



**Smart Growth America**  
Improving lives by improving communities



# **Small-Scale Manufacturing and Place-Based Economic Development: Lowell, Massachusetts Next Steps Report**

May 15-17, 2017

## Introduction

Smart Growth America's Small-Scale Manufacturing and Place-Based Economic Development program, a project in partnership with Recast City, seeks to help communities make strategic land use decisions to enhance small-scale manufacturing and improve economic revitalization. This technical assistance, funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration, guides communities to create policies and programs that will support local producers to grow their business in target neighborhoods.

Communities requested technical assistance and were selected through a competitive process by Smart Growth America. Selected communities received a three-day community assessment, during which the project team conducted fieldwork in the local subject area, conducted in-depth interviews with small-scale manufacturers, and hosted presentations and brainstorming sessions with local stakeholder focus groups.

The City of Lowell, in partnership with the Working Cities Challenge Initiative (WCC), applied for technical assistance from Smart Growth America. The WCC, with funding administered by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, seeks to improve economic development, education, and diversity/inclusion for residents and businesses in the Acre neighborhood. The WCC partnership includes 12 key stakeholder organizations in Lowell, including the Coalition for a Better Acre.

The onsite visit for the City of Lowell occurred May 15-17, 2017. In addition to City staff and local producers, the technical assistance team met with property owners, business leaders, financial institutions, and university staff. The team toured existing and potential production space in downtown Lowell, with a specific focus on the Acre neighborhood.

The intent of the workshop was to meet with local business and community leaders, share information about local opportunities and challenges, and provide the City of Lowell and its local partners with a set of steps to bring more small-scale manufacturing businesses into the Acre neighborhood, and support more business development from Acre residents. The technical assistance was designed not just to train participants but also to build local capacity, support economic development and planning efforts, examine development challenges, assist in potential policy changes, and help coordinate among City agencies and partners.

This memo is a summary of the community workshop and on-site interviews. The report includes an assessment of existing conditions in Lowell, as well as recommendations for strengthening local small production businesses and supporting investment in the Acre neighborhood.

**Recommendations are focused on ways to support the diverse, local small-scale manufacturing businesses, attract more of these businesses, and create a walkable, more pedestrian-friendly Acre neighborhood.** These recommendations will help the group of stakeholders involved to date prioritize work and engage the wider community to carry the effort forward.

## Setting the national context

Our understanding of what makes an ideal environment for manufacturing is changing. Traditional assumptions of large, polluted and isolated spaces are giving way to manufacturing infrastructure

that is small, clean, sometimes shared amongst multiple firms, and integrated with other land uses. Communities benefit in a number of ways when they bring manufacturing education and small production businesses into neighborhoods. With maker communities and locally made products rising in popularity, small-scale producers and manufacturers can attract people to downtown and neighborhood centers.

These businesses can occupy vacant industrial properties or storefronts, and bring vitality to neighborhood centers. Similarly, some manufacturers have found creative ways to be actively “place conscious” by rehabilitating properties, creating shared workspaces, and locating facilities in places that are accessible by public transportation. These activities strengthen the community of producers and promote the area as an employment avenue. Some businesses provide programming that makes use of public spaces to create a vibrant street life that attracts people to downtown on a more regular basis.

Additionally, maker businesses and small-scale manufacturing are key assets to the local job base. These jobs, as well as business ownership, are more accessible to residents without college or advanced degrees. The business type is also more accessible to people from different countries who would otherwise face language or cultural barriers.

Small-scale producers, or maker businesses, are defined as all types of small businesses producing tangible goods. This includes businesses producing goods in textile, hardware, wood, metal, 3D printing, and food. This also includes hardware prototyping, consumer product design and prototyping, breweries and distilleries, and local food production and packaging.

*Source: Recast City*

Communities with a diverse set of small businesses can weather market changes more successfully and are less likely to lose their growing businesses to other cities or countries. Many cities are working on “economic gardening”—the concept of growing the size and scale of existing local businesses—because these owners are most likely to stay in town. Additionally, small-scale manufacturing jobs pay salaries 50-100% higher than service and retail jobs.

Providing space for these local producers to grow their business in city neighborhoods can help connect more people to well-paying jobs, strengthen small business and startup sectors, and offer economic opportunities to a variety of education and skill levels. These businesses and their owners can help to bring vitality to main streets and neighborhood centers and keep jobs in the city. Furthermore, manufacturing employers benefit from being part of a close-knit community with prevalent opportunities to make meaningful connections with nearby firms.

Communities that recognize and harness demand for these trends will take a key step towards diversifying local real estate markets and the employment base. While some communities have shown promise on this front, many more struggle to effectively coordinate the ongoing public and private investments needed for a healthy economic ecosystem. At the municipal level, staff, local business leaders, and community groups must understand what needs to be in place to spur a paradigm shift from the conventional economic development approach to the specifics of growing light manufacturing. Anchor institutions can enhance workforce education, create demand for products, and spin off ideas that can be brought to market. State and federal governments can provide funding for training and infrastructure. And finally, the case needs to be made to the private

sector that business can thrive in a light industrial environment as well as in a neighborhood retail setting; in turn, the private sector can offer partnership opportunities and competition.

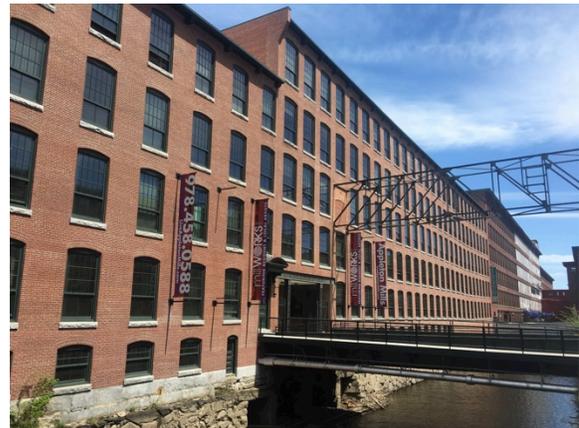
SGA's Small-Scale Manufacturing and Place-Based Economic Development program aims to position communities to reap the benefits of maker education and a small-scale manufacturing sector to strengthen their business base, reinforce goals for cities and neighborhoods, fill vacant properties, and build a strong pipeline of businesses to grow locally.

## Lowell, Massachusetts: local context

The potential for small-scale manufacturing to grow in Lowell is real. The downtown and Acre neighborhood have experienced an influx of small-scale businesses settling into these areas, particularly in the last two years.

As demand and opportunity increase for locally-based, small-scale manufacturing businesses such as microbreweries, textiles, food production, and other crafts, the City recognizes the need to build an infrastructure that supports them. City leaders understand that these businesses are likely to stay in Lowell and provide employment for local residents. Lowell engaged Smart Growth America to help provide a more robust environment for small production businesses to locate throughout the Acre, and increase economic opportunities for all residents in the city.

While there are currently many resources for entrepreneurs and small business owners available in Lowell, the interest and demand for small-scale manufacturing are relatively new. The Acre will be one of the target areas for increasing opportunities for micro-businesses and craft businesses that fall under the category of small-scale manufacturing. The Acre has always been one of the city's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods, serving as a historic entry point for French Canadian, Irish, and Greek immigrants and now refugees and immigrants from Asia, South America, Europe and African nations. In particular, there is currently a large population of Spanish-speaking residents, especially in the Acre.



Small-scale manufacturing is an important sector for Lowell's Acre neighborhood for the following reasons:

- These businesses can bring a strong street front energy into the area, without being completely dependent on daily retail traffic or annual events. Many of the businesses do not even need traditional retail storefronts since their sales are predominantly online or wholesale.
- Local residents are the business owners—people who grew up in the region or picked Lowell as their “chosen” community. This means that the businesses are more likely to stay even as they grow.
- The businesses add diversity to the local job base. This will help stabilize the community

over time. These businesses often offer job opportunities to residents without college or advanced degrees.

- Business owners, artists, and medical device manufacturers are beginning to locate in downtown and sell wholesale products nationally and internationally through online sales. Local businesses are already starting to congregate in downtown and are interested in being around a “community” of other producers. These locally-minded owners are likely to hire Lowellians as they grow.

The City and other community leaders play a key role in the success of the small-scale production sector. The City can serve as a facilitator to remove barriers from the local businesses eager to grow. Long-term economic resilience of this sector will gain strength as the City and its partners continue to support the collection of these businesses in downtown and in the Acre.

Many of the small-scale manufacturing businesses already in the Acre or downtown are long-standing members of the business community. They are choosing to spend money not just on the business materials, but on the location too.

## Lowell’s assets and successes

There are a number of existing assets in Lowell that support small-scale manufacturing throughout the City and in the Acre neighborhood.

### Multiple shared production spaces

**Lowell has several coworking spaces that are nurturing companies that are growing in size, space, and employees.** Spaces such as iHub, UMass Lowell M2D2, Lowell Makes, and Western Avenue Studios span diverse clusters such as medical devices, food production, prosthetics, brewing and small-batch fashion. Office and work spaces are flexible and allow businesses to prototype products through the use of 3D printers, CNC routers, and other advanced machinery that would be out of the price range of smaller start-ups. These spaces share the risk of large capital investments and a forum to learn from other fledgling companies facing similar challenges in their business development.



### Local banks exist and invest in Lowell

**Lowell has multiple locally owned banks that are actively finding ways to invest in the City, specifically entrepreneurs.** One of the most successful financing programs is the Lowell Development & Financial Corporation (LDFC). LDFC is the revolving loan fund that supports companies from \$250,00- \$100,000 if they graduate out of the iHub or EforAll. The structure of the LDFC allows the local banks to share the risk while still supporting local businesses, including small-scale manufacturers. The Merrimack Valley Small Business Center (MVSBC) also coordinates with the SBA to provide up to \$50,000 in microloans to city business and provides important ongoing Technical Assistance.

## **Strong network of nonprofit real estate developers**

**The nonprofit development community is a key partner of the City's efforts.** They are actively thinking about job creation in the small-scale manufacturing sector for its target population. The Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA) is a capable developer that has constructed high-quality housing with wraparound services for its residents. CBA is involved in community development work in the form of the Working Cities program, as well as entrepreneurship and educational programs. The Housing Authority of Lowell is a major landowner and property manager in the Acre. The Housing Authority is also embarking on a new development nonprofit, Revitalization Effort toward New Urbanism (RENU), that could be a great vehicle for small producer space needs.

## **Benefits from strong economic growth in Boston and Cambridge**

**Compared to Cambridge and Boston, Lowell is an affordable city to locate a business, and this holds true for office, light-industrial, and manufacturing spaces.** Many Lowell entrepreneurs made note of the benefits of the venture capital, knowledge base, and other resources available in the Boston-Cambridge metro, but living and or working in Lowell offered a higher quality of life and a more affordable work space. Companies are able to attract employees and meet with individuals with expertise from around the Boston-Lowell metro.

## **Incentive programs robust at all levels**

**The City of Lowell uses a variety of tools from the federal, state, and local levels and blends them for effective partnerships.** At the state level, Massachusetts has multiple innovative programs such as MassWorks and MassMEP that local businesses and the city have used with successful results. Notably at the local level the City created several innovative financing programs technical and financial assistance programs for established businesses and sign and façade grants to improve the quality of neighborhood business districts. The City, EforAll, UMass Lowell, and the Lowell Development and Financial Corporation recently partnered to created two new loan pools aimed at supporting startup companies that find a permanent home in Lowell.

## **Strong small business accelerator and incubators**

**Lowell is home to a small business training environment that helps businesses of all kinds launch and scale, including small-scale manufacturing businesses.** One successful program, EforAll, is a 16-week accelerator program that supports entrepreneurs by providing a mentor team, advice, guidance, and a built-in professional network. Entrepreneurs also receive free space and the opportunity to win cash prizes to launch their business. The program helped dozens of businesses launch over the last few years, predominantly minority- and women-owned. UMass Lowell's iHub provides shared workspace, but also connects businesses to mentors and investors.



UMass Lowell honors the legacy of the American Industrial Revolution by instilling a sense of entrepreneurship and innovation in their students. The University's DifferenceMaker (DM) Program engages students in innovation and entrepreneurship. The program works across colleges, disciplines, and the community to assist students in identifying problems that matter and then provides them with skills and resources needed for implementing sustainable solutions. Students receive training, access to community, faculty and alumni mentors and seed funding. To date, 13 companies have been formed by DM student teams.

## **Local educational anchors are engaged in Lowell**

**UMass Lowell and Middlesex Community College (MCC) are invaluable anchor institutions that are actively engaged in their communities.** A prime example of UMass Lowell's investment in the community is the University Crossing development, a pedestrian-oriented building that connects the North and South campuses. Students are increasingly staying in Lowell to start businesses with the training gained at local institutions. MCC recently launched the IDEA (Innovation Development Entrepreneur Assistance) Center, providing courses, events, workshops, etc. focused on entrepreneurship. A Certificate program in Entrepreneurship prepares students planning to start a small business. The University also has a co-op program for students to work with business, industry, and nonprofits, the estimated impact of which is more than \$25 million in labor contributions and output of participating students. MCC also plays a valuable role in vocational training programs and other pathways to higher education opportunities particularly by providing affordable education programs for non-traditional students, such as immigrant populations and returning students. MCC hosts an entrepreneurship program that could benefit Acre residents.

## **Residents have long-standing roots to the city**

**Many business owners have pride in Lowell and have long-standing roots and connections to the City.** This hometown pride provides an added incentive to stay, grow, and thrive in the community. Interviewees were inspired to create new companies in the buildings that served as the cradle for the American industrial revolution. There is palpable excitement among entrepreneurs, residents, and local leaders about Lowell's growth potential and ability to succeed at this specific time.

## **Frequent community events bring visitors to Lowell**

**Lowell has frequent programming throughout the year and tourist activities that find ways to bring both Lowellians and visitors alike to downtown and the Acre.** Long-standing events like the Lowell Folk Festival, Southeast Asian Water Festival, and more recent attractions like Mill No. 5 draw upon Lowell's strong arts and culture communities to create distinct experiences for visitors. The Acre boasts a community festival of its own that highlights the immigrant history and the food of multiple generations of newcomers to the neighborhood. The Lowell National Historical Park Boott Mills Museum brings in thousands of visitors a year to marvel at the mills and work spaces that drove the City's prosperity for decades. In September



the Cultural Organization of Lowell (COOL) will host Creativity: Lowell's Art and Maker Festival, showcasing the talented artists and creators in the city. These events help to create a new brand for Lowell and create an opportunity for maker markets for start-up production businesses.

## Challenges moving forward

Feedback from the interviews and workshop suggested that there are a number of obstacles small-scale manufacturing businesses in the Acre currently face, along with challenges that limit the ability to attract additional businesses.

### Cultural and language barriers

**Khmer and Spanish speakers have language and cultural barriers that can make existing city and state programs difficult to access.** Lowell's rich immigrant history has been reflected in the Acre for centuries. Most recently, the large influx of Cambodian and Spanish speaking populations have changed the demographic composition of the city from previous generations of Irish, Greek, and French newcomers. Due to language barriers, some residents do not perceive programs as being designed for them, or are not aware of their existence. Additionally, some communities stigmatize asking for help, which creates a cultural barrier to outreach. A number of Acre residents were business owners in their country of origin and could benefit quickly from access to these programs. The Lowell Television Corporation and the Working Cities Lowell Initiative recently (July 2017) crafted and successfully received a grant to translate all Lowell City Council meetings into Khmer and Spanish. Translations should accompany regular local television broadcasts to all residents beginning in September 2017.

The City is aggressively attempting to broaden its translations of printed materials, meetings, and web-related information in cooperation with the Working Cities Initiative through the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. This was recently most visible during public sessions on the proposed new Lowell High School where the "Working Cities model" of community engagement and feedback were used extensively.

### Getting ahead of affordability issues

**UMass Lowell students are beginning to live in the Acre as the university builds in the neighborhood.** The new Hamilton Canal Innovation District development abuts the Acre, and rising development pressure on the Acre could potentially displace current residents and businesses. The University is moving towards a more on-campus model rather than its traditional commuter focus, increasing student-driven demand for housing across the Acre. Long-standing residents and new student residents can coexist, but steps should be taken to understand the current inventory of affordable, subsidized, and unsubsidized housing stock in the Acre. UMass Lowell doesn't anticipate significant enrollment growth after 2020 and has plans in place to accommodate projected housing demand growth through that time.

### Workforce training

**Develop a pipeline of skilled workers.** The Greater Lowell Workforce Development Board and the Lowell Career Center play an important role in supporting Lowell's manufacturing community. Together with local vocational schools and Middlesex Community College, there are multiple

programs that help connect workforce demands with curriculum development. Integration between businesses and curriculum should be designed to fill that workforce pipeline and create partnerships with businesses in need of staff for direct placement.

### **City-business/neighborhood liaison**

**Create a new position for a City Neighborhood Liaison to represent district-based businesses.** There is no designated lead representative in Lowell for small businesses in commercial corridors such as the Acre. Without a unifying voice, there is a breakdown in communication for what can be provided on the city's behalf to help. A main street manager or Business Improvement District could help to provide locally specific context and information. While the City's Economic Development department has a desk at the UMass Lowell iHub and fosters a business relationship with start-ups, there are small-scale businesses in the Acre or coming out of EforAll that would benefit from similar support.

### **Unsupportive zoning**

**Lowell's zoning is not currently supportive of the diverse types of small- and mid-scale industrial spaces businesses need.** Interviewees stated the Acre needs more land zoned for small-scale manufacturing. While the city has worked with developers and business owners in the past, business owners remarked that new concepts have stifled development. It is encouraging to see the City revisit the zoning code with an eye towards accommodating new spaces that could be used for small-scale industrial production, including allowances for craft production in commercial zones.



### **Detrimental tax rates**

**The property tax rate is double for industrial and commercial properties when compared to residential.** The current challenge to enhance spaces for small-scale production creates an incentive to upzone for the redevelopment of industrial space in hot residential markets.

### **Learning curve for property owners**

**Landlords might be unfamiliar with small production business types or land uses, resulting in a learning curve for property owner and developers.** While some landlords may be interested in doing new, innovative things, there are knowledge barriers to creating good spaces from a safety code and facilities standpoint.

### **Limitation around regional success**

**Further efforts to create regional connections between Lowell and nearby cities.** While some individual businesses and representatives from UMass Lowell recognized an opportunity to capture entrepreneurial leakage out of nearby Cambridge and Boston, these conversations have not coalesced into a broader city strategy on making Lowell a regional maker-supportive hub. Neighboring city Lawrence, Massachusetts is already promoting this brand, and Lowell should too. Other than EforAll's presence in both cities, Lowell and Lawrence could channel more efforts towards becoming regional partners.

## Built form and pedestrian experience

**There are a large number of “missing teeth” in the Acre neighborhood.** While moderate block sizes and sidewalk widths make for a relatively walkable neighborhood in the Acre, much of the historic mill building stock faces inward and does not engage the street, creating blank street walls. The area is scattered with abandoned or vacant parcels, and surface parking; where structured parking exists, it dominates the pedestrian street frontage that could be better designed through active uses.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on strengthening the Acre neighborhood by supporting the small-scale manufacturing business sector, and engaging these businesses in placemaking efforts. The recommendations also seek to retain a focus on residents’ needs and the neighborhood’s role as the immigrant “first-place” in Lowell.

Some of the activities below may benefit the business community in Lowell more broadly, and some are specific to the needs of the Acre in particular.

The recommendations are divided into five categories:

- 1. Build the pipeline of small-scale manufacturing businesses coming from Acre residents**
- 2. Scale existing small production businesses and train Acre residents for those new jobs**
- 3. Create a real estate strategy for the Acre**
- 4. Showcase Lowell’s successes**
- 5. Adopt policies that promote inclusive growth in the Acre and maintain its immigrant-first role**

The intention is to give the City and its partners a clear understanding of how to engage on this topic in quick ways as well as in the long-term through larger investments.

### **1. Build the pipeline of small-scale manufacturing businesses coming from Acre residents**

Many of the Acre residents were business owners in their home country and/or produce a good at home. These residents can be supported through existing programs, services, and investment vehicles to establish their businesses in Lowell. Acre residents may sell products at the myriad local festivals and could establish these micro-enterprises as full-time businesses if given support in their language and in a culturally-sensitive way. A number of short-term actions that will help achieve this include:

- Attend all the **summer festivals to compile a more extensive list** of local producers of food products or crafts tied to immigrant cultures. If festivals do not have many vendors who are food producers or craft producers from the Acre, then work with the festivals to identify these businesses and advertise the opportunity in targeted languages. Local festivals are a low risk method for business owners to try out a

- product. If each festival/event has 20-50 production vendors this will help local businesses grow.
- Reach out to business owners of the Acre who sell at the festival and **connect them directly to existing services**:
    - Connect them to other local festivals to be vendors.
    - Connect existing business owners (full and part-time) in the Acre to EforAll or iHub, depending on business type. If demand is high enough, conduct an EforAll informational session in Spanish, Khmer, and other languages, in the Acre.
    - Help the business owners find commercial space.
    - Identify low cost loans for needed equipment (potentially after completing EforAll training).
    - Get existing contract manufacturers involved as mentors and component makers for these existing businesses.
    - Consider developing a program like the business retention loan program that offers technical and financial assistance to individuals seeking to legitimize their business and move into a bricks and mortar space.
  - Engage the Working Cities Lowell Initiative partnership to **conduct outreach to residents who have business ideas**. Consider bringing a series of speakers to the community organizations to introduce existing programs to residents in a manner that is inclusive, in their own language, and culturally appropriate. Make sure to work through existing trusted community ties such as faith organizations and other community groups to ameliorate language or cultural barriers.
    - Bring an EforAll speaker to Latino, Cambodian, and other immigrant group meetings to conduct a 2-3 hour training on what it means to launch a business in Lowell.
    - Connect Acre residents to Lowell Makes to use tools for business ideas; bring Lowell Makes to organizations' meetings or organize a visit to Lowell Makes.
    - Work with the existing commercial kitchens to connect Acre residents to spaces that allow them to produce prepared and/or packaged foods for local festivals and markets.
    - Connect residents to the Middlesex Community College IDEA Center (Innovation Development & Entrepreneur Assistance Center) and provide translation services.
    - Consider coordinating these efforts through an [Inclusive Entrepreneurship Action Plan](#) like Portland, OR.
  - **Develop a fact sheet for existing small production business and interested individuals** about all the resources available to help start a business, scale a business, create business and financial plans, and access low-interest loans. Identify a one-stop shop for these businesses to go to with all questions and to find out how to qualify for these resources. This may be an existing local organization like CBA or a department in the city.
    - Translate this fact sheet into multiple languages.
    - Work with the Acre organizations to distribute this tool at existing neighborhood meetings.
    - Provide this information to vendors at all the local festivals.
    - Have Middlesex Community College, Western Avenue Studios and Lofts Lowell

- Makes and other large clusters distribute this tool among their participants.
- Pair workforce training and available job opportunities through existing resources at the [Greater Lowell Workforce Development Board](#) and the [Career Center of Lowell](#).
- Offer these resources in a hand out and online. [BizLaunch](#) in Arlington County, VA and [SFMade](#) offer two examples of one-stop-shop online business development sites.

## 2. Scale existing small production businesses and train Acre residents for those new jobs

- Inventory and survey all existing businesses at Western Avenue Studios, Mill No. 5, iHub, Boott Mills and the Acre for small producers who may scale soon. **Identify what kind of help they need** to be stable and/or expand, and what kind of space (and at what price point) they need now and in the future. Focus on retaining these businesses in Lowell.
  - Identify businesses that complement the development plan for the Upper Merrimack Street corridor and their job growth needs.
  - Examine the zoning needs of these target businesses and consider any barriers there may be to place them along the corridor. The City should consider adding a land use definition for craft businesses into the commercial district.
  - Consider changes to the local tax rate for industrial use properties.
  - Coordinate with the CBA, Lowell Housing Authority, Community Teamwork, Inc., the Career Center of Lowell, and the International Institute of New England to train residents for specific openings.
  - Connect any business receiving a low-interest loan through the LDFC to the partners listed above who will train people for new jobs as the businesses scale.
  - Recruit businesses graduating from EforAll and Interise to locate in the Acre.
- **Create a Business to Business (B2B) program** and engage directly with Acre businesses for City needs, when possible.
  - Invite small food and craft producers from the Acre to have stalls at the farmer's market at City Hall.
  - Identify specific products the City procures but could purchase from a local business.
  - Host a local pitch contest to showcase products that the City needs.
  - Work with UMass Lowell, Middlesex Community College and other anchor institutions to target certain amounts of products for local procurement for items that can be produced by local small scale manufacturers.
  - Encourage anchor institutions to consider local procurement minimums, like [Johns Hopkins University](#).
- **Encourage the LDFC Downtown Venture Fund to apply to retail and production space**, and target the area of the Acre that abuts the Hamilton Canal District. This fund can help build out a group of micro-enterprise spaces for production businesses identified and scaled through the actions above.

## 3. Create a real estate strategy for the Acre

- Develop **a retail plan for the Upper Merrimack Street corridor**. Consider setting up

- a survey booth at local festivals (could be a big poster board, low budget) to find out what kind of shops residents would like to have within the neighborhood. This may also spark residents to create some of these businesses or ask for services to launch them.
- Determine how to develop main street storefronts strategically.
  - Identify priority intersections or parcels along the corridor to focus incentives, development efforts, and the local businesses.
- Determine if some small producers in the Acre would benefit from small grants to build out a micro-enterprise bricks and mortar space. Consider a funding mechanism from RENU (Revitalization Effort Toward New Urbanism, Inc.) or the Coalition for a Better Acre to provide built out “[warm vanilla](#)”, or minimally built out retail space, micro-retail of 400-500 sq ft.
    - Make sure the zoning does not prevent production businesses from locating in retail at an appropriate scale (for instance, only for production businesses smaller than 2,500 square feet and do not pollute or make loud noise).
    - Consider conducting a retail market study and a [Main Street program](#) for the corridor.
    - The Northern Middlesex Council of Governments, MIT, UMass Lowell, and the Lowell Housing Authority have accomplished targeted studies focusing on the issues of safety, traffic, zoning, and retail development. These studies should be reviewed for common themes, recommendations, and for setting priorities as part of creating a real estate strategy for the Acre.
  - **Create a list of distressed and/or vacant properties** to prioritize action around underutilized assets. This list should inventory ownership, addresses, sales, code violations, delinquencies, property type, lot size, assessed value, and other relevant data elements.
  - Work with developers to consider new **projects around the MarketBasket Supermarket or the Smith Baker Center being redeveloped to create more ground floor commercial use** that can be used by small-scale manufacturers. Consider public-private partnerships or development partnerships with the Coalition for a Better Acre or RENU on these projects to retain ownership and affordable leases long-term for the ground floor uses. [Baltimore Arts Realty Corporation](#) is a strong example for the nonprofit developers.
  - The City, RENU, and the Coalition for a Better Acre, or other partners, should consider building or rehabilitating a **building in the Acre for small producers**. It would also allow the support services to be provided from one location. [Brick City Makes](#) in St. Louis serves as a model to create a building just for small, full-time producers.
  - **Invest in the pedestrian experience in the Acre neighborhood.** Encourage infill development and design standards that ameliorate the “missing teeth” and blank street walls to create a consistent, pleasant pedestrian experience. Lowell invested in healthy transportation options by adding bike lanes and sharrows to 17 downtown and neighborhood streets, and this work should be continued on the pedestrian front. Assess the sidewalk, on sidewalks, on-street parking, and lighting in target areas along Upper Merrimack Street and around the MarketBasket Supermarket. Make sure investments are made along the Upper Merrimack Street corridor that benefit existing retail and places for residential gathering, and result in a welcoming community and/or business environment.
  - **Fund smaller fee-based parking garages** as a way to pull people through the

neighborhoods, including from the Hamilton Canal Innovation District to the Acre. Phase in the parking construction with new development and require that the parking garages be in the interior of the block and not occupy any street front use. The City may provide the funding for the parking garages to each developer or work through a parking district to invest and operate the set of garages. Make them colorful – artsy! Use local artists to help show off the unique character of the Acre.

- Target **existing surface parking lots for redevelopment** to create a consistent street frontage to encourage and support pedestrians. This effort should focus on the Upper Merrimack Street corridor and the area surrounding the Acre supermarket to create more of a main street building character.
- Collaborate with **UMass Lowell on a longer-term housing strategy** to understand whether the school plans to build more on-campus housing or if it will be dependent on the neighborhoods for its growth. Create a set of goals regarding the University's impact on the Acre. The City of Fort Collins and Colorado State University developed a [housing action plan](#) to help facilitate adequate housing supplies for residential and student neighborhoods while identifying opportunities upon existing neighborhoods.
- Look at the **Acre's waterfront for future development potential**. The neighborhood currently seems to turn its back on the water. A neighborhood plan to support canal and riverfront development in the Acre could bring some needed housing for students or more middle-income households to support local businesses.
- Keep working with forward thinking property owners to **invest in local businesses and the space and equipment they need**. LDFC and MassDev helped to finance large scale downtown redevelopment projects in the past, and may consider catalytic projects on Upper Merrimack Street or on a shared building for small production businesses in the Acre.

#### 4. Showcase your Acre successes

- Create a strategy around regional success. Market Lowell in a way that establishes the City as a strong leader that **supports producers in partnership with neighboring towns**.
  - Identify opportunities to capture entrepreneurial leakage out of Boston and Cambridge. Provide marketing information that showcases Lowell's university presence, medical device incubator, shared wet lab, access to freight, and dramatically lower rents than Boston.
  - Partner with Lawrence, EforAll, and neighboring towns to showcase the benefit to small production businesses that choose to locate in the region including networking access, inclusive support, matchmaking with local contract manufacturers, affordable space, and shorter commutes.
  - Show successes through a variety of marketing tools to Lowell residents and the Acre neighborhood to encourage more people to create small production businesses.
- Use **social media (and interns) to promote local small production businesses and Acre legacy businesses** at festivals, online, and in materials marketing to the region.
  - Feature different and diverse business owners online in rotation on the City and local business websites.
  - Promote festivals widely online using Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Promote vendor products on Pinterest. Use the small production businesses and their owners as the unique draw to the events.

- Promote the legacy businesses in the Acre to Lowell residents and to the region to help them get more foot traffic.

## 5. Adopt policies that promote inclusive growth in the Acre and maintain its immigrant-first role

- The City is poised to develop a beautiful extension to downtown and open up development to the canal frontage in the Hamilton Canal Innovation District. This new development abuts the Acre and may cause development pressure to spill over into the neighborhood, potentially pushing out local businesses and residents. The City and its partners should think now about how commercial uses will be protected to serve the community before the development pressure spreads from the Hamilton Canal Innovation District to the Acre. The RENU and the CBA will both serve key roles. A few questions to consider now:
  - Is it a priority for the City to retain low-cost retail space for local businesses in the Acre? How will it ensure this?
  - Is it a priority to ensure that the existing committed affordable residential units in the Acre remain available to low-income residents and not University students? How will these units be protected? How will the City discourage student displacement in the Acre? How will the City work with landlords and property owners in the Acre?
  - How will the City retain the social and life-saving services currently in the Acre even as development pressure builds to use these properties for “highest and best use”?
- Montgomery County, MD executive branch undertook a series of systemic changes to improve linguistic access to government services for people with limited English proficiency (LEP). The county has made a concerted effort to increase language access through certified bilingual employees, on-site and over-the-phone interpretation, and a designated department liaison to work on oversight across agencies.
- Aurora, CO’s office of International & Immigrant Affairs created a [comprehensive plan](#), which seeks to promote immigrant & refugee entrepreneurship. The city’s office has partnered with the [Community Enterprise Development Services](#) to provide microloans of up to \$50k to refugee and immigrant owned businesses, a model that could be used in Metro Lowell.
- One policy to consider is a City-led incentive for developers to **set aside 5-10% of new commercial space for local businesses**. This may be targeted to resident-owned businesses in the Acre, or for other local small production businesses in the Hamilton Canal Innovation District. Somerville, MA included this requirement in recent development projects.

## Conclusion

The City of Lowell is already starting from an advanced place when it comes to small-scale manufacturing and placemaking. The City is building upon decades of successful programs that have actively promoted reinvestment in the downtown. There is a palpable feeling that Lowell has hit its stride and is beginning to reap the benefits of this determined investment in its

neighborhoods, businesses, and residents.

The City has numerous assets to take advantage of including financing programs, small business training, and capacity building tools. However, there are challenges the City is aware of and should continue to address that include making programs accessible to Lowell citizens of international backgrounds, updating the zoning code to facilitate small production in neighborhoods, and providing mentorship and training to support and sustain businesses.

This memo outlines a list of recommendations the City of Lowell and the Working Cities Challenge can collectively take to begin achieving the goal of strengthening small-scale manufacturing in Lowell and specifically the Acre. By following these steps over the short-, mid-, and long-term Lowell can continue to see success in supporting small businesses and residents that are home grown.