



CENTER CITY  
DISTRICT



# CENTER CITY Digest

## Accelerating Recovery in 2024

Do Philadelphia's civic, business and political leaders have what it takes to fashion the city we say we want: a growing, prosperous, diverse and inclusive place? Or will the response to the extraordinary challenges of these last three years relegate us to the left-behind land of *A Nation of Wusses*, as Ed Rendell bluntly titled his autobiography a decade ago?

### Good News First

Center City District's (CCD) June recovery report (see page 8) documented restoration of all 126,500 jobs Philadelphia lost in the spring of 2020 and highlighted that we've now surpassed February 2020 levels by 16,400 jobs. Center City's population continues to grow, more office buildings are being converted, and conventions, tourism and retail are all rebounding, pedestrian vitality is almost fully restored in most portions of downtown.

But perceptions of public safety still lag, even as crime numbers decline. Staffing levels for police remain low, as uncertainty about their role and mission persists. Center City's challenges, to be sure, pale in comparison to those in Kensington, though the problems are connected. Office vacancy is rising, challenged by a partial return to office and reinforced by a wage tax that encourages suburban residents to remain remote. Still, 62% of workers of all kinds were back in Center City in June compared to June 2019, while workers in the office district have steadily risen to 57%.

Center City and University City remain the primary engines of prosperity and opportunity, together providing 53% of all of Philadelphia's jobs. Because they are well-positioned at the center of a multi-modal transportation system, more than half of these jobs are held by neighborhood residents of all skill levels. But if more workers, including those in local government, are not motivated to return and if more underutilized buildings are not refilled or converted to other uses, more moderate wage and entry level jobs are put at risk. Cuts to transit when federal recovery resources run out next year could further undermine access to opportunity for those who may not be able to afford a car or the price to park downtown.

### Lessons from San Francisco

The disturbing prospect of such a downward spiral was apparent last May in San Francisco, where I participated in an Urban Land Institute panel advising local government on ways to restore vitality to their downtown. BART had just floated the idea of reducing regional transit to hourly service.

Arriving a day early on Sunday, I clicked on a mobile app to jump on a bike (speaking of wusses, it was electrified). From media stories, I anticipated a post-apocalyptic landscape with homeless addicts everywhere. To be sure, there were desperate scenes in the Tenderloin, but no more than our local failures in Kensington. The city still had extraordinary natural amenities and scenic views. Adjacent

residential neighborhoods were thriving, as were nodes of tourist vitality. Yes, there was a dearth of workers during the week. Among America's 25 largest downtowns, San Francisco lags most because of a heavy dependence on IT firms and long commutes. But this was hardly the city on the edge of extinction, described by prophets of doom.

A colleague recommended *Season of the Witch* — neither the song nor movie—but David Talbot's cultural history of San Francisco from the 1960s to the 1980s, as it remade itself from a declining, working class port to an international metropolis—long before the advent of information technology.

Talbot evokes the grit of industrial decline, the horror of Hells Angels stomping concert attendees to death at Altamont, the "Zebra murders," Jim Jones' Peoples Temple cult that ultimately ended in Jonestown, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the AIDS crisis, the political assassination of the mayor and gay-rights activist and councilman, Harvey Milk, not to mention earthquakes. Such was my summer reading.

Yet, despite crushing challenges, San Francisco rebounded in 1990s, prospered and will do so again. Think of the utter devastation of Lower Manhattan on 9/11. New York City built back a more diverse downtown, as it is doing again. Philadelphia has its share of triumphs offset by self-inflicted wounds.

But Talbot's book is a reminder that cities are resilient. They are places that continually reinvent themselves; places that require determined leaders to fashion new futures. So consider just two of our current challenges: remote work and public safety.

### Is Hybrid and Remote the Future We Want?

Virtual meeting apps have expanded the extraordinary flexibility first proffered by email and digital phone technology, freeing us from limitations of place, connecting us globally and creating work-from-anywhere scenarios beneficial to both employers and employees. But few major technological changes come without downsides.

Late 19th and early 20th century industrialization and urbanization created enormous new sources of wealth for business owners, new products and services for consumers and unprecedented opportunities for immigrants and for African Americans to escape rural poverty. But it also resulted in overcrowded slums, unsafe working conditions, inadequate wages, discrimination and systemic racism that's taking decades to overcome. So, too, the freedom and flexibility automobiles and suburbanization offered to middle class families in the 1950s and '60s resulted in dramatic increases in homeownership and improved living standards. But it also left us a legacy of unsustainable, regional development patterns and the underside of urban redlining, the abandonment of cities and the concentration of poverty.

When office workers are remote, they gain flexibility with childcare and reduce the costs and time of commuting. But they also undercut demand for jobs in building management, maintenance, security, transportation, retail and restaurants. These jobs cannot be performed remotely and rely on the presence of other workers. Unionized janitorial jobs in offices downtown are currently off by a third. Weekday lunchtime business is a memory for many restaurants.

But there also may be losses in innovation and creativity for firms when workers cease interacting face-to-face. There are missed, unplanned conversations in elevators, hallways and on street corners, random meeting of colleagues from different departments that spark new ideas. There is a loss of on-the-job learning as staff no longer gather in the same room, especially

for younger workers for whom these settings serve as informal moments of apprenticeship. Last month, even Zoom recognized the benefits of collaboration and mentoring when it called its employees back for at least two days per week.

This is a hard assertion to prove, but in 2020 we had years of stored-up social capital from conversations and experiences with colleagues that facilitated communication in a shorthand that made the shift to virtual almost seamless. Three years on, many new employees have yet to meet all of their peers in person and have far fewer reference points of shared experience. Again, this doesn't negate the value of virtual meetings. It is just a reminder that they are not a panacea, nor as substitute for old fashioned human interaction.

What is most encouraging is that Comcast and many other large- and medium-sized employers are moving this fall toward a greater presence in the office. They recognize that hybrid makes sense for some activities and some employees, but they value the collaboration, communication and creation of a cohesive corporate culture when everyone comes together. Most are making this transition not by edict, but through engaging events and by offering new office amenities and programs. Those businesses with their own event and marketing teams can easily direct some resources internally. Others may benefit from outside assistance.

This fall, CCD is presenting a series of morning and evening pop-up events on Center City office plazas and at key transit hubs. Modeled on our successful series last spring and summer, these free events are part of a multi-pronged effort to support the return to office by creating a welcoming presence for workers arriving in the mornings and providing lively destinations to mingle after work. (see page 9). Looking ahead to November, let's imagine a scene in which our new mayor stands with those major firms that have long been back to announce the return of city workers.

### Restoring A Sense of Public Safety

When the CCD was formed in 1991, we embarked on a unique, long-term partnership with the Philadelphia Police Department, just as it was embracing "community policing." During the 1960s and 1970s, police had been incident driven, patrolling behind windows

of air-conditioned cars, responding to 911 calls, jumping out to make arrests and then departing. Priority went to serious (Part One) crimes: murder, rape, arson and armed theft.

By the 1980s, despite decreases in serious crime, communities continued to tell pollsters across the country they did not feel safe. Partially, this reflected the omnipresence of guns in America and the way television and movies highlight violence. But many felt police were simply not focused on the problems that made them feel unsafe. An evocative metaphor, broken windows, helped to redefine "public safety." Just as one untended broken window emboldens those with rocks to break the rest, ignoring petty crimes and misdemeanors conveys implicit permission to perpetrate more serious crimes. Put simply, things felt out of control.

The focus on *quality of life* converged with community policing. With scarce resources, police were urged to rely less on Part One crimes as the organizing principal for patrol and instead to ask residents and businesses: "what makes you feel unsafe?" Rarely would anyone suggest that serious crimes be ignored. Rather, most communities wanted priority given to day-to-day disturbances and misdemeanors: drug dealing on corners; retail theft; disruptive behavior and broken beer bottles in playgrounds; smashed car windows; graffiti on storefronts and in schoolyards. Most requested visible, approachable officers on foot and on bikes.

Rather than respond only to 911 calls, police were encouraged to be proactive and diagnostic, using computer mapping to analyze locations that generated repeat calls for lesser infractions. Often it was discovered that situations like domestic disputes, usually beyond the purview of law enforcement, could degenerate into violence if left untended.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of CCD's partnership, uniformed and unarmed Community Service Representatives, serving as good will ambassadors and as eyes and ears, were co-located in a police substation in CCD's office to ensure close collaboration with sworn officers, patrolling on foot and on bicycles.<sup>2</sup>

In 2002, the partnership substantially expanded with the creation of Philadelphia's Community Court, under the jurisdiction of the First Judicial District (FJD). The court heard cases from across 10 police districts,

<sup>1</sup> For a more sustained discussion of these themes, see Paul R. Levy, *Rethinking Public Safety for Cities*, *The American Downtown Revitalization Review*, Volume 2, 2021: [centercityphila.org/uploads/attachments/cclphpkbb1cmomqd24jp7zpm-rethinking-public-safety-strategies-for-cities-prl-theadrr-v2-2021.pdf](https://centercityphila.org/uploads/attachments/cclphpkbb1cmomqd24jp7zpm-rethinking-public-safety-strategies-for-cities-prl-theadrr-v2-2021.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Over the years, this partnership has grown, as CCD, Project Home and the police collaborate in a jointly-delivered homeless outreach program six days per week. CCD and the police also host bi-weekly coordination meetings that bring all public and private security groups downtown together to analyze and respond to trends.



spanning four Councilmanic Districts, home to 420,000 Philadelphia residents, or almost one-third of the city’s adult population. Traditional adversaries in the criminal justice system came together to focus collaboratively on crimes that traditionally had fallen below the radar: criminal mischief, vandalism, graffiti, theft from auto, obstructing the highway, prostitution, disorderly conduct, retail theft, defiant trespass, drug and weapon possession, and a range of theft of services offenses: fare jumping, non-payment for taxis or meals.

Under one roof at 1401 Arch Street, Assistant District Attorneys and Assistant Public Defenders worked cooperatively with Philadelphia police, drug and alcohol counselors, social service and medical professionals, staff from the CCD and professionals from the First Judicial District, addressing both the impact and the behavioral problems that led to crime.

The court reduced these crimes significantly by blending together disciplines that are traditionally siloed—criminal justice and social services. Using the authority of the court to provide needed services to individuals who committed these offenses, it focused less on punishment and more on preventing a downward spiral into more serious crime. It offered less expensive and more constructive alternatives to incarceration through community sentences. Supervised

neighborhood and park cleanups and administrative work in social services offices were proscribed as a program of *restorative justice*, repaying the neighborhoods and commercial corridors in which the harm was done.

Formal, independent evaluations showed that in the decade during which it operated, Community Court dramatically reduced the rate of recidivism among offenders and prevented many from committing more serious offenses. From 1993 to 2015, there was a 46% decrease in serious crimes within the boundaries of the CCD. But in 2012, the Court lost its City funding due to budget cutbacks precipitated by the Great Recession, and a process of unraveling began. From 2016 to 2019 there was a 39% upsurge in serious crimes within the CCD.

In 2020, the impact of the pandemic and the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and the host of individuals commemorated in Black Lives Matter protests prompted an even more profound debate about the appropriate role of police and optimal ways to produce public safety. But it also generated demands to *defund* the police that were acted upon in several cities, while in others it produced lower staffing levels as many officers chose to leave the profession or move to more homogenous suburban communities.

As recovery proceeds, Philadelphia’s leaders face the extraordinary challenge in polarized times of finding a vital middle ground: recognizing public safety is paramount to economic recovery, both in low income communities and in the downtown, but understanding it must be produced in new and different ways. Restoring the Community Court should be near the top of the list.

Patrick Sharkey’s 2018 book *Uneasy Peace* urged a renewed commitment to community policing, shifting the role and image of the police officer from *warrior* to *guardian* so that departments become more engaged in, and trusted by, the communities they serve. One can reject racist and illegal police actions and the over-investment in jails yet still affirm an appropriate role for well-trained police in concert with other service providers. The revival of our city depends on it.

**Shaping the City We Want**

Every eight years, we get an opportunity to start anew. Philadelphia has many extraordinary qualities and strengths to preserve and enhance, just as we have much to fix and repair. But the central challenge remains that we are a slow growth city with too few jobs, too few businesses and too few minority firms. This directly accounts for our appallingly high poverty rate.<sup>3</sup> Public safety, competitive tax policies and enhanced educational opportunities are key components of a cure. The time for platitudes is over. It’s time to get to work and shape the city we want..



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The ribbon cutting for the Philadelphia Community Court in 2002.

<sup>3</sup> For a full explication of Philadelphia structural deficiencies see CCD’s report *Firing on All Cylinders*, July 2022. [centercityphila.org/research-reports/firing-on-all-cylinders](http://centercityphila.org/research-reports/firing-on-all-cylinders)