IDA DOWNTOWN ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

DECATUR TOWN CENTER PLAN 2.0

SUMMARY

City of Decatur, Planning & Economic Development

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Located in the heart of DeKalb County, the City of Decatur is a vibrant community known throughout Metro Atlanta as a walkable island in an otherwise car-dominated region. Home to notable restaurants, three MARTA stations and a charming small-town feel, by 2030 Decatur is projected to grow from 25,000 to 28,000 Decaturites. With momentum on its side and quality of life in mind, the city's comprehensive plan champions Downtown Decatur as best positioned to accommodate this growth and demand.

As the mixed-use core of the city with access to transit, downtown is primed to continue to grow and improve. Through extensive community engagement that included three community meetings, online activities, online and paper surveys, booths at community festivals, stakeholder roundtables and a steering committee of community leaders, Decaturites shared a vision for the future of downtown that was overwhelmingly positive and beaming with opportunity. The result is a plan that outlines a vibrant future for downtown: A greener, more walkable and more livable district that is welcoming to all residents and visitors. The plan's seven goal statements, 23 Objectives, and 34 Action Items establish a blueprint for downtown's next phase of evolution. From a refreshed vision for Decatur Square – the city's premiere community gathering space – to concepts for shared streets, mixed-use developments and a new ambassador program, the Decatur Town Center Plan 2.0 is both visionary and geared toward implementation.

INNOVATION

The 1982 Town Center Plan set out to address downtown's over-reliance on surface parking lots. Since then, downtown has added mixed-use buildings on empty lots and downtown has experienced an influx of new residents. However, much of the northern half of downtown is still dominated by auto-oriented development patterns and streets that are devoid of street trees and pedestrian comfort.

As such, this plan focused on the Commerce Drive corridor on the northern side of downtown. Originally built as a traffic bypass for downtown, this thoroughfare is typified by surface parking and large setbacks. Recent redevelopment has introduced a more urban condition, with walkable streetscapes and mixed-use development with ground floor uses. Understanding this opportunity, the planning team developed conceptual plans for Opportunity Sites emphasizing walkable spaces, ample public spaces, new retail amenities and sustainable infrastructure. The Commerce Drive corridor is also reimagined with street trees, wide sidewalks and bike infrastructure that ties into the regional trail network. In doing so, these improvements support new development while also serving existing residents by increasing walkability, providing gathering spaces and adding new businesses.

This refreshed vision for the future builds on Decatur's strong planning history and sets out a roadmap for successful implementation. The market is already responding. A new 241-room hotel will redevelop three parking lots on Commerce Drive without the addition of new parking, and nearby property owners are currently working on concepts to redevelop their properties.

OUTCOME

The City of Decatur is committed to implementing the Town Center 2.0 Plan and is already undergoing key initiatives to realize this vision. In its implementation chapter, the plan identifies immediate priorities to jump-start success in the first days following plan adoption, outlined in the plan as a 100-day Action Plan. Since the adoption of the plan, the City of Decatur and the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) has lived up to its commitment through the following actions:

- The DDA implemented various pilot programs to test ideas outlined in the plan, including a Downtown Clean Team with extra services for trash collection and leaf blowing, a free downtown circulator to connect downtown residents with a nearby grocery store and a Square Safety Team to provide additional officers during weekends and nights.
- The City and the DDA will launch a new Downtown Ambassador program to enhance the downtown experience, expected to begin June 2024.

- The City and the DDA will be working to provide clear and concise parking information, update public parking wayfinding signs, expand on-street parking management to new high-demand streets and reprice hourly rates and violations.
- The City is embarking on a future collaboration with Zero Empty Spaces to set up art installations at vacant downtown storefronts, starting in May of 2024.
- In preparation and anticipation of the 2026 World Cup in Atlanta, the City, DDA and the Tourism Bureau will be investing in projects aimed at implementing the plan's vision for a reimagined Decatur Square.

EXECUTION

The Decatur Town Center Plan 2.0 was undertaken as a 10-month planning process between the fall of 2022 and the summer of 2023, completed within the intended schedule and delivering a once-in-a-generation opportunity to refresh downtown. The planning process balanced various factors: A need for high quality on-the-ground engagement expected by an active and highly engaged downtown resident base, the city's desire to complete the planning process by the end of the fiscal year to allow for funding allocation for key implementation items, and a high level of interest and scrutiny from the public resulting from a high-profile project in Decatur's signature district.

Through in-person and online engagement, the City of Decatur, the community and the planning team worked together to leverage these pressures into onward momentum and create a fresh vision for the next 10 years of downtown growth. Through goal statements that branch out into objectives and action items, this plan provides a vision for the future of downtown that is built on the foundation of comprehensive community engagement. The plan was unanimously adopted by the City Commission in June of 2023, within schedule for Fiscal Year 2024 budgeting.

REPRESENTATION

The Decatur Town Center Plan 2.0 Process engaged more than 1,000 Decaturites who shared their passion and love for downtown. Throughout the community engagement process, Decaturites described a walkable and vibrant downtown beloved by the community. The voices engaged through this process reflect the diversity of the community for which this plan is intended. The process, led by a team of City Staff and the planning team, convened the following groups, meetings and platforms to craft the vision for downtown outlined in this document: A Steering Committee of 17 community leaders representing a broad spectrum of downtown residents, businesses and organizations; 15 Stakeholder Focus Groups with multiple individual interviews and follow ups to engage with those most familiar with downtown; a dedicated project website with online activities including an online survey and an interactive map to better reach a wide range of Decaturites; presence at community festivals, events, board meetings and neighborhood association gatherings; nontraditional engagement events, such as pop-ups, running club gatherings, walking tours and "meetings in a box;" and three community meetings, held at each of the three project phases, to have one-on-one conversations with Decaturites and share the plan's progress and recommendations.

REPLICATION

From the very beginning of this process, it became clear that the quality of the downtown experience was a key concern to visitors and residents alike. The planning team consistently heard from residents, stakeholders and community members with concerns about downtown's safety, cleanliness and usability. This includes issues related to the unhoused population, the lack of lighting, outdated wayfinding signage and unclear parking information, key factors that impact how downtown is perceived.

The complexity of downtown management is a familiar challenge for many of Decatur's peer downtowns. To address these key concerns, the plan includes a Downtown Experience section that introduces recommendations focused on making downtown more accessible, safer and welcoming. These recommendations include the creation of a downtown ambassador program, updating signage and wayfinding, providing clear and concise parking information and connecting and collaborating with programs focused on the unhoused population. To ensure its implementation, the plan recommends expanding the capacity of the Decatur Development Authority (DDA) to engage with property owners, businesses and the development community on these and other key issues. Following the plan's adoption, the City and DDA immediately started implementing some of these key ideas as outlined in the plan's 100-day Action Plan.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Downtown Decatur is home to an active and engaged citizenry of 3,500 residents. Since 2014, a subset of downtown residents formed the Downtown Decatur Neighbors (DDN) and quickly championed the case for a new Downtown Master Plan. As early advocates, the DDN expected a central role in the planning process outside of what the city's RFP originally suggested.

Recognizing the importance of this group in having resident buy-in, the City and planning team devised a robust engagement strategy for downtown residents that was beyond what was outlined in the scope. This engagement included planning team attendance at four DDN meetings, hosting a weekend resident walking tour of downtown and including a DDN member on the Steering Committee.

The DDN's priorities presented both a challenge and an opportunity for the planning team. Their desire for a more livable downtown echoed much of the citywide engagement results; however, the group also was hesitant to welcome additional density and development to downtown, which is a key pillar in the City's comprehensive plan and largely supported by the community. Working together, the planning team addressed DDN's concerns and reached solutions that would welcome additional density to downtown, while preserving the area's small-town charm.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

https://decaturish.com/2023/06/decatur-downtown-development-authority-voices-support-of-downtown-master-plan/

https://decaturish.com/2024/01/decatur-mayor-discusses-affordable-housing-parks-and-recreation-during-speech/

https://decaturish.com/2023/06/decatur-planning-commission-recommends-approval-of-downtown-master-plan/

https://decaturish.com/2023/06/decatur-city-commission-approves-downtown-master-plan/

https://decaturish.com/2023/05/decatur-downtown-master-plan-includes-ideas-for-redesigning-the-square/

https://youtu.be/ICxWPXE-dK8?si=Tk9qr-RuDrEExJtb

https://www.decaturga.com/planning/page/decatur-town-center-plan-20-0