

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the early 1970s, faced with continuing disinvestment in its historic core, the City of Omaha commissioned a Downtown Master Plan. Published in 1974, the Downtown Plan was credited by many with helping “save” the heart of the city, creating renewed interest and investment in the downtown, and generally providing a sense of direction and energy for over thirty years. In 2009, City leaders chose to revisit the topic of a downtown plan, and to lay out an ambitious program for the next twenty years of development.

Where a fundamental premise of the 1970’s plan was to ensure that Downtown would survive, the motivating force behind the current plan is to help Downtown Omaha thrive. Omaha is a city of nearly half-a-million citizens, the heart of a metro area of 850,000. What will it take to make the Downtown a world-class place to live, work and play; a resource for residents and workers, regional visitors and tourists from around the globe? The current plan attempts to address these issues and lay out an ambitious, but achievable, vision of what could happen between now and the year 2030.

The backbone of the plan, as presented here, are ten principles that were developed collaboratively during the planning process, with input from all the participants: the City, stakeholders, residents, employees, design professionals, and members of the general public. These ten principles summarize the community’s goals for its heart, covering the full spectrum of social, economic, physical and environmental concerns.

1. Downtown Omaha should be the dominant economic engine for the region.
2. Downtown Omaha should be a great place to live, work, play, visit and learn.
3. Downtown Omaha should be home to the unique civic and cultural resources of the region.
4. Downtown Omaha should have distinct neighborhoods, districts and corridors.
5. Downtown Omaha should be urban.
6. Downtown Omaha should have a comprehensive system of integrated, diverse open spaces for public use.
7. Downtown Omaha should be a multi-modal environment where one can live everyday life without using a car.
8. Downtown Omaha should comprise a series of integrated “park once” districts.
9. Downtown Omaha should be a model of sustainable urbanism.
10. Downtown Omaha should strive to cultivate a culture of design excellence.

These ten principles derive from the surveys, interviews, questionnaires and visioning workshops that defined the first part of the planning process. In turn, they became the framework for the five day planning charrette that was the centerpiece of the effort. Over 400 citizens participated in this charrette, presenting ideas, questioning decisions, offering advice and support, and ultimately helping make the plan their own. Participants represented all walks of life, and ranged in age from pre-teens to retirees. Those who could not physically attend the public presentations watched them on streaming video; and provided



comments on the website set up for this purpose.

The plan builds upon the physical and functional characteristics of Downtown Omaha as it currently exists, and projects a future based on both the publicly espoused principles and a very rigorous quantitative analysis of opportunities and potentials. The program of development outlined in this document derives from a detailed assessment of local, regional, national and even international growth trends, demographic patterns, and development practices. The plan tries to anticipate significant macro-economic factors such as the end of inexpensive fossil fuels or the need for all communities to address green house gases or to minimize their carbon footprints. The plan imagines the heart of the city as much more a “downtown” and much less a “central business district,” offering a wide range of options for people to live, work, play, visit and learn. While the downtown of the future is anticipated to remain the dominant economic center, it will also be a dominant social, cultural, recreational and educational center. All of these characteristics will benefit from a deliberately integrated diversity characteristic of great cities and great downtowns.

This document presents the Downtown Plan as it emerged during the five month planning process. It describes the current situation within the 2.2 square mile study area, and matches quantitative and factual data with the qualitative concerns and overall vision that were presented by the clients, the stakeholders and the community at large. The document describes the “framework elements” around which the downtown will develop, discusses the primary functional issues including a diverse range of mobility options, and summarizes the urban design features and priorities that will help determine the appearance, feel and character of the downtown over time. It highlights the myriad opportunities for change and growth, development and redevelopment, showing how they connect back to the principles and frameworks. The document ends by laying out an implementation matrix – a set of guidelines and directions for how to set about achieving the ideas



Aerial photo of Downtown Omaha from the west

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and projects presented in the Plan.

Omaha may never be as large as New York or Los Angeles, nor as diverse as San Francisco or Toronto. It does not have the same cultural characteristics as Portland, OR or Boston, MA, and it should not strive to be something that is not part of its essential DNA. However, it can and will learn from all the great examples of urbanism, both in North America and world-wide. It will build on the inherent characteristics of its geography, its climate, its economy, its physical location and its people. It will continue to grow and mature into a diverse and wonderful place to live and visit; and, its heart, its iconic image, and its essence will be the Downtown.