



DOWNTOWN FORT WILLIAM STRATEGIC RENEWAL PLAN

BIG MOVES FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

April 4, 2023

URBAN
SYSTEMS

#300 - 123 Bannatyne Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R3B 0R3 | T: 204-259-0094

CONTACT: JEFF PALMER

E: jpalmer@urbansystems.ca



PREPARED FOR:

Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee
The City of Thunder Bay
Victoriaville Civic Centre
111 Syndicate Ave S.
Thunder Bay, ON, P7E 6S4

300-123 Bannatyne Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 0R3

File: 4713.0007.01

This report is prepared for the sole use of the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee. No representations of any kind are made by Urban Systems Ltd. or its employees to any party with whom Urban Systems Ltd. does not have a contract. © 2022 URBANSYSTEMS®.

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 BACKGROUND.....	1
1.2 PLAN CONTEXT.....	2
2.0 EXISTING CONDITIONS OF DOWNTOWN FORT WILLIAM	3
2.1 CONTEXT	3
2.2 LAND USES AND URBAN FORM	3
2.3 SOUTH CORE AREA PLAN (2005).....	4
2.4 OPPORTUNITY AREAS	5
2.5 TRANSPORTATION	5
2.6 DEMOGRAPHICS	9
2.7 RECENT INVESTMENT IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD	11
3.0 VISION, PRINCIPLES, AND OBJECTIVES.....	13
3.1 VISIONING PROCESS	13
3.2 VISION STATEMENT	15
3.3 WHAT WE HEARD	15
3.4 KEY PILLARS	18
4.0 MAKING BIG MOVES.....	20
4.1 REVITALIZE VICTORIA AVENUE	20
4.2 CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DOWNTOWN LIVING	20
4.3 CONNECT PEOPLE, PLACES AND NATURAL SPACES.....	23
4.4 CREATE PLACES WORTH CARING ABOUT	26
4.5 ESTABLISH AN ENTERTAINMENT HUB.....	28
4.6 CREATE A DOWNTOWN EDUCATION CAMPUS.....	28
4.7 IMPLEMENT THE PLAN	29
5.0 IMPLEMENTATION.....	30

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: MAPS

FIGURES

Figure 1. Visions for Downtown Fort William in 5 Years 13

Figure 2. Visions for Downtown Fort William in 20 Years 13

Figure 3. Big Vision ideas for Downtown Fort William14

Figure 4. Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee Walking Tour with Urban Systems on May 13, 202214

Figure 5. Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee Workshop on May 14, 2022..... 15

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In October of 2020, Thunder Bay City Council unanimously endorsed the *Reimagine Victoriaville* report, which recommended that Victoriaville Centre be demolished and the street reopened for public use. The recommendation to approve this catalyst project set in motion a process that will transform Downtown Fort William by establishing a strategic direction for the neighbourhood that, over the long term, will result in a vibrant, sustainable community that all citizens of Thunder Bay can be proud of.

Victoriaville Centre has faced challenges recent years. The City-owned facility was experiencing regular operating losses and facing the prospect of required costly upgrades and renovations. While the indoor public space the centre provides is a relatively rare asset to the surrounding community, the reduced connectivity for vehicles and pedestrians through Downtown Fort William has been a detriment to surrounding businesses. In this context, the 2020 Reimagine Victoriaville report considered four options for Victoriaville Centre – to revitalize, repurpose, reconfigure, or remove the centre.

The Reimagine Victoriaville report looked at best practices both for retail and for downtown revitalization. The project team reviewed literature, including recommendations from prominent experts in urbanism, and case studies from cities across Ontario and Canada. This review and the highlights from the Reimagine Victoriaville report are summarized briefly below.

Based on feedback obtained during various community engagement activities, market analysis and professional best practices, the report recommended removing Victoriaville Centre in order to reopen Victoria Avenue to through-traffic and Syndicate Avenue for public gathering spaces. The design of the reopened streets, from KGS Group, is summarized below and represents an important component of the neighbourhoods renewal.

Demolishing Victoriaville Centre on its own will not revitalise the neighbourhood. No single project on its own ever does. However, removing Victoriaville Centre can be the catalyst that helps capture the imagination of the community and build excitement as people think about the potential opportunities that lie ahead. In response to the decision to demolish Victoriaville, in April of 2021 the City of Thunder Bay established the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Advisory Committee in order to “act in an advisory capacity to City Council and Administration” and guide the neighbourhood revitalization process.

1.1 BACKGROUND

In January of 2022, Urban Systems was retained to prepare a downtown revitalization strategy that will guide the renewal of Downtown Fort William following the demolition of Victoriaville. The strategy that follows, prepared with the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Advisory Committee, identifies a vision for the neighborhood, strategic actions and opportunities, and a strategy to implement the plan over the short, medium, and long term.

Between December 2021 and June 2022 Urban Systems and the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Advisory Committee met virtually as part of the Committee’s monthly public meetings to discuss trends in downtown revitalization as well as develop a vision and strategic focus. The Committee met in person with the consultant team in May 2022 in order to familiarize themselves with the neighbourhood context. The draft Strategic Renewal Plan was then presented to the public for review and feedback in person and online.

The work considers and builds upon the *South Core Neighbourhood Renewal Plan* which was prepared by the Planning Division of the City of Thunder Bay in 2005. A number of recommendations were

adopted and remain relevant today. Although improvements were made at the time, implementation over the long term was only somewhat successful. It is timely now to consider the strategies of 2005 in today's context, by addressing the changing opportunities and constraints that downtowns now face, as well as by placing renewed emphasis on the issues that remain outstanding today.

1.2 PLAN CONTEXT

Since the end of World War II, urban development in North America has focused on moving people around faster and farther. Rather than strengthening existing mass public transit infrastructure, cities and senior levels of government focused on private automobiles. In Canada this was driven by access to resources and vast natural areas. In the United States the push was similar but was also encouraged by national defense strategies that funded the development of the Interstate highway system.

As a result, cities across North America began to develop their edges with increasing frequency. Increasing post-war prosperity allowed for larger and larger lots and homes. Modern zoning regulations resulted in increasingly separate land uses. Densities in these new neighbourhoods decreased. Jobs and retail activity soon followed residents to these new suburban neighbourhoods.

For decades, downtowns struggled to maintain their role as the hub of the city, primarily focusing on their traditional role as an employment centre. Revitalization efforts in the 1980s tried to diversify downtown activity, encouraging the transition to a 'live/work/play' environment. There were increasing efforts to attract housing, and large public investments in recreational activities (sports facilities in particular). This strategy has been generally successful, although the impacts in slower-growth communities have been seen much more slowly.

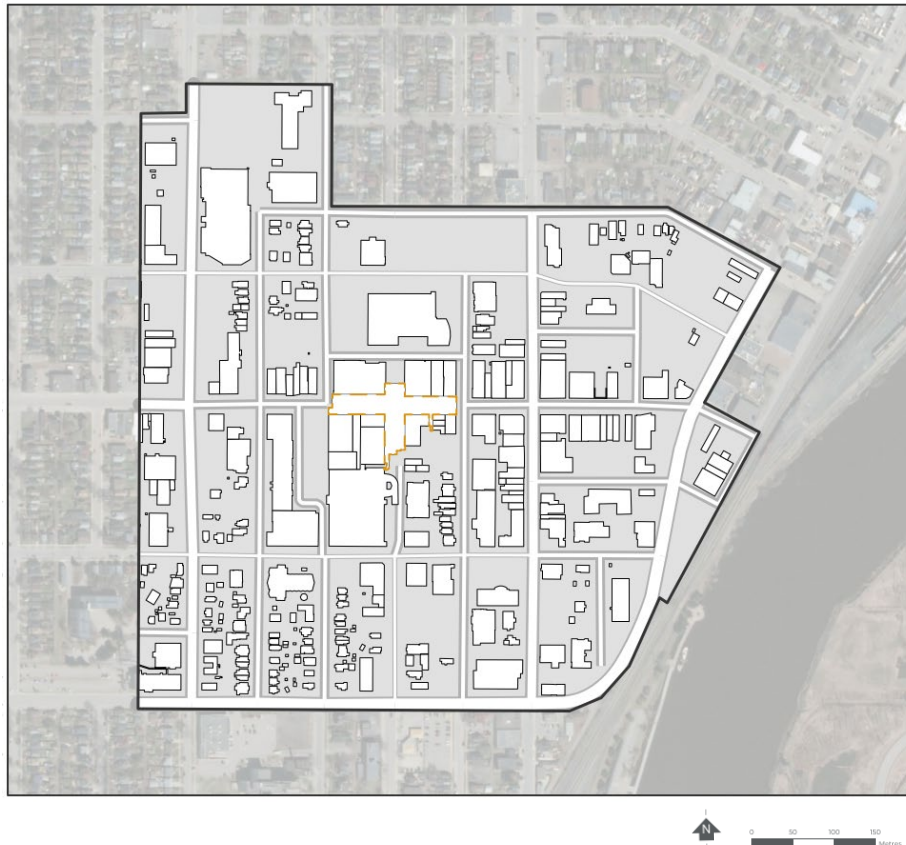
The COVID-19 pandemic has forced communities to rethink this strategy. Even vibrant downtowns have struggled as office workers transitioned to remote work – at first for the short term as an emergency response, but now likely over the long term as the cost savings and improved work/life balance have made it more attractive. Retail activity has also evolved as online shopping and dining/delivery has become mainstream. Although cities have encouraged new housing development downtown for many years, it is now the key focus for practitioners in both large metropolitan regions as well as smaller communities.

The Downtown Fort William Strategic Renewal Plan is timely as it builds upon complementary initiatives already underway in the neighbourhood – namely the removal of Victoriaville Centre (an outdated retail experiment) and the pedestrian-focused revitalization of Victoria Avenue. The downtowns of the future must focus on building a strong residential base, with supporting retail activity. There will always be a role for employment centres and entertainment activities, but a strong, sustainable residential population will drive downtown growth in the future. This plan recognizes that opportunity and puts in place a series of strategies and "Big Moves" that will kick-start the process.

2.0 EXISTING CONDITIONS OF DOWNTOWN FORT WILLIAM

2.1 CONTEXT

Downtown Fort William (also known as the South Core Neighbourhood), located in the south end of Thunder Bay, is one of the primary commercial areas of the former City of Fort William. The renewal area covers an area approximately defined by a 400m radius, or five minute walk, from Victoriaville Centre. The main boundaries are Leith Street to the north, Simpson Street to the east, Arthur Street E to the south and the rear lane west of Vickers Street N to the west (**see Appendix A, Map 1**).



2.2 LAND USES AND URBAN FORM

Public Realm, Parks, and Open Spaces. There are a small handful of parks and open spaces within the renewal area. These include the public plaza in front of Thunder Bay City Hall, the McKellar Park Central Public School grounds, Paterson Park and Kaministiquia (Kam) River Park (**see Appendix A, Map 3**). The majority of streets include sidewalks on both sides, and existing buildings are largely built up to the street, framing the public realm.

Blocks and grids. The renewal area is characterized by a mostly regular street grid and a mix of arterial and collector roads and local streets. This grid is interrupted by Victoriaville Centre at Victoria Avenue and Syndicate Avenue, though the public right-of-way continues through the building. The Kaministiquia River and adjacent rail corridor also influence the grid at the east of the renewal area.

Land uses. The majority of the renewal area is zoned Downtown Neighbourhood Zone (DN), with smaller areas zoned Urban Low-rise (UL), Urban Mid-rise (UM), Service Commercial (SC) and Community (CM). Current uses include a mix of commercial, largely centred along Victoria Avenue and May Street S, and residential focused toward the south of the renewal area. A number of government, institutional and recreational uses are also present and contribute as focal points that break up the rhythm of surrounding buildings. Surface parking lots are present throughout the renewal area.

2.3 SOUTH CORE AREA PLAN (2005)

The South Core Renewal Plan, completed by the City of Thunder Bay in 2005, outlined a number of strategic priorities – many of which remain relevant today. It included a Management Structure, Budget, and Timelines, and made reference to the ongoing need to revisit the Plan to ensure that it responded to changing conditions.

The South Core Renewal Plan proposed to establish an “Office of the Neighbourhood” which would operate within the City of Thunder Bay Planning Division. The Office would consist of one specialized staff person, funded on a two-year renewable contract, who would be responsible for implementation of the Plan. At the end of the two-year period “Council could either close the Office or fund it for an additional period.” The Office was responsible for:

- Being the principal point of contact and coordinating responses to inquiries about the neighbourhood
- Making applications for funds for projects to senior levels of government
- Managing development of plans and programs
- Presenting status reports to Council
- Developing budgets
- Coordinating volunteer initiatives
- Identifying linkages between Plan projects and City activities
- Coordinating interagency liaisons to implement the Plan
- Communicating the status of the Plan to the public
- Coordinating input from City divisions into the implementation process



Finally, the Plan notes that “the priority of the Office would be to *implement a private/public partnership strategy for the creation of new housing and commercial development in the core*, and to attract people to the south core area.” The total operating budget including the single staff person was expected to range between \$60,000 and \$75,000 (2005 dollars). It is not clear as to how long the Office of the Neighbourhood was in operation.

An implementation strategy is perhaps the most significant factor which can determine the success or failure of the Strategic Renewal Plan. Unfortunately, we would suggest that

the implementation of the Plan cannot be considered successful because the majority of the implementation initiatives remain outstanding and the neighbourhood cannot be considered to be ‘revitalized.’ The most significant action (noted in italics above) – implementing a private/public partnership strategy to create new housing and commercial development – did not occur. The implementation strategy is not defined, and the responsibilities of the position do not align with the responsibilities and resources necessary to implement the Plan. Generally speaking, managing

downtown revitalization functions through the Planning Department of the City itself has not proven to be a successful model according to best practices in operation across North America.

2.4 OPPORTUNITY AREAS

City-owned properties within the renewal area provide opportunities to achieve desired outcomes more quickly than on private property. The City of Thunder Bay is a significant landowner within the renewal area. Though many of the City-owned properties in the area (**see Appendix A, Map 4**) are active City facilities, the City of Thunder Bay may wish to redevelop a few key sites. One primary area of focus for development should be the City-owned surface parking lot on North Street, north of Victoria Avenue.

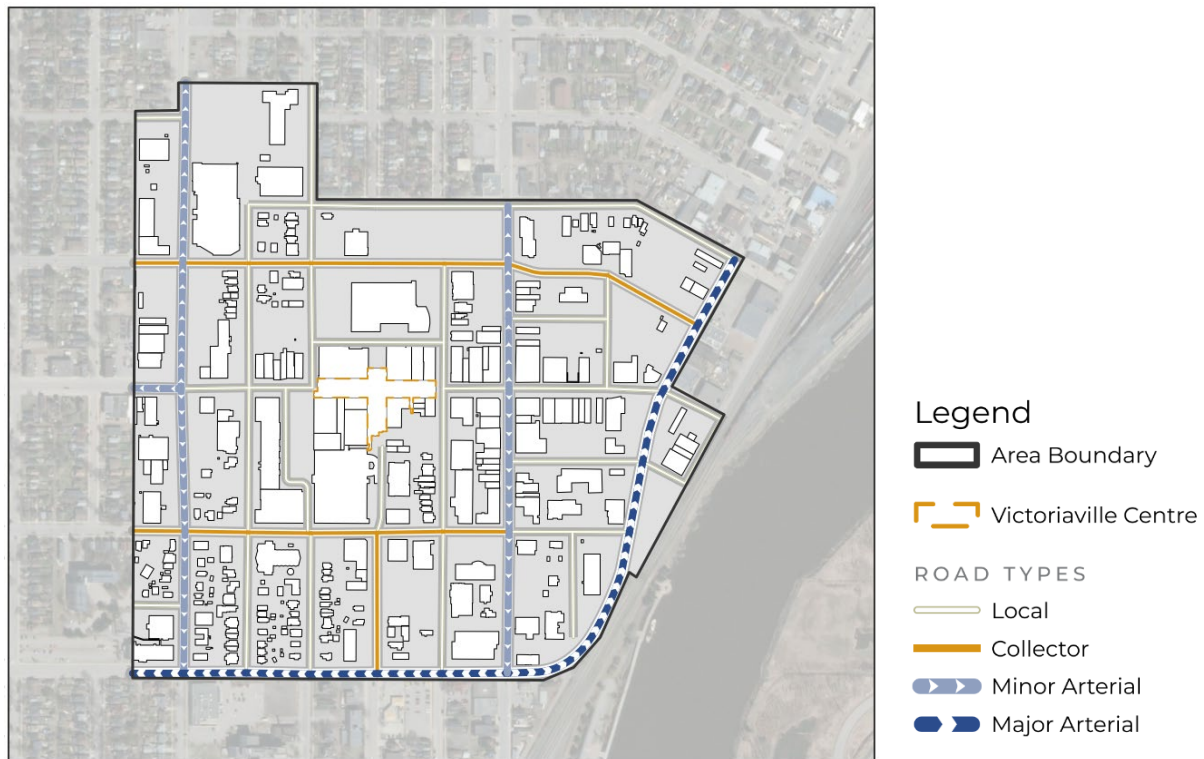
An inventory of vacant buildings and their reuse or redevelopment potential would help to identify other key opportunities within the renewal area. The City of Thunder Bay Zoning Bylaw does not restrict building height in the DN (Downtown Neighbourhood) zone, so vacant or derelict buildings may represent opportunities to renew building stock and increase density while maintaining the general urban form of the area.

Other key sites include areas in and around Victoriaville Centre that will soon be returned to the public realm, including Victoria and Syndicate Avenues. Surface parking lots fronting onto otherwise active streets are also potentially valuable development locations. Because the area has low or even non-existent minimum parking requirements, local business and property owners may see value in selling some surface parking areas or even developing them as more productive and profitable uses.

2.5 TRANSPORTATION

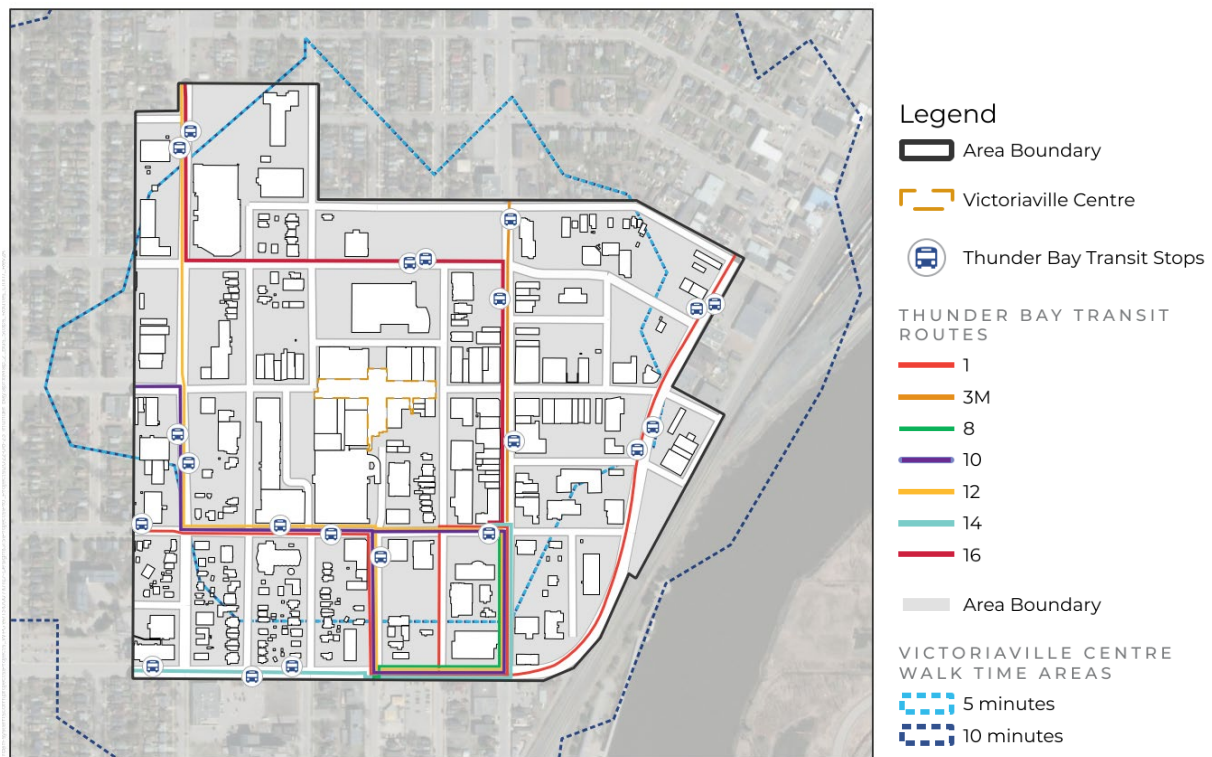
The south and east edges of Downtown Fort William are defined in part by Arthur Street E and Simpson Street, which make up the only major arterial road in the renewal area. These roads are designed to carry the highest volumes of traffic. North-south corridors Vickers Street S and May Street N are classified as minor arterials, while east-west corridors Miles Street E and Donald Avenue are collector streets, bringing traffic to the nearest arterial road. Most other streets in the downtown renewal area are classified as local streets.

Road Types



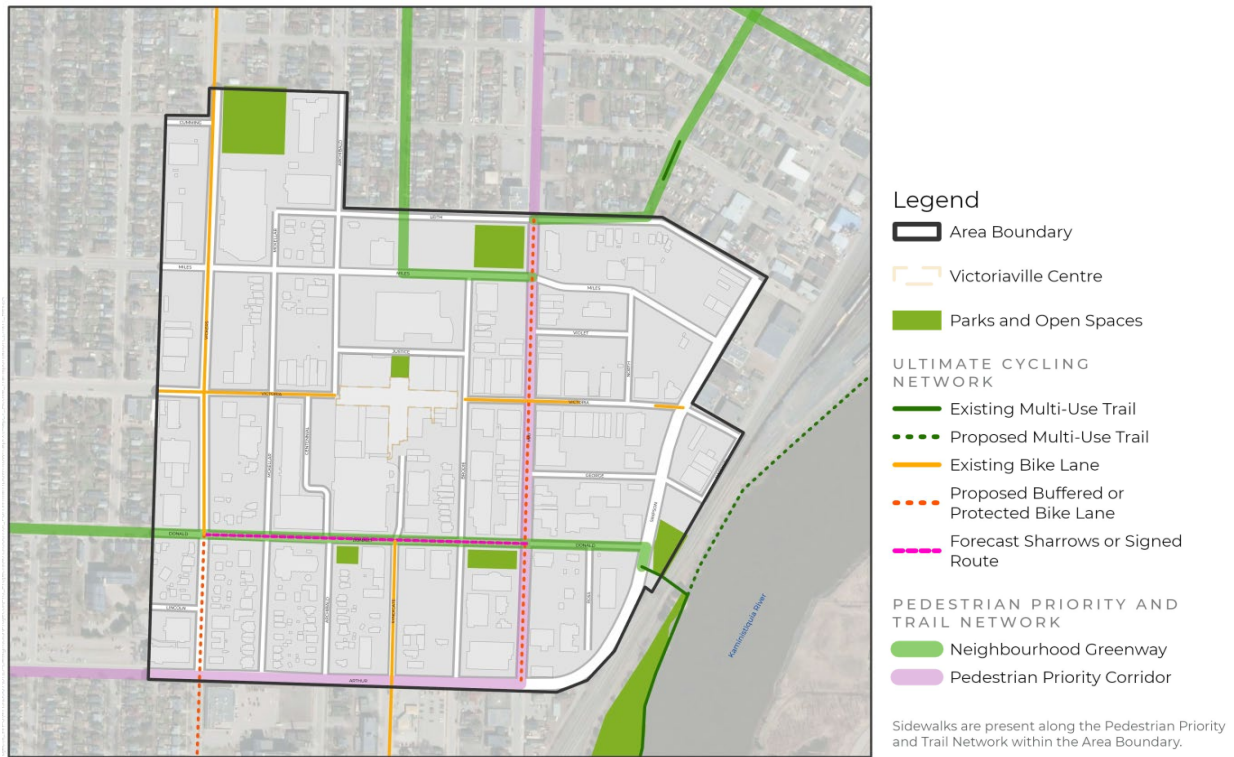
With the closure of Victoria Avenue for the construction of Victoriaville Centre, public transit routes largely divert to the south with several stops located on Donald Avenue and May Street. Seven Thunder Bay Transit bus routes have stops within the renewal area. Most of those stops are within a five-minute walk from the intersection of Victoria and Syndicate.

Bus Routes



Sidewalks are present throughout Downtown Fort William except in a few locations. Existing bike routes are either painted lanes or 'sharrow' markings, and the network of these routes is somewhat disconnected. Forecast and proposed bike and pedestrian routes from the *City of Thunder Bay Active Transportation Plan (2019)* are shown below.

Active Transportation Routes

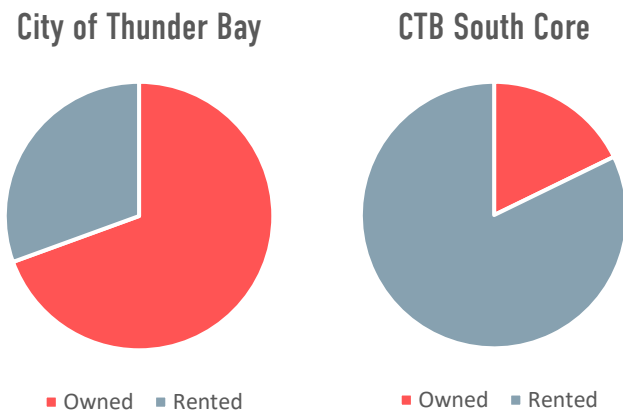


2.6 DEMOGRAPHICS

Downtown Fort William is a small neighbourhood within Thunder Bay, both in terms of size and population. With just over one thousand residents as of the 2016 Canadian Census, the neighbourhood represents less than 1% of the City's population. Compared with the demographics of the City of Thunder Bay overall, Downtown Fort William faces unique challenges and opportunities.

First, residents of Downtown Fort William tend to have less income and lower levels of educational attainment. Both average and median household incomes in the neighbourhood are significantly lower than in Thunder Bay as a whole. The neighbourhood also has a higher proportion of people with no certificate or diploma, and a lower proportion of those who have achieved a bachelor's degree or above.

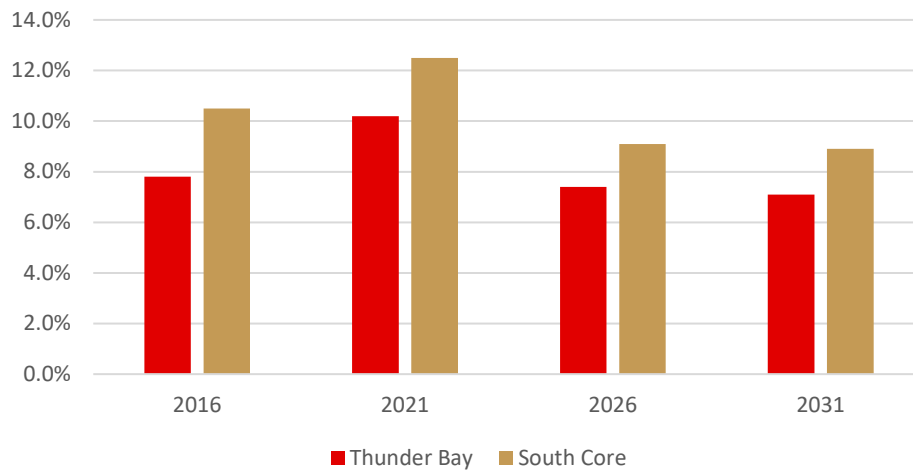
Second, household sizes in the area are smaller in Downtown Fort William than in Thunder Bay. The average household size is 2.2 in Thunder Bay, and 1.4 in Downtown Fort William. This may indicate a higher proportion of one person households in the area, compared with the rest of the City. Rates of renting are also significantly higher in Downtown Fort William compared with the City of Thunder Bay, where most people own their homes.



While demographics do not tell the full story of Downtown Fort William, they can be helpful in pointing to areas where those interested in neighbourhood renewal should focus their attention. This neighbourhood likely has different needs than others in Thunder Bay. Demographic data can inform decisions about housing, employment and transportation that will best serve existing residents, while also providing a positive foundation for growth and for new residents moving to the neighbourhood.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FROM 2016 CANADIAN CENSUS		
Census Category	CTB South Core	City of Thunder Bay
Total Population	1,036	111,119
Average Household Size	1.4	2.2
Average Household Income	\$33,824	\$82,280
Median Household Income	\$28,250	\$67,976
Households with Income over \$100K	2.54%	31%
Education Level Achieved		
No certificate or diploma	33.10%	20%
University Degree (bachelor or above)	4.34%	20%

Labour Unemployment Rates

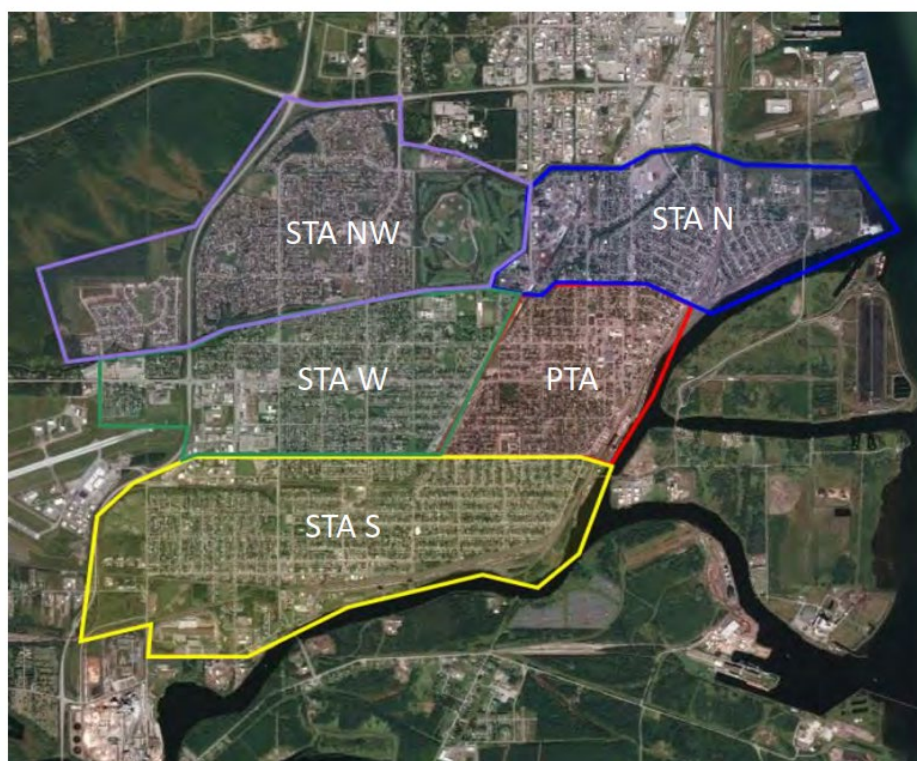


Both current and projected unemployment rates show the unemployment rate consistently higher in the Downtown Fort William (South Core) area than in Thunder Bay overall.

Market analysis undertaken in 2019 for the Reimagine Victoriaville report showed an estimated population of 7,660 in the Primary Trade Area (PTA) of Victoriaville Centre and 42,387 for the Trade Area, which includes the PTA and four Secondary Trade Areas to the south, west, northwest and north (see figure x). The PTA makes up approximately 18% of the total Trade Area population, meaning that 82% of the trade area population, or approximately 34,757 people, lives beyond a 10-minute walk from Victoriaville Centre and most of the Downtown Fort William strategy area.

The same analysis found that 2180 daytime workers have a place of employment within 400m of Victoriaville Centre (Victoria Avenue at Syndicate Avenue), and a further 1570 daytime workers within 800m. Census data shows an estimated 286 residents of Downtown Fort William employed as of 2021. Even if every employed resident worked daytime working hours and worked within the PTA, the vast majority of daytime workers working in the PTA commute from outside of Downtown Fort William.

Victoriaville Centre Retail Trade Area Population & Daytime Employment (2019)



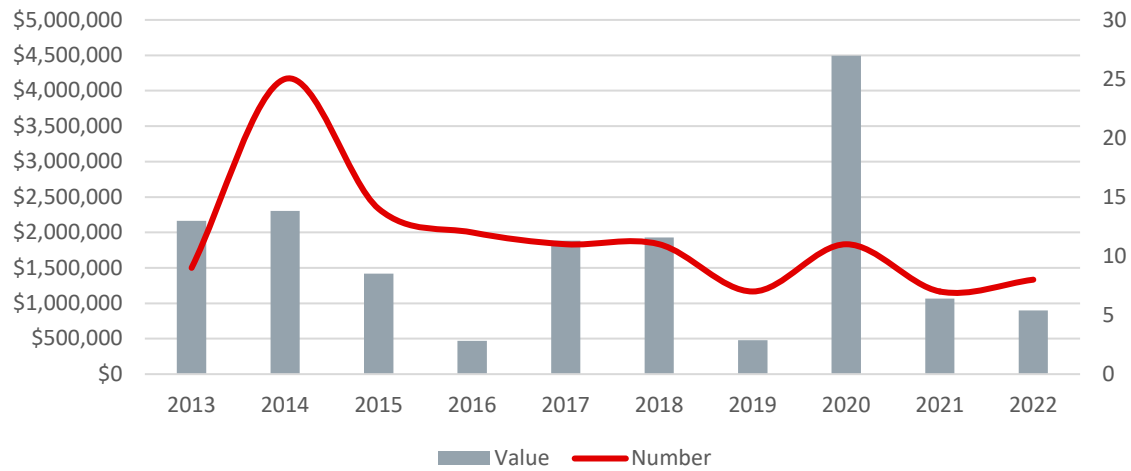
2.7 RECENT INVESTMENT IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

In the ten years between 2013 to 2022, the City of Thunder Bay issued a total of 115 development permits in the Downtown Fort William area. The number of permits varied significantly from year to year over this period, with more than 25 issued in 2014 and as few as seven in other years. A total of more than \$17 million was invested in the area, based on approximate permit values. This includes both private and public investment.

The majority of permits were issued for alterations and additions (95) and relatively few were issued for demolition (11) or new construction (9). This suggests that recent investment activity in Downtown Fort William is focused on retaining and updating or adapting existing building stock rather than demolishing and replacing buildings.

PERMIT WORKCODE	NUMBER OF PERMITS
Alteration	82
Addition	1
Addition / Alteration	1
New	9
Alteration to Residential	11
Residential Building Demolition	4
Non-Residential Building Demolition	6
Non-Residential Partial Building Demolition	1

Building Permits Issued in Downtown Fort William



The small geographic area of Downtown Fort William means that single large projects can heavily skew the data for a given year. While the overall trend in number of projects has been generally in decline since 2014, the amount of investment follows a less clear trend. The five years from 2013 to 2017 saw 71 permits issued for a total value of \$8.2 million, while the five years from 2018 to 2022 saw 44 permits issued for a total value of \$8.9 million. Therefore, while the number of permits declined, the approximate value of work being approved increased slightly.

3.0 VISION, PRINCIPLES, AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 VISIONING PROCESS

As part of the planning process, a project vision statement was prepared to describe what Downtown Fort William could be in the future. Through engagement with the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee, ideas were generated for what Downtown Fort William could look like in 5 and 20 years.

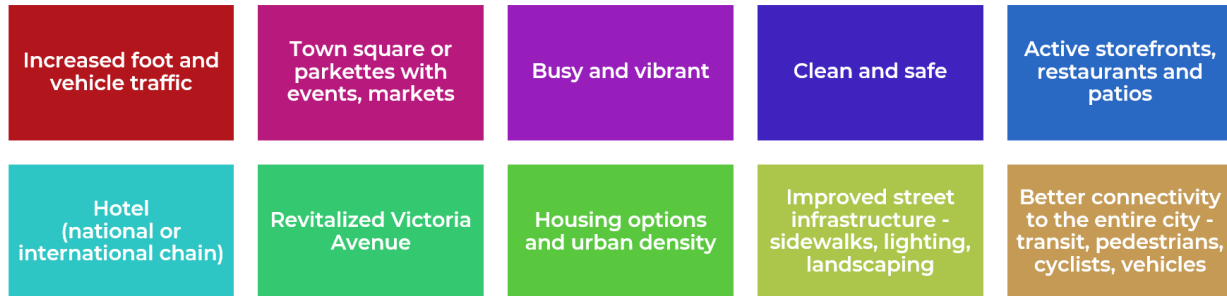


Figure 1. Visions for Downtown Fort William in 5 Years



Figure 2. Visions for Downtown Fort William in 20 Years

The following “big vision” ideas were summarized from the received feedback, as shown below. This data emphasized the priorities for Downtown Fort William and helped to establish the final vision statement.

The first draft of the vision statement was presented to the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Advisory Committee on March 8, 2022, for feedback, where the final iteration (as shown in **Section 3.2**) was shared on May 14.



Figure 3. Big Vision ideas for Downtown Fort William



Figure 4. Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee Walking Tour with Urban Systems on May 13, 2022



Figure 5. Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee Workshop on May 14, 2022

3.2 VISION STATEMENT

The following vision statement for Downtown Fort William was created through engagement and input from the committee.

Downtown Fort William is a welcoming and safe neighbourhood that supports a diversity of residential, commercial, and employment opportunities that reflect the distinct character and history of the area.

3.3 WHAT WE HEARD

Online and in-person conversations with the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee and City of Thunder Bay staff took place between December 2021 and May 2022. During that time the consultant team coordinated a “SWOT analysis” that identified the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats to the Downtown Fort William neighbourhood.

The SWOT analysis presented 15 themes emphasized by the Committee to be prioritized for big moves in the Strategic Renewal plan, as outlined below.

HISTORY AND IDENTITY

Downtown Fort William has a strong history and a unique architectural heritage. However, it was noted that the neighbourhood does not currently have a unified identity. There is a need to create more unity and synergy between the existing spaces and places downtown including Fort William Historic Park, the Thunder Bay Museum, the Friendship Gardens, Patterson Park, Kam Park, and Fort William Gardens.

Many residents have fond memories of the downtown both pre- and post-construction of Victoriaville Centre, and hope to continue to have a space where memories like this can continue.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The Committee emphasized that the Downtown should celebrate Indigenous culture, history, and heritage within the area, and that engaging with local Indigenous communities throughout the process and supporting initiatives that encourage reconciliation is integral to identify synergies and partnerships.

SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

Like many downtowns throughout Canada, there are challenges with perceptions and implications of safety and crime in the neighbourhood. The Committee discussed that these perceptions could affect the reputation of the downtown, further emptying the streets and adding to challenges. They noted that these challenges and barriers must be addressed systemically, through increased resources and supports for vulnerable populations.

CONNECTIVITY

The Downtown currently faces challenges with appropriate infrastructure to support the traffic of vehicles, pedestrians, and cyclists. The removal of Victoriaville Centre and the re-opening of Victoria Avenue will improve connectivity and legibility throughout Downtown.

WATERFRONT

The Committee felt that there is a disconnect between the Downtown and the waterfront, and that there are opportunities to celebrate this unique element of the city. Ideas for better highlighting the waterfront included using fountains to celebrate the water and provide better access, nodes, wayfinding, and AT routing to help stimulate future development and use.

WALKABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

There are many existing amenities downtown and within walking distance that can be leveraged as key supports for downtown residency and visiting, including a grocery store. Ensuring walkability and universal accessibility for all ages and abilities is a priority to further increase access.

TOURISM

To support the development and vibrancy of the Downtown, there is a desire for increasing visitors through tourism initiatives (including developing a hotel in the neighbourhood) and leveraging existing amenities.

COMMERCIAL

Due to the changing retail landscape, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a notable increase of retail vacancies throughout the City of Thunder Bay. As less people come downtown to bank, pay bills, and shop, physical spaces struggle to keep their doors open and move to locations of new residential development. Developing the downtown provides opportunity for increased foot traffic to support existing and new commercial spaces.

MIX OF USES

Downtown Fort William has an existing mix of uses, character, and buildings already developed, with ample infrastructure and a zoning by-law that supports growth. What is now required in the downtown is to leverage the existing density and complexity of the urban form.

RESIDENTIAL

The surrounding neighbourhoods around Downtown Fort William are primarily residential with good housing stock. To provide more housing options for residents, it was noted that there is interest and need for increased accessible and affordable rental units. Enhanced transit connectivity to Lakehead University and Confederation College, may increase demand for student housing in the area.

ADMINISTRATIVE / EMPLOYMENT CENTRE

Downtown Fort William is home to many places of employment, in particular government offices with City Hall and the Courthouse, as well as administrative offices that bring many Thunder Bay residents downtown. Increasing amenities and density provides an opportunity to leverage an increased concentration of well-paying jobs and employment opportunities to the downtown area. This will keep an increased concentration of residents in the area throughout the day, utilizing services and amenities during lunch and after work.

PARKING

Currently there are several parking options available in Downtown Fort William including on-street metered parking, parkades, and the Courthouse surface lot; however the variety of parking styles, costs, and rules provide confusion and deter visitors. Residents have reported a negative perception of visiting downtown due to challenges with parking enforcement. Making parking simpler could be an option for increasing downtown use.

SIMPSON STREET / VICTORIA AVENUE

The Committee emphasized that priority for planning should be focused on Victoria Avenue in order to not spread resources too thin. Simpson Street can continue to function as a main traffic connector downtown. For future development, this could mean that businesses which would require more parking should be built alongside Simpson Street which is better able to support those needs.

PROGRAMMING

Downtown Fort William has seen success in the past with programming such as Christmas and holiday events and festivals. The BIA already is working on programming more community events, however COVID has put an impact on the success and frequency. Programmed events are a priority to bringing people to the downtown. Currently, the Courthouse parking lot provides location opportunities on weekends, and through future development of parkettes on Victoria Avenue, there would be more possibilities for events such as markets, concerts, festivals, or even outdoor skating.

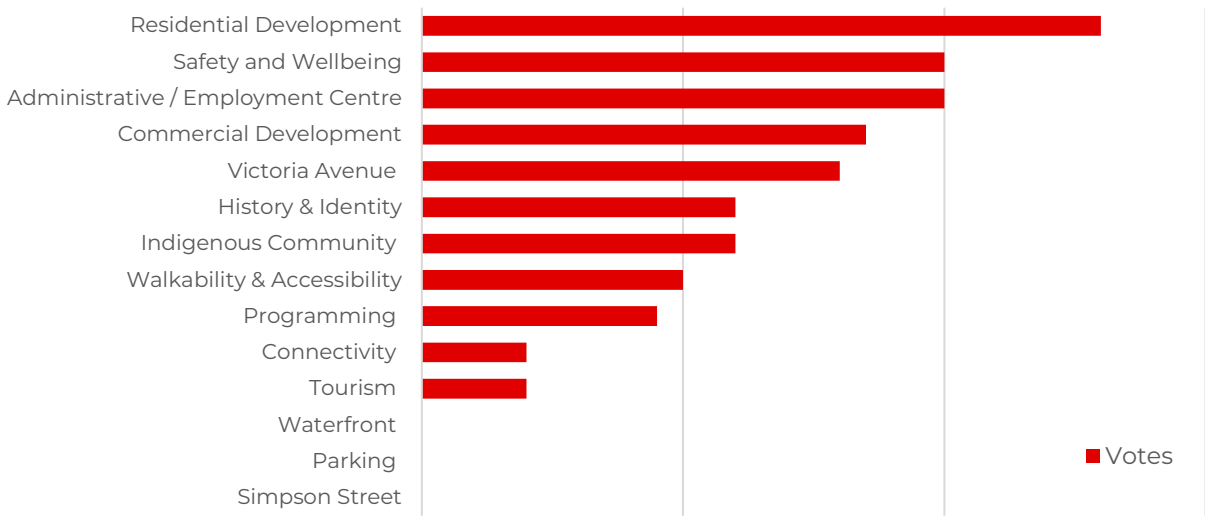
CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS

There are ample opportunities for increasing use and vibrancy of Downtown Fort William, but they are not without potential challenges. Without sufficient partnerships and investment in Downtown development (particularly in comparison to Port Arthur and the waterfront) there is less opportunity to

take advantage of new ideas. The process of revitalizing Downtown Fort William will take time, financial support, and political will. Investment from developers will provide the strongest catalyst for progress.

3.4 KEY PILLARS

To identify the Key Pillars for the Renewal Plan, the Downtown Fort William Revitalization Committee prioritized the identified themes.



Top Priority Areas for Downtown Fort William

The five Key Pillars identified were Residential Development, Safety and Well-Being, Administrative/Employment Centre, Supportive Retail Development, and Reconciliation. The Committee came together to establish key opportunities within each pillar to support the revitalization of Downtown Fort William as outlined below.

RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

Increasing residential development in Downtown Fort William was noted to be the best opportunity to support further development in the area, bringing more people Downtown to live, work, and play. The Committee noted that housing development should focus on high-density development, interspersed throughout the renewal area. In particular, it was noted that there is a need for housing to support independent living for seniors, student residences, and rentals for individuals and young families.

To support the influx of residents in the Downtown, it will be important to also develop amenities such as transit and greenspaces that allow residents to stay in the area.

The Committee noted the following sites as specific residential development opportunities:

- The intersection of Miles Street E and May Street N
- The Bank facade lot on Victoria Street East and North Street
- Lands near the former hospital/vacant lots on Archibald Street S and Arthur Street E

SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

Ensuring the safety and well-being of residents was a key priority for the Committee, as well as supporting opportunities to increase positive perception of the Downtown. Adding more public amenities in the downtown, including public washrooms, water fountains, cooling and heating stations, and food access, would allow residents to have basic needs met. Increasing the availability of programming and the physical locations of social services downtown will allow for systemic improvements to the challenges being faced. It was suggested by the Committee to increase availability of Social Enterprise programs, addictions and mental health services, and student safety programs.

ADMINISTRATIVE/EMPLOYMENT CENTRE

To support the already existing employment hub in Downtown Fort William, it was suggested that further development support the creation of an administrative and employment core. Increasing development of mixed-use and office buildings in a concentrated area will allow for more flow of residents throughout the downtown throughout the day, and support the development of amenities. The Committee suggested that development of this type of building should be concentrated to the east of Victoriaville Centre, between Syndicate Avenue and the river.

SUPPORTIVE RETAIL DEVELOPMENT

Downtown Fort William has an existing mix of uses, character, and buildings already developed, with ample infrastructure providing opportunity for growth. Many of the businesses downtown are independent, providing a unique character that draws in visitors. Where the Committee saw opportunity was in developing hotels downtown to support more visitors and entice further development. In addition, by promoting the development of mixed-use buildings, retail space can be supported by increased residents through housing and businesses on upper levels. It was stressed that development in the Downtown should focus on sustainability, with low-impact design to ensure that the City supports green practices.

RECONCILIATION

Reconciliatory actions must be a part of all future downtown plans to ensure inclusion and support for Indigenous people in Downtown Fort William and Thunder Bay. Applying the appropriate Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *Calls to Action* in all processes, plans, and services is imperative, alongside representation of Indigenous communities on all committees.

For impact on the ground, the Committee recommended that there be an increase in Indigenous-supportive services provided in appropriate languages throughout Downtown, prioritizing programming for both Indigenous and newcomer populations. Finally, the emerging concept of an urban reserve was indicated an interesting future development opportunity.

4.0 **MAKING BIG MOVES**

“Big Moves” are catalyst projects that can focus attention and resources around a specific action that can create positive change in a community. In the case of Downtown Fort William, we have identified seven **Big Moves** that will set the area, its residents and businesses on a positive trajectory for the future.

Where applicable, each **Big Move** features callouts that highlight opportunities for quick implementation, precedent examples, additional context or potential partnerships to explore.

4.1 **REVITALIZE VICTORIA AVENUE**

The first Big Move relates to the demolition of Victoriaville Centre and the re-establishment of Victoria Avenue as a public right of way and thoroughfare. This project will have the single greatest positive impact on Downtown Fort William by changing the way the neighbourhood functions and how people view the community. The design of the street will determine not only how it functions for transportation, commerce and public life, but how residents and visitors perceive the trajectory of the neighbourhood.

A separate, parallel process is currently unfolding that will establish the specific urban design elements for Victoria Avenue. Preliminary drawings of the Victoria Avenue redesign includes:

- Upgraded building facades for those buildings with entrances enclosed in Victoriaville Centre
- A renewed right-of-way along Victoria Avenue with facilities for automobiles, cyclists and pedestrians
- A “pedestrian table” that allows pedestrians to cross Victoria Avenue at Syndicate Avenue with no change in grade while encouraging vehicles to slow down for a safer and more welcoming environment
- Multi-purpose spaces on Syndicate Avenue north and south of Victoria Avenue to accommodate a range of casual and programmed uses.

These elements will support a forward-thinking vision of Downtown Fort William by enhancing the pedestrian realm, encouraging transit use and active transportation, and generally providing an alternative to traditional automobile-oriented suburban development patterns. This plan will support the strategies outlined in the upcoming detailed design report for the removal of Victoriaville Centre and the reopening of Victoria Avenue.

It is not enough however to focus on the public realm. The intersection of Victoria Avenue and Syndicate Avenue is significant and provides an opportunity to create a neighbourhood anchor. This intersection will feature prominently in the following **Big Moves**.

4.2 **CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DOWNTOWN LIVING**

While the renewal area does include some residential buildings (primarily detached single-family houses and some multi-family buildings), the area immediately surrounding the intersection of Victoria and Syndicate Avenues is primarily occupied by commercial, institutional and government uses. With the removal of Victoriaville Centre and a return to the traditional public streetscape along Victoria Avenue, increasing residential density will help to ensure the long-term vitality of the downtown.

The Downtown Fort William Renewal Advisory Committee identified residential development as the top priority for the renewal of Downtown Fort William. The needs for housing options and for increased

residential density can be addressed through new development, through adaptive reuse and renovation of existing buildings, and through other models like extended stay rentals and hotel accommodations.

While Downtown Fort William currently has a small population, there are opportunities to draw new residents to live in a neighbourhood with a vibrant, walkable public realm, affordable housing and housing options that suit the specific needs of smaller households. Boosting density in the downtown not only strengthens the area economically and socially, but can also help the City of Thunder Bay realize service efficiencies over a period when the City's total population is projected to remain stable.

STRONG BONES

Downtown Fort William possesses a strong urban fabric with many commercial storefronts and several historic office buildings. The rhythm of streets like May Street (below) and Victoria Ave provide an interesting environment that is inviting to pedestrians, whether or not they are actively looking to visit the businesses they are passing.



NEW CONSTRUCTION

Much of the area immediately surrounding Victoriaville Centre is occupied by buildings that predate the mall and the closing of Victoria and Syndicate Avenues. While most of the existing building stock will be able to continue with the current commercial and institutional uses after the mall is removed, others may be left vacant or in need of significant repair. New residential development could replace aging or non-viable structures while maintaining the strong urban feel on key streets like Victoria Avenue.

While most of the currently undeveloped land in the renewal area is privately owned and made up of surface parking lots, these properties represent the best opportunity to build new housing. Establishing a dedicated development corporation (discussed in Addendum) may allow the City to work with the owners of parking lots and other vacant or underutilized properties to channel investment to a few key projects over the short term.

City-owned properties within the renewal area also provide opportunities for the City of Thunder Bay to lead by example and to catalyze/energize the community with demonstration housing projects that can achieve residential density while also pursuing social objectives. The City-owned property east of North Street on the east side of the renewal area should be a priority for redevelopment. Whether the project is led by the City or through a partnership or development corporation, the site's location, size and ownership make it an ideal location for a demonstration housing development project.

The replacement of parking lots with more active uses will quickly change perceptions around vitality and safety in Downtown Fort William. Development in key locations like North Street will also help connect the neighbourhood with surrounding areas, providing additional activity and economic development opportunities.

CONVERSION

The reopening of Victoria Avenue and Syndicate Avenue will re-establish connections between many older buildings and the public realm, creating opportunities for buildings to be repurposed for residential uses. Heritage buildings such as the Chapple Building may benefit from retrofits to create apartments where office space is vacant or no longer suitable for its current purpose.

Conversion from office or commercial uses to residential use could include a range of project types. Some buildings may only require interior renovations to divide larger spaces into smaller suites. Other projects may involve preserving important building facades while entirely rebuilding new interior spaces to suit a residential purpose. The type of conversion will depend on the specifics of each building and its surroundings.

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Many of the remaining warehouse buildings in Winnipeg's Exchange District have been renovated over the last few decades from industrial to residential uses. Retaining these heritage buildings with new residents keeps the neighbourhood vibrant while preserving the look and feel that attracts locals and tourists alike to visit for festivals each year.



HOTELS/EXTENDED STAYS

Downtown Fort William presently lacks a hotel that would allow for tourists, visitors and remote workers to take advantage of the range of services and amenities both within and surrounding the renewal area. While a new hotel might not be an immediate City priority or be financially viable in the short term, securing development of a downtown hotel would allow visitors to support local businesses during their stay while also providing employment opportunities for hotel staff.

The rise of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic has created a class of “digital nomad” workers who no longer need to be close to where they work to attend offices in person. In the age of virtual meetings, these workers have the option to leave big cities and work remotely from more affordable places that offer access to a different range of amenities. Thunder Bay could attract these remote workers with residences focused on extended stays, live-work spaces and access to urban conveniences with the added benefit of being near to Thunder Bay’s many natural and cultural assets (i.e., provincial parks, hiking trails, eco-tourism, Fort William Historical Park, etc.)

4.3 CONNECT PEOPLE, PLACES AND NATURAL SPACES

BUILDING A GREEN NETWORK

While there are few large green spaces within the Downtown Fort William renewal area, there are several significant parks and open spaces within walking and cycling distance of Victoria and Syndicate Avenues.

Park Name	Walking time (approx.)	Cycling time (approx.)
Paterson Park	4 minutes	2 minutes
Kam River Park	7 minutes	3 minutes
Dease Park	10 minutes	2 minutes
Kaministiquia River Heritage Park	11 minutes	5 minutes
Vickers Park	17 minutes	6 minutes
International Friendship Gardens	17 minutes	6 minutes
Chapples Park	27 minutes	8 minutes

It should be a priority to create and strengthen connections between these parks and Downtown Fort William. In the near term, these connections should take the form of wayfinding strategy that provides residents and visitors with directions, walking and cycling times, and facilities and amenities available at each destination.

In the longer term there will be opportunities to develop new green spaces at smaller scales throughout the renewal area. Combined with a wayfinding strategy, public realm landscaping and street designs could eventually form a network of 'greened' corridors that feature additional landscaping and amenities for pedestrians and cyclists. Incorporating green destinations into the public transit and active transportation networks will make it easier to live downtown and enjoy these free amenities.

Despite the proximity of the Kaministiquia River to Downtown Fort William, accessing green spaces along the river is currently a challenge. Both the pedestrian underpass from Simpson Street at Donald Avenue and the vehicular underpass via C.P.R. Subway Street require pedestrians to enter dark areas with poor lines of sight between the entrance and exit. In the short term, improved lighting and security measures should be installed to provide safe access during day and evening hours. In the longer term, when either underpass requires upgrades, enhanced lines-of-sight and pedestrian safety should inform designs.

Finally, the renewal of Downtown Fort William should be seen as an opportunity to achieve objectives established in the City of Thunder Bay Climate Adaptation Strategy. Upgrades to the public realm, such as street and boulevard renewals, can incorporate landscaping and design features that improve climate resilience and water quality while also improving comfort, safety and convenience for pedestrians.

TRANSIT

Public transit traditionally brought people from surrounding residential areas to downtown for work, shopping and recreation. With a new focus on revitalizing Downtown Fort William through adding residential density, Thunder Bay's transit network can take advantage of increased ridership from downtown to key destinations.

The Advisory Committee noted that housing for youth and students should be a priority. Transportation for this group is also important to consider. 2016 Census data for Thunder Bay showed that those aged 15-24 were nearly twice as likely to use sustainable transportation (i.e., public transit or active transport) for their main mode of commuting, compared with the population of Thunder Bay as a whole (19.7% vs 10.0%). Catering transit routes, frequencies and destinations to the needs of these groups would help to boost ridership and reduce parking needs for any new residential development.

GETTING A JUMP START

Tactical urbanism in the form of seasonal pop-up parks, temporarily pedestrianized streets and public artwork can get local businesses, residents and community groups involved in placemaking while creating new places for people to gather. Combining programming with these physical interventions can help to generate enthusiasm with minimal up-front cost.



Image credit: Gil Rodan

The newly reopened Victoria Avenue will provide a focal point for those living in and visiting downtown, so ensuring public transit access to businesses and residences along Victoria should be a priority. Despite the importance of transit access in this area, the noise and fumes resulting from frequent buses may discourage active outdoor uses that should be encouraged along key downtown streets. Transit routes currently bypass the Victoria Avenue and Syndicate Avenue intersection, with most stops being about a five minute walk from Victoria & Syndicate. The City should reinforce the connections between existing transit stops and main commercial areas with upgraded sidewalks, intuitive wayfinding and public art and placemaking.

ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

Streetscape and public realm improvements can go a long way to incentivizing active modes of moving to and through Downtown Fort William. Current street designs in the area prioritize car traffic, but during a walking tour with the Advisory Committee, members noted that sidewalks around the downtown are generally clean and in good condition. As streets in and around Downtown Fort William are due for renewal, they should be upgraded to a pedestrian-oriented standard that incorporates street trees, room for public seating and bump-outs to shorten crossing distances. Some of these features are already present around downtown, but are not provided consistently along all streets.

Select routes through Downtown Fort William should also be upgraded to include All Ages and Abilities (AAA) cycling infrastructure. Vickers Street already features dedicated painted bike lanes, but this does not provide the level of separation from cars and truck traffic that allows riders of all experience levels to comfortably use the lanes.

BUILDING BIKE FACILITIES FOR EVERYONE

The National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) defines All Ages and Abilities (AAA) bike facilities with three main criteria: safety, comfort and equity.



Designing for All Ages & Abilities
Contextual Guidance for High-Comfort Bicycle Facilities
December 2017

All Ages & Abilities Bike Facilities are ...

Safe	Comfortable	Equitable
More people will bicycle when they have safe places to ride, and more riders mean safer streets. Among seven NACTO cities that grew the lane mileage of their bikeway networks 50% between 2007–2014, ridership more than doubled while risk of death and serious injury to people biking was halved. ⁶ Better bicycle facilities are directly correlated with increased safety for people walking and driving as well. Data from New York City showed that adding protected bike lanes to streets reduced injury crashes for all road users by 40% over four years. ⁷	Bikeways that provide comfortable, low-stress bicycling conditions can achieve widespread growth in mode share. Among adults in the US, only 6–10% of people generally feel comfortable riding in mixed traffic or painted bike lanes. ⁸ However, nearly two-thirds of the adult population may be interested in riding more often, given better places to ride, and as many as 81% of those would ride in protected bike lanes. ⁹ Bikeways that eliminate stress will attract traditionally under-represented bicyclists, including women, children, and seniors.	High-quality bikeways expand opportunities to ride and encourage safe riding. Poor or inadequate infrastructure—which has disproportionately impacted low-income communities and communities of color—forces people bicycling to choose between feeling safe and following the rules of the road, and induces wrong-way and sidewalk riding. Where street design provides safe places to ride and manages motor vehicle driver behavior, unsafe bicycling decisions disappear, ¹¹ making ordinary riding safe and legal and reaching more riders.

Credit: NACTO

Unlike transit buses, routing cyclists down key streets will improve the environment for all other users and provide the greatest support for businesses. A single on-street parking space for a car can host several bicycle parking spaces, allowing more patrons to park closer to their destinations. Winter cycling and e-bikes will also continue to gain in popularity.

PARKING

While the majority of people traveling to work in Thunder Bay are either drivers or passengers in private vehicles, the need for downtown parking must be balanced with the realities that building and maintaining parking is expensive, that space for parking is space that cannot be used for more productive and active uses, and that surface parking lots degrade the urban experience. The strength of downtown is its orientation toward alternative forms of transportation.

The City of Thunder Bay regulates parking through its Zoning Bylaw. Within the Downtown Neighbourhood (DN) zone that covers most of Downtown Fort William, the city requires 0.2 parking spaces for each residence in buildings with four or more homes, or the equivalent of one parking space for every five housing units. There is no minimum rate of parking for all other uses in the DN zone. These permissive standards allow developers and property owners to largely determine for themselves how much parking each property requires based on market demand and alternative forms of transportation available to residents or customers. By strengthening existing transit and active transportation networks in and around Downtown Fort William, the City can help future development to have less parking that might otherwise be built.

The City-owned Victoriaville parkade is also an asset to the neighbourhood. By providing centrally-located parking within Downtown Fort William for both hourly and monthly users, the facility allows nearby businesses to benefit from vehicle traffic without the expense of building, maintaining and managing their own parking spaces. These parking spaces are also versatile, supporting daytime and evening traffic. If the parkade were to reach capacity in the future, the City of Thunder Bay can use dynamic hourly pricing to incentivize carpooling and other forms of transportation during peak times or events.

4.4 CREATE PLACES WORTH CARING ABOUT

MCKELLAR MALL / CENTENNIAL SQUARE / SYNDICATE AVENUE PARKADE RAMP

While the Victoriaville Centre parkade's centralized off-street parking is an asset to the neighbourhood, the structure's blank walls at street level do not make for a positive urban environment. In the short term, there may be opportunities to engage the community in placemaking exercises around the perimeter of McKellar Mall and the parkade to improve its impact on the surrounding streets and neighbouring properties. The blank walls facing Donald Street and Centennial Square could be activated through public art, landscaping, planter boxes or other features to add interest to the parkade and breakup the asphalt and concrete surfaces during warm weather. It is worth exploring whether additional windows and doors could be feasibly installed to benefit both users of and visitors to the building.

The parkade ramp currently extends over the public right-of-way on Syndicate Avenue. This impedes visual connections from Donald Street north to Victoria Avenue but does not fully block pedestrians and cyclists from traveling between the two streets. While the ramp remains in this location, Syndicate Avenue south of Victoria should be upgraded to provide a separated path around the ramp. A program of **tactical urbanism** interventions to separate the parkade ramp access from the pedestrian access to Victoria Avenue may help to identify creative solutions that can be installed permanently until the

Tactical Urbanism is the practice of using cheap materials to quickly alter the way people use a space. It often takes the form of community events to paint, plant trees and flowers, and experiment with different ways of moving through an urban environment.

parkade ramp is no longer required. If the ramp can ultimately be moved interior to the parkade structure, Syndicate Avenue could then be fully opened as a pedestrian- and cyclist-only street

As the parkade nears the end of its lifespan over the medium to long term, there may be opportunities for adaptive reuse of some or all of the parkade structure to further activate the public realm. Whether it makes more financial sense to renew the structure or to demolish and replace entirely, any changes to the building should orient entrances, windows and public space towards Syndicate Avenue and Donald Street to encourage walking and other active uses along those streets.

INVESTING IN KEY CORRIDORS

Focusing public and private investment on a few key corridors will ensure that the time, energy and money going into Downtown Fort William are reinforcing each other.

- The main east-west corridor in the neighbourhood, the soon-to-be-renewed Victoria Avenue, should be the primary corridor for pedestrians.
- May Street's many storefronts boast an appealing scale and rhythm. Like Victoria on the east-west axis, this north-south corridor presents good opportunities to boost foot traffic.
- Syndicate Avenue also runs north-south but is interrupted by the Victoriaville Parkade ramp and the Thunder Bay Courthouse. When this street is reopened following the removal of Victoriaville Centre, its best function may be as a series of public plazas with seating, patios, and programming to promote gathering.

4.5 ESTABLISH A CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT HUB

A vibrant downtown needs to keep activity going past the end of business hours. Downtown Fort William should establish itself as a hub of cultural and associated activities within Fort William and all of Thunder Bay. Keeping enough people coming to the area after offices close will require a combination of public realm upgrades, regulatory changes, and intentional programming.

PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS

While the street design and network improvements proposed elsewhere in this renewal strategy will contribute to creating safer and more comfortable places for people to gather, there are quicker and cheaper ways to help local businesses attract more customers into the evening. Small, moveable tables and chairs invite people to linger and allow them to move into sun or shade, or to sit alone or in a larger group. Creative or artistic lighting arrangements add interest and improve visibility and safety after dark. Portable heat systems and communal blankets or ponchos can extend the outdoor seating season. City- or BIA-operated public washrooms would allow all visitors to Downtown Fort William to remain in the neighbourhood in comfort and with dignity.

REGULATORY CHANGES

Creating a fast-track permit process to allow businesses to apply for on-street patios would allow restaurants, bars and breweries to capitalize on warm weather. The City should consider applying for a blanket liquor license for a central area at or near Victoria and Syndicate. This would allow customers to visit different establishments to pick up food and drink, and then gather in a common area.

PROGRAMMING

Programming regular events – live performances, rotating art installations, or public speakers series - requires little to no physical infrastructure and can be organized quickly with a small amount of funding in place. Thunder Bay is home to an active arts and culture scene, but at present, the majority of programming takes place at or near the waterfront festival area in Port Arthur. A dedicated events coordinator hired by the BIA, a new development corporation or the City of Thunder Bay could begin with weekly outdoor performances during warm weather months to attract after hours visitors to pop-up performance spaces around Downtown Fort William.

There is potential for partnerships between events at the Fort William Gardens arena and programming at or near local businesses in Downtown Fort William. Fan events before or after key sporting events would capitalize on people already coming downtown and promote the value of Downtown Fort William as a social and cultural gathering space outside of sports seasons.

4.6 CREATE A DOWNTOWN EDUCATION CAMPUS

DOWNTOWN CAMPUS

The City should work with stakeholders to establish a post-secondary urban campus in Downtown Fort William. A downtown campus and student housing facility would attract young people and contribute to a virtuous cycle of artistic, cultural and academic expression in turn attracting a more diverse population to the neighbourhood.

Laurier University established a downtown campus in Brantford, ON in 1999. At the time, the city and its downtown were struggling to adapt to an economy that was quickly shifting away from manufacturing. In the years since, the university has gradually expanded the campus and invested tens of millions of dollars in the area. The influx of students and staff to the campus prompted additional private sector investment.

Over time, a new campus in Downtown Fort William could include a combination of renovated existing buildings and new, purpose-built facilities that would serve both university programs and the wider public. New investments would also create opportunities to partner with a university or college partner and the private sector to upgrade parks and streets.

It is worth noting that downtown educational campuses are also popular with students, and have been proven to function as an important student recruitment strategy.

A downtown campus should explore partnership opportunities with existing Indigenous education institutions in the area and the city to ensure that programs meet the needs of Thunder Bay's diverse population. Oshki-Wenjack – Oshki-Pimache-O-Win (The Wenjack Education Institute) is currently located in Centennial Square on Victoria Avenue.

RED RIVER COLLEGE – ROBLIN CENTRE

This campus in downtown Winnipeg hosts approximately 2000 students. The campus occupies several pre-existing buildings and reuses several heritage building facades with a new, state-of-the-art facility behind.



Image credit: Wpg guy

4.7 IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

ESTABLISH AN IMPLEMENTATION VEHICLE

Great plans often fail without strong implementation strategies. Whether the plan is implemented by a new organization, such as a community development corporation, by a new team within a City of Thunder Bay department, or by an existing agency or organization with an expanded or updated mandate, it is essential that someone is dedicated to championing Downtown Fort William. The exact form of the implementation vehicle is beyond the scope of this strategy but will need to be decided as soon as possible to ensure the strategy is implemented in a timely manner.

5.0 IMPLEMENTATION

5.1.1 STAKEHOLDERS & PARTNERS

The stakeholders and partner organizations identified throughout this plan will be essential partners to the success of strategic renewal in Downtown Fort William. The agencies and groups listed below bring important skills and local knowledge to the table, and will need to buy in to proposed changes in the neighbourhood

- Residents
- City of Thunder Bay & key departments
- Developers
- Downtown Fort William Business District (FWBIA)
- Business owners
- Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Corporation (TBCEDC)
- Housing development corporations
- Not-for-profit organizations
- Emergency shelters

PARTNERSHIPS

While specific partnerships can be ‘built in’ to the mandate and structure of a CDC or formed on-the-go as required by individual projects, the need for partnerships is fundamental to the CDC model. The strength of a CDC is its ability to leverage knowledge and resources from a wide array of sources, and often this means both benefiting from and contributing to partner communities or organizations. For Thunder Bay and Downtown Fort William, key partnership opportunities will be with First Nations communities and Indigenous organizations, with provincial and federal departments and agencies and with local businesses, developers and property owners.

Fort William Business Improvement Area

The Fort William Business District BIA (FWBIA) is a Business Improvement Area (BIA) in Downtown Fort William. The FWBIA is a non-profit organization representing businesses within the boundary of Miles Street (to the north), May Street (to the east), Donald Street (to the south), and McKellar Street (to the west).

The FWBIA “is the voice of the business community. It is committed to improving, promoting and advocating for the area of Fort William Business District as one of Thunder Bay’s shopping, business, entertainment and historic downtown destinations.”

The FWBIA pursues the following objectives:

- Enhance the beautification, maintenance and improvements that the City of Thunder Bay provides for the area;
- Encourage individual property owners to maintain, beautify and enhance their businesses;
- Advocate on behalf of the business community;
- Work with community and municipal partners to address safety and the perception of safety in the area;
- Promote the area as a desirable place to locate a business;
- Promote the area as a business, shopping and entertainment area;
- Highlight the historic aspects of the area and promote as a destination.

The FWBIA should be a key partner of a development corporation established for Downtown Fort William.

5.1.2 TAX INCREMENT FINANCING

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a funding model that municipalities use to encourage new development. When a new development occurs, the value of the property and the associated taxes increase. This increase in property value generates an incremental increase in property taxes. Rather than collect incremental taxes in general revenues, the municipality (or its designated agency) can use these incremental taxes for a public purpose. Often, incremental taxes are used to support development, either through an incentive provided directly to developers or purchasers, or by providing new or enhanced public infrastructure. Incremental taxes are often provided through a multi-year agreement (often between five and twenty-five years).

Municipalities can provide developers the value of the total incremental taxes at the beginning of the project to help support new development, which may not have been financially viable otherwise. For example, the municipality or its designated agency could provide 25 years of incremental tax revenue upon project initiation. After the new property is complete, the developer may choose to sell it to another owner or manage it themselves. The owner pays the baseline and incremental property taxes, which are used to service the loan debt.

Community development corporations (CDCs) – one potential model of implementation vehicle – can support tax increment financing models by acting as the borrowing agent that provides developers with the upfront loan. This model allows CDCs to generate passive revenue from the interest on the loan. Loans are secured against the property, ensuring that risk to the lender is low.

5.1.3 COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN (CIP) INCENTIVES

Community Improvement Plans (CIPs) are community planning tools used by municipalities to revitalize areas of a city or community through programs, grants, and incentives. They are governed by Part IV of the provincial Planning Act.

CIPs can:

- Address the reuse and restoration of lands, buildings, and infrastructure
- Address growth management and challenges
- Plan for rehabilitation, development, and land-use change

Community Improvement Plans (CIP) must be approved in accordance with a municipality's Official Plan. CIPs have been used in Thunder Bay since 1997. Today, CIPs in Thunder Bay provide incentive programs for the North Core, South Core / Simpson Street, and Westfort neighbourhoods.

CITY OF WINDSOR - ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The City of Windsor's Economic Revitalization Community Improvement Plan (CIP), which came into effect on March 15, 2011, provides financial incentives to encourage new investment in targeted economic sectors for the purposes of diversifying the local economy and creating/retaining jobs. The CIP allows the City to take a variety of measures - to further the objectives of the Economic Revitalization CIP - ***that would otherwise be prohibited by Ontario's Municipal Act***. This includes the acquisition and preparation of land; construction, repair, rehabilitation or improvement of buildings; the sale, lease or disposal of land and buildings; and the provision of grants to owners or tenants of land - all of which must conform with the objectives and policies contained within the CIP.

Since 1997, over \$1m in grants and loans have been provided through a number of CIP programs to assist property owners with costs associated with rehabilitating and renovating their properties and buildings (City of Thunder Bay By-law 04-2021).

There are currently four grants available through the Downtown Improvement Program, including:

- Planning and Building Fee Grant, which rebates the full cost of building permit and application fees;
- Commercial Conversion Grant (Main Floor), which reimburses up to 50% of costs to convert or improve a main floor into a commercial space;
- Residential/Office Conversion Grant (Upper Floors), which reimburses up to 50% of costs to convert or improve a second floor into an office or residential unit; and
- Commercial Façade Improvement Grant, which reimburses up to 50% of costs to improve the building façade.

Each grant has a \$10,000 maximum and can be stacked up to \$25,000. In 2022, funding available totalled roughly \$250,000. Roughly half of the program funding is provided by the Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Corporation.

In 2021, all of the grants except one were awarded to North Core applicants. The exception was awarded to a Westfort application.

It may be timely to review the effectiveness of the CIP program and ensure that it meets the goals of this Strategic Renewal Plan. For example, developing housing units has been identified as a key priority (as oppose to converting a second floor unit into an office use). It may be desirable for example to continue to rebate permit fees, and focus grants on developing new housing units and improving the building façade.

Given the significance of building housing units to the Plan, alternative means of incentivizing development should be explored. For example, tax increment financing has proven to be successful in stimulating the housing market in downtown Winnipeg. The program, known as the Downtown Residential Development Grant Program, was first launched in 2007 with funding provided by the City of Winnipeg and Province of Manitoba. The program rebated incremental property taxes (up to \$40,000 per unit) to the developer for up to a 15-year period.

In Calgary, the saturated office market is being converted to residential uses through a \$100m municipal investment in the Downtown Calgary Development Incentive Program that is “focused on supporting Downtown building owners in the conversion of vacant office spaces to residential uses.” The Program offers a grant of \$75 per square foot, up to \$10m per property. Requests in excess of \$10m require City Council approval.

Given the amount of funding necessary to ensure the economic viability of developing new housing units downtown, funding opportunities beyond the CIP should be explored.

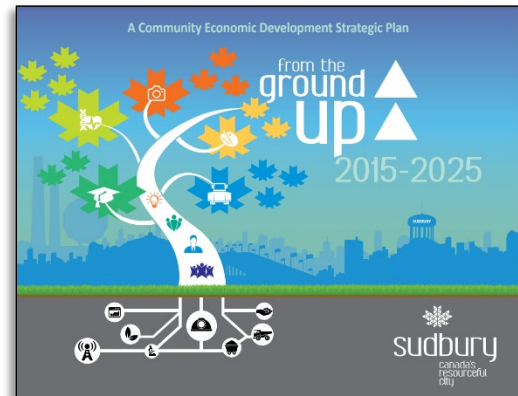
5.1.4 BRANDING & MARKETING RECOMMENDATIONS

The Downtown Fort William implementing organization should coordinate with the Fort William Business District (FWBIA), the City of Thunder Bay and agencies and organizations located in or working within Downtown Fort William to develop a brand and marketing strategy for the community. The strategy should establish objectives and prioritize key activities to achieve the most important outcomes first. Branding and marketing strategies from other CDCs and cities in Canada can provide guidance to developing a strategy that is specific to Downtown Fort William.

The Lac du Bonnet Development Corporation provides marketing not only for its own activities, but as a paid service for client businesses and organizations. This approach not only generates revenue for the CDC, but allows it to help sharpen the branding of the community by working with local clients.

The City of Greater Sudbury Community Development Strategic Plan sets an objective of implementing research and initiatives to capture “Key Market Segments” and identifies five actions, each with a timeframe and potential partners:

1. Promote a brand that distinguishes from nearby competitors
2. Coordinate marketing messages and markets at the local and regional levels
3. Implement a digital and social media marketing, promotions, and communications strategy
4. Integrate local arts, culture, and other attractions into promotional strategies
5. Build partnerships across the province with strategic allies



Finally, the City of Edmonton Place Brand Strategy notes that the City should build a library of assets that each of its departments and representatives can access. This library will help ensure consistency in the content and quality of messaging, and also help keep promotions fresh and avoid overuse. Assets in the library could include photos, videos, text and audio that can be combined and distributed to meet promotional needs as they arise.

Objectives for a branding and marketing strategy for Downtown Fort William could follow a similar approach, with high-level, long term and mid-level, nearer term objectives and corresponding policies:

High Level Objectives

- Create a recognizable visual identity for Downtown Fort William
- Establish a fun, active social media presence for the Downtown Fort William CDC and partner organizations
- Promote after hours destinations and programming to keep Downtown Fort William active throughout the day
- Generate awareness of and enthusiasm for upcoming projects and changes in Downtown Fort William
- Identify key markets, including demographic groups that are currently underrepresented in the area

Mid Level Objectives

- Share regular updates about events
- Commission artistic renderings of potential developments to promote investment
- Coordinate media and social media activities with FWBIA and local businesses and organizations for consistent messaging

5.1.5 METRICS

Renewal is a slow and complex process, so it will be important to check-in regularly with key metrics to ensure trends are showing progress, however incremental. The following metrics may be useful to consider:

Perceptions of Downtown Fort William

An initial community survey of Thunder Bay residents would establish a baseline understanding of how people view the Downtown Fort William area. Subsequent surveys could then help determine whether change and activities in the area are improving the area's standing within the City.

Vacant Properties

While the demolition and construction activities around Victoriaville Centre may create some uncertainty in the area over the short term, a downward trend in long vacancies for commercial properties would help indicate improving prospects.

Population Growth

The next censuses in 2025-6 and 2030-1 will provide valuable insight into how the population of Downtown Fort William may have changed as a result of implementing the renewal strategy. While overall population growth is a top-level metric, changes to the populations of children and young people will also help indicate the direction of the area.

5.1.6 RECOMMENDED SHORT, MEDIUM, AND LONG-TERM ACTIONS

The following table identifies short, medium, and long-term actions that were identified during the planning process. Following establishment of the Downtown Fort William Renewal Strategy implementation vehicle, a five-year Strategic Plan should be adopted in consultation with the project leadership, members of the oversight team (i.e., board of directors, committee members, or other as applicable).

The timelines associated with this Plan are based on an anticipated Victoria Avenue reopening date of Summer 2026. The timeline of specific strategies can be adjusted as required should the reopening date change.

- Short term:** Until the opening of Victoria Avenue (2023 to 2026)
- Medium term:** Two years following the opening of Victoria Avenue (2026 to 2028)
- Long term:** Up to five years after Victoria Avenue opens (2028 to 2031)

Note that the Terms below refer to actions, not outcomes.

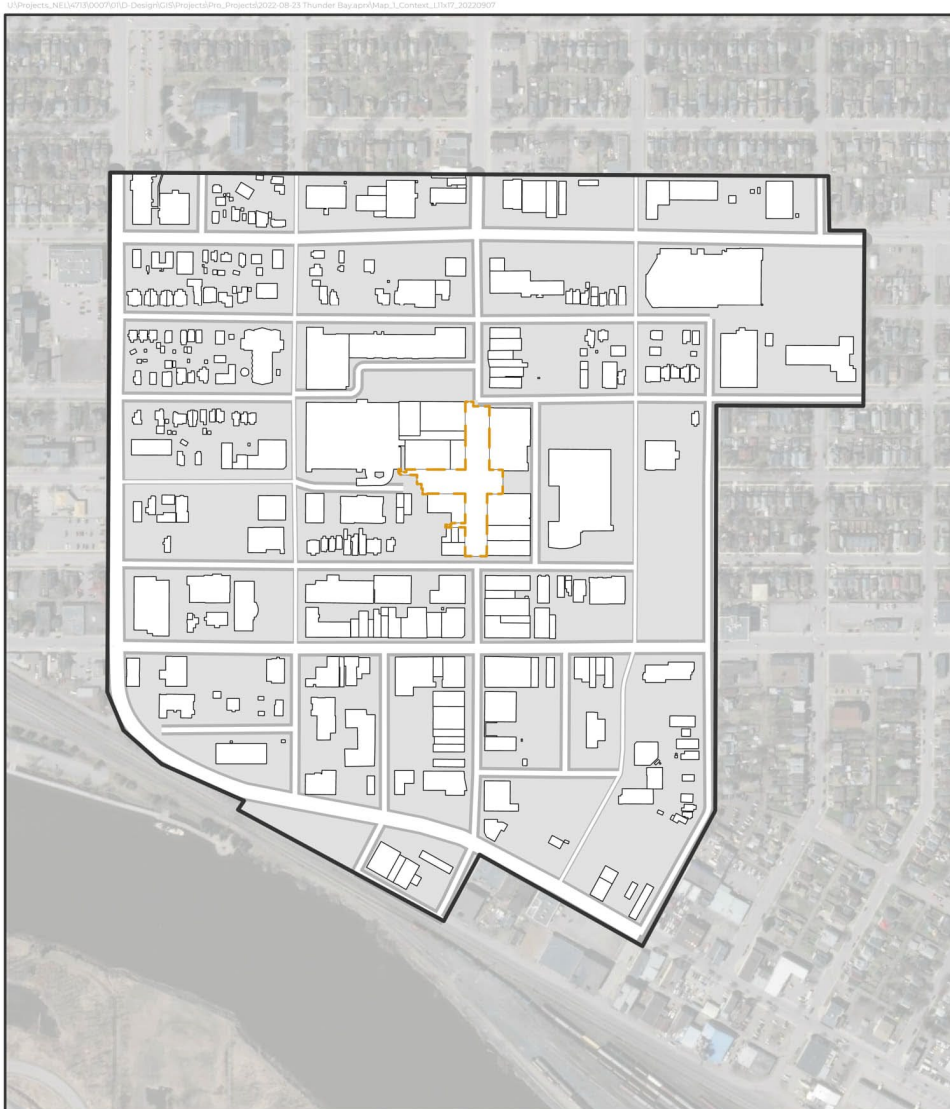
ACTION	TERM	RESPONSIBLE ORGANIZATION(S)
Establish the Downtown Fort William Strategic Renewal Implementation Vehicle	Short	City of Thunder Bay
Confirm implementation oversight model (e.g., board of directors, city committee, etc.)	Short	City of Thunder Bay
Confirm staffing and/or resource requirements (funding, hiring or staff secondment from City of Thunder Bay)	Short	City of Thunder Bay/Implementation Vehicle
Prepare and Approve Business Plan including: Programming / Entertainment Hub strategy Active Transportation / Connections strategy	Short Short	Implementation Vehicle FWBIA ¹

Downtown Living strategy / Community Improvement Program incentives	Short	
Education Hub strategy	Short	
Conduct baseline survey to identify perceptions and barriers to attracting residents and visitors	Short	Implementation Vehicle
Prepare a Branding / Marketing / Communications strategy including Public Engagement	Short	Implementation Vehicle
Engage community groups to participate in tactical urbanism projects during construction works around Victoriaville Centre	Short	Implementation Vehicle + others
Confirm long term operational funding including agreement regarding City lands/assets	Medium	Implementation Vehicle
Commission engaging public art and lighting installations to activate gathering spaces along Victoria Avenue	Medium	Implementation Vehicle + City of Thunder Bay
Conduct follow-up surveys to identify any changes in perceptions of the area	Medium - Long	Implementation Vehicle
Performance Audit	Medium	City of Thunder Bay
Update Strategic Renewal Plan	Long	Implementation Vehicle

¹ Fort William Business District Business Improvement Association

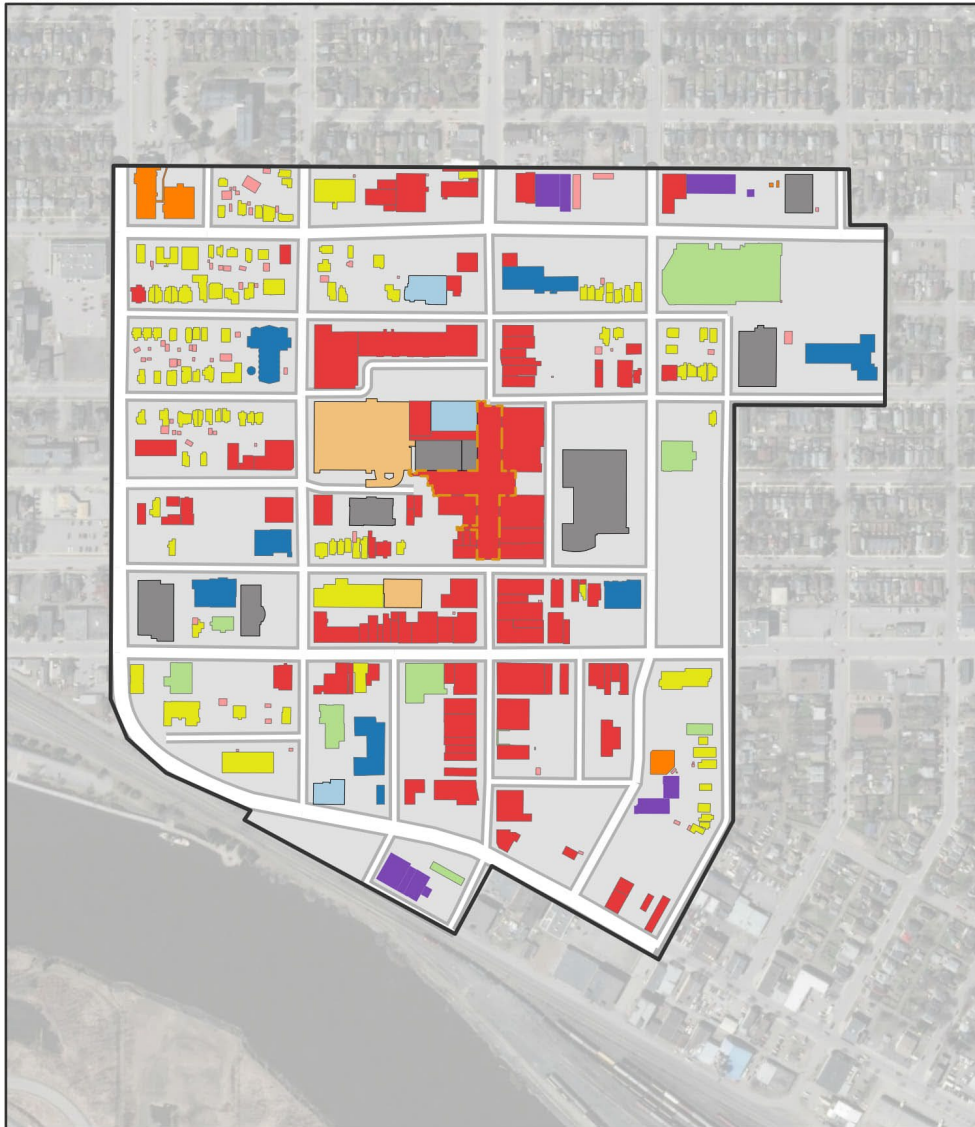
Appendix A: Maps

MAP ONE: CONTEXT



MAP TWO: LAND USE

\\us1urban-systems.com\projects\Projects_WPC\4713\0007\01\0-D-Design\GIS\Projects\Pro_Projects\2022-08-23 Thunder Bay\proxi\Map_7_Land_Use_L1\17_Rev2A



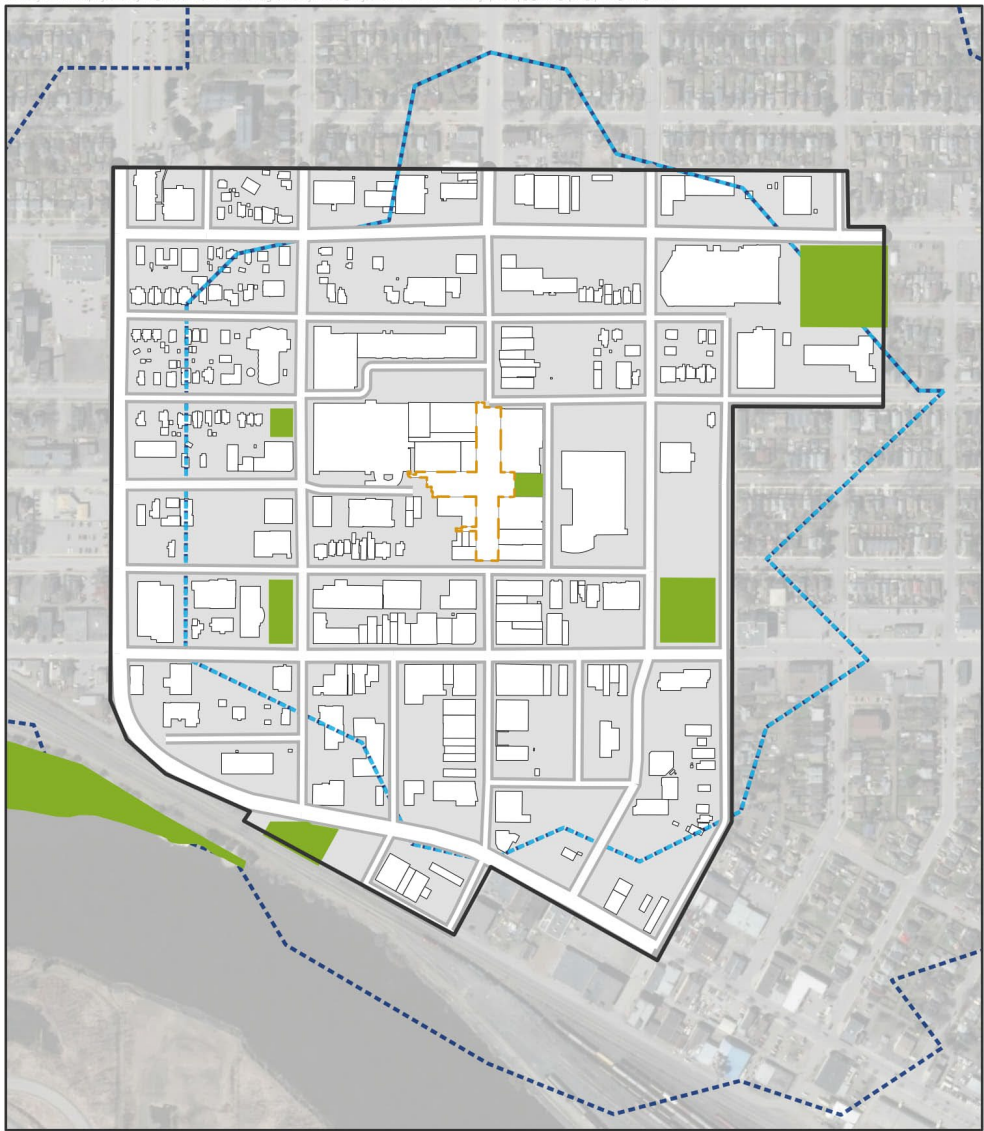
Land Use

- Legend**
- Area Boundary
 - Victoriaville Centre
- BUILDING USE TYPES**
- General
 - Commercial
 - Government
 - Medical
 - Recreation
 - Institutional
 - Industrial
 - Utilities
 - Parking Lot Structure
 - Residential



MAP THREE: PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

\\s:\urban-systems\corporate\projects\projects_vpn\2022\2022-Fort-William-Strategic-Renewal-Plan\2022-08-23-Thunder-Bay\Map-3-Parks-Open-Spaces-UKW-Rev04



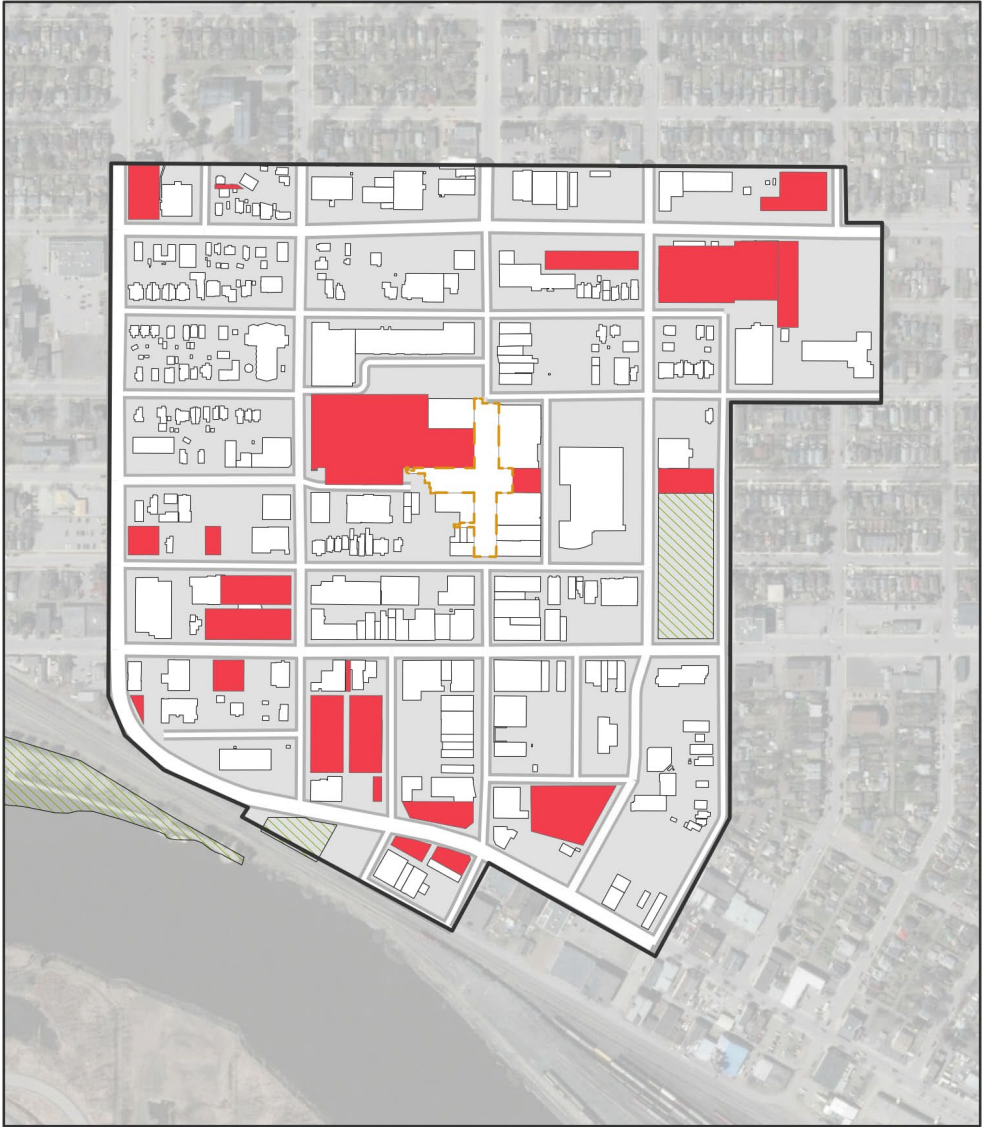
Parks and Open Spaces

- Legend**
- Area Boundary
 - Victoria Centre
 - Parks and Open Spaces
 - Area Boundary Fill
 - VICTORIAVILLE CENTRE WALK TIME AREAS
 - 5 minutes
 - 10 minutes



MAP FOUR: CITY-OWNED PROPERTIES

\\urban-systems\corporate\projects\projects_vpn\swm\0007\010-Design\GIS\ProjectInfo_Planets\2022-08-23 Thunder Bay\Map_3_City-Owned_Property_L1017_Rev04



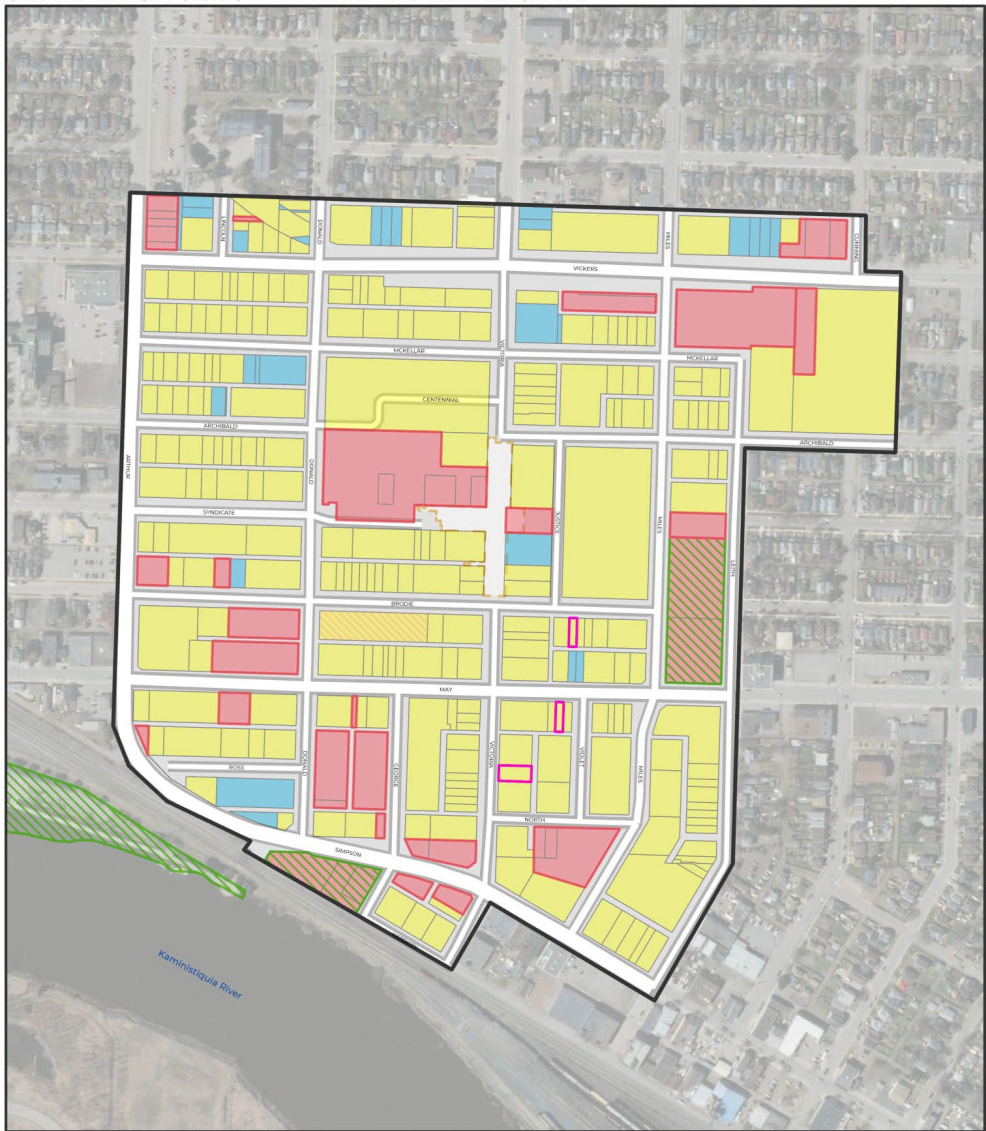
City-Owned
Property

- Legend
- Area Boundary
 - Victoria Centre
 - City-Owned Property
 - City-Owned Park



MAP FIVE: VACANT BUILDINGS/PROPERTIES/CITY-OWNED PROPERTIES

USProjects_wps\cm\p00707\p0_Design\CD\Projects\p0_Prog\067070_FortWilliamDowntown\ap\Map_5_Vacant_Buildings_11x17_Rev0A



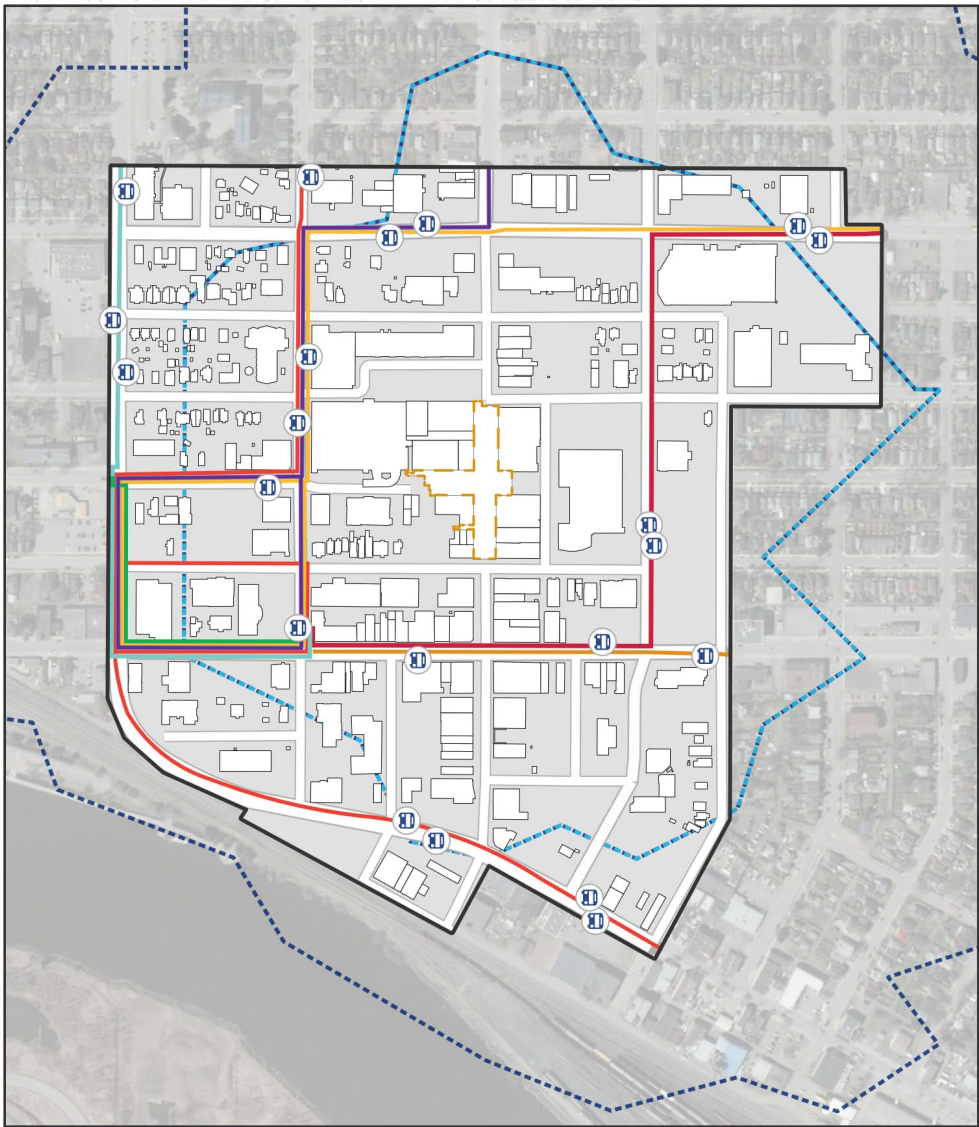
Vacant Lots and Property Ownership

- Legend**
- Area Boundary
 - Victoria Centre
 - Vacant Lots
 - City-Owned Property
 - City-Owned Park
 - PROPERTY PARCELS
 - City Owned
 - Pin Only
 - Regular Property
 - Condo-Common Element



MAP SIX: BUS STOPS AND ROUTES

\\srs\urban\systems\only\projects\projects_vic\city\716\corporate\Design\GIS\Project\Info_Pages\2022-08-23 Thunder Bay\Map 2: Bus Stops, Routes, L1017.docx



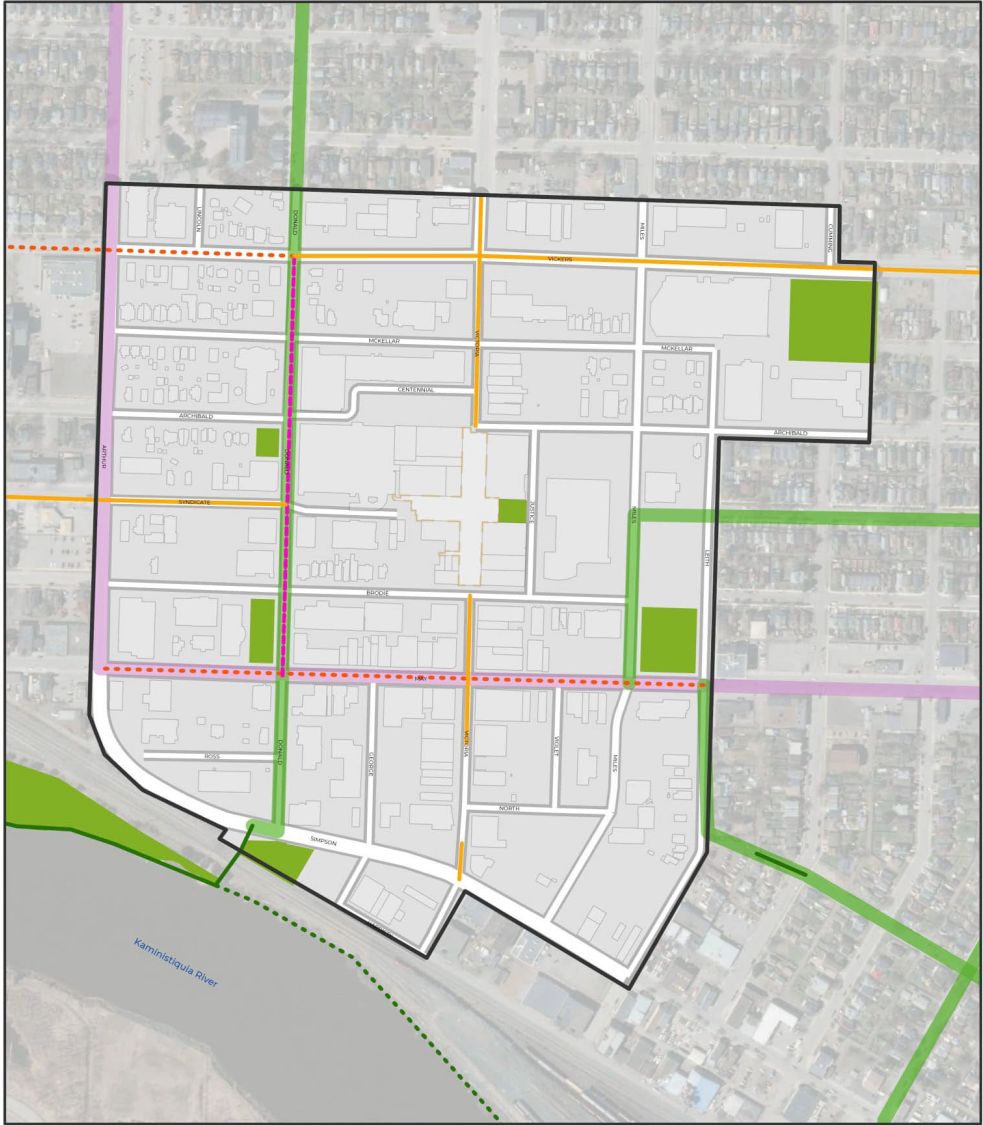
Bus Stops and Routes

- Legend
- Area Boundary
- Victoriaville Centre
- Thunder Bay Transit Stops
- THUNDER BAY TRANSIT ROUTES
- 1
- 3M
- 8
- 10
- 12
- 14
- 16
- Area Boundary
- VICTORIAVILLE CENTRE WALK TIME AREAS
- 5 minutes
- 10 minutes



MAP SEVEN: ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION ROUTES/GREEN CORRIDORS

L:\Projects_wpc\wpr\portfolio_Design\GIS\Vegetation_Properties\GIS\000705_FortWilliamDowntownAprilMap_2_Active_Transportation_1_1x17_revised



Active Transportation

Legend

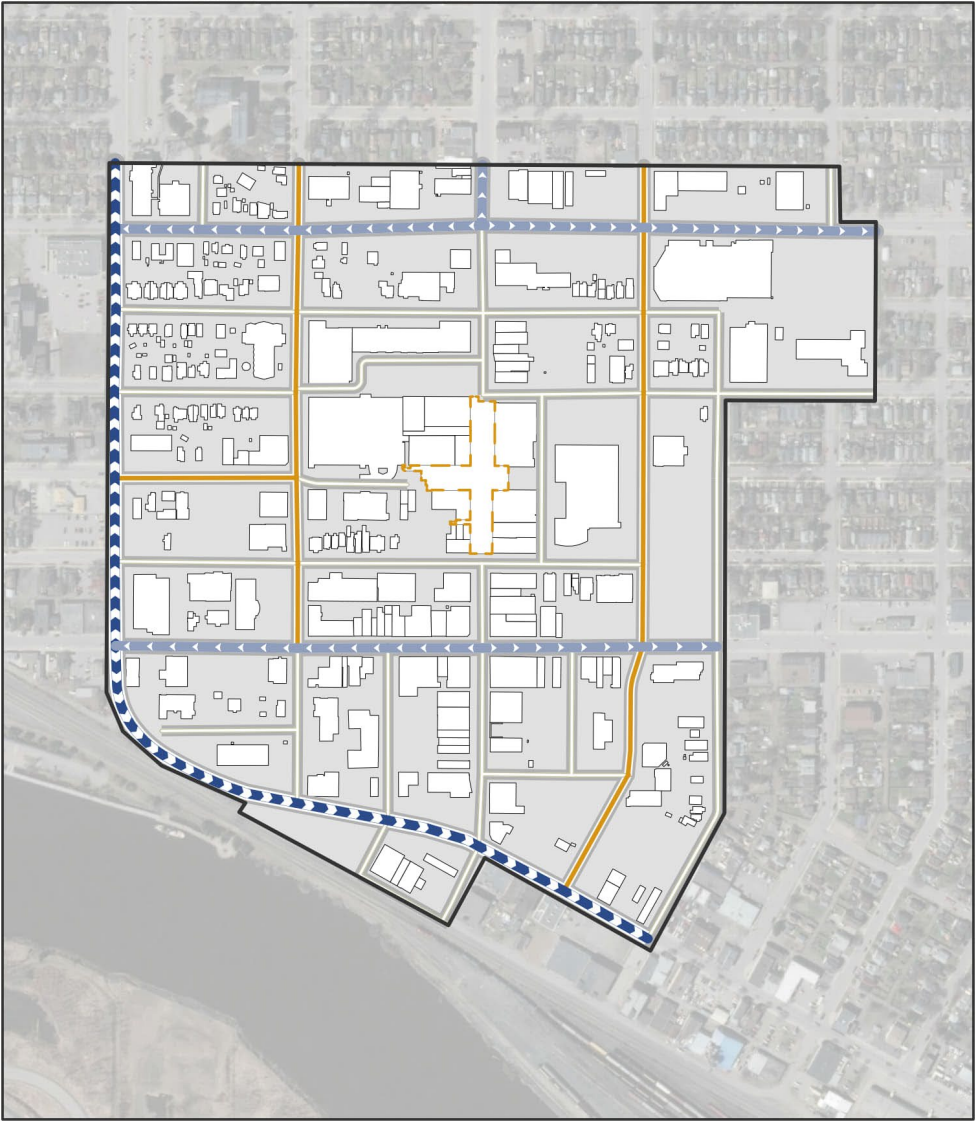
- Area Boundary
- Victoriaville Centre
- Parks and Open Spaces
- ULTIMATE CYCLING NETWORK
 - Existing Multi-Use Trail
 - Proposed Multi-Use Trail
 - Existing Bike Lane
 - Proposed Buffered or Protected Bike Lane
 - Forecast Sharrows or Signed Route
- PEDESTRIAN PRIORITY AND TRAIL NETWORK
 - Neighbourhood Greenway
 - Pedestrian Priority Corridor

Sidewalks are present along the Pedestrian Priority and Trail Network within the Area Boundary.



MAP EIGHT: ROAD TYPES

\\s:\urban-systems\mfr\projects\projects_w\13\750007\010 Design\GIS\Projects\Pro_Pages\2022-08-23 Thunder Bay\april\Map 8_Road_Types_13x75.mxd



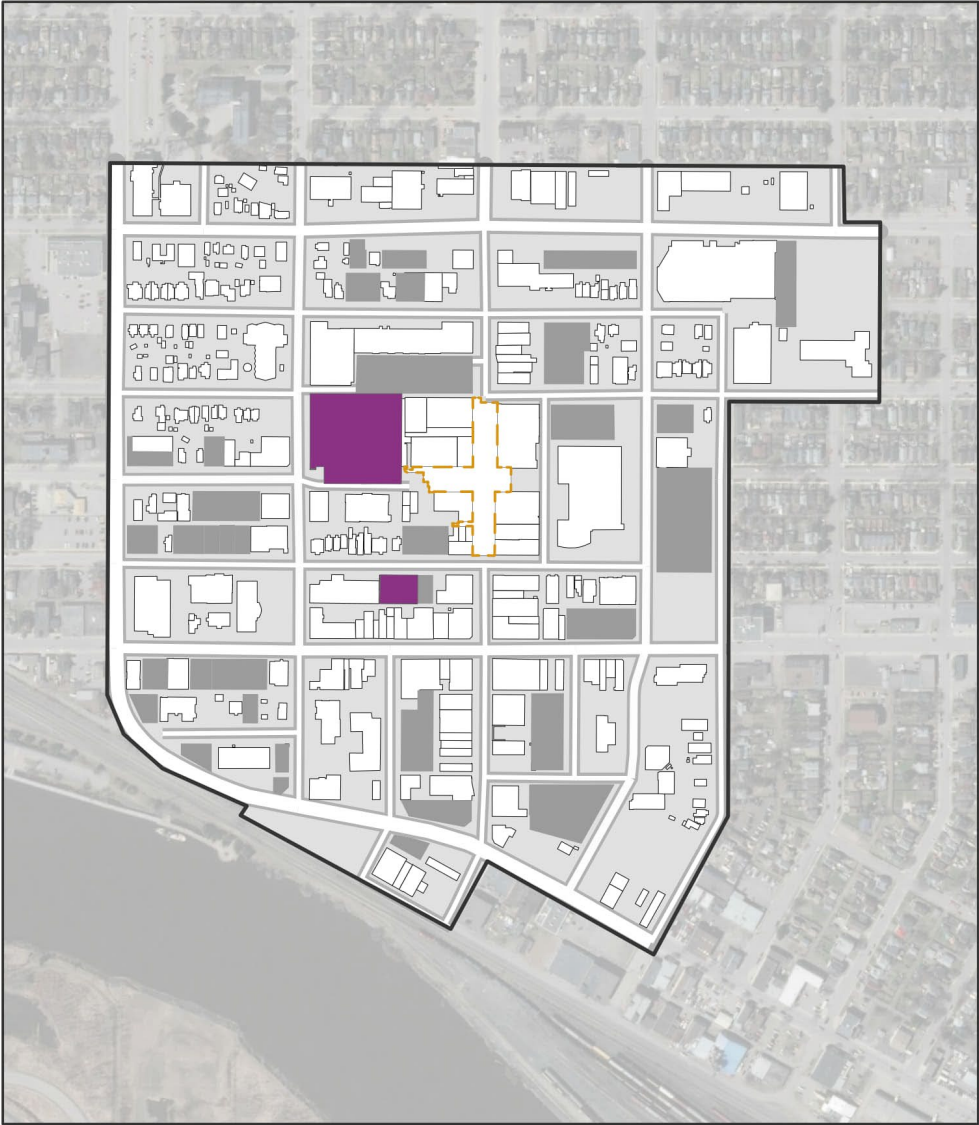
Road Types

- Legend
- Area Boundary
- Victoria Centre
- ROAD TYPES
- Local
- Collector
- Minor Arterial
- Major Arterial



MAP NINE: PARKING AREAS

X:\urban-systems\only-projects\projects_vr\cityofwindsor\pdp\Design\GIS\ProjectInfo\Project\2022-08-23 Thunder Bay\Map 6 - Parking Areas_L1017.mxd

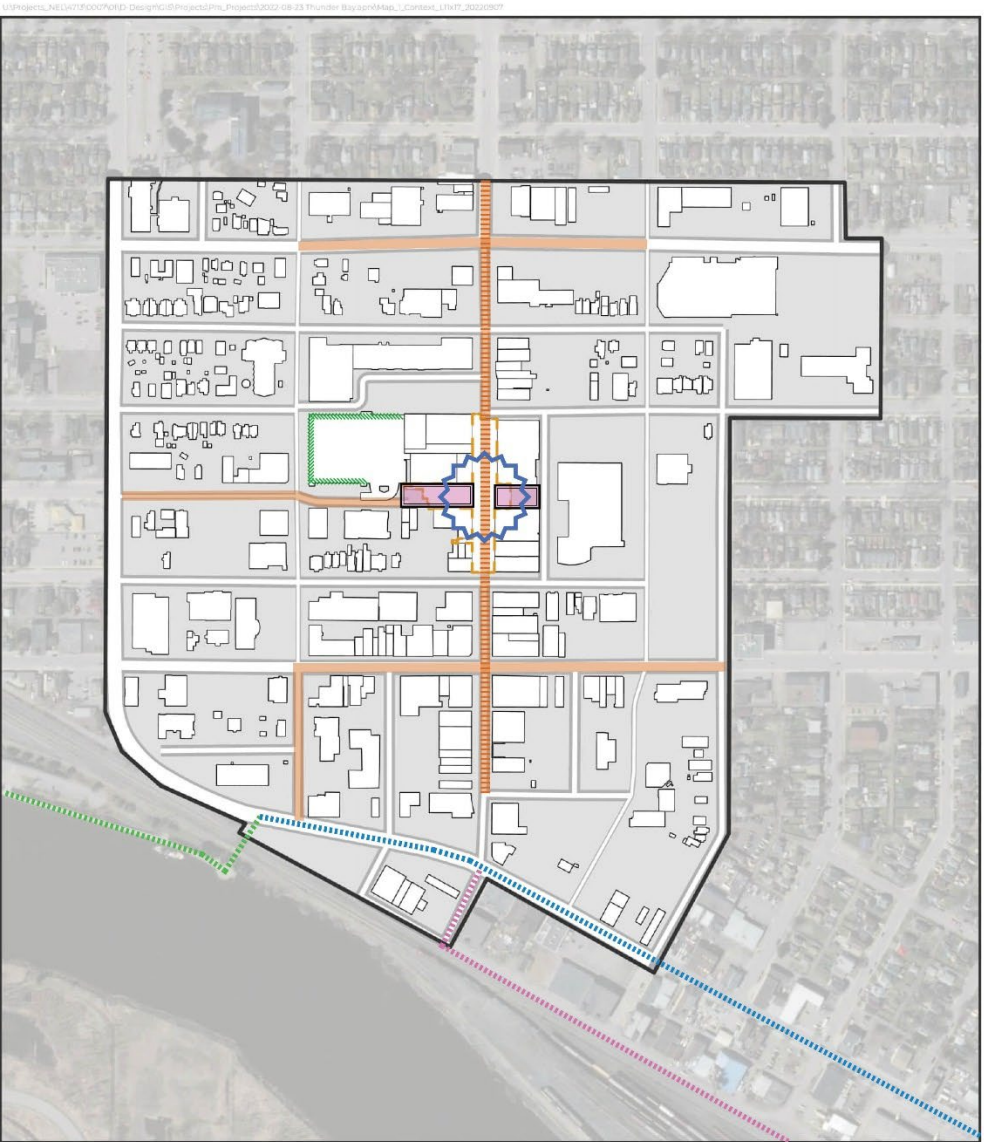


Parking Areas

- Legend
- Area Boundary
 - Victoriaville Centre
 - Parkade
 - Surface Parking Lot



MAP TEN: PROPOSED ACTIVE TRANSPORT ROUTES AND KEY SITES



**Proposed Active
Transport Routes
and Key Sites**

Legend

- All Ages & Abilities Bicycle Track
- Shared Street / Reduced Speed Zone
- On-Street Bicycle Track (to Port Arthur)
- Multi-use Path
- Rail ROW Bicycle Track (to Port Arthur)
- Public Plaza / Pedestrian Zone
- Public Gathering Focal Point
- Priority Placemaking Location