DOWNTOWN PERSPECTIVE

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An Action Plan for Iowa's Urban Place
Introduction

It is time to launch a new initiative for downtown Des Moines. It is time to build an additional dimension to our downtown, a people dimension. This plan lays out how to go about creating the attractive place the people of the community can identify with while increasing the intensity of our focus on business growth.

destination DOWNTOWN is a collaborative process distinguishing it from other planning initiatives that have occurred in the past 20 years. The Downtown Partnership (formerly Downtown Des Moines Incorporated), Des Moines Development Corporation, and the City of Des Moines are jointly presenting this plan outlining their focus for the next 7-10 years. These same groups will adopt it and jointly implement it. Community organizations, by joining forces with downtown stakeholders, can make the downtown their own and turn it into a major attraction for the people of the community.

This plan is also a message, a message that the downtown must be the focus of continued revitalization activity if the Des Moines metropolitan area is going to be competitive in regional and national markets. This plan will not have all the answers. However, answers can be generated through the ongoing dialogue established by this planning process.

What is Strategic Planning?

It is a creative process for identifying and accomplishing the most important actions in view of strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities. Implementation is the key to strategic planning as opposed to long-range planning and goal-setting. It is action-oriented which is why the destination DOWNTOWN Plan is referred to as an "action plan."
Downtown Physical Profile

Study Area

Downtown Des Moines can generally be described as the area bounded by Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway on the west, the Raccoon and Des Moines Rivers on the south, East 14th Street on the east, and Interstate 235 on the north (see Maps 1 & 2). A smaller area was used when gathering and analyzing statistical data. This downtown statistical area is census tract 51 (see Map 2).

Downtown Districts

Although the downtown is often viewed as one geographic unit, several distinct districts that are unique in development and land use can be identified. These districts include the Downtown Core area, Hillside Neighborhood, Sherman Hill Historic District, Gateway District, Skywalk District, Civic Center Historic District, Downtown East, Court Avenue Historic Area, and the Riverpoint area (see Map 3).

- Downtown Core
  The Downtown Core is an area characterized by dense office and retail uses located in the center of the downtown. The Core is generally bounded by 4th, Cherry, 10th, and High Streets. A few of the high density office buildings located in the Core include 801 Grand, the Ruan Building, the Hub Tower, the Financial Center, and Capital Square.

- Hillside Neighborhood
  The Hillside Neighborhood is a 33-acre area directly north of the Downtown Core proposed for redevelopment as an urban residential neighborhood. The concept arose from the Des Moines Vision Plan. Phase one of the actual Hillside Project involved improving the Cityview Apartments located within the Hillside Neighborhood boundary. The first blocks scheduled for new residential development are located between 7th, 9th, Crocker, and Center Streets.

There will be various types of housing units along with space designated for neighborhood support commercial uses.

- Sherman Hill Historic District
  The Sherman Hill Historic District is an area located northwest of the Downtown Core. It can generally be described as a residential neighborhood that lies just west of the Iowa Methodist Medical Center campus, east of Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway, south of Interstate-235, and north of Woodland Avenue. The Sherman Hill area was designated as a local historic district in 1982 by the Des Moines City Council and is also a historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The district is comprised of two small clusters of commercial buildings, several apartment buildings, and various single family residential units ranging from simple cottage-like houses to late Victorian "mansions."

- Gateway District
  The Gateway District is an area located directly west of the Downtown Core and is bounded by 18th Street on the west, High Street on the north, 9th Street on the east, and Walnut Street on the south. This 30-square block area consists mostly of 2 to 3 story buildings of predominantly mixed used commercial development. The commercial focus of the area is related to the sale of automobiles and automotive parts and services. This was the first area of Des Moines to develop around the automobile trade in the early 1900s, hence the historical name Auto Row.

- Skywalk District
  The area in which skywalk development may occur can generally be described as the area bounded by 11th Street on the west, Center and Crocker Streets on the north, 3rd Street and the Des Moines River...
on the east, and Court Avenue and Cherry Street on the south. The skywalk system that has been developed is a public system that serves three purposes. It is an integral part of the public transportation system in the downtown. It also serves an urban renewal project to prevent structural deterioration and to encourage downtown revitalization.

- **Civic Center Historic District**
  The Civic Center Historic District, located in the downtown along the riverfront, is one of the city's most distinctive features due to its unique architectural style, its public focus, and its historic importance. Established in the early 1900s, the district was part of the City Beautiful Movement which produced a "Civic Center Plan" for the Des Moines Riverfront. The plan called for locating all government facilities on both sides of the river in the downtown area to establish unity between the two halves of the downtown and to express the efficiency of the new form of government that was implemented during this time period. Developments arising from the plan include the Main Library in 1901, followed by the Coliseum (since burned down), City Hall, Federal Courthouse, Municipal Courts Building, Post Office, Armory Building, and the recently constructed Federal Courthouse Annex. The district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987.

- **Downtown East**
  This area of the downtown lies east of the Des Moines River, west of East 14th Street, north of East Court Avenue, and south of Des Moines Street. Downtown East can be characterized as a mixture of City and State government buildings, including the State Capitol, and low to medium density office and commercial development. Recent development projects include the State Historical Building, East Grand Office Park, Capitol Centers I through III, and the Northwestern Hotel rehabilitation.

- **Court Avenue Historic Area**
  The Court Avenue Historic Area includes all of the blocks south of Court Avenue to Elm Street between SW 1st and SW 7th Streets. Also included is a partial area just north of Court Avenue and south of Walnut Street between 1st Street and 5th Avenue. Among the businesses located in the district over the years were barbed wire manufacturers, pottery works, carriage factories, grain and feed mills, saddlery companies, several dry goods businesses, furniture manufacture, and wholesale millinery establishments. Today it serves as an entertainment district characterized by restaurants, drinking establishments, and a pedestrian scale streetscape. The area has been identified as having potential for residential development. Significant development projects in the area include the Court Avenue Streetscape, rehabilitation of the Saddlery Building and 100 Court Avenue, and the construction of the Court Avenue Parking Garage.

- **Riverpoint**
  Riverpoint is a 1,125-acre area located south of the Downtown Core and is generally bounded by Mulberry Street on the north, the Des Moines River on the east, and the Raccoon River to the south and west. Redevelopment efforts have focused on providing public improvements to facilitate private development of new low to medium density office, commercial, and light industrial development, as well as support facilities for downtown businesses. Recently completed projects in the Riverpoint area include renovations to Sec Taylor Stadium, development of the Riverpoint Business Park, and the expansion and rehabilitation of four structures. Future projects include the development of the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway (MLK) through the area, greatly increasing the accessibility of the area in both a north/south and east/west direction. Also planned is the continued development of the Riverpoint Business Park.
MAP 3: DOWNTOWN DISTRICTS

Downtown Districts
1. Hillside Neighborhood
2. Sherman Hill Historic District
3. Skywalk District
4. Gateway District
5. Downtown Core
6. Civic Center Historic District
7. Downtown East
8. Court Avenue Historic Area
9. Riverpoint

APPROXIMATE SCALE
300' 600' 1200'
Many citizens of the Des Moines metropolitan area believe downtown Des Moines is at a "crossroads," still strong but facing some significant threats. This opinion is expressed by downtown stakeholders committed to its vitality as well as by concerned citizens appreciative of its potential. Des Moines' downtown faces many of the same problems that Des Moines' neighborhoods face: the lack of commitment to stay and the flight to the fringe of the metro area, loss of investment and loss of character, vacant parcels, and the resulting under development of certain areas. However, by many measures the downtown is filled with opportunity for prosperity and community vitality if we are committed to focusing on a course of action and we implement it.

**Strengths:**
- Growing financial, medical, and government employment center.
- Competitive advantage relative to other downtowns.
- Central location and transportation networks for tapping "Golden Circle" workforce.
- Significant number of existing cultural, civic, and recreational attractions.
- Neighborhood leaders and the City Council have demonstrated a commitment to central city neighborhoods including those adjacent to downtown.
- Urban character, distinguished architecture, and capital city excitement.

**Weaknesses:**
- High taxes relative to metro, regional, and national competitors.
- Population shifts westward out of the central city and no strong downtown residential component, decreasing available workforce.
- Some prominent commercial developers and realtors are steering development outside Des Moines.
- The value of investing downtown is not keeping up with the costs of investing downtown.
- Lack of multi-modal access.
- The downtown is currently lacking what it takes to be a popular destination with people and activity.

**Opportunities:**
- Downtown Des Moines is a strong financial and employment center. If proximity to this concentration of businesses, as well as the social and cultural dimensions of downtown Des Moines, is seen as important to business decision makers, this will be a strength we can continue to build on.
- Downtown Des Moines has a competitive advantage relative to other downtowns for those companies that appreciate an urban location, especially those on the overpopulated east and west coasts. This is due to the availability of land, the lack of density, the downtown's position at the center of transportation networks (both nationally and within the metropolitan area), and its cosmopolitan character.
- Downtown Des Moines has a significant number of existing attractions, such as the Iowa Cubs, the Botanical Center, the Civic Center, City, County, State and Federal government, Veterans Auditorium, historic monuments and districts, etc., in addition to its role as the capital city of Iowa. This, and its riverfront location, positions downtown Des Moines to be a popular center of state and regional activity.
• Neighborhood leaders and the Des Moines City Council have demonstrated a commitment to investing in neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown as well as to the larger neighborhood movement. With renovation of these neighborhoods, restoration of their character, and strong linkages to the downtown, they provide a diversity of residential choices for the downtown labor pool as well as those seeking an urban life-style.

**Threats:**

• Des Moines is facing difficult financial choices and currently has the highest taxes in the metropolitan area. Without metropolitan government, tax base sharing, or other mechanisms to deal with typical American central city and suburban inequities, large commercial properties bear the resulting higher taxes. At some point businesses may no longer be willing to pay what is perceived as an inordinate share. If the central city is seen as declining relative to the metropolitan area, it is difficult to convince businesses of the value of locating and expanding within that downtown.

• Some prominent commercial developers in the metropolitan area are not making major investments in the downtown and have established strong networks in both residential and commercial development in fringe locations. The belief that the "development action" and "the place to be" is in the suburbs has resulted in major commercial and residential shifts away from the central city. This is accompanied by some loss of citizen-owned businesses and the loyalty and commitment to community-building traditionally associated with healthy downtowns.

• The emerging perception on the part of some major employers within the metropolitan area is that there is no economic advantage, not enough of a social advantage, and not enough employee demand associated with being downtown.
Related Plans & Studies

Three plans have laid the foundation for this destination DOWNTOWN plan:

- The City of Des Moines Downtown River Front Master Plan (adopted 1990)
- The Des Moines Vision Plan (1990-93)
- The City of Des Moines Transportation Plan (1995)

Des Moines At The River: Downtown Riverfront Concept Plan was adopted by the Des Moines City Council as an interim working plan for the purpose of making the downtown riverfront a key element in the future growth of the city. Since that time important projects like Sec Taylor Stadium, the Riverfront Plaza and Amphitheater, the Botanical Center Garden Promenade, the new Third Street Bridge, Federal Court House Annex building, and the Embassy Suites Hotel have all been built. Each of these projects has contributed to overall implementation of various elements of that adopted plan.

An important concept included in the destination DOWNTOWN plan is the Cultural Anchor Concept diagram which further builds on the riverfront momentum by proposing a river-centered concentration of activities and attractions on the downtown riverfront forming the open space and cultural centerpiece of the downtown.

Specific strategies and projects include construction of a new Science Center of Iowa on the downtown riverfront, lighting and pedestrian improvements to the four-bridge area, construction of major elements of linkages such as the river promenade, and streetscape improvements along Locust Street to connect the State Capitol to the downtown riverfront.

The Des Moines Vision Plan, like destination DOWNTOWN, was an important learning and consensus building activity. It occurred between 1990 and 1993 and set a new agenda for the partnership between the public and private sectors by identifying important design moments, places in the downtown where design and development opportunities exist. The Des Moines Vision Plan Steering Committee was chaired by Mayor John “Pat” Dorrian and included several of the same individuals involved in this process. The design work and project initiation was provided by Mario Gandelsonas, an urban theorist and New York architect. As a design plan that dealt with the physical form and aesthetic qualities of the downtown, The Des Moines Vision Plan provided important analysis and understanding that laid the foundation for this strategic planning activity. The general objectives of the Des Moines Vision Plan were:

- To promote a physical environment that reflects and contributes to our visual character.
- To develop a new link between the planning and the design disciplines, and to promote the physical/formal planning of our city.
- To deepen the understanding of the specific visual and aesthetic character of the American city.

The destination DOWNTOWN plan, providing the analysis and implementation strategies while taking into account organizational and funding aspects of projects, taken together with the Vision Plan, has the potential to create a lasting impact on downtown Des Moines as we shape our city for the 21st century. It is a logical extension of the Des Moines Vision Plan. The Hillside Neighborhood and the Gateway District, projects currently underway, have roots in the Des Moines Vision Plan. Projects like “Red Brick City” proposed for Downtown East, various schemes for the Court Avenue District, the riverfront, and many other projects not currently underway are addressed in this plan.

TransPlan 21 DM is a comprehensive transportation plan currently being developed by the City of Des Moines to guide and shape future urban development decisions. Assuming the plan is adopted by the Des Moines City Council later this year, it will position Des Moines and its downtown to compete for jobs into the 21st century.

One of the “hot spots” identified in this plan is Des Moines’ Central Business District. This area has critical transportation issues that need to be addressed if the downtown is to remain a vital, driving force in the economy of Des Moines and a convenient destination for popular activities. The Metropolitan Planning Organization’s projections show increases in population and jobs in the CBD based on the assumption that transportation and access issues will be addressed when needed. Several of the draft strategies and action steps incorporated in the destination DOWNTOWN plan, primarily in the “Retain and Expand Downtown Businesses” section are based on analysis presented in this transportation plan.
Left:
*Des Moines at the River: Downtown Riverfront Concept Plan* adopted by the Des Moines City Council in June 1990.

Right:
*TransPlan 21 DM*, a comprehensive transportation plan currently being developed by the City of Des Moines.

Below:
A graphic illustrating the various "downtown moments" as proposed by the *Des Moines Vision Plan*. 