Saving South Street:

A Four-Part Strategy to Restabilize a Historic Cultural Corridor

A Thesis

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To Philadelphia. A city whose toughest critic is always a fellow Philadelphian… I hope I did you proud. But know that, in the end, it's always love.

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Abstract

Saving South Street: A Four-Part Strategy to Restabilize a Historic Cultural Corridor
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Where most neighborhood commercial corridors serve only the blocks around them, South Street has drawn Philadelphians from across the city and region since the colonial period, working at once as a local main street, a regional destination, and a cultural corridor. It has held onto that reach by reinventing itself roughly once a generation, and by 2026 it sits at the bottom of its latest cycle, near its weakest position in three decades on occupancy, foot traffic, property complaints, and civic sentiment, even as the neighborhoods around it have grown in population, median income, and median home values. Using parcel-level fieldwork, historical analysis, demographic comparison, and stakeholder interviews, this study compares South Street to East Passyunk Avenue, a nearby Philadelphia corridor that has recovered more successfully from similar retail and post-pandemic pressures. The findings suggest that South Street's decline is not primarily the result of COVID, e-commerce, or weak neighborhood spending power. Instead, three structural problems drive the corridor's economic doom loop: governance gridlock between the Business Improvement District and overlapping Registered Community Organizations, dormant real estate ownership that freezes long-vacant parcels and stalls reinvestment, and declining pedestrian demand as cultural anchors disappear and nearby housing supply tightens. In response, this thesis recommends a four-part package, no single piece sufficient on its own: a Pennsylvania Creative District paired with a Cultural Corridor Overlay, a South Street Revitalization Corporation, a CMX-3 upzone with pedestrian design standards, and pedestrianization of the 300 to 600 blocks, together aimed at preserving the corridor's cultural identity while giving it the capacity to build itself new again.

Chapter I: Introduction

Step onto South Street on a Saturday night in September 1985, and half of Philadelphia was already on the sidewalk, block after block from Front to 11th: punks and jazz heads, art students and record collectors, suburban kids and corner regulars, drawn from the neighborhood and the suburbs alike to the same dozen blocks. The Theatre of the Living Arts (TLA) on the 300 block ran nearly twenty films a week, Fellini one week, Kurosawa the next, Rocky Horror every Saturday at midnight with corsets and bags of rice in the line out front. Across the street, JC Dobbs ran a punk-rock bill, mohawked Tyler students and older rockers in patched battle jackets pouring onto the sidewalk between sets. Zipperhead at 407 caught visitors in spiked hair and Doc Martens, the giant metal ants over the door doing the marketing, while Isaiah Zagar's mosaics climbed the facade of the Eyes Gallery across the street at 402. At 5th and South, Grendel's Lair filled with the cabaret and jazz crowd ahead of the late set. Record stores and the Book Trader took the 500 and 600 blocks, crate diggers flipping vinyl while clerks played Hüsker Dü behind the counter. Galleries opened whole storefronts to poets and painters in paint-flecked jeans, nursing cheap wine at Friday openings. Ripley Music Hall on the 600 block was two Octobers past the Stevie Ray Vaughan live record cut on its stage. None of it was staged. This was an ordinary Saturday night on a corridor that ran this way most nights of the week, every tribe in the city finding its people on the same sidewalk.

Forty years later, on the last Saturday of September 2025, I walked South Street from Front to 8th and watched the same scene form all over again, this time for the South Street Fall Fest. For eight hours, the street returned to its origins as a place for all Philadelphians, local and regional alike, drawing unlikely crowds together block by block: geeks and college revelers, goths and hip-hop fans, young families and aging punkers. It was the human version of a Philly Taco, the corridor's unlikely mashup of a Jim's cheesesteak wrapped in a giant Lorenzo's slice.

On the 100 block, Queen & Rook's Fantasy coinciding Renaissance Faire spilled onto the sidewalk: a woman in velvet robes reading tarot beside two teenagers dueling with foam longswords, a fire-dancer warming up his torches. The 200 belonged to families, strollers parked four-deep outside Bridget Foy's, toddlers in tutus bouncing on a makers' market mat. Foodie Alley took the 300, tables lined with arepas, bao, and vegan tamales, with live rock music drifting from Nikki Lopez next door as a line began to wrap around the corner for hip-hop artist Che's REST IN BASS show that night at the TLA. On the 400, MilkBoy's thirty-first anniversary pulled in indie-rock lifers in Dickies jackets and worn band tees. Punkers and skaters owned the 500, hoodies and Vans, dropping in on Nocturnal's pop-up skate ramp. The 600 turned goth and cosplay, Atomic City Comics' Macabre Masquerade drawing corpse-painted couples in Beetlejuice stripes, with a DJ spinning vinyl. Brauhaus Schmitz's tent swallowed the 700, with hundreds of Philadelphians in dirndls and lederhosen, liter steins raised to an oompah band. Concluding near 10th at Philadelphia's Magic Gardens where visitors queued for Isaiah Zagar's mosaic cathedral, couples on first dates and art students with sketchbooks. South Street did what it has always done best: served as a collision point for Philadelphians to find their people.

What that 2025 Saturday cost to stage is the real measure of South Street's decline. The 1985 collision cost nothing to produce. The tenant mix made it on its own, culture, art, and entertainment living inside the buildings and spilling onto the sidewalks. The 2025 version took a permit calendar, a sponsor deck, and street closures, all run by the South Street Headhouse District (SSHD), to assemble for eight hours what the corridor once did on an ordinary weeknight. The rest of the year, the corridor known for arts, culture, and entertainment has dwindled to a handful of legacy establishments in a sea of long-term vacancies. South Street survives only in glimpses now. The Laff House at Third and South, the stage where Kevin Hart and Bill Burr cut their teeth, closed in 2013, and no comedy club has replaced it anywhere on the corridor in the 13 years since.

Figure 1.1. South Street on the 200 block, 2026.
Vacant and active storefronts illustrating mixed commercial conditions along the corridor.

Source: Author's photograph, 2026.

The question this thesis works through is why South Street, a corridor that drew every tribe in the city and region for a generation, has lost more than half its cultural anchors and seen commercial vacancy climb to a 30-year high. Yet every spending metric for the surrounding neighborhoods has improved. To work through this paradox, the thesis compares South Street to East Passyunk Avenue, one of its closest peer corridors in Philadelphia, with 2026 fieldwork and historical context back to the 1960s. COVID does not fully explain the gap, because other Philadelphia corridors absorbed the same shock and recovered (Figure 5.10). E-commerce does not fully explain it either, because East Passyunk faces the same retail pressure while maintaining substantially higher occupancy (Figures 5.6, 5.7). The decline is structural to South Street, not ambient to retail.

This thesis calls that pattern the *Neighborhood Commercial Corridor Paradox*. Standard neighborhood commercial corridor scholarship treats surrounding neighborhoods as the engine of a healthier corridor: when incomes climb, home prices climb, and education levels climb, the corridor benefits. South Street breaks the rule. The neighborhoods feeding the corridor have grown richer, more expensive, and more educated for three straight decades, while the corridor's vacancy has climbed in lockstep (Appendix A.11., Table 3.1).

South Street's decline traces to three structural problems: governance gridlock between the Business Improvement District (BID) and overlapping Registered Community Organizations (RCO), dormant real estate ownership that keeps long-vacant parcels from returning to productive use, and declining pedestrian demand as cultural anchors close. The thesis proposes a four-part policy package: a Pennsylvania Creative District paired with a Cultural Corridor Overlay, a South Street Revitalization Corporation, a commercial mixed-use (CMX) upzone with pedestrian design standards, and phased pedestrianization of the 300 to 600 blocks. Each tool on its own falls short. Together, the four preserve South Street's identity while unlocking the corridor to build itself new again.

South Street has long been Philadelphia's bellwether, a corridor that signals the city's broader economic health.[1] The corridor's shopping, dining, music, and nightlife have always depended on Philadelphia's discretionary spending power from across the city. News from South Street, good or bad, travels disproportionately across the region.

The past 20 years of corridor data show a doom loop: vacancy depresses foot traffic, weak foot traffic depresses leasing demand, and weak leasing demand closes off reinvestment. Without intervention, two failure modes follow: the *Neighborhood Commercial Corridor*

[1] Author's interviews with multiple corridor stakeholders, 2026.

Paradox widens and residents begin abandoning the South Street area, or residential conversion fills the gaps and erases the cultural identity that defines it. This study argues that the next several years represent a narrowing window for corridor intervention.

The rest of this policy report runs in seven sections. Chapter II builds the conceptual frame through the literature on corridor evolution, BID governance, and cultural districts. Chapter III names the people, places, and rules in play. Chapter IV shows how South Street and East Passyunk arrived at their present condition. Chapter V grounds the analysis in 2026 field data. Chapter VI diagnoses the three structural problems. Chapter VII makes the case for the four-part package. Chapter VIII zooms out to what South Street's experience says about Philadelphia's other corridors at risk.

Chapter II: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Frame

This study takes the position that cities are metabolic, and their commercial corridors are the microcosmic expression of that metabolism. Think of a corridor like a product. The longest-surviving products survive because they find repeat customers, and a corridor's repeat customers are usually the people who live nearby. Those neighbors end up there through a mix of choice and circumstance, sorted by affordability, lifestyle, and the goods and services within reach.[2] Over time, that sorting shapes the corridor. Corridors mirror their neighborhoods.

The exceptions are rare: the handful of corridors whose historical reputation and baked-in marketing invite visitors from across a region, across income classes, and across backgrounds. South Street is one of those rare exceptions, a place where people of different backgrounds collide.

However, as car-oriented visitation gives way to walkable and public-transit proximity, even the exceptional corridors are beginning to drift toward serving their immediate neighborhoods. The political instinct has been to fight back with bureaucratic restrictions and overlays that lock in the original use and protect the regional draw. The instinct is reasonable. A corridor that pulls people from across a city produces real economic output, and a healthy corridor wants as many customers as it can get. But slowing the drift has a cost. Suppress it entirely and the corridor loses its capacity to evolve to find repeat business. The authentic businesses that drew people in the first place give way to tourist-facing establishments grasping at the original regional audiences. A gap, then, opens between what the rules permit and what the corridor desires to be.

This thesis sits across three conversations: corridor evolution and decline, BID governance and place management, and cultural-district policy. To test their governing claims,

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[2] Tiebout, Charles M. "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures." *Journal of Political Economy* 64, no. 5 (October 1956): 416-424.

this study picks up the methodological tradition the Philadelphia City Planning Commission established in *Philadelphia Shops* (1989, 1996, 2004): walk the corridor, block by block, to collect ground-truth data. Historical archival work and structured interviews with corridor stakeholders and subject matter experts then give that data a story and a voice. South Street invites strong opinions about what it should be, and those opinions are part of the data.

2.2 Corridor evolution and decline

The conversation about corridor health starts with Patrick Geddes, who argues in 1915 that cities are living organisms whose planning must begin with observation rather than prescription.[3] Jane Jacobs picked up the thread half a century later and pushed it down to the corridor scale: street-level retail produces the foot traffic and "eyes on the street" that keep urban life self-sustaining.[4] Both treated corridors as systems whose health depends on the fit between physical form and daily use, and both anchored their arguments in walking, looking, and counting what was actually there.

Empirical work since has specified the mechanism. Conrad Kickert finds that corridors thrive on critical mass and decline when retail density falls below the threshold small operators need to survive.[5] Richardson Dilworth carries the Jacobsian frame into Philadelphia and names the structural diagnosis: corridors are subject to a "tragedy of the commons," where individual property owners pursue private benefit at the expense of the collective health of the street.[6] The Geddes–Jacobs lineage still holds. Kickert adds the math; Dilworth adds the politics.

The contemporary frame to this study is Carlos Moreno's 15-minute city, which treats walkable proximity to daily needs as the central measure of corridor health and has been adopted

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[3] Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1915).
[4] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).
[5] Conrad Kickert and Rainer vom Hofe, "Critical Mass Matters: The Long-Term Benefits of Retail Agglomeration for Establishment Survival in Downtown Detroit and The Hague," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 2 (2018): 366–387; Conrad Kickert, "What's in Store: Prospects and Challenges for American Street-Level Commerce," *Journal of Urban Design* 25, no. 1 (2020): 1–18.
[6] Richardson Dilworth, "The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia's Commercial Corridors," *Cascade* No. 88 (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, Summer 2015).

by mayors from Paris to Portland.[7] But Amir Reza Khavarian-Garmsir and colleagues flag the gap: the 15-minute city undertheorizes culture, heritage, and identity, treating them as secondary to walkability and density.[8] This thesis enters at that gap. South Street's currency has never been reach by walkable minutes. Its currency is cultural identity, and that identity is what makes it both a regional draw and an outlier in a literature that now leans toward organization around proximity.

2.3 BID governance and place management

If Dilworth's "tragedy of the commons" names the problem, the BID is the dominant institutional response. Richard Briffault calls BIDs "a government for our time": quasi-public bodies authorized to levy mandatory assessments on commercial property to fund supplemental services.[9] The model is durable for cleaning, marketing, and event programming. Its limits surface elsewhere.

It helps to ask why the model exists at all, because the BID is not a neutral or inevitable tool. BIDs appeared in American cities in the 1970s, in places losing population and business and watching their tax base shrink, and they spread as city budgets tightened and municipalities pulled back on basic services like street cleaning and public safety.[10] Philadelphia's first BID, the Center City District, formed in 1990, when property owners in a high-tax, recession-hit city agreed to assess themselves further to buy back services the city could no longer reliably provide.[11] That history complicates Briffault's phrase. If the BID is a government for our time, it is partly because our time is one in which public provision retreated and quasi-private bodies filled the gap. The model also carries a precondition: it works only where property values are

[7] Carlos Moreno, Zaheer Allam, Didier Chabaud, Catherine Gall, and Florent Pratlong, "Introducing the '15-Minute City': Sustainability, Resilience and Place Identity in Future Post-Pandemic Cities," *Smart Cities* 4, no. 1 (2021): 93–111.
[8] Amir Reza Khavarian-Garmsir, Ayyoob Sharifi, and Ali Sadeghi, "The 15-Minute City: Urban Planning and Design Efforts Toward Creating Sustainable Neighborhoods," *Cities* 132 (2023): 104101.
[9] Richard Briffault, "A Government for Our Time? Business Improvement Districts and Urban Governance," *Columbia Law Review* 99, no. 2 (1999): 365–477
[10] Richardson Dilworth, "Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Philadelphia and Their Potential as Regional Actors," *Urban Affairs Review*, November 23, 2021.
[11] Paul R. Levy, "Business Improvements in Philadelphia: A Practitioner's Perspective," *Drexel Law Review* 3, no. 1 (2010): 71

high enough to throw off real assessment revenue, which is why BIDs cluster in dense downtowns and wealthier corridors and stay hard to sustain on struggling ones.[12] So calling a BID necessary is a conditional claim. It is necessary given a thinner public sector and a property base rich enough to fund itself, not necessary in the abstract. Chapter VI returns to the bind this creates on South Street, where the surrounding wealth disqualifies the corridor from need-based public programs while its own depressed commercial values leave the BID underfunded.

Within those conditions, the BID still hits a ceiling. Jerome Hodos shows that BIDs sit inside a structural conflict between merchants, regional visitors, and surrounding residents that the BID alone cannot resolve.[13] Dorothy Ives-Dewey traces how BIDs expand into planning and capital projects, but only when surrounding political and financial conditions allow.[14] Dilworth, looking at BIDs as a form of regional collective action, argues they may need cross-boundary reach or networked forms to address what a single corridor cannot.[15] The thread, in sum, points to a structural ceiling. Even where a BID is viable, it is rarely enough on its own. When a corridor's problems run deeper than services, the model needs reinforcement.

2.4 Cultural districts and place-based identity protection

That ceiling is most visible in what this study calls the "*Neighborhood Commercial Corridor Paradox",* a term coined here. Standard corridor scholarship treats the surrounding neighborhood as the engine of a healthy corridor: as nearby incomes, home values, and education rise, the corridor should rise with them. The paradox is where that rule inverts, where a corridor declines even as the neighborhood around it grows wealthier (Section 3.3). Underneath the inversion sits a tension in how a corridor is stewarded. Corridors often balance serving the people around it against sustaining its regional draw, usually the two point the same way and attract

[12] Dilworth, "Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Philadelphia."
[13] Jerome Hodos, "Whose Neighborhood Is It, Anyway? The South Street/Headhouse District," *Drexel Law Review* 3, no. 1 (2010): 193–207.
[14] Dorothy Ives-Dewey, "Clean, Safe, and Pretty: The Emerging Planning Role of the Old City District," *Drexel Law Review* 3, no. 1 (2010): 209–230.
[15] Dilworth, "Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Philadelphia."

similar demographics. On a corridor whose values run through cultural identity they may pull apart: the draw that made it regional becomes the thing the neighborhood no longer claims as its own, and stewardship that leans too far either way hollows out the other.[16]

Sharon Zukin's *Naked City* names what is at stake: authenticity is both a corridor's competitive advantage and the thing its own success destroys.[17] The cultural producers who give a corridor its identity are typically priced out, and tourist-facing establishments or higher-ticket markets take their place.[18] Inga Saffron's 2025 report on Philadelphia's South Broad Street 'Avenue of the Arts' shows the local cost of getting that reading wrong: a corridor branded as cultural without being protected as such is left to the market and loses the institutions that gave it its identity.[19]

This study advances the paradox as a working lens, not a settled law. It tests the idea on South Street against East Passyunk, and returns to it twice. Chapter VI diagnoses how the paradox operates on South Street, where the corridor and its neighbors have drifted far enough apart that the residents reviewing its future no longer see themselves in it. Chapter VIII weighs the harder question the construct raises, whether a tension read from a single corridor holds for others. A single case can illustrate a pattern but cannot prove one, so the paradox is offered here as a provocation worth testing well beyond this thesis.

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[16] Hodos, "Whose Neighborhood Is It, Anyway?" (Shortened note; full citation in Section 2.3.
[17] Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–5, 220–245.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Inga Saffron, "Mayor Parker Can Help Keep the Arts in the Avenue of the Arts — If She Acts Quickly," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 15, 2025.

Chapter III: Scope of this Study

3.1 Overview

Understanding this study's corridor analysis begins with revisiting the geographies, structural dynamics, and surrounding context of South Street and East Passyunk. It also requires understanding the local governance bodies that shape policy and decisions on each corridor.

This section serves as a guide to that universe as of 2026. Each section names a single piece of the landscape, defines it in plain terms, explains why it matters to this study, and closes with a table, map, or figure that anchors the definition in the two corridors at hand. The sections move from the broadest frame, what a commercial corridor is in Philadelphia, to the most specific, the zoning code that governs South Street and East Passyunk today and the overlays the corridors do and do not have. The chapter concludes by consolidating each section's illustration into one master orientation table and one master interactive map of the study area with the goal being to simplify understanding who is involved for corridor management and any potential changes the corridor should try to implement.

3.2 Neighborhood Commercial Corridors (NCCs)

Philadelphia has roughly 300 commercial corridors across the city's various neighborhoods, each one a stretch of storefronts, restaurants, services, and gathering places that serves the people who live around it.[20] The Department of Commerce and the Philadelphia City Planning Commission (PCPC) track these Neighborhood Commercial Corridors (NCCs) as the operational units for business investment.

NCCs matter to this study because they function as a local-level health indicator for the neighborhoods that surround them. When a corridor thrives, the neighborhood around it usually thrives. When a corridor empties out, the neighborhood feels it first. A smaller set of corridors carries weight beyond their own blocks. South Street is one of them. Neither South Street nor

[20] City of Philadelphia, "Commercial Corridors," OpenDataPhilly, accessed April 28, 2026, https://opendataphilly.org/datasets/commercial-corridors-of-philadelphia/.

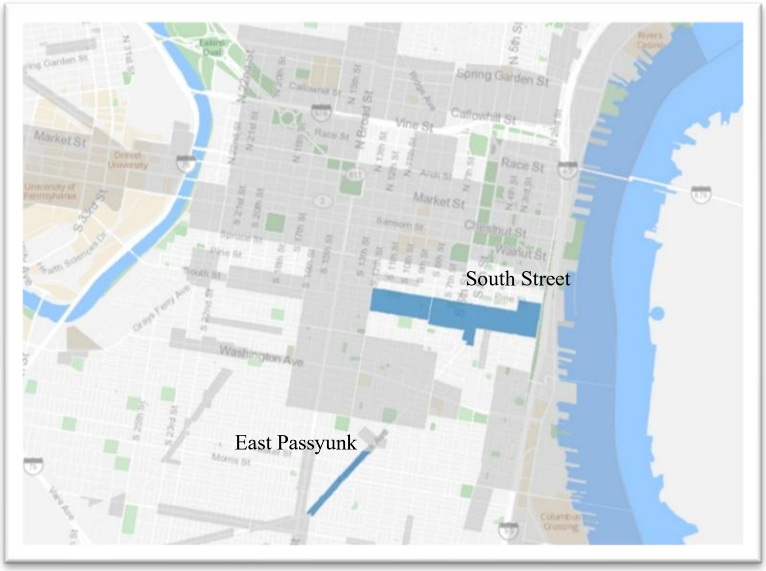
East Passyunk represents the average Philadelphia NCC. Both pull customers from beyond their immediate neighborhoods and should, in theory, generate outsized economic output for the city through tourism, dining, and retail tax revenue.

This study focuses on two corridors. The first corridor is South Street, bounded by Front Street to the east and 12th Street to the west. The study treats the corridor as the parcels lining South Street itself, on both north and south sides. That scope is narrower than PCPC's definition. PCPC defines the South Street NCC as a wider rectangle that extends roughly two to three blocks north and south of South Street, capturing parcels with frontage on Pine, Lombard, and Bainbridge, with a small southern carveout down 4th Street (see Figure 3.1). PCPC's NCC boundary is equal to South Street Headhouse Districts (SSHD) boundary (see Figure 3.2). This study's narrower scope yields 271 total parcels for South Street, of which 245 are CMX-zoned and 229 contain commercial real estate space.

South Street functions very differently from Lombard, Pine, and Bainbridge in practice, user base, and governance, even though PCPC counts them as a single NCC. Interviews with BID leadership, RCO board members, and longtime residents return to this gap repeatedly. Chapter VII shows that the gridlock over South Street's future is, in part, a fight over whose corridor it is, the merchants on South Street itself, or the residents on the streets around it.

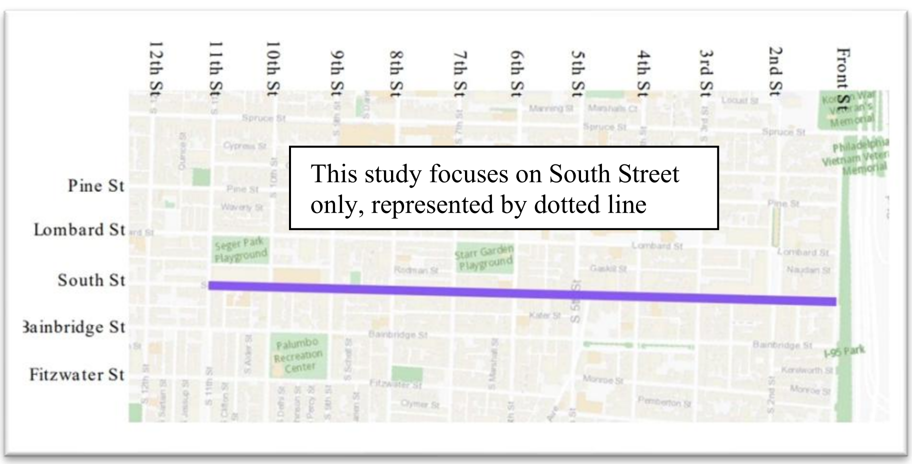
The second corridor is East Passyunk, bounded by the 1200 block of East Passyunk to the northeast and the 2000 block of East Passyunk to the southwest. Unlike South Street, which follows Philadelphia's rectilinear grid, East Passyunk Avenue is a diagonal corridor that cuts across the grid and creates irregular intersections, triangular parcels, and distinctive neighborhood nodes. PCPC's NCC definition for East Passyunk maps to the street itself, so this study and PCPC use the same scope: 248 total parcels, of which 196 are CMX-zoned and 157 contain commercial real estate space.

Figure 3.1. South Street and East Passyunk among Philadelphia's roughly 300 NCCs as defined by PCPC.



Source: Open Data PHLmaps, accessed April 28, 2026

Figure 3.2. Scope of this study, which includes only South Street itself.



Source: Philadelphia City Planning Commission, accessed April 28, 2026

Throughout the thesis, figures and tables key off one of three reference denominators based on the analytical question. The full methods note appears at the start of Chapter V.

3.3 Surrounding Neighborhood Demographics

Changes in the size, age, or household income of the population around a corridor have profound effects on the businesses inside it.[21] That makes the surrounding population as much a part of a corridor's infrastructure as its storefronts. This study defines that population as the U.S. Census Bureau tracts that fall within a 15-minute walk of each corridor's center (see Figure 3.3). The 15-minute walk is the distance most urbanists use to mark a neighborhood's daily reach, since it captures residents who can use the corridor for routine errands and evening visits without driving.[22]

Two tracts required judgment calls. Tract 24 and Tract 25 are large enough that their geographic centers sit roughly 15 to 25 minutes on foot from either corridor's middle point, which means a strict walking rule could place either tract in either set. This study assigned them based on where their residents organize, shop, and weigh in on zoning, using interviews with the Bella Vista Neighbors Association (BVNA), the East Passyunk Crossing Civic Association (EPX), the SSHD, and the East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District (EPABID). For this study, Tract 24 is assigned to East Passyunk and Tract 25 is assigned to South Street.

The remaining tracts follow the 15-minute walking rule. The South Street neighborhood draws from the tracts that flank the corridor between Front and 12th and extend roughly six blocks north and south. The East Passyunk neighborhood draws from the tracts surrounding the avenue between South Broad and Federal. The two neighborhoods share an edge but do not overlap, which keeps the comparison data clean across the rest of the section.

Figure 3.3 below shows both neighborhoods, the corridors at their centers, and the tract boundaries that define each one.

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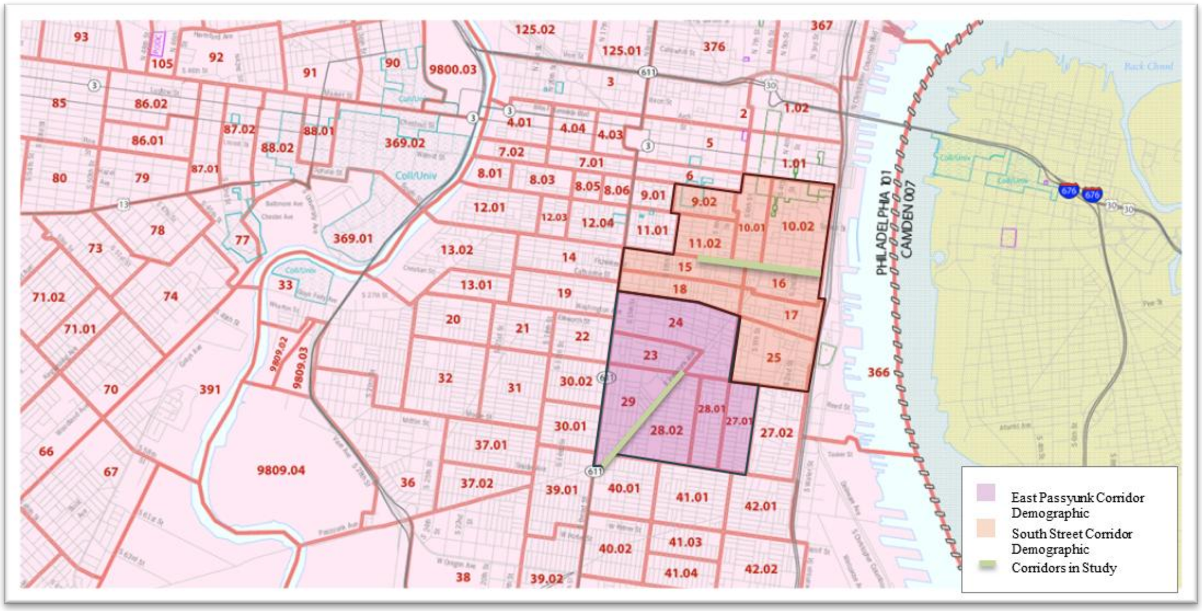
[21] Pennsylvania Economy League and Econsult Corporation, *Toward a Strategic Framework for Investment in Philadelphia's Commercial Corridors* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Economy League, n.d.), 7. The report states that "changes in the size, racial/ethnic composition, average age, or household income of a neighborhood population can have profound impacts on the viability of businesses in the associated commercial corridor."

[22] Moreno et al., "Introducing the '15-Minute City,'" 93–111.

Figure 3.3. Census tracts within a 15-minute walk of the South Street and East Passyunk commercial corridors, with the corridors highlighted in green.



Source: Author's calculations using U.S. Census Bureau tract boundaries (2020 release), with corridor assignments for Tracts 24 and 25 informed by interviews with the South Street Headhouse District, the East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District, the Bella Vista Neighbors Association, and the East Passyunk Crossing Civic Association.

The size and composition of a neighborhood's residents set the daily ceiling for what a commercial corridor can sustain. This study treats cities as metamorphic, meaning they change and grow as the people around them change and grow.[23] A corridor should, in principle, expand alongside the neighborhood that feeds it and contract when that neighborhood thins. Chapter IV tests that principle against the historical record of both corridors, and Chapter VII returns to where it holds and where it does not.

A second relationship is well-established in the urbanist literature: rising household income in a surrounding neighborhood translates into stronger spending power, which in turn drives a more vibrant corridor.[24] One reason this study exists is to examine why that relationship does not hold for South Street, where surrounding incomes have climbed steadily over the past

[23] Geddes, *Cities in Evolution*. The metamorphic framing builds on Geddes' treatment of cities as evolving organisms shaped by their inhabitants, though the term itself is this study's own.
[24] Pennsylvania Economy League and Econsult Corporation, *Toward a Strategic Framework for Investment in Philadelphia's Commercial Corridors*, 7-8. The report frames this assumption as one of the core economic forces driving corridor demand.

two decades alongside rising vacancy. Table 3.1 below presents the current demographic profile of each neighborhood on the dimensions that shape corridor demand. The rows that follow show where the two neighborhoods align and where they diverge. Chapter VII returns to the paradox the comparison produces.

Table 3.1. Demographic Comparison between South Street and East Passyunk, 2023.

	South Street	East Passyunk
Population & Households		
Total population	28,075	25,487
Total households	14,890	12,209
Age		
Median age (years)	40.1	36.8
Share under 18	13.2%	15.4%
Share aged 18 to 34	31.9%	30.4%
Share aged 35 to 64	35.7%	41.6%
Share aged 65 and over	19.2%	12.6%
Income & Education		
Median household income (2020$)	$101,100	$80,200
Poverty rate	8.8%	15.5%
Adults 25+ with bachelor's degree or higher	77.8%	58.1%
Race & Ethnicity		
White alone (non-Hispanic)	74.5%	63.3%
Black alone (non-Hispanic)	8.2%	4.1%
Asian alone (non-Hispanic)	7.6%	14.4%
Hispanic or Latino (any race)	4.0%	12.6%
Other or two or more races	5.7%	5.5%
Households		
Single-person households (proxy: non-family HH)	60.0%	53.0%
Family households with children under 18	15.0%	20.1%
Housing Tenure		
Owner-occupied share	51.4%	57.8%
Renter-occupied share	48.6%	42.2%
Median home value (2020$)	$510,800	$348,900

Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019-2023 5-Year Estimates. South Street neighborhoods include 9 tracts (9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25); East Passyunk neighborhoods include 6 tracts (23, 24, 27.01, 28.01, 28.02, 29). Counts summed across tracts; shares computed as summed numerators over summed denominators. Dollar figures shown in 2020 dollars, deflated from 2023 dollars using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U. The ACS 5-Year Estimates *pool survey responses across a 60-month window, with figures most representative of the period's mid-point in 2021.*

The 2023 snapshot shows the two surrounding neighborhoods share more demographic ground than the corridors' reputations might suggest. Population size is comparable, and the share of residents aged 18 to 34 sits within two percentage points of one another at 31.9% around South Street and 30.4% around East Passyunk. The visible divergences sit on three dimensions. South Street's population skews older, with 19.2% aged 65 and over compared to 12.6% around East Passyunk. South Street also runs wealthier and more credentialed, with a median household income of $101,100 against $80,200 and a 77.8% share of adults holding a bachelor's degree against 58.1%. Median home values around South Street sit at roughly $511,000, nearly $162,000 above the East Passyunk figure. These corridor averages mask real variation within each side, with neighboring Society Hill's 18-34 population standing out as an outlier at only 24.3% (Appendix Table A.1).

A snapshot, however, can only show where the two corridors stand today. It cannot explain how each population arrived at its current shape, or why South Street's commercial vacancy has climbed alongside the wealth around it. The next set of figures traces both surrounding populations from 1970 to 2020 and surfaces the changes over time.

Full 50-year demographic detail by decade, including population and age, economic profile, and household tenure, appears in Appendix Tables A.2 through A.4.

The clearest divergence in the 50-year record is age. South Street's neighborhood grew older across every decade of the window, with median age climbing from 30.2 years in 1970 to 39.3 years in 2020. The share aged 65 and over rose from 12.4% to 18.3% across the same period. East Passyunk moved the opposite direction. Median age peaked at 39.9 years in 1980, then fell to 33.3 years by 2010 before settling at 34.8 in 2020. The two neighborhoods aged in opposite directions over half a century, with South Street accumulating older residents while East Passyunk turned over toward a younger population.

Wealth followed two different paths to a similar place. Around South Street, real median household income climbed in steady, decade-over-decade increments, from $35,000 in 1970 to $95,400 in 2020.[25] East Passyunk held mostly flat through 2010. Its income moved between $36,500 and $43,900 from 1980 onward before jumping to $72,600 in 2020.

Home values traced the same contrast. The South Street figure rose at a measured pace, from $114,700 in 1970 to $572,600 in 2020.[26] East Passyunk lagged for decades at under $107,000, then more than tripled between 2000 and 2020 to reach $329,500. Both corridors now sit well above the city as a whole. In 2020, the median home value for Philadelphia was about $172,000, which puts South Street homes at more than three times the citywide figure and East Passyunk homes at nearly twice it.[27]

The next four charts open up each of these arcs in turn. Figure 3.4 traces total population alongside renter-occupied units to show how the two corridors absorbed different shares of Philadelphia's broader residential changes. Figure 3.5 follows median age across the full window, where the inverse age trajectories land most clearly. Figure 3.6 plots median home value over time, isolating the steady South Street climb against the late East Passyunk surge.

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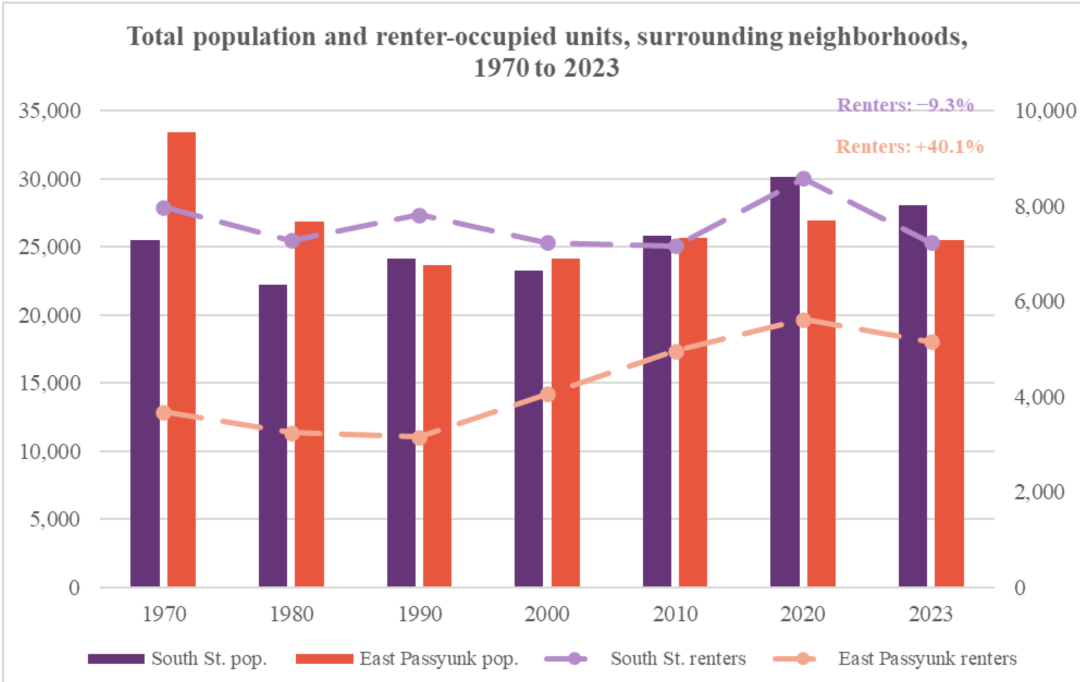
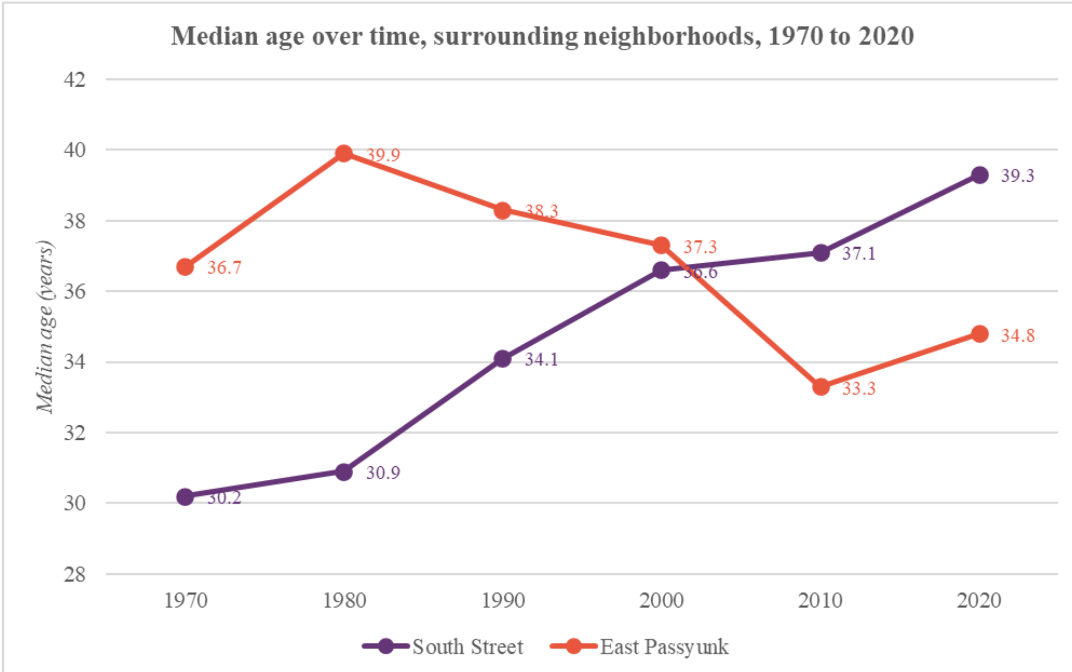
[25] Author's calculations. Full sources and method in Appendix Table A.3.
[26] Ibid. Full source in Appendix Table A.4.
[27] U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2016–2020 Five-Year Estimates, Table B25077 (median home value)

Figure 3.4. Total population and renter-occupied units in the surrounding neighborhoods of South Street and East Passyunk, 1970 to 2023.



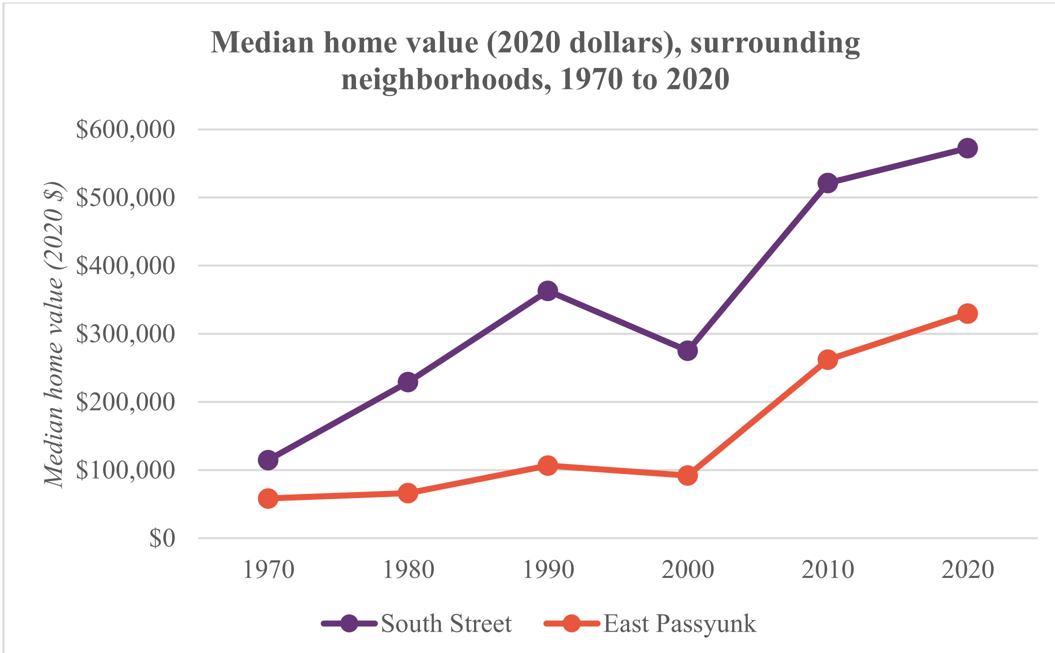
Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau decennial census data and American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. 2010 and 2020 figures from the Decennial Census Demographic and Housing Characteristics file (Tables P1 and H4). 1970 through 2000 figures from the Longitudinal Tract Database (LTDB), Brown University (Logan, Xu, and Stults, 2014), which interpolates pre-2010 census data to 2010 tract boundaries. 2023 figures from the American Community Survey 2019-2023 5-Year Estimates (Tables B01003 and B25003). South Street values aggregate 9 tracts (9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25); East Passyunk values aggregate 6 tracts (23, 24, 27.01, 28.01, 28.02, 29). Counts summed across tracts. Net change percentages shown for renter-occupied units between 1970 and 2023.

Figure 3.5. Median age of surrounding neighborhoods of South Street and East Passyunk.



Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau decennial census data and American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. 2010 and 2020 values drawn from ACS Table B01002. 1970 through 2000 values estimated by linear interpolation within the median bracket from NHGIS detailed age tables (Table B57 for 1970 and 1980; Table CW3 for 1990 and 2000); the 1970 and 1980 estimates carry slightly wider source brackets and should be read as approximations. South Street values aggregate 9 tracts (9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25); East Passyunk values aggregate 6 tracts (23, 24, 27.01, 28.01, 28.02, 29). Median age weighted by population.

Figure 3.6. Median home value in the surrounding neighborhoods of South Street and East Passyunk, 1970 to 2020, in 2020 dollars.



Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau decennial census data and American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. 2010 and 2020 values drawn from ACS Table B25077. 1970 through 2000 values from the Longitudinal Tract Database (LTDB), Brown University (Logan, Xu, and Stults, 2014), which interpolates pre-2010 census data to 2010 tract boundaries. Dollar figures shown in 2020 dollars, deflated using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U. South Street values aggregate 9 tracts (9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25); East Passyunk values aggregate 6 tracts (23, 24, 27.01, 28.01, 28.02, 29). Median home value weighted by owner-occupied units.

Figure 3.4 shows that South Street's surrounding population grew steadily from 25,500 in 1970 to 30,200 in 2020, while its renter base stayed roughly flat across the same window. East Passyunk's population shrank from 33,400 to 27,000, while its renter base climbed from 3,675 in 1970 to 5,613 in 2010 before settling at 5,247 in 2023, a 40% net gain.

Figure 3.5 shows the inverse age stories. South Street's median age rose from 30.2 to 39.3 across the full window, climbing in nearly every decade. East Passyunk's median age peaked at 39.9 in 1980, fell to 33.3 by 2010, and settled at 34.8 in 2020.

Figure 3.6 shows that median home values climbed sharply on both sides but on different tempos. South Street's rose at a measured pace from $114,700 in 1970 to $572,600 in 2020. East

Passyunk's lagged for decades at under $107,000 before tripling between 2000 and 2020 to reach $329,500.

The pattern across the three figures is that East Passyunk has added capacity for renters and South Street has not. South Street's neighborhood has aged in place and consolidated into an owner-occupied residential community, while East Passyunk's has turned over toward a younger, more rental-driven mix. The challenge for South Street is that its population is not rising enough or replacing its older residents with the 18 to 34 cohort that historically drives commercial corridor activity through dining, entertainment, and other discretionary spending.[28]

3.4 Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)

A BID is a defined geography where property owners pay a mandatory annual fee, authorized by City Council, to fund supplemental services within the district. The resulting organization typically operates as a private nonprofit, governed by a board of property and business owners, and delivers services such as daily street cleaning, public safety coordination, marketing, special events, and economic development.[29] Roughly 15 BIDs operate across Philadelphia.

BIDs are important to understand as backdrop to the findings of this study because they are the operational governance body for each commercial corridor. Their staff are the ones walking the block, picking up the trash, planning the festival, and fielding the calls about a vacant storefront. South Street and East Passyunk both fall under BID jurisdiction, but the two organizations differ in size, scope, and years of experience (see Table 3.2).

City Council authorized the South Street Headhouse District (SSHD) by ordinance in 1992, and the district began operations the following year.[30] SSHD today spans South Street from Front to 11th Street, the length of Fabric Row, and select properties around the Headhouse

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[28] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Consumer Expenditure Surveys: Reference Person Age and Housing Tenure of Reference Person Tables, 2023*

[29] City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce, *Starting a Business Improvement District in Philadelphia*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: City of Philadelphia, February 2025), 3, 6-7

[30] South Street Headhouse District, Five Year Plan and Budget: 2018–2022 (Philadelphia: South Street Headhouse District, 2017), 2.

Shambles (see Figure 3.7). It runs on an annual budget of about $1.0 million and delivers the standard suite of BID services: daily street cleaning, marquee events including the South Street Spring Festival, marketing under the "Meet Me on South Street" brand, and ongoing support for the South Street Police Mini-Station.[31]

The East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District (EPABID), established in 2002 and reauthorized in 2024 under Bill No. 240368, serves roughly one mile of East Passyunk Avenue between South Broad and Federal and covers about 200 businesses (see Figure 3.8).[32] It runs on a fraction of the South Street budget. Its director reports annual assessment revenue just under $300,000, supplemented by about $100,000 in Community Development Corporation (CDC) tax-credit funding, for a total near $400,000 that covers all cleaning, events, marketing, staffing, and operations, which she describes as the smallest of any actively operating BID in the city.[33] That total is less than half of what SSHD spends. In 2024, the district also launched an Associate Business Membership program that extends select services to surrounding South Philadelphia businesses for an annual fee, an unusual move that reflects EPABID's posture of integration with its neighborhood.

The East Passyunk governance picture is incomplete without the Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation (PARC). PARC is a separate nonprofit that owns and manages real estate on the corridor, and it uses the income from those properties to fund supplementary public-space services, including the six-day-per-week sidewalk cleaning program that EPABID contracts.[34] PARC holds ten properties on or adjacent to East Passyunk Avenue and anchors the tenant mix with several restaurants and retailers. It also operates at a much larger scale than the BID it supports, reporting about $1.5 million in revenue in 2024.[35] Its director describes

[31] "Staff and Board of Directors," South Street Headhouse District, accessed April 2026, https://southstreet.com/.
[32] "Who We Are," East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District, accessed April 2026, https://www.visiteastpassyunk.com/about
[33] Author's interview with EPABID Director, March 2026.
[34] Author's interview with PARC Director, March 2026.
[35] Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation, IRS Form 990, fiscal year 2024, accessed via ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer

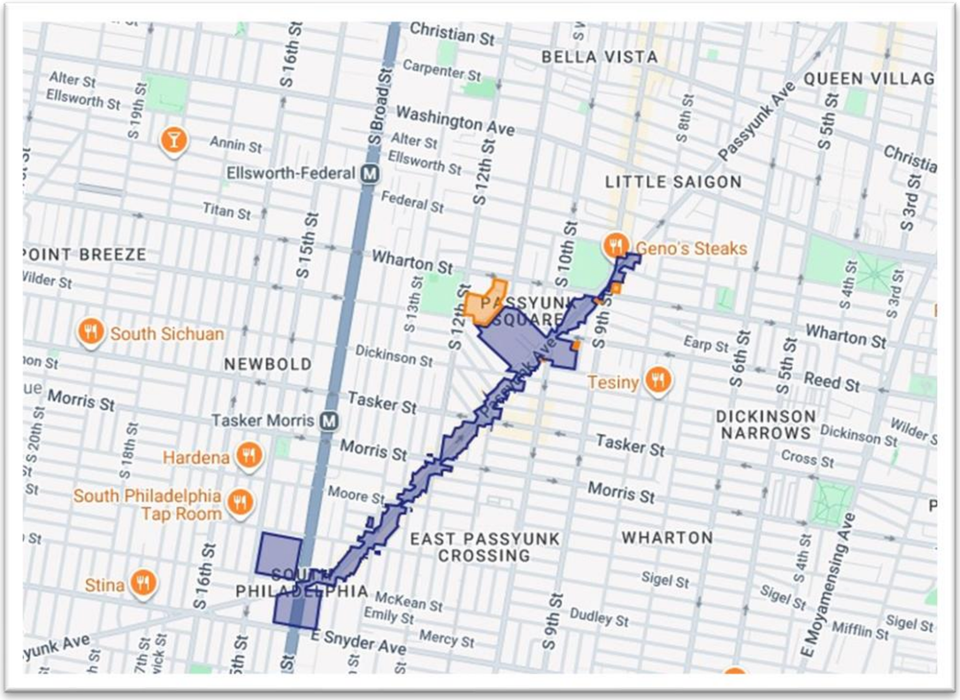
operations scaling toward roughly $2 million in recent years, much of that growth following expanded city cleaning grants under the Philadelphia Department of Commerce's Taking Care of Business Clean Corridors Program.[36] East Passyunk runs one of the city's smallest BIDs, yet its corridor draws on materially more place-management resource than South Street, because a property-owning nonprofit operating well above the SSHD budget sits behind it. PARC has no counterpart on South Street.

Figure 3.7. South Street Headhouse District BID boundaries.

Source: South Street Headhouse District, www.southstreet.com

[36] City of Philadelphia, Department of Commerce, "Philadelphia Taking Care of Business (PHL TCB) Clean Corridors Program," accessed June 2026

Figure 3.8. East Passyunk BID boundaries.



Source: East Passyunk Avenue, www.visiteastpassyunk.com

Table 3.2. Side-by-side comparison of South Street Headhouse District (SSHD) and East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District (EPABID).

Attribute	SSHD	EPABID
Year established	1992 (operations began 1993)	2002
Legal structure	Municipal Authority under the Pennsylvania Municipality Authorities Act (MAA)	501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation under the Pennsylvania Community and Economic Improvement Act (CEIA)
Estimated businesses in district	~450	~200
Annual budget (FY2024)	~$1.06M	~$362K
Size of staff	3	2
Size of volunteer Board of Directors	15	11
Affiliated revitalization corporation	No	Yes (Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation, PARC)
Also serves as Registered Community Organization (RCO)	Yes	No

Source: Author's compilation from SSHD Five-Year Plan (2023-2027), EPABID 2024 Annual Report and IRS Form 990 (FY2024), Philadelphia Department of Commerce, and respective organizational websites. Budget figures: SSHD projected, EPABID actual.

3.5 Registered Community Organizations (RCOs)

A Registered Community Organization (RCO) is a neighborhood group registered with PCPC to participate in the zoning review process for development inside its boundaries. Once registered, an RCO receives notice of any zoning variance, special exception, or Civic Design Review application on parcels inside its boundaries, and the Coordinating RCO selected by PCPC convenes a public meeting and files a written summary with the Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA), PCPC, and the district councilmember.[37]

RCOs matter for this study because they are the procedural gate any corridor-scale change must pass through (Reference Appendix A4). A Cultural Corridor Overlay, a new live-music venue, an upzoning to CMX-3, or a change of use from retail to assembly all travel through the RCOs whose boundaries cover the affected parcels.

The RCO role is technically advisory, but its weight is structural rather than procedural. A 2015 Pew study of councilmanic prerogative, the custom by which City Council follows the lead of the local district councilmember on zoning matters in their district, found that the ZBA rarely approves a project when the district councilmember and the local community groups both oppose it.[38] Because councilmanic prerogative gives the district representative effective deference over land-use decisions in their district, even one or two RCOs sustaining a coordinated objection can reach the council office and signal that the project will not survive a contested vote.[39] The arithmetic matters for this study: the more RCOs whose boundaries touch a given parcel, the more pressure points exist to slow, modify, or withdraw any corridor-scale change.

Five RCOs touch South Street between Front and 12th (Figure 3.9). Four are residential civic associations: the Society Hill Civic Association (SHCA) and Washington Square West

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[37] The Philadelphia Code, § 14-303(11)(A) (Registered Community Organizations) and § 14-303(12) (Neighborhood Notice and Meetings), American Legal Publishing, accessed April 28, 2026, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/philadelphia/latest/philadelphia_pa/0-0-0-288947. The full seven-step PCPC rezoning process is shown in Appendix Figure A.4.
[38] The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Philadelphia's Councilmanic Prerogative: How It Works and Why the Process Invites Scrutiny* (Philadelphia: Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2015), 10-12, https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2015/08/philadelphia-councilmanic-report--with-disclaimer.pdf.
[39] Ibid.

Civic Association (WSWCA) on the north side, and the Queen Village Neighbors Association (QVNA) and Bella Vista Neighborhood Association (BVNA) on the south side.[40] The fifth is SSHD itself; the Philadelphia Zoning Code permits BIDs to register as RCOs, and SSHD has held that status since formation, serving as the Coordinating RCO for parcels along the corridor.

East Passyunk's RCO landscape is simpler. The avenue runs through two residential RCOs, East Passyunk Crossing (EPX) and the Passyunk Square Civic Association (PSCA), with EPABID not registered. South Street's setup is therefore distinctive on two dimensions: the BID is also an RCO, and four overlapping residential RCOs each hold standing on corridor-adjacent parcels. Figure 3.9 shows South Street's overlapping RCO landscape. Table 3.3 compares the two corridors' RCO landscapes side by side.

Figure 3.9. Map of RCO boundaries surrounding South Street.

Source: Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Zoning Meeting 1, accessed April 2026

[40] Philadelphia City Planning Commission, "Find a Registered Community Organization," accessed April 2026, https://www.phila.gov/programs/registered-community-organizations-rcos/.

Table 3.3. Side-by-side comparison of RCOs surrounding South Street and East Passyunk.

Corridor	Total RCOs	Neighborhood Civic RCOs	BID/SSD RCOs
South Street	5	4	1
East Passyunk	2	2	0

Source: Author's compilation from Philadelphia City Planning Commission RCO registry, April 2026

3.6 The Philadelphia Department of Commerce

The Philadelphia Department of Commerce is the city's economic development agency. Its citywide programs reach both corridors: the Storefront Improvement Program (up to $10,000 in facade reimbursement), the Business Security Camera Program (up to 75% on exterior cameras), and the Small Business Catalyst Fund (up to $50,000 for growth-ready operators).[41]

Other programs are gated by income. The InStore Forgivable Loan Program ($50,000 to $100,000 for equipment and fit-out) and the Neighborhood Funding Stream flow only to corridors inside low-to-moderate income communities, a test the city applies to the area around the corridor, not the corridor itself.[42]

That test shuts out South Street. The surrounding blocks, in Society Hill, Queen Village, and Bella Vista, post some of the highest household incomes in the city, near $101,000 (see Section 3.3), far above the cutoff. The corridor reads as affluent even though many of its storefronts would qualify on their own. Commerce staff acknowledge the mismatch, and stakeholders make a strong case for inclusion.[43] Chapter VI treats it as a force driving vacancy, and Table 3.4 lays out eligibility for both corridors.

[41] City of Philadelphia, Department of Commerce, "Storefront Improvement Program," "Business Security Camera Program," and "Small Business Catalyst Fund," accessed April 2026.
[42] City of Philadelphia, Department of Commerce, "InStore Forgivable Loan Program: Eligible commercial corridors," accessed April 2026.
[43] Author's interview with a member of the Philadelphia Department of Commerce, April 2026.

Table 3.4. Side-by-side comparison of Philadelphia's Department of Commerce Programs and South Street and East Passyunk Avenue's eligibility.

Program	What it does	South Street	East Passyunk
Storefront Improvement Program	Reimburses up to 50% of facade improvement costs, capped at $10,000 per property and $15,000 for corner or multi-address properties	✓ Eligible	✓ Eligible
Business Security Camera	Reimburses up to 75% of exterior security camera costs, capped at $3,000	✓ Eligible (citywide)	✓ Eligible (citywide)
The Catalyst Fund	Grants of up to $50,000 to growth-ready small businesses	✓ Eligible (citywide)	✓ Eligible (citywide)
Neighborhood Economic Development Grant	Grants of $50,000 to $500,000 to nonprofits and community development corporations for commercial real estate development	◐ Project-specific (rarely eligible)	◐ Project-specific (rarely eligible)
PHL Taking Care of Business	Funds community-based nonprofits to sweep sidewalks and remove litter on selected commercial corridors	✓ Eligible (not used)	✓ Eligible (currently used)
Targeted Corridor Management Program	Funds community development corporations to staff a dedicated corridor manager	✗ Not eligible	✗ Not eligible
InStore Forgivable Loan Program	Forgivable loans of up to $100,000 for retail, food, and creative businesses to fit out interior space	✗ Not eligible	✗ Not eligible
Neighborhood Funding Stream	Grants for small businesses and nonprofits in targeted areas, covering equipment, beautification, and commercial development	✗ Not eligible	✗ Not eligible
Commercial Real Estate Acquisition Loan (CREAL)	Mortgage of up to $350,000 plus a closing-cost grant of up to $35,000 to acquire commercial property	✗ Not eligible	✗ Not eligible
Broad, Germantown, and Erie (BGE) Project	Multi-year capital investment at the BGE intersection in North Philadelphia, including traffic safety improvements, new public plazas, and storefront work	✗ Not eligible	✗ Not eligible
Keystone Opportunity Zones	State-administered tax exemptions for designated parcels	✗ No designated parcels	✗ No designated parcels

Source: Author's compilation from Philadelphia Department of Commerce program pages, accessed April 2026.

*Author's note***:** *Eligibility reflects Commerce program criteria as of 2026. Both corridors qualify for citywide or broadly corridor-eligible programs such as Storefront Improvement, Business Security Cameras, and the Small Business Catalyst Fund, but not for targeted LMI, Empowerment Zone, or CDC-administered programs such as InStore, the Neighborhood Funding Stream, CREAL, or Targeted Corridor Management.*

3.7 Base Zoning

Base zoning is the classification that Philadelphia's code assigns to every parcel in the city. It sets what can be built on the lot, what businesses can operate inside, and how tall and dense the building can be.[44] A project that fits its parcel's base zoning is built by-right; a project that does not must seek a variance from the zoning board, which sends it back through the RCO process described in Section 3.5.[45] Base zoning therefore sets the ceiling on what each parcel along a commercial corridor can become.

Both South Street and East Passyunk fall almost entirely within the Commercial Mixed-Use (CMX) series along their commercial frontages, with residential districts forming the surrounding fabric. The CMX series spans six base districts that range from CMX-1, which

[44] The Philadelphia Code, Title 14, "Zoning and Planning."
[45] The Philadelphia Code, Title 14, Chapter 14-700 (Development Standards) and § 14-303(7) (Special Exceptions and Variances).

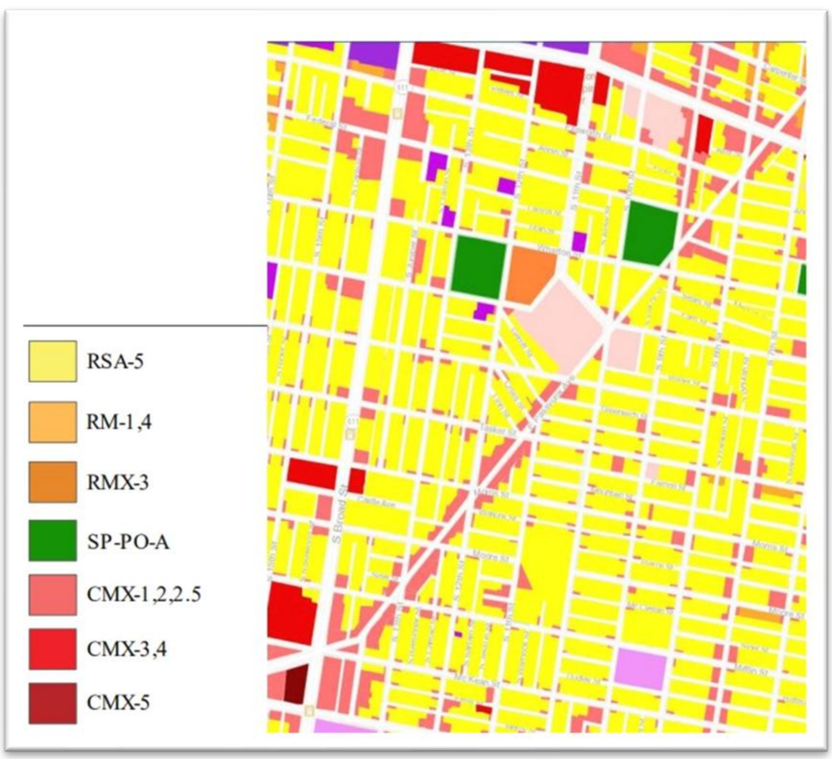
authorizes neighborhood-serving retail in low-rise buildings, to CMX-5, the high-density core found in areas such as Center City (See Appendix A.10.)

The two corridors draw from the same set of categories but combine them very differently. East Passyunk runs almost entirely through CMX-2.5 along its commercial frontage, with only a few higher-density parcels book-ending the corridor. Its surrounding fabric is overwhelmingly RSA-5, the standard rowhouse residential district that defines most of South Philadelphia (see Figure 3.11). South Street's base zoning is fragmented. The corridor moves through four different CMX classifications between Front and 12th, with the heaviest commercial designations clustering on the eastern blocks between 2nd and 5th and the western half from 5th to 12th carrying a lighter, more residential-leaning mix. The surrounding fabric is just as varied, blending RM-1, RM-4, and RMX-3 with pockets of RSA-5 (see Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10. Map of South Street's zoning as of April 2026 from Front to 12th Street.

Source: Adapted by the author from Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Atlas Zoning Map, accessed April 2026.

Figure 3.11. Map of East Passyunk's zoning as of April 2026 from 1200 to 2000 blocks.



Source: Adapted by the author from Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Atlas Zoning Map, accessed April 2026.

The compositional difference matters for policy design. Adjacent parcels along South Street can have substantially different development capacities, while parcels along East Passyunk share a common set of by-right rules. Corridor-scale tools such as overlays, incentives, and design standards are therefore less predictable on South Street, where any uniform intervention has to overlay onto four different base zones rather than one. Section 3.8 turns to overlay districts, the second regulatory layer the city can map onto specific geographies, and Chapter VI analyzes how these compositional differences shape development patterns and policy options on each corridor.

3.8 Zoning Overlays

A zoning overlay is a secondary zoning layer mapped onto a specific geography. The base zoning still applies; the overlay adds another layer of rules tailored to that place. Across Philadelphia's roughly 30 overlay districts, two control types dominate: use restrictions like the convenience-store ban in Wynnefield or the entertainment-venue ban on North Central Front Street, and height and dimensional limits like those in Society Hill and Strawberry Mansion.[46]

Overlays don't have to be restrictive, though that is how they typically read in Philadelphia. In Illinois, Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Bonus, for example, channels downtown development fees into grants for commercial corridors elsewhere in the city.[47]

In Philadelphia, overlays are political tools. Every one of them lives in a single part of the zoning code, Chapter 14-500, the "Overlay Zoning Districts" chapter. A district councilmember introduces a bill, usually at the urging of RCOs and neighborhood groups, Council passes it, and one more overlay is added to the list. Council has done this about three dozen times, nearly always to restrict. The same mechanism could just as easily reward what the city wants to see.

[46] The Philadelphia Code, Title 14, "Zoning and Planning," Chapter 14-500 ("Overlay Zoning Districts"), accessed April 2026, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/philadelphia/latest/philadelphia_pa/0-0-0-289852
[47] City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, "Neighborhood Opportunity Bonus," chicago.gov

Whether a corridor's overlay stack works comes down to what is actually mapped onto it. South Street and East Passyunk sit at opposite ends of that range, despite carrying the same CMX-2.5 base zoning along most of their length.

Table 3.5. Overlay comparison between South Street and East Passyunk, 2026.

Overlay	Code §	South St.	E. Passyunk Ave.
/CTR South Street / Head House Square	§14-502	Yes	No
/CTR South Street / Head House Square Central	§14-502	Yes	No
/CTR Commercial District Control Area	§14-502	Yes	No
/CTR Residential District Control Area	§14-502	Yes	No
/CTR Parking Garage Ground Floor Use Control Area	§14-502	Yes	No
/CTR Residential Parking Control Area	§14-502	Yes	No
/CTR Southwark National Historic District	§14-502	Yes (Front–5th)	No
Total corridor-shaping overlays		**6–7**	**0**
Citywide overlay (not corridor-shaping)			
/NIS Narcotics Injection Sites Overlay	§14-540	Yes	Yes

Source: City of Philadelphia, Atlas, accessed April 2026, https://atlas.phila.gov/; Philadelphia Code, Title 14, §§ 14-502, 14-540.

Chapter IV: Historical Analysis

South Street has functioned for more than three centuries as a local main street, a regional destination, and a tourist draw at the same time, one of the only commercial corridors in Philadelphia where that combination has been held since the city's founding. That triple identity is why the corridor's economic vitality matters more than it does on most neighborhood commercial corridors, and why any policy intervention worth proposing must reckon with the history that produced it.

The corridor's modern arc is roughly two, 30-year cycles of decline, reinvention, and commercialization. This study later finds the corridor in the late stage of a second such cycle (Chapter VI). This chapter supplies the historical context Chapters V through VII rely on.

Two notes on scope. Interview subjects consistently surfaced East Passyunk Avenue as the comparative reference point, and East Passyunk's modern history pivots on the 1990s and 2000s Citizens Alliance intervention led by State Senator Vincent J. Fumo, which used a 1997 PECO settlement to acquire and rehabilitate roughly fifteen properties along the avenue.[48] This chapter does not give East Passyunk the historical depth it gives South Street. The thesis uses East Passyunk as a comparison variable through fieldwork and findings in Chapter V and flags its longer history as a limitation in Chapter VIII. Reliable corridor-level quantitative data, including the Census, PCPC Philadelphia Shops inventories, Office of Property Assessment (OPA) records, and License & Inspection (L&I) records, only extends back to the late 1970s. The pre-Crosstown era is therefore treated narratively through academic writing, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and the Philadelphia Business Journal. The rest of the thesis focuses on the post-Crosstown period, with earlier history as context.

[48] Jamie M. Justice, "Moving On: The East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District," *Drexel Law Review* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 227–263.

4.1 South Street Pre-Crosstown era, 1682–1973

The City's Edge, 1682–1854.

Cedar Street, now South Street, formed the southern boundary of William Penn's 1682 "Greene Country Towne."[49] The line anchored commerce on the city's side and attracted edge uses not allowed due to Quaker norms on its outside. The New Market sheds were established at Second Street in 1744 and extended to South Street by 1797, with the surviving Head House structures built in 1804 and 1805.[50] South of the line, the Southwark Theatre opened in 1766 because live performance was barred within Philadelphia proper. Many locals tell tales that crossing South Street meant crossing police jurisdictions, which made the corridor durable ground for gray-market commerce up until Philadelphia's city consolidation in 1854.[51]

The immigrant retail corridor, 1854–1929.

Two distinct corridors hardened along South Street over the next 70 years. The eastern blocks became Philadelphia's Jewish garment and household-goods district, anchored by Fabric Row and a cluster of synagogues.[52] The western blocks tied into W.E.B. Du Bois's Seventh Ward and developed into one of the city's leading Black commercial and entertainment districts, anchored by the Royal Theater after 1920.[53] South Street drew customers from across the city, not only from the adjacent blocks, a pattern that would define its commercial economy for the rest of the century.

Working main street, 1929–1954.

The corridor entered the postwar period as a working main street. A 1949 inventory recorded thriving businesses along the eastern blocks, including Tri-plex Shoes, L. Dubrow & Sons furniture, and Klinghoffer carpets, and the corridor remained the place where Jewish

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[49] "South Street," *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Rutgers University–Camden, 2015, https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/south-street/.
[50] Ibid., intro.
[51] Hodos, "Whose Neighborhood," 193–197.
[52] Ibid., 194.
[53] Ibid.

families in the region planned weddings and bar mitzvahs.[54] One surviving structure is the Foremost Building at 521-525 South 4th Street, just off the corridor, which housed the Foremost Meat Factory's kosher butchery from 1945 to 1977.[55] At the same time, the New Deal's expansion of federal redevelopment authority and the automobile age were pushing American cities to redesign around vehicular circulation, treating older mixed-use corridors as obstacles to modern commerce. City planners first sketched a "ring road" of highways around Center City in the 1930s, including a southern crosstown expressway that urban planners would eventually settle on as South Street.[56]

Eminent domain and decline, 1954–1973.

The Crosstown Expressway, a planned multilane highway that would have cut along the southern edge of Center City to link I-95 with the Schuylkill Expressway, turned a working corridor into a clearance zone. The state issued eminent domain notices in 1954, designated the route I-695 in 1957, and held public hearings in 1965. Jewish families on the eastern blocks moved to outlying neighborhoods, and Black families west of Broad began leaving as well, as the Crosstown threatened to demolish Hawthorne, one of the city's oldest Black neighborhoods, sitting just south of South Street.[57]

Merchants lost the customer base they had served, then banks redlined the corridor, property values collapsed, and the businesses that had anchored the 1949 retail snapshot closed or relocated. The collapse opened the corridor to a different population. Artists, students, and small operators moved into spaces established merchants had abandoned willing to take on the short-term relocation risk, including the Philadelphia College of Art who opened dormitories on the corridor. The Theatre of the Living Arts opened on the 300 block in 1965, and Isaiah and Julia

[54] Snyderman, Snyderman, and Grant, "The Story of the South Street Renaissance.", pg. 12-20.
[55] "History of the Foremost Building," Foremost 525 LP, accessed May 20, 2026, https://theforemost-building.com/history.
[56] John F. Bauman, "Philadelphia and Highway Planning," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115, no. 4 (October 1991): 504–534.
[57] Hodos, "Whose Neighborhood," 195–197.

Zagar purchased a 400-block house for $10,000 in 1968.[58] Meanwhile, Alice Lipscomb organized opposition in Hawthorne, framed the proposed highway as Philadelphia's "Mason Dixon Line" and a "carbon monoxide curtain," and built an interracial coalition that joined the artist-organized South Street Renaissance in 1970. The Crosstown Expressway was deleted from federal and state plans in 1974.[59]

4.2 South Street Post-Crosstown era, 1973–2025

Renaissance and counterculture corridor, 1973–1992.

The corridor's first reinvestment cycle followed from the anti-Crosstown coalition's victory and the organizing infrastructure that fight had built. South Street merchants worked with local banks to remove the redline in 1974, allowing twenty-five tenants to purchase the buildings they were renting. During the same year, the South Street Renaissance pressed the city to rezone the corridor from industrial to commercial mixed-use.[60] Cheap rent on a historic stretch drew new entrepreneurs to South Street, including restaurants, art galleries, feminist bookstores, queer institutions, and punk and 'New Wave' retail .[61] The most prominent example was Zipperhead, which opened at 407 South Street in 1980 as one of the country's first punk-rock boutiques, selling studded leather, zippered shirts, and other subculture fashion.[62] Live performance ran throughout the era. Grendel's Lair opened at 5th and South in 1972, J.C. Dobbs hosted live music on the 300 block, Stephen Starr's Ripley Music Hall operated at 608 South Street from 1980 to 1985, and the TLA converted to a full-time concert venue in 1988. By the early 1980s, South Street was hosting U2, the Ramones, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Bruce Springsteen alongside many other national headliners.[63] Michael Axelrod, a New York retailer who had made his

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[58] Snyderman, "The Story of South Street", 15.

[59] Andrew Hunter, "How Ideas Stopped an Expressway in Philadelphia," Penn Institute for Urban Research, 2020, https://penniur.upenn.edu/publications/how-ideas-stopped-an-expressway-in-philadelphia.

[60] Snyderman, "The Story of South Street", 17-20.

[61] "South Street," *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia.*

[62] "'The Goldbergs' to Feature Long-Gone South Street Punk Store Zipperhead in Upcoming Episode," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 27, 2018.

[63] Bill Thompson, "What's That Boom in Phila.? That's Entertainment," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 29, 1979, sec. Arts & Leisure; Stephen Starr, interview by Victor Fiorillo in "Stephen Starr and Pierre Robert on Music in Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Magazine*, October 22, 2014, https://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/10/22/stephen-starr-pierre-robert-music-philadelphia/.

fortune in the French Connection clothing chain, began acquiring buildings in 1985 on the tailwinds of the South Street hype machine, purchasing thirteen properties at a total cost of $6.25 million by 1987.[64] He recruited Tower Records, a national music retailer, and The Gap, a national clothing chain, as the corridor's first national-chain tenants.[65]

BID era and the walkable mall, 1992–2008.

Philadelphia City Council authorized the South Street Headhouse District in October 1992 as the city's second business improvement district.[66] Live arts and culture continued to draw investment into the mid-1990s: the Laff House Comedy Club opened on the 200 block in 1996 and became an internationally recognized urban-comedy venue, hosting the early careers of Kevin Hart, Bill Burr, and others.

By the late 1990s, regional malls in King of Prussia and Cherry Hill began absorbing Philadelphia's suburban shopping power, and NCC's across the city saw this competition and began chasing the same national chains retail. Through the late 1990s and early 2000s, South Street would add Johnny Rockets, Blockbuster, Starbucks, Steve Madden, Pearl Arts and Crafts, and Adidas, transforming into what the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called a walkable mall.[67]

Rising rents and a shifting customer base pushed the corridor's countercultural anchors out: J.C. Dobbs closed in 1996, and Zipperhead and the Pontiac Grille (Dobbs's successor) followed in 2005.[68] As the corridor leaned into late-night bars and clubs to make up for losses, tensions between residents and the corridor began rising. The February 2001 Mardi Gras melee, an unofficial celebration that drew tens of thousands and turned destructive with overturned cars and looted storefronts, brought arguments to a head.[69] Finally, the collapse of Will Smith's $63.5

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[64] Linda S. Wallace, "New Yorker finds room for growth on South Street," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 13, 1987.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Philadelphia, Pa., Ordinance No. 209 (October 9, 1992); Hodos, "Whose Neighborhood," 193.
[67] Daniel Rubin, "A Sea Change on South Street," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 3, 1996.
[68] Dan DeLuca, "South Street Landmark Dobbs Has Closed," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 26, 2015; "Zipperhead Is Dead," *Philadelphia City Paper*, August 4, 2005.
[69] Joseph A. Slobodzian and Clea Benson, "Mardi Gras Melee Provokes Outrage and Call for Change," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 1, 2001, A1.

million W Hotel proposal at Headhouse Square signaled that the corridor was losing the commercial momentum that fueled investment like that of the previous decades.[70]

Chain exit, recession, COVID-era, and the second decline, 2008–2025.

The 2008 recession ended the chain-era formula. Most national chains closed within three years, and rising vacancy emerged as the corridor's defining condition.[71] A partial recovery from 2015 to 2020 brought new investment, including Midwood Investment and Development's 2016 acquisition of 11 Axelrod properties, but the corridor never matched the pace of Philadelphia's broader urban revival or the national trend.[72] COVID decimated what retail remained. The June 4, 2022 mass shooting on the 200 block followed. Then came the 2022 to 2023 SSHD financial mismanagement crisis.[73]

By 2026, despite Philadelphia's broader return to pre-pandemic activity, South Street had not bounced back. The corridor is widely described as the emptiest it has felt in a generation. This is the puzzle the rest of the thesis takes up: what dynamics have frozen South Street out of the urban revival that lifted other corridors, and what makes the resulting economic doom loop self-reinforcing?

[70] "Will Smith's Planned Hotel Will Instead Become Condos," *Philadelphia Business Journal*, March 14, 2005.
[71] Natalie Kostelni, "It Was Once Philadelphia's Hippest Street. Is South St. on the Verge of Becoming a Ghost Town?," *Philadelphia Business Journal*, August 9, 2018.
[72] Center City District, *State of Center City Philadelphia*, annual reports 2020.
[73] Mike D'Onofrio, "Three Killed, Eleven Injured in South Street Shooting," *Axios Philadelphia*, June 6, 2022; Jake Blumgart, "South Street Headhouse District Financial Mismanagement," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2024.

Chapter V: Methods and Findings

5.1 Methods

Reading a corridor accurately means walking it. The Philadelphia City Planning Commission set that precedent through its *Philadelphia Shops* surveys of 1989, 1996, and 2004, which walked the city's neighborhood commercial corridors at the height of suburbanization and the mallification of American retail.[74] Forty years later, in the dead mall era, the mall and the corridor are both being asked to redefine around the kinds of live, in-person experiences e-commerce cannot replicate. Yet no Philadelphia municipal system captures parcel-level business tenancy at the granularity required here. The Center City District's Economic Development team confirmed in an interview that walking the corridor remains the most reliable way to read its current state.[75] Where PCPC's planners walked with clipboards and pencils, this fieldwork walked with an iPad and a pointer finger.

Fieldwork covered 519 parcels across both corridors. South Street's 271 parcels were walked five times during March and April 2026 on two weekday mornings (a Monday and a Thursday), two Fridays at four o'clock, and one Saturday at midday. East Passyunk's 248 parcels, from the 1200 to 2000 blocks, were walked three times in March on a Monday morning, a Friday at five o'clock, and a Saturday at one o'clock. Every trip fell on a temperate day between 55 and 75 degrees. The additional South Street visits reflect a deeper focus on that corridor as the analytical center of the thesis. Each parcel had been pre-loaded into the working dataset using Philadelphia's Atlas tool with triangulation from OpenDataPhilly and Google Maps, ordered sequentially by address with evens and odds separated by side of street, so that each storefront could be coded in real time as the walk progressed. One trip on each corridor was dedicated to block-level analysis, treating the block rather than the parcel as the unit of observation.

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[74] Philadelphia City Planning Commission, *Philadelphia Shops: A Survey of Retail Activity Concentrations* (Philadelphia: PCPC, 1989); *Philadelphia Shops Update: A Citywide Inventory of Retail Centers* (Philadelphia: PCPC, December 1996); follow-up update (2004).

[75] Jimmy Salfiti, Center City District, in discussion with the author, April 2, 2026, Philadelphia.

Each parcel was coded on the spot across roughly 30 fields. The four anchor variables were vacancy status, structural condition, storefront condition, and business category and segment for occupied parcels. Vacant parcels carried three further codes for the presence of a for-rent or for-sale sign, visible renovation activity, and the appearance of long disuse.

The block-level trips captured a parallel set of observations on streetscape, walking conditions, and quality of life. The walks attracted attention. The owner of one hookah lounge on South Street stopped me, suspicious, perhaps thinking I was L&I. Two East Passyunk shopkeepers, friendlier on first contact, waved me down to ask what I was tracking and offered the corridor's entire history unprompted.

Beyond those unprompted conversations, fieldwork was paired with 17 scheduled interviews across six categories of corridor actor, including BID and business district leaders, civic association presidents, two City Council offices, the Department of Commerce, two business owners, and a retail brokerage. Twelve interviews ran 60 minutes and five ran 30, with 10 in person, five over Zoom, and two by phone. Each followed a similar arc on the person's role, their historical understanding of the corridor as it touched their work, who they see using it and who they think it is for, real estate observations, and questions calibrated to their seat. Interviews were recorded through Otter.ai, with transcripts coded into themes using Anthropic's Claude and shared back with the interviewee for confirmation. Multiple interviewees flagged absentee landlords, smoke shops, and low housing density as recurring concerns, which informed this study’s diagnosis of dormant real estate ownership and declining pedestrian demand, including Table 5.4 and Figure 5.4.

Each coded field's definition lives in the source line of the figure or table where the variable appears, rather than upfront in this methods section. Composite indices in the block-level analysis are South Street internal measures. The appendix captures the rest of the math, equations, and variables, including the varying denominators used for parcels along a corridor.

5.2 Corridor profile at a glance

The end purpose of this paper is to identify if South Street needs intervention because it's behaving atypically to market norms. This research pushes back on the anecdotal claim that commercial corridors cannot survive in the e-commerce era, a claim that doesn't square with other historic corridors thriving elsewhere across the Northeast or the other voices that say that South Street's recent vacancy is due to COVID withdrawal and will be quick to rebound.[76]

Testing these theories against South Street requires a comparable commercial corridor. East Passyunk was chosen because it fits the bill closest on structural variables: density, transit access, historic building stock, size, and broadly similar surrounding demographics. The two corridors also happen to anchor a cheesesteak rivalry, which kept the fieldwork well-fueled. Table 5.1 confirms most of the similarity: both corridors sit on pre-1900 building stock, comparable lot footprints, and ownership turnover that runs close at the median.

[76] JLL, *2024 City Retail Report* (Chicago: JLL, December 2023), summarized in Diana Mosher, "Why Prime Urban Retail Corridors Are Thriving," *Commercial Property Executive*, December 14, 2023. The report documents foot-traffic recovery to pre-pandemic levels in half of the prime urban corridors surveyed as of October 2023, including Newbury Street in Boston.

Table 5.1. Parcel profile comparison between South Street and East Passyunk, 2026.

The two corridors share similar age, built form, and ownership turnover, but South Street's buildings carry four times the median violation count.

	South Street	st Passyunk
CMX parcels surveyed (N)	245	196
Age		
Year built	Pre-1900	Pre-1900
Built form		
Median lot area (sq ft)	1,416	1,113
Median frontage (ft)	19.0	16.0
Median building height (ft)	37	32
Median building footprint (sq ft)	1,323	1,031
Ownership turnover		
Share of parcels sold for $1	31.8%	35.7%
Median years since last sale	12.7	12.2
Code violations		
Median violation count per parcel	8	2
Share of parcels with ≥1 open violation	18.0%	5.1%

Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records and Licenses & Inspections violation history. Scope restricted to CMX-zoned parcels (South Street N=245; East Passyunk N=196). Medians reported in place of means where distributions are right-skewed.

Author's note: OPA uses 1900 as a placeholder for pre-1900 construction, so "Pre-1900" is reported for both corridors to avoid implying false precision.

The building stock on both corridors is small and old. Median frontages run under 20 feet, median footprints under 1,500 square feet, and construction almost entirely predates 1900, which makes chain retail and large-format redevelopment economically uphill without lot assembly. Ownership patterns track similarly at the surface. Roughly a third of CMX parcels on each corridor have transferred at a dollar at some point suggesting family trust transfers, and the median years since last sale on each side lands within six months of the other. The only immediate high-level observations are violations, where South Street carries four times East Passyunk's median count and more than three times its share of parcels with open violations. The structural variables underneath those medians, traced in the next section, tell a less symmetrical story.

5.3 Structural foundation

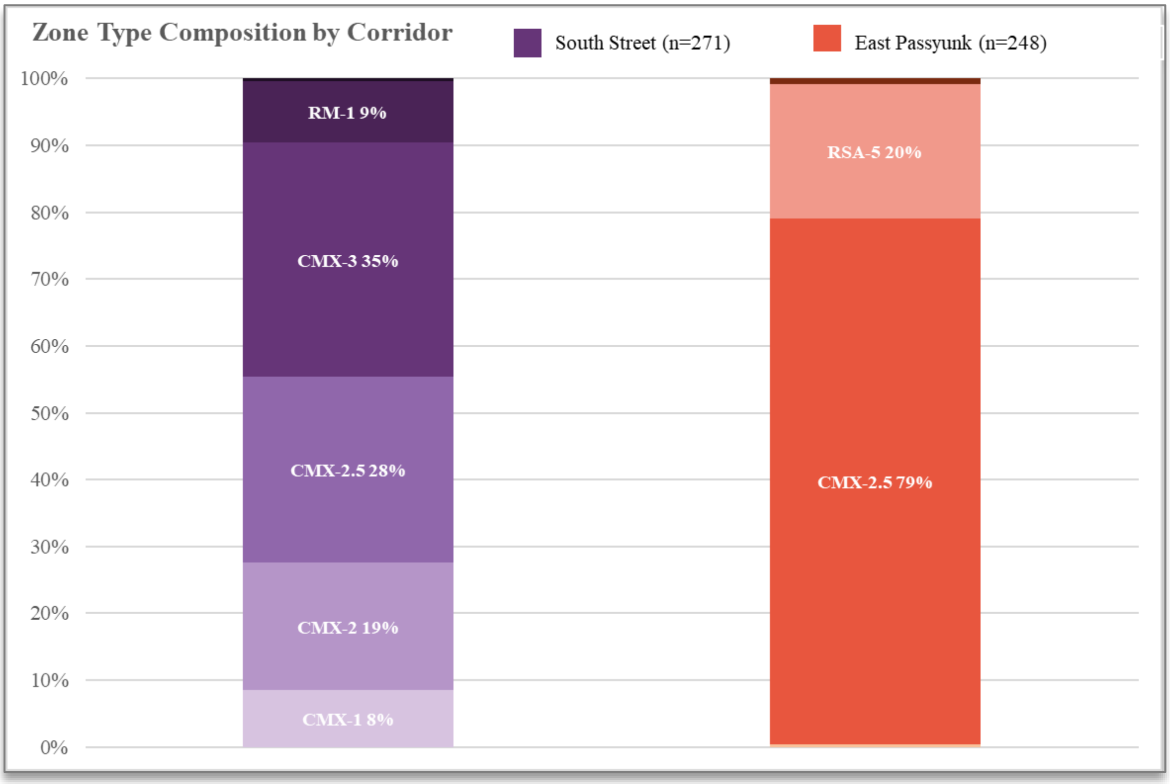
From the sidewalk, the two corridors look similar. Both run with brick row buildings two to four stories tall on average, mostly late nineteenth century, with retail at street level and apartments above. Storefronts are not overly wide or deeply offset from the street, and both streets carry single lanes of vehicle traffic. The one streetscape quirk between them is that East Passyunk's diagonal alignment cuts across the city grid and produces triangular parcels at its intersections, which create natural pockets of public space for park benches and fountains.

Figure 5.1. East Passyunk's Singers Fountain.
One of multiple corner intersections

Source: Google Maps, accessed June 2026.

The bigger difference shows up when walking the entire length. East Passyunk feels more consistent, with buildings lining up uniformly from one block to the next. That architectural evenness mirrors its zoning, captured in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2. Base zoning composition of South Street and East Passyunk parcels.
South Street's parcels span four CMX classifications and a residential pocket, while East Passyunk runs on a single CMX-2.5 designation.

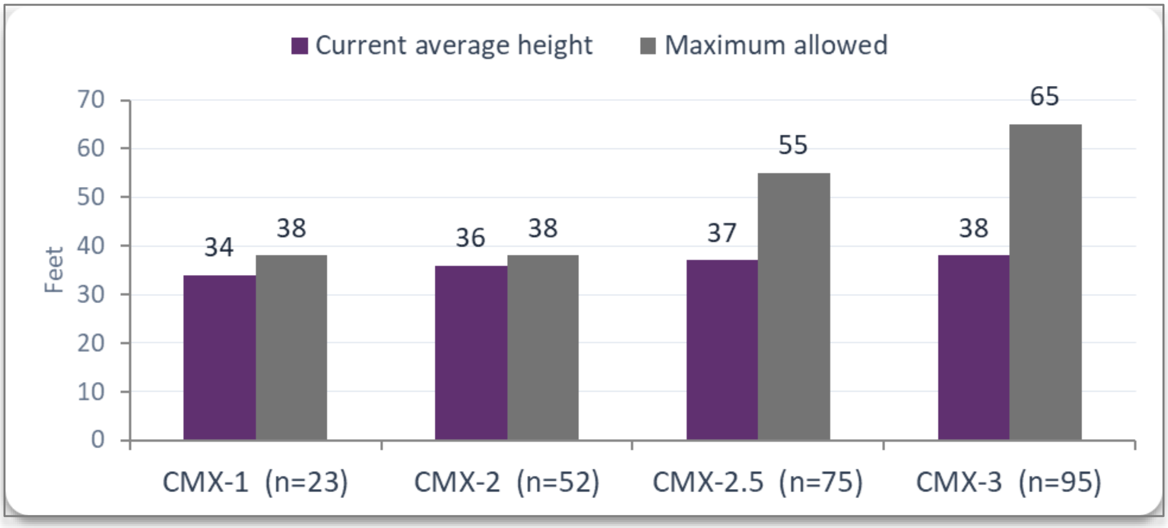


Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia City Planning Commission zoning records, accessed May 2026.

South Street's CMX patchwork sorts geographically like a field goal post. CMX-3 and CMX-2.5 cluster on the eastern and western blocks between 2nd and 5th and between 9th and 11th. The middle runs lighter on CMX-1 and CMX-2, with residential pockets of RM and RSA zoning on the 100, 700, and 800 blocks. The net result is three distinct districts embedded within an 11-block corridor. A tenant looking at two storefronts a few doors apart on South Street can find one that permits the business by-right and another that routes the same use through the ZBA for a variance. Chapter VI takes up what that friction does to commercial supply and demand.

Height does not currently define the corridor, given the prevalence of pre-1900 building inventory. The major difference today is that the CMX-2.5 and CMX-3 blocks include wider parcels where available, such as the Theatre of the Living Arts on the 300 block, Whole Foods on the 900 block, and Abbotts Square on the 200 block. These wide developments came from the conversion of a movie theater, a parking garage, and a dairy farm respectively.[77]

Figure 5.3. South Street building heights compared to the zoning ceiling, by CMX category. *South Street's lower-intensity zones are built to their cap, while CMX-2.5 and CMX-3 parcels sit 18 and 27 feet below theirs.*



Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records, n=270 parcels with valid year-built data. Maximum allowed heights drawn from Philadelphia Zoning Code base district rules and the proposed South Street remapping (CMX-3 capped at 65 feet for the corridor). Of the 4 vacant buildings among the 55 built since 1960, 2 are short-term turnover and 2 are long-term vacant at a single 1985 development at 200-210 Lombard. Pre-1960 construction not shown: 212 parcels,

Figure 5.3 shows current heights clustered between 34 and 38 feet across all four CMX zones, even as the ceilings diverge sharply. CMX-1 and CMX-2 parcels sit essentially at their caps. CMX-2.5 and CMX-3 parcels sit 18 and 27 feet below theirs. The 170 parcels in the heavier zones together carry roughly two to three stories of unused vertical capacity per parcel. The reason developers have not used the headroom is partly economic and partly regulatory. South Street's median 19-foot lot frontages run near the bottom of what makes a vertical residential addition pencil, especially under Pennsylvania's two-stair requirement for residential buildings above three stories, which forces a third or more of the floor plate into stair cores and

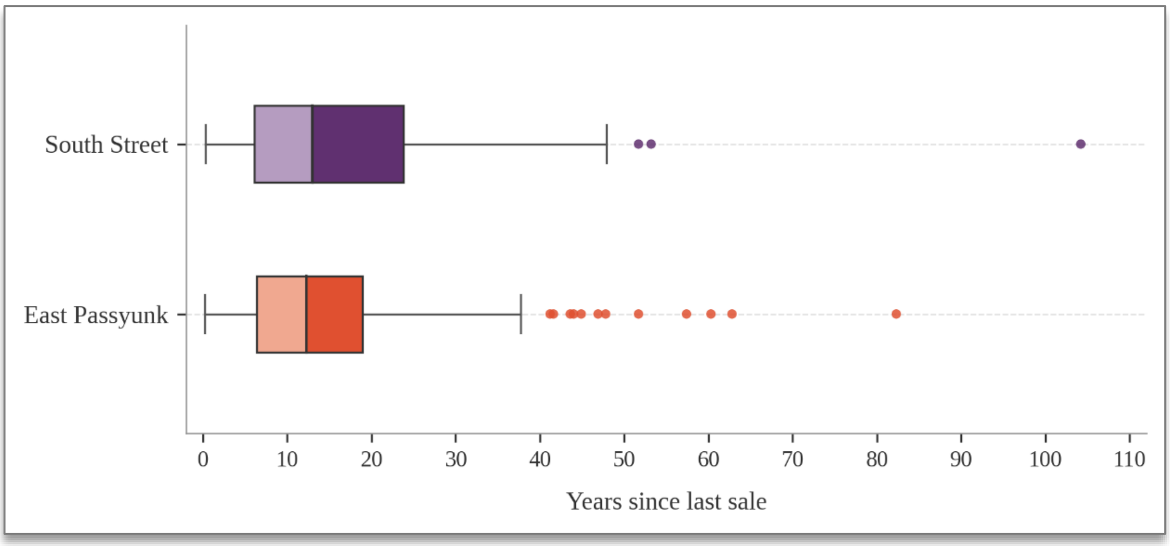
[77] Author’s interview with Executive Director SSHD, April 2026.

circulation.South Street between Front and 11th also holds almost none of the easily developable parcels CMX-3 typically draws, such as surface parking lots or convertible parking garages.

Building age is one window onto how the corridor has aged. Ownership turnover is another. Both corridors run a median of roughly 12 years since last sale, and Figure 5.4 shows where the distributions diverge.

Figure 5.4. Distribution of years since last sale on South Street and East Passyunk parcels, 2025.

South Street's ownership turnover is similar to East Passyunk's at the median, but its upper quartile and right tail run noticeably longer, with 34.9% of South Street CMX parcels last sold 20 or more years ago compared with 22.4% on East Passyunk.



Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records. Sample restricted to CMX-zoned parcels with valid sale date records (South Street n=235 of 245; East Passyunk n=196 of 196). Box edges mark the first and third quartiles; the median divides the lighter and darker halves of each box.

Holding periods on commercial corridors tend to cluster into two regimes. Short tenures of 0 to 10 years usually reflect active capital, such as owner-operators, investor flips, or recent buyers underwriting a current business plan. Long tenures of 20-plus years usually reflect one of two opposite conditions, stewardship or dormancy. The shapes of these two distributions look similar. The owners behind those long tails do not.

East Passyunk's long-tenured cohort skews toward stewardship. PARC owns 10 commercial parcels and operates them with rent structured as a function of tenant sales, prioritizing co-tenancy over maximum rent.[78] Those holdings sit in the right tail by design, because PARC is not in the business of flipping. South Street's long tenure reads differently. Michael Axelrod began assembling parcels on the corridor in 1985, and Midwood Investment & Development acquired 11 of those properties from him in 2016. Together they control more than 40 addresses on South Street today.[79] Beyond those two portfolios, the cohort likely includes a sizable number of family trusts and estates that have held parcels on this historic corridor for generations without engaging the commercial market.

One way to test that hypothesis is the $1-sale record. $1 sales typically reflect non-arms-length transfers such as family handoffs, estate moves, or intra-LLC restructurings. By that measure the two corridors look alike: East Passyunk's share of $1 sales among CMX parcels (35.7%) actually runs slightly higher than South Street's (33.2%), and both saw their first wave of speculative assembly in the 1980s (Appendix Figure A.7). The dormancy picture sharpens only when the two traits are read together. On South Street, 155 of the corridor's 271 parcels fall into the $1 or 20+ year cohort, meaning roughly three out of five parcels have either changed hands without a market transaction or have not transacted at all in two decades.[80] Parcels last sold for $1 sit vacant at 37%, eight points above the corridor average, and 22 of South Street's 35 long-term vacant parcels (63%) come from one or both groups.

Over the past 50 years, South Street's surrounding population aged in place while East Passyunk's shifted younger (see Section 3.3). The typical repeat customer base aged out and was not replaced. Almost every new housing unit built in the surrounding tracts since 1970 has been for-sale rather than for-rent. The median home value across the nine tracts surrounding South Street sits above $510,000, generally pricing the 18 to 34 cohort out of the market entirely due to

[78] Author's interview with Executive Director of PARC, April 2026.
[79] Author's interview with SSHD, April 2026.
[80] Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records (the 155-of-271 calculation).

limited rental stock.[81] Young renters are the same demographic that tends to frequent the independent shops, cafes, and venues thriving on East Passyunk today.

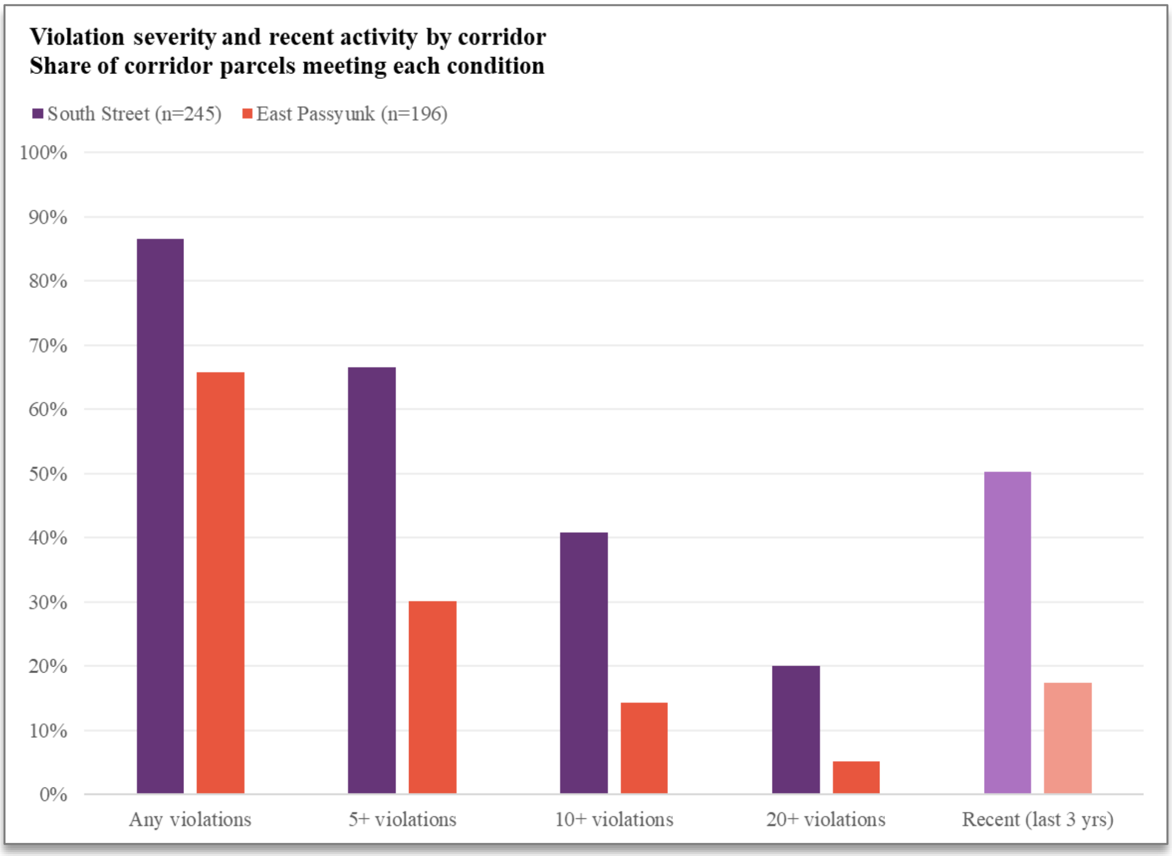
That residential pricing bleeds onto the corridor itself. South Street runs between Society Hill and Queen Village, two of the highest-income residential neighborhoods in Philadelphia, and sits a 15-minute walk from Center City. The adjacent neighborhoods set a residential price floor, and Center City proximity adds redevelopment potential. Together they price the corridor's land independently of how the commercial use is performing. A dormant storefront still sits on a parcel the residential market values highly, because the parcel could plausibly redevelop into housing or mixed-use stock the surrounding demographic can absorb. East Passyunk had no such price floor when PARC and its predecessor Citizens Alliance began assembling property. The affordability allowed them to acquire ten parcels and tie rents to tenant sales. South Street, comparatively, never had a non-profit or revitalization group purchase the bricks on its corridor. South Street's median arms-length sale price runs roughly 1.8 times East Passyunk's, a $273,000 gap (Appendix Figure A.5).

A commercial parcel carries two kinds of value, the land underneath and the building on top. When ownership is engaged, operating the storefront, collecting rent, and maintaining the asset, both kinds of value rise together. When ownership is dormant, holding for land appreciation rather than operating income, the two decouple. The land keeps appreciating on location and redevelopment potential. The building deteriorates because no one is maintaining it.

That decoupling is South Street's diagnosis. High parcel prices coexist with deteriorating buildings because the corridor's dormant owners profit from holding without operating, and still maintain cashflow from the apartment units above. The 20+ year cohort and the $1 transfer cohort identified earlier in this section show who those owners are. Figure 5.5 shows what is happening to the buildings while they wait.

[81] Author's calculations from ACS Table B25077 (median home value)

Figure 5.5. Code violation severity and recent activity on South Street and East Passyunk parcels.
South Street's violation profile exceeds East Passyunk's at every threshold, and 50.2% of South Street CMX parcels recorded a new violation in the last three years compared to 17.3% on East Passyunk.



Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records and Licenses & Inspections violation history. Sample restricted to CMX-zoned parcels (South Street n=245; East Passyunk n=196). The "Recent" bar reflects parcels with a most recent violation date on or after January 1, 2023.

The violation profile is not residue from just the previous decade. Half of South Street's CMX parcels recorded a violation in the last three years, three times East Passyunk's rate, and 16.2% carry open violations today.[82] The deterioration is happening in motion, while price speculation remains high. Owners are not investing in the buildings even as the parcels appreciate.

Two corridors with similar age, frontage, and built form diverge through ownership behavior. South Street's parcels run longer holds, sit with more dormant owners, trade at land-

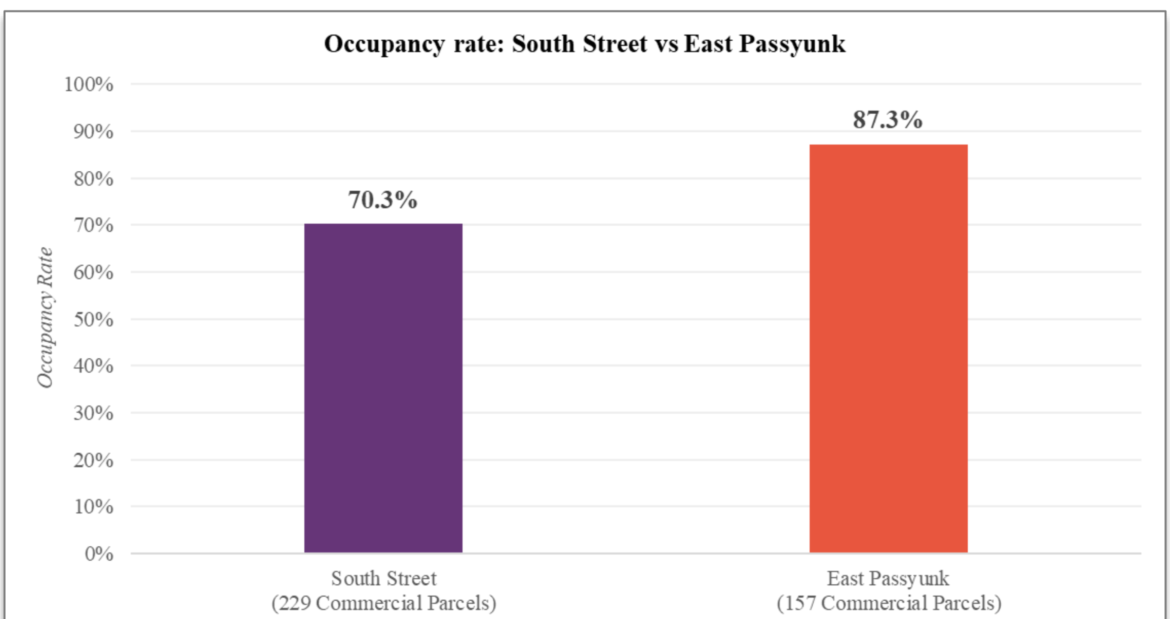
[82] Author's analysis of Philadelphia L&I violation history

value premiums decoupled from commercial performance, and house buildings deteriorating faster than they are being repaired. The next section turns from that structural foundation to the commercial demand it has shaped.

5.4 The occupancy gap

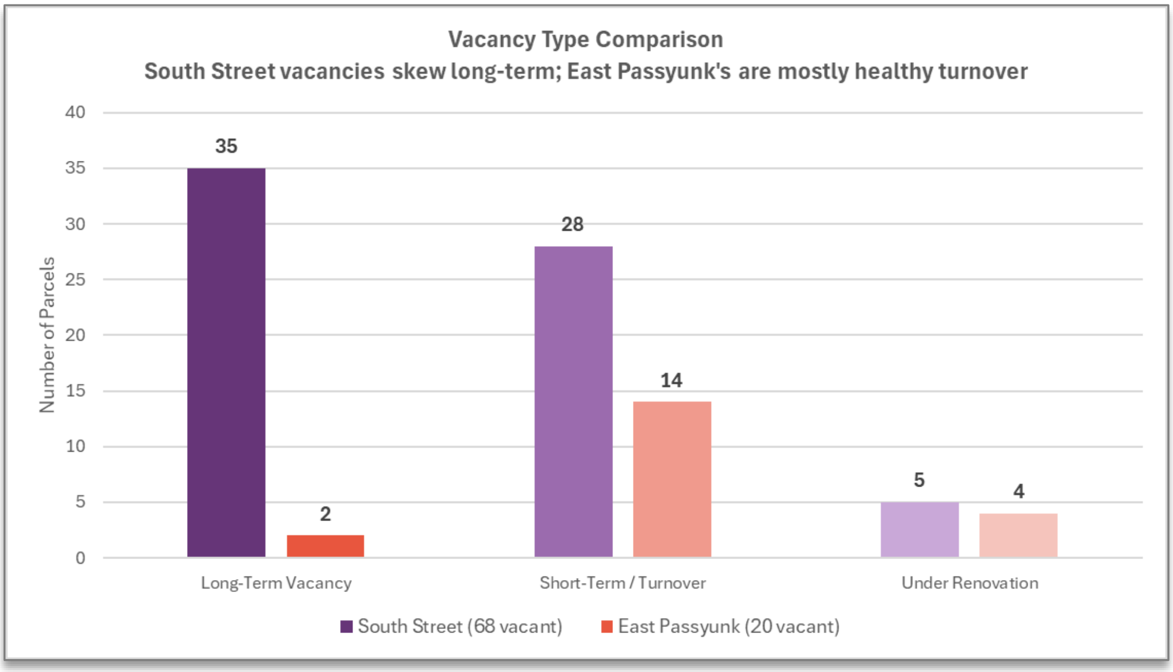
Many of the individuals interviewed in this study shared that their perception was that South Street has emptied out to a shell of its former self, often citing it felt like it was at its lowest vibrancy in decades. This section tests that perception against the reality of what could be seen by walking the corridor. Occupancy is the cleanest single indicator of whether those conditions show up at street level. A corridor with repeat visitors, high foot traffic, engaged owners, diversified commercial offerings leads to full storefronts, supply and demand. Figures 5.5 and 5.6 run that test on both corridors.

Figure 5.6. Commercial occupancy rate on South Street and East Passyunk.
Commercial occupancy on South Street trails East Passyunk by 17 percentage points, with 70.3% of commercial real estate space active compared to 87.3% on East Passyunk



Source: Author's field survey, 2026. Sample restricted to parcels with commercial real estate space, meaning a parcel with an active business or a labeled commercial vacancy (South Street n=229; East Passyunk n=157). Residential parcels on CMX zoning are excluded.

Figure 5.7. Vacancy type composition on South Street and East Passyunk.
South Street has 35 long-term commercial vacancies compared to East Passyunk's 2. East Passyunk's vacancies skew toward short-term turnover.



Source: Author's field survey, 2026. Sample restricted to vacant commercial parcels (South Street n=68; East Passyunk n=20). Vacancy type assigned during the field survey based on observed conditions, signage, and permit activity.

The data delivers two findings, one nested inside the other. The headline is the 17-point occupancy gap: South Street at 70.3% against East Passyunk at 87.3%. That confirms the interview perception in plain numerical terms that South Street is meaningfully less occupied than its comparison corridor.

The deeper finding is in the composition of that vacancy, and it is the more important of the two. East Passyunk has roughly 20 vacant parcels, but only 2 are long-term vacant; almost all of its vacancy is normal market churn, the in-between state of a storefront waiting on its next tenant. South Street has roughly 68 vacant parcels, and 35 of them are long-term vacant. Half of South Street's vacancy is sitting still.

For this study’s purposes, long-term vacancy is a count of a storefront that shows no signs of preparation for a new tenant: no for-rent signage, no posted permits, no construction visible through the windows, and visible signs of accumulated neglect like rotted trim, leaks, layered trash, and graffiti that has been there long enough to fade. In plainer terms, the test is whether the space could realistically appear on a commercial brokerage listing today. If it could not, it qualifies.

The interviewer’s perception that South Street is a "shell of its former self" lands as accurate. Long-term vacancies are visible to anyone walking the corridor with stretches of storefront with no permits, no signage, and no preparation for the next tenant. A boarded window in that state reads as a corridor in stasis, not a market growing or evolving.

Vacancy is only half of the picture. The other half is what fills the storefronts that remain active. Interviewees described the corridor's lost character in two recurring ways: that national chains arrived in the 1990s and pushed out what made South Street distinct, and that the independent makers, artists, and performers who once defined the corridor have largely left. What has come instead, as stated by almost every interviewee regarding South Street, are short-term cash businesses often labeled as “nuisance businesses”. The next tables and figures test these claims against the active tenant mix.

5.5 Active tenant mix and conditions

Operator type, business segment, and tenant character offer three lenses on what each corridor's storefronts add up to. Tables 5.2 through 5.4 trace operator type, segment composition, and concentration of nuisance uses. Tables 5.5 through 5.7 follow with price tier, peak activation period, and outdoor footprint.

Table 5.2. Operator type distribution of active CMX tenants on South Street and East Passyunk.
Both corridors are independent-dominated, with 86.2% of South Street and 87.9% of East Passyunk tenants operating as single-location independents; chain concentration is not where the corridors diverge.

Operator type	SS count	% SS	EP count	% EP	(SS − EP, pp)
Independent	**137**	**86.2%**	**116**	**87.9%**	-1.7
Metro-only Chain	5	3.1%	9	6.8%	-3.7
Regional Chain	7	4.4%	3	2.3%	+2.1
National Chain	10	6.3%	4	3.0%	+3.3
Total active tenants	**159**	**100.0%**	**132**	**100.0%**	

Source: Author's 2026 field survey. Sample restricted to active CMX tenants with operator type coded (South Street n=159 of 160; East Passyunk n=132). Independent = owner-operated single location. Metro-only Chain = multiple locations within the Philadelphia metro. Regional Chain = multi-state but sub-national. National Chain = nationwide presence.

Interviewees on both corridors voiced a common claim that South Street has lost its character to national chains. The data does not bear that out as it appears a reversal since the 1990s has occurred. Both corridors are independent-dominated, with 86.2% of South Street's tenants and 87.9% of East Passyunk's operating as single-location independents. What stakeholders are likely describing is the loss of named cultural anchors that once defined the corridor at its peak: Ripley's Music Hall (closed 1985), Grendel's Lair (1987), JC Dobbs (1996), and the Laff House (2012). The Theatre of the Living Arts still operates as the corridor's surviving live anchor. Independence is not the variable that diverged.

Table 5.3. Business segment mix of active CMX tenants on South Street and East Passyunk.
South Street's tenant mix leans heavily on retail goods (41.3% vs 20.5%), while East Passyunk maintains a broader neighborhood services base across professional services (11.4% vs 1.3%), personal services (19.7% vs 11.3%), and food and drink.

Segment	South Street	% of SS	East Passyunk	% of EP	Gap (SS − EP)
Retail Goods	66	41.3%	27	20.5%	+20.8%
Food & Drink	43	26.9%	40	30.3%	-3.4%
Personal Services	18	11.3%	26	19.7%	-8.4%
Health & Wellness	9	5.6%	10	7.6%	-2.0%
Arts & Culture	7	4.4%	5	3.8%	+0.6%
Financial Services	7	4.4%	1	0.8%	+3.6%
Grocery & Market	5	3.1%	7	5.3%	-2.2%
Civic & Institutional	3	1.9%	1	0.8%	+1.1%
Professional Services	2	1.3%	15	11.4%	-10.1%
Total active tenants	**160**	**100.0%**	**132**	**100.0%**	

Source: Author's field survey, 2026. Sample restricted to active CMX tenants on each corridor (South Street n=160; East Passyunk n=132). The Other category (2 South Street parcels) is folded into Retail Goods. Segments sorted by South Street share, descending.

What did diverge is the composition of that independent base. South Street is more than twice as concentrated in retail goods (41.3% vs 20.5%) and under-concentrated in the categories that anchor a daily-life corridor. Professional services run 1.3% on South Street against 11.4% on East Passyunk. Personal services run 11.3% against 19.7%. Same shell, different commercial economy.

Table 5.4. Nuisance-use tenant concentration on South Street and East Passyunk.
Smoke shops and alternative financial services account for 9.4% of South Street's active tenants and none of East Passyunk's.

Category	South Street (n)	South Street (%)	East Passyunk (n)	East Passyunk (%)	Gap (SS – EP)
Smoke Shop	12	7.5%	0	0.0%	+7.5%
Alternative Financial Services	3	1.9%	0	0.0%	+1.9%
Combined	**15**	**9.4%**	**0**	**0.0%**	**+9.4%**

Source: Author's field survey, 2025. Denominators match active CMX tenants on each corridor (South Street N=160; East Passyunk N=132).
Note: Other tenant types interviewees flagged as nuisance uses, including jewelry stores, late-night restaurants, and hookah bars, fall into Retail Goods and Food & Drink in Table 5.3.

Part of that gap concentrates in nuisance uses. Smoke shops and alternative financial services together account for 9.4% of South Street's active tenants and zero of East Passyunk's. Interviewees flagged a wider set of uses that drive everyday residents away but get absorbed into Retail Goods and Food & Drink in the field categories: unregulated jewelry stores with armed guards, late-night hookah lounges selling alcohol without liquor licenses, and storefronts that present as restaurants but predominantly sell CBD products. South Street's food-and-drink also leans heavily takeout: 10 full-service restaurants against 19 quick-service, while East Passyunk runs the reverse at 25 full-service to 6 quick-service.

Table 5.5. Consumer price tier distribution of active CMX tenants on South Street and East Passyunk.
Despite a surrounding neighborhood with 26% higher median household income, South Street's tenants skew toward value pricing (mean tier 1.96), while East Passyunk's tenants run more upscale (mean tier 2.39).

Price Level (1=value, 4=premium)	South Street	East Passyunk	Gap (SS − EP)
Mean price tier	**1.96**	**2.39**	**-0.44**
Tier 1 — Value / discount	26.9%	13.6%	+13.2%
Tier 2 — Everyday / mid-low	51.3%	40.9%	+10.3%
Tier 3 — Mid-upper	17.5%	37.9%	-20.4%
Tier 4 — Premium	2.5%	7.6%	-5.1%

Source: Author's 2026 field survey. Sample restricted to active CMX tenants (South Street n=160; East Passyunk n=132). Each tenant assigned a price tier from 1 (value / discount) to 4 (premium) based on observed price points, brand positioning, and menu or merchandise review. Vacant storefronts excluded.

Table 5.6. Peak activation period distribution of active CMX tenants on South Street and East Passyunk.
Nearly one in four South Street tenants (23.1%) peaks during late-night hours compared to less than 1% on East Passyunk, while East Passyunk concentrates 79.5% of its tenants in afternoon and evening hours.

Peak period (1=morning, 5=late night)	South Street	East Passyunk	Gap (SS − EP)
Tier 1 — Morning	1.3%	5.3%	-4.1%
Tier 2 — Mid-morning	23.8%	14.4%	+9.4%
Tier 3 — Midday	31.9%	49.2%	-17.4%
Tier 4 — Evening	18.8%	30.3%	-11.6%
Tier 5 — Late night	**23.1%**	**0.8%**	**+22.4%**

Source: Author's 2026 field survey. Sample restricted to active CMX tenants (South Street n=160; East Passyunk n=132). Peak activation period coded on a five-point scale based on posted hours, observed occupancy at multiple times of day, and tenant interviews where conducted: 1 (morning), 2 (midday), 3 (afternoon), 4 (evening), 5 (late night). Vacant storefronts excluded.

Table 5.7. Outdoor footprint share of active CMX tenants on South Street and East Passyunk.
East Passyunk has nearly three times the share of active CMX tenants with outdoor footprints in the public right-of-way (19.7% vs 6.9%).

Outdoor footprint (CMX active tenants)	South Street	East Passyunk	Gap (SS − EP)
Tenants with outdoor footprint	11	26	-15
Share with outdoor footprint	**6.9%**	**19.7%**	**-12.8%**

Source: Author's 2026 field survey. Sample restricted to active CMX tenants (South Street n=160; East Passyunk n=132). A tenant was coded as having an outdoor footprint where café seating, planters, merchandise display, or other programmed spill-out extended into the public right-of-way at the time of observation.

Together, price tier, peak hours, and outdoor footprint show two corridors built for different kinds of visit. South Street tenants skew toward value pricing (mean tier 1.96 against East Passyunk's 2.39), 23.1% peak late at night versus under 1% on East Passyunk, and only 6.9% keep an outdoor footprint against 19.7%. Sidewalk seating turns a visit into a stay: a diner at a sidewalk table holds the storefront for 90 minutes instead of nine and may become motivated to visit the shops next door while seeing them while dining. Instead, South Street's mix produces faster, in-and-out visits.

Tenant mix is one drag on demand; physical condition is another. A prospective operator meets it on the walk down the corridor: chipped facades, faded signage, deferred sidewalk repair, layered graffiti. One director at a large Philadelphia-based brokerage admitted they no longer send tenants to scout South Street at all, a measure of how far the physical and perceptual gap has opened.

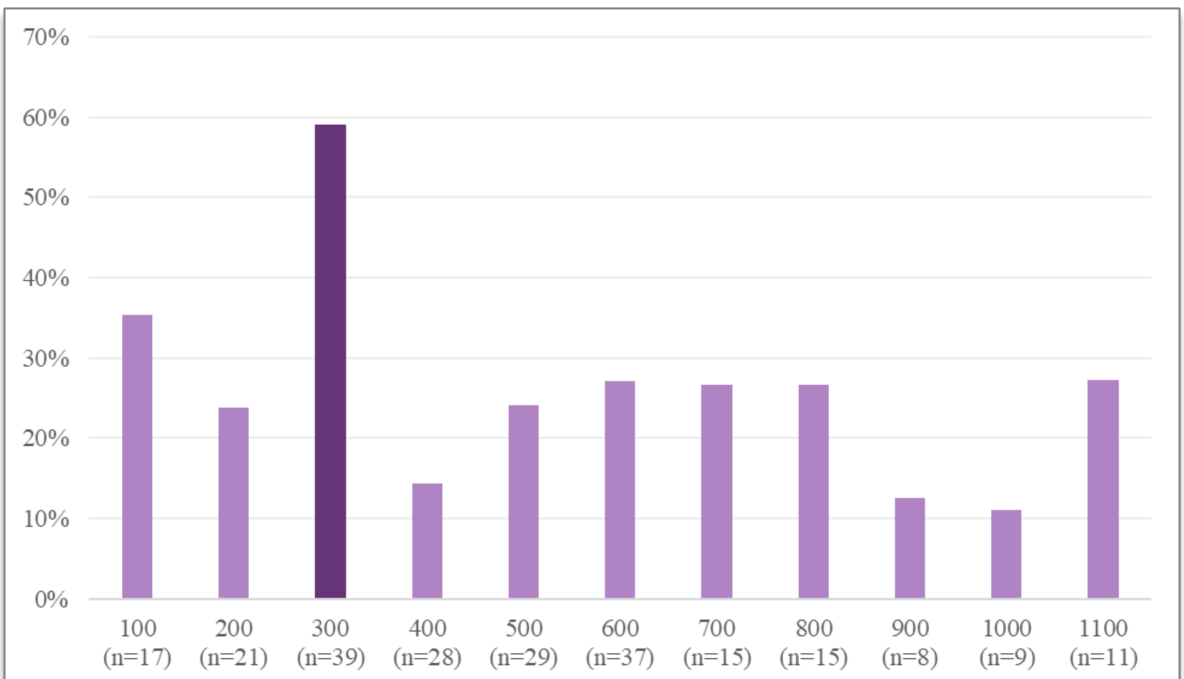
East Passyunk worked as the control for this comparison, holding constant the conditions that might explain South Street's distress: pre-1900 building stock, similar parcel footprints, comparable density and transit, and a surrounding neighborhood with money to spend. The two corridors still diverge sharply on whom they serve and how. Same starting conditions, different destinations. Where that divergence concentrates on South Street, and how it got there, is what the block-level zoom-in in Section 5.6 takes up.

5.6 Zooming in on South Street

Interviewees described South Street as three distinct sections. Front to 5th reads as a dead zone, called a ghost town by one. 6th to 9th reads as the tourist anchor around Jim's Steaks. 9th to 11th reads as quieter and residential, where one interviewee noted that the western blocks once held a health food cluster that has since reversed into the opposite.[83] The dead zone is also where the corridor's live entertainment cluster once stood with live music, jazz and comedy clubs.

Section 5.6 tests those sectional perceptions against the field data. Figure 5.8 begins with the block-level vacancy rate.

Figure 5.8. Commercial vacancy rate by block on South Street, 2026.
The 300 block carries 23 vacant parcels out of 39 (59%), more than the next three worst-performing blocks combined and roughly double the South Street corridor average of 30%.



Source: Author's 2026 field survey. Vacancy rate per block calculated as the share of commercial parcels currently vacant. Sample includes all South Street parcels with commercial real estate space (n=229). The 300 block is highlighted as the corridor's vacancy outlier.

Figure 5.8 shows the share of available commercial parcels on each South Street block currently sitting vacant. The corridor average is 30%. The 300 block clears that mark by a wide

[83] Author’s interview with Executive Director of BVNA, April 2026.

margin at 59% vacant, with 23 of its 39 parcels empty, more than the next three worst-performing blocks combined. The 100 and 200 blocks sit just below the corridor average at 24% each. The western 900 and 1000 blocks anchor the corridor's healthy end at 12% and 11% respectively. Worth noting, a Whole Foods and Starbucks have anchored 9th street for close to 15 years whereas South Street's largest running vacancy, Abbotts Square, available 27,000 sq. feet remains empty.

Figure 5.9. Long-term vacant storefronts on the 300 block of South Street, 2026.
The 300 block carried 23 of its 39 parcels vacant on the 2026 field survey, the corridor's worst stretch, several with no signage or permits.

Source: Author's photograph, 2026.

The corridor average of 30% is propped up almost entirely by the 300 block. If you were to remove it, the remaining 10 blocks come in at 24% vacancy, six points lower. The 900 and 1000 blocks at 11.5% outperform East Passyunk's corridor-wide rate of 12.7%, meaning the healthy end of South Street is healthier than the comparison corridor. The most distressed eastern blocks are also where the corridor's historic live entertainment cluster once stood. In addition, the 300 block alone now holds 14 of South Street's 35 long-term vacant parcels, or 40% of the corridor's stuck inventory on a single block.

Section 5.3 established that 155 of South Street's 271 parcels carry $1 transfers or 20+ year holds, the structural signature of dormant ownership. Axelrod and Midwood, the two New York portfolio owners that together hold dozens of South Street properties, concentrate their holdings on the eastern blocks where vacancies run heaviest. Table 5.8 breaks the corridor's long-term vacant parcels by block.

Table 5.8. Block-level tenant profile summary for South Street, 2026.
South Street's eastern blocks (100-600) carry most of the corridor's distress, averaging 17.5% long-term vacancy compared to 5.4% on the western blocks (700-1100); the 300 block is the corridor outlier at 35.9%.

Block	Top segment	# Active	Vacancy	Longterm vacant	Business Segments	Natl chain	Metro/Reg chain	% Outdoor	% Smoke/AFS
100–199	Food & Drink	17	35.3%	11.8%	4	0.0%	0.0%	18.2%	9.1%
200–299	Food & Drink	21	23.8%	19.1%	5	6.3%	12.5%	18.8%	18.8%
300–399	Retail Goods	39	59.0%	35.9%	4	6.3%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%
400–499	Retail Goods	28	14.3%	10.7%	4	8.3%	8.3%	12.5%	0.0%
500–599	Retail Goods	29	24.1%	13.8%	3	0.0%	18.2%	4.6%	9.1%
600–699	Retail Goods	37	27.0%	13.5%	7	0.0%	7.4%	0.0%	18.5%
700–799	Retail Goods	15	26.7%	0.0%	7	9.1%	9.1%	0.0%	18.2%
800–899	Personal Services	15	26.7%	6.7%	3	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
900–999	Financial Services	8	12.5%	0.0%	5	57.1%	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%
1000–1099	Health & Wellness	9	11.1%	11.1%	7	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%
1100–1199	Personal Services	11	27.3%	9.1%	5	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

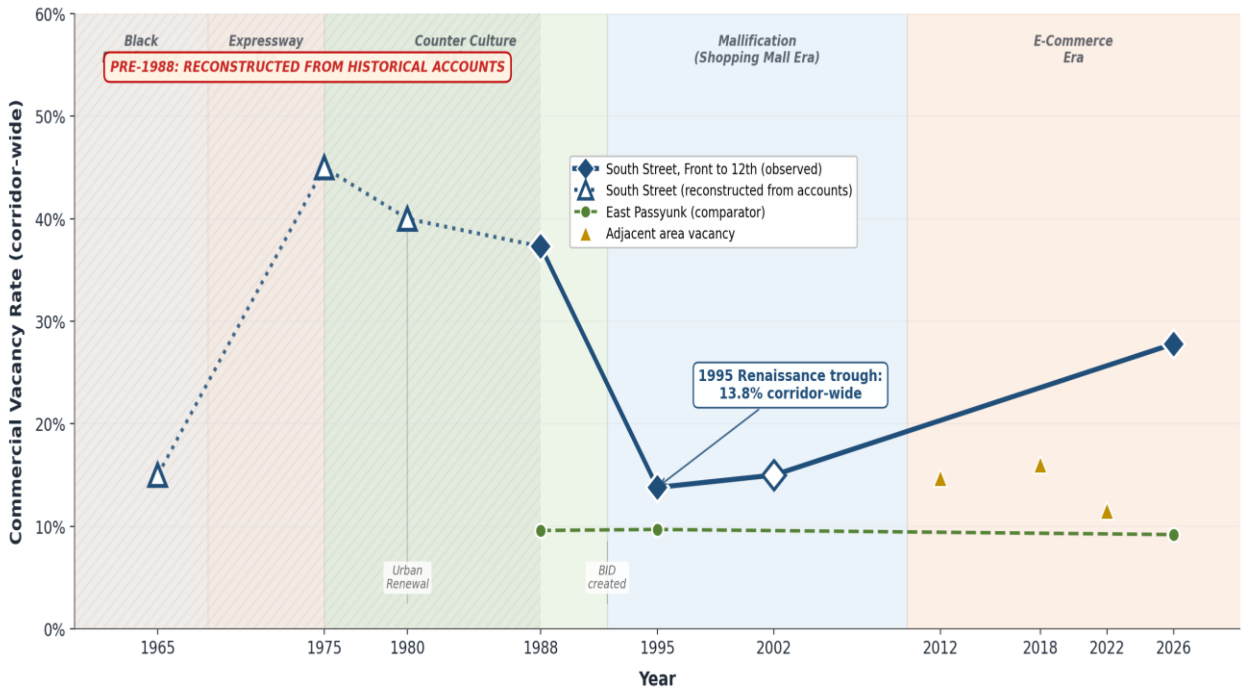
Source: Author's 2026 field survey. Percentages for Longterm vacant calculated against active commercial parcels on each block (occupied plus vacant). Tenant-type shares (National chain, Metro/Regional chain, Outdoor footprint, Smoke/AFS) calculated against occupied tenants only. Business Segments counts the distinct segment categories present on the block.

5.7 Tracing South Street, 1965-2026

This section started by referencing interviewees describing South Street as having felt emptier and less lively than it has in decades. To test that theory a longitudinal dataset of some sort is needed to track the conditions, vibrancy and vacancy over the decades. The figures that follow stitch a 60-year curve together by blending both historic archival references, historical datasets, and this 2026 study.

Six different sources reconstruct the curve. They span planning inventories, consulting reports, academic scholarship, newspaper retrospectives, local journalism, and the 2026 field survey conducted for this thesis. No single source spans 60 years. This is an attempt to triangulate them all together to produce a historical curve.

Figure 5.10. Commercial Vacancy on the South Street Corridor, 1965 to 2026.
Corridor-wide commercial vacancy on South Street between Front and 12th Streets, with East Passyunk Avenue plotted as a comparator.



Source: Author's analysis. Corridor-wide rates derived from Philadelphia City Planning Commission (1989, 1996), Econsult (2009), and the author's 2026 field survey. Adjacent area vacancy benchmarks from Brin (Hidden City, 2012), WHYY (2018), and SSHD board minutes (2022). Reconstructed periods (1965, 1975, 1980) draw on Hodos (2010) and the Philadelphia Inquirer's Crosstown retrospective (2025). The 1988 and 1995 corridor-wide values are weighted averages of PCPC subcorridors covering Front to 8th and 8th to 12th. The 1988 inventory used a gross-leasable-area basis while the 1996 Update used a unit-count basis, so the apparent 1988-to-1995 drop reflects both real recovery and a methodology change.

What that curve shows is a corridor running roughly 30-year cycles, with two complete rises and falls since 1965 and a projected five more years of decline before the next floor. Both prior low points came with external interferences that ultimately shaped each recovery. The 1960s low arrived under the threat of the Crosstown Expressway, which mobilized the residents and artists who built the Renaissance. The 1980s low followed the end of the Renaissance era and decades of suburban flight that had hollowed out the daytime audience. The 1990s recovery was anchored by the long-delayed residential return to Society Hill, Queen Village, and Bella Vista, where urban renewal in the 1960s had taken 20 years to change the surrounding neighborhood demographics, paired with heavy development investments in the mid-1980s that brought national retail rapidly to South Street. The current decline started during the E-Commerce era and accelerated with COVID-19. According to history, the data suggests the market will transform South Street within the next decade. The question is how, and whether the market should be left to do that work on its own.

Chapter VI: Analysis

The fieldwork laid out a corridor sitting near a 30-year low on the metrics that define a neighborhood commercial corridor's health: occupancy, foot traffic, storefront condition, and tenant mix. What the data does not yet do is name the forces producing those numbers. That is what this chapter is for.

The 2026 fieldwork confirms the three structural problems named in the abstract and Chapter I, and shows how they feed each other into a self-reinforcing doom loop.

Governance Gridlock is the institutional layer, where decisions get stuck. Dysfunctional Ownership is the capital layer, where buildings sit frozen. Demand Failure is the customer layer, where the audience the corridor depends on has either aged out or stopped showing up. This section takes them in that order.

6.1 Governance Gridlock

Governance on South Street is not one body making decisions. It is four players with overlapping power and no shared agenda. The Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA) gives the final yes or no on any project that needs an exception to the zoning code. The Registered Community Organizations (RCOs), several neighborhood groups with overlapping turf, vet proposals before the city acts and can line up for or against a change. The Business Improvement District (BID) runs the corridor day to day, from cleaning to events to marketing. The Department of Commerce controls the grant money and decides which corridors qualify for it. No single one is in charge, and any of them can stall a project, so anyone trying to build, open, or change something on South Street has to clear several gatekeepers at once

The result is paralysis on initiatives that on any other corridor would not be controversial. Interviewees described little to no pushback between the East Passyunk BID and its surrounding RCOs, while consensus on South Street is rare on almost any subject.

The four bodies impose different regulatory treatments on the two corridors. South Street's four CMX classifications across 11 blocks (Figure 5.2) and its six to seven /CTR corridor-shaping overlays (Table 3.5) contrast with East Passyunk's single CMX-2.5 designation and zero overlays. A tenant scouting two storefronts a few doors apart on South Street can find one that permits the business by-right and another that routes the same use through a ZBA variance (Section 5.3). One local brewer confirmed this in interview, choosing to open outside the South Street district rather than navigate the variance path as a new operator.

South Street's five RCOs are far more pressure points than East Passyunk's two, and the corridor's only BID is itself one of the five (Section 3.5). Philadelphia's councilmanic prerogative means a project facing coordinated RCO opposition almost never survives a contested ZBA vote.[84] Those pressure points fire consistently against new proposals because of a demographic mismatch between the corridor and the neighborhoods that surround it. South Street's surrounding tracts skew high-income, owner-occupied, and family-oriented (Table 3.1), while the corridor's commercial mix skews value-tier, late-night, and in-and-out frequency (Tables 5.4 through 5.7). The RCOs represent the neighborhoods, not the corridor, so most of what existing operators propose looks like more of what the residents already do not want. This is the *Neighborhood Commercial Corridor Paradox*, where a corridor and its surrounding neighborhood have drifted so far apart in identity that the residents who live next to it no longer see themselves in it, defying the typical pattern where a corridor grows alongside its neighborhood.

The default veto culture compounds beyond storefront-level decisions. Capital projects stall and operators take their plans elsewhere. A multi-residential project just a block over on Bainbridge spent 15 years in RCO and zoning fights before breaking ground.[85] New construction on South Street itself has fallen every decade since the 1960s, from 24 parcels in the 1960s and 70s, to 18 in the 80s and 90s, to 13 in the 2000s and 2010s, to zero so far in the 2020s (Appendix Figure A.1). The most recent debate and delay on the corridor? A pet supply store.[86]

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[84] The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Philadelphia's Councilmanic Prerogative* (2015)
[85] Author’s interview with multiple sources, April 2026.
[86] Author’s interview with SSHD, April 2026.

The corridor's operational arm started 2026 from a position of weakness. SSHD was effectively insolvent as of 2024, with Inquirer reporting that year disclosing roughly $20,000 in operating cash against a $930,000 annual budget, an outstanding credit card balance, and most of the prior year operating without an approved budget.[87] Eleanor Ingersoll took over as executive director, commissioned an outside audit, canceled the South Street Festival, and cut sanitation services to start rebuilding the balance sheet. SSHD has been forced to focus on statutory responsibilities at the expense of the business development, grant making, and capital projects the surrounding neighbors want from a BID. EPABID runs a similarly thin budget, one of the smallest of any BID in Philadelphia, but PARC handles the real estate and capital projects the BID budget cannot reach (Section 3.4). South Street has no equivalent.[88]

The Department of Commerce offers no safety net either. Its targeted programs are restricted to LMI-classified corridors, and South Street sits inside Queen Village, one of Philadelphia's highest-income neighborhoods (Section 3.6, Table 3.4).[89] Citywide programming alone is too small to move the needle on a corridor at South Street's scale. On South Street, the business district and the neighborhood organizations both want a healthier corridor, yet they spend more energy fighting each other than working together on improvements. The result is gridlock, and the corridor keeps sliding while both sides hold their ground.

6.2 Dormant real estate ownership

The capital investments on South Street have stopped functioning the way a healthy corridor's does. Buildings that should be leased, traded, or improved are sitting still, and new capital that should flow in to replace dormant ownership has halted. Section 5.3 laid out 155 of South Street's 271 parcels have been identified as being passive inheritance, with the holding pattern splitting between recent transfers and long-tenured holds leaving very few engaged

[87] Jake Blumgart and Ryan Briggs, "Financial Mismanagement at South Street Headhouse District Jeopardizes Revitalization Efforts," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 2024.
[88] Author's interview with Katie Hanford, Executive Director, East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District, March 2026.
[89] Author's interview with senior staff member, Philadelphia Department of Commerce, April 2026. Interviewee requested anonymity.

owners in the middle that signal active capital (Figure 5.4). What's more, the buildings on those parcels are deteriorating, with half of South Street's CMX parcels recording a new L&I violation since 2023 (Figure 5.5). New construction has fallen each decade since the 1960s, from 24 buildings in the 60s and 70s to 18 in the 80s and 90s to 13 in the 2000s and 2010s to zero in the past six years (Appendix Figure A.1).

Two groups of owners hold South Street's capital in place. The first camp is the long-tenured holders, who inherited or bought decades ago and whose residential cashflow from the apartments above make the ground-floor vacancy painless. With no pressure to lease the storefront, the building falls into disrepair, and the cost to bring it back climbs each year. By the time a prospective tenant appears, restoring the space can run $30,000 to $150,000.[90] A change of use also triggers an L&I inspection that surfaces previously unpermitted bathrooms, HVAC, wiring, and sprinklers, costs that fall on the incoming tenant rather than the owner.[91] Philadelphia's Storefront Improvement Program caps at $10,000 per single property and $15,000 per corner property, a fraction of what these conversions require.[92] Axelrod, the corridor's largest landlord, and the bank that took Abbotts Square after Eric Blumenfeld's sheriff sale both anchor this camp.[93]

Because neglect has driven vacancy up and conditions down across the corridor, the market for South Street leasing has downshifted. The second camp of stuck capital are recent buyers, who acquired during the pre-COVID market peak when conditions had a moment of recoverability. These owners are holding out for pre-COVID rents that the current market no longer supports, leaving storefronts vacant rather than adjusting prices to meet today's demand. Lowering rent depresses both annual income and resale value, so they hold out rather than realize a loss on what they paid or succumb to renting to the next bidder, often a 'nuisance business'. The

[90] Author's interview with a Managing Director of a Philadelphia based real estate brokerage, April 2026. The estimated $30,000 to $50,000 for basic build-out; the upper end of the range reflects L&I-triggered remediation costs detailed below.
[91] Ibid.
[92] City of Philadelphia, Department of Commerce, "Storefront Improvement Program."
[93] Author's interview with a South Street business owner, April 2026. Interviewee requested anonymity.

corner unit at 500 South Street is a visible example - a recently built building with good bones and high rental occupancy, now a homeless encampment in its storefront area, waiting for a tenant the corridor has not produced.

All NCCs have turnover, but long-term vacancy on a corridor's most valuable real estate is the bellwether of a down cycle. South Street has 9 of its 27 anchor parcels sitting vacant, defined as corner properties or lots of 10,000 square feet or more. Anchor parcels are typically the price floors, the visibility magnets, and the tenant draws that define a corridor; it is where several of the historical live venues referenced earlier existed. Instead the Ripley building at 1001-51, Abbotts Square at 200-210 Lombard, 101 South, 347 South, 443-445 South, 500 South, 537-39 South, 645-47 South, 1001-51 South all await a new lease. Whether an owner holds because vacancy is painless or because selling short means a loss, the corridor pays the same price, frozen capital, decaying buildings, and a third of its anchors empty.

6.3 Declining pedestrian demand

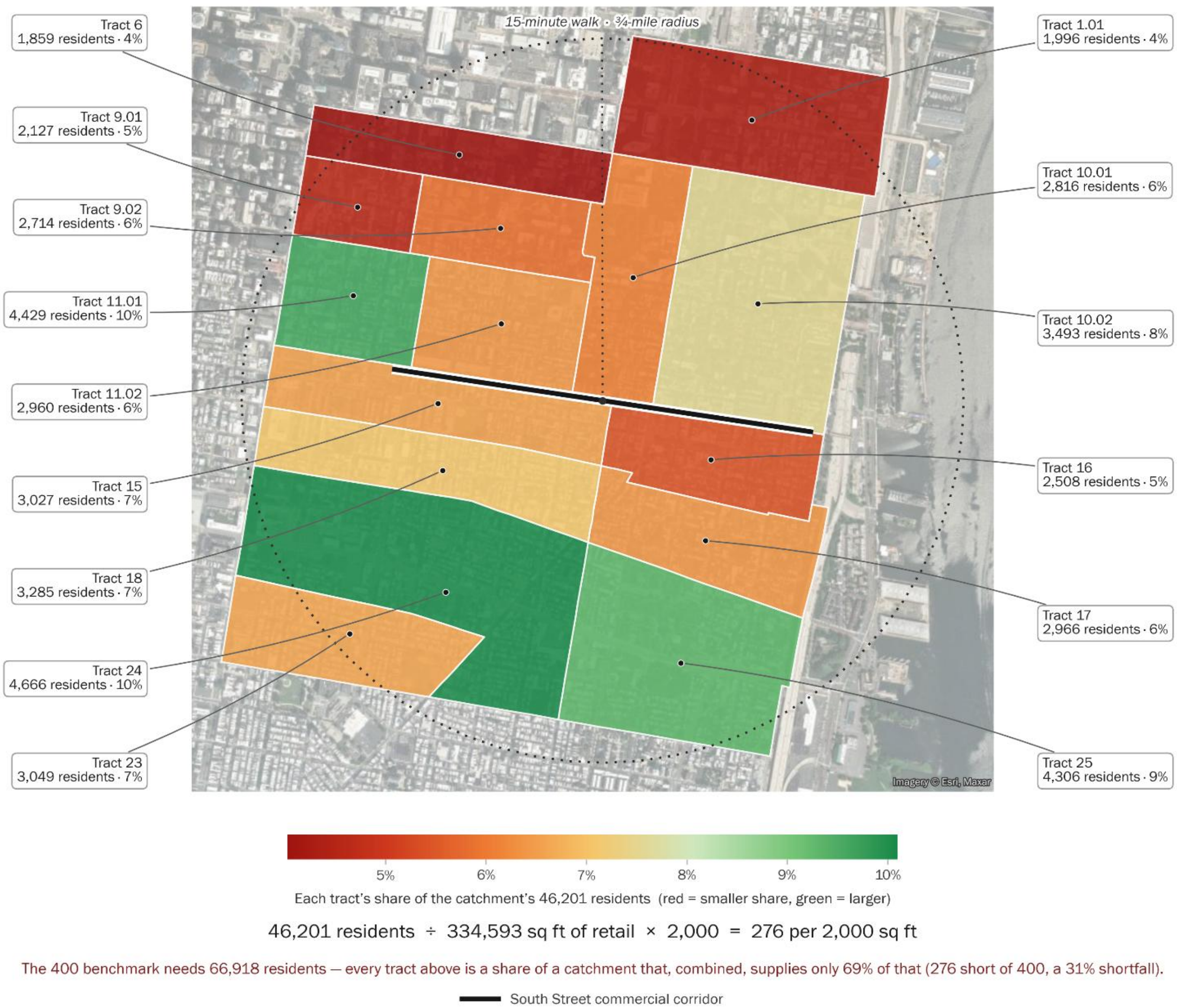
Even with governance and ownership held constant, South Street cannot run on its surrounding neighborhood alone. The residents who live within a 15-minute walk have aged in place across five decades, and the rental supply that would have brought in the next generation of corridor users has stayed flat since 1970. Population density around the corridor now sits below the threshold most small retailers need to survive on weekday business. To compensate, the corridor imports customers from elsewhere in the city and the region, pulling them in through nightlife, takeout, and car-oriented destinations. That import strategy is what makes the corridor episodic rather than habitual, and it has left South Street structurally misaligned with the surrounding neighborhood the city expects to feed it.

Section 3.3 establishes the age divergence. South Street's surrounding neighborhood aged by nearly 10 years on the median across the 50-year window while East Passyunk's got younger, and East Passyunk's renter base grew by 40% while South Street's stayed flat. The two corridors started from a similar age demographic baseline in the 1990s and ran in opposite directions over the past three decades.

What follows from that divergence is a structural under-supply of the daily customer most South Street retailers were built around. Nearly every long-tenured stakeholder interviewed for this study described the missing cohort as the young people who filled the 1980s corridor every weeknight.[94] The math behind this is well-documented. Conrad Kickert's research on commercial corridors shows they decline when the residents nearby fall below the density small businesses need to survive.[95] Alex Balloon, who runs East Passyunk's revitalization corporation, put a number on it in an interview for this study: about 400 residents for every 2,000 square feet of retail.[96] South Street's neighborhood does not produce that ratio. The catchment within a 15-minute walk supplies 276 residents per 2,000 square feet of active retail, 31% short of the benchmark.

[94] Synthesized from interviews conducted for this study with over eight people, 2026.
[95] Kickert and vom Hofe, "Critical Mass Matters," 366–387.
[96] Alex Balloon, Executive Director, Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation, and Job Itzkowitz, Executive Director Old City District, in discussion with the author, March 2026, Philadelphia, PA.

Figure 6.1. South Street's surrounding density, 2026.
The 46,201 residents within a 15-minute walk supply 276 per 2,000 square feet of active retail, 31% below the 400-resident benchmark.



Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019-2023 5-Year Estimates (Table B01003); Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records (2026); and the author's 2026 field survey of active CMX parcels on South Street between Front and 12th. Active retail floorplate (334,593 sq ft) estimated from ground floor area weighted by building-type retail share. Catchment defined as the 13 census tracts within a 15-minute walk (approximately three-quarter-mile radius) of the South Street corridor's midpoint: tracts 1.01, 6, 9.01, 9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.01, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, and 25. Critical mass benchmark of 400 residents per 2,000 square feet of active retail drawn from interview with Alex Balloon, Executive Director, Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation, 2026. Tract shading represents each tract's share of the catchment's total population.

Philadelphia practitioners describe the same gap in their own terms. Job Itzkowitz, executive director of the Old City District, put it this way in an interview for this study: "People in Queen Village and Society Hill might complain that there's nothing for them on South Street. I say, well, there's nothing for them on South Street because there's not enough of them. You need to have double or triple the population."[97] Figure 6.1 puts the formal shortfall at about a one-third the required density for expected corridor health, so the data confirms Itzkowitz's instinct.

A corridor below critical mass has three responses. It can contract its retail stock by converting empty storefronts into housing. It can do nothing and let the economic doom loop continue, with vacancies rising and conditions decaying each year. Or it can make structural changes that allow the corridor to evolve. This study seeks to chart a future path for South Street that balances reinvention with preservation of the historic identity, cultural energy, and commercial diversity that made South Street one of Philadelphia's defining corridors.

[97] Job Itzkowitz, Executive Director, Old City District, in discussion with the author, April 2026, Philadelphia, PA.

Chapter VII: Discussion

This chapter lays out a four-part policy package for South Street. First, it recommends designating the corridor as a Pennsylvania Creative District paired with a city-level Cultural Corridor Overlay. Second, it proposes a South Street Revitalization Corporation. Third, it supports a CMX-3 upzone with pedestrian design standards. Fourth, it recommends phased pedestrianization of the 300 to 600 blocks.

Each step moves the needle on its own; none alone is enough. Without the full package, this study forecasts one of the following two failures for South Street. Either one, the *Neighborhood Commercial Corridor Paradox* keeps widening, and the corridor drifts further from the surrounding neighborhoods until residents abandon it entirely. Or two, residential conversion turns the corridor into just another residential street, and the cultural identity that made South Street a citywide draw disappears along the way. The following package is the recommendation for threading the needle and allowing the corridor to balance reinvention with preservation.

7.1 Proposal 1: Designate a Pennsylvania Creative District and adopt a Cultural Corridor Overlay

The first step in the strategic plan pairs two instruments: a Pennsylvania Creative District designation at the state level and a South Street Cultural Corridor Overlay at the city level. The state designation, an application process administered by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, brings recognition, technical assistance, and up to $50,000 per year for five years in matched grant funding.[98] The city zoning overlay, aimed at being drafted into Chapter 14-500 of Philadelphia's zoning code, would bring enforceable land-use rules the state designation does

[98] Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, "Pennsylvania Creative Districts," accessed May 2026, https://www.pa.gov/agencies/coa/grants-and-loans/creative-districts.

not.[99] Together they give South Street both a marketable, cultural identity and the legal guardrails for business attraction.

This is the first piece of the package because identity protection sets the conditions for everything else. Without it, the capital, zoning, and street-level moves that follow risk producing a corridor that recovers economically but loses the character of being a corridor intended for all Philadelphians. The most recent example of this happening is Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts on Broad Street. South Broad Street has no zoning protection for the arts, so when the University of the Arts went bankrupt in 2024, many of its buildings including Hamilton Hall and the Arts Bank converted into residential apartments.[100]

The Cultural Corridor Overlay aims to bring back legacy uses South Street has largely lost since the late 1990s: comedy clubs, jazz clubs, small ticket venues, art studios, and pop-ups. Other national precedents such as Austin and Seattle layered their overlays onto existing cultural areas to protect art use venues from displacement. South Street, in contrast, has hollowed out to a single large venue, the Theatre of the Living Arts, its last continuously operating live-entertainment anchor – though several art studios still exist along the corridor including Isaiah Zagar’s glass mosaics. There is an in-state precedent for a culture revitalization-type overlay with the Pittsburgh Cultural District, a 14-block stretch of downtown that the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust transformed beginning in 1984 from a red-light district of adult theaters and vacant buildings into a major regional cultural anchor.[101] Important to note regarding South Street, the overlay is designed to lower regulatory friction rather than add to it. Most Chapter 14-500 overlays add height caps, use prohibitions, and control areas; this one would offer by-right approvals for cultural uses, floor-area bonuses for adaptive reuse of historic entertainment buildings, and other economic incentives (see Table 7.1).

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[99] The Philadelphia Code, Title 14, "Zoning and Planning," Chapter 14-500, "Overlay Zoning Districts," accessed May 2026,.
[100] Saffron, "Mayor Parker can help keep the arts in the Avenue of the Arts."
[101] Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, "Background and History," accessed November 2026, https://trustarts.org/pct_home/about/history. The Trust was founded in 1984 by H.J. "Jack" Heinz II to revitalize a 14-block district through theater restoration, real estate acquisition, and public-private partnership with the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh and the Heinz Endowments.

The overlay incentivizes rebuilds and adaptive reuse to fix the corridor's decaying supply. Paired with Creative District grants and cultural-use incentives, it also boosts demand for the kinds of businesses that keep visitors lingering, not the takeout and weekend-nightclub mix that dominates today (see Tables 5.3 and 5.6). Done well, the corridor would shift toward ticketed entertainment, artists and makers, and sit-down restaurants. Over 90% of stakeholders described recovery the same way, yearning for a return to "what South Street once was": the arts, entertainment, and show-based economy of Ripley's Music Hall, JC Dobbs, and the Laff House.

Operationally, the overlay would be proposed to be drafted into Chapter 14-500 and applied to South Street frontages from Front to 12th Street. The proposed design takes the most applicable use-cases from other zoning overlays already in force in Austin, Seattle, and Chicago into a single package adoptable under existing Philadelphia city authority, with no new state legislation required. Table 7.1 summarizes the package by policy dimension.

Table 7.1. South Street Cultural Corridor Overlay incentives by policy dimension synthesized from similar overlays adoptable under existing Philadelphia city authority.

Dimension	What the overlay unlocks	Modeled on
Zoning & Land Use	By-right approval for cultural uses (performance venues, galleries, artist studios, maker retail, event assembly facilities); FAR exemptions and height bonuses for arts space and adaptive reuse of designated character buildings; reduced parking minimums; pedestrian frontage standards (60% ground-floor transparency, primary entrances on South Street, no auto-oriented uses)	Seattle Pike/Pine Conservation Overlay (SMC 23.73); Austin Density Bonus Creative Spaces (Ord. 20241010-034); Chicago Pedestrian Street (§17-3-0500)
Tax & Cash Benefits	Pennsylvania Creative District grant funding (up to $50,000 per year for five years, 1:1 matched); local Cultural Corridor Grant Fund for storefront rehab, cultural buildouts, and creative-business launch capital, deployed via the proposed South Street Revitalization Corporation (Step 2); fee-in-lieu mechanism allowing larger redevelopment to fund creative-space preservation in lieu of on-site provision; LERTA property tax abatement for rehabilitation of qualifying structures within the overlay (up to 10 years); permit fee waivers for cultural-use buildouts and adaptive reuse projects	PA Council on the Arts Creative Districts program; Chicago Neighborhood Opportunity Fund; Austin DBCS fee-in-lieu mechanism; Pennsylvania LERTA (Act 76 of 1977)
Neighborhood Protection	Sound assessment required for new residential or hotel within 600 ft of an outdoor venue or 300 ft of a performance venue; agent-of-change nuisance presumption for compliant existing venues; replacement requirement when redevelopment removes a qualifying creative space	Austin Sound Assessment Ordinance (Ord. 20240912-005); Austin DBCS replacement rule

Source: Author's synthesis of Austin Density Bonus Creative Spaces (Ord. 20241010-034) and Sound Assessment Ordinance (Ord. 20240912-005); Seattle Pike/Pine Conservation Overlay (SMC 23.73); Chicago Pedestrian Street designation (§17-3-0500) and Neighborhood Opportunity Fund; Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Creative Districts program; Pennsylvania Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance Act (Act 76 of 1977).

The vision is a corridor that surrounding neighbors visit during the week and that draws Philadelphians citywide for ticketed entertainment, gallery hops, and maker markets on weekends. The demand is already proven. A South Philadelphia developer interviewed for this study pointed to the Bok Building near East Passyunk. It has a waiting list for makers, solopreneurs, and small creative businesses, all looking for affordable production and retail space they cannot find anywhere else in Philadelphia.[102] Katie Hanford at EPABID, and a musician, noted that South Street is one of the last continuous live-entertainment corridors in Philadelphia

[102] Author interview with a South Philadelphia developer, April 21, 2026.

between Center City and the Sports Complex, a regional position no other corridor in the city occupies.[103]

Future state legislation could extend it further with a Pennsylvania analogue to Maryland's artist-income tax exemption or a venue-operating tax credit similar to other A&E district programs nationwide.[104] Those asks are longer-horizon and would require an operating team with the bandwidth and remit to focus on lobbying, property acquisition, capital deployment, and grant administration.

7.2 Proposal 2: Establish a South Street Revitalization Corporation

The second proposal is to establish a South Street Revitalization Corporation (SSRC), a mission-driven nonprofit built to acquire property, deploy capital, and administer the grants the Creative District designation unlocks. East Passyunk's Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation (PARC) is the closest local precedent. PARC owns ten properties along the avenue including public parks, retail and rental tenants, and funds the daily sanitation work the BID's budget cannot reach on its own (Section 3.4). The SSRC adapts that operating logic to South Street's scale and conditions. That requires a balance sheet large enough to take on long-vacant storefronts and a remit broad enough to handle the grant flows the Creative District designation triggers.

The SSRC would mirror PARC's legal form. A Pennsylvania 501(c)(3) parent sits on top, with property-holding LLCs underneath that hold title to each building. Governance would follow PARC's rules. Those include a small fiduciary board, annual audit, and a staff with urban planning experience. One idea surfaced during an interview for this study; the corporation could add a creative co-op layer where business owners and residents' co-own portions of the real-estate portfolio. That distributes upside to the businesses who may consider choosing South Street

[103] Author interview with Katie Hanford, Executive Director, East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District, March 2026.
[104] Maryland State Arts Council, "Arts & Entertainment Districts," accessed May 2026, https://msac.org/programs/arts-entertainment-districts.

and creates a second source of capital beyond grants and philanthropy. Kensington Corridor Trust is the closest structural precedent for this kind of community-control layer.[105]

Launch requires roughly $3 to $5 million in philanthropic seed capital across the first 24 months for staffing, predevelopment, and grant administration. Another $3 to $6 million in patient debt would acquire its first portfolio of two to three properties.[106] In addition to private investors, additional local funding opportunities may include William Penn for public-space capital around the arts, Knight for creative-economy work, LISC and PIDC for corridor lending and acquisition debt, and the Department of Commerce for corridor contracts. The SSRC should operate parallel to SSHD under a written memorandum of understanding, not merged with it. SSHD continues its statutory work on cleaning, marketing, and events.

The SSRC addresses the corridor's real estate market failure and crumbling infrastructure directly (Sections 5.3, 6.2). Half of the CMX parcels have logged a new L&I violation since 2023, and 155 of 271 parcels sit in a passive inheritance pattern with absent owners. The Storefront Improvement Program caps at $10,000 per property, a fraction of the $30,000 to $150,000 rehabilitation most spaces require. That capital gap is the largest reason South Street's worst buildings stay unleased.

The SSRC also reshapes the corridor's tenant mix. A PARC-style steward can vet tenants for co-tenancy and trip-chaining, pulling in the operators the corridor needs to raise visitor frequency.[107] It would have the precision prospecting capacity to attract, for example, from the waitlist for the Bok Building documented in Section 7.1. Taken a step further, the SSRC could begin to offer a co-op layer that would let tenants like buy into an SSRC building as part-owners.

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[105] *KCT structural precedent.* Drexel Nowak Metro Finance Lab case study on Kensington Corridor Trust, kctphilly.org.
[106] Author's analysis, benchmarked against publicly available IRS Form 990 filings for Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation, 2020-2025 (revenue $1.13M in 2020 to $1.83M in 2025), accessed via ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer, https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/232973751.
[107] Alex Balloon interview, 2026.

With competitive financing, a $1 million mortgage on a typical South Street property is roughly apples-to-apples with what a Bok tenant already pays each month.[108]

The SSRC puts mission-driven ownership and patient capital behind a corridor that has for decades been underinvested. With it, South Street gets the institutional muscle to take on absent owners and restore the corridor's worst buildings, all while stewarding the Creative District vision to bring more arts and culture back to the corridor. But a revitalization corporation cannot realistically buy enough property to fix the corridor's 30% vacancy challenge on its own. The corridor needs other interventions that pull private capital back in. The third proposal offers more flexibility for what private investors can build on South Street.

7.3 Proposal 3: Upzone the corridor to CMX-3 with pedestrian design standards

The third proposal is to upzone the entire South Street corridor to CMX-3, replacing the current patchwork of five zones with one uniform code from Front to 12th Street. East Passyunk is the closest local precedent. It runs a single CMX-2.5 zone across nearly its entire corridor (Section 3.8). That predictability is what tenants, lenders, and neighbors need to lower risk for capital commitment. CMX-3 is already the corridor's single largest zone (Section 3.7), so the proposal extends what already exists rather than introducing something new.

The upzone fixes two problems for South Street. The first is a housing supply shortage. South Street already runs below a healthy residential density (Figure 6.1). On top of that, the younger generation who once powered the corridor's visitation cannot afford to live nearby anymore. South Street's surrounding neighborhood has aged in place over 50 years while the rental stock has barely moved (Section 3.3, Figures 3.4 and 3.5). CMX-3 lifts the height and density limits that have kept new rental housing from getting built. The second is the zoning code itself. South Street runs five base zones across 11 blocks, so the same business is by-right at one address and routed through the ZBA two doors down (Section 6.1). Uniform CMX-3 removes

[108] Author's calculations based on available public rental prices of the Bok Building, 2026.

that obstacle and grants more flexibility up and down the corridor for small businesses to get up and running faster.

Single-stair reform is a complementary tool to unlock density on small urban lots, used by other cities including Seattle since 1977, New York City since 1938, Honolulu since 2012, and Colorado and Tennessee since 2024.[109] Pennsylvania today requires two stairs for buildings higher than three floors. A two-stair requirement eats most of the floor plate on a narrow lot, which applies to the overwhelming majority of South Street's historic buildings (Table 5.1). That means upzoning to CMX-3's height allowance cannot translate into real added units without developers purchasing and knocking down multiple buildings. The Pennsylvania Uniform Construction Code is set at the state level, which puts the reform outside corridor zoning but inside the scope of what an institutional advocate can push for. The SSRC is well-positioned to lobby for it on the corridor's behalf.

The Cultural Corridor Overlay pairs with this initiative because it attaches density bonuses to specific kinds of development. A project that includes ground-floor arts, studio, or performance space earns extra height, FAR, or tax incentives. So does a project that preserves a designated character building. The mechanism turns the upzone into a filter on who builds and what gets built. The SSRC sits in the middle as the entity that administers the Creative District grants and stewards the cultural-use commitments over time. Density still arrives. It just arrives in buildings that protect the corridor's character.

The CMX-3 upzone does not have to produce generic apartment buildings. Under the Cultural Corridor Overlay (Section 7.1), developers who include ground-floor arts, studio, or performance space earn extra height, more units, or property tax breaks. A developer who saves a designated character building earns the same. The SSRC (Section 7.2) administers the Creative District grants and tracks that the arts space promised in year one is still an arts space in year 10.

[109] Pew Charitable Trusts, "States Advance Single-Stairway Reforms to Expand Housing," November 4, 2025.

The upzone makes density possible, the overlay decides what kind, and the SSRC keeps it that way over time. Density and newbuilds still arrive, just in characteristics that keep South Street behaving like South Street.

7.4 Proposal 4: Pedestrianize the 300 to 600 blocks

The fourth proposal is a phased pedestrianization of South Street's 300 to 600 blocks, with a recommendation for capital infrastructure rather than police barricades. This would mean a capital investment in the streetscape of this corridor to install automated retractable bollards that close the street to vehicles, to start, from roughly 7pm to 1am, Thursday through Sunday. In addition, planters, lighting, and built-in outdoor seating should be installed to invite visitors to stay a little longer along the corridor..

If successful, the long-term goal would be full-time closure on the model of Larimer Square in Denver, a one-block historic dining street closed to cars since 2020, or Stone Street in Lower Manhattan, a two-block historic corridor that has done the same since 2000.[110][111] The phased evening approach has its own precedents. Baltimore's Fells Point ran similar Thursday-through-Sunday evening closures to support outdoor dining on a historic Belgian block street.[112] Among large American cities, Philadelphia is one of the few without a fully pedestrianized commercial corridor.[113] Reading Terminal Market's $1 million Filbert Street transformation is the closest local capital model. New York's Times Square plaza, completed in 2009, kept 84% more people in the corridor after vehicles came off.[114]

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[110] City and County of Denver, *Denver Moves: Downtown — Larimer Street Bikeway & Two-Way Conversion* (Denver: Department of Transportation and Infrastructure, 2022 plan amendment), https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/v/2/doti/documents/programsservices/denver-moves-downtown/larimer-street-bikeway.pdf.
[111] Alliance for Downtown New York, "How the Alliance Turned Stone Street into One of the Most Popular Streets in Lower Manhattan," April 28, 2025, https://downtownny.com/news/adny-30-stone-street/.
[112] Baltimore City Department of Transportation, "Fells Point Outdoor Dining Closures," June 25, 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/fells-point-to-close-these-streets-to-pedestrians-only-this-weekend-june-25-28/.
[113] Author's analysis. Among large American cities, fully pedestrianized commercial corridors include Denver's 16th Street and Larimer Square, New York's Stone Street, Boston's Downtown Crossing, Pittsburgh's Market Square, Boulder's Pearl Street Mall, Charlottesville's Downtown Mall, Burlington's Church Street Marketplace, Chicago's Fulton Market, Portland Maine's Wharf Street and Madison's State Street.
[114] New York City Department of Transportation, *Green Light for Midtown Evaluation* (New York: NYC DOT, January 2010), https://nacto.org/wp-content/uploads/greenlight_midtown_nycdot.pdf.

Philadelphia has been testing pedestrianization with its West Walnut program for the past several years, and the results have been positive. West Walnut drew over 170,000 visitors and lifted participating-business sales by 38% on average during its car-free hours.[115] Over 10 stakeholders interviewed for this study supported pedestrianization but said South Street's past closures failed in execution. Those efforts relied on labor-intensive police barricades that made the corridor feel like a crime scene.[116] Police intervention is not just unpopular but expensive. A four-night police-managed closure would run roughly $1.3-$2 million per year in direct labor alone, which would exceed the one-time cost of installing the bollards within a few years.[117]

The intervention concentrates where the corridor is struggling the most (Section 5.6). The 300 to 600 blocks carry the corridor's worst vacancy and worst pedestrian conditions on the field survey (Appendix Figure A.8.), where three problems stack. First, late-night cars, ATVs, dirt bikes, drag racing, and cruising create a safety and noise environment that drives residents away, and removing them during the worst hours removes the threat without removing customers. Second, the corridor has no built-in public space, unlike East Passyunk, whose triangular intersections and mini-parks anchor its cafes and outdoor dining culture. Third, every time South Street closes for a fair, the corridor is packed. That is the foot traffic Section 6.3 says the corridor lacks, showing up whenever the cars come off.

The 300 to 600 blocks are South Street's hardest stretch, and they sit at its center. A failing center splits South Street into two disconnected stretches, and no Creative District grant, SSRC acquisition, or CMX-3 upzone on its own can re-knit the corridor while its middle stays abandoned. Pedestrianization fixes the middle at street level and acts as a magnet for foot traffic from all directions. Built-in seating, lighting, and outdoor space also signal that South Street is a

[115] Center City District, *Open Streets: Reimagining Streets for People in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Center City District, March 10, 2026), https://centercityphila.org/research-reports/open-streets-reimagining-streets-for-people-in-philadelphia.
[116] Composite citation from 2026 author interviews.
[117] Author's analysis using City of Austin, Austin Center for Events, *Event Planning Guide and FY 2025-2026 Special Events Fee Schedule*, https://www.austintexas.gov/ace/event-planning-guide.

place to stay, not a corridor to pass through. It becomes a street people visit for hours rather than one cars cut through in minutes.

7.5 The integrated package

No single proposal solves South Street on its own. The four work as an integrated package. Each one fixes a specific piece of the three structural problems Chapter VI laid out. Some carry the primary load on certain problems while playing supporting roles on others. Table 7.2 maps where each proposal does its work.

Table 7.2. The four proposals mapped against South Street's three structural problems.

Proposal	6.1 Governance Gridlock	6.2 Dormant Real Estate Ownership	6.3 Declining Pedestrian Demand
7.1 Pennsylvania Creative District + Cultural Corridor Overlay	Cultural identity ↑	Grant capital ↑	Visitors ↑
7.2 South Street Revitalization Corporation (SSRC)	Corridor stewardship ↑	Vacancy ↓	Business tenancy diversity ↑
7.3 CMX-3 Upzone with Pedestrian Design Standards	Zoning delays ↓	Private investment ↑	Rental supply ↑
7.4 Pedestrianize the 300 to 600 Blocks	Neighborhood visitation ↑	Property values ↑	Foot traffic ↑

Source: Author's synthesis.

7.6 Other levers interviewees raised

The four proposals are a package, not the whole toolkit. Interviewees raised other ideas worth recording, and many carry strong, empirically backed case studies from other cities. They sit outside the immediate package because they are longer political and infrastructure projects, the kind that take years and partners the corridor does not yet have. That does not make them less worthy. The strongest are collected here to mark the roads not taken and to argue that a few deserve the fight.

Connect South Street to the river. This is the lever interviewees returned to most, and it may be South Street's largest opportunity. Today the corridor is cut off from the Delaware by eight lanes of traffic, four on I-95 and four more on Columbus Boulevard. On the riverfront side, several projects are already underway adding foot traffic to the area: a park cap over Penn's Landing, a protected riverfront trail, and a battery-electric transit line under study for the Columbus Boulevard tracks.[118] Right now, only I-95 has a pedestrian crossing, the South Street Pedestrian Bridge built in the 1990s. A new bridge will extend that crossing over Columbus Boulevard, finally carrying walkers all the way to the river. The existing 1995 span, however, is aging and crumbling, often trash-filled, and cluttered by bulky mid-path sculptures that interrupt any smooth walk across it.

[118] Econsult Solutions, Inc., *DRWC and the Delaware River Waterfront's Transformation: Implementation of the Master Plan for the Delaware Waterfront, 2022 Economic Impact Assessment* (Philadelphia: Econsult Solutions, November 6, 2023).

Figure 7.1. The South Street Pedestrian Bridge.
Left: South Street looking east from the bridge cap over I-95. Right: View west across the bridge. The Penn's Landing arch in the foreground marks where the new planned extension bridge will merge to carry pedestrians over Columbus Boulevard.

Source: Author's photographs, 2026

What is missing, interviewees said, is the corridor reaching back to meet these projects, and two streetscape moves would go a long way. First, South Street should start raising capital now to redesign the aging, poorly maintained pathway from Front Street to the new crossing. Second, the corridor should install an eastbound bike lane that ties into the protected lane already working west of Broad. Together these give people a direct, multi-modal route between the corridor and the river, channeling waterfront foot and bike traffic onto South Street rather than leaving it stranded across the highway.

Streetscape activation. This came up more than almost any other idea, always with the same caution. Interviewees backed weekend closures dressed with planters, seating, and programming, not the police-heavy barricades that made the street read like a crime scene in 2022.[119] Closing a wide, empty street without activation makes it feel worse, not better. Beyond pedestrianizing the 300 block, the corridor needs streetscape investment that activates it in smaller pockets too: planters, public seating, fountains, and other touches that give people a reason to stop and stay.

Recover the upside of appreciation. When an overlay or upzone lifts nearby values, almost all of that gain flows to whoever already owns the land. South Street could capture some of it instead. One approach is a land value tax, which returns a share of the public-created gain and can be directed toward maintenance, programming, or affordable space.[120] Another is a density bonus tied to the CMX-3 upzone in Proposal 3, where any project that takes the added height has to give something back to the public realm, whether a pocket park, a plaza, or streetscape investment along the corridor. Chicago does a version of this through its downtown density bonus, where developers pay for extra floor area and the money funds parks, streetscapes, and commercial corridors in other neighborhoods.[121]

Make vacancy cost something. Interviewees also wanted financial sticks to match the zoning carrots, like a vacancy fee tied to the remapping that would charge owners for leaving storefronts empty. The point is to make sitting on a dead space cost more than filling it.[122] Others cautioned against it, warning that the pressure pushes owners to fill space with any willing tenant rather than vetting for corridor character, which often lets in more of the unwanted business types South Street is already trying to limit.

[119] Multiple Author interviews, 2026.
[120] Laura Wolf-Powers, "Reclaim Value Capture for Equitable Urban Development," Metropolitics, May 28, 2019, https://metropolitics.org/Reclaim-Value-Capture-for-Equitable-Urban-Development.html.
[121] City of Chicago, "Neighborhood Opportunity Fund," Department of Planning and Development, accessed June 2026, https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/neighborhood-opportunity-fund0.html.
[122] Author's interviews, May 2026.

Refactor the Storefront Improvement Program (SIP). Real estate brokers and corridor managers said the current tools are too small. They argued the city's storefront-improvement grant should go deeper, putting larger dollars into fewer projects rather than spreading thin grants across many, since the current cap falls far short of what a real build-out costs.[123]

Activate empty storefronts with pop-ups. Interviewees pointed to pop-ups as the fastest way to fill dead space while longer fixes take hold. Short, flexible leases of a season or six months let a business test the corridor without a multi-year commitment, and let a landlord light a dark window in weeks instead of years.[11] A lit, occupied storefront draws foot traffic and signals momentum, and the ones that work often convert into permanent tenants. San Francisco's Vacant to Vibrant program shows the model, pairing short-term space with light grants and permitting help.[124]

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[123] Ibid.
[124] City and County of San Francisco, "Vacant to Vibrant," Office of Economic and Workforce Development, accessed June 2026.

Chapter VIII: Conclusion, Limitations, and Implications

This analysis set out to explain why South Street's corridor health has fallen toward a 30-year low, with commercial vacancy near a 30-year high. In a city of neighborhoods where most commercial corridors serve the streets around them, South Street is historically an exception. It draws local residents, Philadelphians from across the city, and visitors from beyond the region, across every income level, onto the same handful of blocks. That kind of corridor is rare in Philadelphia and rare among American cities, where most commercial streets reflect the income tier of the neighborhoods that border them. Preserving it is unusually difficult. Chapter V documented its structural distress through field survey, OPA records, and a comparison to East Passyunk. Chapter VI identified three structural problems behind the distress: governance gridlock, dormant real estate ownership, and declining pedestrian demand. Chapter VII proposed four interventions designed to work as an integrated package. None of the four solves South Street alone, but together they address all three problems and chart a path that balances reinvention with preservation.

The study has limitations worth naming. First, the analysis tilts toward South Street, with less depth on East Passyunk's history and on the corridor's pre-1960s past. The paper picks up the corridor's story in the 1960s and 1970s, after Urban Renewal had already reshaped its demographics. Time and the single-researcher format did not allow for the archival depth a longer history would require. Readers interested in the corridor's earlier decades and its racial history should consult W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), Gregory Heller's *Ed Bacon: Planning, Politics, and the Building of Modern Philadelphia* (2013), and Denise Scott Brown's writings on the Crosstown Expressway counter-proposal.

Second, the four proposals are vision-based recommendations rather than financial models. Each one should eventually carry a dedicated return on investment analysis that quantifies the capital required, the expected return, and the timeline for break-even. This thesis frames the strategic logic and comparative precedent but not that financial layer. The single-researcher format also carries inherent bias. The author lives within the corridor's catchment and brings a resident's perspective, which gave access to nuances an outside researcher would have missed but also introduced framing assumptions that two co-readers cannot fully correct.

Third, the study lacked direct visitation data. The analysis relied on business tenancy mix, field survey, and interviews to triangulate corridor demand, but did not have access to Placer.ai or comparable mobility data that would have shown who visits the corridor, when they visit, and which businesses produce the largest economic output. L&I records tracked property complaints and code enforcement, but the broader landscape of corridor-level crime, fraud, and other commercial impact measures remained outside the scope.

The findings have implications beyond South Street. The Chapter VI framework applies to other Philadelphia corridors facing similar pressures, including Frankford Avenue, South Broad Street, Germantown Avenue, and Lancaster Avenue. The four-proposal package could be adapted with corridor-specific calibration.

Two research directions emerge as natural successors. First, how are commercial corridors adapting to a world where most retail spending happens online? Which have made the shift, what does their tenant mix look like, and who is being left behind? Second, South Street's rare corridor type, where local, regional, and national draw intersect across every income level, deserves a study as a category in itself. Commercial corridors are evolving to compete in the future of work and the future economy. The next study worth writing is who they keep open for, and who they leave behind.

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Appendix

Appendix Table A.1. Demographic Comparison between South Street and East Passyunk by neighborhood, 2023.

	South Street			East Passyunk		
	Society Hill	Washington Sq West	Queen Village	Bella Vista	Passyunk Square	Pennsport
Total population	6,309	5,674	5,474	10,978	12,948	12,179
Total households	3,965	2,951	2,725	5,769	5,927	5,762
Median age (years)	57.5	35.3	34.3	35.1	37.8	36.0
Share under 18	7.1%	6.0%	18.1%	14.7%	14.6%	19.3%
Share aged 18 to 34	24.3%	42.4%	33.5%	33.6%	30.7%	27.0%
Share aged 35 to 64	28.8%	31.9%	39.0%	40.0%	41.3%	42.1%
Share aged 65 and over	39.8%	19.7%	9.4%	11.7%	13.5%	11.6%
Median household income (2020$)	$108,000	$95,700	$123,500	$98,100	$89,400	$71,200
Poverty rate	6.0%	9.6%	5.7%	5.8%	13.2%	17.9%
Adults 25+ with bachelor's degree or higher	83.1%	80.4%	85.2%	76.4%	62.3%	45.5%
White alone (non-Hispanic)	87.1%	70.8%	75.5%	73.2%	65.7%	56.2%
Black alone (non-Hispanic)	1.0%	5.6%	4.3%	10.7%	2.4%	10.3%
Asian alone (non-Hispanic)	8.6%	13.4%	3.3%	6.3%	15.2%	13.7%
Hispanic or Latino (any race)	2.0%	5.1%	3.0%	3.7%	10.3%	16.8%
Other or two or more races	1.3%	5.2%	13.8%	6.1%	6.5%	3.1%

	South Street			East Passyunk		
	Society Hill	Washington Sq West	Queen Village	Bella Vista	Passyunk Square	Pennsport
Family HH with children under 18 (% of total HH)	5.9%	5.8%	21.1%	18.8%	17.6%	27.4%
Non-family HH (proxy: single-person, % of total HH)	69.9%	56.6%	60.9%	58.3%	49.0%	52.8%
Owner-occupied share	61.8%	31.7%	57.0%	51.6%	60.7%	55.7%
Renter-occupied share	38.2%	68.4%	43.1%	48.4%	39.3%	44.3%
Median home value (2020$)	$445,800	$646,800	$570,100	$498,000	$356,200	$296,100

Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019–2023 5-Year Estimates, aggregated to neighborhoods on the "By Neighborhood" sheet. Bella Vista shown here covers only the South Street–side tracts (15, 18); a separate Bella Vista portion (tract 24) is included in the East Passyunk corridor totals. Pennsport shown here covers only the East Passyunk–side tracts (27.01, 28.01); the South Street–side tract (25) is not included in this column. Counts summed across tracts; shares computed as summed numerators over summed denominators. Median age weighted by population, median household income weighted by households, and median home value weighted by owner-occupied units. Dollar figures shown in 2020 dollars, deflated from 2023 dollars using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U. Non-family households (householders living alone or with non-relatives only) shown as the closest available proxy for single-person households.

Appendix Table A.2. Population and age, 1970–2020.

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
South Street						
Total population	25,526	22,183	24,161	23,289	25,836	30,155
Total households	9,331	10,822	12,959	13,019	13,683	15,632
Median age (years)	30.2	30.9	34.1	36.6	37.1	39.3
Share under 18	26.5%	18.6%	13.6%	10.2%	11.2%	13.2%
Share aged 18 to 34	29.0%	39.3%	39.3%	38.5%	38.5%	33.9%
Share aged 35 to 64	32.1%	30.2%	35.6%	39.1%	36.2%	34.6%

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Share aged 65 and over	12.4%	11.8%	11.5%	12.2%	14.1%	18.3%
East Passyunk						
Total population	33,410	26,879	23,617	24,154	25,689	26,957
Total households	8,900	10,427	10,095	10,112	10,845	11,883
Median age (years)	36.7	39.9	38.3	37.3	33.3	34.8
Share under 18	26.7%	20.6%	18.6%	20.9%	15.9%	16.3%
Share aged 18 to 34	21.4%	25.0%	26.8%	25.5%	36.3%	33.7%
Share aged 35 to 64	38.8%	36.3%	34.5%	36.7%	36.0%	37.4%
Share aged 65 and over	13.1%	18.1%	20.1%	16.9%	11.9%	12.6%

Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau decennial census data. 2010 and 2020 figures from the Decennial Census Demographic and Housing Characteristics file (Tables P1, P12, P20). 1970 through 2000 figures from the Longitudinal Tract Database (LTDB), Brown University (Logan, Xu, and Stults, 2014), which interpolates pre-2010 census data to 2010 tract boundaries. Median age figures for 1970 through 2000 estimated by linear interpolation within the median bracket from NHGIS detailed age tables (Table B57 for 1970 and 1980; Table CW3 for 1990 and 2000); 2010 and 2020 median age values drawn from American Community Survey Table B01002. The 1970 and 1980 median age estimates carry slightly wider source brackets than later decades and should be read as approximations. South Street values aggregate 9 tracts (9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25); East Passyunk values aggregate 6 tracts (23, 24, 27.01, 28.01, 28.02, 29). Counts summed across tracts; shares computed as summed numerators over summed denominators.

Appendix Table A.3. Economic profile, 1970–2020.

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
South Street						
Median household income (2020$)	$35,000	$43,200	$64,800	$71,900	$74,700	$95,400
Poverty rate	27.4%	27.2%	19.6%	16.4%	16.7%	7.8%
Adults 25+ with bachelor's or higher	14.2%	33.1%	45.9%	58.0%	63.6%	75.7%
East Passyunk						
Median household income (2020$)	$46,800	$36,500	$43,400	$40,200	$43,900	$72,600

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Poverty rate	16.3%	20.4%	18.8%	28.2%	23.7%	13.5%
Adults 25+ with bachelor's or higher	2.1%	6.3%	12.0%	16.8%	27.8%	52.4%

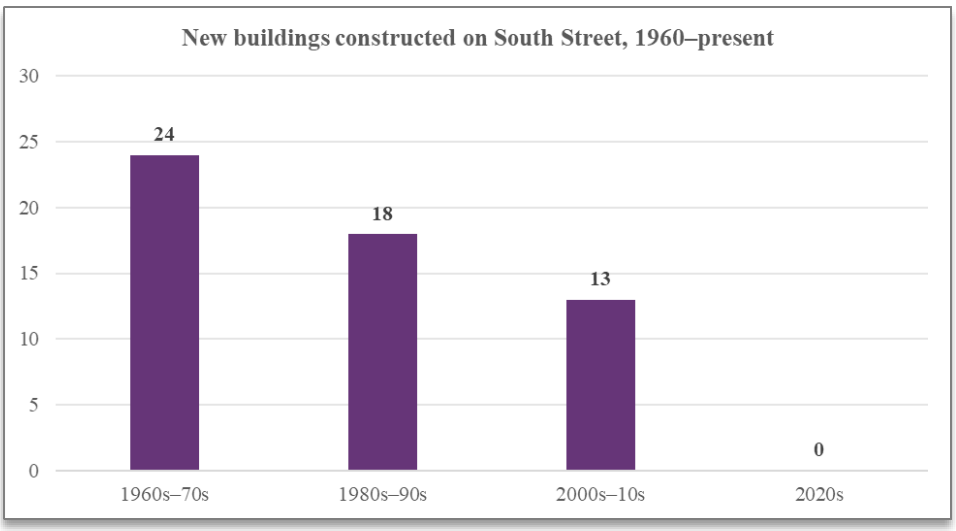
Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau decennial census data. 2010 and 2020 figures from the American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (Tables B19013 for median household income, B17001 for poverty, and B15003 for educational attainment), accessed through the Census API. 1970 through 2000 figures from the Longitudinal Tract Database (LTDB), Brown University (Logan, Xu, and Stults, 2014), which interpolates pre-2010 census data to 2010 tract boundaries. Median household income figures shown in 2020 dollars, deflated using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U. South Street values aggregate 9 tracts (9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25); East Passyunk values aggregate 6 tracts (23, 24, 27.01, 28.01, 28.02, 29). Median household income weighted by households; poverty rate and bachelor's degree share computed as summed numerators over summed denominators across tracts.

Appendix Table A.4. Household and tenure, 1970–2020.

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
South Street						
Family households	5,584	4,665	4,826	4,246	4,913	7,577
Non-family households	3,748	6,156	8,133	8,773	8,770	8,055
Owner-occupied share	24.2%	32.3%	39.7%	44.2%	47.6%	45.1%
Renter-occupied share	75.8%	67.7%	60.3%	55.8%	52.4%	54.9%
Median home value (2020$)	$114,700	$229,100	$362,900	$275,100	$521,500	$572,600
East Passyunk						
Family households	8,790	7,194	6,082	5,587	5,232	6,909
Non-family households	110	3,233	4,013	4,525	5,613	4,974
Owner-occupied share	66.8%	68.8%	68.4%	60.0%	54.3%	52.7%
Renter-occupied share	33.3%	31.2%	31.6%	40.1%	45.7%	47.3%
Median home value (2020$)	$58,400	$66,400	$106,600	$92,100	$262,200	$329,500

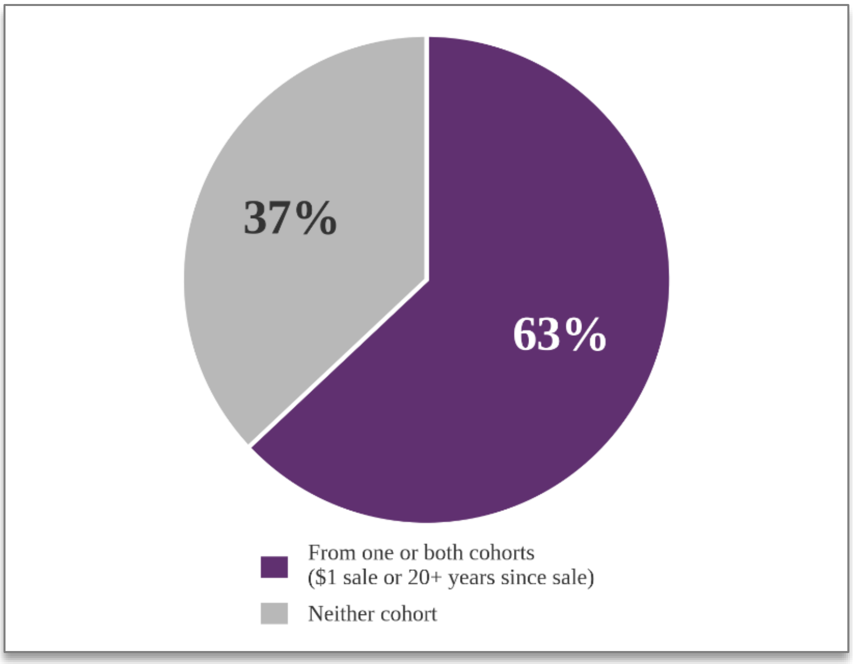
Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census Bureau decennial census data. 2010 and 2020 figures from the Decennial Census Demographic and Housing Characteristics file for household type and tenure (Tables P20 and H4), and from the American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates for median home value (Table B25077). 1970 through 2000 figures from the Longitudinal Tract Database (LTDB), Brown University (Logan, Xu, and Stults, 2014), which interpolates pre-2010 census data to 2010 tract boundaries. Median home value figures shown in 2020 dollars, deflated using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U. South Street values aggregate 9 tracts (9.02, 10.01, 10.02, 11.02, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25); East Passyunk values aggregate 6 tracts (23, 24, 27.01, 28.01, 28.02, 29). Counts summed across tracts; tenure shares computed as summed numerators over summed denominators; median home value weighted by owner-occupied units. The East Passyunk 1970 non-family household count of 110 is a known LTDB interpolation artifact stemming from the 1970-to-2010 boundary crosswalk; the 1980 value should be read as the practical baseline, and the 1970 to 1980 jump does not represent a real demographic shift.

Appendix Figure A.1. New buildings constructed on South Street by decade, 1960 to 2025.
New construction on South Street has fallen in every successive 20-year window since the 1960s, with no new buildings recorded so far in the 2020s.



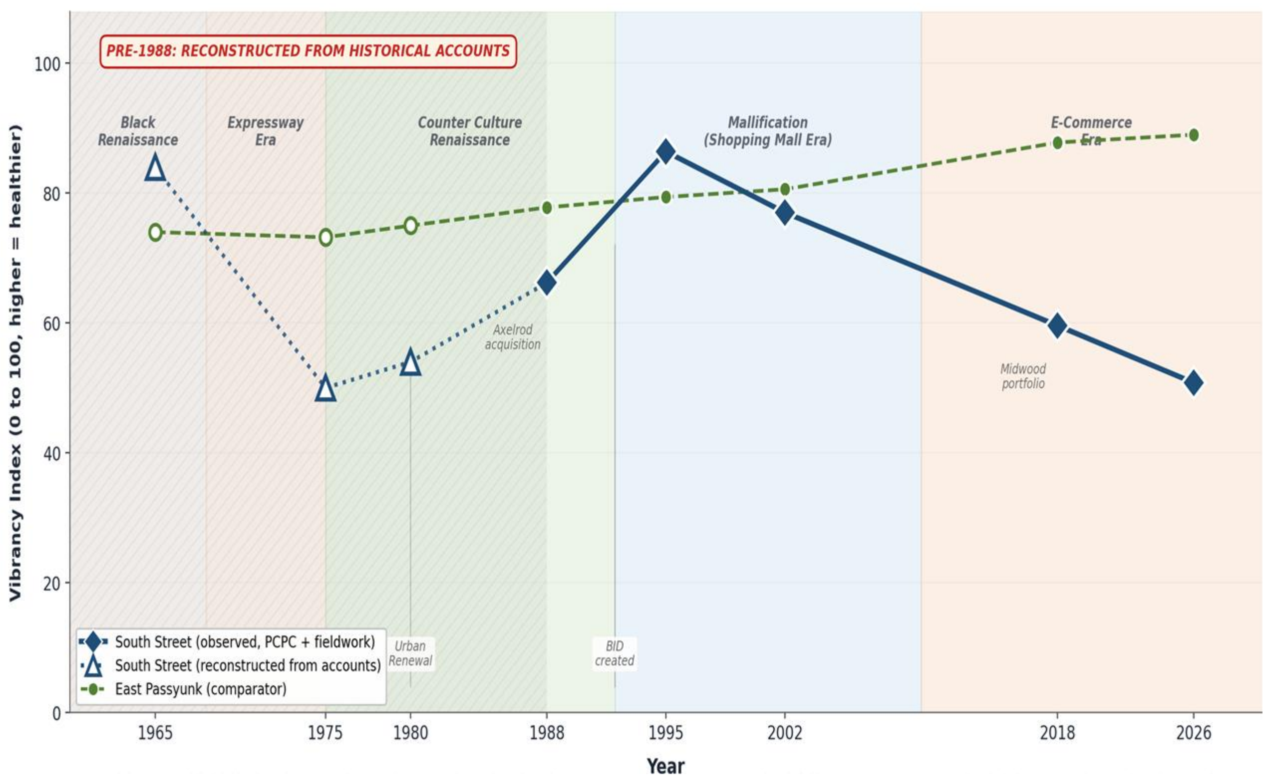
Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records. Sample includes South Street parcels with construction dates from 1960 onward (n=55). The 2020s bar reflects construction recorded through the 2026 field survey and is therefore a partial window compared to the prior 20-year buckets.

Appendix Figure A.2. Long-term vacant parcels on South Street by ownership cohort, 2025.
Twenty-two of South Street's 35 long-term vacant parcels (63%) are held by owners who either acquired the parcel through a $1 non-arms-length transfer or last sold it 20 or more years ago.



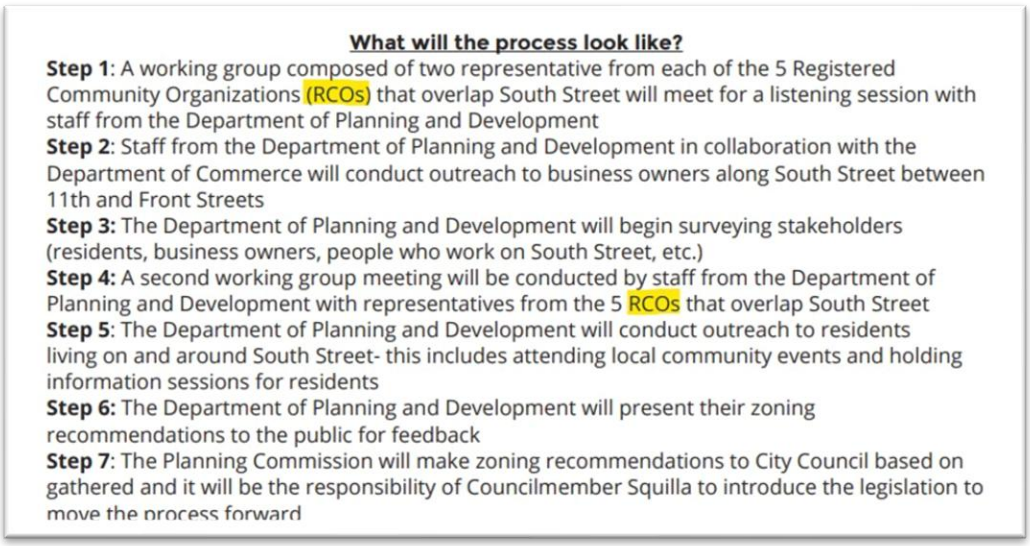
Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records and field survey, 2025. Sample restricted to South Street parcels coded as Long-Term Vacant during the field survey (n=35). The 14 parcels in the $1 sale cohort and the 12 parcels in the 20+ years cohort overlap on 4 parcels.

Appendix Figure A.3. South Street's Vibrancy Index, 1965 to 2026.
A health score combining vacancy, condition, anchors, and tenant mix reveals two complete cycles on South Street since 1965.



Source: Author's analysis. Corridor-wide rates derived from Philadelphia City Planning Commission (1989, 1996), Econsult (2009), and the author's 2026 field survey. Adjacent benchmarks from Brin (Hidden City, 2012), WHYY (2018), and SSHD minutes (2022). Reconstructed periods (1965, 1975, 1980) draw on Hodos (2010) and the Inquirer (2025). The 1988 and 1995 corridor-wide values are weighted averages of PCPC subcorridors covering Front to 8th and 8th to 12th.

Appendix Figure A.4. Example of a rezoning process through PCPC.



What will the process look like?

Step 1: A working group composed of two representative from each of the 5 Registered Community Organizations (RCOs) that overlap South Street will meet for a listening session with staff from the Department of Planning and Development

Step 2: Staff from the Department of Planning and Development in collaboration with the Department of Commerce will conduct outreach to business owners along South Street between 11th and Front Streets

Step 3: The Department of Planning and Development will begin surveying stakeholders (residents, business owners, people who work on South Street, etc.)

Step 4: A second working group meeting will be conducted by staff from the Department of Planning and Development with representatives from the 5 RCOs that overlap South Street

Step 5: The Department of Planning and Development will conduct outreach to residents living on and around South Street- this includes attending local community events and holding information sessions for residents

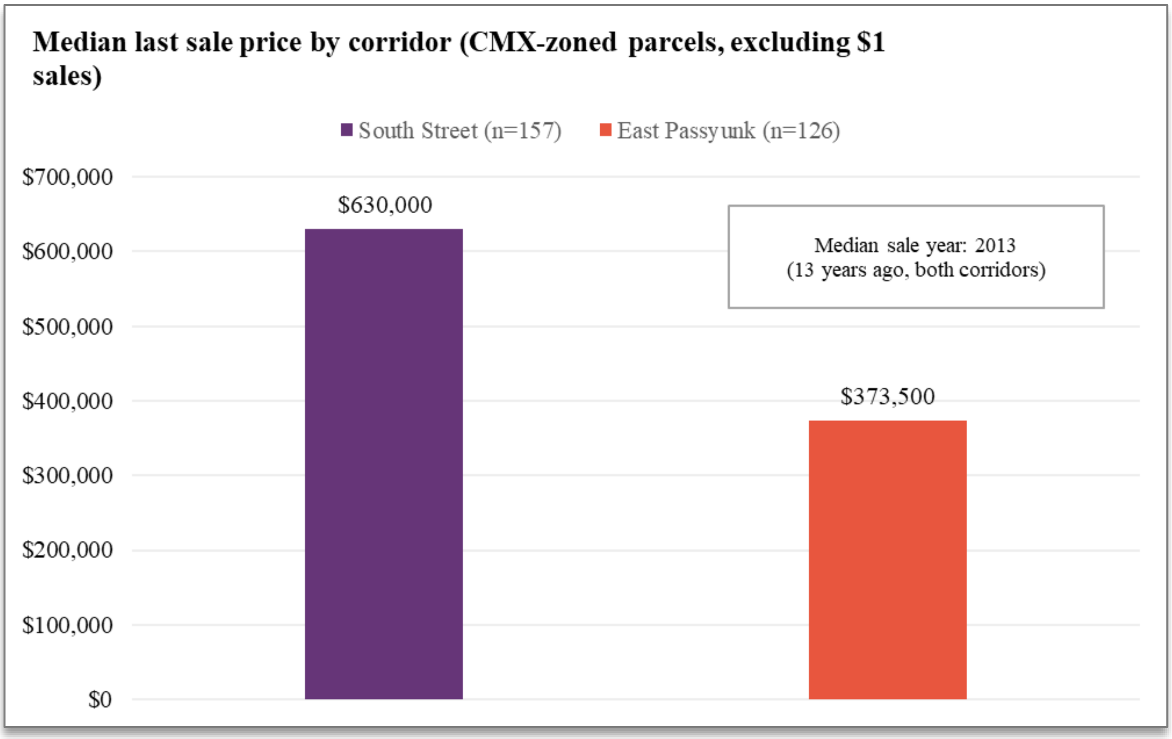
Step 6: The Department of Planning and Development will present their zoning recommendations to the public for feedback

Step 7: The Planning Commission will make zoning recommendations to City Council based on gathered and it will be the responsibility of Councilmember Squilla to introduce the legislation to move the process forward

Source: Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Zoning Meeting 1, accessed April 2026

Appendix Figure A.5. Median arms-length sale price on South Street and East Passyunk parcels.

South Street's median arms-length sale price is roughly 1.8 times East Passyunk's, a $273,000 gap.



Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records. Sample restricted to parcels with valid sale records, excluding $1 non-arms-length transfers (South Street n=168; East Passyunk n=162).

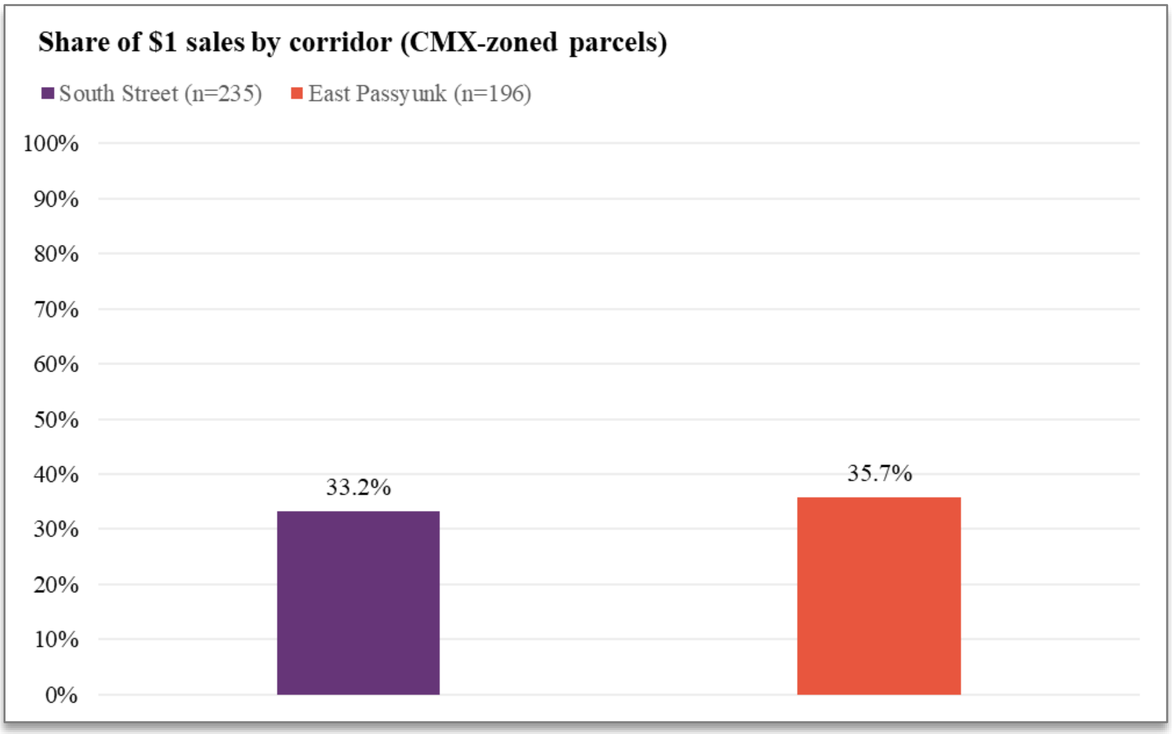
Appendix Figure A.6. Construction era distribution of parcels on South Street and East Passyunk.

Both corridors are predominantly pre-1900 (75%), but East Passyunk added a second wave in the 1920s-30s (19.4%) while South Street's smaller construction waves cluster in the 1960s through 2010s.

Construction era	SS count	% SS	EP count	% EP
Pre-1920	**201**	**74.7%**	**187**	**75.4%**
1920–1939	13	4.8%	48	19.4%
1940–1959	-	-	5	2.0%
1960–1979	24	8.9%	2	0.8%
1980–1999	18	6.7%	1	0.4%
2000–2019	13	4.8%	4	1.6%
2020 or later	-	-	1	0.4%
Total (with valid year)	**269**	**100.0%**	**248**	**100.0%**

Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records. Sample includes parcels with valid Year Built data (South Street n=269 of 271; East Passyunk n=248 of 248). 2 South Street parcels with missing or unavailable Year Built data excluded. Year Built reflects original construction date; substantial renovations are not reflected.

Appendix Figure A.7. Share of valid parcel sales recorded at $1 on South Street and East Passyunk.
East Passyunk's share of $1 non-arms-length sales among CMX parcels is slightly higher than South Street's (35.7% versus 33.2%).



Source: Author's analysis of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment records. Sample restricted to CMX-zoned parcels with valid sale records (South Street n=235; East Passyunk n=196). $1 sales indicate non-arms-length transactions, typically family transfers, gifts, or entity restructuring.

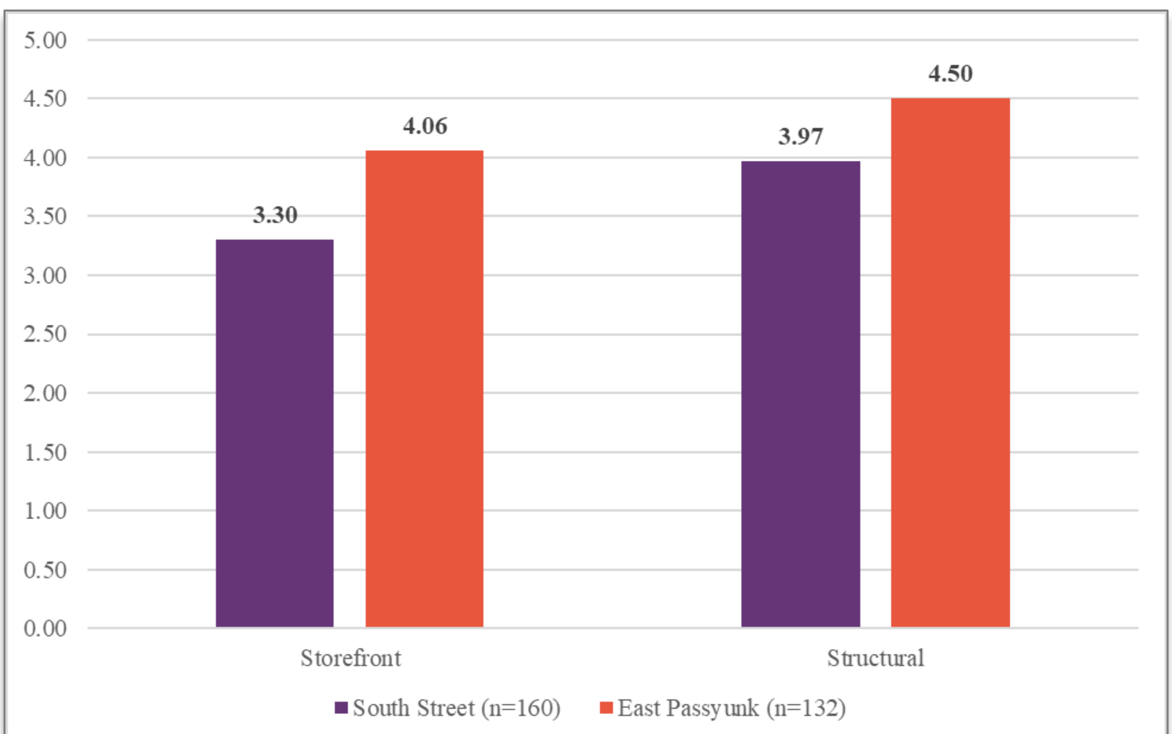
Appendix Figure A.8. Block-level condition profile on South Street, 2026.
South Street's central blocks (400-700) carry the corridor's worst pedestrian conditions, with overall composite scores between 1.7 and 2.8 driven by heavy vehicle traffic and poor quality of life; the corridor's east and west ends score 3.1 to 3.7.

Block	Foot Traffic	Vehicle Traffic	Quality of life	Streetscape	Overall
100–199	1.0	1.0	4.0	2.3	3.1
200–299	3.0	3.0	3.3	4.7	3.5
300–399	5.0	3.0	2.0	3.8	3.5
400–499	3.0	5.0	1.7	2.3	2.0
500–599	3.0	5.0	1.3	1.5	1.7
600–699	3.0	5.0	1.3	2.3	1.9
700–799	3.0	5.0	4.3	2.7	2.8
800–899	1.0	1.0	5.0	3.7	3.7
900–999	3.0	3.0	5.0	3.5	3.6
1000–1099	3.0	1.0	4.3	2.5	3.7
1100–1199	1.0	1.0	4.7	3.2	3.5

Source: Author's 2026 field survey of all 11 South Street blocks. Foot Traffic and Vehicle Traffic are recorded ordinal levels. Quality of Life is the mean of Litter, Disorderly Conditions, Boarded Windows, and Graffiti scores (inverted, so less disorder yields a higher score). Streetscape is the mean of Sidewalk Condition, Trashcans, Public Seating, and Tree Coverage. Each input was rescaled to a 1 (worst) to 5 (best) display scale. Overall is the equal-weight mean of the four columns, with Vehicle Traffic inverted. Lighting Quality, Bike Lane Type, and Bike Storage are uniform across all 11 blocks and excluded from the composite.

Appendix Figure A.9. Storefront and structural condition scores on South Street and East Passyunk.

South Street's storefront scores trail its structural scores by 0.67 points, a 52% wider gap than East Passyunk's 0.44; on South Street, decay manifests in the facade more than in the building itself.



Source: Author's 2026 field survey. Sample restricted to active CMX tenants (South Street n=160; East Passyunk n=132). Each tenant rated on a 1-5 scale for storefront condition (signage, glazing, paint, lighting, facade upkeep) and structural condition (masonry, cornice, parapet, window frames, roofline integrity). Higher scores indicate better condition. Vacant storefronts excluded.

Appendix Figure A.10. Philadelphia's Commercial Mixed-Use (CMX) base zoning districts.

District	Max Height	Ground-Floor Commercial	Defining Feature
CMX-1	38 ft	Optional	Smallest commercial district; permits residential uses comparable to surrounding districts
CMX-2	38 ft	Required	Standard neighborhood-serving retail with multi-family residential above
CMX-2.5	55 ft	Required	Same neighborhood-scale mix as CMX-2 with taller buildings allowed
CMX-3	FAR-driven (no fixed by-right cap)	Required	500% FAR; community- and region-serving mixed-use
CMX-4	FAR-driven (no fixed by-right cap)	Required	500% FAR base, up to 1,200% with bonuses; core commercial mixed-use
CMX-5	FAR-driven (no fixed by-right cap)	Required	1,200% FAR base, up to 1,600% within Center City/University City FAR Map; Center City skyline scale

Source: Author's compilation from The Philadelphia Code, Title 14, Chapter 14-400 (Base Zoning Districts) and Chapter 14-700 (Development Standards); and Philadelphia City Planning Commission,* Zoning Code Quick Guide (September 2022).*
Author's note: Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is the ratio of a building's total floor area to the size of its lot, expressed as a percentage. A 500% FAR on a 1,000-square-foot lot permits up to 5,000 square feet of total floor area, distributed across as many stories as the developer chooses.

Appendix Figure A.11. Philadelphia's largest Neighborhood Commercial Corridors, with study area corridors highlighted.

Rank	Neighborhood Commercial Corridor	Commercial Unit Count	Corridor Type	Specialty or Regional Center (Y/N)
1	Market West	961	Regional Center	Y
2	Market East	941	Superregional Center	Y
3	**South Street (Front to 12th)**	**485**	**Specialty Center**	**Y**
4	Old City	395	Specialty Center	Y
5	9th Street - Italian Market	334	Specialty Center	Y
6	Central Germantown	307	Community Center	N
7	52nd Street	282	Community Center	N
8	Chestnut Hill	260	Community Center	N
9	Philadelphia Mills	239	Superregional Center	Y
10	Woodland Avenue	228	Community Center	N
…	…	…	…	…
24	**East Passyunk**	**164**	**Specialty Center**	**Y**

Source: City of Philadelphia, "Commercial Corridors," OpenDataPhilly, accessed April 28, 2026

Author's note: The "South Street (Front to 12th)" row combines South Street / Front-8th (422 units, Specialty Center) and South Street / 8th-12th (63 units, Neighborhood Center), to reflect the study area boundary. This study only focuses on South Street itself, a narrower definition than PCPC's NCC definition of South Street, so the total commercial unit count is 229.

Note on denominators.

Figures and tables in this thesis key off one of four reference denominators, selected based on the analytical question.

Total parcels (271 South Street / 248 East Passyunk) are used for full-corridor analysis where every parcel matters, including residential zoning. Examples: base zoning composition, orientation maps, and historical building analysis.

CMX-zoned parcels (245 South Street / 196 East Passyunk) are used for parcel-level structural and financial analysis where the question is about parcels zoned for commercial use. Examples: building age and built form, ownership turnover, sale history, and physical condition.

Commercial real estate space (229 South Street / 157 East Passyunk) are parcels with active or vacant commercial storefronts and are used for occupancy and vacancy analysis. This denominator excludes residentially-used parcels on CMX zoning, since a residence is not a vacant storefront.

Active CMX tenants (160 South Street / 132 East Passyunk) are used for tenant-level analysis where the question is about what is currently operating on the corridor. Examples: business segment mix, operator type, storefront and structural condition scores, price level, peak activation period, and nuisance-use share.