

Grand Rapids Downtown Planning Project - Narrative

Fueled by deep community concern about the decline of the downtown commercial district, the current Downtown Redevelopment Master Plan was created in 2006, through an inclusive planning and strategy development process. The Plan has successfully guided public policy decisions and investments as well as stimulated private investment in the Downtown for the past 15 years. A summary of the achievements are described in the comments within the attached copy of the Plan.

As you will see, the majority of the strategies/goals identified in the 2006 Plan have been implemented/achieved in some form. Other strategies have been attempted without success and some have become less relevant with the passage of time.

Unquestionably, the sum of these efforts has put the downtown in a much better position than it was in 2006. Private investment interest is growing, fewer buildings are vacant, blighted conditions are greatly reduced, the public realm is more pedestrian friendly and inviting and the downtown is much more active.

The progress made is certainly worth celebrating, however, now is not the time to relax our efforts. We must build upon the momentum that these successes have powered and create a vision and strategies for the next chapter of downtown revitalization. A vision and strategies that reflect where we are and where we want to be and which are informed by the broader plans for Grand Rapids and the Itasca County community as well as changes in the retail environment, evolving demographics, evolving consumer preferences and enhanced mobility options. The new vision and strategies will be informed by market research that identifies the downtown's economic niche by profiling who is currently visiting and who is apt to visit the downtown and identifies potentially missing business categories, amenities and activities that would serve their interests and create a greater sense of place.

GREDA will be seeking the services of a qualified multi-discipline consultant or consultant team who will be responsible for providing services that result in an updated downtown master plan. The selected consultant team will have considerable experience in developing downtown plans, particularly for communities of a size and standing similar to Grand Rapids, and possess significant urban planning, civil engineering and public engagement capabilities. The consultant team will also possess a depth of experience in community and economic development as well as analysis of market conditions.

The consultant will develop and lead a planning process that features active public participation to combine local knowledge and leadership with professional expertise and guidance. GREDA's intent is to provide its residents, corporate citizens and new investors with a downtown plan that articulates a vision for the short and long-term improvements to the public and private realm that foster additional investment and enhances downtown Grand Rapids as a more livable, walkable and thriving urban center. Public participation may come in a variety of forms including stakeholder interviews, focus groups, surveys, planning meetings and design charrettes. The public participation process will be finalized with the selected firm. At a minimum, participation will be sought from:

- The public at large
- The Grand Rapids Economic Development Authority
- All property owners within the plan area
- All residents within the plan area

- All business owners renting/leasing property within the plan area
- Grand Rapids Area Visitor and Convention Bureau
- The Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce
- Itasca Economic Development Corporation
- City of Grand Rapids Community Development Department Staff
- Other City Departments as necessary and appropriate, such as:
 - Police
 - Public Works
 - Engineering

The scope of work for this project is to prepare an updated downtown master plan with implementation strategies. The planning process will address the following areas:

REVIEW OF CURRENT PLANS

- The planning process should involve stakeholders in gaining an understanding of previous planning, synthesizing and joining the pertinent aspects of past plans to maintain continuity of vision without constricting new ideas and integrating new development influences and community desires. This review of previous planning shall include, but not be limited to:
 - Incorporate into the planning process applicable guidance provide by the City Comprehensive Plan.
 - A review of the 2006 Downtown Redevelopment Masterplan including, at a minimum, a revisit of the Guiding Principles, a review of accomplishments and possible revisions to the planning area boundary.
 - A review of the 2009 Riverfront Framework Plan, in particular areas of overlap with the Downtown Redevelopment Masterplan planning area.
 - A review of the strategies recommended within the City’s arts and culture plan GRMN Creates, an Arts and Culture Roadmap and other arts and culture guiding documents.
 - Other plans that should be reviewed by the consultant for any relevant guidance include: 2014 Grand Rapids Market Area Profile, 2019 City of Grand Rapids Housing Study,

LAND USE

- With stakeholder involvement, assess the assets and liabilities of the downtown to identify the highest opportunity places to create and enhance the network of destinations in the downtown.
- Map current land uses in the downtown and immediate surrounding area and consider unique aspects of downtown sub-areas or districts in the planning process.
- Inventory commercial and retail space vacancy levels and underutilization.
- Identify and prioritize specific sites for development and redevelopment and their preferred uses or adaptive reuses.
- Inventory the status and quality of transportation and circulation systems including automobile parking, pedestrian routes, bicycle parking and micromobility deployment/use.
- Identify cultural, recreational and institutional assets, such as museums, library, art studios, public art, parks, trails and government services and consider how they can be enhanced to better support the downtown as a community gathering space/destination.
- Determine whether and how existing land uses or physical characteristics help or hinder economic development efforts i.e.; parking lot locations, vacant parcels, railroad corridor, variety of businesses, etc.

TRANSPORTATION

- Through the planning process, embrace the perception of streets not only as conduits for automobiles but also, as places that are an opportunity to add value to the community by enhancing economic productivity and social engagement.
- Equitably consider all modes of mobility in downtown transportation planning.
- Consider the current and potential roles for public transit linkages to the downtown.
- Consider non-traffic solutions to traffic problems, such as increasing mixed-use development and high density housing opportunities in and near the downtown.
- Survey the community, and specifically downtown business owners, about traffic concerns, parking, and general accessibility.
- Determine if traffic speeds are appropriate for the downtown context and if calming measures are needed.
- Conduct field surveys to record the amount and location of on and off street parking in the downtown, calculate the parking requirements for existing and future land uses, identify deficiencies, and define short and long-term strategies for improvements to downtown parking, including accommodation of residential and hospitality uses that require longer term parking.
- Review the interaction of on street parking with traffic flow.
- Assess the pedestrians ease in crossing streets and provide recommendations for improvements that do not conflict with other design standards.

URBAN DESIGN IMPROVMENTS

- Affirm the identity of core downtown streets and critical street intersections.
- Catalog existing sidewalk and pathway conditions, and identify important linkages within and connecting to the downtown.
- Identify existing landscaping in the downtown and create a plan to maintain trees and plantings as part of the urban infrastructure.
- Review the existing streetscape elements (vintage lighting, street furnishings, plantings, and sidewalk and street pavement treatments) of the downtown and consider revisions to and/or expansions of it.
- Identify public space opportunities in the downtown and examine their full multi-use potential as a means to create a sense of place and attract and bring people together.
- Consider improvements to the plan/programs for building façade improvement in the downtown.
- Identify priorities for the improvement of on and off street public parking.
- Identify potential infill and new development opportunities in the downtown, prioritize those opportunities, and identify strategies for their implementation.
- Review design guidelines created by the Grand Rapids Economic Development Authority and consider whether similar design guidelines should be established as a universal requirement for the downtown.

MARKET ASSESSMENT, ECONOMIC NICHE AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

- Utilizing available data sources, including access to geo-location data within the downtown and the broader community, as well as credit card data through the City's Datafy (See Source) subscription to profile who is currently visiting the downtown and whom we envision using the downtown.
- Define the downtown's economic niche to inform strategies for marketing, promotion and design/appearance.
- Provide recommendations for how the downtown can better serve these categories of users.

- Identify business categories that may be missing from the downtown that would serve the interests of the identified categories of visitor users and local users.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Define strategies, including financing options, for implementation of all aspects of a downtown plan that takes into consideration: need, feasibility, and consistency with the downtown vision.
- Assess the organizational capacity of community stakeholders to play a role in implementation.
- Strategies will identify sub-tasks and timelines where appropriate and assign roles and responsibilities for community stakeholders.

The key element to the success of this project is active public engagement across all stakeholder groups. Active engagement generates buy-in, enthusiasm and desire to be involved in the implementation of goals and strategies. Through a City Comprehensive Plan public survey, it is clear that the citizens greatly value the downtown and want it to be improved. We are confident we will be successful in engaging the public in this project.

The implementation strategies will focus on which stakeholders will play a role in carrying out various actions within the plan based upon their organizational capacity and strengths. The assignment of implementation roles will act to sustain the engagement of stakeholders.

Question 2: What are your feelings about redevelopment in the following locations?

Location	Like it the way it is now	Needs some attention	Major updates needed	Total Responses
A: Downtown	90	264	155	509
B: Highway 2 W corridor from city limits to Downtown	69	263	163	495
C: Riverfront area from 7 th Avenue to Blandin	180	233	96	509
D: EDA Block 21 (across from KAXE library on 2 nd Street NE)	157	236	100	493
E: EDA Block 5 (old recycling center site on 3 rd Street NE)	62	244	172	478
F: Former Kmart site on Highway 169 S	18	103	387	508

