



VISION CEDAR RAPIDS

DOWNTOWN FRAMEWORK PLAN

Original Plan 2007 | Update 2012 | Update 2017

It is an exciting time for the community of Cedar Rapids. Downtown, in particular, has experienced a myriad of changes in the last ten years. The historic flood of 2008 has forever changed this city, but under strong leadership, the people of Cedar Rapids have turned this disaster into possibility – a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent the downtown. Inspired by the ensuing transformation, Downtown stakeholders have continued to build on the *Vision Cedar Rapids* plan to advance a framework for investment that honors the past while maintaining focus on the future.

In 2007, the Cedar Rapids Downtown District (now the Cedar Rapids Metro Economic Alliance) commissioned the first *Vision Cedar Rapids Downtown Framework Plan* study to review, coordinate, merge, and prioritize over a dozen independent studies that had been completed in order to help mold a clear, unified vision for downtown, which directly informed the planning efforts in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 flood event. The original 2007 *Vision Cedar Rapids* was wildly successful, as the coalesced information was translated into a clear and actionable plan that allowed the City to start rebuilding their Downtown with a unified direction. Top priorities were broken down into specific recommendations and examples that allowed the City of Cedar Rapids to have a clear path forward. This graspable approach is what differentiates this plan and the subsequent 2012 and 2017 updates, because so much was able to be translated into action. Out of the 40 specific recommendations outlined in the 2007 plan, 32 of these have been completed or are in the process of being completed.

With the framework for flood recovery in place, the study was updated in 2012 and served as a guide for further project implementation. Similar to the original 2007 *Vision Cedar Rapids* success, 45 of the 51 recommendations from the 2012 update are in implementation. And now, after the 2017 *Vision Cedar Rapids* plan update, with many of the previous recommendations realized and much of the downtown and surrounding districts transformed, Downtown Cedar Rapids is at an inflection point, prepared to launch to an even bigger and brighter future as the result of some significant factors that set the 2017 updated plan apart from the rest:

1. **Impact sites.** To a large degree a result of flood protection planning, but also – significantly – due to the foresight and vision of City leadership, there exists approximately 23 acres of City-owned, undeveloped property in the heart of the downtown. This includes the parcels assembled along the riverfront and collectively they represent an unprecedented opportunity for the community to do something remarkable for Cedar Rapids and for Iowa. In addition to these impact sites, over two dozen privately-held sites have been identified as opportunities for improvement and investment throughout the downtown core.

2. **District leadership.** Perhaps stimulated by the district areas suggested in the 2007 plan, but certainly catalyzed by the strength and success of the downtown SSMID, the formation of new Self-Supported Municipal Improvement Districts in Cedar Rapids has spurred organized efforts for improvements and has brought a stronger definition to the character of these unique areas. Moving forward, a more focused and coordinated effort between the different districts will help unify and strengthen the goals of the greater downtown and community.

3. **Momentum.** The phenomenal belief in, commitment to, and real investment in the priorities identified in the earlier plans has resulted in coordinated projects that have yielded material results. There is still work to be done, but the energy generated from these successes will provide the fuel for downtown's continued evolution, challenging us to not just consider, but to champion big ideas.

Impact sites, district leadership, and momentum are three over-arching opportunities that set this 2017 study apart from previous ones, and are opportunities that must be leveraged towards a vision for at least the next five years.

And so the team approached this latest study from a new vantage point. It has become more and more clear, as we listened, observed, and engaged, that the focus is shifting from implementation to experience. What priorities, if implemented, would best contribute to creating a vibrant downtown experience? If the focus is on experience, then how can Downtown serve as the consummate host?

The answers to these questions have found common language around the ideas of connections, opportunity investments, culture, and big ideas, and these themes permeate the eight priorities that have been established in the *2017 Vision Cedar Rapids* plan:

1. **Invest** in Impact Opportunities
The 23 acres of City-owned property located in the heart of downtown is the place for big ideas, and tolerating anything less than distinguished, postcard-worthy development on these sites will be a failure.
2. **Energize** the Connectors
Create welcoming gateways and friendly corridors for visitors. Streets are obvious connectors, but the Cedar River and Lake, Cedar River Trail, the railways, and the riverfront all start to form a comprehensive system that not all cities are in the position to explore.
3. **Activate** Mays Island
Mays Island is the ultimate “postcard” for Cedar Rapids; it is the aspect of downtown that is the most recognizable and unique. Signature event space, activation of public space, implementation of a pedestrian bridge, and removing the jail off the island are all steps to activate and celebrate this asset.
4. **Embrace** the River
Explore connecting the river through recreation like kayaking, canoeing, and trail activities to take advantage of this amenity through all seasons. Implement the river promenade as flood control is phased along with consideration of balanced, short-term improvements.
5. **Champion** Urban Living
The critical missing link in Downtown Cedar Rapids is the density of people living in the core. Focus on 18-hour energy and vibrancy.
6. **Create** a Cultural Quad
Provide unique experiences – like Signature 3rd Street, American Discovery “Museum” Trail and celebration of the Grant Wood heritage - will start to distinguish downtown Cedar Rapids as a host community.
7. **Distinguish** the Downtown
Distinguishing the Downtown through initiatives such as intensified activity on the street level, pedestrian accommodations, and brand consistency will build up the vital heartbeat of the city.
8. **Establish** District Coordination
Establish coordination between the downtown SSMID districts to drive a unified vision and assure progress by leveraging common interests.

It has been very important that, as we narrowed these priorities and strategies, the hallmarks of past planning efforts not get lost. This plan, like past efforts, needs to be relevant, thoughtful, and actionable. But building on current momentum, it also cannot be a vision plan that is timid, afraid to suggest big ideas.

As experience started to reveal itself as a central theme, the committee became inspired by an old postcard image of Cedar Rapids. Conversations and brainstorm centered around visions of how a vibrant downtown experience might be expressed on a postcard. In five, ten or twenty years from now, what are the big ideas that will inspire that image? And so this “postcard concept” is woven throughout this study as a way to think boldly about the future and remind us to make big plans.