Downtown Master Plan
Aurora, IL

Plan Overview

A Vision for Downtown Aurora

Over the course of the planning process for the Downtown Master Plan update, residents, City staff, business owners, recreational and environmental advocates contributed to the development of guiding principles. These principles will help the community build toward a future where unique local businesses thrive; where live music and social gatherings attract people from around the region; where diversity is embraced and residential population grows; where theater goers can dine al fresco at an array of restaurants overlooking a picturesque river scene; where walking and biking is a comfortable way to get around town and access trails; and where people discover all that Aurora has to offer – an experience unlike any other Fox Valley community.

The following are vision statements and summary recommendation areas that align with the chapters of the Downtown Master Plan, and chart the course for downtown Aurora's future. The full plan will have detailed action items for each recommendation area.

An experience to remember

Downtown Aurora will be promoted and recognized as a desirable destination to people who live here, work here, or just come to visit.

With a full calendar of events and activities, a backdrop of re-energized iconic buildings, an edgy art scene, award-winning Broadway shows, a scenic river, and a diverse and broad-minded populace, downtown Aurora has something for everyone. With an enhanced marketing campaign, it will be promoted and recognized as a desirable destination in the region. A comprehensive wayfinding system makes the downtown area more inviting for people arriving by all modes of transportation, whether they are coming from nearby neighborhoods or far-away regions. Unique, memorable, and attractive public spaces filled with people and events help to craft a downtown where people want to be.

Key Recommendation Areas

- Enhance the built environment to create a sense of place.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive signage and wayfinding program.
- Enhance marketing, branding, and communication.
- Improve feelings of comfort and safety.

Growing and diversifying businesses

Downtown Aurora will have a strong and diverse economic base, highlighting its creative entrepreneurs and restaurant options, built upon arts and cultural successes.

As more and more people choose to live downtown, new businesses are following their lead and the demand for new amenities has increased. A strong and diverse economic base, built up by creative entrepreneurs and restaurants, has capitalized off recent arts successes. An active business support center has dedicated staff working hard to build strong relationships with existing businesses and help get new small businesses off the ground.

Key Recommendation Areas

- Enhance the business climate by focusing on economic development initiatives and programming to encourage investment.
- Focus on growing small, local, and niche businesses.
- Support the downtown core by enhancing livability.

A place for creatives

Downtown Aurora will have a robust and inspired arts, culture, and entertainment community

Known for its robust and inspired arts, culture, and entertainment community, downtown Aurora has given balanced attention to a range of artistic endeavors. Aurora is known as a welcoming place for all. With an intrinsic historical and aesthetic appeal, the city has a lot to offer potential artists. The city has continued to develop as a haven for the arts community by giving local artists display opportunities, financial support, and helping to build a local arts network. Working with local schools and schoolteachers, the City has broadened the reach of arts into the community.

Key Recommendation Areas

- Coordinate and encourage local efforts to promote art, highlight culture and support the performing arts.
- Leverage CMAP's Arts & Culture Toolkit.
- Pursue targeted arts and culture endeavors.

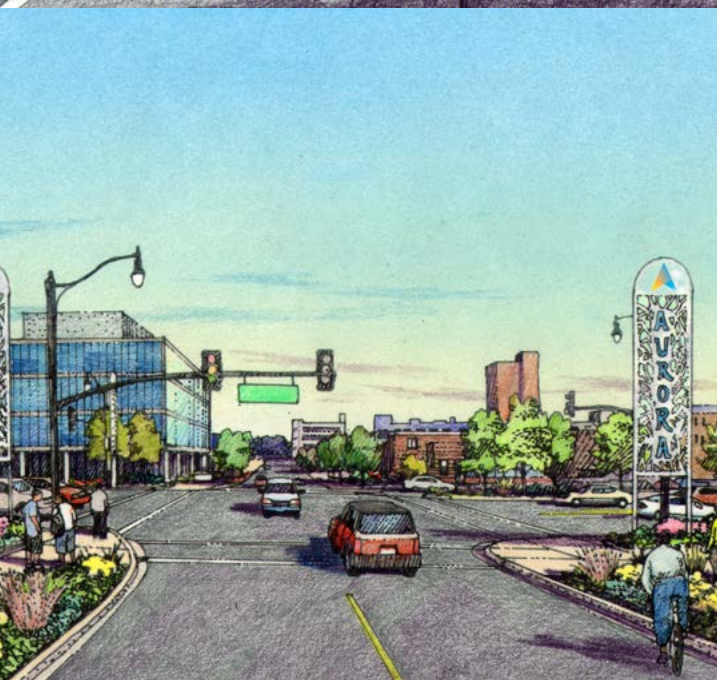
Safe and easy to navigate

Downtown Aurora will have a comfortable and inviting environment for all modes of transportation.

By calming traffic while reducing bottlenecks, the city has reduced crashes and improved travel experiences for motorists. With a focus on getting people to downtown and facilitating movement throughout the downtown core, the city encourages drivers to slow down and be alert for pedestrians and bicyclists. Parking signage and information are used as part of a strategy to improve utilization of long-term parking lots, along with continued analysis of parking management strategies. Complete streets, safe for travelers from ages eight to eighty, is the goal, as more and more people seek to live downtown.

Key Recommendation Areas

- Identify traffic network bottlenecks and high crash locations for projects to improve traffic flow.
- Encourage walking and enhance the transition to walking from all transportation modes.
- Encourage the use of bicycles for transportation.
- Address downtown parking challenges.
- Encourage more transit usage and visitors by train.
- Identify and fix barriers for those with mobility challenges.



A vibrant Fox River

The Fox River will be celebrated as the heart and center of Aurora.

By orienting more aspects of the riverfront community toward the Fox River, Aurora has been able to attract more visitors and riverfront activity. The city has capitalized on the river's unique place-making opportunities, its connection to the history of the area, and its abundance of natural amenities. Through programming, open space, and water-based recreation, the river draws hundreds of residents and visitors alike, helping to create a thriving and ecologically sustainable downtown business district.

Key Recommendation Areas

- Activate the Fox River Corridor.
- Enhance connections between the Fox River and downtown.
- Continue to demonstrate leadership in improving environmental quality.

An engaged community

Downtown Aurora will have a growing and engaged residential community.

Downtown Aurora's creative and targeted approaches to engage its diverse residents, businesses, and institutions helped to forge new relationships and led more people to choose to live downtown. By listening to residents and incorporating stakeholder priorities into plan implementation activities, improved levels of trust have helped projects roll out smoothly. Through innovative public engagement methods, increased communication, and inclusive practices, the City built trust among community stakeholders, is fostering a new generation of leaders, and strengthening local capacity for the growing residential population.

Key Recommendation Areas

- Explore innovative public engagement methods to implement the downtown master plan.
- Engage the diverse population of Aurora.
- Strengthen local capacity.
- Update the City's Comprehensive Plan.

Plan recommendations

The Downtown Experience

Enhance the built environment to create a sense of place

- Identify and prioritize major and minor gateway entrances into, and prominent corridors within downtown
- Target infrastructural and aesthetic improvements to enhance the sense of place
- Develop stronger visual and physical links to the river front

Develop and implement a comprehensive signage and wayfinding program

- Identify key routes between destinations and important gateways in downtown
- Coordinate with other riverfront communities to create a cohesive wayfinding package to promote riverfront downtowns
- Extend signage and marketing to the tollway and the City's major arterials to draw visitors into the downtown area

Enhance marketing, branding, and communication

- Promote and cultivate the creative, cultural identity of downtown
- Establish a broad marketing reach

Improve feelings of comfort and safety

- Identify and evaluate common pedestrian routes and parking facilities for safety improvements
- Identify and activate vacant spaces
- Promote community engagement and enhanced patrolling techniques

Revitalizing the Downtown Economy

Enhance the business climate by focusing on economic development initiatives and programming to encourage investment

- Create a redevelopment facilitation strategy and continue to streamline and improve efficiencies in permitting for redevelopment
- Identify an Individual to Coordinate Downtown's Economic Development Partners
- Continue efforts to attract, retain and expand businesses through engagement and collaboration

Focus on growing small, local, and niche businesses

- Reestablish specialized efforts for growing small businesses
- Explore the expansion of new hotel exhibition/meeting space opportunities throughout downtown and support boutique hotels in existing properties
- Continue to expand technical assistance provided for local business development including incubator resources for startups, and accelerator resources for growing businesses

Support the downtown core by enhancing livability

- Maximize the rehabilitation of the existing downtown residential spaces through engagement, resources, and support
- Increase access to goods and services for current and future downtown residents
- Continue to support inclusive and supportive housing initiatives
- Identify and support key sites for the construction of new higher density residential development

Activating Downtown through Arts and Culture

Coordinate and encourage local efforts to promote art, highlight culture and support the performing arts

- Develop an Arts and Culture Consortium to leverage resources through coordination and collaboration
- Develop a comprehensive arts and culture plan for Downtown Aurora

Pursue targeted arts and culture endeavors

- Boost architectural tourism to strengthen Downtown Aurora's sense of heritage and identity
- Add public art installations to downtown at strategic locations with a self-guided public art tour
- Increase support for both active and passive arts and culture initiatives
- Create a comprehensive inventory of space available for cultural uses
- Simplify processes for arts and culture initiatives

The Heart of Downtown: The Fox River

Activate the Fox River Corridor

- Enhance riverfront infrastructure to increase active recreation
- Promote events and activities along the river
- Create passive recreational attractions
- Provide and enhance river and riparian habitat to create a wildlife friendly environment
- Enhance environmental education opportunities and facilities

Enhance connections between the Fox River and downtown

- Implement improvements that enhance connectivity
- Align riverfront planning and economic development planning
- Improve signage to provide information and connect to downtown attractions

Continue to demonstrate leadership in improving environmental quality

- Pursue collaborative environmental improvement efforts with other Fox River communities
- Identify priority restoration areas
- Encourage pride and stewardship of the river through education

Transportation: Getting to and around Downtown Aurora

Identify traffic network bottlenecks and high crash locations for projects to improve traffic flow

- Evaluate Broadway lane reconfiguration to address network bottlenecks and crashes
- Continue 2-way conversion initiative with New York Street and Galena Boulevard to improve traffic flow

Encourage walking and enhance the transition to walking from all transportation modes

- Establish a hierarchy of walkways and pedestrian routes within the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods
- Create a clear pedestrian connection between the Downtown Metra Station and Stolp Island
- Eliminate the use of pedestrian buttons and transition to automatic walk icon at all traffic signals
- Continue to enhance overall pedestrian experience with infrastructure changes

Encourage the use of bicycles for transportation

- Continue to enhance overall bicycle experience with infrastructure changes
- Encourage active transportation and healthy living through programs and activities
- Adopt a Complete Streets policy

Address downtown parking challenges

- Use simple signage and information delivery to improve the parking experience
- Continue to assess strategies for managing demand, including the potential of user fees for on-street parking
- Restructure fines to create more of a deterrent to parking abuse

Encourage more transit usage and visitors by train

- Provide clear, direct, and inviting options for connections between downtown and the Downtown Metra Station
- Improve real-time transit information delivery at bus stops
- Market transit for events, destinations

Identify and fix barriers for those with mobility challenges

- Improve Riverwalk accessibility from downtown streets
- Continue with plans to create a drop-off area near RiverEdge Park
- ADA improvements on downtown streets

Building the Downtown Community

Explore innovative public engagement methods to implement the downtown master plan

- Hold educational forums
- Re-engage existing resident groups and facilitate the creation of new community groups
- Update website and use social media outreach

Engage the diverse population of Aurora

- Make public engagement accessible
- Address communication barriers
- Improve language access

Strengthen local capacity

- Build trust and collaboration between the City and the residents
- Foster leadership among the various constituencies
- Promote civic engagement
- Organize community building activities

Update the City's Comprehensive Plan