

DOWNTOWN SAFETY STRATEGY

Taking action to respond to national trends and issues manifesting in our downtown
October 2023

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

In recent years, downtown districts throughout the nation have found themselves at the confluence of several challenging issues. These issues, which have reverberated beyond downtown and the city limits, include:

- Economic and social impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The growing opioid and overdose crisis in our region and nationwide.
- Increased homelessness due to rapidly increasing housing costs and other factors.

At the same time, additional challenges exacerbated these conditions, including insufficient resources to address behavioral health issues, substance use recovery and incarceration needs, as well as staffing shortages in law enforcement, social work and other services. The culmination of these challenges has led to an increase in open drug use and distribution, theft and vandalism, and increased numbers of visible and vulnerable community members. It has also resulted in increased fear and a general perception of danger amongst community members.

Downtown is everyone's neighborhood. This becomes increasingly clear as we see more people struggling on the streets. Their needs manifest most prominently downtown. This is because people require services, proximity to others, and a sense of safety and belonging to navigate their most difficult times.

Additional Factors and Considerations

- Trends in remote work have reduced the number of daytime office workers.
- Remote work has also allowed an unprecedented number of people to relocate. More people can move to places like Bellingham that offer unmatched recreational opportunities.
- Downtown entertainment, nightlife and dining industries are booming.
- Experiential retail at local brick-and-mortar stores continues to compete with online warehouses as people seek reconnection and authenticity.
- People still flock to downtown as the heart of the community and seek to experience and invest in its success.

Working Together on Solutions

In response to these and other complex and interconnected challenges, City leaders have forged unprecedented partnerships, engaging with not only the public but also the private and non-profit sectors. This approach recognizes that the safety and vitality of downtown depends on diverse perspectives and collaborative action. Business owners, residents, and casual visitors are the lifeblood of downtown. They provide invaluable feedback on what it's like to work, live and visit among multifaceted challenges and play a crucial role in downtown's success.

WHAT IS THE DOWNTOWN SAFETY STRATEGY?

Background

From 2014 through 2020, the City prioritized actions downtown based on the [City Center Implementation Strategy](#). Most of those actions were completed by 2020, when pandemic-related impacts and [recovery efforts](#) took precedence.

In 2020, pandemic responses resulted in:

- Distribution of more than half a million dollars in CARES Recovery Act dollars to downtown businesses,
- Measures to permit and encourage outdoor dining, and
- Other support to business owners and social service agencies.

As the community began to climb out of COVID in 2021, the societal issues described above drove needs to an unprecedented demand. The City responded nimbly and strategically. New partnerships and programs were established to inform how to deploy available resources and identify next steps.

During 2022 and 2023, multi-year, multi-million-dollar strategies focused on public health and safety have been underway, including security personnel, cleaning services, graffiti removal and other measures. These initiatives, detailed beginning on page 6, were identified with participation and feedback from the downtown business community and other stakeholders.

Downtown Safety Workgroup and the Resulting Strategy

In 2023, Bellingham Mayor Seth Fleetwood continued the commitment to this work, including convening a Mayor's Downtown Safety Workgroup. The group:

- Discusses and provides feedback about downtown needs and concerns.
- Helps develop and prioritize downtown initiatives.
- Ensures close contact with downtown business representatives.

The Downtown Safety Strategy outlines the City's approach to addressing challenges downtown with unwavering urgency and a commitment to creative solutions.

A HOLISTIC RESPONSE

As outlined in the [Downtown Bellingham Plan](#), strategies to create a great place reach far beyond safety. As physician and author Dr. Gabor Maté has so eloquently put it, "Safety is not the absence of threat; it is the presence of connection."

"In evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, PPS [[Project for Public Spaces](#)] has found that to be successful, [great places] generally share the following four qualities: they are *accessible*; people are engaged in *activities* there; the space is *comfortable* and has a good image; and finally, it is a *sociable* place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit."

- PPS: *What Makes a Successful Place*

The City has worked with PPS and many other partners for decades to revitalize downtown using this approach. These include “legacy commitments” such as:

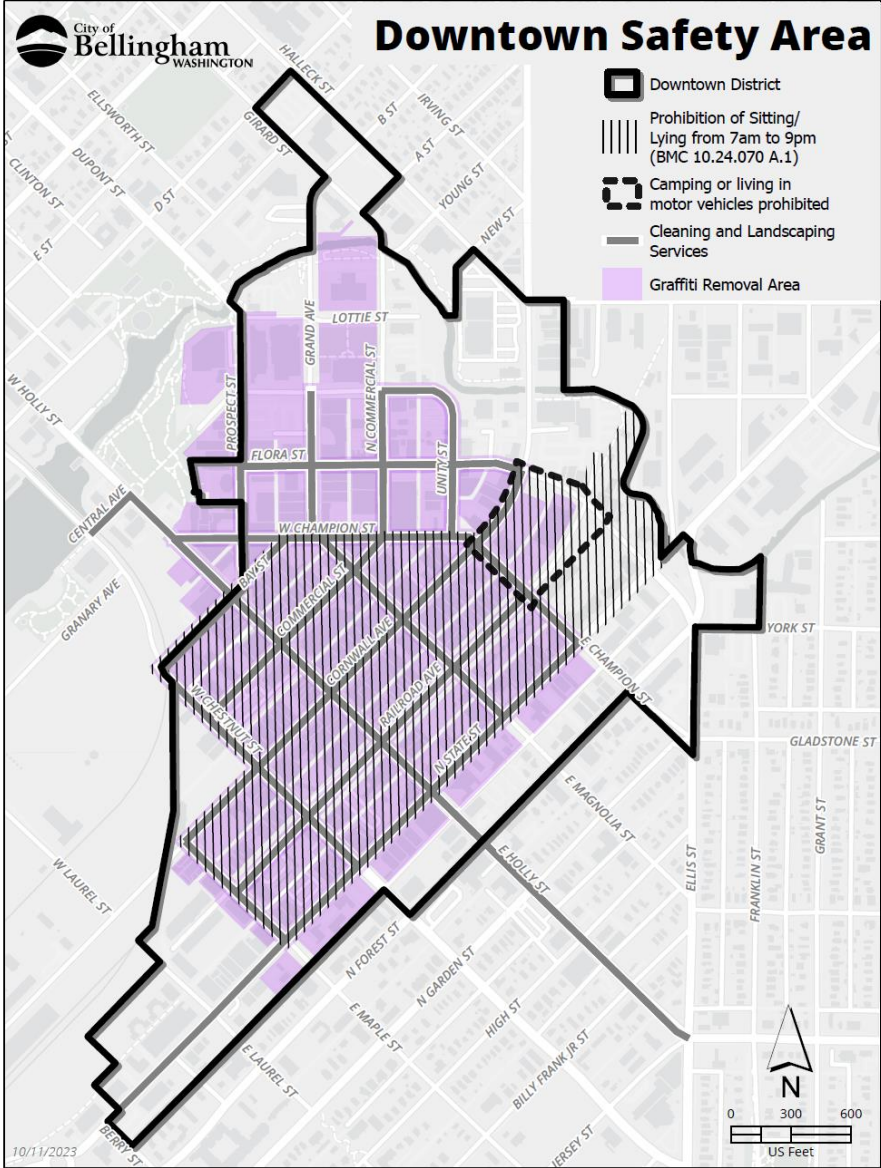
- ❖ **[Financial incentives and funding to encourage construction](#)** of more housing and investments in businesses and commercial development, bringing more customers and eyes on the street. This includes tax credits and impact fee reductions, such as the multifamily tax exemption, B&O tax credit, Transportation Impact Fee reductions, and historic building tax credits.
- ❖ **Funding for [arts](#) and [tourism](#):** This includes financial support for Mount Baker Theatre, Whatcom Museum, the Pickford Film Center, event start-up costs for Signature Events like Seafeast and Northwest Tune-Up, sponsorship of legacy events like Pride Month, WWU student welcome, and support for artwork, murals and activities in highly-visible public spaces.
- ❖ **Developing a [downtown retail strategy](#) and focusing on the activation of ground-floor businesses,** including City-owned storefronts at Commercial Street and Railroad Avenue.
- ❖ **Funding business counseling and support** from the [Small Business Development Center \(SBDC\)](#) to help downtown businesses navigate challenges, plan for growth and access financial resources.
- ❖ **Preserving and promoting downtown historic resources** through [incentives for building renovations](#), [interpretation](#) and [tours](#).
- ❖ **Nimble and responsive [parking](#) and transportation** management and infrastructure investments to support business activity and serve people using all types of [transportation](#).
- ❖ **Funding the [Downtown Bellingham Partnership](#)** to market and support downtown businesses and host events to promote activity and tourism.
- ❖ **Funding the [Downtown Bellingham Partnership](#)** to operate the downtown cleaning, landscaping, safety ambassador and graffiti removal programs, organize alley activation and provide public space improvements.
- ❖ **Partnering with Whatcom County and others** to provide [shelters](#), [behavioral health](#) and [substance use disorder services](#), [affordable housing units](#) and [human services](#).

DOWNTOWN SAFETY AREA

Downtown sidewalks and streets are heavily utilized; it functions as the whole community’s neighborhood. Pedestrians, businesses, shoppers, bicyclists and vehicles vie for limited space. The Downtown Safety Area defines an area of more restrictive use and dedicated resources for keeping streets and sidewalks clean, beautiful and clear. Extensive City services and funding have been dedicated to:

- Intensively clean and remove litter from streets, sidewalks and alleys.
- Provide graffiti removal services to private businesses and public infrastructure.
- Add landscaping, artwork and other amenities.

This area also has restrictions on sitting, lying, and use of parking spaces. This ensures that the sidewalk and street remain clear for everyone’s use.



ACTIONS FOR A SAFE AND WELCOMING DOWNTOWN

The Downtown Plan established a future vision for the neighborhood, based on extensive community feedback. Part of this vision is our commitment to a downtown that is **safe and friendly for people of all ages, income levels and cultures**:

“To capitalize on the many cultural and entertainment options available Downtown, people must feel safe and comfortable. The cleanliness, comfort, and safety of Downtown are key to attracting residential, business and tourism investment. Additionally, accessible tourist resources are essential to a positive visitor experience and influence the likelihood of a future visit or positive recommendation.”

We continue to focus attention and resources on this vision, which shapes and informs our work downtown.

ACTIONS UNDERWAY TO ADDRESS IMMEDIATE NEEDS

A. Response to crime and antisocial behavior

1. Resumed Bellingham Police Department (BPD) foot patrols on an overtime basis, which had been suspended due to limited police staffing.
2. Adopted an ordinance to make it illegal to do drugs in public, responding to a gap in State laws.
3. Hired additional BPD employees to support officers with duties that don't require commissioned officers, freeing up commissioned officers for patrol and enforcement of illegal activity.
4. Employing every available tool to recruit and retain BPD officers to return to maximum staffing with a goal of eventually reestablishing specialty units, such as bike patrol, drug unit, traffic unit, and community officers.
5. Worked with Whatcom County and others to embed an Alternative Response Team (ART) of behavioral health and medical professionals at 911 dispatch to appropriately divert calls for service to the most appropriate teams and free up police response.

B. Response to behavioral health needs

1. Continued mental health and drug courts to divert low-level offenders from jail into necessary treatment.
2. Increased the number of downtown safety patrols through contracts with private security, adding more eyes on the street and connections to other outreach teams.
3. Coordinated safety patrol and outreach teams for maximum coverage and support (private security, safety ambassadors, Homeless Outreach, BPD – including cross-training and enhanced communication).
4. Installed safety ambassador teams downtown and in Maritime Heritage Park to monitor illegal activity and connect visitors to outreach teams and other resources.
5. Increased intensive case management and wrap-around services for those most in need of services (GRACE & LEAD programs) to free up behavioral health, medical and police services for other community members.
6. Expanded outreach services and staff at the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) to connect people experiencing homelessness to housing and basic needs.

7. Partnered with Chuckanut Health Foundation, Whatcom County Health and others on broad education, training and coordinated response to the opioid and meth addiction crisis to increase public understanding, confidence and ability to participate in solutions.
8. Supported the construction of a safe, functional and humane jail and behavioral health center through the upcoming ballot initiative to provide consequences for criminal activity and connect people with the resources to address behavioral health needs.

C. Response to maintain a clean and welcoming downtown

1. Conducted Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) audits and improvements in problem areas (e.g. alleys, parking garages, Unity Circle) to discourage illegal activity.
2. Coordinated cleanup of encampments and increase resources to allow for a prompt, thorough and compassionate response.
3. Established permanent guidelines for streateries & sidewalk cafes to ensure safety, good design and ADA compliance, supporting downtown businesses and adding to positive street life.
4. Scheduled monthly deep cleaning of downtown streets and alleys to address increases in litter and grime.
5. Dedicated weekly cleaning and litter removal in alleys, using specialized equipment to keep them safe and sanitary.

NEXT STEPS TO SUPPORT A SAFE AND WELCOMING DOWNTOWN

A. Response to crime and antisocial behavior

1. Train and onboard 16 new recruits (*as of Oct 2023*) as they complete police academy as BPD continues creative, effective recruiting and retention strategies to reduce personnel shortages and resume full staffing as quickly as possible.
2. Address jail booking and transportation limitations in the short term by partnering with other communities to provide these services as an interim solution to a new Whatcom County jail.
3. Provide trespass authorization branding stickers to downtown businesses to facilitate faster BPD response.

B. Response to homelessness and behavioral health needs

1. Expand Therapeutic Court to offer alternatives to incarceration and pathways to treatment for low-level offenders.
2. Coordinate legislative advocacy to the State and Federal government for increased resources to address the behavioral health and housing affordability crises.
3. Create a partnership with Whatcom County to fund a behavioral health team that will be housed at the Bellingham Public Library to better serve patrons with complex needs.
4. Partner with Whatcom County to deploy an additional \$9M in state funding to increase other behavioral health services, including the Waystation respite and service facility opening in 2024.
5. Provide funding to nonprofit organizations to build additional capacity to provide housing, behavioral health and homeless services.

C. Response to maintain a clean and welcoming downtown

1. Revisit strategies to address long-term vacant buildings, property and underutilized properties, including banks, to activate these areas with businesses, housing and increased foot traffic.
2. Implement CPTED improvements in alleys, parking garages and Unity Circle (e.g. lighting, artwork, graffiti deterrents, access restrictions) to increase safety and public use of these areas.
3. Improve safety and beautification in downtown parking garages to encourage long-term parking in these areas and support commercial tenants.
4. Install and regularly monitor and maintain two new 24-hour public restrooms (“Portland Loos”) in high-visibility locations to increase access to hygiene facilities.
5. Design and install new banners to beautify and elevate the image of downtown.
6. Construct street improvements in Old Town to support redevelopment, including 500 new housing units, adding new customers and increasing foot traffic downtown.
7. Pilot a new bicycle lane to improve bicycle safety on Holly Street.
8. Provide clear wayfinding to connect pedestrians between downtown, waterfront and Old Town, increasing tourism resources and foot traffic between these districts.
9. Prioritize strategies to identify and stimulate catalyst sites for new development, including by means of acquiring public property for additional housing to activate empty lots.
10. Develop and launch a collaborative communication strategy and marketing of the Downtown Safety Strategy to increase community awareness and engagement in solutions.
11. Evaluate the Downtown Retail Strategy and whether to refill the Retail Advocate position to actively recruit new businesses and fill vacant downtown storefronts.
12. Support Whatcom Transportation Authority with the redevelopment of the downtown transit station, including possible housing and supplementary services, to expand bus service and create a hub of activity downtown.

PROPOSED MEASURABLES

We recommend identifying and tracking key metrics to evaluate these actions. By monitoring specific metrics, we will be able to better identify where the City and partners should focus efforts. Possible measurables may include:

Measuring crime

1. Types and frequency of calls to 911/crime reports*: What type of crime is occurring? What are the responses and response times? How many calls are diverted to the Alternate Response Team?
2. Drug distribution enforcement*: What are the number and types of drug enforcement actions occurring? What types and amounts of illegal substances are being confiscated? Where are these enforcement actions occurring? What additional resources are needed to respond?

Measuring homelessness and behavioral health needs

1. Number of people experiencing homelessness*: What does the annual Point-In-Time count tell us about the fluctuation of people experiencing homelessness? Where are they coming from? What are their needs?
2. Number of available behavioral health treatment beds and facilities*: What types of facilities and resources are available? How are they being used? What additional facilities are needed?
3. Types and frequency of responses by outreach teams*: How are the Homeless Outreach, safety ambassador and security teams responding to community needs? Where are incidents occurring? What additional resources are needed?
4. Drug overdose monitoring*: How many overdoses are occurring in the community? What types of overdoses? Where are they occurring?

Measuring a clean and welcoming downtown

1. What is the community perception of downtown safety?* How are the experiences of downtown stakeholders changing over time? This could be obtained through periodic surveys and/or regular focus groups.
2. Cleaning response: How many graffiti tags have been removed? How many businesses are participating in the graffiti removal program? How many tons of garbage have been removed?

Measuring economic development and business support

1. Foot traffic: Where are people visiting? How long are they staying? Where are they coming from?
2. WTA ridership*: How many riders are boarding or visiting downtown? What is the frequency of behavioral issues on WTA buses?
3. Private investment downtown*: How many new buildings (including housing units) are under construction? What are the costs and size of these units?
4. Public investment downtown*: What new public infrastructure and amenities have been built? How is it being used? What events and tourism facilities are being funded? What additional investments are needed?

5. Vacancy data: What is the ground floor vacancy rate within the retail core? What are the characteristics of these spaces? How is vacancy data changing over time?
6. Business success*: How many new businesses have opened? How many have closed? What challenges are businesses facing? How can the City and partners help ensure their success? What do tax revenues tell us about the health of downtown businesses?

**Indicates a measurable already being fully or partially tracked*

CONCLUSION

The Downtown Safety Strategy represents a comprehensive and collaborative response to downtown safety issues. It reflects our determination to address both the symptoms and root causes of the complex challenges faced by downtown districts nationwide. By seeking and deploying additional resources for housing, behavioral health services, and law enforcement, we aim to reduce homelessness, addiction, mental health crises, and crime.

This is a living document. It includes actions that are underway and will be updated as we identify more solutions. The proposed measurables will play a crucial role in gauging the effectiveness of our actions. They will help us determine where adjustments and attention are needed.

While concerns about public safety have been raised, downtown remains the vital hub of community life, drawing residents, visitors, and businesses. The Downtown Safety Strategy is a testament to our community's resilience and determination. It is a commitment to preserving the vitality and charm of our downtown, ensuring it remains the beating heart of our city for generations to come.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Downtown Bellingham Safety Webpage. www.cob.org/downtown-safety

Research Brief: The Death of Downtown? Pandemic Recovery Trajectories across 62 North American Cities. Karen Chapple, Hannah Moore, Michael Leong, Daniel Huang, Amir Forouhar, Laura Schmahmann, Joy Wang, and Jeff Allen. June 2022, updated January 2023: [death of downtown policy brief.pdf \(downtownrecovery.com\)](#)

Public Safety Initiatives: 2022 Public Safety Initiatives for Urban Place Management Organizations. International Downtown Association. 2022. [Publications - International Downtown Association](#)

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design Guidebook. National Crime Prevention Council. October 2003. [Draft1n \(ed.gov\)](#)

Brookings Institution: To Recover from COVID-19, Downtowns Must Adapt. Tracy Hadden Loh and Joanne Kim. April 15, 2021 [To recover from COVID-19, downtowns must adapt | Brookings](#)