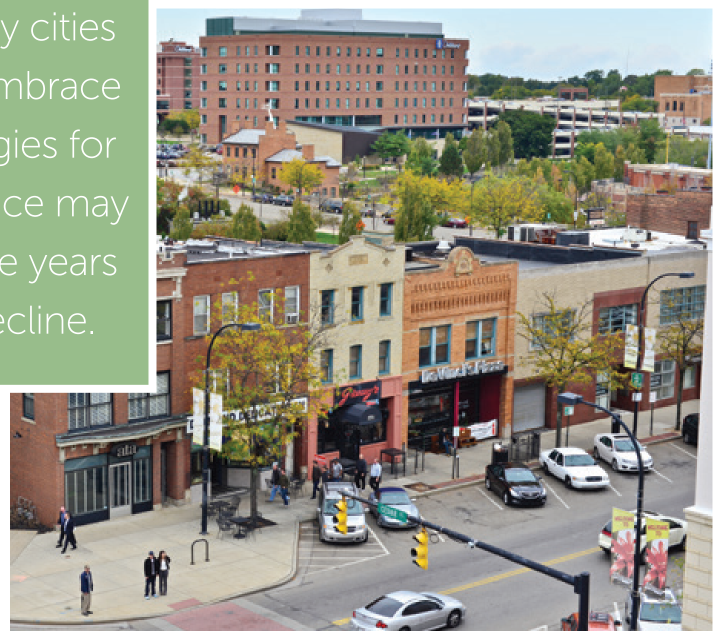
Legacy cities that embrace strategies for resilience may reverse years of decline.



Akron, Ohio, is one of the small and medium-sized legacy cities seeking renewal.

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Revitalizing America's Small and Medium-Sized Legacy Cities

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Many older industrial cities struggling to recover from long-term economic downturns, such as Detroit or Pittsburgh, have received attention from academics, practitioners, and the press for their decline and emerging recoveries.[1] The trajectory of small and medium-sized legacy cities (SMLCs)[2] like Ohio's Akron or Dayton (or, in New England, Springfield, Massachusetts, or New Haven, Connecticut) has received much less consideration. While large legacy cities were engines of our nation's growth for almost a century, smaller cities made important marks on our history as well. Smaller cities face challenges similar to those of larger cities, such as job and population loss, which are often compounded by their smaller size and regional location. In aggregate, these cities' dire economic circumstances continue to be a drag on the overall health of the state and national economies, slowing economic recovery.

To put the spotlight on the health and needs of SMLCs nationwide, the Greater Ohio Policy Center (GOPC) examined the condition of SMLCs in the Midwest and Northeast. In considering how to reverse economic decline, we sought to understand the factors that enable some SMLCs to be resilient, find their competitive edge, and transform into thriving, sustainable cities. Using US census data, we developed a typology based on urban vitality indicators[3] and measured performance through peer comparison. Through data analysis and interviews, we identified several promising strategies and practices for resilience, highlighted (along with case studies, also drawn from our research) on the following pages.[4]

Case Studies

Worcester, Massachusetts

Although its geographic proximity to Boston plays a role in its success, local stakeholders in Worcester credit leadership changes over the past decade with much of its revival. A number of long-term community leaders retired around the same time, creating an opportunity for a new set of leaders to step in—some from the community and others who were actively recruited from other cities. A number of key positions, including the mayor, city manager, and executive positions at major corporations, were filled with new, energetic leaders. This new leadership shepherded the city through the process of developing a new vision for the city's downtown after the closure of a center-city mall. This effort was successful because "the right people in the right positions" were willing to work across sectors. The shift in leadership has not been without bumps, but the city's positive trajectory is tied to the overall willingness of leaders to work collaboratively.

Kalamazoo, Michigan

When 200 city staff members accepted an early retirement package, the median age and experience in city administration suddenly dropped. While there were challenges with loss of institutional knowledge, current city staff report that a new culture of creativity and collaboration has emerged. According to them, one of the most important aspects of this new culture is the fact that almost no one on staff remembers how things were done in "the good old days." All current staff came to their jobs understanding that the city was in a difficult situation and were willing to try new and innovative things to deal with that.

Syracuse, New York

CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity (CEO), the regional chamber of commerce and economic development organization for the city of Syracuse and the 12-county surrounding region, has recognized that a vibrant downtown Syracuse is critical to the success of its entire footprint. Its member businesses have come to realize that they can retain a strong workforce better if they are located in places that workers want to be, which has led them to choose downtown office space over suburban office parks. The Downtown Committee of Syracuse, a program of CenterState CEO, underscores the organization's commitment to building a strong downtown. New York State and other regional stakeholders have also invested heavily in the downtown to attract and retain local businesses. For example, the local utility company, National Grid, has created a grant program focusing on downtown development.

Develop, Attract, Retain, and Network Local Leadership

Leadership at the political, institutional, and corporate levels is critical for success. Cities that have been successful in revitalizing after decline frequently credit savvy leaders with guiding the city into a new era. Successful leaders have adopted a "networked" approach to governance—reaching out to their peers across sector boundaries—and have sought new ideas and ways of doing things. Some cities have worked to attract outside candidates for important community and economic development roles, recognizing that the expertise required for some of these positions cannot always be homegrown. This approach is in sharp contrast to the top-down regime style of the 1980s and 1990s, in which one leader managed a series of like-minded colleagues to control a city.

The example in Worcester demonstrates how a future-focused mind-set is important in moving the city forward. A city is more likely to succeed when the leadership has acknowledged the city's current, realistic condition and isn't wedded to doing things the old way. Sometimes, a catalytic event or hitting rock bottom pushed community leaders to such a realization. In Kalamazoo's case, mass early retirements made a new outlook possible.

Focus on Downtown and the Center City, Not Just the Region

Regional cooperation has emerged as an important tool for helping legacy cities of all sizes compete in a global economy. However, economic development strategies for SMLCs must reinforce downtowns and the central cities as the economic heart of their region. Nationwide, communities are recognizing that vibrant downtowns lead to strong regions. Young, creative professionals increasingly prefer downtown living and work options, and cities that provide those are better positioned to attract and retain this coveted demographic. (See the Syracuse case study to the left.)

Additionally, siting new projects in central cities served by bus lines makes them accessible to low-income workers who may

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The city of Worcester is benefiting from energized new leadership.

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Walton Street is part of Armory Square, a district in downtown Syracuse, New York, that is undergoing renewal.

not have access to a car. When well-paying, lower-skilled jobs are located in outlying areas, access to transportation may prohibit some qualified workers from taking those jobs. Business siting is a particular challenge in SMLCs where many economic development efforts may be regionally focused. (See the Akron case study.) Additional incentives for businesses to locate in the central city may be useful, but an explicit downtown-first or city-first attitude may be even more important in correcting this imbalance so that outlying areas do not become the default option.

Work to Strengthen Local Businesses in a Manner That Addresses Generational Poverty

Successful SMLCs cannot tell a tale of two cities. For a true rebound, SMLCs must attract new talent and must invest in the economic health of current citizens. Generational poverty is an intractable problem in many SMLCs, and few have tackled the issue head on, though Syracuse, New York, is one that has. (See the Syracuse case study to the right.) All will need to if they are to build stronger communities and make their cities more attractive places to live and work.

Although SMLCs face challenges, many have an opportunity to reinvent themselves as more collaborative, creative, and equitable places to live and work. Charting a future for these places will require doing things differently than they have been done in the past, but many SMLCs are already demonstrating how embracing change can lead to positive outcomes.

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Endnotes

[1] See, for example, Alan Mallach and Lavea Brachman, *Regenerating America's Legacy Cities* (2013); and "Legacy Cities Partnership," a website of the Center for Community Solutions (http://www.legacycities.org/).

[2] SMLCs are defined here as cities with populations between 30,000 and 200,000 as of 2013, historical manufacturing bases (and not college towns), more than a 30-minute commute to major, strong-market cities such as New York City and Boston, and that experienced significant population loss between peak population in the mid-twentieth century and 2000.

[3] Cities were evaluated based on percent change between 2000 and 2013 data for six indicators of urban stability and vitality: population change, median household income, unemployment, vacant properties, poverty, and attainment of a bachelor's degree. The study selected 65 SMLCs in seven states on the basis of (1) their current condition and (2) the direction of recent trends from 2000 to 2013, using the decennial censuses for peak population year (usually 1950, 1960, or 1970), 2000, and 2013 American Community Survey data.

[4] This article is part of a longer report on SMLCs due out later this year in partnership with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

Akron, Ohio

The city of Akron and its regional partners have worked together successfully to attract businesses to the region. Officials from the city, county, and regional chambers of commerce have created a partnership focused on regional job growth that has drawn foreign businesses to the area. But the city did not encourage businesses to locate downtown or within Akron proper. Consequently, suburban office and industrial parks have become the default location for many new employers, leading to transportation challenges for transit-dependent workers and increasing downtown office vacancy rates in the last five years. However, evidence suggests that new local leadership may deploy new strategies this year that include prioritizing downtown.

Syracuse, New York

Syracuse came to view generational poverty as a liability for the local business sector and government. Syracuse's poverty and inequality created a negative city image; the long-term costs of blight reduction and lost tax revenues were massive drags on the city's finances; and visible poverty in the city's urban core discouraged businesses from locating there. CenterState CEO took on the issue by creating the Work Train Collaborative, a workforce development program that aims to find good jobs for low-income workers while also training good employees for local businesses. CenterState CEO and grassroots organizing initiatives piloted a workforce development strategy that tied a redevelopment project near a local hospital to high-paying jobs and skills training. The program has since expanded from construction into health care jobs and has expanded its geographic reach.

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With support, legacy cities like Syracuse can reverse decline.