

# RECAST BOOST REPORT

## Bellflower, CA

March 2021

### Current Situation & Urgency

Downtown Bellflower, California is a mile and a quarter stretch of the city in Los Angeles County that struggles to attract people and active businesses to create a lively destination for residents and others in the region. Currently, many service and medical businesses operate in the existing buildings of downtown Bellflower, creating less and less opportunity for a vibrant destination both north and south of the freeway division.

But Bellflower's city leadership, business owners, and citizens see the chance to create a stronger place that brings a diversity of business types and owners into the center of the city and recognizes that small-scale manufacturing businesses can help achieve this outcome. The potential to build on recent successes and continue to bring downtown back to life excites residents and leaders alike.

The current model of downtown is likely to deteriorate over time if nothing happens. If the downtown cannot reposition itself in the region, then success will be slow for the city, downtown will stay sleepy, and investment will continue to be spotty.

The city is likely to lose people who appreciate the downtown, lose people who believe in this community, and lose hope of being more than a cross-through place.

In the Bellflower Boost, the city team worked with Recast City to 1) understand the assets and challenges of the city for small product businesses, 2) identify ways to bring this new business type into storefronts and connect them to property owners, 3) develop a set of actions to support these small businesses and others like them, all to establish Bellflower as a distinct destination for small-scale manufacturing businesses and their fans.

## **Downtown and Economic Development Opportunity**

**A strategy that focuses on small-scale manufacturing will bring energy and new development back to downtown.**

Small-scale manufacturing businesses, and space for this business type in a neighborhood, are missing tools to create thriving neighborhood centers and downtowns. This type of business produces tangible goods (for example - hot sauce, handbags, or hardware) with one to fifty employees - a size that fits into the fabric of the neighborhood and storefronts. These businesses provide a number of benefits to a city and the neighborhood:

- Business ownership is open to anyone with an entrepreneurial spirit and the ability to make something - college and advanced degree not required.
- The skill to create comes from every population in the city - allowing us to build an inclusive community of business owners and have more people build wealth for their families.
- Employees at these businesses make, on average, 50-100% more than their service or retail counterparts, allowing more people to move out of poverty and into the middle class.
- The businesses are locally owned, meaning they typically invest their revenue back into the community and hire from within it.
- They are often native to e-commerce which means that they bring revenue into the city from the rest of the country (and possibly internationally) from online sales.

- They help a city or a neighborhood stand out and remain unique even as a place is built up and changes.

These kinds of businesses will be an essential resource to build up the business presence in downtown, build foot traffic, and brand downtown as a place to be, stroll, and linger with family.

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## Vision for Downtown

Bellflower residents, business owners, and elected officials universally envision a downtown that has more energy, more foot traffic, and more thriving businesses. In interviews with community members a number of dominant themes came out in conversation. These include:

- People walking around downtown, stopping in for dinner, music or a comedy show, lingering to pop into local shops and see something special.
- Local shops and programming that cater to the blue-collar community alongside new destinations and activities that bring in young families and Millennials.
- A downtown with good paying jobs and people who pop out during lunch to get food and do a little shopping.
- A mix of housing in downtown with unique shops that are specific to Bellflower.
- Places for the close-knit community of Bellflower to come together for events.
- A community where a diversity of small business owners – especially product businesses – come together to help each other, build the community, and succeed as local businesses.
- New development alongside the older buildings that creates a Bellflower environment that is a mix of modern with the old town feel.
- More shops for people to wander – both locals and visitors – that are distinctly Bellflower creations.
- A place where everyone feels like family and feels like they are included in downtown.

This combination of visions all come together in the way the city pursues future development, what businesses occupy downtown's storefronts, the programming hosted downtown, and the diversity of individuals who participate and lead those pieces.

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## Bellflower Assets and Challenges

We know that creating a strong local economy in a thriving downtown takes a number of different elements. The place needs adequate and affordable space for small businesses, welcoming property owners, appropriately sized commercial spaces for current retail trends, programming to attract customers to the area, and assistance for business owners to stabilize and grow their enterprises.

As a starting point to understand how Bellflower can achieve the vision set out by its residents and business owners, Recast City worked with the team to understand what works and what might be challenging for small businesses and real estate development in Bellflower.

### Bellflower Assets

A number of Bellflower assets came through in the interviews and small group discussions. People are proud of the community and see many good pieces coming together in the past five years, including:

- The city is mostly blue-collar, family-oriented, and has a growing, youthful energy. People are excited to be true to these roots and grow in a way that respects its history and builds for new families.
- Bellflower is distinct. It is not the same as its neighbors, and people don't want to try to be the neighbors. People interviewed are excited for Bellflower to be its own place. They celebrate the diversity of the community and business owners, and want to show off the Black, Latino, Dutch and other cultures that make this city special and different from other places.
- Residents and business owners feel like there is significant good will and support within the city. This is an amazing asset – it not something you can

recruit or buy for the community – this is a homegrown set of values essential to inclusive success.

- People rave about the great city leadership. Business owners and property owners talked about the city staff as innovative and receptive to new ideas. People brought up city leadership as the key factor driving change in the downtown over the past five years. A city that is good to its business owners will grow a strong reputation that will attract other entrepreneurs. The city serves an active role to purchase key buildings and sell them to users dedicated to building a strong community in downtown. Keep it going.
- Downtown’s presence and attraction is growing. A number of people interviewed brought up market information that destinations like SteelCraft, new restaurants, and the soon-to-be-open comedy club are bringing people from the region into the city. This is a wonderful quality to grow while also creating space for residents.
- Bellflower’s location - mid-way between a lot of other destinations in the region and next to the freeway – came up repeatedly as a good reason for people to stop in and meet friends “half-way” without facing the big traffic of Los Angeles County. This is interesting positioning for the downtown to build a brand about where “people meet up” or where “people come together.”

Property and business owners noted that they located in the city because of the wonderful community feeling, the support from the city, and their identification of a significant untapped potential of the downtown. People see it on the rise. This is a great opportunity to take hold of and build on.

### **Bellflower Challenges**

While these assets are wonderful opportunities for the city and its downtown to build a thriving place with extraordinary local businesses, a number of challenges came up in the interviews and small group discussions that are essential to address. Some of these issues may be resolved with small, quick solutions and others will be bigger, long-term projects to fix. The primary challenges that came up include:

- There is a significant amount of deferred maintenance on the existing tenant spaces and buildings on Bellflower Boulevard. Some property owners are looking to future tenants or a building sale as the solution instead of providing basic upkeep of the building. They are not investing in updates to the façade or in ways to use the interior that are consistent with current commercial use trends. There is some reluctance to change. A number of owners still hope that the retail market of the 1980's will just magically come back.
- Many existing retail spaces may still be large footprint spaces that do not meet the needs of current businesses. These spaces are left over from large furniture stores or other large square footage retail needs. Property owners of these spaces do not know and may not be interested in how to finance or break down these spaces effectively for current retail trends to match their commercial spaces with market need. There are very few smaller commercial spaces in downtown.
- Some of the key properties in downtown Bellflower are owned by distant and absent landlords who are not interested in new initiatives, filling vacant storefront space, or investing in downtown. This is both a barrier to reuse but also depresses the value of neighboring properties, suppresses their reuse, and potentially reduces the sales tax revenue of neighboring businesses.
- The perception of downtown Bellflower is lagging in its reality of reinvention. Some of those interviewed mentioned that many residents rarely come downtown and are not aware of the changes over the past few years. They think that people still think of downtown as a pass-through place as opposed to a place to gather and spend time.
- The city does not sponsor or host significant small business support programs. There are opportunities in the broader region, but there is no sustained programming hosted in the city or in downtown for startups or businesses ready to grow and scale. Businesses get one on one support from city staff or SCORE volunteers on specific needs, like finding appropriate commercial space (which is a great way to support them), but the more detailed technical and capital needs go unanswered. Additionally, there is no available programming specific to e-commerce and distribution for product businesses.

- Downtown Bellflower has little available housing and no density in downtown. This is a major barrier to downtown's success. Foot traffic can grow by attracting people into downtown from the community and region, but the fastest way to grow foot traffic and customers is by putting more housing nearby. Additional housing will also help bring more energy to the downtown streets and make good use of the future transit station at the north end of downtown. Without housing, the downtown is likely to stall in its reinvention and continue to struggle with vacancies and foot traffic.
- Downtown does not use its public gathering spaces effectively. There are some spaces in downtown for outdoor events, but they are not well-known and they are not easy for local business owners to access to sponsor their own events. Programming in downtown will be essential to future growth and outdoor space for these events will be essential to success.
- Bellflower Boulevard is wider than it is tall. When the proportions of the space feel right, a place can feel cozy and make you want to linger. For a road the width of the Boulevard, the neighboring buildings need to be taller.
- Zoning and permitting do not allow artisan manufacturing on Bellflower Boulevard or the surrounding commercial areas, and the Design for Development (DFD) overlay zone south of the freeway makes development challenging. The prohibition of artisan production in downtown limits the smaller scale uses and tenants available to local landlords. These potential tenants can be limited to the same types of noise or odor regulations as any other storefront tenant and widely expand the opportunity to bring interesting businesses and uses into town. Additionally, the complexity and highway-oriented design of the DFD overlay zoning south of the freeway does not encourage the type of development that exists along the block of The Exchange nor does it support or allow housing nearby to support this use to create a thriving place.

These assets and challenges are important considerations as we develop plans for the future of downtown Bellflower – both to build on the assets already working for the city and to address the most important challenges to create a thriving downtown for the community.

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## Recommendations for Action in Downtown Bellflower

By bringing small-scale production businesses into the economic and real estate strategy, Bellflower can create a cool factor to attract new business and entrepreneurs, fill vacant buildings, build an inclusive and diverse community of business owners, increase strong middle-income jobs, and increase property values. This, in turn, will increase the resiliency of the local business community, showcase the hidden gems of the community, and make a place that people love.

There are essential elements of success that are core to this work:

- Clear outcomes
- Appropriate land use policy
- Focused mentorship and business support
- Buy-in from real estate owners and developers
- Effective promotion and branding
- Program to draw the business owners & customers



The community has a clear outcome that came through in the small group discussions and interviews: a downtown that has families and neighbors out on the sidewalk, storefronts filled with unique businesses, programming that brings together the local blue-collar community and the visitors from the region, and a diversity of business owners that shows off the distinctiveness of Bellflower.

Now we need to get the other elements in line for implementation. All of the recommendations below are actions the community can choose to take. Consider both immediate actions that can build the momentum and good-will alongside the bigger or more difficult actions that might take more time. Every community needs the short-term wins – people can't wait for change. They need the support and opportunity now.

## 1. Appropriate Land Use Policy

Communities benefit from zoning, land uses, and road design that support downtown, small businesses, and small-scale production. The goal is to create an outcome where small product businesses, with retail and production space in a storefront, can be located alongside mixed-use, retail, and office uses. These new tenants will bring a new business type to properties and create a unique destination for downtown Bellflower.

- **Downtown Bellflower needs housing density.** Momentum will always be stunted and slow until additional housing is built downtown. Housing will be a strong fit for the future transit station and a wonderful way to bring more foot traffic and customers to the downtown stores. The city should consider using the existing parking lots behind the Bellflower Boulevard stores as developable land and partner with a developer on a housing design that replaces needed parking for the storefronts. Apartment buildings that average five to six stories will create a close-knit feel along the Boulevard and help to achieve local housing goals.
- **Extend street landscaping and improvements south of Flower Ave.** The improvements to northern Bellflower Boulevard help [create a more welcoming environment for pedestrians](#) and this opportunity should be incrementally extended farther south to create a unified and coherent brand for all of downtown, with the potential to brand different segments as different centers or neighborhoods with complimentary character over time.
- **Adopt a vacant property ordinance.** Property owners have a right to fill their storefront with the business of their choosing. But when landlords choose to leave storefronts vacant for extended periods of time, they depress the rest of the property values on that block. Many cities have [adopted ordinances](#) that penalize property owners with a fee if they leave their space vacant for extended periods of

time without renovation or construction taking place. Bellflower has a responsibility to the community and other property owners to protect their investment and require landlords to be good stewards of the community.

- **Consider refining the retail frontage use requirement.** Some zoning requires retail uses on key commercial corridors to ensure that service businesses are not moving in and closing up storefronts. The city should review its current requirements to ensure that service businesses on the Boulevard maintain an interactive and transparent frontage with the street, and to encourage more retail in place of service tenants. The city can support retail as the dominant use at the front of each property to help ensure that future tenants will have their doors open and welcoming to customers, thereby helping to drive foot traffic in downtown.
- **Adopt an artisan land use definition and permit it by-right along Bellflower Boulevard.** Amend the city's zoning to include a [land use definition for artisan manufacturing](#) so that these businesses can move into existing spaces by-right and not navigate a conditional use permit. Make it as easy as possible for artisan businesses to locate in downtown – including the review process of the permitting and occupancy requirements to make sure it all works for product businesses and their needs. Ensure that shared spaces, such a cowork space for artisans, is permitted in the zoning amendment as well.
- **Fix or eliminate the Design for Development (DFD) zoning overlay district south of the freeway.** Amazing development and investment are coming to Bellflower south of the freeway. The zoning code should reflect the opportunity to add to these investments in a way that creates a mini-main street that is unique to that part of downtown. Change the zoning to include mixed use housing, and an incentive or requirement to build at the front lot line (not suburban setbacks). These changes can help to create a place that matches the small main street feel of the Bellflower Boulevard block between Artesia and Ramona.
- **Amend licensing and permitting to make it easier to do the great stuff.** The city should review its permitting process for live music and its alcohol licensing to allow local business owners to more easily create the mix of activities that help storefronts thrive. Experiential retail (a storefront that is much more than a storefront) was the major trend before the pandemic, and this will quickly return.

Places that make the mix of activities – from retail, to small-scale production, to small events with music or drinks – will be more successful.

## 2. Focused Mentorship and Business Support

Small businesses thrive and grow when they have the right support. Lessons from the tech sector show that business owners are more likely to succeed when they have the right training and access to mentors who can guide them through both growth opportunities and challenging times. Bellflower has the opportunity to bring this kind of support to existing and new small businesses, with a specific focus on support for small-scale manufacturing businesses to help them grow on the Boulevard.

- **Launch a business development cohort program for existing product businesses.** This program can be geared toward home-based businesses and those already in bricks & mortar space to help them expand their distribution, build their revenues, and create more stable business opportunities in the future. This program can be modelled on the program from [37Oaks University](#) or other scaling programs like [Million Dollar Women](#).
- **Create a startup program for local small businesses.** Offer a broader startup training program for residents, and others in the region, who are interested in starting a business. This can include both product businesses and service businesses, or it can focus primarily on the producers. This kind of program helps more people understand how to create a product-market fit, price their goods correctly from the start, and set up their baseline systems effectively for a small business. The program can be modelled on the curriculum from [CO.STARTERS](#) or [MORTAR](#). The most effective program should be created with target audiences in mind, and with their involvement, to make sure the program meets their needs.
- **Establish a city commitment to spend local.** Each city procures products throughout the year – everything from paper towels to food for events to chairs for the office. Local governments and other anchor institutions can [commit to procure a minimum percent](#) of their needs from local or regional businesses. This is an incredibly effective way to use local dollars as an investment and anchor purchases from local businesses.

- **Create the cool business owner meet-up.** A growing number of local business owners are drawn to the Boulevard. They are the energy that will attract other entrepreneurs to the city and encourage more people to open up storefronts in the city. Work with this crew of owners to start an [informal meet-up](#) (monthly?) at each of their locations of business to help them connect, share lessons learned, and identify local business needs from the city. The [Knoxville Mayor's Maker Council](#) is a formalized version of this, but Bellflower can probably start with something more informal.
- **Consider opportunities for more people.** The city could partner with local non-profits to create training programs and entrepreneurship programs for people who are unemployed, under-employed, or returning citizens who struggle to find employment. The [Refoundry](#) in Brooklyn teaches returning citizens to create artisan products in wood and metal and sells their products at [Brooklyn Flea](#) in a shared revenue model. They also teach participants to become their own business owner – helping people create family wealth where there was no opportunity before. The [Etsy Craft Entrepreneurship](#) curriculum focuses on under-represented creative entrepreneurs to help them launch their products online. Each program is a great step to helping more people build their family wealth and break out of cycles of poverty.

### 3. Buy-in from Real Estate Owners & Developers

Downtown will need the buy-in from existing property owners and new developers to be able to create the vision of the thriving place, full of foot traffic and exciting local businesses. The way the real estate is used, the energy put into it, and the vision of what is possible in these spaces will all be impacted by the commitment of the property owners. There a number of ways the city can lead and partner with property owners to make this happen.

- **Create real estate ownership opportunities for strong local businesses.** Local ownership of the storefronts is a great way to ensure that as the city grows and prospers, so do local residents. The city can work with select business owners to become property owners now so that they can benefit from future downtown

investments and secure the cost of their space for the long-term. Revolving loan funds, CDFIs, and local banks may be great partners for this. The [Pittsburgh program](#) is a model worth considering as well.

- **Continued city ownership of key parcels.** The city's actions to purchase key properties and hold them for a future owner ready to invest in downtown is a fantastic way to direct investment in downtown. The city should continue to serve in this role with target properties. The city should also consider partnering with local or regional operators to create shared spaces that the city owns or leases for the long-term. This may include micro-retail spaces, a Bellflower Made shop, shared production space for startup product businesses, or a commercial shared kitchen with a storefront commissary. Spaces like [La Cocina](#) in San Francisco and [MADE by Millworks](#) in Long Beach are great examples of what might help local product businesses grow.
- **Support additional development south the freeway.** The opportunity to add business space near the new investments south of the freeway is an exciting opportunity. This might be a case of offering an incentive to a property owner or developer, or buying a property short-term, to create a complimentary use that will add to the energy on the block south of Artesia. A makers' market – like a food hall, but for products – that is focused on Latino businesses - could be a great compliment to the new food production space at The Exchange and the food hall at The Orchard at Belle Fleur Centre. Also, allowing housing in and around that block can help create a thriving destination where people can live, work and play, potentially with a complimentary brand to the northern end of the Boulevard. "SoBo" – South Boulevard – could be distinct and branded as such. Consider shared space models such as those in [Atlanta](#) and [Dallas](#) for this area.
- **Encourage rear facing micro-retail spaces** along the surface lots at the northern end of the Boulevard. Most retail spaces are too big for current users. The city could offer a financing incentive (zero percent loan for 10 years with a commitment to low-cost space for producers during that time) for existing property owners to subdivide their retail space and create a unique set of micro-shops that would be perfect for small-scale producers – with a focus on consumer products that could grow into full storefronts. The spaces at the [Art Walk at Monroe Street Market](#) and

[Press Bay Alley](#) are both great models for this work. Longer-term, these micro-units could potentially face new residential development that is built in the rear lots.

- **Invest in more murals.** Instagrammable moments are still king. Create spaces and destinations that look as cool as they feel. Commission more murals in downtown in the locations to which you want to draw people. Invite alley-facing micro-units to paint their exteriors in unique and funky designs. Invite residents and visitors to find all the unusual art and use this as a way to draw people through the downtown.
- **Create a popup shop program.** Many startup producers are looking for low-cost ways to build out their brand and attract customers both onsite and online. Popup shop programs can help bring visibility to these businesses, showcase community support for them, and attract new tenants to vacant spaces along the Boulevard. Popup shops are also a great opportunity to fill storefront space in transition – something slated for redevelopment in a few years but needs to be filled now to build up a brand and foot traffic. Popup programs can be single spaces – the city can announce competition for one storefront to be used by a rotating list of local producers for a limited time each – or it can be a combination of spaces in a coordinated brand and promotional period. The [St'artUp317 model](#) from Indianapolis and [Pop-Up Connect](#) in Los Angeles may serve as good examples.

#### 4. Effective Promotion & Branding

Creating a great place is wonderful, but people also need to know about it. People who live in the community, but don't frequent downtown yet, and people in the broader region all need to know about what is going on in Downtown Bellflower. The intent is to make the city stand out for the vision we established at the start – a mix of blue-collar, very real, kinds of places, alongside events and businesses that also draw young families from the region. The city can lead this effort to promote downtown, but also partner with key entities to expand that reach to more people.

- **Create a social media partnership with local business owners.** The city can bring in a consultant to create content specific to downtown businesses, offer trainings to them to refine their own social media outreach, and promote this new content through the city's platforms too. This can also include partnering with local

influencers who have significant followings online and working with them to promote local businesses and events. “Bellflower Distinct” could serve as an umbrella brand for the business promotion and could be expanded in the future to “Bellflower Made” and “Bellflower Live” (the later working for both live events and for new housing!).

- **Launch a website for local product businesses.** This site can be modelled on Knoxville’s [Maker City Directory](#) or Columbia, MO’s [cre8como.com](#) site and can include all product businesses in the city. The same site can be used to recruit and sign-up vendors from the region for local events. This can help to promote these businesses to the community and serve as a main branding point for this sector to the region. The city can also offer procurement incentives to the businesses listed on the site.
- **Promote city support of local businesses.** The City of Bellflower does a lot for its local businesses. Owners were profusive about how much individual support they received from city staff. They felt taken care of and appreciated. This should not be a best-kept secret. The city should work with journalists or regional blogs to get this story out or create its own content on the city website to showcase how it works in partnership with business owners who move into downtown.

## 5. Program to Draw the Business Owners & Customers

Events that bring people together are one of the essential ways to both promote downtown to people and to help people feel tied to the community. Programming helps people show off their community and feel proud of it. Tying small-scale manufacturing businesses – both established ones and newer vendors – helps create events that are unique to the city and creates low-risk ways for businesses to test products and grow. Bellflower should consider a number of programming opportunities to compliment the other work taking place.

- **Use existing open spaces for programming and events.** The plaza performance space and surface parking lots behind the stores at the north end of the Boulevard are all places for events. The city can invite local and regional product vendors to participate in events – big and small – as a way to both promote these businesses to event attendees but also to promote the city to these vendors. Regularly scheduled

events for young adults, families, and long-term residents will also help re-introduce downtown to people who may not have visited in some time and help to build foot traffic for the businesses already in downtown storefronts. This can also include First-Fridays with regular music events for families that have maker activities for kids alongside artisan vendors. With Bellflower's wonderful weather, year-round kiosks on Laurel Street could turn the one-way access point into a major attraction for the city and startup producers. The [kiosk program in Muskegon, MI](#) is one model to consider.

- **Move the farmer's market into downtown.** This wonderful community event should be held in downtown as a way to promote downtown businesses, build awareness, and grow foot traffic. The city should also work with the farmer's market to add a weekly or monthly makers or artisan market to the food selection and begin to build a pipeline of product businesses growing in Bellflower. The vendors selected should reflect the amazing demographic diversity of the city as well.
- **Work with popular destinations, like SteelCraft, to partner on vendor popup events.** The city can continue to build its database of small producers and work with existing local businesses like SteelCraft and StormyWeather Designs to create popup events with product vendors that complement their growing brands.
- **Ensure outdoor dining and programming are easy to do.** The city should review temporary use permitting and the business recovery program rules to ensure that local businesses can easily host events and dining in parking lots, on sidewalks, and in other public properties.

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## Next Steps

The City of Bellflower is primed to create a special downtown that reflects its great and growing diversity of the community in a way that is unique to the city. The opportunity is right now – once the transit station comes in, many options for these businesses will be more limited. The city clearly welcomes businesses with open arms. Now is the time to purposefully lead toward an inclusive vision with young families, long-term residents, and visitors from the region all charmed by downtown Bellflower. With a comprehensive effort across these five areas of action, the city can create a great place that families will call home for generations and where local product businesses will thrive.

## RECAST CITY

Recast City is a national consulting firm that works with real estate developers, city, county and other civic leaders, and business owners to integrate manufacturing space for small-scale producers into redevelopment projects. We build the startup community for small manufacturers and makers in the city - across industries of textiles, electronics, wood, metal and other materials.

*Recast City brings together small-scale manufacturers and community developers to strengthen our neighborhoods, build value in our real estate, and create more job opportunities for residents.*

We help landowners, developers, and city leaders understand this growing business sector and how to incorporate it into real estate products. We help maker industry entrepreneurs and small manufacturing business owners get the support and exposure they need. And we help communities create more good paying jobs for our local residents.

**For additional information, contact:**

**Ilana Preuss**

**Founder & CEO**

**Recast City LLC**

**[ilana@recastcity.com](mailto:ilana@recastcity.com)**

**240-472-2765**

