

City of Tonawanda Downtown Revitalization Initiative



Local Planning Committee Meeting #6 Summary

October 24, 2024 @ 6:00 – 7:30 pm | Twin Cities Elks Lodge
55 Main Street, Tonawanda, NY 14150

Attendees

State Partners

- Ben Bidell, NYS Department of State
- Angela Keppel, NYS Department of State
- Amanda Bearcroft, NYS Department of State
- Erin Corrado, Empire State Development
- Mo Sumbundu, Empire State Development
- Lenny Skrill, NYS Homes and Community Renewal

City of Tonawanda

- Sharon Stuart, City of Tonawanda
- Judy Kurtzworth, City of Tonawanda

Local Planning Committee

- Co-chair Hon. John White, Mayor
- Co-chair Paul Brown, WNY Regional Economic Development Council
- Marty Grunzweig
- Skip Johnson
- Nhi Kha
- Debbie Jaeger
- Alice Roth
- Joan Horn
- Jeffrey Ross
- Mark Saltarelli
- Michelle Lockett
- Suzanne Zuchlewski

Consultant Team

- WSP
- Highland Planning
- Prospect Hill

Agenda

1. Welcome and Introductions

- LPC Co-chair Mayor White called the meeting to order and led the pledge of allegiance.
- Stephanie Camay (WSP) led introductions of the LPC, State partners, and the consultant team.

2. Code of Conduct Preamble

- Ben Bidell (DOS) recited the Code of Conduct preamble. The preamble reminds LPC members of their obligation to act in the public interest and recuse themselves, if necessary, from talking or making decisions about projects where they have a conflict. The following conflicts are documented:
 - Alice Roth
 - Affiliation: Volunteer and Trustee for the Historical Society of the Tonawandas
 - Project: Long Homestead and Historical Museum Improvements

- Skip Johnson
 - Affiliation: Member and Treasurer of the Historical Society of the Tonawandas
 - Project: Long Homestead and Historical Museum Improvements
- Deb Jaegar
 - Affiliation: Former owner of 77 Young St.
 - Project: Construct a Mixed-Use Waterfront Building at 77 Young Street
- Mayor White gave opening remarks, thanking the LPC for their commitment and reaching the final step in the DRI planning process as well as expressing optimism for Tonawanda's revitalization.

3. Planning Process and Engagement Updates

- Brendan Kelly (WSP) summarized the DRI scope and process, including a recap of LPC Meeting #5, the agenda for LPC Meeting #6, and what to expect after the final LPC meeting.
- Brendan summarized public engagement throughout the DRI process. Public engagement has been crucial at every step and involved:
 - Public Workshop #1, which included a DRI overview presentation, visioning and goal-setting, and a mapping exercise.
 - The Public Survey, which identified community issues, opportunities, and needs.
 - The Open Call for Projects, during which sponsors submitted projects for DRI funding consideration.
 - Interviews with community stakeholders.
 - Public Workshop #2, during which members of the public reviewed, discussed, and provided feedback on submitted projects.
 - Pop-up events at events and festivals throughout the community.
 - LPC meetings, open to the public for observation and public comment.

4. Project Updates Since Last Meeting

- Bob Gibson (WSP) gave updates on projects for which additional information was received since LPC Meeting #5. Project updates included:
 - "Transform an Underutilized Ellicott Creek Site by Building 'The Elli' to House a Mix of Residential and Commercial Uses": Total project cost was reduced to \$35,194,000 to reflect amounts previously expended, which cannot be considered as part of the total project cost for DRI purposes. The project sponsor also provided additional details regarding energy efficiency and decarbonization measures.
 - "Renovate the Tonawanda Castle to Reignite the Event Center and Introduce Commercial Spaces": The project sponsor confirmed that State Historic Preservation Office review is not required if the sponsor replaces the roof to match the existing materials.

- “Renovate the Vacant Former Stamps into a New Restaurant and Bar”: The total project budget was reduced to \$750,000 and the DRI request was reduced to \$562,000 to more accurately reflect the work to be conducted as part of the project.
- “Improve Downtown Access and Waterfront Connections at the Blueways and Greenways Intermodal Hub and Canal Street Plaza”: Project scope was modified to include a new pathway along the waterfront, raising the total project cost and DRI request to \$1,934,000.
- “Create the Downtown Small Project Fund”: Project sponsor was changed from the City of Tonawanda to the City of Tonawanda Local Development Corporation (LDC) which will administer the fund.

5. Project Evaluation Criteria

- Stephanie reminded the LPC of the criteria used to evaluate the projects considered for DRI funding, which included:
 - Alignment with Tonawanda DRI Vision and Goals
 - Alignment with State DRI Goals
 - Alignment with WNY Regional Economic Development Council Strategies
 - Consistency with State Evaluation Criteria
 - Consistency with Local Evaluation Criteria

4. Vote on Final Slate of Projects

- Stephanie presented an overview slide for each of the 12 projects that the LPC included on the preliminary slate of projects during LPC Meeting #5. The slate includes \$13,100,000 in DRI funding requests, representing total project costs of \$49,913,000.
- The project types include 5 public improvement projects, 1 new development project, 5 redevelopment/renovation of existing building projects, and 1 Small Project Fund.
- The Department of State advises that the final slate of projects range from \$12,000,000 to \$15,000,000 in DRI funding requests. The Governor’s Office will ultimately select projects from the final slate to award \$9,700,000 in DRI funding to.
- The LPC voted unanimously to approve the preliminary slate of projects as the final slate of projects to be recommended to New York State for DRI funding, with the changes noted during the Project Updates. Tables summarizing the LPC’s final project recommendations are provided at the end of this meeting summary. The final slate of recommended projects is summarized in Table 1. The projects recommended for other funded are summarized in Table 2 and projects recommended for the Small Project Fund are summarized in Table 3.

5. DRI Roadmap recommendations

- Katie O’Sullivan (WSP) presented an overview of the DRI Roadmap. The DRI Roadmap provides a path for continued revitalization after the DRI planning process concludes. It includes near near-term recommendations for policies, leadership and capacity, community engagement, future revitalization projects, and measures of progress. Recommendations include:

- Policy Considerations:
 - Apply for Pro-Housing Community designation in Tonawanda.
 - Adopt the 2021 Draft Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan.
 - Update the City's zoning code.
 - Consider additional plans and studies such as a Gateway Harbor user study, visitor study, and rental housing vacancy study as well as policies around vacant land assembly strategies and redevelopment of City-owned land.
- Leadership and Capacity
 - Identifying City of Tonawanda staff that will administer DRI grants and projects.
 - Consider transitioning the LPC into a new advisory committee or Small Project Fund selection committee.
 - Collaborate with revitalization partners such as the Chamber of Commerce, Local Development Corporation, Tonawanda Housing Authority, and community-based organizations to advance revitalization efforts.
- Community Engagement
 - Involve the community in the design of public projects.
 - Share information with the public during DRI implementation.
 - Work with community-based organizations to share information through their networks.
 - Share information in high-visibility areas and online.
- Future Revitalization Projects
 - Provide support for future revitalization projects to sustain momentum, including DRI projects recommended for other funding that require further development or are located outside of the DRI boundary.
- Measuring Progress
 - Collect data that can help to understand and communicate project impacts and overall success, such as dollars invested, new housing units created, vacancy rates, number of businesses and employees, etc.
- A meeting with a one-time advisory committee for the DRI Roadmap led to the following additional recommendations:
 - Establish the proposed local historic district to make properties eligible for historic preservation tax credits.
 - Hire a Planning and Development Director to research and write grants, manage planning projects, staff advisory boards, and market development opportunities.

- Form an Economic Development Committee to advise on business development, retention, and attraction.
- Identify and prioritize opportunities for Restore NY state grant funding.
- Annually review grant opportunities to better align available grant funding with local projects.

6. Next Steps in the DRI Process

- Stephanie concluded the meeting by reviewing next steps in the DRI process. The Final Draft Strategic Investment Plan will be compiled and will include the following sections:
 - Executive Summary
 - Downtown Profile and Assessment
 - Summary of Public Engagement
 - Community Vision, Goals, and Strategies
 - Projects Recommended for DRI Funding
 - Pipeline Projects
 - DRI Roadmap
- Stephanie then presented an example of a project profile, which is the standard format for summarizing a project recommended for DRI funding in the Strategic Investment Plan.

7. Public Comment

- Stephanie then opened the floor to public comment. The following comments were made:
 - Can the DRI team share public feedback about proposed projects with the project sponsors?
 - Stephanie agreed that the DRI team could provide feedback received upon request.
 - How was the DRI Roadmap Committee selected? Can there be a public call for involvement in future committees?
 - Mayor White said he selected the committee to include those already familiar with the DRI process due to time constraints. He agreed that having more public involvement in future committee meetings would be beneficial. Ben clarified the DRI Roadmap meeting was a brainstorming session and not a formal committee meeting, but that it could serve as a model for an Economic Development Committee or other advisory board.
 - Eastern Park is not a suitable location for a natural playground. It should be located at Niawanda Park or behind Kohler Pool.
 - Could the State cut City of Tonawanda projects from the final DRI award?
 - Ben clarified that the State can decide to fund or not fund recommended projects regardless of sponsor.

- Are Small Project Fund project selection meetings going to be open to the public?
 - Mayor White said that yes, transparency is the City's intention and that public engagement will continue to be a priority.
- The Citizen Police Academy (CPA) building would be a good fit for the Small Project Fund.

Table 1: Tonawanda DRI Final Slate of Projects Recommended for Funding

Project Title	Sponsor	Total Project Cost	DRI Funding Requested	DRI Funding Recommended
Replace and Enhance City Docking Facilities on the Erie Canal to Attract More Transient Boaters	City of Tonawanda	\$2,578,000	\$2,578,000	\$2,578,000
Improve Downtown Access and Waterfront Connections at the Blueways and Greenways Intermodal Hub and Canal Street Plaza	City of Tonawanda	\$1,934,000	\$1,934,000	\$1,934,000
Renovate the Tonawanda Castle to Reignite the Event Center and Introduce Commercial Spaces	Property Development of the Tonawandas, Inc.	\$1,580,000	\$1,185,000	\$1,185,000
Redevelop the Former American Legion into an Event Center and Overnight Suites	RZ Real Estate, LLC	\$1,352,000	\$1,012,000	\$1,012,000
Renovate the Vacant Former Stamps into a New Restaurant and Bar	West End Properties of Buffalo, LLC	\$750,000	\$562,000	\$562,000
Replace the East Niagara Street Pedestrian Bridge to Strengthen Connections between Downtown and the Empire State Trail	City of Tonawanda	\$2,750,000	\$629,000	\$629,000
Construct a Mixed-Use Waterfront Building on the Former Smoke on the Water Site	JKMR, LLC	\$1,580,000	\$500,000	\$500,000
Enhance and Improve Access to the Historic Long Homestead to Attract More Visitors	City of Tonawanda	\$324,000	\$324,000	\$324,000
Redevelop the Former Church at 116 Broad Street into Apartments	116 Broad, LLC	\$1,071,000	\$296,000	\$296,000
Preserve the Historical Society of the Tonawandas Museum	Historical Society of the Tonawandas	\$80,000	\$80,000	\$80,000
Create the Downtown Tonawanda Small Project Fund	City of Tonawanda Local Development Corporation	\$720,000	\$600,000	\$600,000

**The above projects will be considered by New York State for a share of the \$9.7 million in Tonawanda DRI funding available. Not all projects will receive a DRI grant award.*

Table 2: Tonawanda DRI Projects Recommended for Other Funding

Project Title	Sponsor	Total Project Cost	DRI Funding Requested	DRI Funding Recommended
Convert the Former Rite Aid into a Multi-Story Mixed-Use Building	REHMY, LLC	\$10,200,000	\$2,000,000	\$0
Build a Natural Playground behind the Long Homestead to Activate the Space for Children and Families	City of Tonawanda (Playground Committee)	\$350,000	\$350,000	\$0
Reconstruct Niagara Street between City Hall and Main Street to Create a Safer and More Attractive Downtown Gateway	City of Tonawanda	\$7,000,000	\$1,400,000	\$0
Convert the Kohler Pool into a Splash Pad and Modernize the Facility to Provide Safe Outdoor Summer Activities for Kids	City of Tonawanda	\$2,750,000	\$2,750,000	\$0
Construct the Mixed-Use Erie Canal Lofts on the Adam Street Parking Lot	Niagara Development Group	\$17,000,000	\$3,500,000	\$0

**Projects listed at \$0 are not recommended for DRI funding but are additional priorities of the Tonawanda DRI Local Planning Committee to be included in the Strategic Investment Plan. These projects will be given greater consideration in future state grant applications.*

Table 3: Potential Projects for the Tonawanda DRI Small Project Fund

Project Title	Sponsor	Total Project Cost	DRI Funding Requested	DRI Funding Recommended
Expand Joey's Place Restaurant by Adding Outdoor Seating	West End Properties of Buffalo, LLC	\$334,000	\$250,000	\$0
Improvements to Eldredge Bicycle Club	Eldredge Bicycle Club	\$100,000	\$75,000	\$0
Improvements to Fiorella's Garden Center	City of Tonawanda	\$75,000	\$56,000	\$0
Improvements to Twin Cities Elks Lodge	Twin Cities Elks Lodge #860	TBD	TBD	\$0

**The above projects will be included in the Strategic Investment Plan as examples of the types of projects that could be funded through the Small Project Fund. New York State will decide whether the Small Project Fund will be created based on documented demand and need. If created, project sponsors will apply for funding through a separate application process to be established.*