



August 29, 2024 @ 6:00 – 8:00 pm | Senior Citizens Center
35 Main Street, Tonawanda, NY 14150

Attendees

State Partners

- Ben Bidell, NYS Department of State
- Angela Keppel, 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

Meeting Summary

1. Welcome and Introductions

- LPC co-chair Mayor White called the meeting to order and led the pledge of allegiance.
- Mayor White thanked project applicants for their attendance and brief presentation on their project.
- LPC Co-Chair Paul Brown (WNY REDC) 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 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

- Mark Saltarelli
 - Affiliation: Member of the Twin Cities Elks Lodge
 - Project: Renovate 2nd Floor of Elks Lodge into an Event Space
- Ben Bidell (DOS) announced that the project applicant for “Renovate 2nd Floor of Elks Lodge into an Event Space” withdrew their application from DRI consideration, so there are no potential conflicts with that project anymore.

2. Planning Process and Schedule

- Stephanie Camay (WSP) summarized the Tonawanda DRI process and schedule, including a recap of LPC Meeting #3, the agenda for LPC Meeting #4, and what to expect at LPC Meeting #5.

3. Engagement Updates

- Brendan Kelly (WSP) provided initial highlights from the public survey, which was open from May 16 to August 2, 2024. There were 295 responses with 90% of respondents indicating they live in the City of Tonawanda, 72% of which have lived in the city for more than 10 years.
- Responses indicate the following priorities for downtown Tonawanda: supporting and growing businesses, developing vacant and underutilized sites, beautifying Main Street and other streetscapes, attracting tourism and visitors year-round, and improving waterfront access.
- Full survey results will be distributed to the LPC prior to individual evaluations and also posted online via the Tonawanda DRI website.
- Brendan gave an overview of findings from the stakeholder interviews. Seven stakeholder interviews were conducted from June 25 to August 13, 2024. Stakeholders represented the following organizations/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 & Performing Arts
 - Local real estate agency
- Results from the stakeholder interviews indicate the following themes: demand for family-friendly and youth-oriented businesses and activities, problems with vacancy and eyesore areas, and need to better connect the waterfront with downtown.
- A full summary of stakeholder interviews will be distributed to the LPC prior to individual evaluations.
- Brendan presented a summary of pop-up engagement events and Public Workshop #2, which provided opportunities for the public to learn more about the DRI process and provide feedback on proposed projects.
- A public Project Feedback Form opened on August 6 and will close September 9. The form is available online at www.TonawandaDRI.com and in physical form at Tops on Niagara Street, City Hall, and the City of Tonawanda Public Library.

4. Downtown Profile and Assessment Market Findings

- Stephanie presented market findings from the Downtown Profile and Assessment, which is a substantial piece of the Strategic Investment Plan. Key findings include:

- Housing vacancy in the City of Tonawanda is extremely low and housing values are way up, indicating strong demand for new housing, likely at different price points.
- A high proportion of housing is detached, single-family housing homes that are more than 60 years old. Diversity in new housing types will provide housing for all ages, incomes, and living preferences.
- The number of commercial buildings has not changed much over the past ~10 years, however rents have increased substantially in the office and retail market. Increased rents suggest that the market can absorb increased office and retail space.
- Consumer spending by Tonawanda residents is less than Erie County residents (as a whole) in key areas. Lower spending on food and transportation suggests a lower cost of living in the city and potentially higher discretionary spending that could be captured locally.
- Tonawanda is home to regional attractions that draw hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. The city should focus on enhancing existing attractions, better connecting visitors to downtown, and extending visitor stays.

5. Potential Projects

- Bob Gibson (WSP) provided an overview of the potential DRI projects and their locations within the DRI boundary. At this stage in the DRI process, there are 16 projects under consideration, plus the Small Project Fund. The projects under consideration amount to a total DRI request of \$16.5M and a total project cost of \$80M. The LPC is tasked with recommending \$12M to \$15M in DRI requests.
- The projects fall into the following categories:
 - 6 public improvement projects
 - 2 new development projects
 - 8 redevelopment/renovation of existing buildings
- Project applicants were invited to give a brief presentation (up to 3 minutes each, plus 1 minute for initial questions) on their project. The LPC documented additional questions and comments for project applicants on a handout that the consultant team collected. The consultant team will follow up with applicants to provide answers to the LPC's questions.
- Bob noted that only two Small Project Fund interest forms have been submitted to date. Ben clarified that more responses to the form will be needed to justify inclusion of the Small Project Fund in the Strategic Investment Plan.

6. Project Evaluation Process

- Stephanie presented an overview of the project evaluation process and the materials that will be provided to the LPC for their project evaluations, including the consultant evaluations, results of the Project Feedback Form, and project profiles. The LPC will use an online form to evaluate each project.
- The questions on the LPC Evaluation Form include:
 - Does the project align with the DRI vision and goals?
 - Does the project align with the State DRI goals?
 - Does the project align with the WNY Regional Economic Development Council strategies?
 - Is the project consistent with the State evaluation criteria?
 - Is the project consistent with the local evaluation criteria?

7. Next Steps

- Stephanie provided an overview of upcoming LPC meetings, including:

- LPC virtual information session (week of September 9, to be determined) – This will be closed-door meeting where LPC members will review project details including confidential financial and other information.
- LPC Meeting #5 (September 25) – At this meeting, the LPC will review their project evaluations, the consultant evaluations, and public feedback and begin developing the final slate of projects to be recommended for DRI funding.
- LPC Meeting #6 (October 24) – At the final LPC meeting, the LPC will finalize and vote on the slate of projects recommended for DRI funding, which will be included in the Strategic Investment Plan.
- Stephanie presented upcoming engagement opportunities:
 - The Project Feedback Form is available to the public until September 9 both online and in hard copy at City Hall, City of Tonawanda Public Library, and Tops Market.
 - The final DRI pop-up event will be at Food Truck Thursdays on September 5 which will be used to promote the Project Feedback Form.
 - Members of the public are encouraged to visit the DRI website at www.TonawandaDRI.com for general information and updates.
- Mayor White gave closing remarks and thanked the LPC for their continued engagement.

8. Public Comment

- Stephanie opened the floor to comments from members of the public. The following comments were made:
 - Seeing this level of engagement and attention in the City of Tonawanda is awesome, regardless of opinions on projects.
 - One member of the public provided remarks on each of the projects being considered for DRI funding.