

# **Portland's Downtown District**

## **5-Year Strategic Plan**

### **June, 2015**

#### **Introduction**

Portland's Downtown District was established in 1992 through an act of the Maine State Legislature under the "Maine Municipal Development Districts" statute. It was incorporated as a 501C(4) non-profit called the Downtown Improvement District, Inc. The initial overriding goal, as taken directly from the enabling legislation, was to "promote and enhance the image of downtown Portland, Maine, as a safe, clean, well-managed area in which to live, visit, shop and conduct business."

The legislation document goes on to describe many of the goal elements that PDD still performs today. More recently, these were incorporated into the mission statement established during the organization's previous strategic planning process:

*Portland's Downtown District is in the business of maintaining a clean and safe downtown while building and promoting a vibrant business, residential and tourism destination.*

While PDD's original goals have remained relatively constant over the preceding 23 years, Portland has evolved to become one of the leading cities in New England, and, arguably, the economic engine for Maine. The downtown in particular has built its reputation as an important visitor destination, and a popular place to live, play and work. Portland now receives national accolades for its successes, and regularly makes top ten lists for its scenic beauty, restaurants, active arts culture and quality of life.

PDD deserves at least some of the credit for the city's resurgence. Working mostly behind the scenes, Portland's Downtown District has been committed to maintaining a clean and safe environment for visitors, workers and residents. It has consistently produced popular city events, developed a successful website, distributed printed visitor brochures and maps, and worked hard with other partners to create value for its property owner constituents.

#### **Current State – Spring 2015**

Today, Portland is a city in major transition. Older infrastructure is requiring upgrades along with major capital projects that need prioritizing and funding. Transportation and parking pressures

must be addressed so that the city maintains its walkability, while vehicular access to, and through, the downtown is not adversely constricted. New housing is needed to satisfy demand in all economic groups from affordable to workforce to retirement. While development projects should be carefully considered and encouraged, zoning schemes must also be scrutinized so as not to limit appropriate private investments. Open space and historical complexities must be balanced against the city's growing economic needs. Social service capabilities require a new collaboration of all downtown organizations, along with funding to mitigate acute problems like homelessness and panhandling.

This is a long list of transitional growth issues! Yet, Portland's Downtown District's mission and original goals still remain relevant today. Our role in Portland's future success will require establishing priorities in the areas of Downtown Vitality and the Downtown Experience. And, the organization must fill a leadership void and become a stronger voice for the city.

In the fall of 2014, the Chamber of Commerce cast light on the current economic realities of Portland in its annual benchmark report. On the surface the city appears thriving, but as the Chamber has pointed out underneath the foundation is hardly solid. Income, housing costs, tax burden and other key metrics are underperforming when compared to similar sized peer cities in New England and across the country. These issues are of similar concern and importance to PDD.

### **Looking Forward**

Portland's downtown has physically grown beyond the PDD borders which were established over two decades ago. Today it reaches into the surrounding downtown areas and pockets of real estate that were not included within the original footprint. An expansion of Portland's Downtown District is needed to allow the organization to provide more resources to these newer regions, incorporate the businesses into our marketing strategies, and more importantly to bring additional voices in support of the organization's goals.

The next 5 years will present significant challenges as well as opportunities, and is a crucial period for Portland's long term social and economic future. Clearly, there are conflicting views on where that future should take the city, and there is no overriding leadership coming from the public or private sectors. Often voices representing narrow interests are able to have a significant influence over local decisions, with more traditional organizations or business interests left out of the discussions. Even the normal

process of government is impacted with the 'legislation by referendum' phenomenon Portland is currently experiencing.

Though unintended, this lack of broad thoughtful leadership and consensus building has the potential for harming the positive economic advances and reverting Portland back to the difficult times that spawned the organization in the first place!

Portland's Downtown District has always supported a healthy mix of economic development, business and income growth, combined with maintaining the city's superior quality of life. PDD is in the unique position of speaking for the downtown's largest cross section of constituents - property owners, businesses, residents and employees. In the end the current situation and potential for the next five years, presents a clear opportunity, and responsibility, for Portland's Downtown District to help shape the dialog and influence the future of Portland.

### **Strategic Planning Process**

Many paths can be taken to achieve a strategic plan. Ultimately, its purpose is to set goals and initiatives that are expected to be achieved over a reasonable timeline. It is not a business or operational plan, as these are more granular and short term, and generally adopted in support of the strategic plan. Clearly, a good strategic plan will not simply be an exercise conducted according to bylaw requirements, but a document that guides the organization forward.

The process was conducted over six months in expectation of adoption by June FY15, the end of the current year. Below is the timeline to achieve the final document:

1. 1<sup>st</sup> Draft was reviewed by all board members prior to the January 15<sup>th</sup> board meeting/morning retreat.
2. An electronic survey was sent to PDD constituent groups for strategic planning input.
3. The same survey mailed to PDD property owners.
4. Survey results were closed and tabulated by January 31<sup>st</sup>.
5. Board members offered additional input, changes and prioritization of items.
6. A 2<sup>nd</sup> draft was completed in March and reviewed by the board electronically.
7. Changes and refinements were made in April and May.
8. The final document will be approved at the June board meeting.

The Strategic Plan is organized into Four Key Initiatives. These are the broad, core categories that will define the focus of the

organization through 2020. Incorporated into the Key Initiatives are the specific goals to be achieved during this 5 year cycle.

## **Strategic Plan Key Initiatives**

### **A. The Downtown Experience Initiatives**

Portland is an old city with narrow streets, crooked sidewalks, historic buildings, public parks, a working waterfront, 4 seasons of weather, and a resulting charm that is not seen in a city of its size anywhere in America. Our core responsibility is to be the leaders for maintaining the downtown, and these Downtown Experience priorities incorporate our traditional “clean and safe” goals.

Property owners rightfully expect a certain level of baseline public services from the city of Portland paid for by property taxes. Our investment in a supplemental level of services is where PDD is able to make a major difference. To provide this, we contract with the city of Portland annually on a Supplemental Services Agreement.

Portland is generally a safe city but PDD must remain vigilant as perception for many is reality. This requires continuous work to create a comfortable experience for visitors, employees and residents. We manage safety concerns through a close working relationship with the police and fire departments, hired cadet patrols, human service agencies and city staff.

Top strategic priorities are:

1. Expanded police and cadet presence – to add more foot patrols and expand the hours and coverage in the downtown.
2. Create and hire a new position called Community Services Coordinator – with property management skills to monitor ‘the streets’ and work closely with city staff and property owners.
3. Improved street lighting – by addressing poor lighting in darker downtown zones. Consider ways to fund city lighting upgrades.

4. New signage and banners – to improve wayfinding and replace aging banners
5. Focused effort on homelessness and panhandling – Work with city staff and shelter agencies to find common ground in solving these problems. Research legislation to reduce panhandling
6. Increased landscaping and plantings – Consider ways to beautify the downtown such as an “adopt a planter” program and volunteer landscapers. Work closely with “Friends” groups to support park maintenance.
7. More resources for graffiti removal and education – Closely monitor Learning Works and consider additional removal vendors. Provide frequent information to property owners on latest removal techniques.
8. Additional public restrooms – identify sites for new public restroom facilities, or other alternative concepts. Seek funding sources.
9. Sidewalk brick and tree well repair – Inspect and log all sidewalk issues and create priorities for use of CIP funds. Replace trees and reconstruct tree wells, or brick in unused wells and remove old asphalt repairs.
10. Improved snow removal procedures – Refine rules for parking bans in the downtown and closely monitor removal following storms
11. Recycling and waste removal – In conjunction with the city, implement a recycling and food waste removal plan.
12. Management of supplemental services agreement – create a new working model for oversight. Monitor and track See, Click and Fix performance.

## **B. The Downtown Vitality Initiatives**

Our ‘Downtown Vitality’ strategy will be contemporized through a stronger focus on marketing and online communications. Major downtown events like the Old Port Festival, Winterfest and Light Up Your Holidays present an

opportunity for partnerships to achieve even greater success, and to share some of the operational burdens.

Much of our vitality efforts will be directed toward the support of downtown businesses, especially those on the street level that struggle to compete with online companies and national competitors located in South Portland, Freeport and the other surrounding communities. Our new website will feature a comprehensive calendar of events and provide help to visitors with parking, transportation and other needs.

1. Develop and execute a long-term consumer marketing and communications plan – focus will be in support of downtown businesses, mainly retail, and expanding local and long-distance visitations on a year-round basis
2. Hire a Marketing and Communications Coordinator – to focus on executing a marketing plan, and managing the website, database, and internal and external communications.
3. Establish [www.portlandmaine.com](http://www.portlandmaine.com) as the online hub for Portland – feature local events, business information and how to travel to downtown Portland. Create a plan to monetize elements of the site.
4. Maintain PDD events – Retain ‘ownership’ of the Old Port Festival, Winterfest, Light Up Your Holidays and seek partners and outside event management for support.
5. Event partnerships – provide our city knowledge and marketing capabilities to support other downtown events
6. Improve the Park and Shop Program – update this program to better serve the public, merchants and parking lot owners.
7. Complete a parking and transportation study – to inform city leaders and provide solutions
8. Research and monitor the health of downtown businesses – acquire information about retail sales and track performance

9. Maintain business database – continually update business information and communicate effectively to individual sector groups.
10. Seek sponsorships and grants – to provide funding for events and other marketing or maintenance initiatives
11. Support acquisition and recruitment of new businesses and residents – by participating with other organizations, and remaining engaged on all housing and zoning issues

### **C. The Advocacy Initiatives**

Portland's Downtown District should take carefully considered positions on major issues that affect our constituents. Moreover, PDD is positioned to be in a leadership role with regard to all issues that impact the future of Portland. This responsibility requires an advocacy process that seeks input from the community, vetted through a committee of the board of directors.

1. Establish a formal advocacy policy – a committee should be formed to create the procedures for adopting positions. The executive director should speak publicly for the organization.
2. Create a process to solicit community input – utilize surveys and meetings to elicit feedback and support.
3. PDD Representation – to remain informed in all city decision-making, PDD should provide a member(s) to all city committees, task forces, and study groups. The executive director should be a member of other organization boards, such as the Chamber and CVB.
4. Consistent communication to constituents – PDD should frequently communicate its position to all constituent groups. It should seek supporters to attend council and committee meetings
5. Continuous board and committee recruitment – to maintain fresh perspectives and keep a 'pipeline' in place

## **D. The Growth Initiatives**

Portland's downtown has grown significantly since PDD was established in 1992. However, the organization's footprint has not grown beyond its initial boundaries. A specific plan is needed to expand.

1. Add properties within the current footprint but not presently included in the assessment – for a variety of reasons a significant amount of property was excluded or has been redeveloped since the district was established.
2. Expand east of Franklin Street - to include the India Street Neighborhood and the waterfront area down to the current Portland Company property
3. Consider expansion to the Bayside Neighborhoods – to include some of downtown Portland's fastest growing areas
4. Consider expansion to include the total Downtown TIF – The newly enacted 'downtown TIF' includes nearly all of the commercial area in the central peninsula of Portland.
5. Consider acquisition of other 'like purpose' downtown organizations – there are a number of non-profits that have similar roles and are often inadequately funded and staffed. PDD could incorporate them under our umbrella.
6. Evaluate a two-tier assessment program – analyze the financial and operational issues with offering a different rate for residential and commercial properties

### **Summary**

Portland's Downtown District is completing an organizational transition much like the city itself. By the end of June it will be launching a new website to better represent its high profile URL, portlandmaine.com. At the same time it will be changing its name to simply Portland Downtown, removing the 'district' label and broadening its focus to be more inclusive of all constituent sectors in the city.

This five year plan lays out an ambitious strategy for the 23 year old organization. While the plan does not establish many of the specific details or timelines to complete each goal or initiative, it

identifies the path toward positioning Portland Downtown as a leader in the future evolution of the city.

Some strategic goals are likely to be completed more quickly than others. And, while certain goals may be dropped, others will likely be added by future boards. This is a normal process in a dynamic organization. In fact, the strategic plan should be reviewed annually and a business plan created for each fiscal year cycle.

Finally, Portland Downtown will only be as strong as its volunteer board of directors and committees, supported by talented staff members. A continuous effort should be made to recruit and retain a team of influential people with a passion for Portland and a positive outlook for the future.