

## 6.0 KEY PRINCIPLES

### INTRODUCTION

A key to devising an effective long-term strategy for downtown development and redevelopment is to work around areas of significant agreement and consensus as to what is acceptable and desirable. After reviewing the results of the Visioning Process and Development Opportunities Assessment, a number of areas emerged around which there seemed to be considerable agreement. These areas were presented during the initial phases of the Design Charrette as potential Key Principles. As such, they were discussed and debated, not only by the members of the design team, the Steering Committee, and Advisory Group, but also by members of the audience and the general public. During the course of the week-long Design Charrette, the list of proposed principles was revised and modified, but by the end of the event there was considerable agreement among all participants that the principles were, in fact, essential elements of the desired future for Downtown Omaha.

As presented here, the principles summarize key motivations for the final Downtown Omaha Master Plan. Each principle is stated in a brief sentence, which is then elaborated upon in several paragraphs. The principles are deliberately broad, but are also object oriented. They strive to define key conditions and characteristics of the desired Downtown, without necessarily prescribing specific features or elements. The subsequent Framework Elements, Development Opportunities, and



*The Key Principles carried through design into the final master plan.*

Operational Initiatives that comprise the recommendations of this plan reflect, to some degree, one or more of these ten principles.



## 6.1 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### 1. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD BE THE DOMINANT ECONOMIC ENGINE FOR THE METRO REGION

At present, Downtown Omaha has the largest and most diverse concentration of employment within the greater Omaha Metropolitan region, with over four million square feet of office space. Approximately thirty to thirty-five thousand people work each day within the Study Area and that number has been steadily, if slowly, climbing. Nonetheless, as the metro area grows, significant development is occurring in locations away from the Downtown and even outside the city limits. A variety of factors impact the location of such projects: the desire for large areas of open land, generally less expensive land costs, the desire for horizontal rather than vertical development, the need to be closer to potential customers and/or workers.

As the commercial heart of the metro area, however, the Downtown needs to maintain its economic concentration and diversity. Economic development policies should promote a broad range of employment opportunities within the Study Area, including the potential for modest amounts of light industrial development at the northern and southern fringes. These policies should build on the current employment base of the Downtown, but should highlight other, non-employment features: walkability, diversity, the ability to live and work in close proximity, easy access to cultural, recreational and sporting events, etc.



*View of Downtown from the east*

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## **2. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD BE A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE, WORK, VISIT, PLAY & LEARN**

Unlike most other areas of the City, the Downtown truly belongs to everyone and, as such, it must truly be a great place for all users. First and foremost, the Downtown must cater to the needs and wishes of those people who choose to live there and/or to work there. Beyond residents and workers, however, the Downtown must be a place that is receptive and accessible to residents from throughout the City and region who may look to come there intermittently: once a week during basketball season to watch the Creighton Blue Jays or seasonally to catch a play or eat at a fine restaurant.

Downtown must also be a place that is receptive and inviting to the occasional visitor. These could be residents of the greater Omaha region who might come to town once or twice a year for a special event. They could be regular business travelers who come to the City often for work, but look to stay downtown because of all the additional amenities and features. Or, they could be the occasional tourist, drawn to Omaha for its myriad resources and attractions, but who stays Downtown because of its special and unique character and sense of place.

Beyond these different types of users, the Downtown must have features and attractions that appeal to multiple economic brackets. It cannot be a place where only the well-to-do can afford to attend events or visit attractions. Nor can it be a place reserved for young adults or middle-aged empty-nesters. It must cater to the needs, wishes and tastes of all incomes brackets and age groups, from toddlers and school-age children all the way to retirees and senior citizens.

In addition, Downtown Omaha should strive not simply to accommodate these varied audiences, but to be a great place for all of them. Features and attractions for these different users need not occur in all parts of the Downtown; clearly, there will be districts and quarters that cater to one market or another. Nonetheless, everybody should be able to claim some area or aspect of the Downtown as his or her own and, in this respect, the Downtown should strive to be a vibrant and special place for these unique visitors and users - not simply another place to go, but the place to go.



*The Old Market has been a popular destination for more than 30 years*



### 3. DOWNTOWN SHOULD BE HOME TO THE UNIQUE CIVIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES OF THE REGION

Part of what makes a great Downtown is its clustering of unique and special elements. A primary principle in thinking about continuing growth within the greater Omaha region is that Downtown Omaha should be the home of the unique civic and cultural uses for the region.

**Facilities:** This applies particularly to cultural facilities such as museums or performing arts centers, civic facilities such as main libraries or government buildings, or sports facilities such as arenas or stadiums.

**Programs and Events:** Beyond individual buildings, the Downtown should look to be the setting for unique events or programs: arts fairs, cultural events, music festivals, etc. Downtown Omaha is already the setting for a number of such events, and this will grow with the addition in 2011 of the College World Series. As such, the Downtown is a well-established setting for large, popular, occasional events and has the infrastructure, as well as the primary and ancillary facilities needed to support such events. The annual calendar of programmed events should aim for one or two significant events each month.

**Districts:** Beyond serving as the setting for individual events, the Downtown can also strive to develop a series of unique and special districts dedicated to supporting special activities: Arts District(s) notable for their galleries, studios and other facilities; an Entertainment District recognized for its venues hosting live performances; and so forth. The size of such districts can vary significantly, and based on theme, individual districts could host specialized programs or events.



*Holland Performing Arts Center*

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*Joslyn Art Museum and Sculpture Garden*

#### 4. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD HAVE DISTINCT NEIGHBORHOODS, DISTRICTS AND CORRIDORS

Downtown Omaha, as defined for this project, covers over 2.2 square miles of area. This area is not a single, undifferentiated locale, defined by a single type of urbanism, a single overall appearance, character, or feel. Rather, it is comprised of dozens of unique enclaves characterized by broadly diverse architecture and building scales, ranging from twenty and thirty-story full-block high rise office buildings to one- and two-story historic houses on small lots. Any good downtown is this diverse and varied, and downtown Omaha should strive to build upon these natural differences and distinctions. As defined for this project, Downtown Omaha should be a combination of many diverse and unique neighborhoods, districts and corridors.

Neighborhoods are defined as mixed-use places where people live, shop and recreate, generally in close proximity. Districts can be less diverse and are often dominated by one or two primary uses – i.e. a convention center district, an arts district, etc. Corridors are long linear elements that serve to tie the Study Area together, help differentiate between neighborhoods and districts, and can also be neighborhoods or districts in their own right. While the primary corridors within the Downtown at present are roadways, any linear element can serve this purpose: a streetcar line, a linear park, a water’s edge, etc.

The extent of individual neighborhoods or districts can be loosely or crisply defined. It is not unusual for two neighborhoods to overlap at certain points, and corridors clearly cut across multiple neighborhoods and districts. In general, the transition from one enclave to another is marked by a change in the scale and/or use of buildings, the character of the urbanism (the relationship of

one building to another, or buildings to the street), the nature of the architecture, and/or the nature of streetscape and open space.

In some areas of the Downtown, the transitions are easy to understand and commonly accepted; i.e. the use of I-480 to separate “Downtown” proper from “North Downtown.” In other areas, the boundaries are less clearly defined or perceived – i.e. the functional definition of the “Old Market.” In all cases, however, going forward, significant attention should be given to the linkages between enclaves. These will generally be street corridors which should be designed to accommodate the fullest range of users and uses and should be “complete streets” in the fullest sense of the term.



*Towns at Little Italy in the Near South District*



## 5. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD BE URBAN

As a mid-sized metropolitan area, Greater Omaha should encompass a full range of neighborhoods and districts, providing a wide variety of places to live, work, play, and visit. Within the metro area, however, Downtown Omaha should be the predominant urban setting, recognizing that the word “urban” implies more than simply large buildings or higher-density development. As defined in this principle, Downtown Omaha should be a mixed-use environment. This implies that many different types of land use should be proximate to one another. The most urban situation would be vertical mixed-use where two or even three distinct uses would be contained within a single building. The next scale would include two, three or more uses mixed horizontally within a single block. This is a condition that already exists in many locations within the Study Area and should be further encouraged. In almost every situation, a wide variety of uses – residential, commercial, retail, recreational, etc.— should be located within two to four blocks of one another.

In this same vein, Downtown Omaha should include a wide variety of typologies within an individual land use. For example, Downtown Omaha should encourage a broad range of housing types, sizes and levels of affordability. High-rise condominiums, mid-rise apartments, townhouses, lofts, duplexes, triplexes, small-lot single family homes - all of these and more should find an appropriate setting within the downtown.

A complementary characteristic of an urban setting is that it must be oriented towards pedestrians. The benefits of density and proximity disappear if people cannot easily and comfortably walk between different uses. This implies that significant attention must be paid to the quality of the pedestrian experience – the design

of streets and sidewalks, the inclusion of streetscape elements – lights, kiosks, benches, etc., landscaping – street trees, planters, etc., and urban design elements – galleries, awnings, etc.

Finally, Downtown Omaha should be significantly denser than most other parts of the metropolitan region. This does not imply a uniform density across the Study Area, nor should there be a minimum threshold for development density. The Study Area already includes a broad range of densities and intensities of development: thirty story office buildings on one block, single-family homes less than half-mile away. Across the range of accepted building types, however, the density of uses within Downtown should be higher than in other locations. One benchmark that can be used to differentiate urban densities from suburban densities is the use of structured parking versus surface parking. With few exceptions, a downtown environment is built to densities and intensities that optimize the use of structured parking, where most suburban environments are built to the standards of surface parking.



*Downtown density*

## 6. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD HAVE A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF INTEGRATED, DIVERSE OPEN SPACES FOR PUBLIC USE

A complement to the increased density and intensity of a downtown setting is the provision of a wide range of open spaces designed for public use. A key distinguishing difference between living in a downtown and living in a suburban or exurban neighborhood is the provision of significant amounts of private open space in the latter settings. While urban dwellers often forego private open space (although many urban dwelling units contain balconies or porches), there is still a strong desire and demand for access to usable outdoor space. In urban settings, this must come in the form of parks, plazas and playgrounds, and, in particular, well-designed, well-landscaped streets.

Downtown Omaha should be designed to accommodate a wide-range of well-connected open spaces. These should be both formal and informal – a public plaza versus a corner café with outdoor seating. These should be both publicly owned and maintained and privately owned and operated - the aforementioned plaza and café. These should be active and passive - there should be a place for young people to throw Frisbees, play catch, and even use their skateboards, but there should also be places for people to sit and read or eat or talk or just watch the world go by. These range of activities need not be in separate locations; one of the time-honored pastimes of urban living is sitting and watching other people playing formal or informal sports.

These spaces can be very small – a pocket park or a small open space carved out of an otherwise built-up lot—or very large – a riverfront park filled with ponds, picnic areas, jogging trails and play fields. Regardless of size or location, they should cater

to the full range of audiences found in a diverse downtown: playfields, pocket-parks, outdoor dining, jogging trails, dog parks, community gardens, skate-parks, fountains, and so forth.

Functional open spaces should be distributed throughout the Study Area as well, although certain facilities may tend to cluster in key locations – i.e. large-scale outdoor gathering spaces along the Riverfront. Each neighborhood and district within the Downtown should have a representative sampling of accessible open spaces, and to the degree possible, the range of spaces across the Study Area should fit within an integrated network of “green streets.” These last are streets that have been specifically designed to highlight landscape and streetscape features and which should function as some of the urban corridors mentioned in a previous principle.



*The popularity of the slides at Gene Leahy Mall, even in winter*



## 7. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD BE A MULTI-MODAL ENVIRONMENT WHERE YOU CAN LIVE EVERYDAY LIFE WITHOUT USING A CAR

A characteristic of a truly urban environment is that one is able to comfortably live a full and active life without access to a personal automobile. Within the greater Omaha metro region, the Downtown should be the setting that most supports this lifestyle. As mentioned in previous principles, this implies a broad mix of uses, generally higher densities and intensities, and a focus on designing to support pedestrian activities.

Beyond walking, however, a downtown should support a broad range of mobility options. Primary among these are the use of bicycles and access to transit. As corollaries to this principle, the following three conditions should apply within Downtown Omaha:

- A person should be able to easily get anywhere in the downtown on foot.
- A person should be able to get within two blocks of any location downtown on a designated bike lane or path.
- A person should be able to easily get within four blocks of anywhere in the Downtown by using mass transit.

The combination of these three modes (walking, biking, transit) plus the use of cars as desired or needed, characterizes an urban environment as truly “multi-modal.” Currently, bus service already meets the four-block spatial requirements within many parts of the downtown, but needs to be improved with respect to the timing of service. Facilities for biking within the downtown remain underdeveloped and warrant significant improvement. Bicycles are a successful, popular and time-honored form of urban mobility in cities across the globe, but the use of bikes is impacted

by physical conditions – is the city designed and built to support this mode? —and cultural conditions – are bikes recognized as a legitimate form of mobility? Global cities such as Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Berlin have long recognized bike mobility as a valid urban form; many American cities are following suit, such as Portland OR, Boulder, CO, and New York City, NY.



*Streetcar in Portland, Oregon*



*Bicycle parking*

## 8. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD COMPRISE A SERIES OF INTEGRATED “PARK-ONCE” DISTRICTS

As a complement to the previous principle, Downtown Omaha should be planned and organized to optimize the efficiency of private automobiles. The primary goal is not to ban or necessarily discourage the use of cars, but to create a setting where individuals, particularly visitors and commuters, are able to park their cars once at the beginning of their visit downtown, and not need to use it again until they leave. This is known as the “park once” concept and implies that the entire downtown should be organized around an integrated series of district parking plans and official parking management strategies.

Downtown Omaha currently has a significant amount of both surface and structured parking, most of which is used for less than fifty hours a week. In the case of structured parking, this is an extremely inefficient use of infrastructure. In the case of surface parking, it is an inefficient use of downtown land. As additional growth occurs within the Downtown, it should be organized around defined parking districts, in which the goal is to accommodate the full complement of weekly parking needs within centralized parking facilities, with an eye on mixing uses based on complementary parking demands. For example, offices typically need parking during the 8:00 – 5:00 M-F work week. Restaurants typically need parking in the evenings; hotels and apartments need parking at nights and on weekends. Organizing these uses within physical proximity of each other and centralized parking facilities optimizes the use of the parking spaces and minimizes the need to create redundant facilities.

A successful parking management strategy requires coordination of all forms of parking across the downtown. It will imply 18-hour or even 24-hour operation (much of which can be automated), the organization of facilities to coordinate with transit routes and well-designed pedestrian streets, the use of effective signage and lighting, and the use of just-in-time information sources, to make the system effective and efficient for downtown residents, regular users, and occasional visitors.



*Parking garage with corner liner building*



## 9. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD BE A MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE URBANISM

Sustainability, in its most simple form, implies the use of limited resources in an effective and efficient manner. Traditionally, mixed-use, medium- to high-density urban environments have been among the most sustainable when measured in terms of resource use per capita. In terms of simple metrics such as energy use, water use or carbon footprint, the most efficient setting in the United States is the island of Manhattan in New York, followed by other urban enclaves on the West Coast. Conversely, the least efficient tend to be the largely suburbanized Sunbelt cities.

Downtown Omaha should strive to build upon the inherent sustainability of an urban center, a place where the density and mix of uses reduces the resources consumed by buildings or for mobility. Beyond these inherent characteristics, however, Downtown Omaha can become a model for sustainability across many areas of focus:

**Energy** – An urban concentration allows for the development of district energy (cogeneration) systems to provide heating and cooling efficiently to a large number of buildings source.

**Mobility** – A pedestrian-oriented urban plan combined with a range of bicycle and mass transit options can dramatically reduce per capita energy demand for mobility.

**Waste** – The concentration of population generally reduces the amount of waste generated per capita, and also allows for efficiencies of scale for recycling and waste diversion programs.

**Water** – Water-use per capita is lowest in an urban setting, but low-impact development principles, the use of district stormwater



*Green roof on Chicago City Hall*

collection, and/or the development of a district reclaimed water system can further reduce water use.

**Facilities** – Great strides have been made in recent years to dramatically enhance the resource efficiency of buildings, primarily through the efforts of the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) program of the United States Green Building Council (USGBC). Many jurisdictions and entities mandate that new buildings achieve a minimum level of LEED certification, and opportunities exist to develop such a program within Downtown Omaha.

**Open Space** – The large percentage of vacant land in the Study Area represents an under-utilized resource that allows for substantial development without the use of agricultural or natural open space.

**Landscape** - Urban landscapes, whether low-irrigation, native plantings, functional open space, street trees or green roofs help to address water and air quality as well as mitigate the urban heat island effect.

## 10. DOWNTOWN OMAHA SHOULD STRIVE TO CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF DESIGN EXCELLENCE

Downtown is the dominant post card image of Omaha and the metropolitan region. It attracts more visitors than any other district in the state, and contains the widest diversity of uses and users. As such, it deserves to be approached as a comprehensive design opportunity, in which each addition adds to the overall perception of aesthetic excellence. This cuts across all aspects of the downtown: buildings and facilities, streets and bridges, public spaces, open space, etc. It implies the preservation, renovation and rehabilitation of existing examples of design excellence, and the development of guidelines and programs for insuring similar standards of excellence for all future development, be it public, private or a public-private partnership.

Downtown Omaha already has a significant presence of artists and arts-related businesses and programs. There is significant opportunity to build upon these entities and expand the impact of the arts to other aspects of the downtown as a whole – i.e. arts festivals, annual art competitions for public art or open space design, rotating collections of public art, etc. At a minimum, as a follow-up to this current master plan, a formal plan should be developed for arts within the Downtown.

The same approach could be taken for the design of new buildings and facilities within the Downtown. An important corollary to the current urban planning process is the development of an agreed-upon set of design guidelines for future urban development. Within these guidelines, however, future developments could be given a variety of non-financial incentives to exceed the expectations for design excellence. These could imply programmatic elements such as formal design competitions, urban elements such as the dedication of public open space, design elements such as the inclusion of public art, or cultural elements such as historic preservation or the inclusion of public facilities as part of a new project.

In the competition among cities worldwide, design and the arts carry significant weight. While downtown Omaha may never have the density and intensity of Manhattan, or the cultural diversity of San Francisco or Miami, it has the capacity to compete nationally, if not globally, from a perspective of excellence in urban design, architecture, and the arts.



*Enhanced design of 10th Street Bridge*

© Tom Kessler Photography



*The Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge over the Missouri River*

