Downtown Parry Sound
Sustainability Report & Recommendations

Prepared by: Downtown Task Team

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Sustainability Report and Recommendations

1.0. Background

At the November 17th Council meeting, direction was given for staff to work with the Downtown Business Association (DBA) to bring forward a comprehensive strategy as to how we can ensure the long-term viability of the downtown:

> comparing what we do with other communities;

> what is allowed to be done;

> assess how we are meeting our stated goals of our Official Plan and Zoning By-law;

> staff to provide Council with an indication on how this will impact the budget in moving forward and taking actions.

This direction resulted from discussion about parking in the downtown. Through this discussion, it became apparent that parking was but part of a bigger problem, that being, sustainability of the downtown.

It was further recognized that the vitality of the downtown really is a community matter, not just a matter for the Town and Downtown Business Association (DBA). To that end, a task team was developed consisting of representation from the Parry Sound Area Chamber of Commerce, the DBA, downtown business owners and property owners, and the Town. The task team has been meeting weekly since January and has followed a strategic framework in developing the recommendations which is discussed further later in the report. It could be said that the entire exercise has been about building community.

In 2015, the DBA hired a consultant to prepare a Downtown Consumer and Market Study. The study identified was very comprehensive and identified several recommendations. The number of recommendations alone, made the implementation overwhelming. The DBA did, however, identify recommendations that they saw as priorities:

- Memorandum of Understanding: Town of Parry Sound and the DBA
- Research funding opportunities
- Retail recruitment
- Retail retention
- Events (families & young adults)/Retention
- Working committee – communication plan

The Downtown Consumer and Market Study served as a resource document for the task team.

The task team represents a collaborative and this is what makes it different from past revitalization efforts. The coming together, collective recognition and appreciation of the important role the downtown plays in our community's economic and social health creates an opportunity for unique solutions.

2.0. **The Importance of the Downtown**

Roger Brooks is an internationally-renowned expert in the field of marketing and branding, with extensive experience in downtown revitalization. Mr. Brooks and his team have done work throughout North American and Europe, including Bracebridge, Kenora, Huntsville, Collingwood, Alliston, Tobermory, Owen Sound and Orangeville to name a few comparable communities. Following is an excerpt from Mr. Brooks' presentation regarding the integral role and purpose of a downtown as part of a community.

"1. The heart and soul of every community, besides its people, is its downtown. The health of a community can instantly be portrayed by the vitality of its downtown. It is the litmus test for all your economic development efforts – both tourism and non-tourism. Downtown provides that all-important first impression of the community that answers the questions: "Is this a place I'd want to live? A place my employees would want to live? A place I'd want to hang out? Show off to friends and relatives?" If you want people to visit your community, to open or relocate a business there, or move to your town, downtown needs to be a place they'd enjoy spending time in.

2. The number one activity of visitors throughout the world is shopping, dining and entertainment in a pedestrian friendly setting. It's typically not the reason we go to a destination, but it is the top diversionary activity of visitors once they're there.

3. Consider this: The average visitor is active 14 hours a day, yet they only spend four to six hours with the primary activity that brought them there. Then they spend eight to ten hours with diversionary, or secondary activities. Diversionary activities are things they could do closer to home but will do while in town. As an example, Branson, Missouri hosts 7.5 million visitors a year, and the average visitor will see one or two shows a day, totaling approximately four hours. The 49 theaters are what brings them to town (the primary lure), but once there, they spend the rest of their time shopping, dining, at theme parks and attractions, or on recreational pursuits: hiking, biking, boating, fishing, golf, etc.

4. Here's the amazing statistic: Secondary activities are where 80% of all visitor spending takes place. It's ok to be a "diversionary" activity. When we're out fishing or hiking or biking, we are not spending money. When we are competing in a sports game, we are not spending money. But when we're done, guess what? We're off looking for the nearest watering hole, great shops, restaurants, and entertainment. Why did Disney build Downtown Disney outside of Disney World? To capture that other 80% of visitor spending. Smart move.

5. Curb appeal can account for 70% of visitor sales at restaurants, golf courses, wineries, retail shops, and lodging facilities. Amazing isn't it? You could spend millions of marketing dollars to pull people into your community, but none of that will make a visitor walk into a restaurant or retail shop and say, "Here's my credit card." The merchant must do that. It's that old adage of "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Many merchants have no idea how to pull customers in the door by presenting a beautiful, welcoming entry with planters, benches, attractive signage and window displays.

We all travel. Have you ever uttered these words: "That looks like a nice place to eat." Other than asking a local, or finding where the most local pickup trucks are parked, this is our only other clue to help make a decision.

6. If local residents do not hang out in your downtown, neither will visitors. Visitors are not looking for "best kept secrets" or "solitude" when downtown. They are looking for places where other people go. They want to be in a lively, thriving environment. If downtown has the activities and attractions to draw residents, visitors will want to go there too. The number one reason people travel is to visit friends and relatives. When they visit you, where do you take them? That's what I thought.

7. Then there's the 10+10+10 rule or the "Rule of Critical Mass." After researching 400 towns and downtown districts in the U.S. and Canada, we found the minimum critical mass it takes to make downtown a destination. In just three lineal blocks (not square blocks) you must have a minimum of ten places that serve food: soda fountain, bistro, café, bakery, confectionary, sit-down restaurant, coffee shop, to name a few. The second ten are destination retail shops. These are NOT big box and chain stores, but ten specialty shops. These might include galleries, clothing, outfitters, artisans in action, wine shops, books, antiques (not second hand stores), home accents, gardening and gourmet cooking stores. And the third ten: Places open after 6:00 pm, preferably entertainment.

8. And that brings us to today's most important and amazing statistic. **A full 70% of all consumer spending (locals and visitors alike) takes place after 6:00 pm. Are you open?** And you wonder why downtowns are dying while lifestyle retail centers are thriving.

For you in the tourism industry, consider this: people spend the night where there are things to do after 6:00. Not just dining, but also shopping, activities or entertainment.

Few people, particularly leisure travelers, want to be holed up in a hotel room twiddling their thumbs watching reruns of Fear Factor.

These few statistics are why more and more Destination Marketing Organizations are now being forced to step out of the comfort zone of focusing all their efforts on marketing, and into the realm of product development. After all, a good product sells itself, and many downtowns need work to become a good product."

The Main Streets program is a practiced downtown revitalization program in the US. Its principles are that "the downtown district is the most visible indicator of community pride, along with its economic and social health. It is either an asset or a liability in the effort to recruit new residents, new businesses and industries, retirees, tourists, and others to your community and to keep those you already have. Quality of life is what separates successful cities and towns from declining communities in the new millennium. Finally, your downtown or neighborhood commercial district is the visual representation for your community's heritage. The architecture of your commercial district is a physical expression of your community's history.

Downtown districts are prominent employment centers. Even the smallest commercial district employs hundreds of people, and often the district is collectively the community's largest employer.

The downtown district is a reflection of community image, pride, prosperity, and level of investment — critical factors in business retention and recruitment efforts.

Downtown represents a significant portion of the community's tax base. If the district declines, property values drop, placing more of a tax burden on other parts of town.

The traditional commercial district is an ideal location for independent businesses, which in turn:

Keeps profits in town with local owners

Supports other local businesses and services

Supports local families with family-owned businesses

Supports local community projects

Provides a stable economic foundation with direct ties to the community

Downtown is the historic core of the community. Its buildings embody the community's past and its visual identity."

Statistically, the importance and impact of a healthy downtown on the overall health of a community has been well studied and documented.

3.0. **Town of Parry Sound Policies: The Downtown as a Priority**

The Town of Parry Sound recognizes the importance and role of the downtown as a contributor to the overall health of the community; as such, many policies and procedures give priority or prominence to the downtown.

The Strategic Plan identifies the Downtown as a priority by stating, "supporting the implementation of the Downtown Consumer and Market study will enhance the downtown experience by creating opportunities for enhanced shopping and potentially attracting new housing opportunities."

The Town's Official Plan includes several sections that identify the downtown as a priority and set it apart from other commercial districts, as noted below:

2.2.4
The Town will continue its commitment to develop, maintain and enhance an active and vital downtown core with a pedestrian oriented, culturally and historically rich Central Business District, integrally linked with the waterfront.

2.8.1.2

Economic development is focused on:

a) protection and expansion of the employment land base (commercial and industrial);

b) strengthening the Central Business District as the prime location for commercial, office, business services and cultural activities;

c) the transformation of the Waterfront Area into a major tourist and service centre;

d) stimulating and encouraging the growth of the tourist industry on a four season basis through a supply of accommodation facilities, amenities, tourist destinations, activities and an attractive natural environment;

e) encouraging the development of home based businesses provided the use is compatible with adjacent land uses; and

f) providing training and education opportunities to enhance and develop a qualified labour force in the Town.

2.8.3.1
The Central Business District will remain the principal focus of commercial and administrative activity in the Town. This role will be supported by ensuring that the traditional advantages of the area are maintained.

2.8.3.2
Continual upgrading and redevelopment of the existing Downtown will be supported by the Town in conjunction with the business community. Efforts will be made to:

a) maintain an adequate supply of on street and off street parking;

b) enhance the appearance of the Downtown through building repair and streetscape improvements;

c) improve municipal infrastructure; and

d) adopt improvement programs for the Downtown Area.

2.8.3.3
The commercial function of the Town is supplemented in the District Commercial and Highway Commercial designations where developments not able to be accommodated in the Central Business District may be located.

2.8.3.4
The planned function of the Central Business District will be protected. In the following circumstances, a market impact study shall be undertaken by a qualified professional, submitted to and approved by the Town and must demonstrate that the planned function of the Central Business District will not be prejudiced as a result of the development:

a) any Planning Act application submitted to increase, add to or change the permissions in the existing Zoning By-law for lands designated District Commercial; and

b) any application to amend this Plan to designate additional lands District Commercial or to add a new Commercial designation which would have the effect of allowing additional floor space over that allowed currently by this Plan.

3.2.1.3
Commercial activity is divided into five types according to economic function, scale of development, range of activities and locational requirements.
a) The Central Business District functions as the primary service centre for the Town and contains the most important concentration and broader range of services, including retail and service commercial, administrative and cultural facilities. It also functions as the historic core of the Town.

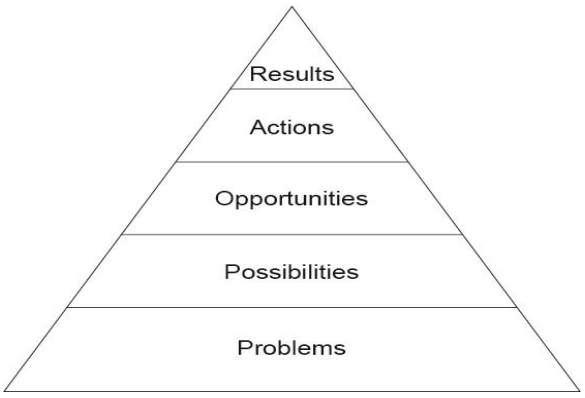
5.9.4
The character of the downtown area will be preserved through the maintenance of building fronts and heights along Seguin and James Streets. Development will be supported that preserves the architectural style and periods reflected in the downtown area.

The Community Improvement Plan (CIP) also identifies the downtown as an area where incentives such as the Façade Improvement program apply.

The levels of service around snow removal are higher in the downtown. Snow removal efforts occur more frequently in downtown than outlying areas. Snow plowing occurs sooner in the downtown than outlying areas. Sidewalks area are cleared and sanded/salted earlier than most other areas. Garbage is picked up daily in the summer months. Sidewalks in the downtown are swept earlier than others. Placement of cans and benches are done as soon as possible before outlying areas. Street sweeping is completed downtown earlier than other areas.

4.0. **The Task Team – Strategic Framework**

Tackling the issue of the health and vitality of the downtown is no short order. To help keep the task team focused, a strategic framework was developed and worked through in a contemplative and explorative manner.



Nothing was off the table. All ideas, suggestions, comments were invited and all members of the task team were engaged and demonstrated tremendous interest and genuine care for the downtown and the community. The commitment by all members to meet weekly confirmed this.

4.1. **Problems**

The first step in the strategic framework was identification of the problems. Through a dot-mocracy exercise, problem statements were identified. The problems appeared to focus around four main areas:

- Apathy
- Resources
- Vision, common sense of purpose, neighbourhood
- Destination, gathering, sense of community

Problem statements were identified for each problem. The problem statements were used to then identify possibilities, opportunities, actions and results, per the strategic framework.

The problem statements all spoke to 'value'. What value does the downtown offer the community? What value does the downtown offer the consumer? What value does the community offer the downtown? How is the downtown connecting with the community, and the community with the downtown? Value for the DBA members is also an issue. What would add value to the Downtown?

The lack of leadership was also identified as a problem. Currently, there is separate leadership through the Parry Sound Area Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Business Association, individual businesses and the Town of Parry Sound; however, there is no overall organization or structure in place and therefore no overall leader.

The roles of the various organizations were discussed. What is the role of the DBA, the Town, individual businesses, and others?

Processes, such as approving buskers on the downtown streets, were also discussed.

Commercial tax rate is high, higher than comparable, competitive communities. What options exist, or incentives to counter this? Incentives such as those provided through the Renew program should be explored.

Resources, or the lack thereof, is a significant problem, not just for the downtown but for the other partner organizations. How are budgets being spent? Is there a return on that investment? And, is the spend creating value? How is the parking budget being spent?

What is the product of the downtown? What are we selling? What is Downtown Parry Sound? Is parking a problem only in certain areas? What are we focusing on; retail or services, other? What is the brand of the downtown? All these questions were raised, discussed and considered when developing possibilities, opportunities and ultimately the recommendations, all connecting back to the matter of creating value.

4.2. **Possibilities & Opportunities**

Problem statements were reviewed with a view to creating value for the community and downtown. The task team identified priorities of trends or movements that could create value for the downtown and community. Champions for each of these movements

already reside in our community. Engaging them will help with implementation and grass roots participation and buy-in.

i) Locally Produced
- a number of products are produced locally, everything from soaps to boats and everything in between. Create an inventory of locally produced products, promote and market them.

ii) Active Living & Outdoorsing
- with the proximity to the waterfront, downtown Parry Sound is a perfect setting for taking commerce outside; look to create more people-friendly outdoor spaces, patios, etc.
- our natural environment offers a perfect opportunity for creating an active living atmosphere in the downtown. Open Streets is a good example.

iii) Culture and Heritage
- tell the stories about our heritage and culture; coordination of look/ preservation of buildings, designations, façade improvement program, design guidelines, site plan control, sign by-laws, canopy of trees, modern infrastructure.

In keeping with the need to create value in the downtown, the question – What would add value to the Downtown? - was discussed. Items such as parking, wifi, standard of care, street cleanliness, changing art work in Jukes Lake, installing and removing decorations, maintenance, link to the waterfront areas were also discussed. All of these items lead to possibilities and opportunities, many of which could be addressed through a Memorandum of Understanding between the Town and the DBA and other community collaboratives. The MOU would clearly identify expectations, resources and priorities.

The DBA boundaries cover significant area. This can be a good thing, but it can also pose its own challenges. Within the boundaries, there are natural differences or variations in make-up and character. This lends itself nicely to the development or identification of downtown neighbourhoods which create opportunities/possibilities for retail and service attraction, themes, and beautification. The downtown area is not homogenous – there are naturally-occurring zones or neighbourhoods.

Philosophies and focus can become stale and need to be nimble to address the changing environment. There is a collaborative opportunity to look at the DBA differently. Is it time for a change in philosophy, refocusing or restructuring?

4.3. **Actions**

Actions have been identified in the form of concepts which have been developed into the following recommendations. For each priority, a goal statement has been prepared which captures the overall intent linking it back to the Town's Strategic Plan and policies that currently identify the downtown as a priority, such as the Official Plan.

4.3.1 **Downtown Parry Sound is a priority**

Recommendations:

a) That Council adopt the following Goal Statement:

That Council of the Town of Parry Sound affirms its commitment to the Downtown as stated in Section 2.2.4 in the Official Plan being to "develop, maintain and enhance an active and vital downtown core with a pedestrian oriented, culturally and historically rich Central Business district, integrally linked with the waterfront."

b) That the Downtown Task Team continue as the Downtown Steering Committee to provide stewardship and oversight to the implementation of the Downtown Sustainability Report movements and recommendations. And, that the Downtown Steering Committee develop terms of reference and skills matrix for recruiting members, for Council's approval.

c) That Downtown maintenance processes be reviewed and recommendations developed through the Downtown Steering Committee in consultation with the Director of Public Works, recognizing the Downtown as a high priority for standard of care.

d) That the DBA members work collaboratively with the Town on initiatives.

e) That the Downtown Steering Committee develop a position description and budget for a downtown custodian and that the Town and DBA fund the position for a 2016 tourist season recruitment.

f) That the DBA and Chamber of Commerce be requested to develop a volunteer downtown Ambassador program for implementation.

g) That the Town develop a Downtown Standard of Care policy with accompanying checklist, with input from the Downtown Steering Committee. Policy to include cleanliness of public spaces such as parking lots, parking spaces, laneways, and park space.

h) That a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) be drafted by the Downtown Steering Committee for approval by the Town and the DBA. MOU to identify expectations, financial commitments, collaborative programs, marketing co-

operative opportunities, infrastructure, level of service and standard of care, banners and installation, etc.

i) That the Steering Committee develop a position description and budget for a 3-year contract position (position title yet to be determined), to implement the approved Downtown Sustainability Report recommendations, and that an application be made to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for funding. If approved, the position would be advertised for a 2016 hire. Council and the DBA be requested to contribute the 50% matching funding from reserves.

4.3.2 **Parking**

a) That Council adopt the following Goal Statement:

Considering the provision of well-maintained parking spaces, will be viewed as a value-added component to the Downtown experience.

b) That Council approve the parking program as follows:
2 hour complimentary parking for on-street parking;
4 hour complimentary parking for lot parking

Unlimited, complimentary parking on Sundays, lots and on-street.

c) Following the 2 hour and 4 hour complimentary parking periods, By-law staff will provide an approximate ½ hour grace period before issuing a ticket. If the recipient of the ticket can prove they have been shopping/spending money downtown (ie: sales receipt), they can attend to the Town Office where By-law staff will consider cancelling the ticket.

d) That parking zones be identified in the downtown. Re-parking will not be permitted within the same zone.

e) That Council direct staff to develop a zero-tolerance policy for re-parking offenders. A Court summons will be issued for chronic re-parking offenders.

f) That Gibson Street (south of the Bell building), be designated as a long-term, free parking zone.

g) That parking enforcement be ‘high’ in the following zones:

i)James Street from McMurray Street to the CP Train Trestle bridge.
ii)Seguin Street from Church Street to the Seguin River bridge.

h) That the Town and DBA provide education to business owners on the downtown parking provisions.

i) That staff provide a cost analysis of removing the meters.

j) That the Downtown Steering Committee and By-law Department work together to conduct an annual review, reporting to Council and the DBA.

4.3.3 **Neighbourhoods**

a) That Council adopt the following Goal Statement:

   Envisioning the Downtown as a collection of neighbourhoods will build pride in the Downtown creating a culture of ownership and engagement

b) Develop a vision/specific use for each neighbourhood as part of the Zoning By-law Review process.

c) That consideration be given to beautification – different flowers, banners, etc., in each neighbourhood.

d) Conduct an audit and inventory for each neighbourhood for items such as wayfinding signage, condition of benches, equipment, etc.

4.3.4 **Signage/Built Environment/Façade**

a) That Council adopt the following Goal Statement:

   Expression and creation of sense of place will be strengthened through signage, the built environment and facades.

b) That Council include Façade Improvement Program funds in the 2017 budget process given the continued inquiries and demand for the program. Further, that the Steering Committee identify a vision and target/priority area for program eligibility. Further, that the Downtown Steering Committee review the Façade Improvement Policy.

c) That the Steering Committee identify/define what beautification means and looks like and what resources are available or required to see results.

d) That an inventory of downtown wayfinding signage be done.

e) That the Town's sign by-law be reviewed with a view to what is working and what could be improved.

f) That the Downtown Steering Committee work with a media company and investigate the feasibility of installing a banner face sign on the CN bridge (Seguin/Bowes Street).

4.3.5 **Vacancy**

a) That Council adopt the following Goal Statement:

Exploring and providing creative opportunities to increase occupancy will strengthen the Downtown.

b) That options to the Vacancy Rebate be explored.

c) That the Renew program be investigated with a recommendation to be brought back to Council regarding the feasibility of the program.

4.3.6 **Rethink/Reinvent the Downtown Business Association**

a) That Council adopt the following Goal Statement:

As the core of the community and the link to the waterfront, the Downtown Business Association will set priorities and undertake initiatives that result in a return on investment by providing value to visitors, residents and business owners alike.

b) That the DBA be requested to consider developing a board membership skills matrix, and that a philosophy of appointing a skills-based board be adopted.

c) That the DBA be requested to conduct an inventory of existing members to determine any gaps in skills sets.

d) That the DBA be requested to review their mandate with consideration to undertaking activities/initiatives that see a return on investment.

4.4 Communication

Communication with the members, community and partners is critical to the success of the implementation of the recommendations of the Downtown Sustainability Report.

The development of a communication plan is a priority for the Steering Committee, a plan that is long-term and includes both traditional and social media applications. Ensuring that someone with marketing/communication expertise is appointed to the Steering Committee is important.

4.5 Next Steps

The Downtown Sustainability Report will be considered by Council at the May 3rd Council meeting. Implementation is obviously key to a sustainable downtown and continued community momentum.

The Task Team is not afraid nor shying away from the hard work associated with the implementation of the recommendations.

The Task Team is recommending that the Downtown Sustainability Task Team continue as the Downtown Steering Committee to provide stewardship to the report and recommendations.