Acknowledgments

A community’s heart and soul is its downtown. It defines and separates it from all other cities. It is who you are and how you will be remembered. In Cedar Rapids, it’s also the job center and entertainment hub for the entire region, with more jobs, more businesses, more entertainment venues and a higher concentrated tax base than any other area of the region. Its success is uniquely and inescapably entwined to the success of the entire metropolitan area and even beyond.

Community leadership united to work on the original 2007 Vision Cedar Rapids Downtown Framework Plan and has come together again for this 2012 update to the plan, all with the common purpose to make downtown a vibrant, innovative and successful place. Six organizations funded this update plan: city of Cedar Rapids, Linn County, the Cedar Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown District, Priority One and 2001 Development Corporation.

While many stakeholders from these organizations and other downtown interests have been involved in the planning process, the following individuals merit acknowledgement for the time and resources they have given and for their leadership roles in the organizations that collaboratively funded this effort.

Study Purpose

Cedar Rapids was forever changed by the historic Flood of 2008. The damage done to downtown and other core neighborhoods added to economic damage totals throughout Eastern Iowa that made the flood the worst natural disaster in Iowa history and one of the worst in U.S. history.

Cedar Rapids has won national acclaim for the speed and strength of its recovery. Flood-damaged businesses returned at a rate almost double the average for disaster-recovery areas, and flood recovery aid spurred an estimated $750 million of downtown, as it provided the framework for many development decisions that otherwise could have taken far more time.

Leaders acknowledged the importance of the plan when deciding to do a five-year update. This update is in much the same spirit as the original plan – it is a “vision” and not intended to be a literal plan or detail of every solution. This vision should guide the process, not create a road map, but rather to update already-dynamic plans to incorporate the latest circumstances and future opportunities.

Study Process

The original 2007 Vision plan placed particular emphasis on the need to create a common vision, build consensus and develop goals which would win the support of the entire community. JLG Architects of Minneapolis, MN was hired to facilitate the effort and develop the framework plan.

The study included individual interviews with over 30 downtown stakeholders, a community wide public forum to determine downtown preferences and multiple focus groups. From this analysis, conclusions were drawn regarding Downtown’s role in the community, investment opportunities available to the market for both public and private sectors and barriers to investment. Tools necessary to implement the strategy, as well as select opportunity sites and concepts, which could serve as catalysts for a stronger downtown neighborhood, are among the products which resulted from the effort, each of which is described and now updated in the following sections.

This 2012 update followed a similar process - engaging the downtown stakeholders through a series of informal information gathering sessions. The update built on much of the same issues were still important to the revitalization of downtown Cedar Rapids. The flood of 2008 added several new items to the list and re-prioritized the others.

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Downtown Today

The 2007 Vision Cedar Rapids Plan had identified the downtown as a well-kept commercial district with excellent transportation and traffic systems. It had experienced significant growth and change in the 1980’s but had somewhat stagnated and fallen behind since. Typical to many urban centers, Cedar Rapids lost most of its retail function in the 1980s and along with it, much of its vitality. Streets and sidewalks were much too quiet and while the business day saw activity, the district nearly emptied at night and on weekends. Very little housing existed downtown and while many cities of comparable size were seeing a re-birth of their downtown housing, Cedar Rapids lagged behind.

The city’s riverfront was primarily used for agriculture and food processing as the city developed at the turn on the 20th century, and typical for most industrial cities, the river was never the focus of development. In fact the river was the downtown’s very edge until the police station was constructed in 1997 and began the process of making the river a feature.

The flood of 2008 gave the city an opportunity to jump start implementation of the plan. There was great value to the reconstruction by having the plan in place. Having consolidated the last 20 years of planning efforts created a plan that everyone was behind and gave the rebuilding immediate momentum.

The 2007 study identified 34 initiatives to bring back the vibrancy of the downtown district. In the four years that have followed the flood, much as been accomplished. The following page identifies some of those successes.

Initiatives mostly complete:

1. Host Community Events (Riverfront Amphitheater)
2. Place future civic facilities along the river
3. Redevelop the Old Federal Courthouse
4. Remove overhead power lines
5. Identify and improve the idea of Downtown Districts
6. Elevate architectural aesthetic
7. Develop a housing revitalization and infill program (60% complete through the Neighborhood Planning Process)
8. Ask medical park to increase density
9. Create pedestrian streetscapes
10. Remove 1st street parkade
11. Hide new parking behind mixed use
12. Provide on-street parking improvements
13. Renovate the Mays Island parking structure
14. Purchase and restore Sinclair brownfield
15. Renovate U.S. Cellular & associated hotel
Downtown Districts

Step one of the 2007 Vision Plan identified the specific functions of all the buildings in the district. These functions, as indicated on the diagram on the following page, were primarily civic facilities, commercial/office, medical and arts/entertainment facilities. Coe College, while not considered in the immediate district, was an important additional component. Surrounding this primary core is a ring of both warehouse buildings and active food processing plants giving the downtown a unique mix and character. Traditional single family residential neighborhoods adjoin the downtown and provided the employee base as the city was developing. This housing took another hit with the 2008 flood, as it continues to struggle for viability and is in an even greater need of assistance than 2007.

The second step of the 2007 study identified the distinct districts of the downtown as defined by the functions and uses within them. As it turns out, the downtown’s different zones or districts are very well defined as indicated in the diagram on page 6. The four dominant districts are the commercial/office core (orange), warehouse (grey), medical park (red) and municipal (brown). They are unique to Cedar Rapids and should be celebrated and identified graphically.

Bordering these primary districts are several smaller supportive districts to the downtown including Coe College to the north, the New Bohemia / Czech Village cultural districts, the Riverfront and the Quaker / Penford Industrial districts.

Why are districts important? Similar uses feed, support and grow from one another. They create momentum which creates further development. As an example - Minneapolis jump started the re-birth of their downtown by identifying their “theater district” and worked to build it into a destination. Singularly, these theaters had little draw. Once identified as a district, they became greater than the sum of their parts. With multiple venues to support them - restaurants opened and the area of Minneapolis Avenue which had grown decline in the 90’s - suddenly became the place to be in the 90’s and was the start of a downtown renewal. Grouping like functions creates synergy, momentum and leverages the community’s resources.

Understanding the districts is also important in determining future growth and change and how the seams between these zones should be treated. Seams can be either vibrant transitions or deteriorating edges depending on the district’s growth patterns.
Downtown Framework Plan

The following page identifies the composite framework plan and is intended to guide future development in a broad sense. It identifies several themes to create focus. They are outlined in the order of their importance throughout the rest of this document.

1. Implement Flood Protection
2. Create a Riverfront Park
3. New Downtown Housing
4. Parking
5. Restore Near-side Neighborhoods
6. West Side Re-Development
7. Create a Walkable Downtown
8. 3rd Street as Signature Street
9. Thinking About the Future

NEED NEW MAP
1 Implement Flood Protection

The top priority identified in this update to the Vision Plan is to implement flood protection for both sides of the Cedar River. This may seem obvious and already happening, but it will take vigilance to see it through. There are many hurdles to overcome including acquisition of land, funding, environmental concerns and public apathy as the flood event gets further away.

Flood protection is necessary to ensure that investment dollars return to the downtown. It is common for the public sector to re-invest initially with large scale projects but private re-investment will lag far behind until there is assurance that these investments will not be harmed again. Private money will want that guarantee. We are seeing this happen in the downtown right now. Most of the large scale projects under construction are public projects - Federal Courthouse, City Hall, Public Library, Paramount Theater, Civic Center and Hilton Hotel to name a few.

The flood protection project is on the right course - work with the Army Corps of Engineers to deliver a certified project capable of removing the downtown area from the 100 year flood plain. An approved project will not only provide the confidence necessary for private sector re-investment, but will eliminate the need for flood insurance in this area as well. This area holds a lot of real estate value and collectively this cost becomes a large number.

The biggest issue the downtown faces is a lack of privately owned housing stock. We simply do not have enough people living in the downtown core. This issue is taken up in section 3 and was a problem even before the flood. Multi-family housing will really struggle to get going with out flood protection. It is much easier to rebuild than it is to start a for profit real estate business venture that will have thin margins to start with. These projects are built strictly as investment properties by developers who will not take risks with their investment dollars. Most of the re-building happens from insurance money while new investment housing is built with mostly financed money. It will be nearly impossible to get this financing without flood protection. Additionally the cost of insurance will lower the return and the flood risk will simply scare away many investors.

The west side needs flood protection as well. This side of the river was heavily damaged and the property value there was significantly less even before the flood. The economics of rebuilding here will be harder than the east side where a much higher proportion of the real estate value was above the water and not harmed. The west side is another key initiative taken up in section 6, but it is important to call out the need to flood protect this area as well. The west side has not met the Army Corp’s cost-to-benefit ratio and will be a bigger struggle to complete. This area is important to the downtown and without protection will be a blighted area for years to come.

The flood protection project brings a great opportunity to the downtown area - the resources to implement the riverfront park (see section 2). A wide swath of the riverfront will be reconstructed. If designed correctly, this project will allow for a new greenway inside the protection lines, a continuous bike and walking trail, a way to improve the pedestrian crossings at the bridges and the financial resources to turn the river into the city’s largest public amenity.

2. Gain Riverfront Access Through Penford

3. Flood Protect West Side

4. Preserve Historic Structures

It is very important to have a flood management strategy that protects both sides of the river as shown in the City’s Preferred Flood Management Strategy. Having removable flood walls Downtown is a necessity to creating connections to the riverfront during non-flood times.

The second issue identified in this study is to create a riverfront park. It is essential that a public connection is gained across the waterfront at the Penford site. This should be built into the flood mitigation plan.

In order for any significant redevelopment of the West Side to happen, there needs to be some form of flood protection in place.

There are a number of existing buildings, including the Louis Sullivan Bank above, which should be preserved. Depending on their current location, some of these existing structures would benefit from re-locating to a different area.
2 Create a Riverfront Park

The 2007 Vision plan identified the riverfront as Cedar Rapids’ greatest—and most under-utilized asset. It has the potential to be a very special “people place” which the downtown area currently lacks. The existing riverfront park system was slowly improving prior to 2007 but the flood, and the likely resulting flood protection system, bring an enormous opportunity to reshape this vision and give it a huge jump-start (including financial resources). The entire swath of land between the river’s edge and the buildings which face it, will be reshaped to provide the city a new level of flood protection. Cedar Rapids should embrace this opportunity by identifying the improvements they wish to see and working with the Army Corps of Engineers to make it happen.

Because of its easy access to the river, its location in the heart of downtown and its recent conversion to mostly public facilities, the four blocks of riverfront between First and Fifth Avenue should be identified and targeted as an enhanced destination zone— the trail head if you will, of the new park system. This area now houses mostly public agencies or agencies with a public purpose including the new Federal Courthouse, City Hall and Economic Alliance. Great America, also located in this zone has already been recognized for setting an excellent example of how to embrace the river’s edge (see figure 10). The city also owns the now empty site of the former First Street Parkade. The opportunity exists for these entities to work together alongside the Army Corps of Engineers to create a new front door to the river. This section of the riverfront has previously been identified as one of the key investment zones in both the 1990 Downtown Redevelopment Strategy Study and the 2008 Framework Plan for Reinvestment and Revitalization. All parking and vehicular service should be removed from the immediate riverfront behind these buildings and placed between the buildings or to the east side of First Street SE. Where possible these and all future buildings should work to create secondary entries and frontage from the river side. A sophisticated pedestrian activity corridor can be created in what is now a service/parking zone. The promenade would be predominantly paving, with canopy trees in grates and provisions for flexible seating.

One of the key elements to a successful large river park is a continuous loop on both sides of the river (see figure 6). It should include a minimum of two pedestrian / bike dedicated crossings - one at the north side of the downtown and one at the south. Possible options include using the I-380 overpass on the north and the railroad bridge at the Sinclair site on the south. Another possibility would be a crossing at the tip of Mays Island and would help to connect the Mays Island Park to the greenway. Acquiring public access is a key although almost all of this land is already dedicated to this purpose and the flood mitigation project should make this easier. A few small gaps occur at the former Federal Courthouse (now City Hall), behind the Police Station and at Penfold. The City will need to work with Penfold to gain an easement along the river as it appears the firm’s industrial use of the river is not

1. Convert the Riverfront to a Public Park
2. Redevelop Prime Riverfront Lots
3. Re-Orient Buildings to Front the River
4. Link the East side to the West

Many cities have turned their Riverfront into public access parkways. The river is downtown Cedar Rapids’ greatest and most under utilized asset. A riverfront park will provide an amenity to attract housing and entertainment which will create vitality at nights and weekends.

There are many excellent riverfront lots being used for parking lots and even garbage piles. These are prime development sites for entertainment venues and housing. These properties should be re-developed privately through a city controlled RFP process.

Many buildings were constructed with their backs to the river. Every effort should be made to create an additional front door for these structures, which would face the new audience using the river parkway. Parking and access should be relocated between the buildings.

As in most midwest river cities, the waterway was originally used for industry and utility. It was a boundary, not an amenity. With most of these problems now removed, development should continue on the west side to make the river the centerpiece of the downtown.
2 Create a Riverfront Park

essential as it may have been in the past (see figure 2). Proper design will ensure safety to the public - it’s not necessary to gain access onto Penford’s site, but rather just pass through it. Additionally - many of the existing public river parks do not connect. Design changes, such as dedicated underpasses at the bridges, need to occur to connect the parks and make a continuous loop without vehicular conflicts around the entire parkway (see figure 7). Prior to the flood the bike trail system around this loop was approximately half complete. There are many gaps which will need to be filled. Many people use the current system between the African American Historical Museum & Cultural Center of Iowa and Smulekoff’s Furniture Store but are forced back onto the city streets at these points.

The next step will be to redevelop key river sites already owned by the City of Cedar Rapids, to possibly include the Park and Ride site, and the parking lots south of the Police Station (see figure 2). These sites could become housing, corporate, mixed use or civic facilities. Careful attention should be given to ensure the developments keep dedicated public access and provide a face to the river. Section 3 identifies downtown housing as the most important key to increasing downtown vitality. Urban housing relies upon public park infrastructure as its primary outdoor recreation space and the Cedar River is poised to become just such an amenity. A well designed riverfront area will provide the catalyst and incentive for the development of new downtown housing. The parkway will need to connect to the housing districts through landscaped pedestrian-friendly sidewalks and dedicated easements. These connections will provide safe easy and convenient access to the system making it an attractive reason to live downtown.

The west side of the river was significantly impacted by the flood and will need the most attention (see section 6). The Cedar River will eventually become the heart of the downtown district, but not until the west side becomes fully engaged and connected. Every effort should be made to redevelop the west side based around a newly created focal point in the river park. The new multi-purpose amphitheater is an excellent starting point from which to build this idea. This portion of the park should extend back into the residential neighborhood giving those residents access without vehicular crossings where possible. Extending the greenway even further than these boundaries and connecting to the citywide trail system would further enhance the parks usage. Additional development on the west side will further “center” the river in the downtown district and enhance it as a focal point. Every effort should be made to redevelop available sites on the west side.

Mays Island is a unique asset to Cedar Rapids. A great municipal Island of public use and service. It is a wonderfull image maker for your community. As the park develops Mays Island will become an obvious focal point to the park.

5. Host Community Events

Create and hold community events at the Riverfront park. These activities will create vitality and bring people and activity to other downtown venues. This photo taken at Grind福ks, ND shows how they are using the river for farmers markets, artfests and similar public events.

6. Create a Continuous Pedestrian/Bicycle path

Create a riverfront park with a continuous pedestrian loop around both sides, connected at each end, will help link the west side of the river to the downtown. Dedicated pedestrian / bike crossings need to be developed at the north and south ends of the downtown.

7. Solve the Traffic/Pedestrian Conflicts

The bridges create barriers to the continuous bike path. Every effort should be made to carve out access below these bridges creating a safe continuous movement - without having to cross traffic on the bridge deck above. This condition already exists at the 12th Avenue bridge.

8. Develop Sport and Recreation Opportunities

Develop new parks and community facilities to serve the City residents and the regional population, including new community centers, major regional indoor and outdoor recreation facilities, an amphitheater, as well as continued support for the new neighborhood parks and playgrounds.
Create a Riverfront Park

The river park plan should embrace the island - working hard to incorporate it into the circulation plan, hosting public events and keeping it in good repair. A worthy project would be to finish the tip of the island - moving the existing parking to the ramp below and creating a public space at the end. Remove the rip-rap and improve the flood wall to match the rest of the Island. The tip of the island would be a great location for a pedestrian dedicated bridge to connect the two sides of the river between the previously recognized civic “hub” and the new amphitheater. Every effort should be made to host the community’s activities at sites along the new riverfront park. Farmers markets, artists, community celebrations etc. help to create activity and vitality downtown and help set the character of the downtown as an entertainment destination.

Many Midwest cities grew up around a river but as buildings were constructed they placed their backs to the river so that utility services could be hidden, leaving the building’s front as the clean and inviting customer entrance. The river ultimately became a utilitarian corridor with value to the downtown equivalent to its roadways and sewage systems. Many of those communities have now recognized the potential of their river as a feature are now reaping the benefit of such an asset and are experiencing downtown renewal and revitalization (Dubuque, Des Moines, Winnipeg, Grand Forks as examples). Cedar Rapids should follow their lead.

9. Provide Connections to Downtown Housing

10. Follow Lead of Great America Building

11. Continue Public Improvements to May’s Island

12. Location for Future Civic Facilities

The parkway should connect to the housing districts through landscaped, pedestrian friendly sidewalks and pathways. These connections will provide safe and convenient access to the system making it an attractive reason to live downtown.

The Great America Building is the best example of riverfront development along the river. The facility provided both a public face and public access along the river, in the form of a landscaped bike path through their property.

May’s Island is a downtown asset. Work to keep it in top physical condition. Improve the tip of the island to include parking removal and a pedestrian link to both sides. Remove the rip-rap and improve the flood wall to match the rest of the Island.

New civic facilities should be located along the river greenway. These sites will help convert the river into a public use destination. The photo above is of the new Federal Courthouse situated along the Cedar River in Cedar Rapids.
3 New Downtown Housing

The 2007 Vision Plan, through a series of public forums and meetings with engaged stakeholders, determined the number one issue for Cedar Rapids’ downtown at that time was a lack of vitality created by a lack of downtown housing. And while Cedar Rapids has made great strides in implementing the 2007 plan, housing is the one area that has not improved. Additionally the 2008 flood further diminished the residential population by causing great damage to the near side neighborhoods. To be fair the community has had a lot of work to do since the flood i.e.: restoring public infrastructure, drafting the flood mitigation plan, acquiring properties which need to relocate and creating the framework plan plane for its recovery. It is time however to focus on the core downtown problem - a lack of housing.

The vitality of downtown rests in part on the round-the-clock presence of downtown residents. In Cedar Rapids, the combined amenities of the riverfront and proximity to downtown’s retail, cultural and employment offerings create exciting opportunities for residential development. The residential population will extend the cycle of downtown activity beyond working hours and provide a ready market for expanded retail and entertainment uses. The success of the Water Tower Place and Riverbend Park has demonstrated the appeal of downtown residential opportunities. Appropriately scaled new residential development should be encouraged and even incentivized to expand downtown’s residential population and to ensure that a variety of household types and income levels can be accommodated.

Downtown living should offer unique amenities and lifestyle choices to residents. Typically, residents are attracted to the convenient access to restaurants, stores, downtown jobs, and events. The diverse mix of people and events provides a distinct culture and sense of place not available elsewhere. The number of households potentially interested in downtown residences is growing as more young professionals are waiting to start families, families are decreasing in size, and “empty nesters” are looking to “downsize” their households.

Part of the recommended housing strategy is the design of a compact zone and of a process that always keeps multiple projects moving forward simultaneously. This strategy sends a message to the outside world that Cedar Rapids is successful and is making positive strides and creates an increasingly attractive environment for investment and development. Investors, developers and lenders seek out environments with market opportunity and areas with prospects for success. Such people like to follow success. A compact zone will support additional development and will leverage private funds from its success. Several locations which can take advantage of this amenity are identified as follows:

1. Create a re-development area in the warehouse district. This area of the downtown is ideally situated between the Medical Park and the Commercial District, both of which will provide the employee base to support it. The warehouse district contains several outstanding under utilized warehouse facilities that are primed for conversion to housing.

2. Re-Develop Under Utilized Lots

The warehouse district is ideally situated between the commercial district and medical park. It is a perfect location to support rehabilitation of its former industrial buildings into both rental and owner occupied multi-family housing.

Build new, multi-family housing in the under utilized lots between the new Federal Courthouse and the Oak Hill / Jackson neighborhood. This housing will cap the end of the warehouse district and will provide the density required to build future momentum.

3. Re-Develop City Owned Parcels

Construct new housing on city owned parcels that border the river. One possibility includes the Park and Ride lot near Water Tower Place. This site offers the benefits of the Greenway as well as being closely tied to the warehouse district, helping to create a compact development area.

4. West Side Housing

This part of the downtown has the most potential for higher-end owner occupied housing. The west side has an opportunity to be master planned to include connections to river, the amphitheater and trails and offers fantastic views of the east side of downtown.
3 New Downtown Housing

as well as under utilized buildings and empty lots that could become new multi-story mixed use developments. Additionally, this area of the downtown can provide the multi-family zoning layer necessary to further protect the Oak Hill / Jackson neighborhood from designation from the commercial core. Mixed use developments are acceptable as well as commercial ventures mixed throughout. The two can coexist in this type of environment.

2. Build new, multifamily housing in the under utilized lots between the new Federal Courthouse and the Oak Hill / Jackson neighborhood (see figure at right and figure 2). This housing will cap the end of the warehouse district development area and will provide the density required to build future momentum. This housing should be architecturally designed to fit the character of the district (see figure 8).

3. Build new housing or mixed use projects on city owned parcels that border the river. Three excellent possibilities exist - including the Park and Ride lot near Water Tower Place (see figure 3). This site offers the benefits of the Greenway as well as being closely tied to sites one and two listed above, helping to create the compact development zone as previously discussed.

4. Build new housing on the west side. This part of the downtown has the most potential for higher-end owner occupied housing. The west side has an opportunity to be master planned to include connections to river, the amphitheater and trails and offers fantastic views of the east side of downtown. New construction can offset the noise issues associated with I-380 and this land is farther from the train whistles. The west side of the downtown has the room and potential amenities to create a very desirable owner occupied mixed use housing zone.

To help create an environment for successful housing re-development the downtown district and city should look to solve several infrastructure needs:

1. Continue to work to remove the overhead power lines still remaining in the downtown area. Much progress has been made in this area since 2007 - lets continue to complete this task.

2. Eliminate train whistle. The train whistle is impediment for creating the highly desired "owner occupied" housing. This type of housing will bring greater private investment but will struggle to locate along the noisy railroad. Many communities have been successful in solving this issue by working with the railroad to make "quiet zones" which do not require the ever present horn. This is not inexpensive, but is worth the effort.

Creating a pedestrian oriented downtown housing district will help create a healthy, active and re-invigorated downtown. No single other improvement will cause as dramatic an effect to its character and value. The district should be identified with graphics and landscaping (see figure 5) and tied directly to the Cedar River Greenway. This type of development makes financial sense, because the infrastructure is already here to support the new developments. Creating density and increasing the city’s tax base without having to build roads, sewer or water systems is efficient and cost effective for all. A vibrant downtown has the ripple effect of causing all properties to be more valuable creating higher resale value and higher taxable value.

Flood protection will be vitally important (see section 1). New housing will only happen through private investment and it will be heavily financed. Financial institutions will have rules about loaning money to properties in 100 year flood plains. It is essential to get flood protection in place capable of removing the downtown from the 100 year flood plain.

Cedar Rapids should begin by incentivizing the first several projects. City leaders should look to Grand Forks, ND as an example of post flood success in redeveloping their downtown housing market. That community created incentives to jump start the desired housing they also lacked for nearly 40 years. They assembled land, created financial and tax incentives and asked for proposals from private developers to make it happen. The first few projects needed to be heavily incentivized including donation of land, tax breaks and cash loans. The middle projects required much less and today new multi-family housing projects are being constructed with no city participation at all. The results have been dramatic: nearly 500 new housing units completed, new restaurants, boutique shops, office spaces, community events and dramatically rising.

5. Continue to Remove Overhead Power Lines  
6. Create a Whistle Free Zone  
7. Identify & Celebrate the Downtown Districts  
8. Architectural Design
**Parking**

The public parking system has an opportunity to be a real asset to downtown Cedar Rapids, but it hasn’t always lived up to that potential.

The off-street facilities provide parking capacity that allows many developers and property owners to forgo the cost of providing private parking, thereby holding down occupancy costs and helping make commercial rents very competitive.

Five long-established parking ramps are all debt-free, allowing the system to sustain itself even with below market parking rates. Two planned new ramps will need higher revenues to support anticipated debt service, but even these ramps are likely to be priced well below rates seen in most Midwestern urban markets.

Unfortunately, the system suffers from disinvestment because historic rates were kept too low, and appropriate maintenance was long-deferred. Also, poor design of parking facilities and poor choices for locating facilities have hampered downtown development.

On-street parking assets have benefited from new multi-space meter technology. But some on-street spaces are being inefficiently used for monthly permit parking and additional changes may be needed as the entertainment district is restored with the reopening of the Paramount Theatre and the new convention center.

Significant signs of improvement are apparent since 2007, particularly since privatization of the parking operations in 2009 and privatization of the parking management in 2010.

New and continuing priorities for the parking system should be:

1. **Minimize use of surface parking lots in core areas.** Large surface parking lots negate the urban densities and compact development necessary for vibrant people-spaces. Push surface parking to the fringes of core neighborhoods and link them with pedestrian-friendly routes or a downtown shuttle system. Core-area surface lots should be looked at as land-banks for future redevelopment opportunities.

2. **Build new ramp capacity, as needed, within mixed-use buildings rather than single-use parking structures.** While the two newest downtown ramps will add street-level retail activity and a higher architectural finish than the older ramps, they still fall far short of what many other similar communities are accomplishing with mixed uses and exterior finishes. Off-street capacity should be adequate for the near-term, but plans should be made now for how/where the next ramp gets built.

3. **View on-street parking as a premium customer amenity.** Use pricing policies, education and enforcement to move employee and other long-term parking to off-street facilities. Manage on-street assets for high-turnover and convenience for downtown visitors.

4. **Implement the 2010 Strategic Parking Action Plan.** The plan details many of the operational tactics, policy decisions, technology upgrades and maintenance needs that will transform the system into a true asset for downtown economic development.

5. **Typical downtown patrons want convenient, safe and friendly parking, even more than they want cheap parking.** While rates should be kept as low as reasonable, downtown development is actually hurt when a lack of reinvestment affects the convenience, safety or friendliness of the system.

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1. Minimize Surface Parking in Downtown Core
2. Develop Mixed-Use Buildings with Parking
3. On-Street Parking as Premium Amenity
4. Implement 2010 Strategic Parking Action Plan
5. Investment in Downtown Development
5 Restore Near-side Neighborhoods

Near-side neighborhoods are valuable to downtowns and communities as a whole. The existing infrastructure of water, sewer and streets make these neighborhoods the most efficient in the city, and these districts add life and vitality to the downtown 24/7. Investment in these neighborhoods builds commercial centers, and conversely, deterioration of this core housing erodes them.

Cedar Rapids’ near-side residential neighborhoods are the oldest residential neighborhoods in the city. They are immediately contiguous to the downtown, and at their origin supplied the downtown workforce with single-family residential housing. Through the years, many of these neighborhoods have diminished as a result of, among other reasons, uncontrolled development of the commercial and medical core as well as land speculation and a poor transition between the two zones. And in 2008, the flood devastated significant portions of some of the core neighborhoods, most notably: Time Check, Taylor, and Oak Hill/Jackson.

A contributor to the decline of the Wellington Heights and Oak Hill/Jackson neighborhoods has been large-scale property acquisition in anticipation of expansion of the Medical District. The medical district currently has enough property within its limits for long-term expansion, and so while further growth of the medical institutions is desired, it should not encroach any further into the residential neighborhoods. Similarly, property acquisitions of Coe College have contributed, along with other factors, to uncertainty and decline in the Mound View neighborhood.

In all these cases, a well-defined edge needs to be created that is both regulated and tangible. Heavily landscaped and celebrated, this line will provide the residents with assurance that their future is safe and reinvestment can occur — a friendly seam between equally important districts.

1. Implement Neighborhood Planning Process
2. Encourage Owner-occupied Housing
3. Identify and Restore Neighborhood Centers
4. Respect Existing Neighborhood Character

Home ownership should be encouraged. Where rental properties do occur, encourage landlords to live in the same neighborhood to avoid absentee landlords.

Support and strengthen neighborhood centers by promoting a diverse array of local businesses that would be accessible to all modes of transportation.

Preserve the existing character of each neighborhood through housing reinvestment and creation of new affordable alternatives, preservation of viable buildings, and use of materials and forms that complement the existing traditional structures.
Restore Near-side Neighborhoods

Prior to the flood in 2008, the condition of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown could be classified as “distressed”. The flood changed all that – what was distressed became devastated and the affected area grew dramatically, enveloping significant portions of the Time Check and Taylor as well. But as a result of the flood, the City was able to invest in large-scale community planning that recognized the key role these areas play in our communities, with specific focus in the Neighborhood Planning Process conducted and completed in 2009.

With the Neighborhood Planning Process in place and action items identified, the City of Cedar Rapids has taken a significant step toward the re-imagining and revitalization of these near-side neighborhoods. Reinvestment strategies are dependent upon a reliable flood protection implementation plan and timeline and should further focus on:

1. Implementing strategies, principles and recommendations from the Neighborhood Planning Process
2. Encouraging owner-occupied housing and discouraging absentee landlords
3. Identifying and incentivizing restoration of neighborhood centers
4. Respecting the scale and character of the existing neighborhoods, without committing to “period” architectural design constraints
5. Keeping schools open
6. Connecting neighborhoods to each other via walkable routes
7. Establishing and enforcing standards for the physical condition of properties
8. Define the Edge of Medical Park

Neighborhood schools, like McKinley Middle School, are essential to the neighborhood’s identity and create a sense of pride. Closing schools in these neighborhoods will hurt their ability for revitalization.

Reinvestment of the neighborhood should start with the establishment and enforcement of standards for the physical condition of properties, whether they are new or existing structures.

Coe College has demonstrated how Medical Park could physically define its boundary to keep future development from encroaching further into the single family neighborhoods. Land speculation and uncertainty is causing vital downtown housing districts to deteriorate.

Enhance connections, both vehicular and pedestrian, between the near-side neighborhoods and downtown as well as connections between neighborhoods and the river.

This planning has paid off and there are some early successes: the City’s HAND district in Oakhill/Jackson that introduced well-designed infill; the Affordable Housing Network’s initiative to purchase and rehab problem properties in Wellington Heights; CDBG funding of neighborhood associations, resource centers, BRIGHTEN, and similar programs; and the revitalization of New Bo, to name a few.

While there is much to be proud of, it is important to recognize that significant pressure on near-side neighborhoods continues to be an area of concern and in need of focused attention.

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West Side Re-Development

The downtown area west of the river has potential for more dramatic transformation than any other flood recovery area in Cedar Rapids. However, redevelopment has and will continue to lag other areas. Flood protection uncertainties, the lack of significant private sector investment and lack of a common vision for redevelopment have slowed progress so far. This is not unusual in post-disaster redevelopment and shouldn’t be viewed as a negative. As these uncertainties resolve themselves and as a common vision emerges, this area will begin to move, with significant progress evident five years from now and within a decade, one of the most dynamically changed neighborhoods in the region.

This area clearly needs more significant planning. Stakeholders ranging from top community leadership to neighborhood residents to people who are likely users of a redeveloped area need to come together to create a common vision for the area, much as has been done in other neighborhoods. While this plan will offer some high-level vision ideas, more detailed work should commence immediately.

Some concepts that might frame this planning include:

1. Clearly communicate to the development/business community the regulations, as well as the best practices for flood plain construction. In many cases, it is possible to build responsibly in the flood plain. Cedar Rapids already features several excellent examples. The Human Services Campus makes good use of ground-floor parking beneath a well-designed urban building. Even more impressive is the True North building that puts minimal investment on the ground floor but hides that with a design that would lead one to believe Class A office space is located throughout the structure. The same type of development may work in the near-west area.

2. Understand the operational needs of the new amphitheater. Pedestrian patterns, parking demands, noise concerns, recreation trail use and other factors could dictate how some adjacent development proceeds.

3. Take advantage of the geography. The land near 8th Avenue/Diagonal Drive is significantly elevated from the properties starting at First Avenue and First Street. Designing the entire neighborhood to “face” north-northeast would provide interesting views for multiple tiers of development as they worked “up the hill.” The higher elevations may provide earlier development opportunity, as those areas would be less endangered from potential floods.

4. Embrace history where possible. The Louis Sullivan Bank obviously is a treasure that could anchor a transformed neighborhood.

5. Bridge the river. Make the existing east-west connections more pedestrian friendly. Also, reconsider the pedestrian bridge across the southern tip of May’s Island. The really good design ideas have been incorporated in several previous plans. These connections strengthen the potential of the near-west side becoming the premier option for young professionals living in multi-use, mid-rise developments, and for multi-family, higher-density residential units to fill the neighborhood.

6. Be bold. Planners and developers should think with a “blank-slate” mentality rather than be limited by the way things used to be. Even the existing street grid could potentially be adjusted. Imagine the neighborhood as a gateway for those coming off I-380 at the Diagonal Drive interchange. From the interchange, a new street grid could carry motorists in an arch that ultimately aligns with Third Avenue. Other bold, transformative ideas could lead to the much-needed common vision.

Get a clear grasp on the regulations of flood plain construction. In many cases, it is possible to build responsibly in the flood plain. Cedar Rapids already features several excellent examples. The Oak Hill Jackson Brickstone Apartments is an example that has ground-floor parking beneath apartment units.

The land near 8th Avenue/Diagonal Drive is significantly elevated from the properties starting at First Avenue and First Street. Designing the entire neighborhood to “face” north-northeast would provide interesting views for multiple tiers of development and avoid potential floods.

Historic Buildings like the Louis Sullivan Bank is a treasure that could anchor a transformed neighborhood.

Make the existing east-west connections more pedestrian friendly, including a pedestrian friendly bridge across the southern tip of May’s Island, such as the above bridge in Omaha that crosses the Missouri River.
Create a Walkable Downtown

One of the keys to creating a desirable place to live and work downtown is designing a walkable, pedestrian friendly environment. Walkability is a cornerstone to an urban area’s vitality. The 1990 Downtown Development Strategy highlighted walkability as the downtown’s greatest need.

The following are key details to work toward:

1. Design for People. Make decisions based on people first, cars second. Downtowns designed for people have many investments being made in plazas, parks and pedestrian walkways. Pedestrianize intersections with slip lanes, bulbouts and medians to effectively to reduce street crossing exposure. Add trees and streetscaping.

2. Create Great Public Space. Create places for people to assemble, play and associate with others within their downtown. The best downtowns have welcoming public space within 1/8th mile (700 feet) of all residential areas. These spaces are easily accessed by all people.

3. Streets, Trails and River are Well Linked. The best features of downtown are disconnected and do not encourage pedestrian activity. Look for ways to connect the river and the city’s trail system to the pedestrian friendly streets. Extend streetscaping and walkability east to the new housing district. A truly walkable community does not force lots of people to drive to where they work.

4. Follow the Lead of Czech Village and New Bohemia streetscape improvements. The streetscape work at these two centers is an excellent example of the kinds of physical improvements Cedar Rapids should continue to build.

5. Convert one-way streets back to two-way. The one-way system is no longer necessary, causes confusion and is counter productive to a pedestrian friendly neighborhood. Design streetscaping improvements which provide adequate walkway widths, quality paving, boulevards and medians with canopy trees, clear signage and lighting to encourage pedestrian activity. Key streets are “speed controlled”. Traffic moves on these streets at safe, pleasant, courteous speeds. These streets are tree lined, have on-street parking and use other methods that are affordable means to keep traffic speeds under control. Reduce the number of one-way streets designed to flush downtown of its traffic in a rush or flight to the outskirts of town.

Street vitality is downtown’s missing link. It will take a number of changes to solve this issue, but high on the list will be creating space where people will want to be. New streetscaping and pedestrian friendly streets, medians and intersections are a good starting point.

Design streetscape improvements to provide adequate walkway widths, quality paving, boulevards and medians with canopy trees, clear signage and lighting to encourage pedestrian activity. The 1990 Downtown Development Strategy focused on this item and details physical changes to be implemented (some of which have been implemented).

Create new parking behind mixed use structures that provide a better image and activity along the street than traditional sterile parking structures. Encourage public/private partnerships which take advantage of mutual parking needs.

Follow the lead of Czech Village and New Bohemia streetscape improvements. The streetscape work at these two centers is an excellent example of the kinds of physical improvements Cedar Rapids should continue to build.
Third Street as Signature Street

Downtowns benefit from having a “signature street” that includes amenities, programming and targeted uses that distinguish it from other downtown streets. In Cedar Rapids, that has clearly been identified and widely accepted as Third Street SE. The convention center/hotel complex anchors the north side and the rapidly rejuvenating New Bohemia district anchors the south side, linking two vibrant areas and providing an excellent focal point for unique streetscape and activity alluring to both the pedestrian and people in vehicles.

Third Street’s continued development can be spurred by:

1. Work with private property owners to redevelop the surface parking lots and under-utilized properties in the 100 block, 400 block and 500 block of Third Street SE. This signature street needs urban edge development, urban density and street-level activity. The experience of Third Street is negatively affected by surface parking lots.

2. Renew streetscape. The benches, lights, planters, bike racks, banners and brickwork throughout downtown have created a beautiful environment over the past couple of decades. But many features are showing their age. It’s time for a significant investment in renewing the streetscape elements. In that renewal, consideration should be given to creating elements that distinguish Third Street from others downtown, perhaps via high density of planters and benches, or possibly by altering the colors or designs on Third Street.

3. Incorporate patio/outdoor seating at restaurants wherever possible along Third Street, and encourage clear windows at street level, so the inside activities at a restaurant or bar can easily be viewed by passers-by. That’s all part of the experience of a signature street.

4. Consider development incentives for very specific uses along Third Street to try to encourage and attract the type of businesses that add to a signature street identity. Private markets will fill the spaces with any available tenant. But ideally, these would be spaces of interest to visitors — food-and-beverage, niche retail, a visitors center, arts-and-culture venues with playbill advertisements that create interest even without patronizing a show. For some buildings, upper floors might make for good residential conversions, and that might also be an incentivized activity to spur downtown housing options.

5. Businesses on Third Street that aren’t directly of visitor interest should be encouraged to think creatively about what might create exterior interest. A real estate company might include visual displays of listed property or of recent development successes; a community foundation might include exterior promotions of programs and projects it has supported; a bank or investment firm might have an electronic scroll board that shows the latest market/business news.

6. Signature streets are about much more than the infrastructure. The City, the Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, the hotel/convention center operators, the Economic Alliance and others should consistently view Third Street as a first option for event and activity programming. The street should be designed for easy closure for a Downtown Farmers’ Market, an outdoor theatre production or corollary space to convention activities.

I. Redevelop Surface Parking with Urban Density

II. Streetscape Improvements

III. Encourage Pedestrian Interaction

IV. Invest and Encourage Local Galleries, Studios, & Shops
Thinking About the Future

Cedar Rapids has plenty of near-term priorities to work on. It’s important for community leaders to also keep the more distant future in mind. The current wave of post-flood development cannot be followed by a vacuum of ideas, plans and progress. To be one of America’s great cities, it’s going to be critical to continue planning for community development improvements that could take a decade or more to come to fruition.

In a series of stakeholder meetings held as part of this update plan, several ideas of merit arose:

1. Improve Cedar Lake and integrate it as an amenity into the Cedar River Park. The idea of cleaning up Cedar Lake has been around since at least 1979 when a Cedar Lake Master Plan was developed. But recent changes regarding the lake’s usage by its major industrial neighbors have brought the lake’s potential, as a downtown asset, to light once again. Those changes include decommissioning the Alliant Energy Sixth Street generating station and its associated above-ground steam lines around the lake. The decommissioning provides a window of opportunity to consider Cedar Lake as an amenity and an extension of the River Parkway. This evolution could take many years because there are numerous complicated issues that will take time to resolve. It should in no way take priority over the main river channel, but this is a key link between the city’s bike trails and parks to the north. The trail has been very successful and is an indicator of potential for both the river and the lake. Working with the industrial users will be a key issue. The city should support them in making the transformation from industrial use to public use.

2. Re-route downtown switching operations that stall trains across downtown streets should continue to be a long-term priority. Here, too, industrial users and their needs should be paramount to planning. But if there is ever opportunity to extend the rail yards to the north and reconfigure the railroad bridges to allow switching to be accomplished in a different way, it would benefit downtown tremendously. Leaders should also continue to explore transit train potential, linking downtown with the Eastern Iowa Airport and, potentially, to Iowa City, as considered in earlier plans.

3. Interstate 380. Changes in land-use, local traffic patterns and development potential make some of the interchanges to and from I-380 less logical than when it was constructed more than three decades ago. What changes in route, design or interchanges would benefit core neighborhood? What changes might drive future economic development or downtown success? Community leaders should be prepared with ideas should the opportunity for changes ever arise.

4. Cedar River use. The focus today is logically on flood protection and riverfront development. But as the river develops, there may be increasing demand or desire to actively use the river. Several conditions make navigation below the dam difficult today. But changes to the existing dam or other riverway changes downstream could create conditions that make the river far more usable in the stretches through downtown. Looking a decade or more into the future, this could become a tremendous new asset for downtown Cedar Rapids.