



Downtown Greensboro Incorporated

INNOVATION

The Plan establishes a clear set of priorities, partnerships, and projects to ensure that the next decade of growth is consistent with the needs, values and priorities of the Greensboro community. Rooted in stakeholder engagement, the Plan includes community-vetted projects and strategies that have support from the city, county, non-profit, private sector and philanthropic organizations. Innovations woven throughout the Plan will leverage Greensboro's unique assets to put the city "on the map" as a forward-thinking, entrepreneurial and equitable downtown.

One notable innovation is the Autonomous Vehicle (AV) Connector that will move students, residents and visitors to and through downtown. It will better link college and university students to employment and incubation opportunities downtown. The project provides a practical application for ongoing AV research at the North Carolina A&T State University, while addressing downtown mobility challenges. Instead of investing in expensive, fixed infrastructure, the AV connector will provide a nimble transit solution that can easily adapt and change routes and be implemented in phases as technology and mobility needs evolve.

Other innovations include:

- Supporting BIPOC business owners and entrepreneurs with programs that increase access to capital and opportunity. DGI's pandemic recovery efforts provide a springboard for sustained efforts, including the new Black Entrepreneur Program.
- Repurposing under-utilized assets to support and incubate small businesses while activating downtown. The Plan calls for creating a container hub on a vacant lot that will offer affordable, short-term commercial spaces.

OUTCOME

The 2030 Strategic Vision Plan provides clear direction for DGI staff and board members to focus resources on community-supported projects and programs. It includes an implementation action plan outlining roles, responsibilities and resources for near- and long-term initiatives. The Plan also serves as a marketing tool for potential employers, investors and developers, demonstrating that the downtown community is forward-thinking and has a clear, cohesive vision.

The Plan Framework is a "plan on a page" that allows DGI and city staff to quickly evaluate ideas and proposals for consistency with adopted goals and strategies. It is usable and accessible for multiple audiences, providing a transparent decision-making structure.

The Plan will provide multiple benefits for Downtown Greensboro's diverse community.

Creating a dynamic pedestrian environment with ground-floor activation, infill projects, programming, and trail-oriented development will benefit the public, attract visitors, improve safety and support local businesses with increased foot traffic and visibility.

Talent development programs and enhanced partnerships will benefit students, young professionals and employers by expanding and enhancing the local talent pool. Plan recommendations will improve access to employment, internships, business support networks, and financial resources for local students and residents.

Retailers, restaurateurs and other entrepreneurs will enjoy improved access to affordable, flexible and highly-visible commercial spaces. Downtown Greensboro's robust maker culture will continue to thrive as business opportunities expand and visits to downtown increase.

The Plan is enduring but flexible. It provides phasing and near-, mid- and longer-term action items that can be updated to respond to changing conditions and new opportunities.

EXECUTION

The Downtown Greensboro 2030 Strategic Vision Plan is grounded in qualitative and quantitative data. The project team coupled policy and data analysis with extensive stakeholder and community engagement to create a complete picture of the state of the center city. As noted above, the project team adapted to the unprecedented events of 2020 by taking extra steps to re-connect with the community online and to adapt to changing priorities.

Community engagement activities encouraged stakeholders and residents to think big and offer creative ideas. The project team was able to take community input in raw form (example: "Downtown should be buzzing with activity and excitement,") and turn it into specific recommendations and actionable ideas.

High-quality illustrations including before/after photo simulations, context-appropriate precedent imagery, and easy-to-understand diagrams facilitated community understanding of draft ideas. The project team was able to test ideas with these engaging tools and incorporate community input and feedback into final products.

The Plan also leveraged several parallel and complementary planning and design efforts, including a wayfinding plan, streetscape design improvements, and the city's recent Comprehensive Plan update. Frequent meetings and communications with other teams allowed efficient coordination and execution.

REPRESENTATION

The community and stakeholder engagement for the Plan relied on true partnerships between MIG and DGI, city councilmembers, county representatives and other downtown stakeholders. DGI staff, board members and constituents were all actively involved in Plan development, review and in community engagement activities.

While the Plan is centered on downtown, it was critical to reach into the broader Greensboro community to get input from a range of voices, including those who were not currently invested in or frequently travelling to downtown. Each City Council member hosted an in-person meeting in their district and DGI Board members activated their networks to promote input opportunities and collect feedback.

Through targeted events, a diversity of voices contributed to the Plan. Engagement efforts reached and engaged groups and populations who typically are not active participants in planning efforts, including creative professionals, BIPOC community organizations, student and young professionals. By using plain language, plentiful graphics, photos and illustrations and asking straightforward questions, the project team made it simple and fun for people to participate and contribute to the plan development. Input was collected through pop-up events throughout Greensboro, online surveys, small group meetings and (pre-pandemic) in-person events provided multiple convenient options for community participation.

REPLICATION

The 2030 Strategic Vision Plan sets a new standard for Greensboro and downtown plans across the US. DGI and its partners have been developing effective strategic plans for downtown Greensboro every ten years. Several high-profile and transformative projects in previous plans are now part of the downtown fabric, including a state-of-the-art performing arts center, greenway loop around downtown, and minor league baseball stadium.

The 2030 Plan improved upon previous efforts through an extensive community-centric process, by developing more robust strategies, and by creating a fine-grained implementation action plan. The Plan document is highly visual and easy to understand by residents, developers, investors, city and county staff, property owners, community advocates and other audiences.

The plan process and engagement efforts are easily replicable and scalable for future efforts. Each community-centered activity was designed for flexibility and adapted for multiple platforms (i.e., online and in-person, with posters and iPads). The document, process and community engagement strategy each provide a model for replication in Greensboro and other mid-sized cities and by downtown place management organizations.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The mission and charge for the 2030 Plan was bold, expansive and ambitious. At the same time, the process was designed to be logical, linear and transparent, while preserving flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.

The profound challenges of 2020 added complexity to the day-to-day work of DGI and its partners and altered the community engagement plan. The DGI/MIG project team was able to pivot to meet these challenges by moving to virtual events, re-engaging stakeholders, and modifying draft recommendation and priorities.

Plan strategies, projects and action items respond to these once-in-a-lifetime challenges and complexity by embracing elegant solutions that provide multiple benefits. For example, actions that increased opportunities for safe outdoor dining and Open Streets are included in the plan as long-term policy changes and improvements that both support local businesses and contribute to an engaging, active pedestrian environment. Adapting existing indoor and outdoor spaces to create opportunities for local businesses with an emphasis on BIPOC entrepreneurs creates exciting downtown environments that will support individual residents and expand access to opportunity.