

ConnecToledo Downtown Development Corporation

INNOVATION

It was clear from the first public meeting that activating the Maumee riverfront was of tremendous importance to the community. This early consensus around the development of a continuous and interconnected network of open spaces along both sides of the river allowed for immediate community collaboration toward implementation.

Part of an innovative and ambitious goal to build 320 acres of new park space, the community's investment in the riverfront is also the centerpiece of the plan's economic redevelopment strategy to bring visitors, jobs and residents back to downtown and core neighborhoods. This is exactly what is occurring today. Funding from the city, county, state, federal government, Metroparks, and the philanthropic community has resulted in five new park and trail projects that are either built or under construction along the Maumee River, boosting the fortunes of both downtown and six historic neighborhoods. The public has continued to voice their strong support of this investment, recently passing a \$112 million levy to fund projects like the five-mile Riverwalk and 70-acre Glass City Metropark. Because of the Master Plan's guidance and demonstrated action toward completing the plan, Toledo was awarded a \$23.6M BUILD grant for the Riverwalk.

These investments in public space have been complemented by a network of connected and pedestrian-friendly streets, focused residential development, rehabilitation and reuse of existing historic buildings, investment in hospitality and entertainment, and dozens of new locally-owned businesses. This has brought much needed energy, activity and livability back to the core of Toledo.

OUTCOME

Before the plan was adopted in 2017, one of the first implementation recommendations was already underway—the creation of ConnecToledo. This new organization has focused on downtown and acts as the consistent planning partner of the city, county, and community.

The implementation results benefit all Toledoans: \$244 million of completed catalytic projects, from the new ProMedica corporate headquarters to the residential conversion of downtown office towers and warehouse buildings for both market rate and workforce housing. Investment in the riverfront is just beginning. Promenade Park opened in summer 2017 and has been a hub of activity for the community, hosting dozens of community events and attracting tens of thousands of residents downtown each summer. More than \$425 million of additional catalytic projects are currently underway, including the \$200 million Glass City Metropark that fulfills the community's vision of a restored riverfront park system on both sides of the Maumee River. An \$80 million renovation to the Glass City Convention and Event Center and attached hotel is currently underway that will boost downtown's hospitality market. From the architecturally significant "Four Corners" buildings at the intersection of Huron St. and Madison Ave. to Fort Industry Square, 11 historic structures have also been rescued from neglect and plans for restoration are underway. Downtown mobility improvements have also been made, with a new transit center, and the pedestrian-focused and bicycle-focused streetscape improvements underway on Summit Street and Jefferson Avenue. The 12 Priority Action Items in the plan are either complete or have significant action underway.

EXECUTION

The Downtown Toledo Master Plan was unanimously passed by both the City Plan Commission and City Council in February 2017. Since adoption, the plan has generated increased confidence, recognition and investment in downtown.

As a result of the plan's strategic direction and resulting successes, the nation has taken notice. For its work implementing the riverfront park system, Metroparks was the recipient of the 2020 National Gold Medal Award for excellence in parks and recreation management. The city of Toledo was ranked #1 for new business investment by Site Selection Magazine. In February 2021, Bitwise selected Toledo to build Bitwise Cowork and Bitwise Workforce Training at The Jefferson Center. This 100,000 square foot building in downtown's core will be home to 400 tech jobs and include event facilities for tenants and the surrounding community as an innovation center.

As a local demonstration of the confidence that downtown property owners have in their future, the Downtown Toledo Improvement District was recently renewed for an additional five years. In addition to an overall renewal rate of 85% of existing property owners, the special improvement district expanded its boundaries. With the additional funding, the district now has funds to make more physical improvements.

REPRESENTATION

Throughout this inclusive process the public was invited to participate. Between three public meetings in 2016, more than 1,000 people attended to give their input and ideas. Broad community engagement was achieved through a website that garnered 34,000 page views and a stand-alone project storefront in downtown that allowed passersby to participate in planning activities. To reach people where they are, volunteers from the Toledo Design Center took traveling displays and input activities to multiple office lobbies, community events, games and gatherings. Finally, more than 60 stakeholders – from faith leaders and community organizers, to business owners and young professionals – were interviewed to gain specialized input about the opportunities and challenges facing downtown and its core neighborhoods. Taken together, this public discussion yielded more than 1,000 unique ideas and comments that helped to shape and guide the plan.

Throughout this planning process the community showed that they love and cherish downtown and are invested in its renaissance. The inter-disciplinary planning team created a vision for future growth and revitalization that responded to these aspirations. The robust community conversation helped craft a common vision and consensus for the future of downtown Toledo, which has helped spur its rapid implementation.

REPLICATION

While many communities claim to be well practiced at public-private partnerships, the hands-on involvement of Toledo leaders in this planning effort sets an example for others to follow. The direct involvement and cooperation of city and county government, business and civic leaders, educational and arts institutions, and not-for-profit partners in the Downtown Toledo Master Plan was critical to success. The formation of 22nd Century Committee and the broad coalition that it formed sent a clear and powerful message to the residents—that the entire community was dedicated to seeing downtown and its core neighborhoods succeed. This commitment was evident not just in the shared funding of the plan, but also at each of the three community events and at dozens of stakeholder meetings where committee members were true participants in the work of listening, learning, and crafting solutions. As a result, the plan was able to build trust with the community. Residents knew that what they were saying was being heard because they saw that those who are able to effect change were in the room working alongside them. The importance of public-private partnerships in both plan creation and the continued resurgence of downtown Toledo cannot be understated.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The simple act of involving the business community and political leadership in the creation of the plan has made solving complex problems easier. This led to the execution of catalytic projects before the plan was complete. As an example, following initial stakeholder and community meetings, the committee became aware of an opportunity to purchase 70 acres of brownfield property on the east bank of the river. The committee quickly raised funds to purchase the land and start a public process with the long-neglected East Toledo community. The community-led process that called for parkland and mixed-use development has already come to fruition, with the 2020 completion of phase one of the Glass City Metropark and the \$50 million Marina Lofts project.

This model of leadership cooperation around a singular vision continues today as the plan is implemented. On the opposing bank of the Glass City Metropark was a piece of underutilized property owned by Norfolk Southern. Private discussions by ConneCToledo with the railroad lead to an agreement for it to be sold to ConneCToledo. In February 2021, ConneCToledo sold the property to the Metroparks. As a result, the Riverwalk has secured its final piece of property that will enable its success.