



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

Briefing Note

To: Council

File No.: 1407-20

From: Director of Development Services

Date: February 12, 2025

Subject: Downtown Vitalization Local Area Plan Phase 1 Update

PURPOSE: To update Council on Phase 1 of the Downtown Vitalization Local Area Plan (DVLAP) Communication Strategy.

BACKGROUND:

Council received the Downtown Vitalization Local Area Plan Communication Strategy at the October 23, 2024 regular meeting of Council and endorsed the plan (Attachment 1).

Staff and Consultants have now concluded Phase 1 of the communication strategy and this report outlines what we heard from the working group. What we heard forms the planning principles that will guide the development of the DVLAP over the next few months as the project moves into Phase 2.

DISCUSSION:

Phase 1 of the project created a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis for the plan area (Attachment 2). During this process four districts with unique characteristics and planning opportunities were identified within the plan boundaries as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Planning Districts



The SWOT document provides situational analysis of the plan area as a whole as well as for the distinct districts and includes an inventory of land use, infrastructure and current development. The SWOT reviews existing documents, capital projects and infrastructure to identify big ideas to guide the development of the plan. The process identified the following Big Ideas:

- Reimagining the riverfront
- Activating Harmston Park and surrounding
- Strengthening the Downtown core
- Fitzgerald Corridor as a key corridor with unique place making and design considerations
- Remaining focused on implementing a number of the Downtown Playbook (2016) priorities including enhancing public spaces, improving connectivity, and supporting cohesive development.

As part of Phase 1 project engagement, working group members identified in the *Downtown Playbook: A Partnership Action Plan* (2016) were contacted for focused interviews in order to ensure the project team has a more complete understanding of study area attributes and external factors impacting the project's success. These working group members are: Downtown Courtenay Business Improvement Association, Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce, Comox Valley Art Gallery, Comox Valley Arts, Sid Williams Theatre Society, Courtenay and District Museum and Palaeontology Centre, and two property owners (Central Builders properties and property owner of a number of properties adjacent to Harmston Park).

In preparation for the interviews, the SWOT was distributed to the working group members with the following questions:

- Looking at the SWOT, what's most important? Should we be elevating any of these identified issues or opportunities based on your perspective and/or specific interests?
- Did we miss anything?
- Is there anything you see in the SWOT that is no longer relevant or should be removed?

The interviews were conducted with each group to understand if the SWOT analysis captured the key ideas for the downtown and what aspects of the SWOT analysis required further technical review for the development of the DVLAP. The consultants produced a "What We Heard" document which is Attachment 3 to this report and Table 1 below summarizes the key findings.

Table 1 Key Interview Findings

Key Themes: What We Heard from Interest-Holder Interviews	Planning & Design Considerations: How Feedback Can Inform the LAP Process
Recognize the Cultural District as a Focal Point	Identify the cultural district as a centralized activity hub/focal point and an existing gateway to downtown
Bring People Downtown	To support implementation of the LAP, the City may consider initiatives and investment to encourage downtown visitation such as expanded utility for events/programming, increased transit access, interpretive/historic signage, public art, wayfinding, and public realm enhancements

Key Themes: What We Heard from Interest-Holder Interviews	Planning & Design Considerations: How Feedback Can Inform the LAP Process
Enhance Greenspaces	Consider differences in type, distribution and function of parkland and greenspace in downtown (i.e., for recreation, public realm, access to nature, event programming)
Support Housing Development & Local Businesses	Consider opportunities to support denser forms of housing development in the downtown and pedestrian focused streets to enhance walkability and liveability
Utilize Strength of Community Groups & Potential Partnerships	Include community group involvement as a strength to implementation of the LAP and explore opportunities with KFN and other planning partners
Align with other Plans & Strategies	Ensure that strategic objectives within the Cultural Plan and provincial housing legislation are referenced and/or integrated into all downtown planning efforts

The findings from both the SWOT analysis and the “What We Heard Report” confirm that the vision and number of specific ideas and projects for the downtown as identified in the Downtown Playbook (2016) and incorporated into the Official Community Plan (OCP) remain a strong foundation for the development of the DVLAP. The plan when completed will focus on identifying key projects to include in future financial planning and implementation.

As part of Phase 1 a project page has been developed to launch on Social PinPoint which provides a project schedule, documents, how to provide comments or questions, and how the public can get involved. This project page for the DVLAP can be found on engagemoxvalley.ca/Courtenay.

Staff have reached out to K’omoks First Nation (KFN) to initiate a discussion with KFN on preferred engagement and partnership approach.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

The table below provides an overview of the next stages of DVLAP planning process including communication and engagement milestones and timelines.

Tasks	Estimated Timeline
PHASE 2: Key Directions & Concept Plan	
Prepare Urban Design Framework and draft policies for public and interest holder input including the following but not limited to: project implementation options for each District, overall hierarchy of public spaces, green network, circulation, place-making strategy, areas of cultural value, new residential and mixed-use development location and massing, reimagining vacant properties.	February – March 2025

Public Interest and Intergovernmental engagement session. A one-day session that will bring together interest holders, intergovernmental interests and the general public through the use of creative engagement techniques similar to the OCP 2020 Ideas Fair. Interest holders including intergovernmental will have a separate session for more technical discussion on the same day. (public open house)	April 2025
Virtual Engagement (Social PinPoint): Online survey and input opportunity	Will run for two weeks around the time of the public open house
What We Heard Summary and Draft DVLAP for Council consideration	May 2025
PHASE 3: Refinement & Draft Plan	
Virtual Engagement (Social PinPoint) with focused questions on plan refinement	June 2025
Public Interest and Intergovernmental follow-up meeting	June 2025
Staff report to Council on engagement findings and recommended DVLAP for adoption	August /September 2025

RECOMMENDATION: THAT Council receive the “Downtown Vitalization Local Area Plan Phase 1 Update”.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. October 23, 2024 staff report “Downtown Local Area Plan Communication Strategy and Workplan and endorsed the community strategy”
2. Courtenay Downtown & Harmston Park Local Area Plan – SWOT Analysis
3. Phase 1 What We Heard Report

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