

A nighttime photograph of a street in St. Catharines, Ontario. The scene is illuminated by multiple strings of warm white LED lights strung across the street. A large, full moon is visible in the dark sky. On the right, a multi-story brick building with arched windows is lit up. In the foreground, several cars are parked along the street, some with snow on their roofs. A blue semi-transparent banner with a subtle snowflake pattern is overlaid on the middle of the image, containing the title text.

ILLUMINATING DOWNTOWN ST. CATHARINES

Prepared By:

City of St. Catharines
Economic Development & Tourism Services

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The Tourism Partnership of Niagara

INTRODUCTION

The revitalization of Downtown St. Catharines has made major strides since its genesis in the City's Downtown Creative Cluster Master Plan (DCCMP) in 2008 which initiated the significant investments seen to date in the core. The lessons learned over the last two years have highlighted the need for a recalibration of its objectives and the importance of creating safe and inviting public spaces for visitors, residents, and business owners.

Downtown St. Catharines has reached another critical juncture in its history. Like most communities, Downtown St. Catharines has been challenged by the substantial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic issues seen in urban centres across Canada. As outlined in the City's Pandemic Recovery Strategy released in May of 2020, restoring confidence in public spaces, specifically the downtown core as Niagara's urban playground will be crucial to economic recovery efforts. Public realm improvements and animation of the core will act as important tools to attracting visitors to a safe and inviting setting.

To support this enhancement of the public realm, the City of St. Catharines is proposing to work together with the Tourism Partnership of Niagara to improve lighting in public spaces downtown. Improved illumination enhances the tourist experience in the core as a proactive measure to improve public perceptions of safety for visitors and residents alike. The lighting, in the form of a canopy of lights shown in **Figure 1**, would span the entirety of the main artery - St Paul Street and parts of James Street as the central area of commerce in the downtown core providing a safe and welcoming tourist-friendly destination for all.



Figure 1: Example of Proposed Lighting Canopy & street projection lighting, St Paul Street, Downtown St. Catharines

The following proposal provides an evidence-based case for this project as well as a breakdown of the costing and logistics of implementation with a key outcome of enhancing downtown as a tourism destination with better visibility while improving its perception as a safe place for visitors at all hours of the day.

BACKGROUND:

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT & COVID-19 RECOVERY

The City of St. Catharines is the only Niagara community identified in the Growth Plan as an 'Urban Growth Centre.' With greenbelt communities to the east and west, and lands designated for specialty crop production within its municipal boundaries, St. Catharines continues to embrace the challenge to grow inwardly, targeting its downtown urban core for intensified growth.

The Downtown Creative Cluster Master Plan (DCCMP) served as a fundamental input to the foundations of the Garden City Plan. The framework provided by the DCCMP identified the development of outdoor public spaces for those visiting, working and living in the downtown as a strategic priority. The overall objectives of the DCCMP that were identified by staff and stakeholders are:

- to create a safe and attractive Downtown that will attract both investment and tourists;
- to redefine the downtown as a desirable place to live, shop and do business; and,
- to encourage people to walk through the downtown, day and night.

To date, more than \$300 million in public/private investments have helped form the basis for revitalization of the core aimed at attracting visitors, residents and new commerce including:

- Meridian Centre Spectator facility
- The FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre
- Brock University's Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine & Performing Arts
- Carlisle Street Parking Facility
- Burgoyne Bridge Replacement
- Two-way traffic conversion
- Streetscape Enhancements
- Redrawing of the Wine Route to include Downtown

In keeping with the objectives of the DCCMP, the downtown core saw a renewed interest in independent entrepreneurial ventures as new restaurants and niche retailers opened to capitalize on the increased traffic, bringing new life to downtown storefronts. A new class of businesses have emerged that are owned and operated by young professionals and local graduates from Brock University and Niagara College. This was further facilitated by the creation of an ecosystem of supports for start-up businesses, generating home-grown talent through a multi-million-dollar investment in the Innovate Niagara Regional Innovation Centre and programming provided through the St. Catharines Enterprise Centre. The downtown has also attracted larger business investments filling previously vacant or underutilized commercial spaces. Enhancing the public realm continues to be a priority for the City of St. Catharines. Lighting being a consistent theme in feedback from the public as a contributing factor to the perception of the downtown's safety.

In a pre-COVID survey undertaken by staff regarding perceptions of Downtown St. Catharines with 486 participants, respondents pointed to dining as the number 1 reason as to why they visited downtown, followed by live performances and concerts, festivals and social events, as well as shopping (See Figure 2). When asked how safe they felt visiting downtown during the day, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt either 'Very safe' (140), or 'Safe' (250), highlighting the perception that downtown is a safe place to visit during the day. When asked how safe they felt when visiting downtown at night, respondents felt less confident. Although 150 respondents said they still felt 'Safe' downtown at night, 136 answered that they felt 'Unsafe,' with another 55 responding that they felt 'Very unsafe' and 128 responding as 'Unsure'. When asked about what could be done to alleviate their concerns about safety downtown during the night, survey participants pointed to better lighting as one of the most important factors among other suggestions to enhance their experience of downtown at night.

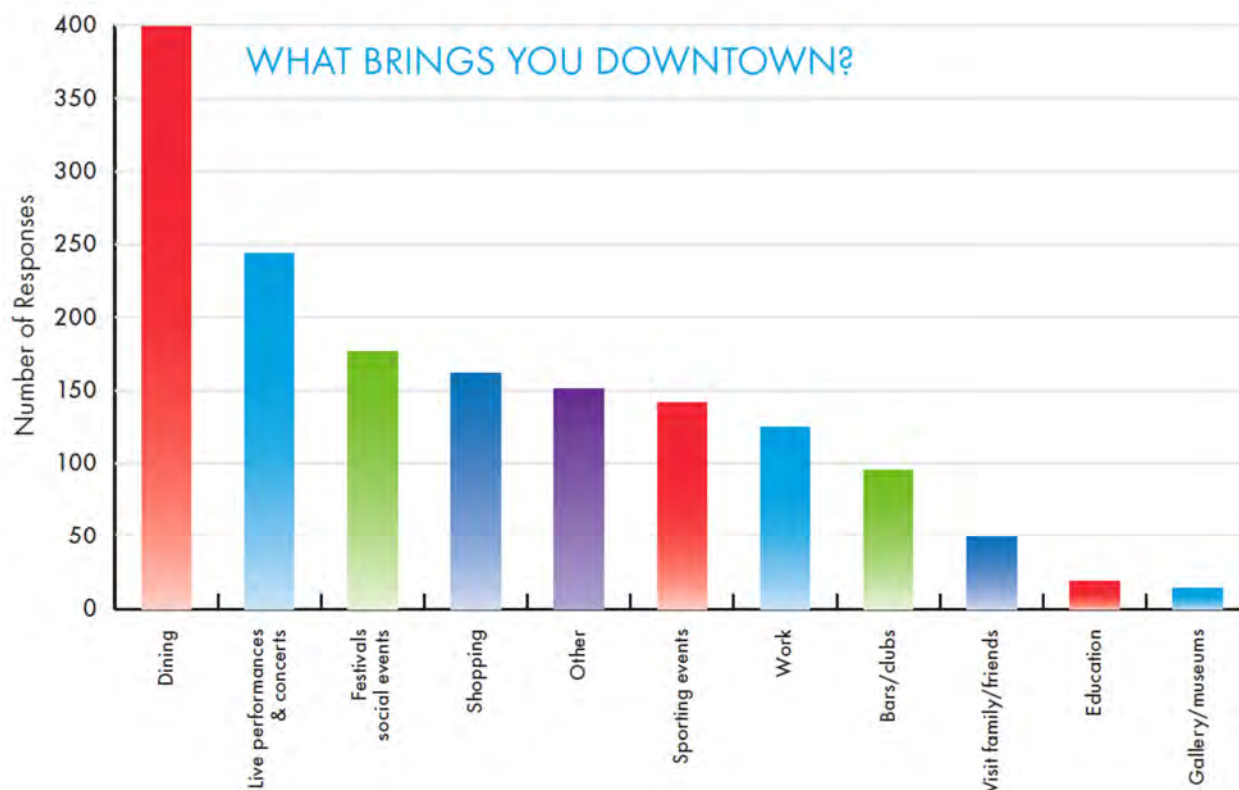


Figure 2: Downtown Survey Responses, "What Brings You Downtown?"

Based on these responses and the important ties between the new investments in venues such as the Meridian Centre and FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre, live performances and events, as well as the burgeoning dining scene, the success of downtown depends significantly on evening traffic, particularly during key events that are a draw for the food and hospitality sector.¹ With the dramatic changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting limitations placed on both in-person events and public dining, these sectors face even greater hurdles as they begin the long road to recovery while regaining the trust of a public that is still weary of the risks of COVID-19 and new variants of the virus that continue to pose challenges.

¹ When asked 'What Do You Like About Downtown?' 225 respondents said 'Dining/Bars' with nearly 200 responding 'Arts/entertainment'

The reinvention and rethinking of public space such as the successful implementation of the City's Temporary Patio program (See **Figures 3 & 4**) as well as the pedestrianization of downtown through weekly street closures in the spring and summer seasons of 2020-21 led by the City and the St. Catharines Downtown Association, have also built the case during the COVID-19 pandemic for more inviting and well-lit public spaces as a future proofing measure that ensures the vitality of important community assets and civic identity. The proposed downtown lighting project seeks to build upon this momentum by enhancing

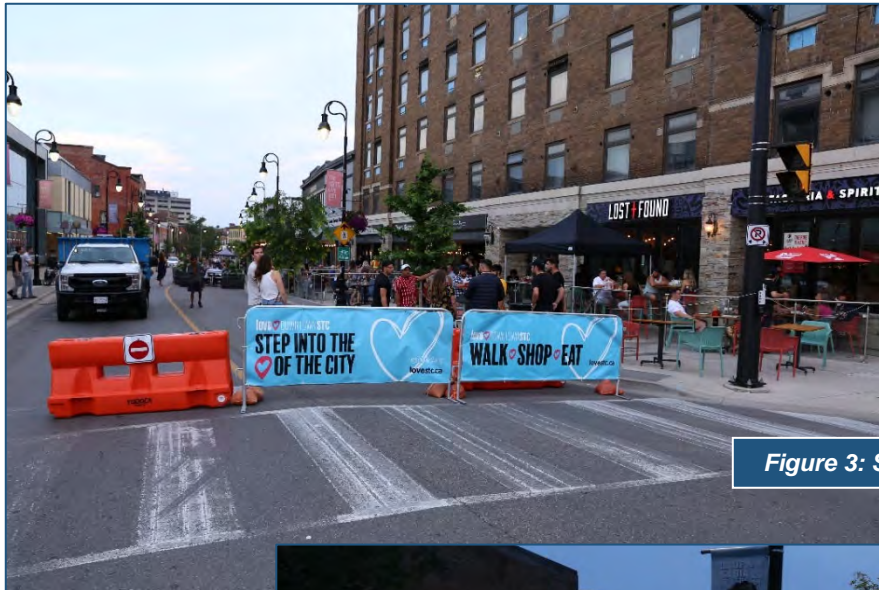


Figure 3: Street Closures - St Paul Street, St. Catharines

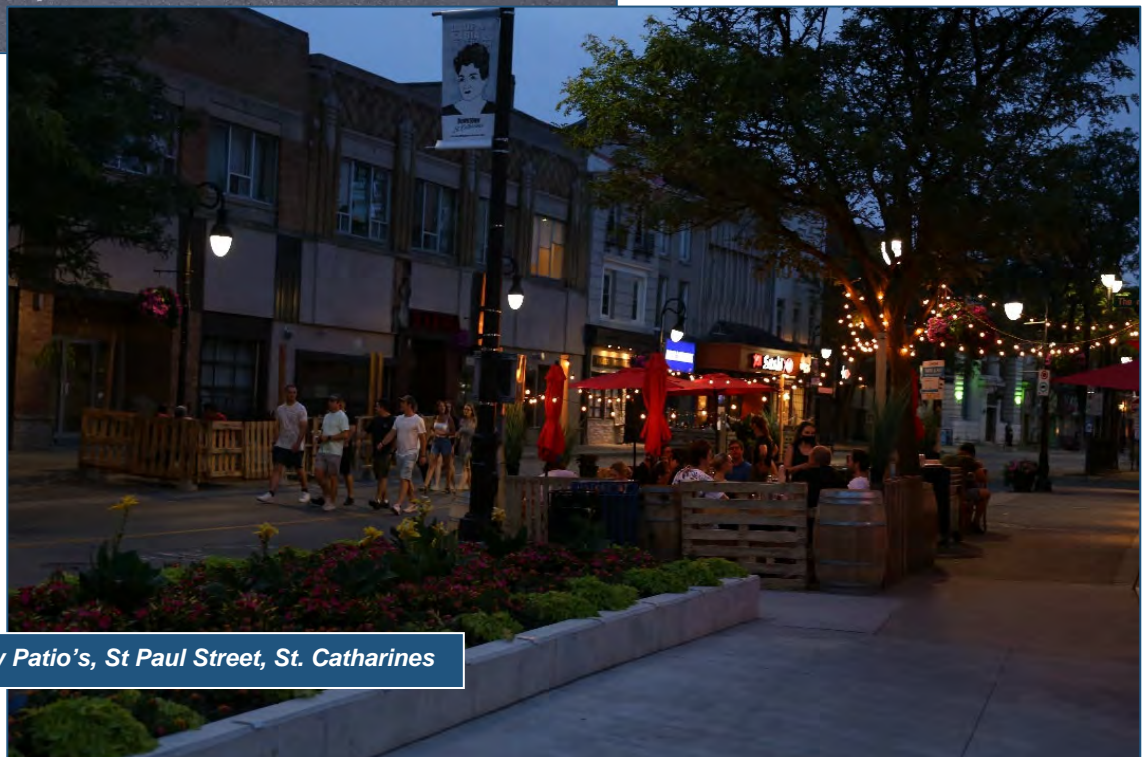


Figure 4: Temporary Patio's, St Paul Street, St. Catharines

PROPOSED PROJECT:

CANOPY OF LIGHTS – ILLUMINATING OUR MAIN STREETS

The proposal to enhance lighting in the downtown centers primarily on a canopy of string lights that would span St Paul Street from Ontario Street to Geneva Street as well as James Street from St Paul Street to King Street (See **Figure 3**). The string lighting would be fastened to existing light poles, hanging over the road allowance to create a canopy effect for visual appeal. An additional feature would include a canopy of lights spanning the courtyard of the Old Courthouse located at 101 King Street, which is another key intersection of the downtown. This lighting canopy would be accompanied by projection lighting on the street to promote events taking place in the Downtown.



Figure 5: Proposed Project Area (in red), including Old Courthouse (in blue)

Working internally with staff from the Engineering, Facilities and Environmental Services and Municipal Works Departments as well as St. Catharines Fire Services, the project will require consideration of the following:

- Varying road width/distance between light poles
- Transit & Emergency vehicle access heights (4.5m clearance according to Ministry standards)
- Infrastructure for installation of lighting/meeting of height requirements
- Contingency planning in the event of emergency, ie. Mechanism for quick release of lighting to access upper floors of buildings in impacted areas
- Durability of lighting in the event of emergency release
- Cost of replacement of infrastructure and yearly maintenance
- Approval and rating for weight and wind resistance by an engineer

BUDGET

In consultation with other communities, various vendors and industry partners, the budget request from the Tourism Partnership of Niagara is intended to cover initial capital investment for the new infrastructure. A breakdown of the total estimated project costs are as follows:

Project Item	Estimated Cost (Inclusive of HST)
Brackets + Quick Release Mechanism: Supplied by Hamill Machine (140 units)	\$50,940.40
Lighting: 50' strings with a socket every 10.' (203 units) 10W 3K A19 style LED lamps supplied by Kraun Electric	\$36,160.00
Gobo Projector Light + Lens Tube From AvShop.ca	\$3,353.84
Street Light Installation/Labour Costs By Alectra Utilities (\$225 + HST x 140 poles) ³	\$35,595.00
Misc. Materials Related to Installation (from Alectra)	\$7,000
Light Installation/Labour Costs at Courthouse Courtyard By City	\$5,000
Engineering Services for Approval of Brackets + Lighting	\$5,000
Staff Time/Labour/Maintenance Costs	TBD – In-kind
Total Estimated Project Cost	\$143,049.24

TOURISM IMPLICATIONS

Broadly speaking, this lighting canopy proposal is tourism infrastructure investment aimed at supporting the recovery of one of the most desirable destinations in Niagara. The pandemic has had a profound impact on travel preferences which in turn has created a permanent change in industry economics, shifting travel patterns, expectations and opportunities, while also shaping an unequal recovery. The proposed permanent lighting canopy will have direct implications on the enhancement and development of Downtown St. Catharines as an intentional tourism destination, providing visitors with an incentive to visit downtown for a unique urban experience in Niagara. Illuminating the core will draw visitors to downtown's well-lit and welcoming atmosphere supporting events impacted heavily by the pandemic such as Niagara Wine Festival, In The Soil Arts Festival, Celebration of Nations, Quench Craft Beer Festival, among other diverse event opportunities.

The proposed lighting canopy will further augment new events and tourism-related projects that have emerged during the pandemic. With two successful years of summer road closures in the downtown providing more than 850 hours of closures facilitating the pedestrianization and activation of downtown's streets, lighting has become an important way for individual businesses to draw visitors to and support event activations. With the increased reliance on public space and outdoor dining options becoming a necessity, a canopy of lights will provide the ambiance needed to draw tourists seeking an engaging and visually appealing destination. The successful launch in 2021-22 of "Let it Glow" by the City (See **Figure 6**) as a winter lighting festival has shown the opportunity of marketing Downtown St. Catharines as a year-round tourism destination, once again emphasizing lighting and aesthetic enhancements to the downtown.

The project will also support the retention of existing jobs, with 514 businesses employing 7,168 people, including important jobs in the tourism, hospitality, and entertainment sectors. Visitors will be encouraged to dine, shop, and explore, giving even more reasons to stay longer in the downtown core while re-imagining public space for visitors.



Figure 6: Let it Glow – Festival of Light



CONCLUSION

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on the tourism and hospitality sector across the country, it has also accelerated and necessitated the need to rethink the visitor experience. Together with successive lockdowns that have severely limited the ability of businesses to operate and the urgency of adapting public space to recoup lost capacity, the pandemic has shown the importance of the public realm as not just a place for residents, but as an important asset in welcoming new visitors to the community.

Furthermore, as a beautification project, the enhancement of lighting in the core appeals to more social media driven interactions between visitors and the public realm. In a short study by Copenhagen-based Gehl Architects on the link between social media and public space during COVID-19, photos featuring “Instagrammable Moments” of public spaces and landscapes were among the most popular social media posts in their study areas of public space investments in Akron, Detroit, Philadelphia and San Jose. This trend indicates a surge in usership of public spaces during lockdowns and underlines the importance of these spaces in connecting people to each other even in times when they are apart or cannot travel abroad. As the City of St. Catharines continues its path to revitalizing the downtown core, this project will play an important role in achieving the goals envisioned in the DCCMP of 2008, making it safe and attractive for investment, a desirable place to live and do business, and a place where residents and visitors can take in the beauty of St. Catharines any time of day.

