



# Wilmington Greater Downtown Plan

June 16, 2026





## Acknowledgments

The City of Wilmington is grateful, first and foremost, for our community. We were welcomed with open arms, and the thousands of conversations we had with community members and the warmth and courtesy we received will never be forgotten. The names below represent the team that assisted in pulling together this document, and we are grateful for all of their contributions. While the names of the many thousands of voices who shared ideas in community meetings, neighborhood conversations, online, and at events and festivals are not listed here, the Plan's vision and recommendations are driven by their ideas.

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# Mayor's Welcome Letter

To my fellow Wilmingtonians,

This document presents a bold new vision for the future of our Greater Downtown, made possible by over 6,300 voices and contributions from our community. On behalf of the City of Wilmington, I thank each of you for your dedication to this effort and for shaping our shared future.

The vision outlined in this Plan will be realized through five key themes: Local Character, Economy, Small Business, Mobility, and Resiliency. It includes 12 strategies and 52 actions, all rooted in community feedback and tailored to our unique context, to enhance the quality of life for all residents. We have also pinpointed critical “Game Changers,” such as expanding access to affordable housing, securing a downtown grocery store, and fulfilling our Vision Zero commitment, all priorities identified by residents that we are committed to delivering.

Our Greater Downtown is our historic urban core, home to treasured neighborhoods, popular attractions, and essential access to jobs, goods, services, and recreation. The community’s input has been invaluable in helping us preserve what people love, improve areas needing attention, and build a better Greater Downtown. The journey has just begun, and while the City leads many of these efforts, the success will depend on our strong partnerships. We need everyone’s help to move these recommendations forward.

Thank you for your interest and commitment to your local government. Now is the time to actively get involved and make a difference.

With Gratitude,

Mayor Bill Saffo



# 1

## Introduction

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# The Need to Plan

## Growing Pains

Wilmington is rapidly changing. Since the 1990s, the City's population has doubled, and more than 6,500 new residents have moved in since the pandemic alone. Much of this growth is due to the booming healthcare and hospitality industries.

But Greater Downtown hasn't shared equally in that boom. While the rest of the City grows, the population of Greater Downtown has stayed the same. Long-time residents have been priced out, and affordable housing has become harder to find, especially for the service workers powering our hospitality economy. The look and feel of Greater Downtown has been incredibly dynamic, with new businesses and developments popping up in places that 10 years ago were just ideas on a map.

This is why the City of Wilmington developed the Greater Downtown Plan. This plan lays out a vision for how our central neighborhoods can grow in a way that supports the people who live and work here, keeps our economy strong, and protects the City's history and natural environment.

Greater Downtown neighborhoods were originally built for walkability, and one big focus of the plan is making it easier and safer to get around without a car. That includes everything from fixing intersections and sidewalks to expanding the Riverwalk into a bigger network of greenways.

Economically, the plan offers ways to support small businesses, attract investment, and make it easier to start or grow a business. It also tackles housing head-on, with ideas to create more homes at different price points, protect renters from displacement, and allow for more housing options in the City's zoning regulations.



### What Do We Mean by "Greater Downtown"?

The Greater Downtown Plan covers the 18 neighborhoods inside the City's 1945 boundaries. This includes places like Downtown, the Northside and Southside, Historic Wilmington, and areas between Smith Creek and Greenfield Lake.

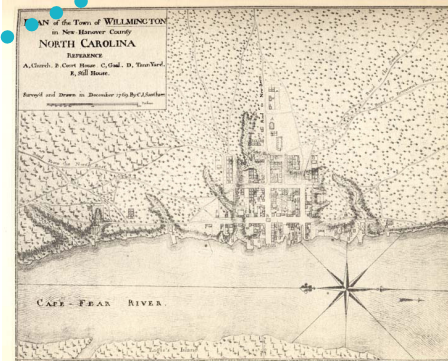
## Neighborhoods of Choice

Housing is just one part of what makes a neighborhood a good place to live. People also need access to everyday essentials like grocery stores, hardware stores, childcare, and other basic services. Therefore, this plan does not only focus on big projects, it also emphasizes the need for neighborhoods where people can live comfortably and conveniently.

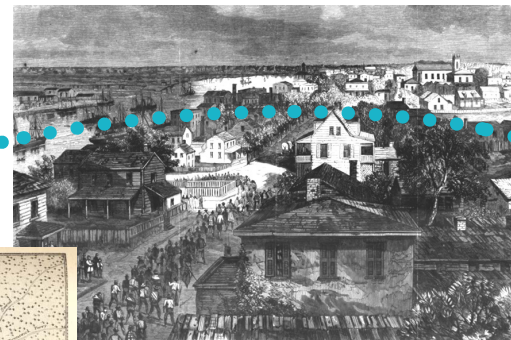
This is a plan built to spark action. While it's designed to be adopted by City Council as an official planning document, it also serves a broader purpose. It helps residents, business owners, and community partners see the direction Wilmington is heading and understand how they can be part of it. The Greater Downtown Plan is a roadmap, and a call to action, for building a city center that's more connected, welcoming, and built to last.



# History of Greater Downtown



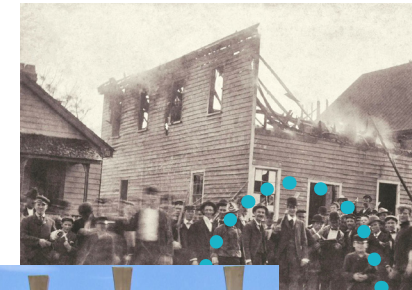
**Plan of the Town of Wilmington in 1769**  
Photo Credit: Documenting the American South, Academic Affairs Library, UNC Chapel Hill



**Downtown Wilmington during the Civil War**  
Photo Credit: ECU Library Archives

## American Coup

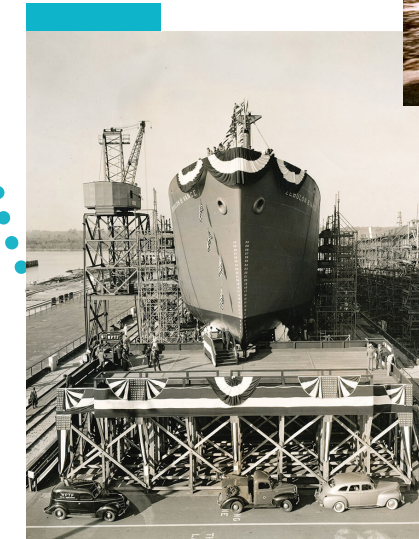
Photo Credit: NC Archives and History



**1898 Memorial Park**  
Photo Credit: Wilmington & Beaches CVB

## A vibrant center for arts, dining, and recreation with historic charm today

Photo Credit: Wilmington & Beaches CVB



**A shipping hub before experiencing urban decline in the 20th century**  
Photo Credit: North Carolina Shipbuilding Company

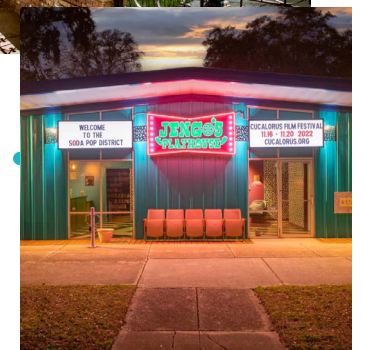


Photo Credit: Cucalorus Film Foundation

### Early Settlement and Growth (18th Century)

The downtown area started to take form in the mid-1700s along the Cape Fear River as a hub for trade and commerce. Streets like Front and Market became the foundation of Wilmington's economic and administrative activities, while the riverfront hosted docks and warehouses supporting the naval stores industry.

### Industrial and Social Hub (19th Century)

By the 1800s, downtown Wilmington flourished as a trade center with thriving businesses, churches, and theaters. During the Civil War, it became a Confederate lifeline for blockade runners. The fall of Fort Fisher in 1865 ended its wartime significance but marked a period of rebuilding.

### Reconstruction and Racial Conflict (Post-Civil War)

Downtown recovered economically after the war, bolstered by railroads and trade. It was a vibrant multiracial community until the 1898 Wilmington coup d'état and massacre, which devastated African American businesses and leadership, leaving a lasting impact on the area's social and political landscape.

### Urban Decline and Preservation (20th Century)

Mid-century suburbanization led to downtown decline until the 1970s when preservation efforts started to revitalize the area. Projects like the Riverwalk and the restoration of historic sites brought new life, while retail and cultural institutions began to return.

### Revitalization and Modern Growth (21st Century)

Today, the downtown area thrives with its Riverwalk, historic landmarks, and vibrant arts and dining scene. Modern development has brought apartments, offices, hotels, and events, blending historic charm with urban renewal, making it the City's cultural and economic heart. The rise of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to attract new residents to Wilmington.

# Community Snapshot

## A Growing Economy

Greater Downtown Wilmington is on solid economic footing. Healthcare and hospitality lead the way, employing more than 14,000 people. In fact, about 17% of all the jobs in the City are located in Greater Downtown, which qualifies it as an “emerging downtown” by national standards set by the International Downtown Association.

There is a strong mix of restaurants, bars, and entertainment options that bring in locals and visitors alike. However, residents have made it clear that we need more day-to-day services, like dentists, childcare providers, grocery stores, and pharmacies. These are not luxuries; they are the basics of a livable community.

With growth and economic success come challenges, especially around affordability. Over the past 10 years, median rent has increased by 44%, now at \$1,206. Home values have nearly doubled, rising from under \$150,000 to almost \$300,000. In some parts of the Northside, home values have skyrocketed by nearly 190%.

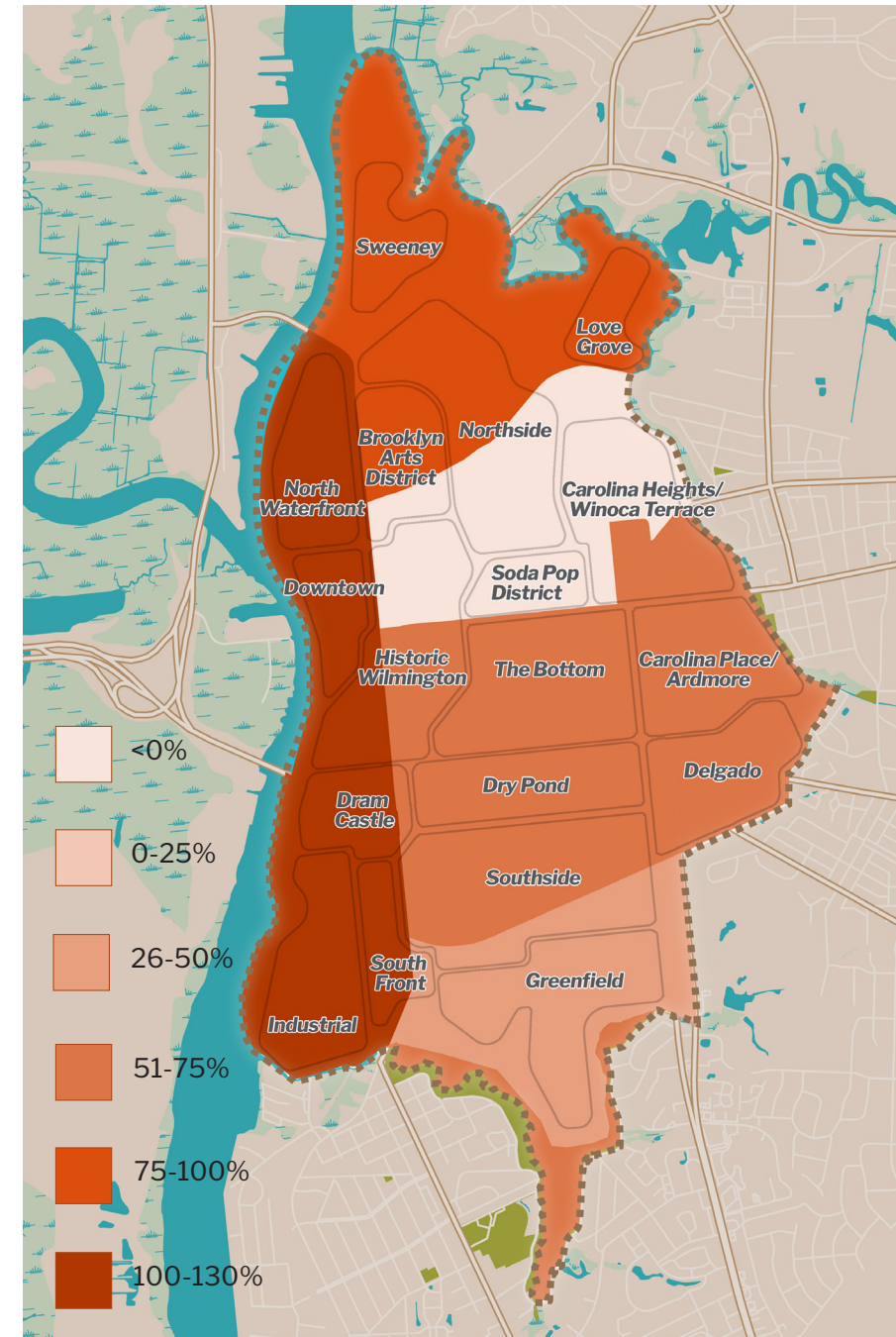
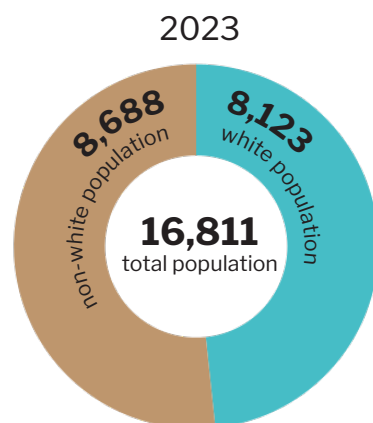
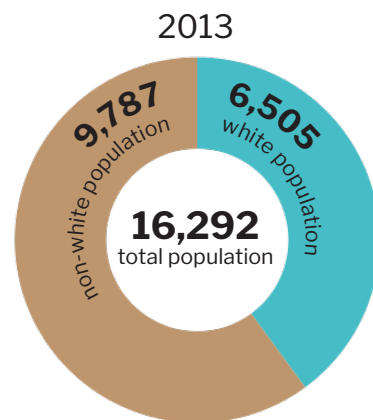
This creates intense financial pressure for long-time residents, even as newcomers from higher-cost cities like Washington, D.C., New York, Boston, and Los Angeles find Wilmington’s prices more manageable.

## Who’s Living in Greater Downtown?

Interestingly, even though housing costs have soared, the population in Greater Downtown has not. It has held steady at around 16,000 people for the past decade, but the people living here have changed.

In neighborhoods like the Northside and Southside, the number of non-white residents has dropped sharply, as much as 27–34% in some areas, while white residents are moving in. That points to a serious affordability and displacement issue.

Adding more housing, both affordable and market-rate, is essential. Right now, Greater Downtown averages just five residents per acre, while the national average for downtown areas is closer to 13 residents per acre. To meet that benchmark, Greater Downtown would need to grow by roughly 8,600 people. This Plan does not recommend adding that number of people overnight, but increasing housing close to where people work, go to school, and play can offer significant benefits to the entire City, so long as it is done carefully, respecting the historic character that makes Wilmington special.



**Map of Median Rent Increase in Greater Downtown, 2013-2023**

This map illustrates the percent increase of the median rent by census tract in Greater Downtown.

# Plans that Inform This Work

Small-area plans provide a collaborative framework for residents, businesses, and organizations to shape the future of their neighborhoods. These plans outline specific strategies to preserve and enhance targeted areas within the City, developed through collaborative engagement with community members, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and City staff.

The City of Wilmington has completed several neighborhood-focused plans, including the Northside Community Plan (2003), Wilmington Vision 2020: A Waterfront Downtown (2004), and Southside Small Area Plan (2009). These plans identify strategies to strengthen and improve distinct neighborhoods within Greater Downtown. However, the Greater Downtown Plan is the first comprehensive effort to establish a cohesive vision for the City's central core.

In addition to small-area plans, Wilmington has developed several citywide plans focused on specific topics such as parks and open space, mobility, and climate resilience. These thematic plans provide valuable insights into current systems and opportunities for improvement, forming a strong foundation for the Greater Downtown Plan.

## Northside Community Plan (2003)

This plan focused on revitalizing the historically significant Northside neighborhood through housing improvements, economic development, and community engagement, aiming to enhance livability while preserving the area's cultural heritage. One of the major successes of this plan was the 2006 relocation of police headquarters to the Northside; which was recommended to help address the community's highest priority: crime prevention.

## Wilmington Vision 2020 (2004)

As a long-term vision for downtown Wilmington's waterfront, this plan emphasized mixed-use development, public space enhancements, and stronger connections between the riverfront and surrounding neighborhoods to support economic growth and urban vibrancy. This plan led to several successful initiatives, including the expansion and activation of the Riverwalk, the creation of Riverfront Park, and the establishment of the Urban Mixed-Use (UMX) zoning district in Greater Downtown.



Northside Community Plan (2003)



Wilmington Vision 2020 (2004)

- Plan Boundary
- Plan Focus Areas
- Greater Downtown Area - 1945 City Limit Boundary

## Southside Small Area Plan (2009)

This plan aimed to strengthen the Southside neighborhood by addressing housing, mobility, and economic opportunities, with a focus on fostering community investment, improving infrastructure, and promoting equitable development. Following adoption of the plan, more than 600 parcels in the Southside, including along Dawson Street, portions of Castle Street, and the South Front district were rezoned to UMX.

## Walk Wilmington Plan (2023)

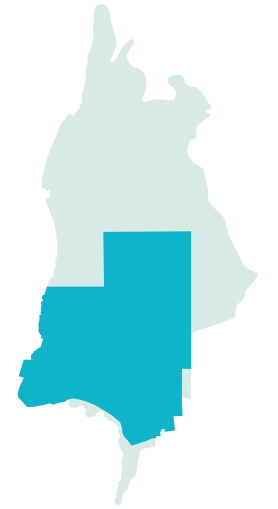
This plan outlines a vision for a more walkable Wilmington by enhancing pedestrian infrastructure, improving safety, and increasing connectivity. It prioritizes equitable access to sidewalks, crosswalks, and greenways to support a more vibrant and accessible city.

## Wilmington Rail Realignment Project

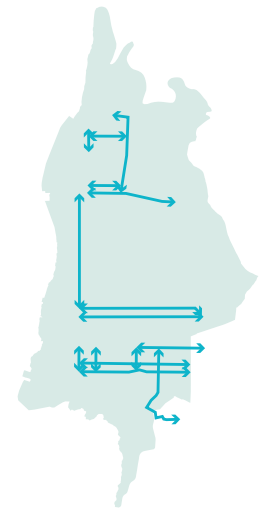
This ongoing initiative aims to relocate freight rail operations out of the City's urban core to improve safety, reduce traffic congestion, and create opportunities for economic development and future passenger rail service.

## Create Wilmington Comprehensive Plan & Others

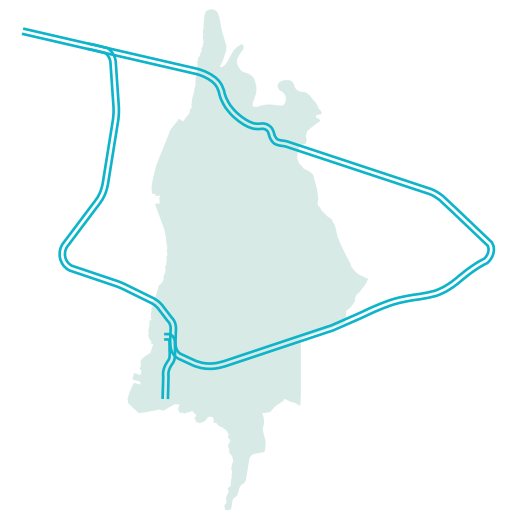
The Create Wilmington Comprehensive Plan sets a 25-year vision for the City's growth and redevelopment. This plan provides a number of recommendations specific to land use and zoning that remain relevant alongside the Greater Downtown Plan's recommendations. The Greater Downtown Plan, as adopted, is an appendix to the Comprehensive Plan. Additionally, the Comprehensive Parks, Recreation + Open Space Master Plan guides park improvements, while the Urban Forestry Master Plan focuses on protecting and expanding urban forests. These and other citywide plans provide valuable context that supports the Greater Downtown Plan's vision and strategies.



Southside Small Area Plan (2009)



Walk Wilmington Plan (2023)



Wilmington Rail Realignment Project (Ongoing)

# Project Team

This plan was shaped by City staff, consulting planners, and thousands of voices from the Wilmington community, who shared their hopes, dreams, and priorities for a brighter future.



## City of Wilmington

- Legislative adoption of the Plan (Planning Commission and City Council)
- Provide executive Oversight (City Manager)
- Manage the project and lead community engagement (Planning and Development)

## Wilmington Community

- Establish shared values and priorities
- Share expertise of lived experience
- Give feedback on the Plan's proposals
- Spread awareness and boost participation

## Consulting Planners

- Conduct technical analysis
- Share expertise from around the country
- Help synthesize all inputs into an actionable plan

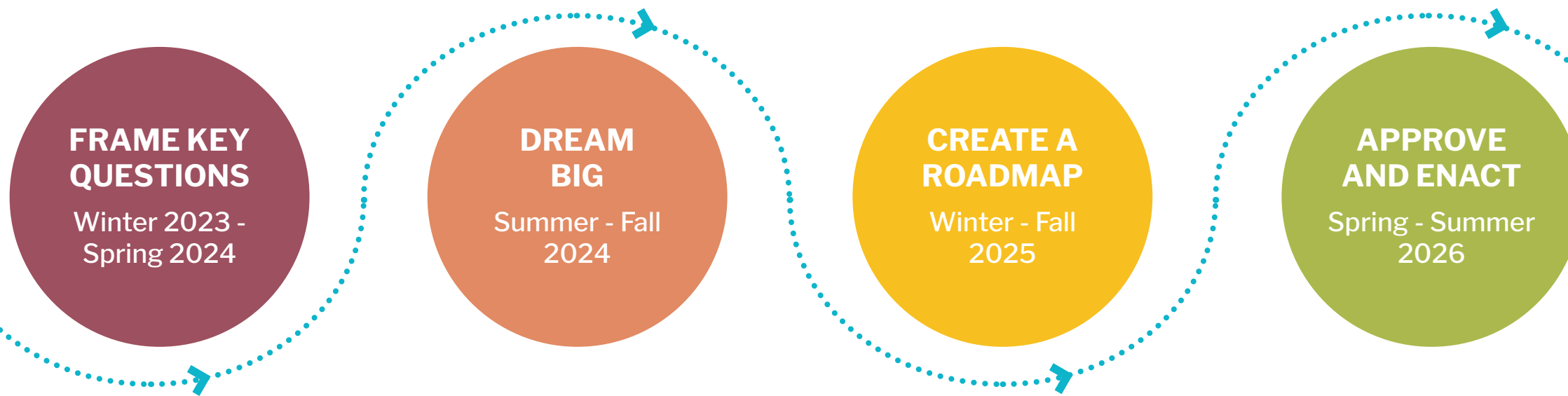
## Steering Committee

- Comprised of Wilmington residents, community leaders, business leaders, and the local public sector partners
- Guide the development of strategies and actions
- Ensure the plan reflects City values and aspirations

## Implementation Committee

- Comprised of City organizational leaders, including key actors in implementing the Plan
- Shape the plan to be actionable in Wilmington's unique conditions
- Advise on the strategy to implement the Plan

# Plan Process



## Asking the Right Questions

We started by looking back, reviewing earlier plans and projects that have shaped Greater Downtown Wilmington. We met with key stakeholders, visited important sites, and asked: What’s working? What’s not? What do people want this place to be? Along the way, we gathered data to better understand the local economy, housing trends, and how current policies shape what gets built.

## Imagining the Future Together

Next, we asked the community to help us dream big. Over 6,300 people took surveys, joined focus groups, or stopped by one of our 61 pop-up events or open houses. What came through loud and clear was that people want a Greater Downtown that feels welcoming, walkable, affordable, and uniquely Wilmington. From those conversations and data insights, we drafted big-picture goals focused on four themes: Local Character, Economy, Small Business, and Mobility. We brought those draft ideas back to the community for feedback and fine-tuned them based on what we heard.

## Creating a Game Plan

With a clear vision in place, it was time to figure out how to make it real. We laid out specific steps to achieve the community’s goals, identifying sites for new development, potential policies, funding tools, and the partners we will need to work with. This stage produced the Plan’s “implementation tree,” a guide to turning vision into action.

## Making it Official

To make this Plan count, we brought it back to the community to determine: “Did we get it right?” Feedback from the community, Steering Committee, and Implementation Committee on the draft plan presented in the fall of 2025 led to the final plan being presented to the Planning Commission and City Council for adoption as an appendix to the Create Wilmington Comprehensive Plan. That stamp of approval gives us the momentum we need to bring in funding, build partnerships, and get things done

# The Community Speaks

## How We Engaged the Community

The voices of Wilmington residents guided every step of this Plan. We heard from thousands of people across Greater Downtown through surveys, open houses, focus groups, and local events. Early on, people told us what they love about the area and what they want to change. As the Plan was developed, they continued to weigh in on what mattered most to shape the strategies and actions recommend in this Plan.

## Pop-Up Events

We attended local community events such as farmer's markets, festivals, community meetings, and other community gatherings with an activity to collect opinions and ideas from the community. We also worked with various institutions within Greater Downtown, such as Cape Fear Community College, the Good Shepherd Center, Vigilant Hope, and others to ensure as many voices as possible could contribute to this plan.

## Open Houses

Each open house offered a closer look at the planning process and an opportunity for participants to shape the plan's outcomes in more detail.

## Survey

Surveys, offered online and in-person, were an important tool for reaching residents to gather input on multiple topics informing the plan, such as housing, the local economy, and new development, along with surveying opinions on the direct outcomes of proposed Plan actions.

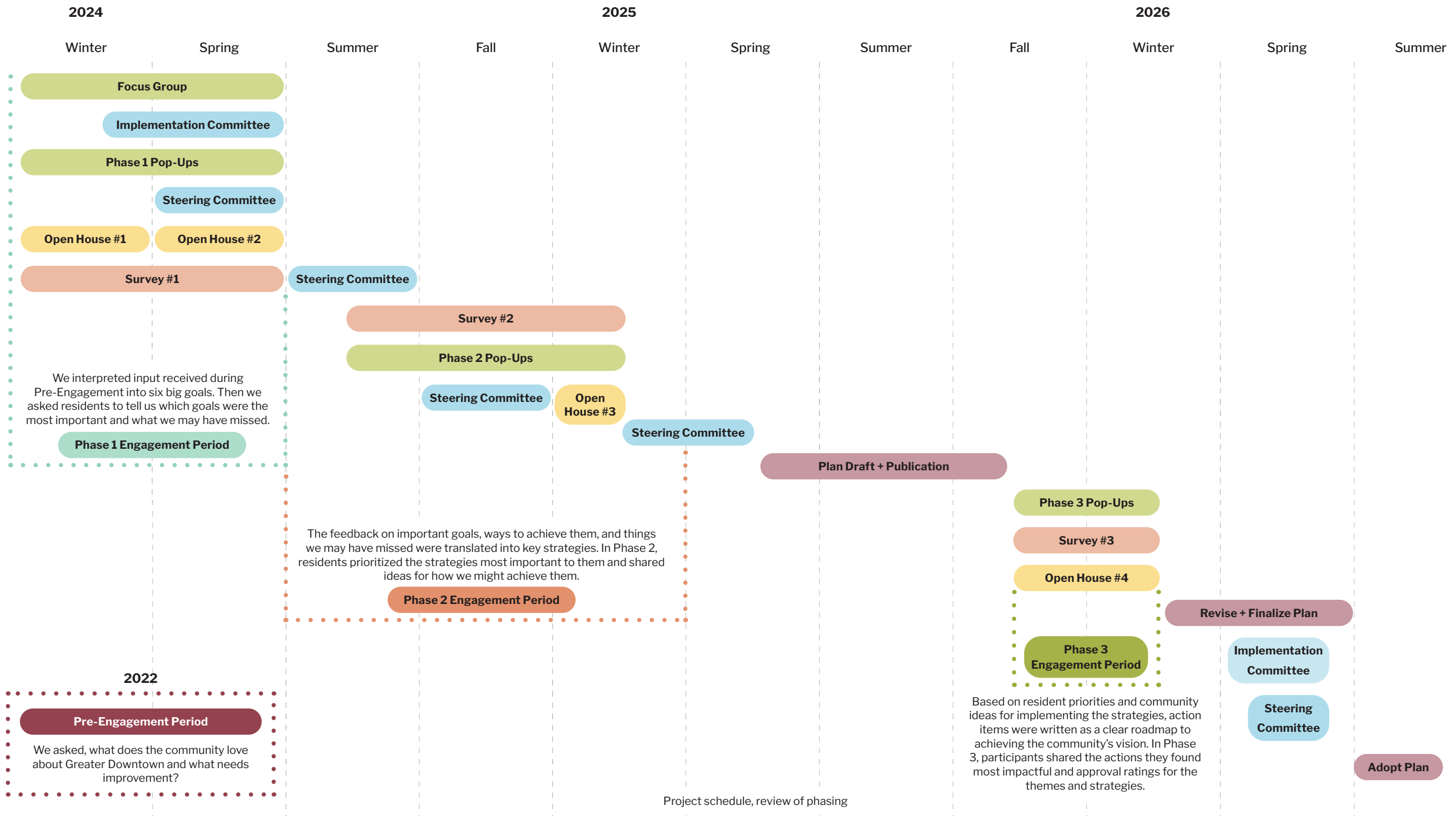
## Focus Groups

We met with focus groups composed of professionals and community organizations specializing in topics such as affordable housing, economic development, the environment, justice and belonging, and mobility.



Map of Engagement Locations by Phase

# The Community Speaks



## Engagement Highlights

**6300+**  
residents participated

**2800+**  
survey responses

**61**  
pop-up appearances at various events

**11**  
focus groups conversations

**4**  
public open houses

**4**  
steering committee meetings

**5**  
implementation committee meetings

# Community Engagement Takeaways

## Pre-Engagement - Fall 2022

### Purpose

Before the start of the project, we hit the streets asking neighbors to share what they love about Greater Downtown, and what they'd fix. A brief survey was also collected to learn more about resident needs.

### Engagement Highlights

**400+**  
Pre-Engagement  
participants

**6**  
community  
events attended

### What needs to change?

Top 3 Answers:

- 1 **17%** | Safety
- 2 **33%** | Better walking and biking
- 3 **12%** | More green spaces and beautification of public space

### What do people love?

Top 3 Answers:

- 1 **42%** | Community culture
- 2 **33%** | Biking and walking
- 3 **7%** | The parks



"vibrant walkable downtown"



"improper infill development doesn't match character"

"more public transit options"

"vacant space infill - set standards and develop well"

"maintenance of downtown area"

"loss of tree canopy"

"strong community"



# Community Engagement Takeaways



## Phase 1 - Winter 2023 to Spring 2024

### Purpose

In Phase 1, the goal was to identify community interest in big picture goals and highlight areas needing attention.

### Engagement Highlights

**3,000+**  
Phase 1  
participants

**1,370+**  
in-person  
participants

**2**  
open house

**1,400+**  
survey responses

**16**  
community  
events attended

**8**  
focus groups

### Pop-Up Event Highlight

The first pop-up event of Phase 1 was the annual Azalea Festival Street Fair. Staff kicked off this phase with 726 responses over two days!



### Community Ideas for Greater Downtown

Community members shared their opinions, needs, and concerns for Wilmington's Greater Downtown, contributing to a collective vision for its future. Participants found it important Greater Downtown be:

- 1 **27%** | A safe and pleasant place for walking and biking
- 2 **21%** | Authentic, driven by locals, and uniquely ours
- 3 **20%** | A beautiful place known for its lush green space
- 4 **16%** | An affordable and convenient place to raise a family
- 5 **8%** | A destination for tourism and recreation
- 6 **7%** | A jobs center for commerce and industry

From that input, four guiding themes emerged:

**Local Character, Economy, Small Business, and Mobility.**



## I want Greater Downtown to be...



# Community Engagement Takeaways

## Phase 2 - Spring 2024 to Winter 2024

### Purpose

In Phase 2, we circled back with residents to test strategies and ensure we got it right through a community voting exercise.

### Engagement Highlights

**2,300+**  
Phase 2  
participants

**1,100+**  
in-person  
participants

**1**  
open house

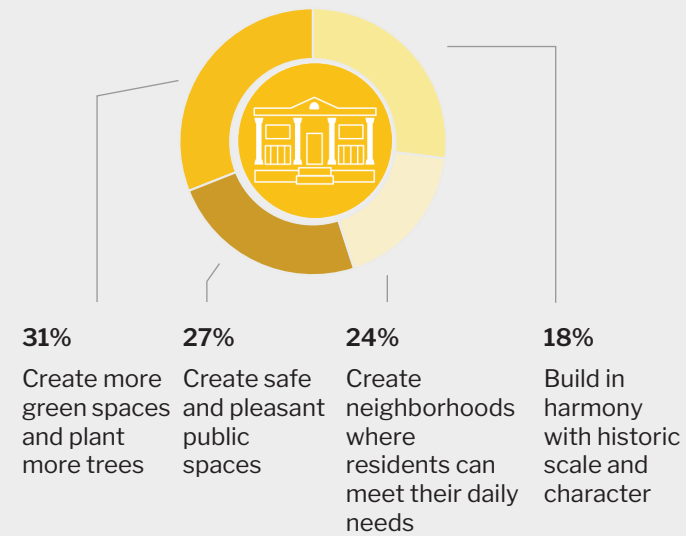
**1,200+**  
survey responses

**22**  
community  
events attended

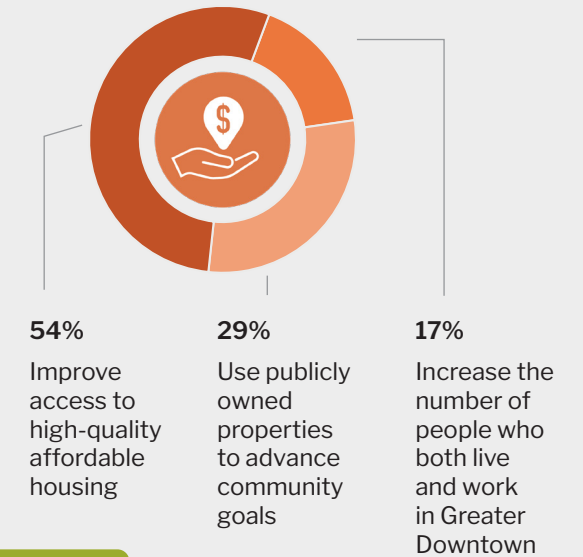


### Community Ideas for Greater Downtown

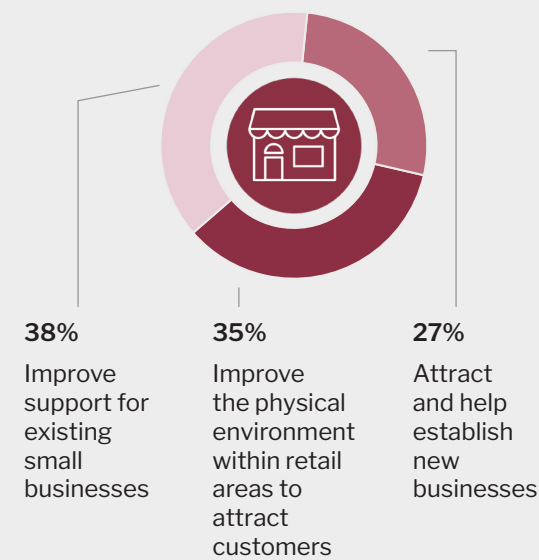
#### Local Character



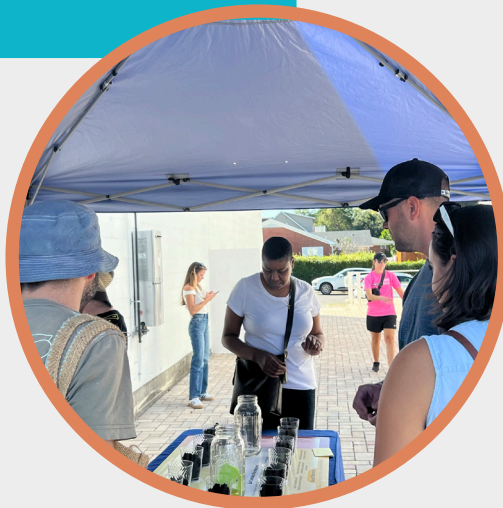
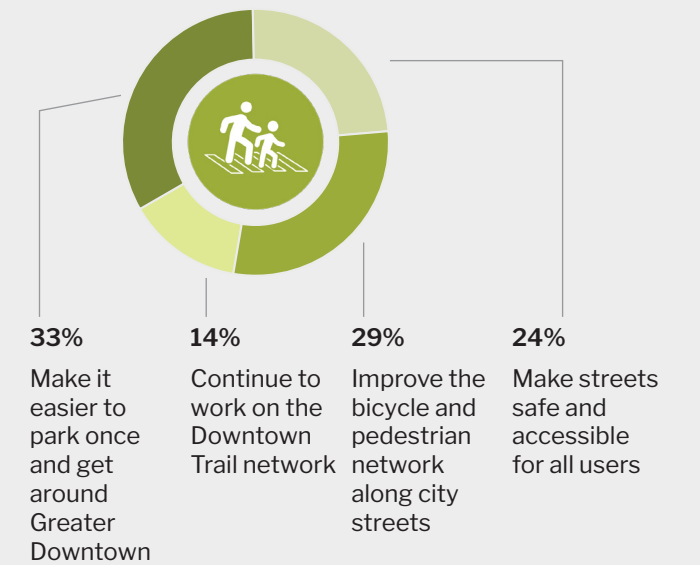
#### Economy



#### Small Business



#### Mobility



### Pop-Up Event Highlight

The Northside Food Co-op was a vital community partner in connecting with Northside residents. Staff popped-up at Northside Food Co-op Community Dinners and other events in each phase.



# Community Engagement Takeaways

## Phase 3 - Fall 2025 to Winter 2025

### Purpose

In the final phase, we shared a draft of the Plan for comments and collected input on priorities to inform the implementation of the Plan.

### Community Ideas for Greater Downtown

#### Local Character

% of survey participants felt the actions in this strategy nailed it!

- Make public spaces safe, welcoming, and enjoyable** 36%
  - Highest Priority Action** Improve streets and parks to make them more welcoming
- Ensure new development fits in with the area's historic look and feel** 35%
  - Highest Priority Action** Launch an incentive program to reuse and rehabilitate older buildings
- Encourage neighborhoods where everyone can meet their daily needs** 41%
  - Highest Priority Action** Support mixed-use zoning, infill, and redevelopment
- Create more green spaces and plant more trees** 29%
  - Highest Priority Action** Add green spaces

#### Economy

% of survey participants felt the actions in this strategy nailed it!

- Improve access to affordable, high-quality housing** 33%
  - Highest Priority Action** Turn around vacant or neglected homes AND Help more people access existing housing programs
- Use public land to support community goals** 31%
  - Highest Priority Action** Use publicly owned properties to help meet community needs

#### Small Business

% of survey participants felt the actions in this strategy nailed it!

- Support existing businesses and attract new ones** 42%
  - Highest Priority Action** Attract and keep businesses that offer a range of goods and services
- Make business districts more attractive and welcoming** 35%
  - Highest Priority Action** Expand grant programs for storefronts, signage, and art projects
- Make local rules and processes more business-friendly** 41%
  - Highest Priority Action** Simplify the overall process for registering and opening a business

#### Mobility

% of survey participants felt the actions in this strategy nailed it!

- Make streets safe and accessible for everyone** 35%
  - Highest Priority Action** Build priority sidewalk and crossing projects from the 2023 Walk Wilmington Plan
- Build a connected trail network for walking and biking across Greater Downtown** 46%
  - Highest Priority Action** Finish the Downtown Trail, all the way from the river to Forest Hills
- Make it easier to get around Greater Downtown without a car** 39%
  - Highest Priority Action** Upgrade key streets for safer walking and biking



### Engagement Highlights

1,000+  
Phase 3  
participants

800+  
in-person  
participants

1  
open house

200+  
survey responses

19  
community  
events attended

### Pop-Up Event Highlight

In partnership with the Wilmington Metropolitan Planning Organization (WMPO), city staff hosted two "Parklet Day's" that showcased the opportunity parking spaces provide for enhanced public spaces.



Wilmington Greater Downtown Pla

# What Ties it All Together

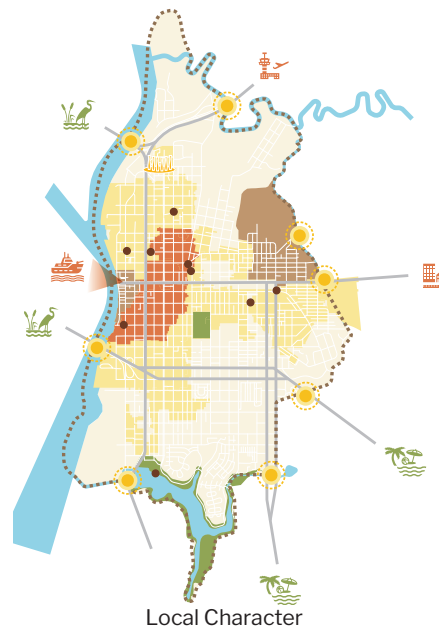
Even with thousands of voices in the mix, the community's message was surprisingly consistent. The themes of Local Character, Economy, Small Business, and Mobility are all tied together by a shared desire for resilience, or the ability for our community to adapt and thrive, no matter what comes our way.

## Local Character



**Steward unique architecture, culture, and sense of place**

Protect what makes Wilmington special like its buildings, people, and local flavor while ensuring all residents can meet their daily needs close to home.

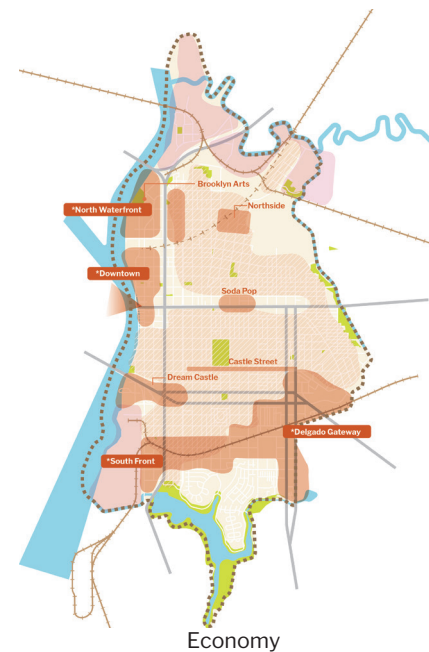


## Economy



**Boost economic opportunity and improve fiscal health**

Grow from within. Attract outside investment while ensuring existing residents can find opportunity, especially through more housing that is affordable to local residents and workers.



## Resilience



**Lessen the physical and economic impact of disaster events**

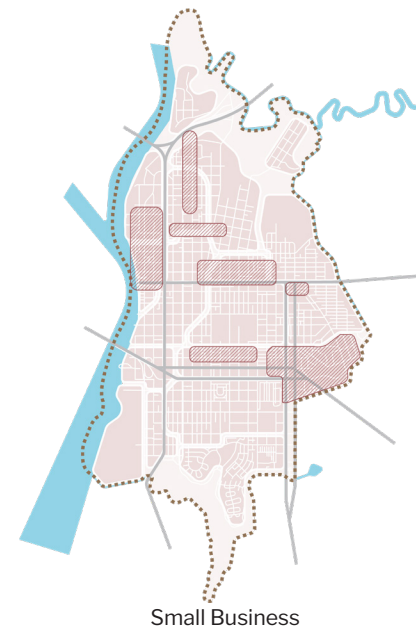
This theme runs through everything. From climate change to economic shifts, Greater Downtown needs to be a community that can adapt and bounce back. This means supporting strong local businesses, expanding housing options, improving mobility, and creating public spaces that serve residents and visitors, even during challenging times.

## Small Business



**Support small business and retail economy**

Support the backbone of the local economy by helping small businesses thrive. Whether connecting entrepreneurs with space or making retail districts and corridors more vibrant, this is about building an economy that stays local.



## Mobility



**Make it easier, safer, and more pleasant to get around**

People want to walk, even car owners told us that. Safer crosswalks, tree-lined sidewalks, and new biking and trail connections will make Greater Downtown easier and more enjoyable to navigate.



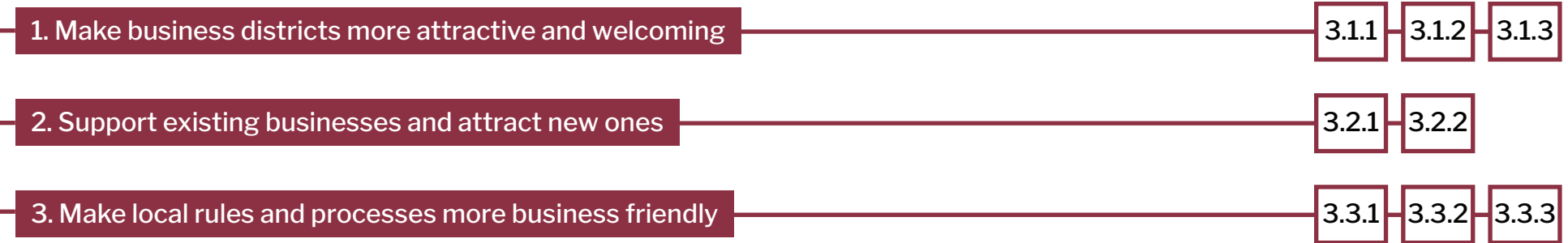
**Local Character**  
*Steward unique architecture, culture, and sense of place*



**Economy**  
*Boost economic opportunity and improve fiscal health*



**Small Business**  
*Support small business and retail economy*



**Mobility**  
*Make it easier, safer, and more pleasant to get around*



# Resilience in Greater Downtown

**Resilience** is defined as the ability to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from shocks and stresses while maintaining essential functions.

Residents of Greater Downtown have expressed concerns about the need to adapt to climate-related risks, including extreme heat, rising sea levels, and hurricanes and flooding events that are expected to become more frequent and intense in the coming decades. The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the vulnerability of local businesses and workers, underscoring the importance of building a more resilient local economy that can withstand future disruptions.

The Greater Downtown Plan weaves resilience throughout the Local Character, Economy, Small Business, and Mobility strategies and actions. For example, in the **Local Character** theme, expanding tree canopy, green infrastructure, and open spaces helps reduce flooding, lower urban heat, and provide safe places for community gathering and emergency response. In the **Economy** theme, increasing the supply of high-quality, affordable housing helps protect residents from storm damage while allowing households to better prepare for and recover from unexpected events. Supporting **Small Business**, strengthening local supply chains, and encouraging collaboration among businesses helps build a resilient local economy that can adapt to economic shifts, disruptions, and natural disasters. Mixed-use neighborhoods and improved **Mobility** options also help people reach essential goods, services, and jobs during everyday disruptions as well as after disasters.



# A Vision for Greater Downtown

“

Greater Downtown Wilmington honors its rich history while moving toward a more sustainable future. It's a welcoming and affordable place to live, full of local character and culture, with growing opportunities for work and business all within a walkable and charming urban setting.

”



# Bringing the Vision to Life

The map on the next page shows how the Plan's strategies and actions come together.

## Investment Areas

The striped zones are places where we will focus on small business development, mostly neighborhood corridors that serve nearby residents.

## Catalyst Sites

Marked in orange, these are key properties with big potential, vacant, underused, or well-positioned to spark broader change.

## Mobility Networks

**Blue lines** show existing and proposed greenways, including an expanded Riverwalk and connections to the River to Sea Trail.

**White outlines** show potential crosstown bike/pedestrian routes, such as an improved 5th Avenue with protected bike lanes, slower traffic, and safer sidewalks.

**P symbols** mark possible new municipal parking lots at each end of the Riverwalk, making it easier for visitors to park once and walk to multiple destinations. For this to work, we will also need better alternative transportation options.

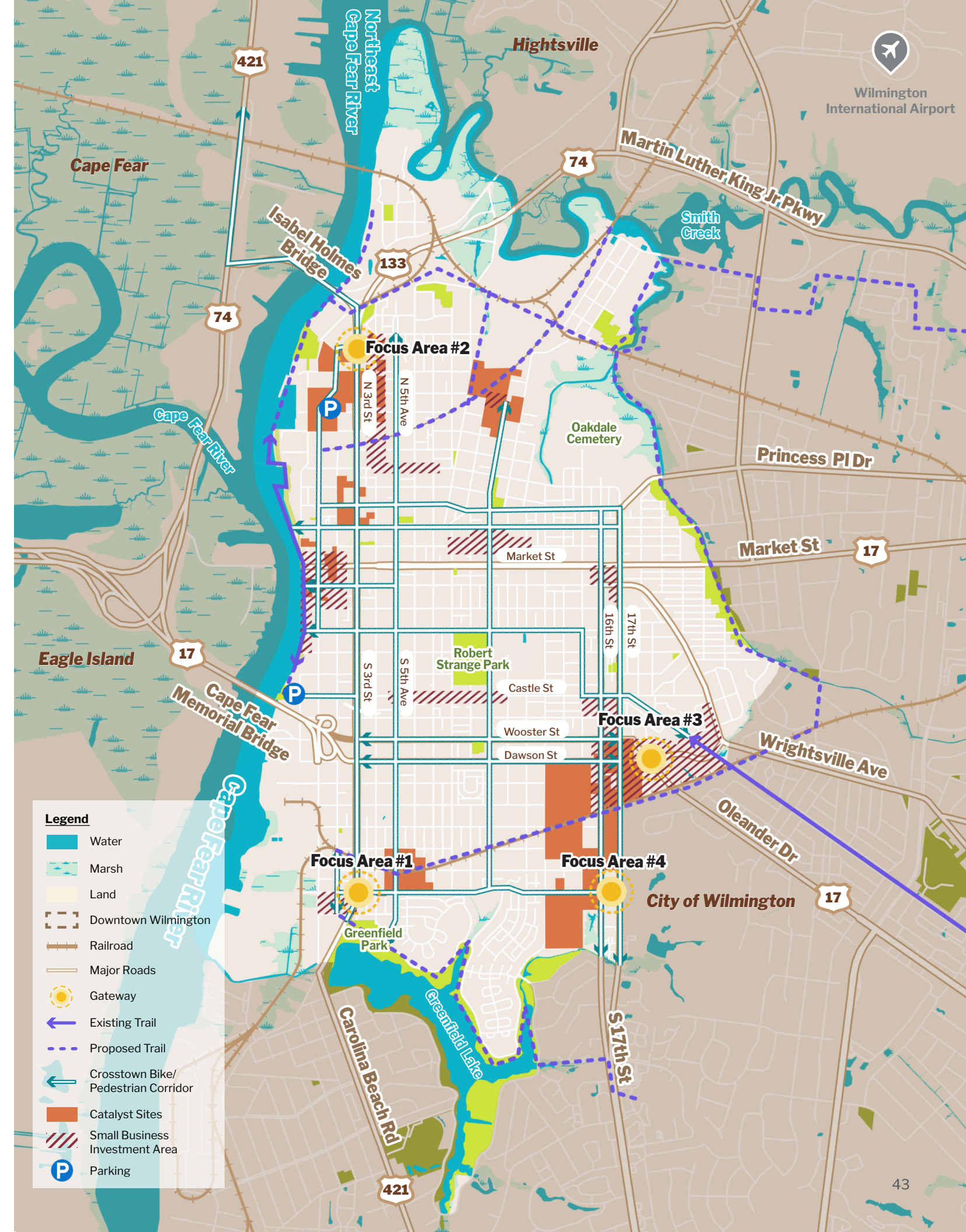
## Focus Area Plans

The following pages highlight focus area plans for several of the catalyst sites shown on the previous map. These sites were selected because they are likely to experience new development or redevelopment in the near future. The focus area plans illustrate what could be possible if the community's priorities, and the recommendations of this plan, are put into action.

As conditions evolve and more information becomes available about other catalyst sites across Greater Downtown, the city will continue developing additional focus area plans.

These future plans will be created in partnership with local stakeholders and the broader community and incorporated into this Plan over time.

One particular area that will require focused attention is the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge replacement. Once the bridge's final design is known, a dedicated focus area Plan will be developed to guide related opportunities. In the meantime, the city supports a replacement bridge that honors the character of the surrounding community, enhances multimodal access, and maintains its role as a defining landmark for Wilmington and the greater Cape Fear region.



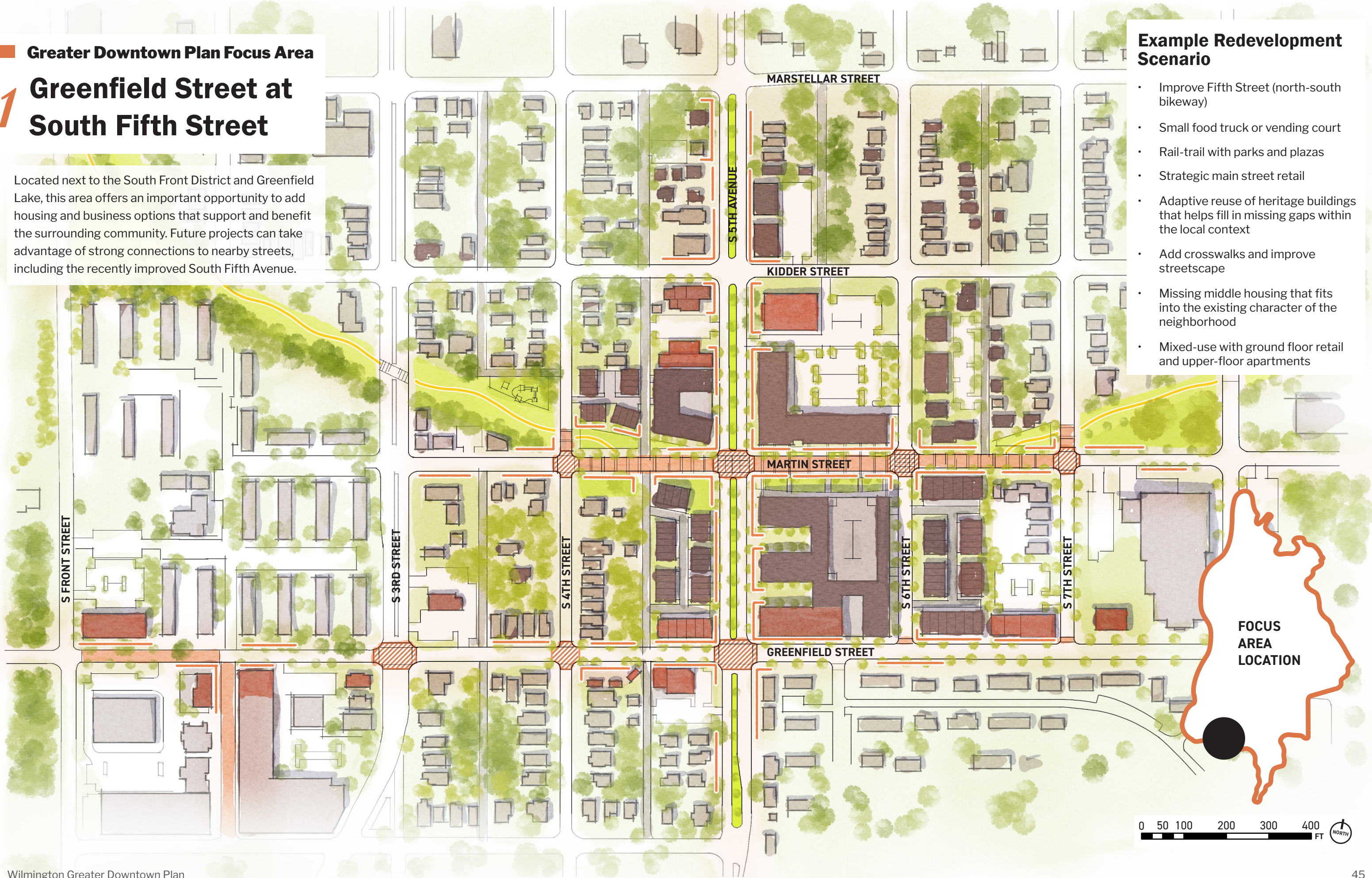
**Greater Downtown Plan Focus Area**

# 1 Greenfield Street at South Fifth Street

Located next to the South Front District and Greenfield Lake, this area offers an important opportunity to add housing and business options that support and benefit the surrounding community. Future projects can take advantage of strong connections to nearby streets, including the recently improved South Fifth Avenue.

## Example Redevelopment Scenario

- Improve Fifth Street (north-south bikeway)
- Small food truck or vending court
- Rail-trail with parks and plazas
- Strategic main street retail
- Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings that helps fill in missing gaps within the local context
- Add crosswalks and improve streetscape
- Missing middle housing that fits into the existing character of the neighborhood
- Mixed-use with ground floor retail and upper-floor apartments



## Greater Downtown Plan Focus Area

# 2 Northern Riverfront & Brooklyn Arts District

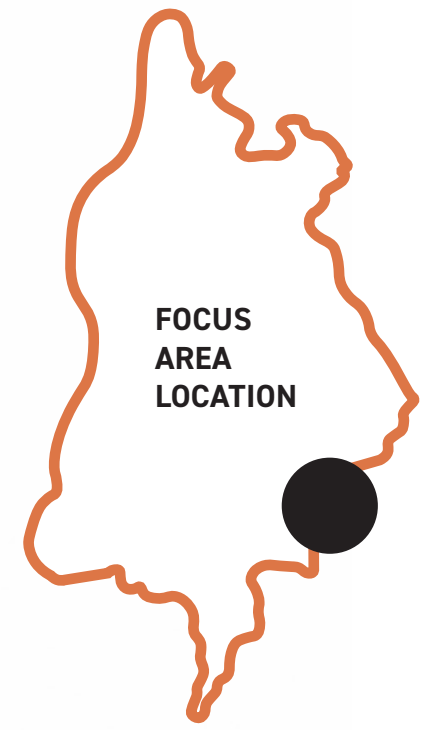
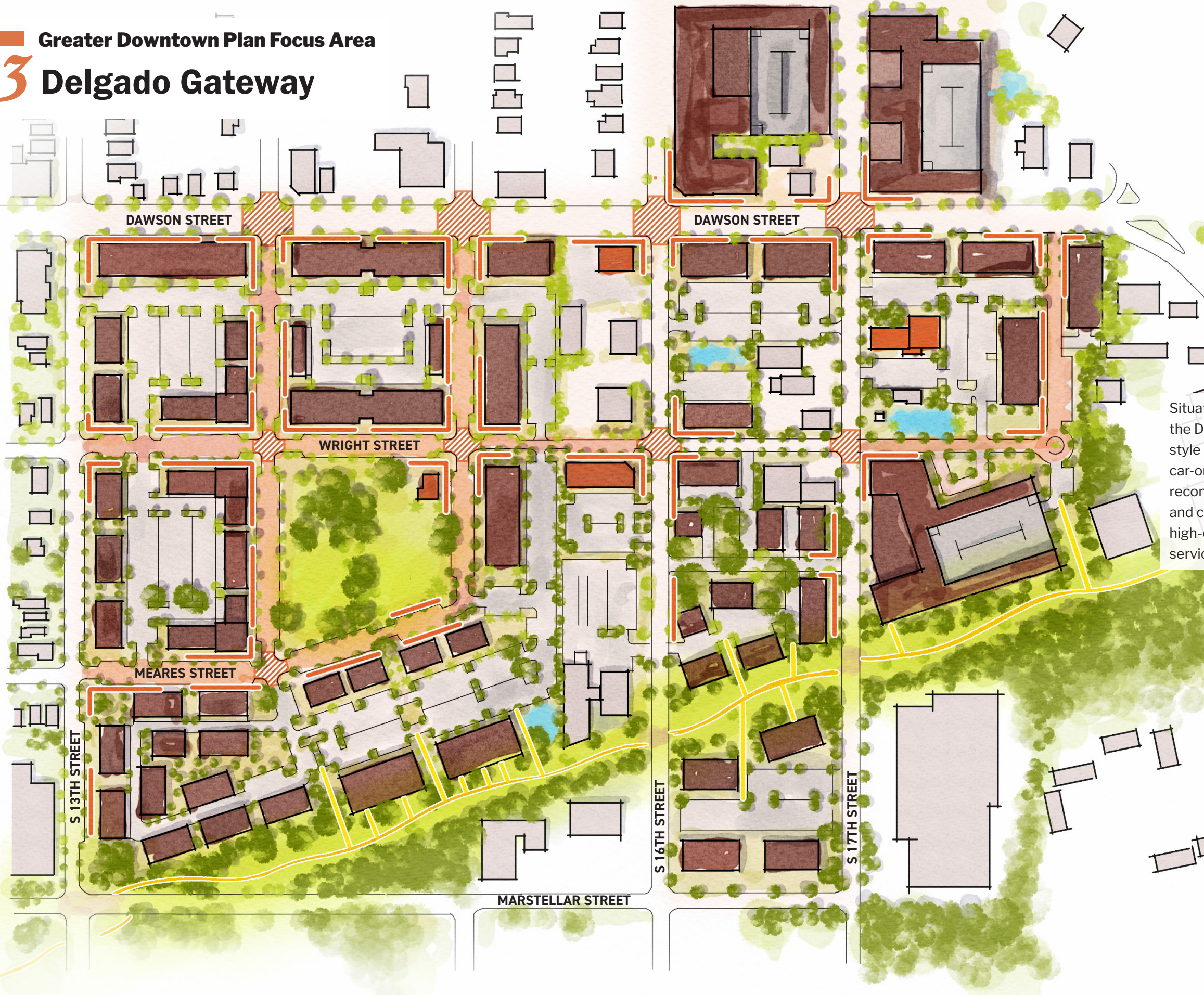
### Example Redevelopment Scenario

- Festival retail street on Bladen Street
- Active ground floor uses and upper floor apartments
- Narrow build types that harmonize with the fine grain of the Brooklyn Arts District
- Alley activation and placemaking venues
- Public uses that activate Riverfront Park and connect it to the North Front district
- Waterfront hotel connected to shared parking deck
- Cape Fear Community College expansion area
- Artistic facade on parking garage

Serving as the main gateway to Downtown Wilmington, this area includes several vacant and underused sites, many owned by the City, that have the potential for transformative development. New projects here should focus on activating the streetscape and creating strong pedestrian connections between the Brooklyn Arts District, Riverfront Park, Skyline Center, the Wilmington Convention Center, Cape Fear Community College, and the Riverwalk. This area can accommodate both tall buildings and higher density of use, taking the pressure off of other areas and helping to strengthen downtown connectivity.



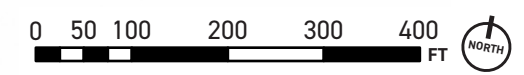
# 3 Delgado Gateway



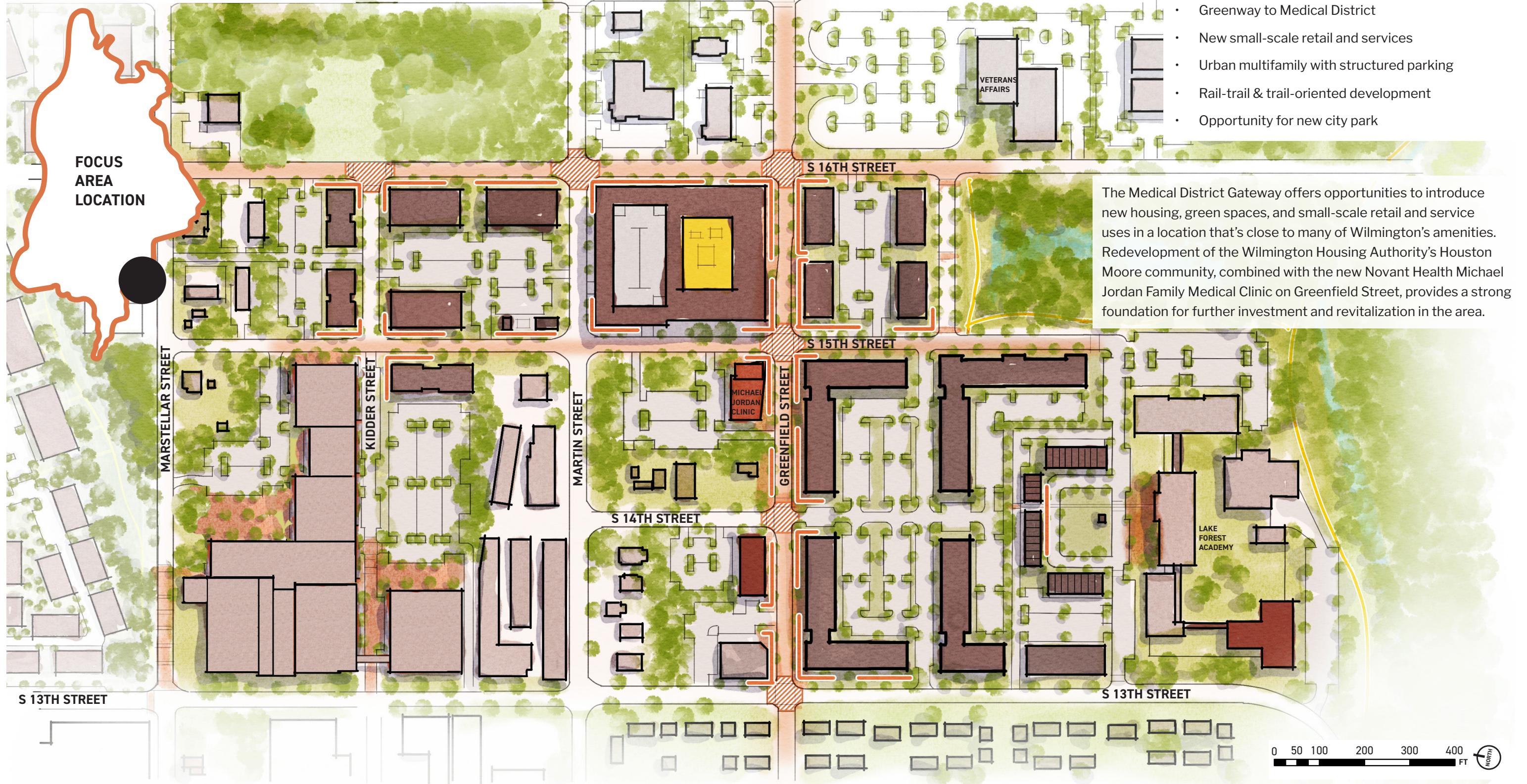
Situated at the intersection of several major corridors, the Delgado Gateway area currently reflects a suburban-style development pattern, with large parking lots and car-oriented uses. Redevelopment should prioritize reconnecting the street grid, improving major corridors, and creating a walkable, mixed-use environment with high-quality, affordable housing and easy access to goods, services, and jobs.

### Example Redevelopment Scenario

- Restored street network that improves multi-modal connectivity
- Open space
- Residential and mixed-use buildings lining Dawson Street
- New stand-alone retail
- Rail-trail & trail-oriented development
- Urban multifamily with structured parking & ground floor retail
- Mix of affordable housing typologies
- Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings that helps fill in missing gaps within the local context



# 4 Medical District Gateway

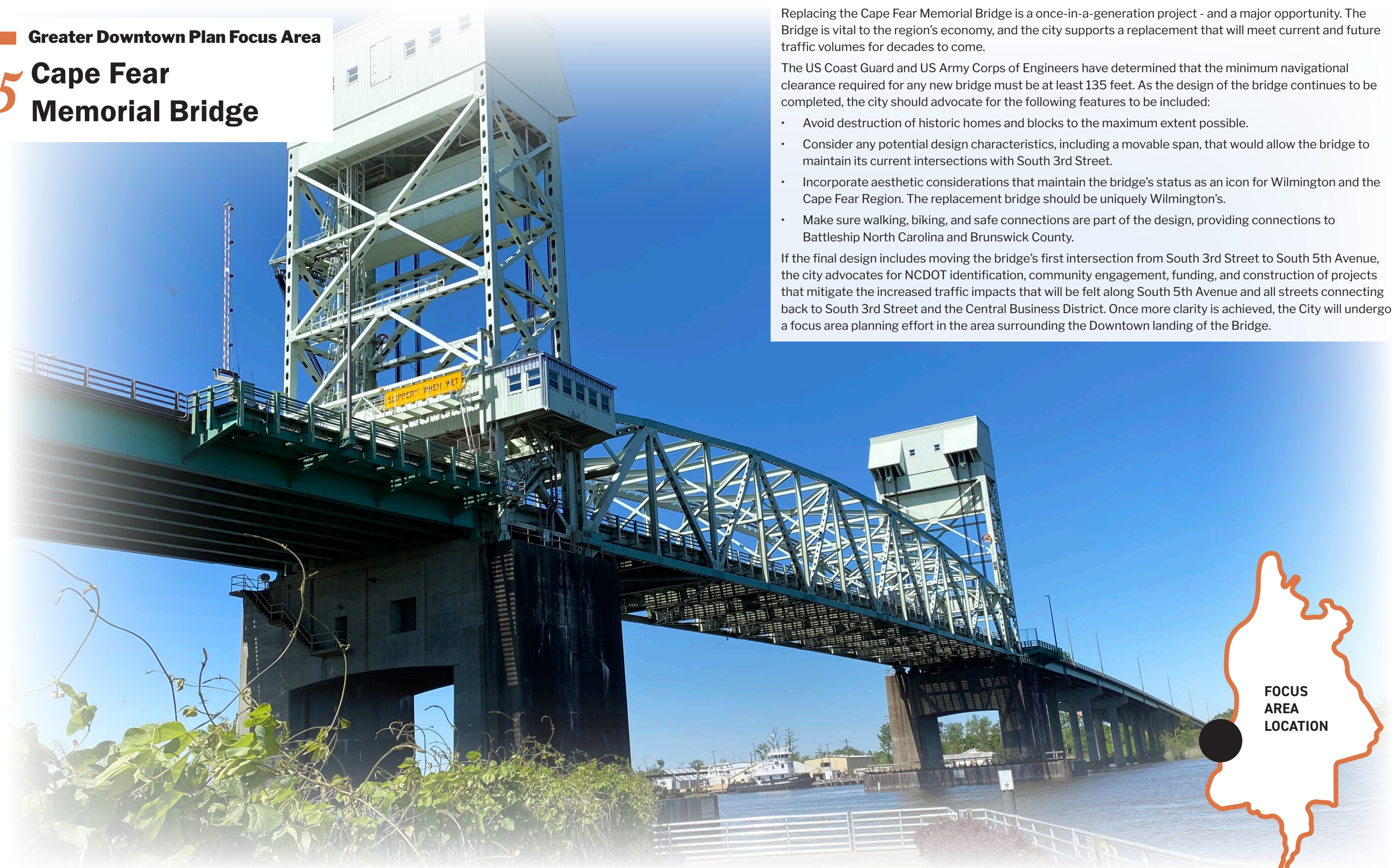


## Example Redevelopment Scenario

- Redevelopment of Houston Moore
- New Hanover County School (NHCS) campus expansion
- Housing on NHCS property with open space
- Greenway to Medical District
- New small-scale retail and services
- Urban multifamily with structured parking
- Rail-trail & trail-oriented development
- Opportunity for new city park

The Medical District Gateway offers opportunities to introduce new housing, green spaces, and small-scale retail and service uses in a location that's close to many of Wilmington's amenities. Redevelopment of the Wilmington Housing Authority's Houston Moore community, combined with the new Novant Health Michael Jordan Family Medical Clinic on Greenfield Street, provides a strong foundation for further investment and revitalization in the area.

# 5 Cape Fear Memorial Bridge



Replacing the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge is a once-in-a-generation project - and a major opportunity. The Bridge is vital to the region's economy, and the city supports a replacement that will meet current and future traffic volumes for decades to come.

The US Coast Guard and US Army Corps of Engineers have determined that the minimum navigational clearance required for any new bridge must be at least 135 feet. As the design of the bridge continues to be completed, the city should advocate for the following features to be included:

- Avoid destruction of historic homes and blocks to the maximum extent possible.
- Consider any potential design characteristics, including a movable span, that would allow the bridge to maintain its current intersections with South 3rd Street.
- Incorporate aesthetic considerations that maintain the bridge's status as an icon for Wilmington and the Cape Fear Region. The replacement bridge should be uniquely Wilmington's.
- Make sure walking, biking, and safe connections are part of the design, providing connections to Battleship North Carolina and Brunswick County.

If the final design includes moving the bridge's first intersection from South 3rd Street to South 5th Avenue, the city advocates for NCDOT identification, community engagement, funding, and construction of projects that mitigate the increased traffic impacts that will be felt along South 5th Avenue and all streets connecting back to South 3rd Street and the Central Business District. Once more clarity is achieved, the City will undergo a focus area planning effort in the area surrounding the Downtown landing of the Bridge.



# 2

## Goals and Actions Framework

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Photo Credit: Wilmington & Beaches CVB



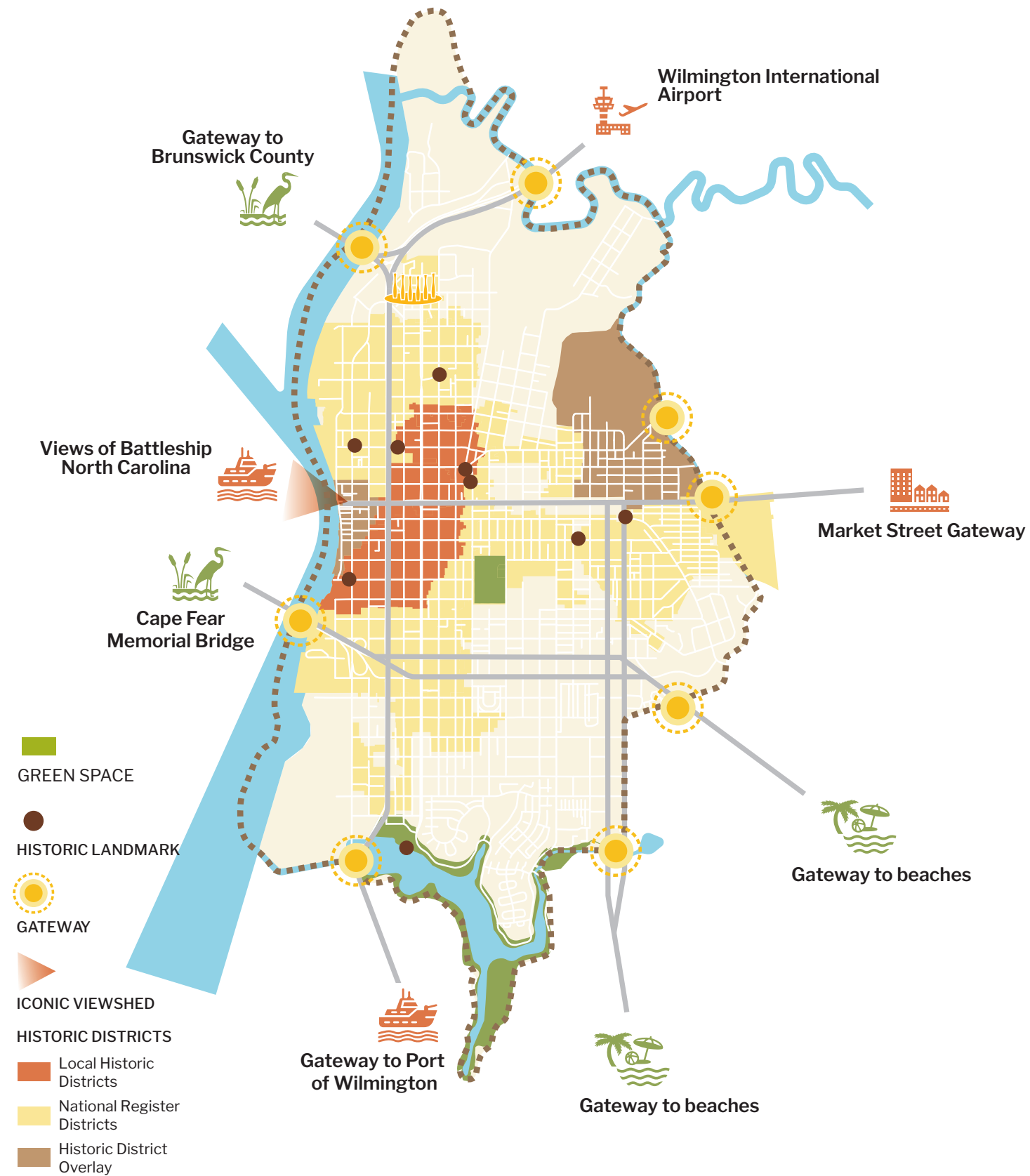
Photo Credit: Wilmington & Beaches CVB



Photo Credit: Wilmington & Beaches CVB



Photo Credit: Wilmington & Beaches CVB



## Theme #1

# Local Character

Steward unique architecture, culture, and sense of place

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# Local Character Today

Greater Downtown Wilmington is full of life, history, and charm. With its historic buildings, waterfront views, green spaces, and creative energy, the area offers a one-of-a-kind experience that feels both exciting and authentic. Together, these elements help give downtown its special identity and strong sense of place.

## Green Spaces for All

Greater Downtown Wilmington has 28 parks that offer something for everyone. Large gathering spaces like Riverfront Park and Greenfield Park offer open lawns, walking paths, and scenic vistas, while smaller neighborhood parks like Portia Hines, Northside Park, and Archie Blue, are places people can walk, play, and relax close to home.

## Creative Spirit

Wilmington's artistic energy is easy to see, from live performances at historic Thalian Hall, the Wilson Center, and Live Oak Bank Pavilion to the growing arts and maker scene to colorful murals and public art throughout the City. Big events like the Azalea Festival, Riverfest, and weekly farmers' markets help bring people together and keep downtown buzzing with activity. Wilmington also has deep roots in the film industry and has earned the nickname "Hollywood East." This legacy still shapes the City's cultural identity.

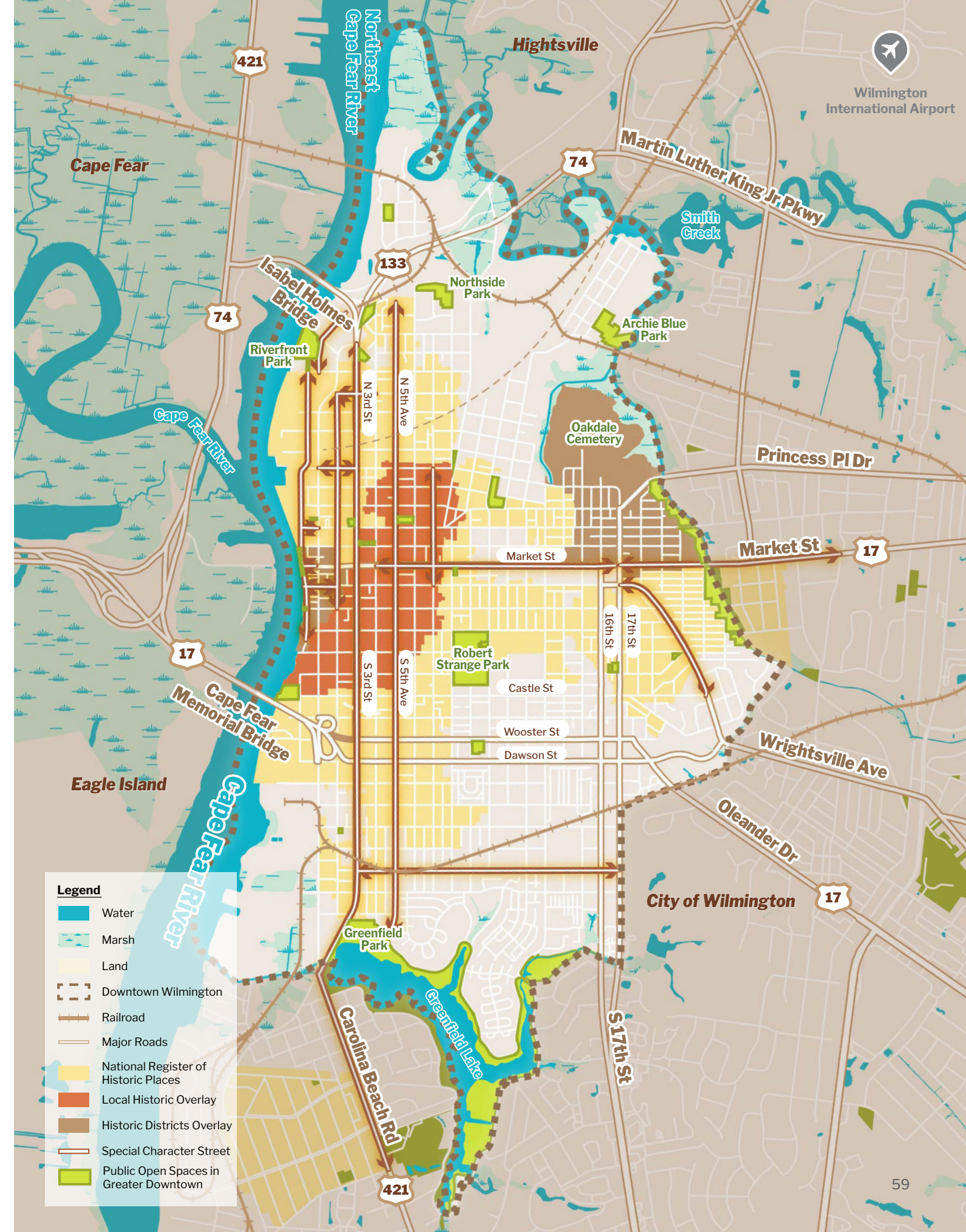
## By the Water

The Cape Fear River is a defining feature of downtown. Popular spots like the Riverwalk and the Battleship North Carolina offer scenic views, local shops, restaurants, and entertainment along the waterfront.

### City Highlight

#### MLK Center Upgrades

In 2024, the City upgraded the MLK Center in Robert Strange Park, including a new gym, a commercial grade community kitchen, a new lobby, and more.



## Historic Charm

Greater Downtown is home to one of the largest, best-preserved historic districts in the Southeast, where you'll find brick streets full of character with buildings from the 1700s through the early 1900s, and classic facades that tell the story of the City's past. Market Street and Front Street are two of the most iconic roads in the area, lined with historic storefronts, local restaurants, and small businesses that make downtown feel vibrant and alive.

Just to the north, the Brooklyn Arts District pairs old and new structures with art studios, event venues, and housing to infuse Greater Downtown with creative energy. Other standouts like Castle Street have been lively main streets since the 1800s, and over the past few years have been steadily growing and transforming with vintage shops, cafes, restaurants, and new mixed-use buildings.

## Transforming Neighborhoods

Greater Downtown Wilmington is changing quickly. People are drawn to the charm and convenience of living downtown, and recent improvements have made these areas even more desirable. However, as property values and the overall cost of living rise, some long-time residents can no longer afford to stay and are forced to move elsewhere. This not only breaks up close-knit communities but also changes the feel and identity of the neighborhoods.

One of our biggest challenges is figuring out how to keep improving our neighborhoods by making them safer, more connected, and more vibrant without pushing out the people who already live there. Our goal is to strengthen neighborhood identity, ensure everyone can stay in their homes, and enjoy the benefits of a better neighborhood. We envision a community created for residents, by residents.



# What the Community Wants to See in Greater Downtown

People in Wilmington care deeply about the future of Greater Downtown and want to see it grow in ways that protect the things that make it special, like its historic charm, beautiful green spaces, and the scenic Riverwalk. Residents want safe, walkable, and welcoming neighborhoods, with easy access to the things they need every day. With so many City-owned properties and unique features, Greater Downtown has a real opportunity to grow thoughtfully and create an even better place for everyone.

## What idea do you think will best improve Local Character?

31%

Create more green spaces and plant more trees



27%

Create safe and pleasant public spaces

18%

Build in harmony with historic scale and character

24%

Create neighborhoods where residents can meet their daily needs

*\*During the 2nd round of community engagement, this question focusing on Local Character was asked, and data was collected through online surveys and printed surveys distributed at pop-up events.*



## Protect and grow green spaces

A common request from residents is to preserve and expand green spaces and protect our tree canopy. Many are concerned about too much development cutting down trees and taking away natural areas. People want more parks, more trees, and better care for the green spaces we already have.

By following the City's Urban Forestry Master Plan, planting more trees, maintaining what we already have, and turning empty lots into temporary green spaces, we can keep our neighborhoods healthy, beautiful, and resilient for generations to come.

## Keep the Riverwalk a "Jewel of Downtown"

The Riverwalk is one of Wilmington's most loved features. Residents want to make sure it is well cared for and completed, especially extending it farther north. People envision a continuous, safe, inviting path that keeps its historic charm. The Riverwalk should continue to be a space that brings people together, whether they are locals or visitors.

## Protect historic buildings and support new uses where appropriate

Wilmington's historic character is something residents want to protect. Many are worried about new buildings that do not fit the style and feel of the City. Instead of tearing down old structures, people want to see creative reuse that turns historic buildings into shops, homes, or community spaces that still honor their past.

With support from groups like the Historic Wilmington Foundation, Residents of Old Wilmington, and others, and thoughtful zoning that encourages fitting new development into the existing style, the City can keep its charm while making room for smart, sustainable growth.

*"don't use public funds to build green spaces the public cannot always use"*

*"improve communication to residents about City tree removal/ replacement"*

*"complete riverwalk in front of state/ federal building"*

*"riverwalk surface maintenance. fix damages and splinters"*

*"more distinct neighborhoods"*



*\*During the 3rd round of community engagement, online survey participants were asked to share an overall rating of Local Character strategies and actions from the draft plan.*

### Create spaces that bring people together

People want more places to connect with their neighbors, especially spaces that welcome families, seniors, and people of all abilities. Ideas include more accessible playgrounds, cultural events and performances for all audiences, family-friendly programming in parks, diverse food options, and small businesses that serve locals, not just tourists. Residents also emphasized interest in more regular maintenance and cleaning of public spaces and along streets.

By investing in clean, safe, inclusive, and fun spaces and partnering with local organizations to bring in new events and entertainment, Greater Downtown can be a place where everyone feels welcome and engaged.

*“love historic buildings + the riverwalk + all it’s restaurants + concert venue/music”*

*“do better at acknowledging, preserving, and celebrating downtown’s black history... (north, south, east)”*

*“slightly renovate historic buildings and make it easier through regulation”*

*“when people say ‘I love Wilmington,’ Local Character is what they mean, whether it’s cycling around Greenfield Lake, or strolling the River Walk”*

*“would love to see more art pieces commemorating local figures that are sadly forgotten or obscure to most of the local populace”*



Photo Credit: Wilmington and Beaches CVB

# Theme #1

## Local Character

The findings from initial research, mapping, and community engagement activities led to the creation of three strategies to amplify local character and improve safe access to the many places that make Greater Downtown Wilmington's neighborhoods so special.



### Strategy #1

**Make public spaces safe, welcoming, and enjoyable**

### Strategy #2

**Protect established neighborhoods and ensure new development fits in with the area's historic look and feel**






### Strategy #3

**Create more green spaces and plant more trees**

## Strategy #1

# Make public spaces safe, welcoming, and enjoyable

People across Greater Downtown want safer, inviting places to gather, play, and connect. They have called for better park maintenance, improved lighting, more activities for all ages, and welcoming public spaces that feel alive and cared for. This strategy includes several actions to meet those goals.

This strategy also touches on: Small Business  Mobility  Resiliency 



“Incorporate safe + lush green spaces that can accommodate all kinds of people (handicapped + neurodivergent)”

“I would love to see more parks dedicated to public use, instead of private events like expensive concerts”

“Create a 3rd space: there are currently no spaces except for the library that are safe and supervised for all people.”

“Repair sidewalks in the areas that look desperate, beautify those areas through making sidewalks and crossings neat, art installations, flower areas planting.”

## Action 1: Improve streets and parks to make them more welcoming

Residents want streets and parks that feel safe, family-friendly, and full of life, especially in areas that have seen less investment in the past. Previous initiatives, such as the Comprehensive Parks, Recreation + Open Space Master Plan, offer additional guidance and set the ideal tone for public spaces throughout Wilmington. Pairing these initiatives with recent public input, we can make vital investments that enhance all residents’ experience in parks and along streets, regardless of age and ability.

### Examples of improvements:

- Better sidewalks and lighting
- Safer street crossings and curb extensions
- More benches, shade, and places to gather
- Updated playgrounds and clean, well-maintained parks

### How we’ll measure success:

- Number of upgrades made such as new lighting, shade, landscaping, seating, crosswalks, or play equipment
- Community feedback on the quality of parks and streets through the Biennial Community Survey

### Getting started:

- Review strategies and approaches to successful past projects like North Front Street and North 3rd Street
- Develop baseline standards for streetscape projects
- Plan upgrades along key walking routes that connect significant destinations, like Castle, Princess, Greenfield, and Red Cross Streets, plus 4th and 10th Streets
- Ensure Capital Improvement Project maintenance plans consider and prepare for the life cycle of features and installations
- Continue to implement the Comprehensive Parks, Recreation + Open Space Master Plan, specifically goals focused on maintaining high quality facilities and improving physical conditions
- Improve wayfinding

### Related strategies/actions

- Mobility Strategy 3, Action 2

**Time:**     **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Parks and Recreation, Asset and Property Management, Communications and Engagement

### Case Study

#### Downtown Orlando Chalk Festival, Orlando, FL

In 2026 downtown Orlando was brought to life by the DTOLive Chalk Festival. Artists transformed City Hall Plaza with temporary masterpieces while visitors looked on and enjoyed live music and local food.

Photo Credit: City of Orlando



City Highlight

Riverfront Park, Wilmington, NC

Riverfront Park, located in the North Waterfront of Greater Downtown, is a great example of a multi-use active space. The park is used to host live music through Live Nation and community festivals like FEAST Wilmington, the Multi-Cultural Festival, and the Cape Fear Latinos Festival. Outside of active events, residents can enjoy the Park's open green space, gardens, playground, and interactive water feature.



Action 2: Offer more activities and amenities in parks

People want parks that serve everyone including families, seniors, kids, and pets. That includes more things to do and events that reflect the City's culture, community spirit, and character.

Ideas from the community:

- More places to play: pickleball, basketball, swimming pools, bike/skate parks, etc
- More events: movie nights, food trucks, cultural festivals, music, etc
- More programs: storytime in the park, fitness classes, family-friendly fun, etc

How we'll measure success:

- Number of events, upgrades, and new park features
- Resident satisfaction with parks according to the Biennial Community Survey

Getting started:

- Continue engaging residents to increase awareness of existing programs and events.
- Focus improvements on places like Portia Hines Park, Northside Park + Pool, and Archie Blue Park
- Partner with community groups to bring more diverse programming
- Continue to implement the Comprehensive Parks, Recreation + Open Space Master Plan, specifically goals focused on upgrading parks to include amenities reflecting community needs, improving inclusivity, and creating programs that activate public spaces

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Parks and Recreation, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau, Communications and Engagement

Action 3: Make public spaces safer

Safety is a top concern. We can make parks and public areas feel safer by keeping them clean, well-lit, and thoughtfully designed. This is known as Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). Examples of safety improvements:

- Brighter, motion-activated lighting
- Removing graffiti and fixing damaged structures
- Emergency call buttons along trails and in parks
- Trimming bushes and landscaping for better visibility and streetlight efficiency

While lighting is a key feature for improving safety, it is important to note City parks operate from dawn to dusk and are lit to align with open hours.

How we'll measure success:

- Number of public space improvement projects using safety design techniques
- Number of crime incidences in and near public areas

Getting started:

- Identify City spaces with high crime
- Develop a safety improvement plan using CPTED
- Prioritize areas for upgrades in the City's budget

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Parks and Recreation, Transportation, Design and Construction, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Wilmington Police Department, Duke Energy



Case Study

Congress Square Park, Portland, ME

Park programming for all users / all seasons through "lighter, quicker, cheaper" interventions.

Photo Credit: Corey Templeton Photography

### Action 4: Add public art that reflects our community

People want public spaces that reflect Wilmington's identity and history. Art is a powerful way to create a vibrant sense of place and bring people together.

#### Community art ideas include:

- Murals
- Painted crosswalks and sidewalks
- Art installations created by local artists and residents
- Historical storytelling through art, such as an art trail

#### How we'll measure success:

- Number of public art projects like murals and street art added

#### Getting started:

- Identify where art projects could go
- Partner with local artists and community groups
- Identify and implement public art funding opportunities
- Analyze existing mural policies for barriers to their creation

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Arts Council of Wilmington and New Hanover County, Planning and Development, Parks and Recreation, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, WMPO, Asset and Property Management



#### City Highlight

##### City Mural Program

In collaboration with the Arts Council of Wilmington and New Hanover County, the Parks and Recreation department is actively implementing a mural projects program to activate public spaces with community art. The mural process is highly collaborative where the community has stake in the selection of the art and helps paint the mural. A few recently complete murals can be found at the MLK Community Center, Derick G.S. Davis Center, Sherridale Morgan Fitness Center, and Maides Park basketball courts

### Action 5: Create a parks conservancy

Residents want better-cared-for and more active parks. A Parks Conservancy, a nonprofit that works with the City, can help with funding, programming, and long-term planning. Parks conservancies are often most successful when they start from grassroots organizations and have a healthy, ongoing financial foundation.

#### A parks conservancy can:

- Facilitate public/private partnerships to reinvest in programming and maintenance in parks
- Activate volunteers to provide fundraising, publicize future projects, and advocate for park accessibility, new park spaces, and other improvements
- Allow the community to more directly invest in public park projects
- Advocate for parks and green spaces that reflect community needs and belong to everyone

#### How we'll measure success:

- Creation of a Parks Conservancy organization for Wilmington
- Resident satisfaction with parks according to the Biennial Community Survey
- Maintenance response time for park repairs and improvements

#### Getting started:

- Study how other cities like Raleigh have established parks conservancies (see sidebar)
- Explore partnerships with local organizations to scope, develop, and fund a parks conservancy

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Parks and Recreation, North Carolina Coastal Land Trust



#### Case Study

##### Dix Park Conservancy, Raleigh, NC

A nonprofit group that serves as the philanthropic and community engagement partner of the City to ensure the creation and long-term success of the park system.

Photo Credit: City of Raleigh

## Strategy #2

# Protect established neighborhoods and ensure new development fits in with the area's historic look and feel

"I wanna see adaptive use of historic properties."

"Slightly renovate historic buildings and make it easier through regulation."

"I want to keep the beautiful architecture and historic buildings."

From the start, residents have made it clear that they want to keep the historic charm, scale, and character that make Greater Downtown Wilmington special.

In a community survey, more than a quarter of participants said protecting that historic feel was essential to preserving local character. Many also supported adding housing in ways that blend in with existing buildings, like turning older homes into rentals or adding apartments above shops. Participants also highlighted the need for new construction to blend into the look of Greater Downtown.

By restoring historic buildings, encouraging mixed-use neighborhoods, and guiding the design of new development, we can grow in a way that feels true to Wilmington's roots while making room for more people, small businesses, and creative energy.

At the same time, Wilmington is growing and changing, and the best way to protect the historic character and charm of our neighborhoods and historic downtown is to accommodate higher-intensity development within the Central Business District (CBD), along our major corridors, and in key redevelopment areas like the northern riverfront.

This strategy also touches on:



Economy



Resiliency



### Action 1: Make historic homes easier to own and maintain

Many residents love the look and history of downtown's older homes but keeping them in good shape can be expensive. Homes across Greater Downtown, both within and outside of national and local historic districts, are aging and in need of support for minor and major repairs that can keep residents in their homes while preserving the character they bring to the community. To help, the City can work with local and state partners to:

- Highlight resources to make repairs easier
- Connect residents to existing financial incentives such as tax credits and grants, and consider offering other financial help
- Encourage updates to the Design Standards for Historic Districts and Landmarks that preserve the look while meeting modern needs and improving resilience

This will make it easier for more people, especially those with lower or middle incomes, to live in older homes and keep our neighborhoods diverse and vibrant.

#### How we'll measure success:

- Number of citations for demolition by neglect
- Number of minimum housing code violations
- Number of homes maintained or renovated through grant or incentive programs

#### Getting started:

- Develop a list of resources for current and potential homeowners to utilize
- Analyze historic preservation design standards for barriers to affordability and resiliency

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Community Building, Compliance Department, State Historic Preservation Office

"Owning and maintaining a historic home needs better financial incentives"

"Seek updates to relevant codes, to favor the preservation of the facades of historic (+50 year old) buildings"

"New construction should fit the character of downtown"

#### City Highlight

##### The S 7th Street House, Wilmington, NC

The S 7th Street House is a historic home that was preserved through a preservation grant, administered by the Historic Wilmington Foundation, that supports low and moderate income homeowners in maintaining their historic homes.



City Highlight

The Brooklyn House, Wilmington, NC

The Brooklyn House introduces apartments over retail in a modestly-scaled building that blends in and adds to the walkability of the neighborhood.



Action 2: Launch an incentive program to reuse or rehabilitate older buildings

Some older buildings in Greater Downtown, like those on South Front Street, are empty or underused but still full of potential. Rehabilitation or adaptive reuse offers an opportunity to support new uses and services while preserving the historic elements that support the charm of Greater Downtown. These structures are often too costly to renovate without help.

To bring them back to life, the City could:

- Offer low-interest loans
- Create a “revolving loan fund” to support renovation projects
- Work with local partners to raise funds
- Examine zoning and historic preservation regulations for barriers to adaptive reuse

Adaptive reuse also enhances resiliency in Greater Downtown. Adaptive reuse can redirect development away from green spaces to preserve natural areas that keep downtown cool, absorb rainwater, and preserve local biodiversity. Reuse also creates less building waste which reduces cost and diverts waste from the landfill while making older buildings stronger and able to withstand severe weather. By focusing on adaptive reuse and reimagining old buildings for new purposes, we preserve history and breathe new life into unique spaces.

How we'll measure success:

- Percentage of older buildings reused versus demolished
- Number of properties revitalized
- Vacancy rate of properties

Getting started:

- Review statutory authority to provide tax incentives for adaptive reuse and successful programs in other cities
- Review zoning and historic preservation regulations to remove barriers to adaptive reuse

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Planning and Development, Economic Development, New Hanover County, North Carolina State Delegation, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated

Action 3: Encourage new development to improve or enhance desired character while respecting existing communities

Residents want to see new development fit in with the key character elements of Greater Downtown. The height, shape, and character of new buildings should blend in with the unique block structure and existing neighborhood identity, while improving the development pattern to bring more opportunities, services, and housing to residents. New development within our Greater Downtown should contribute to the area’s role as the traditional urban core, with urban building patterns throughout the study area. A traditional urban core offers a variety of services in a walkable setting with buildings placed close to streets and sidewalks, a mix of uses, medium-high density buildings, and public spaces in one unique place.

The City can shape new development character by:

- Exploring design preferences that embrace key character elements in new development and ensuring that regulations support desirable and predictable outcomes
- Considering a form-based code in the National Register Historic District, Central Business District (CBD), and Urban Mixed-Use (UMX) zoning districts
- Adding incentives to the Land Development Code for high quality design
- Focus growth in places that have the infrastructure to support it
- Identifying corridors and blocks where taller, larger buildings are appropriate in the CBD

How we'll measure success:

- Number of new buildings developed with key elements of historic downtown or neighborhood character where appropriate
- Number of new developments applying design incentives or preferences

Getting started:

- Identify key desirable design elements for new buildings and the barriers to building in the defined manner
- Create a design preferences guide for Greater Downtown that encourages thoughtful site design that aligns with or enhances distinctive neighborhood character.
- Study and benchmark the development, application, and outcomes of a form-based code for special areas like the National Register Historic District or Urban Mixed-Use centers

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Private Development Community, Planning and Development, City Attorney’s Office

Project Example

Revolving Loan Fund

A pot of money used to provide low-interest loans for community projects. As loans are repaid, the money is reused to fund new projects. The example below is The Bridge by 8K in Cincinnati, OH. This is a \$8.4 million revitalization project in Evanston’s historic business district that used a revolving loan fund to restore three vacant buildings, create 27 affordable apartments, and add new commercial space to support local business growth.

Photo Credit: Cincinnati Preservation



Definition

Form-Based Code

A form-based code would create more predictability in new construction in Greater Downtown by setting standards for building form such as height, shape, and character. Form-based codes focus on how buildings look and fit within their surroundings rather than strictly what they are used for. In applicable areas of Greater Downtown like the CBD, National Register Historic District and Urban Mixed Use zoning districts, it would ensure new construction fits in aligns with the charm of downtown neighborhoods.

#### Action 4: Guide bigger and taller development to the Northern Riverfront area

Over the past 30 years, the Northern Riverfront area around Skyline Center has changed dramatically. What used to be mostly empty industrial land has become a welcoming northern gateway into Downtown. Today, the area is home to important community anchors like the Wilmington Convention Center, Riverfront Park and Live Oak Pavilion, Cape Fear Community College, and the new City Hall at Skyline Center, formerly the PPD headquarters.

Even with all this progress, there is still a lot of room to grow. More than 22 acres in this area are either vacant or used for surface parking, and the City owns about half of that land. There are also more opportunities for redevelopment in the Sweeney area north of the Isabelle Holmes bridge. Together, these sites offer a chance to bring new homes, jobs, parks, and activity to the northern gateway for decades to come.

To make the most of these opportunities, we can create a clear, shared roadmap for what we want this area to become. This would outline things like:

- What types of buildings and growth make sense here
- The parks, public spaces, and amenities that can attract investment and bring people together
- How streets, walkways, and bike connections should link the area to the rest of Greater Downtown
- The overall look, feel, and character we want this district to have

##### How we'll measure success:

- Creation and adoption of a Northern Riverfront District master plan, along with the design standards needed to bring it to life
- Number of new businesses and homes established in the Northern Riverfront District
- Creation of active storefronts, including filling long-vacant spaces and activating new ground-floor commercial space

##### Getting started:

- Develop a district master plan for the northern riverfront area south of the bridge, where the City owns the most land
- Create design standards that encourage creativity while still giving everyone predictability
- Partner with NCDOT to improve connections to the Sweeney area, which will be key to any future redevelopment

##### Related strategies/actions

- Economy Strategy 1, Action 5
- Economy Strategy 3

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Private Development Community, Planning and Development, Parks and Recreation, Downtown Services and Special Events, City Attorney's Office



## Strategy #3

# Create more green spaces and plant more trees

"I really enjoy plenty of trees, & the riverwalk"

"The more trees and greenery the better. Compared to Greenville SC, for example, downtown doesn't feel green even where there are trees."

"I want to see more trees and native plants in Downtown"

"Climate resiliency, green infrastructure, and eco-friendly services are needed."

When we asked what matters most to residents, one message came through loud and clear: plant more trees and create more green spaces. In all phases of public input, people across Greater Downtown shared how important it is to protect our tree canopy, preserve open space, and make our neighborhoods greener.

Trees and green spaces aren't just beautiful; they help clean the air, cool our neighborhoods, manage stormwater, and make us more resilient to the impacts of storms and other extreme weather events. This strategy lays out a path to turn those community priorities into results.

This strategy also touches on: Mobility



Resiliency



### Action 1: Put the Urban Forestry Master Plan into action

Wilmington's first Urban Forestry Master Plan (UFMP) includes a detailed look at the trees in Greater Downtown and outlines how to care for them. The plan was built with input from residents and gives our City a roadmap to:

- Maintain healthy trees
- Plant new trees where they're needed most
- Remove dead or dangerous trees safely

The Urban Forestry Master Plan calls for updating the City's tree-canopy study to see where we need to protect older trees and plant new ones. It also recommends putting good rules and practices in place to help our tree canopy grow and creating clear plans for how we care for trees across the City. By following the UFMP, the City can reduce heat, cut energy costs, and create a more beautiful, livable community.

#### How we'll measure success:

- Number of completed actions from the Urban Forestry Master Plan

#### Getting started:

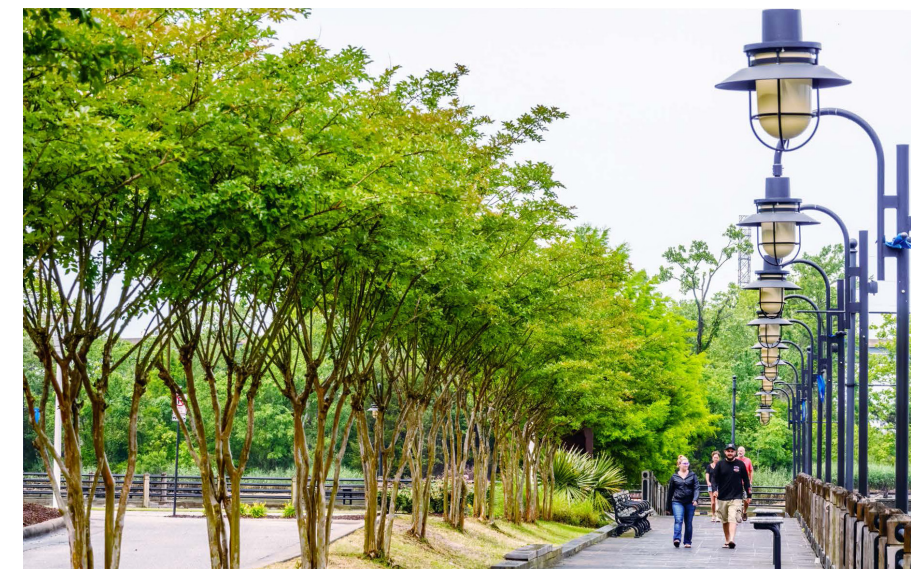
- Continue the work already underway by the Parks and Recreation Department to implement this plan
- Work with internal and external partners, including the Wilmington Tree Commission and Alliance for Cape Fear Trees, to extend the City's reach into community forestry
- Examine our ordinances and technical standards for opportunities to improve our urban tree canopy

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Asset and Property Management, Wilmington Tree Commission, Alliance for Cape Fear Trees

"I would like to see the City put more effort into maintaining and saving the trees that already exist"

"Plant more trees that create shade"



#### City Highlight

##### Urban Forestry Master Plan, Wilmington, NC

The plan focuses on protecting and enhancing the City's urban forest resources, diversifying tree species, and expanding the City's tree canopy to support its equity and sustainability goals.

City Highlight

**Wilmington Resilient Coastal Communities Program (RCCP)**

RCCP Phases 1–2 (September 2025 – September 2026), funded by the North Carolina Division of Coastal Management, aim to identify communities and assets within Wilmington City limits that are vulnerable to natural hazards and to develop a portfolio of projects that will make the City safer and more resilient. If funded, RCCP Phases 3–4 will support the implementation of projects that incorporate nature-based solutions, such as green infrastructure and conservation initiatives.

**Action 2: Encourage efforts to build climate resiliency**

Residents want an increased emphasis on improving the resiliency and responsiveness to disaster risks in Greater Downtown neighborhoods. A climate resilient community is one thoughtfully planned to lessen the physical and economic impact of changes in the climate and future extreme weather events. There are many different ways to accomplish these goals, including:

- Incorporating green infrastructure into new developments and redevelopment
- Continuing to make stormwater improvements, like those seen in our many parks and along corridors like Ann and Dock Streets
- Planting more trees

These actions and others help absorb rainwater, cool down neighborhoods, support wildlife, and make our community a more pleasant place to be. Beyond construction projects, the City can also work with our neighbors and community partners to ensure residents are personally prepared for storms and other natural hazards.

**How we'll measure success:**

- Number of resilience efforts undertaken in public and private development
- Number of Resilient Coastal Communities Program project recommendations implemented
- Number of nature-based solutions applied to City properties

**Getting started:**

- Identify disaster vulnerabilities and risks in Greater Downtown through the Resilient Coastal Communities Program grant
- Identify opportunities to incorporate green infrastructure into parks projects and transportation improvements
- Review barriers to green infrastructure and identify regulatory incentives to encourage green infrastructure in private developments
- Monitor what is working and make improvements over time
- Participate in local and regional efforts to build resiliency

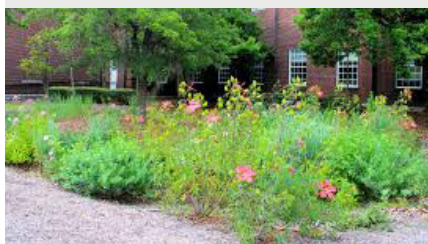
**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Community Building, Parks and Recreation, Design and Construction, Asset and Property Management, WMPO

Definition

**Green Infrastructure**

Strategies such as rain gardens, green roofs, permeable pavement, or bioswales that manage rainwater using natural systems to reduce flooding impacts.



**Action 3: Choose the right trees for the right places**

Not all trees thrive in urban settings so it is important to plant ones that will grow strong and stay healthy for years to come. By creating a catalog of native, hardy trees that are the right size for streets and sidewalks, we can make sure new plantings:

- Survive storm events and heat
- Reduce urban heat and provide shade
- Enhance urban ecosystems with more biodiversity
- Do not damage sidewalks or buildings
- Add to the beauty and identity of each neighborhood

Planting location is equally important to species selection. Neighborhoods in Greater Downtown experiencing low tree canopy and higher temperatures should be prioritized when selecting new planting locations.

**How we'll measure success:**

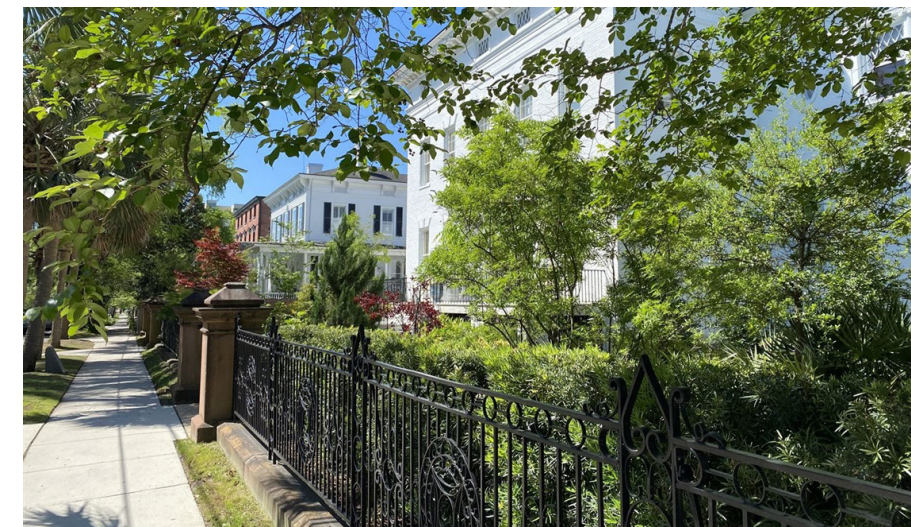
- Number of native trees planted
- Number of native trees saved in new developments
- Tree canopy coverage across Greater Downtown's 18 neighborhoods

**Getting started:**

- Set clear policies for siting and planting native species
- Conduct a tree canopy assessment
- Ensure Greater Downtown is a key component of any planting action plan

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Asset and Property Management, Parks and Recreation, Planning and Development, Alliance for Cape Fear Trees, Wilmington Tree Commission



#### Action 4: Add green spaces

Many opportunities exist to expand and create new green spaces within Greater Downtown.

Many projects, including the Downtown Trail, are already underway to create new green spaces and enhance access to existing parks. Focusing on completing these projects should remain a top priority.

Several green space recommendations from Vision 2020, most notably Riverfront Park, have been fulfilled. As the Central Business District continues to evolve, additional recommendations, such as establishing a park next to Thalian Hall, should continue to be investigated. Looking forward, neighborhoods with low investment, minimal green space, and resiliency concerns should be priority locations for future green spaces.

As the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge is replaced, we have a chance to do something great for the community—turn the space underneath into expanded parkland and create a green buffer to offset the traffic nearby.

By continuing to focus on building and expanding green spaces throughout Greater Downtown, we can:

- Create a new green destination
- Absorb pollution from trucks and cars
- Help cool the area and support local wildlife
- Filter stormwater and decrease flooding concerns

##### How we'll measure success:

- Acreage of green space protected
- Number of residents within a half mile of a park

##### Getting started:

- Fulfill the Comprehensive Parks, Recreation + Open Space Master Plan and other previous planning efforts
- Finish Water Street Park
- Continue coordination with NCDOT and WMPO on the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge replacement project, specifically highlighting the potential for reuse of the property where the current bridge sits

##### Related Strategies/Actions:

- Theme #4 – Mobility, Strategy 4, Action 8

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Parks and Recreation, Asset and Property Management, North Carolina Department of Transportation, WMPO

#### Action 5: Turn vacant lots into pop-up public spaces

Vacant lots can feel like eyesores, but with some creativity, they can become temporary parks, gardens, or event spaces. A Vacant Lot Activation Program would incentivize property owners who agree to open up their lots for community use. These pop-up spaces could host:

- Outdoor movies or events
- Farmers markets
- Gardens or shaded seating areas

This is a low-cost way to bring more life, green space, and neighborhood connection, especially in places where permanent parks may not be possible. Temporary activations can also lead to long-term investment and permanent activation. By testing the success of different temporary uses in vacant lots across Greater Downtown, we can discover permanent future uses that best fit each site. While temporary activations may be an important tool in finding the right fit and bringing the community together, they should not hinder properties from permanent development. There are already great examples of this in Greater Downtown, especially along Castle Street.

##### How we'll measure success:

- Number of lots activated per year
- Number of days that vacant spaces are activated per year

##### Getting started:

- Identify legal and zoning hurdles and look at similar programs (like in Philadelphia)
- Choose a pilot site—an area with a high amount of pedestrian traffic is most appropriate
- Work with local groups such as Young Scientists Academy, religious groups, and non-profits to bring the first site to life through community engagement

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, New Hanover County, Downtown Services and Special Events



##### Project Example

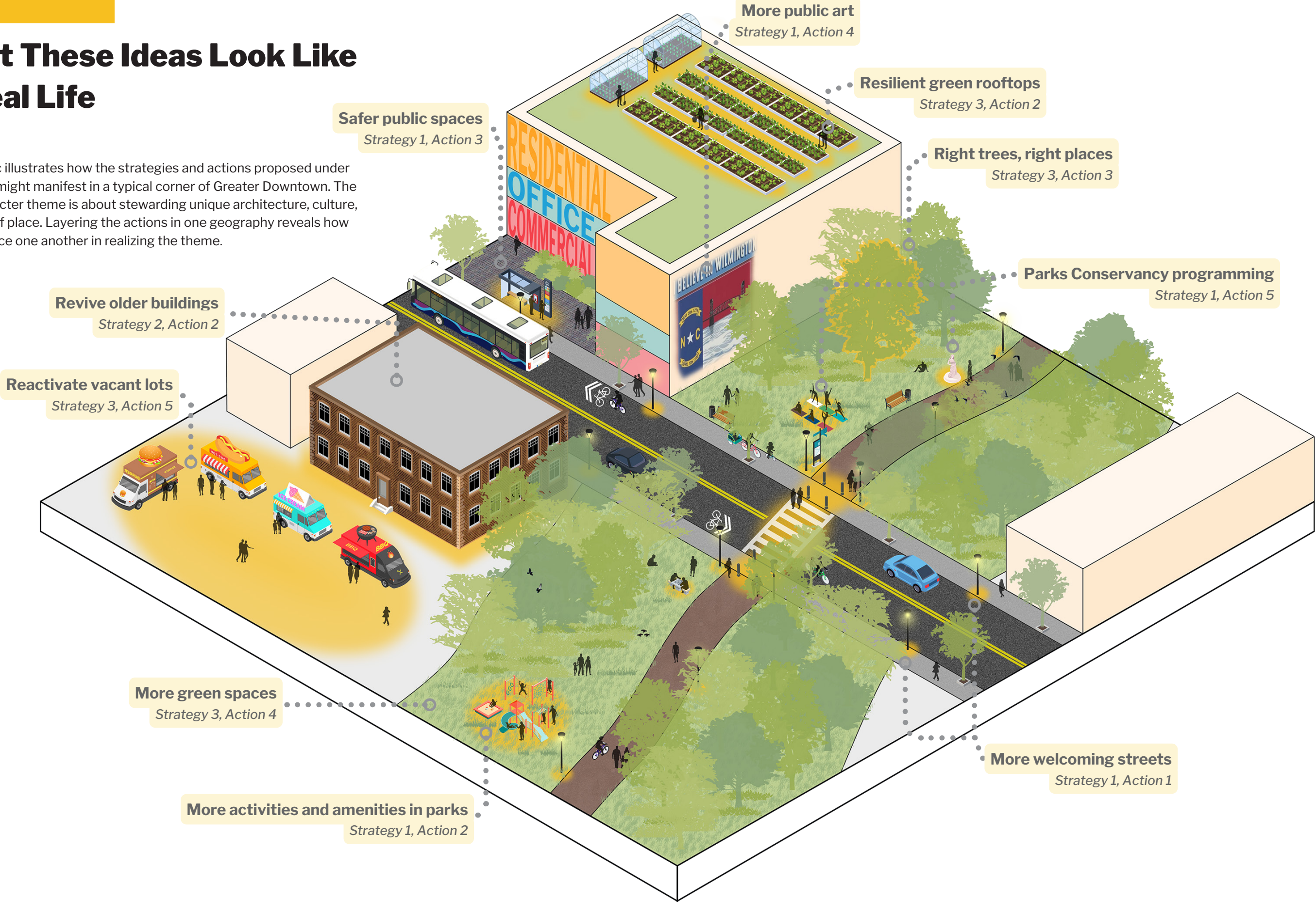
###### Circular Philadelphia Vacant Land, Philadelphia, PA

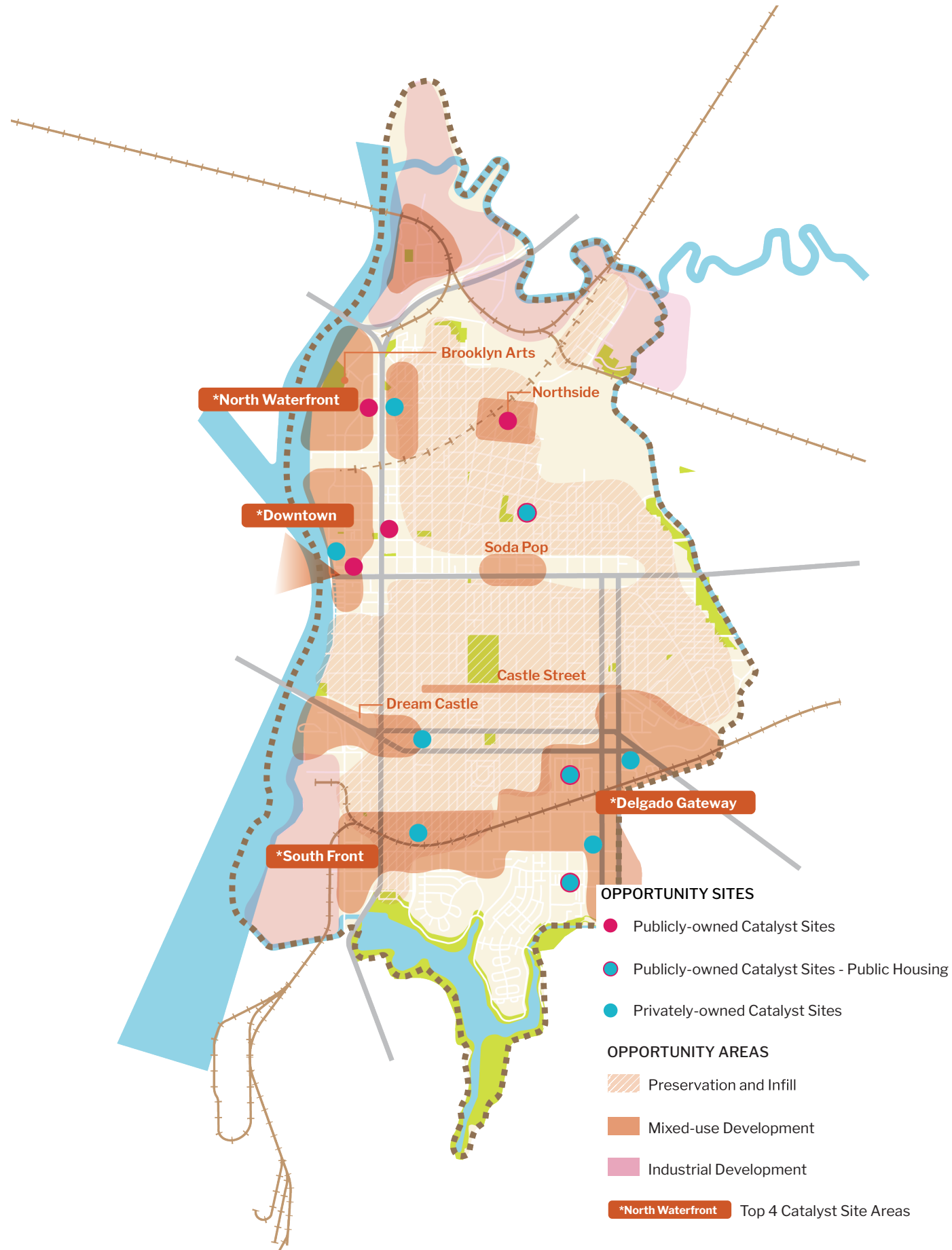
Circular Philadelphia is a community coalition that advocates for temporary activations of vacant lots to reduce illegal dumping and improve quality of life in Philadelphia neighborhoods.

Photo Credit: Circular Philadelphia

# What These Ideas Look Like in Real Life

This graphic illustrates how the strategies and actions proposed under this theme might manifest in a typical corner of Greater Downtown. The Local Character theme is about stewarding unique architecture, culture, and sense of place. Layering the actions in one geography reveals how they reinforce one another in realizing the theme.





## Theme #2

# Economy

Boost economic opportunity and improve fiscal health

### Theme Contents

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2 Encourage neighborhoods where everyone can meet their everyday needs	110
3 Use public land to support community goals	116
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# Economy Today

## Economy Trends

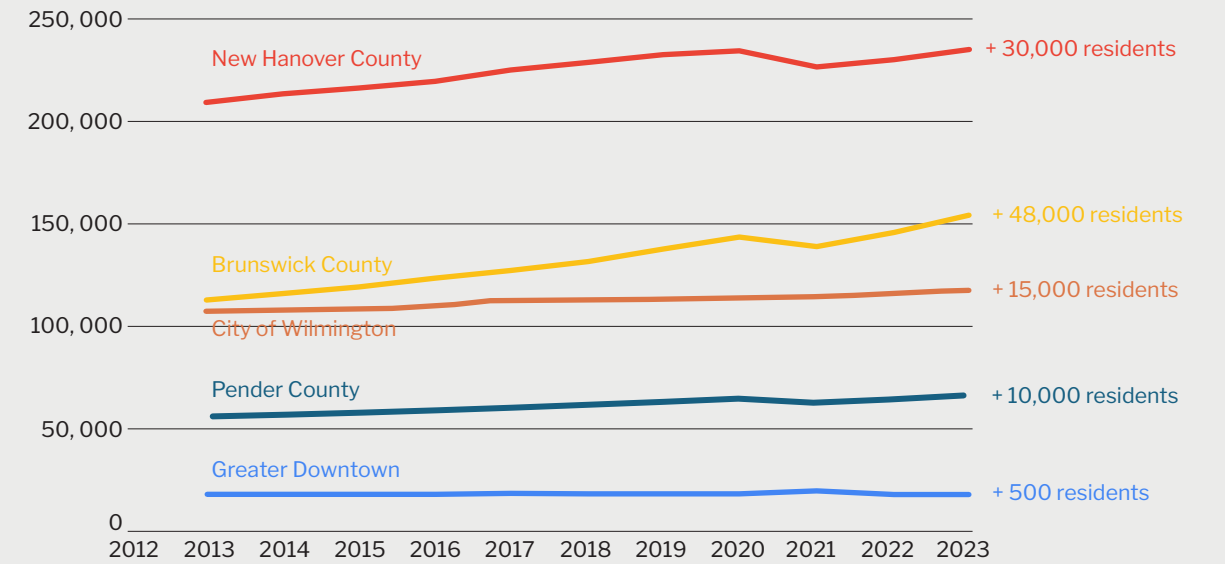
Greater Downtown Wilmington is the heart of the region's economy. It is home to some of the area's biggest public and private employers, including the City of Wilmington, New Hanover County, local schools, and a growing number of retail, hospitality, and tech companies.

While many people work in Greater Downtown, we are not seeing the Greater Downtown population increase like we are across the rest of the City. In fact, most of the region's population growth over the past 10 years has been happening in surrounding areas—like the rest of New Hanover County, as well as Brunswick and Pender counties—not in Greater Downtown. That suggests housing costs may push people to live farther away and commute into the area.

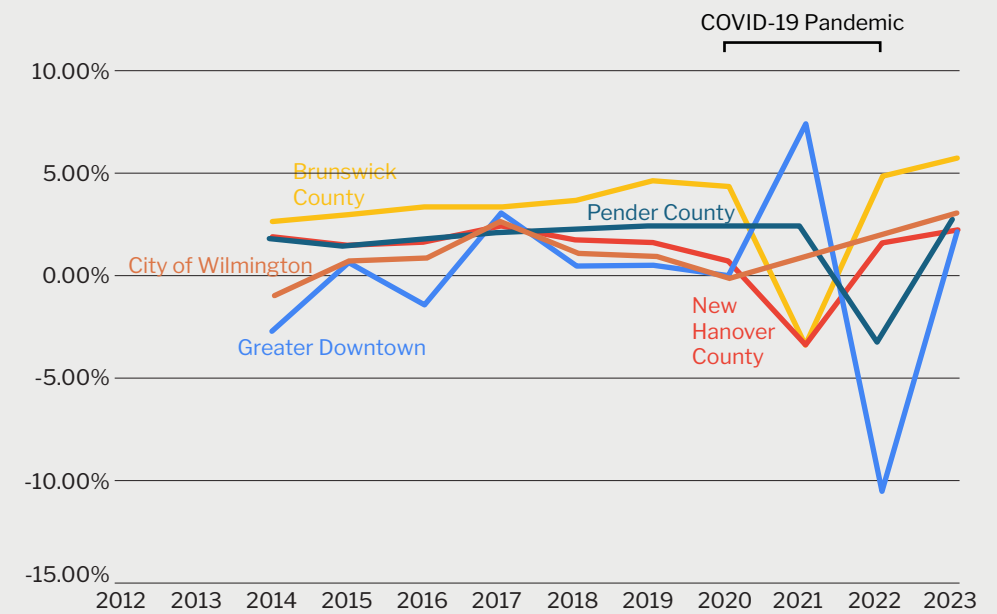
Here is a closer look at some key trends:



Population Change 2013 - 2023



Rate of Population Change



**Population Growth:** Between 2013 and 2023, New Hanover, Brunswick, and Pender Counties added nearly 79,000 people—a 21% increase. Even though Greater Downtown remains a hub for jobs, it hasn't seen the same level of new residents.

## Employment

The region's economy is growing fastest in healthcare and hospitality. Financial technology and creative industries are also attracting new workers. In Greater Downtown, major employers include:

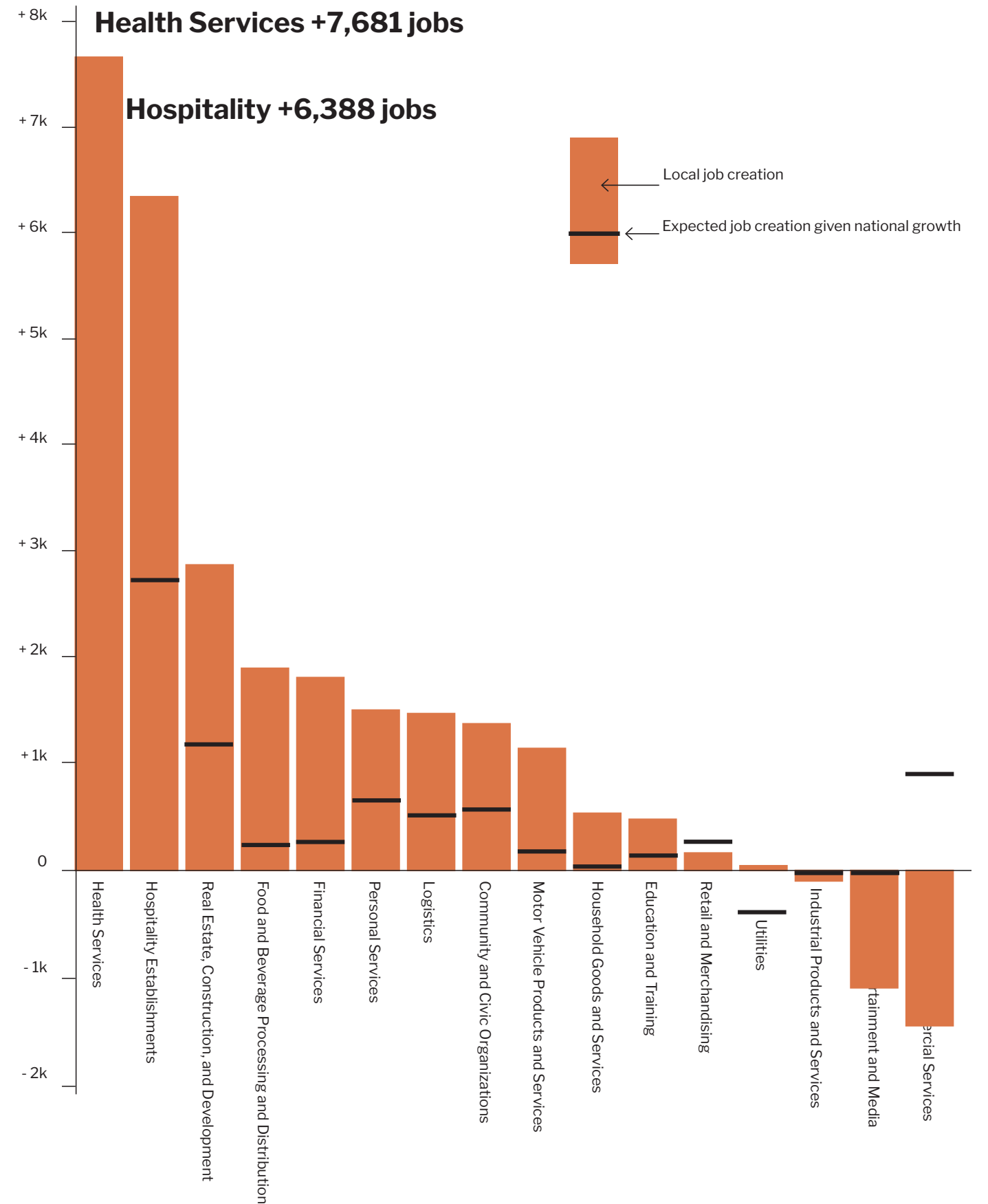
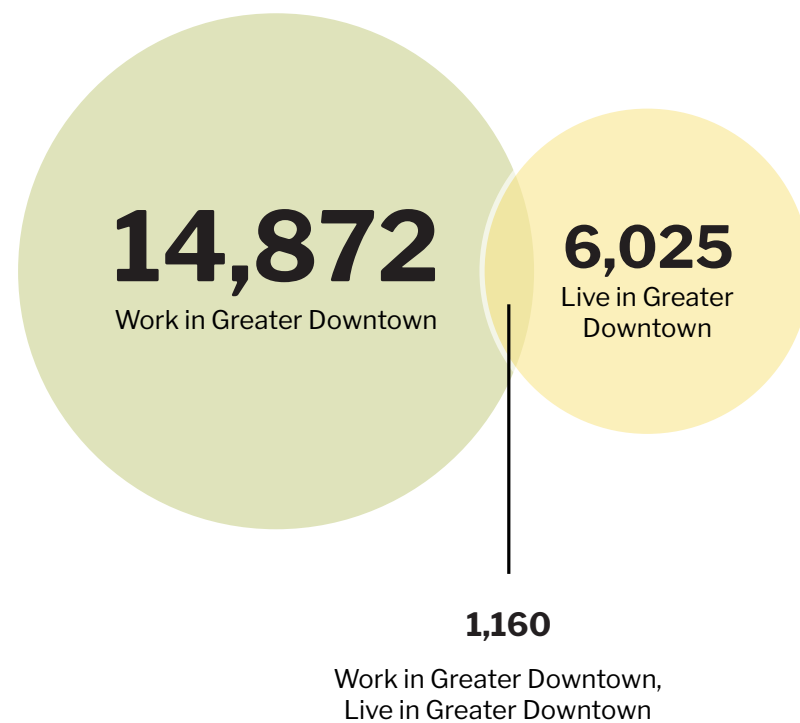
- The City of Wilmington
- New Hanover County (Health & Human Services, Schools)
- Wilmington Housing Authority
- Retailers, banks, hotels, restaurants, and other small businesses

Public-private partnership projects like River Place and Project Grace as well as privately-led emerging districts like Cargo and Soda Pop help attract new jobs and investment to Greater Downtown.

## Commuting Patterns

Every day, over 14,800 people travel into Greater Downtown for work. But only 1,160 people both live and work here. That means most employees are commuting from outside neighborhoods or towns—often because living in Greater Downtown is too expensive.

## Commuting Patterns



\* This chart shows the most recent data available from the USDA Cluster Mapping data set (2001-2021), prior to the outmigration of Thermo Fisher Scientific.

## Housing Affordability

Most people living in Greater Downtown (about 60%) are renters. And more than half of them spend 30% or more of their income on rent, which is considered unaffordable by national standards. This burden is especially high in historically underserved neighborhoods like Northside, Southside, Brooklyn Arts, and Love Grove, as well as rising-cost areas like Carolina Heights, Delgado, and Carolina Place.

## Disaster Resilience and Housing Stability

Housing issues are made worse by disaster risks. Many homes in historically underserved neighborhoods are older and in poorer condition—making them more vulnerable to damage from storms and flooding. Residents with limited income may not be able to afford flood insurance, make repairs, or safely evacuate during disasters.

The strategies and actions in the Economy theme are designed to strengthen resilience so residents and businesses can remain safe and financially stable during both natural hazards and economic disruptions. This includes supporting access to affordable, high-quality housing that is built to better withstand storms, helping residents remain safely in their homes and reducing long-term recovery costs. In areas where homes have been repeatedly damaged by flooding or other hazards, additional measures, such as elevating homes above flood levels or participating in voluntary property buyout programs, may help reduce future risk and support safer long-term development patterns.

## Hurricane Florence, 2018

Since 2018, the City of Wilmington has been recovering from the impacts of Hurricane Florence, which brought the highest recorded rainfall in the City's history and caused widespread damage to buildings, roads, and other infrastructure. Events like Hurricane Florence serve as powerful reminders of the importance of disaster resilience.

Greater Downtown Wilmington faces particular challenges when it comes to flooding and other extreme weather events. Low-lying areas near the Cape Fear River and major drainage corridors are especially prone to flooding during heavy rains and hurricanes, which can cut off access to roads, damage homes and businesses, and strain public infrastructure. Rising sea levels and more frequent intense storms have increased the risk of both tidal and stormwater flooding, making resilience planning even more critical for the future.



# What the Community Wants to See in Greater Downtown

People want Greater Downtown to be a place where residents can thrive, not just visit. That means more affordable housing, better job opportunities, and a variety of locally owned shops, restaurants, and essential services that meet daily needs.

Here are the key ideas we heard from the community:

## What idea do you think will best support the economy?

**54%**  
Improve access to high-quality, affordable housing



**17%**  
Increase the number of people who both live and work in Greater Downtown

**29%**  
Use publicly-owned properties to advance community goals

*\*During the 2nd round of community engagement, this question focusing on Economy was asked, and data was collected through online surveys and printed surveys distributed at pop-up events.*



## Grow local retail and dining options

Residents love Greater Downtown's one-of-a-kind shops and restaurants, and want to see more of them. There is a strong desire for local businesses instead of national chains, and for family-friendly, affordable places to eat and hang out. People also want Greater Downtown to feel more alive beyond just the workday, where more retail businesses are open longer.

## Attract better jobs and support workers

The community wants more job opportunities, especially higher-paying jobs outside of tourism and hospitality. There is support for bringing in new industries, encouraging home-based businesses, helping small business start-ups, and expanding job training and workforce programs so that residents can grow their careers right here in Wilmington.

## Make housing more affordable and diverse

Housing affordability is a top concern. Residents want to see a mix of housing types—like townhomes, duplexes, and small apartments—to make Greater Downtown more accessible to public servants, service workers, and everyday families. At the same time, people care about preserving existing neighborhoods and preventing displacement due to rising costs.

## Bring essential services closer to home

Many neighborhoods in Greater Downtown don't have easy access to basic services like grocery stores, pharmacies, or childcare. Expanding these services in walkable locations would make daily life easier and support both current and future residents.

## Improve public spaces to support businesses and residents

A safe, clean, and welcoming downtown benefits everyone. People want better public transportation, improved parking, safer sidewalks, and well-lit, inviting streets. Public gathering spaces, like plazas and pocket parks, can also help build community and boost nearby businesses.

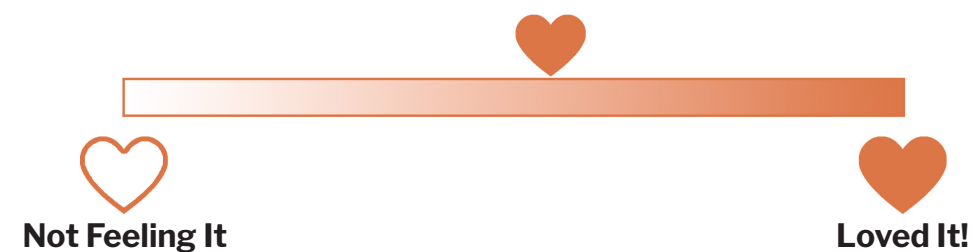
*"affordable housing / apartment options"*

*"RFP City site for affordable housing, hotel & retail + parking"*

*"mixed residential types. encourage housing affordability"*

*"mixed use with a grocery store"*

*"service & retail in walking distance"*



*\*During the 3rd round of community engagement, online survey participants were asked to share an overall rating of Economy strategies and actions from the draft plan.*

*"I want to see a grocery store or two! And a pharmacy and another gas station!"*

*"broaden your marketing/ outreach about available grants and programs that will help people maintain their homes BEFORE they fall in total disrepair."*

### **Build more resilient homes and infrastructure**

Hurricanes and flooding have caused severe damage to homes in Greater Downtown neighborhoods in the past. Cost-burdened households are especially vulnerable, often lacking the resources to evacuate, rebuild, or purchase flood insurance. The community wants to see investments that make homes and infrastructure more resilient to disaster risks.

### **Helping the unhoused population**

While many residents have expressed concern about the unhoused population, this issue is being addressed through a coordinated, Citywide approach. The City of Wilmington is addressing homelessness by investing federal housing funds in emergency shelter, rapid rehousing, and supportive services that help people move from the streets or shelters into stable housing as quickly as possible. The City works with local nonprofit partners and the regional coordinated entry system to connect individuals and families to rental assistance, case management, and other support such as help with employment or basic needs. The approach focuses on preventing homelessness when possible, shortening the length of time people remain unhoused, and helping residents secure safe, stable housing they can maintain over time.



#### **City Highlight**

##### **The Sparrow**

A 32-unit Permanent Supportive Housing development was built on surplus City property on Carolina Beach Road to support individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, reusing the site of a relocated fire station.



Photo Credit: Habitat for Humanity Tampa Bay Gulfside

# Theme #2

## Economy

The summary of current conditions and what the community has shared helped shape three main strategies. These strategies focus on growing economic opportunities and making Greater Downtown Wilmington a more convenient and affordable place for residents.



*Strategy #1*  
**Improve access to affordable, high-quality housing**



*Strategy #2*  
**Encourage neighborhoods where everyone can meet their everyday needs**

*Strategy #3*  
**Use public land to support community goals**



## Strategy #1

# Improve access to affordable, high-quality housing

“I’d like to see Greater Downtown grow and evolve by encouraging mixed use work & live development.”





“There are many vacant buildings in town that could be used for housing”

“RFP City site for affordable housing, hotel & retail + parking.”

During community outreach, affordable housing came up repeatedly - especially for the workers who help power Greater Downtown’s economy, like those in retail, restaurants, and hospitality. Some people are worried that rising costs will force long-time residents out of their neighborhoods. Others are concerned that there aren’t enough housing options at different price points or types.

At the same time, we heard support for a wide range of solutions like building more homes, fixing up existing ones, helping residents stay in their homes during hard times, and protecting neighborhoods from being left behind.

While North Carolina state statutes limit local governments’ ability to provide tax rate exemptions and exclusions, these actions aim to help current residents stay in their neighborhoods through programs that support rent, home repairs, and legal assistance, while also adding more affordable housing in Greater Downtown. By reducing structural risks, they also make homes safer during storms so more people can remain safely housed during and after disasters.

**This strategy also touches on:** Local Character  Small Business  Mobility  Resiliency 



### Action 1: Help more people access existing housing programs

Wilmington already offers great programs that help people stay in their homes or repair them, such as the Home Ownership Pool program, the Rental Rehabilitation Incentive Program, and Owner-Occupied Housing Rehabilitation Loan. The Housing Counseling program connects residents with available resources that provide housing-related support and assistance. However, not everyone knows about them, and resources are limited. By better spreading the word, especially in neighborhoods with the greatest needs, more people can get the help they need.

#### Some of the things we can do:

- Targeted outreach within New Hanover County Schools
- WAVE Transit advertising
- Connecting door-to-door
- Popping up at community events

#### How we’ll measure success:

- Number of residents participating in housing program
- Number of residents reached in high-need areas
- Number of homes repaired
- Availability of program funding
- Number of units demolished due to deteriorated condition

#### Getting started:

- Launch a marketing campaign to share information through mailers, social media, community events, etc.
- Pursue additional funding options and enhanced partnerships to support housing programs

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Community Building, Compliance, Cape Fear Housing Coalition, Communications and Engagement, WAVE Transit

#### City Highlight

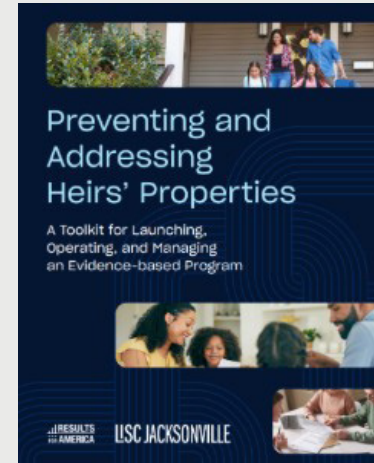
##### Existing Programs Offered by Housing and Neighborhood Services

- 1. Home Ownership Pool (HOP):** Mortgage loans for low to moderate income families offering 100% financing, and down payment assistance may be available.
- 2. Housing Counseling:** Provides counseling, education, and information to consumers seeking to finance, maintain rent, or own a home.
- 3. Rental Rehab Incentive Program:** Targeted low-interest loans to support scattered-site affordable housing, repair dilapidated housing, and projects that provide permanent supportive housing.
- 4. Owner Occupied Housing Rehabilitation Loan:** Offers affordable loan options to low to moderate-income homeowners in need of housing repairs.

Case Study

Jacksonville, SC

Preventing and Addressing Heirs' Properties: A Toolkit for Launching, Operating, and Managing an Evidence-Based Program gives step-by-step guidance for local governments to help resolve and prevent heirs' property issues in local communities.



Action 2: Support legal assistance for housing issues

Many residents - especially long-time or elderly residents - face legal problems like evictions, unclear property ownership, or scams. Conflicts around inheritance, in particular, have led to vacant and neglected homes and lots in Greater Downtown and across the City. In addition to offering education and resources to help address these kinds of issues, The City can partner with local legal experts to create a program that provides free legal help to those who need it most.

This legal aid can help residents:

- Establish wills
- Avoid evictions and foreclosures
- Address fair housing concerns and housing discrimination

How we'll measure success:

- Number of evictions
- Number of foreclosures
- Number of vacant and neglected properties

Getting started:

- Identify existing lawyers and legal groups offering help
- Pursue funding options to support a housing legal aid program or help desk

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Planning and Development, Community Building, Legal Aid of North Carolina, Habitat for Humanity, Wilmington Housing Authority

Action 3: Expand rental assistance programs

The Wilmington Housing Authority provides rental assistance vouchers under the Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) Program. These programs focus on very low-income households. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, local programs expanded rental assistance to others as well, though those programs have since ended. As the gap between wages and rents continues to grow, both within Greater Downtown and Citywide, more assistance is needed across the housing spectrum. While North Carolina state law restricts the use of local rent control policies, the City can explore ways to expand programs so residents don't get priced out when rent goes up.

How we'll measure success:

- Availability of program funding
- Number of program participants
- Number of fewer evictions

Getting started:

- Pursue funding options and partnerships to expand rental assistance

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Planning and Development, Community Building, Wilmington Housing Authority

Action 4: Turn around vacant or neglected properties

Some homes sit empty for years because of legal issues or absentee landlords. A "vacant house receivership" program would allow the City or a trusted partner to fix them up and return them to use so that they do not fall into dilapidation. Whether inside or outside our historic districts, Greater Downtown is made up of a large number of older structures—retaining and reusing those structures helps keep the fabric of our community alive while improving neighborhood conditions and reducing the need for new construction.

Why is this important?

- Existing structures are cheaper and more sustainable than building new ones as they reduce materials use
- Whether inside or outside our historic districts, Greater Downtown is full of great older homes that tell the story of our community

How we'll measure success:

- Number of blighted homes repaired
- Number of homes reoccupied

Getting started:

- Explore legal processes and staffing needs for a receivership program

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Planning and Development, Community Building, City Attorney's Office

Case Study



Greensboro Vacant House Receivership Program

Over 200 blighted properties have been renovated or demolished through Greensboro's receivership program, which transfers neglected properties into the hands of qualified receivers for blight remediation.

Photo Credit: City of Greensboro

**Definition**

**Affordable Housing**

Affordable housing in the context of this plan is housing that costs no more than 30% of a household's gross income.

**Action 5: Continue to use public land for affordable housing**

When the City has vacant land or buildings it isn't using, it can turn some of those properties into affordable housing. In Greater Downtown, these unused sites are usually close to transit, services, and jobs. Building affordable homes in these convenient locations is especially helpful for people who don't have a car, as well as older adults and people with disabilities.

Affordable housing can also be created through partnerships with nonprofit and private developers, or through community-based models like cooperatives, community land trusts, and mutual housing groups. Past examples include:

- Working with Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity to build single-family homes
- Using a former fire station site for Permanent Supportive Housing

Projects like these, and others, can serve people across a range of incomes and may include supportive services or homeownership opportunities.

**How we'll measure success:**

- Number of affordable homes built on public land

**Getting started:**

- Create a cohesive strategy for how to use public land for housing
- Partner with developers who build affordable homes

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Community Building, Wilmington Housing Authority, Habitat for Humanity



**City Highlight**

**Starway Villages**

Starway Villages, a 278-unit affordable housing apartment community.

**Action 6: Update zoning to reduce barriers to “missing middle” housing**

Many neighborhoods were initially built with a mix of duplexes, townhomes, and backyard apartments. But zoning regulations changed and made these housing types, which traditionally had smaller unit sizes, harder to build. Zoning regulations can act as barriers to missing middle housing through:

- Requiring larger lots to build missing middle housing types, which do not often exist in an urban context
- Requiring certain lot frontages or larger setbacks
- Requiring additional parking

By updating zoning rules or using form-based codes in the right places, we can allow more types of housing that fit comfortably into existing neighborhoods. Form-based codes also let more projects move forward without needing a rezoning, which can speed up approvals, reduce uncertainty, and lower costs, making affordable housing easier to build.

Allowing more “missing middle” housing in urban areas not only brings more affordable homes but also gives current property owners a chance to earn income by renting out additional units on their property. And when we increase the overall supply of housing at different sizes and price points, it helps reduce competition and can stabilize or even lower housing costs over time.

**How we'll measure success:**

- Number of new accessory dwelling units, duplexes, townhomes, and other missing middle housing types

**Getting started:**

- Review zoning to remove barriers to missing middle housing
- Look at things like minimum lot sizes and where small apartments are allowed
- Promote housing types and designs that are compatible with neighborhood context
- Host a design competition for missing middle housing types, including accessory dwelling units, to create a 'pattern book' of plans, and if possible, create demonstrations of these housing types

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Community Building

**City Highlight**



**Missing Middle Housing**

Middle-density housing such as townhomes, duplexes, quadplexes, and accessory dwelling units are a widely popular type of development that can help address the affordable housing crisis.

LaRue on 3rd (pictured above) introduces “gentle density,” the practice of providing more homes per lot at the same scale as the neighborhood context.

This is considered an example of “infill” development, filling vacant or underutilized “gaps” in urban areas with buildings and uses that complement the existing neighborhood fabric.

**City Highlight**

**Progress on Implementing this Action**

In January 2026, the City Council approved an amendment to the zoning code, which reduced the minimum lot area requirement for duplexes in the R-3 zoning district, significantly increasing the number of lots on which duplexes are permitted in Greater Downtown.

## Action 7: Encourage new affordable housing in areas of opportunity

Many of our Greater Downtown neighborhoods already have an eclectic mix of uses, but the income levels of area residents vary widely from street to street. As Greater Downtown continues to grow, we can ensure that new affordable housing is built in areas that can support it. This means focusing our more intense growth on major corridors and areas with excellent access to jobs, goods, and services, while supporting smaller infill projects where appropriate along residential streets. If some of our larger housing communities are redeveloped, we could also introduce mixtures of different price points.

### This can be done through:

- Following the other actions listed in the rest of this plan, including establishing mixtures of uses within neighborhoods and turning around vacant or derelict structures
- Working with developers to include affordable housing in new developments and requiring those units to remain affordable to lower-income residents for a set period
- When redevelopment occurs, incentivizing the inclusion of a mixture of price points

### How we'll measure success:

- Number of updated or new affordable projects and units
- Number of incentives utilized

### Getting started:

- Examine barriers to mixed-income neighborhoods within the City's zoning regulations and identify potential incentives to include many price points in redevelopment
- Support rezonings that allow for affordable housing along major corridors within Greater Downtown, such as some portions of Market Street, and near jobs, goods, services, and amenities
- Build public-private partnerships to make large-scale redevelopments possible
- Advocate for and educate the public about the benefits of mixed-income communities through future planning

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Community Building, Wilmington Housing Authority



## Strategy #2

# Encourage neighborhoods where everyone can meet their everyday needs

“I am eager to have more places to shop and bring kids, instead of bars.”

“I would like to see more local food markets, grab and go local restaurants.”

“I wanna have better stores and an environment and government that supports local businesses. I live in downtown and have to get in a car and drive to do most of my shopping.”

“The community needs a grocery store”

Many residents, especially those in the Southside and Northside, told us that one of the most important goals is to make Greater Downtown a more affordable, convenient place to raise a family. In fact, 40% of Southside participants and 25% of Northside participants at our Phase 1 pop-ups said this was their top priority. In Phase 2, nearly a quarter of respondents told us that neighborhoods where they can meet their daily needs like getting groceries, visiting the doctor, or shopping without leaving their community was their top priority.

People consistently shared concerns about access to fresh food, walkability, and the need for everyday services, especially in historically underserved neighborhoods. These actions aim to bring more essential services within walking distance, supporting healthier, more convenient living, reducing reliance on cars, and boosting community resilience during emergencies while keeping existing residents in their homes.

**This strategy also touches on:** Economy  Small Business   
 Mobility  Resiliency 



## Action 1: Support mixed-use zoning, infill, and redevelopment

People love the mix of homes, shops, restaurants, and green spaces in Greater Downtown—and want more of it. That’s where Urban Mixed Use (UMX) zoning comes in. UMX allows a blend of homes, small businesses, and even some light industry to exist side-by-side in a walkable setting. Expanding UMX zoning helps support lively, walkable neighborhoods where people can live, work, and shop close by, reducing the need to drive and reducing traffic demands on our roadways.

Areas well suited for UMX are:

- Well-connected to public transportation and pedestrian connections
- Lacking in proximity to everyday services
- Small vacant or underutilized lots along highly urban streets
- Central to existing urban neighborhoods

UMX can fit into current neighborhoods, but any new UMX areas should be planned carefully so they respect the neighborhood’s character and meet the needs of the people who live there.

**The City can help by:**

- Adjusting zoning regulations to support this kind of development
- Providing incentives for developers
- Improving sidewalks and street connections
- Encouraging community involvement
- Promoting high-quality design that is respectful of neighborhood context through the City’s development review process

**How we’ll measure success:**

- Number of rezonings to Urban Mixed Use (UMX) and the number of mixed-use components introduced into formerly residential areas.

**Getting started:**

- Identify where UMX zoning would be a good fit
- Ensure future community engagement efforts mention the benefits of UMX zoning
- Update zoning regulations in places where mixed-use development supports community needs
- Support private requests for UMX zoning where consistent with the recommendations of this plan and the Create Wilmington Comprehensive Plan

**Related Strategies/Actions:**

- Small Business Strategy 3
- Economy Strategy 3

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Wilmington Housing Authority, Private Development Community

### Definition

#### Mixed-Use

Combining homes, shops, offices, and other uses within the same area or building to create a more walkable, vibrant community and reduce the need for long commutes.





**Fresh Options in Greater Downtown**

The DGX on Water Street is one of few corner stores offering a produce section with fresh and pre-packaged healthy foods in Greater Downtown.

**Action 2: Make it easier for everyone to find and afford fresh, healthy food**

Many areas in Greater Downtown, especially in the Northside and Southside, are considered food deserts - meaning residents have to travel more than a mile to find affordable, healthy food. Bringing a full-service grocery store to the Central Business District remains a significant challenge, and while there are a number of factors that influence our ability to make this a reality, the community has consistently identified this as a key priority. We will keep working to make a downtown grocery store a reality. In the meantime, the City can also respond to the food desert challenge through:

- Updating zoning regulations to make it easier for corner stores to open
- Supporting pop-up farmers markets
- Providing incentives to encourage more community gardens
- Supporting programs that promote healthy eating and nutrition education, such as the MLK Community Kitchen.
- Partnering with existing non-profits like Feast Down East and Nourish NC
- Improving residents' access to grocery stores by supporting safe, comfortable travel options, including well-maintained sidewalks with shade

One potential solution is to partner with local corner stores to help them stock more fresh produce and healthy items. A Healthy Corner Store Program would give store owners support such as:

- Refrigerators and equipment for fresh food
- Training on how to handle and sell healthy items
- Marketing materials and small subsidies to get started

**How we'll measure success:**

- Percentage of areas considered food deserts
- Number of farmers' markets in underserved neighborhoods

**Getting started:**

- Identify barriers to healthy food access
- Examine successes in other communities

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Economic Development, Wilmington African American Business Council, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Cape Fear Community College

**Action 3: Attract more everyday services to the neighborhood**

Residents in neighborhoods like the Northside have asked for more nearby shops and services like grocery stores, clinics, pharmacies, hardware stores, and places to pick up essentials. These types of businesses are called Neighborhood Goods & Services (NG&S).

To make that happen, the City can:

- Partner with developers, business owners, and property owners
- Offer flexible zoning or incentives to encourage new stores
- Through the City's development review process, encourage new developments to include everyday businesses
- Help small businesses navigate City regulations

Adding more NG&S options will make neighborhoods more livable, help residents stay local for their needs, and support job growth in the community. Raising awareness of goods and services that are already within walking distance of homes is another way to strengthen vibrant, convenient neighborhoods.

**How we'll measure success:**

- Number of new everyday shops and services opening in Greater Downtown

**Getting started:**

- Use the development review process to recommend rezonings that align with the actions outlined in this Plan.
- Examine incentive opportunities within Greater Downtown
- Help residents learn about nearby goods and services within a 5 to 10-minute walk (about a quarter to half mile) from home.

**Related Strategies/Actions:**

- Small Business Strategy 2

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Economic Development, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Downtown Business Alliance, Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, Communications and Engagement

**Definition**

**Development Review Process**

The City's review process that evaluates proposed development projects to evaluate consistency with local plans, zoning regulations, and design standards before construction begins. This process is managed by our Technical Review Committee which includes many City departments as well as numerous state and federal agencies.

#### Action 4: Connect residents to job training and employment opportunities

Many of the jobs in Greater Downtown are in health care, hospitality, construction, and other skilled trades. Great workforce training and placement programs are already in place around Wilmington, but not everyone knows how to access them.

The City can help connect the dots by:

- Building partnerships to help guide people toward training and job opportunities, while also guiding service providers to key community groups that can help spread the word
- Using the MLK Community Center's incubator kitchen to support food service and hospitality training

#### How we'll measure success:

- Number of residents connected to new training and job opportunities
- Number of new partnerships formed

#### Getting started:

- Identify the full range of entities already involved in this space, like Cape Fear Community College's Small Business Center, and build partnerships
- Identify gaps and create strategies to connect people with jobs and training
- Explore how the MLK Center Community Kitchen can be used for culinary job training

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$





**Partners:** Planning and Development, Economic Development, Cape Fear Community College Small Business Center, Communications and Engagement



## Strategy #3

# Use public land to support community goals

The City can put vacant or underutilized public properties to work for the community by supporting needed amenities like grocery stores, community centers, or affordable housing. Decisions about these properties will be guided by community input to ensure they help neighborhoods thrive. We can also create “focus area” plans to show what’s possible for key sites and attract partners.

**This strategy also touches on:** Local Character  Small Business   
 Mobility  Resiliency 



*“I’d like to see small communities that are walkable to bring together those who live nearby. Small restaurants or shops mixed into housing.”*

*“Can these lands be used for more community spaces and parks which we are severely lacking? Could they be used to inject more commercial development in the area and bring jobs?”*

*“I want to see increased Residential Housing Density. A vibrant downtown is dependent on increasing the number of full-time residents living within walking distance to employment and entertainment.”*

*“I will live in Greater Downtown if there are more service & retail in walking distance.”*



### Action 1: Use public property to help meet community needs

Urban properties typically have higher land values, and there are many publicly owned but underused properties in the Greater Downtown area. We need to plan strategically for the future use of these properties, ensuring that they are used in a way that addresses community challenges and enhances the neighborhood. In some cases, this may mean transferring a property to a partner agency for a critical need, such as permanent supportive housing; in others, it may be obtaining the best price to help pay down City debt.

Based on community input, existing needs include:

- More affordable housing
- Everyday services that make life easier and more enjoyable, like a full-service grocery store, pharmacies, doctor’s offices, daycare centers, community centers, parks, and community gardens
- A wider range of jobs and industries, including healthcare and hospitality
- More support for local entrepreneurs and small businesses
- Improvements to the riverfront docks so boaters can visit downtown businesses

We will keep talking with residents and business owners to stay aware of their needs and desires. Where financial constraints are a challenge, the City can explore ways to lessen that financial burden, potentially through a “cross-subsidy” model (see sidebar). Other methods may also exist depending upon the specific property or use being sought.

#### How we’ll measure success:

- Number of uses or services established that respond to identified needs in this plan or other planning efforts

#### Getting started:

- Create and execute a cohesive strategy for how the City uses and manages public land that is responsive to the needs of the community
- Work with other public property owners in Greater Downtown, such as New Hanover County, to ensure that future use of their properties also address community goals as well

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, Community Building, Parks and Recreation, Parking, Downtown Services and Special Events, Communications and Engagement, Asset and Property Management

#### Definition

##### Cross Subsidies

Surplus revenue from high-demand, revenue-generating City facilities such as downtown event venues can be reinvested to support programming and ongoing maintenance for neighborhood amenities such as parks and community centers, which will in turn generate local job opportunities. This “cross-subsidy” approach ensures that residents across Greater Downtown benefit from economic activity concentrated in a high-value locations such as the Downtown Core.

**Action 2: Create focus area plans that show what is possible and get the community excited**

This plan already includes focus area plans for catalyst sites across Greater Downtown. These plans do not lock the City or property owners into exact building shapes or uses and are not a reflection of exactly what will be built in these areas; instead, they paint a picture of what is possible and what people might expect to see in the future. Showing what a site could become, even with illustrations or examples, can build community excitement and attract investment partners as well as businesses large and small.

We will continue to add new focus area plans and update the ones already in place. Each plan will build on past planning work, the recommendations in this plan, and community input, especially from neighbors near each site. Depending on what residents need and prioritize, some plans may include mixed-use development with local amenities such as healthy corner stores, childcare options, or parks to fill neighborhood specific gaps.

**How we'll measure success:**

- Creation of new illustrated area plans
- Number of funders and developers expressing interest
- Number of projects that reflect what the community wants and needs

**Getting started:**

- Seek clarity on future use of key catalyst sites, including the Northern Riverfront District, Central Business District, the north end of 10th Street, the Greenfield Street corridor, the Soda Pop District, and Market Street around 16th and 17th Streets.
- Work with New Hanover County to develop a vision for City and County-owned properties in the Northside
- Choose specific areas with redevelopment potential and create more example plans

**Related Strategies/Actions:**

- Local Character Strategy 2 Action 4
- Economy Strategy 1, Action 7
- Economy Strategy 2, Actions 1 and 3
- Economy Strategy 3, Action 1

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

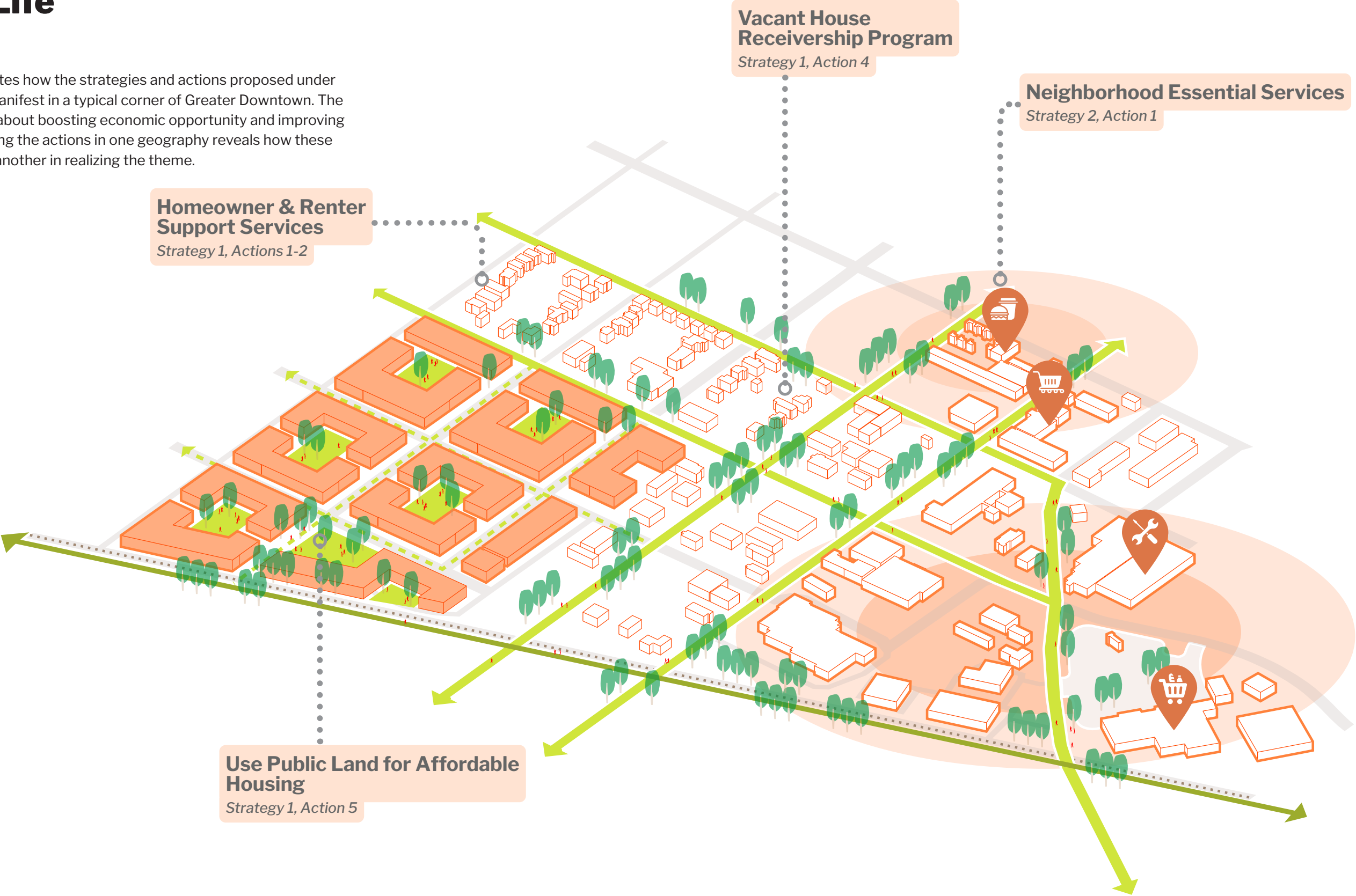
**Partners:** Planning and Development, Communications and Engagement, New Hanover County, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated

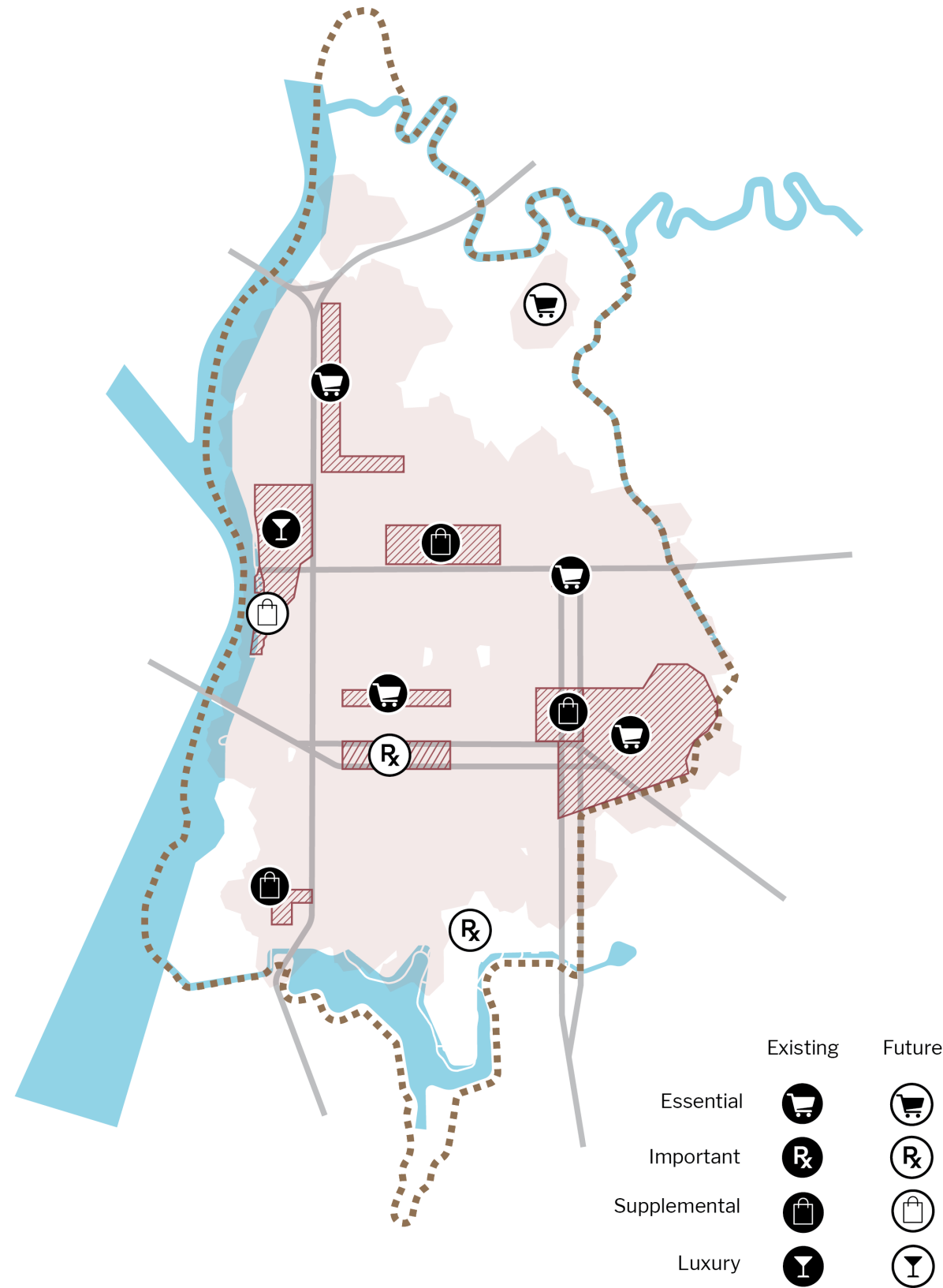


The City of Raleigh's 2030 Comprehensive Plan examines specific areas throughout the City and offers thoughtful suggestions tailored to various neighborhoods, nodes, gateways, and other opportunities for change. These recommendations do more than just address use and density; they help guide the scale of development, how different uses can work together in harmony, and how new projects should engage with the existing community, all shaped by the valuable input provided by local residents.

# What These Ideas Look Like in Real Life

This graphic illustrates how the strategies and actions proposed under this theme might manifest in a typical corner of Greater Downtown. The Economy theme is about boosting economic opportunity and improving fiscal health. Layering the actions in one geography reveals how these they reinforce one another in realizing the theme.





## Theme #3

# Small Business

Support the local entrepreneurship and retail ecosystems

### Theme Contents

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# Small Business Today

**Greater Downtown's small businesses are what make it special and there's room to support more of them, especially those meeting everyday neighborhood needs.**

From cozy coffee shops and breweries to bookstores, restaurants, and boutiques, Greater Downtown Wilmington's small businesses give the area its unique flavor. Both residents and visitors love these local spots; they create energy, attract people, and contribute to the area's charm.

But while there is no shortage of places to eat and shop, many Downtown residents, especially those without a car, struggle to find nearby businesses that meet their everyday needs, like grocery stores, childcare, or basic services.

## Retail Business Mix

Retail businesses do best in places where lots of people can see them - whether they are driving or walking - and where the storefronts line both sides of the street without big gaps like blank walls or driveways. That kind of setup makes shopping areas feel more inviting and keeps people moving from one shop to the next.

In Greater Downtown Wilmington, we have several strong retail areas that take advantage of this, especially in the historic parts of town and near new developments. But there are also smaller groups of shops tucked into residential neighborhoods that do not get as much visibility or foot traffic, which can make it harder for those businesses to thrive.

Most of downtown's retail is concentrated in the historic district, along main roads and side streets, and in strip centers like those in Delgado. Businesses are located in all kinds of buildings, from the ground floors of multi-story buildings to converted houses and old industrial spaces.

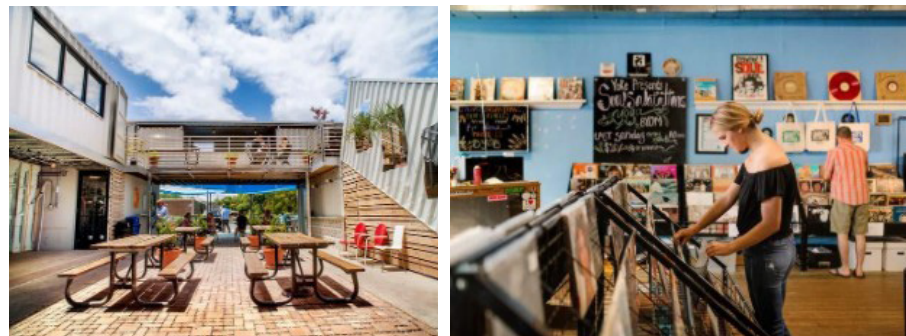
There is a real opportunity to bring more everyday businesses like grocery stores, pharmacies, and dry cleaners into the mix. People spend the most money on these kinds of neighborhood goods and services, but there are not many places offering them in the downtown area right now.

### City Highlight

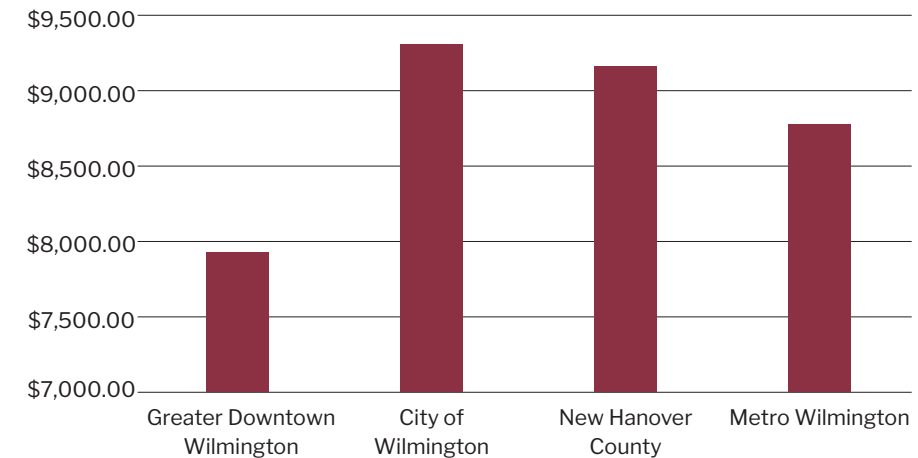
#### Retail Areas

Greater Downtown has distinct shopping areas, each with its own unique feel. These include the Central Business District, the historic district's main and side streets, Dawson, Wooster, and Castle Streets, and the Soda Pop, South Front, and Cargo Districts. You'll also find smaller clusters of shops and local businesses tucked into residential neighborhoods.

Photo Credits: Wilmington and Beaches CVB



## Average Retail Expenditure per Person

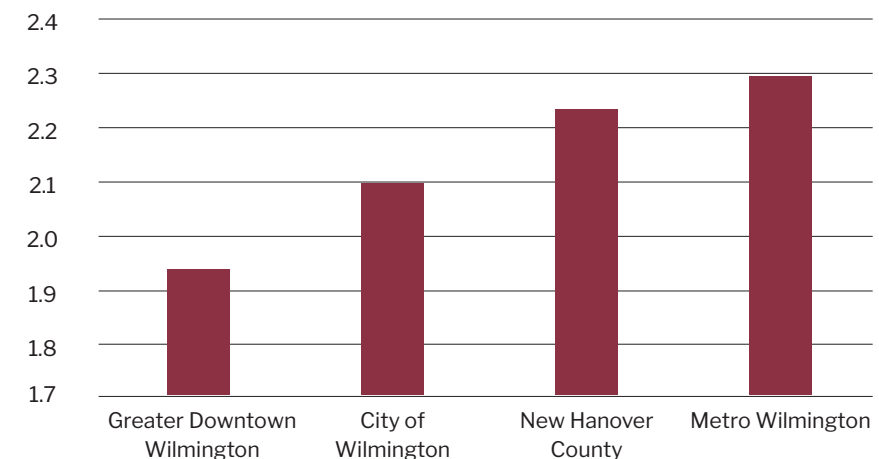


Greater Downtown residents spend less on retail than other residents in the metro area



**LOWER**  
average retail expenditure per person

## Household Size

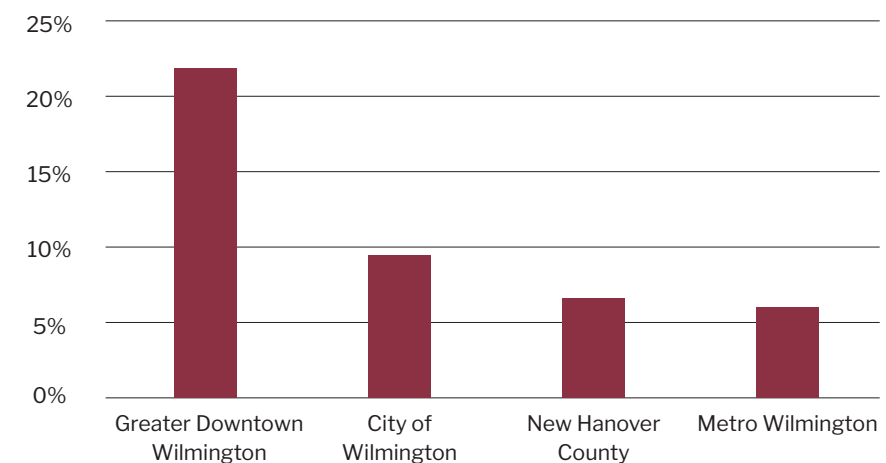


Fewer families with children and more young professionals and empty nesters means Greater Downtown households are much smaller than households in elsewhere in metro Wilmington



**SMALLER**  
household size

## Households with No Vehicles Available



1 out of 5 Greater Downtown residents walk, bike, or use transit to get around



**LESS**  
households with vehicle available

## Types of Businesses

Greater Downtown is home to a wide variety of businesses, including shops and services for everyday needs (Neighborhood Goods & Services), restaurants and bars (Food & Beverage), and stores that sell general goods (General Merchandise). These businesses are found in all kinds of spaces, including on the ground floor of taller buildings, in former factories, or in converted houses. Even though everyday goods and services bring in the most income overall, there are fewer of these businesses compared to other types.

## Who Shops Here

Many Greater Downtown residents spend less than the average Wilmington resident, live in smaller households, and have less access to a car than people in other parts of the Wilmington region. In some neighborhoods like Northside, Love Grove, Brooklyn Arts, and Southside, more than 1 in 3 households do not have a vehicle. That means people rely heavily on stores that are nearby or are easy to reach by public transit.

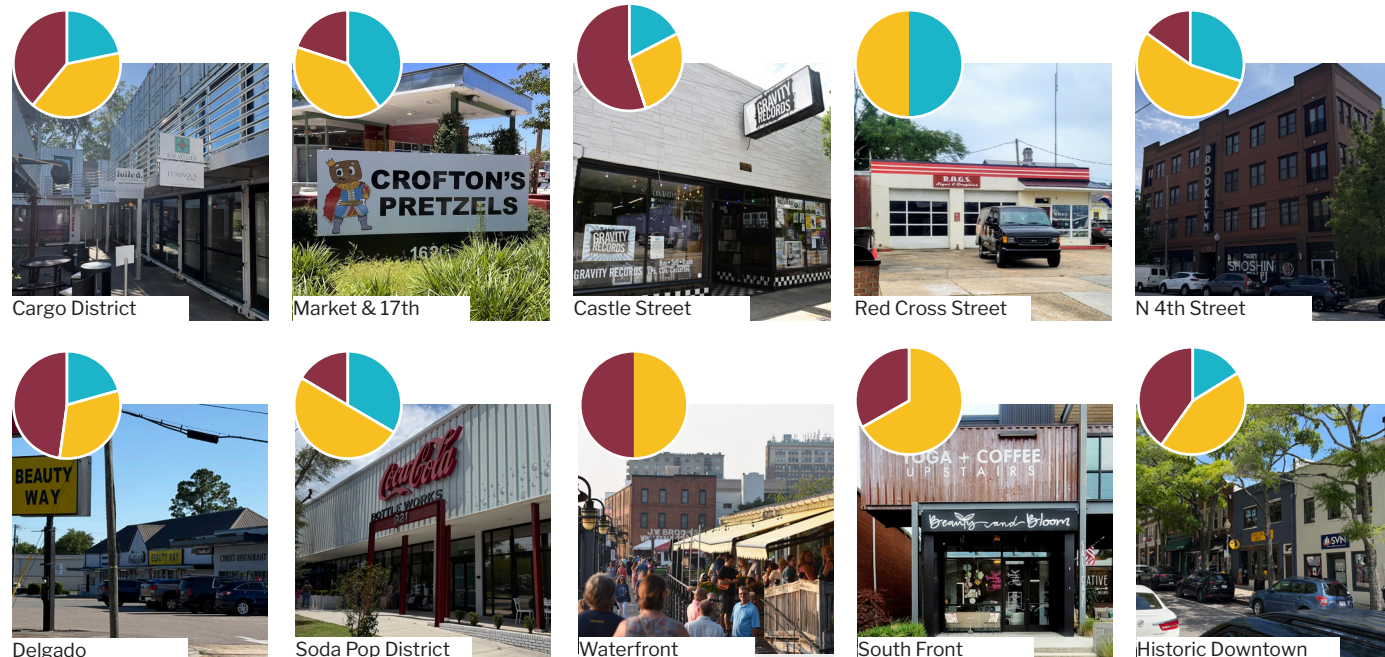
## Small Business Resiliency

Small businesses can be especially vulnerable to disruptions that threaten their operations, income, and long-term stability. While natural disasters can cause significant losses, businesses may also face challenges from economic downturns, supply chain disruptions, rising costs, and other unexpected events. The strategies and actions within the Small Business theme help strengthen resilience by supporting financial stability, encouraging collaboration among local businesses, and building stronger connections between businesses and the community. These efforts help small businesses adapt to changing conditions, withstand disruptions, and recover more quickly from both economic challenges and natural hazards.

Neighborhood Goods & Services

Food & Beverage

General Merchandise, Apparel, Furniture, and Other



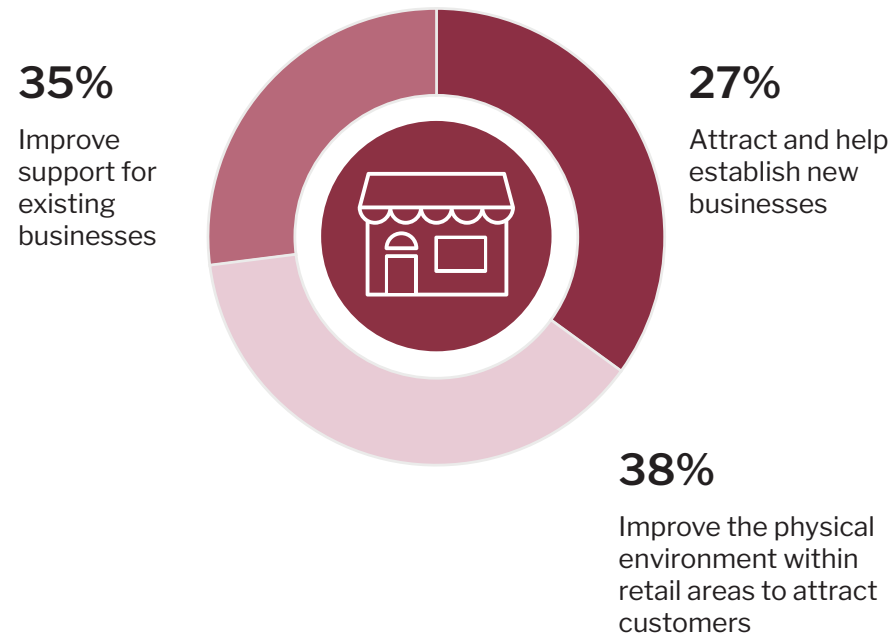
# What the Community Wants to See in Greater Downtown

Residents would love more accessible and welcoming businesses, more substantial support for existing establishments, and expanded shopping and service options tailored to neighborhood needs.

“Help people get to yes with regulations”

“Add resident centered businesses and services (a grocery store, bakery, butcher, a gym - things for people who actually live here)”

## What idea do you think will best help small businesses?



\*During the 2nd round of community engagement, this question focusing on Small Business was asked, and data was collected through online surveys and printed surveys distributed at pop-up events.



## Make business areas more welcoming and walkable

People want business areas that feel inviting and easy to navigate - not just for shoppers but anyone passing by. That means having clean, wide sidewalks with few driveway breaks, landscaping and seating, visually engaging buildings with limited blank walls, safe crossings, and good lighting.

38% of survey respondents named better storefronts and streets a top priority for small business success.

## Add more everyday shopping and services in neighborhoods

There is a clear need for more neighborhood-friendly businesses. People want better access to grocery stores, health services, childcare centers, and convenience stores.

They also want more variety - a mix of independent shops, restaurants, and gathering places, all within walking distance. This helps create a Downtown that is not only fun to visit but also a great place to live.

## Make businesses accessible and welcoming for all

79% of survey respondents said it is important that businesses and public spaces feel welcoming to all, including parents with strollers, older adults, children, and people with disabilities.

This means prioritizing accessibility in building and sidewalk design, culturally inclusive businesses, and services and goods that match the needs and budgets of all residents

When everyone feels welcome and included, businesses see more customers – and communities feel stronger and more connected.

## Support the businesses already here

People value the businesses that have been here for years, and they want to see them succeed long-term.

To help, the community recommends more financial assistance, grant programs, or marketing support, business-friendly regulations and simpler permitting processes, and easier access to technical assistance and small business resources.

Helping current businesses grow will strengthen Downtown’s economy and give new entrepreneurs a better shot at success.



“love the sense of community between business owners and employees”

“keep the small town vibe - help get the word out to the larger community for the small businesses”

“keep the community and fellowship of the downtown business alliance”

“We need support for small businesses: they couldn’t afford rent. Small business support center staff were overwhelmed and didn’t have time to help (they may be focusing on younger people).”

\*During the 3rd round of community engagement, online survey participants were asked to share an overall rating of Small Business strategies and actions from the draft plan.

# Theme #3

## Small Business

The findings from initial research, mapping, and community engagement activities guided the creation of three key strategies to better support local businesses and ensure residents' needs are met by the retail market in Greater Downtown.



*Strategy #1*

**Make business districts more attractive and welcoming**



*Strategy #2*

**Support existing businesses and attract new ones**



*Strategy #3*

**Make local rules and processes more business friendly**

## Strategy #1

# Make business districts more attractive and welcoming

“Investing in local businesses like restaurants and making Wilmington a destination for all ages - families and young professionals that will have families.”

“I wanna see more shopping and more diverse restaurants (Thai, kid-friendly or kid-centered stores).”

“Mix of business and residential. City government doesn’t need to be spending taxpayer money on enhancing downtown. Rather policies should encourage private investments that benefit quality of life.”

During public engagement, nearly four in ten participants said their top priority for supporting small businesses was to improve the look and feel of commercial areas. This is not just about adding flowers or fixing sidewalks - it is about making sure Greater Downtown feels safe, clean, and inviting for residents, visitors, and businesses alike while respecting the local character and enhancing sense of community.

While popular corridors like Front Street benefit from high visibility and substantial foot traffic, many neighborhood businesses do not. Smaller clusters of shops, especially those tucked into residential areas, often lack good signage, landscaping, or well-maintained sidewalks, all of which can affect their ability to draw customers and succeed. A pleasant, welcoming streetscape will encourage residents and visitors to stay longer and enjoy more of what our Greater Downtown business community has to offer.

This strategy also touches on: Local Character  Economy  Mobility  Resiliency 



“The City totally misses the opportunity to unify merchants towards a more vital economy”



## Action 1: Improve the pedestrian experience in retail districts

Attractive sidewalks, benches, trash cans, trees, murals, and banners make business districts more vibrant and walkable, benefiting businesses large and small. These kinds of improvements have worked well on North Front Street, and similar investments that build on the distinct character of each neighborhood can help other areas of Greater Downtown thrive as well.

The City can:

- Help organize and fund these kinds of projects, especially in areas that do not currently have strong merchant associations
- Support regular maintenance and encourage partnerships with local groups for ongoing care
- Coordinate efforts across departments (like Planning, Transportation, Design and Construction, Asset and Property Management, and Downtown Services and Special Events) to make implementation smoother

### How we’ll measure success:

- Availability of City funding and staff support dedicated to beautification projects
- Number of business partners involved
- Number of improvements completed and maintained

### Getting started:

- Engage with small business owners to identify specific concerns and needs
- Explore options for funding and performing long-term maintenance
- Figure out what resources (staff, time, funding) are needed for streetscape upgrades
- Identify local merchants or groups who want to participate and build partnerships

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Economic Development, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Downtown Business Alliance, Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, Planning and Development, Asset and Property Management, Downtown Services and Special Events, Transportation, Design and Construction

### Case Study

#### Seattle Restored Program

The Seattle Restored Program transforms empty storefronts into pop-up shops, art installations, and bazaars to offer burgeoning small businesses the chance to test and grow their brand. The program also showcases the potential of vacant commercial spaces as rental or redevelopment opportunities.

Photo Credit: Seattle Restored



## Action 2: Expand grant programs for storefronts, signage, and art projects

Curb appeal matters, but not all business owners have the time or budget to take it on themselves. Whether it is new signage, exterior paint, or even a sidewalk art installation, these improvements can make a big difference.

Building on the success of Wilmington Downtown, Inc.'s façade improvement grant program, the City can expand support across all of Greater Downtown by:

- Creating or growing grant programs for façade upgrades and street-facing improvements
- Offering guidance to help small business owners apply and complete their projects

While Action 1 covers improvements the City can make in public spaces, this action focuses on helping business owners improve their own properties.

### How we'll measure success:

- Total amount of grant funding secured
- Number of projects funded and completed

### Getting started:

- Pursue funding opportunities to expand business support
- Build partnerships with local organizations to manage the program

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Wilmington African American Business Council, Arts Council of Wilmington and New Hanover County, Wilmington Business Development, Economic Development, Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Services and Special Events

### Case Study

#### City of Raleigh Façade Rehabilitation Grant Program

The City of Raleigh's Façade Rehabilitation Grant supports property owners and small businesses in upgrading building exteriors, including the installation of art and murals. These improvements help businesses strengthen their visibility, attract customers, and create inviting storefronts, while contributing to a more active and appealing commercial district.

Photo Credit: City of Raleigh



## Action 3: Support business district efforts

Many strong retail districts have organizations that help promote them, advocate for merchants, and even pool resources (like dumpsters or events). These organizations are already being innovative and are responsible for some of the most exciting things happening within our Greater Downtown neighborhoods.

We encourage these organizations to remain innovative and share new ideas with us. The City can help by:

- Encouraging and actively participating in merchant groups to foster collaboration with the City and with the residential communities that surround business areas
- Supporting the creation of business improvement districts (BIDs) or other tools that allow the City to meet the market where it wants to be, where appropriate
- Helping merchants collaborate — from cross-promotion on social media to shared services that save money
- Facilitating creative and innovative proposals where possible while protecting neighborhood residents

### How we'll measure success:

- Availability of public or private funding to support retail districts
- Number of new marketing or business support initiatives launched

### Getting started:

- Work with Wilmington Downtown Inc., the Chamber of Commerce, and neighborhood groups to identify funding for local marketing and merchant support programs
- Designate a specific staff person(s) to liaise with Greater Downtown merchant associations
- Seek out and participate in merchant group meetings

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Economic Development, Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Downtown Business Alliance, Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Services and Special Events



### City Highlight

#### Wilmington Downtown Inc.

Wilmington Downtown, Inc. is a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote the economic growth and development of downtown Wilmington. It offers façade improvement grants, business recruitment and retention, and district promotion services.

Photo Credit: Wilmington Downtown, Inc

## Strategy #2

# Support existing businesses and attract new ones

"I really enjoy the local businesses, historically significant buildings, street markets, and concerts."

"Support existing businesses but also offer services to help encourage entrepreneurship from within the community and improve the success rate of new ideas."

"Keep the small town vibe - help get the word out to the larger community for the small businesses."


Residents and business owners told us they want a wider variety of stores, services, restaurants, and recreation options in Greater Downtown, especially ones that reflect the needs and tastes of the neighborhoods around them. At the same time, many people shared that navigating the rules for opening or growing a small business can be confusing.

This strategy focuses on two key goals:

1. Make it easier to start and grow a business
2. Bring in more of the businesses that people actually need and want, like neighborhood grocery stores, daycares, doctors' offices, and community-serving shops

Because many residents in Greater Downtown do not have access to a car, walkable access to daily essentials is more than a nice-to-have, it is a critical part of equity and quality of life. Supporting these kinds of businesses near where people live can reduce traffic, keep spending local, and build a stronger, more self-sufficient downtown economy.

This strategy also supports: Local Character  Economy 

Resiliency 



### Action 1: Attract and keep businesses that offer a range of goods, dining, and entertainment

Strong business districts rely on personal relationships. A healthy district includes many kinds of businesses, shops, services, startups, and offices that meet different needs and interests. The City can help by staying actively involved, building relationships with business owners, and attracting new businesses that fit the area and support a diverse local economy. This could include:

- Regularly attending merchant meetings to hear directly from business owners
- Working more closely with groups like Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, the Downtown Business Alliance, and Wilmington Chamber of Commerce to promote Greater Downtown and attract businesses
- Collaborating with local startup hubs like Genesis Block, Cape Fear Community College's Small Business Center to support entrepreneurship
- Continuing to create partnerships that help attract and retain businesses, especially those that fill gaps in services and reflect the community's culture and needs

#### How we'll measure success:

- Number of new partnerships formed
- Rate of tax base growth in Greater Downtown
- Number of new jobs by sector
- Number of new businesses started

#### Getting started:

- Talk with local business owners to understand what challenges they are facing
- Build new and stronger partnerships with business support organizations
- Work together to create a business recruitment plan focused on local needs and diverse offerings

**Time:**      **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Wilmington Downtown Incorporated, Wilmington African American Business Council, Downtown Business Alliance, Economic Development, University of North Carolina Wilmington Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Cape Fear Community College Small Business Center, Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Services and Special Events



#### Case Study

##### Detroit District Business Liaison program

The Detroit District Business Liaison program assigns a dedicated staff person to each City council district. This "DBL" helps businesses navigate City processes and expedites service provision. Additional staff to supplement the Chamber's existing retention and expansion services could focus on site selection for retail and microbusinesses.

#### Case Study

##### Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund

Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund offers matching grants to developers and new businesses on the City's South and West sides by capturing zoning fees paid for downtown developments. This innovative funding strategy leverages downtown investment to create opportunities in City neighborhoods.

Photo Credit: City of Chicago



City Highlight

Cape Fear Community College Small Business Center

Cape Fear Community College Small Business Center offers a variety of support systems to help develop and grow small businesses. From seminars and workshops, to counselors and referrals, the SBC helps position participants to turn their small business ideas into reality.

Photo Credit: Cape Fear Community College Small Business Center



Action 2: Help businesses navigate the permitting process and find support

Many entrepreneurs, especially first-timers, struggle with permitting, zoning, inspections, and other regulatory requirements. The City can work together across departments to make it easier for entrepreneurs to understand local requirements with a clear, step-by-step website and staff who are trained to help can guide people through the process. This helps business owners quickly find the information they need, connect with the right departments, and get timely support, ultimately saving them time and money.

The City can also help connect entrepreneurs to existing programs, grant opportunities, and support networks to help them as they launch their business.

How we'll measure success:

- City website updated to include information targeted to entrepreneurs and business owners
- Staff trained to help entrepreneurs navigate requirements and connect to resources

Getting started:

- Identify local requirements, responsible departments, and helpful resources for entrepreneurs such as the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce and Cape Fear Community College's Genesis Block
- Update the City's website to clearly outline requirements, provide contact information, and compile available small business resources
- Train staff across departments to help entrepreneurs navigate the requirements and connect to other resources

Time: ⌚⌚⌚⌚ Cost: \$\$\$

Partners: Economic Development, Planning and Development, Communication and Engagement, Downtown Services and Special Events



## Strategy #3

# Make local rules and processes more business friendly




“Add more shopping (high end options) and add rental units in the historic buildings versus adding any new or modern structures.”

“We need better stores and an environment and government that supports local businesses. The best store downtown (Thrive) left and was transparent about how challenging they found it to run a business there. Modern Legend says the same.”

“I’d love to see more local business owners, and limiting out of state corporations buying out commercial spaces to abuse rent increases.”

Residents and business owners told us loud and clear: it is not just about helping people navigate the system - we also need to improve the system itself. Many of Wilmington’s regulations and processes are perceived to be confusing, expensive, or time-consuming. That can discourage new business owners and make it harder for existing ones to grow.

This strategy focuses on modernizing local regulations to reflect today’s small-business landscape, including flexible uses such as pop-ups, food trucks, temporary events, and hybrid models. These low-cost entry points are critical for entrepreneurs just getting started or who want to test an idea before investing in a permanent location.

**This strategy also supports:** Local Character  Economy  Resiliency 



## Action 1: Ensure zoning regulations support local makers and artists

Wilmington has a strong creative spirit, and local artists and artisans want more places to work and share their craft. Many creative businesses are currently limited to industrial zones, but most would fit perfectly in mixed-use or commercial areas.

Imagine:

- A tailor shop or pottery studio next to a café
- A guitar repair shop near a music venue
- A coffee roaster in a neighborhood market space

By updating zoning regulations to allow these uses, we can support small businesses, add more life to our streets, and keep our makers close to the people they serve.

**How we’ll measure success:**

- Number of maker spaces started in Greater Downtown

**Getting started:**

- Review zoning regulations to see what is getting in the way
- Add clear definitions for artisan businesses
- Allow these businesses in appropriate commercial and mixed-use areas

**Time:**     **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development



### City Highlight

#### Cargo District Makers Spaces

Artisan manufacturing includes a variety of small-scale production businesses, such as carpentry workshops, commercial bakeries, breweries, and print shops. In Greater Downtown Wilmington, the Cargo District has organically fostered a community of makers and creative entrepreneurs, with shared spaces such as Designworx allowing flexible production and maker spaces within the UMX district.



**City Highlight**

**MLK Commercial Kitchen**

MLK Center's fully equipped commercial kitchen hosts hands-on programs where participants can learn culinary skills, explore new recipes, and engage in food-based activities. The kitchen also serves as a valuable resource for entrepreneurs, providing a licensed food preparation facility that enables food trucks, caterers, and other mobile food vendors to test new concepts, refine menus, and grow their businesses without the significant upfront investment of establishing a permanent commercial kitchen.



**Case Study**

**Invest PGH**

Invest PGH offers microloans for new businesses and flexible expansion loans for small and medium sized businesses. These loans are targeted at brand new businesses and businesses insufficient collateral for traditional loans or credit history issues.

Photo Credit: InvestPGH Facebook

**Action 2: Ensure that regulations make it easy to test new business ideas**

Pop-up shops, markets, and food trucks are great for testing business ideas, bringing life to underused spaces, and activating neighborhoods; but current regulations do not always make it easy. Permits can be expensive, confusing, or take too long.

Wilmington can update its zoning and permitting processes to make it easier (and faster) for small businesses to set up temporary operations, especially in currently vacant or underutilized places.

**How we'll measure success:**

- Number of temporary businesses launched
- Feedback from businesses on process improvements

**Getting started:**

- Review existing regulations for things like mobile vending, pop-up retail, and temporary events
- Identify specific roadblocks and work with stakeholders to find safe, practical solutions
- Consider updates to zoning regulations and City Code to make it easier for temporary businesses to operate, including:

Expanding Food Truck and Market Opportunities: Broaden the scope for food trucks, flea markets, making it easier for vendors to operate and serve the community.	LDC - Food trucks - See Article 3, table 18-229 and conditions in 18-235.
Increasing Sidewalk Cafes: Extend the provisions for sidewalk cafes to additional districts in Greater Downtown, enhancing the area's vibrancy and appeal.	LDC - Flea markets - See article 3, table 18-229 and conditions in 18-239.
Reviewing Event-Based Restrictions: Reevaluate restrictions related to City-operated or sponsored events to allow more flexibility for vendors and small businesses.	City Code - Ice Cream Vendors - Section 4-104
	City Code - Section 4-109
	City Code - Section 4-101 and 4-105

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Planning and Development, New Hanover County

**Action 3: Simplify the overall process for registering and opening a business**

Whether they are getting a permit, applying for a license, or figuring out what is required for a new storefront, small business owners need a clear, simple, and consistent process. The City can take a close look at how business applications are handled today and find ways to make the experience faster, easier, and more predictable.

That might include:

- Standardizing forms and approval timelines
- Making instructions clearer
- Combining multiple steps into one
- Eliminating outdated or overly restrictive rules

**How we'll measure success:**

- Completion of updated, streamlined processes
- Average processing time

**Getting started:**

- Audit current business-related processes to identify areas for improvement
- Identify governmental processes outside the City's control and partner with those agencies to improve effectiveness and efficiency
- Create a plan to streamline and modernize those processes
- Make updates to City Code to help streamline and simplify processes, including:

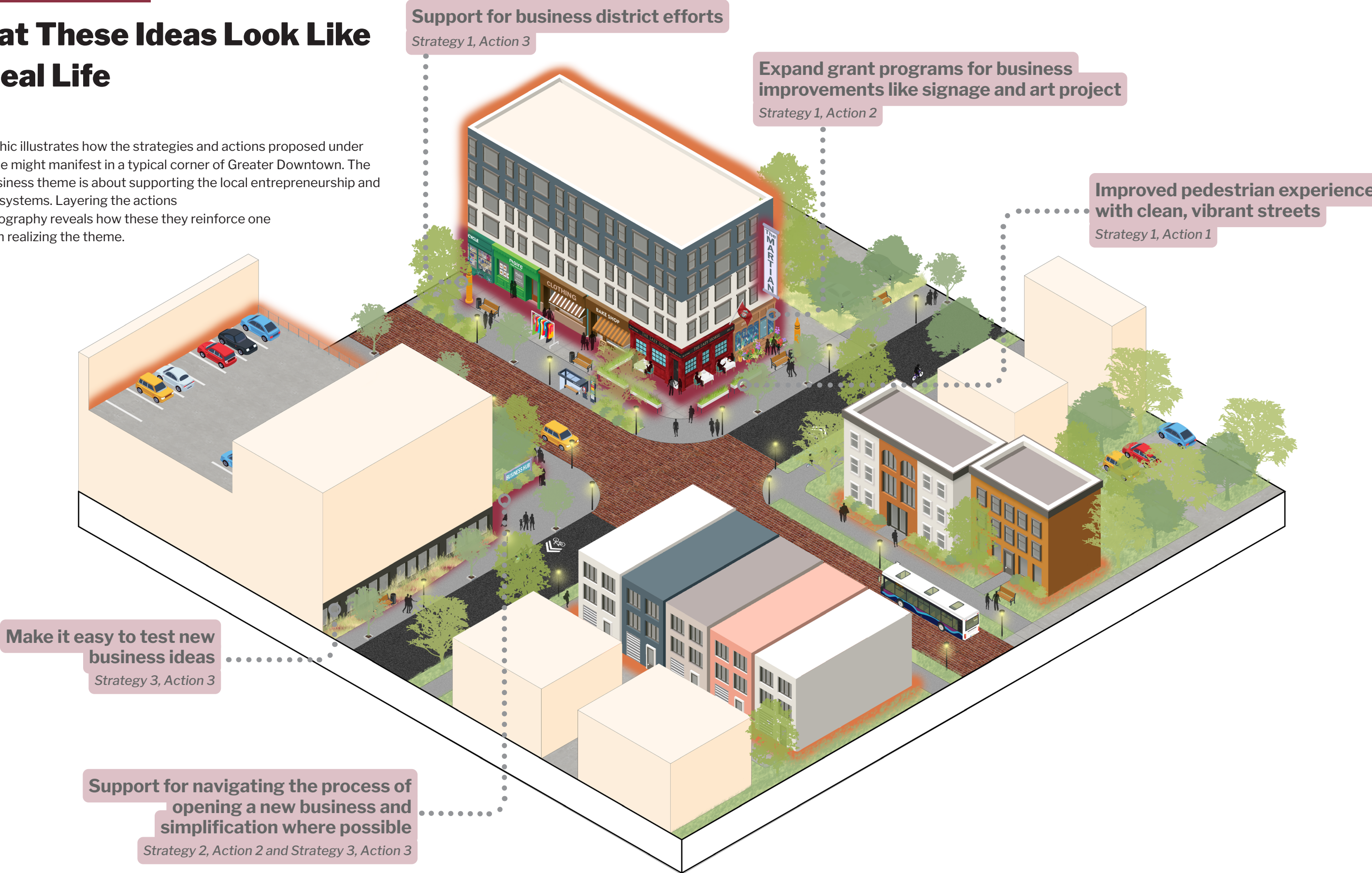
Simplify Application Requirements: Revise the general requirements for the sale of goods and services to streamline the application process.	City Code - Section 4-108
Clarify Roles in Approval Processes: Establish clear, written policies for the involvement of police and the City manager in business applications and approvals, reducing ambiguity and increasing transparency.	City Code - Business Licenses - Section 4-56
	LDC - Administrative Provisions - See Article 7
Remove Restrictions for Specific Activities: Address and remove restrictive regulations that impact revenue-producing activities for massage parlors, shipping containers, breweries, food trucks, street vendors, and home occupations, ensuring fair opportunities for all types of businesses.	City Code - Certificates of Occupancy - Section 18-51
	City Code - Massage Parlors - Section 4-127
	City Code - Shipping Containers - Section 18-302
	City Code - Breweries - Section 18-325
	City Code - Food Trucks - Section 18-340
City Code - Street Vendors - Section 4-102	
City Code - Home Occupations - Section 18-279	

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Economic Development, Planning and Development, New Hanover County

# What These Ideas Look Like in Real Life

This graphic illustrates how the strategies and actions proposed under this theme might manifest in a typical corner of Greater Downtown. The Small Business theme is about supporting the local entrepreneurship and retail ecosystems. Layering the actions in one geography reveals how these they reinforce one another in realizing the theme.



**Support for business district efforts**  
*Strategy 1, Action 3*

**Expand grant programs for business improvements like signage and art project**  
*Strategy 1, Action 2*

**Improved pedestrian experience with clean, vibrant streets**  
*Strategy 1, Action 1*

**Make it easy to test new business ideas**  
*Strategy 3, Action 3*

**Support for navigating the process of opening a new business and simplification where possible**  
*Strategy 2, Action 2 and Strategy 3, Action 3*



## Theme #4

# Mobility

**Make it easier, safer, and more pleasant to get around**

### Theme Contents

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# Mobility Today

## Street Network

A number of major roads crisscross Greater Downtown Wilmington. Key north-south routes include Front Street, 3rd Street, 5th Avenue, and the one-way pair of 16th and 17th Streets. Important east-west streets include Market, Dawson, Wooster, and Greenfield Streets. Roads like Oleander Drive, Carolina Beach Road, and 17th Street connect into Greater Downtown from other parts of the City, while Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway provides direct access to the airport and I-40. Two bridges, the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge and Isabel Holmes Bridge, bring traffic into Greater Downtown from across the river.

While some of these streets have sidewalks and bike lanes, many do not, especially on the Southside. Improving these gaps is a key priority.

## Current Projects

Several major projects in planning or under construction aim to make walking, cycling, and getting around without a car easier and safer. South 5th Avenue has recently been reimagined as a complete street, with a road diet and the introduction of bike lanes connecting Market Street to Greenfield Lake, and new sidewalks and improved streetscapes are coming to Dawson and Wooster Streets in the future. Other projects also include new sidewalks, safer crossings, and better spaces for people to enjoy the street. These projects are great building blocks, and we can use their momentum to guide future investments.

<b>Existing Greenways</b>	
1 Riverwalk (1.7 miles)	8 Greenfield Park Master Plan (including improvements to existing multi-use path)
2 Greenfield Park (5 miles)	9 5th Ave Improvements (bike lanes, improved sidewalks, and better connection to Greenfield Park)
3 Multi-use path from Colwell Ave to Park Ave (0.4 miles)	10 3rd St signalized crossings (Orange St and Ann St)
<b>Walking and Biking Routes</b>	
4 River to Sea Bikeway	11 Wooster and Dawson St (sidewalks, curb extensions, crosswalks, and pedestrian signals)
5 East Coast Greenway	12 Castle St (bike lanes from 3rd St to 16th St)
<b>Key Projects Planned or in Development</b>	
6 Cape Fear Memorial Bridge Replacement	
7 Wilmington Rail Trail (multi-use path from 3rd St to Love Grove bridge)	



### Transit Network

Padgett Station, located at 3rd and Campbell Streets in the heart of the Central Business District, is a hub for several bus routes. WAVE Transit recently launched a redesigned system (Reimagine WAVE) in early 2025, bringing new routes to the area. Most of these serve neighborhoods south and east of Greater Downtown, including along Market Street and the hospital. The Port City Trolley also runs a loop that connects spots like Dram Tree Park, Front Street, and the Brooklyn Arts District. These services are important, but there's room to improve their reliability and connection.

### Parking

The Central Business District and the Northern Waterfront have a mix of paid street parking, parking decks, and surface lots owned by the City, county, or by private entities. Most street parking is free outside this core area, though the historic neighborhoods just south of Greater Downtown use a residential permit system. As Greater Downtown grows, parking demand is increasing fast, especially in emerging districts like the Cargo District, South Front, Soda Pop, and the Brooklyn Arts District. At the same time, redevelopment of surface parking lots is a great opportunity to provide more space for housing and businesses, so long as parking needs are still met.



# What the Community Wants to See in Greater Downtown

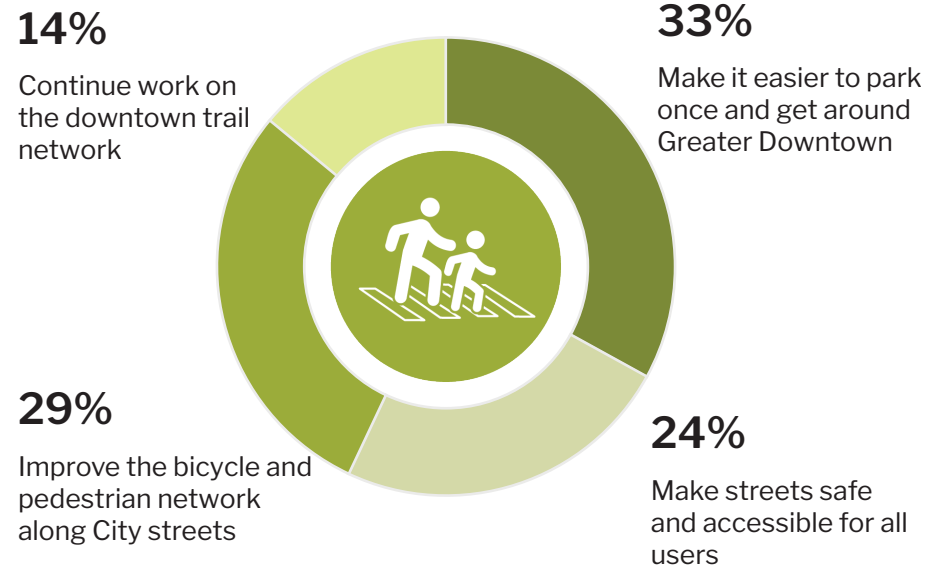
Residents generally love that Greater Downtown is walkable, but they want to see more done to improve safety, public transit, and parking access. Here's a summary of what people said:

"increased signage for bike routes/ bikeways (including historical)"

"fix uneven sidewalks - elderly mobility issues"

"bike parking ( more) in Cargo District"

## What idea do you think will best improve Mobility?



\*During the 2nd round of community engagement, this question focusing on Mobility was asked, and data was collected through online surveys and printed surveys distributed at pop-up events.



## Make it safer to walk and bike

Many residents said they feel unsafe crossing busy streets, biking on roads without protection, or walking in areas without sidewalks or lighting. There is strong support for adding protected bike lanes, better lighting, and improving sidewalk conditions. People also emphasized the importance of completing the Downtown Trail and connecting it to other trails, so there is a safe, continuous route for everyone, whether walking for fun, commuting, or running errands.

"more multi-use instead of sidewalks"

"clearly fenced or divided bike lanes"

"buffered & protected bike lanes"

"more connectivity/ walk blue paths"

## Improve public transit access and experience

People want more frequent, reliable, and better-connected transit options. Ideas included expanding bus routes, improving shelters and amenities, and offering alternatives like neighborhood shuttles or more trolley service to help reduce reliance on cars.

## Calm traffic and rethink street design

To make streets safer and more comfortable, many suggested slowing down traffic. Some also liked the idea of turning certain streets into pedestrian-focused or one-way streets to help traffic flow better and create a more walkable environment. Front Street's success and the planned upgrades to Dawson and Wooster Streets were often mentioned as models.

## Address growing parking needs

As Downtown gets busier, parking is getting harder to find — especially in newer districts like Cargo and South Front. Residents talked about the need to balance visitor and resident parking, suggested more shared parking options, clearer signage, and better management of which lots are public versus private.

"crosswalks/ safe crossing infrastructure @ 17th and Queen/ Castle (Cargo District)"

## Connect neighborhoods and overcome barriers

Railroads, wide roadways, and missing sidewalks make it hard to move easily across Greater Downtown. Residents recommended building more pedestrian bridges, safer crossings, and clearer signage to link neighborhoods. In the Robert Taylor Homes area, residents especially emphasized the importance of accessible sidewalks and crossings to help older adults and people with disabilities get around safely.



\*During the 3rd round of community engagement, online survey participants were asked to share an overall rating of Mobility strategies and actions from the draft plan.

# Theme #4

## Mobility

Based on community input and current opportunities, we've identified three key strategies to improve how people move around Greater Downtown Wilmington. These strategies are especially focused on making it safer and easier to walk, bike, use public transit, and travel without needing a personal car.



*Strategy #1*

**Make streets safe and accessible for everyone**

*Strategy #2*

**Build a connected trail network for walking and biking across Greater Downtown**



*Strategy #3*

**Make it easier to get around downtown without a car**

## Strategy #1

# Make streets safe and accessible for everyone




“Complete streets implementation!”

“I’d like to see crosswalks/ safe crossing infrastructure @ 17th and Queen/ Castle (Cargo District).”

“Make it more pedestrian friendly! Cut down on parking, add public transit and walkability, close streets for outdoor dining, pedestrian safety, and creative public space.”

“Specific bike safety measures to make bike community more realistic”

Our streets should be designed so that they work for everyone, whether walking, biking, driving, using a wheelchair, or riding the bus. That means building on what the City, the Wilmington Metropolitan Planning Organization (WMPO), and North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) are already working on and by focusing on the parts of Greater Downtown where traffic is heaviest and where people most rely on walking, biking, and transit.

**This strategy also supports:** Local Character  Small Businesses  Resiliency 



### Action 1: Achieve Vision Zero by working to eliminate pedestrian fatalities and serious injuries

In September 2025, the City of Wilmington adopted Vision Zero, an international strategy to prevent fatal and severe crashes through a safe systems approach. The City’s goal is to eliminate all traffic deaths and serious injuries by 2036.

Greater Downtown is the most walkable part of our city, and walking to school, work, or local shops is a realistic option for many. Still, pedestrian fatalities and serious injuries persist citywide, and we are working to end them. Safety for all travelers is our primary focus, and all actions in this strategy contribute to this overarching goal.

#### How we’ll measure progress:

- Number of pedestrian injuries and fatalities per year

#### Getting started:

- Explore low-cost, high-impact ways to reduce pedestrian collisions, including No-Right-on-Red, leading pedestrian intervals, and other tools that improve safety for all roadway users while the Vision Zero Action Plan is being developed
- Incorporate Greater Downtown Plan recommendations into the forthcoming Vision Zero Action Plan
- Ensure that Vision Zero is the primary consideration in the development and implementation of any mobility project
- Do more to get the word out on pedestrian and driver safety, including collaborating with the WMPO’s “Be a Looker” campaign

**Time:**     **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Wilmington Police Department, Planning and Development, North Carolina Department of Transportation, WMPO

## Action 2: Fund and support Complete Streets projects

As we modernize our street network, we are committed to designing streets for everyone, not just cars. We will continue to invest in Complete Streets projects that make room for people walking, biking, and using transit. The recently completed 5th Avenue project, which reduced travel lanes and introduced bike lanes, is a great example of a large, corridor-focused approach that establishes a complete street and increases the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists.

We can continue this approach through:

- Taking a big-picture look at the entire roadway corridor and develop Complete Streets projects of inclusion in the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP)
- Supporting and helping to implement projects already in the pipeline, like:
  - The City's Dawson and Wooster Street upgrades (starting construction in 2026)
  - NCDOT's 16th and 17th Street corridor improvements
  - WDOT Castle Steet restriping to include dedicated bike lane and painted curb extensions
- Working closely with the WMPO to identify and coordinate priority projects

### How we'll measure success:

- Number of potential Complete Street sites and improvements identified
- Number of Complete Streets improvements completed

### Getting started:

- Identify available funding (grants, local fees, etc.)
- Explore an updated complete streets policy
- Add Complete Streets improvements to future city budgets
- Identify Complete Street improvement locations

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, North Carolina Department of Transportation, WMPO



City Project

### Complete Streets in Action

Conceptual improvements on Castle St at 4th St including curb extensions with green stormwater infrastructure, bike parking, street furniture, high visibility crosswalks, and pedestrian-scale lighting.





City Highlight

**Temporary Interventions**

Demonstration projects (also called quick-build, tactical urbanism, or interim design projects) use lower-cost materials to temporarily introduce a project to the community for a predetermined length of time. Data and public feedback are gathered and, if needed, desired changes can be incorporated into the final (permanent) design. This approach can help build trust between residents and local government and increase community support for walking and biking infrastructure.

**Action 3: Improve conditions for walking and biking on key streets**

Greater Downtown has many streets that connect residents to neighborhoods, parks, shops, and cultural destinations, while also serving as main routes for those traveling to or through the area. Some of the most critical north-south streets include Front Street, 3rd Street, 5th Avenue, and 10th, 16th, and 17th Streets. Key east-west streets include Greenfield, Dawson, Wooster, Ann, Market, Grace, Chestnut, Rankin, Red Cross, Nixon, and Castle Streets.

While this plan recommends improving safety on all Greater Downtown streets, focusing on the busiest streets first has the greatest impact on the largest number of travelers. These streets can pose significant barriers to walking and biking, and any improvements to these major roadways should include ample opportunities for walkers and bikers to cross safely and efficiently.

Some of these streets are owned and maintained by the City, while others are managed by NCDOT. Each partner has a role to play in making these streets safer, and we're already seeing significant progress, whether through the recently completed 5th Avenue improvements, the Dawson and Wooster Street improvements (construction expected in 2026), or the soon-to-be-installed improvements in the Cargo District. We can build on these successes. That means:

- Adding safer crossings, better and more complete sidewalks, more bike lanes, and improved sight lines
- Including improvements when roads are already scheduled for repaving
- Trying out temporary demonstration projects (like pop-up bike lanes or crosswalks) with input from residents

**How We'll Measure Progress:**

- Linear feet of new sidewalks
- Number of new crosswalks
- Number of new ADA ramps
- Community feedback on pilot/demonstration projects

**Getting started:**

- Identify priority streets and upcoming resurfacing schedules
- Build on existing partnerships with the WMPO and NCDOT to address mobility challenges along major roadways
- Launch a pilot demonstration program with local groups

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, North Carolina Department of Transportation, WMPO

**Action 4: Build priority sidewalk and crossing projects from the 2023 Walk Wilmington Plan**

The Walk Wilmington Plan, adopted in 2023, identified top priorities for new sidewalks and safer crossings based on public input and safety data. The Plan identifies a high-injury network, streets with a high concentration of traffic fatalities and serious injuries. Many of the Plan's recommendations focus on this network, which includes many of the key streets mentioned in the previous action. Additional high-priority areas include:

- Around Greenfield Lake
- The Northside and Brooklyn Arts District
- New and growing retail areas

The projects identified in the Walk Wilmington Plan have already been adopted as priorities, and the City is responsible for developing specific projects and implementing these recommendations. Where the plan recommends changes to NCDOT-managed streets, we'll partner with NCDOT and the WMPO to ensure implementation. Walk Wilmington also includes a number of low-cost, high-impact solutions, many of which are appropriate inside Greater Downtown's street grid.

**How We'll Measure Progress:**

- Number of improved intersections and new pedestrian signals

**Getting started:**

- Select top priority projects for funding and design
- Coordinate with NCDOT and WMPO

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, North Carolina Department of Transportation, WMPO



City Highlight

**Curb Extensions**

Curb extensions, like the one shown above in front of Bijou Park, extend the sidewalk into a street, often at intersections or midblock to enable a midblock pedestrian crossing. These extended sidewalks help to narrow the street and can reduce the speed of vehicles and make pedestrians who would like to cross more visible.

**Action 5: Add more curb extensions to calm traffic and make crossings safer**

Curb extensions, also called “bump-outs,” make it safer and easier to cross the street by narrowing intersections and slowing down cars. They also create space for things like trees, plants, benches, signs, and bike racks. Installing curb extensions also provides the opportunity to increase the accessibility of our sidewalk network, ensuring that those with mobility challenges can still travel easily without a car.

To make them work well, we will need to:

- Coordinate with NCDOT on state roads
- Plan around future bike routes and utilities
- Follow design guidelines like NCDOT’s Complete Streets Manual and National Association of City Transportation Officials’ Urban Street Design Guide
- Encourage installation of curb extensions with new development and redevelopment at key intersections

**How We’ll Measure Progress:**

- Number of curb extensions added per year

**Getting started:**

- Identify priority intersections that need safety improvements by focusing on areas where people are already walking frequently
- Use temporary measures, such as vertical delineators, to demonstrate effectiveness if funding is limited.
- Incorporate curb extension efforts into future budgets
- Work with NCDOT to design and approve installations along state-maintained roadways
- Update Technical Standards and Specifications to include curb extension design standards

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, North Carolina Department of Transportation, Private Development Community





In December of 2025, the City completed an improvement project along Fifth Avenue, a scenic connector between downtown and Greenfield Lake Park, through a coordinated effort that brought multiple plans, departments, and partners together around a shared goal. Building on a collaborative effort the City developed a comprehensive project to resurface the roadway, restripe the pavement to include bicycle lanes in both directions, and address needed repairs to sidewalks, stormwater infrastructure, and curbs.

## Strategy #2

# Build a connected trail network for walking and biking across greater downtown

Trails are more than just places to walk or bike; they connect neighborhoods, parks, schools, and local businesses. They provide safe and healthy transportation options, reduce traffic, and make Greater Downtown more livable and enjoyable.

The top priority is completing the Downtown Trail, which has been in the works since the 2013 Greenway Plan. Once finished, it will stretch from the Riverwalk to Love Grove, Forest Hills, and eventually link up with the River-to-Sea Bikeway and the Gary Shell Cross-City Trail. The other priorities focus on Riverwalk expansion and ensuring that our trail network is comprehensive in connecting Greater Downtown's many neighborhoods and destinations.

This strategy also supports: Local Character  and Resiliency 

### City Project

#### Rail Trail Master Plan

The City's 2020 Rail Trail Master Plan envisions a phased project to bring a pedestrian/bicycle trail, and eventually a return of passenger rail, to a decommissioned railroad right of way on the Northside.



### Action 1: Design and build the Downtown Trail

The 2020 Rail Trail Master Plan established an overarching vision for the Downtown Trail. Phase 1 of the trail is already in design and will follow the former Atlantic Coastline Railroad route from the Riverwalk, through Cape Fear Community College and the Brooklyn Arts District, to the Northside and eventually to Love Grove. Phases 2 and 3 will continue the Downtown Trail southward along Burnt Mill Creek to Forest Hills, linking the Downtown Trail to the rest of the City's trail system.

This project has the opportunity to serve as the crown jewel of the Cape Fear Region's trail system and drastically improve walking and biking access across Greater Downtown. Its completion is a key goal of this plan. To make this happen, we will continue our work with the WMPO to fund and build each phase.

#### How we'll measure success:

- Miles of trail designed or built

#### Getting started:

- Begin dedicating funding for the construction of Phase 1 and finalizing a design for Phases 2 and 3
- Start planning now for placemaking and storytelling elements along the trail's path, including public art and green infrastructure, by engaging the residents along its path

**Time:**      **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** WMPO, Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development



City Highlight

#### Setting Space Aside, Durham, NC

[The Conservation Fund](#) is partnering with Person and Durham counties to acquire a 26-mile rail corridor for a future rail trail. Through partnerships, technical assistance, and financial support, The Fund protects critical lands and waters to provide access to nature, strengthen local economies, and enhance climate resiliency. It uses capital to facilitate timely land acquisition, helping conservationists, agencies, and community leaders protect properties for wildlife, recreation (including parks and trails), and historic significance. The Fund is also working with North Carolina communities to preserve rail corridors for trail use, including Durham and Person counties.

Photo Credit: Alta Planning + Design

## Action 2: Expand the Riverwalk and connect it to Greenfield Lake

Right now, a gap between the south end of the Riverwalk and Greenfield Lake is making it hard to bike or walk between two of our most significant outdoor assets. There are also identified, but unfunded, projects to expand the Riverwalk northward and connect it to the Northside neighborhood.

Here's how we can close the gap:

- Partner with NCDOT to complete a new multi-use path along South Front Street (already in design through the South Front Street Widening Project)
- Improve nearby sidewalks and crosswalks to connect the South Front District and Greenfield Lake safely
- Prioritize funding for the design and construction of northern Riverwalk expansions to the Northside and Sweeney
- Address the major barrier that S. 3rd Street and Burnett Boulevard present to bicycle and pedestrian movement between the South Front neighborhood and Greenfield Lake
- Ensure that the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge replacement contains bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and connects to the Riverwalk

The Riverwalk is also a transportation method for those who have tied up boats at the many docks along its course.

### How we'll measure success:

- Completion of a pedestrian/biking connection from the Riverwalk to Greenfield Lake
- Riverwalk expansion projects funded and completed

### Getting started:

- Advertise the Greenfield and 3rd Street signalized pedestrian crossing, showcasing the viability of walking and biking between the south end of the Riverwalk and Greenfield Park

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, WMPO

## Action 3: Plan a future rail trail on the Southside

If the rail realignment project moves active freight rail out of Greater Downtown in the future, we may be able to turn the old tracks on the Southside into a new rail-trail, a safe, separated route for walking and biking. This connection through the Delgado and Southside neighborhoods would provide a more direct linkage between the rest of the City's trail network and the South Front neighborhood and Greenfield Lake.

Though this is a long-term project and is dependent upon other significant projects moving forward, we can start now by:

- Meeting with potential partners like The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit that helps communities convert rail corridors into trails
- Partnering with state and local organizations to create a plan and open conversations with the track owner, CSX

### How we'll measure success:

- Completion of an update to the 2013 Wilmington-New Hanover County Comprehensive Greenway Plan

### Getting started:

- Consider designating a bike route from the River-to-Sea Bikeway in Delgado to connect to Greenfield Park and to the South Front District as an interim measure. This will help gauge usage and need
- As the future of the rail realignment project is determined, begin analyzing the feasibility of establishing the rail trail

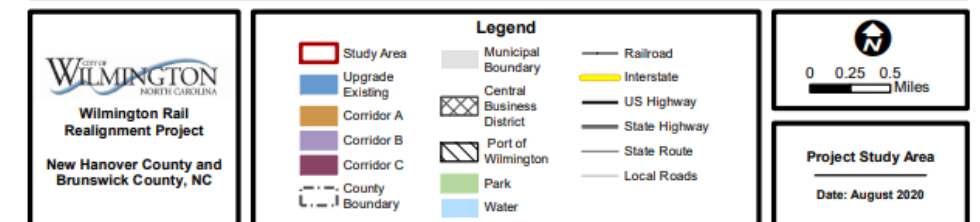
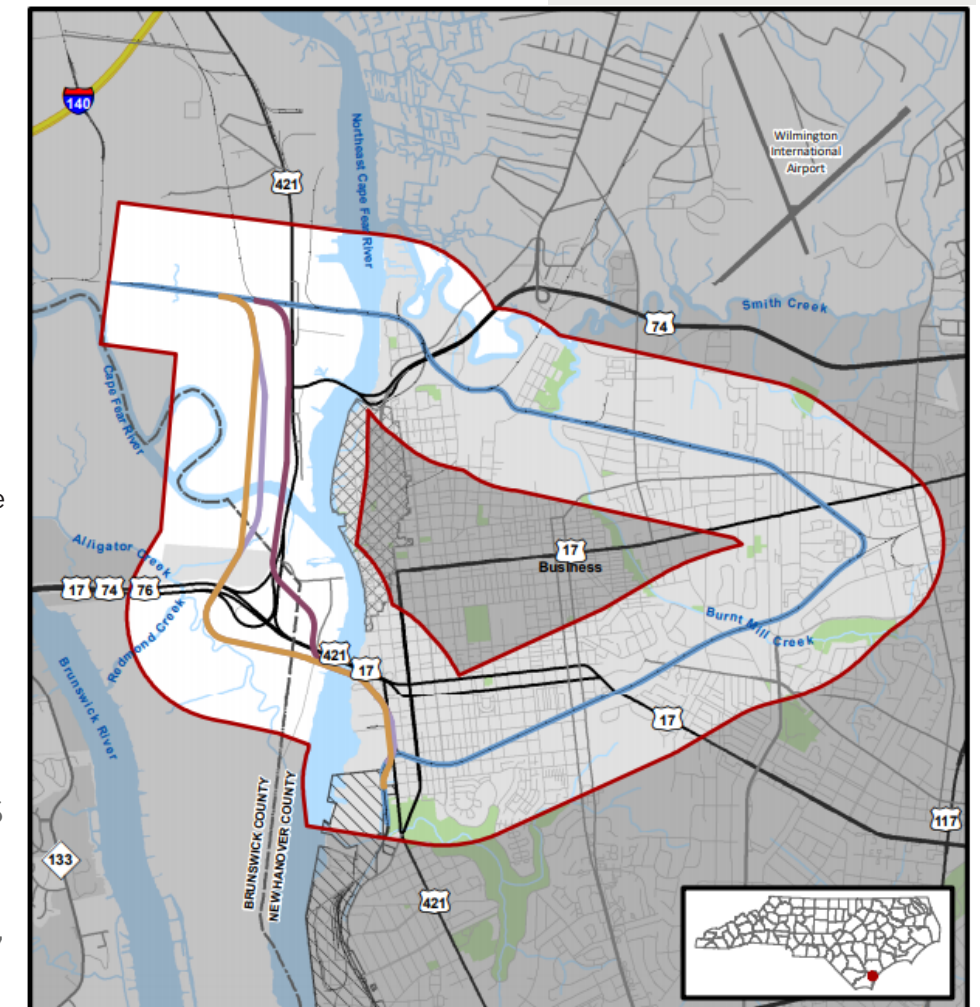
**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, WMPO

City Study

### Rail Realignment




A study of potential options for realigning freight rail that serves the Port of Wilmington was conducted in 2020 resulting in the map to the right.



## Strategy #3

# Make it easier to get around downtown without a car

Greater Downtown is a busy hub for the entire Cape Fear region. Every day, thousands of people come here to work, visit, or attend events, and most of those visitors drive. But that is changing, and community feedback indicates strong support for improving transportation choices and making all modes easier to use. This strategy focuses on just that, whether it's making parking more convenient or easier to use, improving transportation and wayfinding options, or making walking, cycling, and transit easier. It also aims to make parking more convenient and reduce its negative impacts on nearby neighborhoods.

This strategy also supports: Local Character  Small Business  Resiliency 



"I wanna see ways that support and encourage locals to enjoy and live downtown, such as locals discounted parking, special offers for small/locally owned businesses, etc. In general, I am apprehensive about downtown growing in a way that only supports large corporations and tourism."

"I'd love to see solutions for downtown parking for shop and restaurant employees."

"More options for visitors to park outside of the city and shuttle bus or bike ride into town would be great."

"Bus stops needs to be clearly marked and well-lit"

"Downtown should be a pedestrian paradise"

### Action 1: Make it easier to "park once" and explore

We heard from a number of people that parking in Greater Downtown was a challenge in both the Central Business District and emerging retail districts, made even more complex if you want to visit multiple areas in one day. By making it easier for visitors to park once and move throughout Greater Downtown, we can help folks have a simpler journey and spend more time enjoying all that Greater Downtown has to offer, rather than spending time and energy circling every destination in search of parking. One in three residents identified this as a top priority.

While this action is relevant each and every day, it is particularly important for special events, and special consideration should be given to them. For example, we could:

- Use off-site parking lots (such as schools, churches, or government buildings)
- Provide shuttles, bike parking, or safe walking routes to the event
- Create designated drop-off zones, especially for those with mobility challenges

#### How We'll Measure Progress:

- Number of off-site lots used for events
- Availability of shared mobility options such as bike-share or rental, shuttles, and water taxis

#### Getting started:

- Connect parking to shops, parks, and neighborhoods with sidewalks and bike lanes
- Explore viability of transportation options to help people travel between multiple destinations downtown
- Continue to partner with WAVE Transit and other downtown organizations to create a shuttle service that connects emerging commercial districts across Greater Downtown

**Time:**     **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, Parking, WAVE Transit



Case Study

#### Off-Site Parking Program, Raleigh, NC

For its 2024 Fourth of July Fireworks event, Dorothea Dix Park in Raleigh organized free off-site parking at NC State University and several downtown parking decks. Free park and ride shuttles were available for certain areas; attendees were encouraged to walk or bike from the closer parking areas (.6 to .9 miles). A local advocacy group, Oaks and Spokes, provided a staffed bike corral at the park. The multi-pronged approach gave attendees plenty of options and freedom to choose their preferred transportation type.

Photo and Graphic Credit: Dix Park, City of Raleigh

## Action 2: Improve signs and maps for parking and getting around

Greater Downtown is a rapidly changing place, and we have many visitors every day, whether that's residents from other parts of the Cape Fear region or tourists from all over. We heard from many folks that finding their way to public parking lots or getting from one retail district to another can be confusing. Residents want better signage that helps everyone, no matter their language, find parks, shops, playgrounds, parking, and more.

We can help by:

- Working with the Wilmington & Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau to develop and install clearer signs and directional maps
- Updating online maps to include walking and biking routes, transit options, and parking details
- Signs that clearly distinguish public parking from private parking

### How we'll measure success:

- Completion of Wilmington & Beaches Convention and Visitor Bureau's Wayfinding Assessment and Conceptual Design
- Number of recommendations implemented from the above study
- User feedback on wayfinding improvements

### Getting started:

- Actively participate in the ongoing study and start implementing its recommendations
- Ensure online data is relevant and accessible, and seek feedback from the community on additional improvements

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, WMPO, Downtown Services and Special Events, Wilmington & Beaches Convention and Visitor Bureau, Parking, Communications and Engagement

## Action 3: Help service workers get to work affordably

Downtown service workers and their employers often say parking is too expensive, but affordable options could help. While the City already has programs to address this, it is clear these programs are not well known or understood within the community. The service industry and its workers are vital to Greater Downtown's economic health and supporting them was a high priority from the community.

We can:

- Promote existing programs and cheaper parking lots farther from the core, paired with the Downtown Trolley or a future bike share program
- Explore additional reduced-rate parking programs for Greater Downtown businesses and lower-wage workers. For example, in Durham, eligible workers pay just \$35/month for garage parking.

### How we'll measure success:

- Usage of reduced-cost parking program for workers

### Getting started:

- Through direct outreach and partnerships with organizations like Wilmington Downtown, Inc. and merchant associations, advertise the discounts we already offer, while also ensuring we're directly engaging with employees to develop a full understanding of need and of the effectiveness of potential solutions
- Through these partnerships, work with the Greater Downtown business community to determine additional ways to support our workers

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

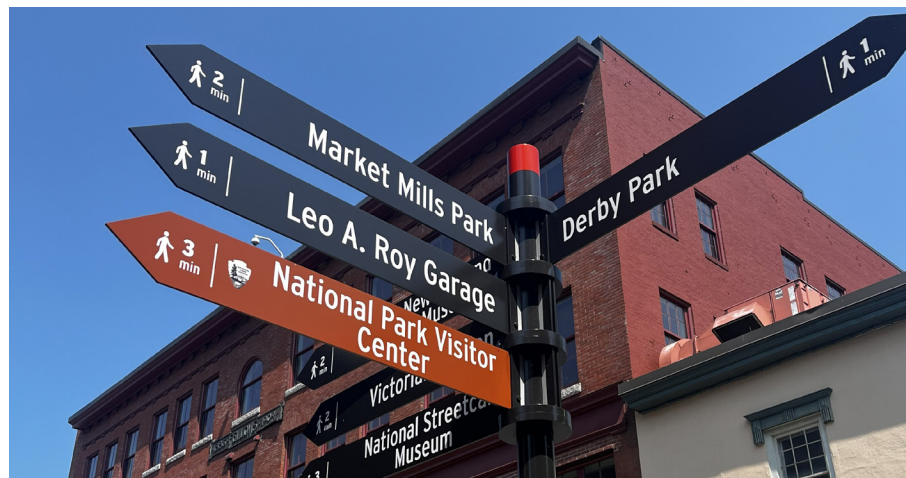
**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, WMPO, WAVE Transit, Parking, Downtown Services and Special Events

### Case Study

#### Finding Your Way

Wayfinding signage in Lowell, MA.

Photo Credit: Guide Studio



## Action 4: Protect neighborhoods with smarter parking rules

As destinations grow, nearby residential streets often fill with visitor parking, especially during big events. Some streets already have residential permit programs, particularly immediately south of the Central Business District, and as Greater Downtown continues to evolve, these programs should remain part of our toolbox, while also ensuring that we're reserving space for our business community and visitors alike. The community particularly identified this problem in the Brooklyn Arts District and Northside areas.

To help, the City can:

- Monitor parking demand and complaints annually, taking into account usage rates and competition for parking from residents, businesses, and visitors.
- Adjust or expand residential permit programs as needed, ensuring that we are looking at larger areas and not problems specific to one block
- Respond quickly to issues as they arise

### How we'll measure success:

- Annual tracking of parking use and neighborhood concerns

### Getting started:

- Engage with residents and businesses within and adjacent to existing residential permit areas to gauge effectiveness
- Continue ongoing efforts to analyze parking demands across Greater Downtown
- Ensure that neighboring residents and their needs are part of any parking management changes
- As the need arises, prioritize innovative solutions that can respect the needs of all neighboring users

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Parking, Planning and Development, Downtown Services and Special Events



### City Highlight

#### Smarter Parking

Many municipalities enforce residential permit parking to protect residential blocks from overparking by non-residential parkers.

## Action 5: Pilot temporary street closures for pedestrians

Throughout our conversations with community members, we frequently heard that people missed the COVID-19-era street closures on Front Street that allowed for outdoor dining and activities, and they asked whether and when it could return. The opportunity exists to bring this back not just along Front Street but also along other streets within Greater Downtown. We already allow for street closures for farmers' markets and other events, but this would allow existing businesses along the corridor to start taking advantage of these closures as well.

Next steps:

- Learn from other cities that do weekend street closures
- Test a temporary pilot, and adjust based on local business feedback
- Develop a policy to address operational concerns associated with temporary street closures, such as pedestrian safety and alcohol sales
- Consider other streets for temporary closure as opportunities arise

### How we'll measure success:

- Complete feasibility study and pilot weekend closure

### Getting started:

- Work with organizations like Wilmington Downtown, Inc. to establish an action plan, ensuring that local businesses are consulted

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development, Downtown Services and Special Events, Wilmington Police Department, Parks and Recreation



### Case Study

#### Corridors Connect, Charlotte, NC

Charlotte's 2023 [Corridors Connect](#) series (part of its Open Streets 704 program) closed six streets to vehicles on consecutive weekends in October and transformed them into parks. The 2023 event focused specifically on the City's Corridors of Opportunity to promote connectivity and equity across Charlotte neighborhoods.

Photo Credit: Well-Run Media

### Definition

#### Temporary Street Closures

Temporary street closures are a way to utilize space typically occupied by motor traffic, creating active spaces for foot traffic. This space can be repurposed for festivals, markets, recreation, and other activities.

## Action 6: Reconnect streets and sidewalks through redevelopment

In some parts of Greater Downtown, especially near large housing communities on the Southside, the street network is disconnected. That makes it harder to drive, walk, or bike across neighborhoods safely and efficiently, and can increase traffic on other streets. We can reconnect our street grid through large-scale redevelopment efforts, such as Hillcrest, or through more incremental changes over time.

Some new connections may be limited to walking and biking to help calm traffic and improve safety. Local engagement is essential to ensure that these changes reflect community needs.

### How we'll measure success:

- Number of new or reconnected streets and paths
- Community feedback from local residents on mobility improvements

### Getting started:

- Coordinate with prospective developers and ensure that the goal of reconnecting neighborhoods is communicated early and often in the development process.
- Host engagement sessions with nearby residents

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development

### City Highlight

#### 10th Street

10th Street is envisioned as an important north/south route for crossing town safely on foot or by bike. It connects the Northside, Soda Pop District, Robert Strange Park and public schools complex, Castle Street, and Dawson Street. But it stops short and doesn't connect to Greenfield Street Lake Park because an Urban Renewal project cut it off.



## Action 7: Make bus stops safer and more comfortable

Better bus stops make riding transit more appealing, and riders should be able to wait for the bus in a dignified manner. Posted signs are great, but opportunities to sit down under a covering that protects riders from the elements can make all the difference. While there are already some sheltered bus stops in Greater Downtown (for example, along N. Front Street near Skyline Center), we can collaborate with WAVE Transit to increase the quality of our transit stops throughout the system.

Specifically, we can:

- Add shelters, benches, trash cans, and multilingual signage at key stops
- Work with WAVE Transit to focus improvements where ridership is highest
- Sync upgrades with route changes from the Reimagine WAVE plan
- Incorporate public art and history into stop upgrades

### How we'll measure success:

- Number of bus shelters installed or improved each year
- Transit ridership rate in Greater Downtown

### Getting started:

- Coordinate with WAVE Transit to identify high usage stops and prioritize those for improvements first
- Facilitate new bus stops when new developments are built

**Time:** 🕒🕒🕒🕒 **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** WAVE Transit, Planning and Development, WMPO, Transportation, Design and Construction



### Case Study

#### GoRaleigh Bus Shelters

The GoRaleigh public bus system held a design competition for new bus shelters to be installed throughout Raleigh as a way to elevate safety and creativity.

Photo Credit: GoRaleigh

### Action 8: Expand and protect the City's bike rack program

Installing bike racks may sound simple, but their existence can often be the difference between someone choosing to bike or drive. By identifying and installing bike racks near major traffic generators, we can help improve biking as a realistic transportation option and reduce vehicular traffic and parking pressures. The City offers a request-a-bike-rack program, but the lack of requests makes it clear that it is not a well-known service. We can fix that with better outreach and a proactive plan for installing more bike racks where people need them.

Here is what we can do:

- Spread the word through newsletters, social media, and Downtown networks
- Budget annually for new bike racks based on installation trends
- Identify and install racks in high-demand locations, working with nearby businesses and property owners

#### How we'll measure success:

- Number of bike racks installed per year
- Increase in awareness according to community survey

#### Getting started:

- Launch an awareness campaign
- Map priority areas for bike rack installation

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Design and Construction, Planning and Development



### Action 9: Help spread the word about safe travel habits and why walkable, bikeable communities are good for everyone

Building sidewalks, bike lanes, and multi-use paths isn't enough. We must also remain engaged within the community, sharing information on what we are building, why we are building it, and how to use it effectively. At the same time, we know tourism plays a major role in our economy, and our Greater Downtown is always drawing a mixture of visitors from other parts of the world who do not know our streets.

To broaden education, we can coordinate with the WMPO's "Be a Looker" program to increase awareness and education across the City about safe transportation behaviors. Helping residents learn about safe cyclist practices, where to ride bikes, and what common roadway symbols mean can further educational efforts. We can also collaborate with organizations like the Wilmington and Beaches Convention & Visitors Bureau to ensure that information reaches visitors. We can also work with these organizations and others through community engagement on the upcoming Vision Zero Action Plan and all future planning efforts.

#### How we'll measure success:

- Number of pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities and injuries
- Rollout of public campaigns to engage the community
- Number of citizens that participate in planning efforts

#### Getting started:

- Begin more direct collaboration with the WMPO and integrate their messaging and more around transportation safety into regular social media presence
- Ensure walkability and bikeability remain key components of future planning efforts; the community has repeatedly told us that these are high priorities
- Partner with the WPD to raise awareness on pedestrian safety

**Time:** ⌚⌚⌚⌚ **Cost:** \$\$\$

**Partners:** Transportation, Planning and Development, WMPO, Wilmington Police Department, Communications and Engagement



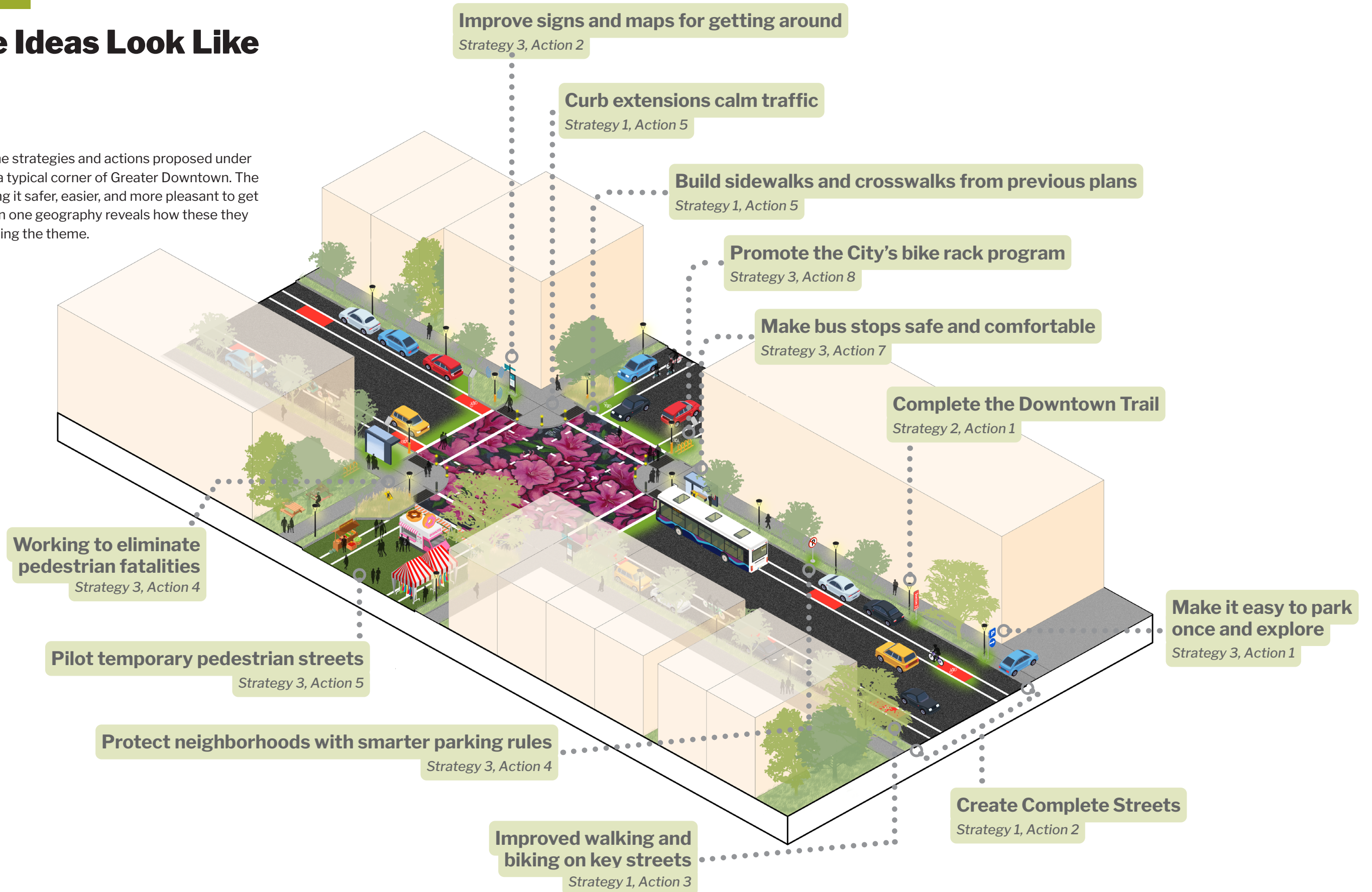
City Highlight

#### Be A Looker Campaign

Be a Looker is the WMPO's bicycle and pedestrian safety campaign. It aims to educate drivers on how to look for those bicycling and walking, and to educate bicyclists and pedestrians on ways to stay visible and predictable. Anyone can take the Be a Looker Pledge: a pledge to look out for each other when sharing the road!

# What These Ideas Look Like in Real Life

This graphic illustrates how the strategies and actions proposed under this theme might manifest in a typical corner of Greater Downtown. The mobility theme is about making it safer, easier, and more pleasant to get around. Layering the actions in one geography reveals how these they reinforce one another in realizing the theme.





# 3

## Implementing the Plan

### Chapter Contents

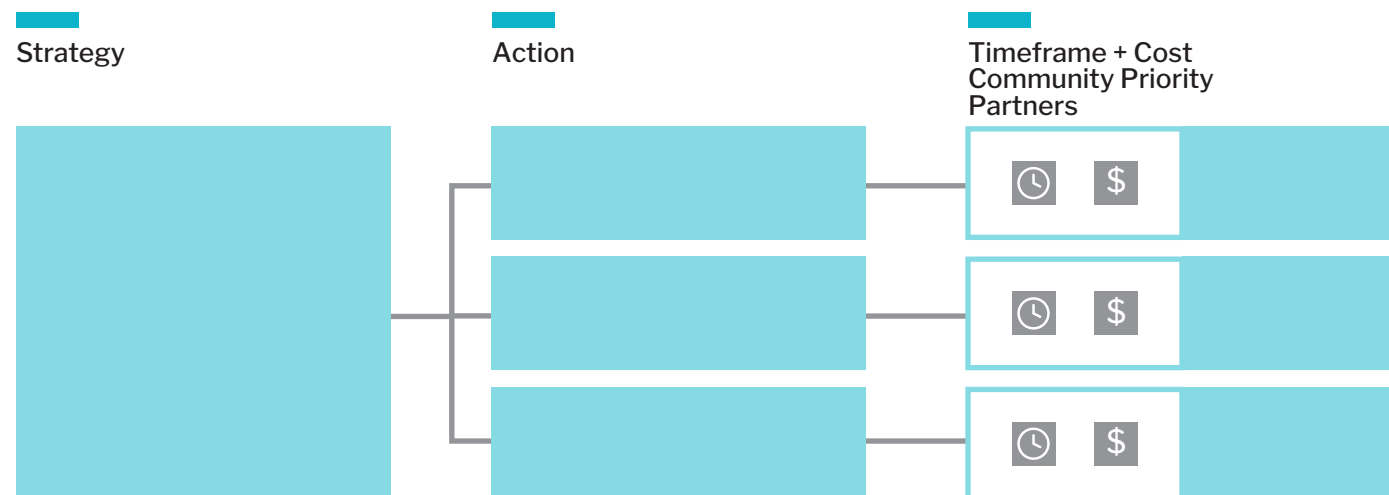
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# Implementation

This plan’s recommendations are rooted in public input, and any action that is present within its pages can be considered a priority for residents of the City of Wilmington and its government. More than 6,300 participants in various phases of public engagement have confirmed our understanding of what is needed within Greater Downtown to protect local character, boost our economy, support our small business community, improve all forms of mobility, and build resiliency.

In the following pages, every action is presented in an implementation matrix that displays our anticipated timeline for implementation, a preliminary estimate of cost, and potential partners or responsible entities for ensuring these actions are completed. While the City anticipates playing a role in completing every action, we welcome collaboration wherever possible. This is the community’s plan, and any community member, business owner, or other interested party should look to this document as an overarching vision statement. Any proposal, big or small, that supports the recommendations of this plan or improves its success measures is something we are interested in exploring.

Many of the actions in this plan are the responsibility of the Planning and Development Department to lead, and a number of those are projects that do not require much, if any, dedicated funding. For those projects that do require dedicated funding, they must be programmed through our existing Capital Improvement Program (CIP) process, which already includes a number of priority projects within Greater Downtown and across the rest of the city. Because we make every attempt to be the best stewards of taxpayer dollars we can, we cannot move every project forward at once. As we move through implementation, care will be taken to ensure that the priorities of this plan are well represented and are thoughtfully implemented in the context of other goals for other parts of the City.




## Timeframe

 In Progress

 Medium-term (2-5 years)

 Near-term (0-2 years)

 Long-term (5-10+ years)

## Cost

\$\$\$ Low-cost

\$\$\$ Medium-cost

\$\$\$ High-cost

## Partners

Abbreviated Name	Full Name
AABC	Wilmington African American Business Council
ACW	Arts Council of Wilmington and New Hanover County
ACFT	Alliance for Cape Fear Trees
APM	City of Wilmington, Asset and Property Management
CAO	City of Wilmington, City Attorney's Office
CB	City of Wilmington, Community Building
CCFC	Cape Fear Community College
CFCC SBC	Cape Fear Community College, Small Business Center
CFHC	Cape Fear Housing Coalition
C&E	City of Wilmington, Communications and Engagement
Comp	City of Wilmington, Compliance Department
CVB	Convention and Visitors Bureau
DBA	Downtown Business Alliance
DSSE	City of Wilmington, Downtown Services & Special Events
D&C	City of Wilmington, Design and Construction
DE	Duke Energy
ED	City of Wilmington, Economic Development
H4H	Habitat for Humanity
LANC	Legal Aid of North Carolina
NC CLT	North Carolina Coastal Land Trust
NCDOT	North Carolina Department of Transportation
NHC	New Hanover County
Parking	City of Wilmington, Parking
Priv Dev	Private Development Community
P&D	City of Wilmington, Planning & Development Department
P&R	City of Wilmington, Parks and Recreation Department
State Delegation	North Carolina State Delegation
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
UNCW CI&E	University of North Carolina Wilmington, Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship
WAVE	WAVE Transit
WBD	Wilmington Business Development
WCC	Wilmington Chamber of Commerce
WDI	Wilmington Downtown Incorporated
WDOT	City of Wilmington, Transportation
WHA	Wilmington Housing Authority
WMPO	Wilmington Metropolitan Planning Organization
WPD	City of Wilmington, Police Department
WTC	Wilmington Tree Commission

# Theme #1

## Local Character








Strategy	Actions	Timeframe + Cost Community Priority* Partners
<b>1</b> Make public spaces safe, welcoming, and enjoyable	1.1.1 Improve streets and parks to make them more welcoming.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&R, APM, C&E
	1.1.2 Offer more activities and amenities in parks.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&R, WDI, CVB, C&E
	1.1.3 Make public spaces safer.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #4</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&R, WDOT, D&C, WDI, WPD, DE
	1.1.4 Add public art that reflects our community.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #5</b> <b>Partners:</b> ACW, P&D, P&R, WDI, WMPO, APM
	1.1.5 Create a parks conservancy.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&R, NC CLT

<b>2</b> Protect established neighborhoods by ensuring new development fits in with the area's historic look and feel	1.2.1 Make historic homes easier to own and maintain.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, CB, Comp, SHPO
	1.2.2 Launch an incentive program to reuse or rehabilitate older buildings.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, ED, NHC, State Delegation, WDI
	1.2.3 Encourage new development to improve or enhance desired character while respecting existing communities.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: NA</b> <b>Partners:</b> Priv Dev, P&D, CAO
	1.2.4 Guide bigger and taller development to the Northern Riverfront area.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: NA</b> <b>Partners:</b> Priv Dev, P&D, P&R, DSSE, CAO
<b>3</b> Create more green spaces and plant more trees	1.3.1 Put the Urban Forestry Master Plan into action.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #5</b> <b>Partners:</b> APM, WTC, ACFT
	1.3.2 Encourage efforts to build climate resiliency.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #4</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, CB, P&R, D&C, APM, WMPO
	1.3.3 Choose the right trees for the right places.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> APM, P&R, P&D, ACFT, WTC
	1.3.4 Add green spaces.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&R, APM, NCDOT, WMPO
	1.3.5 Turn vacant lots into pop-up public spaces.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, NHC, DSSE

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# Theme #2

## Economy

Strategy	Actions	Timeframe + Cost Community Priority* Partners
<b>1</b> Improve access to affordable, high-quality housing	2.1.1 Help more people access existing housing programs.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&R, CB, Comp, CFHC, C&E, WAVE
	2.1.2 Support legal assistance for housing issues.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #7</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, CB, LANC, H4H, WHA
	2.1.3 Expand rental assistance programs.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #5</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, CB, WHA
	2.1.4 Turn around vacant or neglected properties.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, CB, CAO
	2.1.5 Continue to use public land for affordable housing.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #4</b> <b>Partners:</b> CB, WHA, H4H
	2.1.6 Update zoning to reduce barriers to “missing middle” housing.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #6</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&R, CB
	2.1.7 Encourage new affordable housing in areas of opportunity.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, CB, WHA

<b>2</b> Encourage neighborhoods where everyone can meet their everyday needs	2.2.1 Support mixed-use zoning, infill, and redevelopment	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, WHA, Priv Dev
	2.2.2 Make it easier for everyone to find and afford fresh, healthy food.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, ED, AABC, WDI, CFCC
	2.2.3 Attract more everyday services to the neighborhood.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> ED, WDI, DBA, WCC, C&E
	2.2.4 Connect residents to job training and employment opportunities.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #4</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, ED, CFCC SBC, C&E
<b>3</b> Use public land to support community goals	2.3.1 Use public property to help meet community needs.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, CB, P&R, Parking, DSSE, C&E, APM
	2.3.2 Create focus area plans that show what is possible and and get the community excited.	 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, C&E, NHC, WDI

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# Theme #3

## Small Business

Strategy	Actions	Timeframe + Cost Community Priority* Partners
<b>1</b> Make business districts more attractive and welcoming	3.1.1 Improve the pedestrian experience in retail districts.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> ED, WDI, DBA, WCC, P&D, APM, DSSE, WDOT, DC
	3.1.2 Expand grant programs for storefronts, signage, and art projects.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDI, AABC, ACW, WBD, ED, WCC, DSSE
	3.1.3 Support business district efforts.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> ED, WDI, DBA, WCC, DSSE
<b>2</b> Support existing businesses and attract new ones	3.2.1 Attract and keep businesses that offer a range of goods, services, dining, and entertainment.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDI, AABC, DBA, ED, UNCW CI&E, CFCC SBC, WCC, DSSE
	3.2.2 Help businesses navigate the permitting process and find support.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> ED, P&D, C&E, DSSE

<b>3</b> Make local rules and processes more business-friendly	3.3.1 Ensure zoning regulations support local makers and artists.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D
	3.3.2 Ensure that regulations make it easy to test new business ideas.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> P&D, NHC
	3.3.3 Simplify the overall process for registering and opening a business.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> ED, P&D, NHC
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# Theme #4

## Mobility

Strategy	Actions	Timeframe + Cost Community Priority* Partners
<b>1</b> Make streets safe and accessible for everyone	4.1.1 Achieve Vision Zero by working to eliminate pedestrian fatalities and serious injuries.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, WPD, P&D, NCDOT, WMPO
	4.1.2 Fund and support complete streets projects.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #4</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, NCDOT, WMPO
	4.1.3 Improve conditions for walking and biking on key streets.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, NCDOT, WMPO
	4.1.4 Build priority sidewalk and crossing projects from the 2023 Walk Wilmington Plan.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, NCDOT, WMPO
	4.1.5 Add more curb extensions to calm traffic and make crossings safer.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #5</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, NCDOT, Priv Dev
<b>2</b> Build a connected trail network for walking and biking across greater downtown	4.2.1 Design and build the Downtown Trail.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> WMPO, WDOT, D&C, P&D
	4.2.2 Expand the Riverwalk and connect it to Greenfield Lake.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, WMPO
	4.2.3 Plan for a future rail trail on the Southside.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, WMPO

<b>3</b> Make it easier to get around downtown without a car	4.3.1 Make it easier to “park once” and explore.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #2</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, Parking, WAVE
	4.3.2 Improve signs and maps for parking and getting around.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #6</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, WMPO, DSSE, CVB, Parking, C&E
	4.3.3 Help service workers get to work affordably.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #4</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, WMPO, WAVE, Parking, DSSE
	4.3.4 Protect neighborhoods with smarter parking rules.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #7</b> <b>Partners:</b> Parking, P&D, DSSE
	4.3.5 Pilot temporary street closures for pedestrians.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #3</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D, DSSE, WPD, P&R
	4.3.6 Reconnect streets and sidewalks through redevelopment.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #1</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D
	4.3.7 Make bus stops safer and more comfortable.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #5</b> <b>Partners:</b> WAVE, P&D, WMPO, WDOT, D&C
	4.3.8 Expand and protect the city’s bike rack program.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: #8</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, D&C, P&D
	4.3.9 Help spread the word about safe travel habits and why walkable, bikeable communities are good for everyone.	🕒🕒🕒🕒 \$\$\$ <b>Community Priority: NA</b> <b>Partners:</b> WDOT, P&D, WMPO, WPD, C&E

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