



Community Workshop Summary

Tuesday November 13, 2018

The City of St. Joseph hosted a community workshop on Tuesday, November 13, 2018 as part of St. Joseph Downtown Vision, the City's master planning process. Attended by 50 individuals, this workshop was the first of numerous opportunities for residents and community stakeholders to offer their input and feedback regarding Downtown St. Joseph. The workshop included a review of the planning process to be undertaken as well as an exercise designed to gather input regarding issues, opportunities, potential projects, and key strengths and assets of the downtown area. Input from this and other workshops will help to guide the planning process and will be directly reflected in the goals, recommendations, and policies of the final St. Joseph Downtown Master Plan.

The top issue identified at the workshop was parking, relating to a variety of factors. Some participants indicated that Downtown lacks necessary parking, while others felt that existing parking is not in the right places or not well maintained. There was concern that Downtown has too much free parking, and that parking regulations do not cause enough turnover, restricting the availability of parking. Further, residents felt that many existing parking lots are taking up prime real estate that should be utilized to support future investment. When asked to identify priority projects, residents heavily focused upon solutions to parking problems.

Main Street was also a key focus for residents, related to both pedestrian safety, the speed of traffic, and a desire to expand Downtown across Main Street to the east as the most viable option for growth. In many cases, participants felt that Downtown St. Joseph does not capitalize on important assets, such as the riverfront, boat access and the harbor, the beach, or the bluff. A lack of activities, venues, and businesses that appeal to youth was also emphasized. Many of the issues discussed at the workshop focused on the seasonal nature of Downtown and the lack of year-round activities, events, and business.

When asked to identify the assets and strengths of Downtown St. Joseph, residents listed a variety of features and amenities that should be carefully preserved. Top amongst these were Lake Michigan, Silver Beach, St. Joseph River, and the proximity of these amenities to Downtown. Residents also highlighted independent businesses and restaurants, the welcoming community, year-round activities and events, and the general character of the community as important assets.

Note on Summary Context

The following is a summary of the thoughts, comments, and opinions received in the workshop. Some comments were shared with the entire group, while others were recorded privately on worksheets. It is important to note that the items identified in this summary are not recommendations or observations of the consultant, but rather feedback and comments received from those who participated in the workshop.

Issues & Concerns

At the beginning of the workshop, participants were asked to identify their top issues and concerns for Downtown St. Joseph. After generating a single, cumulative list, participants were asked to individually rank their top three issues identified by the group, be it their own or those raised by others. Below are the highest ranked issues as determined by those in attendance, as well as all other issues identified through the workshop.

Highest Ranked Issues

- Parking in Downtown, as relates to the amount, location, duration, and cost.
- Existing parking lots are taking up prime real estate for future investment
- Need to reconstruct or redesign the ramps down the Bluff
- Lack of activities, venues, and businesses that appeal to youth, teens, and young professionals
- Connecting Main Street to State Street and expanding Downtown across Main Street to the east
- Lack of boat activity and accessibility, particularly connections to the harbor
- Poor utilization and activation of the riverfront, often due to undesired uses in adjacent properties

Other Issues by Category

Growth & Development

- Lack of space for businesses to expand and grow
- Scarce long-term rental options
- Industrial uses taking up waterfront properties
- County jail and courthouse taking up prime waterfront properties
- Limited temporary lodging or hospitality
- Lack of historic preservation and impact of teardowns
- Conflicts between commercial and adjacent residential uses
- Improved resident amenities
- Housing that appeals to young professionals

Businesses & Retail

- Lack of restaurants that appeal to residents
- Uninviting or poorly maintained storefronts
- Greater variety and diversity of shopping
- Need for later operating hours and more night life
- Need to attract businesses that offer essential and daily services
- Temporary businesses, such as hotdog stands, compete with brick and mortar businesses but have low overheads

- Need for modern and well-known businesses, such as national chains

Transportation

- Traffic patterns during the summer
- Pedestrian connections to the beach
- Bikeability and bicycle infrastructure
- Brick roadways and alleys, related to their maintenance and safety
- Safety at the intersection of Main Street and Price Street
- ADA accessibility and universal design
- High Speed of cars on Main Street
- Traffic circulation and the relationship between cars and pedestrians
- Need for more parking east of Main Street that forces pedestrian to walk through the Downtown to reach the beach, supporting businesses
- Need for rideshare programs
- Maintenance of Main Street, including potholes
- Pedestrian safety on Broad Street
- Lack of public transportation options

Community Facilities & Amenities

- Snow plowing and winter maintenance of Downtown, particularly sidewalks
- Too many events at the beach during the summer
- Decaying infrastructure
- Need to update/renovate the bandshell
- Code enforcement for rental properties
- Sidewalk upkeep

Parks, Open Space & The Environment

- Need for a pedestrian plaza or community gathering space
- Need for a dog park and/or dog accommodations at the beach
- Replacement of trees taken down along the Bluff
- Need to loop the arboretum trail through Downtown
- Need for athletic courts at the beach
- Need to make the lake more accessible and affordable
- Lack of running trails
- Lack of bike trails

Tourism

- Impact of tourism, particularly during Summer months, on year-round residents
- Improving tourism during the winter
- Regional competition
- Seasonal nature of businesses and the Downtown in general

Other

- Need for wayfinding signage
- Rules and accommodations for skateboarders
- Poor connections to Benton harbor

- Lack of an inclusive and equitable downtown environment
- Light pollution, particularly due to the water treatment plant
- Need to update and improve lighting

Priority Actions & Projects

In response to the list of issues, participants were asked to name specific projects or actions that would provide solutions to those issues identified in the first part of the exercise. Recommended projects and actions are categorized below.

Growth & Development

- Encourage appropriate redevelopment along Main Street to act as a gateway to Downtown
- Establish focus groups of young professionals to explore ways to improve Downtown to attract more of this demographic.
- Encourage mixed-use development east of Main Street including residential, retail, and restaurants.
- Develop the vacant YWCA lot, potentially as a public plaza, mixed-use development, commercial centers, or other viable use.
- Develop parking lots along the bluff.
- Identify and remove blighted homes in Downtown.
- Relocate the county jail and courthouse and develop that area as part of Downtown.
- Updating zoning to incentivize the development of all waterfront areas.
- Fill-in parking lots on both sides of Broad Street and Lake Boulevard with mixed-use development, including a venue for the Twin Cities Players.

Businesses & Retail

- Attract a grocery store to Downtown.
- Develop the riverfront as a small business district with retail and restaurants
- Develop new commercial spaces for well-known or chain stores that will attract more shopping and investment.
- Facilitate development of new restaurants with water views and unique vistas.
- Attract music venues and performance spaces to Downtown.
- Attract a greater variety of shops and businesses.
- Incentivize and encourage the opening of late-night options, such as restaurants and entertainment.
- Provide economic incentives for year-round ‘experiential’ businesses and retail.

Transportation

- Redesign and better control summer traffic patterns, including better looking equipment and signals.
- Improve pedestrian facilities for crossing Main Street.
- Build a pedestrian bridge across Main Street.
- Reduce speeds on Main Street to improve safety.
- Reduce Main Street to two lanes and add bike lanes, or add parallel parking.
- Improve pedestrian and vehicle traffic controls to ensure safety in Downtown.

- Re-complete the parking study from three years ago and implement findings.
- Complete a study of traffic flow and signage.
- Construct guardrails along the pier.
- Re-route I-94 Loop
- Make Lake Boulevard a ‘woonerf’ from Park Street to the Whitcomb
- Develop public transit connecting to the Township, Stevensville downtown, and Benton Harbor downtown.

Parking

- Build dedicated parking garages to concentrate parking.
- Build a parking deck east of Main Street or move parking underground.
- Designate specific parking areas for Downtown residents and business owners to reduce impact on public parking.
- Designate resident-only parking below the Bluff for the beach.
- Prohibit beach-related parking in residential neighborhoods and enforce.
- Eliminate free parking in residential neighborhoods adjacent to Downtown.
- Offer shuttles to Downtown, Beach, and Marina to reduce parking in residential areas.
- Modernize parking facilities at Silver Beach.
- Develop parking garage where the county courthouse is located.

Downtown Character & Amenities

- Construct new and improved signage to direct tourist and make Downtown user friendly
- Encourage downtown businesses and property owners to improve the facades of their structures.
- Complete a Downtown “facelift,” including new lamps, landscaping, pedestrian and bicycle amenities, and other streetscaping.
- Improve lighting Downtown, particularly on side streets.
- Fix light pollution at the water treatment plant.
- Encourage general maintenance and upkeep of businesses.
- Construct heated sidewalks in Downtown.

Parks, Open Space & The Environment

- Redevelop the Bluff and pedestrian ramps down the Bluff, possibly including underground parking.
- Clean up the Bluff with improved landscaping and maintenance.
- Add public docks and visitor slips to improve boat access to Downtown.
- Improve the Arboretum with boat access along the river.
- Designate a dog beach or dog-friendly hours or days at the beach.
- Build a boardwalk along the riverfront
- Connect the Downtown, the riverfront, and Kiwanis Park with walkways and bike paths.

Other

- Redo brick roads and side streets.
- Increase police patrolling and enforcement in Downtown.
- Curtail additional tourism growth and re-balance Downtown to cater to St. Joseph residents.

- Schedule tourist events along the riverfront, near the bandshell, and in unique parts of Downtown.

Strengths & Assets

As the Downtown Master Plan is developed, the key strengths and assets of Downtown St. Joseph should be regarded as areas to maintain and build upon. For the final part of the exercise, community members were asked to list strengths and advantages of Downtown that should be preserved. The following were identified:

Attributes & Characteristics

- Regional location
- Proximity to Chicago
- Access between Downtown and beach/lakefront
- Historic character
- Walkability
- Small town feel
- Active Downtown

Businesses & Retail

- Non-chain, independent businesses and restaurants
- Year-round businesses
- Major regional employers, such as Whirlpool
- Charm of Downtown shops and restaurants
- Downtown shopping
- Business environment and community

Facilities & Amenities

- Krasl Art Center
- St. Joseph City Library
- Whirlpool Fountain
- Pier and Lighthouse
- Parking on the Bluff
- Brick streets and alleys

Landscape and Open Space

- Lake Michigan
- St. Joseph and Paw Paw Rivers
- Silver Beach
- The Bluff and the monuments, sculptures, and statues along the Bluff
- View of both the Lake and River, particularly from the Bluff
- Sunsets
- Landscaping, planters, and decorations

Community

- Great public officials and City staff
- Residents and community
- Civic pride
- Events, festivals, and activities

- Year-round activities
- Family-friendly community
- Pedestrian-friendly