

Executive Summary

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The Heart of Our City Master Plan

The Heart of Our City Master Plan represents a milestone in the long-term project to revitalize Downtown Lethbridge. Successful downtowns accommodate a range of commercial, cultural, residential, and recreational activities; they are vibrant and prestigious destinations, attracting businesses, residents, and tourists; and they provide a high level of amenity and economic opportunity for the community at large.

This Master Plan provides the framework to guide future public improvements and private development, to ensure the emergence of just such a coherent, vibrant, and economically vital Downtown. The Plan also aligns the many previous studies with new strategies to ensure consistency with broader long-term objectives, presenting a powerful and comprehensive long-term vision with the potential to transform Downtown and benefit the entire City of Lethbridge. The Plan’s clear direction will guide decision-makers and, its Vision and Supporting Principles having been derived through broad-based community participation, will inspire confidence in investors.

Document Structure

The consolidated Heart of Our City Master Plan is comprised of 8 sections, of which there are six key ‘parts’:

- Part 1 Introduction
- Part 2 Background Report
- Part 3 The Vision
- Part 4 The Guiding Framework
 - districts
 - public realm
 - built form
- Part 5 Development Design Guidelines
- Part 6 Implementation Strategies

Part 1: Introduction

Downtown Lethbridge is well-positioned to become a success, fortunate as it is to be endowed with significant strengths and assets, including:

- Its continuing role as a major employment node for the entire city, some 8400 jobs being located Downtown
- Its identity as a local and regional shopping destination
- Indian Battle Park, one of the largest urban greenspaces in North America
- Landmark vistas, overlooking the river valley and its coulees

- A nearby academic centre
- A concentration of key cultural venues
- A substantial endowment of built heritage, include treasured century-old buildings and a collection of modernist architecture
- Anticipated population growth of 16,500 persons over the next 20 years

The long-term vision expressed in the Heart of Our City Master Plan will allow Lethbridge to best seize the opportunities presented by these assets.

The Heart of our City Campaign

The Master Plan and its implementation have been positioned within the Heart of Our City Campaign, a long-term process that provides a framework for initiatives that work towards the revitalization and growth of Downtown Lethbridge.

Purpose of the Master Plan

This Master Plan is a key component of the action strategy for the Heart of Our City Campaign, providing a framework to move from planning to action. The Master Plan has three key purposes:

- To consolidate and refine previous and current visions, plans and studies;
- To establish a comprehensive and coherent planning framework; and,
- To provide strategic guidance for implementation.

Scope: A Comprehensive Plan

The Master Plan is intended to be wide-ranging and comprehensive. It seeks to meet community needs, integrate previous and ongoing studies, and establish and prioritize actions necessary for the revitalization of Downtown. The original scope of the project sought to achieve the following outcomes:

- Land Use Plan
- Urban Design Guidelines
- Streetscape Plan
- Downtown Transportation Plan
- Long Range Parking Plan
- Implementation Action Plan
- Governance Model for Downtown

Through the Master Plan process these components, among others, had been refined and integrated into Parts 2-6 of the consolidated document.

Public Consultation

The Master Plan was developed over 4 phases, spanning 16 months. The process was community driven, and public input received during each successive phase informed the next (See Part 2 for a detailed discussion of the Public Consultation Process). Public input was elicited from a wide range of interests and stakeholders at four well-attended major community-oriented events. Over the course of these fora (the Kick-Off, a Visioning and Planning Forum, a Forum that considered the Draft Guiding Framework Plans and Downtown opportunity sites, and a Final Planning Forum and presentation of the Draft Master Plan) the community directly contributed to shaping many key elements of the Plan, particularly the Guiding Principles and the Vision.

Part 2: Background

Historical Overview

The Background Report considers the historic roots of Lethbridge's urban form, and the evolution of Downtown Lethbridge through the 20th century. An Historic Downtown timeline provides an overview of key moments in the history of Downtown Lethbridge, from 1870 to the present time.

Precedent Study

As part of the background review and analysis phase, the Consultant Team completed a detailed Precedent Study of downtown revitalization to derive lessons learned from successes among comparable mid-sized North American cities, including:

- Ann Arbor, MI
- Savannah, GA
- Boulder, CO
- Burlington, VT

Market Analysis Overview

A market analysis was conducted to provide guidance early in the Heart of Our City Master Planning process. This analysis included a commercial inventory of downtown Lethbridge; a demographic analysis; and a review of relevant documents provided by City staff.

The results of the analysis indicated that while Downtown Lethbridge continues to function well as an arterial retail destination and an employment centre, it is also faced with several challenges, including:

- Strengthening the historic retail core;
- Improving perceptions regarding downtown attractiveness and safety
- Bolstering attractiveness as a tourist destination
- Growing a residential base that is currently underdeveloped compared to other downtowns of a similar size.

Existing Conditions Mapping

Comprehensive mapping was undertaken to understand the patterns of built form, circulation, land uses and open spaces that define the character and quality of the Downtown. Mapping was also used to depict opportunities and constraints identified during the existing conditions analysis. The outcomes of these mapping exercises are included in Part 2.

Public Engagement Process and Outcomes

A detailed review of the process employed at each of the four public forums, and of the outcomes of their respective workshops concludes Part 2.

Part 3: The Vision

Heart of Our City Guiding Principles

The Guiding Principles for the Master Plan, prepared collaboratively with community participants, give direction to the Vision by providing a framework to organize concepts, plans and ideas for Downtown. Together the Guiding Principles direct all aspects of the Plan from process to implementation.

1. Movement

- Downtown should be pedestrian-oriented, and should provide transportation options that are safe, integrated and that prioritize walking and cycling.

2. Green

- Downtown should be green - sustainable and beautifully landscaped.
- Public space should be protected and enhanced.
- Microclimate conditions and the unique character of the bioregion should be considered and respected when planning and designing the public realm.

3. Complete Neighbourhoods

- Downtown neighbourhoods should provide the necessary support services and amenities for living within walking distance.
- Downtown should provide a mix and variety of housing types that reinforces and supports a critical mass of activity and diversity.

4. Animated & Vibrant

- Downtown should be active at all hours of the day and night and during all seasons.
- Downtown should be a dynamic, diversified centre that is a fun and welcoming place for employees, visitors and the community.

5. Entrepreneurial & Supportive

- Downtown should be an attractive and sustainable place to invest.

- Downtown should have a vibrant and diversified economic base.
- Downtown should promote, facilitate and enable small, local entrepreneurial and creative businesses.

6. A Quality Public Realm

- Downtown streets are a key component of the public realm, and the City should plan accordingly.
- Downtown should reinforce and build upon the distinct qualities and characters that already exist.
- Downtown should be designed with an emphasis on craftsmanship, quality and permanence.

7. Inclusive

- Downtown should be a vibrant, safe and welcoming environment to live, work and play.
- Downtown should include a diversity of uses, users and cultures.
- Downtown should accommodate housing that appeals to a broad demographic, and that offers a variety of tenures (ownership and rental).

8. Integrate heritage, culture & local values

- Downtown should celebrate and use heritage resources; built, landscape, arts and cultural.
- New development should be compatible with the historic Downtown character.
- New built forms should be compatible with areas adjacent to Downtown.

9. Downtown=Lethbridge=Region

- Downtown should be integral and integrated with the city, and should continue to enhance its role as the primary regional commercial and service centre.
- It is also a gathering place for all of Lethbridge.

10. Process Matters

- The planning of Downtown should continue in a manner that values the input of stakeholders – residents, landowners, businesses – that have an interest in the outcome.

Heart of Our City Vision Statement

Downtown is characterized by a variety of residential, commercial, institutional, cultural and recreational components that firmly establish the role of the city core as the heart of the greater Lethbridge community.

Downtown is also the symbolic and historic heart of Lethbridge. It is distinguished by its rich past that is evident in its historic architecture, streets, parks, neighbourhoods and landmarks, which are also expressive of the cultural heritage and community values that are unique to Lethbridge as a whole. Downtown is thus both a source and an expression of community identity and pride. Change and growth should strive to strengthen these roles and build on the best qualities that define this urban environment.

Downtown will build on its rich history and distinctive character to nurture an urban context that will create broad sustainable benefits to the community with respect to social, arts, cultural, educational, environmental and economic vitality. Downtown will serve to enhance the quality of life for all Lethbridge citizens.

The vibrancy of Downtown is rooted in its diverse population and accordingly it will strive to be an open, safe, affordable, accessible and welcoming place to people of all walks of life. This social diversity will be embraced and celebrated through urban design, architecture and the day-to-day function and role of Downtown Lethbridge.

10 Key Visioning Strategies

Ten Key Visioning Strategies embody the Vision and reflect the most significant and unifying themes in the Guiding Principles. These strategies present important 'Big Moves' to make in order to achieve the long term planning and urban design outcomes envisioned over the long-term – 20, 50 years or more.

1. Reinforce the Retail Core & Cultural & Civic Corridors

Using beautiful spaces and streetscapes, infill development, and adaptive reuse, enhance and strengthen the Retail Core of Downtown as characterized by pedestrian-oriented retail and heritage resources.

2. Transition areas to buffer established neighbourhoods

The districts on the periphery of the Downtown will create 'transition zones' to ensure appropriate land uses and development scale adjacent to stable residential areas.

3. Reconnect the Downtown to the River Valley

To reconnect Downtown to East-west connections, Scenic Drive will be enhanced to frame views to the valley as well as to potential public art sites. A new north-south boulevard aligned to the edge of the river valley will help to reestablish a meaningful connection and serve as a desirable address.

4. New complete mixed-use Downtown neighbourhoods

Currently or in the future, areas in and around Downtown that are transitioning from former commercial or light industrial uses present significant opportunities to develop desirable mixed-use neighbourhoods within walking distances. Future opportunities include current shopping malls that may eventually be redeveloped or intensified.

5. New open spaces for amenity & foci for livable districts

New open spaces - parks, squares and plazas – animated by retail and public uses provide a civic focus to enhance district identity and can catalyze revitalization. Open spaces will form an important component of the network of public spaces, connections and destinations that enhance the livability, aesthetic quality and pedestrian environment in and around Downtown.

6. Promenades & plazas to extend from Galt Gardens

To reinforce the prominence of Galt Gardens, four grand Promenades will extend as ‘green fingers’ from all sides of the park and link across Downtown’s districts. These Promenades will enhance visual and physical connectivity while providing for local amenity. Where the Promenades connect to Galt Gardens, a series of public plazas similar to Festival Square are proposed for all sides of the Park.

7. Streets designed to enhance the walking experience

Streets are the public open space that will have the greatest impact on the image and success of the Downtown. To ensure the comfort, convenience and appeal to pedestrians, all Downtown streets ought to be designed with walking in mind. Street trees, broad sidewalks, high quality street furniture, and crosswalks all play roles in ensuring amenity, safety and convenience.

8. Gateways & landmarks for orientation & visual delight

Gateways will signal key points of arrival into the City or Downtown Districts. These features can help visitors and residents navigate the area, provide for a ‘sense of place’ and enhance civic pride.

9. Enhanced pedestrian & cycling connections

The Downtown pedestrian and cycling network will be augmented by improving access and connectivity to the wider City. This will be done by bridging barriers such as highways and connecting to Lethbridge’s excellent trail system along the river valley.

10. Strategic sites for attractions & civic destinations

Several visually strategic sites have been identified as potential opportunities to develop new civic, cultural, entertainment or commercial attractions. These sites could serve to reinforce existing assets and/or act as catalysts to transform certain areas.

Part 4: The Guiding Framework

The Guiding Framework provides comprehensive guidance for making planning and investment decisions that are consistent with the Vision Statement and Guiding Principles, and that are coordinated to achieve desired outcomes. The Guiding Framework is comprised of a series of physical plans that illustrate the desirable planning and urban design objectives over the long-term – 20, 50 years or more. Specifically, the Guiding Framework informs decisions on land use, circulation, capital improvements, urban design and built form. The components of the Guiding Framework include: Districts & Neighbourhoods, Public Realm Framework, and the Built Form Framework.

Districts and Neighbourhoods

Distinct Districts and Neighbourhoods are the fundamental building blocks of great cities. This Framework helps to understand Downtown Lethbridge as a collection of areas with distinct existing and/or potential identities and built characteristics.

The purpose of this Framework is to guide capital investments and growth in a manner that respects local identity and reinforces the desired future land uses, built qualities and characteristics of the various areas that comprise the Downtown area. The Downtown area is comprised of eight distinct existing and potential Districts that will be guided by this plan:

- Central District
- Civic District
- Midtown District
- Scenic District
- Upper East Side District
- Park Place District
- Centre Village District
- Broadview District

The character and boundaries of these districts are defined in the Framework, and a set of key objectives are provided for each.

Public Realm Framework

The Public Realm Framework is the general plan that defines and guides the implementation of the Heart of Our City Vision with respect to the existing and potential elements of Downtown that are primarily in public ownership. Consistent with the Vision, the purpose of this Framework is to ensure that the quality and character of the public realm will enhance Downtown's livability, economic vitality, aesthetic quality and pedestrian environment.

The components that comprise the Public Realm Framework are:

- Streetscapes
- Open Spaces
- Gateways & Public Art
- Pedestrian & Cycling Connections
- Public Transit
- Public Parking
- Civic & Cultural Sites

Streetscapes

Streets comprise the most significant component of the public realm and they are the primary means by which we move about, shaping the way in which we experience a given place. Because of the profound impact of streetscape on the perceived and functional quality and character of the built environment, the streetscape strategy is the largest component of the Public Realm Framework.

The Streetscape Character Framework identifies the hierarchy and design objectives for Downtown streets. This Framework will assist in guiding the quality of the pedestrian environment (sidewalks, crosswalks, landscaping) and the appropriate relationship of the buildings to the street to reinforce the intended land uses and streetscape character. The proposed categories of Downtown streetscapes include: Parkways; Boulevards; Main Streets; Promenades; and, District Streets. Role, function and design characteristics are discussed for each typology, and prototype streetscapes are presented.

Built Form Framework

Built form refers to the function, shape and configuration of buildings as well as their relationship to streets and open spaces. The Built Form Framework defines an overall structure for guiding the order and hierarchy of the future built quality and character of Downtown as shaped by the use, design, massing, scale and type of buildings.

The purpose of the Built Form Framework is to guide the scale and intensity of uses and built form to the appropriate areas to reinforce the desired future Vision, including the Public Realm Framework. The Built Form Framework will inform and be supported by subsequent land use policies, design guidelines, development standards and incentive programs. The Framework is also the basis of the Development Design Guidelines which provide standards and benchmarks for parts of Downtown as well as for types of buildings.

The components that comprise the Built Form Framework are the Built Character Framework and Prominent and Distinct Character Sites.

Built Character Framework

The Built Character Framework serves to provide a level of predictability with respect to where change ought to be directed and in what use, shape and form. Because conventional land use and zoning approaches to planning are two-dimensional in their scope, they often do not have the intended outcome. Downtowns are complex environments with mixed and intertwined uses. Accordingly, for Downtown to thrive it should be understood as a hierarchal and ordered structure defined less by land use, and more by its built characteristics as defined by the pattern of streets and blocks, the forms of buildings and the interrelationship between all these components. Therefore, this Framework considers land uses with a focus on the character of built aspects to ensure that the intended outcomes are clearly understood. The typologies of built character considered are:

- Urban Core and Heritage Blocks
- Urban Centre

- Urban Corridor
- Civic Character
- District Centre
- District Corridor
- District Neighbourhood
- Required Retail Frontages

Prominent and Distinct Character Sites

Prominent and Distinct Character Sites are locations with exceptional visibility or opportunity for landmark architectural treatments or features. These sites can enhance the quality of the public areas, reinforce Downtown or District identities, orient pedestrians and strengthen civic pride. They include Prominent View Terminus Sites, Prominent Corner Sites, Prominent Frontages, Potential Civic or Cultural Development Site, and Built Heritage Sites.

Part 5: Development Design Guidelines

Development Design Guidelines provide appropriate standards or benchmarks applicable to new Downtown development. The Guidelines are informed by and reinforce the objectives of the Guiding Framework. Although they seek to provide clarity on intended outcomes of the Plan, they also provide flexibility within certain parameters to encourage distinction, variety and creative architectural responses.

The Guidelines are comprised of: Central District Built Form Design Guidelines; Building Types Design Guidelines; and Environmentally Sustainable Design Guidelines.

Central District Built Form Design Guidelines

The Central District Built Form Design Guidelines apply to all new development in what the Built Form Framework defines as the Urban Core. These guidelines are informed by best practices in urban design but tailored to the unique conditions of Downtown Lethbridge.

Built form refers to the function, shape and configuration of buildings that frame streets and open spaces. The distinct identity of Downtown Lethbridge relative to the rest of the city is closely linked to its “human scale” and the fine grain rhythm of uses and buildings. With respect to built form in Downtown, a central concern of these guidelines is the comfort, convenience, security and visual interest of the pedestrian as shaped primarily by the experience at the level of the sidewalk. To this end, the guidelines contain standards for the following streetscape elements:

- Building Elements
- Orientation & Placement
- Street Wall
- Height & Massing
- Corner & Terminus Sites
- Parking & Servicing
- Landscaping & Amenity Areas
- Architectural & Material Quality
- Infill Design Guidelines for the Heritage Blocks

Building Types Design Guidelines

Building Types refers to the conventional terms used to describe standards of building forms such as “Row House”. The Downtown has evidence of a tremendous variety of building types due to the extent of its area, its long history and the broad mix of uses. While many building types are appropriate and desirable, some are not desirable due to their location or because they are not consistent with the objectives of the Master Plan. At the same time, there are building types that are not currently evident in the Downtown, but that would be appropriate additions when the market permits. Building typologies reviewed in this section include:

- Residential & Mixed-Use Types
- Office & Commercial Types
- Industrial & Storage Types
- Public Building Types
- Above-Grade Parking Facilities

Design Guideline standards for these building types address building placement & orientation, massing & height, parking & servicing, and other design considerations.

Environmentally Sustainable Design Guidelines

As a leader in environmental and energy innovation, Lethbridge is committed to the concept of sustainability. Sustainable design can be defined as architecture and engineering that establishes the conservation of natural resources and systems as a primary consideration in the planning, design, and construction process.

To achieve this goal, all proposed projects will be evaluated against the intent and spirit of Environmentally Sustainable Design Guidelines included in the Framework, that encourage project proponents to design, construct, and operate buildings and landscapes in an environmentally responsible manner.

Part 6: Implementation Strategies

The Implementation Strategies provide a roadmap for action, in order to implement this Vision It outlines steps the City of Lethbridge should consider taking to implement the Master Plan.

Governance and Process

1. Create Downtown Business Unit and prepare a business plan
2. Appoint / hire Downtown Business Unit Manager
3. Allocate Downtown Business Unit staff support (administrative, planning, urban design)
4. Develop Downtown strategy with Economic Development Lethbridge and the Business Revitalization Zone
5. Allocate Business Unit Managers for Technical Advisory Committee meetings (quarterly)
6. Revise Heart of Our City Advisory Committee mandate and initiate meetings
7. Implement a capacity building program in urban design in Planning and Development Services

Planning and Regulatory Framework

1. Create a direct control area as an interim approval process for all Downtown
2. Adopt the Downtown Master Plan, Sections I-III
3. Amend the Land Use By-Law
 - Create a new general Mixed Used District Designation for Downtown
 - Employ Individual District Overlays for Downtown Districts
 - Consideration should be given to allowing non-conforming uses in Downtown to expand
 - A form-based zone for Downtown should be included as a component of Master Plan
 - Integrate Site and Built Form Guidelines into Land Use Bylaw
4. Establish a Design Review Panel
5. Amend the Municipal Development Plan (MDP) to be in keeping with the Guiding Framework (Part 4)7. Amend the Transportation Master Plan for Roadways
8. Amend Consolidated Traffic By-Law #3499
9. Amend Design Standards 2007 (Section 6: Transportation)
10. Amend Business License By-Law #3998
11. Undertake a Municipal Heritage Plan

12. Identify Adaptive Re-Use and Mixed-Use Conflicts in the Building Code
13. Remove Zoning Barriers and provide incentives to Affordable Housing
14. Undertake the Necessary Supporting Studies and Initiatives
15. Review and Amend Recent and Ongoing Master Planning Initiatives

Incentives and Financial Tools

Infrastructure and Circulation

- Build strategically located and well designed municipal parking structures
- Implement more favourable parking standards to stimulate investment
- Develop a comprehensive parking marketing and promotion strategy

Transit Incentives

- Implement and market improved Transit Service Standards and Design
- Further explore the viability of an interim downtown shuttle
- A transit marketing and promotional campaign

Capital Improvements

- Explore the viability of using height/density bonusing
- Amend Offsite Levy By-Law
- Create a Downtown fund for capital improvements
- Create a development tool package for planners and development officers

Economy and Culture

- Streamline and simplify the business permitting and development approval process
- Continue to permit all retail formats but with strict design controls
- In consultation with the BRZ, ensure the provision of amenity and service levels that shoppers expect
- Safety + Security
- The Business Revitalization Zone, Economic Development Lethbridge and the Downtown Business Unit should work together to develop a multi-tiered marketing and business promotion strategy for Downtown retail

- The Business Revitalization Zone, Economic Development Lethbridge and the Downtown Business Unit should work together to develop extensive business assistance and resource tools.
- Initiate A 'Downtown Living' campaign
- Generate a compelling branding strategy

Arts, Culture and Tourism

- Explore funding for and implement an annual Downtown Forum for arts and culture organizations
- Implement the Cultural Corridor Focus Area
- The Downtown Business Unit, in conjunction with the Allied Arts Council and the BRZ, should explore the viability of creating public/private partnerships to support a comprehensive assistance package for artists and other producers of culture
- Collaborate with the First Nations people to create a First Nations Lethbridge cultural summit

Residential

- Consider revising Land Use By-Law Section 10 (64 – proposed MCR District) to include a three pronged approach as an incentive to residential development (small-scale, larger-scale, and multi-block developments)
- Promote and enable both high-income (market) housing and alternative or unconventional housing forms
- Develop an infill / adaptive reuse development toolkit for mixed-use development to overcome building code barriers
- Consider reducing or waiving development charges and permitting fees for Downtown residential investment
- Streamline the permitting and approvals process for residential development
- Improve Financing Options for smaller residential projects

Other Mechanisms and Programs

- Implement payment-in-lieu for parking to encourage municipal or partner-developed offsite parking lots.
- Employ density bonusing as a component of downtown developments.
- Continue to match Provincial grants for Main Streets to enhance the Urban Core: Heritage District.
- Develop a Study Grant Program

- Develop a Landscape Improvement Grant Program
- Create a Residential and Commercial Loans/Grants Program
- Explore Federal redevelopment grants for large Downtown projects
- Consider parking revenues as a long-term funding source
- Create a Downtown Fund for short-to-mid-term capital improvements
- Actively pursue Federal redevelopment grants for capital improvements
- Encourage adaptable grade-levels designed to commercial standards on all developments in the Central Core

Development Controls

- Implement retail frontage requirements
- Employ form-based zoning

Taxation and Assessment

- As part of an Area Redevelopment Plan, or another mechanism, designate Downtown as a distinct area in the City
- Employ tax increment financing for significant Downtown Capital Improvements
- Explore the viability of increasing the tax abatement program to \$5 Million
- Consider expanding Downtown Revitalization Zone (BRZ)
- Negotiate with the Province to examine the feasibility of forgoing the Provincial Education tax increment within Downtown
- Consider creating a Realty Tax Arrears Cancellation Program

Partnerships

- The City should develop partnership models for participation in Downtown developments

Capital Improvement Priority Plan

This section of the Implementation Strategy details and prioritizes projects in the immediate term (less than 3 years), near term (3-5 years), medium term (5-10 years), and long term (11-50 years).