



Steering Committee Workshop Summary

Wednesday October 3, 2018

The City of St. Joseph hosted a workshop with the Downtown Master Plan Steering Committee on Wednesday, October 3, 2018. This workshop marked initiation of St. Joseph Downtown Vision, the planning process to develop a new master plan for 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 discussed by the steering committee was parking in Downtown. This related to the location, amount, duration, and cost of parking, with participants concerned that existing parking lots do not appropriately support those who visit Downtown throughout the year. Parking during the summer months in particular was identified as a concern. In addition to parking, another key issues that was emphasized was the lack of connectivity and coherence across Main Street. Many participants indicated that each side of Main Street has a very different character which fragments Downtown and limits the potential for growth. This was closely related to connectivity and mobility, particularly for pedestrians and bicyclists. The appearance and general quality of aesthetics in Downtown was also highlighted as an issue that should be addressed.

Many of the issues discussed related to tourism and summer-based activity. Residents felt that Downtown becomes congested and hard to navigate during the summer months due to visitors and tourist. In addition, many noted the prevalence of business catering to tourism, resulting in a lack of commercial variety and diversity as well as stores closing during the rest of the year.

When asked to identify priority projects and actions to improve Downtown, participants focused on parking and the potential for converting underused parking into sites of investment, or relocating parking into dedicated structures. Other projects focused on extending the Downtown east across Main Street and improving pedestrian mobility down the Bluff. Regional location, access to Lake Michigan and Silver Beach, distinct views and sunsets, and the St. Joseph community itself were identified as important assets and strengths of Downtown St. Joseph.

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
- Connectivity and mobility throughout Downtown, particularly to the beach and riverfront
- Connecting Downtown east to west across Main Street
- Lack of variety and diversity of commercial businesses
- Poor appearance of Downtown, including inconsistent aesthetics

Other Issues by Category

Growth & Development

- Blighted and vacant properties
- Limitations to growth due to the size and geography of Downtown
- Poor utilization of the riverfront, including non-optimal uses on properties along the river
- Lack of connection between traditional Downtown and “Southtown” businesses
- Lack of residential options in Downtown

Businesses & Retail

- Lack of non-seasonal businesses
- Restaurants and businesses close too early
- Lack of additional retail space
- Lack of nightlife and entertainment

Transportation

- Location of parking relative to the downtown core, particularly parking east of Main Street
- Lack of parking and general congestion of Downtown during the summer months
- Traffic flow through Downtown, including both above and below the Bluff
- The visual impact of surface parking lots
- The lack of public transportation to and from Downtown
- Limitation of Main Street as an entrance to Downtown due to high speeds and poor visibility of State Street
- Poor roadway circulation
- Need for greater walkability and bikeability

Community Facilities & Amenities

- Need for improved wayfinding signage and streetscaping
- Lack of a central hub or community gathering space
- Need to provide a variety of activities

Other

- Unattractive commercial harbor docks
- Lack of boater access to Downtown
- Sustainable tax base to support city-wide improvements
- Balancing the needs of tourist with the needs of residents

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

- Redevelop unused parking lots with mixed residential and commercial uses and enclosed parking.
- Develop a “town square” between State Street and Lake Boulevard, potential on the vacant YWCA property.
- Utilize property along the river for residential development and marina-styled commercial.
- Move the county courthouse and jail away from the riverfront and develop docks in that location.
- Build residential options that are family oriented.
- Build a mixed-use development on the east side of Main Street with a pedestrian bridge across Main Street.

Businesses & Retail

- Invite franchises to open businesses and restaurants in Downtown.
- Develop an economic development strategy.
- Encourage a better mix of businesses and activity in Downtown.

Transportation

- Complete a dedicated parking study to determine fees, analyze need for parking garages, and improve enforcement.
- Construct a parking structure away from the Lake.
- Develop an underground parking garage.
- Create dedicated walkways or routes east-to-west to connect across Main Street.
- Construct signs direction pedestrian and cars to reduce congestion and improve flow Downtown.
- Design and develop pedestrian- and bicycle- oriented sidewalks.
- Install bike lanes throughout Downtown.
- Reconstruct Lake Boulevard to add a gathering space, increase mobility, and improve safety.
- Route traffic off State Street and create pedestrian-only zones.

Downtown Character & Amenities

- Develop a landscape plan to both install and maintain landscaped areas.
- Develop an aesthetic consistency plan for Downtown, working with businesses.
- Plant trees and new landscaping along Downtown streets and around parking lots.
- Improve the appearance of alleys Downtown.

Other

- Build an elevator between the beach and top of the Bluff.
- Build a new ramp down the bluff incorporating benches, look out points, and coin-operated microscopes.
- Increase public work services, such as trash and recycling.
- Explore better uses of the arboretum.
- Convert the temporary equipment for traffic control in the summer to more permanent looking improvements .

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
- Compact and urban development
- Scale of buildings
- Existing aesthetic of State Street
- Beautiful houses Downtown
- Walkability
- Historic architecture
- Boutique shopping and dining
- Tourism

Facilities & Amenities

- Krasl Art Center
- Amtrak train station
- The City is not in debt
- Resident trust in City Hall
- Effective City government

Landscape and Open Space

- Lake Michigan
- Silver Beach
- St. Joseph River
- Views of the lake and river
- Sunsets
- The Bluff

- Whirlpool Field

Community

- Boating community
- History
- Small town feel and charm