

# From Planning to Collabora(c)tion:

*Making Brandon's HUB Move-in Ready*



## Abstract

*Caitlin Kotak  
in collaboration  
with Nadalene Khan-  
Cooper, Manitoba Local  
Government, and Ryan  
Nickel, City of Brandon  
Planning Department*

'The Downtown HUB: The Place for People,' Renaissance Brandon's ambitious secondary plan for the City of Brandon, was created to breathe fresh life into living, working, and playing in the very heart of Brandon's downtown core. This Case-in-Point focuses on how the pillar structure of both the Brandon Area Planning District's development plan, and the City of Brandon's secondary plan have combined with strategic planning policies and finance mechanisms to push planning forward into action, resulting in the incredible ongoing transformation of the downtown. Making Brandon's HUB a reality would not have been possible without many members of public, private, and third-sector organizations going beyond the expected to transform this series of projects from planning to collabora(c)tion.

# Background & Context

The city of Brandon is Manitoba's second largest settlement by population and is located approximately 200 kilometres due west of Winnipeg. Today Brandon is home to over 46,000 and continues a strong trend of growth: in the past five years, Brandon has sustained an astonishing 11% growth rate, over double the provincial average of 5.2% (Statistics Canada, 2012). Related to this high growth rate, construction of new housing is lagging in the urban areas, and a high level of demand exists for affordable housing units in particular. Contrary to expectation with this high level of growth, only approximately 800 people live in the underdeveloped downtown area indicated by the red circle in the satellite image below.

Brandon is part of the Brandon and Area Planning District (BAPD), which also includes the municipalities of Elton, to Brandon's north, and Cornwallis, to the south. The 2006 BAPD Development Plan contains a number of growth management policies and programming geared towards:

- focusing development towards existing urban centres,
- encouraging infill development and urban densification,
- conserving resources,
- revitalizing the downtown,
- protecting heritage buildings and districts,
- providing affordable housing, and;
- increasing opportunities for local economic development.





## Facts of the Case

Furthering the BAPD development plan and the 2008 Downtown Economic Development Strategy, in 2011 City of Brandon staff and the newly elected city council collaborated to produce an interdepartmental nine pillar Roadmap for Growth, as seen above. Each pillar has a series of specific programs tied to short- and long- term strategic policies, as well as to the other pillars. Each pillar is individually managed by a dedicated member of city administration and takes into account relevant environmental, economic, and social indicators. This structure of the pillars and the supporting project framework itself provides opportunities for interdepartmental collaboration to evolve into the realm of collabora(c)tion, a synthesis where collaboration and action merge to create a new standard

for the development of interdepartmental, improvement-driven and implementation-oriented, planning practices.

One of the nine pillars is what Brandon has called the ‘Downtown HUB.’ The HUB pillar has four specific goals: the creation of a downtown seasonal pedestrian HUB; the establishment of building equivalency standards to aid in the redevelopment of older or heritage buildings; the exploration of options for an entertainment complex, and; the creation of a secondary plan for the Renaissance District, a section of the core within the Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (BNRC) designated boundaries of the downtown. Though the pillar strategy was only formalized in 2011, the City of Brandon has already made

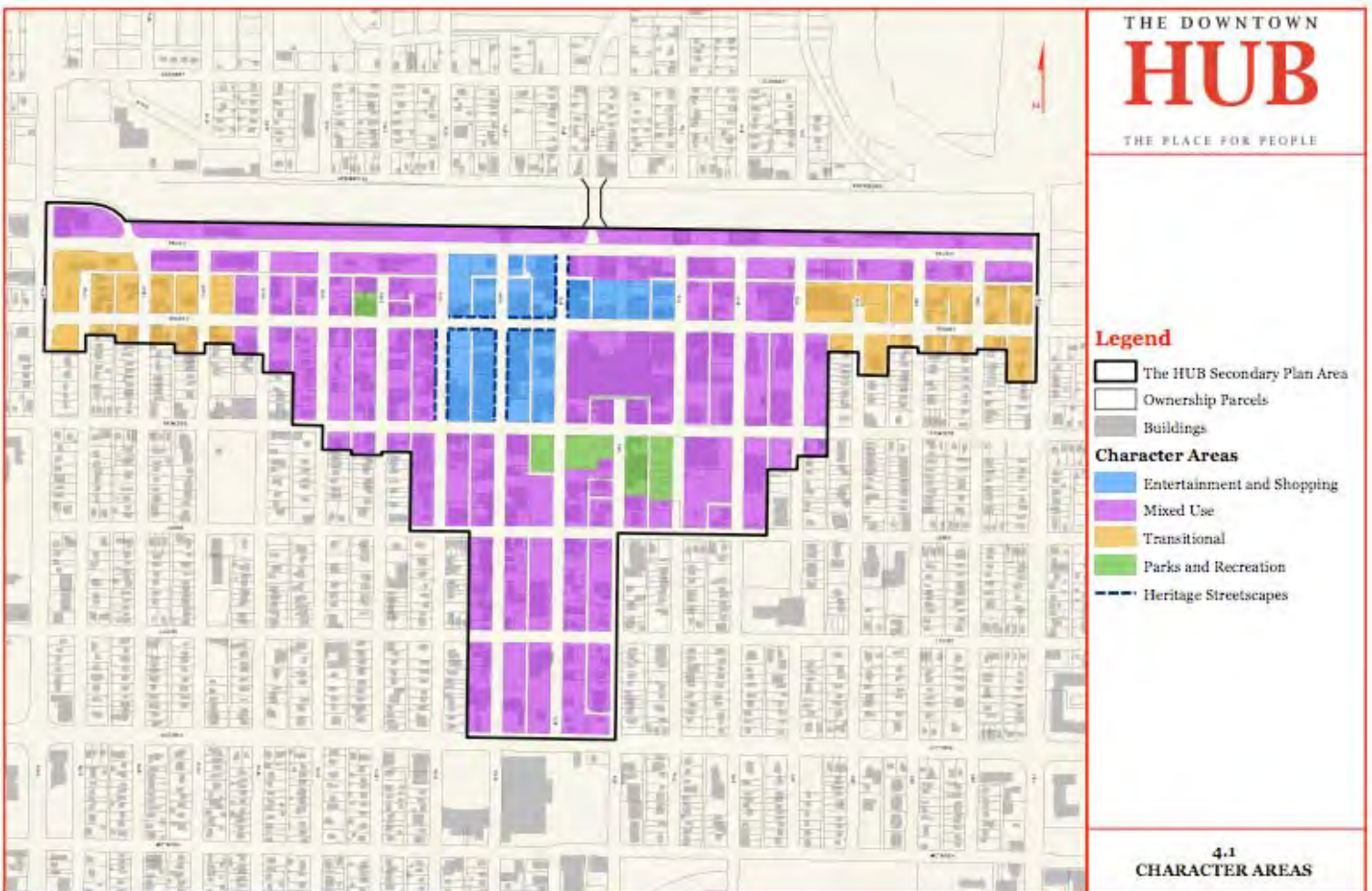
good on the HUB by approving the plan in early 2012. The City of Brandon’s secondary plan, **The Downtown HUB: The Place for People** (or City of Brandon By-Law No. 7010) was completed by Renaissance Brandon with funding support from the City of Brandon and the Province of Manitoba.

Renaissance Brandon, or RB, is an arms-length City of Brandon downtown development organization that was formed in 2008. RB operates under shared funding from the City of Brandon and the Province of Manitoba to manage many economic incentives that provide the traction necessary to enact what the HUB plan has set out to do. The Renaissance District of downtown, from 6th to 13th, and Pacific to Lorne, is covered by a dedicated tax abatement program to offset some of the costs associated with redevelopment of older buildings. To ensure that the redeveloped spaces are used, as an application-based rent abatement program run by RB subsidizes businesses making the move into the downtown area. There are also event-based arts, culture and heritage grants available to draw festivals, concerts and other programming into the downtown.



*The HUB secondary plan is rooted in the notions of diversity, uniqueness, and character, which form the backbone of six more specific strategies.*

*Those six strategies and their actions are: ‘People on display’ (enacted through transport policies and design guidelines for first-floor storefronts, sidewalks, and other ground-level areas privilege the pedestrian and support livable public spaces, as well as the creation of public wireless hotspots within the HUB); ‘Mixed-use development’ (diversifying uses through zoning controls to create complete communities; denser residential development fosters mixed-income residences and builds support for local shops and amenities); ‘Pedestrian-friendly’ (active transportation corridor policy and the inclusion of attractive street furnishings improves wayfinding and gets pedestrians out of their cars); ‘Life after dark’ (zoning will support the location of offices and residences above shopping opportunities and within walking distance from entertainment options); ‘Building blocks’ (plan policies in heritage redevelopment help both preserve and modernize the existing HUB area), and; ‘Active and engaged merchants’ (establish a system of incentives outside of the plan process through RB to encourage current and future business owners to locate in the core).*



# Actions & Interactions: Looking Back for Lessons Learned

Many of the redevelopment projects in the HUB area began years before the new secondary plan was approved as shared initiatives between the City of Brandon and the Province of Manitoba. These projects have helped navigate the territory of transforming departmental and governmental silos into interdepartmental and intergovernmental collaborations. This series of redevelopments, both internal to government operations, and on-the-ground in the city, have boosted momentum to a high level: anyone visiting Brandon's downtown today can clearly see considerable change from five years ago (particularly as seen in the before and after photos of a 9th Street redevelopment project by RB).

**Highlights of the past five years include:**

Princess Park, the historic site of Brandon's original City Hall, was transformed into an attractive family-friendly urban green-space. Outdoor dancing and concerts (in summer and winter) and weeknight summer programming let the site act as an ambassador for the HUB, drawing considerable pedestrian traffic to Brandon's downtown.

The cutting-edge design of the Kristopher Campbell Skateboard Plaza has drawn thousands of youth and adults alike.

The nearly completed YMCA facility on 8th Street is now one of the nicest indoor recreation centres in the whole city of Brandon.

Westman Immigration Services relocated into the freshly renovated heritage CPR station on Pacific Avenue.

The City of Brandon Development Services Department has begun the process of relocating to the HUB area.

Entry-level condo developments such as Paragon Lofts have been completed and put on the market.

The iconic McKenzie Seeds buildings have begun conversions into almost 100 condominium units with ground-level commercial and office space and underground parking. The residential units are market rate, available for purchase and lease, and are between 800 and 1600 square feet. The project is driven by RESLAND Development Corp., a private-sector developer based in Vancouver. McKenzie Towers was the first property in the City of Brandon to achieve TIF (tax increment financing) status from the province, and also







has tax abatement status from the City of Brandon. The McKenzie buildings are pictured on the above left, while the Massey Harris building is pictured on the above right.

Completion is looming for the **Massey Harris redevelopment project**, where a century-old heritage building has nearly reached the end of its conversion into residential units by non-profit groups.

The Massey Harris building and environs is now managed jointly between the Brandon Friendship Centre, the Canadian Mental Health Association, and Habitat for Humanity. The conversion project is becoming a national case study of how, with public support, a collection of non-profits can assemble to build self-contained, integrated, multi-form and multi-tenure affordable and market housing units (and even an upcoming playground

and park space next door!) within a historic building in the core of a city's downtown.

Massey Harris is now home to main-floor self-contained emergency shelter units, subsidized and market rate units, as well as sweat-equity mortgaged Habitat units. The 1- to 4- bedroom market and subsidized rental units are identical and integrated throughout the building, so it is impossible which is which. Subsidized rents are \$340 per month for a 2-bedroom, falling well under Brandon's average. Each unit is individually metered for hydro which includes electric heat..

The emergency shelter model used in Massey Harris has been replicated in Dauphin, Flin Flon, Portage, Thompson, and Swan River. Individuals renting the emergency shelter units can remain in them for up to two months and are occasionally hired to work for the non-profits. By hiring these individuals, the

non-profits have been able to help them get back on their feet and transition into other, more permanent forms of housing.

The conversion of Massey Harris will be completed at an estimated cost of \$108 per square foot, which is astonishingly low for a multi-floor development, let alone a historic building conversion. Much of the work on the Habitat floor was performed by volunteers, however skilled tradesmen had to be hired to do the plumbing, electrical and to retrofit the building with custom sprinkler systems and an elevator. To cut costs, the non-profits commissioned the students of the Crocus High Drafting & Design program to redesign the building program from the ground up. While this stage of the process took two years to complete, it meant that for a \$7 million dollar project, the total cost for a project architect to certify the plans was just over \$96,000.



*Habitat 'Sweat Equity' homes require future owners to put contribute a certain number of hours of manual labour to be eligible for the program.*

As expected with difficult projects, the Massey Harris conversion has exceeded expected timelines for completion by an additional year and has gone over the original budget yet the overall construction costs are still less than half of what it would have cost for new construction. The McKenzie Towers conversion is also well behind schedule, with completion expected in another 18 months after construction begins.

## Looking Forward

The scale and diversity of Brandon's recent downtown redevelopment (and by association its accompanying revitalization) would not have been possible without the collabora(c)tion and continued dedication of public, private, and third-sector organizations.

The projects occurring in Brandon's downtown HUB have shared a number of lessons. First, the level of coordination between individual projects would not have been possible without overarching guidance from supportive development plan policies. As the BAPD development plan is currently undergoing consultation for its' term review, it will be interesting to see what, if any, policy and program changes will be made to the urban area – and the downtown area – in particular.

Second, tools and incentives are most effective when they are able to be tailored to meet the needs of individual projects on a case-by-case basis. This means that staff needs to have a keen awareness of organizational protocols, and in particular, understand which boundaries can be pushed, and which need to remain firm. Individual staff members, for better or worse, can exercise considerable influence in developers' approaches to the flexible inner intricacies of the development approvals process. This case-by-case basis means that the approvals process may become convoluted, and that projects will likely have considerably longer lag-times, resulting in increased carrying costs for the developer (which is a dis-incentive to entering the development process in the first place).

Third, these tools, while tailor-made, function best when implemented in a coordinated approach





guided by a dedicated organization and a clear secondary plan. Whether justifying the redevelopment of a run-down and disused greenspace, installing active transportation elements, or removing the safety hazard of crumbling buildings, having a secondary plan provides the public sector with the backing it needs to press for change. On the other hand, due to the existence of these tools and the drive to use them, the public-sector runs the risk of over-subsidizing development.

Fourth, redevelopments, particularly in the case of heritage structures, have many uncertainties. Bringing a structure up to modern building code, in particular, requires a level of dedication surpassing greenfield development processes. Heritage renovations and redevelopments have additional hurdles, longer timelines (and often, longer still than previously expected) as well as the omnipresent element of considerable financial risk.

Fifth, non-profit redevelopers, though armed with the best intentions, often warrant additional assistance due to their inexperience with development. This can have significant impacts on a project's bottom line, and can draw considerable municipal staff attention away from other work. In many ways, however, the completed projects are of such value to their communities that the additional collaborative leg work in the beginning is well worth it in the end.

In many ways, non-profit developments are notoriously complicated simply because their projects are about making due with the 'leftovers.' They are, quite literally, given buildings with more restrictions that require more work, more expertise, and more overall cost to develop than public- or private- sector developers are willing to take on. Yet somehow, non-profits, with considerably less financial freedom than other organizations, make these projects work.

Because of their financial constraints, non-profits are often forced to think far beyond traditional processes. By finding other, less expensive avenues of securing skilled trades and expertise, non-profits can actually do more in heritage conversions, with less.

Since the approach of tailoring tools and incentives to particular redevelopment, renovation, and conversion projects taken by Renaissance Brandon, the City of Brandon, and the Province of Manitoba has proven itself to be quite effective when considering public, private, and non-profit bottom lines: the next logical step for the public sector appears to be to start thinking more like non-profits: **outside of the box.**



*I would like to express my appreciation for the following individuals who helped make this Case-in-Point possible:*

*Nadalene Khan-Cooper, Policy Planner, Manitoba Local Government*

*Glen Kruck, Regional Director, Canadian Mental Health Association*

*Terri McCartney, Sales, McKenzie Towers*

*Ryan Nickel, Community Planner, City of Brandon*

*Braden Pilling, Downtown Development Specialist, Renaissance Brandon*

*Angie Veilleux, Senior Planner, City of Brandon*

## *Author*

### **Caitlin Kotak**

B.Env.D., MCP Candidate, is completing her Master of City Planning at the University of Manitoba while continuing her employment with Manitoba Local Government.

## *References and Resources*

Brandon's 2008 Downtown Economic Development Strategy: [http://renaissancebrandon.ca/about/brandon\\_downtown\\_strategy\\_2008.pdf](http://renaissancebrandon.ca/about/brandon_downtown_strategy_2008.pdf)

Brandon's Roadmap for Growth:  
<http://brandon.ca/roadmap-for-growth/overview>

The Downtown HUB: The Place for People:  
<http://www.brandon.ca/images/pdf/bylaws/7010.pdf>

McKenzie Towers Development:  
<http://www.mckenzietowers.ca>

Renaissance Brandon:  
<http://www.renaissancebrandon.ca>

Statistics Canada. (2012). Population and dwelling counts, for Canada, provinces and territories, and census subdivisions. Retrieved March 12, 2012 from: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/hlt-fst/pd-pl/Table-Tableau.cfm?LANG=Eng&T=302&SR=1&S=51&O=A&RPP=25&CMA=0&PR=46>

## *Images (left to right)*

Cover, 1 and 3: Renaissance Brandon, both from [http://renaissancebrandon.ca/?page\\_id=10&paged=2](http://renaissancebrandon.ca/?page_id=10&paged=2). 2: Author.

Page 2: Screenshot from Google Maps (March 2 2012)

Page 3: City of Brandon, from <http://www.brandon.ca/images/stories/roadmap/pillars.png>.

Page 4: City of Brandon, Bylaw 7010 Map 4.1.

Page 5, 1 and 2: Renaissance Brandon, both from [http://renaissancebrandon.ca/?page\\_id=10&paged=2](http://renaissancebrandon.ca/?page_id=10&paged=2).

Page 6, 1: Renaissance Brandon, from [http://renaissancebrandon.ca/?page\\_id=10&paged=2](http://renaissancebrandon.ca/?page_id=10&paged=2). 2: C. Corneau, from [http://media.brandonsun.com/images/110913\\_massey-bldg-2.jpg](http://media.brandonsun.com/images/110913_massey-bldg-2.jpg).

Page 7, 1: B. Bumstead, from [http://media.brandonsun.com/images/648\\*418/111206-habitat3.jpg](http://media.brandonsun.com/images/648*418/111206-habitat3.jpg). 2: Author.

Page 8: Author.