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from insight to impact

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City Of Courtenay
Downtown Local Area Plan
What We Heard Report - Phase 1

January 2025

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The City of Courtenay is evolving to meet the needs of a growing community and accommodate new residents and businesses through a comprehensive approach to land use and community planning in the downtown core.

Building upon the vision established by the Official Community Plan (OCP, 2022) and the Downtown Courtenay Playbook (2016), the **Local Area Plan (LAP) for Downtown and Harmston Park** will provide a detailed understanding of the physical constraints and opportunities to support community development and implementation in the downtown.

By strategically guiding development, partnerships, and capital projects, the LAP will include actions to support residential and commercial growth, activation of civic spaces and programming, and more connection through downtown so that Downtown Courtenay and Harmston Park can become a vibrant, beating heart of the community.

To facilitate more detailed exploration, the LAP is organized into four distinct 'districts' – each representing unique characteristics and opportunities within the broader study area – including: the Riverfront, the Downtown, the Fitzgerald Corridor and Harmston Park.



Downtown LAP 'SWOT' Analysis

A 'SWOT' analysis of the study area was undertaken as a first step and included policy context and physical analysis of each district, highlighting strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for community planning. The SWOT Analysis provided the basis for discussion and initial feedback in this first phase of engagement.

ENGAGEMENT PURPOSE

Public and interest-holder engagement will support the planning and design efforts and communication across all three project phases. Engagement opportunities will be used to gain a better baseline understanding of the study area (phase 1), to inform design directions and draft concepts (phase 2), and to help refine the final LAP and its implementation (phase 3).

Engagement in Phase 1 focused on sharing the Downtown LAP SWOT Analysis with key interest-holders and ensuring the project team has a more complete understanding of study area attributes and external factors impacting the project's success.

Feedback from Phase 1 informed the final SWOT Analysis, the Communications and Engagement Strategy, and the Draft Design Framework.

	PHASE 1 DESIGN FOUNDATIONS	PHASE 2 KEY DIRECTIONS & CONCEPTS	PHASE 3 DRAFT PLAN & REFINEMENT
engagement	Interest-holder meetings	- Public Website Launch - Community Open House - Virtual Survey - Interest-holder follow up	- Virtual Survey - Interest-holder follow-up
outcomes	- Communications & Engagement Strategy - Final SWOT Analysis - Draft Design Framework	- Draft Downtown Local Area Plan - Public Engagement Report	Final Downtown Local Area Plan
	December 2024 – January 2025	February – March 2025	April - June 2025

ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

Interviews were scheduled with individuals and groups based on their availability and regular meeting times and were conducted by phone and/or videoconference. Participants were provided the draft Downtown LAP SWOT Analysis (SWOT) and associated questions ahead of time to help them prepare for the meeting.

Generally, each meeting included a brief project introduction from City staff to provide context, project background, and answer any clarifying questions about the project scope. MODUS then led the discussion by walking through key elements of the materials provided and recording feedback guided by 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?

Interview questions were intended to guide the conversation but were not explicitly answered as interest-holders provided general feedback based on their own priorities and experiences.

Five meetings and interviews in this first phase allowed the team to collect qualitative information from individuals and groups representing organizations most impacted by the future LAP. This included the following groups:

Organization	Method	Meeting Date
Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce	Interview (virtual)	December 20, 2024
Arts & Cultural Service Providers (Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce, Comox Valley Art Gallery, Comox Valley Arts, Sid Williams Theatre Society, Courtenay and District Museum and Palaeontology Centre)	Group Meeting and follow-up emails	December 5, 2024
Downtown Property Owners (2)	Interview (virtual) Interview (in-person)	December 19, 2024 December 20, 2024
Downtown Courtenay Business Improvement Association (DCBIA)	Group Meeting (in-person)	January 13, 2025

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

Through conversations with interest-holders, several key themes emerged that should be emphasized in the draft Design Framework. The chart below provides an overview of key themes identified from interviews and considerations to inform the planning and design process. This section also includes descriptions of each key theme and comments from different interest-holder groups.

Overview of What We Heard and Planning Response

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
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 First Nations 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

Recognize the Cultural District as a Focal Point

- Arts & culture providers stressed the importance of Courtenay's existing **community-built cultural and heritage assets**, including the theatre, art gallery, museum and Native Sons Hall. The LAP can better consolidate, connect and expand these spaces to further establish a cohesive Cultural District. This would strengthen its function as a focal point for downtown and its role in wellness, tourism and economic growth.

Planning & Design Considerations: Identify the cultural district as a centralized activity hub/focal point and an existing gateway to downtown

Bring People Downtown

- A key challenge identified by the Downtown BIA and Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce was the **limited access to power/utilities** in the downtown, limiting the number of spaces to host public events. This is also important for existing park programming such as the farmers market.
- Many interest-holders expressed the **limited parking capacity** as a current weakness in the downtown. More parking is needed to support visitation, especially for events and art and culture programming. There were suggestions to improve public transit options through a downtown shuttle (that is more frequent and accessible) in addition to "park and ride" lots located outside of the downtown.
- Strengthening the sense of place in the downtown was very important to arts and culture providers and Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce. More **wayfinding** can help lead visitors to and from key destinations, shops or public spaces within the downtown. As the LAP takes shape, the Downtown BIA commented on the need to unify the entire downtown as the '**heart of the Comox Valley**' and cautioned against placing too much focus on creating a unique character or branding for specific streets.
- Other public amenities can also help visitors enjoy the downtown and the riverfront. There were suggestions for more **seating** (benches, picnic tables, hammocks) along the riverfront and pedestrian pathways to enjoy the scenery as well as **shaded areas** with tree canopy (Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce).
- Along the riverfront, the Downtown BIA recommended additional amenities such as **washrooms, waste infrastructure** and **waterfront recreational activities** (i.e., kayaking, swimming, etc.) to encourage visitation. Designating space for **interpretive**

signage and public art (i.e. installations, sculptures, murals) - particularly along the riverfront - is a priority for some groups to enrich the city's vibrancy, build community identity, and work with local First Nations to reflect pre-colonial history of the land (Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce).

- Downtown Courtenay BIA emphasized the opportunity for downtown to be not only a local destination, but also a regional 'heart'. **Pedestrianizing sections of the downtown** and directing visitors to local businesses can support this vision, along with **expanding transit connections** and **cycling infrastructure** (i.e. bikeshare) to create more opportunities for people to access the area.
- One property owner identified **perception of safety** as a current barrier to downtown investment, visitation and residential growth. Cases of vandalism and vehicle break-ins were cited as examples that may deter people from spending time downtown.

Planning & Design Considerations: 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

Enhance Greenspaces

- Many interest-holders emphasized the goal to preserve and expand parkland and greenspace throughout downtown. The City can utilize finance tools like Development Cost Charges to ensure public amenities comes with growth (i.e. more green space with more housing density).
- One property owner commented on the opportunity to **expand Harmston Park** with higher density development, providing more green space for residents and recreational amenities.
- Suggestions included expansion of green and public gathering spaces that are closer to commercial streets to support retail and visibility of downtown businesses. **Public events in central green spaces** like Duncan Commons or Duncan Mews can help activate downtown, where Harmston Park is fairly removed from existing businesses (Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce).
- Throughout downtown, greenspace should be increased to **enhance the public realm** and enjoyment of the scenery/surroundings – through tree canopies, grassy areas, etc. (Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce).

Planning & Design Considerations: 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

- Downtown property owners, the Downtown Business Improvement Association and the Chamber of Commerce expressed support for **higher density development in downtown** to meet Courtenay's housing need, specifically around Harmston Park. This can be encouraged through **adjusting height restrictions** to allow for more storeys downtown and **streamlining development and permitting** (provincial archeology and environmental permits were mentioned as particularly challenging processes by one of the landowners).
- One property owner envisions **Harmston Park as a pedestrian-focused nodal** area by expanding both Mcphee Meadows Park and Harmston Park and closing off some laneways and arterial roads. Higher density development in this district could also create an opportunity for public housing (with BC Housing) and future civic projects, building more connection to the arts and cultural hub.
- To strengthen downtown as a key destination and support future residential density in the area, The Downtown BIA expressed interest in dedicating **5th Street as a high commercial** street that is pedestrian focused and closed to vehicles. This would require transportation studies, adequate and accessible parking nearby and could start with a pilot street closing during the summer months to test public interest and impact on businesses.
- Property owners also indicated opportunities for **development on City-owned or underutilized lands**. The Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce recognized the recent purchase of the hostel as an opportunity for the City to create more of an activated 'gateway' into the downtown. In the riverfront district, relocating industrial uses such as the Central Builders site could free up land for more riverfront access and/or development. A key challenge identified was the lack of industrial zoned land in the area, limiting where the existing site could be relocated.

Planning & Design Considerations: 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

- The involvement and **engagement of community groups** was identified as a strength to the process. These include partnerships between institutions such as the downtown farmer's market, Theatre, Museum, Downtown Courtenay BIA, etc. To ensure LAP meets diverse needs, it will be important to include Courtenay community groups and their networks in the planning through to implementation (Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce).
- Downtown BIA expressed the importance of planning lands, particularly around the riverfront, with **K'ómoks First Nation** and exploring opportunities with **Green Shores**.

Planning & Design Considerations: Include community group involvement as a strength to implementation of the LAP and explore opportunities with First Nations and other planning partners

Align with other Plans & Strategies

- Arts & culture providers noted that the LAP should be aligned with the recent **Cultural Strategic Plan**, which specifies facility improvements and investments, as well as the upcoming Cultural Facility Space Needs Assessment.
- The LAP should also respond to the updated **Official Community Plan** and **Small-Scale Multi-Unit Housing (SSMUH) requirements** to identify where growth can- and should- go within the downtown. The downtown is targeted area for future development, and it will be important to specify how much new housing this study area can support (Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce).

Planning & Design Considerations: Ensure that strategic objectives within the Cultural Plan and provincial housing legislation are referenced and/or integrated into all downtown planning efforts

NEXT STEPS

Interest-holder feedback will be used to inform the Design Framework. In late February 2025, the City will launch a first round of public engagement to seek feedback on the design framework and key directions for the LAP. Opportunities will include an online survey and community open house. Draft materials and background information will be shared through the project's webpage.