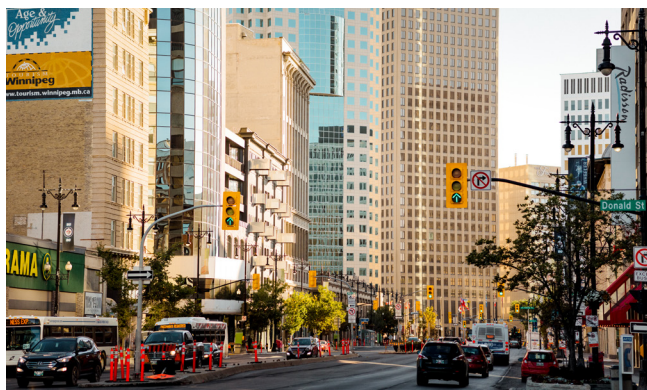


Downtown Recovery Framework

OCTOBER 2021



Downtown Matters



Winnipeg’s downtown is the city’s heartbeat. It’s the place where Winnipeggers gather to celebrate their cultures, creativity, and pride. Our downtown captures the essence of what Winnipeg is, and what it can be, for visitors, residents, and investors. The vibrancy of downtown Winnipeg leaves a lasting impression on everyone who spends time within it that our city is prosperous, inviting, and successful. Winnipeg’s past and present is rooted in the downtown and as a hub of innovation and collaboration, our downtown matters for the future of all Winnipeggers.

THE PANDEMIC’S IMPACTS ON DOWNTOWN

Over the last two decades, downtown Winnipeg experienced a resurgence. This momentum saw the downtown’s potential being fulfilled with more diverse and vibrant districts and more people living, working, and playing in our city’s centre. The pandemic has slowed some of that momentum. COVID-19 impacted the livelihood of downtown businesses more acutely than elsewhere in Winnipeg and disproportionately affected Winnipeggers facing poverty and systemic barriers, many of whom reside downtown.

THE PAST MONTHS

In February 2021, a Downtown Recovery Strategy working group was formed to assess and address the pandemic’s impacts on the businesses and communities in downtown Winnipeg. The working group is comprised of three downtown business improvement zone agencies Downtown Winnipeg BIZ, the Exchange District BIZ, and the West End BIZ; CentreVenture Development Corporation; Tourism Winnipeg; and, City of Winnipeg planning staff.

In July 2021, the working group released a [State of the Downtown](#) report which captured the quantitative impacts of the pandemic to date, highlighted the impacts on the people behind the numbers, and included immediate calls to action. From May to September, more than 20 roundtable discussions were conducted, reaching 110 people from various community sectors downtown including large employers; poverty reduction and community support agencies; restaurant and retail businesses; real estate professionals and developers; tourism, entertainment, and arts organizations; educational institutions; and downtown residents.

The research and critical discussions undertaken by the Downtown Strategy Recovery working group have informed and shaped the framework being proposed for the Downtown Recovery Strategy.

THE NOW

It is clear that the impacts of the pandemic have acutely affected Winnipeg’s downtown an overcoming these impacts will require immediate and long-term commitment, visionary leadership, and collective action. Some of these impacts may be lasting or structural, such as the future of office work in a time where remote work is more readily undertaken. The businesses that are integral to our downtown, and the people who live, shop and explore there, need our continued commitment to implementing and accelerating the downtown revitalization strategies that were working well pre-pandemic. Winnipeg’s downtown requires us to collectively build a more supportive, equitable, and inclusive community.

The past year and a half has been arduous; Winnipeg’s downtown has demonstrated its resiliency in the past and it will continue to do so into the future. A bold, collaborative Downtown Recovery Strategy will provide our downtown with the investments and supports that it needs to continue growing as a creative, innovative, and prosperous centre, that benefits all of Winnipeg.

The Framework

Three key principles guide the framework for the Downtown Recovery Strategy, will inform the detailed design of all strategic actions, and will provide a foundation for measuring success:

- 1. Local economy** – Manitoba-owned, independent, and small businesses are the backbone of downtown’s economy and critical to maintaining and increasing the community’s vibrancy.
- 2. Social inclusion** – Downtown is a place where everyone feels a sense of belonging and where Truth and Reconciliation is integral to business and community life.
- 3. Arts and culture** – Artists are a sustaining force downtown and a prosperous cultural sector is essential to inviting people to shop, play, live, and work downtown.

The framework establishes high-impact strategic actions for the next three years in five overlapping and complementary streams of activity: **revitalizing places; energizing spaces; supporting people; living downtown; and building business.** To achieve our goals and best position Winnipeg’s downtown for future success, collective and collaborative action is required between all levels of government and among all downtown community sectors.

NEXT STEPS

Building up a strong and resilient downtown that has been uniquely affected by COVID-19 will require a dedicated, visionary, and skilled team to lead, implement, and assess the impacts of the Downtown Recovery Strategy.

Named the **Downtown Action Team**, the team will include the organizations on the Downtown Recovery Strategy working group, representatives from poverty reduction and community support agencies, and members from the arts and cultural sectors. Key responsibilities of the Downtown Action Team will include:

- Conducting further consultation on the detailed design of the actions proposed in this framework document;
- Collaborating and co-designing the implementation strategy with the organizations, experts, and communities impacted by the actions;
- Taking accountability for the strategy’s actions to ensure alignment and coordination;
- Establishing outcome measures;
- Providing consistent public reporting; and,
- Working collectively to address policy barriers and opportunities through implementation.

THE INVESTMENT AND RETURN

The Downtown Recovery strategy will be an innovative and intensive three-year, coordinated action and investment plan to kick-start downtown recovery post-pandemic. A total investment of \$90 million in the Downtown Recovery Strategy is being requested from the three levels of government, that will generate more than \$300 million in private sector investment. Collectively, this community effort will create a cleaner, safer, and more prosperous downtown that builds the local economy, achieves greater social inclusion, and reinvigorates downtown as the centre of arts and culture in Winnipeg.

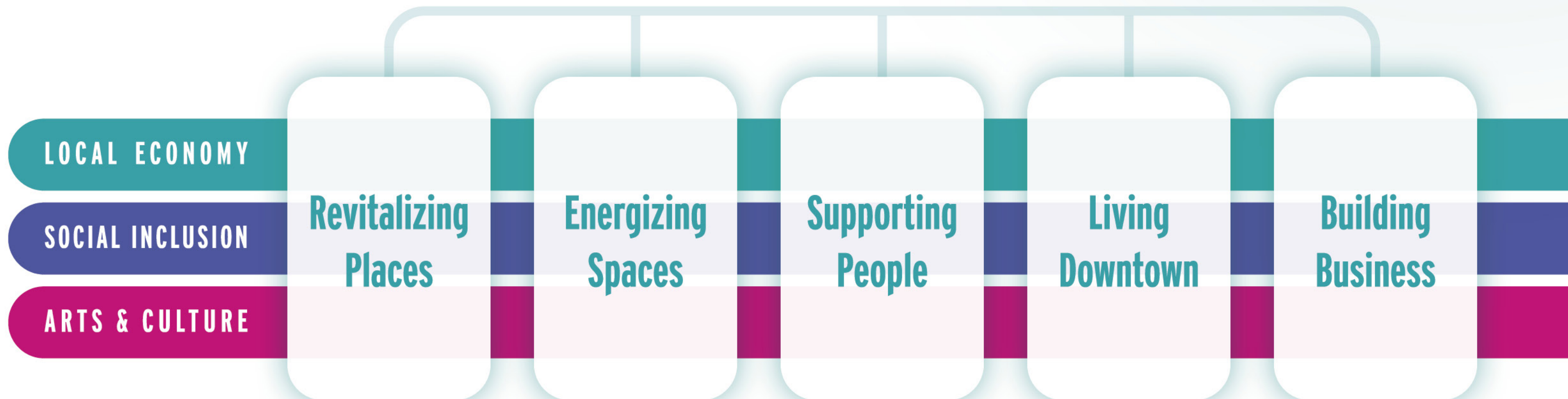
STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

The Downtown Recovery Strategy is designed to align with, and support, the City of Winnipeg’s upcoming Downtown Plan By-Law, Poverty Reduction Strategy, and Transportation and Transit Master Plans. Working together, these strategies and plans will create a powerful synergy to invigorate downtown’s social and economic development. Drawing on the expertise, knowledge and passion found across downtown networks, the Downtown Recovery Strategy will be well-positioned to connect with and inspire the community.

Winnipeg's downtown recovery strategy framework

STRATEGY STREAMS

Tightly focused along 5 streams, these high impact strategic investments will be implemented on the ground by agile downtown agencies over 3 years. Each stream is complementary and collaborative with the others, multiplying our return on investment.



Stream One: Revitalizing Places



Since the pandemic’s onset, Winnipeggers have turned to the outdoors to recharge and re-energize themselves during a strenuous time. The city’s outdoor spaces have provided essential places for residents to safely reconnect with each other; re-establish connection with friends, family, and co-workers; and find refuge from the stress of living through a global pandemic.

We have been reminded anew that downtown’s public parks, plazas and streetscapes are its greatest tangible assets that create space for exploring the benefits of economic development, cultural creativity, and personal potential. Downtown’s public places spark tourists’ interest in exploring downtown and create lasting memories; attract budding entrepreneurs and established companies to secure office spaces and fulfill their innovative visions; and create a vibrant and energized neighbourhood that makes people want to live downtown.

With fewer people regularly visiting and working downtown, the tired and neglected infrastructure of these places has never been more apparent. The disinvestment over past years poses a significant, but not insurmountable, challenge to economic recovery. For Winnipeg’s downtown to prosper, increased long-term investment is required.

Action Areas:

- a) Prioritize tree planting, sidewalk repair, lighting, and eliminating accessibility barriers on key pedestrian corridors.
- b) Invest in high impact infrastructure projects to improve destinations and better connect and sustain downtown’s distinct districts, while encouraging surrounding economic investment. Examples include:
 - Air Canada Park Redevelopment
 - Broadway Median Renewal
 - Market Lands Public Realm
 - SHED to Exchange District Connection
 - Alexander Docks Phase One
 - Central Park Upgrades
- c) Design and implement a new accessible and inclusive wayfinding strategy for downtown.
- d) Host community clean-up events and develop a rapid-response public space cleanliness strategy or service.



Stream Two: Energizing Spaces

Downtown is our city’s preeminent destination for arts, culture, entertainment, and is a hub of creative innovation. Every Winnipegger and visitor will find something that sparks their interest and creates a memorable experience for them downtown—whether it is the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the Manitoba Theatre Centre, Nuit Blanche, the Winnipeg Jets, or countless other venues or events.

The pandemic altered our ability to gather, shifting many of our regular in-person activities to take place virtually. These changes have impacted downtown’s creative, tourism, and hospitality sectors in ways that no one could have planned for or expected. Critical gathering places such as performance halls, exhibition spaces, and cultural facilities were among the first to close at the onset of the pandemic and the last to re-open. Recovery will take time, but it is possible.

To build back a better and stronger downtown, Winnipeggers will need to be reminded of the tremendous value that downtown’s assets offer them and be attracted to engage in downtown in new and imaginative ways.



Action Areas

- a) Create a ‘Downtown Events Fund’ to help existing festivals adapt to hosting large gatherings that ensure public safety and respond to the lasting effects of the pandemic. The fund will also seed new and expanded public events that will fill downtown spaces with Winnipeggers and tourists once again. Initiatives that raise downtown business revenue, advance cultural understanding and reconciliation, and increase winter visitation will be the focus of this fund.
- b) Establish a ‘Pop-Up Spaces Program’, that includes moveable and re-useable capital infrastructure, to activate four-season, under-utilized spaces throughout the downtown, creating new reasons to visit and experience downtown.
- c) Launch a multi-faceted ‘Spend Downtown’ marketing campaign, providing engaging cross-promotional opportunities to support existing retail, hospitality, and arts and cultural businesses.

Stream Three: Supporting People

Downtown Winnipeg is a critical part of our city in multi-faceted ways. Importantly, it is a place where Winnipeggers living in poverty access many of the supports and services they need. During the pandemic, the realities and challenges of people experiencing unemployment, homelessness, or substance use disorders in our downtown have continued.

The pandemic has illuminated the insufficient systems, policies, and investments that cause far too many people in our city to experience extreme hardship and duress. Throughout the past year and a half, a strong level of collaboration has emerged among agencies working together to support people downtown during this difficult time. Springing forth from those collaborations is an encouragingly high level of optimism that effective, long-term solutions supporting people can be developed.

The Downtown Recovery Strategy alone cannot address the underlying systemic and structural causes of poverty and marginalization in Winnipeg. However, it can provide some immediate actionable items that will contribute to creating a more supportive downtown community, one committed to treating people with dignity and ensuring their needs are met and rights are respected.



Action Areas:

- a) Expand community outreach presence on the streets.
- b) Collaborate with existing community partners to develop and secure long-term sustainable funding for low-barrier 24-hour safe spaces and prioritize supporting Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people.
- c) Adopt a harm reduction approach and provide safe amenities such as additional public washrooms and drinking water locations throughout the downtown.
- d) Establish connections between downtown businesses and community-based groups that serve Winnipeggers facing poverty to reduce stigma, deepen understanding, and enhance collaboration.

Stream Four: Living Downtown

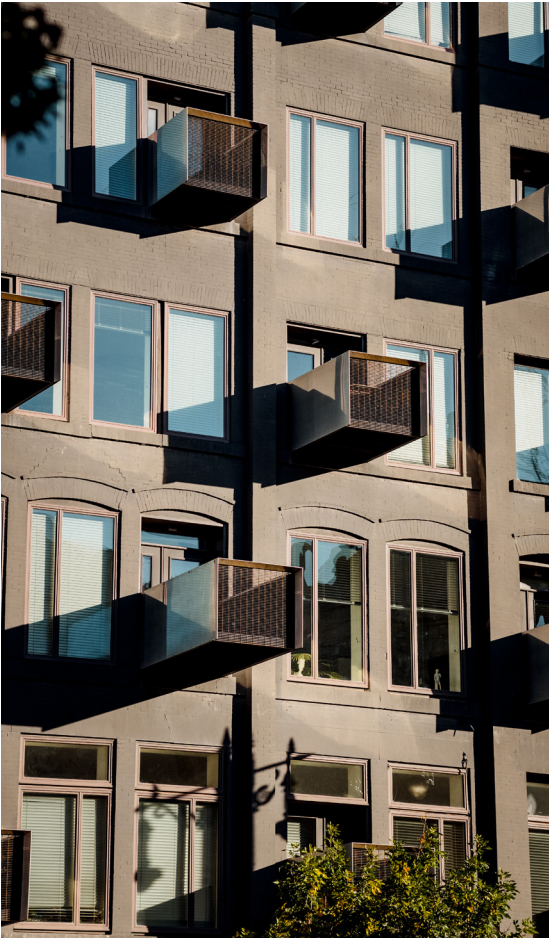
Those who live in downtown Winnipeg have a panoramic view of the heart of the city. Over the last 20 years, Winnipeg has enacted a successful public-private partnership geared to increasing the number of people who call downtown home and creating a 24-hour population, thus improving the community’s safety and vibrancy. The results of this effort has been the creation of nearly 5,000 new homes for an additional 8,000 downtown neighbourhood residents.

The pandemic has reinforced the need to continue this housing strategy and to increase the number of people who support downtown businesses outside of typical office hours. The imperative to end chronic homelessness has never been stronger and will require investments in transitional and low-barrier housing.

Downtown’s recovery is intertwined with the need for a range of new housing options. Everyone has the right to adequate housing and creating housing with a range of affordable options will ensure that downtown is a vibrant and inclusive place to live.

Action Areas:

- a) Initiate 1,500 new mixed-income downtown housing units over the next three years using tax increment financing.
- b) Augment affordable housing initiatives to overcome hurdles to developing low-barrier, transitional, and social housing, such as the need for downtown land or building acquisition.
- c) Develop and align a marketing plan with downtown’s educational institutions to match students with new downtown living options.
- d) Advocate for and support efforts to restart and increase international immigration to Winnipeg.



Stream Five: Building Business



Actions Areas:

- a) Develop a campaign to support and encourage companies to bring workers back downtown and to attract new companies to locate downtown, including methods for safe return and promotion of the unique amenities and offerings in the downtown.
- b) Establish a robust ground floor incubation strategy to mentor and match emerging businesses with empty downtown storefront locations.
- c) Implement a façade improvement program to redress dilapidated storefronts and to provide existing storefront businesses with support to reach out into the public realm, creating more inviting and attractive entries.
- d) Replenish CentreVenture’s gap financing fund in support of challenging revitalization projects, including surface parking lot redevelopment.

Over the last decade, downtown’s districts experienced an exciting growth in business confidence that coincided with new construction projects and creative retail and hospitality concepts. Cost barriers to downtown development were being addressed through innovative tax credit and gap financing programs. Downtown was moving in a visionary direction, becoming a more viable and attractive place to invest in, and grow, businesses.

The pandemic has shaken that confidence—new project starts are waning and storefront businesses are experiencing significant revenue losses, and in some cases, closures. Welcoming workers back downtown and reactivating retail storefronts and underutilized buildings or sites will be essential to building back business investment and momentum.



Thank you

Our downtown
will recover
through collective
leadership and
collaborative
action.

There are many Winnipeggers who contributed to this report. The Downtown Recovery Strategy working group would like to thank each individual and organization that has participated in roundtable discussions and interviews to date as well as the City of Winnipeg for its guidance and support. We have heard so many great ideas and solutions to aid in the economic and social recovery of our downtown. There is clearly a commitment in our city to working together for a strong downtown community. Thank you for being a part of something bigger than any one organization or effort.

