

# City Centre Revitalization Discussion Paper City of Spruce Grove, Alberta

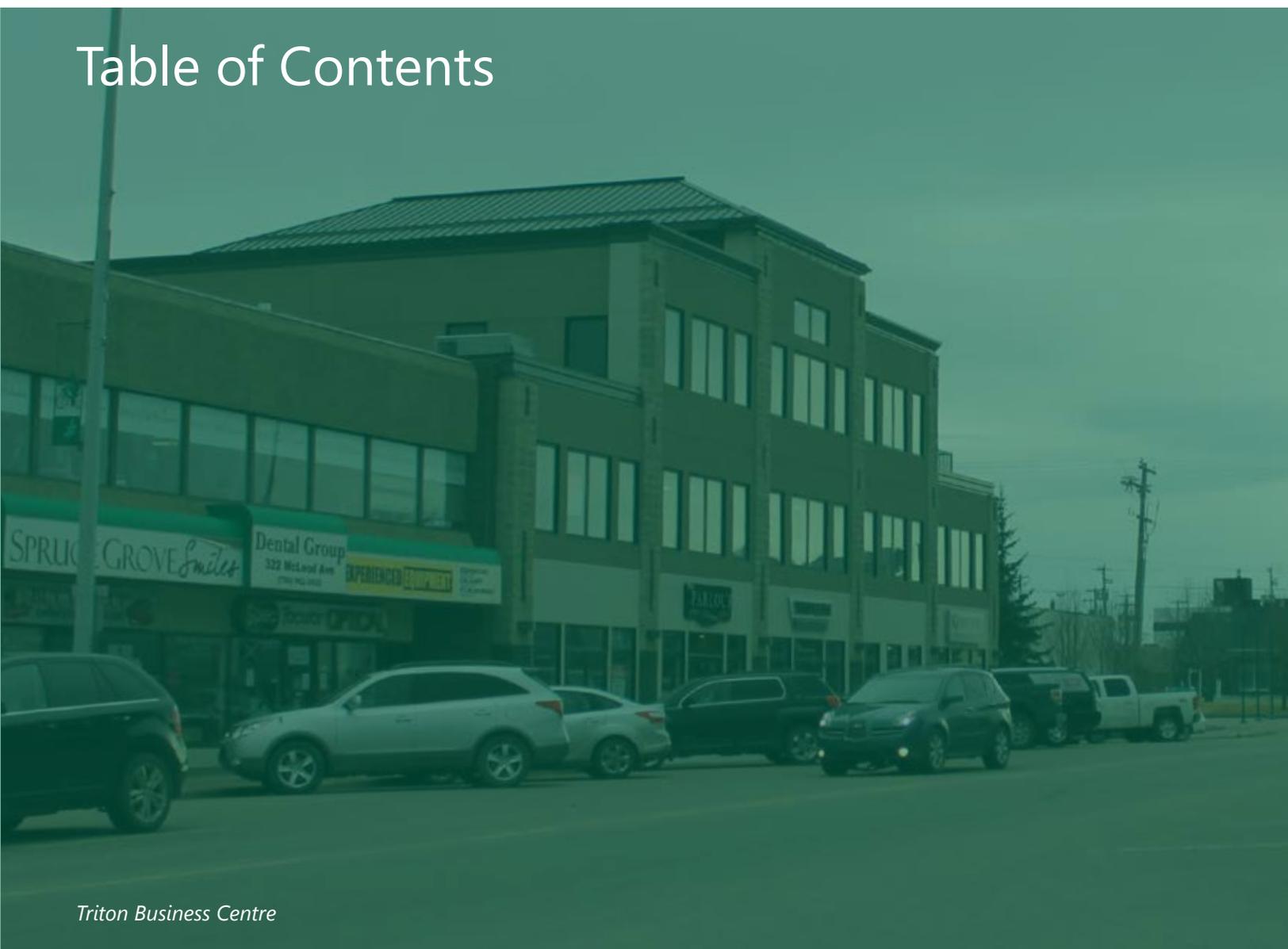


June 2014



**CUSHING  
TERRELL**  
ARCHITECTURE, INC.

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*Triton Business Centre*

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# Preface



*McLeod Avenue Commercial Buildings*

Cushing Terrell Architecture Inc. ("Cushing Terrell") was commissioned by the City of Spruce Grove in April 2014 to conduct a Discussion Paper outlining the potential next steps for the City in how it could or should pursue the topic of Revitalization for its City Centre or Downtown area.

The study was carried out over the period of April to June 2014.

The objective of this study is to document the current status and situation analysis of Spruce Grove's City Centre as it relates to its viability for revitalization strategies and initiatives.

Reference material for this report was obtained from, but not limited to; The City of Spruce Grove, Urban Land Institute (ULI), International Downtown Association (IDA), National Main Street Organization, Congress for New Urbanism, International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) and Cushing Terrell Architecture Inc.

Additionally, data for Case Study Profiles and Business Improvement Associations was obtained from interviews with personnel involved in or closely familiar with such projects (e.g. Planners, Economic Development Officers, and Executive Directors etc). Opinions expressed by such individuals represent their own opinions which Cushing Terrell has provided for consideration.

This document is not intended as a Revitalization Strategy and should only be viewed as a document to stimulate discussion and identify considerations for the City to potentially pursue

This analysis was conducted by Cushing Terrell as an objective and independent party; and is not an agent of the City.

As is customary in an assignment of this type, neither our name nor the material submitted may be included in a prospectus, or part of any printed material, or used in offerings or representations in connection with the sale of securities or participation interest to the public, without the expressed permission of Cushing Terrell Architecture Inc. or the City of Spruce Grove.

# Executive Summary



*McLeod Avenue Retail Storefronts*

This City Centre Revitalization Discussion Paper collected information from many sources using several methods to prepare a list of City Centre revitalization considerations for discussion by Spruce Grove City Council and Staff. It is not intended to recommend any one particular revitalization strategy. Through on-site assessments, interviews and policy reviews the discussion paper found opportunities and challenges to City Centre revitalization generally including:

- A scattered yet strong mix of tenants
- Lack of definition
- Financial redevelopment constraints
- Missing “active” uses and events
- Aspiring but outmoded planning documents
- A passionate and divided stakeholder group
- Space for opportunities in the City Centre’s physical environment
- Progressive yet limited land use policy framework
- Issues with parking and the perception of parking

Using case studies of similarly sized and contextual cities/towns from around Alberta and the United States, a list of ten “Key Principles” that guide successful City Centre revitalization efforts was developed:

1. Vision
2. Communication
3. Pedestrian Orientation
4. Marketing
5. The Champion
6. Spirit of Volunteerism
7. Faith
8. Parking
9. Residential Development
10. Focus

Finally a collection of best practices was created for the benefit of discussing potential revitalization options. Considerations are to be further researched and evaluated for their merit relative to the unique circumstances apparent in Spruce Grove. Considerations include:

- a. Establish a Business Improvement Association (BIA)
- b. Establish a Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ)
- c. Branding and Theming
- d. Identify and Pursue a Catalyst Project
- e. Infrastructure and Capital Improvements
- f. Incentives
- g. Prioritize City Centre Projects Over Peripheral Projects
- h. Continue Revitalization through Streetscape Planning (1997 Strategy)
- i. Conduct an Economic Development Master Plan
- j. Increase the City Centre’s Population Density
- k. No Intervention (Business as Usual)

The discussion paper concludes that revitalization requires a long-term vision that does not lend itself to instantaneous results; rather patience and vision are paramount to overcoming the various obstacles inherent in any effort. As such the paper poses a list of questions directly to Spruce Grove City Council that can be summarized as “Which direction does the City want to go?” in regards to City Centre revitalization.

# Introduction

## Background

The City of Spruce Grove Economic and Business Development Department retained Cushing Terrell Architecture Inc. (“Cushing Terrell”) to conduct a City Centre Revitalization Discussion Paper to consider general approaches to revitalizing the City Centre as an initiative from the 2013-2016 Corporate Plan. The intent is to assist City Council in a discussion of the extent of the City’s ability to conduct a City Centre revitalization effort.

Current momentum in North American planning organizations such as the Urban Land Institute, International Council of Shopping Centers, International Downtown Association, National Main Street Organization, Congress for New Urbanism, Canadian and American Institutes of Planners are all placing significant emphasis on rediscovering and redefining downtowns and main streets, particularly in smaller communities. Professionals in these groups are realizing the downtown’s role in the overall creation of place, particularly in smaller downtowns where constant pressures for expansion and growth have put their downtowns in unstable circumstances.

## Approach

The approach consists of a review and assessment of past efforts, existing planning documents and physical conditions, followed by discussion of a stakeholder input gathering session with City Centre business or property owners. After compiling a list of key issues, the discussion paper then presents case studies of similarly sized communities in Alberta and the US with successful downtown revitalization programs to discuss strategies from comparable municipalities.

A list of “Key Principles” for City Centre revitalization then synthesizes the collected information to highlight the characteristics evident in most downtown revitalization efforts. Finally, the discussion paper offers a set of considerations for City Council and Planning Staff.

# Assessment of Existing Conditions

## Review of Downtown Revitalization Studies and Existing Bylaws

Spruce Grove’s City Centre has a history of downtown revitalization, with strategies dating back to the early 1980s. The following discusses the role of previous studies and existing bylaws in future revitalization conversations.

### 1991 Central Area Redevelopment Plan

The Edmonton Regional Planning Commission prepared the City of Spruce Grove Central Area Redevelopment Plan (CARP) as an update to a 1982 plan of the same name. The key goal of the 1991 plan was to strengthen “the role and identity of Spruce Grove’s City Centre.” Recognizing that the centre no longer served as a node of commercial, civic and social activity, the 1991 CARP posed goals and objectives to bolster development in the Central Area (see map at right).

The CARP Review Steering Committee was comprised of two City Aldermen, Department Directors of Economic Development, Planning and Engineering, Chamber of Commerce members, Business Association members and citizens. The Review Steering Committee decided the historical City Centre be retained and promoted, rather than alternative land use scenarios such as conversion into a residential district.

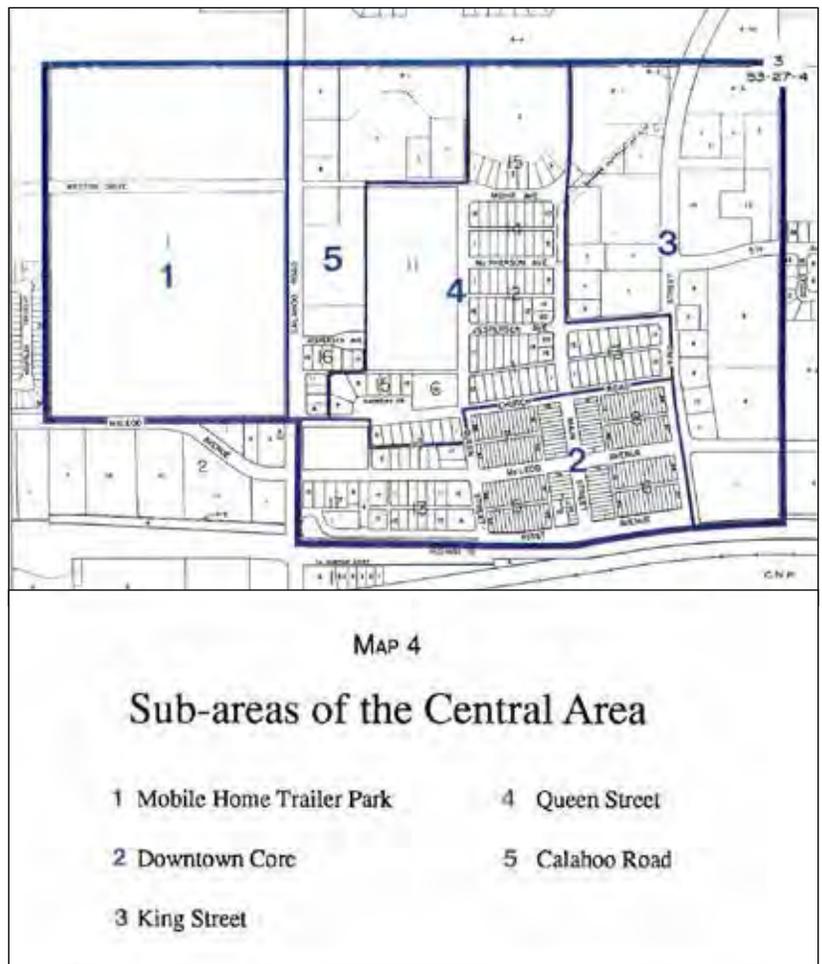
Creating a vision was integral to the CARP. The following desired characteristics emerged from the visioning process:

- Physically compact downtown
- Closely spaced buildings in a continuous streetscape
- Coordination of signs, scale and detail
- Pedestrian improvements

- Public space and pedestrian pathways
- A focal point for community events
- Coordinated marketing, promotion and improvements

The Steering Committee understood that a successful strategy must not only include land use and urban design; central area revitalization was not to occur without marketing, promotion and community organization. The CARP also included plan components of infrastructure, streets and parking.

Implementation was to occur primarily through an included list of Land Use Bylaw amendments and a matrix of actions assigned to specific organizations.



*Planning Scope and Sub-areas of the 1991 Central Area Redevelopment Plan*

Recommended Land Use Bylaw amendments were aimed to differentiate Central Area commercial districts from the neighbourhood and vehicle-oriented commercial districts elsewhere in the City. Recommendations included adding “residential above first storey” as a discretionary use and excluding drive-through uses in the Central Area. In the neighbourhood commercial district, downtown-oriented uses such as professional, financial and medical offices were removed to encourage them in the Central Area.

Actions were organized by priority level. The following are three examples of the 23 Immediate Actions:

**1.1.5:** Support efforts to relocate the Farmers’ Market or similar venture within the Central Area

**1.4.7:** Investigate possible incentives for developers for provision of public spaces or amenities

**3.1.5:** Undertake a parking study

The action matrix, for instance, assigned the task of investigating development incentives as the primary responsibility of City Council and City Departments, while a “Central Area Business Association” (not yet established) and “External Agencies” were to have secondary responsibility. Nearly every action was the primary responsibility of City Council, giving most of the obligation to the public sector. As with revitalization strategies to follow, the high amount of City responsibility and lack of private ownership responsibility may have impeded the success of the CARP because of the private sector’s limited role.

### **1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy**

The most recent redevelopment effort for the City Centre occurred 17 years ago with the *1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy* (DDAS). The City hired design and planning consultants to engage stakeholders in an effort to create a unified vision of the downtown.

Strategies were aimed at cosmetic and physical improvements, local business support and marketing, all of which could lay the foundation for a Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ). The Council’s priority to fund and complete the DDAS came in response to the ineffectiveness of the 1991 CARP.

Recommendations were made through extensive interviews with key stakeholders, (business owners, property owners, residents, and city officials) and guidance from a Steering Committee. During plan development, the consultants appeared to be successful in generating buy-in from the community members included in the input process. Stakeholders identified several issues and impediments many of which remain today, including:

- Lack of unified vision
- Financial restraints
- Lack of buy-in from various constituencies
- Commercial development focused on highway rather than downtown
- Competition from nearby “one-stop” shopping areas (West Edmonton, Stony Plain)

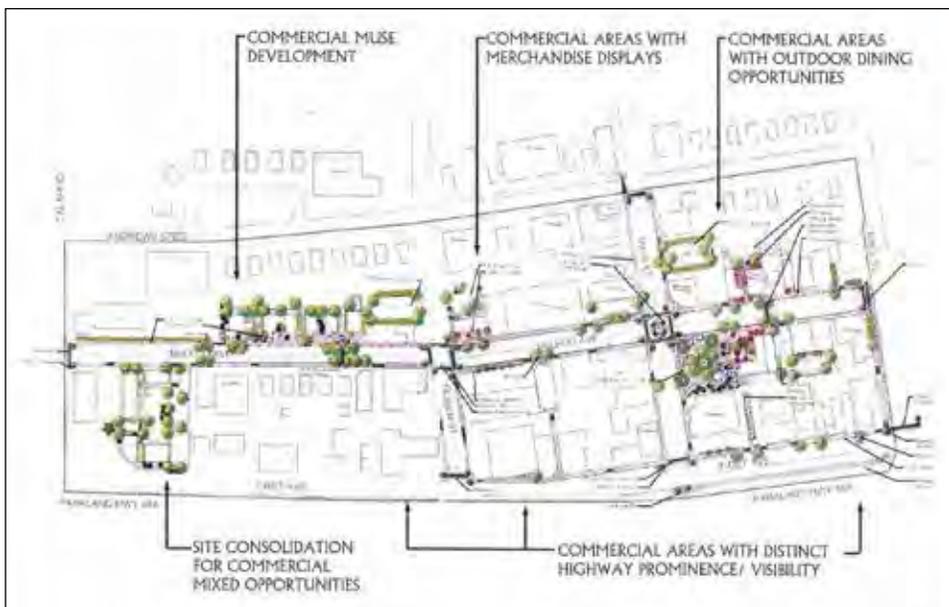
During the survey process, stakeholders also identified Spruce Grove City Centre’s advantages, which included:

- Small town feel
- Community spirit
- Small/craft shops
- Nearby residential areas
- Potential of Columbus Park

Recommendations in the DDAS consisted of several design interventions largely focused on beautification of the streetscape, public spaces, and storefronts in a roughly nine-block study area. Land Use and economic restructuring strategies were recommended to a lesser extent.

Design strategies aimed at creating a “pedestrian-oriented environment” would attract people to new and existing businesses along McLeod Avenue and adjacent thoroughfares. The main concepts included a unified theme for downtown streets, enhanced pedestrian, gateway, and corner features, and compatible infill developments in the form of commercial and mixed-use structures expanding into surrounding blocks.

Contemporary economic development trends do not overlook the importance of the visual appeal and pedestrian function of a place, but rather consider it one strategy in a larger framework; a framework that usually considers fiscal implications. Recommending financial incentives that increase the appeal of private investment and/or reduce the risk private developers assume when considering a redevelopment project in a desired area are examples.



In addition, parties involved could not agree on the amount of investment required to complete initial enhancement efforts. Funding for one particular streetscape enhancement project was to be split one-third to the property owners and two-thirds by the City. Property owners chose not to contribute to public right-of-way enhancements that did not benefit their individual properties. The City could not allocate 100% of the funds and the project was limited in completion.

*Planning Scope and urban design interventions from the 1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy*

In general, the DDAS more than adequately identifies the constraints and opportunities for the future success of the City Centre through enhancement of the visual appeal. The design strategies the DDAS offered are well-developed and the recommendations outline the path to future growth. However, a lack of structural economic redevelopment strategies and unforeseen issues with private investment in specific projects hindered the plan’s overall success.

In theory, the function of the DDAS was to increase the appeal of the City Centre, thereby generating pedestrian foot traffic and increasing the spending of potential customers. Economically, this was a prevailing theory of urban regeneration at the time. But without larger structural goals, enhancing the physical appeal is only as useful as its implementation.

**Current Municipal Development Plan**

The City’s Municipal Development Plan (MDP) was most recently revised and updated in 2010. The *Your Bright Future* plan offers a geographic definition of the City Centre and addressed revitalization in several sections. *Figure 8: Future Land Use* describes the City Centre as a large area bounded by Calahoo Road to the west, Highway 16A to the south, the Broxton Park School to the east, and natural open space parkland to the north. An objective of *Section 5; Form and Infrastructure* is to “develop the City Centre as a mixed-use hub of activity with a distinct identity.”

Policies are guided toward developing an urban form with small-scale commercial uses, a pedestrian-oriented environment, consolidated lots, and the creation of an area redevelopment plan. Performing a traffic analysis and parking study are some specific initiatives also mentioned in Section 5.

Under Economic Development (Section 6), the plan calls for the City Centre to be a mixed-use district that offers housing and services to complement the vehicle-oriented commerce and industry elsewhere in the City. Policies are geared to enhance business that serves local customers while also attracting regional users. The concept of mixed-use redevelopment is mentioned repeatedly as a vision for the City Centre. A specific task assigned under this section is to conduct a City Centre Revitalization Study focusing chiefly on economic development.

The Municipal Development Plan has many of the necessary policies already in place and establishes a consistent vision of the City Centre. Revisions to the MDP may be necessary if or when the community chooses to focus more energy on City Centre-specific revitalization, however the plan currently lays the groundwork at a policy-level for revitalization efforts.

### **Land Use Bylaw**

The City's Land Use Bylaw was updated most recently on January 1, 2013. Land Use district regulations for the City Centre study area are in Section 123 C1 – City Centre Commercial District. The R2 District (Mixed Medium to High Density Residential) is also found on City Centre blocks and is intended to generate dense urban residential structures that contribute to the streetscape. The general purpose of the C1 District is to create a downtown retail shopping environment with storefronts, pedestrian-oriented development and residential uses above the ground floor.

Pedestrian orientation is controlled through streetscape design, which features setbacks, step-back requirements, and parking orientation requirements that contribute to human-scale design and ease of pedestrian access. Façade glazing requirements state that a minimum of 40% of the ground floor façade must be occupied by display windows, and these windows shall not be more than 3.5 metres apart.

The land use bylaw states parking and loading may not occur in the front of the building, and that buildings on prominent corners must use visual cues to display their prominence (e.g. parapets, dormers or towers). Corner structures must address all streets and adjacent buildings in a manner that creates a downtown urban form. Any designated "Mixed-Use Development" must reserve the ground floor for commercial uses, and requires an amenity area of 7.5 square metres for residents.

Design elements in the land use bylaw play a central role in achieving the vision for the City Centre set forth in the MDP, which is for a compact, traditional downtown with shops and amenities for nearby residents and visitors. The bylaw allows for a wide range of permitted uses in the C1 District and is generally not restrictive. It remains to be seen if the revised design standards will have a catalyzing effect upon the form, environment or the commercial success of the City Centre, as the revisions have been valid for about one year as of this writing.

Regarding City Centre revitalization, the most recent (and any subsequent) land use bylaw update may be limited by the absence of an Area Redevelopment Plan (ARP). An ARP enables the goals and objectives of the MDP to be implemented on more specific terms, and can be very effective in activating land use change in targeted redevelopment areas.

## Assessment of the City Centre to Identify Key Issues

### City Centre Walkabout

The MDP describes the City Centre as a roughly 55-hectare area north of Highway 16A, south of the natural area, east of Calahoo Road and west of the Broxton School. On Tuesday April 20, 2014, project consultants performed a walkabout and site assessment of this area at approximately 12:00 pm.

### Strengths

Project consultants found a strong mix of local commercial and residential uses to be the primary strength of the City Centre. Numerous neighbourhood serving businesses and local amenities were located along key thoroughfares. A variety of housing types and densities existed throughout the area, including several mid-rise multi-family structures. The grid street network of 300 foot (92 metre) by 500 foot (153 metre) blocks – still intact from the historical platting of the early 20th century – contributed to a compact urban framework. Both on and off the street parking appeared to be available in front of and behind businesses.

Alleys provided access for loading and delivery vehicles. Columbus Park was found to be a valuable public space amenity in a key location at the principle intersection of McLeod Avenue and Main Street. Themed pedestrian amenities such as a clock tower, decorative banners, street lighting, trash bins and signage existed in some areas. These streetscape elements were limited and inconsistent with those in other City Centre areas, which included standard concrete and metal light poles, different sidewalk paving and varying street trees.

### Weaknesses

Weaknesses found during the walkabout focused not on the mix of key amenities, but rather on their dispersed distribution. Although all the “pieces” were located somewhere in the district, they were not organized in a way that enhances walkability, pedestrian access or an urban downtown form. Building orientation with the street was inconsistent, as staggered setback and parking configurations broke up the sidewalk network and disconnected building storefronts, which diminished the ease of pedestrian navigation. At 80 feet (24.4 metres) along Main Street and McLeod Avenue as compared to 66 feet (20 metres) elsewhere, vehicle rights-of-way appeared to be excessively wide, taking away space from the pedestrian network and eliminating space that could potentially be used for active, outdoor uses such as café seating.

These factors lead to a scattered and confused district, where an unfamiliar person would most likely choose to navigate by vehicle rather than on foot or bicycle.



*Streetscape elements (lighting, signs, decor, color palette, seating, landscaping) contrast in the City Centre*

## Evaluation of existing buildings in the City Centre

Consultants photographed the buildings, spaces and infrastructure in the City Centre to create a visual database of existing conditions, streetscape amenities, parking and landscaping.



*Certain buildings promote a blank wall to the street front that lack access to the sidewalk, changes in facade articulation or windows*



*Parking in front of McLeod Avenue buildings creates "staggered" setbacks detracting from a pedestrian-scale retail storefront environment*



*Curious infrastructure decisions, like this hydrant directly in the sidewalk, create a visual impact and are a nuisance to pedestrian access*

*Setbacks offer little space for "active" and "spill-out" uses such as cafe seating*



*Lower quality signs and materials (top) clash with those of higher quality (bottom)*





*Streetscape features and minimal setbacks contribute to the pedestrian experience along First Avenue*



*Older structures along McLeod Avenue have the potential to add a bit of historic character to the street*

*Excessive "hardscaping", or paved, inorganic landscape, was once popular but now contributes to an unwelcoming feeling at Columbus Park*



*Retailers that display glazed storefronts greatly add to the perception of a shopping district*



*Breezeways like this one connect parking areas on First Avenue to shops and businesses on McLeod Avenue, however they are limited in their comfort and functionality*





*The transition between business and residential districts is marked by home-occupied businesses and multi-family housing*



*On-site business parking in the front of buildings provides immediate vehicle access but commonly disrupts the pedestrian network*



*Public transit to Edmonton stops at McLeod Avenue and Queen Street, making this intersection important for the roughly 200 daily commuters who take the bus*



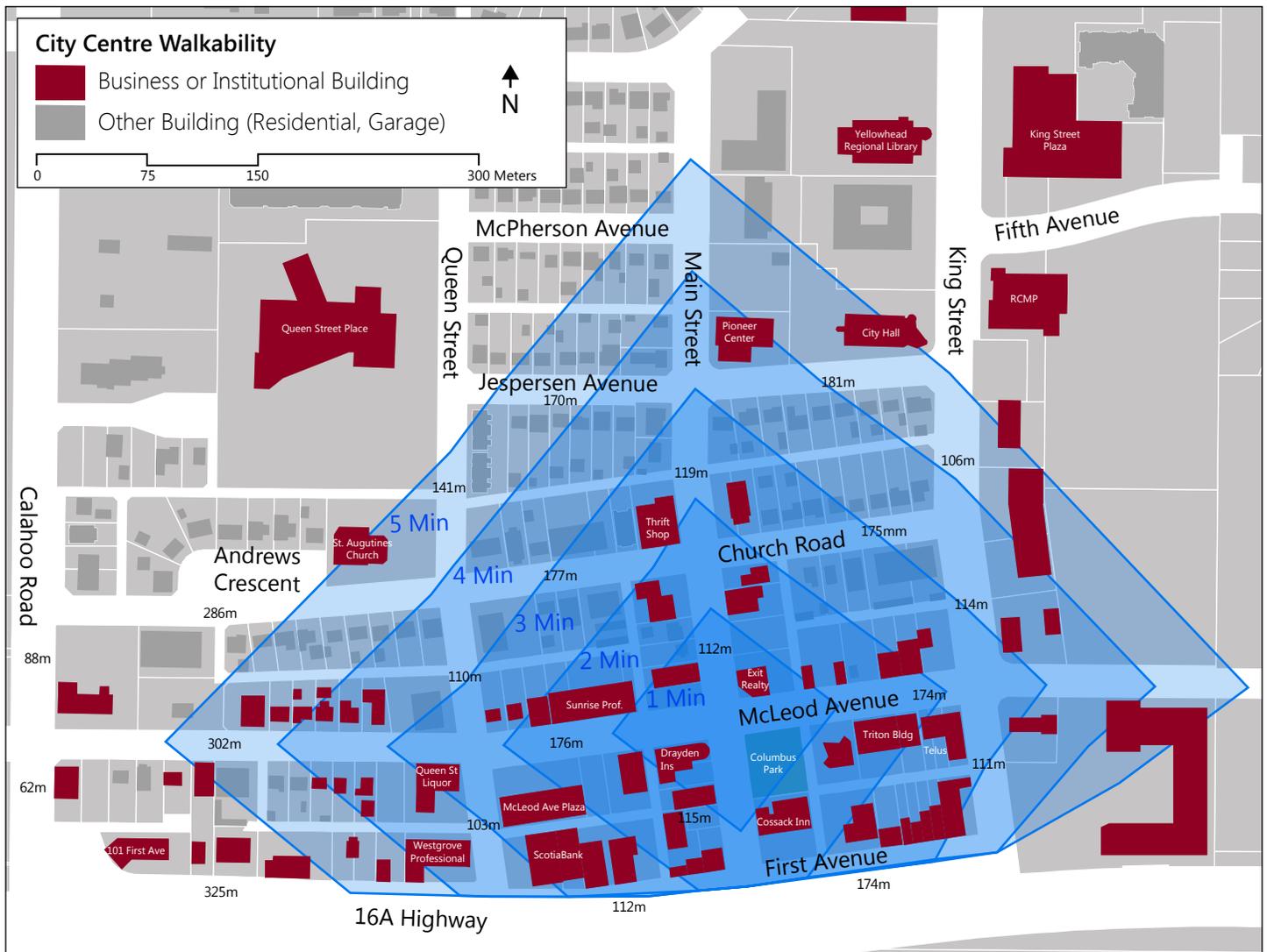
*Vacant lots, although valuable for snow removal and a bit of green space, will offer infill development opportunities in the future*



## Walkability of the City Centre to and from prominent nodes and activity centres

Research shows the likelihood of pedestrian travel to amenities decreases with distance. The most central and prominent intersection in the study area is McLeod Avenue and Main Street, due to the location of a community focal point (Columbus Park), traffic flows and the historical transportation network.

Walking at a speed of 1.3 metres per second, a pedestrian unimpeded by vehicle traffic or weather could reach most of the commercial businesses or institutional buildings (churches, public or non-profit services) in a five-minute or roughly 390 metre walk. Businesses near the Calahoo Road and First Avenue intersection are beyond a five minute walk time but are within a ten minute walk, as are public buildings to the northeast.



Walking Distances and Times to Businesses or Institutional Buildings from McLeod Avenue and Main Street

## Stakeholder Engagement Meeting 04/23/14

A three-hour stakeholder meeting was held on April 23, 2014 at Spruce Grove City Hall. Seven business and property owners in the City Centre met with City Economic Development staff and project consultants to voice their concerns, opinions and assessments of the economic and physical climate in downtown Spruce Grove.

Although seven stakeholders do not comprise a complete representation of City Centre ownership, the thoughts and opinions of participating individuals lent shape to the concerns of private stakeholders. The following is a summary of the discussion (a transcript of the meeting minutes can be found in the Appendix).

### What were the perceived strengths?

Advantages or opportunities were brought forward despite mention of substantial concerns, as well as several strengths. Perhaps the most prominent was the indication of continued investment in downtown, specifically referring to the Triton Building. Despite issues with the condition of buildings and fiscal constraints, small businesses are still willing to invest and start new operations. Despite some local and regional businesses leaving, there was a critical mass of businesses and amenities in the area to attract investment. Another strength mentioned was the success of informal events in bringing people downtown. Participating stakeholders suggested property owners and residents both inside and outside the City Centre will likely support spending on revitalization efforts. There was consensus that a strong downtown would benefit the City as a whole.

### What were their key issues and concerns?

Participants were asked to offer five descriptive characteristics reflecting their perception of the City Centre, and responses indicated a lack of definition as a key weakness (responses are provided in the Appendix).

The downtown was not a “place” and lacking any unifying elements, people unfamiliar with the City are often unaware of existing businesses in the City Centre. Participants agreed amenities that attract a range of customers are too scattered, preventing people from parking once and taking care of all their needs on foot. Examples of places that attracted people and businesses included the 4th Street Promenade in Edmonton, Stony Plain’s downtown and Perron Street in St. Albert.

Parking was repeatedly mentioned as a chief concern. Some stakeholders praised a recent conversion from parallel to angled stalls along Main Street and McLeod Avenue, however to others this increase in stalls was not significant enough to support businesses. Specifically, more parking near storefronts was determined to be needed for new business attraction, as customers are less willing to look for parking in the rear of buildings or off-site. A lack of unlimited parking for employees forces workers to park along McLeod Avenue and move their vehicles every two hours, occupying spaces for potential customers.

Another concern was the failure of previous revitalization efforts. Some property owners perceived that a lack of buy-in from the City prevented past efforts from being successful. Going forward, stakeholders determined that city investment or significant leadership would be required for them to support another revitalization effort. The failure of two past business improvement organizations bolstered skepticism about moving forward with an owner-initiated plan without substantial public investment, though stakeholders understand it is not the City’s role to fund a BIA.

Other issues centred on fiscal restraints including increases in taxes and inability to lease commercial spaces at market rates, particularly after redevelopment that would include current parking requirements.

The prohibitive cost of new construction forces many owners to lease older structures and sit on rental income for years. The availability of new commercial space elsewhere in the City or in nearby places has attracted long-standing downtown businesses away, including several financial institutions. This fractures the faith of existing or potential owners to stay or establish businesses in the City Centre. Some participants perceived a lack of housing as an issue, as more rooftops within walking distance of the City Centre could encourage retailers to locate nearby.

### **What concrete ideas were brought up?**

Ideas to encourage revitalization included enhancing the perception of downtown with visual theming, streetscape enhancements and tourist attractions. Focusing on bringing local customers to downtown (while still attracting outsiders) was mentioned as important. Holding established city events in the City Centre rather than in farther, more suburban or industrial areas was paramount to this idea. Although the City is not a party to where the local agricultural society holds the Farmer's Market, there was some agreement among participants that such an event downtown could be very beneficial to economic development. Reviving a business improvement organization was discussed, however participants agreed that certain challenges must be overcome before that idea is realized.

### **What was their overall willingness to get to a solution?**

In general, participants were very willing to reach a solution. Increased communication and buy-in from all parties must be achieved before moving forward. Participating business and property owners would like to see more initiative from the City, in the form of guidance and organization, but more importantly with investment. Additional outreach must be performed to encompass the stakeholders who may be less willing to participate.

## Key Issues

The following key issues were derived from the review of existing plans, walkabout and stakeholder interviews. This list synthesizes all specific weaknesses, issues or concerns and generally conveys them as eight discussion points.

### 1. “Scattered”

As mentioned, all the functional, urban-oriented uses and amenities required for an economically and socially successful City Centre currently exist, however they are dispersed across a large area. This makes pedestrian navigation and access difficult, and detracts from the centre’s perception as an urban area.

### 2. Lack of definition

Similarly, the City Centre is not unified to the extent that people can easily define where the downtown begins and ends. Comparisons to 50th Street in Stony Plain were used as a contrasting “well-defined” downtown place.

### 3. Difficulty enacting land use change

In recent land use bylaw amendments, the City has laid the framework for urban revitalization in the centre, particularly through design standards. Understanding that changes in land use policy are incremental, there is room to craft more effective land use policies, starting with the creation and adoption of an Area Redevelopment Plan for the City Centre.

### 4. Failure of previous revitalization efforts

The success or failure of past revitalization plans, documents or projects has hinged on two elements: investment from all parties, and the scope of projects. In the former, certain projects failed because the amount or the distribution of financial investment was deemed too burdensome on either the City or private owners. In other cases, the scope – either of the geographic district or of the changes in policy – of revitalization plans was perhaps too grand, making these efforts cumbersome to implement.

### 5. Parking

The issue of parking centres on where customer parking is located, and how many stalls are necessary to strengthen and encourage business. Is it simply a matter of perception driven by the current lack of shops, services and amenities? If so, a proper solution may be to increase driver awareness of parking availability through signage or other means.

A visual count of the number of on-street parking spaces in the City Centre area comprising First Ave, MacLeod Avenue, Church Avenue, Main Street, Church Street, and King Street revealed a total of 277 parking spaces (207 angled and 70 parallel).

### 6. Cost prohibitive to redevelop

Rising property values and competition from other commercial districts in the City has created financial barriers to redevelopment. Are there incentives to alleviate this burden for potential developers?

### 7. Lack of catalysts: events and “active” uses

Spruce Grove benefits from many public festivals and events throughout the year that are supported by various organizations. Few, if any, of these are held in the City Centre, but rather located in the outer fringes of the City such as at Jubilee Park and the Tri Leisure Centre. Catalyst such as cafes and eateries that “activate” a street, sidewalk or park are lacking downtown. Such events and amenities are known to energize a place simply by bringing in people. What can be done to encourage these catalysts downtown and what role can the City play in encouraging community activities in the City Centre?

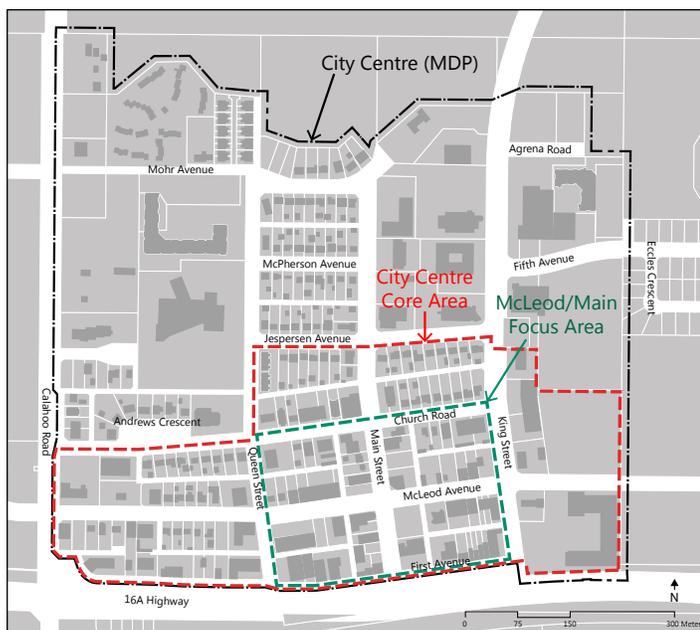
### 8. Stakeholder vs. City vs. Community investment

All parties must invest both in resources and energy to make a successful revitalization effort happen, and how buy-in occurs becomes a critical element in a project’s early stages. Which party invests first is a matter of communication. What sequence of events must occur to ensure project success?

# Scope, Case Studies, and Considerations

## Scope

The City should consider alternative geographic boundaries for City Centre revitalization given commercial development patterns elsewhere in the community. What may have defined the City Centre years ago, may no longer be relevant in the face of new competitive forces and market realities.



City Centre Focus Area Alternatives

A new definition of the City Centre as defined in the MDP is not warranted at this point, however a specific core focus area may be considered. This area comprises the eight blocks bounded by First Avenue to south, Jespersen Avenue to north, Calahoo Road to west and King Street to east. The core focus area represents the area easily accessed by pedestrians from the intersection of McLeod Avenue and Main Street. The MDP City Centre should be the target of broader land use and growth policy, while the core focus area should be the target of smaller projects, such as the design interventions mentioned in the *1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy*.

## Case Studies of Successful Downtown Revitalization Efforts

Place	Population (est)	City Area (km <sup>2</sup> )
Leduc, AB	27,241 (2013)	42.2
Camrose, AB	18,435 (2013)	42.5
Montrose, CO	19,015 (2013)	29.7
Kalispell, MT	20,972 (2013)	30.4
<b>Spruce Grove</b>	<b>27,875 (2013)</b>	<b>32.4</b>

Sources: US Census, City of Spruce Grove, Environics Analytics

### Case Study 1: Leduc, Alberta

Leduc, about 45 driving minutes to the southeast, is home to roughly 27,241 people. Leduc is experiencing an economic growth rate of six percent per year, similar to that of Spruce Grove, and is about the same distance from large commercial centres in Edmonton. Because of the nearby Nisku Industrial Park, about 70% of people that live in Leduc do not commute to jobs in Edmonton but rather work in the City or surrounding area.

After a period of decline, Leduc's downtown is now in transition due to a series of successful small interventions that stem from a cooperative approach between local businesses and the City. Every few years, the City holds visioning workshops where stakeholders and the public gather to discuss the broad progress of City development. Over time, the pressure to do something about the downtown built to the point where all parties decided something needed be done.

The first step in Leduc's approach to downtown revitalization was to evaluate their options. The community considered applying to join the Alberta Main Street program, however they determined that it would not offer them the flexibility they desired to allow development to occur. A Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ) and business improvement area (BIA) was also discussed but not pursued.



Case Study Locations

Local businesses knew they wanted to organize, but desired a less formal structure, and thus formed the Leduc Downtown Business Association that operates similar to other civic groups. They do not collect membership fees or special taxes, but the association does provide a venue to apply for funding.

The Downtown Business Association's first effort was to perform a Downtown Master Plan (DMP), which was adopted in 2012. City Council agreed to pay 100% of the costs for the creation of the plan. The City hired a design consultant to craft the DMP as a physical form-oriented long range plan. The plan provides a list of goals and design interventions and includes a table of specific tasks to be implemented over a term of 20 years. Project implementation consists of coordination between the City and Downtown Business Association regarding which projects to pursue and the allocation of the costs. To date this cooperation has resulted in several successful small interventions including: a Heritage Inventory that documents the significant historic buildings without placing properties on a registry which was paid for through matching grants from the province; a façade program where owners are incentivized to improve their structures through a 50/50 split of improvement costs; and an outdoor patio beautification project, where owners are incentivized to create small patio space along main streets by temporarily occupying parking stalls. With the exception of the façade improvement program (it was just recently adopted, however there are two applicants beginning the process), these incentives have all been utilized by the local business community with little push back or controversy. Rather, City staff gave an example of one owner who saw their neighbouring business utilizing one of the City's improvement incentives, and followed suit with their own application.

Bringing active events to downtown was also a major component of the DMP. This goal is currently being implemented by relocating the local Farmer's Market and several other civic events or festivals to the main downtown corridor.

After a trial run last summer, the Chamber of Commerce, Agricultural Society and Business Association all unanimously voted in favor of a temporary one-season relocation. So far, 30 events are planned for the downtown this summer.

This case is notable for its less-formal, grassroots level business organization cooperating closely with city council and staff. Although Council did not initially agree to invest considerable financial resources in specific implementation projects, they agreed to pay for the initial planning document to kick start the effort and convey to the business community their willingness to buy in. Over time, funding sources for implementation projects were secured through a variety of means, and the cooperation has paid off. One indication of the success of Leduc's downtown revitalization is the purchase of downtown land by the Leduc Foundation, a non-profit housing corporation. The Foundation acquired one of the last prime vacant corner parcels downtown and is developing a large mixed-use project that will bring retail and affordable housing to Leduc's Main Street. The developer expressed that their willingness to build at that location came from their faith in the efforts of businesses and the City to create a lasting, vibrant downtown.

### **Case Study 2: Camrose, Alberta**

Camrose, a city of about 18,435 just beyond the Edmonton Capital Region, has seen downtown revitalization success through the application of a Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ). The peak of City Centre decline occurred somewhere between 10 and 15 years ago, spurring the establishment of the Camrose BRZ in 1998 (known as City Centre Camrose) after provincial legislation was passed enabling BRZ formation.

Even though the BRZ has evolved over its history in its membership and functionality, it has always benefitted from the City's backing.

A member from council is appointed to the BRZ board as a liaison, and the Economic Development Director is on the board as an advisor. These members partake in discussions and commit energy, but not financial investment, to BRZ initiatives.

Anecdotal evidence from longtime owners suggests their efforts have made a significant impact over fifteen years according to the BRZ Manager. If a Main Street building comes on the market, it will not last long before being sold. Specific projects have been oriented toward enhancing the appearance of the physical environment and attracting locals and tourists to the City Centre. Among the most powerful interventions was the installation of decorative planters with integrated benches, a low-cost project with a tremendous visual impact. Visitors repeatedly applaud the pleasant environment the planters create in the summer months. The City agreed to water and maintain the planters, as well as change refuse containers that the BRZ recently replaced. Camrose greatly profits from a robust spirit of volunteerism, as many community members commit their time. It is then no surprise that local ownership of City Centre businesses is quite high. Such individuals have a great amount of faith in downtown investment.

The BRZ's Events Committee is dedicated to attracting civic events to the City Centre. Their "Music on Main" summer concert series has been a remarkable example of the benefit of cooperation between Camrose Economic Development and the BRZ. The free event happens every Thursday evening in a city plaza and is paid for by the BRZ while music groups are booked and vendors are organized by Economic Development. "Midnight Madness" is a Christmas festival that brings a variety of seasonal attractions downtown, while shops stay open until midnight to serve and interact with visitors. The businesses have long supported the event on a grassroots level, albeit with assistance from the BRZ.

The first annual Scarecrow Festival was a big hit among locals, with about 30 vendors supporting a scarecrow contest and indoor market. Because of these events, Camrose is on the map for many visitors from Edmonton and the rural region surrounding the City.

In addition, Camrose was a member of the most recent Alberta Main Street program in the late 2000s, and has signed back on when that program was reinstated in 2013. The Main Street funds greatly supplemented revitalization efforts by improving the facades of most historic storefronts on the main street.

### **Case Study 3: Montrose, Colorado**

A City in western Colorado of about 19,000 people, Montrose has doubled in population in the past 15 years. Since 2000, the City has added 7,000 new residents, most of whom moved to suburban subdivisions on the City's periphery. Approximately one hour driving time from the regional economic centre of Grand Junction, Montrose supports a large rural trade area with several retail power centres, a municipal airport and regional hospital.

Downtown Montrose, like other small City Centres, has experienced cycles of prosperity and decline. Local businesses struggled during the recent recession leaving many storefronts vacant. In the 1990s, a non-profit citizens group was formed to consider options for strengthening the downtown, however lack of funding and organization disbanded them, but not before creating community-wide downtown revitalization momentum. As sidewalks and storefronts deteriorated and as businesses continually moved out, local owners and residents performed outreach to assess the possibility of forming a tax increment financing district. After lengthy public consideration and information, community leaders agreed to establish a Downtown Development Association (DDA) through a state program that allowed businesses within a district to use tax increment financing to fund projects.

The DDA was officially formed in 2010 as a City Council Ordinance passed by a vote of qualified electors (downtown business owners and residents) with 63.5% voting in favour.

The Montrose City Council did not initiate the latter effort, but they supported it by contributing modest seed funding for getting the district off the ground. Some of this funding was used to create a Plan of Development; a strategic guiding document outlining tasks and prioritizing options for using the limited funds to their greatest effect. The Plan of Development closely follows the “Four Point Approach” created by the National Main Street Center of the US. The DDA simultaneously joined the Colorado Main Street program to garner additional resources.

Although initially established through a local desire to preserve existing historical buildings, the DDA hoped to use Main Street funds to achieve a broader and more holistic revitalization vision. With the DDA's direction, the Main Street program was used to fund a number of catalyst projects. The single most successful intervention has been the DDA- and federally-backed revolving loan for small businesses. At very low interest rates (1.6%), the loan was accessible to struggling businesses trying to survive the recession and to start-ups looking to establish in vacant downtown buildings. The DDA also helps fund those wishing to renovate older buildings. Recently, property owners have utilized funds to repair upper floor space for conversion to multi-family housing. According to the DDA's Executive Director, interest in such projects has been increasing.

Other projects that are gaining steam include transportation interventions such as traffic calming and sidewalk widening. The City's Office of Business and Tourism is involved through the Retail Sales Enhancement program, a tax revenue sharing program that contributes remitted taxes to projects that benefit downtown retailers.

A merchant's group approached the City council to establish the program in the 1990s. The City has completed a five-year capital improvements plan to complete infrastructure projects.

In addition to buy-in from city council, the DDA and civic organizations, finding innovative avenues to fund projects that directly benefitted business owners was vital to downtown Montrose's rebirth. One such effort on the drawing board is the creation of a new 501(c)(3) non-profit entity that would begin by raising money for a façade improvement program. The combination of these efforts has resulted in a drastic reduction in vacant businesses (up to about 87% occupancy) and a refreshed willingness among owners to reinvest in their properties.

#### **Case Study 4: Kalispell, Montana**

The hub of northwestern Montana, Kalispell is a centre of tourism and outdoor activity dubbed the “Glacier Park's Hometown”; a tribute to the City's proximity to Glacier National Park. As of 2012, about 20,000 people live in Kalispell, and the City has seen population fluctuate through the recession years.

A booming housing market during the pre-recession years brought expansive suburban commercial development. Kalispell's downtown went through the same hardships as every other case study: small downtown shops and offices, unable to compete with sprawling retailers, gradually shuttered and deteriorated over the years. Eventually, concern among residents and businesses mounted to the point of action.

In 2005, property owners formed the Kalispell Downtown Association as a membership organization to charge fees to participating establishments. The Kalispell Business Improvement District was the result. The KDA has implemented a façade improvement grant program using KBID funds. In addition the chamber of commerce formed a Tourism Business Improvement District (TBID) that promotes businesses comprising the core economy.

A revitalization effort spearheaded by the City was the formation of Urban Renewal Districts that utilize Tax Increment Financing. As part of a City-wide urban renewal strategy, the City council adopted an Urban Renewal Plan and TIF district in 1997. The City revisited this plan in 2012 and expanded the district to include the downtown “Core Area”. Accompanying the district expansion was the 2013 Core Area Plan with the intention of developing innovative projects on former freight rail yards. Imperative to this effort was the involvement of key landowners who shared the voice and vision of the community.

## Key Principles of City Centre Revitalization

Key principles are characteristics of effective downtown revitalization strategies. Some are tangible and concrete, while others are abstract or emotional. These principles are evident in all cases where a small downtown area has been transformed from a declining collection of buildings into a resurgent or vibrant commercial district.

### Vision

A realistic yet bold vision will communicate future goals to all stakeholders. It should draw upon the strengths, history and people in the community. A vision can be a series of statements, images or a document that use extensive Public and Stakeholder input to convey the theoretical end result of revitalization. A downtown that expresses a strong vision has a solid platform to begin revitalization, even if that vision seems like a distant dream.

### Communication

Regardless of the approach, open communication between Municipal, Civic and Business Groups is critical to a lasting effort. Successful revitalization organizations share a common voice with one spokesperson typically holding a liaison position.

### Pedestrian Orientation

A small downtown area is unlike other commercial districts because of its compact, human scale. Such places are successful because they are appealing to sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. Good pedestrian orientation involves the art of “placemaking”, which means creating interventions in the physical environment that motivate people to arrive and stay somewhere simply because it is a place to be.

### Marketing

Vibrant neighbourhood commercial districts need a critical mass of stores or offices, but if this is absent it becomes very difficult to attract new commerce. Places that have been successful in turning a commercial district around have been effective marketers. This means understanding your market position, tenant mix and products sold, and strategizing to attract businesses or increase sales.

### The Champion

In many cases, a revitalization effort is only the most recent in a series of less successful or failed attempts. What separates the effective effort is the Champion. The Urban Land Institute offers the following definition: “the Champion will be a person (or a group of people) who is a committed, responsible stakeholder who recognizes the problem, has dreams of something better, and has the passion to overcome obstacles to achieve results” (Beyard, Pawlukiewicz & Bond 2003).

### Spirit of Volunteerism

Behind every great small urban downtown is a strong commitment of personal time, resources and energy from those who care. Most places do not have extra resources to hire staff, thus the slack must be picked up by individuals who believe in the downtown and its success.

### Faith

Having faith in downtown is critical because of the inevitable amount of risk involved in taking the first step. In terms of places to invest, there are often safer areas in a city that may offer better returns. However this first leap of faith must occur to reverse this trend. If the City doesn't have faith in its Downtown, then how are the businesses and residents expected to have faith and visa versa?

## Parking

No matter how vibrant a City Centre may be, there will still be issues with parking. Places that have experienced commercial growth downtown have made progress in providing accessible or abundant parking close to storefronts while ensuring surface parking lots do not detract from the charm of the retail storefront environment. In some places a lack of parking is a matter of perception, where available stalls are less visible or convenient. Very few great downtowns have excessive parking; they rather have an effective parking management strategy.

If a particular area has no excitement or energy then the appetite to find parking close is more prominent. However, if an area has a compelling and enticing environment of shops, amenities and activities, people will have a greater propensity and acceptance to park further.

## Residential

Rooftops drive commerce, and the closer houses are to businesses the more likely residents are to purchase goods and services at these nearby businesses. Conversely, businesses are attracted to potential customers. Not all flourishing downtowns exhibit dense housing, particularly in mixed-use structures, but increasing housing within a short walk of downtown can stabilize the neighbourhood and increase the customer base, in turn attracting larger anchors and extending the evening activity in the district.

## Focus

In planning for the long term, a revitalization strategy must prepare and manage for constant change in the short term. Revitalization of struggling areas is a long reinvestment process and market realities will continue to change throughout the evolution and duration of the project.

Unlike traditional retail nodes, downtown revitalizations should never stop evolving. The initial efforts should therefore be focused on carefully identified and defined redevelopment/development areas or nodes to maximize efforts, create momentum and promote a belief in the project. A focus that is too large will be diluted in the larger picture. Once the project and more resources become available, the focus can organically expand to neighbouring streets or blocks.

Sources:

Beyard, Michael D., Michael Pawlukiewicz, and Alex Bond. *Ten Principles for Rebuilding Neighborhood Retail*. Washington, D.C.: ULI—the Urban Land Institute, 2003.

## Best Practices

### a. Establish a Business Improvement Association (BIA)

Pursuing a BIA as an avenue of revitalization that offers many challenges and obstacles because of the range of interests involved. Yet the biggest reason a BIA may be a suitable option is the streamlined coordination between the City and businesses due to the ability to communicate with one voice rather than every voice. In turn, having one representative speaking for the BIA contributes to the power of their message.

The success or failure of a BIA is contingent upon the relationship between the businesses and the property owners, although the problem with absentee landowners – those who collect rent checks from afar while not contributing to the business community – is not necessarily a prevalent one. Strong organization directly contributes to a BIA's success in securing grant funding.

Creating a BIA can be motivated by private owners or by the City. In Aldergrove, BC, the municipality initiated the first attempt at establishing BIA by organizing a meeting and hosting the space. They were successful in attracting a concerned group of owners and garnering interest. Encouraged, the municipality then organized and hosted another gathering and invited BIA representatives from various associations in BC and Vancouver, as well as a business owner from one successful BIA to share thoughts. The experience was a positive one, however once the municipality stepped away, the fledgling BIA could not find the energy to mobilize and further the effort, and the organization was not successful. Like a parent teaching a child to ride a bike, once the hand pushes off the seat, the child must balance and ride on their own or they will fall.

In this case the City can be the champion, but cannot impose the formation of the BIA. City Council can lend the support of their Economic Development Department and provide monthly meeting space, but when it comes time to let the BIA operate on its own, the entity must rely on their own relationships to champion their cause. Most significantly is the fact that in the past month and five years later, the Township of Langley has been approached again by a new set of business interests in Aldergrove to help re-ignite the BIA process for Aldergrove realizing that the BIA is a critical tool for mobilizing and coordinating enhancement efforts from the private sector. The business and property owners now have a different sentiment and champion for the BIA.

There are independent, concurrent and sequential programs, ideas and initiatives that are possible in a downtown revitalization, but the best way to achieve success is to have some ideas run concurrent. The danger of having independent initiatives is that they do not gain enough traction in the market. In addition to their effort to establish the original BIA, the Township of Langley invested \$4.6 million in capital improvements that included trees, streetscape and planters over a 2 year period. On its own and as of today, the impact has been relatively negligible on the business environment. However, Aldergrove recognizes revitalization takes time and is focused on a 20+ year horizon for the various initiatives on their pallet.

Another notable BIA is from Fort Langley, BC. Although a community with strong heritage roots, the town was suffering from numerous run-down buildings and vacated premises in the late 1990s. In addition to the establishment of a BIA as well as incremental improvements BIA funds offer, private investors in that association took initiative to buy disadvantaged properties to invest and renovate them.

This single-handed private investment has significantly rejuvenated the physical and economic climate in Fort Langley to the point where there are no vacancies, despite higher rents. A key component of the BIA was to focus on a concentrated area. Although the BIA perhaps took a backseat to private investment, this example displays the importance of faith in investment and the significance of the champion's role in a neighbourhood business district.

### **b. Establish a Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ)**

Cases like Camrose display how special assessment funds from a BRZ can be redirected back to downtown revitalization. A BRZ is a long-term financial system once established will likely remain in place and continually provide resources for small- to medium-scale interventions and marketing. It is the responsibility of the business community to initiate a BRZ and the discretion of council to approve it. The 4th Street BRZ in Calgary explains the process as follows:

"A BRZ is formed through an application to the City Clerk's office. A petition signed by at least [25% of businesses] listed on the current business assessment role for the area is submitted defining the boundary of the area. The City notifies all potential members of the proposed BRZ. Then, City Council may proceed to establish a by-law which lays out the boundaries and purpose of the BRZ.

The BRZ is governed by a Board of Directors composed of up to eight local business people. They are responsible for the BRZ's yearly program and receive financing from a special BRZ tax levy added to all business tax assessments within the boundary." (4streetcalgary.com)

The BRZ board decides on a budget which drives the amount of the levy assessed on businesses in the district. Assessing additional taxes is always a challenge when individual owners consider a BRZ, however efforts to educate stakeholders of the immediate and long-term

benefits may alleviate concerns. In some places, paid staff members manage and organize efforts, while other BRZs operate entirely on volunteer commitments.

The *1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy* outlined the foundation for creating a BRZ in Spruce Grove. The recommendation then was to establish an interim or informal downtown business association who would take ownership of the plan's implementation. This may still be a valid approach as representatives from each City Centre block would participate in an informal association, creating a forum to express ideas.

### **c. Branding and Theming**

Related to marketing principles, branding and theming applies a unified visual character to an area to create an experience and strengthen a sense of place. Concepts of retail district branding are well understood and effective examples exist across Canada. Kimberly, BC nods to its picturesque alpine setting by employing a Bavarian theme. Neighbouring Stony Plain's brand reflects its agricultural history with murals on buildings. Neither of these are a compatible match for Spruce Grove's progressive character, yet the absence of a strong brand for the City Centre suggests an opportunity for improvement.

Theming is not a new idea in Spruce Grove; street lighting, benches, metal post design and consistent color palettes were incorporated to some extent in the late 1990s. Regardless, the idea of re-branding Spruce Grove's City Centre is one to revisit during the revitalization discussion.

### **d. Identify and Pursue a Catalyst Project**

A catalyst project is just that: an intervention in the economic, cultural and built environment that catalyzes change in its surroundings. The CityCentre MacMurray organization for instance created a list of catalyst projects stemming from the City Centre ARP.

These include a centrally located public space called Jubilee Plaza. Adjacent to the municipal offices, the space will host festivals, small events and markets in a central location.

Catalyst projects may be specific things the community desires such as medical facilities, mixed-use projects, a new downtown hotel, a large event, or they may involve the relocation of city offices to the downtown. Smaller activities or events that bring people downtown are catalysts, as it would reverse the current trend of such activities moving to the City's periphery. Any use, activity or improvement that can attract redevelopment downtown is a catalyst, and identifying what catalysts are desirable is the first step in finding a way to complete projects.

#### **e. Infrastructure and Capital Improvements**

A city may improve its infrastructure or capital facilities – water, sewer, roads, parks, law enforcement/emergency medical equipment, public buildings or staff – to encourage City Centre economic development. A number of municipal and grant funding sources have been used by cities to attract business to their downtowns. Improvements to the public right-of-way (streetscaping, landscaping or lighting for instance) are included here.

#### **f. Incentives**

Incentives, particularly regarding taxes, provide a direct benefit to new and existing private businesses by reducing costs and thereby risks associated with developing property. One example comes from Terrace, BC where improvements performed on properties within certain core business districts are exempt from municipal property taxes for a period not to exceed five years. Only the increase in assessed value that the improvements create is exempt from taxation. The municipality may also place design standards on projects that wish to take advantage of an incentive.

Requiring new multi-family buildings to have a minimum number of units is one example. The application of tax and other incentives are widespread in use and complexity throughout North America.

One specific example is a Community Revitalization Levy (CRL). CRLs are a dedicated tax district used to incentivize catalyst projects and infrastructure that will spark development and in turn raise property values. Typically CRLs are utilized for large-scale projects in large cities; Downtown Edmonton's CRL is being used to partially fund the new Rogers Place arena for example. However, there may be ways to use them in smaller cities although few precedents exist.

#### **g. Prioritize City Centre Projects over Peripheral Projects**

The City could look to prioritize redevelopment/development applications in the defined City Centre area as an additional way to incentivize activity. One model of doing this is to make City Centre projects more appealing than elsewhere by reducing development risk. Creating an overlay district that provides development bonuses for applicable projects and creative parking requirements are examples of two ways municipalities have used their land use bylaw to encourage downtown development.

Changing land use policy to incentivize development offers a set of challenges including setting precedents, dealing with existing nonconforming uses and creating competition between other commercial districts in a city. However these amendments can be established as interim or temporary policies, and may be revoked after a trial period.

### **h. Continue Revitalization Through Streetscape Planning (1997 Strategy)**

City Centre revitalization initiatives recommended in the *1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy* were targeted at enhancing business through design interventions. These streetscape interventions may still be valid, and implementing some enhancements may be possible as-is, while others may not.

Should the City wish to continue in this direction (pursuing strategies that intervene in the public built environment, rather than taking a more holistic approach), revisiting and updating this plan would allow the City to customize the menu of options to better fit today's needs as consumer, retailer and developer expectations have evolved.

### **i. Conduct an Economic Development Master Plan**

This planning document would holistically include aspects from considerations (a) through (j) while staying entirely focused on impacts to economic development. The focus area of the Master Plan would be very narrow geographically so as to keep energy pointed on small yet powerful interventions. The map on page 31 "*Alternative City Centre Revitalization Focus Areas*" provides three examples of how the City Centre can be geographically defined.

The key to such a document would be looking at revitalization through the lens of the private sector. Creating a sample proforma for one specific property in the area with the aid of local developers could be an example of one part of the document. This would make clear what the market will bear and enable the City to make policy decisions on what incentives they are willing to pursue.

### **j. Increase the City Centre's Population Density**

Incentives or bylaw amendments aimed at increasing the number of residents in a downtown area is a common strategy for many communities like Spruce Grove that are experiencing population and economic growth. Leveraging opportunities to capture some of this growth in the City Centre rather than near the City edge will provide a consumer base for new businesses, reduce car trips and parking needs, and increase activity on the sidewalk. The City Centre currently has single family and multi-family housing, but is there the critical mass needed to support economic growth downtown?

### **k. No Intervention (Business as Usual)**

The Urban Land Institute states the following: "If the Champion, the City or the Property Owners are not prepared to support the changing dynamic in perpetuity, with both their efforts and their money, the revitalization project should not be undertaken". This sentiment should not be understated. However, it does not mean the City should truly do nothing, rather it recommends to wait until the timing is right and the parties involved are capable of full buy-in. Until that happens, other smaller efforts can take place to build momentum.

In the case of Leduc, the City hosted biannual community open houses that were not issue-related to assess economic health and trajectory. This open discussion was a precursor to a formal effort to organize, which occurred a few years later once there was grassroots-level support.

Sources:

4StreetCalgary.com. "About Us". <http://www.4streetcalgary.com/4th-Street-BRZ>

# Considerations

The list of considerations is not all-encompassing, and any single consideration does not offer a one-size-fits-all solution. The City should discuss considerations in detail, using examples from this document and elsewhere to determine the appropriate strategy. Expanding stakeholder interaction to reach a broader understanding of owner sentiment, and weighing the challenges and benefits of each consideration with stakeholders will be key to choosing a successful approach.

This paper is concluded with a series of statements posed to the City of Spruce Grove. The following are intended to stage the discussion of City Centre revitalization:

## 1. Clearly identify and articulate a vision of the City Centre.

Is it a gathering space or a neighbourhood commercial district? How necessary is having a vision? Does the City Centre serve a traditional downtown role?

## 2. Redefine and delineate the City Centre Boundaries.

To focus revitalization efforts, it is important to discuss where the City Centre begins and ends. Three alternative focus areas are presented at right: 1) MDP boundary, 2) Core Area boundary, 3) McLeod Avenue and Main Street focus area boundary. The best prospect for success is if a narrowly focused area is used.

## 3. Encourage the business community to establish a BIA.

A strong BIA is a precondition to successful revitalization, however there is no BIA in Spruce Grove and the City cannot require one to be established. There are ways the City can offer indirect support to a BIA. Some BIAs lose momentum after being established and therefore how far does the City go with revitalization efforts in the absence of a functional BIA? What role can the Chamber of Commerce play in establishing a BIA?

## 4. What role does the 1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy play?

The *1997 Downtown Development Action Strategy* provides a foundation, but if it is to be useful, it must be reviewed and updated to reflect best practices and new market realities. Does the City continue along the path of a streetscaping plan, or is it time to consider another approach? Individual Property and Business Owners have indicated they would not expect any different result than in 1997 if the same approach was used.

## 5. Take an approach that focuses more on economic development.

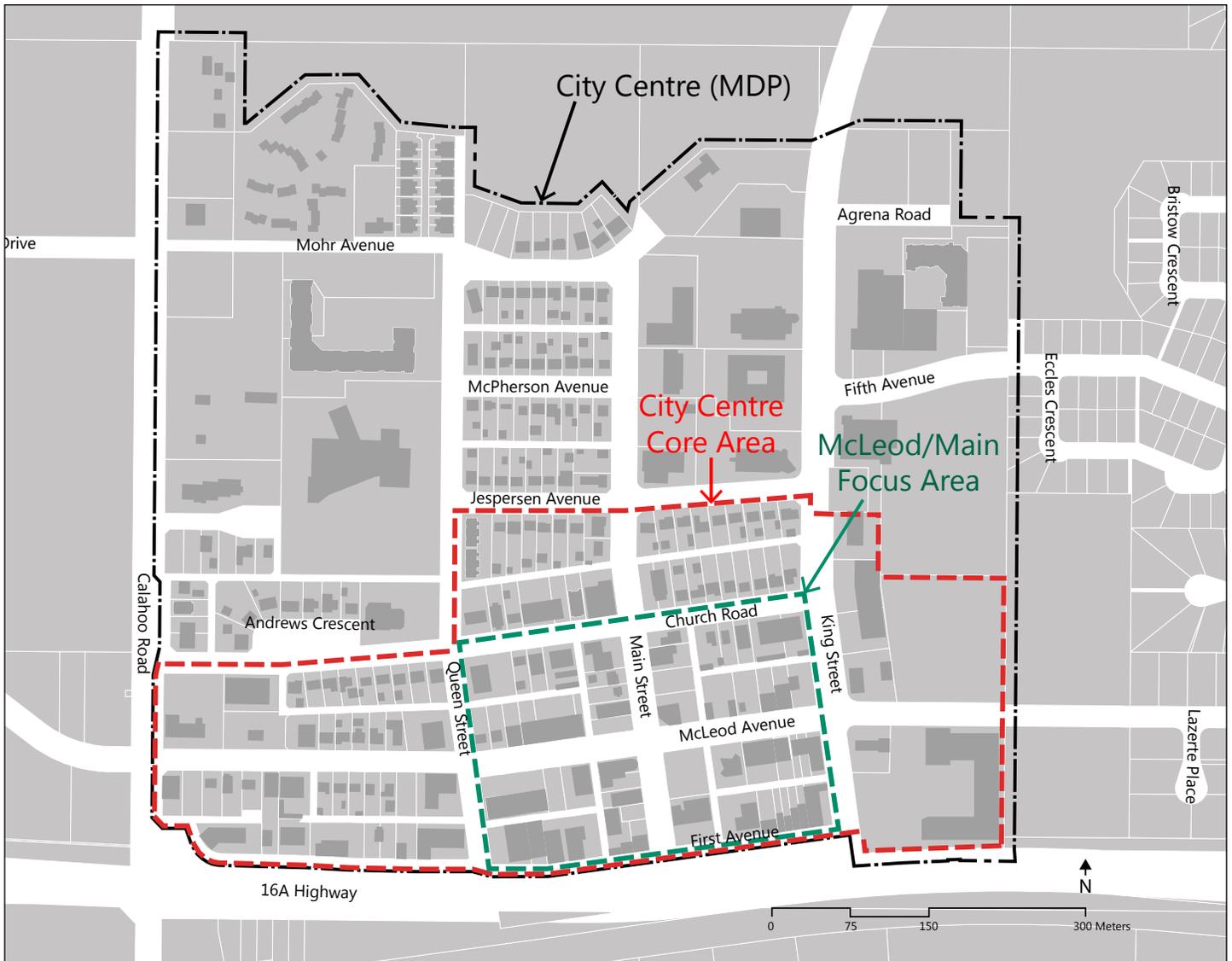
In other words, should the City consider incentives and addressing structural issues such as parking? Previous revitalization efforts focused more on interventions in the streetscape and public realm, and were for the most part, limited in effectiveness.

## 6. Be prepared to take an active role in revitalization.

Acquiring strategic downtown properties, for example, is a way for the City to engage in an active way. Incentivizing catalyst projects, relocating city offices downtown or investing in infrastructure improvements (e.g. parking) are other ways the City can take an active role. Is the City prepared to put a financial commitment as part of any revitalization strategy?

## 7. Identify the best approach for developing a strategy.

This discussion paper identifies two general approaches moving forward: 1) City Council assigns the Economic and Business Development department to lead an effort accompanied by a Steering Committee comprised of stakeholders or, 2) establish a separate Task Force with representation from Council, the Economic Advisory Council and stakeholders.



*Alternative City Centre revitalization focus areas.*

The City takes significant ownership in the former, and in the latter there is some distance between the City and the Strategy.

City Centre revitalization is a long term process. It will require consistent vision and support long after its inception. There are no prevailing views on what a strategy should entail, and getting to consensus will prove challenging. Even considering the need for a revitalization effort must be discussed.

Previous efforts were generally unsuccessful, and there is now an opportunity to ensure the efficacy of future strategies.

Businesses, people and activities have migrated to the edges of town in recent years, and this trend shows little sign of changing. Part of the success of City Centre revitalization will come from how effectively this trend can be reversed. Downtown revitalizations, unlike suburban retail developments take time to reestablish themselves and resonate with the community.

# Appendix

## Notes from Meeting with Stakeholders City of Spruce Grove, 04/23/14

### **Attending:**

#### City of Spruce Grove Economic and Business Development:

Karla Gould

Cheryl Schultz

Dave Walker

#### Participating Stakeholders:

Braven Blackwell

Frank DeAngelis

Brenda Johnson

Gerry Lavasseur

Victor Moroz

Ron Stropel

Rosetta Taylor

#### Consultants (Cushing Terrell):

Kieron Hunt

Dave Dixon

- Spruce Grove Economic and Business Development opens the meeting and does introductions
- Cushing Terrell asks for five words to describe downtown/City Centre
- What are some of the big issues?
  - › Taxes are too high; insurance, assessed values are going up
  - › Consensus: if you don't get all owners involved, any effort will not be successful
- Parking is the number one issue
- Spruce Grove is a town that has evolved into a City with no definition
- Spruce Grove has developed a car-centric form
  - › Power centres do not offer any walkability
  - › Only folks who live in town understand why that matters
  - › What do you do first, build retail, or build houses?
- Definition: visual, placemaking, signify
- City boasts about 6% growth rate and development, but doesn't take care of old development
  - › City needs to spend money on this effort
  - › People will just start new businesses in old buildings because they can't afford to build new
  - › People need to get an idea of character from the City
- Neighbourhood owners are seeing businesses, banks leave downtown...what gives them the faith to stay?
  - › Need to make an effort to keep key businesses, (banks, post office)
- Large retailers in Spruce Grove draw heavily on the rural trade area to the north and west
- Is it too late to spend money on Spruce Grove's downtown? Some think so.

- What is it about the parking that is not working?
  - › If you want more businesses, need more parking
  - › Seems to “feel” like there’s not enough
  - › Angled parking was good for slowing down traffic
  - › Employees use McLeod parking, but they should be using First Ave parking which is limited to two hours
  - › Columbus Park is a nice focal point: One owner swapped the land for the park fifteen years ago for a parking lot, but the design was unsuccessful in that owner’s opinion
- Everyone knows where Stony Plain’s downtown is, but businesses there are also suffering – at least Spruce Grove is getting new investment (Triton Building)
- Need to supplement this effort with marketing
- With lease rates around \$28/SF, need a big money-maker to have any success
- In Edmonton, 104th St was in bad shape, then the City started redevelopment efforts that began with a few million in streetscape investment, then lofts and trendy businesses came after
- Perron Street in St. Albert: good example of a “look” and definition
- One owner wants to do something with lots, but construction costs are prohibitive, and so that owner is sitting on the rental income
- Business Improvement Association: have had two over the years but didn’t survive, some owners blame the City for not contributing
  - › Informal things have worked: events like “More in the Core”
  - › City can only guide, but the property owners demand more initiative from Council
  - › “What will the City do for us? We’re tired of doing it all by ourselves.”
- › Edmonton’s Business Revitalization Zones: run by local owners, while still being a City organization
- › But before Spruce Grove owners make another BIA, want to meet with the City to make sure they give backing; to “see the whites of their eyes”
- City’s Economic Development Department is great now, used to be more difficult
- Commercial leases are \$18-\$22/SF in new building, \$20/SF in industrial park, but industrial park space was leased through extensive marketing efforts to attract a firm from the US
- Some owners believe people outside the downtown will vote in favor allocating funds for City Centre revitalization, everyone wants something to happen downtown
- Banks: One bank didn’t invest in downtown when they could have because of its perception. Another bank moved to a strip centre and now hears that people are upset they cannot walk there anymore.
  - › People want to angle park once and shop, eat and take care of all their business
- Are developers more attracted to Stony Plain?
- City can take the Canmore, AB model and heavily restrict commercial growth out of town; some owners agree with that approach.
- Some believe \$1-2 million commitment from the City is required for buy-in
- In late 1990s, effort was for a 2/3 investment from city and 1/3 from owners, and owners wouldn’t commit: “Why do we have to pay for improvements to the public right-of-way? We already pay taxes.”
  - › Some think City has to lead or at least commit money. Owners need to communicate vision.
- Assessed value has gone up 20% for whole town

- How do we prevent this plan from being shelved: tailor it to council, be direct, and use examples
- Farmer's Market: unanimous agreement that it would attract more people to downtown than at its existing location across rail tracks and Highway 16A
- Potential City Centre business: wants to operate in a 40 year-old building, but has been trying to get through city approvals since May; it is noted that planning and building fees can also be prohibitive
- Idea for tourist attraction: flags of all the nations and provinces along rail corridor. VIA train will see them, then people will return to visit. But what does that do for downtown? Should at least locate them along McLeod, First, etc. and have local students make the flags.
- What theme would work in Spruce Grove?
  - › Eclectic, people-friendly, tree lighting, tables for people to rent for events, cohesive lighting (e.g. Tivoli lights)
- Need that signature thing along a decided corridor
- Big events during holidays: many families will come – why not do them downtown (e.g. the tree lighting)?
- Have a lot of new housing, why could it not be near downtown? Does it matter? The new apartments near the TransAlta Tri Leisure Center leased 100% in weeks. Those folks will still demand services in a downtown.
- Owners find this meeting and the effort "encouraging"
- City Centre Revitalization Discussion Paper must focus on Key Issues
- Some thought Edmonton city officials were crazy when they proposed a vision for 4th Ave Promenade, but now it's the heart of that area. It was perceived that political will with money to back it up made the project successful.
- Fifteen years ago, had the same discussion here and nothing happened. These stakeholders do not want to be back here in another fifteen years with no progress.
- What comes first: direction from the City or just money?
- The City does believe there are redevelopment opportunities in older sites
- Some wonder why the City can't close McLeod for any events? Even for parades.
- Businesses that normally go in a downtown are going into industrial park because of cheaper lease rates – not to mention the City grants variances for uses.
- Political will needs to change

## Top 5 Descriptions for Spruce Grove’s City Centre

As provided by each attendee in the Stakeholder Session (anonymous):

- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>#1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disjointed</li> <li>• Vibrant</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Walkable</li> <li>• (No fifth response given)</li> </ul> | <p>#5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where is it?</li> <li>• Planning</li> <li>• Zoning</li> <li>• Needs of the area</li> <li>• (No fifth response given)</li> </ul> | <p>#9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-relevant</li> <li>• Dull</li> <li>• Uninteresting</li> <li>• Inconsistent</li> <li>• Not a Downtown</li> </ul> |
| <p>#2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awful</li> <li>• No Parking</li> <li>• No Definition</li> <li>• No Perfection</li> <li>• Neglect</li> </ul>                  | <p>#6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scattered</li> <li>• Blah</li> <li>• Uninteresting</li> <li>• Dilapidated</li> <li>• Run Down</li> </ul>                        | <p>#10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unknown</li> <li>• Unattractive</li> <li>• Dated</li> <li>• Dingy</li> <li>• Inconvenient</li> </ul>              |
| <p>#3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where</li> <li>• Old</li> <li>• Town</li> <li>• No Focus</li> <li>• Poor</li> </ul>  | <p>#7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undefined</li> <li>• Unattractive</li> <li>• Service-heavy</li> <li>• Unexciting</li> <li>• Unstructured</li> </ul>             |   |
| <p>#4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Centre</li> <li>• Retail Stores</li> <li>• Open Space</li> <li>• Character</li> <li>• Non-cohesive</li> </ul>       | <p>#8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scattered</li> <li>• Patchwork</li> <li>• Dilapidated</li> <li>• Non-descript</li> <li>• Life support</li> </ul>                |   |

City Centre Revitalization Discussion Paper  
City of Spruce Grove, Alberta  
DRAFT June 2014

