strong disposable income. Some merchants and owners have begun organizing.
	Lola to Cornelia	Highway City	CDC could be asset. HSR is creating challenges. Adjacent neighborhoods have low discretionary income. Underground Gardens are a tremendous asset.
F Street	Fresno to Ventura	Chinatown	TCC projects, good buildings, and some interesting businesses are strengths to build on. HSR construction, homelessness, and high vacancies are challenges.

Currently, the Blackstone Avenue and Ventura/Kings Canyon corridors should be considered the highest priority corridors. Due to recent investments in Bus Rapid Transit, streetscape studies conducted in these areas, developer interest, and organizing done by the Better Blackstone Association and other groups, these corridors offer fertile ground for revitalization efforts. Within these corridors, two key segments should be identified as the first to be taken through the Corridor Revitalization Cycle.

### **Performance Measures**

How do we measure success? How do we know if we are winning? These are questions that must be answered with any undertaking. As this program is launched, tested, and perfected it will become very clear which performance measure are most important, and what thresholds should be used to measure success. However, prior to the launch of the program, the following measures represent an appropriate starting point:

- **Commercial Rents.** Rents are a strong indication of the desire of entrepreneurs to be in the area, or their lack of interest. When they are making higher profits, or they feel that higher profits are



*The Olive Avenue corridor west of the Tower District.*



possible, they are willing and able to pay higher rents. Commercial rents that are at least 80% of the regional average would indicate that businesses are healthy and the market views the corridor in a positive way.

- **Retail Sales.** The Finance Department can provide aggregated sales data based on sales tax receipts for an area. In order for improvements to commercial corridors to be sustainable, merchants must make reasonable profits. Growth (or decline) should be tracked in relation to the regional average.
- **Vacancy Rates.** Tracking vacancy rates over time and relative to the region will provide important information to the team about the corridor's economic health and the effectiveness of the CRT program.
- **Pedestrian Counts.** Tracking walking activity will indicate the success of streetscape improvements and business development.
- **Transit Boardings/Alightings.** Increasing housing, employment, shopping, and entertainment along a corridor is likely to produce additional transit ridership.
- **Public Perception of Appearance.** This is a subjective, if not visceral indicator. However, potential investors and customers often judge an area based primarily on their superficial impression of its appearance. Surveys of customers and passersby in which they score the area's appearance should be taken before the launch of the program, and then periodically thereafter in order to gauge performance.
- **Public Perception of Quality of Businesses.** This is also subjective, but surveys of customers and residents can indicate perceptions and how they change over time.



*The Olive Avenue corridor in the Tower District.*

## Conclusion

Fresno's ½-mile grid of major streets makes it a city of corridors. Some of them are thriving, but many are in a state of decline. These major street commercial corridors tie the community together and carry visitors across neighborhoods and districts. Sometimes our corridors leave a good impression; often, they don't.

This paper has proposed to carry out the commercial focus of the RESTORE Fresno initiative by revitalizing these corridors.

Like the neighborhoods benefiting from the work of the Neighborhood Revitalization Team, most of the commercial corridors in need of revitalization also suffer from disinvestment, dilapidated structures, and poor property management. However, this is often compounded by the fact that they don't even have the basic physical building blocks needed for success. In many cases the design of the street is counterproductive to retail success, buildings often are poorly designed, many parking areas are harsh and uninviting, signage clutter abounds, and the pedestrian environment is uncomfortable at best. These design challenges are exacerbated by the national contraction of brick and mortar retail.

Therefore—in addition to the tactics of code enforcement, capacity building, and property owner assistance programs use by NRT—corridors often require City investment in street improvements as well as private sector investment in new development and new businesses.

It will not be easy work, but it will be worth the effort. The revitalization of Fresno's major street commercial corridors can improve quality of life, enhance our civic image, expand economic opportunities, provide new lifestyle choices for those who seek them, increase transit ridership, and improve the City's tax base.



*An artist's conception of a revitalized El Camino Real corridor in Santa Clara County.*