



Figure 1. Rendering of Victoria Avenue

## The Mid-Size City Downtown Mall: How Can Winnipeg Learn from Thunder Bay on Addressing Downtown Revitalization? Reimagine Victoriaville

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### 1.0 Introduction

Across mid-size cities in Canada are increasing conversations on how to revitalize downtowns, especially those which contain underutilized downtown malls. The Reimagine Victoriaville project, undertaken by Urban Systems with support of Public City Architecture, Three Sixty Collective, and Menic Planning Services, engaged stakeholders and the broader community to create and evaluate options for the redevelopment of Victoriaville Centre in the Downtown Fort William neighbourhood of Thunder Bay, Ontario. The final recommendation was to remove the mall and embark on a process to involve more community stakeholders within the next phases of downtown revitalization. While Victoriaville Centre is unique in its architecture and closure of public right-of-ways, the process provides insight into how the lessons of the Reimagine Victoriaville study can support downtown revitalization in cities like Winnipeg, affected by increasingly vacant downtown malls.

*“Shopping centres are not a redevelopment strategy so much as a ‘band aid’ solution, as the resulting project is typically not financially viable and does not contribute to the revitalization of the community.”*

*- Urban Systems, p. 30*



**Figure 2.** Victoriaville Centre Exterior West Entrance

## 2.0 Background and Context

The population growth of mid-size Canadian cities in the 1950s saw increased suburban development. As these developments grew along city edges, competition increased between newer shopping centres in the suburbs and the established downtown core (Jamal, 2018). Faulk (2006) emphasizes how “there is a direct relationship between sprawl (excessive decentralization) and downtown vitality” (p. 625). To compete with suburban development, many mid-size cities across Canada erected shopping malls in their downtown cores as a strategy to draw people downtown. With the continued need for vehicle access, downtowns adapted by increasing road lanes and adding ample parking to replicate the successful suburban model (Fillion & Hammond, 2008, p. 3). Enclosed malls were used to safely separate pedestrians from vehicles, while including infrastructure to support parking (p. 8). These downtown malls now act in complete opposition to modern revitalization strategies of street-level pedestrian orientation, walkability, and historical preservation (Fillion & Hammond, 2008; Leinberger, 2005, Ross, 2018; Faulk, 2006).

Many downtown malls established during this time have declined. Mid-size cities simply do not have the tourism, transit systems, and employment opportunities to support the bustling downtowns that these malls require and do not provide enough nearby residential population and free parking options (Fillion & Hammond, 2008, p. 3). Many of the major retailers that started with these malls chose to not continue their leases or went out of business due to low foot traffic. These large,

primarily vacant buildings affect the local area by lowering property values and creating a decline in public perception (Faulk, 2006). In time, these malls saw their storefronts replaced with bargain stores, offices and public services that took advantage of the now lower rents (Fillion & Hammond, 2008).



**Figure 3.** Chapples Department Store from inside Victoriaville Centre

Victoriaville Centre in Thunder Bay, Ontario has experienced the same fate. In 1970, the cities of Fort William and Port Arthur amalgamated to form Thunder Bay, creating a city that had two competing central business districts. In the 1970s, the province of Ontario introduced a Downtown Revitalization Program to



**Figure 4.** Inside Victoriaville Centre

support downtowns experiencing decline due to suburban development. The former Fort William area used the program funding in 1979 to create Victoriaville Centre, an enclosed

### 3.0 Case Summary

In response to increased operational costs, declining revenues and demand from some downtown business owners to demolish Victoriaville Centre, the City of Thunder Bay conducted stakeholder and public engagement in 2016. The survey results suggested that residents saw Victoriaville Centre as worsening the downtown and that it should be demolished. In 2019 the City of Thunder Bay retained Urban Systems, to identify and evaluate three options for the redevelopment of Victoriaville Centre.

The planning team completed two phases of engagement. Phase 1 involved stakeholder interviews, open houses, an online survey, public newsletter, and website, with 410 residents participating. This phase asked participants about the current conditions at Victoriaville Centre, resulting in feedback focusing on frustration from continued engagement on this project, concerns about safety in the mall and downtown, the need for community spaces and programming, and the need for a more comprehensive downtown strategy.

After receiving this feedback, the planning

team developed and thoroughly evaluated four options. These options were presented to the public for feedback in Phase 2 of the engagement process, which saw 220 participants. As to not create the impression that participants were ‘voting’ on an option, the team did not ask for respondent preference, but instead for positive and negative feedback for each presented option.

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**Figure 5.** Engagement at Victoriaville Centre

## Option 1A + 1B: Revitalize or Repurpose

Keeps Victoriaville Centre's structure and existing businesses, by renovating and improving the infrastructure to maintain it as an indoor space. *Revitalize* continues as a mall, where *Repurpose* changes the building's primary use to a recreation, entertainment or community facility. This option continues running at a deficit, requires significant funds for renovations, and continues the decrease in traffic due to the street closure. Most respondents were not supportive of keeping the mall, however noted the importance of the interior as a gathering space and refuge from the outdoors, but did not view this as an appropriate solution.

## Option 2: Reconfigure

Removes part of the building structure to re-open Victoria Avenue to vehicles, increasing vehicular and pedestrian circulation and street-oriented retail, while keeping indoor spaces, the food court, and public washrooms over Syndicate Avenue. However, the remaining

building would still operate at a deficit. Respondents appreciated that indoor space remains in this option, but worried about displacement of businesses, and increased risk for pedestrians due to traffic.

## Option 3: Remove

The original inspiration for Victoriaville Centre, Mail St. Roch was ultimately removed to re-establish the right-of-way in 2007. Similarly, *Option 3* completely removes Victoriaville Centre, re-opening the Victoria and Syndicate right-of-ways, eliminating all operating costs, increasing connectivity, adding outdoor plazas, street level retail, and outdoor pedestrian space. The planning team suggested that there could be additions of active transportation and pedestrian paths, market spaces, community spaces and activities to the outdoors. This option received the strongest support, but respondents still worried about loss of indoor space and displacement of current users, suggesting increased investment in community programming.

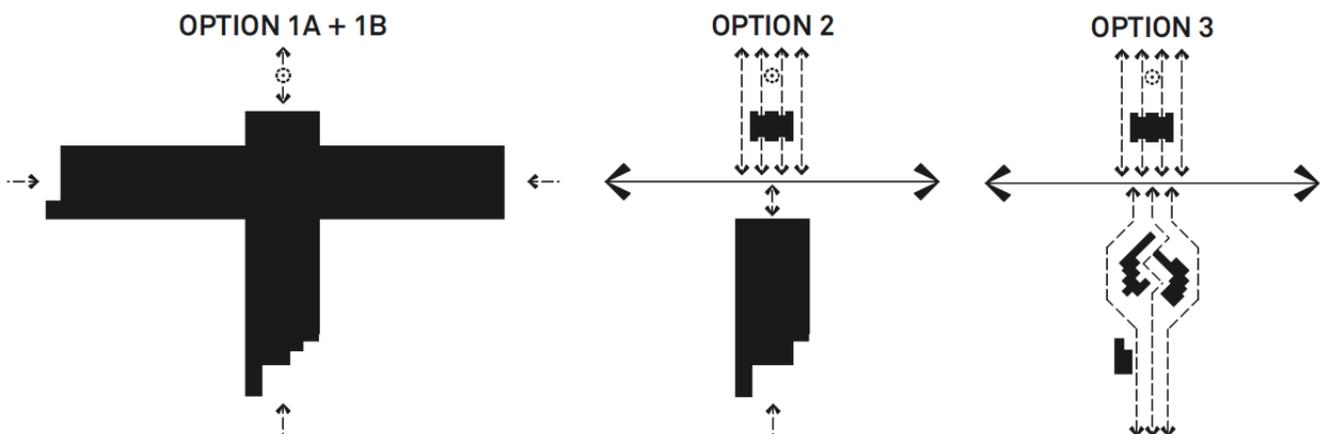


Figure 6. Ideograms of the presented options

## 4.0 Outcomes

Based on market feasibility, financial analysis of capital and operational revenues and expenditures, stakeholder and public feedback, and best practices for urban revitalization, the planning team concluded by recommending *Option 3: Remove* to the City of Thunder Bay. The team suggested that this solution must be managed by dedicated staff and recommended this be the responsibility of the existing Business Improvement Area (BIA) to run the

programming, with enhanced staff support to respond to this new venture. The use of "main-street" programs have evidentially shown better building management and rehabilitation, and better support local businesses (Faulk, 2006). Using a BIA will allow a more community-based focus, and could support the needs of programming, maintenance, security, leasing, marketing, and on-the-ground solutions.

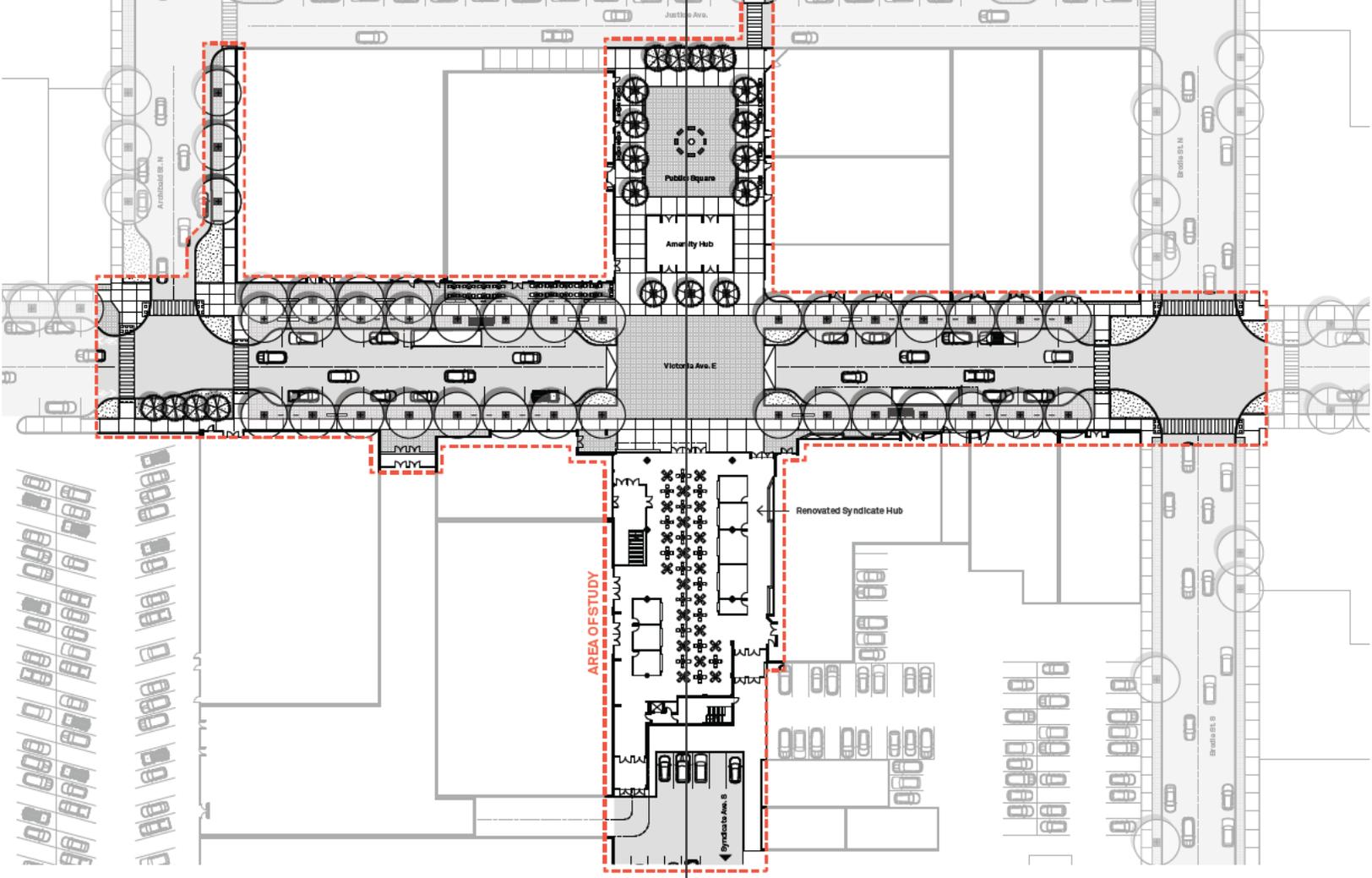


Figure 7. Plan Drawing of Option 3

## 5.0 Lessons Learned

Jeff Palmer and Ryan Segal from Urban Systems discussed the challenges with community engagement on a high-profile project such as Reimagine Victoriaville. In Phase One, much of the data that was presented to the public was quantifiable. This type of data easily highlights changes and can “prove” the worth of decisions. However, Palmer noted that “planning is an art, not a science” and that there is “room for gut feeling” in these decision-making processes. It is a challenge to determine how to display and collect resident feedback without focus on data-centred structures.

Segal saw success in how they chose to receive feedback in Phase 2 of the engagement process, by asking for likes and dislikes of each option presented instead of forcing a ranking. This allowed for broader discussion on big-picture solutions, instead of limiting to a choice.

The challenge with a project such as Reimagine Victoriaville, and often discussed locally with Portage Place in Winnipeg, is the broader context of what is happening downtown. Addressing one project will not create the needed solution that supports all residents and users of the area. Downtown revitalization efforts have historically displaced and stigmatized marginalized and homeless communities (Speer, 2019) and so the removal of downtown malls must be done with care, proper community engagement, and support. Burayidi (2001) emphasizes that establishing a long-term vision for downtown is an essential part of downtown revitalization. Palmer and Segal noted that there was not enough time in the Reimagine Victoriaville project to complete further studies on downtown challenges, and that a downtown secondary plan or strategy should be established if proceeding with the presented option.



**Figure 8.** Portage Place in Winnipeg

While the literature supports the need for incremental changes for downtown revitalization (Jamal, 2018), it is challenging for the public to accept slow and long-term results. Downtown revitalization requires a long-term strategy, which is why it can be so challenging to complete (Leinberger, 2005). “Revitalization is a slow process most often occurring in increments—one building at a time” (Faulk, 2006, p. 632). The Reimagine Victoriaville process could have increased purposeful questioning of who participated in the engagement, who was not in the room, and who still needs to be consulted. The Reimagine Victoriaville report does acknowledge that next steps must include working closely with local Indigenous communities, that the needs of marginalized communities must be addressed in all strategies moving forward, and considerations of short-and-long-term solutions for the loss of safe indoor spaces and public washrooms must be addressed before demolition would begin.

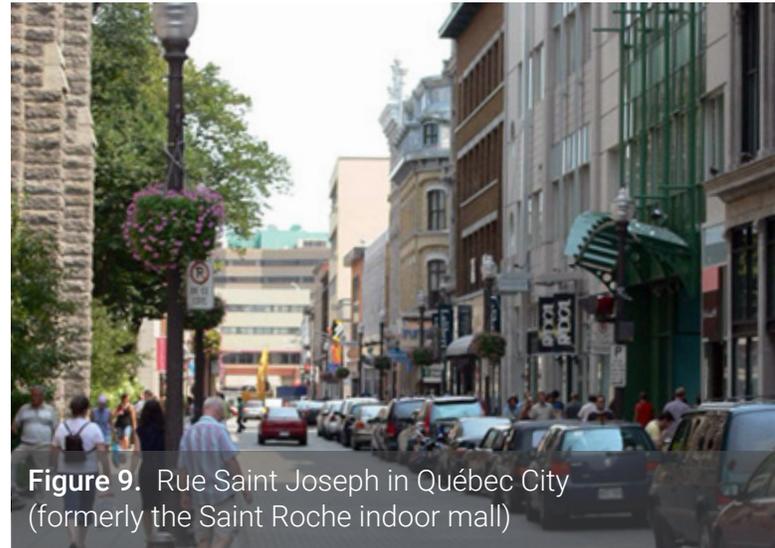
The Reimagine Victoriaville engagement process took place before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, where we are now

## 6.0 Conclusion

The Reimagine Victoriaville project successfully managed to engage residents and stakeholders of Thunder Bay to propose a solution for their struggling downtown mall. The process made clear that downtown malls in mid-size cities often are unable to sustain themselves on retail or community spaces alone, and that clear public consultation supports the

seeing a shift in how people use their cities. As people increasingly work and shop from home, businesses have had to change how they interact with residents. The literature suggests many opportunities for a post-COVID downtown, including increased housing in now-vacant office spaces, more active transportation opportunities and outdoor pedestrian spaces, and an influx of outdoor recreation and dining options (Sands et al., 2021). The emphasis continues to prioritize the importance of pedestrian-friendly spaces and increased mobility, both of which the Reimagine Victoriaville report support.

Through acknowledging these needs in the suggested implementation of the Reimagine Victoriaville recommendation, cities like Winnipeg can take note on how the engagement process can be more inclusive when it comes time to determine how to address their downtown malls. Winnipeg can focus attention on strong inclusion of these communities throughout development processes instead of after decisions have been made.



**Figure 9.** Rue Saint Joseph in Québec City (formerly the Saint Roche indoor mall)

ideation for effective solutions, such as street-focused pedestrian spaces. While Victoriaville Centre is a unique precedent for downtown malls, this engagement process highlights opportunities for cities like Winnipeg to use successful strategies for finding solutions that support both community need and downtown revitalization.



Figure 10. Rendering of Reimagine Victoriaville Option 3

## 7.0 References

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Figure 11. Option 3 Vehicle and Cycling Rendering

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Figure 1. Public City Architecture. (2020). *Rendering of Victoria Avenue* [Rendering]. Reimagine Victoriaville Final Report.

Figure 2. Mirabelli Corporation. (n.d.). *Victoriaville Centre* [Photograph]. Mirabelli Corporation. <https://www.mirabellincorp.com/victoriaville-centre-lease>

Figure 3. Cano, D. (2011). *The Chapple Building corner* [Photograph]. The Hot Rods and Jalopies. <http://hotrodsandjalopies.blogspot.com/2011/01/victoriavillethe-place-we-love-to-hate.html>

Figure 4. The Thunder Bay Archives. (1981). *Victoriaville Civic Centre* [Photograph]. Flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thunderbayarchives/15827642754>

Figure 5. Urban Systems. (2020). *Engagement at Victoriaville Centre* [Photograph]. Reimagine Victoriaville.

Figure 6. Public City Architecture (2020). *Ideograms of Presented Options* [Graphic]. Reimagine Victoriaville.

Figure 7. Public City Architecture (2020). *Option 3 Site Plan* [Drawing]. Reimagine Victoriaville.

Figure 8. Mike Deal (n.d.). *With the latest plan to redevelop portage place shopping centre shelved, it's time for inner-city community leaders to come up with a bold new vision for the mall.* Winnipeg Free Press. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/new-vision-needed-for-portage-place-576253662.html>

Figure 9. St-Roch Hors Norme (n.d.). *Revitalization* [Photograph]. St. Roch. <https://www.stroch.com/en/district-history>

Figure 10. Public City Architecture (2020). *Rendering of Reimagine Victoriaville Option 3* [Rendering]. Reimagine Victoriaville.

Figure 11. Public City Architecture (2020). *Vehicular & Cycling Circulation* [Rendering]. Reimagine Victoriaville.