

Town of Whitby

Staff Report

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Report Title: Downtown Whitby Action Plan September 2024 Update

Report to: Committee of the Whole

Date of meeting: September 16, 2024

Report Number: CAO 18-24

Department(s) Responsible:

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

Submitted by:

Sarah Klein, Director of Strategic Initiatives

Acknowledged by M. Gaskell, Chief Administrative Officer

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1. Recommendation:

1. That Report CAO 18-24 – Downtown Whitby Action Plan September 2024 Update, be received as information; and,
2. That staff be directed to undertake an update to the Downtown Whitby Action Plan in 2025 and bring forward a new plan for Council’s consideration and approval.

2. Highlights:

The Downtown Whitby Action Plan was adopted by Council in October 2016. Of the 27 action items, 15 have been completed, three are in progress, and nine are ongoing. Highlighted action items include:

- \$2.5 million of additional funding to support new high-density residential and mixed-use residential developments in Downtown Whitby through the Housing Accelerator Fund.
- Donation of two parcels of town-owned land located in Downtown Whitby, valued at \$5.9 million, to Habitat For Humanity of the Greater Toronto Area to support the establishment of 40 new affordable housing (ownership) units in the community.

- Completion of the first phase of engagement on the [Brock Street Redesign Study](#), gathering feedback from over 580 participants who identified their top design priorities, including patios, trees, planters/flowers, and more.
- Increase in pedestrian activity in Downtown Whitby, with the total number of pedestrians up 7.7% year-over-year (from 8,082 in 2023 to 8,705 in 2024) at six key intersections.
- Increase service level in Downtown Whitby to manage weeds throughout the summer months through more frequent weed removal and targeted graffiti removal on public infrastructure.
- Installation of three new CCTV cameras and DRPS bicycle patrols throughout the summer months to support community safety.
- Approval of the Public Art Policy and the installation of two new public art pieces ('The Hive' across from the Centennial Building and a new Indigenous mural series at Rotary Park) to support the 'Cultural Corridor' in Downtown Whitby.
- The launch of the first Food Tour series in Downtown Whitby (and Downtown Brooklin) to promote and support local restaurants and breweries to showcase Whitby's thriving culinary scene.
- Continued low vacancy rates for retail (0.6%) and office (1.7%) year to date in Downtown Whitby, demonstrating a strong demand for these types of uses in the downtown.

Overall, the Downtown Whitby Action Plan has been instrumental in achieving several significant studies and initiatives implemented over the past eight years. Staff recommend that a new Downtown Whitby Action Plan be undertaken in 2025 and brought forward for Council consideration and approval.

3. Background:

The Downtown Whitby Action Plan was approved in 2016 and 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. Staff report annually on the implementation of the Plan.

4. Discussion:**4.1 Downtown Whitby Action Plan**

The following information provides an overview of the action items (projects, studies, activities, and programming) that have been 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.

- In December 2023, the Town of Whitby received funding through the Federal Housing Accelerator Fund to support various initiatives, including additional investment to support the Downtown Whitby Community Improvement Plan (CIP). An additional \$2.5 million was allocated to the Development Charge Grant program to support high-density residential and mixed-use residential development in Downtown Whitby. Staff have reached out to potential applicants to advise them of the additional funding for this program.
- In 2023, four Maintenance and Improvement Grants (i.e. Façade Grant, Sign Grant, Interior Building Grant and Design Grant) were approved with a total municipal investment of \$21,926 and a total private investment of \$48,406.
- Brookfield Residential Station No. 3 is scheduled to obtain occupancy in September 2024 and was the location for this year's Mayor's Gala. Staff are also working with Brookfield to support the promotion of Whitby's latest new public art to be located on the south wall of the development.
- Staff conducted the second Downtown and Lifestyle Business Roundtable session, with several Downtown Whitby businesses participating. Key items raised included replacing missing downtown banners, reviewing garbage collection locations, and general sidewalk maintenance and cleaning.
- From September 2023 to September 2024, the following six businesses were featured as a spotlight in the Economic Development e-newsletter: Frame by Design, Melly's Market and Café, ShiftLink, Quantic Croven, Love Child Connected, and Style Loft Boutique.
- As part of the Economic and Development Business Retention and Expansion Program, 20 Downtown Whitby businesses have been interviewed, collecting valuable information such as their number of employees, key concerns they are experiencing, plans for expansion, labour attraction, etc.
- In June 2024, staff, in collaboration with Mayor and Council members, participated in Whitby's first Local Business Week – interviewing 28 Downtown Whitby businesses. Common concerns were homelessness, parking, garbage, inflation and rent.

- On June 24, 2024, Town of Whitby Council approved the donation of two parcels of land, valued at \$5.9 million, to Habitat For Humanity of the Greater Toronto Area (“Habitat”) to support the establishment of 40 new affordable housing units in the community. The parcels are located on Hickory Street South and Dunlop Street East in Downtown Whitby. The Town discounted the lands by \$2.9 million and used \$3.0 million in Housing Accelerator Funds to enable the transfer of the lands at no cost to Habitat. As part of this agreement, Habitat commits to maintaining the ownership units as affordable units for at least 25 years.
- In 2024, the Town entered into another three-year lease agreement with the property owner for the Dundas/Byron Parkette to continue to provide an outdoor amenity space in the heart of Downtown Whitby.
- Staff have been working with the Region of Durham to support a future family shelter to be located at 316 Colborne St W. Work on the shelter is being reviewed by the Region’s social services team, and timelines will be forthcoming.

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

- The Town has completed its first phase of engagement on the [Brock Street Redesign Study](#) with over 580 participants. Top design priorities included patios, trees, planters/flowers, road safety, pedestrian safety, heritage character, accessibility, parking, festivals and events and transit connectivity. This fall, staff will present the proposed concept designs to the Town’s Advisory Committees along with hosting a public meeting to obtain feedback. A recommendation report will be coming forward to Council in Q1 2025.
- In July 2024, the Town retained a consultant to complete a condition assessment and feasibility study on the fountain at Celebration Square in order to better understand the existing fountain equipment, complete pipe pressure testing and provide an engineering report for staff’s consideration and next steps.
- [The Town modified four intersections in Downtown Whitby](#) for traffic control purposes through the installation of new ‘all-way stops.’ The intersections in the Downtown are:
 - Athol Street and Colborne Street West;
 - Chestnut Street West and Kent Street;
 - Green Street South and Ontario Street East; and
 - Reynolds Street and Dunlop Street.
- In June/July, pedestrian counts were undertaken at six different intersections in Downtown Whitby. The results indicate an increase in the total number of pedestrians year-over-year – up 7.7% (from 8,082 in 2023 to 8,705 in 2024). This level is above the pre-pandemic pedestrian count in 2019, which saw 7,644 pedestrians. Cyclist activity, however, has decreased year over year by 20%

(629 in 2023 vs 525 in 2024). Children under 14 (521), as well as individuals using mobility devices (174) and E-Bikes (34), were tracked this year as well.

- The consultants for the Urban Forestry Management Plan have completed the park tree inventory and the tree inventory analysis. Substantial progress has been made on the background review, Phase 1 engagement results and environmental vulnerability matrix. This information is being compiled into a report to help inform the second round of community engagement in September.
- Increased service level in Downtown Whitby for weed management throughout the summer, with more frequent removal across a larger geographic area, prioritizing the historic core. This includes staff training on Foamstream for better weed removal around parked cars, as well as the removal of advertising yard signs and graffiti from public infrastructure, such as garbage cans and light posts.
- Purchase and replacement of two stream garbage/recycling receptacles in Downtown Whitby to support better waste management practices.
- Participation in the LEAF program to plant trees to combat climate change. One business and two residential properties in Downtown Whitby participated in the program from August 2023 to August 2024.
- In partnership with DRPS and a Provincial grant, three new CCTV cameras have been installed at the following intersections:
 - Dundas Street East / Hickory Street (looking in all directions)
 - Dundas Street West / Henry Street (looking west)
 - Brock Street South / just south of Gilbert St (looking in all directions)
- DRPS also deployed bicycle patrols in Downtown Whitby during the summer months to help support community safety.

Objective 3: Inspire and enhance cultural life.

- The Town entered into a new three-year lease at Celebration Square with the Whitby Farmers' Market and provided free parking for 35 Farmers' Market vendors on Wednesdays (market days).
- The Town supported the Downtown Whitby Business Improvement Area (BIA) by permitting various spaces, including the Dundas/Byron Parkette and Celebration Square, to support the BIA's Summer Art Series pop-up events and movie nights.
- The Town permitted the King Street parkette (located south of 360 Insights) to the King Street Cooperative Community Garden to support a neighbourhood event celebrating gardening, music and crafts.

- Staff permitted Municipal Parking Lot #1 and provided picnic tables to support several events for the Whitby Legion over the summer months.
- The Town approved the Public Art Policy in January, and two new public art pieces have been created in Downtown Whitby to support the 'Cultural Corridor' including:
 - "The Hive" located across from the Centennial Building on Centre Street South – this tree carving by Ryan Locke (@thetimberripper) used a century-old black walnut tree and transformed it into a honeycomb with honeybees.



- A new mural series by Indigenous artist Emily Kewageshig (<https://www.emily-kewageshig.com/>) has been installed at Rotary Park on the north wall of the utility building. This artwork speaks to the themes of family and nature, as the park is known for its floral designs. The murals are located just north of the playground. The Town was fortunate to receive a \$5,000 grant from Elexicon Energy to support this artwork.



Objective 4: Cultivate downtown connections and promotion.

- The Town created and launched the first Food Tour series in Downtown Whitby (and Downtown Brooklin) to promote and support local restaurants and breweries to showcase Whitby's thriving culinary scene. The Food Tours were sold out within a few days, with more days added throughout September to meet the growing demand.
- Hosted the second Downtown Whitby Meet and Greet event in March 2024 with Downtown Whitby business and property owners for a chance to network and learn about upcoming projects and events from the Town, BIA and Whitby Chamber of Commerce.

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 (2023 – 2024) of tracked data indicators.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Data

Metric	Downtown Secondary Plan Area	Whitby
Population	7,172	138,501
Median Age	49	40
Average Household Income	\$84,121*	\$142,400*
Average Persons per Family	2.6	3.1
Number of Occupied Private Dwellings	3,565	46,460
Number of Singles, Semis Links	1,265 (36%)	33,710 (73%)
Number of Townhomes	50 (1%)	6,135 (13%)
Number of Apartments	2,225 (63%)	6,605 (14%)
Average Workforce Participation Rate	53%	67%
Employment Rate	47%	59%
Top 3 Occupations of Residents	Healthcare and social assistance (12%) Retail Trade (12%) Manufacturing (10%)	Healthcare and social assistance (11%) Retail Trade (11%) Professional, scientific and technical services (9%)

- The population of Whitby grew by 7.8% from 2016 to 2021.
- The Town of Whitby shows a larger, younger, and more economically active population compared to the Downtown Secondary Plan Area (SPA).

- The Town of Whitby has approximately 73% Singles, Semis, and Links and 14% of Apartments type dwellings. This is the opposite in the Downtown SPA, where 36% are Singles, Semis, and Links, and 63% are Apartments.
- Note: Data marked with an asterisk (*) is based on data from 2020.

Tables 2-4: Summary of Real Estate Analytics

Metric	2023	2024 (YTD)	Difference
Office Vacancy Rate SPA	1.8%	1.7%	-0.1%
Retail Vacancy Rate SPA	1.9%	0.6%	-1.3%
Gross Office Rent Per Square Foot SPA	\$26.38	\$27.91	+\$1.53
Gross Retail Rent Per Square Foot SPA	\$19.93	\$23.81	+\$3.88

Asking Rent SPA Per Unit	2023	2024 (YTD)	Difference
Studio/Bachelor	\$1,133	\$1,156	+\$23
1 Bedroom	\$1,647	\$1,628	-\$21
2 Bedroom	\$1,888	\$1,926	+\$38
3 Bedroom	\$1,540	\$1,552	+\$12

Vacancy Rate (%) All Rental Units	2023	2024 (YTD)	Difference
Whitby	1.2%	2.2%	+1.0%
SPA	2.2%	1.0%	-1.2%

- The Secondary Plan Area (SPA) has shown a consistent retail and office vacancy rate below 3%, which indicates strong demand for these types of uses in the downtown.
- The gross office and retail rent per square foot has slightly increased which is consistent with responses staff are hearing from meetings with business owners as part of the Business Retention and Expansion program.

- The asking rent for Studio/Bachelor, 2 Bedroom and 3 Bedroom units have all increased while 1 Bedroom unit type has decreased.
- Overall, the vacancy for all rental units remains quite low for the Town of Whitby and Downtown Whitby, indicating high demand for rental units in the community.

Table 4 Summary of Pedestrian and Cyclist Counts

Metric	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total Pedestrians per Annual Count	7,644	4,238	6,914	8,082	8,705
Total Cyclists per Annual Count	641	431	570	629	525

- 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 total number of pedestrians has steadily increased year-over-year and is now well above the pre-pandemic levels. Intersections with the most pedestrian activity include Dundas/Brock, Brock/Colborne and Brock/Dunlop.
- The total cyclists count has generally remained consistent with slight fluctuations year over year. Intersections with the most cyclist activity include Dundas/Henry and Dundas/Brock.
- It is anticipated that, with the occupancy of Station No. 3 this year, the Dundas/Colborne intersection will see a significant increase in pedestrian activity for the 2025 count.

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. The update to create a new Downtown Whitby Action Plan will be done in house by staff within existing operating budget.

6. Communication and Public Engagement:

Various stakeholders, such as the Downtown Whitby BIA, Whitby Chamber of Commerce, and the Whitby Public Library, are regularly updated on the progress of the initiatives in the Downtown Whitby Action Plan. The Town uses various communication channels to engage on specific projects as they come forward i.e. Connect Whitby, social media, web story etc. for the Brock Street Redesign Study as an example.

7. Input from Departments/Sources:

An interdepartmental team was established to collaborate on the initiatives of the Downtown Whitby Action Plan. The team includes representatives from Strategic Initiatives, Planning and Development, Community Services, Financial Services, Communications and Creative Services.

8. Strategic Priorities:

The Downtown Whitby Action Plan addresses several of the actions in the Community Strategic Plan, including:

Objectives 1.1.4 and 1.3.6 Improve community safety, health and well-being by working with partners at Durham Region to implement proactive 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.

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, investing in the Community Improvement Plan and tracking data annually to ensure low vacancy rates are maintained year over year.

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

This report 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 2024 Update