

Vista Avenue

Boise, Idaho

Using Corridor Revitalization and Placemaking to Establish a Gateway



Lessons Learned

- » Survey local businesses and residents to understand their needs and get their input on the meaning of a “healthy corridor.”
- » Set up a process to guide redevelopment, such as a steering committee with dedicated staff that leads visioning, decision making, and implementation work.



ABOVE: The width of Vista Avenue, along with the automobile-oriented strip commercial land uses and the lack of pedestrian- and bike-friendly infrastructure, is typical of many corridors across the country. (Guy Hand)

LEFT: Area stakeholders toured Vista Avenue during the local workshop and analyzed various segments of the corridor. (Guy Hand)

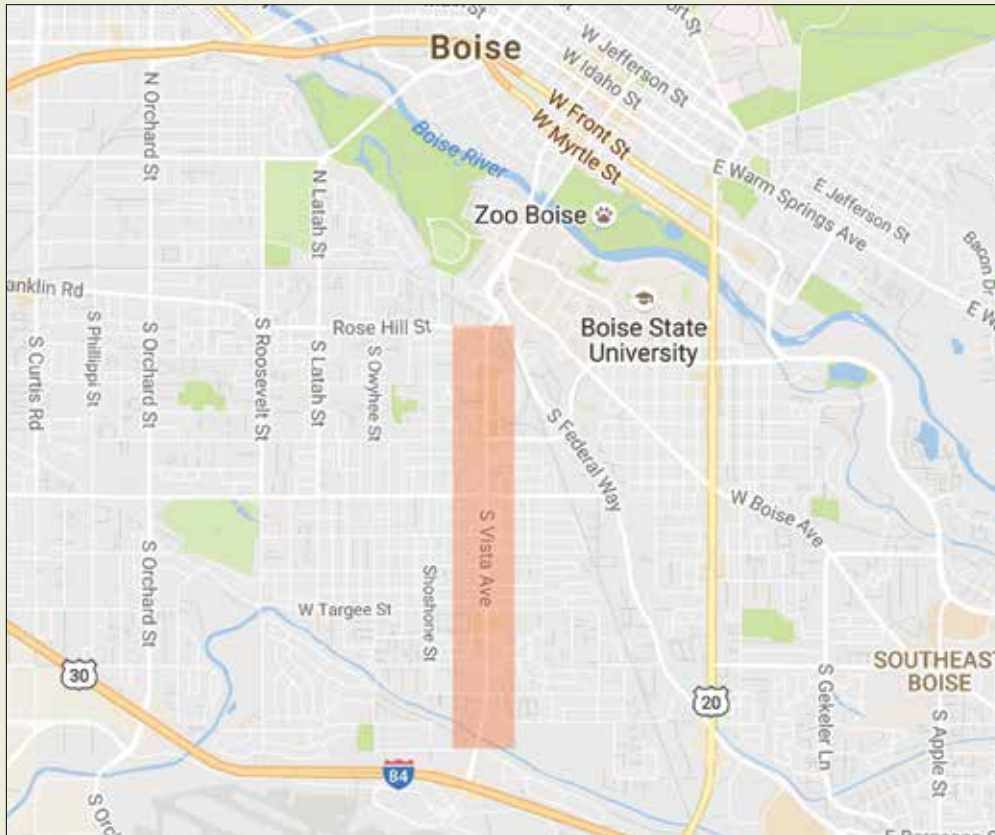
Vista Avenue, in Boise, Idaho, serves as a gateway to the city and connects the airport and interstate highway to Boise State University and downtown. With automobile-oriented retail, bars, pawnshops, a mix of converted and generally dilapidated housing, and very few pedestrian-oriented facilities, Vista Avenue exemplifies a typical strip commercial street. ULI Idaho and local partners worked on a 1.7-mile segment of the corridor, which spans four miles in total.

This segment of the corridor bifurcates the Vista and Depot Bench neighborhoods. The Vista neighborhood has some of the lowest livability indicators (including income and single-family home values) in

the city, and it includes a mix of single-family and multifamily housing. Because of the function of Vista Avenue as a gateway to the city and the lack of a relationship to the surrounding neighborhoods, there are ample opportunities to improve the uses and infrastructure of the corridor. These improvements will make the corridor more attractive to visitors while simultaneously improving the health and well-being of neighborhood residents.

Local Work for Change

The Vista Avenue local leadership group held its local stakeholder workshop in June 2015. During the walking tour portion of the workshop, participants



The Vista Avenue corridor area (shaded) and surroundings. (Google Maps)

Quick Facts

- » **Length of Study Section:** 1.7 miles
- » **Average Number of Lanes:** 4–6 lanes of traffic
- » **Average Posted Vehicle Speed:** 35–40 mph
- » **Available Transit Options:** Bus, 30-minute headways, 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.
- » **Bike lanes:** 0 miles
- » **Sidewalks:** The corridor has 4-foot sidewalks adjacent to the street with few sidewalk connections on streets off Vista Avenue; it is not a safe, walkable neighborhood.
- » **Income Data:** Median household income is \$35,551.
- » **Safety:** Vista Avenue carries 23,000 cars a day but has only seven pedestrian crosswalks; from 2011 to 2013, there were 249 accidents on the corridor.
- » **Land Use:** Single-family housing, single-story strip commercial, car and tire dealers, automobile repair shops, fast-food restaurants, drive-ins, bars, pawnshops, and adult-entertainment venues.
- » **Distinguishing Features:** Vista Avenue acts as a gateway to the city of Boise and connects the airport to I-84, Boise State University, and downtown.

broke into groups to observe and analyze different sections of the corridor. Photos taken by participants were shared with the whole group to start a conversation about the current and desired conditions of the corridor and surrounding neighborhoods.

A diverse group of participants attended, including community stakeholders and local and regional agency representatives. Key issues that emerged from the workshop included the need to improve pedestrian access, reduce lane widths and speeds, and work with business owners to get buy-in on improvements and reinvestment.

The local leadership group then identified next steps, which included developing a vision for the corridor with comprehensive engagement and diverse support, as well as looking at quick wins, including cosmetic improvements. The local team investigated leveraging the gateway aspect of Vista Avenue to help create a stronger identity for the surrounding neighborhoods and increasing the engagement of businesses along the corridor. The outcome of an online survey and in-person interviews with business owners indicated interest in an informal business association and greater-than-expected support for improving nonmotorized access to their businesses.

Recommendations

The national study visit was held in February 2016 and presented the participating national experts with several issues to address.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

- » How can the Vista corridor's public infrastructure be reconfigured to improve health and enhance the corridor's function as a gateway?
- » What are key placemaking strategies that will help foster activity and drive ongoing reinvestment?
- » What are successful processes to create and implement a corridor vision plan?
- » How can corridor programming and improvements be funded or financed?
- » What is the best organizational structure to champion this effort now and over the long haul?

The national experts assessed the assets and challenges of Vista Avenue and the surrounding neighborhood. They then presented the local leadership group and other stakeholders with a set of recommendations centered on emphasizing



the corridor's role as a gateway and creating a healthier and more vibrant district. The national team noted that achieving these goals will require focusing on infrastructure, land use, economic development, culture, social connectivity, and health.

Key recommendations included the following:

INFRASTRUCTURE: Reduce travel lanes from five to three (one travel lane in each direction, a center turn lane, and protected bike lanes). Expand pedestrian and planting spaces on each side of the street to 12 feet. Support bike connectivity along Vista or parallel streets, add and enhance signals at intersections, and enhance bus stops by including shelters and benches with schedule displays.

LAND USE: Create a mixed-use zoning designation along Vista and implement a form-based

code and a district parking strategy or shared parking plan.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Use facade grants and low-interest loans to support local businesses. Promote the redevelopment and reuse of existing buildings and develop prototypes to demonstrate the potential reuse of typical lot types along Vista.

CULTURE, SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY, AND

HEALTH: Use placemaking, the arts, and culture to develop and cultivate an identity for Vista Avenue and surrounding neighborhoods. To demonstrate the corridor's potential, implement quick wins such as signage, parklets, community gardens, public art in central nodes, and weekend beautification projects involving the community. Build social capital in the neighborhoods by intentionally engaging the different populations that live and work there. Focus on relationship building and neighborhood partnerships, specifically between the Vista and Depot Bench Neighborhood Associations, the city's Energize Our Neighborhoods initiative, and local businesses.

The national experts also recommended a process to begin realizing these recommendations, starting with the local jurisdictions collaborating to establish a Vista Avenue executive steering committee.

First, the steering committee should conduct an objective assessment of the corridor district; in coordination with the city, the Energize Our

Neighborhoods initiative, the Depot Bench Neighborhood Association, the Ada County Highway District, and other stakeholders, the committee should also develop a unified vision that helps prioritize investments. Second, the steering committee should ensure appropriate staffing by hiring an individual with responsibility for activities related to Vista Avenue and the surrounding neighborhoods. Finally, the committee should evaluate potential funding sources (federal, state, regional, local, and philanthropic) and establish an implementation program and timeline.

Next Steps

Using the recommendations from the national study visit—but recognizing that local elected officials considered some recommendations controversial—the local team identified some next steps in the corridor redevelopment process. The local leadership group first communicated the outcomes of the study visit with the Vista and Depot Bench Neighborhood Associations and with elected officials through presentations and summary documents.

The key to next steps for Vista Avenue redevelopment for local stakeholders is to work closely with the city of Boise. The local leadership group will support city efforts to develop a work plan that implements the study visit recommendations, including suggestions about needed funding and organizational structure. The local team also intends to develop a facilitated visioning process for the corridor that engages residents, local businesses, public agencies, and other key stakeholders.

A potential source of funding under exploration is the tax increment financing that is available through the Capital City Development Corporation. This funding source can be tapped by designating Vista Avenue as an urban redevelopment district. If the redevelopment agency is supportive, the agency staff would work with the city of Boise to develop a master plan and implementation strategies for the district; it would also work with the city of Boise to set priorities for reinvestment in public infrastructure.

In addition, building on the work of the Healthy Corridors project and other local efforts, including ULI Idaho's Moving People First Summit and the city of Boise's Transportation Action Plan, the local team and city partners plan to work with the Ada County Highway District to revise policies for public roadways in ways that will foster health and economic development along the corridor.

The research accomplished and the partnerships established over the two years of the Healthy Corridors project have set the stage for positive changes to occur along Vista Avenue. Bob Taunton, chair of the local leadership group and president of Taunton Group LLC, noted that the lasting value of the Vista corridor demonstration project became clear when community members realized that the corridor, now primarily a thoroughway for vehicles, could become a community place with a unique identity. "The power of that understanding is driving business owners, residents, and local government to imagine a shared vision for Vista Avenue that will lead to future positive individual and economic health outcomes," Taunton said.

OPPOSITE: One asset of the corridor is the variety of housing types that exist along and adjacent to Vista Avenue. (*Jess Zimbabwe*)

BELOW: Plans for Vista Avenue include developing a master plan and reinvesting in public infrastructure along the corridor. (*Jess Zimbabwe*)

