

# Downtown Revitalization Strategy Phase 1 Summary Interim Report

City of Hamilton

June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025



**Cultural Spaces**  
People and Places

## Context

Cultural Spaces was retained by the City of Hamilton in the Spring of 2025 to help develop a revitalization strategy for its Downtown. The strategy is meant to capture a range of considerations and provide recommendations for priorities and actions.

The project is divided into phases, where Phase 1 is focused on engaging with a diversity of stakeholders. Council requested an update on the project in Q2 2025.

### 1. What we did

The project began in early March with an internal team meeting that focused on reviewing priorities and setting up a schedule for visits and stakeholder engagements.

The first site visit took place between March 24th and 26th. This was the opportunity for the team to familiarize itself with Downtown Hamilton and meet some of the key City contacts.

Following the first visit, the priority was to establish a structure to engage key stakeholders. The objectives of the structure were to: 1) capture a diversity of stakeholders; 2) encourage conversations on themes that were interrelated; and 3) offer a format that was conducive to open exchanges.

Based on that approach, 9 themes were identified: Arts, Culture, and Entertainment; Small and Mid-Size Businesses; Transportation and Mobility; Safety and Social Services; Downtown Marketing Positioning for Tourism; Housing, Commercial Properties; and Urban Fabric and Public Realm. An average of 15 people joined each thematic conversation. Some of these conversations were jointly organized with outside groups, such as the BIAs and established social services and housing committees.

In addition to these, we met with City staff and senior leadership involved in a wide scope of programs and the senior leadership of the police service. In order to broaden the ability for stakeholders to engage with the project, we set up two online tools. One is for staff to engage and share ideas on their role in revitalizing Downtown, the other is for external stakeholders to share their efforts to make Downtown an attractive and welcoming space for all.

Lastly, we visited Downtown Hamilton four times since the end of March for a total of 10 days. We walked the streets of Downtown at various occasions, during all of our visits, day and night. We stopped and chatted with individuals, entered stores, and always stayed in a Downtown hotel. This allowed us to immerse ourselves as much as possible in the fabric and the feeling of Downtown.

While we do not claim to have spoken to everyone and remain available to engage with others, this phase of engagement heard from hundreds of stakeholders and offered a credible cross-section of individuals and organizations involved with Downtown.

### 2. What we heard

Each engagement was facilitated by the Cultural Spaces team and was guided by open ended questions and trust building through anonymity so as to provide an open forum to share

perceptions, experiences, ideas, frustrations, and needs. The team was strictly in a listening mode.

The following are the highlights of the exchanges:

- **A neighbourhood that people care about**: stakeholders care about the area and demonstrate great pride in fostering activities, initiating and growing businesses, and taking care of their spaces. They conceive of Downtown as a neighbourhood with regular amenities required for residents (e.g. grocery stores, parks, schools) as well as one that is home to amenities of interest to the city as a whole and beyond (e.g. the public library, the art gallery, theatres). Stakeholders use the urban fabric and wealth of opportunities that typical city downtowns offer to live, create, invest and innovate. They continue to spend time and resources to beautify, animate, and make the place attractive.
- **The home and livelihood of many**: Downtown is not just a space, it is a place. It is the home of tens of thousands of residents, mostly renters, and the livelihood of hundreds of independent businesses, artists, and innovators. Residents are there most by choice and some because of the affordability of housing and availability of specific services. The attraction of an urban setting and lifestyle is important and valued. More people are able to settle Downtown under certain conditions. Some businesses have been around for decades and are institutions in the city. Many independent businesses are entrepreneurs, especially for women and from underrepresented groups, who are attracted to Downtown as a first opportunity to launch a business.
- **The perception of abandonment**: Residents, creators, and businesses expressed feelings of abandonment, frustration, and of not being listened to. Concerns about the state of infrastructure, safety, long-term planning, accessibility, and positive promotion of the neighbourhood have remained unaddressed according to stakeholders. Stakeholders expressed strong emotions of hurt, pain, and sense of loss from not being heard. For the residents and businesses who live and have their livelihood Downtown, the negative perceptions that outsiders may have on the neighbourhood is often more than a perception, it is an experience. They have expressed frustration at not getting answers about major projects and being in limbo, the concentration of services for people in need without an assessment of potential impacts, and the lack of care for the quality of the urban furniture and maintenance of the public realm. The feeling is that Downtown is neither treated as a proper neighbourhood nor a destination for visitors.
- **The experience of disconnect**: The perception of abandonment is coupled with an experience of disconnect between the efforts of residents, creators, and businesses and those of the City. They have difficulty reconciling the negative perception of Downtown from non residents, a lack of awareness of the positive aspects of the life of residents and contributions of local business owners, and a lack of prioritizing by the City. Stakeholders do not believe that their neighbourhood is a priority. They expressed that they feel that their own investments in making Downtown a place of choice for residents, creators, and businesses are not matched by the City. They feel that they are more often met with 'no', a wait-and-see attitude, delays, and sometimes confusion in responses from the City. Inside the City a similar perception of lack of focus on priorities and inability to make timely decisions hinders the efforts of staff to be responsive. Stakeholders are looking for better communication with the City, a clear sense of priorities, openness to initiatives, responsiveness, coordinated prioritization, sustained engagement of stakeholders by the

City, sustained effort to take care of both infrastructure and social issues, and a people-first attitude.

### **3. Elements for a vision**

Council requested an update on the vision for a revitalized Downtown on July 9th. Based on the efforts made to date, it is too soon to engage in discussions of visioning.

However, there are elements that are gleaned from what stakeholders said that are helpful to imagine the future. These pertain to a Downtown that is both a neighbourhood and a destination for visitors and Hamiltonians, a place to display City pride, a home that is accessible for all, and a place of positive energy and excitement. It is a place that is welcoming and offers opportunities for the city as a whole.

As the Cultural Spaces team continues to engage with stakeholders, more focused efforts will be made to craft a vision that is authentic, pragmatic, attainable, incites change, and builds confidence for all those involved.

### **4. Core principles**

Council requested an update on the principles for a revitalized Downtown in Q2 2025. Similarly to the vision, it is too soon to discuss principles.

There are nevertheless some elements that offer a sense of how principles can form the basis for decisions that have an impact. These include a people focused approach, a back-to-basics approach, a build and care approach, a desire and commitment to change, a commitment to taking control of what the City can control, a strong public presence, encouraging initiatives, and a commitment to collectively own Downtown while empowering residents.

Principles will be developed in the next few months together with stakeholders and City staff.

### **5. Next steps: framing the data collection and analysis**

The next steps of the work will focus on developing the methodology to collect data and analyze it. This will require close cooperation with City staff and some key stakeholders to have access to credible and up to date data. Additionally, we will consult relevant plans and current strategies to find a relevant pattern of actions and start building a coherent direction for the City as a whole.

The methodology will rely on a sustainability approach that considers the interconnectedness of social, environmental, cultural, and economic matters. The identification of pillars to support the revitalization and of levers to activate those efforts will form the foundation of the revitalization strategy. Recommendations will be crafted in a direct and pragmatic language. They will emphasize the ability to deliver change within 5 years and prioritize longer term changes over 10 years.

The project will continue to listen to stakeholders and engage with them to provide the necessary meaningful long-term direction for the success of the strategy.