

City Planning 642-001
Spring 2026, University of Pennsylvania
Paul R. Levy

4th Class

<https://centercityphila.org/bidclass>

The role of a business improvement district (BID)
Intermediate scale management: between public & private
How to get things done in cities without robust public sector funding

1. What is a BID & where do they exist?
2. Why form a BID
3. What BIDs do
4. The organizing process

1

2

Defined geographic area from which resources are raised & to which services are provided by entity below municipal scale



First BIA: Bloor Street, Toronto, Canada, 1970
Retail street that was losing market share to other places



3

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Change in transportation technology



Bloor Street in Toronto was served by a major east-west streetcar line, known as the **Bloor route**, which operated until February 1966.

This line was a critical component of Toronto's transit network before it was replaced by Bloor-Danforth Subway that connected to a new regional shopping center.

Undermined competitiveness of a place

Local business leader approached municipal government with proposal:
Can we create a mechanism to generate revenue on a mandatory basis & direct it exclusively to this commercial area to regain market share?



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Business Improvement District (BID)

- Spread to United States; first in New Orleans in 1975 (loss of market-share due to falling oil prices)
- Huge growth in 1990s
- Initially: A response to declining urban market share/suburbanization
- Response to “new federalism” 1980s, declining public resources
Bruce Katz. “the new localism”
- Response to declining local business ownership & leadership (globalization)
- But then spread to successful city and commercial centers
- Expanded globally after 2000

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2025 - 1,200 Business Improvement Districts in U.S.



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Business Improvement District (BID)

- Grounded initially in North American system of decentralized taxation & service delivery
- In United States & Canada BIDs are established under state or provincial law & approved by local municipal govt.
- In North America there is not one national law for BIDs, there are 50 different, though similar laws, in each American state & in each Canadian province
- BIDs as non-profit corporations & municipal authorities (very limited)

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What is a business improvement district (BID)?

- BID is an independent management organization (separate from local government) whose purpose is to improve the competitiveness & attractiveness of a commercial area
- BIDs do many different things in many different cities depending on local needs, priorities & the types of businesses that are within the BID area
- BIDs are usually private sector initiated & supplement, but do not replace municipal government services

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1,200 U.S. + 500 Canada
= 1,700 BIDs in North America



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North America



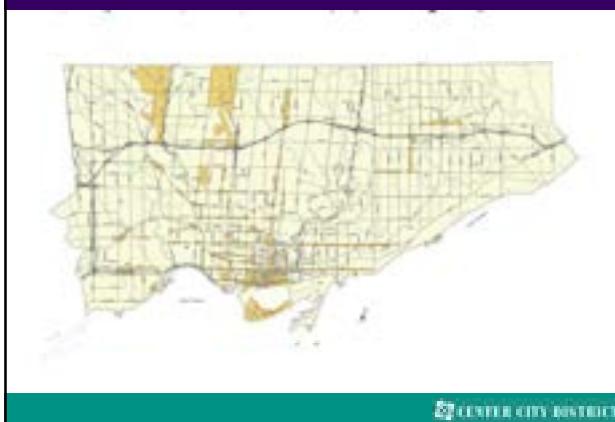
Toronto	84 BIDs
New York City	76 BIDs
Los Angeles	39 BIDs
Vancouver	22 BIDs
San Diego	18 BIDs
San Francisco	15 BIDs
Philadelphia	14 BIDs

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84 BIAs in Toronto: city center & neighborhoods



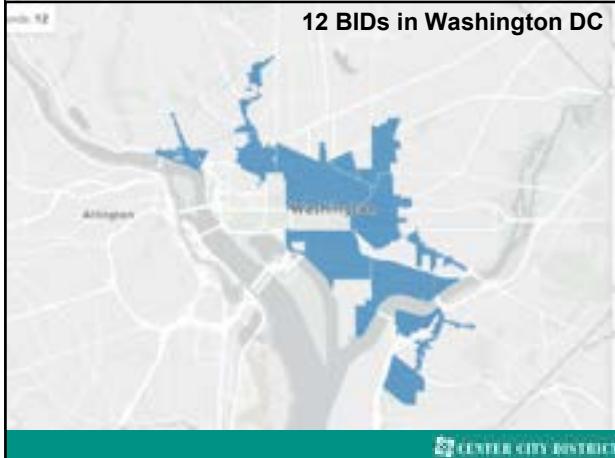
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Map of NYC BIDs



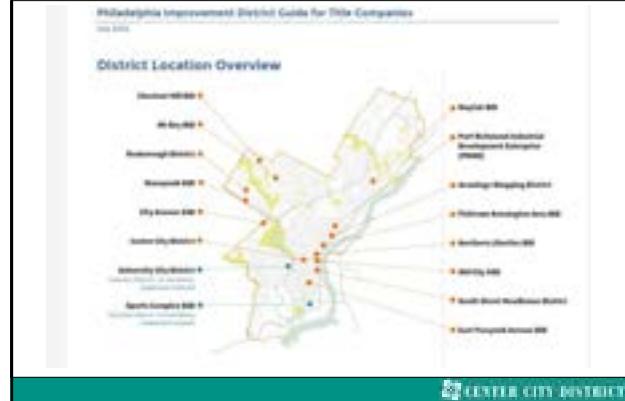
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12 BIDs in Washington DC



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Philadelphia's 14 BIDs (+2 voluntary) Germantown & Frankford (defunct)



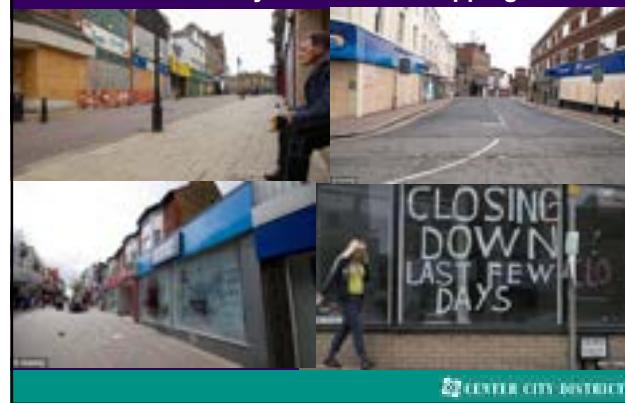
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BIDs were organized in England around 2001

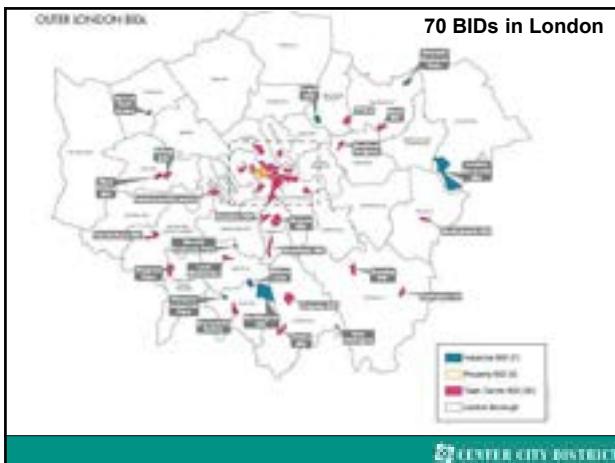


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To restore high streets, undermined by out of town shopping centers



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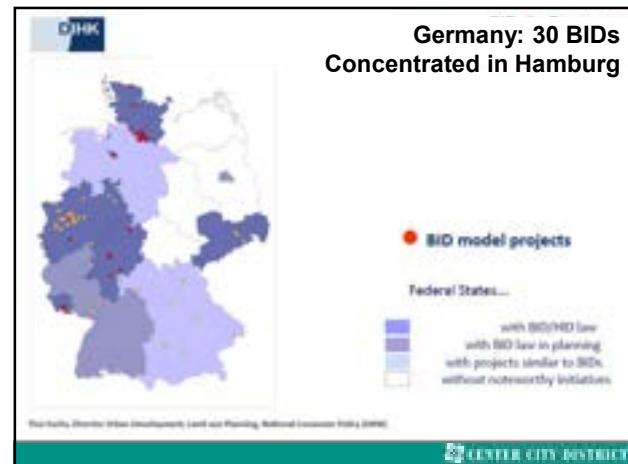
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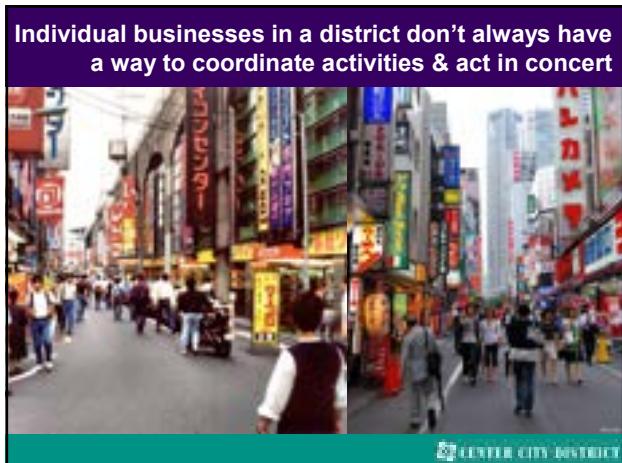


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In a large city with diverse private property ownership

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Individual businesses in a district don't always have a way to coordinate activities & act in concert

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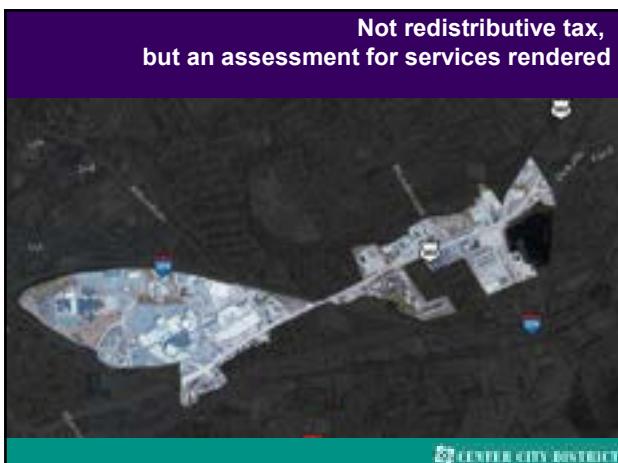
In voluntary associations often a few carry the load, while others ride for free

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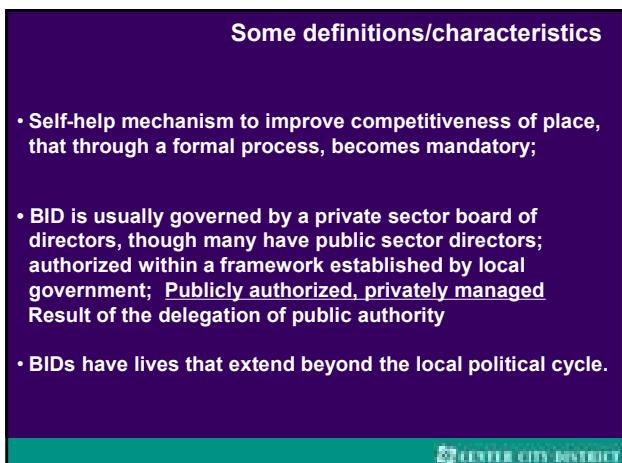
**All taxable property owners within boundary pay for services
Delivered exclusively within boundaries of BID**

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Not redistributive tax, but an assessment for services rendered

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Some definitions/characteristics

- Self-help mechanism to improve competitiveness of place, that through a formal process, becomes mandatory;
- BID is usually governed by a private sector board of directors, though many have public sector directors; authorized within a framework established by local government; Publicly authorized, privately managed Result of the delegation of public authority
- BIDs have lives that extend beyond the local political cycle.

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What is the context for a BID? A continuum from top-down to bottom-up

- BIDs emerge when government doesn't have sufficient resources, or when government recognizes that local business leaders may be able to bring a more focused and hand-crafted approach to area based management, marketing & enhancement
- BIDs emerge when local government is willing to "let go" and recognize that local businesses may bring a more entrepreneurial approach (Giuliani, Bloomberg in NYC) Rendell in PHL; Australia & Bulgaria; Rio in Brazil)
- BIDs are organized when business leaders are willing, or feel compelled by competition or decline, to "do more"

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Business Improvement District (BID)

- BIDs are substantially different from privatization, since they are not usually spending out-sourced public resources, but rather newly raised resources;
- BIDs are not imposed by government; rather business owners take initiative, conduct a planning process in consultation with government to determine if additional services are needed, what those services should be, and how the cost of services should be allocated among beneficiaries
- Funded thru mandatory assessment that is self-imposed; different from Main Street & town center management

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Management vs. governance

BIDs are not about "governance" & are not governments: they neither make nor enforce law.

False analogy to "gated communities"

BIDs are about management, promotion, public space improvement & stimulating development
In a context in which government is either insufficiently funded or doesn't see it as their role

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Government provides the cake (basic services);
BIDs add the special topping or icing



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CCD formed in 1990: office boom transformed skyline



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Significant decline in federal resources A degraded & squalid public environment:



Substantial ground & upper floor vacancy

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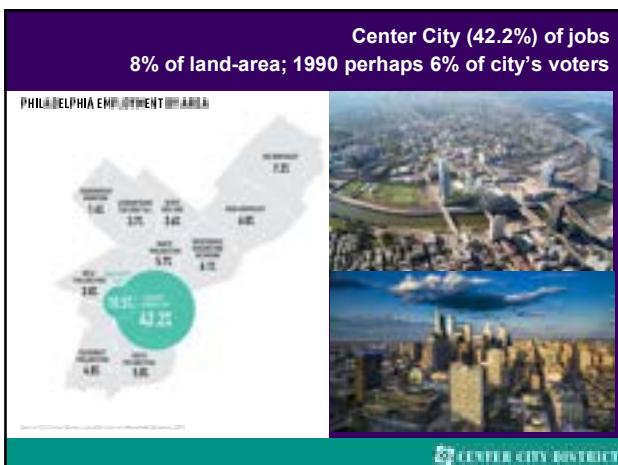
Neglected facades, solid security gates Limited retail services



9 to 5 downtown; empty streets at night

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Center City (42.2%) of jobs
8% of land-area; 1990 perhaps 6% of city's voters



Two things prompted creation of CCD: Public space crisis

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Convention Center under construction:
Fear & opportunity



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Capitalizing on state law: business improvement district
Self-help effort by business community



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Pennsylvania Municipality Authorities Act of 1945
Special services districts

A Special Services District is a legal mechanism for property owners in a commercial area to act together to achieve common goals, such as improving the safety, cleanliness & image of public areas, marketing & promoting the district & to fund these services thru mandatory charge.

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Legal requirement: rational nexus

There should be "...a rational, definable benefit which accrues to any property owner assessed a fee

All property owners ... paying a special assessment fee must benefit directly or indirectly from facilities or services provided ...within the BID."

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Commercial office
district Historical dept
store district

Boutique retail streets

1990: what size District?



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Enlightened self-interest
Reclaiming the public domain



"I already provide cleaning & security for my 15 properties in Center City. But if our holdings are just islands of clean & safe in the middle of a downtown that no one will go to, it's bad for everyone's business"

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Approval process 1990

On March 22, City Council passes enabling legislation creating Special Services District Authority for the commercial core of Philadelphia.

Between June 30 & July 2, the CCD plan, budget and estimated charges mailed to 2,752 property owners & 6,598 tenants in the District.

CCD holds public hearings August 1-2. Seventy-two individuals testify - 46 supportive of the CCD, 18 opposed. Forty-five-day public comment period began at close of public hearings.

Public comment period ends September 17. 316 (12.2%) property owners file objections, representing 11.7% of total taxable assessed value of District (State-enabling legislation requires objection from at least 33% of District property owners to defeat)

Full City Council voted 14-1 in favor of CCD; Mayor Goode signed the Bill into law on November 2, 1990, Authorizing the operation of the District through 1995.

March 21, 1991 Programs Commenced

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Formal plan & budget describes all services
Reauthorization every 5 years

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220 blocks in CBD: started with \$6.5 million operating budget
Grown in 34 years to \$32 million
Supplement but not replace city services

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CCD 1.0: Since 1991
Focus on the basics – comprehensive cleaning

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Municipal government cleans roadway

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CCD: each walkway swept manually minimum 3 x day
Competitively outsourced to One Source
Employees represented by SEIU (job training)



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Mechanical cleaning throughout the day



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CCD only cleans sidewalk; City Sanitation empties cans



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City removes snow from streets, property owners, sidewalks



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Pressure wash sidewalks



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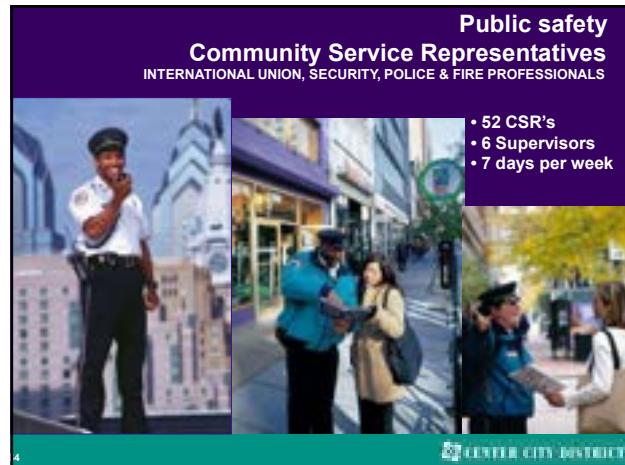
**Continuous graffiti removal from first floor only
During warm weather months**



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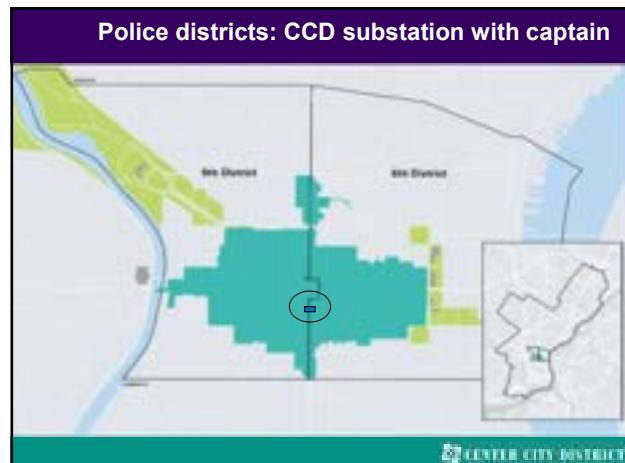
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Alert Philadelphia



Coordinated by CCD & Philadelphia Police 2,000 users.
Serves as critical communications network for CC.

Major fires & traffic detours.
Significant transportation emergencies.
Evacuation information & shelter-in-place practice drills.
Demonstrations & marches.
Crime patterns or trend alerts.

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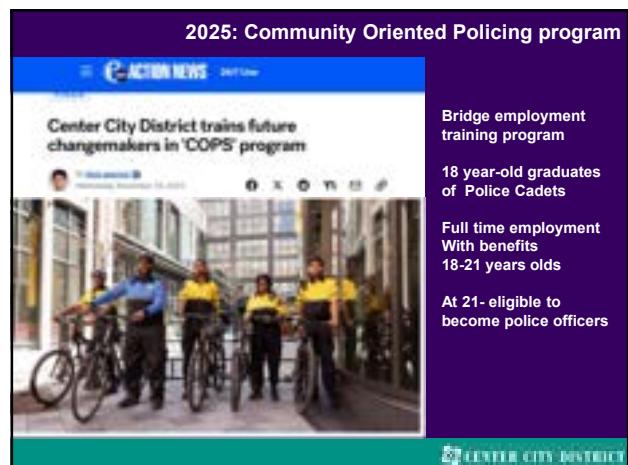
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Since 2018 to address homelessness
Developed a co-service delivery program



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Ambassadors of Hope
CCD funds: Social workers, Project Home & CIT trained police
CCD provides dedicated van to transport to shelter



76

Clean-up efforts in Kensington
displaced addicted individuals
2025, CCD – 205 people connected to services



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#1 BID's role as direct service provider



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#2 BIDs as “place marketers”
attract customers to businesses and places



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Highlight downtown amenities & attractions



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Market & manage nighttime economy



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BIDs organize special events to attract people to a place



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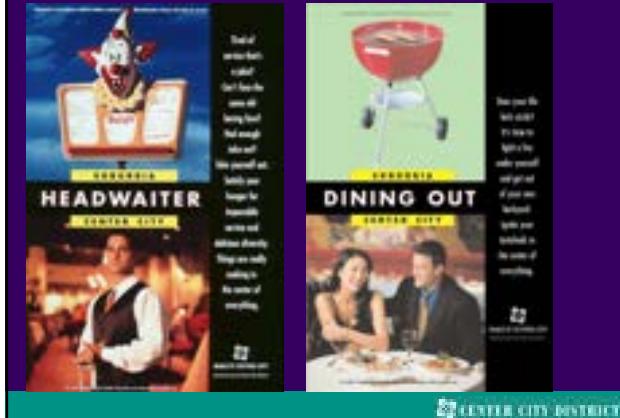
Events, paid & free media strategies



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Had some fun in the late 1990s



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SIPs promotion: After work amenities
Highlighting bars & outdoor cafes



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After work social gatherings

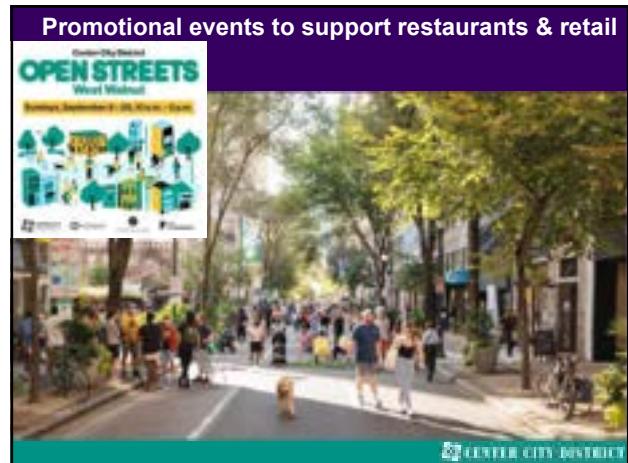


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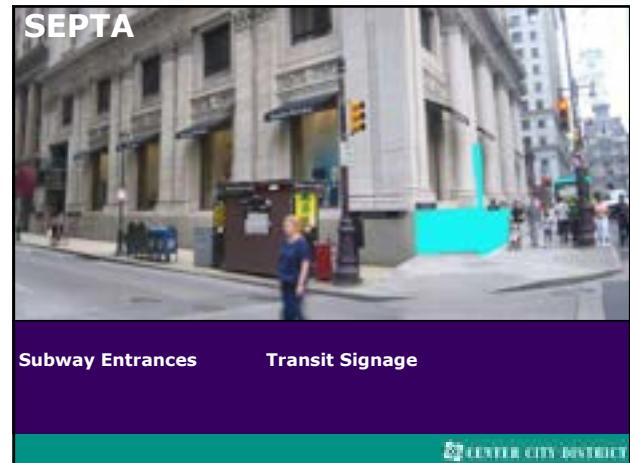
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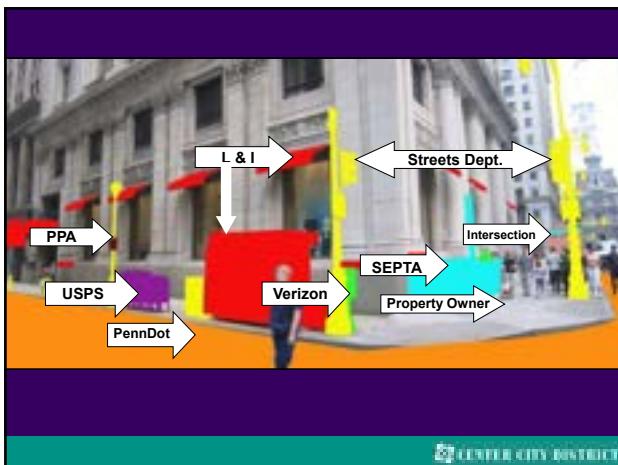
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Email reports to municipal government departments



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BID as place-manager: meet regularly to review



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#4: BID as vehicle for improving the product



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Begin in mid 1990s installing banners



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Today: 3,556 banners for 70 non-profit groups



144

Grand Central Partnership one of the first BIDs to finance streetscape improvements: 1994



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Unique Pennsylvania Aspects

- BIDs formed under the Municipality Authorities Act (prior to 2000) are municipal authorities, not non-profit corporations
- Have the authority to bill & collect directly from property owners without the city as intermediary – relatively unique
- Have power to file liens co-equal to municipal liens
- Have the authority to issue tax-exempt debt, independent from the city debt ceiling and bond-rating

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CCD 2.0: Financing public area improvements



1994

- 20-year reauthorization

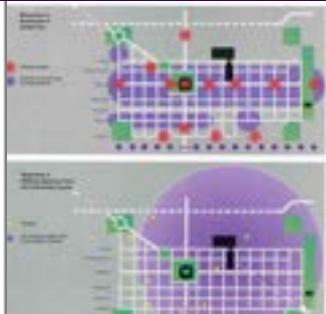
1995

- \$21 million tax-exempt bond issue backed only by CCD revenues
- +\$5 million City funding
- Master plan for streetscape improvements

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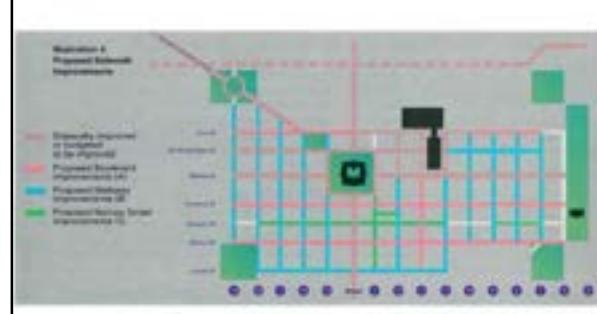
Priorities shaped by office & retail density, transit stops & convention center



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Hierarchy of streets: Lighting, landscaping & corners: not sidewalks



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Comprehensive sign system



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Based on William Penn's 1682 grid

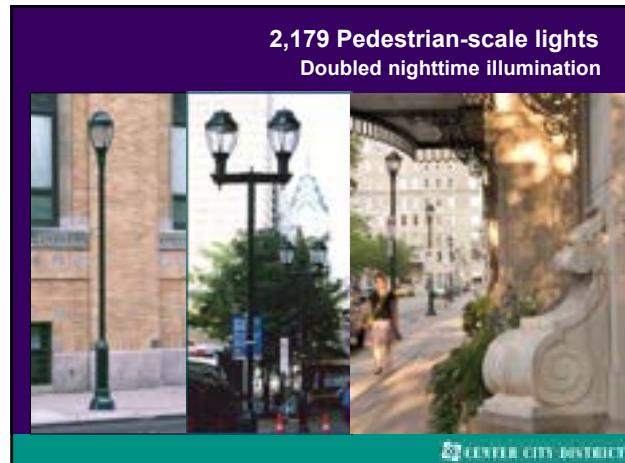


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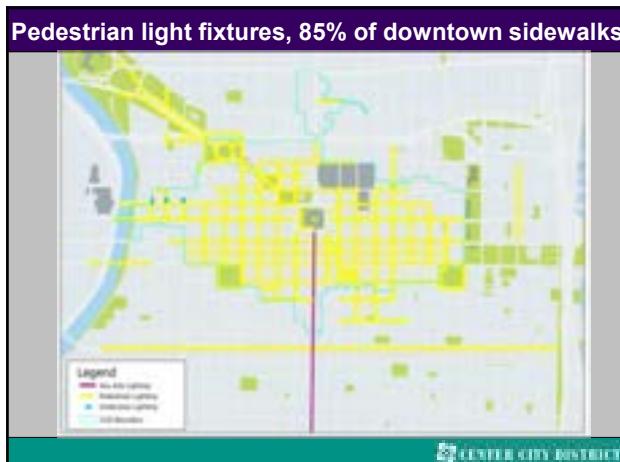
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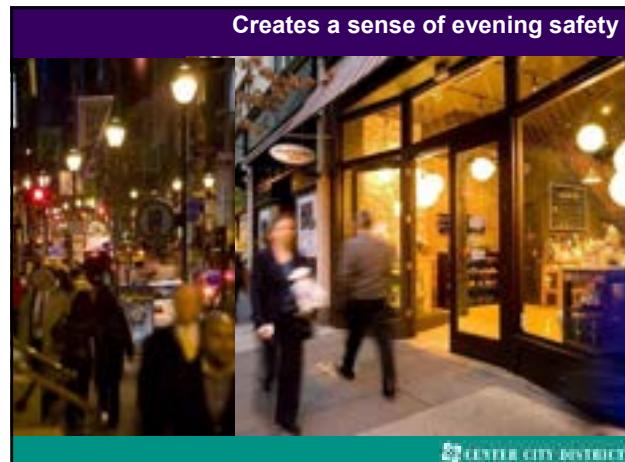
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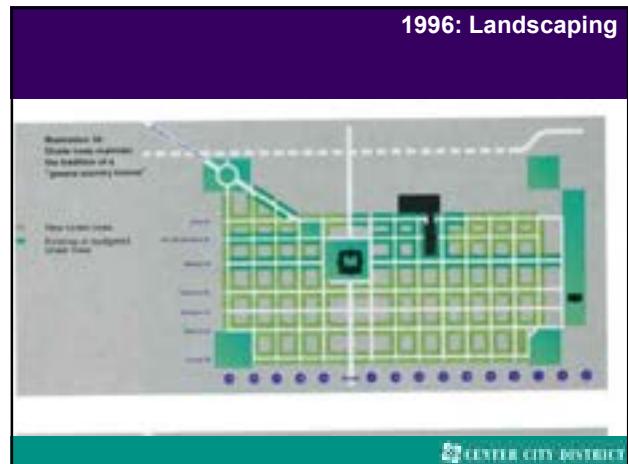
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West Market & JFK Boulevard Office District planters
Funded in partnership with property owners
During pandemic



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Market & JFK, 15th to 20th



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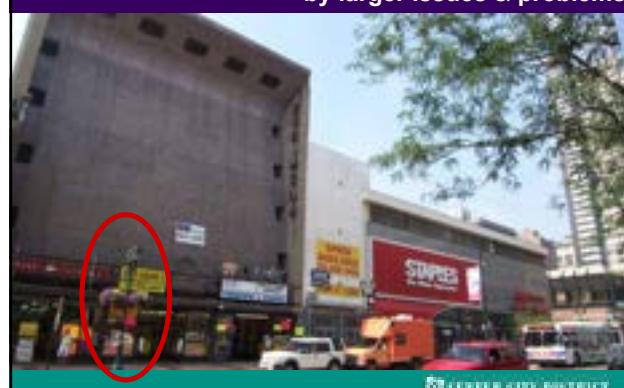
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Can leverage change when the street is dwarfed by larger issues & problems



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BIDs don't own or redevelop real estate;
Not economic development agencies
unless partnered with CDC

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BIDs improve the appearance of retail shops
34th Street Partnership, NYC

- Provide storefront design & window display services
- Advise on marketing & promotion
- Coordinated advertising campaigns

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Wall St 1995: empty after 5:00 pm & on weekends



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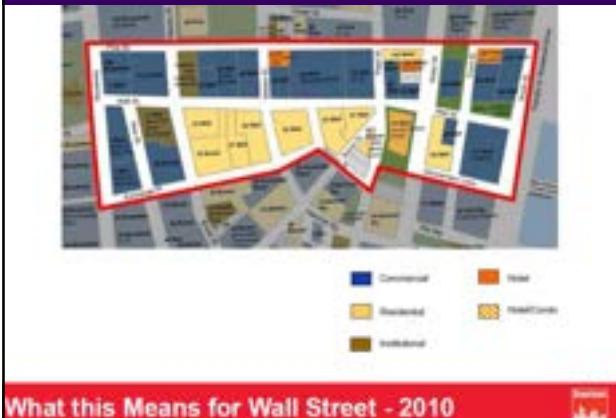
Formed 1995: Strengthen & diversify commercial core



What this Means for Wall Street - 1995

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Incentives to reduce office vacancy, transition to residential



What this Means for Wall Street - 2010

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Wall Street 3.0
A Diversified Lower Manhattan



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Residential revival
1996: 4.5 million sf. Vacant Class "C" office space



- Retained architect & developer to evaluate buildings
- Survey to determine best buildings; floor layout, window size & exposure
- Detailed economic analysis of 10 buildings: evaluation for code compliance, cost-estimate, pro-formas.

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10 year residential tax abatement
Approved 1997



- Extraordinary costs of converting from vacant office or industrial to residential use
- 10 year abatement on improvements
- Available city wide

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From 1998-2024, 40 major buildings converted downtown to Residential, hotel or educational use: 10 mil sf of office space



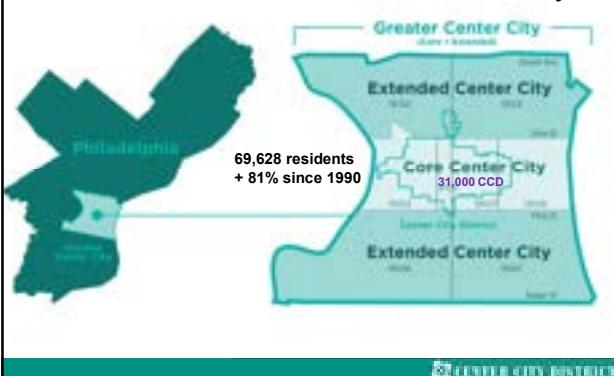
183

Expanded in 2000 to include new construction



185

**Greater Center City (1.5 mile ring): 300,000 jobs
206,676 residents; up 24% since 1990 (47% work downtown)
13% of citywide**



187

Everything below the red line is back on tax rolls

184

Renovation & new construction radiating outward around prime job nodes



186

#6: BIDs manage parks & public spaces: Bryant Park



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A screenshot of the 34th Street Partnership website. The header features the text "34th Street Partnership" and "Placemaking". Below the header is a navigation menu with links: "34th Street Partnership", "Neighborhood", "34th Street", "Meet the Board", and "About Us". The main content area shows a photograph of a street scene with people and flowers, and a section titled "34th Street Plaza" with a description and a "View Details" button. To the left is a sidebar with a "Community" section containing links to "Community", "Neighborhood", "34th Street", "Meet the Board", "About Us", "Press Releases", "Community Events", "Community Projects", and "Community Resources". At the bottom right is a logo for "CENTRAL CITY INSTITUTE".

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A collage of images from the 2004 PCVB MGA Partners presentation. It includes the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau logo, a photo of the Philadelphia skyline, a map of the Schuylkill River, and a photo of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

190

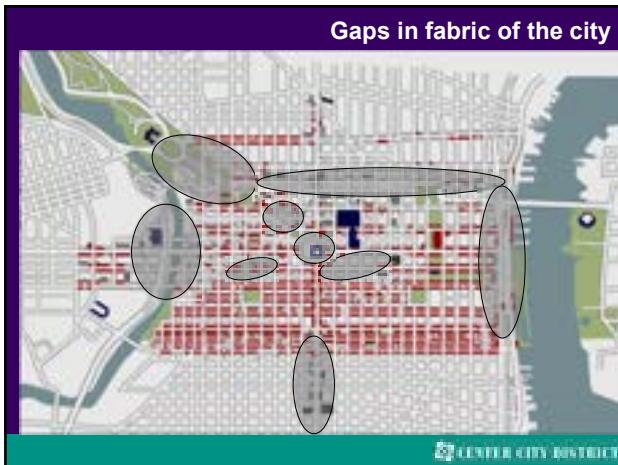
Mapped the clusters of visitor destinations

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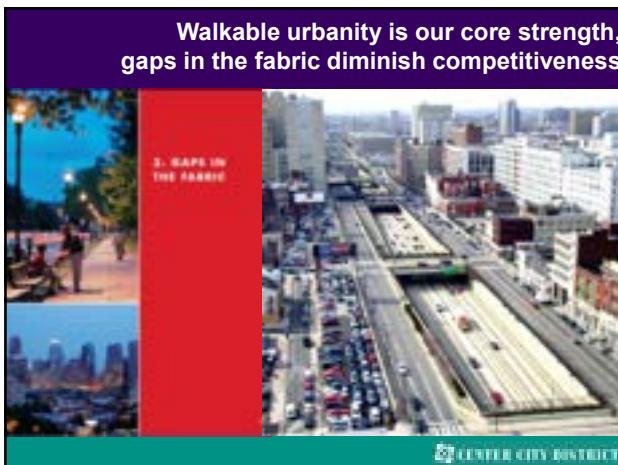
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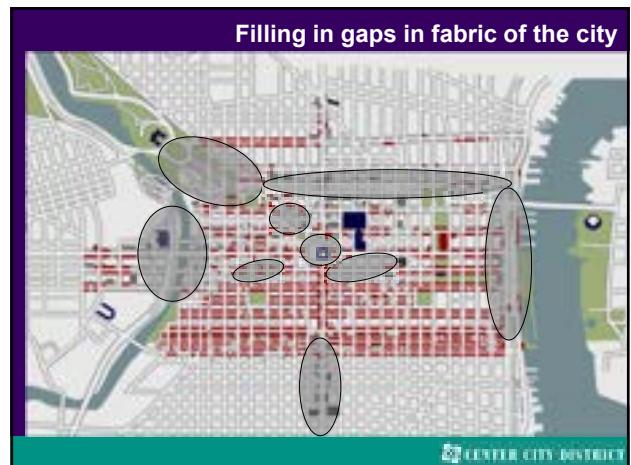
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Created plans for 4 different districts



202

The Benjamin Franklin Parkway prepares for its second century: What path should we follow?



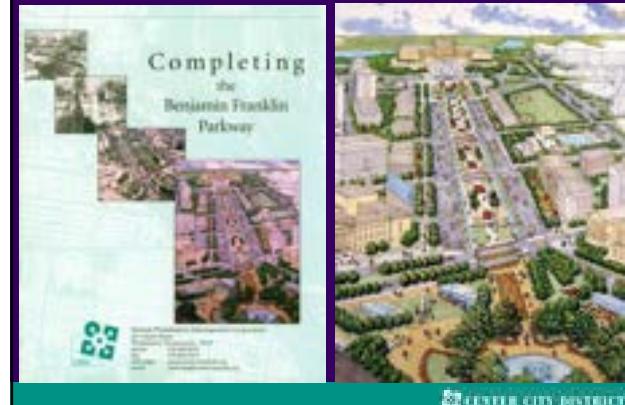
203

1 mile cultural district: 3 million visitors annually
Tourists, regional residents



204

1999 Higher density plan



205

Buildings front on the Parkway
Vision totally rejected: Barnes, Calder



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CCD 3.0: 2008 Improving public spaces: Cret Park



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Started with neglected empty space
Leased from the City



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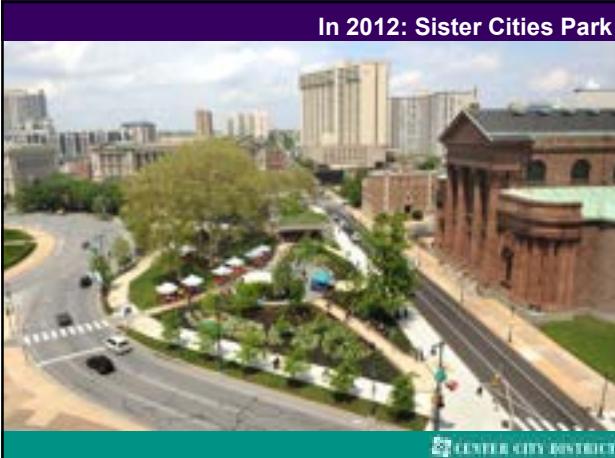
208

Create a thriving gateway to the Parkway



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In 2012: Sister Cities Park



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Took a barren and forgotten space



211

And transformed it



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A place for families with children



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Very successful water fountain



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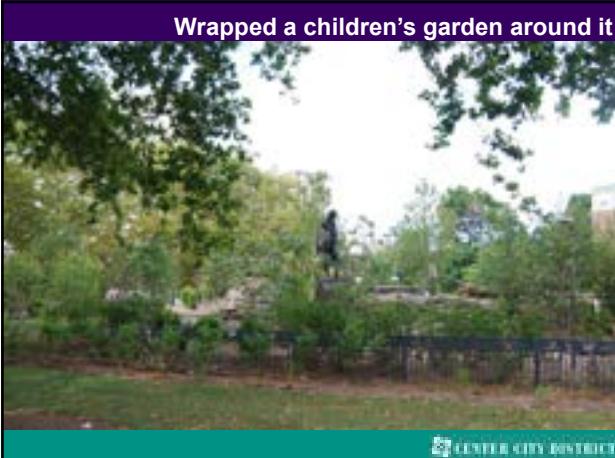
Took a solitary neglected statue



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Wrapped a children's garden around it



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With a pond



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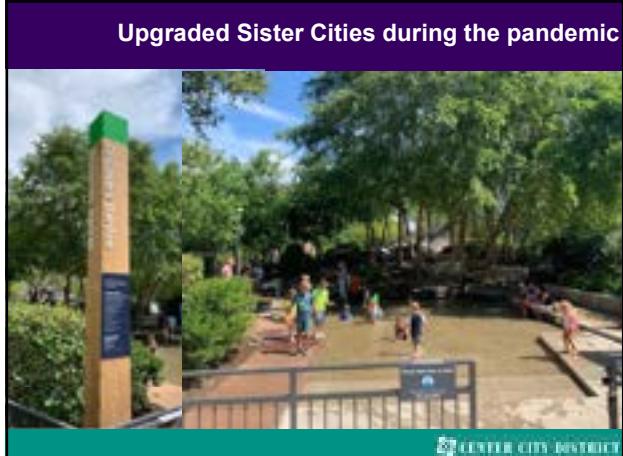
And climbing mountain



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Upgraded Sister Cities during the pandemic



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226

Collins Park, 1700 block Chestnut Street



227

Completed \$60 million renovation in September 2014



228

Barren failed space over transit lines



229

Dead center was the gap created by City Hall



230

At the crossroads of the visitor experience



231

Inadequate funding for maintenance



232



233

\$60 million construction project
Broad range of public, private & foundation funding
Federal TIGER grant

Contributors to the Transformation of Dilworth Park
Major Public Donors

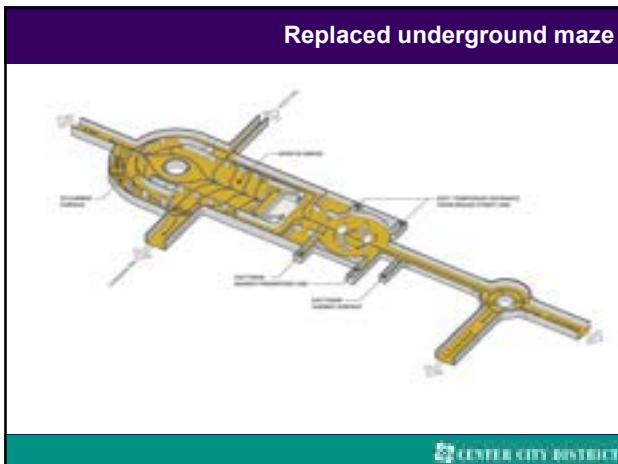
Center City District	\$15 million
City of Philadelphia	\$5.75 million
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	\$16.35 million
Federal Transit Administration	\$15 million
SEPTA	\$4.3 million

Major Donors to Construction

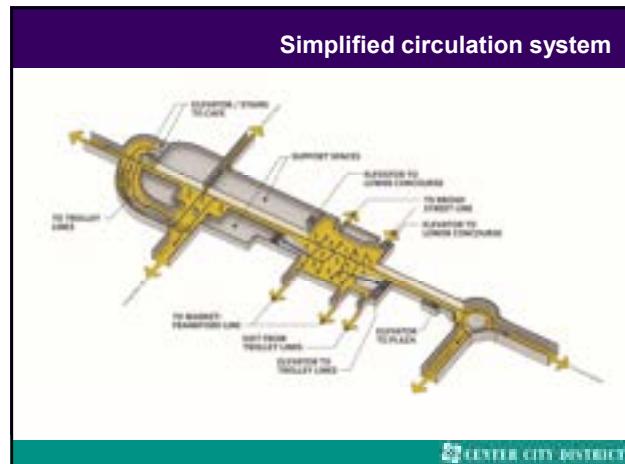
The Albert M. Greenfield Foundation	\$225,000
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation	\$400,000
PNC	\$300,000
William Penn Foundation	\$1.2 million

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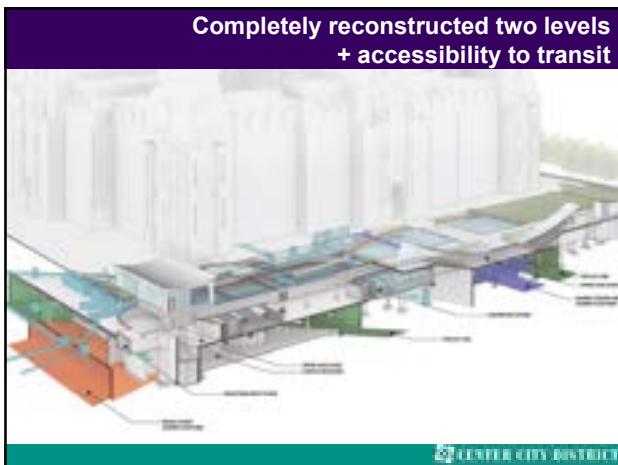
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Walk directly in from the street



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Goal: Create first-class gateway to transit



241

Fountain



242

Program year-round



245

With performing arts



246

October Harvest festival



247



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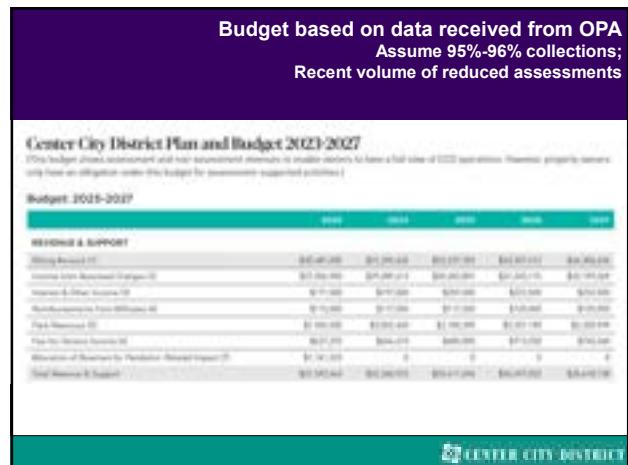
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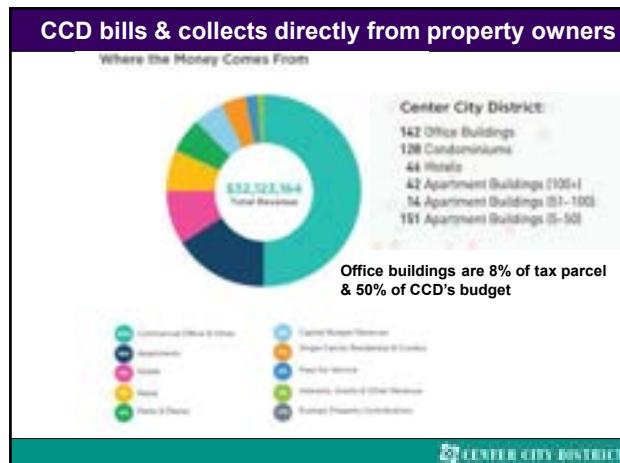
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Method of assessment

Based on municipal valuation of real estate without regard for any tax abatements or KOLZs

CCD independently calculates charges creating a fraction:

Assessed value of property \times \$32.3 million = charge

Assessed value of CCD

Billed and collected by CCD

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Top 10 Properties by Billing

RANK	PROPERTY NAME	2022 BILLING AMOUNT
1	Comcast Center	\$584,526.40
2	Mellon Bank Center	\$573,406.05
3	Centre Square	\$569,679.46
4	One Liberty Place	\$532,490.70
5	Comcast Innovation Center	\$453,924.30
6	Independence Blue Cross - DiBona Building	\$452,675.53
7	One Commerce Square	\$433,713.97
8	Two Commerce Square	\$411,484.99
9	Marriott Hotel	\$407,518.22
10	401 North Broad Street	\$400,192.85
TOTAL		\$4,419,419.62

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Pass-through to tenants

Mellon Bank
\$553,617.92 annually

Divided by 1.2 million sf = 36 cents/ft

On top of rent of \$30- \$35/sq. ft.

CENTER CITY DISTRICT

264



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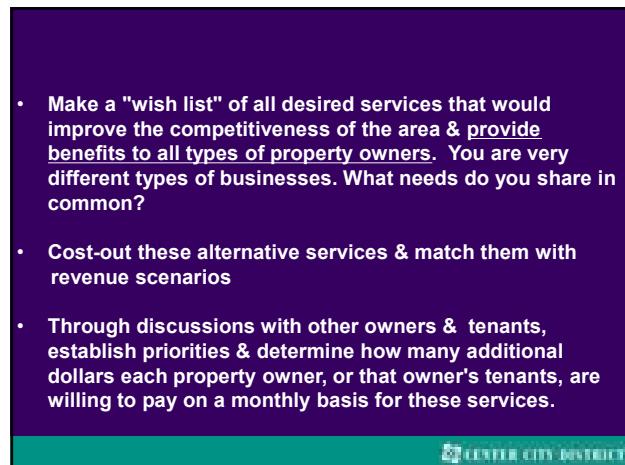
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Steps

- Does the concept of paying extra make sense or is it dead on arrival?
- Are major business/property owners willing to take the lead on exploring the options? A group needs to lead!
- What exactly are the boundaries?
- What Services? Property owners will want to know what they are already getting for their tax dollars, before they agree to pay for supplemental services.
- City needs to quantify “base level of services.”



280

Assess strengths & weaknesses

Conditions Survey

Condition	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
1. Proximity	0	1	2	3
2. Infrastructure	0	1	2	3
3. Economic activity	0	1	2	3
4. Business environment	0	1	2	3
5. Retail activity	0	1	2	3
6. Residential density	0	1	2	3
7. Residential mix	0	1	2	3
8. Residential amenities	0	1	2	3
9. Infrastructure	0	1	2	3
10. Retail mix	0	1	2	3
11. Residential mix	0	1	2	3
12. Residential amenities	0	1	2	3
13. Infrastructure	0	1	2	3
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280. Infrastructure	0	1	2	3
281. Residential mix	0	1	2	3
282. Residential amenities	0	1	2	3
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285. Residential amenities	0	1	2	3

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The role of a business improvement district (BID)

Intermediate scale management: between public & private
*How to get things done in cities without
robust public sector funding*

1. What is a BID & where do they exist?
2. Why form a BIDs
3. What BIDs do
4. The organizing process
5. Could intimate scale organization like BID complement
& counter-balance strong centrally directed management?



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