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CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS AGENDA ACTION REQUEST

DATE: December 8, 2015

TO: Gregory A. Sundstrom, City Manager

COMMITTEE: Committee of the Whole
LIAISON: Gregory A. Sundstrom, City Manager

FROM: Suzanne M. Schulz, AICP 
Managing Director of Design and Development

SUBJECT: **Adoption of the GR Forward Plan as an Amendment to the 2002 Grand Rapids Master Plan**

The full GR Forward plan is available for review here: <http://downtowngr.org/our-work/projects/gr-forward>.

GR Forward is a community plan and investment strategy that envisions the future of Downtown and the Grand River – two of the city and region’s strongest assets. Facilitated by Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. (DGRI), the City of Grand Rapids and Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS), GR Forward is meant to be a roadmap to guide change and direct investment in the coming years. With a focus on Downtown, the Grand River and improving public schools through efforts to reimagine the Grand Rapids Public Schools Central Campus and establish a new Museum School, GR Forward encompasses three planning efforts in one.

BACKGROUND

GR Forward launched in April of 2014 with the goal of creating a community-driven plan fueled by a robust public outreach initiative. The outreach process broadened the reach of GR Forward by deploying innovative methods for inviting the public into the process including community surveys, focus groups, neighborhood meetings, an active online presence, public forums and an open house that repurposed a vacant storefront for two months. The process and engagement were overseen and enhanced by four steering committees comprised of 145 citizen members. In total, more than 360 events, involving over 4,400 Grand Rapidians were held during the GR Forward process.

VISION, GOALS AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Towards an Equity Driven Growth Model

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 are not welcome or do not belong in Downtown Grand Rapids.

To combat this, *GR Forward* identifies six broad categories that include more than 20 action items intended to frame a collective, partner-driven implementation approach designed to ensure that ALL Grand Rapidians have the opportunity to participate and thrive in the "new" Grand Rapids. The six categories are:

- Establish a regional equity framework and plan of action
- Cultivate an equity perspective in civic governance
- Foster racially and ethnically diverse business ownership
- Achieve a more diverse Downtown workforce
- Create a more welcoming and inclusive Downtown
- Attract a diverse population to the Downtown neighborhood

The recommendations toward creating an equity driven growth model are in addition to the six general goal areas outlined in *GR Forward*. Those six goals are detailed below.

1. *Restore The River As The Draw & Create A Connected And Equitable River Corridor*

The Grand River is the game-changer for Grand Rapids that can help to attract talent and elevate the City as a unique destination, a catalyst for development and an amenity for the region. To be successful, Downtown and the River must be accessible and welcoming to all Grand Rapidians. Recommendations to accomplish this include:

- Integrating art, education, infrastructure and ecology
- Reinforcing the Grand Rapids whitewater initiative
- Establishing Grand Rapids as the hub in a regional trail system with universal access along the river on both the east and west sides
- Enhancing neighborhood access to the river
- Creating an outdoor adventure city

2. *Create A True Downtown Neighborhood That Is Home To A Diverse Population*

Throughout the *GR Forward* process, Grand Rapidians indicated the desire to have "more" Downtown –more retail, more services and more activity. These amenities require more people living within the City's core. Housing is a driver to build more value Downtown and more demand for the services that people want. While welcoming new neighbors, we must continue improving services for existing residents and ensure that Downtown remains accessible and affordable to a range of incomes. Recommendations to accomplish this include:

- Leveraging development opportunities to hit "critical mass"
- Supporting initiatives that improve downtown living for existing residents & attract new residents downtown
- Preserving and expanding housing opportunities
- Concentrating retail and closing the retail services gap
- Requiring energy efficiency, green building practices, and universal design principles in projects with local subsidy

3. Implement A 21st Century Mobility Strategy

The future growth of Downtown will increasingly depend on a multi-modal transportation system that is safe, convenient and affordable to all Grand Rapidians. This will be achieved by leveraging Downtown's existing transportation assets and providing additional options for employees, residents, and visitors to get around. The end result will be a Downtown where people can choose to drive, but are not required to. Recommendations to accomplish this include:

- Providing a stress-free pedestrian experience for all ages and abilities
- Establishing Mobile GR
- Completing the networks in and out of downtown
- Getting connected and utilizing technology to make getting around easier
- Putting Grand Rapids 'on the map'

4. Expand Job Opportunities & Ensure Continued Vitality Of The Local Economy

Today there are a variety of organizations and initiatives dedicated to fostering the next generation of businesses and helping local residents attain quality jobs. In the future, their efforts to expand job opportunities and to grow the local economy will depend on four related factors: Space for business growth at all scales; recruitment and retention of talent; additional marketing to reposition Grand Rapids in a new class of cities and; expanding programs and services designed to link residents with job opportunities. These efforts must take place while Grand Rapids continues to evolve its downtown as an excellent place to live, work and enjoy. Recommendations to accomplish this include:

- Promoting inclusion and equal participation in the local economy
- Attracting talent and link job seekers with local opportunities
- Creating and preserving space for job creation and economic growth
- "Brand Rapids"

5. Reinvest In Public Space, Culture & Inclusive Programming

Successful downtowns, those that attract investment and jobs, are quickly adapting to meet today's opportunities. There are more people living, and excited to live in Downtown Grand Rapids than in almost a century. At the same time, businesses are competing for talent with cities across the country. A key factor in supporting both residential and job growth is the quality of the place. Downtown Grand Rapids needs to provide a unique experience that cannot be found regionally or even in other cities. Recommendations to accomplish this include:

- Expanding arts and cultural events and temporary programming to further activate the public realm year-round
- Raising the profile of downtown parks and public spaces
- Expressing downtown Grand Rapids' character and identity through public realm improvements
- Continuing to ensure the safety and cleanliness of Downtown Grand Rapids

6. Attract Families, Talent, And Job Providers With High Quality Public Schools

Attracting and retaining a diverse population that includes families from all socio-economic backgrounds is vital to achieving both resident and job growth Downtown. This begins with

strategic investment in our city's schools, the expansion of successful Pre K-12 programs, and the implementation of new and dynamic programs that can provide exceptional learning opportunities. Recommendations to accomplish this include:

- Increasing investment in and expansion of theme schools and specialized programs to retain and attract students and parents and meet the needs of a diverse student and city population
- Building partnerships with Grand Rapids institutions to develop a locally-rooted workforce
- Ensuring high quality environments that enrich the educational experience, elevate community interaction, and create safe routes to school

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

The same collaborative spirit that shaped the initial outreach for GR Forward also underpinned the public review process. Starting with the release of the draft plan on July 2, 2015, more than 50 events and presentations were scheduled with key stakeholders to review the content in GR Forward and solicit feedback to improve the plan. This included a fourth round of neighborhood meetings, more than 30 meetings with organizational and community leaders, a second Open House staged at DGRI, and a variety of media appearances. Copies of the draft plan were also posted at all Grand Rapids public libraries, City Hall, the Development Center and MadCap Coffee, and were available online at the DGRI, City of Grand Rapids, and GR Forward websites.

The Planning Commission reviewed the draft document on July 23, 2015 and voted in support of forwarding the plan to the City Commission for distribution to surrounding jurisdictions, utilities, and other interested parties for review and comment. On August 11, 2015, the plan was accepted by the City Commission for review and comment, and the plan was distributed as required.

The Michigan Planning Enabling Act requires a 42 day public review period for a Master Plan amendment. However, given the community interest in the process and the desire to provide input, the public review period for GR Forward was extended to 73 days (ending October 23, 2015) and generated more than 750 comments. All comments were reviewed by staff and the project team. Of the comments received, 194 were identified as actionable and resulted in edits to the draft plan. The majority of actionable comments related to diversity, inclusion and equity, housing affordability, the Grand River and general formatting. The full inventory of public comment is [available for review on the DGRI website](#).

After the expiration of the required public comment period, the Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. Board of Advisors, the Downtown Development Authority and the Monroe North Tax Increment Finance Authority all voted unanimously to approve GR Forward and forward to the City Commission for adoption. Following this, the Planning Commission held a public hearing on November 12, 2015 and also voted unanimously in support of forwarding the plan to the City Commission for adoption as part of the City's Master Plan.

The next and final step is action by the City Commission on GR Forward. The City Commission may: 1) approve the plan, 2) reject the plan, or 3) modify the plan. If the City Commission rejects