



# CENTRAL DISTRICT **COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION REPORT**

Produced By

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# INTRODUCTION



In 2024, Central Area Collaborative released a Request For Proposal (RFP) to initiate the 2025-2027 Central Area Commercial Revitalization Plan.

The Central Area Collaborative (CAC) is a non-profit organization with a stated mission of promoting economic empowerment, equity, and unity in Seattle's Central Area neighborhood.

Through an open bidding process, AxSM Art LLC was selected. It was identified early on that in order to have the most impactful plan, it would need to be informed by a **strong community voice**. This became the catalyst for community engagement and creation of the Central District Community Revitalization Report.

The goal of this report is to contribute to the conversation around the direction of Economic Development, Cultural Revitalization, and Community Engagement in the Central District. Our hope is that agencies and individuals will be able to use these findings as a tool to organize and inform their own initiatives.

The narrative and recommendations that lie within this report reflect a deeply engaged process. This report is meant to be a tool to advocate and serve in the most responsive and impactful way.

This report lays out the methodology, findings, and recommendations with a central focus on highlighting community-driven solutions.

# INTENTION





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# OVERVIEW

## ***Goals of this report:***

- 1.To understand the needs, challenges, and desires of residents of the Central District, a community that is one of the most rapidly changing neighborhoods in one of the most rapidly growing cities in the US.
- 2.To strengthen the relationships and care for the ecosystem of businesses and residents in the Central Area.

This report will inform the creation of the Commercial Revitalization Plan, which will be used as a framework for enhancing commercial vitality, leadership development, and cultural legacy preservation by mobilizing community-driven strategies and tools that support wealth creation for historical, present, and future residents of the Central District.

## **The Vision:**

**The Central Area as a thriving economic and culturally vibrant community.**



# Operating Values

The Operating Values for the research in this report was created within the paradigm of Relational Accountability\*, a term coined by indigenous author and researcher Shawn Wilson.

Relational Accountability describes the framework from which responsible research is developed and establishes that researchers are accountable to the relationships with their participants. It also acknowledges the value of lived experience and honors the sharing of it in research.

The following values guided us in forming our research methodology:

- Culturally **comprehensive and creative** engagement
- Provide a **fully informed** feedback process
- **Value all participants** time, efforts, and experience
- Result in a **feasible and actionable** plan

*\*Relational Accountability -*  
*Relational accountability refers to the responsibility that arises from our interconnectedness with others, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and understanding in relationships. It involves being accountable not just for one's actions, but also for how those actions affect others within a community or relationship.*



# DESIRED OUTCOMES



## PROJECTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

*Creation of projects, programs, and partnerships that meet the needs of the community and prevent displacement.*

## AWARNESS AND ADVOCACY

*Drive awareness and interest of the needs of Central District businesses, residents, and community. Serve as a tool for advocacy, planning, and organizing.*

## THRIVING CENTRAL DISTRICT

*Cultivate a vibrant and thriving cultural and business district and preservation of the area's rich heritage.*

The desired outcome of the creation and distribution of this report is to serve as a tool for organizing, advocacy, and action in the Central District and showcase an example of *by, for and with* community engagement. We hope this report will be used as a tool and reference point for community development.

# Method

## Parameters

*Current and recently displaced\* Central District Businesses, Residents, and Organizations*

**Participant outreach** was done through word of mouth, social media, posters and fliers, email, and interpersonal requests to share. A total of **55 individuals** participated across several forums: Virtual and in-person one-on-one **conversations** (18 respondents), virtual and in-person **Circle talks** (11 respondents), written or video **recorded answers** (1 respondent), and a response **online form** (25 respondents).

Breakdown of respondents is as follows:

**Table 1.** Demographics of participants.

| Role                      | Total<br>(N = 55) | Current Residents<br>(N = 46) | Displaced<br>(N = 9) |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Business Owners/Operators | 27                | 24                            | 3                    |
| Organizational Leaders    | 9                 | 9                             | 0                    |
| Residents                 | 19                | 13                            | 6                    |

**Interview questions** were created working with Jacqueline Robinette of Uncommon Bridges. We chose the following simple, open format questions to assess neighborhood assets, barriers, and desires.

1. Why are you in the Central District?
2. What are some challenges in the Central District and/or what is working well?
3. What does a thriving Central District look like?

**Accuracy and Accountability** was ensured through each participant having the ability to audit and add to their transcripts via live document links and a one week report feedback period offered to all participants.

*\*experienced displacement within the last 7 years*

# KEY FINDINGS: A COMMUNITY OF OPPORTUNITY

## *“Why are you in the Central District?”*

Participants discussed their reasons for being in the Central District. Responses fell into in three main themes that encompassed new opportunities and ties to the area.

These were also seen as valuable assets to be leveraged to meet their needs.

### **ROOTED IN THE CD**

#### *HISTORICAL RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES*

Across multiple generations of residents, **Community** and **Culture** were named as attracting attributes. For many in particular, the concentration of Black

- residents or the CD as a Black historical site was named as an opportunity for creatives and entrepreneurs to find belonging and thrive. Historical family ties were also often indicated as a key reason for residing in the CD.

### **A PLACE TO GROW**

#### *A PLACE OF OPPORTUNITY*

Location and development resources such as affordable

- business spaces, community support, and accessible location were seen as fertile ground for economic development of small businesses across multiple waves of settlers to the area.

### **A SENSE OF BELONGING**

#### *THE CULTURE AND COMMUNITY*

Established relationships, a strong sense of belonging and

- history of resilience were seen as a draw to the area as well as an opportunity to further improve the cohesiveness, morale, and safety of the Central District.



# KEY FINDINGS:

## GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF PLACE

Notably, there appeared to be four waves of residents in the CD. The experiences of these groups were reflected in their perception of challenges and level of thriving.

**1940 - 1970: The Second Great Migration.** The Black population increased by 780%\* with Black people making up 80% of the Central District, many from Louisiana and Texas for defense jobs.<sup>1</sup>

**1968:** The first Black-owned bank in Seattle, Liberty Bank, opened its doors on May 31. The bank's mission was to support the Central District community, helping the neighborhood's residents of color to access capital to purchase homes and start businesses.<sup>2</sup>

**1970:** Black homeownership in King County is 50%, majorly restricted to the CD through redlining practices.

### Multigenerational Families 30+ years

Multigenerational respondents expressed a sense of cultural loss in the area and discussed the importance of the preservation of Black Culture.

1970-2000

**2000 - 2019:** Major tech companies including Google (2006), Amazon (2011), and Expedia (2019) opened headquarters and major campuses in the Seattle city core.

**2017:** Seattle's City Council approved an upzone plan in the Central District to encourage development of more affordable housing, including implementation of Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) program for 7-10% of new units.<sup>6</sup>

**2018:** The Central Area Design Guidelines Coalition is formed and The *Central Area Neighborhood Design Guidelines* are adopted in an effort to mitigate impacts of development.<sup>7,8</sup>

### New Residents <5 years

Newer residents indicated affordable and/or accessible housing is what brought them to the area

2020 - 2025

### Legacy Families 60+ years

Many Legacy families respondents are actively engaged or running organizations dedicated to the preservation of Black Space and Culture or working in support of Black businesses and community.

1940-1970

**1974:** The Federal Equal Credit Opportunity Act imposes heavy sanctions for discriminatory practices.<sup>3</sup>

**July 1975:** The Central Seattle Community Council Federation published a report, "Redlining and Disinvestment in Central Seattle: How the Banks are Destroying our Neighborhoods."<sup>4</sup>

**1980 - 2000:** Migration flowing to Washington accelerated and changed. California was the leading contributor, followed by Oregon and Mexico. Washington also attracted diverse populations; most notably from East Africa, South East Asia, Pacific Islands, and Central and South America.<sup>5</sup>

### First Generation Residents 10+ years

One First Generation resident indicated internal conflict about their role in gentrification of the Central District

2000 - 2015

**2021:** Black Legacy Home Owners Association is formed to help Black homeowners "stay in our homes and stabilize ourselves" and "turn back the tide of gentrification".

**2021-22:** The median home in King County is valued at more than 35x what it was in 1970. Black homeownership in King County has dropped to 28%, with Black and Latino median home values at an average of \$200K less than White and Asian median home values.<sup>9</sup>

# KEY FINDINGS: A TALE OF TWO CDS

**Housing affordability** emerged as both a challenge and opportunity, reflecting starkly divergent experiences within this neighborhood. For many Legacy and Multigenerational residents, affordability has steadily declined. Overcrossing this decline is an increased perception of affordability by newer residents who have arrived within the past two decades.

Now, many long-term residents and their families are finding they are not able to access the wealth-generating equity created by the rapid rise in property values in the Central District. The generational wealth building activity of property ownership is disrupted by displacement. Several respondents discussed the challenges in being able to hold onto multiple family properties in the area, including rising property tax burdens, lack of knowledge around estate planning, and need for family and legal mitigation.

Historically, the Central District is a neighborhood in which deep racial lines were drawn using federal, state, and city mandates to exclude Black people from accessing credit. In spite of this, legacy families have demonstrated incredible resourcefulness to still be able to purchase and retain properties and build communities in what was meant to be a cast off place. The resilience of those who have held onto their homes in spite of mounting challenges and powerful developers deserves a chance to thrive in this community. Yet ongoing housing affordability pressures threaten to undermine this.

**Displacement prevention** efforts are needed in the Central District, and that can be more effective when done through partnerships. There are existing organizations currently working to solve this problem. For example, Black Legacy Homeowners Association provides resources, education, and support to homeowners to achieve and sustain homeownership. Uplift Investment Group is another organization that partners with homeowners to help keep their homes and build generational wealth through the support of impact investment groups.

**A diverse neighborhood is a resilient neighborhood.**

# KEY FINDINGS: COMMUNITY ASSETS

## ***“What is working well in the Central District?”***

Participants identified neighborhood assets that were working to their advantage or had the potential to if stewarded and strategized properly.

### **Location**

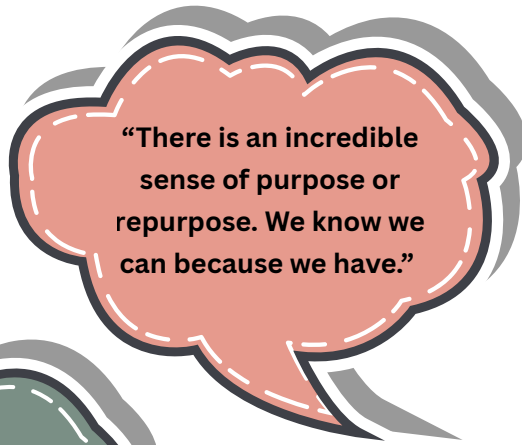
- Access, proximity, walkability, visibility



“I love all the things to do, and I like that it’s in the city but not main downtown.”

### **Community and Culture**

- Relationships, Black community, art community
- Sense of belonging, clean up projects, history of resilience



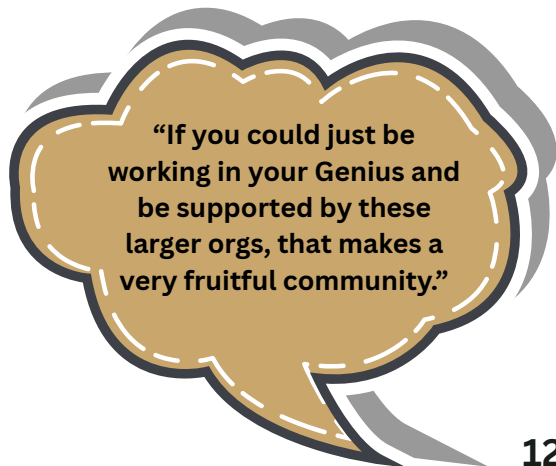
“There is an incredible sense of purpose or repurpose. We know we can because we have.”

### **Development Resources**

- Business development landscape and ecosystem
- Access to preservation, equity programs, multigenerational programs, food programs, land acquisition services, safety resources (police light was working, now gone), special needs services



“The food bank is well known and centrally located. We have a very efficient system...”



“If you could just be working in your Genius and be supported by these larger orgs, that makes a very fruitful community.”

# KEY FINDINGS: CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

## *“What are some challenges in the Central District?”*

Participants identified four clear categories of challenges. Based on community feedback, we identified priority needs that can address the named challenges.

### **LACK OF SHARED IDENTITY**

**Need 1:** Clear placemaking and wayfinding

**Need 2:** More visibility in the greater Seattle area

### **ACCESS OR AWARENESS OF RESOURCES**

**Need 3:** Cohesiveness between orgs, businesses, residents

**Need 4:** Authentic relationships and support from the City

### **INFRASTRUCTURE AND SAFETY**

**Need 5:** Infrastructure planning and support

**Need 6:** Safety and sanitation improvements

### **GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT**

**Need 7:** Bridge disconnect between older and newer residents

**Need 8:** Preservation of cultural spaces and community

**Need 9:** Mitigate financial disparities

**Need 10:** Affordability and ownership

# KEY FINDINGS: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS



During interviews, many respondents spontaneously engaged in solution-focused problem solving of identified challenges. Several residents, organizations, and business owners are currently working on implementing solutions using their own time, effort, and finances. Supporting these existing efforts is a low lift, high impact way to foster a thriving Central District. Intentional planning and wider dissemination can help ensure these solutions are supported, implemented, and accessible to the broader CD community.

"Things for young adults to do. The ability for them to feel safe in certain places"

"A social media map with shops and had them tagged...a legend indicating Black Owned"

"...grant money, accounting, tech support, and 1:1 financial education"

- ART AND WAY FINDING
- YOUTH PROGRAMMING
- ELDER ENGAGEMENT
- BUSINESS MEET UPS
- TECH SUPPORT AND RESOURCES
- COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER
- BUSINESS DIRECTORY OR MAP
- CD AMBASSADORS
- ACCESSIBLE 3rd SPACES
- COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARDS
- ANTI-DISPLACEMENT SUPPORT TEAM
- META COHORT OF LOCAL ORGS
- ACCESS TO REPRESENTIVES AND CITY DEPARTMENTS

**COMMUNITY-LED  
SOLUTIONS CREATE  
DEEPER INVESTMENT**



# KEY FINDINGS: A THRIVING CENTRAL DISTRICT

## *“What does a thriving Central District look like?”*

There were six indicators\* that characterized a “thriving” Central District, per participants. Themes that arose often were around desires for collaboration, business support, cultural preservation, and multigenerational sustainability, particularly around affordable housing and safety.

### **1. COHESIVE IDENTITY**

A strong Central District identity and opportunities for collaboration.

### **2. ACTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT**

Opportunities for the Central District to create a healthy and active ecosystem and creation of accessible and diverse spaces.

### **3. HEALTHY BUSINESS SECTOR**

Diversity of businesses and business development landscape.

### **4. MULTIGENERATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Investment in youth programs and elder engagement, stabilization of ownership and affordability, and safety and services.

### **5. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Fostering strong City relationships and empowering local leadership

### **6. CULTURAL PRESERVATION**

Leveraging arts and culture to preserve the heritage of the Central District.

\*Not listed in any particular order

# IMPLICATIONS AND KEY OBJECTIVES

There is a strong opportunity and desire for collaboration among residents, business owners, artists, organizational leadership, and city officials. With support, the area can become a shining example of how to create a diverse, sustainable, community-driven neighborhood.

## 1. THE CENTRAL DISTRICT AS A DESTINATION

One goal that can consolidate many desires is establishing the Central District as a tourist destination and cultural hub. Using art, culture, and history to engage the city at large can drive tourists and locals to the area. This provides a positive economic impact for businesses and creatives in the CD and helps bridge the gap created by rising costs.



## 2. COALITION BUILDING

Through facilitating regularly scheduled meetings of organizations, creating business committees and coalitions, and neighborhood groups or activities, the act of “*holding space*” is an easy way to facilitate a thriving Central District. Partner organizations can be a conduit for relationship building with the City of Seattle to support the Central Area as part of a stronger Seattle.



# IMPLICATIONS AND KEY OBJECTIVES

## 3. BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Many of the identified barriers for growth by business owners included marketing, planning, technical assistance, capacity building and access to capital. There are many organizations in the area and across King County that offer these services. The work of coordinating these support programs would yield high impact.



## 4. GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT PREVENTION

Through creative partnerships focused on displacement prevention, the Central District can be a truly thriving place for all. Creating programs, partnerships and resources to increase **ownership** will be key to making these efforts sustainable. As one respondent stated, “Thriving has to be lasting”.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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These recommendations stand as a holistic set of actionable items. Many of these initiatives are actively being worked on by a variety of community members and organizations, some with a longstanding history of this work. Support, coordination, and collaboration with existing projects and programs should be priority for strategizing in these areas.

## 1. Coalition Building

- Create opportunities for collaboration among Central Area organizations in ways that can increase awareness and access to resources and participation within the community.

## 2. Community Workshops and Forums

- Facilitate regular meetings to gather input and foster collaboration among residents, business owners, and stakeholders.

## 3. Place Making and Promotion

- Create a branding campaign to highlight the unique offerings of the Central District. Use art as placemaking to orient and engage visitors and residents.

## 4. Cultural Events and Preservation

- Host regular events celebrating the cultural heritage of the Central District and work to preserve historically significant spaces.

## 5. Business Support and Development

- Support Small Businesses through capacity building, technical assistance, and access to capital.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## **6. Business Incubation Programs**

- Develop programs to nurture start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures.

## **7. Multigenerational Engagement Initiatives**

- Create programs to involve and empower the youth and elders in the community and bring them into engagement with one another.

## **8. Sustainable Development**

- Support stabilization of residents and businesses through developing access to affordable housing and ownership.

## **9. Safety and Sanitation**

- Support safety and sanitation improvements through job creation, advocacy, and leveraging the city's commitment to support infrastructure needs.

## **10. Local Government Collaboration**

- Work closely with city officials to align revitalization efforts with broader urban development plans.



# CONSIDERATIONS

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There are a few things that should be factored into any future planning. It is important to consider these as both threats and opportunities and to mitigate or leverage accordingly. The following upcoming events and policy changes should be considered in terms of preparation both in defense of and as an opportunity for the best outcome for the residents, business owners, and organizations of the Central District. It is also important to consider the exponential effects any of these events have upon the remaining population of those displaced by gentrification.

**Light Rail Station completion and line expansion**

**FIFA World Cup and other mega events**

**One Seattle Plan zoning changes**

**Doors Open program and legislation**

*"The [Central District] is the home of my friends and family. There are many multigenerational levels of connection for me. It's a place I have found belonging and connection and my needs have been met with all love... [...] I'm here to be rooted in the community and to make a multigenerational impact."*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A special thank you to the participants and all who had a part in the efforts of this report and the creation of the resulting Commercial Revitalization Plan. We are deeply grateful for your role in this work and hope your skill set will continue to be valued and called upon.

**Stephanie Morales** - Lead Researcher and Reporter

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**Gavin Amos** - Development and Thought Partnership

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*Biographies available in the the full report*

**To receive a full copy of the report  
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