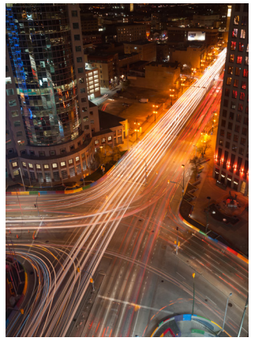
Downtown Recovery Strategy Report

SEPTEMBER
2023

Winnipeg's downtown is the front door to our city. Approach Winnipeg from land, and downtown rises out of the prairie horizon as a friendly Manitoban greeting. Approach from the sky, and all roads converge at the city's heart.



The reduction in tourists and locals visiting downtown during the pandemic meant that the city centre suffered more acutely than elsewhere in the city. Downtown residents who faced poverty and systemic barriers were disproportionately affected when businesses closed temporarily or permanently.

Winnipeg always rallies in times of crisis. In 2021, organizations with a vision for downtown's economic and social recovery coordinated to produce the Downtown Recovery Strategy. Developed by The Downtown Winnipeg, Exchange District, and West End BIZes; Tourism Winnipeg; CentreVenture Development Corporation; Downtown Community Safety Partnership; End Homelessness Winnipeg; Winnipeg Arts Council; and the City of Winnipeg, this innovative and intensive three-year action and investment plan kick-started downtown's recovery post-pandemic.

This report outlines the results of the Downtown Recovery Strategy to date, showing how we have, and will continue to, revive the heart of our city and welcome everyone back downtown.

Downtown Recovery Strategy

The Downtown Recovery Strategy is steered by the Downtown Action Team, comprised of organizations and representatives from economic development, poverty reduction and community support agencies, and members from the arts and cultural sectors.

Three key principles informed the strategic actions under a framework, and provided a foundation for measuring success:

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.

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.

Arts and culture

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 established five high-impact strategic actions in overlapping and complementary areas: revitalizing places, energizing spaces, supporting people, living downtown, and building business.

Downtown Recovery Strategy
Revitalizing Places

Downtown's public parks, plazas and streetscapes create space for exploring the benefits of economic development, cultural creativity, and personal potential; 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 neighbourhood where people want to live.

The wear and tear on these places became more apparent during the pandemic. For Winnipeg's downtown to prosper, increased long-term investment is required in improving pedestrian corridors, high impact infrastructure projects, accessible wayfinding, and community clean-up.

Results

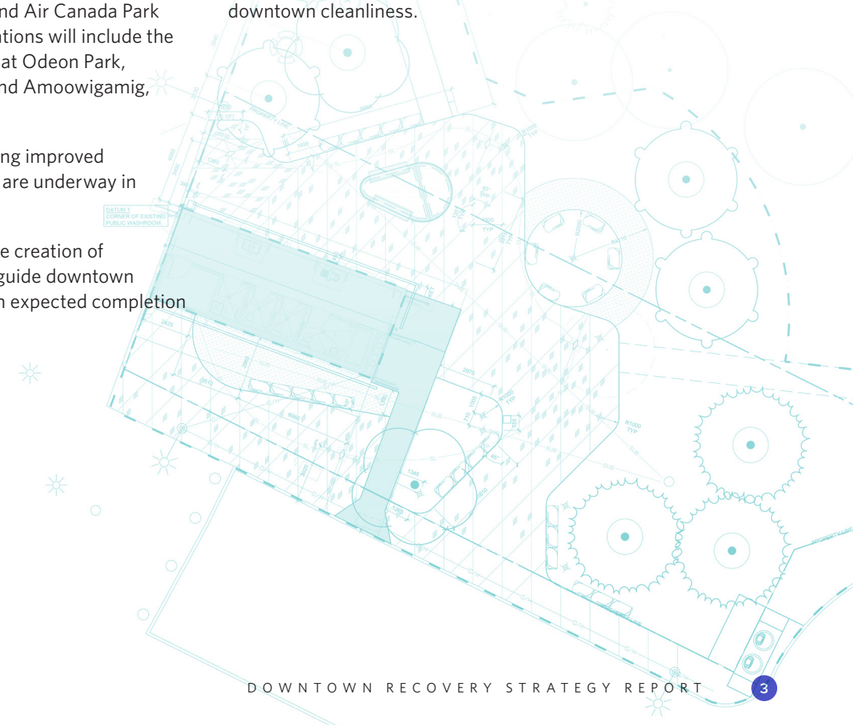
Leveraging a $10M funding contribution from the City of Winnipeg through the Canada Community-Building Fund, many of the revitalizing places strategic actions got underway in spring 2023. Construction started on new and revitalized parks and open spaces with anticipated completion in fall 2024. Upgrades are happening at Central Park, trail enhancements are underway at Stephen Juba Park, and Air Canada Park is being redeveloped. New destinations will include the Market Lands, an expanded plaza at Odeon Park, and a new community space around Amoowigamig, the permanent public washroom.

Key corridors' infrastructure is being improved and regular community clean-ups are underway in targeted areas.

The City of Winnipeg is leading the creation of CentrePlan 2050, a plan that will guide downtown development and investment, with expected completion in spring 2024.

Future Actions

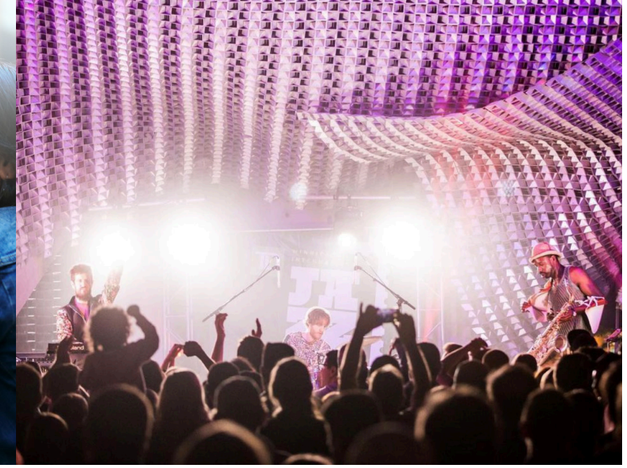
Three actions will be undertaken in the future. First, the development of a wayfinding strategy, alongside the City of Winnipeg's upcoming Transportation and Transit Master Plans, will help locals and visitors navigate and learn more about downtown. Second, the Alexander Docks site will be redeveloped. Finally, continued work to provide new and improved services will support downtown cleanliness.



Downtown Recovery Strategy
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.

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



Results

With $500,000 in funding from the Commemorate Canada program, six downtown destinations were supported for Downtown Culture Days between October 1-8, 2022. West End BIZ, The Forks Renewal Corporation, Exchange District BIZ, Winnipeg Chinese Cultural and Community Centre, and Academy Hospitality offered cultural experiences, performances and programming. A total of 31,350 participants celebrated all forms of culture including music, dance, artistic instalments, and workshops.

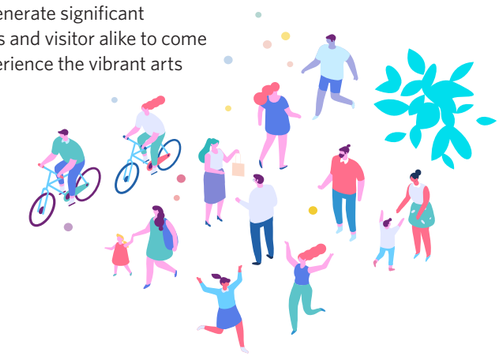
The return of major Winnipeg festivals, such as ManyFest, Fringe, Jazz Fest, and the new Lights on the Exchange, drew tens of thousands more locals and visitors downtown.

Business tourism is also on the rise. In 2022, 46 business events were held downtown, with an economic impact of $16.1M (direct spend); an increase of 39 events and $3.5M from 2021. Combined, these efforts brought an increase of almost 38% of visitors from 2021 to 2022.

And 2023 got off to a great start, with 65 events planned, hosting 36,000 delegates, and an astounding $38.6M economic impact. These events are particularly important for downtown hotels given they are dependent on group business such as meetings, conferences and events. Occupancy rates have increased city-wide from 25.2% in Q1, 2021, to 75.9% in Q1, 2023. With the Winnipeg Sea Bears, Winnipeg's new Canadian Elite Basketball League (CEBL) team, hosting ten home games at the Canada Life Centre and major events like the 2023 World Police & Fire Games, downtown is once again a hub of destination sports, hospitality and entertainment.

Future Actions

Tourism Winnipeg is focused on securing citywide events to generate significant economic impact. Events of this scale encourage Winnipeggers and visitor alike to come downtown and support hotels, shops and restaurants and experience the vibrant arts and culture scene.

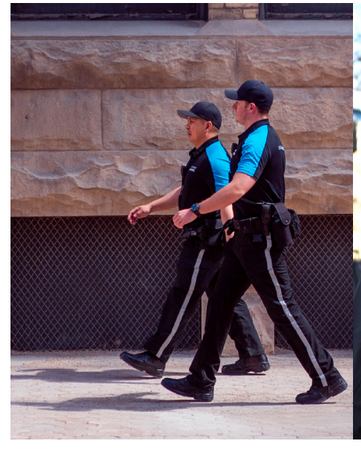


Downtown Recovery Strategy
Supporting People

The pandemic brought into sharp focus the multi-faceted ways that our city centre is where many Winnipeggers living in poverty access most of the supports and services they need.

Post-pandemic, the realities and challenges of people experiencing unemployment, homelessness, or substance use disorders in our downtown have continued. The Downtown Recovery Strategy alone cannot address the underlying systemic and structural causes of poverty and marginalization in Winnipeg. However, the strategy provided some immediate actionable items that helped create a more supportive downtown community, committed to treating people with dignity and ensuring their needs are met and rights are respected. Going forward, it proposed how to bolster strong multi-sectoral engagement to help people living downtown.

Expanding community outreach, collaborating with community partners, adopting a harm reduction approach, and establishing connection between businesses and community groups will help ensure downtown residents thrive.



Results

During the pandemic, strong collaboration emerged among agencies working together to support people downtown by creating emergency spaces and supports. An encouragingly high level of optimism that effective, long-term solutions to support people can be achieved also emerged.

Bolstered by $3.6M of funding from the Province of Manitoba and another $250,000 from the City of Winnipeg, the Downtown Community Safety Partnership (DCSP) is an expanded community outreach presence on the streets. Fielding calls for service, helping people transition out of homelessness, de-escalating disturbances, and checking in with businesses are key parts of the DCSP's work in serving downtown residents.

One of the first things the pandemic shuttered were safe public spaces. These are critical to people living downtown. Both N'Dinawemak and Velma's House opened 24-hour safe spaces in 2021. N'Dinawemak is a low barrier, Indigenous-led warming space that is coordinated by End Homelessness Winnipeg and its partners. With the support of $1.9M in funding from the Province of Manitoba, N'Dinawemak serves more than 200 Indigenous relatives. Velma's House is run by Ka Ni Kanichihk and supports Indigenous women and girls.

Amoowigamig, a new and permanent public washroom funded by the City of Winnipeg and operated by Ma Mawi Chi Itata, opened its doors in 2022. The facility also supports individuals through a harm reduction lens with connections to resources, harm reduction supplies, a foot-washing station and fresh drinking water.

Future Actions

DCSP and the new Indigenous-led safe public spaces are reasons for our whole city to celebrate. The DCSP is expanding its programs to meet community needs, including increased neighbourhood clean-ups, to leverage work in the community and increase collaboration among organizations. The DCSP is also leading a new Coordinated Assistance Network (CAN) to improve safety downtown.

End Homelessness Winnipeg is developing a high-level land use assessment of the Neeginan area, at the corner of Higgins and Main. The plan will consolidate existing plans to leverage that history for the local community to reference when determining future ideas for the area.

To fully support Winnipeggers living downtown, an increased number of public washrooms and places to access drinking water and additional supports for people who are living with addictions are essential.

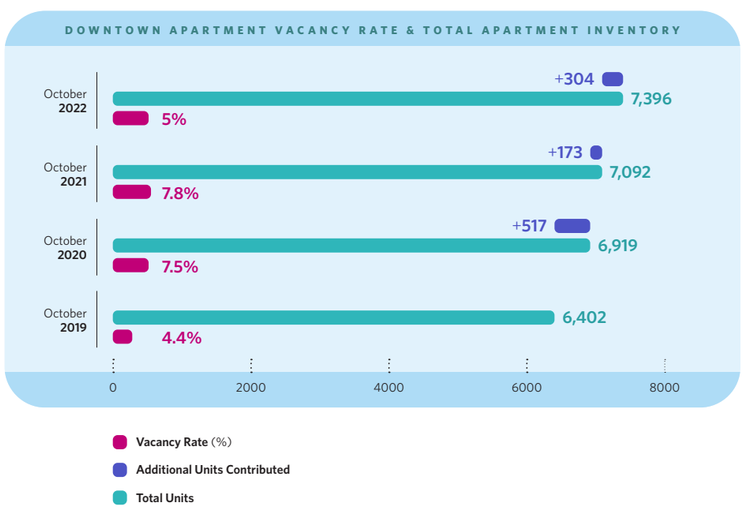
Downtown Recovery Strategy
Living Downtown

Over the last 20 years, a successful public-private partnership has increased the number of people who call downtown home and created a 24-hour population, thus improving the community's safety and vibrancy. This partnership created nearly 5,000 new homes for an additional 8,000 downtown neighbourhood residents.

The pandemic reinforced the need to continue this housing strategy and to increase the number of people who support downtown businesses outside of typical office hours. 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. Initiating new mixed-income housing units, augmenting affordable housing initiatives, marketing downtown living spaces to students, and advocating to restart and increase international immigration to Winnipeg will help grow downtown's population.

Results

During the pandemic, 994 new units were completed and added to downtown's rental inventory. In 2022 alone, rental vacancy rates decreased by 2.8%, nearing pre-pandemic levels (Source: CMHC Housing Market Information Portal).



To encourage housing and economic development downtown, the City of Winnipeg launched The Heritage Economic Development incentive and the Affordable Housing Now program in 2022. Through these programs, businesses can be started or expanded, heritage buildings revitalized, parking lots eliminated, and affordable housing constructed.

Leveraging over $100 million in private sector and government funding, the results of these programs include:

- a 21-storey mixed-used and mixed income building that will include 214 rental units, 108 of which are affordable;
- an 11-unit, 27-bedroom second-stage transitional housing project on a surface parking lot for Indigenous and newcomer women and children experiencing gender-based violence;
- a mixed-used building on a surface parking lot that includes 80 apartments and 19,000 square feet of office/retail space.

Future Actions

A variety of housing options in downtown are being reviewed that will support the diverse population needed for the core to thrive. At 2.9%, vacancy rates in studio apartments have declined at a faster rate than one and two-bedroom apartments, which are now at 5.3% and 5.9% respectively. This suggests a higher demand for lower-cost rental options in the downtown. CentreVenture continues to market opportunities to development and housing organizations.

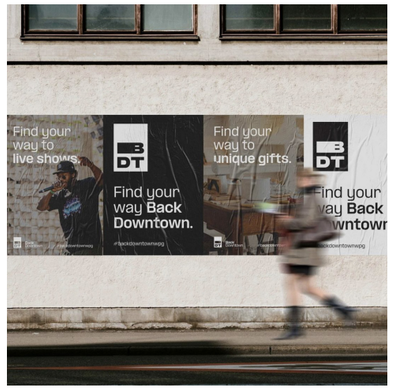
Downtown Recovery Strategy
Building Business

Over the last decade, downtown 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 addressed through innovative tax credit and gap financing programs. Unfortunately, the pandemic reduced that confidence. New projects waned and businesses experienced significant revenue losses. Since 2021, more than 90 businesses closed or moved out of downtown.

Post-pandemic, the downtown economy is rebounding, with more than 50 new businesses opening in the city centre. Welcoming workers back and re-activating storefronts and underutilized buildings as well as creating business mentorship programs are building back momentum and supporting the success of new businesses.

Results

The Manitoba government and Prairies Economic Development Canada each contributed $2.5M towards the Building Business Program. Launched in October 2022, this program supports existing businesses and encourages new businesses to locate downtown. The program streams include a grant program, marketing campaign, and market research. Over 250 applications have been submitted to the grant program and over $1M has already been allocated to downtown businesses as of summer 2023.



The #BackDowntown advertising campaign launched in late 2022 to encourage downtown workers to come back to the office and invite Winnipeggers to come back and see what they've been missing. The campaign wrapped up with Spirit Week in May 2023, with over 65 businesses participating, inviting downtown workers to celebrate the things you can only find working downtown and by supporting local businesses.

Future Actions

Accomplishing the vision for a downtown filled with flourishing businesses will take time.

Ongoing market research will help existing and new businesses understand potential revenue generation and customer traffic.

One major gap is the increasing office vacancy. Downtown office vacancy in Winnipeg continues to increase since 2021 but sits below the national average of 18.4% (CBRE). Ground floor vacancy in the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ has remained just over 30% since 2021. To help address vacancy rates, the Building Business grants will target both new and expanded offices and ground floor storefronts. Other policies and programs, including office conversions, are being explored municipally and provincially to address vacancy issues in the core.

Conclusion

Winnipeg's downtown has always reflected the vibrancy, resiliency, and adaptability of city residents. This vibrancy is part of what attracts visitors, entrepreneurs, and locals alike. The pandemic tested the grit of Winnipeggers and our city centre still faces unique challenges.

With visionary direction led by the Downtown Action Team, and investment and support from community organizations and all levels of government, the heart of Winnipeg is beating strong once again. The implementation of the Downtown Recovery Strategy and identification of future actions means that with courage and commitment, downtown can and will be a place of pride for all Winnipeggers.

DOWNTOWN WINNIPEG BIZ

THE EXCHANGE DISTRICT BIZ

WEST END BIZ

centreventure development corporation

TOURISM WINNIPEG

Winnipeg

DCSP Downtown Community Safety Partnership

WINNIPEG ARTS COUNCIL

HOPE END HOMELESSNESS WINNIPEG