

Narrative: River District Implementation Plan

SETTING THE STAGE

In 2017 the City of Elkhart adopted the River District Revitalization Master Plan. Developed with broad community and stakeholder involvement, the plan built on extensive work completed over the previous two decades to turn around Elkhart's downtown. It laid out a vision for the River District—a walkable, mixed-use expansion of downtown on 100-plus acres of parking lots, disparate retailers, and auto-repair shops immediately to the east.

Creating the River District offered a way to address an especially vexing problem: a housing shortage that makes it hard to attract and hold the mid-skill workers critical to Elkhart's employers, largely tied to RV manufacturing. It would also give civic leaders a powerful tool to support efforts to diversify the city economy. Aware of changing demographics and markets, they believed that an expanded downtown that works as a livable, walkable neighborhood—combined with high-quality open space and a riverside setting—would strengthen Elkhart's hand in attracting knowledge workers, new industries, entrepreneurs, and artists, all key to sustainable economic diversification.

IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

The Mayor and City Council immediately commissioned the River District Implementation Team (RDIT) to design and build the River District plan. Composed of 17 leaders from both public and private sectors, RDIT set out to develop an implementation plan focused on introducing walkable residential living; promoting health and fitness; and enhancing existing parks and uniting isolated sections of a Riverwalk. In a key move, it brought in a consultant to develop a clear picture of the housing market. The resulting study concluded that the district could support up to 1,000 units of housing over its first five years and an additional 500 units over the next five.

Guided by ongoing stakeholder engagement and holding periodic public meetings to validate choices and direction, RDIT developed a set of districtwide principles and recommendations, and it outlined 20 specific capital projects for advancing the vision.

Because the City wanted to see quick action, it had already bought land and approved some key initial projects. These preliminary proposals, however, lacked coherence and generally leaned more toward car-reliant than pedestrian-friendly development patterns. These first-out-of-the-gate projects would set a tone for the entire district, but their design threatened to undermine walkability and other urban qualities the vision promoted.

With City backing, RDIT helped proponents reorganize sites into more urban, walkable configurations. At the same time, the team built a district-wide urban design framework that:

- introduced a civic square and a town green to serve as key district focal points;
- mapped out a “complete streets” approach designed to foster pedestrian and bicycle use;
- connected parks and recreational spaces into a true network;
- redesigned some sites to take better advantage of river views; and
- outlined a parking-management plan so persuasive that the City dropped plan for a parking garage and redirected money earmarked for that project to further improvements in the public realm.

Of the projects already in the pipeline when RDIT started its work, three “anchor” developments helped shape the urban design framework:

- An **aquatics, health, fitness and community center**. Developed by a partnership between a healthcare provider and the community foundation, the center combines a state-of-the-art aquatics and wellness center for all city residents; includes community meeting spaces; and features one of just five pools in the country built to hold comparable regional competitions.

- **Stonewater at the Riverwalk**, a 200-unit market-rate apartment complex with 7,000 SF of retail space. No one had built a residential project of this size in the city in decades.
- **Great Lakes Capital mixed-use development**, a 150 market-rate apartments and a branch of a local grocery chain, Martin's Super Market. The market will face the district's civic square, drawing people and activity to it, and will add an important amenity for district and downtown residents.

In addition, the City has begun its complete-streets makeover of Jackson Boulevard and Elkhart Avenue in the district. The reconstruction will bury utilities, reduce travel-lane widths, create landscaped medians, introduce on-street bike lanes, widen sidewalks, and plant street trees along both sides of both streets. Construction will wrap up in fall 2018.

GETTING IMPLEMENTATION RIGHT

RDIT and its consulting team paid close attention to the details of implementation. Three examples illustrate how it shaped plan recommendations to reinforce the likelihood of success.

- **Walkability:** Creating a walkable district for a city that relies on automobiles presented a challenge. The team worked to move every building on every parcel up to the sidewalk to define the street (parking was moved behind buildings). Other measures included spreading amenities strategically across the site to create more destinations for walking and more activity at key focal points like the civic square; matching the street grid of the original downtown; and combining more than one use wherever possible,
- **Parking Plan:** The City had planned to build a parking garage for swim meets at the Aquatics Center. Yet, outside of those events—about one every third weekend—the garage would have stood empty. The team devised a shared-parking strategy to avoid the need for a garage, capitalizing on nearby lots with different peak-demand times. The plan delivers two important benefits. First, it made the garage unnecessary, and the City agreed to redirect the construction budget to park enhancements. Second, the use of scattered parking lots introduces swimming fans to local businesses as they travel to and from the Aquatics Center. This added foot traffic boosts sales for restaurants, coffee shops, and stores along the way.
- **Retail locations:** The plan locates retail zones strategically, *requiring* them around the civic square and town green and *allowing* them in other spots. The required locations contribute to street life, and the allowed locations support future expansion as the district attracts more residents and visitors.

RESULTS

In total, the City has spent \$30 million on land acquisition and public-realm improvements. In return, it has triggered \$150 million in outside funding for development just during Phase 1. The plan front-loads projects to reach a critical mass of people and activity within three years. Construction is well under way for the Aquatics Center; the 200 Riverwalk apartments; the Great Lakes Capital project (150 apartments and Martin's Super Market); and the complete-streets project. All of these will open between fall 2018 and summer 2019, and by the end of the Phase 1, more than 550 apartments and townhouses will have reached the market, more than half of the 1,000 units the plan is designed to create.

The River District Plan caps a string of projects that have reinforced and revitalized its downtown. It uses downtown expansion as a tool for resolving housing and labor shortages and for attracting new kinds of workers to help diversify the economy—and it sets Elkhart on an ambitious path for growth and for the future.