

SAULT STE. MARIE

THE SAULT STAR



From concept to reality, plaza and market designed to draw crowds

The pent-up demand to socialize and be among others as the pandemic begins to wind down and restrictions eliminated, is also something stakeholders are hoping to capitalize on.

[Elaine Della-Mattia](#)

Mar 10, 2022 • 16 hours ago • 7 minute read • [Join the conversation](#)



A stage and outdoor showplace will be one of the features of the Downtown Plaza. PHOTO SUPPLIED.

The Downtown Plaza and the relocation of the Mill Market were always projects planned to be joined at the hip.

It's one of many recommendations that consultant Roger Brooks cemented in the minds of city leaders several years ago when he visited Sault Ste. Marie to conduct a review of the pros and cons of the downtown core and how it could better transform into a vibrant and active place.

This summer, the community is expected to see those projects move to the construction phase, with the anticipation that completion dates of both projects will be close together, creating a new interest and spark in the downtown. In other words, it's expected the vision will soon become a reality.

The pent-up demand to socialize and be among others as the pandemic begins to wind down and restrictions are eliminated is also something stakeholders hope to capitalize on.

"We're excited to see the plaza project move ahead," said Tom Vair, the city's deputy CAO of community development and enterprise services. "We're putting a lot of thought, a lot of strategy and best practices into it."

Now in the works for more than a year, the Downtown Plaza will move from concept to construction phase this year.

With an approved budget of \$8.44 million, including the city's contribution of slightly more than \$6.9 million, the plaza will create a gathering and event space in the heart of the city's downtown.

Project funding includes \$4.1 million of one-time gas tax funding, \$2.7 million of community growth initiative dollars from 2019-2024, a little more than \$1.4 million from the Future Community Growth Initiatives for 2022-2024 and \$110,134 for the property purchase from reserve funds.

Without even a shovel in the ground, the original budget of \$5.3 million was blown and attempts to reduce elements and whittle down costs were not overly successful to include the necessary elements that would create the desired effect.

The project is just too important for the community not to move forward with, said Mayor Christian Provenzano.

"We've been very thoughtful about the whole process. Our goal is to revitalize the downtown and we've brought stakeholders together and hired expert advice and we took those recommendations to heart," he said.

The recommendations included developing an anchor or feature area in the heart of the downtown and moving the farmer's market to that area to create a hub of activity, Provenzano said.

That also frees up the Gateway site for other development, which could also add activity to the city's core.

"The importance of investing in quality of life attributes for the community is also an important component of our workforce attraction and retention strategy," Vair said. "As the recent census illustrated, Sault Ste. Marie needs to attract and retain a significant number of residents in the future to make up for an older workforce that is set to retire."

Provenzano said developing healthy lifestyles and activities will attract newcomers and encourage others to do the same.

"Attracting people to the community has become a competition between communities now and, if we can offer health activities and a healthy lifestyle, then that's a positive for our community," he said.

The Downtown Plaza will include a "dynamic" water feature and fountain design, skating rink, performance stage and digital screen for concerts, theatre, movie nights, videos and viewing parties, a play structure for youth, gathering areas and food, drink and retail opportunities. A skate change area and mechanical room will also be included.

In the end, it will be paired up within walking distance of a new Mill Market, which will be created at the former Union Cab building on Brock Street, property the city also purchased.

The city's injection into the downtown will complement private property owner investment that has been made in recent years and ensure about 400 property owners are there to stay for the long run.

The entire concept has also created interest and excitement among Downtown Association members, said Salvatore Marchese, DTA's executive director.

"We've been actively working with the city, we're at the table and we plan on trying out different things to activate the downtown."

He hinted that various themes for different Queen Street blocks may be on the horizon this year and, if they prove successful, it's something that can grow.

A number of events – at least one a month – is already scheduled to focus on Queen Street, starting with an Easter egg hunt in April, the first of its spring events, designed to draw people downtown with a chance to win a gift card. Several will include street closures, such as the traditional Soo Greyhounds tailgate party and two summer afternoon/evening street parties.

Marchese hopes more events and more downtown traffic will also prompt certain businesses to remain open later hours in the evening, or on weekends.

"I think that if businesses see more people going downtown, they will stay open later," he said.

The Downtown Association is also exploring options with Algoma University's City Studio to attract more people downtown Marchese said.

The Mill Market's current location is also on city-owned property but was always meant to be temporary, right from the outset when former restorative development company Riversedge Development owned adjacent property and wanted to see the market draw people downtown to what is now known as the Canal District, Vair said.

City council recently approved tending what is expected to be the new Mill Market at its recent council meeting.

The approval allows city staff to move forward with architectural and engineering services for the Mill Market's future home at 73 Brock St., tendering the detailed design and more precise project costs for the project, which have already been sheered from \$2.9 million to \$2 million.

Applications are also being penned to federal and provincial funding programs and city staff are awaiting word on their status. The city has received confirmation of \$250,000 from the Rural Economic Development Program. It's been denied a requested \$750,000 from the Canada Community Revitalization Fund.

It awaits decisions from the Green and Inclusive Community Building Program with Infrastructure Canada for a requested \$1.75 million, and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., for \$450,000.

City council is relying on the success of the Downtown Plaza and the Mill Market combination based on Roger Brooks's recommendations and a number of other studies.

The studies show that communities with downtown gathering spaces – whether they be plazas or squares – tend to draw community members to the heart of the city, something that tourists also follow, Vair said.

“This is an opportunity to bring people together, to create the benefit of foot traffic of the market and plaza amenities to downtown businesses and to create a place with venues and events the community can enjoy,” Vair said.

He said city staff have engaged with a number of stakeholders, all of whom are excited about the opportunity to create new events and opportunities for the community to get together and have some fun.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker agrees getting people downtown and ensuring a healthy city core is important to the community, and one he wants to ensure the city has a role to play for many years to come.

City council passed a resolution led by Shoemaker asking staff to ensure more downtown events are created to yield the draw needed.

Shoemaker said while council's discussion veered away from the intent of his resolution, the idea is to have the city lead the charge to ensure organic activities are formed in the downtown.

And while the city doesn't have any power to set business owner's hours of operation, he wants to find ways to encourage incentives that will see longer hours and greater foot traffic along Queen Street, especially in blocks that may not be currently heavily populated due to the kinds of businesses located there.

"It would be great to look at the makeup of each block and determine which businesses generate activity, where they're located and how to attract new ones in the slower blocks to generate more activity and walking traffic," he said.

That could mean altering or adding a new community incentive grant that helps businesses set up shop where that walking traffic is needed.

"That's a tool the city has at its disposal and may be worthwhile pursuing," Shoemaker said.

Vair said event programming is coming together well, not only because of Shoemaker's resolution, but because it is part of the role the city has to play with the future Downtown Plaza.

"I think what you're going to see is that we don't have to close down Queen Street as often as one would think, but the plaza can host a number of events and save the closures and the block parties for some very specific events," Vair said.

City staff are also taking a look at events created in similar spaces in other communities, using their best practices and perhaps even some of their event ideas to develop a unique Sault Ste. Marie spin.

"We really want to have our own space and make sure this space is an engaging place, a place where people really want to be," Vair said.