

Chapter One.

Downtown Harrington - The Introduction



Downtown Description

In 2014, the Downtown Development Districts Act was enacted by the Delaware General Assembly in order to:

- spur private capital investment in commercial business districts and other neighborhoods;
- stimulate job growth and improve the commercial vitality of such districts and neighborhoods;
- help build a stable community of long-term residents by improving housing opportunities; and
- assist local governments in strengthening neighborhoods while harnessing the attraction that vibrant downtowns hold for talented people, innovative small businesses, and residents from all walks of life.

Selection as a Downtown Development District (DDD) in Delaware allows private construction projects within the designated area to receive grants covering 20% of eligible capital construction costs.

The Downtown Development District program was rolled out in three rounds:

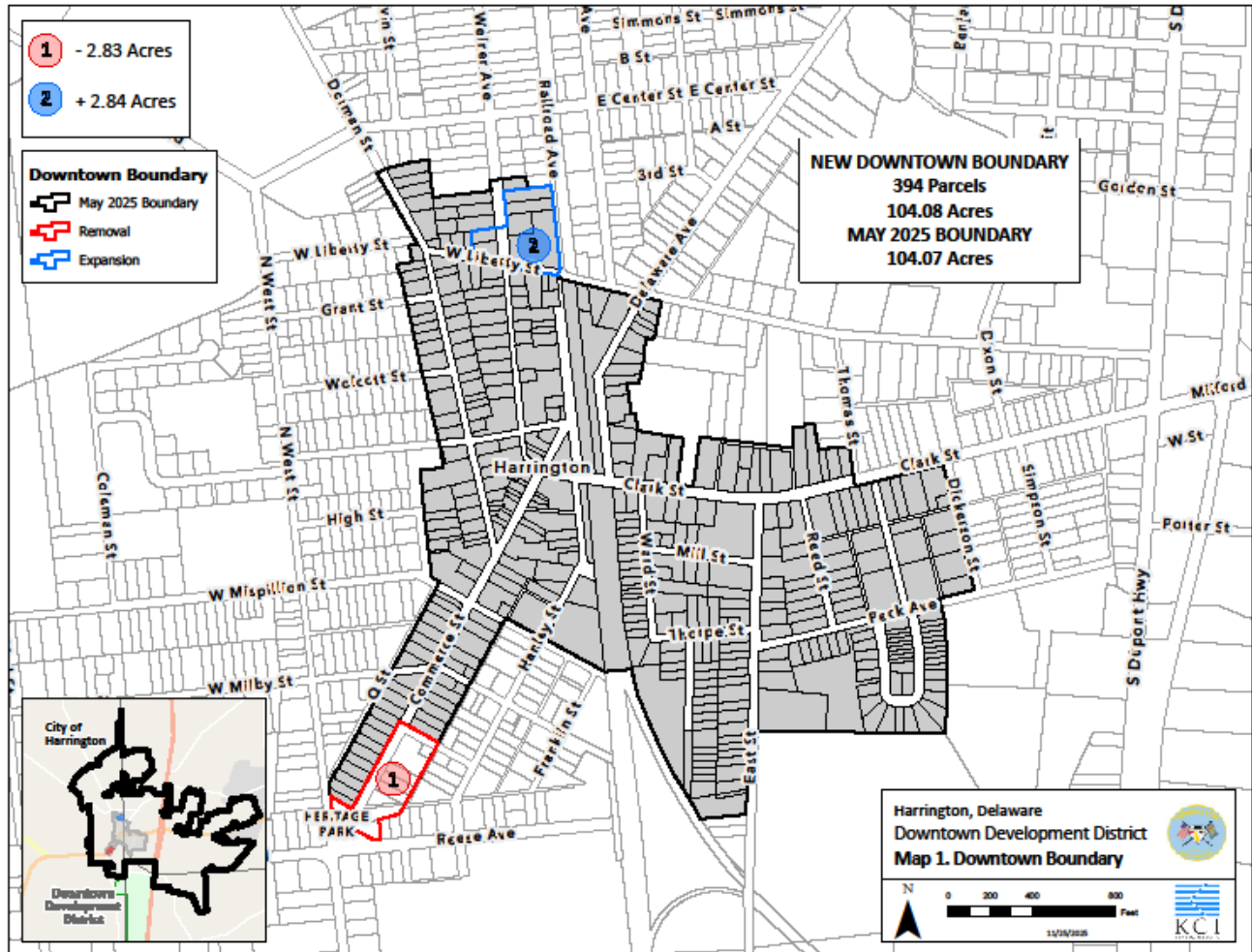
- 2014 (Round 1): Dover, Seaford, and Wilmington
- 2016 (Round 2): **Harrington**, Smyrna, Milford, Georgetown, and Laurel
- 2019 (Round 3): Clayton, Delaware City, Middletown, and City of New Castle

Harrington received its DDD designation in 2016, with an initial term extending through 2026. This designation is currently eligible for a five-year renewal through 2031, with a final potential renewal available through 2036.

Harrington's Downtown Development District, referred to as the Downtown, was originally established as a 33-acre area encompassing 108 parcels centered around the city's traditional business core (Commerce Street, Railroad Avenue, and Mechanic Street). The boundary also included nearby residential streets (Fleming, Dorman, and Delaware Avenue) where many homes had been converted to businesses or other non-residential uses and extended east along Clark Street to include commercial properties crossing the north-south railroad tracks. With a population of approximately 3,500, according to the 2010 U.S. Census count, this area represented the portion of the city most in need of revitalization.

Within the past decade, several boundary adjustments have been made in alignment with the state's Downtown Development District guidelines, which allow up to 105 acres for municipalities with populations under 9,000. The most recent update (May 2025) expands the district to approximately **104 acres**, encompassing **398 parcels**. Currently, the Downtown includes a mix of residentially zoned areas (Dorman Street, Fleming Street, Commerce Street, Clark Street, Ward Street, East Street, and Peck Avenue) alongside commercially zoned areas (Railroad Avenue, Mechanic Street, Hanley Street, and the northern sections of Commerce, Clark, and East Streets).

This five-year renewal plan proposes a new change to the Downtown boundary, displayed in Map 1. Downtown Boundary, removing ten parcels on the South end of Commerce Street and adding six parcels along Weiner Avenue. The expansion is intended to extend incentive opportunities to additional properties, while the removed parcels no longer meet the current criteria or strategic objectives for inclusion within the DDD.



Map 1: Downtown Boundary

Need & Impact

Over the past decade, the DDD program has been a cornerstone of revitalization and community growth, fostering investment, improving infrastructure, and enhancing the quality of life in the heart of the city. By leveraging both public and private resources, the DDD has encouraged commercial, residential, and mixed-use development that has strengthened the economic, cultural, and social vitality of the downtown district.

In the last ten years, approximately nine projects, both commercial and residential, have been completed in and around the downtown core, representing more than \$400,000 in reinvestment. These improvements have repaired and renovated important properties, preserved the district's historic character, and advanced the goal of creating an inviting, economically sustainable downtown.

An additional six projects within the downtown area have contributed over \$370,000 in improvements to building exteriors and interiors, helping to enhance the visual appeal and functionality of the district. These efforts have introduced new businesses and amenities, such as a sweet shop, which complements long standing establishments like banks, the post office, and retail shops, creating a more diverse downtown experience. However, the next section, Demographic Data, will highlight the continued need for additional variety in Downtown establishments. Several barriers contribute to these needs, including vacant and non-code-compliant buildings, vacant lots, and existing ADA accessibility gaps.

Efforts to market the downtown for customers and businesses have started through two successful shopping events, with more planned in the future to increase visibility and engagement. Additionally, the city is pursuing a partnership with the Milford Chamber of Commerce to take on the role once held by the Harrington Business Association. This collaboration will help connect potential businesses with available downtown properties, encourage entrepreneurship, continued growth and investment in the district. Furthermore, the new city website will feature an online business directory and interactive map to increase awareness of downtown businesses and make it easier for residents and visitors to connect with local services.

Accessibility improvements have begun with updates to curbing, addressing pedestrian safety and supporting future ADA compliance efforts. While this represents an important first step toward creating a more walkable and inclusive downtown, additional ADA compliant improvements to sidewalks and pedestrian pathways are still needed to fully enhance accessibility for residents and visitors of all ages and abilities.

Community engagement and cultural vitality have continued to grow through annual events like Heritage Day, as well as newer initiatives such as the Night with Frostbites movie night. The Community Events Committee and Beautification Committee have become active contributors to downtown programming, and the museum has expanded its offerings to include Black History Month and other educational events.

To further strengthen coordination and visibility, a comprehensive calendar of community events and activities focused on downtown will be launched with the city's new website, providing a central hub for promoting events, volunteer opportunities, and partnerships.

Public safety continues to be a priority for maintaining an inviting downtown environment. The installation of security cameras and upgraded LED street lighting has improved both safety and perception, supporting a sense of comfort for businesses, residents, and visitors.

In addition to these downtown-focused improvements, the city has invested more than \$1.5 million in parks and recreation projects, enhancing the community's overall livability and attractiveness. These include the renovation of the former National Guard facility into a multi-purpose community center, the addition of outdoor pickleball and basketball courts, a community pavilion, a paved walking trail, a playground, Price Center renovations, and



the development of a new library. These facilities provide recreation, education, and gathering spaces that complement Downtown Development District’s mission of fostering an active, engaged downtown community.

The progress achieved through the DDD program over the past ten years has been substantial, but continued investment is essential to maintain momentum and address emerging needs. The upcoming chapter will present demographic data and community survey findings, which will further illustrate the current needs, opportunities, and challenges within the downtown area. This data will help guide the next 5 years of strategic planning, identifying target demographics, highlighting community priorities, and supporting data-driven decisions to ensure the DDD continues to strengthen the heart of the city.