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Citation: McDonald, K.. (2025) Shared Streets, Shared Stakes: Lessons from Banff's Bear Street, *Local Governance Hub Policy Briefs*, No. 4, pgs. 1-7.

Published: 2025-12-10

Shared Streets, Shared Stakes: Lessons from Banff's Bear Street

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Key messages

- Bear Street shows that shared streets can turn a car-dominated road into a lively, pedestrian-first space that pulls people off Banff Avenue.
- Stakeholders care most about business impacts and street design, especially construction disruption, parking, and long-term viability.
- Even intensive engagement over several years can still leave people divided, so how participation is designed matters as much as how much of it there is.
- The project boosts resilience and environmental goals in a tight, tourism town but also nudges the street toward more tourist-oriented, higher-revenue businesses.
- Future projects need to tightly align construction timing, communication, and street role within a clear mobility and land-use strategy that foregrounds justice and trust.

Introduction and Case Context

Banff is a small municipality embedded within Banff National Park, constrained by national park legislation, fixed town boundaries, and commercial caps, yet hosting millions of visitors annually and experiencing severe pressure on transportation and public space systems (Government of Canada & Government of Alberta, 1989; Bunt & Associates Engineering, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2022). Within this context, Bear Street's redevelopment emerged as a response to congestion, limited road capacity, and a desire to improve downtown livability and the visitor experience, building on recommendations in the 2012 Transportation Master Plan and subsequent council decisions to trial "woonerf" configurations (Town of Banff, n.d.; Enns, 2019b). The project culminated in a shared street that prioritizes pedestrians while maintaining managed vehicle access and embeds environmental design features such as soil cells and expanded landscaping.

The research asks three core questions: (1) What challenges are associated with redeveloping a street into a shared street from the perspectives of elected officials, administrators, and Bear Street business owners? (2) How did these groups experience the conception, implementation, and outcomes of the Bear Street project? and (3) What lessons from this case can inform similar initiatives elsewhere, particularly regarding resilience, economic impacts, design, and community experience? Given Banff's tourism-dependent economy and multi-jurisdictional governance, the case offers insights for other communities facing growth, space constraints, and pressure to enhance walkability and downtown vitality.

Planning approaches and concepts

Planning approaches in Canada

The project situates shared streets within a century of evolving planning paradigms. Garden city and garden suburb models, inspired by Ebenezer Howard, strongly influenced post-war Canadian planning, promoting low-density suburban development, separation of land uses, and heavy reliance on private vehicles (Grant, 2003, 2006, 2018; Lewyn, 2012; Belshaw, 2016; OECD, 2018). Critiques of sprawl and car dependency spurred the rise of New Urbanism in the 1990s, emphasizing compact, mixed-use, walkable neighbourhoods with connected street networks and stronger public realms (Grant, 2003, 2006, 2018). Recent notions such as the "15-minute city" deepen these trends but have also been politicized, including through conspiracy narratives circulating during the COVID-19 pandemic (Glover, 2025).

Shared streets and related concepts

Shared streets—also known as woonerfs or living streets—originate from European traffic and urban design debates, particularly in the Netherlands, and seek to rebalance the hierarchy of street users by integrating vehicles and pedestrians in a single, low-speed, highly designed public space (Buchanan, 1963; Ben-Joseph, 1995; Hamilton-Baillie, 2008; Karndacharuk et al., 2014). Core design elements include minimal demarcation between carriageway and footway, physical traffic calming, pedestrian priority, extensive landscaping and furnishings, and discouragement of through-traffic (Ben-Joseph, 1995; Karndacharuk et al., 2014). Shared streets differ from conventional traffic-calmed streets by intentionally overlapping pedestrian and vehicle domains rather than separating them.

The project also draws on literatures in placemaking and authenticity, which highlight how design and programming can foster a sense of place and social connectedness (Madden, 2011; Mehta, 2018; Zukin, 2010, as cited in Mehta, 2018). Environmental psychology underscores that place attachment can both motivate and resist redevelopment, as changes to familiar environments may be experienced as threats to identity and community (Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Silberstein & Maser, 2016). Social justice perspectives emphasize that sustainability transitions entail distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice dimensions, requiring attention to who is involved, how decisions are made, and who bears costs and benefits (Bissell, 2016; Bennett et al., 2019).

Participatory planning, tourism, and trust

The project is grounded in participatory planning theory, which promotes public hearings, meetings, workshops, focus groups, and surveys as mechanisms to improve decision quality, legitimacy, and implementation, while building social learning and empowerment (Laurian, 2009). Research on tourism communities shows that residents' attitudes toward tourism depend on factors such as length of residency and economic dependence, with higher tourism volumes often correlating with more negative perceptions among those not directly benefiting (Um & Crompton, 1987; Pizam, 1978; Hu et al., 2022). In this setting, trust between public officials, planners, and community members is a critical resource, potentially reinforced or eroded through iterative interactions and perceived transparency (Laurian, 2009).

Methods

The study uses an interpretive, multi-method case study design to capture the meanings stakeholders attribute to the Bear Street shared street initiative (Hamel et al., 1993; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Thorne, 2025). Three main methods were combined: a literature review, desk research on the local policy and media context, and semi-structured interviews with key actors.

Desk research focused on Town of Banff council documents (requests for decision, meeting minutes), planning reports, and local newspaper coverage related to Bear Street's trials, design, and construction. These documents were used to trace the project's policy trajectory, identify key decision points, and surface the assumptions embedded in official narratives, consistent with document-based policy analysis (Moe & Karppinen, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 participants in three groups: administrative staff (3), Bear Street business owners (6), and current or former councillors (8). Administrative staff were drawn from the Bear Street planning team (planning, communications, engineering), business owners were recruited through letters, follow-ups, and in-person contact along Bear Street, and councillors were invited by email with multiple follow-ups. Interviews of 30–45 minutes followed a flexible guide tailored to each group, allowing probing and adaptation to emergent themes, as recommended in qualitative interviewing literature (Silberman & Patterson, 2022).

Interviews (April–September 2023) were recorded, transcribed, and inductively coded in NVivo. Codes were grouped into five thematic bundles: (1) Urban Resilience and Adaptability; (2) Socio-Economic & Business Impacts; (3) Urban Design, Policy & Governance; (4) Environmental Stewardship & Public Space; and (5) Social Well-Being & Community Experience. Hierarchy charts and word clouds were used to visualize the prominence of themes within each participant group.

Two main limitations are noted. First, the timing of interviews shortly after both the completion of construction and the lifting of pandemic travel restrictions makes it difficult to isolate the effects of the street redesign from tourism rebound, complicating causal claims about observed increases in activity. Second, the sample excluded residents who are neither business owners nor officials, even though subsequent controversy over a nearby pedestrian zone indicates that resident attitudes toward pedestrianization may diverge from those of the engaged stakeholders interviewed.

Key Findings

Thematic priorities by stakeholder group

Across all participants, two thematic bundles dominated: socio-economic and business impacts, and urban design, policy, and governance. For business owners and elected officials, socio-economic and business impacts were the top themes, encompassing concerns about construction disruption, revenue effects, parking, traffic, and the long-term business mix on the street. For administrative staff, the leading theme was urban design, policy, and governance, reflecting their focus on design quality, policy alignment, communications strategy, and the mechanics of implementation.

All groups recognized that the shared street has increased pedestrian activity and altered how people use and perceive Bear Street, although they interpreted the implications differently. Business owners tended to anchor their assessments in sales, customer behavior, and operational challenges; councillors

emphasized strategic goals such as economic resilience, livability, and environmental stewardship; administrators highlighted integrated design, coordination across departments, and technical execution.

Business owners: impacts, communication, and trust

Business owners agreed that the project significantly affected their operations throughout trials, construction, and the post-redevelopment period, but assessments of net impact were mixed. During construction, owners uniformly reported severe negative effects on sales and accessibility, describing construction as a "stranglehold" on business despite federal and provincial COVID supports that cushioned some losses. Most owners, however, judged the timing—during a tourism downturn—preferable to construction during a full recovery period.

Post-redevelopment, four of six owners felt the street's transformation and increased foot traffic had ultimately benefited their business and the broader community, even if gains did not always translate directly into higher sales. Two owners remained skeptical, emphasizing reduced parking, perceived rushed decision-making, and mismatch between the trials and final design, and arguing that more vehicles and curbside parking were essential for their business model.

Communication and trust emerged as critical fracture points. Several owners praised the frequency of updates, the visibility and responsiveness of Bear Street Ambassadors, and opportunities to raise concerns in meetings and walkthroughs. Others experienced communication as reactive, incomplete, or dismissive, especially when construction access differed from communicated schedules or when comments from staff were perceived as under-valuing existing businesses. These experiences contributed to diminished trust and influenced political attitudes, including future voting intentions, aligning with theories that highlight the feedback loops between process experiences and institutional trust (Laurian, 2009).

Business owners also reflected on shifts in street use and the likely evolution of the business mix, anticipating that food, beverage, and visitor-serving retail will increasingly dominate, while services such as medical offices and hardware stores may relocate to less central, lower-rent locations. Several owners saw untapped potential in winter animation and interpretation, suggesting more winter patios and onsite storytelling about the street's history and environmental infrastructure (e.g., soil cells).

Elected officials: political judgment, design choices, and parking

Councillors framed the project as both an infrastructure necessity—replacing aging underground services—and a strategic opportunity to reclaim street space from cars and align with Banff's role as a national park community. Most believed moving ahead during COVID was politically and economically prudent, given the tourism collapse, available supports for businesses, and the prospect of avoiding construction during a later upswing. A minority feared a "double hit" on businesses and would have preferred to delay major works until after recovery or until intercept parking and mass transit improvements were in place.

On design, councillors agreed that the pre-project Bear Street was neglected and incoherent, sometimes described as Banff Avenue's "ugly sister," and that the new shared street significantly improved its attractiveness and social function. Nonetheless, some were dissatisfied with compromises, notably reductions in the number and placement of trees to address concerns about visibility, signage, and clutter. For several councillors, more tree planting was central to

environmental stewardship and place quality, while others emphasized the political necessity of responding to business preferences.

Parking and vehicle access were recurring tensions. Councillors generally recognized that a fully pedestrianized Bear Street is unlikely in the near term due to strong expectations for convenient parking, the presence of a surface lot and parkades, and continued dependence on private vehicles in the absence of rail or robust regional transit. Some envisioned a long-term shift away from surface parking toward green space or civic uses, but acknowledged that public will is not yet aligned with such changes. In the interim, the shared street operates as a hybrid: strongly pedestrian-oriented in the summer, but more road-like in winter.

Councillors described public engagement as unusually extensive, citing five summers of trials, open houses, design workshops, working groups, newsletters, dedicated communications staff, and a significant communications budget. They also noted structural communication challenges: busy residents who only pay attention when directly affected, a vocal minority that can dominate discourse, and persistent ambiguity over whether dissatisfaction reflects lack of information or disagreement with decisions.

Administration: implementation, design detail, and evolution

Administrative staff emphasized the complexity of executing the project—coordinating design, communications, engineering, and construction while maintaining business and resident relations—and viewed the shared street as a high-quality, carefully detailed intervention that substantially enhanced public space. Some reflected that the level of design detailing, particularly in stonework, may have exceeded what most users notice, suggesting opportunities to balance craftsmanship with cost and implementation efficiency.

Administrators confirmed that communication required significant resources, and that even robust outreach cannot guarantee uniform understanding or engagement given varying levels of interest and capacity among stakeholders. They also highlighted the structural challenge of construction communications, where misalignments between contractors' schedules and municipal updates can quickly erode trust despite best efforts.

Like councillors and business owners, administrators anticipated an eventual shift in the business mix, driven less by the project itself than by rent levels and the relative profitability of different uses in a high-foot-traffic, tourism-focused environment. From their perspective, the shared street has already generated substantial intangible benefits in terms of social interaction, lingering, and perceived quality of place, consistent with placemaking and environmental psychology insights.

Cross-cutting issues: resilience, justice, and participation

Across stakeholder groups, the project can be read as an experiment in urban resilience and just sustainability transitions. Themes of adaptability, uncertainty, and the need to redesign public space in response to both long-term pressures and acute shocks (COVID-19) were salient, positioning Bear Street as an investment in economic resilience and visitor appeal in a constrained environment. At the same time, the project reallocated street space, altered access patterns, and advantaged some business types over others, raising questions of distributional justice and long-term equity between street users and business sectors, as discussed in the sustainability transitions literature (Bennett et al., 2019; Bissell, 2016).

The project is also a practical example of participatory planning. It deployed multiple engagement tools—trials, open houses, surveys, council hearings, and

targeted outreach—and generally aligns with the participatory toolbox described by Laurian (2009). Yet, the varied experiences of business owners underscore that intensive participation does not guarantee perceived fairness or trust; expectations, prior relationships, and communication breakdowns shape how processes are received. The absence of non-business residents from the sample, in contrast to later resident mobilization against a nearby pedestrian zone, further illustrates the challenge of ensuring recognitional and procedural justice for all affected groups.

Recommendations

Drawing on the Bear Street case and the wider literature, the project advances several recommendations for Banff and other municipalities contemplating shared streets or similar street transformations.

1. Clarify long-term street function and network strategy

Municipalities should situate shared street projects within a broader mobility and land-use strategy, clarifying whether a street is intended to remain a hybrid space, evolve toward full pedestrianization, or retain a substantial vehicular role. In Banff, stronger integration with plans for intercept parking and regional transit could help manage expectations about future car access and support more ambitious reallocation of street space over time.

2. Plan construction timing and mitigation with business risk in mind

When possible, major construction should coincide with periods of reduced activity or when financial support is available, as occurred during COVID in Banff, but this must be accompanied by strong mitigation measures. Municipalities should co-develop construction phasing and communication protocols with local businesses, including clear escalation paths when schedules change, and support tools where disruptions are severe and prolonged.

3. Invest in layered communication and explicit expectation management

Shared street projects benefit from layered communication strategies that combine visual trials, in-person engagement, digital updates, and dedicated liaison roles such as street ambassadors. However, it is crucial to be explicit about what is a "trial," what is non-negotiable (e.g., underground works), and which design elements are open for adjustment, to avoid perceptions that the final outcome diverged from what was shown. Communications should acknowledge uncertainties, such as construction risks, and avoid over-promising on timelines to protect trust.

4. Address trust and justice explicitly in engagement design

Given the importance of trust and the justice dimensions of sustainability transformations, engagement plans should explicitly consider distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice. This includes identifying all stakeholder groups (including residents not directly tied to downtown economies), ensuring meaningful opportunities for input at multiple stages, and transparently explaining how feedback influenced decisions and where constraints limit changes. Evaluating engagement processes after completion can help identify and repair trust fractures.

5. Support business transition and street activation

As street function and user composition change, municipalities should anticipate shifts in the business mix and consider policies to support desired outcomes, such as encouraging uses that benefit from pedestrian activity and contribute to placemaking. This may involve zoning tools, design guidelines, or economic development supports for arts, culture, and food and beverage uses, alongside strategies for winter activation to maximize year-round public space value.

6. Communicate environmental features and performance

Design features like soil cells and enhanced landscaping contribute to environmental stewardship and resilience, but their benefits are often invisible to users. Interpretive signage, digital materials, or guided programming can highlight these elements, reinforcing the project's sustainability narrative and strengthening place attachment.

7. Expand research to residents and comparative cases

Future research should examine resident perspectives on shared streets in Banff and comparable communities, particularly in light of subsequent debates over pedestrian zones on Banff Avenue. Comparative studies in non-tourism towns could clarify how differing economic bases, governance structures, and resident-business relations shape acceptance, impacts, and justice outcomes in street transformations.

Taken together, these recommendations stress that successful shared street projects require more than good design. They demand integrated planning, careful management of construction and communication, explicit attention to justice and trust, and ongoing alignment between street function, business evolution, and community goals.

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