

Memorandum

To: Yakima City Council
From: Joan Davenport, Community Development Director
Date: City Council Study Session of June 28, 2022
Subject: Summary of Potential Downtown Plan Update

The City of Yakima downtown has undergone substantial change over the past 15 years. This includes the loss of significant retail space that remains vacant in the downtown, an expansion of the Downtown Convention Center, continued growth in the arts (Seasons and Capital Theater) and culture segment of our local economy, continued growth in the City's tourism economy, and continued growth in the beer and wine industry, as well as businesses surviving the pandemic and growing more resilient as they bounce back during the economic recovery. The City maintains a solid partnership with the Downtown Yakima Association, the City's Main Street Association.

A number of projects and economic development strategies are either in progress or in the development stage in the City of Yakima core downtown area. For example, the presentation earlier in this Study Session regarding the desire by property owners to form a Creative District in the Yakima Central Business District (CBD) is one example. Other projects in the formative stage include the identification and subsequent "Request for Proposals" (RFP) to sell certain City-owned properties in order to promote housing and hotel development, development of a Tax Increment Financing District to fund capital projects downtown that will aid in economic revitalization, and revision of downtown parking.

As the City Council is aware, the 2013 Downtown Plan was largely a City led effort to identify methods that would revitalize the Central Business District including a series of projects to enhance the area and create market draw. While there was significant community input to create this Plan, several of the major projects were subsequently withdrawn by the Council and implementation of the remainder of the plan has not been pursued. In 2019, prior to the COVID pandemic, a fledgling effort was started to re-open dialogue regarding the unfinished projects in the 2013 CBD Plan. In 2021, the City adopted its Housing Action Plan and strategies for enhanced housing downtown should be reflected in the downtown plan.

An update of the City of Yakima Downtown Plan could provide a document that captures the vision of property owners, articulates the strategies of City projects and addresses some of the critical needs of the area, like housing and destination planning. Inclusion of major city efforts in a Comprehensive Plan document is generally required for grant applications. To be successful, any updates to the Downtown Plan would need to have significant involvement from stakeholders and support from City Council. The City will need to fund the necessary support to develop this element of what will eventually be an overall update of the City's comprehensive plan.

Topics to Include in a Downtown Plan Update:

1. Housing. The 2013 Downtown Plan was virtually silent on the need for housing in and near the CBD, other than mixed use approach. Implementing the Housing Action Plan, encouraging additional private investment, reviewing zoning requirements, encouraging revitalization of upper stories in buildings for housing, and making the attraction of individuals into living downtown a core piece of the City's planning and economic development.
2. Focus on Yakima Avenue as a Main Street and a destination. Rather than prioritizing through traffic, the speed and volume of traffic on Yakima Avenue could be reduced. Making the CBD more multi-modal friendly for pedestrians, bicycles and transit could create a more attractive place to live and visit. This topic was included in the 2013 CBD Plan, but was secondary to the Plaza and Incubator projects. A number of capital projects would need to be constructed in order to promote this goal.
3. Diversity and Inclusion. While this is not strictly a land use issue, a CBD Plan should include strategies that encourage, support and celebrate the culture of our community. This is an important component of a successful CBD that was not highlighted in the 2013 Downtown Plan.
4. Capital Projects and Investments. The City needs to create a guiding document for capital investments, including the development of funding sources and capital financing.
5. Creative District, Arts and Alleys. As detailed in the presentation of the Creative Districts, the Yakima CBD has tremendous potential to provide a vibrant and unique neighborhood, provide some middle housing, and become a special area that supports the arts, education and business. A land use strategy needs to incorporate these desires of the stakeholders in the area. Likewise, capital improvements need to consider these unique plans and include them as appropriate. Recognition of a capital investment plan for the CBD can be a good addition to the Creative District application process.
6. Public Parking. The management strategy of on-street public parking with public parking lots has been a critical issue for the Yakima CBD for many years. A unified approach needs to be developed that manages the resource in an efficient and thoughtful way.
7. Public Safety and Security. Encouraging the development of a downtown neighborhood and supporting an inviting CBD will need investment to enhance the sense of safety and walkability, pedestrian lighting and other features of enhancing safety through environment and building design.
8. Encourage the development of infrastructure that meets the City's sustainability goals and the modern economy of the future.
9. Enhance the opportunity for the City's transit system to impact the downtown positively through enhanced mobility.

A Sub-Area Plan of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan requires review and involvement of the Planning Commission. If the City Council is interested in pursuing this effort, City staff will develop the appropriate funding and operation plan to implement the effort.