

Downtown Austin, Minnesota

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Foreword

Why do we want a Vibrant Downtown? Our Downtowns are the stage for which we celebrate our community. Our downtowns reflect who we are. The City of Austin Master Plan and strategic initiatives are developed around three values; Economic value, Regional Value, and Symbolic Value. Additionally, four elements will be emphasized.

- Context
- Perception
- Expectations
- Experiences

Downtown Austin needs to express the uniqueness of your community and build on that quality. The perception needs to be engaging. Expectations need to be high to motivate the redevelopment of the downtown to become an experience.



Essential partnerships are required.

- Downtown organizations
- City Government
- Business and property owners
- Developers
- Sponsors
- Industry
- Lenders
- Media

Austin has several prominent employers which drive the regions economy; Hormel Food Corporation, Quality Pork Processors, Inc., and the Austin Medical Center to name a few. Each of these companies participation, support, and assistance with the plan implementation will be essential. A community wide collaboration and tireless partnership will be the key to success.

Overview

In August 2005, the City of Austin commissioned Hammel, Green and Abrahamson Inc. (HGA) to develop a Master Plan for the Downtown district of Austin, Minnesota. The Master Plan will act as a framework for decision making, a framework in which to seek and evaluate development proposals for projects that will make Downtown Austin an even better place to live and work.



The plan addresses retail, entertainment, office space, and housing. Additionally, the plan develops a link between the existing green spaces in and around the Downtown, vacant storefronts, disconnected places, and boundaries. Strategically located parking, traffic patterns, and carefully placed public spaces are key to the success of the plan.

The downtown development plan process has resulted in a platform that will leverage limited public funds to promote private investment. The implementation program and the short-term development strategy all focus on redefining the Main Street as the destination for retail and entertainment, not only for citizens of Austin, but for the region. The program provided provisions for public improvements and amenities, to encourage the completion of private development projects that may result in the reconfiguration of key blocks.

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.

The creation of spaces must appeal to all the senses.

- Hear music
- Smell food
- Touch things

The built environment must....

- Be built around transportation
- Utilize the environment
- Create spaces people want to be
- Create memories

Our society is moving into an experience economy. The Austin community needs to deliver:

- Entertainment
- Education
- Escape
- Aesthetics – uplifting experience

“Vibrant Mass”, once achieved, will create memories that will motivate people to come back.

Executive Summary

Summary of Community Visioning and Accomplishments to Date:

- Austin's commercial areas are in the midst of transition. Historically, Austin was organized with a strong Central Business District (CBD) and small neighborhood commercial areas scattered throughout the community to provide local services to neighborhoods. Through the years, the CBD has lost its importance as the "primary" focus of regional retail commercial activity. Similarly, many of the neighborhood retail commercial facilities have also suffered from a lack of reinvestment.
- The "Take Part" workshops identified problems with the current Downtown, then created a shared vision, and established goals. Finally the "Take Part" workshops identified several areas Downtown which need the most attention. See Appendix A
- The City of Austin has developed the pedestrian trails, through Sutton Park, connecting the East Side Lake trail to the Central Park trail. The expansion of pedestrian walking and bike trails from the adjacent lake and park system into Downtown Austin will increase pedestrian flow to business in the Downtown.
- The recently renovated Paramount Theatre is a destination point for local residents and the surrounding communities. The location of the theatre at the end of First Street Northeast, and adjacent to the existing park to the north, provides an excellent opportunity to expand on a "jewel" in Downtown Austin.
- The public library moving from Second Avenue Northwest to Fourth Avenue Northeast is another key to revitalizing Downtown Austin. The library is another destination point for Austin residents, and capitalizing on its location will only enhance the appeal of residents to come Downtown.
- Based on a 2003 Retail Trade Analysis Report preformed by the University of Minnesota Extension Service, the Pull Factor for food sales is increasing and is leading the City of Austin in total sales, by nearly 50% over General Merchandise. Food sales are also leading building materials and apparel by nearly 125%. This would reinforce the need for more restaurant and food sales in the Downtown district. Currently there are three restaurants, two Mexican and Piggy Blues. Increasing the number of restaurants, and variety of restaurants would positively impact both daytime and evening traffic flow, as well as weekend traffic flow to the Downtown. See Appendix B.



Currently the City of Austin has a Downtown Design Committee. This committee should be allowed to review new building alterations, as well as establish guidelines to assist business' in the future improvements. These guidelines should not restrict businesses from making improvements, but encourage them to help create a unique character for Downtown Austin by using building standards and guidelines, to improve the quality of signage, building lighting, and color selections for remodeling. 'Bricks and Mortar' projects and "programming" are of equal importance for strategic activation of Downtown Austin.

During the "Take Part" sessions, the groups identified the following items which need attention:

- Keep the Courthouse downtown
- Second floor improvements needed
- Arts and culture in the Silver Bullet area
- Build on strengths of the Spam Museum and Paramount Theatre
- An automotive museum in the Usem building
- “Rides” in the downtown area....summer and winter
- Create “ambiance”...a “sense of place”
- Use for the Silver Bullet building compatible with the Paramount Theatre
- Expand the Spam Museum area
- We need a plan to follow
- A good “old fashioned” hotel
- A trolley to the Spam Museum
- Bike rental needed
- Replace “bar area” with parking
- Restore the building fronts
- Improve signage
- More residential downtown
- Dancing place downtown
- Grocery store needed
- Miniature golf needed
- Create a “Courthouse Square” area



Planning Process

The downtown Austin development plan is the result of an assessment process involving community leaders, residents and business owners in a series of discussions and working committees. The process began in August of 2005 with an extensive physical analysis of downtown Austin by the consulting team. During this time the team also collected market and real estate information. A working committee, comprised of residents, business and property owners, city of Austin representatives, and other concerned citizens met on several occasions throughout the brainstorming and assessment process. The results of the sessions, downtown studies and data were provided to HGA to assist the City in developing a Master Plan and concept for improving existing structures.



Citizens committees played a significant role in developing ideas. An Ad Hoc committee assembled to aggressively brainstorm on creative ideas. The term “Vibrant Mass” was created to describe the goal of achieving an increased level of entertainment, office space, housing and retail. The increased mass supported by strategically placed parking will make Austin a destination drive for the surrounding area and a vibrant marketplace for local citizens. The committee stressed the importance of helping existing businesses become stronger and develop into the core strengths from which we build the future.

In November 2005, HGA presented the Master Plan to the public. Participants were invited to express their thoughts on the ideas, development concepts and the downtown revitalization overall plan. Issues addressed in the plan are numerous, but the lack of connection between the existing green spaces to the north, vacant and dilapidated storefronts, and reuse of the existing government building are a few.

Based on the input and feedback from the public, Vibrant Mass Ad Hoc Committee, and steering committee meetings, the HGA team prepared a draft plan for review and comment. The recently finalized Master Plan will be submitted to the city council for approval to become the plan for the revitalization of downtown Austin.

HGA implemented a Discovery, Design, and Documentation (3D) process:

Discovery:

- Using the information previously identified through the “Take Part” workshops, HGA and the City of Austin, established a set of goals, set expectations, and established a process to complete a plan and a schedule for a completed Master Plan of Downtown Austin.

- Key buildings and Downtown features were identified that will become the foundation for the new vision.
- Using a previously generated Downtown Parking Study updated January 2004, HGA was able to identify the highest concentration of on-street parking and how that parking related to existing businesses and potential future development. See Appendix C.

Design:

- Based on interviews with Downtown business owners and Downtown residents, combined with the vision of the “Take Part” mission, the HGA team prepared a draft plan and improvement concepts for review and comment. This plan, upon adoption by the City, will be the updated blueprint for revitalization in Downtown Austin.
- Discussions were opened with business owners who are currently renovating, or are considering renovating their exteriors. Initial design concepts were shared with those business owners to encourage them to remodel in a fashion conducive with the proposed Design Guidelines.

Documentation:

- This final document includes a compilation of supporting documentation for the recommended plan. Various documents address the analysis of the market, existing buildings, user volume, and space requirements.
- The document also includes an outline of design framework for future designs. These parameters will be used as a tool to assist business owners who wish to update their storefronts, remodel, or build new, within the downtown district. The framework will not hinder, but instead help the business owner make sound and cost effective decisions, before and during the building process.



Market Strategies

Economic Development:

“Vibrant Mass”; defined as the expansion of economic development throughout a defined boundary of downtown. Vibrant Mass requires both the expansion of residential and commercial development. Renovation of existing second floor space into apartments, and infill of abandoned storefronts will spark the movement toward a revitalized downtown.

Downtown Austin is in a period of economic stagnation. The current Judicial Center will be relocating outside of downtown, removing a large number of daily visitors and employees from the area. There is a need to improve housing stock, enterprise development, and parking. This will require thoughtful use of resources and incentives to encourage optimal reinvestment in the community in order to stem the decline, and encourage the development of a competitive and vibrant downtown.



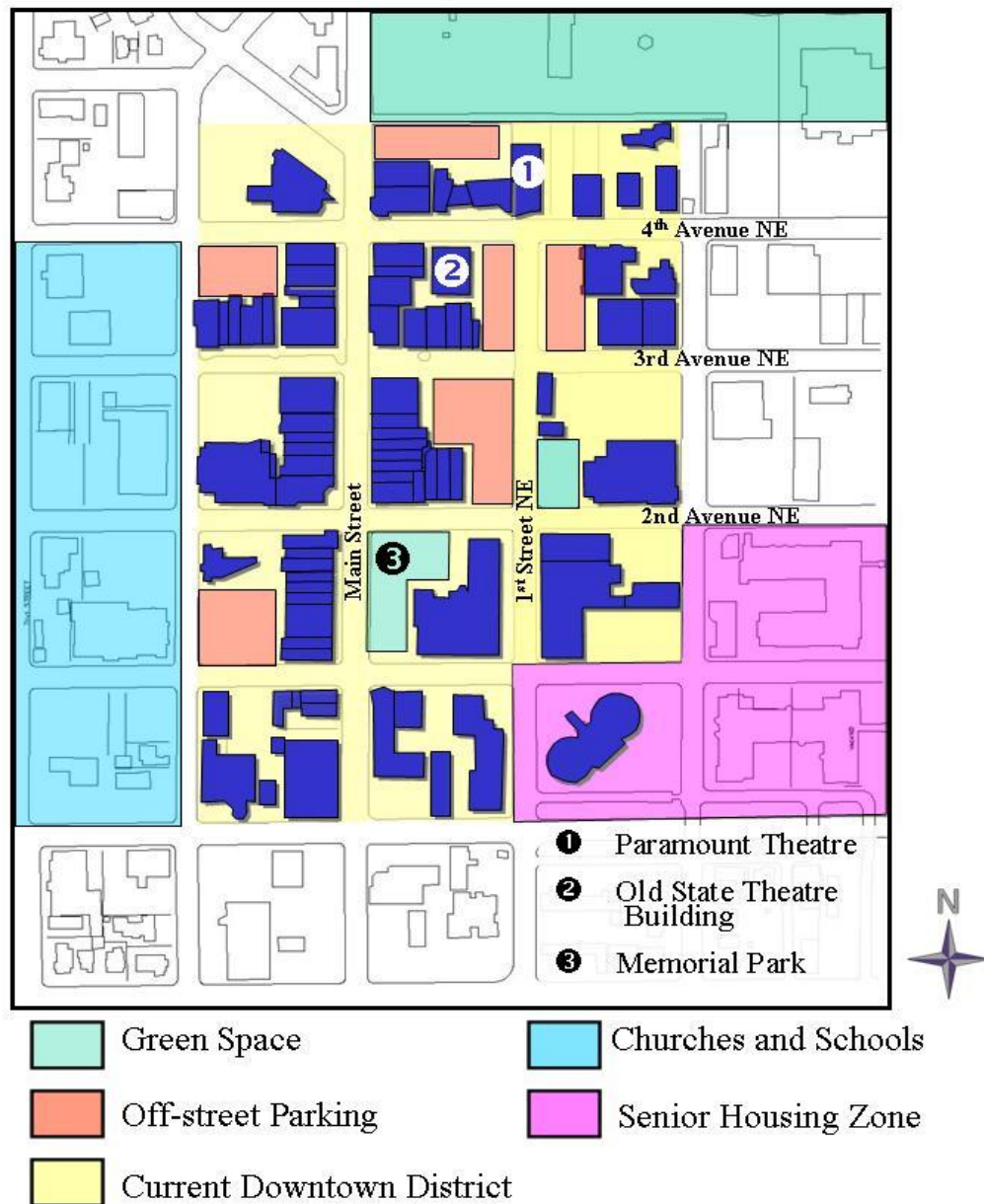
Austin should focus on incremental steps to improve the respective environments (live, work, play and shop) encouraging private investment while targeting markets, which will provide additional resources to downtown and help to create a more positive, dynamic environment. Examples of such developments might include the establishment of a residential neighborhood on the second floor of current businesses, and a separate enclave for the young, urban professional market. Policies designed to encourage the restoration of the character-laden downtown structures is a policy priority.

Main Street Downtown Austin can benefit directly and indirectly from all economic development activity that takes place within the Downtown district. Reestablishing a retail district north of Second Avenue Northeast, and between First and Second Street Northeast would increase “Vibrant Mass” to the Downtown Main Street core.

Expanding the retail district in the Downtown core would prompt the need for more parking. Eventually, a strategically located parking structure with retail stores on the main floor should be developed.

The Master Plan

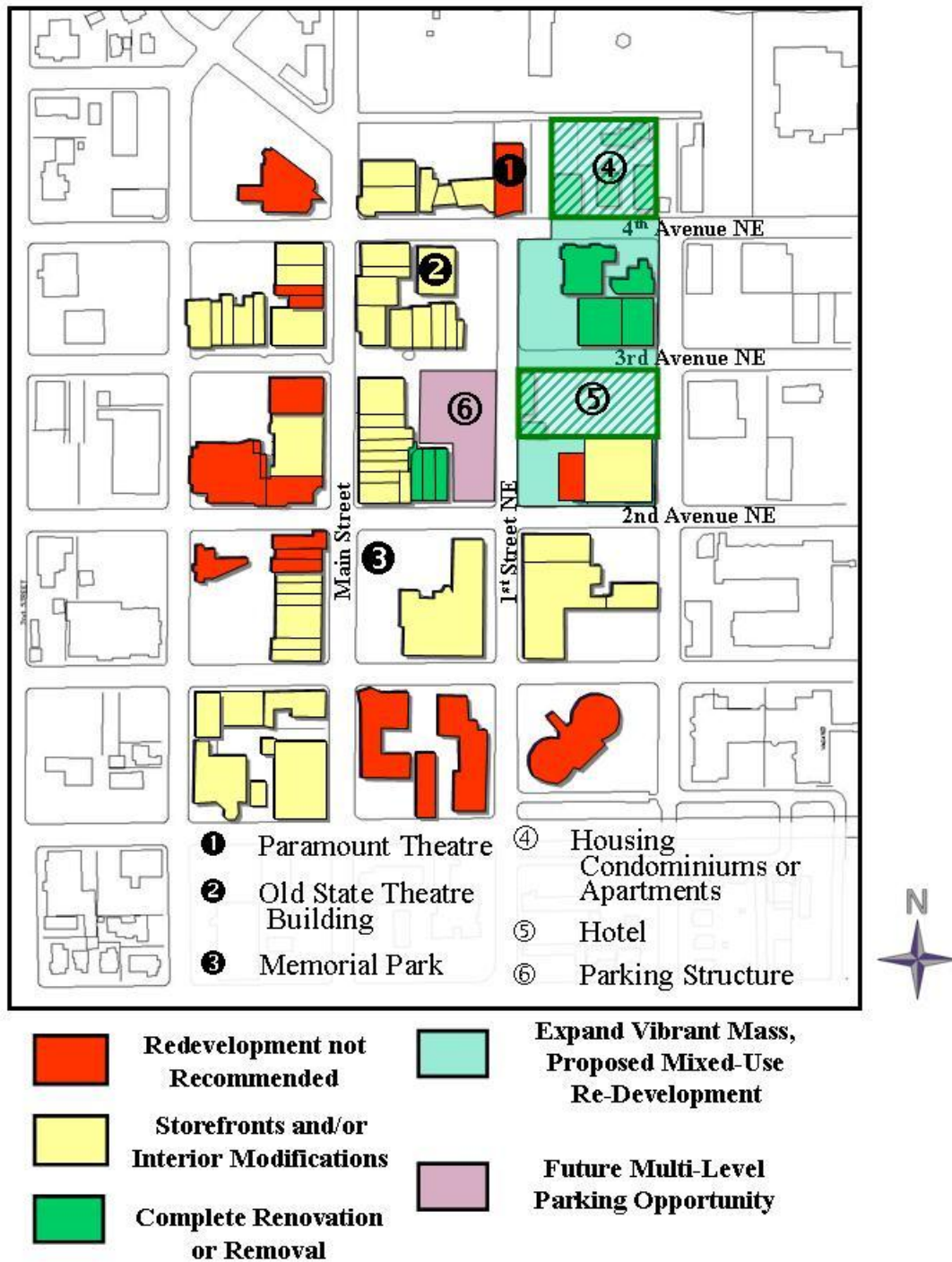
Existing Downtown



Existing Downtown

The existing downtown boundary is identified in Image 1, as the yellow boundary. The existing buildings identified within the downtown boundary are colored blue. The green spaces, or parks, are green. Off-street public parking is orange, churches and school district is cyan and the senior housing is magenta.

Expanding to Vibrant Mass



Fixed Assets

Upon review of the existing buildings located within the downtown district, levels of redevelopment are identified as red, yellow and green. The buildings identified as red would require no development, or modifications.

(Continued)

These buildings have been recently renovated, are new buildings, or their age and character do not warrant modifications. Yellow buildings have been identified as buildings which have been identified needing improvement. The buildings shaded green are classified as high priority. Improvements are necessary to achieve the goals of the downtown revitalization endeavor.

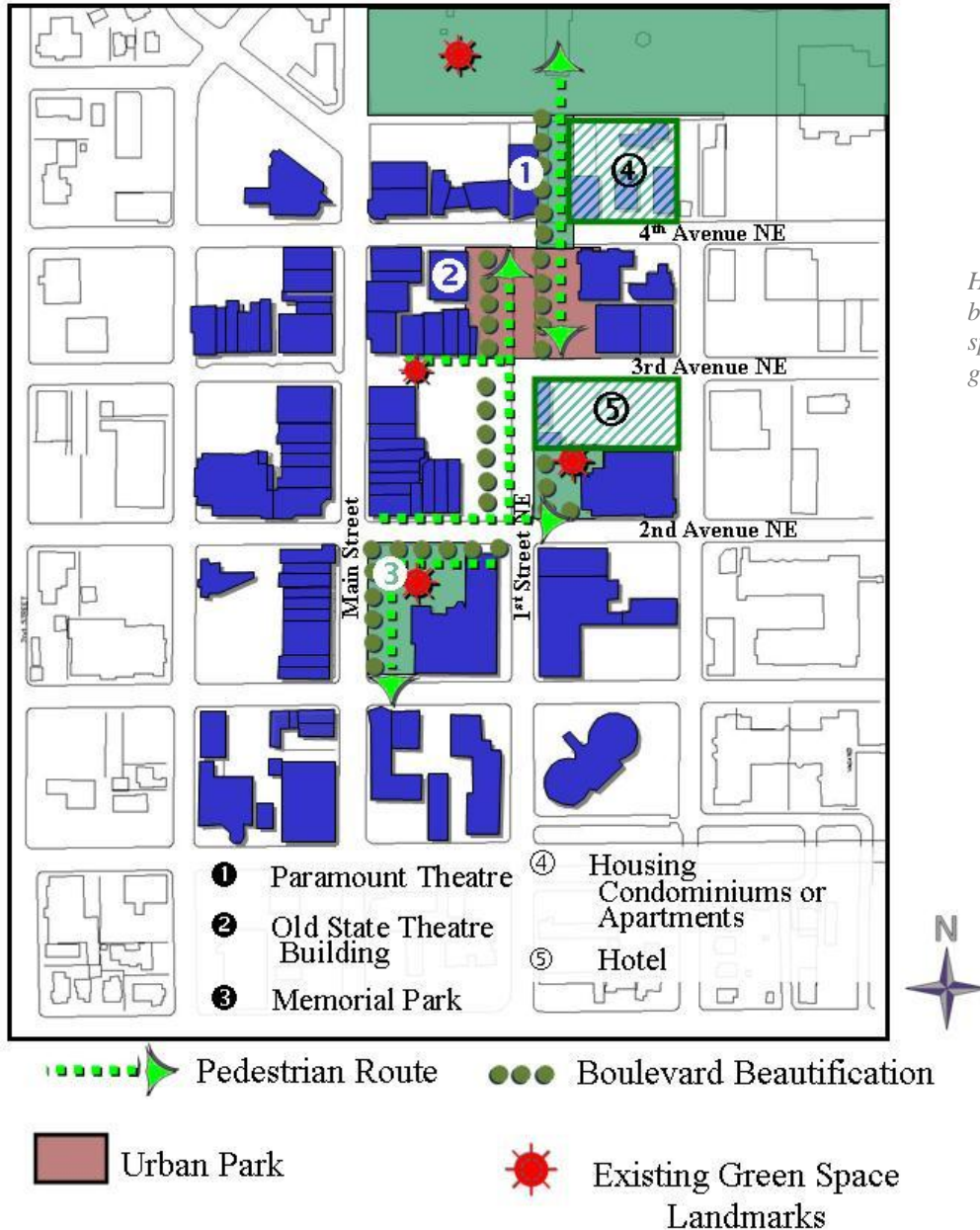
The expansion of Vibrant Mass between 1st Street Northeast and 2nd Street Northeast would allow for new business to enter the downtown, meanwhile at the same time expanding economic vitality throughout the district. New business expanding into the retail redevelopment district would be held to the same design guidelines as the central downtown district.

Once the expansion of Vibrant Mass is complete, the load on the current off-street parking will be exceeded. At this time a multi level parking facility will be needed.



The Master Plan

Green Space Development Plan



Housing zones will benefit from the green space and outdoor gathering spaces.

The key to making the Green Space Development successful would be the construction or and expansion of the Urban Plaza. This plaza would take advantage of the existing Paramount Theatre landmark. This park would be a strategic green space link between the existing park to the north and the Memorial park to the south. A pedestrian route would include benches, alternate paving and historic lighting. The urban park will provide outdoor recreation space for downtown housing units.

Paramount Theatre Plaza

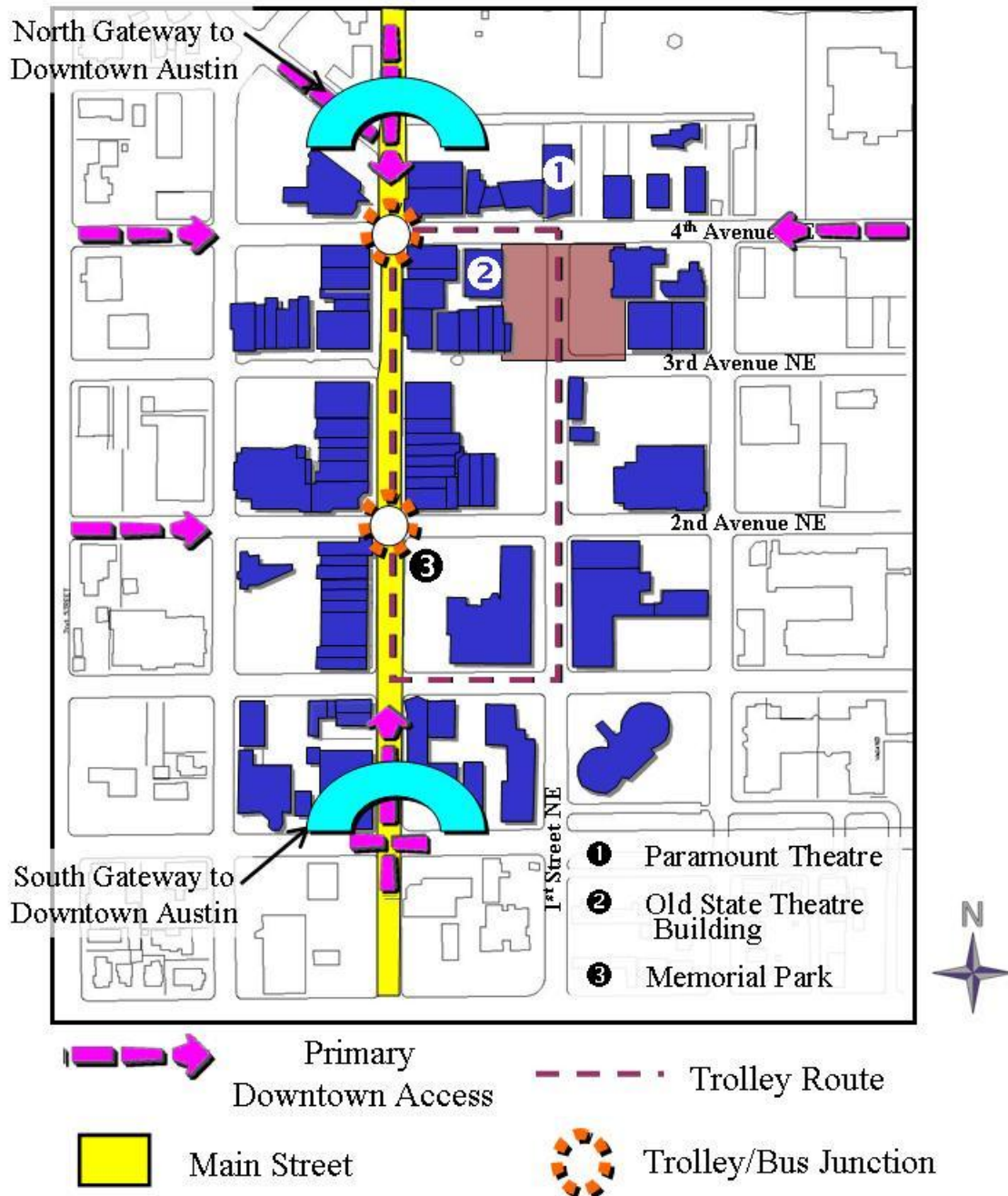


Paramount Theatre Plaza



Proposed Vehicle Flow

Dominant Vehicle Points



(Proposed Vehicle Flow Continued)

Currently there are no entrance gates, or boundaries at the entrance points to the downtown. Adding a gateway arch at the north and south ends of the main street would create a gateway to downtown. The corners of Mainstreet and 4th Avenue and 2nd Avenue, offer opportunities for bus and trolley junctions. These nodes are key access points from the churches and to the west. A trolley route would circle schools from the Spam Museum, south on Main Street to 1st Avenue Northeast, east one block to 1st Street Northeast, north to the Urban Park and the Paramount Theatre, then west to Main Street. This trolley route would increase visibility and access to the expanded Vibrant Mass.

Re-opening Third Avenue N.E., yet keeping a portion of the existing park would further enhance the access to future retail development. The park would also encourage outdoor seating for the adjacent Mexican restaurant.



Initiative Areas and Opportunities

Initiatives:

I-1) Urban Plaza: Developing an Urban Plaza south of the recently renovated Paramount Theater will expand on a current strength of the Downtown District. The Urban Plaza would connect the east side of the original State Theater, east to the existing commercial buildings across First Street Northeast. The Urban Plaza would host a weekly Farmer's Market, seasonal activities, and summer concerts. The Plaza would be a link between the existing lake and park to the north, and Memorial Park to the south. First Street Northeast would not be closed to traffic, but instead the surfacing would be unique enhance its aesthetic value. A future fountain or entertainment area accommodations may be considered in the plans within the Plaza area.



I-2) Judicial Center: Relocate the existing Human Services from their current temporary leased location to the future offices at the Judicial Center. Numerous options exist for utilization of space in the Judicial Center once the space is vacated.

I-3) Trolley Connections: Using a retrofitted trolley car to connect the existing Spam Museum, to the Downtown. This trolley could be used on weekends, holidays, and during Spam Jam. The trolley could also be used for the other special events throughout the year.

I-4) Gateways: The Downtown District has two main entrances, one from the north, and one from the south. Neither of the entrances are identified or marked as a welcoming entry. The Gateways could be as simple as an obelisk located on an island in an intersection, or an arch spanning an intersection.



I-5) Re-open Third Avenue: Re-opening the Third Avenue Plaza for vehicular access between First Street Northeast and Main Street North would enhance the retail businesses that front Third Avenue Northeast. The street would be opened for one-way traffic only allowing for a small green space on the northeast corner of Main Street North and Third Avenue Northeast. Retaining the green space would keep the established landmark and allow for outside seating for the adjacent Mi Tierra restaurant.

I-6) A water feature could be added in the Mill Pond adjacent to North Main Street.

I-7) Housing: Opportunities for downtown housing abound. Second floor apartments above street level business may be the best opportunity. Hotels, lofts, and condominiums should be developed in the Paramount Theatre Plaza zone. Possibly condominiums and multi-unit apartments east of the Paramount would be appropriate.

I-8) Brick and Mortar: Many of the existing businesses on Main Street have fallen in disrepair. The facades are dated and are in dire need of appropriate architectural improvements. Exposing the original facades in combination with added awnings, new storefront framing, signage, lighting, enhancing and showcasing the individual character of the building details would greatly enhance the historic Downtown District. The quality and uniqueness of the architecture and details should be captured.

I-9) Outdoor seating for restaurants.



I-10) Highlight the quality and uniqueness of the architecture and details that exist in the existing Downtown buildings.

I-11) Vacate space within the High School

- Art studios
- Higher Education classes
- Community Education classes
- Evening events
- Youth center
- Business incubator space – Allowing students to visit and experience the work environment

I-12) Parking

Eventually a parking structure should be constructed to allow the City of Austin to use the surface parking lots for development. The City ownership of the land area provides numerous opportunities to entice development. A parking structure north of the current Judicial Center should be constructed in the next five years.

Parking for the High School may need to be addressed within the next decade. Convenient parking for students will eventually add to the downtown Vibrant Mass and entice students to use and enjoy the “new downtown”.

Implementation of Initiatives:

A successful downtown revitalization requires careful planning but the implementation requires a balance of the critical components. Housing, retail, entertainment, and office space must be developed to gain the “Vibrant Mass” necessary for success. Careful planning of parking will be required to appropriately support the parking of vehicles with the downtown zone. Convenient parking is always a fundamental factor in becoming successful with a downtown revitalization plan.

A downtown improvement program can be implemented in phases, however the overall Master Plan must be carefully considered as the pieces get assembled.

The core improvements should be the first priority.

Phase I:

- Improvement of storefronts.
- Second and third floors of existing buildings need to be brought back to life.
- Implement programs to strengthen and help existing business prosper and grow.
- Attract new businesses downtown.
- Coordinate and expand promotional and marketing activities.
- Build housing and hotel(s).

Phase II:

- Build on existing assets. Expand and build the public improvements surrounding the Paramount Theatre. Implement the park and plaza concepts outlined in the plan.
- Improve gateways.

Phase III:

- Expand parking.
- Implement transportation concepts identified in the plan.

Phase IV:

- Expand community activity venues and create destination attractions within the downtown; i.e., daycare, social services, street markets.

Phase V:

- Continue to expand housing, retail, entertainment (including restaurants) and office space.

The plan can be implemented in phases; however, overlap of the improvements or simultaneous development is preferred. Maintaining the momentum is critical. Each component of a successful downtown builds off the creation and success of the other.

Opportunities

Main Street and 2nd Avenue Northeast



Now



Opportunity

Now



Main Street (Mi Tierra)

Opportunity





Now

4th Avenue Northeast (Old State Theatre)



Opportunity

Ideas from other Communities



Awnings



Signage



Outdoor Seating



Banners





Historic Lighting



Seasonal Lighting

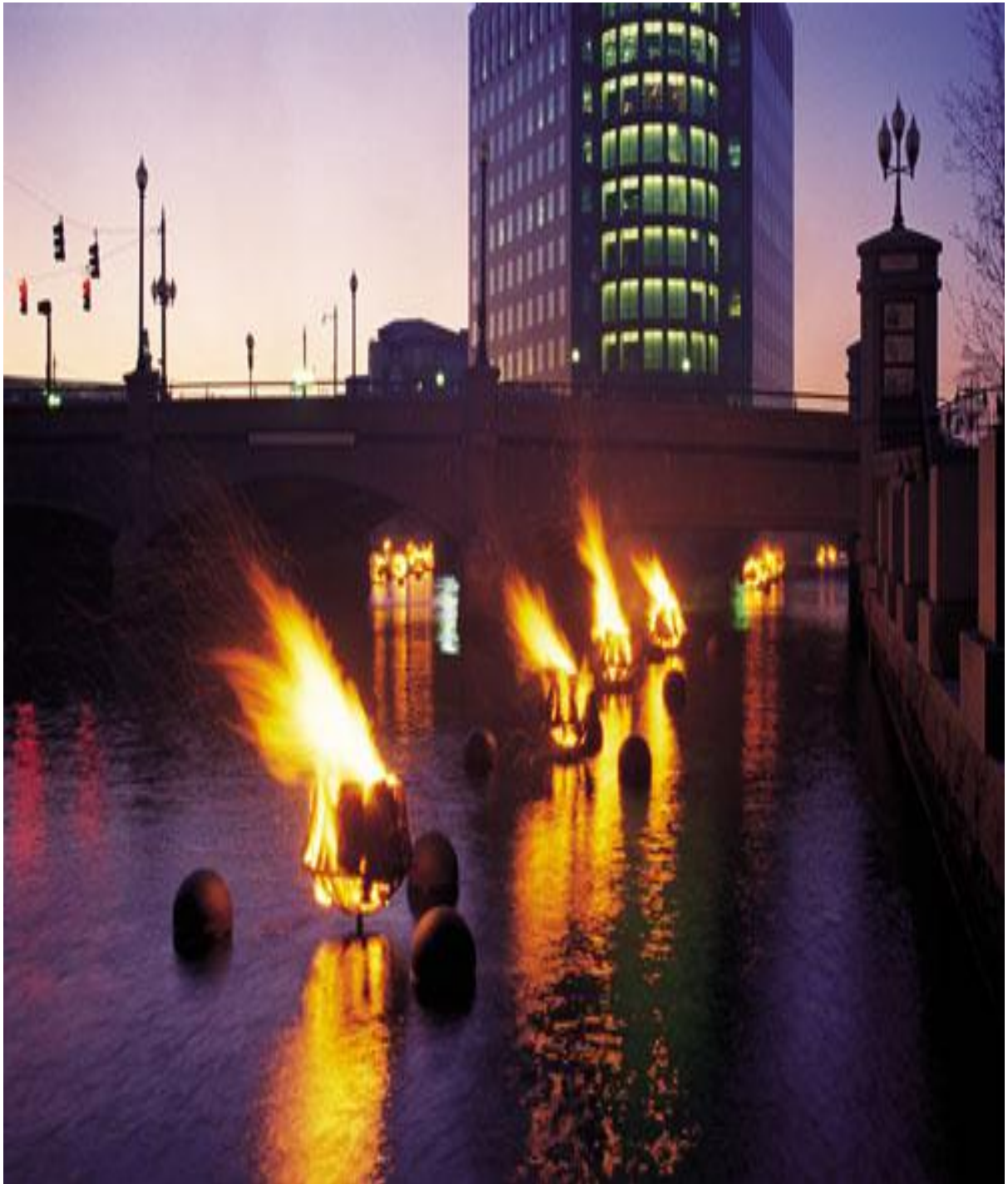


Seasonal Lighting

Lighting



Highlighting Building Detail



Creative ideas with downtown ponds, lakes or rivers.

Design Guidelines

All of the issues facing downtown Austin cannot be addressed immediately, nor should they be. It is important to have a strategy for implementation and coordination as opportunities arise for making the Master Plan a reality. This section outlines recommendations for Austin to insure that all elements of the Design Guidelines are accomplished, and strategies for putting the recommendations into action.

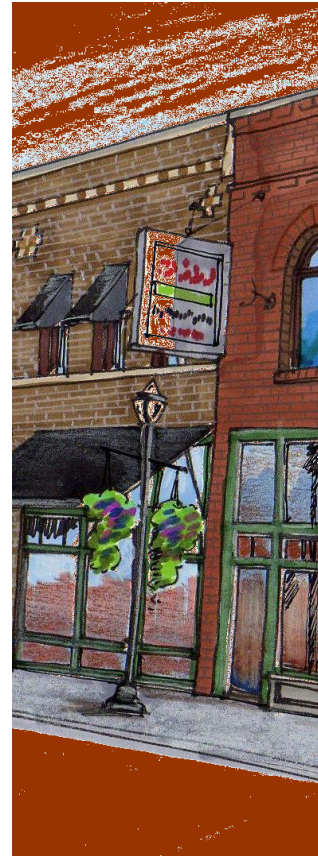
How will the Design Guidelines be used?

The Design Guidelines are intended to be used as a guide for future decision making for the downtown. The plan is intended to be flexible, as long as the implementation strategies are in keeping with the overall intent of this plan. The city will continue to respond to growth and change over the coming years and this document should evolve as well.

These Design Guidelines are a framework only. Specific design details should be measured against the intent of this plan as development occurs. This document will provide a basis for decision making and policy direction for Austin in years to come.

These guidelines may be used to achieve public buy-in of this process and vision. As major development opportunities arise in the city, it will be important to maintain an open dialogue with the citizens and development community of Austin by engaging them in the decision making process. Since this plan does not replace any existing policy, there should be a plan for engaging the city and the policy makers in order to insure implementation is successful.

These guidelines are also a marketing tool. These guidelines should be used to get potential investors, developers, and decision makers excited about the potential in downtown Austin. (For complete Design Guidelines refer to Appendix F.)



Recap of Strategies

The Master Plan relies on a series of initiatives, working together to advance the revitalization of downtown Austin which began with the 2000 Austin Comprehensive Plan Update and “Take Part” campaign. Community pride is apparent in every meeting, strategy session and enthusiasm will provide the energy and motivation for success. The plan identifies several initiatives which combine private development with public improvements. To be successful, it is essential that the commitment to improve the public spaces occurs simultaneously with private enhancements the city encourages and /or assists. The goal is to create “Vibrant Mass” within the Downtown area to become the destination of choice for the citizens and visitors to Austin. The “Take Part” process was the start of a shared vision for the Downtown Austin area. The implementation structure is intended to aggressively spark the improvement process. Leadership has begun to develop a strong public/private partnership. To achieve the goals and priorities identified by the citizens and consultants engaged in the process.

Trust and commitment to the plan is essential.

