
MEMORANDUM

To: City Council

From: Emily Fernandez, Community Project Planner; Katie Behnke, Economic Development Manager

CC: Thom Sheridan, City Manager; Frank Comeriato, Asst. City Manager-Operations; Greg Hannan, Community Development Director

Date: April 2, 2024

Subject: **Downtown Master Plan Update**

Council has reviewed multiple opportunities over the past year to enhance downtown Hudson in a way that protects its character while maximizing its cultural/economic value to the community. Two of the opportunities were a downtown master plan and the Heritage Ohio DART visit.

Needs & Opportunities

Community Development and Public Works staff have documented many existing needs to address and opportunities to consider. Several of these have been identified by the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee, downtown property owners, and recently by additional community organizations. The Steering Committee was especially interested in identifying events or amenities that could increase foot traffic to support businesses. A master plan would allow the City to formally capture input from interested parties and receive necessary technical guidance on opportunities (see attachment, “Downtown Needs & Opportunities”).

February Council Discussion

City Council discussed several questions at the February 2024 workshop:

1) *Is there a need for a plan within Hudson’s well-preserved downtown?* Yes, staff suggests that there are several opportunities downtown as outlined in the “Needs & Opportunities” attachment. The area is well maintained but could be significantly enhanced with improvements to strengthen sense of place and encourage greater foot traffic. The City already allocates significant staff and maintenance resources to downtown. The plan is an opportunity to maximize existing resources and prioritize future investments, as well as holistically address the ongoing discussions regarding sign clutter, event management, public art, etc.

2) *Could the effort capture more of the City than downtown?* Staff considered expanding to a city-wide commercial corridors plan that would capture Main Street as one corridor of many, given that the draft Comprehensive Plan is recommending enhancements to the South Main-

Darrowville corridor. However, it did not make sense to address downtown in this way as the nature of Main Street and other downtown corridors are very different than expansive commercial corridors (many downtown parcels are City-owned, City maintains public spaces & parking, focus is public investment, traffic is lower speed). A corridor plan does not capture key landscape architecture opportunities that have been identified for downtown. Downtown plans and DART visits are both focused on a geographic area considered to be the downtown. While DART is strictly downtown-focused, a master plan can include recommendations for adjacent corridors. For reference, the current RFP requests analysis of the corridors from downtown to Evaporator Works, Veterans Way, Acme, and Barlow Community Center.

3) Would a DART visit accomplish the goals of the Downtown Master Plan? Staff evaluated the two options in detail and determined that no, a DART visit does not capture nearly the breadth of a master plan. Staff reviewed master plans from seven cities and spoke to planning consultants from several firms to confirm the level of technical expertise that is offered. Master plans are tailored to a city’s physical landscape, funding sources, and cultural context as determined through extensive public engagement. Plans can include historic preservation recommendations in addition to guidance on landscaping, event programming, streetscape enhancements, public art, and overall branding. ***The master plan is focused on prioritizing the existing funds the City invests in public spaces and capturing opportunities for future enhancement.*** Staff spoke directly with Heritage Ohio (organizer of Main Street Communities program) and several Main Street Communities to understand what a DART visit offers. DART visits are considered the first step in preparing communities to establish a Main Street Program (see attachment, “DART Agenda”). Advancing towards Main Street would involve establishing an independent 501(c)3 to lead downtown improvement efforts. ***The DART visit is focused on determining how various organizations manage downtown preservation efforts and how responsibilities can be fitted to the Main Street model.*** See “Comparison Matrix” for details.

4) Could staff complete the work outlined in the master plan RFP? The current RFP for the downtown plan assumes significant staff involvement alongside a consultant who will bring necessary expertise in landscape architecture, branding, and knowledge from working with other communities on similar efforts. Staff reviewed existing opportunities and determined there is a need for consultant assistance to formulate a clear vision that can address opportunities strategically. Staff, or staff and a DART visit team, could complete a portion of the public engagement outlined in the master plan RFP. However, staff suggests that planning the public engagement strategy with a master plan consultant would help ensure that the best questions are asked to collect the most relevant data for the goal of downtown enhancement.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that Council proceed with the Downtown Master Plan effort to capture community input, prioritize the ongoing funds the City invests in the downtown, improve resident experiences, and strengthen economic vibrancy.

If there is not Council consensus to issue the RFP at this time, staff suggests the following next steps:

1. Proceed with stakeholder engagement and peer city visits to further document a needs analysis and the desired vision for downtown.
 - This effort could be completed by City staff *or* through a DART visit.
2. Document findings to City Council and proceed to issue a Downtown Master Plan RFP with revised/reduced consultant scope, confirmed by the additional engagement.