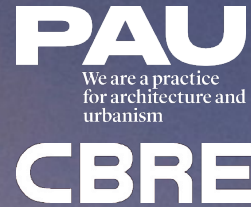


# Downtown Niagara Falls Development Strategy

## Executive Summary - June 2021



**USA Niagara  
Development  
Corporation**



**FORSYTH STREET**  
**TROPHY POINT**  
**HIGHLAND PLANNING**



## Introduction

The land market in downtown Niagara Falls has historically languished because of a conundrum: while the City's economy was stagnant as it restructured away from its heavy industrial history, parcels near Niagara Falls State Park continued to have high valuation given their proximity to the globally-recognized tourist destination. Thus, many local and out-of-town investors often practiced land speculation—the holding of land long-term in hopes of future appreciation in value. Additionally bolstered by the 2011 establishment of casino gaming on Seneca Nation lands in downtown, this practice led to owners holding parcels for years without building anything new or updating existing structures. This resulted in the several key properties in downtown Niagara Falls remaining largely vacant, partially vacant, or underutilized for as long as 30 years. These properties—many dating to the city's ill-fated urban renewal program in the 1970s and 80s—continue to serve as deterrents to significant investments in Niagara Falls State Park and downtown Niagara Falls.

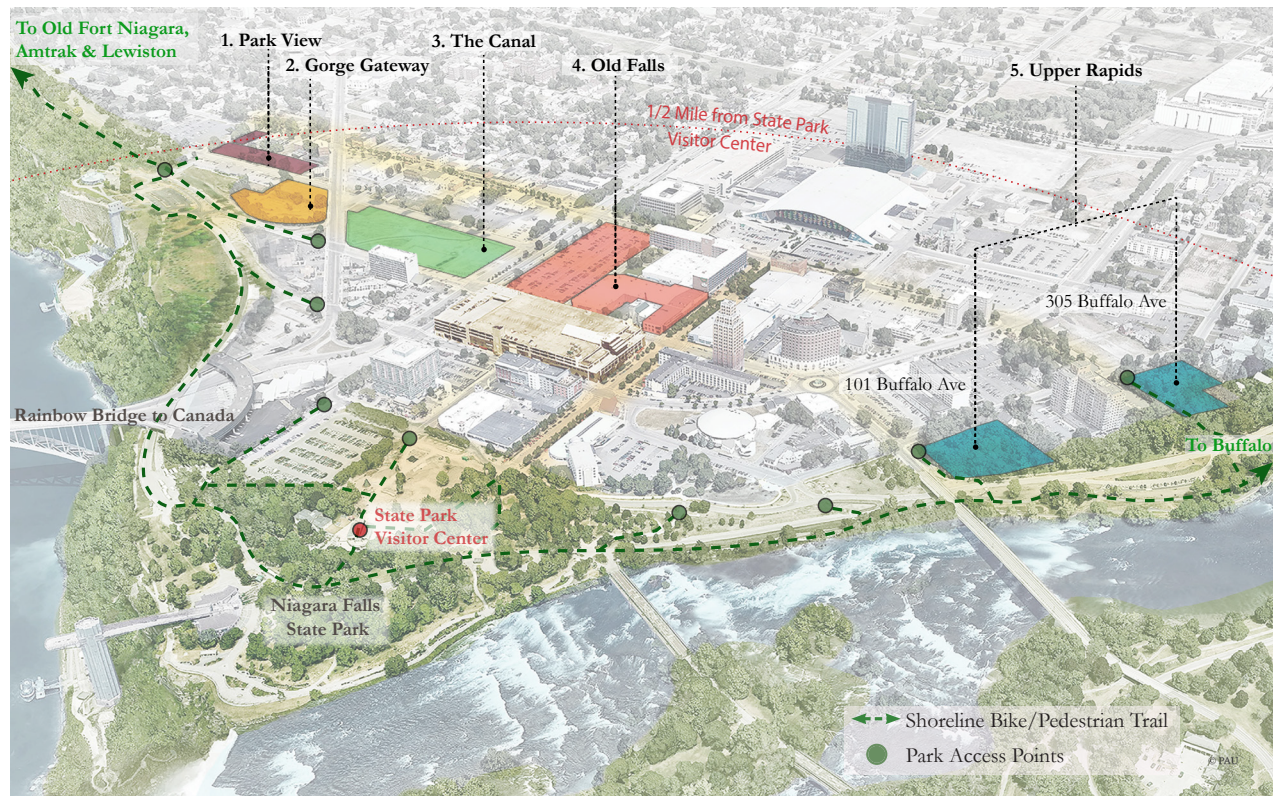
In 2018 USA Niagara Development Corporation (USA Niagara)—with funding from the Buffalo Billion initiative—began purchasing vacant parcels across downtown. In total, USA Niagara acquired 7 buildings and over 8 acres of vacant land through its Strategic Land Acquisition Program.

With these key parcels now acquired, USA Niagara has begun to focus its attention on strategies to activate these properties and bring new mixed-use developments that will enhance the tourism industry, evolve a downtown neighborhood, diversify the economy and benefit those who live and work in Niagara Falls.

The first step in this process was the formulation of a formal strategy to ensure new development is done in a thoughtful manner that responds to the character of downtown. The resulting “Downtown Niagara Falls Development Strategy” illustrates a range of interim interventions and attainable development guidelines to re-imagine a vibrant downtown in the near-term while building momentum and continuing to promote sustainable dynamic growth and development over time.

The process to develop the strategy began with an analysis of both historic and contemporary conditions, followed by a study of the local needs of the city and its citizens. The strategy links the history, community and culture that are embedded in downtown Niagara Falls, ensuring a clear connection to and relationship with the City.

USA Niagara-Owned Development Sites



## Building on Two Decades of Investment in Niagara Falls

USA Niagara Development Corporation (USA Niagara), a subsidiary of Empire State Development, supports and promotes economic development initiatives in Niagara Falls by leveraging private investment and encouraging growth and renewal of the tourism industry in the City of Niagara Falls. USA Niagara supports a variety of projects that are creating jobs, encouraging business investment, improving regional infrastructure and promoting tourism activity. Through direct investment, incentive programs and planning support, USA Niagara has been involved in \$444 Million worth of projects in downtown and Niagara Falls. Some notable achievements are shown below.



In 2004 the state-of-the-art Conference Center Niagara Falls opened in the heart of downtown on Old Falls Street.



The Niagara Community College Culinary Institute opened in 2012 in the former Rainbow Centre Mall.



In 2016 the "Riverway" project removed one mile of highway east of downtown opening up new access to the Upper Niagara River.



Old Falls Street opened in 2009 bringing new activity to downtown with a new streetscape, events and other amenities.



Since 2015, USA Niagara has participated in 7 hotel projects creating approximately 600 new hotel rooms and renovated 357 existing rooms in downtown.



In 2020, two additional miles of highway were removed north of downtown adding new pathways and parkland while opening up new access to Niagara River Gorge.

## What is a “Development Strategy?”

### The Development Strategy is:

- Informed by a study of the local, regional and national market.
- A series of conceptual temporary interventions, public realm and transportation improvements, and development strategies for USA Niagara and City-owned sites.
- A holistic study that aims to link the project sites and downtown together.
- An assessment on preliminary cost estimates for the interventions, improvements and strategies.
- A phased effort. Recommendations for sequencing are included as part of the strategy.

### The Development Strategy is not:

- A building plan spelling out actual uses on USA Niagara and City-owned sites. Rather, the strategy seeks to inspire possible aspects of future development and will be used as a guide for considering private proposals and infrastructure projects.
- A call for a proposal that only includes components included in the strategy. Other opportunities may be viable given they comply with the City’s Comprehensive Plan policies and zoning requirements.
- A fully-designed plan. USA Niagara will work with other public agencies and private sector partners to progressively design and implement aspects of the strategy.

# The Strategy

## Make History Legible



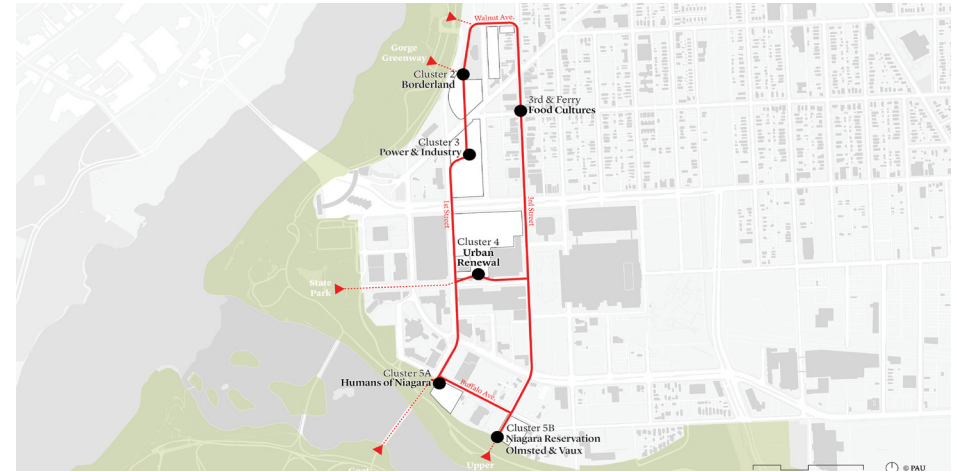
Niagara Falls has been an important location in almost every era of American History, a fact that while well known locally is decidedly absent from the understanding that most tourists take away from their visits. Uncovering this hidden past should be the foundation of new developments.

## Build Critical Mass Through New Activity



Current market conditions may not support ground-up development on all publicly-owned parcels at once. That does not mean the sites should sit vacant in the short-term. Interim uses will help to activate vacant land and bring foot traffic to long-dormant areas of the city.

## Connect Sites with Each Other and The State Park



The City of Niagara Falls' topography makes it extremely walkable; it is relatively flat and surrounded by a ribbon of world-class parkland. Creating a defined path through downtown will complete a full circuit that connects the State Park's natural sites with downtown's urban amenities.

## Infill with Mixed-Use Developments



The end goal is to return all sites back to productive use, but this must be done in a way that supports downtown's long-term viability. Infill developments will not rely solely on tourism-related uses. Mixed-use buildings will integrate hotel, residential, retail, restaurants and office uses.

## Make History Legible

The key to this strategy is making downtown Niagara Falls a place that is forward-looking while remaining deeply rooted in its storied past. By illuminating the history of this city for both visitors and locals, this strategy hopes to inspire today's luminaries to pick the Power City of the Niagara Frontier as the place where they write the future of Western New York. Several important themes will be used to tell the story of Niagara Falls.

### 1. Haudenosaunee Mythology



The history of downtown Niagara Falls, not surprisingly, revolves around the Falls themselves. For centuries before European colonization, the Falls held a central place in Haudenosaunee society, both strategically in limiting the navigability between the great lakes thereby defining the importance of the “Western Door” and spiritually as an integral part of their mythology which ties the creation of the falls during the battle between the thunder- being Hé-no and the demon Djodi'kwado'; and the rescue of Princess Lelawal by Hé-no, marking humans gaining knowledge of the divine for the first time.

### 2. European Romanticism



The first European to provide a written account of visiting the falls in person, Father Louis Hennepin, reportedly responded in horror. The cultural norms of that era considered such raw power to be hideous, however, in the thinking of the time, the notions of awe, horror nature, and the sublime were deeply intertwined in ideas about Romanticism. By the 19th century, the Falls were an established symbol of power, awe, and wonder, attracting the preeminent landscape painters of the time. The artists of the Hudson River School, known as the first truly American painting movement, frequented the Falls, some painting it multiple times often on monumentally large canvasses.

### 3. The Impact of Industry



In the same decades as the height of its artistic fame, Niagara Falls underwent rapid industrial development. With the Erie Canal defining the City's previous industry, overland portage between the great lakes, obsolete, speculators financed the construction of a hydraulic canal to divert water from the Niagara River above the Falls and harness its power, providing the infrastructure for what would become the Mill District.

## Make History Legible

### 4. Preservation & Niagara Reservation



In the second half of the 19th century, tension began to build between industrial and private tourism development near the Falls and a growing group of influential people who were captivated by the Falls as it had been portrayed in the romantic paintings. Famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted spearheaded the preservation effort and designed a park around them in collaboration with Calvert Vaux.

### 5. Technology & Commerce as Spectacle



Tourism in the Niagara region was not limited to the naturalistic mode of romanticism, it followed the progressive romantic ideas around human taming of the wild as well. The triumphs of engineering, from the electrification of the 1901 Expo to Tesla's genius at the Adams Power House to things as mundane as the production of shredded wheat drew scores of tourists in their own right.

### 6. The Underground Railroad & The Niagara Movement



The engineering triumphs that produced the multiplying crossings that traversed the Niagara gorge made Niagara Falls the perfect, and therefore busiest, terminal of the Underground Railroad. Free persons could find employment in local hotels serving Southern tourists who were accustomed to black servers—less common in other parts of the “free” north while using their earnings and position to help escaped slaves flee to freedom in Canada.

The Falls captivated the imagination of the Niagara Movement and its founder W.E.B. Dubois, putting the awesome romantic power of the Falls in full force behind their quest for full equality. A radical position at the time, given that other prominent civil rights leaders like Booker T. Washington were decidedly not calling for an end to Jim Crow, the Falls gave the Niagara movement a potent metaphor for the moral force and inevitability of their platform. While the Niagara Movement was short-lived, its members would go on to found the NAACP, marking the beginning of the modern civil rights movement.

### 7. De-industrialization & Legacy of Urban Renewal



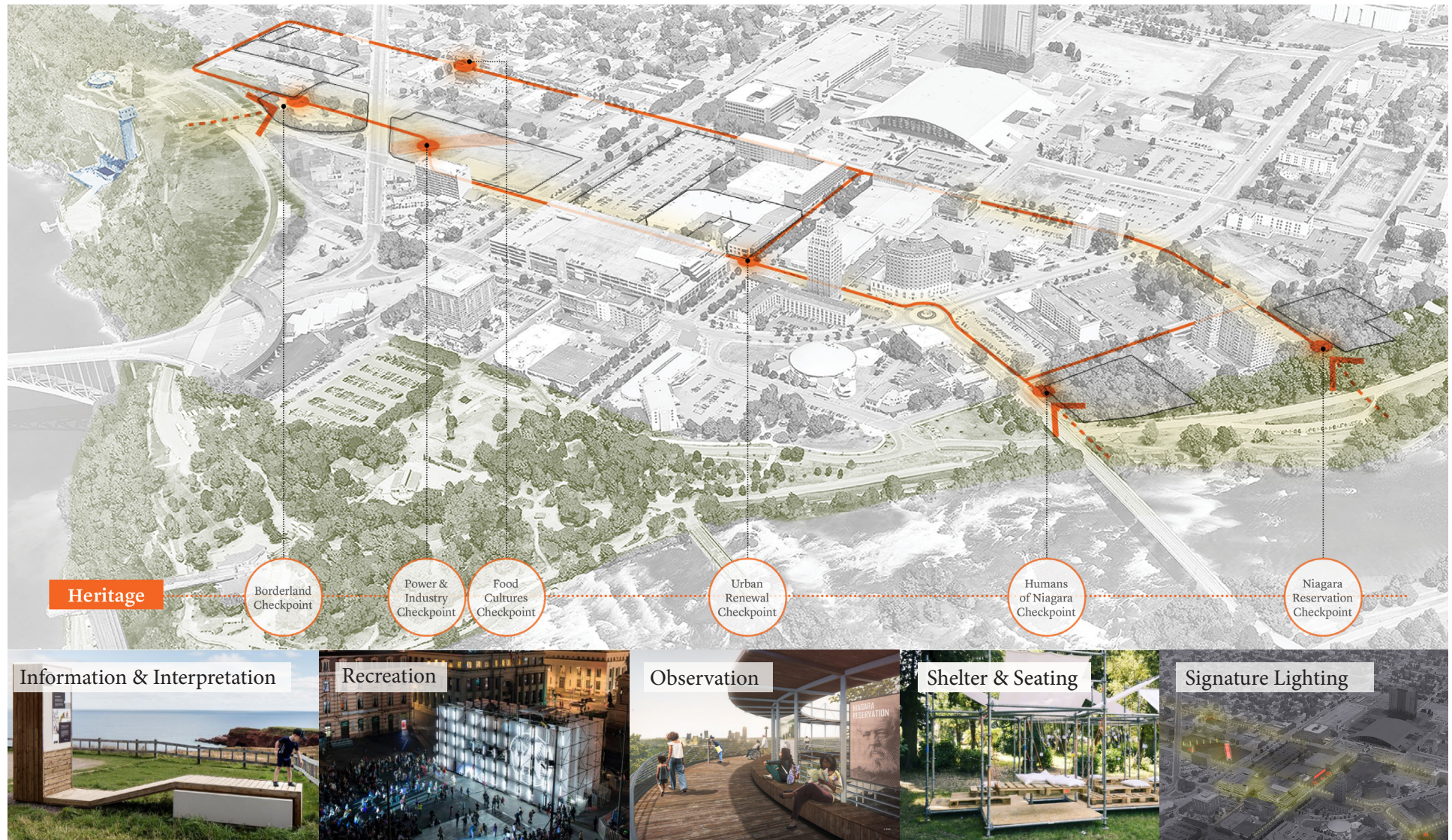
The collapse of the Schoellkopf Power Station in 1956—the impetus for Robert Moses's work to the north—brought about the end of industry in downtown Niagara Falls proper. The businesses in the Mill District had already been slowly closing their doors for at least two decades as transmission technology removed the necessity of industry to locate directly next to power generation. The collapse of the Power Station was the last nail in the coffin, prompting the closure of the hydraulic canal and the erasure of much of the physical evidence of Niagara Falls' industrial heritage.

Following the combination of de-industrialization and the siphoning of tourist traffic by the Robert Moses Parkway, large swaths of downtown Niagara Falls were designated as blighted and demolished with Federal Urban Renewal funds through the Rainbow Center Project No. 1 Urban Renewal Plan of 1967 and the East Falls Street Redevelopment Area Urban Renewal Plan of 1972. The plans called for the rebuilding of a brand new, auto-centric downtown, though ultimately only a few new structures including the Rainbow Centre Mall and the Convention Center and Civic Center were built.

## Connect Sites with Each Other and The State Park

The strategy calls for a new Heritage Path that will enable visitors to learn about the history of Niagara Falls while helping them navigate downtown. The proposed route connects a network of checkpoints throughout downtown, explaining the city's varied and dynamic history. The topics and events included in this path follow the historic events highlighted in the 2013 Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Interpretive Plan.

### Proposed Heritage Path, Checkpoints & Recommended Design Elements



## Build to Critical Mass Through New Activity

Achieving a bustling downtown district that serves the needs of residents and visitors alike will not happen over night. This strategy recommends efforts that will induce organic growth over time, starting with the injection of new activity and public investment on publicly-owned sites. Initial uses on these sites will include interim, flexible improvements that will stimulate new foot traffic but also adapt as the market for infill development evolves.

### Getting to Critical Mass will Require...



#### Multiple people working in concert

- Past efforts have been hampered in part by an **“edifice complex”** – a real estate-led or campus-led strategy that requires sustaining long-term political and financial support among a small handful of public or private actors.
- **Smaller-scale efforts** are not as sensitive in aggregate to market swings, availability of large subsidy, and the ability of a single private actor to navigate policy and economic headwinds.



#### Cultivating “early adopters”

- Helps establish new business activity with “organic” growth in complementary sectors.
- Builds a more resilient business community that can sustain itself over time.
- Early adopters could value proximity to Downtown Niagara Falls strengths and are less sensitive to challenges.



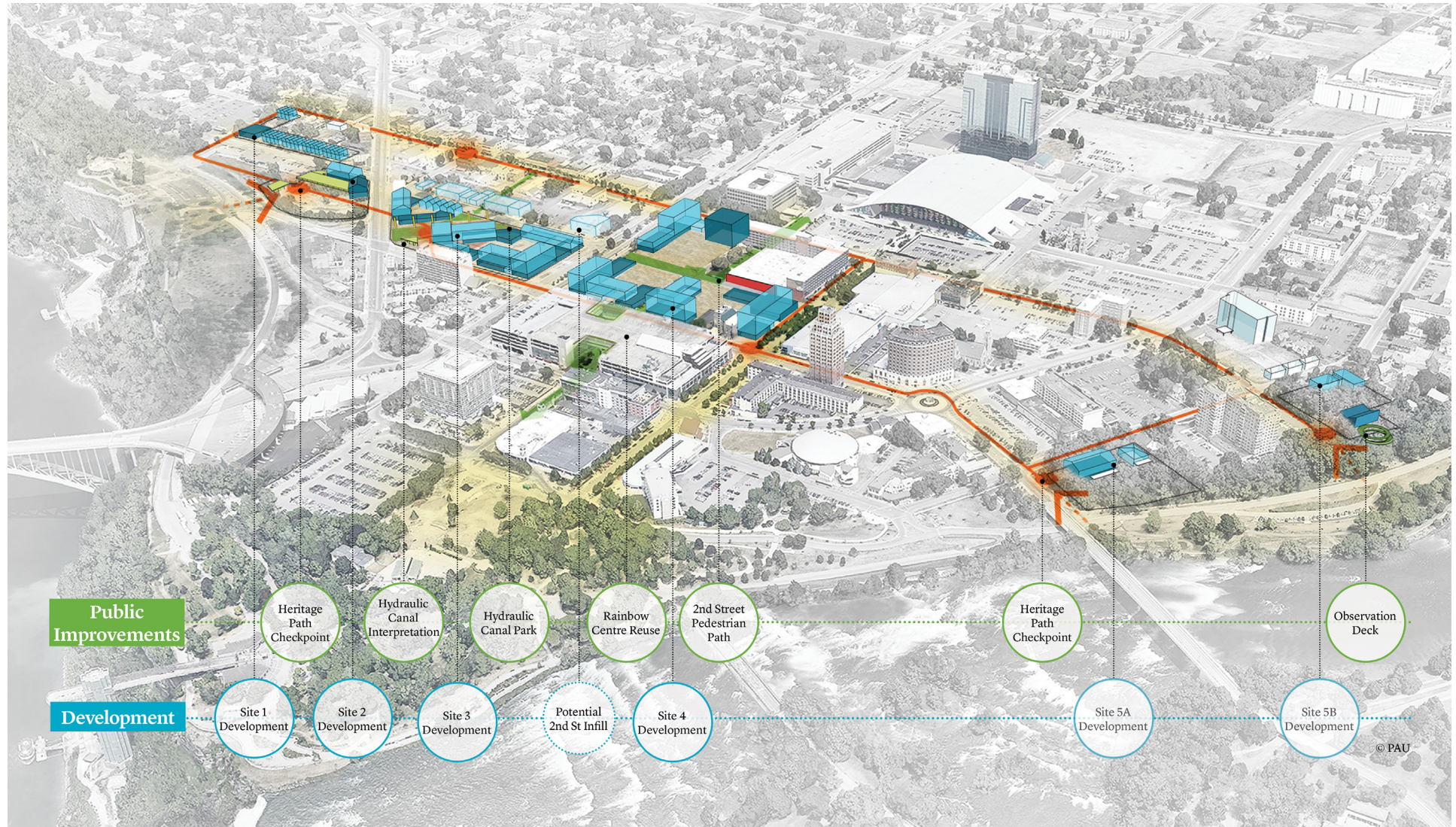
#### Initial emphasis on interim uses

- Allows for **flexibility** in following emerging market trends and ability to experiment without high stakes while mitigating vacancy.
- Avoids real estate appraisal traps for capital intensive uses that end up requiring high amounts of subsidy.
- Helps lift-up successful concepts that can guide the development of more capital intensive projects and can graduate to such projects (e.g. incubating concepts and establishing demand for Rainbow Centre).
- USA Niagara is already implementing some of this through programming.

## Infill with Mixed-Use Developments

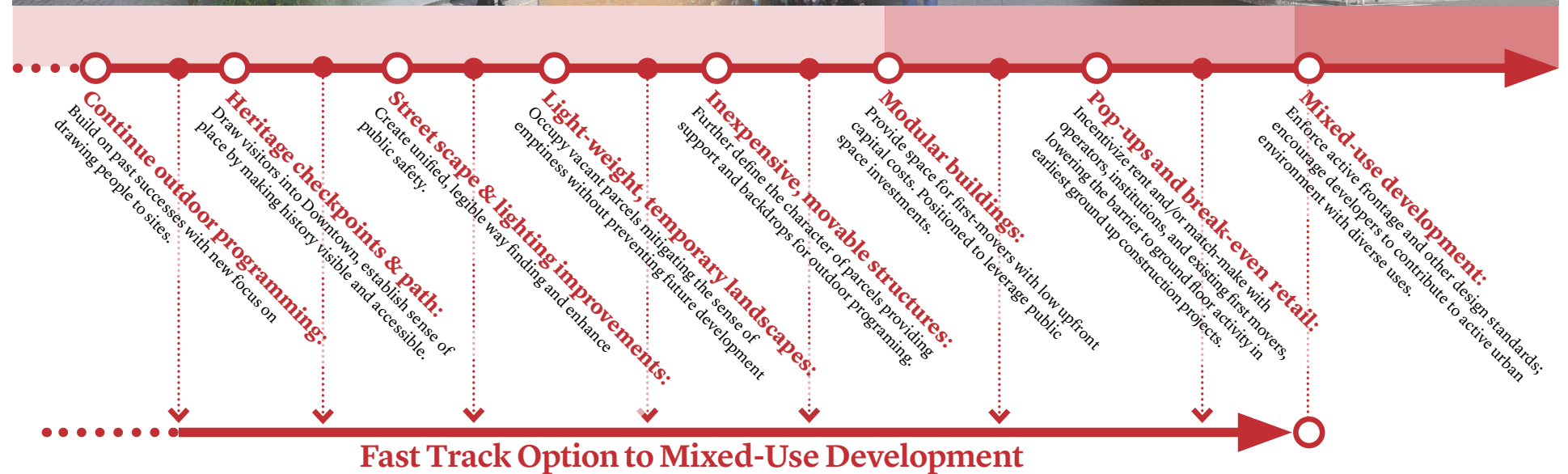
Over time, USA Niagara will work with private sector partners to design and build mixed-use infill developments that reflect the character and history of Niagara Falls. Each site has been studied and appropriate future uses are recommended to respond to the urban context, local needs and market conditions. Proposals for the sites work together as a comprehensive framework promoting activity and development, amplifying their cumulative positive impact on downtown and the city as a whole. And while this strategy will serve as a guide for future work, USA Niagara will address each development individually to ensure they respond to the ever-evolving needs of this place.

Conceptual Build-Out with Mixed-Use Infill Development & Heritage Path



## Implementation

Now that a course has been charted, USA Niagara has started working with other public agencies and private sector partners to design and construct successful projects. Next steps will include assembling funding and more detailed designs for the Heritage Path and other interim uses. Mixed-use infill projects will also be pursued concurrently as opportunities arise.





## USA Niagara Development Corporation

See more of USA Niagara's work and follow projects with the Instant Input app:



[Send any questions or inquiries to Paul Ray at NiagaraFallsStrategy@esd.ny.gov](mailto:NiagaraFallsStrategy@esd.ny.gov)

Historical Photo Sources (pages 6 and 7):

[1. Hé-no and Djodi'kwado' "Heno and the Horned Serpent" by Jesse Cornplanter as published in Seneca Myths and Folk Tales by Arthur C. Parker, 1922.](#)

[2. Thomas Cole, Distant View of Niagara Falls, 1830.](#)

[3. Niagara Falls, mill district on American shore, ca. 1900 Detroit Publishing Co.](#)

[4. Map of New York State reservation at Niagara and Queen Victoria Niagara Falls Park, 1890.](#)

[5. Generating Station of The Niagara Falls Power Company, 1904, 6. Niagara movement: meeting in Fort Erie, Canada, 1905.](#)

[6. Top row \(left to right\): H. A. Thompson, Alonzo F. Herndon, John Hope, James R. L. Diggs \(?\). Second row \(left to right\): Frederick McGhee, Norris B. Herndon \(boy\), J. Max Barber, W. E. B. Du Bois, Robert Bonner. Bottom row \(left to right\): Henry L. Bailey, Clement G. Morgan, W. H. H. Hart, B. S. Smith. Library of Congress.](#)

[7. Niagara Falls Urban Renewal. "Urban Renewal." Uniquely Niagara, 2020.](#)