

Town of Whitby

Staff Report

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Report Title: Downtown Whitby Action Plan September 2023 Update

Report to: Committee of the Whole

Date of meeting: September 25, 2023

Report Number: CAO 21-23

Department(s) Responsible:

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

Submitted by:

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**Acknowledged by M. Gaskell,
Chief Administrative Officer**

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1. Recommendation:

1. That Report CAO 21-23 – Downtown Whitby Action Plan September 2023 Update, be received as information.

2. Highlights:

The Downtown Whitby Action Plan was adopted by Council in October 2016. Of the 27 action items, 13 have been completed, five are in progress and nine are ongoing. Highlighted action items include:

- Council adoption of the Downtown Whitby Secondary Plan (pending Regional approval).
- Connected with and supported various Downtown Whitby businesses through the Meet and Greet event, Business Retention and Expansion program interviews, Downtowns and Lifestyle Business Roundtable and business spotlights in the Economic Development online newsletter.
- Retained a consultant (AECOM) to initiate the Brock Street Redesign Study that will assess existing streetscape conditions and develop a cohesive vision and

concept design that creates a more walkable / pedestrian friendly street from Highway 401 to the CP Railway Bridge.

- Upgrades to various municipal parking lots, including providing additional parking spaces, repaving lots, providing accessible parking options, and adding EV charging stations.
- Completion of the placemaking projects at Celebration Square and the Dundas/Byron Parkette to provide additional outdoor spaces with shade seating options and access to Wi-Fi.
- Initiated of the Public Art Policy with input from key stakeholders, Council, and the public to support a public art program in the community.
- Distribution of Community Support cards to businesses linking them to [online resources](#) for items such as homeless supports in Durham Region; who to call (i.e. if you find a needle on public property); access to food banks; housing supports; and information on encampments.
- 2nd Edition of the Whitby Food Guide was launched in May 2023, featuring 28 Downtown Whitby restaurants and food establishments, receiving over 8,585 page views in four months.

3. Background:

The Downtown Whitby Action Plan identifies municipal initiatives aimed at revitalizing Downtown Whitby. It is a comprehensive approach to action-targeted projects with the goal of inspiring change so that together we can make Downtown Whitby a destination.

The vision is “Downtown Whitby is a vibrant, innovative, inclusive and walkable urban destination, where our heritage is conserved and celebrated and where residents, employees and visitors are inspired to shop, live work, play and connect.”

To translate this vision into reality, implementation is focused on the following four key objectives:

1. Enable new opportunities for a prosperous and innovative downtown;
2. Create Downtown Whitby as a walkable pedestrian-focused destination;
3. Inspire and enhance cultural life; and
4. Cultivate downtown connections and promotion.

Successful implementation of these initiatives is being realized through collaboration across the organization and with key partners, aligning financial and human resources.

4. Discussion:

4.1 Downtown Whitby Action Plan

The following information provides an overview of the action items (projects, studies, activities, and programming) that are being implemented and/or are completed. A detailed status and timing chart is included in Attachment 1.

Objective 1: Enable new opportunities for a prosperous and innovative downtown.

- Municipal investment of \$3,277,925 (95% of funds) for various incentive programs as part of the Downtown Whitby Community Improvement Plan. In 2022, nine Maintenance and Improvement Grants (i.e., Façade Grant, Sign Grant, Interior Heritage Building Grant and Design Grant) were approved in Downtown Whitby totalling \$79,086 with private investment of \$250,000.
- Continued construction of Brookfield Residential's Station No. 3 development in the heart of Downtown Whitby at 201 Brock St S. The development will feature a six-storey mixed use building with 160 residential units and 9,500 sf of commercial floor space along Brock St S. Anticipated timelines for occupancy are July 2024. Staff are currently working with the developer to support the creation of a public art mural on the south wall.
- Council adoption of the Downtown Whitby Secondary Plan through Official Plan Amendment No. 126 (still requires approval by the Region of Durham). The Secondary Plan study included extensive public and agency consultation with the overall intent of the plan to guide future growth; maintain and enhance the area's unique cultural heritage; support a range of housing options; improve access to transit and active transportation; enhance public open spaces, and promote a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable downtown core.
- Conducted the first Downtowns and Lifestyle Business Roundtable session to discuss best practices, opportunities, and challenges impacting the sector. Key findings included concerns with hiring and retaining staff and filling specialized roles; businesses are taking a more personal approach to marketing (i.e., storytelling rather than pushing out brand); and concerns for parking in the Downtown area in terms of location and costs.
- From September 2022 to August 2023, several Downtown Whitby businesses were featured as a business spotlight in the Economic Development online newsletter including 360insights; Unique Town Boutique; One More Cocoa; 1855 member Jody Swain; Green & Frugal; Brunch & Co; The Food & Art Café; and Rain Spark Media Group (1855 member).
- As part of Economic Development's Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Program, several Downtown Whitby businesses have been interviewed, collecting valuable information and data to assist in business opportunities. The businesses include Frame By Design; Maximum Cards and Collectibles; Headstock Music; DOT Furniture; and RainSpark Media.
- Support to unsheltered individuals in Downtown Whitby through the use of 117 King Street for an overnight warming centre and support services in collaboration with the Region of Durham and Salvation Army. Staff are also working with the Region to create Durham's first family shelter at 316 Colborne St W to be opened late 2023.

- Listed the municipally owned property at the northeast corner of Hickory Street and Dunlop Street East on the Region's surplus land website for potential creation of affordable housing.
- Completion of the King Street Community Garden project and historic interpretive plaque to recognize the Werden's Plan Heritage Conservation District.

Objective 2: Create Downtown Whitby as a walkable pedestrian-focused destination.

- A consultant has been retained for the Brock Street Redesign Study in Q3, 2023 to undertake a review of existing streetscape conditions and develop a cohesive vision and concept design that creates a more walkable / pedestrian friendly street that respects the cultural heritage, sustainable design and placemaking opportunities. The study area is along Brock Street from Highway 401 to the CP Railway Bridge, just north of Maple Street and will provide recommendations regarding intersection treatments, lighting, plantings, pedestrian infrastructure (i.e., benches), placemaking, and signage amongst other items. The findings will be used to guide future capital improvements along this corridor.
- Expansion of Municipal Parking Lot 5 at Colborne and Green Streets to include 20 new parking spaces and two new accessible parking spaces in Downtown. Repaving of Municipal Parking Lot 2 at Elm and Byron Streets. Completion of two accessible parking spaces in Municipal Lot 1 at Colborne and Byron Streets.
- Identification of the 15-minute parking spaces in Downtown Whitby with yellow metre caps to increase awareness and support quick pick up / delivery options at key locations.
- Installation of refurbished pay and display parking machines that have the capabilities to enter a licence plate and tap pay feature.
- Modifications to five intersections in Downtown Whitby for traffic control purposes (i.e., new stop signs).
- Pedestrian counts were undertaken again in June 2023, showing an increase of 14.5% (1,168 pedestrians) throughout the downtown core year over year, with cyclists numbers also increasing by 9.4% (59 cyclists) compared to 2022. These numbers are comparable to 2019 numbers as pedestrian and cyclist counts were lower during the pandemic.

- The Urban Forestry Management Plan has been recently awarded with work started in August 2023. The Plan will take approximately 18 months to complete and will evaluate the urban forest canopy to better understand the most appropriate tree species suitable for various locations, including Downtown Whitby.
- Participating in the LEAF program to plant trees to combat climate change. A total of nine participants in Downtown Whitby participated in the program from August 2022 to August 2023.
- In partnership with DRPS and a Provincial grant, the Town installed 4 new CCTV cameras that have proved to be instrumental in a couple of major investigations. The cameras are located at the following intersections in Downtown Whitby:
 - Brock St / Dundas St (looking north)
 - Brock St / Dundas St (looking south)
 - Brock St / Mary St (looking south)
 - Brock St / Colborne St (looking north)

Objective 3: Inspire and enhance cultural life.

- With a grant from the Canada Community Revitalization Fund, Celebration Square was enhanced with the installation of new permanent seating (with attached umbrellas for shade), moveable furniture and new chess/checkerboard tables. The grant also supported additional Muskoka Chairs and self-watering planters at the Dundas/Byron parkette.
- Worked in collaboration with the Whitby Farmers' Market to support access to public parking on market days. The Town provided additional 'Green P' lawn signs to direct customers to the municipal parking lot and created signage for adjacent private businesses to help redirect market customers.
- The Town launched the 2nd Digital Food Guide in May 2023, highlighting 28 Downtown Whitby food establishments. A QR code and postcard have been distributed to restaurants to further promote and support local businesses. From May to August this year, the Food Guide has been viewed over 8,585 times.
- Council approval the Public Art Policy Framework in Q1, 2023 which included information on the Environmental Scan (Phase 1) and Comparator Analysis (Phase 2). Staff have completed Phase 3, Community Engagement this summer and will bring forward the recommended Public Art Policy for Council's consideration in Q4, 2023.

- Installation of QR Codes for the public art featured in [Whitby's Arts Trail](#), which allows users to directly link to the online resource map highlighting the artists and the artwork.
- The Downtown Whitby BIA in collaboration with the Economic Development team are working with STEPS Public Art to create animated storefronts through an innovative community-driven art project that uses window decals to narrate Whitby's unique and cultural diverse business community. Anticipated launch of this project is Q4, 2023.

Objective 4: Cultivate downtown connections and promotion.

- Established the first Downtown Whitby Meet and Greet Event in March 2023 to host business and property owners along with key stakeholders for a chance to network and learn about upcoming projects and events from the Town, Downtown Whitby BIA, and Whitby Chamber of Commerce. A total of 66 people attended the event and overall feedback was quite positive with many excited for the next opportunity to get together.
- In partnership with the Downtown Whitby BIA, staff distributed Community Support cards to businesses in May 2023 which provided a QR code linking to [online resources](#) for items such as homelessness supports in Durham Region; who to call (i.e. if you find a needle on public property); access to food banks; housing supports; and information on encampments. Businesses were appreciative of the information and showed empathy on how to support individuals in need.
- As part of the Canada Community Revitalization Fund, the Town received a grant to enhance Wi-Fi at Celebration Square in front of the Whitby Public Library. Now the entire square has access to free Wi-Fi to further support events like the Farmers' Market.

4.2 Benchmarking Report

The initial benchmarking data analysis was undertaken in 2017 based on the previous five years of activity and development in the Downtown Whitby Secondary Plan Area (SPA) and the Business Improvement Area (BIA). This information is reviewed annually as new census, economic, and planning and development data becomes available.

The following information is the latest snapshot (2022 – 2023) of various data indicators tracked.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Data

Metric	Secondary Plan Area	Whitby
Population	6,630	138,501
Median Age	49	40
Average Household Income	\$70,315*	\$121,180*
Average Persons Per Household	1.9	2.9
Number of Dwellings	3,375	46,460
Number of Singles, Semis Links	945 (28%)	33,710 (73%)
Number of Townhomes	50 (1%)	6,135 (13%)
Number of Apartments	2,365 (70%)	6,605 (14%)
Employment Rate	46%	64%
Top 3 Occupations of Residents	Retail Trade (10%) Healthcare and social assistance (11%) Manufacturing (8%)	Retail Trade (11%) Healthcare and social assistance (10%) Educational Services (9%)

Note: Data marked with an asterisk (*) was obtained from the 2016 Census.

- The Town of Whitby has a median age that is almost 10 years younger than the Downtown Secondary Plan Area (SPA).
- Between 2016 and 2021, Whitby’s population grew by 7.9%, while the downtown population has slightly increased. It is anticipated that with the next census, the downtown population will go up based on the number of new residential units coming forward.
- The average persons per household along with the high median age may be an indicator that the Downtown area has a higher percentage of empty-nesters and retirees.

- Apartment dwellings make up 70% of all residential units in Downtown Whitby in comparison to the Town of Whitby at 14%.
- The Town of Whitby has an employment rate that is 18% higher than the Downtown Whitby SPA.

Table 2: Summary of Real Estate Analytics

Metric	2022	2023 (YTD)	Difference
Office Vacancy Rate SPA	2.9%	3.2%	+0.3%
Retail Vacancy Rate SPA	1.5%	2%	+0.5%
Gross Office Rent Per Square Foot SPA	\$27.35	\$26.44	-\$0.91
Gross Retail Rent Per Square Foot SPA	\$21.76	\$22.67	+\$1.44
Asking Rent SPA Per Unit			
Studio/Bachelor	\$1,339	\$1,198	-\$141
1 Bedroom	\$1,361	\$1,569	+\$208
2 Bedroom	\$1,563	\$1,731	+\$168
3 Bedroom	\$1,562	\$1,572	+\$10
Vacancy Rate (%) All Rental Units			
Whitby	1.2%	2.0%	+0.8%
Secondary Plan Area	1.0%	4.4%	+3.4%

- The Secondary Plan Area (SPA) has shown a consistent office vacancy rate below 3%, however Year to Date (YTD) is showing a slight increase in office vacancy. In addition, gross office rent in Downtown Whitby YTD has slightly decreased. Both factors could be attributed to hybrid / remote working environments post pandemic.
- There has been a steady decline in retail vacancy rates and a slight increase in gross retail rent in the SPA since 2017, indicating a relatively strong demand for retail in Downtown Whitby.
- The asking rent for Studio/Bachelor units has decreased while all other unit types have increased.

- Vacancy rates for all rental units in the SPA has increased; however, the data could be very limited and therefore sensitive to outliers. Staff will continue to monitor this going forward.

Table 3.0: Summary of Pedestrian and Cyclist Counts

Metric	2019	2021	2022	2023
Total Pedestrians per Annual Count	7,644	4,238	6,914	8,082
Total Cyclists per Annual Count	641	431	570	629

- Pedestrian and cyclist counts are undertaken at six different intersections on a weekday (Wednesday) and a weekend (Saturday) between the hours of 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.
- The overall number of pedestrians and cyclists in Downtown Whitby appears to have rebounded to the 2019 numbers prior to the pandemic.
- The Brock/Dundas and Brock/Colborne intersections have the most pedestrians, which aligns with the heart of Downtown Whitby and easy bus connections (north/south and east/west links).
- The Dundas/Henry/Euclid intersection contain the most cyclists year over year, which signifies the direct cycling route to the waterfront trail.
- Interestingly, the Brock/Dunlop intersection (the location of 12welve and Brock St Brewery) has consistently had an increase in pedestrians each year, aligning with its opening in 2019.

5. Financial Considerations:

Financial resources to implement the Downtown Whitby Action Plan have been included in the Town’s approved budget. Any additional new projects will need to be considered and reviewed through the future budget review process.

6. Communication and Public Engagement:

Various stakeholders such as the Downtown Whitby BIA, Whitby Chamber of Commerce, neighbourhood associations, and Whitby Public Library are regularly updated on the progress of the initiatives in the Downtown Whitby Action Plan.

7. Input from Departments/Sources:

An interdepartmental team was established to work collaboratively on the initiatives of the Downtown Whitby Action Plan. The team includes representatives from Strategic

Initiatives, Planning and Development, Community Services, Financial Services and Communication and Creative Services.

8. Strategic Priorities:

The Downtown Whitby Action Plan addresses several of the Strategic Pillars as part of the new Community Strategic Plan. Specifically, this report meets the following Objectives:

Strategic Pillar 1: Whitby's Neighbourhoods

Objective 1.1.4 and 1.3.6 Improve community safety, health, and well-being by working with partners at Durham Region to implement pro-active strategies to manage homelessness and mental health needs in Downtown Whitby and implement features such as CCTV cameras to provide safer spaces.

Objective 1.2.3 Investing, promoting, and strengthening the local arts, culture, heritage and creative sector through creating placemaking opportunities and building out the Town's Public Art Policy.

Strategic Pillar 2: Whitby's Economy

Objective 3.1.1 and 3.2.3 Implementation of the Economic Development Strategy through Business Retention and Expansion interviews, Meet and Greets, business spotlights and roundtables.

Objective 3.2.5 Implementing initiatives that support the downtowns as thriving destinations through new placemaking initiatives at Celebration Square and the Dundas/Byron Parkette, investing municipal funding through the Community Improvement Plan, and tracking data annually to ensure low vacancy rates are maintained year over year.

Strategic Pillar 4: Whitby's Government

Objective 4.1.2 Strengthening existing and build new partnerships through work with the Downtown Whitby BIA, Chamber of Commerce, Whitby Public Library, Durham Region Police Service and Downtown Whitby business and property owners.

This report also takes into consideration accessibility planning by ensuring both public and private developments in the downtown incorporates accessible principles. Furthermore, sustainable practices through environmental, social, and economic pillars are used to develop and implement the action items.

9. Attachments:

Attachment 1: Downtown Whitby Action Plan September 2023 Update