

# Downtown Austin Master Plan Update 2014



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## I. Executive Summary

Downtown Austin is at an exciting point in its history – years of investment along Main Street, community efforts, and the planned relocation of the SPAM Museum have spurred new activity in the Downtown Area. The Downtown Master Plan update provides a framework for decision making for the long-term desired outcomes in Downtown Austin.

In June of 2014, the City of Austin commissioned CR Planning, Inc. and SEH, Inc. to update the City's Master Plan for the Downtown Area. The Downtown Master Plan (the Plan) update was completed after several months of working with city staff, key stakeholders, and community members. The Plan addresses a variety of issues that affect how the downtown is used by residents, businesses, and visitors. The Plan is organized into three major sections: Existing Conditions, Desired Conditions, and Strategies. Each section lays out a path for determining where the community is, to where it wants to go, and how it can get there.

Using this framework, the community can take a comprehensive approach to maintaining a thriving downtown that serves as a vibrant destination for people in the region to live, work, and play.

### History

The original Downtown Master Plan – completed in 2005 – focused on redefining Main Street as the destination for retail and entertainment, not only for Austin residents, but also for the region. The Plan developed the concept of creating a “vibrant mass” of restored historic facades, public and private uses, and public green space. Since then, institutions and organizations have worked to implement the Plan, resulting in successfully reinventing Main Street through the renovation of and reinvestment in existing buildings.

The Austin Main Street Project had a direct impact on the revitalization of Main Street. The project was formed after the completion of the 2005 Downtown Master Plan to administer programs for the downtown area, in addition to guiding planning and promotion for the downtown. The Project oversaw a highly successful façade renovation program and a small business improvement program.

Vision 2020 was initiated in 2011 for the purpose of positioning Austin to be regionally competitive and improve quality of life. Since its creation, Vision 2020 has performed extensive outreach within the community and has laid out visions for a variety of issues in the Austin area. The outreach conducted and the momentum that has been built by this organization has been valuable in informing this plan and will be a key entity in achieving desired outcomes looking into the future.

### Planning Process

The Downtown Master Plan update process began in June 2014 and continued through the end of October 2014. The process was designed to incorporate past and ongoing work of city staff, the Vision 2020 process, and the Main Street project to update the focus, goals, and desired outcomes of the Austin Downtown Master Plan.

The project began with a kick-off meeting where stakeholders shared their priorities for the Plan and considerations for the process. Also during this time, the consultant team worked to compile background materials from existing policies, plans, studies, and programs to inform the foundation of the Plan. The final step in gathering initial input and information was the Reconnaissance Visit, a day long participatory event in which the consultant team, city staff, and a number of key stakeholders discussed the geographic, economic, and social context of Austin's Downtown.

After compiling background information and stakeholder input, the consultant team developed a Straw Man Plan. The Straw Man plan is a conceptual document that was intended to elicit response from the community to better inform the draft and final plans. The Straw Man Plan was presented to stakeholders

and their input was incorporated into draft plan. The completed draft plan was then presented to the community, city staff, and elected officials for finishing comments and thoughts. After the incorporation of community input, the final plan has been completed and will be presented to the city council for final approval.

### Existing Conditions

The **Existing Conditions** section answers the “where are we now?” question regarding Austin’s Downtown. The Existing Conditions section includes background on the following components:

- **Vision, Goals, and Policies** of existing plans and documents cross-referenced with priority issues identified by the community and the city.
- **Urban Design**, describing the inter-relationship of social and physical environments and how it creates places that are welcoming.
- **Economic** analysis that assessed the economic health of the downtown area and where it can be strengthened.
- **Natural Systems** in the downtown, which provide value to the community, enhance development opportunities, and strengthen the links with the rest of the city.
- **Housing** in the downtown, currently located on the east side of downtown where apartment buildings provide market rate, affordable, and senior units.
- **Transportation** systems, including the interaction of automobile traffic, pedestrians, cyclists, and transit options.
- **Sustainability** of downtown investments, infrastructure, and natural systems,.
- **Development Standards** for the downtown area and the relationship to desired outcomes.

### Desired Conditions

The **Desired Conditions** section describes the long-term outcomes that the community of Austin wants to achieve in the Downtown area – it answers the question “Where do we want to be?”

The Desired Conditions are presented in guiding principles, vision statements, goals, and policies:

1. **Guiding principles** are broad concepts that should guide all decision making in regard to development, redevelopment, public investment, and public management in downtown.
2. **Vision statements** describe the general desired outcome for a particular area, from the standpoint of a person 15-20 years in the future.
3. **Goals** are more specific statements that describe components of the vision statement, such as desired outcome for specific geographic areas or issues raised by community members or stakeholders.
4. **Policies** describe not only the goals but identify steps to achieving the goals.

This section looks at the desired conditions for Downtown Influence Areas, Greater Downtown, and the Downtown Core Areas.

The **Downtown Influence Areas** are locations outside the downtown that have been identified by stakeholders as places that have connections to the downtown or influence it in some way. The City should consider how management decisions affect the downtown, to maximize synergies and minimize potential conflicts. These areas include:

1. **High School/Institution** Area at 301 3<sup>rd</sup> Street NW.
2. **Employment Zone**, including Mayo Hospital and facilities, Hormel and Quality Pork facilities and related employment north of the YMCA and south of the North Business District.

3. **North Business District** is the commercial area primarily on the south/west side of the Cedar River on either Main Street and north of the Employment Zone.
4. **YMCA Redevelopment Area** includes several city blocks between downtown and the Employment Zone.
5. **South Business Corridor** connects the downtown planning area with the commercial development along Oakland/1<sup>st</sup> Avenue South running east to the Sterling Shopping Center.
6. **Cedar River East Bank** is the area immediately east across the Cedar River from the downtown planning area, including Packer Arena and the homes and businesses along the River.

**The Greater Downtown** includes the area historically considered as the central business district. There are five distinct policy areas within the Greater Downtown:

1. **West Supportive**, a four-block area between the High School and the Main Street Core area. This area includes a significant amount of surface parking facilities that support the Main Street Core in addition to several auto-oriented businesses and institutions such as churches.
2. **East Supportive**, including approximately nine blocks between 3rd Avenue N and Oakland Avenue, and 1st street NE and 4th Street NE. Existing uses include public and private institutional uses, service businesses, multi-family housing, and a lot of surface parking.
3. **South Supportive**, The South Supportive area includes the three-block area focused on the intersections of Main Street with Oakland Avenue and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue South
4. **Mill Pond and the Riverfront**, including the public recreation areas and floodplain restricted areas on the south side of Mill Pond to the developed lots along 4th Avenue NE and the west bank of the Cedar River over to 4th Street NE. The areas are primarily owned or controlled by the City or other public entities.
5. **Post Office Development Area**, approximately six blocks south of Oakland Avenue and east of 1<sup>st</sup> Street SE, extending to the Riverfront blocks and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue SE. The area includes a mix of residential, institutional, commercial, and light industrial uses.

For each of these supportive areas the Plan identifies a long term vision, and goals and policies that identify desired future conditions for these areas and aspirational outcomes to create an economical and socially self-sustaining regional destination.

The Plan also describes desired future conditions for the Greater Downtown transportation system. The transportation system includes the sidewalks, trails, bicycle facilities, parking facilities, transit services and streets. Key to enhancing these facilities is an understanding of how the downtown street network functions and relates to adjacent land uses.

**The Downtown Core Area** is the main focus of the downtown plan and includes Main Street Corridor and the 4th Avenue Cultural Corridor. The Downtown Core desired conditions include goals and policies that apply to the entire downtown core, and goals and policies that are specific to one of the two key activity corridors that comprise the area: the Main Street Corridor and the 4th Avenue Cultural Corridor.

The Downtown Core section recommends site-specific redevelopment, restructuring, and renovation areas, consistent with the visions, goals, and policies of the area. The overall vision of the Downtown Core is:

*To create an economic, cultural and environmentally sustainable vibrant area within the Greater Downtown and larger community of Austin that serves as a primary regional destination for visitors.*

The visions for each of the specific core areas are:

**Main Street Corridor Vision:** An economically self-sustaining commercial corridor that embodies the historic and cultural character of Austin, provides a variety of services and goods to residents and visitors, and serves as the hub of Austin's multi-modal transportation system. Gateway

developments at the Oakland Avenue and 5th Place NE intersections create a clear commercial identity and new commercial development wraps around the corners at intersections along the corridor. Trees and other green infrastructure complement the public realm.

**Cultural Corridor Vision:** A pedestrian-oriented mixed-use corridor with entertainment and art-focused businesses, public spaces and uses, and high quality urban scale housing mixed with other uses. The corridor includes protected historic structures and historic designs along its entire length. Pedestrian and bike gateways open to Mill Pond and to both banks of the Cedar River. The street design characteristics should promote walkability and emphasize slower vehicle speeds.

### Strategies

Finally the Strategies section of the plan lays out how the City can get from “where we are now” to “where we want to go.” The Plan recommends eight specific implementation strategies for achieving the desired future for Austin’s downtown:

1. **Develop organizational infrastructure** to manage implementation efforts.
2. **Revise development regulations** to reflect desired outcomes in the Downtown and influence areas.
3. **Continue financial assistance programs** for façade and business improvements.
4. **Create specific redevelopment plans** for targeted Downtown Core restructuring areas.
5. **Incorporate transportation and infrastructure improvements** into the capital improvement plan and other capital projects to ensure opportunistic implementation of infrastructure elements of the Plan.
6. **Create appropriate green infrastructure standards** for Greater Downtown and Downtown Core to improve walkability and improve functioning of natural systems that support downtown development.
7. **Consider development of a Heritage Preservation Commission** to ensure consistent management of historic and cultural resources consistent with community standards.
8. **Consider sustainable building design and public infrastructure standards** to minimize operating costs for building infrastructure and improve the multi-functional purpose of infrastructure.

## II. Introduction

### What is a Downtown Master Plan?

The Master Plan serves as a framework for decision making by providing context and identifying priorities for the long-term desired outcomes in the downtown area.

The plan addresses a variety of topics and issues that affect how downtown is used by residents, businesses, and visitors. By identifying the desired mix of uses, enhancing opportunities for downtown housing, and managing the “public realm” of streets, bikeways, walkways, and green infrastructure the plan becomes the foundation for making Austin a better place to live and work.

What makes downtown exciting are the people enjoying restaurants, boutique shops, theatres, churches, museums, art centers, sidewalk activities, parks, and space to interact with others. The components of a downtown are packed into a relatively tight space – but designed correctly these are the things that make for a vibrancy that draws people.

### Why a New Downtown Master Plan?

The original Downtown Master Plan, developed in 2005, focused on redefining the Main Street as the destination for retail and entertainment, not only for citizens of Austin, but for the region. While areas other than the Main Street corridor were important to the downtown’s long-term success, the critical priority was redefining Main Street and recreating the heart of the community through encouraging public improvements and amenities and completion of private development projects that resulted in the reconfiguration of key blocks.

The successful implementation of the 2005 Plan included renovation of and reinvestment in buildings and facades along and near to Main Street over the subsequent nine years. The Austin Main Street Project oversaw more than 40 renovations, and worked with businesses, government, and non-profit organizations to promote Main Street as a commercial corridor and as the center of Austin’s larger community. As new redevelopment projects began to move forward, including the relocation of the Spam museum to the site of the downtown fire along Main Street, and the likely redevelopment of the power plant site along the Cedar River, the 2005 Plan was no longer sufficient to provide guidance to these projects. In addition, a new emphasis on opportunities along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE sparked an interest in creating a “cultural corridor” that could complement the Main Street commercial district and bring additional vibrancy to the downtown.

Consequently, in June 2014 the City of Austin commissioned CR Planning, Inc. and SEH, Inc. to update the City’s Master Plan for the downtown area. The process would be rooted in the existing policies and ongoing stakeholder engagement, affirm or modify the historic focus of the city’s downtown planning and programs, and provide context for ongoing discussions about redevelopment and public investment in the downtown area. The new Downtown Master Plan would emphasize building on the successes of the 2005 Plan, extending the planning effort to additional nearby areas, and considering new best practices for sustaining downtown areas into the future.

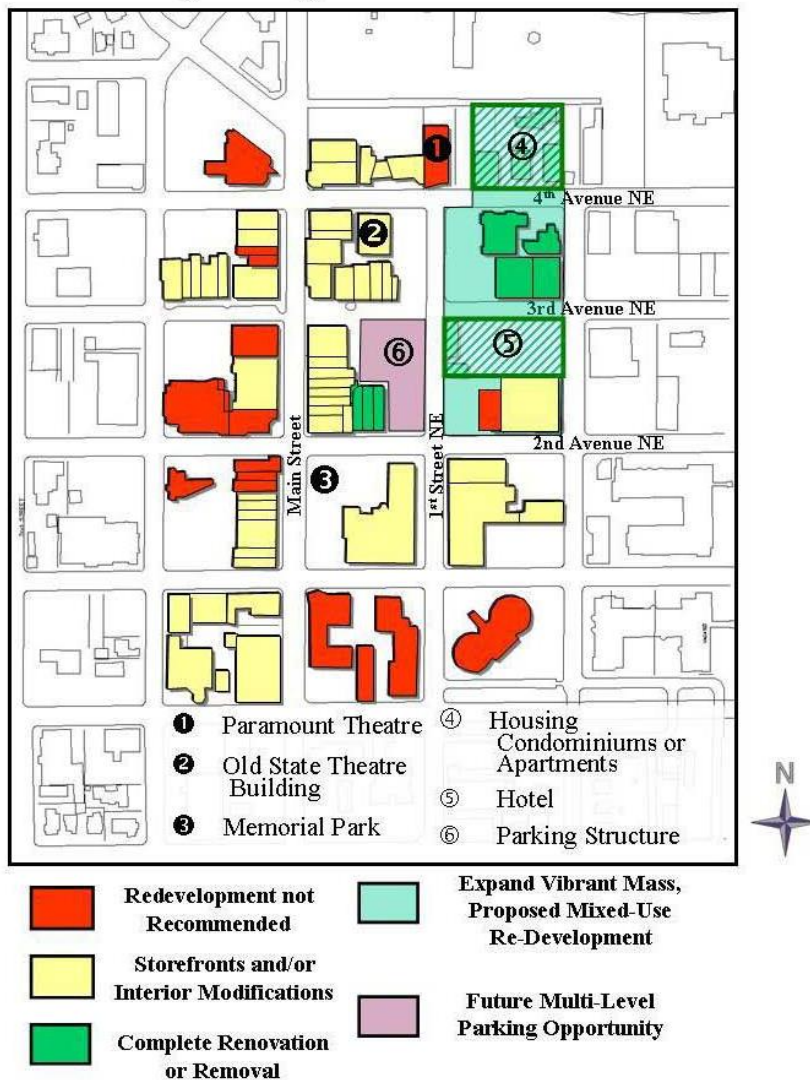


### III. History

#### Existing Plan

The original Downtown Master Plan (the Plan) was initiated in 2005 and focused on Main Street businesses, buildings, surrounding institutions, and infrastructure, laying out a blueprint to revitalize a 15 block area centered on Main Street. The Plan developed on the concept of creating a “vibrant mass” of restored historic facades, public and private uses, and public green space.

#### Expanding to Vibrant Mass



Source: 2005 City of Austin Downtown Master Plan

Over the next eight years the City and a variety of institutions and organizations worked to implement the Plan. Implementation efforts resulted in successfully sustaining and revitalizing dozens of Austin’s downtown commercial buildings and spaces, re-characterizing Austin’s downtown identity, and creating organizational infrastructure and collaborative initiatives across public, private, and non-profit institutions.

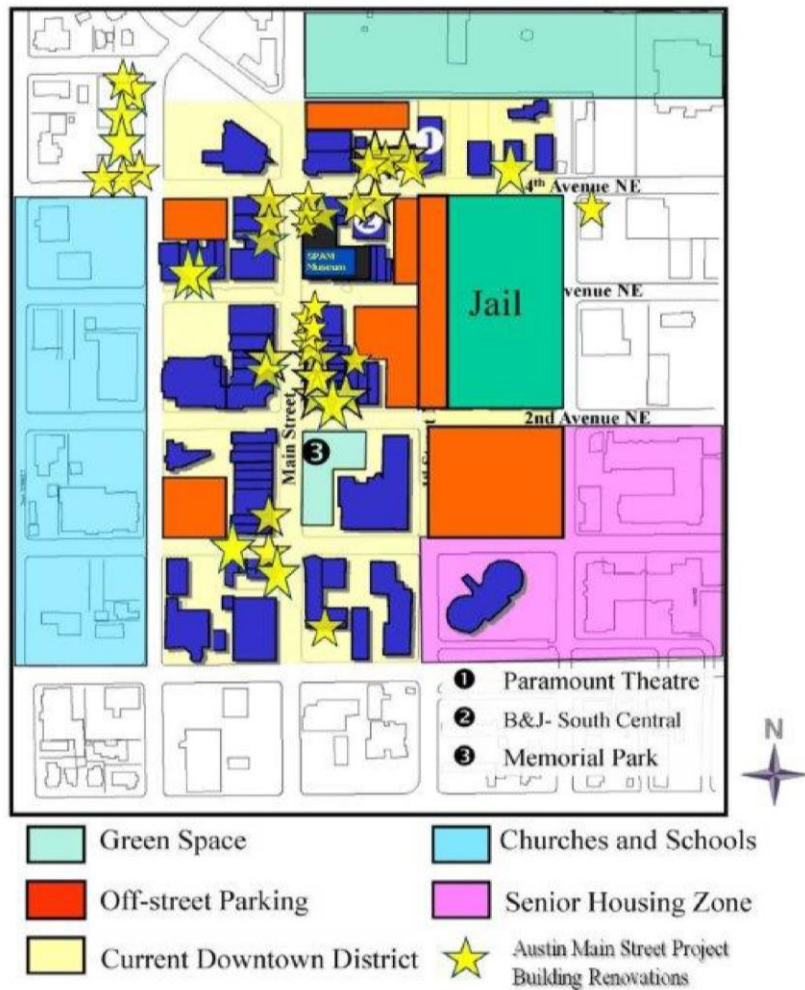
**Vision 2020**

Moreover, in 2011, the City and stakeholders initiated a new effort, named Vision 2020, to create projects that would position Austin to be regionally competitive and improve quality of life. The Vision 2020 process identified a number of projects that brought renewed focus and identified outcomes for Austin’s downtown. The projects included planning for significant public investment and facilities, such as a new community recreation center. The Vision 2020 projects and other planning work also addressed issues in the 2005 Plan, unforeseen events (such as the Main Street fire that destroyed several buildings and the decommissioning of the downtown power plant), and an expanded emphasis on natural and cultural resources in and around the downtown. Vision 2020 was organized as a non-profit entity that continues to work on the projects identified in the 2011 community engagement process, and related projects.

**Austin Main Street Project**

The Austin Main Street Project was formed after the completion of the 2005 Downtown Master Plan. The Project was funded by several public and private organizations, including the Development Corporation of Austin, the Austin Port Authority, the Hormel Foundation and the City of Austin. The Project administered several programs and promotions for the downtown area identified in the 2005 Plan, including a very successful façade renovation program and a small business improvement program. Over 40 buildings were improved within the downtown area and agreed to abide by the design standards created under the Main Street Project and administered by the Port Authority.

The Project also advocated for and helped develop residential options in the downtown, particularly in unused second stories of retail businesses on Main Street. The second-story apartments have a low vacancy rate, indicating a strong potential rental market.



Source: Austin Main Street Project

**Other Initiatives**

Austin also adopted new initiatives and policies to sustain the city into future, including recognition of the value of multi-modal travel in its Complete Streets policy, trail mapping, planning, and trail development. The City joined the GreenStep Cities program in 2012, documented a number of sustainability initiatives including the downtown plan implementation efforts, and set the stage for moving further along the path to sustainability. Several studies were also conducted since 2011 that provided recommendations to City decision-makers and staff, including the 2013 Retail Trade Analysis and the 2013 Housing Study.

## IV. Planning Process

The Downtown Master Plan update process took place over a four-month period, starting in June of 2014. The process was designed to incorporate the ongoing work of city staff, the Vision 2020 process and project work, and the Austin Main Street Project to update the focus, goals, and desired outcomes of the Austin Downtown Master Plan. The process key components included several rounds of engaging stakeholders over the planning process and creating several iterations of a new Downtown Master Plan.



### Kick-Off

The project team visited Austin in mid-June for a kick-off meeting in which various stakeholders were invited to attend and share thoughts on their priorities for Downtown Master Plan Update and considerations for the process. Approximately two-dozen people attended the night's event and each shared his or her desire for what they would like to see downtown Austin. Those opinions are reflected in the plan that follows.

### Background

In preparation for the kick-off visit and in order to have complete information to help guide the project, the consultant team compiled background information from a number of sources. Sources included various policies and actions the city has taken since adopting the 2005 Master Plan as noted in the History section. Given the short timeframe and the limited community outreach for the development of this plan, existing information and tangent efforts proved an invaluable resource to inform this plan.

### Reconnaissance Visit

The Downtown Master Plan Update process began with a day-long participatory event in which the consultant team, city staff, businesses, Vision 20/20 volunteers and staff, non-governmental and semi-governmental organizations, and members of the general public discussed the geographic, economic, and social extent of Austin's Downtown. Stakeholder organizations that participated in the discussions included:

- Austin Main Street Project
- Development Corporation of Austin
- Austin Port Authority
- Vision 20/20 committee volunteers
- City staff (Community Development, Public Works)
- City elected officials
- Mower County staff



Reconnaissance Visit. Photo Credit: CR Planning

- Hormel Foundation
- Hormel Corporation/Spam Museum

These stakeholders, along with members of the general public not affiliated with an organization, participated in focused meetings, individual interviews, site tours and walking tours, and public meetings.

The groups were asked to identify a downtown planning area consistent with their ongoing work and projects, define a new “core” downtown area that incorporated changing policies and issues that evolved since 2005, and discussed short and long-term priorities for making downtown a vibrant center for the entire city.

### ***Straw Man Plan***

The Straw Man Plan was developed based on existing visions, goals, and strategies in the Comprehensive Plan, the 2005 Downtown Master Plan, Vision 2020 outcomes, existing worked proposed on redevelopment sites, economic and housing studies, and the input from the reconnaissance visit. The Straw Man Plan is a conceptual document intended to elicit response from the community to better inform the draft and final plan. This plan was presented to stakeholders in two sessions (to accommodate stakeholders’ schedules and availability), presented to the media, and offered for review and comment on the City’s website. Stakeholder organizations and city agencies reviewed the Straw Man Plan and provided comments and feedback to be incorporated into the draft and final plans, as appropriate.

### ***Draft Plan***

The Draft Plan was developed after receiving feedback on the Straw Man Plan. The Draft Plan modified, added, and removed content from the Straw Man Plan based on community and stakeholder input. In comments, stakeholders raised questions about or offered additional information on background material, asked for clarification on some vision, goal, and policy language, affirmed or endorsed material or recommendations in the Straw Man Plan, and offered some additional or new language on the Desired Conditions Section. The most significant addition was the expansion of Section 7, the Strategies section.

The general response from stakeholders to the Straw Man Plan was affirmation and endorsement. However, as might be expected, not all comments were in agreement. The Draft Plan addressed differing visions and priorities expressed in the comments by balancing or noting some alternative concepts.

The completed Draft Plan was presented to staff and elected officials for final modifications. A community meeting was also held to present the Draft Plan for finishing comments and thoughts by interested businesses, residents, and organizations.

### ***Final Plan***

Final modifications in response to the community meeting were incorporated into the Final plan. The Final Plan was submitted to the Planning Commission for review and public hearing. The Planning Commission recommended the Final Plan to City Council, and the City Council adopted the Final Plan on \_\_\_\_\_, 2014.

## V. Existing Conditions

The Existing Conditions section answers the “where are we now?” question regarding Austin’s downtown. Knowing the downtown existing conditions lays the foundation for identifying where the community wants to go.

The Existing Conditions section includes the following components:

1. **Vision, Goals, and Policies**, which provide an analysis of existing goals and policies in current documents cross-referenced with the priority areas laid out by the community and city.
2. **Urban Design** describes the current visual impact of the downtown in its current state.
3. **An Economic** analysis was performed, to the extent possible, to determine the health of the downtown area and where it can be strengthened.
4. **Natural Systems** in the downtown provide value to the community, enhance development opportunities, and strengthen the links between the downtown and the rest of the city.
5. **Housing** in downtown is primarily located on the east side of downtown where apartment buildings provide market rate, affordable, and senior units.
6. **Transportation** includes the interaction of automobile traffic, pedestrians, cyclists, and transit options.
7. **Sustainability** is important to the community, but is not explicitly addressed in most city documents.
8. **Development Standards** for the downtown area include seven different zoning districts.

Austin’s Downtown Master Plan uses the elements listed above to answer the question “where are we now”.



Downtown Austin, view of Main Street. Photo Credit: CR Planning

### *Visions, Plans, Policies*

Austin has significant resources in its existing policies and goals that provide valuable background material to inform the Downtown Master Plan Update. Current documents and community input help describe the future vision of downtown and how it fits into the larger Austin community. Relevant policies and goals have been extracted from various city documents and put into a matrix to help organize them into a usable format that serves as a checklist throughout the development of the Downtown Master Plan. Each of the elements included in the matrix have been incorporated into the Goals and Policies sections of this plan for all of the downtown areas.

In the organization of the matrix, these priority areas were cross-referenced with existing policies and goals to identify overlaps and gaps and to establish existing, documented priorities in the community. The inventory of existing documents includes:

- 2005 Downtown Master Plan
- Austin Comprehensive Plan
- Vision 2020 Goals
- The Comprehensive Housing Study
- Vibrant Mass
- Complete Streets Policy

Each document was then reviewed to extract relevant goals and policies for the downtown area. Preceding community and City input informed the categorization of the goals and policies under various priority areas, previously established. Priority areas of concern related to downtown include the following:

- Development (housing, commercial)
- Sustainability
- Transportation/Connectivity
- Parking
- Streetscape
- Vibrancy
- Water Access

### **Matrix Summary**

Upon completing the matrix overlaps and gaps among the various documents became apparent and illustrated how the existing policies and goals are useful in supporting a new Downtown Master Plan. Each of the existing goals and policies were incorporated into the desired future conditions, which are used to inform the policy recommendations and strategies set forth in the Downtown Master Plan. A summary of the policies and goals are included below:

**Development.** Development – including residential and commercial – is a primary factor in shaping the downtown area. Elements related to future development were included across all policy documents in the matrix, demonstrating consistency and providing support for how stakeholders envision building out downtown.

- Fill in vacancies (e.g. second floor space)
- Encourage a variety of economic activity
- Preserve historic buildings
- Remove blighted buildings
- Increase Multi-family housing
- Improve connections to nearby and outlying areas

**Sustainability.** Sustainability is frequently mentioned as an important element of Austin moving forward. However, the explicit mention of sustainability is limited in existing documents.

- Increased and connected green space
- Improved bicycle/pedestrian access
- Building reuse

**Transportation and Connectivity:** Enhanced connection from downtown to the larger community and region is crucial to bringing more people into downtown to support economic viability. Goals and policies related to connecting downtown to the region were included in multiple policy documents.

- Add “gateway” to downtown
- Multi-modal connections
- Accessible CBD
- Better signage

**Parking:** Residents and business leaders have made it clear that ample parking is a necessary part of any future growth in downtown Austin. Policy documents recognize that there are opportunities to consolidate parking and improve existing parking areas.

- Should be ample parking for any new housing
- Parking ramp
- Clean up alleys and dumpsters

**Streetscapes:** Streetscapes help to define the character of a community; Austin policies and goals reflect the importance placed on this concept and elements of design were included in nearly all policy documents.

- Urban Plaza
- Historic lighting
- Outdoor seating
- Public art
- Updated facades
- Improved landscape



View of Main Street in Downtown Austin. Photo Credit: CR Planning.



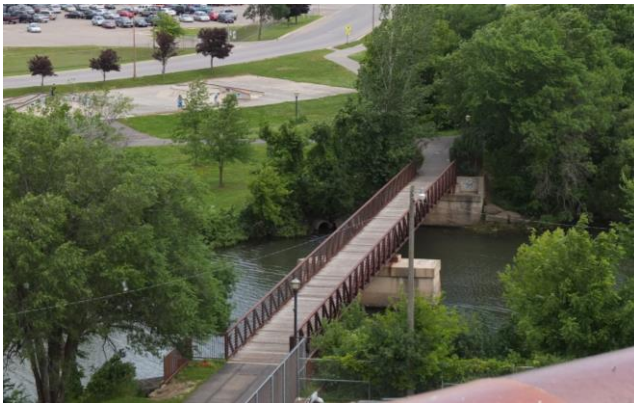
**Vibrancy:** Vibrancy has become an important word in Downtown Austin among stakeholders. The Vibrant Mass document was used to define what it means to establish vibrancy and various elements of that definition were repeatedly found within existing policy documents.

- Promote efforts to attract people to downtown
- Recruit businesses
- Bring entertainment downtown (microbrewer, outdoor dining, music venue, etc.)

**Water Access:** Downtown Austin is situated near the south shore of Mill Pond and the west bank of the Cedar River. Community members and stakeholders have made it clear that they would like to see better use of the waterways, though there are limited formal goals and policies.

- Maintain clean, natural shoreline and waterway
- Enhance recreation opportunities

While the matrix is a comprehensive inventory of current goals and policies, it does not incorporate goals and suggestions put forth by community members who have participated in the development of this plan. Those goals, as well as those listed here, are included in the policy recommendations section of this plan.



## *Urban Design*

### **Main Street**

The downtown Main Street corridor between Oakland and 5<sup>th</sup> Place NW is well defined by a mix of fairly continuous commercial and civic buildings. Many of these buildings are two stories in height, which provides a comfortable sense of enclosure to the downtown streetscape. Previous façade renovations also contribute to the corridor's attractive visual appeal, and combined with occasional awnings, decorative streetlights and comfortably wide sidewalks – this is downtown Austin's most vibrant area. Shortcomings include a lack of shade (no street trees), inadequate signing or wayfinding to public facilities such as parking lots, library and riverfront, and unoccupied upper stories which would provide more evening inhabitants and eyes on the street.

### **4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Cultural Corridor**

While 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE is beginning to emerge as a cultural corridor a number of things need to happen before this vision is achieved. The area between 1<sup>st</sup> St. and Main Street is well defined by several traditional commercial buildings including the Paramount Theater. Moving eastward, visual character begins to diminish especially along the south side of the avenue where surface parking and minimally landscaped space occupy over half of the frontage. The north side of the avenue is more attractive and better defined by a mix of older buildings, the heavily landscaped library parking lot and the old power plant site.

### **East Supportive**

The east side of the Larger Downtown is nondescript with intermittent buildings, extensive surface parking lots, disconnected streets and a mix of civic, institutional, service and residential uses. There is a distinct lack of enclosure and undefined visual character due to the intermittent nature of buildings, lack of street trees and prevalence of surface parking lots. Additionally, the form and style of some of the multifamily housing is of a more suburban nature, with single points of entry, large continuous pitched roofs, landscaped setbacks, driveways and surface parking lots. Sidewalk location and width varies in this area with some walkways such as along 1<sup>st</sup> St. NE and Oakland being separated from the street by a lawn area and others such as along 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> streets NE running continuously from the back of curb. On-street parking is prevalent throughout the area and helps to provide a buffer between the vehicular travel-way and the sidewalk. While the Cedar River runs along the eastern edge of this area, its location is not apparent due current land use patterns, vegetation and topography.

### **West Supportive**

The west side of the Larger Downtown is the four-block area that lies between the High School (and surrounding influence area) and the Main Street Core area. This area includes a significant amount of open, un-landscaped surface parking facilities that support the Main Street Core in addition to several auto-oriented businesses (also with drive-throughs) and institutions such as churches. Visual character shifts 1<sup>st</sup> St. NW to 2<sup>nd</sup> St. NW due to the significance of the Austin High School campus with its landscaped lawn areas and the residential tree lined streets to the north.

**Economic**

**Downtown Economic Base and Retail Analysis**

The Main Street Corridor (the full blocks on either side of Main Street) is the primary business area of the downtown, with over 80 small businesses. Businesses along or adjacent to Main Street include a breadth of business types serving a variety of markets, including retail goods, specialty goods, restaurants and bars, professional offices, non-profit organizations, and governmental offices.

A walking inventory was conducted of the larger downtown area to identify the number and types of businesses in downtown, including the primary Main Street Corridor and surrounding supportive areas. Service businesses were the most prominent type of business, composing approximately half of the businesses in the larger downtown. Service industries were broken into several categories including professional and business facilities such as law offices and financial advisors, retail such as hair, personal, and health services, and financial institutions such as banks and credit unions. Retail establishments comprise approximately a quarter of businesses. Retail was similarly broken into subcategories including grocery, food and bar service, and others. The other prominent category is government/non profit institutions that comprise approximately 23% of businesses. Only a few rental-housing properties are in the downtown, although these are a significant land use in the larger downtown, as noted below.

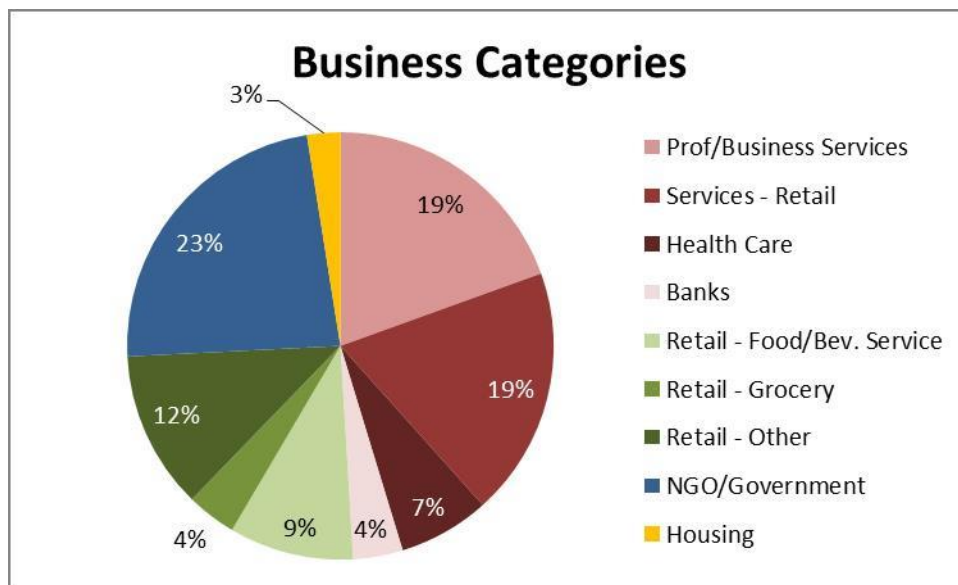


Figure 1 Business categories based on inventory.

Employment in the downtown was not independently assessed, but the largest employers are clearly the government sector, with the County Courthouse and Judicial Center being the most prominent employment centers and the largest land uses. All the other downtown businesses are much smaller as measured by employment.

**Housing as Economic Engine**

Housing is a prominent land use in the Greater Downtown area, centered in three large multifamily rental properties, all managed by the Austin Housing Redevelopment Authority (HRA). Housing does not figure prominently in the number of business, nor is housing a significant employer. Housing does, however, play a critical role in the economic sustainability of the commercial core, creating an important market that is distinguished from the rest of the downtown’s market area; multi-family housing and other high density residential development that is walkable to commercial clusters is a distinct market from customers who are

driving. The number of driving trips originating at residential land uses declines significantly when commercial land uses are accessible to pedestrians in the residential uses.

### Destination Business

An important element of successful downtowns is the presence of “destination” businesses.

Destination businesses are places that bring people to the downtown and encourage them to stay.

Examples include restaurants, bars, and coffee shops, but also include clusters of similar businesses such as retail stores that create a shopping experience or tourist or entertainment venues such as the Spam Museum and Paramount Theater. Downtown Austin has a number of destination businesses.

Within the retail sector, the downtown has 15 businesses that primarily serve food and beverages, including a number of sit down restaurants and bars. Several groceries catering to ethnic or cultural markets are located downtown, and a few specialty retail stores.

The pending relocation of the Spam Museum to Main Street adds a significant destination business to the downtown mix. The Spam Museum and the Paramount Theater are both part of Austin’s tourist trade, and these uses will now be a mere block apart. Moreover, the 2014 opening of the ArtWorks Center on Main Street creates additional potential synergy with these other entertainment options. With these foundational attractions, Austin has the opportunity to create a cluster of venues and businesses that create a downtown destination.



Downtown Destination Businesses, Photo Credit: CR Planning

### Competing Commercial Areas

The core downtown area is linked to another business node outside the larger downtown area, the Sterling Shopping Center via a commercial corridor between Oakland Avenue W and 1st Avenue S. The same corridor also provides a transportation link to the East Side shopping center and commercial business area. The commercial corridor has mostly sporadic commercial businesses intermixed with some residential and institutional uses. The greatest concentrations of commercial activity are in and immediately adjacent to Sterling Shopping Center and the commercial node at 4th Street SW, where Oakland/1st Avenue S. Fourth Street (SW and NW) has the highest average daily traffic counts in Austin. As with the Main Street business area, there is a mix of primarily small business types, serving a variety of retail and service markets. Businesses include some auto/traffic dependent establishments such as fast food restaurants, gas stations, and convenience stores.

A small cluster of businesses outside of the downtown, but still along Main Street, can be found north of the hospital and Spam Museum, where Main Street crosses the Cedar River. These businesses have historically been at risk of flooding from the Cedar River, but a new flood control project will significantly limit that risk into the future. Due to a lessened flood risk, and the relocation of the Spam Museum to downtown, this area is likely to see greater opportunity for investment, and some change in market focus.

**Employment Areas**

The Austin downtown is adjacent to the primary campuses of Austin’s two largest employers (Hormel Foods, with over 4,000 employees, and the Mayo Clinic Health System, with over 900 employees). Hormel Foods’ primary facility is located across the Cedar River/ Mill Pond from the larger downtown area but also has some buildings in the employment area north of downtown, along with an associated large employer, Quality Pork. Employment centers near the downtown commercial areas can contribute significantly to sustaining the commercial core under the right circumstances and for market segments that serve employees’ needs.

**Retail Trade Analysis**

In 2013 the Minnesota Cooperative Extension, Center for Community Vitality completed a Retail Trade Analysis for the City of Austin and Mower County, a study sponsored by the Austin Area Chamber of Commerce. The study examined the retail activity in Austin and Mower County by sector and over time, including data up to 2011. The analysis focuses on retail trade – the sale of goods to the end-use consumer – and thus does not capture all the economic sectors that contribute to the economic sustainability of the downtown. Retail trade businesses comprise only a quarter of the downtown businesses. In addition, the Retail Trade Analysis focuses on taxable sales as its primary metric, and consequently does not capture sales activity that is not taxed. Gross sales data is provided for the entire retail sector, but not by subsector.

Although retail trade is only a quarter of downtown businesses, it is a critical component of the downtown’s economic vitality, and understanding the implications of the city’s overall retail trade position will help define opportunities and risks for the downtown. Moreover, retail trade tends to be a job intensive sector of the economy, and thus probably contributes more significantly to downtown employment than its representation by the number of businesses.

As the data time series ends in 2011, the analysis captures the effects of the national recession that started in 2008, but does not capture the effects of the recovery. Some care should be taken when using this study’s results to consider the national recovery that has been realized since 2011.

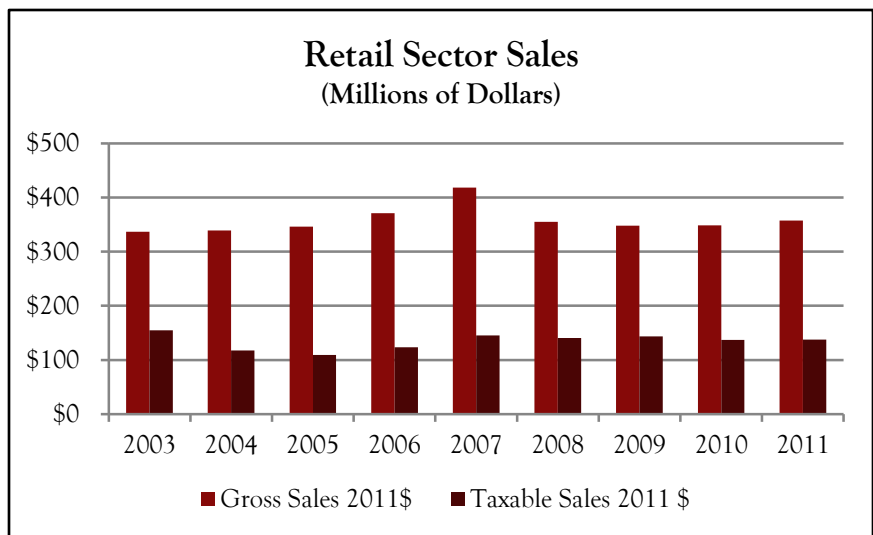


Figure 2 Source: Retail Trade Analysis

**Primary Retail Sectors**

Total retail sales (taxable sales) were \$137 million in 2011, down slightly from 2008 (accounting for inflation). The most significant sectors of retail activity, as measured in taxable sales, were:

1. General Merchandise Stores (\$33 million)
2. Eating and Drinking (\$30 million)
3. Food and Groceries (\$18 million)

These three sectors accounted for 57% of Austin’s total taxable sales in 2008, and almost 60% in 2011. The remaining 11 retail sectors, including such sectors as building materials, lodging and accommodations, and motor vehicles/parts, all accounted for much smaller portions of Austin’s total retail activity. Of these three primary retail sectors, the downtown area contributes significantly to the eating and drinking sector, but more marginally to the general merchandise and food and grocery sectors.

**Pull Factors**

Part of Extension’s methodology includes comparing Austin’s retail activity by sector to the entire state, based on per capita taxable sales. The analysis calculates a “pull factor,” which measures how retail activity is higher or lower on a per capita basis than in the state as a whole. A “pull factor” of 1.0 indicates that the City is on par with the rest of the state, while a number greater or less than 1.0 indicates the City has more or less retail activity than the rest of the state. This analysis can shed light on the opportunities for business recruitment, fostering entrepreneurship, business retention and enabling expansion of existing businesses.

The Retail Trade Analysis finds that the retail sector in Austin has a low (0.59 in 2011) retail “pull factor,” the measure of how Austin’s retail sector performs compared to the rest of Minnesota. The pull factor has increased significantly since 2004 (from 0.45 to 0.59) but remains well below 1.0, the level at which Austin’s per capita taxable sales would be at par with the state.

Since pull factors are based on per capita sales, some care needs to be taken when interpreting the pull factor to account for differences in prices in different market areas across the state. Prices for goods in Austin may be lower than for the same goods in other parts of the state, which would mean that an equivalent amount of market activity (by sales volume rather than dollars) would show a pull factor of less than 1.0.

While Austin appears to underperform the state in retail sales, the pull factor analysis shows that Austin performs well in some retail sectors and poorly in others. In the Eating and Drinking sector Austin had a pull factor of 1.0 in 2008, and was just under 1.0 in 2011. Given the Eating and Drinking sector’s

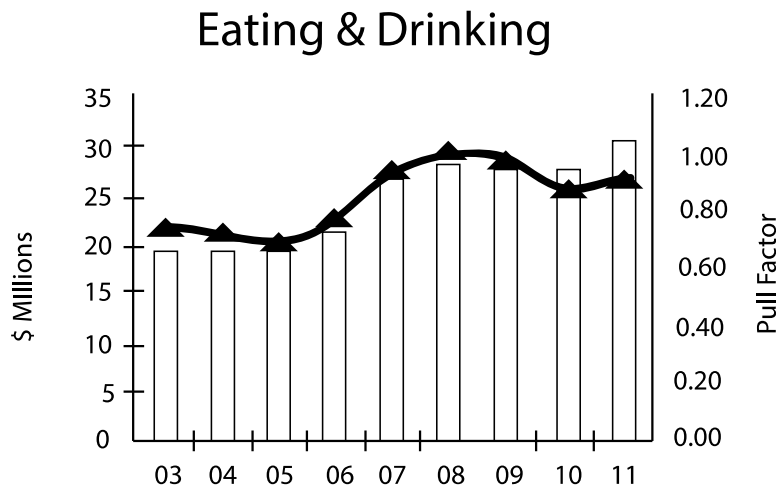


Figure 3. Source: Retail Trade Analysis

importance in the downtown, this finding shows that Austin’s downtown is competitive in a key retail sector, but has room for improvement. The pull factor indicates that Austin downtown may not be serving as a regional attraction, but is showing strength and sustaining itself economically.

In contrast, the downtown has a number of businesses providing personal services, such as hair and beauty shops, photography and related services, laundry, and similar services. This sector is a small contributor to Austin’s overall retail sector as measured by taxable

sales, and the pull factor for this sector is quite low, less than 0.50 in 2011, and lower in earlier years. While some of this may be accounted by differences in prices, these businesses may not be generating the kind of activity seen elsewhere in the state.

**Expected Sales**

Expected sales is a measurement that allow Austin to evaluate how the city’s retail businesses perform compared with other Minnesota cities of a similar size, comparing Austin to its peers across the state. Expected sales provide a different indicator than pull factor for whether the city is a regional draw for a given retail market, or whether the city is losing market share to other areas. Expected sales does include, as a component, the pull factor for the peer cities against which the expected sales metric is applied. Thus, if pull factors are similarly low for Austin and for its peer cities, this metric would account for that as a structural difference between Austin and the state as a whole and more accurately represent the strength of Austin’s retail sector.

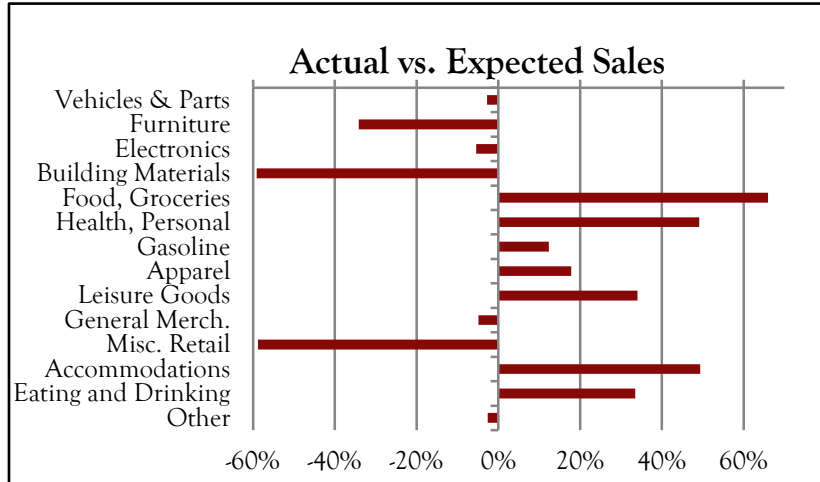


Figure 4 Source: Retail Trade Analysis

Expected sales are compared to actual sales, and the result is a calculation of “surplus” or “leakage” in Austin’s market. A surplus shows that Austin is serving as a regional draw, a leakage shows Austin is losing market share to other retail centers.

Using the Expected Sales comparison, Austin demonstrates net “surplus” with an overall surplus of over 13% in 2011. This indicates that the city’s retail sector is a regional center for retail activity. But as with the pull factor, there are substantial variations by retail sector. The implications for the downtown are similarly related more to those retail sectors that are located in the downtown, or that have growth opportunities in the downtown.

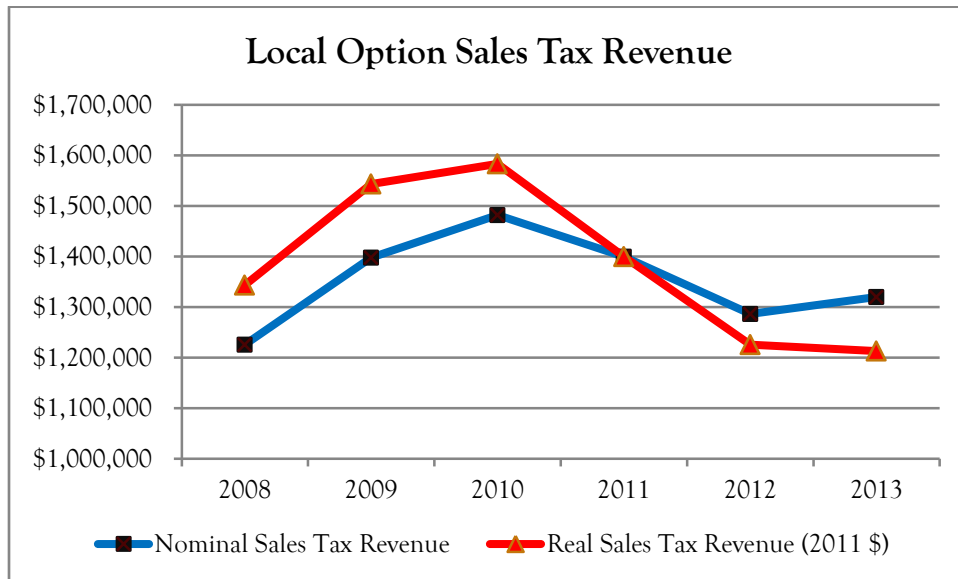
The three sectors (General Merchandise, Food and Drinking, Food and Groceries) that dominate taxable sales for Austin show wide variation in the Expected Sales metric:

- General Merchandise Stores - Leakage of 4.9%
- Eating and Drinking - Surplus of 33.5%
- Food and Groceries - Surplus of 66%

As with the pull factors, the most prominent retail sector in the downtown (Eating and Drinking) shows very strong performance compared to peer communities. Most of the retail sectors show surpluses. Two of the three retail sectors that most prominently lag (Building Materials, Furniture) are not downtown retail sectors. All these data indicate that the downtown retail sector is economically well positioned.

**Local Options Sales Tax**

The retail sales analysis focused only those categories of taxable local sales by businesses that were classified as within the retail industry (using the North American Industry Classification System, NAICS). This does not, as noted in the above summary, account for all taxable sales within Austin. Austin has, as allowed under state law, a local option sales tax (LOST) that generates sales tax revenue to support city services and investments. The LOST is levied on all sales, and thus can provide another indicator of economic activity. Between 2008 and 2011 (the same time period covered under the retail sales analysis) Austin LOST revenues showed a slightly better pattern than portrayed in by the retail analysis. Rather than a slight decrease in real sales activity, the LOST data show a modest increase of about 4% in real (inflation adjusted) sales between 2008 and 2011. However, the 2012 and 2013 LOST revenues indicate that real taxable sales slowed down in those years, showing a decrease from 2008 to 2013 of about 10%.





### *Natural Systems*

As identified in the 2000 Comprehensive Plan, the 2005 Downtown Plan, and recently in Vision 2020 goals and projects, Austin's downtown has natural resources that provide value to the community, enhance development opportunities, and strengthen the links between the downtown and the rest of the city. City policies acknowledge and support two specific natural systems; the Cedar River and associated waters, shorelines, and natural amenities; and, the urban forest, which extends into the downtown and is part of Austin's identity as a "Tree City" since 1978.



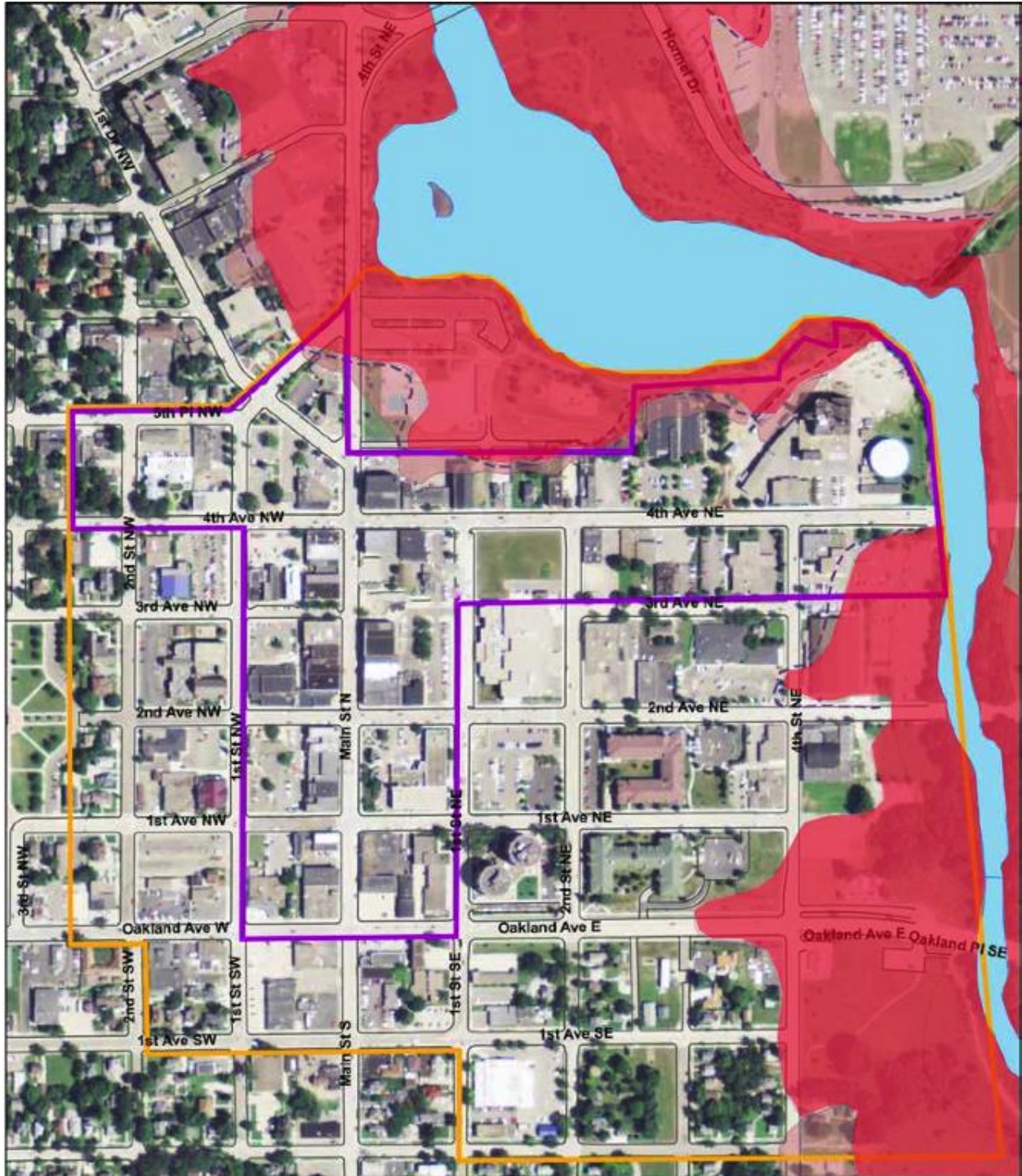
**Cedar River. Photo Credit: CR Planning**

The Cedar River and the Mill Pond (that forms just north of the dam at 4th Avenue NE) are prominent natural resources. The Cedar River is the primary waterway for the region, beginning northeast of Austin in Dodge County and joining with a number of streams and rivers through south Minnesota and into Iowa, where the river finally joins with the Mississippi River in Louisa County, Iowa. The City of Austin is on the western edge of the Cedar River watershed, and the entire downtown area is within a sub-watershed that drains directly to the river.

The Cedar River was, historically, a primary reason for the location of the Hormel facilities and the development of the City of Austin around the downtown. The River provided a transportation route, a source of water for industrial processing, a means of disposing of waste products and a power source. The City's primary power plant was located at the dam to supply water for the coal-fired boilers.

The river forms the eastern edge of the core downtown area, and the north and eastern edge of the larger downtown area. The Cedar River affects the functioning and long-term sustainability of Austin's downtown in several ways:

- Waterways and shorelines are amenities that add value to almost any type of development. The Downtown Plan should maximize the value of the riverfront and shoreline in leveraging public and private investment.
- The River serves as a popular recreational area and a transportation corridor for bicycle and foot traffic, connecting the downtown to other recreational and natural areas. The Downtown Plan should recognize the recreational uses of the River and adjacent public areas.
- The 100-year floodplain extends into the downtown core for as much as a city block, and the floodway by as much as a half block. The Downtown Plan should help maintain the functioning of the floodplain and recognize risk to development that could be flooded (refer to map on next page).
- The Mill Pond and the River have some on-going water quality issues that are likely exacerbated by non-point pollution from storm water runoff and discharges from the City's municipal storm sewer system. The Downtown Plan should encourage use of storm water best practices consistent with the City's Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP)



Downtown Floodplain and Flood Zones

- |                  |                 |                     |
|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Greater Downtown | Floodplain Zone | 100 Year Flood Zone |
| Core Downtown    | Open Water      | 500 Year Flood Zone |

Figure 5: Flood Zones in Downtown Area

Austin has been a designated “Tree City, USA” (by the Arbor Day Foundation) continually since 1978, one of the longest running designations in Minnesota. The Park, Recreation and Forestry Department is responsible for the maintenance of all trees in the public rights-of-way and parks.

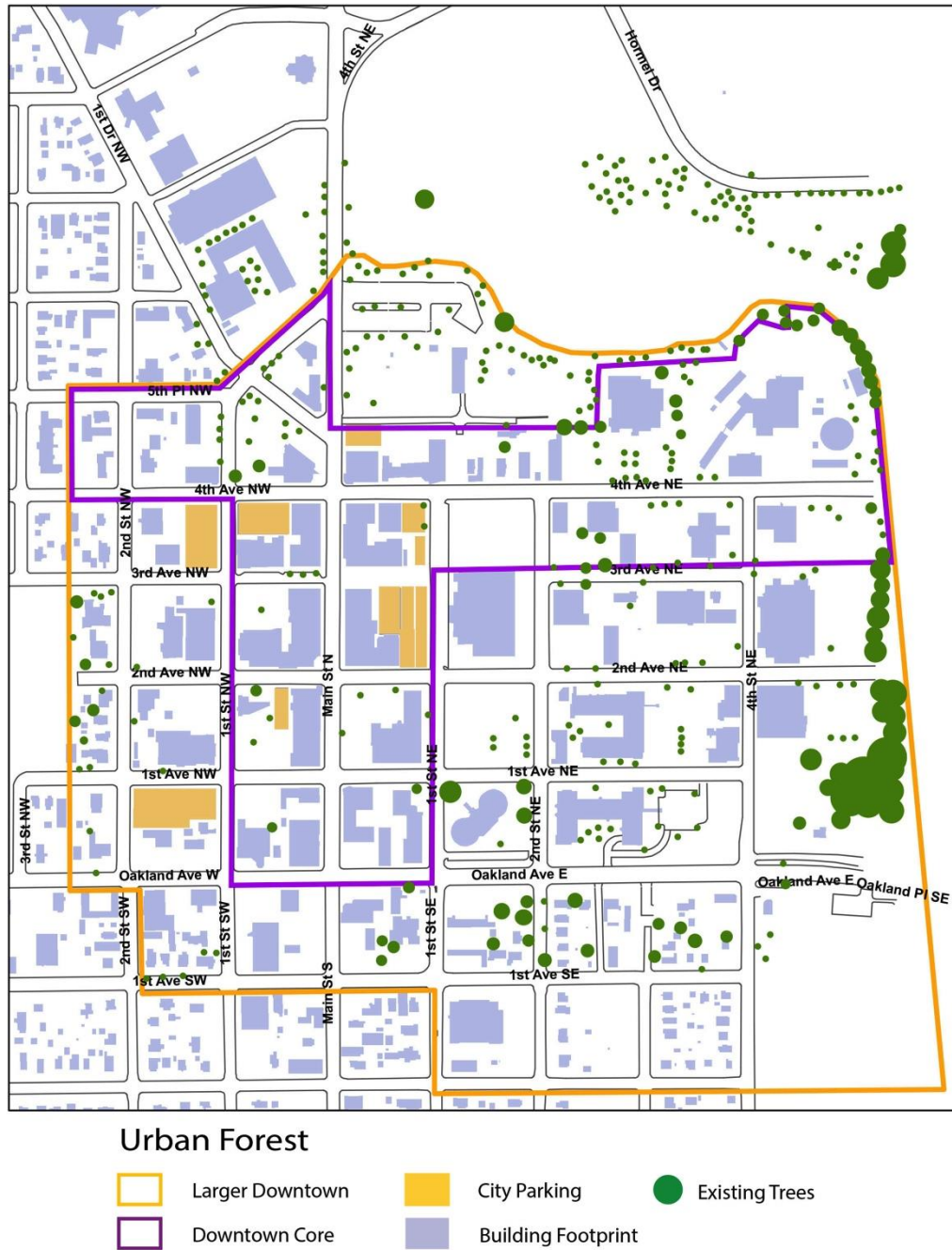


Figure 6: Urban Tree Canopy Coverage

The Greater Downtown is part of Austin’s urban forest. Mature trees can be found in the public rights-of-way in a number of locations and the City has incorporated tree planting in several public parking lots. However, the tree coverage in the Greater Downtown area is less than found in most areas of the city. The downtown has a number of blocks without any tree canopy, including much of the Main Street corridor.

Historically more trees did exist in the downtown area. Some ash trees were removed in the downtown area in response to the growing risk from the emerald ash borer, while others were removed to limit bird nesting and habitat that was deemed a nuisance to businesses, or to facilitate construction programs. Urban tree canopy has many well-documented benefits, including improving stormwater management, reducing heat island effects, making public ROWs more pedestrian-friendly, and increasing property values. Trees can also create nuisances, including creating the need for clean up of leaves, seeds and branches (depending on the species), limiting visibility of business signage, and creating habitat for some species of birds.

## *Housing*

### *Summary*

In 2013, the City of Austin contracted Maxfield Research, Inc. to conduct a comprehensive analysis of its current and forecasted housing market conditions. The study included an evaluation of a several factors including: demographics; employment and economic trends; existing housing stock; the for-sale and rental markets; and senior housing. The information gathered as part of this study provides a framework from which the city can plan for future housing, particularly in the downtown area. The following is a brief summary of the data included in the report and resulting implications for the Downtown Master Plan update.

Over the next decade, Austin will see modest growth in its community in both population and consequently, in households. The population of Austin is expected to grow 4% by 2020, and households by 4.2%. Much of this growth will come from residents over the age of 55, though there will be some growth in residents aged 25 to 34. The growth is driven both by an aging population moving closer to urban amenities as well as a projected 10.1% job growth rate over the next decade, bringing in younger workers.

Due to retirees downsizing their households and the changing dynamics of younger couples, Austin will likely see a shift in demand for the type of housing residents seek. Fewer couples are getting married and having children and there will be an increase the number of people who live alone or with roommates; from 2000 to 2010, people living alone increased 2.3% and roommate households increased 24.1%. These trends are shifting the housing demand from single-family detached households to multi-family apartments. Over the same ten-year period, there was a 25% increase in renter-occupied households, putting pressure on the rental market in Austin.

By the year 2020, 25% of the for-sale housing demand will be for multifamily and the number of renters looking for multi-family housing will continue to rise. Currently, demand for multi-family housing is out pacing supply. The vacancy rate for rental units was 2.8% in 2011, well below the equilibrium rate of 5%, stressing the rental market. There have been no major multi-family developments in recent years, further limiting options. Moreover, the report estimates there will be demand for nearly 300 rental units and about 40 multifamily for-sale units by 2020. The opportunity exists for the city of Austin to increase the availability of multi-family housing for both buyers and renters, particularly in its downtown.



Austin HRA Housing 2nd Street NE Photo Credit: CR Planning

### Implications

Multi-family housing works best when it is located near employers, multiple transportation options, and other amenities like restaurants, grocery stores, and cultural institutions. Much of the demand for multi-family housing could be met in the downtown area. Current Austin policies, goals, and community input on the future of downtown are consistent with the development of multi-family housing in the area. Because the anticipated population growth includes a diverse mix of new residents – in age, income, and culture – it is important to consider an assortment of new housing to accommodate different needs and desires.

In order to attract new residents, any housing development should be flexible in terms of the number of bedrooms per unit and affordability. The study recommended a mix of 1 to 3 bedroom apartments to house individuals, roommates, and small families. Additionally, it advises adding up to 190 market rate rentals and 80-100 affordable units. Strategic consideration of where these apartments will be located is critical in maximizing the benefits of housing more people downtown.

New housing should be modern and urban in design and amenities, including on-site or site-adjacent access to covered and secured parking which may limit some potential sites for new housing. Connections to nearby employers – Hormel and Mayo – will be instrumental in attracting new, young employees. Similarly, consideration should be made to connect residents to the river, Mill Pond, and the Downtown Core. Possible areas for housing development in the downtown area include the Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Cultural Corridors, the East Supportive Area, the Post Office redevelopment site, and the YMCA redevelopment site just north of the Greater Downtown.

### Main Street

Main Street is the commercial heart of downtown and has limited opportunities for new housing. However, there are under-utilized spaces within existing buildings, especially on the second floor. While not all vacancies will lend themselves to be suitable apartments, consideration should be given to convert those spaces that could. Adding housing in the commercial center helps to support businesses that provide daily needs, like convenience stores, restaurants, and coffee shops.

### 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Cultural Corridor

Stakeholders have expressed the desire to develop multi-family housing units that draw artists into town, particularly along the 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. Cultural Corridor. Apartments may include art studios for work or be in close proximity. Housing should provide for flexible arrangements, such as shared space, and incorporate creative design to attract more people. Row-housing and luxury apartments have also been suggested for this corridor.

### East Supportive

The east side of the Greater Downtown includes approximately nine blocks between 3rd Avenue N and Oakland Avenue, and 1st street NE and 4th Street NE. The existing uses include public and private institutional, service businesses, multi-family housing, and significant surface parking. Some isolated retail and entertainment uses are also located here.

The East Supportive area of the Greater Downtown is perhaps the best location to significantly increase housing density in Austin. The area currently supports three multi-family housing facilities, including lifecycle and market rate rentals. With ample opportunity for redevelopment of surface parking, this area is suitable for residential redevelopment to further support the economic health of the immediate downtown area, both the Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Cultural Corridors.

**Redevelopment Areas (Post Office & Power Plant)**

Depending on where the Community Center is developed, either the Post Office or Power Plant site could support additional residential structures. Each of these locations are in close proximity to the Downtown Core Areas and – with strategic connections – could provide additional density of residents who will contribute to economic activity.

**Transportation**

Transportation connections emerged as a theme in the stakeholder and community meetings. Connections between parking areas and businesses, connections between the trail network and downtown streets, connections from the interstate to downtown and connections to amenities in the downtown including the Library, Cedar River and Mill Pond.

**Streets**

The Downtown street network consists of a grid structure of primary spines, Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and supportive streets that provide parking and access to adjacent land uses. There are segments where the grid is not continuous that create an expanded block:

- 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue between Main Street and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street NW – the block between Main and 1<sup>st</sup> Street will be opened in conjunction with the development of the Spam Museum. The block between 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street NE was closed to accommodate the County Jail.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE between 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue – the street now provides a southbound one-way diagonal parking lot for the County.

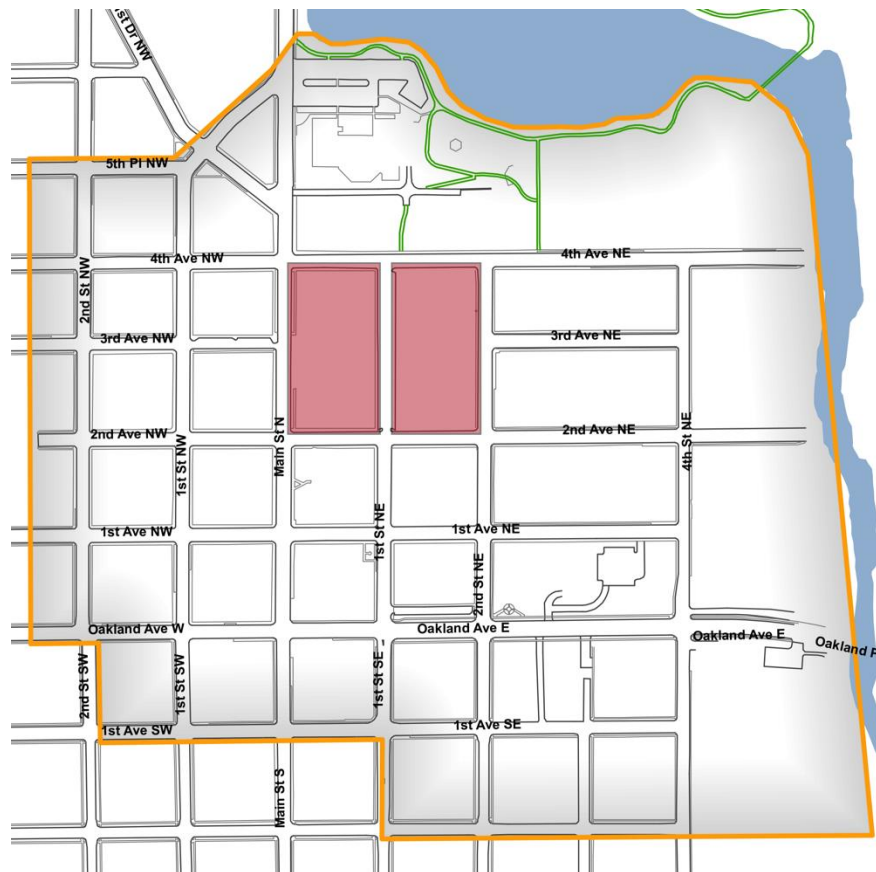


Figure 7: Downtown Streets with Expanded Blocks.

Generally streets in downtown have two lanes with on-street parking and two-way operation. The capacity of a two-lane street is generally 12,000 vehicles per day. The daily traffic volumes in downtown suggest that all of the streets have adequate capacity (*MnDOT 2012 Traffic Volume Map*). The Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT) counts for downtown streets are:

- Main Street – 3,700 AADT
- 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE – 6,600 AADT
- 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NW – 4,500 AADT
- 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE – 1,350 AADT
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Street NE – 1,150 AADT
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Street NW – 1,250 AADT

### Parking

An inventory of downtown parking completed by the City in May 2011 and June 2014 showed that overall there is available parking in 50% of the total parking spaces on the streets and in parking lots. The survey also showed that there are over 950 parking spaces on the streets and in parking lots available to downtown residents, employees, visitors and businesses.

Despite the surplus of available parking found in the survey, there is a perception by some stakeholders that there is not enough parking downtown. A closer look at the most heavily parked areas in downtown show concentrations in the Methodist Church lot, near the high school, during the school year and also in the Main Street area between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenues including the nearby lots (Downtown Bar and the K-C lot).



Parking in Downtown Photo Credit: SEH

Near the more heavily parked area between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenues, the 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE/County Parking lot appears to be parked at a rate of less than 50%. The entry to the parking area is currently signed as follows, “Mower County Customer & Permit Parking Only Mon - Fri, 7am - 4pm Violators will be towed, Open to Public 4PM – 2AM. There are also some spaces signed “Public Parking, 90-minute.” Other parking lots are signed as private parking, while others are signed with City parking restriction signing. Adjusting these restrictions may better accommodate parking demand as outlined in the Plan sections that follow. Wayfinding to parking areas in the Downtown is inconsistent and could be enhanced to be more visitor friendly.

The abundance of surface parking lots along some downtown corridors also detracts from pedestrian-friendly design goals and uses land that would be better suited for more productive use (both from the sense of generating tax base and supporting economic activity). The Downtown Core area is approximately 25% surface parking lots (including public and private lots, but excluding on-street parking). The Main Street corridor, which is very pedestrian-friendly, has an appropriately low exposure to surface-parking use and a high exposure to building frontages. Fourth Avenue NE, has a high exposure to surface parking relative to the building frontages.



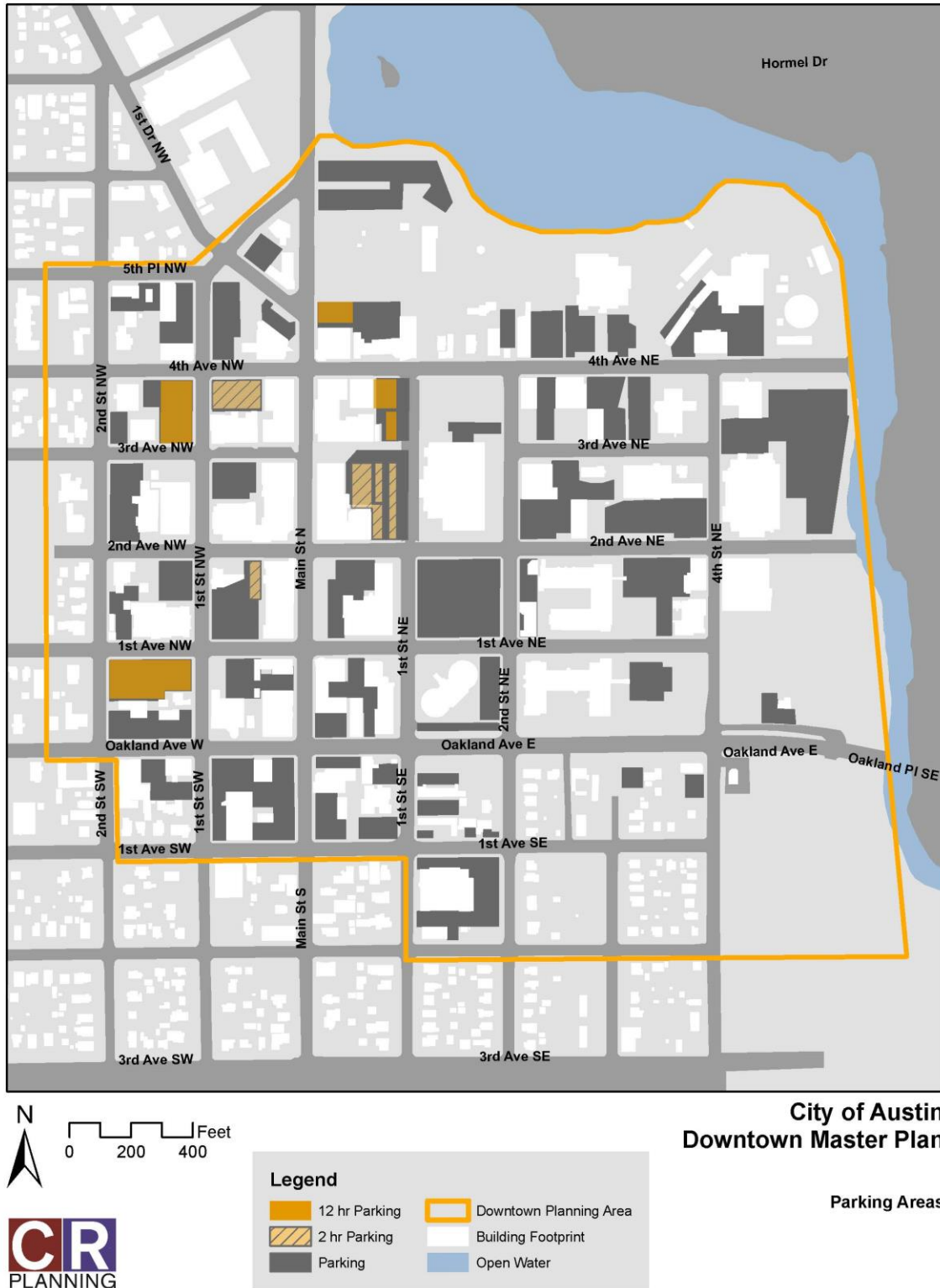


Figure 8: Downtown Surface Parking

**Pedestrians and Bicycles**

Sidewalks line the streets of Downtown and some also include amenities enhancing walkability such as pedestrian scale lighting and nicely maintained planters. Pedestrian crossings of streets are marked at intersections with standard parallel lines. The trail along Mill Pond has been connected to the Downtown east of the Paramount Theater near the intersection of 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE.



Pedestrian walking downtown. Photo Credit: SEH

There are not presently on-street bike facilities in the Downtown area, though there is interest in providing connections for bicyclists to the Mill Pond Trail from Downtown locations such as Main Street businesses and residential areas in the Downtown. While bike racks are provided at a few locations in the Downtown there is a general need for additional bicycle parking throughout the downtown.

**Transit**

The Downtown is served by Southern Minnesota Area Rural Transit – SMART (formerly Austin Mower County Area Transit, AMCAT). Regular transit service in the City of Austin including the Downtown area and greater Austin is provided on the red and purple routes as shown on the route map below. In the Downtown there are four transit stops for the red route and three transit stops for the purple route. The service for these two routes is as follows:

- Monday through Friday: Hourly from 7AM to 9PM
- Saturday: Hourly from 9AM to 4PM
- Sunday: Red Route only, hourly from 1PM to 5PM

The cost per ride is \$1.50 for adults, \$1.00 for children 5-18 and free for children under the age of 5. There is also a monthly pass available at a cost of \$30. The website for SMART is <http://smartbusmn.org>

There is also a dial-a-ride service available for \$2.00 per ride with two buses operating during the following timeframes:

- Monday through Friday: 6AM to 6PM
- Saturday: Hourly from 9AM to 5PM

Rides on this service are free for senior citizens traveling to and from the

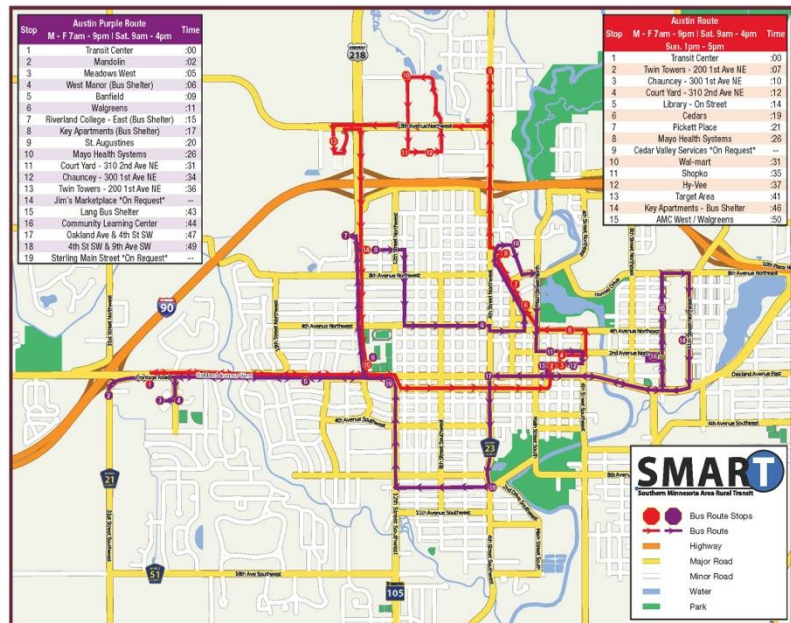


Figure 9: Transit Service for Downtown Austin. [www.smartbusmn.org](http://www.smartbusmn.org)

Austin Clinic. The Austin Clinic is located near the downtown in a *Downtown Influence Area* including the Mayo Clinic facilities along 1<sup>st</sup> Drive NW. There is an additional service provided free of charge to dialysis patients traveling to Albert Lea.

Lastly, there is a dial-a-ride work route that operates on the following schedule:

- Monday through Friday: 5AM to 7:30AM, 1PM to 4PM and 9:30AM to 2:30AM

#### Access to Downtown

Currently traffic from Interstate 90 accesses downtown via interchanges at exit #175, Oakland Avenue West (I-90 Business Loop), exit #178A, 4th Street NW, exit #178B, 6th Street NE and exit #180A, Oakland Place NE (I-90 Business Loop). The routes to Downtown from these locations do not provide clear guidance to motorists in the form of signing and gateways that indicate one is approaching Downtown Austin. Access to Downtown from the east and west areas of the City occurs along the Oakland Avenue and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue one-way couplet and along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NW which bridges over the Cedar River as does Oakland Avenue. Similar to the freeway interchanges, the downtown gateways at these bridges and adjacent areas do not provide any indication that one has entered Downtown Austin.

### ***Sustainability***

Minnesota GreenStep Cities is a voluntary program that assists and recognizes cities throughout the state that implement sustainable practices. The program is based upon 28 best practices in 5 different categories. The City of Austin has participated in the GreenStep Cities program since 2011 and has achieved a Step 2 level based on actions reported. The tables below inventory actions taken, related to the downtown area, as those actions have been reported by the City.

<b>Buildings and Lighting</b>
<p><b>Efficient Existing Public Buildings</b></p> <p><b>Action 1.</b> Enter baseline information into the Minnesota B3 Benchmarking database</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data has been entered and maintained for 18 city buildings</li> </ul> <p><b>Action 3. Invest in energy efficiency opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Riverside Arena lighting retrofit</li> </ul> <p><b>Action 7. Install for one or more city-owned/school buildings one of the following energy efficiency measures:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mower County Justice Center: Complete 50 ton GX system</li> <li>• Packer Ice Arena: Complete 50 ton GX system</li> </ul>
<p><b>Efficient Existing Private Buildings</b></p> <p><b>Action 4. Describe efficiency actions and other green building practices at business located within the city.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hormel Food Corp. retrofit of lighting systems at Corporate Office North and Corporate Office South facilities to high efficiency T8 and LED from T12. Implemented water use reduction measures at both facilities as well. Both buildings are benchmarked using Energy Star Portfolio Manager.</li> </ul> <p><b>Action 5. Conserve drinking/ground water.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Austin Utilities uses a conservation rate structure utilizing seasonal rates to promote water conservation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>New Green Buildings</b></p> <p><b>Action 4. Provide incentive to private parties who build new buildings that utilize a green building framework.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Austin Utilities currently offers up to \$25,000 financing for customers to use for green building design assistance.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Efficient Outdoor Lighting and signals</b></p> <p><b>Action 4. Coordinate Traffic signals and/or optimize signal timing so as to minimize car idling at intersections.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 50% of city traffic signals have loop detectors that allow better flow of traffic. Current policy is for all future city traffic signals to be controlled with loop detectors as they are replaced in the future.</li> </ul> <p><b>Action 6. Re-lamp/improve exterior building lighting for city-owned buildings/facilities with energy efficient, Dark-Sky compliant lighting.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When fixtures are replaced they are replaced with Dark Sky compliant fixtures</li> </ul> <p><b>Action 8. Replace the city's existing traffic signals with LEDs.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All red and green city traffic signals have been replaced with LED lighting.</li> </ul>

## Land Use

### Comprehensive Plan and Implementation

**Action 5. Adopt climate protection/adaptation, resiliency or energy independence goals and objectives in the comprehensive plan or separate policy document and link these goals to direct implementation.**

- The City has adopted the Minnesota State Energy Code.

### Efficient City Growth

**Action 3. Encourage a higher intensity of commercial land uses**

- B-3 district, 100% lot coverage allowed in this district, permitted in CBD

**Action 4. Provide incentives for infill projects, or for life-cycle housing at or near job or retail centers, or for achieving an average net residential density of seven units per acre.**

- Community block grants and TIF or revolving loan funds

### Mixed Uses

**Action 1. Organize or participate in community planning process for the city, a mixed-use district.**

- Implemented in 2004, developed design standards for program: Austin Main Street Program. Working now in Vision 2020 to make Main Street a destination place (have businesses and residential rental space on second floor).

**Action 5. Have a downtown zoning district that allows residential and compatible commercial development.**

- Currently permitted in zoning ordinance

## Transportation

### Complete Green Streets

**Action 1. Adopt a complete streets policy that also addresses street trees and storm water.**

- Completed and passed by City Council at 6/4/12 meeting

**Action 3. Document inclusion/installation of green infrastructure elements as well as grey infrastructure elements in at least one complete streets reconstruction project.**

- Completed tree inventory and planned documentation of future installation of trees. Installation of trees is part of Complete Streets policy.

### Mobility Options

**Action 1. Promote walking, biking and transit use**

- 2 Circulators that serve downtown Austin
- Trail signage from the Austin trails system, JC Hormel Nature Center & Shooting Star Trail
- Added 39 bike racks in the city
- Used SHIP funding to purchase free swim times for the Austin pool
- Used SHIP funding to purchase 40 pairs of snowshoes for Shooting Star Trail 30 pairs of skates for Packer arena, 25 sets of snowshoes and 6 sets of skis for the JC Hormel Nature Center.
- City officials did a walking audit around downtown to learn how to be more pedestrian friendly

**Action 3. Prominently identify mobility options**

- AMCAT

<b>Environmental Management</b>
<p><b>Purchasing</b></p> <p><b>Action 2. Purchase energy distributed by a municipal utility from renewable energy source.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The City purchases electrical power from Austin Utilities, which gets its power from SMMPA. 14.3% of SMMPA’s power comes from renewable energy sources, which is less than the requirement, working to get to 15%.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Urban Forests</b></p> <p><b>Action 1. Certify as a Tree City USA</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Austin has been a Tree City USA for 32 years. Just applied for 33rd year (2012)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Efficient Stormwater Management</b></p> <p><b>Action 5. Adopt and implement guidelines for stormwater infiltration/reuse techniques.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rain gardens have been constructed at the Mower County Jail, Justice Center, and Mill Pond</li> </ul> <p><b>Action 6. Adopt an ordinance with erosion and sediment control provisions as well as requirements for permanent stormwater treatment.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The County has an ordinance to address this. The Cedar River Watershed District has a sediment and runoff policy that is enforced.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Surface Water Quality</b></p> <p><b>Action 3. Adopt and report on measurable, publicly announced surface water improvement targets for water bodies.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The City of Austin works closely with the Cedar River Watershed District and local conservation groups in promoting and facilitating citizen education and shoreland and water quality management.</li> </ul> <p><b>Action 4. Adopt a shoreland ordinance for all river and lake shoreland areas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Section 11.66 Shoreland Overlay District. The uncontrolled use of shorelands of the city affects the public health, safety and general welfare not only by contributing to the pollution of public waters, but also by impairing the local tax base. Therefore, it is in the best interests of the public health, safety and welfare to provide for the wise subdivision, use and development of shorelands of public waters. Recognized by the City.</li> </ul>
<b>Economic and Community Development</b>
<p><b>Renewable Energy</b></p> <p><b>Action 1. Adopt solar energy standards or a wind energy ordinance that allows or encourages appropriate renewable energy installations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The city adopted a wind energy ordinance</li> </ul>
<p><b>Local Food</b></p> <p><b>Action 3. Inventory and promote local food production/distribution within the city</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thursday’s downtown Main Street Farmers Market</li> </ul>

Austin has taken significant steps to improve its sustainability, however it has not received the credit it deserves since the GreenStep database has not been updated in two years. Actions that have not been claimed include:

- Since 2005, the Main Street program has made it possible for 42 buildings to undergo renovations, which allowed for the reuse of existing buildings rather than the energy and money required to tear down and rebuild.
- In 2013, the City of Austin adopted solar ordinances based upon the Minnesota Solar Challenge model ordinance.

### *Development Standards*

Within downtown and surrounding influence areas, the City has assigned seven distinct zoning districts:

- Central Business District
- Community Business District
- Multi-family Residential
- Multi-family Office
- Single-Family Residential
- Limited Industrial
- Industrial

In addition to these zoning districts, the Greater Downtown area includes areas by the Cedar River that are covered by a Floodplain overlay district (both floodway and floodplain). Most of the land within the Greater Downtown area is zoned Central Business District or Community Business. The City uses three non-industrial business zoning districts (Neighborhood, Community, and CBD). The districts are “cumulative,” meaning that the uses allowed in the most restrictive district (neighborhood) are all allowed in the next most restrictive district (Community), along with some additional uses, which in turn are allowed in the least restrictive district (CBD) along with some additional uses. The two commercial business districts are described below.



Figure 10: Current Downtown Zoning Map

**Community Business District.** The Community Business District allows for a range of commercial uses including automobile oriented commercial uses and shopping centers (as a conditional use) in addition to residential uses. The Community Business areas of the Greater Downtown area are primarily north and west of the Mill Pond, including the Mayo Hospital, the original Spam Museum, and nearby businesses. The district has dimensional standards (but no design standards), including a minimum lot area (6,000 sq. ft.), maximum height (45 feet or three stories), and minimum required open area of 20%.

**Central Business District (CBD).** As the least restrictive commercial zoning district, the CBD zoning allows for any commercial use that is allowed elsewhere in the city. The CBD purpose is defined as:

**It is the purpose of the B-3 district to permit and to encourage the establishment of a wide variety of shopping goods and services in the central area in such a way as to attract consumers from a large trade area. Only those (uses) that will materially interfere with the overall function of the central area will be excluded.**

The CBD zoning also allows for limited industrial uses and residential uses. The only other limitation on the type of commercial use is a restriction on uses that create nuisances or are clearly incompatible with the purpose of the CBD district.

The city does not currently incorporate design standards in its zoning, and the CBD district does not include height standards or other dimensional standards, except as limited by the building code.

**Multi-Family Residential (R-2).** The R-2 district allows a multi-family and single-family residential uses, and institutional uses such as hospitals as conditional uses. The R-2 district is located in the north and west of the Greater Downtown area, including the Mayo Hospital and associated facilities, and existing multi-family housing. The district includes dimensional standards that vary according to lot size, such as greater setbacks and higher height limits for larger lots. The maximum allowed height is 80 feet for lots greater than 10,000 square feet.

While Austin has a confluence of institutional (hospital) uses with multi-family housing, these uses are not necessarily synergistic, and may have some conflict. Consideration should be given to separating large institutional uses from residential housing. Some consideration may also be needed for integrating small commercial uses with multi-family housing without having to rezone or initiate a map change.

**Multi-Family Residential-Office District.** The Multi-Family Residence- Office (RO) district allows for a variety of small and more intense office uses in addition to residential uses (including multi-family). The RO areas within the Greater Downtown area are primarily west of the CBD, including the high school and grounds, and nearby institutional uses. Some parcels designated RO also lie in the southeast corner of the Greater Downtown Area.

The RO district includes the following purpose statement:

**It is the purpose of the RO district to restore economic value to developed sections of the city where old, large estate properties are no longer practical for single-family residency, and where residential properties along major thoroughfares can be removed and replaced by modern residential and office buildings.**

The purpose of the RO district may no longer apply to the downtown area, although the mix of uses is appropriate for some of the Larger Downtown areas and influence areas. Some consideration may be needed for integrating small commercial uses with multi-family housing without having to rezone or initiate a map change.

**Industrial Districts.** The industrial districts in the Larger Downtown area are limited to the former power plant site (zoned Industrial, I-2) and a few parcels in the southeast corner of the planning area where a railroad right-of-way used to exist (zoned Limited Industrial, I-1). The I-2 district allows heavy industry consistent with the power plant use, but is inconsistent with surrounding areas as the area.

Limited industrial allows for uses that can be compatible with adjacent non-industrial uses. But the original reason for the existing I-1 zoning in the Greater Downtown area, the rail ROW, no longer warrants this zoning classification.

Some consideration may be needed for integrating small manufacturing or production uses with commercial retail uses in appropriate locations. Many communities have created, for instance, provisions that allow food production (e.g., micro-breweries, ice cream production, small scale local food processing) that also has a retail function, and can be integrated into appropriate commercial areas that can serve both land uses.



**Austin Municipal Power Plant Photo Credit: CR Planning**



### Implications for Downtown Planning

Zoning is one of the primary tools the City has to shape private sector development to be consistent with the City's desired future conditions. Zoning should be structured to enable desired development to occur with minimum regulatory requirements, and to discourage or restrict incompatible development. In current practice, a wide variety of zoning standards are used to achieve downtown plan goals that depart from traditional use categories, elevate the importance of form or design standards, and identify or even require compatible mixes of uses.

The City's zoning regulation, while generally not directly incompatible the policy goals of the 2005 Downtown Master Plan or the Vision 2020 goals and projects, still does create some indirect barriers to implementation. The most significant barrier to achieving the desired mix of uses is that the zoning standards do not distinguish among types of retail, office, residential, and mixed-use land uses that are given priorities in the existing plans and policies. Virtually all commercial uses, and some residential and industrial uses, are permitted as-of-right under the existing ordinance.

The CBD purpose statement is well conceived and consistent with plan and policy desired outcomes. Another indirect barrier to implementation in the CBD zoning, however, is the use definitions, design characteristics, and dimensional standards that do not reflect desired design outcomes. These could be substantially improved to encourage private sector investment consistent with desired outcomes, to identify specific synergies between types of land uses, and to limit incompatible development.

As noted above in the descriptions of other districts, some consideration needs to be given to how a mix of uses (commercial/residential, commercial industrial) can be encouraged, and what limitations would need to be placed on such mixes. The traditional zoning classifications of residential, commercial, and industrial uses should be reconsidered for the downtown and surrounding areas in order to encourage appropriate mixes of uses that can create the vibrancy of an urban downtown. Care must still be used, however, to limit nuisances and distinguish between deliberate mixed-use development and a random or unplanned cobbling together of different uses.

Similarly, the zoning map is no longer consistent with the City's plans and policies. The industrial uses that are compatible with plans and policies can probably be incorporated into new mixed-use districts. The CBD zoning district may need to be redefined and remapped to be consistent with redevelopment opportunities and design and character standards articulated in the City's plans and policies. Office and multi-family zoning districts also likely needs to be remapped to be consistent with desired outcomes. The development limitations on sites in the floodplain should be acknowledged, giving consideration to zoning regulation that is compatible with natural system functions.



**Building form and design can be part of development regulation. Photo Credit: CR Planning**

## VI. Desired Conditions

The Desired Conditions section describes the long-term outcomes that the community of Austin wants to achieve in the Downtown area. Just as the Existing Conditions answers the “where are we now?” question for the downtown, the Desired Conditions answers the “Where do we want to be?” question.

The Desired Conditions are presented in the form of guiding principles, vision statements, goals, and policies.

1. **Guiding principles** are broad concepts that should guide all decision making in regard to development, redevelopment, public investment, and public management in the downtown. These principles reflect state-of-the-art downtown planning best practices, the specific assets found in Austin’s downtown, and the priorities reflected in existing plans, programs, and visions.
2. **Vision statements** describe the general desired outcome for a particular area, from the standpoint of a person 15-20 years in the future
3. **Goals** are more specific statements that describe components of the vision statement, such as desired outcomes for specific geographic areas or issues raised by community members or stakeholders. Goals describe a desired outcome, but not a method or process.
4. **Policies** are a subcomponent of the goals, and are the most specific element of the Desired Conditions. Policies describe not only the goals but provide a recommendation for specific actions or steps to achieving the goals.

Austin’s Downtown Master Plan uses the above-noted elements to address three specific geographies associated with the Downtown: Influence Areas, Greater Downtown, and Core Downtown. Goals and policies are offered at each level, but in increasing detail as the Plan examines each of the areas. The goals and policies for the Downtown Core area are the most detailed, setting priorities for parcel specific outcomes.



## *Guiding Principles*

The following principles were developed to provide guidance for all aspects of downtown Austin's redevelopment, enhancement, management and maintenance activities.

### **1. Keep the Buildings, Change the Uses**

Austin's historic, main street buildings are one of its greatest assets: their ground floors are adaptable to multiple uses and their masonry and plate glass exteriors establish downtown's character and charm. The uses within these buildings may change as business come and go but the exterior of the buildings themselves should continue to be restored or renovated, and maintained in a state of good repair.

### **2. Provide a Mix of Uses**

Austin's downtown core is the best place for continuing the long tradition of mixing retail, service, entertainment and residential uses, vertically and side by side. The more people can meet their daily needs on foot, the more sustainable the city will be.

### **3. Enhance the Public Realm**

Downtown Austin is highly accessible in its compact, walkable form. With buildings facing the sidewalk and moderate block lengths, pedestrians can experience the character and charm of renovated building facades, make eye contact or converse with friends and visitors along the street. The quality of a person's walking experience through downtown is the measure of its success as a place.

### **4. Share the Street**

Downtown, more than any place else in the community, relies on multiple modes of transportation; walking, bicycling, transit, auto, etc. Downtown's streets serve as the outdoor rooms of the city where daily life is carried out face to face. Accommodating multiple modes of transportation increases accessibility for people of all ages and abilities.

### **5. Program Events in Public Spaces**

Activities such as sidewalk sales, street fairs, cultural festivals and parades should be routinely planned for public spaces to strengthen downtowns' role as Austin's primary activity center. These events help promote awareness of downtown businesses, strengthen community spirit and reinforce downtown as the heart and soul of the community.

### **6. Preserve and Enhance Neighborhoods Surrounding Downtown**

The connections between downtown Austin and its surrounding neighborhoods should be enhanced. A vital downtown is surrounded by strong neighborhoods and vice versa. There are a mix of residential uses within and adjacent to downtown Austin that provide feet and eyes on the street, enhancing public safety, sociability, and economic viability.

### **7. Manage, Promote and Support Downtown Austin**

Unlike other centralized commercial areas within the city such as a regional mall, downtown is comprised of numerous small, independent business and property owners. Keeping buildings leased, maintaining predictable business hours, promoting special sales or seasonal events, relies on organized and coordinated management. Establishing a single organization (formally or informally) dedicated to advancing the downtown agenda and taking the lead on coordination and management, is critical to maintaining a successful downtown.

## *Downtown Influence Areas*

### **Definition**

Austin's downtown does not exist independently of the rest of the community. The Downtown Master Plan consequently addresses the land uses, transportation corridors, and natural and built infrastructure that are connected to or influence the long-term sustainability of the downtown as the City's heart.

The influence areas are identified in Austin's 2005 Downtown Master Plan, the Vision 2020 projects and vision statements, and the background studies and analyses described in the inventory chapter of this plan. Influence areas were also identified by stakeholders and community members during the reconnaissance discussions held in July of 2014.

Six influence areas are described below. The descriptions are followed by planning goals and policies that describe how the development and management of these areas should consider the effect on the downtown. The City should maximize synergies with downtown development and promotion, and minimize potential conflicts.

1. **High School/Institution area.** The Austin High School, located just to the west of the downtown planning area at 301 3rd Street NW, is the only public high school in Austin, and is thus a primary focus of community activity. The campus covers five city blocks, from almost 2nd Street to 5th Street east to west, and Oakland Avenue to 2nd Avenue NW south to north. The primary buildings date from 1919 (Christgua Hall) to 1939. While the buildings are not registered as historic structures, the high school is a landmark imbued with and defining the character of the community and the downtown area. The area is also the location of a number of institutional public uses, including several churches and professional offices.



**Goal:** Continue to integrate the high school and other institutional uses with downtown development in both the urban design of the adjacent downtown areas and in programmatic and promotional activities.

**Policy 1:** Building and street design should retain sight lines along corridors from the school entrances and public spaces to the core Main Street area.

**Policy 2:** Facilitate multi-modal options between downtown areas and the high school area, and ensure that public realm improvements accommodate safe routes to school goals.

- Employment Zone.** The Mayo Hospital and facilities, the Hormel and Quality Pork facilities and related employment areas north of the YMCA site and south of the North Business District are large employment centers very close to the downtown core areas. Moreover, the hospital is a destination facility for many patients and families every day. The businesses have important impacts on the functioning of the downtown, with both potential synergies and risks. Employees and visitors are prospective customers for downtown businesses. The traffic and traffic management techniques (road design, traffic flow, parking, wayfinding) associated with these destinations could, for instance, compete with accommodating traffic associated with downtown destinations. Land uses around the employment centers could detract from destination land uses in the downtown area, and limit opportunities for expanding the employment centers themselves. Improved multi-modal connections between the employment zone and downtown could help sustain both areas.



**Goal:** Integrate development and infrastructure decisions in employment area with downtown principles, goals, and policies.

**Policy 1:** Improve physical design and multi-modal transportation connections between employment centers and the downtown core areas

**Policy 2:** Encourage compatible development in and around employment centers that gives primary emphasis to the future needs for employment center development and that retains the downtown core as the primary commercial center serving the employment area.

3. **North Business District.** The north business district is the commercial area primarily on the south/west side of the Cedar River on either side of Main Street at the Main Street bridge and north of the employment businesses. The area recently benefited from completion of a floodwall that significantly lowers the risk of flooding, a risk that had limited this area's potential as a commercial district. The pending move of the Spam Museum from its location adjacent to the north business district to the downtown similarly changes the nature and potential of the business district. The business district is an influence area because of its location on Main Street, its proximity to the employment centers, and its strategic position on a corridor that connect I-90 to the downtown. The North business district offers both potential synergies and conflicts with the city's goal of making downtown an economically self-sustaining regional center.



**Goal:** Distinguish North Business District commercial uses from desired Main Street uses in regulation, programs, and policy.

**Policy 1:** Define the type of retail that would distinguish the North Business District from the Main Street corridor in zoning and economic development programs, including use distinctions and characteristics such as size.

**Policy 2:** Create wayfinding systems that link the North District to the Main Street corridor.

4. **YMCA Redevelopment area.** The YMCA redevelopment area includes several city blocks between the downtown planning area and the employment area where Mayo Hospital is located. This influence area is most notable as the location of the YMCA, which is likely to be a significant redevelopment opportunity in the near future when the new Community Recreation Center is built. The redevelopment area has multiple opportunities for new land uses that could include community recreation, additional high-density housing, or other housing amenities.



**Goal:** Enhance and expand higher density housing, develop additional housing and community amenities.

**Policy 1:** Ensure redevelopment incorporates public and community amenities.

**Policy 2:** Encourage new high-density housing development.

**Policy 3:** Enhance multi-modal connections to Mill Pond and core downtown areas.

5. **South Business Corridor.** The south business corridor connects the downtown planning area with the commercial development to the east (East Side) and the west (Sterling Shopping Center). The corridor has distinct types of businesses from the downtown core, and at generally lower densities except at the shopping centers. The corridor connects the south supportive area for the Downtown with the business corridor that makes up the Businesses I-90 alternative route. Commercial uses in this corridor are typically automobile or convenience-oriented.



**Goal:** Distinguish development patterns and uses from those in the Larger Downtown and Downtown Core.

- Policy 1:** Protect traffic flow and access management along Business I-90 outside the Larger Downtown.
- Policy 2:** Encourage business nodes rather than liner buildings along corridor.
- Policy 3:** Create wayfinding system to link the Downtown Core with the East Side and Sterling shopping areas.
- Policy 4:** Define commercial uses for the South Business corridor that are distinct in characteristics or use from the commercial development priorities in the Downtown Core.



6. **Cedar River East Bank.** The area immediately across the River from the Downtown Planning Area includes uses that are linked to downtown uses, such as Packer Arena, public parks, and important segments of the Austin trail system. The area is linked to the downtown planning area by three bridges in addition to a bicycle/pedestrian bridge, and the latter serving with the 4th Avenue bridge as a gateway to the cultural/arts core area of downtown. The existing public land uses, the high value location on the River, and the transportation infrastructure all contribute to the area's future potential for gateway-oriented redevelopment.



**Goal:** Connect the East Bank land uses and infrastructure to the Larger Downtown, considering design, function, density, and use.

**Policy 1:** Improve hardscapes to better incorporate green infrastructure.

**Policy 2:** Consider opportunities to increase density along the river with appropriate low-rise housing.

**Policy 3:** Incorporate Packer Arena area into planning and design for the Power plant redevelopment and development of the Cultural corridor.

**Policy 4:** Improve connections between east bank trails and sidewalks with the network in the Larger Downtown area.

**Policy 5:** Consider eventual connection of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Cultural Corridor to the east side businesses at 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 10<sup>th</sup> Street NE

*Greater Downtown*

**Definition**

The Greater Downtown includes the area historically considered as the central business district (as mapped in the zoning code) and modified as described in Vision 2020 vision statements and project priorities. The Greater Downtown includes a wide mix of land uses that serve as destinations in their own right or directly support the Core Downtown areas.

Five distinct policy areas within the Greater Downtown are described below. The descriptions are followed by a long-term vision statement and goals and policies that identify desired future conditions for these areas. The vision statement describes the aspirational outcomes that can be achieved if Austin successfully creates an economically and socially self-sustaining regional destination for its downtown core. The goals describe both short and long-term outcomes, and are dependent on suitable market conditions that enable the public and private investment necessary to achieve the goals.

**Greater Downtown Austin**

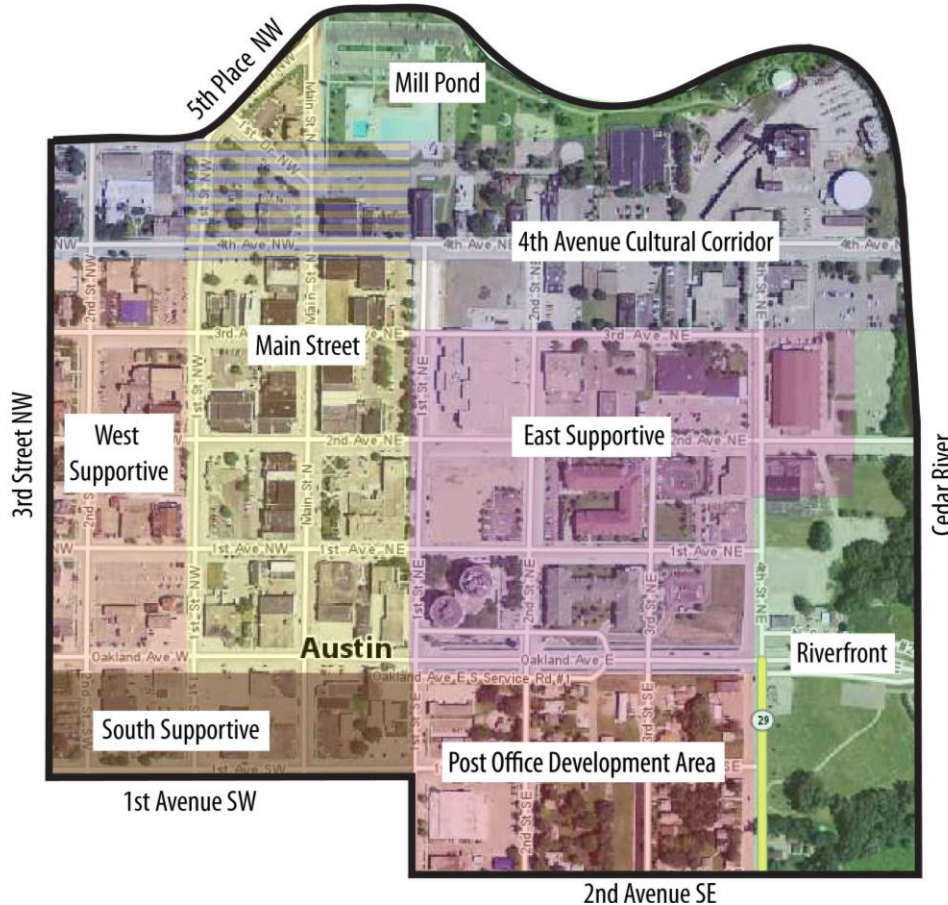


Figure 11 Greater Downtown Subareas

1. **West supportive.** The west side of the Greater Downtown is the four-block area that lies between the High School (and surrounding influence area) and the Main Street Core area. This area includes a significant amount of surface parking facilities that support the Main Street Core in addition to several auto-oriented businesses (also with drive-throughs) and institutions such as churches.

**Long-Term Vision.** The West Supportive area will continue to provide parking for the Main Street Core, High School and institutional uses to the west. Surface parking areas are enhanced with trees, native plantings, stormwater management features, decorative railings/fencing and/or low masonry walls to create a visual break between the Core and High School, and function as shared parking systems. Complete street concepts are integrated over time to emphasize multi-modal travel with integrated streetscaping and green infrastructure features. Businesses will include a mix of service and institutional uses, but will comprise less than half the land area.

**Goal 1:** Retain supportive function for Main Street Core and High School.

- Policy 1.1:** Encourage complementary, but non-competitive, service commercial and institutions
- Policy 1.2:** Improve way-finding into downtown core
- Policy 1.3:** Develop connectivity for all transportation modes into downtown core

**Goal 2:** Create a welcoming gateway for people coming into the downtown area.

- Policy 2.1:** Rehab backs of stores, storage areas, and alleyways
- Policy 2.2:** Integrate green infrastructure features into surface parking lots/hardscapes
- Policy 2.3:** Remove blighted buildings and rehab/ redevelop vacant buildings



2. **East Supportive.** The east side of the Larger Downtown includes approximately nine blocks between 3rd Avenue N and Oakland Avenue, and 1st street NE and 4th Street NE. The existing uses include public and private institutional uses, service businesses, multi-family housing, and a lot of surface parking. Some isolated retail and entertainment uses are also located here.



**Long Term Vision.** The East Supportive area has new, urban style, street facing multi-family life-cycle housing that include attached or underground secured parking and multiple pedestrian connections to adjacent streets and trails. An attractive public gathering space incorporating green infrastructure is the location for outdoor entertainment events, farmers' market activities, and informal social activities. The east supportive area is pedestrian-oriented in both design of streets and buildings, with welcoming pedestrian and bike corridors connecting the Riverfront and Main Street.

**Goal 1:** Reestablish a recognizable urban form.

**Policy 1.1:** Require the placement and design new buildings to follow traditional urban design parameters such as entrances facing the primary street, shallow front yard setbacks, front porches and/or walk-up entries.

**Policy 1.2:** Use internal alleyways or service drives for locating private utilities, and access to parking.

**Policy 1.3:** Require new buildings to be at least 2 stories in height to help create a sense of enclosure along the streetscape and compatibility with the downtown core.

**Goal 2:** Emphasize a variety of complementary uses to support activity of downtown core.

**Policy 2.1:** Encourage the development of multi-story mixed-use residential buildings.

**Policy 2.2:** Develop housing with amenities to accommodate different groups including seniors, young professionals, and lifecycle renters.

**Policy 2.3:** Strategically locate a community gathering space.

**Policy 2.4:** Retain ice Arena and Ballroom as entertainment destinations connected to Cultural/Art Core.

**Goal 3:** Create safe, attractive pedestrian/bike connections to other areas within downtown.

**Policy 3.1:** Improve walkability through complete-street design.

**Policy 3.2:** Consolidate surface parking where feasible, including consideration of centrally located multi-story structure(s), to enable new development that enhances walkability and uses land more productively.

**Goal 4:** Connect residents and visitors to green space.

**Policy 4.1:** Consider a green corridor with biking and pedestrian paths to the river.

3. **South Supportive.** The South Supportive area includes the three-block area focused on the intersections of Main Street with Oakland Avenue and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue S.

**Long-Term Vision.** The intersections of Oakland and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenues S with Main Street incorporate designs that create gateways into the Main Street Core area.

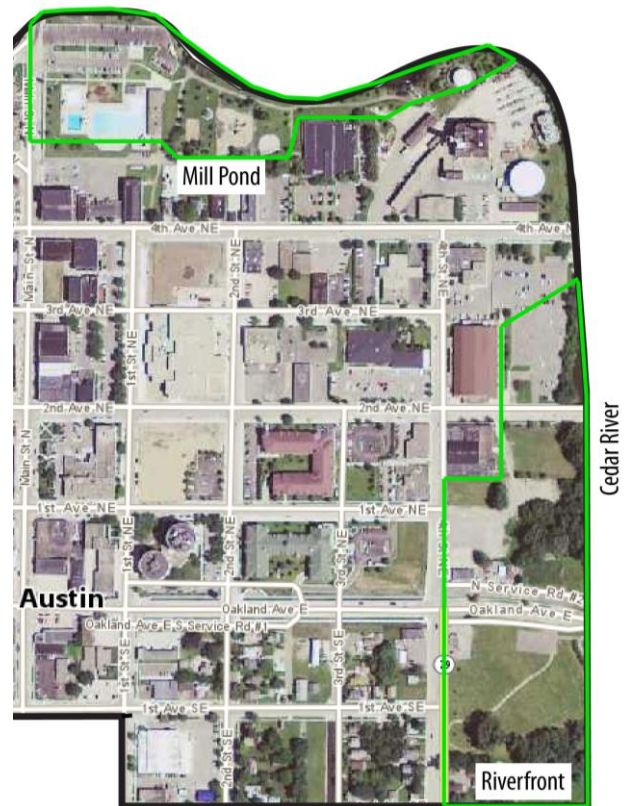


**Goal 1:** Manage traffic flow through the Larger Downtown Area.

- Policy 1.1:** Emphasize pedestrian crossings across Oakland Avenue into Downtown.
- Policy 1.2:** Create downtown gateway through public realm and building façade design at Oakland Avenue and Main Street.
- Policy 1.3:** Emphasize zero or short lot line development along Oakland.
- Policy 1.4:** Continue to support access management in South Supportive area to limit turns other than at intersections.

4. **Riverfront and Mill Pond.** The public library and the power plant site separate the Riverfront/Mill Pond into two areas. These include the public recreation areas and floodplain restricted areas on the south side of Mill Pond to the developed lots along 4th Avenue NE and the west bank of the Cedar River over to 4th Street NE. The areas are primarily owned or controlled by the City or other public entities. Much of the Riverfront area is within the FEMA designated floodway or 100-year floodplain. Other than recreational amenities and parking lots, the areas have no structures.

**Long-Term Vision.** The Riverfront and Mill Pond include a combination of recreational facilities, trails, formal and informal landscaping and water quality amenities. Both Mill Pond and the Riverfront have trails and passive recreation facilities, including water trails and paddle craft access points to the water and bike and pedestrian connections to the larger Austin trail network. The green space is visually integrated with surrounding housing and commercial development. The Riverfront functions as green infrastructure, managing runoff and sediments from surrounding built environment. These areas are directly connected to and integrated with the Community Recreation Center. The power plant site in the 4th Avenue Cultural corridor is adaptively reused and renovated as a new mixed use development that contributes to downtown vitality and overall community enhancement.



**Goal 1:** Protect water quality in design of recreational amenities.

**Policy 1.1:** Create a shoreline buffer with trail along west bank of River.

**Policy 1.2:** Develop a low-impact park shelter for public gathering space.

**Goal 2:** Restore natural vegetation, slopes, and drainage.

**Policy 2.1:** Reduce impervious pavement and emphasize permeable surfaces for built structures and surfaces.

**Policy 2.2:** Design disconnects between all impervious surfaces and drainage to River.

**Policy 2.3:** Incorporate rain gardens or other infiltration best practices in redevelopment and public infrastructure improvements.

**Goal 3:** Enhance recreational opportunities.

**Policy 3.1:** Develop amenities for a kayak or water trail on the River.

**Policy 3.2:** Consider facilities for canoe and kayak rental along Mill Pond.

**Policy 3.3:** Continue to support a mix of recreational facilities in Mill Pond area, including the water park.

**Policy 3.4:** Integrate the Mill Pond/Riverfront area into the design of the Community Recreation Center.

5. **Post Office Development Area.** The Post Office redevelopment area includes approximately six blocks south of Oakland Avenue and east of 1<sup>st</sup> Street SE, extending to the Riverfront blocks and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue SE. The area includes a mix of residential, institutional, commercial, and light industrial uses. The Post Office is in the southeast corner, and an old rail ROW (no longer in existence) runs in the center of the area.



**Long-Term Vision.** The area is largely redeveloped, serving as either the site for a use such as a Community Recreation Center or for urban-style mixed use housing and commercial development. The area retains a mix of uses including the post office and residential housing. The industrial uses have been relocated and commercial also relocated or integrated into the new development. The redevelopment process considers and integrates with the green and recreational infrastructure in the adjacent riverfront parcels. The single-family neighborhoods adjacent to the area have walkable access to the site, the Riverfront, and across Oakland Avenue.

**Goal 1:** Redevelop area as an anchor destination for downtown.

**Policy 1.1:** Encourage development that serves as a destination to draw more vitality to the Downtown areas.

**Policy 1.2:** Provide multi-modal connectivity to downtown residences and businesses.

**Policy 1.3:** Install safe crossings at Oakland Avenue intersections.

**Goal 2:** Link development to improved Riverfront area.

**Policy 2.1:** Ensure ease of pedestrian movement to and from the Riverfront.

**Policy 2.2:** Large-scale redevelopment, such as the Community Recreation Center option, should design the facility toward the River and consider co-development of river amenities to serve facility activities.

**Goal 3:** Create a “gateway” design to buildings and amenities at the Oakland Avenue bridge.

**Policy 3.1:** For large-scale redevelopment options limit surface parking on either the Riverfront or Oakland Avenue.

**Policy 3.2:** Design buildings to face the River in addition to Oakland Avenue.

**Policy 3.3** Commercial uses should front on Oakland Avenue.

**Policy 3.4** Encourage the development of park shelters or facilities that are in park areas to be architecturally significant to enhance the park near the downtown area.

**Goal 4:** Connect the Post Office to the Larger Downtown.

**Policy 4.1:** Improve wayfinding and transportation linkages between the Post Office and Main Street.

**Policy 4.2:** Consciously connect pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to the Post Office.

6. **Downtown Transportation.** The transportation system in Downtown Austin includes the sidewalks, trails, bicycle facilities, parking facilities, transit services and streets. Each facility is interrelated and augments multimodal transport options for residents and visitors. Key to enhancing these facilities to better support multimodal transportation is an understanding of how the downtown street network functions and relates to the adjacent land uses.

**Street Typology.** The design of streets and the characteristics of adjacent land uses are inextricably linked. Land uses with their relative intensities and densities put specific needs upon the surrounding network of streets. The need for on-street parking, public plazas, continuous sidewalks or transit stops are directly tied to presence of shops and restaurants, offices, schools and residences. Together with the buildings they inhabit, land uses and streets define the form and character of the built environment, which in turn can be described as a series of places or place types. These include such places as business districts or activity centers, neighborhood commercial nodes and civic or institutional districts and residential neighborhoods. Employing a place-based methodology for street design provides for a more complete and integrated transportation system that ultimately balances needs for multiple modes and supports meaningful place making.

The map below identifies the proposed street types in Downtown Austin based on these criteria. The types reflect desired characteristics based on many existing characteristics as well as recommendations from this plan. Transforming a street from one type to another type requires an integrated redevelopment approach that addresses both street infrastructure and the uses and design of buildings fronting on that street. The following section provides a description of each street type.

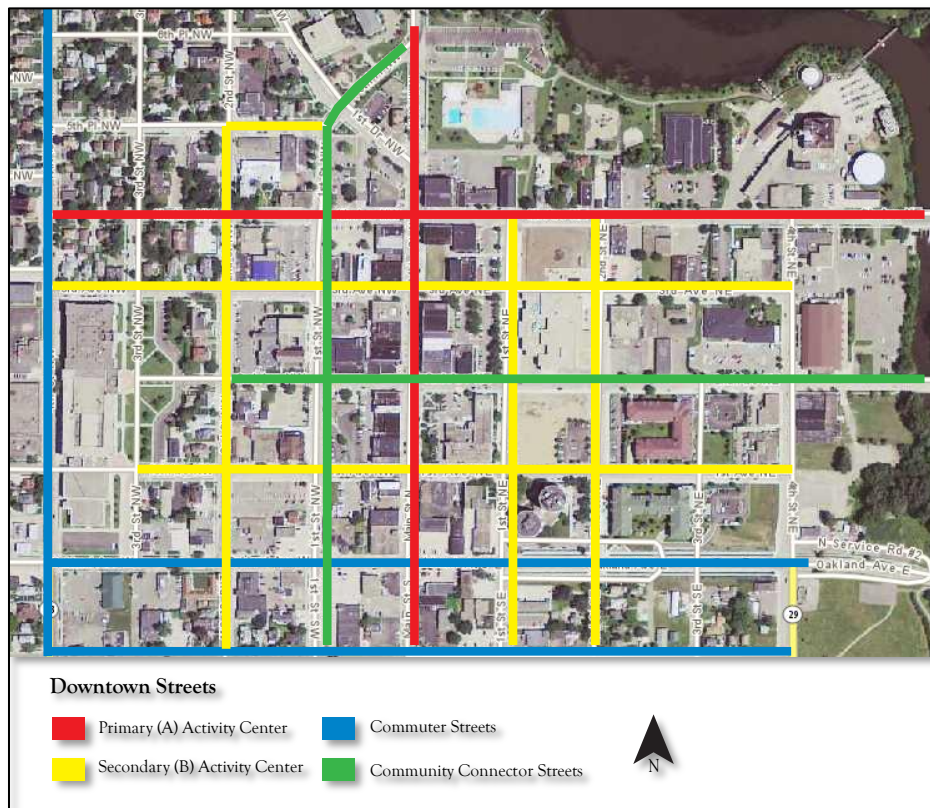


Figure 12 Downtown Austin Streets by Desired Type



**Activity Area Street – A and B (Primary and Secondary).** Activity Area Streets generally support concentrated retail, service, commercial and higher density residential land uses in a node of several blocks such as Downtown Austin. Activity area streets serve significant pedestrian activity, accommodate transit, provide on-street parking and can serve bicycles.

These streets in Austin fall into two categories. Activity Area A streets are the primary commercial destination spines with adjacent concentrated mixed-use development in the downtown carrying higher volumes of all modes of traffic. Activity Area B streets are supportive streets connecting the grid and providing access to businesses, residences and off-street parking, typically carrying lower volumes of vehicular traffic. Existing typology limits the category of Activity Area A Streets to Main Street. However, 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue N also exhibits many Activity Area A street characteristics, and based on recommended improvements (as described in the following sections) is identified as a future Activity Area A street. The Activity Area B streets include most of the remaining streets in the downtown core. Because Activity Area Streets and the adjacent land uses often have unique needs within a specific area, they may have different design characteristics and capacities.

**Community Connector.** A Community Connector connects neighborhoods within the City to one another including commercial nodes, residential areas and other districts. These streets are used to access such nodes and the activity center of Downtown Austin. These streets include 1<sup>st</sup> Street NW – which is on the west side of downtown – providing north-south connectivity and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue NE, which connects to the residential and employment areas across the Cedar River.

**Commuter Street.** Commuter streets primarily carry through motorists with higher capacities to serve longer trips and provide access to more dispersed land uses. These streets also typically provide connections to the regional system and bridges such as the Oakland Avenue Bridge over the Cedar River. Although commuter streets are intended to serve higher volumes of motorists, non-motorized travel must be accommodated adjacent to these routes as commerce is spread along these corridors. In addition to Oakland Avenue W, 4<sup>th</sup> Street NW is also a commuter street in the area of Downtown Austin.

**Transportation Goals.** Based on street types and place types framework, a set of goals and policies for transportation have been identified.

**Goal 1:** Create a set of Complete Streets-Multimodal street design standards for Downtown Austin.

**Policy 1.1:** Develop and adopt a set of place-based street types for Downtown Austin.

**Policy 1.2:** Develop cross section alternatives for each street type identifying standards for parking, motorists, bicycles, transit and the pedestrian realm.

**Goal 2:** Increase connectivity to Mill Pond and the Cedar River.

**Policy 2.1:** Enhance existing connections to the Mill Pond Trail through marked, signed and well lit and street crossings for pedestrians and bicyclists.

**Policy 2.2:** Provide wayfinding signage to Mill Pond and the Cedar River.

**Policy 2.3:** Improve wayfinding signing along the Mill Pond trail

**Goal 3:** Improve the utility of available parking.

**Policy 3.1:** Develop branding and wayfinding signage for Downtown Parking lots.

**Policy 3.2:** Develop branding and wayfinding signage for parking for Spam Museum visitors.

**Policy 3.3:** Review and “right-size” the time allotment for the existing parking restrictions to encourage parking where appropriate – specifically in the area bound by Main Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenues which has high demand in present condition and is likely to have increased demand due to the new Spam Museum. Restrictions should promote extended customer parking for a multiple stop visit and limit extended employee parking in prime parking areas.

**Policy 3.4:** Review permitting process for downtown employee parking and identify parking locations.

**Policy 3.5:** Review ticketing process for parking violations to promote extended customer parking and limit extended employee parking in prime parking areas.

**Policy 3.6** Evaluate options, costs, and benefits for structured multi-story parking that can centralize parking near the core to:

- make parking more predictable and fully utilized
- open up scarce land for redevelopment and improving tax base, and
- potentially provide covered parking for downtown residents.

#### **Goal 4: Improve bicycle facilities in the Downtown**

**Policy 4.1:** Develop a bicycle master plan for Austin, including the downtown, which connects bicyclists to the city center, other primary destinations, the trail network and transit facilities on well-marked routes.

**Policy 4.2:** Provide a bike connection along 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE to the Mill Pond trail with a well signed and marked on-street facility. This may require a parallel route for northbound bicyclists due to the one-way segment of 1<sup>st</sup> Street NE.

**Policy 4.3:** Utilize road diets that narrow travel lanes to provide dedicated on-street bicycle facilities where appropriate. Construction of dedicated on-street bicycle facilities will need to be opportunistic to coincide with other infrastructure projects. Due to the street cross-sections in Downtown and MnDOT design standards, on-street facilities will, absent road reconstruction projects, require:

- Consideration of one-way pair bike facilities (e.g. 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue eastbound bike lane, 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue westbound bike lane)
- Targeted, not across-the-board, use of sharrows and/or enhanced sharrows to provide a shared bike and auto space
- Tradeoffs with existing on-street parking, or
- Working through a variance process with MnDOT to allow reduced lane widths.

**Policy 4.4:** Add bike racks to surface parking lots and sidewalks to provide bicycle parking at regular intervals in the downtown.

#### **Goal 5: Enhance walkability**

**Policy 5.1:** Promote building façade renovation.

**Policy 5.2:** Reduce the number of curb cuts through access consolidation as redevelopment occurs.

**Policy 5.3:** Incorporate more vegetation into the streetscape such as street trees, plantings, ornamental planters and baskets.

**Policy 5.4:** Review the potential for the strategic installation of curb extensions at unsignalized intersections to improve pedestrian-motorist visibility aligning crossing pedestrians with the parking lane and reducing the crossing distance for pedestrians. They may be installed on one corner or two corners rather than all four corners of an intersection. Curb extensions also serve to physically and visually narrow the traveled roadway, providing traffic calming. Potential locations to install curb extensions have been identified on Figure 2 and should be further evaluated for impacts to safety, drainage, on-street parking supply and motor-vehicle movements.

Main Street was originally constructed with curb extensions in 1978 and then was reconstructed to remove the curb extensions in 1993. Other sections of Main Street were reconstructed as recently as 2011 and 4th Avenue NE was constructed in 1993. The streets in the Downtown network are not planned for reconstruction within the horizon of the Downtown Master Plan with the exception of 2nd Avenue NE. Thus the installation of curb extensions will need to be completed as opportunities present themselves for the redevelopment of certain buildings or blocks and resources for non-motorized improvements through entities such as SHIP and Active Living.

**Policy 5.5:** Add pedestrian lighting to side streets and corridors such as 1<sup>st</sup> Street NW where there are several parking lots to enhance visibility of pedestrians increasing personal security.

**Policy 5.6:** Install pedestrian count down timers at signalized intersections.

**Policy 5.7:** Complete Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements at pedestrian crossings.

**Policy 5.8:** Install durable international style crosswalk markings at appropriate intersections as street maintenance and rehabilitation activities occur.

*Downtown Core Areas*

**Definition**

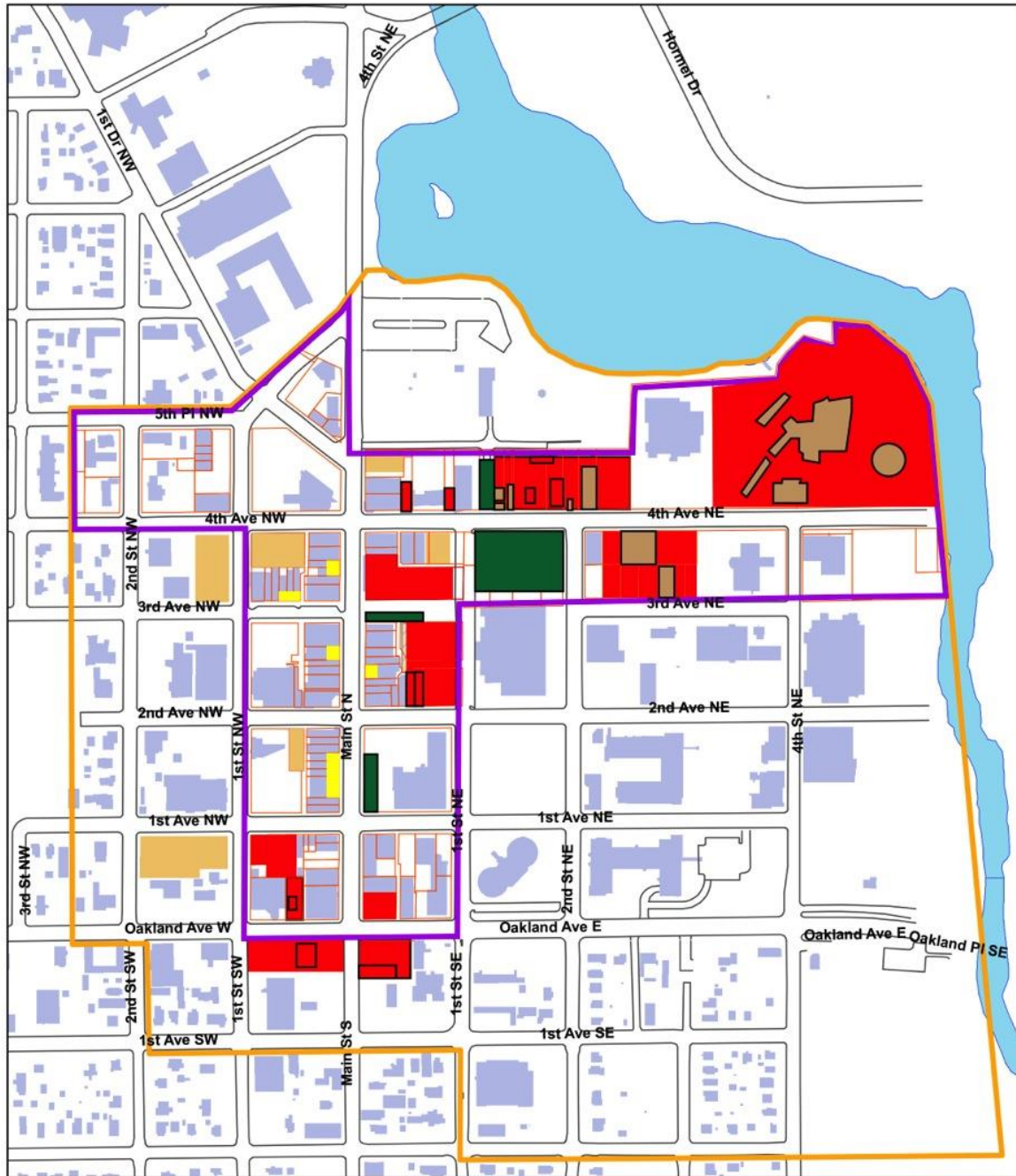
The Downtown Core area is the main focus of the downtown plan. The Core area encompasses the primary commercial corridor and the proposed “cultural” corridor that create a regional destination. The Downtown Core includes the full city block of land uses on either side of Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE/W, from the south side of Oakland Avenue to 5<sup>th</sup> Place NW, and from the west side of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street NW to the Cedar River. The Downtown Core section of the plan considers how to meet the City’s varied goals along Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and also considers each intersection (turning the corner) as an important part of meeting corridor goals.



**Figure 13 Downtown Core Corridors**

The Downtown Core desired conditions include vision statements, goals and policies that apply to the entire downtown core, and goals and policies that are specific to one of the two key activity corridors that comprise the area: the Main Street Corridor and the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Cultural Corridor.

The Downtown Core section recommends site specific redevelopment, restructuring, and renovation areas. These areas are described in the Downtown Core policies, and are identified on the following map.



**Downtown Commercial Redevelopment**

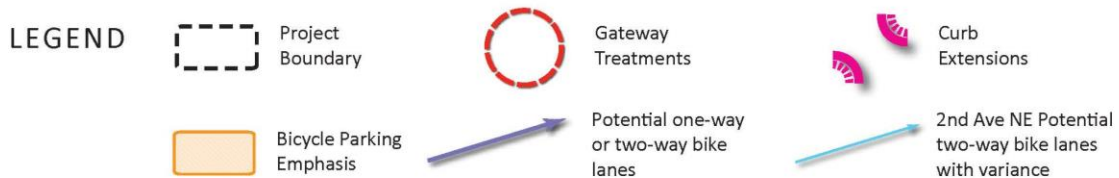
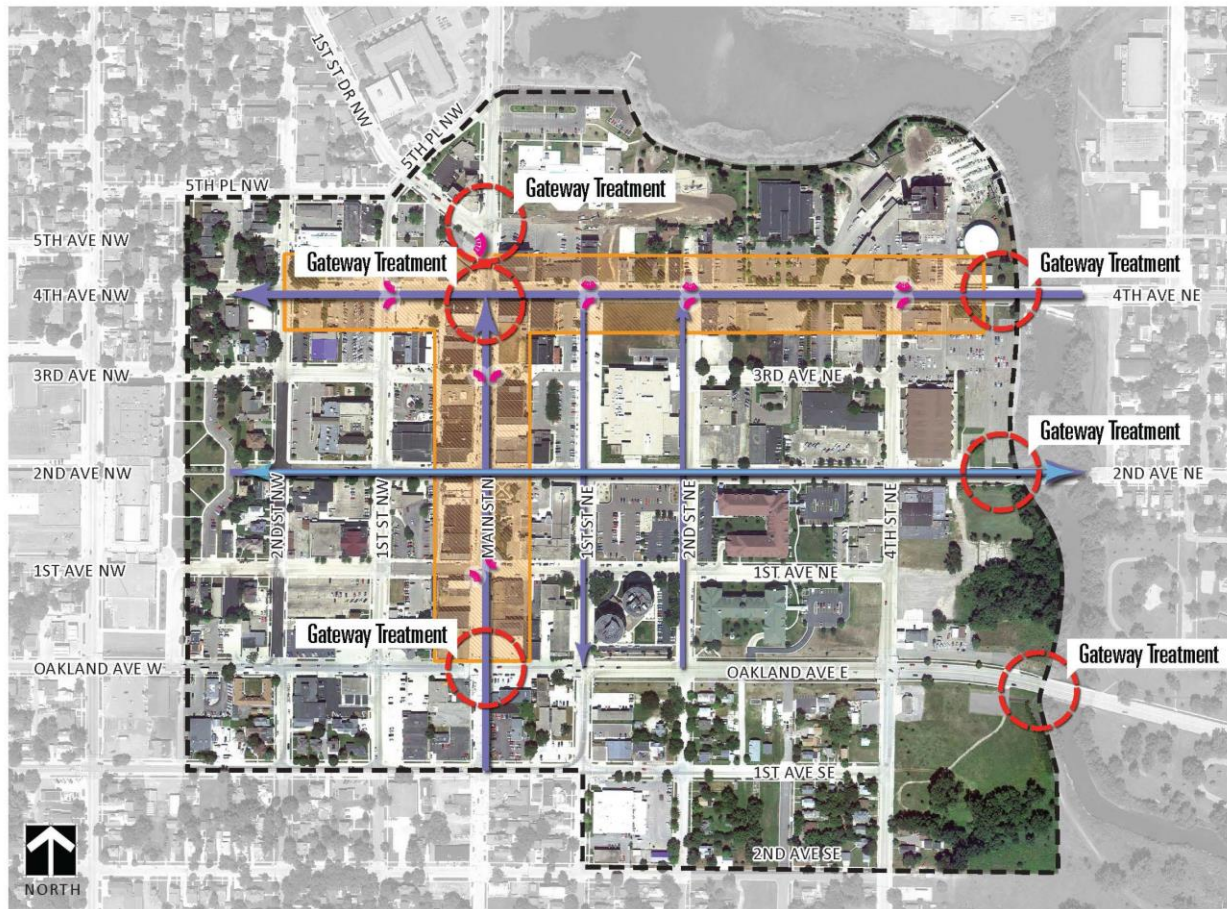
- |   |                       |   |                                |
|---|-----------------------|---|--------------------------------|
|  | Greater Downtown Area |  | Building Footprint             |
|  | Downtown Core         |  | Greenspace Restructuring       |
|  | Parcel                |  | Lot or Building Redevelopment  |
|  | City Parking          |  | Building or Use Restructuring  |
|  | Water                 |  | Façade or Building Improvement |

Figure 14 Redevelopment, Restructuring, Renovation Opportunities

**Downtown Core Vision:** To create an economic, cultural and environmentally sustainable vibrant area within the Greater Downtown and larger community of Austin that serves as a primary regional destination for visitors.

**Goal 1: Emphasize the downtown core as the economic and cultural center of Austin.**

- Policy 1.1** Prioritize sustaining economic activity in the downtown core in the city’s overall economic and land use decision-making.
- Policy 1.2** Incorporate form-based redevelopment practices and standards, where appropriate, in Austin’s development regulations.
- Policy 1.3** Direct appropriate gathering place entertainment uses in the downtown core to sustain and grow the cluster of destination entertainment businesses and institutions.
- Policy 1.4** Emphasize the core as a primary origin and destination in developing multi-modal transportation infrastructure including the potential projects shown in Figure 15.



**Figure 15: Downtown Transportation Improvement Options**

**Policy 1.5** Build upon the success of the Austin Main Street Project by creating new organizational infrastructure that can coordinate and direct downtown plan implementation efforts.

**Policy 1.6** Develop historic or heritage preservation guidelines that ensure compatibility with existing buildings and completed renovations. Consider educational, incentive-based and regulatory methods for implementation in redevelopment and renovation activities.

**Goal 2: Create a sustainable physical environment in the Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Cultural corridors.**

**Policy 2.1:** Create Complete Green Streets standards for all new street construction consistent with Austin's Complete Streets policy.

**Policy 2.2:** Prioritize the reuse of existing buildings whenever possible, and encourage reuse of building materials in redevelopment and reconstruction.

**Policy 2.3:** Encourage new buildings and renovations to incorporate lifecycle cost paybacks in energy efficiency, or consider promotion of Minnesota Sustainable Building 2030 energy standards or equivalent.

**Policy 2.4:** Increase downtown green space and vegetation, including selective reintroduction of tree canopy in the Downtown core area that balances the benefits of tree canopy with potential nuisances, and integrating innovative stormwater management best practices such as permeable paving, rain gardens, and similar techniques within public areas.

**Goal 3: Improve connectivity and access to the Downtown Core area for all modes of transportation.**

**Policy 3.1:** Improve multi-modal connections at major crossings and along supportive streets

**Policy 3.2:** Develop wayfinding standards and implement the standards to improve access and connectivity of the Downtown Core to the larger Austin area

**Policy 3.3:** Enhance the transportation corridor between the Downtown Core and the proposed I-90 corridor gateway entrance at 4th Street NW and the Spam Museum entrance corridor

**Policy 3.4:** Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections between Main Street and nearby facilities such as the High School, future Community Recreation Center, riverfront and the larger Austin trail system.

**Policy 3.5:** Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections between the library and other 4th Avenue Cultural Corridor destinations and nearby housing areas.

**Goal 4: Focus on livability in the Downtown Core for residents, businesses, and visitors.**

**Policy 4.1:** Develop a variety of public gathering spaces, large and small and improve connections to existing public spaces such as the riverfront.

**Policy 4.2:** Encourage public art throughout Downtown Core, such as integrating art into the design of streetscape elements, facades of new buildings, free standing sculpture and murals.

**Policy 4.3:** Ensure downtown core is attractive, safe, and welcoming for all downtown visitors.

**Policy 4.4:** Encourage and support outdoor dining, sidewalk seating and rooftop dining and similar public gathering to add vibrancy and increase activity within the public realm.

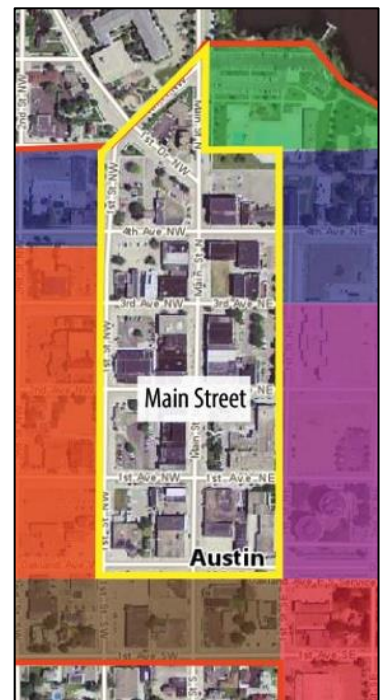
**Main Street Corridor Vision:** An economically self-sustaining commercial corridor that embodies the historic and cultural character of Austin, provides a variety of services and goods to residents and visitors, and serves as the hub of Austin’s multi-modal transportation system. Gateway developments at the Oakland Avenue and 5<sup>th</sup> Place NE intersections create a clear commercial identity and new commercial development wraps around the corners at intersections along the corridor. Trees and other green infrastructure complement the public realm.

**Goal 1: Enhance and define the economic vibrancy of the Main Street Corridor.**

- Policy 1.1:** Encourage appropriate adaptive reuse for underutilized buildings.
- Policy 1.2:** Renovate existing spaces in a manner that is consistent with historic character of the downtown core.
- Policy 1.3:** Increase density of commercial uses through infill on Main Street and increasing intensity of uses on side streets (turning the corner on development and redevelopment).
- Policy 1.4:** Identify appropriate and synergistic mix of uses to sustain commercial activity, modify regulations and programs to encourage implementation.
- Policy 1.5:** Consider opportunities for housing or live/work spaces on Main Street, including both street and upper levels.
- Policy 1.6:** Consider opportunities for lodging, B&B, or hotel on or adjacent to Main Street.
- Policy 1.7:** Encourage the growing ethnic and cultural diversity in services and products in the Main Street corridor and support expansion of existing businesses and new entrepreneurs serving these niche, but growing, markets.
- Policy 1.8:** Provide visible and ample parking for bicyclists and provide a network that provides bicycle access to Main Street through development of a Citywide Bicycle Plan.

**Goal 2: Maintain the historic character of the Main Street Corridor.**

- Policy 2.1:** Create Main Street design standards for façade renovation, maintenance and management.
- Policy 2.2:** Continue to manage façade easements consistent with written design guidelines, work with willing building and business owners to bring additional buildings into consistency with design guidelines.
- Policy 2.3:** Continue to encourage new investment by business owners to enhance services, expand offerings and products, and expand to meet new demand.
- Policy 2.4:** Maintain scale of buildings to a two or three story maximum in the Main Street Corridor while also discouraging the construction of new single story buildings.
- Policy 2.5:** Keep new development in character with design goals.





**Goal 3: Redevelop underused sites on and adjacent to Main Street.**

**Policy 3.1:** Redevelop the Paradise building (2nd Avenue NE) and the parking area behind the Main Street buildings into a multi-story parking ramp. The ramp will create predictable parking access for the Spam Museum, connect upper stories of Main Street buildings that have apartments to parking access, and consolidate surface parking capacity on nearby blocks (allowing additional redevelopment opportunities). However, parking fees from a ramp are unlikely to pay for construction of a ramp, which the City estimates to be as high as \$3 million for a 3-story, 120 stall ramp. Costs and benefits of such a development include direct costs and revenues such as construction, maintenance, parking fees, increased tax revenue from redeveloped surface lots, Indirect costs can also be considered, such as convenience to downtown patrons and employees, creation of a higher quality covered parking space, and higher value for nearby lots.

**Policy 3.2:** Redevelop the “fire site” lots and adjacent buildings on 3rd Avenue NE into the relocated Spam Museum (Main Street and 3rd Avenue NE). Redesign the 3rd Avenue Plaza to reopen the auto traffic flow, but retain a plaza function and design enhancing pedestrian connections with updated green infrastructure that promotes walkability and placemaking.

**Policy 3.3:** Redevelop underused frontage and surface parking along avenues turning off Main Street (1st through 4th). Work with land and building owners to identify redevelopment opportunities that turn the corner from Main Street. One example of such an opportunity is on 1st Avenue NE where converting parking and vacant lots to liner buildings extends the Main Street corridor from the existing 1st Avenue NE businesses.

**Policy 3.4:** Redevelop the gateway lots at Main Street and Oakland Avenue. The gateway to Main Street includes under-landscaped parking lots on three corners and buildings that do not meet Main Street character at this important intersection. Long-term redevelopment should consider infill buildings in character with Main Street design. Shorter-term redevelopment could include landscaping and monuments that announce Main Street to people traveling Oakland and 1st Avenue S.

**Goal 4. Enhance pedestrian connections along Main Street**

**Policy 4.1:** Emphasize pedestrian crossings by reviewing the potential to install curb extensions at unsignalized Main Street intersections such as at 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues. Curb extensions improve the visibility of and for pedestrians aligning them with the parking lane and reducing the crossing distance for pedestrians.

**Policy 4.2:** Install durable international style crosswalk markings at key Main Street intersections.

**Policy 4.3:** Review the street lighting at pedestrian crossing locations and provide well lit street crossings for pedestrians.

**Cultural Corridor Vision:** A pedestrian-oriented mixed-use corridor with entertainment and art-focused businesses, public spaces and uses, and high quality urban scale housing mixed with other uses. The corridor includes protected historic structures and historic designs along its entire length. Pedestrian and bike gateways open to Mill Pond and to both banks of the Cedar River. The street design characteristics should promote walkability and emphasize slower vehicle speeds.



**Goal 1: Establish 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue as the cultural center of downtown Austin.**

**Policy 1.1:** Support the expansion on the Paramount Theater.

**Policy 1.2:** Develop urban-scale, urban design redevelopment opportunities, including working with existing building owners, relocation of existing businesses where appropriate, and purchase and redevelopment working with willing landowners.

**Policy 1.3:** Consider opportunities for artist studios or live/work space along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

**Policy 1.4:** Expand appropriate entertainment uses in new development or redevelopment, emphasizing uses that fit the Cultural Corridor vision.

**Goal 2: Transform 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue into complete green street.**

**Policy 2.1:** Create a pedestrian emphasis along the full length of 4th Avenue with pedestrian scale streetscape elements.

**Policy 2.2:** Expand urban forest in redevelopment projects along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and incorporate green infrastructure (vegetation and trees) in the public realm to serve shading, storm water management, and aesthetic purposes.

**Policy 2.3:** Connect storm water conveyance systems to appropriate infiltration or rain garden areas to provide water for urban forest and landscaping in the public realm.

**Goal 3: Transform 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue into an Activity Area A Street** by defining 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue as an inviting entrance into the downtown area with a multi-modal street design and traffic calming techniques.

**Policy 3.1:** Slow traffic coming into downtown from the Cedar River crossing west to 4<sup>th</sup> Street NW through gateway treatments that narrow the cross section and/or calm traffic.

**Policy 3.2:** Create welcoming entrances into downtown, in redesign of the public realm and adjacent private realm redevelopment at both ends of the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue corridor.

**Policy 3.3:** Emphasize pedestrian crossings by reviewing the potential to install curb extensions at key 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue intersections such as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> Streets NE, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street NW. Curb extensions improve the visibility of and for pedestrians aligning them with the parking lane and reducing the crossing distance for pedestrians.

**Policy 3.4:** Install durable international style crosswalk markings at the intersection of the Mill Pond Trail/1<sup>st</sup> Street NE and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue to provide a well-marked connection to the Mill Pond Trail and Riverfront.

**Policy 3.5:** Review the street lighting at pedestrian crossing locations and provide well lit street crossings for pedestrians.

**Policy 3.6:** Review potential to implement a road diet to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue that narrows motor vehicle lanes to provide bike lanes in each direction using the MnDOT variance process or a one-way pair bike facility with 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue which utilizes one street for an eastbound bike lane and the other for a westbound bike lane.

**Policy 3.7:** Provide clear wayfinding signage along the corridor to direct users to parking areas.

**Goal 4: Optimize water access to Mill Pond and the Cedar River.**

**Policy 4.1:** Connect businesses and residents to Mill Pond and river trails.

**Policy 4.2:** Ensure new development maintains river access for all downtown visitors.

**Goal 5: Redevelop underused or blighted sites on or adjacent to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE to create a vibrant cultural corridor.**

**Policy 5.1:** Consider redevelopment opportunities of boardwalk buildings adjacent to the Paramount Theater. The Theater is considering expansion and several buildings to the west could be redeveloped and existing businesses relocated. The bicycle/pedestrian gateway to the Mill Pond area to the east of the Theater should be improved and expanded, if possible, to emphasize the gateway function of that parcel.

**Policy 5.2:** Strategically consolidate and redevelop the lots between the Paramount Theater and the Library. This stretch of approximately seven lots includes building redevelopment sites, underused surface parking, renovation or restructuring opportunities and at least one cultural icon (the Tendermaid). Redevelopment can increase the building density and create new public and visual gateways to Mill Pond. The new or restructured buildings could be designed to create opportunities for artist/cultural/ entertainment uses fronting on the Avenue and housing that captures access or views to Mill Pond.

**Policy 5.3:** The historic power plant site at the east end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Corridor is likely a prime redevelopment or adaptive reuse site in the Greater Downtown area, and one of the most important opportunities in the city. Several competing proposals have been suggested for this site, including as the location for a new Community Recreation Center. Given the site's many amenities and competing potential uses, the redevelopment process should follow guidelines that emphasize opportunities and minimize long-term risks:

1. Encourage the adaptive reuse of the power plant buildings where economically feasible to support heritage preservation and sustainable development principles.

2. New uses within or upon the power plant site should support and compliment uses within the downtown core.
3. Redevelopment or adaptive reuse of the power plant site should include green space and connections to adjacent public sidewalks, trails and open spaces.
4. Encourage the use of sustainable, green building practices as established in the LEED and MNB3 rating systems.

**Policy 5.4:** The block on the south side of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> NE streets includes several appropriate uses for the corridor but significant amounts of underused surface parking. Redevelopment opportunities include infill along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and consolidation of parking and automobile access along 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, retaining the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue trees and expanding green infrastructure to retain walkability.

**Policy 5.5:** The lawn north of the Judicial Center encompasses an entire block along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The currently unstructured space is a reserve for expansion of the Judicial Center. The empty space does not serve a meaningful green infrastructure purpose and creates sight lines only to the back of the Judicial Center and existing surface parking. The site presents a substantial opportunity for integrating the new Spam Museum, the redesigned plaza or public space along the reopened 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, and Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue pedestrian traffic with green space or a community gathering location. A gathering area design should retain expansion opportunities for the Judicial Center.

## VII. Strategies

The Strategies section answers the question of how the City of Austin will move from “where we are now” to “where we want to go.” After identifying the preferred destination(s) in the Desired Conditions section, the Strategies section provides a roadmap of implementation recommendations that use a variety of tools. Successful implementation of the Downtown Plan depends on appropriate actions by both the public sector and the private sector. Implementation strategies will range across a spectrum of influence, from methods of encouragement and education, to direct public ownership and management. Tools can be placed into four general categories (although a number of hybrids also exist):

1. **Encouragement or education.** Providing private sector businesses and consumers with appropriate information can frequently help them make decisions that are consistent with the plan. Marketing the downtown as a vibrant place to live, work, and play to residents, businesses, and visitors is an example of an encouragement strategy.
2. **Incentives.** Sometimes, rather than relying on convincing people or businesses to act in ways to achieve the desired conditions, an incentive can be offered to elicit desired action by the private sector. The financial incentives administered by the Austin Main Street Project, offered to Main Street businesses to improve their business or façade, are an example of an incentive tool.
3. **Regulation.** The City has a number of regulatory tools that it currently uses to guide private sector development. The zoning ordinance, sign ordinance, parking requirements, and other local ordinances can be effective methods for implementing the Downtown Master Plan. Regulatory tools place some decisions about private sector investment in the hands of appointed or elected officials.
4. **Public management.** Some components of the Downtown Master Plan are in the public realm, such as how the public rights-of-way are used, the park and floodplain areas under public ownership or control, and the public buildings and facilities in the Greater Downtown area. Similarly, the façade easements acquired under the Austin Main Street Program improvement are managed in the public realm.

Eight specific implementation strategies are recommended for achieving the desired future for Austin’s downtown:

1. **Develop organizational infrastructure** to manage implementation efforts.
2. **Revise development regulations** to reflect desired outcomes in the Downtown and influence areas.
3. **Continue financial assistance programs** for façade and business improvements.
4. **Create specific redevelopment plans** for targeted Downtown Core restructuring areas.
5. **Incorporate transportation and infrastructure improvements** into the capital improvement plan and other capital projects to ensure opportunistic implementation of infrastructure elements of the Plan.
6. **Create appropriate green infrastructure standards** for Greater Downtown and Downtown Core to improve walkability and improve functioning of natural systems that support downtown development.
7. **Consider development of a Heritage Preservation Commission** to ensure consistent management of historic and cultural resources consistent with community standards.
8. **Consider sustainable building design and public infrastructure standards** to minimize operating costs for building infrastructure and improve the multi-functional purpose of infrastructure.

1. ***Develop new organizational infrastructure to manage implementation efforts.***

Creating a downtown-focused organization or program greatly enhances implementation of the Downtown Master Plan. A staffed organization can marshal resources, coordinate action across different public and private downtown stakeholders, manage downtown programs, and advocate for downtown plan goals. The Austin Main Street Project, which served these functions since 2006, was disbanded in 2014 as part of a reorganization of resources, participating organizations, and programmatic emphasis. However, a review of the defined missions and programs of Austin's business, community development, and economic development organizations reveals that no other entities appear to have an existing program sufficient to serve these purposes. Perhaps more importantly, no existing organization has a mission focused specifically on growing and sustaining downtown's importance as the social and economic hub within the greater Austin area.

***Why a downtown organization or program?***

Creating a downtown organization, or a program within an existing organization, to ensure the continued success for downtown-focused economic and community development is a proven strategy that has worked not only in Austin but in communities across the nation. As is typical for urban downtowns, Austin's downtown does not have centralized property ownership, as seen in a mall or an industrial park, that allows coordinated improvements in infrastructure and design. Such coordination maximizes value, coordinates the mix of businesses to minimize conflict and promote synergy, and implements promotion and marketing of the downtown area for the benefit of all businesses. Moreover, the downtown is unique in that its business makeup is typically small and entrepreneurial owner-operators that have less access to capital, few staff resources, and very limited capacity to manage or advocate for coordinated economic planning, design and promotion.

**Austin Main Street Project**

The Austin Main Street Project, created to implement design goals of the 2005 Downtown Master Plan, was a version of the third category, a program within a public agency. While the Project had the appearance of a stand-alone non-profit, it was legally a component of another non-profit, and physically housed within another government program. The Austin Main Street Project took responsibility for planning, designing, initiating, and managing several programs that successfully renovated facades and physical improvements in over 42 buildings in the downtown core areas. Operational funding and capital to leverage private investment was provided by other private and public organizations, in addition to some dedicated fundraising for specific initiatives. The Project also served economic restructuring and promotional goals for the downtown, including helping to organize events and recruit compatible businesses and organizations to the downtown.

A number of organizations played critical roles in the successful implementation of the 2005 Plan, including the:

- Hormel Foundation,
- Austin Housing Redevelopment Authority,
- Development Corporation of Austin,
- Port Authority,
- Chamber of Commerce, and
- City of Austin.

Additional non-profit organizations also contributed to the success of the Austin's downtown improvements through coordinated promotional and organizational initiatives, including Vision 2020 and the Austin Area Commission for the Arts.

Ensuring the economic sustainability and maintenance of community character for the downtown requires organizational infrastructure that facilitates such coordinated planning, programs, and investment.

**Options.** Austin has several options to explore for creating a downtown organization that can take responsibility for implementing the downtown plan. Four alternative structures for a downtown organization include:

- a) Informal organization
- b) Program within an existing non-profit or business organization
- c) Program with City government or agency
- d) Stand-alone non-profit organization

Hybrids of these categories are also common, but these four types of organization summarize the spectrum of options.

Each of these organizational types has unique strengths and drawbacks. For instance, the informal or ad hoc organization works well when participating businesses and organizations have an established cooperative history and demonstrated capacity to manage not only their own organizations but to participate fully in (and fund) cooperative ventures. Informal organizations are, however, very unstable and frequently dependent on a single business or even a single person maintaining the organization, and rarely go beyond the “promotion” function of a downtown organization.

Programs within existing organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce or Vision 2020, or within a governmental entity such as the Port Authority, also have specific strengths and limitations for implementing downtown goals. The existing organizational structure provides stability and experience, funding support, and connections that give validity to the program. Drawbacks include potential conflicts between the parent organization and the downtown program, shared staff that may not be available for downtown specific needs, and, in the case of a governmental program, limited ability to provide direct financial incentives to businesses. Some successful downtown organizations in Minnesota have used this model. Not infrequently, this model becomes a transition, where the downtown program is ultimately spun off into a separate organization when conflicts or differing priorities with the parent organization limit implementation options.

The fourth category, a stand-alone non-profit organization, has been recently strengthened as an option with the revival of the Minnesota Main Street program. A stand-alone non-profit organization does not have to be a sanctioned program under the Minnesota and National Trust parameters. However, the statewide program represents a new opportunity for the City of Austin. A stand-alone non-profit organization could fit well with Austin’s mix of existing organizations, funding, and programs. A non-profit would provide a vehicle for continued funding from downtown stakeholders that cannot be used for direct assistance to for-profit businesses, and could be characterized as a component of the funder’s mission without programmatic responsibilities. The successful formation of a state-wide Main Street program in 2010 gives the city and a potential new non-profit technical assistance and peer relationships to draw on that did not exist when the Austin Main Street Program was created.

**Minnesota Main Street™**

Designated Minnesota Main Street Programs use the National Main Street Center’s Four-Point Approach®, have broad community support, paid staff, and meet other standards. Designated Main Street Programs receive several benefits from their annual membership including complimentary training admissions and funding for on-site technical assistance. Minnesota’s designated programs are:

1. Faribault Main Street
2. New Ulm Retail Development Corporation
3. MainStreet Owatonna
4. Main Street Shakopee
5. Willmar Design Center
6. Winona Main Street

*Source: Preservation Alliance of Minnesota*

**Responsible Parties.** Evaluation of new downtown organizational infrastructure options should, ideally, include all the parties involved previously involved with funding and promoting the previous downtown program (noted above). The new program or organization should be explicitly consistent with the mission of any host organization or agency. A stand-alone non-profit would create its own mission statement and Board. Some technical assistance may be available from the Minnesota Main Street program.

2. **Revise development regulations to reflect desired outcomes in the Downtown and Downtown influence areas.** Current zoning in the Central Business District does not reflect the desired types or mixes of uses as presented in the Downtown Master Plan, nor the preferred physical design for buildings, green infrastructure considerations, or integration with pedestrian and bicycle goals. Moreover, the City also has standards regulating signs, requiring parking, and guiding the design of public streets. The City has a variety of tools and options at its disposal to include some or all of these desired outcomes in its development regulation and other regulatory and design standards.

**Options.** A number of options are available for integrating the Downtown Master Plan visions and goals into development regulation.

- a. **Revise zoning ordinance to be consistent with project goals.** Elements of the zoning ordinance that could be changed include:
  - i. **Create new definitions of commercial uses** that distinguish between, for instance, commercial that is appropriate for a walkable Main Street and commercial that is more automobile dependent. Similarly, commercial definitions can include distinctions based on type of product or service being sold, the size (square footage) of the business, and even the type of ownership (franchise, chain, individual proprietor). Some care needs to be taken in creating some of these distinctions, but the City has a number of options to defining categories of commercial uses.
  - ii. **Create new mixed use districts** that explicitly encourage particular mixes of uses, and that define incompatible uses. The current CBD district allows a wide variety of uses, from residential to industrial, but does not identify the preferred mix of uses. A district can use such a definition to enhance or clarify the listed mix of allowed uses.
  - iii. **Create a separate district or an overlay district for the Downtown Core corridors.** A separate district or overlay would recognize that the Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue corridors have a distinct preferred development form and mix of uses than the surrounding areas.
  - iv. **Consider incorporating design and dimensional standards** for the Downtown Core within zoning. The current CBD has very little guidance in regard to design for new or renovated buildings, lacking even a defined height standard. Design standards can address bulk, height, setback, density (floor-to-area ratio), amount of fenestration, preferred materials, consistency with surrounding properties, etc. The City can choose to require some elements, and recommend others.
  - v. **Consider form-based zoning.** As an alternative to defining districts by the preferred uses, the City could instead focus on urban form (placement, height, width, fenestration of buildings, walks, parking areas, etc.) and allow more flexibility and mixing of uses. This allows for creativity by the businesses that choose to locate in the downtown, and focuses city regulation on maintaining the physical characteristics (buildings close together and up to the street) and mix of uses (commercial, office, residential, institutional, etc.) that define downtown.



**50-16.6 Form District 5 (F-5) Mid-Rise Community Shopping and Office**

**A. Purpose**

The F-5 District is applied to both the West Superior Street study area (Lincoln Park) and the transitional areas surrounding Downtown, including Canal Park and Central Hillside (2nd Street from 6th Ave. West to 3rd Ave. East). These areas consist of a combination of traditional mixed use buildings and office buildings, which conform to the style of Main Street Building II and Corridor Building II. Permitted and special uses are shown in Table 50-19.8.

		Form Districts								
		F-1	F-2	F-3	F-4	F-5	F-6	F-7	F-8	F-9
Building Types	Main Street Building I	•	•							
	Main Street Building II			•	•	•	•			
	Main Street Building III							•	•	
	Corridor Building I		•							
	Corridor Building II				•	•				
	Lakefront Corridor									•
	Corridor Building III								•	
	Cottage Commercial I		•				•			
	Cottage Commercial II			•						
	Iconic Building	•	•	•					•	

**B. Example**

F-5 Example Building Forms



Source: Duluth Unified Development Code, Form Districts, page 2-45

- b. **Revise other development regulations to be consistent with the Downtown Plan.** Other elements of the City’s regulations also affect achievement of the Downtown Plan goals.
  - i. **Modify the sign ordinance.** Austin recently made some changes to its sign ordinance to streamline approval of signs and more clearly delineate allowed uses. Additional modifications may need to be considered, both regarding streamlining regulation and ensuring the permanent signage is consistent with design standards and community character.
  - ii. **Consider parking requirements and design standards.** The Greater Downtown area has an abundance of surface parking lots, most of which are privately owned. Changing standards to encourage shared parking facilities, underground or building-integrated facilities, and methods for businesses to contribute to centralized parking rather than develop dedicated parking areas.
  - iii. **Develop Complete Green Street standards.** Austin has a Complete Green Streets policy, but has not identified how to implement the policy in its street design standards. Street design, particularly as major restructuring or redevelopment projects move forward on 4th Avenue, is a critical component for meeting downtown goals of enhancing pedestrian and bicycle movement. Moreover, the managing green infrastructure in Austin’s public rights-of-way in the downtown helps meet Austin’s stormwater management and surface water quality goals.

**Responsible Parties.** Development regulation revisions are overseen by the Planning Commission, and approved by the City Council. Stakeholders for development of new regulations should include downtown businesses, non-profits such as Vision 2020 and the Chamber of Commerce, and public entities such as the Port Authority.

3. ***Continue financial assistance programs for façade and business improvements.***

The Austin Main Street Project, with its partners and funders, administered several successful façade and business expansion programs. These programs continue to be a vital component to sustaining the revitalization of Austin's downtown. The need for access to capital and technical assistance will be continual; Main Street businesses are typically small and entrepreneurial, and lack access to resources that larger businesses or chains and franchises have. In addition, the core downtown area includes historic and community character assets that are absent or less visible in other commercial areas, and which the larger community has an interest in protecting.

***Options.*** Austin can take several steps to ensure continuing success in leveraging private investment in the public realm, and in creating self-sustaining small businesses in the downtown. Options to consider include:

- a. **Maintain funding and program administration** for the façade improvement program and the tenant-assistance program for business improvement.
- b. **Consider options for expanding the focus** of programs, or develop new programs, to be consistent with the vision of businesses participating in Downtown Plan.
- c. **Consider options for expanding geographic scope** of the programs to be consistent with the Downtown Plan. The current programs are targeted at a geography that includes the Main Street corridor but not the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue corridor.

***Responsible parties.*** The existing programs are funded and supported by an ad hoc group of non-profit and governmental entities, and managed by the now-defunct Austin Main Street Project. Management of such programs should fall to the new downtown organization, regardless of the organizational form. The providers of funders and other support will need to re-evaluate their participation in and how to sustain these efforts into the future consistent with each organization's economic and community development mission.



4. ***Create specific redevelopment plans for targeted Downtown Core restructuring areas.*** The Downtown Master Plan identifies several sites for redevelopment or significant restructuring. While these sites provide opportunities to meet downtown plan goals, the City should develop more specific plans for redevelopment, engage stakeholders to participate in the planning process, and consider how existing businesses within some of the areas can be retained throughout the restructuring process.

***Options.*** Austin can evaluate the priority of the redevelopment sites and stage redevelopment planning consistent with other projects, market conditions, and availability of capital. Options include:

- a. **Identify each restructuring or redevelopment area.** Redeveloping a multi-owner site is a more complex and time-consuming process than a single-owner site or a building improvement.
- b. **Prioritize redevelopment opportunities.** Two sites (the Spam Museum site and the power plant site) are currently in the process of redevelopment or redevelopment discussions, and take current priority. The 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE site north of the Avenue at 2nd street has been partially cleared, and the green space north of the Judicial Center is also a prepared site. Other sites will require demolition, relocation of businesses, consolidation of lots, or other pre-restructuring actions.
- c. **Tie redevelopment plans to larger downtown goals.** The Downtown Master Plan provides the context for linking individual projects to larger goals. In the redevelopment process, these connections between different sites and to public realm improvements need to be maintained.
- d. **Evaluate market opportunities for specific sites.** Some sites will be relatively straightforward, as the site and preferred use is likely to attract private capital. Others, such as the redevelopment site identified in both the 2005 and 2014 Plans for a multi-story parking facility, are unlikely to attract private capital and are necessarily linked to other redevelopment opportunities (such as redevelopment of existing surface parking lots).

***Responsible Parties.*** The city's public and private economic and community development entities will need to coordinate on many of these projects: the Development Corporation of Austin, the Port Authority, the Housing and Redevelopment Authority.



5. ***Incorporate transportation and infrastructure improvements into the capital improvement plan.*** A complete streets-based multimodal transportation system in Downtown Austin will support adjacent land use and in part facilitate a lively and vibrant downtown. Multimodal transportation Improvements must be identified and planned for within the City's planning process. This is important for the Downtown transportation improvements in particular as no street reconstruction is scheduled for Downtown within the 50-year horizon with the exception of 2nd Avenue NE. Thus funding for such improvements will need to be strategic and opportunistic rather than come from routine street improvement projects. Developing plans which identify improvements in the near term prepares the City for opportunities as they arise.

**Options.** Austin has a number of options for implementing its Downtown transportation goals that support the desired outcomes in the Greater Downtown area. The following options are separated into planning, design, and strategic implementation options.

***Planning/Code Options:***

- a. **Comprehensive Plan.** As part of the upcoming Comprehensive Plan work, extend the place-based street typologies identified in the downtown plan to the city as a whole. Adopt a set of typologies and metrics that apply to all street types, in and outside of downtown, that provide for an integrated transportation system that ultimately balances needs for multiple modes and support meaningful place making. The street typologies must reflect the context of the area through which the street travels and reflect the diverse uses and functions of the street.
- b. **Design Guide.** Develop a Street Design Guide that establishes a set of design standards for the street typologies identified in the Comprehensive Plan that provide flexibility for multimodal transportation and build upon complete streets principals set forth in the MnDOT document, Complete Streets Implementation Resource Guide for Minnesota Local Agencies. <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/research/TS/2013/2013RIC02.pdf>
- c. **Pedestrian and Bicycle System Plan.** Develop a City-wide plan that includes the existing and proposed off-street network for pedestrians and bicycles (trails) and supports this network with pedestrian connections across gaps and on-street linkages to allow bicyclists of varying skill levels to safely, efficiently, and comfortably connect to and between all significant destinations within the City.
- d. **City Codes.** Integrate the Street Design Guide as part of the City's zoning and subdivision ordinances as a key regulatory tool to ensure that streets and the public right-of-way are designed to meet complete streets standards.



*Design Options:*

**Bicycle Facilities** – Due to the widths of downtown streets and current Minnesota State Aid (MSA) Standards, the network may not simply be restriped to add on-street bicycle facilities without loss of parking or a travel lane. The following are steps to provide on-street facilities for bicyclists within this constrained environment.

- a. **Variance** – To maintain travel lanes, two-side parking and add bike lanes, a variance from MnDOT would be required for most streets in Downtown Austin to reduce lane widths below MSA standards due to existing street widths. Minnesota’s recently enacted Complete Streets policy ensures that a local government can request a variance when asking for state funding for a Complete Streets project. The legislation requires Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) to evaluate all Complete Streets’ variance requests using specific Complete Streets guidance publications.

The variance process is outlined in Section VII of Chapter 1 in the 2011 State Aid Manual ([www.dot.state.mn.us/stateaid/manual/sam2011.pdf](http://www.dot.state.mn.us/stateaid/manual/sam2011.pdf)) and in the flow chart from the Public Health Law Center, ([publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/ship-fs-ww-mndotvariance-flowch-2010.pdf](http://publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/ship-fs-ww-mndotvariance-flowch-2010.pdf))

- b. **Directional Routes** – To maintain travel lanes and two-side parking and meet MSA standards, bicycle lanes could be added in a directional fashion on two parallel streets. An example would be to install westbound bicycle lanes on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE and eastbound bicycle lanes on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue NE which each provide connectivity across the Cedar River to and from Downtown.
- c. **Shared Lane Markings or Sharrows** – Sharrows are markings that identify a shared bicycle and auto space on the street and encourage a bicyclist to travel along a specific path in that space. Sharrows are placed in the travel lane such that bicyclists will not be subject to collisions with opening doors on parked vehicles and establish the legitimacy of the bicycle on the street. Sharrows should not be considered a substitute for bike lanes, cycle tracks, or other separation treatments where these types of facilities are otherwise warranted or space permits. The application of sharrows and related enhancements should consider the NACTO Urban Bikeway Design Guide <http://nacto.org/cities-for-cycling/design-guide/bikeway-signing-marking/shared-lane-markings/> and the MnDOT Bikeway Facility Design Manual.
- d. **One-side parking** – Consideration to remove parking from any side of the street in Downtown Austin must include review of the demand and supply in the adjacent areas as well as the potential for new parking resources.



### GreenStep Cities Best Practice No. 11 - Complete Green Streets

Create a network of multimodal green streets that add value to the surrounding properties.

1. Adopt a complete streets policy that also addresses street trees and stormwater.
2. Adopt zoning language or approve a development agreement for a selected area/project that is substantially equivalent to LEED for Neighborhood Development certification, including credits for Walkable Streets and Street Network.
3. Document inclusion/installation of green infrastructure elements as well as grey infrastructure elements in at least one complete streets reconstruction project.
4. Identify, prioritize and remedy complete streets gaps and lack of connectivity within your road network by, for example, adding a bike route/lane, truck route or sidewalk.
5. Identify and remedy street-trail gaps between city streets and off-road trails/bike trails to better facilitate walking and biking.
6. Implement traffic calming measures, including road diets, roundabouts, shared space and depaving, in at least one street redevelopment project.

Source: GreenStep Cities Website

### Strategic Implementation Options:

Transit, parking, pedestrian and bicycle improvements will require incorporation into the CIP, catalyst projects and pursuit of outside funding opportunities. Federal funding for transportation remains politically charged at this time thus policies and programs for future transportation system enhancements are unknown.

- a. **Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)** – Many complete streets improvement projects are modest in scale and can be incorporated into existing budget planning.
- b. **Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) and Mower Refreshed** – Active living and nonmotorized transportation projects may be entitled to funding assistance through these agencies.
- c. **Redevelopment** – Look for opportunities to integrate improvements to adjacent transportation facilities with larger scale redevelopment in the downtown such as the power plant site and the recently razed area east of the Paramount Theater.



6. ***Create appropriate green infrastructure standards for Greater Downtown and Downtown Core.*** Green streets provide environmental and community benefits through the improvement of stormwater management and the creation of a more pleasant space for visitors. Green infrastructure includes rain gardens, a variety of tree species and shrubs, as well as other vegetation strategically located to create a sense of place in downtown.

Rain gardens can be designed to provide both a functional and visual utility. Constructing rain gardens in areas that capture runoff from surface parking and buildings helps to reduce the amount of rainwater that flows directly into the river. Captured rainwater also helps to decrease the amount of sediments and other pollutants that find their way into nearby waterways. Planting rain gardens with appealing vegetation can improve the aesthetics of downtown, particularly in areas with larger surface parking lots.

Trees are important features of any public space. The presence of trees can create economic, environmental, and quality of experience benefits. Studies have shown that consumers' perceptions of stores can be affected by the visual appearance of the exterior; shoppers tend to be more attracted to economic centers that create a positive and welcoming environment. Further, surveys found that consumers are willing to pay more for goods in services in business districts that have trees. Trees also provide important environmental benefits including absorbing pollution from vehicle traffic and other combustion, providing shade, and mitigating urban heat island effect.

Other important elements of green infrastructure include a variety of smaller plants to provide focal points within the community. Currently, Downtown Austin, has a number of hanging baskets that provide a pleasant visual aesthetic during the summer months. Increasing hanging baskets or adding large planters would help provide additional foliage to help soften the appearance of downtown.

**Options.** Austin can take steps to improve its streetscape in the downtown area through green infrastructure design and development. Options include:

- a. Consider adding appropriate tree species, biodiversity, rain gardens, and other green infrastructure throughout downtown.
- b. Soften surface parking lots with increase vegetation around the perimeter and rain gardens, where appropriate.
- c. Plant and maintain trees and other vegetation along Main Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue corridors to attract visitors to the core area.
- d. Improve visual appearance of residential areas with added green infrastructure.
- e. Use green infrastructure to improve river connections to various destination points throughout downtown.

**Responsible Parties.** Parks, Recreation and Forestry department; Public Works Department.



7. **Consider development of a Heritage Preservation Commission.** The City of Austin previously considered developing a heritage or historic preservation commission and chose not to undertake such an initiative. The decision was at least in part due to uncertainty about the effect of using state or federal designations on Austin’s façade and building improvement programs, and concern over local control of design standards. Now that Austin has made substantial progress on improvement downtown facades and administering a design standard incentive program, the City should re-evaluate the potential benefits of a local heritage preservation commission. Local programs are administered under local decision-making standards, but do (depending on the form of the organization) enable some financing, grants or tax credit benefits to flow to qualifying redevelopment efforts.

**Options.** Consider formalizing existing design standards and review process into a local heritage preservation commission or similar organization, to ensure management of historic and cultural resources consistent with community standards.

- a. **Initiate a stakeholder review of heritage preservation options.** A number of different models and options are available, and the City should understand its options. Several historic preservation organizations can help describe options, and help in the formation of a program, including the State Historic Preservation Office and the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota.
- b. **Form a heritage preservation commission** as part of local government functions and regulations that qualifies as a Certified Local Government program. Several nearby communities have formed such commissions and can provide examples for Austin to consider the risks and opportunities associated with creating a Certified Local Government program.

**CERTIFIED LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM**

This nationwide program helps local preservation groups transform themselves from grass-roots advocates to policymakers. A city, county or township with a qualifying heritage preservation ordinance and commission (HPC) may become a Certified Local Government (CLG) by applying to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

CLG status enables the local government to apply for federal matching grants to preserve historic properties. This local-state-federal partnership encourages the integration of historic preservation into local government policy.

**CLG Responsibilities**

- Establish and maintain a qualified HPC.
- Maintain a system for identifying historic properties.
- Enforce appropriate legislation for the designation and protection of historic properties.
- Provide for public participation in the local preservation program.
- Play an expanded role in nominating properties to the National Register.
- Perform other agreed-upon functions delegated by the SHPO.

Source: State Historic Preservation Office website  
<http://www.mnhs.org/shpo/local/clg.php>





- c. **Form a local commission with historic review oversight** but do not certify at this time. The City can experiment with a local commission that has some local review authority but does not necessarily follow all the procedures of a certified program.
- d. **Integrate historic or heritage preservation functions into a new downtown organization or program.** Heritage preservation goals can be administered by an entity that is not part of local government or integrated with local government review processes. While some financial opportunities (grants, tax credits) may not be available to such an organization or program, the community can manage its heritage resources via a non-governmental program.

**Responsible Parties.** The initial investigation and stakeholder engagement can be overseen by an ad hoc committee created by City Council or by a stakeholder organization such as the Hormel Foundation, Chamber of Commerce or Vision 2020. Formation of a CLP is the responsibility of City Council, while other options can be overseen by a new downtown organization or program staff.

8. ***Consider sustainable building design and public infrastructure standards.***

Sustainable building standards help to reduce the operating costs, improve employee comfort, and have less of an impact of the environment. Important components for sustainable building standards include building material, location, and efficiency of operations. There are a number of sustainable building practice tools that are available for Austin to use; a few that are well established in Minnesota include:

The Minnesota B3 Sustainable Buildings 2030 (SB 2030) is the state standard to significantly improve the energy efficiency of buildings and reduce carbon emissions in Minnesota commercial, institutional, and industrial buildings. The standard incrementally becomes better every five years, until new buildings are net zero energy by 2030. Currently, all state bonded projects are required to meet these standards.

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification requires buildings to achieve various thresholds in building design and construction. LEED allows for flexibility in how aggressively buildings are designed to achieve different levels of environmental standards.

Another important tool to improve building performance is the Minnesota B3 benchmarking program. Austin Municipal Utilities has done an excellent job maintaining its B3 database for all public buildings. B3 allows cities to see how buildings are performing compared to a baseline. This information helps building operators identify poor performers and prioritize improvements.

### **GreenStep Cities Best Practice No. 3 - New Green Buildings**

#### **Best Practice Actions**

1. Require by city policy that new city-owned buildings built in the future use a green building framework.
2. Work with the local school district to ensure that future new schools are built using a green building framework.
3. Customize a model sustainable building policy and adopt language governing new private development projects that:
  - a) Receive city financial support, and/or
  - b) Require city regulatory approval (conditional use permit, rezoning, variance, PUD)
4. Provide a financial or other incentive to private parties who build new buildings that utilize a green building framework.

Source: GreenStep Cities website, [greenstep.pca.state.mn.us/bestPracticesDetail.cfm?bpid=3](http://greenstep.pca.state.mn.us/bestPracticesDetail.cfm?bpid=3)

**Options.** Sustainable building practices recognize that today's buildings are multi-generational assets, and should be built to capture lifecycle cost savings and improve quality of life for current and future users. Options for Austin to consider include:

- a. Commit new city development to utilize established sustainable building practices (SB 2030, LEED, etc.).
- b. Continue to keep B3 database up to date and use information to inform and prioritize building improvements.
- c. Encourage private development to use sustainable building practices, including participation in Austin Utility energy efficiency or renewable energy programs, third-party certifications such as Energy Star, Green Globe or LEED.
- d. Require private development using city funding to implement sustainable building practices.

**Responsible Parties.** Public Works, Community Development, and Austin Municipal Utilities.

