



November 30, 2017

Kevin Murphy  
President  
Berks County Community Foundation  
237 Court Street  
Reading, PA 19601

Dear Mr. Murphy,

This letter and attached strategic plan, are being sent in response to your letter dated July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in which you requested the City of Reading, as well as other interested stakeholders, come together and chart a vision for Downtown Reading that would "capitalize on the progress" that has already been made. In the letter you made it clear that future Berks County Community Foundation (BCCF) investments would be tied to the development and implementation of such a plan.

On behalf of the City of Reading, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, the Downtown Improvement District, and the Berks Alliance, we are pleased to provide you with our collective strategy for moving Downtown forward. We are particularly proud of this plan because it represents a collaboration among several organizations in partnership with city government. We are already executing parts of the plan, and we have secured the funding commitments to move forward in 2018.

As always, we remain grateful to BCCF for your continued support and counsel. We look forward to receiving any additional feedback from you and your staff, and we welcome the opportunity to discuss our vision with you further.

Sincerely,

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Wally Scott  
Mayor  
City of Reading

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Randy Peers", written over a horizontal line.

Randy Peers  
President & CEO  
Greater Reading Chamber Alliance

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Jeff Waltman", written over a horizontal line.

Jeff Waltman  
President  
Reading City Council

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Glenn Steckman III  
Managing Director  
City of Reading

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Charles Broad", written over a horizontal line.

Charles Broad  
Executive Director  
Reading Downtown Improvement District Authority

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "John P. Weidenhammer", written over a horizontal line.

John Weidenhammer  
Chair  
Berks Alliance





# 5-Year Strategic Plan for Downtown Reading

PRIMED FOR OPPORTUNITY + GROWTH

Prepared by Aaron Gantz, MPA  
Executive Director of Downtown Revitalization  
Greater Reading Chamber Alliance

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## BACKGROUND

The Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) was formed out of a strategic alignment between three Berks County business organizations – Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Greater Reading Economic Partnership & the Greater Berks Development Fund. Randy Peers started as President and CEO of the GRCA at the end of January 2017. During his first 6 months in Berks County, he spent time meeting with community stakeholders, leaders, organizations and elected officials. In nearly every conversation, it was clear the City of Reading, the County Seat, and largest municipality, is critical to the overall health and wealth of Berks County.

Based on those conversations he developed six strategic themes to guide the newly merged organizations – one of those strategic themes is READING MATTERS. GRCA represents and works with businesses across Berks County, however out of this came the commitment to putting resources behind someone who will wake up every day and focus on downtown Reading. That person is Aaron Gantz recently named Executive Director of Downtown Revitalization.

Aaron earned her Masters in Public Administration from West Virginia University and has since worked in economic development over the last seven years for the Greater Reading Economic Partnership. As a native of the City of Reading she is passionate about the City and its future.

This Strategic Plan was developed by Ms. Gantz with input from other stakeholders as part of a coordinated effort to revitalize Reading's downtown.

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As of 2018, the GRCA offices will be housed at 606 Court Street in the heart of downtown Reading. In addition to GRCA's offices, the new location will also be home to partners such as:

- Assets Lancaster
- Berks County Latino Chamber of Commerce
- Kutztown University Small Business Development Center
- SCORE
- U.S. Small Business Administration regional office

The co-location of these offices will allow for a full deployment of resources in a state-of-the-art business center for downtown Reading businesses.

## VISION

Downtown Reading is a vibrant, urban destination where people not only want live, work, and play, but also want to make permanent investments in the urban center of Reading.

The GRCA seeks to create a sustained, strategic, private/public, in partnership with an involved community, making this vision a reality.

## ASPIRATIONS

- Encourage and facilitate economic development to strengthen the downtown Reading commercial core and the surrounding neighborhoods
- Attract and retain quality investment in downtown Reading
- Cultivate an environment where businesses and entrepreneurs thrive in downtown Reading
- The perception of downtown Reading is largely positive and viewed as a unique and attractive place for business, entertainment and living

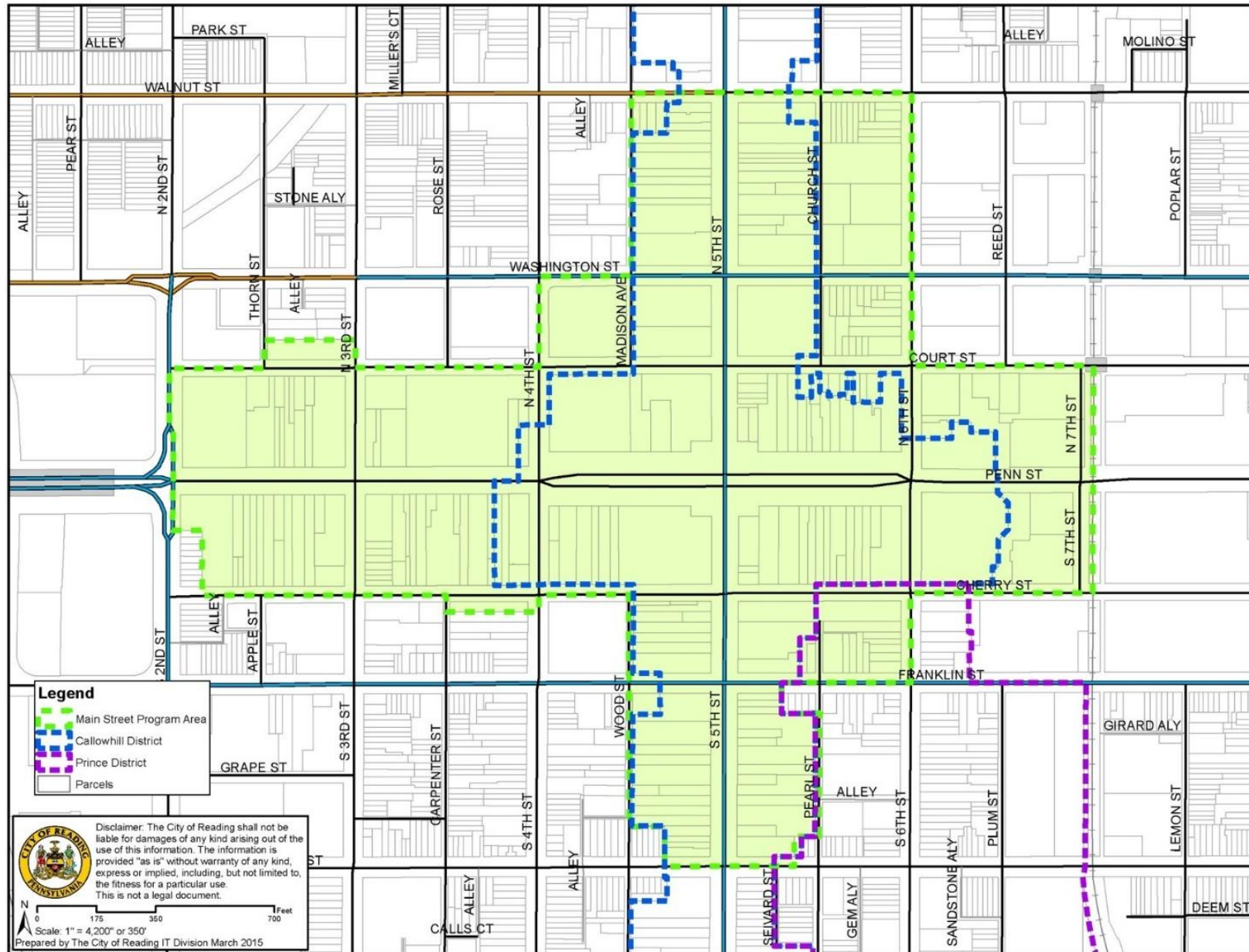
## **STRATEGIES**

Three strategies guide the downtown Reading revitalization plan:

- STRATEGY 1 | Traditional economic development focus
- STRATEGY 2 | Attraction/retention of new investment and businesses to downtown Reading
- STRATEGY 3 | Improve and maintain a positive perception of downtown Reading

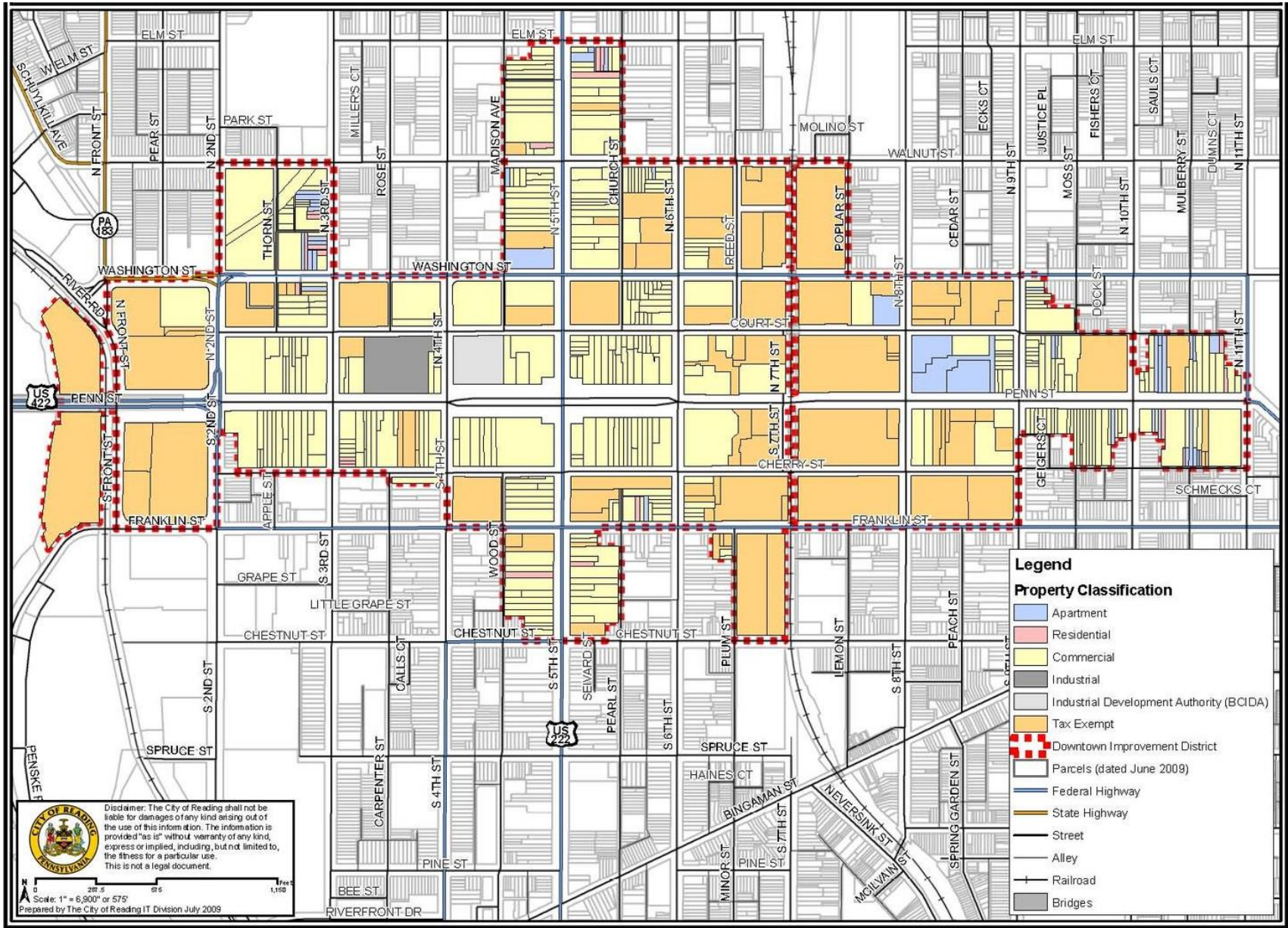
## Downtown Reading Area of Focus

Initial area of focus 200 through 700 blocks





Long term area of focus

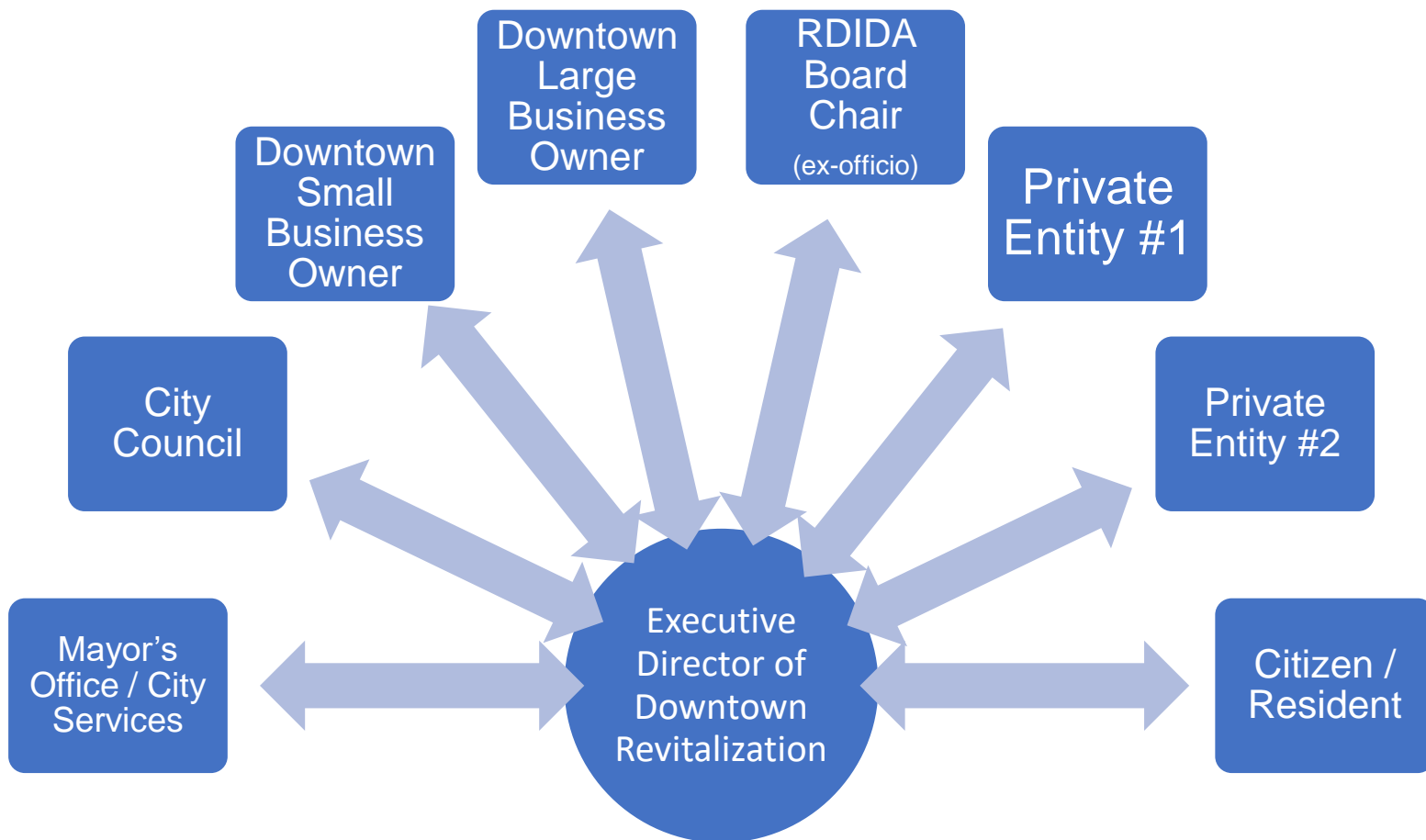


## STRATEGIES + IMPLEMENTATION

### STRATEGY 1 | Traditional Economic Development Focus

- Lead a comprehensive planning process for downtown Reading – much like that of Lancaster City Alliance “Building on Strength” plan – with a focus on gaining information on real estate values and a market assessment
- Develop and maintain comprehensive inventory of properties including, current and potential uses, occupancy, and ownership
- Establish and maintain inventory of properties currently for sale and/or lease utilizing GreaterReadingSites.com as platform to aggregate downtown properties
- Identify key properties in downtown Reading for short and long-term investment
- Establish Executive Director of Downtown Revitalization as the go-to person for developers and new businesses to liaise with City Hall
- Work collaboratively with the Penn Street Façade/Streetscape Improvement group to:
  - Determine next steps for the Greening of Penn Street plan
  - Reinvigorate the City’s façade improvement program alongside private funding
  - Identify targeted properties as best candidates for façade improvement investment
  - Development of a public art installation strategy to:
    - Add to the permanent vibrancy of downtown Reading
    - Create visually stimulating pathways from parking garages to various points of destination
    - Add vibrancy to low-occupancy corridors such as Cherry Street
  - Plant scape plan with ongoing maintenance plan
- Establish tools in collaboration with the City of Reading Community Development Department to enhance investment and redevelopment:
  - Develop “how to open a business” document with step-by-step actions to navigate the permitting process
  - Develop “you bought a property, now what?” document with step-by-step actions to navigate the permitting process
- Identify and provide a variety of resources for funding to help developers, property owners and business owners close the gap on projects
- Utilize the Main Street framework as part of revitalization framework and engagement via committee structure





Purpose:  
Visionary  
Comprehensive & Inclusive  
Focused, Manageable, & Deliberate  
Executed & Measured

## **STRATEGY 2 | Attraction/Retention of New Investment and Businesses to Downtown Reading**

- Work collaboratively with the Berks Alliance, the City of Reading, and a third-party consultant to re-develop and re-release RFP for Penn Square properties
- Work with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) via the Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to analyze market conditions and market demand
- Host a downtown real estate forum followed by familiarization event with a targeted group of real estate professionals, developers, investors and business owners in late Spring 2018 and every other year moving forward
- Interface with potential investors and business owners seeking to purchase property in downtown Reading
- Partner with real estate community and business community to develop incentives for moving into downtown Reading
- Take the lead on establishing co-working space in the downtown area
- Develop and maintain comprehensive inventory of businesses
- Partner with GRCA Small Business Coordinator to visit targeted existing businesses to:
  - Gain an understanding of challenges and opportunities
    - Identification and connection to resources to address challenges and opportunities
    - Identify common themes around opportunities and challenges collectively to create a group session lead by a partner or subject matter expert vs. individual referrals
  - Determine if and how GRCA can assist with their continued growth and retention in downtown Reading
- Work collaboratively with partners to provide:
  - Small business assistance to targeted existing businesses
  - Marketing/merchandising assistance to targeted existing businesses
  - Financing opportunities for reinvestment/growth



### STRATEGY 3 | Improve and Maintain a Positive Perception of Downtown Reading

- Re-establish an identity to aggressively market the community as a place ready for investment and opportunity
- Establish and enhance communication channels with a digital focus to highlight assets (dining, events, shopping, the arts, etc.) in downtown Reading – specifically:
  - Establish and maintain a Facebook and Instagram account for Destination Downtown Reading
  - Add depth of information and resources to DowntownReading.com website
- Partner with real estate community and business community to highlight benefits of living in and around downtown Reading
- Capitalize on existing events happening in downtown Reading to curate and enhance connectivity with existing downtown Reading assets
- Create a sense of vibrancy and activity on a year-round-basis through seasonal events:
  - Winter: Work with the Reading Downtown Improvement District Authority (RDIDA) in 2018 to market Fire + Ice
    - Determine next steps for 2019 and beyond signature winter event
  - Summer: Work with RDIDA and SMG in 2018 to market 3-4 Downtown Alive concerts in June, (July possibly), August and September
    - 2019: re-think number and timing of concerts – determine with partners how the concerts could align with other events and points of destination in and around downtown Reading
  - Summer/Fall:
    - Manage and execute the outdoor, seasonal, Penn Street Market
    - Work with RDIDA on marketing MidDay Café events
    - Work with RDIDA on marketing fall themed event
    - Work with RDIDA on marketing 2018 and beyond Reading holiday parade and tree lighting
  - Collaboratively execute events in the Spring and Fall:
    - Pop-up events – art galleries, retail, beer gardens, food trucks, etc.
    - Architectural tour(s) – commercial and residential
    - Partner with GRCA to host a minimum of 2 events in collaboration with existing downtown events
    - Annual public art celebration
  - Immediately following all events – recap on what worked and what did not work, ROI, work to develop plan for 2019 including establishing dates ASAP
- Collaboratively market events happening in downtown Reading
  - Santander Arena + Performing Arts Center
  - The WCR Center for the Arts
  - GoggleWorks
  - Reading Symphony Orchestra
  - Reading Public Library
  - DoubleTree by Hilton Reading
  - Abraham Lincoln
  - Downtown Restaurants
  - R/C Reading Movies 11 & IMAX
  - Restaurant based events
  - Business based events

## INDICATORS OF SUCCESS OVER 5-YEAR PERIOD | 2018 to 2023

Baseline numbers to start January 1, 2018, with annual status updates + 5 year report out

How do you measure the success of downtown Reading revitalization? To understand the full picture, it is critical to look at several indicators both qualitative and quantitative. The indicators below have been developed by the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign based on a comprehensive review of successful downtowns. The indicators below range from retail, housing, organization and partnerships, design, marketing, finance, employment in the downtown area.

- Retail development indicators:
  - Quantitative
    - Proportion of all retail businesses located downtown
    - Increase in retail businesses downtown
    - Occupancy rate (or drop in vacancy rate)
    - Longevity of businesses (or turnover rate)
  - Qualitative
    - Daytime population
    - Nighttime population
    - Business mix
- Downtown Housing Indicators
  - Quantitative
    - Proportion of city's population residing downtown
    - Increase in downtown housing units
  - Qualitative
    - High density residential development
    - Surrounding market rate residential neighborhoods
    - Regulatory framework supporting downtown housing
- Organization and Partnership Indicators
  - Qualitative
    - Active leadership leading downtown development with organizational support
    - Partnerships and coalitions
    - Downtown redevelopment plan
- Multifunctionality Indicators
  - Qualitative
    - Mixed use development
    - Office development
    - Conference/meeting space
- Downtown Design Indicators
  - Qualitative
    - Sense of place
    - Clear entrance
    - Design guidelines
    - Bike/pedestrian friendliness
    - Public space
    - Streetscape and façade improvement programs
    - Accessibility and connectivity



- Downtown Finance, Employment and Demographic Indicators
  - Quantitative
    - Change in assessed value of property
    - Change in real property investment
    - Change in downtown employment by sector
    - Percentage increase in rental value
    - Lease rate comparison with peer cities
    - Income of downtown residents
  - Qualitative
    - Make up of downtown labor force

## FUNDING

Long-term, sustainable funding for downtown focused revitalization is critical to realize positive results over the next 5 years and beyond. The GRCA is committed to serving as the lead for these collaborative efforts.

- Please see budget projections on the following page
- GRCA has been engaged in ongoing conversations with City of Reading administration to establish funding for a public/private partnership focused on downtown Reading revitalization
- The Berks Alliance has committed to funding specific projects in downtown Reading – including, but not limited to - façade/streetscape improvements and consultant fees for RFP and market analysis
- GRCA is seeking downtown Reading revitalization funding from the Berks County Community Foundation
- GRCA is actively working to identify funding sources from various government agencies such as the PA Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) as well as foundations – requests for funding will be focused on specific programs like the Penn Street Market and economic development focused programs



DOWNTOWN READING REVITALIZATION

OPERATIONS & EVENTS REVENUE	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Greater Reading Chamber Alliance	\$ 76,760.00	\$ 78,012.80	\$ 79,303.18	\$ 80,632.28	\$ 82,001.25
Berks County Community Foundation	\$ 170,000.00	\$ 170,000.00	\$ 155,000.00	\$ 130,000.00	\$ 115,000.00
City of Reading	\$ 60,000.00	\$ 63,000.00	\$ 66,150.00	\$ 69,457.50	\$ 72,930.38
Berks Alliance	\$ 40,000.00	\$ 41,200.00	\$ 42,436.00	\$ 43,709.08	\$ 45,020.35
TOTAL	\$ 346,760.00	\$ 352,212.80	\$ 342,889.18	\$ 323,798.86	\$ 314,951.98

EXPENSES	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
OPERATING EXPENSES - SALARIES	\$ 199,260.00	\$ 203,662.80	\$ 208,197.68	\$ 212,868.61	\$ 217,679.67
EVENTS & MARKETING EXPENSES	\$ 230,500.00	\$ 226,500.00	\$ 226,500.00	\$ 226,500.00	\$ 226,500.00
TOTAL	\$ 429,760.00	\$ 430,162.80	\$ 434,697.68	\$ 439,368.61	\$ 444,179.67

## THE TEAM

### **Randy Peers, President & CEO, Greater Reading Chamber Alliance**

Randolph Peers has spent the last twenty-five years working in the fields of economic & workforce development, adult education and association management, and currently serves as President & CEO of the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA). GRCA was formed out of a strategic alignment between three Berks County business organizations – Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Greater Reading Economic Partnership & the Greater Berks Development Fund. The GRCA, with an operating budget of over to \$3MM and assets totaling over \$40MM, is the leading business membership association and economic development corporation in Berks County, PA.

Prior to this role, Randolph led Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT), NYC's leading provider of job training and education services for disconnected youth. OBT is known for its highly effective job training and education program designed specifically to meet the unique needs of out-of-school, out-of-work, youth. OBT served approximately 5,000 people annually on an \$8MM budget.

Before becoming CEO at OBT, Randolph spent four years at the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce as Vice President for Economic Development. During his tenure at the Chamber, Randolph managed a project portfolio of over \$3MM, including Brooklyn Goes Global (exporting initiative) and the Good Help program (small business staffing service). Under his leadership, the Brooklyn Chamber launched a research department that produced the Brooklyn Labor Market Review and the Brooklyn Business Survey, two leading borough-wide business publications. One of his proudest achievements was developing a nationally recognized model for integrating workforce and economic development services for small business that has been expanded and replicated over the years.

Randolph holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Brooklyn College and a Master's in Public Administration from New York University's Wagner School.

### **Pamela Shupp, President, Greater Reading Economic Partnership**

Pamela is responsible for managing the economic development strategy for the Greater Reading Economic Partnership (GREP). She leads the GREP team to provide the best possible business support to prospects considering Berks County as a location and to existing businesses that need to grow and expand. She manages several regional and state partnerships and initiatives to ensure that Berks County has access to economic development resources.

Pamela has more than 30 years of experience in economic, housing, and community development with various private companies and government agencies including 12 years with the City of Reading where she served as Community and Economic Development and Redevelopment Authority Director.

She earned two substantial professional certifications – the AICP (American Institute of Certified Planners) from the American Planning Association and the CEcD (Certified Economic Developer) designation from the International Economic Development Council (IEDC).

Pamela is a native of Berks County, and received a bachelor's degree in Public Administration and Urban and Regional Planning from Bloomsburg University.

### **Aaron Gantz, Executive Director of Downtown Revitalization, Greater Reading Chamber Alliance**

Aaron is a self-motivated, dynamic, passionate professional committed to enhancing the community through holistic community and economic development. She is a leader, she is an advocate, and she is a big picture person. She uses her expansive and growing personal and professional skills to align her vision with the community's vision to enhance her position as an up and coming leader in the field of economic development.

Not only does she possess passion for her work, but she brings over seven years of professional economic development experience to the table. Aaron is the Chair of the Pennsylvania Economic Development Association's communication and membership committee; Vice Chair of the Smart Growth Alliance of Berks County; a United Way of Berks County Focus Area Panel member; and a member of the West Reading Economic Development Committee.

Aaron is a native of the City of Reading. She graduated from West Virginia University where she earned both her B.A. in Political Science in 2008 and MPA, Master of Public Administration degree in 2010. She is a member of Pi Alpha Alpha, the National Honor Society for Public Affairs and Administration. She is also a recipient of the 2011 Rising Star Award from the Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

### **Jobany Bedoya, Small Business Coordinator, Greater Reading Chamber Alliance**

As the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance's Small Business & Latino Outreach Coordinator, Jobany provides resources and solutions for small businesses in the Berks County community; establishes new relationships and provides resources and support for Latino and minority-owned businesses.

Jobany comes to the organization from the United Way of Berks County where he was Campaign and Community Relations Manager. He currently serves on the Executive board of The Council on Chemical Abuse, is a bilingual mentor for SCORE of Berks County and Board Chair for Star City Boxing. In Lancaster County, Mr. Bedoya was active in the Spanish American Civic Association (SACA) - one of the largest Latino nonprofit organizations in Pennsylvania, the Latino Vision Association (LVA), the Latin American Cultural Center (LACC) and founder of Union Colombiana in 2013.

Jobany is also an entrepreneur and owns a DJ & event planning services business which will serve him well in his new role with his small business ownership knowledge and experience. Jobany earned an Associate Degree in Business Studies at Harrisburg Area Community College.