

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

City leadership, Community Main Street, and local business owners have worked together to revitalize Main Street and create a vibrant destination for boutique shopping, restaurants, and other entertainment opportunities. Following this success, Downtown Cedar Falls is currently experiencing development pressures, but the City’s aspirations for the scale and character of future growth have not been well-defined. Even with the recent refinement to the design review standards for the Central Business District overlay district, the development review and approval process remains subjective due to vague standards, with new projects often requiring unique “one-off” negotiations between the city and developers. This consumes substantial staff, planning commission, and city council time, and creates uncertainty for developers and neighbors alike. This process adds to overall project costs, (with much of the additional cost going into the approval process rather than into the project itself). This is reflected in the scale¹—only larger developers and projects can afford the time and expense required for potential negotiation and project redesign—and price points of recent Downtown development, which have been well above average for Downtown and the City on the whole. The opportunities for small scale incremental infill, and the potential to reach a broader residential and commercial market segment, are greatly limited under the current scenario.

Recognizing the need, the City initiated a process for a Downtown vision plan and zoning code update to provide a road map for growth and development: *Imagine Downtown! Cedar Falls Downtown Vision Plan*. (Hereafter, *Imagine Downtown Project/Plan*.) The plan will provide a general framework for public policy decisions and investment, in tandem with clear aspirations for the scale and character of private development in Downtown and the adjacent neighborhoods, to be followed by new objective development standards.

Throughout the Downtown visioning process, the Cedar Falls community—elected officials, business and property owners, and residents—consistently indicated a desire for an economically viable, walkable, mixed-use Downtown, surrounded by neighborhoods that provide a range of housing options in close proximity to the goods and services of daily life.

The *Imagine Downtown Plan* includes: an overview of the planning process; a summary of input gathered from the community during kick-off events; consultant team analysis; the “Big Ideas” (the main concepts) from the Community Hands-On Visioning Workshop; prototypical redevelopment scenarios; and recommendations for implementing the community vision.

This plan is graphic intensive, aiming to help community members visualize change before it occurs. Many of the changes recommended in the plan are shown using “before-and-after” images, in the context of 2019 Cedar Falls.

As in many communities, a segment of the population is concerned about change, perhaps understandably, because the current policies and regulations do not produce predictable outcomes. However, development pressures exist, and in a healthy, dynamic city, change will occur; the City should make every effort to harness and guide that change in a positive direction. This plan envisions incremental growth within the current Downtown context, building on the success of the past while recognizing the importance of growth and development to maintaining a livable and economically vibrant city.

Although the plan report is organized around the visioning process, individual issues, prospective “what if” design scenarios, and approaches to implementation, all are interrelated and should be viewed holistically. Urban design and revitalization issues are multifaceted. Achieving the vision will take place over a number of years, or even decades, and require multiple tools and approaches, frequently used in conjunction with one another. The implementation tools used—whether policy, regulatory or financial—should be coordinated to support and reinforce the overarching vision.

¹ Note: As the scale of development projects increase, the probability that the developers, architects, builders, and owners are from out-of-town increases as well, with related revenues also leaving the community.

VISIONING PROCESS AND PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

Prior to the Community Hands-On Visioning Workshop, the consultant team conducted stakeholder interviews, completed site analysis of the study area, reviewed the recent parking study, and studied the current demographics and market information for Cedar Falls. All of this information was used in conjunction with the community aspirations, to test different development scenarios against the market realities and within the Downtown context, and to establish a framework for future growth and development. The *Imagine Downtown Plan* anticipates the public and private sector working together—with the public sector “setting the table” for growth through investment in the public realm and establishing rules to provide certainty for the private sector to invest and (re)develop, fulfilling the community vision.

The Plan addresses several topics and includes recommendations for creating a vibrant, mixed-use, walkable district. These can broadly be identified as either matters of physical design and placemaking; or technical policy and management issues, to help implement or reinforce the community vision. Some topics fall into both categories and many are interrelated. These design concepts and policy recommendations include the following.

Increase the “sense of place” throughout Downtown. Build on the historic character and success of the Main Street Parkade.

Define the public realm with active building facades and additional street trees. Rules for new development should help to further define and enhance the public realm—typically the public streets and sidewalks (from building face to building face) as well as parks and squares. The uses inside the buildings can and will change over time; but if the buildings are well designed for an urban context and made of durable materials, they will continually be reused, just as those along the Main Street Parkade have been (many for more than a century).

Recognize that Downtown (and nearby neighborhoods) are not the same as the rest of the City. The rules and processes for development should reinforce placemaking concepts at the street and block level, rather than parcel-by-parcel, so that in the future, Downtown becomes much more than the sum of its parts. These areas are not just comprised of individual buildings on individual lots, but rather buildings that relate to one another, and to the streets, sidewalks and other public spaces throughout the district.

Design Downtown Gateways to provide a sense of arrival. Gateways are much stronger when the streetscape and built environment work together to narrow the perceived roadway width and slow traffic, signaling that people are entering a special place—one designed for people rather than cars. Much more than simple signage (*Welcome to Cedar Falls!*) a true gateway creates a welcoming environment for pedestrians and cyclists alike.

Expand beyond the success of the Parkade as a destination environment. Move beyond Main Street and provide more opportunities for living and working downtown for people of all ages and a range of socioeconomic levels. (This can help balance the parking management concerns through greater trip capture and the creation of a “park once” environment.)

Implement the street and sidewalk rebuilding program to improve the pedestrian environment and enhance walkability. This effort should include the planting of street trees throughout the district. The existing street and block network is a great framework for people to move in and around Downtown efficiently. The targeted public investment in the pedestrian realm will make walking a more viable transportation option and encourage more reinvestment by current property owners as well as new infill development. The importance of street trees cannot be overestimated. Not only do they provide shade and assist with stormwater runoff, they help to define the pedestrian realm, increase pedestrian comfort, and calm traffic. In addition, in a built-out condition such as Downtown Cedar Falls, with limited opportunity to create new public green space, streets should be celebrated as the preeminent public space that they are.

Understand the market and use it to create more housing and employment options. Cedar Falls continues to grow in a slow and consistent manner. Downtown provides a unique environment for living and working that cannot be replicated in the newer portions of the City. Emptynesters, millennials, and employers are looking for “sense of place” when choosing where to locate. There are opportunities to provide work spaces and a range of housing options for people who are looking for a “live-work-play” environment—whether millennials, young entrepreneurs, emptynesters, or snowbirds—that can support a walkable “car free” (or one car rather than two) environment. Many young people who currently work in the food and beverage sector in Downtown expressed an interest in living nearby, but cannot afford to. Enabling a broader range of development options will provide a wider range of prices and create a more diverse housing stock in close proximity to a range of job opportunities.

Change the rules for development. The context analysis included a review of the current zoning and development review process. The consensus during the public visioning process was that new development should respect the existing context. However, there is currently a mismatch between the existing built environment, the current zoning, and the community aspirations for the future. This plan illustrates ways for context-sensitive growth, while permitting infill development that can accommodate both more intensity and the variety of uses currently allowed.

Create a consistent process for development review and approval. Establish more objective design and development standards and use refined zoning requirements as one tool in a new approach to parking management.

Manage and carefully increase the parking supply. The Downtown parking study provides a wealth of information and approaches to parking management. This plan builds upon several of those through a lens of placemaking and walkability, and recommends updating the current requirements in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Parking supply should support the goals of the *Imagine Downtown Plan*—not be an end in-and-of itself.

Update the current parking requirements. The location, design, and quantity of parking are all important in the context of a walkable, mixed-use environment—and there are mechanisms for addressing all three. Downtown is different from the rest of the City, and parking should be managed accordingly. While an appropriate amount of parking is necessary to support residential development, requirements for parking over and above what the residential market demands will simply add to the per unit cost of the housing. At the same time, simply relying on the existing parking supply will not support additional Downtown growth. As growth occurs, some additional strategically located public parking will be necessary to create the supply needed to support a “park once” environment—one in which Downtown visitors and customers can undertake several activities on foot (without having to move their car). Multiple strategies will be needed to finance, develop, and manage new publicly-available parking. Requiring private, exclusive parking on each individual downtown lot will detract from the envisioned walkable environment and hinder the creation of a shared parking supply. (The existing patchwork of unattractive, underutilized private surface parking lots scattered throughout Downtown are evidence of this previous approach.)²

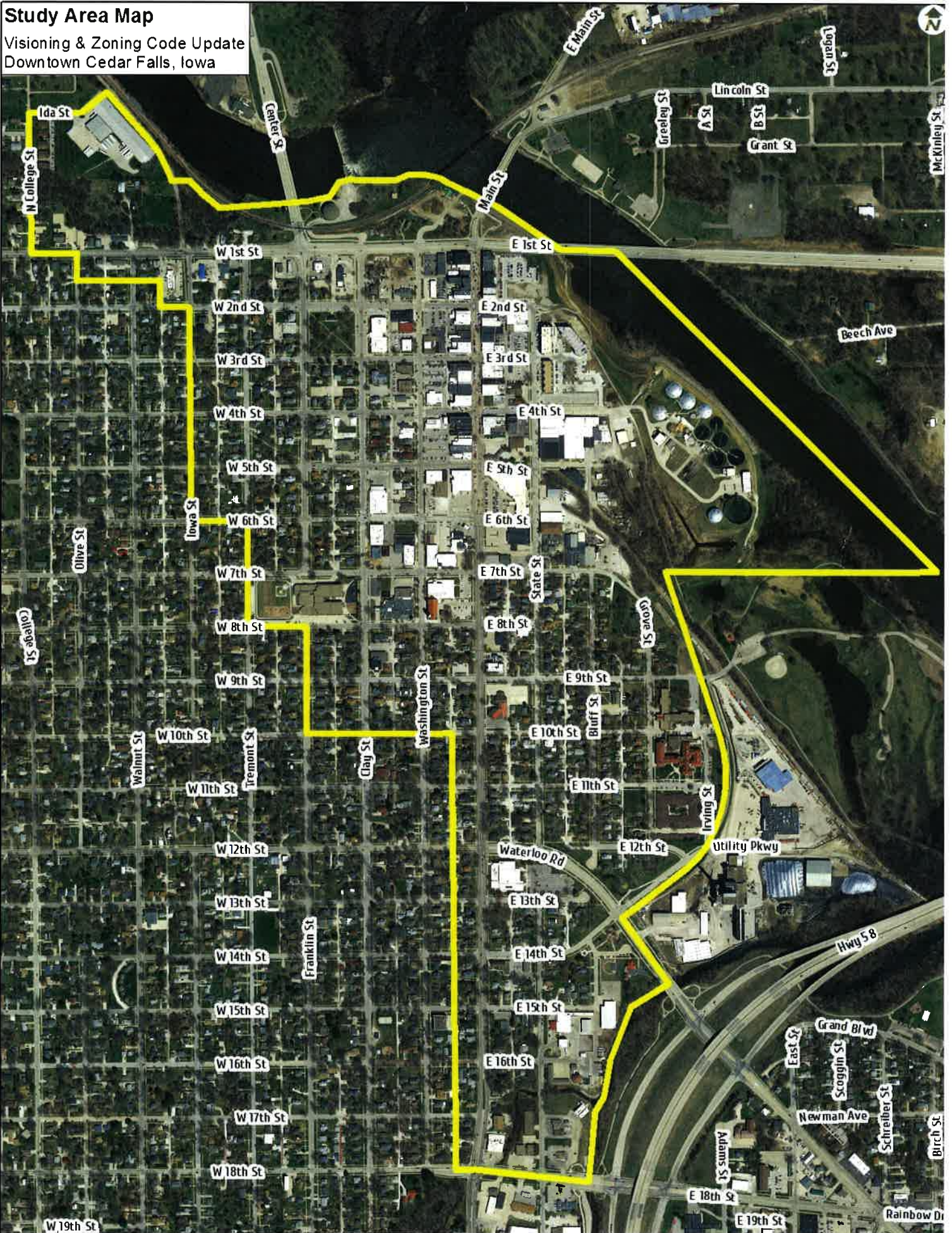
CONCLUSION

The City initiated the visioning and zoning code update process to provide a framework for future growth and development. The goal of the *Imagine Downtown Plan* is to define that framework—building on the community aspirations, and incorporating several urban design and placemaking principles—within the existing Cedar Falls context; not to prescribe specific building designs. This community vision will also lay the foundation for updating the zoning and other development regulations for Downtown. The plan provides illustrations of one or more ways in which development could occur, over time, on prototypical study area sites. Each example addresses one or more of the plan goals and recommendations to achieve the community vision for a compact, walkable, mixed-use district. These concepts (and more) are further defined, explored and illustrated through “before and after” computer visualizations, photo examples, and drawings in the *Imagine Downtown Plan* that follows.

² Note: The development of a publicly-owned, single-use parking ramp is not a good option. Not only are they expensive, they damage the city fabric, creating a dead zone along the streets they abut. This plan envisions the development of a mixed-use ramp, as illustrated in the project prototypes on pages 46 - 59.

Study Area Map

Visioning & Zoning Code Update
Downtown Cedar Falls, Iowa



Ida St

N College St

Center St

E Main St

Greene St

A St

B St

Grant St

Lincoln St

Logan St

McKinley St

Main St

W 1st St

E 1st St

W 2nd St

E 2nd St

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Beech Ave

State St

Irving St

Waterloo Rd

Utility Pkwy

Hwy 58

Grand Blvd

Scoggin St

Newman Ave

Schreiber St

Birch St

Rainbow Dr

College St

Olive St

Walnut St

Tremont St

Franklin St

Washington St

Clay St

Adams St

East St

Schreiber St

Birch St