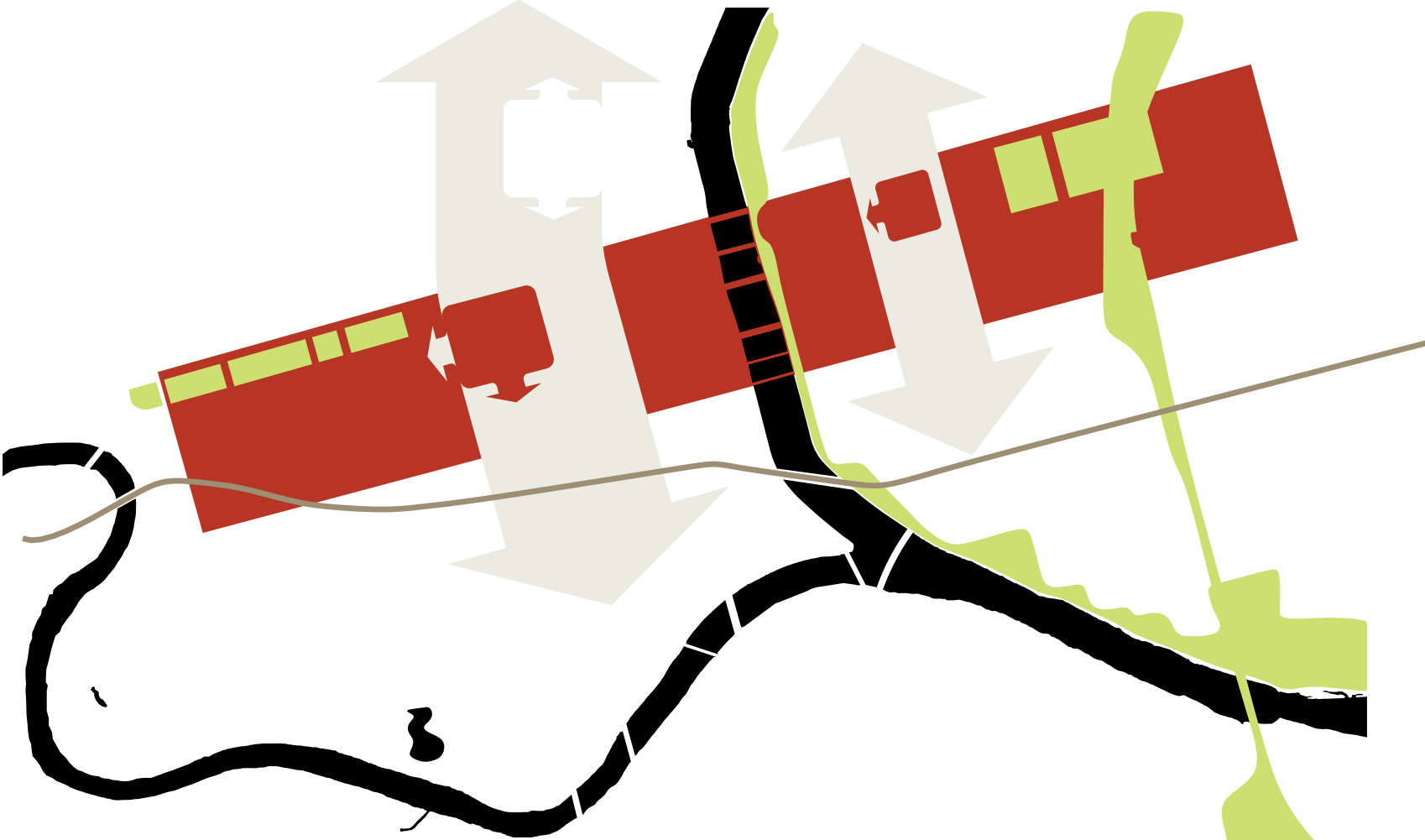


What's Next, Downtown?



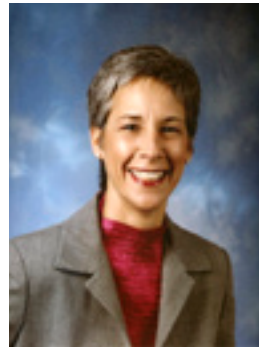
Approved by the Des Moines City Council: March 10, 2008 [resolution 08-110]
Approved by the Polk County Board of Supervisors: March 11, 2008
Endorsed by the Downtown Community Alliance Board of Directors

downtown des moines
planning project

Steering Committee Chairman:
Franklin Cownie, City of Des Moines Mayor



Steering Committee Co-Chairwoman:
Angela Connolly, Polk County Board of Supervisors



Steering Committee Co-Chairman:
Jim Cownie, 2007 Chair of the
Greater Des Moines Partnership



Downtown Planning Project Steering Committee:

Franklin Cownie (Chairman), Angela Connolly (Co-Chairwoman), Jim Cownie (Co-Chairman), Mollie Anderson, Chris Coleman, Eric Crowell (Joe Corfits - alternate), Dann Flaherty (Kaye Lozier - alternate), Todd Garner, Marian Gelb, Christine Hensley, David Hurd, Kevin Johnson, Joe LeValley, Robb McCammon, Brian Meyer, Mary O'Keefe, Sarah Oltrogge, John Ruan, Art Slusark, Mike Utley, Marc Ward, and Ben Washburn

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Downtown Community Alliance: Mary Lawyer

Project Liaison: Andrea Hauer, City of Des Moines

Consultants:

Mario Gandelonas and Diana Agrest, Agrest and Gandelonas
Erin Olson-Douglas

I am pleased to share “What’s Next, Downtown” with you. After a decade of unparalleled downtown investment resulting from the 1994 Vision Plan, this plan identifies “What’s Next” for our future. It provides initiatives and best practices for our city to build on our accomplishments and create Des Moines as a truly great American city for the 21st Century.

This great vision could not have been possible without the noteworthy partnership that produced this Plan. The City of Des Moines, Polk County, and Downtown Community Alliance, representing the business community, came together to form an unprecedented collaboration. This joint effort puts the most important ideas forward for the advancement of downtown and offers the best possibility of realizing the ambitious proposals held within this Plan.

If you look at downtown today, you see the fruits of our city’s projects ranging from the century-old gems to a glistening new Public Library, Science Center, and Iowa Events Center. Principal Riverwalk is under construction and a world class sculpture collection is slated for placement in Gateway Park. New corporate offices, delectable restaurants, a wide variety of housing options and interesting shops have created an appealing environment for workers, residents and visitors. We are fortunate to have engaged leadership, civic pride and passionate supporters that invest in the downtown and take on projects for the betterment of our community.

We have accomplished many major new projects in the past few years. When we embarked upon this downtown plan, it was important to us that we support these new investments while expanding these developments in a sustainable way for the future. We want to create a vibrant urban area in which we achieve a sustainable future in business, residential, cultural and recreation areas.

We started this planning process by asking the basic question of how we wanted our downtown to function, look and feel to us as its users and what the downtown will need so that future generations will continue to identify Des Moines as the heart of Iowa.

Our answer centered around providing connections for where we work, live and ‘play’. The way which we move about our city became a consummate underpinning of how we ensure these successes. Providing transportation options --- including a downtown tram to connect various places in downtown, uniting our unique skywalk system with re-invigorated sidewalks, and a notion of a ‘green’ downtown with parks, trails, bike lanes, connections to our Rivers -- emerged as key ideas to transform the way we use our downtown. We are enthusiastic about these ‘movement’ proposals that will enhance the livability of the metropolitan area and the development potential of downtown.

I have a special interest in downtown as owner of a century-old family business that has its origins on Market Street. I know first-hand that urban development faces distinct challenges. It can also realize great rewards. Downtown must continue to build on its strength as a regional business hub for large and small businesses. We must ensure that ‘living downtown’ grows in its attractiveness and the downtown population continues to expand. Cultural development in downtown has reached a new pinnacle with an array of live performance events and venues, new restaurants and unique shops. However, we know we have not reached our full potential. To strengthen our livability and economic attractiveness, our cultural options must expand and excel.

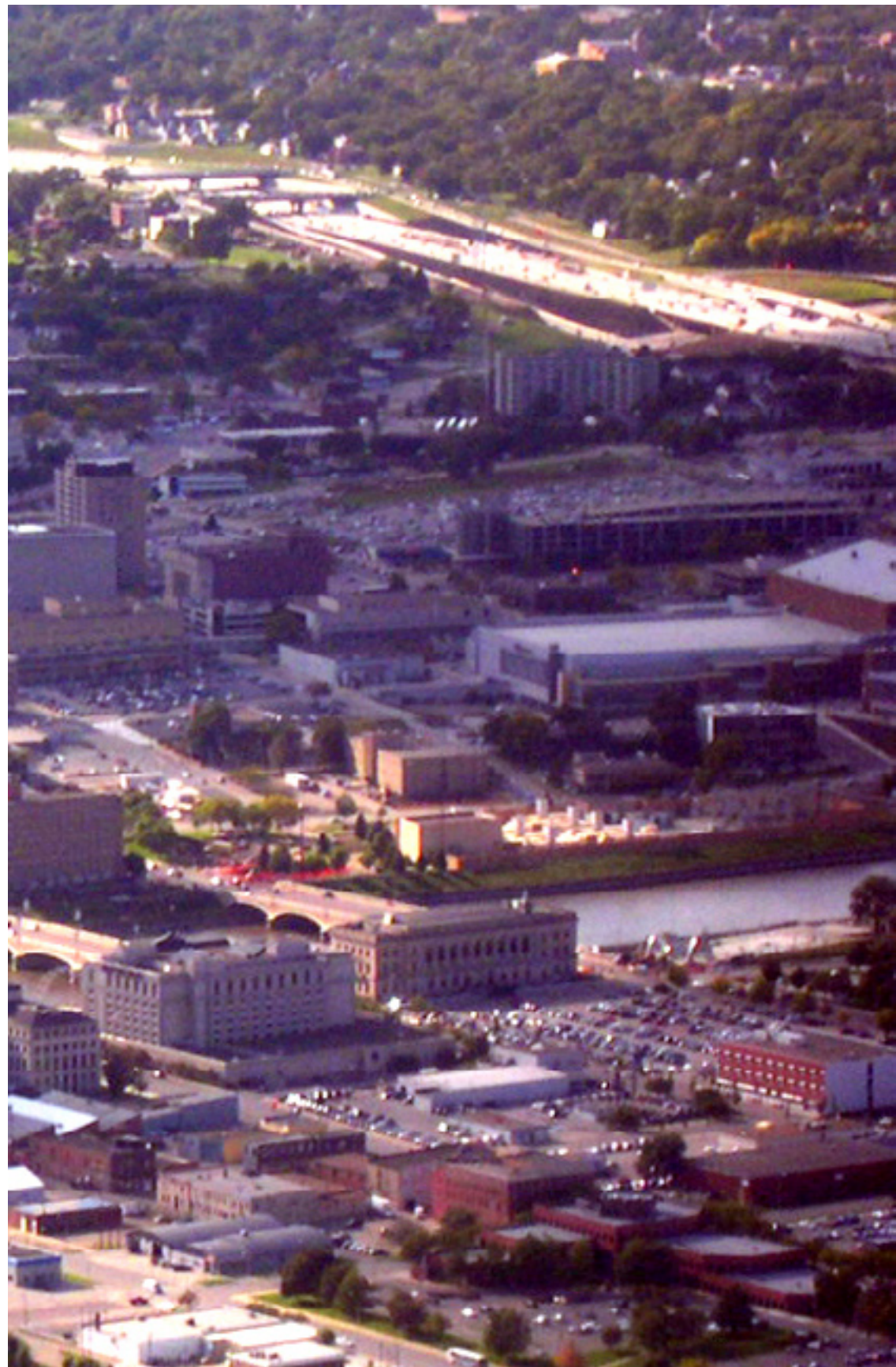
Much has been accomplished. For that, we offer our thanks. Yet, to stride ahead, BOLDLY, into the 21st Century, much is left to do. Our enthusiasm for these “What’s Next” initiatives is profuse; our collective commitment is steadfast. As with the accomplishments of those before us, we set our standards high. We challenge you to join us as we create a great city with world-class achievements that will be our legacy for the next generations.

Respectfully,

T. M. Franklin Cownie
Mayor, City of Des Moines
Steering Committee Chairman



aerial photograph of downtown looking northwest: Des Moines River and downtown Des Moines skyline, September 2006



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

downtown des moines planning project

OVERVIEW

Downtown Des Moines has been the recipient of unprecedented investment in the past decade. Nearly \$2.8 billion dollars have been spent on a broad range of downtown projects since the turn of the millennium in this metropolitan area with a population of about half million people. Visionary ambitions outlined by several significant planning efforts in the 1980-1990's, including the Des Moines Vision Plan and the Major Projects Task Force findings, inspired a wave of investment in civic, commercial, residential, infrastructure and recreational projects, and spurred a sense of collaboration among the business community, the City of Des Moines, and Polk County. This collaborative spirit, paired with the momentum of recent successes, has produced a shared desire to understand the implications of this recent downtown activity, capitalize on the investments, and plan for new opportunities.

The Downtown Des Moines Planning Project is a co-sponsored study by the City of Des Moines, Polk County, and Downtown Community Alliance. These groups collectively recognized the accomplishments that have been made as well as the potential of our downtown. This project comes at a juncture where people from across the city, metropolitan, state and region are beginning to look at this thriving urban area for much more than its

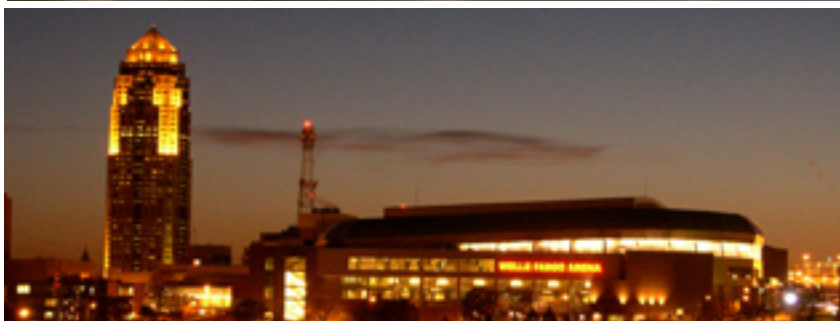
traditional role as an employment center. In addition to providing approximately 70,000 jobs, downtown Des Moines is now home to several thousand residents and, with such venues as the Iowa Events Center, Principal Park, the Brenton Skating Plaza, Court Avenue, the Civic Center of Greater Iowa and Gateway Park, it also serves as a regional entertainment center and visitor destination.

Utilizing the foundations of Des Moines' earliest planning, this project builds on the unique and exemplary 20th Century urban structure with Locust Street's view to the State Capitol, Court Avenue's focus on the Polk County Courthouse and our civic Des Moines Riverfront. This project supports our new downtown amenities, aiming to bolster their utilization. The contribution of the ideas presented herewithin is the way that they will significantly alter how people *use* our downtown area and the many opportunities it offers. These ideas enhance our downtown and prepare our city for economic, social, environmental, and cultural advances that will benefit future generations.

Much progress has been made in downtown Des Moines; much is left to do. Please enjoy the following pages and indulge yourself: imagine how you and future generations will use our downtown with the proposed initiatives.

GOALS

1. Identify future downtown opportunities
2. Propose frameworks that capitalize on existing and future downtown investments and/or catalyze further development.
3. Develop strategies for building synergy and linkages between downtown amenities, such as:
 - Iowa Events Center, the Brenton Ice Skating Plaza, Iowa Historical Building, Iowa State Capitol, East Locust Street and the East Village, Botanical Center, Principal Riverwalk, Center Street Pedestrian Bridge, Asian Gardens, World Food Prize Headquarters, Civic Center and Nollen Plaza, Central Library, Western Gateway Park, Court Avenue, Science Center of Iowa, Principal Park, Gray's Lake Park, John Dorrian downtown trail network (including Meredith Trail, Kruidenier Trail, the ML King Jr. Trail, and the Principal Riverwalk), Pappajohn Higher Education Center, and Hoyt Sherman Place.
4. Generate support from the public and private sectors and expand momentum for downtown investment.



photographs (clockwise from upper left): the Court Avenue bridge across the Des Moines River, the Iowa State Capitol at the east end of East Locust Street, warehouse conversion to housing on Court Avenue, Central Public Library in Gateway Park, East Village shops on East Locust Street, Wells Fargo Arena at the Iowa Events Center



Over \$2.8B invested in downtown Des Moines since 2000!

VISION and PRINCIPLES

Des Moines City Council Goal for a “vibrant downtown area”

Downtown Des Moines will be a ‘24-7’ city within a city with a strong employment base, and a variety of opportunities for entertainment, recreation, housing, and retail.

*per 2006 Des Moines City Council 12 Goals
authored by Mayor Cownie and Council members Coleman, Kiernan, Hensley, Mahaffey, and Vlassis.*

Downtown Des Moines has traditionally been the metropolitan area’s commercial business center. It is now increasingly a leisure and entertainment destination for metropolitan residents and state, regional, and national visitors. Meanwhile, the past five years have seen downtown become the residential location of choice for a growing number of people.

As this plan developed, it becomes evident we are asking our downtown to provide a place not only for working, but also for living and playing. In addition to providing a downtown for this array of uses, public input suggested that, as the core of our city, our county, and our state, downtown Des Moines will be most successful if it concentrates on a few key principles. Overlaying the vision for a “vibrant downtown area,” the following principles were recurring themes in discussions with the steering committee, stakeholders, and from the input offered by several hundred people who attended public meetings throughout the process:

Vibrant: Exciting. Stimulating. Lively. Energetic. Full of activity. Animated. Colorful. These are all terms used to describe a vibrant downtown. Ultimately, this principle comes downtown to people. The proposals strive to create a downtown that is inviting, vibrant place for people to live, work, and play.

Healthy: Fit. Prosperous. Clean. Strength. Flourishing. Active. This principal has a couple of applications. First, it calls for aspects which improve the wellness of people in the city -- trails, recreation facilities, pedestrian focus, bicyclist amenities, and events. “Healthy” also refers to the environmental quality of our urban environment. Proposals made in this plan, such as downtown transit, mixed use development, greening downtown, and celebrating the Rivers, adhere to sound environmental principles and will improve the health of our downtown.

Diverse: Variety. Unique. Different. Distinct. Interesting. Diversity was identified as one of downtown Des Moines’ unique advantages, with planning participants identifying that downtown’s diversity needs to be fostered in order to achieve future successes. Diversifying business, cultural, and housing opportunities will encourage interest in downtown from a variety of Des Moines residents and visitors.

Accessible: Open. Available. Inviting. Approachable. Usable. Many of those participating in the plan input expressed an egalitarian view of downtown Des Moines. It is important that downtown is appealing and accessible to a wide range of ages, income levels, and demographic backgrounds. This principle addresses our cultural offerings, range of housing and transportation options, and business opportunities.

PROPOSALS

Proposals are grouped into two categories: ***Movement*** and ***Development***.

Movement concepts address the ways which people get around downtown and move between places in the city. Typically, these proposals are associated with public sector investment or public-private collaboration.

Development proposals are somewhat speculative. They generally address private sector response to a number of conditions, including recent investments in the downtown as well as those proposed in the *Movement* section.

MOVEMENT recommendations:

- Transform Walnut Street
- Create a downtown transit system
- Introduce a network of urban bike lanes
- Improve walkability
- Skywalk revival
- Integrate parking
- Create a network of urban public spaces
- Celebrate the Rivers
- Sustainability as a core principle

DEVELOPMENT recommendations:

- Downtown as a business hub
- Downtown as the center of many seats of government
- Living downtown
- High density mixed use development
- Enticing and unique retail, restaurant, entertainment, and hospitality opportunities
- Excellence in downtown education
- Expanded downtown cultural offerings
- Celebrate downtown’s arts, architecture, and culture
- Sustainability as a core principle



long-term plan for potential development in downtown Des Moines

MOVEMENT

Walnut Street Transformation

Stretching from one end of the downtown to the other and crossing the Des Moines River, Walnut Street covers a range of urban conditions from old warehouses and single story service shops mixed with fledgling art galleries to the west, to a vacant department store, multi-million dollar corporate headquarters, high rise office buildings, an urban public plaza at the center, to civic buildings at the River, to sparse development at the east before passing the State Capitol with its verdant grounds. The mid-1980's saw a 7-block stretch of Walnut Street converted to a metropolitan bus transit mall.

This proposal removes the devoted bus-only use and returns Walnut to a conventional urban street, suggesting that it become a "movement spine" through the downtown. Walnut Street Transformation proposes 2-way traffic, on-street parking, bike lanes, active ground level uses, renewed landscape, vertical skywalk access points and that Walnut Street serve as the route for a new downtown transit system. This proposal explores the creation of nodes for transit stops that serve as locations for higher intensity development. Three of these nodes (15th Street, 2nd/3rd Streets, and East 6th Street) would also serve as the location for future north-south downtown transit routes.

Transforming Walnut Street imagines a significant shift in the way that people use downtown Des Moines



Transforming Walnut Street includes all modes of downtown movement: walking, biking, autos, and transit

Skywalks & Sidewalks

Des Moines' skywalk system is the most extensive system of its kind in this country with more than three miles of public walkways including sixty bridges crossing downtown streets and alleys. From its 1970's inception, the system has focused on creating an interior experience at the second level of buildings and above the streets. The skywalk system is largely blamed for siphoning activity from the sidewalks. With the oldest skywalk sections are approaching thirty years, many parts of the system are showing their age. Meanwhile, attention to sidewalks has mainly been perfunctory.

A thorough modernization plan is needed to carry the system into the next generation. Most importantly, *Skywalks & Sidewalks* proposes re-examining the links between the ground and skywalk levels. A network of identifiable vertical access points between the skywalk and sidewalk levels is proposed. Highest priority for these vertical links are new development and Walnut Street, where connections can be made to downtown transit. Expansion of the skywalk boundary to connect to emerging areas, such as Gateway Park, Methodist Hospital, Wells Fargo Arena, Court Avenue, and north of Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway is explored. Finally, improvements to the skywalk system need to coincide with a commitment to improving the quality of the sidewalk experience. Priority streets are identified as a part of this proposal.

Vibrant and beautiful urban street life with our unique skywalk system would elevate the pedestrian experience at both levels while promoting use of downtown during our harshest seasons.



Greening Downtown

Downtown is truly a hub for regional trail users with its connection to over 300 miles of Central Iowa trails. Public spaces such as Nollen Plaza and the State Capitol Grounds, as well as the open spaces at private companies such as Principal Financial and American Republic Insurance offer downtown's workforce respite for lunchtime outings and breaks. However, as downtown becomes a place to live and play, the open space needs to adapt to its new users.

Greening Downtown proposes a network of parks that includes active uses such as playing courts, dog parks, water activities, playgrounds, and community gardens. This network of parks utilizes the strong tradition of trails that converge in downtown and includes a proposal for a system of urban bike lanes linking to the trail system and downtown parks and providing a viable transportation alternative. One of the most significant projects currently underway in downtown is the Principal Riverwalk, a one-mile riverfront revitalization project that includes a loop trails, and a promenade as well as a series of discrete parks. *Greening Downtown* proposes building on this momentum of celebrating the Rivers to include water activities and recreation, attention to the bridges, and riverfront development.

Greening Downtown would produce a downtown system of parks and open spaces that enhance daily life of downtown workers and residents, attract visitors, and promote bicycling as a viable transportation mode as well as recreational activity.



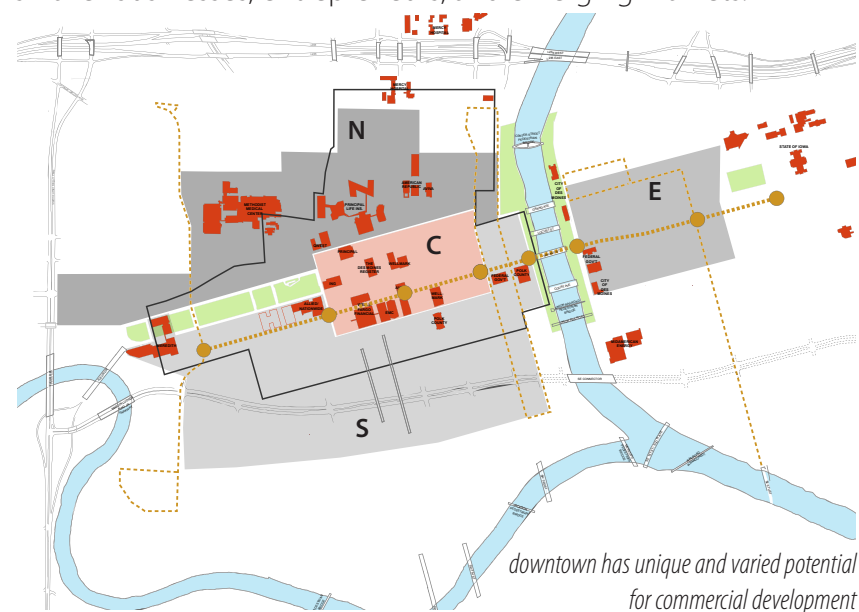
DEVELOPMENT

Downtown as a Business Hub

Recent investments in downtown, as well as those proposed in the *Movement* section, create a wide variety of commercial opportunities in downtown.

This section identifies four distinct areas of downtown with unique development potential. The northern section (N) offers frontage on Gateway Park, as well as adjacency to the newly reconstructed I-235 freeway. It has the benefit of being almost entirely within the boundary of the skywalk system. The eastern section (E) is defined by the State Capitol and the East Village. Infill, adaptive reuse, and new construction are all available in this area. Access created by transit on Walnut and E. 6th Streets will allow greater flexibility for live, work, and parking situations. Riverfront development is also an opportunity in this area. The southern section (S) benefits greatly from the new Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway. The Parkway offers a range of highly-visible, easily-accessible commercial development opportunities with skywalk access possible to blocks north of the Parkway. The central core (C) is a compact collection of mainly for-lease office space, offering adequate parking, skywalk connection, and transit access. Some infill and redevelopment opportunities exist throughout the core.

Taken together, these areas support traditional insurance and financial service strengths while providing opportunities for smaller businesses, entrepreneurs, and emerging markets.



Living Downtown

Through targeted initiatives, downtown Des Moines has doubled its downtown residential population in recent years. With approximately 6500 people living downtown, there is evidence of a market for downtown housing and the first threshold has been cleared for attracting downtown residents. Many more opportunities for downtown housing abound, meanwhile establishing a vibrant downtown area is dependent upon a robust resident population.

Living Downtown identifies areas where creating downtown neighborhoods is possible. Through public input, it was clear that those who live in Des Moines identify with a specific neighborhood in the city. In the course of developing additional housing, downtown has the potential to offer unique neighborhoods as well. East Village, South of Sherman Hill, Gateway West, Gray's Landing, Court Avenue, South of the Parkway, Lower East Village, Northeast Riverfront, and Oakridge all have the possibility to be distinct, vibrant neighborhoods in the downtown area.

If developed to appropriate urban densities, these areas represent the capacity for adding 8,000 - 12,000 housing units to downtown. While this is an exciting prospect for the city, it also requires focus in order to create densities that will support the range of urban amenities, such as parks, retail, services, transportation, and education, that entice people to live downtown.

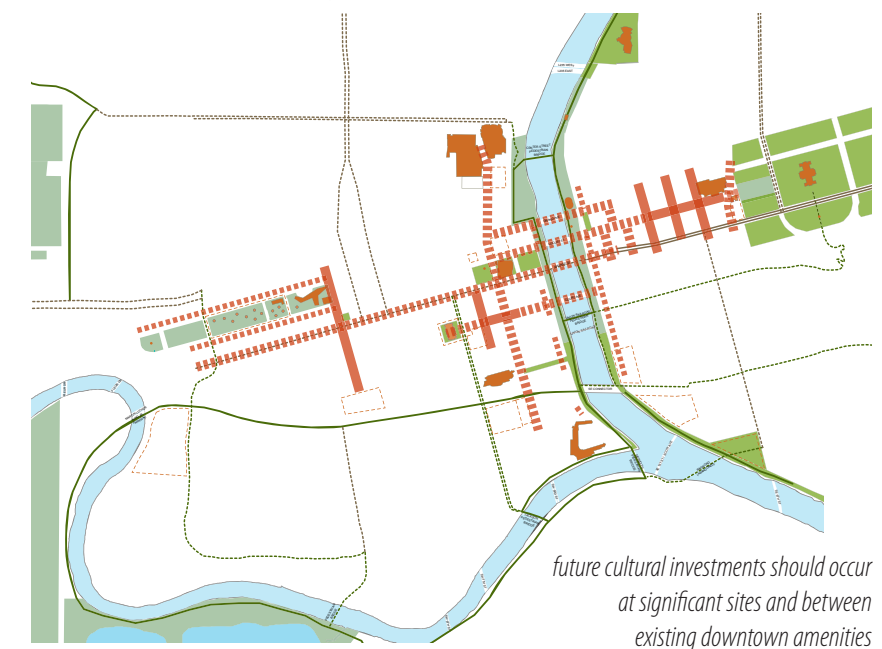


Cultural Development

As with residential development in downtown, significant cultural amenities have emerged in recent years. Since 2000, downtown has realized a new Science Center, new Central Library, an Events Center with its multi-purpose arena and convention space, Gateway Park, new bars and restaurants on Court Avenue, and specialty retail and eateries in the rejuvenated East Village. These important places impact all areas of the downtown, but are separated from each other by several blocks.

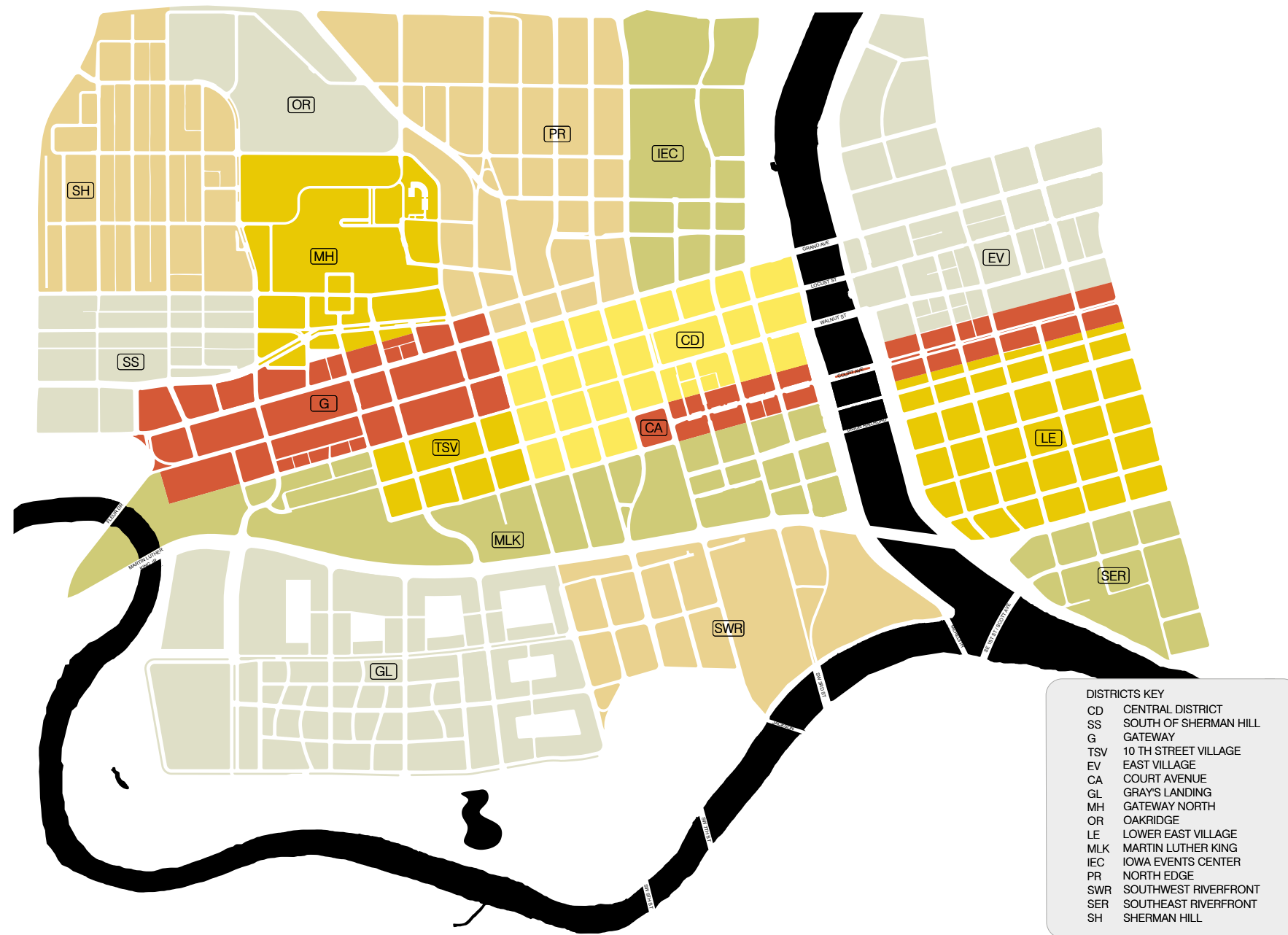
Cultural Development proposes that future cultural attractions such as retail, restaurants, arts venues, entertainment amenities, and hospitality concentrate along strategic routes to improve connections between our important cultural amenities. This section also identifies significant sites for future cultural development such that these future investments best support existing amenities and downtown's unique urban structure. Historic resources, notable historical civic structures, and the future of this civic presence in downtown are also identified in this section. Establishing a fourth downtown cultural district at the west end of Walnut Street is proposed to bolster the existing and planned arts activity in this area.

Cultural Development imagines enhancing one's experience of downtown Des Moines, supporting existing and future cultural resources and effectively drawing scattered places closer together.



DISTRICT PLANNING and DESIGN GUIDELINES

As downtown has evolved in the past decade or so, the challenge of connecting the east and west parts of downtown is being overcome. This accomplishment opens up opportunities to discover the quilt of districts that surround the traditional core of downtown. This graphic provides a key to the districts that are discussed individually in the *District Planning and Design Guidelines* section of the report.



The *District Planning and Design Guidelines* are intended to reinforce the proposals made in the *movement* and *development* chapters and provide an introduction to the potential for the various districts. A forthcoming *Volume II*, an informational resource to this Plan, will offer further guidance and greater detail for each district through a series of plans and diagrams.

Additionally, this section offers general guidelines for downtown as a whole. They are sound urban planning principles explained in a manner that relates to downtown Des Moines and addresses issues such as density, balancing modes of transportation, parking, quality construction and development, sustainability, scale, mix of uses, and landscape.

PLAN PRIORITIES

The proposals outlined in this plan, when implemented, represent a bold shift in the way in which workers, residents and visitors use and access our downtown. They are forward-thinking and take a proactive stance to create a vibrant, accessible, diverse, and healthy urban area for the Des Moines metropolitan area.

The steps to achieve these proposals are heavily interrelated and will expand the collaboration across public and private sectors, among public entities, and between areas of expertise that have brought downtown's recent accomplishments to fruition. Teamwork spanning traditional boundaries and jurisdictions will be essential to achieve the proposals outlined in this plan.

The *Plan Priorities* section examines the steps necessary to achieve the vision in the plan. Here we see the ambition that will be necessary to achieve the proposals over a 20-year time horizon. Success relies on quality private investment and judicious public improvements; both must make a formidable commitment to accomplish the next steps in downtown's evolution. For example, commitment and investment to create Gateway Park led to ING, Meredith Corporation, and Allied /Nationwide's office buildings in western downtown. Construction of Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway has been a catalyst for the location of the Science Center of Iowa and proposals for Gray's Landing. Similar commitments to infrastructure and open space will stir continued evolution of downtown.

The PLAN

The following Plan document is organized into five chapters. [Chapter 1](#) provides context for this planning project and covers the process that was undertaken to produce the Plan. [Chapter 2](#) provides detail on the Movement proposals. [Chapter 3](#) provides detail about the Development proposals. [Chapter 4](#) outlines basic planning and design guidelines for the various districts comprising downtown as they relate to the *Movement* and *Development* proposals. This chapter also reviews basic guidelines for planning and design in the whole of downtown Des Moines. [Chapter 5](#) looks at phasing and implementation of the proposals outlined in the plan by offering the Plan's top priorities and projects implementation in intervals over a 20-year time horizon.