



# INTRODUCTION

WHEN YOU THINK OF  
DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS  
AND THE GRAND RIVER, DO  
YOU FIND YOURSELF THINKING  
ABOUT WHAT'S THERE NOW,  
OR DO YOU IMAGINE THE  
POTENTIAL OF WHAT COULD  
BE?

GR Forward is a comprehensive plan and investment strategy that envisions the future of Downtown and the Grand River - two of the City's strongest assets. Grand Rapids is poised to become a resilient, waterfront city and an urban playground for all ages centered around a progressive and lively Downtown. GR Forward is designed to guide this ongoing transformation.

All members of the community - those who live, work, learn, and play in and near Downtown and the River - were welcomed participants, invited to help craft a collective vision for the future and identify key actions for change to make the vision become reality. Thank you to the thousands who engaged with the planning process and in doing so enriched this plan. Your words, your ideas, and your energy are present in every page.

Facilitated by Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. [DGRI], the City of Grand Rapids and Grand Rapids Public Schools [GRPS], GR Forward is our roadmap to guide change and direct investment in the coming years. With a focus on Downtown, the Grand River and public schools, GR Forward encompasses three planning efforts in one.



### DOWNTOWN:

What will the next decade bring for Downtown? The Downtown Plan component of GR Forward identifies strategies to address some of the primary challenges Downtown faces including: promoting new jobs and economic growth; improving access to the Grand River; creating new housing for a range of incomes and household types; enhancing mobility and parking options; expanding retail and services; creating new open spaces and outdoor programming and; upgrading infrastructure, among other important issues. Downtown is defined as the combined Downtown Development Authority [DDA] and Monroe North Tax Increment Finance Authority [MNTIFA] boundaries encompassing Monroe North south to Wealthy Street, and Seward on the near West Side to Heritage Hill.

### RIVER CORRIDOR:

Grand Rapids' namesake rapids were removed from the landscape more than a century ago. The river shaped our past; now how will we design the future? The River Corridor Plan reimagines the lands along the riverfront and how we interact with the Grand River itself. The work is coordinated with the Grand Rapids Whitewater initiative to restore the rapids as well as the need to address FEMA requirements with respect to updating flood infrastructure. The plan makes recommendations for the entire length of the river corridor from Lamoreaux to Millennium parks.

### CENTRAL INNOVATION HIGH & THE MUSEUM SCHOOL:

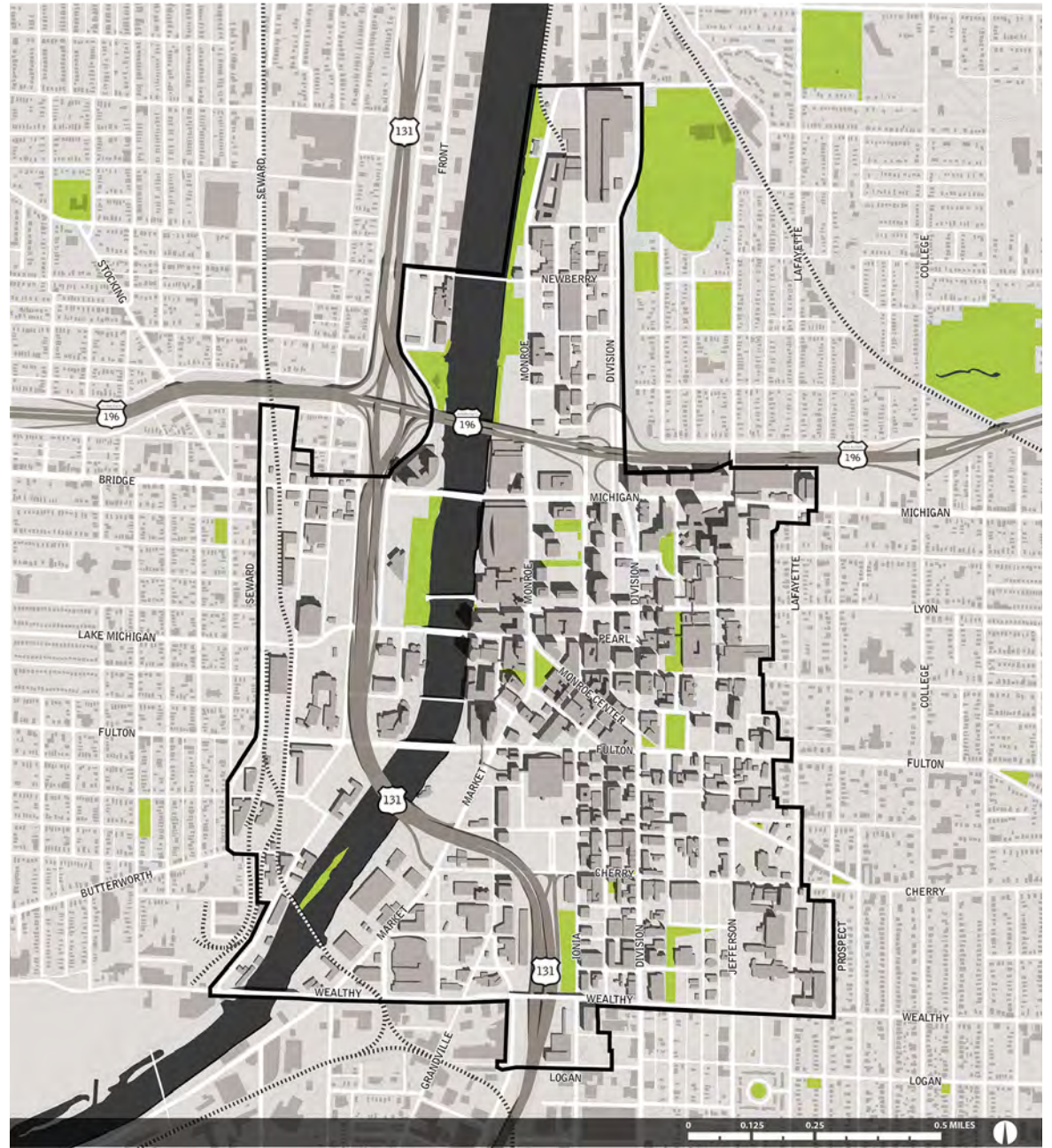
Imagine the potential of cutting edge public school choice in Downtown. GRPS invited students, parents, staff and neighbors to participate in the GR Forward process in an exciting design/visioning and redevelopment plan for the Innovation Central High campus and a new Grand Rapids Public Museum School located in the recently opened Van Andel Museum Center.



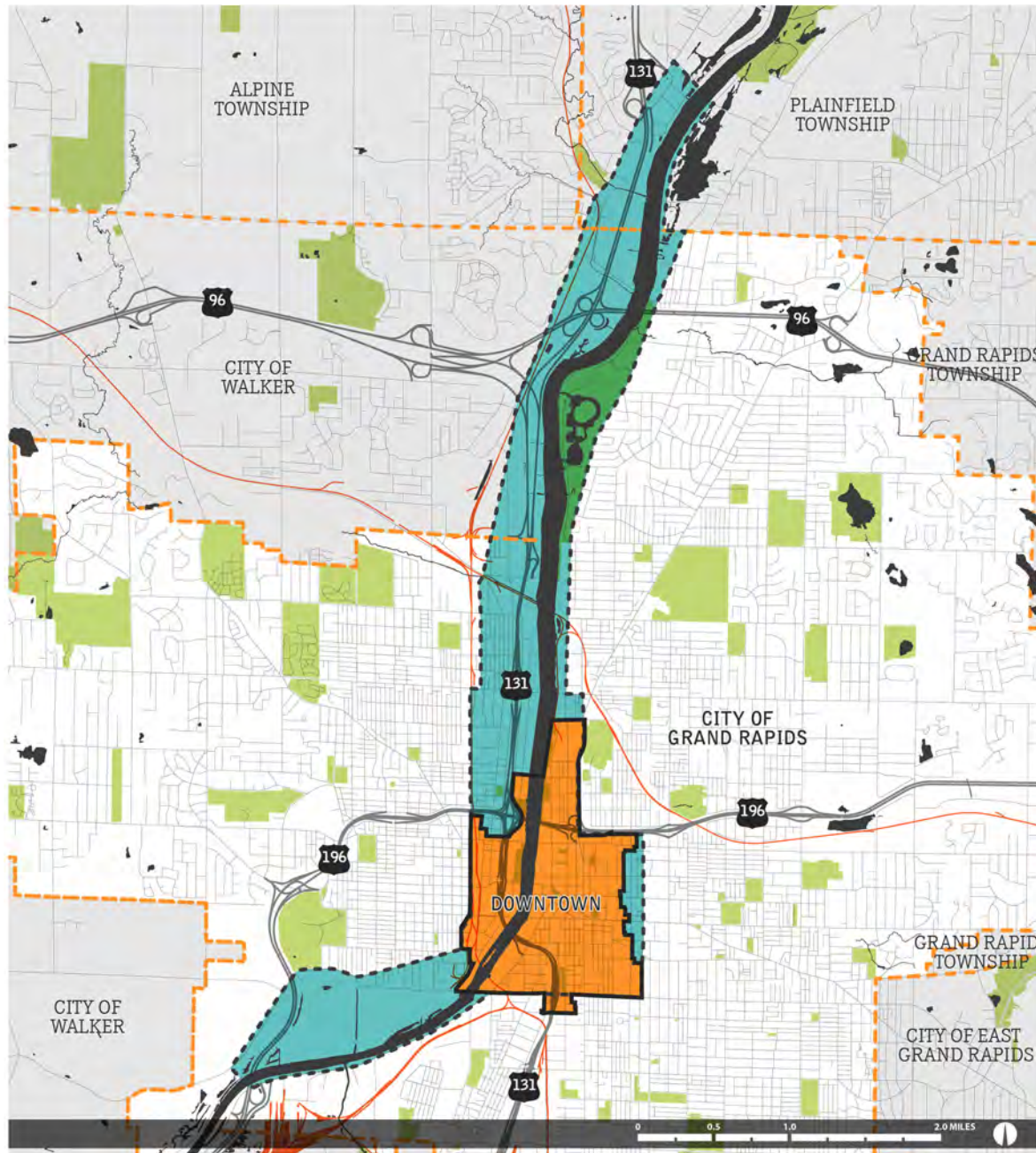
# DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS

A steering committee comprised of key stakeholders from throughout Grand Rapids guided each of these planning efforts. In addition, a River Restoration Steering Committee was appointed by the Grand Rapids City Commission to evaluate long-term management and financing options available to implement the River Corridor Plan and river restoration efforts.

GR Forward is the umbrella that unites these planning efforts. It is a plan but also a call to action that organizes the actions of local leaders, private and non-profit organizations, residents and businesses toward a shared vision for Downtown, the River and local schools. With this plan in place, the next step is to fully focus on implementation - the act of transforming ideas into reality within our Downtown and along the River for all to inhabit and enjoy. To be successful, GR Forward needs the continued support and involvement by the whole of our community. Stay involved and continue to raise the expectations of what can be accomplished in Grand Rapids!



# RIVER CORRIDOR STUDY AREA



- RAIL
- HIGHWAY
- STREETS
- - - CITY / TOWN BORDER
- RIVER STUDY AREA
- DOWNTOWN STUDY AREA

## WHY DO WE PLAN?

“A goal without a plan is just a wish.”

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPERY

There are no shortage of ideas for the future of Grand Rapids. Organizing, prioritizing and implementing these ideas requires a clear plan of action. What are the key issues the community faces and what are ways that we can overcome them? What is most important to the community? What can we achieve now and down the road? These questions and more are the reason for a plan - one that is generated with local residents and stakeholders. Specifically, GR Forward starts with a plan to:

- >> Coordinate, inform budgeting decisions and guide the revitalization activities of DGRI, the City, GRPS and their many partners over the next 10 years
- >> Leverage public, private, and philanthropic dollars by clearly signaling where improvements will be made Downtown and along the River
- >> Identify additional opportunities to raise funds for implementation from outside Grand Rapids
- >> Empower residents and local stakeholders as agents of implementation

*GR Forward went on the road to neighborhood meetings, festivals and other events to find out what Grand Rapidsians want for their Downtown and River.*



## HOW DOES GR FORWARD RELATE TO PREVIOUS PLANS?

Plans are not static. As “living documents,” plans often need to be updated based on local conditions and/or larger economic forces like recessions that can hamper even the best laid plans. But while some of the specifics may change, effective planning establishes the core principles and the vision that represents the values of the community.

Grand Rapids has a number of effective plans that have helped to shepherd in the improvements now seen in Downtown and along the River. Beginning in the 1980s, the Grand River Edges Plan helped to guide the creation of the trails that exist today. The last true strategic Downtown Plan – Voices & Visions – was completed in 1993. Since that time, two other notable plans have been completed that provide the foundation for GR Forward. These include the 2002 City of Grand Rapids Master Plan and Green Grand Rapids completed in 2012. In addition, the Arena South Visioning Plan provides a development approach for five Downtown Development Authority owned parking lots south of the Van Andel Arena and the Michigan Street Corridor Plan addresses the Medical Mile. All of these plans establish clear principles and values that GR Forward builds upon. Both the 2002 Master Plan and Green Grand Rapids emphasize the need to:

- >> Expand opportunities for partnerships and neighborhood / resident involvement
- >> Ensure choice and “honor the diversity” of Grand Rapids
- >> Focus on economic health and expanding economic opportunities for residents
- >> Balance economic and job growth with environmental stewardship
- >> Promote high quality design and maintenance of the public realm and private development
- >> Create a pedestrian-friendly City, improve transit and accommodate the car
- >> Protect our environment and create a sustainable City

These values are echoed in the Arena South Visioning Plan and align with the “Constitution for Downtown Grand Rapids” from Voices & Visions that emphasizes the following:

- >> Downtown is the physical and spiritual heart of the metropolitan area
- >> Downtown Grand Rapids is for everyone
- >> Downtown is a place for pedestrians
- >> Development in Downtown must protect and enhance the natural environment
- >> Downtown reflects and celebrates our community’s diversity
- >> Downtown must be economically strong

These values and others described in previous plans emerged again in the GR Forward public engagement process. Indeed, Grand Rapidians put these values into practice with thousands of observations and ideas that seek to link the River with Downtown and the neighborhoods, improve the environmental health of the River, boost the creation of jobs and businesses, improve the pedestrian environment, protect and celebrate diversity Downtown, connect riverfront trails and build both the plan, and its implementation, in partnership with the community. GR Forward is the next step in the City’s legacy of progressive planning and addresses the new challenges and opportunities present today.



## GREEN GRAND RAPIDS



*Previous plans have established the foundation for GR Forward. The last Downtown Plan was completed in 1993.*

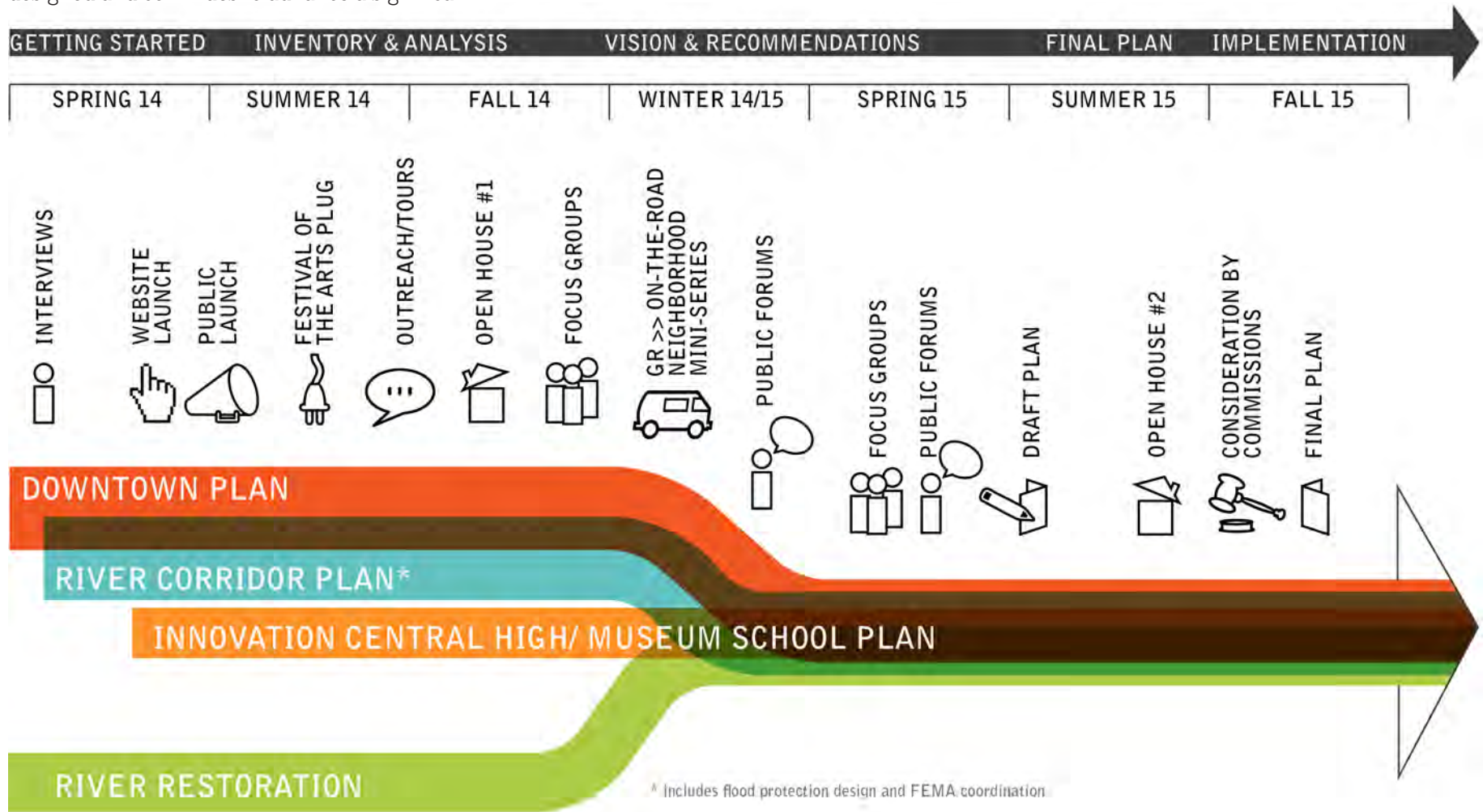
## THE GR FORWARD PROCESS

GR Forward launched in April of 2014 with the goal of creating a community-driven plan fueled by a robust public outreach initiative. Grand Rapidians are proud of their hometown and demand a say in shaping the future of their City. In order to make their voices heard, DGRI, the City of Grand Rapids, GRPS and their partners designed and continues to advance a significant

public engagement effort that is directly involving residents, businesses, developers, non-profit and institutional partners, decision makers and other stakeholders. A special thank you to the Dyer-Ives Foundation, Grand Rapids Community Foundation and the Wege and Frey Foundations whose contributions enhanced the

scope and breadth of the GR Forward outreach initiative.

The process broadened the reach of GR Forward by deploying innovative methods for inviting the public into the process.



A summary of the GR Forward planning process



## GR FORWARD BY THE NUMBERS

GR Forward monthly project steering committee meetings:

- >> Downtown Plan Steering Committee [32 members] - 14 meetings
- >> River Corridor Plan Steering Committee [78 members] - 14 meetings
- >> River Restoration Plan Steering Committee [22 members] = 12 meetings
- >> GRPS Museum School and Innovation Central High [13 members]: 8 meetings
- >> DGRI leadership network reports and roundtable discussions with the following groups:
  - >> DGRI Board of Advisors [12 members]
  - >> Alliance for Investment [23 members]
  - >> Alliance for Vibrancy [19 members]
  - >> Alliance for Livability [22 members]
- >> One-on-one interview with key stakeholders at the outset of the process: over 50 completed
- >> Neighborhood consultations: 26 total city-wide drawing more than 450 in attendance
- >> Focus groups: 13 to date on housing, diversity and inclusion [3], student life, economic development, social services, River ecology, parking, DASH service [2], and public art [2]: 70 participants
- >> Public open house installed in a storefront @ 50 Louis Street: 450 + visitors
- >> Public forums: 225 attendees
- >> Downtown resident event: 170+ attendees
- >> Collaborative mapping: 991 comments about resident ideas, insights and local barriers
- >> Organizational consultations: 75+ conversations with groups representing the private sector / business interests, education, civic organizations, state agencies, foundations, accessibility & transportation organizations and adjacent communities.
- >> Survey of Downtown residents and employees: 376 respondents
- >> Mini-grants: \$30,000 to 12 neighborhoods voluntarily applying to support public outreach - grants were provided to Black Hills Neighborhood Association, Cook Library, Creston Neighborhood Association, Disability Advocates of Kent County, Grand Rapids Initiative for Leaders, Grandville Avenue Arts Center, Heritage Hill Neighborhood Association, John Ball Neighbors dba Swan, LINC Community Revitalization, Inc., Neighbors of Belknap Lookout, Roosevelt Park Neighborhood Association and, West Grand Neighborhood Association.
- >> Leadership luncheons: 4 roundtable discussions involving approximately 100 civic leaders
- >> Speaker series: 4 events featuring leaders on justice/inclusion, urban planning leadership, mobility, and civic performance technologies
- >> Speech bubble ideas: 150
- >> GR Forward website: Over 3,250 views/month
- >> Social media: 1,300+ like on Facebook, 290+ Twitter followers and 250+ Instagram followers
- >> Local government briefings: 18 to various City commissions, councils and advisory boards
- >> Planners in public spaces: Over 150 people engaged at ArtPrize, Movies in the Park and other events
- >> E-Newsletter of updates and insights: 80 distributed with a weekly reach of 300 people
- >> Media: dozens of print/radio/web/TV clips focused on GR Forward
- >> Total residents, businesses and organizations engaged: **Over 4,400**



*GR Forward included both large public events and smaller discussions with neighborhood organizations and local organizations*



**23 mini-series meetings**



**94+ presentations**

Help shape the future  
of GRAND RAPIDS.  
Get involved TODAY.

LEARN MORE: WWW.GRFORWARD.ORG

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF GRAND RAPIDS AT  
FACEBOOK.COM/GRFWD

JOIN THE CONVERSATION ON TWITTER  
@GRFWD

SHARE PHOTOS OF YOUR FAVORITE SPOTS  
AND PLACE-SPECIFIC IDEAS ON INSTAGRAM @GRFWD



GR Forward outreach materials

# Grand Opening

Welcome to the  
**GRAND OPENING**  
of the

**GR FORWARD**  
DOWNTOWN & RIVER ACTION PLAN >>

**OPEN HOUSE**

The **Open House** is a temporary installation of the **GR FORWARD** planning process that features interactive exhibits allowing **YOU** to share your ideas and shape the future of **Grand Rapids**.

**FEATURING:**

- We want to hear YOUR comments!
- Stickers!
- Card Games!
- Collaborative Mapping!

GR

FORWARD

CONNECTED

vibrant



bold

fun

Welcoming

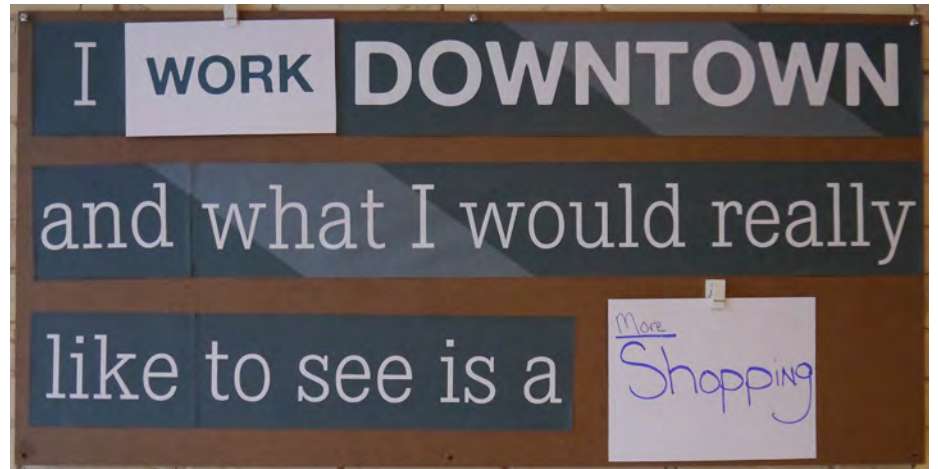


DOWNTOWN & RIVER ACTION PLAN



## MAP OF ACTIVITIES

- 1: ENTRANCE TABLE / SIGN IN
- 2: COLLABORATIVE MAP TOWER
- 3: EXISTING CONDITIONS ROOM
- 4: SURVEY TABLE
- 5: RIVER TOWER
- 6: RIVER CARD GAMES
- 7: DOWNTOWN TOWER
- 8: INTERACTIVE SUPER GRAPHIC



*GR Forward Open House repurposed an empty storefront for approximately 2 months and invited the public to come share their thoughts.*

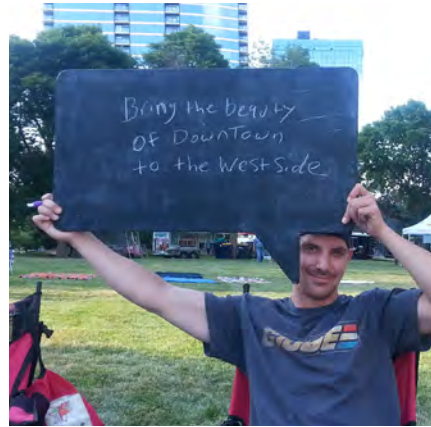


A critical result of the extensive outreach is what was learned and applied to the GR Forward plan. Each outreach technique enabled different types of conversation about Downtown and the River's primary challenges. Steering committee meetings, focus groups and leadership roundtables enabled in-depth discussion on specific topics including everything from housing affordability to parking. The large public events, most notable the public open house and two public forums, were designed to both inform the public but also enable them to share their observations and ideas with fun and interactive methods. The resident and business surveys offered an opportunity to answer a range of questions that could be quantified and touched issues of services, river access, transportation and parks. Finally, the web and social media were used to share information but also continue the conversation online. All of these techniques have enriched the discussion about the City's future and directly generated many of the strategies contained in this document.

Results from the exercises, games and questions posed to the public are distributed across this document. Below are a few important highlights:

- >> The chalkboard speech bubble made the rounds to Movies in the Park and various other events across Grand Rapids. This simple and fun exercise enabled residents to share their top-of-mind ideas for Downtown and the River's future.
- >> The large-scale Collaborative Map was

*A sampling of ideas captured through GR Forward's photo suggestion booth.*





installed in the open house, brought to neighborhood meetings and available online resulting in 991 ideas, insights and barrier comments. Overall, the comments focused on the River [21% of total comments] followed by parks and open space [including a lot of comments about VandenBerg Plaza and Heartside Park] and the lack of commercial services Downtown.

The collaborative map was installed at the open house, brought to neighborhood meetings and accessible on-line. All comments were compiled by the GR Forward planning team.

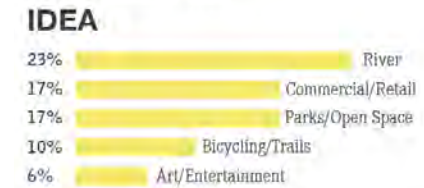
# COLLABORATIVE MAP RESULTS

## 991 COMMENTS

Overall Comments by Type



Top 5 by Sticker Type



INSIGHT



BARRIER



IDEA

INSIGHT

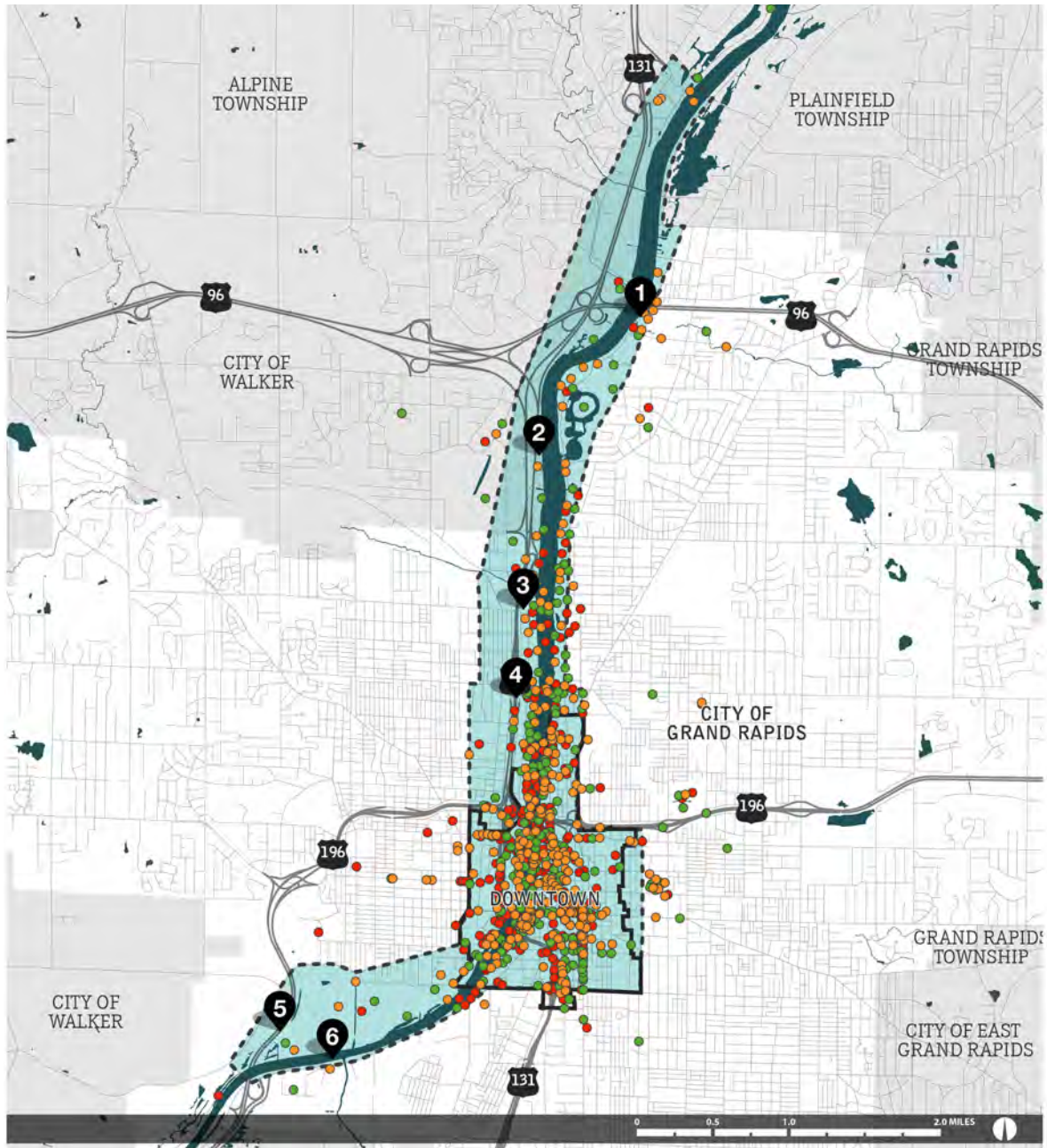
BARRIER

RIVER STUDY AREA

DOWNTOWN STUDY AREA







## IDEA. INSIGHT. BARRIER

**1**

“Boathouse for rowing, kayaking, and canoeing, accessible to White Pine Trail and Veterans Home.”

**2**

“The Grand near Riverside Park is a top 5 location for boating in the country. Grand Rapids is on shortlist for National Masters Championships. City could easily host an event.”

**3**

“The west edge of the river must be public space - should connect to West Side neighborhoods.”

**4**

“Extend river promenade on west bank up to Leonard. Develop a mixed-use urban village of destination retail, restaurants, and entertainment that faces the river.”

**5**

“Combine Millennium Park with Butterworth Landfill to create a huge urban nature preserve.”

**6**

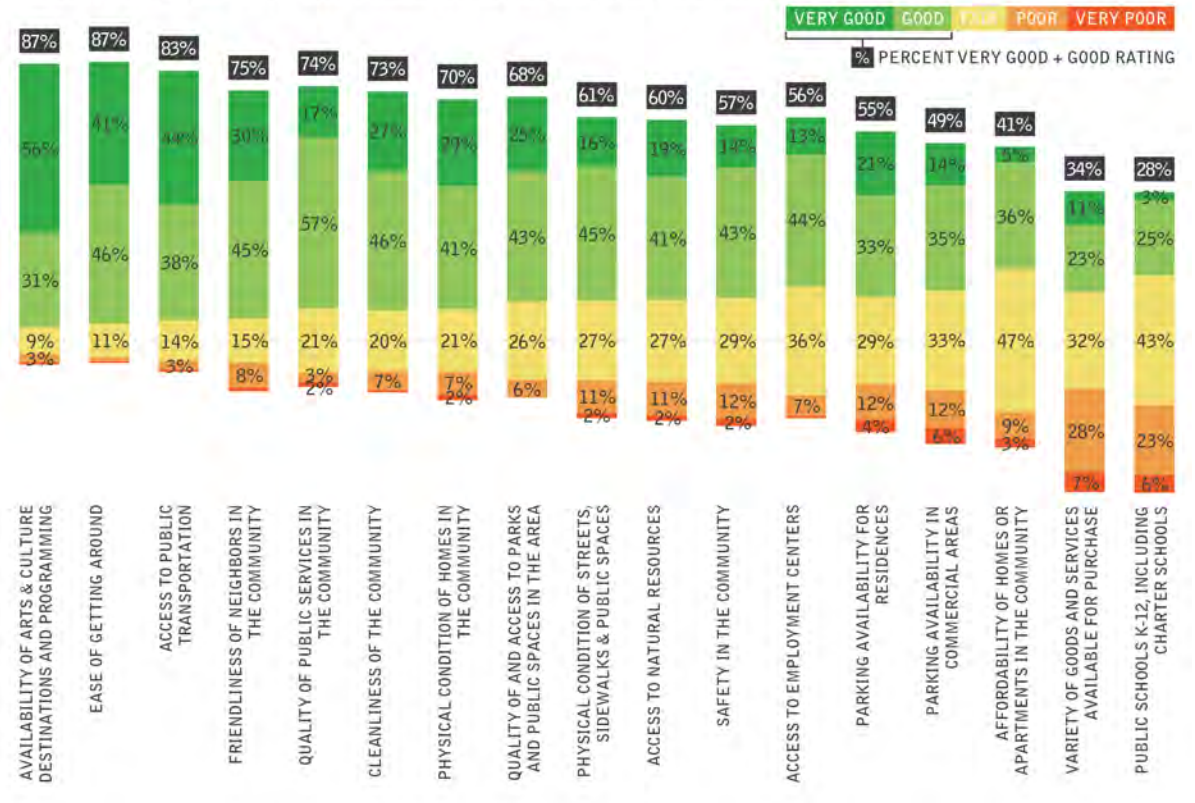
“This part of Market connects to the Kent Trails but is currently dangerous for bikes and pedestrians.”

>> The resident survey asked participants to rank various aspects of their community. Those characteristics that received the most positive rankings include: The availability of arts and culture; access to public transportation; friendliness of neighbors and; the quality of public services in the community. The characteristics that fared the worst include: parking availability; the affordability of homes/apartments in the community and; the variety of goods and services available in the community. When asked if you would consider buying a home in Downtown [if you don't already own], those that responded "no" cited the range of homes that are available as a primary factor and issues such as safety as a secondary factor. Expanding the range of housing options Downtown and improving the perception of safety are important elements of GR Forward.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR COMMUNITY

RESIDENT SURVEY

HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS OF YOUR COMMUNITY?



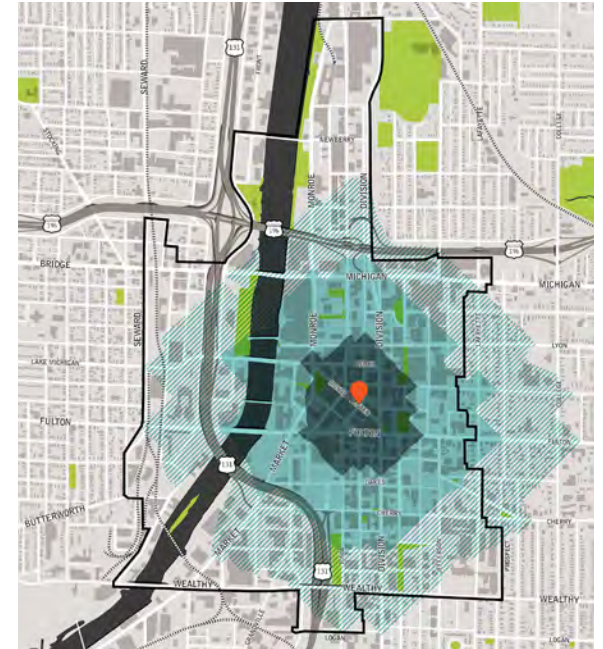
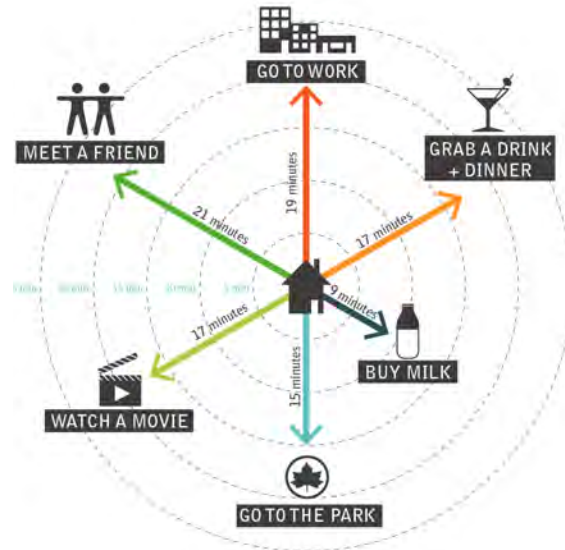
Summary results from the Downtown resident survey

>> Participants at the open house and at neighborhood mini-series meetings indicated that they drive alone the majority of time for shopping and getting to work. However, when asked how far they would walk to meet a friend, go to work or grab dinner, answers varied between 9 and 21 minutes. The majority of Downtown is accessible to the majority of Downtown residents via even a 15 minute walk. Improvements to streets and sidewalks can help to encourage more walking Downtown.

>> At the open house and neighborhood meetings, the public was asked to identify from pictures of other cities their favorite ideas to improve streets, parks and other spaces. The “thumbs up” exercise revealed attendees overwhelmingly supported protected bike lanes followed by underpass lighting improvements, community gardens, food truck rallies and pop-up beer gardens. Similarly, when asked what would make Downtown easier or more fun to get around, the top two answers were separated bike lanes and more trees.

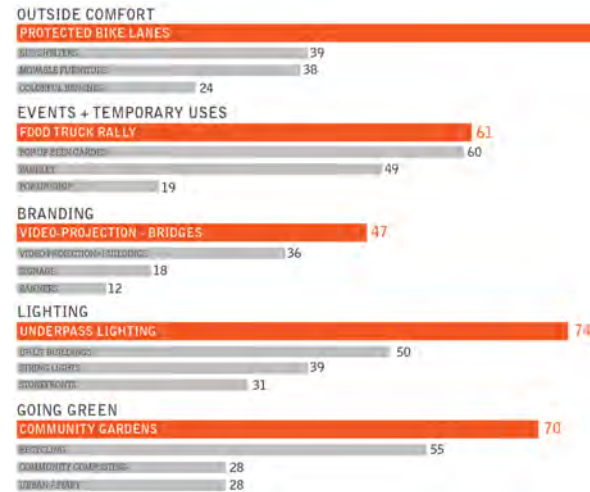
>> In discussing the River, the identified preferences for programs along the River focused on creating new spaces including playgrounds, wetlands and trails and paths. In addition, the public strongly indicated preferences for activities such as fishing, rowing, swimming, canoeing/kayaking and for new River elements such as docks, lighting and artwork.

## HOW MANY MINUTES WOULD YOU WALK/BIKE TO...



Much of Downtown is accessible within a 15-minute walk [hatched area]. The dark green represents a 5-minute walk from Monroe Center.

## THUMBS UP EXERCISE RESULTS:



Protected bike lanes, community gardens, underpass lighting and food trucks represent some of the short-term improvements Grand Rapidsians would like to see.



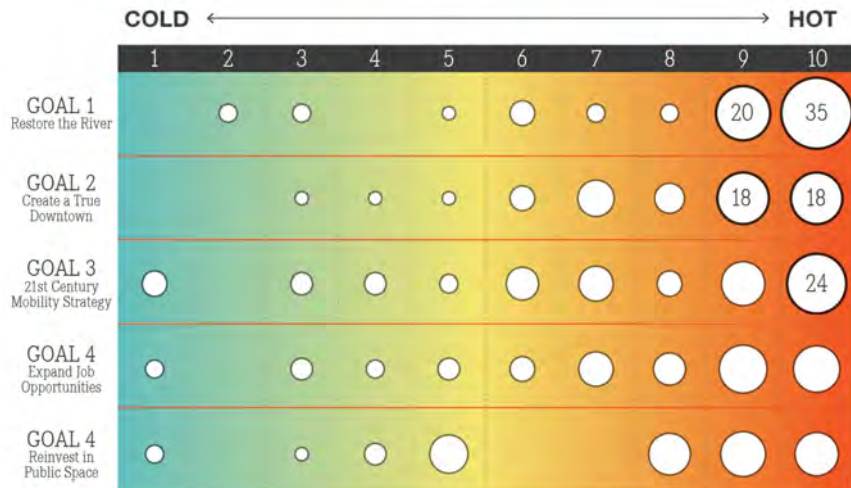


>> Toward the end of the planning process, GR Forward moved the discussions toward priority setting. In public forums and at the Downtown and River Corridor steering committee meetings, participants were asked to discuss and negotiate their top 3 strategies among the 50 different strategies listed at that time. All three groups chose the same top answer: “concentrate retail and close the retail services gap”. The other priorities identified in public forums include “provide more transportation choices”, “create a continuous river trail on both sides of the river”, “enhance the ecology and expand habitat of the river”, “provide access and activities on the river”, and “support initiatives that bring new residents Downtown.”

*Top 10 priorities of 50 potential strategies presented to the public.*

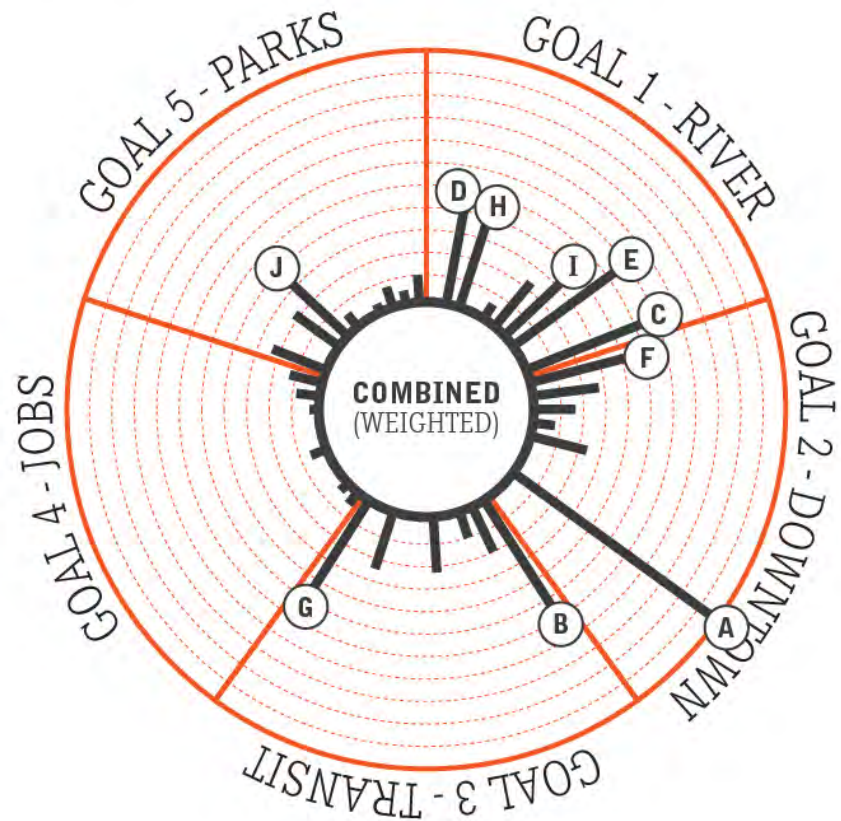
### TOP PRIORITIES

- A Concentrate retail and close the retail services gap
- B Provide more transportation choices
- C Enhance the ecology and expand the habitat of the River
- D Provide access to the river to allow activities within the river
- E Create a continuous river trail on both sides of the River
- F Support initiatives that bring new residents Downtown
- G Improve regional connections to Downtown
- H Balance open space with new mixed use development on the River corridor
- I Improve east-west streets as boulevards that connect neighborhoods to the River
- J Expand arts and cultural events and temporary programming



Results of the temperature exercise.

○ Size represents the number of stickers  
● Top 5 responses



## REVIEWING GR FORWARD

The same collaborative spirit that shaped GR Forward strategies underpinned the review of the draft plan. Starting with the issuance of the draft plan on July 2, 2015, more than 50 events and presentations were scheduled with key stakeholders to review the content in GR Forward and solicit feedback to improve the plan. Activities included:

- A fourth round of neighborhood meetings with the Black Hills, Roosevelt Park, Westside Collaborative, Creston, Belknap, and Heritage Hill;
- More than 30 meetings with organizational and community leaders, including local business associations, real estate developers and professionals, mobility advocates, civic boards and commissions, and those groups devoted to promoting diversity, inclusion and equity in Grand Rapids and throughout West Michigan. Among them: LINC, NAACP, Endless Opportunities, Convention and Arena Authority's Community Inclusion Group, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Grand Rapids Area Black Businesses, Black Women Connect and Outpro.
- A second Open House staged at the Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. offices with copies of the draft plan available for review and comment;
- Copies of the plan posted at all Grand Rapids public library branches, City Hall, Development Center and MadCap Coffee;

- Media appearances on WGVU-TV's West Michigan Week, Bliss for GR, Robert S' "Pulse of the City", and La Mejor Radio with Chuy Morales;
- Electronic versions of the plan on the Downtown Grand Rapids Inc., City of Grand Rapids, and GR Forward websites.

In total, the public review period spanned 73 days and generated more than 600 comments. We thank everyone who took the time to read this plan and offer detailed feedback. Your comments, suggestions and ideas further improved GR Forward.

## HOW TO USE THIS PLAN

The opportunities for the community to get involved with GR Forward have been many, and the community responded in force. The input was invaluable in creating this plan. The public involvement is not over. GR Forward is focused on getting things done and additional involvement is necessary to assist DGRI, the City of Grand Rapids, GRPS and their partners to bring the community's ideas to reality.

Recognizing that local leadership and organizations are focused on different aspects of the GR Forward plan, this document is designed to be flexible and customizable. Combined with this introduction and vision for the entire GR Forward process, each of the above goals is written as its own, stand-alone mini-action plan.

Think of it as a "choose your own" GR Forward adventure. A separate executive summary is available for those that would like to understand all of the GR Forward strategies without reading all 6 goals in detail.

Above all, GR Forward is about taking action. Some strategies can be accomplished very quickly, while others will take time due to many factors including the availability of resources [time, people, and/or money]. GR Forward is designed to help local partners leverage various opportunities to help make the vision a reality. To that end, each of the goal areas include a specific implementation approach that seeks to answer the following questions for each and every strategy:

- Who will take the lead to ensure this action is implemented?
- Who are the partners that need to be at the table?
- When should we implement?
- How much will it cost?
- Where could funding come from?

Those that have provided their ideas and helped shape this plan expect results. Downtown and the River are poised for real change that will benefit all of the City and the region. Stay involved and work with your neighbors to help achieve your vision.



**GR >> IN CONTEXT**

## DOWNTOWN & THE RIVER TODAY

Just think how different things were ten years ago. Downtown has hit an accelerated stride as a destination, as an economic center, and, increasingly, as home to many residents. The River, once forgotten and overlooked, is now the center of discussions regarding outdoor recreation and programming, water quality and potential development.

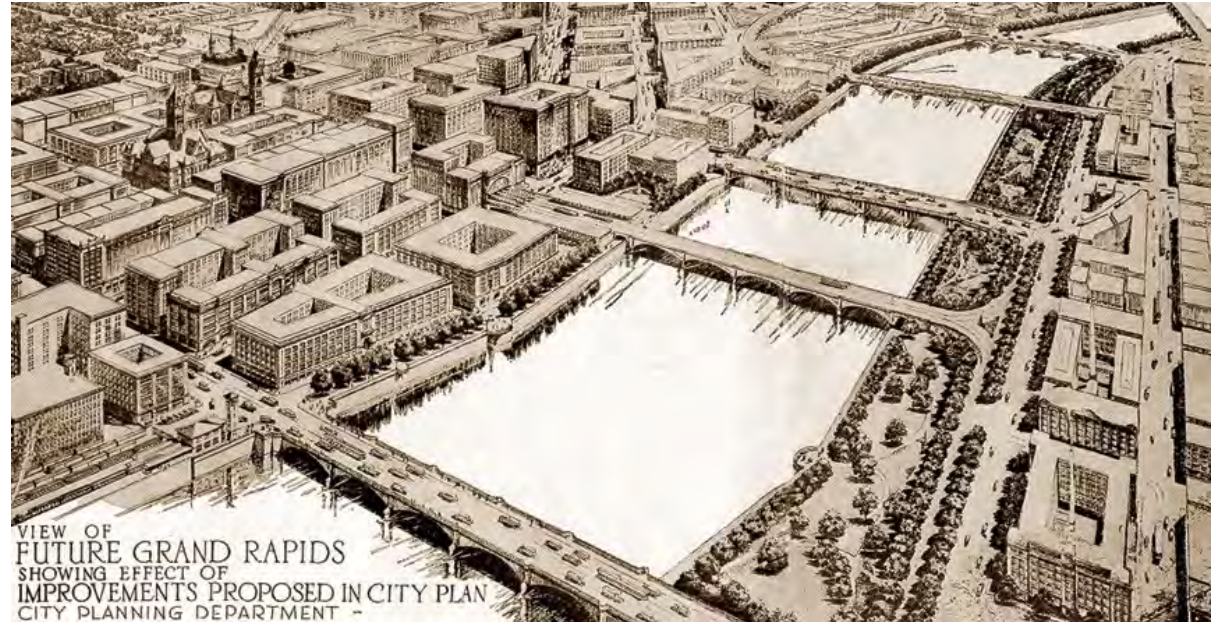
As reflected in the name, the City of Grand Rapids is inextricably linked to the Grand River. The heart of the City, now Downtown, was founded along the River which was used to provide power for local industries and provide transportation for logging activities. The lumber helped Grand Rapids to become the “Furniture City” with over 40 sawmills and 50 furniture companies in the early 1900s. The booming population of the City not only designed and created furniture but established trades in leather goods, finished lumber, flour, grain, cloth, carpet, and beer among others. These activities created a vibrant Downtown with retail-lined streets and, at one point, four different department stores.

“ The name Grand Rapids indicates the importance of the rapids in the history of the City and would be an excellent beginning to a vibrant future City ”

*Floods have long impacted Grand Rapids and resulted in the flood walls that exist today.*

But what the River provided in terms of economic activity, it also destroyed through flooding. Residents remember the dates of the multiple floods that have caused significant damage to Downtown and nearby neighborhoods. By 1911, the first flood walls were installed. In 2003, the

walls were rebuilt to one foot above the 100-year flood level. While this infrastructure was necessary, the floodwalls also serve as a barrier between Downtown and the River, a link GR Forward is seeking re-establish.



*Image from a plan completed in 1927. The proposed parks and boulevards represent early ideas about connecting Downtown to the River.*





Like many American cities, Downtown Grand Rapids started to experience a decline by the 1950s. Residents began to push out of the area, lured by new housing and lower cost of living in suburbs. Retail followed suit with the development of new malls that attracted stores and services formerly located Downtown. As if these trends were not enough, the new and expanded highways combined with the changing nature of industrial production resulted in the relocation or closure of local factories. Simply put, the loss of residents and jobs directly resulted in fewer residents, workers, tax payers, customers, visitors, students, and businesses. There was less revenue and economic activity to offset the disinvestment occurring in the area. Combating “blight” spurred the use of Federal Urban Renewal dollars that helped to demolish portions of Downtown. Ultimately, this activity set the stage for Vandenberg Plaza [City / County buildings], new office space, and extensive parking Downtown.

In the past decades, local leaders, foundations and notable organizations such as Grand Action have helped to transform Downtown into a growing destination. The collective result is a range of unique and world-class amenities including the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Downtown Market, Van Andel Research Institute, Cook-DeVos Center for Health Sciences, Secchia Center Medical School, Spectrum Health, the internationally recognized ArtPrize competition, plus the Van Andel Arena and DeVos Place, two

facilities that outpace most cities in terms of occupancy. In addition, universities and colleges are investing in Downtown and, despite the new hotels, it can still be difficult to find a room at certain times. Today, proposals for new housing are scattered across Downtown reflecting the growing desire to live in Downtown where the concentration of arts, culture and nightlife has helped Grand Rapids earn the moniker “Beer City USA.” Underlying this concentration of jobs, destinations, housing and nightlife, are

public investments designed to create a more sustainable, environmentally conscious city. From separating combined sewers to developing new transit service, the City and their partners are forward-thinking and poised to further enhance Downtown, restore the rapids and finally capitalize on the value of the River.

Downtown Grand Rapids and the Grand River face new challenges that GR Forward must directly address the issues that follow.



*Images of Downtown in the 1950s and today. Unfortunately, the department stores and other retail that made Downtown the center of the region have largely left. Today, restaurants and new assets like the Downtown Market are attracting new visitors to Downtown.*

## WE NEED TO MAXIMIZE THE VALUE OF THE GRAND RIVER

With coordinated investment, the Grand River can help to attract residents and businesses to the City while providing a unique space accessible to all Grand Rapidsians. Grand Rapids has a long history of turning its back to the Grand River. Due to the need for flood walls and the prevalence of industrial uses that formerly polluted the river, as well as the development of Downtown highways, the Grand is disconnected from Downtown and nearby neighborhoods. The Grand River Edges Plan sought to address some of these issues by establishing a trail system along the River. This work has progressed but the trail system in its current form is discontinuous. Within the GR Forward study area, the current trail is 63% incomplete and 43% of what currently exists is too narrow. Where the River is not accessible, it's often difficult to find with buildings and flood walls preventing visual access. The effort to restore the Rapids has helped to kick start a larger conversation about the River that now includes the landform

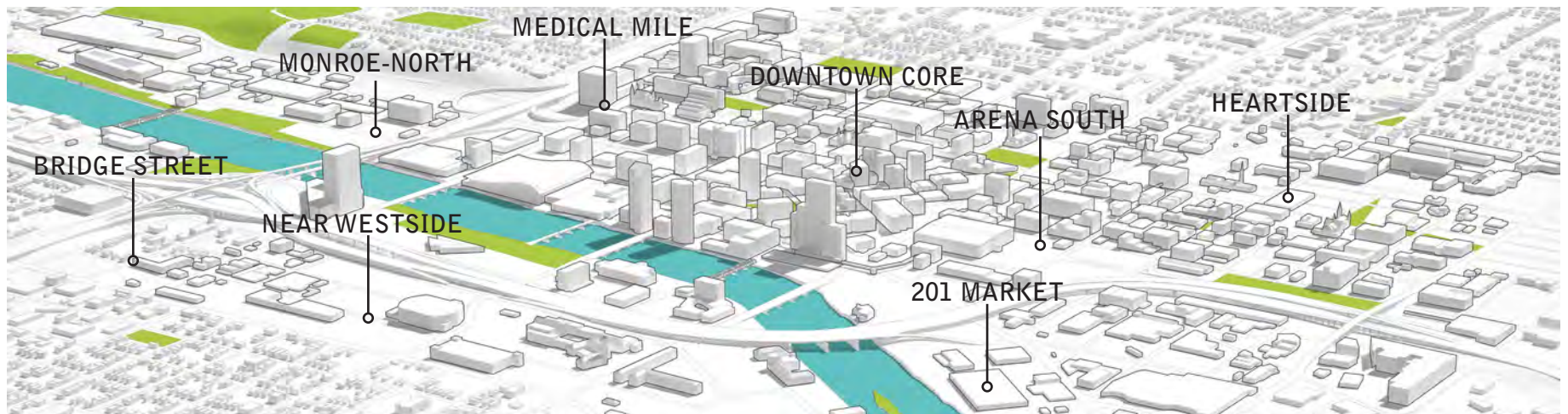
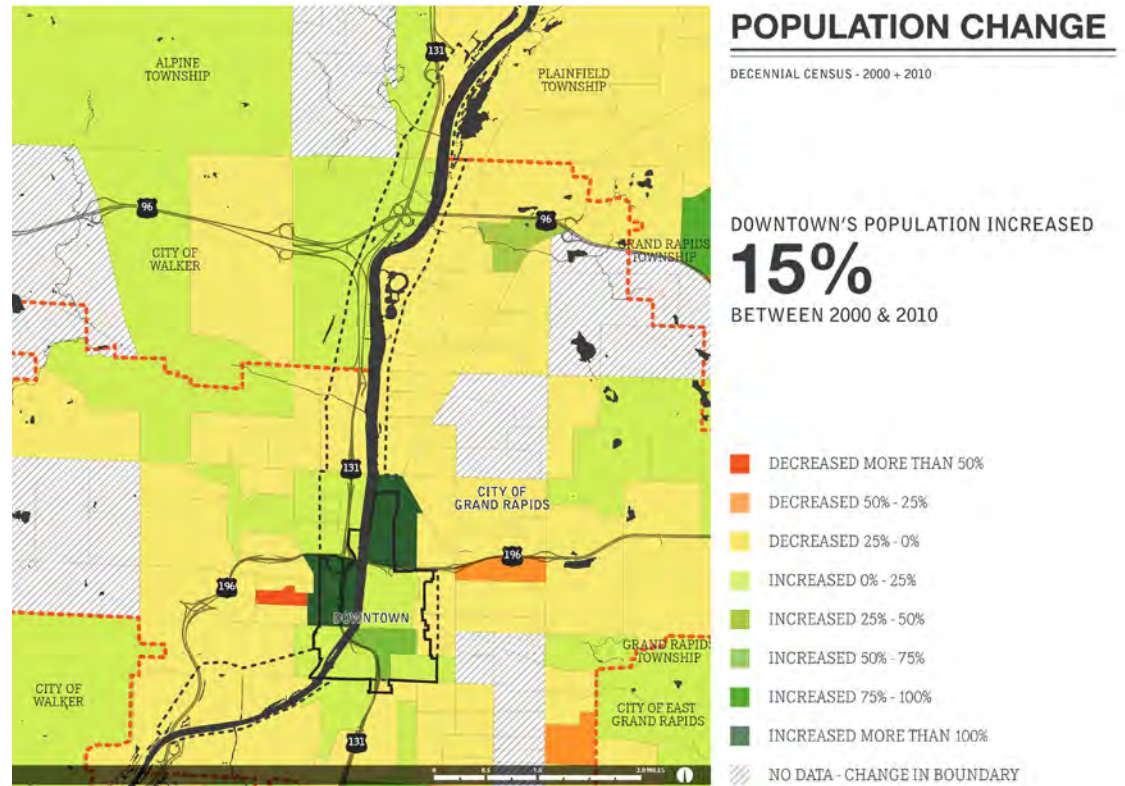
design of flood infrastructure that reveal potential river edge uses such as new parks and development. Creating new open space along the river and in select Downtown locations will

help to address the lagging 6.4 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents which is considerably below the median for the 100 largest cities in the US [12.4 acres per 1,000 residents].



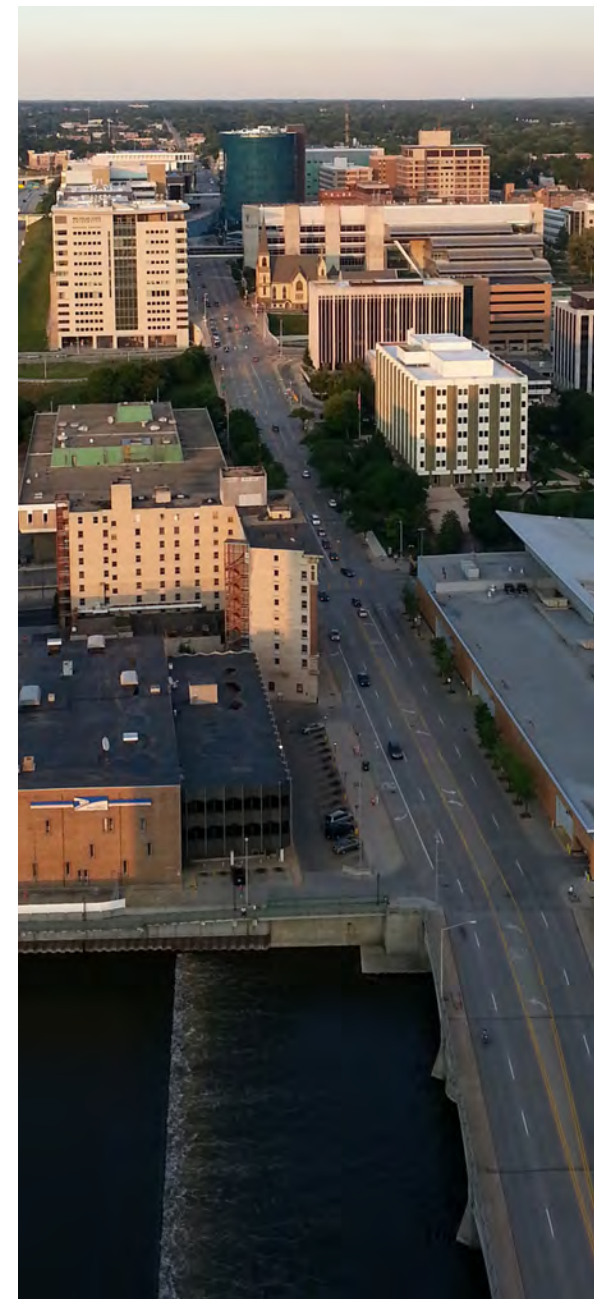
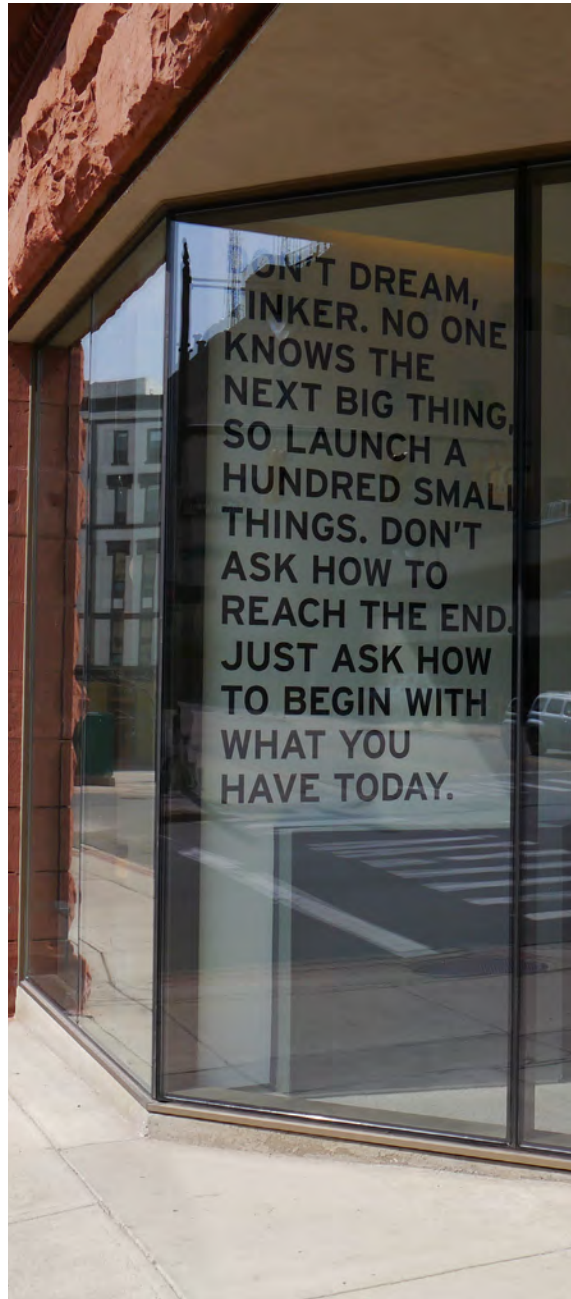
## DOWNTOWN IS GROWING BUT NEEDS TO REACH “CRITICAL MASS”

The constant refrain from public engagement events is the desire for “more” – more retail, more services, more restaurants and more stuff to do. In the past 20 years, the census tracts touching Downtown have doubled in population. In 2014, there were approximately 5,000 people living Downtown, many living in apartment/condominium buildings. But while Downtown is growing, there are limited retail options and services for residents and employees. Data from other successful downtowns across the country indicate that for a Grand Rapids-sized downtown, critical mass can be defined as approximately 10,000 households or over 12,000 residents. It is at this point that downtowns are able to attract a grocery, pharmacy and have services like coffee shops and laundromats that are open Saturday mornings. Downtown needs to embrace and encourage growth.



## GRAND RAPIDS NEEDS A 21ST CENTURY ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Growth cannot be just about housing. Downtown and the City needs jobs, as well. The Medical Mile and the development of major venues like the DeVos Place and Van Andel Arena have provided both temporary and permanent job growth. Today we face the challenge of where the next jobs will come from. Downtown is home to a greater concentration [46%] of small to mid-size companies [between 5 and 250 employees] than the metro area [37%]. But of those companies where offices are their primary work space, only 16% are located Downtown. Most of the office use is outside of the City and a lot of the creative professional companies are not in Downtown. Downtown does not offer a range of inexpensive, flexible spaces suitable for new start-ups or existing companies seeking to migrate into larger space. Grand Rapids needs a 21st century economic infrastructure that focuses on providing this flexible space accessible to the amenities of Downtown.



A large crowd of people is gathered in a city square, many of whom are dancing in a circle. The scene is set at dusk, with the sun low on the horizon, casting a warm glow. In the background, there are modern buildings with glass facades and some trees. The overall atmosphere is vibrant and social.

## TALENT ATTRACTION IS CRITICAL TO THE CITY'S FUTURE

New start-ups and growing businesses need talent. Recruitment is critical in meeting the technical skill needs of current companies as well as emerging companies. The ability to attract talent to Grand Rapids is a key determining force in the future of Downtown. Talent is attracted by a combination of opportunities [are there jobs available?] and location [are there things for me to do?]. Along these lines, Downtown Grand Rapids is competing with other downtowns across the country for the same talent. Downtown should be considered a product, and to compete with these other cities, the quality of the place matters. Grand Rapids has come a long way in recent years. Since 2009, there has been a 29% drop in crime in Downtown. New housing and restaurants, as well as events like ArtPrize and Laugh Fest, are unique. Improving the Grand River will have a major impact, but Downtown also needs more events, programming and street improvements [including street trees] to create a strong place.

*“ In order to get city lovers to move to GR they have to feel like they are actually moving to a big city - including retail, entertainment, parks, activities, and communities. ”*

## WE MUST RECONNECT

Downtown was once an interconnected collection of commerce, services and housing nestled around the Grand River. As national trends altered where people chose to live and work, the result was a Downtown designed to accommodate commuters and visitors. This includes the introduction of highways, streets designed to efficiently shuffle commuters on and off the highway, and a lot of parking Downtown. So while many have said that one of Downtown's strengths is its walkability, the reality is that the environment Downtown does not promote walking with 63% of Downtown streets lined with "inactive uses" [blank walls, parking lots or empty space]. There are unique amenities and things to do Downtown and, soon, along the River. To fully realize the benefit of these investments, we need a Downtown that is accessible and connected. For those who will continue to drive, Downtown parking must be managed to maximize the use of the parking spaces that exist. For those that choose to walk, bike or take transit, Downtown streets and connections to the Grand River must be designed to safely incorporate different modes of transportation.

