

## What's up with downtown Norfolk? Downtown Norfolk teams with consultant to make a strategic plan

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Nearly 100 downtown Norfolk residents, business owners and stakeholders teamed up last week during a Downtown Norfolk Council open house session to help prioritize future downtown improvements. Their ideas and feedback will help the council create a strategic plan, to be revealed this summer.

The plan will be neatly packaged and ready to present to potential investors, said Mary Miller, president and CEO of the Downtown Norfolk Council.

The council has teamed with Progressive Urban Management Associates to create the strategic plan. PUMA, a Denver-based firm specializes in advancing downtown community development by helping with management, marketing, financial and implementation tactics.

The open house sessions took place on the 21st floor of 150 W. Main St., overlooking a striking view of Norfolk's waterfront - an area that many downtowners believe has enormous potential.

At the sessions, M. Bradley Segal, president of PUMA, presented a report highlighting trends impacting America's cities.

"Never in our lifetimes have converging trends favored downtowns like they do today," Segal said.

According to Segal, the United States has a worker shortage looming due to skill gaps, which causes cities to compete for talent.

As countless Hampton Roads leaders have pointed out, the region faces an outward migration of young talent.

Currently, 36 percent of the workforce is made up of millennials. By 2020, that number will have grown to 50 percent, making millennials an important demographic.

Additionally, Segal said, the majority of bachelor's and master's degrees are being earned by females.

"Norfolk needs to look at ways it can get women into positions of power," he said.

Lifestyle trends are changing, and since the recession, impulse spending has been replaced by more deliberate spending. Millennials are ditching their cars in favor of alternative transportation methods such as walking, biking, ride-sharing and public transit.

Segal said downtown Norfolk has a walkability score of about 85, compared to the city of Norfolk's walkability score of 44.

This will make it easier to implement the global trend of "living streets," which emphasize age-friendly, walkable and bikeable streets.

The Downtown Norfolk Council announced several initiatives to help the city become more bikeable. Downtown continues to install bike racks and recently added a Bike Maintenance Fixit Station adjacent to the light-rail stop at MacArthur Center.



Shared-lane markings have been added to downtown streets to make it easier and safer for cyclists and motorists to share lane

In his presentation, Segal also mentioned the much talked about subject of regionalism.

"Washington is broke," he said.

As the national debt continues to rise and the federal government becomes less reliable, regions must bond together and invest themselves, he said.

Norfolk also should be ready for social equality as diversity continues to emerge as a top trend, Segal said.

He listed ideas to help Norfolk based on these global trends:

- As the U.S. continues to grow in population and become more competitive, Norfolk should foster entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Norfolk also must capture a young workforce and embrace talent, diversity and women.
- Housing with diverse price points will attract a diverse population, as well as lower-income young talent.
- Age-friendly, universally designed, walkable and bikeable streets will increase interest in downtown, he said.
- Norfolk also should embrace the health movement, which is beginning to be embraced by all generations, especially millennials.
- Although cities often compete for tax revenue, Segal said the region must come together and advocate for regional investment and join forces on regional projects.
- Lastly, he said, keep it fun, entertaining and interesting.

The Downtown Norfolk Council has received feedback on about 500 surveys and aims to have feedback on 1,000 by April.

Common themes throughout the survey include the need to activate the waterfront, make downtown more walkable and bikeable, create more vibrant and local dining and retail options.

Both the survey and the open house suggested a year-round farmers market with more selection, more dog parks, better access to grocery stores and more affordable rent.

The Downtown Norfolk Council and PUMA will use the information from the survey and the open house sessions in their strategic planning process.

To fill out a survey, visit [www.surveymonkey.com/s/downtownnorfolk](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/downtownnorfolk).

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