

12.0 OPERATIONAL INITIATIVES

INTRODUCTION

In addition to the development opportunities identified in the previous chapters, several key operational initiatives that are imperative to the success of Downtown Omaha were also identified. These range from arts and sustainability initiatives to parking management and housing policy. A summary of these initiatives is provided on the following pages:

12.1 CULTURAL ARTS PLAN

The arts community – including those who make a living from all forms of the arts (painters, musicians, playwrights, authors, sculptors, etc.), those who run businesses that help support these artists (galleries, theaters, etc.), the audiences, collectors and fans who view, visit and attend events, as well as amateurs—is a key element of any major city or metro area. Often, this community aggregates around certain physical locations, buildings or neighborhoods – this could be a theater, a collection of galleries or night-clubs, or a single building turned into lofts. Within Omaha, there is an increasing focus of such activities and individuals within the Downtown Study Area. As such, these people and activities represent an enormous resource for the Downtown that should be encouraged, supported and cultivated.



A Cultural Arts Plan should include traditional as well as contemporary arts

The City should work with arts groups and individuals to strengthen and expand existing arts “clusters” – south of the Old Market around the Kaneko and Bemis Center, north of Cuming Street around the Hot Shops; in NoDo around FilmStreams and Saddle Creek records; and along Leavenworth Street where individuals are buying buildings to create work spaces. This work should build upon the nascent “cultural arts plan” that some members of the arts community have begun circulating, collecting and modifying ideas from other cities across North



Publicly funded Dangoes at the Hilton Omaha

America. Developing and refining a formal cultural arts plan for Downtown should be a key operational initiative to follow this master planning effort. It should look at not only the physical locations of different facilities, but also programmatic elements that can help support and expand the role of artists and the arts community within the downtown. This could range from the development of additional public and civic institutions oriented towards the arts – theaters, museums, etc.—to the support for existing non-profit entities and facilities—to the creation and organization of regular events that will support the arts



Pieces of First National Bank's world class bronze collection

community and attract increasingly diverse audiences to the downtown – arts fairs, music festivals, film festivals, etc.

Many communities require that 1% of any building built in the downtown be contributed to some form of public art. Some communities limit this requirement to public buildings, to buildings above a certain size or cost, or to buildings that receive

any form of public assistance. Omaha needs to craft such a program to best meet its own criteria, but any program should include a clear set of guidelines as to what constitutes public art, and an overarching plan for tying together the various arts project that will ensue. Additional ideas include annual public arts events or competitions, annual arts festivals that could draw crowds not unlike the College World Series does, using existing downtown facilities and resources and contributing similarly to the city's financial success and reputation.

Implementation:

- Develop a City-wide Cultural Arts Plan with a specific focus on Downtown Omaha

12.2 PARKING MANAGEMENT PLAN

While great downtowns are invariably pedestrian-oriented environments that support a wide range of mobility options, parking for automobiles is, nonetheless, a critical concern. Key to addressing this issue is to provide just enough parking within the downtown to meet the average daily demand, but very little more, to locate these spaces in a manner that is in keeping with the overall downtown plan, and to charge an appropriate fee for the use of these spaces.

Currently, downtown Omaha has an oversupply of parking, both in structures and surface lots. These spaces occupy unnecessarily prominent locations and are, for the most part, ineffectively managed and operated. A key goal over the upcoming years will be to gradually increase the efficiency of downtown parking operations, to replace surface lots with more effective uses, and to dramatically increase the effectiveness of current public parking operations.



Back-in angle parking is safer for streets with parking and bike lanes

The best way to address all of these goals is to devise a Downtown Parking Management Plan that will address the location, design, and operations of all public parking spaces within the downtown, including those located on-street. The overarching goal for this plan must be the effective deployment of what is a very expensive piece of public infrastructure. Quite simply, every parking space should be filled as often as possible. Empty spaces represent inefficiencies and potentially lost revenues.

District Parking Approach - People will willingly walk a certain distance between a parking facility and their destination. Depending on a number of factors, this distance could be as high as a quarter mile (approximately 1300 feet; three or four urban blocks in most cities). This factor must be taken into account when developing a parking plan for the downtown, which



should be divided into logical parking districts, with the goal of matching average daily parking supply and parking demand within each district. Within each district, all parking spaces must be considered, including on-street spaces as well as those within structures.

On-Street Parking - Within a typical downtown, hundreds, if not thousands of parking spaces can be found along the edges of streets. On-street parking serves multiple purposes: it helps meet parking demand, it helps create activity along the streets and sidewalks, it provides separation between sidewalks and moving vehicles, and it can help slow down traffic thereby increasing overall safety.

Commonly, on-street parking occurs in three forms: parallel parking, angled parking, and head-in parking. Within Downtown Omaha, every street should be evaluated for its capacity to provide one of these forms of on-street parking. Initial studies done during the first North Downtown planning process in 2004 indicated that a typical block in NoDo could accommodate well over 80 angled parking spaces if all four block faces were utilized. Spread out over a multi-block district, on-street parking could easily accommodate over 500 vehicles.

Operationally, on-street spaces should be metered and planned to provide short-term parking, generally ranging for time frames between 1 and 3 hours. The exact time should be determined by analyzing the uses found in adjacent buildings and the preponderance of nearby destinations. A retail street with multiple short-term uses such as restaurants could be metered for 1 or 2 hour time frames. An office block with regular visitors could be metered for 2 or 3 hours time frames. Only in a few situations should on-street spaces be metered for times longer



Parking kiosks on each block can replace meters and allow payment with cash, parking card or credit card

than three hours: locations that include only office or employment uses, with little day-time turnover and little demand for short-term usage. In locations where deliveries and/or pick-ups occur, spaces can be metered for as little as 5, 10 or 15 minutes.

All on-street spaces should be metered. The appropriate fees for usage should be established after significant study. One does not want to under-value parking spaces and lose potential revenues. Nor, however, does one want to over-value such spaces and induce people to seek other options. It is accepted practice to charge different rates for spaces at different times of the day or different days of the week. Downtowns often see a drop in demand outside of the standard work week (8:00 AM – 5:00 PM, M-F), and many meters drop in price outside these hours.

Demand Pricing - A key goal in devising a parking plan is to accurately match the price of a metered space (on-street or in a structure or lot) to the amount of money a typical user will willingly pay. This number will vary throughout the day, week and year, and is probably most easily addressed in parking structures that include human parking attendants. Increasingly sophisticated technology is being applied to these issues, however, all approaching the goal of adjusting the cost of parking spaces to match the demand for these spaces on a user by user basis.

Parking Structure Wayfinding - In recent years, the City of Omaha has invested significantly in the Downtown, including the construction of eight public parking structures. All were designed as stand-alone buildings with considerable visibility, so additional thought went into the architecture, materials and details of the buildings. Programmatically, however, all of these facilities should be considered as part of an overall parking “system” within the downtown. Visitors, in particular, often have little idea of where these structures are located and even regular users have difficulty determining how many spaces may be available in a structure or in finding out where the most convenient structure might be.

As part of a coordinated “park once” approach, all of the parking facilities within the downtown need to be organized into an overall system. Information about rates, vacancies, etc. should be prominently displayed using just-in-time sensors, and external signage throughout the downtown should make it easy to find the nearest structure and include relevant information as to rates, hours of operation, etc. Possibly, city-owned structures could be renamed based on their location or other identifying feature as opposed to the existing generic number one through eight, which means virtually nothing to most users.

Operations - A critique of parking within Downtown Omaha is

that it is not always convenient for the users. As a case in point, the hours of operations for garages are often limited, with no attendants available a key times of the evening and night. Across the nation, garages are moving to automated payment systems, in which people can either pay when they enter the garage, or use a credit-card machine to pay when they leave, at any time of night and day.

Implementation:

- Develop a Parking Management Plan for Downtown Omaha

12.3 DOWNTOWN SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

The subjects of sustainability and sustainable design were recurring issues of interest throughout the public process and particularly during and immediately after the five-day design charrette. People energetically supported the principle that Downtown Omaha should be a model of sustainable urbanism, and proffered a wide variety of ideas for how this might be accomplished.

While a full-fledged sustainability strategic plan is beyond the scope of this planning process, the key elements of such a plan are well known and deserve particular attention. Communities across North America and the world are all trying to address the need to simultaneously become more energy and resource efficient, more financially frugal, and to provide increasing services to ever more diverse audiences. The more successful examples begin with the fundamental elements of community sustainability and look to two critical goals: first, enhancing the inherent internal efficiency of addressing each individual element and, second, looking to optimize the interaction among different elements.



The commonly-addressed elements of a community sustainability plan include:

- Land Use & Community Form
- Climate
- Culture
- Economics
- Energy
- Environment
- Facilities
- Health
- Mobility
- Quality of Life
- Waste
- Water

A sustainability strategy for Downtown Omaha would address each of these issues individually, looking for ways to optimize their role within the Downtown, and would then look for synergies between elements. For example, it has been recognized that the downtown should provide a wide range of mobility options for people. At the same time, it has also been recognized that land uses within the Downtown should be mixed, as much as possible. However, mixing land uses also helps reduce the need for mobility in that people need not move around as much to accomplish a wide variety of tasks. And, the reduced need for mobility helps to reduce per-capita energy use within the Downtown.

The following describe some of the conceptual elements of a downtown sustainability strategy as they relate to each of the aforementioned elements.



The National Park Service Headquarters was one of Omaha's first LEED certified buildings.

Land Use & Community Form - Land uses within the downtown should be mixed as much as possible, and the “grain” of the mix should be as fine as possible. That is, different uses should be integrated with one another to the highest degree possible. At the same time, the overall community form of the downtown should reflect both the mix of uses and their integration, knitted together by a very cohesive street grid with lots of intersections and a wide variety of options for moving about within the downtown.

Climate - Cities, in general, and city centers in particular, have significant impacts on the climate, at several scales. The “urban heat island effect” has been widely studied, and it is not unusual for an urban center to be five to nine degrees warmer than a



Curb-side swales can be used in dense urban environments to increase stormwater absorption and add landscaping

nearby suburban or rural area. This temperature differential impacts the local micro-climate in multiple ways, not the least of which is that it causes heating, ventilating and air conditioning equipment to function less efficiently. A number of strategies are being proposed world-wide to address this issue: they include high-reflectivity roofing materials, green roofs, urban forestry, heat-recovery systems, and other low- and high-tech measures.



Green stormwater solutions can be incorporated into Downtown development projects.

Culture - It is accepted that sustainability incorporates environmental, economic and social elements. A truly sustainable city center has a place for the full diversity of residents and users, reflective of the larger metropolitan area as a whole. In contrast to an individual neighborhood, which almost always reflects the dominance of one or a few cultural, ethnic or economic cohorts, a sustainable downtown provides opportunities for all users. A traditional way this is accomplished is not by providing diversity everywhere, but by coordinating a wide range of individual enclaves into a cohesive whole. The classic downtown with its “Chinatown,” “Little Italy,” “Uptown”, “Jazz District,” “Steeltown” and collection of other ethnic and functional neighborhoods provides this level of social sustainability while, at the same time, facilitating internal coherence among a broad range of distinct ethnic, economic and demographic cultures.



Climate sensitive features like these sunshades can be a feature of high quality design projects.

Economics - Economic sustainability means that there is a degree of diversity and resilience in the economy of the Downtown. It is not overly dominated by a single industry or business but instead has a broad mixture of primary and secondary industries that mutually reinforce one another. In addition, the downtown provides a venue for startup businesses, particularly for entrepreneurs who would benefit by proximity and easy access to capital, mentors, and other human skill sets.

Energy - Because of their density and mix of uses, downtowns tend to use energy more efficiently than less urban environments in which users are dispersed. Nonetheless, significant opportunities exist to optimize the way energy is used within the downtown. There are opportunities to take advantage of economies of scale: district heating and cooling, cogeneration, and related

collaborative approaches to energy generation, transmission and use. Alternative, or renewable energy options should also be explored, particularly for isolated situations – for example, the roof of the City-owned parking garages could be used to hold a solar array; wind mills and turbines could be integrated with public art within key public areas of the downtown; etc.

Environment - Historically, downtowns have emphasized the human environment, often by significantly diminishing the natural environment. The best cities, however, recognize that there must be a symbiotic relationship between the built-up physical environment and the natural environment. Downtown Omaha still has significant amounts of open, undeveloped land within it. This open environment should be as well designed as the built-up physical environment, with emphasis on xeriscaping that uses native flora and designs that provide habitat for native species, where possible.

Facilities - In recent times, the term “sustainability” has often been synonymous with “green building” design. Because of the density of structures and the increased mix of uses within a downtown, structures have inherent opportunities to be more efficient and effective than their suburban counterparts. Nonetheless, every new and renovated structure within Downtown Omaha should be viewed as an opportunity to optimize green design and development. Logically, these structures should adhere to the principles and practices of the LEED green building approach, as presented by the US Green Building Council. Older buildings could be retrofitted over time, with an eye towards increasing energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions.

Health - The health of the people who live in and visit the Downtown is a key social aspect of sustainability. To the extent



Facilities like bike lockers encourage Downtown residents and commuters to make greener transportation choices

that the downtown is a comfortable, convenient and exciting place to walk, people will take advantage of this option, with its related health benefits. Biking is another form of renewable, effective and healthy exercise. As with walking, the downtown should support effective, safe and comfortable biking, including the ancillary elements associated with such a program – i.e. bike racks, signage, locker rooms and changing facilities.

Mobility - Downtown should be the Omaha metro region’s most efficient and effective multi-modal environment, providing residents, workers and visitors with myriad options for moving about. As noted, the plan should begin with a safe, comfortable and stimulating pedestrian environment. This may go beyond traditional streetscape measures to include weather protection designed into buildings – canopies, awnings, arcades, etc—and

climate controlled walkways – i.e. radiant heating coils to keep ice from forming. Particular attention must be paid to the quality of the street crossings within the downtown; the environment will not work for pedestrians if they cannot safely and easily cross streets.

The same attention should be paid to the quality of the downtown as an environment for biking. Again, non-conventional measures should be considered – “zip bike” rentals available to anyone looking to quickly get from one location to another; “bike box” road striping that gives priority to bicyclists at intersections; “free bike” giveaway programs to downtown residents and employers.

Downtown is one of the most effective environments for mass transit in Omaha; this service should be expanded with an eye on easy accessibility anywhere within the Downtown. One element of this could be the proposed streetcar system, which would not only create enhanced mobility within the Downtown, but would also create an effective link to the Medical Center complex in Midtown Omaha, another significant concentration of jobs and visitors.

Cars will remain a key mobility element within the downtown, but should not be allowed to dominate. Streets should be designed and configured to naturally reduce vehicle speeds, and every opportunity should be taken to level the playing field among the multiple mobility options. One of the allures of downtown is the ability to live without recourse to a personal car. Many cities across the United States now have “zip car” programs in which residents or workers can easily and conveniently rent a variety of vehicles for short periods of time.



Downtown offers play opportunities for young and old.

Quality of Life - Three of the fundamental principles behind the Downtown Omaha Plan are that residents and visitors to the downtown should have access to a full range of activities and choices; that Downtown should be a great place to live, work, play, and learn; and that those elements and activities that are unique to the Omaha metro region should be located downtown. Combined, these three principles suggest that the quality of life in Downtown Omaha should be the highest of any location within the metro area.

While quality of life is a subset of the socio-cultural aspects of sustainability, it is also a goal and an end unto itself. A person who chooses to live or work in Downtown Omaha should have access to as full a set of opportunities as anyone in the metro area. In addition to the typical services and activities – shopping, recreation, restaurants, etc.—those who live and work in the

downtown should have access to civic, cultural, artistic and entertainment activities unrivaled in the metro area. These also include a full range of educational options, including elementary, secondary and college level courses as well as life-long learning options. In short, the downtown should become a microcosm of the metro area as a whole, with the full range of life-style and quality of life options compressed into a dense and concentrated urban core.

Waste - Cities across the nation are aggressively trying to reduce the amount of material sent to landfills by diverting it to other options, including composting and recycling. Nationwide, the average city diverts about 35% of its waste, and the option to do this efficiently increase in a compact, dense mixed-use urban center. Omaha should examine the solid-waste characteristics of the downtown looking for opportunities to institute recycling measures and to streamline the efficiency and efficacy of collection and disposal.



The Omaha Public Library provides outdoor recycling bins.

Additional waste reduction options include organizing restaurants and food processing groups to collect used cooking oil, which can be cleaned and mixed to create bio-diesel, and food wastes which can be used for a communal composting facility. In addition to formal city-run recycling programs, the city can encourage and support the creation of drop-off or walk-in recycling centers (often associated with larger for-profit entities or dedicated non-profits) for easy-to-recycle items such as glass, plastics, paper, cardboard and aluminum.

Water - Across the world, the efficient use of water is becoming a critical concern. Even in environments that have substantial rainfall (forty or more inches per year), communities are focusing on enhancing the effective capturing, retention, purification and use of water. Substantial areas of downtown Omaha are impervious – buildings, hardscape, pavement and streets. Rainfall cannot penetrate these areas and must be diverted, collected and captured prior to any potential re-use. Many communities are instituting policies that call for green roofs on all urban buildings as a way to capture rainwater before it hits the ground. (Green roofs have the additional benefit of providing additional insulation effect, often reduce the solar absorption of buildings, and can counter the urban heat-island effect). Others are calling for the use of pervious pavements in low-traffic areas. Captured rainwater can often be used immediately within the buildings with green roofs, for process water or as greywater for flushing toilets and urinals. The innovative Banner Bank building in downtown Boise, ID, collects stormwater from a seven block area and uses it for all the grey-water systems within the building.

Implementation:

- Develop a Sustainability Strategy for Downtown Omaha

12.4 DOWNTOWN SIGNAGE

Just as a coherent approach to streetscape and the use of urban design guidelines can help create and enhance an over-arching character for Downtown Omaha as a whole, so too should an overall strategy be developed for signage within the downtown. A signage strategy, or wayfinding plan serves the very functional purpose of facilitating navigation throughout the downtown, making life easier for residents and regular users, as well as tourist and occasional visitors.

Omaha completed a Downtown wayfinding plan in 2007. The plan identified primary entrances and provides directions to popular destinations. Since the plan was drafted, attractions like the TD Ameritrade Park Omaha and the Kaneko have been located or opened downtown. The wayfinding plan should be updated as attractions are added.

Implementation:

- Review existing wayfinding plan and develop a complete and flexible signage strategy for Downtown Omaha

12.5 DOWNTOWN HOUSING STRATEGY

Downtown Omaha has witnessed significant growth in residential development in recent years, but there remains significant potential for additional development. As this potential comes to fruition, efforts must be made to insure that housing options within the study area are not balkanized into enclaves for the very well-to-do, with few moderate and market-rate options. There are a wide variety of programs and approaches that can be applied to help insure a range of housing options. These



Small lot, single family homes are an option for more affordable family housing on the periphery of Downtown

range from regulatory mandates such as inclusionary zoning, to financing incentives such as low-income housing tax credits, to bonus programs such as providing additional density to projects that include a range of housing options.

It is difficult to predict which of these approaches might be best applied to Downtown Omaha, but policies should be established to insure that future housing within the downtown is as diverse and representative as the population of the greater Omaha metro area. Housing policies for the downtown should address both the full range of price points as well as the range of consumers – student housing for undergraduates and graduates at Creighton University, rental options for recent graduates and young professionals, small-scale ownership options for first-time homebuyers, all the way to luxury urban condos and apartments for empty-nesters and mature professionals.



Contemporary infill townhomes

Price point issues should be considered in keeping with discussions of appropriate scales and densities for different neighborhoods and districts, and all should be ultimately formalized through the development of form-based codes to insure appropriate integration within the overall fabric of the downtown.

Implementation:

- Develop a Housing Strategy for Downtown Omaha

12.6 DESIGN COMPETITION FOR KEY PUBLIC SPACES

A key defining element of a good downtown environment is the manner in which public spaces are treated. With private open space a premium, public open spaces become a significant

factor in determining the viability and livability of an urban environment. Parks, plazas, squares, playgrounds and other open space facilities are critical aspects of a good urban setting. Equally important, if not more so, are the streets and rights-of-way which, by themselves, comprise the largest open space element within a city center.

In this respect, the streetscape can be seen as a framework that helps tie the downtown together. The dedicated open spaces become the key elements within the framework that create variety, bring utility, and ultimately add delight to urban living. At present, the current and potential open spaces within downtown Omaha provide areas of respite, but do not really attain their potential quality, variety and status. One way to address this issue and, at the same time, to help bring some attention to the downtown would be to establish a program of design competitions for key open public spaces throughout the downtown. The scale and nature of these could range from low-key, local efforts to help address some of the smaller spaces within the Downtown, all the way to well-publicized and well-funded international competitions to help stimulate ideas for and interest in some of the city's key public spaces. These could include re-thinking the role and design of the Gene Leahy Mall; developing a design for the proposed Grand Lawn linking Qwest Center Omaha to the Riverfront, enhancing the open spaces around TD Ameritrade Park Omaha; or devising ideas for the proposed Civic Square at the western side of Downtown.

Implementation:

- Develop a Process to hold Design Competitions for Key Public Spaces in Downtown Omaha

12.7 FORM BASED CODE FOR DOWNTOWN

As has been discussed, the 2.2 square mile study area for the Downtown Master Plan is extremely diverse and varied. No single type or scale of development describes the entire area. Instead, it is an integrated tapestry of uses, building types, scales, heights and densities, and these characteristics should be maintained and enhanced in the future. Wherever possible, future designs and development should build upon the historic and existing physical character of the surrounding sites and blocks. As a follow-up to the master plan, a form-based code should be devised that helps define the parameters for future designs and development and also helps insure compatibility between the existing urban fabric and future opportunities. A form-based code emphasizes that physical characteristics of new and future development as much, or more so, than the defined or potential uses of such development. In taking this approach, a form-based code holds out the opportunity that development will be seen as a long-term investment aimed at enhancing the physical and social character of the community as well as the financial returns for the developer or investors.

The outcome of an effective form-based code will be a clear sense of the downtown as a compilation of distinct neighborhoods, districts and corridors, with different physical scales, types of development, and types of architecture. The current diversity of scale and type found within the Study Area will be maintained and strengthened.

Implementation:

- Develop a Comprehensive Form Based Code for Downtown

