



DOWNTOWN ALBANY STRATEGY

PHASE 1 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY REPORT

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Prepared by Highland Planning



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OVERVIEW

Phase 1 of the Downtown Albany Strategy establishes Albany’s competitive market positioning, defines growth targets, and evaluates real estate and economic opportunities to create a foundation for catalytic investment. Engagement in this phase involves listening to the community to understand current challenges, define Downtown’s future potential, and identify desired outcomes and priorities for the Downtown Albany Strategy.

Approximately 1,500 people were engaged during Phase 1 of the Downtown Albany Strategy. Engagement activities included focus groups, business drop-ins, the first public workshop, an online questionnaire, and a community tabling event. Each event was designed to reach different audiences in Downtown Albany with multiple opportunities for input. These efforts were guided by the project’s core community engagement principles of continuous transparency, accessibility, flexibility, and trust to ensure the process was inclusive, responsive, and reflective of the diverse voices and needs across Downtown Albany.

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

FOCUS GROUPS

In July 2025, the project team conducted 12 focus groups as part of Phase 1 of the Downtown Albany Strategy. Two sessions were held virtually to capture citywide input, and 10 were held in person across five districts: Arbor Hill, Central Avenue/Lark Street/Washington Avenue, Madison Avenue and the South End, the Central Business District, and the Warehouse District. Each district offered two date and time options to increase accessibility.

The focus groups engaged nearly 100 individuals from over 50 different organizations representing neighborhood associations, housing and community organizations, arts and culture groups, businesses, real estate, youth organizations, and local government. Each discussion was structured around the same set of questions related to Albany’s strengths, desired changes, opportunities for investment, and what “transformational” means for Downtown Albany.

BUSINESS DROP-IN VISITS

Also in July 2025, Highland Planning conducted business drop-ins along the main commercial corridors of Downtown Albany’s five focus districts. Outreach was carried out in teams of two during regular business hours, with 2-3 hours spent in each district. The corridors included Henry Johnson Boulevard in Arbor Hill; Central Avenue, Lark Street, and Washington Avenue in the Central Avenue/Lark Street/Washington Avenue district; Madison Avenue and South Pearl Street in the South End; Pearl Street and Broadway in the Central Business District; and Broadway in the Warehouse District.

Approximately 50 businesses were reached through these visits. Business owners and staff were provided with information about the Downtown Albany Strategy, invited to participate in upcoming focus groups, and given flyers for the first public workshop. For those unable to attend later engagement activities, drop-ins also served as an opportunity to share input on Albany’s strengths, desired changes, and transformational priorities. In addition, the visits expanded the project’s stakeholder database and built awareness of the planning process among small businesses throughout Downtown Albany.

PROJECT WEBSITE: DowntownAlbanyStrategy.com

The project website, DowntownAlbanyStrategy.com, served as a central resource for public-facing information throughout Phase 1, hosting resources such as project context and purpose, goals and anticipated outcomes, public engagement opportunities and summaries, frequently asked questions, and the project’s phased approach. The website launched in August 2025 and will continue to be updated throughout the upcoming project phases.

PUBLIC WORKSHOP #1

The first public workshop for the Downtown Albany Strategy was held on Wednesday, August 8, 2025, from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Albany Capital Center, hosted by Empire State Development. Nearly 700 participants attended, making it one of the largest public meetings in Albany in recent years. The purpose of the workshop was to share information about the Strategy and invite community input to help define its purpose, goals, timeline, expected outcomes, and opportunities for public involvement. It also served as a forum to gather feedback on community benefits, desired changes, and priority development strategies.

The event began with an open house that featured informational displays, activities, and a partner resource fair including NYS Office of General Services and Department of Transportation, Empire State Plaza, Re-imagine 787, and the City of Albany. A formal presentation followed, with remarks from Governor Kathy Hochul, ESD President, CEO, and Commissioner Hope Knight, and the consultant team, MIG. Interactive polling was used to gather participant perspectives, and attendees then joined small group table discussions to answer two key questions:

- What positive changes and community benefits should occur through investment in Downtown Albany, and how should they be measured?
- Where should growth and investment occur first to achieve these benefits?

The workshop concluded with closing remarks and the collection of discussion materials. Spanish and ASL interpretation were available, and the full presentation recording was posted on the project website. Outreach for the event included flyers, palm cards, social media, email announcements, and promotion through focus groups, business drop-ins, and the Downtown Albany Strategy website.

ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE #1

Between August 16 and September 12, 2025, an online questionnaire was available to gather input from those unable to attend Public Workshop #1. A total of 581 responses were recorded. The questionnaire invited participants to share their ideas for the future of Downtown Albany and to identify positive changes the community would like to see, helping the project team define priority areas for investment. The questionnaire was designed to be completed in approximately 10 minutes and was promoted alongside other Phase 1 engagement activities through the project website, social media, email, and at the Palace Theatre tabling event.

PALACE THEATRE TABLING EVENT

On Saturday, August 16, 2025, from 12:00 to 4:00 PM, Highland Planning participated in the Palace Theatre Community Block Party at 19 Clinton Avenue, Albany, NY. The community event was hosted for residents and visitors to connect, enjoy entertainment, access community services, and prepare for the upcoming school year. The project team used the event to raise awareness of the Downtown Albany Strategy, promote the online questionnaire, and gather direct feedback from the community. The team engaged with over 200 attendees representing a diverse mix of families, seniors, youth, and individuals with disabilities. The engagement station featured a variety of interactive tools designed to encourage dialogue and gather input from attendees, which were recorded and included in the feedback analysis.

KEY TAKEAWAYS ACROSS PHASE 1 ENGAGEMENT

Throughout Phase 1 of the Downtown Albany Strategy, the public was asked to identify the benefits and investments they would like to achieve through Downtown Albany's future growth. The input received reflects broad community aspirations for quality of life, equity, economic opportunity, and a vibrant Downtown environment. The themes below were drawn from all engagement conducted in Phase 1:

- New housing options, safety, and public infrastructure were the most consistently raised issues across all engagement formats.
- Small business support and activation of public spaces were seen as ways to achieve economic vibrancy.
- Many participants stressed the need for equitable implementation.
- The public emphasized celebrating culture and history to strengthen identity, build pride, and enhance tourism appeal.
- Calls for transparency, accountability, and ongoing communication are needed to build trust in the Downtown Albany Strategy's planning process.



PRIORITY INVESTMENT THEMES

The following topics were consistently raised as priority investment areas in Downtown Albany across all engagements, organized by topic area.

TOPIC	PUBLIC INPUT
Housing	Strong call for more housing options in downtown and surrounding neighborhoods; adaptive reuse of vacant/unsafe buildings; infill development; revitalization of existing housing stock
Public Infrastructure, Mobility & Streetscapes	Safer streets for walking, biking, and transit; pedestrian-scale lighting, sidewalks, and beautification; better connections between neighborhoods and downtown; stronger bike and pedestrian links to Rensselaer and the waterfront; shuttle service to expand access to Downtown destinations.
Economic Development & Business Support	Support for small businesses through grants, incubators, and facade programs; diversification of retail, dining, and entertainment; expansion of nightlife and cultural offerings; activation of vacant storefronts.
Public Spaces, Parks & Waterfront	More community gardens, parks, and year-round programming; stronger activation of Washington Park, Lincoln Park, and Corning Preserve; development of the waterfront as a safe, active destination; restoration and celebration of the Erie Canalway; creation of cultural heritage trails and destinations.
Culture, History & Community Identity	Celebration of Albany’s history (e.g., Underground Railroad, historic landmarks, Erie Canal); expanded public art, murals, and cultural events; inclusive and multicultural programming.

TOPIC	PUBLIC INPUT
Vulnerable Populations & Social Services	Expanded mental health and social services; more shelters, safe havens, and supportive housing; more safe spaces for youth and at-risk populations; expanded food access including grocery stores and pharmacies.
Public Safety & Cleanliness	Concerns about safety, especially at night; calls for more community-oriented policing, street cleanliness, sanitation programs, and code enforcement.
Education & Youth Support	Expanded youth programming, after-school and summer activities; support for schools and literacy; opportunities for skills-building and empowerment.
Community Collaboration & Capacity	Strong interest in partnerships among nonprofits, local organizations, and government, and the creation of shared resources or platforms to connect and scale community-driven investment.
Sustainability & Resilience	Upgrades to utilities and public infrastructure; clean energy investments; environmentally sustainable design.
Governance, Equity & Implementation	Desire for transparency and accountability in planning; concerns about gentrification; call for equitable, phased implementation with visible wins; need for continuous engagement, clear communication, and trust-building.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR EARLY GROWTH AND INVESTMENT

When asked where growth and investment should be concentrated, the following areas were most consistently identified across all engagement activities:

- The **Central Business District, Greyhound Terminal/Liberty Park, and Broadway corridor** were viewed as catalytic sites for early investment, especially for mixed-use and transit-oriented redevelopment.
- The **Waterfront** and **Corning Preserve** were mentioned the most frequently, with calls to re-establish connections between downtown and the river, improve safety, and introduce year-round public programming and dining options.
- The **Erie Canal corridor** and **I-787** and subsequent development opportunities were seen as major redevelopment opportunities. Many participants supported reimagining I-787 as a boulevard with green space and public access to the riverfront.
- Recommended investments along **Pearl Street** and **Lark Street** included improved pedestrian infrastructure, business revitalization, and enhanced safety, all of which were identified as key to creating a more active, walkable downtown core.
- Public safety and cleanliness were identified as issues along **Central Avenue** and **Madison Avenue**, and corridor revitalization through small business and streetscape improvements was consistently recommended.
- Opportunities for adaptive reuse, beautification, and infill development to attract residents and new businesses were identified in the **Warehouse District** and **Parking Lot District**.
- Public input underscored the need for equitable investment in essential services, affordable housing, and local ownership opportunities in the **Arbor Hill, South End, Mansion Area**, and **West Hill** neighborhoods.

DESIRED INVESTMENTS BY NEIGHBORHOOD

Phase 1 participants also identified priorities for investment in Downtown Albany neighborhoods.

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

Participants prioritized mixed-use, mixed-income development to bring more residents downtown. There were several calls for improvements to pedestrian safety, better coordination among city agencies and business groups, and investment in youth programming linked to local schools. Redevelopment sites like the Greyhound Terminal, Kiernan Plaza, and the former South End Grocery site were frequently cited as opportunities for early investment.

WAREHOUSE DISTRICT

Participants called for high-density, mixed-use development that integrates housing, small businesses, and family-friendly activities. There was strong interest in redeveloping vacant industrial properties and addressing the Central Warehouse blight, while improving pedestrian connections, lighting, and safety under the Livingston Avenue Rail Bridge and along Broadway and North Pearl Street.

SOUTH END AND MADISON AVENUE CORRIDOR

Participants saw these areas as critical for neighborhood-scale investment and stressed the need for grocery stores, pharmacies, and health services, as well as public gathering spaces, community gardens, and housing preservation. Vacant properties such as 15 Warren Street and 282 South End Avenue were identified for redevelopment into community-serving spaces.

MANSION AREA

Participants called for essential neighborhood services such as grocery stores, pharmacies, and workforce development programs. There was a desire for infill development focused on high-quality affordable housing and better maintenance of existing properties to strengthen the residential fabric and enhance safety.

ARBOR HILL

Participants emphasized affordable, energy-efficient housing, redevelopment of vacant and “Red X” buildings, and new drop-in and crisis support spaces. There was strong interest in small business and cultural investment, particularly along Henry Johnson Boulevard and Central Avenue, to support entrepreneurship and create safer, more welcoming streets.

CENTER SQUARE

Participants recommended providing support for small and minority-owned businesses, improving pedestrian safety, and expanding arts and cultural programming. Participants also emphasized maintaining the area’s historic character while encouraging modest infill and ground-floor activation that connects to nearby activity on Lark Street and Washington Avenue.

SHERIDAN HOLLOW

Participants expressed interest in reactivating the historic steps and improving pedestrian connections to the downtown core. Investments in walkability, lighting, and green spaces were seen as critical to enhancing neighborhood safety and linking residents to nearby amenities and employment opportunities.

PARK SOUTH

Participants sought stronger physical and social connections to downtown, with new small businesses and local entrepreneurs around Albany Medical Center. They also emphasized opportunities for collaboration between the medical district and neighborhood services to expand access to healthcare and community clinics.

WEST HILL

Participants prioritized investment in affordable housing, public safety, and stronger connections to employment and services downtown. There was also a desire for youth programming, workforce training, and improved neighborhood maintenance to enhance overall quality of life.

WASHINGTON SQUARE

Participants emphasized the need for improved cleanliness, safety, and active storefronts along major corridors. Investments in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure were identified as ways to strengthen connections between the neighborhood, downtown, and adjacent residential areas.

PHASE 2 PREVIEW

Phase 2 of the Downtown Albany Strategy began in Fall 2025 and focuses on identifying and refining catalytic sites and district-level interventions, strategically integrating real estate, public space activation, and infrastructure improvements. Engagement during this phase centers on gathering public feedback on proposed development opportunities, policies, and programs.

Focus groups will be held throughout the phase to review and refine potential development opportunities. These discussions may include one-on-one meetings or small group sessions with business owners, public safety officials, anchor institutions, developers, social service providers, cultural organizations, residents, and neighborhood associations. The project team will also table at community events to connect with people who might not otherwise participate in the engagement process.

Public Workshop #2 will take place in November 2025 to gather feedback on proposed opportunities, policies, and programs that will make the biggest difference for downtown and Albany as a whole. A second online questionnaire will also be available to collect input from those unable to attend the workshop.



