

Downtown Columbia Special Business District Strategic Plan

Summary of Stakeholder Outreach, Priorities & Implications

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In the spring of 2008, the Downtown Special Business District (SBD) commissioned the Denver-based consulting firm Progressive Urban Management Associates (P.U.M.A.) to assist in developing a strategic plan for the organization. As Downtown Columbia prepares for new development opportunities amidst economic uncertainty, there was recognition by the SBD and Central Columbia Association (CCA) that it was time to take a fresh look at the future of Downtown and how these organizations could best be positioned to address future growth.

To develop this plan, P.U.M.A. conducted extensive interviews and forums with Downtown stakeholders, and a survey of Downtown business and property owners was distributed. More than 50 property owners, businesses and city officials participated in a series of meetings and an online survey revealed opinions and priorities from an additional 129 businesses and property owners. The following summarizes the findings from this initial research.

Stakeholder Interviews: In March 2008, P.U.M.A. conducted a site visit in Downtown Columbia to appraise the dynamics of Downtown’s economic, political and planning environment. During this visit, the team engaged more than 50 key Downtown stakeholders through focus groups and one-on-one interviews, including:

- SBD Board of Directors
- CCA Board of Directors
- Property Owners
- Merchants
- Civic Leaders
- Festivals and Attractions Leaders

P.U.M.A. led these groups through a participatory visioning process which probed stakeholder’s perceptions on how Downtown Columbia had evolved in the past ten years, and what their vision for Downtown Columbia is ten years ahead, in 2018. The following table summarizes the results of this exercise:

Ten Years Ago	Today	Ten Years Ahead
Empty	Inviting, enjoyable, attractive	Vibrant, beautiful, welcoming, safe and clean
Rundown, stagnant	Growing, rejuvenated, expanding, on the verge, challenging	Actively being developed, wildly successful
Slow	Active, busy	Energized
Eclectic, but aging	Fun, entertaining, vibrant	Diverse and artful, local and distinctive
Old	Progressive, young and diverse, highly creative, inclusive	Sky is the limit! Creative explosion, progressive, eclectic
Transition, gaps	Destination	Unique hub of activity, the nucleus of Columbia
Lack of vision	Limited vision	Innovative

Based on this feedback, P.U.M.A. inquired about improvements and investments which need to occur to achieve this vision, and asked stakeholders to prioritize these items, ranking their importance towards achieving the desired goals. The priorities for Downtown Columbia that emerged from the stakeholder focus groups include:

DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENTS AND PRIORITIES

1	Attract New Business and Investment: Become an incubator of creative activity and business. Focus on filling empty storefronts and coordinate incentives for unique, independent, stable businesses and retail.
2	Downtown Residential: Encourage development of a quality mix of residential uses.
3	Cleaner and Safer: Focus on cleanliness and maintenance and improve standards for Downtown. Improve policing and safety, vagrants, bar problems, and provide comprehensive security.
4	Improve the Pedestrian Experience: Create a more walkable environment and focus on improving connections. Improvements could include greening, trees and landscaping, appealing night lighting, and upgraded infrastructure.
5	Parking: Combat negative perceptions, encourage use of garages, discourage surface parking.
6	Marketing: Strengthen and diversify marketing to create a “call to action” for both consumers and investors.
7	Improve Aesthetics and Facades: Including identifying design standards.
8	Stronger Downtown Organization: Mobilize more energy and resources to create a stronger leadership presence. Work to unify businesses and encourage participation. Collaborate and solidify civic partnerships.
9	Complete a Downtown Master Plan: Focus on connections and transition areas and clarify public and private sector roles.

Organizational roles were also probed in the stakeholder focus groups, with specific questions focusing on how the SBD and CCA could be positioned to implement priority projects and programs and how the organizations should be positioned within the contextual environment of the City of Columbia and the Downtown community. The following themes emerged:

ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE

1	Advocacy and Leadership: Be a stronger and more vocal advocate for Downtown and provide a liaison role between the public and private sectors. Organization should have the ability to influence political processes, collaborate and facilitate relationships in order to make Downtown a top priority of the City.
2	Attract (and Retain) Business and Investment: Nurture businesses to help them grow and survive by serving as a central clearinghouse for Downtown Columbia to help businesses find resources and important information.
3	Strengthen the Organization: Generate more resources for the Downtown through a stronger Downtown authority organization, perhaps a CID. Mobilize as many resources as possible to facilitate change. Look at bringing sales tax to parity as a potential funding source.
4	Promotion and Marketing: Provide both consumer and investor marketing for Downtown.
5	Communications: Facilitate constant communication among stakeholders Downtown and use that information to provide a unified voice, influence and leadership.

Stakeholder Survey: Following the initial on-site visit, an on-line survey to Downtown business and property owners as conducted to assess overall satisfaction with the Downtown Columbia SBD's activities and to probe their priorities for Downtown improvements and investments. P.U.M.A. was particularly interested in investigating whether the priorities of stakeholders interviewed during the initial site visit matched the priorities of survey respondents. 129 individuals responded to the survey, with the respondents fell into the following categories:

Downtown Interest	Percentage of Respondents
Downtown Commercial Property Owner	28.6%
Downtown Business Owner	63.9%
Resident	10.9%
Charitable/Non-Profit	5.9%
Government	12.6%
Other (Downtown employees, consumers)	5.9%

In assessing the current state of Downtown Columbia, respondents noted the following projects and investments have been "Very Important" in improving the Downtown environment over the past five years:

VERY IMPORTANT to Improving Downtown Over the Past Five Years

Overall Rank	Improvement	DT Property Owner Rank†	DT Business Owner Rank
1 (60.8%)	Safer	2-TIE (55.9%)	1-TIE (54.7%)
2 (54.4%)	Beautification Efforts	1 (63.6%)	1-TIE (54.7%)
3 (45.6%)	More festivals and events	5 (40.6%)	3 (46.7%)
4 (44%)	Cleaner	2-TIE (55.9%)	4 (43.2%)
5 (43.2%)	Better marketing and information about Downtown		5 (42.7%)

†Downtown Property Owners ranked "Canopy Removal" as #4 (44.1%).

Respondents also were asked to express their opinion on which general improvements will be very important to enhancing Downtown Columbia in the next five to ten years:

VERY IMPORTANT to Downtown in the Next Five to Ten Years

Overall Rank	Improvement	DT Property Owner Rank	DT Business Owner Rank††
1 (62.1%)	Attract new businesses and more jobs	1 (75.8%)	2 (56%)
2 (58.2%)	Safer	2 (67.6%)	1 (58.6%)
3 (50.4%)	More convenient parking	3-TIE (50%)	3 (52.7%)
4 (45.2%)	Cleaner	5 (48.5%)	4 (48%)
5 (44.7%)	Improve shopping and the selection of stores		

†Downtown Property Owners ranked "More Downtown Housing" as #3-TIE (50%).

††DT Business Owners ranked "Better marketing and information about Downtown" as #5 (46.7%).

When asked to use brief words to summarize their vision for Downtown Columbia as they look ten years ahead to 2018, the following words were most frequently noted:

Friendly	Attractive	Accessible	Diverse
Safe	Trendy	Local	Vibrant
Clean	Unique	Alive	Charm

To achieve this vision for Downtown, respondents suggested the following actions will be important:

VERY IMPORTANT Actions to Improve Downtown in the Next Five to Ten Years

Overall Rank	Improvement	DT Property Owner Rank	DT Business Owner Rank†
1 (72.7%)	Attract new businesses and help existing businesses grow	1 (75.8%)	1 (75.7%)
2 (54.5%)	Make Downtown safer	3 (60.6%)	2 (54.7%)
3 (52.1%)	Develop new destination attractions, such as a hotel, museum, others	4-TIE (48.5%)	5 (49.3%)
4 (50.4%)	Improve Downtown cleanliness	2 (62.5%)	3 (52%)
5(48.4%)	Improve the pedestrian experience		

†Downtown Business Owners ranked “Improve parking management” as #4 (50%).

Most interestingly, a majority of respondents said they would consider paying new or additional assessments to support these actions, improvements and/or investments:

Willing to Pay?	Overall Score	DT Property Owner Rank	DT Business Owner Rank
Definitely Yes	9%	23.5%	10.5%
Probably Yes	45.1%	29.4%	50%
Don't Know	36.9%	35.3%	30.3%
Probably No	4.9%	2.9%	5.3%
Definitely No	4.1%	8.8%	3.9%

Of those items respondents would be willing to pay for, the following ranked the highest:

SERVICES respondents would consider paying for

Rank	Service	DT Property Owner Rank†	DT Business Owner Rank††
1 (44.2%)	Attract new businesses and help existing businesses grow	1-TIE (47.8%)	1 (39.7%)
2 (38.4%)	Make Downtown safer	1-TIE (47.8%)	2 (34.5%)
3 (30.2%)	Develop new destination attractions, such as a hotel, museum, others		

†Downtown Property Owners ranked “Develop a Downtown Master Plan that builds on the Sasaki Plan” and “Encourage Downtown Residential Development” as #3-TIE (30.4%).

††Downtown Business Owners ranked “Increase Downtown marketing efforts” as #3 (32.8%).

Overall, the priorities which emerged during initial stakeholder outreach was verified by the survey results, creating a clear stakeholder direction for future efforts.

Implications for Downtown Columbia

From the preceding outreach, plus additional operational and best practice research conducted as part of the strategic plan process, the following observations were made. These statements set the stage for the strategic plan and begin to define the evolution of the SPD and the CCA organizational structures and their priorities and focus moving ahead.

“The District” is a Strong Product: Surrounded by educational institutions and supported by the Downtown workforce, “The District” grown as a vital, sustainable, recognizable environment. Many past barriers have been overcome, and the unique clusters of retail and restaurants as well as proposed new development means the coming years will be about ensuring Downtown can mature into consistently vibrant, strong economic destination. In other words, it’s time to take it to the next level, and develop a strong public/private partnership that can support Downtown as it exists today and as it grows in the years ahead.

Need for a Stronger Downtown Advocate: The SBD and CCA have served Downtown well in the past nearly 30 years, investing in major projects that changed the Downtown landscape, and supporting the environment with consumer marketing and events. The challenges of Downtown in 2008 and in the next five to ten years look different. Turbulent economic environments, combined with new growth, means the Downtown needs a strong, unified voice representing it. Partnership with civic and private sector leaders must be established, and clear goals and actions will need to be tackled by following a straight-forward game plan. A new, sustainable Downtown management model will likely need to emerge to create the resources, both financial and staff, to support the needs of the next decade.

A Shift from Marketer to “Property Manager”: Downtown Columbia needs to refocus priorities and strategic directions to respond to the current and future environment. A shift away from marketing and events and towards creating an environment to attract investment should occur through initiatives to not only create a more welcoming environment for business and development, but to support and help recruit the types of small, innovative and creative businesses that make Downtown Columbia unique. To help lead and guide the economic development, the CCA/SBD needs to shift from an emphasis on promoting Downtown, to managing Downtown much as a property manager within a shopping mall. This role suggests working closely with property owners and businesses to monitor vacancies, recruit prospective tenants and ensure that Downtown’s common areas are safe, clean and attractive.

A Shift from Tasks to Strategy: Like many downtown organizations throughout the country, CCA/SBD has evolved to take care of the many details that make Downtown a great place – from cleaning alleys to installing street furniture to developing a distinctive Downtown brand. To meet the stakeholder priorities revealed by the Strategic Plan surveys, CCA/SBD must also be prepared to look at the big picture strategies for Downtown – attention to both the trees *and* the forest is important to help advance a new era of Downtown development.