

Strengthen.
Succeed.
Expand.



Downtown Evanston

5 Year Strategic Plan

2016 - 2020



Executive Summary

With a new Executive Director and the sun setting on its previous 5-year strategic plan, Downtown Evanston (DE) realized that the time was right to begin planning again to ensure that the organization was ready to take full advantage of future opportunities. DE hired PLACE Consulting to take the organization through a new strategic planning process that would assess current capacity, identify gap and growth areas, identify strategic partners and result in a 4-year strategic planning document.

Key components of the process included demographic data review, Board and stakeholder engagement, an organizational audit, surveys, and peer scans for best practices and benchmarking of programs against four aspirational downtown communities.

PLACE's demographic analysis revealed that the downtown area has higher educational attainment, household income and median income than any other area within a 15-minute drive time. According to Nielsen Company, Inc., there are 22,700 employees in the downtown vicinity (within a half-mile of Church and Sherman), working for nearly 1,000 establishments.

The Board was surveyed about satisfaction and importance of current programs as well as priority of new programs. Attendees at the organization's annual meeting provided their input on current and future programs, as well as sent a mock postcard to someone considering locating in Evanston. The postcard allowed stakeholders to highlight the advantages of Evanston versus another competitive community, and identified existing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a fun and engaging way.

The final result was a set of recommendations organized into four areas:

1. Strengthen Downtown Evanston as an organization;
2. Engage in placemaking activities to further enhance the downtown area;
3. Create and expand partnerships that bolster and amplify the mission and vision of Downtown Evanston;
4. Market and promote downtown Evanston's events, businesses, employers and other attractions and assets.



Learning from Peers: Ideal Organization Benchmarking

VALUE - members and municipal staff find value in the organization and see tangible benefits from its existence

EFFICIENCY - organization's services complement, not duplicate, other services, and are executed with care and costs appropriate to outcomes

EFFECTIVENESS - organization gets done what it sets out to do - and what the community/members want it to do

STRENGTH - organization's governance and management is strong, reliable and respected

POWER - organization holds power because of its ability to represent its constituents, get things done, manage resources, and balance competing interests



2016 - 2020 Goals

1. Strengthen Downtown Evanston as an organization
2. Engage in placemaking activities to further enhance the downtown area
3. Create and expand partnerships that bolster and amplify the mission and vision of Downtown Evanston
4. Market and promote downtown Evanston's events, businesses, employers and other attractions and assets



GOAL ONE

Strengthen Downtown Evanston as an organization

- Diversify and increase funding streams to avoid over-reliance on SSA and City funds
- Develop events as a sustainable and independent funding source
- Consider changing or modifying the name of the organization to distinguish the organization from the geographic area
- Develop Board nomination process including description of expectations of Board members
- Update/revise bylaws to include term limits, better representation from owners, tenants and residents, and required contribution (“give or get”)
- Change Board meeting culture to actively engage members and demand outcomes from them
- Institute Board committees with representation of non-Board members
- Develop a culture of accountability, such as Board self-assessment and organizational scorecard
- Hold regular (annual) planning retreats
- Distribute surveys to members on an annual basis to determine satisfaction and program direction
- Periodically benchmark downtown Evanston/DE to other downtowns and downtown organizations
- Visit inspirational/aspirational neighborhoods and meet with organizations for critical assessment and best practice research



GOAL TWO

Engage in placemaking activities to further enhance the downtown area

- Identify no-cost/low-cost interventions providing places to gather, interesting art installations, interactive elements, etc. (e.g. “tweet seats,” pop-up stores, performance artists, food-centric events)
- Look to resources such as Candy Chang’s book, *Before I Die*, and other cities’ examples of Tactical Urbanism
- Connect with Project for Public Spaces for technical assistance and best practice guidelines
- Host events that positively contribute to an improved sense of place in the downtown area
- Focus on “bread and butter” activities, such as landscaping, to ensure satisfaction levels remain high
- Establish a design character and standard that will allow Evanston to become/remain a distinctive destination



GOAL THREE

Create and expand partnerships that bolster and amplify the mission and vision of Downtown Evanston

- Continue to develop the partnership with Northwestern University
- Consistently demonstrate the value of DE in order to identify and foster new partnerships
- Evaluate and consider restructuring the partnership with the Evanston Chamber
- Build and strengthen partnerships with other organizations and institutions in Evanston and the region
- Explore International Town Gown Association involvement
- Expand the NU “Cat Cash” program using Loyola University’s “Rambler Bucks” as a model
- Increase interaction with/penetration to students, faculty and staff
- Increase interaction with/penetration to residents and customers
- Jointly develop materials for students, faculty and staff for distribution on campus, at football games, in new visitor’s center, etc.



GOAL FOUR

Market and promote downtown Evanston's events, businesses, employers and other attractions and assets

- Develop high quality design guidelines and standards for in-house production materials
- Produce a professional video to promote the downtown Evanston area to prospective business and visitors
- Increase the use of Vine and Instagram in order to reach Millennials and younger consumers
- Rigorously apply criteria to event outcomes to determine if they are having the desired impact (generate organizational revenue, increase business sales, etc.)
- Refine and rebrand events to reach target markets, including adding morning and lunchtime events
- Benchmark events against aspirational communities and review effectiveness

