



GOAL 5

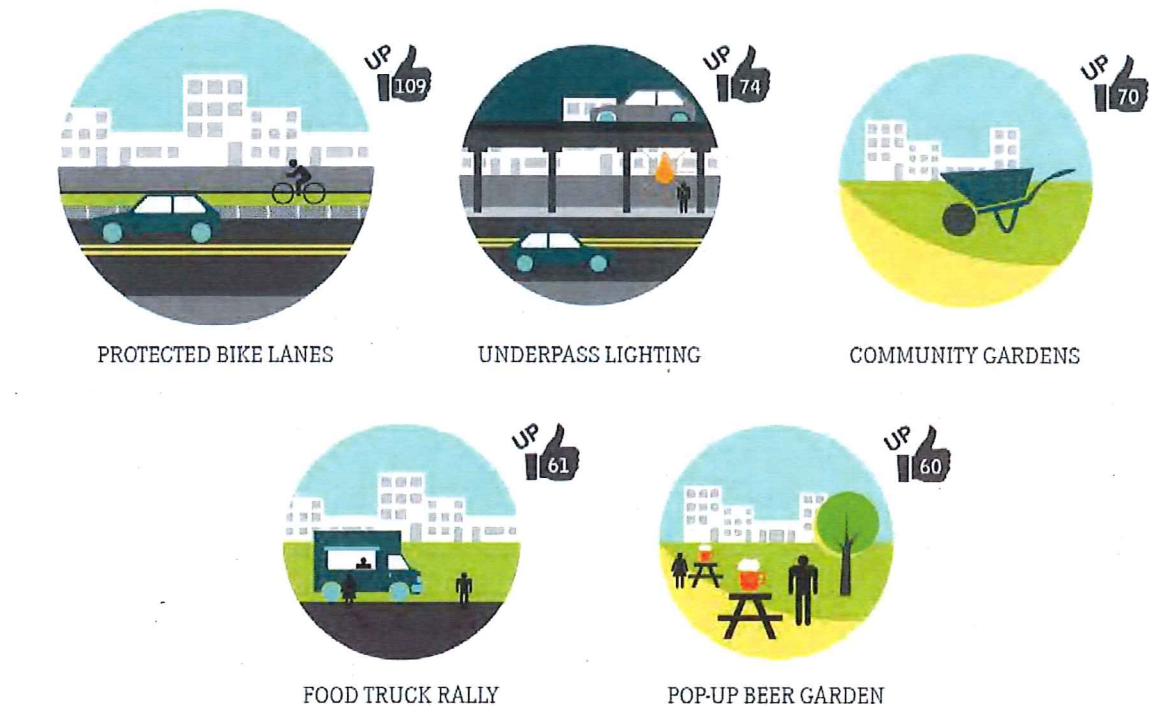
**REINVEST IN PUBLIC  
SPACE, CULTURE  
& INCLUSIVE  
PROGRAMMING**

## WHY THIS MATTERS

Downtowns across the country function differently than they did even a few decades ago. Successful downtowns, those that grace the pages of “best of” lists and 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 recent memory. 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 can’t be found regionally or even in other cities.

The experience of Downtown is defined by the quality, character and amenities provided on Downtown streets, in Downtown parks, within destinations like GRAM or the Arena and through events and programming that bring people together.

The foundation of creating this kind of Downtown experience is taking care of the basics—clean, safe, and well managed public spaces and streets. There are mixed feelings about safety Downtown depending on who is talking. For many less familiar with urban areas, the issues of panhandling, trash, graffiti and news reports that highlight crime in the area help to form strong negative perceptions about Downtown. Recognizing that perception can be reality to many, DGRI launched the Downtown Ambassador Program in 2013. The Ambassadors are visible on the street, provide services to local businesses and residents, and



**FIG 5.1:** “Thumbs up” activity results. Four of the top five priorities from the “thumbs up” exercise at the public open house are related to public realm elements and programming.

support safety Downtown. To date they’ve helped to remove 211 instances of graffiti, provided over 4,000 safety escorts and been in contact with over 1,400 businesses. Even prior to the launch of this program, crime in Downtown Grand Rapids dropped 29% between 2009 and 2013—a rate of reduction greater than that of the City as a whole. To further this trend, other actions including improved lighting, clean-ups and effective snow removal can help to greatly improve the perception and experience of Downtown.

The most effective tool to changing perceptions, however, is more activity. More people on the streets, more businesses and more programming provide what is frequently referred to as “eyes on the street”—a key factor in improving safety in other successful downtowns. The challenge is that much of Downtown’s built environment does not actively support street activity. 63% of Downtown streets are lined with “inactive uses” [blank walls, parking lots or empty space] that can make a street feel unsafe. This discourages walking and does not provide an attractive



“Instead of a subterranean entrance to Government Center complex, install a “Spanish Steps” style walkway to a new entrance/connection Center between City Hall and the County building and access to Calder Plaza. Existing lower lobby could be partially retained behind the steps and current elevators can be used to continue to provide handicap access to the upper level.”

- Online map comment

The Grand Rapidians shared hundreds of great ideas about public spaces through the online collaborative map. This one is a spoiler for what's included in the coming pages.

space to enjoy. In contrast, streets lined with trees and storefronts are inviting to customers and residents alike. Today, the Downtown tree canopy is 5% compared to the city-wide goal of 40%. A map illustrating trees in and around Downtown [Fig. 5.19] makes the point clear - the Downtown boundaries are clearly visible simply from the lack of street trees alone.

Coupled with the quality and character of Downtown streets is the role of parks in bringing people together. Currently, Downtown lacks sufficient open space, with only 6.4 acres of parks per 1,000 residents. With residential growth, this number will further decline. For comparison, the median for the 100 largest cities is 12.4 acres per 1,000 residents. Improvements on the Grand River can make a significant difference by providing new active and passive

recreation on, and within, the Grand River. But as Downtown grows, additional parks will be needed to provide space that brings together residents and/or visitors. These parks can act as vibrant public spaces for growing Downtown neighborhoods, help to strengthen connections within Downtown and provide ecological benefits. But one of the key needs is to re-think the Downtown parks that exist today. Grand Rapidians have strong opinions about parks Downtown and have contributed multiple suggestions for ways in which to activate Vandenberg Plaza and Heartside Park, among others.

A near term opportunity is to ramp up Downtown programming. ArtPrize, Laughfest, Movies in the Park and many other programs

and events already transform Downtown into a local, regional and national destination at specific times of the year. A full slate of major events, year round, as well as continuous smaller events like parklets and other temporary “pop-up” spaces can provide spaces that people want to use. In fact, participants in the GR Forward Open House prioritized programming such as food truck rallies, pop-up beer gardens, outdoor dining and parklets to help activate Downtown streets. In expanding a calendar of events, it is essential that programming be inclusive by both seeking to attract a full cross section of individuals and families from across the region, and, by marketing to communities of color. As the vision for GR Forward states, Downtown must be welcoming to all Grand Rapidians.



FIG 5.2: Open space access statistics



## 5.1 EXPAND ARTS AND CULTURAL EVENTS AND TEMPORARY PROGRAMMING TO FURTHER ACTIVATE THE PUBLIC REALM YEAR-ROUND

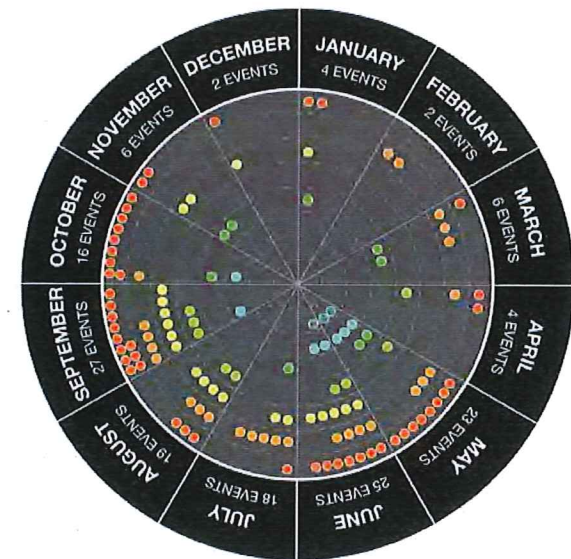
As part of the Downtown residents survey, participants were asked to rate a number of aspects of their community. One of two aspects tied for the top rating among them was “Availability of arts and culture destinations and programming.” Without discounting the value and importance of Downtown Grand Rapids’s many significant arts and cultural institutions, an important part of this is events and temporary programming. Towards that end, Grand Rapidians offered some creative outside-the-box ideas for events programming Downtown, such as tractor pulls, dragon boat races, igloos in winter, and a “bacon fest” during GR Forward outreach and engagement events. Clearly, the increased activation of Downtown’s parks and public realm with events and

temporary programming, such as Movies in the Park at Ah-Nab-Awen Park, ArtPrize, parklets, and many more, has ramped up interest in these types of activities and there is additional demand for more.

### DESIGN AND PROGRAM PUBLIC SPACES TO ACCOMMODATE WINTER ACTIVITIES

Part of the challenge is ensuring that Downtown Grand Rapids feels as active during the winter months as it does during the rest of the year. Events are an important way of encouraging foot traffic Downtown to sustain businesses through the winter, not to mention boosting morale and fostering community when everyone has had enough of the cold, wind, and snow.

DGRI has made efforts to expand festive winter programming and activities Downtown through a range of initiatives, including ice skating at Rosa Parks Circle, which welcomed over 35,000 skaters during the 2013-2104 season;



- ACTIVE (47)
- ARTS/PERFORMANCE (26)
- CELEBRATION (23)
- FOOD & DRINK (10)
- MARCH/PARADE (9)
- COMMUNITY/CEREMONY (7)
- TRADE SHOW (4)

FIG 5.3: Downtown events by time and month [source: City of Grand Rapids Office of Special Events]



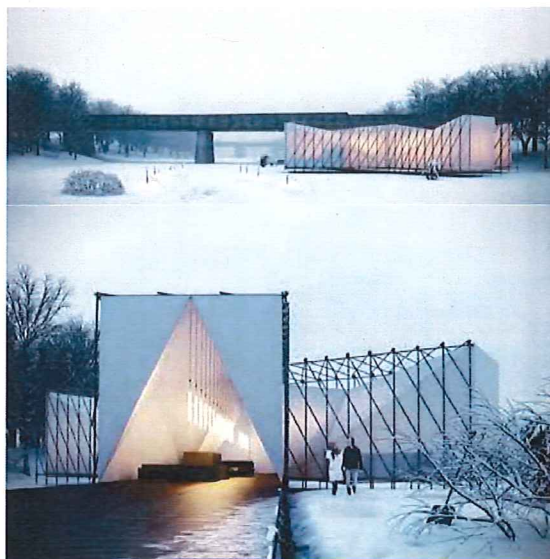
Big ideas for Downtown events at movies in the park and Grand Rapids Festival of the Arts; DGRI's Valent-ICE installations.



hanging over 84,000 holiday lights throughout the Downtown area; the Window Wonderland Competition, which engaged Kendall College of Art and Design students in designing storefront displays; the “Valent-ICE installations” of custom ice carvings outside of businesses leading up to Valentine’s Day; and others. That said, plotting the frequency of Downtown public events throughout the calendar year [Fig 5.3] reveals that there is still work to be done in filling the gaps to activate Downtown with events and programming through the most challenging months.

Recommendations put forth through the GR Forward process include accommodating seasonal programming for winter activities along the Grand River and in Heartside Park, which will bring more energy and foot traffic to the Downtown area. Complementing these activities—and rounding out winter activities in the near term before these types of capital improvements are fully implemented—there is room for additional winter events and programming.

>> The winter version of food trucks—featuring concept menus and collaborations between Downtown businesses—may look a little different than they do in warmer months, but the novelty in and of itself could prove to be a draw. Temporary restaurants specifically tied to river locations have generated a buzz in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and a similar idea could bring a buzz to Downtown Grand Rapids and the Grand River through the winter months.



#### RAW: ALMOND POP-UP WINTER DINING

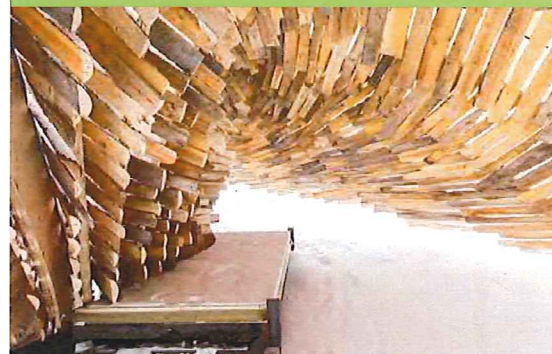
RAW: Almond, the “first ever outdoor dining restaurant on a frozen body of water,” has reinvented the experience annually in Winnipeg, Manitoba since 2013. Pictured is the winning entry of the 2015 design-build competition, by UK architects OS31, which specializes in lightweight and adaptable architecture.

>> How can Downtown’s public spaces be temporarily reconfigured to invite use and provide comfortable utilization of Grand Rapids’s public spaces during the winter months? Keeping warm by staying active is a worthwhile approach, but if you’re just wanting to relax and stay warm while socializing, how can public realm amenities accommodate breaks between shopping, enjoying the outdoors after dinner, or enjoying the setting of



#### WARMING HUTS

Since 2010, The Forks Renewal Corporation has invited artists, designers, and architects to submit ideas through a design-build competition for temporary structures intended to draw folks outside during the winter months, when temperatures commonly drop to 30 or 40 degrees below zero in Winnipeg. Several of the structures are built each year, clustered along the Red River Mutual Trail. Pictured [above] are Patkau Architecture’s 2011 ice skating shelters and [below] “the Hybrid Hut,” a 2015 entry by Rojkind Arquitectos





Downtown Grand Rapids when it would be too cold outside to do so otherwise? The idea is to winterize our sidewalks by learning from other cities and creating a range of amenities that provide outdoor comfort even in winter months.

With the wealth of innovative ideas being generated among the design and entrepreneurial community in Downtown Grand Rapids, one might expect that this crowd might have some innovative ideas about how to beat the cold in winter while also activating the public realm through the winter months. What better way to engage the community through the winter months than to host a collaborative design-build competition resulting in the installation of site-specific winter retreats and programmatic features, accompanied by a week long festival during which the community experiences each of the temporary installations and votes for their favorite winter destination? The competition could also invite entries from across the globe, creating the opportunity for spreading awareness of the climate for design innovation in Grand Rapids beyond the region.

## LEVERAGE THE OPPORTUNITY OF DOWNTOWN EVENTS

Downtown events are essential in creating a great place and level of activity that compel residents to live and visitors to hang out Downtown. They are also a great opportunity to introduce potential residents to the lifestyle, cultural vibrancy, and entertainment Downtown Grand Rapids has to offer. Part of leveraging the opportunity is maximizing marketing and promotional tools to make the most out of all the hard work that goes into organizing events Downtown:

>> DGRI already makes use of social media tools to spread the word about things going on in the Downtown area, but there may be additional strategies that can help boost awareness and attendance of events. Running a real-time interactive competition or creative crowd-sourcing event-within-an-event with a visual presence at the event itself would ideally prompt attendees to respond to social media prompts, boosting visibility of the event among networks of participants. For example, having a “caption that photo” or “guess the number of

*“During ArtPrize businesses were closed by 7pm, including the public museum. This was a missed opportunity.”*

*- Online map comment*

bottle caps in the truck bed” contest could help bring attendees to a specific location where marketing materials promoting Downtown living and amenities are stationed could boost participation and social media activity while bringing more visibility to additional Downtown marketing materials.

>> It’s often easy for some to lose promotional eblasts among the piles of marketing and sales emails, especially around the holidays when Downtown event marketing is often in full swing. Grand Rapidians could be given the option to opt in to a text alert subscription service to stay in the loop about upcoming events Downtown.

>> Partner with local educational institutions to ensure that event details are reaching the local student population through school email lists.



## KENSINGTON KINETIC SCULPTURE DERBY

Since 2007, the annual Kensington Kinetic Sculpture Derby has invited entrants to parade their wild and crazy custom modifications of bikes and other wheeled and pedaled self-powered transportation machines in a wacky “race” through neighborhood streets in one of Philadelphia’s hipster enclaves. Reaching the finish line [a goal secondary to that of creating a totally off-the-wall kinetic sculpture] is usually preceded by a major bloop moment as participants try to navigate their rides across a

treacherous mud pit, which, as any cyclist would know, is pretty darn near impossible on two wheels. The Derby, organized by the New Kensington Community Development Corporation [NKCDC] as a part of the Trenton Avenue Arts festival in East Kensington, brings together thousands of bike enthusiasts, local artists, residents, and visitors, increases exposure of Philadelphia’s creative community, and promotes local bike culture.

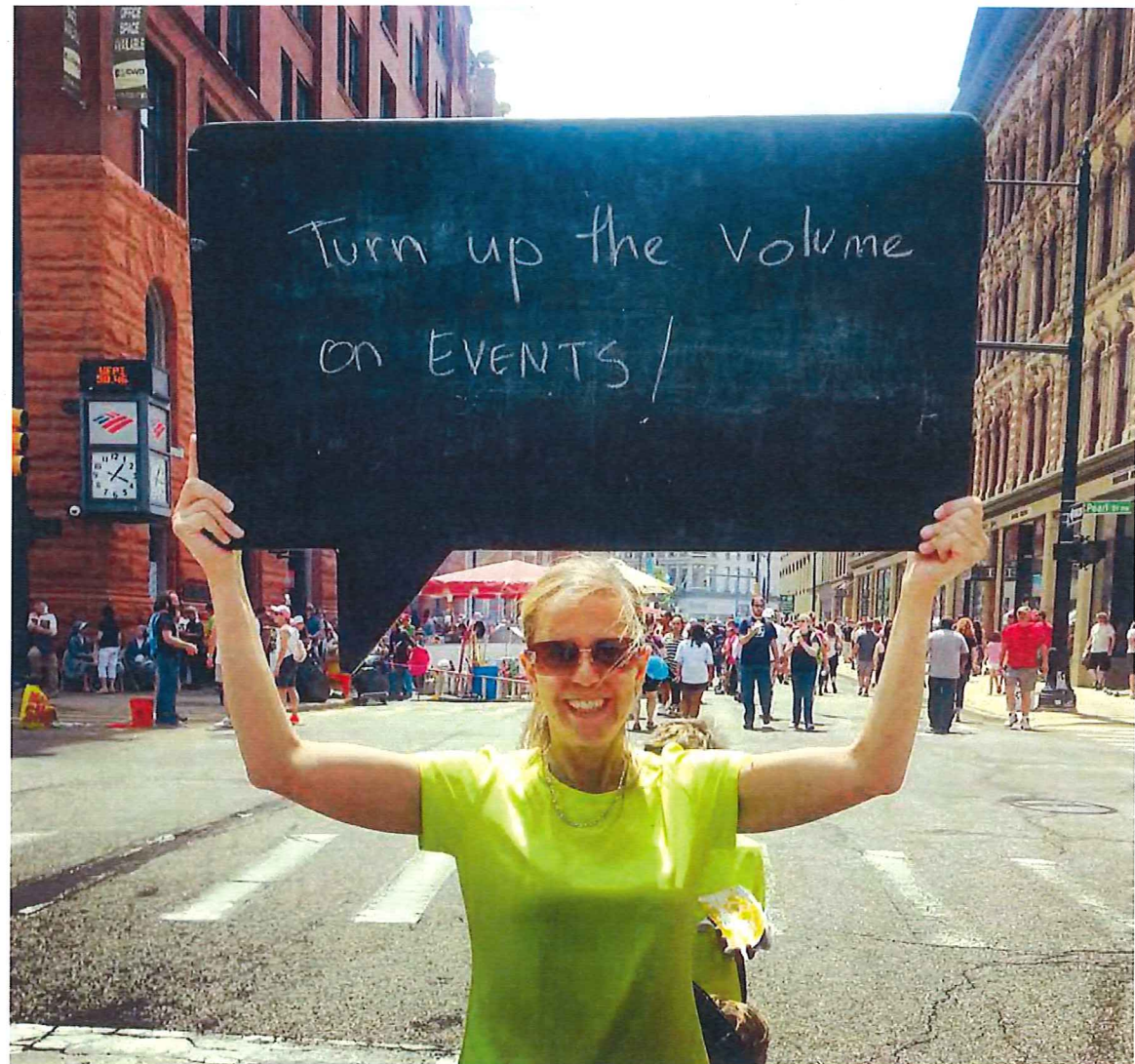


>> Ensure that events are directly marketed to communities of color. All should feel welcome to participate in Downtown events.

A second important aspect of leveraging the opportunity of events Downtown is ensuring that those who attend events are able to experience first-hand all that Downtown has to offer. Specifically, local businesses should be encouraged to stay open, whether or not that means extending their hours, during major events. Well in advance of a major event, organizers should make a coordinated outreach effort to businesses within walking distance [and potentially beyond, depending on the type of event] to inform them of the hours and benefits of staying open during the event.

### BUILD UPON LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

Consider establishing a Performing Arts District to help promote Downtown arts assets including the Avenue for the Arts, UICA, Ladies Literary Club, Civic Theater, Spectrum Theater, Dog Story Theater and St. Cecilia Music Center. Branded as a year-round entertainment destination, it could help establish Grand Rapids as an alternative to Detroit, Toronto or Chicago. If established, the District would require a name, banners, signage and lighting to help create a sense of place. Marketing for the district should be coupled with the museums [GRAM, Grand Rapids Children Museum, Ford Presidential Museum and VanAndel Public Museum] as well as the Arena District and could be done in partnership with Experience Grand Rapids. The opportunity



is to assist the member organizations to plan year-round programming that inspires visitors to stay overnight for 2 or more events. As the

District evolves, it could consider creating pop-up museum space, arts studios and other venues that promote local live music.



## 5.2 RAISE THE PROFILE OF DOWNTOWN PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACES

At 6.4 acres of parks per 1,000 residents, Downtown currently falls short of standards for the amount of parks and public spaces. In fact, more than 10 times as much area is dedicated to transportation [including parking] than open space. With continued growth Downtown, the need for more parks and public spaces will only grow. Downtown needs new open spaces to serve as gathering spaces and amenities for residents and employees.

But it is not just the amount of parks and open space that matters but the quality. Existing

### OPEN SPACE STRATEGY

-  RIVER TRAIL
-  HEALTH LOOP
-  NEW PARK
-  IMPROVED PARK
-  OUTDOOR ENTERTAINMENT
-  LINEAR PARK
-  RIVER ISLANDS
-  RIVER DREDGE / BOAT ACCESS

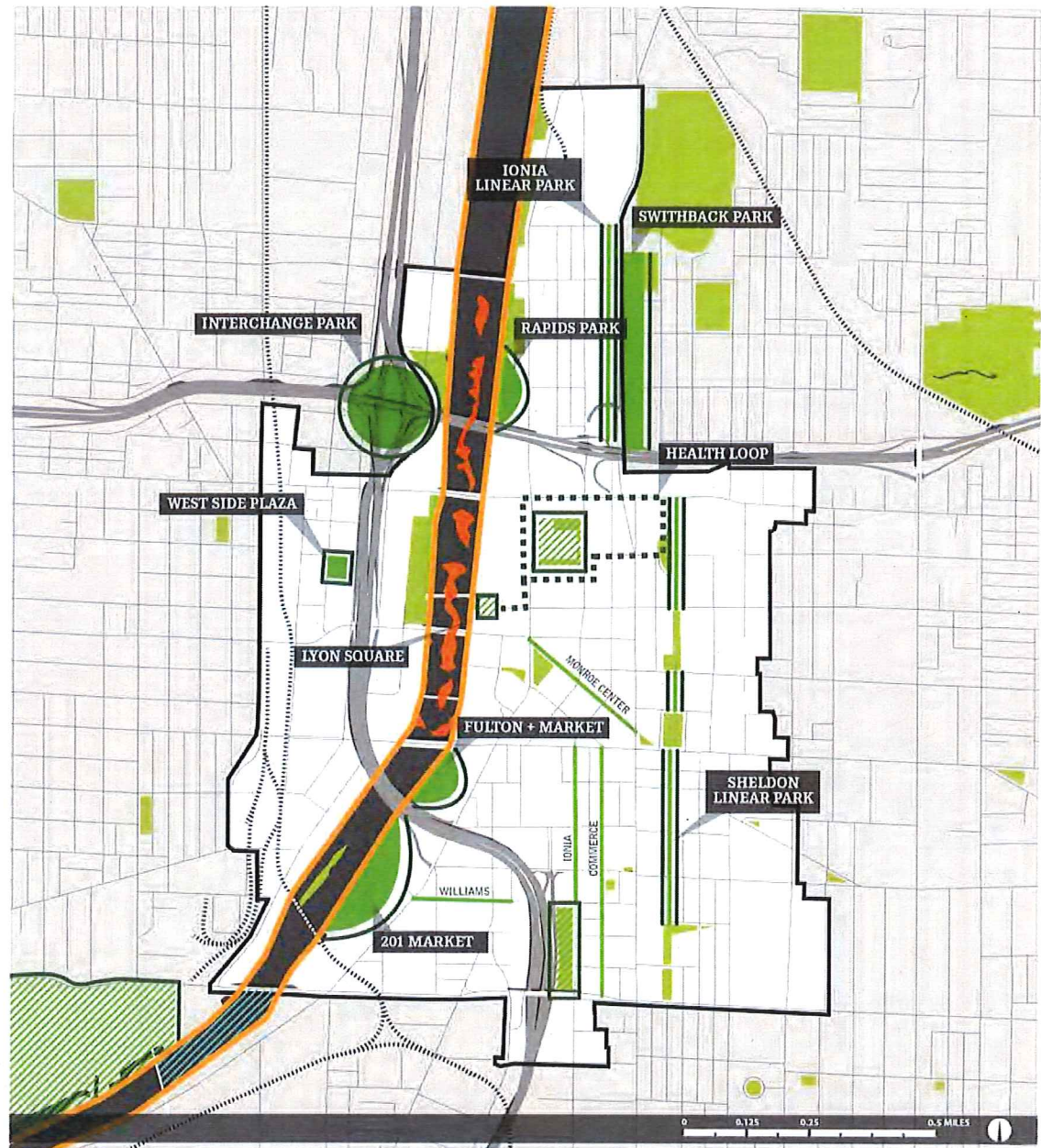


FIG 5.4: Open space strategy



parks Downtown are both undervalued and overlooked. These spaces often lack programming and are physically or socially disconnected from the surrounding context of homes and/or businesses. The opportunity is to transform these parks into vibrant public spaces that truly represent Downtown.

### ENHANCE EXISTING NON-RIVERFRONT PARKS AND OPEN SPACES THROUGH REDESIGN AND PROGRAMMING

#### >> VandenBerg Plaza [aka Calder Plaza]

VandenBerg Plaza and its famous sculpture are true icons of Grand Rapids. The plaza consists of a raised plinth encompassing the superblock bounded by Ottawa, Lyon, Monroe, and Michigan streets and includes 3 office buildings, and 3 government buildings one of which is City Hall. In true modernist fashion, VandenBerg Plaza serves more as a backdrop for the architecture and sculpture than an active, functioning public space. While the design has certain merits; classic modern design, unobstructed views of the sculpture, easily programmable space for large scale events like ArtPrize and Festival of the Arts, there are a series of strategic measures to be taken that can allow flexible opportunities to activate the space for everyday use.

#### > Integrate a “Health Loop” to Connect Medical Mile to the River

VandenBerg Plaza is located between the Medical Mile and the Grand River. With improvements to the Grand River, there



**FIG 5.5:** Medical Mile/Grand River health loop  
VandenBerg Plaza has the potential to be a hub in a new “health loop” that connects Medical Mile to the River

should be opportunities for local employees to walk to the River. The idea is to create and brand a “health loop” – an approximate 1 mile loop connecting Medical Mile with the River. While some GR Forward participants think of the elevation change as an impediment to pedestrian mobility, branding it as a health and exercise amenity would help recast Downtown’s topography as an amenity. The Loop would

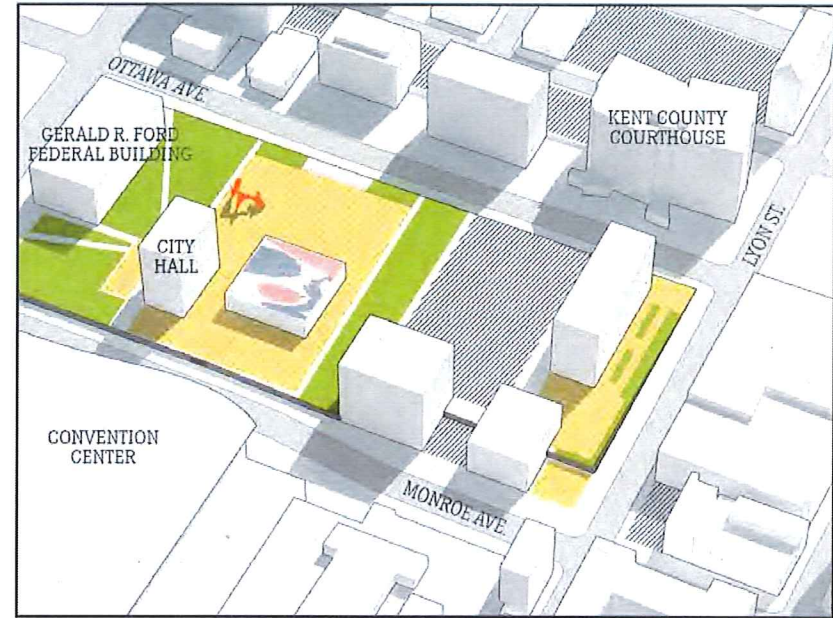


View from Crescent Park towards VandenBerg Plaza and the River





*VandenBerg Plaza's plinth creates a barrier to connections to Monroe Avenue.*



**FIG 5.6:** Existing VandenBerg Plaza

begin at Crescent Park, continue down Crescent Street, between two existing office buildings, through VandenBerg Plaza and down to Monroe Avenue and the River at Lyon Street. The design of VandenBerg Plaza should accommodate this Loop with new seating, landscaping and a designated path. This idea reflects a plan developed by Grand Action who is working to advance its implementation.

- > **Improve Visual and Physical Access**  
Due to its raised plinth, 3 sides of the plaza have large stone walls which make seeing or accessing the plaza difficult and

unpleasant. The most obvious example of this condition is the large inaccessible wall along the entire expanse of Monroe Ave between Lyon and Michigan. This is particularly problematic as the location of the main entrance to the convention center is across the street. To address these conditions, the stairs on Ottawa Street should be replaced with a ramp that seamlessly connects the street to the plaza. Visually compelling pedestrian lighting fixtures could also help link the plaza to the street, especially if they are extended along Ottawa itself. On the Monroe Avenue side, a new stair tower can serve to connect the

Plaza to Monroe or, preferably, a collection of ramps and stairs that gently step down to the street integrated with a new landscape. This option will require altering the existing parking garage on the Monroe Avenue side. Using this option, VandenBerg Plaza will have a direct and visible connection to the Convention Center's main entrance.

- > **Activate the Plaza**  
A series of mobile landscapes of various different configurations will break up the space into more intimate environments, introduce more greenery to the paved plaza, and provide more seating options.



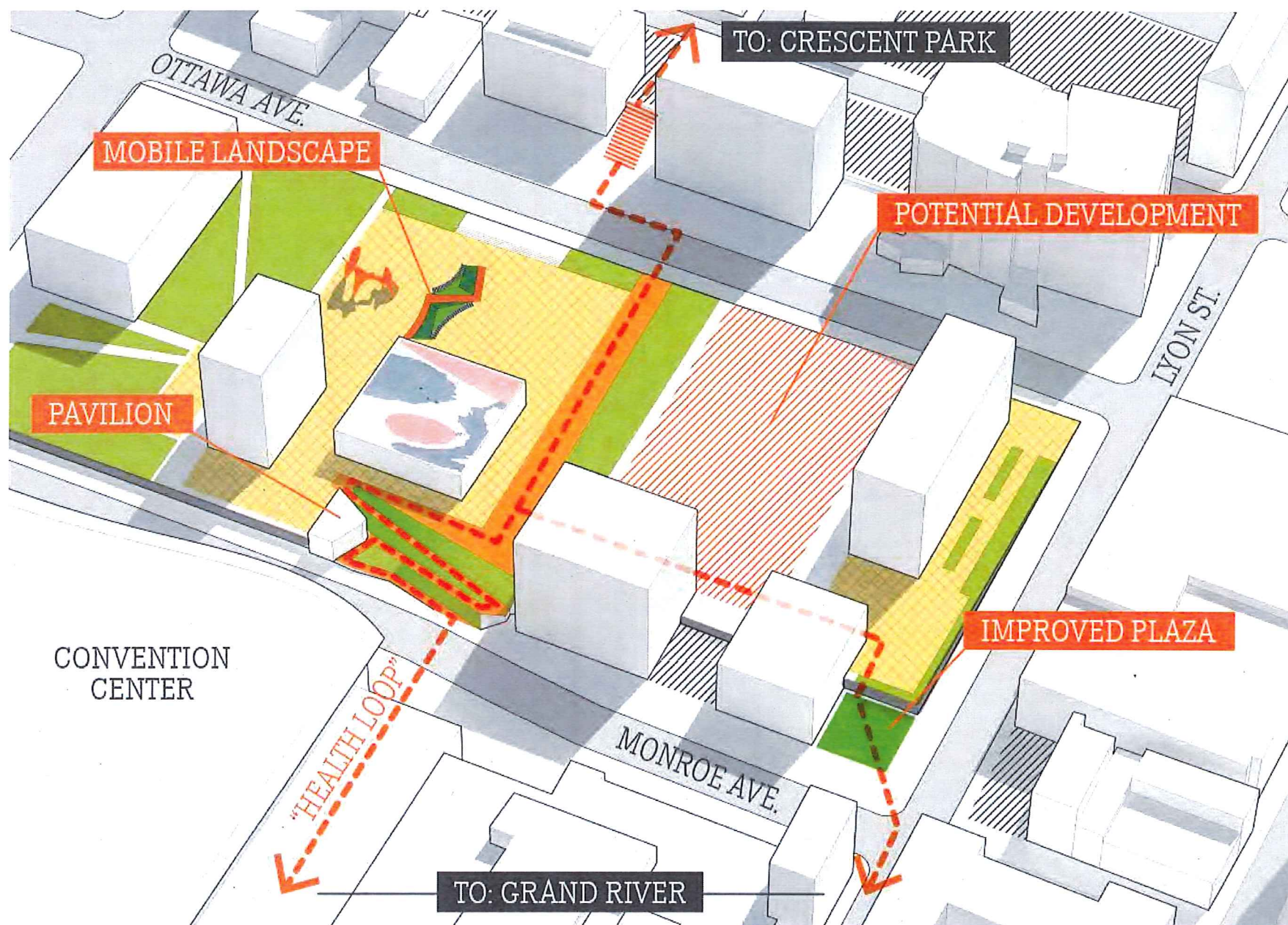


FIG 5.7: Proposed "Health Loop" and Vandenberg Plaza Improvements



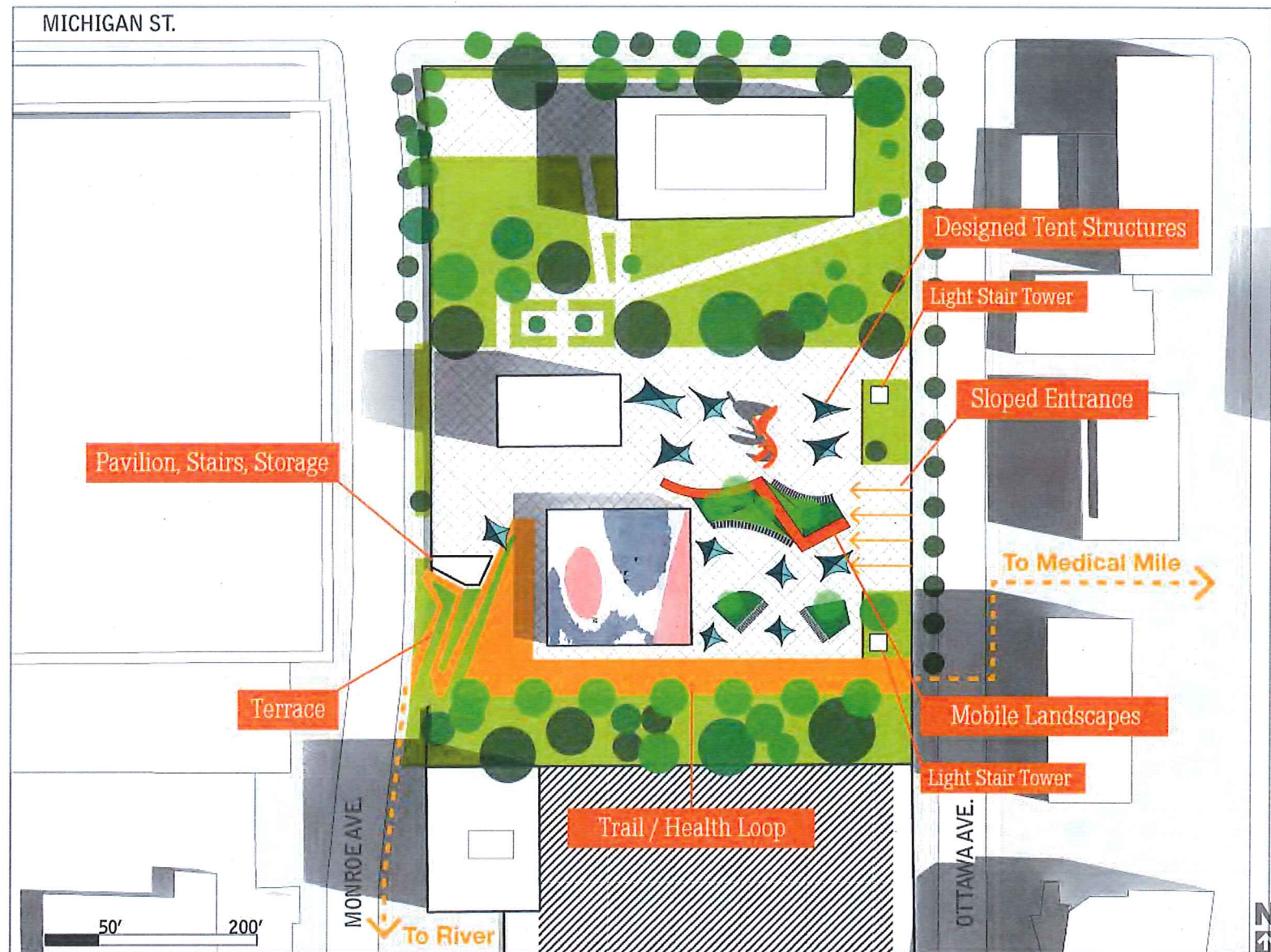


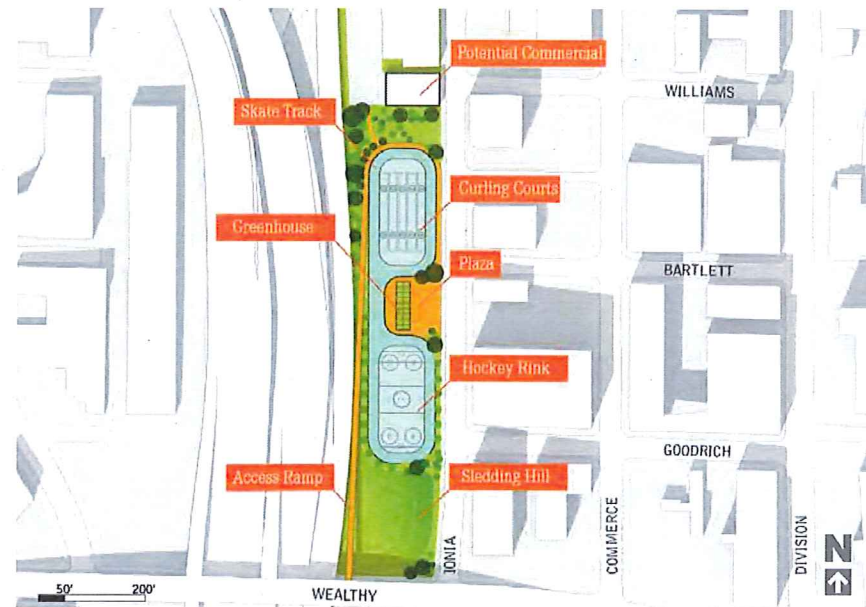
FIG 5.8: VandenBerg Plaza concept



FIG 5.9: Concept for Heartside Park, Summer



FIG 5.10: Concept for Heartside Park, Winter



As movable planters, they can fit into a variety of different configurations suitable for various events and programs.

- > **Explore Development Opportunities**  
The large parking lot immediately to the south of VandenBerg Plaza and the entirety of Lyon Street offer an opportunity to integrate new development and new retail into the area. On the parking lot, a variety of new building configurations are possible as the lot is very large. On Lyon Street, simply extending the lobby space of the two Fifth/Third buildings all the way to street with new commercial space will provide a more active streetscape.

### >>Heartside Park

Heartside Park is the result of a collaboration between grassroots organizations and City leadership to bring a new open space to the Heartside neighborhood. This important work has established a sizable open space in the heart of an area undergoing significant development. In its current form, Heartside Park has limited landscaping and minimal programming. Many have noted the current use of the park for illegal activities which has fostered negative perceptions about the park and the surrounding area. The local social service agencies, many of which provide necessary services for those that are homeless or in transitional housing, agree with the broader public that Heartside Park needs more programming and people to root out the activities that deter use of the park by local

residents and visitors alike. The opportunity is to build upon the grassroots interest and success in creating Heartside Park by taking its design to the next level as a local and regional destination for families of all backgrounds. A lighting plan will play a key role in reversing perception of Heartside Park.

Heartside Park is envisioned as a park that changes with the seasons. In the warm weather there will be various types of gardens and meadows, raingardens and space for growing food. In the colder months the park will transition to a winter playground with a skate track, hockey rink, curling courts, and sledding hill. A manufactured hill on the western edge of the Park will help to buffer it from US 131