

A New Paradigm for Downtown Louisville

The Louisville Downtown Development Strategy

March 2024



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Foreword

Dear Downtown Stakeholders:



Craig Greenberg
Mayor
Louisville Metro



Ja Hillebrand
Chairman
Downtown Development Corporation

Downtown Louisville is the heart of Louisville, the center of the region, the economic engine of our state. While downtown has been hit hard by the pandemic and its aftermath – as have most downtowns across the country – downtown Louisville is resilient, and we can take comfort that we have built a strong base over the past few decades. That being said, we understand that downtown Louisville as we move forward needs to adapt to a new paradigm for downtown, and broaden its approach. We need more people coming downtown to live, to work, to play, to visit, to create and innovate.

We need to think of downtown as a neighborhood – a unique neighborhood – with all of the attributes of great neighborhoods: great parks, open spaces, places to eat and drink, and enjoy the company of others. A place with comfortable and active streets and public spaces where everyone feels safe and welcome; a place people choose to be, rather than where they have to be.

Downtown Louisville can be – and will be – such a place, if we act both boldly and strategically. This Downtown Louisville Development Strategy provides the blueprint for downtown over the next decade, not through a series of wish-list items and pretty pictures, but through a thoughtful strategy of activating downtown, investing in the quality of its public spaces, and creating a critical mass of downtown housing – with increased availability of housing styles and affordability. Quality of place is especially critical in the post-pandemic world; in fact, improving the quality of place is one of the four pillars in Louisville Metro’s recently released *Growing Louisville Together* economic development strategy.

This new approach to downtown Louisville demands that both the public and private sector work proactively to make things happen. Not merely to support and encourage projects and development, but to invest in downtown. We cannot expect others to invest in downtown if we don’t first do so ourselves. This Strategy lays out how such investments can be most impactful.

Downtown Louisville should be the most vibrant, authentic, unique, clean, green, safe, and creative neighborhood in our entire city. The public and private partners are committed to supporting and implementing this Strategy, in conjunction with our economic development plan, to ensure that downtown Louisville reaches its best potential.

Craig Greenberg

Ja Hillebrand

Introduction

Over the last few decades, significant growth and development have transformed downtown Louisville into a far more vibrant and engaging place to live, work, and visit. Popular attractions like Whiskey Row and Waterfront Park, cultural destinations like Muhammad Ali Center and the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory, and entertainment venues like the KFC Yum! Center and Fourth Street Live! have all contributed to the vitality of downtown Louisville. In recent years, the continued growth of bourbon-centric tourism has also fueled downtown's identity as the centerpoint of Louisville's Urban Bourbon experience.

These improvements were designed to complement downtown Louisville's primary focus as the region's most vital business hub. While that focus remains true today, significant changes in the workplace as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted downtown Louisville - just as it has many downtowns across the country; most evident by a significant downturn of street activity. Although this may be less dire for Louisville than in many larger cities, it is clear that **downtown Louisville must adapt in order to thrive**. While strategies to encourage businesses to remain in or relocate to downtown and entice workers to return to regular in-office schedules are important, ***it is vital that Louisville create and provide a more diverse mix of uses and attractions throughout its downtown districts.***

In short, prior initiatives to supplement downtown office space with other types of uses - especially residential - must evolve and expand if downtown Louisville is to remain active throughout the day and evenings.

Post-Pandemic Takeaways

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

1. Office space is still important, but downtowns *must* become truly mixed-use areas; thinking of downtown as simply the "central business district" of a city is a losing strategy. **A vibrant mixed-use downtown must now be a major part of a business attraction strategy.**
2. **Reinforcing Downtown as a Residential Neighborhood** must be a major component of any thriving downtown now and in the future.
3. Need to ensure that **downtowns are attractive and desirable for those who choose to be downtown**, especially residents and visitors and *workers* who are empowered with choice.
4. The vibrant public realm is not merely a "nice amenity;" **it is a driving economic development force.**

A New Paradigm of Downtown Louisville

The set of principles, initiatives, and actions that comprise this Development Strategy for downtown Louisville is designed to improve the public realm – its quality of place – and create places where people want to be, want to live, and want to invest in. The Strategy strongly emphasizes investing – and reinvesting – in downtown’s pedestrian environment, which has been somewhat neglected in recent years.

The Strategy is a 10-year blueprint illustrating how downtown Louisville can position itself for continued – and accelerated – growth and vitality over the next decade. Many of these strategies, if implemented early, can achieve results in the first few years; in fact, some have already been initiated. There also are short-term issues that must be resolved to ensure long-term success, including public safety, security, and infrastructure maintenance. Louisville Metro, Louisville Downtown Partnership, and others are working diligently to address these current challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought little positive impact to the city. But an understanding of this “New Paradigm for Downtown Louisville” enables downtown Louisville’s stakeholders to reconsider right now downtown’s mix of uses, the quality of its space, and how it can best serve those who want to be here. These are issues that would have needed to be addressed at some point regardless of the pandemic. Even as the effects of the pandemic continue to evolve, a diverse and engaging downtown public realm is essential for ensuring that downtown Louisville is poised to embrace change and take advantage of emerging trends.

Looking Ahead

Downtown Louisville’s long-term future is bright. Major improvements over the past quarter-century have established a solid foundation for growth and success, and many more are underway. A new and committed Louisville Metro administration is in place – one that understands the importance of building upon, strengthening, and expanding the city’s downtown sector. By crafting a blueprint that recognizes – and actively embraces – this new paradigm, **downtown Louisville can position itself to become an even more dynamic, vibrant, and engaging place to live, work, visit, and create over the next decade.**



Stakeholder Input

Despite concerns about some of the challenges currently facing downtown Louisville, a wide variety of stakeholders - individuals, businesses, and more - have demonstrated deep commitment and support of downtown. Many have expressed optimism and belief that taking a fresh view will ultimately lead to a more vibrant and flourishing downtown. Likewise, stakeholders have uniformly expressed the need to address today's challenges with strong, substantive action - prerequisites for downtown's longer-term economic health and sustainability.

Over the course of 70+ meetings with key stakeholders and the public, certain common themes emerged:

- Challenges: safety; homelessness; lack of office workers, deferred maintenance
- Streets focused on cars, not pedestrians
- Need more residential; wider range of affordability and housing types
- Too many vacant lots (surface parking)
- Downtown not well connected to adjacent districts and neighborhoods
- Inconsistency; some great streets/districts; others unpleasant or empty
- Not bike friendly
- Need better connectivity; transit and pedestrian
- Doesn't connect well to waterfront
- Public spaces are forlorn and mostly empty
- Downtown is vibrant primarily due to tourists
- Downtown needs more events/activities for locals



Downtown Strategy Conclusions

- **Downtown must be considered broader than the Central Business District;** a “Greater Downtown” must include, better connect, and reduce barriers to its edge neighborhoods
- **Downtown must have a stronger mix and breadth of uses,** designed to encourage activity on a 24/7 basis.
- Office use remains a vital element, but **downtown must adapt to its new realities for it to prosper.**
- **Downtown must be seen as a unique and vibrant residential neighborhood;** with a significantly increased number of people living in “greater downtown”; fostering the creation of true downtown neighborhoods on its edges .
- **An engaging public realm – and its social infrastructure – is critical.** It is more than merely aesthetics; but now an important economic development driver.
- **Downtown Louisville is comprised of a series of unique and distinct downtown districts, some more distinct than others.** Efforts must be made to generate greater activity within each of these districts and highlight what makes each unique; and strengthen the connections between and among them.
- **Downtown’s streets must be prioritized for pedestrians throughout the day and evening;** rather than acting as wide corridors designed to move vehicles in and out of downtown as quickly as possible.
- **Downtown’s open spaces must be refreshed and function together as a coordinated network of engaging places for people to seek out and enjoy.**
- **Downtown’s existing anchors - e.g. University of Louisville, LOUMED, Arts/Culture, and its Educational Corridor - must be supported** and provided with an environment in which they continue to thrive as economic drivers of downtown.
- **Downtown must broaden its range of attractions and activity generators.**
- **Public safety must be a high priority,** with a greater police presence, more downtown ambassadors, and support for more transitional housing options for the unhoused population.
- **Downtown must be viewed as a welcoming place for all;** a safe, inclusive destination that serves as “everyone’s neighborhood.”

Guiding Principles for Downtown Louisville

The first step in responding to these conclusions was to agree upon and establish guiding principles that will serve as the mechanism for evaluating efforts to move downtown Louisville forward. Any proposed project, development, or initiative requiring the participation of the public sector or a public/private partnership should align with - and advance - one or more of these principles.

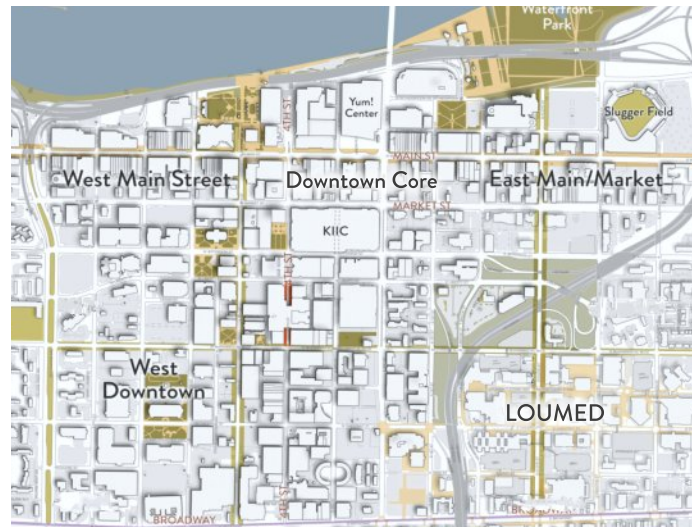
These guiding principles should serve as a “report card” on how downtown Louisville is doing. If continued progress reflecting each of these principles can be demonstrated, confidence that downtown is moving in the right direction will build. If downtown begins to fall short, however, then appropriate corrections and adjustments can be made.



Strategic Initiatives

Activate Downtown

Downtown Louisville has suffered a downturn in overall activity since 2020, for reasons described earlier. Certain sectors within the downtown economy - such as tourism - have rebounded and, in some cases, exceeded pre-pandemic levels. Some districts of downtown are thriving and growing, but this success is not evenly distributed throughout the entire downtown area. An increase in activity can be expected in downtown Louisville as time passes, but more proactive intervention is needed in order to spur development and catalyze a wider range of opportunities and uses *throughout* the greater downtown area.



Greater Downtown's Districts



Old Walnut Street Corridor



Louisville Creativity Center

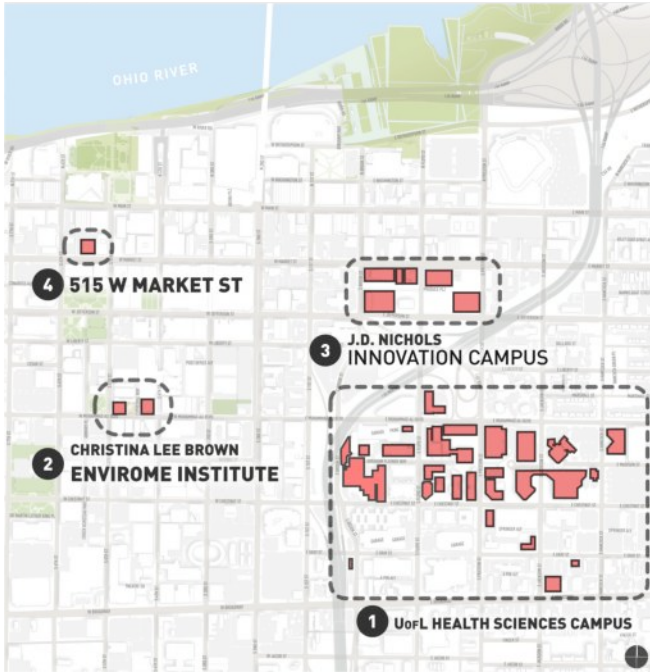
Activate Downtown

- Reinforce, recognize and support downtown's districts and district anchors
- Celebrate the Old Walnut Street Corridor
- Support downtown anchors
- Expand downtown's attractions
- Showcase Louisville's creativity

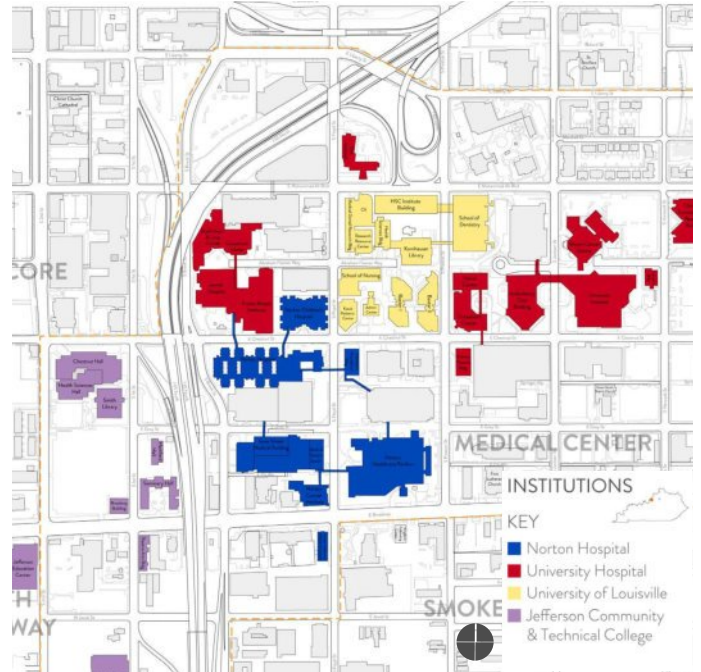
STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Support Downtown Anchors

University of Louisville's "Four Corners" Downtown Campus



LOUMED



Educational Institutions



Arts & Cultural Attractions



Strategic Initiatives

Reinforce Downtown as a Residential Neighborhood

The overall economic health of downtown Louisville over the next 10 years greatly depends on the establishment of a strong residential sector. This cannot be overstated. The residential population of downtown will become a major driver of its economy. Although that population has grown in past years, it still remains well below critical mass. To attract more residents, downtown Louisville must provide a sense of neighborhood and community that exemplifies the same quality of place as any other desirable residential neighborhood in the city.

Reinforce Downtown as a Residential Neighborhood

- Create a series of residential neighborhoods in and at the edges of downtown
- Incentivize conversion of Class B and Class C office buildings into residential use
- Encourage residential infill of vacant parcels
- Expand the array of residential neighborhood amenities, including fresh food and grocery stores

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

After Five Years
Newly-Developed Study Area Units

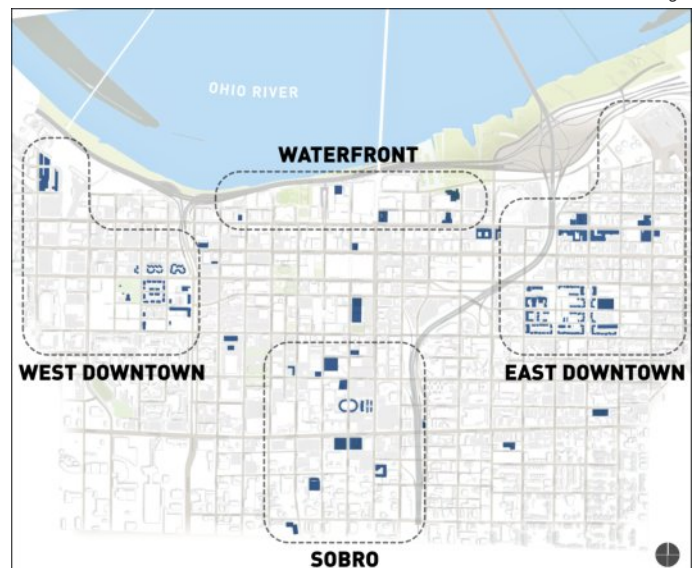
1,635 to 2,045 new rental units

430 to 725 new ownership units

Downtown Louisville Residential Absorption



Prime downtown office-to-residential conversion buildings



Downtown Residential Neighborhood areas

Strategic Initiatives

Enhance the Public Realm

Just as the residential sector is a critical economic factor for downtown Louisville, a high-quality and socially engaging public realm is also essential to its overall health and sustainability. No longer simply a “nice” amenity, the public realm must rise to meet the increasing needs and choices that people have regarding where they wish to work, live, visit, and play. While most of the necessary infrastructure elements are already in place, downtown Louisville’s **quality of place** must be refreshed and prioritized. Following these strategic initiatives will jumpstart efforts to expand, enhance, and celebrate that quality of place and infuse throughout downtown the very best that Louisville has to offer its citizens and visitors.

Enhance the Public Realm

- **Prioritize downtown’s streets for pedestrians**
- **Transform barriers into seams (Broadway; 9th Street; I-65)**
- **Activate and connect underutilized spaces**
- **Reimagine downtown’s open spaces**
- **Better connect Waterfront Park and downtown**
- **Encourage outdoor dining**

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES



West Market Street Transformation

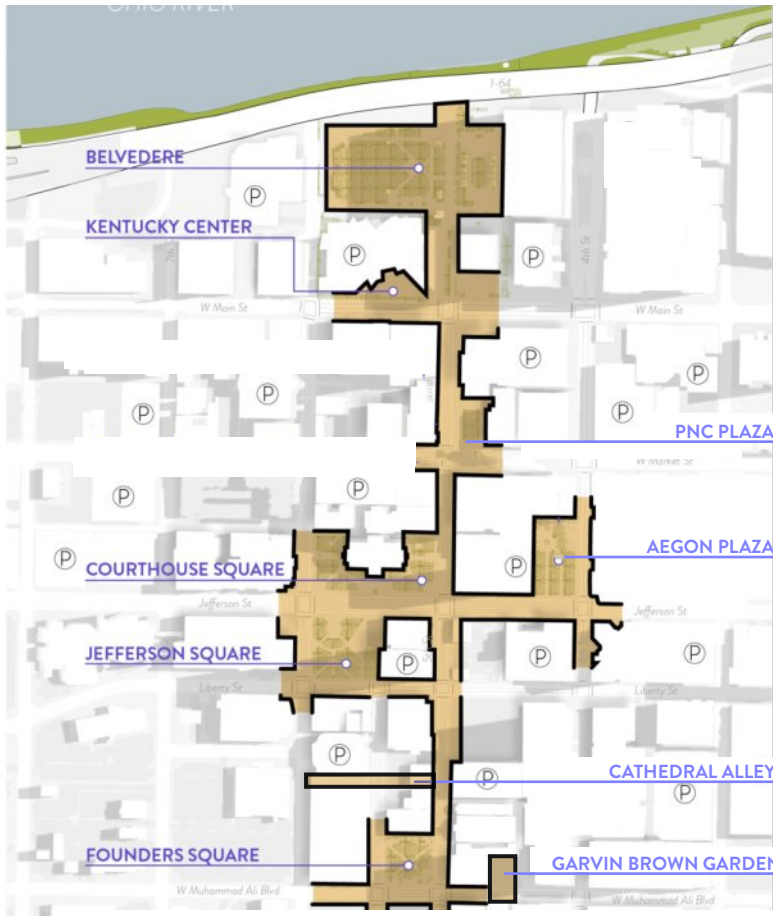


I-65 Underpass Lighting Program

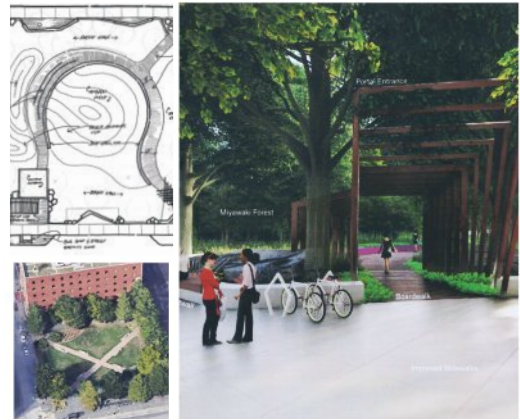


Whiskey Alley

Downtown Open Space Network



Downtown Open Space Network



Founders Square Trager Microforest



Metro Hall CitySpot

Mayor Greenberg announces bold effort to reimagine The Belvedere



Implementation Actions

Activate Downtown

- Reinforce, recognize and support downtown's districts and district anchors
- Celebrate the Old Walnut Street Corridor
- Support downtown anchors
- Expand downtown's attractions
- Showcase Louisville's creativity

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

- *Create a Downtown Investment Fund*
- *Develop underutilized properties*
- *Assist in office tenant retention/attraction efforts*
- *Recognize a "Greater Downtown" and reinforce Downtown as a series of unique districts*
- *Support and help strengthen downtown's major economic development drivers*
- *Support the redevelopment of Louisville Gardens*
- *Establish a downtown "Louisville Creativity Center"*
- *Activate Muhammad Ali Boulevard through the Old Walnut Street Corridor Plan*
- *Encourage and incentivize additional non-traditional uses into the greater downtown area*
- *Invest in a Transitional Housing Investment Fund*

Implementation Actions

Reinforce Downtown as a Residential Neighborhood

- Create a series of residential neighborhoods in and at the edges of downtown
- Incentivize conversion of Class B and Class C office buildings into residential use
- Encourage residential infill of vacant parcels
- Expand the array of residential neighborhood amenities, including fresh food and grocery stores

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

- *Support and incentivize the conversion of appropriate Class B and Class C office buildings to residential use*
- *Prioritize such conversions in the use of the Downtown Housing Fund*
- *Incentivize the transformation of surface parking lots into new residential development*
- *Encourage the development of clusters of residential development with necessary neighborhoods amenities, in areas adjacent to and abutting downtown Louisville*
- *Invest in “pilot” Missing Middle residential housing types in SoBro and West Downtown*
- *Ensure that the Metro properties redevelopment plans contain residential components*
- *Investigate changes in tax assessment policies to encourage the redevelopment of vacant properties and office-to-residential conversions*

Implementation Actions

Enhance the Public Realm

- **Prioritize downtown's streets for pedestrians**
- **Transform barriers into seams (Broadway; 9th Street; I-65)**
- **Activate and connect underutilized spaces**
- **Reimagine downtown's open spaces**
- **Better connect Waterfront Park and downtown**
- **Encourage outdoor dining**

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

- **Accelerate the repair and maintenance program of existing downtown infrastructure**
- **Prioritize downtown streets for pedestrians; West Market Street as initial "pilot" project**
- **Accelerate two-way street conversions into and through downtown**
- **Enhance the pedestrian-environment of River Road**
- **Improve the connectivity between Waterfront Park and downtown; and its Phase IV expansion to Russell and Portland**
- **Improve the pedestrian environment under and through the I-65 overpasses**
- **Create a Downtown Open Space Network, with a re-imagined Belvedere as its "Crown Jewel" and including a downtown public art trail**
- **Create a signature streetscape program for 4th and 5th Streets**
- **Undertake the LOUMED public environment recommendations**
- **Transform the 100 block of Washington Street into the pedestrian and entertainment-focused "Whiskey Alley"**
- **Encourage and incentivize additional outdoor dining opportunities**

A New Paradigm for Downtown Louisville

The Louisville Downtown Development Strategy

March 2024

Acknowledgements



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Gheens Foundation
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To view the full report

"A New Paradigm for Downtown Louisville: The Louisville Downtown Development Strategy"

www.louisvilledowntown.org/downtown-strategy