

# Small Town Downtown Revitalization

Applying the Main Street Approach to the towns of Perth and Carleton Place, Ontario

A Master's Report submitted to the School of Urban and Regional Planning in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Planning

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Considering the majority of Canadian citizens live in small communities with populations varying between 3,000 to 50,000 persons, small town planning is an important topic despite the lack of discourse, analysis and research that surrounds it (LeBlanc, 2011). Despite a community's historic focus around its Main Street, a cultural shift in the 1940s toward suburban sprawl and auto-centrism "led to the decentralization of many functions that had once been the exclusive domain of downtown" (LeBlanc, 2011; Robertson, 1999, p. 274). This shift became especially problematic with the trend towards development of malls and shopping strips along the periphery of new suburban communities (Robertson, 1999; LeBlanc, 2011). As the "downtown commercial district is the most visible indicator of a community's economic and social health", there is a strong need for planners, politicians, community groups and citizens alike to protect downtowns against future threats and revitalize those in need (Heritage Canada Foundation, 2009). In response to the trend towards suburban sprawl development, the Main Street approach was established in Canadian towns in an effort to encourage revitalization of downtowns and to provide the tools to do so. Operating on a four-pillar approach to downtown revitalization (organization, marketing and promotion, economic development, and design and physical improvements), the program denoted that in order for a small town to thrive, it must be economically viable and play upon its identity and strengths as a community. Originally piloted in Perth, Ontario in 1979 and implemented in over 70 communities, funding for the Main Street Canada program eventually ceased in the early 1990s despite being largely considered a success (Heritage Canada Foundation, 2009).

This research report seeks to compare the planning principles and policies adopted in two small Ontario towns: Perth and Carleton Place. The report will outline the similarities and differences between the towns' policy and plans, and their organizations in place to encourage downtown revitalization, by using the Main Street principles as a benchmark for best practice. The report addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1:** How effectively do the Town of Carleton Place and the Town of Perth's respective policies and plans encourage downtown vitality in terms of economy, built form, heritage, and identity, according to the organization, marketing, economic, and physical design pillars of the Main Street approach?
- RQ2:** Based on lessons learned from Carleton Place and Perth, how can the Main Street approach principles be better incorporated and applied in small town planning policy

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and documents to encourage revitalization of other comparable small towns' downtowns in Ontario?

A two-pronged methodological approach has been applied for this report: 1) a comparative case analysis and 2) analyses of municipal policy, and related marketing and promotion documents. The research investigates and compares planning and municipal policies used by Perth and Carleton Place to encourage downtown economic, built form and identity vitality. An evaluative framework was developed for each pillar of the approach: Pillar 1: Organization; Pillar 2: Marketing and Promotion; Pillar 3: Economic and Commercial Development; and, Pillar 4: Design and Physical Improvements. Each pillar features several subcategories, based on research surrounding best practices and features of North American Main Street revitalization programs. Data is collected via analysis of policies including Official Plans, Community Strategic Plan, Development Permit By-law, Zoning By-law, Heritage Conservation District Plan, Community Improvement Plan, as well as organization's mandates, brochures, and websites including Business Improvement Areas and Economic Development Committees, to supplement the findings. Photographic observation of infill development, street furniture, crosswalks, and other streetscape features were incorporated to demonstrate how certain policies manifest throughout both towns. The effectiveness of each towns' existing mechanisms was evaluated by applying the developed criteria of each of the four pillars to the data, analyzing the frequency of repetition of various sub criteria themes, and comparing the frequency of repetition and quality of each town's policy statements.

The towns of Perth and Carleton Place may use the recommendations formulated from this research to further improve mechanisms in place for revitalization to ensure continued longevity of their downtowns. The recommendations may be of interest to other comparable small towns in Ontario, featuring similar size, geography, demographics, heritage features, and planning challenges. The Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing or the National Trust for Canada may apply these findings to support the reinstatement of a provincial funding program revitalization programs in Ontario, comparable to those currently in Alberta, Quebec and Saskatchewan. Ultimately, this research presents one motion towards reinforcing the need to continue discussion and progress towards maintaining, reinvigorating and protecting the vitality of Canada's small towns in order to maintain diverse, strong and complete communities across the nation.

Findings of the policy and plan analysis for the Town of Carleton Place and Town of Perth demonstrate that both towns incorporate policy that works towards encouraging downtown revitalization in terms of economy, built form, heritage, character and identity. By

assessing the frequency of repetition of policy related to the Main Street approach, then comparing the Town of Perth and the Town of Carleton Place's policies in terms of repetition and quality, a more clear understanding is developed of which town most effectively encourages downtown revitalization overall. The most comprehensive policies overall at encouraging downtown revitalization from the four pillars of the Main Street approach were the Community Strategic Plan and the Official Plan, which generally included policies from all pillars of the Main Street approach. The least effective plans for encouraging downtown revitalization overall were the Development Permit By-law and the Zoning By-law. An overview of the comparison of each policy's effectiveness follows:

### ***Official Plan***

The Town of Perth's Official Plan was far more effective than Carleton Place in promoting downtown revitalization in terms of economy, built form, heritage and identity. The Town of Perth's Official Plan surpassed the Town of Carleton Place in nearly all of policy themes related to encouraging community self-help, focusing on community strengths and traditions, focusing on socio-cultural activities and events, the conversion of unused commercial properties, ensuring a combination of retail and service mix, as well as focusing on good built form and community identity, restoration of heritage buildings, development of appropriate planning legislation, and creating a pedestrian-friendly downtown core.

### ***Community Strategic Plan***

The Town of Carleton Place's Community Strategic Plan focuses significant attention on economic and community development strategies for the downtown, and surpasses the Town of Perth in terms of outlining policies relevant to downtown revitalization from an economic, built form and identity standpoint. Though Perth's Community Strategic Plan did have a significant number of effective policies (especially in terms of tourism development), Carleton Place's CSP exceeded Perth in terms of promoting volunteer committees, establishing non-profit organizations, focusing on community strengths and traditions, active recruitment of new businesses, encouraging an appropriate combination of retail and service mix, as well as appropriate development of planning legislation to improve the physical environment.

### ***Development Permit By-law/ Zoning By-law***

Overall, the *Development Permit By-law* and *Zoning By-law* were not effective at encouraging downtown revitalization from all aspects of the four pillars of the Main Street approach. The Town of Perth's Zoning By-law is regulatory in nature and largely ineffective in encouraging vitality. By comparison however, the Town of Carleton Place's Development Permit By-law is much more well-rounded and includes goals and objectives surrounding downtown

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development in terms of built form, heritage character, and identity. The DPS By-law is a much more effective municipal tool than Perth's Zoning By-law in encouraging downtown vitality from a built form and identity perspective.

### ***Community Improvement Plan***

The Town of Perth's Community Improvement Plan effectively encourages downtown revitalization in terms of promoting community self-help, creating and partnering with variations of volunteer Main Street committees, creating a special assessment district or community development entity, creating promotional materials to convey the goals of the CIP, developing appropriate planning and incentive programs for economic development, as well as promoting quality built form and community identity, and providing façade improvement grants to assist businesses in improving their storefront appearances.

### ***Heritage Conservation District Plan***

The Town of Perth's Heritage Conservation District Plan is extremely effective at encouraging downtown revitalization from the perspective of built form and design and physical improvements. The Plan most prominently includes themes related to good built form that reflects the Town's identity, restoration of heritage buildings, appropriate use of planning and legislation, appropriate infill design, and design submissions that enhance and reflect the area's identity. Overall, because the Town of Perth does have this HCD plan, the municipality is far more effective at encouraging design and physical improvements than Carleton Place.

Overall, Carleton Place was more effective in encouraging downtown revitalization through its Community Strategic Plan and Development Permit By-law. Comparatively, Perth more effectively achieves downtown revitalization with its Official Plan, Community Improvement Plan, and Heritage District Conservation Plan. In consideration of the strength of the policies, the Town of Perth more effectively encourages downtown revitalization overall. Ultimately, the most effectively achieved pillars of the Main Street approach through policy are design and physical improvements first, economic and commercial development second, marketing and promotion third, and organization fourth. As discussed interspersed throughout the findings (Chapter 3) of this report, the organization and marketing and promotion pillars of the Main Street approach may also be effectively encouraged by organizations and their marketing tools, including the Business Improvement Area, Chamber of Commerce, and other economic development entities.

To conclude, this report offers seven recommendations to respond to the second research question presented in this report, and to offer guidance for small towns in Ontario

similar to Perth or Carleton Place, in order to support the revitalization of their downtowns, which follow.

***Recommendation 1: Identify a unified town identity and downtown vision***

An important aspect of each of the Town of Carleton Place's and the Town of Perth's policies is the inclusion of a unified vision statement, that reflects each municipality's commitment to the preservation of a unique, small town identity. It is important to note that before a town can make any change or progression by way of economy, built form, character or identity, it is important to define what its identity is, and what the municipality seeks to achieve. By creating a unified vision, the municipality can set the foundation for creating policy objectives that will in turn achieve downtown revitalization. Once the town's particular identity is defined, the Main Street approach can be used as a tool to achieve the vision, by incorporating policies that suit themes identified in the four pillars of the Main Street approach. This identity should be well defined within the municipality's Official Plan, which will act as the leading policy in guiding overall downtown revitalization.

***Recommendation 2: Develop and implement a Heritage Conservation District and associated plan***

Though an inherent focal point of the Main Street approach is the need for simultaneous well-rounded economic and built form improvements to achieve downtown vitality, built form is inevitably an important aspect of creating a vibrant, aesthetically pleasing and appropriative preserved downtown core (LeBlanc, 2011). As such, the establishment of a Heritage Conservation District is useful municipal policy mechanism that can be developed in small towns in Ontario to identify, protect and preserve their heritage assets. Small towns in Ontario seeking to revitalize their downtowns should conduct studies to assess whether the downtown has built or cultural heritage resources that are valuable and require preservation. A Heritage Conservation District plan could have an important impact in conserving, protecting and restoring cultural and built heritage resources to ensure the lasting built identity of the downtown. In combination with other policy initiatives, built form conservation will be an important step in creating a beautiful, unique and character-filled downtown Main Street core.

***Recommendation 3: Develop and implement a Community Improvement Area and associated plan***

Through consultation processes, a Community Improvement Plan can be drafted to incorporate the downtown Main Street area into its study area, and set clear goals and objectives for the future development of the area. Considering the Town of Perth's policy primarily focused on the design and physical improvements pillar of the Main Street approach; however, additional

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language to include economic and commercial development may be incorporated as well. When creating the Community Improvement Plan, care should be taken to incorporate policy language that addresses aspects of the Main Street approach.

### ***Recommendation 4: Develop or amend a Community Strategic Plan to focus on downtown organization, and marketing and promotion***

A Community Strategic Plan is a valuable tool for the municipality to define its goals and objectives, while effectively creating an organizational framework for how to achieve these goals. A Community Strategic Plan should therefore be developed based on a town's objective to revitalize the downtown. The Plan should simultaneously incorporate strategies for formulating strong community partnerships with existing associations including but not limited to: Chambers of Commerce, Business Improvement Areas, Heritage Associations, and Tourism Associations. In order to develop a well-rounded and effective approach to downtown revitalization, these community groups are essential to creating a lasting positive impact in the downtown, considering their ability to work from a grassroots approach to achieving economic, built form and character development. These associations are responsible for the groundwork associated with the Community Strategic Plan, as well as other relevant policies, and their roles and partnerships should be clearly defined within Council's strategic directions.

### ***Recommendation 5: Incorporate commonly repeated themes from the Main Street approach into existing and new policy***

There appears to be a relationship between the frequency of repetition of the developed sub-criteria themes and the overall direction for the policy in terms of downtown revitalization. Therefore, the most frequently repeated themes within the Town of Perth and the Town of Carleton Place's policies overall appear to be focal points of interest for municipal policy and contribute positively to the effectiveness of encouraging downtown revitalization. Policy that is newly developed or subject to amendments within the review period should incorporate these themes, considering their inherent importance to the Main Street approach, as demonstrated through the case study research at hand. By frequently repeating these themes, in combination with strong policy with a clear strategic direction, the municipality will be one step closer in creating policy conducive to downtown revitalization.

### ***Recommendation 6: Incorporate frequently missing themes from the Main Street approach into existing and new policy***

Upon amendment of plans or creation of new policy, a municipality should take special care to ensure that policy statements are incorporated that reflect the less discussed or neglected sub criteria of the Main Street approach throughout the documents. One of the core considerations

of the Main Street program is the need to take a holistic approach to downtown revitalization, by ensuring that each of the various aspects are incorporated within a municipality's strategy or policy. By ensuring that the frequently missed policies are adequately addressed throughout municipal documents, a municipality will have a more coordinated, organized and well-rounded strategy for downtown revitalization that embraces all of the Main Street pillars. Considering Perth and Carleton Place overlooked several policy themes, their future inclusion would contribute to creating an even stronger municipal policy strategy for downtown revitalization.

***Recommendation 7: Focus on community organization and cooperation to coordinate downtown revitalization efforts***

As discussed throughout this report, one of the key underpinnings of successful implementation of a Main Street revitalization strategy is the need for collaboration and cooperation amongst municipal staff and Council, as well as community members and community groups or associations. The groups can be organized at either the municipal or community level, and include: Business Improvement Associations, Chambers of Commerce, Heritage Advisory Committees, Economic Development Committees, Tourism Committees, and varieties of special events and/or promotional committees. Comparable towns to Carleton Place and Perth should ensure that this sense of community ownership is championed in order to protect the vitality of the downtown. Community organizations should be formed to promote the downtown as a well-rounded place to live, work, eat, shop and visit. In doing so, the community and downtown business or properties owners may better understand that a successful and thriving main street is overall beneficial to the town, which may ultimately lead to a downtown revitalization strategy that makes a lasting impact.

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