

Councillors to vote on funding downtown EcoDistrict idea

[OBJ Contributor](#)

Published on September 30, 2013

Thousands of dollars in public money will be on the table when a proposal to turn Ottawa's downtown core into a hub of environmentally-friendly buildings goes to city hall this week.



(Provided.)

By Jacob Serebrin

The plan to make an area south of the Parliament Buildings into what's known as an EcoDistrict goes before the city's finance and economic development committee on Tuesday

The group behind the proposal, [the Ottawa Centre EcoDistrict \(OCED\)](#), is asking for \$20,000 from Invest Ottawa. It also wants to formally affiliate the project with the city.

This would allow it to apply for up to \$100,000 in matching funds from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' green municipal fund program.

The money from Invest Ottawa would come from the municipal economic development agency's existing funds. Staff are recommending councillors who sit on the committee, which Mayor Jim Watson chairs, approve the spending.

Invest Ottawa has been involved in the plan from the beginning and is strongly promoting it.

"We're hoping that they'll approve it," said Karen Pero, the agency's senior business development manager for the cleantech sector. "We're pretty confident that they will."

The plan has the support of several downtown businesses, the Bank Street and Sparks Street business improvement areas, the Ottawa Chamber of Commerce and city councillor Diane Holmes, who represents the ward where the eco-district would be located.

Supporters of the plan say it will help draw more businesses downtown as several

departments with the federal government – the city’s largest single tenant for office space – plan moves to the suburbs.

“The basis of this is the exodus of the federal government from downtown Ottawa, which leaves a lot of B and C class buildings vacant and gives landlords an opportunity to do renovations,” said Ms. Pero.

But it’s not just about fixing up buildings.

“There’s a lot of smaller stuff and a lot of bigger things,” said James McNeil, co-chair of OCED, and the co-founder and managing principal at real estate brokerage [JJ McNeil Commercial](#).

The proposal calls for “collaborative infrastructure,” large-scale projects like centralized heating and cooling for the district. It would also promote “sustainable business practices.”

The ecodistrict would “provide experts from the community,” said Ms. Pero. These experts would “offer their services to any local business and offer advice on how the business can be more energy efficient and eco-friendly.”

The plan also calls for more public art, community gardens and a new street vendor program, which are intended to make downtown more pedestrian friendly and draw shoppers to area retailers, said Ms. Pero.

The plan’s other focuses will also benefit Ottawa’s economy, said Ms. Pero, by “helping to attract companies to locate in Ottawa.”

“A lot of companies, especially big companies, want to be seen as being eco-friendly and green,” said Ms. Pero. “They’re interested in being in green buildings.”

According to Mr. McNeil, for many businesses, being more environmentally friendly is “becoming a core part of how they conduct business. It’s part of being best-in-class.”

Landlords could also see benefits, Ms. Pero said, as green-building tenants typically sign longer leases.

The renovations needed to implement the plan would also create jobs, according to Mr. McNeil, providing work for architects, engineers and consultants.

“The transition would create opportunities to help grow the city,” said Mr. McNeil. “It’s designed to help the city and help the downtown.”

The project still has a ways to go. If it gets finance committee approval, it will still have to be approved by the full city council.

“It isn’t something that happens overnight,” said Ms. Pero. “We’ll start to see things happen over the next six months.”

With other cities, including Toronto, Washington D.C., Portland and Seattle, implementing similar programs, Mr. McNeil said the initiative is “needed to allow us to compete.”

“Capital cities should reflect on what a city should be, they should be the showcase,” said Mr. McNeil. “This is an opportunity for Ottawa to be a showcase city for the rest of Canada and the world.”