



# PAS MEMO

## Legacy Business Programs: Emerging Directions

By Elizabeth Morton, PhD

Across North America, especially in rapidly growing communities, the public laments the demise of quirky, independent enterprises—the long-standing barbers, bakeries, and bookstores that have sustained a sense of place for generations. This issue is related to but beyond the traditional scope of, both historic preservation and economic development agencies, and thus planners have had few tools available to promote or preserve these community institutions. However, a growing number of U.S. communities are establishing legacy business programs—which range from simple documentation and marketing campaigns to technical assistance programs, grants, and incentives—to support and sustain these businesses.

Legacy business programs are also part of a steady movement to confront the “diversity deficit” in the historic preservation field (Kaufman 2009). Practitioners increasingly call for new ways to expand concerns beyond architecture to include intangible cultural heritage, which according to UNESCO can include oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, festive events, knowledge, skills to produce traditional crafts, and more (UNESCO n.d.). Preservationists hope that with new ways of documenting and promoting a broader set of resources, they can bring to light more inclusive community narratives (Avrami et al. 2020), ensure that vernacular and underrepresented heritage is recognized (Ryberg-Webster and Kinahan 2014; Buckley and Graves 2016), and foster “social sustainability” (UN-HABITAT 2008).

Attention to the understudied cultural contribution of local businesses can be a key part of this effort. A 2021 study of Black enterprises in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, for example, convincingly details the essential role that they play in “establishing and maintaining the cultural vibrancy of their communities” (Figure 1) (Prince et al. 2021, 5).

While recognizing that legacy business programs cannot alone solve the myriad of challenging economic conditions faced by small businesses, this *PAS Memo* seeks to broaden planners’ exposure to the concept and encourage them to join forces with preservationists and economic development offi-



Figure 1. Legacy businesses, such as Moore’s Barbershop in Arlington, Virginia, have sustained a sense of place for generations (Sarah Steller/Virginia Tech Urban Affairs and Planning)

cial to support authentic longstanding enterprises as critical components to further equity and economic prosperity.

The *Memo* summarizes the roots of the legacy business movement in the United States, including the pioneering example of San Francisco and some international precedents, and provides an overview of how both local governments and grassroots actors are initiating programs. The author gathered data from online research and targeted interviews of public and nonprofit stakeholders, along with in-depth research in her own community. The field is developing rapidly, and the number and breadth of local initiatives is likely to grow significantly in the years to come.

## The Legacy Business Concept

The term “legacy business” has been used in an informal way over the years to refer to iconic and cherished community enterprises. In the last decade, interest in establishing formal programs for these enterprises has dramatically increased.

The first U.S. legacy business program was established in San Francisco and is rooted in pathbreaking research and advocacy by grassroots actors and [San Francisco Heritage](#), a nonprofit organization. In the early 2010s, many small businesses were facing dramatic rent increases, and commercial evictions and closures had reached record rates (San Francisco Heritage 2014). As in many cities, public attention to small business displacement was heightened by the loss of one iconic establishment; in this case, the Gold Dust Lounge was replaced by the chain clothing store The Limited. Preservationists realized that the policy and advocacy tools at their disposal, which typically focused on architectural character, limited their ability to protect resources like these.

The nonprofit group’s policy paper, [Sustaining San Francisco’s Living Heritage: Strategies for Conserving Cultural Assets](#), explored an array of approaches to protecting intangible resources in communities facing growth pressures (San Francisco Heritage 2014). Several international cases were highlighted (see the sidebar on p. 5) that supported the interrelationships between small business retention and preservation of cultural heritage.

Drawing inspiration from Buenos Aires’ *Bares Notables* program, in 2013 Heritage developed a Legacy Bars & Restaurants initiative, which documented and publicized “San Francisco’s most legendary eateries, watering holes, dives and haunts.” To qualify, establishments had to be at least 40 years old and possess distinctive architecture or interior design or otherwise demonstrate their contribution to the sense of place. The organization developed a logo and a variety of ways to support the 100 businesses on the list, including an online map, a foldout paper map and brochure, and a storefront window decal.

Building on these efforts, San Francisco County Supervisor David Campos proposed the establishment of an official [San Francisco Legacy Business Registry](#), administered by the Small Business Commission. The new program, authorized in 2015, encompassed a broader set of business types, along with nonprofit organizations, and also lowered the age threshold. A second phase of this effort established the Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund via ballot initiative, making funding available to provide incentives to landlords and small business owners, along with a dedicated staff position to administer the program (San Francisco Heritage 2015). The sidebar on p. 9 provides a more detailed look at San Francisco’s groundbreaking program.

This program is an excellent illustration of the way that public policy often advances by first socializing a concept and gaining acceptance through “soft” tools. The Heritage campaign, which included nominations from the public, had generated awareness, dialogue, and debate. Unlike many historic preservation designations, listing on the city’s registry was not associated with any new regulations.

In the United States, legacy business programs have been popularized by San Francisco’s efforts. Almost every city surveyed cited San Francisco’s program as an inspiration, though no other local programs have yet matched its size, scope, or resources.

The definition of “legacy business” varies from locality to locality (Table 1, pp. 3–4), but in general the term is being applied to longstanding, independent enterprises that make a strong contribution to community character. Legacy businesses are cultural anchors, repositories of community traditions and stories. They are run by what the City of North Miami calls “serial entrepreneurs,” often providing a foothold and place to prosper for immigrants to the United States. They often serve as “third places” where community members gather regularly outside of their individual homes and workplaces. “The soul of San Francisco,” “Quintessentially Seattle,” and “businesses that make Austin feel like home” are ways that communities that have recently started programs describe these cherished institutions.

## Challenges

Not surprisingly, legacy businesses face many of the challenges common to most small businesses, including dramatic rent or property taxes increases in hot markets, intense competition in the restaurant sector, and of course, competition from online shopping. Skyrocketing property values provide powerful incentives for businesses that own their properties to cash out and for landlords to favor more lucrative franchises when it is time to renew leases (LaVecchia and Mitchell 2016).

Explaining its legacy business program, the City of Pasadena states, “As national retailers and online shopping continue to lure a larger portion of consumer spending, it is increasingly important to recognize elements of local Commerce that help set our community apart from other cities” (McCray 2020).

The opportunity for regular, face-to-face interactions between proprietors and staff have been a hallmark of legacy businesses. While surveys have noted that Millennials and Gen Zs crave authenticity and human experience (Deloitte 2019), at the same time business analysts have noted the general move towards a frictionless customer experience, in which a premium is placed on technology and efficiency. Some older business owners are daunted by the need to adapt their business practices to match consumer expectations for social media presence and online arrangements. As of 2020, it was estimated that less than two-thirds of small businesses had their own website (SBA 2020). One long-established bakery in Arlington, Virginia, for example, struggles to keep up with customers who expect baked goods like they see on baking shows and Pinterest to be instantly available through an app. An immigrant restaurateur notes the challenges of adapting traditional staples to accommodate growing awareness of allergies and dietary preferences.

A significant challenge in preserving local ownership of iconic businesses is succession planning. Some communities fear the impact of the “silver tsunami” of baby boomer retirement, which may result in business closures or purchases by

**Table 1. Characteristics of City-Sponsored Legacy Business Programs**

Locality and Agency	Criteria/requirements (condensed)	Benefits (condensed)
<p><b>Horry County, SC</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Recognition Program</a>                      Historic Preservation Commission (est. 2014)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 50 years</p> <p>Contributes to the economic heritage of County</p>	<p>Award ceremony</p> <p>Publicity on City website</p>
<p><b>San Francisco, CA</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Registry</a>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Preservation Fund</a>                      Office of Small Business (est. 2015)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 50 years</p> <p>Contributes to the economic heritage of County Minimum age of business: 30 years (20 if at risk of displacement)</p> <p>Contributes to the neighborhood’s history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community</p> <p>Commits to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms</p> <p>Nominated by Mayor or member of the Board of Supervisors</p>	<p>Rent stabilization grant for landlords</p> <p>Grant funds for legacy businesses for activities that promote long-term stability</p> <p>Marketing/promotion products include logo, brand book, marketing toolkit, bronze plaques, decals and stickers, letterhead, and more</p> <p>Website with map and profiles of businesses on registry</p> <p>Technical assistance, such as Small Business Toolkit for Transitioning to Employee Ownership</p>
<p><b>San Antonio, TX</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Program</a>                      Office of Historic Preservation (est. 2018)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 20 years</p> <p>Must meet one of the following: (1) owned by generations of the same family; (2) provides authentic goods or services; (3) cultivates tradition and culture; (4) located in a landmark or historic district; (5) eligible and willing to be a landmark</p>	<p>Award ceremony</p> <p>Online map</p> <p>Extensive promotion on social media of newly inducted businesses</p> <p>Special funding may be available for resources in the vicinity of the city’s World Heritage Site</p>
<p><b>Cambridge, MA</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Program</a>                      Community Development Department and Historical Commission (est. 2019)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 25 years</p> <p>Application includes description of how business maintains physical features and/or traditions that define the business, including craft, services, culinary, or art forms</p> <p>Businesses must be nominated</p>	<p>Award ceremony</p> <p>Promotion on social media</p> <p>Online map</p> <p>Decal and website icons</p> <p>Technical assistance under development</p>
<p><b>Washington, D.C.</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Grant</a>                      Great Streets Program (DMPED) (est. 2019)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 25 years</p> <p>In one of 13 “Great Streets” commercial cores</p> <p>Must provide information about the historic significance of the building and its impact on the District of Columbia and its respective neighborhoods (among other criteria)</p>	<p>Grants for build-out of new or vacant space; interior or exterior renovations (including façade improvement; and/or purchase or installation of heavy equipment)</p> <p>Legacy Business Supplemental Microgrants part of COVID-19 Relief funding</p>

Locality and Agency	Criteria/requirements (condensed)	Benefits (condensed)
<p><b>Seattle, WA</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Program</a>                      Office of Economic Development                      (est. 2019)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 10 years</p> <p>Contributes to ground-level streetscape and/or neighborhood identity (“placemaking”)</p> <p>Serves a community function “above and beyond basic sale of good and services”</p> <p>Faces a significant risk of displacement</p> <p>Employs fewer than 50 people; independently owned</p>	<p>Award ceremony</p> <p>Promotional video produced, shared on city website and social media</p> <p>Comprehensive Commercial Lease toolkit</p> <p>Comprehensive Succession Planning toolkit</p> <p>Social media marketing toolkit</p> <p>2 hours free legal consultation</p> <p>8 hours free CPTED consultation</p>
<p><b>Missoula, MT</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Program</a>                      Historic Preservation Program                      (est. 2019)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 50 years</p> <p>Longstanding, community-serving local business</p>	<p>Publicity on City website</p> <p>Educational and promotional assistance</p>
<p><b>Birmingham, AL</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Program</a>                      Office of Business Diversity and Opportunity                      (est. 2020)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 25 years</p> <p>On average, less than 20 employees</p> <p>Contributes to city’s historic and cultural fabric</p> <p>Commits to maintaining culinary, art and/or craft heritage that braids the history and progression of Birmingham</p>	<p>Public recognition by elected officials</p> <p>Decals</p> <p>Social media marketing toolkit</p> <p>Ability to display promotional video on the City’s website</p> <p>Access to specialized training opportunities</p> <p>Public-private grant fund anticipated in “phase 2”</p>
<p><b>Pasadena, CA</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Program</a>                      Economic Development Division                      (est. 2021)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 50 years</p> <p>Has operated under the same general name for duration of the business</p> <p>Contributes to the community “in a unique way”</p>	<p>Publicity through City website, newsletter, and social media</p> <p>Formal recognition by city council</p> <p>Identified with Legacy Business Marker</p>
<p><b>Miami Beach, FL</b>  <a href="#">Legacy Business Registry</a>                      South Beach Entertainment District                      (est. 2021)</p>	<p>Minimum age of business: 25 years</p> <p>Unique to/original location Miami Beach</p> <p>Has demonstrated record of promoting Miami Beach in a positive manner</p> <p>Has significantly contributed to history or identity of the City or neighborhood</p> <p>Commits to maintaining unique physical features, services, arts, performances, or traditions that define business, including but not limited to craft, culinary, or art forms</p>	<p>Documentation, with possible benefits (e.g., regulatory flexibility) in the future</p>

## International Precedents



Figure 2. This store, “the oldest magic shop in the world,” is one of Barcelona’s Establishments of Interest (Elizabeth Morton)

### Barcelona

Since 1993, the Barcelona City Council has recognized businesses that have operated for at least 50 years while retaining their architectural character with “Forever Beautiful” awards; these establishments are marketed by tourism associations and featured in online tourist routes and illustrated books. Since 2016, the city’s heritage protections have been extended to include intangible resources, including three categories for “Establishments of Interest” (Figure 2). This designation qualifies owners for several funding or technical assistance programs and, for the highest category of shops, allows the Barcelona City Council the right of first refusal if the property is put on the market (Pauné 2016).

### Buenos Aires

In 1998, concerned about closures of establishments that defined the city’s famous cafe culture, Buenos Aires established a Commission for the Protection and Promotion of Notable Cafes, Bars, Billiards and Confectionaries, a designation program administered by the city’s Ministry of Culture. Businesses that

qualify based on their age and architectural merit or cultural significance are eligible for capital improvement grants, official storefront decals, and some special planning provisions. The Ministry of Culture has cooperated on promotional campaigns with a variety of grassroots and tourism partners and the municipal tourism agency maintains [an online map](#) with profiles of each business.

### London

After documenting the loss of hundreds of pubs and small shops per year over the prior decade, London passed the Localism Act of 2011. A component of the Act authorized communities to nominate [Assets of Community Value \(ACVs\)](#), buildings or land parcels that “further the social well being or social interests of the community.” If the nomination is successful, the owner of the asset must notify the city before placing it on the market and, if the community indicates interest, a six-month moratorium is placed on the sale to allow community members to put together a bid. Local authorities also consider the ACV designation when evaluating applications for a change of use. As in Buenos Aires, a nonprofit group has played a very active role in promoting the use of this tool for London pubs, and between 2012 and 2020 more than 2,000 pubs have been designated (Campaign for Real Ale n.d.) The municipal government also instituted a series of tax incentives, education programs, and technical assistance for designated pubs (San Francisco Heritage 2014, 34).

### Paris

Alarmed at the prospect of “blandification” of iconic neighborhoods like the Latin Quarter, Paris has taken the most aggressive approach to preserving legacy businesses by playing an active role in the real estate market. Through its [Vital’Quartier](#) program, the city’s semi-public community development entity, Semaest, aims to “ensure commercial diversity” by buying and renovating buildings in designated businesses districts that are either in need of revitalization or dominated by a single commercial type (such as tourist uses or IT). The agency then either leases the buildings at below market rate or sells them with restrictive covenants; in either case, specific independent enterprise types, such as bookshops, artisans, or bakeries, must be maintained. Semaest also supports these designated businesses with technical assistance and access to credit (San Francisco Heritage 2014, 27). Paris officials are also seeking UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Status for its collection of traditional bistros; advocates explain “A bistro isn’t just some place for a quick bite to eat...It’s the home of the Parisian art de vivre [art of living]—that’s what we’re losing if these places die out: our way of life” (Katz 2018).

national franchises. The nonprofit Project Equity worked with the City of Long Beach to document locally owned businesses over 20 years old and found that only 15 percent of business owners passed their businesses on to their children, in part because the younger generations were not interested (Project Equity 2020). The situation has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Northwestern University’s Center for Family Enterprises, even for businesses that have prospered for 100 years or more, too often “there isn’t the next generation with the passion to take the business through a crisis” (cited in Haimerl 2020).

**Promoters of Legacy Business Programs**

As shown in Table 1, city-sponsored legacy business programs have been organized by both historic preservation and economic development agencies. To date they have been most often seated in local economic development departments, but since 2019, at least five city-wide nonprofit preservation organizations have established their own legacy business programs (Table 2).

Business associations and local newspapers have long been stalwart supporters of small enterprises, and several have incorporated specific legacy business activities. For example, Main Street organizations in Annapolis, Maryland; Muskogee, Oklahoma; and the State of Kentucky have instituted legacy business awards, as have the Leesburg, Virginia, and Myrtle Beach, Florida, chambers of commerce. Since 2017 the Long Beach Business Journal has been compiling and promoting a list of Long Beach businesses and organizations that began operations before 1970. The local media outlet *Eye on Annapolis* features Anne Arundel County, Maryland, mainstays in its weekly **Legacy Business Spotlight**, which includes podcast interviews with business owners.

Nonprofit organizations and grassroots actors also play important roles in catalyzing and gaining public support for legacy business programs. San Francisco is not the only city in which nongovernmental actors generated awareness before an official legacy business program was established. In Seattle, amidst headlines bemoaning the loss of dive bars and mom and pop shops, the **Ghosts of Seattle Past** campaign, spearheaded

**Table 2. Legacy Business Programs, Nonprofit Preservation Organizations**

Organization	General criteria	Program components
<b>Baltimore Heritage</b> <a href="#">Legacy Business Program</a>	Minimum age: 100 years  List curated by organization staff	Inclusion on online map and tour  Narrative and Five-Minute History videos produced on website
<b>Greater Portland (ME) Landmarks</b> <a href="#">Legacy Business Award</a> Est. 2020	Maine-owned businesses that “have come to symbolize greater Portland over the last century”	Public ceremony  Inclusion on website
<b>Long Beach Heritage</b> <a href="#">Certified Legacy Business Program</a>	Minimum age: 35 years or meets two of these criteria: (1) in operation for at least 25 years; (2) contributes to a sense of history; (3) associated with distinctive architecture, interior design, or landscape; (4) possesses significant cultural value	Public ceremony  Branded signage, logo, and marketing material  Inclusion on map, brochure, and online/ social media outreach  Additional partnership and networking opportunities
<b>Los Angeles Conservancy</b> <a href="#">Legacy Business Initiative</a>	Minimum age: 20 years	Online interactive map and narrative  Spotlights on website  Advocacy for legacy business interests and legislation  Legacy business network
<b>Preservation Chicago</b> <a href="#">Guide to Legacy Businesses</a>	Minimum age: 25 years  Locally owned  Crowdsourced requests for nominations through social media	List and map  Intent to inspire locals to “vote with their wallets”  Advocacy for legacy business interests and legislation

by a local author in 2015, organized events on Seattle’s “Legacy Spaces” and crowdsourced mapping efforts that grew into a “living atlas” and eventually a book. The following year, a city councilmember, after exploratory studies with arts and culture organizations, initiated a city-funded legacy business survey to explore common challenges to the city’s longstanding businesses and the feasibility of establishing an official program.

**Criteria and Process for Designation**

As outlined in Table 1, communities have adopted a variety of criteria determining what can qualify as a legacy business, depending on their local character and program objectives.

Cities with formal programs require a minimum term of continuous operation, ranging from 10 to 50 years; 25 years is the most common age requirement. In some programs there are caps on the number of employees or explicit prohibitions on chains. Recognizing that contributions are both physical and intangible, some cities require maintenance of either physical fabric or traditions that are determined to contribute to a civic identity.

The process for nominating businesses also varies from place to place. Many cities have a public call for nominations, supplemented by research and encouragement by staff. In San Francisco, legacy businesses must be nominated by the

mayor or a member of the board of supervisors. While some early opponents of the legacy business initiative expressed concerns about political favoritism (Buckley and Graves 2016), today supporters state that this practice has been a critical way of gaining buy-in and sustained interest from elected officials, who often “go to bat” for legacy businesses (Buhler 2020). Some other localities have followed suit by formally or informally nominating businesses spanning the range of political districts.

San Francisco’s [online registry](#) demonstrates the expansive set of cultural resources that can be captured in a Legacy Business program, with categories ranging from animal care to martial arts schools to wig shops (Figure 3).

**Tools to Promote and Protect Legacy Businesses**

Each legacy business program that has been created by local governments or organizations is different, but there are some commonalities in the tools localities offer for officially designated legacy business.

**Information**

Most public efforts to date focus on public awareness and education. For example, the City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation celebrates Preservation Month by highlighting legacy

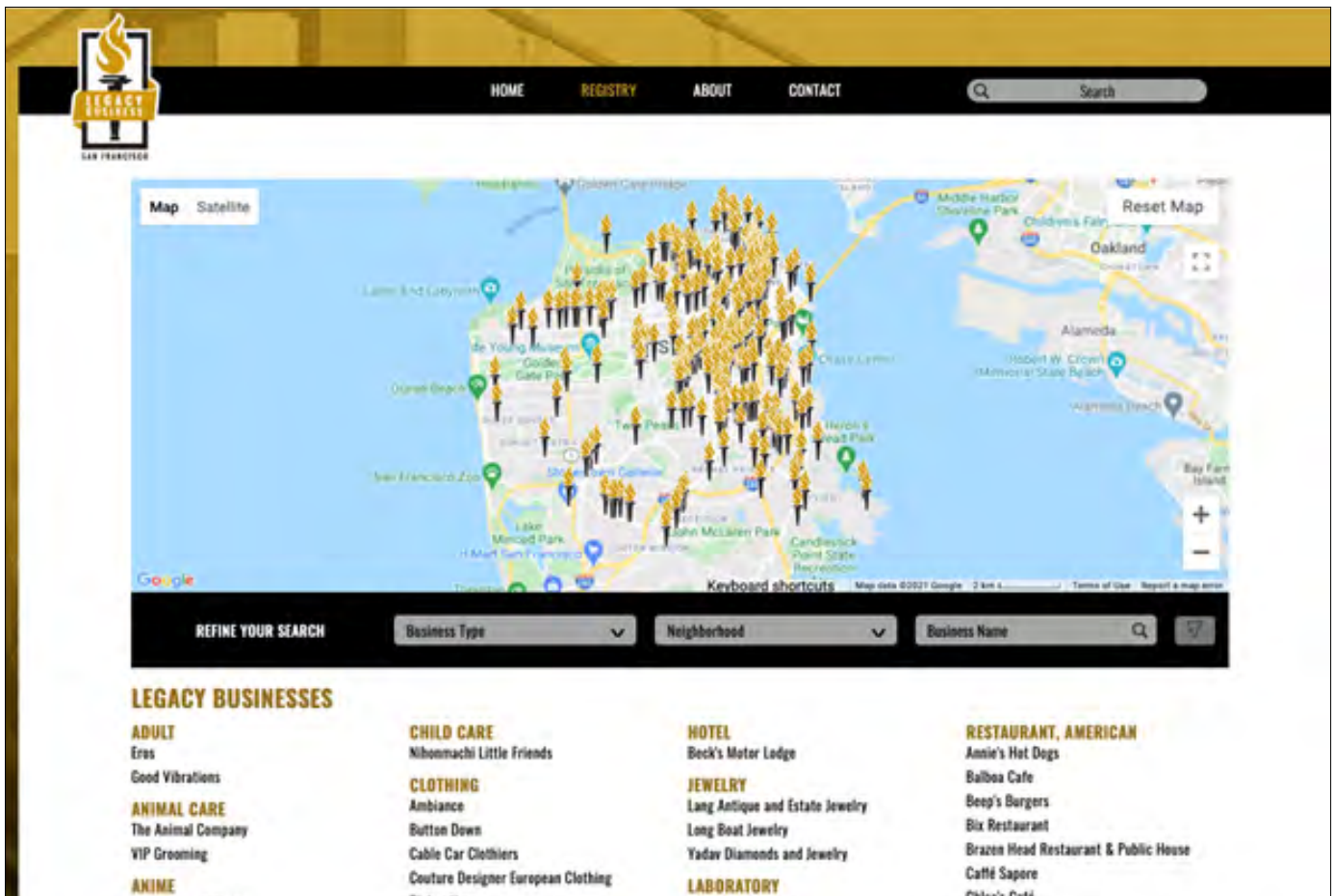


Figure 3. San Francisco’s Legacy Business online map and directory (City and County of San Francisco)

## San Antonio: Linking Authentic Intangible Culture and Economic Prosperity

San Antonio's legacy business program grew out of a 2017 Living Heritage Symposium. One of the motivations for that event was the loss of a community treasure valued primarily for its cultural significance, not its architecture.

Inspired by San Francisco's efforts, San Antonio planners launched the city's [legacy business program](#) in 2018, based in its Office of Historic Preservation. Reflecting the rich, often intangible, cultural resources of the city, the call for applications states: "Boot makers and hat shops, piñata-makers and sellers, restaurants, ice-houses, saloons and cantinas, schools of ballet folklórico, butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers are all eligible!"

Planners stress that the legacy business program aims not only to recognize and cultivate the authenticity of existing businesses, but to encourage new enterprises to perpetuate those traditions. For example, because skilled tradesmen are essential to maintain and restore San Antonio's historic buildings, the program is planning to expand its scope to include individuals like master craftsmen and others in the building trades.

Oral histories tied to [online maps](#), a "museum without walls" StoryMap, and crowdsourced historic markers have revealed that among the most cherished community resources are community gathering places like small shops and music venues. Indeed, the first legacy business designated was Del Bravo Records, established in 1966.

The Office of Historic Preservation consistently stresses the links between authentic living heritage and economic prosperity. Assisting legacy businesses is viewed as a way to expand preservation's scope by including cultural systems and furthering the city's equity goals (Miller 2020).

The city's World Heritage Office established an important complementary effort for legacy businesses in the vicinity of San Antonio's World Heritage Site, though funds have been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. The [World Heritage Area Legacy Business Grant Pilot Program](#) recognized that authentic and stable legacy businesses help provide an "inviting cultural experience" to those who visit the city's famed collection of colonial Missions. It has supported designated businesses with matching grants for facade improvements, signage, and landscape improvements; loans for interior improvements; and technical assistance programs (San Antonio World Heritage Office 2018).



Figure 4. The owners of Del Rio Tortilla Company, a designated San Antonio legacy business, and their city council representative celebrate the city's Preservation Month (City of San Antonio)

businesses through photos, posters, and social media featuring City Council representatives with business owners (Figure 4).

In some cities, the program consists of an annual award with a ceremony and publicity. Cambridge, Massachusetts, celebrates small business legacy business awardees with a Small Business Legacy Luncheon, an event that is a part of the city's National Small Business Week celebrations (Figure 5).

Localities often spread the word using their website and social media outlets. Seattle and Birmingham are two cities that produce and host promotional videos for legacy businesses. Several cities, including Pasadena, have followed San Francisco's model of providing window decals, and others produce online or "analog" paper maps.

### Grants and Loans

San Francisco is distinctive in the level of funding it has made available for financial support of legacy businesses, as described in the sidebar. Many state constitutions or local political conditions prohibit or dissuade local governments from giving public funds to individual businesses.

Some of the localities that do provide grants to legacy businesses target specific neighborhoods. For example, Washington, D.C.'s Legacy Business Program is focused on its 13 "Great Streets" commercial districts. In San Antonio, enhanced funding may be available for businesses in the vicinity of the city's World Heritage Site.

### Technical Assistance

Legacy business designations and small grants on their own may not be enough to save a business facing considerable pressure. Several cities offer specialized training opportunities geared towards legacy businesses. For example, Birmingham, Alabama, offers a social media toolkit, and Missoula, Montana, offers promotional assistance.

Before launching its program, Seattle staff spent several years studying the needs of small businesses and found that many were skeptical of the legacy business concept; staff heard that "another plaque was not going to solve anything" (Wells 2019). As a result, Seattle worked hard to create products that would be useful; among the benefits of legacy business des-



Figure 5. Cambridge Small Business Legacy Luncheon, May 2019 (Kyle Klein/City of Cambridge)



## San Francisco: A Broad Array of Planning Tools

The Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund established by the 2015 ballot initiative has provided San Francisco with the largest budget for legacy building programs in the United States by far; since FY2016–17 the program's typical annual budget for grants and program expenses has been over \$1 million. San Francisco was the only city surveyed with a staff person entirely devoted to legacy business program nomination and administration, housed in the Office of Small Business.

The Fund established two grant programs. The Business Assistance Grant provides up to \$500 per full-time employee (for a maximum of 100 employees) directly to designated legacy businesses; this program was suspended for 2020–2021 due to funding constraints related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The **Rent Stabilization Grant** offers building owners an incentive to provide long-term leases to businesses on the Registry; although it does not prohibit rent increases, the fund offers landlords up to \$4.50 per square foot for up to 5,000 square feet if they offer a 10-year lease.

In addition to the grant programs, San Francisco offers an extensive set of marketing and promotional products, including a logo, a brand book, bronze plaques, and letterhead (Figure 6). The city also has an interactive searchable [online registry](#), which by the end of 2021 had grown to over 275 businesses (Figure 3, p. 7).



Figure 6. San Francisco's Legacy Business logo (City and County of San Francisco)

Although there are currently no formal requirements for review of changes to legacy businesses, San Francisco's Historic Preservation Commission reviews the nominations and provides advisory recommendations to the Small Business Commission. According to local advocates, legacy business designation is taken into account when considering mitigation of development impacts (Buhler 2020). For example, in one case the Planning Commission required a height reduction when a project would have cast significant shadow on a beer garden on the legacy business registry (Scerrato 2017).

As a long-range strategy, San Francisco is studying potential expansion of the tools it uses to encourage legacy businesses, most of which recognize the distinct advantages for businesses to own and accrue equity in their own property. Possible legislation could include:

- Streamlining permits and other planning and zoning benefits for legacy businesses
- Encouraging or requiring developers of mixed-use buildings to provide commercial condominiums
- Providing incentives for the sale of commercial condominiums to legacy businesses
- Offering down payment assistance loans or grants for legacy businesses buying property
- Purchasing property for long-term rent-to-own programs for legacy businesses

A new **grant program** for legacy business owners and renters, including nonprofit organizations, was established in November 2021, which provide funds for tenant improvements, rent, relocation within the city, and other activities that promote long-term stability.

ignation now are a comprehensive commercial lease toolkit, succession planning toolkit, and several hours of free legal consultation and crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) advice.

### Targeted COVID-19 Relief Funds

Many legacy businesses have thrived for years because they provide gathering spaces and personalized attention. However, businesses that rely on this "person to person contact" were particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (SBA 2020). Recognizing this, in addition to traditional Community Development Block Grant funds, several localities have allocated designated portions from the 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act specifically for legacy businesses (Table 3, p. 10).

In two of the most recent initiatives, Austin, Texas, and North Miami, Florida, CARES Act funding was these cities' first legacy

business-related policy. In late 2020, the City of Austin established the \$5 million **Austin Legacy Business Relief Grant**, a component of the \$15 million Save Austin's Vital Economic Sector (SAVES) Fund. These funds were specifically targeted for the arts and nightlife fixtures for which Austin is famous; eligible enterprises include art galleries and museums, art venues, bars, live music venues, performance venues and theaters, and restaurants that have been operating for 20 years. In the first phase of emergency funding, rolled out in February 2021, eligible legacy businesses could apply for \$20,000 grants and access technical assistance evaluation and coaching. In a later phase of enhanced funding, Phase 1 recipients are eligible for an additional grant of up to \$140,000.

In a recent round of CARES Act funding in North Miami aimed at businesses with up to 10 employees, a legacy business in operation for at least 15 years is eligible for up to \$5,000,

**Table 3. COVID-19 Relief Enhancement for Legacy Businesses**

City and Program	Description/Criteria
<b>Austin, TX</b> <a href="#">Legacy Business Relief Grant</a> (est. 2020)	Minimum age 20 years Targeted to art galleries/museums, art venues, bars, live music venues, performance venues/theaters, and restaurants  Must be a “brick and mortar” establishment  Must commit to maintaining the business’ unique contribution to the City’s special culture and brand
<b>Washington, DC</b> <a href="#">Legacy Small Business Recovery Grant</a> (est. 2020)	Minimum age 20 years Enhanced micro-grant for previously qualified legacy businesses
<b>North Miami, FL</b> <a href="#">Legacy Business Grant</a> (est. 2021)	Minimum age 15 years Legacy businesses eligible for up to \$5,000 in working capital assistance, as opposed to \$1,000 for other businesses

an enhancement over the “regular” business stabilization grant of up to \$1,000. The city underscores the challenges of legacy businesses and the role they can play in community resilience, stating:

Our locally owned commercial establishments such as retailers, artisans, restaurants, bars, professional offices, restaurants, manufacturers, and personal service providers are all the bedrock of the community. Their presence contributes to the vibrancy and unique North Miami brand... Unfortunately, these businesses have been severely hit due to the economic downturn caused by the Coronavirus pandemic and are at risk of going under. Without funding assistance, many of these businesses will fail. Preserving our longstanding businesses is critical to maintaining a strong local economy and the very essence of what makes North Miami a special place. (North Miami 2021)

**Action Steps for Planners**

The experiences and approaches being taken by the communities described in this *Memo* to support local legacy businesses suggest a number of ways that planners can work with pres-

ervationists, economic development staff, and others to help protect and promote these special establishments and their contributions to local history, character, and sense of place.

**Collect accurate information and authentic perspectives.** The history of commercial properties is not always well represented in local historic inventories or city records, and proprietors themselves may have difficulty locating their own records. Planners should work with their community’s historic preservation staff, historical society, and local library to identify the best sources for identifying business establishment dates. Tax assessor records, advertisements, and trade publications may provide supplemental information about the history of commerce in an area.

If a program does contain incentives based on legacy business designation, well-researched information will help to establish program legitimacy. But even if a program is largely honorific, collecting as detailed information as possible from existing business owners, employees, and customers allows for the creation of powerful new narratives and material that can be used for other promotional purposes. Cambridge, for example, folds information gained from its legacy business research into its marketing programs, such as [National Small Business Week](#), [Black Business Month](#), and [Women-Owned Business Month](#).

Oral histories and crowdsourced information are highly encouraged, as they can yield invaluable and authentic perspectives not found in the official record. Although the data gleaned from conversations with proprietors and customers may not always be 100 percent accurate, these conversations can forge stronger relationships and provide a more nuanced understanding of the contributions and needs of local businesses. Universities and other institutions can help support these efforts, as has been the case in Arlington County, Virginia, described in the sidebar on p. 11.

**Consider community needs and program goals when deciding on criteria.** Basing legacy business designation on age alone may sound simple. But the dynamic nature of commercial enterprise can introduce complications. Local governments have debated issues such as whether a business needs to be located in its original building, whether it needs to be run by the same family, and whether there should be a cap on the number of employees. Seattle found that, due to the labor-intensive nature of small restaurants, their numbers of employees exceeded the anticipated definition of “small business.” Cambridge distinguishes between national chains, which are explicitly excluded, and “chain-lets,” businesses that were established in Cambridge and that have only a limited number of locations within the Greater Boston area.

Some cities include only retail, while others allow personal services. Recognizing the important contributions made by nonprofit organizations, some cities include them on their list. Other cities feel that supporting nonprofit organizations is beyond the purview of their economic development agency’s mandate.

Although some communities take an open approach, some respond to specific priorities in focusing eligibility. For example, because one of the motivations of the San Francisco program

## Virginia Tech Arlington County Legacy Business Project

In Arlington County, Virginia, a rapidly growing area, a graduate studio at Virginia Tech's Urban Affairs and Planning program conducted research on longstanding businesses and conducted a series of oral histories in two neighborhoods facing growth pressures.

The county's Center for Local History provided transcriptions and a permanent home for the oral histories, which helped fill a gap in the center's material on the county's commercial history. In addition, students embedded excerpts from the recordings in a legacy business website and wove them into narratives to create [The Local Shop weekly radio broadcast](#) on the local independent radio station (Figure 7) (Coleman 2018).

While bars and restaurants are typically what immediately comes to mind as community icons, these oral histories brought to light the lasting, intimate relationships fostered by establishments such as pharmacies, repair shops, and framers. In the historically African American community of Green Valley, institutions such as funeral homes, barber shops and salons, and cab companies sustained families that for decades had been excluded from going elsewhere.

In the words of Jim Moore Jr., whose father established Moore's Barber Shop on Arlington's Lee Highway in 1960,

*So, the barber shop business, historically, was one of the few businesses black men could do and... raise their family and generate money, without the help of anyone. ... We still provide great service, and we've been able to maintain those relationships throughout the years. (Morton 2017)*

This project has sparked interest among several business district associations and county preservation and planning staff, who have begun incorporating narratives and information collected about these businesses into a redevelopment initiative along a major commercial corridor.



Figure 7. Graduate student Valeria Gelman created a radio show featuring oral histories of legacy business owners like KH Art & Framing (Valeria Gelman/Virginia Tech Urban Affairs and Planning)

was outcry over displacement, its program makes a distinction between businesses at risk of displacement (eligible at 20 years old) and those that are not (eligible at 30 years old). And Austin targets its iconic arts and entertainment enterprises in its Legacy Relief Grant.

**Reconsider the notions of authenticity and documentation.** Legacy businesses, and their attendant intangible heritage, may not fit neatly into existing preservation inventories or planning incentive programs. Although they may be essential cultural gathering places, businesses may have moved or made modifications to their buildings, or even their names.

It may be much more challenging to document aspects such as food traditions, festivals, and business practices, but it can surface stories of underrepresented or marginalized groups and fill gaps in established histories. Documentation can also provide a record of nontraditional aspects that may define a business, like menus, uniforms, or signage, that could be important to consider if a business needs to relocate (Buhler 2020).

Planners must balance making program usage as easy as possible for struggling and at times suspicious business owners and requiring documentation that justifies public expenditures on particular establishments. San Francisco has developed an [application form](#) with detailed prompts about criteria; staff feel this yields valuable information and fosters a sense of collaboration between the city and local businesses. In contrast, San Antonio's [nomination forms](#) are intentionally simple, and nominations can come from anyone in the community.

**Engage the public.** Several cities include a crowd-sourced component of their program, such as "People's Choice" nominations, which have proven to be popular with the public and the press. Planners hope that the public enthusiasm will strengthen residents' resolve to shop locally.

As noted above, university students can be employed to help map and document enterprises and provide social media assistance. A side benefit of engaging this demographic is that it can make them reconsider their relationship to local businesses and become emissaries to their peers.

**Work collaboratively across policy silos.** At a minimum, planners, historic preservationists, and economic development offices should join forces to recognize and promote the contribution of authentic enterprises to the local economy, combining their traditional tools and constituencies. Legacy businesses advocates can try to link their programs to other less obvious city programs; for example, Cambridge works with its bike-sharing program to promote local businesses on its bike facilities. Cities can refine their public procurement policies to favor locally owned businesses (LaVecchia and Mitchell 2016).

Zoning and land-use policies can also encourage a more favorable environment for small, locally owned businesses. For example, in 2017 Cambridge, Massachusetts, amended its zoning ordinance to create an overlay district for its Central Square neighborhood to "respond to the unique problems and pressures for change particular to Central Square" ([§20.302](#)). The overlay establishes a Formula Business District that requires formula businesses (defined as having either 10 Massachusetts or 20 national establishments along with standardized logos,

signage, or other design elements) to obtain a special permit to locate in the district (§20.304.5(4)). Criteria for approval include modification of formula design elements to reflect the character of the Square, preservation of the Square's cultural diversity, and the creation of retail that serves people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Planning and development agencies can encourage the inclusion of locally rooted businesses in new mixed-use developments, partially subsidized by market-rate enterprises, similar to inclusionary housing policies (Kimmelman 2019). For example, the New York Economic Development Corporation incorporated the Lower East Side's historic Essex Market into the massive Essex Crossing project; that market's nonprofit management entity offers below-market rents and technical assistance to small businesses, many of which are Lower East Side institutions and the majority of which are immigrant, minority, or women owned (Scherling and Margolis 2020).

**Partner with employee ownership programs with complementary aims.** Some organizations are using the concept of legacy businesses in their efforts to prevent displacement and address the succession challenge. For example, [Project Equity](#) and the [Democracy at Work Institute](#) are drawing attention to the pressures on minority-owned legacy businesses and promoting employee ownership as a way to expand opportunities for building wealth and stabilizing commercial corridors (Democracy at Work Institute 2017).

## Conclusion

Legacy business advocates acknowledge that these programs alone are most likely not enough to forestall evictions or transform local economies. However, these initiatives are one tool to raise awareness and provide a more representative account of valued institutions in a community. Planners can begin with documentation to create a foundation for complementary policy tools such as incentives or protections.

Preservationists increasingly realize that their focus should not be limited to saving buildings, but should extend to fostering places that connect people to "meaningful narratives about history, culture, and identity" (Kaufman, cited in Buckley and Graves 2016). As evidenced by the proliferation of legacy business programs, a broader range of stakeholders is seeing these resources as both vulnerable and as assets that may serve as a counterweight to the unsettling forces of economic dislocation and persistent racial injustice. As the City of Seattle puts it, a legacy business program can "combat displacement of longstanding, culturally relevant businesses and support their continued stability and growth in a volatile period of economic growth, change, and opportunity" (Vansynghel 2020).

In the words of one scholar and advocate, "unlike housing, small businesses are not widely viewed as critical to a community's life and livelihood in ways that justify public policy interventions" (Lung-Amam 2021). It's time for planners to challenge traditional assumptions and push for the incorporation of legacy business considerations into development policy to support these essential contributors to local quality of life.

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