

## FINDING OPPORTUNITY FROM DISASTER

Cedar Rapids leaders crowned 2008 the “Year of the River,” a title meant to celebrate and reinforce the connection between the City and the Cedar River that runs through its core. But that declaration took on new meaning when that adored river overflowed with raging floodwaters that caused the worst natural disaster in Iowa history and one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history. A June 13, 2008, crest that far exceeded even 500-year flood levels forced the evacuation of almost 25,000 people and damaged or destroyed some 5,000 homes and almost 1,000 businesses. At the epicenter of 10 square miles of devastation was a once-proud Downtown and the riverside neighborhoods that surrounded it.

Though stunned and uncertain of the path to get there, Downtown and community leaders quickly resolved to not just rebuild the flood-damaged areas, but to try to transform this community into one of America’s greatest cities for generations to come. The planning that began just days after the disaster held that singular goal in mind throughout its process.

The City and its residents mobilized in two phases of reinvestment and revitalization planning. The planning process has been a partnership between multiple City departments, City Council, and agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, FEMA, the Downtown District and Chamber of Commerce, and Linn County. Efforts have been guided by a multi-disciplinary consultant team, lead by Sasaki Associates, with experts including urban planners, urban designers, landscape architects, hydrologists, transportation engineers, and other specialists.

Phase One, a four-month public process to develop a flood management strategy, began in June 2008. Immediately following, Phase Two focused on developing plans for reinvesting in the flood-affected neighborhoods, with Downtown at the very heart of that focus.

### Phase One: The Flood Management Strategy

Within days of the flood, City Council outlined a series of strategic recovery goals and plan elements. Primary among these was the need to better protect the community from future flood risk. To this end, Phase One identified these community goals:

- Develop an effective flood management system that minimizes future risk;
- Identify impacts to neighborhoods and provide initial ideas for reinvestment to strengthen them;
- Provide a framework for improving neighborhoods, housing, business, transportation, open space and public facilities.

Phase One engaged over 2,680 residents at three milestone open houses, garnering feedback on options for flood management and community revitalization. The interdisciplinary consultant team partnered with City departments and agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to synthesize community objectives into a comprehensive Flood Management Strategy.

The Flood Management Strategy incorporates approaches to minimize future risk while improving the relationship of the City to the River. The lowest lying areas within the 100-year floodplain are converted into a 220-acre greenway park and levee system, providing public recreational space along the River. Along the edge of Downtown, an innovative removable floodwall system allows for visual connections to the River and creates an urban promenade lined with restaurants and entertainment venues.

### Phase Two: The Neighborhood Planning Process

Phase Two directly engaged community members in planning for reinvestment and recovery of Cedar Rapids’ flood-affected neighborhoods. Between January and May of 2009, neighbors came together and planned their futures through a series of City-wide Workshops and neighborhood-based Area Meetings. The consultant team and City-trained staff facilitated meetings in a process that sought to increase community leadership, promote neighborhood governance, and test a new model for interaction with City government. Over 1,270 residents and business people attended 8 public meetings and spent over 5,620 hours collaborating to create the Plan and establish their role in ongoing review as projects begin.

Together, the community worked to:

- Create a framework for evaluating plans to ensure adherence to community goals.
- Create a detailed set of actions for reinvesting in neighborhoods.
- Encourage leadership building and improved communication between the City and community.

Collectively, the completed plans embody a compelling vision for Cedar Rapids over the next 15 years. They envision a sustainable Cedar Rapids characterized by strong pedestrian, transit and vehicular connections between Downtown, the neighborhoods and the Cedar River, with a network of diverse open spaces. The Plans imagine vibrant, revitalized neighborhoods with a variety of housing types, diverse economic opportunities, and thriving cultural destinations.

#### Downtown Outcomes

The Central Area of Cedar Rapids is a diverse, mixed use area composed of the Downtown core, May's Island, and sub-districts including the Medical District, Coe College, and the West Bank. It serves as an employment, civic, retail, and cultural hub. Approximately 13,000 people work Downtown, supporting a diversified economy of manufacturing, technology, and service industries, with 4,500 jobs in the Medical District. Downtown is a major cultural destination, with historic buildings, public art, a farmer's market and other attractions.

The 2007 Downtown Vision Plan, though predating the flood, represents a shared vision developed through outreach to stakeholders, focus groups, and the community. This 2007 Plan has served as a foundation for the Central Area's Plan in the 2009 Neighborhood Planning Process. In fact, the Downtown District engaged its board members and volunteers from its Program and Development Committees to attend each of the planning meetings and to ensure the most-treasured elements of that earlier plan remained a focal point of the new, post-flood vision.

The 2009 community-driven planning process has allowed for the establishment of goals to guide Downtown reinvestment in light of the flood. While many ideas garnered consensus—such as rebuilding cultural venues, reinforcing the commercial core, and increasing housing options—the process provided a forum for debate over open issues including transportation improvements, parking, underutilized land, the Medical District and Coe College's relationship to Downtown.

Community members believe all efforts must reinforce the existing core, with enhanced retail and focused commercial. They resolved that the West Bank be developed as a mixed use district with connections to Downtown via a restored May's Island, and the Medical District's potential was highlighted. Transportation issues were paramount, and the Plan addresses improved transit routes, priority streetscape improvements, parking strategies, expansion of Greene Square Park and a new West Bank park.

#### Implementation

On November 12, 2008, the Council adopted the Flood Management Strategy, allowing the City to move forward with interim planning and potential acquisitions. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is studying the feasibility of the community's preferred flood protection alignment. On May 13th, 2009, the City Council unanimously voted to adopt the Neighborhood Reinvestment Plan and use it to direct redevelopment of the flood-affected neighborhoods for the next 15 years.

Implementation will be guided by an Action Plan developed by the City and community. Residents provided over 400 actions steps, including roles and responsibilities, to accomplish 25 planning initiatives, ranging from repairing flood-damaged utilities to strengthening the economic sustainability of Downtown and the West Bank. The City developed a timetable that is sensitive to funding and phasing factors. The Action Plan is a "living" document that will evolve as items are completed or new needs arise. Implementation is already underway, with a community process for urban design guidelines to ensure that reinvestment meets standards of high-quality, sustainable development and another community planning process to strengthen the City's Public Facilities and Parks and Recreation system.