

Yellowknife's Downtown: Realistic Ways to Move Forward

Robert Warburton

Co-Founder

CloudWorks

I recently attended the Business Incentive Association of BC conference held in Vancouver as a business representative for the City of Yellowknife. Over 3 days of interactive walking tours and presentations I saw how Vancouver, and cities across North America, are revitalizing various business districts in their cities and the creative ways they are achieving lasting change. Overall, I believe the best way to apply these ideas to Yellowknife is in short, medium, and long term actions we can take as a city to improve our downtown.

Short Term (6 months or less)

Activate our Downtown

Through two very powerful presentations, **Placemaking** and **Pop-ups**, I saw how others aren't waiting for policy, planning or funds. The community and businesses are just making it happen.

First, let's discuss **Placemaking**. Repeatedly, we heard the phrase 'quick and cheap', basically test quickly to see what works and, more importantly, what doesn't. Examples of this were as simple as more chairs on the sidewalk in front of stores or picnic tables in a park to encourage people to hang out. Super low risk actions can be temporary in nature, but provide you insight into how a space can best be used. We are already doing this with things like food trucks in the 50/50 lot. Let the visible feedback on how people actually use a space dictate the eventual design, not a landscape design in the dead of winter from asking a few questions.

Next is **Pop-ups**, which is essentially new businesses or non-profits utilizing dead space. As a downtown property owner, this has been my mantra for years but now it has a name! Currently, downtown Yellowknife has a plethora of unused and dead office and retail spaces. What we need is to encourage these landlords to get creative with their spaces. The days of big companies signing a 5 or 10 year lease are essentially over. These long term leases are also a huge barrier to new small businesses that need to test the waters and see if their idea is even viable. For a pop-up to work, these new businesses need to lease a space for as little as a few days or a few months to see if the idea is worth pursuing.

This is where the landlords of the city, of which I am one, can step up with little risk. With new innovative ways of covering the insurance and liability issues on short term rentals, landlords can incubate these short term tenants into long term businesses. In fact, over 50% of the pop-ups in the past few years in Vancouver are now established in a full-time location. Plus, new businesses, even temporary ones, drive more foot traffic to your building and your other tenants are better served as well. They are heated and lighted spaces anyway, so why not try something besides waiting?

Medium Term (6 to 18 months)

A Feeling of Safety

One of the most innovative and thought provoking presentations was by Chief Constable Adam Palmer of the Vancouver Police Department (VPD). His focus on **Community Policing and Safety** really resonated, considering our social issues in the downtown core.

For the VPD, it took the death of a young man to really spur them into action. He dealt with mental health and addictions issues and came into contact dozens of times a month with police, health services, and eventually the

Correctional Service. Never really getting the help he needed, he used up vast amounts of public resources and fell through the gaping holes in the system. Sound familiar?

Again, we don't need to wait, and the City of Yellowknife and our local RCMP detachment have the power to affect this issue. What the VPD achieved didn't use additional resources, it just reallocated them. Police officers are paired with public health nurses and local non-profits, like the YWCA, and joined into teams a few times a week. Not arresting, but community policing. They go to the marginalized and homeless populations to help them get those resources they need and access to the programming that is often already available.

We can achieve this feeling of safety in our downtown again. Our Municipal Enforcement Division (MED) staff can assume a community policing role, after they are provided with the training and skills required to expand their roles. Alternatively, the city could reallocate some MED resources to the RCMP for a dedicated officer to work with the community on addressing these issues. The cities continued support of the day shelter, as well as reallocation of existing money rather than new money, can make this happen in the medium term.

Long Term (18+ months)

Business Incentive District (BID's)

Once we find out how our community actually uses and activates space through placemaking and pop-ups, and we've made it safer through a community policing model, we can look at an organized drive to bring new business and life to our downtown area.

There are two main ways that BID's are organized and funded. One is a tax on the business and one is a tax on the property itself. Due to economies of scale, the only version I think that would work in Yellowknife is one tied to the property. There are just not enough businesses to support this type of organizational financial structure. Through an addition to the property taxes, landlords can be assured the extra funds are going directly into improving the areas around their specific buildings. Businesses in these buildings will likely see a small increase in their rental rates, one that goes right into the surrounding community and not into a corporate black hole.

So what do you do with these funds? Basically whatever is identified in the steps to get here. Some BID's coordinate and provide security for whole areas so the costs are shared among everyone, not just a few individuals. Others have active street cleaning and beautification programs. A prime example in Yellowknife is Adam Dental Clinic, which works with the community to keep its place looking good and therefore preventing much of the vandalism we see elsewhere. The list is endless but the important part is that the BID's can hyper-focus efforts on specific buildings, businesses and areas in ways that a city government just can't while serving a general tax base.

As a downtown resident, business and property owner, I want as much as anyone to see the downtown thrive. Through actions, instead of more pointless policy papers and reports, the downtown core can become the economic and social hub that will ultimately make living in Yellowknife better for everyone.