

Downtown Revitalization Initiative In Focus

Strategic Project Selection and Synergies in Oswego



Downtown Revitalization Initiative In Focus — A SERIES

Governor Kathy Hochul's Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) is transforming downtown neighborhoods into vibrant communities where New Yorkers want to live, work and raise families. Recognizing that companies are increasingly seeking to relocate and invest in vibrant, walkable downtowns in an effort to attract and retain a talented workforce, DRI is an investment to improve the vitality of urban centers across New York State.



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Oswego is a waterfront community; a major strategy in the DRI is to bring people to the water through downtown.
Top—the Oswego River, Lake Ontario and the city skyline;
Above—kayakers on the Oswego River.

Selection of DRI projects is not as simple and straightforward as you might think. Project selection is both a science and an art. And it's usually a product of good community planning.

DRI projects are not selected in a vacuum. Rather, all the projects should reinforce one another in a synergistic way so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And they are always selected by the residents themselves through a bottom-up, community-based planning and outreach process. Sound a little fuzzy? Well, it works!

The City of Oswego presents a classic case study in holistic, synergistic and strategic DRI project selection and good planning. In addition to developing a quality DRI Strategic Investment Plan, Oswego had previously created both a DOS Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan (LWRP) and a Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA) plan; these plans laid the groundwork for their successful DRI application and allowed the city to integrate the LWRP, BOA and DRI plans and projects.

“The Downtown Revitalization Initiative gave Oswego the opportunity to create and realize a vision to connect our core historic downtown area to our waterfront, making Oswego a more desirable place to live and visit. The program has truly revived our downtown and will have a dramatic positive impact on this community for generations to come.”

**--William “Billy” Barlow,
Mayor of Oswego**

The overarching strategy in the Oswego DRI is this—connect the more vibrant South side of downtown to the struggling North side, and in turn connect all of downtown to the spectacular waterfront. All 12 of the City's DRI projects feed into that grand strategy, creating an interlocking necklace of projects that is allowing its downtown to reach its full potential as a waterfront community.

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“As co-chair of the Central New York Regional Economic Development Council, I have witnessed firsthand Governor Cuomo’s and Mayor Barlow’s collaborative leadership throughout the DRI process, which has brought substantial and transformative investment to the greater Oswego community. Without question, jobs will be created, housing stock will increase, and our recreational opportunities will grow, but nothing will compare to the dramatic changes to our residents’, students’, and visitors’ pride and quality of life. Those changes are immeasurable.”

-- Deborah Stanley, SUNY Oswego President and Central New York Regional Economic Development Council Co-Chair

Here’s how it’s working...

Complete Streets

First, how to get people to cross from the South side of downtown to the North side and the riverfront. The obstacle—a busy, congested and dangerous four-lane highway that cuts the downtown in half. The solution—a “Complete Streets” make-over of the main downtown intersection.

Complete Streets are streets that are designed for all users—pedestrians, bicyclists, public transit riders, people with mobility restrictions, younger and older persons and, of course, cars. The City committed \$1 million in DRI funds to re-design and re-make the streetscape with people and downtown revitalization—and not just cars and trucks—in mind. Residents, visitors and workers can now more safely and easily cross from one side of downtown to the other.



A safe, enjoyable and walkable streetscape is an essential component of downtown revitalization (before/after).

Downtown Housing and Retail

Next, how to get more people to live downtown. The solution—more downtown housing, of course. Which is what Oswego did—with an eye toward affordability and equity.

With \$2 million in DRI funding, the East Lake Commons project is transforming an ugly vestige of 1960s urban renewal into an aesthetically-pleasing mixed-use anchor on the East side

of downtown—with 71 units of affordable housing and several retail and office spaces. Harbor View square is using \$1 million in DRI funding to turn a formerly-contaminated brownfield site into clean, affordable downtown housing for lower-income households in close proximity to the waterfront.



East Lake Commons will replace an ugly remnant of urban renewal and serve as an anchor and gateway for the East side of the river (before/after).

Three other projects—Cahill Landing, River Walk and L.I.T.A.T.R.O.—are delivering market rate and mixed-income apartments to round out the downtown housing picture. Cahill Landing occupies the oldest commercial structure in the city, dating back to 1828. Originally built as a ship chandlery where sail ships buy their anchors and rope, over the years it also served as a fish market and an Irish pub. With support from the DRI and Governor Cuomo’s historic preservation tax credit, the



The Cahill Landing project won an Excellence in Historic Preservation Award from the NYS Preservation League in 2019 (before/after).

Cahill building has been re-developed into luxury waterfront apartments. The Riverwalk project is re-developing several downtown buildings into mixed-use spaces—with retail and commercial space on the first floor and 35 apartments above. And the L.I.T.A.T.R.O. project (discussed below) is creating 21 new apartments above a new restaurant on the first floor.

Fun For All Ages

Now, how to create fun and exciting destinations for residents, workers and visitors. The L.I.T.A.T.R.O. (“Luck Is The Ability To Recognize Opportunity”) project is transforming an aesthetically-challenged buffet restaurant into a mixed-use



The LITATRO project is a beautiful mixed-use building with a restaurant, apartments and an overlook deck; it replaced an unappealing building at the downtown’s main intersection (before/after).

destination right in the center of downtown—featuring a new high-end, Southern-fare restaurant on the first floor and a rooftop bar overlooking the river with a magnificent view of the downtown skyline and Lake Ontario.

Drilling down further, two projects were selected specifically to attract children and families to the downtown. The DRI is funding the Children’s Museum of Oswego (CMOO) on the West side of the river and the Lake Ontario Water Park on the East side, conveniently adjacent to a major hotel. There’s something for everyone now in downtown Oswego.

Public Spaces

And finally, how to create safe, enjoyable and strategically-located public spaces. Enter the Water Street Square pocket park. Oswego took an under-utilized and uninviting dead-end alley-way and transformed it into a vibrant pocket park. The small park provides a place for people to relax, recreate and enjoy performances... or just people-watch. But its location is key to



The Children’s Museum of Oswego got a complete make-over, with help from DRI, corporate, philanthropic and individual contributions.



Water Street Square: An uninviting alleyway was transformed into a safe, enjoyable and pleasing pocket park right at the waterfront (before/after).

its success—it connects the downtown commercial strip to the waterfront. The power of smart public spaces on full display!

Put Them Together and What Have You Got?

Walkable streets... a variety of downtown housing choices... destinations for people of all ages, families and children... and safe, accessible public spaces. All combine to connect and integrate the downtown to its greatest natural, historical and recreational asset—the waterfront.

And that’s how Oswego’s DRI projects reinforce one another to create that recognizable, but undefinable, quality we call “urban revitalization.” □



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Downtown Revitalization Initiative

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