

## Narrative: Reasserting Downtown Oswego as a Regional Destination

In 2016, the State of New York selected the City of Oswego to take part in the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI). The program sought to use downtown revitalization as an engine for long-term growth and prosperity throughout the city. The City received a \$10 million grant, divided in two parts:

- \$300,000 to hire consultants to help the community assess and strengthen projects that could spur downtown revitalization and attract additional investment.
- \$9,700,000 of seed money to kick-start the projects identified by the community.

The DRI grant offered a chance to accelerate momentum already building in Oswego's downtown. Like many Rustbelt cities, Oswego had endured decades of decline spurred by suburban development and competition from suburban retail and employment. Nevertheless, the city had retained its historic walkable scale and a dramatic waterfront setting where the Oswego River empties into Lake Ontario. A series of public workshops helped identify key goals that created a road map for turning the \$9.7 million in seed money into more than \$120 million of new developments and initiatives.

Oswego's DRI planning began with a community-engagement program that included stakeholder interviews, public meetings, creation of an active advisory committee, and online forums designed to reach people unable to attend meetings. As the planning team explored community aspirations, it began developing a detailed downtown profile to establish baseline conditions. The team then

worked with community members to develop a vision, supporting goals, and strategies for reaching the goals. The planning team pushed community members to make the goals ambitious but provided technical support that kept them anchored in market-based strategies designed to promote long-term growth.

The final plan identified 30 catalytic projects—highly visible efforts with strong potential to attract further private investment. The report included a detailed profile explaining how each project supported downtown revitalization; a pro forma; and a cost-benefit argument in favor of the project showing feasibility, sustainability, and potential impact. Each profile also included an implementation strategy with recommendations on management and economic sustainability over the long haul.

### **Making Downtown a Three-Hour Destination**

The planning team's market study showed downtown Oswego competing for business with—and losing out to—Armory Square and the suburban Destiny Mall in Syracuse, 45 minutes away. A key take-away was that Oswego could compete if it offered multiple activities that could be combined in one visit. Adding more, and more varied offerings would draw people from a wider area, and they would spend more time downtown. The right mix of activities—for example, lunch, a visit to the Children's Museum, ice skating, and a stroll along the lakefront or riverfront—could keep visitors happily occupied for three-hours or longer, particularly if it could all be done on foot.

The planning process identified six core strategies for strengthening downtown. All projects recommended for funding advance at least one of these strategies:

- **Focus On Market Realities.** Stick to what would be economically feasible in Oswego. Adding housing could support a growing population of downtown residents. They, in turn, would increase retail demand.
- **Create a Connected, Inviting Public Realm.** A well-designed public realm attracts people and invites them to linger downtown, enlivening sidewalks and public spaces. Design streets for the safety of all users, including pedestrians and bicyclists.
- **Promote High-Quality Design.** Oswego's downtown character and historical charm will play a central role in its future success. New construction and renovations should embody high-quality design and complement the downtown context.
- **Create a "Park Once" setting.** Visitors worry about finding parking. Performance management, shared parking, public valets, and zoning changes would help Oswego use existing supply more efficiently.
- **Install a Coordinated Signage System.** Clear signage and wayfinding helps people find (or discover) points of interest. It contributes to the feeling that downtown is welcoming and easy to figure out. That, in turn, benefits small businesses throughout the area.
- **Make Downtown a Destination.** More varied amenities will appeal to different audiences and support redevelopment. Strengthening existing amenities and developing new ones will help retain and attract residents and visitors.

## Implementation Success

The City approved the final plan and submitted it to the State, which reviewed all 30 recommended projects. It ultimately awarded funds to a mix of 12 projects. Half will improve Oswego's public realm and half are private-sector development projects.

**The public realm projects** focus on creating a more inviting framework for private investment and a more appealing sense of place for visitors, workers, and shoppers. This group of projects includes renovation of the Children's Museum of Oswego; revitalization to improve the look and feel of Oswego's River Walk; a Complete Streets make-over for one of downtown's most important streets; and a financial mechanism for supporting outdoor programming in downtown.

**The private development projects** comprise residential and mixed-use development—a mix of historic rehab and new construction—that will yield more than 230 new housing units downtown, as well as a significant volume of new and high-quality commercial space.

The DRI program emphasizes projects that can move into implementation within a year. Of the 12 funded projects, construction has begun one one—rehabilitation of the historic Cahill Building into 7 luxury apartments—and it is 75% complete. Of the remainder, the majority are moving through final permitting and will begin construction between March and October 2018. All will be completed by the end of 2020.