

Northville Downtown Strategic Plan Stakeholder Interview Summary

October 2016

Q1: IMAGE OF DOWNTOWN

The most common words used to describe the downtown were clean, inviting and quaint. While visitors are generally impressed with its attractiveness and historic elements, some say it's quiet and sleepy and that it's small town vibe has "few things that fulfill specific needs" for patrons. Perhaps partially due to its family-friendly atmosphere, some have said that the downtown "streets roll up early" and that it could benefit from more convenient business hours such as evenings and weekends. This could also explain why one respondent remarked that businesses are "struggling to grow." The contrary desires of diverse downtown patrons is summarized nicely by one resident who thinks "there is an important balance of tradition and historical elements", but they could be "blended with some initial attempts to appeal to a more modern or contemporary perspective. The downtown is lacking a coherent brand identity that stalls efforts to market it to other communities.

Q2: ASSESS THE VITALITY OF THE BUSINESS DISTRICT

Two respondents chose to rank the vitality of the business district and giving it rather average scores of 5 and 6, respectively. Again, respondents mention that a lack of vitality is due to retail closing early. Some offer examples of the downtown bustling in the mornings on both week days and weekends, but that foot traffic dies down in the evenings, and even compare Northville negatively to a much livelier downtown Plymouth. While most properties are occupied, but still with a noticeable amount up for lease, there lacks a diversity and uniqueness of stores and services that draw patrons downtown. One suggests that keeping services out of the retail first floor could improve foot traffic.

Q3: IMPROVEMENTS

The improvements explained by participants touch on several related issues. A common improvement was to have a greater variety of businesses including brand name retailers and restaurants. In addition to a more diverse mixture of unique retail, there is a specific request for these businesses to stay open later as this would attract outside patrons and make downtown a more convenient place to shop for residents. There is a desire "to combat the perception that Northville is a quiet town and find more ways to keep people in town longer." Two people mention building condos or lofts which would inevitably increase the amount of people that frequent downtown establishments, and could possibly support more business.

Second to this improvement are requests for repaired roads and improved pedestrian connections that lead to downtown, in particular a better connection to Ford Field. Parking lot improvements is not a view shared by many, but it does arise consistently and "is becoming a bigger issue each year."

Q4: DESIRED NEW BUSINESSES

These responses are mixed but provide some insight on what types of businesses the community wants to see. A few respondents would like to see activities or stores geared toward children and families. Some of the examples listed were retail stores with items for children such as clothing or toys, a movie theatre, and/or a bowling alley. Retail and restaurants were the most common responses. Residents mentioned a few types of retail, one being a hardware store although he/she also notes that it "is unlikely because it is so hard to compete with big box stores." The types of retail suggested reflect the diversity of the community's shopping needs, but they also seem to share an affinity for small businesses. One person said explicitly that he/she supports restrictions on chain businesses and that only local businesses "should have the opportunity to thrive in our town." Despite the range of retail requested, the respondents used adjectives such as "niche," "independent," and "unique" to describe the type of retailers. Aside from this, the retail request span more clothing options for men, millennials, children, and athletes.

The range for types of restaurants was also broad. One respondent reported wanting more casual options with dining outside, a butcher shop with a deli, and another for upscale restaurants because there is "room for more." Or, as someone noted, there could be space allotted to pop-up dining like brew pubs.

Q5: BARRIERS

A few respondents mentioned that the racetrack takes up a lot of space and is "unsightly and not very welcoming" especially as people enter Northville. As expected from previous comments on the downtown's general cleanliness, there are no other physical barriers discussed.

The other barriers do not stand clearly on one side; there seems to be a divide between reality and perception. Speaking from professional experience, one respondent said that developing in Northville is not difficult, while others note that "the city council drags things on too long for developers." Other echo this idea reiterating the city government's "unsupportive attitude" towards existing businesses as exemplified by taking away a successful event: First Fridays. In regards to ending First Friday's wine samples, another participant writes that the city government made "NO effort to find a way to make it work within the framework of existing laws and regulations," and considers this the city's "most glaring debacle." These comments reveal that one of the main barriers is a lack of coordination between the city and business community.

Still others note it could be a combination of high costs for land acquisition and lease rates couple with low foot traffic (due to relatively low housing density near downtown to support business) that deter developers from investing in Northville. Another common response is that Northville's image of itself is limiting and warns the city that it "can't be afraid of out-of-the-box-thinking" and in those cases the city council can be a "bottle neck to a new level of excitement" that the city could offer. In addition to complaints about the City Council, there is a general belief that older, more established residents are also resistant to any proposed changes to the business profile downtown demonstrated by the quote "we have been surprised at our fellow residents' hesitancy (and sometimes downright refusal) to accept any type of change. "

Barriers	Suggestions
High property values/ lease rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a database for landlords to compare lease prices • Improve parking and pedestrian connections to make higher up-front investment worthwhile
Unsupportive city government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide matching grants for business improvements • Replace First Fridays with an equally popular event • Offer grants or incentives for businesses to locate in Northville • Streamline procedures for development
Perception of quiet town	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase residential density near downtown • Support and promote events to surrounding communities • Zone for retail on the ground level • Change business hours to accommodate evening activities/events • Allow for pop-up retail and dining
Resistance to changing Northville's small-town image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal support for out-of-the-box businesses • Encourage unique dining and shopping experiences • Expand outreach to ensure the city is capturing all resident's input, not only the most vocal
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve bicycle lanes and amenities • Create short-term parking spots for patrons, separate from employee parking • Advertise free parking spots

Q6: HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAN HELP THE DOWNTOWN DISTRICT

There are practically no comments on how the city is hurting the downtown but rather a focus on what they could be doing to assist redevelopment and revitalization in the downtown. Some voiced concern that local government's processes and procedures are inaccessible, and that they hinder anyone "straying too far from the 'image' of Northville."

Respondents tend to believe that the city government could improve marketing and coordinating community events, festivals, parades, etc. and make the permitting process for events easy. The city and other relevant agencies should advertise events in addition to posting on social media and the DDA website because those platforms may exclude those who are not digitally active. One person remarks that city government is on the right track by supporting Victorian festivals and the Buy Michigan Now festival. However, there is more they can do in terms of outreach and promotion because this person knows "a lot of people I know are unaware that events are taking place." And another respondent alludes to quality over quantity of events stating that working more closely with the Chamber "to host fewer but better events" could prove beneficial.

Some recommendations are to make parking more accessible because it appears that parking "spots are taken by 9 am" by downtown employees. Another recommendation that has been voiced in earlier responses is to allow retail on the ground floor and to place offices above to generate more foot traffic. To help businesses, the city government could "provide matching funds for business improvements" and/or other business incentives like grants or tax abatements, but must also understand the pros and cons to incentives. It would also be helpful if there were a database or a place to find "comparable data for leases" for potential landlords considering leasing a space downtown.

Q7: INFLUENTIAL AREAS

The improvements for influential areas are varied. Three of 14 responses call for more parking, especially long term parking for employees and "short-term parking in more desirable lots". One person asked for more bike stands. A couple of participants would like the city to keep up the events; one person said "I really think the City is on to something with the Friday Night Concerts, Food Trucks and Beverage Tents. It really seems to bring people into town and I am sure it supports the local retailers." Events would also draw more residents downtown, and perhaps those in surrounding areas, if the events had a kids-area. Two related requests are to increase green space downtown and that a "shopping district that was foot traffic only would be good addition and a positive influence to downtown." More generally, a resident wants to see the city "grow the sense of community that we have" so that Northville can become the backyard to neighboring communities.

Some improvements call for better maintenance, for instance, cleaning up the corner of Griswold and Cady where the Downs discards debris. Additionally, a commenter thinks the Yerkes area is not inviting and could use better maintenance along 7 Mile (between Northville Road and Marilyn).

Q8: NORTHVILLE AS A GOOD PLACE TO INVEST

Five out of fifteen respondents replied unequivocally that downtown is a good place to invest, however the response differs by homeowner and business owner, the former more positive than the latter. One commenter voiced the concern that "most small businesses do not stay for very long." Other respondents think investment opportunities are good as well but attached qualifiers to their replies. For instance, one comment was "Yes, if the foot traffic is there," or that it "would be better with a greater variety of housing options." This respondent continues that there is a missing middle in the housing market, meaning there is either affordable housing or high end housing, and that a mix of housing types close to downtown would enliven the space.

Replies allude to concerns heard in previous questions. Northville may not be perceived as a place to invest because it "is often viewed as a daytime business district only," and that it would be a better place to invest but it is "stagnant."

Q9: TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

While some think that overall the parking options are more than adequate in comparison to other downtowns, a few would like to see a parking deck. One reply envisions a parking deck near the post office, or renting a portion of Northville Downs and providing bikes or shuttles to downtown destinations. As discussed earlier, patrons find that the best spots are taken by employees all day and believe metered, short-term parking would alleviate some of the parking shortage for patrons. One person acknowledges that there is free parking in Northville and that parking concerns could be eased with better advertisement.

Moreover, pedestrian connections, specifically near Kroger, could encourage people to walk downtown instead. Another suggestion is to enforce the parking commitments made by downtown entities as one reply implies that businesses are not abiding by the rules and taking up parking for other consumers.

Q10: ROUTINE DOWNTOWN SHOPPING

About half of the respondents say they shop downtown routinely. Even those who do not shop downtown routinely note that they do occasionally go for one service or another to get a haircut, to dine, to visit the cobbler. Those who shop elsewhere express that the shops do not fit their needs, the "prices are offensively high", the volume of goods is not high enough. The perception overall is that there is limited shopping downtown and the current retail is not a huge draw. Dining downtown seems to be a more popular activity than shopping as both shoppers and non shoppers report visiting restaurants downtown.

Q11: GREEN SPACE

There is a clear consensus that respondents would prefer to see more green space downtown. Those who disagree cite Ford Field is close enough to make additional green space "redundant," and funds would be better used to improve Ford Field, namely by adding restrooms. One person stated that parks are "not the best utilizations of prime downtown areas." However, another response noticed the power of public space. The respondent observed that a recent downtown renovation that included wi-fi, seating areas, and a fire pit "has helped to draw residents to their downtown." The majority of replies repeated the sentiment that "it would be nice" and list several potential sites:

1. Northville Downs* (most popular)
2. Begonia Brothers spot
3. E. Cady Street (linear park)
4. Center/Main
5. Downs and Cady Street
6. Portion of the former psychiatric hospital

Of those that acknowledge the proximity and size of Ford Field still wish that there was development of other parkland downtown.

Q12: PEDESTRIAN-FRIENDLY

Overall, pedestrian record feeling safer than bicyclists; some pedestrians even saying they feel "extremely comfortable." One comment hints at a divide amongst pedestrians and cyclists. One pedestrian commented that even though he/she doesn't bike ride, "it seems we provide reasonable spaces/lanes for them." On the other hand, cyclists and even pedestrians, note that "bikes do not seem to have any place on most streets and signs do not head motorists to watch out for them." Cyclists would prefer streets and sidewalks be separated by trees where that does not currently exist. Another person remarks that downtown bicyclists ride on the road with cars through stop and go traffic, and would prefer their own lanes. More specifically, one reply requests "better sidewalk or pathway connection from Hines Park (7 Mile & River Street). Also, bicyclists noticed that infrastructure for biking is missing such as bike stands, signage, and bike lanes.

Q13: OTHER DOWNTOWNS

The most commonly visited downtown is Plymouth and is described as more "alive" than Northville; one person even used the word "progressive." Some features that attract Northville residents are Kellogg Park and the events that are held there, the variety of restaurants, retail, entertainment and activities. Other popular downtowns are Birmingham, Ann Arbor, Detroit, and Royal Oak with the same claim that these downtowns are more vibrant and active, and the restaurants stay open later. When referring to Plymouth

and Ann Arbor's downtown, the respondent feels that there "is always something to do or eat." In reference to Detroit, one person states "I can actually meet up with people past 9pm."

Q14: DOWNTOWNS THAT CAPTURE WHAT NORTHVILLE IS MISSING

The most common answer for frequently visiting other downtowns is because Northville is missing a variety of dining and shopping destinations. Participants cite "food trucks," "rooftop dining," a "Mexican restaurant," a bar with "folk, Irish, and jazz" music. In addition to the style of dining, responses demonstrate that they appreciate the range of prices offered in other downtowns. It appears that patrons can find a "great variety of price points." The other common response is that more unique retail opportunities lie in other downtowns that are more reasonably priced. In particular, responses note clothing, jewelry, home wares, and antique stores that they have found in other places.

A couple comments hint at how other nearby communities have more pride, and that instead of capitalizing its potential to create a stronger Northville, the city allows only for certain agendas to be implemented.

Q15: OTHER ISSUES

The positive responses revolve around Northville being a clean, safe, and friendly city. One resident even wrote "my family is blessed to live here."

Negative issues refer to responses reiterated through the interviews. Small businesses struggle in Northville, they are out-of-date, and they close too early. One resident lamented the end of First Fridays without the wine and cheese, and write he/she no longer enjoys the event.

Only a couple comments throughout the interviews discuss the farmer's market. Similarly to the early closing times, this resident would like the farmer's market to be held on the weekend because it is more convenient for working families and/or individuals. Another commenter mentions that farmer's market is in need of repair and could be incorporated with the farmer's market in "a more presentable way."

One response recommends starting a river walk once the race track is redeveloped as it would be "a great way to expose the Rouge River" that could continue north onto Beal Street.

Strengths	Assets
Attractive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean • Well-maintained • Historic • Relatively low commercial vacancy rate in the core
Family-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedestrian safety • Ford Field • Low crime rates
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmer’s market • First Fridays • Friday Night Concerts • Sponsor a Skeleton • Buy Michigan Now Week