

Downtown Fairbanks 2040 Plan

Themes from Interviews with Downtown Business Owners, January 2021



This summary offers themes from interviews with 15 downtown business owners and managers, along with specific recommendations and interview quotes.

Strengths – What do you value about operating a business downtown? What characteristics of downtown are meeting your needs as a business owner?

- **City center.** Downtown is the heart of Fairbanks. In summer there is increased foot traffic from residents, especially on First Fridays. Downtown is a popular destination for cruise companies to drop off bus passengers, and guests at downtown hotels patron local businesses.
- **Public spaces.** Downtown has welcoming open spaces, riverside parks and beautiful public areas.
- **Walkability.** The downtown area is walkable and offers a mix of restaurants, bars and retail that mutually generate business for one another. Walkability is especially important for the residents who live downtown and are “regulars” at local restaurants and shops.
- **Representation.** Downtown businesses have a strong advocacy group in the form of the Fairbanks Downtown Association.
- **Improvements.** Business owners applaud recent upgrades to segments of downtown, including Lacey Street, 5th Avenue, Cushman Street and Noble Street. Some interviewees feel these upgrades have increased the number of people who are walking or biking downtown. Specific beneficial features cited by interviewees include the addition of maps on street corners, planting more trees, adding street lighting, planting more flowers and public art installations.
- **Historic.** Downtown Fairbanks has historic buildings, log cabins and unique character that celebrates the community’s past.
- **Camaraderie.** Downtown businesses range from multi-generational family-owned businesses to innovative new businesses, but overall, local business owners know and support one another.

“We are happy with where things are at. We like being downtown and do not have any plans to move anytime soon.”

“Downtown Fairbanks is continually changing but doesn’t necessarily seem to grow. Almost like the little plant growing up through the concrete. There is a tenacity that keeps it here.”

“I really like the community; we all look out for each other here. There are lots of family-owned businesses. We support each other by patronizing each other’s shops, we know and look out for one another.”



Challenges and Recommendations - What are the challenges or negative characteristics of downtown Fairbanks? What specific actions would improve and promote a thriving Downtown Fairbanks?

- **Address Parking.** Parking was cited as an issue in every interview, and business owners say parking is a frequent complaint from their customers. Some business owners feel their needs to be more parking; others say there needs to be better education and navigation to help people find existing parking. Specific suggestions include:
 - Increase wayfinding to and promotion of existing parking opportunities through increased signage and possibly virtual tools such as a phone application.
 - Educate business owners and downtown employees on the value of preserving available parking for customers; encourage business owners/staff to use off street parking such as garages.
 - Work with private parking lot owners to increase access outside of regular business hours. These lots currently restrict hours to align with adjacent businesses.
- **Improve Navigation.** Downtown’s many one-way streets and seasonal construction closures make it challenging to get around and access businesses.
 - Consider how proposed changes will impact the flow of traffic in and out of the garages, including the proposal to turn a portion of Lacey Street into a park. Many business owners expressed concerns about the proposed changes to Lacey Street and the associated reductions in vehicle access. Specifically, they feel any changes that further limit residents from easily driving around downtown will hurt business, especially during the winter months when business is already slower. They would prefer not to see any pedestrian improvements that come at the expense of vehicle navigation.
 - Better consider the impacts of traffic changes and construction projects on businesses. Improve communications regarding upcoming traffic changes, including both permanent and short-term impacts. A multi-month road closure in front of a small shop can be devastating to a business, especially during key revenue-generating tourism months.
 - Add more wayfinding to guide visitors to businesses located beyond the immediate tour bus drop-off sites and toward other businesses in the surrounding areas.

“Customers can’t find a place to park and when they do, they don’t know the rules, get a ticket and proclaim they are never coming downtown again.”

“We’re not Seattle, people are not accustomed to using parking garages. In the winter, folks would rather drive 30 minutes in a warm car to a place where they can park and walk right in. From October to April, if people can’t find parking right away, they go somewhere else.”

“We need to educate business owners on how valuable the parking places are in front of their businesses. Business owners and their staff need to get off the street and free up those spaces for customers.”

“Parking is a commodity. Businesses on the street have a responsibility to keep the inventory moving.”

“The battle with the one-way roads is a challenge. It’s hard to tell people how to get to our business.”

“I recognize space is a challenge – the roads are small, the parking is limited, the sidewalks are narrow. I do not want to eliminate any of that, so it is really important to make sure designs are cohesive with clear signage. Not just paint on the roadway that is covered much of the year.”

- **Attract Businesses.** Increase and incentivize more retail, restaurants and other businesses to open downtown to attract more visitors. Specific suggestions include:
 - Address antiquated zoning that makes it hard to bring in new business types (e.g., breweries, brewpubs, distilleries, mobile food trucks, etc.).
 - Recruit a grocery store to open in the downtown area.
- **Attract Visitors.** Increase the number of events downtown to attract more visitors and residents to the area via live music, festivals, dog races, etc. Work collaboratively with event planners to help promote events and eliminate barriers to putting on events, such as reducing the cost of using infrastructure (electrical outlets, banner posts, etc.) and providing more accessible information about the permitting process.
- **Improve Aesthetics.** Make downtown a more beautiful and cohesive area. Specific suggestions include:
 - Demolish and/or rehabilitate vacant and dilapidated buildings.
 - Create more cohesive branding.
 - Increase the amount of public art and murals throughout downtown.
- **More Maintenance.** Expand efforts to clean up and clear streets and sidewalks, remove snow more promptly in winter, respond to vandalism more quickly and better maintain infrastructure such as lighting.
 - Relocate phone and power lines in areas with frequent outages caused by trucks running into lines.
- **Safe Non-Motorized Transportation.** Continue to improve bike and pedestrian infrastructure and access both to/from and within downtown, while acknowledging Fairbanks is a winter city and vehicle access will likely remain the primary mode of transportation for most residents.
- **Address Homelessness.** Continue to address homelessness and substance abuse through patrols, social services and partnerships with downtown businesses and by reducing vacant properties. Some downtown business owners feel this is getting better, while others state it is getting worse.
- **Add Public Restrooms.** There are currently no public restrooms available in the downtown area and small businesses frequently field requests from passerby to use their restrooms. Public restrooms could serve many populations including visitors, residents enjoying park facilities and persons experiencing homelessness.
- **Maintain Communications.** Strategically engage the business community regarding policy changes, updates and events.
 - Use the Downtown Association and the Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce as conduits for helping communicate with the business community.
 - Recognize the Downtown Association and the Chamber are not representative of all business owner perspectives; some downtown business owners do not support or participate in either organization. Direct correspondence to businesses remains important.
 - Maintain email and hard copy mailing lists of business owners to share updates regarding traffic changes, construction plans, public safety policing changes, etc.

“There have been some good improvements, but there is still a lack of character downtown. The roads are managed by a mix of state, city and FAST partners and there is not one plan or organization working to make sure everything matches and has the same theme.”

“There are these beautiful benches, monuments, and bridges along the river, but the only people who spend time there are inebriates. I recognize this is a complex issue, but it creates problems for businesses and residents. The one summer we had a policeman doing patrols in the area it was much better.”

“Businesses are often overlooked during these types of projects and I’m glad to see that’s being recognized. Everyone in the community needs a voice.”

- **Adaptable Permitting.** Be flexible when working with downtown businesses on building permitting issues. Downtown has many older and historic buildings situated on small lots; as a result, renovations are expensive, time intensive and logistically complex. Businesses would like to see more flexibility and collaboration through the permitting process.
- **Promote Local Businesses.** Increase promotion for existing businesses and encourage residents to shop local. To thrive, downtown needs residents to visit the area – businesses cannot rely on tourists alone.
 - Be especially sensitive to changes that could impact small businesses in the short term. The pandemic resulted in the loss of tourism revenue, decreased resident traffic and an increase in online and out-of-state shopping. Many small businesses are on the brink of closure and will be very sensitive to even small changes that could impact their viability over the next few years, such as road closures.