

# Concord, MA

Village Center Assessment Study

Massachusetts Downtown Initiative



4/1/2022

Authored by: Ann McFarland Burke, Consultant  
annmburkeco@gmail.com

 Ann  
McFarland  
Burke  
Consultant  
Vibrant downtowns,  
healthy communities.

---

## Project Overview

The Town of Concord, MA secured a Massachusetts Downtown Initiative Grant to outreach to Concord businesses, property owners, visitors, and residents to explore issues, opportunities, and general perceptions on how to improve the village centers to better serve the community and create more vibrant destinations. The three village centers include: Concord Center, Thoreau Depot, and West Concord. The project presented the opportunity to gauge current perceptions, business conditions, COVID recovery, and opportunities to develop strategies to support the village centers in Concord, and the user experience for visitors and residents. The results of this assessment will inform the Town, property owners, community organizations, visitor attractions and residents on ways to enhance the village centers.

## Project Approach

The village center analysis was accomplished through a series of surveys and focus groups targeting specific stakeholders in the village commercial centers in Concord. These tools provided a wide range of input from residents, tourism and historic attractions, visitors, businesses, and property owners.

### Surveys

The project consultant worked with the Economic Vitality Committee and Town to develop two surveys. These surveys focused on consumers/public, and commercial district businesses and property owners. A visitor's survey was not done in this project and could provide additional information. Survey questions covered the following topics:

- Consumer patronage of businesses and commercial districts
- Business characteristics and satisfaction with location
- Impacts of COVID
- Opinions regarding potential strategies to support business and improve the village center, doing business or visiting Concord.

Web based surveys were distributed through Concord Together, the Concord Chamber of Commerce, Economic Vitality Committee and Concord Business Partnership. Hardcopies of the survey were also available/drop-off at the Town House, Concord Free Public Library Main Street and Fowler branches, and

the Harvey Wheeler Community Center.



*Web-based survey outreach flyer*

### **Focus Groups**

The Economic Vitality Committee/ Town and consultant utilized focus groups to further research opinions from specific stakeholders in Concord's village centers and visitor attractions. The group convened five focus groups. These included:

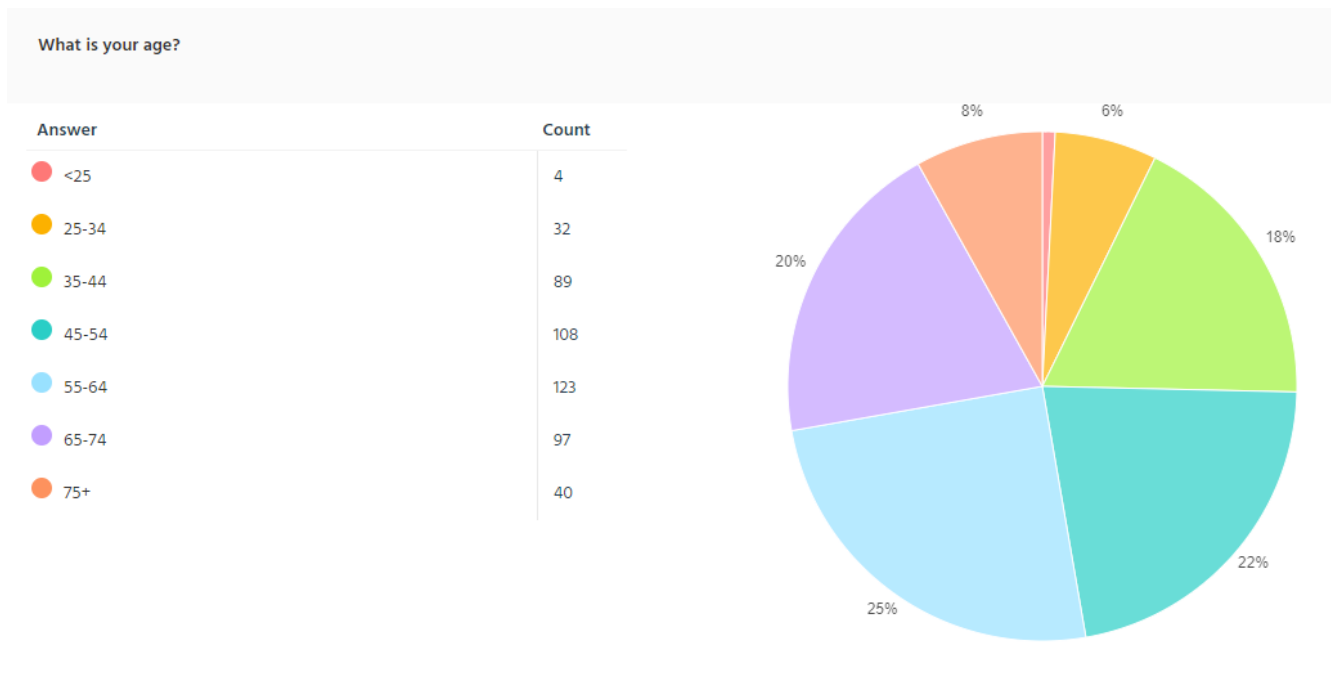
- Property owners
- Nonprofits and cultural attractions
- Retail businesses
- Restaurants/food establishments
- Concord Together

The purpose of each focus group was to gain a deeper understanding on status, challenges and opportunities, and priority strategies that would help make their business, attraction, and overall district be more successful.

## Consumer Survey Findings

### General

The Consumer Survey received 493 responses. 97% of respondents lived in either Concord or West Concord. The respondents ranged across all age categories. 66% of the respondents live or work in one of Concord village centers. 92% were not regular MBTA commuters.



### Accessibility and Frequency of Visits

93% of respondents felt that Concord village centers were readily accessible. 44% of survey participants walk to the village centers and 51% drive personal vehicles. 5% of respondents primarily accessed village centers by bicycles.

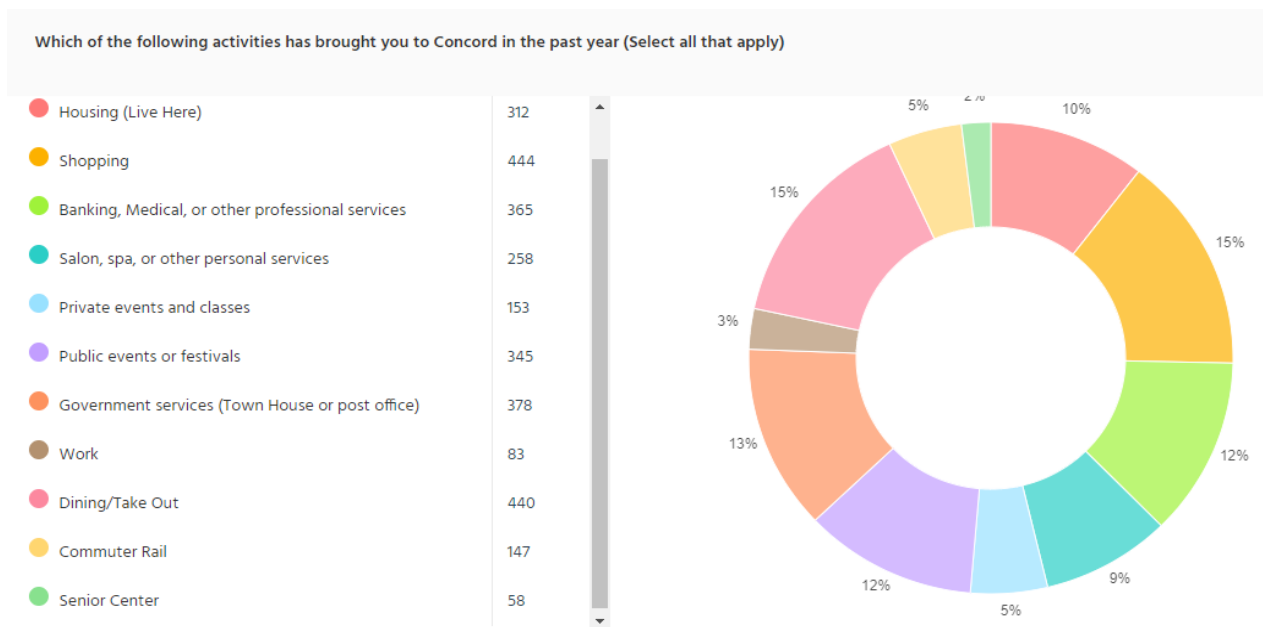
51% of survey respondents visit the Concord villages centers on a weekly basis and 29% visit at least monthly. While respondents visited Concord village centers rather frequently, 56% of those visits were 30 minutes or less. 35% of respondents' visits were 1 to 2 hours in duration. Respondents visited the village centers for a variety of reasons including:

- Professional services – 34% weekly, 35% monthly, 20% quarterly
- Personal services - 4% weekly, 30% monthly, 26% quarterly, 37% never

- Events/classes – 16% weekly, 17% monthly, 28% quarterly, 35% never
- Shop– 25% daily, 53% weekly, 14% monthly, 6%, quarterly, 2% never
- Eat – 7% daily, 51% weekly, 29% monthly, 10% quarterly, 4% never

## Reasons for Visits

Survey respondents visited Concord village centers for a wide range of reasons from work, personal and professional services, shopping, dining, and events. This provides the opportunity for village center businesses to reach different audiences who routinely visit commercial districts.



## What Draws Respondents to Concord Village Centers

Survey participants responded to an open-ended question about what attracts them to Concord village centers. Responses fell into the following various categories:

- Independent retail shops
- Range of dining options
- Coffee shops
- Walkability
- Convenience
- Historic character, charming, authentic feel
- Camaraderie of neighbors
- Market
- Banks
- New England “vibe”
- Libraries
- Energy

## The Impact of Sustainability Initiatives

Respondents indicated a willingness to support businesses that utilized sustainability initiatives in their businesses or organizations. 28% of survey participants preferred business that offered sustainable sourcing or sustainable goods. 21% supported businesses with sustainable operations practices, and 11% offering charging stations. 17% respondents said that sustainability initiatives did not influence their decisions to shop in Concord village centers. Interest in supporting sustainability initiatives may translate into a willingness of participants to pay a premium for sustainable goods and services. 14% said they would “always” be willing to pay a premium, and 69% indicated a willingness to pay a premium “depending on the product.”

## The Impact of Online Commerce

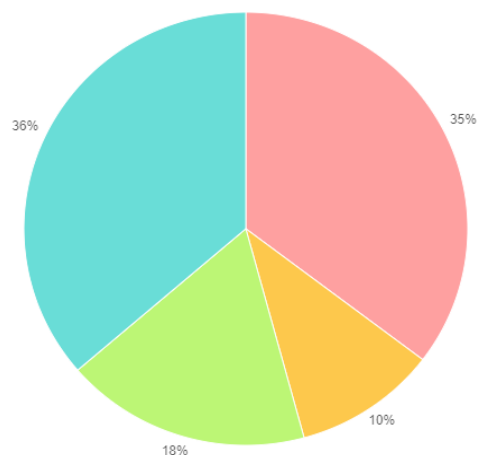
The COVID pandemic accelerated the use of online commerce for convenience and safety. Survey respondents reflect that trend. 40% of respondents utilized online services for ordering and delivery of food and groceries. 60% of respondents do not use online ordering. 54% of respondents use online ordering for retail goods and 46% do not use online services for retail purchases.

## Interest in Shared Space in Village Centers

Respondents indicated an interest in a variety of shared space opportunities in the village centers for co workspace, corporate meetings, commercial kitchens, and maker spaces. 42% of respondents indicate they would potentially utilize well managed, appropriately priced shared spaces in village centers.

Many communities have shared space for office, commercial, or light industrial uses that are used to support small businesses and/or serve as a business start-up space. What kinds of private shared spaces do you want to see in Concord village centers? (select all that apply)

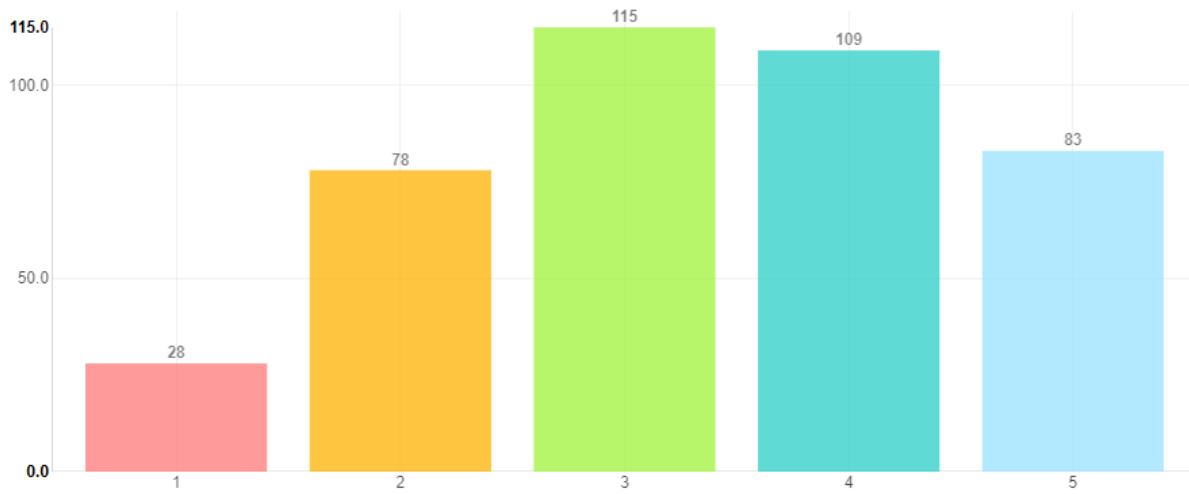
Answer	Count
Co-working office space	142
Corporate event space	42
Commercial Kitchen	72
Community maker-space	146



## Customer Satisfaction with Concord Village Centers

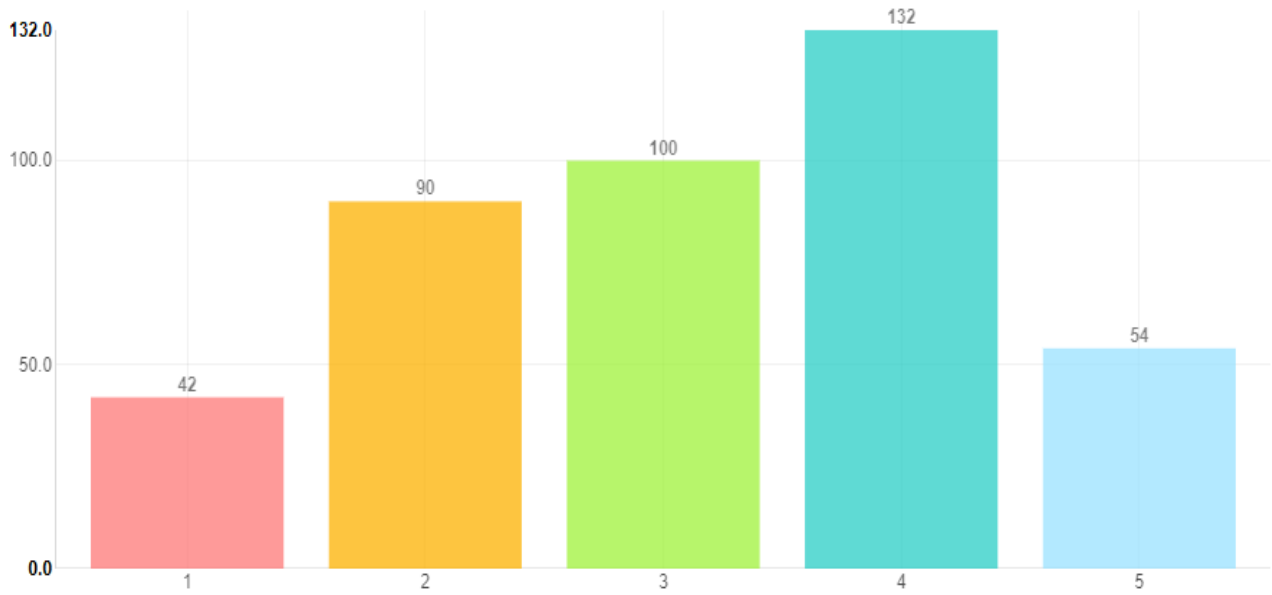
Survey respondents were asked a series of questions to determine how much they agreed with the following statements. Most responses ranged from neutral to slightly positive or slightly negative perceptions of adequacy of parking, shopping, dining, workspace, entertainment, art, and socializing opportunities in the village centers, except for the perception that the village centers lacked sufficient “fun” entertainment offerings.

How much do you agree with the following statement? Concord's village centers have opportunities to meet with friends for a night out (1, Disagree - 5, Agree)



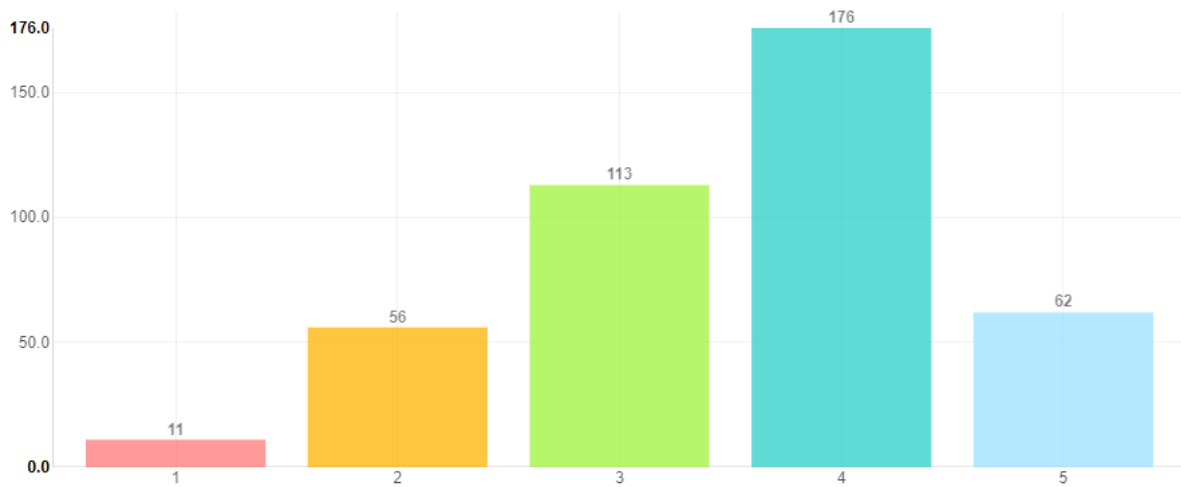
How much do you agree with the following statement? Concord's village centers have adequate opportunities to eat/dine

(1, Disagree - 5, Agree)

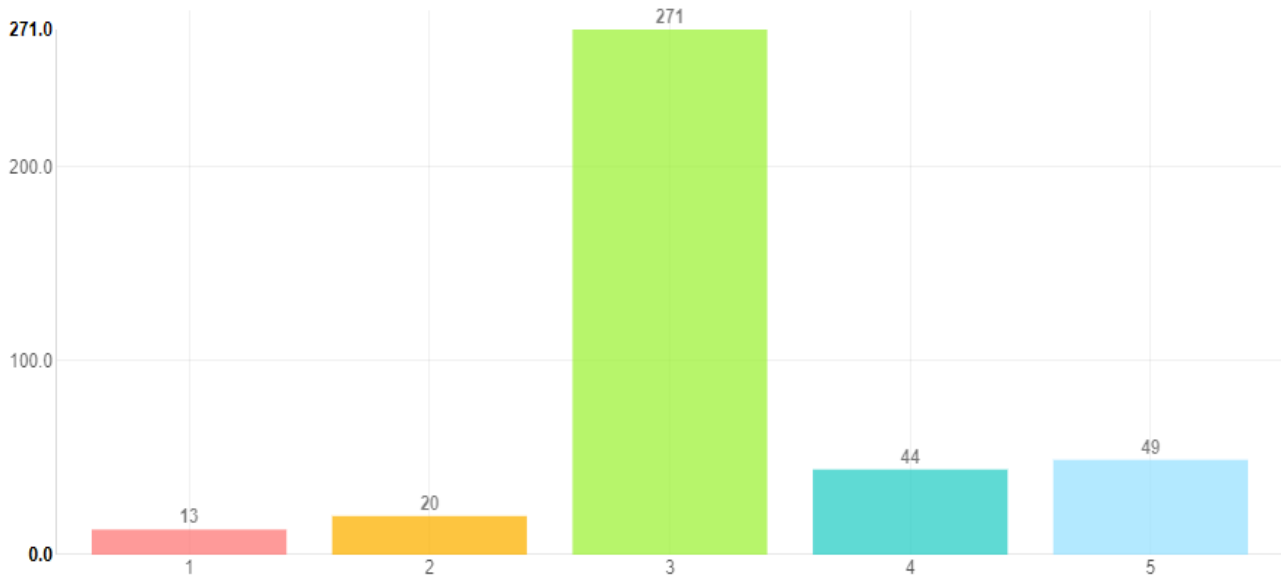


How much do you agree with the following statement? Concord's village centers have adequate opportunities to shop

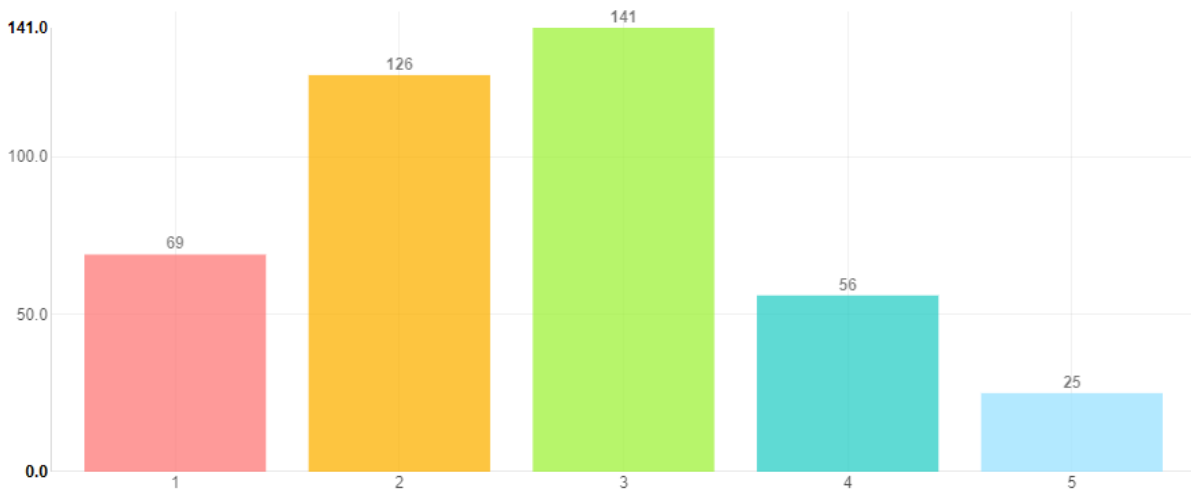
(1, Disagree - 5, Agree)



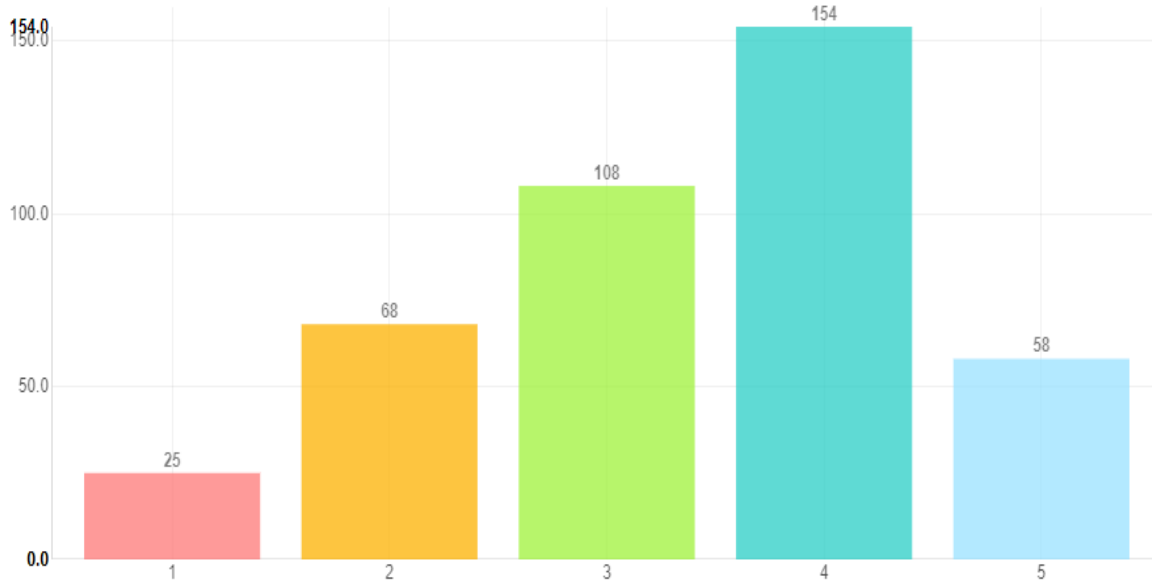
How much do you agree with the following statement? Concord's village centers have adequate workspace/office space options  
(1, Disagree - 5, Agree)



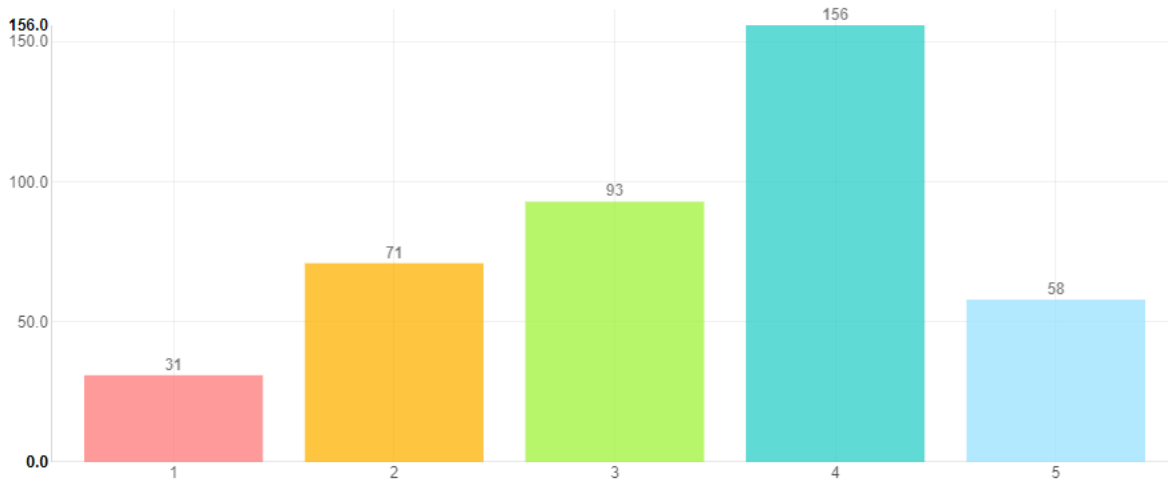
How much do you agree with the following statement? Concord's village centers have adequate entertainment options/fun things to do (1, Disagree - 5, Agree)



How much do you agree with the following statement? Concord's village centers have adequate public art, festivals, and public events (1, Disagree - 5, Agree)



How much do you agree with the following statement? Concord's village centers have adequate parking and transportation options (1, Disagree - 5, Agree)



## What's Missing in Village Centers

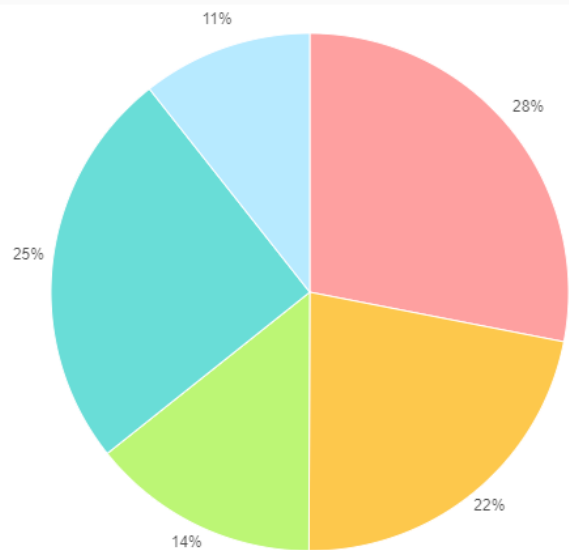
Concord village centers have a good mix of professional services, retail, dining, workplace, and entertainment options as noted in the open-ended comments by survey participants. There were also recommendations for improvements to the villages centers that bring additional social and economic activity to the districts. These include:

- More options for dining including fine dining, full service, and healthy casual dining
- More independently owned retail
- Activities to develop the next generation of retail entrepreneurs – pop ups
- Safe bikeways
- Improved public gathering spaces
- More entertainment options like live music, ice skating, movies, performances
- WIFI and improved cell service
- Brewery/ beer gardens
- Better coordination with historic and cultural attractions
- Cross-promotions to capture visitors
- More activities in village centers – particularly West Concord and Concord Center
- More public events like farmers/arts markets, retail promotions, film festival
- Restaurant week
- Expanded permanent outdoor dining
- Wayfinding
- Communications and central calendar
- More active use of public spaces

The following charts illustrate most common suggestions.

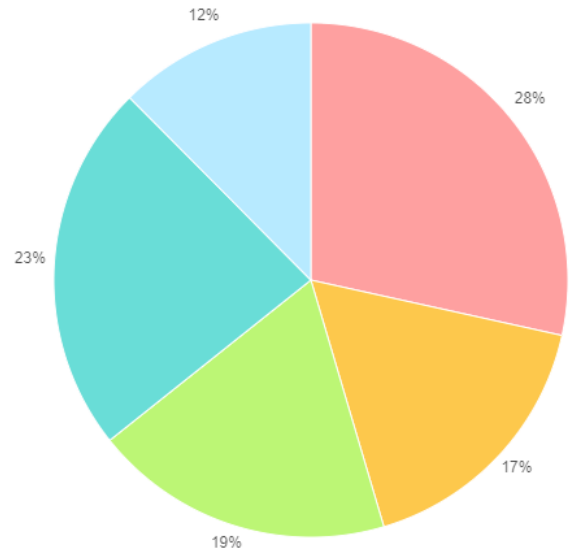
What additional food and beverage business types would you like too have in Concord's village centers (select all that apply)

Answer	Count
Full service restaurants	272
Brewery with a tasting room	213
Grocery Store	138
Healthy fast-food	243
Other/None	103



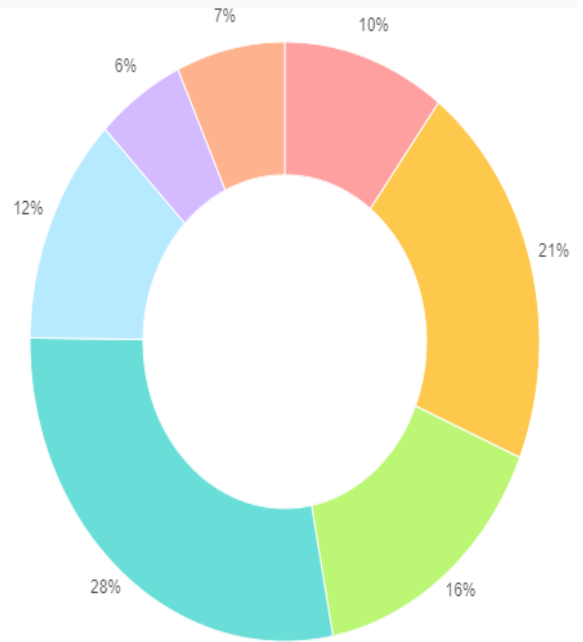
What additional retail business types would you like too have in Concord's village centers (select all that apply)

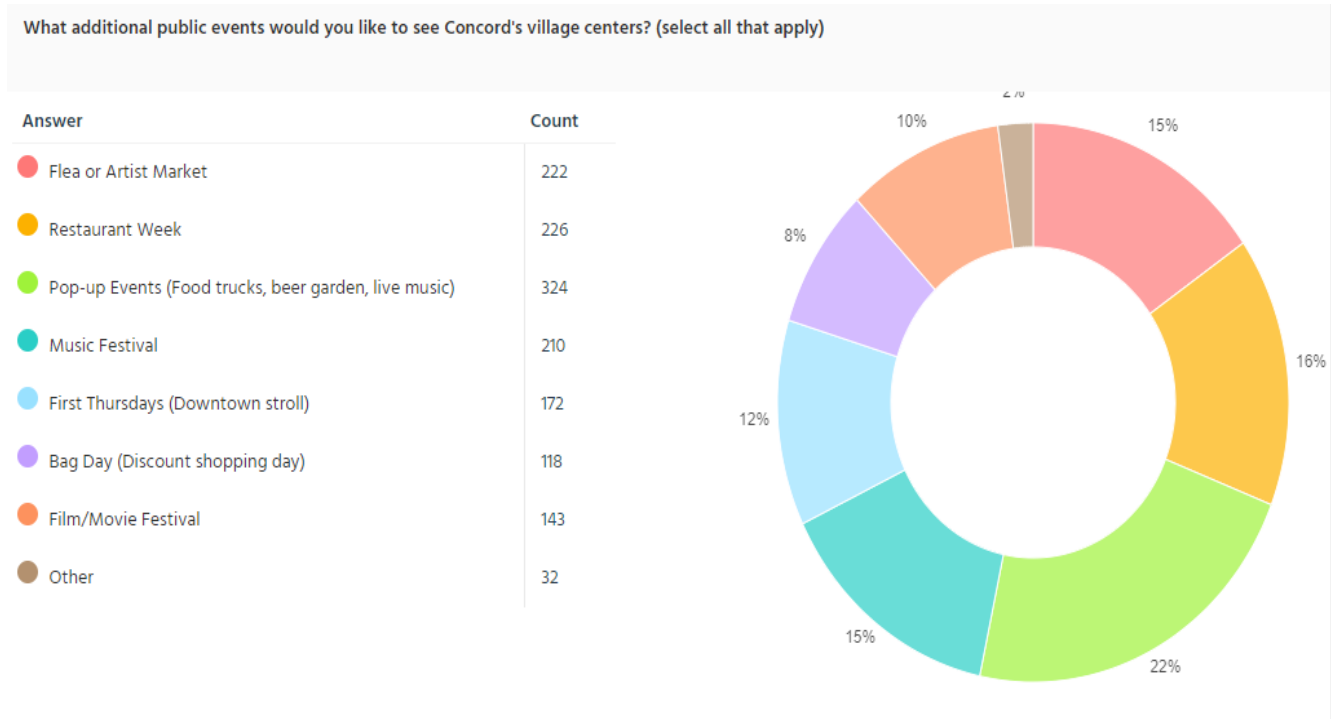
Answer	Count
<span style="color: red;">●</span> Kitchen and cooking	208
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> Consignment/clothing store	124
<span style="color: lightgreen;">●</span> Furniture and homewares	138
<span style="color: teal;">●</span> Games/kids toy store	170
<span style="color: lightblue;">●</span> Other/None	91



What additional entertainment options does Concord need? (select all that apply)

Answer	Count
<span style="color: red;">●</span> Performing Arts/Theater	87
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> Movies	177
<span style="color: lightgreen;">●</span> Ice Skating Rink	132
<span style="color: teal;">●</span> Live Music	238
<span style="color: lightblue;">●</span> Bowling Alley/Candlepin	104
<span style="color: purple;">●</span> Giant Sidewalk Chess/Game	47
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> Other	58





## Business Survey Findings

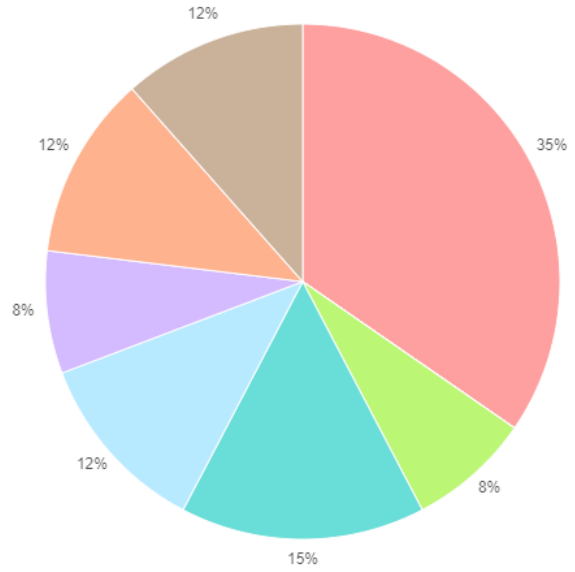
Concord has economic assets that contribute to its economic vitality, unique character, and quality of life that are critical to preserve and strengthen. Concord’s village centers are particularly important as vibrant business, historical, and cultural centers that provide valued amenities to residents and are attractions for visitors. The village centers proximity to transit, amenities, and active businesses also make West Concord, Concord Center, and Thoreau Depot areas desirable business locations. The future economic vitality depends on tackling three critical challenges:

- Business characteristics and satisfaction with location
- Impacts of COVID
- Opinions regarding potential strategies to support business and improve the commercial districts or doing business in Concord.

The business survey questions were built on the surveys conducted by Concord Together during the pandemic as well as those used in the Local Rapid Recovery Plan program offered by the Commonwealth. Twenty-five businesses responded to the survey. Their responses were generated from each village center with sixteen business responses from Concord Center, 2 from Thoreau Depot, and 7 responses from West Concord. A good cross section of businesses participated in the survey representing retail, food service, personal services, professional services, arts and entertainment, nonprofits, and other stakeholders. There were businesses of diverse sizes from sole proprietors to businesses with more than fifty employees participating in the survey. Respondents were split almost evenly between tenants and property owners. All respondents were business owners or senior managers for the organizations.

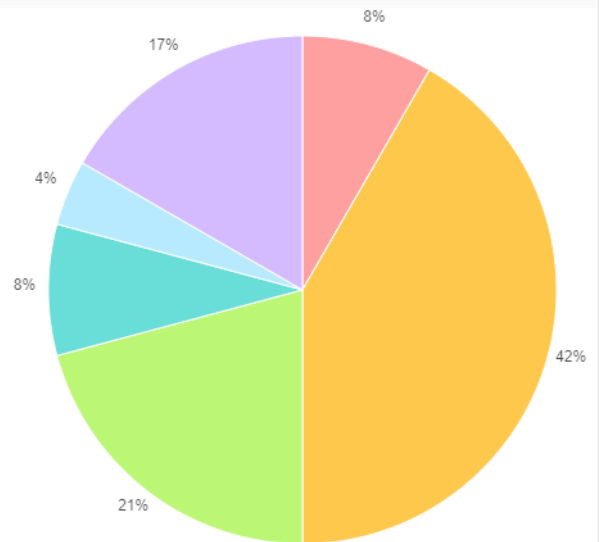
Please select the category that best fits your business

Answer	Count
Retail	9
Food service (restaurant, bar, coffee shop, etc)	0
Personal service (hair, skin, nails, laundry, dry cleaning)	2
Professional, scientific & technical (legal, finance, insurance, real estate)	4
Health Care	3
Arts, entertainment, recreation, fitness	2
Non-profit, community, social services	3
Other	3



Including yourself, how many people did your business employ PRIOR to COVID19, including both full-time and part-time? (If your business has multiple locations, please answer the question as it pertains to the establishment located in Concord.)

Answer	Count
1	2
2-5	10
6-10	5
11-20	2
21-50	1
More than 50	4

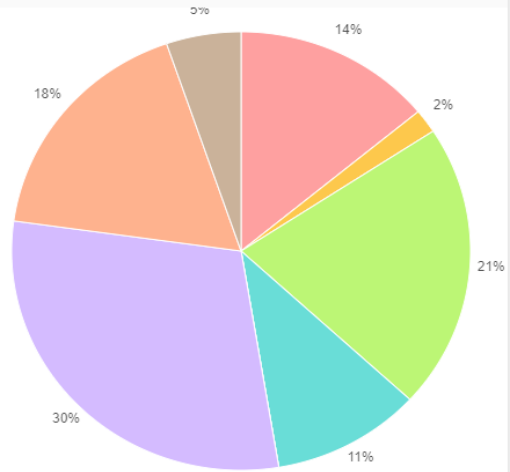


## COVID Impacts

In the 3 years prior to the COVID -19 pandemic, village center businesses responding to the survey saw the businesses increase (13) or stay the same (8). Not surprisingly, this past year the impacts of the pandemic continued to be felt by most businesses who responded. Nearly all the businesses surveyed reported a significant reduction of customers who physically visited the business.

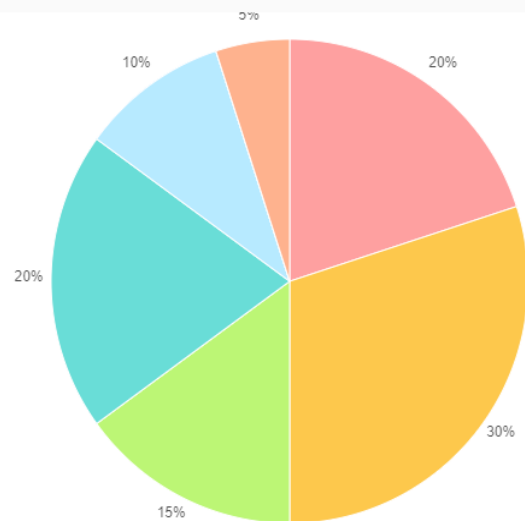
In the last year, has your business experienced any of the following due to COVID19? Please select all that apply

Answer	Count
Decline in revenue	8
Employee layoff	1
Reduced operating hours/capacity	12
Business closure (temporary or permanent)	6
Stopped/deferred rent or mortgage payments	0
Incurring expense to implement safety measures	17
Established alternative mode to sell and deliver products	10
None of the above	3



How did your 2020 business revenue compare to your 2019 revenue?

Answer	Count
Increased	4
Stayed about the same	6
Decreased by 1-24%	3
Decreased by 25-49%	4
Decreased by 50-74%	2
Decreased by more than 75%	0
Don't know/Not applicable	1



## COVID Recovery

65% of the businesses responding to this survey reported that they are operating at full capacity, and 25% were still operating at reduced capacity due to COVID. While businesses are recovering from the impacts of the pandemic, they are still experiencing challenges.

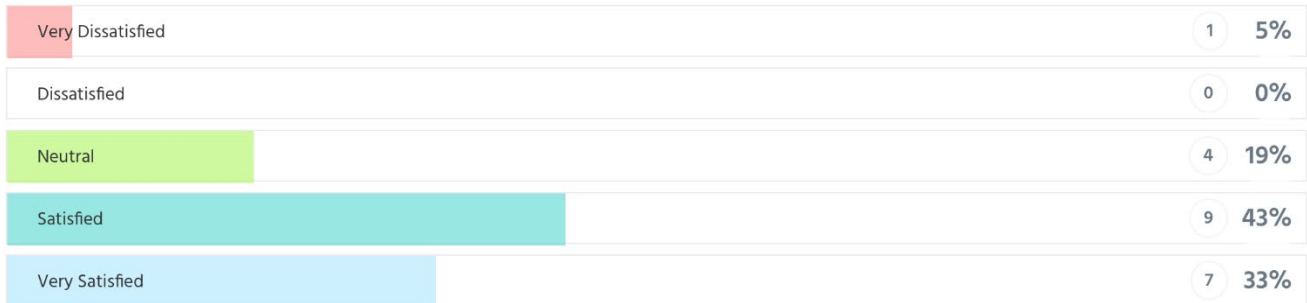
## Business Satisfaction

Business owners responded to a series of questions to gauge their satisfaction with “doing business” in Concord’s village centers. These questions covered a range of issues including the physical characteristics of the village center, local regulations, access to customers, safety and comfort of employees, complementary businesses etc. Survey respondents were mostly satisfied or very satisfied with the village center locations as a place for their business.

Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of the Downtown or Commercial District where you business is located

Physical appearance/appeal

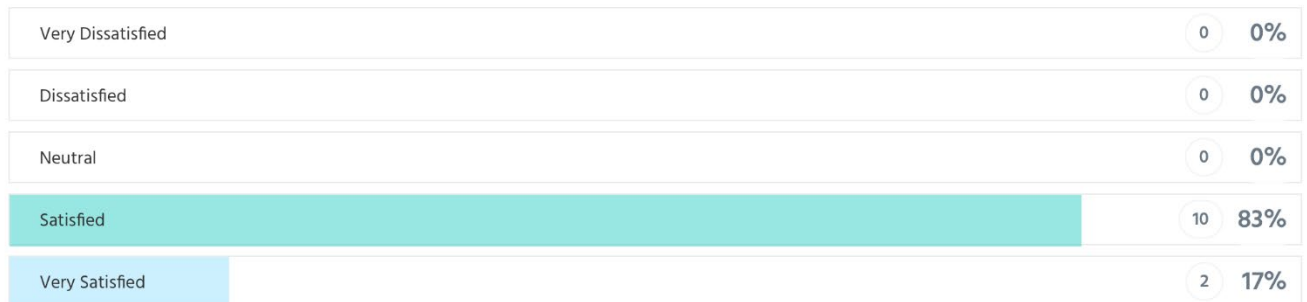
< ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ >



Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of the Downtown or Commercial District where you business is located

Accessibility for customers and employees

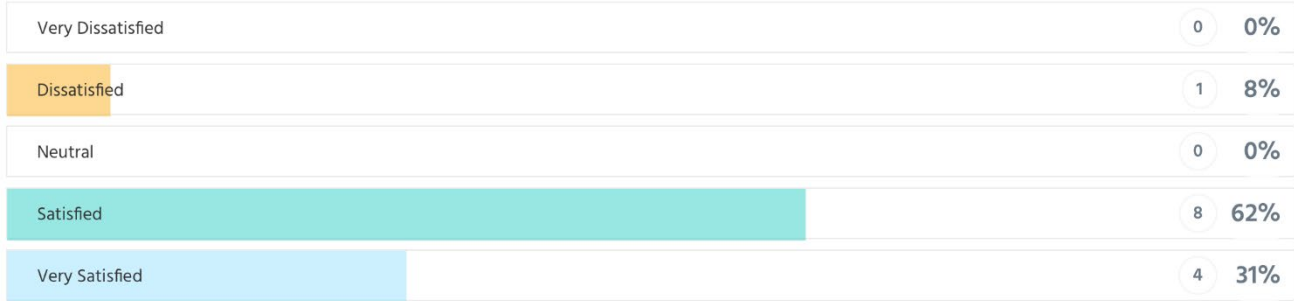
< ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ >



Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of the Downtown or Commercial District where you business is located

Safety and comfort for customers and employees

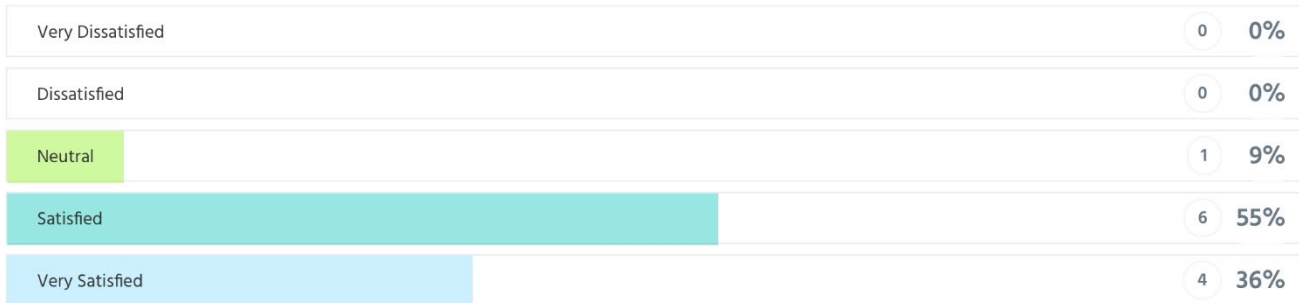
◦ ◦ ◯ ◦ ◦



Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of the Downtown or Commercial District where you business is located

Proximity to complementary businesses or uses

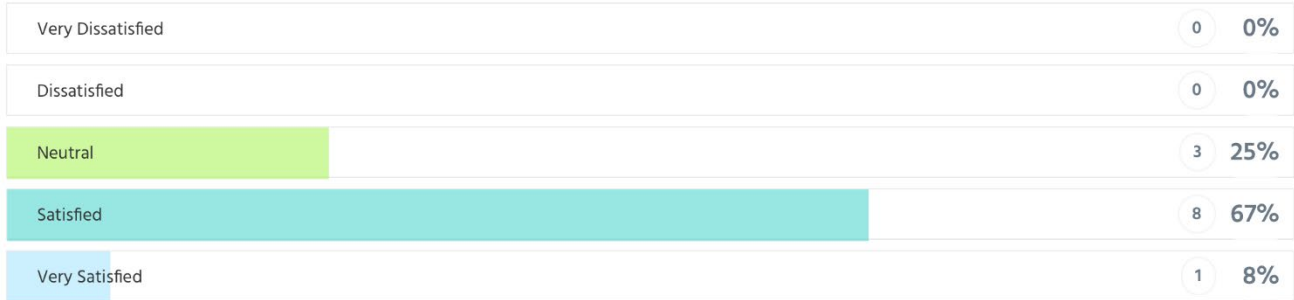
◦ ◦ ◦ ◯ ◦



Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of the Downtown or Commercial District where your business is located

Visibility of your business to potential customers

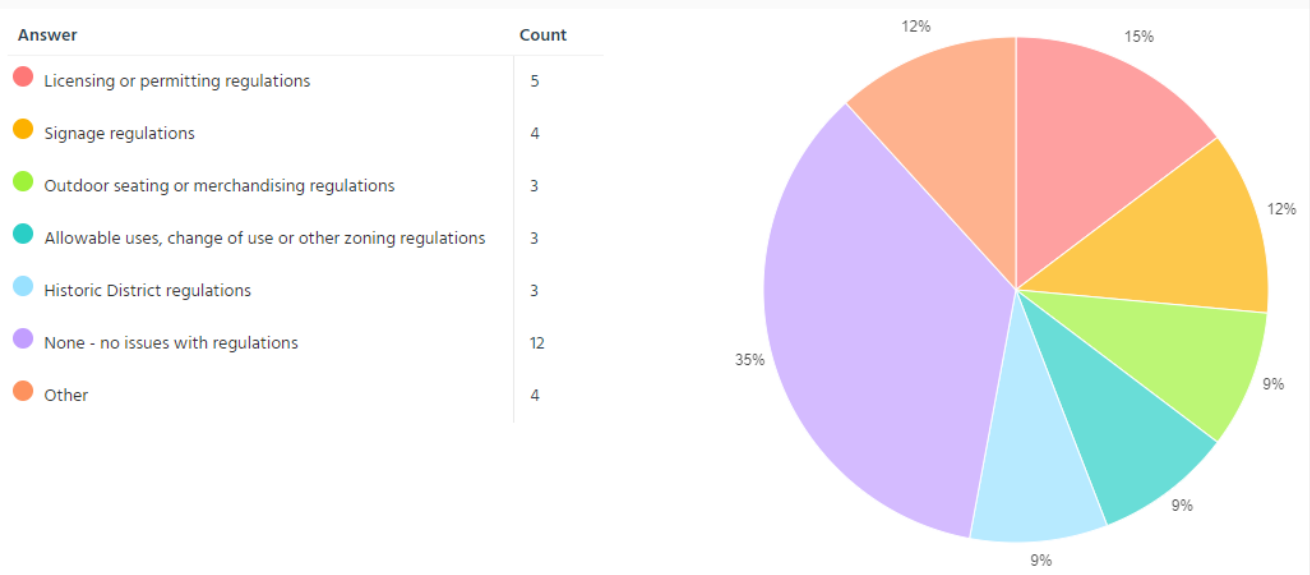
◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦



## Regulatory Concerns

About 50% of survey respondents identified different local regulations that negatively impact their businesses. 35% of respondents had no issues with regulations in the village centers. These issues included licensing and permitting, historic district commission, outdoor dining, merchandising, and zoning related concerns.

Do any local regulations (not related to COVID19) pose an obstacle to your business operation? Please select all that apply

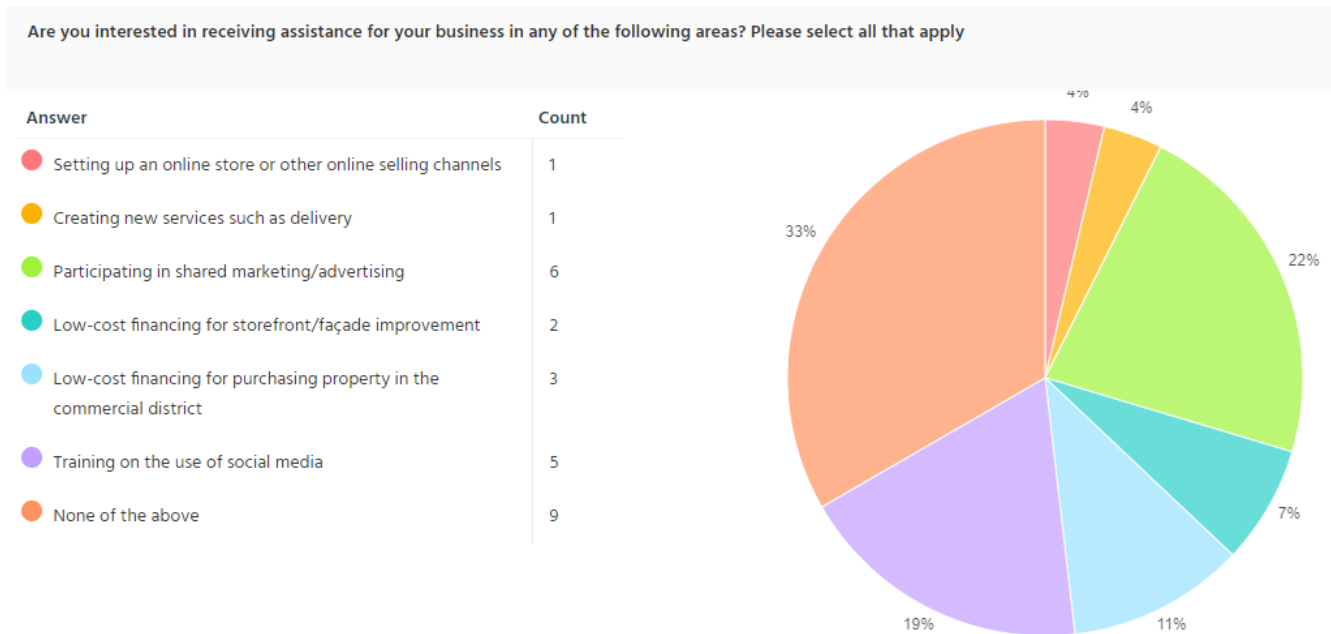


## Participation in Concord Sustainability Initiatives

38% of business respondents have taken steps to sustainably improve their building or operation as a marketing tool. 22% of businesses actively inquire about rebates and other assistance to achieve their sustainability goals, and 14% of businesses are interested in installing electric vehicle charging stations. Businesses indicated that case studies (35%), rebates (53%), customer requests (38%) and availability of coaching (41%) would be the most compelling ways to assist them in implementing sustainable improvement for their business or building operations.

## Business Assistance /Urgent Needs

Businesses were surveyed on what form of assistance would help their business grow in a Concord village center.



Additionally, businesses ranked their most urgent needs and other suggestions. These included:

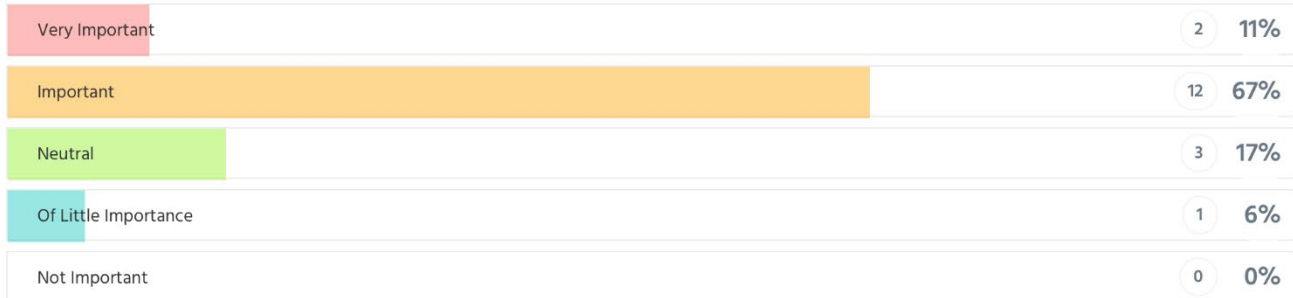
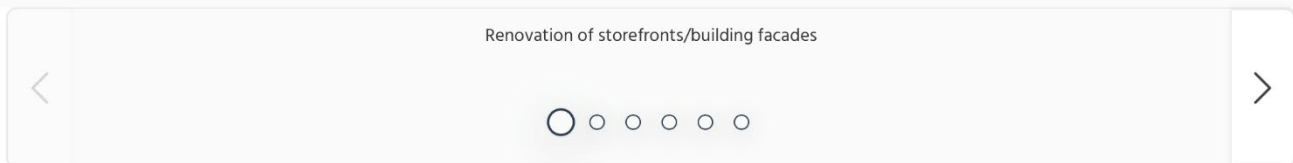
- Rent/ utilities
- Marketing /Communications
- Help securing funding - loans, SBA, PPP, grants
- Employees
- Help understanding town guidelines and navigating zoning process – expensive and time consuming
- Renovations or safety improvements related to COVID
- Help building e-commerce or social media sites
- More active ground floor uses (fewer real estate office on ground level)
- Improvement cleanliness/ maintenance in West Concord center
- Wayfinding signage to attractions

## Business Feedback to Strategic Activities to Improve Concord Village Centers

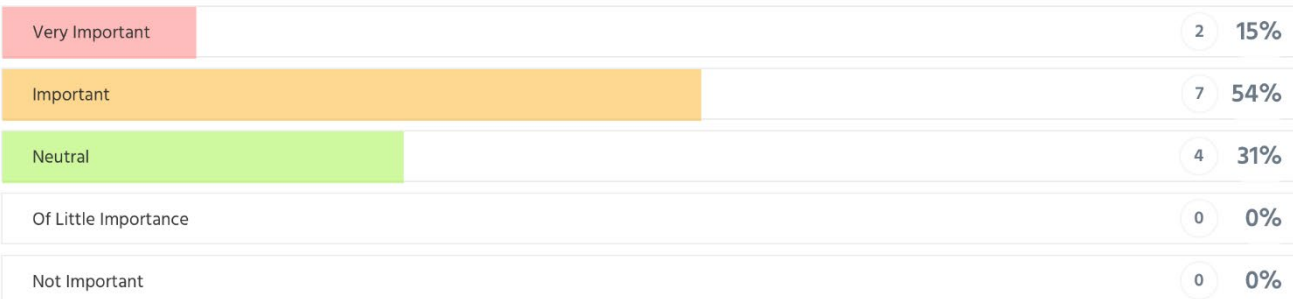
### Physical Environment, Atmosphere and Access

The following approaches to address the physical environment, atmosphere and access in village centers ranked by businesses by their order of importance. Most respondents feel that improvements to the physical environment are either very important or important. Respondents perceived improvements to biking and public transportation to be neutral to important /very important to their businesses.

A few approaches to address the physical environment, atmosphere and access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



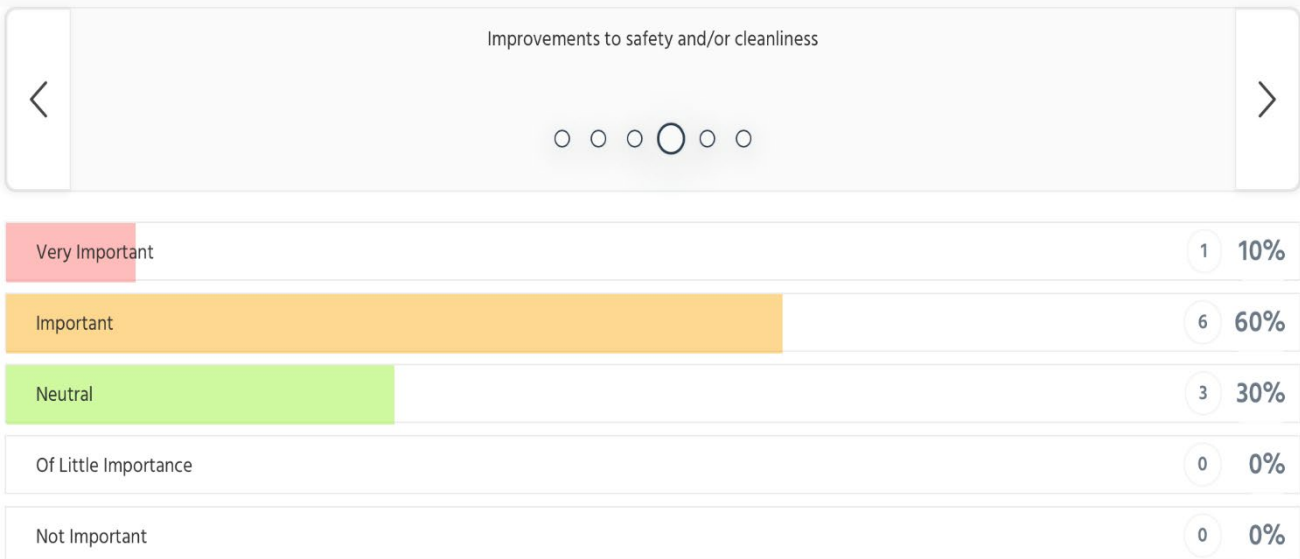
A few approaches to address the physical environment, atmosphere and access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



A few approaches to address the physical environment, atmosphere and access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



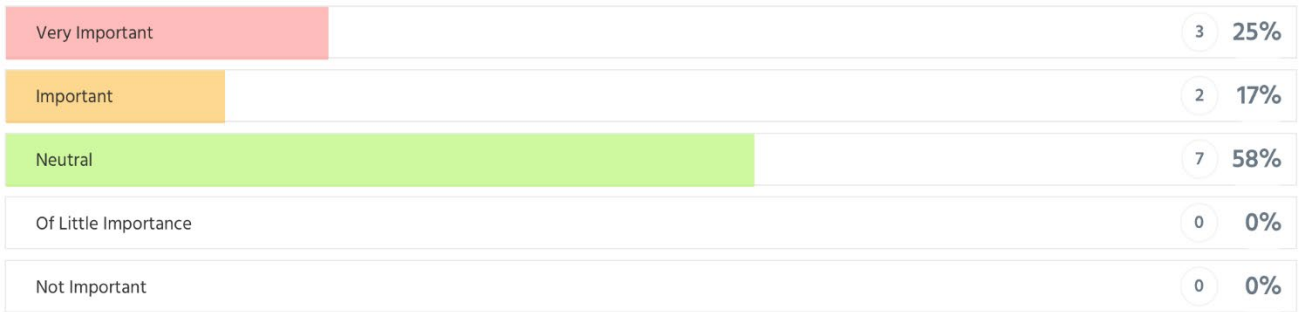
A few approaches to address the physical environment, atmosphere and access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



A few approaches to address the physical environment, atmosphere and access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?

Amenity improvements for public transportation

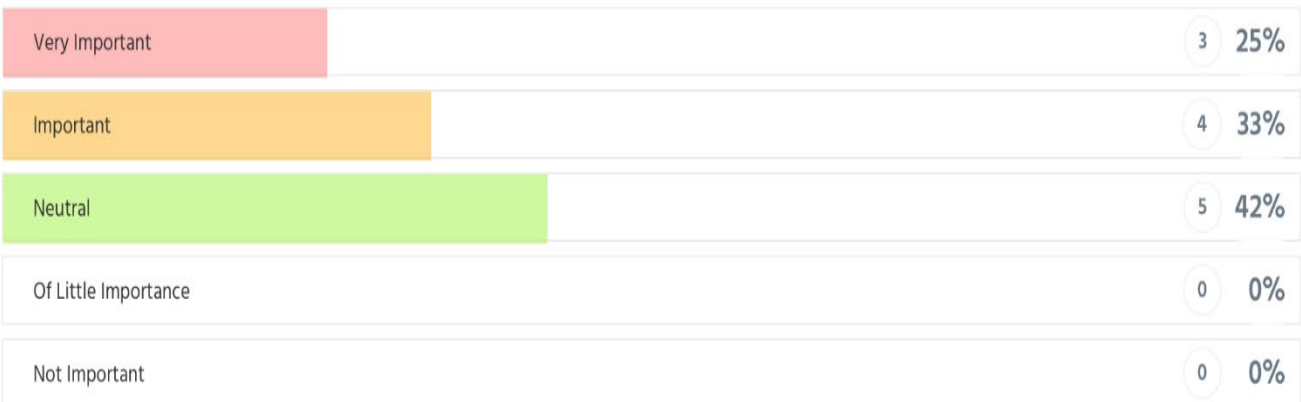
◁ ○ ○ ○ ○ ● ○ ▷



A few approaches to address the physical environment, atmosphere and access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?

Amenity improvements for bicycle riders

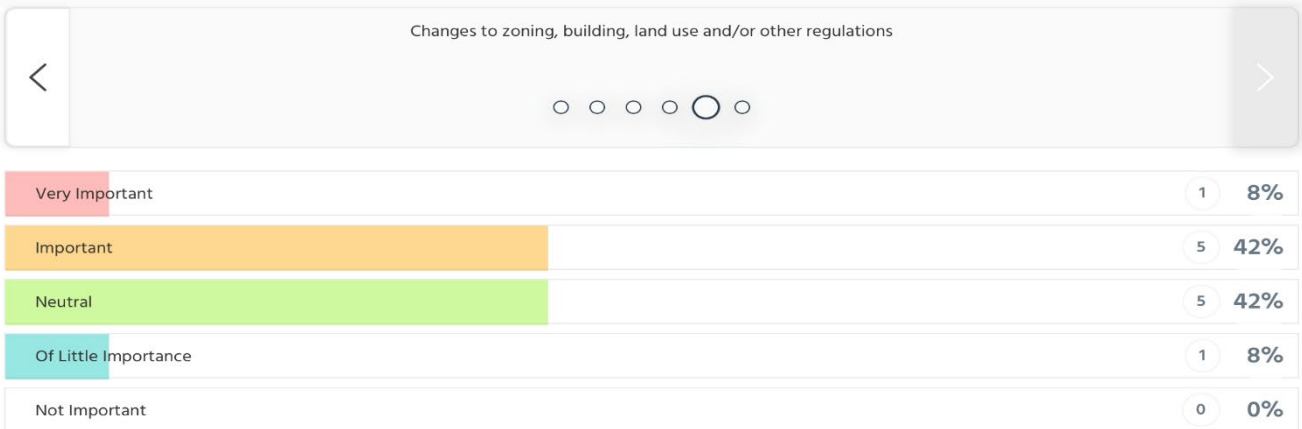
◁ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ● ▷



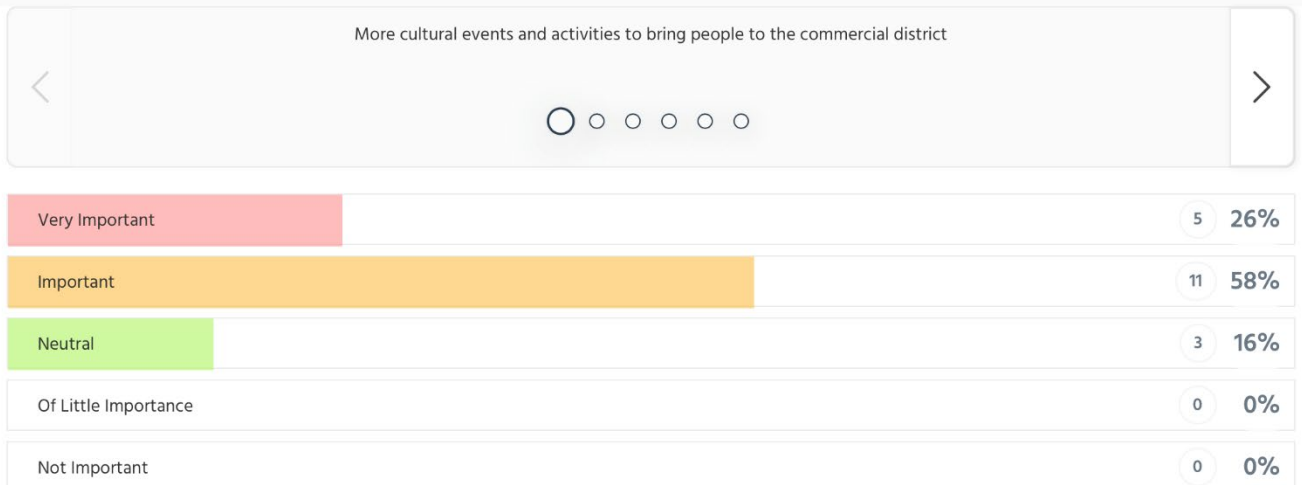
## Attraction and Retention of Customers and Visitors

Business survey respondents feel that activities to attract and retain customers and visitors were important or very important to improve outdoor dining and retail sales, marketing, creating more cultural events and implementing recruitment strategies. Respondents were more neutral on creating a management entity. Changes to regulations and zoning generated a wider range of response with 50% of respondents ranking it as important or very important and 50% ranking it as neutral or of little importance.

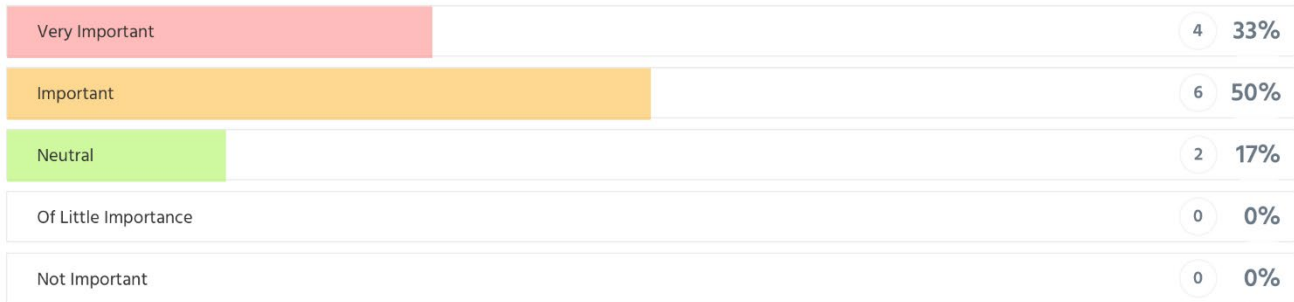
A few approaches to address the attraction and retention of customers and businesses in Concord's commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



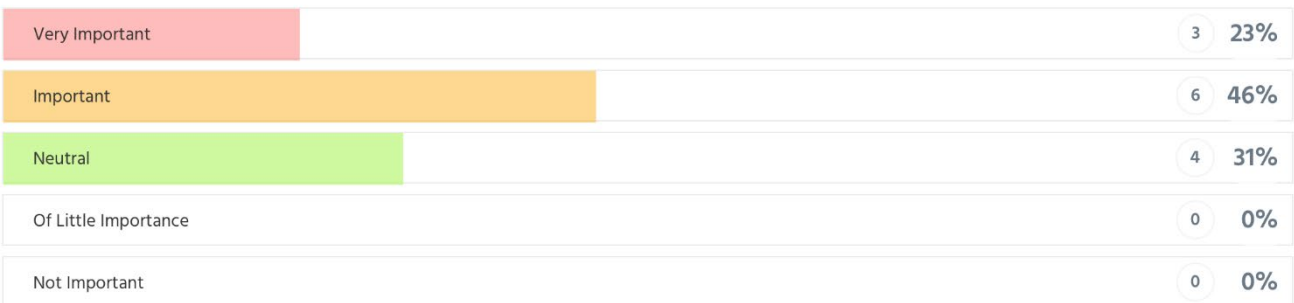
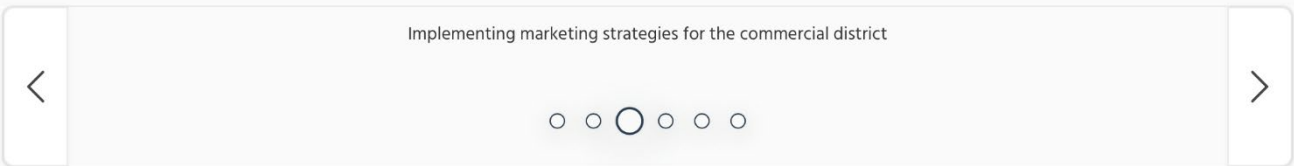
A few approaches to address the attraction and retention of customers and businesses in Concord's commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



A few approaches to address the attraction and retention of customers and businesses in Concord's commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



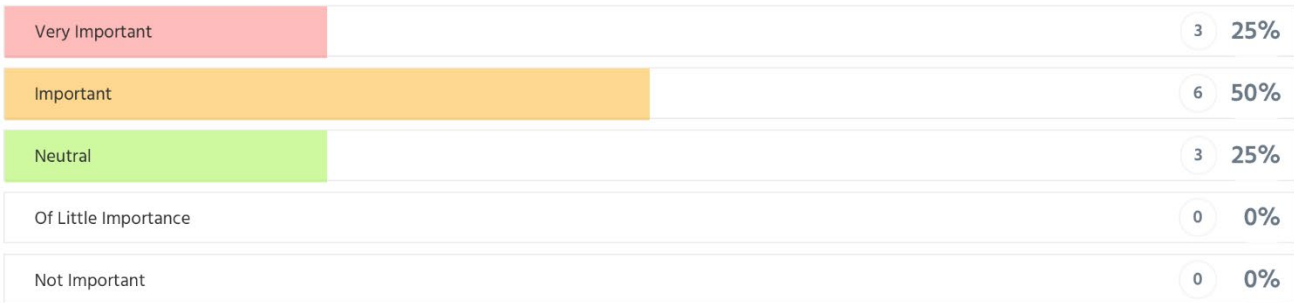
A few approaches to address the attraction and retention of customers and businesses in Concord's commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?



A few approaches to address the attraction and retention of customers and businesses in Concord's commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?

Recruitment programs to attract additional businesses

○ ○ ○ ● ○ ○



A few approaches to address the attraction and retention of customers and businesses in Concord's commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important or necessary are each of the following strategies?

Create a district management organization to spearhead activities

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ●



---

## Focus Groups Findings

**Focus Groups** - Focus groups provide the opportunity to have a more in-depth conversation with specific stakeholders from Concord's village centers and representatives from Concord's major visitor attractions. The focus groups were selected to help identify the issues and opportunities that directly impact specific businesses or attractions. Distinct groups will offer insight on the priority projects around which there is consensus and support from Concord stakeholders. The focus groups provide valuable insight on identifying strategies that will have the most impact. The five focus groups were:

- Commercial /retail businesses
- Arts/ cultural/visitor attractions
- Property owners
- Food and dining
- Concord Together

The focus groups were 1 hour facilitated conversations focusing on their business/ organizational response to COVID, strategies for COVID recovery and a discussion of challenges, opportunities and strategies that could be employed to create stronger, more vibrant village centers. Participating focus group members were engaged and actively participated.

## Retail Focus Group

### Business Environment

Businesses have chosen to locate in one of Concord's village centers because it is a unique mix of other businesses, "character and New England charm," loyal support of residents and fellow business community. Additionally, the visitor/ tourist activity offers a potential market for Concord businesses to capture. Some businesses chose their location because of its proximity to their home, and the balance of family/business life it offered. Participants felt that Concord was a good place to locate a business and would recommend to others. For some participants, there were concerns about challenges with regulatory, zoning and other approval processes that hindered their ability to do business and detract from the otherwise attractive business environment in Concord. Participants expressed a desire to see a more streamlined regulatory process and more "business supportive" approach from boards and town government.

### COVID

- **Impacts**

Participants in the retail focus groups provided a powerful picture of the impacts of COVID on their retail businesses and their efforts to survive and recover from the pandemic. Participants described the initial impacts as "swift and stark". Most businesses closed or dramatically reduced their hours of operation, and lost staff. They embraced new or expanded to digital platforms to offset the lack of in person customer activity. This included utilizing Facetime, Venmo, online sales, inventory management software and other digital tools. Most businesses received little or minimal relief from property owners during the pandemic. All business participating in the focus group lost revenue and experienced layoffs.

---

Retailers continue to feel the impact of hiring workforce. One participant described her typical part time worker as “moms doing it for cocktail money” and the convenience of a part time job, or highschoolers. These workers are no longer looking for opportunities for employment, placing additional stress on the small business. Employers described themselves as “tired and stretched thin.” The impacts of the pandemic are not over for small businesses in Concord.

- **Support**
  - **Buy Local Initiatives** – Retailers were buoyed by support of Buy local initiatives that were launched during COVID. Customers reported that they chose to live in Concord in part because of the independent retailers in the village centers and acknowledged that these businesses would be lost if residents did not support them during the pandemic and going forward. Retailers also saw a trend of residents no longer commuting and more likely to shop local businesses to show their support. Retailers want to see the Buy Local effort continue.
- **Concord Together** – Retailers in the focus group felt strongly that the voluntary Concord Together group was critical in helping businesses through COVID. Their efforts to organize support, raise money and promote local businesses was acknowledged as crucial to their business’s survival.
- **Grants** – Grants made available through community efforts were helpful in bridging lost revenue, purchasing technology, equipment and other COVID related necessities.
- **Fellow Business Support** – Focus group participants felt Concord businesses banded together to support each other during COVID.
- **Technology** – While some businesses are seeing a drop-in online activity, most see the benefit of expanding their use of technology to augment/enhance the in-person retail experience.

## Recommended Strategies for Village Centers

Retail focus group participants feel that Concord village centers have strong potential as a location for their business and a good location for new businesses. They offered the following recommendations for consideration:

- **Unlock Visitor Market for Concord businesses**– The visitor market offers potential for retailers. Increase efforts to work with historic sites and other visitor attractions to cross promote, develop marketing opportunities and reasons for visitors to frequent village center businesses.
- **Wayfinding**- Improve wayfinding to help visitors and locals navigate to village centers, retail and dining opportunities. This may include, maps, web-based listings, digital tours, signage etc.
- **Public Restrooms** – Create public bathrooms for visitors. Retailers expressed a need for public bathrooms to relieve requests from patrons and visitors.
- **Concord walking tours** - Offer walking tours of village centers for residents and tourists.

- **Improve Transportation Linkages / Trolley** - Establish a trolley or shuttle service to connect visitors arriving by public transportation to village centers and attractions.
- **Concord Together / Chamber of Commerce** – Develop sustainable organizational capacity to continue work of Concord Together to organize and mobilize the community to support an economically and social vibrant village center and community of Concord. The need to identify how that is achieved was acknowledged by focus group participants.
- **Produce More Planned Events in Village Centers** – Develop more planned events and reasons for people to visit Concord village centers (particularly in West concord and Concord Center) to increase foot traffic for retail stores.
- **Improve WIFI /Cell Service** – Improve WIFI and Cell service in village centers. Retail businesses need improved service for their business operations and to support customers.
- **Streamline Regulatory and Permitting Processes** – Create a more “business friendly” permitting and regulatory process. Encourage town to “put out the welcome mat” for businesses, streamline processes and assist in the navigation of approvals to save time and money.
- **Facilitate Outdoor Seating/Retail** – Create more opportunities for outdoor seating for dining and retail by using public and private locations. Make it easier to implement outdoor seating by utilizing techniques successful in other communities.

## Property Owner Focus Group

### Business Environment

A small group of owners participated in the property owners focus group. Owners represented traditional office, restaurant and retail spaces in Concord Center and West Concord. Property owners feel that the Concord village centers are undergoing a considerable amount of change. More service businesses are taking up prime retail ground floor space. Owners realize that residents want retail options and support “Buy Local,” but many independent retailers find ground floor retail space expensive and competing for other types of uses. Owners commented that Concord Center has transitioned from “a place where you went to get things you needed to a place for galleries and real estate offices.” Property owners struggle with the conflict of renting to a tenant that can pay a market rent, such as a bank, versus a tenant that might contribute to a more robust retail mix in the village centers. Focus group participants also commented on a perceived “anti -business, anti- development bias of citizen boards and town officials that could be addressed to make the village centers more attractive to new development and businesses interested in Concord. There are no significant parking issues, particularly during COVID, but there will be pressure on available parking as visitors and businesses return to pre-pandemic levels and if Buy Local initiatives continue to be supported. Property owners need better cell and wireless service in village centers to help make their properties work for tenants.

Concord village centers are perceived to be good locations because of walkability, tourists, local resident support and a core group of interesting retail and dining options.

---

## COVID

- **Impacts**

Property owners participating in this focus group were not substantially impacted by COVID. Property owners made modifications during COVID. Examples included:

- Some focus group property owner participants were also business owners who closed their on-site location but continued to serve their clients remotely. Emerging from COVID, some professional services businesses are maintaining a hybrid model that is working for the employers and employees. Their sales and services were not negatively impacted.
- Some owners/businesses implemented curbside pickup and delivery services to offset in person interaction with customers.
- Property owners with tenants occasionally saw an increased demand for office space for remote workers.
- Property owners with retail or restaurant tenants occasionally offered relief to tenants on rents during COVID.

- **Support**

**Buy Local Initiatives** – Property owners supported efforts to promote Buy Local to support their tenants and businesses. More residents were looking for local services and goods, remote work locations and outdoor options.

- **Concord Together** - Property owners valued the work of the voluntary Concord Together group to bring the community together to support businesses during COVID. The Concord Together efforts to organize support, mobilize the community and promote local businesses was acknowledged as important to helping many of their tenants make it through the pandemic.

### **Recommended Strategies for Village Centers**

Village center property owners participating in the focus group feel there are opportunities in Concord village centers for property owners. They offered the following recommendations for consideration:

- **Continue Buy Local Initiatives** - Property owners endorse Buy Local initiatives to support retail tenants in their properties. These initiatives help tenants recover from COVID and be successful in Concord.
- **Adopt a Business-Friendly Approach - Streamline Permitting/ Regulatory Process/ Change Zoning** – Focus group participants felt that the Town and citizen Boards should adopt a more business friendly attitude toward property owners and businesses looking to locate in Concord. Recommendations included implementing a more streamlined permitting process, updating current zoning to be more business friendly, providing better web-based guidance for navigating the permitting process, and creating an ombudsman position to assist businesses interested in Concord.

- 
- **Hire Economic Development Professional to Develop an Economic Vision for Concord-** The Town should hire dedicated economic development staff to create an economic vision for the town and actively pursue its implementation.
  - **Concord Together /Organizational Capacity–** Property owners acknowledged the importance of the volunteer effort of Concord Together to organize and mobilize the community to come together during COVID and felt this effort should continue. They feel the efforts of Concord Together has shown a light on the importance of supporting local businesses. Property owners feel there is a need to develop the organizational capacity to do these activities that may include the Chamber of Commerce, Concord Together or other approach to district management.
  - **Evaluate Parking and Plan for Parking Improvements/ Improved Management -** Participants believe that future investment in Concord villages centers will impact parking and recommend that the Town consider exploring ways to utilize existing assets, develop shared use agreements and other parking initiatives.
  - **Land Conservation Trust for Commercial Properties -** Consider creating a Land Conservation Trust or other ways to incentivize property owners to utilize their properties to benefit the vibrancy of village centers.

## Food and Entertainment Focus Group

### Business Environment

A small diverse group of food related business owners participated in the food and entertainment focus group. Participants included a range of food-oriented businesses from farms to markets to dining/entertainment establishments. Participants feel that Concord is a good environment for their businesses because of the demographics and economic strength of the community. They also believe customers welcome the opportunity to be in person, enjoy outdoor dining, and participating in opportunities to socialize now that COVID restrictions have begun to ease. COVID had a significant impact on their businesses, and they are just beginning to recover. Some owners noted their businesses have bounced back more quickly in Concord than other communities in which they have operations. They also feel that the Town and boards present challenges for their businesses to recover from COVID and thrive.

### COVID

- **Impacts**

COVID had a significant impact on food and entertainment-based businesses. COVID safety mandates forced businesses to significantly reimagine their business model, daily operations, customer safety, service delivery, online reservation systems, curbside pickup, staffing, and use of technology. Business owners felt that COVID required them to be resilient, creative, and resourceful, and they are not “out of the woods yet”. There were some changes that were made during COVID that owners would like to maintain and need cooperation from the Town to support.

---

- **Support**

**Outdoor Dining-** Implementing outdoor dining was helpful for those businesses who were able to create outdoor dining and curbside delivery to serve customers. Businesses would like to see the outdoor dining experience expanded, facilitated and embraced by town officials. Customers love it, and they believe it adds vitality to village centers.

**Buy Local Initiatives-** Food based businesses benefited from Buy Local initiatives supported by Concord residents.

**Concord Together** - Restaurant and food-oriented business owners benefited from Concord Together efforts to promote local businesses and bring people together.

### **Recommended Strategies for Village Centers**

Food and entertainment-based businesses participating in the focus group feel that the village centers in Concord would benefit from more food-centric businesses to create vitality, support retail, and capitalize on the resident and tourist markets. They offered the following recommendations for consideration:

- **Facilitate and Expand Outdoor Dining** – Outdoor dining was extremely popular with diners and critical to restaurants during COVID. Focus group participants stated that “outdoor dining creates energy, adds life to the street, brings people together and creates a European feel that people love.” Food establishments would like to see outdoor dining fully supported by the town. This may include:
  - Identifying outdoor locations for seating
  - Adopt a “problem solving” approach and attitude within town hall to make outdoor dining, attractive, affordable, and available to food-based business.
  - Adopting best practices from other communities (Mass.gov Outdoor Dining Toolkit)
  - Consider bylaw changes to support outdoor dining
- **Coordination with Visitor Attractions and Retailers** – Develop more collaborations and coordination with visitor attractions and retailers. Dining supports retail and extends the visitor stay in Concord.
- **Marketing and Public Relations** – Promote village center businesses and dining through websites, collaborative marketing, and other activities.
- **Physical Amenities** – Add more flowers, landscaping and other amenities to beautify village centers.
- **Create More Events to Draw People to Village Centers** - Produce events to give people additional reasons to come the Concord village centers. Experiments with live music were well received and attracted people to their businesses.

- 
- **Create Resources Within Town Hall to Help New and Existing Businesses** – Focus group participants suggested several ways to make Concord more business friendly including:
    - Create an online resource for businesses to guide them through the permitting and zoning process
    - Create a “one stop shop” - Consider identifying town staff dedicated to work with businesses to coordinate permitting and approval processes.
    - Use best practices from other communities to streamline permitting and approval process to reduce bottlenecks and costly delays.
    - Adopt as a town mission to become “business friendly” – moving from an attitude of “no” to “problem solving to get it done.”

## **Nonprofits and Cultural Attraction Focus Group**

### **Business Environment**

Concord has an impressive collection of cultural and historic visitor attractions that draw an international audience. The nonprofit and cultural attraction focus group included representatives from all of Concord’s cultural and historic attractions. The focus group generated a lively discussion and recommendations for consideration. Like other businesses, the visitor and cultural attractions in Concord are slowly recovering from COVID and beginning to bring back tours, classes, events, performances, and major fundraising events. Concord historic and cultural attractions continue to be a significant destination driver for Concord and the region. Focus group participants see the opportunity for more collaborations, promotions and cooperative interactions with the town and other businesses in village centers.

### **COVID**

- **Impacts**

COVID had a direct and immediate impact on cultural and visitor attractions. Most were closed for extended periods of time, resulting in a loss of revenue from rentals, attendance, programming, classes and annual fundraising events, staffing, and services to the community. Some attractions took this time to do strategic long-range planning, grant development, planned renovations, sustainability improvements, and technological improvements. Organizations provided classes online with mixed success (specifically with young children). Some organizations brought performances and lectures online and offered the opportunity to reach new international audiences. Online sales of art proved to reach new markets and bring revenue into the organizations. All organizations implemented safety and other protocols including timed entry reservations, guided tours, vaccine protocols and other tools. Some of the strategies and techniques required by the pandemic have been permanently adopted, but organizations are enthusiastic about welcoming back visitors and classes in person as well as online.

- 
- **Support**

**Technology / Online Platforms** - The use of technology to provide a conversion of classes, performances, lectures, virtual tours and other programming to an online audience was instrumental to keeping connections to patrons and the community.

**Concord Together** - Efforts to pull together the community were important to lend support during the pandemic for all cultural and historic venues. Concord Together was instrumental in that role.

**Visitor's Center Town Effort** – Focus group participants feel the visitors center is helpful in promoting attractions, events, and coordination.

## **Recommended Strategies for Village Centers**

Cultural and Historic attractions feel there is tremendous opportunity to capitalize on their presence in Concord and the visitors and residents they serve. Many attractions have an international audience and routinely draw visitors that are unfamiliar with Concord and its other assets and businesses. They also hope to continue to build positive relationships with the town and boards to help them address their needs to serve the visitors who visit. The focus groups made the following recommendations to leverage their attractions to help build strong village centers for consideration:

- **Improve Communications- Create a Flagship Bulletin Board** - Build on the work of the Visitors Center and individual organizations to develop a robust centralized information site for coordination, cross promotion, calendars, classes, tours. Focus groups participants feel this would “elevate the wonderful resources” available through Concord’s historic and cultural sites.
- **Improve Transportation linkages and Wayfinding for Visitors** – Create better transportation connections from MBTA to village centers and attractions. Consider a shuttle or van service to facilitate connections. Create better wayfinding signage to direct visitors to attractions, shops and dining.
- **Branding** - Brand Concord as a destination for visitors and residents. A branding effort will require buy in and participation by attractions, town and businesses to be successful.
- **Streamline Permitting and Approval Process**- Implement changes to current approval processes to streamline the process to save time, money, and problem solve more effectively. Organizations stated that it “feels the town does not fully understand the value of the institutions and what they contribute economically, culturally and socially to Concord.” If processes were improved, it would enable the attractions to better service the visitors and the functioning of their organizations.

---

## Concord Together Focus Group

Concord Together is a voluntary group organized during COVID to offer tactical, financial, and emotional support to the community of Concord and its businesses. Key stakeholder groups, town, and volunteers brought people around a common agenda. Throughout this analysis, survey respondents and focus group participants acknowledged its impact, the organization and success it had on businesses and residents. As one focus group member stated, “Concord Together made everyone realize they needed to support local businesses and cultural organizations, or they would be lost forever”. As Concord moves out of the pandemic, Concord Together is also transitioning, but the need for the organizational structure and the role it has played to bring the community together still exists. As part of this analysis, we convened a Concord Together focus group to assess how to continue the momentum Concord Together generated, its model and future direction of the work.

### What worked:

**Time Availability** - During COVID people had time available and wanted to help support businesses and their community. “Everyone had free time on their hands and wanted to help”.

**Inclusivity** - Focus group participants commented that the volunteer group invited anyone and everyone to participate. “Everyone spoke freely,” and “there were so many great moments” as people met this call to action.

**Focus** – Concord Together was “focused on action” and creating a “lifeline” for businesses and organizations.

**Collaboration**- The focus groups participants agreed with the statement – “It took a disaster to bring a community together to work together.”

**Town Cooperation** – Town relaxed its regulations and adopted a cooperative attitude to support the efforts. Town Manager was incredibly supportive of the effort.

**Volunteer Structure** - Concord Together was not a formal organization. It was “organic” and grew in a very natural way that appealed to participants. Focus group participants referred to Concord Together as their “tribe” and valued the relationships that were developed.

### Challenges

**Time Availability of Volunteers** - As COVID retreats and lives return to a more normal schedule of work, school, and homelife, volunteers find themselves “stretched to the max and are done”.

**Bandwidth of Other Organizations** – There is interest and support from the town and Chamber of Commerce to support some aspects of the work but no one organization currently has the ability to take on the challenge to continue Concord Together.

---

**Continued Need for Organizational Capacity** – Feedback from the business and community surveys and focus groups identified recommendations for strategic activities that would support the economic and social vitality of Concord village centers. To successfully implement these recommendations, both the town and stakeholder support will be necessary. Determining what organization or strategic partnership to steward this work forward will be instrumental in its success.

### **Recommended Strategies:**

**Convene Concord Together Group Reunion Discussion-** Concord Together Chairs will convene a reunion of Concord Together to discuss interest, future direction and sustainability of current effort.

**Explore Partnerships or Other Organizational Models** –The momentum and success of Concord Together is valuable to the long-term economic vitality of Concord village centers and visitor attractions. Concord stakeholders and town should work to determine a sustainable approach to continue the work of Concord Together in its current or modified form.

**Make Concord Together the Town Brand** - Build on goodwill of Concord Together as a brand for Concord.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

Common themes and recommendations appeared throughout the business and customer surveys and focus group recommendations to add vitality to Concord village centers. They can be grouped into the following major categories:

**Enhance Public Amenities** - Improve public amenities in village centers to encourage the active use of public spaces, support the ease of navigation between village centers and visitor attractions, improve technology and physical appearance of the village centers. Recommendations included:

- Maximize the use of public spaces for events, dining, and recreation
- Enhance WIFI and internet connectivity
- Add wayfinding signage
- Enhance landscaping /flowers in public spaces
- Create transportation linkages/ trolleys
- Visitors Center / public bathrooms

**Expand Programming – Create Reasons for People to Visit** - Work with businesses, town and visitor attractions to develop and implement a robust calendar of programming in village centers to provide more reasons for people to visit, dine, shop and extend their time spent in village centers. A sampling of recommendations include:

- Expand outdoor dining and retail opportunities
- Create music and cultural events
- Create opportunities for pop up retail
- Collaborations with retailers and attractions

---

**Marketing and Communications** – Adopt a comprehensive approach to marketing and communications to promote the village centers and Concord as a whole. Recommendations included:

- Expand participation on Visitor Center website to promote dining, retail, attractions
- Create Concord Brand
- Develop cross promotional opportunities with retailers and attractions
- Walking tours and wayfinding
- Events
- Retail recruitment

**Improve Town /Business Relations** - A common theme that emerged in survey comments and focus groups was the need to improve the perception that the town and citizen boards are not “business friendly” in relation to their neighboring communities. Not all participants shared this opinion, but it was a common theme in all focus group conversations. Recommendations to address this concern included:

- Streamline regulatory and permitting processes for town and citizen boards.
- Establish a webpage designed to assist businesses with information of requirements.
- Designate a town economic development professional to help businesses navigate the process and work with businesses.
- Adopt a consistent culture of “business friendly” assistance within town departments and boards.
- Adopt best practices to facilitate outdoor dining.
- Create an economic vision for village centers that is adopted by boards and town officials.

**Sustainable Organizational Capacity** - Determine the appropriate model to continue the work of Concord Together. While there is agreement that the Concord Together was highly effective and important to continue, there is currently no consensus on what organization or group of organizations will continue the momentum of Concord Together going forward. Recommendations to consider include:

- Continue Concord Together if there is sufficient interest from volunteer group and sustainable resources for programming.
- Formalize a partnership with existing organizations, like the Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders and town to continue Concord Together work.
- Consider forming a new district management organization to continue Concord Together as a formal organization dedicated to supporting Concord’s village centers.