

# TRANSFORMING DOWNTOWN:

## BUSINESS LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

*Hosted By:*

**hamilton**  
chamber of commerce  
your voice in business

*In Partnership With:*

**FirstOntario**  
CREDIT UNION

**Cornerstone**  
Association of REALTORS®  
REALTORS® Together, Stronger Together

## Dear Chamber Community,

Downtowns reflect a city's history and indicate its future potential. A thriving downtown can enhance urban development and boost a city's appeal.

Hamilton's downtown is at a critical juncture. While opportunities for investment and growth abound, challenges in public safety, affordability, and economic development pose risks to progress. Without decisive action, these challenges could hinder our efforts.

At the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, we are committed to our downtown's success. We advocate for policies and initiatives that address these challenges and unlock downtown's potential as a hub for business, culture, and community.

In November 2024, the Chamber, alongside FirstOntario Credit Union and the Cornerstone Association of Realtors, hosted the Transforming Downtown Roundtable series. This event gathered business leaders and stakeholders to discuss issues affecting downtown Hamilton and envision its future.

Our advocacy has led to significant wins, including the launch of the Core Patrol for public safety and securing over \$800,000 in funding for core maintenance. We support the Light Rail Transit (LRT) project to enhance mobility and attract businesses. Events like the Night-Time Economy Summit and Hamilton Day have also revitalized local engagement.

Following our roundtable, Hamilton City Council voted to create a 10-year Downtown Revitalization Strategy to tackle crime, homelessness, and vacancies. This strategy aims for a clear vision and targeted investments to strengthen the core.

Revitalizing our downtown requires sustained investment, strategic policy changes, and collaboration across the community. The Chamber will unite these efforts and advocate for solutions addressing our members' concerns.

We invite you to help shape our downtown's future through participation in discussions and engagement with policymakers. Together, we can build a safe, prosperous, and welcoming downtown for all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'GD', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Greg Dunnett  
President & CEO  
Hamilton Chamber of Commerce

# OVERVIEW

Downtowns are not just a reflection of a city's history but also a barometer of its future potential. A healthy, thriving downtown can set the tone for broader urban development and contribute to a city's reputation and appeal.

Over the decades, Hamilton's downtown has undergone significant transformations, reflecting broader social, economic, and urban trends. Today, downtown Hamilton faces interconnected challenges and opportunities related to public safety, social supports, affordable housing, and economic revitalization.

The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce has identified key advocacy priorities to drive the revitalization of downtown Hamilton. These priorities, developed through collaboration with business leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders, focus on addressing critical challenges such as public safety, affordability, and economic development, while leveraging the significant opportunities for growth and investment.

*By championing the following priorities, we aim to foster strategic partnerships and advocate for policies that will ensure downtown Hamilton remains a vibrant, prosperous, and welcoming hub for all.*

## ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

### 1. Public Safety and Crime Prevention

Safety is a top priority for Hamilton's businesses, residents and visitors. Concerns such as open drug use, encampments, vandalism, and insufficient law enforcement presence have created an environment that hinders investment, patronage, and residency downtown. While an increased police presence offers immediate relief, long-term solutions require a balanced approach that combines enforcement with community engagement.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Reinforce a long-term safety strategy that leverages recent successes in police visibility and community engagement.
- Provide businesses with clear protocols for addressing safety concerns.
- Establish a centralized reporting platform for security and incidents.
- Advocate for a Safety & Security Grant Program with municipal and provincial governments to fund safety enhancements such as improved lighting, cameras, and neighbourhood patrols.

## 2. Downtown Investment & Revitalization

Downtown Hamilton's growth depends on infrastructure investment, cultural vibrancy, and a robust small business ecosystem. However, stalled projects and safety concerns have slowed progress. Delays in major infrastructure work have resulted in visible deterioration and postponed essential repairs, impacting the area's economic and aesthetic appeal.

### Recommendations:

- Expedite strategic infrastructure upgrades, particularly in areas affected by the LRT project that can proceed independently.
- Support small businesses through accessible funding programs and tax incentives.
- Promote Hamilton as a cultural and tourist destination by fostering local events and creative placemaking initiatives.
- Harness the commitment of local institutions to maximize the social benefit of public and institutional projects.
- Encourage placemaking strategies and pop-up retail initiatives to create spaces for civic connection, creativity, and family life.
- Establish a dedicated downtown revitalization taskforce to champion and benchmark the progress of the future Downtown Revitalization Strategy.

## 3. Addressing the Housing Crisis

Hamilton is facing an escalating housing crisis. The number of Hamiltonians able to purchase a home continues to shrink, while renters face unprecedented challenges in finding affordable apartments. Regulatory delays, rising construction costs, and a lack of coordination among stakeholders is further compounding the issue.

Although all levels of government have implemented policies aimed at rebalancing housing supply and demand, the time lag between policy implementation and actual market impact can span years, leaving many without immediate relief.

Expanding the social housing stock is essential, but without meaningful improvements in housing affordability, the demand for social housing will continue to surge. Affordable and supportive housing plays a critical role in addressing homelessness and fostering community stability.

### Recommendations:

- Streamline development approvals to reduce delays. Approval timelines continue to be long and have worsened overtime, with Hamilton having among the worst average approval timelines. Improving efficiency will support growth, and encourage investment.
- Encourage public-private partnerships to build affordable housing units.
- Leverage provincial funding and city-owned land for housing projects.
- Explore zoning adjustments and innovative housing models from other cities. For example, Kelowna's 'off-the-shelf' pre-approved designs.

## 4. Showcasing Downtown as a Destination to Visit

Downtown Hamilton is a vibrant hub of culture, business, and entertainment, uniquely positioned as an accessible and affordable alternative to larger cities. With its rich history, thriving arts scene, and growing reputation for hospitality, Hamilton has the opportunity to establish itself as a premier destination for visitors, investors, and talent. Strengthening the downtown brand through strategic investments and improved event support will unlock its full potential, attracting more cultural experiences, economic activity, and community engagement.

### Recommendations:

- Develop a bold, long-term tourism strategy that positions Hamilton as a must-visit destination for major events, business investment, and cultural experiences.
- Invest in mid-sized (300-500 seat) venues to expand entertainment options and support the creative economy.
- Modernize event permitting and policies to encourage more festivals, concerts, and public gatherings in key downtown spaces.
- Launch a marketing campaign to redefine Hamilton's downtown identity, celebrating its energy, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit.
- Strengthen collaboration between city departments, businesses, and event organizers to enhance visitor experiences and drive economic impact.
- By elevating its downtown brand and fostering a dynamic urban environment, Hamilton can solidify its reputation as a thriving, inclusive, and exciting destination.

## 5. Providing Social Supports for Vulnerable Populations

A sustainable approach to addressing homelessness, mental health, and addiction is crucial for both social well-being and economic stability. Shelters lacking 24-hour services leave businesses managing the unintended consequences of unsheltered individuals. A coordinated effort among public, private, and nonprofit sectors is essential.

### Recommendations:

- Conduct a comprehensive assessment of existing service gaps to better allocate resources.
- Secure increased funding for mental health and addiction treatment programs.
- Expand 24-hour shelters with support services to transition people off the streets.
- Develop transitional housing programs that move individuals from shelters to permanent housing.
- Engage businesses in job training, internships, and employment opportunities for individuals transitioning out of shelters.

# CONCLUSION

The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce is committed to driving a bold, action-oriented vision for downtown revitalization. These roundtable discussions reinforced the urgency of addressing key challenges through strategic investment, collaboration, and decisive leadership. Success depends on businesses, government, and non-profits working together to create lasting, meaningful change.

## Next Steps for Advocacy & Leadership

- **Unite Stakeholders** – Form a coalition of businesses, non-profits, developers, and city representatives to align efforts on safety, social services, and economic development.
- **Strengthen Government Partnerships** – Work across all levels of government to drive investment in safety initiatives, housing solutions, and economic growth while streamlining processes and ensuring accountability.
- **Establish the "Hamilton Way" Strategy** – Develop a results-driven action plan to tackle downtown's challenges, unlock business opportunities, and position Hamilton as a premier destination for business, tourism, and culture.

By securing investment, cutting red tape, and executing a coordinated strategy, Hamilton can transform its downtown into a thriving, inclusive economic hub. A dedicated coalition of local champions must lead the charge, ensuring a unified approach that delivers real impact.

Together, we can build a downtown that is not only resilient but thriving — a place where innovation, culture, and community shape the future of Hamilton.

# APPENDIX: BREAKOUT GROUPS

## Tourism, Hospitality and Placemaking | Key Takeaways

### Priority Focuses of Group:

- Promoting a Vibrant Nightlife and Cultural Scene
- Supporting the Small Businesses through Infrastructure Developments
- Effective branding and marketing of Downtown Hamilton

Downtown Hamilton has strong potential as a cultural and economic hub. Key priorities include tourism, small business support, infrastructure, and stakeholder collaboration. Securing events will establish Hamilton as a year-round destination, while investment, marketing, and tourism strategies will boost engagement. Expanding cultural infrastructure—mid-sized venues, outdoor spaces, and streamlined planning—will attract more events. Long-term growth requires investing in public spaces and improving coordination. Advocating for events' economic and cultural value will position Hamilton as a top destination.

## Public Safety, Social Supports & Housing | Key Takeaways

### Priority Focuses of Group:

- Public Safety and Crime Prevention
- Social Supports for Vulnerable Populations
- Affordable Housing and Long-Term Solutions

Community leaders are committed to strengthening downtown Hamilton through public safety, social supports, and housing. A thriving downtown requires both immediate action and long-term strategies. Key priorities include increased police presence, expanded mental health supports, and business engagement through initiatives like the "Open for Business" subcommittee. Expanding supportive housing with 24-hour services and streamlining approvals will promote stability and investment. Improved infrastructure, transit, and public spaces will further boost economic growth. With strong leadership and collaboration, Hamilton can drive urban revitalization and create a more inclusive, prosperous downtown.

## Investment in Infrastructure, Intensification & Development | Key Takeaways

### Key Priorities

- Economic Opportunities as we see Larger Residential Base in Downtown
- Infrastructure Investments for Economic Growth
- Economic Incentives and Support for Small Businesses

Downtown's growing population presents a major economic opportunity, but slow development approvals and infrastructure delays threaten progress. Streamlining processes and clear investment plans are crucial.

Businesses face rising costs and regulatory hurdles, prompting calls for grants, tax relief, and support programs. Lessons from other cities highlight the need for proactive strategies. Strong leadership and coordinated investment will help Hamilton modernize infrastructure, support businesses, and build a thriving, prosperous downtown.