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A Vision for Downtown Brandon

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“Dull, inert cities, it is true, do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.”

Jane Jacobs

Background

On April 4th, 2007 more than 150 people attended the Downtown Summit meeting held at the Town Centre to discuss the future of downtown Brandon.

As a result of this Summit, on May 14, 2007 the Brandon City Council voted to establish a task force to assess the need for an organization that could guide the redevelopment of downtown Brandon.

The Downtown Task Force commenced work and gathered information, reviewed the Summit recommendations and in turn made recommendations to Brandon City Council. The primary recommendation of the Task Force was to create a Board to develop a strategy that would focus on the priorities as determined at the Downtown Summit. The Task Force further proposed that Council grant a mandate to this Board allowing the creation of a new development corporation for downtown to be called the Brandon Downtown Development Corporation.

Renaissance Brandon

Renaissance Brandon, as the downtown development corporation has become known, was granted authority

from the City of Brandon to conduct activities related to downtown business development such as the ownership of property, granting of loans, the establishment of incentive programs and retention of proceeds from investments. Moving forward, the organization is to create unique partnerships between the public and private sectors that bring renewal and energy to downtown.

The Heart of the City

The Renaissance District, as defined by Renaissance Brandon, is that area of downtown Brandon between 6th Street westward to 13th Street & Pacific Avenue southward to Lorne Avenue. This area contains a cornucopia of buildings from the newly built and renovated to those nearing the point of no return. The Renaissance District is the heart of the city: a mix of light industrial, retail, service centers and both low and high income residential areas.

Establishing a Foundation

In 2008, Renaissance Brandon created a Downtown Economic Development Strategy that utilized The Main Street Approach in establishing a vision, mission, guiding

principles, strategic goals and a plan of action.

In the summer of 2009, a part-time Development Specialist was hired to facilitate the organization's operations on a more consistent basis. In April 2010, the Downtown Development Specialist position became full-time.

A Plan to Move Forward

In late 2009 and early 2010 Renaissance Brandon conducted two internal planning sessions that identified three central issues: Communication, Finances, and Reinventing the Destination Neighbourhood. Renaissance Brandon created time-line goals of one year to complete branding and logo development and a secondary land use plan for the district. An RFP was issued by staff to hire consultants to conduct a visioning workshop to develop a vision plan for the district, which would guide the branding/logo development and secondary land use plan. This document is the formal definition of the Vision Plan as articulated by the Renaissance Brandon Board.

Introduction

Why Create a Vision Plan?

Central to the goal of rejuvenating and redeveloping the “Heart of the City” is the articulation of a Vision; a dream that stretches the idea of what Downtown Brandon can be and a future that inspires the imagination, motivating key stakeholders into support and action.

Why is Vision important? In the words of Calvin Coolidge:

“No enterprise can exist for itself alone. It ministers to some great need, it performs some great service, not for itself, but for others; or failing therein, it ceases to be profitable and ceases to exist.”

The Board has acknowledged that without a healthy core, a healthy “heart”, the greater urban identity is at risk. The health of the City Center serves as a general barometer for outside investment as well as for civic pride and as such deserves a special place in the minds of the citizenry. The great service the Renaissance District provides is to keep the pulse of the city strong and by extension, the greater Westman area.

What is a Vision Plan?

Developing a Vision is the first step towards creating a community that is future-seeking. To do this, the community must first be able to imagine and decide what they want their future to be and second, they must decide how they propose to make this desired future a reality.

A vision plan brings focus to the leadership effort: to the process that brings people together to think about the future, to create the shared vision and to make the future happen. The primary function of leadership is to make things happen through determination, community teamwork, and disciplined actions that would otherwise not happen naturally and, in some cases, prevent things from happening that might occur otherwise.

A Blueprint for Change

This is a document recording what board members and invitees to the Visioning sessions think; it is a broad blueprint for positive change that defines a vision and key outcomes

that must occur to attain this vision. Moreover, it is a framework for getting people to work together to achieve common goals and aspirations and to transform visions into reality.

A Plan to Implement

Detailed implementation efforts and plans such as a comprehensive land use plan, financial plan, development and redevelopment plans, and economic development plans are policy and decision making tools that assist the community, Renaissance Brandon Board, and administration in achieving the vision.

Together, the long-range and strategic leadership perspective and plan are intended to challenge and stretch the community's imagination in defining what is possible and test its will to commit to a great and exciting, rather than "good enough", future. The plan will forge and sustain the critical partnerships and relationships required to translate the vision into a reality as well as act as a compass to test new ideas and initiatives against to overall direction of the collective will.

Continually Renewed

Ultimately this Vision Plan describes a dynamic and continuous process defined by how our community sees, thinks about, and creates. Through decisive and resolute leadership and management commitment and actions, we achieve the future the community desires. It focuses not only on the Renaissance Brandon Board but the entire community. The community is given a voice and everyone has a role to play and a stake in the successful implementation of the vision and plan.

A community's Vision Plan should be reviewed and updated at least every five years to ensure its ongoing relevance and the continued involvement of the entire community in defining and achieving the Renaissance District's future. It also is a time to celebrate the many accomplishments made during the previous years.

Executive Summary: The Vision Plan for the Renaissance District of Brandon

On April 12, 2010 the Renaissance Brandon Board convened to share their thoughts and ideas about what downtown will look like in the years to come.

During this session and the two planning sessions that preceded it, Board Members offered thoughtful insight and inspired opinions about the area. The purpose of this document is to summarize the Board's input and articulate the shared vision of this dedicated and passionate group.

'The Renaissance District': Telling a Tale of the Heart

The phrase "Heart of the City" is almost universally applied for a reason: every city has one. And to the extent its heart is healthy, so is the city. The Renaissance Brandon Board recognizes that for greater Brandon to thrive so must the Downtown Core. But what values make Brandon's heart beat just a little faster, with just a little more pride? What ideas can the heart hold on to as meaningful?

Core Values

The Board agreed that for Downtown Brandon to thrive, it must embrace these three values:

Diversity | The Downtown Core is about diversity of both people and experience. It is a good place to live, work and play for everyone regardless of age or income level.

Uniqueness | Experiences that are found downtown, the merchants, activities, and promotions are unique to downtown and need to be capitalized on. Big box stores, retail chains and other elements more common to the suburban landscape are conspicuously absent.

Character | Building on the bones of the historic buildings and turn of the century architecture in the area, downtown is meant to remind citizens of where we've come from and the values upon which the City was built.

Organizing Themes

How will these values be represented in the Vision? By taking action and making decisions that are aligned with the values of Diversity, Uniqueness and Character, the future reality will unfold with the purpose intended. The Board identified 6 broad themes under which to organize action.

I. People on Display

People rarely sit and gaze out onto an empty street. A vibrant community requires people to be interacting. The district will be an inviting place where people feel welcome to socialize and connect with other people. Having people on display through storefront windows and on sidewalks will attract others to join the experience.

II. Mixed Use Development

The District will celebrate diversity in both experience and people. It will blend a mix of income levels into a neighborhood where it is a short walk to a pub, office, store, dentist, friend, school or park.

III. Pedestrian Friendly

While vehicle traffic is a reality, the District will work to dampen traffic to allow for foot and bike traffic to flourish. However, in order for the District to be walkable, there must be a reason for people to make the walk; the streetscape must be visually appealing.

IV. Active and Engaged Merchants

There must be an active and thriving merchant community to give people reasons to live, work and play downtown. Civic leadership must be actively involved in helping merchants succeed downtown.

V. Life After Dark

The District will be open after 5 pm. This will be largely because of an active resident community that will demand services and provide merchants with a reason to stay open late. This demand will be augmented by visitors who come to understand that something is always going on in the District.

Executive Summary: The Vision Plan for the Renaissance District of Brandon cont.

VI. Building Blocks

Future development must leverage the beauty and character of the historic building stock and be consistent with a coherent urban design vision. The community must also be able to thrive online. Wireless hotspots are an attractive benefit to students, young professionals and families.

Summary

The rest of this document expands on the 6 themes that make up the Vision of the Renaissance District and address some key areas of action that follow naturally and should be used as anchors to create a comprehensive list of development ideas to revitalizing the downtown core.

Organizing Themes

The Renaissance District

What will the ‘Renaissance District’ look like in 10 years time? What needs to occur in order for the District to be known as a destination neighborhood? The themes expressed by the Board, were:

I. People on Display

While this might seem self-evident, urban areas across North America have lost sight of this obvious fact.

Successful places exist because people frequent them. Efforts to create a rejuvenated downtown must start with this principle and provide an environment for people to engage in the pastime of “people-watching”.

The idea of “energized crowding” evolved quickly from the Board with comments like:

“Tons of people socializing, relaxing and enjoying themselves.”

“Plenty of activities for kids and families.”

“People from all over Brandon and surrounding area providing comments and stories about visiting and experiencing downtown.”

“Place to gather.”

“Place to be outside and sit.”

“Lots of people at all hours.”

“People of all ages milling about.”

Organizing Themes cont.

“There will be lots of people moving around downtown both day and night.”

“Hustle and bustle of people down every street sidewalk.”

“Sidewalk cafes.”

These comments summarize the purpose of the entire endeavor: it's all about people! However, “build it and they will come” only works in the make-believe world of Hollywood. The Board recognizes that in order for the people to embrace downtown, they must understand that there are spaces of character and quality in the Renaissance District worth caring about and those spaces are there for them to enjoy.

The quotes above are representative of a broad understanding that downtown Brandon must be about a mixed-use community. It is more than a business district. It is more than commercial activity. It's about commerce in the broader context of an extensive network of social interactions; it is a place to be a citizen, to be proud to be from Brandon - a place where suburban Brandonites bring their out-of-town guests to show them the “real” Brandon.

II. Mixed Use Development

There will be special places on every block, an eclectic mix of shops, restaurants and boutiques unique to downtown.

There will be professional services and other key residential services like grocers to serve a well-established resident base. People will visit because areas within the District will feel like outdoor living rooms and places to go because it is pleasurable to do so.

The Board quickly identified that to be a “destination neighborhood” there must be a) destinations worth attending and b) a community of neighbors. This was expressed in a number of ways:

“Upscale housing with amenities.”

“Mixed housing with restaurants, shops.”

“Younger and older people accommodated.”

“People will reside in the downtown in a wide variety of ‘upper end’ to ‘affordable housing’.”

One of the consistent themes that emerged was the notion of a downtown that has a mix of residential and commercial developments that would capitalize on the potential diversity of downtown. The redevelopment of the McKenzie Seeds building into residential units is a great example of the synergy possible in the downtown area.

There was great optimism for the idea that new Canadians would embrace downtown living and celebrate their cultural heritage in ways both big and small, which would in turn draw other socio-economic groups into the area.

A greater concentration of services would allow citizens to age in place thereby connecting not only cultures, but generations as well. The community would also benefit from a mix of income levels and housing.

III. Pedestrian Friendly

There will be, if not fewer vehicles, then certainly slower moving vehicles to accommodate more citizens on the streets walking, biking and enjoying the urban experience.

The pedestrian experience will be buoyed by friendly objects that invite more than passing interest: window displays, awnings, lampposts, restaurants spilling onto the streets, planters and trees, placards and fences. These urban design elements will play an important role in defining the character of the District as well as establishing an environment that is unique.

A pedestrian friendly neighborhood is more than just changing traffic patterns; it's rethinking the urban landscape to give pedestrians a reason to enjoy a walk from 6th to 9th along Rosser. The stroll should be at least in part because of the journey and not just the destination.

"Trees with lots of lights illuminating sidewalks."

"No parking issues."

Organizing Themes cont.

"Closed section of streets to pedestrians."

"Hustle and bustle of people down every street sidewalk."

"Ease of access, transportation and parking. Free buses or shuttles. Area parking lots."

"Clean, well maintained streets & blocks."

"Mostly pedestrian transportation."

While everyone agreed that it was important to accommodate vehicles, there was considerable discussion about how to slow traffic and perhaps undermine, in subtle ways, vehicle dominance downtown.

Suggestions included minimizing surface parking, converting one-way streets into two-ways and even closing certain blocks to traffic on summer weekends as starting points to changing traffic patterns. Urban planning must acknowledge and accommodate different modes of transport including transit, pedestrian, vehicular and bicycle.

The Board recognized that, with respect to parking, accommodations must be made to both the local residents and businesses that are living and working in the area, as well as to commercial traffic that is critical to facilitating downtown activity. The area has negative parking

perceptions therefore; the board will consider alternative parking solutions and plans to balance the interests of all stakeholders. Ultimately however, to be pedestrian-friendly goes much deeper than just dealing with traffic. This idea evolved into an understanding that a walkable district was as much about the environment as it was about traffic patterns and if the area was truly a destination neighborhood, commuters would tolerate some inconvenience with respect to parking.

IV. Active and Engaged Merchants

There will be an active merchants association which understands that competition is important to the health of the Core; more merchants mean more choice which means more people. These merchants understand they are the primary drivers of a thriving downtown.

The Renaissance District is experiencing the classic chicken and egg question: what comes first? Will more merchants attract more people or will more people attract more merchants? The most critical audience in a rejuvenated downtown core is the merchants and there were many comments from the Board in this regard:

“Action means entertainment, shopping, arts, culture...”

“Happy merchants with successful businesses.”

“Restaurants are not chains; Boutiques have unique items, local products.”

“Street/sidewalk cafes.”

“Appealing storefronts.”

“Unique shops concentrated in areas.”

“The number of specialty shops and local businesses will have grown. There will be a focus on uniqueness and customers service in retails. There will be more opportunity for patios, sidewalk cafes, etc.”

“Unique shops from around the world, people from all ethnic backgrounds.”

“Businesses are scrambling to be part of the area.”

“Street vendors.”

“Multiple curio shops.”

The future of downtown Brandon pivots around existing and future merchants and those that facilitate economic development: lenders, realtors, developers and investors. The shared vision is of a downtown that is easy to do business in, with a minimum of red tape and unnecessary oversight.

Downtown is naturally positioned, because of lower costs per square foot and smaller and less homogenous rental spaces, to attract boutique, niche business concepts. A vibrant, eclectic downtown “merchant scene” will follow naturally when investors and entrepreneurs understand that it is easy to do business downtown.

Organizing Themes cont.

V. Life after Dark

The area doesn't empty out at the end of the workday. There will be a large resident population that takes pride in their neighborhood and supports local businesses.

The base of economic activity from the residents serve as a critical mass, which allows business to get through low receipt days.

A vibrant downtown nightlife is more than just bars. Local residents, who support the late night pizza place, the local coffee shop and who, by their sheer presence, serve as a natural neighborhood watch, are key components of a mixed use neighborhood. The Board expressed this idea using phrases like:

"Open outdoor concerts."

"Many people living downtown."

"Clean, well maintained streets & blocks."

"Nightlife, whatever you want to do you can do, theatre, music, dance, and social gatherings."

"Lots of people at all hours."

"Lights, all year round."

"Security."

What does it mean to stay "alive after five"? To reach the critical mass whereby shops stay open after the day traffic has left for the suburbs, there must be more than just the nightlife crowd. The tipping point will be the local residents. A purposeful and balanced mix of residential development is central to the downtown vision. Every robust downtown 24/7 neighborhood is founded first as support network for a residential neighborhood.

VI. Building Blocks

Infrastructure improvement decisions will impact many components of the vision. Primarily, the Downtown is fortunate to have a good stock of unique historical buildings with character.

These buildings not only provide visual interest and thereby contribute to the “livability” of the area, but they also ground the entire region in the past. By making history visible and by taking action to restore and honor it, citizens will participate in the present with enthusiasm and move forward into the future with confidence. Derelict buildings offer no hope for the future.

Redevelopment of Pacific Avenue, the improvement of Princess Park and other projects will serve as anchor points from which private development will occur.

In addition to “bricks and mortars” infrastructure, an active community in the 21st century is a “wireless” community. Wireless access gives citizens another reason to participate in the downtown experience and adds a dimension

of connectedness that is the hallmark of progressive communities and a virtual requirement for recent college grads, young professionals and families with children.

A Blue Print for Action

"A vision without action is just a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. A vision with action can change the world." Nelson Mandela

Ensuring the Vision doesn't devolve into a dream requires specific actions. While the land use and other vision-facilitating plans have yet to be developed, the following principles are foundational for success:

Pick a Place and Raise a Flag

Development will likely start slowly and gain momentum, but change must be seen in order to get stakeholders to buy into the Vision.

We suggest that within the Renaissance District there is a core area, a "heart of hearts" that should be considered as ground zero for development.

Consider the block of 9th and 10th and Rosser and Princess and begin with a collection of small scale, quick and relatively affordable cosmetic improvements that will accentuate what is already there. Establish visual cues that say to people, "Look, here's something interesting". Incorporate

the visual identity in the street signs, window displays and in downtown coop advertising. Add banners to each lamppost to mark the District.

Pick Pods to Develop

In addition to Ground Zero, two or three other areas will be identified for future concentration of re-development efforts.

Like ripples in a pond, the development will emanate outward and eventually overlap into a coherent whole. Specific ideas include:

Widen Sidewalks and allow merchants to spill onto public areas with cafes and sidewalk sales. Add planters, wrought iron railings and large trees to provide shade and windbreaks. Reduce east/west through streets to one lane each way.

Improve the quality of public gathering spaces. In particular, improve Princess Park.

Add bicycle paths and bicycle racks.

Offer tax or rebate incentives to local merchants who invest in improving their property in accordance with specific guidelines as set out by the Board.

Build gates on the east and west ends of Rosser to clearly delineate the area and to provide a sense of entering and leaving a “place”.

Merchants First

Risk takers must feel the love from the City. Development will not occur apace without the sincere commitment from the City to make it easier to do business.

Diversity infers difference therefore an overly restrictive bureaucracy which attempts to impose consistency and conformity runs counter to this goal.

Civic leaders must guard against curbing entrepreneurial enthusiasm with the word “no”; they must find reasons to say “yes” instead of saying “that’s not how it’s done”. They must look for roadblocks so they can remove them.

Residential Development

Rejuvenation begins and ends with people. Aggressive residential development integrated into the commercial core must be central to the plan.

As Urban thinker Jane Jacobs has said, “You can’t rely on bringing people downtown, you have to put them there”.

Mixed residential should also include apartments to provide flexibility for the highly mobile. High density housing and second floor residences above storefronts should be considered.

Urban Development Guidelines

Aesthetics matter. People want to live, work and play in places with beauty.

Assuming basic services are provided for people will consistently rank the community experience higher if

A Blue Print for Action cont.

the physical environment is positive. While the District has a good stock of historic buildings to leverage in this regard, there must be comprehensive urban design and development standards which are exclusive to the Renaissance District to take advantage of these “bones” and ensure that future buildings and renovations are consistent with planned aesthetics.

A Narrative Vision for the Renaissance District

Action focused in each of the preceding areas will contribute to a rejuvenated downtown district.

Detailed plans for comprehensive land use, finances, develop and redevelopment and specific economic initiatives are yet to come and will be implemented to serve the vision of what the Renaissance District can and should be.

With collaboration and focus the District will evolve once again, into the heart of the Westman region as represented in the following narrative.

A Day in the Life Of...

Fast forward to the year 2020 and imagine a graduate from the class of 2010 getting ready for work in the morning. Let's call her Branda.

Twenty-eight year old Branda, a graduate of Brandon University, full of energy, is excited to start her day. As she locks the door and walks down the stairs of her five year old, 3 story walk up apartment on the edge of downtown, she says good morning to Mrs. Smith, a retired school teacher who is on her way to tend to the community garden in the nearby park.

As Branda walks to catch her bus to take her to the coffee shop she owns with her two friends, "Bean to Brandon", she reflects on her decision to stay in Brandon after graduating and how happy she is to live and work in the "Renaissance District".

What is it about Branda's neighborhood that fills her with such energy and gives her so much hope for the future? As Branda looks out the window during her short commute, what does she see?

A Narrative Vision for the Renaissance District cont.

People on Display

As Branda looks out the window of her bus she sees a few familiar faces and many familiar places. She feels connected to the community. She nods and smiles to many of the folks on the bus. As she walks from her stop to her shop she feels embraced by her surroundings. In some way that she can't define, she takes comfort in the historic facades and faux facades that honor the past; they give her the ability to dwell in a hopeful present. She revels in the bustle of the early morning as the District awakens and strides confidently into the new day.

A Mixed Use Neighborhood

Branda smiles as her first customer of the day comes in. Jorge orders his usual dark roast for the trip to the Maple Leaf plant and tells Branda of the new restaurant his cousin's uncle just opened up on Pacific Avenue. Soon after Jorge leaves, the welcome bell begins to chime regularly as customers come and go.

Branda's good friend Dan stops in. Dan's commercial real estate office is just up the street and he reminds Branda

of the Merchant Association meeting that evening over at Clancy's.

Pedestrian Friendly

Branda is relieved by one of her partners and takes the opportunity to grab some air and a late lunch. As she heads up 10th she stops to watch a street mime performing on the cobblestone street. She notices the street performers have begun to show up on Fridays as well as Saturdays and Sundays now.

She turns onto Princess and stops at the Jewelry window display, narrowly missing the two exuberant skateboarders turning the corner. The colorful awnings and tent signs along Princess beckon her block by block until she stops for a Gyros from a Street Vendor and sits and rests on the edge of a planter under the shade of a tree.

She is rocked by a sense of *déjà vu*. Was it only 6 months ago that she sat in this very same spot with a cup of Hot Chocolate and enjoyed the twinkling lights of the Holiday season?

Active Merchants

As Branda walks to her Downtown Merchant Association Meeting, she notices that although the offices are closed for the day, the sidewalk café's are bustling. She stops for an ice cream and lingers as she watches a horse and carriage pass by. She remembers it is part of a progressive dinner promotion four of the local restaurants have joined together to run and she reminds herself to ask the organizer about it at the meeting.

Getting to the meeting a little late she quietly sneaks in and, as she listens to the agenda, feels energized by the wealth of initiatives tabled for discussion. She nods a welcome to the City's Economic Development Officer whose job it is to "live the Vision" at City Hall. First up on the Agenda is dealing with the rogue tagger who's been spraying the free bicycle rental stations.

Life after Dark

After their meeting, Branda and Dan decide to check out the local dance group performing in the park before hitting their favorite watering hole. The event is organized by the

Downtown Residents Association with all proceeds going to support the homeless shelter on Pacific.

They pass the brightly lit Laundromat which is packed at 9 pm and Branda notices with chagrin that they have a little espresso bar set up inside. Oh well, she thinks, a little competition will never hurt anyone. As they walk down 10th toward the park they nod to a Cop walking the streets. The air is alive with the sounds of a Friday night.

Summary

Although it's late, it's a beautiful night and Branda decides to make the 20-minute walk home. She resists the temptation to stop in for a bowl of noodle soup and acknowledges a honking horn with a wave as one of her regulars passes by. Alone with her thoughts, she smiles at the trike that has rolled onto the sidewalk. She pushes it onto the lawn and continues on, enjoying the last of the evening and feeling a deep sense of connectedness with her 'hood' and the many kinds of people she shares it with each and every day. She stops and in the stillness of the night feels her heart beat, one among thousands beating strongly and passionately together, creating the heart of a city.