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INFORMATIONAL

To: Thomas A. Golden, Jr, City Manager 

From: Yovani Baez-Rose, Assistant City Manager/DPD Director

RE: Frontrunner City Initiative

Representatives from the City of Lowell visited Toronto in November to learn about the Frontrunner City Initiative. During that visit we had an opportunity to visit the World Urban Pavillion, better understand the connection with the United Nations, and visit projects completed under this program. The City should consider signing a formal MOU with the World Urban Pavillion to commit to becoming the first designated Frontrunner City in the United States.

In order to fully explain the Frontrunner City Program, it's important to acknowledge and understand the many global partners involved in this program:

United Nations

The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945, following the devastation of World War II, to promote peace, security, and international cooperation. Its overarching goals are rooted in the UN Charter and include:

1. Maintaining International Peace and Security.
2. Promoting Sustainable Development
3. Protecting Human Rights
4. Delivering Humanitarian Aid
5. Upholding International Law¹

UN-Habitat

The United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) is mandated by the UN General Assembly to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities. UN-Habitat is the focal point for all urbanization and human settlement matters within the UN system.

UN-Habitat works with partners to build inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities. UN-Habitat promotes urbanization as a positive transformative force for people and communities, reducing inequality, discrimination and poverty.

UN-Habitat plays a critical role in monitoring and advancing the New Urban Agenda which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2016. UN-Habitat is also the entity responsible for the

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/>

advancement of Sustainable Development Goal 11: “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.”²

Urban Economy Forum

The Urban Economy Forum (UEF) is an organization that collaborates with the United Nations system and international partners to accelerate the implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 11, through innovative and practical solutions to urban management, economy, and resources.³

UEF hosts annual forums with guests from across the globe to discuss important issues facing cities. The UEF 6 forum was held in September 2024 and was attended by Mayor Rourke. The focus of this conference was: “Financing Sustainable Tourism Advancing Quality of Life.” It was at this conference the Mayor connected with representatives from UEF and learned about the Frontrunner City Program.

World Urban Pavilion

The UEF and global partners created The Pavilion to create a centralized hub for information sharing. The Pavilion is a knowledge exchange hub to share best practices, innovation and research in urban development and revitalization from countries around the world. The Pavilion envisions people centered, sustainable cities that are planned through data analysis, driven by innovation and informed by the SDGs.⁴

In order for the City of Lowell to become a recognized Frontrunner City we will be required to negotiate an MOU with The Pavillion. This agreement would make Lowell the first city in the United States with this designation.

Toronto Tour

The purpose of the visit to Toronto in November was to learn more about the Frontrunner program and see firsthand some of the projects that have been undertaken. Upon arrival in Toronto, we went directly to the World Urban Pavilion. At The Pavilion we were introduced to representatives from UN-Habitat, Co-Directors of the Pavilion, board members of the UEF, and a number of local businesses that have worked collaboratively on Toronto’s Frontrunner City projects including representatives from Montrok Group Inc., Solar International LLC, Monage and Montinova. This initial conversation introduced the city to the structure around the Pavilion and further explained how this program combines local (municipal) efforts into the larger framework of global entities working towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

DPD had shared a significant amount of information about the city, ongoing projects and completed plans with the group and they had reviewed them prior to our arrival. This information sharing was helpful and confirmed our initial impressions that Lowell is already undertaking a number of projects that are consistent with the program goals.

Regent Park

Representatives from Toronto Community Housing presented an overview on the revitalization that occurred in the Regent Park neighborhood of Toronto. This 69-acre development project includes:

- 637 workforce housing units

² <https://unhabitat.org/about-us>

³ <https://www.ueforum.org/>

⁴ <https://www.worldurbanpavilion.org/>

- 633 subsidized affordable housing units
- 1,976 market rate units
- 112,601 SF of commercial/retail space
- 39,977 SF of community space
- A new public library

We also did a walking and driving tour of the Regent Park area to visit the aquatic center, the performing arts center and saw some of the community spaces and housing created. This neighborhood revitalization project included significant community process to identify development opportunities and uses that were prioritized by local residents.⁵

Richmond Hill

We visited Richmond Hill and met with Mayor David West and members of the city council to discuss their designation as a front runner city. Mayor West described his community's commitment to sustainable development and how many of their priorities aligned with the Frontrunner Program. In conversation with the Mayor and councilors from Richmond Hill they encouraged Lowell's participation in the program, and felt it was beneficial to their community.⁶

Richmond Hill staff work directly with The Pavilion and have already seen forward momentum in the community since signing on. From the execution of the MOU to the first project getting underway was 18 months.

Distillery District

A visit to the Distillery District showcased a major tourist attraction in Toronto that was once vacant industrial space and former home of the Gooderham & Worts Distillery. The district is comprised of 47 buildings built in the 19th century and has historical characteristics very similar to Lowell. The district is now home to a bustling pedestrian only retail space that includes small artisans, art galleries, shops, restaurants and bars. The district was developed by private developers without municipal investment, and on average brings in 2M visitors annually.

Next Steps

If the Council votes to allow the Manager to pursue negotiations toward an MOU the city would work with the UEF and The Pavilion to make a case for itself with the UEF board, assuming the UEF board approves Lowell as a Frontrunner City we would negotiate terms for the MOU. Lowell would craft a vision for the community which highlights our efforts towards achieving SDGs, highlight potential projects and areas for revitalization, commit to learning and implementing data collection methods recognized by the UN, such as the City Prosperity Index or the Quality of Life Index, commit to participate in research and present of best practices and track progress of our goals.

Once an MOU is executed, the city would be connected to a global network of practitioners in the fields of finance, construction, design, sustainability, community engagement and community development to share knowledge, information, and bring their expertise and capital to Lowell.

⁵ <https://torontohousing.ca/building-construction-and-revitalization/revitalization/regent-park>

⁶ <https://www.richmondhill.ca/en/index.aspx>