Fall 2020 marks the Central Square Business Improvement District’s first year of service. As we reflect on the work our organization did, it is hard to overstate the unprecedented challenge COVID-19 presented our community here in Cambridge and around the world. We had just gotten underway when Governor Baker declared the pandemic. I am extremely proud of our small team’s ability to mobilize quickly on behalf of our neighborhood, lead by example, and set a standard for creative thinking in a crisis. From securing public safety infrastructure and writing a legislative agenda, to our Speak Your Piece public art campaign, Hello Again, and Starlight Square, this Annual Report showcases all that we were able to do in our first year.

Of course, the backbone of the BID is our team of ambassadors who have worked around the clock in hazard conditions since March. As I think about what’s next for us, I think about a couple things: partnership and leadership. Our small team has done great things, but it is not enough. Central Square is in crisis, and we have been vocal about the need for relief on many fronts— for our housing insecure neighbors, our small business community, arts organizations, and residents.

One striking question one of our Mayor’s Program students asked us this summer was, “Is there a place for me in Central Square?” When we think about the future, we are thinking about them. Soon-to-be CRLS graduates of color who want to pursue a future in the trades here, open a small business here, be a working artist here, continue to live here. Right now, there is no guarantee for them that that is possible. Creating that future is part of our job, and we look forward to working with like-minded individuals and organizations to do so.

On behalf of our team, thank you for your support throughout the pandemic and for keeping Central essential.

Michael Monestime
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Our Team

Michael Monestime
Executive Director

Nina Berg
Creative Director

Nick Surette
Content Manager

Zola Coleman
Events Manager

Edhere Joanis
Operations Manager

Heather Grunwald
Office Manager

Block by Block Team:

Leila S.  Brian W.  Stephanie J.  Carl E.  Oswaldo S.
Abdul Y.  Paul W.  Krystal E.  Daryn D.  Treg M.
Central Square Business Improvement District

BID Boundary Map
Faced with an unprecedented crisis in our first year of service, the BID’s entire team rallied around one idea:

Keep Central Essential.
# Table of Contents

**Section 1:** Year One  
**Section 2:** COVID-19: The BID in Action  
**Section 3:** Creativity in Crisis  
**Section 4:** Recognition and Shine  
**Section 5:** Looking Ahead

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End of Year Report prepared by Nina Berg  
All BID photography by Nick Surette
Section 1

Year One
Central Square Business Improvement District

**Moving In**

*620 Massachusetts Ave. Suite 3*

The BID team transformed an old conference room into the headquarters for everything Central Square, complete with a new mural by artist Brian Denahy and photos by Jeff Dunn from his 1986 *Meet Me in Central* exhibit.

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**Kicking Off**

In what would be the first of many collaborations with Joe Barr and the team at the City of Cambridge’s Traffic, Parking, and Transportation Department, the BID’s inaugural celebration took place on top of the Green Street Garage. Local officials, City staff, partners, and residents joined to celebrate the decades-long effort to create a BID. This re-imagining of underutilized space set the tone for the year to come.
As fall turned to winter, we turned to the Central Square community to help direct our efforts in our first year. We convened 50 community members at the 8 Essex Street storefront to imagine what was possible. With intergenerational representation from the arts, social service, transit, and community organizing groups, our list of things to accomplish was matched by the desire to make it happen.

October 1, 2019 marked the first day BID Ambassadors were in the Square. Since then, our team has been on the frontlines of compounding crises in the neighborhood: public health, economic, and homelessness.
Place Leadership Network

We knew that in order to lead as an organization, we needed to learn from other places. Executive Director Michael Monestime was accepted as part of a Central Square cohort, including the Dance Complex and Community Art Center, to participate in the Boston Foundation’s Place Leadership Network, a year-long program of idea exchange with other cities throughout the Commonwealth. We hosted the group in Central in November, 2020.

Programming

Within the first quarter of the BID’s launch, we worked with property owners and BID members to program vacant storefronts and add vibrancy to the street level experience for residents.

8 Essex’s industrial feel quickly attracted emerging visual and musical artists, while Pop Central became a retail destination, showcasing 10+ vintage vendors.
Even amidst a pandemic, businesses are opening in Central Square, a testament to its resilience as a commercial and cultural district.
Community Spotlights

On storefronts and pole banners, we told the stories of Central, past and present. Cambridge’s Black Trailblazers, the organizers of Cambridge Carnival, and the folks behind Central’s beloved small businesses rotated as the face of Central Square every month.
Section 2

COVID-19:
The BID in Action
“Where would we be without the BID?” is a common refrain in the Square these days.

We were entering our second quarter in operation when Governor Baker declared the State of Emergency in the Commonwealth, sending our team into overdrive. The novel coronavirus, COVID-19, was officially a pandemic. From sourcing essential public health infrastructure and writing a legislative agenda for urgently needed relief to inspiring our community through art and placekeeping, the BID has championed Central Square like no other organization, and has been recognized internationally for our efforts.

In addition to our work in Central Square, the CSBID participates weekly in a call with all nine BIDs in the Commonwealth led by Ann Burke, Vice President at Economic Development Council of Western Massachusetts, and Emmy Hahn, Program Coordinator at MA Department of Housing & Community Development. During the pandemic, this group of Executive Directors banded together to form an association, sharing ideas and resources. Through this association, we have developed working relationships with Secretary Conneally’s office, as well as other state-level politicians working to advance economic development statewide.
Year in Review: By the Numbers

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## Advocacy

**March 10, 2020**


**March 13, 2020**

BID publishes District Impact Study and shares relief recommendations with Cambridge City Council.

**March 13, 2020**

BID sources and installs three hand-washing stations at the Needle Exchange, Carl Barron Plaza, and in front of the warming center, providing much-needed public safety infrastructure. (We would double this number over the course of the spring/summer.)

Our small businesses owners, arts organizations, and non-profit directors are being asked to make public safety judgment calls, putting themselves, their staff, and future at risk. In the District Impact Study, we quantified, as best we could, the damage to-date and anticipated for Central Square. Of the over 100 constituents the BID represents, 51 responded to our survey.

60% of the surveyed businesses and organizations will not survive another eight weeks at this rate.

72% are waiting for more direction from local and state government as to whether to stay open or close, some of which came from the Governor.
March 26, 2020

**Regional Impact Study**

Led by the Central Square BID, the Regional Impact Study built a bigger case for emergency relief by joining forces with the East Cambridge Business Association and Union Square Main Streets in Somerville, presenting a robust set of Recommended Relief Measures to local and state legislators.

Between the BID, USMS, and ECBA, we represented 450+ individual businesses and organizations in Cambridge and Somerville—restaurants, retailers, entertainment and arts venues, hotels, non-profits, and service businesses. 98 testimonials were included.

**Grassroots Relief for Main Streets.**

In addition to the three organizations in the Regional Impact Study, over 50 business associations, elected officials, and Chambers of Commerce signed in support of the proposed relief measures, to help elevate them to higher levels of government. Together we launched Grassroots Relief for Main Streets, a state-wide legislative agenda for emergency relief.

We continue to advocate for these policies and recommendations. We believe this is essential work to undertake on behalf of the people of Central Square and the Cultural District.
CSQLive (now Central Square TV) was one of our first COVID-19 responses. We took Central Square online, paying freelance creatives, teachers, and hospitality staff to bring the best of Central to folks at home. Segments included yoga, mixed drinks, crafts, drone tours, and science club, among others. Thanks to our friends at CCTV, this free public programming streamed online and on their channels for folks to enjoy from the safety of their own home.

https://centralsq.org/tv
Food Security Initiatives

Off Their Plate
Within a week of the state of emergency, we partnered with Central Square restaurateur and chef, Tracy Chang to deliver 900 meals to the shelters in the district. Since this early pilot, Chang and fellow BID chefs like Jamie Bissonnette created Off Their Plate, a nonprofit feeding the frontlines and restoring restaurant jobs that has served 100s of thousands of meals and raised over $5,000,000.

Food and Supply Pantry at Cambridge Community Center
At the onset of the pandemic, we reached out to all the BID’s community centers, knowing they are closest to the families and seniors who may need help. In partnership with Executive Director, Darrin Korte, we launched the Food and Supply Pantry out of their gym at 5 Callender Street. The BID raised over $10,000 to purchase essential goods to supplement the donated food by Food for Free.

Central Square Farmers Market
We’re proud to be home to the first Farmers Market back online, post-COVID19. On May 19th, the Central Square Farmers Market reopened, safely and successfully.
Central Square is home to many community centers with generational ties, including Cambridge Community Center and Community Art Center. It was clear, early on, that the pandemic would jeopardize people’s income and food security. We teamed up with CCC to raise over $10,000 to fund a new Food & Supply Pantry, open to all on a first-come, first-served basis every Tuesday - Friday from 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m at 5 Callender Street. CCC has continued operation of the Pantry throughout the pandemic.

Similarly, we teamed up with Community Art Center, Margaret Fuller House, and Tutoring Plus of Cambridge to raise money for their art and supply kits, an initiative that mailed creativity kids to young learners needing support processing the pandemic through art-making and self-expression.

Throughout the pandemic, the BID was the go-to, can-do partner for many other non-profits in the City.
Small Business Advisory Committee

In March, the City of Cambridge established the Small Business Advisory Committee. Since the inaugural meeting, the BID has championed the same legislative agenda and brought solution-oriented ideas to the table, including Project Neighbor and the heat lamp pilot program.

As a connector between Central Square’s small business community and the City of Cambridge and state relief programs, we deployed all of our communication channels to connect businesses and organizations with available resources.

Of the 13 commercial districts, Central Square took the most advantage of the City of Cambridge's Small Business Assistance programs.

Of the 329 businesses assisted, **60 were Central Square businesses**.

Central Square businesses were given **$627,778 in relief assistance** by the City of Cambridge.
Section 3
Creativity in a Crisis
Once public safety mandates were put in place by city and state, we rolled out Project Neighbor, a district-wide campaign to support our small business and arts community and help residents feel safe as they resumed daily activities in Central Square. Affectionately named Project Neighbor by our collaborators at global design firm IDEO, this campaign connected social distancing and public safety reminders with wayfinding and window signage to communicate restaurant and retailers modified hours - all in the same “Positivity Pink.”

We used every available surface to reinforce messages of safety and solidarity. This campaign was so successful in Central Square that it was picked up city-wide.
Murals for the Movement

The BID has facilitated over 20 pieces of public art as part of our public art program. New murals include Hueman’s “Minerva & The Muse” on the 907 Main hotel and “See Me” by Mz. Icar behind Revolutionary Clinics. Both are part of Murals for the Movement, an initiative by our partners at Street Theory Gallery.
The murder of George Floyd heightened the intensity of conversation and action around racial injustice in Central Square, while also catalyzing a movement across the country in support of Black lives. In response, we turned every available storefront in Central into a canvas, inviting young artists of color to comment on the current historic moment. Curated by Rixy Fernandez, these 22 new pieces can be found as you walk throughout the district, on big walls and in unexpected nooks, each one encouraging us to stop and think.

https://centralsq.org/public-art
At the same time our public art campaign was being installed, we rallied the restaurant community to turn their dining rooms inside out. We secured jersey barriers, tables and chairs, umbrellas, and other patio fixings to assist fourteen district restaurants. Not only that, as our small businesses took over lanes of traffic, we took the opportunity to add a protected bike lane to the Mass Ave block between Magazine and Brookline Street.

The BID sourced and purchased 70 heat lamps for the Central Square restaurant community. This allowed all BID restaurants with a patio to go al fresco. Ultimately, our quick decision-making led the City of Cambridge to offer heat lamp reimbursement to the entire restaurant community, city wide.
Our biggest undertaking of the year, Starlight Square actually started as something much smaller in 2019. Originally a placekeeping pitch to create a square in the Square by framing a quadrant of Lot 5 behind Shalimar Spices, Starlight grew to meet the scale of the crisis we faced as a Cultural District.

Designed and developed in partnership with Flagg Street Studio and Boyes-Watson Architects, Starlight Square is a re-imagining of city-owned land. Once a parking lot for cars, it is now a place for people. A true sprint of a project, the BID not only convened all partners, we fundraised upwards of $500,000 to build, program, operate, and underwrite free performances for the public. This project epitomizes the BID’s placekeeping mandate, and we are beyond proud of the initiative.

https://starlightsquare.org
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Central Square’s Cultural District consists of arts and cultural organizations, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and artists, all of whom have pivoted to stay in business and of service to the community throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Central Square BID partnered with Reevx Labs™ by Berkshire Bank on Popportunity, an initiative to support small businesses at Starlight. For two months, we ran pop-up retail markets, providing safe, outdoor vending opportunities. We also hosted forums and shared resources around financial planning and small business support.

As we look forward to our work in our second year, investing in the Starlight economy, which we built from scratch, is a priority.

https://starlightsquare.org/popportunity
Thank You to Our Sponsors!
Section 4
Recognition and Shine
Starlight Square Is The New Communal Space Coming To Cambridge

July 21, 2020 | By Christian Burne

A sketch of Starlight Square, which is being constructed on Lot 5 in Cambridge for safe, outdoor cultural events. (Courtesy Central Square BID)

In the spirit of communion and healing, Cambridge will be the new home to a public space meant for physically-distanced fun with friends during the pandemic.

The City of Cambridge closed Municipal Lot 5 Tuesday. The space at the corner of Bishop Allen Drive and Norfolk Street will be transformed from a parking lot to a multi-use public space with an amphitheater.

With permission from the City of Cambridge’s city manager Louis DePasquale, Central Square Business Improvement District has been working on the project for the past three months. The new concept, called Starlight Square, is set to debut during the first week of August. In addition to the amphitheater, the project will turn the lot into an outdoor dining space and community center for open air events until late fall.

Michael Monestine, executive director of the Central Square Business Improvement District, said daily routines must transition outside in order to keep the community safe.

“Outside is where our local economy will recover, and where we as neighbors will heal,” he said.
In the Press

The Boston Globe
SCOUT Somerville
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METROPOLIS
CAMBRIDGE DAY
Chronicle
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Closing Statement

In 2021, our goal and tactics will be the same: keep Central essential through placekeeping. We know that recovering from COVID-19 will take time and care. We consider ourselves first responders in Central, providing services to keep neighbors of the Square safe, centering Central Square stories and ideas in programming, and leading with creativity when it comes to supporting our Cultural District, small business, and resident community. For us, that includes folks dealing with housing insecurity.

We look forward to our continued partnership with the City of Cambridge and Central Square property owners, without whom our work would not be possible.

Michael Monestime