



SARNIA ONTARIO

Neighbourhood Revitalization Project Action Plan 2024 - 2025

May 2024

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Neighbourhood Revitalization Project

Project Mission and Vision

The City of Sarnia's Neighbourhood Revitalization Project is an initiative funded in partnership by Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and the City of Sarnia. The project aims to enhance the areas of Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village by identifying opportunities for improvements to public space, marketing and promoting the areas, and providing business development services to retain, grow, and attract business.

Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village, as defined in the City's Community Improvement Plan adopted in 2020, are the focus areas for this project. The entire community was invited to share their input on what's needed to enhance these areas.

Since the program's launch in August 2023, the project coordinator has updated the areas' business inventories, compiled historical and archival data on the areas, and hosted community engagement events. The project team has used a series of public consultations, digital surveys, and pop-ups to gather input from residents, businesses, visitors, and organizations in these areas. The feedback gained is incorporated here in the short-term activation initiatives, and longer-term strategic planning priorities, for the revitalization of these areas.

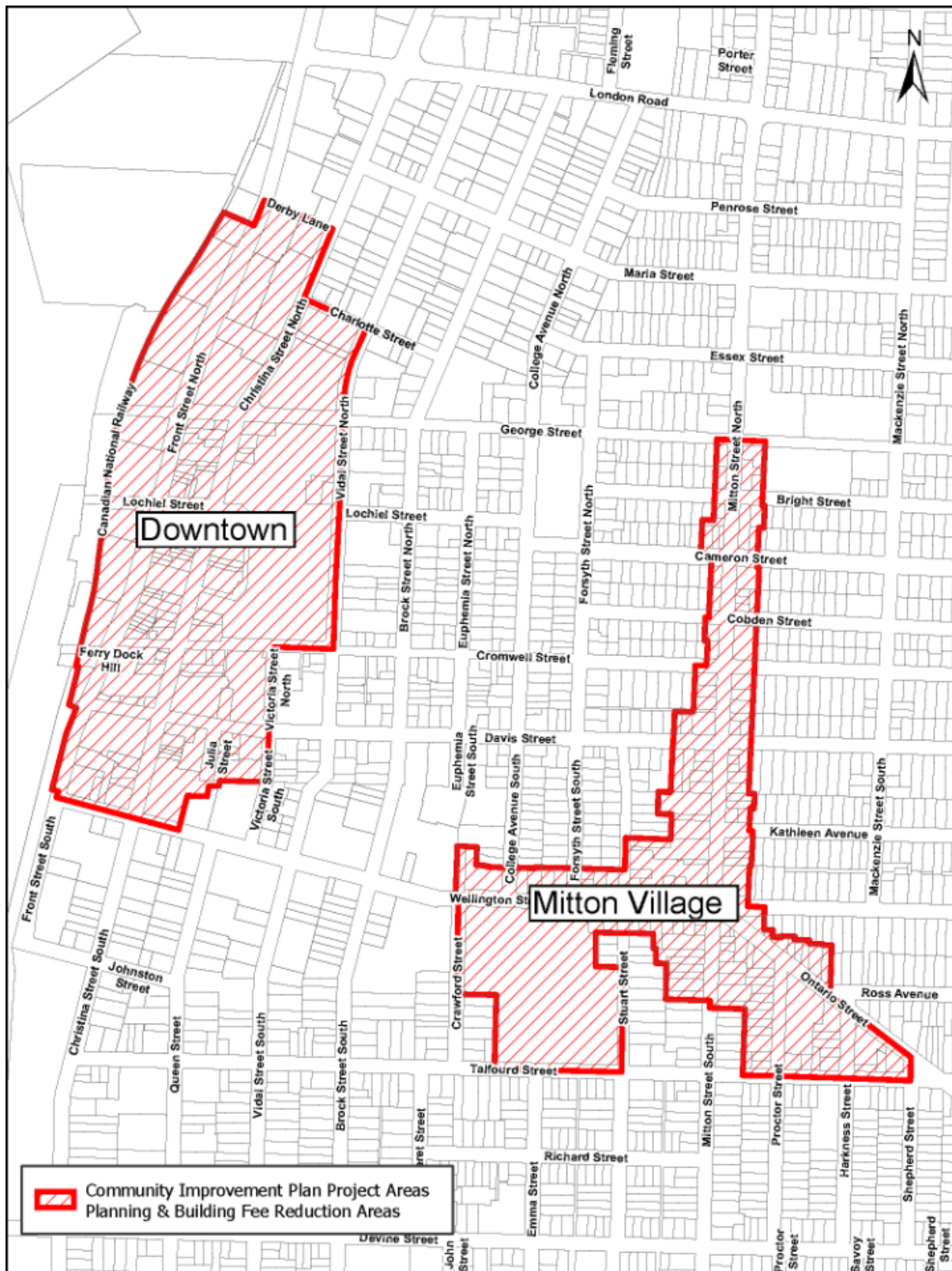
Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) - Rural Economic Development (RED) Grant Program

Ontario's Rural Economic Development (RED) program provides cost-share funding to support activities that create strong rural communities in Ontario, and opens doors to rural economic development through:

- Funding assistance to address barriers to economic development, better position rural communities to attract and retain jobs and investment and enhance economic growth.
- Funding to build community capacity and support for economic development in Ontario's rural communities.
- Investments in rural communities to help diversify and grow local economies – making economic growth more inclusive so rural Ontario continues to share in the province's economic prosperity.

Funded by OMAFRA's RED grant, the City enrolled in their streamlined "Downtown Revitalization Project" to support Sarnia's Downtown and Mitton Village. The Downtown Revitalization (DR) program was created to help improve rural communities' Downtown cores and boost overall economic well-being.

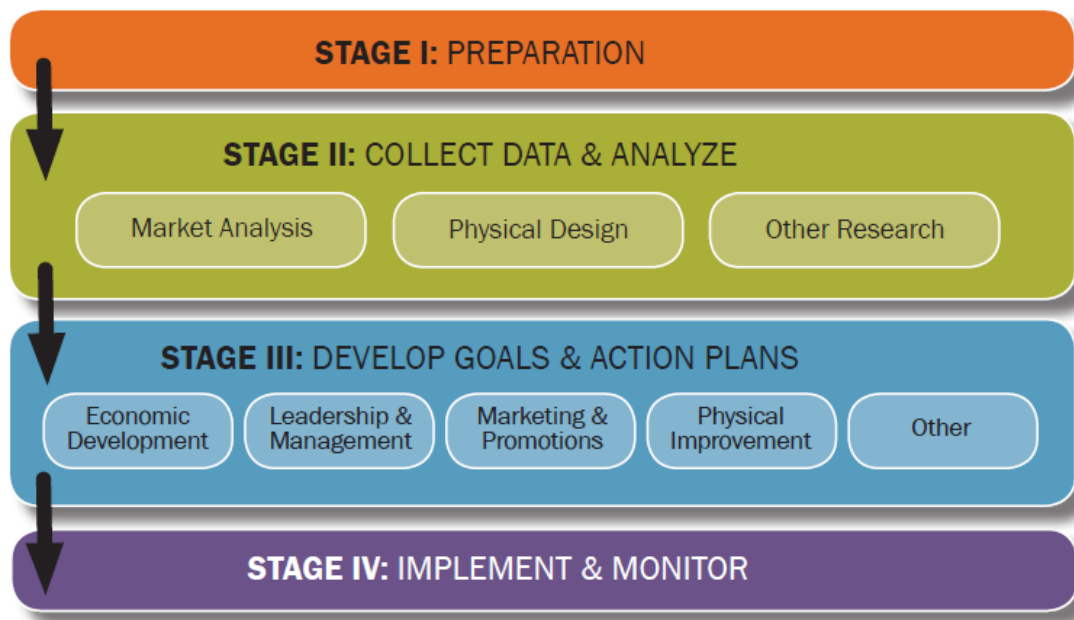
Neighbourhood Revitalization Project Focus Areas – Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village



Source: NRP Focus Areas, an excerpt from City of Sarnia Community Improvement Program (CIP) 2020

Project Structure

As per the OMAFARA handbook on Downtown Revitalization, this project follows OMAFARA's four phases:



Source: OMAFARA's four phases (Ontario Downtown Revitalization Coordinator's Manual)

Neighbourhood Revitalization Project Management Committee

OMAFRA's Downtown Revitalization Program recommends the establishment of a management committee to advise on the project work plan and activities and to assist with analyzing the wants and needs of businesses.

Representatives of businesses in the Downtown and Mitton Village and business support agencies were invited to participate on the committee. The members are:

Chair:	Nicole Warner – That's What She Grows, Owner (Downtown)
Members:	Sarah Reaume – Sarnia-Lambton Business Development Corporation, Chief Executive Officer Keeley McMullin – First Friday, Committee Member (Downtown) Joshua Walters – Maud's Variety, Owner (Mitton Village) Matt Pasut – Team Outfitters, Owner (Mitton Village)
Staff Support:	Kelly Provost – City of Sarnia, Director of Economic Development Ethan Paxton – City of Sarnia, Economic Development Coordinator

What's Been Done

Sarnia Downtown and Mitton Village Community Improvement Plan (CIP), 2020

A CIP is a planning tool to support strategic community investment priorities. It provides a framework for public investment opportunities in the public realm and incentive programs to assist the private sector to stimulate redevelopment and to facilitate property improvements. The City of Sarnia adopted the Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village CIP in 2020 and provides annual funding through the City's budget process.

The financial incentive programs for Mitton Village and Downtown businesses include:

- Additional Residential Units Grant
- Building Façade Improvement Grant
- Landscape and Property Improvement Grant (Mitton Village only)
- Renovation Grant
- Planning & Building Fee Reduction Program

The full plan can be found at www.sarnia.ca/community-improvement-plan.

Healthy Communities Initiative through Government of Canada, 2021

The Mitton Village Parkette Project was funded by a \$30,000 non-repayable grant. Through the Healthy Communities Initiative, the City was able to add a touch of colour and an abundance of creativity that transformed a portion of a municipal parking lot into a vibrant and inclusive outdoor gathering space. The space featured 8 picnic tables, each painted by local artists, community groups, not-for-profits, and businesses. Minor landscaping and other small features were also added to the space. This temporary activation helped advance a resurfacing project of the space to support long-term community use of the space.

My Main Street Local Business Accelerator Program, 2022-2023

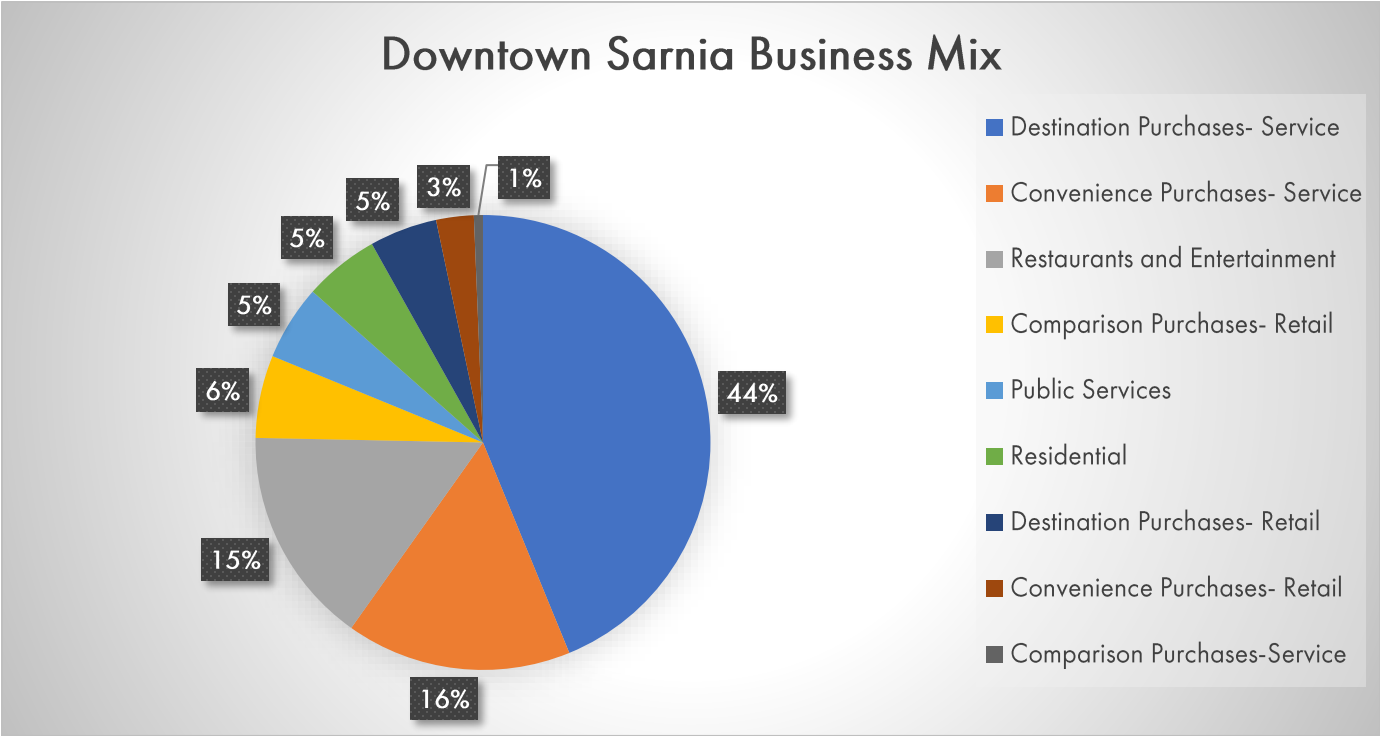
The My Main Street Local Business Accelerator program was offered by the Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO) and implemented by the City of Sarnia's Economic Development Department in 2022. It was a data-driven program focused on the revitalization of Sarnia's Downtown & Mitton Village areas. Through this program, 10 small businesses in Mitton Village and Downtown Sarnia each received \$10,000 of non-repayable grant funding to support their start-up or growth needs. The program also offered business support and custom market intelligence to grant recipients and all other Main Street businesses.

The My Main Street Local Business Accelerator Program was data-driven and focused. The program emphasized the impact of market research and deep data analysis on the Main Street community to understand demographics, media habits, income spending data, consumer behavior, and the market. The findings from these community profiles can be found at www.investsarnia.ca/community-profile.

Funding for this program ended in 2023, but the project was deemed a great success.

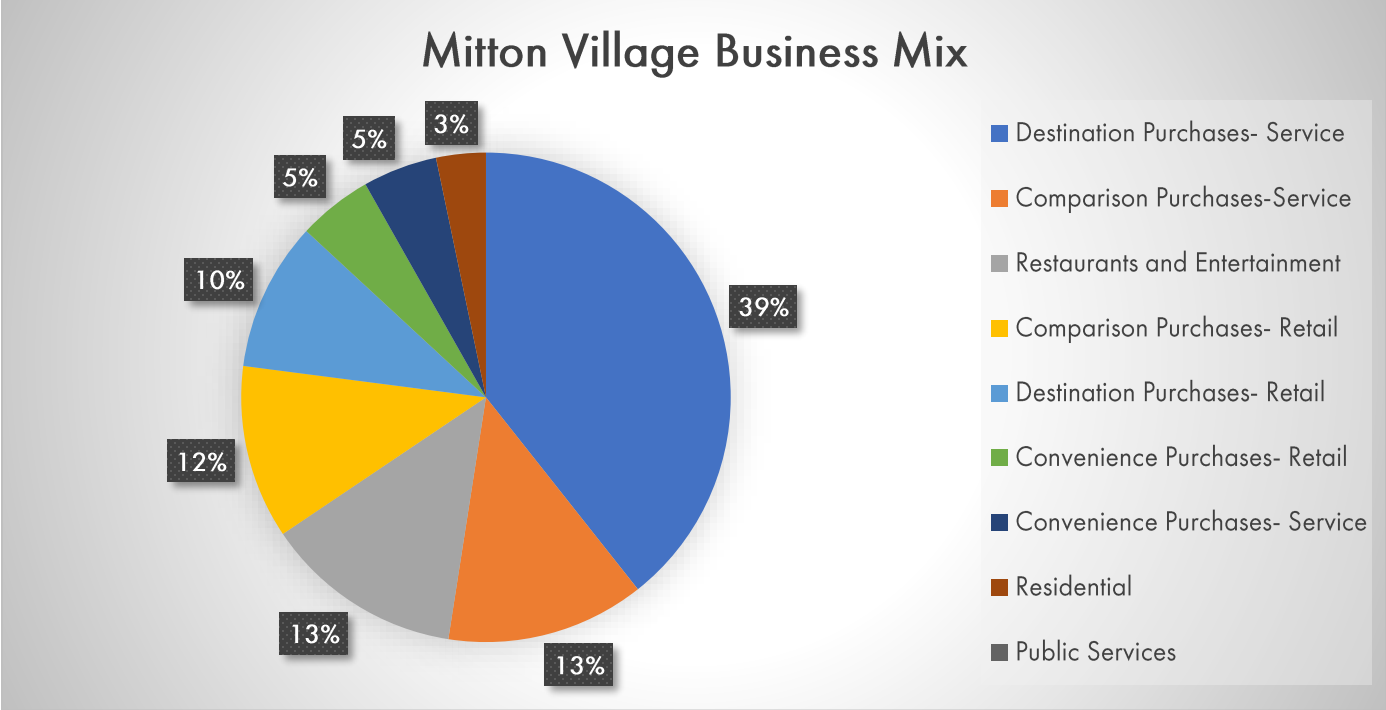
What We Know

Downtown Sarnia



Source: Downtown Business Mix., City of Sarnia Downtown and Mitton Village CIP 2020

Mitton Village



Source: Mitton Village Business District Analysis, City of Sarnia Downtown and Mitton Village CIP (2020)

What We’ve Learned

Since October 2023, the NRP has been working to collect data from business owners, residents, and visitors of Sarnia. This data received is intended to guide the efforts of this project moving forward and shape the project’s action plan.

The project launched two surveys to receive feedback from the community, one survey specific to business owners, and one for residents, visitors, and other interested parties. These surveys received 57 responses from business owners and 509 responses from residents, visitors, and other interested parties.

In addition to the surveys, feedback has been received from local business owners through months of business visits in both Mitton Village and Downtown. Additional feedback was received from hosting “pop-up” stands at local events. Lastly, a community engagement workshop was held on March 19th.

The findings from all these channels were incorporated together to develop the NRP Action Plan for 2024-2025.

Combined Themes from Public Input

Feedback from all efforts of public engagement were combined and distilled into themes. Below are some of the key assets and challenges for Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village as heard from the public:

Downtown Sarnia

Key Assets to Leverage	Key Challenges to Overcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Close to higher density residential on the waterfront and downtown▪ Significant cultural facilities are located downtown, including the library, theatre and the art gallery▪ Intact façade of buildings lining Christina and most of Front Street▪ Downtown has restaurants, bars and cafes, making it a focus for entertainment▪ A series of summer weekend events provided a draw to bring people downtown▪ Connected to the water’s edge with a street and block pattern that knits the waterfront to Downtown	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Derelict, vacant or underused buildings and properties▪ Downtown is no longer the primary retail and service commercial center for the city and most retail appears to be struggling to survive▪ There are substantial alternative development and locational opportunities in Sarnia that attract investment making it difficult for Downtown to compete▪ Inconsistent image▪ The cost of development▪ Lack of a Business Improvement Association (BIA)

Key Assets to Leverage	Key Challenges to Overcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eclectic character with diverse built forms and streetscape conditions ▪ The historic Sarnia Farmer's Market as a key anchor and destination ▪ Proximity to Downtown and the waterfront ▪ Active Advisory Committee organizing community events ▪ Redevelopment potential of the former Sarnia Collegiate Institute and Technical School ▪ Well-connected business area to adjacent residential neighbourhoods ▪ The presence of unique, independent owner-occupied businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inconsistent image ▪ Derelict, vacant, or underused buildings and properties ▪ Loss of market due to the hospital and school closures ▪ Competition with alternative development opportunities in Sarnia ▪ High development costs ▪ Perceived lack of parking for the Farmer's Market ▪ Absence of a central civic/green space ▪ Limited days for the Farmer's Market, missing potential opportunities. ▪ Lack of a Business Improvement Association (BIA)

Top 3 Responses for Challenges Facing Businesses:

1. Poor Community Image/Awareness
2. Public Safety Services (ie. Lighting, security, etc.)
3. Availability of Parking Spaces

Top 3 Responses for Improvements Needed in their Business Areas:

1. More Variety of Businesses
2. Building appearances
3. Public Gathering Spaces

In the next 3 years, the following applies to business respondents:

- 46% would like to expand their business sales
- 44% would like to hire more employees
- 37% said they may consider relocating their business

Top 3 Responses for Priorities in their Business Areas:

1. Filling vacant storefronts
2. Addressing public safety concerns
3. More small business support opportunities

Top 3 Responses for How Respondents Find Out About Local Products, Services, or Events:

1. Social Media
2. Word of Mouth
3. Friends or Family

Vision Statements

An innovative vision statement features what these areas would do over the next five years to ensure that they are the very best that they can be. A vision statement is a declaration that informs the owners, staff, customers, and the community of the desired future of each area and what people can expect to experience in both Sarnia Downtown and Mitton Village.

The potential vision statements developed were evaluated by participants of the public engagement session and one vision statement for each area emerged with very strong support.

Sarnia Downtown: Connecting communities, commerce, and culture.

Mitton Village: Neighbours connecting. Businesses serving. People belonging.

Action Plan

There are many actions that could help to ensure that the revitalization of the Sarnia Downtown and Mitton Village communities will be vibrant and meet the needs of business owners, staff, customers, and the community. These actions should build on the assets, and reduce or eliminate the challenges, all the while keeping in mind the desired outcomes and vision statements.

There are three pillars of potential actions within the scope of this revitalization project. They include:

1. Business support services
2. Marketing and promoting both Sarnia Downtown and Mitton Village areas
3. Identifying opportunities for improvements to the public realm

Below are the Goals and Actions that will be executed over the remainder of the Neighbourhood Revitalization Project. The short-term and immediate actions will be prioritized. Longer-term actions and/or those requiring funding beyond the scope of this project will be pursued beyond the scope of the project where funding and resources are available.

Long-Term Growth and Monitoring

The Neighbourhood Revitalization Project has committed to continuous monitoring of progress through its two-year research and development work. Success will be defined by the project's ability to support our business community, support a positive experience for our residents and visitors, and increased attraction of more people to these areas.

The City is committed to working on these items through the end of this program contract in August 2025. However, beyond that time it will need to be determined how the long-term action items and goals will be met when the Economic Development Coordinator position is brought to an end.

Goal #1: Business Support Services to retain, attract, and grow business in Downtown & Mitton Village

Key Actions	Lead/Partners	Proposed Timeline
<p>1. Create and Maintain Inventories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and maintain a list of all property owners and business tenants in Downtown and Mitton Village. Obtain contact information and permission to contact to advance business connectivity. 	Coordinator	Short Term
<p>2. Host Business Retention and Expansion Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with all businesses in Downtown and Mitton Village to identify challenges, barriers, or potential growth opportunities and connect these business owners and managers with the appropriate resources required. 	Coordinator	Ongoing
<p>3. Meet with Property Owners of Unoccupied Storefronts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with property owners who have unoccupied storefronts to determine any plans they may have for the space. Raise awareness about grants that support renovations and façade improvements. Highlight available properties on the Invest Sarnia website's site selection tool (where possible) 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept, Building Owners	Short Term
<p>4. Host and/or Partner on Business Training Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer quarterly training sessions between now and project end for local businesses on topics necessary for business sustainability, growth, productivity, and more. 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept, Community Partners	Ongoing
<p>5. Improve Business Connectivity and Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase communication with businesses on relevant programs/services/policies that impact their business. This may include information on grants and financing; policy changes/updates; regulatory impacts; engagement opportunities; and more. 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept	Ongoing
<p>6. Facilitate discussions on a Business Improvement Area (BIA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public engagement and surveys showed an interest in exploring the benefits of a BIA and the process behind creating one. The City can act in a facilitator role to provide information and create opportunities for discussions on the topic. 	Coordinator, Community Partners, NRP Management Committee	Mid Term

<p>7. Increase Participation in Policy Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work with the NRP Management Committee and businesses to identify any potential City policies that may impact revitalization and growth of Downtown or Mitton Village. The City can promote engagement on policy updates to ensure the needs of businesses are considered. 	<p>Coordinator, EcDev Dept, City Communications, NRP Management Committee</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
<p>8. Promote City Programs for Business</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Educate business and building owners on CIP grant opportunities to promote private property improvements ▪ Increase awareness of the City's Sidewalk Patio Program to increase activation in both areas ▪ Raise awareness of the City's Economic Development department and assistance they can provide to startups and expanding businesses ▪ Provide one-to-one assistance for any business needing support in accessing programs or incentives. Provide referrals to community partners where possible. 	<p>Coordinator, EcDev Dept, Community Partners</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

Goal #2: Marketing and Promoting Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village

Key Actions	Lead/Partners	Proposed Timeline
<p>1. Encourage, Cultivate, and Promote Events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market the City's infrastructure as potential locations for events and festivals Promote events and festivals through the Explore Sarnia brand, including the website, community calendar, and social media Provide support to streamline event applications where possible to encourage more events 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept, Parks & Rec Dept, Community Partners	Mid Term
<p>2. Develop Marketing Tools and Channels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create an Instagram account managed by Economic Development to promote Sarnia's businesses, services, events, public engagement, announcements, and milestones. Feature Downtown and Mitton Village businesses on social media channels through blog articles and/or featured business of the week/month. Produce new video and photography of Sarnia, including Downtown and Mitton Village specifically, to use in promotion, marketing, and advertising efforts Develop and implement strategic advertising to promote Sarnia, the Downtown, and Mitton Village to residents, visitors, and investors Invest in paid advertisement opportunities to promote Sarnia to potential visitors outside the community Create marketing material that promotes Downtown and Mitton Village as safe, family-friendly environments to visit 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept, NRP Management Committee, City Communications, Community Partners	Ongoing, Short and Mid Term
<p>3. Create and Deploy Custom Marketing Campaigns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with local business owners and the NRP Management Committee to identify and implement seasonal marketing campaigns that would benefit both Mitton Village and Downtown Explore a passport-style marketing campaign for Downtown and Mitton Village to encourage residents and visitors to visit a variety of local businesses Develop digital and downloadable maps that highlight the public parking available in both areas 	Coordinator, NRP Management Committee	Short and Mid Term

Goal #3: Identify Opportunities for Improvements to the Public Realm

Key Actions	Lead/Partners	Proposed Timeline
<p>1. Beautification*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seek opportunities to further develop streetscapes by implementing colour, culture, lighting, and beautification measures ▪ Engage community partners, the public, and residents/businesses in both areas to help develop ways to activate Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village with art and additional cultural- and heritage-related elements ▪ Be a champion for infusing creativity, imagination, and celebration of Sarnia in activating public spaces ▪ Seek out and apply for granting programs that align with this priority 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept, City Departments, Sarnia City Council, Community Partners	Long Term
<p>2. Improve Safety Measures*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore funding opportunities that would assist in adding additional lighting to both areas to create vibrancy, help address safety concerns, and increase activation ▪ Engage in ongoing conversations with community partners, residents, and visitors to better understand safety challenges ▪ Work with community partners to help identify solutions to safety challenges identified by businesses and to encourage more visitors to both areas ▪ Seek out and apply for granting programs that align with this priority 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept, City Departments, Sarnia City Council, Community Partners	Long Term
<p>3. Develop Engaging Infrastructure*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engage in ongoing conversations to explore ways to improve shared outdoor spaces in collaboration with community partners ▪ Facilitate and/or participate in conversations on accessibility issues in both areas to seek solutions and/or funding to tackle these challenges ▪ Assist in identifying gaps in infrastructure to support new, mobile, and temporary investment opportunities in Downtown and Mitton Village ▪ Seek out and apply for granting programs that align with this priority 	Coordinator, EcDev Dept, City Departments, Sarnia City Council, Community Partners	Long Term

*= Not funded within the NRP project budget 2023-2025