

## 4.0 VISIONING PROCESS

### INTRODUCTION

A key element of the planning process was the establishment of a consensus-driven Vision for the Study Area. This Vision, when combined with the Market and Real Estate Assessment, helped form the Strategic Principles necessary to guide the effort and was manifested in the Development Program that was followed during the design process. For the Downtown Omaha Master Plan, a thorough process for soliciting public input and establishing a consensus-driven vision was undertaken, and is highlighted on the following pages.

### 4.1 SPECIFIC INTERVIEWS

The public involvement process began with small group interviews with Steering Committee and Advisory Committee members. On February 10-12, 2009, five Steering Committee members and approximately 30 Advisory Group members took part. Each interview lasted one and a half hours and included the following questions:

1. What are your general impressions of Downtown Omaha/ North Downtown?
2. What do you feel are the problems and issues facing Downtown?
3. What specific uses, features, items, etc. are necessary for a successful downtown?
4. What specific uses, features, items, etc. are currently missing from Downtown Omaha?

5. Are there any specific uses, feature, items, etc., that would not be appropriate for Downtown Omaha?
6. What is your most important priority, goal, use, etc. for Downtown Omaha?
7. Are there references (projects, districts, uses) that you have seen in other cities that you think would be relevant for Downtown Omaha?
8. Is there anyone who is critical to the success of this effort who should be involved?

Each individual response varied and, depending on the group, conversations focused more or less on particular topics. Still, common themes emerged. Overall it was agreed that Downtown Omaha has many successful signature projects, but the spaces between the projects need work. The physical and psychological connections between projects need to be made with better pedestrian connections, fewer surface parking lots, and more two-way streets. The everyday areas – not the museums and concert venues – are in need of public and private investment. Neighborhood-scale improvements, small parks, maintained sidewalks, on-street service retail, and informal gathering spaces would do a lot to increase the level of activity downtown and could help dispel negative misconceptions of the area. Any major addition to Downtown should complement its unique culture, support its role as the region's employment center, sustain a diverse population and foster creative endeavors.



## 4.2 VISIONING WORKSHOPS

Following the Specific Interviews, two Visioning Workshops were held. On February 17, 2009, Steering Committee members, Advisory Group members, Elected Officials, and City Staff participated in the first Visioning Workshop. The 40 participants were given an overview of the downtown planning process, participated in a SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), performed a Geographic Mapping Exercise, and developed a Vision Statement.

The Public Visioning Workshop was held the evening of February 18, 2009. The agenda for this workshop was the same as the previous day's workshop. Turnout for this workshop was heavy, with over 300 participants in attendance. The following is a brief summary of the ideas gathered during the two Visioning Workshops.

- Downtown has many great, world-class arts and entertainment venues, but a better physical framework is needed to maximize its potential. The physical framework should be

based on maximizing accessibility, incorporating principles of sustainability, and encouraging a sense of community.

- The Old Market is a genuine, urban environment. Its energy and atmosphere is something to be valued and preserved.
- Activity centers and visitor attractions need better connections for cars, transit, bicycles, and pedestrians. Pedestrian and bicycle accessibility should take precedence. One-way streets cause confusion and limit convenient accessibility.
- Downtown Omaha's corporate headquarters and 30,000 daily employees are assets that should be capitalized upon.
- Adequate parking should be provided without wasting space or limiting the density needed to create a true urban environment.
- Actual and perceived crime and safety concerns limit downtown's potential.
- Every day, round-the-clock activity should be encouraged through the creation and programming of usable public parks and community gathering spaces.
- 16th Street is inefficient as a transit mall for bus passengers and MAT. Constant bus traffic along the street does not support new uses or redevelopment. A better solution for transit is needed throughout downtown.



*Images of the public Visioning Workshop*



- High standards for maintenance of public spaces and infrastructure would encourage additional use and investment.
- The Gene Leahy Mall needs to be renovated to create more usable space.
- Housing options should be broadened to attract a mix of incomes, lifestyles, and age groups.
- A cultural arts plan, public art, art institutions, galleries, and incubator display space can enliven downtown. The importance of art should also be reflected in the architecture of downtown.
- Service retail – grocery, drug store, etc. – is needed to make living downtown more convenient.
- A spirit of inclusivity should guide the provision of social services and facilities to help address concerns about homelessness and panhandling.



*Small groups listed ideas that were later voted on by all in attendance*

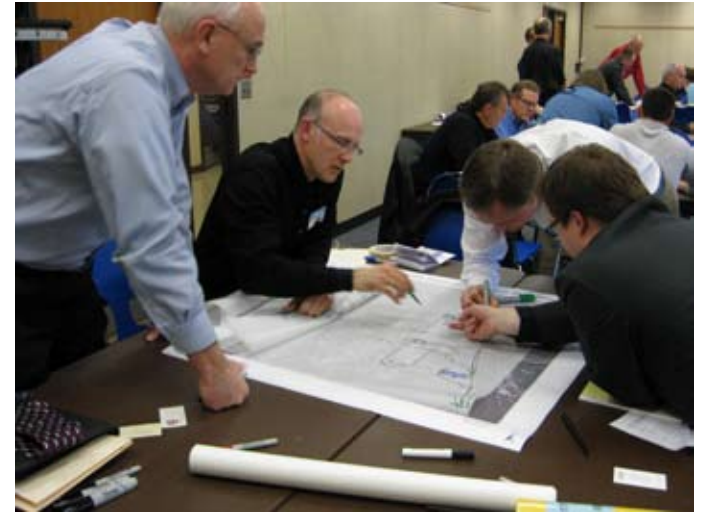
- Omaha has a history of successful public/private partnerships and a committed philanthropic community. Development and revitalization of downtown should be a joint public/private endeavor.

These common themes and the visioning statement exercise at the close of the workshop were the basis of what became the downtown plan's ten guiding principles.



### 4.3 DESIGN COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

On February 27, 2009, design professionals met to share their knowledge and expertise of Downtown. More than 50 professionals donated time to contribute to the Downtown Master Plan. Working in small groups, they developed overall concepts for the Study Area. Nearly all of the groups identified connectivity as a central feature to their design. Connectivity took many forms. Many concepts focused on internal connections between downtown activity centers and neighborhoods. Strengthening connections between the Riverfront and the rest of downtown was a principle focus, as was improving north/south access under the railroad viaduct and I-480 overpass. In some cases, these connections were made with small improvements – prominent gateways, pedestrian improvements, and wayfinding signage. In other cases, the connections required major interventions – adding a streetcar system, creating a series of urban parks stretching from the River to Midtown, or demolishing the I-480 overpass and replacing it with an at



*Interdisciplinary design teams allowed for a mix of ideas and expertise*



*Teams identified key activity centers and the connections between them*



*City staff provided detailed information to design teams*

grade urban boulevard or below grade expressway. New connections and linkages were intended to support the creation of additional activity centers in the form of a new artist district, a revitalized Gene Leahy Mall, and affordable housing on perimeter surface parking lots.

The connectivity and activity concepts recommended in the Design Professionals' Workshop were critical concepts discussed during all public involvement opportunities and have guided many of the design concepts included in the plan. Other specific site interventions may not ultimately have been included in plan, but the basic design components and principles are found through its recommendations.

#### 4.4 YOUNG PROFESSIONALS COUNCIL

The Omaha Chamber's Young Professionals Council created a downtown plan website ([www.omahadowntownplan.com](http://www.omahadowntownplan.com)) to stream public meetings and offer a discussion venue for sharing ideas. Comments on the website ranged from suggestions for a specific site to general comments on the safety and affordability of living downtown. Gathering spaces were common suggestions, specifically skate and dog parks, but also more conventional parks and recreation opportunities. Services for those living downtown were considered lacking. Bicycle routes for recreation, like along the River, and for commuting east/west were popular recommended improvements. Other suggestions included: public market space, stronger connections to North and South Omaha, boating facilities along the River, a cultural arts plan, and providing social services for downtown residents in need. The input gathered on the website was shared with the City and the design team to help refine concepts included in the master plan.



<http://www.omahadowntownplan.com>



*Young professionals discussing concerns at the public visioning workshop*

