

Middle Neighborhoods Best Practice: Supporting Small Businesses in the Middle of a Pandemic

Old Brooklyn CDC
Cleveland, OH

Small businesses in the Old Brooklyn neighborhood (Cleveland, OH), like others around the country, have had to scramble to adjust during the COVID19 pandemic. Business owners had to quickly re-think how they would offer products and services, plus how they would tell the public that they were not only open for business, but safely so. Already facing decreased revenue due to decreased foot traffic, it was a struggle for businesses to fund these adjustments. In response, Old Brooklyn CDC decided to dip into its rainy-day fund to help small businesses transition to this new reality. Executive Director Jeff Verespej thought, “If this isn’t a rainy day, I don’t know what is.”

About a month into the pandemic, Old Brooklyn CDC launched two micro-grant options: one to help businesses establish social distancing and the other to provide marketing and technology support. The grant application was short and simple with two questions, each limited to 100 words or less. “We did not want to make this a long and difficult application process,” explained Verespej, “Businesses needed our help fast.” Old Brooklyn CDC has strong and established relationships with businesses in the neighborhood, so was able to roll funds out quickly.

Businesses could request micro-grants of up to \$750 each but most asked only for what they needed. Thirty businesses applied and received about \$500 each. Business owners used grant funds to purchase masks, reconfigure offices, build plexiglass barriers, reconstruct websites to allow for virtual interaction, develop digital ordering systems and so on. Verespej noted that the micro-grants were not intended to be ‘life-altering’ funds, but were meant to provide fast help when fast help was needed. The quick success of the program was due to the existing relationships Old Brooklyn already had with neighborhood businesses.

To learn more about Old Brooklyn CDC’s business partner approach see: *Resource: Developing a Targeted Approach to Business Development at the end of this document.*





Emergency Micro-Grants During COVID19

Marlon Brown of the Legoheadz Barber Saloon utilized the COVID-19 Physical Distancing Grant to purchase new sanitation stations, cleaners and masks to keep employees and customers safe.

Photo used with permission from Old Brooklyn CDC

About Old Brooklyn

“Old Brooklyn is a middle neighborhood in Cleveland for all of the classical reasons. It’s large, it’s on the fringe of the city, and it’s surrounded by suburbs on three sides. It’s far from downtown and the local economy is untethered from the regional economy. The neighborhood is out where the factories used to be and has miles and miles of workforce housing, which is decent and affordable.”

--Executive Director, Jeff Verespej



Old Brooklyn CDC works to develop and revitalize the community by uniting and empowering residents, business leaders and government around plans and initiatives, and achieve social, economic, and civic involvement. It was founded in 1974 and has 11 staff and 11 board members

RESOURCE: Developing a Targeted Approach to Business District Development

Set Your Intention	<p>Strategic plans are a tool for supporting and growing business districts. In formulating its Business District Strategic Plan, Old Brooklyn CDC identified the district's key strengths and weaknesses. It realized that the neighborhood's lack of anchor institutions or features that naturally draw foot traffic made it harder for businesses to thrive. The CDC decided to focus on community experiences, which create bonds between business owners, connects consumers with businesses, and unites residents. Old Brooklyn focused both on creating new community events and enhancing existing events in ways that helped small businesses grow.</p>
Know Your Approach	<p>Many groups and communities understandably want to start with what's missing. Old Brooklyn CDC, however, did just the opposite; it began by focusing on existing strengths. Staff evaluated multiple nodes within its business district, identified assets such as employment hubs (the local hospital), historic structures, density areas, architecturally significant buildings and existing experiential events that could be leveraged, and then chose a business node to target and built on its strengths.</p>
Boosting Foot Traffic	<p>Many middle neighborhoods lack anchor institutions or features that naturally draw foot traffic, which can make it hard for businesses to thrive. Old Brooklyn CDC began focusing on experiential events to draw people to the neighborhood.</p>
Sample Experiential Events	<p>Pop-Up Chefs: Old Brooklyn CDC identified restaurants that were closed on certain days of the week and invited pop-up chefs to take over for a day. This drew patrons and generated buzz for the restaurant.</p> <p>Trick or Treat on Main St: A large trick or treat event that took place at the local hospital was moved to Main St. This brought hundreds of families to the business node.</p> <p>Relocating the Farmers Market: Old Brooklyn CDC facilitated the move of the local farmer's market from a community park to the center of the commercial district. Market shoppers subsequently learned of other businesses in their community.</p> <p>Cycling Scavenger Hunt: Although the cycling scavenger hunt was a challenge due to traffic on Main St., it was worth the effort to have 1,000+ cyclists on Main St. that day.</p>
Great Ideas:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be creative with pop-up events. • Start with strongest nodes of the business district and work outward. • Create experiences for the community to draw them to the business district. • Incorporate events into your marketing and branding strategy. • Identify target markets that are a good match with your business district and recruit them directly. • Own and manage commercial real estate to gain influence over the retail mix. • Develop relationships with and among business owners so they can take coordinated actions quickly. • Use social media to tell stories and generate interest. • Align philanthropy and policy with business development. • Get comfortable with the idea that your strategy may require funds. • Advocate with local government on behalf of business owners.
Potential Challenges	<p>One challenge for Old Brooklyn CDC was deciding on which business node to target. Many areas wanted support, so the decision was difficult. Develop a decision scorecard to help with the selection process and provide clear expectations. Also, develop an explicit growth and preservation plan that prevents practices that could lead to gentrification or damage housing affordability, such as partnerships with land banks.</p>