Des Moines’ traditional neighborhoods have character worth protecting in existing neighborhoods and duplicating in newly developing areas.

The older or traditional neighborhoods of Des Moines, with commercial uses that complement a healthy mixture of multi-family and single family housing, are an alternative to the single use model of development (see illustration). The neighborhoods provide quality housing along walkable streets, connected to a variety of uses. These neighborhoods are Des Moines’ competitive edge in the region. They provide qualities that are desirable among a large group of residents. The desirable qualities in traditional neighborhoods should be retained and enhanced and duplicated as new areas of Des Moines are platted and developed.

Des Moines has a distinctive “sense of place” in its urban character.

Des Moines has a distinctive identity as a community with qualities that are unlike the suburban communities, even though Des Moines is an integral portion of the region’s fabric. The city is a place, functionally and visually. It has parts which interact including homes, workplaces, shops and open space that depend and build upon each other. It provides the downtown with its mixture of intensive office, cultural, and housing opportunities.

Preservation of Des Moines existing housing and commercial buildings is an effective growth management tool. The most cost-effective method of preventing suburban sprawl is through effective use of buildings and sites already in place within the community. Reusing existing buildings also means using existing public infrastructure. Last but not least, older neighborhoods and buildings provide that “sense of place” that is so often lacking from new areas of cities and suburbs.

Historic districts and landmark structures should be preserved and protected.

The historic buildings throughout Des Moines are not merely relics and artifacts of bygone days. While buildings alone do not make a community, the built environment shapes our perceptions and lives, expresses our priorities as a society, and influences our future possibilities. Preserving these buildings signifies we value the historical fabric of our community.

Suburban Sprawl

Traditional Neighborhood

This graphic contrasts suburban street patterns and a traditional neighborhood street pattern. The typical suburban development has minimal street and path connections among and within neighborhoods. Homes are isolated from different uses. The traditional neighborhood has more and stronger connections among housing, commercial and civic uses.
Transportation Concepts

The 2020 Community Character Plan proposes a paradigm shift in Des Moines' approach to transportation and traffic planning. It promotes a holistic planning approach to transportation that is well-integrated with land use.

The following principles will be considered when making land use and transportation decisions:

- Transportation facilities should support and guide the balanced growth concept for the metropolitan area;
- New development should be compact to promote walking and transit;
- Traffic calming techniques that slow down traffic are important to implementing a pedestrian and child friendly city;
- Buildings, not roads, should dominate the city;
- Pedestrian amenities are an integral component of street improvements and design; and
- Guidelines for new construction and reconstruction of streets should be based on abutting land use classifications.

The city’s transportation system will be a large determinant in meeting the other goals of this plan. The challenge is to maintain convenient and safe access to jobs, services, shopping, and schools for the user of the automobile, the user of mass transit, and the pedestrian or bike rider. Land use recommendations also need to consider future impacts on transportation such as increases in gas prices or additional mass transit budget cuts.

Although this plan does not attempt to eliminate or limit the automobile or its use in Des Moines, basic concepts will change the approach to construction of new roads and the impact increased traffic will have on abutting land uses. This will create a more livable city, that provides open access to all citizens regardless of age or economic status. It will also provide more efficiencies in land use and city services.
Transportation facilities should support and guide the balanced growth concept for the metropolitan area. Balanced growth is defined as growth spread equally throughout the county rather than expanding only in one direction. Des Moines is the hub for the growth as it spreads throughout the metropolitan area. A comprehensive highway system that balances safety, function and amenities is one of the best measures to ensure that balanced growth occurs. It ensures that Des Moines remains the hub of the regional area and that access is maintained to all suburbs and county areas.

New development should be compact to promote walking and transit. Compact development is more compatible for walking and transit. The overall density in Des Moines is 3.8 persons per acre. This low density makes it difficult for mass transportation to compete with the automobile. Establishing a light rail or other system that needs heavy investment in infrastructure is not considered feasible in such a low density community. The 2020 plan will encourage areas of higher density where walking and bus service is feasible and where other forms of mass transit may be developed in the future. Higher density will not be considered when it would compromise the existing neighborhood character or the existing infrastructure.

Compact development is very important in commercial development and its accommodations for the automobile. Mixed use developments and neighborhood commercial services should be provided near residential development. Services clustered together along walkable streets promotes walking rather than driving to every store. The concept of shared rather than fragmented parking lots is necessary for pedestrian compactness. Exploration of maximum and minimum number of parking spaces for commercial development is also important in encouraging more dense development.
Buildings, not roads, should dominate the city.
Paramount to this principal is that buildings should frame the street and the width of the street should complement the building height. When the street becomes too wide and large setbacks are instituted on either side of the street, all sense of connection between the buildings and the street is lost. Consequently, the motorist or pedestrian also loses his or her sense of relationship between the street and adjacent land use.

Most recent street improvements have been engineered to a standard that is primarily concerned with the flow of traffic at a maximum speed. The standard requires purchase of additional right-of-way and additional pavement width. Smaller lanes are an environmentally friendlier approach to development and encourage slower vehicle speeds. The slower traffic can encourage drivers to stop, shop or eat and increase business rather than just getting commuters home in a hurry.

Pedestrian amenities are an integral component of street improvements and design.
Safe and convenient pedestrian facilities, including sidewalks and walking trails, should be fully integrated into the city's transportation system. Sidewalks within a subdivision encourage walking to destinations and interactions among neighbors. Street improvements should encourage the walkable connections and street character that exist throughout Des Moines' traditional neighborhoods. Pedestrian amenities in new shopping areas encourage walking to shops, cutting down on time and short auto trips. In new plats, sidewalks or walking paths can create connections among residences, recreational areas, and commercial uses.
Traffic calming techniques that slow down traffic are important to implementing a pedestrian and child friendly city. Traffic calming is a series of techniques that can implement many of the underlying principles of the 2020 Plan. Traffic calming refers to a holistic, integrated approach to traffic planning that slows down automobile traffic in both newly developing and existing areas to encourage mobility for pedestrians, bicycles, and mass transit. (More is discussed on Traffic Calming in Chapter 7, Transportation)

Techniques that physically change the road design such as traffic circles, knuckles, and stop signs work in developed parts of the city to slow traffic. Techniques in platting, such as the installation of bike trails and pedestrian walkways and narrowing streets, can effectively slow automobile traffic and encourage pedestrian traffic in newly developing areas.

Guidelines for new construction and reconstruction of streets should be based on abutting land use classifications.

The traditional concept of street classification has been a hierarchy of street functions based on a tradeoff between through movements and access to properties. High level-of-service standards have emphasized efficient through traffic movement over property access and pedestrian accommodation. The 2020 Plan starts with this traditional hierarchy and then expands it to include land use functions. The result is a street classification based not only on the automobile functions of the streets, but also on the functions of the land use adjacent to the street. Automobile capacity, speed and through movements, are balanced with building orientation, need for access, and pedestrian activity.

The street classification focus, then, is switched from a focus on auto capacity to a focus on street environment. The objective is for a street to serve multiple purposes, and not merely move traffic. Particularly important to this idea, is the concept of protecting residential corridors. A continuation of single family housing and well integrated multi-family housing is the best use for several streets that are heavily traveled. The impact of street improvements and traffic changes on residential streets must be evaluated prior to implementation. Through traffic calming techniques and careful street improvements, the location of residential property on a corridor should not be a negative. (More information on a street classification system is in Chapter 7, Transportation)

CONCEPTUAL TRAFFIC ROUNDABOUT

A traffic circle installed in the center of an intersection may be the most efficient way to discourage through traffic in residential neighborhoods. Circles should be large enough to slow down traffic, but not so large as to constrict it. Usually this means about an 18-foot diameter. Circles should be mounted in the center, planted with trees, and enclosed by a curb.
Growth and Annexation

Prior to the annexations of the 1980’s, Des Moines was out of land to develop for new growth. Much of the vacant land that existed within the city was scattered in sites that were hard to assemble, had no sewers, or had environmental problems. The southeast and southwest involuntary annexations brought in vacant land for business parks, commercial and residential development. The city currently has approximately three square miles of area that will be developed for residential use.

Further additional physical growth is also important to the city. In Cities without Suburbs, David Rusk, former mayor of Albuquerque, connects a city’s ability to physically grow with issues of social equity, racial segregation and population loss. Rusk’s thesis is that cities that have had the ability to expand boundaries by annexation or consolidation are less segregated by race and class, are economically healthier, and are simply more equitable to a region’s people.

- Develop new areas of the city as a series of interconnected neighborhoods that incorporate the values of traditional neighborhoods.
- Promote annexation as a way to expand the city’s boundaries and capture new growth for Des Moines.

The principles developed as a part of the 2020 Plan, will insure that development in new areas is done with regard to sewer and water. It will also provide residents the choice of living in a new house but with the qualities and services of a traditional neighborhood.
Develop new areas of the city as a series of interconnected neighborhoods that incorporate the values of traditional neighborhoods. As subdivisions are platted, they need to be connected through a series of pedestrian and automobile connections. Pedestrian amenities along through streets, multi-purpose recreational paths, and connections to open space will all serve to make the neighborhood unified. Further the plan will provide for good access to pedestrian shopping areas, public transit and civic or school buildings.

As an implementation step to the 2020 Community Character Plan, the city will develop a specific area plan for the undeveloped southeast portion of the city. That plan will focus on a neighborhood planning unit of approximately 160 acre increments. Within those 160 acres, a mix of single and multi-family housing that will also support commercial uses should be incorporated. Developments or plats could be submitted in any size, however, a development must be compatible with the overall plan for the 160 acres. Connections among the neighborhoods will be provided by pedestrian-friendly streets and multi-purpose paths.

Promote annexation as a way to expand the city’s boundaries and capture new growth for Des Moines.

Rusk contends that for a city's population to grow, the city must be "elastic." If there is little or no vacant ground to develop, it has minimal elasticity. The most common method by which a city acquires new territory is annexation. He presents empirical evidence that if a city does not grow, it begins to shrink in population and captured commercial growth. Cities surrounded by suburban communities become trapped geographically and are blocked from capturing growth from the metropolitan area.

In a region with an "elastic" central city, low density suburban areas expand around the central city but do not cut it off from total growth. The central city is able to expand and capture much of the suburban type of growth within its municipal boundaries. Tapping a broader tax base, an elastic city government is better financed and able to rely on local resources to address local problems.

Annexation can provide an increased opportunity for Des Moines to capture new growth and ultimately result in a stabilization or reduction in the city's tax rate. It also can provide for a different kind of growth with a greater choice for housing in a wide variety of locations, price ranges and styles. Lastly, it provides for managed growth in order to protect farmland.

Proposed 1998 Annexation Map
Chapter Two discusses the physical features of Des Moines that influence the patterns of daily life in the city. Starting with the natural systems, the chapter tells a story about the importance of form and function, attractive design, and beauty in the built and natural designs that make up Des Moines' environment. Recommended policies focus on preserving and enhancing the character of our community by building on our natural and urban forms. The chapter uses two previous works, the Des Moines Vision Plan and Kevin Lynch's Image of the City to analyze and develop policies for neighborhoods, streets, corridors, and buildings.

An underlying principle of the 2020 Community Character Plan is to marry the positive components of Des Moines' historic development patterns and natural features, with new development, the transportation system and capital improvements needed in the twenty first century. A successful marriage of the existing and the new requires an analysis of Des Moines' physical form.

Land use planning should play an important role in the creation of a physical environment that reflects and contributes to our visual culture. However, planning has focused almost exclusively on the economic and functional issues and has resulted in visual chaos. Our physical environment should reflect the aesthetics of our culture and not only the market forces.

It is essential for the planning that occurs in Des Moines to take into account the formal physical structures and patterns of the city such as its landmarks and street system. Therefore, this plan establishes a framework for development decisions based on Des Moines' physical form.
Des Moines’ Natural Setting

Des Moines’ historic development was strongly influenced by the location and configuration of its natural features such as topography and its resulting river systems. Had the rivers not existed, Des Moines would undoubtedly not have been built. The rivers provided protection and a water supply as well as a strategic military site. The river areas remain today as outstanding advantages for recreational sites and potential metropolitan parkway systems.

Des Moines is situated on a glacial plateau of flat or gently sloping land, rising from the Des Moines and Raccoon River valleys (flood plains). Interspersed in the flat uplands, which were leveled by glaciers, are ravines and steep bluffs carved by glacial waterways. Prominent physical features created by glacial movement are Four Mile Ridge and Capitol Hill.

The gently rising slopes and the relatively flat uplands of Des Moines lend themselves to economic, efficient construction of both buildings and streets. The ravines and bluffs interspersed in the upland areas offer visual relief and valuable recreational area with the concentrations of homes and businesses which dominate both the northeast and northwest sections of the City. Also, the areas’ topography influenced the location of Iowa State Capitol’s location, made prominent by its elevation.

The Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers have both positive and negative affects upon the growth of the City. They provide the city’s water supply; they are natural corridors for rail transportation; they are valuable recreation areas; but, they also restrict free movement of automobile travel.
Des Moines' Historic Development Patterns

The natural elements of the land were responsible for Des Moines' initial development patterns. However, political/economic context, democracy and the free market were and continue to be additional layers of influence. Examples which show where natural elements have influenced land use and the siting of buildings include the locations of the airport, the State Capitol, the Art Center and the creation of unique residential areas such as the Chautauqua Park neighborhood.

Formally, Des Moines streets are laid out on a true north/south Jeffersonian grid pattern. In the downtown area, the grid shifted from its north/south orientation to run parallel with the Des Moines River. The points of intersection between the north/south grid and the shifted grid area create unique nodes in the city's street patterns, as does the creation of cross-town roads running against the grid, that were built in the early 1900's. In 1909 Charles Mulford Robinson recommended extensions of and creation of cross-town highways or interconnected boulevards such as Cottage Grove, Easton Blvd. and Keosauqua Way.

A series of diagonal streets were proposed for Des Moines in the Charles Mulford Robinson plan of 1909.
Approaches to City Form Analysis

Two approaches to urban analysis were utilized in establishing a picture of Des Moines’ physical form as a framework for developing this plan’s policies:

- *The Des Moines Vision Plan*, by Agrest and Gandelsonas
- *Image of the City, An Analysis of City Form*, by Kevin Lynch

The Vision Plan, completed in 1994, involved an analysis of the specific formal/aesthetic conditions of Des Moines. In this approach the physical plan of the city can be seen as a text to be read and deciphered. The goal of the Vision Plan was to discover Des Moines’ particular formal organization and guide future growth through analyzing the specific geographical, historical and cultural features that define that formal organization. New growth will then enhance the city’s physical and formal urban character. The Vision Plan was developed specifically for Des Moines but its principles are universal.

Kevin Lynch’s analysis of city form, published in 1960, is an additional valuable approach to use in a planning process aimed at improving community character. This approach highlights the most imageable elements that shape people’s perception or impression of a city. These elements are paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks; the basic building blocks of urban form that make a city legible and memorable.

These building blocks may hold a favorable image to people such as in a beautiful tree-lined boulevard, or a negative image, such as in an area dominated by salvage yards. The form elements that are unfavorably perceived and detract from the city’s desired character, call for policies and interventions to alter their continued development and to create a stronger organization and continuity among any positive design elements that already exist. Those urban form elements identified as clearly contributing to a strong community character call for policies to ensure their integrity, preservation, and growth.

A city-wide form analysis based upon Lynch’s approach was completed as a part of this planning process. The major paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks of Des Moines were identified. Vision Plan observations were analyzed and related to each of the Lynch elements. The Vision Plan observations are included under the particular section to which they related, such as landmarks, paths, nodes, edges, and districts. Both Lynch’s elements and the Vision Plan observations were then used to develop policies for enhancing the community character of our city.
The Building Blocks of City Form

The following section provides a description of the building blocks of urban form accompanied by major examples of each. The examples include both natural and built elements. Observations from the Vision Plan about the particular urban form element are then presented. The Lynch analysis serves to highlight the significant nodes, landmarks, districts, edges and paths in the city on which to focus policy development. The Vision Plan observations look comprehensively at the formal relationships and patterns of these form elements.

Des Moines' major nodes, districts, landmarks, edges and paths can be found on the 10 character analysis maps, pages 28 - 37. The analysis maps are an important framework for land use planning and policies regarding the design and layout of streets and new development.
NODES
Nodes are points; the strategic spots in a city into which a person can enter, and which are the concentrated activity points to and from which a person is traveling. They may be primarily junctions, places of a break in transportation, a crossing or convergence of paths. Conversely the nodes may simply be concentrations, which gain their importance from being the condensation of some use or physical character, as a street-corner hangout or an enclosed square. (They may be called cores.) The concept of node is related to the concept of path, since junctions are typically the convergence of paths.

Example: The intersection of Fleur Drive and Grand Avenue, Highland Park Commercial area at 6th and Euclid.

Vision Plan Observation
• Grand Avenue acts as a hinge between the two downtown grids. In its intersection with Fleur Drive on the west side and Hubbell, and University Avenues on the east side, it creates two junctions or nodes with potential as gateway intersections.

Proposed Policy
• Apply special design standards and site plan review to specific commercial nodes of Des Moines with aesthetic integrity, in order to preserve their design character and market edge.

(See Significant Corridors, pages 38-39, for gateway policies.)
DISTRICTS

Districts are the medium to large sections of the city which a person is mentally aware they enter inside, and which are recognizable as having some common, identifying character such as architecture, streetscape design and building setback. These districts may be partially defined by topography, e.g. hilly districts or low lands, by open space typologies such as woodlands and marshes, and by built typologies such as the downtown core, the airport, commercial areas and neighborhoods.

Examples: Waveland Golf Course and Glendale Cemetery, Iowa State Fair grounds, the Airport, the State Capitol district, Sherman Hill, Grandview Park, Beaverdale, Owls Head, and other neighborhoods.

Des Moines' Highly Imageable Neighborhoods

The accompanying character analysis maps identify the neighborhoods in Des Moines that are highly imageable and memorable, due to a strong organization and continuity among their elements.

These include the Grandview Park neighborhood and Beaverdale, with its continuity of brick building materials, and house styles. The Sherman Hill neighborhood is also highly imageable based on the Victorian style of many of its homes as well as its hilly topography, hence its name. Much of the residential area located south of Grand Avenue is also highly imageable as a result of its mature tree stands, the width and design of its roads, as well as its hilly topography. Neighborhood streets such as Tonowanda Drive, Polk Boulevard or Thompson Avenue with their strong streetscape design continuity strongly contribute to establishing their neighborhoods as memorable.

Neighborhoods can be seen as a composition of their individual physical elements (as listed below) and their unique relationship to each other. The repetition of these form elements create patterns, and therefore begin to read as fabric, or as a whole district, rather than as individual buildings and individual streets. In order to evaluate new road improvements and infill housing proposals based on their ability to further enhance the neighborhood's unique character, one can identify the individual elements or puzzle pieces that fit together to form the district's makeup.

- type of residential land use
- street width and design (e.g. boulevard, edge treatment)
- street to sidewalk transition
• public r.o.w. plant materials (density, size, type)
• driveway width and location
• garage type and location
• depth and width of front yard (setback of residential units)
• depth and width of backyard
• scale of residential units (height, mass)
• building materials
• architectural style of houses or residential units.
• alleys

The ability of these elements to read as a cohesive district, suggests a level of design integrity. Individual interventions over time that remove or interrupt these individual elements can result in a breakage of the pattern, or loss of the integrity that holds a neighborhood together as an identifiable district.

Vision Plan Observations

♦ Distortions in the street grid, created by diagonal and curvilinear streets can be seen to create a constellation of unique districts.
♦ The Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers initially subdivided the city into east, west and south. The neighborhoods further subdivided the city with their boundaries following the one mile grid.

Proposed Policies
• Preserve the unique characteristics that make-up Des Moines' highly imageable neighborhoods by maintaining the scale and form relationships, as listed above, that constitute them.
• In districts where garages are less prominent than houses, require infill development to place garages in the rear yards or set back from the front of the house.

Woodland Cemetery
The Victorian architecture and shallow front yard setbacks help to define the Sherman Hill Neighborhood as a district.
LANDMARKS

Landmarks are a type of physical reference but a person does not enter within them, they are external; usually a simply defined physical object such as a building, sign, store, or mountain. They are used by people to help determine their particular location on a journey. They involve the singling out of one element. Some are distant, others are primarily local, visible only in restricted localities and from certain approaches. These are the signs, store fronts, trees, doorknobs, and other urban detail which fill in the image of most observers. They are frequently used clues to identify and even structure ones wayfinding, and seem to be increasingly relied upon as a journey becomes more and more familiar.

Examples: State Capitol Building, Polk Co. Courthouse, the Des Moines Art Center, St. John’s Basilica, the Colonial Bakery Sign and the A-E Dairy Cows.

Vision Plan Observation

- The skyline of downtown and the Capitol building are the strongest elements that provide an identity to the city.

Proposed Policies

- Streets that lead to major landmarks should be designed as special approaches to them.
- Establish landmark protection status for key landmark buildings in Des Moines.
- Apply site plan review for properties within the vicinity of major landmarks such as St. John’s Basilica, to ensure design compatibility.
- Preserve and reinforce existing viewing points that successfully frame the downtown skyline and Capitol Building as they are the strongest elements of Des Moines identity.
EDGES

Edges are linear elements primarily not used or considered as paths. They are linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroad cuts, edges of development and walls, and serve as linear references along ones journey. Although often not as dominant as paths, they are still important organizing features. Examples include the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers and their tributaries including Yeader Creek, as well as the Burlington Northern RR lines.

Vision Plan Observations

♦ The Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers are major edges that separate the city into east, west, north and south sections.
♦ Numerous tributary streams and creeks subdivide the city and region and add a unique natural edge character to many of Des Moines' neighborhoods.
♦ The one mile grid shift at University Avenue establishes an implied wall that separates downtown from Drake and its neighbors to the north.

Proposed Policies

♦ Develop measures for street and building development to minimize the negative impacts on the integrity of environmentally critical areas such as steep slopes, ravines, woodlands, wetlands and stream corridors.
♦ Establish a tree-saving policy for new building and road development.
♦ Establish new development patterns and regulations based on preserving the integrity of natural areas.
♦ Convert abandoned rail lines to landscaped multi-purpose paths, improving the image of these major edges.
PATHS

Paths are channels along which a person customarily moves, such as streets, transit lines, and railroads. Paths also functionally become edges. Since paths are highly imageable elements, it is important that they have a strong positive image.

Examples: I-235, Grand Avenue, East University Avenue, Merle Hay Road, Polk Boulevard and Fleur Drive.

Vision Plan Observations

- Des Moines' street pattern is a Jeffersonian grid, with some diagonal streets, such as around Drake University.
- Grand Avenue acts as a hinge between the two downtown grids. In its intersection with Fleur Drive and Hubbell Avenue, Grand Avenue defines two potential gates and links three major public spaces: the Airport, the Fairgrounds and Greenwood Park.
- The one mile grid shifts at University Avenue pose a strong edge that separates the Downtown from Drake and its neighbors to the north.
- I-235 and the proposed MLK Parkway create strong edges with the potential to isolate the areas on either sides of them, from each other.
- The vision plan has detected several existing 'viewing points' in the city and 'view corridors' in the downtown area that successfully frame elements. These 'points' and conditions should be preserved and reinforced.

Proposed Policies

- "Humanize" auto-strips with human scale elements.
  - Promote out-parcel development in “big box” parking lots.
  - Promote shared parking in commercial areas.
- Identify the scenic corridors in Des Moines and their needed protection and enhancements. (Please refer to Corridors, Chapter 2)
- Maintain the street grid as the preferred option when evaluating new development street patterns.
- Restore the street grid whenever possible.
- Discourage the closing of street sections which disrupt the existing grid pattern.
- Restore the direction of streets to 2-way function.
- Ensure the planning and implementation of a comprehensive landscape plan for I-235 and for the MLK Parkway with emphasis placed on the connections across them.
Des Moines' major districts, nodes, paths, edges and landmarks can be found on the 10 Character Analysis Subarea maps. (Please see Character Maps pages 28-37) The analysis maps serve as an important framework for land use planning and policies. They will guide development decisions concerning new subdivisions, infill projects, and street improvements.
- The Des Moines River and I-235 are major edges defining this area.
- Union Park, Birdland Marina, North High School, Kiwanis Nature Island, and McHenry Park form a park and open space district along the areas' west edge.
- The Guthrie industrial park is a major district.
- North High School, East High School and Grandview College are major nodes and districts.
- The intersection of Euclid Avenue and 6th Street is an important commercial node.