



# Linking People and Places

Downtown New Brunswick and the  
French Street Corridor

September 2025



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# Executive Summary

## Overview

The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority’s (NJTPA) Vibrant Places Program, in collaboration with the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) at Rutgers and coLAB Arts, initiated the Linking People and Places project to develop a neighborhood activation plan that identifies recommendations for strengthening physical and social connections between two communities: Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor in New Brunswick’s Esperanza Neighborhood.

## What’s Included

This project report summarizes findings from background research on relevant plans, policies, and placemaking initiatives, as well as public engagement with community members, including a survey and two workshops. The report also provides a series of recommendations and case examples illustrating how a combination of strategies could be employed to strengthen connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the Esperanza Neighborhood along three priority gateway paths.

## Findings

The project team identified key opportunities and challenges related to improving connectivity, safety, and vibrancy between the Esperanza Neighborhood and greater Downtown New Brunswick. The following findings highlight the most salient themes, priority areas, and community-driven needs that will inform future recommendations.

### Community-Identified Priorities

- **Prioritize improvements** in safety and infrastructure, with a focus on lighting, traffic calming, and sidewalk maintenance.
- **Expand the diversity of businesses and amenities** in both French Street and Downtown to better meet community needs.
- **Address public safety concerns** such as substance use, homelessness, and crime to create a more welcoming environment.
- **Invest in placemaking** through murals, interactive art, community events, and green spaces that foster pride and connection.
- **Support French Street businesses** in resource-sharing and coalition-building efforts that promote sustainable, community-led growth and celebrate cultural heritage.

### Walk-Time Analysis Insights

To better narrow down areas where improvements and activations should occur, the project team conducted a Walk-Time analysis. Based on the analysis, the following streets are candidates for potential activation improvements that promote connectivity between both neighborhoods: **Somerset Street, French Street, Paterson Street, Bayard Street, New Street, Joyce Kilmer Avenue, and Drift Street**. Underpasses are also key areas of concern within or adjacent to the hotspot areas and are located on **French Street, Paterson Street, Bayard Street, and Joyce Kilmer Avenue**.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, recommendations were structured around three themes: **Safety and Security, Visual Identity and Comfort, and Community Vitality and Belonging.**

- **Safety and security** recommendations focus on increasing feelings of personal safety through the implementation of pedestrian-scale lighting, improved sidewalks, high-visibility crosswalks, and curb extensions. The report also identifies strategies that promote neighborhood cleanliness and harm reduction.
- **Visual identity and comfort** recommendations include the installation of green infrastructure, public amenities, neighborhood-focused art, and wayfinding measures that highlight the Esperanza Neighborhood.
- **Community vitality** recommendations address programming and placemaking efforts to activate public spaces and promote a sense of place.

The project team also identified three priority gateway paths where the core recommendations should be applied to better connect Esperanza Neighborhood's French Street Corridor to Downtown New Brunswick. In addition to paths, the team identified a subset of action items to improve mobility and feelings of safety for nearby underpasses.

- **Segment 1:** Train Station → French Street (via French Street)
- **Segment 2:** George Street → French Street (via Bayard Street)
- **Segment 3:** French Street Corridor Entrance → War Memorial Park (via French Street)

## Next Steps

The report concludes with a set of next steps, including working with community members, the City of New Brunswick, and local and regional partners to ensure the successful implementation of community-driven and well-resourced strategies that strengthen neighborhood connections, improve safety and mobility, and support the vitality of the Esperanza Neighborhood.



## Acknowledgements

The Linking People and Places Project was funded by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) through the Vibrant Places Program. This program provides staff support and technical assistance through a partnership with the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University to advance local initiatives that promote creative placemaking in the NJTPA Region. Staff from NJTPA and VTC would like to acknowledge our positions as researchers and planners providing support and technical assistance to local partners in New Brunswick, NJ. We do not have the lived experiences as members of the local communities for which we provide support and technical assistance. We respectfully join our partners in celebrating their local communities and assist in furthering their mission to support their growth and vitality.

This report has been prepared as part of the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) Vibrant Places Program with financing from the Federal Transit Administration and the Federal Highway Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation. This document is disseminated under the sponsorship of the U.S. Department of Transportation in the interest of information exchange. The NJTPA is solely responsible for its contents.

### The Vibrant Places Project Team

The Vibrant Places Program is a partnership between NJTPA and VTC. The Technical Assistance Project Team (Project Team) for work in New Brunswick included the following individuals:

VTC: Jesika Tixi, Samuel Rosenthal, Miriam Salerno, Kenia Coronel-Gonzalez, Caroline Grant

NJTPA: Blythe Eaman

Thank you to Daniel Swern, coLAB Arts' project lead, coLAB Arts, New Brunswick Tomorrow, and the community members who contributed their time and input to this project.



**FIGURE 1. THE PROJECT TEAM AND ATTENDEES AT THE LINKING PEOPLE AND PLACES PUBLIC WORKSHOP, MAY 2025. SOURCE: COLAB ARTS.**

# About The Vibrant Communities Initiative

The NJTPA's Vibrant Communities Initiative is a partnership with the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University. The Vibrant Communities Initiative provides targeted support to municipalities, counties, and community organizations in the NJTPA region through technical assistance, placemaking projects, information resources, and applied research. This effort promotes economic development, highlights cultural and historic resources, and engages communities in opportunities to enhance the quality of life for all residents while building strong, vibrant communities.

The Vibrant Communities Initiative continues the mission of municipal capacity building originally advanced through the Together North Jersey Initiative. Since the Together North Jersey grant ended in 2015, NJTPA and VTC have continued advancing the TNJ Plan goals by providing technical assistance to communities and working to advance the themes from the NJTPA's Long Range Transportation Plan.

## About the Vibrant Places Program

Funded by the NJTPA under the Vibrant Communities Initiative umbrella, the Vibrant Places Program (VPP) leverages the power of placemaking to strengthen connections between people and places, enhancing the social, physical, and economic fabric in communities across the region.

Placemaking is the application of community planning that integrates arts, culture, and other community assets to attract new investment and strengthen the local economy. It is a sustainable form of economic development that links job creation to specific places by enhancing public spaces, streets, and other community amenities. The Vibrant Places Program supports and advances placemaking projects with a focus on disadvantaged communities and diverse stakeholders. The Vibrant Places Program is supported by NJDCA through market analysis and subject matter expertise.

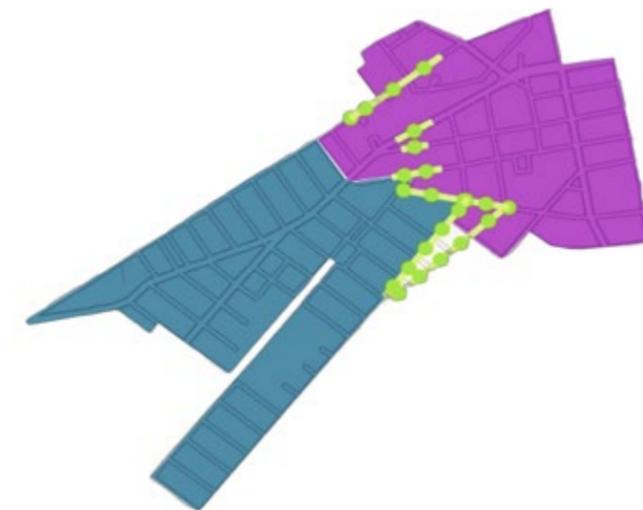
Eligible applicants for the program include municipal and county governments or non-governmental organizations. Each fiscal year, the NJTPA selects up to two projects and works directly with local communities to complete these projects within six months.

## About the Project

The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority's (NJTPA) Vibrant Places Program, in collaboration with the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) at Rutgers and coLAB Arts, initiated the **Linking People and Places** project to develop a strategic activation plan that identifies recommendations for strengthening physical and social connections between two communities: Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor in New Brunswick's Esperanza Neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> With the support of local partners, including New Brunswick Tomorrow, the project aims to:

- ◆ *Revitalize key gateways and strengthen connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor and the Esperanza Neighborhood.*
- ◆ *Explore opportunities for sustainable economic growth that support the vitality and identity of the French Street Corridor and the Esperanza Neighborhood.*
- ◆ *Identify tactical placemaking and placekeeping<sup>2</sup> strategies to improve safety, mobility, and cultural exchange in New Brunswick.*

This report includes an activation plan with recommendations intended to support and inform future stakeholder engagement and guide the implementation of projects that bridge neighborhood gaps and create safer and more cohesive connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor.



<sup>1</sup> French Street is considered the main thoroughfare within the Esperanza Neighborhood and is home to much of the neighborhood's retail and public space. Outreach with community partners revealed that many local residents refer to the Esperanza Neighborhood (including and beyond French Street) as the "French Street Corridor". This report uses the term "French Street Corridor" when referring to the area around French Street and uses the terms "Esperanza Neighborhood" and "La Esperanza" to refer to the wider neighborhood.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture defines placemaking as a community development strategy that uses arts, culture, and other assets along with outside funding to improve or revitalize a neighborhood's physical and social environment. While placekeeping is about local people actively caring for their community, preserving its culture and traditions, and maintaining their way of life, not just saving buildings, but keeping the spirit of the place alive.

## Community Overview

Located at the central-west border of Middlesex County, along the southern banks of the Raritan River, New Brunswick spans about 5.75 square miles. Often known as “The Hub City” due to its concentration of medical facilities, New Brunswick is most notable for housing the main campus of Rutgers University, the state university of New Jersey. Despite its distinction as one of Central Jersey’s most popular commuter towns and commercial hubs, New Brunswick continues to face challenges related to connectivity, economic sustainability, public safety, and traffic safety. The areas of focus for this project are: 1) the Downtown Commercial area along George Street and 2) the commercial corridor along French Street in the Esperanza Neighborhood.

### Downtown New Brunswick

Downtown New Brunswick covers 0.19 square miles and hosts several prominent institutions, such as Rutgers University, RWJBarnabas Health - Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, Johnson & Johnson World Headquarters, and municipal buildings. It is home to approximately 3,624 residents, 51 percent of whom are categorized as Metro Renters, residents in their late twenties or thirties, highly mobile, living alone or with a roommate in apartments at the urban core of a city. The area also hosts about 637 businesses that employ about 11,171 people, making it an economic anchor to the surrounding area.<sup>3</sup> The New Brunswick train station at the corner of Albany Street and Easton Avenue is serviced by NJ TRANSIT and Amtrak on the Northeast Corridor Line. NJ TRANSIT hosts six bus stops in this area for bus routes 810, 811, and 814. The Rutgers University bus network also services this area.

### The Esperanza Neighborhood- French Street Corridor

The Esperanza Neighborhood covers 0.21 square miles, contains stretches of French Street and Jersey Avenue, and is bounded by Joyce Kilmer Avenue to the southeast and Somerset Street to the northwest. It is home to approximately 5,688 residents. Most households are Latine working families, which are often new to the United States and often young.<sup>4</sup> The Esperanza Neighborhood is situated centrally in New Brunswick, with Downtown New Brunswick at its northeastern boundary. The Esperanza Neighborhood is also within walking distance of the New Brunswick train station, carrying daily commuters throughout the New York Metropolitan Region. The Northeast Corridor rail line bisects the neighborhood; Handy, Suydam, and Townsend Streets allow cars and pedestrians to cross under the rail line. The neighborhood is also home to 167 businesses that employ about 5,663 people. The Esperanza Neighborhood’s rich heritage and location can be leveraged through placemaking strategies to meet the community’s current needs while enhancing its vibrancy and supporting its growth.

<sup>3</sup> ESRI Business Analyst 2024.

<sup>4</sup> ESRI Business Analyst 2024.



**FIGURE 2. MAP OF NEW BRUNSWICK, INCLUDING THE ESPERANZA NEIGHBORHOOD AND DOWNTOWN NEW BRUNSWICK, WHICH SERVED AS THE PROJECT AREA. SOURCE: VTC.**

# Planning Process and Findings

## Existing Plan and Policy Scan

To better ground the project understanding within the context of the Esperanza Neighborhood and the broader City of New Brunswick, the project team reviewed relevant plans and policies. While not exhaustive, this focused review highlights common themes related to characteristics of the Esperanza Neighborhood and priorities for future community development. The following plans and policies were included in the review:

- ◆ [New Brunswick Master Plan \(2022\)<sup>5</sup>](#)
- ◆ [Esperanza Neighborhood Plan \(2019\)](#)
- ◆ [New Brunswick Complete Streets Policy \(2012\)](#)
- ◆ [Municipal Public Access Plan \(2019\)](#)
- ◆ [New Brunswick Parks Action Plan \(2018\)](#)

After reviewing the relevant plans and policies, the team identified the following salient topics as they relate to the Esperanza Neighborhood and its connections to greater New Brunswick:

### **Variety of Land Uses**

The Esperanza neighborhood includes a mix of high-density single/two-family residential and commercial zones. The neighborhood commercial zone supports small-scale retail and services, while the community commercial zone along French Street allows for a broader range of commercial uses, like banks, supermarkets, medical clinics, offices, art galleries, music studios, theaters, and bakeries. Institutional and hospital land uses around Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital are also very prominent and occupy much of the area between the Esperanza Neighborhood and Downtown New Brunswick.

### **Complete Streets and Active Transportation**

New Brunswick passed a Complete Streets policy in 2012. The resolution affirms the City's "commitment to creating a comprehensive, integrated, connected street network that safely accommodates all road users of all abilities and for all trips." Additionally, the Circulation Element of New Brunswick's 2022 Master Plan identifies the need for improved bicycle and pedestrian circulation and safety to address the city's gap in mobility for households without vehicles. Prioritizing Complete Streets and active transportation improves access, public health, and connectivity between neighborhoods and to essential facilities and day-to-day activities like work, school, and shopping, creating more livable communities.

### **Activating Parks and Open Space**

New Brunswick's 2022 Master Plan includes parks and open space goals. The Plan calls for increasing the number of parks and recreational facilities in the City's neighborhoods and maximizing access to open space throughout New Brunswick. The City's 2019 Municipal Public Access Plan further addresses the need for open space, specifically recommending integrating parks into the fabric of existing neighborhoods and working with communities to identify suitable amenities and programming for each park. Both the Master Plan and the Parks Action Plan outline recommendations pertaining to specific parks throughout the city, including two parks in the Esperanza Neighborhood: Joyce Kilmer Park and War Memorial Park.

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<sup>5</sup> Select elements reviewed: Land Use, Circulation, and Open Space and Recreation.

### Promoting Community Identity through the Arts

The Esperanza Neighborhood Plan recommends promoting and celebrating the arts, culture, and community identity. This includes producing more murals and public art that celebrate the neighborhood’s culture and strengthen community pride. The Plan suggests working with partners such as New Brunswick Tomorrow, coLAB Arts, New Brunswick Cultural Center, Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, Saint Peter’s University Hospital, and the Rutgers New Jersey Medical School to provide arts and cultural programming for adults and children in the community. The Plan also recommends continuing to host culturally relevant neighborhood celebrations, noting the success of events like the annual Corazón Latino music festival, Cinco de Mayo celebration, and Our Lady of Guadalupe procession.

### Creating Neighborhood Gateways

The Esperanza Neighborhood Plan specifically articulates a goal to create discernible neighborhood gateways for the northeast and southwest areas of the community. The Plan envisions developing gateways through distinctive streetscaping, wayfinding signage, culturally relevant public art, and billboards enticing visitors to patronize local businesses. The Plan’s recommendation to create neighborhood gateways that enhance community identity and connections to downtown New Brunswick is central to this project’s effort.

## Public Engagement Activities

Once the context research was completed and key project focus areas were identified, the project team planned and developed a series of public engagement components for the initiative titled: **Linking People and Places**. These activities were designed to spark discussion and gather community input on improvements to revitalize key gateways and strengthen connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor / Esperanza Neighborhood. The public engagement activities included:

#### ◆ Outreach and Promotion

Outreach for the Linking People and Places project began in early February 2025. The project team developed promotional materials and an outreach plan to guide effective engagement strategies. They collaborated with coLAB Arts and New Brunswick Tomorrow for support in developing materials and identifying contacts within their networks. Through additional desktop research, the team also identified local businesses, institutions, nonprofits, and Facebook groups in the project area to reach out to via phone and email.

#### ◆ Community Survey

The project team began by designing a community survey to learn more about the community’s needs and challenges regarding connectivity and mobility. The survey was 28 questions in length, with an average completion time of 15 minutes and a mix of open-ended, multiple-choice, and scale-based questions on the topics of safety, mobility, and public space improvements. The survey was available in digital and printed formats in English and Spanish from March 18 through April 27, 2025. To support the outreach of the survey, New Brunswick Tomorrow conducted a series of survey intercepts between April 2 and 12, 2025, throughout French Street and Downtown New Brunswick. The survey garnered 173 responses, with 71 percent of the responses recorded in Spanish.

#### ◆ Virtual Stakeholder Workshop

The project team planned and facilitated a virtual stakeholder workshop on May 21, 2025, via Zoom. The team presented their work to date, shared community survey findings, and led a discussion activity. Outreach for this event took place via email and targeted institutions and groups with influence across New Brunswick and the state at large. Thirty stakeholders from a range of sectors, including transportation agencies and local hospitals, participated in the meeting and shared their reactions to the survey, as well as their hopes for a more connected New Brunswick in the future.

#### ◆ Public In-person Workshop

The project team co-facilitated a public workshop with coLAB Arts at Blanquita B. Valenti Community School on the evening of May 28, 2025. Outreach took place via email and word of mouth to the public. Fifteen residents attended. The team presented their work to date, shared findings from the community survey, and led three activities to spark group discussions, all in Spanish. These activities included: 1) a Rose, Bud, Thorn icebreaker, 2) a charrette gallery walk on the topics of murals, safety, lighting, space activation, and wayfinding, and 3) a visioning activity on redesigning the neighborhood. These activities explored public perceptions of the neighborhood, hopes for the future, and invited participants to design their ideal mobility, placemaking, and connectivity improvements.



**FIGURE 3. RESIDENTS PARTICIPATING IN A VISIONING ACTIVITY AT THE MAY 2025 PUBLIC WORKSHOP. SOURCE: COLAB ARTS.**

## Public Engagement Key Takeaways

Most respondents walk between downtown and the French Street Corridor and visit both areas frequently. Downtown is a destination for work and dining and is associated with calm and energized feelings. French Street is preferred for shopping but evokes more mixed emotions, with people often feeling unsafe in parks and underpasses, though many express optimism for its vibrancy and potential as a key destination in New Brunswick. There is strong community pride in both the Downtown and French Street areas, and a desire from stakeholders and the public for continued engagement in conversations about improving the area.

### What we heard...

“Improve pedestrian safety for children when they get out of school”

“Lighting all streets not only some”

“Crosswalks with artistic designs that give positive messages and create a sense of safety”

“There is nowhere to shop, sad considering downtown used to have many stores...”

“Less smoke shops, please. The town should be focused [on] being a 10-15 minute city where you have access to all essentials one being a pharmacy”

“...For French street, there is an overkill of liquor stores and bars...”

“A lot of people live in the underpasses, and that is why I avoid going there because they’re drunk or have other bad habits.”

“The parks should have security, police presence, and security cameras.”

“There should be more green spaces, planters, and murals.”

“I feel inspired by all the businesses but would like to see them be more creative”

“I feel hopeful for its future now that more small businesses are opening.”

“Yes, they’re kind and have a lot of food variety from different countries. They’re welcoming, which makes us feel like we’re in our country.”

## Community Priorities



Prioritize improvements in safety and infrastructure, with a focus on lighting, traffic calming, and sidewalk maintenance.



Expand the diversity of businesses and amenities in both French Street and Downtown to better meet community needs.



Address public safety concerns such as substance use, houselessness, and crime to create a more welcoming environment.



Continue to invest in placemaking through murals, interactive art, community events, and green spaces that foster pride and connection.



Support French Street businesses in resource-sharing and coalition-building efforts that promote sustainable, community-led growth and celebrate cultural heritage.

# General Recommendations

## Overview

After conducting background research and public engagement, the project team devised a series of placemaking and tactical recommendations organized into three larger themes: **Safety and Security, Visual Identity and Comfort, and Community Vitality and Belonging**. The themes and recommendations respond to key findings identified in the document scan as well as feedback gathered through public engagement efforts, including the community survey, public workshop, and stakeholder meeting. The recommendations also aim to address the project's three primary goals:

- ◆ *Revitalize key gateways and strengthen connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor and the Esperanza Neighborhood.*
- ◆ *Explore opportunities for sustainable economic growth that support the vitality and identity of the French Street Corridor and the Esperanza Neighborhood.*
- ◆ *Identify tactical placemaking and placekeeping<sup>6</sup> strategies to improve safety, mobility, and cultural exchange in New Brunswick.*

Spatially, the recommendations apply to both Downtown New Brunswick and the Esperanza Neighborhood, with particular emphasis on the streets and underpasses near French Street. This focus reflects the recognition that, of the two neighborhoods, Esperanza faces greater challenges and requires more targeted improvements and investment.

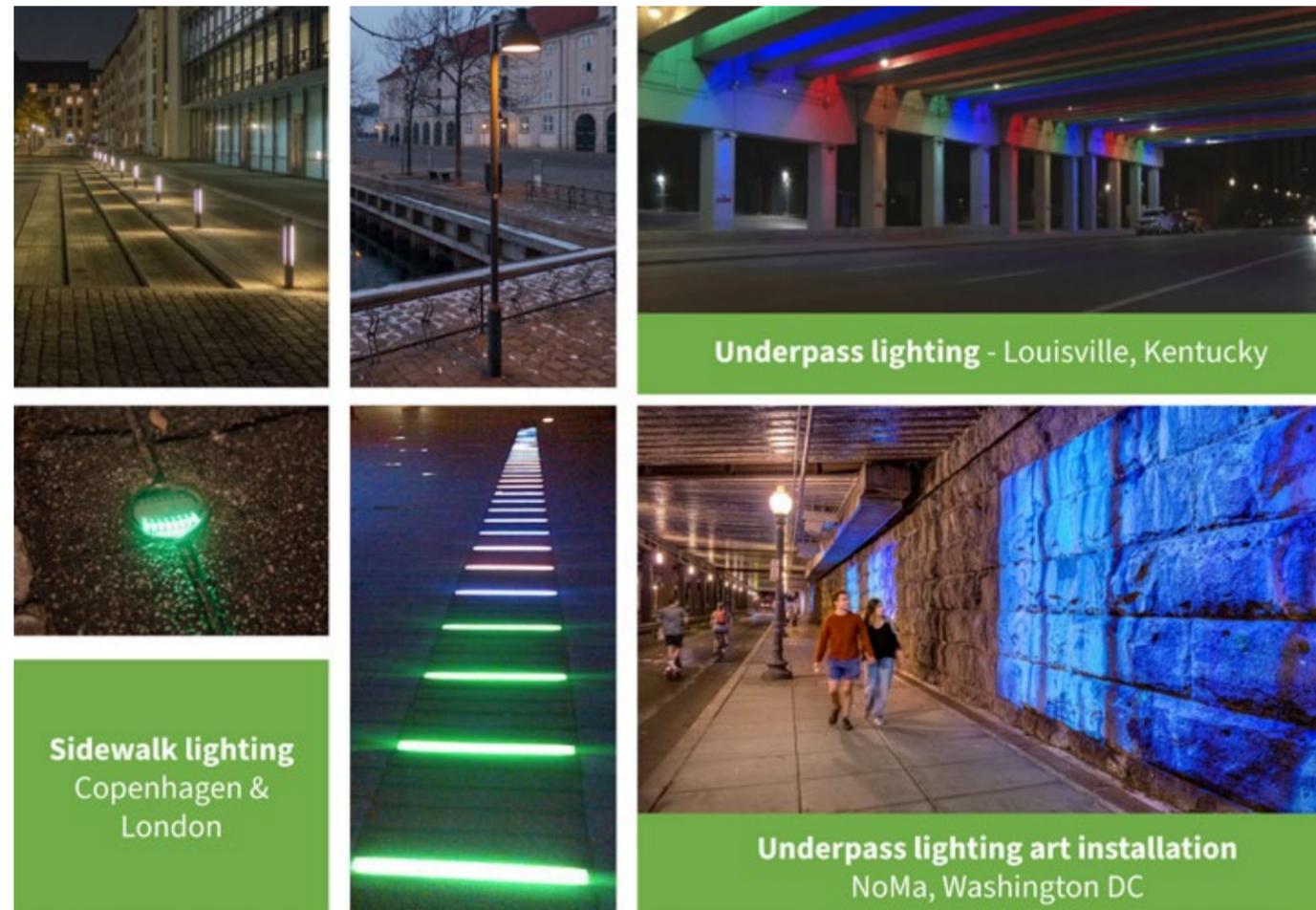
It is important to note that these recommendations do not stand alone, and a coordinated combination of feasible interventions can maximize impact. The latter part of this section presents site-specific recommendations that draw on a combination of strategies from the three overarching themes. These recommendations focus on key gateways, identified by the project team as important connection points between the two neighborhoods.

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<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture defines placemaking as a community development strategy that uses arts, culture, and other assets along with outside funding to improve or revitalize a neighborhood's physical and social environment. While placekeeping is about local people actively caring for their community, preserving its culture and traditions, and maintaining their way of life, not just saving buildings, but keeping the spirit of the place alive.

# Safety and Security

One of the primary concerns among survey respondents and workshop participants is centered around physical safety and personal security along the French Street Corridor. While some lighting currently exists, there are opportunities to install more **pedestrian-scale lighting**, particularly in and around railroad underpasses. Nearly half of community survey respondents (49 percent) expressed support for improved lighting around the Corridor. In the public workshop and survey, participants specifically identified the Paterson Street, Townsend Street, and Bayard Street underpasses as being especially dark. New lighting should effectively illuminate streets and underpasses to increase visibility and feelings of safety for those walking and biking, and to help deter illicit behavior while bringing more attention to these spaces. Beyond their safety benefits, improved lighting can also be implemented in tandem with other placemaking initiatives like public art to create active public spaces where people can feel safe and engage with their surroundings. Installing more lighting in the railroad underpasses that connect the French Street Corridor to Downtown New Brunswick also presents an opportunity to install creatively designed art installations. Community members were open to artistic interventions provided that any installations were effective in providing adequate light. These installations can simultaneously illuminate these spaces and provide aesthetic value, helping transform the underpasses into inviting public areas.



**FIGURE 4. CASE EXAMPLES OF POTENTIAL LIGHTING IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE PROJECT AREA. IMAGES USED UNDER FAIR USE FOR EDUCATIONAL/REPORTING PURPOSES.**

When paired with activation strategies, lighting used as a placemaking and safety intervention has seen success in places like NoMa in Washington, D.C., where illuminated underpass art exhibits have become both passive and active third spaces that visitors interact with. However, experiences in NoMa also highlight the importance of coupling aesthetic improvements with meaningful investments in social support, particularly to address broader social challenges faced by vulnerable populations, such as unhoused individuals who could settle in underpasses.

Given that about half of the survey respondents indicated that they walk between French Street and Downtown New Brunswick as their mode of travel, improvements should seek to increase safety for those using active travel modes like walking and biking. **Sidewalk conditions**, especially in underpasses, should be improved to ensure walking routes are safe and accessible. While the French Street railroad underpass currently includes barriers between the roadway and the sidewalk, the others do not. There may be opportunities to install aesthetically pleasing physical barriers or railings beneath heavily used underpasses to protect pedestrians from vehicle traffic.



**FIGURE 5. CASE EXAMPLES OF TRAFFIC SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS FOR CONSIDERATION IN THE PROJECT AREA. SOURCE: VTC.**

Pedestrians would also benefit from more **high-visibility crosswalks** along the French Street Corridor. In the workshop, participants discussed feeling unsafe crossing French Street due to low visibility at certain crossing locations and a lack of marked crosswalks at others. Participants specifically noted difficulty with the triangular-shaped intersection of French Street, Jersey Avenue, Handy Street, and Alexander Street, including the absence of a marked crosswalk across the western side of French Street.

Crosswalk improvements should aim to ensure all crossings along the corridor are marked with high-visibility paint designs and [Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons](#) (RRFBs) where appropriate. RRFBs enhance pedestrian visibility by allowing those crossing a street to activate a flashing beacon that signals their presence to drivers. RRFBs would be most effective along French Street at crossing points that are marked by paint but not controlled by other signals.

Similarly, **curb extensions** at intersections and crossings can help increase pedestrian visibility and feelings of safety. Curb extensions can be implemented with paint and plastic delineators and help improve safety in multiple ways. Not only do curb extensions narrow travel lanes to slow vehicle speeds, but they also expand the amount of sidewalk space around crosswalks, which both increases pedestrian visibility and shortens crossing distances.

In addition, there are opportunities to install more robust **bicycle infrastructure** along routes connecting the two neighborhoods. The Esperanza neighborhood has a history of supporting bicycling, including through Ciclovía events in [2013](#) and [2016](#), and should continue to bolster its bicycling culture through the implementation of protected bicycle lanes and/or secure bicycle parking. On-street bicycle lanes protected either by plastic delineators or jersey barriers would not only offer safe routes for those cycling between the French Street Corridor and Downtown New Brunswick, but they would also help narrow road widths and encourage slower vehicle speeds, which in turn increases safety for pedestrians walking along those same routes. Protected bicycle lanes can be supplemented by bicycle parking, such as sheltered racks or locked facilities like Oonee pods, which provide bicyclists with a secure option once they reach their destinations.

Many survey respondents and workshop participants identified concerns with a general lack of cleanliness in the public spaces around the French Street Corridor and unhoused individuals living and sleeping beneath railroad underpasses, specifically on Townsend Street, both of which contributed to feelings of unsafety.

While street design alone will not be able to solve the deep-seated social and economic issues that contribute to houselessness, a combination of measures may help alleviate residents' safety concerns. This may include increasing the number of **public trash receptacles and the frequency of trash pickup, implementing mobile service vans, and supporting policy interventions that promote more affordable housing and encourage harm reduction**. In some cases, there may be opportunities to integrate placemaking efforts into these measures, such as incorporating neighborhood-specific branding on public trash cans while increasing the number of receptacles. Strategies like this can encourage people to keep their neighborhood clean, which can in turn increase residents' feelings of safety. It is recommended that any actions that address houselessness should reflect a holistic and humane approach that seeks to improve public safety without further marginalizing unhoused individuals.



Village of Hope- Temporary Housing  
Bridgeton, NJ



Trash bin sculpture  
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico



Mobile service unit  
Newark & Rutgers Medical School



Bright underpass gateway with railings  
Santa Barbara, CA

**FIGURE 6. CASE EXAMPLES OF METHODS TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND CLEANLINESS IN THE PROJECT AREA. SOURCES INCLUDE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE BLOGS AND ARTICLES.**

### Key Action Items

- Install more pedestrian-scale lighting, particularly in and around railroad underpasses
- Install physical barriers or railings beneath heavily used underpasses to protect pedestrians from vehicle traffic
- Implement high-visibility crosswalks at key crossing locations
- Install Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons (RRFBs) to increase pedestrian visibility at crossings
- Add curb extensions to increase pedestrian visibility and shorten crossing distances
- Install protected bike lanes to support safe cycling, narrow road widths, and encourage slower vehicle speeds
- Implement secure bicycle parking
- Increase the number of public trash receptacles
- Increase the frequency of trash pickup
- Implement mobile service vans
- Support policy interventions that promote more affordable housing and encourage harm reduction

## Visual Identity and Comfort

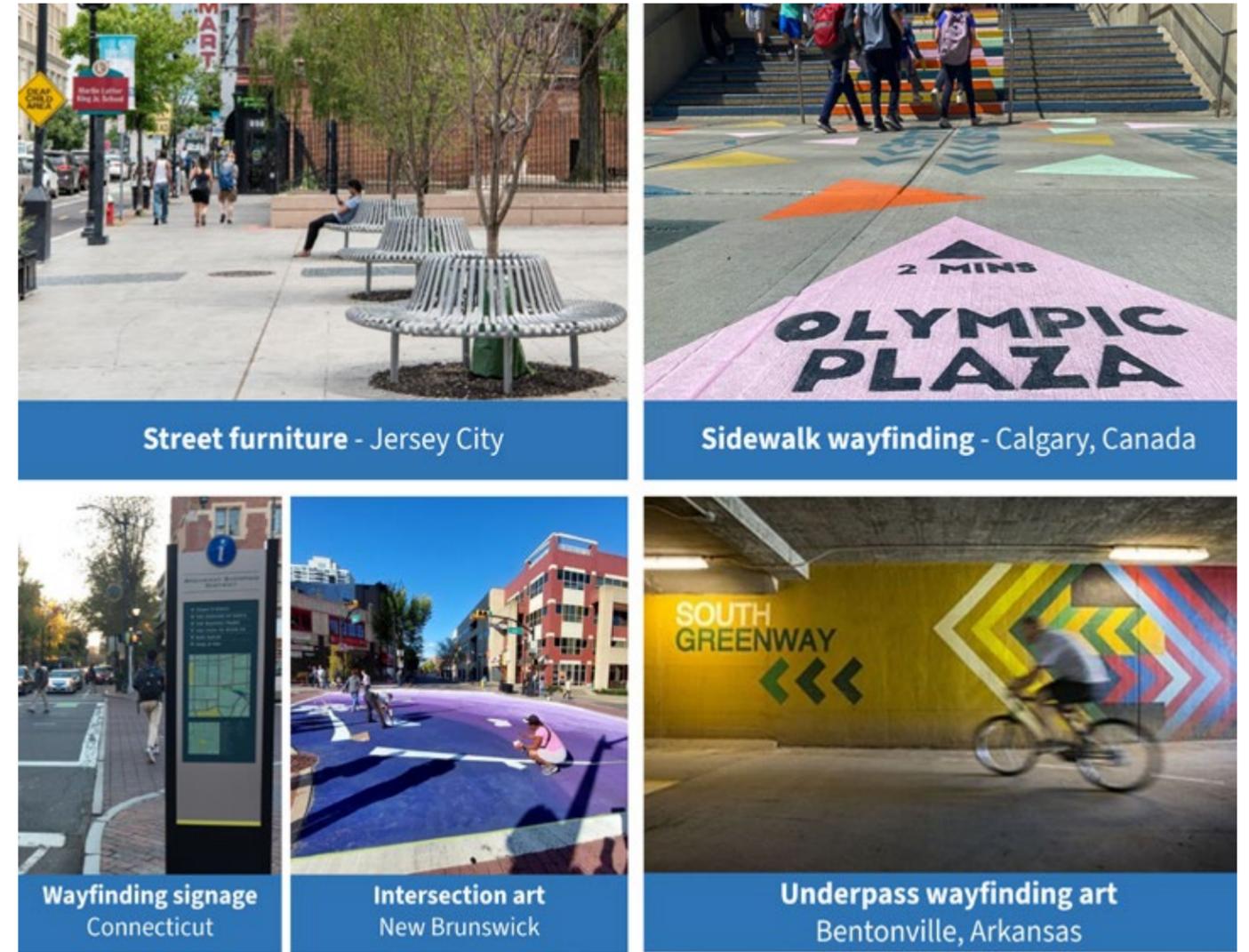
Survey respondents and workshop participants expressed interest in interventions that would both strengthen the visual identity of the Esperanza Neighborhood and increase the comfort of public spaces. This could include **landscaping and green infrastructure** installations that offer visual appeal while providing health and environmental benefits. Currently underutilized spaces around New Brunswick’s railroad underpasses could be repurposed as rain gardens or bioswales that capture stormwater runoff and improve air quality. For example, there are spaces near the French Street and Joyce Kilmer Avenue underpasses that would serve as good candidates for green infrastructure. In addition, living walls that consist of live plants growing vertically could be attached to the abutments beneath the underpasses for both aesthetics and soundproofing.



**FIGURE 7. UNDERUTILIZED SPACES NEAR RAILROAD UNDERPASSES COULD BE REPURPOSED AS GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE. SOURCE: VTC.**

To improve the physical comfort of the public spaces connecting the French Street Corridor and Downtown New Brunswick, **amenities like benches or tables** could be added. Seating could be designed in such a way as to provide temporary comfort while discouraging long-term use. Benches and tables should be designed with visual appeal, and there may be opportunities to partner with local artists in the design process.

Survey respondents and workshop participants alike expressed strong interest in continuing to implement **neighborhood-focused art** projects. Community members noted a particular desire for **murals with positive and motivational themes**, such as promoting youth, family, unity, respect, faith, and discouraging drug use, discrimination, and violence. Murals should also emphasize themes of nature and employ vibrant colors. In addition to buildings and walls, murals could be applied to underpass infrastructure (such as brick abutments) or to pavement at intersections. Community members noted that murals should use high-quality paint that will not fade quickly.



**FIGURE 8. CASE EXAMPLES TO STRENGTHEN THE VISUAL IDENTITY AND IMPROVE THE PROJECT AREA’S AMENITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE. IMAGES USED UNDER FAIR USE FOR EDUCATIONAL/REPORTING PURPOSES.**

Other neighborhood-centric art could include **flags or banners** affixed to streetlamps or telephone poles that promote the multicultural character of the French Street Corridor. In addition, public trash cans could be wrapped in banners with positive, community-oriented messaging encouraging people to keep the neighborhood clean. Banners and trash can wraps could also employ unique branding highlighting the Esperanza Neighborhood. For all neighborhood-focused art projects, local artists (including youth and students) should be involved wherever possible to ensure the final products resonate with community members.

The public spaces connecting the French Street Corridor to Downtown New Brunswick also present opportunities to **highlight local businesses or community members** in creative ways. There are currently two billboards at street level in the space between French Street and Joyce Kilmer Avenue which could be renovated as attractively designed advertisements promoting local artists or retail establishments along French Street.

**Wayfinding** is another strategy that can be employed to create a cohesive visual identity for the French Street Corridor while providing a sense of comfort for those navigating the neighborhood and its public spaces. Wayfinding may include the creation of signage, kiosks, maps, and graphics that let people know where they are and how to get around. Wayfinding should highlight safe walking and biking routes between the French Street Corridor and Downtown New Brunswick and may involve unique elements like directional signage painted on sidewalks or maps designed by local artists posted in public spaces.

### Key Action Items

- Implement green infrastructure such as rain gardens, bioswales, or living walls
- Install amenities like benches or tables
- Create and implement additional neighborhood-focused public art with positive themes on buildings, walls, underpasses and pavement at intersections
- Develop neighborhood-specific branding
- Create community gateways by installing branded banners, flags, and trash can wraps in public areas
- Highlight local businesses or community members through billboards or other public signage
- Develop a wayfinding package including signage, kiosks, maps, and graphics that reinforce the visual identity of the French Street Corridor

## Community Vitality and Belonging

Beyond streetscape and design improvements, there is a need to create spaces of belonging, both in a physical and social sense, as a means of building connections between the French Street Corridor and Downtown New Brunswick.

**Places of belonging** refer to actual spaces or groups that are inclusive and where people can feel accepted and connected to their community. It is crucial that these spaces are rooted in cultural strategy. [Cultural strategy](#), as defined by the University of California, Berkeley’s Institute of Othering and Belonging, refers to incorporating culture (including values, norms, everyday practices, relationships, symbols, and lived experiences) into efforts for economic and political transformation in a way that is meaningful and holistic. It draws on the insights and wisdom already present in communities that have been historically marginalized or othered. While residents expressed appreciation for existing cultural initiatives, they emphasized the importance of continued programming and strategies to enhance the vitality of the French Street corridor as a safe, welcoming, and culturally diverse destination.

The corridor’s proximity to Rutgers University and other institutions presents strong opportunities for continued collaboration for public engagement. There is significant potential to **expand and diversify free public programming on or near French Street**. Public programming refers to planned activities for community engagement, such as workshops, walking tours, classes, exhibitions, farmers’ markets, and live music, to name a few.

In addition to programming, the neighborhood would benefit from more gathering spaces or “third places” that foster community connection. Given the area’s high Social Vulnerability Index, establishing a **resilience hub** in the Esperanza Neighborhood could provide critical support. Such a hub could serve as both a communal gathering space and a resource center, offering social services and shelter during extreme weather or other emergencies.

There are also a lot of opportunities for **public space activation** in parks, plazas, sidewalks, and passive parcels in the Esperanza Neighborhood. War Memorial Park, or Oaxaca Park, sits at the heart of the neighborhood and is an example of a space that can be revitalized to meet community needs. Although the park has seen some well-intentioned upgrades in recent years, its current design remains uninviting. Fencing, border planters, and limited seating create a space that feels closed off rather than welcoming. Given its proximity to the Blanquita Valenti Community School (a key neighborhood gathering place) and the commercial corridor of French Street, War Memorial Park is a natural candidate for revitalization. Residents have voiced a strong interest in more diverse and youth-friendly public spaces. Enhancements such as **shade trees to combat the heat island effect, a playground, skate areas, sidewalk art, native gardens, picnic tables, and interpretive signage** would help transform the park into a more inclusive, active, and welcoming space. Additionally, there are opportunities to support local food vendors, whether through designated food truck parking or sanctioned food stands in open space areas, **which can help stimulate small business activity while increasing foot traffic and visibility in the park**. Food truck culture is a prominent feature of both Rutgers University and Latine communities, and New Brunswick already has the legal infrastructure to expand this amenity into the Esperanza Neighborhood. While safety remains a central concern, research shows that green infrastructure and increased foot traffic can deter loitering and improve perceptions of safety. These design changes, when paired with strategies such as a neighborhood watch program, emergency call boxes, and improved surveillance, can help ensure the space is both vibrant and well-used.



**Open streets** as incubators for cultural and recreational events continue to be widely supported and requested by project participants. While Joyce Kilmer Avenue remains the main location for events like Mercado Esperanza, Ciclovía, and the Cinco de Mayo Festival, expanding cultural programming to other streets, particularly those identified in the analysis as potential hotspots, can help boost foot traffic between Downtown New Brunswick and French Street. All the streets identified as potential gateways fall under municipal jurisdiction, except for French Street. While the process of closing down French Street itself would likely be complicated and lengthy due to state ownership, it may still be possible with the right coordination. Generally, community partners would need to prepare a traffic control and detour plan, secure municipal and county endorsements, secure law enforcement commitment, and apply for a Highway Occupancy Permit (HOP) through NJDOT. However, for a smoother implementation, it is recommended that community partners consider municipally owned streets when applying for open streets events, as they have already been doing.

**To support local business resilience and retention**, it is recommended that French Street adopt a **Community-Based Economic Development (CBED)** approach to its planned growth. CBED centers communities as the drivers of the development and growth of their own spaces. While CBED acknowledges that sustainable economic development goes beyond attracting outside investment or creating jobs, it also focuses on strengthening communities to prosper economically and socially. Specific business resilience and improvement strategies can include **commercial preservation and property improvement, tax credits and incentives, commercial tenant protections, local hiring and entrepreneurial support, community ownership, and place-based management**. Community partners are encouraged to explore these strategies further to ensure that growth and revitalization efforts align with the interests of their existing constituents.



**Open street festival**  
New Jersey



**Portland Mercado - Portland, Oregon**



**Native garden bed**  
Groundwork Elizabeth



**Mobile Resilience Hub - Central Florida**

### Key Action Items

- Promote bilingual and ESL programs to support residents and small business owners, enhancing inclusiveness and economic opportunity.
- Expand multi-cultural public programming and increase the frequency of such events, such as festivals, walking tours, workshops, and live music.
- Create community-serving facilities to provide the population with third places to foster a community connection.
- Encourage community beautification and activation. Activate public spaces by promoting community groups to beautify public spaces with trees, community gardens, and picnic tables, making both communities more welcoming and vibrant.
- Advance economic development and local business support. Implement recurring local business markets to support the local economy and attract residents and visitors to increase visibility in the neighborhood.

**FIGURE 9. CASE EXAMPLES TO ACTIVATE PUBLIC SPACES TO EXPAND AND DIVERSIFY THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ESPERANZA NEIGHBORHOOD AND DOWNTOWN NEW BRUNSWICK. SOURCES INCLUDE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE BLOGS AND ARTICLES.**

# Site-based Recommendations

## Walk-Time Analysis

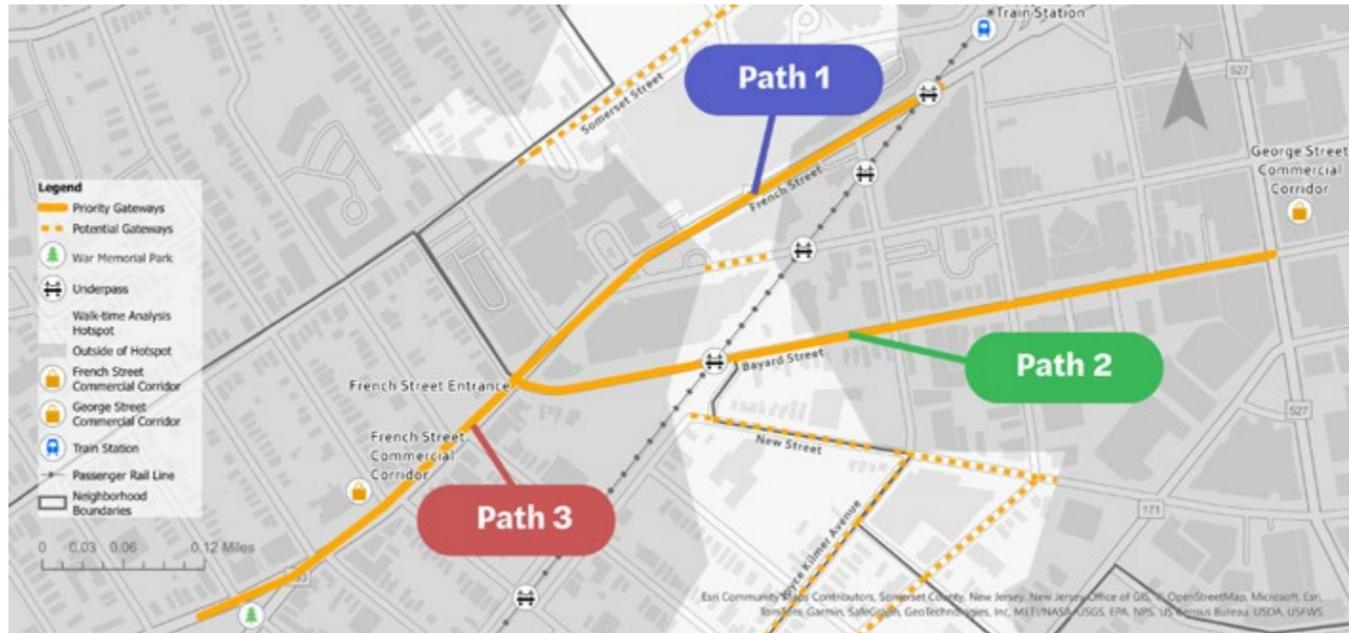
To better narrow down areas where improvements and activations should occur to better connect the Esperanza and Downtown communities, the project team conducted a walk-time analysis using ArcGIS Pro. Datasets on neighborhood boundaries, land use, commercial area points, and transit rails were used to create a walk-time map using the “Generate Travel Areas” tool in ArcGIS. This tool creates maps for the land area covered within 5- and 10-minute walking intervals from a given central point, assuming no disruptions on an average weekday. This tool was applied to George Street, in Downtown New Brunswick, and the French Street Corridor in the Esperanza Neighborhood. The 5- and 10-minute travel areas for both commercial corridors were generated, and when overlaid with each other, they visualize where the travel areas overlap. This overlap suggests potential hotspot areas that could benefit from targeted street improvements to enhance walkability, safety, and accessibility. Based on the analysis, the following streets are candidates for potential activation improvements that promote connectivity between both neighborhoods: **Somerset Street, French Street, Paterson Street, Bayard Street, New Street, Joyce Kilmer Avenue, and Drift Street.** Underpasses within or adjacent to the hotspot areas are located on French Street, Paterson Street, Bayard Street, and Joyce Kilmer Avenue. These findings, along with sites of concern identified through public engagement, will help inform the selection of site-specific recommendations in later parts of the plan.



FIGURE 10. MAP OF PRIORITY CORRIDORS FOR CONNECTIVITY IMPROVEMENTS. NEARBY UNDERPASSES ARE LOCATED ON FRENCH STREET, PATERSON STREET, BAYARD STREET, AND JOYCE KILMER AVENUE. SOURCE: VTC.

# Gateway Paths

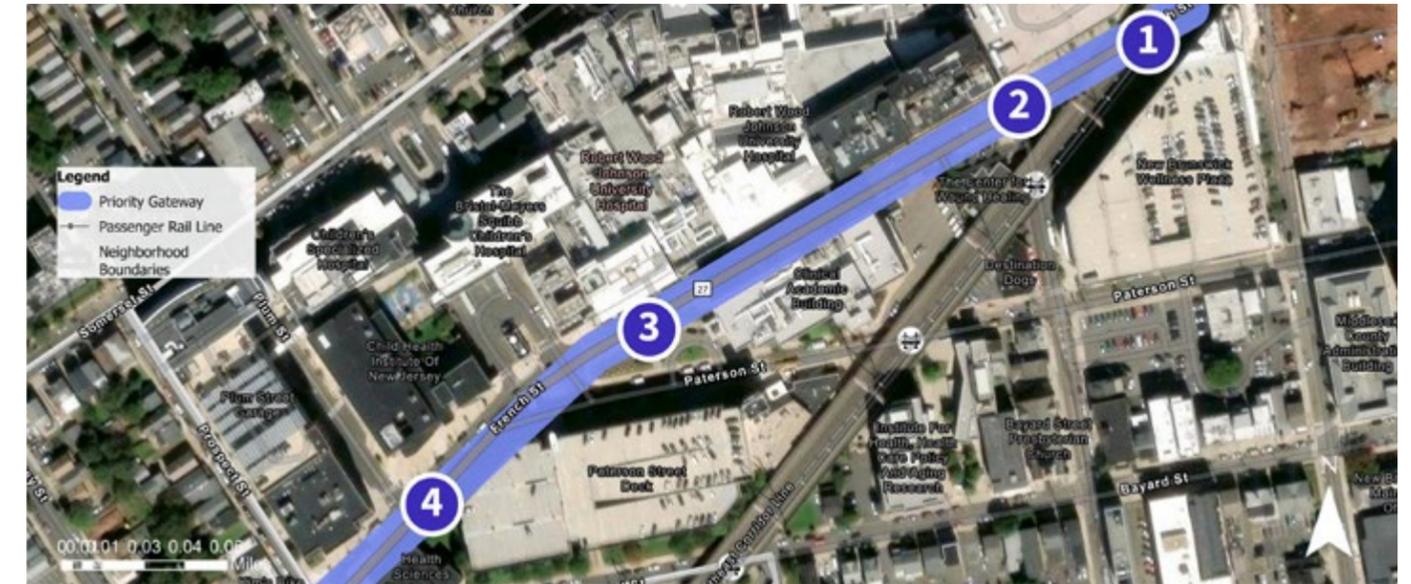
To illustrate how **Safety and Security, Visual Identity and Comfort, and Community Vitality and Belonging** strategies can work together, the project team identified three gateway paths based on the walk-time analysis and public engagement that should be prioritized for these improvements. These paths represent important connections between the French Street Corridor, the Esperanza Neighborhood, and Downtown New Brunswick, and the following examples can serve as models for future placemaking efforts on similar corridors in the area. Along with improving connections and supporting the vitality of the Esperanza Neighborhood, these site-specific recommendations aim to revitalize gateway areas, enhance safety and mobility, and support sustainable economic growth that reflects Esperanza’s cultural identity and vitality.



**FIGURE 11. MAP OF THE THREE PRIORITY GATEWAY PATHS THAT CONNECT THE ESPERANZA NEIGHBORHOOD AND DOWNTOWN NEW BRUNSWICK. SOURCE: VTC.**

One gateway path begins at the NJ TRANSIT’s New Brunswick Station, aiming to draw in commuter foot traffic. The other originates from George Street, the city’s main commercial corridor, to attract pedestrians already present downtown. These two paths converge at the intersection of French Street and Bayard Street, the key gateway into the Esperanza Neighborhood. The third path begins at the key gateway into the Esperanza Neighborhood and ends at War Memorial Park. If all three paths are enhanced, they would create natural, connected pathways into the French Street Corridor, with two defined entry points and War Memorial Park serving as a central anchor linking the surrounding neighborhoods. Potential improvements should focus on key locations along each route to create a sense of continuity and invite community members to move along the path. Potential partnerships and site considerations should also be explored to ensure long-term success and community alignment with the proposed improvements.

## Segment 1: Train Station to the French Street Corridor via French Street



**FIGURE 12. MAP OF SEGMENT 1 WITH STOPS FOR POTENTIAL SITE-BASED IMPROVEMENTS. SOURCE: VTC.**

**Stop 1- French Street Underpass:** Transform the underpass with community-driven art, enhanced lighting, wayfinding, and green infrastructure such as planters to improve visibility and visual appeal (Figure 13).

**Stop 2- French Street and Joyce Kilmer Ave:** Improve safety by improving crosswalk visibility, adding lighting, bollards or signage to protect pedestrians from blind spots and left turns. Activate the greenspace by the underpass to feature local artists or businesses on billboards or through art that also provide seating or shade (Figure 14).

**Stop 3- Medical Building Strip:** Install wayfinding elements, such as standing maps or sidewalk art, to help orient pedestrians and connect the adjacent neighborhoods along the hospital corridor.

**Stop 4- French Street and Plum Street:** Activate the underutilized green space near the Paterson Parking Deck and the Health Sciences Technology School by introducing temporary art installations, such as murals or sculptures, that students can help design. To further enhance the space, consider removing the existing fence and transforming the area into a passive green space (Figure 15).

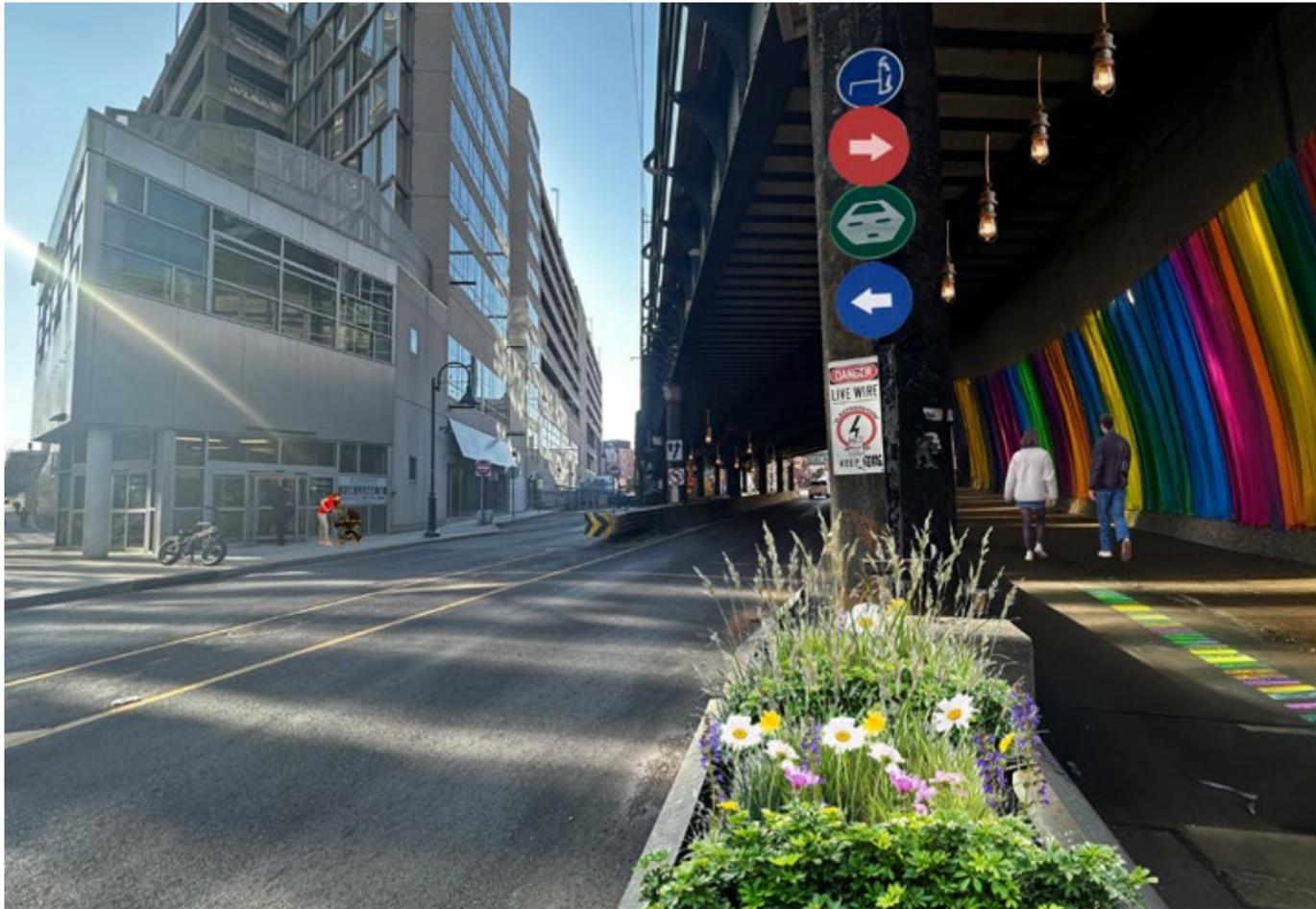
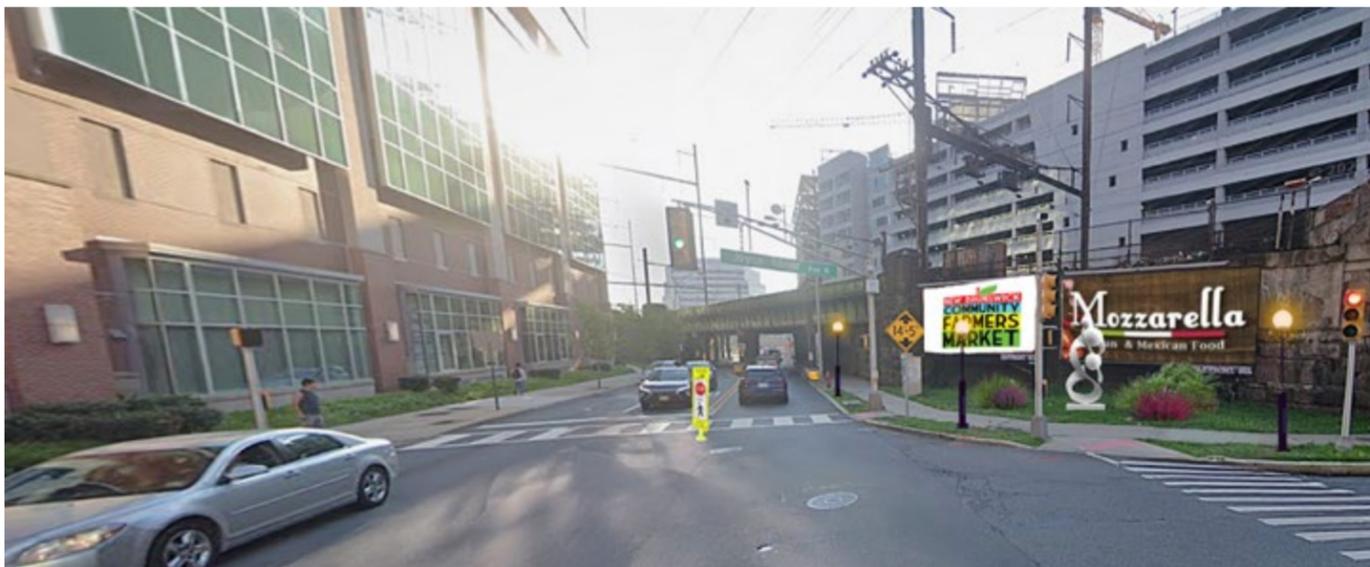


FIGURE 13. RENDERING OF POTENTIAL SAFETY AND VISUAL IDENTITY IMPROVEMENTS TO THE FRENCH STREET UNDERPASS. SOURCE: VTC.



FIGURE 14. RENDERING OF POTENTIAL SAFETY AND VISUAL IDENTITY IMPROVEMENTS TO FRENCH STREET AND JOYCE KILMER AVE. SOURCE: VTC.

FIGURE 15. RENDERING OF POTENTIAL VISUAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY BELONGING IMPROVEMENTS TO THE PASSIVE PARCEL ON FRENCH STREET. SOURCE: VTC.



## Segment 2: George Street to French Street via Bayard Street



FIGURE 16. MAP OF SEGMENT 2 WITH STOPS FOR POTENTIAL SITE-BASED IMPROVEMENTS. SOURCE: VTC.

**Stop 1- City Hall / Administrative Sector:** Install Spanish-language wayfinding that highlights available public services and directs visitors to nearby shops and the Esperanza Neighborhood (Figure 17).

**Stop 2- Bayard Street and Joyce Kilmer Ave:** Explore implementing a bike lane (sharrow or protected) from Joyce Kilmer to French Street, building on the existing shared lane to guide cyclists toward the Esperanza Neighborhood.

**Stop 3- Bayard Street Underpass:** Improve lighting, street markings, and sidewalk conditions; add railings for pedestrian safety, and install an emergency call box.

**Stop 4- Bayard Street Parking Lot:** Partner with the New Brunswick Parking Authority to activate the lot for community events such as farmers' markets.

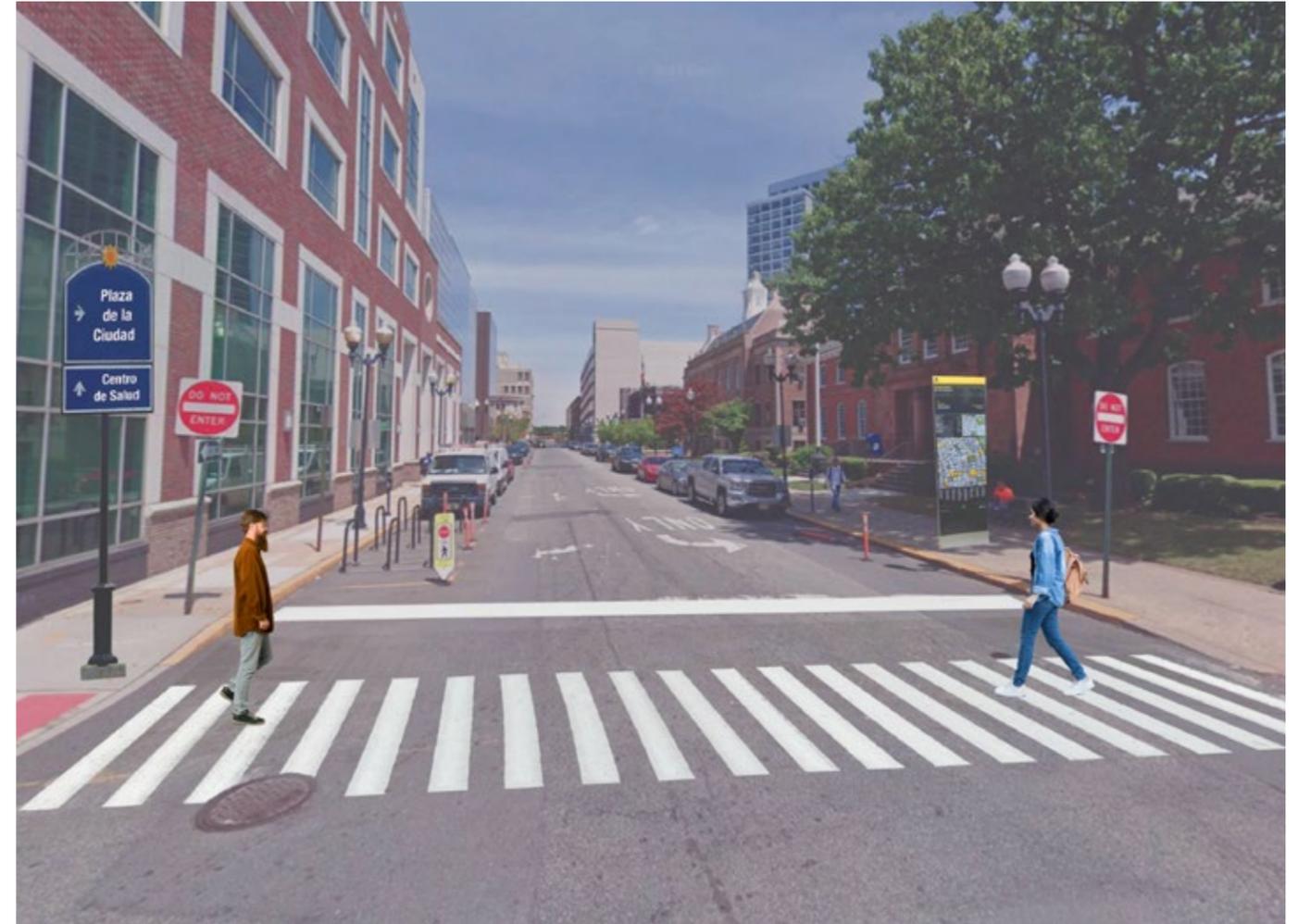


FIGURE 17. RENDERING OF POTENTIAL VISUAL IDENTITY AND SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS TO THE CITY HALL SECTOR ON BAYARD STREET. SOURCE: VTC.

Segment 3: French Street Corridor Entrance to War Memorial Park via French Street

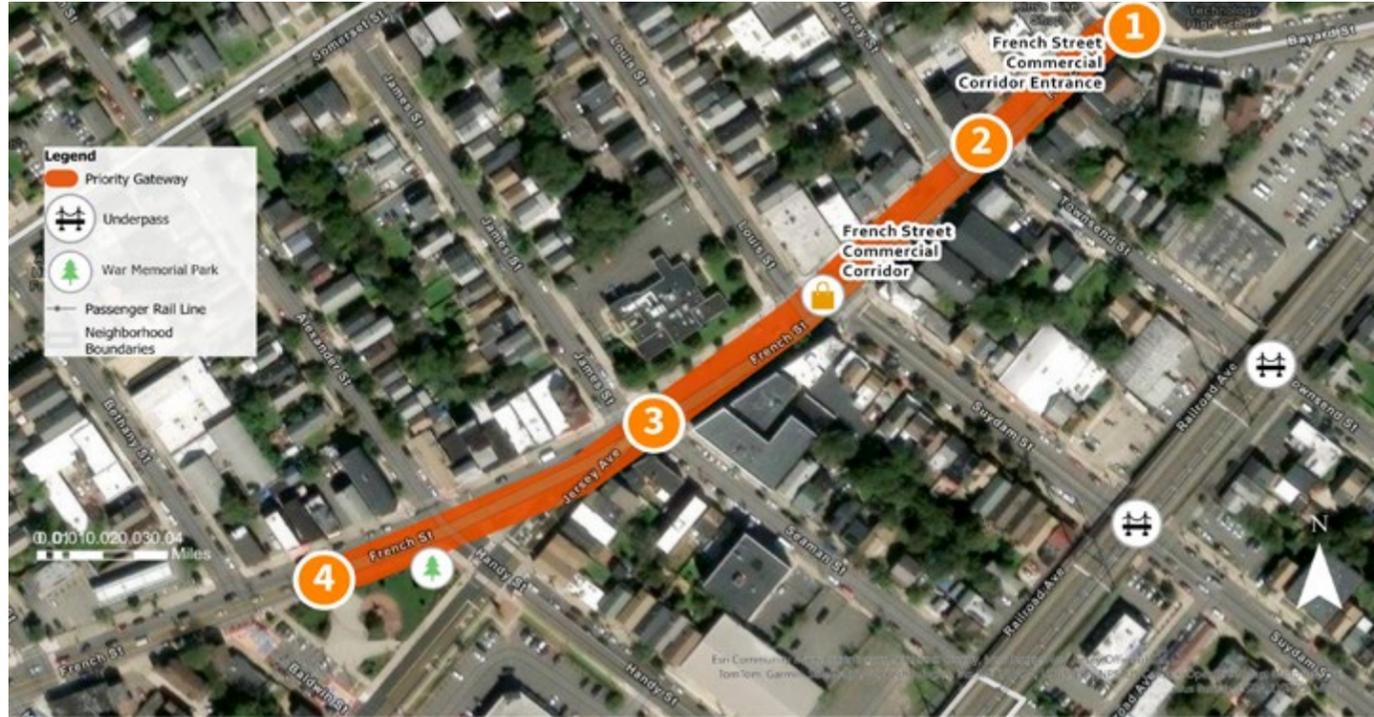


FIGURE 18. MAP OF SEGMENT 3 WITH STOPS FOR POTENTIAL SITE-BASED IMPROVEMENTS. SOURCE: VTC.

**Stop 1- French Street and Bayard Street (Key Entrance):** Install intersection art and wayfinding signage, like a banner, to mark the entrance to the French Street Corridor/Esperanza Neighborhood. Add Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons (RRFBs) to improve pedestrian safety (Figure 19).

**Stop 2- Townsend Street and French Street:** Enhance crosswalk markings, install an emergency call box, and add pedestrian-scale lighting extending toward the underpass. Designate space for a mobile service van, install security cameras, and explore parklet options to support local eateries (Figure 20).

**Stop 3- Seaman Street and French Street:** Improve crosswalk visibility, add pedestrian-scale lighting, expand trash bin availability, introduce sidewalk planters, and incorporate art into streets or infrastructure to reinforce the corridor’s visual identity.

**Stop 4- War Memorial Park:** Remove physical barriers to entry and add wayfinding elements like banners or maps to promote community pride. Install emergency call boxes and RRFBs at nearby crosswalks. Add seating, water fountains, and interactive, Spanish-language signage with local historical context. Incorporate art features that serve as seating or play structures and designate or repurpose parking for food trucks or parklet use.



FIGURE 19. RENDERING OF POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS TO LA ESPERANZA KEY ENTRANCE. SOURCE: VTC.



FIGURE 20. RENDERING OF POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS TO TOWNSEND STREET AND FRENCH STREET INTERSECTION. SOURCE: VTC.

## Underpasses

Given that one of the goals of this project is to strengthen connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor, it is important to consider the railroad underpasses that separate the two neighborhoods. The following table highlights a subset of the strategies listed above that apply more specifically to activating railroad underpasses with the aim of improving mobility, increasing feelings of safety, and ultimately strengthening neighborhood connections.

### Key Underpass Action Items

- Install more pedestrian-scale lighting in and around railroad underpasses
- Install physical barriers or railings beneath heavily used underpasses to protect pedestrians from vehicle traffic
- Install protected bike lanes to support safe cycling, narrow road widths, and encourage slower vehicle speeds
- Implement mobile service vans to assist unhoused individuals who congregate beneath underpasses
- Support policy interventions that promote more affordable housing and encourage harm reduction
- Implement green infrastructure such as rain gardens, bioswales, or living walls to mitigate storm-water flooding and beautify areas in and around underpasses
- Create and implement additional neighborhood-focused public art with positive themes on buildings, walls, and pavement at intersections, with a particular focus on the areas in and around underpasses



## Next Steps

The project team recommends that coLAB Arts continue their work to advance the **Community Priorities** as devised from the public engagement of this project. Continued stakeholder outreach and buy-in are essential to fostering meaningful connections and realizing the broader project vision. Comprehensive outreach should include residents, local businesses, and key city and state agencies such as transportation, public works, planning, and relevant authorities like the Parking Authority and Police Department. Beyond gaining support, building these relationships is critical for navigating city planning and zoning processes. It is important to determine whether proposed interventions align with existing zoning and infrastructure plans, and project partners should be prepared to submit the necessary permit applications for improvements in public spaces such as sidewalks, streets, and parks.

Strengthening connections with local artists, schools, service providers, and nonprofits is equally important to support the programming and outreach aspects of this initiative. In addition to coalition-building, it is recommended that coLAB Arts and its partners engage consultants to conduct feasibility studies, prepare formal site plans, and support design work. This will help distinguish quick-win projects (such as lighting enhancements and signage) from more complex, long-term infrastructure efforts like park redesigns.

Working with the City of New Brunswick and exploring diverse and intersectional funding sources is also key. This includes sharing this report with the City to discuss infrastructure improvements and identify funding opportunities. Potential funding sources may include grants from local or state transportation departments, such as Safe Routes to School and the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside Program (TASA), as well as environmental and sustainability grants to support green infrastructure and lighting improvements.

Pilot programs and temporary installations are encouraged as a way to gauge community interest and support. Attendance at these events can serve as a key measure of success. These efforts might include temporary parklets, pop-up markets, pilot bike lanes, or temporary art installations. At the same time, it is important to establish maintenance and stewardship plans to ensure the upkeep of visual enhancements and safety improvements over time. It is recommended that coLAB Arts work with City staff to explore opportunities for temporary demonstration projects in the Esperanza Neighborhood. Resources such as the [NJTPA Complete Streets Demonstration Library](#) can help facilitate the installation of high-quality temporary projects.

Finally, identifying a formal community champion or lead organization will be vital for sustaining momentum. This point person or group should be responsible for communications, visibility, and engagement around the ongoing changes in the area. A public-facing campaign, particularly through social media, can help build local awareness and invite residents to take part in the larger movement. It's essential that all improvements to the built environment continue to prioritize connections between the Esperanza and Downtown neighborhoods, especially to prevent disproportionate development outcomes. These efforts should be grounded in social infrastructure principles identified in the "Community Vitality and Belonging" section of this report and, more importantly, guided by the values and priorities voiced by community members themselves.

## Appendix A: Task 1 Memo

### Linking People and Places:

Tactical Strategies for Connecting French Street and  
Downtown New Brunswick

#### Task 1 Memo



Source: My Central Jersey

# Appendices

April 18, 2025

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## Part I: Project Overview

### Introduction

North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority’s (NJTPA) Vibrant Places Program, in collaboration with the Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC), is working with coLAB Arts to develop a strategic activation plan to identify potential gateways that can be revitalized to strengthen connections between two communities: Downtown New Brunswick and the Esperanza Neighborhood.

With the support of local partners, including New Brunswick Tomorrow, the study focuses on identifying tactical strategies that strengthen physical and social connections between communities. This project aims to unify the community with a set of strategies designed to bring people who live and work in the Esperanza Neighborhood together, enhance safety, and improve connectivity through the arts, activated green space, better bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and clear wayfinding. By fostering connectivity, the project offers opportunities for economic growth, cultural exchange, and active transportation improvements that drive progress and support the vitality of its largely Latine community.

Project objectives include:

- **Identifying Best Practices** - Research and document creative placemaking projects that address transportation infrastructure challenges and improve community connectivity.
- **Understanding Community Barriers** - Develop and deploy a survey to assess emotional and behavioral factors influencing cultural and commercial interaction between the Downtown and Esperanza neighborhoods.
- **Engaging Stakeholders in Visioning** - Organize community convenings, including Spanish-language engagement, to gather input and facilitate community-led design for activation sites.
- **Developing a Strategic Activation Plan** - Synthesize research, survey findings, and community input into a cohesive plan and toolkit that outlines actionable strategies for improving connections and activating underutilized spaces.
- **Fostering Cross-Community Collaboration** - Present findings and proposed strategies in a final session to encourage shared understanding and buy-in from diverse stakeholders.

The final deliverable will be a hybrid “Gateway Activation Plan/Toolkit” that could support and inform future stakeholder projects and guide implementation funding to bridge neighborhood gaps and create a safer and more unified environment for all its community members. This memo is part of the Initial Research Phase of the project.

## Existing Conditions

The Esperanza Neighborhood covers 0.21 square miles, contains stretches of French Street and Jersey Avenue, and is bounded by Joyce Kilmer Avenue to the southeast and Somerset Street to the northwest. It is home to approximately 11,880 residents, and the majority of households are Hispanic working families ([Source](#)).

The neighborhood includes seven Census Block Groups: 34023005500, 34035053300, 34023009300, 34023005601, 34023005602, 34023005200, and 34023005300. The neighborhood covers census tracts 53 and 56.02 and cuts into 55 and 93 at its northeastern and southwestern edges, respectively.

The Esperanza Neighborhood is situated centrally in New Brunswick, with Downtown New Brunswick at its northeastern boundary. Downtown New Brunswick covers 0.19 square miles and hosts several prominent institutions, such as Rutgers University and Robert Wood Johnson Hospital, making it an economic anchor to the surrounding area. The Esperanza Neighborhood is also within walking distance of the New Brunswick train station, carrying daily commuters throughout the New York Metropolitan Region. The Northeast Corridor rail line bisects the neighborhood; Handy, Suydam, and Townsend Streets allow cars and pedestrians to cross under the rail line. The Esperanza Neighborhood's rich heritage and location can be leveraged through placemaking strategies to meet the community's current needs while enhancing its vibrancy and supporting its growth.

Figure 1. Esperanza Neighborhood with Boundaries



Source: NBT Esperanza NRTC Plan Draft

Figure 2. Esperanza Neighborhood Context



Source: NBT Esperanza NRTC Plan Draft

## Plan Review

To better understand the project context within the Esperanza neighborhood and the City of New Brunswick, the project team reviewed relevant plans and policies. The team identified overarching themes from the reviewed documents, including characteristics of La Esperanza and recommendations for future community development efforts.

Included in the review were the following plans and policies:

### ***New Brunswick Master Plan (2022)***

The New Brunswick Master Plan was last updated in 2022 and provides a comprehensive framework outlining New Brunswick's current conditions and strategies for future growth and development. For this project, only select elements of the Master Plan deemed most relevant were reviewed: Land Use, Circulation, and Open Space and Recreation.

### ***Esperanza Neighborhood Plan (2019)***

The Esperanza Neighborhood Plan was created in 2019 through a partnership between neighborhood residents and New Brunswick Tomorrow (NBT). The community-driven planning process included public meetings, surveys, focus groups, and demographic analyses. The plan looks forward 10 years and advances community building, economic development, housing, community services, connection, and movement recommendations.

### ***New Brunswick Complete Streets Policy (2012)***

New Brunswick passed a Complete Streets policy in 2012. The policy reinforces the City’s commitment to creating a comprehensive, integrated, connected street network that safely accommodates all road users of all abilities and for all trips.

**Municipal Public Access Plan (2019)**

New Brunswick’s Municipal Public Access Plan (MPAP) was adopted in 2019. The city developed the Plan with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). The MPAP lays out a comprehensive vision for providing access to tidal waters and shorelines within the municipal boundary.

**Parks Action Plan (2018)**

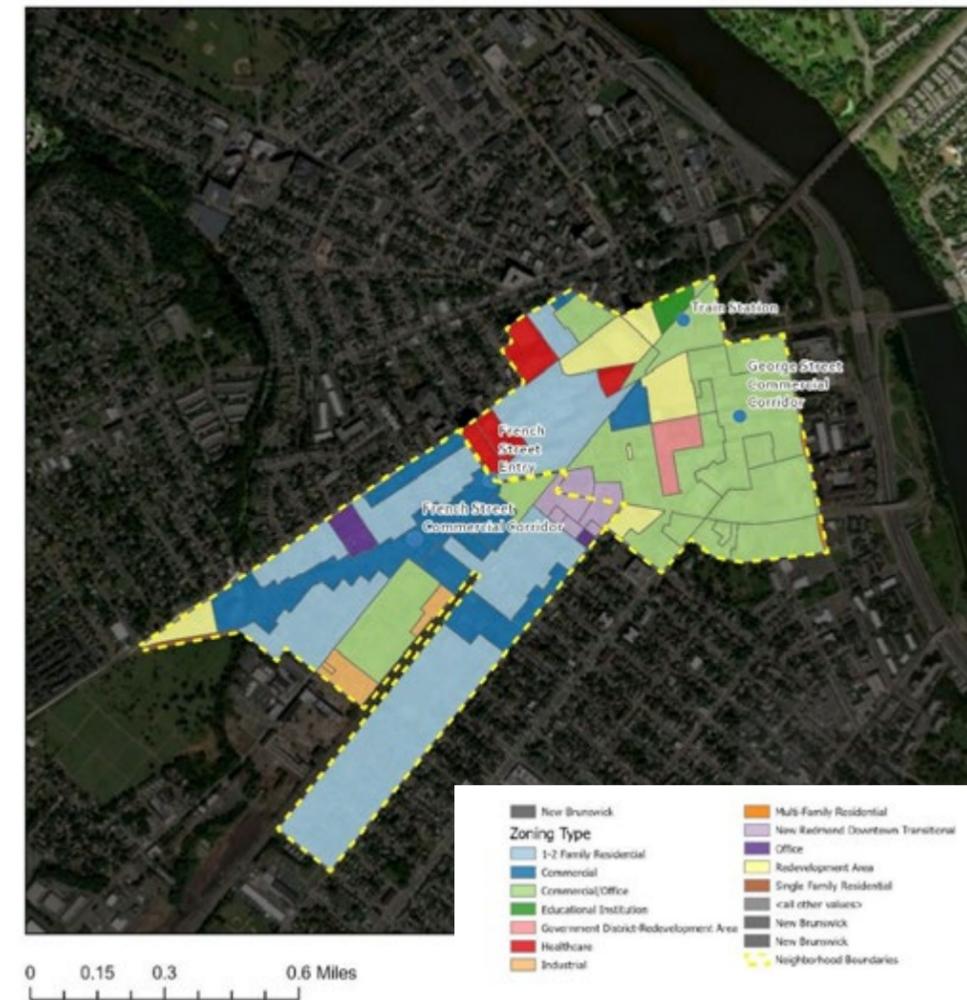
The New Brunswick Parks Action Plan is intended to provide an assessment of the City’s parks and help guide the management of park assets, including efforts to ensure an equitable distribution of park-planning resources for the residents of New Brunswick. The report contains specific recommendations for each City’s parks and more systemwide park-related strategies.

After reviewing the relevant plans and policies, the team identified the following salient topics as they relate to La Esperanza and its connections to greater New Brunswick:

Variety of Land Uses

Land use in the Esperanza neighborhood is a mix of high-density single/two-family residential and neighborhood/community commercial. The neighborhood commercial zoning district is intended to allow for small-scale retail and service uses, such as stores for hardware, general merchandise, groceries, delis, packaged goods, and clothing. The community commercial zone, located along French Street, allows for a broader range of commercial uses, including banks, supermarkets, medical clinics, professional offices, printing and publishing businesses, graphics services, art galleries, music studios, indoor theaters, bakeries, convenience stores, taverns, employment agencies, and transportation and communication offices. In addition, institutional and hospital land uses associated with Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital occupy much of the area between the Esperanza neighborhood and downtown New Brunswick.

**Figure 3. Land Use Map of Project Areas**



Source: VTC

Connections through Complete Streets and Active Transportation

New Brunswick passed a Complete Streets policy in 2012. The resolution affirms the City’s “commitment to creating a comprehensive, integrated, connected street network that safely accommodates all road users of all abilities and for all trips.” The policy outlines several benefits of Complete Streets, including improving safety for pedestrians, bicyclists, children, older adults, non-drivers, and the mobility challenged; providing connections to bicycling and walking trip generators such as employment, education, residential, recreation, retail centers, and public facilities; and creating more livable communities. These noted benefits align with the goal of improving cohesion between New Brunswick’s neighborhoods, including connections between downtown and the Esperanza neighborhood.

The Circulation Element of New Brunswick’s 2022 Master Plan identifies the need for improved bicycle and pedestrian circulation and safety. The Plan notes that, as of 2019, nearly 22% of New Brunswick

households do not have access to a vehicle to commute to work. As a result, residents become much more dependent on public transit and pedestrian circulation networks for commuting. While some active transportation facilities have been implemented in the Esperanza neighborhood, such as a marked bike lane along Suydam Street south of the railroad tracks, more opportunities exist to enhance the safety and connectivity of the neighborhood's active transportation network.

#### Activating Parks and Open Space

New Brunswick's 2022 Master Plan includes parks and open space goals. The Plan calls for increasing the number of parks and recreational facilities in the City's neighborhoods and maximizing access to open space throughout New Brunswick. The City's 2019 Municipal Public Access Plan further addresses the need for open space, specifically recommending integrating parks into the fabric of existing neighborhoods and working with communities to identify suitable amenities and programming for each park.

Both the Master Plan and the Parks Action Plan outline recommendations pertaining to specific parks throughout the city, including two parks in the Esperanza neighborhood: Joyce Kilmer Park and Monument Square Park. Relevant short- and mid-term recommendations for Joyce Kilmer Park include adding sidewalks, bike racks, signage, and plantings. Long-term recommendations focus on adding amenities such as a skate park and developing a unique park identity. For Monument Square Park, recommendations involve collaborating with the local arts community to bring art into the park. Other recommendations to repaint nearby crosswalks and redesign the plaza have largely been addressed. However, benches have been removed, resulting in a lack of seating options at the park. The Esperanza Neighborhood Plan notes that the park is also a gathering spot for residents looking for work as construction and landscape laborers.

#### Promoting Community Identity through the Arts

The Esperanza Neighborhood Plan recommends promoting and celebrating the arts, culture, and community identity. This includes producing more murals and public art that celebrate the neighborhood's culture and strengthen community pride and working with partners to provide arts and cultural programming for adults and children in the community. The Plan recommends continuing to host culturally relevant neighborhood celebrations, noting the success of events like the annual Corazon Latino music festival, Cinco de Mayo celebration, and Our Lady of Guadalupe procession. The Plan also identifies the need to support arts institutions in the neighborhood, such as museums, art galleries, and/or performance spaces.

#### Creating Neighborhood Gateways

The Esperanza Neighborhood Plan specifically articulates a goal to create discernable neighborhood gateways for the northeast and southwest areas of the community. The Plan envisions developing gateways through distinctive streetscaping, wayfinding signage, culturally relevant public art, and billboards enticing visitors to patronize local businesses. The Plan's recommendation to create neighborhood gateways that enhance community identity and connections to downtown New Brunswick is central to this project's effort.

## Activation Analysis

The project team conducted a preliminary walk-time analysis using ArcGIS Pro to identify where improvements and activations should occur to connect the Esperanza and Downtown communities better. Datasets on neighborhood boundaries, land use, commercial area points, and transit rails were used to create a walk-time map using the "Generate Travel Areas" tool in ArcGIS. Maps for 5-minute and 10-minute walking intervals were generated from the central commercial district on George Street in Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor in the Esperanza neighborhood. The intervals were displayed as buffers, and an average walk on an average weekday with no disruptions was estimated. The walk-time analysis is an initial assessment of walking distances between the two neighborhoods, highlighting areas where walking times overlap. This overlap suggests potential hotspot areas because of their proximity that could benefit from targeted street improvements to enhance walkability, safety, and accessibility. Based on the analysis, the following streets are candidates for potential activation improvements that promote connectivity between both neighborhoods: **Somerset Street, French Street, Paterson Street, Bayard Street, New Street, Joyce Kilmer Ave, and Drift Street.** Underpasses within or adjacent to the hotspot areas are located on French Street, Paterson Street, Bayard Street, and Joyce Kilmer Ave. These findings will help guide further analysis, public engagement activities, and potential design interventions in future phases of the project.

Figure 4. Walk Time Analysis for Esperanza and Downtown Commercial Corridors



Source: VTC

Figure 5. Map of priority corridors for connectivity improvements. Nearby underpasses are located on French Street, Paterson Street, Bayard Street, and Joyce Kilmer Avenue.



Source: VTC

### Existing Engagement

The project team has conducted various research tasks to assess community perceptions and stakeholder networks, ensuring project tasks align with existing needs. As part of the initial research, the team conducted preliminary stakeholder mapping and generated a contact list of businesses and organizations in the project areas. With support from coLAB Arts, it will continue to engage these stakeholders in future project phases.

The project team also analyzed a survey previously conducted by coLAB Arts in the Esperanza Neighborhood, focusing on traffic and public safety concerns at the Suydam Street and Remsen Avenue intersection. Although this location falls outside this project's study area, the survey provided a

framework for understanding how residents of Esperanza- one of the two neighborhoods studied in this project- perceive local safety issues. The findings indicate that safety concerns were predominant, with 79 out of 150 respondents (52.6%) reporting feeling unsafe. Security, crime, and traffic safety were the most cited challenges and desired improvements. While street design issues were not explicitly mentioned, they are likely contributing factors.

Residents expressed appreciation for local businesses, walkability, and community identity, with local businesses and stores identified as the most valued aspects of the community. Public spaces that foster engagement were also seen as necessary. While respondents felt that essential services were within walking distance, they desired better access to public transit, enhanced public safety, and revitalized public spaces such as parks, community centers, and gathering areas.

## Part II: Best Practices and Case Studies

Based on initial conversations with coLAB Arts, the project team determined that the most effective final deliverable would be a hybrid activation plan and toolkit. A toolkit provides flexible resources and actions applicable to various planning scenarios, while a plan offers a structured roadmap with defined boundaries and objectives. This hybrid approach ensures coLAB Arts has the tools needed to activate spaces that strengthen connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the Esperanza neighborhood while continuing to empower their network of stakeholders.

To inform this approach, the project team reviewed the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute's Placemaking Assessment Tool as an example of a similar effort that guides municipalities, non-profits, and other community partners seeking to develop and implement placemaking projects to create quality places that are both functional and attractive. The tool helps communities assess their capacity for placemaking and determine which strategies best suit their needs. It is designed to guide neighborhoods and planners in aligning placemaking efforts with broader strategic goals, such as economic development. It includes assessments to evaluate readiness for different types of placemaking. Additionally, the tool offers resources, self-assessment questions, and guidance to overcome barriers to effective placemaking involving stakeholders from government, business, and civic groups.

Building on this framework, the team reviewed case study examples relevant to the existing infrastructure in the project areas to understand how placemaking projects have been successfully implemented. Most case studies focus on examples from New Jersey, though examples centered on underpass activation draw on projects across the United States. Case studies were organized into the following general topics:

- Underpass Activation
- Public Art
- Tactical Urbanism
- Wayfinding
- Business-Oriented Community Events

From the review of the Placemaking Tool and case study project examples, the project team identified several overarching themes that can inform efforts in the Esperanza neighborhood:

### Pedestrian Safety

Placemaking efforts at underpass locations present an opportunity to improve safety and create a sense of security for pedestrians and bicyclists. Most underpasses are existing travel routes but are often not designed with people in mind. Placemaking projects can improve underpass conditions for non-motorized forms of transportation by adding more lighting, wider sidewalks, and protected bike lanes. In addition, placemaking can slow driver speeds through underpasses by providing visual interest along the streetscape, thereby improving safety for those walking and biking.

### Sustainability

Placemaking at or around underpasses can include landscaping that provides a visually pleasing aesthetic and incorporates green stormwater or other types of infrastructure that support the surrounding neighborhood's sustainability efforts. This can include living sound walls, solar panels, or green infrastructure such as trees or bioswales with native plants that effectively manage stormwater runoff and improve air quality.

### Culturally Relevant Artistic Elements and Wayfinding

Placemaking projects can include artistic elements like murals or sculptures that both provide visual interest and connect to the specific cultural identity of the surrounding community. Art installations can also serve a wayfinding purpose by incorporating elements that signal when one has entered a particular neighborhood.

### Activation through Recreation

Recreation is often essential to placemaking efforts, and projects at or around underpass sites are no different. Recreation opportunities can activate an underpass, usually where people try to spend as little time as possible. The types of facilities will vary depending on the size and context of the specific site. Still, they can include athletic-oriented facilities like basketball courts or skate parks or more leisure-oriented facilities like swing sets or sandboxes. In addition, programmed entertainment, such as movie screenings, can draw people toward the space and give them a reason to be there.

### Strategic Placemaking as a Driver of Economic Development

Strategic placemaking is a process involving projects that are intentionally implemented over a larger area covering many individual sites. Strategic placemaking can contribute to a community's overarching goals, like economic development, by creating a network of quality places attractive to business owners, talented workers, and visitors. The larger tax base generated by more people living, working, and shopping in a community allows for better-supported municipal services that further drive community and economic development. An important part of strategic placemaking involves partnering with anchor institutions like universities and hospitals ("Eds and Meds"), often a community's largest employers. Placemaking initiatives that leverage these community partners can have an added impact. In New Brunswick, Rutgers University, Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, and Johnson & Johnson could be effective partners in strategic placemaking efforts.

## Underpass Activation

Figure 6. Rendering for Virginia Ave Underpass



*Image Credit: Capitol Riverfront BID*

### ***Underpass + Virginia Ave Corridor Vision Plan***

This project, developed by the Capitol Riverfront BID, began in 2021 when the Capitol Riverfront BID convened a group of stakeholders to discuss possible improvements to a network of I-695 underpasses in Washington, DC. The group determined the best approach was to create a coherent vision to transform the underpasses into welcoming gateways that activate the underutilized sites and connect to the surrounding community through lighting, wayfinding, art installations, and programming.

Source: [Capitol Riverfront BID](#)

Figure 7. “El-Space” Pilot in Sunset Park features custom planters for capturing stormwater runoff



*Image Credit: NYCDOT*

### ***Under the Elevated***

This project, developed by the Design Trust for Public Space in partnership with the NYC Department of Transportation, aimed to transform the space beneath New York’s elevated highways, bridges, and rail lines into valuable public resources. The two-phase project involved site research, participatory workshops, the development of context-specific design and programming recommendations, and installing several pilots. The project also developed an “El-Space Toolkit” with recommendations for activating underpass spaces.

Source: [Design Trust for Public Space](#)

Figure 8. Rendering of Electric Philadelphia Art Installation



*Image Credit: Streets Dept*

### **Electric Philadelphia**

Electric Philadelphia is a public art installation created by artist David Guinn. The project involves an 8,500-square-foot mural along the 6th Street Bridge underpass under the Ben Franklin Bridge in Philadelphia. The mural was painted in bright colors and featured integrated neon lights that kept it lit both day and night. The mural aimed to provide a vibrant gateway to Philadelphia's Historic District while improving lighting conditions for pedestrians and cyclists who use the underpass. The mural is supported by Visit Philadelphia, Mural Arts Philadelphia, AP Construction, and Historic Philadelphia, in partnership with PennDOT.

Source: [Streets Dept](#)

Figure 9. Holton Bridge Swing Park in Action



*Image Credit: Zoe Benjamin*

### **Holton Street Bridge Swing Park**

The Holton Street Bridge Swing Park in Milwaukee activates a bridge underpass with seating, swings, and a sandbox. The park is situated along the scenic Milwaukee River and is also proximate to local businesses, including a brewery. The park is also programmed with regularly scheduled entertainment like bike-in movie nights.

Source: [OnMilwaukee](#)

## Sidewalk/Street Activation

Figure 10. Red Bank Pedestrian Plaza Photo



*Image Credit: Red Bank Pulse*

### **Red Bank Pedestrian Plaza**

Red Bank established a pedestrian plaza in 2020 in response to the emergence of COVID-19. Parts of downtown were closed to vehicle traffic and repurposed for outdoor dining and use by pedestrians. The plaza hosted performances by street performers and musicians and popular events, such as a corn hole tournament. Initially, the plaza was open Thursday through Sunday, but it was so popular Red Bank extended the street closure into the fall and kept it open 24/7. The plaza was re-opened for the summer of 2021.

Source: [Red Bank Pulse](#)

Figure 11. Outdoor Dining at Ridgewood Pedestrian Plaza



*Image Credit: Welcome to Ridgewood*

### **Ridgewood Pedestrian Plaza**

Ridgewood established a pedestrian plaza in 2020 in response to COVID-19. On summer weekends, streets were closed to cars and opened for outdoor dining, pedestrian access, and performances. The town took advantage of the plaza to host a number of events, including symphony performances, step dancers, sidewalk chalk decorations, the “Touch A Truck” day where people could see and touch the towns emergency vehicles. The plaza was a success and continued in 2021. After complaints about the aesthetics of the concrete barricades used in 2020, the town painted the barricades to make the plaza more appealing.

Source: [TAPintoRidgewood](#)

**Figure 12. Highland Park Town Tables in Action**



*Image Credit: My Central Jersey*

### **Highland Park Street Closures**

Highland Park created a “Town Tables” program in 2020 that opened more space for outdoor dining. Part of Third Avenue, a side street connecting to the town’s main street, was closed to vehicles and picnic tables and barricades were added. Additionally, the permit fee for outdoor dining was waived and restaurants and shops were encouraged to make use of sidewalk space. The program was a success and continued in 2021.

Source: [my central jersey](https://www.mycentraljersey.com)

## **Parklets**

Parklets are products of the repurposing and reimagining of curb spaces. They are a way of reclaiming a mostly passive or idle strip of the road and turning it into an active space for people to use by providing additional places to eat, relax, socialize, create, work, and more. Physical barriers are often arranged around one or two parking spots to separate them from vehicular traffic. Then, the sidewalk is extended from the curb into the street. Finally, they are accessorized according to their new use. ([Together North Jersey Parklet Guidebook 2023](#))

**Figure 13. Parklet in Montclair, NJ**



*Image Credit: NorthJersey.com*

### **Montclair Parklets**

Montclair began to experiment with “parklets”, repurposing parking spots as small parks or outdoor dining spaces, in 2018, allowing them from May to October. The goal was to bring foot traffic to the streets with the parklets by making pedestrians feel safer and adding to a sense of place. The parklets were also used to expand outdoor dining during COVID-19, with over a dozen businesses showing interest. Parklets have the added advantage of calming traffic.

Source: [northjersey.com](https://www.northjersey.com)

## Flexible Public Space Use

Figure 14. Picture of Highland Park's Multi-Use Parking Lot



*Image Credit: Main Street Highland Park*

### **Highland Park Multi-Use Parking Lot**

Highland Park has turned a municipal parking lot on its main street, Raritan Avenue, into an event space on certain days of the week; it still functions as a parking lot at other times. The space is most commonly used for the Highland Park Farmers Market and outdoor movie theater, where hundreds of residents bring their own seating to the lot.

Source: [Main Street Highland Park](#)

Figure 15. Picture of New Brunswick's Open Street Ciclovía Event



*Image Credit: New Brunswick Ciclovía*

### **New Brunswick Ciclovía**

New Brunswick has hosted a Ciclovía event, a free event where a stretch of streets is closed to cars and open to pedestrians and bicyclists. The New Brunswick Ciclovía is health-themed, with tables and events promoting health through health checks and activities like fitness classes. Additionally, there is live entertainment, cultural parades, and activities for kids. Community sponsors have supported the program, and it was exceptionally well attended, allowing residents to visit parts of the city they would not otherwise visit.

Source: [Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center](#)

## Public Art

### Public Art Installations

Figure 16. Art Installation in Downtown Haddonfield



*Image Credit: [tripsavvy.com](https://tripsavvy.com)*

#### **Haddonfield Statues**

Downtown Haddonfield boasts public/private outdoor sculptures and statues. One of the most well-known is Haddy, an eight-foot-high statue of a Hadrosaurus Foulkii dinosaur in the center of the shopping district. The statue commemorates the discovery in 1858 of the world's first complete dinosaur skeleton not far from where the statue now stands.

Source: [Downtown NJ](https://downtownnj.com)

## Murals

Figure 17. Mural in Somerville, NJ



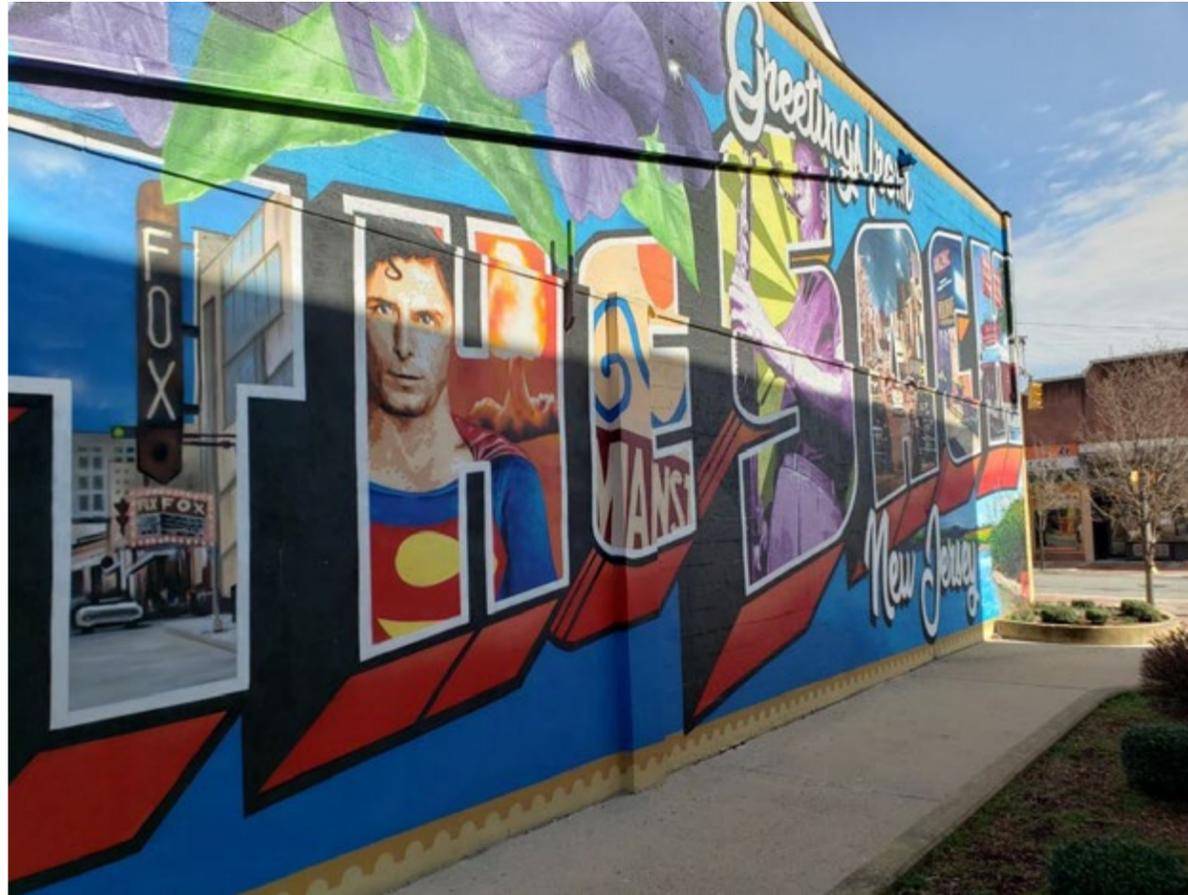
*Image Credit: [Downtown NJ](https://downtownnj.com)*

#### **Somerville Mural Program**

In 2018, Somerville created a public mural program that allowed qualified artists to create murals on brick facades along its main street. A non-profit reviews the applications and oversees the profit. The goal is to create an artistic sense of place and walkability. The murals are part of an effort to make the downtown district competitive with emerging e-commerce competition, like Amazon and Instacart, by creating a place shoppers want to visit.

Source: [Downtown NJ](https://downtownnj.com)

Figure 18. Mural in Hackensack, NJ



*Image Credit: Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center*

#### **Hackensack “The Sack” Mural**

In Hackensack, the Main Street Business Alliance manages a Special Improvement District (SID) that extends along Main Street from Clinton Place to Atlantic Street. Within the SID, the MSBA works to revitalize and promote the Main Street area and support local businesses and property owners. The organization has undertaken a number of arts-related initiatives in recent years, including utility box painting and a mural on a building façade along Demarest West.

Source: Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center

## Creative Crosswalks

Figure 19. Pictures of Painted Crosswalks in New Brunswick and Asbury Park, NJ



*Image Credit: App.com*



*Image Credit: Asbury Park Sun*

#### **New Brunswick & Asbury Park**

To increase pedestrian visibility and improve the aesthetics of public spaces, many towns have turned to creative crosswalks. As part of the opening of the New Brunswick Performing Arts Center (NBPAC), the city painted a crosswalk leading to NBPAC to look like piano keys. The crosswalk enhances the area's aesthetics, helps with wayfinding to NBPAC, and connects the Center to a park on the other side of the street. Asbury Park painted a rainbow-colored, high-traffic crosswalk across from the Empress Hotel in 2018. It signals the city's support for inclusiveness and was initially installed during October LGBTQ History Month. Maplewood, New Jersey, has a similar crosswalk.

Source: [Asbury Park Sun](#)

## Tactical Urbanism

Tactical urbanism refers to “a city, organizational, and/or citizen-led approach to neighborhood building using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions to catalyze long-term change.” (Tactical Urbanist’s Guide)

**Figure 20: Painted Intersection in Red Bank, NJ**



*Image Credit: Voorhees Transportation Center*

### **Red Bank Pedestrian Safety Demonstration Project**

In 2019, Red Bank implemented a pedestrian safety demonstration project at the intersection of James Parker Boulevard and South Bridge Avenue. A mural was created to draw drivers’ attention to pedestrians, and curbs were extended using traffic cones to slow down turning cars. Surveys conducted after the project suggested residents approved of the project and that cars were more compliant with crosswalk crossing regulations.

Source: [North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority \(NJTPA\)](#)

**Figure 21: Painted Curb Extension in Action in Jersey City, NJ**



*Image Credit: Voorhees Transportation Center*

### **Jersey City Painted Curb Extension**

After listening to public feedback, Jersey City worked to improve pedestrian safety and walkability at a number of intersections. The project included painting the areas near the curb to draw attention to pedestrians and the installation of plastic bollards to shorten crosswalks and encourage shorter turns.

Source: [North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority \(NJTPA\)](#)

Figure 22: Photo of Montclair Pop-Up Bike Lane in Action



*Image Credit: Montclair Public Schools*

### **Montclair Pop-Up Bike Lane**

For one day in 2017, Montclair created a pop-up bicycle lane for students and their parents to bike to school. The bike lanes were created using traffic cones and barriers and included a police escort. Over four different schools in Montclair have had similar lanes. At the school, students were given biking accessories like clip-on reflectors and both cyclists and motorists received road safety information.

Source: Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center

## Wayfinding

Wayfinding design elements are aspects of the physical environment designed to make it easier for people to find their way. ([Canadian Museum for Human Rights](#)) Typically, they take the form of signage and can be integrated with other activation strategies to foster a sense of community pride.

Figure 23: Picture of Wayfinding Signage in Highland Park



*Image Credit: Borough of Highland Park*

### **Wayfinding Signage for Community Identity**

Several New Jersey municipalities provide wayfinding to help residents and visitors navigate the street network and highlight destinations. Wayfinding signage often includes prominent gateway signs that alert pedestrians or motorists when they are entering a town or district. Wayfinding signs give a community a sense of place and enhance aesthetic appeal.

Source: Together North Jersey

## Business-Oriented Community Events

Figure 24: Metuchen Small Business Saturday Tabling



*Image Credit: Downtown Metuchen*

### **Metuchen Downtown Events**

Metuchen hosts numerous business-oriented community events yearly to encourage patronage at main street businesses. One recurring event is Small Business Saturday, where companies create specials for the day and entertainment is provided in the town plaza. Other examples include Haunted Downtown, during which businesses are invited to provide activities on the sidewalk and in-store, a Scavenger Hunt that takes people through different businesses, and Restaurant Week events, where restaurants offer specials and residents are encouraged to go downtown to dine.

Source: [njtod.org](http://njtod.org)

Figure 25: Participants at the Rahway Soup Stroll



*Image Credit: John Jones, NJ Advance Media*

### **Rahway Soup Stroll**

Rahway has organized a number of business-oriented community events since the beginning of the pandemic. One of the more unique examples is the Soup Stroll: Participating restaurants offered free 4-ounce samples of a featured soup. Community members and visitors stroll through the downtown, enjoy their soup, and take selfies at the restaurants to enter in a photo contest. The event brings foot traffic downtown and introduces people to restaurants they may not be familiar with. The town also hosted a holiday bazaar with activities for children and crafts from local merchants. Rahway also hosts small business Saturdays that include specials, giveaways, and raffle competitions.

Source: [TapintoRahway](http://TapintoRahway)

Figure 26: Participants at Somerville’s “Lady’s Night Out”



Image Credit: NJ Next

**Somerville Promotional Events**

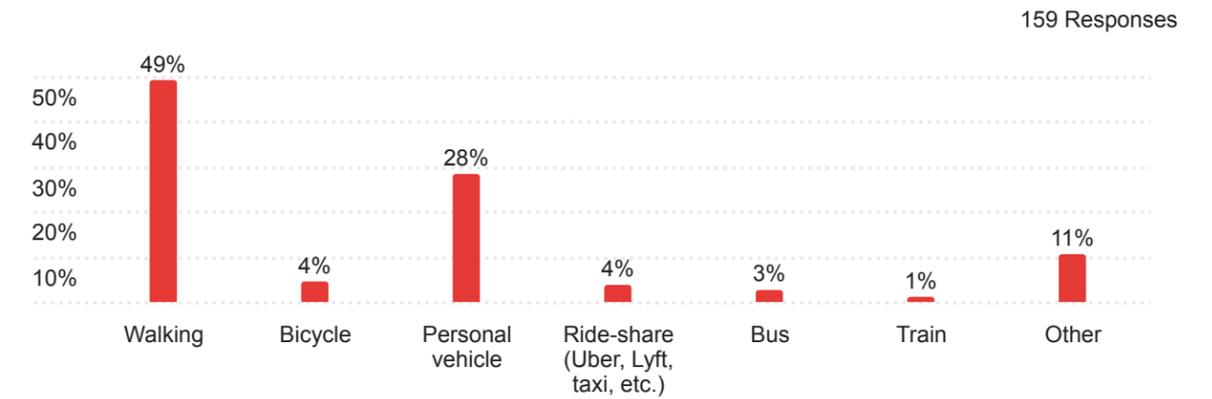
Somerville also hosts several community events combined with business promotions, including seasonal events and small-business Saturdays. Examples include town pub crawls where people can purchase wristbands for special deals, Lady’s Night Out with unique shopping and dining deals, raffles, events like palm reading and yoga, and Spooktacular events with trick-or-treating at businesses and live music.

Source: [NJ Next](#)

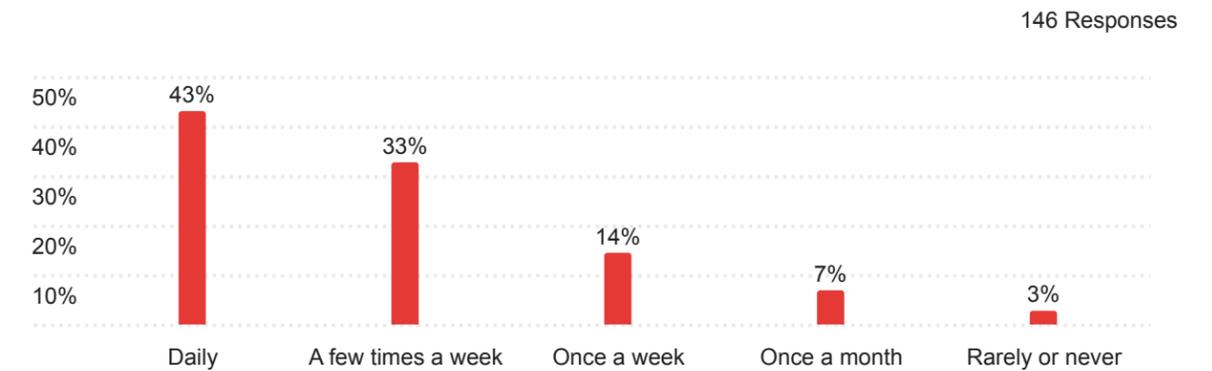
Appendix B: Community Survey Results

1

Q10 - What is your primary mode of transportation when traveling between the French Street Corridor and downtown New Brunswick? - Selected Choice

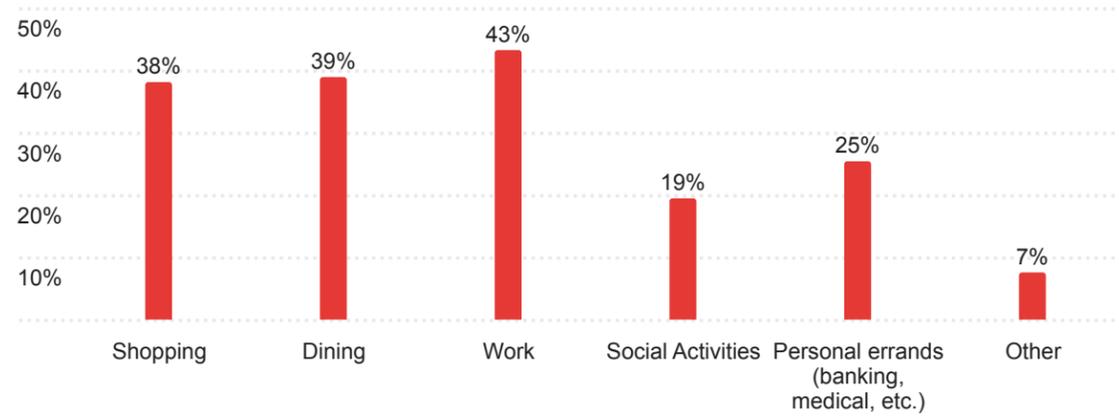


How often do you visit downtown New Brunswick?



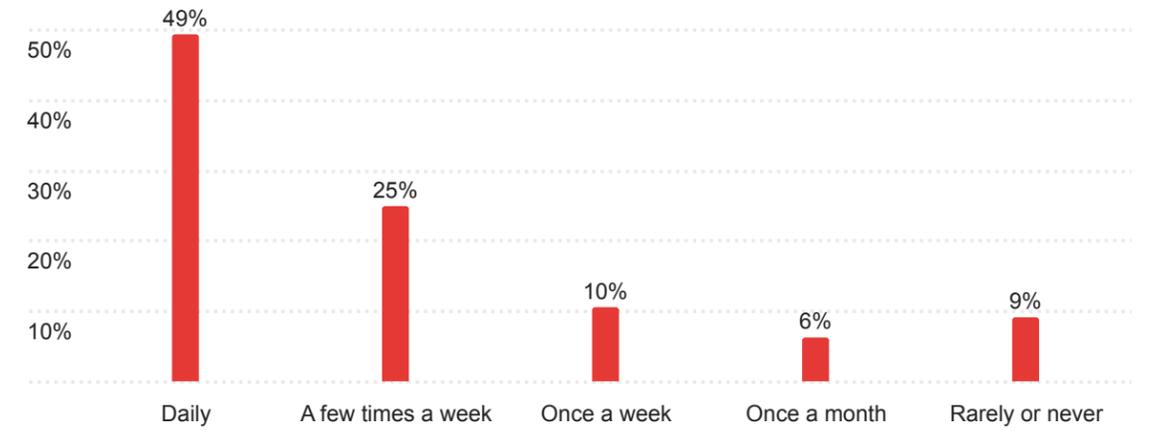
### Why do you visit downtown New Brunswick? (Check all that apply)

134 Responses



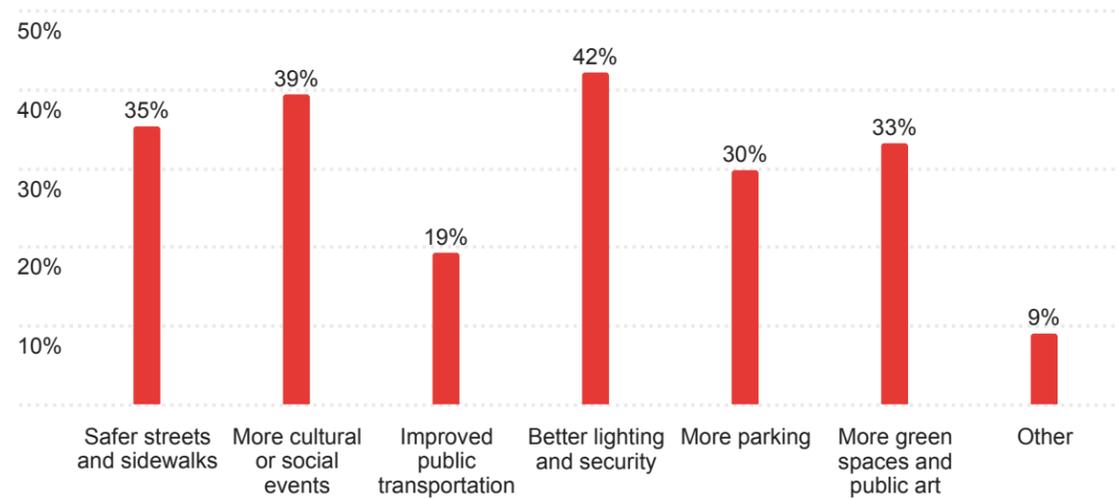
### How often do you visit the French Street Corridor?

144 Responses



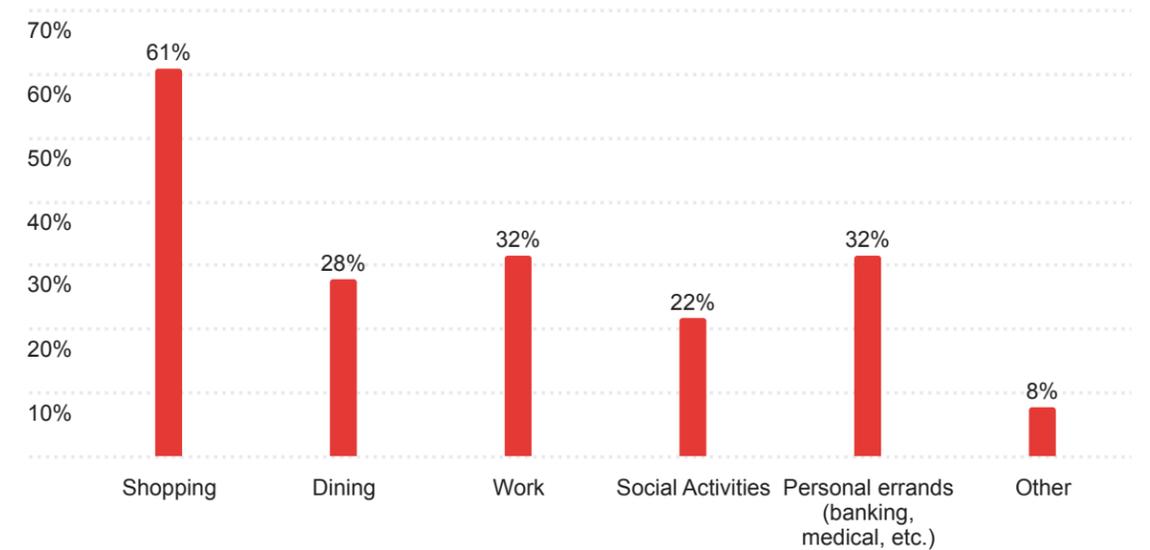
### What would encourage you to visit downtown more often? (Check all that apply)

145 Responses



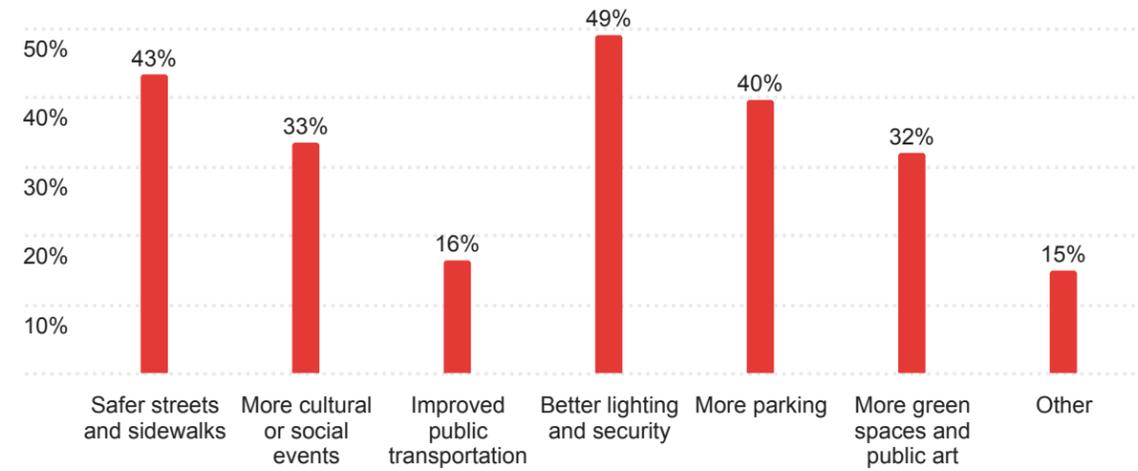
### Why do you visit the French Street Corridor? (Check all that apply)

130 Responses



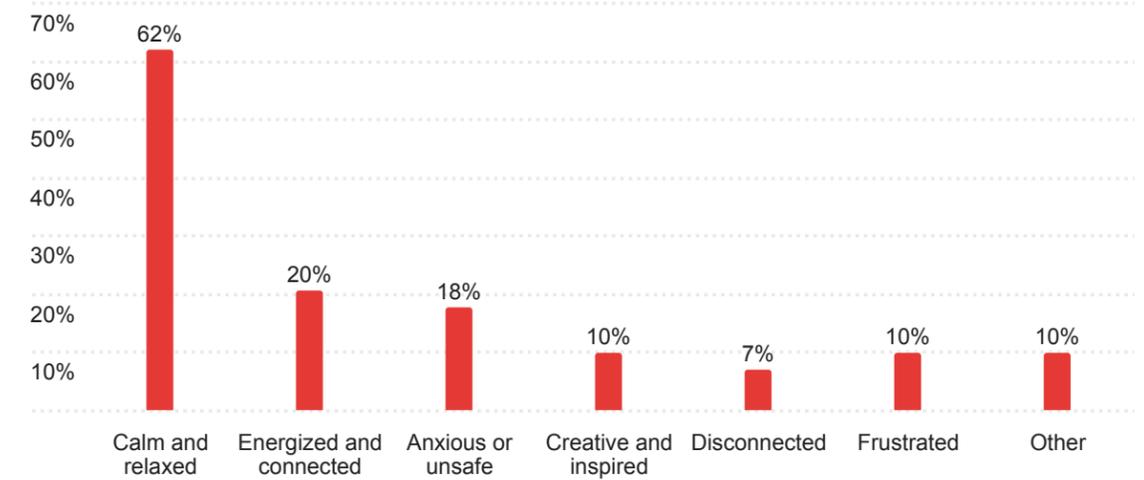
What would encourage you to visit the French Street Corridor more often? (Check all that apply)

141 Responses



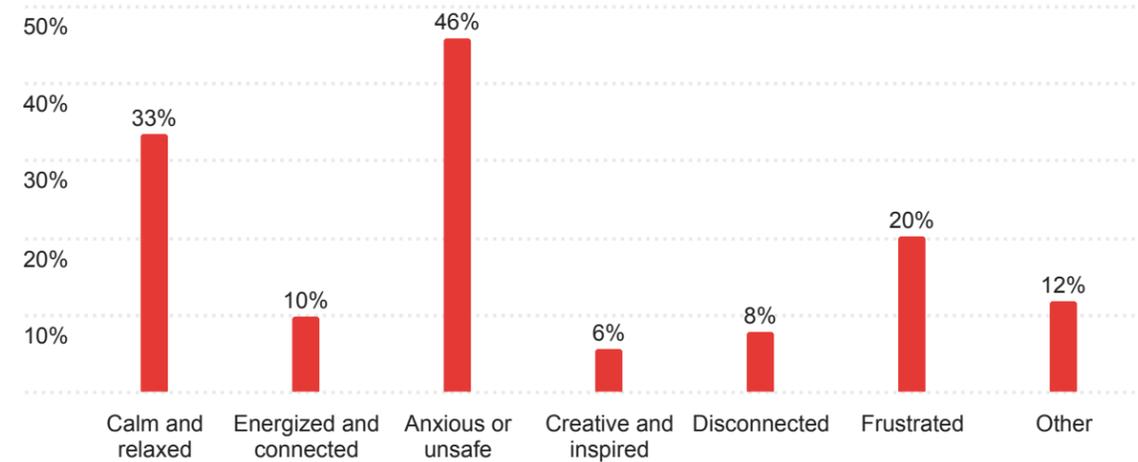
When you're out and about in downtown New Brunswick, how do you feel? (Choose up to 3)

142 Responses



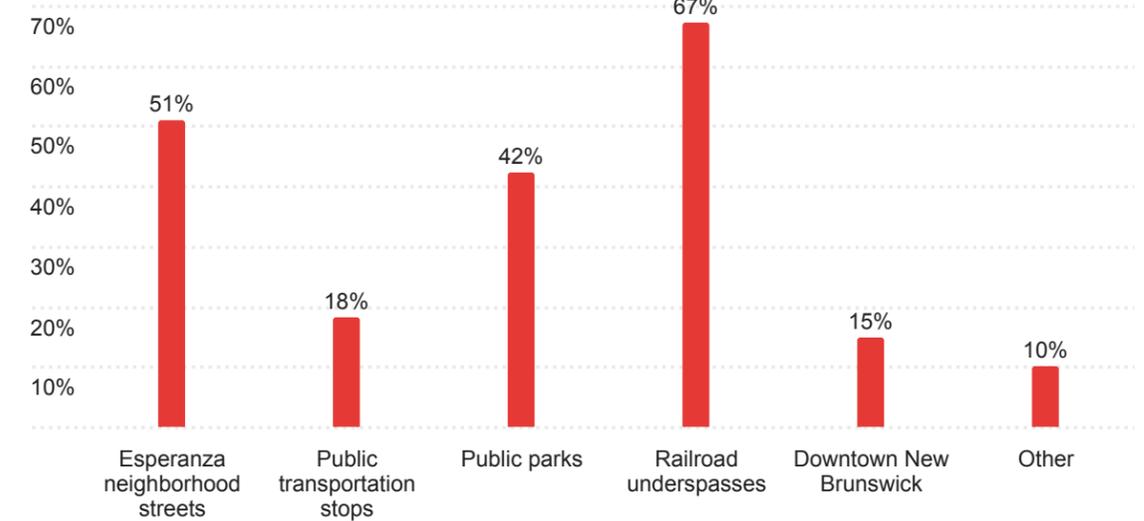
When you're out and about on the French Street Corridor, how do you feel? (Choose up to 3)

144 Responses



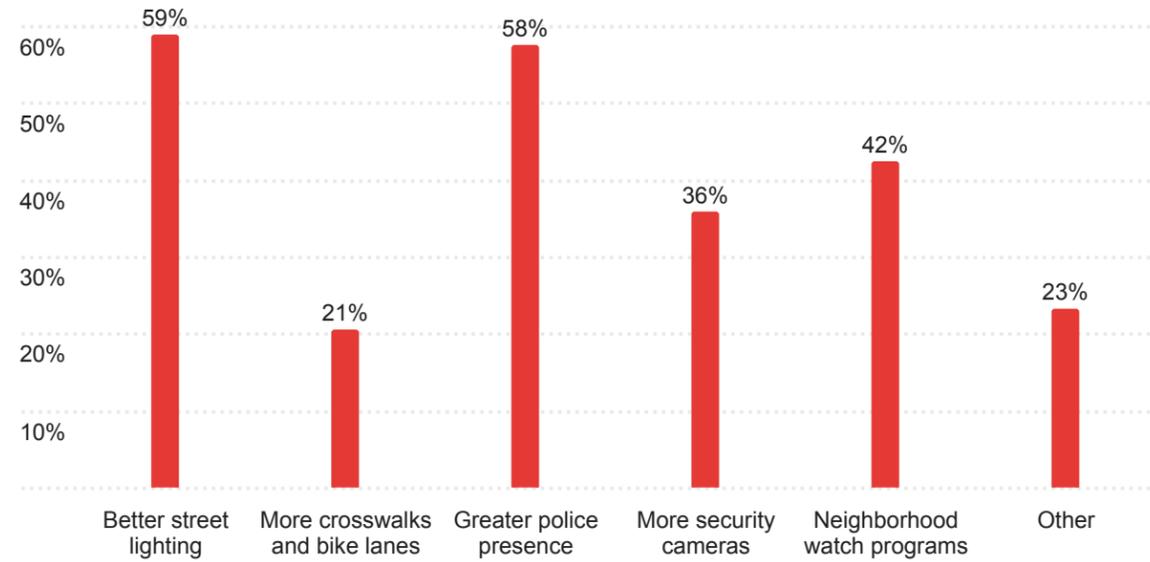
Do you have safety concerns in the following areas? (Select all that apply)

149 Responses



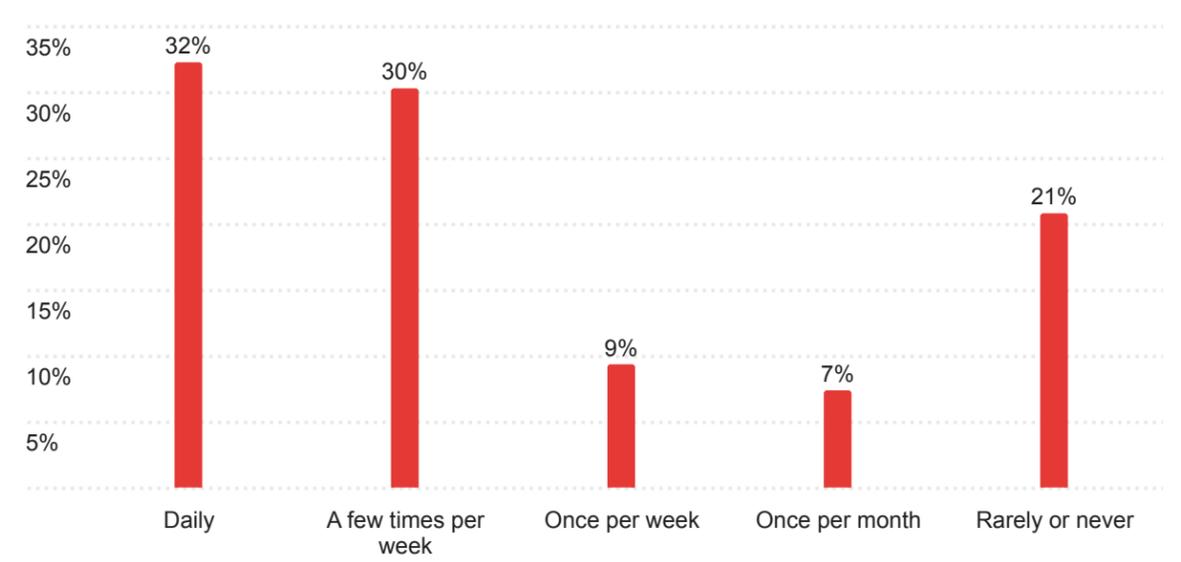
What safety improvements would make you feel more comfortable in the areas you selected above? (choose up to 3)

151 Responses



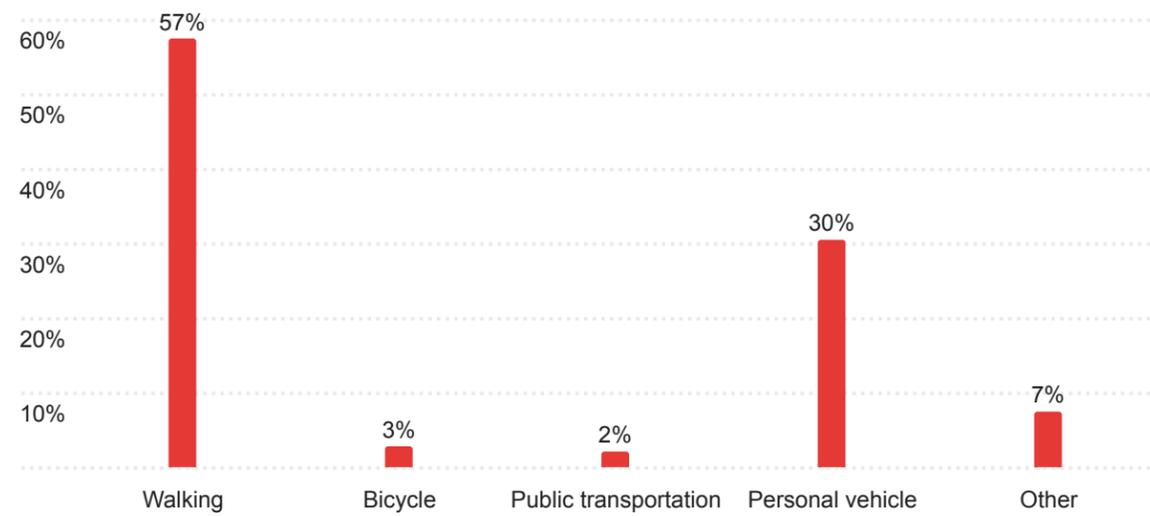
How often do you walk through the railroad underpasses connecting downtown New Brunswick and Esperanza?

149 Responses



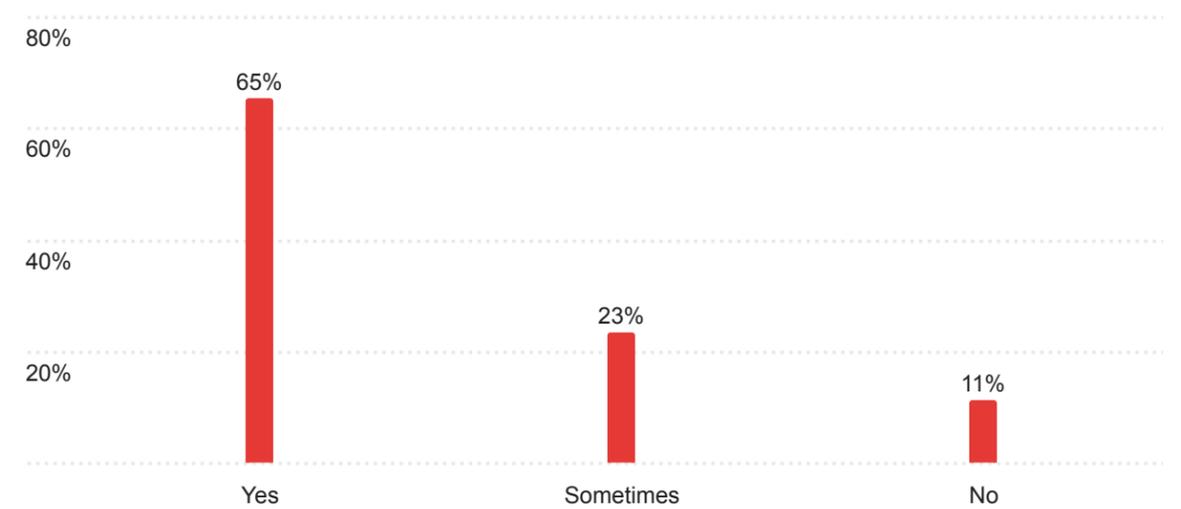
How do you most often travel through the railroad underpasses between downtown New Brunswick and Esperanza?

148 Responses

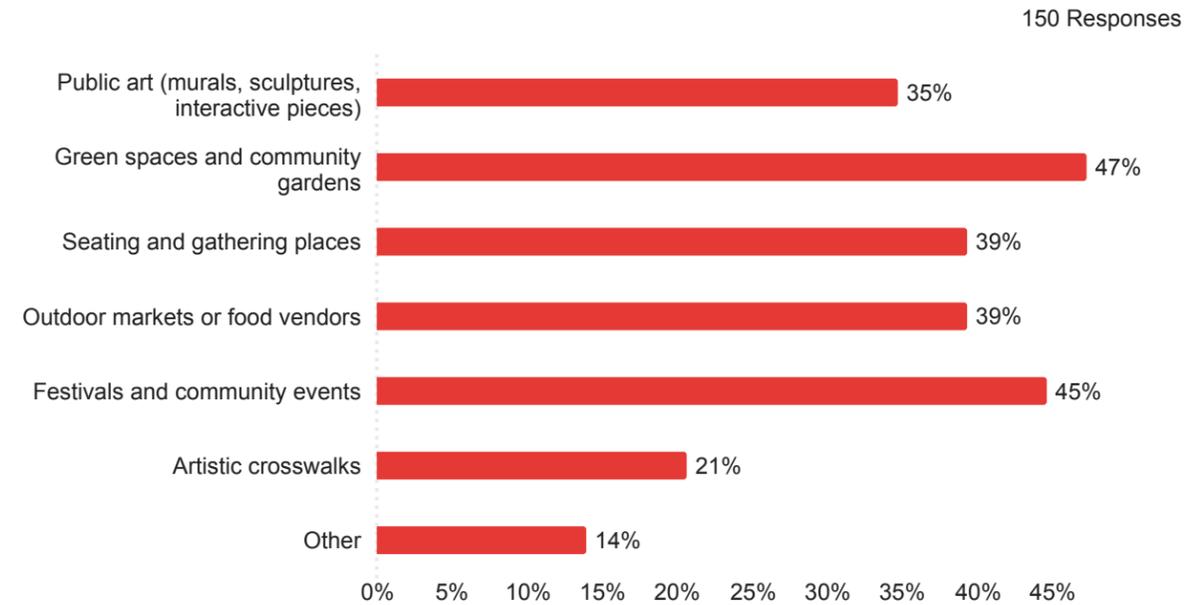


Do you actively avoid using underpasses?

150 Responses



Which of the following makes a place feel inviting and vibrant? (choose your top 3)



# Linking People and Places

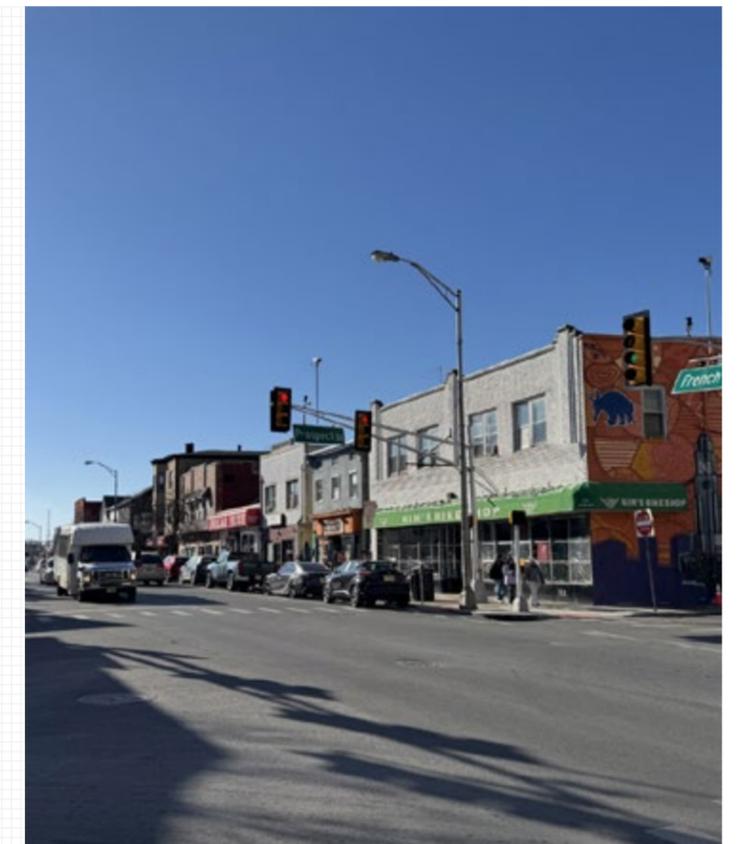
Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor

Stakeholder Meeting  
May 21, 2025



## Overview

- Project Background
- Progress So Far
- Preliminary Findings
- Discussion
- Next Steps



## Project Background

- Vibrant Places Program
- Project Partners
  - North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA)
  - Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University (VTC)
  - coLAB Arts
  - New Brunswick Tomorrow



**Project goal:** Revitalize key gateways and strengthen connections between Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor / Esperanza Neighborhood

## Project Scope

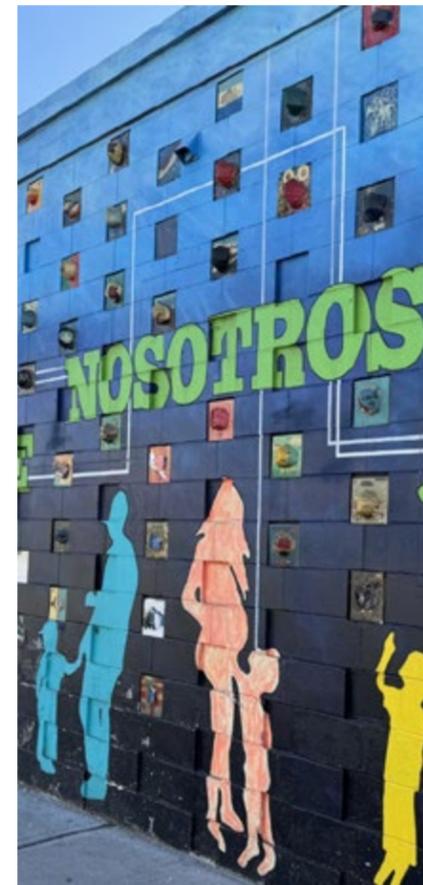
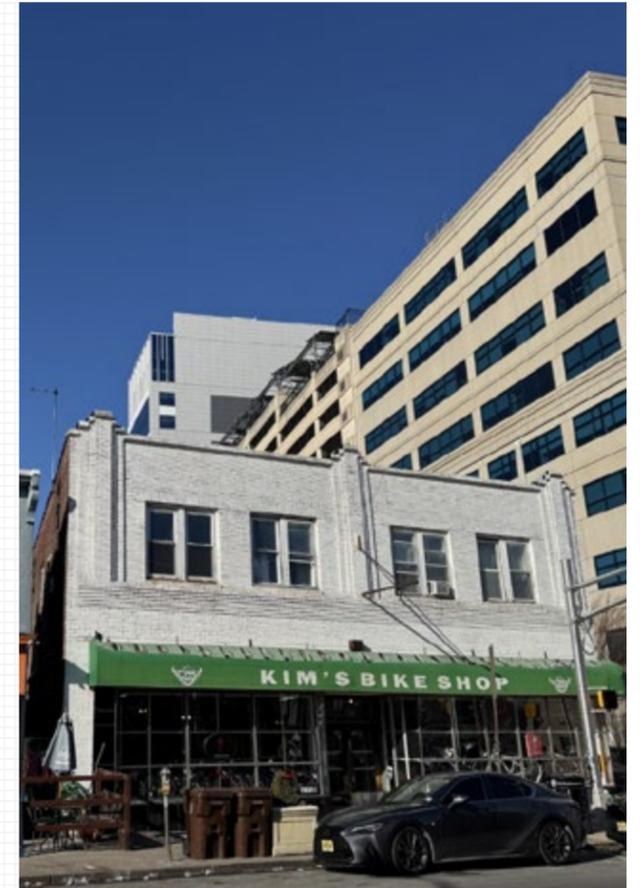
Context Research

Public Engagement

Toolkit Development

## Context Research

- Plans we looked at:
  - New Brunswick Master Plan (2022)
  - Esperanza Neighborhood Plan (2019)
  - New Brunswick Complete Streets Policy (2012)
  - Municipal Public Access Plan (2019)
  - Parks Action Plan (2018)
- Placemaking projects in other communities

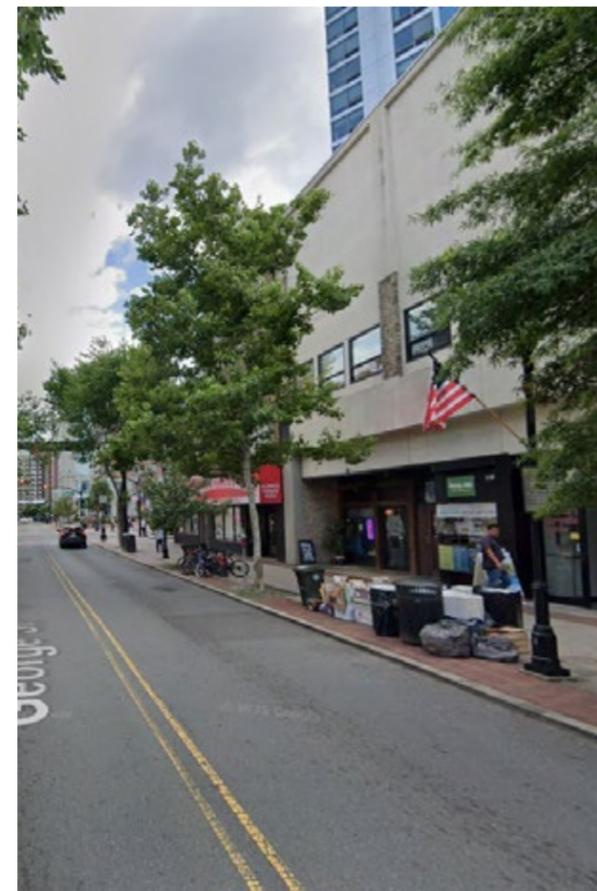
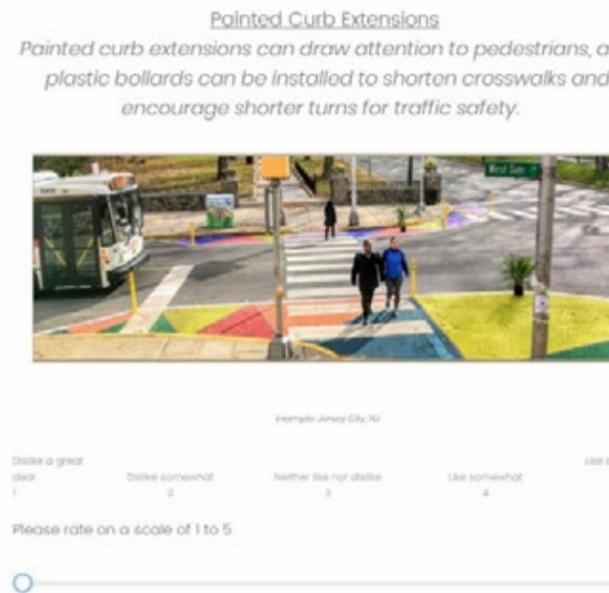


## Context Research

- Connections through Complete Streets and Active Transportation
- Activating Parks and Open Space through Recreation
- Promoting Community Identity through Wayfinding and the Arts
- Creating Neighborhood Gateways
- Incorporating Sustainability
- Strategic Placemaking as a Driver of Economic Development

# Survey

- March 18 – April 27, 2025
- Questions about safety, mobility, and public space improvements
- **173 responses** received
  - 29% English and 71% Spanish
- Printed and digital copies



## Reasons for visiting

- Most common reason people visit **Downtown** is for work (43%) and dining (39%)
- Most common reason people visit the **French Street Corridor** is for shopping (61%)
- Other reasons:
  - Downtown- schools, work, services like laundromats and church
  - French Street Corridor- schools, residency, social ties

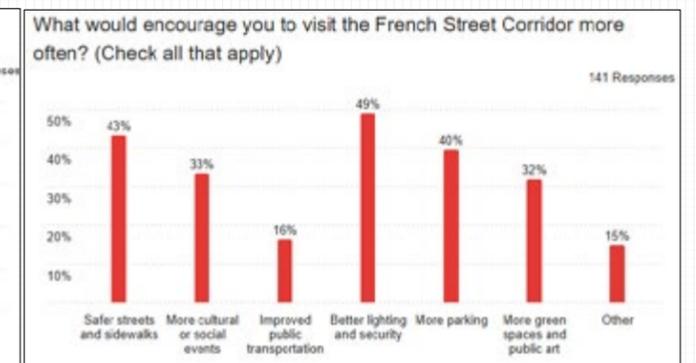
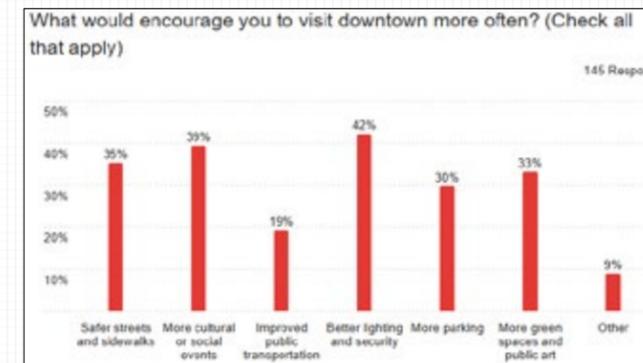
# Preliminary Survey Findings

## General travel patterns

- 49% walk when traveling **between Downtown and French Street**
  - 28% drive between the two areas
- 76% visit **Downtown** daily or a few times a week
- 74% visit **the French Street Corridor** daily or a few times a week



## What would encourage people to visit

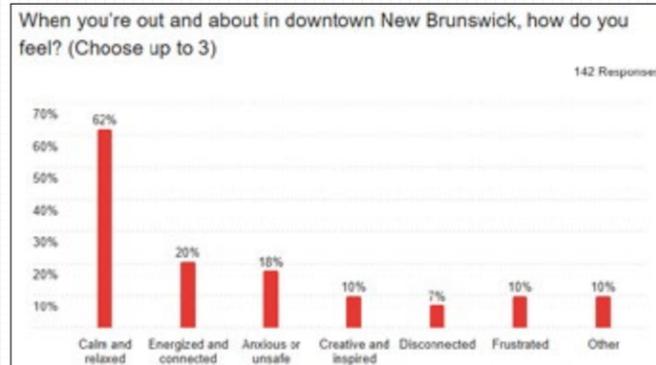


### Other:

**Downtown:** more retail and food options, employment, affordability, mental health services, and addressing homelessness

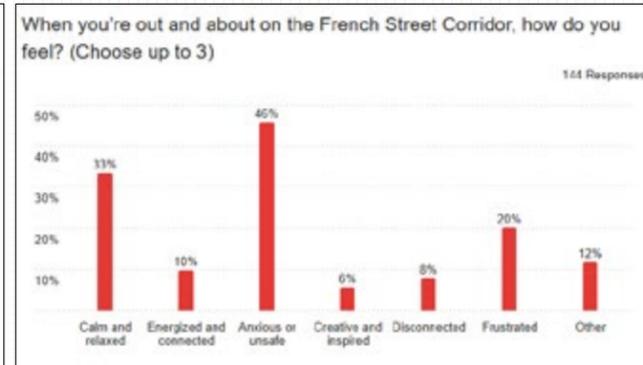
**French Street:** improved cleanliness, reduced public intoxication and alcohol availability, more food and drink options, bike and pedestrian safety

## Neighborhood perceptions



### Why:

**Downtown:** People feel positive about police presence, walkability, student presence, and business offerings. Concerns with a lack of amenities, substance use and unhoused populations.



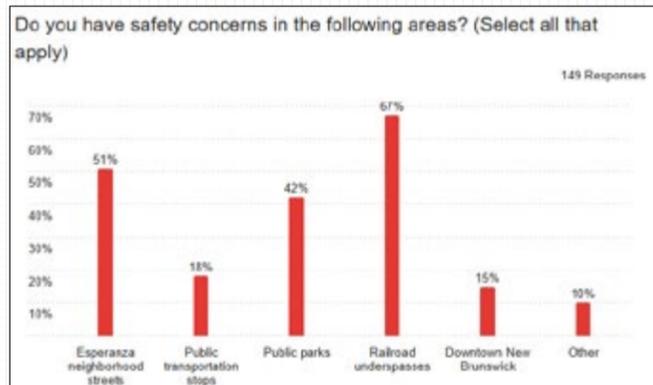
**French St:** Concerns with crime, traffic conditions, homelessness, and public substance use. People feel safer during the day with police presence or with company.

## Perceptions and use of underpasses



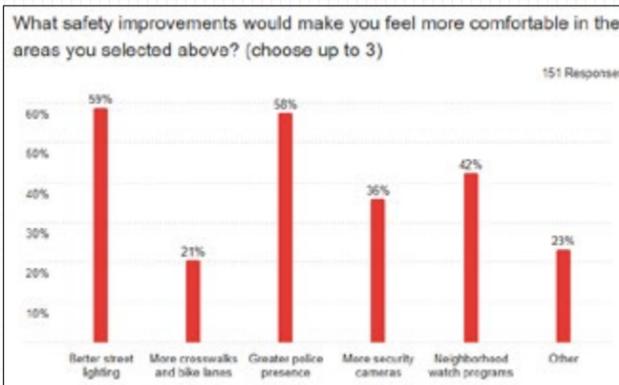
- **57% of respondents walk through underpasses** between Downtown New Brunswick and the French Street Corridor
  - 30% drive through underpasses
- **32% of respondents walk through the underpasses daily**
  - 30% walk a few times a week

## Perceptions on safety



### Why:

- The underpasses, parks, and certain streets (especially Townsend St., French St., Unity, and Joyce Kilmer Park) are widely perceived as unsafe.
- Concerns are strongly tied to homelessness, drug use, lack of lighting, crime, and insufficient police presence.
- Children's safety is a recurring concern, especially near schools and public walkways.

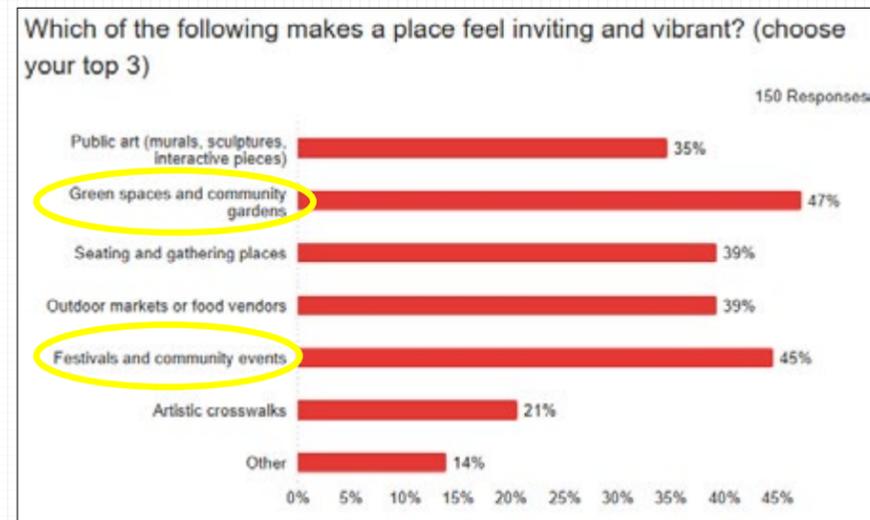


## Underpasses (cont.)

- **88% of respondents avoid underpasses at least some of the time**
- **Common reasons for avoiding underpasses:**
  - Concern for safety
  - Presence of unhoused or intoxicated individuals
  - Poor lighting, fear of crime (e.g., muggings)
  - Unsanitary conditions
  - Concerns for women and families



## Perceptions on placemaking



## Perceptions on Public Art

Respondents would like to see...

- **More murals**
  - With positive and motivational themes (ex. youth, family, unity, respect, faith, anti-drug, anti-discrimination, anti-violence)
  - Nature and vibrant colors
- **Flags and multicultural representation**
- **Other Features:** Benches, painted crosswalks, sculptures, more green spaces, seasonal decorations (ex. Christmas lights)
- **Community participation and local artists**
  - Responses called for residents (especially youth and students) to be involved in creating the artwork



Please rate the following placemaking ideas from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning you strongly dislike the idea and 5 meaning you like it a lot.



Small Business Oriented Community Events  
4.42



Wayfinding Signage and Landscaped Greenery  
4.37



Underpass Installations  
4.54



Painted Curb Extensions  
4.62

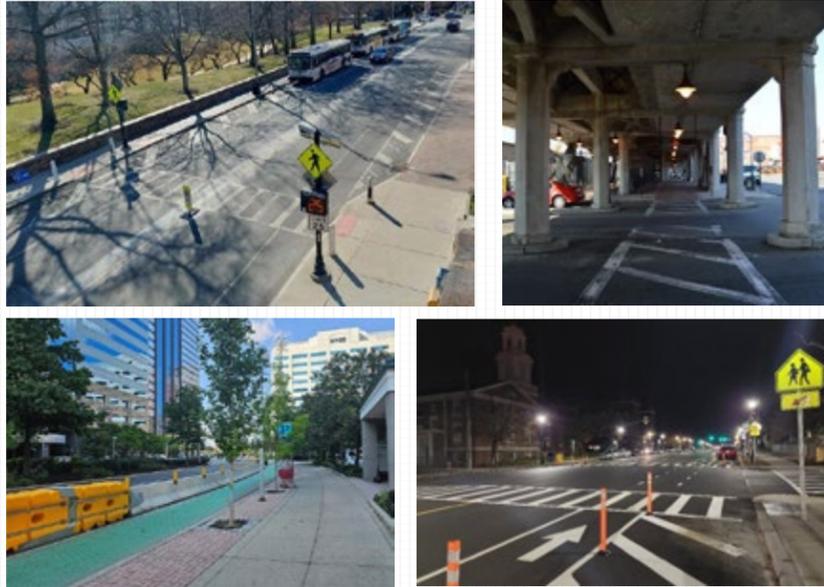
## Survey Takeaways

- Most respondents **walk** between downtown and the French Street corridor.
- The majority visit **both areas daily or frequently**.
- Downtown draws residents for **work and dining**; French Street is preferred for **shopping**.
- **Improved lighting, security, and more events** would encourage downtown visits.
- **Safer streets, lighting, and sidewalks** would increase visits to French Street.
- Downtown is associated with **calm, relaxed, and energized feelings**.
- French Street elicits **mixed feelings: mainly unsafe or frustrated, but also some hope**.
- Respondents would like to see **safety and infrastructure prioritized. Especially lighting, traffic calming, and maintenance**.
- **Public safety concerns** like substance use, homelessness, and crime need attention.
- There is **strong support for placemaking**: more murals, interactive art, events, and green space are desired.

## Preliminary Recommendations

### Safety and security

- Pedestrian-scale lighting, especially around underpasses
- High-visibility crosswalks
- Bike lanes



## Preliminary Recommendations

### Activation

- Farmers markets
- Open streets events
- Festivals and neighborhood celebrations
- Skate parks or other opportunities for recreation



## Preliminary Recommendations

### Visual identity and comfort

- Landscaping and green infrastructure
- Benches and seating
- Neighborhood-focused art
- Billboards highlighting local businesses
- Wayfinding



## Thank you!

- Follow for updates: <https://linktr.ee/ConnectingCommunitiesNB>



# Discussion: Survey Findings

### What are your thoughts on our survey findings?

Basic needs need to be met before we can think about beautification—safety should be addressed

Art is both beautification and functional

Survey respondents—would be great to get more detailed demographic information

Community gatherings and a desire for more green spaces was in the top percentages, this feels connected to a desire to feel safe and connected with each other

not surprised with the findings. Safety has always been a major concern for this area.

### What factors influence how the two neighborhoods interact? Can you share examples.

There are bike lanes in the downtown area  
Bike lane on Suydam St

Underpass supports narrow roadway—bike lanes disappear and reappear under underpasses

Perception is a huge influence on how the two neighborhoods interact  
Unhoused communities  
Most college students don't even know about French St, many do not come downtown either

Johnson & Johnson—approx. 2 years ago, looking for grant to improve lighting at George St underpass & possibly Easton Ave underpass  
Identified the need to work with NJ TRANSIT and Antrak—partners  
RWJ may also be a partner  
Opportunities now with renovation of NJ train station—conversation with someone at city level.

Necessity is a factor  
French St residents feeling that there isn't much affordability downtown, but also feeling the need to travel downtown for errands that can't be completed in French St

Safety is a big factor  
Downtown—desire for more diverse food/drink options (encourage more visibility and celebration for the existing food/drink options on French St.)

NJ City Center hires police foot patrol in Esperanza and Downtown  
Community Police Patrol Unit—French St business are happy to see this has been implemented  
Opportunity to see if perceptions have improved since patrols were implemented

# Discussion: Preliminary Recommendations

### Do you have opinions on the preliminary recommendations we covered?

Ways to ease the waiting situation  
Shuttle services to support active transportation  
Accessibility concerns—who is not able to make that walk?  
Who isn't able to make the trip due to accessibility concerns?  
RIDE Modereck County transit services

Green spaces and community gardens were positively received on survey—good initial action that is fairly easy to implement

Community building through open space—bridging connections between different neighborhoods  
Reach out to orgs to help with creating these spaces like with trash cleanup  
activating/amplifying existing cultural opportunities versus only creating new ones

Involvement of unhoused communities  
Matching up multiple needs with single idea or program

### Do you have suggestions for improvements that were not listed?

# Discussion: Survey Findings

### What do you think encourages people to travel between each neighborhood?

### Are there other local leaders, artists, or community organizations that could help bridge that divide?

RWJ hospital—major employer  
NAACP  
Fire department

Artists—diversity of mediums  
Video artists—screenings in underpasses  
Art Pride New Jersey has a lot of connections with artists and community orgs  
Arts educators could be involved in youth-oriented programming  
Senior citizens

Need a good representation of local leaders who have been in these communities for a long time

Someone from school superintendent's office—a community outreach staff member?

Community elders, not necessarily someone tied to a specific professional role  
Grassroots connections

Reach out to local churches  
Groups that work with unhoused individuals  
Interfaith Rotating Men's Shelter  
Salvation Army

# Discussion: Survey Findings

### What are your thoughts on our survey findings?

Happy to see the business. Bridge underpass (Townsend Street) a big challenge to community. Liquor store & Bar frequency in the French St Corridor

Concerns about benches being used to sleep

Letting community know about mobile police presence

challenging to get from one area to another

French St & Bayard street School has been there a while nothing has happened

Would like to see more cohesiveness between both downtown areas

### What factors influence how the two neighborhoods interact? Can you share examples.

programming opportunities widely shared across New Brunswick, people are encouraged to go - promoting has a lot to do with it and continuing that.

Ciclovía connected both communities

extant/persistent reputation of lack of safety (even if not true in all cases)





