



Delaware County 2035 | Central Places

Downtown Upper Darby

Vision Plan: Executive Summary



May 2018



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Learn more a

Introduction

The *Downtown Upper Darby Vision Plan* is a long-range vision plan developed through community outreach to help guide future improvements. It is intended to build on recent efforts and current momentum in the community – not replace it. The plan helps to coordinate the efforts and vision of multiple stakeholders to keep working towards common goals.

The study area (see below) is located immediately south of 69th Street Transportation Center, including the eastern terminus of West Chester Pike and Garrett Road. It serves as a regional transportation hub and a cultural destination due to its entertainment options, such as the Tower Theater. Much of the area was originally developed as a mixed-use town in the 1920s and attracted new residents with its regional transit access. Today, the mix of residential and commercial uses continues in many of the original structures.

Background

Downtowns and main streets across the country have seen renewed interest as people look to live in walkable and vibrant communities. Additionally, online retail is changing the perception of in-store shopping from a 'chore' to a 'leisure experience' to be enjoyed. This change is having a significant impact on the expectations that people have for downtowns across the country – they expect it to be enjoyable, relaxing, and unique.

There have been several studies for this area dating back to the 1970s, many of which focused on large-scale changes to completely redevelop downtown. This plan takes a different approach – it is rooted in community input and focuses on creating the experience that people want to have downtown. The plan emphasizes smaller-scale projects that can help build momentum to make larger-scale projects more feasible.

Downtown Upper Darby Study Area



Planning Process

Because the community is such an important aspect of downtown Upper Darby, its input is at the heart of this plan.

A strong outreach process at the beginning of the project gave people the opportunity to voice their ideas for the long-term vision of downtown. This included an open house style meeting that provided community members with the chance to offer input at several "stations" around the room. Attendees marked-up maps with opportunities and prioritized types of improvements by "voting" with stickers. The project planning team walked community members through options and described the potential benefits of each.

A public online survey was used to further collect ideas from the community. Participants were asked to weigh in on the importance of certain factors commonly found in successful downtowns, such as outdoor dining, gathering spaces, and special events.

At the same time, a more detailed inventory and analysis was conducted by the planning team to review current conditions and opportunities. Together, these efforts helped to guide the recommendations and prioritization of the action plan.





Key Takeaways

Most of the feedback received through the survey and open house focuses on several recurring topics: things to do, getting around, and maintenance. Additionally, there was an underlying theme revolving around the perception of downtown Upper Darby; people have made certain assumptions about downtown based on things they have heard or read – much of which does not accurately reflect all of the good things happening.

Things to Do

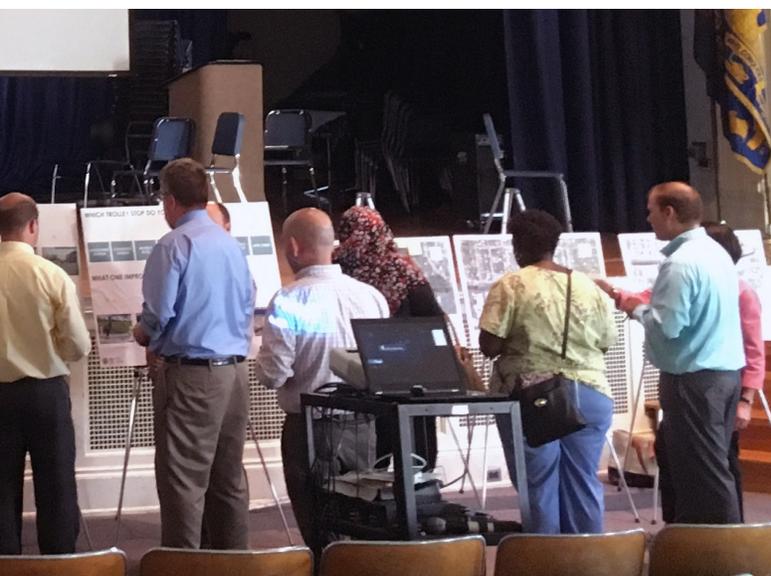
While most people recognized several significant destinations, such as the Tower Theater and Studio Movie Grill, many people noted that they felt there were limited other destinations, particularly restaurants and stores. Although there are many stores and several restaurants, most people perceived a lack of options because they felt they are not “destinations” – that is, stores may serve the local neighborhood or function for an errand, but do not entice people to spend time walking around enjoying the shops.

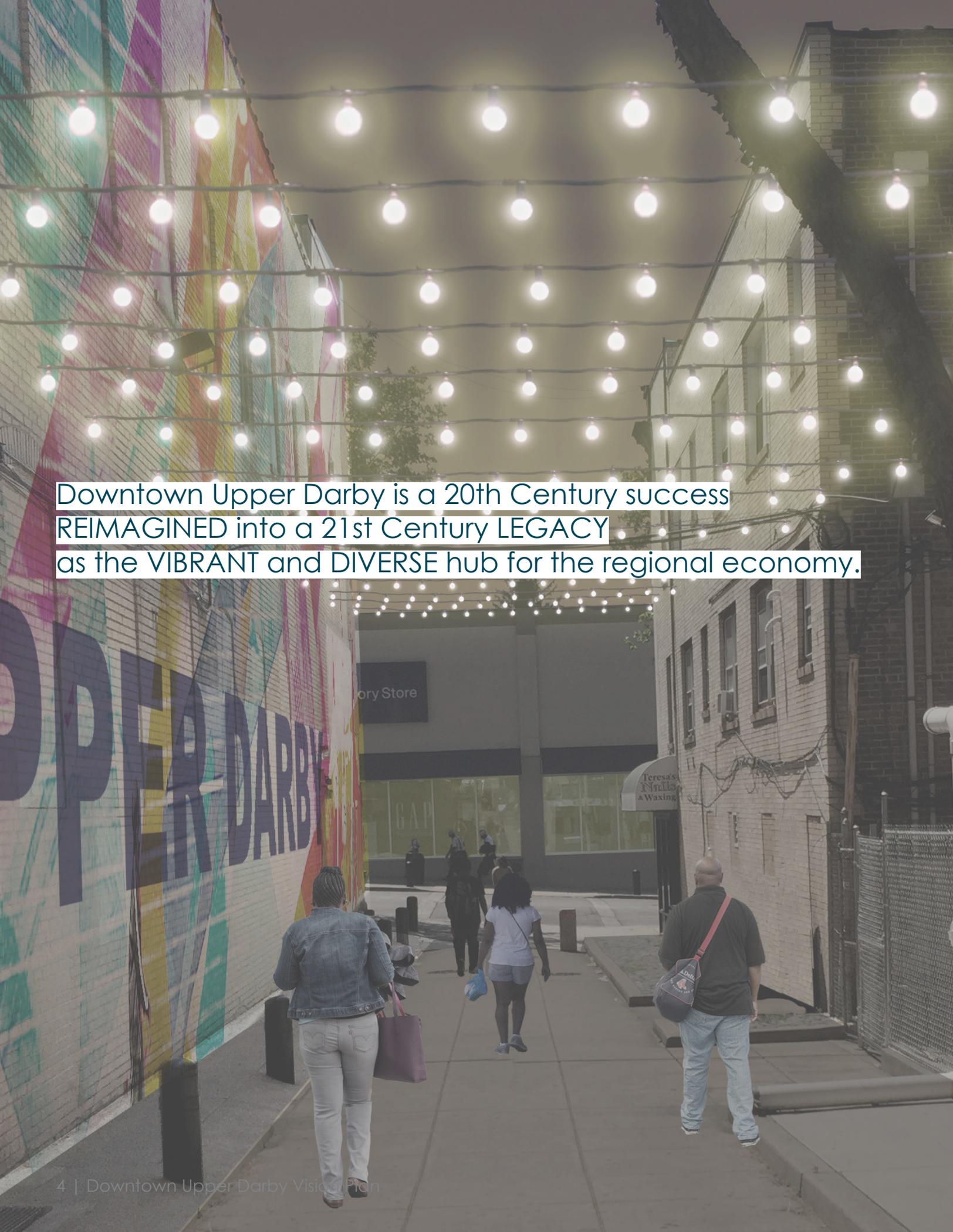
Getting Around

Nearly every participant noted that transit access was a great amenity, but most people just passed through 69th Street and did not stop. Some people expressed that while there are sidewalks and crosswalks, it is not comfortable for people to walk around due to difficult intersections with heavy traffic. Additionally, it was noted that it can be difficult to find parking, particularly when there is a large event.

Maintenance

Many people pointed out the condition of some buildings and expressed a desire for better, or more consistent, maintenance of both public and private properties.





Downtown Upper Darby is a 20th Century success
REIMAGINED into a 21st Century LEGACY
as the VIBRANT and DIVERSE hub for the regional economy.

Vision Statement

Downtown Upper Darby was developed in the early 20th century as an innovative transit-oriented community and flourished throughout much of the 1900s. It weathered the flight of many commercial stores to more suburban-style (i.e., car-centric) shopping malls and strip malls. Today, ironically, it stands as a prime example of the type of dense, walkable development pattern many others are trying to replicate while retrofitting shopping malls.

The emphasis for Downtown Upper Darby is to strengthen its position in the next century by reimagining itself and creating an experience that is unique and fosters innovation. This will allow it to be continuously reimagined as community needs and market demands change and maintain pace with ever-advancing technological opportunities. Together, these elements will forge Downtown Upper Darby into an even stronger regional hub.

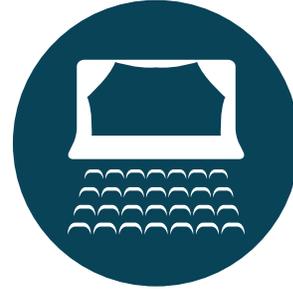
Vision Themes

The Vision Themes serve as the guiding principles – not specific actions or projects – for working towards the community vision. As needs and market demands change over time, so too will the projects; the Vision Themes provide broad principles to help decision-makers remain flexible while still building towards the community vision.



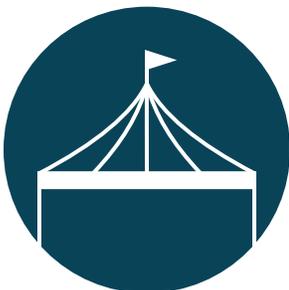
Tell the Story

The positive perception of downtown Upper Darby is a vital element to its success. The story told about downtown Upper Darby should portray it as a vibrant and distinct experience in the region. The built environment should support this narrative by creating positive focal points.



Build on Strengths

The variety of entertainment options draws visitors from across the region for shows, concerts, and movies. Attracting uses that support these entertainment options, such as restaurants, will contribute to the experience and entice retailers looking to enter into markets that take advantage of the trend toward shopping as an entertainment experience.



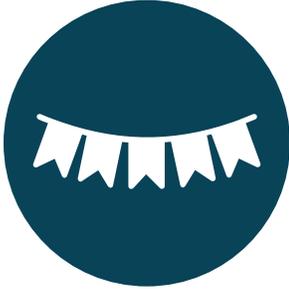
Curate an Experience

Online retail has changed the way that people shop; in-store shopping is now seen as a leisure “experience” to be enjoyed rather than a chore. Unique shops and special events should be encouraged to draw people downtown where the streetscape becomes a community focal point – the place to see and be seen.



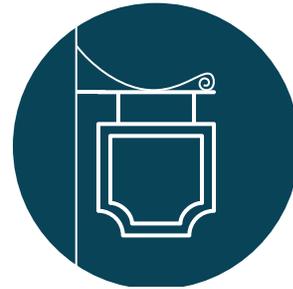
Protect Signature Features

The unique art deco design style that is prevalent in the built environment of downtown Upper Darby distinguishes it from similar commercial districts in the region. Iconic structures, such as the McClatchy Building and Tower Theater, serve as celebrated features in the community. Together, these elements contribute to a unique sense of place that cannot be mimicked.



Embrace the Heritage

The diverse cultural background of the Upper Darby community contributes to the distinct mixture of shops and restaurants that make the downtown special. It is a welcoming environment for residents and visitors alike that embraces unique heritage and cultural traditions.



Foster Local Business

The local business community serves as a strong foundation for growth of the downtown economy. Local businesses are invested in the future of Upper Darby and are a crucial component of the community vision for a diverse and vibrant economy. The community should support local and small businesses to ensure it remains the footing of the local economy.



Streamline Access

Downtown Upper Darby is surrounded by dense residential development with tens of thousands of people traveling through it every day.

Simplifying multimodal access is essential to effectively capturing this market. Emphasizing pedestrian comfort and safety in downtown as the top priority will encourage people to spend more time here.



Capitalize on Assets

The dense urban fabric of downtown Upper Darby produces a walkable community with a mix of housing options that supports a range of age-groups and economic backgrounds. It has transit access that is nearly unparalleled in the region. The existing scale of development sustains a variety of uses and creates a vibrant downtown throughout the day; underutilized sites should be redeveloped to reinforce this.

Vision Realized

The plan calls for efforts focused on creating unique experiences along the streetscape for pedestrians, including special events and a mix of stores and restaurants. These types of projects, centered around people and experience, will bring renewed activity and a dynamic feel to downtown Upper Darby.

Alleyway

Gateways to downtown set the tone for what type of experience people should expect. Special treatments, such as a mural, signage, or lighting, can create a unique sense of arrival for visitors. Many of these potential improvements are relatively low cost, but can have a long-lasting impact on the perception of the area. It is worth noting that these improvements, as with any meaningful change, would need to involve a partnership with private property owners.



Plaza

Wide sidewalks provide the opportunity to host smaller events, such as a farmers' market, in highly visible and highly trafficked locations to create activity downtown. The existing space can be used to minimize effects on parking and traffic. These events can contribute to a vibrant and active streetscape environment downtown.



Existing



Potential

Existing

Activity Node

Some spaces can be enhanced to increase the comfort of people and create greater visual distinction – this will create natural gathering spaces and “landmarks” for people. These “activity nodes” are an important element in drawing people through different areas of downtown Upper Darby.



Dining

The temporary use of on-street parking for outdoor dining can provide additional space for local businesses without reducing the sidewalk space for pedestrians. This use of additional space and visual interest on the ground floor of buildings will make it comfortable for people to spend time walking around downtown.



Action Plan

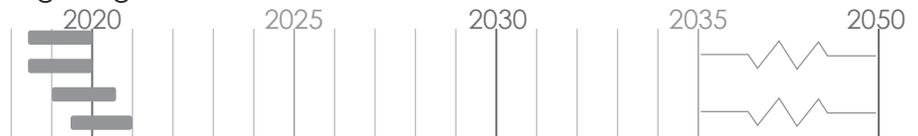
The Downtown Upper Darby Vision Plan represents a unique summary of what the community believes will make downtown Upper Darby thrive in the 21st Century. The strategic action plan included will guide the community in achieving this long-range vision by building around existing strengths and attracting private investment. It will require a long-term, coordinated effort that involves many public, private, and non-profit partners that should remain flexible over time. At times, this may even mean experimenting with temporary improvements to determine if they are successful. Upper Darby should remain focused communicating progress with the community – touting successes and emphasizing how projects contribute to the community vision.

The action plan is organized by overarching and interacting projects, each representing an issue or opportunity identified through the community visioning process. The projects are broken down into more actionable phases that represent the next steps. These phases become more general as time progresses, providing flexibility in later years when they should be guided more by the effects and actual implementation timing of earlier action items. In fact, the strategy recommends an update to this action plan be completed around 2030 to continue supporting the Vision Themes. This update can review previous efforts and adjust the action plan based on the impact of changing trends, such as housing affordability, market updates, and business mixes.

Project 1: High Impact Changes/Catalyst Projects

There are several relatively low-cost actions that can begin immediately and have a very high positive impact on the experience in downtown Upper Darby. These sorts of actions can go a long way in changing the perception of the area and showing people that the community is committed and ready to work together towards the long-range vision.

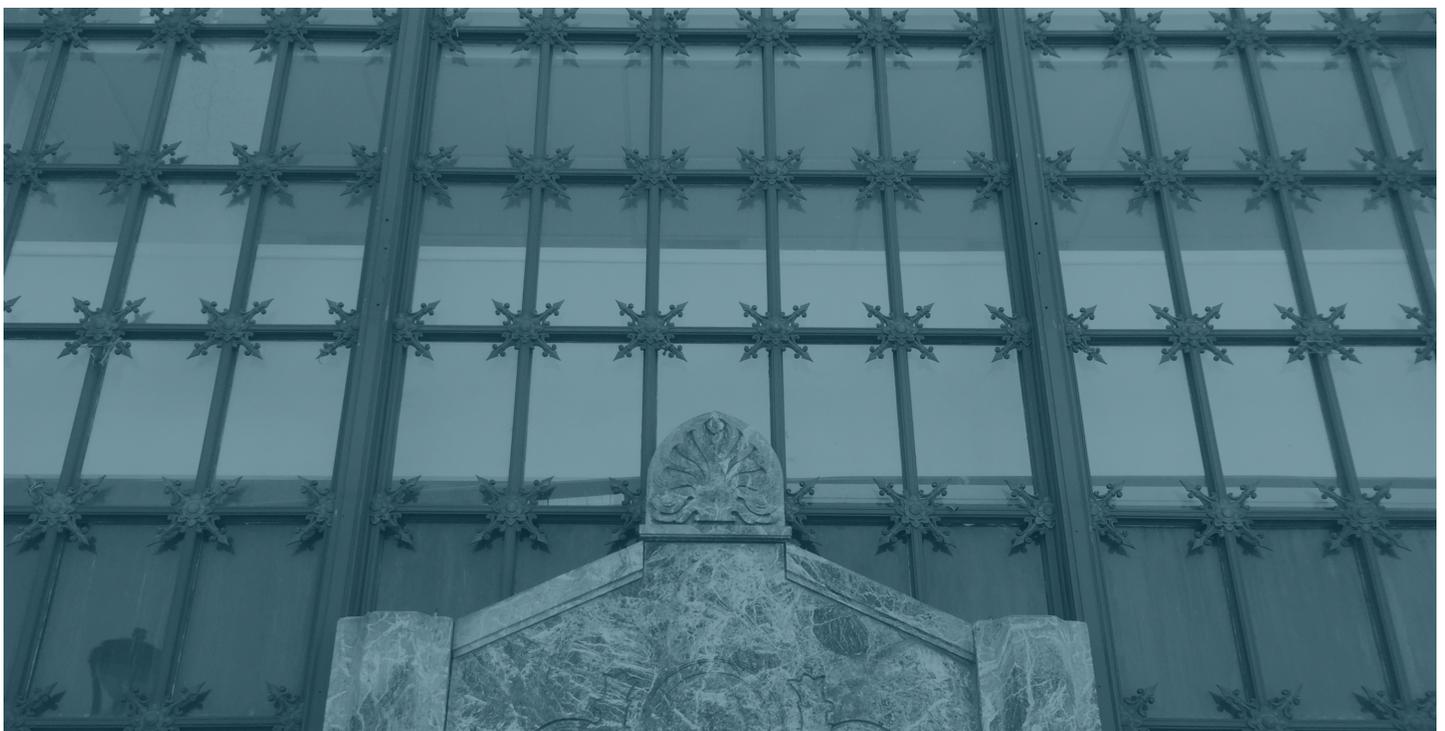
- Phase 1: Maintenance "Blitz"
- Phase 2: Rideshare Stations
- Phase 3: Pedestrian Signals
- Phase 4: Alleyway Enhancements



Project 2: Community Messaging

It is important that the community works together to tell a story that accurately represents the experience of downtown Upper Darby because the perceptions can directly impact the experience of visitors.

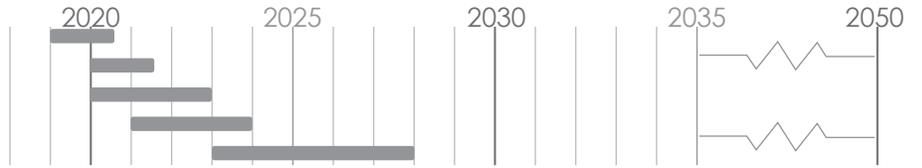
- Phase 1: Community Branding
- Phase 2: Marketing Campaign
- Phase 3: Signage System



Project 3: Parking Strategy

While there is tremendous transit access to downtown Upper Darby, parking should also be available at appropriate levels to encourage visitors.

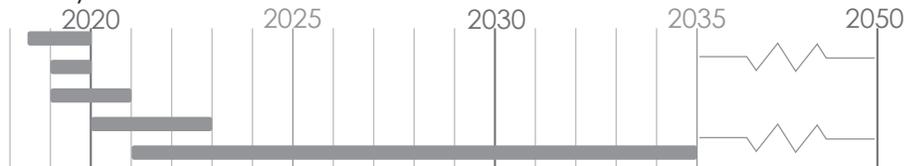
- Phase 1: Parking Analysis
- Phase 2: Install Parking Kiosks
- Phase 3: Implement Analysis Results
- Phase 4: Commuter Garage
- Phase 5: Public Garage



Project 4: SEPTA 69th Street Transportation Center

In many ways, the 69th Street Transportation Center serves as an important anchor for the community; it is often the first (and sometimes only) impression of downtown Upper Darby. As such, it should reflect the same values as downtown Upper Darby.

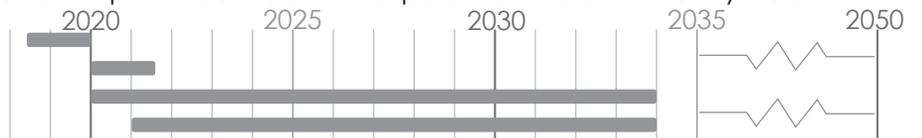
- Phase 1: Cosmetic Fixes
- Phase 2: Station Market Study
- Phase 3: Station Master Plan
- Phase 4: Implement Market Study
- Phase 5: Implement Master Plan



Project 5: Downtown Management Entity

A special management entity, such as a business association or special district, for downtown Upper Darby may help to coordinate business and spearhead certain aspects of the community vision.

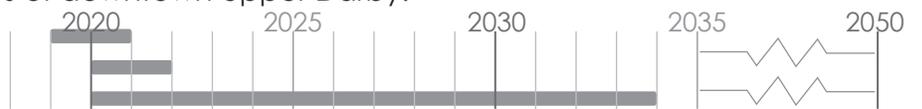
- Phase 1: Explore Management Options
- Phase 2: Organization Strategic Plan
- Phase 3: Special Events
- Phase 4: Regularly Scheduled Events



Project 6: Historic Resource Protection

A balance of reuse of historical structures and redevelopment of other sites can provide for new growth while protecting the signature features of downtown Upper Darby.

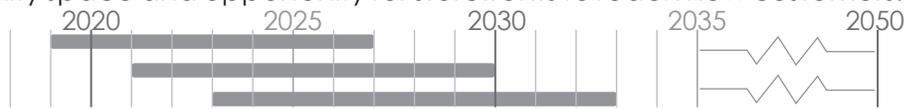
- Phase 1: Enact Protections
- Phase 2: Historic Design Guidelines
- Phase 3: Adaptive Reuse



Project 7: Streetscape Enhancements

In any downtown area, a safe, complete, and attractive streetscape is an important factor in its economic vitality; it creates a community space and opportunity for storefronts to reach new customers.

- Phase 1: Tactical Placemaking
- Phase 2: Streetscape Engineering
- Phase 3: Streetscape Construction



Project 8: Administrative Updates

The Township has done a good job at streamlining the permitting and development review process with developers and these efforts should continue to evolve.

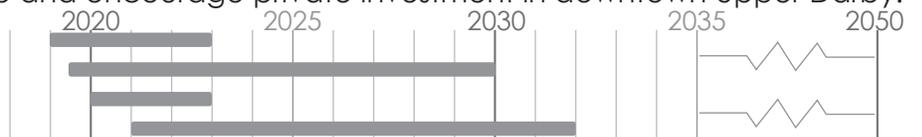
- Phase 1: Zoning Update
- Phase 2: Zoning Outreach
- Phase 3: Streamline Permitting

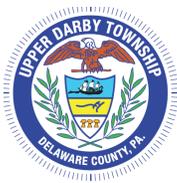


Project 9: Redevelopment Initiatives

While private investment is largely based on market conditions, there are specific steps that can be taken by the community to incentivize and encourage private investment in downtown Upper Darby.

- Phase 1: Façade Improvements
- Phase 2: Business Recruitment
- Phase 3: Identify Development Sites
- Phase 4: Market Development Sites





Upper Darby Township

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Laura Wentz, Council at-large
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