

Dunkirk Downtown Revitalization Initiative

Public Workshop #1 Meeting Summary

June 13, 2023 | 5:30PM – 7:30 PM, Dunkirk High School Cafeteria

1. Welcome & Introductions

- Stephanie Camay (WSP/Downtown Revitalization Initiative consultant) started the meeting and introduced the co-chairs of the Local Planning Committee (LPC), City of Dunkirk Mayor Wilfred Rosas and Mike Metzger (Western New York Regional Economic Development Council), who welcomed attendees.

2. DRI Program Overview

- Stephanie presented a program overview of the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) and the roles and responsibilities of partners including the LPC, state agencies, the City of Dunkirk, and the consultant team. She reviewed the role of the public throughout the DRI process to provide feedback on community issues, needs and opportunities, project ideas, and proposed DRI projects.
- Opportunities for public input include public workshops and online engagement activities after each workshop, pop-up events, LPC meetings (during the public comment period at the end of each meeting), the comment form on the Dunkirk DRI website (www.DunkirkDRI.com), and public survey.
- Stephanie presented DRI project general guidelines, the Open Call for Projects, and the scope and schedule of the DRI process. The Open Call for projects is a public process for sourcing potential projects for inclusion in the Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) that will be submitted to the State. The SIP will include a slate of projects recommended by the LPC for funding. Project sponsors must submit an application, posted on the DRI website, by July 17. In advance of completing the full Project Form, potential project applicants can submit the Simple Project Interest form posted on the website through June 30. The form provides an option to request technical assistance in completing the full Project Form.

3. Dunkirk DRI Application

- Vince DeJoy (City of Dunkirk) presented an overview of Dunkirk's DRI application, including what makes Dunkirk unique and recent and current investments that the DRI will build on. Vince described how potential investments identified in Dunkirk's DRI application would support outcomes like waterfront activation, year-round activities, jobs, housing, and walkability.
- Vince discussed the DRI boundary, within which projects must be located in order to receive funding from the State, and the vision included in the City's DRI application.

4. Vision & Goals Exercise

- Nancy Raca (Highland Planning/DRI consultant) facilitated a vision and goals exercise.
- Attendees completed individual worksheets to reflect on a draft vision statement and set of goals for the Dunkirk DRI.
 - Draft vision statement: *The City of Dunkirk outlined a vision for downtown that is striving to harness the powerful connection with Lake Erie as a wave of energy surging with new significant private and public investment activating the waterfront and harbor with activities for residents and visitors. Downtown Dunkirk will be more attractive, livable, walkable, welcoming, and memorable. The Dunkirk DRI will amplify our diversity, history, and unique sense of place with a genuine and authentic experience that will be catalytic for future organic growth.*

- Draft goals:
 - Reverse the trend of vacancies in Downtown Dunkirk.
 - Attract new investment in Downtown Dunkirk through commercial, educational, and entertainment opportunities that will result in increased vitality, more visitors and new residents.
 - Create a robust environment for rehabilitation of historic downtown buildings.
 - Reactivate Central Avenue storefronts with new business and services.
 - Increase opportunities for quality affordable housing.
 - Spur development that creates employment opportunities and expands the tax base.
 - Embrace Dunkirk's strong heritage and ethnic diversity.
- A total of 49 participants completed the vision and goals worksheets and an additional eight people provided comments after the workshop via an online feedback form for those who were not able to attend in-person. Themes from participant feedback are summarized below.
 - Vision Exercise:
 - What resonated about the draft vision:
 - a. Walkable (5)
 - b. Welcoming (4)
 - c. Attractive (3)
 - d. Livable (3)
 - Suggested improvements/additions:
 - e. Add "year-round destination"
 - f. Define what sets Dunkirk apart from other lakefront communities
 - g. Add language related to quality of life (employment, housing, health, mobility, etc.)
 - h. Add a reference to sustainability
 - i. Add a reference to private-sector investment
 - The vision statement was revised as follows based on public input:

Downtown Dunkirk will harness the powerful connection with Lake Erie as a wave of energy to activate the waterfront and downtown area with activities for residents and visitors. Downtown Dunkirk will be a year-round destination that is more attractive, livable, walkable, welcoming, and sustainable. The Dunkirk DRI will build on our unique diversity, history, and natural environment to provide opportunity and high quality of life for people of all ages.
 - Goals Exercise:
 - What resonated about the draft goals:
 - a. "Attract investment..." (16)
 - b. "Rehabilitation of historic buildings..." (15)
 - c. "Embrace strong heritage and diversity... (12) "Reverse the trend of vacancies..." (10)
 - Additional themes that emerged relative to goals:
 - a. Transportation (public transportation, bike/ped needs)
 - b. Sustainability/green space
 - c. Youth focus
 - d. Four season/winter activities
 - e. Culture
 - f. Healthcare

- g. Private investment
- The goals were revised as follows based on public input:
 - a. Reverse the trend of vacancies in Downtown Dunkirk
 - b. Attract new investment in Downtown Dunkirk and the waterfront through commercial, educational, and entertainment opportunities that will result in increased vitality year-round, more visitors, and new residents
 - c. Create a robust environment for rehabilitation of historic downtown buildings
 - d. Improve access and connectivity to employment, education, healthcare, other essential services, and natural areas
 - e. Increase opportunities for quality affordable housing
 - f. Support an inclusive community spirit that embraces Dunkirk’s strong heritage, ethnic diversity, aging adults, and youth
- Strategies also emerged from the vision and goals exercise:
 - Public recommendations on strategies fell into the following themes:
 - a. Focus on uniqueness and what makes Dunkirk stand out
 - b. Involve all the community in the process across age, abilities, ethnicity, etc.
 - c. Rehabilitate existing/historic buildings
 - d. Start with a “success story” that spurs more development
 - e. Focus on projects that improve quality of life (business, jobs, entertainment, art)
 - f. Focus on projects that strengthen the community (community centers, event spaces)
 - g. Focus on year-round destinations
 - h. Improve recreation to keep residents in the city
- Nancy asked for volunteers to share their thoughts on the draft vision and goals. The following comments were shared verbally:
 - All projects need to be aligned with the state’s energy efficiency requirements.
 - Repurpose Brooks Memorial Hospital into a psychiatric facility with services for those in need.
 - Dunkirk needs housing for retirees, and not just low-income retirees. There could be condos or apartments in a campus-like setting. Mixed-use development with a small healthcare facility and fast-food restaurant could attract retirees to the area and create jobs. Dunkirk has a great cost of living and could market that to retirees.

5. Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities Exercise

- In small groups of 4-8 people around large table maps, attendees brainstormed strengths, challenges, and opportunities in the DRI area. A representative from each group reported on the discussion at the end of the session. Feedback from the small group discussions at the workshop, and from the eight responses to the online feedback form after the workshop, is summarized below.
 - Strengths:
 - Walkability
 - Social and volunteer opportunities along Central Avenue
 - Proximity to water
 - Relaxed atmosphere and small-town feel
 - Lakeshore Drive
 - Diversity
 - History
 - Dunkirk volunteer garden maintenance

- Concerts/events during the summer
- Fredonia Technology Incubator
- Waterfront development that works for everyone, not just boat owners
- Parks system
- Commercial district
- Fishing
- DRI area is the “heart” of Dunkirk
- Bikeable near the waterfront
- Access to parks
- Variety of housing options
- Restaurants
- Weaknesses:
 - “Bad areas”
 - “Drug houses”
 - Need for something between the Clarion and Tim Hortons on Lake Shore Drive.
 - Lack of improvements to residential areas
 - Empty upper floors on Central Avenue
 - Absentee landlords
 - Property maintenance and enforcement
 - Negative attitudes
 - The Brooks Hospital property
 - Hazardous sidewalks
 - Winter accessibility
 - Lack of parking
 - Lack of public transportation x
 - DRI area misses Point Gratiot
 - Railroad divides the community
 - Lack of off-season activities
 - Underutilization of prime waterfront real estate
 - No sustainable employment opportunities
 - Party environment on Lakeshore Drive
 - Aging residential stock
 - Lack of tourist destinations
- Opportunities:
 - Lakefront housing to create foot traffic
 - Facility for youth x (project in process in Regent building)
 - Multi-use sports facility
 - Ferris wheel and climbing wall on waterfront
 - Museum on shipwrecks
 - Revisiting Lake Erie Visitor Center
 - Intermodal facility and Amtrak
 - Planting more trees and native plant gardens x
 - JCC on Central Avenue
 - Arts facility and repurposing the Adams Art Gallery
 - Amphitheater
 - Re-use
 - Public, nonprofit, and landbank-owned properties are plentiful in the DRI area

- Diversity
 - Housing – Adams Gallery and library and house in the back that could be affordable
 - Cruise ship
 - Angle parking on Central Ave
 - More activities for people who enjoy cold weather
 - Alternative day spa with hot tubs
 - Café on waterfront
 - Cut off traffic from pier to 5th Avenue to make it a walking only street
 - Food truck parks in vacant spaces
 - Community gardens
 - Third places (places other than home or work for the people to gather, such as coffee shops or community centers)
 - Business incubators
 - Incentive program to live and work in Dunkirk
 - Improve marina
 - Housing within walking distance to the lakefront and Central Avenue
 - Reopen NRG Energy
 - Renovate vacant properties for small businesses to move into
 - Rooftop solar and small wind turbines
 - Updated trail amenities on waterfront (seating, signage, kayak launch)
 - Electric micro-mobility stations
- Themes:
 - The most recurring themes identified as strengths were related to the waterfront (15), walkability (8), parks (5), and history (4). Participants found that Dunkirk’s waterfront and walkability bolster vitality downtown, while parks and history create an enjoyable, quaint atmosphere.
 - The most recurring themes for weaknesses were related to vacancy (8), bike/pedestrian needs (6), and public transportation (3). Participants identified storefront and housing vacancies as a major detriment to the city. Participants also raised concern for bike/pedestrian improvements and a need for expanded public transportation.
 - Themes related to opportunities were varied, with the most recurring themes related to the waterfront (7), vacant/available space (5), arts center (4), museums (4), Central Avenue (4), and beautification (4).

6. Next Steps

- Stephanie thanked attendees for their time and feedback and reviewed next steps in the DRI planning process. Next steps include:
 - An online engagement activity for the workshop will be posted to the DRI website for those who were not able to attend this workshop to provide input.
 - Two additional public workshops will be held later on in the DRI process.
 - The public survey will be open through July 17 and is available in English and Spanish on the DRI website.
 - LPC Meeting #2 will be held June 27, 6:00-7:30pm at the Clarion Hotel.
 - LPC Meetings #3-#6 will be held the fourth Tuesday of the month, 6:00-7:30pm, locations TBD
 - Projects can be submitted using the Project Form during the Open Call for Projects period which extends through July 17. Applicants may also submit a Simple Project Interest Form by June 30 to request technical assistance from the consultant team for project development.