



City of Tonawanda Downtown Revitalization Initiative

Stakeholder Interviews Summary

September 5, 2024

OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

The City of Tonawanda was selected to receive \$10 million through New York State's Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI), a cornerstone of the State's economic development program. The DRI transforms downtown neighborhoods into vibrant centers that offer a high quality of life and are magnets for redevelopment, business, job creation, and economic and housing diversity. The funding will be allocated to public, private, and/or nonprofit projects that will contribute to the City's ongoing revitalization.

Public engagement is a key component of the DRI planning process. Throughout the planning process, key stakeholders in the Tonawanda community were engaged to provide input on the city's challenges, opportunities, and best avenues for public engagement. The feedback received during the stakeholder interviews resulted will be used to inform investments that have potential to transform the downtown area. This document summarizes the results of the stakeholder interviews as part of the DRI public engagement process.

INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

Seven stakeholder interviews were conducted over the phone between June 25 and August 31, 2024. Stakeholders were identified by the City, based upon their involvement in the community and their unique knowledge of certain aspects of the City, such as the arts and early education.

Stakeholders represent the following organizations or agencies:

- Niagara River Greenway Commission
- Partners in Art
- Tonawanda City School District
- Tonawanda High School
- City of Tonawanda Public Library
- City of Tonawanda Board of Visual and Performance Arts
- Local real estate agency

Stakeholders were asked the following thematic and auxiliary questions:

1. What does your organization do and how does it impact downtown Tonawanda? What populations or audiences does your organization serve or engage with?
2. What are the greatest challenges facing the city today? What trends concern you when thinking about Tonawanda's future?
3. What are some of the greatest opportunities in downtown Tonawanda? Are there specific industries or types of businesses that have growth potential in Tonawanda? What are ways the city can enhance residents' quality of life?
4. What is your opinion on current community engagement for the DRI? How would you recommend that we get a diverse representation of the community to respond to the Public Survey and Project Feedback Form? Are there any minority-owned/run businesses or nonprofits you know of who may be interested in the Open Call for Projects or Small Project Fund?

KEY FINDINGS

High-level takeaways from the stakeholder interviews include an emphasis on demand for family-friendly or youth-oriented businesses, the need to improve vacant or underutilized areas, and the importance of connecting waterfront amenities and assets with the downtown core. Themes from the key findings are summarized below:

- **Demand for family friendly and youth-oriented businesses:** The City of Tonawanda lacks places that children, teenagers, and young adults like to frequent. Many businesses that appeal to this demographic is in neighboring towns, which presents a barrier to underserved families. Having more businesses like coffee shops or smoothie shops would provide a safe, accessible place for younger residents to socialize.
- **Vacancy and eyesore areas:** Stakeholders believe that vacant or underutilized buildings downtown create an unfriendly or dreary environment. These buildings or sites could be improved by new infill development or by beautification/public art initiatives.
- **Connecting the waterfront with downtown:** By making improvements to Tonawanda's highly popular waterfront, the city has an opportunity to capture visitors to its waterfront and draw them into downtown. Creating more opportunities for restaurant and retail options on Main Street will help to attract waterfront visitors into the downtown core.

The following pages contain a summary of the stakeholder interviews.

SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW RESULTS

This section summarizes the findings from the stakeholder interviews by theme.

I. Challenges

- Vacancy is damaging the downtown economy and is making the city less attractive to new residents. Stakeholders believe that prime locations in the downtown core are underutilized or vacant. They believe that the downtown should be a lively area filled with retail, restaurants, and entertainment options. Many of the stakeholders specifically cited urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s as a challenge that the city is still recovering from. Utilizing the “bones” of what was once a dense, bustling commercial area is a challenge that should be addressed through the DRI.
- Beyond the waterfront, there is little “draw” to downtown. The City of Tonawanda welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors to its waterfront each year but struggles to capture them and bring them into the city. Stakeholders cited the lack of a “draw” to downtown as a primary challenge. According to stakeholders, there is too little to do in Tonawanda as compared to similar localities. Stakeholders pointed to the success of breweries, festivals, theaters, and music venues in other communities as missed opportunities in Tonawanda.
- There is a need for all housing types. Stakeholders agree that the lack of housing options in Tonawanda limits new residents from being able to move to the city. Stakeholders emphasized the problem that there are too few places to live that are truly downtown. As more younger professionals and families desire to live in urban settings, they struggle to find housing in Tonawanda that meet this criterion. The lack of housing options also affects affordability. Many potential residents are looking for low-cost alternatives to traditional single-family housing, such as apartments or patio homes designed for people looking to downsize. These options are sparse within the downtown area.
- There are too few amenities designed for youth. Tonawanda’s youth have few options downtown that suit their preferences. Stakeholders specifically cited the lack of youth-oriented businesses downtown as a crucial challenge. Stakeholders claim that this has been detrimental to Tonawanda’s youth, who have limited spaces to socialize without spending a high amount of money. Stakeholders think that lacking these kinds of spaces may contribute to drug or alcohol use and delinquent behavior in younger populations.



Stakeholders cited lack of retail businesses, few restaurants, lack of amenities for families and youth, and low visual appeal on Main Street as crucial challenges in downtown Tonawanda

- Streetscapes, especially Main Street, need to be refreshed. Stakeholders are concerned that the low visual appeal of Main Street and other areas in the city may be unattractive to visitors who are passing through the city. Visual appeal may also dissuade nearby residents from wanting to spend time and money in downtown Tonawanda.

II. Opportunities

- The waterfront is the city's biggest asset and should be utilized effectively. Stakeholders agree that new waterfront development should be planned in a way that brings people downtown. Stakeholders say that many out-of-town visitors are simply unaware of Tonawanda's downtown strip since there is little wayfinding that orients them toward the city. Expanding waterfront amenities and trail systems is an excellent opportunity to link downtown and the waterfronts through wayfinding.
- Bringing in an anchor or draw on Main Street that attracts people downtown. Stakeholders agree that a centerpiece attraction in the city would help bring people into downtown. Many stakeholders think that a walkable, revitalized Main Street with shopping, dining, and entertainment options in proximity would create a destination for visitors and would create a reason for people to want to live in the downtown core.
- Tonawanda has a rich history that people take pride in. Tonawanda's Erie Canal heritage is a source of pride in the community. Finding ways to create a unified, historic theme in downtown Tonawanda would help restore vitality and pride in the downtown. Stakeholders also stressed the importance of preserving or restoring historic buildings, since they lend to the charming, quaint feel of the city.
- There is demand for expanded access to the arts. Tonawanda has a thriving art scene that is struggling from the lack of dedicated venues downtown. Music venues were cited as a crucial opportunity that would provide a space for local musicians to perform and for residents to enjoy live music. Commissioned public art by local artists would present an opportunity for Tonawanda's art scene to grow while also bolstering visual appeal of the downtown.
- Attracting new restaurants that cater to all age groups. Stakeholders agree that restaurants present an excellent opportunity to draw in residents and visitors to the downtown area. However, stakeholders noted that new restaurants should be centered around all age groups, not just drinking age adults. Exclusively adding breweries or bars without full service, sit-down restaurants excludes children, young adults, and other people who do not drink alcohol.



Hundreds of thousands of people visit Tonawanda's waterfront and trails each year. Stakeholders think drawing these people downtown, especially to Main Street, is a huge opportunity for revitalizing Tonawanda.

III. Community Engagement

- Current promotion efforts are working well. Stakeholders agreed that current outreach has been successful. Examples of successful promotion include email blasts, social media posts, press releases, pop-up events, and stations at highly trafficked locations in the city.
- Ensure that promotional materials are accessible and that physical copies are spread throughout the city. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of ensuring promotional materials are easy to read and understand for a wide audience. Ensuring that physical copies of outreach materials are spread throughout the city is important to reaching people who do not access the internet regularly.
- Local organizations beyond the City of Tonawanda have wide-reaching networks that can be tapped to promote interest in the DRI. Promoting the DRI to networks beyond the city may help generate a buzz within it.



Based on recommendations for how to improve accessibility, the Project Feedback Form is available in physical form at Tops, City of Tonawanda Public Library, and City Hall.