

# Executive Summary

## Project Description

In 2022, the Ontario government passed the *More Homes Built Faster Act* which, among other things, changed the way that municipalities protect heritage properties. There are three primary tools in the *Ontario Heritage Act* (OHA) that municipalities use to conserve the cultural heritage of their communities; listing on a register, Part IV designation, and Part V designation. Listing is considered a screening tool used to identify potential heritage value, while Part IV and V address individual and multiple properties or districts, respectively. Prior to the changes in 2022, municipalities used registers of listed properties to identify potential heritage properties and determine where an evaluation of heritage significance may be required before a demolition permit was issued.

The change to the OHA requires municipalities to review their registers to identify properties that should be considered either for Part IV or V designation or removal from the register. In the City of St. Catharines (the City), this means a review of the *Heritage Register of Non-Designated Properties* (the Register) which includes 163 properties that must either be designated or removed from the Register by January 1, 2027. Where a property is removed from the Register, it cannot be re-listed for a period of five years.

At the direction of Council, the City released a Request for Proposals in September 2023 to retain a consulting firm to prepare the *Downtown St. Catharines Heritage Conservation District Study* (the Study) to consider Part V designation for a high concentration of its listed properties. The City defined the Study Area to span the bulk of historic downtown St. Catharines including 452 properties, of which 341 were determined to represent potential heritage resources, 97 are currently listed on the Register, and 14 are individually designated under Part IV of the OHA. Following a public bid process, Stantec Consulting Ltd. (Stantec) was selected as the project team to determine whether the Study Area merits consideration for designation as an HCD, in whole or in part. Stantec's experience in HCD Studies and Plans spans the province with expertise in commercial and residential districts alongside HCD Plan updates.

HCD designations are policy-based tools that can help manage change in a community by providing a district planning framework for conserving the heritage character of a specific place. This allows for compatible new designs that coexist with the historic fabric of a community, rather than freezing a place in time. As of 2020, Ontario contains 134 HCDs which range from pre-confederation landscapes to mid-century modern buildings, and even active historic industries. Many contain typical types of resources, such as commercial or residential properties. Others contain a mixture of many different property types like active oil fields. At present, 56 of these HCDs are categorized by the Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT) as "commercial", "commercial-residential", or "commercial-institutional".

District designation remains one of the strongest tools to protect heritage character while allowing for a community's ongoing evolution into the future. Often referred to as a change management tool, HCDs are rooted in how a community sees and experiences a place both now and in the future. This requires review of the historical development of a place and preparation of a detailed inventory of buildings, landscapes, streetscapes, views, and other elements that contribute to the character of a study area. An



HCD Study also includes a detailed review of planning policies which apply to a study area alongside a program of public consultation. This allows the HCD Study to be grounded in a modern planning context while providing an understanding of how the community views itself. Finally, an HCD Study closes with an evaluation of the study area against provincial criteria under the OHA and preparation of recommendations to guide Staff and Council in their decision making. The results of these steps are briefly summarized below as they apply to the St. Catharines HCD Study.

## **Historical Review**

The Study Area reflects the evolution of St. Catharines from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present-day. This begins with the alignment of St. Paul Street which generally follows part of an Indigenous trail commonly called the “Iroquois Trail”. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, colonial settlement in the area had begun, linked to Loyalists arriving in the aftermath of the American Revolution. The construction of the Welland Canal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century made St. Catharines an important location on the journey between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, a crucial transportation corridor at the time. The arrival of the Welland Canal resulted in the creation of a commercial core along much of St. Paul Street and an important source of waterpower for industrial development.

The industrial base of St. Catharines brought prosperity to the Study Area as people lived, shopped, and worked downtown. At the same time, people were drawn downtown to the various cultural attractions such as opera houses, playhouses, and later movie theaters. As a result of its geographical advantages and proximity to the Welland Canal, St. Catharines developed into the economic, social, and political centre of the Niagara Region by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This is directly demonstrated by the decision to move the county seat to St. Catharines in 1862. As a result, numerous civic, institutional, and large commercial structures were constructed during this period. The trend occurred again in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as government expanded in the postwar years. Several civic structures with regional or federal connections were constructed during this period. This continued into the later 20<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of large commercial buildings. This reflects the large workforce in the community and the prominent role the city played in the region's economy.

The decline and closure of several local industries in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a general economic slump in St. Catharines, including within the Study Area, which persisted into the early 2010s. In the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the City looked to revitalize the downtown area with construction of public spaces and strategic partnerships with local institutions like Brock University. These spaces include the First Ontario Performing Arts Centre, the Meridian Centre, and the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts.

Like many urban regional centres in Canada, the Study Area has faced considerable pressures during the 2020s as municipalities have grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing development pressures, and calls for intensification as a result of a nationwide housing crisis. The City's Official Plan highlights that Downtown St. Catharines, as one of the city's oldest areas, best reflects its cultural heritage, identity, and sense of place. Having played a significant role in the city's development, the City's Official Plan policies encourage the downtown to evolve as a key activity centre and multifunctional hub for government, civic, commercial, cultural, and residential activities, while also attracting investment and



infrastructure. The City has also been identified as an Urban Growth Centre by the Region of Niagara and is anticipated to accommodate intensification and new development in the future.

## **Heritage Character and Public Consultation**

As mentioned, defining the character of a place is a multi-disciplinary process. The Project Team, including Public and Architectural Historians, Landscape Architects, and Planners, compiled a detailed inventory of the 452 properties within the Study Area. The area was determined to consist of a variety of architectural types. These ranged from typical 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial and residential structures to stately residences that reflected St Catharines' economic growth and success in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to residential, and commercial construction typical to the post-Second World War period alongside contemporary architecture. More specifically, 8% of the building stock was built before 1852, 25% between 1853 and 1875, and 31% were built between 1876 and 1913. A total of 341 properties were determined to contain potential heritage value as stand-alone properties.

Our understanding of the history and built form of the HCD Study Area formed the basis for our first Public Input Centre (PIC) held in April 2024. During this open house styled event, the Stantec team presented findings related to the history of downtown and its existing characteristic alongside more generic information about how HCDs function. With 44 members of the public in attendance, the Project Team looked to expand the reach of consultation through preparation of multiple surveys. One was aimed at community members across the City and the second was business focused.

When asked about what people think is unique or special about the downtown a range of responses were provided by the survey respondents. Some responses included mention of the architecture and curvature of St. Paul Street, an appreciation for the charm and walkability of the downtown, and the variety of services offered, among other things. The public also helped to identify landmarks.

A strong majority of respondents indicated they were concerned about adequate protection of the City's older buildings and downtown character (82%). When offered an opportunity to provide open ended comments, a wide variety of feedback was received. The Project Team identified a number of themes associated with this feedback ranging from opposition to the district in general to a concern that without a district downtown will suffer further degradation. Other topics included support for adaptive reuse, concern for red tape, and a desire for revitalization, among others.

Alongside the public survey, an additional survey was distributed to the property and business owners within the HCD Study Area. With 46 respondents, the feedback received expressed concern for additional red-tape and approvals perceived to be associated with HCDs as respondents indicated their preference for no restrictions at all, permitting property owners to alter and demolish their property as they wish. Unlike the results of the city-wide survey, only about half of the property and business owners indicated an interest in the historical architecture of their properties or businesses.

Consultation with the public is ongoing. PIC 2 is planned for April 2025 and will include a presentation of the HCD Study results alongside a question-and-answer period. In addition to the public meetings, an interactive map has been posted online to allow members of the public to provide comments about things



they value or things they would like to change within the HCD Study Area. Equipped with a drawing tool, the map has been and will continue to be live through the duration of the HCD Study.

### **Definition of Sub-Areas**

Through the course of analyzing the findings of the historical background review, inventory, planning review, and public consultation, Stantec determined that the architectural characteristics of the Study Area are set within a variety of streetscapes. Through an analysis of the visual and contextual qualities of the Study Area, the Project Team identified three distinct sub-areas that are based on the historical development of downtown St. Catharines: the St. Paul sub-area, Civic Centre sub-area, and South Church Street sub-area. These are briefly described below:

- The St. Paul Sub-Area is centred around the historic commercial streetwall encompassing much of St. Paul Street and sections of Queen Street and James Street. This streetwall is comprised mostly of mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century attached structures with examples of mostly sympathetic mid-20<sup>th</sup> to late 20<sup>th</sup> century infill. Many of these structures share a similar massing, setback, and design that supports a definable context.
- The Civic Centre Sub-Area includes many of the Study Area's civic, institutional, and mid-rise office properties. This sub-area contains a mixture of historic properties, including many of the Study Area's churches, former Lincoln County Courthouse, and City Hall, as well as mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century office and commercial buildings. These structures are mostly located on Church Street and King Street between Queen Street and Academy Street. While some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings replaced previous 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, the variety and evolution in this sub-area reflects the importance of St. Catharines as the Niagara Region's social and economic centre.
- The South Church Street Sub-Area is located south of the Laura Secord Building to the termination of Church Street at Ontario Street. This area contains a concentration of mostly residential properties, many of which have been converted to commercial or mixed use. This concentration of converted properties is connected to the commercial and civic character of the Civic Centre Subarea which abuts this subarea.

### **Results and Recommendations**

The Study Area presents a narrative of the development of St. Catharines from its founding along St. Paul Street to the modern day. This includes construction of the Welland Canal in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the civic and commercial intensification of the downtown core in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This culminated in development of sub-areas to reflect these phases of development. The entire HCD Study Area was evaluated according to O. Reg. 9/06 as was each sub-area. The results were clear that both the Study Area and each of the three sub-areas on their own exceeded the required 25% threshold for Part V designation. Moreover, the identified sub-areas contain distinct concentrations of heritage resources with differing physical, historical, and contextual significances reflective of different chapters in the story of St. Catharines' development.



The Project Team recognizes the challenges that lie ahead for municipalities to protect large numbers of heritage properties, especially in places identified for future intensification. We further acknowledge that proceeding with the HCD Plan stage will be done at the direction of municipal council, based in part, on the advice of staff. To provide Staff and Council with flexibility in next steps, the Project Team has developed a series of recommendations that are aimed at the conservation of heritage properties, current and future planning needs, and the ongoing and everchanging need for housing.

We strive to debunk the myth that heritage hinders change by providing municipalities with flexible recommendations and options. This is not to say that one area merits designation more or less than another. It is simply a recognition that there are factors outside of heritage conservation which Council may consider. Through preparation of multiple options, our intention is that Council can digest the merit of each area in accordance with the OHA, weigh input from the public, and contemplate the future of Downtown St. Catharines in an appropriate context. The following five options have been prepared based on the results of the HCD Study:

1. Proceed with an HCD Plan for the entire Study Area
2. Proceed with an HCD Plan for only the three sub-areas as a single HCD
3. Proceed with separate HCD Plans for the sub-areas as separate HCDs, producing the HCD Plans concurrently with one another
4. Proceed with separate HCD Plans for each sub-area as separate HCDs, producing the HCD Plans at separate and staggered timeframes
5. Do not prepare an HCD Plan and implement alternative approaches

**Summarized:**

- Option 1 prioritizes conservation of the largest number of heritage resources, including 97 listed properties within the Study Area.
- Options 2 and 3 prioritize conservation of heritage resources within concentrated areas (the sub-areas), including 62 listed resources within the Study Area.
- Option 4 would require prioritization of sub-areas for designation. When done at staggered timeframes, it is anticipated that listed properties within these areas will be removed from the register prior to completion of the HCD Plan putting these properties at risk of demolition.
- Option 5 prioritizes alternative planning approaches like a Community Planning Permit System or Secondary Plan for the Study Area and offers no recognition under the OHA. This would necessitate a separate planning process and leave the 97 listed properties vulnerable to alteration and demolition, after the OHA changes coming into effect in 2027.

In each case where an HCD Plan is recommended, the Plan(s) would need to consider a range of policies and guidelines for different types of contributing properties and the identified sub-areas. This may include distinguishing between different types of contributing properties, perhaps based on building age, type, and/or location. In each option, there may also be supplementary planning and policy tools that could support the area and property/business owners and enhance the creation of an HCD or multiple



HCDs, including enhanced grants, tax rebate programs, Community Improvement Plan (CIP) incentives and commemorative/interpretive measures to celebrate the history of the Study Area.

Should council decide not to proceed with an HCD Plan for the Study Area or any of the sub-areas, it is recommended that in order to conserve some heritage resources within the downtown area, the City initiate Cultural Heritage Evaluation Reports for the properties listed on the register and pursue Part IV designation for all those meeting two or more criteria of O. Reg. 9/06. This would include site specific research, description, and evaluation for each property. If an CHD is pursued, to help manage change and new development in the downtown the City should explore the feasibility of a Community Planning Permit System or Secondary Plan for the Study Area as tools to guide redevelopment.

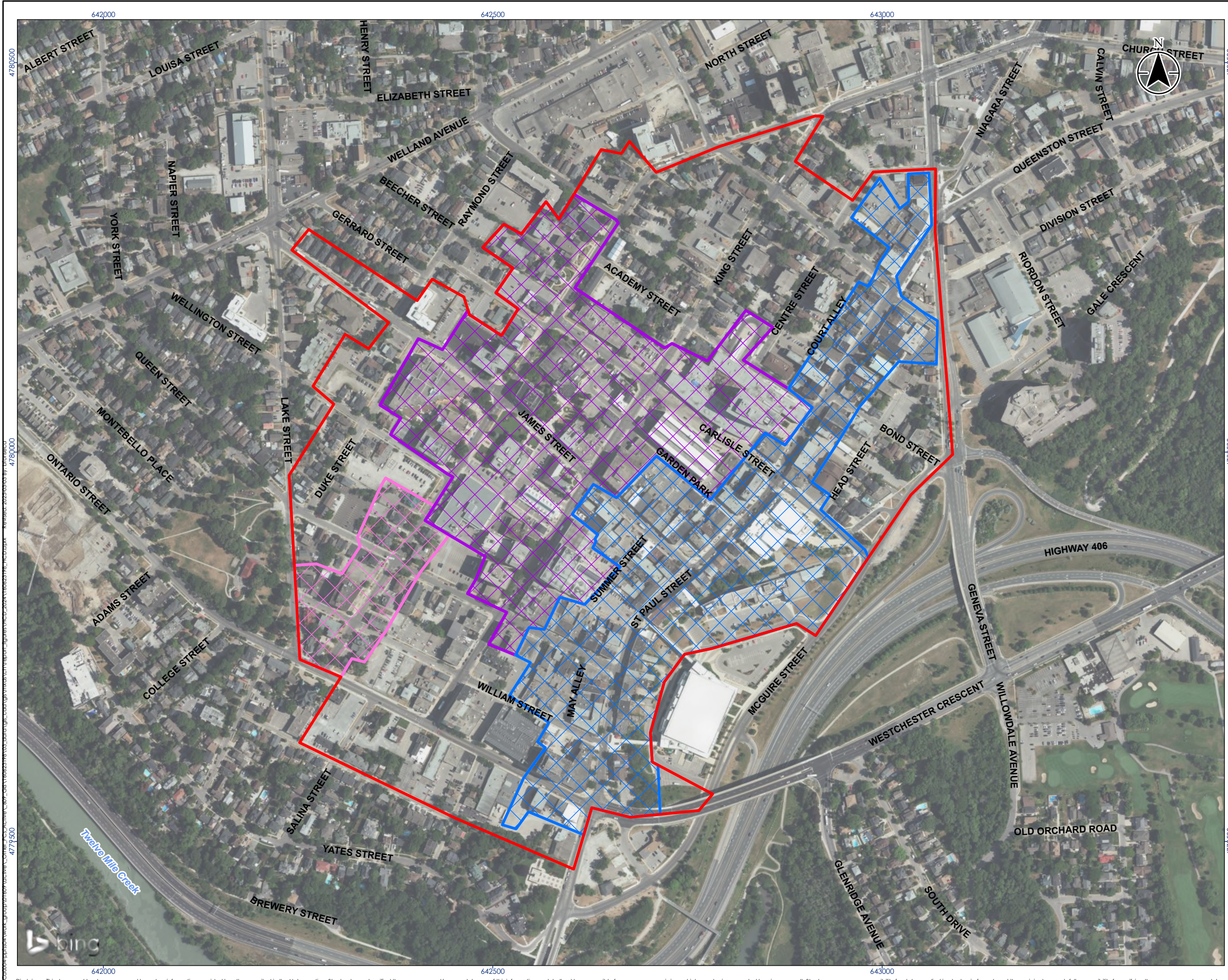
The City should also consider opportunities to maintain and enhance CIP policies for heritage properties and supplement the desired approach with commemorative/interpretive measures for the Study Area. It is important to note that in terms of conserving heritage resources and managing change, HCDs are currently the only legislative tool that provides the robust framework to manage alterations, additions, and demolition for all properties within the Study Area. HCD plans are community driven tools that allow for a wide range of flexibility, rely heavily on community input for direction, and can be as strict or lenient as the community desires.

The other tools outlined above can provide guidance on new development and manage change on properties designated under Part IV of the OHA but have less ability to conserve the overall character and streetscape of the Study Area or sub-areas. It is also important to note that for each HCD by-law or notice of intention to designate a Part IV or V property, there will be a 30-day period where property owners may register their objection, potentially resulting in appeals to the Ontario Land Tribunal. Multiple Ontario Land Tribunal appeals on Part IV designations can become time consuming and costly for municipalities.

It is recommended that Staff and Council review the various HCD boundaries and alternative tools provided, examine the feasibility of their various implementations, and consider public input provided through the HCD Study process in making their decision for next steps.

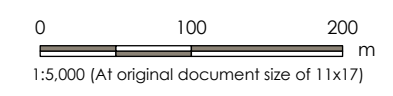
*The Executive Summary highlights key points from the report only; for complete information and findings, the reader should examine the complete report.*



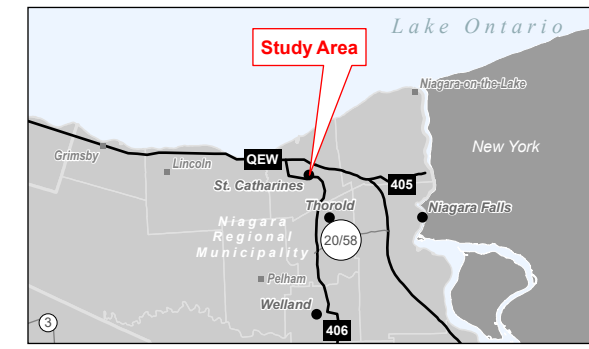


Legend

- Study Area
- Character Area**
- Church Street South Subarea
- Civic Centre Subarea
- St. Paul Subarea



- Notes**
1. Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 17N
  2. Base features produced under license with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry © King's Printer for Ontario, 2024.
  3. Orthimagery: © 2025 Microsoft Corporation © 2025 Maxar © CNES (2025) Distribution Airbus DS.



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City of St. Catharines Prepared by BF on 2025-03-03  
Technical Review by AW on 2024-12-20

Client/Project  
CITY OF ST. CATHARINES  
HERITAGE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Figure No.  
**17**

Title  
**Identified Subareas**