

Policy Brief: The Heart of the City

■ **Downtowns.**

Downtowns were historically the economic, social, and cultural hubs of a city. Everybody would go downtown to shop and socialize. Downtowns were a place to see and be seen. Beginning in the early 1950s, people began settling further and further away from the central core. Businesses soon followed, leading to a gradual hollowing of downtowns and an increasing reliance on personal automobiles; a double whammy for downtowns, which unlike suburban neighbourhoods, were not designed to accommodate cars.

In recent years, many North American downtowns have enjoyed resurgence, with large scale public and private investments aimed at revitalizing and reinventing historic community centres. Sault Ste. Marie's downtown is no exception. Beginning in the 1970's, the downtown area, especially the waterfront, began to transform from an industrial hub with tank farms, coal piles and scrap yards to a cultural and recreational hub linked by the waterfront walkway. Industrial sites were replaced with recreational, cultural and administrative uses such as the Centennial Library, Art Gallery, City Hall, Clergue Park and Roberta Bondar Pavilion.

Downtown revitalization continues to be an important focus for the City. Since 2007 the Downtown Development Initiative has provided grants to property owners to facilitate façade improvements and interior renovations. Over the last 10 years, there has been over \$95 million in private sector investment. Other recent efforts include streetscape improvements along Gore Street, the Queen Street tree replacement program, and laneway improvements in an effort to improve linkages between the waterfront, Bay Street and Queen Street.

■ **Why do downtowns matter?**

Downtowns instantly tell the state of a city, speaking volumes about the city's economic health, quality of life, pride and history. A healthy, vibrant downtown reflects a healthy, vibrant community and can affect the city's ability to attract new people and investment.

The downtown is an important economic engine for the city, and a significant employment and administrative hub of the community. Over 20% of the city's commercial tax assessment comes from the downtown, generating over \$5 million in tax revenue.

Major facilities such as the Essar Centre, waterfront walkway, Bushplane Museum, public library, and numerous locally owned eateries and bars make the downtown the recreational and cultural hub of the community. Most commercial, cultural and recreational amenities can be found in the downtown, which is centrally located and easily accessible by all forms of transportation.

Over half of our city's historic buildings are located downtown. The historical, architectural, and aesthetic character of heritage buildings and the downtown core are a defining feature of the entire community.



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■ The current state of our downtown.

Our downtown has been facing challenges that hold it back from becoming a more vibrant place:

- A stretched out linear commercial area along just a single street (Queen Street) as opposed to a more concentrated and walkable core.
- Perception of property crime and safety risks.
- Exodus of major facilities such as the hospital and Algoma Public Health.
- Competition with suburban shopping centres.
- Retail and office vacancies.
- Small lots and lot-line-to-lot-line building development.
- Lack of available housing options – although this is changing!

At the same time, the downtown has key advantages and opportunities that can be capitalized upon:

- Relatively low rents and property values.
- Exceptional waterfront, including vacant waterfront properties: Gateway Site, former Petro-Canada site, and St. Mary's Paper Mill.
- Plenty of surplus infrastructure capacity (water and sewer).
- The downtown remains the administrative hub of the community, with over 700 businesses and organizations in the downtown core.

■ Imagining a healthy, vibrant downtown.

We spend most of our time at home or at work. Where do we go to unwind, meet friends and just chat about things? We need a space that is separate from home and work, something that has been referred to as the "third place". Third places are spaces where we can gather easily, regularly and comfortably; coffee shops, clubs, libraries, gyms and parks are often perfect for this.

Advocate of downtowns Roger Brooks gives a "10-10-10" rule for a critical mass of businesses that makes downtowns successful: 10 places that sell food, 10 destination retail shops and 10 places open after 6pm.

The Sault's downtown has many elements that can make it the perfect third place: it is centrally located, filled with open public spaces, programmed with many events and festivals, plus the main streets have an intimate charm that makes us want to stay there. But, to have a downtown that's healthy and vibrant all day and all week, it needs to have elements that sustain vibrancy. Advocates of downtowns across North America say that, ideally, downtowns should have many shops and establishments that are open later (past 6pm), a strong 'base' of people who live right in the downtown, and 'anchors' that can propel people to come downtown. Our new Official Plan will have policies to transform our downtown for the better.

What would make me want to live and spend more time downtown?

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