

An aerial photograph of downtown Norfolk, Virginia, showing a mix of historic brick buildings and modern high-rises. The city is situated along the waterfront, with a harbor and several boats visible. A large white circle is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing the title text. To the left of the circle, there are several vertical bars in shades of blue, teal, and yellow.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DOWNTOWN NORFOLK STRATEGIC PLAN

PLAN PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

Founded in 1979, the **Downtown Norfolk Council (DNC)** is a member-based, 501(c)(6) urban place management organization dedicated to promoting and enhancing business, cultural, retail, and residential initiatives in Downtown Norfolk. DNC manages the **Downtown Improvement District (DID)**, a 50-block district that was created in February 1999, and that is funded by a special assessment on property. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Downtown Norfolk Fund, is also under the purview of DNC. DNC is governed by a Board of Directors that represents Downtown stakeholders and oversees all programs and services administered by the organization.

In early 2023, DNC initiated the ***Downtown Norfolk Strategic Plan Update*** to help identify priorities for the organization and guide Downtown's growth and development over the next five-to-seven years. The Plan Update builds on the previous Downtown Norfolk Strategic Plan, which was completed in 2015. This Strategic Plan update is timely as Downtown adjusts to new challenges and opportunities that have emerged following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent acceleration of trends affecting downtowns throughout the nation, including Norfolk.

STRATEGIC PLAN GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Strategic Plan is founded upon a set of guiding principles that anchor the plan's recommendations and implementation moving forward. The guiding principles include:

VISIONARY

DNC will be the leading voice for Downtown Norfolk, advocating on behalf of the interests of all segments of the Downtown community at the city and regional levels. DNC will be the leader on issues and initiatives that exclusively affect Downtown and be a partner at the table in citywide and regional policies and programs that also impact Downtown. DNC will innovate and consider new ways of doing things, soliciting ideas from the greater Norfolk community, and incorporating national best practices tailored to addressing Downtown Norfolk's challenges.

RESILIENT

As was clearly demonstrated over the last several years, the needs of Downtown Norfolk are constantly evolving and DNC needs to adapt to new realities as new challenges and opportunities arise. DNC should support and advance opportunities to advance Downtown's economic, social, and coastal resilience.

INCLUSIVE

One of Norfolk's greatest strengths is its racial and ethnic diversity. DNC will embrace this diversity through programming and initiatives that are reflective of the broader community by seeking opportunities to cultivate a sense of belonging for all community members in Downtown, and in engaging an array of stakeholders to invoke a strong spirit of collaboration. DNC will also proactively identify and remove barriers to participation in the organization's governance structures, programming, and policies.

PLANNING PROCESS

The downtown strategic planning process included the following core components:



Evaluation of existing conditions:

To understand recent planning efforts that impact Downtown Norfolk and adjacent areas, a thorough review of existing plans was conducted to ensure this process builds upon such efforts. Additionally, to analyze existing conditions, the plan includes a market assessment that identifies strengths, challenges, and opportunities within four market sectors: Live, Work, Shop & Dine, and Visit & Stay.



Extensive community engagement:

To understand Downtown's strengths and challenges, and to identify community priorities for the next five years, extensive engagement included **more than 2,000 inputs** from Downtown stakeholders, civic partners, City officials, DNC board members, and the community-at-large.



A refreshed Strategic Plan structure:

The Strategic Plan lays out a vision for Downtown and a refreshed mission for DNC that are then supported by a physical framework, goals, strategies, and organizational recommendations to guide what is next for DNC and Downtown over the next five years.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Comprehensive, inclusive community engagement was critical to ensure a wide spectrum of voices were heard throughout the strategic planning process. In total, **over 2,000 inputs** were gathered as part of this process. Outreach methods included an online survey, one-on-one interviews, topic-based roundtables, steering committee meetings, a pop-up at the annual Juneteenth Festival at Town Point Park, a planning charrette at DNC's annual meeting, and open house meetings to present draft plan recommendations.



Community Engagement at the Juneteenth Festival Pop-Up

DOWNTOWN STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH

During the initial phases of the Strategic Plan process, Downtown stakeholders were asked to identify Downtown’s strengths and weaknesses, and to brainstorm improvements for Downtown moving forward in roundtable meetings and during individual interviews.

Strengths	Challenges	Priorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasingly a mixed-use neighborhood Access to green space, including the waterfront Authenticity, character, sense of community, and civic engagement Overall cleanliness of the Downtown environment Arts and culture hub for the region, including new public art, thriving music scene Abundant parking supply Unique, local restaurant, cafes, stores, and outdoor dining Compact Downtown, easily walkable and bikeable Large-scale events and festivals that attract visitors and locals alike 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MacArthur Center Parking experience Many Black community members shared that they do not feel welcome Downtown Storefront vacancies throughout Downtown and barriers to opening new ground level businesses Real and perceived safety concerns Flooding Lack of consistent connection to the waterfront and public space programming Things to do after 5 p.m. Lack of connectivity between Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure Downtown is clean and safe Strengthen and activate the storefront economy Encourage more year-round, local-serving public space programming and activation Improve marketing and communication about existing strengths and assets Enhance the parking experience and management of existing supply Make Downtown welcoming and inclusive to the entire community Create more reasons for people to come Downtown in the evening Improve collaboration between DNC and partners

ONLINE SURVEY

The community-wide online survey collected **1,337 responses**, a majority representing Norfolk residents and Downtown employees. Respondents’ top physical improvement priorities for Downtown Norfolk are:

- Reimagine and redevelop MacArthur Center (44%)
- Redevelop and repurpose underutilized surface parking lots and vacant buildings and lots (16%)

Respondents’ top service or program priorities for Downtown Norfolk are:

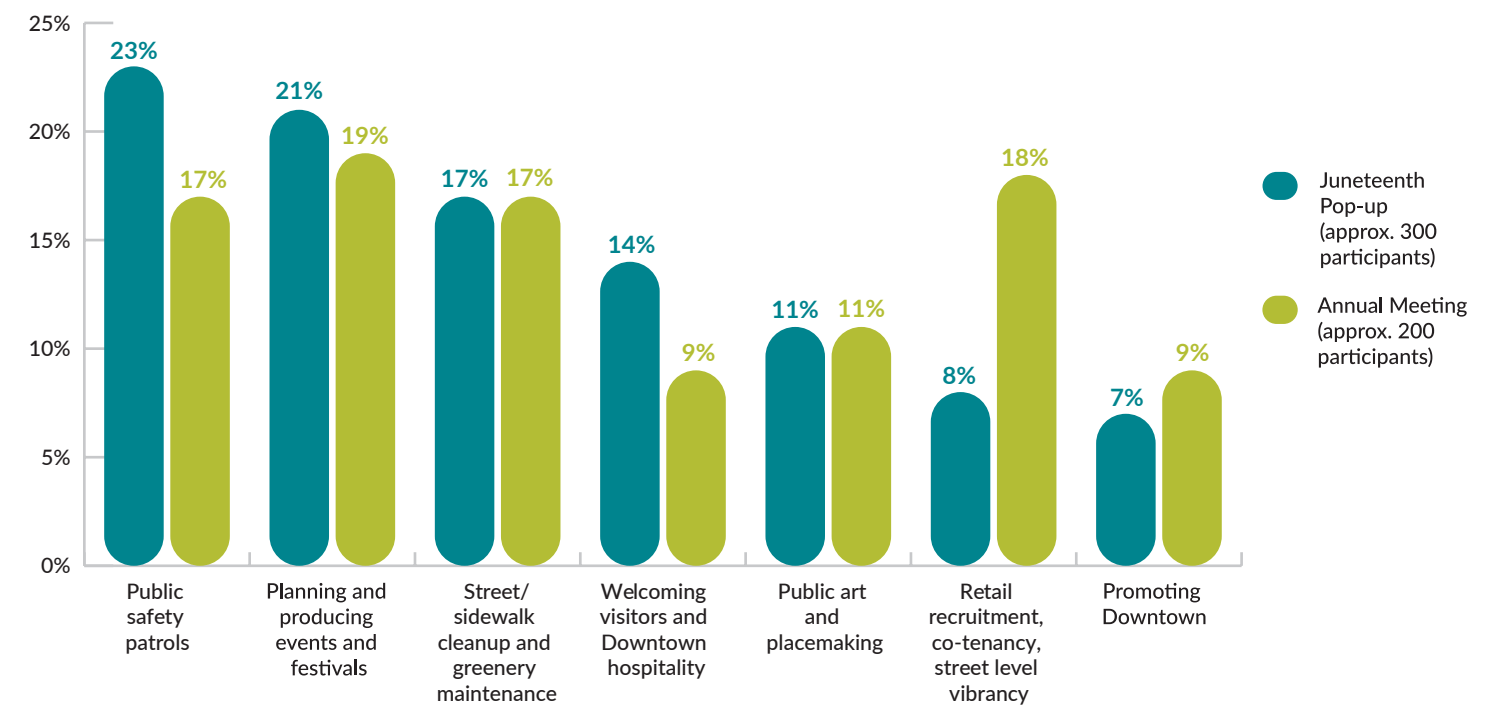
- Ensure Downtown is clean and safe (30%)
- Attract retail and services for daily needs (21%)
- Create more reasons for people to come Downtown, particularly after 5 p.m. (17%)



Looking to the future, what three words best capture your desired vision for Downtown Norfolk in the year 2033?

DNC ANNUAL MEETING & POP-UP AT JUNETEENTH FESTIVAL

To gather input on priorities for DNC services moving forward, approximately **500 individuals** were engaged at DNC’s Annual Meeting and a pop-up booth at the annual Juneteenth celebration in Town Point Park. At each event, attendees participated in an interactive voting exercise in which they were asked to use ‘DNC Bucks’ to fund three DNC services that are most important to them. Results from both voting exercises are provided below.



MARKET CONDITIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

To understand existing conditions in Norfolk, a market assessment examined Downtown through the lens of four main topic areas: Live, Work, Shop & Dine, and Visit & Stay. Understanding Downtown’s market dynamics informed development of the plan’s vision, physical framework, and recommendations. Key findings and opportunities from the market assessment include:

LIVE

- Downtown’s residential population has grown by 87% since 2010, and could grow by an additional 25% over the next several years.
- Moving forward, new or converted housing should be offered at a variety of price points, including options for lower- and moderate-income households and ownership housing types.
- Continued population growth should help attract desired household-serving retail such as a grocery, and drive investment into resident-serving amenities that include green space and dog parks.
- As the office real estate market evolves, consider opportunities to convert underutilized inventory to alternative uses, such as housing.

79%

of respondents to the Plan’s online survey indicated interest in living Downtown, with the greatest interest in ownership options like condominiums and townhouses.

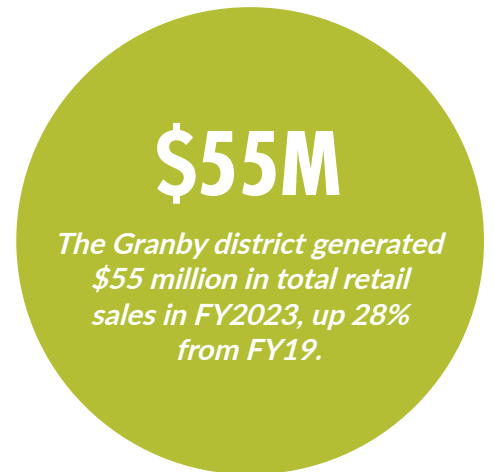
WORK

- Downtown comprises less than 0.5% of the city's total land area, but is home to 16% of the city's businesses and 15% of the city's jobs.
- Like most downtowns, there has been volatility in the Downtown office sector post-pandemic. The office sector will need to adapt to changing worker needs and preferences with flexible configurations and a greater variety of price points.
- Enhancing the overall quality of the Downtown experience will help attract workers back to the office more frequently. Safe and programmed gathering places in the public realm are critical amenities.
- Downtown can leverage and connect with Tidewater Community College, Norfolk State University, and Old Dominion University, to collaborate and help market small business resources and programs.



SHOP & DINE

- Many sub-districts in Downtown have surpassed pre-pandemic retail and food and beverage sales, while other sub-districts have struggled with vacancy and turnover.
- Loss of property and retail tax revenue from the declining MacArthur Center will be a key challenge (and opportunity) for the City of Norfolk and Downtown partners moving ahead.
- There is an opportunity to continue diversifying the restaurant and retail mix to add dining options with more affordable price points and new food, beverage, and entertainment concepts that are culturally relevant, particularly for young professionals of color and students.



VISIT & STAY

- Hotel revenue is at an all-time high, which has been fueled in part by an increase in conference attendees, and occupancy is close to 2019 levels.
- Downtown continues to maintain a reputation as a regional and national tourism and event/festival destination, with many organizations working to promote Downtown's offerings.
- Downtown Norfolk faces growing competition from local and regional destinations, such as Virginia Beach's ViBe District and Town Center.
- Based on community feedback and survey responses, many people of color in the city and region do not feel welcome Downtown. Moving forward, there is an opportunity to provide diverse experiences and cultivate a more inclusive environment through events, music, arts, and culturally-relevant programming.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following key takeaways summarize findings from the preceding existing conditions analysis and themes from engagement with Downtown stakeholders, representatives from adjacent neighborhoods, and the greater Norfolk community. These key takeaways serve as a pivot into Downtown Strategic Plan recommendations, and are split into takeaways that apply to Downtown Norfolk, and key takeaways focused on the DNC organization.

DOWNTOWN NORFOLK AS A WHOLE

- 1 Downtown has made great strides over the last 10 years toward becoming a mixed-use neighborhood through substantial investment in new housing, businesses, and amenities.
- 2 While Downtown Norfolk is physically attractive, it faces lingering challenges coming out of the pandemic that include erosion in office, retail, and entertainment, housing affordability and a more visible unhoused population, plus concerns with safety.
- 3 For many community members, Downtown does not reflect nor welcome the diversity of Norfolk.
- 4 Despite its challenges, Downtown has the potential and asset base to reemerge as the vibrant, inclusive, and prosperous center of Norfolk.

DOWNTOWN NORFOLK COUNCIL

- 1 Outside of the Downtown core, DNC's role and services are not well understood.
- 2 Strengthening DNC's position will require the organization to better connect to, embrace, and reflect the diversity and creative energy that exists within Downtown and Norfolk as a whole.
- 3 Given the loss of value in MacArthur Center and potential erosion of value in office buildings, DNC faces financial challenges that will require creative solutions and focus on key objectives.
- 4 There is an opportunity to improve collaboration and better leverage resources among the organizations working to improve Downtown, including the City of Norfolk, and the economic, creative, cultural, and higher education partners in and around Downtown.

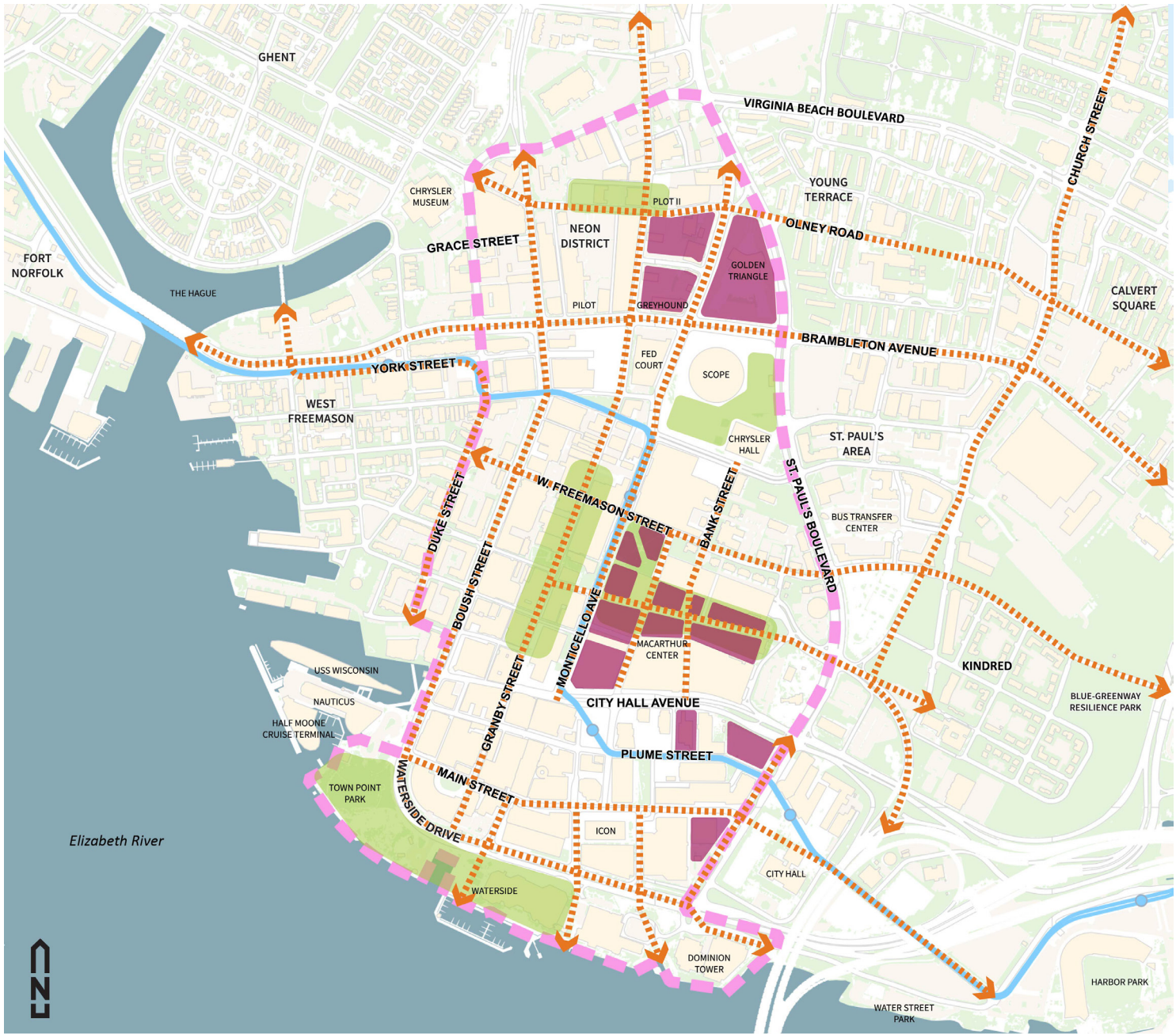
WHAT'S NEXT FOR DOWNTOWN

VISION FOR DOWNTOWN

Downtown is the vibrant and welcoming center of Norfolk where people, culture, and commerce intersect.

PHYSICAL FRAMEWORK

This physical framework outlines a vision for Downtown Norfolk’s physical environment and provides recommendations for returning it to its role as a vibrant urban neighborhood where everyone is welcome, there is something for everyone to do, and there is always something new to discover. This framework is intended to provide a roadmap for DNC’s advocacy and activation efforts over the life of this Strategic Plan, ensuring DNC is a key partner contributing to all future development and physical improvements happening in Downtown Norfolk over the next five years and beyond.



DOWNTOWN NORFOLK STRATEGIC PLAN PHYSICAL FRAMEWORK | SUMMARY

- OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC REALM ENHANCEMENTS OR PROGRAMMING
- OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEIGHBORHOOD USES
- OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCED MULTI-MODAL CONNECTIVITY

WHAT'S NEXT FOR DNC

The strategic plan presents a refreshed organizational structure for DNC that includes a set of Strategic Plan guiding principles, a revised organizational mission, internal core values, and that is focused around four goals. These four goals will become the bedrock of DNC's work over the next five years. Each goal is supported by several strategies and that will help the organization be successful in that given area. Goals and strategies are provided below.

REVISED DNC MISSION

DNC enhances Downtown Norfolk's value, energy, and activity through providing essential clean and safe services, strengthening authentic urban experiences, and fostering inclusive community.

GOALS & STRATEGIES

GOAL 01

BE THE LEADING VOICE AND ADVOCATE FOR DOWNTOWN NORFOLK.

- **Strategy 1:** Ensure DNC has an influential impact in decisions affecting Downtown.
- **Strategy 2:** Enhance communication of DNC's value proposition to Downtown stakeholders, DNC members, and the broader Norfolk community.
- **Strategy 3:** Assure the DNC organization is inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the greater Downtown community.
- **Strategy 4:** Increase DNC membership and existing member engagement.

GOAL 02

ENSURE DOWNTOWN IS CLEAN AND SAFE.

- **Strategy 1:** Focus on optimizing DNC's clean and safe program, including employing national best practices.
- **Strategy 2:** Establish a storefront presence for the clean and safe team.
- **Strategy 3:** Work with the Norfolk Police Department to ensure adequate, consistent, and visible coverage for Downtown.

GOAL 03

DRIVE ECONOMIC VITALITY AND GROUND FLOOR ACTIVATION.

- **Strategy 1:** Retain and attract additional cultural, entertainment, restaurant, and nighttime economy uses to create a more vital Downtown.
- **Strategy 2:** Support Downtown's office market.
- **Strategy 3:** Strengthen, support, advocate for, and promote a diverse and equitable Downtown business community.
- **Strategy 4:** Continue to support the transformation of Downtown into a mixed-use neighborhood.

GOAL 04

PROMOTE AND MARKET DOWNTOWN NORFOLK AS A DESTINATION FOR THE REGION AND BEYOND.

- **Strategy 1:** Focus on small-scale public realm activation and promotions that drive foot traffic to Downtown, and ultimately to Downtown businesses.
- **Strategy 2:** Embrace arts and entertainment through partnerships with cultural organizations and community partners.
- **Strategy 3:** Continue marketing Downtown and its unique character districts.
- **Strategy 4:** Rebrand the DNC organization to better reflect its revised mission.
- **Strategy 5:** Provide regular updates to the City and regional leaders to build a shared understanding that a successful Downtown drives prosperity for ALL neighborhoods and residents.



ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT

Over the next several years, stagnant commercial real estate values will create an environment where DNC must get the most from existing resources, as opposed to anticipating growth. Under this revenue assumption for the DID, the subsequent organizational recommendations for DNC will emphasize near-term organizational focus, efficiency, and optimization of resources to benefit Downtown stakeholders plus key partners in adjacent neighborhoods. Key recommendations include:

- Develop a mission screen to create clear parameters and expectations around what DNC does and does not do, both internally and externally, to ensure DNC staff and resources do not get pulled in too many directions.
- Optimize each of the entities that comprise the DNC family of organizations – the DNC 501(c)(6) membership organization, the DID, and the 501(c)(3) – to leverage funding, streamline staff allocation, and foster innovation moving forward.
- Redefine the 501(c)(3)'s role to champion special projects in Downtown and diversify funding sources for improvements and initiatives within Downtown while exploring physical and economic connections to surrounding areas.
- Align DNC staff and committee structures to the goals laid out in this plan.
- Make Board adjustments, including pursuing opportunities to diversify DNC's Board, and amending the bylaws and establishing a new board for the 501(c)(3).
- Bolster and redefine the DT100 program, offering DT100 members an opportunity to have a greater impact on Downtown and increase direct involvement with DNC.
- Diversify funding sources through pursuing grants, fundraising, increasing membership dues, exploring membership and sponsorship bundling, and pursuing strategic contracts for service.
- Proactively increase collaboration with key partners, including the City of Norfolk, other Downtown-oriented civic organizations, and Downtown-adjacent entities, educational institutions, and neighborhood groups.