Downtown Activation Initiative v 1.00
Proposed Approach

Identified Parameters and Restrictions

1. $135,000 is a one-time allocation, not an ongoing program.
2. Existing Community Development Authority (CDA) programs and other resources already address some business and property needs.
3. The Common Council has identified this as a priority in recent Visioning Session and is looking for visible results within 6–12 months.
4. Staff capacity is finite.
5. Downtown transformation is realistically a 2-to-3-year effort, and then continual ongoing programming/maintenance, not simply a one-year project.

After review of City Manager’s initial draft proposal, the Community Development Department believes that the strongest proposal is a hybrid "Downtown Activation Initiative" that focuses on three outcomes:

- Improving perceptions of downtown immediately.
- Activating key spaces, particularly First Street.
- Creating recurring programming activity that drives foot traffic and supports downtown businesses.

This approach aligns closely with the City Manager's conclusion that a hybrid is viable while incorporating staff concerns about implementation capacity.

Downtown Activation Initiative
Proposed Uses of $135,000 Allocation

Purpose

The Downtown Activation Initiative is a one-time investment designed to create visible, measurable improvements in the downtown experience over the next 6-12 months while laying the groundwork for longer-term revitalization efforts already underway through the Tax Increment District #12, CDA programs, and private investment.

The initiative focuses on:

1. Clean and welcoming public spaces.
2. Activation of First Street as a prioritized gathering space, already identified in Whitewater Forward.
3. Increased downtown activity and business participation.

4. Improved perception of downtown among residents, students, visitors, and prospective investors.

Priority 1: Downtown Appearance & Maintenance
$25,000

Goal: Improve first impressions and address one of the most frequently cited concerns regarding downtown.

Actions

- Hire seasonal downtown maintenance worker (part-time or temporary).
    - Conduct sidewalk power washing.
    - Graffiti removal and minor cleanup efforts.
- Place additional trash receptacles, any other fixtures.
- Reissue downtown power washing RFP in the fall for future years.
- This position would likely be supervised by the Public Works Department.

Why: This is the most immediate and visible improvement residents will notice and requires minimal program administration.

Priority 2: First Street Activation & Tactical Placemaking
$45,000

Goal: Create a recognizable downtown gathering space and test long-term concepts before committing significant capital investment.

Actions

Phase 1
Complete inventory of:

- Benches
- Planters
- Barricades
- Tables/chairs
- Vacant storefronts
- Publicly owned assets

Phase 2
Implement tactical improvements:

- Semi-permanent or seasonal First Street closure pilot.
- Movable seating and gathering spaces.
- Decorative planters.
- String lighting or programmable lighting.
- Wayfinding elements.

- Temporary portas
- Shade implementation
- Temporary public art installations.
- Staff will also investigate the feasibility of a limited or temporary DORA (Downtown Outdoor Refreshment Area) ordinance, modeled after those passed in Janesville, Oshkosh, and other communities.

Phase 3
Incorporate recommendations from:
- UW-Madison Design Studio
- Whitewater Forward concepts
- Future stakeholder and business input

Why: Rather than investing immediately in permanent infrastructure, this approach creates visible change quickly while allowing the City to test concepts before larger capital commitments.

Priority 3: Downtown Programming Series
$35,000

Goal: Increase foot traffic during periods of lower activity by establishing consistent reasons to visit downtown.

Actions

Develop a recurring event series focused on:
- Summer months
- Beginning and end of academic semesters
- Weekend afternoons and evenings

Potential activities:
- Small live music events
- Open mic nights
- Outdoor movies
- Arts events
- Pop-up markets
- Student/community collaborative events

Delivery Model

City funding would support:
- Event production costs
- Equipment
- Marketing

Programming should be delivered primarily through partnerships with:
- Downtown Whitewater
- Whitewater Area Chamber
- UW-Whitewater
- Whitewater Arts Alliance
- Private businesses

Why: Staff should not become event producers. The City should act as a funding and facilitation partner rather than the primary organizer.

Priority 4: Business Participation & Window Activation
$20,000

Goal: Address vacancies and encourage businesses to participate in activation efforts without duplicating CDA programs through a two-prong strategy.

Window Activation Program
$10,000

Small grants ($1,000–$2,500):
- Window art
- Murals
- Temporary displays
- "Coming Soon" branding

Preferred partners:
- UW-Whitewater Department of Art and Design
- Whitewater Arts Alliance
- Whitewater Unified School District
- Downtown Whitewater

Downtown Event Activation Partner Pilot
$10,000

Performance-based incentives for businesses that host new one-time downtown activation events such as:
- Live music
- Sidewalk sales
- Special promotions
- Outside art displays
- Collaborative programming (e.g. cross-promotion sales, classes, etc)

This would be structured as a $500 grant per event, and no more than $2,000 per business per year. This would be structured as a temporary pilot with a defined sunset.

Why: This addresses downtown vibrancy without creating a new permanent subsidy program or competing with existing CDA incentives.

Priority 5: Strategic Reserve
$10,000

Goal: Maintain flexibility for opportunities that arise during implementation.

Potential uses:
- Matching funds for private investment.
- Sponsorship opportunities.
- Small placemaking enhancements.
- Pilot projects identified through the First Street activation process.

Whitewater Activation Initiative Budget Summary

Category	**Amount**
Appearance & Maintenance	$25,000
First Street Activation & Tactical Placemaking	$45,000
Programming & Events	$35,000
Window Activation & Event Activation Pilot	$20,000
Strategic Reserve	$10,000
TOTAL	**$135,000**

Governance & Administration

Regarding the above budget summary, staff propose that the Community Development Department be allowed to administratively reallocate up to 10% of any above budget line to another budget line, to allow for adjustments as the program operates. This will still be with the requirement that total expenditures do not exceed $135,000. Any changes to the above will be communicated in staff memos to the Common Council and Community Development Authority.

To address staff capacity concerns:

City Role
- Project management.
- Grant administration.
- Procurement.
- Coordination.

Partners Role
- Event production.
- Volunteer recruitment.
- Programming.
- Business outreach.

Potential Partners
- Downtown Whitewater, Inc
- Whitewater Area Chamber of Commerce
- UW-Whitewater
- Whitewater Arts Alliance
- Whitewater Unified School District

No new City staff positions are proposed as part of this initial program beyond one temporary seasonal worker.

Success Metrics

Report back to Council after Year 1 with:
- Number of downtown events conducted.
- Event attendance estimates (this may require use of third-party subscription software or other methodology).
- Number of participating businesses.
- Number of activated storefront windows.
- Downtown vacancy rate trend.
- Stakeholder survey results.
- Recommendations for Phase II investments.

Program Sunset
Staff further propose that program sunset by December 31, 2027. This will ensure this program does not become a permanent continuing funding obligation for the City. Any unspent funds could be reallocated at that point. If desired, the Common Council can review future planning or collaborative initiatives at that time.

Key Message for the Common Council

This proposal intentionally prioritizes visible and achievable wins within 12 months while avoiding long-term operating obligations or programs that exceed staff capacity. It positions the City to test ideas, demonstrate momentum, and inform larger downtown investments over the next 2–3 years rather than attempting to fully solve downtown revitalization with a one-time $135,000 allocation.