IDA DOWNTOWN ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

DOWNTOWN DURHAM BLUEPRINT: 2035

PINNACLE AWARD 2026
PLANNING, DESIGN AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUMMARY

Downtown Durham, Inc.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Blueprint emerged from the recognition that the pandemic fundamentally changed the trajectory of downtown Durham's growth. Hybrid and remote work patterns, safety concerns, rising housing costs, underperforming public spaces, disconnected transportation networks and a perceived erosion of Durham's authentic culture posed risks to downtown's long-term vibrancy. In response, community leaders developed an inclusive, 10-year strategic roadmap to ensure downtown remains vibrant, inclusive, economically resilient and culturally authentic through a coordinated and forward-looking approach. The plan focuses on seven primary goals driven by extensive community engagement: Rooted and Ready to celebrate Durham's cultural heritage; Open for Business to support and diversify small businesses; Welcome Home to expand mixed-income housing downtown; Walk and Roll to improve walkability and multimodal connectivity; Common Grounds to enhance and activate public spaces; Downtown Works to strengthen downtown's employment base and office market resilience; and The More You Know to improve communications around downtown safety, accessibility and belonging. Under these goals, the Blueprint provides detailed strategies for the future of downtown. Key components include transforming the one-way "Loop" road to reconnect downtown; identifying opportunities for new and enhanced parks, alleys and public spaces; reinvigorating the historic Black Wall Street; promoting mixed-income housing through strategic reuse of publicly-owned properties, and preserving old commercial and industrial space through a commercial trust. The Blueprint serves as not only a guide for investment downtown but also an implementation tool designed to align public agencies, economic development partners, community organizations and private stakeholders to collaborate and take action.

INNOVATION

The Blueprint is a highly integrated, community-driven and implementation-focused approach that moves beyond traditional master planning. It was a process of storytelling where the data helped inform and shape the engagement, while the engagement provided insight the data can't entirely reveal. The plan is intentionally inclusive and equity centered. Rather than treating culture and diversity as side notes, it embeds them into core strategies, positioning cultural identity as an economic asset, not just a historic reference. Multiple touchpoints with diverse communities helped to reach audiences that are not typically included in planning. It functions as a coordinating framework that aligns with concurrent transportation, zoning, parks and economic development initiatives. This ensures public investments reinforce one another while reducing redundancy and increasing feasibility. It includes a detailed implementation tool with clearly defined actions, key partners and timelines. Tactical Action Groups (TAG) are identified as meaningful ways to engage individuals dedicated to implementing key aspects of the Blueprint, providing an avenue for people of all backgrounds to take action. This approach balances catalytic ideas, like road redesigns, with practical, near-term actions, including improved wayfinding, safety ambassadors, small business support and programming activation. The Blueprint pairs vision with implementable actions, making it both aspirational and executable.

OUTCOME

The Blueprint advances an equitable, resilient vision for downtown Durham. It reserves publicly owned sites for mixed-income, mixed-use development; protects affordable ground-floor commercial space; supports small businesses; and promotes a diverse retail mix to prevent overreliance on food and beverage uses while creating a true downtown neighborhood. These strategies strengthen economic stability while ensuring opportunities for local entrepreneurs. Modernizing legacy infrastructure and investments in plazas, parks, alleys and other public spaces are central priorities. Enhancing safety, accessibility and functionality encourages gathering, supports businesses and improves everyday experiences for residents and visitors. The Blueprint reinforces Durham's distinct character by elevating its Black Wall Street legacy, creative culture, independent businesses and historic buildings. Strategies to celebrate Parrish Street, preserve older "funky" buildings as affordable office space and activating underutilized alleys further support downtown's authenticity. The Blueprint implementation tool identifies priority projects and integrates specific data points to measure and track success. In addition, several projects require a dedicated coalition of partners to see results. Recognizing this need, the Blueprint creates a structure called TAG that organizes partners around a specific action.

This structure provides flexibility to bring together stakeholders for short periods of time to accomplish projects that align with their mission. Since plan adoption, immediate actions include launching a Safety Ambassador team; completing Durham's first comprehensive Homeless Strategic Plan; opening a retail incubator supporting three African American female-owned businesses; conducting a retail market analysis; and activating downtown alleys through partnerships and grant-supported investments.

EXECUTION

The Blueprint's process demonstrated Downtown Durham Inc.'s deep commitment to meaningful community engagement and strong coordination with the many public and private plans shaping downtown. From the outset, DDI prioritized listening over assumptions. Even before the Blueprint started, DDI worked to develop a survey that generated almost 600 responses and informed an intensive 48-hour IDA site visit with a broad cross-section of downtown stakeholders. This work revealed critical challenges that shaped an RFP and scope for the Blueprint, centered on advancing equitable economic growth and strengthening downtown's cultural ecosystem. Blueprint planners committed to reaching people that normally do not participate and from communities often marginalized in the city. Feedback loops ensured a back-and-forth discussion with people to develop ideas and refine strategies. The process included surveys, pop-ups across the city, interviews, city staff coordination and panels including the widely popular Black Voices for the Future event. All of this served to intentionally elevate underrepresented voices. In the final year, the team finalized the plan by creating a detailed implementation tool clearly identifying specific tasks, partners and timelines. The plan was unanimously adopted by the Durham City Council as a Small Area Plan, supplementing the Comprehensive Plan.

ENGAGEMENT/REPRESENTATION

The Blueprint was intentional, inclusive, equitable and community-driven. Engagement included 2,230 survey respondents, hundreds of participants at nine pop-ups, 75 attendees at the Black Voices for the Future panel and 200+ open house participants. Combined with a 15-member Steering Committee, interviews with 20 cross-sector stakeholders and 38 local businesses and surveys of 99 downtown employees, these touchpoints ensured representation across race, income, age and professional backgrounds. Targeted outreach included visiting Latino community hubs with bilingual materials and staff and partnering with local youth arts organization Blackspace to integrate engagement activities into popular Black community events. Equity is embedded in the plan's strategies, elevating Parrish Street's Black Wall Street legacy, proposing a Latino cultural hub, expanding mixed-income housing and improving safety perceptions without criminalizing vulnerable populations. The Blueprint impacts a wide range of stakeholders: Residents benefit from housing diversity, safer streets and improved public spaces. Small businesses gain technical support, activation strategies and more affordable spaces. Developers and property owners receive clearer design expectations and policy direction. Visitors experience improved wayfinding, programming and family-friendly amenities. Downtown Durham, Inc. has and continues to lead coordination, implementation and stakeholder outreach, serving as the bridge between the community, city leadership and private partners.

REPLICATION

The Blueprint was designed as a flexible framework rather than a rigid master plan, making it highly adaptable to changing economic, political and development conditions. First, its recommendations are structured in phases, allowing cities to prioritize quick wins—such as programming public spaces, improving signage, supporting small businesses, or deploying safety ambassadors—before undertaking larger capital investments like street redesigns or plaza reconstruction. This makes the model scalable for communities with limited funding. Second, the Blueprint separates policy direction from site-specific design, meaning its core strategies—mixed-income housing, inclusive placemaking, retail diversification, mobility improvements, and safety initiatives—can be applied to other downtowns facing similar challenges, including hybrid work impacts or rising vacancies. Third, the plan emphasizes leveraging existing assets rather than requiring new land acquisition. Activating alleys, improving curb management, aligning with ongoing transportation or zoning updates and strengthening partnerships with local institutions are approaches that can be replicated regardless of market size. Finally, the Blueprint's engagement model—broad survey with targeted outreach to historically underrepresented groups—can be adapted to communities of varying demographics. By combining phased implementation, scalable strategies, cross-sector coordination and asset-based development, the Blueprint provides a replicable model for downtown revitalization regardless of geography, size, budget or audience/end user.