

Report to Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee

To: Chair and Members
Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee

From: Scott Mathers, MPA, P. Eng
Deputy City Manager, Housing and Community Growth

Subject: Downtown Master Plan: Quick-Start Actions

Date: March 25, 2025

Recommendation

That, on the recommendation of the Deputy City Manager, Housing and Community Growth, the following actions **BE TAKEN** with respect to Downtown Master Plan quick start actions:

- a) The Downtown Quick-Start Actions highlighted in this report **BE ENDORSED** and implemented immediately, and
- b) The Civic Administration **BE DIRECTED** to implement 1-hour free parking in Municipal Lots #1 and #2 in Old East Village, and 1-hour free onstreet parking in the Core Area through the parking services HONK app, effective April 1, 2025, ending October 31, 2025;
- c) The funding for the programs included in b) above, in the estimated amount of \$181,875, **BE APPROVED** from the Economic Development Reserve Fund, it being noted that on May 15, 2024, Council approved \$330,000 from the Economic Development Reserve Fund for the same parking programs, but the funding was not fully utilized when the programs ended in 2024, and \$181,875 was returned to the reserve fund.
- d) The following report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Executive Summary

The Downtown Master Plan aims to support the evolution of downtown London, which is facing significant social and economic challenges, including high commercial office vacancy rates, reduced foot traffic, and concerns around safety and homelessness.

To address these issues in the short term, Civic Administration has developed a series of "Quick Start Actions" aimed at improving downtown conditions while development of the Downtown Master Plan is underway. These actions are categorized as New, Ongoing, and Reprioritized actions and will be funded through the existing multi-year budget. Key actions include initiatives to improve public safety (e.g., increased police visibility, expanded outreach programs), enhance municipal compliance (e.g., regular walkabouts by law enforcement officers), support economic development (e.g., new incentives for vacant properties), and improve public services (e.g., extended public washroom hours and exploring enhanced waste management solutions).

This proactive approach ensures that downtown London is positioned for success and is a more vibrant, safe, and welcoming place for residents and visitors alike, and will usher in favorable conditions to implement the Downtown Master Plan when it is completed.

Linkage to the Corporate Strategic Plan

This report supports the 2023-2027 City of London Strategic Plan and directly aligns with the following Areas of Focus:

Economic Growth, Culture, and Prosperity

- London encourages equitable economic growth and diversification.

- London is a destination of choice.
- London encourages the growth of local artistic and musical talent.
- London's Core Area (Downtown, Midtown, Old East Village) is a vibrant neighborhood and attractive destination

Housing and Homelessness

- The City of London demonstrates leadership and builds partners to increase quality, affordable, and supportive housing options.

Wellbeing and Safety

- London has safe, vibrant, and healthy neighbourhoods and communities.
- A well-planned and growing community.

Analysis

1.0 Background Information

1.1 Previous Reports Related to this Matter

- October 29, 2024 – Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – Initiation of the Downtown Master Plan
- May 28, 2024 – Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – 2023-2027 Implementation Plan: 2024 Update
- April 17, 2023 – Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – Council's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan

1.2 Background

London's downtown area is continuing to adjust under significant social and economic shifts in recent years which have impacted Downtown's landscape since Council's adoption of the last strategy. Commercial office vacancy rates are high, daytime foot traffic has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and concerns on crime, safety and health and homelessness have risen, though conditions present within the downtown area are improving. Many improvements and continued efforts are being directed towards the Downtown area to ensure it is safe, welcoming, and a place Londoners can be proud of.

The Terms of Reference for the Downtown Master Plan was approved by Municipal Council on November 5th, 2024, and this report has been brought forward as of this result, being:

That, on the recommendation of the Deputy City Manager, Housing and Community Growth, the following actions BE TAKEN with respect to the development of the Downtown Master Plan:

- c) That Civic Administration BE DIRECTED to report back in Q1 2025 with a series of quick start actions based on the feedback received to date.

1.3 Status of the development of the Downtown Master Plan

Civic Administration has concluded the procurement process to retain an experienced and qualified consultant to lead development on the Downtown Master Plan. Presented to the Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee on March 25, 2025, the accompanying report, "Appointment of Consultant RFP 2025-001 – Downtown Master Plan", highlights the steps taken in the procurement process and includes the recommendation to Municipal Council to award the successful proponent.

The project is on schedule to begin in April 2025 and is tracking to be completed and presented to Municipal Council in Q2 2026. Implementation of the quick-start actions

will assist in ensuring favourable conditions are present to fully implement the Downtown Master Plan once development is complete.

The Downtown Master Plan ‘GetInvolved’ webpage is scheduled to launch on Monday March 17th as an information webpage to provide updates, project status, information on engagement sessions, and answer any questions or record comments from Londoners. The webpage is one of the many engagement tools that will be leveraged through development of the Downtown Master Plan. The timing of the webpage launch date is aligned with the intended project start date in April 2025.

1.4 Downtown Master Plan and the Economic Development Strategy

The Downtown Master Plan and the Economic Development Strategy are designed to serve distinct but complementary purposes for London. The Downtown Master Plan focuses on evolving Downtown London to accommodate the growing residential population, emphasizing living, working, and playing.

In contrast, the Economic Development Strategy aims to enhance London’s overall economic health by strengthening global connections and fostering local economic development, innovation, business growth, and workforce development. While the Downtown Master Plan is geographically focused on Downtown London, the Economic Development Strategy covers the entire city and its regional connections. To ensure alignment and avoid duplication, the project teams will coordinate through bi-weekly check-ins, synchronized schedules, aligned engagement approaches, data-sharing, and coordinated efforts. The Economic Development Strategy approach report is scheduled for an upcoming SPPC meeting and will be brought forward by the City Manager’s Office.

2.0 Discussion and Consideration

2.1 Development of Quick Start Actions

Through an enterprise-wide approach, Civic Administration identified several improvements and opportunities to improve service delivery in the Downtown Area. These actions, combined with the continued daily efforts of service areas, help address the underlying conditions that are affecting downtown revitalization and work towards addressing many concerns that have been voiced by the downtown London community and area residents.

All Quick-Start Actions introduced are funded through the existing operational multi-year budget. Civic Administration canvassed each Service Area to complete a review of operations within the downtown area and to bring forward new ideas and opportunities that can be completed within existing budgets.

2.2 Summary of Quick Start Actions

The Quick Start actions have been separated into the following categories:

- New Actions:** These actions are brand new priorities for Service Areas
- Continue Ongoing Actions:** These actions continue temporary programs delivered by Service Areas
- Reprioritizing Actions:** These are actions identified by Service Areas to explore opportunities or look at providing existing services in a different way

New Actions

Action 1: London Police Service Priorities in Downtown

- Launch of new ‘open air, public space drug strategy’
- Expansion of the Community Outreach and Support Team (COAST)

- Increased police visibility in the Core Area for renewed commitment to public safety

Action 2: Prioritized Municipal Compliance Deployment

- Beginning in spring 2025, Municipal Law Enforcement Officers (MLEOs) will initiate a proactive ‘boots on the ground’ initiative including a regular downtown route, with the following goals:
 - Provide a visible presence in the Downtown for public and business/property owners
 - Immediately and proactively address damage such as broken windows, dumping on public streets and debris buildup on private property
 - Identify larger or systemic issues to work towards initiating continuous improvement projects in the Downtown, addressing the conditions, aesthetics and safety.
- These resources were effectively re-allocated through streamlining the vacant building process, reducing both staff workload and administrative processing time significantly, providing staff with extra capacity to engage in new efforts. By implementing these new processes, staff are now better able to respond to problems more efficiently on a rotational basis through the Core Area.

Action 3: Transit-Oriented Development Community Improvement Plan

- As part of London’s commitment to the Housing Accelerator Fund, development of a new transit-oriented community improvement plan (CIP) is being introduced along the rapid transit links in London – this includes the downtown area. The proposed incentive will support accelerated development of new residential units and eligible office-to-residential conversions by providing \$15,000 per unit, subject to funding availability.
- The Transit-Oriented Development financial incentive program is stackable with existing CIP programs that the City offers, including the recently approved Affordable Housing CIP incentives for highly supportive housing and affordable units, and the current Office-to-Residential grant in the Downtown CIP.

Action 4: Downtown Community Improvement Plan (CIP) Incentive to address Vacancy

- A new financial incentive program is currently in development to support the Core Area Vacancy Reduction Strategy (CAVRS). The ‘Vacant Commercial Space Fit-out Grant’, intends to provide an incentive to new targeted use business tenants that occupy vacant spaces in the Downtown CIP area, providing funding to complete eligible renovations to ready their space to open and operate.
- The ‘Vacant Commercial Space Fit-Out’ program is funded through the existing multi-year budget and does not require an additional source of funding or drawdown on the CIP reserve fund.
- This program is intended to be presented to Municipal Council for approval in April 2025 and eligibility, terms and conditions, grant amounts, and program guidelines are currently being finalized by staff.

Action 5: Dundas Place Public-Access Washroom Hours

- Reviewed in fall 2024, expansion and alignment between Victoria Park and Dundas Place public washrooms hours of operation started from 900am-900pm 7 days a week. The extension of hours at both locations is supported by approved funding provided through the 2023-2027 Multi-Year Budget.
- As included in the report to Council on December 17, 2024, public access washroom hours are continually reviewed to ensure adequate availability to the public.

Action 6: Enhanced Downtown Activations and Beautification on Dundas Place

- Starting in spring 2025, Dundas Place will have more consistent road closures for planned activations in the evenings from Thursday to Saturday and in the days on Sundays.
- The Dundas Place Public Art Project is expected to add beauty to Dundas Place by September 2025 that will attract more residents and visitors to this culture and entertainment district. Through the City's Public Art and Monument Program, diverse artworks for Dundas Place fixtures, including banners, gateway marker kiosks, and planter/pole wraps will be created by local artists to be installed along the street.
- The Downtown Loop Rapid Transit Shelter Artwork will include local artist public art into the design of four downtown loop shelter stops. The inclusion of public art is a great way to enhance the waiting experience of rapid transit riders and get the community involved.
- Two downtown self-guided public art and monument tours have been launched by the City of London and London Arts Council this year (visit londonarts.ca/public-art-tour-downtown). These tours feature public artworks and podcast-style videos to guide participants on a historic tour of London from the experience of London's first inn keeper and entrepreneur to animate the City's downtown landmarks and legends.

Continue Ongoing Actions

Action 7: Support of CPTED Audits

- Municipal Compliance successfully completed 80 CPTED audits in 2024
- For 2025, Municipal Compliance has committed to an additional 50 CPTED audits in the Core Area.
- Coordinated Informed Response officers are receiving CPTED training, which will provide front-line staff with the information and knowledge to help provide supports to business and property owners in the Core Area through a customer service lens. CIR officers will not be performing formal audits as part of their duties.

Action 8: Return of the Core Area 1-Hour Free Parking Program

- Starting on April 1st 2025, Parking Services will offer 1-hour free parking in Municipal Lots #1 and #2 in Old East Village, and 1-hour free on street parking in the Core Area through the parking services HONK app, until October 31st 2025, at a projected cost of \$181,875.
- For 2024, the actual realized cost to offer 1-hour free parking in Municipal lots #1 and #2, and on-street in the Core Area was \$148,125 of the initial request from Council to redirect \$330,000 from the Economic Development Reserve Fund. This program concluded at the end of 2024.
- When the 2024 parking programs concluded at the end of 2024, the funding that was not fully utilized, \$181,875, was returned to the Economic Development Reserve Fund.

Action 9: Providing enhanced operations delivery in Downtown

- Road Operations, Park Operations and Solid Waste Operations continue to provide daily, weekly, and specialized as needed services at-or-above city-wide maintenance standards in the Downtown Area to meet the needs that are unique in this general area.

Reprioritizing Actions

Action 10: Exploring service enhancement opportunities in Downtown

- Environment and Infrastructure continues to work with downtown residents, businesses and property owners to best respond to changing service demands, such as waste collection patterns in the downtown area as infill and densification evolve the downtown streetscape.

Action 11: Dundas Place Traffic Management and Activation Enhancements

- Presented to Council on December 17, 2024, several approved changes will be established on Dundas Place in Spring 2025. These include:
 - Additional loading zones for improved ease of access and to support local businesses with drop-off / pick-up opportunities
 - Additional bollards to improve compliance and increase clarity of appropriate parking/loading zones
 - Removal of Dundas Place turn restrictions to improve motorized vehicle access and egress

Action 12: Additional Investment in Downtown Beautification and Cleaning

- On November 22, 2024, Municipal Council amended the 2025 and 2026 operating budgets to include an investment of \$300,000, funded by the Economic Development Reserve Fund, to be allocated to the Downtown London Business Improvement Association (BIA) for the purpose of cleaning and maintenance on private property, such as graffiti removal, power washing, expanded cleaning (litter and sharps removal), and beautification and maintenance in support of member businesses and private property owners.

2.3 Review of Quick Start Actions

Civic Administration will continue to review and evaluate the effectiveness of the quick-start actions to determine whether or not these initiatives should continue throughout development of the Downtown Master Plan. Included in the phase 1 deliverable – ‘Downtown Master Plan Background Study’, Civic Administration will provide a summary of the actions and include recommendations on next steps for each action.

3.0 Financial Impact/Considerations

Development and implementation of the Downtown Master Plan: Quick-Start Actions was conducted through the existing approved multi-year budget and additional annual investments previously approved by Municipal Council. As a result, the work plan to initiate the Downtown Quick-Start Actions will have no future impact on Council’s 2025-2027 multi-year budget.

Conclusion

Implementation of the Quick-Start Actions is scheduled to begin immediately to help address concerns on the state of the downtown while development of the Downtown Master Plan continues. Services provided in the downtown continue to receive the highest level of attention, and Civic Administration is committed to evaluating and revisiting how these services are provided, as demonstrated through the enterprise - wide collaboration to bring forward the Quick-Start Actions to ensure conditions present downtown are favourable to implement the Downtown Master Plan when it is completed.

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