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memo

Date: September 14, 2026

To: Lisa Serieyssol, City of Trenton Planning Department

From: Maggie Nemetz, Economic Development Planner

Subject: Downtown Trenton Dataset and Economic Analysis (Product #26148)

Purpose

The City of Trenton staff requested an analysis of the commercial downtown that synthesizes various datasets, recent and ongoing multimodal investments and planning efforts, and anticipated transit-oriented residential developments to be conducted during FY2026. DVRPC staff completed an inventory of Trenton's commercial corridors and an analysis that assesses gaps and shifts in the retail landscape, identifies opportunities to activate downtown and support existing businesses, and recommends strategies to build an ecosystem that sustains long-term economic growth. The inventory dataset has been added to the DVRPC Data Catalog and the findings and analysis were delivered as a slidedeck to Lisa Serieyssol with the City of Trenton.

A Snapshot of Downtown Today

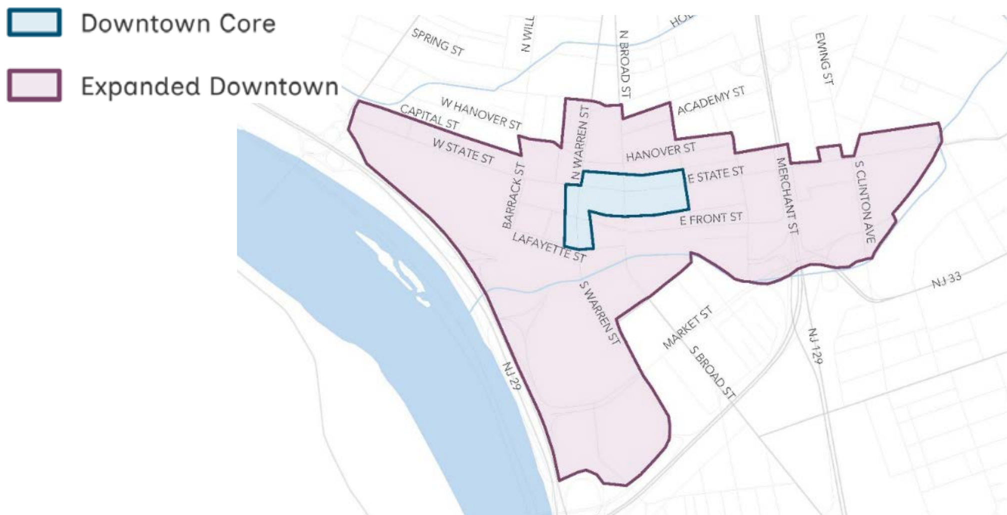
Why This Matters

To develop the most locally relevant economic growth strategies, DVRPC staff conducted an on-the-ground inventory of building uses in Downtown Trenton in November 2025. Collecting address-level data allows for a nuanced analysis of the current conditions and characteristics of the downtown, a foundation for the development of place-based strategic actions.

Defining Downtown

Two geographies within Downtown Trenton were inventoried: the Downtown Core and the Expanded Downtown. The Downtown Core encompasses the primary commercial corridor, which was determined by DVRPC staff through a qualitative review of the built environment and mix of uses. DVRPC staff also inventoried an Expanded Downtown area, which extends to the municipally defined special improvement district (SID) area, managed by the Trenton Downtown Association (TDA). The address-level data for both areas is included in the accompanying dataset.

Figure 1. City of Trenton Study Areas



What the Inventory Captured

The inventory captures the current use of the ground floor of each address, therefore mixed-use is not captured. Addresses are classified among ten use categories: civic, construction, cultural, institutional, office, parking, residential, retail, transit, or vacant. Within the retail category, there are five subcategories: experiential, food and beverage, general merchandise, hospitality, and neighborhood goods and services. The name of the retail establishment is recorded as well as three additional qualities: whether the retailer is a local business, has a website, and has social media (Instagram, Facebook, and/or Twitter/X). Website and social media presence were determined through online searches of establishment names and results reflect information available during the inventory process.

Understanding Change Over Time

Why This Matters

Monitoring changes in the composition of a commercial corridor or downtown over time provides important context for understanding the evolution of its current conditions. It also reveals trends that can highlight buildable strengths and/or areas of improvement.

Downtown Trenton Over Time

This analysis builds on previous inventories of Trenton's Downtown Core conducted by DVRPC staff in 2020 and 2022. Combining those inventories with the 2025 inventory enables a multi-year analysis of changes in the downtown's composition over time. The inventory is also part of DVRPC's broader program to monitor a representative sample of 75 retail districts across Greater Philadelphia. Because the Expanded Downtown was inventoried for the first time in 2025, change-over-time analysis is limited to the Downtown Core.

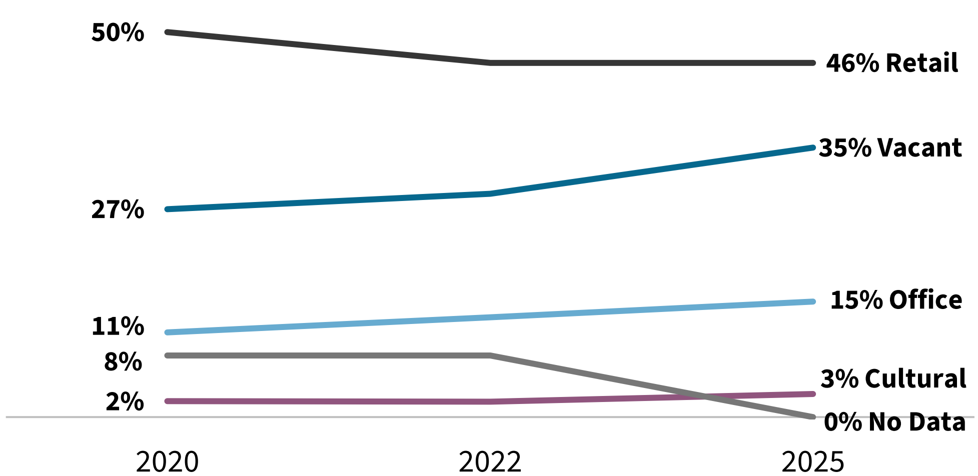
Inventory Findings

The inventory of Downtown Trenton includes 101 addresses in the Downtown Core and 315 addresses in the Expanded Downtown. The data for the two areas is analyzed separately, as only data from the Downtown Core can be assessed over time. To meet the City of Trenton's request for a comparative study that relates trends in Downtown Trenton to the rest of the region, the findings are presented alongside data from the 2022 inventory of all 75 Retail Districts. The average of "All Districts" serves as the regional comparison for each data point. Understanding the mix of uses and retail types, and the share of retailers that are local, their digital presence (whether they have a website and/or social media) is important in developing strategies that foster greater vibrancy and economic activity and enhance the ability of downtowns to compete with e-commerce.

Mix of Uses

The mix of uses refers to the share of each Use Category. In the Downtown Core, Retail is the most common use, representing 46 percent of addresses, which is down from 50 percent in 2020. From 2020 to 2025, the share of Office uses grew from 11 to 15 percent and Cultural uses grew slightly from 2 to 3 percent. Civic, Construction, Institutional, Parking, Residential, and Transit each consistently make up one percent or less of uses. Residential uses are represented differently across inventories. Where residential use is defined, inventories generally reflect the ground-level use category rather than the number of residential units. The vacancy rate, which is the share of properties that are vacant, increased from 27 percent in 2020 to 35 percent in 2025. It should be noted that 8 percent of addresses did not have data in 2020 and 2022, while the 2025 inventory captured all addresses. The missing data from previous inventories makes the exact change in vacancies unclear, however the vacancy rate in Trenton's Downtown Core is consistently higher than the regional average of 10 percent.

Figure 2. Mix of Uses in Trenton's Downtown Core (2020–2025)

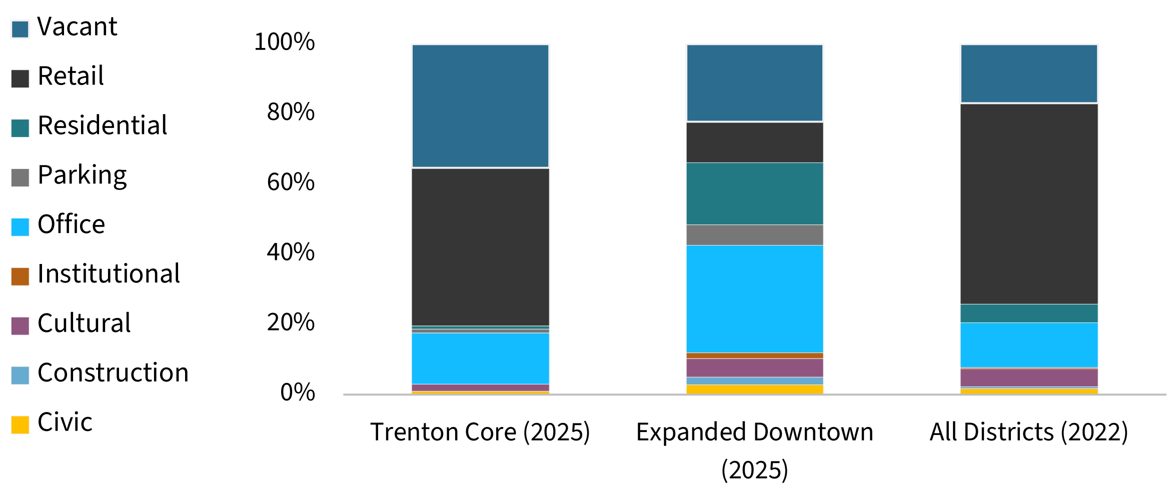


The Expanded Downtown has a greater mix of uses than the Downtown Core. Office is the most common use, at 31 percent, with the share of other uses as follows:

- Residential, 18 percent
- Retail, 12 percent
- Parking, 6 percent
- Cultural, 5 percent
- Civic, 3 percent
- Institutional, 2 percent
- Construction, 2 percent
- Transit, 1 percent

At 22 percent, the vacancy rate is lower than the Downtown Core, yet still higher than average.

Figure 3. Mix of Uses in Trenton's Core, Expanded Downtown, and All Districts

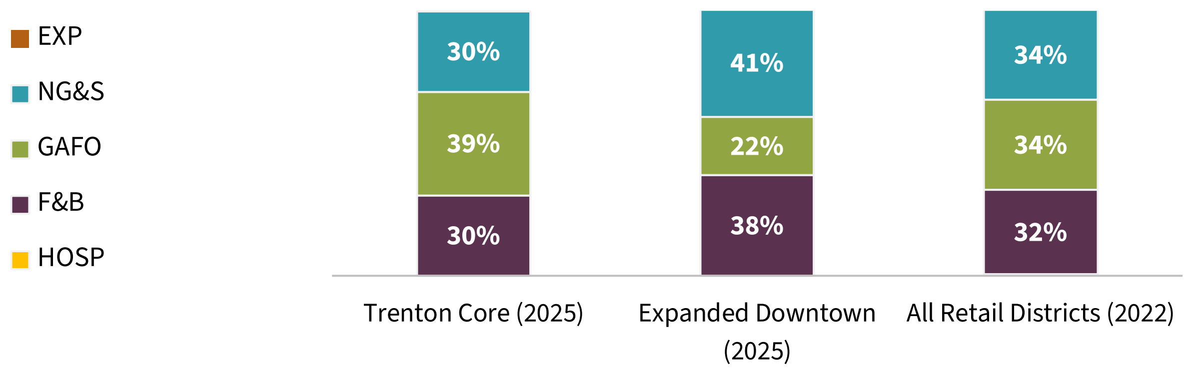


Retail Types

Among the five Retail types, Trenton's Downtown Core and Expanded Downtown contain a mix of Food and Beverage (F&B), General Merchandise (GAFO), and Neighborhood Goods and Services (NG&S). Neither area, including in past inventories, had either Experiential or Hospitality establishments. From 2020 to 2025 in the Downtown Core, the share of NG&S retailers increased from 24 to 30 percent, the share of GAFO declined from 42 to 39 percent, and the share of F&B retailers declined from 34 to 30 percent.

Compared to the Downtown Core, the Expanded Downtown has a higher share of NG&S retailers, at 41 percent; a smaller share of GAFO retailers, at 22 percent; and a higher share of F&B establishments, at 38 percent. Across All Districts, the average share of NG&S retailers was 34 percent, GAFO was 34 percent, and F&B was 32 percent in 2022.

Figure 4. Share of Retail Types in Trenton's Core, Expanded Downtown, and All Districts



Local Retailers

In the Downtown Core, the share of local retail establishments remained unchanged from 2020 to 2022, at 72 percent, and increased to 78 percent in 2025. The total number of retail establishments declined from 2020 to 2025, while the number that are locally owned remained the same. Rather than a growth in local ownership, there has been a decline in chain businesses. In the Expanded Downtown, 87 percent of retailers are local. Across all 75 Retail Districts inventoried by DVRPC staff in 2022, the average share of local retailers was 89 percent, which is higher than in each of the Trenton geographies.

Retailers with a Website

In the Downtown Core, the share of retailers with a website grew from 42 percent to a high of 61 percent between 2020 and 2022, coinciding with a national increase in e-commerce demand. The share declined to 54 percent in 2025, which may reflect the closure of several chain retailers that reliably have websites. In the Expanded Downtown, 62 percent of retailers have a website. Across All Districts, the average share of retailers with a website was 80 percent, which is higher than in each of the Trenton geographies.

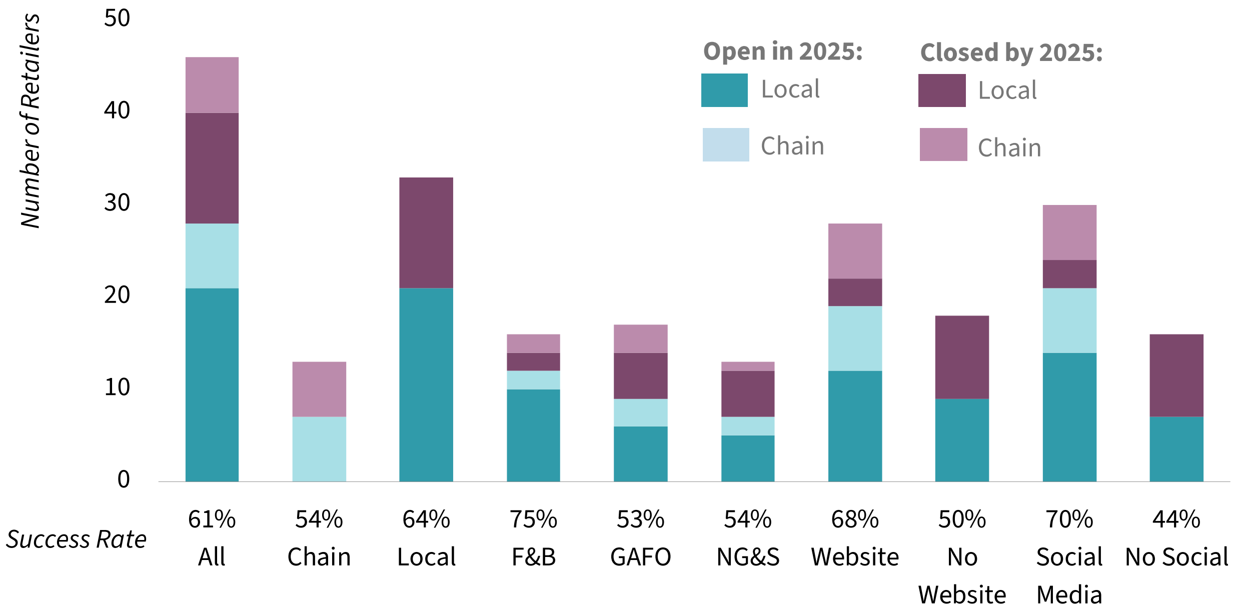
Retailers with Social Media

At 63 percent, a greater share of retailers in the Downtown Core has a social media account than has a website, which may be due in part to the relative ease and zero cost of creating a social media account. That share was 60 percent in 2020 and 65 percent in 2022. In the Expanded Downtown, 78 percent of retailers have social media. Across all 75 Retail Districts inventoried by DVRPC staff in 2022, the average share of retailers with a website was 88 percent, which is higher than in each of the Trenton geographies.

Retail Success Rates from 2022 to 2025

In the Downtown Core, 28 of the 46 retailers open in 2022 were still operating in 2025, representing a success rate of 61 percent. The inventories are a snapshot in time and do not capture businesses that opened and closed between 2022 and 2025. Since we do not have updated numbers for the other 74 retail districts, we are unable to determine if this success rate is low or high compared to regional peers.

Figure 5. Retailer Success Rate in the Downtown Core (2022–2025)



To better understand factors that may have contributed to retailer success, individual success rates were calculated based on retail type and digital presence, and distinguished between local and chain businesses, as shown in Figure 5. The retailers that remained open from 2022 to 2025 were more likely to be locally owned, have a website, and be on social media. Among retail types, F&B establishments had the highest success rate, at 75 percent. On the other hand, nearly half of all GAFO, NG&S, and chain retailers open in 2022 had closed by 2025. Retailers without social media had the lowest success rate, at 44 percent.

Of the eighteen retailers that closed from 2022 to 2025, 12 were locally owned, 8 were GAFO, 6 were NG&S, and 4 were F&B. Half of the storefronts are now vacant, one is now an office, and eight were filled by retail uses. In addition to those eight retailers, ten other new retailers opened between 2022 and 2025, all of which filled storefronts that were vacant in 2022. Of the 18 newly opened retailers, 16 are locally owned, 8 are GAFO, 8 are NG&S, and 2 are F&B.

Synthesizing the Findings

The inventory findings revealed strengths that can be built upon, as well as areas for improvement for Downtown Trenton.

Buildable Strengths:

- Retailers' adoption of digital platforms can be enriched to maximize the benefits of an online presence, including by supporting the expansion into e-commerce.
- The greater success rate for locally owned businesses underscores the value of local entrepreneurs and can be leveraged by identifying market gaps for them to fill.
- Educational institutions present opportunities to develop targeted training programs and grow the in-person, student population of downtown campuses.

- State government workers and Capitol visitors can be better served. These are large groups with a relatively stable presence in the city, whose interests and needs may not be met by downtown's current commercial and/or residential offerings.
- The potential of downtown's natural and built environment is under-realized. Walkability, robust transit options, and the riverfront are valuable and integral assets for boosting quality of life and fostering a visitor economy.

Improvement Areas:

- Vacant lots and buildings throughout downtown work against the goal of a dense, walkable, and populated downtown and raise public health concerns.
- Over-dependence on services-based retail exists downtown after the closure of many general merchandise stores, contributing to a lack of economic diversification that could leave Trenton exposed to other forms of economic disruption in the future.
- Hospitality and culture assets are not being fully leveraged to attract visitors from within and outside the city and can be expanded to offer a wider array of experiences.
- Significant land used for surface parking to accommodate commuters supports the state workforce but discourages public transit use and foot traffic through downtown.

Strategic Actions

The inventory and analysis of Downtown Trenton's strengths and challenges informed potential action City officials can consider. A review of recent planning work in Trenton; which identified weak retail demand, high vacancies, and extensive surface parking as key challenges; provided additional support and context for the following actions.

Activate Opportunity: Foster vibrant commercial areas that generate foot traffic.

Know the public and leverage the markets.

- Conduct a community and economic development-focused public needs survey with targeted outreach, including to small business owners.
- Leverage data to understand resident, workforce, and niche populations to meet the retail needs and interests of all represented populations.
- Assess uses and identify market gaps in the city's other commercial corridors. Ensure development efforts downtown work synergistically, rather than in competition, with successful businesses in those areas.
- Work with educational institutions, including Thomas Edison State University and Mercer County Community College. Encourage the expansion of in-person offerings.

Fill vacancies downtown.

- Build upon the previous Trenton Neighborhood Restoration Campaign work and activate vacant storefronts by supporting temporary uses of existing retail space, including window murals to improve facades and pop-up businesses to boost foot traffic and test for successful retail uses.

- Expand the Mixed-Use Industrial (MU-I) zone, particularly to the downtown area, to allow for corridor appropriate small-scale manufacturing businesses that drive visitors.
- Seek retailers that sell goods less commonly bought online, such as sporting goods and gardening stores to increase corridor resilience to the impacts of e-commerce.

Support Local: Develop and keep assets in the community.

Invest in entrepreneurs.

- Identify gaps in the entrepreneurship ecosystem and continue to pursue funds, support programs, and refine policies to fill those gaps.
- Connect with additional civic and entrepreneurial programs, such as Trenton Forward, to learn how the city can support their success.
- Partner with local institutions to offer training on digital literacy, e-commerce, and advanced digital technologies to small business owners, especially retailers, to help grow Downtown Trenton's presence in the digital marketplace.

Enhance business ownership and expansion pathways.

- Train municipal staff on cooperative business models and their specific needs.
- Partner with the Free Library and/or local educational institutions to offer training on succession planning for business owners looking to retire and sell their business.
- Explore collaboration with a local organization to develop a neighborhood trust to acquire and steward properties, particularly small commercial spaces in the primary corridor that are optimal for local businesses.

Build an Ecosystem: Curate a downtown that serves residents, businesses, and visitors.

Attract more residents and visitors.

- Increase wayfinding and multimodal access to bus, bike, pedestrian, and trail routes to and within downtown.
- Engage in marketing efforts to boost visibility for Trenton businesses and attractions, including by coordinating with state and industry leaders during events.
- Incentivize the production of market-rate housing downtown, including through strategies identified in *Trenton250*, and continue to pursue state funding opportunities.
- Prioritize launching the Upper Floor Restoration Program in mixed-use areas to increase the housing supply while maintaining the city's character.

Facilitate culture and entertainment opportunities.

- Sponsor events and initiatives in the downtown corridor, such as street markets in the evenings and/or weekends, which encourage nonresidents to spend time downtown.
- Subsidize permit fees for outdoor arts and culture events in the downtown area that align with economic growth goals, such as pop-up markets and park festivals.
- Evaluate regulations and administrative processes to ensure new and existing culture and entertainment establishments can successfully operate and expand.

- Increase municipal arts and culture capacity to coordinate, strengthen, and promote historic and cultural assets through additional staff and/or establishing a council.

Conclusion

The City of Trenton, alongside planning, nonprofit, and private sector partners, has developed strategic plans, secured critical funding, and launched valuable programs. The City can continue to build upon those efforts by implementing the strategic framework outlined in this memo, which capitalizes on existing strengths to address key challenges identified through the inventory analysis:

- facilitate a retail mix that meets the needs of the resident population to fill vacancies,
- bolster local entrepreneurialism to keep wealth in the community, and
- leverage under-emphasized cultural assets to foster a visitor economy.