
A PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN GRAND FORKS

Mayor's Downtown Vibrancy Group

ENGAGE. ANIMATE. CATALYZE.



ENGAGE

Downtown Grand Forks offers something for everyone.

ANIMATE

Thoughtful design can improve people's lives.

CATALYZE

Mobilizing the right community policies, processes, partners, and resources to improve Grand Forks



CONTENTS

PG / 04

Summary & Introduction

10

Defining Downtown

14

Development Ideas

24

Bold Public Spaces

28

A Way Forward

08

Why Downtown?

13

Looking to the Future

16

Improving Transportation

26

Animate Street Life

30

Conclusion & Next Steps

A PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN GRAND FORKS

Mayor's Downtown Vibrancy Group

about the project

The Mayor's Vibrancy Initiative (MVI) was introduced with full recognition that Grand Forks IS a vibrant community. Many motivated organizations, both public and private, sponsor and support numerous quality events, a rich cultural environment, and a unique community identity. But, knowing that these elements have become vital to a city's long-term economic health and success, can we do better? Would a more strategic approach allocate public- and private-sector resources more efficiently and with greater impact?

To define 21st century priorities and develop action-oriented strategies to move them forward, the MVI began organizing in early 2015 around three distinct but interconnected focus areas: Arts & Events, Downtown Development, UND/City Relations. And while this was labeled the Mayor's Vibrancy Initiative, it was led by private-sector individuals who were -- and continue to be -- committed, knowledgeable, and willing to lead a community conversation on their respective subjects. Each group was autonomous but all had the following in common:

- Now is the time – Grand Forks has outgrown existing modes/models
- Greater good – pursue what's best for the community, not individual interests or groups
- Private sector led – each group determined its own membership, work plan, schedule
- Strategic and sustainable – maximize impact, minimize duplication

The Downtown Vibrancy Group assembled in March 2015 to help chart a path to the future for Downtown Grand Forks. This ten-member community group gathered monthly for 18 months to discuss the future of downtown, consulted with the community and outside experts during Downtown Day in 2015 and 2016, gathered ideas during Alley Alive, and held a community input session in March 2016 to discuss specific concepts.

Trips to Winnipeg and Ft. Collins brought members together with other community leaders to emphasize common goals, broaden perspectives, share insights and spur inspiration. Public forums and listening sessions tested and refined findings. This confluence of energy and effort extended beyond the MVI: the City was simultaneously partnering with UND to evaluate a potential "vibrancy district," with the Community Foundation on the Arts + Culture Master Plan, and with the Library Board to pursue a 21st century facility for Grand Forks.

As stones were uncovered and new ideas emerged, what was expected to be a "short term" group process extended well into a second year. But it was clear: Grand Forks IS ready to move to the next level, with the Vibrancy Initiative providing direction on how to do just that.



Downtown Vibrancy Group Membership

CO-CHAIRS:

Jim Galloway, *JLG & Chamber BGEA Committee co-chair*

Jonathan Holth, *Toasted Frog & DDA Board Member*

MEMBERS:

Eric Burin, *UND History Dept.*

Kevin Ritterman, *Dakota Commercial & Development*

Maureen Storstad, *City Finance Dept.*

Klaus Thiessen, *Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corporation*

Bret Weber, *City Council*

Brad Wehe, *Altru Health System*

Margaret Williams, *UND School of Business & Public Admin.*

Chris Wolf, *Alerus Financial*

FACILITATOR:

Mark Schill, *Praxis Strategy Group*

STAFF:

Planning and Community Development Department

REPORT MAPS & SKETCHES:

Samuel Erickson, *JLG Architects*

Shawn Senescall, *JLG Architects*



SUMMARY & INTRODUCTION

Downtown Grand Forks is the community's most unique neighborhood, a critical part of the community's identity, culture, and history. The Downtown Vibrancy Group's work and the development of this plan were guided by one fundamental question: "What is best for the community of Grand Forks?" The downtown experience reflects our personality and vitality for residents, visitors, and business. This makes downtown a key part of any community's economic future and talent development equation.

Why Downtown? The economy is changing and our community must compete for high-end knowledge industries and the people who work at these businesses. With this economic shift comes a change in our city's function. Whether it's a single family home or an apartment downtown, people now wish to work closer to where they live and reduce their commutes. The desire for mixed use neighborhoods and working at home are both part of this trend.

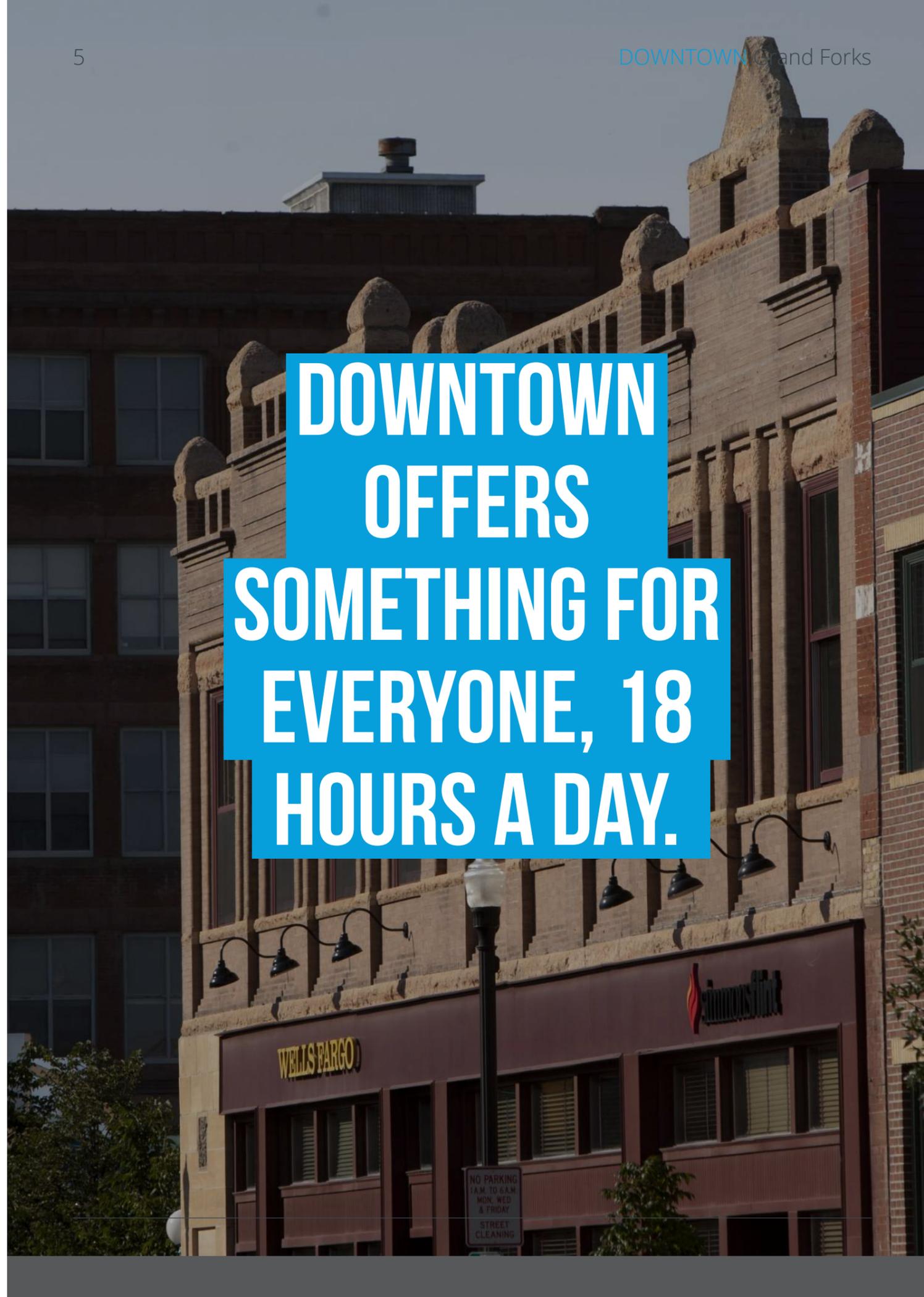
There are several reasons why downtown is important:

- Its uniqueness offers Grand Forks a competitive advantage in competing for businesses and workers.
- It's our only truly mixed-use neighborhood, where we can experience greenspace, arts and culture, civic institutions, history, and community events.

- Downtowns are simply more fiscally efficient for local communities, including Grand Forks.
- More housing downtown can help alleviate the housing shortage without costly new infrastructure.
- Downtown is critical to our community's identity and to recruiting new people to our region.

Downtown has seen many successes in recent years, including a surge in growth of housing; successful shops and restaurants; growth of large anchor professional services firms; an active town square; Art Fest, Alley Alive and many other civic events; and the ground-up formation of a neighborhood advocacy organization: the Downtown Development Association.

Downtown Grand Forks is riding a significant wave of momentum and positive development. Nearly 20 years ago, Grand Forks city leaders made the conscious – and unpopular among some – decision to reinvest in downtown after the flood and fire disasters. That investment has paid off. Many businesses returned. It is now a hub of nightlife, cultural, and community events. Community members are stepping forward to engage and support downtown. New private investments and developments are emerging. We should continue to make incremental improvements to our downtown, and it's time for another round of thoughtful big ideas.



**DOWNTOWN
OFFERS
SOMETHING FOR
EVERYONE, 18
HOURS A DAY.**

DOWNTOWN'S FUTURE

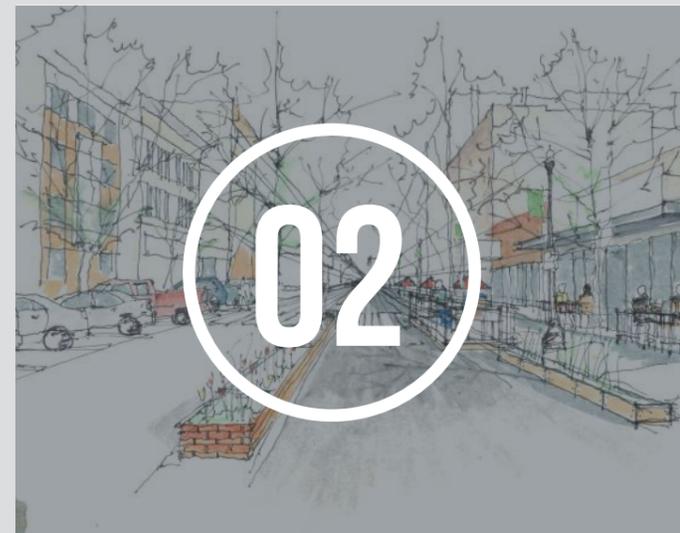
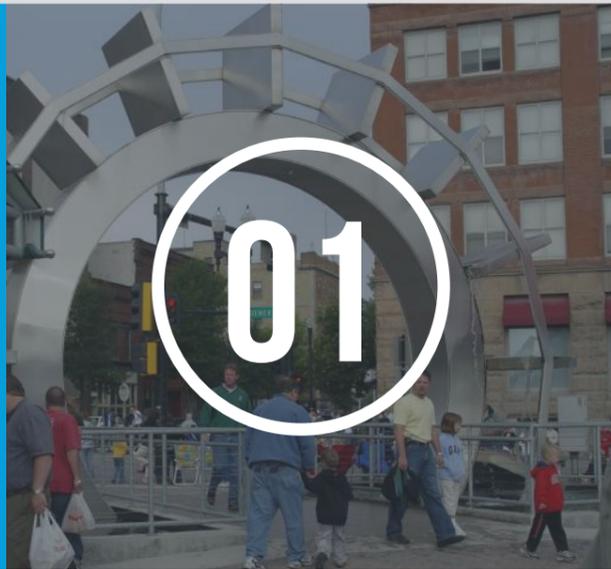
Here are several guidelines to shape future development in downtown Grand Forks (outlined further on pg 13):

- *Continue to place a high priority on places to live downtown.* Residential development is the foundation of development downtown because more residents will mean more businesses and amenities downtown.
- *New developments should be mixed use buildings with "retail ready" commercial space on the first floor.*
- *Support existing and create new community open streets events downtown.*
- *Protect the architectural history of existing buildings but allow for style evolution in new structures.*
- *Consider surface parking lots and other open spaces to be transitional land uses.*
- *Embrace winter with new community events and implementing winter design and planning practices.*

It's time to take the next step. There are several concrete actions we can take to help us make downtown Grand Forks the best it can be. A great downtown makes for a great Grand Forks. Here are **five big ideas** to form the foundation of the future of downtown Grand Forks.

Create bold public spaces.

Public gathering space and art is critical to downtown. Town Square should be improved to become a hub for events, daily civic life, and public art downtown. Town Square could become a highly-trafficked public sculpture garden, a daily hang out space, and a place for major community events all with a better integration with the Greenway. The area of town surrounding the Sorlie Bridge over the Red River offers perhaps the best opportunity to be a hub of local public life in Grand Forks. This unique confluence of assets should be the starting point for a future long-term technical plan for open space downtown.



Animate street life downtown.

Design matters. Downtown is unique in that it offers many different activities and amenities for all ages at different times of day. This makes it our manifestation of the "18-hour city," an active neighborhood for 18 hours each day. Because of its momentum, the Third Street corridor offers the best opportunity to activate street life using streetscape improvement efforts. Grand Forks should begin by making small aesthetic and streetscape investments and moving forward with a technical streetscape improvement plan.



Improve access to and around downtown.

Every form of transportation in Grand Forks has a role downtown. Downtown can be reached by car from nearly everywhere in the city in less than ten minutes. It is perhaps the most walkable area of town, it offers bike infrastructure, and it is home to the city's transit hub. Downtown could benefit from a bike share and rapid transit partnership with UND, improved transit, and streetscape improvements for walkers. There are 4,000 parking spaces downtown. In the final analysis, parking is a solvable issue in downtown Grand Forks improved by creating awareness and partnerships.

Spur development in key emerging areas downtown.

The former water treatment plant site could provide an anchor site with river views and a connection to Minnesota in future years. Several city-owned and private lots in the core area surrounding Demers on 3rd and 4th Streets present key opportunities for infill development while preserving displaced art. The Demers Avenue corridor from 5th Street towards the warehouse area near the overpass could present the next key corridor. Redevelopment at the corner of North 5th and University Avenue could provide the anchor for a resurgence along University Avenue in both directions.



Mobilize the right community policies, partners & resources to improve downtown.

We should forge the partnerships needed to invest existing economic development funds in space and infrastructure downtown to create a new type of industrial park catering to the knowledge-based companies we need. Downtown development is economic development; it supports the entire community. These multi-agency, multi-stakeholder partnerships will create the capacity we need to sustain the future of Grand Forks.

Why Downtown?

Great downtowns make great towns

Why downtown? Because a successful downtown is a successful Grand Forks. Downtown is everybody's neighborhood. The Downtown Vibrancy Group's work and the development of this plan was guided by one fundamental question: "What is best for the community of Grand Forks?"

Success Downtown

More job opportunities have materialized in Grand Forks in the past two decades. To compete in the knowledge-based economy, Grand Forks needs to leverage what makes it unique. Downtown is the unique confluence of our greenspace, arts and culture, civic institutions, history, and community events.

Several forces have shaped downtown Grand Forks:

- The growth of shopping malls and big-box retail in the southern reaches of the community in the 1980s;
- The flood and fire of the 1990s; and
- A period of reinvestment and growth in residents and local businesses in the last decade.

Downtown Grand Forks is the community's most unique neighborhood, a critical part of the community's identity, culture, and history. Beginning with its role as a hub for early fur traders at the confluence of two rivers, the landing of steamboat captain Alexander Griggs, and its role as the original town site after city incorporation in 1881, downtown Grand Forks is uniquely ours. It offers us the opposite of the "anywhere USA" feeling induced by modern strip mall developments.

Its role has changed over the decades, but downtown has remained the home of many of

Grand Forks's civic institutions; its arts community; a gathering place for its signature outdoor events; and many unique restaurants, shops, and social outlets. The downtown experience reflects our personality and vitality for residents, visitors, and business. This makes downtown a key part of any community's economic future and talent development equation.

New Economic Drivers

Economic development focuses on companies that export, typically manufacturing. In past decades this meant communities across the country would hope to create jobs by luring large manufacturing companies. Most communities have invested in industrial park land at the edge of the city to become space for new factories to locate.

Manufacturing remains important to any city's economy; however, the national manufacturing sector is thriving with fewer and fewer workers every year, just as agriculture did decades ago. At the same time the economy has changed as technology has allowed services to be exported from Grand Forks to anywhere in the world. This means knowledge-based services companies – such as finance, accounting, software, or engineering – can now be considered a part of the primary sector.

New economic development theories are emerging to focus on investing in the local firms and local people that make Grand Forks tick. "Economic development" now includes workforce and community development. This

means economic developers are becoming network builders and community brokers just as much as they remain recruiters. Understanding this change, the Grand Forks EDC already places a strong focus on assisting local firms and building local capacity.

It is time to strengthen these efforts by expanding our economic development investments to target industries that export professional services. These new locally-grown knowledge-based services companies often fit best downtown where the action is and their employees live. Co-working spaces are popping up where these individual professional services entrepreneurs can collaborate. Downtown office space for these new emerging and growing firms could become the industrial park of the next three decades.

Downtown Living and the Importance of Neighborhoods

With this economic shift comes a change in how our cities function. Whether it's a single family home or an apartment downtown, people now wish to work closer to where they live to cut down their daily commutes. The desire for mixed use neighborhoods and working at home are both part of this trend. Walking and biking more often to get the things we need promotes community wellness. Travel agency AAA estimates the cost of car ownership as \$8,700 per year. Mixed-use neighborhoods offer more residents the chance to save money by owning fewer cars per family.

Growth in Grand Forks is a good thing. Demand for housing is high. Single family home prices are up 30% since 2013 and apartment owners downtown report low vacancy. These rising costs have put a strain on families and made it tougher for workers to move to Grand Forks.

Grand Forks needs more housing of all types. More housing downtown can provide a critical outlet for this growth. With its restaurants and shops, arts, and connections to the Greenway, downtown Grand Forks has the most unique amenities of any neighborhood in town. There is demand for downtown apartments, townhomes, and single family homes adjacent to the core.

More residents downtown support more amenities and more business activity.

An 18-Hour Neighborhood for Everyone

Downtown is the one neighborhood in our community that offers something for everyone throughout the day. Downtown is home to Central High School, with roughly 1,000 students and staff and host of many arts and sports events throughout the year. There are coffee shops and gathering spots for morning meetings, unique shopping during the mid-day, many lunch spots, office workers and high school students mingling on the streets during the day, evening events, and places for dinner and nightlife into the wee hours of the night. Downtown is active 18 hours a day.

Many residents stop downtown to engage with government functions and to access health care and other social services delivered by non-profits. The recreation amenities on the greenway and cultural event spaces attract residents of all ages. The downtown neighborhood is our best example of an "18-hour neighborhood" for all ages.

Downtown Investment Delivers

Downtowns are simply more fiscally efficient for local governments.

Cities and towns across America are facing headwinds. State and federal dollars for community development are dwindling with no signs of a turnaround. This means locals will need to depend on themselves for the revenue they need to maintain their communities.

On an acre-for-acre basis, downtowns deliver more tax revenue than other types of development because of the higher assessed land values per acre downtown. This is also true in Grand Forks.

Grand Forks is full of nice neighborhoods but more housing capacity downtown provides variety that might be missing. New downtown housing units can be added without the need for costly new street and other infrastructure that is needed for new developments on the edge of town. Some growing local employers report that a lack of housing downtown leads

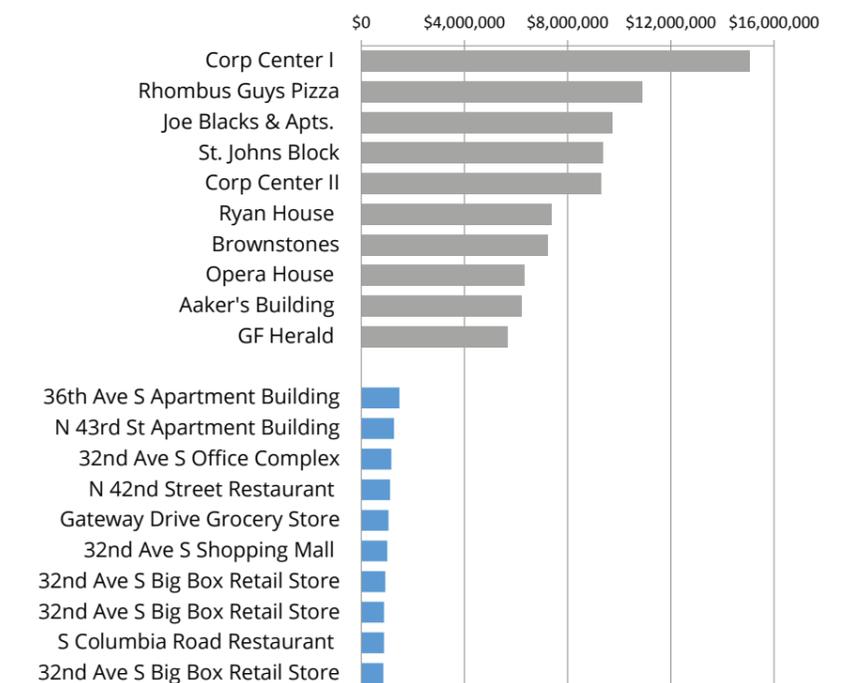
them to question whether or not Grand Forks can support the types of workers they need.

Communities with strong downtowns will be better positioned to maintain the programs and the infrastructure investments they need. The revenue generated by a strong downtown helps reduce the need to raise taxes in the future for the entire community.

The following chart shows the value per acre of land in downtown Grand Forks compared to newer areas of the city. The chart shows that many buildings downtown offer as much as 6-8 times the tax revenue per year as newer car-oriented developments.

Downtown housing is fiscally prudent, it provides additional supply for the entire community, and it offers more variety for local residents and new workers. This makes it important for economic development.

GRAND FORKS ASSESSED VALUE PER ACRE
INSIDE & OUTSIDE DOWNTOWN



THE PHYSICAL SPACE: DEFINING THE SPECIFICS

“Downtown” means different things to different people. The narrowest definition of downtown is perhaps the Historic Overlay District, comprising the most central portion of the original city on both sides of Demers Ave. This historic district contains more than 70 structures dating from the 1880s to the 1960s.

Another method of defining downtown is the Renaissance Zone. The Renaissance Zone is a state program that offers redevelopment incentives for targeted areas defined by the city. Downtown is one of two Renaissance Zones in Grand Forks, along with the area surrounding Grand Cities Mall. This zone covers several connected blocks, skipping over those that may not be ripe for redevelopment.

Yet these definitions of downtown may be too narrow to include all of the functions of downtown today and in the future. The downtown defined on the following map is broader and includes new downtown developments and areas ripe for growth in the future. Downtown includes University Avenue to the north, the warehouse district to the west, First Avenue South near the police station, and the water treatment plant site towards the south. These boundaries are depicted on the map on the next page.

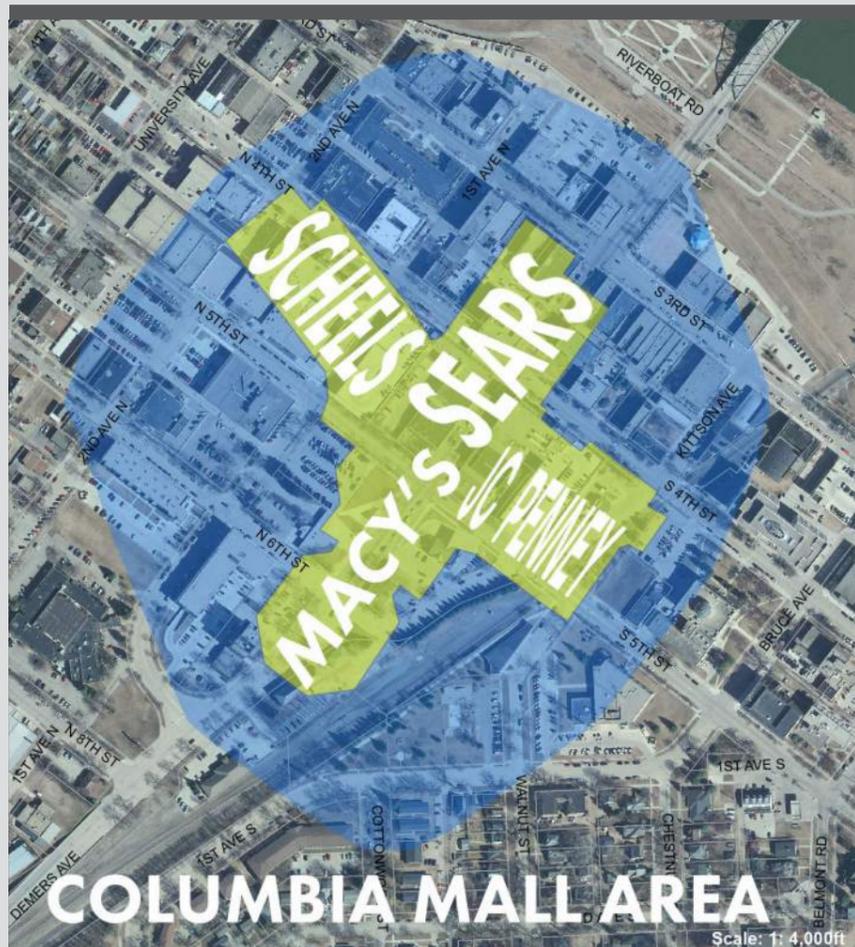
The map also shows several key entry points to downtown, including:

- Demers overpass and University Ave and 9th St (near the Red Pepper) to the west
- Sorlie Bridge to the east

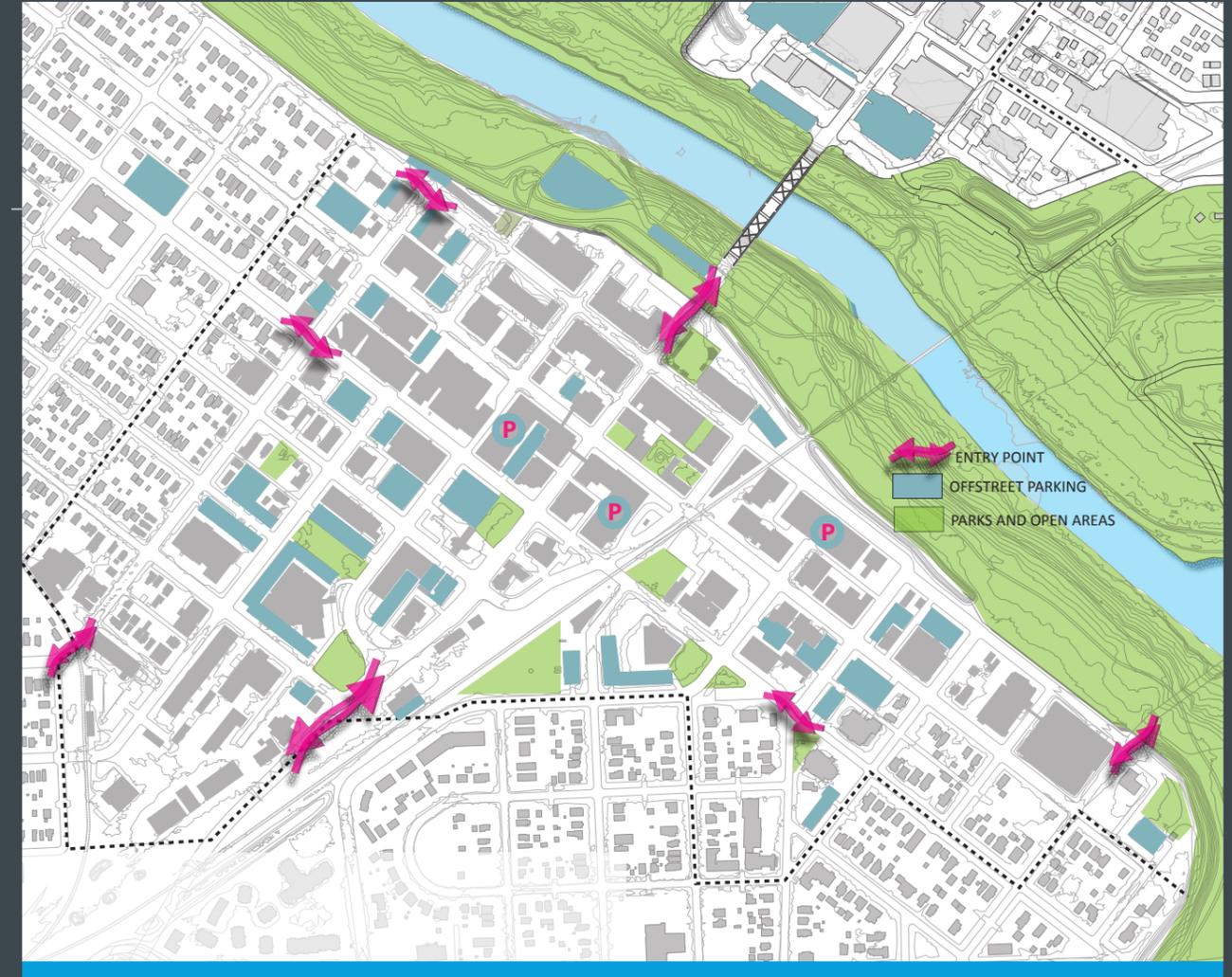
- North 5th St and 3rd St near University Avenue to the north
- S 5th Street near Belmont Road
- S 3rd St near Minnesota Ave. to the south

These entry points are key gateways to the rest of the city and are prime spots for improvements or public art in the future.

COLUMBIA MALL AREA COMPARED TO DOWNTOWN: The map below depicts the Columbia Mall (yellow) and its parking lots (blue) superimposed over downtown. The space occupied by the mall is surprisingly similar to downtown, making a stroll around downtown similar in distance walked to parking at the mall and visiting a few stores. The scale of downtown is manageable.



MAP: DOWNTOWN BOUNDARIES, ENTRY POINTS, OPEN SPACES AND OFF-STREET PARKING



OPEN SPACES DOWNTOWN

Parking and green space are evenly distributed throughout downtown. There are several areas of green space in a cluster near Demers Avenue and in the western areas of downtown. These open spaces include Town Square and several pocket parks featuring art and sculptures. Other spaces are simply undeveloped lots.

As demand increases for development downtown, this is likely to place pressure on these undeveloped lots and parking lots. Several pocket parks have become part of the identity of Grand Forks, yet these open spaces offer some of the best opportunities for development downtown. At the same time, it is critical that the community continues its high priority of supporting public art and community gathering spaces. Constricting development will only increase rents and gentrification downtown. Ultimately, the best long-term land use for many of these open spaces is a building.

Open spaces that present prime development opportunities should be developed. Yet Grand Forks must recognize that it needs functional open spaces and public art created as part of a cohesive vision and plan. Going forward, Grand Forks must manage the tension between the need for development and the importance of public art and gathering spaces downtown.

DOWNTOWN TODAY

Grand Forks has achieved many successes downtown in recent years. The Town Square at Third and Demers has become the premier location for outdoor community events and concerts. Thousands of people attend major street events throughout the year, including Art Fest, Sertoma Fourth of July, the Downtown Street Fair, Big Forkin' music festival, Alley Alive, Blues on the Red, the Potato Bowl Parade, and others. In recent years, Grand Forks citizens and businesses stepped forward to form the Downtown Development Association (DDA) with the help of startup funds from the city. The DDA is now a self-sustaining organization. Development in downtown Grand

Forks saw a resurgence in the past decade. New restaurants, art galleries, and shops have popped up and longtime institutions such as the Empire Arts Center and Fire Hall Theater are on solid footing. Several new apartment buildings have been constructed in the past few years.

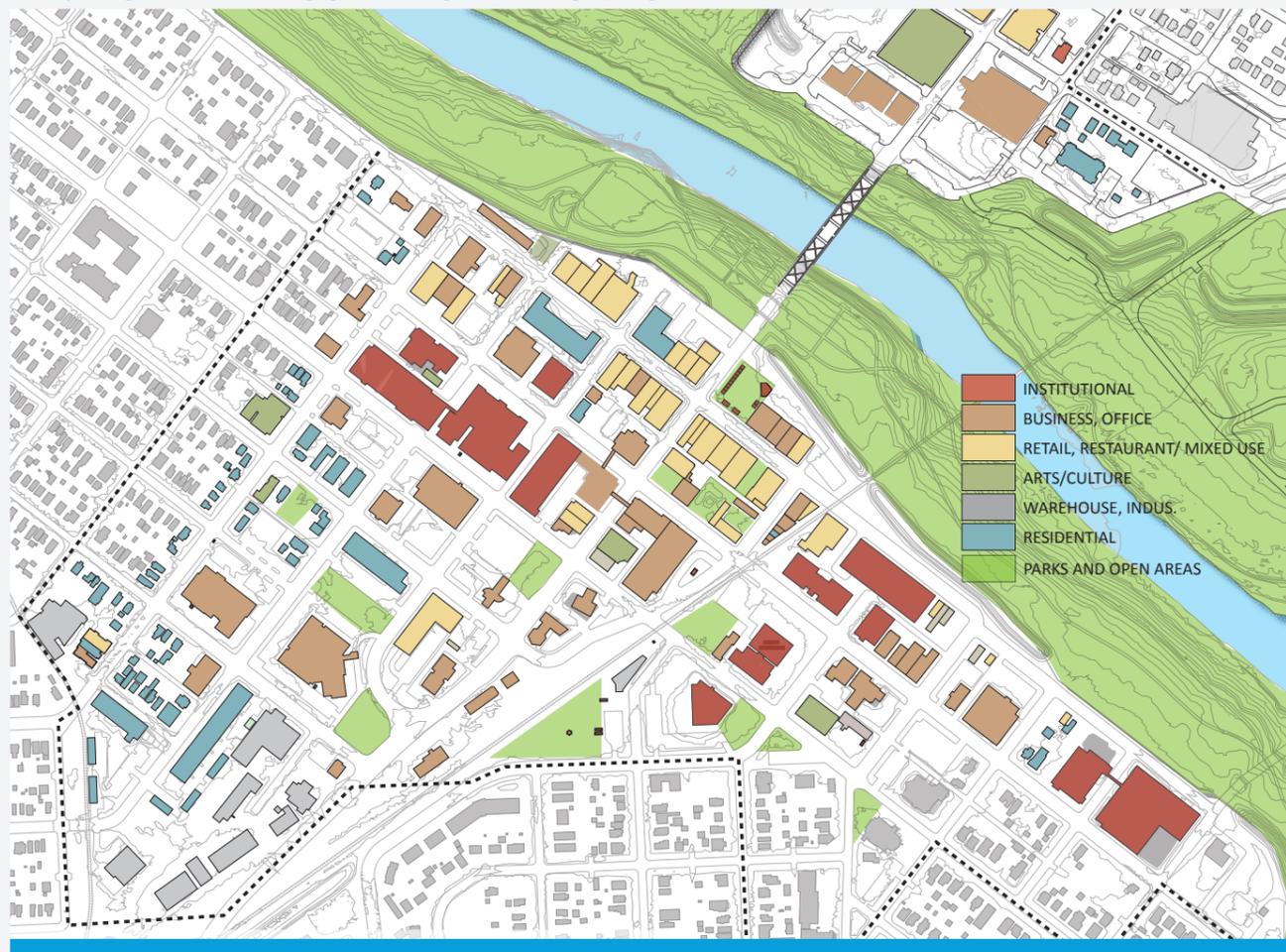
Government and social service institutions are a major strength downtown; dining, entertainment options and housing are approaching critical mass. Downtown is home to unique local retail shops, but this remains an area of need in order for downtown to become a shopping destination. Many in the community still hope to see a stronger presence of the University of North Dakota

downtown.

Downtown Grand Forks is very safe and welcoming, and the community has done a good job preserving and improving its character. Attention is needed to resolve the perception of a lack of parking and to improve transit use.

Retail and restaurants are clustered on Third Street on both sides of Demers Avenue. Several key social service and nonprofit institutions anchor the southeast area of downtown. Residential buildings are clustered northwest of Demers Ave. and office space is dispersed throughout the area, anchored by the City-owned Corporate Center in the middle of the neighborhood.

MAP: PRESENT DAY TYPES OF DEVELOPMENT DOWNTOWN



GUIDELINES FOR THE FUTURE

Downtowns have changed over time. Basic retail may never return to downtowns across the country, but downtown Grand Forks is now home to several successful niche retailers. Downtown should remain essential to the identity of the community and be a place where people live, work and play at the same time. As we make decisions about the future of downtown Grand Forks, there are several key outcomes to keep in mind. Improvements to downtown Grand Forks should:

- Create community identity and character
- Create places to live
- Create places to gather and do business
- Increase density
- Benefit local citizens because tourists will come to places where locals want to be
- Increase multi-functionality and mixed use of land
- Improve walkability
- Fuel growth and development for the entire community, and
- Benefit high school students, university students, young professionals

Guidelines for the Future

Future development and new projects in downtown Grand Forks should aim to follow these general guidelines and priorities as closely as possible:

- 1. Continue to place a high priority on places to live downtown.** Residential development is the foundation of downtown development because more residents will mean more businesses, more jobs, and more amenities. Growth in homes downtown and in adjacent neighborhoods will help relieve the housing shortage without requiring expensive infrastructure upgrades needed for new developments on the fringe of the city.
- 2. Newly-constructed projects downtown should be mixed use buildings with "retail ready" commercial space on the first floor.** "Retail ready" first floor space
- 3. Support existing and create new community open streets events downtown.** Grand Forks has been extremely successful creating downtown outdoor events in recent years, such as Alley Alive, Artfest, Street Fair, several concert series, the 4th of July, Potato Bowl, Big Forkin' Festival, Art and Wine Walk, and Frosty Bobber. Building on the summer successes, event planners should continue to pursue winter-themed events. "Open streets" events promote pedestrian friendliness by temporarily using streets for purposes other than driving.
- 4. Protect the architectural history of existing buildings but allow for style evolution in new structures.** Grand Forks should be open to new architectural styles. A wave of new developments offers the community a chance to develop a signature architectural style.
- 5. Consider surface parking lots and other open spaces to be transitional land uses.** Because of its layout and design, downtown remains one of the few areas of Grand Forks that is ripe for incremental development. Downtown is always evolving and developing, and this is a good thing. As Grand Forks grows as a community, downtown is likely to become more dense. Open lots will become new buildings, small buildings will become large buildings, and large buildings will intensify and transition in activity.
- 6. Embrace winter with new community events and implementing winter design and planning practices.** Grand Forks is a winter city. Winter is part of the community's identity and explicit steps should be taken to embrace winter. With its walkability and connection to the Greenway, downtown offers a prime opportunity to host more winter-themed events and to implement winter-oriented design features.



DEVELOPMENT IDEAS ON HIGH-POTENTIAL SITES

Grand Forks has turned the corner and withstood the disasters of 1997. Post-flood investments have paid off, many more people are living downtown and, after several market cycles, downtown is now home to several stable retailers, restaurants, and other small businesses. It's time for downtown to take the next step. There are several current needs that could be filled with new developments downtown:

- Hotel, boutique and general
- Mixed-use buildings with "retail ready" space on the first floor
- Grocery
- Improved, cohesive park amenities
- Restaurants

- Kids activities
- Places to sit
- University presence

Significant development has occurred in recent years, but many opportunities remain downtown. Many of these sites with potential are depicted on the adjacent map.

The **water treatment plant site** (purple on map below) could provide an anchor redevelopment opportunity with river views and a connection to Minnesota in future years. Several city-owned and private **lots in the core area surrounding Demers** (green towards top of map) on 3rd and 4th Streets present key opportunities for infill development.

The western **Demers Avenue cor-**

ridor from 5th Street towards the warehouse area adjacent to the overpass (yellow with conceptual drawing to the right) could present the next key corridor. On the northern side of downtown, redevelopment at the **corner of North 5th and University Avenue** (red) could provide the anchor for a resurgence along **University Avenue** in both directions.

The area just **north of the Demers Avenue overpass offers potential for a new warehouse district** redevelopment (green, lower left). Underutilized lots surrounding South 5th Street near the police station and courthouse are a chance to expand on the **civic district** (blue).

MAP OF KEY DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES DOWNTOWN (CONCEPTS DESCRIBED ABOVE)



Entering downtown from the Demers Avenue overpass, this conceptual drawing shows the potential for street improvements and new structures near the U.S. Bank Building and Red Roof Inn.

Development Case Study: Downtown Corporate Center

Following the 1997 flood and fire, community leaders invested heavily in downtown Grand Forks. This took many forms – from rebuilding the historic Grand Forks Herald to creating a brand new Town Square – and used many resources, public and private. A cornerstone of this post-disaster renaissance was the Corporate Center. Located in the heart of downtown Grand Forks at 401-402 DeMers, the Corporate Center was designed to fill several roles: provide first-class office space to retain key downtown businesses, create fit-up ready space to attract new corporate and retail opportunities, and send a strong message that Grand Forks was open for business.

The City developed the Corporate Center using federal grants to leverage local bonding. Lease terms with anchor tenants (Alerus Financial, Brady Martz, and Camrud law firm) ensured the project would not need future taxpayer subsidy. To further enhance their downtown position, anchor tenants were given the option to purchase their spaces after 20 years. While full occupancy took several years, Grand Forks now has a parking ramp and 89,000 square feet of fully leased commercial space that did not exist 20 years ago. And following bond retirement in 2017, the Corporate Center will begin to generate "profit" that can be rolled into future economic development projects. Growth, jobs, vibrancy ... win, win, win.

The Corporate Center was a product of disaster recovery and is unique to its time and place; however, it offers replicable ideas and a successful model for future public-private ventures. Although controversial at the time, it's now clear that the Corporate Center was a wise decision. Investing in downtown pays off.

IMPROVING TRANSPORTATION LINKS

Every form of transportation in Grand Forks has a role downtown. Downtown can be reached by car from nearly everywhere in the city in less than ten minutes. It is perhaps the most walkable area of town, it offers bike infrastructure, and it is home to the city's transit hub.

TRANSIT

Downtown is perhaps the best-served by transit of any neighborhood in the city. The bus system's transit hub is located just south of Demers Ave on 5th Street. This facility is a major transfer point for several bus routes, and it hosts the intercity bus station for the community. However, the community lacks direct, regular, and fast transit links between major community amenities, particularly downtown and UND. Grand Forks should improve direct transit links between the following key points in the community:

- UND
- Near North Neighborhood
- Near South Neighborhood
- Ralph Engelstad Arena
- Alerus Center Corridor and 42nd Street housing developments north and south of Demers

Transit Recommendations

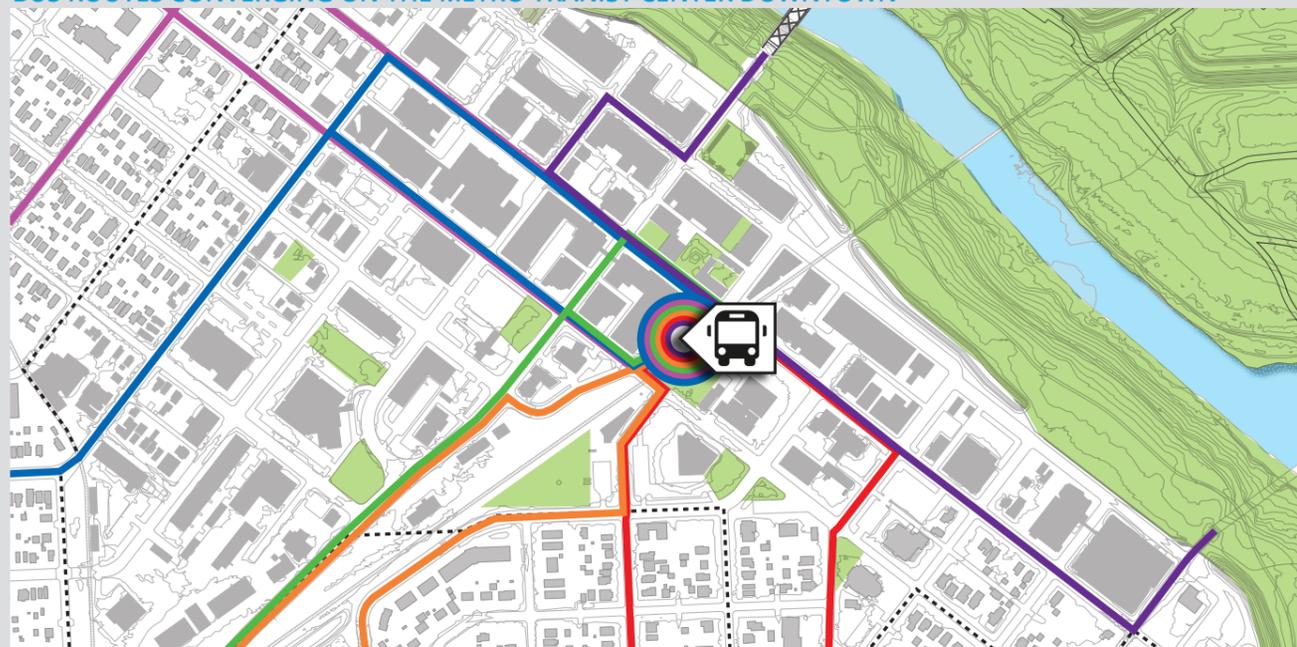
1. Implement incremental improvements to transit connections between UND and Downtown

- Evaluate bus routes 4 and 6 connecting downtown with UND campus
- Increase frequency at key times
- Allow student ID access for transit payment
- Engage UND and student leadership as a cost sharing partner
- Create a bus lane between downtown and campus
- Allow bus queue jumps, using signals and traffic lanes to allow buses to move quickly through high-traffic areas.

2. Create a dedicated, frequent transit connection between UND and downtown. The route should run during late night hours. The line could help alleviate parking constraints in both sectors of the community.

- #### 3. Improve transit connections between downtown and Alerus Center Corridor.
- Connect downtown to Alerus Center for events
 - Consider creative bulk ticket buying packages for hotels and events
 - Connect emerging 42nd Street commercial, hotel, and residential corridor to downtown
 - Allow for park-and-ride from Alerus Center parking to downtown

BUS ROUTES CONVERGING ON THE METRO TRANSIT CENTER DOWNTOWN



A new, dedicated transit link could follow Dyke Avenue (above) to connect UND with downtown. This direct, fast connection could link UND with downtown housing and amenities and increase visitors at both locations without increasing traffic congestion or demand for parking. A redeveloped warehouse district near the Demers overpass downtown (below) could anchor the new downtown-to-UND transportation connection corridor.



PARKING AND DRIVING

Grand Forks is an extremely drivable city. Virtually any part of the city can be reached by car in a short drive, including downtown. The entire city – save the farthest southern developments south of 47th Avenue – can be reached from the corner of 5th St. and Demers Ave. in less than 10 minutes. The 10 minute drive time is an aggressive standard, considering that the average commute time in the two-county metropolitan area is roughly 12 minutes. This is the shortest commute time of all the nation's 381 metropolitan areas. This easy accessibility by car makes downtown a prime location for specialty retail, homes, restaurants, arts organizations, and other amenities.

There are 4,000 parking spaces downtown. Downtown is home to three large parking structures in addition to its many surface lots.

These parking ramps are centrally located, providing access on either side of Demers Avenue. The parking ramp for the county office building provides excess capacity for community events in Town Square or on the Greenway.

Like many communities, complaints about the lack of parking are common in downtown Grand Forks; however recent parking studies have found there are enough physical spaces to fill the demand for parking at various points in a day. City staff and downtown stakeholders should continue to work together to best utilize the parking spaces already present downtown. For instance, there are businesses and institutions whose most intense parking needs occur at different times of the day, allowing these organizations to share parking spaces.

In the final analysis, parking is a

solvable issue in downtown Grand Forks. The biggest parking problem is a misperception of a shortage. Significant local businesses are successful downtown without designated parking. Parking lots should be viewed as a temporary transitional land use with the idea that any could be developed in the future with the right opportunity.

Driving and Parking Recommendations

1. **Continue strengthening institutional partnerships to share parking spaces at various times in the day.** Parking requirements vary among downtown stakeholders according to the time of day. Many who need parking during daytime hours do not require it in the evenings or weekends and vice versa, making sharing possible.

2. **Consider returning N 3rd St and N 4th St to two-way streets.** This would improve traffic safety, pedestrian safety, bicycle access, and promote development of the area north of University Avenue. The high speeds and high traffic throughput offered by these one way pair streets are unnecessary.
3. **Install a roundabout at 5th and Belmont intersection.** This intersection is a critical gateway from south Grand Forks into downtown but the intersection is awkward and confusing for motorists. A roundabout at this location would improve safety and traffic flow.
4. **Consider a reverse angle parking pilot project.** Reverse angle parking is curbside parking where drivers back into the parking space instead of pull forward into a space. This improves safety

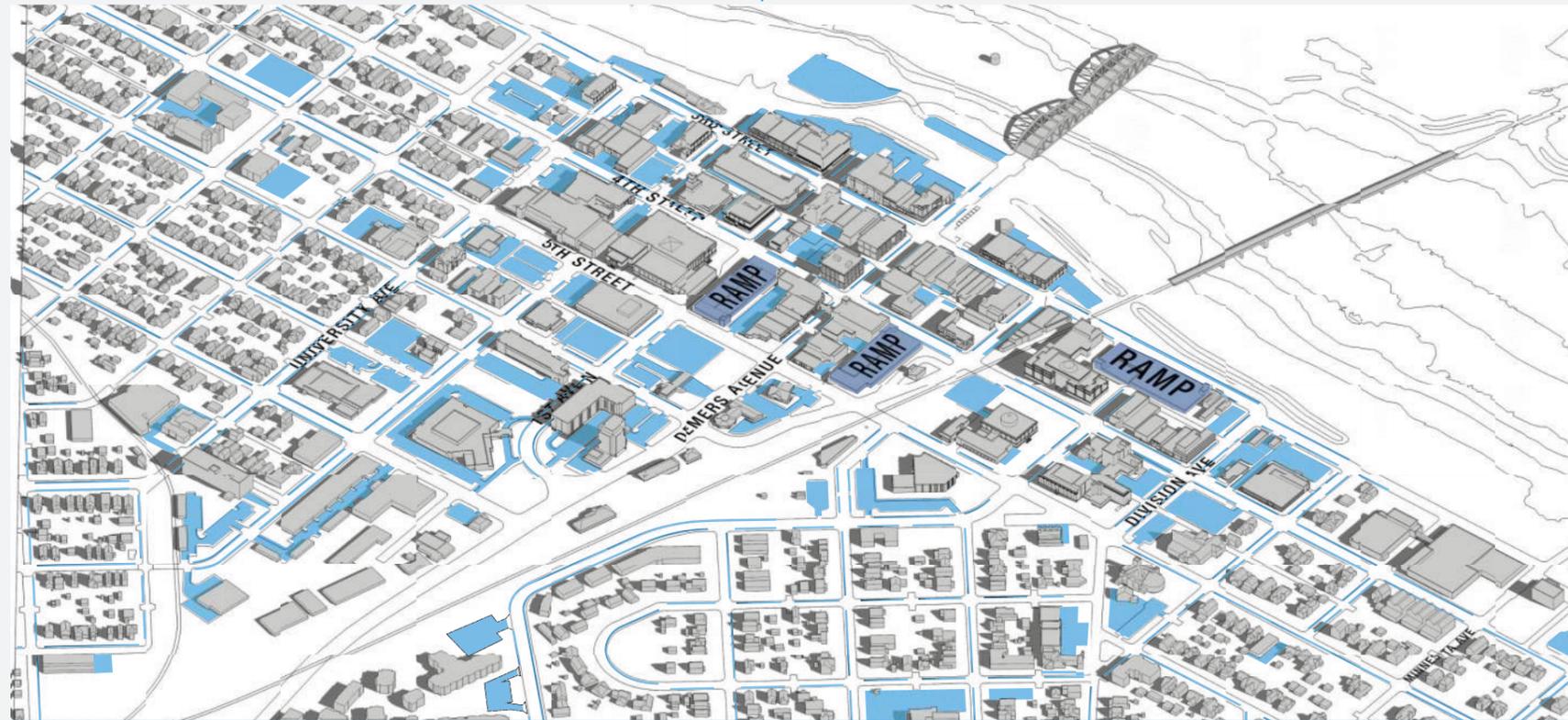
because it eliminates the situation where drivers are backing up blind into the oncoming traffic when exiting the parking space. Instead drivers pull forward and back into the space with full visibility and exit of the space driving forward in the direction of traffic flow with a clear view of approaching cars. Children exit the vehicle and run toward the sidewalk instead of toward the street. Reverse angle parking

should not be used in situations where vehicle exhaust impacts sidewalk activity.

5. **Modify curbs at key corners to create bump-outs.** These improvements can increase visibility at intersections, improve pedestrian safety, create safe havens for handicap parking, and create more usable sidewalk space for planters or other amenities.

THE BIGGEST PARKING PROBLEM IN DOWNTOWN IS A MISPERCEPTION OF A SHORTAGE.

DOWNTOWN PARKING DEPICTED IN BLUE. THERE ARE MORE THAN 4,000 PARKING SPACES DOWNTOWN.



A roundabout could improve the Belmont Road and 5th Street intersection. Entrance gateways to downtown are prime spots for public art.



“

GRAND FORKS HAS THE CHANCE TO BE ONE OF THE GREAT DOWNTOWNS OF THE NORTH IF YOU KEEP THE MOMENTUM THAT YOU'VE GOT.

CHARLES MAROHN, STRONG TOWNS

”



WALKING AND BIKING

Downtown Grand Forks developed as a walkable, human-scale environment. This is perhaps its most significant difference compared to newer areas of town, making it unique. The slower, more limited traffic on adjacent streets to downtown offers good access for cyclists. The city center is also connected to the city's burgeoning trail system via access to the west near the Demers overpass and to the north and south via the riverfront Greenway trails.

Two key factors influence walkability and bike-ability in a neighborhood: there must be a place to walk to and neighborhoods must be pedestrian friendly and safe. High levels of walkability have been shown to correlate with positive public health, higher home and commercial property values, and good economic perfor-

mance.

One method of measuring this is the Walk Score, a numerical indicator of neighborhood walking routes to destinations such as grocery stores, schools, parks, restaurants, and retail. The Walk Score for downtown Grand Forks is 83 (at 500 Demers Ave.). This is the highest Walk Score value in town and places downtown in the "very walkable" category. The overall walk score for the entire city of Grand Forks is 40, placing it in the "car dependent" category.

Bike friendly infrastructure is important, but perhaps the most important method of increasing bicycle use is to improve access to bikes themselves. Many smaller communities are now operating bike share programs. Bike share programs offer

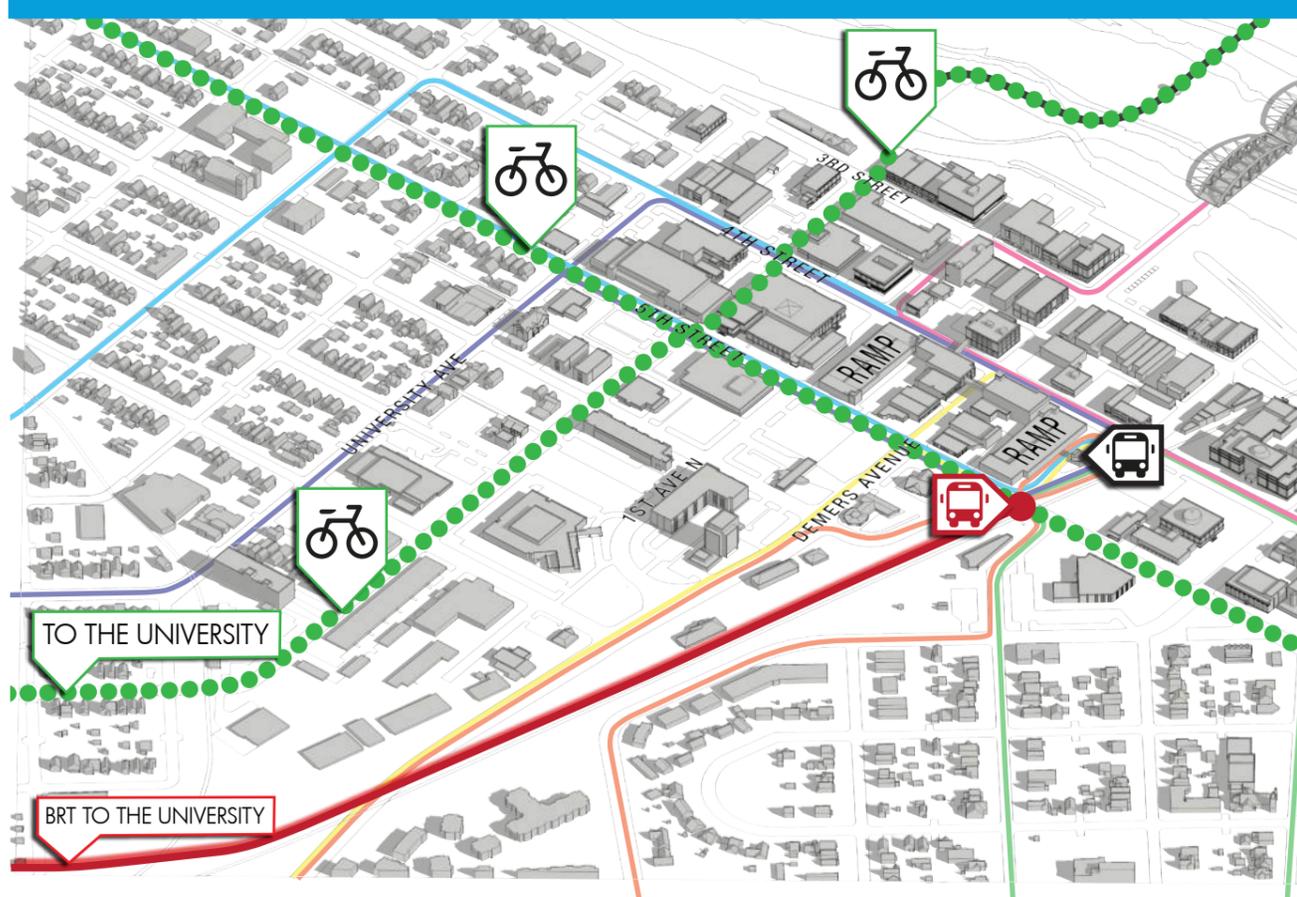
bicycle rental check-out and return stations at key points in the community. This allows residents to use a bike for a small fee when they need it, and return it to any station in the system. Bike share programs also typically offer membership programs for unlimited bike use.

One of the most successful small bike share programs in a small winter city is already operating in Fargo. A bike share program in Grand Forks could provide easy bike access in downtown, the UND campus, and points in between. Downtown stations could provide easy bike rental for residents and travelers to access the greenway.

Walking and Biking Recommendations

1. *Initiate a Grand Forks bike share, starting with stations in downtown and at UND.* Connect with

2ND AVE & 5TH ST BIKEWAY CONCEPT CONNECTING UND, CENTRAL HIGH, TRANSIT HUB, AND DOWNTOWN DESTINATIONS



bike share proprietors in Fargo to share their experience. Assemble a group of organizations or citizens to drive the process. Reach out to East Grand Forks to partner.

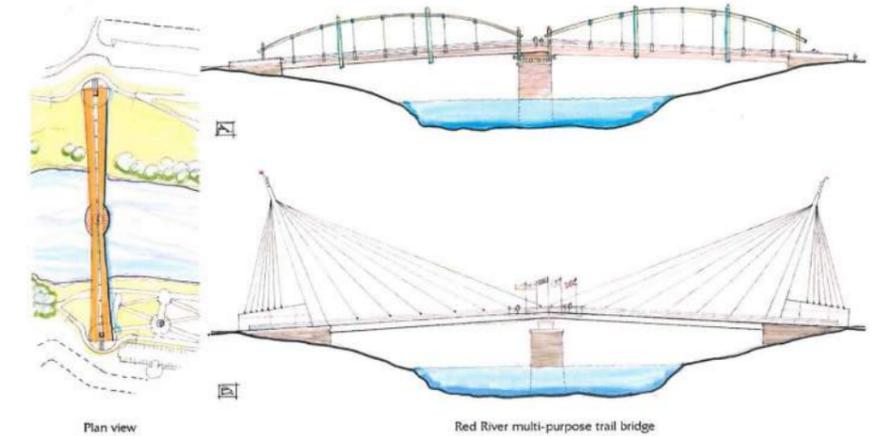
2. *Improve bicycle access to and within downtown*

- Prioritize downtown in existing Grand Forks Bikeway Plan
- Install dedicated lanes where appropriate with a focus on a 2nd Ave. North bikeway connection to the UND campus
- Install bike share stations
- Improve bike access into west downtown surrounding Demers overpass and trails and Cherry Street region

3. *Improve walkability within downtown*

- Improve aesthetics in alley areas
- Add benches in strategic locations
- Assess the efficiency and

BELOW: Pedestrian river crossing concepts using the existing historic railroad bridge pier, developed for the 2009 River Forks plan.



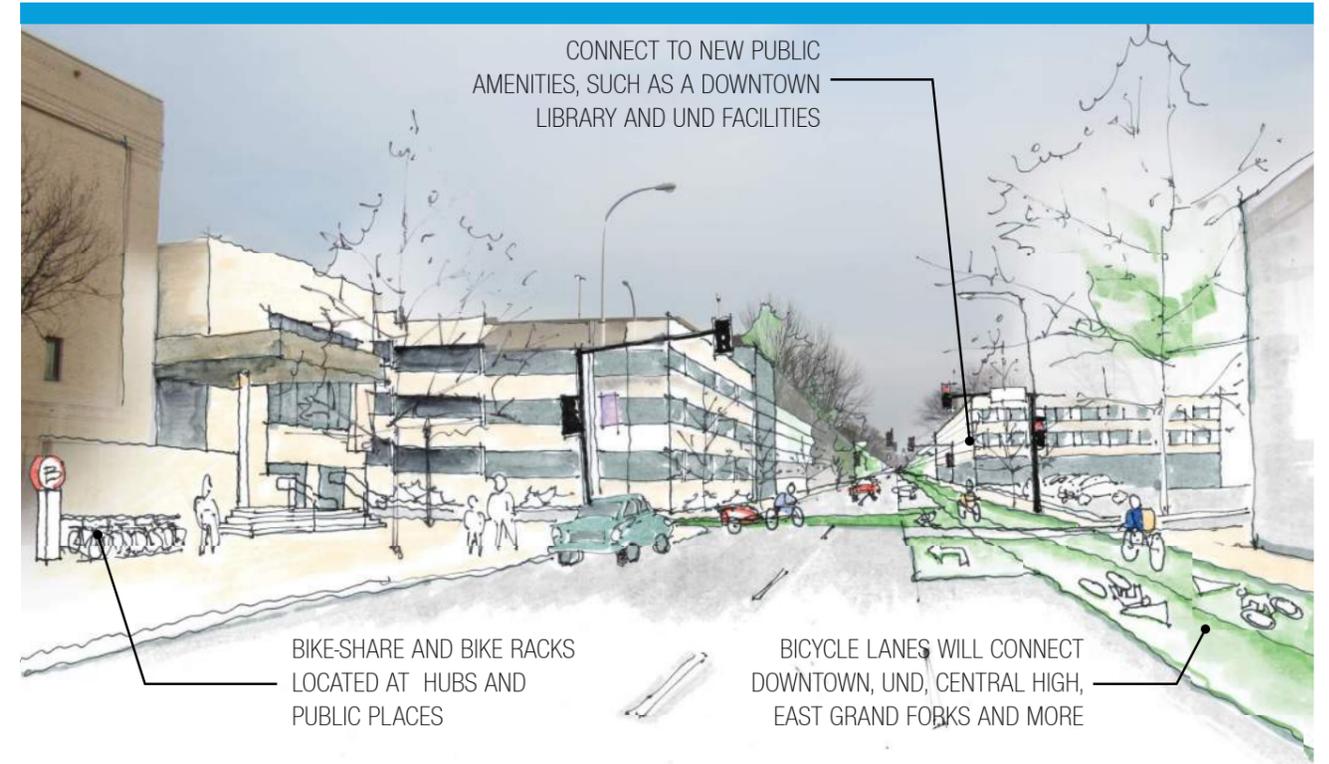
pedestrian impact of signal crossings

- Improve lighting downtown, particularly the area beneath the Central High School skyway. Install downward-facing streetlights to light the sidewalk and street areas more directly.

- Assess lighting in alleys. Assess pedestrian access to emerging areas such as the new University Flats Development

4. *Connect to East Grand Forks with a pedestrian and bike crossing in downtown area,* developed in partnership with East Grand Forks.

Central High School could become a connecting point for new bike infrastructure on 2nd Avenue N. This new bicycle corridor would support a UND-Downtown bike share pilot project, provide a connection to the river, and improve access to downtown in all directions.



CREATE BOLD PUBLIC SPACES

It is critical to maintain open community space and public art downtown, even as downtown Grand Forks might lose pocket parks to development. As development occurs, open space and public art must remain a high priority. The current pocket parks should only be developed as part of a bigger plan to implement open space downtown. Each of the pocket parks and Town Square are used to varying degrees throughout the day. Many successful, well-attended events and festivals occur in Town Square; however, downtown currently lacks a heavily used daily community space where residents can fully appreciate public art and hold community events.

Town Square, created after the flood of 1997, has been a success but it is time to take it to the next level. Town Square could benefit from a facelift, additional amenities such as a warming house, better implementation of children's play space, public art displays, and a better connection to the greenway. Town Square could become highly trafficked public sculpture garden, a daily hang out space, and a place for major community events all at the same time.

These Town Square improvements should occur as part of an intentional redesign of green space downtown.

According to a common rule of thumb, urban green space should be reachable within a 2.5 minute walk from any location downtown. The downtown entry points identified in this report also present opportunities for new public art installations. This is the community's chance to take its public art and community gathering space to the next level.

The area surrounding the Sorlie Bridge offers perhaps the best opportunity to be a hub of local public life in Grand Forks. Along with the ripe gathering space in Town Square, the area offers:

- **Direct access to the river** for fishing and other water sports.
- Direct access to the city's ample summer and winter **trail system**.
- A **boat house** offering rent-

als for river paddle sports operated by non-profit Ground Up Adventures.

- An opportunity to locate a **new skate park or other alternative sports activities**. The current downtown skate park is set to be displaced by a new permanent supportive housing facility.
- **Ample parking** north of the Sorlie Bridge (149 public spaces).
- Spaces for **winter activities**, including access to the riverfront for skiing and ice skating in Town Square or elsewhere. Winter activities could be catalyzed by a **new warming house structure**.
- **Bicycle connections** to Riverside Park and Lincoln Park each in fewer than eight minutes.
- Under-utilized **green space and riverfront access at 2nd Ave. N.** near the Chamber of Commerce. Improvements in this area could increase use of the parking area and activities below the flood wall.

This unique confluence of assets should be the starting point for a future long-term technical plan for open space downtown.

WINTER OPEN STREETS EVENT



Clockwise, from above: A conceptual design for a new Town Square event space and band shell improvement. A conceptual winter warming house within Town Square. The boathouse on the Red offers rentals of kayaks and paddleboards from the riverfront area just north of the Sorlie Bridge. Paddling on the Red. The greenway access point and private green space is an underutilized area ripe for redesign to invigorate the greenway (bottom). With planning, the area could become a hub for winter outdoor activities such as skating and sledding.



ANIMATE STREET LIFE

Design matters. Downtown is unique in that it offers many different activities and amenities for all ages at different times of day, making it our manifestation of the "18-hour city." Downtown is our community's living room. Thinking about how we would design a living room in our own home. There are several guidelines we can use as we design our public spaces downtown:

- 1. Comfort:** Can it provide warmth when it's cold outside, and can it provide coolness when it's hot outside? Can I let the sun in when I want to and have an area to block the sun when I want to?
- 2. Multiplicity:** Are multiple activities available? In our living room, we can watch television, read a book, take a nap, or play with our kids. Single-use spaces are rarely used. Downtown should feature things to do for people of all ages and abilities at all parts of the day.
- 3. Aesthetics:** Is it aesthetically pleasing so that people want to stay? We don't spend much time in a living room painted with ugly colors. Do the space and art make me feel comfortable? Does the art have meaning and reflect our identity? Does the space tell a story about our community? These stories lead to connection and relationships in our community.
- 4. Flexibility:** Is it flexible? No one sets up their living room and keeps it that way for twenty years. It should be easy and inexpensive to change the layout, the art and colors, and the general setup to adapt as our needs change.
- 5. Synergy:** Are there amenities nearby? A living room located too far from the kitchen may include a small refrigerator. Is there a restroom close by? We want people to enjoy the space, and if they need something that the space does not provide, it should be available nearby.
- 6. Capacity:** Is the space comfortable for a lot of people? A living room is a space to host a group, while an office is designed primarily for solitary work, so spaces for groups and individuals are designed differently. Our public spaces should be designed to host large groups of community members.

Several anchors have emerged downtown. The south-east quadrant is a hub of social services; major residential redevelopment has occurred in the northwest. Third Street from Second Ave North to Kittson Ave is quickly becoming the most vital anchor of downtown. The Third Street area is home to several destination retail and eating establishments. "Alley Alive" events have occurred in the alleys between Third and Fourth Streets. Many citizens gather at events in Town Square and a redeveloped Town Square could increase daily activity and

provide a gateway to the greenway, a new play space or an amphitheater.

Because of its momentum, the Third Street corridor offers the best first opportunity to activate street life using focused streetscape improvement. The seeds of activity have already been planted. Grand Forks should double down on Third's "Destination Street" status by creating a concrete vision and and by making small aesthetic and streetscape investments and then moving forward with a technical streetscape plan.

Small design improvements can also improve street and business activity downtown. These could include store owners cooperating to keep store fronts lit until a certain time at night, wayfinding signage, continuing use of taller trees instead of low-branched ornamental varieties, and minimizing dark tint in storefront windows. More residents downtown also create more active streets. Is the downtown coffee shop open and active on the weekend? If not, downtown needs more residents.

"YOU GUYS HAVE A BEAUTIFUL MAIN STREET— IT'S VERY CLEAR, IT RUNS PARALLEL TO THE RIVER," HE SAID, REFERRING TO NORTH THIRD STREET. "I LIKE THE RELATIONSHIP OF IT. I PARTICULARLY DON'T READ GRAND FORKS AS A CITY— IT'S MORE OF A TOWN, AND IT HAS A MAIN STREET."

Walter Hood, renowned landscape architect, University of California, Berkeley. Grand Forks Herald, April 1, 2016.



Conceptual examples of streetscape improvements on North 3rd Street looking towards Demers Ave.

First Ave N near N 3rd St offers an opportunity for a new greenway entry, pedestrian bridge, and connection to a UND-to-downtown bikeway.



a way forward

Mobilizing the right community policies, processes, partners, and resources to improve Grand Forks

Downtown Grand Forks is uniquely ours, replicated nowhere else in the world. It's unique to our history, community narrative, and identity. And it's enjoying a significant wave of positive momentum and development. We should ride that wave and take specific steps to make downtown Grand Forks the best it can be. A great downtown makes for a great Grand Forks.

Invest economic development funds downtown. The City, County, Growth Fund and EDC, along with state and federal partners, have long been effective in using economic development funds and programs. Traditionally this involved expanding manufacturing jobs and creating spaces for them in business/industrial parks west of I-29. But in today's economy, focusing these efforts downtown could create a 21st century version of the industrial park that caters to the new primary sector: knowledge-based companies that export their services all over the world. The City's Planning & Community Development Department should house a position dedicated to integrating this concept into existing community and economic development activities and helping manage downtown

issues. The EDC should continue to work hand in hand with the City to partner on downtown economic development, acting as recruiter and broker.

Seek opportunities to redevelop downtown properties while planning for permanent public art and open spaces. Public art and greenspace are important and valued in our downtown. Because of its density and human scale, downtown offers the best chance for residents and visitors to enjoy public art. As downtown space becomes increasingly desirable from a development perspective, it is important to create public open spaces that are intentional, that connect spatially as well as aesthetically, and that serve the growing and varied downtown constituencies. The City should engage with the Park District, Central High, artists and arts organizations, skateboarders, and other downtown stakeholders to ensure that repurposing parks and public art/open space are not mutually exclusive. Both are priorities in a thriving "18-hour downtown."

Invest Beautification Program funds in a Town Square facelift.

Over the past few years, the City has accumulated approximately \$500,000 in Beautification carryover funds. We agree with the Arts & Events Vibrancy Group that these funds should be invested in Town Square to update it and make it Grand Forks' signature outdoor arts and events venue.

Expand partnership efforts with East Grand Forks. The downtowns of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks are inextricably linked. The two cities already cooperate in many ways, including transit services and the Greenway, and new partnerships are forming, such as the wastewater interconnect project. Elected officials and staffs from both local government entities should add an explicit downtown focus as part of their collaborative efforts.

Continue discussions about UND's presence downtown. A stronger university presence downtown would benefit the University of North Dakota, its students and the community at large. UND has been navigating a period of turbulence, but small steps could open up big opportunities. The gallery space at the Empire Arts Center is a great start. An incremental expansion of

the UND-City internship program would be a logical next step, since experiential learning opportunities abound downtown in business, government, non-profits, arts, recreation, and entrepreneurship. A group of interested citizens should be formed to engage with the new UND administration to enhance UND's presence downtown.

Commit to a comprehensive downtown planning process. This document offers a downtown vision, but that vision must be supplemented by technical plans to bring it to fruition. That includes a plan for downtown public art and open space that connects to the Greenway on both sides of the river; a pedestrian-friendly streetscape plan with wayfinding and parking elements; a transportation/transit component; updated downtown design guidelines that reflect current conditions rather than a disaster-recovery mindset. This could include a form-based downtown code instead of typical zoning based on land use.

Support community policing efforts. As downtown continues to grow, the safety of its residents and visitors is paramount to Grand Forks' success. Conversations with community leaders, law enforcement, and the general public should continue to recognize the

changing needs of the downtown area. Programs like a "Downtown Resource Officer" have been successful across the country, and local community policing initiatives have already taken steps to improve relations between officers and citizens in neighborhoods throughout the city; those efforts should continue and expand. Downtown leaders should establish a regular dialogue with the Grand Forks Police Dept. to continually improve relationships between the police, business owners, elected officials, and the general public, and to discuss policies and programs that fit with a dense, diverse, and growing population.

Catalyze social experiences and opportunities. Downtown attracts a wide range of visitors and supports a diverse population base: people who live there, work there, study there, eat there, shop there, play there. It's a population that changes depending on the time of day and the time of year. A framework that supports opportunities to bring these different demographics together socially should be developed. Alley Alive exemplifies a grassroots-led event that did this successfully. Expanding downtown winter activities, like ice skating or the holiday parade, should be a priority.

Improve market information about residential and commercial vacancy downtown. Downtown is a unique real estate market in Grand Forks. Create and continuously update an inventory of available space downtown. Adapt the geographic categories of the Grand Forks Apartment Association's semi-annual vacancy survey to include an explicit measure of downtown.

Implement a "little changes" investment program where the community makes a series of small investments in citizen projects (such as \$200 each) to improve downtown. The program could be progressive, with many investments at a small amount of funds and "finalists" that advance toward larger grants. Include a peer-to-peer element where participants learn from each other after each project is completed.

Continue with a citizen-led downtown working group. The Downtown Vibrancy Group has provided a vital holding environment and sounding board for discussions about the future of downtown. The presence of this group has improved policy- and decision-making about downtown. It should continue in this role in a reconstituted form.

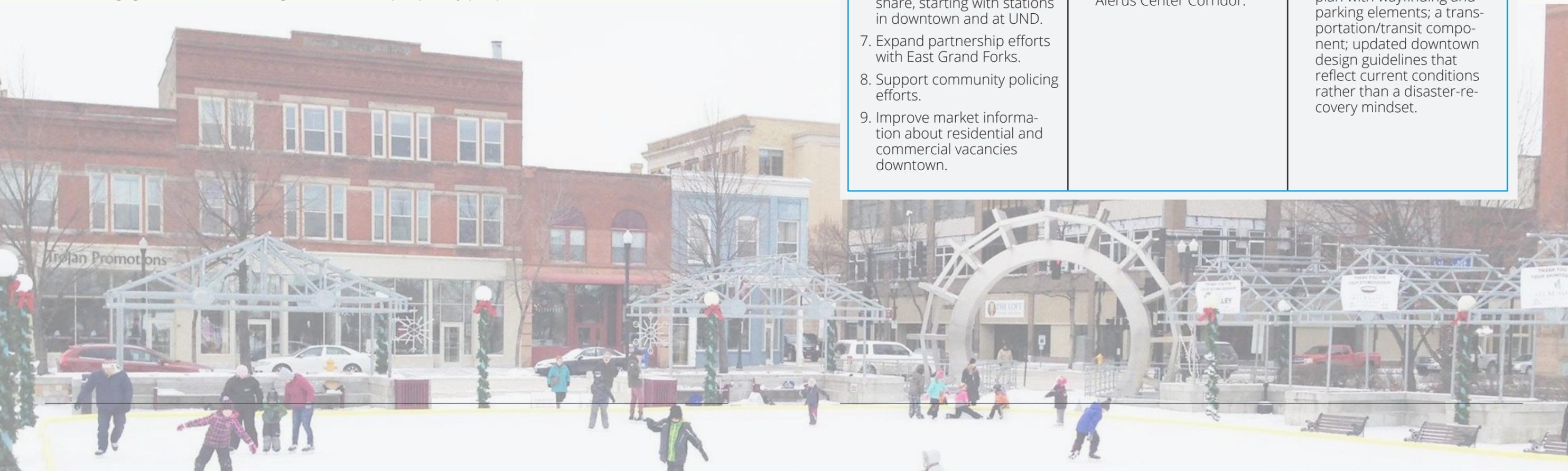
CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Nearly 20 years ago, Grand Forks leaders made the conscious – and unpopular among some – decision to reinvest in downtown after the flood and fire disasters. That investment has paid off. Many businesses returned, it is now a hub of nightlife, cultural, and community events. It is a key connection point to our other major physical asset: the Greenway. Downtown is the most important connection to our neighbor and partner: East Grand Forks, MN. Community members are stepping forward to engage and support downtown. New private investments and developments are emerging.

It is time to expand our economic development investments to target industries that export professional services. These new locally-grown knowledge-based services companies often fit best downtown where the action is and where their employees live. A new co-working space downtown will be a place where these individual professional services entrepreneurs can collaborate. Focusing more economic development efforts downtown could create a 21st century version of the industrial park that caters to the new primary sector: knowledge-based companies that export their services all over the world.

This progress is real. A neighborhood for all ages, downtown Grand Forks is uniquely ours. It is a cornerstone of life in Grand Forks, and it is a critical part of recruiting new talent to our community. The following page lists the recommendations in this report, outlined as an action plan. Implementing our incremental improvements and our big ideas downtown should use authentic citizen engagement to move things forward, “for people, by people.”

DOWNTOWN GRAND FORKS Action Plan		
Immediate Improvements Continue Work Already Underway	Catalytic Physical Projects Begin Planning Discussions	Plans and Big Investments Assess Demand and Feasibility
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Invest economic development funds downtown. 2. Support existing and create new community open streets events downtown. 3. Seek opportunities to redevelop downtown properties while planning for permanent public art and open spaces. 4. Implement incremental improvements to transit connections between UND and Downtown 5. Continue strengthening institutional partnerships to share parking spaces at various times in the day. 6. Initiate a Grand Forks bike share, starting with stations in downtown and at UND. 7. Expand partnership efforts with East Grand Forks. 8. Support community policing efforts. 9. Improve market information about residential and commercial vacancies downtown. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Invest accumulated City Beautification funds in a Town Square facelift. 2. Implement small streetscape improvements. 3. Improve lighting, aesthetics, and benches for walkability within downtown. 4. Modify curbs at key corners to create bump-outs. 5. Return N 3rd St and N 4th St to two-way streets. 6. Improve bicycle access to and within downtown. 7. Consider a reverse angle parking pilot project. 8. Improve transit connections between downtown and the Alerus Center Corridor. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create a dedicated, frequent transit connection between UND and downtown. 2. Continue discussions about UND's presence downtown. 3. Install a roundabout at 5th and Belmont intersection. 4. Connect to East Grand Forks with a pedestrian and bike crossing downtown. 5. Commit to a comprehensive downtown planning process, including a plan for downtown public art and open space that connects to the Greenway on both sides of the river; a pedestrian-friendly streetscape plan with wayfinding and parking elements; a transportation/transit component; updated downtown design guidelines that reflect current conditions rather than a disaster-recovery mindset.





A PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN GRAND FORKS

Mayor's Downtown Vibrancy Group