

Part 1.

Insights and

Learnings



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Foreword from BLOXHUB

Downtown Tacoma is at a pivotal moment of opportunity. With its unique mix of cultural richness, natural beauty, and entrepreneurial spirit, the city has a solid foundation for creating a vibrant, inclusive urban core that reflects the needs and aspirations of its community. To support this effort, the **City of Tacoma** has partnered with **BLOXHUB**, the Nordic Hub for Sustainable Urbanization based in Copenhagen, with financial support from the **Scan Design Foundation**.

Since May 2024, we have worked closely with Tacoma's leaders, residents, and stakeholders to develop solutions tailored to the city's context. Drawing on Nordic approaches to sustainable urban transformation, this partnership has combined global expertise with local knowledge to offer a fresh perspective and harness Tacoma's unique opportunities.

The Action Plan builds on the collaborative insights and strategies developed during this process. It proposes actionable initiatives to bring more people downtown, foster community connections, and create spaces where Tacoma's residents and visitors can thrive. These initiatives result from the long and dedicated work by the City of Tacoma and BLOXHUB experts and reflect the city's spirit and vision for the future.

We proudly support this process and look forward to seeing Tacoma realize its aspirations for a vibrant and inclusive downtown.

Introduction

The Tacoma Action Plan provides a comprehensible roadmap for urban regeneration in downtown Tacoma. This document, which follows the **Tacoma Playbook** 📖 in September 2024, builds on the principles and strategies developed by BLOXHUB and its partners in cooperation with the City of Tacoma, the Downtown Tacoma Partnership (DTP), and selected stakeholders. It represents Phase 2 in an ongoing process of collaboration and experimentation aimed at activating downtown Tacoma.

The plan is divided into two parts:

Part 1: Insights & Learnings focuses on analysis, offering a deep dive into the background, activities, and insights that underpin the recommendations. It explores the context, user needs, and opportunities for transformation, providing an understanding of the challenges and strengths that shape downtown Tacoma.

Part 2: Recommendations translate these insights into tangible recommendations. It presents a cohesive set of initiatives and success criteria designed to activate and enhance downtown, ensuring they address identified needs while inspiring action and excitement.

The Action Plan, outlined in part 1, lays the foundation for the recommendations presented in part 2.

Goal: Feet on the Street

The overarching goal of this Action Plan is to propose activities that support Tacoma's vision of increasing **feet on the street** in downtown Tacoma, particularly along Broadway. Tacoma can create a vibrant, inclusive, and engaging urban core by attracting a critical mass of people to live, work, and spend time downtown. This aligns with Tacoma's vision to become *"one of the nation's healthiest, safest, and most playful cities."*

Tacoma's assets make it a city with qualified potential. It offers daily access to natural beauty, from Puget Sound's shores to Mount Rainier's peaks, alongside a strong sense of community pride and entrepreneurial spirit. This combination of outdoor adventure, creative energy, and inclusive culture has drawn people across the region to see Tacoma as a place of opportunity and promise.

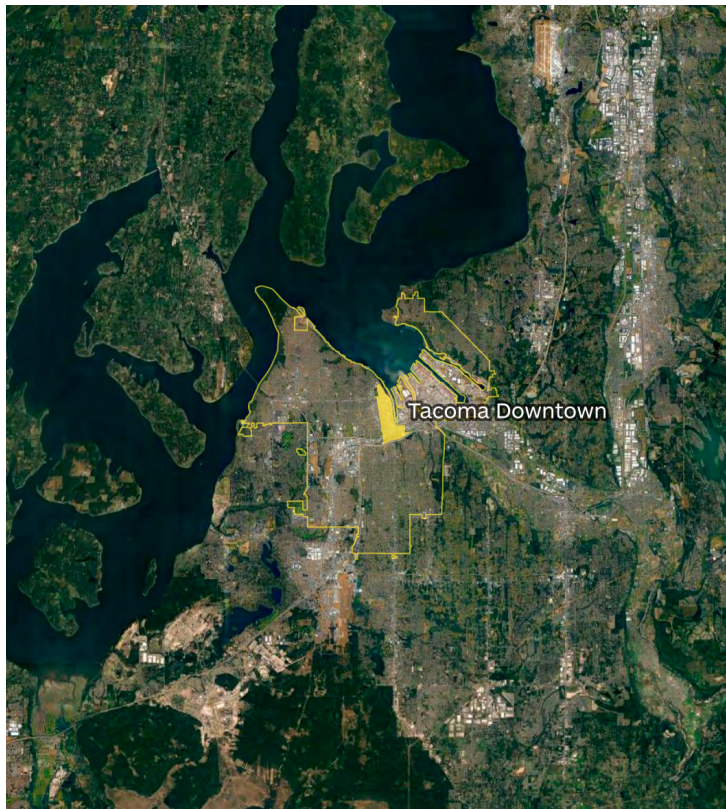
A scalable roadmap

Grounded in the **Tacoma Playbook** 📖, the Action Plan proposes eight interconnected initiatives tailored to Tacoma's unique context. By focusing efforts on a specific, opportunity-rich area, the plan offers guidance for achieving quick progress that can be scaled for broader impact. Specifically, these initiatives are designed to:

- Attract people by creating engaging, inclusive, and welcoming spaces.
- Extend time spent downtown by enhancing the experience for existing users.
- Support local businesses and entrepreneurs by fostering new opportunities.

Together, these initiatives provide a roadmap to spark activity, strengthen community connections, and build lasting momentum for a thriving downtown Tacoma.

City of Tacoma



The BLOXHUB approach

Our drafting of the Action Plan reflects a shared commitment to creating a vibrant and inclusive downtown where community and innovation come together to unlock the area's full potential. Developed through a cross-disciplinary, collaboration-driven process, the plan combines local knowledge with global expertise to deliver suggestions for initiatives tailored to Tacoma's unique context.

Since May 2024, this collaboration has drawn on decades of Nordic experience in transforming urban spaces into vibrant, community-driven environments. Connecting local leaders, stakeholders and international experts fosters the exchange of ideas and cross-disciplinary solutions that leverage Tacoma's unique strengths and opportunities.

This approach ensures:

- **Strong local anchoring:** The proposed initiatives are grounded in the real experiences of those who live, work, invest, and study in Tacoma. They reflect Tacoma's unique strengths and challenges, as seen through the locals' perspectives.
- **Grounded in deep insights:** The proposed initiatives build upon a balanced and comprehensive understanding of downtown Tacoma's needs and opportunities, ensuring representation across age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and professional roles.
- **Relevance to diverse stakeholders:** The proposed initiatives cater to a broad range of target groups and stakeholders. Different groups bring varied perspectives shaped by their resources, experiences, and habits. For example, younger stakeholders may perceive safety differently than older demographics. At the same time, individuals with higher financial means may overlook the need to offer affordable options in downtown Tacoma. Recognizing potential **bias in stakeholder input** was critical in developing initiatives that appeal to different needs.

Activities

The action plan was developed through a series of targeted stakeholder activities (see timeline in **Appendix 2** 📅) to ensure a nuanced understanding of Tacoma's assets, challenges, and user dynamics. Key steps included:

- **Site visit and stakeholder meetings:** A site visit to downtown and meetings with local stakeholders allowed the BLOXHUB experts (**Appendix 1** 📅) to explore Tacoma's unique assets and gain


a deeper understanding of the community dynamics and sense of place.

- **Collaborative workshop:** Held at the Pantages Theatre, the workshop convened 27 participants, including the mayor, city staff, local stakeholders, and BLOXHUB experts. Participants identified user needs and co-created potential initiatives (see **Appendix 3** ➔ for workshop summary).
- **Stakeholder roundtables and surveys:** Additional input from targeted roundtables with developers and high school students and an online survey to the broader community broadened the range of perspectives, addressing gaps in representation (see **Appendixes 4 and 5** ➔ for roundtable summaries and survey results). In addition, interviews were conducted with specific experts in Tacoma to qualify the initiatives.



Context

Opportunities for transformation

Tacoma's downtown core is at a critical moment of opportunity. With the city's population projected to grow by 55% in the next 15 years, Tacoma has momentum to reimagine its downtown into a thriving, inclusive urban hub. This transformation aligns with the bold vision of Tacoma 2025, which aims to make Tacoma "one of the nation's healthiest, safest, and most playful cities." (**Tacoma Strategic Plan** )

Momentum is already building. Downtown Tacoma has a growing residential population, cultural anchors like theaters and schools, a thriving Farmer's Market, and a strong foundation of independent businesses. Tacoma's natural beauty, historic architecture, and entrepreneurial spirit make it a city with immense potential. By building on these strengths, Tacoma can create a vibrant, people-centered downtown that connects the community and serves as a model for urban transformation.

Current size of target user groups and expected increase in coming years (numbers from City of Tacoma)

Target group	Current numbers	Estimated 2028
Current and future residents of Downtown	10,183	20,000
Visitors from the conference center and Hotel Murano	730,000 visitor days	1,000,000 visitor days ¹
Local high school students	650-850/day	1,000-1,200/day
UW Tacoma students	5,000	10,000
Workers from workplaces in downtown	-	-
Residents from other neighborhoods in Tacoma	-	-

¹ Estimate assuming visitor volume will continue to increase beyond pre-COVID levels

From Playbook to Action Plan

This Action Plan is the follow-up document to the **Playbook** 📖. The Playbook is a guiding framework developed through six months of cross-sector collaboration between BLOXHUB experts, the City of Tacoma, and local stakeholders. The Playbook offers a flexible, adaptable approach founded on three key principles:

- **Experimentation:** Start small, test ideas, and scale up gradually;
- **Collaboration:** Engage the community at every level to foster shared ownership;
- **Integration:** Align individual initiatives to contribute to a larger, cohesive vision.

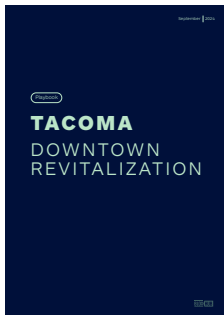
Two key action areas for applying these principles are central to the Playbook: *transforming existing buildings into multi-use hubs and improving public spaces to invite dynamic activation*. These priorities form the foundation for shaping the initiatives outlined in this Action Plan.

Additionally, the Playbook identified **six success factors** for downtown activation efforts:

- **Municipal leadership:** City leadership drives and supports the vision.
- **Downtown Tacoma Partnership (DTP):** A key liaison organizing private-sector coalitions.
- **Collaboration among property owners:** Property owners must work collectively to reuse spaces adaptively.
- **Building and zoning code revisions:** Temporary exemptions to unlock innovative uses.
- **Funding and resources:** Securing investments for impactful projects.
- **Community engagement:** Involve the community to ensure projects reflect their needs and aspirations.

These factors were considered when designing the collaborative process and coordinating closely with the City of Tacoma and stakeholders, including the DTP and developers in the area. Further, the initiatives are developed assuming these success factors are met, and the city and stakeholder engagement so far indicates a commitment to realize these aspects.

Playbook September 2024



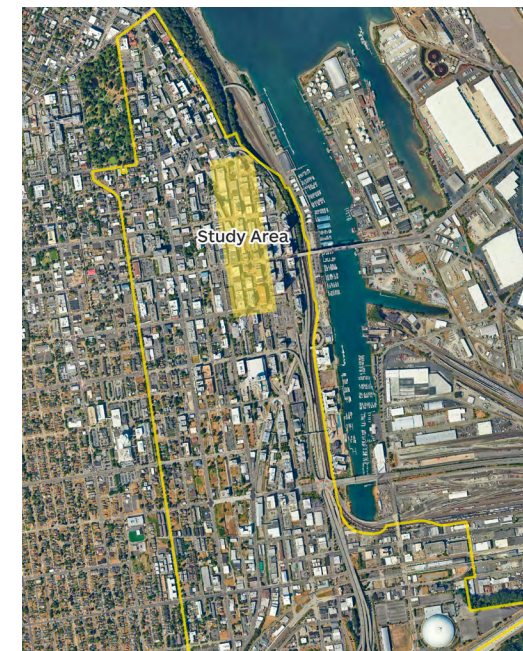
Study area: Broadway 7th to 13th Streets

The Action Plan focuses on the **Broadway corridor between 7th and 13th streets**. It connects the University of Washington (UW) Tacoma to the south and a bar and restaurant district to the north, offering substantial potential to become a thriving and lively urban center. The area has been selected based on its unique assets, existing activity, and opportunities for further development:

- **Schools:** Three schools bring students into the area daily.
- **Emerging food scene:** A growing restaurant presence and the seasonal Farmer's Market make the area a natural gathering point.
- **Public spaces:** The Theater Square, three hill climbs, and an unused fountain offer opportunities for activation and programming.
- **Accessibility:** Broadway is Tacoma's most pedestrian-friendly street, connected with transit options like the Link light rail.

The mix of activity, amenities, and spatial potential makes the Broadway corridor ideal for testing and implementing initiatives. While the focus is rooted here, initiatives are not limited to this area. The solutions and successes achieved here are designed to be scalable, creating ripple effects that can inspire a broader impact across a wider area.

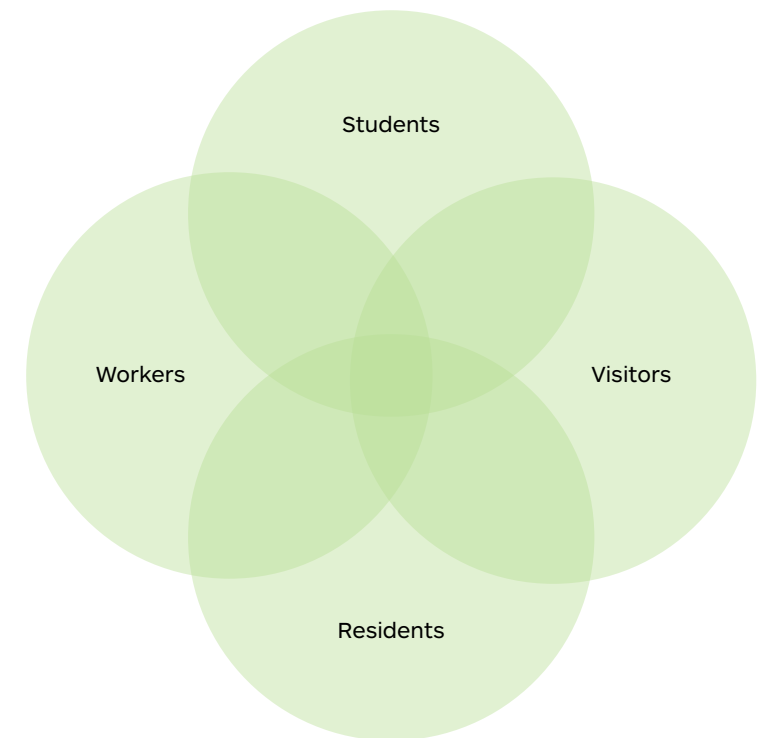
Map of the downtown study area



Insights: User Journeys & Needs

Understanding how different groups interact with downtown Tacoma is critical for shaping initiatives that address user priorities while fostering vibrant, people-centered spaces. Through workshops, stakeholder roundtables, and an online survey, five key user groups' user journeys and needs were analyzed: high school students (SOTA), university students (UW Tacoma), workers, residents, and visitors. This analysis highlights patterns in user behavior, identifies unmet needs, and uncovers opportunities to create a more inviting and active downtown. The following section summarizes the information gathered from these stakeholder groups. Detailed summaries of the workshops, roundtables, and survey results can be found in **Appendices 3–5**.

Key downtown user groups



High school students

Currently, 650–850 high school students use the Broadway school complex daily, with projections estimating 1,000–1,200 students in future years (Phillip Schmitt, TPS). Most students rely on public transportation, such as city buses or the Link light rail, or walk be-

tween school buildings and nearby destinations. Driving is uncommon due to high parking costs, limited availability, and the ease of public transit. Students with extracurricular activities may remain downtown until late afternoon after the 3:30 PM school day ends.

During the midday lunch break (11:20 AM–12:10 PM), students use affordable nearby spots such as Mom's Bistro, Abella's, or Freighthouse Square, but the majority bring a packed lunch. The seasonal Farmer's Market is popular but operates only once weekly for part of the year. After school, students participate in clubs and rehearsals or leave downtown. Recreational visits to Wright Park, the Glass Museum waterfront, or Antique Row are common, though students avoid areas perceived as unsafe, particularly South Pacific Avenue and the Dome District.

Highlighted needs:

- Affordable food options close to school, including lunch offerings and places open after 3:00 PM.
- Spaces to gather, study, and socialize outside of school buildings.
- Safe, accessible routes between key locations like school buildings and destinations.
- Better lighting and revitalization of areas perceived as unsafe.
- Regular cultural events like music festivals and markets.
- Accessible spaces for student performances, exhibitions, and creative expression.

University Students (UW Tacoma)

Nearly 5,000 students attend the University of Washington Tacoma (**UW Tacoma** 📍), with enrollment expected to double in the next decade (City of Tacoma). The students are predominantly commuters by car, arriving early for classes (around 7:30 AM) and leaving by 3:30 PM to avoid peak traffic. This time-constrained routine limits their interaction with downtown beyond campus-centric activities.

Students often prioritize quick, affordable meals during the midday break (12:30–1:30 PM). While downtown options exist, students prefer driving to nearby areas to go to Chipotle outside of Tacoma's center, citing familiarity, cost, and speed as primary considerations. Campus clubs—focusing on cultural, recreational, and social activities—are a significant aspect of student life. However, the lack of flexible and affordable off-campus spaces limits integration between university activities and downtown.

Highlighted needs:

- Affordable, quick food options near campus.

- Accessible spaces for social activities and student clubs outside of the university.
- Convenient amenities within a short walking distance of campus to support tight schedules.

Workers

Workers in downtown Tacoma typically arrive around 9:00 AM. Many use coffee shops for informal meetings or quick stops before work, especially if they lack dedicated office space. However, lunch routines are constrained by limited variety, inconsistent hours, and closures, prompting workers to bring food from home or leave downtown for areas like Proctor.

The shift to remote and hybrid work since COVID-19 has further reduced the presence of workers downtown, with many only visiting occasionally for specific meetings or activities. After work, workers often leave downtown quickly, citing safety concerns and limited dining or entertainment options as barriers to staying longer. Access to basic amenities like public restrooms or clear wayfinding further affects their experience.

Highlighted needs:

- Affordable, quick lunch options within walking distance.
- Improved wayfinding to locate amenities such as restrooms and key services.
- Extended dining and entertainment options to encourage wafter-work engagement.
- A stronger sense of safety, particularly during the evenings.

Residents

Downtown Tacoma is home to 10,464 residents (**2023 ACS 5-year estimates, U.S. Census Bureau** 📍). The population is expected to double within three years, driven by the development of **over 4,000 new housing units** 📍. Residents in downtown Tacoma reflect a diverse mix, including remote workers, military personnel, low-income residents, and professionals commuting to nearby cities. Hybrid and remote workers use coffee shops, gyms, and coworking spaces to break up their routines. However, limited access to essential services, such as grocery stores and pharmacies, often forces residents to leave downtown for neighboring districts like Proctor.


While residents value Tacoma's sense of community and access to cultural offerings, public spaces lack amenities for informal gatherings, such as covered seating or green areas. These gaps impact

the quality of life and limit opportunities for residents to interact and engage with their surroundings.

Highlighted needs:

- Grocery stores and affordable food options to meet daily needs.
- Accessible, comfortable public spaces for gathering and informal activities.
- Retail options like pharmacies for essential errands.

Visitors

Post-pandemic, downtown Tacoma attracts approximately 440,000 visitors annually from over 50 miles away, contributing to 730,000 visitor days per year (Matt Wakefield, Visit Pierce County/**Visit Tacoma-Pierce County 2022 Tourism Impact Report** ).

Visitors include attendees of major events, such as Tacoma Dome shows, local theater performances, and conventions. These events generate significant crowds but create a “boom-and-bust” cycle, with activity peaking on event days and sharply declining afterward. Visitors often seek convenient food, parking, and entertainment options before and after events. Still, limited dining choices—particularly quick and affordable options – frequently drive them to other parts of the city.

Highlighted needs:

- Quick, affordable food options before and after events.
- Improved wayfinding for easy navigation and locating amenities.
- Safe, well-lit walking routes between key destinations.



Analysis SWOT

In addition to understanding the perspectives of specific user groups, it is crucial to consider Tacoma's broader history, character, and context when shaping the proposed initiatives. Below, a SWOT analysis clarifies the key *Strengths*, *Weaknesses*, *Opportunities*, and *Threats* that emerged from the collaborative activities mentioned earlier. While the analysis reflects conditions across the entire downtown area, the identified factors are equally relevant and applicable to the specific study area of the Broadway corridor, ensuring alignment between the broader downtown context and localized activation efforts. This analysis highlights critical factors in each category that underpin the design and implementation of the initiatives.

Strengths: Tacoma's assets

Tacoma's existing strengths provide a strong foundation for creating a vibrant downtown. By building on the city's unique character, history, and creativity, Tacoma can foster spaces and experiences that celebrate its identity and attract people downtown.

A rich history and strong identity

Today, Tacoma is deeply rooted in its history as a transportation hub and industrial center. Founded in 1872, the city grew rapidly due to its location along Puget Sound and its role as a gateway to the Pacific Northwest. This legacy, coupled with a diverse identity and strong community pride, gives Tacoma its distinct and welcoming atmosphere, often described as a "je ne sais quoi" quality that sets it apart from other cities. The city also benefits from easy access to city staff, creating a collaborative environment where residents and businesses can engage smoothly. This rich history underscores the importance of incorporating Tacoma's unique identity and community pride into initiatives, ensuring they reflect the city's character while fostering its future growth.

Great architectural potential

Downtown Tacoma boasts an architecturally rich fabric that offers untapped opportunities for revitalization. While many sections remain overlooked by the broader population, its historic buildings, streetscapes, urban qualities, and connection to natural scenery create significant potential. These assets make the downtown core a strong candidate for becoming a sought-after destination where people can gather, explore, and enjoy a unique urban experience.

An entrepreneurial and community-driven city

Tacoma is characterized by its local, independent businesses, which form the backbone of the downtown economy. Unlike cities dominated by national chains, Tacoma's businesses including grassroots

success stories like Ebony & Ivory Coffee and contemporary concepts like Jin Jin Matcha, contribute to its creative, entrepreneurial energy and a strong sense of community. To sustain and expand this dynamic, it is crucial to support initiatives that empower local entrepreneurs, ensuring they remain integral to shaping Tacoma's identity and driving its future growth.

Points of pride and existing strengths

Tacoma's cultural and recreational assets further reinforce its appeal. Schools like the Tacoma School of the Arts (SOTA) fuel its glass-blowing traditions, skate culture, and creative energy. Community events such as the Farmer's Market, annual block parties, and venues like the Pantages Theatre serve as gathering points that strengthen social bonds. Proximity to Mount Rainier, Puget Sound, and a scenic waterfront offer unmatched opportunities for recreation. The city's affordable housing and collaborative spirit continue to attract people seeking a better quality of life.

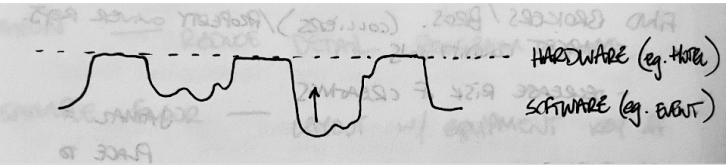
Tacoma's strength lies in its ability to dream big while staying true to its roots. Tacoma is poised to leverage its assets, capitalize on its potential, and reimagine downtown as a vibrant, inclusive center of gravity that draws people together and inspires pride.

Weaknesses: Urban Fragmentation

Disengaged user groups

The user journey insights reveal that downtown Tacoma currently operates as a fragmented space with limited overlap between user groups. Many residents, workers, and students only visit downtown for specific tasks or immediate needs, and for large parts of the population, the area remains outside their daily routines. This disconnect is driven by shifts in working patterns since COVID-19, the commuter lifestyles of university students, and the absence of spaces or activities that encourage people to linger or engage.

Accommodating boom-and-bust cycles



Boom-and-bust cycles

A recurring challenge is Tacoma's boom-and-bust activity cycle, particularly visible during Tacoma Dome events. While these large events bring crowds downtown, the activity is concentrated and

does not spill over into the rest of the week. This inconsistency highlights the need for sustained, everyday vibrancy through accessible dining, gathering spaces, and ongoing programming.

Cultural trends

Urban fragmentation is a reflection of cultural and social trends. Economic pressures, segmented routines, and changes in social habits exacerbated by specialized interests in digital-based cultures have led to an increase in societal isolation. As a result, organic interactions and shared experiences that strengthen community bonds are becoming rarer.

To overcome these challenges, Tacoma could benefit from bridging the gaps between user groups by promoting sustained activity, fostering shared spaces, and addressing fundamental needs such as food, safety, and connectivity. By ensuring these activities are inclusive and welcoming, downtown can transform into a resilient and vibrant space for the entire community.

Opportunities: Target demographics for activation

Youth as a driving force

Youth, particularly high school students, are among the most frequent users of public spaces, making them a critical demographic for downtown activation. Parks, squares, and informal gathering spots are central to their social, physical, and creative development, offering opportunities for peer interaction and self-expression. By responding to youth needs, Tacoma can harness their energy and density to enliven public spaces. Attracting youth also naturally draws their families, thereby engaging a broader demographic.

Creative student contributions

Students from SOTA offer a unique opportunity to infuse creativity into downtown. Their involvement in arts, music, and cultural activities can drive dynamic programming through performances, exhibitions, and interactive projects. Partnering with schools and applied learning programs enables students to contribute as designers, artists, and participants, fostering a sense of ownership and connection to downtown.

University students, despite their commuter lifestyle, also represent an untapped opportunity for activation. University clubs—currently the heart of social life on campus—can extend their activities into downtown with the right infrastructure and programming. Accessible, flexible spaces for clubs and events can help bridge the gap between campus and city life, encouraging students to spend more time in downtown Tacoma.

By prioritizing these young demographics, Tacoma can tap into their creativity, energy, and presence to drive downtown vibrancy and attract a broader range of users.

Threats: Barriers to vibrancy

Public safety concerns

Perceptions of safety, especially during evenings and in specific areas within the study area, such as the North Park Plaza parking garage and underutilized hill climbs, remain a significant barrier to downtown activation. Insufficient lighting and concerns about crime deter people from lingering downtown or visiting regularly. Addressing these concerns requires interventions, including improved infrastructure, better lighting, and community engagement to create an environment where all user groups feel secure and welcome. Increasing foot traffic through vibrant activities and well-maintained spaces can enhance natural surveillance and deter criminal behavior. These strategies are detailed in the initiatives presented in **Part 2** ➔.

Organizational silos

Fragmentation within public administrations can hinder coordination and alignment across departments and stakeholders, resulting in delays, redundancies, and missed opportunities. Breaking down silos is essential to ensure that resources are used efficiently and projects move forward cohesively. Clear communication channels, cross-departmental collaboration, and strong leadership will be critical to overcoming this challenge and maximizing the impact of proposed initiatives. The recommended initiatives in **Part 2** ➔ will require and support such cross-organizational collaboration.

Bureaucratic hurdles

Complex and inflexible regulations, particularly those related to zoning, building codes, and permitting, can slow or block innovative uses of downtown spaces. These hurdles discourage creative projects and temporary activations, often essential for testing new ideas and building momentum. Collaboration among property owners, streamlined approval processes, and adaptive regulatory frameworks are vital for encouraging innovation and facilitating the transformation of underutilized spaces.

Climate change

The growing impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and shifting environmental conditions, threaten downtown Tacoma's long-term sustainability, including the study area. These risks could damage infrastructure, disrupt daily

activity, and strain city resources needed for resilience planning. Integrating climate adaptation measures, such as sustainable infrastructure and green building practices, into downtown development will be critical to ensuring the area remains viable and attractive for future generations.

Conclusion

Overlapping needs

The user journey insights and SWOT analysis highlight common priorities across user groups and underscore opportunities for Tacoma to create a more connected, vibrant downtown. Key overlapping needs include:

- **Affordable, accessible food options** for all user groups, ensuring quick, convenient, and appealing dining choices.
- **Safe, well-lit connectivity** through improved lighting, walkable routes, and wayfinding.
- **Spaces for gathering and socializing** that enable informal interactions, events, and opportunities to linger.

With targeted interventions, the Broadway area can transform into a dynamic and inclusive hub that meets the needs of its community while building pride and long-term engagement.

The following **Part 2: Recommendations** ➔ expands on these shared priorities, introducing actionable initiatives that directly address the identified needs and translate the vision for downtown Tacoma into tangible, impactful strategies.

