International Downtown Association
2014 Downtown Achievement Awards

Bernard Avenue Revitalization
Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada
Note Regarding the Submission

The stakeholder consultation along with the design and construction phases of the project were overseen by the City of Kelowna. Additionally, although the adjoining property owners will contribute approximately 25% of the cost of the streetscape works through a levy on their municipal taxes over the next 20 years, the remainder of the project was funded by the City of Kelowna. The submission for a 2014 Downtown Achievement Award is accordingly being made by the City of Kelowna, with the support of the Downtown Kelowna Association (DKA).

Project Description

When the decision was made in 2010 to replace the aging underground infrastructure along a 7-block stretch of Bernard Avenue, Kelowna’s “Main Street”, the City took on a streetscape project in tandem with the utility upgrades. Working with the DKA, the City recognized the opportunity to breathe new life into Bernard Avenue and to restore it as the centrepiece of Kelowna’s Downtown.

A retail specialist was included as part of the consultant team. His analysis indicated a high percentage of food and beverage operations along the street. The majority of these were locally-owned, with 37% of them offering ethnic cuisine. These insights pointed the way to more animation of the street if the restaurants and coffee houses could spill onto the sidewalk. Sidewalk cafes providing a critical mass of local fare were seen as the ticket to economic revitalization if they could attract more local and out-of-town visitors to Bernard Avenue. This in turn, would generate more walk-by traffic for all businesses in the area.

An outdoor seating program had been in effect for over a decade, but permits were limited and allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. An earlier planning exercise had suggested widening the sidewalks by reducing the number of vehicle lanes from 4 to 3 to create a more pedestrian-friendly street. To maximize flexibility for outdoor café seating, and to open the door to more outdoor cafes, the City asked: What if the sidewalks could be made even wider by converting the existing angle parking to parallel parking?

The issue was contentious. However, an inventory indicated that there was an abundant supply of conveniently-located, short- and long-term parking within Downtown generally, and a safety audit identified parallel parking as a safer option for motorists and bicyclists. Ultimately, parallel parking, although not embraced due to the associated loss of on-street parking, was acknowledged by the Bernard Avenue business and property owners as a reasonable trade-off to create a street that would function in a new and exciting way.

The consultation process delivered a concept plan that the stakeholders supported as the preferred option. The resulting sidewalk has three zones. Located immediately next to the parking lane is the Furnishings Zone with the street trees, light poles, etc. The middle zone is an unobstructed 2-metre wide Pedestrian Zone. Immediately next to the buildings is a three-metre deep Frontage Zone. This zone is available for café seating, as well as for sandwich boards and merchandise displays and sales. Generous curb bulbs complement the wide sidewalks with additional seating and areas for street programming.

With an aging local population, the design also makes the street accessible for mobility-restricted individuals. The design focuses on people with visual impairments by incorporating a wayfinding system referred to as Urban Braille, which aids mobility through a system of visual and tactile cues.

Working with the street cross section developed in the concept design phase, the detail design phase was very much a placemaking exercise with an emphasis on creating an authentic setting where people would want to spend time and where retail sales would be a positive spin-off.

The summer months and the weeks leading up to Christmas are the busiest times of year for Downtown for merchants. The business owners were therefore very vocal about the impacts that construction would have
during these critical months. After weighing the many technical, financial, and logistical implications of veering from an uninterrupted schedule, the City agreed to 3 construction periods, with no construction from May to September. Construction of the $14 million project began in September, 2012 and finished in May, 2014.

Prior to the start of construction, a Communications and Marketing Plan was prepared. The Plan, jointly funded by the City and the DKA, developed a strategy to help merchants with customer retention during the construction phase. It included an action plan to keep business owners up-to-date on construction activity and to help manage their businesses on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, it developed a project theme, “My Downtown” that was implemented through advertising and promotional activities to draw customers to Downtown throughout the construction period.

A City staff liaison was assigned to communicate directly with business owners and to deal with issues as they arose throughout the construction period. During construction, regular updates were made available via the City website as well as the City’s email subscription service. Local media was kept informed through regular media releases from the City’s Communications Division.

**Innovation** - The project recognized that the greatest asset was the quality and variety of businesses along the street and that creating more room for on-street merchandising and café seating could be a stimulus for more economic activity. It acknowledged that enhancing the street as a public space, along with a concentration of independent merchants was occasion for a special synergy.

**Replication** - The outcome is based on sound urban design principles which can be the foundation for any streetscape project. A lesson might be that an effective revitalization project should be more than skin deep; it requires an understanding of the underlying economic fundamentals and opportunities.

**Representation** - The Bernard Avenue Revitalization was inclusive. It brought together key stakeholders and the community-at-large to shape an exciting vision of Bernard Avenue. The Downtown Kelowna Association was an enthusiastic partner bringing its support and resources to the project.

**Implementation** - The City demonstrated a commitment beyond the consultation phase of the project, dedicating resources in conjunction with the DKA, to helping Downtown visitors and the merchants transition into, and navigate through the construction phase.

**Sustainability** - The project demonstrates sustainability in all key areas:

1) Economic - the concept is based on a strategy to attract more people to the subject area, resulting in more sales to sustain locally-owned and operated businesses;

2) Environmental - in addition to creating a more pedestrian- and bicyclist-friendly urban environment, the project focuses public investment in Downtown as a catalyst for denser, mixed-use development, mitigating pressure to develop the outlying areas with the associated environmental impacts;

3) Social - the street functions as Downtown’s “living room”; one intended to encourage an emotional attachment and to build social capital through greater social interaction; the street also accommodates individuals across a wide range of physical abilities and most notably, incorporates Urban Braille to allow visually-restricted individuals to move on foot with greater confidence.

**Conclusion**

The revitalization project underlines the importance of Kelowna’s Downtown and local independent businesses to our community. It speaks to the confidence of Downtown Kelowna and its willingness to define itself as a progressive, 21st century urban centre.