

## TOWARDS AN EQUITY-DRIVEN GROWTH MODEL IN DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS

*GR Forward* brings together ideas from thousands of Grand Rapidians who collectively imagine a transformed waterfront, a thriving commercial and residential Downtown neighborhood, and a better transportation network for their City's future.

The robust public engagement process also revealed widespread concern regarding everyone's ability to participate in Downtown's historic and future prosperity. Put plainly, a broad swath of our community, including many from historically marginalized areas of the City, believe they're not welcome or don't belong in Downtown Grand Rapids.

*GR Forward* envisions a Downtown and Grand River corridor where all people and communities come together and thrive - regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, language, income, ability and other identity markers. This collaborative planning effort has sought out new and better solutions to ensure that ALL Grand Rapidians have the opportunity to participate and thrive in the "new" Grand Rapids. *GR Forward* also is informed by, and aspires to complement, the ongoing work community groups and networks are already doing to champion diversity, equity and inclusion issues.

The recommendations to set Downtown on the path of equity-driven growth are integrated throughout the strategy sets presented in *GR Forward's* six goal areas. More specifically, *GR Forward* recommends expanding access safe and efficient transportation, quality affordable housing, high quality public education and other important determinants of equity. This section compiles these recommendations into six categorical groups that include more than 20 action items, plus corollary measures and targets, intended to frame a collective, partner-driven implementation approach designed to yield significant results.

### Establish a regional equity framework and plan of action

The *GR Forward* process by design focused rigorously on improving Downtown Grand Rapids and a limited reach of the Grand River corridor. But the trends and patterns of development - housing, transportation, education, health and business - that create the conditions for people to flourish [or not] play out across a much broader geographic area. And so promoting equity requires regional thinking, solutions and collaborative action, just as any meaningful approach to grow and sustain the economy depends on a regional strategy.

>> Identify a coalition of racially and ethnically diverse partners to lead the development of a regional equity framework and plan of action that, among other things, defines:

- Shared understanding of key terms,
- baseline data,
- common rationale and goals to achieve equity,
- clear complementary roles for partners,
- new implementation tools and strategies, and
- measurable indicators to track progress.

>> Work with community assets and partners to continue raising awareness of racial and economic disparities and help strengthen efforts that build the case for equity, inclusion and justice as an urgent economic and social priority.

Measure: An informed and innovative regional framework and strategy to build equity and inclusion in greater Grand Rapids.

Target: Establish project steering committee in 2016. Produce widely accepted regional framework and plan of action by 2017.

### Cultivate an equity perspective in civic governance

Effective community engagement in public process builds relationships, trust and communication channels required to bring new perspectives to the table and breakdown silo-ed thinking. Civic Boards, Commissions, and other leadership bodies also provide a critical method for participating in public decision making, monetary policy, and other resolutions that impact the path forward for the Grand Rapids community. To support integration of an equity and inclusion lens in local decision-making, we must increase representation in formal and informal forums to tap the experience and wisdom of all within our community.

- » Appointing entities should seek to diversify Downtown and Grand River corridor governance and leadership decision-making bodies to ensure a representative cross-section of the Grand Rapids community is at the table when deliberating key issues.
- » Support training, networking activities, mentorship and other leadership development and recruitment efforts that support and engage emerging equity leaders.
- » Deploy proactive and targeted public engagement strategies that effectively bring traditionally marginalized communities

into program design and decision-making processes.

Measure: Demographic and psychographic statistics

Target: By 2019, achieve a proportionate representation of various City Commission appointed Boards, committees, and DGRI Alliances relative to city-wide demographic and psychographic profiles.

### Foster racially and ethnically diverse business ownership

While Downtown Grand Rapids currently enjoys a ground-floor occupancy rate above 90%, the percentage of minority-owned business is very low. Only 20 of 310 [6.5%] ground floor businesses in Downtown are currently owned by persons of color, according to a recent analysis by Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. Diversifying the mix of Downtown business ownership will make Downtown stronger.

- » Identify a coalition of partners and mentors to advance and expand minority business ownership in Downtown;
- » Identify a funding source[s] dedicated to help support minority-owned business success in Downtown;
- » Work with lending institutions to create a specialized lending program designed to

foster minority-owned business success in Downtown;

- » Modify incentive programs to create a more intentional and targeted approach to achieving greater racial equity; and
- » Support positive and effective youth development initiatives that provide opportunities for kids to explore their interests, build skills, and develop their ability.

Measure: Number of ground-floor businesses owned by racial and ethnic minorities in Downtown Grand Rapids

Target: By 2025, increase the number of minority- and locally-owned ground-floor businesses in Downtown Grand Rapids by 50 percent.



### **Achieve a more diverse Downtown workforce**

With nearly 40,000 private and public sector employees, Downtown excels as a regionally significant employment hub. However the percentage of white employees in Downtown is extremely high [90.2%] relative to the percentage of white residents that call Grand Rapids home [60.5%]. More intentional efforts are necessary to diversify the Downtown workforce and build greater equity in Downtown's prosperity.

- » Develop an outreach program and incentives that encourage Downtown employers to diversify the racial composition of the Downtown workforce, with a special emphasis on employing residents from Downtown's near-neighborhoods;
- » Work with community assets and partners to develop a campaign that encourages African American and Hispanic talent who left West Michigan to attend college out of state to return home;
- » Facilitate opportunities for local small businesses to find and retain employees/professionals of color;
- » Promote job growth and better Grand Rapids communities of color to overcome systemic barriers to living wage employment;
- » Create and expand successful workforce development and internship programs; and
- » Support smarter criminal justice initiatives proposed by the Grand Rapids City Commission's 2014 SAFE Task Force.

Measure: Racial and ethnic composition of the Downtown Grand Rapids workforce

Target: By 2025, triple the percentage of non-white employees in Downtown Grand Rapids.

### **Create a more welcoming and inclusive Downtown**

Downtown Grand Rapids currently boasts a thriving dining and entertainment scene and hosts more than 200 special events annually. However, many communities of color cite a distinct feeling of unwelcome and exclusion in Downtown. Specific efforts to expand the number of minority-owned businesses in Downtown should be coupled with intentional efforts to authentically recast Downtown as a welcoming place for all of the City's residents.

- » Support and produce an expanded set of cultural and recreational events that attract diverse audiences;
- » For existing events, integrate more inclusive programming and adopt more intentional marketing efforts designed to attract more communities of color;
- » Work with community assets and partners to integrate a front-line employee training curriculum on intercultural sensitivity, unintentional bias and microaggressive behaviors into successful programs such as the Certified Tourism Ambassadors; and
- » Assemble a task force charged with attracting an African-American Cultural Heritage Museum to Downtown Grand Rapids and re-establishing the African-American festival.

Measure: Surveyed perception Downtown Grand Rapids as welcoming and inclusive by Grand Rapids citizens.

Target: By 2025, at least 85% of all Grand Rapidians surveyed regard Downtown Grand Rapids as welcoming and inclusive.

### **Attract a diverse population to the Downtown neighborhood**

While Downtown Grand Rapids is relatively racially diverse among neighborhoods in Grand Rapids, protecting and building upon that diversity is a critical and interrelated driver for all of the racial equity ambitions included in GR Forward. To achieve that ambition, GR Forward proposes to:

- » Provide a diversity of housing types and options, at different price points, to appeal to a wide range of people and families;
- » Protect affordable housing stock, and create tools to expand that supply. Modify incentive programs to assist in achieving GR Forward's target for affordable housing;
- » Modify the zoning code to reduce the development costs for new housing to keep prices more attainable; and
- » Identify effective approaches and tools to lower barriers to home ownership in Downtown.

Measures: Housing inventory by price point and typology

Target: Reach a Downtown housing inventory of 10,000 units and achieve a 30% mix of affordable housing by 2025