

INTRODUCTION



In fall 2022, the City of Grand Rapids launched Bridge to Our Future, a process to create a Community Master Plan. The previous master plan was adopted in 2002, with additional updates, and since then new challenges and opportunities in the city called for a new plan. Bridge to Our Future was a community-driven process that focused on engaging residents of all backgrounds throughout the city. The result is a plan that includes a community-generated vision statement, value threads, goal areas, and specific recommendations to guide the future physical development of the city. The Community Master Plan sets a long-term direction for the city's growth and development and serves as a guide for decision-makers and the community for future development.

BACKGROUND

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY MASTER PLAN?

A Community Master Plan is the blueprint for how a community grows and evolves, set forth by the Planning Commission and adopted by the City Commission. It is a statement of the community's character and defines a long-range vision for the desired physical development of the community into the future, typically 20 years. A Community Master Plan addresses a range of topics such as population, economy, housing, transportation, facilities, and land use. The plan integrates technical analysis with robust public input from residents, businesses, and other community stakeholders. Although the 2002 Master Plan has been updated since it was created, it is time for a new one. The Community Master Plan serves as the foundation of the Zoning Ordinance. This relationship is described in more detail in the Desirable Development Character chapter.

WHY DOES GRAND RAPIDS NEED A NEW COMMUNITY MASTER PLAN?

To be effective, a plan must be periodically updated to account for changing conditions, new technologies, and other evolving factors. Since 2002, Grand Rapids has experienced many changes such as population growth, demographic and employment shifts, climate change effects, and a global pandemic. The Michigan Planning Enabling Act of 2008 emphasizes the importance of long-range planning by authorizing the creation of a Community Master Plan and requiring reviews of the plan every five years. The new City of Grand Rapids Community Master Plan promotes coordination around development and redevelopment, protects and enhances community development character, and creates the legal basis for zoning.

PRE-PLANNING

Before commencing the Community Master Plan process, the City of Grand Rapids conducted a review of the 2002 Master Plan with the community in 2020. Facilitators from neighborhood organizations, non-profit organizations, and other community groups, as well as interested residents, held four rounds of sessions with community members to review the plan. The groups discussed the successes of the 2002 Master Plan, and where improvements could be made with the next plan. The facilitators engaged over 500 community members in over 90 meetings. Facilitators did an outstanding job responding to pandemic challenges by hosting meetings virtually, distanced, or outside. The insight gathered during the robust engagement effort contributed to the development of the project scope and the planning process, as well as the formation of the Steering Committee.

STEERING COMMITTEE

Following the pre-planning phase, the City built a diverse steering committee. The Mayor appointed members of the committee with input from the City Commissioners. Additionally, individuals were selected to ensure representation across a number of factors such as ethnicity, gender, residency by ward, and sector. Once appointed, members of the committee helped the City hire a consultant team to write the new Community Master Plan for Grand Rapids by reviewing the Request for Proposals. Four members of the Steering Committee and one member of the Planning Commission also served on the interview panel to read and score proposals and interview and select the consultant team.

Once the process to write the Community Master Plan began, the Steering Committee informed the planning process and the plan's content. The committee served as community advocates for the plan, assisted with community outreach, and provided guidance and direction regarding the engagement process of the plan. The Steering Committee generally met consistently throughout the process, reviewing engagement materials and feedback, providing expert community knowledge, and advocating for the community in their meetings. Members of the Steering Committee also acted as table facilitators at engagement and community events.

The Steering Committee was led by a five-person Leadership Committee, nominated by the group, of which four members were permanent and one position rotated. The Leadership Committee met with staff and consultants on a regular basis to assist in generating agendas for the Steering Committee meetings, discuss ideas around engagement of the community, and address any special circumstances that arose.



TODAY'S CHALLENGES

HISTORY OF REDLINING IN GRAND RAPIDS

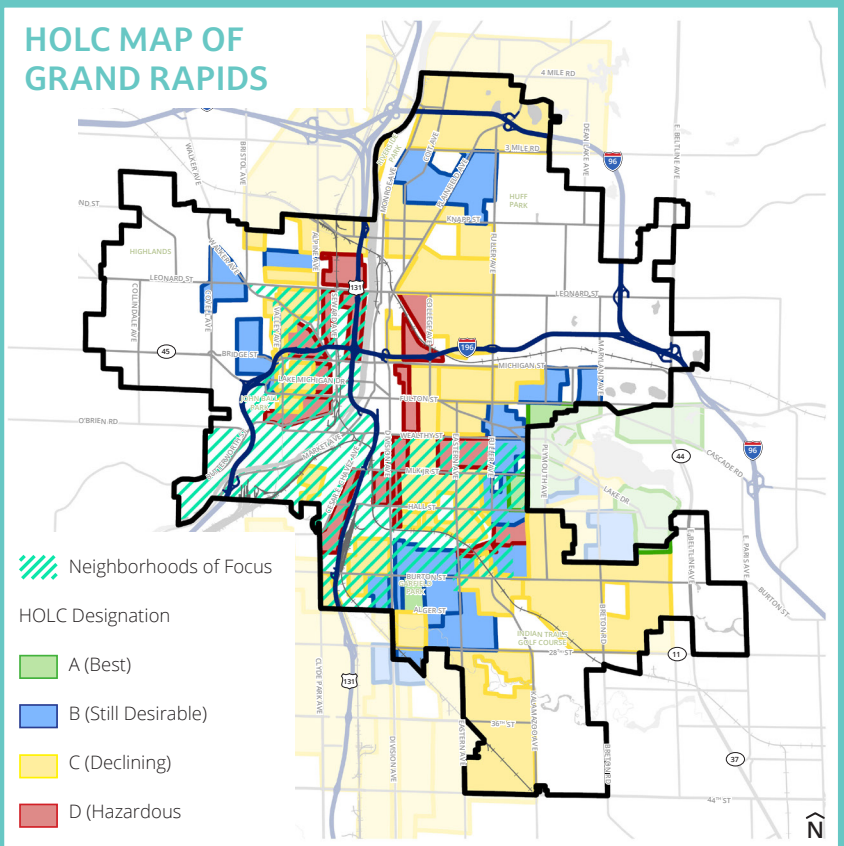
Across the United States, persistent economic and racial segregation means that children grow up in neighborhoods with vastly different opportunities and resources.

The causes of segregation are multifaceted, but government policies at the federal, state, and local levels have contributed in significant ways. In 1937, the Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) created risk maps for home financing for over 200 cities across the country. The risk maps created four categories, from A to D, into which neighborhoods were rated. Within Grand Rapids, six neighborhoods received A ratings, twenty received B ratings, twenty-eight received C ratings, and seven received D ratings. Residents of neighborhoods labeled C and D, or failing neighborhoods, were primarily Black and other immigrants and ethnic groups. The government agencies and mortgage lenders believed the presence of Black and immigrant homeowners would drive down property values in a neighborhood. The HOLC, in partnership with the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and private banks, used these risk maps to deny home loans in redlined communities, even when the applicant may have otherwise been eligible for the loan. The FHA continued to use neighborhood composition in drafting its loan underwriting guidelines until 1949.

The policies were upheld by local governments who used the maps to direct funds and resources such as public water and sewer to higher-rated neighborhoods, while exclusionary zoning policies were often drafted in a manner that reflected the redlining of previous generations. The biased homebuying market kept Grand Rapids' neighborhoods mostly segregated for decades. A 1964 report from the Grand Rapids Urban League found that 88% of the city's Black families lived within five census tracts of land in the city.

The legacy of these policies continues today and has resulted in large disparities in resources and services while constraining residential choices. Due to systemic and historic inequities, including redlining, residents in Neighborhoods of Focus (shown on the HOLC map of Grand Rapids) experience the most disparate outcomes in income, home ownership, and wealth accumulation compared to other Grand Rapids census tracts and the city as a whole.

Reversing the impacts of redlining is a focus of the City of Grand Rapids and the Grand Rapids Community Master Plan. Policies in the CMP can help to ensure that neighborhoods deliver a rich set of opportunities by tracking disparities, directing investments in neighborhoods, and identifying opportunities for community partnerships.



CLIMATE CHANGE

While the City of Grand Rapids has been a leader in environmental sustainability, the impacts of climate change are being felt in Grand Rapids. To avoid the worst impacts, it's necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and plan for known changes and increased extreme weather. The climate change crisis is one of the City's top concerns.

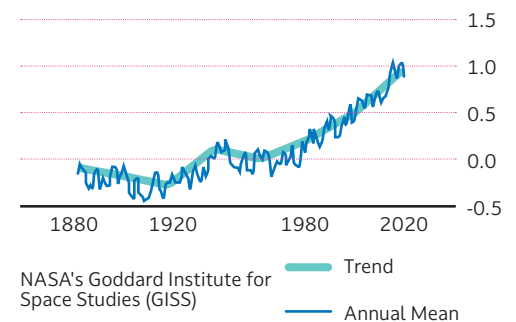
Climate change results in long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts may be natural, such as through variations in the solar cycle. But since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, mainly due to burning fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas. While some years have seen hotter or colder weather, the averaging of those changes over 20 to 30 years shows that the planet is warming.

The Great Lakes Integrated Sciences and Assessments (GLISA), in partnership with the City, created a summary of historic and projected changes in climate specific to Grand Rapids. This information is valuable in understanding what changes have already been experienced as well as the changes to still to come. Anticipated changes include increasing temperature, precipitation, and extreme weather events.

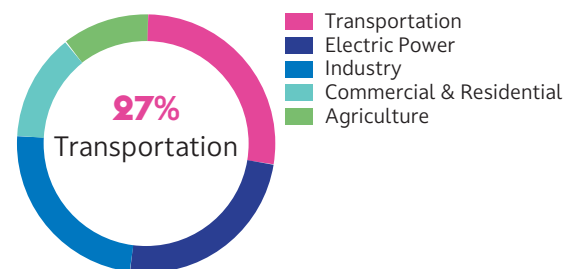
The City of Grand Rapids Office of Sustainability collaborated with the Planning Department to emphasize environmental justice and climate mitigation and adaptation in the Community Master Plan. Recommendations in the plan intentionally address:

- Affordable Housing:** Energy cost burden more often falls on low-income households due to substandard housing. Climate change will likely deepen this problem due to ongoing and projected increases in average and extreme temperatures. Increasing access to energy-efficient, affordable housing is a key climate justice solution.
- Transportation Equity:** Transportation is the number one source of carbon emissions in the United States. Transportation equity focuses on solutions that include equitable access for low-income and communities of color and move away from reliance on automotive vehicles. Solutions involve encouraging public transportation and forms of active mobility such as walking or biking.

Global Temperature Trend



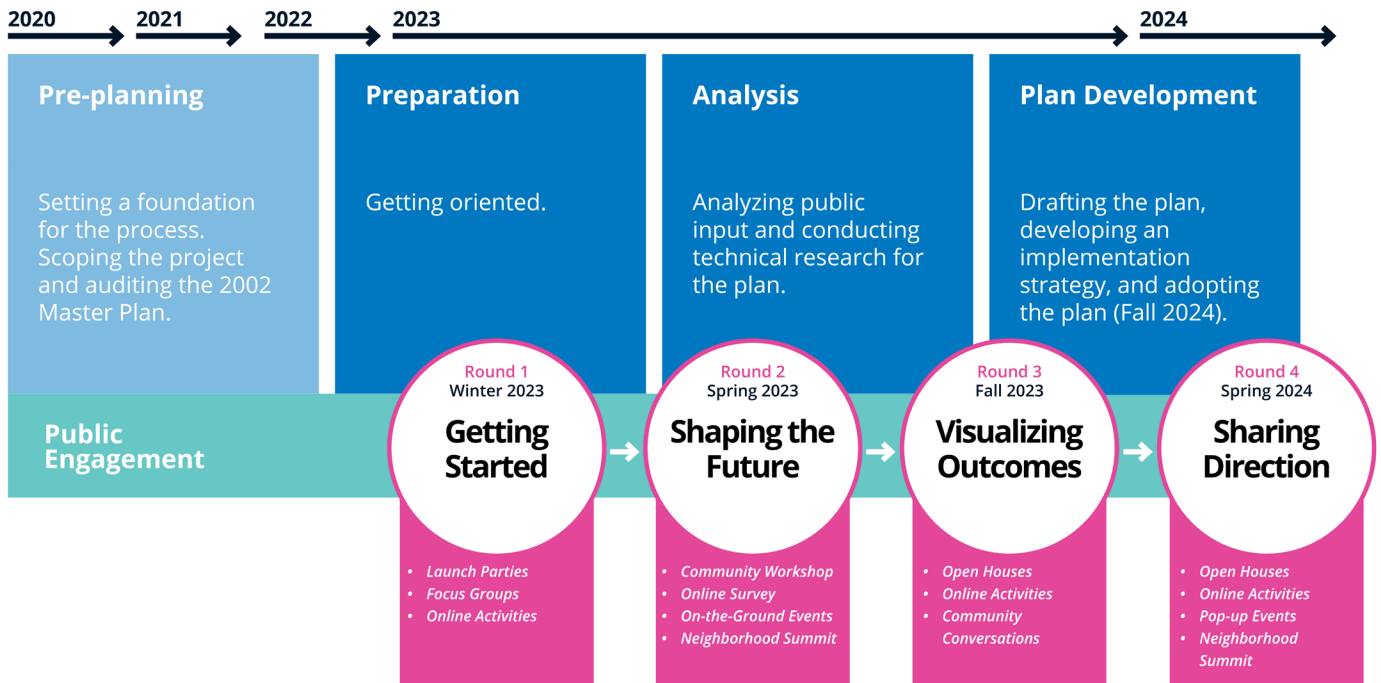
Total U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Economic Sector in 2020



U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

PROCESS

The planning process was shaped by data, existing conditions, and the experiences of people who live, work, and play in Grand Rapids.



COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

The planning team generated a community profile using data from the 2020 U.S. Decennial Census, the City of Grand Rapids, and other sources. The profile featured baseline information about existing conditions in Grand Rapids and was used to inform the planning process. The report covered demographic conditions and trends, the built environment, housing, employment, and prosperity. This data can be found throughout the plan chapters to support the recommendations. The full community profile is contained in the appendix.

COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

Those parts of the population that have historically been overlooked through traditional engagement approaches received special focus through a diverse team of Community Connectors. A range of community members served as Community Connectors for the planning process and were compensated for their work. Community Connectors were trusted voices in the community that helped expand the reach of engagement efforts. The group was comprised of diverse community leaders and activists representing non-profit organizations, community groups, and other organizations from across Grand Rapids. They provided facilitation and outreach support throughout the engagement process through small group meetings, community conversations, one-on-one interviews, and more. Snacks and meals were provided during the outreach events to remove barriers to participation. Their partnership created a more direct exchange of information with residents and strengthened the relationship between City departments and the community. The Community Connectors broadened participation in the process by doing engagement activities from each of the four rounds with their networks in their neighborhoods.

NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS

The City of Grand Rapids has more than 30 neighborhood organizations, many of which were involved in the Community Master Plan process in a variety of ways. Some Neighborhood Organizations were represented on the Steering Committee, while others served as Community Connectors. Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding allowed those organizations that did not serve as Community Connectors to host engagement meetings and community conversations in their neighborhoods. The Neighborhood Organizations did everything the Community Connectors did and more. Their efforts helped spread the word to their residents about the process and allowed the public to become more informed about the Community Master Plan.

FOCUS GROUPS

A series of focus groups were conducted supplemented the public engagement and generated more direct input on themes and topics important to the planning process. Focus groups were organized around topics such as career development, transportation, social services, housing, and more. Residents, professionals, and other experts in the topics participated in the discussions and provided critical insights.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The process included four rounds of community input opportunities that focused on engaging a diverse community. These events were intended to increase awareness of the process to promote open and transparent dialogue with a low barrier to participation. Community engagement was conducted concurrently with technical analysis on land use, economic conditions, and other topics. The engagement rounds moved from generative to responsive and each round of engagement built upon the insight gathered from the previous round.

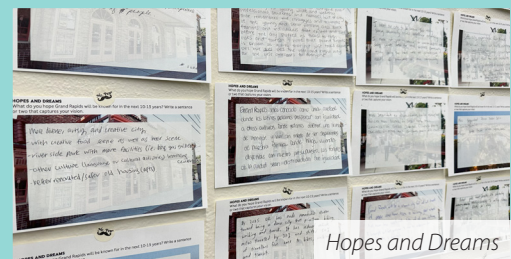
ROUND 1: WINTER 2023

The City hosted three Launch Parties, one in each ward, and an online engagement campaign to generate excitement about the process. The activities at these events gathered ideas about development and the future of the city to help inform the direction of the plan. Participants were asked to dream big and share their big ideas for the future of Grand Rapids. The events were widely promoted and open to anyone who cared about the future of Grand Rapids. The Launch Parties were designed to be fun and engaging for participants of all ages and backgrounds. The activities were replicated online for people who were unable to participate in person. To gain more participation, Community Connectors and Neighborhood Organizations conducted additional small workshops in their communities that mirrored the activities from the larger workshops. They also completed one-on-one interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the community's needs. Representatives from the City facilitated activities from the workshops in local high schools and college classes to generate input from students.

Activities

- Grand Rapids trivia
- Hopes and Dreams cards
- Small group discussions
- Comments on Area Specific Plan areas
- Future Housing Mapping

730+ participants
4,000+ pieces of input



ROUND 2: SUMMER 2023

The second round of engagement took a deeper look at three important topics that emerged from the first round of community engagement. A workshop was held with an interactive approach to the topics of

- Land Use Planning for Climate Mitigation and Adaptation;
- Land Use Planning for Environmental Justice, Health, and Equity; and
- the 15-Minute City: Land Use, Housing, Mobility.

Representatives from the planning team and the City attended the City of Grand Rapids Neighborhood Summit. They held one session on the 15-Minute City and another that combined the two land use planning topics. Participants in the workshop and at the Neighborhood Summit were also asked to provide feedback on the draft vision, values, and goals of the Community Master Plan, which were created using input gathered in the first round of engagement and additionally vetted by the Steering Committee. Community Connectors and Neighborhood Organizations involved their networks through Move and Talks, during which community members were invited to move through their neighborhood as a group and discuss and provide their feedback and ideas on topics such as housing, environmental justice, and health equity as they pertained to the neighborhood. City staff also engaged students at local high schools, and attended Parks and Recreation Department Summer Camps and other area summer camps to gather input from children and teens in the city.

DEFINED PLANNING TEAM


The Planning Team included City staff and consultants with expertise in land use, transportation, economic development, sustainability, and community engagement.



Community Walk-and-Talk



Public Meeting

 **1,800+** participants
2,500+ pieces of input



Creating Complete Neighborhoods



Creating Complete Neighborhoods



Community Walk-and-Talk

ROUND 3: FALL 2023


The third round of engagement focused on testing the goals and big ideas tested in the workshops that were developed using the insight provided by the community in the previous rounds of engagement. Three workshops were held, one in each ward, that asked participants to visualize outcomes of the plan and provide their feedback. The goal and one big idea from each chapter was presented and participants completed a corresponding activity. For example, the Great Neighborhoods idea was centered around housing, and the activity asked for participants' thoughts on where accessory dwelling units, duplexes, and quadplexes should be allowed in the city. The activities covered topics such as housing, economic development, and transportation. Each workshop opened with a special event such as a poetry performance, a community-led panel with speakers from a variety of community organizations, and national-level public speaker Shane Phillips, who addressed strategies for housing affordability and access. The Community Connectors and Neighborhood Organizations held Community Conversations in their communities, during which the display boards from the workshops were placed for review and participants held a discussion around a specific topic from the Community Master Plan. The Community Connectors and Neighborhood Organizations chose topics based on their importance to the community. Steering Committee members also held conversations to broaden the reach of the third round of engagement. City staff generated input from students and youth in the city by holding conversations in high schools and tabling at a local college event.



Public Meeting



Public Meeting



1,100+ participants
3,400+ pieces of input



Public Meeting



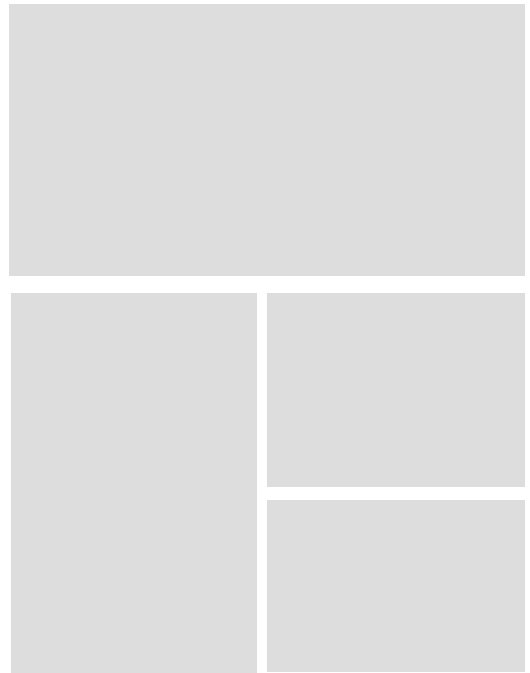
Poetry Performance



Public Meeting

ROUND 4: SPRING 2024

During the fourth round, one workshop was hosted in each of the three wards to share the draft recommendations for the plan chapters. The workshops began with an open-house-style viewing of the recommendations for each chapter of the plan. Participants reviewed the recommendations at their own pace through display boards with City staff and consultants available to answer questions. The second half of the workshop allowed participants to dive deeper into chapters of interest and the plan value threads through small group discussions, during which each small group focused on one chapter and the corresponding recommendations. The Community Connectors and Neighborhood Organizations hosted a roadshow of the display boards and hosted smaller discussions around chapter recommendations.



PLAN FRAMEWORK

The Community Master Plan includes a vision for the future, values important to the community, and goals for the community to achieve. The plan framework provides an intentional path forward for the City of Grand Rapids and its partners. The engagement and technical analysis informed the framework of the plan. The development of the plan framework moved from the broad to the specific and each step was presented and tested with the public during the engagement rounds.

VISION STATEMENT

The Vision is an expression of the community's future.

VALUE THREADS

Values reflect, at a high level, what the community cares about.



Culture



Equity



Safety



Sustainability



Vibrancy

GOAL AREAS

Desired outcomes expressed in simple terms.

1. Great Neighborhoods
2. Vital Business Districts
3. A Strong Economy
4. Balanced Mobility
5. Strong Development Character

OBJECTIVES

Strategic direction that organizes the recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Projects, policies, and programs to achieve desired outcomes.



COMMUNITY VISION STATEMENT






At the highest level—and therefore most general—the vision is an expression of a community’s future. It reflects the community’s values and sets the tone for more specific recommendations.

IN THE NEXT 20 YEARS,
Grand Rapids aspires to build a city of inclusion, where people in all neighborhoods have the opportunity to live in safe and affordable housing, to move throughout the city in a variety of ways, to earn a living wage through meaningful job choices, and to gather together in vibrant spaces that celebrate our unique cultures and histories.

COMMUNITY VALUE THREADS

Values reflect, at a high level, what the community cares about. The values are threaded throughout the plan content and recommendations and noted through symbols.

The community of Grand Rapids values:

-  **Culture:** Traditions and experiences that originate from one's background and lived experiences and can be shared and celebrated with others.
-  **Equity:** Where all residents have access to resources that allow for opportunity, influence, and positive life outcomes no matter their starting point.
-  **Safety:** Where all people are secure and protected in all communities no matter where they live or come from, or what they look like.
-  **Sustainability:** Balancing growth, environmental stewardship, and well-being in a way that fulfills current and ongoing needs and opportunities of future generations.
-  **Vibrancy:** A variety of amenities, including arts, culture, and recreation opportunities, that activate and contribute to the energy of the city year-round.

COMMUNITY GOAL AREAS

The goals are desired outcomes, expressed in simple terms. These goals also serve as the organizing elements of the plan. Each goal is a chapter with supporting text, recommendations, and information.

- 1. Great Neighborhoods:** Connected and diverse neighborhoods where residents can thrive. Grand Rapids neighborhoods will have access to housing, retail, open space, and more that meet the needs of residents in all phases of life.
- 2. Vital Business Districts:** A network of unique and diverse businesses in all neighborhoods. Vital business districts will provide a variety of products, services, amenities, and safe, walkable places that attract people.
- 3. A Strong Economy:** An economy that offers a prosperous quality of life. Grand Rapids economy will offer a range of employers and job choices so that everyone can access and earn a living wage.
- 4. Balanced Mobility:** A transportation network that is safe, reliable, and affordable. Grand Rapids will have mobility options that include a variety of ways to move about the city and beyond.
- 5. Development Character:** A strong sense of place through high quality design. New development will improve or support the existing fabric of each neighborhood.