OUR CITY. OUR FUTURE.

What We Heard

Downtown St. John's Neighbourhood Plan



December 2023

ST. JOHN'S

Disclaimer

- This document provides a summary of what was heard from participants during this engagement process. It is not meant to reflect the specific details of each submission word-for-word, although attempts have been made to do so when possible.
- The City produces a What we Heard document for every city-led public engagement project. This collected commentary is shared with the community to ensure we heard you correctly.
- The City protects the privacy of those who provide feedback as per Access to Information and Privacy Legislation.
- The full scope of commentary is used by city staff and Council to help inform recommendations and decisions.

Context

Downtown St. John's is one of the City's most vibrant neighbourhoods, but it has been experiencing change:

- Economic and business activity has wavered;
- Many companies have relocated to other parts of St. John's, leaving behind large, empty office spaces in the downtown area;
- Retail storefronts are struggling to compete with online shopping, hybrid retail, and big box development;
- Businesses in general are facing a new reality as employees adopt working from home or other alternate live/work scenarios;
- Long-term social changes due to COVID-19, such as increased awareness of hygiene and social distancing, have created challenges in the current compact urban environment;
- There is a need to respond to impacts of a changing climate and improve the resilience of new and existing buildings, roads, and stormwater management infrastructure to extreme weather.

Context

These challenges, among others, raise some big questions:

- What does all of this mean for Downtown?
- How do we address these concerns and ensure that Downtown St. John's remains a desirable place to live, work, invest, and play in the future?

Finding the answer to these and other challenging questions is part of this Neighbourhood Plan.

Context

The Downtown Neighbourhood for this project is defined by the yellow dashed line



Background

- The City retained Mills & Wright Landscape Architecture and The Planning Partnership to complete a Neighbourhood Plan for Downtown St. John’s.
- The Plan will be developed based on research and community engagement.
- The purpose of the Neighbourhood Plan is to establish the following for Downtown:
  - The desired mix of land uses;
  - The height and density of development;
  - The transportation network (both on-street and off-street);
  - The open space network;
  - Protection of natural and cultural heritage assets.

Public Engagement Plan

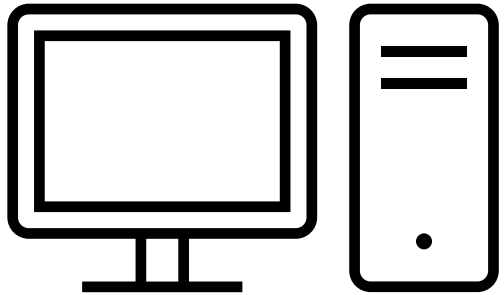
Purpose

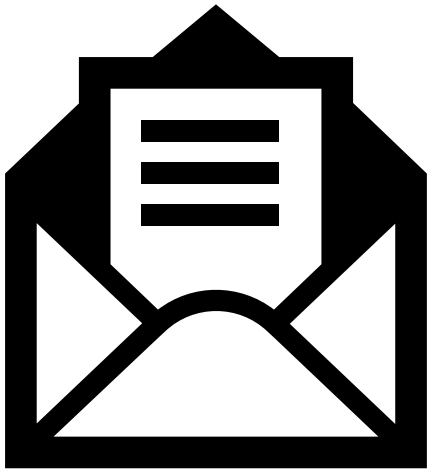
- To gather feedback from stakeholder groups and individuals to support the creation of a Downtown Neighbourhood Plan that aligns with the City's Envision Municipal Plan, providing goals and objectives to ensure that Downtown's heritage character is maintained while the commercial core is revitalized to make it more attractive to business, residents, and visitors.

Approach

- Meetings (in-person and virtual) with residents and key stakeholders
- One pop-up event
- Youth survey
- City Advisory Committee meeting
- Through tools on EngageStJohns.ca
- Email
- Phone
- Provided organizations with engagement information for specific community groups

Engagement and Communications





- News release issued on May 23, 2023
- Project page on EngageStJohns.ca published on May 23, 2023
- Newsletter to 3740 registered users on launch day and three follow up newsletters to registered users and followers of EngageStJohns.ca
- Posts to regular City communications channels including social media, listservs, website
- Social media posts
- News stories by VOCM, The Telegram

Who Engaged



On EngageStJohns.ca

- Total Visits: 1500
- Max Visitors Per Day: 225
- New Registrations: 44

- **Engaged Visitors** (People who posted questions/ comments or answered surveys): 114
- Informed Visitors: 588
- **Aware Visitors** (Unique visitors): 1100

Online Submissions:

- 255 ideas posted on EngageStJohns.ca
- 111 contributors made 1282 total contributions

Survey Responses:

- Youth Engagement Panel Survey: 30

Focus Groups/Individual Meetings:

- 18 meetings

Email:

- 17 submissions

Stakeholders Consulted (1/2)

- Downtown Residents
- Downtown Business Owners
- Downtown Office Workers
- Business and Arts NL
- Royal Newfoundland Constabulary
- Anna Templeton Centre
- St. John’s Women’s Centre
- NL Historic Trust
- Ordinary Spokes
- Memorial University Students Union
- Seniors NL
- George Street Association
- Destination St. John’s
- Downtown St. John’s
- St. John’s Sports and Entertainment
- TechNL
- St. John’s Port Authority (Board Chair)

Stakeholders Consulted (2/2)

- Jimmy Pratt Outreach Centre
- Downtown Building Owners Management Association
- Metrobus
- Youth Engagement Panel
- City of St. John’s Staff and Council
- City of St. John’s Advisory Committees
- Association for New Canadians
- Oceanex
- econext
- St. John’s Board of Trade
- NL Credit Union
- First Light (ongoing)
- Government of NL (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation)
- Provincial Historic Sites
- Ecclesiastical District Working Group

What We Heard: What is Currently Working Well Downtown? (1/2)

- A unique built environment not found anywhere else (heritage buildings, colourful rowhouses, historic laneways, old monuments)
- It has a strong and rich history.
- It has something for both residents and visitors.
- Interesting natural features like the harbour and southside hills
- Local shops and restaurants
- Pedestrian Mall

What We Heard: What is Currently Working Well Downtown? (2/2)

- It feels very walkable.
- There is a strong sense of community and sense of place.
- A great place for special events such as concerts
- Water Street renewal is a step in the right direction.
- The energy, especially on a nice summer evening when there is lots of activity

What We Heard: What is a Key Issue or Challenge for Downtown? (1/4)

- There has been an increase in panhandlers, anti-social behaviours, and the homeless population.
- Lack of police or security presence – downtown feels unsafe (especially George Street), particularly at night
- There are not enough alternative transportation or transit options (more park and ride options, cycling infrastructure, wider sidewalks, curbed bump-outs).
- Downtown caters too much to vehicles and not enough to pedestrians.
- Large companies relocating out of downtown have left behind empty office spaces and created a decrease in commercial activity, particularly during the day.
- Vacant and neglected properties hurt the character (there should be a penalty for this).

What We Heard: What is a Key Issue or Challenge for Downtown? (2/4)

- There has been an increase in crime such as littering, vandalism, vehicle break-ins and graffiti.
- Lack of accessibility (within buildings as well as along the streetscape)
- General perception that “convenient” parking is hard to find
- New development is out of context – feels placeless and not complementary of downtown’s unique character
- Temporary rentals (Airbnbs, etc.) remove housing choices from the market and compete unfairly with regulated accommodators
- It sometimes feels like the tourism industry is the priority downtown, but focus should first be on supporting residents and businesses – a great place to live is a great place to visit.

What We Heard: What is a Key Issue or Challenge for Downtown? (3/4)

- Lack of support from the City to work with, and incentivize, downtown business and make new development more achievable (this is stifling growth and causing businesses/developers to locate elsewhere)
- The City is not currently taking a leading role in revitalizing downtown – invest public money in improving downtown and addressing challenges
- The Pedestrian Mall is popular with visitors and residents, but can be cumbersome for business owners (requirements constantly changing, fees are too high)
- The waterfront needs to be more pedestrian friendly (the harbour fence blocks access, Harbour Drive is not a nice place to be)
- We need to get more people living downtown – bring people and other things will come to support those people

What We Heard: What is a Key Issue or Challenge for Downtown? (4/4)

- Beautification is not currently a priority
- The industrial port presents unique challenges (noise, odours, views)
- There is no childcare available downtown
- Downtown is a desirable place to live, but there are not enough housing units/choices to support demand
- Time limit for paid parking is not long enough and forces people to leave downtown
- The tourism brand promise is not currently being provided downtown
- Climate change, particularly rising sea levels, needs to be considered

What We Heard: What Does Downtown Need That it Currently Does Not Have? (1/3)

- A central public building such as a library or community centre that can act as a hub/people-magnet (and is free to use)
- More uses other than restaurants or pubs, especially family-friendly activities and quick bites
- Public washrooms
- Better signage and wayfinding
- Future-proofing upgrades (EV charging, free public wifi)
- Indigenous culture needs to be incorporated
- More housing options, including more choice, density, mixed use and affordable housing

What We Heard: What Does Downtown Need That it Currently Does Not Have? (2/3)

- Bury utilities to reduce visual clutter and improve the streetscape
- Design guidelines that encourage appropriate development
- Ride sharing options
- Beautiful streetscapes that are clean and filled with trees, landscaping, art, benches, lighting, waste/recycling bins, etc.
- More things to do in the winter, including protection from the elements
- Easier ways to move north-south within downtown
- Reliable, convenient and dependable public transit (both into/out of downtown as well as to move within downtown once you are there)

What We Heard: What Does Downtown Need That it Currently Does Not Have? (3/3)

- Cycling infrastructure
- Incentives for businesses or residents that make investments to their properties (especially improvements that make downtown a more desirable place to live, work and play)
- Sidewalk snow clearing needs to be prioritized

What We Heard: What Would Make Downtown More Attractive? (1/2)

- Family friendly spaces and activities
- Improved accessibility
- Four season use (including weather protection, winter programming, etc.)
- More public spaces, including trees and green spaces
- Longer season for Pedestrian Mall or make it permanent
- Better pedestrian access to the harbour
- More basic services such as grocery store, hardware store, pharmacy, etc.

What We Heard: What Would Make Downtown More Attractive? (2/2)

- More affordable housing options
- More variety in the stores and shops
- Maintain important views and vistas, especially of the harbour
- More outdoor activities and events (that are free and open to everyone)
- There is a view that one-way traffic on Water and Duckworth would make streets safer, less costly to maintain and would increase pedestrian and streetscape space on the sidewalks
- Fewer vacant storefronts

What We Heard: What Do You Hope to See for Downtown's Future?

- A downtown for everyone (accessible, inclusive, affordable, embraces all cultures)
- A downtown that addresses climate change thoughtfully
- A vibrant place full of people and activity, year-round, at night and day
- Improvements in safety and cleanliness
- Better support for local businesses and appropriate new development
- Multiple ways to get there and move around (other than a car)
- Better and more public spaces (including landscaping, plazas, art, benches, improved streetscapes, etc.)

What We Heard: Draft Vision Statement

- The vision is too vague and too long - it needs to be more aspirational
- It’s missing elements such as pedestrian-oriented, accessibility, inclusivity, climate change, and long-term sustainability

Next Steps



Release What We Heard to Council and Public



Draft the Neighbourhood Plan



Public Consultation of Draft Neighbourhood Plan



Plan finalized and adopted by Council

To Stay Informed

Follow the project page or sign up to receive notifications at EngageStJohns.ca

