

REPORT

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL MEETING

MEETING DATE: JULY 7, 2014

FROM: Commissioner of Community Development,
Commissioner of Community Services and
Commissioner of Corporate Services

DATE: June 20, 2014

SUBJECT: Downtown Plan

LOCATION: Downtown Oakville

WARD: Town wide

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RECOMMENDATION:

That the vision, objectives and evaluation framework for the Downtown Cultural Hub and the Downtown Transportation and Streetscape Study as outlined in the report entitled "Downtown Plan", dated June 20, 2014, be endorsed.

KEY FACTS:

The following are key points for consideration with respect to this report:

- Downtown Plan is comprised of two studies the Downtown Cultural Hub study and the Downtown Transportation and Streetscape study.
- Two companion reports on each of these studies are on the same Council agenda.
- The public have been engaged in a series of open houses and workshops in order for staff to identify themes to ensure a cultural hub for the Town as a whole is achieved in the downtown and to identify options for the transportation network and streetscape master plan for all the downtown streets. The synergies between these two studies and ensuring we used the public's time most effectively brought these two studies together under the Downtown Plan.
- Staff is requesting that Council endorse the vision, objectives and evaluation framework which will guide the selection of a preferred option for both of these studies.
- Through this work merchants have raised concerns with the existing economic state of the downtown and the impact of the pending Lakeshore Road construction. This report includes an economic assessment which provides information to be considered as we move forward with these

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studies but also as we consider additional actions to ensure the sustainability of our main street commercial areas.

BACKGROUND:

The Downtown Plan launched its public consultation program on December 5, 2013, at the Oakville Centre for the Performing Arts. The plan is comprised of two studies the Downtown Cultural Hub study (DCH) and the Downtown Transportation and Streetscape study (DTS). There are several factors that influenced the initiation of these studies including:

- Downtown Strategic Action Plan
- Cultural Master Plan and the Parks, Recreation and Library Facilities Master Plan
- Infrastructure and Building Assessments

In 2010, Council endorsed the Downtown Strategic Action Plan with 12 actions, most of which were to be undertaken by the town with one, the retail strategy, to be led by the Downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA). Council implemented the first action, the Downtown Heritage Conservation District, in early 2013 which raised the importance of the heritage character of the downtown influencing all of the other actions. The DCH Study was designed to address the following actions:

- Downtown Culture
- Youth Initiatives
- Post Office, 197 Church Street
- Centennial Square Facilities

The DTS Study was designed to address the following actions:

- Accessibility and Safety
- Urban Design Guidelines
- Towne Square
- Transportation Access and Mobility

The remaining three actions (Retail Strategy, Tools and Incentives, Communications and Coordination) will be undertaken as implementation components of these two studies.

At a similar time, the town had undertaken its first Cultural Master Plan – *Enabling Culture to thrive in Oakville, Oakville's Strategic Directions for Culture*, which was

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approved by Council in 2009. The plan identified downtown as a location for a new creative hub. The Parks, Recreation and Library Facilities Master Plan had identified the replacement of the Centennial Pool with a new facility at the South Central Community Centre, located on the Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital site and the retention of the library downtown with the relocation of some internal functions.

The town had also undertaken a building assessment of both the Oakville Centre for the Performing Arts and the infrastructure along Lakeshore Road. The performing arts centre does not meet the current legislated standard such as accessibility and does not adequately accommodate the current technological standards. Replacement or substantial renovation is necessary. In addition, the town in 2011 conducted a strategic business plan for the Oakville Centre for the Performing Arts which concluded that the town had outgrown this facility and a full feasibility and market needs analysis needed to be completed to assess the extent of the cultural facilities required.

Similarly in 2008, the infrastructure assessment of Lakeshore Road had recommended that the rehabilitation of the road platform (curb to curb) commence in 2009. However, Council had requested staff to explore different phasing options and upon further consideration had deferred the work so that the conclusions of the Downtown Strategic Action Plan could be taken into consideration. Hence, the initiation of the DTS study.

On the same Council agenda are two companion reports related to the Downtown Cultural Hub and the Downtown Transportation and Streetscape. Each of these reports provide details on the need for this work to be undertaken, study findings, public comments that have influenced the themes and options, a presentation of the themes and options as well as the next phase of work to be completed in the two studies.

Bringing these two studies forward under the Downtown Plan allowed the public to be consulted on both studies at the same time and enabled the interconnections between the two to be fully understood. The two studies are however, at very different stages.

The DCH study is at an early stage of determining its scope of work. Council has previously considered the DCH in June of 2012 when the preliminary work was initiated and then again in the fall of 2013 when Council endorsed the initiation of the current phase. The 2013 report had indicated that this phase of the study would define the demand for cultural facilities, define a preferred development plan, detail the costs of both capital and operating and explore procurement strategies. While this phase is not expected to be completed until the spring of 2015, staff is providing

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an update on the needs assessment, themes to address the needs in various development scenarios and a high level assessment of capital and operating costs. Given the scale of this project, staff is requesting that Council endorse the next steps.

The DTS study is at a more detailed stage with the outcomes of the study to include a preferred option for the reconstruction of Lakeshore Road, and the Towne Square as well as an overall Streetscape Master Plan addressing mobility of all modes of travel and a streetscape approach for all downtown streets. The companion report on the DTS presents the options for Lakeshore Road and requests Council to endorse the next steps in this study.

Through the Downtown Plan review both the public and town staff has identified many synergies between these two studies. In particular, DCH directly influences the treatment of Navy St and its ability to deliver cultural activities in coordination with the Centennial Square site. As well the treatment of Church Street is elevated when you consider the vista to the Centennial Square site especially with a potential redesign making enhanced connection to the riverfront and the open space proposed through the DCH study. Also, the Post Office site and its location at George and Church is a potential cornerstone of a cultural district linking visually to the Centennial Square and the Towne Square. The Streetscape Master Plan under the DTS study provides the opportunity to make the visual connections stronger, dispersing the cultural activities throughout the downtown.

Given the scale of the Downtown Plan, there has been an extensive staff team involved in the project from all three Commissions, Community Development, Community Services and Corporate Services. The details of the internal engagement are outlined in Appendix A – Downtown Plan, Public Participation Plan.

The purpose of this report is to outline the Downtown Plan consultation program, present the vision and objectives that have shaped the overall plan and the framework for evaluation of the options recommended to Council.

In addition, this report will present the analysis on the economic health of the downtown undertaken by the JC Williams Group. As the Downtown Plan was underway, there was feedback from the local merchants about the vitality of the Downtown and concern that the DCH and DTS construction would exacerbate the current economic situation. Since the initiation of the Strategic Action Plan, the approach had been to ensure the sustainability of the Downtown and at the time a revitalization plan was not considered necessary. However, it is important to test this assumption and accordingly JC Williams Group, a retail economist firm, was retained to evaluate three questions:

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1. What is the current economic health of the downtown?
2. What is the future outlook for the downtown given the changing nature of retail?
3. What are the benefits of the cultural hub and the transportation and streetscape on the downtown economy that the town needs to be aware of as we complete these two studies?

The Executive Summary of the JC Williams Group report is attached as Appendix B. The full report is available at <http://www.oakville.ca/townhall/downtown-plan.html>

COMMENT/OPTIONS:

The vision for the Downtown Plan is:

The Downtown Plan vision is to create an attractive, active, animated and vibrant downtown where people come together to live, work, shop, meet and engage.

It will be the cultural, social and economic heart of our community where citizens and visitors can celebrate and experience the natural setting, heritage, culture and the arts.

The vision is reflective of Livable Oakville and depicts the many voices we heard at our community and stakeholder meetings. The vision has guided the studies and the development of the themes and options described in the DCH and DTS report referred to earlier. Given we are at the mid-point of the studies, staff are recommending that Council endorse this vision as our guide for the balance of the work.

Accompanying the vision are five objectives that are to be achieved with the implementation of the two studies. The objectives are:

- To contribute to a successful economically vibrant downtown
- To create a cultural focus for the town in the downtown
- To provide facilities and infrastructure that meet existing and future needs
- To protect and enhance the natural environment and cultural heritage of downtown
- To develop solutions that are financially sustainable.

These objectives have shaped the themes and option presented as part of the DCH and DTS studies. The objectives have also established the five themes for the evaluation criteria. Staff, based on the vision, objectives and the values expressed by the community, has developed an evaluation framework. Attached, as Appendix

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C, is a program distributed at our last open house which includes the framework which will guide the development of evaluation criteria for each of the studies. Staff and the community will need to evaluate the options through this set of evaluation criteria.

Staff is recommending that Council endorse both the objectives identified above and the evaluation framework attached as Appendix C in order to provide direction for the selection of a preferred option.

Public Consultation

The Downtown Plan has been the subject of an extensive public consultation program. Beginning with the launch on December 5, 2013, there have been over 1,500 residents and business owners actively participating in meetings, open houses and workshops.

At the launch we asked participants to dream of what they would like to see along the street and in the cultural hub. We heard those dreams first at a series of individual interviews and meetings with stakeholders in mid January and then at our first open house on January 30th. At that evening meeting we had 150 individuals share their ideas.

With those ideas in hand, the staff and consultant team developed concepts for discussion and held further stakeholder meetings testing out these concepts. The stakeholder group represented a range of community groups, cultural organizations and business associations. The detailed list of stakeholders is included in the Public Participation plan attached as Appendix A. In particular, given the impact on the downtown merchants several forums were held in the early morning to gain the benefit of the merchant and landowner insights.

These discussions led to further refinements and a presentation of the concepts at an open house on April 12. This event, similar to the workshop in January, asked participants to work through the concepts and provide revised arrangements of the cultural elements, themes and streetscape options. With the benefit of this advice and the hands on participation of over 160 individuals at the workshop, we refined the concepts to themes for the cultural hub and options for Lakeshore Road.

These themes and options were evaluated based on technical constraints and financial implications so that we could be assured that they are feasible. The options and themes were presented to the public at the last open house on June 10, 2014, with more than 300 people in attendance. The program that was distributed at that meeting is attached as Appendix C.

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The in-person open houses/workshops were in addition to the online discussion forum and the various surveys undertaken. The Oakville Centre for the Performing Arts patron survey collected over 650 responses, and the library survey elicited over 2,000 responses providing us insight in the needs and demands of the Oakville Public Library patrons.

A full package of information and videos of each of the open houses are on the town's website and in addition several e-newsletters were sent out to the 1,600 individuals registered, providing regular updates on the project.

Finally, the study benefited from the advice of a focus group which included a diverse range of members from cultural groups and patrons, Downtown BIA, residents associations, The Oakville Cycling Club and staff. These members provided several hours of their time providing insight into the concerns and issues discussed among their groups and in assisting us getting information out to the various organizations they represent. The focus group members are included in Appendix A.

Downtown Economic Health Assessment – JC Williams Group

Attached as Appendix B, is an executive summary of the report on the economic health of downtown from the JC Williams Group, a consulting firm specializing in retail analysis and strategy. The full report is available at: <http://www.oakville.ca/townhall/downtown-plan.html> In addition to the firm's research on retail trends, socio-economic changes, and an audit of existing retailers, information was gathered through interviews with downtown retailers, property owners and other stakeholders, as well as intercept and telephone surveys.

The highlights of the report are as follows:

Current Economic Health of Downtown Oakville

Downtown Oakville experienced some of the highest sales volumes years from between 2006 to 2008. With the recession in 2008 to 2009 and the increased competition from Sherway Gardens and the redevelopment of Mapleview Mall, these sales volumes have declined. Most retailers indicated that sales are down 10 to 20% compared to 2 years ago and they all indicated a significant decline in pedestrian traffic. However, the impact on sales productivity does not seem to be uniform across all downtown merchants. In the last 2 years, about one quarter indicated sales were good or positive, half the retailers indicated that their conversion rate (sales to visitor percentage) is the same or increased and one third indicate that their average transaction size is higher.

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In assessing the target markets for Downtown, JC Williams Group noted the declining population in the nearby community as well as the shift to an older age group who will be spending less retail dollars as they move into retirement. The regional shopper views Downtown Oakville as a top rated shopping location and while they tend to spend at higher dollars, they visit less frequently. Visitors to the other facilities downtown, spend limited dollars on the retail sector, but provide a much higher level of support to the restaurants. Of note, are the comments on the harbours and the attraction to the downtown from this target group as well as their support to both the retail and restaurant trade.

Downtown retail supply has shifted with the decrease in foot traffic. There are more fashion retailers and the cross shopping opportunities have shifted to a format more similar to malls, rather than the complete experience that the consumers are looking for. Downtown retailers perform better when there is more cross shopping when they are merchandised “narrow and deep”. However, now retailers are selling products and goods that other retailers carry with very little differentiation in price.

Future Outlook for Downtown

To provide the Downtown with the best result for the future, the JC Williams Group have advised that for retailers, the focus needs to be on such things as the merchandise mix, assortment, marketing and on-line sales opportunities. For the Town and the BIA this also includes retention and recruitment programs that include retail mix, marketing and parking solutions. In the downtown shoppers are looking for a experience that includes cultural facilities, enjoying the lake and riverfront, trails in addition to the shopping. Shifting solely to a shopping experience will have very serious negative long-term consequences. Solutions which look to a design that flows consumers through the Downtown, attracted by an overall Oakville brand will provide sustainable viability to the downtown. In light of the pending construction, understanding this long term vision and strategy now is essential to ensure success post construction.

Cultural Hub and Transportation/Streetscape Considerations

Overall the JC Williams report sees these two projects as being supportive of downtown's economy. In designing the spaces and buildings, the town will need to ensure that we have paid attention to the target market and that we provide the opportunity for a full experience that allows consumers to flow through to all parts of the downtown. Retailers will also want to consider ways in which they can support the needs of the cultural patrons by providing opportunities for them to take advantage of the retail experience as well.

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The work undertaken by the JC Williams Group will be applied during the evaluation of the options in order to ensure that we have achieved our objective of “Contributing to a successfully and economically vibrant downtown”. The firm will provide further comments on DCH and DTS to outline the implications of the respective recommendations on the economic health of the downtown. The full JC Williams Group report provides considerable analysis that will provide the town and the BIA with the basis for on-going discussion and follow-up to improve the existing and future economic environment for Downtown. In addition, this work will inform the staff report to Council on the short, mid and long term strategies to sustain the economy downtown as well as the Bronte and Kerr commercial areas anticipated for late July.

Conclusions

The Downtown Plan is one of the town’s largest planning studies. Comprising two studies, the Downtown Cultural Hub and the Downtown Transportation and Streetscape study, the Plan will result in significant enhancements to what is the cultural, social and economic heart of our community. The vision, objectives and evaluation framework established through our extensive community engagement will guide each of these two studies to completion. Details on the work completed and the next steps, for each of these studies, is contained in two companion reports on the same agenda, Downtown Cultural Hub and Downtown Transportation and Streetscape.

CONSIDERATIONS:

(A) PUBLIC

Attached as Appendix A to this report are the details of the public participation program. The receipt of these reports at the Planning and Development Council has been well advertised through each of our open houses as well as the town’s website.

(B) FINANCIAL

This report has no direct financial implications, however it does anticipate future financial implications which will be identified in future staff reports.

(C) IMPACT ON OTHER DEPARTMENTS & USERS

The Downtown Plan initiative has involved staff from all three commissions. A staff team was established early in the process with 25 team members bringing a wide variety of expertise directly to the study. In addition, most other departments were consulted.

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(D) CORPORATE AND/OR DEPARTMENT STRATEGIC GOALS

This report addresses the corporate strategic goal to:
be the most livable town in Canada.

(E) COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

The Downtown Plan initiative impacts all 4 pillars of sustainability and are specifically addressed in the vision and five objectives which define the two studies – Downtown Cultural Hub Study and Downtown Transportation and Streetscape Study.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A – Downtown Plan – Public Participation Plan
Appendix B – JC Williams Group Executive Summary report
(full report is available at: <http://www.oakville.ca/townhall/downtown-plan.html>)
Appendix C – Program Book from the June 10, 2014 Open House

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