

Staff Report

Report To: City Council
Report From: Tim Simmonds, City Manager
Meeting Date: October 6, 2025
Report Code: CM-25-032
Subject: Fostering a Vibrant River District – Report II

Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report CM-25-032 respecting Fostering a Vibrant River District – Report II, City Council directs staff to include \$50,000 in the December update to the 2026 Capital Plan to support the preparation of a River District Revitalization Plan, outlining short, medium, and long-term actions to revitalize the streetscape elements and at grade infrastructure of the River District.

Highlights:

- The City of Owen Sound is committed to revitalizing the River District through coordinated leadership, planning, and stakeholder engagement.
- A dedicated River District Project Lead will oversee projects, partnerships, and initiatives to strengthen the area’s economic, cultural, and social vitality.
- A comprehensive River District Revitalization Plan will identify short, medium, and long-term strategies to enhance public spaces, infrastructure, and programming.
- Service Level Standards and by-law updates will ensure consistent maintenance, safety, and public amenities..

Strategic Plan Alignment:

[Strategic Plan](#) Priority: Prosperous City.

This report and the actions support the City’s strategic priority of a “Prosperous City” by fostering economic growth, cultural activity, and tourism within the River District. By coordinating revitalization efforts, enhancing public spaces, and improving infrastructure and amenities, the City is strengthening the district’s role as a vibrant hub for business, community, and visitor activity.

Climate and Environmental Implications:

This supports the objectives of the City’s Corporate Climate Change Adaptation Plan by strengthening the resiliency of City infrastructure or services.

Previous Report/Authority:

[CM-25-027](#) - Update Following the July 28 Community Stakeholder Discussion to Foster a Vibrant River District

R-250922-003

"THAT in consideration of Staff Report CM-25-027 respecting Update Following the July 28 Community Stakeholder Discussion to Foster a Vibrant River District, City Council receives the report for information purposes."

Background:

The City’s Official Plan identifies the River District as the primary economic, commercial, financial, cultural, tourism, and employment focus for Owen Sound and the surrounding region.

The area faces challenges related to aging streetscape elements, as well as the impacts of homelessness on the cleanliness and perceptions of safety in the area. Much of the streetscape in the area was upgraded between 2000 and 2006, with the 800 and 900 blocks of 1st Avenue East being completed in 2018 and 2025, respectively. Many of the assets are tired and in need of replacement. The 8th and 9th Street areas have not been updated since prior to 2000.

On July 28, 2025, the City convened a facilitated community stakeholder discussion to foster a vibrant River District. The session brought together approximately 100 participants, including residents, businesses, social

service agencies, elected officials, and staff. The meeting generated constructive dialogue and surfaced a shared commitment to collective action

Common themes included:

- Desire for improved communication and coordination between stakeholders;
- Need for concrete, visible actions such as public washrooms, beautification, and safety enhancements;
- Recognition that long-term, sustained commitment and leadership from the City are required; and
- Strong expectation that the City will convene, coordinate, and enable the revitalization process.

Analysis:

Council received an initial report ([CM-25-027](#)) on September 22, 2025. The report noted that a follow-up report on certain key issues would be presented at the Council meeting on October 6, 2025.

1. Dedicated River District Project Lead

A single point of contact is essential to lead and integrate downtown-related initiatives.

The existing role of the River District Coordinator has been revised and expanded to provide additional focus to:

- Provide strategic oversight and coordination of the efforts of the River District Project team;
- Coordinate projects, programming, and maintenance activities in the River District;
- Create an annual workplan and budget for the River District that aggregates the various workplans and budgets across the organization into a single point of reference;
- Act as liaison between City departments, the River District Board of Management, businesses, and community stakeholders;
- Track and report on progress of actions identified through stakeholder engagement;
- Conduct research projects with respect to business and community development, to support and enhance the Municipality's strategic objectives in the River District; and

- Seek external funding and partnerships to support revitalization initiatives.

The River District is supported by operational and capital efforts of staff across the organization. This includes everything from community development, the administration of the community improvement plan incentives, marketing and promotion, events, maintenance, beautification and snow removal. A dedicated River District Project Lead will ensure cohesive oversight, strengthen collaboration across departments and stakeholders, and drive long-term strategies that enhance the River District's vitality, sustainability, and prosperity.

2. Project Charter

A draft Project Charter (Attachment 4) has been created to support clarity of purpose for this role. Although the Project Lead will be key, the support and buy-in of staff in Parks and Open Space, Public Works and Engineering, Planning, By-law Enforcement, and Finance will play key roles. Support from other agencies, such as Grey County and Owen Sound Police Service, will also be key.

3. River District Revitalization Plan

The Project Lead has submitted a [Rural Ontario Development Program Grant](#) application to support the city in engaging a qualified consultant to prepare a comprehensive plan for upgrading streetscape features and at grade infrastructure in the River District. This work will build upon the 2000 Downtown and Harbourfront Master Plan and the more recent Downtown River Precinct planning initiatives.

This Plan will build on the asset inventory and condition assessments that have been completed and will recommend actions and create estimates and tenders for the work.

The scope of the project will include:

- Assess existing downtown infrastructure and validate our listed deficiencies in lighting, benches, banner poles, landscaping, and sidewalks as outlined in the City's GIS.
- Provide recommendations that align with the City's long-term vision for the River District as a hub for commerce, culture, and community life.
- The current list of deficiencies includes items such as; heaved sidewalks, broken tree grates, deteriorated pavers, broken curbs,

trees, aged benches. Attachment 4 is a location map of the deficiencies for context.

4. Service Level Standards

Service levels for the River District are critical; defining the expected level of service and ensuring that resources are allocated to support achieving the defined level of service. Service levels should reflect the role of the River District as the City's economic and cultural heart. Standards would include:

- Waste collection and litter control
- Street and sidewalk cleaning
- Beautification
- General maintenance

The Manager of Parks & Open Space, along with the Director of Community Services, has a project underway to establish Service Levels for the River District that are consistent with the City's agreement with the River District Board of Management. This document will clearly define roles and responsibilities for the various tasks.

This work is scheduled to come through the Service Review Implementation Committee in February of 2026.

5. Update to the River District Action Plan

In 2020, the City and River District shared the cost to develop the River District Action Plan. This Marketing and Branding Action Plan was developed as a 3-year plan, and many of the initiatives under the plan have been implemented.

At its meeting in May of 2025, the Board has approved an approach that would see staff work to undertake this update with the Board.

This 2020 Plan included objectives and actions in 4 key areas:

- River District Branding
- River District Management
- River District Experience Development
- River District Promotion

The Plan and its four key pillars remain highly relevant. Work is underway by the River District Board to update the actions within these pillars. A report is planned for the November Board meeting to present the approach and methodology that will be used in the update.

6. Update By-law Enforcement and Updated Regulatory Framework

Enhanced coordination with By-law Enforcement will help address issues such as cleanliness, property maintenance, and public safety, ensuring consistent standards that support the River District's role as the City's economic and cultural centre.

Council approved the September 10 Service Review Implementation Ad Hoc Committee [minutes](#), which recommends the addition of By-law staff to be included for consideration in the 2026 Mayor's budget. Once staffing is in place there will be proactive enforcement in the River District including foot patrols and waste management audits.

7. Role of Police Service

Police Services play an important role in fostering a safe and welcoming River District by maintaining a visible presence, responding to incidents, and supporting crime prevention initiatives. Their collaboration with the City, businesses, and social service agencies helps address community concerns, build trust, and enhance perceptions of safety. By working proactively on both enforcement and community engagement, Police Services contribute to creating an environment where residents, visitors, and businesses can thrive.

8. Role of other social services

Social services, including Grey County and its partners, play a key role in supporting the vitality of the River District by addressing social and community needs that impact perceptions of safety, inclusivity, and well-being. Their involvement will ensure coordinated responses to issues such as homelessness, mental health, and housing stability, while also providing resources and supports that foster dignity and connection for vulnerable populations. Collaboration between the City, Grey County, and local agencies strengthens the overall revitalization efforts by balancing economic growth with social responsibility and community care.

The City Manager was notified on September 29, that with funding from Health Canada, Grey County and Safe n' Sound are launching a Social Navigator program starting mid October. This program will see two staff members, 7 days a week for nearly 10 hours per day, connecting with people in the River District, facilitating support to those in need, including but not limited to needle collection. More about this program will be released as it

rolls out beginning with a County Staff report to Grey County Council, scheduled for October 9.

9. Public washrooms

Under the River District Management pillar of the current Action Plan, with the objective of creating a clean and safe space, actions include ensuring adequate (safe and clean) public washrooms are available. The plan calls for an assessment of the need for additional public washrooms, together with wayfinding signage, and ensuring the washrooms are safe, clean and open year-round.

This action has been supported by a recent motion of Council:

R-250922-004

"THAT in consideration of Staff Report CM-25-027 respecting Update Following the July 28 Community Stakeholder Discussion to Foster a Vibrant River District, City Council directs staff to bring forward a report to the October 27, 2025 Council meeting with options for public washrooms in the River District, including associated capital and operating costs."

A report will come forward to the October 27, 2025, meeting to address this recommendation.

The River District is central to the economic, cultural, and social vitality of Owen Sound. Building on recent stakeholder engagement, the establishment of a River District Project Lead, the preparation of a Revitalization Plan, and the setting of Service Standards will ensure the City fulfills its leadership role in maintaining and enhancing the River District's long-term viability.

Financial Implications:

The Capital Budget update in December will include funds to support the development of the River District Revitalization Plan. The updated job description for the River District Project Lead has resulted in a change in job classification that has a minor impact to budget. The change in compensation (approximately \$10,000) will be incorporated into the City's budget.

Communication Strategy:

Once approved by Council, this process will be shared with the River District Board of Management as well as communicated to the River District membership through newsletters and to the greater community via Media Advisory when appropriate.

Consultation:

Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services

Viveca Gravel, River District Project Lead

Attachments:

1. Attachment 1 - River District Action Plan
2. Attachment 2 - City of Owen Sound and River District Board of Management agreement 2024-057
3. Attachment 3 – River District Deficiencies GIS Map
4. Attachment 4 - Draft Project Charter

Recommended by:

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

Submission approved by:

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Tim Simmonds, City Manager at tsimmonds@owensound.ca or 519-376-4440 Ext. 1210.