

The Draft Downtown Ithaca 2020 Strategy

An Executive Summary

February 2010

This executive summary of Downtown Ithaca's 2020 Strategy outlines the key concepts, goals, strategies and action items that downtown, the City of Ithaca, and entire community must take if downtown is to adapt to our changing world. There are several big ideas that permeate the 2020 Strategy. These big ideas are the underlying themes in the directions downtown Ithaca must take in the next ten years.

CONCEPTS AND BIG IDEAS:

During public input sessions and neighborhood workshops that were held in 2008/2009, the question of defining a desired character for downtown was discussed at each session. Several key themes emerged:

1. Downtown should be pedestrian friendly; easy to traverse and navigate on foot.
2. Downtown should feel urban. It should be different from other parts of the community.
3. Tall buildings are appropriate for downtown, within some rational range, provided they promote an environmental character that is pedestrian friendly and conducive to retail.
4. Ground floor commercial/retail space should be reserved.
5. There are ten "big ideas" that are basic to all of our future plans:
 - i. **Mixed Uses:** Downtown must have mixed-use projects and mixed-use streets.
 - ii. **A Dense Urban Core:** Downtown density and downtown success are inextricably connected.
 - iii. **Reducing Automotive Usage in Downtown:** We will pro-actively seek to reduce downtown dependence on the automobile whenever possible.
 - iv. **Transition Zones at Downtown's Edges:** The heights and densities of downtown should begin to scale down toward the neighborhoods.
 - v. **A Preference for Pedestrians:** The community wants a downtown that has a walkable scale and is considered pedestrian friendly.
 - vi. **Maintaining the Retail Street:** We must act to protect, preserve, and enhance the downtown retail core.
 - vii. **The Commons as a Transit Hub:** The Commons should be considered a key part of the community's public transit system.
 - viii. **In-Fill Development:** In-fill development is an environmentally conscious way to maximize limited downtown real estate.
 - ix. **Clustered Destinations:** There is a need for the community to seek to cluster pedestrian foot-traffic generating uses into downtown.
 - x. **Downtown as a Community Center:** Downtown should remain the community's focal center for major events, celebrations, and community gatherings.
 - xi. **A Leader in Green Practices and Sustainability:** Downtown should serve as a showcase for the community's broader interest in green and sustainable practices.

GOALS, STRATEGIES & ACTIONS

THE ITHACA COMMONS

- Ensure that there is a **long-term plan for the capital replacement, repair, and maintenance of the Commons.**
- The current Commons has functional and visual shortcomings that need to be identified and incorporated into a **new plan for updating and modernization.**
- Any updating and modernization plan and project for the Commons should contain a section devoted to infrastructure improvement, such as potable water delivery, run-off water collection and storm sewers, sanitary sewer upgrade, gas, electric, and fiber service delivery to abutting buildings, electrical and water servicing of the Commons, and Wi-Fi Internet service.

DOWNTOWN RETAIL

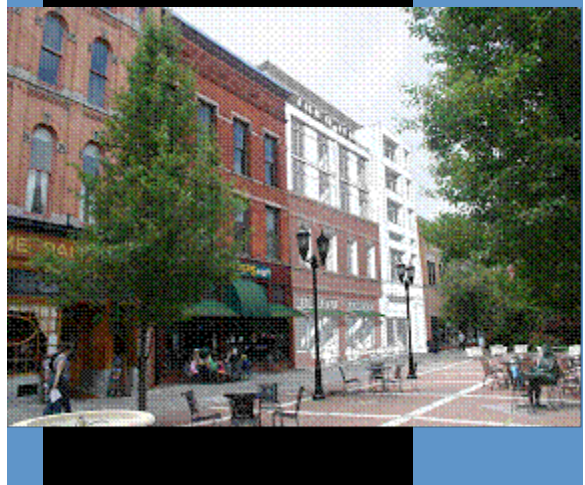
- Aim for a 5% annual turnover rate and a 5% vacancy rate.
- **Attract another 2-4 national tenants** to complement the existing retail inventory.
- Redesign the Commons and pedestrian linkages to better promote shopping experiences.
- Work to create an incentive program to **encourage diversity in downtown business ownership.**
- Work to ensure that there is compatibility between commercial districts. Plans for City commercial development should encourage compatibility rather than competing uses.
- Locate food & beverage operations so that they will complement retail businesses.
- Ensure that key street level location remain available for retail use.

According to a 2008 DIA volumetric study, developing just 50% of the in-fill and redevelopment property opportunities in downtown Ithaca will result in the potential for up to 1,075,000 SF for new residential spaces and 355,000 SF of new office space.

DOWNTOWN HOUSING

- Subject to future demand studies, **add up to 500 units of housing to downtown.**
- Downtown residential projects should be **mixed-use, and when financially feasible, mixed-income**, while **integrating other street-level uses into projects.**
- Respect transition zones along the edges of the downtown district to help maintain and promote the scale and character of the surrounding lower density residential neighborhoods.
- The City and County approved Urban Community Benefits Tax Abatement Program should be revised to better encourage desired outcomes. Since its 2007 revision, it has produced no new units of urban housing.

This artist's rendering shows the Night and Day building on the Ithaca Commons with additional floors, as part of a strategy that calls for a dense urban core and mixed use buildings.



- Affordable housing requires some level of public support and subsidy. Given the already present project gaps in conventional projects, it will be necessary for the community to **provide subsidy assistance and/or development incentives to help achieve downtown affordable units.**

DOWNTOWN OFFICE SECTOR

- **Increase the supply of downtown office space by 200,000 square feet** by the year 2020.
- **Add an additional 600 employees** to the downtown workforce by the year 2020.
- Based on the volumetric study appended to the full 2020 plan, downtown Ithaca has the capacity to **add another 1-2 major office buildings** by 2020.
- Downtown Ithaca should strive to **house at least 50% of the region's commercial office space.**
- New downtown buildings should be mixed-use, blending office use with retail and/or other commercial/foot traffic generating uses.
- Work with Cornell University and/or other stakeholders to **create a downtown business incubator project** to nurture new start-up businesses.
- Work with the three institutions of higher education to attract additional office employees and office space into downtown.
- The City of Ithaca and Tompkins County should investigate the feasibility of a new joint City/County administrative office building to be located in downtown.

DOWNTOWN ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURAL ARTS

- **Increase family entertainment venues** and add more family-friendly events.
- Add and market downtown Ithaca entertainment opportunities to and for students.
- **Add iconic art pieces** to the entrances to the Commons.
- Financially stabilize and **complete the restoration of the State Theatre.**
- **Add more restaurants, a music club, a brew pub, and ten new artist studios.**

OTHER DOWNTOWN INFRASTRUCTURE (NON-COMMONS)

- Downtown will be recognized and perceived to be more than the three blocks of the Commons.
- Develop a **capital repair and replacement plan for all existing downtown Ithaca garages.**
- Develop **capital repair and replacement plans** for the secondary Commons, Dewitt Park, and creek walk areas.
- **Improve crosswalks and curb cuts** throughout downtown to better assist pedestrian movement and facilitate wheelchair mobility. Add audible crosswalk devices as funds become available.
- **Complete the Six Mile Creek river walk** into the gorge.
- Explore the feasibility of **extending the Commons to the 300 East State Street, and the 100 West State Street blocks.**

TOURISM AND VISITORS

- Position downtown as a walking campus for conferences by utilizing the resources of various hotels and venues. Work with stakeholders to **create a downtown conference/meeting center.**
- Improve way-finding signage into downtown, particularly helping visitors find and access downtown from the major entry highways into the community.
- Create and maintain remote, portable downtown information kiosks that can be strategically located at key visitor destinations.

- Connect downtown to Collegetown and Cornell University through more frequent shuttles and/or fixed rail trolleys, or other public transit to enable visitors from Cornell to more easily access and experience downtown.
- Create a **joint community/Cornell/Ithaca College/TC3 downtown welcome and visitor center**.
- **Attract one or more additional hotels** to downtown Ithaca, to further solidify downtown as an overnight visitor destination.

TRANSPORTATION

- **Increase the number of downtown employees who use alternative, non-automotive means of transportation.** Explore the feasibility of guaranteed ride home programs, park and ride services with shuttles, and incentives for workers to use alternative forms of transportation.
- **Ensure downtown has sufficient parking capacity,** first from transportation demand management strategies and then, if needed, from adequate parking supply for cars, bicycles, and mopeds/motorcycles, to accommodate the desired density development in 2020.
- **Implement a shuttle service connecting Ithaca College and downtown** similar to TCAT Route 10.
- A financial and **physical feasibility study of a fixed rail trolley loop connecting downtown and Cornell/Collegetown should be undertaken,** as a preliminary step in investigating this option for enhancing service between these two community centers.
- **Contract for private municipal parking management or create a new and distinct parking department or Authority** charged with managing and maintaining our public parking.

SERVING YOUTH AND SENIORS

- Engage youth in the planning, promotion, and management of downtown Ithaca, and in learning about business and entrepreneurship. **Create a Downtown Youth Advisory Council** for the DIA
- Work with community partners to **explore the feasibility of creating a center for youth activities** in downtown. This is one of the most asked for items in meetings with high school students.
- Work with downtown attractions such as Cinemapolis, the Community School of Music and Arts, and the Kitchen Theatre to offer more activities and daytime events targeted to seniors.
- **Create a Downtown Senior Advisory Council** that would be tasked with providing insights and input from a senior citizen perspective to downtown management and development.
- Promote inter-generational activities.
- Improve mobility and work to ensure that seniors feel safe when visiting downtown.

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

- **Engage Cornell University, TC3 and Ithaca College in participating in new or additional projects** that will help them address key campus issues and needs. Explore projects that could involve and partner multiple institutions, ensuring that each project makes fiscal sense to each institution.
- Work with Cornell University to **explore the feasibility of a community-based business incubator.**
- Work with TC3 to **explore housing-related opportunities for students in downtown.**
- **Work with Ithaca College to explore a downtown project** that would address campus/student needs and provide the College with a strong and visible community presence

WORKING WITH OTHER CITY DISTRICTS

- Evaluate the potential for future BID expansion, either through boundary expansion or contracting with other nearby/ adjacent districts
- **Explore collaborative marketing opportunities with Collegetown and West End/Inlet Island** businesses that can demonstrate benefits accruing to both downtown and these other districts.
- **Ensure that the growth and development of all commercial districts is done in a complimentary manner,** not a competitive, zero-sum manner that will injure districts and cost the community.
- Work with the Town of Ithaca and stakeholders such as Ithaca College and Cornell University to **ensure that nodal growth in the town is compatible with a strong and healthy downtown.**
- **Obtain more frequent transit links using either mass or alternative public transportation** for day and evening hours between downtown and Collegetown/Cornell, the West End/Inlet Island.
- Improve the visual and physical streetscape linkages between downtown and the West End/Inlet Island and Collegetown.

DOWNTOWN AS A REGIONAL CENTER

- Create appropriate local financial tools to permit and assist downtown density efforts and downtown development projects.
- **Collaborate on regional efforts to contain and reduce sprawl,** farmland preservation and the open space view sheds that help provide rural character to our region.
- The Tompkins County Community Investment Incentive Program (CIIP) was created as a fiscal tool to help fill financial gaps that can prevent downtown/urban projects from moving forward. It is imperative that consideration of community benefits not result in a program that fails to deliver the needed gap funding to make downtown projects viable. The DIA and City, in conjunction with the IDA, should **undertake an economic assessment and possible recalibration of the CIIP program.**
- The Density Tax Abatement Program managed by the Tompkins County Industrial Development Agency can benefit other traditional village centers in the County that might benefit from a gap-financing tool to facilitate development projects. The DIA and City should work with the County IDA and/or other villages and town centers to facilitate their use of this tool.

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO DOWNTOWN ZONING

- Commons- 60 feet with a provision for additional upper story setbacks
- Incentive zoning- extra height for community benefits (affordable housing/ mixed income)
- East downtown – The Trebloc Block - 85 feet
- Seneca Street corridor – Strand site (75 feet); Bank of America site (100 feet); 100 East Seneca Street mid-block site (85 feet); Women’s Community Building (60 feet)
- Green Street corridor- Green garage (85 feet); Tompkins County Public Library site (100 feet); Sunoco gas station site (100 feet); Ithaca Journal area site (85 feet)
- West State Street corridor- Block 14- (60 feet); Medical building site (60 feet); 100 West State block empty lot- (60 feet); Health club site- (60 feet)
- South downtown sites- Pritchard site (60 feet); body shop site (75 feet)
- North downtown sites- HSBC site (75 feet); old County Library site (60 feet)
- Include the above locations in CBD zoning to encourage use of public versus on-site parking

VIEW THE ENTIRE DRAFT 2020 DOWNTOWN STRATEGIC PLAN AT: www.downtownithaca.com