



Downtown Grand Rapids

Building Organizational Capacity

August 2024

Financial support for Downtown Grand Rapids capacity building provided by



Background

- 2020 Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan identifies downtown as a priority
- 2023 Downtown Grand Rapids Plan Update – Highlights
 - Establish an **organization** of stakeholders, business & property owners
 - Keep a focus on downtown’s **economic niche & strategic business mix**
 - Optimize **physical design & appearance** to support economic niche & customer experience
 - **Activate downtown** with events, flexible experiences like the bookwalk & engagement within businesses (e.g., classes, events)
 - Support investment with updated **finance & technical assistance** tools

Why create an organization to lead downtown revitalization?




- Grand Rapids is an important regional center for employment, retail, professional services, government, health care, education, arts & culture
- Downtown embodies the region's history & culture. It is central to a community's identity
- A vibrant downtown can attract residents, visitors & a talented workforce
- Positive, fun, shared experiences build a sense of community
- Downtown areas face challenges
 - Independent business & property owners are a strength & a challenge!!
 - Evolution of retail – big box, on-line
 - Aging structures & infrastructure need updates
 - Lack advocate, coordination

Leadership and teamwork is essential!

Downtown organizations serve as a hub coordinating the key components of successful downtown revitalization





What's happened so far in 2024?

- EDA created Downtown Advisory Committee to guide creation of an organization (January)
- 14 participants toured 5 regional center communities with healthy downtown areas to learn how they succeeded (April-May)
- Recent activity
 - Developed 2-year workplan
 - Developed budget & fundraising strategy (3-5 year commitments)
 - Drafted Memorandum of Agreement(s) with partner non-profits
 - Prepared position description

Downtown Tour

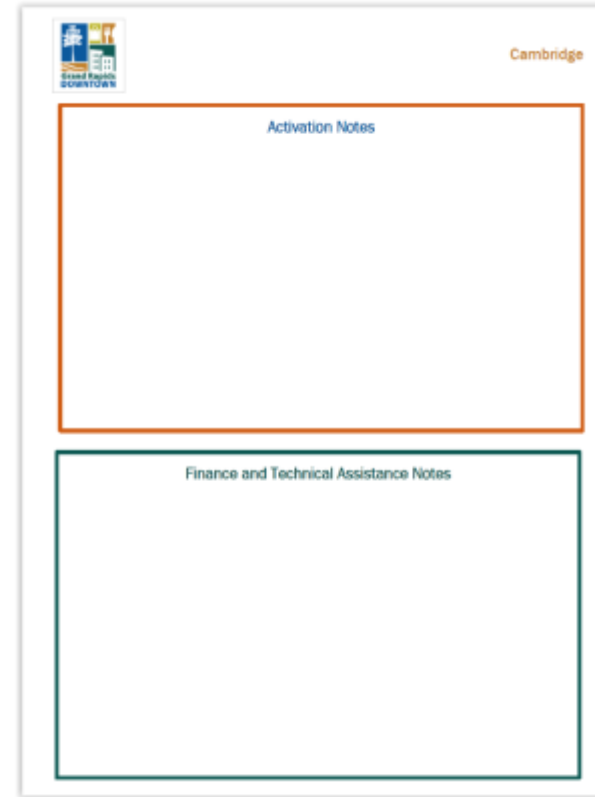
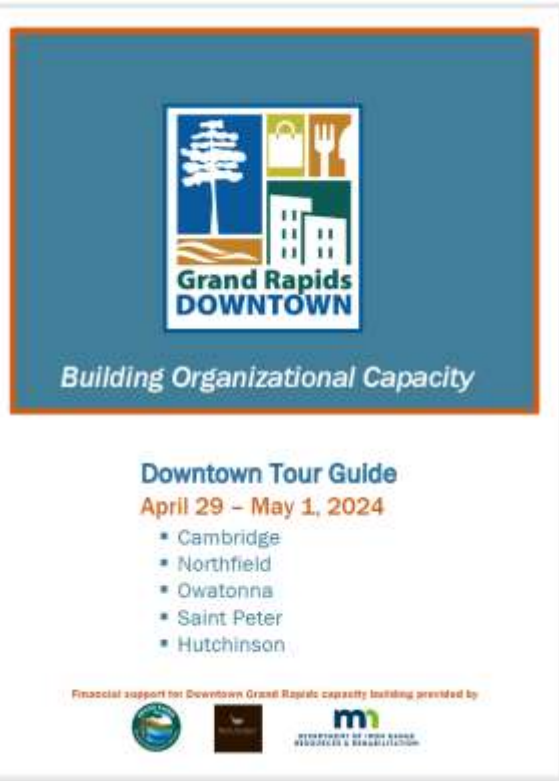
April 29 – May 2, 2024

Cambridge
Northfield
Owatonna
St. Peter
Hutchinson



Tour Participants Actively Engaged & Observations Documented

Tour Guide Book → Profiles of tour communities → Participants recorded → Participant Surveys impressions



Top “Take-aways” from Cambridge

- Benefits of business co-location & innovative product mix
- Businesses promote each other
- Downtown financing tools to meet local business needs (e.g. fire suppression, ADA, facade & interest buy-down)
- Strong city council support. Good engagement by private sector businesses (15-20% active) & problem-solving dialogue with city staff
- No formal organization or budget. Chamber is active partner, doesn't require membership up front.
- Committees active with Chamber & social media support
- Good communication. ID barriers & work to reduce them collaboratively.
- Lots of events – thoughtfully timed for broad engagement



Top “Take-aways” from Northfield

- Charming riverfront & colorful historic buildings & facades with parks, Riverwalk and patios overlooking river
- Strong financial resources – good communication, good business start-up system
- Full time downtown staff - in City Com Development Dept. has regular direct contact with businesses
- Significant volunteer involvement
- Technical assistance & support to businesses beyond publicity on loan programs
- Good wayfinding
- Dual mix businesses to increase traffic
- River Walk Market Fair (every Saturday mid May - Oct) & Third Thursdays involve farmers, artists, and food vendors. Significant sponsorship by area businesses.



Top “Take-aways” from Owatonna

- Exceptional city, private business and chamber collaboration – great attitudes
- Chamber includes Visit Owatonna, Mainstreet & Business Partnership (event group). SBDC & incubator also active partners.
- Branding of partners reflects teamwork
- Dedicated public & private champions willing to stand up for the value of downtown
- Well staffed & organized - FT Mainstreet staff - Chamber employee with in-person contact with businesses
- Excellent communication builds trust
- Strong relationships with local developers, investors
- Higher income area, larger population



Top “Take-aways” from Owatonna

- Wide sidewalks, narrow streets for 3 blocks in lower traffic downtown connect to central park square with bandshell
- Attractive, well-lighted alleys with removable bollards connect to parking in the rear of businesses
- Great hotel & walkable meeting space in area restaurants
- Adjacent office employment generates foot traffic
- Good way-finding signage
- Good financing tools
- SBDC – succession planning for downtown businesses & support Farmer’s Market vendors to locate downtown
- Link public investments to private investment
- Raise substantial \$\$ through sponsorship of concerts & activities
- Well planned event calendar, work shared with various orgs



Top “Take-aways” from St. Peter

- ✦ City, businesses & developers work well together
- ✦ Getting new development projects including housing downtown
- ✦ Significant financial resources to support revitalization from tornado.
- ✦ City provides some innovative financing tools
 - ✦ During road construction – offered 0% loan based on monthly occupancy cost. Repayment after road complete - \$100/month until repaid
- ✦ Historic properties as amenity get additional financial support
- ✦ Events held 2 blocks south of downtown in large park; core of downtown not configured well for events
- ✦ Business mix and cooperation are strong
 - ✦ 3 businesses located near each other draw same demographic
 - ✦ New brewery will have an app with the coop – food delivery across the street



Design & Appearance Goals since 2002

- Distinctiveness from other commercial settings
- Multifunctional
 - Multiple destinations in a compact place
 - Government / services / parks / housing / dining, etc.
- Pedestrian friendly
 - Walkable
 - Compactness, safety & design as key elements
- Unique heritage
- Human activity – people are present!
- People are encouraged to linger
 - Area is safe
 - Exciting / attractive
 - Things to see and do
 - Places to sit
- Community ownership

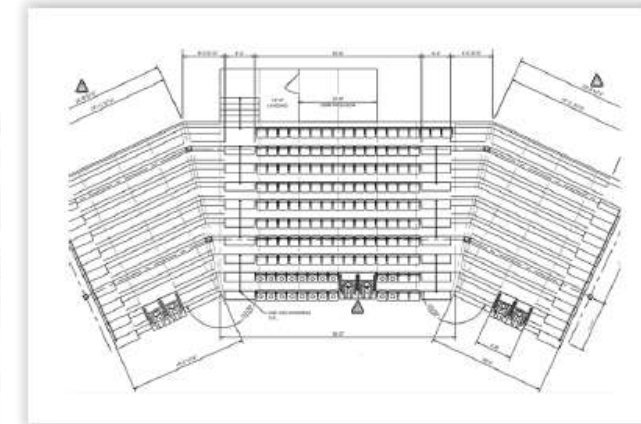
Hutchinson



Crow River Park & Trail Complex



2024 -270 seat baseball grandstand w/roof – east edge of downtown



Top “Take-aways” from Hutchinson

- ✦ City driven, Chamber involvement in events & murals
 - ✦ Chamber sponsored music – Mondays in the summer, sponsorship - \$600 by local businesses
- ✦ City – planning, redevelopment, financing & entrepreneurial support
- ✦ Downtown Association “on pause”. Why? Farmer’s Market created separate non-profit. Trouble recruiting volunteers. Things going well.
- ✦ Strong relationship with major employer 3M that cares about talent retention & attraction provides significant \$\$
- ✦ Very focused on downtown plans & implementation
- ✦ Intentional, “can do” mindset
- ✦ “A shared vision via the plan is the secret sauce that unifies us & reduces uncertainty for everyone, including developers
- ✦ Important to take time for communication, it builds understanding & trust (city staff visited every property owner before special assessments for streetscape improvements)



Top “Take-aways” from Hutchinson

- ✦ Target blight & take balanced approach to historic preservation
- ✦ Parking behind businesses along busy highway
- ✦ Active alleys pull people away from noisy traffic
- ✦ Great recreational riverfront & trails adjacent to downtown
- ✦ Annual national sculpture competition, sculpture walk & people’s choice award
- ✦ Maximize Library Square (central green space) as gathering space (removing berms at Central School would help in Grand Rapids)
- ✦ Solid city grant/loan programs (typical - TIF, DEED, loan fund)
 - ✦ Innovative - \$2K grants to businesses every 5 years for signs/awnings
- ✦ Business plan competition targets vacant properties – SBDC involvement is significant & required. Forgivable loan awarded to winner + private support to winners from accountants, website providers, etc.



Tour “Wrap-up” Survey



What lessons will you remember from the tour?

- ✦ *Commitment to taking on the work*
- ✦ *Collaboration, leadership & teamwork – public and private sector, non-profits*
- ✦ *Working together – positive attitudes, shared vision, patience*

What makes the difference between good & great work?

- ✦ *Good = recent projects and investors*
- ✦ *Great is more*
 - + *Willingness to invest time & resources (e.g., full time staff)*
 - + *Positive attitude & shared vision*
 - + *Collaboration & teamwork – public & private*
 - + *Reassess some old rules*
 - + *Walkable spaces*
 - + *Gathering place for community*

Wrap-up Survey

Question: What would you tell to.....

Grand Rapids EDA

- More resources are needed to actively focus on downtown, engage the private sector, raise awareness of the shared vision & financing tools, provide support to businesses, entrepreneurs & investors & promote downtown.
- Invest in making downtown more walkable and attractive with a mix of uses

Business & Property Owners

- “We can do this in Grand Rapids!”
- Active participation & volunteering from the private sector
- Takes hard work, teamwork & a shared vision
- Support from the City and Chambers
- “Many hands makes light work”
- Big rewards: better bottom line, enhanced property values, community building, personal satisfaction, more attractive, welcoming place



Foundations & Non-profits

- Everyone needs to be involved and work together
- Need leadership commitment, champions, staff & financial resources
- It will take time

Recommended Organizational Structure & Office Location

Start up – 6-18 months

- Fiscal sponsorship by the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, while creating an independent 501(c)3 organization
- Co-location with the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce

Launched/Established

- Independent 501(c)3 organization with governing board
- Office located in Central School

Budget

- Annual Operating budget \$138,000
- Start-up related expenses \$ _____
- 3-5 year funding commitments to support operations for operations
- Funding Sources
 - Memberships – individuals, small businesses
 - Sponsorships – community events, small business education, etc.
 - Fundraising event/activity
 - Foundation grants
 - Fees (booth fees at events)

City/EDA/Grant funding

- Planning, engineering & design studies
- Public works, community development, parks & rec staff time
- Coordination with MNDOT
- EDA financing tools, support for grants & loans to businesses
- Infrastructure investments (e.g., signage, streetscape, lighting)



Stakeholder Engagement

- Volunteers to serve on board & committees
- Financial support for the organization & events
- Advocacy with funders, grantors, city
- Honest feedback
- Publicity & support for opportunities, events, financing tools & downtown businesses
- Celebrate successes!!



What's Next?

- Secure start up funding & volunteers
- Establish interim governance
- Fundraising
- Recruit & hire





Discussion

Thank you!!