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1.0 Introduction to the Background Report

The process of developing a new Master Plan for Downtown Strathroy started with an analysis and photographic documentation of the current structure and physical characteristics of the downtown buildings and streetscapes.

This background report is intended to make accessible much of this background information for future reference as an aid to implementing the Master Plan. This report has been organized into the following broad sections:

- Downtown Fabric
- Heritage Characteristics
- Downtown Streetscapes
- Focal Points
- Character Areas
- Gateway Locations
- Visioning Workshop

Downtown Strathroy Study Area
2.0 Downtown Fabric

Downtown Strathroy is an area of historic, compact and varied land use that has traditionally formed the social, commercial and administrative core of the community and is generally geographically defined by:

- The Sydenham River to the north
- The CN rail corridor to the south
- Head Street to the east
- Thomas Street to the west

The Fabric of downtown Strathroy is based on a traditional street grid dating from the early 1830’s. With the exception of the auto-oriented Keswick Mall area with expansive parking fields the streets have a comfortable and inviting human-scale. This sense of comfort results from the combination of short blocks of a walkable scale, a contiguous facade of two to three storey high commercial buildings placed close to the street and presence of traditional single and semi detached houses and townhouses promoting a strong pedestrian element on the street. In general the historic commercial buildings of the downtown are modular in form, built with regard for the buildings located on adjacent parcels as a component of cohesive streetscape.

Historically the downtown evolved in this location as the focus of a thriving extended agricultural community based around the formal elements of the mill, the market and the Railroad. With the arrival of the Great Western Railway, the Train Station and associated yards at the foot of Frank Street, commercial development expanded west along Front Street from the original settlements around the mill pond, forming the current structure of the downtown.

Through a number of changes the Market grounds located on Frank Street has been transformed into the current Strathroy Public Library. Although the Town Hall’s parking area which lies adjacent to the Public Library is often used as an outdoor farmers market it has lost its character as a formal public space and a focus of activity in the Downtown.

Today, the mill pond (Pincombe’s Pond) located to the north just outside Downtown and the flour mill at the intersection of Frank Street and Metcalfe Street, adjacent to the CN rail corridor, are iconic reminders of the traditional agricultural industries that drove the development of Downtown Strathroy.

Overtime with the development of the Provincial and County road system and the closure of the CNR station (passenger connection still active), Caradoc Street (County Road 81) and Metcalfe Road (County Road 9) have become the principle all purpose transportation connections to the surrounding region and beyond through Highway 402 and County Road 22. Currently Caradoc Street and Metcalfe Street are the principle gateways to the Downtown for the majority of visitors.

Map of the village of Strathroy as Surveyed 1837
3.0 Heritage Characteristics

Although some building facades have been renovated, and architectural details removed or masked, many building facades along the principal civic, cultural and commercial streets retain their architectural integrity. The prevailing late nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial architecture incorporates several Italianate and other classical motifs including detailed and regular upper story windows and detailed or bracketed pediments or cornices. The strong Romanesque arches and heavy stone work lend the former Post Office and Customs House a strong stoic presence along Frank Street. The neo-classical façade and elevated entrance of the Town Hall exude civic importance. The new Post Office, Public Library and Strathroy Museum are later additions to the Downtown, in a modern style and are physically and architecturally less visually dominant.

In addition to the large single-detached Edwardian houses and more diminutive single-detached cottages and farmhouse vernacular constructed of local yellow brick, Downtown Strathroy has an unexpected collection of urban residential dwelling types. On Front Street there is a trio of semi-detached Italianate houses, that in their repetition and orientation to the street give the impression of street townhouses; and on Front Street, Caradoc Street and James Street there are large semi-detached Edwardian and Bay and Gable houses with twinned entrances.
4.0 **Downtown Streetscapes**

The building stock that lines the downtown streets is generally well designed and consequently visually and physically supportive of an attractive pedestrian friendly environment. The landscaping components of the downtown streetscapes are attractive and vary from the formal tree plantings along Front Street and Frank Street to the informal landscaping and tree plantings along the other downtown streetscapes. In general the landscaping along Front Street and Frank Street reflect the intentions of the previous Community Improvement Plan for Downtown Strathroy. The following sections provide a brief description and photographic documentation of the downtown streetscapes in their current conditions.
4.1 Caradoc Street

Caradoc Street which crosses over the CN rail corridor and Sydenham River has developed as one of the two principal arterial roads running through Downtown Strathroy. Between Front Street and CNR lands the streetscape is formed with a diverse mix of low rise building types that include traditional Victorian commercial buildings (Age Dispatch Building) as well as single and semi-detached homes and contemporary commercial strip development adjacent to the CNR lands.

Over time and as a result of increased traffic volumes Caradoc Street appears to be caught in a transition with single and semi-detached houses being redeveloped for service commercial uses. Employment lands adjacent to the CNR lands are currently underutilized, vacant or in transition as the importance of a rail connection declines. This streetscape was not identified for improvement in the previous Community Improvement Plan and so has not benefited over time from a coordinated approach to tree planting and streetscape design.
4.2 Metcalfe Street and Albert Street

Metcalfe Street along with Albert Street forms the principal east/west arterial route through the southern end of the downtown linking with Highway 402 in the east. Before and after passing through the downtown Metcalfe Street and Albert Street are primarily residential streets fronted with single detached homes with direct driveway access to the street. The landscape component of Metcalfe Street and Albert Street which is dependent on the collective planting and maintenance of the individual home owners includes a large proportion of attractive mature high crowing shade trees along both sides of the street.
4.3 Front Street

Front Street is in general a well preserved example of a rural Victorian commercial streetscape containing many buildings of local and architectural interest. As the founding commercial street in the downtown, Front Street is physically and historically the origin point for the Town of Strathroy. Much of this streetscape is generally architecturally intact particularly on its south side from Thomas Street to Colborne Street. The streetscape is composed mainly of two and three storey narrow lot Victorian brick commercial buildings with its focus traditionally located at the intersection with Frank Street. Parallel parking is provided along both sides of Front Street in lay-bys separated by street trees and decorative paving. It is clear that the streetscape has benefited from following the landscape concepts provided by the previous Community Improvement Plan with regard to paving, lighting, tree planting and street furniture.
Frank Street has traditionally been the civic focus of the community. The Town Hall, former Post Office and Customs House, the new Post Office, and the Public Library and Strathroy Museum are located mid block on Frank Street. A Market and Market House were once located on Frank Street on land now occupied by the Library and Strathroy Museum. Like Front Street much of Frank Street still provides a vivid glimpse into the Town’s past as a cultural and commercial focus for a successful rural community. Moreover, like Front Street, parallel parking is provided along both sides of the street in lay-by separated by street trees and decorative paving. The streetscape has benefited from following the landscape concepts provided by the previous Community Improvement Plan with regard to paving, lighting, tree planting and street furniture.
4.5 Centre Street and James Street

Centre Street and James Street are traditional urban residential streets within the interior of the Downtown that contain a mix of single-detached and semi-detached houses as well as integrated institutional and commercial uses. Both of these provide the downtown with additional opportunities for landscaping and on street parking. The intersection of Centre Street and Frank Street provides the locations for both the old and the new post offices and a strong visual punctuation on Frank Street. James Street is an attractive short one block street that helps to maintain the close pedestrian scale of the downtown.
4.6 **Bounding Streets, Thomas Street, Richmond Street, Maitland Street**

Thomas Street, Richmond Street, and Maitland Terrace are all transitional commercial/residential streets, beyond which residential neighbourhoods comprised of primarily single-detached houses have developed in close proximity to the commercial and institutional uses in the Downtown. Each of these streets is currently single sided with houses facing or flanking onto commercial or employment lands within the downtown. These streets may collectively possess unique individual design challenges in the future.
5.0 Architectural and Social Focal Points of the Downtown

The fabric of the downtown contains a number of architectural and social focal points that support its structure and function. The following sections identify and document these focal points.

5.1 Town Hall (52 Frank Street)

The present Town Hall located on Frank Street south of Centre Street was constructed in 1928. The initial design by William Robinson, an Ontario architect, included a market, council chambers and assembly hall, but was never realized. The more modest design by Wait and Blackwell Architects of London, Ontario was constructed. The building is a full two storeys with a bell tower located above and fire hose tower to the rear (since removed), as well as an elevated basement level. The neo-classical motifs that dress the red brick building include slender columns flanking the entrance and bell tower, a decorative frieze and cornice and central pediment that are notably more reserved and delicate than the motifs on the Former Bank of Commerce Building.
5.2 **New Post Office (62 Frank Street)**

The new Post Office located on the southwest corner of Frank Street and Centre Street was formerly the site of a number of hotel ventures; most notably the J.W. Prangley Hotel that was converted to apartments and demolished to make way for the new Post Office in 1965. The new Post Office is a single storey building with a flat roof as per the contemporary style at the time of construction. Large limestone wall titles dress the principal entrance of the otherwise red brick building.

5.3 Former Post Office and Customs House (71 Frank Street)

The Former Post Office and Customs Houses located on the northeast corner of Frank Street and Centre Street was designed by Thomas Fuller, the Chief Architect for the Federal Department of Public Works in the “Dominion” style, a blend of Gothic and Romanesque forms developed for public buildings. Characterized by a two and half storey mansard block and a tall pyramid roofed clock tower, Fuller’s “Dominion” style buildings provided an immediately recognizable symbol of the Federal government. Constructed in 1889, the building contained the Post Office on the first floor of the main block, weights and measures and an examining warehouse on the first floor wing, the Customs and Inland Revenue Offices on the second floor and the caretaker’s quarters in the attic. The building functioned as indented until 1964 when the new Post Office was constructed.

5.4 Public Library & Strathroy Museum (34 Frank Street)

The Public Library and Strathroy Museum is located on Frank Street adjacent to the present Town Hall on the site of the former market square and later the armories constructed by the Federal government. Consideration was given to repurposing the armories for use as the Public Library and Strathroy Museum, but in 1965 the present Public Library and Strathroy Museum was constructed where the armories stood. The single storey brick building is of the same period and contemporary style as new Post Office, but does not share in the flat roof. Two twinned peaked roofs cap the Public Library and Strathroy Museum building.
5.5 Former Bank of Commerce Building (51 Front Street West)

The former Bank of Commerce Building, and later Strathroy Police Station, located at the northwest corner of Frank Street and Front Street was constructed circa 1883 in the Neo-classical style that is suggestive of stability and security. Neo-classical features include a central doorway flanked by two Doric columns, a decorated frieze and cornice with the unusual placement of balustrades above. The second storey of the building originally contained quarters for the bank clerk.
5.6 **Aged Dispatch (8 Front Street)**

The building housing the Aged Dispatch was constructed in 1915 at the corner of Caradoc Street and Front Street where formerly the Callaghan Block stood. The building is two-storeys and clad in red brick with a neo-angle entrance. In 1921 the newspapers the “Age” and the “Dispatch” amalgamated forming the “Aged Dispatch”.


5.7 **Strathroy and Area Seniors Centre (137 Frank Street)**

The Strathroy and Area Seniors Centre on Frank Street adjacent to the Sydenham River was designed by Sarnia architect William Andrews and constructed in 1965 as the offices for the Public Utilities Commission on the former site of the pump house that contained the water works pumps and electric generator. The pump house was partially demolished and the portion that remained faced with Angel stone to blend seamlessly with the new single storey construction. The building was converted from the offices for the Public Utilities Commission to its current use as the Strathroy and Area Seniors Centre in recent years from which several community programs are run.

5.8 Fraternal Hall - Former Salvation Army Citadel (15 Centre Street)

The former Salvation Army Citadel located on Centre Street was constructed in 1886 by members of the ‘corp.’ or church and is currently occupied by the Order of the Eastern Star. The building is constructed of local yellow brick and features decorative brick courses about the window and central door, and dental detailing below the simple limestone cornice. There is a recent addition to the eastern side of the building.

Source: Cox, Clifford R. Strathroy (Red Valley) 1834-1934.
5.9 Flour Mill

The founding of the flour milling industry on the mill pond (Pincombe Pond) is interwoven with the history of Strathroy. The monolithic concrete silos located at the intersection of Albert, Metcalfe and Frank Streets that formed part of the Strathroy Flour Mills Ltd. holdings until sold circa 1970 are reminders of this industry and its considerable influence in the development of Strathroy.
5.10 First Baptist Church (20 Centre Street)

Circa 1863 Rev. George Richardson purchased a modest framed building believed to be the first Town Hall at public auction and moved the building to Centre Street repurposing it as a place of worship. The building was subsequently sold and moved when the congregation outgrew it and the present First Baptist Church constructed in 1888 and dedicated the following year in 1889. The present building is clad with predominately local yellow brick and features red brick polychromatic banding and courses around the windows. Modest wooden tracery decorates the central peak of the front façade.

5.11 St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church (152 Albert Street)

Construction on the present St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church located on the southeast corner of Richmond Street and Albert Street commenced in 1877 and the building was dedicated the following year in 1878. The building is clad with local yellow brick and features a bell tower and many gothic decorative features including arched and circular rose windows with tracery and ornamental brick buttresses. A modern addition with a flat roof has been added to the rear of the building.

Source: Cox, Clifford R. Strathroy (Red Valley) 1834-1934.
5.12 Pedestrian Footbridge

A pedestrian footbridge crossing the Sydenham River is located at the base of Frank Street and facilitates an important pedestrian connection with Alexandra Park to the north. The pedestrian bridge is presently a rudimentary steel girder crossing but has the potential to be developed into a strong visual terminus. The previous Community Improvement Plan had recommended improvements to this effect, including a “doorway” arch at Frank and Front Street highlighting the continuation of Frank Street to the Sydenham River and reconstruction of the Pedestrian Bridge, but was not realized.
6.0 Character Areas

As a result of the review of the existing fabric of the downtown, its buildings and streetscapes it is clear that Downtown Strathroy can be seen as a collection of six different primary character areas that each provide a distinct amenity to the community. The characteristics of each of these areas help to identify opportunities that can be built on in the development of the downtown master plan.
6.1 **Front Street and Frank Street**

Front Street between Head Street North and Thomas Street and Frank Street between Front Street and Metcalfe Street are the principal civic, cultural and commercial streets in Downtown Strathroy.

Front Street with its stately streetscape and mix of residential and commercial use is the traditional main street of the Town.

Frank Street with its history of public buildings and institutions is traditionally the civic street. During the period of public reliance on the railway system Frank Street with its public buildings and market was the economic and social gateway to the downtown linking the railway station and employment lands to the public buildings, market, hotels and commercial uses to the river and residential neighbourhoods. The character of this area is evident in its surviving buildings and streetscape.

Building Facades (East Side of Frank Street)
6.2 Kenwick Mall

The area of the Kenwick Mall contains both opportunities and challenges. The Mall provides a food store within easy walking distance of residential uses within the downtown and adjacent neighbourhoods. The Mall is also provided with abundant parking which is an asset to attracting customers from a wider area which is important to its survival and may be mutually beneficial to the adjacent independent business located in the downtown. The challenge presented by the Mall is the effect of this extensive open parking area on the Front and Head Streetscapes.
6.4 Rail Corridor and Associated Lands

The rail corridor lands at the southern limit of the downtown currently appear to be under utilized and present an image of neglect with the absence of any clear intentions for their current or future use. With the demolition of the train station these lands which were at one time the focus of transportation and commerce in the Town have become a void that needs to be addressed. This void in the fabric of the downtown provides a range of opportunities for the re-establishment of a lost visual or physical focal point as public space or through the infilling of this area with other uses. Since passenger service is still offered at the former location of the train station this area should be re-established as an attractive and inviting pedestrian environment.
6.5 Rear Lanes and Public Parking

The rear lanes and informal parking system located in the middle of commercial blocks in the downtown is a remarkable asset to local business and provides ready built opportunities to reduce the visual impact of parking lots on streetscapes. Of the mid block parking areas the four most significant are the:

- Northwest Area, north of Front Street between Thomas Street and Frank Street.
- Northeast Area, north of Front Street between Thomas Street and Caradoc Street.
- Southwest Area, south of Front Street between Thomas and Frank Street.
- Southeast Area, south of Front Street between Thomas and Frank Street.
6.5 Sydenham River, Mill Pond and Alexandra Park

Along with its environmental, social and visual benefits, the Sydenham River is the origin point for the Town of Strathroy. As a readily accessible energy source, the River provided the opportunity for the construction of the mill and subsequent development of the original settlement of the Town. Today, the Mill Pond is a living artifact that speaks to this history and along with the River provides an invaluable visual backdrop to the downtown as well as a passive recreational resource while Alexandra Park provides both active and passive recreational opportunities which collectively complement the mix of available uses in the Downtown.

Sydenham River Looking West from Pedestrian Footbridge

Mill Pond (Pincombe Pond) Looking East to Head Street

Alexandra Park
7.0 Gateway Opportunities

The fabric of the downtown and its street pattern present opportunities to identify visually and physically prominent locations that have the potential to act as gateways to the downtown and to help guide and invite visitors. Potential gateway locations occur at:

- Caradoc Street on the North end of the bridge over the Sydenham River
- Front Street at Head Street
- Caradoc Street at Metcalfe Street
- Frank Street at Metcalfe Street
8.0 Visioning Workshop

A visioning workshop was held at the Strathroy-Caradoc Town Hall on April 21st 2009 and as part of the workshop the participants in their groups were asked to identify:

- What qualities the downtown should have;
- How the downtown is to be used;
- What can be built on;
- What can be made better; and
- What needs to be added to the mix.

8.1 The Answers

From the answers to these questions it was clear that there are commonly held views of the opportunities present in the downtown that can be built on to strengthen the downtown and make it a sustainable mixed use focus for the community. In summary the responses to these questions have been organized as follows:

Things that work in the downtown include the compact form, civic identity and social role, library, unique stores and essential services, heritage, housing stock, parks, river, pond and natural area as well as parking.

The downtown could be made better by signage for parking, making better use of the senior’s centre and under-utilized land, community communication, promotion, beautification, façade improvements, family events and bike racks.

Things needed in the downtown include a community focus (i.e. town square, bandshell or parkette) outdoor skating rink, youth facility, multi-purpose space (arts and entertainment, conferences), and different types of housing and public transit (local and regional).
8.2 The Priorities

As a follow up to the questions regarding the opportunities for the downtown the participants were asked to prioritize possible initiatives by which their vision for the downtown could be implemented.

First, the need for community and political support, programming and events, and a multi-purpose centre;

Second, the creation of design guidelines, a parking plan, signage plan, and beautification plan, crime prevention through environmental design, economic development, business recruitment and forgiveness of development charges; and

Third, the introduction of incentive programs to encourage the development of infill housing within the downtown.

8.3 The Implied Vision

Although the workshop participants were not asked for a specific vision for the downtown it is fair to say that one can be drawn from their responses and from the discussions that took place in their groups and collectively. It was clear that the participants want a downtown that will continue to be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable and relevant to the lives of the members of the greater community regardless of their ages and economic opportunities. The downtown must continue its historic role as a focus for the community.

8.4 Recommendations for the Downtown Master Plan

In addition to the discussions related to the issues to be considered in the master plan it was generally agreed that the boundary of the study area should be increased to take into consideration the adjacent residential lands.