



# FORWARD

DOWNTOWN & RIVER ACTION PLAN >>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREPARED FOR:



DOWNTOWN  
GRAND RAPIDS INC.



CITY OF  
GRAND  
RAPIDS





October 26, 2015

**DEAR CITY COMMISSIONERS AND CITIZENS OF GRAND RAPIDS,**

It is with great pleasure and pride that we present GR Forward, a new strategic plan for Downtown Grand Rapids and the Grand River corridor. GR Forward is managed in conjunction by three key partners: the City of Grand Rapids, Downtown Grand Rapids Inc., and the Grand Rapids Public Schools. GR Forward will guide strategic and tactical decisions over the next decade to transform Grand Rapids into a more dynamic, resilient and prosperous waterfront city.

Guided by four steering committees with 145 members, GR Forward accomplished one of the most extensive and inclusive public engagement processes in our city’s history. Through this 18-month effort, more than 4,400 citizens, businesses, institutions, developers and other stakeholders directly shaped this strategic plan through their wonderful ideas, insightful comments and positive encouragement.

The process - which included dozens of neighborhood workshops - empowered Grand Rapidians to shape the vision for their City, strengthened community connections, and generated support and enthusiasm for what our community can build working together.

Twenty-two years ago, a similar initiative entitled *Voices and Visions* helped shepherd many of the drivers that make Downtown Grand Rapids a premiere walkable urban district today. GR Forward expands upon the vows made at that time with further commitments to advancing excellent public education, stewardship and equity across the greater Grand Rapids community.

This is an important time for Grand Rapids. The shape of a city reflects how its people choose to live, work and play within it, ultimately enabling the city’s to achieve its full potential. GR Forward aspires to build a modern way of life that unites our neighborhoods and brings our river to our city and her people. Decades of leadership, generosity, and collaboration have brought Downtown this far, and continued partnerships in city building must guide the next decade forward.

Respectfully submitted,

Howard Hansen, Chair, Monroe North Tax Increment Finance Authority

Brian Harris, Chair, Grand Rapids Downtown Development Authority

Mayor George Heartwell, City of Grand Rapids

Bob Herr, Chair, Downtown Improvement District

Ray Kisar, Chair, Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.

Teresa Weatherall Neal, Superintendent, Grand Rapids Public Schools

## PREAMBLE: BUILDING EQUITY AND OPPORTUNITY IN GREATER GRAND RAPIDS

Signs of renaissance abound in the City of Grand Rapids. Cranes and construction dominate the urban heart of Downtown. The city is on track to recover all of its pre-recession population and now claims one of the nation's strongest real estate markets. And Forbes recently declared the regional economy one of the fastest-growing in the U.S.

Yet this rapid expansion is contrasted by a costly degree of deepening racial inequity. Poverty, for example, grew faster across greater Grand Rapids in recent years than it did in Detroit. The unemployment rate exceeds 25 and 50 percent for Hispanic and Black citizens, respectively, in our urban neighborhoods. Even in Downtown Grand Rapids, generally perceived as affluent, 66 percent of residents earn less than the area median income.

Clearly, conventional economic recovery and growth is not sufficient to solve the persistent racial and ethnic inequity in our community. We need a fundamentally new approach to systemically achieve growth with prosperity that is widely shared by all residents in the "new" Grand Rapids.

Toward this necessary end, *GR Forward* recommends a series of sound strategies to simultaneously promote growth, equity of opportunity, and a more welcoming Downtown. Please find a summary of these proposed actions, targets, and success measures on page 34 of the full *GR Forward* plan. These recommendations reflect what we heard from thousands of citizens and stakeholders who participated in *GR Forward's* extensive engagement process.

*GR Forward* charts a new path of policy and programs to advance the ongoing work of championing diversity and inclusion while building equity in Downtown Grand Rapids. But Downtown alone cannot overcome our community's legacy with racial inequity.

By design, the *GR Forward* process focused rigorously on improving Downtown Grand Rapids and a limited reach of the Grand River corridor. Meanwhile 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.

Pursuing equity, then, requires regional thinking, solutions and collaborative action, just as any meaningful approach to grow and sustain the economy depends on a regional strategy.

The time for this region-wide conversation and agenda is overdue. The demography of metro Grand Rapids, like the State of Michigan and the nation as a whole, continues to grow more racially and ethnically diverse.

Ninety percent of the metro population was white in 1980. Since then, people of color grew from less than 9 to more than 20 percent of the population. The Latino population is growing the fastest locally and is projected to approach 25 percent of the city's total population by 2040. The trends suggest Grand Rapids will grow much more multicultural than it is today.

This diverse and growing multicultural population contributes significantly to the local community. But unintentional and intentional racial bias and persistent racial gaps in employment, income and other opportunities

too often limit the ability of people of color to contribute equally to our city and region. Across the board, people of color earn less and have less access to advanced levels of learning than their white neighbors and friends in greater Grand Rapids.

This inequity undermines our values of fairness, decency and justice. It also weakens our economy. Indeed, the metro Grand Rapids economy would generate \$3.3 billion more annually absent existing racial income gaps, based on research by the National Equity Atlas. The costs of racial inequity will only grow - low wages, decreased workforce skill, and reduced purchasing power to cite a few indicators - as the community becomes more diverse. Without intentional action, these disparities will widen.

An equity-driven growth model, by sharp contrast, will make Downtown Grand Rapids and West Michigan stronger by expanding opportunities for everyone to participate and prosper.

Bold and committed leadership is necessary to set the region on a path of racially equitable and inclusive growth, and empower more people with the right to determine their future. The private sector must take the lead in generating truly equitable and inclusive growth. The public sector can support the movement by establishing an effective framework of civic goals, policies, investments, incentives, strategies and mutual accountability to guide the growth.

What's urgently necessary is a collaborative regional approach that recognizes our growing diversity has real potential to drive more robust economic growth, and focuses on building racial equity, increasing opportunity, and pursuing economic justice to ensure the metro area grows into a great place to live, learn, work and play - for everybody.

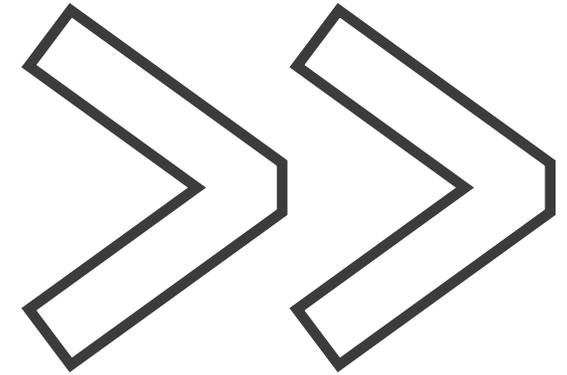
# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the members of the following committees that made this draft plan possible:

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<b>Sam Cummings</b>	CWD Real Estate
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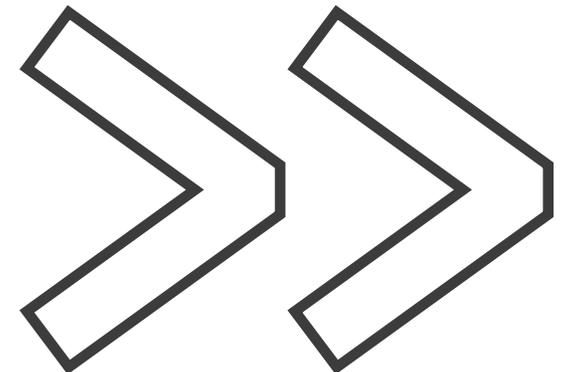
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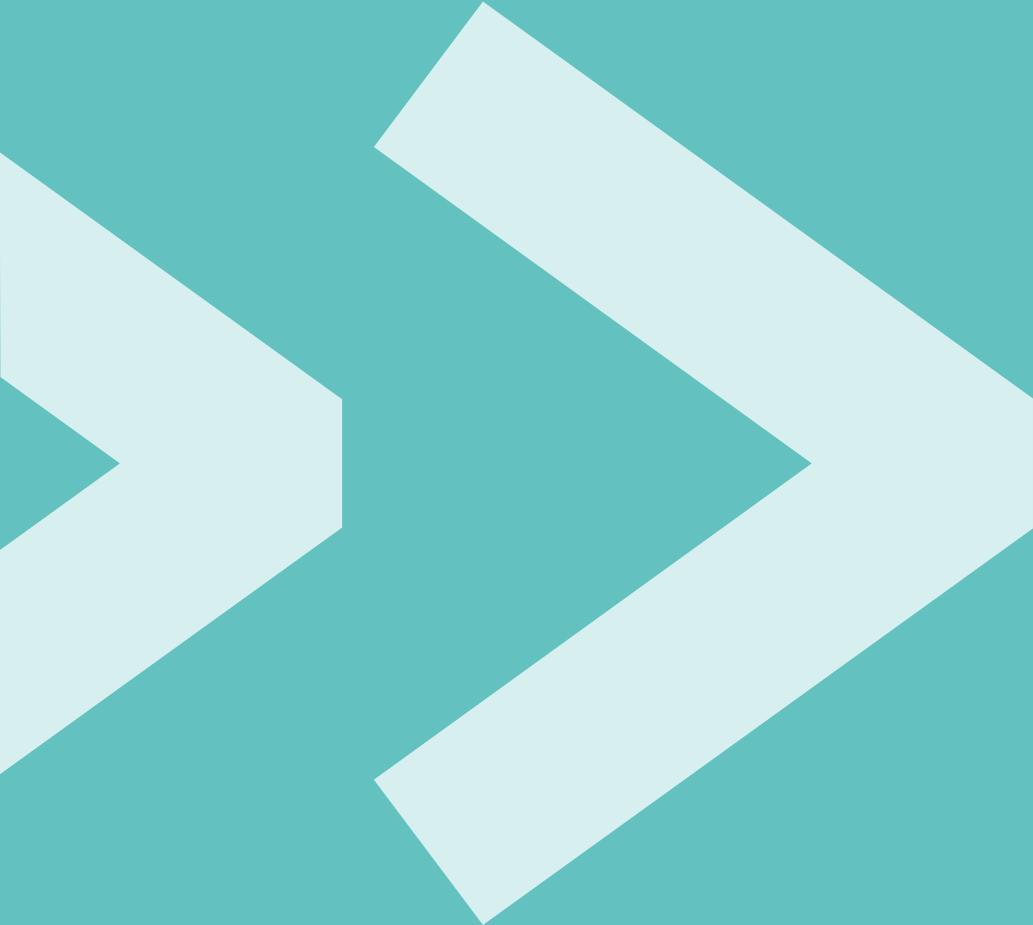
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

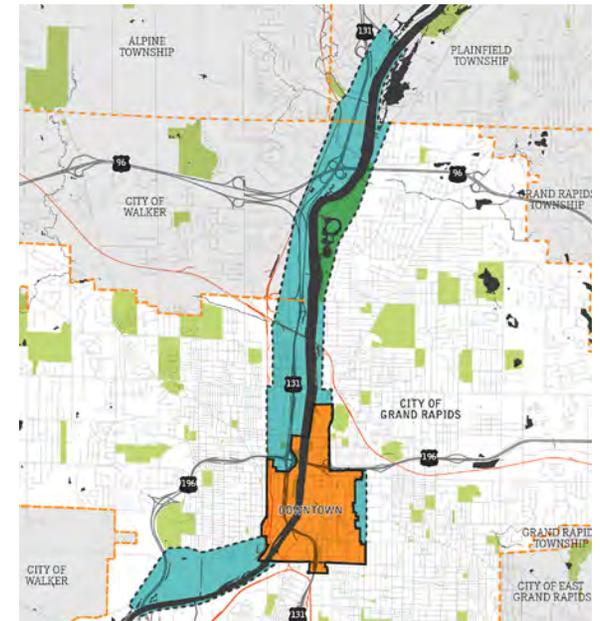
When you think of Downtown Grand Rapids and the Grand River, do you find yourself thinking about what's there now, or do you imagine the potential of what could be?

GR Forward is a community plan and investment strategy that envisions the future of Downtown and the Grand River - two of the city and region's strongest assets. Grand Rapids is poised to become a resilient, waterfront city and an urban playground for all ages centered around a progressive and lively Downtown. GR Forward is designed to guide this ongoing transformation.

All members of the community - those who live, work, learn, and play in and near Downtown and the River - were welcomed participants, invited to help craft a collective vision for the future and identify key actions for change to make the vision become reality. Thank you to the *thousands* who engaged with the planning process and in doing so enriched this plan. Your words, your ideas, and your energy are present in every page.

Facilitated by Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. [DGRI], the City of Grand Rapids and Grand Rapids Public Schools [GRPS], GR Forward is our 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 Innovation Central High and a new Museum School, GR Forward encompasses three planning efforts in one.

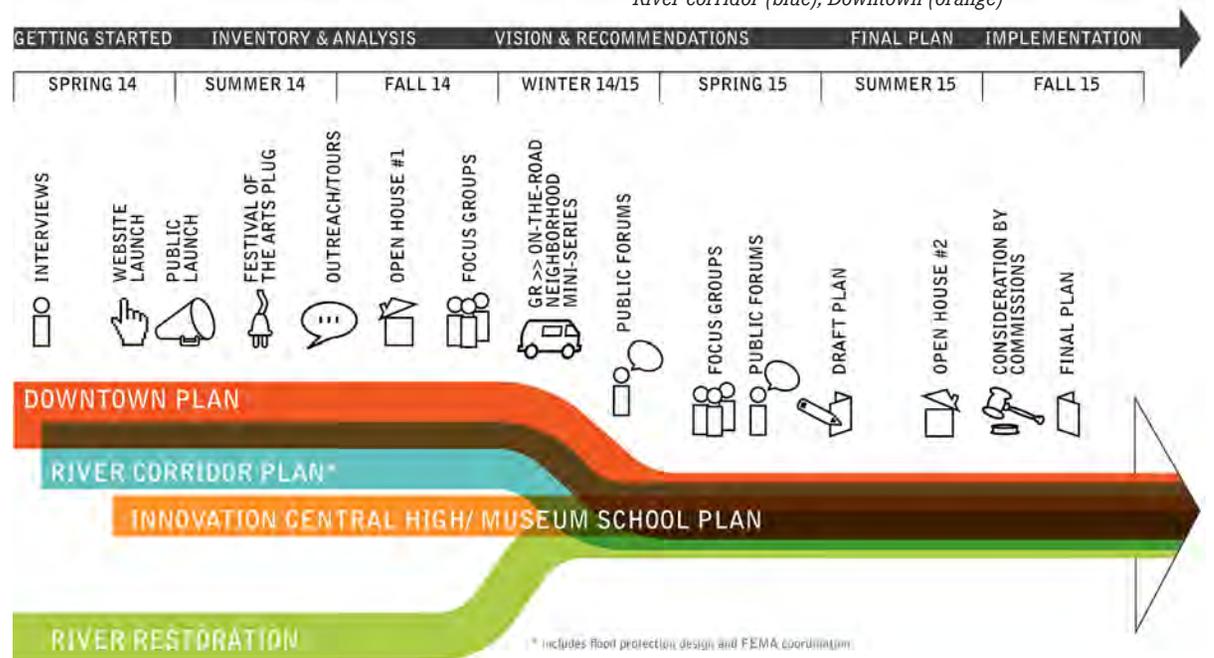
GR Forward is a plan but also a call to action that organizes the actions of local leaders, private and non-profit organizations, residents and businesses toward a shared vision for Downtown, the River and local schools. Grand Rapidians are proud of their hometown and are eager to participate in building their city.



River corridor (blue), Downtown (orange)



Summary of the GR Forward planning process.





Downtown planning area

GR Forward launched in April of 2014 with the goal of creating a community-driven plan fueled by a robust public outreach initiative. The 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. Over **4,400** Grand Rapidians offered their concerns and ideas as a part of GR Forward. A special thank you to the Dyer-Ives Foundation, Frey Foundation, Grand Rapids Community Foundation, and the Wege Foundation whose contributions enhanced the scope and breadth of the GR Forward outreach initiative.



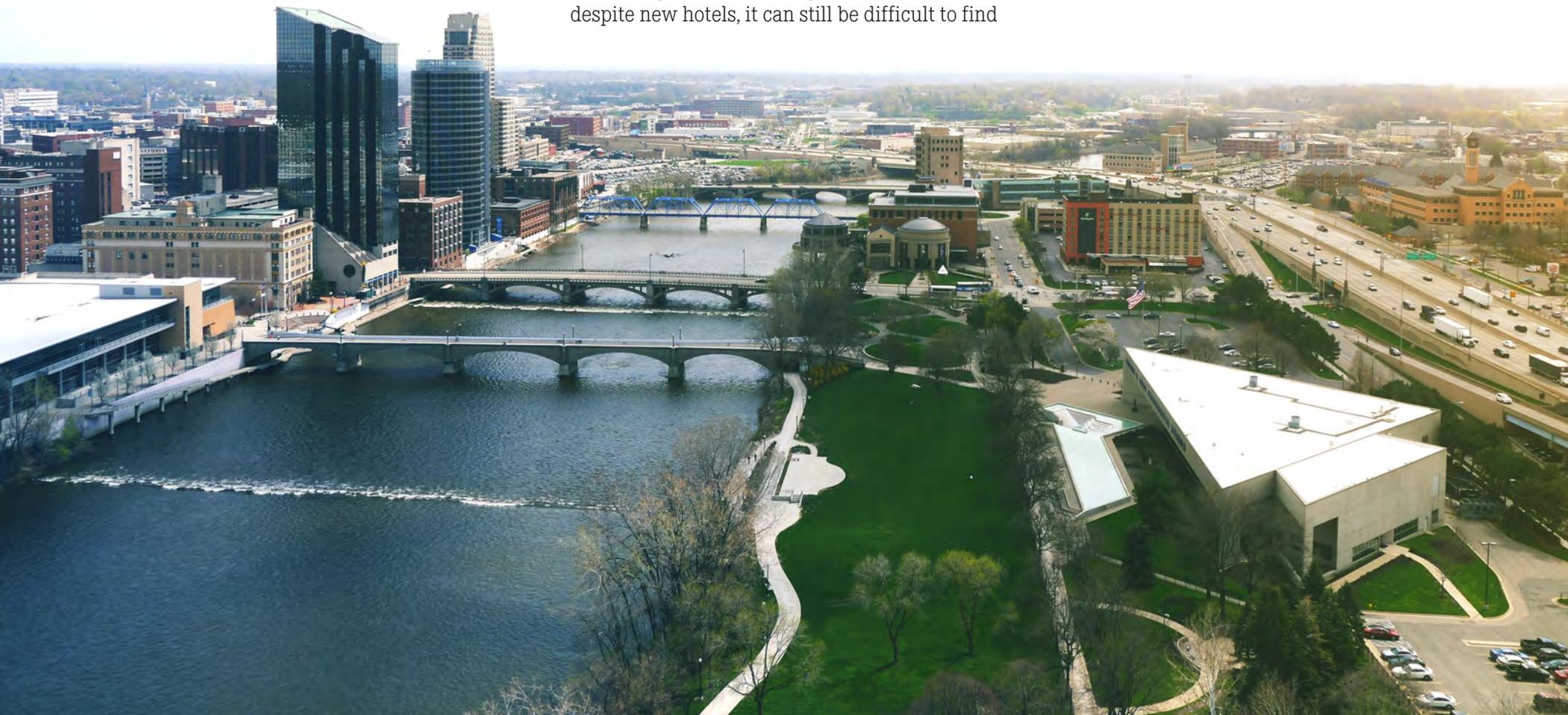
GR Forward is a community-driven investment strategy built from an extensive public engagement process.

## **DOWNTOWN & THE RIVER TODAY**

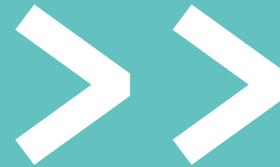
**Just think how different things were ten years ago - vacant lots, deteriorated buildings, very few residents, and more empty storefronts. Downtown has hit an accelerated stride as a destination, as an economic center, and, increasingly, as home to many residents. The River, once forgotten and overlooked, is now the center of discussions regarding outdoor recreation and programming, water quality and potential development.**

In the past decades, local leaders, foundations and notable organizations such as Grand Action have helped to transform Downtown into a growing destination. The collective result is a range of unique and world-class amenities including the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Downtown Market, Van Andel Research Institute, Cook-DeVos Center for Health Sciences, MSU College of Human Medicine Secchia Center, Spectrum Health, the internationally recognized ArtPrize competition, plus the Van Andel Arena and DeVos Place, two facilities that outpace most comparables in terms of occupancy. In addition, universities and colleges are investing in Downtown and, despite new hotels, it can still be difficult to find

a room at certain times. Today, proposals for new housing are scattered across Downtown reflecting the growing desire to live where the concentration of arts, culture and nightlife has helped Grand Rapids earn the moniker “Beer City USA.” Underlying this concentration of jobs, destinations, housing and nightlife, are public investments designed to create a more sustainable, environmentally conscious city. From separating combined sewers to developing new transit service, the City and their partners are forward-thinking and poised to further enhance Downtown, restore the rapids and finally capitalize on the value of the River.



Although much has changed for the better, Downtown Grand Rapids and the Grand River face challenges that must be overcome:



## EQUITY AND OPPORTUNITY FOR EVERYONE IS ESSENTIAL

Signs of renaissance abound in Grand Rapids, yet our rapid economic expansion is contrasted by a costly degree of deepening racial inequity. Conventional economic recovery and growth is not sufficient to solve the persistent racial and ethnic inequity in our community. We need a fundamentally new approach to systemically achieve growth with prosperity that is widely shared by all residents in the “new” Grand Rapids.

GR Forward charts a new path of policy and programs to advance the ongoing work of championing diversity and inclusion while building equity in Downtown Grand Rapids. But Downtown alone cannot overcome our community’s legacy with racial inequity. Pursuing equity requires regional thinking, solutions and collaborative action, just as any meaningful approach to grow and sustain the economy depends on a regional strategy.

The demography of metro Grand Rapids, like the State of Michigan and the nation as a whole, continues to grow more racially and ethnically diverse. What’s urgently necessary is a collaborative regional approach that recognizes our growing diversity is a real strength, and focuses on building racial equity, increasing opportunity, and pursuing economic justice to ensure the metro area grows into a great place to live, learn, work and play – for everybody.

## WE NEED TO MAXIMIZE THE VALUE OF THE GRAND RIVER

With coordinated investment, the Grand River can help to attract residents and businesses while providing a unique space accessible to all Grand Rapiidians. Grand Rapids has a long history of turning its back to the River. Due to the need for flood walls and the prevalence of industrial uses that formerly polluted the River, as well as the development of Downtown highways, the Grand River is disconnected from Downtown and nearby neighborhoods. The effort to restore the Rapids has helped to kick start a larger conversation about the River that now includes the design of flood infrastructure that reveal potential river edge uses such as new parks and development. Creating new open space along the river and in select Downtown locations will help to address the need for more, and better programmed, park space Downtown and help fill the gaps of a discontinuous trail system.

## DOWNTOWN IS GROWING BUT NEEDS TO REACH “CRITICAL MASS”

The constant refrain from public engagement events is the desire for “more” - more retail, more services, more restaurants and more stuff to do. In the past 20 years, the census tracts touching downtown have doubled in population. But while Downtown is growing, there are limited retail options and services for residents and employees. Data from other successful downtowns across the country indicate that for a Grand Rapids-sized downtown, critical mass can be defined as approximately 10,000 households or over 12,000 residents. It is at this point that downtowns are able to attract a grocery, pharmacy and have services like coffee shops and laundromats that are open Saturday mornings. Downtown needs to embrace and encourage growth.

## GRAND RAPIDS NEEDS A 21ST CENTURY ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Growth cannot be just about housing. Downtown and the City need jobs as well. The Medical Mile and the development of major venues like DeVos Place and the Van Andel Arena have provided both temporary and permanent job growth. Today we face the challenge of where the next jobs will come from. While Downtown is home to a greater concentration of small to mid-size companies (between 5 and 250 employees) than the metro area, companies that require office space and a lot of creative professional companies are not in Downtown. Downtown does not offer a range of inexpensive, flexible spaces suitable for new start-ups or existing companies seeking to migrate into larger space. Grand Rapids needs a 21st century economic infrastructure that focuses on providing this flexible space accessible to the amenities of Downtown.

*“The name Grand Rapids indicates the importance of the rapids in the history of the city and would be an excellent beginning to a vibrant future city”*





## GOAL 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. The River corridor presents the opportunity to offer a range of connected, unique experiences around outdoor adventures not usually found within urban centers. It's time to re-establish the emotional and physical connections between Downtown and the River that Grand Rapids was built upon. Downtown and the River must be accessible and welcoming to all Grand Rapidians.

To accomplish this goal, the following strategies are necessary:



### 1.1 INTEGRATE ART, EDUCATION, INFRASTRUCTURE AND ECOLOGY

To guide the design of the Grand River, GR Forward recognized the need to improve how the River is accessed (both visually and physically) but also how it functions. It is a critical piece of infrastructure that, with strategic investment, will enhance access, restore and create new opportunities to support habitat, integrate specialized programming and improve water quality. To maximize this opportunity, the design is grounded in forging renewed connections with the River through education and art. With greater awareness, Grand Rapidians can better appreciate the River's important ecological role and advocate for continued water quality enhancements.

### 1.2 REINFORCE THE GRAND RAPIDS WHITEWATER INITIATIVE

Grand Rapids Whitewater [GRWW] is a catalyst project that is emblematic of the effort to restore the River as the iconic center of the City. It will not only substantially improve habitat, but serve as a significant recreational asset that establishes the River as an active public space. GR Forward will reinforce this critical initiative through the design of the River edges, integration of new trails and the design of open spaces that capitalize upon the proposed activities in the River.

### 1.3 ESTABLISH GRAND RAPIDS AS THE HUB IN A REGIONAL TRAIL SYSTEM WITH UNIVERSAL ACCESS ALONG THE RIVER ON BOTH THE EAST AND WEST SIDES

One of the primary components in realizing the future for the Downtown and the River corridor is understanding how we create access that can serve to inspire new activities and amenities like lodging, great restaurants, unique open spaces, programs, and festivals. The catalyst is a new, interconnected trail system that ties into the regional trail systems that surround the city. The impact will be to draw people to the City and provide residents access to regional recreational opportunities. A new, robust, trail system on BOTH sides of the River will become an identifiable element and part of a unique brand that makes Grand Rapids a great place to be.

### 1.4 ENHANCE NEIGHBORHOOD ACCESS TO THE RIVER

Connecting neighborhoods to the Grand River establishes the need to reconsider critical east-west streets as not just traffic arteries but as cultural and environmental corridors that extend the presence of the River into the City. These east-west corridors include Ann, Sweet/Richmond, Leonard, 6th, Bridge/Michigan, Pearl/Lake Michigan, Fulton and Wealthy. Each is an opportunity for improvements that express and enhance their best features and provide clear pathways to the River.

## 1.5 CREATE THE OUTDOOR ADVENTURE CITY

Part of what has always made Grand Rapids a unique place is the relationship people have to the River as a natural resource. Despite the introduction of dams, flood walls and buildings that turned their back to the River, some Grand Rapidians still maintained a connection to the River and continued to recreate. There are not many cities where you can go out and find a hundred fishermen casting right in the shadow of a downtown. The River is an opportunity to create an outdoor “Adventure City” that brings the City together with nature. GR Forward includes the design of 28 opportunity sites along the River that integrate new flood infrastructure, trail, new parks, unique recreational programs and potential development opportunities.



Above: New trail proposed within the Coldbrook site.  
Top: Potential improvements in and around “Fish Ladder Park”  
Right: Aerial view of River improvements looking north. >>



## **GOAL 2: CREATE A TRUE DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD THAT IS HOME TO A DIVERSE POPULATION**

Downtown was once home to four department stores and a mix of housing, retail and services. Throughout the GR Forward process, Grand Rapidsians have 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 living remains accessible and affordable to a range of incomes.

To accomplish this goal, the following strategies are necessary:

### **2.1 LEVERAGE DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES TO HIT “CRITICAL MASS”**

Encouraging growth and new housing is essential to attracting the retail and services that participants in GR Forward have been asking for. To support growth, GR Forward includes recommendations to change the existing regulations for height, density, parking and development bonuses. These changes are designed to encourage more investment and provide incentives to create better open spaces, activate the streets with ground floor retail, establish public access to the River and, integrate mixed-income housing. To help

illustrate the potential, GR Forward includes potential design approaches to the development of key opportunity sites Downtown.

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

Downtown Grand Rapids’ 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. This includes: Strengthening community ties Downtown through a new residents’ council and continued capacity building with Downtown residents; maximizing the use of online tools to engage residents and improve Downtown services; expanding youth programming Downtown; working to expand access to fresh food; exploring opportunities to create incentives to attract more Downtown residents and; actively marketing Downtown as a neighborhood.

### **2.3 PRESERVE AND EXPAND HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES**

Downtown needs to provide a range of housing types and prices to offer true housing choice for families and individuals of all backgrounds. To ensure there are housing options for a range of incomes in the future, 30% of Downtown housing units should be available for those earning below 120% of the area median income – this includes both housing for low-income families

as well as workforce housing for those that are getting priced out of Downtown units. Coupled with strategies to protect housing affordability, there must also be a focus on encouraging market-rate development Downtown that offers a diversity of housing types from “micro-units” for students and young professionals to lofts and attached townhomes that offer opportunities to expand homeownership Downtown.

### **2.4 CONCENTRATE RETAIL AND CLOSE THE RETAIL SERVICES GAP**

Although growing, there is not enough demand for new stores to fill the gaps in Downtown. There needs to be targeted marketing to attract destination retailers like restaurants but also careful regulation of new development to encourage active, ground floor stores and services on key commercial streets.

### **2.5 REQUIRE CLEAN AND EFFICIENT ENERGY, GREEN BUILDING PRACTICES, AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN PROJECTS WITH LOCAL SUBSIDY**

Grand Rapids is setting a leadership example in the country for sustainability. New projects with financial assistance from DGRI or the City should be required to incorporate energy efficiency and green building practices to decrease their environmental footprint and improve the environmental quality of life in the City. This includes addressing stormwater on site and using techniques to reduce waste and energy including recycled materials, green/white roofs and pervious pavement.



Top: Potential development Downtown including already proposed projects in orange. Below: Conceptual site plan and potential street view for 201 Market Avenue >>



## **GOAL 3: IMPLEMENT A 21ST CENTURY MOBILITY STRATEGY**

Owing both to change in travel behavior among the millennial generation and the limited ability to dedicate more land and right-of-way to personal vehicles, the future growth of Downtown will increasingly depend on a multi-modal transportation system that is safe, convenient and affordable to all Grand Rapidsians. This will be achieved by leveraging Downtown's existing transportation assets and providing additional options for the area's 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.

### **3.1 PROVIDE A STRESS-FREE PEDESTRIAN EXPERIENCE FOR ALL AGES AND ABILITIES**

Whether one arrives in Downtown via car, train, bus, or bike, eventually everyone becomes a pedestrian. In an urban place, business, entertainment, and recreation occur at the human scale. To that end, Downtown Grand Rapids is unique because of its overall walkability. While density and land use have helped create this asset, there are still many forces in Downtown working against it - from the design of streets, to driver behavior, to gaps and barriers in the pedestrian network. As the future growth and success of Downtown directly correlates to the amount of pedestrian activity on its streets, GR Forward prioritizes pedestrian improvements and offers designs to help improve safety along key Downtown corridors including Cherry, Division, Fulton, Market and Michigan.

### **3.2 ESTABLISH MOBILE GR**

In order to best serve the future of Grand Rapids residents, businesses, and visitors, the way that Downtown parking is managed must continue to evolve to meet the City's future transportation demands. Recognizing this, Parking Services must broaden its scope to cover all transportation choices, not solely driving and parking. This expanded department, Mobile GR, will encompass multiple modes of transportation to help achieve the City's economic development and quality of life goals by increasing the number of people who take transit, walk, bike, or commute/travel in a way other than driving alone, in addition to continuing to manage the City's parking assets. Mobile GR will seek to manage parking Downtown through creating more supply where it's needed, and altering parking pricing to encourage greater use of existing parking ramps. In addition, Mobile GR will seek to reduce the demand for Downtown parking by working with employers on parking cash out programs, redesigning the DASH system as a true Downtown circulator and pursuing alternative transportation options including bike share and car share.

### **3.3 COMPLETE THE NETWORKS IN AND OUT OF DOWNTOWN**

Complete Streets and multi-modal planning usually focuses on specific street design and how to prioritize the use of space. Each of those pieces must be part of an entire network that connects Downtown to surrounding neighborhoods and provides people with choices on how to reach their destination. Just

like every street cannot be a car street, every street cannot be a bike street or a transit street. Street typologies should be created that aligns the right type of improvements with the right type of street. This includes accommodating trucks and the impacts of local highway traffic but also in developing cost-effective strategies to become the most bicycle friendly Downtown in the Midwest.

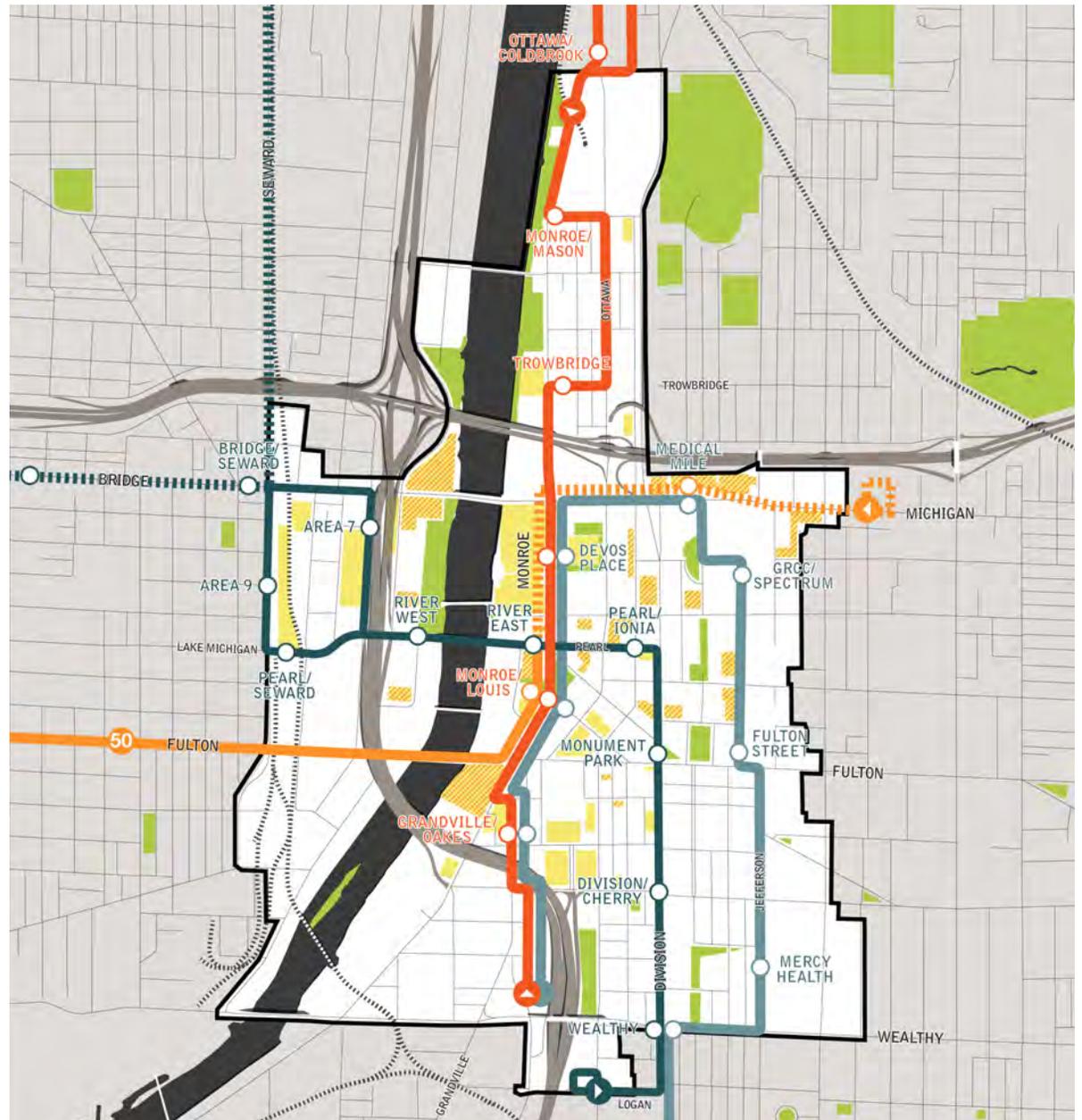
### **3.4 GET CONNECTED: UTILIZE TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE GETTING AROUND EASIER**

As Downtown modernizes its transportation system with more options, it must also begin to integrate technology with those options to provide users with more information and ability to pay for these options in a variety of ways. Wherever possible, these solutions should be designed by local entrepreneurs and students to address specific issues in Downtown. Local partners should explore the creative use of technology to address a range of opportunities including: Registering issues with local streets; monitoring in real-time street construction or plowing; creating real-time digital signage; and improving the reliability and service of local transportation services like taxis and the Rapid.

### **3.5 PUT GRAND RAPIDS 'ON THE MAP'**

With the expected growth of Grand Rapids and all of its unique assets, it is anticipated that the number of visitors to Grand Rapids, from the Midwest, nationally, and globally will

continue to grow. Transportation is the first and last experience for most visitors and should help support the overall unique experience of Downtown. The different regional connections to Grand Rapids - from Amtrak to the Airport - should be actively marketed, (particularly within the Midwest) and new wayfinding should be installed in those locations that will best serve to welcome visitors to Downtown.



Above: Proposed DASH routes. Top Left: Approach for Ottawa and Ionia. Bottom Left: Potential Fulton Street improvements. >>

## **GOAL 4: EXPAND JOB OPPORTUNITIES & ENSURE CONTINUED VITALITY OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY**

Downtown Grand Rapids offers a sense of opportunity. The belief that young, creative entrepreneurs have lower barriers to entry to pursue their professional goals while enjoying the benefits of an urban lifestyle—all at a much more affordable cost of living than major urban centers—is one of the attractive things about the area. 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.

To accomplish this goal, the following strategies are necessary:

### **4.1 PROMOTE INCLUSION AND EQUAL PARTICIPATION IN THE LOCAL ECONOMY**

As important and necessary as it is to attract talent to the City, it is also critical to grow and retain talent from within Grand Rapids. Sustaining job growth will require both tactics. Realizing the vision of GR Forward will produce jobs - jobs in construction, maintenance, marketing, design and many other professions. To address economic inclusion, it will be critical to align the implementation of GR Forward with opportunities for local skills training and jobs. Leaders in diversity and inclusion efforts, local service providers, local business and industry leaders, and place-based nonprofits should be recruited to collaborate on inclusion and economic participation issues through new programs and services designed to train and link residents with job opportunities.

### **4.2 ATTRACT TALENT AND LINK JOB SEEKERS WITH LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES**

One of the challenges Grand Rapids' faces as its technology-focused innovation economy expands is its continued ability to attract and retain talent. The region produces a large number of graduates in a number of technical and design fields. Retention of this talent is vital for the long-term viability of the region's innovation and creative driven businesses. GR Forward recommends expanding active engagement programs with universities, including a range of internships and co-op

programs to increase their access to entry level jobs and support efforts to keep them in Grand Rapids after graduation.

### **4.3 CREATE AND PRESERVE SPACE FOR JOB CREATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Expanding job opportunities and ensuring the continued vitality of the local economy requires that Downtown provide spaces for businesses at all stages of their growth. Grand Rapids needs a modern economic infrastructure of inexpensive, flexible spaces for new and growing businesses in and close to Downtown. This requires that the appropriate space - both buildings and land - be reserved for job creation. A Production Development and Space Modernization Entity would help to develop key spaces for new start-ups and growing businesses. To support this initiative, zoning changes are needed to allow specific kinds of maker spaces Downtown and partnerships should be explored with local institutions to identify underutilized space that could serve as a temporary home to new companies.

### **4.4 BRAND RAPIDS**

Given the population of the metro area, the positive stories of Grand Rapids from its quality of life to the economy, too often flies just under the national radar. As the region's primary urban lifestyle option and home to an increasing number of scientific, technical and creative resources, Downtown Grand Rapids plays an important role as the premier location



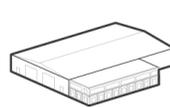
of the region's talent and innovation assets. Collaborating with Experience Grand Rapids, The Right Place, Inc., GR Current, and others, the City and DGRI should continue direct marketing to strategically chosen "Top American Cities" list and continue to market and brand Grand Rapids as a visitor destination in the region and beyond.

## ATTRACTING TALENT

A HIGH-QUALITY DOWNTOWN PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ATTRACTING AND RETAINING VARIOUS TYPES OF TALENT

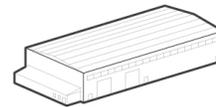
AGE TYPE  
CHALLENGE  
ATTRACTOR (ROLE OF DOWNTOWN)

IT/DATA	DESIGN/ CREATIVE	ACADEMIC/ SCIENTIST/ RESEARCHER	GENERAL UPPER/MID PROFESSION	START-UP STAFF
20s - 30s	28 - 38 "Diaspora returning"	30+	38+	Under 40
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruitment issue</li> <li>Perception must be on coast to advance in career</li> <li>"Cutting edge not taking place in GR"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Typically coming from larger cities - have larger city amenity expectation</li> <li>Want to come home but perception of no jobs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trailing spouse significant problem - typically an academic or researcher</li> <li>Larger city amenity questions</li> <li>"People like me"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trailing spouse issue</li> <li>Tend toward suburbs due to educational concerns</li> <li>Role of HR in companies diverting people away from downtown</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Risk of location - start ups fail - where to find next job in GR</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lifestyle/living choice</li> <li>Entertainment options</li> <li>Housing options/prices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lifestyle/living choice</li> <li>Entertainment options</li> <li>Housing options/prices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lifestyle/living choice</li> <li>Entertainment location</li> <li>Housing options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Entertainment location</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lifestyle/living choice</li> <li>Entertainment location</li> <li>Housing options</li> </ul>



RESEARCH / FABRICATION FACILITY

Pre-clinical R&D, prototyping, test kitchens, light industrial



HIGH BAY FLEX SPACE

Research & Development (e.g., clean room, air handling requirements), Logistics, Fabrication



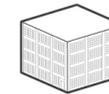
READY-TO-GO SPACE

Entrepreneurial - Industrial service businesses



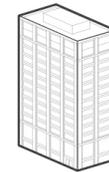
MIXED-USE / GROUND FLOOR COMMERCIAL

Small-scale retailers/ office users



MAKER SPACE

Small batch production / co-working space



SOFTWARE / PROGRAMMING SPACE

Preclinical lab space, "bench research" / co-working space

Top Left: Potential locations for new work space in and near Downtown. Top Right: Summary of challenges and opportunities in attracting talent to Grand Rapids. Bottom: Typology of work spaces necessary to support job growth in and near Downtown. >>

## GOAL 5: REINVEST IN PUBLIC SPACE, CULTURE & INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMING

How can we rethink our parks and public spaces to better serve the entire community and further activate Downtown Grand Rapids and the Grand River year-round? Through both programming and design, public investment can make a big impact by creating a more inclusive City and Downtown.

Downtowns across the country function differently than they did even a few decades ago. 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.

To accomplish this goal, the following strategies are necessary:

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

Downtown events and cultural programming are already significant attractions. Movies in the Park regularly attracts thousands of people and results in significant spending in Downtown. This successful activity should be further expanded to design and program public spaces to accommodate winter activities. Further, Downtown events are a great opportunity to introduce potential residents to the lifestyle, cultural vibrancy, and entertainment Downtown has to offer. To capitalize on this, Downtown businesses need to stay open late during events and expand the tools used to market and promote events including everything from text alerts to social media.

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

Downtown needs new open spaces to serve as gathering spaces and amenities for existing and new residents and employees. Based upon comments from the public process, GR Forward identified a range of opportunities to create new Downtown open spaces including: Small-scale "parklets"; a new skate park under the highway and; parks that serve to create stronger connections between nearby neighborhoods and Downtown like "Switchback Park" along the hillside of the Belknap neighborhood.

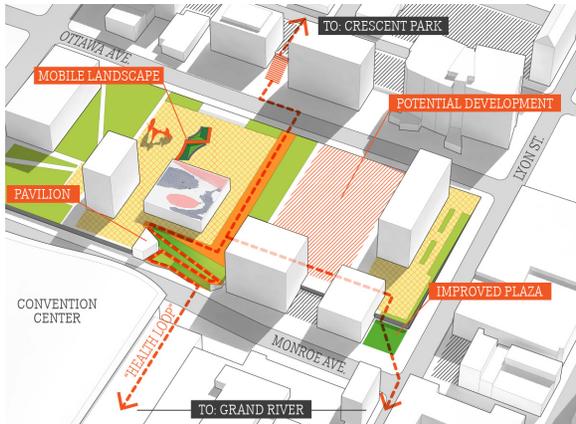
But it is not just the number of parks and open space that matters, it is their quality. A number of existing parks Downtown are both undervalued and overlooked. These spaces often lack programming and are physically or socially disconnected from the surrounding context of homes and/or businesses. There is an opportunity to transform these parks into vibrant public spaces that truly represent Downtown. Enhancing existing Downtown parks - most notably Vandenberg Plaza (Calder Plaza), Heartside Park and Veteran's Park - through redesign and programming will create new green spaces that serve a growing Downtown population.

### 5.3 EXPRESS DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS' CHARACTER AND IDENTITY THROUGH PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS

The look and feel of streets should exemplify the direction Downtown is heading. Street furniture, lighting, signage, street trees and landscaping should play a prominent role in helping to upgrade Downtown streets as spaces that support local business and encourage activity. Making a statement with improved gateways, including strategic investments to highway overpasses, and key Downtown streets will help to welcome residents, employees and visitors alike. Be bold and seek locations for public art and use the example of the Blue Bridge to light other bridges when they require maintenance.

## 5.4 CONTINUE TO ENSURE THE SAFETY AND CLEANLINESS OF DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS

Cleanliness, safety, fun, and attractiveness are the bedrock of the Downtown experience. Without the first two, the second two are not possible. In order for Downtown to continue building momentum, the basics of public realm management and perception will continue to play a critical role. This includes adding more trash and recycling bins in public places, increasing graffiti removal efforts, improving lighting on key Downtown streets, expanding the Downtown Ambassador program and evaluating how snow is removed and managed in ways that are better for the environment.



*Clockwise from the top: Photo suggestion booth images; rendering of potential improvements along Ionia and Division north of I-196; proposed Calder Plaza improvements and; DGRI Ambassadors >>*



## **GOAL 6: RETAIN AND 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.

To accomplish this goal, the following strategies are necessary:

### **6.1 INCREASE INVESTMENT IN AND EXPANSION OF THEME SCHOOLS AND SPECIALIZED PROGRAMS TO RETAIN AND ATTRACT STUDENTS AND PARENTS AND MEET THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE STUDENT AND CITY POPULATION**

An existing partnership between Grand Rapids Public Schools and the Grand Rapids Public Museum has resulted in the IMMERSE program at the Van Andel Museum Center (VAMC). IMMERSE brings classes to the VAMC for a full week so that students can use the Museum as their classroom and take their love of learning to a new level. Building on the success of IMMERSE, GRPS and the GRPM have partnered with Grand Valley State University, Kendall College of Art and Design/FSU, DGRI, and the City of Grand Rapids to build a new theme school in Downtown Grand Rapids. The Museum School will eventually provide educational opportunities to students from grades 6 through 12, with grades 6 through 8 at VAMC and grades 9 through 12 at 54 Jefferson. Implementation of the Museum school is currently underway, with the first 60 students scheduled to begin classes in the fall of 2015 at VAMC.

In addition, investment in both Innovation Central and Grand Rapids Montessori is envisioned to transform these growing programs into exceptional learning environments that provide educational choices for families and rigorous academic training for students. The five distinct academies on this one campus will continue to provide opportunities for a wide-range of interests that will provide skills for the 21st Century economy. Careers in health, science, technology, engineering, design, and business can be initiated and "home-grown" on this campus to provide the future Grand Rapids economy with a supply of knowledge based employees and leaders.

### **6.2 BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH GRAND RAPIDS INSTITUTIONS TO DEVELOP A LOCALLY-ROOTED WORKFORCE**

To address issues of economic inclusion, GRPS will partner with leaders from the fields of business, construction, engineering, and health to build relationships and strengthen quality of instruction at Innovation Central High School. These partnerships will help to build a model private-public partnership that will flourish under the tutelage of leading practitioners, passionate faculty, and engaged students. As the Museum School, Innovation Central, and Montessori are all within very close proximity to Downtown, DGRI and GRPS should collaborate on opportunities to get students more involved in the Downtown experience and grow a sustainable, well-educated workforce.

### **6.3 ENSURE HIGH QUALITY ENVIRONMENTS THAT ENRICH THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE, ELEVATE COMMUNITY INTERACTION, AND CREATE SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL**

The design of both Innovation Central and the Museum School include not just the renovation of older structures and the removal of obsolete ones, but an effort to create a model environment for education and exploration. The result will be schools better connected to transit, safe routes to school on nearby streets, spaces that promote sustainable stormwater management and, new landscapes for learning.

Site plan for Innovation Central High. >>

- ① MONTESSORI STAFF PARKING
- ② VISITORS / EVENT PARKING
- ③ PLAZA / STAGE
- ④ PRE-SCHOOL PLAYGROUND
- ⑤ INFILTRATION-SCAPES
- ⑥ PLAY-SCAPES
- ⑦ OUTDOOR CLASSROOM
- ⑧ GREEN / SOLAR ROOF
- ⑨ SILVICULTURE
- ⑩ FARM
- ⑪ GREENHOUSE
- ⑫ SOLAR ROOF
- ⑬ COMPOST AREA
- ⑭ VISITOR PARKING
- ⑮ INNOVATION CENTRAL STAFF PARKING



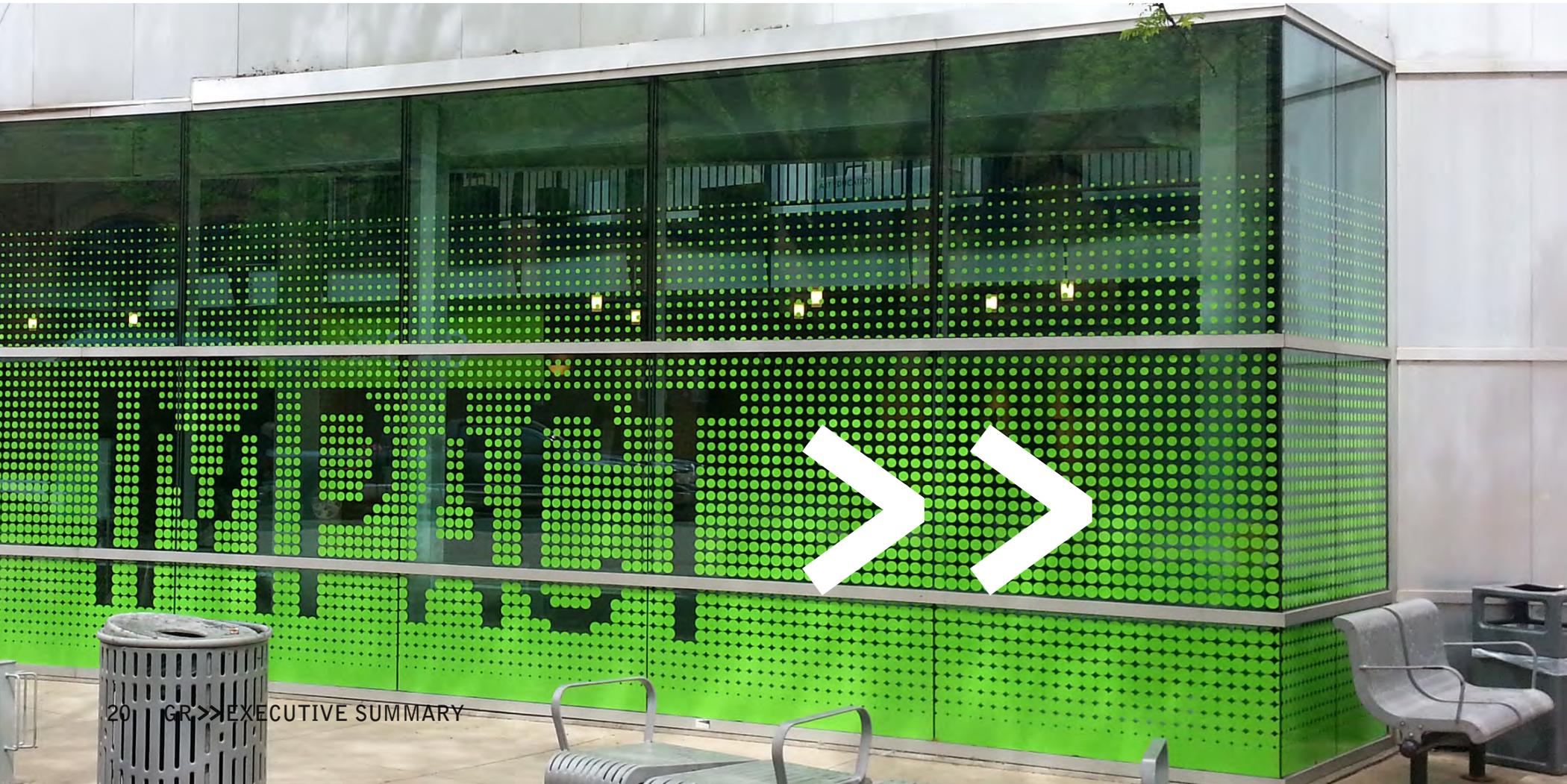
# KEEP MOVING GR...FORWARD

Those that have provided their ideas and helped shape this plan expect results. Downtown and the River are poised for real change that will benefit all of the City and the region.

With this investment strategy in place, the next step is to fully focus on implementation - the act of transforming ideas into reality within our Downtown and along the River for all to inhabit and enjoy. To be successful, GR Forward needs

the continued support and involvement by the whole of our community. Stay involved and continue to raise the expectations of what can be accomplished in Grand Rapids!

To learn more and to stay involved,  
please visit [www.downtowngr.org](http://www.downtowngr.org)







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