

The Vision: Build a Downtown That People Are Proud to Visit, Live In, and Invest In

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Downtown Welland has spent years being defined by its challenges: empty storefronts, perceptions of crime, struggling businesses, aging buildings, and a lack of confidence in its future.

But downtown also has something many communities would love to have: a strong foundation. Welland has a historic downtown, the canal, trails, public spaces, cultural assets, independent businesses, artists, restaurants, a diverse community, and people who care deeply about the city.

The goal should not be to turn downtown into something it is not. The goal should be to build on what already exists and create a downtown that feels authentic, welcoming, creative, and alive.

A successful downtown does not happen because of one festival, one project, or one government program. It happens when businesses, residents, community groups, artists, and the city work together toward a shared vision.

1. Create a Downtown Task Force Focused on Action

The current approach has often been too focused on meetings, studies, and individual projects without enough visible progress. Downtown needs a dedicated group focused on results.

A Downtown Task Force should include:

- Downtown businesses
- Residents
- Property owners
- Artists and cultural organizations
- Community groups
- City staff
- Regional partners

Purpose: Identify problems, create solutions, and measure progress.

Key Focus Areas:

- Filling vacant storefronts
- Improving cleanliness and appearance
- Supporting businesses
- Addressing safety concerns
- Activating public spaces
- Encouraging investment

Downtown needs less bureaucracy and more action.

2. Support Local Businesses and Fill Empty Storefronts

Empty buildings create the feeling of decline. Bringing life back into these spaces should be a priority.

Downtown Starter Program

Create incentives for new businesses, artists, and entrepreneurs to test ideas downtown:

- Reduced rent agreements with willing property owners
- Short-term pop-up spaces
- Artist studios
- Small retail concepts
- Local food businesses
- Creative businesses

A vacant storefront produces nothing. Even a small business, gallery, studio, or community space creates activity. Explore incentives to convert spaces into:

- Apartments
- Artist studios
- Small offices
- Creative workspaces

More people living downtown means more customers, more activity, and more eyes on the street.

3. Build on Welland's Identity: Arts, Culture, and Creativity

Welland has a unique opportunity to become known as a creative community. Instead of trying to copy other cities, Welland should embrace what makes it different.

Key Assets:

- Artists & musicians
- Cultural institutions (Library, Museum, Central Fire Hall)
- Public art & heritage buildings
- The recreational canal & the Floating Stage

Create the Welland Downtown Arts District

A connected cultural area that supports:

- Galleries & studios
- Murals & public art
- Live performances & creative businesses

Art should not just decorate downtown. Art should help drive economic activity.

4. Make Downtown Cleaner, Safer, and More Welcoming

People will not support a downtown they do not feel comfortable visiting. This requires addressing real concerns while avoiding the idea that downtown problems cannot be solved.

Better Maintenance

The city should ensure:

- Faster response times for complaints
- Clean sidewalks and regular weed cutting
- Maintained public spaces and proper upkeep of public art
- Better communication with residents and businesses

Address Homelessness Through Partnership

Downtown challenges involving homelessness and addiction cannot be solved by businesses or police alone.

The city should work with:

- Niagara Region
- Housing organizations
- Outreach groups
- Health services

The goal should be compassion combined with responsibility. A healthy downtown supports vulnerable people while also supporting residents and businesses.

5. Activate Downtown Every Week, Not Just During Special Events

Downtown should feel alive throughout the year. Instead of relying on one large event, focus on many smaller reasons to visit:

- Monthly art walks
- Outdoor markets
- Small music performances
- Local business promotions
- Community gatherings
- Seasonal activities & cultural celebrations / demonstrations

The Goal: Give people a reason to come downtown, and give them a reason to stay.

6. Improve Connections Between Downtown and the Canal

The canal is one of Welland's greatest assets, but downtown has not fully captured its potential. Downtown should become the place people stop before, during, and after using the canal.

- Better signage connecting trails to downtown
- More seating and gathering areas
- Waterfront businesses & outdoor dining opportunities
- Events connected to the canal
- Better pedestrian connections

Welland should become known as a canal city, not just a city with a canal.

7. Encourage Partnerships Instead of Doing Everything Alone

Municipal budgets are limited. Welland should look for opportunities to share costs and resources with:

- Niagara Region
- Other neighbouring municipalities
- Local businesses
- Community organizations
- Educational institutions

Partnerships can reduce costs while creating better results.

8. Change the Story About Downtown

One of the biggest challenges downtown faces is perception. A community that constantly talks about decline eventually believes it.

Welland needs an honest but balanced message: Yes, downtown has problems. But downtown also has **history, character, creativity, entrepreneurs, community spirit, and potential.**

Revitalization begins when people believe improvement is possible.

The First Three Years: A Practical Plan

Timeframe	Key Initiatives & Milestones
First 6 Months	• Create Downtown Task Force • Identify priority buildings and vacant spaces • Improve communication between city, businesses, and residents • Create a downtown action plan with measurable goals • Address visible maintenance issues
Year One	• Launch storefront activation program • Begin regular downtown events • Develop arts district strategy • Create stronger partnerships • Improve marketing around downtown assets
Years Two & Three	• Attract new businesses and investment • Expand residential development downtown • Improve waterfront connections • Establish Welland as a destination for arts, culture, and community

Final Vision

A successful downtown Welland does not need to become Toronto, Niagara-on-the-Lake, or another city. It needs to become Welland.

A downtown where:

- Businesses can succeed
- Residents feel proud
- Visitors want to explore
- Artists and entrepreneurs have opportunities
- Public spaces are cared for
- Community voices matter

The future of downtown will not be created by one organization, one politician, or one project. It will be created by people working together with a shared purpose:

Restore pride. Create opportunity. Build a downtown that belongs to everyone.