



## New 3-year Downtown Pittsburgh plan focuses on retaining businesses, clean streets and 'transformative' retail

The Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership said the initiative is designed to turn 'strategy into action'



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The Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership has unveiled a three-year plan for revitalizing the Golden Triangle, aimed at preventing businesses from bolting, keeping the streets safe and clean, and filling empty storefronts with "transformative" retail.

Jeremy Waldrup, the partnership's president and CEO, said Tuesday the initiative is designed to turn "strategy into action" in the efforts to bring new vitality to a downtown that, like many others, has struggled to right itself in the aftermath of the pandemic.

"We're committed to delivering actual results for the community," he said.

The new strategic vision falls under three broad categories — core, activation and transformation — all centered on tackling needs or cultivating growth, whether it involves shuttles to take homeless people to shelters or thinking outside the box to fill office buildings.

Among the key pushes over the next three years will be a “commercial tenant engagement strategy” meant to encourage businesses that are nearing the end of their leases in Downtown to renew rather than move elsewhere.

The idea is to keep those tenants from jumping to the Strip District, the North Shore, or points beyond, as some have done in the past.

Mr. Waldrup said the retention effort will involve direct conversations with tenants to encourage them to stay put and to help them understand how integral they are to the success of the Golden Triangle.

Asked about the possibility of some types of incentives to keep businesses, Mr. Waldrup replied, “I think everything is on the table right now. We will work to continue to understand what their needs are.”

In a similar vein, the PDP also plans to explore the idea of recruiting “non-traditional office users” to fill some of the empty space in Downtown, where the vacancy rate hovers around 19%.

The partnership, Mr. Waldrup said, plans to reach out to Point Park University, whose campus stretches from Fort Pitt Boulevard to Forbes Avenue along Wood Street, to see if there are opportunities to grow its presence.

Point Park is currently putting together a plan to build a community events center in Downtown that would seat 2,000 and host sports competitions, concerts and other activities.

University President Chris Brussalis also has floated the idea of using some of the failing office buildings in the Golden Triangle for housing, not only for its students but also for those at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University once the bus rapid transit line to Oakland is finished.

That, too, is on the PDP’s radar. “We’d love to see things like that happen in Downtown Pittsburgh,” Mr. Waldrup said.

The partnership, he added, also intends to “play a strong leadership role” in converting more office buildings into residential hubs. Among those targeted in the \$600 million plan are the Gulf Tower, 933 Penn, and First and Market.

“We want to see more conversions of historic office buildings,” he said.

On the retail side, the PDP is looking at rent abatements to help fill some of the empty storefronts, both large and small, in the central business district to encourage investment.

“There are some real opportunities for some transformative retail,” Mr. Waldrup said.

Another focus of improvement will be Smithfield Street, a main Downtown corridor that is pockmarked with empty storefronts and buildings. It also has been plagued by concerns about safety, open drug use, lewd behavior and homelessness, prompting a few businesses to leave.

The city, Mr. Waldrup said, is almost finished with final design work to improve Smithfield between Sixth and Forbes avenues. The PDP, he said, is continuing to raise money to do the sections from Forbes to Fort Pitt Boulevard and Sixth to Liberty Avenue.

“We have really pushed the design of that street. We are looking to invest in some destination-creating public art in that corridor,” he said.

As part of the three-year plan, the PDP will be doubling down on its efforts to keep streets clean and safe, helping visitors and providing outreach to help with issues like homelessness.

Mr. Waldrup said the PDP has nearly doubled the size of its Downtown clean team to 42 people and has put together a staff of five people to help homeless individuals get support services. It also has formed a team of eight ambassadors to provide directions and other assistance to visitors.

In addition, it has deployed teams to power wash alleys, a source of complaints by Downtown workers and visitors; created a new operations center on Liberty Avenue to dispatch teams; and employed a shuttle in the morning and the evening to transport unhoused folks to cold weather shelters.

The PDP was able to do some of that work with the help of \$2 million raised by the Allegheny Conference on Community Development in 2023.

Mr. Waldrup said the partnership should be able to continue that work after City Council renewed Business Improvement District assessments for another five years in December.

The action increased the BID portion of the PDP's budget from \$2.6 million to \$3.5 million. The funding makes up about 25% of the partnership annual spending plan.

Asked if the increase would be enough, Mr. Waldrup said the PDP will continue to evaluate the resources it needs, both through the BID and other funding sources, to ensure that it has enough "to support this plan and operate efficiently."

Among the other initiatives planned by the PDP over the next three years are four major annual festivals — Picklesburgh, Oktoberfest, the holiday market and another to be announced shortly tied to winter.

The PDP said that the new plan was the result of a community engagement process that involved more than 100 stakeholders, including developers, corporate leaders, government officials and nonprofits.

"For nearly three decades, the PDP has been at the forefront of creating impactful change and advancing meaningful progress in Downtown Pittsburgh. This plan highlights PDP's unwavering dedication to Downtown's revitalization and investment in the future," said Shannon Baker, the PDP's board chair.

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