

# THE LOCAL LEADER'S TOOLKIT:

A STRONG TOWNS RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC



*Image via annheathon*

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There are times that call for good management, the steady presence of solid individuals to steward a community. Then, there are those unique times when our cities need something more, when they need people who can guide us to somewhere new.

Right now, our cities need leaders.

They need those special people ready to step up and push the boundaries of what is possible. They

need those that can see opportunity amid the distress. They need individuals who can not only seize the moment, but communicate a positive, uniting vision to their community.

The global pandemic is laying bare all the fragility that has built up over decades within our society. These are scary times filled with uncertainty. It's unclear what next month will bring, let alone next year.

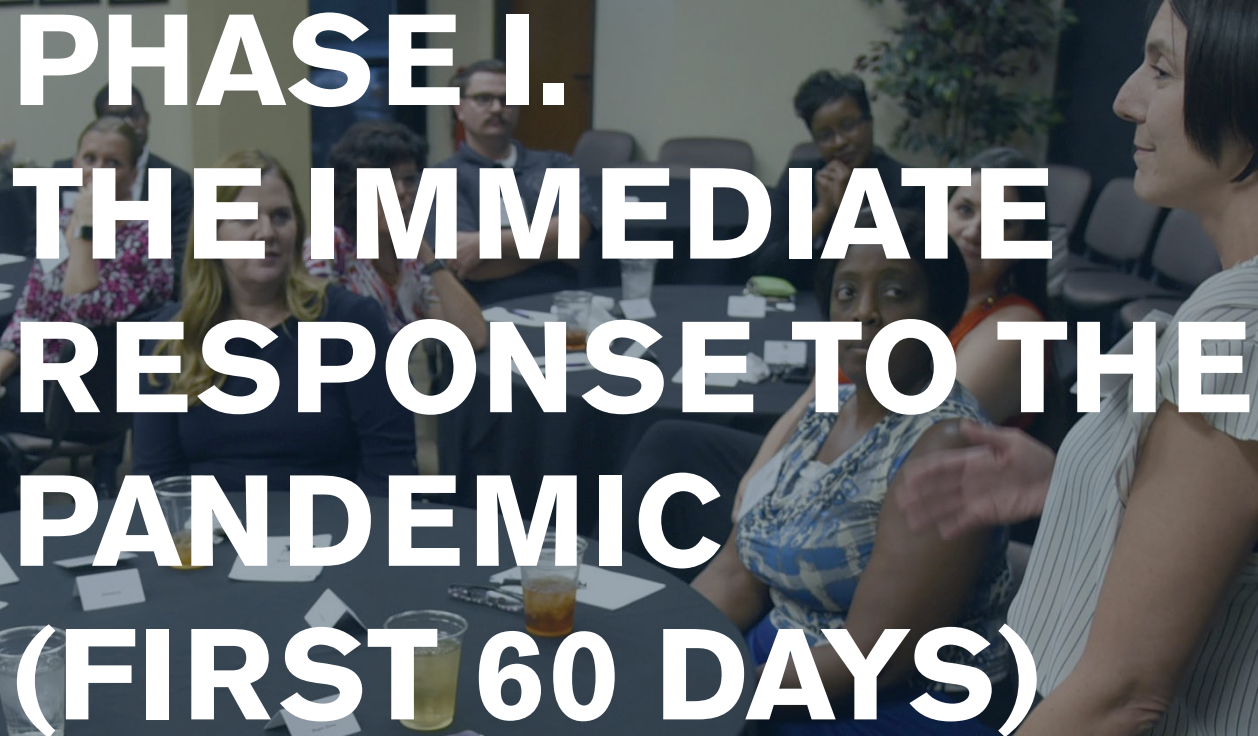
Even so, there are some simple things you can do right now to stabilize your community, put yourself on solid ground, and start the process of recovery. To help that effort, we've put together *The Local Leader's Toolkit: A Strong Towns Response to the Pandemic*. This book is broken down into three phases for action: from the immediate steps your community should be taking to the mid-range tactics to the long-term action items.

In each section, we outline necessary shifts in thinking for leaders to embody and communicate. We give you specific action steps for your community to take. And we help you anticipate difficult challenges so you are ready for them when they arrive.

Strong Towns is a bottom-up revolution to rebuild American prosperity. Thousands of people across North America are using the Strong Towns approach to make their cities stronger and more financially resilient. You're not alone.

This toolkit is for all the leaders out there. The entire Strong Towns movement stands with you.

- Charles Marohn, President of Strong Towns



# PHASE I. THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC (FIRST 60 DAYS)

Local governments are on the front lines of our nation's response to the combined public health and economic crisis created by COVID-19.

Local leaders are being forced to adapt to new realities in an environment where the individuals, families, businesses, and civic organizations within their community are under extreme stress.

And, for the most part, local governments have found themselves on their own, without financial support from the state and federal governments, spectators of a clumsy response.

To make it through this crisis with the least loss of life, to set ourselves up for the strongest possible economic recovery, and to keep our community dialogue productive and healthy, local government must fill the leadership void.

It's time for local governments to be the leaders their communities need. Here are the first steps to making that happen.

We're in a time of transition, the process of defining a new normal. The way things used to be, local governments were largely the implementation tool of state and federal policy. In the emerging reality, our systems need to become more bottom-up.

To build strong and prosperous communities, a local leader must:

- **Step up.** Recognize that local government is not the lowest form of government in an ecosystem of governments, but the highest form of coordination and advocacy for your community.
- **Orient horizontally, not vertically.** Firmly ground yourself in representing the people in your community. Orient yourselves to zealously serve their needs, particularly in the face of established top-down systems that are not.
- **Be a voice of unity.** Understand that, in such an emotional and volatile time, with so much difficult work to be done, divisive language will slow you down. Be your most generous self. There is too much to do—you can't afford to needlessly alienate anyone.
- **Seize the moment.** In such volatile times, small steps taken now will ripple through time and dramatically change the course of future events. You can't wait around for others to show the way. The cities that will emerge strongest are those that take decisive action now.



## Your Town's Immediate Response

Before we can discuss recovery, we need to stabilize our community. Immediate actions need to focus on securing the health and well-being, including the mental health, of the people and small businesses within the community. Here is a list of nine things to get started on immediately:

- 1. Get people fed.** Focus on getting people food. This is an urgent and immediate need. We should think in terms of public-private partnerships because, while local governments are generally not experts at this type of work, there are many civic organizations—religious and non-religious—that are very good at it. Having the support of the local government, whether it is providing space, coordinating responses among different groups, or even public relations support to get the word out, is the quickest way to get food to people that need it.
- 2. Get people shelter.** Focus on getting people shelter. This is also an urgent and immediate need and we need to be creative in addressing it. The same public-private kind of relationships apply as with food. This is an emergency, so don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Be flexible to help people do what they can now with a commitment to making improvements over time.
- 3. Support the public health response.** Resist the temptation to make the conversation adversarial between public health and the economy. A good leader will understand that, at the local level, there is no difference. We need to fight this enemy on two fronts with equal seriousness and devotion. Be truly committed to that and people will respond positively.
- 4. Connect masks to economic recovery.** Ubiquitous mask use is the quickest and easiest way to get the local economy moving again, but it requires a [cultural shift](#), which is difficult to do, especially as top-down partisanship invades our discourse. Local leaders inside and outside the government must lead by example. Be very conspicuous in wearing a mask in public and take every opportunity to explain why, emphasizing the relationship between getting the economy moving and donning a mask. You need wearing a mask to become a public duty that good citizens feel compelled to do, not for health reasons (that's obvious—don't dwell on it) but for economic reasons.



**5. Provide people space.** Proactively make as much space as possible available for people to get outdoors. Open up streets and public spaces to people, trading space typically reserved for automobiles (now a lower demand) for the exclusive use of people walking and biking (now a high demand). Humans are social creatures and we need to keep our people mentally healthy.

**6. Go easy on enforcement.** Understand that most people will practice social distancing voluntarily. If they don't, it's peer pressure and a sense of commitment to their community that will motivate them. Understand that there is no amount of enforcement that can ensure social distancing with a population not committed. At this moment, law enforcement can do more good focusing on education and breaking up major gatherings. Direct your public safety personnel accordingly.

**7. Support adaptation.** Local businesses need to adapt if they are going to survive. Get out of their way and let them innovate. If you wish to be proactive, ask them what can be done to help them in the adaptation process. If permitting is an issue, provide 90-day waivers to allow them to try new approaches.

**8. Collect data.** Reassign idle and underutilized staff to collect data and support these efforts. At the very least, have them calling and talking to people and collecting information on what is needed. Keep them busy being helpful.

**9. Preserve cash.** Resist the temptation to throw money at these problems. Nobody knows what is coming next, so preserve cash by delaying non-critical projects and hires. It is almost certain that the community's priorities will be different in twelve months and, in that case, you will be grateful you have the flexibility that the extra resources will provide.

## Assistance to Small Businesses

Right now, it is very unclear how the overall economy will respond to this pandemic. Will it last three months or eighteen? Will federal efforts to bail out corporations be successful, or is this just squandering resources? Will consumers drive an aggressive recovery or will they be unable to? Will the economy restructure to bring more critical manufacturing back to North America?



There are too many unknown factors to accurately predict. And too much at stake for local communities to gamble on such uncertainty.

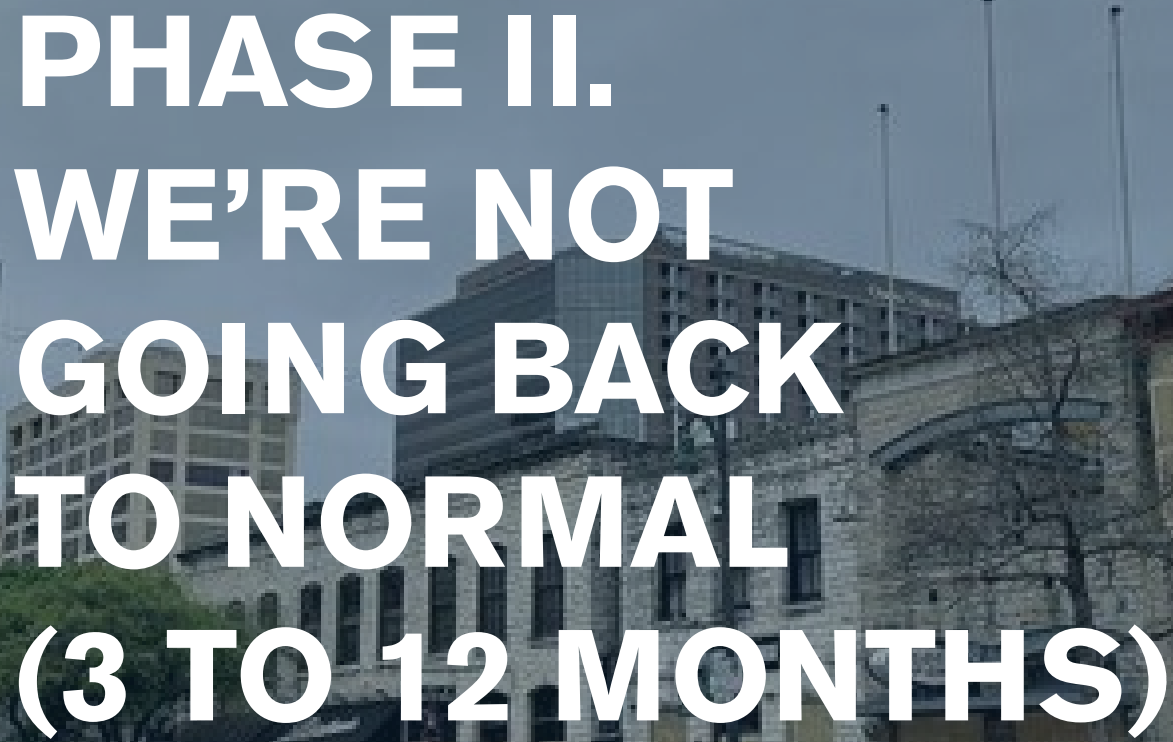
The changes happening to local economies right now are like a wave of unknown size and intensity. It is a natural reaction to want to stop the wave, but there is a good chance that this wave exceeds our capacity to withstand. Instead of pushing back, our local strategy should be to weather the storm and focus our efforts on a quick recovery.

In practical terms, bailing out local businesses—diverting public resources into them directly or indirectly—is a high risk strategy for a local government. Providing flexibility for entrepreneurs to adapt and innovate today, and creating fertile ground for a future recovery, is the best economic development strategy right now.

There will be a time to be more assertive in supporting small businesses, but now is not that time. That is painful, and it's very human to want to help, but we need to be there for the businesses that survive the wave—and some will survive—to help them recover as quickly and vigorously as possible. Resist the temptation to spend your limited resources now.

**In the next phase, we'll share a list of mid-term actions for cities that have taken steps to secure themselves and are ready to start preparing for a strong recovery.**





# PHASE II. WE'RE NOT GOING BACK TO NORMAL (3 TO 12 MONTHS)

It seems unlikely that we are going to return to pre-coronavirus America anytime soon. This global pandemic feels like a switch that has released long-standing tensions within our society, revealing deep dysfunction and fragility in the critical systems we depend on.

Whether it's food supply, housing, health care, transportation, or just basic community commerce, local communities are waking up to just how fragile we are.

Community leaders are going to have to address these problems in real time, under stress, with limited outside assistance. And with financial resources stretched, they won't have the option to simply throw money at these problems.

To prepare the ground for recovery, we are now forced to innovate. We must find ways to do much more with what is likely to be much less. That's what local leadership now requires.

Local leaders must continue the mental shift begun during the first 60 days of the response phase by recognizing that:

- **Recovery will not mean restoration.** You are leading your community through a transition to something new. Mentally focus on the positives of what lies ahead, not on trying to reclaim what is perceived to have been lost. It is okay to acknowledge the pain of this transition, but your community's energy and vision must be directed towards a positive future.
- **You must work towards community self-sufficiency, fully knowing you won't get all the way there.** Nearly every community could produce the food needed to feed themselves, but none do. This acceptance of dependency crosses nearly every domain of essential need. There are many jobs to be created by recognizing that self-sufficiency is a community value of greater urgency than mere economic efficiency. We won't get all the way there, but that doesn't mean it's not important to work towards it.
- **There is a tradeoff between growth and stability.** The pre-coronavirus [answer to economic stress at the local level was economic growth](#), even when that growth made the community fragile. You must now respond to economic stress by [emphasizing community stability](#), even if that means foregoing opportunities for growth. Without stability, you will be thwarted in your response to every other challenge you face.



## Preparing for Recovery

With the community stabilized, it's time to shift to preparing for a recovery. Here is a list of ten things to work on once you're ready:

- 1. Waive home occupation restrictions.** With shelter-in-place orders, suddenly all neighborhoods are mixed-use, with commercial activity happening even in places zoned exclusively residential. Allow this obvious fact to be a catalyst for legalizing the recovery.
- 2. Legalize neighborhood essential services.** In a pandemic, obtaining daily essentials shouldn't require everyone to travel to the same big box store. Along with legalizing home occupations, allowing neighborhood-scale commercial activities—things like small grocery stores, pharmacies, hair salons, and other quintessentially neighborhood-focused businesses—to open in residential neighborhoods creates room for innovators to respond to the crisis.
- 3. Kickstart entrepreneurs.** Many commercial buildings are going to be stuck in a type of financial purgatory, one where they can't fill vacant space at current lease rates but they also can't lower the rent due to financing agreements. Particularly in strategic locations (ones that fill streetscape gaps and connect places), use [pop-up commercial spaces](#) to seed the next generation of entrepreneurs.
- 4. Legalize housing adaptations.** Your community is going to have people searching for affordable housing. Your community is also going to have people needing more income to avoid foreclosure and stay in their home. Match these two quickly by legalizing accessory dwelling units and duplex conversions.
- 5. Make quick and lean investments in walking and biking.** The quickest way to free up private capital within the community is to make it possible for individuals and families to not have to own and operate a motor vehicle. A family that can shift from two vehicles to one saves thousands each year, money they can redirect to more urgent needs. Have city staff utilize the [Strong Towns 4-Step Approach to Making Capital Investments](#) to identify and address the most urgent barriers to walking and biking.



**6. End parking requirements.** Don't burden the recovery with requiring any additional parking. With an approach based on building strong neighborhoods, more parking is not only unnecessary, it's an impediment to future success.

**7. Start growing food.** People are already responding to potential food shortages by starting to grow their own food. At a

minimum, stay out of their way by removing restrictions on gardening, greenhouses, chickens, and other small-scale food production activities. Be proactive by allocating unused public land for community farming. Empower volunteers in the community to organize and lead these activities.

**8. Thicken civic infrastructure.** Private-public partnerships should not be reserved for only commercial transactions. There are many amazing non-profit organizations—some secular and some religious—serving the needs of people within the community. Allow them to lead in the areas where they are experts. Use city resources to coordinate, connect, and promote these efforts.

**9. Begin reorienting bureaucracies.** Most cities have a large number of staff whose job is oriented around pursuing or facilitating growth projects. This personnel should be redirected to working on the [Strong Towns 4-Step Approach to Making Capital Investments](#). Start creating a culture that rewards acts of service/support to groups or individuals within a neighborhood and away from rewards for simply completing transactions or even for finding outside sources of capital for new projects.

**10. Change how you measure success.** We measure what we value and we improve what we measure. As an indicator of progress, most cities track and publicly report on transactions, such as the number of permits issued. Transactions are not well correlated to successful outcomes. Create a community dashboard to publicly track and report on your desired outcomes. Use it as a North Star to guide and interpret collective action. (The Studer Community Institute has developed a model you can customize. It's online at [www.studeri.org/community-dashboard](http://www.studeri.org/community-dashboard).)

## State and Federal “Assistance”

It is likely that local governments will be offered some form of recovery assistance from the state and/or federal governments. In advance of these funds being offered, be proactive in having a discussion about how to respond.

In 2009, most local government recovery aid came in the form of infrastructure money targeting “shovel-ready” projects. While some of these projects were beneficial, many of them were projects that had been put on the shelf for good reasons. They were not high-priority investments. Few of these projects responded to the immediate urgency experienced within the community.



Infrastructure spending is popular among state and federal officials because it creates immediate jobs and the potential for long-term growth. For local governments, new infrastructure has some of those same benefits, but also the additional long-term liability of now having to service and maintain that infrastructure. Over time, these hasty transactions rarely work out well for local communities, most of which are already burdened by years of deferred maintenance.

If you are asked or have a chance to influence deliberations, tell your state and federal officials that cities would benefit more from cash assistance than aid channeled through a narrow infrastructure funnel. Local government officials are more influential than they may think, so know that your recommendation could be impactful.

If the only form of assistance provided to local government ends up being an infrastructure appropriation, take steps to focus those funds. You want to select projects with the most upside benefit and the least additional long-term commitment. When considering projects:

- **Prioritize maintenance over new capacity.** With such a massive backlog of basic maintenance needs, it's irresponsible to build additional capacity. If you can use assistance dollars to fix critical infrastructure, make that the priority.
- **Prioritize below-ground infrastructure over above-ground.** Many of our sewer and water systems are approaching 100 years old. When these core pipes fail, the problems cascade throughout the system. It's possible market shifts or even technology may dramatically change how we use roads and streets, but water and sewer will still flow through pipes as it has for thousands of years. If given the chance, target your assistance spending underground.
- **Prioritize neighborhoods that are more than 75 years old.** The firm Urban3 has modeled the revenue streams of hundreds of cities across the country. In every one, the neighborhoods with the highest financial productivity are the ones that existed before World War II, [even when they are occupied by the poorest people within the community](#). These are traditional neighborhoods but today they still have the greatest capacity to adapt to new realities. Investments in stabilizing these neighborhoods have the greatest potential to pay off.

When making infrastructure investments, the more you can let a neighborhood assessment of urgent needs guide your priorities, the more effective your efforts will be. Ground yourself in your people and places. The less time you spend chasing the shiny object or projecting theoretical new growth opportunities, the more likely your investments will help the community prosper.

**In the final section, we'll share long term actions for a strong recovery.**



# PHASE III. BUILDING A STRONG TOWN (1 YEAR AND BEYOND)

The things we need to focus on doing immediately are clear. The further we look out into time, however, the more ambiguous the path becomes. Nobody knows exactly what is going to happen, so we need to remain flexible in our thinking and nimble enough in our approach to adjust to changing circumstances.

Just like a strong and healthy human body is more likely to overcome a viral infection, a strong and healthy community is more likely to withstand unexpected trauma, and perhaps even grow stronger in the process.

In that sense, the Strong Towns Approach is a lot like regular exercise and a healthy diet for the community. We need to create the habits and practices that allow us to productively respond to stress while growing stronger and more prosperous over time.

Local leaders can build a Strong Town by prompting their community to do the following:

- **Rely on little bets, not transformational projects.** In the book *Little Bets*, author Peter Sims describes how low-risk actions can help us discover, test and refine ideas. We can apply this approach to the places we live. The book *Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change*, by Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia, is a how-to guide for making low-risk, high-return investments in a place. Identify the minimum viable project, get it up and running, see what happens, then refine the approach.

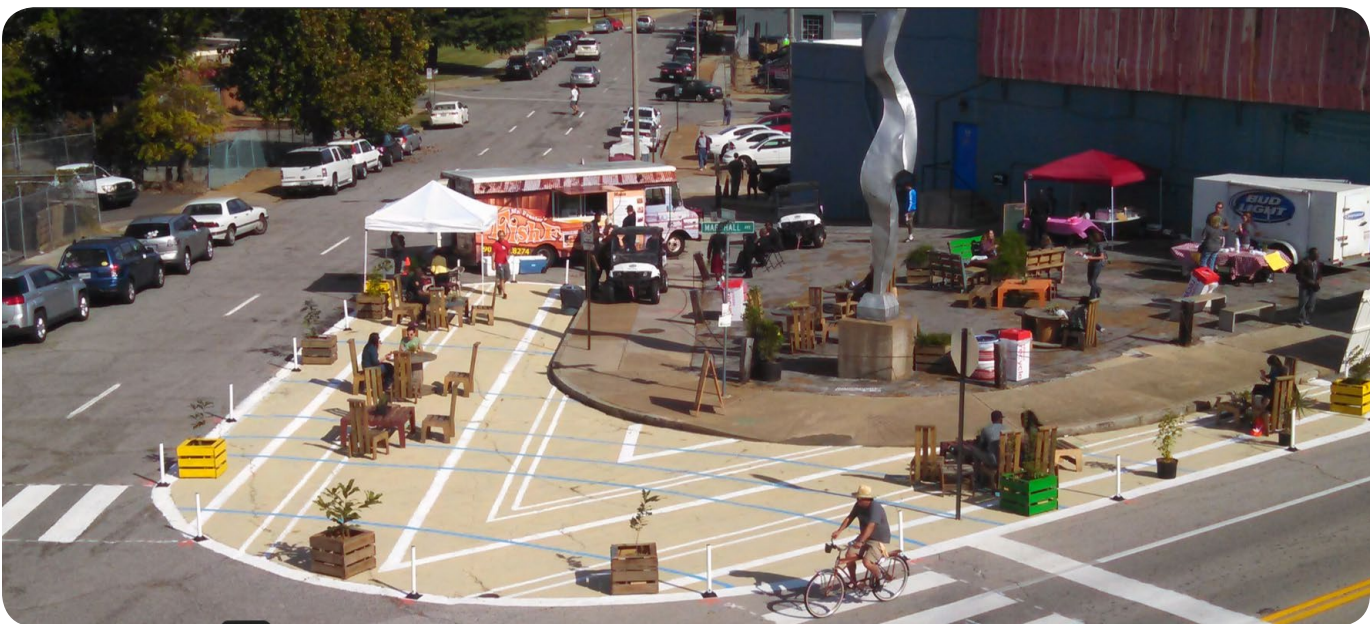


- **Emphasize resiliency, not simply efficiency.** Darwin's core insight was never "survival of the fittest" but survival of the most adaptable. When we fine-tune our systems for efficiency of execution, those systems lose their adaptability. They become fragile and prone to failure. They lack resiliency. A Strong Towns approach recognizes that success over the long term cannot be mass-produced through some efficient process. It must be built incrementally over time.

- **Design to adapt to feedback.** Cities are complex adaptive systems. They need to be able to respond to feedback at the block level. When we freeze our neighborhoods in place, we make them fragile. A Strong Towns approach not only welcomes feedback, it favors approaches that allow individuals and businesses to adapt their places incrementally over time.



- **Use bottom-up action, not top-down systems.** Instead of developing a grand, top-down plan, we must humble ourselves to learn from those around us. When we make the effort to humbly observe where people struggle to live in the places we have built, and then respond quickly with the minimum viable project that can make that struggle a little bit easier, we will discover that we can iterate our way to success, even on a limited budget.
- **Conduct as much of life as possible at a personal scale.** People are the indicator species of success. There is an overwhelming correlation between places built for human beings and financial productivity. The more places we build that scale to humans instead of automobiles, the more financially successful we are going to be.
- **Always do the math.** Local governments budget year-to-year, yet they tend to be amazingly casual about debt and, even more so, about taking on long-term maintenance obligations. When we don't hold ourselves to a rigorous financial approach, we tend to descend into dogmatic thinking and start relying on our convenient urges instead of prudence. Cities are not collections of people serving the public balance sheet. Quite the opposite: the public balance sheet needs to serve its people. To ensure we're doing this, we have to keep score. Rigorously and obsessively.



## Applying the Strong Towns Approach

With an understanding of the Strong Towns approach, here are eight ways to focus your ongoing efforts:

**1. Focus on your downtown and an ecosystem of neighborhoods.** A strong and prosperous place is a healthy ecosystem. Traditional neighborhoods around a core commercial center form the most adaptable, productive, and strong form of development. These places need to thicken up and become vital again. That's where our iterative and incremental efforts should begin.



**2. Focus on neighborhood compatibility and not simply use.** Fragile development approaches focus on separating all elements of human habitat into monoculture pods. This is what use-based zoning does, even though monocultures are uniquely fragile. Development regulations need to focus on overall compatibility instead of trying to solve every potential conflict with different degrees of isolation.

**3. Focus on expanding housing opportunities.** Top-down financing has provided local communities with an abundance of single-family homes and clusters of high-density apartments, but this is like a forest with only two types of plants: sequoias and ferns. Housing types that fall somewhere between these two are often called the “missing-middle” and they’re “missing” partially because cities make them difficult to build. There is enormous demand for expanded housing opportunities and we need to respond to that feedback.

**4. Focus on transportation as a means, not an end.** Spending money on transportation does nothing for us if it doesn't make us stronger and more prosperous. Throw out the transportation wishlist (and it's critical to redirect staff or they will keep pushing for these projects). Shift capital investment dollars so that 90% or more goes toward maintenance, with the remainder directed to neighborhood-focused enhancements identified using the [Strong Towns 4-Step Approach to Making Capital Investments](#).



**5. Focus on economic development with a gardening mentality.** In good times, nearly every city was out trying to hunt for their next business, paying whatever it took to get them to town. Winning a race to the bottom meant financially losing for the community over the long run. Focus on growing your own ecosystem of businesses, replacing your imported goods and services with locally-produced

alternatives whenever possible.

**6. Focus on leveraging public spaces.** When cities had excess resources, we could pretend that parks were mere recreational amenities. Poorer cities of the past built spectacular parks by recognizing their capacity to improve surrounding property values. Instead of building a parking lot, physically connect your community to your park with improved walkways.

**7. Focus on your people.** Public engagement must shift from something we do formally as part of a process to something continually ongoing, collected at the point of human experience. Think of a restaurant with a suggestion box versus one where the owner stops by the table while you are eating. That's the shift we need to make.

**8. Focus on reducing debts and liabilities.** Cities are burdened with decades of legacy obligations from the suburban growth era—promises that now rob communities of options. The obligation to maintain a road or repair a pipe has real consequences on people's lives if ignored, so it's not clear how these unpayable local commitments are rebalanced to fit local capacity. We should be cognizant of not expanding our liabilities while we find ways to adjust community commitments to match community resources.

This is by no means a comprehensive list of work to be done, but it will get you powerful momentum in the direction of growing stronger and more prosperous.



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND THE STRONG TOWNS ACADEMY

Strong Towns is a national movement to change the approach to growth and development across North America. Our core insight is that the American pattern of development extracts wealth from communities, leaves them with unsustainable long-term liabilities, and results in places that are designed to decline. We are building the capacity of city leaders, institutions and built environment professionals to challenge the status quo. And we are inspiring a broad movement of people, from all walks of life, who are actively engaged in making their neighborhoods more resilient and livable.

On the following page, you'll discover all the resources—from web broadcasts to buzzing community sites—to help you implement the action items you learned today. In addition, you'll learn about the Strong Towns Academy: the latest Strong Towns platform that will give you a deep dive into core Strong Towns principles.

All content is offered free of charge at [strongtowns.org](https://strongtowns.org) for anyone to access and share thanks to the support of Strong Towns members and other generous donors. You can support the movement and become a member of Strong Towns at [strongtowns.org/membership](https://strongtowns.org/membership).

For those wanting to delve deeper, we have created the Strong Towns Community, a platform for connecting to others working to implement Strong Towns ideas in their place. The Strong Towns Community provides resources, discussions, and answers to questions. It's also free of charge for participants and can be accessed at [community.strongtowns.org](https://community.strongtowns.org).

To meet demand for additional guidance, in April 2020 we launched the Strong Towns Academy, a learning platform to assist local leaders (inside and outside of government) in developing a Strong Towns plan of action for their community. The Strong Towns Academy can be found at [academy.strongtowns.org](https://academy.strongtowns.org).

**The Academy features Strong Towns 101**, a seventeen-lesson course providing a broad overview of the Strong Towns approach. This course is free and designed to be shared throughout the community to broaden understanding and build support for change.

These courses are available individually or as part of a subscription package. For those lacking the ability to pay for access to the courses, we are working with our donor network to provide scholarship opportunities.

**The Strong Towns Academy also offers an Executive Learning package for groups seeking additional coaching and on-site support beyond what is offered in the individual courses. For information on Strong Towns Academy Executive Learning, contact Michelle Erfurt at 844-218-1681 or by email at [michelle@strongtowns.org](mailto:michelle@strongtowns.org).**

- *Aligning Transportation with a Strong Towns Approach* (Summer 2020)
- *Creating Housing Opportunities in a Strong Town* (Summer 2020)
- *Making Capital Investments in a Strong Town* (Fall 2020)
- *Jobs, Growth, and Economic Development in a Strong Town* (Fall 2020)
- *Building Neighborhood Resiliency* (Fall 2020)
- *Doing Public Engagement that Matters* (Winter 2021)
- *Mobilizing Your Community to Become a Strong Town* (Winter 2021)
- *Urban Design Principles for a Strong Town* (Winter 2021)