



**Date:** October 14, 2025

**To:** Durham Planning Commission

**Through:** Sara M. Young, AICP, Planning Director

**From:** Nicole J. Thompson, President & CEO, Downtown Durham, Inc.

**Subject:** Downtown Durham Blueprint: 2035

### **Executive Summary**

The Downtown Durham Blueprint: 2035 is a detailed plan on how downtown Durham can preserve its unique character while supporting continued growth and vibrancy. It includes a shared vision, seven targeted goals that each have deliberate strategies which are further defined through implementable actions. Additionally, the Downtown Durham Blueprint provides a detailed implementation matrix identify key partners, in progress projects, early action projects, and longer term projects.

### **Background**

There have been several plans and studies addressing individual components of the city and county of Durham and downtown in recent years (to include several large plans in progress). Over the past 20+ years, there has been one overall downtown master plan that has focused on creating an exciting, vibrant, attractive, and safe environment in downtown Durham. Created in 2000 and (with two updates in 2007 and 2017), the Downtown Durham Master Plan has been the one document that has focused on downtown's continued growth and vibrancy.

At the time of the 2000 plan, downtown's goals centered on establishing a pivotal center of activity within the city and region, and growing a tapestry of mixed uses that would fan the sparks of growth. The 2007 Downtown Durham Master Plan was a review and update of the original plan. By this point in time, the sparks of growth the 2000 plan had hoped to kindle had become a clear reality, and the first stages of downtown Durham's rapid growth had begun. The major goals of this plan included restatements or reiterations of goals from the 2000 plan, such as creating a downtown that was the centerpiece of the city, further residential in-fill development, and improving connectivity and infrastructure to adjacent neighborhoods. It also included new goals of enhancing the capacity of downtown organizations and expanding recreation opportunities and open space downtown. The 2017 Downtown Master Plan was the final update to the 2000 plan. During the period between 2007 and 2017, downtown Durham continued to experience rapid growth across all major sectors, and the area had matured into a nationally recognized real estate market. With this growth came the need for the downtown plan to transition from being a primarily visioning document to establishing frameworks by which to act on a common agenda. The 2017 plan identified four key themes: Connectivity, Logistics, Diversity, and Design. These themes, along with many elements from the earlier plans, still resonate today.

As Durham emerged from the pandemic in 2022, Downtown Durham, Inc. (DDI) realized that this was a crucial time to assess downtown Durham's current growth trajectory and address key objectives that would strengthen downtown Durham's future. In 2023, an International Downtown Association Advisory Panel team, was asked to identify challenges that, if not addressed, may prevent downtown Durham from continuing to be a vibrant and inclusive community. Following a combination of studying the area, reviewing of existing reports and plans, surveying downtown users, touring and experiencing, the panel recommended seven key challenges that must be addressed in the forthcoming blueprint process.

These key challenges provided the overall scope and objective of a request for proposals which was released in 2024. Nine firms responded and Interface Studios (with partnering firms & Access, All Together, Blackspace, and Ninigret Partners) was selected to lead the process to create the Downtown Durham Blueprint: 2035. Over the course of 12 months, the consultants implemented an exhaustive engagement process through survey, focus groups, planning and public input meetings, interviews, a special Black Voices for the Future panel, and numerous pop-ups at events, festivals, and activities throughout downtown. Through this effort, over 2300 people were reached. In addition, the consultant completed a comprehensive review of other existing (and in-progress) plans, that included an in-person meeting with representatives of these plans to discuss the blueprint and the potential collaboration between plans. This information combined with data about downtown businesses, residents, development trends, crime, street activity and more was evaluated to provide a picture of downtown today. The analysis identified major downtown trends and concise and actionable strategies to address the most pressing issues that may limit downtown's diverse vibrancy, sustainable development and impactful growth.

### **Plan Content**

The Downtown Durham Blueprint: 2035 includes three major sections. The first section sets the stage by providing a quick overview or guide of the recommendations of the blueprint, an discussion of how the blueprint aligns with other plans impacting downtown, highlighting key plans and initiatives that relate to downtown, a summary of the intense public engagement that was held to garner public input and feedback, and ends with a clear identification of the major trends impacting downtown.

The second section introduces the seven goals of the blueprint and immediately launches into an extensive discussion of each goal to include a discussion of the importance of the goal, the strategies to meet the goal, and the very detailed actions that will need to be implemented. This section also includes renderings of potential improvements as well as examples of actions, activities, and programing that have been successful in other downtowns.

The third and final section, Implementation, is the meat of the blueprint. This section presents an approach that, if followed, can achieve much of what is in the plan. To realize the vision of the Downtown Durham Blueprint, DDI will serve as a key leader but the plan's success will ultimately depend on the collective commitment and coordination of a broad coalition comprised of the key departments at the City and County of Durham, elected officials, nonprofit organizations, business owners, residents, property owners and other community stakeholders. All must work in concert with DDI to implement the plan's recommendations. This plan ends with a very detailed implementation matrix that clearly identifies lead and support partners. It goes one step further to identify projects and plans that are in progress, early action projects, and longer-term projects.

### **Issues**

The Downtown Durham Blueprint: 2035 is being presented to the City Council for adoption as one of the city's long-range plans. In doing so, future decisions about capital investments and departmental work program priorities can take into consideration the recommendations of the plan. Adoption of this plan will ensure that the collaboration between the city and DDI that helped develop this plan carries forward into the plan's implementation.

### **Contact**

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### **Attachments**

**Attachment A:** Draft Downtown Durham Blueprint: 2035