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The Future of Downtown Calgary

By Ximena González · October 18, 2021

Calgary's Greater Downtown Plan is offering a roadmap to revitalization for the beleaguered core communities, but is it a silver bullet or a missed opportunity for innovation?



Illustration by Tyler Lemermeyer


What comes to mind when you think about downtown Calgary? For some, it's traffic congestion and parking woes; while others may be reminded of the beautiful river pathway system that runs alongside Prince's Island.

Increasingly, however, the image evoked by downtown Calgary is one of emptiness and loss. After the last economic bust in 2014-2015, the decline of the oil-and-gas industry has left downtown Calgary with 14 million square feet of vacant office space in faceless glass towers amongst empty parking lots. The effect of this extensive vacancy is hitting the city in its heart. "When you have blank windows

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President of **Brookfield Properties Development** [Privacy & Cookies Policy](#) [Economic Development's](#) real estate sector advisory committee (RESAC). 

In a joint effort, the City of Calgary and Calgary Economic Development (CED) are determined to propel the city's downtown core forward and into a more prosperous future with Calgary's **Greater Downtown Plan**. Armed with five "strategic moves," this "roadmap to reinvention" provides a set of future-oriented initiatives and actions to transform downtown into a hub of innovation and creativity where people want to live, work and play. "Downtown is a source of pride for Calgarians," says Thom Mahler, manager of urban initiatives at the City of Calgary. "And we want to give Calgarians a reason to have pride in their city."


If the implementation of the plan succeeds, in 10 years Calgary's downtown core neighbourhoods will be a solid community hub where the lives of Calgarians of all backgrounds harmoniously converge whether they live there, work there, play there – or do all three.

The plan envisions a wide arrangement of housing options to suit the lifestyles of families and young professionals alike, and a variety of transportation modes connecting them effectively and safely to the many amenities located in and outside of downtown. Barcelona-style "super-blocks" encompassing pedestrian-only streets lined with trees and greenery will hum with activity year-round with programming driven by a thriving cultural and business community.

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Calgarians working at tech startup offices and attending university campuses in the commercial core will support independent restaurants, cafés and unique shops along Stephen Avenue. On the weekend, young professionals living at a repurposed office building in Eau Claire will stop at a local artist's gallery on their way to shop at the farmers' market just off their building's doorstep. In the evening, a group of friends will ponder whether they should walk or take e-scooters down a car-free road to enjoy an outdoor performance at Prince's Island. A pop-up creators' market

they eventually head back to their home in the south end of downtown on the [Green Line](#). [Privacy & Cookies Policy](#) [ton on](#) 

Furthermore, by 2031, property values will have stabilized and brought back the revenue needed to allow the rest of the city to benefit from the renewed success of the downtown core, and businesses everywhere in Calgary will thrive.

It sounds wonderful on all counts, but the path to successfully accomplish this vision is still unclear, and some of the risks associated with its achievements don't seem to have been considered. "[The plan] has laid out a vision of where we're headed – but it doesn't tell you exactly how you're going to get there, because the future is hard to predict right now and we didn't really see one clear path," Mahler says.

High-vacancy rates since the downturn have resulted in the loss of about \$17 billion in downtown property value and the tax revenue attached to it. The City's reliance on downtown property values to service the rest of our sprawling city means that "anything that happens downtown has a disproportionate impact on property tax revenues," says Hannes Kovac, president and CEO at [Opus Real Estate](#) and co-chair of CED's RESAC committee. As such, the demise of our city's core impacts the competitiveness of Calgary as a whole.

But according to Beverly Sandalack, a professor of landscape architecture and planning at the University of Calgary's School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, the problems downtown Calgary faces go well beyond the economy. In a 2020 paper, Sandalack categorizes the problems the downtown core faces as being of a "morphological" nature, as the built forms that characterize downtown aren't conducive to street activity.

"Throughout the downtown, you've got buildings that don't have entries or they are blank walls," she says. "That needs to be changed."



Illustration by Tyler Lernermeier

Many of the current issues with downtown’s lack of vibrancy are rooted in the values of the mid-century era, which prioritized cars over pedestrians, resulting in a sterile business district, poorly connected to the rest of the city, that went to sleep when office workers drove home to the suburbs. “The 1966 downtown plan set the stage for redevelopment that started to dismantle that mixed-use core,” Sandalack says, noting how this plan implemented a new planning paradigm: urban renewal. “It was a planning paradigm that thought that anything old was old-fashioned and should be cleared out and replaced by new modern buildings of a different scale.”

In a way, the wealth brought to Calgary by the oil-and-gas industry has also been its demise, as it seemed easier to clear less desirable mixed-use areas and replace them with a certain building type: office towers. But this typology “was only going to work if the economy was really good,” Sandalack says. “As soon as the economy declines, then this building type doesn’t work.”

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Sandalack outlines four essential interventions for downtown Calgary to come back to life: attracting residents through housing choice, improving the public realm to enhance the pedestrian experience, connecting the places where people already are and rethinking mixed-use buildings at street level. “Downtown needs to be a neighbourhood rather than a destination,” she says.


For Byron Miller, a professor of geography at [UCalgary](#), the proposed Greater Downtown Plan is a step in the right direction, in that it addresses the issues raised by Sandalack. And although he thinks the plan could be bolder, his main concern is its vagueness, particularly in regard to who it is the City is trying to attract downtown and how office conversion and the implementation of the plan will affect who the City is trying to attract to downtown.

To support the transformation of downtown into a complete community, this past April, Calgary City Council approved an initial investment of \$200 million to kickstart some of the actions outlined in the Plan. This represents 20 per cent of the overall funding that the plan requires. The balance will be funded through future Council requests, from other orders of government and through possible partnerships. Of this initial \$200 million investment, \$45 million is allocated to a financial incentive meant to transform vacant office space into residential and other uses. Public realm improvements will come from direct City investment, including a \$55 million Downtown Vibrancy Program. The Plan will also use the development permit process to require some public-realm improvements or contributions where they are available, through public-private partnerships and density bonuses (a feature that allows developers to build additional units in exchange for financial contributions or the construction of public amenities).

“The investment in private real estate is joined at the hip with the investment in public amenities within the downtown core,” Mahler says. “You could spend a bunch of money on public infrastructure but if there’s no economic viability to bring these products to market, it might be years before somebody would take a chance on a new building, or adapting an existing one.”

For this reason, repurposing office buildings seems to take precedence over public realm improvements. However, Sandalack notes that “unless there’s somewhere for people to go, unless the public realm is good, and unless it’s developed as a neighbourhood with mixed-use opportunities – a good ground floor and a good public realm – then all those people living in a converted office building aren’t going to improve the area.”

Eliot Tretter, an associate professor of geography at the University of Calgary, notes that another key aspect to consider is the ways in which the physical and social transformations brought about by the plan could affect the diverse populations in the seven core neighbourhoods (Downtown West End, Eau Claire, Downtown Commercial Core, Chinatown, East Village and the Beltline) that it encompasses.

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Sandalack would like to see a clearer commitment to public-realm improvements.

Historically, developers have built downtown Calgary's public amenities. "The City hasn't invested heavily in the public realm of the downtown core; a lot of what we do have was delivered through density bonus contributions and requirements of new development," Mahler says. As a result, developers also influenced the current character of our city's core.

"Because Calgary was such a boomtown ... office developers and property owners didn't want a lot of [planning] restrictions; they just wanted to be able to respond to the booming office market," Mahler says, "and office use continually encroached into areas that were originally planned for residential, especially in Eau Claire."

Cognizant of the importance of the public realm for downtown vibrancy, the current plan introduces public-private partnerships to help mitigate these risks and move public-realm improvements forward. Julie McGuire, project lead for Calgary's Greater Downtown Plan at the City of Calgary, says "when community groups get involved and take ownership of these public spaces it just makes for better, more socially connected neighbourhoods." These partnerships are also meant to support the maintenance, management and programming of new and existing amenities.

Even though one of the criticisms of public-private partnerships is that the interests of private enterprise are disparate from those of the public, Mahler thinks that the opportunities brought by business to the community are greater than the risks. "A lot of the success [of the plan] will be in fostering some of the local and small businesses that have connections to the community."

"Companies will come and go, but if your community is solid and you have a great commitment to your neighbourhood, to your communities, it can withstand [economic woes]."

One of the actions outlined in the plan to increase vibrancy is to "deliver park activation and operational efficiencies in downtown parks, including fee-based and revenue-generating programs." But revenue for whom? According to Miller, city planners should "have a clear vision of what the public good is and how to get there." In this case, the public good seems to be a return to higher property values.

Because property values downtown have seen a \$17 billion loss in value since 2015, taking action seemed imperative. "There's an urgency to act, and not doing anything was really not an option for Calgary anymore, from a vacancy and property-tax-revenue-loss perspective," Edwards says. And the challenges Calgary faces in today's hyper-global reality called for a different type of plan. In this sense, Calgary's Greater Downtown Plan is intended to be a high-level vision and strategy for decision makers to provide direction and de-risk investment projects, and an important component of our city's re-branding strategy to put Calgary "back on the map" and attract the hottest commodity of our day: tech talent.

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