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FOR REAL ESTATE AND URBAN ACTION

BOSTON COLLEGE CARROLL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Codman Square Neighborhood Business District

Impressions of Business Owners and Managers

Summary of Interviews Conducted
November and December 2020

Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent reaction by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and City of Boston, on the small business community in Boston has been substantial. This is particularly true in communities most often classified as vulnerable, where all other factors associated with the pandemic are worst. The neighborhood of Codman Square, located in the southern end of Dorchester, is one such community. A team of undergraduate students associated with Neil McCullagh at the Corcoran Center for Real Estate and Urban Action at Boston College, with Dr. Samantha Teixeira and Josh Lown in the School of Social Work at Boston College, interviewed nine small business owners in Codman Square. The purpose of these interviews was to better understand the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses in Codman Square and their community perceptions.

Several difficulties were identified across interviews and were shared as protective factors that helped lessen the pandemic's worst effects. Overall, interviews with small business owners in Codman Square showed us the following:

- ***The Impact of the Pandemic.*** The pandemic greatly affected the business community in Codman Square as a whole. Those local businesses that have succeeded seem to have done so due to assistance from community members. The pandemic has highlighted where these businesses need to improve, and the type of business support required. (i.e., marketing, training, e-commerce, etc.)
- ***The Impact of the Community.*** The community itself seems to be the most significant protective factor as described by the participants. Contradictorily described as lively, supportive, and loving, it is also described as disorganized and troubled by crime. Interviewees describe the Codman Square Business District as greatly improved but in need of further improvement. Participants were dedicated to their community and wanted the community's businesses to continue to be owned and operated by locals.
- ***The Hopes for the Future.*** Participants had a wide range of ideas and goals for bettering their businesses and community. In particular, the addition of more retail and health food businesses would greatly benefit the neighborhood. Participants also noted that the area's traffic was a problem before the pandemic, and the lack of parking exacerbates this. Participants note that they want economic growth and financial investment in the community, but they want it in the form of supporting local- and Black-owned businesses. Aside from this, participants want to continue to keep their community intact in any way they can but noted that they may need some support in the process.

Methodology

In collaboration with the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation (CSNDC), the Urban Action Lab run by Neil McCullagh at Boston College sought to better understand the concerns of small businesses in the Codman Square Business District and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the business community. With the support of Dr. Samantha Teixeira and Josh Lown from the Boston College School of Social Work, students developed an interview protocol. Dr. Teixeira and Josh Lown trained six undergraduate students to take part in in the Urban Action Lab, using the proper qualitative interview process. These six students interviewed nine Codman Square business owners. Transcripts for each interview were written and provided by the students. Students learned how to code transcripts using thematic coding, with the assistance of Josh Lown. Josh Lown then grouped the coded transcripts to find common themes across interviews. Using this information, Josh Lown completed the following report.

Community

Small business owners in the Codman Square Business District view their immediate community as a protective factor for their business but also as a limiting factor of success.

‘Community here is defined by those interviewed as a) patrons to their business, b) the local business community, and c) the residential areas and businesses immediately surrounding their business.

Those interviewed discussed that their patrons were their most extensive support system and have been a reliable source of building their brand and finding new customers in the community. Interviewees described how residents, including their patrons, have been “priced out”. Gentrification has made it more difficult for many of their customers to support their businesses. There is a general concern that new residents may be less likely to support existing businesses.

COVID-19 has escalated these concerns. Patrons have had less purchasing power, and foot traffic has been depressed in the business district. Nearly all participants mentioned the support of the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation. Participants said they knew CSNDC was there to help, but they had yet to attempt to ask for help and are unsure how to do so.

The physical environment immediately surrounding the participants’ places of business was a common point of ire. Concerns mentioned included the prevalence of crime, disorganization (e.g., trash on sidewalks), and the need for renovated business facades. Other concerns included lack of parking. This was especially true for restaurants. Many of the participants desire beautification efforts in the neighborhood, including efforts to increase greenery and improve maintenance of the sidewalks and trash collection.

Several interviewees mentioned high traffic volume and the lack of viable parking. Participants noted that, before the pandemic, there was often a “logjam” of vehicles on Washington Street. Much of this was blamed on the lack of parking that resulted in cars circling to look for places to park. Participants also felt that lack of parking limits consumer traffic and encourages people to drive through instead of parking to take care of errands.

Protective Factors *“...sometimes they're out there playing music, and everybody's like congregating talking joking around, and I see community. That's the first thing that comes to my mind. And if they're playing music, I love music. I'd go over there, and I'd grab somebody's hand, and I'm dancing on the sidewalk with them because I love the community.”*

Community Disorganization *“The first thing I notice is KFC has a window boarded up because someone broke in. Um, dirt. It's flighty. um, I don't think the city does a good job with cleaning Codman Square at all.”*

CSNDC *“Being a business owner in the community, to see a development like [CSNDC] checking on you, making sure even with the Covid they’re checking on you, asking are you okay? How is the business doing? You know it says a lot about the community and the people who monitor the community, you know, the care and spirit.”*

Worries About Change *“I feel like no outsider should be, um, in my neighborhood. No big companies - anybody that doesn’t have an office in my neighborhood shouldn't get business from my neighborhood. And I feel that I feel about that strongly.”*

Parking and Traffic *“...the minute there's a free, empty lot, they put in luxury apartments. And what we need is parking so that people can park behind Washington Street and walk...”*

Economic Constraints

The economic constraints described by business owners revolved almost entirely around the impact of COVID-19 on their businesses. Participants described having to decrease the number of staff they had working or decrease the hours and services they offered. Companies have been double impacted for months by closures and by serving customers who are struggling financially and are less able to shop in the community.

Restaurant owners began to rely on technology and service delivery apps, such as UberEATS and Grubhub, more than ever before to keep their businesses running. Business owners recognized the importance of more substantial financial and technological literacy due to the pandemic. They are interested in increasing training opportunities to leverage technology to boost their business.

Pandemic Economy *“...we could tell it was declining, gradually declining. And even in Thanksgiving, like the day before Thanksgiving, normally we would be swamped, like one of the busiest days of the year, but this year was kinda quiet.”*

“So, the people that we rent from, they still want their money every single month. Even though we’re not open, I still have to pay my rent, which is the same as my mortgage, which is a lot of money.”

Community Economy *“I think, for where we're at, we're in an economically depressed area. People have very little to spend, and I'm not even thinking about Corona, just in general.”*

Hopes for the Future

Aside from the suggestions for beautification of the community surrounding and including businesses, small business owners in Codman Square voiced their concerns about how the neighborhood was changing and the types of companies currently existing and coming in to the community. Participants noted that there are empty storefronts that they would like to see occupied with new, diverse businesses. According to participants, restaurants saturate the market, and many spoke explicitly to the need for more healthy food options in the area. The residents' commitment to maintain local ownership, particularly Black ownership, is a significant hope for the future. The support and advancement of local- and Black-owned businesses seems to be felt strongly across the community, with the idea that through this support, Codman Square can work toward building political and financial power for the community. According to interviewees, there are still many unmet resident needs, and involving residents in this process will help address those needs.

Expanding the Current Retail Offerings “...people are running away from the rents, and they are not doing anything, and there are not enticing stores around anymore. We need some enticing stores; we need more, I think better restaurants around there.”

Promoting the Neighborhood “I just think they need to do more of awareness of the neighborhood because people know what it was before. They need to do more awareness that the state of....that the area has been cleaned up and is doing better.”

Including the Neighborhood “You know we need a group like that where we can come together and say okay, we are here for the community. I'm not just here to make money and leave out the money you have to help the community. What about the children in the community? What is happening to them? You know, let's get together and see how we can help these young people that are coming up.”

Conclusion

Small business owners convey loyalty to the area and to community members. This sentiment is reflected in their expression of hope for the Codman Square Business District. Even as they discuss challenges faced by the Business District, such as disorganization and crime, these challenges are not considered the “fault of the community” nor are they considered insurmountable. Participants see the opportunity to develop and implement solutions by involving the community.

Two prime concerns expressed by business owners were local control over the development decisions and the inclusion and advancement of local- and Black-owned business. Participants want to see more businesses in the Codman Square Business District, especially if they are owned by residents.

COVID-19 has had a markable impact on the financial well-being of the Codman Square Business District. Businesses reduced staff, and some were run entirely by the owner. While participants noted that they are still able to survive for the time being, the impact of the pandemic has been notable. On the other hand, the impact of the pandemic has shown small businesses where they need more support and training in order to grow.

As we review the comments made by these local businesses, there are priorities that can be considered by business owners, the city, and by the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation. The following are recommendations based on the compilation of comments from the nine interviews of Codman Square Business District Owners.

- Commit to funding programs that promote local small businesses owned and operated by community members
- Develop a neighborhood beautification effort that increases plantings and greenspaces
- Increase efforts to maintain a trash-free environment
- Prioritize cleaning and renovating sidewalks in the business district
- Develop a program to fund the renovation of business facades
- Develop dedicated training opportunities for businesses in the Codman Square Business District (technology use to grow business)
- Incentivize local startups; develop support for low-cost, homegrown companies
- Involve neighborhood residents in the decision-making process of creating the neighborhood
- Create local boards, or a commission of neighborhood residents that works in tandem with any developmental decision-making organizations
- Develop a dedicated business support organization that provides walk-in service focused on the advancement of business interests in the Codman Square Business District