

COUNCIL – AGENDA REPORT

Meeting Date:	18 April 2017
Subject:	Summary of Downtown Visioning Exercise Results
Boards Routed Through:	N/A
Date:	N/A

Issue:

Council is being provided with a summary of the results from the “Airdrie, Let’s Connect: Downtown” visioning exercise. Based on the results, Council is being provided with a series of options on how to proceed with the information collected.

Background:

Council voted to commence a downtown visioning exercise as immediately as possible at the regular meeting on November 21, 2016. On January 16, 2017, Administration presented the branding of the visioning exercise as “Airdrie, Let’s Connect: Downtown”, as well as the plan for engaging citizens and stakeholders as part of the visioning exercise.

Between January 31 and March 1, Administration engaged with residents and stakeholders in the following formats:

- Two workshops (105 total participants)
- Two mobile workshops (Airdrie Youth Committee and Cedarwood Station)
- Five focus groups (97 unique participants)
- Online surveys (434 total survey participants)
- Six one-on-one meetings, small group meetings or major e-mail submissions

The questions posed to participants in each of these visioning exercise formats were specifically designed to address the following critical issues:

1. Where should the boundary line for “downtown” be drawn?
2. What is the opinion of the current state of the downtown and what is the vision for it?
3. What land uses and services are expected to be found within our downtown?
4. What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing our downtown?

The variety of consultation formats provided residents and stakeholders with an opportunity to participate in the manner(s) that they found most convenient. As such, the overall level of participation in the downtown visioning exercise was quite high. In particular, the registered attendees for the focus groups exceeded the ability of staff to accommodate them on just three nights, and an additional two focus groups were conducted on February 23 and February 28 to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to participate in this format.

While it had never been the intent of the “Airdrie, Let’s Connect: Downtown” visioning exercise to provide absolute statistical validity, there were over 7,500 comments from the combination of engagement formats provided, and the analysis of these comments allows for some broad conclusions to be drawn. A full summary of the comments received during the visioning exercise can be found in Appendix 1, but the main comments and trends are as follows:

1. The vast majority of residents want the Downtown to be something more, and to be better overall. This is identified in a number of ways throughout the responses, but the average (mean) score of +/- 4.56 to the question of “How would you rate the current downtown on a scale of 1 to 10?” is a key indicator.
2. The number of weaknesses and negatives seen in the current downtown far outweighs the number of positives and strengths found in the responses. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of online survey participants used a negative word or phrase when describing the current state of the downtown and over 40% of the survey respondents found there to be nothing unique about the Downtown. More people (79% of detailed online survey responses) wanted something done about that fact, than not (21% of detailed online survey responses).
3. Despite the weaknesses and issues cited with the existing state of the Downtown, there is still a feeling of optimism and potential from most respondents, as noted by the fact that the number of opportunities (818 comments) considerably outweighed the number of threats (627 comments) facing the downtown. There is a general desire to tie to the past and to retain some degree of “small town feel” in an authentic and appropriate way. Residents want the improvements to Downtown to represent a “made in Airdrie solution”.
4. While there is perceived to be a significant auto-oriented culture to our existing Downtown that a minority of residents would like to keep intact, the general desire is to make Downtown more walkable and accessible, while reducing or eliminating certain site and time-specific parking issues.
5. The areas on which 75% - 90% of residents agree to be “downtown” is much more related to the Main Street core than the current Downtown Plan boundary (see Appendix 1) and could be used as an area of focus for future planning and civic improvements, based on the overall desire to see something positive happen within the downtown.
6. The City of Airdrie is seen to have a variety of roles in the desired improvement of Downtown. However, the primary activity for the City of Airdrie in the minds of the participants is to “set a clear vision and to stick to it”. Other roles, beyond that of strong leadership, include facilitation, negotiation and creating incentives. However, participants were generally not in support of advancing public monies as incentives, nor having the City act as a developer. Separate discussion with the community, based on an objective understanding of the pros and cons of such a philosophical approach, is likely required on that issue.

As demonstrated consistently throughout the summary of findings contained in Appendix 1, on most questions posed to them, the majority of visioning exercise participants (between 80% and 90%, depending on the question) want Airdrie's Downtown to become something better and for the City of Airdrie – represented by Council and Administration – to be involved in a number of ways to make that happen.

In total, Council had authorized up to \$100,000 to be spent on "Downtown Planning" as part of the 2017 Operating Budget. In direct response to an inquiry posed during the Public Question Period of the Council meeting on January 16, Administration noted that up to \$25,000 of that budget would be used for the downtown visioning exercise. As identified in Appendix 2 of this report, through a variety of cost-saving measures, the total out of pocket cost of the "Airdrie, Let's Connect: Downtown" visioning exercise came out at \$12,771.05 – considerably less than the anticipated out of pocket expense. However, it bears noting that approximately 850 hours of total staff time from Senior Leadership, Planning, Communications, Economic Development and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) were employed to carry out this visioning exercise in the expedited manner requested by Council.

Alignment with AirdrieONE:

The downtown is recognized as an important part of the long-term sustainability of Airdrie under the *Built Environment* pillar of the AirdrieONE Sustainability Plan. Accordingly, a review and potential re-write of the Downtown Plan (2008) had originally been part of the 2017 Business Plan for the Planning & Development Department. Council's direction to conduct a visioning exercise as expeditiously as possible in 2017 aligned with these policies of the AirdrieONE Sustainability Plan. As part of the *Governance* pillar of the AirdrieONE Sustainability Plan, the focus is on how local government can collaborate with Airdrie citizens and embrace sustainability in decision-making, investments, and actions. Continually improving opportunities to engage citizens in local government initiatives and decision-making is one measure of success for this pillar. Ensuring ongoing fiscal stewardship as part of budgeting practices is another method for achieving success under the *Governance* pillar.

Overall, the "Airdrie, Let's Connect: Downtown" visioning exercise provided a robust engagement initiative, in keeping with the *Governance* pillar of AirdrieONE, that effectively outlined the major desires of the residents and stakeholders regarding the downtown. The general trends and data from this engagement exercise clearly identify that there is a desire to improve Airdrie's Downtown. The total expenses related to this visioning exercise come to \$12,771.05 (see Appendix 2 for full details), representing a very prudent set of budgeting parameters for this level of public engagement and thereby meeting the measure of success for this portion of the *Governance* sustainability pillar.

Boards Routed Through:

As a direct request and initiative of Council, the summary of results from the Downtown Visioning exercise have not be routed through any boards in advance of this presentation.

Alternatives/Implications:

Option 1: Development of a NEW Downtown Plan

This option involves the development of a NEW Downtown Plan for Airdrie. This option is presented on the basis of:

- General dissatisfaction with the status of the existing Downtown (articulated through a number of means, including higher incidence of negative comments over positive comments in all formats, as well as the score of approximately 4.5 out of 10 in the “satisfaction” question in the online survey);
- The stated desire of residents and stakeholders in all consultation formats for the City of Airdrie to “set a clear vision and stick to it”, and;
- The fact that in most survey, workshop and focus group questions, between 80% and 90% of participants used negative words to describe the current state of the downtown and an equivalent percentage wanted to have the downtown improved. To this end, it was frequently stated in the workshops and focus groups that the City of Airdrie should instigate growth, improvement, and redevelopment in the downtown. The most frequently stated mechanisms that would be supported by the public included a combination of policy development, consultation, collaboration, and consideration of tools such as tax and payment deferrals (rather than expenditures in physical redevelopment and upfront development incentives)

This option best matches the overwhelming majority of data from the participants in the downtown visioning exercise that want to see the downtown improved in a significant way.

Option 1: Implications

With this option, Administration would require some length of time to determine:

- a) the precise planning boundary for the NEW Downtown Plan;
- b) the preferable methodology for completing such a plan, and;
- c) the most appropriate consultation/collaboration needed to create such a plan

Presumably, the planning boundary for this exercise would fall within the areas identified by 75% - 90% of all participants as being part of the “downtown” during the visioning exercise. Based on the roles identified by the public as being the most important for the City of Airdrie with respect to the downtown, the steps necessary to create a NEW Downtown Plan would likely take 15-18 months to complete. The overall process would involve significant consultation and collaboration with residents and a variety of stakeholders, including major landowners and representative agencies/groups.

Expenses related to the development of such an important planning document would likely require the use of the remaining funds allocated for “downtown planning” as part of the 2017 Operating Budget, which currently amount to just over \$87,000. An additional funding request for the 2018 Operating Budget may be required, depending on the methodology involved in creating the NEW Downtown Plan as well as the competition for the Planning Department’s staffing resources, which is – in turn – conditional on Council’s Strategic Priorities for 2018. Administration could provide an update on their recommendations for the preferred plan boundary and the probable methodology to be involved in creating a NEW Downtown Plan as early as September 2017.

Should this option be selected and a planning exercise to develop a NEW Downtown Plan conducted, then in late 2018 or early 2019, Council would likely need to make a decision on

whether or not to adopt and implement the NEW Downtown Plan while simultaneously repealing part, or all, of the existing Downtown Plan (adopted in 2008).

Option 2: Amend the Existing Downtown Plan

This option involves analyzing the existing Downtown Plan to determine which area, or areas, should be amended in order to match the overall sentiment voiced during the Downtown Visioning exercise. This option does not align as neatly with the expressed desire provided most frequently during the visioning exercise that the City of Airdrie should “set a clear vision and stick to it”. However, it does allow for Administration to identify how the existing Downtown Plan could be supplemented and amended to align with at least the majority of the opinions expressed during the downtown visioning exercise.

Public consultation and collaboration with key stakeholders would be greatly reduced with this option. The primary focus of the work to be conducted by Administration with this option would be analysis of existing policy, review of public opinions collected during the visioning exercise, and determination of any required policy changes within the existing Downtown Plan. However, some engagement with major stakeholders and landowners would still occur. Public consultation and information sessions would likely still guide some of the key policy changes that may, or may not, be recommended for the existing plan.

Option 2: Implications

Based on the methodology noted above, some degree of expense would likely still be incurred for the use of a consultant, or consultants, to analyze and amend existing policies and assist with public engagement. The total costs would likely be less than in Option 1, and would be anticipated to be in the range of \$50,000 to \$75,000, depending on the extent of public consultation and the availability of the Planning Department’s staffing resources.

A preliminary review of the existing policies within the Downtown Plan could likely be conducted by Administration by September 2017, which would help to define a set of potential amendments to the existing Downtown Plan. A public engagement strategy would likely follow shortly after this analysis. Depending on the extent of the public engagement to be employed for amending the existing Downtown Plan, the final set of potential amendments to the 2008 version of the Downtown Plan would likely be available for review and decision by Council in Summer 2018. Additional funding requests as part of the 2018 Operating Budget would likely not be required.

Option 3: Defer Downtown Planning Until 2018

This option is designed to defer planning in Downtown Airdrie until 2018. However, this option is not well-aligned with the majority of responses (up to 90%) received from the public and associated stakeholders during the downtown visioning exercise. Overall, the participants in the “Airdrie, Let’s Connect: Downtown” visioning exercise told Administration that they wanted to see improvements to the downtown and that the City of Airdrie had a clear role to “develop the vision/plan and then to stick to it”. In the eyes of many respondents, the time is now for taking steps to improve the downtown and some of the participants indicated that there would be a loss of faith with Council and Administration if steps were not taken, based on their comments, to begin downtown planning immediately.

However, as noted in the detailed visioning exercise results (see Appendix 1) there is a minority faction (+/- 10%) within those that participated that appreciate the downtown as it

currently exists and which do not want to see public monies invested in any form within the downtown. Additionally, while it was the mandate of this Council to undertake downtown visioning, Council may wish to defer any decisions on downtown planning to allow for a fresh look at Council's *Strategic Priorities* for 2018.

Option 3: Implications

This option would suspend all work on reviewing, updating or conducting, planning work on Airdrie's Downtown until at least the 2018 Operating Budget review period (November 2017). The deferral in conducting downtown planning would be out of alignment with the sentiment expressed by the public during the Downtown Visioning exercise and it would be contrary to Council's 2017 Strategic Priority for *Well Managed Growth*. However, it would allow the Planning & Development Department to focus on other projects that are also part of Council's *Strategic Priorities*.

Council would select this option if they wanted to postpone key planning decisions for the downtown until at least November 2017.

Communications Plan:

Should Council selection Option 1 or Option 2, then Administration would continue to communicate the status of the downtown planning (or downtown planning amendment) exercises, including any associated public or stakeholder engagement events, through the website created as part of the "Airdrie, Let's Connect: Downtown" visioning exercise (www.airdrie.ca/downtown). Additional communication methods would also be used to supplement this primary communication tool, including, but not limited to:

- Advertisements in City Connection;
- Direct communications from the "downtown@airdrie.ca" e-mail account, and;
- Social media advertisements and event reminders (i.e. Twitter), where applicable

The branding developed as part of the "Airdrie, Let's Connect: Downtown" campaign would likely be able to be reused in some fashion as part of the communication for Option 1 or Option 2. A communication strategy would likely not be required if Council chose Option 3.

Recommendation:

Administration recommends that Council select "Option 1: Development of a NEW Downtown Plan".

Stephen Utz, RPP, MCIP
Team Leader, Planning & Development

Presenter:	Stephen Utz, RPP, MCIP
Department:	Planning & Development
Reviewed by:	Lorne Stevens, Director of Community Infrastructure
Attachments:	Attachment #1: Summary of Results from Visioning Attachment #2: Summary of Visioning Expenses
Appointment:	N/A