SECTION 1

Background
1. BACKGROUND

2007 aerial photograph showing downtown study area
BACKGROUND

Mention downtown Des Moines to most people who have a history with the city -- long-time residents, frequent visitors, civic leaders -- and the superlatives start flowing. "My parents were visiting last weekend and were stunned by the progress that’s been made in downtown," or "I just love the energy of coming to downtown Des Moines," or "Friends from Chicago were visiting recently and declared that they are going to stay longer next time in order to take in the downtown activity," or "I’d love to find a way to live downtown," or "It’s a ‘Golden Age’ for downtown." Even the New York Times weighed in late in 2007 upon returning for the 2008 Iowa caucuses, declaring that, "Des Moines...has most certainly become cool."

Aware of this progress and armed with ambition and progressive spirit, the City of Des Moines and Polk County authorized funding for a downtown planning study in late 2005. As the scope of the planning project became more defined, Downtown Community Alliance, the downtown advocacy group steered by Des Moines’ preeminent business leaders, became engaged in the project. The collaborative public-private sector group was instrumental in outlining the following goals of the planning effort:

1. Identify future downtown opportunities.
   Recent accomplishments in downtown open the doors for new opportunities. In the wake of the significant new investments in downtown, downtown’s leaders need definition of and direction on these opportunities to focus efforts for future downtown investment.

2. Propose frameworks that capitalize on existing and future downtown investments and/or catalyze further development.
   The community has invested wisely in places that have catalytic potential. This plan is about identifying frameworks -- networks and systems -- that support and build on what exists now or is presently underway in downtown. The criteria for new proposals in this plan is they must have the potential to inspire catalyst investments or development beyond the proposal itself. Stated another way, this goal states what this plan is NOT attempting to do, it is not aiming to identify the next $500M wave of development in civic places. While the frameworks that build on the recent $500M in civic investment may not be as sexy as the likes of a new copper-clad Central Library or glistening like the Events Center or as whiz-bang as the Science Center, the proposals found in the following sections are aimed to make the most of these recent investments and, in doing so, fostering the longevity of these places and downtown’s quality of life for live, work, and play.

3. Develop strategies for building synergy and linkages between downtown amenities.
   This third goal recognizes recent investments in downtown have extended the dimensions that once constituted downtown Des Moines. Places such as the Iowa Events Center, Gateway Park, the East Village, and ML King Jr. Parkway have brought people to areas of downtown that were previously void of activity. With this growth comes an increased need for creating connections among the places in downtown that people frequent. It is anticipated that greater connections will increase the use and enhance the experience of places in downtown.

4. Generate support from the public and private sectors and expand momentum for downtown investment.
   In the early 1990’s, development activity in downtown was at a virtual stand-still. It took a tremendous push in the late 1990’s to get the present activity that we are currently experiencing accomplished. The second law of physics, the law of momentum, gets the present activity that we are currently experiencing accommodated. The second law of physics, the law of momentum, is found many applications in daily life; urban development is no exception. "An object in motion tends to stay in motion." With the support from public and private sectors, this hard-earned momentum can continue.

Plan Boundaries

The focus of the downtown Des Moines planning project lies within the boundaries defined on the preceding map. Des Moines has fairly definitive boundaries which outline the downtown area. Transportation corridors define the northern, western, and a portion of the southern edges -- I-235 on the north, the north-south section of ML King Jr. Parkway on the west, and the future extension of the east-west section of ML King Jr. Parkway on the south. Geography also figures into the definition of downtown boundaries through natural topography and the confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers. The Raccoon River forms part of the southern edge of the downtown. A hill rising north and west of downtown forming the Raccoon River bluff forms the western edge. The 150-acre State Capitol grounds sitting on the hill on the east side of downtown defines the eastern edge.

Significant stakeholders and future opportunities on the periphery of the boundary are acknowledged on the map, as well. Mercy Medical Center to the north, Gray’s Lake to the south, and the State Capitol grounds to the east all impact downtown and, conversely, downtown has interests in the future plans and successes in these areas. Planning and development interest exists for the area south of the confluence of the Rivers, known as the “Two Rivers District.” This downtown planning project will take the work for the Two Rivers District into account.

The area within this boundary is about 1,600 acres and measures approximately two miles from the foot of the State Capitol on the east to the western end of Locust Street. The widest north-south dimension, between Principal Park and I-235 measures about a mile and quarter. As with most planning projects, the final product may address areas beyond these boundaries, but the focus will remain on planning for the area delineated.
Downtown Des Moines: Quick Statistics

- Des Moines population: ~200,000; metropolitan area population: ~500,000
- Downtown Des Moines population: ~7,800 residents
  - including ~1,800 Sherman Hill residents
  - 1.5% of metro residents live downtown
- Downtown workforce: ~70,000 workers
- Acres in downtown study area boundary: ~1600 acres (~1% of area in Des Moines)
- Length of rivers running through downtown (Des Moines and Raccoon): ~3.25 mi.
- Area of parks in downtown study area: 40 acres
  - Area of parkland adjacent to downtown study area: ~1,500 acres
- Number of parking spaces in downtown: ~50,000
- Acres of vacant land and surface parking in downtown: ~200 acres
- Tallest building in downtown: 801 Grand (45 floors / 630')
- Taxable value in downtown study area: $1.2B (~13% of City's tax base)

Plan Process

Many people contributed to this Plan throughout the course of its 18-month process. Staff at the City, County, and Downtown Community Alliance were instrumental in providing background material and base information and defining the scope of the Plan. Many local developers and downtown stakeholders with ‘in the trenches’ insight painted a picture of what was going well, what could be improved, and what they would like to see happening in downtown.

A steering committee was formed, led by chairman, Mayor Franklin Cownie and two co-chairpersons, Polk County Supervisor Angela Connolly and Greater Des Moines Partnership Supervisor Angela Connolly and Greater Des Moines Partnership Chairman James Connolly. The committee’s first task was to select the national consultant that would assist in forming the vision and the proposals for downtown. Mario Gandelsonas and his firm, Agrest and Gandelsonas Architects, were selected. Mario has a history with the city that dates back twenty-five years to the work on the Des Moines Vision Plan. In addition to authoring this formative plan, he experienced the evolution of Des Moines first-hand through periodic advising and consulting trips in the two decades since completing the earlier Vision Plan.

As this project progressed, the seasoned experience of the steering committee oversaw the formation of the vision and its set of proposals. They were the group that tested raw ideas, offered their reactions and thoughtful advice. The steering committee was comprised of a range of downtown leaders from the public and private sectors including elected officials, appointees from the Downtown Community Alliance, neighborhood leaders, and heads of Boards and Commissions. Its members were drawn from people with interests and expertise in the State, the County, the City, and particular areas of downtown.

Dovetailing into the series of steering committee meetings, three public input sessions paced at several month intervals were key to synthesizing and testing proposals for downtown. The robust participation by the hundreds of people who turned out for the series of public meetings is a good indicator that there is a mass of public input informed the writing of this report. Input from the public at-large was thoughtful, well-informed, and constructive. The maps collecting input from the first public meeting are distributed in the Background, Movement Development sections. The table below summarizes input from the second public meeting where drafts of the proposals were presented. Participants were asked to respond to the proposals with a list priorities for downtown. As the work in the plan became further defined, the third public meeting requested input on more particular aspects of the plan’s proposals. Participants discussed drafts of the plan material and this input informed the writing of this report.

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<th>Common Themes</th>
<th>Downtown Des Moines: Quick Statistics</th>
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Priorities list developed from input received from participants at Public Input Meeting #2.
1. BACKGROUND

Introduction

Erin Olson-Douglas

Downtown Plan Project Liaison

INPUT

City of Des Moines, Polk County, Downtown Community Alliance, Greater Des Moines Partnership, Downtown Neighborhood Association, Skywalk Association, Court Avenue Business Association, East Village Associations, Sherman Hill Neighborhood, Des Moines Area Regional Transit, Metropolitan Planning Organization, Greater Des Moines Community Foundation, Greater Des Moines Visitor and Convention Bureau, Impact Downtown, Riverfront Development Authority, Des Moines School District / Downtown School, Methodist Hospital, Mercy Hospital, State of Iowa, downtown churches, local design community Civic Center, Public Arts Commission

Vision Iowa fund recipients:

Public Library, Science Center, Pappajohn Higher Ed. Center, World Food Prize, Riverwalk, Iowa Events Center, major downtown employers

INPUT / OVERSIGHT

PRODUCT

Technical

City of Des Moines staff: Economic Development, Community Development, Engineering, Parks and Recreation, (Public Works, Police, and Fire Departments periodically)

Polk County staff, Downtown Community Alliance (DCA) staff

Boards / Commissions

Planning & Zoning, Urban Design Review, Parks and Recreation, Access Advisory

Investors / Developers

real estate developers, real estate brokers, and present investors, with a local, regional, and national presence

Public

one public input session per phase; combination of open house and workshop forums

Stakeholders

City of Des Moines, Polk County, Downtown Community Alliance, Greater Des Moines Partnership, Downtown Neighborhood Association, Skywalk Association, Court Avenue Business Association, East Village Associations, Sherman Hill Neighborhood, Des Moines Area Regional Transit, Metropolitan Planning Organization, Greater Des Moines Community Foundation, Greater Des Moines Visitor and Convention Bureau, Impact Downtown, Riverfront Development Authority, Des Moines School District / Downtown School, Methodist Hospital, Mercy Hospital, State of Iowa, downtown churches, local design community Civic Center, Public Arts Commission

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graphic description of the input process that informed the Plan

Technical Group

Rick Clark, Sue Elliott, Mary Lawyer

City of Des Moines, Polk County, Downtown Community Alliance

Steering Committee

Mayor Franklin Cownie*, Angela Connolly**, James Cownie**
Mollie Anderson, Chris Coleman, Eric Crowell, Dann Flaherty, Todd Garner, Marian Gelb, Christine Hensley, David Hurd, Kevin Johnson, Joe LeValley, Robb McCammon, Brian Meyer, Mary O'Keefe, Sarah Oltrogge, John Ruan, Art Slusark, Mike Utley, Marc Ward, Ben Washburn

* steering committee chairman,
**steering committee co-chairperson

Mario Gandelsonas

Agrest and Gandelsonas Architects

Project Liaison

Andrea Hauer

City Manager's Office

Downtown Plan

Erin Olson-Douglas

City of Des Moines, Polk County, Downtown Community Alliance

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### PHASE I – Analyze Existing & Planned Conditions
- What impact do recent and future investments have on downtown?
- What is the vision for downtown Des Moines?
- summer-fall, 2006

### PHASE II – Develop Planning Frameworks
- How can present and future downtown amenities work together?
- What are the catalysts for further progress?
- winter 2006-spring 2007

### PHASE III – Develop Site-Specific Strategies
- What are the important sites and districts to downtown’s future?
- How should they develop?
- spring-summer, 2007

### PHASE IV – Prepare Plan
- What is the most meaningful end product for guiding downtown’s future?
- summer-fall, 2007
The planning effort took a 4-phase approach, each approximately 4-5 months long, spaced at equal intervals over the duration of the planning project. Each phase was punctuated by a public input session and contained one or more steering committee meetings. Feedback from these forums shaped the ideas that moved forward.

The first phase required a tremendous amount of information gathering. To assemble seemingly disparate information — from traffic patterns to zoning regulations to various projects that were underway, many people with various areas of expertise were consulted and offered their insights and aspirations for downtown. Much of the material in the following pages of this Background section was compiled during these first few months. Previous and current plans for downtown work were reviewed. Amazingly, so many plan proposals have come to fruition. Proposed ideas in some plans that have not yet been completed were considered.

The goal of this first phase of work was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the important investments that have recently been made in downtown and prepare a compelling vision statement to provide a reference point, or the “test,” for the ensuing proposals.

The second phase contained the bulk of the big-picture thinking about downtown. In this phase, work focused on what would propel downtown forward, making the most of what exists presently and proposing a new set of catalytic ideas for downtown. The result of this phase is the proposals found in the Movement and Development sections of this Plan.

From the outset, phase III anticipated identification of salient aspects for emerging downtowns; it was through the work on the first two phases that the concept that downtown had now grown and evolved into a series of fledgling districts emerged. The third phase deployed the Movement and Development proposals in the various Districts that comprise downtown and worked to identify those aspects that are key to the development of each District. The recommendations from phase three are primarily found in the District Planning and Design Guidelines section.

The fourth phase presents the proposals in a manner that is communicative and accessible would be paramount to advancing the ideas that were generated throughout the planning process. Recognizing that a majority of people will primarily be interested in the highlights of the Plan, the Executive Summary section of the plan report is intended to serve as a stand-alone overview of the Plan, as well as an introduction to the ideas discussed in the other sections of the Plan.

In full, the plan report is the lasting document that captures the imagination of downtown’s leaders and inspires progress on the proposals herewithin.
We’re Not Starting from Scratch: Previous Plans

The following documents provide the base which this Plan builds:

**Southeast Connector Land Use Planning and Development Study** (May 2007). A small portion of this plan deals with downtown, however, this portion plays a key role. The Southeast Connector, now known as East Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway, will serve as a new southeast gateway to downtown. This Study identifies planned land uses along the eastern extension of ML King Jr. Parkway in order to design the Parkway with appropriate roadway capacity. A mix of uses is planned along the Parkway east of the Des Moines River, including signature development sites at the eastern landing of the new bridge.

**Polk 2030: Polk County Comprehensive Plan** draft (Spring 2006). This Plan recognizes the role that downtown plays in the economic health of Polk County. "Downtown Des Moines Improvements" are identified as a key policy in the economic development plan, calling for, "...continue[d] support [for] improvements downtown that raise the quality of life for all residents and assist in attracting and retaining trained financial sector employees." Additionally, Polk 2030 identifies a Medical District on the north side of downtown drawing on the existing Mercy, Iowa Methodist, and Iowa Lutheran Hospital locations.

**Western Gateway Area Redevelopment Goals and Guiding Principles** (December, 2005). A group of public sector and business leaders assembled this two-page document identifying the important aspects of development around Gateway Park. The goal is stated as: "Development surrounding the Western Gateway Park shall contain large-scale office, retail and residential investments that result in added tax base, jobs and increased pedestrian activity. The Goals and Guiding Principles were adopted by City Council and serve as the basis for economic incentive packages, with the "minimum average taxable value for a block of $20M/acre" resonating as a clear benchmark for redevelopment around the Park.

**Court Avenue Historic Area New Construction and Rehabilitation Design Guidelines** (December 1987, updated February 2005). These Guidelines were developed to "ensure that new construction is compatible and strengthens the pedestrian character and the historical and architectural importance of the Court Avenue Historic Area." In addition to requirements that address materials, bulk, set-back, use, and elevation texture for new construction, the Guidelines also identify significant historic buildings in order to discourage demolition. In order for Court Avenue development to qualify for tax abatement, it must comply with the Guidelines.

**Rediscovering the Rivers: Des Moines Riverfront Master Plan** (2003). In an unprecedented move, Principal Financial Group commissioned a riverfront master plan. The Master Plan serves as the basis for the Phase I Riverwalk improvements that are currently underway in downtown and aims to bring the city’s Rivers to the forefront once again, stating that they should be a "significant recreational, social, and economic amenity by connecting them to the city’s growth." The current planning effort embraces the broad Riverfront...
The history of planning in downtown Des Moines spans over a century from the “Des Moines Business Blocks” (courtesy of Cowles Library at Drake University) to the “City of Ceramics” to Civic, Art, Industry, and a “Beautiful Waterfront” through Urban Renewal, Skywalks, and Downtown Housing.

**Master Plan and calls for study to begin for the next phases of implementing riverfront improvements.**

**Eastern Gateway Design Guidelines (May 2003).** These Guidelines address the area commonly referred to as the "East Village." Like the Court Avenue Guidelines, the Eastern Gateway Design prescribe a number of requirements -- materials, bulk, set-back, use, and elevation texture -- that are used as the basis for funding incentives.

**Downtown Traffic Study (May 2002).** This comprehensive for the entire city of Des Moines served as a guide and a reference for understanding a number of recent and planned traffic and transportation changes in downtown.

**Sherman Hill Neighborhood Action Plan (February 1999).** As Sherman Hill has grown into a more stable, established neighborhood on the northwest side of downtown, their desire for greater connection with the denser areas of downtown has increased. The Neighborhood Plan identifies some mechanisms for connecting to downtown -- development, open space, street character -- that are incorporated and expanded in this current planning effort.

**Major Projects Task Force findings, “A New Era for Downtown Living, Learning, and Growing” (July 1998).** The process that produced these findings was a pivot point in downtown’s recent history. The Task Force was comprised of a large group of community leaders in the private and public sectors that spent about a year analyzing a number of ideas for downtown. This Task Force is often credited with jump-starting the recent accomplishments in downtown, with a united voice they recommended a series of downtown investments including: a downtown neighborhood, Court Avenue Entertainment District, public events center, science center, learning center, food policy and research center, Gateway East, Gateway West, Gray’s Lake, riverfront improvements, downtown public library, Iowa CHILD project, Children’s Museum, Hoyt Sherman Place, and Chinese Cultural Center. Most of these projects have been accomplished or are underway in downtown.

**Des Moines: Capital Gateway East Urban Design Plan (September 1997).** This plan set forth a goal of revitalizing the east side of downtown into a “thriving, diverse, desirable city neighborhood and outlined four catalytic initiatives: E. Locust Street improvements, City Hall parking lot redevelopment, West Capitol Terraces landscape, and building renovations at E. 5th and E. Locust Streets. In the ten years since the plan, the East Village is well on its way to achieving the goal and its particular initiatives are proving to be catalysts for further progress in the area.

**Des Moines 2020 Community Character Plan (August 2000):** Prepared by the Des Moines Plan and Zoning Commission, this plan offered a vision for the entire city of Des Moines. The Character Plan defined downtown, identifying important nodes and general land use direction with downtown core commercial, support commercial, mixed use, high density residential, institutional, and industrial categories.

**Destination Downtown (December 1995).** As with a number of other plans for downtown, an impressive number of the initiatives outlined in Destination Downtown have been accomplished. As one of the early plans pertinent to this review, one can clearly see how policies and projects proposed as a part of this plan layed the groundwork for future downtown improvements.

**The Des Moines Vision Plan Workbook (1994).** The document, prepared by Agrest and Gandelsonas, was a watershed point for downtown, recognized by one of the opening lines of the report: “The Vision Plan attempts to reverse the tendency [to abandon downtown for the suburbs] in Des Moines through a continuing process of revitalization, focusing on important areas in downtown.” The Vision Plan identified several “important areas” such as the “Red Brick City,” “Central Park,” and “Civic Center,” -- the well-known downtown projects that are now known as East Village, Gateway Park, and the Riverwalk -- that downtown has been working on ever since.

Finally, it would be remiss not to mention the earliest plan known to guide downtown Des Moines. The Civic Art Report written in 1927 by famed early 20th Century planner, Harland Bartholomew offers a delightful glimpse of downtown nearly a century ago. He graciously describes Des Moines -- its buildings, the rivers, homes, landscaping, streets, the "dignity" of Grand Avenue, its civic center -- then offers, "Des Moines is different enough from other cities to be easily remembered. Without great effort, every phase of its development can be given outstanding merit."
Recent Downtown Investments

Since the year 2000, public and private investments in downtown have surpassed two and a half billion dollars ($2.5B). They span the gamut of uses -- commercial business, medical, retail, residential, parks, cultural, and infrastructure. These investments touch nearly every corner of downtown -- center, north, south, east, and west. They include enormous corporate commitments in commercial real estate, as well as personal investments in restaurants, retail, and housing. In terms of sheer quantity, the largest investments include (by sector):

Commercial:
- Allied / Nationwide - nearly a million square feet of corporate office buildings completed in three phases located along Gateway Park with associated parking structures south of the Park.
  Total investment = $280M*
- Wells Fargo Financial - over seven hundred thousand square feet of corporate office buildings built in two phases along Walnut Street with associated structured parking.
  Total investment = $150M

Cultural:
- Iowa Events Center - a new $217M performance and convention space including a 16,000-seat arena and 100,000 SF exhibit hall with adjoining meeting facilities. The facility incorporates the 1950’s Veteran’s Memorial Auditorium and is located on the north side of downtown along the west side of the Des Moines River.
- Science Center of Iowa - 110,000 square foot science center with rotating exhibits and IMAX theater located along ML King Jr.
  Total investment = $60M
- Central Library - replaced the Beaux Arts Public Library on the Des Moines riverfront with a 110,000 square foot glass and copper-clad library with a green roof in Gateway Park designed by renowned British architect, David Chipperfield. Total investment = $32M
- Pappajohn Higher Education Center - new multi-level academic and administrative buildings.

Parks and Recreation:
- Principal Riverwalk - 1.2 mile pedestrian loop along the Des Moines Riverfront between the Iowa Events Center and Principal Park with a series of plazas, activity nodes, a street level promenade, a recreational trail, and public art. The loop is completed by two new pedestrian bridges: a converted railroad bridge and a new crossing above the Center Street dam. The trail will connect to over 300 miles of Central Iowa trails.
  Total investment: $60M*
- Gateway Park - redevelopment of five blocks on the west side of downtown into open space. In addition to open green space, the Park hosts some development including civic uses such as the Central Library, Temple for Performing Arts, and the Pappajohn Higher Education Center. Creation of the Park recently inspired the donation of the world-renowned Pappajohn sculpture collection for placement in the Park.
  Total investment: $16M*

Infrastructure:
- I-235 - $469M reconstruction of the freeway running along the northern edge of downtown.
- Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway - new multi-lane parkway on the southern side of downtown connecting Fleur Drive to the Des Moines River. A new bridge and Parkway extension to E. 6th Street is planned for completion in 2012 with further expansion eastward anticipated in future phases. Total investment = $130M*

These top the list in terms of dollar investment. For each of these projects, there are many others that contribute mightily to the evolution of downtown, through direct economic contribution and/or through indirect support of the the experiences for those who live, work and play in downtown. Restaurants or entertainment venues or retail shops may not appear on a list of expenditures made in downtown, but they contribute to the reasons that corporations are able to attract workers or executives opt for downtown offices. Consider the impact that the John “Pat” Dorrian Trails network makes on downtown as this ~$2M investment links existing and planned central Iowa trails allowing connections through downtown to over 300 miles of regional trails. Each decision by the 3000 new downtown residents who rented apartments or bought real estate represents a significant investment in downtown. Big and small investments have amounted to significant changes in downtown in a few short years.

* denotes that the project is not yet completed, so investment total could change