



THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF COURTENAY

## STAFF REPORT

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**To:** Council  
**From:** Chief Administrative Officer  
**Subject:** 2015 Downtown Forum Summary

**File No.:** 6520-20  
**Date:** December 7, 2015

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### **PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this report is to inform Council of the summary of the Downtown Forum and obtain direction from Council on the next steps in revitalizing the Downtown.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

The Downtown Forum, one of the Council strategic priorities in 2015, was successfully delivered from the 26<sup>th</sup> through 28<sup>th</sup> of October with enthusiastic supports from members of the public and the consultant. On the first day of the Forum, staff met more than 50 individuals through both interview and drop-in sessions during the day, while 21 community leaders shared their visions and thoughts about downtown revitalization in the evening. A highlight of the Forum was the Community Discovery Workshop, which was held on the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> at the Native Sons Hall. 76 members of the public participated and discussed future vision, opportunities, and strategies for the downtown revitalization.

While many ideas were expressed, these ideas are broad in nature and need to be better defined in order to determine a future vision, develop strategies, and specific activities that result in positive outcomes as the project goes forward.

### **CAO RECOMMENDATIONS:**

THAT based on the December 7, 2015 staff report "2015 Downtown Forum summary", Council direct staff to continue with the downtown revitalization tasks outlined in Option 1, which include meeting the requirements of the Real Estate Foundation of BC grant, and alignment with the recommendations of the Downtown Revitalization Forum consultant.

Respectfully submitted,

David Allen, BES, CLGEM, SCLGM  
Chief Administrative Officer

### **BACKGROUND:**

In the beginning of this year, Council established five "Now" corporate strategic priorities to address current and emerging issues and opportunities facing the City. Downtown Revitalization is one of the five priorities that Council established to identify a vision and strategies necessary to enhance the viability of downtown. A "Downtown Forum" was planned as a means of communicating with the community and

investigating shared community values toward downtown revitalization. Its primary goals were to identify challenges, opportunities, and strategies through a series of public consultation, and ultimately to establish a vision and develop detailed plans for the coming months.

The City retained Michael von Hausen, the President of MVH Urban Planning and Design Inc., as a facilitator of the Forum. Staff and the consultant established several outreach programs in order to achieve the goal. After two months of preparation, the Forum took place from October 26<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

The Forum began with City staff meeting and a downtown walking tour with the consultant in the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>. A Community Leader's Workshop, which involved members of City Council and Local Business Leaders including the Downtown Courtenay Business Improvement Association (DCBIA), Chamber of Commerce and Comox Valley Economic Development Society, was held in the evening. More than thirty leaders got together at the Native Sons Hall and had a discussion over downtown revitalization and many ideas were brought up. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, staff and the Consultant conducted four face-to-face interviews with downtown business owners and individuals who were unable to attend the workshop. Staff also led a drop-in session at the City Hall Council Chambers on the same day for interested individuals. More than fifty people showed up and shared information with staff. The highlight of the forum was the Community Discovery Workshop in the evening at the Native Sons Hall. Over eighty members of the public attended the workshop and had fruitful discussion in small groups following the Consultant's presentation. Many ideas of downtown revitalisation were presented by the participants. Staff and the consultant met the next morning to review the process and discuss the next course of action. Based on the outcomes of the Forum, the consultant submitted the final report with recommendations (**Attachment No. 1**).

## **DISCUSSION:**

Throughout the Forum, staff was able to hear many ideas, critiques, and hopes about the downtown through both workshops and interviews.

During the Forum, standard questions were asked to all participants in a hope that staff could find out key messages and indicators for revitalization. This method maintained consistency in the search for keywords from different groups and individuals. Sixty-nine individuals completed the questionnaire. Staff reviewed all the answers received and the assessment sheets that the participants completed. While many individuals provided answers in different ways, preliminary analysis indicates that keywords in each question were somewhat similar (**Attachment No. 2**). Below is the brief summary of common themes identified in the questionnaires.

## **Questionnaires**

### **1. What is special about Downtown Courtenay?**

- Speciality shops
- Small town feeling/character
- Walkable
- Central and cultural amenities
- History

### **2. What is missing in the Downtown?**

- Public open spaces

- Residential uses
- Balance between commercial and residential activities
- Access to parks and greenway

3. Describe your vision for Downtown Courtenay 2025.

- Be a vibrant place
- Capitalize on natural beauty
- Be a cultural hub
- Be inclusive and diverse
- Be more walkable

4. What Strategies can we use to unlock the full potential of Downtown?

- Partnership, inclusion, & coordination
- Densification (more mixed-use type of development)
- Development Incentives
- 5<sup>th</sup> Street Improvement
- Better connection with Courtenay River or the parks/green ways
- Wayfinding

### **Downtown Health Action Tool Assessment (DHATA)**

Fifty-nine participants handed in their health assessment score. The result indicates an average score of 55 out of a possible maximum of 100. According to the consultant's assessment tool, the number falls into low-medium downtown category. The result was also similar when the assessment was conducted by members of the community, the leaders, and staff at separate times.

### **Consultant's Report**

Based on the results of the interviews, discussion, and forum, Mr. Von Hausen has submitted a report. He has identified nine observations and ideas as well as several recommendations in the report.

### **Next step**

The Downtown Forum was successful in establishing enthusiasm in supporting downtown revitalization. It was also apparent that community expectation for downtown revitalization is high. If this is to be maintained it is important to respond and follow up with specific actions quickly.

Staff believes it is appropriate to continue to work on downtown revitalization tasks in the following year. This approach also aligns with the consultant's report and the City's Real Estate Foundation of BC grant application, which is detailed below.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:**

The Development Services Department initially allocated \$50,000 for Downtown Revitalization tasks in the 2015 budget. To date the remaining budget is \$32,764 (\$16,687 was spent for consulting services of Mr. von Hausen and the remainder was spent on food, advertising and materials for the workshops).

In addition to the departmental budget, staff applied for a grant program to financially assist some of the planned actions for downtown revitalization earlier this year. The City was successful in the application, and subsequently a total grant of \$20,000 has become available from the Real Estate Foundation of BC upon completion of the proposed revitalization tasks outlined in the application (70% of the payment will be paid upon receipt of an executed copy of the Agreement and the final 30% will be paid upon receipt of the final report). The due date for the final report is May 15, 2016.

**ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:**

To date the total staff time spent is approximately two hundred hours to deliver the forum and prepare the report. Currently the senior planner coordinates all related activities under the Director's supervision. Several planning staff were also involved in the preparation stage and material review process. Some managerial staff from other departments provided assistance during the workshops as well as staff meeting. A similar level of resources and staff hours are anticipated as the downtown revitalization project moves forward. However this will be more accurately determined once Council has provided direction to staff.

**ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS:**

As this is a visioning exercise, there are no direct asset management implications at this time.

**STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:**

Downtown Revitalization is one of the five "Now" strategic priorities for the year of 2015.

**OFFICIAL COMMUNITY PLAN REFERENCE:**

Downtown is one of the defined land use designations within the jurisdiction. Section 4.1 of the Official Community Plan constitutes goals and policies of land use for downtown. The City of Courtenay is committed to a healthy vibrant downtown, and will continue to ensure this area remains viable.

**REGIONAL GROWTH STRATEGY REFERENCE:**

A policy under GOAL 3: LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT of Regional Growth Strategy encourages downtown to be a town centre-based employment area.

***3-D: Promote designated Town Centres as regional employment centres.***

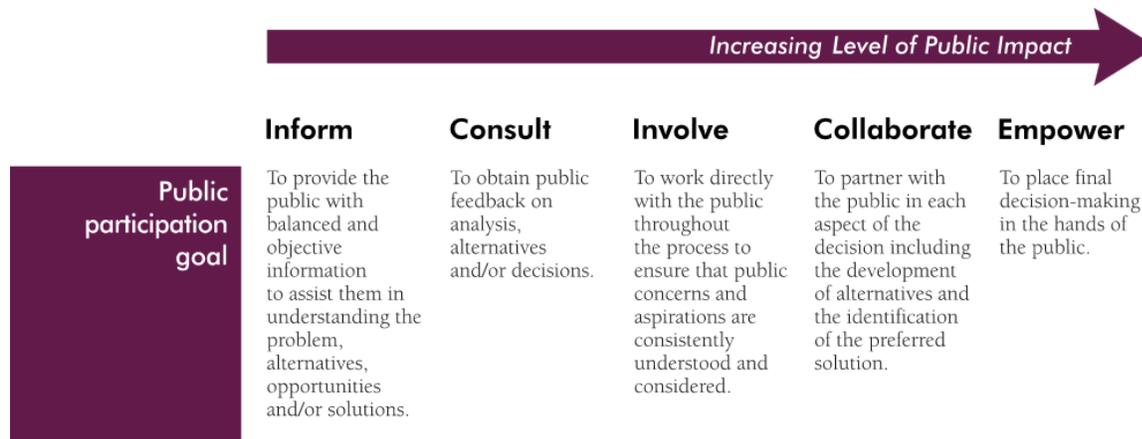
*Mixed-use, compact and accessible employment centres (i.e., accessible by foot, transit, bike and car) tend to retain, attract and encourage new business development better than a more dispersed and scattered local job base, single use downtowns, or office parks. Town centre-based employment areas also tend to be less expensive to service and maintain.*

**CITIZEN/PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:**

The Downtown Forum was widely advertised. Information was released in the two local newspapers four times prior to the event. Staff utilized social media tools such as Facebook as well as the City's website. Social media was found to be a very powerful communication tool. The community discovery workshop advertisement was reached by 3,419 people, while the daytime event advertisement was reached by 3,521 people through Facebook News Feed. According to Google Analytics, as of November 11<sup>th</sup> there were 141 page views and 121 unique page views for the City's Downtown Revitalization page.

To date the City has involved and collaborated with the community based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:

[http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/imported/IAP2%20Spectrum\\_vertical.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/imported/IAP2%20Spectrum_vertical.pdf)



**OPTIONS:**

- 1) THAT Council direct staff to continue with the downtown revitalization objectives and activities outlined in the consultant report and committed to by the City in our grant application to the Real Estate Foundation of BC, which are:

#	Objectives	Activities
1	Take stock of existing information pertaining to the downtown.	Compile all existing information re: land use policy and plans, history, stakeholder projects/plans and any existing community engagement work and BIA working-recommendations.
2	Ensure that collaborative engagement and easy-to-access communication processes are designed throughout the Plan process.	Develop a community-engagement strategy that actively seeks out engaged stakeholders and the general public. Consider involving stakeholders who have the capacity to contribute film and photography to document the process for sharing.
3	Confirm relevance of existing policy and vision material produced in the reference document with Council, stakeholders and general public and establish site-specific visions.	Conduct design charrette to establish a high-level illustrated Vision for the downtown area including natural amenities (e.g. the Courtenay River), appropriate land uses, public spaces, accesses and mobility routes for a variety of modes, the use of 'gateways', and core character elements.
4	Conduct a land economics and market analysis, including assessment of	Conduct a land economics analysis to examine development opportunities in the Plan area given current and projected market analyses including under various

#	Objectives	Activities
	publically-owned lands, their use, possible disposal, and strategic acquisitions.	development incentive scenarios (e.g. waiving development fees/servicing, tax exemptions, partnership contributions, etc.).
5	Create illustrated design guidelines for downtown as well as surrounding residential lands	Work with a designer/landscape architect with illustrative skills to use visionary direction to establish design guidelines for the mixed uses within the downtown and the surrounding residential lands.
6	Compile a community-partnership capacity 'play-book' (summary document)	Establish from the outset of the program how to collect information from the various stakeholders who are actively contributing to downtown viability, including how to establish lines of communication and foster collaborative working-relationships during the Plan process and beyond.
7	Confirm Vision and implementation tools with the public	Hold final public consultation to confirm Plan compilation and deliverables produced (above), and make edits where warranted.
8	Retain 'social learning' from the process	Create a 'lessons learned' report to ensure that procedural, relationship and public relations/marketing successes and areas for improvement are documented.
9	Council adoption	Seek approval from Council on Plan to direct staff towards recommended implementation actions.

2) THAT Council direct staff not to proceed with any further work on Downtown Revitalization at this time.

Prepared by:



Tatsuyuki Setta, MCIP, RPP  
 Senior Planner



Ian Buck, MCIP, RPP  
 Director of Development Services

*Attachments:*

1. *Attachment No. 1 : Re: City of Courtenay Forum Summary Results and Next Steps by Michael von Hausen*
2. *Attachment No. 2: Synthesis of the Questionnaires*

**Attachment No. 1**

***MVH Urban Planning & Design Inc.***

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November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Ian Buck MCIP, RPP

Director of Development Services

City of Courtenay

830 Cliffe Avenue

Courtenay, British Columbia V9N 2J7

Dear Ian:

**Re: City of Courtenay Downtown Forum Summary Results and Next Steps**

Thank you for inviting me to help facilitate the Downtown Forum. Judging from the response at the various workshops and associated discussions, the Courtenay Downtown Forum was a success from a number of perspectives.

**The Downtown Forum:**

- Engaged community stakeholders to begin to shape the vision for the downtown;
- Used various tools including presentations, workshop discussions, a drop-in at City Hall, and interviews to discover some further issues and hidden opportunities in the Downtown and adjacent areas;
- Generated some preliminary discussions for strategic actions; and
- Excited Council and the community about the possibilities for Downtown Courtenay.

The purpose of this memo is to summarize the results of the forum activities and outline further work required to support the next steps. It is important to note that this Downtown Forum is the beginning of a process. The Forum was only three days, so the outcomes are only preliminary in nature and in draft form. Further detailed work and discussions will be part of a continuing process that will conclude in the spring of 2016.

**This discussion is divided into four areas:**

1. Preliminary Observations;
2. Big Ideas;
3. Steps Forward; and
4. Recommendations.

The Big Ideas text is supported by some concept diagrams that visualize the full potential of the ideas and inform the implementation “Playbook” for Courtenay’s Downtown. There are also two attachments: Attachment A – Purpose and Structure of the Downtown Courtenay Forum and Attachment B – Notes from the Downtown Courtenay Forum. Each of these attachments provides supporting detail on the goals, method, desired outcomes, and detailed agenda as well as some of the highlights that came from the various discussions.

I hope this summary is helpful in shaping the next steps in the process. I believe we have ignited the “spark” in the community. Now it is time to follow through.

Best Regards, Michael

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. von Hausen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael von Hausen, President, MLAUD, MCIP, RPP, CSLA, LEED®AP  
Adjunct Professor, Simon Fraser University

# 9 Preliminary Observations

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Based on the forum workshops, discussions, interviews, and review of the results, I would like to submit the following observations:

- 1. Community and Civic Commitment:** The community is committed to the downtown as the business, institutional, cultural, entertainment, tourism, and civic heart for the City. This message came forward loud and clear during the Community Leaders Workshop and the Community Discovery Workshop. Other civic and cultural projects including the upgrades to City Hall, the Old Fire Hall, and Jubilee Square illustrate civic commitment to downtown. There is some differences of opinion as to the downtown's role as the centre for the Comox Valley considering the other centres of Comox and Cumberland. The downtown vision statement should confirm the downtown's role within the City and the Comox Valley. There is an opportunity to clear up this disconnect in a clear and complementary vision commitment.
- 2. Relative Strength:** Most of the discussions focussed on the downtown's great potential. Downtown is a viable and interesting place that has many characteristics of a healthy downtown with many opportunities to grow right and further strengthen its core. The DHATA Tool analysis (see Attachment B – page 18) indicates a strong civic presence in the downtown, a variety of public meeting places, strong parking options, and good primary attractors. These are excellent structural elements or "bones" to add further "muscle" to as part of a "vitalization" plan. Public washrooms are sorely missed and an important enhancement in future improvement considerations. The current diversity of office and institutional uses bring further support for the retail uses. At the same time, there is an opportunity for more diversity of retail and other uses that complement and create more attractors to the downtown as a destination shopping area and activity centre. Housing intensification in and bordering the downtown is a key ingredient to supporting and strengthening its core on a daily basis as the community heart.
- 3. Condition and Care:** Businesses and building owners care for their premises downtown. Those participants in the Forum discussions showed pride in their businesses or actively supported the downtown as residents. Courtenay's downtown is generally well-cared for but the some of the buildings are old and are in need of more significant renovations beyond cosmetic improvements. There are sites (such as the former "Theatre" site) that are critical pieces in the overall image of the downtown and need further attention, if not complete redevelopment. These sites will, in part, contribute the missing pieces in the puzzle for resilience and sustainability as they are important sites that could contribute residential and mixed uses as well as needed community amenities in the downtown area.

4. **Boundaries and Core Area:** The Forum discussions brought further focus for the need for re-examining the concept of distinct boundaries for the downtown. There is the confusion between the Commercial (C-1 Zoning) and the Business Improvement Area (BIA). There is the potential for creating a Downtown Districts Plan that delineates the various parts of the downtown (e.g., core area) without compromising the adjoining areas potential to contribute to the health of the overall downtown (See Big Idea #1: A Greater Downtown: The Downtown Districts Concept).
  
5. **Progressive Policies and Supportive Development Approvals:** Recent amendments to the City of Courtenay Zoning Bylaw No. 2500, 2007 include removing commercial parking requirements, allowing stand-alone residential uses, and removing the requirement for multiple-family outdoor useable space. These steps are excellent initiatives to represent the City's administrative commitment to supporting the right changes in the downtown. Much effort has also been directed at improving the development application processing specifically within the BIA. This improvement process is a continuum with the City making further advances recently but also an opportunity for the City to explain and provide advice on the development/permitting process. Perhaps better and more efficient communication processes are required which may include a downtown page on the City website, a dedicated downtown coordinator, and yearly seminars on development review and approval processes.
  
6. **Incentives for Redevelopment and Improvements:** A common theme in the Community Leader's Workshop and community discussions was the aspect of creating more and effective incentives to improve the downtown's buildings and stimulate redevelopment of some sites. Mechanisms like a revitalization tax exemption; reducing development cost charges and parking patios incentives to extend commercial space onto the street generally were supported in the discussions and should be considered for the Courtenay downtown action plan "Playbook". At the same time, small and effective incentives such as cost-sharing (e.g., Facade Facelifts and Parking Patios - \$5,000 grant program) can make the real difference and show civic commitment to change. Investigation as to what works in comparable municipalities could provide a resource for further incentives that are effective, supported, and contribute to real improvements on the street.
  
7. **Strategic City Investments:** At least one table at the Community Leaders Workshop focused on strategic redevelopment opportunities in the downtown. The City's analysis and strategic investment in downtown properties will show civic priority, leadership, and commitment to the downtown area. The former "Theatre" site and other sites along 4th and 6th Streets should be analyzed as potential mixed use or residential redevelopment sites that contribute increased business, residents in the core and along the edges of downtown. The City could consider acquisition and sale of sites, or even acquisition and joint venture of sites, supported by comprehensive development agreements, that better ensure that commitments, especially residential and mixed use intensification, are executed properly.

8. **Partnerships:** Discussions and interviews during the Forum amplified the fact that there is an extensive voluntary infrastructure of non-profit organizations that could be sourced as partners in implementing actions in the downtown. However, it appears that these non-profit organizations need to be acknowledged and supported further in their endeavors. Further strengthening partnerships should be a high priority between the Downtown Courtenay Business Improvement Association, Comox Valley Tourism Association, Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Society, Land Owners, other non-profits like the Comox Valley Arts Council, private developers, and the City of Courtenay.
  
9. **Other Initiatives:** The Forum discussions appeared to reinforce a host of strategic actions that are currently being considered by the City:
  - a. Improving and expanding the downtown parks and greenway system including the Riverway Greenway, Mile of Flowers, street end parks, streetscape improvements; Harmston Park, and other park improvements;
  - b. Developing improved transit to downtown which should include improving the bus transit terminal at Cliffe Avenue and 4th Street;
  - c. Possibly developing informal market uses by allowing stalls and vendors in specific locations, although there is sensitivity to food trucks in the downtown on a regular basis;
  - d. Continuing to address parking challenges and associated strategies by acquiring properties, improving bicycle and pedestrian access, providing proper signage, considering timed parking programs specific to areas, and assessing existing City parking lots; and
  - e. Developing a downtown wayfinding strategy with signage and directories;

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## 3 Big Ideas

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### 1. A Greater Downtown: The Districts Concept

What emerged from our discussions is the need for **more people** in the downtown and the **need to connect to the Courtenay and Puntledge Rivers. Connection to, improving and redeveloping bordering uses, and direct use of the rivers as downtown amenities, are key moves to realizing a “Greater Downtown.”**

The riverfront area north of Cliffe Avenue from 5th Street to the redevelopment site south of 6th Street offers a significant opportunity to develop a “River” district bordering the Courtenay River with a potential pedestrian connection across to Lewis Park. The development concept could follow that of the very successful Granville Island in Vancouver and also be a “trailhead” for adventure tourism adjoining the downtown core area of Courtenay.

More people in the downtown mean more activity and more business. This is a simple element but a profound driver for change. How do we get more people in the downtown? One way is to increase housing intensification in or near the downtown - a topic that dominated many discussions. This means residents living within a five to ten minute walk (400 to 800 meters) of the downtown core area centred at 5th Street and England Avenue (see **A Connected Downtown: Pedestrian First** on page 8 and 9).

It also appeared that intensity of housing was not an apparent issue. However, it is realistic to assume that intensification of land uses has to incorporate guidelines to make the proposals respectful of context and integrate appropriate transitions of height, use, and form.

There are only so many redevelopment parcels in the downtown core area for residential redevelopment, especially if 5th Street remains a one to two story form in the near future. There appears to be little economic incentive to demolish buildings, especially if they have been handed down generation to generation, each have a positive cash flow, redevelopment entails considerable capital or financing without the necessary development interest nor expertise, and there are no guarantees for success, especially in a relatively small market.

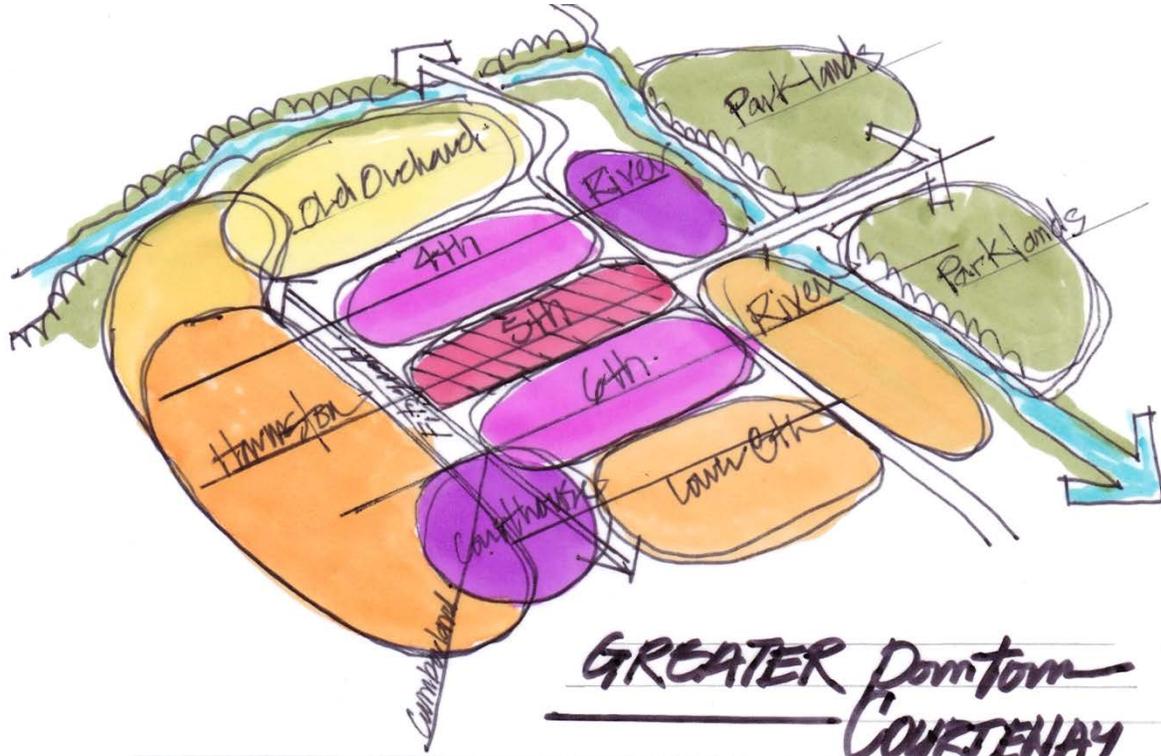
A complementary and alternative approach is to bring more people into the downtown by intensifying the inside and outside edges of downtown. The intensification may vary from a height consideration of a maximum of 8 stories in the core (current zoning) to a consideration of 3 to 4 stories outside the core area to be compatible with the current residential character. This approach will require rezoning and design guidelines to permit and help guide sensitive intensification of these bordering areas.

The “greater” downtown area may be divided into districts to distinguish unique characteristics and compatible intensification forms. These districts could be part of the “**Greater Downtown**” intensification strategy that may include apartments, townhouses, suites, and other types of lot infill units (lane housing if applicable). This strategy also includes Lewis and Simms Parks and the riverfronts as part of this greater vision for the downtown. Some of these may already be permitted but a broader range of higher density housing could spark more redevelopment opportunities.

### **THE GREATER COURTENAY DOWNTOWN Districts Concept**

The accompanying **Downtown Districts Concept** divides the “Greater” Downtown into nine districts as follows:

- 5th Avenue Core District;
- 4th Avenue District;
- 6th Avenue District;
- Lower 8th Street District;
- Courthouse District;
- Harmston District;
- Old Orchard District;
- River District; and
- Parklands District.



**GREATER Downtown  
COURTENAY  
DISTRICTS CONCEPT.**

MVH '15.

## 2. A Connected Downtown: Pedestrian First

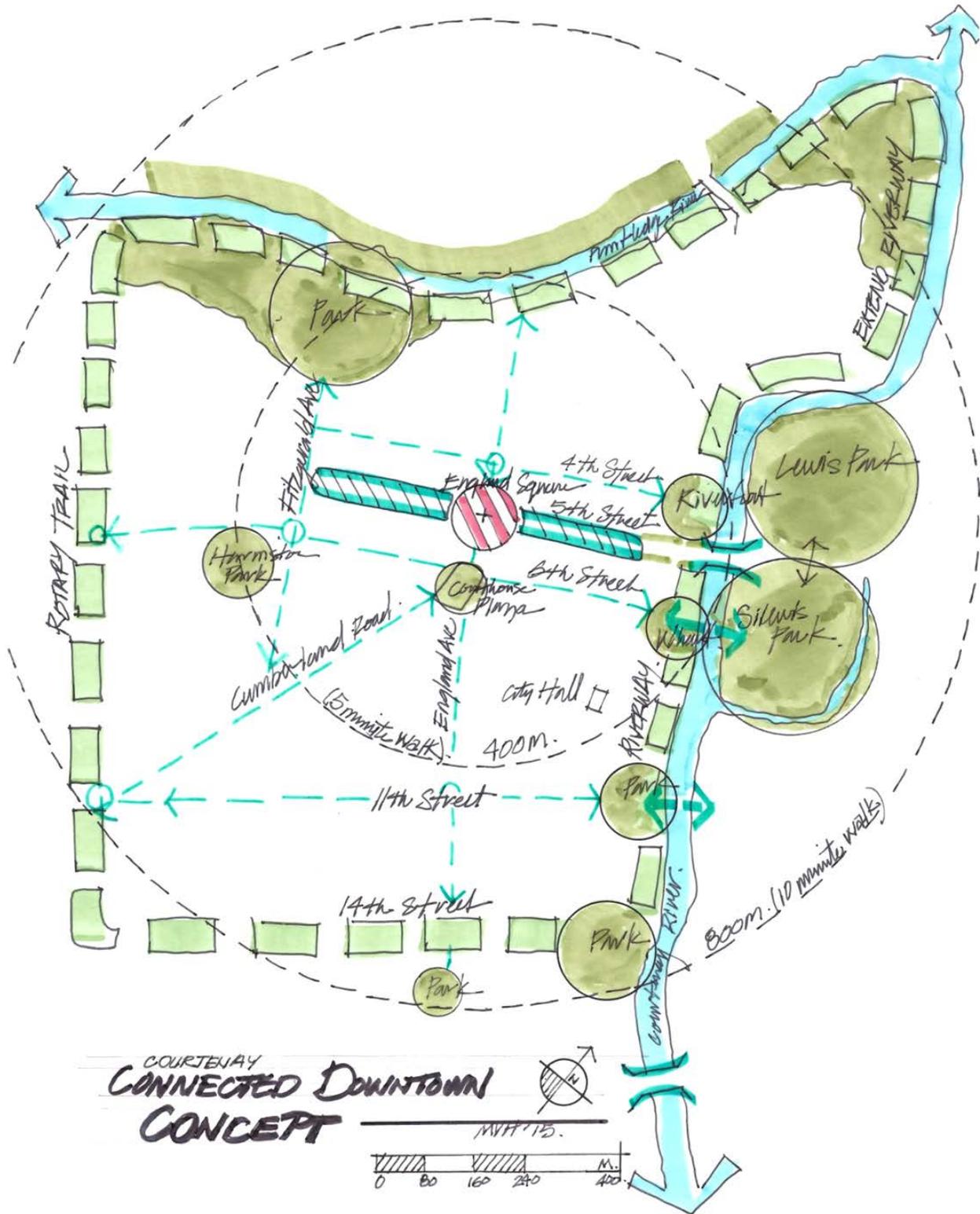
A “pedestrian first” strategy is a core priority for a more walkable and accessible downtown. This means that pedestrians come first in any transportation discussion within the downtown. Coupled with this priority is a bicycle-friendly downtown to encourage more individuals and families to come downtown by bicycle. Pedestrian and bicycle connections to and through the downtown were common themes in most group discussions.

**Riverway Loop:** The Courtenay Riverway was one of the common opportunities identified with its current terminus at 6th Street just above Anderton Avenue. The continuation of the Riverway around to connect to the Puntledge River, then connect into the Rotary Trail to create a greenway loop around the Downtown.

**Downtown Bike and Pedestrian Green Connectors:** Improved bike lanes and green connectors along streets in the downtown was also discussed and supported.

**Courtenay River Crossing:** A pedestrian connection across the Courtenay River to Lewis Park or Simms Park was also an important topic – the question was where and how. Further work (flooding and associated infrastructure) needs to be completed along the Courtenay River banks so the pedestrian bridge to Simms Park or Lewis Park could be planned as part of a provincial and/or federal infrastructure funded infrastructure improvement project.

The accompanying **Connected Downtown Concept** begins to connect the public open spaces, plazas, and parks together in an amenity network in and around the Downtown. Combining the potential of the Downtown Districts Plan and the Connected Downtown Concept, people will want to walk and bike and leave their car at home or possibly become “car-less”. Note that the plan illustrates the 5 minute (400 meter) and 10 minute walking distance from the downtown core area at England Avenue and 5th Street.



### 3. Courtenay's Complete Downtown: Live, Work, Play, Learn, and Shop

The sum total of housing intensification, more and diverse commercial uses, civic and social institutions, in a “connected” and walkable downtown equals a “complete downtown”. Although, there will remain some greater Courtenay and Comox Valley services that will be required. Residents will, for the most part, live, work, play, learn, and shop within a five to ten minute walking distance of their home. The following ideas to make Courtenay's Downtown more complete came, in part, from the 20 DHATA indicators analysis – summary of trends on page 20 (Attachment B) and other discussions. The gaps in the downtown may include:

1. Focal point or public “Heart” in the downtown;
2. Year round public market square;
3. Redevelopment of underutilized land parcels;
4. Residential intensification in and close to the downtown;
5. Connecting with the Courtenay River;
6. Active redevelopment of the riverfront especially adjoining downtown;
7. More outdoor cafes and pocket park areas;
8. Pedestrian Bridge to Lewis Park;
9. Boutique hotel;
10. Public washrooms;
11. Public art program;
12. Downtown park with a playground for families;
13. Biking and walking trails to downtown;
14. Night market on 5th Street;
15. Street upgrades to include a bike lane;
16. Gateways to the downtown with a distinct local signature; and
17. Wayfinding program that clearly delineated public parking and points of interest.

The ***Complete Downtown's*** social fabric is connected to the cultural, recreational, and business fabric not in dislocated places but in one place, as the accompanying diagram illustrates.



# 4 Steps Forward

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## 1. Baseline Information

There are a number of information (data) layers that will help further development of the downtown strategies for action:

- a. Traffic volumes and locations
- b. Classification of streets (arterial, collector, and local)
- c. Parking inventory and use
- d. Potential infill sites
- e. Public open space
- f. Land ownership
- g. Outdoor meeting places
- h. Building coverage (%) of land area
- i. Vacancy and locations as well associated economic indicators in the downtown
- j. Event programming and location/frequency

## 2. Communication and Partnerships

- a. Continue to build relationships with businesses in the downtown by continuing the one on one interview program;
- b. Complete an email to all participants in the Downtown Forum and inform them of the next steps and potential timing of events and their potential engagement opportunities;
- c. Engage the arts community in the project in supporting the Charrette process;
- d. As part of a continuing public engagement process, contact local schools to have youth input from grade 8 and 12 classes. There is potential for youth to join the Charrette and/or try to get this project completed as a class assignment. If the assignment is to be done in class, the assignment could simply be: *“Draw your vision of a Great Downtown Courtenay in 2025 with improvements and label those improvements on your map or drawing. The assignment can be done on an 11” x 17” map of downtown or on an 11” x 17” white sheet of paper. Place your name, grade and school in the bottom right hand corner and frame the sheet with a one inch border.”*; and
- e. Consider a *Downtown Partners Program* and convene a meeting about how that would work and how to implement it (this would be an early start to creating the foundation partnership for the “Playbook.”).

## 3. Momentum, Process, and Early Actions

- a. Since you have built enthusiasm for the downtown, proceed to the Charrette early in the new year to keep momentum in the process;
- b. Develop a detailed process chart that can be presented to the community as to milestones and action orientation activities; and
- c. Implement actions as soon as possible to show “actions speak louder than words” based on support, funding, and impact.

#### 4. Action Oriented Tools

Develop strategic plans, policies and guidelines that direct progressive redevelopment and improvements downtown that may include:

- a. *Public Realm Toolkit*: (sidewalk, furnishings, planting, lighting, and street standards especially for 4th Street);
- b. *Downtown Parks and Greenways Connector Plan*;
- c. *Intensification Action Plan*: further development and infill strategies for potential redevelopment sites;
- d. *Building Guidelines* (including facade, building form and massing, and materials); and
- e. *Downtown Playbook* as a critical a piece of this Action-Oriented Plan that indicated roles, funding, responsibilities, and schedule.

# Recommendations

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It is important to realize that we are at the beginning of the design and planning process for downtown Courtenay. We have begun to engage Council, downtown businesses, community organizations and the community in general. The alignment of these potential partnerships are starting to form and we have established some enthusiasm for specific ideas but we need further development before informed decisions and priority in directions can be established by Council. The following are a sequence of scheduled steps that bring more certainty and direction to the process and desired outcomes over the next few months.

## 1. Report to Council (December 2015)

- a. **What We Heard:** Present 9 Observations and 3 Big Ideas and the recommendation to test them in a Downtown Design Charrette in January/ February 2016.
- b. **The Charrette:** We will also develop a **Now, short and medium action plan** that is reviewed by the community including, setting priorities that may include:
  - i. *Wayfinding:* Gateways, parking, and landmarks in the downtown.
  - ii. *Public Realm Toolkit:* (sidewalk, furnishings, planting, lighting, and street standards);
  - iii. *Downtown Parks and Greenways Connector Plan;*
  - iv. *Intensification Action Plan:* further development and infill strategies for potential redevelopment sites and the greater downtown transition areas; and
  - v. *Building Guidelines* (including facade, building form and massing, and materials).

These will be assembled as a foundation for *The Downtown Playbook* and a critical piece of this Action-Oriented Plan that will delineate roles, funding, responsibilities, and schedule.

## 2. Preparation for the Charrette (December/January 2016)

- a. **Hire the Charrette Team:** MVH will provide: Lead Facilitator, Planner, and Urban Designer – Michael von Hausen and Urban Designer/ Illustrator – Cal Srigley as well as Landscape Architect –Kim Perry.
  - i. Supporting Local Team: one architect and one landscape architect
  - ii. City Team: Senior Planner, Environmental Planner
  - iii. Other Artists: three artists/illustrators of ideas
  - iv. City Staff: Support community workshop and final presentation
- b. **Complete Economic Analysis on Key Sites:** MVH can help select economics consultant to briefly look at 4 to 7 sites to assess financial feasibility, desired density, uses, and potential required incentives/deal structures to permit viability. (This task can be done in coordination with the charrette to inform the land use program and associated intensification.)

- c. **Develop the Charrette Design Brief:** Information and design/planning program for the downtown as well as an initial implementation action plan which will be the basis to the *Downtown Playbook*.
- d. **Invite Community Leaders and the Public:** Invite the community leaders to the Community Ideas Workshop and Downtown Directions Presentation as well as the drop-in sessions during the Charrette (allow at least two weeks' notice).

**3. Execute the Charrette (Late January/ February 2016)**

- a. Day 1: Discussions and idea development at Community Ideas Workshop
- b. Day 2: Design team work and community drop-in
- c. Day 3: Design team refinement and community drop-in
- d. Day 4: Presentation preparation and Community Presentation on Downtown Directions.

**4. Assemble a Downtown Action Plan for Council Review (March/April 2016)**

- a. Summary of Findings and Recommendations
- b. The Land Use and Infill Concept Plan
- c. The Wayfinding Concept Plan
- d. Green Belt Concept Plan
- e. Mobility Concept Plan
- f. Action Plan: Now, Short and Medium
- g. Funding and Organization for Action

## **ATTACHMENT A: Purpose and Structure of the Downtown Courtenay Forum**

**Goals:** In accordance with Council direction, the Downtown Forum was to determine “what is the vision and what are the strategies to enhance the viability of downtown.”

**Method:** Develop the vision and strategies through a number of discussions, interviews, drop-ins, site walks, workshops, a comment sheet, questionnaire, and the DHATA evaluation tool that assesses the health of the downtown.

### **Desired Outcomes:**

1. *Special Characteristics:* Summary of what is special about Downtown Courtenay.
2. *Missing Pieces:* Summary of missing elements in Downtown Courtenay.
3. *Gap Analysis:* The Downtown Health Action Tool Assessment (DHATA) will provide information of distinct gaps in the downtown from social, economic, design, and organizational perspectives.
4. *Vision:* A basis for a draft Vision for the Downtown – the key elements for the vision.
5. *Strategies:* The foundation for ideas relating to strategies to enhance the viability of downtown.

### **Detailed Agenda:**

Sunday, October 25:

11:00 – 3:00 pm      Walking Tour with Consultant

Monday, October 26:

9:00 – 12:00 pm      Staff Discovery Workshop

12:00 – 1:00 pm      Lunch

1:00 – 3:00 pm      Staff Site Walk and Mapping

3:00 – 4:00 pm      Preparation for Community Leaders Workshop

4:00 – 8:00 pm      Community Leaders Workshop

Tuesday, October 27:

8:30 – 11:30 am      Interviews with Businesses

11:30 - 2:00 pm      Drop-in for Courtenay Residents and Businesses

2:00 - 4:00 pm      Interviews Continued

4:00 – 5:00 pm      Light Dinner

5:00 - 6:00 pm      Preparation for Community Workshop

6:00 – 9:30 pm      Community Discovery Workshop

Wednesday, October 28:

8:30 -11:00 am      Interviews

11:00 -12:00 pm      Wrap up with Staff

1:00 – 4:00 pm      Final Staff Discussion

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## **ATTACHMENT B: Notes from the Downtown Courtenay Forum**

### **Top Ten Themes:**

1. Plan for a greater downtown - Rethink boundaries (include the river and residences)
2. Promote downtown living
3. Create and connect people places
4. Capitalize on re-development opportunities – strat land acquisition. Same map with CVEDS
5. Make mobility work
6. Establish a clear identity for downtown
7. Maintain and emphasize the positive
8. Make evidence-based decisions
9. Unify and support business practices
10. Embrace the community's commitment and implement as a team

#### **1. Rethink boundaries: *Acknowledge the rivers as prominent assets of the Downtown and surrounding residential lands as supportive lands to downtown viability***

- a. **Show it visually:** possible boundaries of the downtown planning process
- b. **Why this move:** People gravitate to natural features, the lands across the Courtenay River expand the range of amenities and 'destination generators' to the area, floodplain planning will require that we consider how public safety considerations incorporate a functional and positive relationship to the downtown core, opportunity for enhanced community pride and awareness of environmental values (e.g. water – flooding, drought, climate change. Huge leverages with the stewardship sector). Greeninfrastructure, Blue-way plan.
- c. **What info we need:**
  - i. Clarity on floodplain infrastructure requirements
  - ii. Acquisition opportunities along the floodplain
  - iii. Setback and access along the rivers
  - iv. Residential assessment potential for intensification surrounding downtown
  - v. Land use and redevelopment along and bordering the rivers

#### **2. Promote downtown living: *More people means more life***

- a. **Show it visually:** The locations for residential development. Show the 'saddle' cross section over 5<sup>th</sup> Street.
- b. **Why this move:** More people will equal more foot traffic and likely committed customers. City should be ready to actively work with interested investors by having thought through development impacts. E.g. More housing creates transportation impacts, and needs to be considered in advance to support private investment decisions. Ensure mix of tenures and demographics: e.g. Student housing with a NIC shuttle? Seniors housing).
- c. **What info we need:**
  - i. Acceptable design parameters

- ii. Understanding of how much density is appropriate, workable, infrastructure renewal projects required.
- 3. Create, connect and animate people places: *Adopt a public space framework that clearly connects adjacent neighbourhoods into the downtown, people to the rivers and supports events and activity***
- a. **Show it visually:** Show the ‘hearts’ of downtown and how they connect to other parks and across the River, including bridge(s).
  - b. **Why this move:** Public spaces draw people into the downtown and provide leisure amenity to encourage people to stick around. They can be used for multiple uses such festivals, concerts and other public uses. People like to access water amenities and are a destination in and of themselves, as demonstrated by the Riverway Greenway. Public spaces should be well connected to logically lead people into and within the downtown. Support facilities should be provided (e.g. public washrooms) and other amenities (e.g. wifi, outdoor music). Public spaces should encourage community building.
  - c. **What info we need:**
    - i. Acquisition opportunities and opportunities for greenway/park development
    - ii. Access points to the river
- 4. Capitalize on re-development opportunities: *Make plans for and invest in core development sites***
- a. **Show it visually:** Possible core redevelopment sites.
  - b. **Why this move:** Promote the merits of downtown living and bring people downtown.
  - c. **What info we need:**
    - i. Data on costs/availability of lands
    - ii. Confirmation of which are priority through more land use planning
- 5. Make Mobility work: *for pedestrians first as well as more efficient traffic flow and parking options***
- a. **Show it visually:** Show which streets need re-prioritization of pedestrian work + cross section? Leave 5<sup>th</sup> Street alone (for now). Invest in 4<sup>th</sup>. Show the existing parking.
  - b. **Why this move:** To be truly pedestrian-oriented and offer a ‘distinct’ streetscape feel, 50% of the road right of way should be allocated to uses other than the automobile. Welcoming streetscape elements. Traffic should be slow and people should feel comfortable near and on the streets. Universal design. Cars should feel like they’re on pedestrian turf, not the other way around. Encourage bikes and buses to alleviate car/parking pressure. Select streets should be designed to accommodate short-term closures. It should be clear where parking is (and marketed that it is not far from shops).
  - c. **What info we need:**
    - i. Traffic flows/data including pedestrian and cycling counts
    - ii. Parking study

- iii. Street plans to assess the potential for improvements

**6. Establish a clear identity for the downtown: *Establish our unique character, distinct districts/development clusters, prominent gateways, effective wayfinding and coordinated events and marketing***

- a. **Show it visually:** The districts (river, heritage, main street, farmers market, mixed use (residential), etc.), gateway locations, where wayfinding is critical.
- b. **Why this move:** We should enhance the presence of the downtown within the overall community. Visitors and community members should know when they are entering or are in the downtown through obvious tool such as signage, but more importantly through purposeful urban and architectural design and character elements. It is distinctive yet complementary of its surroundings, recognizing and building on the diverse and dynamic nature of our community, using districts as organizing principles can create clarity on what elements and local charm to emphasize in different areas.
- c. **What info we need:**
  - i. Know the boundaries: functional, perceptual, visionary
  - ii. Determine the best locations for gateways and wayfinding signage
  - iii. Event schedules – in advance

**7. Maintain and emphasize the positive: *selling the successes and joys of Downtown is more effective than the negative***

- a. **Show it visually:** One idea was to develop a “Love Downtown” slogan that is picked up in all promotional materials via a heart logo or similar inspiring visual image that illustrates that Courtenay’s Downtown is – unique, special and valued!
- b. **Why this move:** Community asset-based planning (‘polishing the diamond’) can be an effective means to attracting excitement and commitment from a wide variety of supporters and shoppers. To build on what’s already working, we have to ensure that it remains working - emphasize its current positive attributes.
- c. **What info we need:**
  - i. Develop a “positive” assets campaign and partner with the BIA behind the positive messaging in all events

**8. Make evidence-based decisions: *Use data to take informed action***

- a. **Show it visually:** Illustrate graphs on downtown, illustrating number of stores and types/diversity of businesses as well as number of residents; other trends can be shown graphically so the community understands the current position and desirable targets such as more specific types of businesses and residents living downtown.
- b. **Why this move:** Know thyself to ameliorate and provide information to investors, and be proactive in response to changes in the data. Know vacancy rates, turnover, land values, condition of building stock, number of customers, revenue, business financial situation, successions.
- c. **What info we need:**
  - i. Number of residents in the downtown
  - ii. Number and type of businesses

- iii. Vacancy rates and turnover
- iv. Other economic health indicators

**9. Unify and support business practices and marketing:**

- a. **Show it visually:** Success stories about downtown businesses posted on website – both old and new...and in marketing materials.
- b. **Why this move:** Ensure that Downtown feels like a cohesive unique experience from other shopping experiences in the Comox Valley: a commitment to customer service, promoting each other, similar signage/marketing cues, consistent hours, loyalty programs (downtown wide?), co-mentorship. Recognize the challenge of retiring businesses and ensure that incoming businesses are welcomed and supported.
- c. **What info we need:**
  - i. Coordinated marketing program by BIA and others
  - ii. Business support and retention strategies

**10. Commit to implementation as a team: *It takes a community to create a downtown***

- a. **Show it visually:** Promote a - Progress by Action campaign with posters illustrating moves in the downtown and a report card on progress to Council on a semi-annual basis to show progress.
- b. **Why this move:** It takes a community to create a downtown, especially in this highly engaged and resourceful citizenry. Working together will leverage opportunities and resources unique to each sector. Dedicated human resources and a participant framework will build capacity for delivery. Coordinator needs to be project manager, community builder and action oriented.
- c. **What info we need:**
  - i. Interested parties and individuals
  - ii. Potential partners provincially and federally in infrastructure and other programs
  - iii. Commitment to work with existing parties (BIA and others) to add support but not duplicate efforts

## **DOWNTOWN HEALTH ACTION TOOL ASSESSMENT (DHATA)**

Twenty primary health indicators, benchmarks and measurements are tools to begin to understand the profile of Courtenay's downtown as it compares to very healthy downtowns and other downtowns. These 20 indicators are divided into four groups: social, economic, physical and organization. These are quantitative and qualitative measurements of Courtenay's downtown so we can assess its deficiencies (gaps/weaknesses) and then strategically improve them.

The DHATA tool was used at the Community Leaders Workshop, the Community Discovery Workshop and with Staff on a walking tour of the Downtown. The results below reflect total of 45 submissions with some submissions not completed in every category. Each indicator was marked out of a possible 5 points with 1 being low and 5 being high. Where there are two numbers indicated below, this means there was a difference of opinion between the public (first number) and staff (second number).

### **Summary of Indicators:**

#### Weak:

- Heart (2 and 1)
- High values/sales per sq ft, low vacancy, extended hours (2)
- Wayfinding (2)
- Landmarks and entrances (2)
- Effective marketing (3 and 1)

#### So-So to Strong:

- Outdoor meeting places (3)
- Arts, culture and activity programming (3 and 4)
- Pedestrian activity (3)
- Mix of Uses(3)
- Incentives (2 and 3)
- Safety and accessibility for pedestrians (3)
- Building unity and continuous elements (2 and 3)
- Uniqueness and identity (3 and 4)
- Primary leadership organization (4 and 3)
- Coordinator (3)
- Collaborative partnership (3)

#### Strong:

- Public facilities and institutional indoor meeting places (4)
- Civic presence (4)
- Local first and tourist second – primary attractors (4)
- Parking (4)

The overall mark was 59 out of a possible 100 points that places Courtenay in the middle category which indicates significant room for improvements. This DHATA tool is by no means scientific but provides an indication of Courtenay's downtown overall level of health. It also provides distinct indications where the downtown is weak and provides specific opportunities for improvements.

## Attachment No. 2

Sample size: 69 questionnaires submitted

### 1. What makes our Downtown Special?

- Variety of shops (local, unique, independent, small, speciality, quality, niche, “mom and pop”), including specific shops mentioned: 37
  - o Related: Shop owners characteristics (friendly, engaged, charitable, personable, relationships): 11
  - o Related: Restaurants and coffee shops mentioned specifically: 9
- Aesthetics (setting, view of the glacier, ambiance and care, attractive storefronts, general small town feel, uniqueness): 27
  - o Related: River specifically mentioned: 14
  - o Related: Streetscapes (flowers/landscaping, trees, music, heritage signage, absence of street lights): 12
  - o Related: Historic elements: 8
  - o Related: Absence of ‘chain’ or ‘big box’ retail: 7
  - o Related: Compact form: 6
- Amenities nearby
  - o Cultural amenities: Library, Filberg Centre, Art Gallery, City Hall, Museum, community centre facilities: 18
  - o Parks, greenways and access to Nature: 12
  - o Events: 10
  - o Mix of uses either in Downtown or nearby (e.g. residential in Old Orchard): 8
- Mobility options
  - o Walkable within the Downtown: 10
  - o Accessibility (from outside the downtown): 5
  - o Free Parking (e.g. park once): 5
- Vibrancy and spirit: 18

### 2. What is Missing from our Downtown?

- Public space improvements/additions:
  - o Central plaza/meeting place (all weather): 26
  - o Pedestrian mall, explicitly ‘car free’ spaces: 10
  - o Green spaces, explicitly stated (with sun): 10
  - o Small gathering locations: 6
  - o Kid friendly: 7
  - o Washrooms: 4
- Transportation and greenway network improvements:
  - o Better cycling/walking connectivity into downtown: 8
  - o Underground/parkade, more or better parking: 6
  - o River way greenway connectivity, including connectivity to the River: 6
  - o Pedestrian connection across the River: 3

- Residences: 17
- Downtown aesthetic:
  - o Street improvements: wider sidewalks, more seating, rain covering, greenery: 12
  - o Outdated look/care of buildings: 7
  - o Public Art/cultural presence: 6
  - o Coordination of aesthetic: 3
- Orientation and community information (signs, maps, event listings, directory, community notice boards): 11
- Specific businesses/private venues:
  - o Outdoor cafes and restaurants: 7
  - o Nightlife/ entertainment/live music/ films: 10
  - o Arts studios
  - o Hotel (boutique?)
  - o New commercial
  - o More mix of commercial
  - o More specialty shops
  - o More every day shops, including an affordable grocery store and department store
  - o Convention centre type facility
  - o Stationary store
  - o Photocopy shop

3. Describe your **Vision** for Downtown Courtenay in 2025?

- Quality of the feeling:
  - o Vibrant (related to there being lots of people, 'where the action is', 'place to be', place to take tourists): 27
  - o Capitalizing on natural beauty (River and views (glacier)): 12
  - o Diversity and inclusivity: 12
  - o Unique: 3
- Residences: 21, with higher density(4-6 stories) noted: 6
- Related to public open spaces:
  - o Greenway network (with emphasis into the downtown and across the River (bridge)): 15
  - o More walkable/pedestrian oriented: 13
  - o Cycling routes: 10
  - o More greenery (landscaping): 9
  - o Social Gathering Spaces: 8
  - o Street closures (permanent): 8
  - o Fewer automobiles: 5
  - o Green spaces: 4
- Cultural hub/arts facilities: 10
- Outdoor eating (patios): 10
- Thriving businesses: 7
- Coordinated signage/wayfinding effort, including beyond Downtown's boundaries: 6

- Redevelopment of older buildings: 5

4. What **Strategies** can we use to unlock the full potential of Downtown?

- Continue to involve the public/stakeholders, and invest in partnerships/coordination ('we are here to help' sentiment): 20
- Find ways to support/create housing: 15
- Provide leadership (4), particularly in the area of property acquisition: 8 and/or permanent street closures: 4
- Financial incentives (tax breaks, lower/no DCCs): 15 and remove Red Tape: 5
- Create access to/across the River, riverway walkway development: 7
- Grants for beautification/upgrades specifically: 6
- Regulatory reform to limit commercial development outside the downtown: 4
- Look to other leading municipalities: 4
- Limit cars – promote cycling/walking: 4

