

2.2 SUPPORT INITIATIVES THAT IMPROVE DOWNTOWN LIVING FOR EXISTING RESIDENTS & ATTRACT NEW DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS

Downtown Grand Rapids's most valuable asset is its people. As the Downtown population grows steadily and residents are turning districts and areas into neighborhoods, local leadership is tasked with ensuring that civic infrastructure, programs, and services are improving in step with this evolution. The following strategies should be considered to continue cultivating growth and encourage Downtown residents to put down roots.

FOSTER CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY TIES DOWNTOWN

The numbers of people who participated in the GR Forward process in various ways speak for themselves: Grand Rapidians are eager for opportunities to be a part of the future of Downtown Grand Rapids. Community members who participated in the process also spoke for themselves: at the public open house, public forums, and other engagement events, the planning team regularly heard individuals voice the need for continued community engagement and input beyond the horizon of the planning process itself. City leaders are encouraged to create regular and structural opportunities for the community to be a part of shaping the future of Downtown and the Grand River.



>> Support efforts to establish a Downtown residents council

Many Grand Rapids neighborhoods have formalized civic groups to establish formal representation within city-level dialogues and leadership structure among neighborhood residents. Efforts recently begun to assemble a Downtown residents council should be supported in order to create more opportunities for community building and social interaction among Downtown residents, many of whom are living in disconnected pockets of the Downtown area; and establish a venue for community dialogue about change Downtown. Among the roles the council may decide to take on, it may consider ways of welcoming new residents, creating a communications infrastructure to facilitate information sharing specific to Downtown among residents, and ensuring that the views of Downtown residents are being represented in major decisions by Downtown leadership.


>> Educate residents about ways to be engaged in discussions around change Downtown

Outside of a comprehensive planning process, how will Downtown residents be able to continue taking part in guiding change Downtown?

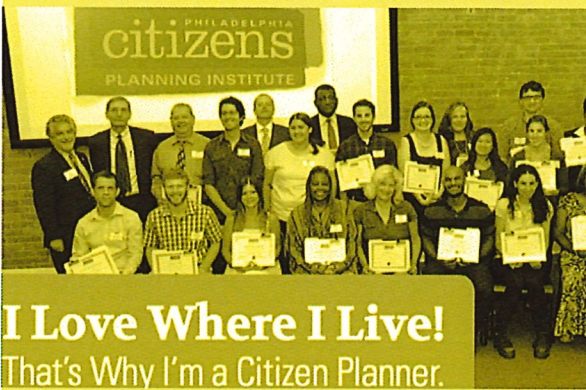
- > Once established, the regular meetings of a Downtown residents council would act as appropriate venues for the City and Downtown leadership to engage the community in opportunities for input in decisions and priorities when appropriate.
- > Though some long-time residents may be familiar with channels of civic engagement, Downtown's growing base of new residents will need some orientation. Grand Rapidsians care deeply about the future of their City and form online discussion boards around development, transportation and green space among other topics. The opportunity is to spread this knowledge further and empower others across the City to better understand, and engage in, local planning and design issues. One example of this kind of initiative is Philadelphia's Citizen's Planning Institute [CPI], the education and outreach arm of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission. CPI offers courses and events designed to inform civic-minded community members about planning principles and municipal procedures around development and City decision making, including how to engage in opportunities for public input. Other cities pursue this idea outside of City government relying instead

“Having lived in Heritage Hill for 27 years and loving the “neighborhood.” I would love to see the same “community” environment shared with Downtown residents.”

- Public forum participant



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on local non-profits and development agencies. The City, DGRI and their partners should consider tapping into local expertise to develop a program focused on citizenship education. More informed and engaged citizens would benefit Downtown and communities across the City as well. As with the Citizen's Planning Institute, accommodations must be made to ensure the broadest participation possible across incomes and neighborhoods. CPI tracks participation in their programs in order to identify and address gaps in their services.