

Staff Report



Development Services Department

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REPORT TO: Planning and Strategic Initiatives Committee

DATE OF MEETING: October 30, 2023

SUBMITTED BY: Cory Bluhm, Executive Director Economic Development, 519-741-2200 ext. 7065
Rosa Bustamante, Director of Planning, 519-741-2200 ext. 7319

PREPARED BY: Darren Becks, Manager of Downtown Development and Innovation, 519-741-2200 ext. 7064
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WARD(S) INVOLVED: Wards 9 and 10

DATE OF REPORT: October 10, 2023

REPORT NO.: DSD-2023-425

SUBJECT: Downtown Kitchener Vision and Principles

RECOMMENDATION:

That the downtown vision and principles, prepared by the Downtown Community Working Group (DCWG) in direct collaboration with the project consultant, and staff be endorsed; and,

That staff be directed to use the vision and principles to develop an action plan for Downtown Kitchener, and inform new and ongoing City initiatives that include or are about the downtown.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- The work of the Downtown Community Working Group (DCWG) was framed by the Terms of Reference approved by Council and detailed in Report No. DSD-2022-014.
- The Downtown Kitchener vision process was community-led, and staff supported. Central to this community-led process was a Downtown Community Working Group (DCWG) comprised of approximately 25-30 members of the downtown and broader Kitchener community each bringing unique and diversified perspectives to the process.
- Community engagement for Phase One (June 2022 – April 2023) included workshops with the DCWG as well as participation from approximately 1,700 participants in person through a wide range of engagement methods including pop up sessions at the Kitchener Farmers' Market, meetings with stakeholders, and do-it-yourself workshops and an additional approximately 900 participants online.
- Community engagement for Phase Two (May 2023 – August 2023) included a pop-up community engagement session, online feedback from the Engage Kitchener platform, and Council feedback from the August 14, 2023 meeting.

*** This information is available in accessible formats upon request. ***
Please call 519-741-2345 or TTY 1-866-969-9994 for assistance.

- This report supports the Strategic Plan theme A Vibrant Economy.

BACKGROUND:

Downtown Kitchener is at a critical point in its evolution. Unprecedented growth is happening at a time where housing affordability, climate, equity, and social factors are intersecting. The pandemic has caused significant impacts to Kitchener's business community, including the many businesses and organizations reliant on in-person sales/transactions. As a result of all these converging factors, it is an opportune time for the community to shape a new vision for downtown Kitchener. Since June 2022, a Downtown Community Working Group (DCWG) has been guiding the development of the vision and principles, with support from City staff and LURA Consulting (a community engagement consultancy). The DCWG is comprised of 25-30 members of the downtown and broader Kitchener community, each bringing unique and diverse perspectives.

The work of the DCWG is to create a high-level vision and guiding principles to inform new and ongoing City initiatives. These current and future initiatives may include a land use and zoning framework for the Major Transit Station areas, Civic District Master Plan, District Energy, Bramm Yards Master Plan, Arts and Culture Strategy, Inclusionary Zoning, Places and Spaces, Comprehensive Review of City-owned Properties and a new or updated Official Plan.

To date the DCWG shaped and assisted in delivering a fulsome community engagement process to gather input to inform the vision and guiding principles and receive input on the draft. This community-driven process has been intended to build consensus, motivate, and inspire action and ensure inclusive community building. The report titled, "*Downtown Kitchener Vision and Principles Phase One Engagement Summary*" (Attachment A) summarizes input received during Phase One of this project and was used by the DCWG to draft a vision and principles for community and Council comment.

The report titled, "*Downtown Kitchener Vision and Principles Phase Two Engagement Summary*" summarizes input during Phase Two of this project (Attachment B). The DCWG utilized input from Phase Two, and with the assistance of an external writer, finalized the Downtown Kitchener Vision and Principles, which is the subject of this report.

REPORT:

Since June 2022, the Downtown Community Working Group has worked together with City staff and LURA Consulting to shape a comprehensive community engagement process and identified key themes and issues in the downtown. From February to April of this year phase one of the DTK Vision and Principles community wide engagement occurred which included:

- 1,615 participants over 5 community in-person pop-up events.
- 95 participants through 11 do-it-yourself workshops including ones with the City of Kitchener's Downtown Action and Advisory Committee and Climate Change and Environmental Advisory Committee.
- 2 meetings with local Indigenous Organizations.
- 4 DTK social service organizations through a service provider workshop.
- 1,313 project webpage views on the City of Kitchener's website.
- 60,216 social media ad impressions.
- 3,210 project webpage views on EngageWR.

- 899 participants in online engagement, and
- 1 Council strategic session

From May to August of this year phase two of the DTK Vision and Principles community wide engagement occurred which included:

- 242 participants at a community pop-up event,
- 1 Council feedback session,
- 7 participants at the Downtown Action and Advisory Committee meeting,
- 41 participants in an online survey,
- 278 project webpage views on the City of Kitchener's website, and
- 3,002 project webpage views on EngageWR.

The community and Council input received earlier this year is summarized in Attachments A and B to this report.

Key messages that emerged throughout the Phase One engagement process that helped to inform a draft vision and principles were:

- The need for community-building efforts, strengthening the connection between neighbours.
- The importance of vibrant streets, public spaces and green space, especially as density grows within the downtown.
- Strong support for more connected and continuous active transportation and public transportation networks.
- Greater efforts to support the unhoused/precariously housed and those in crisis who live in Kitchener.
- Downtown Kitchener was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and requires investment and rejuvenation to support existing local businesses and attract new ventures.
- The importance of integrating climate adaptation and resiliency actions into the city's day-to-day functions.
- Strengthened support, advocacy, and action towards an inclusive, equitable and accessible downtown, that also helps to advance Truth and Reconciliation.

Key messages that emerged from the Phase Two engagement process on the draft vision and principles that helped the DCWG form the final vision and principles were:

- A human-centric lens is the correct approach to revitalizing downtown.
- Improved access to affordable housing is integral to the success of downtown.
- Access to clean and safe green space is a priority for most community members.
- Connections to downtown and within downtown, must be safe, affordable, and accessible.
- The vision and principles should be unique to downtown Kitchener.

Utilizing the extensive community and Council feedback, combined with the support of staff, an external consultant, and writer, the DCWG have prepared the following vision and principles for Council's endorsement.

Vision

“Downtown Kitchener. The heart of the city that excites, supports, and unites.”

First Guiding Principle – *Radiating Vibrancy*

DTK pulses with a positive energy that makes it feel alive – from workdays to date nights and every moment in between. It’s not just about lively programming; it’s about people, places and spaces that hum with purpose.

In DTK, sustainable streetscapes blend familiar landmarks with deliberate new designs. Independent shops and restaurants flourish alongside well-known brands in DTK.

It’s the place where world-class cultural institutions leave lasting impressions. It’s where innovation takes root. It’s where learning never stops, work feels welcoming and creativity flows naturally.

At its core, DTK is more than a desirable destination. It’s an unmistakable feeling that even if something awesome isn’t happening right this minute, it’s just around the corner.

Second Guiding Principle – *Cultivating Connection*

In DTK, people routinely bump into someone they know well or someone they’d like to get to know better. From solo excursions to group events, DTK fuels shared experiences that leave a lasting impression.

DTK prioritizes pedestrians while making sure smart transportation choices abound. It’s the place where accessibility is never an add-on but baked in from the start. In DTK, everyone can easily get where they need to go, within and beyond the core.

DTK is the place to recall fond memories and make new ones. It’s where planning draws from rich roots to fortify the future. It’s where creating thoughtful public spaces is at the forefront, not an afterthought. It’s where being green isn’t a talk track, it’s a natural choice. It’s the place where people form those magnetic bonds that keep drawing them back to the heart of the city.

Third Guiding Principle – *Belonging*

People feel seen in DTK. The Downtown community respects and accepts every person for who they are. DTK provides the comforting feeling that they are meant to be here.

Whether simply passing time or on a mission to get things done, DTK makes it easy for people to find support for their goals and acknowledgement of their progress.

Working and living in DTK is not an either/or proposition. Housing is deliberately designed for the diverse majority, not the privileged few. DTK embraces a mix of residents who seek security and take care of their neighbours.

The DCWG, together with staff are recommending that Council endorse the vision and principles for Downtown Kitchener and that it be used by staff to inform new and ongoing city initiatives that include or are about the downtown. Additionally, subject to Council’s

approval, staff will develop a high quality designed version of the vision and principles for public use.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports A Vibrant Economy. The DTK vision project delivers a wholistic vision for the future of DTK enabling the continuation of strategic investments supporting job creation, economic prosperity, thriving arts and culture, and great places to live.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Capital Budget – This project is funded through approved capital budget for costs associated with consultant services and community engagement.

Operating Budget – The recommendation has no impact on the Operating Budget.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

The DTK vision engagement process was centered on COLLABORATION and CONSULTATION. The process was community-led and, staff supported. Central to the engagement process was a DCWG, comprised of 25 to 30 individuals representing different aspects of downtown life. The DCWG informed, guided, and participated in themed conversations which were used, together with broad community input, to develop the vision and principles for Downtown Kitchener.

Since June 2022, the DTK Vision Project has included:

- 15 DCWG meetings;
- 6 community-wide pop-up events with approximately 1,800 participants;
- Meetings with local Indigenous organizations;
- A workshop with downtown service provider agencies;
- 8 Do-it-Yourself Workshop with approximately 95 participants; and,
- Two phases of online engagement that included surveys, ideas boards, and mapping exercises with approximately 940 responses and ideas.

In addition to the broad representation that was critical to the formation of the Downtown Community Working Group (DCWG), the project team engaged the Downtown Kitchener BIA, the Downtown Action and Advisory Committee (DAAC), the Climate Change and Environmental Advisory Committee (CCEC), Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee (GRAAC), and Arts and Creative Industries (ACAC) as part of engagement in March/April of this year and had two touch points with Council in April and August of this year.

All input received to date was provided to the DCWG to assist them in developing the final vision and series of principles for DTK.

INFORM – This report has been posted to the City’s website with the agenda in advance of the council / committee meeting.

PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:

[DSD-2022-014 Downtown Kitchener Vision Project Plan](#)

[DSD-2023-197 Downtown Kitchener \(DTK\) Vision and Growing Together Workshop](#)

[DSD-2023-315 Downtown Kitchener Draft Vision and Principles](#)

REVIEWED BY: Garrett Stevenson, Manager, Development Review

APPROVED BY: Justin Readman, General Manager, Development Services

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A - Downtown Kitchener Vision and Principles – Phase One Engagement Summary

Attachment B - Downtown Kitchener Vision and Principles – Phase Two Engagement Summary