Three Challenges to Overcome

Notwithstanding the potential, the challenges facing the desired evolution of Downtown Belleville are multi-faceted and daunting. There are three challenges to realizing the Master Plan for Downtown Belleville that must be overcome, they are:

1. Lack of Market Support

There is a general lack of market support for widespread redevelopment of retail uses, or any other large scale projects. The market problem is multi-faceted, such that:

- an ever eroding retail base that will be difficult to maintain without a commitment to attract new businesses and a strategy to attract shoppers/tourists from within the Municipality and beyond;
- tremendous competition from other historic downtowns and new format retail centres throughout eastern Ontario; and,
- generally low growth rates and historically stable housing prices make substantial new development and major redevelopment projects unlikely.

2. Eroding Urban Character

The existing urban character of Downtown Belleville is eroding, requiring a complete repositioning of the Downtown in terms of its planned function and the political will to achieve success. The Downtown does not take advantage of its key attributes - its historic character, waterfront and riverfront.

3. Poor Image

Community perceptions of Downtown Belleville are poor, which is a significant deterrent to attracting shopping traffic and major private sector investment.

These challenges will ensure that substantial changes within Downtown Belleville will be incremental, and will occur over a very long time frame. It is therefore, the purpose of this Implementation Strategy to provide guidance with respect to the necessary tools for the Municipality to consider for both stimulating and managing change over time.

Five Keys to Success

Increasingly, there is evidence that a much more comprehensive way of planning for the future is required if the planned evolution of Downtown Belleville is to be achieved. The key triggers for success for establishing the environment for change must include a complex combination of political will, investment in infrastructure, public buildings and public spaces and a comprehensive package of land use planning policies, including development incentives. In summary, there are five keys to success:

1. **Political will is critical**
   The Municipality, in partnership with the BIA, must establish and champion the Master Plan for Downtown Belleville. The partnership must continue to be the pioneer, willing to share in the risk of change and support the private sector. Without political will, the desired evolution simply will not materialize.

2. **The public sector must continue to lead through action**
   Both the public and private sectors have a role to play in realizing the Master Plan for Downtown Belleville. However, the public sector has to lead the way by showing an obvious commitment to change by investing in the quality of the public realm. This is especially true in the early stages of development, where the onus will be on the public sector to show new direction and to provide evidence of a lasting commitment to the adaptation of the Downtown into a diverse, high quality, pedestrian-friendly district. Private development initiatives can be expected only in response to a demonstrated commitment of the public initiative.

3. **An array of planning and financial tools will be required**
   It is important to recognize that some financial incentive tools are already in place but a complex combination of actions and additional tools will be required to effectively stimulate change in Downtown Belleville. No action or tool, on its own, will have a sufficient impact on the achievement of municipal goals and revitalization objectives.

   The actions or tools that will have the greatest impact are the construction of infrastructure, such as public buildings (including parking garages) and other public realm improvements (streetscapes and park development). The funding and financing for these actions and tools and the political will to implement them will be of paramount importance to Downtown revitalization.

4. Cooperation among all stakeholders is required

The process of achieving the Master Plan for Downtown Belleville will require substantial cooperation among all Municipal staff departments, Council, the Business Improvement Association ("BIA"), business owners, property owners and the residents of Belleville. With such a diverse range of interests and expectations, clear communications about the Master Plan and the responsibilities for the achievement of that vision will be required. Part of an enhanced strategy for communications will be a requirement for ongoing accountability - a report card on improvements at all levels.

5. Success takes commitment, cooperation and time

The process of achieving the Master Plan for Downtown Belleville will not be quick, nor will it be a result of one single action. It is always a complex combination of actions, players and time. There is no set formula for success.

While it is understood that the public sector must lead, it is also understood that cooperation and coordination among all levels of government, the BIA, landowners and business operators is required to facilitate change. Consequently, the decisions that the public makes every day related to where they live, where they work, where they shop, as well as how they travel and what they do in their spare time will also play a role in generating change. The magnitude of this fundamental repositioning ensures that the complexity of issues and the complexity of solutions are magnified.

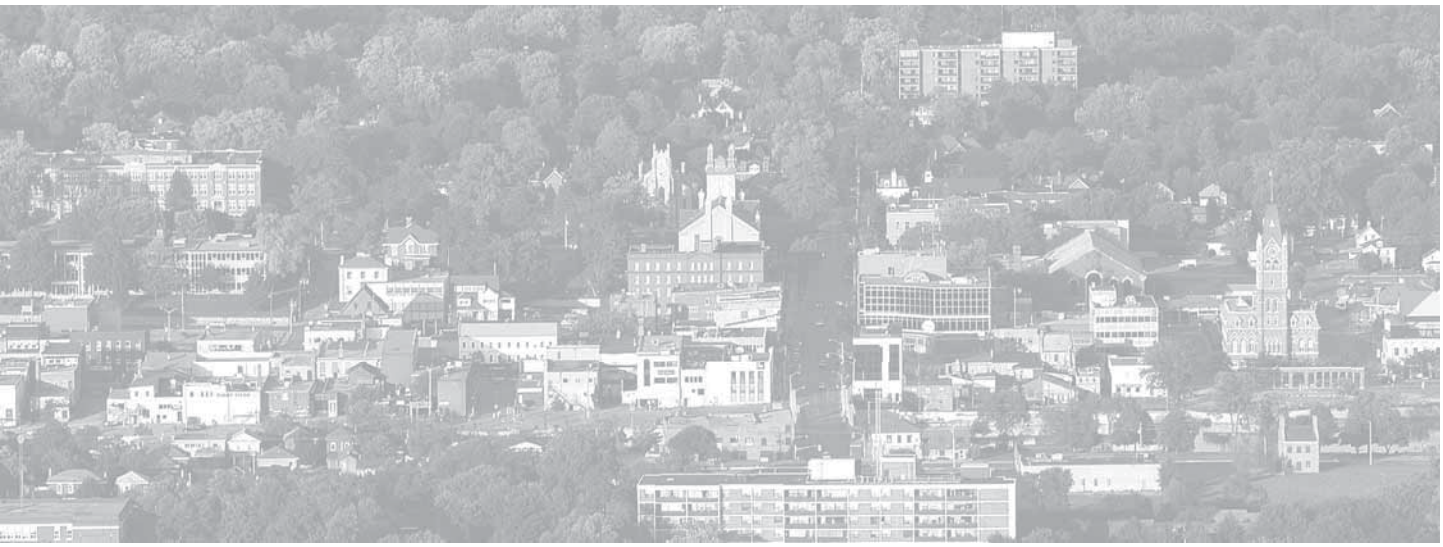
Ten Priority Actions

A comprehensive implementation strategy starts with tools that the Municipality can use to facilitate and manage change. This Action Plan suggests a list of activities that the City of Belleville must consider, if success even in the long-term, is to be achieved. Each of the tools is intended to achieve one or more of the following three objectives:

- **Market Demand Enhancement** - Tools in this category come in different scales, ranging from streetscape improvements to the development of public buildings and facilities, with a corresponding scale of impact on the market attractiveness for new development/redevelopment. New development can be attracted to Downtown Belleville through the development of public infrastructure. While there is typically a large capital cost, new development can have considerable positive impact on market demand for more intensified uses in proximity to that infrastructure investment.

- **Development Cost Reductions** - A number of tools in this category are already in place and are intended to reduce the development costs incurred by private developers, which in effect, increases the likelihood of development of the type desired within Downtown Belleville. These programs should continue and other potential reductions explored as there is evidence to support the idea that at the very least, financial instruments (development charges, taxation) should not discourage development or redevelopment.

- **Development Risk Reduction** – These tools are expected to reduce the risk for private developers. In other words, a private developer wishing to seek approval of development within Downtown Belleville will be more likely to develop if there is municipal support for the vision and more certainty – and less time consumed - surrounding the approval process. As-of-right approvals (as established through the implementing zoning by-law), and political will to support the vision are key components in reducing private sector risk.



Establish the environment for change

The public sector needs to work in a coordinated and cooperative manner to implement this required change in Downtown Belleville. The Municipality must be the promoter of change. It must be the pioneer, ready to be the first to develop. It must continue to dedicate substantial funds for the building of civic buildings, the building of infrastructure and offering of financial incentives to the private sector. The Municipality must also pay close attention to the initial key projects, since their success is critical to the long-term achievement of the Municipality's goals. There must also be a firm commitment to ongoing maintenance and property standards. Image is a critical component of success. Actions for consideration include:

1. Adopt the Master Plan

Without a long-term vision, there is no direction for making decisions. Without a set of common objectives and principles, ongoing change will be without focus. Without a comprehensive Master Plan for the future no one will understand the interrelationships between incremental change and the achievement of success.

The adoption of the Master Plan for Downtown Belleville is a critical first step in managing positive change. It will establish the framework for future development and investment decisions. The Master Plan will provide a benchmark for measuring success and creating excitement over the Downtown's future.

2. Improve the Public Realm

The public realm includes the road right-of-ways, public open space and facilities and the Riverfront lands. It is a requirement for the successful realization of a more diverse and intense Downtown that the public realm be dramatically enhanced to attract new residents and businesses.

These new residents and businesses will be looking for a high quality urban environment. Basically, they will be trading space (large buildings on large lots with plenty of surface parking) for a finer grained, higher quality character and an enhanced array of shopping, cultural, entertainment and housing options typical of a successful Downtown. The public sector will be responsible for starting this evolution.

3. Build Public Buildings and Facilities

The Municipality maintains a range of facilities in Downtown Belleville. These types of investments are crucial to the Downtown, given the clear message they send to the private sector of the Municipality's capital investment (i.e. risk) in the future of the Downtown.

Decisions about where new public educational, cultural, administrative, recreational and health care buildings and facilities are located need to be considered strategically. These types of buildings and facilities create tremendous spin off effects that are crucial to the establishment of a strong and healthy Downtown. Further, they also have a tremendous stimulative effect on private sector development decisions.

Develop a planning policy framework that facilitates and manages change

The Municipality should approve an over arching set of planning policies and design guidelines for the entire Downtown Belleville based on the recommendations in this report. These policies and guidelines will articulate public expectations and will add certainty in the approval process.

4. Establish a Planning Policy Regime that Facilitates Redevelopment

It is expected that the current planning policy regime in place in Downtown Belleville is out of date. A new approach is required that will facilitate change. It is expected that a new planning policy regime would:

- establish the role and function of Downtown Belleville within the broader Municipal context;
- provide clear statements of intent for land uses and development forms throughout Downtown Belleville; and
- include a comprehensive set of Design Guidelines aimed at achieving appropriate development within Downtown Belleville.

5. Enhance the Financial Incentives Package

In discussions about planning strategies that facilitate redevelopment through an incentives program, the use of Community Improvement Plans (CIP) is always identified as one of the major planning tools available to municipalities. A CIP is already in place for the Downtown.

This approach is an important one. The establishment of the incentives package by the Municipality through the CIP legislation can be used as a "carrot" to ensure conformity with the Downtown Belleville vision. Simply stated, to gain access to the incentives, you must conform to the stated objectives of the Municipality, some of which may not always be fully articulated in the statutory planning documents.

The CIP has enabled a number of programs that are currently in place, including:

- Redevelopment Tax Rebate Program - a program to provide grants that would offset increases in municipal property taxes that are as a result of an increase in assessment due to redevelopment;
- Planning and Development Fees Rebate Program - a program that provides rebates of various municipal application fees;
- Facade Improvement Grant Program - a program to provide grants for the sensitive redesign of existing building facades to enhance the image of the area;

Additional programs that can be considered in the Downtown's CIP may include:

- Study Grant Program - a program that provides grants to offset the cost of required studies such as traffic impact studies, servicing studies, archaeological surveys, site contamination and remediation studies;
- Landscape Improvement Grant Program - a program to promote the establishment of improved landscaping to enhance the image of the area;
- Residential Loan/Grant Program - a program to improve existing residential properties and/or convert other buildings to residential use;
- Commercial Loan/Grant Program - a program to improve existing commercial properties;
- Heritage Grant Program - a program to assist with the improvement of heritage buildings for adaptive reuse;
- Municipal Property Acquisition/Rehabilitation Program - a program for the Municipality to acquire and/or rehabilitate properties that are strategically located either directly or in partnership with other government agencies or the private sector; and,
- Realty Tax Arrears Cancellation Program - a program to allow the Municipality to cancel outstanding realty taxes to help facilitate redevelopment. This program can be initiated in conjunction with School Boards.

6. Create a Priority Plan for Capital Improvements

The level of financial commitment to achieve the new vision for Downtown Belleville will be significant, and will be required over the long term. As such, a Priority Plan is required to ensure that public sector investment is focused in the locations where redevelopment is required in the short term and strategically staged over the long-term. (see next section)

7. Pre-Zone Lands in Conformity with the Downtown Master Plan

The Municipality must become a supporter of development in conformity with planning policies and zoning. As such, the onus to achieve the vision is shared by the public and private sectors through the pre-zoning exercise.

Assist the private sector in responding to the market

The private sector will respond to municipal initiatives only once it can be satisfied that the combination of infrastructure building and any incentives package has substantially reduced the costs/risks of development to ensure a reasonable return on investment. Once the environment for redevelopment has been established, the "critical mass" will, itself, begin to entice new residents and businesses to want or demand to locate within the Downtown Belleville without the need for further government intervention. Key actions to consider include:

8. Reduce Development Charges/Taxation Rates

- Monitor the effectiveness of the reductions in the Development Charges for parts of the Downtown and adjacent areas in encouraging new development interest. Consider further rate modifications and apply them in accordance with priority areas for investment in the Downtown.

- Examine property tax rates to determine if they reflect the real cost of providing services within Downtown Belleville, in comparison with other areas of the City.

9. Streamline the Development Approval Process

The City should continue to streamline the development approvals process. Development applications that conform to the Official Plan, and implementing zoning should be supported by the Municipality and should be reviewed through an expedited site plan review process.

The Municipality should not require additional detailed study of development applications that achieve their approved planning and design objectives. More appropriately, site specific engineering analyses should be carried out by the Municipality if a development application is in conformity with the Municipality's objectives, policies and regulations.

10. Support the BIA in Preparation of a Marketing Strategy

The BIA should prepare a marketing strategy designed to enhance recognition of Downtown Belleville as a special destination. Shoppers, new retail businesses and new residents must be attracted to help sustain the various retail functions of the Downtown. As popularity grows, supporting facilities such as parking and pedestrian amenities will require enhancement. A typical marketing strategy breaks down into three main topic areas:

1. **Product Development** - Product development ideas are suggestions regarding ways in which the mix of retail and service businesses, as well as the types of cultural, recreational and entertainment activities available, could be enhanced to offer a greater range and variety of reasons to come to Downtown Belleville. Suggestions include:

- increasing the critical mass of activities available in Downtown Belleville by diversifying the retail and services mix and by developing a substantial resident population;

- promoting the availability of redevelopment properties to potential investors by working with the Municipality's Economic Development Department to recruit appropriate private sector investment; and,

- establishing annual events that are specifically targeted to attracting people from around the broader region to Downtown Belleville;

2. **Marketing and Promotion** - With fundamental improvements in the nature of the product available to residents and businesses alike, the next step is to market and promote Downtown Belleville. The success of the Downtown as a shopping area relies on a coordinated approach; and,

3. **Implementation** - Implementation encompasses a number of considerations, including funding, human resources requirements, organization and coordination. In effect, these components represent all of the considerations involved in turning the product development and marketing and promotion ideas into reality.

The recommended priority for capital improvements in the Master Plan should be considered to be dynamic and could be changed in response to plans and projects by other agencies and individuals that may present opportunities to combine efforts and maximize benefits.

In general, the community should set a high priority on an improvement when it can help support private development that is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Master Plan and as presented in The Guiding Framework document.

Criteria for Assessing Projects and Programs

There will be times when decision-makers need to reassess the priority of a recommended action or one of the tasks necessary to implement it. When this occurs, the community should use the following criteria. Projects that meet several of the criteria should be given the highest priority for short-term implementation.

Financing Criteria

1. The project will generate funds to cover portions of development costs. (for example, resulting uses will generate user fees, rental income or sales tax revenues),

2. The project will leverage investment from other sources. (for example, potential for public/-private partnerships or Federal funding programs that will match municipal spending),

3. Funding programs are available to cover portions of development costs,

4. The project fits within a larger capital improvement project, such that cost savings will be realized (for example, sidewalks could be constructed when a street is to be re-paved),

5. Funding for maintenance costs of the improvement are provided (this is an important consideration for streetscape, gateways and parks improvements), and

6. The project yields significant results for the level of investment.

Location Criteria

7. The project is located in a Focus Area of the Districts and Neighbourhood plan,

8. The project will have high public visibility (For example, a project visible along Front, Dundas or Pinnacle streets).