



PRESS RELEASE

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City and DIA Complete Retail Study, Advance Coordinated Plan to Strengthen Ithaca's Commercial Districts

ITHACA, NY — The City of Ithaca and the Downtown Ithaca Alliance (DIA) today announced the completion of a comprehensive Retail Study & Strategy that provides a proactive, data-driven roadmap for strengthening Ithaca's commercial districts—while affirming that implementation is already well underway.

Conducted by MJB Consulting and led by retail strategist Michael Berne, the study evaluates retail conditions across Downtown and the Commons, West State Street, the West End/Waterfront, and Collegetown. It confirms that Ithaca possesses a distinctive competitive advantage: its nationally recognized arts vibrancy aligns with its substantial consumer demographic mix. Ithaca ranks second among mid-sized arts-vibrant communities, and sixth nationwide, a distinction the report identifies as central to the city's retail positioning and future growth.

The study, a companion piece to the City of Ithaca's 2024 Downtown Plan, concludes that in a market of Ithaca's size, retail success requires clarity, strategic tenant recruitment, and strong public-private-nonprofit coordination. Each business district must be clearly differentiated within the broader ecosystem, while citywide branding and recruitment efforts align with shared consumer characteristics and visitor demand.

"Ithaca has powerful fundamentals," said Berne. "Its arts identity, educated population, and student and visitor bases create real opportunity. These advantages can only be realized if districts are clearly positioned, recruitment is intentional, and the public and private sectors work together consistently and pragmatically."

A Strategic Framework for Growth

Citywide, the strategy organizes its recommendations into focus areas: using data to fully understand the market, refining branding, recruiting appropriate retail, supporting existing businesses, and enhancing the physical and experiential environment that attracts both merchants and customers. The strategy provides recommendations that are applicable Citywide, as well as outlines those specific to the respective districts studied.

For Downtown and the Commons, the Study reinforces Ithaca's role as a historic, walkable "arts town" and recommends targeted recruitment in arts and crafts, vintage and consignment, destination food and beverage, and entertainment uses that reinforce the city's identity. Continued activation of the Commons as Ithaca's social and cultural center is identified as a

priority, with emphasis on year-round programming that encourages people to linger and return.

On West State Street, which is anchored by contemporary food and beverage concepts, the strategy calls for preserving ground-floor retail, strengthening streetscape identity, and addressing quality-of-life concerns raised by merchants to ensure stability as redevelopment plans evolve. The West End/Waterfront remains relatively auto centric and should further capitalize on creating walkable connections to its adjoining neighborhoods while also establishing key retail opportunities.

In Collegetown, near Cornell University, the study recommends closer collaboration with university stakeholders to encourage vibrancy that is attractive to faculty and student recruitment and lifestyles emphasizing the need for strategic upgrades within the district's core strength of casual dining and convenience retail.

Momentum Already in Motion

While the Retail Study & Strategy provides formal direction, many of its recommendations have already been implemented through coordinated City, County, and DIA efforts.

In 2025, through American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding provided by the City, the Ithaca Retail Mini-Grant Program awarded \$172,245 through 32 grants to 28 businesses throughout Downtown and the City. Businesses used the funding for façade and interior improvements, marketing initiatives, and collaborative promotions. DIA is currently administering an additional \$50,000 round of Downtown-focused grants.

The City of Ithaca has committed an additional \$50,000 in 2026 to support key strategy recommendations for Downtown, including vacant storefront window activation, retail recruitment materials generation, placemaking initiatives on the Commons, and direct business assistance—building on several years of ongoing retail investment.

"Our downtown is home to vibrant and dynamic entrepreneurs that help define Ithaca's unique charm," said Mayor Robert Cantelmo, "Since I took office in 2024, we have been committed to grantmaking, business support, and placemaking partnerships with Downtown and this study promises to sharpen that focus and strengthen our coordination. This year's funding decision further underscores our deep commitment to supporting existing merchants and new businesses."

Dominick Reckio, Acting City Manager, stated, "this strategy highlights that our retailers and small businesses are the heartbeat of the City of Ithaca's economy. Our local businesses bring energy, character, and opportunity to every corner of Ithaca. I am excited about the opportunities this coordinated approach creates, and I'm proud of the work already underway to strengthen every commercial district in our City. We remain committed to supporting our merchants, encouraging entrepreneurship, and ensuring Ithaca continues to be a place where local businesses can grow and thrive."

DIA has expanded its recruitment and matchmaking efforts, maintaining a comprehensive list of available Downtown properties and working directly with prospective retailers and property owners to align opportunities. Data from both DIA and MJB Consulting are being used to

present Ithaca as a compelling, well-positioned market for targeted concepts. Tompkins County has supported recruitment of businesses that enhance retail offerings and complement activity at the Ithaca Downtown Conference Center.

Sustaining existing businesses remains equally important. Downtown is home to merchants that have operated for decades – some for more than a century—and DIA continues to provide HR training, grant guidance, marketing assistance, and general business consulting to support long-term stability.

“This strategy confirms that Ithaca has both the identity and the capacity to support more retail,” said Nan Rohrer, CEO of the Downtown Ithaca Alliance. “Our focus is action—proactively recruiting the right businesses, supporting the merchants who are already here, activating our public spaces, and aligning partners around shared goals. Retail success depends on consistency and collaboration, and that work is ongoing.”

Shared Responsibility and Continued Growth

The Retail Study & Strategy makes clear that strengthening Ithaca’s retail landscape is a shared responsibility. The City, Tompkins County, DIA, non-profit organizations, property owners, merchants, and residents each play an important role in sustaining a healthy commercial environment.

New businesses continue to open, with additional announcements expected in the coming months. Recruitment efforts remain active, and support programs for existing merchants will continue to evolve in alignment with the study’s findings. Ithaca’s capacity for additional retail across its districts will be further pursued by a balanced, well-curated mix to meet the needs of residents of varying interests and income levels while strengthening the visitor experience and the regional economy.

By building on its nationally recognized arts vibrancy, clearly differentiating its commercial districts, and maintaining strong public-private-nonprofit partnerships, Ithaca is positioning itself for continued retail vitality grounded in strategy, momentum, and shared commitment.

The Retail Study & Strategy Synopsis can be found [here](#).

The complete Citywide Retail Market Study & Strategy can be found [here](#).

Both documents are available in print format at the City of Ithaca Planning & Development Department or the Downtown Ithaca Alliance during normal business hours.

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The City of Ithaca

Nestled in New York's scenic Finger Lakes region, Ithaca is celebrated for its vibrant community, natural beauty, and innovative spirit. Home to world-class educational institutions, thriving local businesses, and diverse cultural amenities, Ithaca is committed to sustainability, inclusivity, and a high quality of life for all residents and visitors.

The Downtown Ithaca Alliance (DIA) is a State chartered nonprofit organization, established in 1997, with the mission to promote and enhance Downtown Ithaca (formally known as the Ithaca Business Improvement District) as a vibrant and thriving urban center. We support economic development, cultural events, placemaking, small business growth, and community engagement. Our work is driven by a small, passionate team committed to preserving the uniqueness and vitality of Ithaca's urban core. We envision Downtown Ithaca as a safe and vibrant, inclusive community of diverse people and businesses; a place that is memorable and captivating, where people aspire to return. We will continuously work toward a sustainable Downtown Ithaca that fuels both the regional economy and the psyche of our City, County, and region, and a place where commerce, residential living, and our social community successfully intersect and interact.