WHAT’S NEXT FOR DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS?

AND THE RIVER CORRIDOR?
Welcome to Grand Opening: the Grand Rapids Forward Open House!
GRAND OPENING is a temporary installation featuring interactive exhibits that allow YOU to share your ideas to help shape the future of Grand Rapids.

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 planning process that invites the public to join Downtown Grand Rapids Inc [DGRI], the City of Grand Rapids, and their partners in envisioning the many ways in which we can leverage this momentum to make progress towards a holistic vision for Downtown and the Grand River.
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
Our focus is on DOWNTOWN: roughly between Wealthy Street and the N. Monroe area, Seward to Lafayette Streets
Our focus is on the RIVER: stretching from north to south across the City and a little beyond
In fact, GR Forward is really many plans in one. In addition to the Downtown and the River, GR FORWARD includes work on local schools with Grand Rapids Public Schools.
We’ve been at work since the spring, collecting data and reaching out to residents, business owners, employees and local leaders.
We launched GRFORWARD.COM in June and set up a Facebook page, Instagram and Twitter accounts.
We’ve also been at events to ask you about your big ideas – we’ve learned a lot already.
Now is our chance to share with you some of what we’ve learned
First, how did we get here? Let’s quickly start at the beginning. Grand Rapids was settled to capitalize on the River
The river, and later, railroads, spurred economic growth
Grand Rapids: “the furniture city”

The River was essential to early industry. Lumber provided jobs in over 40 sawmills and 50 furniture companies in the early 1900s.
Furniture, finished lumber, harnesses, leather goods, flour, grain, cloth and carpet among other manufacturers found a home in Grand Rapids
Grand Rapids Brewing Co.

Annual Capacity: 250,000 Barrels
this helped to create a bustling downtown
A downtown with a lot of retail (including 4 department stores)…
...and the place to hold major events
But as much as the river brought growth, it presents challenges…
...challenges that remain today.
In 1927, a plan was completed for the next 50 years to widen streets and improve the street cars – notice the new parks and streets along the river
But how we live changed and people and jobs started leaving the City. “Urban Renewal” in the late 1950s provided a means to address the creeping blight found in downtown. Most of what is in this photo was demolished in the 1960s.
Parking replaced buildings until development occurred.
Urban renewal created the foundation for the convention center, medical mile and the government center.
In 1993 the Voices and Visions plan was created for downtown. This plan set the tone for much of the investment that has occurred since.
In 2011, Green Grand Rapids sets an agenda for a greener, healthier City. GR Forward builds upon this work.
Due to thoughtful planning and investment, downtown today is a very different place.
New development sits along side historic buildings
Grand Rapids is a center for education and medical institutions (eds and meds)
…and for arts and culture
The City’s focus on streetcars is again renewed with progressive investments in new transit.
We also have a growing bike culture to design for
Nearby, there are historic and attractive neighborhoods.
But also new housing investment downtown
It's not just about housing, there's a growing recognition that job growth will come from new businesses and local leaders are trying to encourage them here.
Despite the positive change, there are visible signs of vacancy and empty storefronts.
What do we fill the available space with?
We also have a legacy of really wide streets that serve to fragment downtown…
...along with our highways
The reality is, major roads, highways and other factors have created not one downtown, but many smaller districts.
The result is this collection of districts, each with its own personality and challenges to address:

- **MEDICAL MILE** - Landlocked or a continued driver of downtown development?
- **WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE DOWNTOWN CORE?**
- **ARENA DISTRICT** - New development from growth or redistribution of existing uses?
This plan is intended to build on prior work but also address the new challenges and opportunities the City faces.

Today, we think there are a few key questions to address:
1. HOW DO WE MAXIMIZE OUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET?
THIS IS YOUR RIVER!
Grand Rapids Whitewater has already recognized the value in transforming the River for recreational use. Our job is to think about the river’s edges and work with Whitewater to re-think the River in the City.
This is the Grand River as we know it today.
This is what it really is – a larger swathe that formed from a glacier – it occupies the low-lying areas in the City. We’ve simply channelized it to enable the development of the City.
We’re ignoring not only how the River functions, but also its role in the City.

“WAKE UP AND REALIZE THERE IS A NATURAL ASSET IN DOWNTOWN.”

“THERE’S A NATURAL AMENITY HERE THAT’S HIDDEN”
IT IS ABOUT INFRASTRUCTURE, HOW THE CITY MEETS THE RIVER AND HOW RESIDENTS ACCESS THE RIVER.
Today, how we experience the River is defined by its edges. Flood walls in some locations create hard edges that limit River access.
In other cases, there are some green spaces along the River that could be redesigned to encourage more interaction and access.
BUT WE ALSO HAVE TO THINK ABOUT STORMWATER: THE CITY HAS ALREADY REDUCED COMBINED SEWER OVERFLOW BY 98%

WE NEED TO TREAT AN ADDITIONAL 70 MILLION GALLONS OF STORMWATER... AND THERE MAY BE OPPORTUNITIES TO TREAT EVEN MORE
Other cities are exploring innovative solutions to managing stormwater that also provide river amenities.
This is what’s called a terraced bioswale – it helps to clean water and provide a riverfront amenity.
It can look something like this.
IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE WATER. IT IS HOW WE FIND OPPORTUNITIES ON THE LAND THAT IS NEXT TO THE RIVER
Grand Rapids has made strides toward providing public access along the River but there remains a legacy of industrial use. Almost 40% of riverfront use is industrial.
There aren’t that many vacant sites along the River that could be re-purposed for river access. What exists is shown in purple and focused downtown. We have to make the most of the opportunities we have.
BUT EVEN IF YOU CAN ACCESS THE RIVER, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO THERE?
Here is how other cities are making use of riverfront land
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It’s important to think about the programs we want and align them to where they fit – here are just a few examples and their relative size:

- **White Water**
  - Fishing
    - Wilmington, Delaware
  - Kayaking
    - Wichita, Kansas
  - Swimming
    - Barton Springs Pool, Austin

- **Agriculture**
  - Farmers Market
    - Plainfield Avenue, Grand Rapids
  - Community Garden
    - The Treehouse
  - Urban Farming
    - City Lights, Grand Rapids

- **Events**
  - Movie Screening
  - Art Installation
    - Lights in the Night
  - Music Festival

- **Play**
  - Volleyball
  - Rock Climbing
  - Open Space
IN DOWNTOWN…

HOW DO WE ACHIEVE CRITICAL MASS?
Between 2000 and 2010, the downtown population grew by 15% and this doesn’t count the new housing built in the last few years.
Since 1980, downtown has experienced a lot of investment.
but we need to grow a lot more. why?

- MORE PEOPLE MEANS WE CAN SUPPORT MORE RETAIL
- MORE DEVELOPMENT PROVIDES MONEY TO IMPROVE OUR STREETS AND PUBLIC SPACES
- WE WANT PEOPLE TO BE CONFIDENT THAT DOWNTOWN IS MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION – CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO INVEST HERE
Many have said they’d like more services downtown – services like:

>> breakfast / lunch places that are open on the weekends
>> multiple mini-markets
>> CVS / Walgreens urban format model (includes fresh food)
>> neighborhood restaurants with neighborhood price points
>> dry cleaners / laundries spread throughout and open on weekends
>> public space for residents and visitors

so how do we get these things? we need more people. downtowns around the country demonstrate that with about 10,000 households downtown, these services are possible.
Today there are 5,000 people downtown. You can see from this map that they are concentrated in a few locations.
according to our economist, the downtown could support approximately 2,000 new housing units over the next 5 years. Units like:

- Rental & For-Sale Lofts/Apartments
- For-Sale Townhouses/Live-Work
- For-Sale Urban Houses

sounds like a lot right?
EVEN WITH 2,000 NEW UNITS, DOWNTOWN WILL HAVE ABOUT 9,000 RESIDENTS...HOW DO WE ACCELERATE GROWTH?
WE ALSO NEED TO FOCUS ON BUSINESS ATTRACTION AND JOB CREATION
The downtown is home to a greater concentration (46%) of small to mid-size companies (between 5 and 250 employees) than the metro area (37%)
Of those companies where offices are their primary work space, only 16% are located downtown.

Why does this matter? Most of the office use is outside of the city and a lot of the creative professional companies are not in downtown.
It will take 28 quarters (7 years) to fully absorb Grand Rapids’ existing downtown office space if the quarterly absorption rate over the last three years continues.

Why all the vacancy? A lot of the existing space is small, fragmented and not suitable for many businesses.
34% of tech start-ups will need a mix of office, research and fabrication space as they grow.

But there is not a lot of inexpensive, suitable space for small start-up companies. Can they be a source of new real estate demand downtown?
So where could new housing and new jobs be located?

Today, almost half of downtown is parking & institutional use.
Despite office vacancies, there’s not a lot of vacant property to develop.
3. HOW CAN WE ATTRACT TALENT?
DOWNTOWN IS A PRODUCT: TO COMPETE, PLACEMAKING IS ESSENTIAL
This is Paley Park in NYC. It’s the kind of space that attracts people and nearby investment. Notice the emphasis on engaging people with water.
THIS MEANS FOCUSING ON CREATING STREETS AND PUBLIC SPACES THAT ARE COMFORTABLE AND WELCOMING FOR EVERYONE
Sometimes downtown is visibly vacant which sends negative messages to residents, visitors and potential businesses.
Many have already told us they’d like more festivals and events
What about more winter programming?
What about crime? Overall, crime downtown accounts for 9% of the City’s total and has declined since 2009.
Another aspect of creating a great place relates to the natural environment. We have a limited tree canopy downtown.
A healthy tree canopy creates these kinds of attractive streets
And what about parks?

In downtown Grand Rapids, there are approximately 6.4 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, based on an estimated population of 5,000 residents.

For comparison, the median for the 100 largest cities is 12.4 acres per 1,000 residents. We’ll need to plan for new open spaces going forward.
4. HOW DO WE IMPROVE CONNECTIVITY?

...WITHIN DOWNTOWN AND TO THE RIVER
“BALANCED STREETS” ARE BRINGING ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO DOWNTOWNS ACROSS THE COUNTRY
Today, a lot of downtown’s area is dedicated to streets, highways and parking.
The opportunity is to make downtown more walkable which, as other cities have seen, reduces traffic.
“Walkability” or what encourages people to walk is closely related to street activity. Do the streets feel active and safe? Streets like this one, with active storefronts and trees encourage walking.
From our analysis, these are the “active” streets downtown – they have open storefronts and street amenities.
In other cases, there are streets lined with empty storefronts, parking lots / ramps, fences and blank walls. We call these inactive frontages.
From our analysis, these are the “inactive” streets downtown – streets with blank walls, parking lots / ramps or vacant properties.
And what about parking?
This map shows all of the existing parking downtown. It's 171 acres of land.
Our study shows that there are over 20,000 spaces available to the public - I.E., spaces that are not dedicated for a hotel or private use.

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<td>ON-STREET</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>1,800</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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During peak times, the average utilization is 65%. This means that 35% of spaces are not used during peak times downtown.

For on-street parking, the utilization is high on the weekends because the spaces are not enforced.
WHAT ABOUT ACCESS TO AND ALONG THE RIVER? TRAILS ARE AN IMPORTANT TRANSPORTATION ASSET.
There is potential to link into a regional and national trail system that already exists
But currently we are missing about 9 miles of trails along the river that would connect to this larger trail system.
Where a river trail does exist, it has different characteristics. This provides good access to the river.
Here, we have a trail but it's really narrow – it's hard to fit both walking and bicycling.
There are places where the trail simply ends...
...and where there is no current riverfront access
It's not just about a trail but how neighborhoods access the river. This map represents some potential connections using either existing roads or abandoned rail lines. The River should be a true amenity for all Grand Rapidians.
So what do you think? GR Forward is so important to the City’s future and we need your help
This is your checklist of activities, the more you tell us, the better this strategy will be and the more impact it will have. Have a question? Ask anyone with a GR Forward shirt on.
THANK YOU!