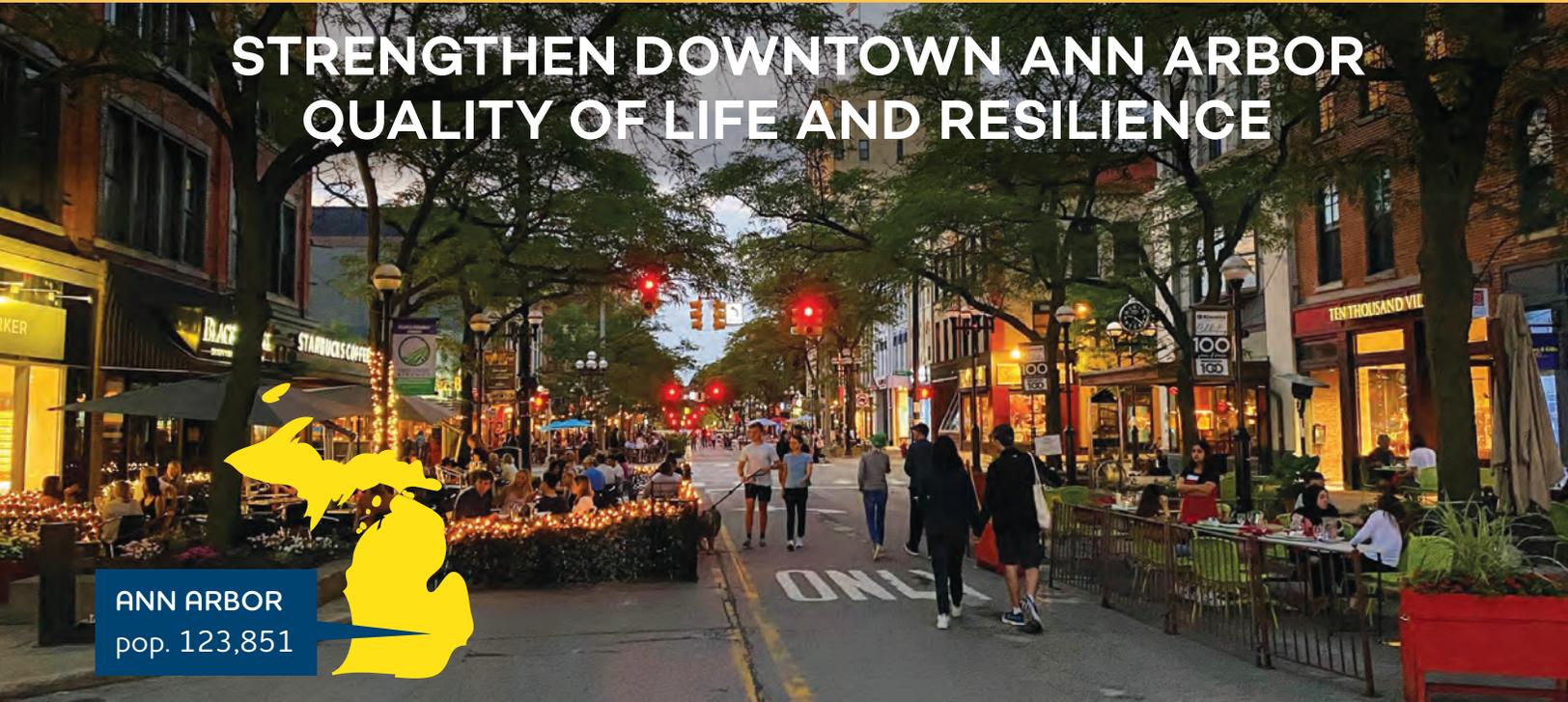


# PEOPLE-FRIENDLY STREETS INITIATIVES

STRENGTHEN DOWNTOWN ANN ARBOR  
QUALITY OF LIFE AND RESILIENCE



ANN ARBOR  
pop. 123,851

By Amber Miller, Chris Wall, and Bob Doyle

**D**owntowns are the heart of communities, ideally shaped by the values of the people who live there. Ann Arbor's vibrant, active downtown has helped the city earn national best place to live recognition year after year. Despite its strengths, the city's urban core was not immune to COVID-19 impacts. Reflecting on input from engaged stakeholders and lessons learned during the pandemic, the Ann Arbor Downtown Development Authority (DDA) has implemented a variety of People-Friendly Streets initiatives to promote urban health and vitality and build resilience against future unexpected events. From pilot projects to constructed improvements, downtown streets and spaces have been reclaimed for greater public use in ways that are scalable for communities of all sizes.

## Recovery Approach Puts People First

As downtown offices, parking facilities, and the University of Michigan campus emptied, and indoor dining and shopping were prohibited, a new paradigm began. Ann Arbor took the opportunity to reimagine how downtown streets that prioritized vehicle movement and parking could be repurposed to promote more equitable use among people while working toward long-term community goals. In response to safe social distancing needs, it was clear that more space was needed for walking, biking, shopping, and dining. The DDA's People-Friendly Streets concept—to increase safe and comfortable access for people of all ages and abilities using all modes of transportation—became integral to the city's pandemic response and recovery approach.

**The duration and extent of COVID-19 pandemic impacts were a wakeup call for organizations responsible for the health and vitality of urban cores.**

**Gold-Level Bicycle Friendly  
Community Award**  
The League of  
American Bicyclists



**Infrastructure Award**  
League of  
Michigan Bicyclists



Downtown Ann Arbor  
June-August, 2023



Extensive community outreach, engagement, and education activities were held to verify that projects that prioritize people aligned with the community's desires and expectations for street use. Projects were shaped by the adopted values of the DDA's People-Friendly Streets program: safe, comfortable downtown streets; affordable and inclusive community; vibrant and thriving local economy; connected community with streets as civic space; equitable, just access for all people; resilient, energy responsible downtown; and responsible design and implementation.

Using a multi-phased approach to improvements, the DDA introduced design concepts and temporary changes, gathered feedback from the public, evaluated the impacts, and worked with the community to refine a project's final design before it was permanently constructed. Some of the most helpful feedback came from quick-build pilot projects. This approach also amplified opportunities to collaborate with other agencies and departments to maximize the overall value of community investments.

### **Pilot Projects Test Viability of Bikeways**

Under its Healthy Streets Program, the City of Ann Arbor and DDA conducted five 90-day pilot projects to expand physical distancing for walking and biking. Locations were chosen for their ability to address high priority safety and connectivity issues. Traffic lanes were reconfigured to accommodate temporary non-motorized travel lanes, two-way bikeways, and separated bike lanes. The pilot projects were designed and implemented based on national guidance, city policies and plans, and the DDA's adopted values for People-Friendly Streets. Each project incorporated monitoring, review, adjustment, and opportunity for public feedback.



Pilot project findings were used to inform the design of permanent infrastructure projects. The most successful pilots served a higher volume of users; connected key home, work, and commercial destinations; and linked to other lower stress bicycle facilities. Based on the results, three of the pilot projects have since been installed as permanent bikeways. Embraced by the community, the city's bikeway efforts have yielded a gold-level Bicycle Friendly Community award from The League of American Bicyclists and an Infrastructure Award from the League of Michigan Bicyclists.

### **Flexible Streets Maximize Benefits**

As the pandemic evolved, downtown retail and restaurant businesses were desperate to expand physical space to sustain operations. Working with the downtown area associations, the DDA established partnerships and programs that helped businesses set up curbside pickup, extend patio space, and periodically close portions of streets to vehicle traffic. Transforming streets into active community spaces for outdoor walking, dining, and shopping created a more dynamic and accessible downtown landscape for all. Now called A2 Summer Streets, the popular street closure practice remains in summer months with additional features such as live music on Thursday nights, community activities from local businesses and organizations on Friday and Saturday mornings, and a Sunday Brunch with live music.

Envisioning greater mixed-use possibilities for a three-block section of State Street that borders the University of Michigan's central campus, the DDA made improvements to maximize the street's flexibility. Designed as the first curbsless street in the city, the project is intended to improve safety, accessibility, and ease of navigation for all users through the downtown commercial district.

Key stakeholder groups, including local organizations that advocate for people with disabilities, were engaged to help shape the design. Highlights include more versatility to support events with street closures such as Art Fair, more space for business activities and curbside zones, traffic calming measures, and a bikeway link.

The project was coordinated with critical city infrastructure upgrades including water main replacement, street resurfacing, and stormwater improvements.

### Infrastructure Upgrades Build Resilience

Anticipating the continued escalation of climate-related events, the DDA integrated a stormwater system into their approach to strengthen downtown resilience and maximize community investment. When a big storm hits, the high amount of impervious area preventing stormwater absorption can cause disruptive conditions like flooding. Challenges are compounded by the Allen Creek Watershed that flows underground through the downtown area and the limited capacity of the original storm sewers installed in one of the oldest and most congested parts of the city.

To reduce the volume of water that enters the storm sewer and improve water quality, the DDA integrated green infrastructure practices, like infiltration systems, bioswales, vegetated areas, and tree wells, into street improvement projects. Designed to comply with the city's Green Streets Policy—where all road reconstruction requires the collection, storage, and infiltration of a certain amount of stormwater—perforated stormwater trenches were designed to maximize water collection and infiltration into underlying soils. Each trench was specifically designed to accommodate varying elevations, utility conflicts, historic building vaults, stone foundations, and other unique characteristics. These practices convey stormwater more naturally to the underground water table and aquifers, freeing up capacity in the storm sewers and reducing pressure on downtown areas that are prone to flooding.



### Lasting Impacts

The duration and extent of COVID-19 pandemic impacts were a wakeup call for organizations responsible for the health and vitality of urban cores. The Ann Arbor DDA's takeaway is the need for a clear strategy to build downtown resilience to

withstand unexpected events and ensure equity and access for all in the process. Guided by the premise that streets are for all people, not just vehicles, People-Friendly Streets initiatives were integral to the city's pandemic response. Spacious bikeways, street closures, and expanded outdoor seating that helped people feel comfortable returning to downtown are now part of Ann Arbor's unique character and quality of life. 

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