



Envision Downtown Open House Local Guide: Vision and Big Moves

April 2026



How To Use This Guide

- 1.** Learn more about the Envision Downtown Madison Project and the development of the Downtown Plan and Downtown Strategy
- 2.** Navigate the open house stations and provide feedback on the content
- 3.** Share your responses in your preferred way:
 - » Interact with the boards in the activity rooms
 - » Scan the QR code (both in this guide and on the boards) to use your phone to respond to the questions about the Big Moves online.
 - » Use the link and respond in the comfort of your own home.

Take the guide home with you!

Room Directory

2nd Floor Hallway - Welcome & Sign-In

Room 202	What We've Heard: Engagement Findings + Emerging Vision and Values
Room 206	What We've Been Doing: Technical Analysis
Room 215	Envision Madison: The Ten Big Moves
Room 204	UW-Madison Student Design Gallery City of Madison staff engaged a UW-Madison Landscape Architecture class to explore open space ideas for areas that were deemed park deficient in previously adopted City Plans. Check out their ideas and concepts for a new downtown park.

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

What is Envision Madison?

Envision Downtown Madison is a strategic partnership between the City of Madison and Downtown Madison, Inc that will guide the future of downtown. It's comprised of two separate but coordinated efforts: the City of Madison's Downtown Area Plan and the Greater Downtown Economic Investment Strategy (or simply, the Downtown Strategy).

What is the Downtown Plan?

The City's Downtown Area Plan will guide growth, public policy, and public investments for land use, housing, infrastructure, parks and recreation, among other items. The Downtown Area Plan builds off the success of the 2012 Downtown Plan.

What is the Downtown Strategy?

The Downtown Strategy is a framework for public and private investment and economic development. It will look at trends and identify opportunities that best support, strengthen and balance the economy, livability, and accessibility of the Greater Downtown Madison area.

Room 202

What We've Heard: Engagement

Downtown Strategy Survey

The survey was designed to reach as many community members and business owners as possible and gather input on key topics shaping the Downtown Area Plan and Greater Downtown Economic Investment Strategy. A total of 630 citywide residents, workers, and Downtown business owners completed the survey, including 112 business respondents and 518 community respondents.

Downtown Strategy Focus Groups

To help shape the Greater Downtown Economic Investment Strategy and broader Envision Downtown effort, the project team conducted 15 interviews and focus groups with stakeholders representing major industries, institutions, employers, and community organizations that play an important role in Downtown's future. Additional feedback was also collected through follow-up questionnaires to help validate key themes and identify emerging opportunities.

Fifteen different focus group interviews were conducted spanning across the following sectors:

- Tourism and Hospitality
- Arts and Entertainment
- Commercial Real Estate
- Banking & Investment
- Infrastructure
- Education
- Athletics & Sports
- Health & Wellness
- Science & Technology

Downtown Area Plan Engagement: Madison Madness

Using a single elimination tournament style "bracket," Madison residents helped to share their priorities for the downtown. Each "team" represented an essential component of a downtown for all. The tournament helped people understand trade-offs and important elements that shape Downtown Madison's future.

Downtown Pop-up Events and Online Mapping Tool

City planning staff handed out over 3,000 pieces of Halloween candy, made hundreds of buttons, and talked to families, students, and downtown adventurers. Families were looking for more reasons to be downtown. Young professionals and students were for unique downtown experiences, third spaces, and access to a future Amtrak station.

Envision Madison Open House

The Envision Madison process kicked off in December 2025 with over 175 participants in person and online. Participants completed three activities to define priorities and highlight issues and opportunities in the downtown.

The 2023 kick-off meeting and downtown pop-up events gave people their chance to tell us their "BIG Ideas" for Downtown Madison.

I wish...
it was easier to get around.

- ... more protection for pedestrians & cyclists.
- ... more accessible for all.
- ... that construction projects wouldn't close lanes or sidewalks.
- ... that there were more car-free spaces.
- ... that State Street was more pedestrian.

More Culture...

- ... & free family events.
- ... & outdoor music.
- ... with variety & diversity.
- ... & public art.

Space for...

- ... people.
- ... recreation.
- ... trees & parks.
- ... playgrounds.
- ... discovery.
- ... a giant slide.

Downtown should...

- ... have a movie theater.
- ... have more "Third Spaces."
- ... fill empty storefronts.
- ... have more winter events.
- ... be memorable.
- ... diverse and welcoming.

More Lake Access...

- ... for food and drink options.
- ... Lake Mendota waterfront path.
- ... to touch water.
- ... for everyone.

I worry...

- ...housing is too expensive.
- ...local businesses are getting pushed out.
- ...about being safe at night.



What's your **BIG** idea for Downtown?
What's your **LITTLE** idea?
What's your **FUTURISTIC** idea?

possible to share /
 open markets
 1. Location
 2. Access
 3. Cost
 4. Quality
 5. Quantity
 6. Timing
 7. Flexibility
 8. Reliability
 9. Security
 10. Convenience
 11. Comfort
 12. Health
 13. Environment
 14. Community
 15. Future
 16. History
 17. Tradition
 18. Identity
 19. Values
 20. Beliefs
 21. Attitudes
 22. Behaviors
 23. Interactions
 24. Relationships
 25. Networks
 26. Systems
 27. Processes
 28. Outcomes
 29. Impacts
 30. Legacy
 31. Stewardship
 32. Responsibility
 33. Accountability
 34. Transparency
 35. Integrity
 36. Honesty
 37. Openness
 38. Communication
 39. Collaboration
 40. Participation
 41. Empowerment
 42. Ownership
 43. Control
 44. Influence
 45. Voice
 46. Choice
 47. Freedom
 48. Autonomy
 49. Independence
 50. Self-determination
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WHAT WE'VE HEARD: ENGAGEMENT

After you have visited room 202 and reviewed the materials, did anything surprise you? What questions or comments do you have? Share your thoughts below!

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ROOM 206: WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING

After you have visited the room 206 and reviewed the materials, did anything surprise you? What questions or comments do you have? Share your thoughts below!

EMERGING VISION AND VALUES

WHERE DID THESE COME FROM?

The City of Madison's Comprehensive Plan—Imagine Madison (2023)—and the Downtown Madison, Inc. Strategic Plan (2022–2028) together define key goals and values that guide the future of Downtown. The Strategic Plan includes a set of five paired values to help articulate how DMI and its members advance the vision for Downtown.

Through the Envision Downtown engagement process, these priorities have been strongly reinforced by the community and are reflected here as the Vision Elements and Values for Greater Downtown. One new, sixth vision element/value has also emerged as a consistent theme in conversations about how Downtown can continue to evolve and improve.

Please review the Vision Elements and Values below and head to room 202 to share your feedback!

Experiential & Engaging Downtown

Greater Downtown is a multi-faceted gathering place that offers immersive and memorable experiences for all. Through a unique and dynamic collection of destinations, events, programming, and public spaces, Greater Downtown cultivates authentic connections to people and place.

Economically Vibrant & Inclusive Downtown

Greater Downtown is an economically thriving mixed-use activity center with businesses, diverse employment, housing, shopping, dining, cultural, and entertainment offerings that attract, serve, and reflect all Madison residents.

Safe & Welcoming Downtown

The Greater Downtown environment and experience are comfortable and inviting for all employers, employees, residents, and visitors regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, mobility, or other identifying characteristics.

Diverse & Equitable Downtown

Greater Downtown celebrates the diversity and history of the Madison community. Through intentional inclusivity, dedicated resources, cultural competency, collaborative partnerships, and authentic representation, downtown creates spaces where everyone belongs and independent, minority, and women leaders and entrepreneurs are actively supported, empowered, and celebrated.

Connected & Accessible Downtown

Greater Downtown promotes accessible movement and mobility in and around Downtown with well-connected, multi-modal transportation networks that link key destinations, services, retail, entertainment, and the lakes is essential for a healthy and thriving Downtown.

Sustainable & Resilient Downtown

Greater Downtown Madison embraces sustainability and resilience as core principles for our future. By working together to address environmental, social, and economic challenges, the Greater Downtown creates adaptive solutions and lasting impact through education, advocacy, and collaborative partnerships that ensure continued prosperity and vitality for all.

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EMERGING VISION AND VALUES

Circle the two vision elements and values that resonates the most with you?

Economically Vibrant & Inclusive Downtown

Experiential & Engaging Downtown

Safe & Welcoming Downtown

Diverse & Equitable Downtown

Connected & Accessible Downtown

Sustainable & Resilient Downtown

Tell us a little about why they resonate with you.

Is there anything missing?

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ENVISION MADISON

THE TEN BIG MOVES

Welcome to the conversation!

Greater Downtown Madison is evolving—and we want your input.

We're introducing 10 Big Moves that represent early ideas for how Downtown could grow and improve over time. These are not final decisions or commitments, but examples meant to spark conversation and gather feedback.

Step 1: Review the Big Moves

Walk through each Big Move and consider its potential impact on Downtown.

Step 2: Rate the Impact

For each Big Move, place a dot sticker on the scale to indicate the level of impact you think it would have on downtown.

Step 3: Go Deeper (Optional)

If you want to share more detailed ideas, scan the QR code to provide feedback on potential partnerships, implementation ideas, opportunities, concerns, or additional areas of impact we should



SCAN ME!



WHAT THESE BIG MOVES ARE

- » Early ideas for how Downtown could evolve
- » Based on community input, planning work, and existing strengths
- » Meant to explore possibilities—not select final projects
- » A starting point for understanding potential directions

WHAT THESE BIG MOVES ARE NOT

- » Final plans or approved projects
- » Funding commitments or construction schedules
- » Fixed priorities or guaranteed outcomes
- » The only ideas being considered for

YOUR INPUT SHAPES WHAT COMES NEXT!

These Big Moves will be refined based on community feedback and further analysis. Your ideas will help shape the next phase of planning for Greater Downtown Madison.

THE BIG MOVES COME ON DOWN(TOWN)



Become one of the easiest downtowns to get to, and make downtown enjoyable, safe, and clear to navigate with or without a car.

Downtown still feels harder to get to and move through than it needs to. Successfully attracting more residents, employees, and visitors will make reliance on driving as the main way to get to and through Downtown even more challenging. That came through clearly in discussions around driving, parking, walking, biking, transit, accessibility, and wayfinding. Madison already has strong building blocks to work with, including BRT, a strong bike culture, and a compact Downtown. **The goal is a Downtown that is less dependent on any one way of getting around and that feels easier, calmer, safer, and more enjoyable to travel to and around.**

Illustrative Targets

- Increase transit, walking, and biking for trips to Downtown.
- Increase transit, walking, biking, and micromobility for trips within Downtown.
- Improve ease and comfort for people moving between key Downtown destinations.
- Achieve “better than ADA” accessibility for public spaces.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Better wayfinding, park-once options, and easier connections between all parts of Downtown.
- Stronger transit service within Downtown, especially for evenings, weekends, and major events
- Safer and clearer walking, biking, and micromobility connections.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Boulder, CO pedestrian streets; Chattanooga, TN electric shuttle; Vancouver, BC water taxi; Providence, RI waterfront trail linking destinations

THE BIG MOVES COME ON DOWN(TOWN)



Supporting Information...

What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Survey Says:
 - » 49% of respondents drive into the Greater Downtown Madison area. Many cite parking and traffic their top concerns
 - » Transit frequency is the defining challenge for young people when traveling downtown (40% of 18-34 year olds)
- Focus Group Participants talk about getting to and around Downtown:
 - » Parking often feels limited, expensive, or hard to find
 - » Transit can feel limited in timing, coverage, and convenience
 - » Walking routes can feel disconnected or inactive

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Downtown Madison is a destination for all of Madison, Dane County, and Wisconsin. People make their way downtown. The City has made strides to make the downtown more accessible by transit and bicycles. However, our street network and constrained geography of the isthmus make wayfinding difficult for those not familiar with street patterns. (see Getting to Downtown - Travel Sheds, Transit, Park Once - Room 206)
- Madison has lots of events, activities, and experiences in a compact space. There are still opportunities to enhance experiences for pedestrians and bicyclists. Some intersections are less comfortable for users on foot or on wheels. (see Identifying Safety & Connectivity Gaps - Room 206)
- Madison has lots of events, activities, and experiences in a compact space. There are still opportunities to enhance experiences for pedestrians and bicyclists. Some intersections are less comfortable for users on foot or on wheels. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Getting to and through Downtown - Room 206)
 - » >50% commuters to Downtown that Drive alone to work
 - » >90% Commuters to Downtown that leave downtown without lingering
 - » 67% Trips into Downtown by people that live within 50 miles

THE BIG MOVES

CURATE UNFORGETTABLE DISTRICTS



Cultivate and promote several thriving districts within the Greater Downtown that are memorable, walkable, and well-connected.

Right now, Downtown can feel like one large area rather than a collection of unique visitor destination districts with their own identity and sense of place. At the same time, Madison already has the raw material for stronger districts, including State Street, the Square, the lakes, clusters of commercial activity, and other unique but emerging areas. And new development has the ability to move the dial for the better or for the worse. The goal is not to force a “brand” onto every block. **As Downtown grows, this is about celebrating unique cultures and offerings in Madison, complementing and serving neighborhoods, avoiding homogeneity, and making different parts of Downtown easier to understand, easier to navigate, and easier to remember.**

Illustrative Targets

- Create a clearer set of Downtown districts with their own feel and purpose.
- Make districts feel “stickier” so people spend more time in an area strolling and visiting more destinations.
- Lengthen the time people spend Downtown and increase the number of districts visited per trip.
- Make Downtown easier to understand and remember.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- District-specific signage, lighting, art, and branding improvements.
- Streetscape and public space upgrades that make each area feel more distinct.
- Programming and business mix strategies that reinforce local flavor and identity.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Charleston, SC shopping on Kings Street; Pittsburgh, PA downtown restaurants; Portland, OR Mississippi Avenue; Pittsburgh, PA Strip District

THE BIG MOVES

CURATE UNFORGETTABLE DISTRICTS



Supporting Information...

What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Survey Says:
 - » 2 in 3 respondents stated they primarily engage with Greater Downtown Madison for entertainment and leisure (outside of work or living).
 - » Events remain the central driver for most visitors. Downtown residents, City visitors, Dane County commuters, young adults, families, and tourists share a desire for more reasons to visit and more experiences that meet their wide interests.
- Focus Group Participants talk about inclusion and belonging:
 - » Does not always feel equally welcoming to all
 - » Must grow in ways that are intentionally diverse and inclusive
 - » Should better reflect people in its spaces, events, and culture

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Downtown has seen significant change since the last Downtown Plan in 2012. Over 9,000 new neighbors made the Downtown their home.
 - » COVID-19 changed the employment landscape and day-to-day rhythm of the downtown experience, but downtown is still poised to see tremendous growth and opportunities.
 - » Several major redevelopment opportunities, surface parking lots, and a shift in State government has opened up new avenues for downtown change. (see Areas of Change - Past & Future - Room 206)
- Downtown's current users skew towards students, higher-income workers, and visitors. The mix of housing, retail, and recreation reflects that. At the same time, some categories - families with children, seniors, lower-income workers, and people of color - are missing or underrepresented among Downtown's users. The mix of housing options, shopping and dining locations, and event and programming attractions can better support a wider audience that intentionally invites missing and underrepresented users into Downtown and encourages them to stay for longer. A Downtown that works for all is stronger and more resilient - economically and otherwise. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Who's Here, Who's Coming, and Who's Missing - Room 206)

THE BIG MOVES PUT THE "THERE" BACK IN STATE AND SQUARE



Make the ground floors along State Street and the Square reflections of the diverse, high quality offerings Madison and Wisconsin have to offer.

State Street and the Square, as Wisconsin's capital, are still Downtown's symbolic center and one of the community's most important shared places. What happens here sends a message about Downtown as a whole. **As Wisconsin's capital, these are signature public spaces with the largest collection of ground floor commercial spaces and the opportunity to offer more for a greater diversity of people.** With their locations between Downtown's largest institutional anchors, high level of visibility, and importance to locals and visitors, this area can be Downtown's most recognizable district and strongest amplifier of its energy, character, and investment.

Illustrative Targets

- Strengthen State Street and the Square as Downtown's most recognizable and memorable district.
- Improve the mix of uses and the day-to-day experience to be more welcoming and more reflective of and attractive to all Madisonians.
- Make this area more active throughout the week and all seasons.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Ground-floor activation and support for a stronger mix of tenants and uses, including retail to better balance with food and beverage offerings.
- Public realm improvements that make the corridor and square more inviting, better for events, and more flexible for a variety of formal and informal programming.
- A clearer plan for how this area connects the University, the Square, and nearby districts

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Boulder, CO Pearl Street Pedestrian Mall; Charleston, SC Kings Street; Indianapolis, IN Massachusetts Avenue; Indianapolis, IN Massachusetts Avenue

THE BIG MOVES PUT THE "THERE" BACK IN STATE AND SQUARE

Supporting Information...



What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Survey Says:
 - » 78% of respondents rated the Greater Downtown Madison economy as 'moderately' or 'very strong'. The majority of people rated it moderately strong which means they feel it is doing well, but there is some room for improvement too. Retail and entertainment, higher education, and tourism are the most important perceived drivers of economic growth.
 - » 68.3% of respondents perceive 'retail and entertainment' as vital for growth in the Downtown
- Focus Group Participants talk about public spaces and experiences:
 - » Downtown includes strong retail and restaurant corridors and districts, while others need improvement

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Downtown's economy is driven by four key pillars: UW-Madison, government offices, fast-growing creative and innovation sectors, and a thriving hospitality and tourism market. Each provides real strengths, but each also has vulnerabilities. Remote and hybrid work shifts thinned out the weekday population. State office consolidation cut into a once-sizable worker base. Innovation and tech jobs are growing faster in other regional hubs than they are Downtown. Visitors are also spending an increasing share of their time outside of Downtown, though Downtown remains the primary regional draw. Amidst growing regional competition and broader workforce shifts, Downtown needs renewed attention to attract and retain jobs and commercial assets. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Employment and Economy - Room 206)

THE BIG MOVES REIMAGINE PEOPLE SPACES AND PLACES



Expand and rethink the delivery, ownership, programming, and operations of public spaces and who they serve.

Downtown needs more places where people want to stay, not just pass through. Madison already has a strong foundation of parks, streets, gathering places, and public destinations, but there is a growing number of residents, workers, and visitors asking for more safety, more comfort, more variety, and more low-cost things to do. With constraints on the amount of traditional park land that can be added, **Downtown will need to be more creative in using streets, street ends, parking, plazas, balconies, rooftops, and the lakes to create more places and spaces that are safe, attractive, and accessible to the public.** The goal is a Downtown that feels useful and welcoming to a more diverse audience in everyday life, not only for a select few and not only during special events.

Illustrative Targets

- Create more places where people want to stay, gather, and return.
- Expand low-cost and free things to do Downtown.
- Increase the number of indoor and outdoor spaces available to the public for free.
- Make Downtown more comfortable for everyday use, not just special events.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- New or improved plazas, play spaces, seating areas, and year-round gathering places—both in the public realm and as part of new development/redevelopment.
- Reuse of select leasable ground-floor spaces for community-serving or experience-based uses.
- Creation of a program promoting privately-owned public spaces that incentivizes, coordinates, and promotes these spaces.
- Improvements to existing public space that support a greater diversity of residents, longer visits, and more daily activity.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: San Francisco, CA “Privately Owned Public Open Spaces”; New York, NY “Privately Owned Public Spaces”; San Francisco, CA parklet; Asheville, NC Pack Square Park

THE BIG MOVES REIMAGINE PEOPLE SPACES AND PLACES



Supporting Information...

What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- “People are attracted to places due to the energy and it is contagious. When parts of State Street or the Square “feel” quiet or empty or you have to walk too far from one activated space to the next activated space, it can be a turn-off. “ - Focus Group Participant
- Survey Says:
 - » An overwhelming majority of respondents (92%) identified parks, lakes, and public spaces as essential for a thriving Greater Downtown economy. Other top rated priorities include Arts & Music, Local businesses, UW-Madison, and the tourism sector.
 - » 2 in 3 respondents stated they primarily engage with Greater Downtown Madison for entertainment and leisure (outside of work or living).
 - » Events remain the central driver for most visitors. Downtown residents, City visitors, Dane County commuters, young adults, families, and tourists share a desire for more reasons to visit and more experiences that meet their wide interests.

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- With downtown population growth, there is more pressure on public open space to serve residents and visitors. We must ensure existing open spaces are meeting the needs of the downtown and look for new ways to enhance access to the lakes. (see Parks and Open Space - Room 206)
- Downtown has grown fast, outpacing citywide and regional growth since 2010. This momentum creates both opportunity and urgency. Rising costs, shifting visitor and workforce patterns, limited land, and access constraints impact Downtown’s vitality and challenge future growth. Increasing competition from other regional attractions requires Downtown to reimagine what makes it unique and desirable to users. Decisions and actions taken now will shape what Downtown looks and feels like as growth continues here and across the region. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Downtown at a Crossroads - Room 206)
 - » +55% Downtown total population growth 2010-2023
 - » +20% Madison citywide total population growth 2010-2023
 - » +18% Dane County total population growth 2010-2023

THE BIG MOVES

FEEL THE LAKE EFFECT



Leverage the lakes and lakefronts for access, activation, recreation, and connectivity.

Madison is one of just two U.S. cities with a downtown located on an isthmus, and the fact that downtown is surrounded by lakes is one of Madison's biggest advantages. However, the lakes do not always feel as central and connected to Downtown as they could. There are already several signature community events that celebrate the lakes, and a strong interest in recreation, views, trails, and improving the overall waterfront experience. With that said, there is a big difference between being a city on a lake and being a celebrated waterfront community. **The goal is to make the lakes feel more integral to daily life Downtown, more important to how people experience the city, and a stronger complement to other destinations in Greater Downtown.**

Illustrative Targets

- Better connect Downtown to the lakes and waterfront experience.
- Expand year-round recreation and activity on and near the water.
- Make the lakes feel more central to Downtown life.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Better pedestrian and bike connections to the waterfront.
- Full implementation of the Lakeway project.
- Public space and recreation improvements along the water.
- Increased education about water safety and the lakes
- New programming, amenities, and destinations tied to the lakefronts and the lakes themselves.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Boston, MA Wharf District Parks; Boston, MA Harborwalk; Tampa, FL Riverwalk; Seattle, WA Overlook Walk

THE BIG MOVES

FEEL THE LAKE EFFECT



Supporting Information...

What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Focus Group Participants talk about public spaces and experiences:
 - » Benefits from lakes that are a standout but underused asset
 - » Needs more waterfront access, gathering spaces, and evening activity
- At the first Envision Madison Open House (2025), participants stated their Big Idea for Downtown included more lake access for food and drink, to touch the water, for everyone, and a Lake Mendota waterfront path.
- Survey Says:
 - » 78% look forward to enjoying a variety of eating / drinking options
 - » 46% look forward to gathering for social meet-ups

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Madison has lots of events, activities, and experiences in a compact space. There are still opportunities to enhance experiences for pedestrians and bicyclists. Some intersections are less comfortable for users on foot or on wheels. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Getting to and through Downtown - Room 206)
- People who visit Downtown - including Madison and Dane County residents as well as visitors from further away - are a major economic driver. These “guests” in Downtown support local businesses, patronize arts & cultural institutions, and create a consistent presence that supports a strong sense of place. At the same time, the tourism & hospitality sectors face challenges. Affordability, public safety perceptions, and physical access to and within Downtown may discourage guests from coming Downtown or staying longer. Meanwhile, growing regional competition creates strong attractions for people elsewhere in and around Dane County. Improvements that grow, diversify, and connect Downtown attractions - including shops and restaurants, cultural institutions, and outdoor spaces like the lakes - can help support a thriving guest experience and drive economic activity. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Tourism and Hospitality - Room 206)
 - » 60% of guests to Dane County never set foot in Downtown Madison in 2025
 - » \$327M of visitor spending in Downtown 2024

THE BIG MOVES

DRIVE THE NEXT GEN ECONOMY



Attract investment and growth in existing economic anchors, growing business sectors, and new jobs and businesses.

Downtown has a role to play in the future of Madison's next economy, especially because of its ties to UW, homegrown businesses, and the city's broader innovation base. Recent shifts toward hybrid and remote work, along with government job relocations and changing space needs, have created near-term challenges for Downtown's traditional employment base. At the same time, the strongest future demand may look different from older office patterns, with more need for flexible space, collaboration, and stronger links between talent and business growth.

Downtown can serve as a central gathering hub and support center for the larger regional economy. Discussions also highlight opportunities for downtown businesses to better attract, serve, and reflect the increasingly diverse local and regional population. The goal is to make Downtown a visible and useful part of Madison's innovation ecosystem.

Illustrative Targets

- Strengthen Downtown's role in Madison's innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem.
- Create more space and support for growing firms, talent, and new ideas.
- Better connect Downtown to lifelong education and university-driven innovation.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Flexible spaces for startups, research partnerships, and innovation activity.
- Programs or partnerships that connect students, founders, and employers.
- Mixed-use development that ensures space for jobs and businesses alongside more housing.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Nashville, TN Entrepreneur Center; Austin, TX Downtown Innovation District by University of Texas; Pittsburgh, PA Carnegie Mellon University Robotics Innovation Center; Pittsburgh, PA Bakery Square mixed-use district

THE BIG MOVES DRIVE THE NEXT GEN ECONOMY



Supporting Information...

What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Survey Says:
 - » 78% of respondents rated the Greater Downtown Madison economy as 'moderately' or 'very strong'. While the majority of respondents feel it is doing well, there is some room for improvement too. Retail and entertainment, higher education, and tourism are the most important perceived drivers of economic growth.
 - » 68% of business owners overwhelmingly plan to stay or expand their businesses in the region
 - » Business Opportunity Areas
 - » High costs of entry and access to capital constrain business growth. Twice as many BIPOC business respondents identified high costs of entry as a barrier compared to other businesses.
 - » Non-traditional owners experience structural barriers across every section — permitting, access, cost, and transit.
 - » Business equity will remain a requirement

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Downtown's economy is driven by four key pillars: UW-Madison, government offices, fast-growing creative and innovation sectors, and a thriving hospitality and tourism market. Each provides real strengths, but each also has vulnerabilities. Remote and hybrid work shifts thinned out the weekday population. State office consolidation cut into a once-sizable worker base. Innovation and tech jobs are growing faster in other regional hubs than they are Downtown. Visitors are also spending an increasing share of their time outside of Downtown, though Downtown remains the primary regional draw. Amidst growing regional competition and broader workforce shifts, Downtown needs renewed attention to attract and retain jobs and commercial assets. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Employment and Economy - Room 206)
 - » 3x4x increase in remote/hybrid workers whose jobs are based in Downtown since 202
- Downtown has grown fast, outpacing citywide and regional growth since 2010. This momentum creates both opportunity and urgency. Rising costs, shifting visitor and workforce patterns, limited land, and access constraints impact Downtown's vitality and challenge future growth. Increasing competition from other regional attractions requires Downtown to reimagine what makes it unique and desirable to users. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Downtown at a Crossroads - Room 206)

THE BIG MOVES MAKE DOWNTOWN A DIVERSE AND COMPLETE NEIGHBORHOOD



Deliver more housing for more people and support housing choices with amenities that serve daily needs.

Downtown housing needs to work for a wider range of people than it does today. With the largest number of housing units being apartments and detached homes with a heavy emphasis on serving students, there are opportunities to attract and serve a more diverse downtown residential base. Discussions have pointed to gaps in single-family attached products, family-sized housing, ownership options, attainable and workforce housing, supportive housing, and other housing supporting older adults, as well as the amenities and services to support a livable downtown. Madison already has strong housing demand and continued population growth to build on. **The goal is a Downtown with more people, more housing choices, and more resident-serving retail and amenities for a broader mix of households.**

Illustrative Targets

- Add more housing choices for a wider range of people and households.
- Support a more mixed-income, mixed-age, and mixed ownership Downtown.
- Increase housing types that are limited today, including family-sized and ownership options.
- Increase access to daily goods and services.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Incentives for mixed-income and workforce housing.
- Support for a broader mix of housing types and unit sizes.
- Housing tied to walkable areas, transit, and everyday amenities.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Boston, MA triple-decker homes; Jersey City, NJ Journal Square transit-oriented development; San Diego, CA East Village District housing; San Diego, CA townhomes in Little Italy

THE BIG MOVES MAKE DOWNTOWN A DIVERSE AND COMPLETE NEIGHBORHOOD

Supporting Information...



What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Focus Group participants talk affordability and access:
 - » Face cost barriers across housing, transportation, and daily activities
 - » Need more affordable options for food, events, and entertainment
 - » Need more housing choices for families, seniors, and young professionals
- Survey Says:
 - » Top factors for business growth includes affordable commercial space, streamlined permitting and regulatory processes, housing supply and mixture, and incentives and grants

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Downtown has seen significant change since the last Downtown Plan in 2012. Over 9,000 new neighbors made the Downtown their home. (see Areas of Change - Past & Future - Room 206)
 - » 7,500 homes were added, which is 1/3 of all downtown housing but housing is less affordable. 43% spend half of their income on rent
- Downtown has dramatically increased its housing stock and grown commercial real estate offerings in the last 15 years. Investors and businesses look here first for opportunities to build and grow. However, mounting affordability pressures and demand for a wider diversity of physical spaces create barriers for residents, businesses, and developers looking to enter or remain in Downtown. A wider range of housing options, including affordable units, family and workforce housing, condos and homeownership opportunities, and senior and supportive housing are needed to make Downtown a welcoming place to live for all. Meanwhile, real estate investment must diversify and expand office and retail offerings in a constrained physical environment with few clear sites for catalytic development. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Housing and Real Estate - Room 206)

THE BIG MOVES ELEVATE THE ARTS, CULTURE, AND ENTERTAINMENT SCENE



Establish a sustainable roadmap and set of tools for better connecting, activating, funding, and promoting Madison's great existing events, venues, and cultural and historic resources.

Arts, culture, and entertainment are already one of the strongest advantages of Madison's Greater Downtown. The issue is not whether this matters, but how to build on it in a way that results in a sustainable ongoing funding and organizational strategy, supports maintenance and reinvestment in existing events, venues, and cultural and historic resources. **Better showcasing the existing arts, culture, and entertainment scene and better wrapping it into the urban fabric of Downtown can create even more activity, more variety, and more reasons to come Downtown beyond just food and drink.**

Illustrative Targets

- Build on Downtown's role as a major arts, culture, and events destination.
- Expand activity throughout the year.
- Increase number and diversity of people attending events Downtown.
- Integrate more visible and recognizable placemaking with activation through public art, the arts, and entertainment. Give people more reasons to come Downtown beyond food and drink.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Better coordination across venues and destinations.
- Exploration of a dedicated funding stream to reinvest in existing events and venues.
- Support for cultural programming, public art, and events.
- Space and support for artists, makers, and creative activity.
- Improved coordination and support around larger events that draw visitors.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Pittsburgh, PA Cultural Trust programming; Columbus, OH Short North Arts District; Knoxville, TN downtown events; Columbus, OH gallery hop

THE BIG MOVES ELEVATE THE ARTS, CULTURE, AND ENTERTAINMENT SCENE

Supporting Information...



What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Focus Group Participants talk arts, culture, and activity:
 - » Madison offers a unique concentration of arts, events, and venues
 - » Downtown drives local pride and national visibility through major attractions
 - » Downtown relies on regular events to sustain Downtown's energy and economy
- Survey Says:
 - » Businesses are staying - and some are ready to grow. Most plan to maintain operations or even expand. To support that, businesses identified key needs. Arts, Culture, and Creative (55%) was the top service and amenities needed to incentivize economic growth in Greater Downtown.

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Downtown is where Madison comes together to experience music, art, history, and events. They influence the experience and perceptions of the city's public spaces.
 - » Highest Concentration of cultural venues in the city
 - » Concentrated along the spine of State Street through King Street
 - » Often are a primary reason for people to visit downtown (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Getting to and through Downtown - Room 206)
- People who visit Downtown - including Madison and Dane County residents as well as visitors from further away - are a major economic driver. These "guests" in Downtown support local businesses, patronize arts & cultural institutions, and create a consistent presence that supports a strong sense of place. At the same time, the tourism & hospitality sectors face challenges. Affordability, public safety perceptions, and physical access to and within Downtown may discourage guests from coming Downtown or staying longer. Meanwhile, growing regional competition creates strong attractions for people elsewhere in and around Dane County. Improvements that grow, diversify, and connect Downtown attractions - including shops and restaurants, cultural institutions, and outdoor spaces like the lakes - can help support a thriving guest experience and drive economic activity. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Tourism and Hospitality - Room 206)
 - » \$327M of visitor spending in Downtown 2024
 - » \$1B+ Annual economic impact of arts and cultural attractions in Dane County

THE BIG MOVES BECOME THE HEALTHIEST AND GREENEST DOWNTOWN



Promote and support community and environmental health with green infrastructure, development, and recreation.

As Greater Downtown grows, people want it to feel cleaner, greener, and easier to use. Madison already has a strong culture of health, a strong environmental ethic, and a strong bike and outdoor recreation culture to build on. Achieving this vision will require investments in greener infrastructure and everyday mobility, including expanded tree canopy, green stormwater features, and safer, better-connected pedestrian and bike networks that make it easier to access Downtown and move between its existing destinations, neighborhoods, parks, and waterfront assets. **The goal is a Downtown that feels healthier, more resilient, and more pleasant in everyday life.**

Illustrative Targets

- Make Downtown easier to use, more sustainable, and more resilient.
- Improve everyday cleanliness, comfort, and the public realm.
- Reduce the environmental impact of future growth.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Greener streets (e.g., green stormwater features), more shade (e.g., increased tree canopy), and more climate-responsive features.
- Cleaner, safer, and better-maintained public spaces.
- Better integration of recreational opportunities in Downtown and Greater Downtown.
- Sustainability features tied to new development and infrastructure upgrades.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Portland, OR South Park Blocks; Washington D.C. bioswales; Portland, OR green streets; Austin, TX Lady Bird Lake waterfront

THE BIG MOVES

DRIVE THE NEXT GEN ECONOMY



Supporting Information...

What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Survey Says:
 - » Business Pride & Strengths - Business owners celebrate walkability, diverse customer segments, and special events as factors that drive business success. When asked what the best parts of owning a business in the Greater Downtown Area, respondents said the 'walkability', 'shop proximity', 'special events', 'street vibrancy', with 'natural setting' rounding out the top 5.

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- With downtown population growth, there is more pressure on public open space to serve residents and visitors. We must ensure existing open spaces are meeting the needs of the downtown and look for new ways to enhance access to the lakes. (see Parks and Open Space - Room 206)
- Beyond parks, adding and preserving our tree canopy provides welcome shade, improves air quality, and reduces the heat island effect in a mostly paved downtown. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Downtown at a Crossroads - Room 206)

THE BIG MOVES INFUSE LEARNING, PLAY, AND DISCOVERY



Reshape one or more districts in Downtown as a can't miss destination for kids and families.

The Greater Downtown needs to work better for families if it wants to draw more local and regional users over time. Madison already has strong family-oriented assets and destinations, but those largely are housed in individual venues and a handful of events. Children and families represent a largely untapped market for Downtown. Discussions have suggested there are not enough family-friendly and multi-generational amenities and offerings spread across Downtown, ranging from restaurants, shops, art, and public spaces. **The goal is not to make this the only story, but to make sure families of all shapes and sizes are better served across many parts of Downtown.**

Illustrative Targets

- Make one or more Downtown districts more welcoming and useful for families.
- Increase family-oriented visits and activities.
- Better connect students with the business community.
- Build more reasons for local households to come Downtown regularly.

Illustrative Public And/Or Private Investments

- Family-friendly public spaces, restrooms, seating, art, and play features.
- More low-cost family programming and events.
- Family-friendly interpretive signage and other storytelling elements.
- Better family-oriented amenities across one or more districts and destinations.

TELL US WHAT
You THINK!



IDEAS IN ACTION



L to R: Vancouver, BC play area in Science World; Halifax, NS waterfront park; Boulder, CO Pearl Street Pedestrian Mall play area; Halifax, NS waterfront hammocks

THE BIG MOVES INFUSE LEARNING, PLAY, AND DISCOVERY



Supporting Information...

What We've Heard

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 202

- Survey Says:
 - » When asked what they most look forward to doing
 - » 78% said enjoying a variety of eating / drinking options
 - » 61% said attending special events like the Market
 - » 46% said gathering for social meet-ups

What We've Learned

Interested in Learning More? Go to Room 206

- Downtown's current users skew towards students, higher-income workers, and visitors. The mix of housing, retail, and recreation reflects that. At the same time, some categories - families with children, seniors, lower-income workers, and people of color - are missing or underrepresented among Downtown's users. The mix of housing options, shopping and dining locations, and event and programming attractions can better support a wider audience that intentionally invites missing and underrepresented users into Downtown and encourages them to stay for longer. A Downtown that works for all is stronger and more resilient - economically and otherwise. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Who's Here, Who's Coming, and Who's Missing - Room 206)
- Downtown has dramatically increased its housing stock and grown commercial real estate offerings in the last 15 years. Investors and businesses look here first for opportunities to build and grow. However, mounting affordability pressures and demand for a wider diversity of physical spaces create barriers for residents, businesses, and developers looking to enter or remain in Downtown. A wider range of housing options, including affordable units, family and workforce housing, condos and homeownership opportunities, and senior and supportive housing are needed to make Downtown a welcoming place to live for all. Meanwhile, real estate investment must diversify and expand office and retail offerings in a constrained physical environment with few clear sites for catalytic development. (see Existing Conditions Analysis: Housing and Real Estate - Room 206)

RIP OR CUT HERE AND LEAVE AT
THE SIGN-IN DESK ON YOUR WAY
OUT!



THE BIG MOVES

Now that you've learned about each Big Move, which one are you most excited about? Ask Staff for a gold star and add it to that Board!

Come on Down(town): Become one of the easiest downtowns to get to, and make downtown enjoyable, safe, and clear to navigate with or without a car

Curate Unforgettable Districts: Cultivate and promote several thriving districts within the Greater Downtown that are memorable, walkable, and well-connected

Put the "There" Back in State and Square: Make the ground floors along State Street and the Square reflections of the diverse, high quality offerings Madison and Wisconsin have to offer

Reimagine People Spaces and Places: Expand and rethink the delivery, ownership, programming, and operations of public spaces and who they serve

Feel the Lake Effect: Leverage the lakes and lakefronts for access, activation, recreation, and connectivity

Drive the Next Gen Economy: Attract investment and growth in existing economic anchors, growing business sectors, and new jobs and businesses

Make Downtown a Diverse and Complete Neighborhood: Deliver more housing for more people and support housing choices with amenities that serve daily needs

Elevate the Arts, Culture, & Entertainment Scene: Establish a sustainable roadmap and set of tools for better connecting, activating, funding, and promoting Madison's great existing events, venues, and cultural and historic resources

Become the Healthiest and Greenest Downtown: Promote and support community and environmental health with green infrastructure, development, and recreation.

Infuse Learning, Play and Discovery: Reshape one or more districts in Downtown as a can't miss destination for kids and families.

Tell us why you are most excited about this Big Move!