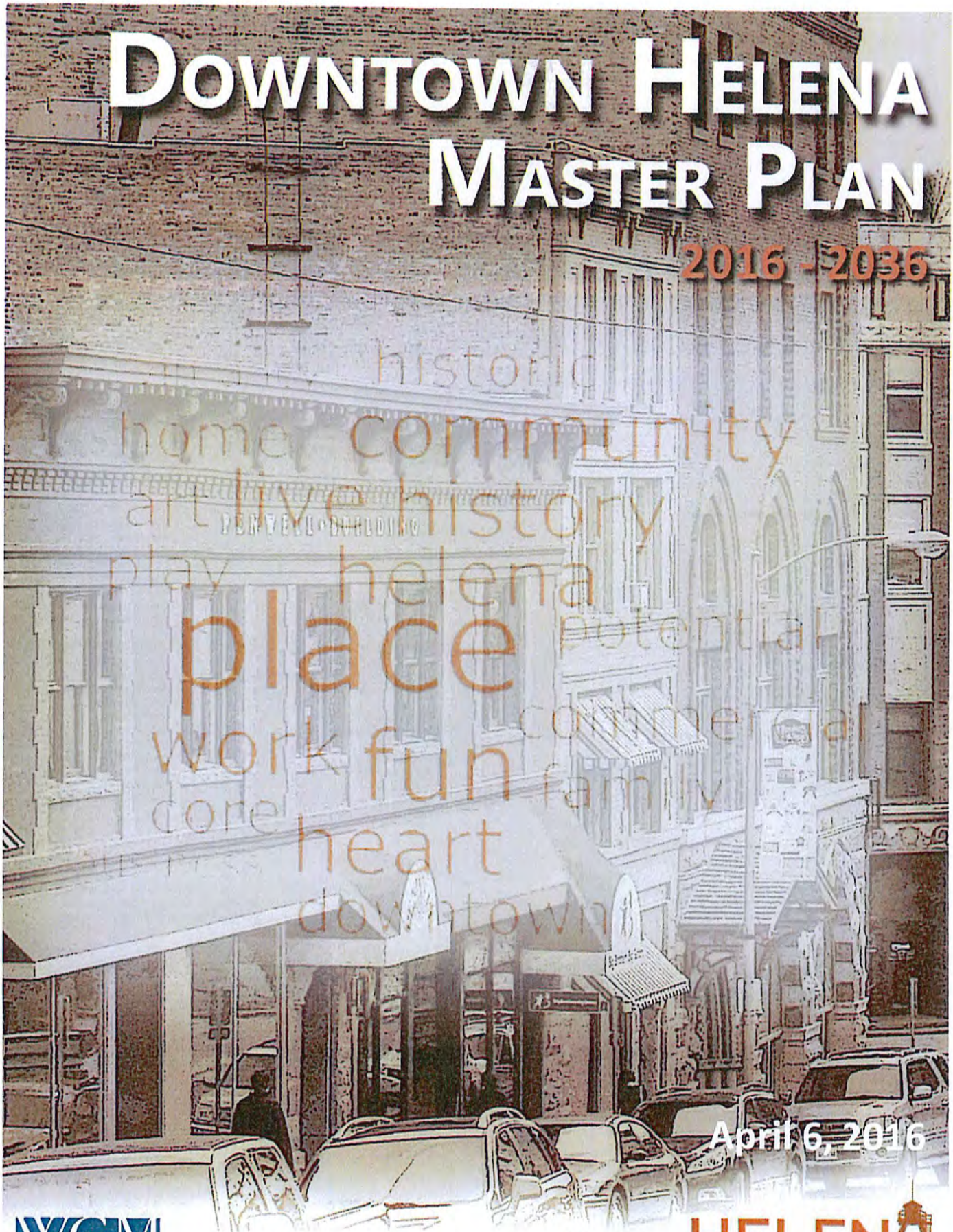
Downtown Helena Master Plan

2016 - 2036



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DOWNTOWN HELENA MASTER PLAN

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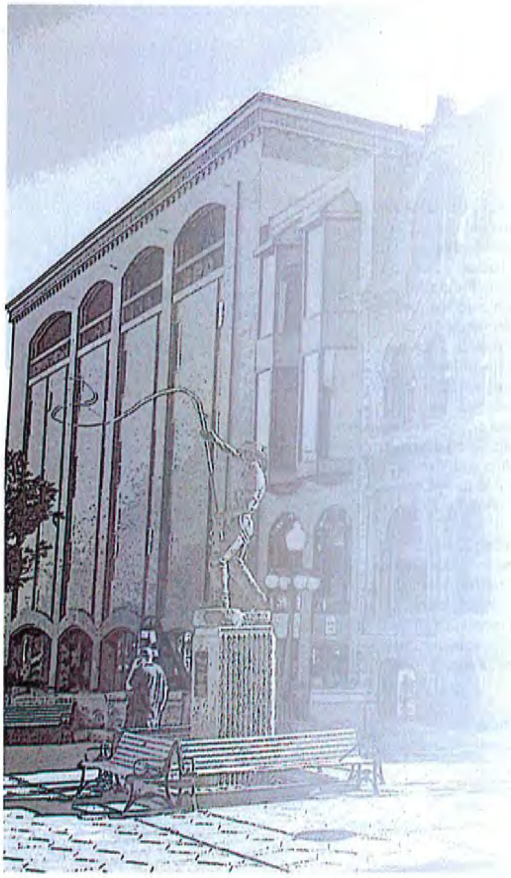


Executive Summary

Downtown is the heart of Helena. It is a special, unique place that has a strong emotional bond with residents and visitors alike. The community has many pieces that all need to function together, but the Downtown is central to how the community is defined. Business owners, residents, employees and citizens of the broader community have a shared passion for Downtown. The Master Plan shapes that passion and provides a guide for implementing changes that will attract future growth and development in Downtown.

The Master Plan builds on Downtown's past success, leveraging its unique sense of place and historic identity to prepare for new opportunities in a changing marketplace. As many communities seek new approaches to economic development, Helena is well-positioned to offer what people are looking for.

Increasingly, people are choosing quality of life over other factors, including higher salaries. At the same time, technology and growth of "creative-class" industries allow people and businesses to locate anywhere. Building a strong and resilient economy starts with creating a great community where people want to live and work.*

Downtown Helena is well-poised for success. Current market trends favor Downtown growth, but the Plan must be proactive to capture these opportunities. Fundamental to the Plan is the idea that Downtown must not only sustain existing business, but capture demand for development that is currently occurring elsewhere.

** Place Value: How Communities Attract, Grow and Keep Jobs and Talent in the Rocky Mountain* West, Sonoran Institute

Planning for the Heart of Helena

The Downtown Helena Master Plan is the story of a grass roots effort to define, understand, and capture opportunities for the Downtown and the greater Helena community. The Master Plan is an exciting glimpse into the future, and will help Downtown Helena build on past success, leverage its unique sense of place, and prepare for new opportunities to achieve the best potential for this magnificent place.

The Master Plan:

- ✓ provides a tool for guiding Downtown economic growth;
- ✓ reaffirms Downtown's role in the community;
- ✓ guides decision-making for public improvements, private investments, and changes to existing regulations;
- ✓ anticipates foreseeable development opportunities; and,
- ✓ provides a clear path for leadership to successfully implement the Plan.

The Master Plan represents a community-based planning effort. The process engaged a wide range of stakeholders, business leaders, and the general public to create a plan with strong buy-in and support from the community. The process included three steps.

1 Issues, Ideas, & Barriers

The first step in the process identified issues, barriers, and assets within Downtown. The assets are catalogued in the Existing Conditions report (Appendix A). The ideas have been incorporated throughout the recommendations in the plan. The issues within Downtown determined what problems needed to be addressed.

Key Issues

- ✓ Connections to the greater community need to be strengthened.
- ✓ Business access and visibility is limited by a lack of wayfinding and through traffic.
- ✓ Pedestrian and bicycle routes lack continuity and connectivity.
- ✓ Parking is inconvenient and confusing.
- ✓ Current aesthetic and maintenance levels don't reflect the desired quality of Downtown.
- ✓ Marketing and branding for Downtown lacks a consistent voice and identity.
- ✓ Existing land uses don't support a desirable, walkable Downtown with neighborhood services and amenities.

2 Goals & Vision

The second step formed the goals and vision for Downtown. This step developed the Guiding Principles which provided the foundation for decision-making throughout the Plan and the Downtown Framework which provided a conceptual vision for Downtown.

Guiding Principles

Downtown is Walkable One of Downtown's most important assets is the concentration of goods and services within easy walking distance. Above all else, walking in Downtown must be clean, comfortable, efficient, interesting, and safe.

Downtown is Connected to the Community As the heart of the community, Downtown must strengthen connections with other important community centers and destinations.

Downtown is a Desirable Place Downtown must enhance the unique, high-quality environment that attracts a wide variety of visitors, residents, and businesses. Downtown must be a desirable place to live, work, shop, learn, and play.

Downtown is Alive Downtown must be a vibrant, year-round destination for business and activity throughout the day and evening hours, including residential housing, arts and entertainment, events and activities.

Downtown is Convenient Downtown must have convenient access, circulation, parking, and every-day services that allow people to easily visit and stay Downtown.

Downtown Framework

The Downtown Framework provides a conceptual vision for Downtown, linking the modern Great Northern Town Center and the Historic Downtown with a strong retail backbone along Last Chance Gulch. The two "districts", the Great Northern District and the Fire Tower District, are given distinct identities, but remain strongly connected by the Last Chance Gulch Retail Core. Each district is anchored by employment and entertainment uses that support the retail core, which provides a strong walking connection along a traditional retail shopping street.

The areas that surround the retail core provide a foundation to support and sustain the other districts by providing opportunities for workforce housing, business incubators and start-ups, and parking. Each area plays an important role and function in the success of the entire Downtown, and is necessary to strengthen Downtown's potential.

The following page provides descriptions and imagery of the vision for each district. Each district should look to strengthen its individual identity while adding key elements to increase its desirability for residents, employees, and visitors.

Great Northern District

A modern center for business and family entertainment

The Great Northern District caters to the modern professional who lives and works Downtown. With upper-level housing, coffee shops, fitness centers, family entertainment, and a lively nightlife, the young professional or retiree's desire for an urban lifestyle is satisfied with a wide variety of amenities.

Last Chance Gulch Retail Core

A traditional downtown shopping street with appeal for both tourists and local residents alike

The Last Chance Gulch Retail Core invites Helena and its surrounding communities into the Downtown for a unique experience with historic architecture, local shops and restaurants, and an active street life. The retail core celebrates the traditional main street character and charm with wide sidewalks, engaging storefronts, and the distinctive walking mall.

Fire Tower District

A hub of entertainment, recreation, history, arts and culture

By embracing its eclectic mix of businesses and architectural styles, the Fire Tower District's casual atmosphere welcomes locals and visitors to hang out in a brewery, meet up with friends before hitting the trails, or pick up dinner from a local vendor at the public market. Condos and townhouses that appeal to the millennial or baby boomer bring energy and demand for restaurants, outdoor gathering places, and cultural vibrancy.

3 Implementation Actions

The third step established and prioritized the Implementation Actions. The illustrative plan identifies land uses and specific projects that are steps to realizing the vision for Downtown.

Implementation Actions were organized into five categories. These categories broadly lay out the plan for how Downtown Helena can meet its goals, addressing marketing, land use, historic resources, parking, infrastructure, and circulation.

Downtown as a Brand

- Create one strategy for all of Downtown
- Prioritize aesthetics and maintenance to create a high-quality shopping district
- Create a high- quality downtown experience

Create a Dynamic Downtown Environment

- Revise the Downtown development code to facilitate good urban design and stimulate development
- Promote redevelopment of underperforming properties
- Create a public market that brings unique options for food into Downtown
- Encourage Downtown Housing

Capitalize on Downtown's Historic Assets

- Update historic resource inventories
- Promote historic preservation and context-sensitive design

Update & Manage Downtown's Infrastructure Assets

- Manage parking to add convenience and encourage desired land uses
- Proactively invest in Downtown infrastructure that supports new development

Connect Downtown

- Increase transit options
- Invite visitors to explore downtown Downtown by improving access and circulation
- Optimize pedestrian connectivity
- Develop a comprehensive bike network
- Improve vehicle circulation and access to increase retail viability

Last Chance Gulch Streetscape Concept
Public investment in streetscape amenities will help support private investment in underutilized properties.

Marlow Market Concept
A public market with year-round space for 15-20 tenants will bring unique food options into Downtown.

Conclusion

Helena has an extensive trade area with a large high-income, well-educated population. The retail market analysis found Downtown has, conservatively, an existing demand for up to 142,900 square feet of retail developing producing up to $41.4 million in sales. By 2020, this demand will likely generate up to $46 million in gross sales which could be absorbed by existing businesses and/or the opening of 45-60 new stores and restaurants.

The Guiding Principles, Downtown Framework, and Implementation Actions form the vision for Downtown Helena and should be used to guide growth and investment in Downtown Helena over the next 20 years. The Implementation Actions require a diverse range of policy actions, physical changes, and marketing steps to support future growth and development in Downtown Helena. These actions will need the collective leadership of the Helena Business Improvement District, Downtown Helena, Inc., and the City of Helena along with strong support from partnering organizations for Downtown Helena to reach its potential.

Introduction

Downtown Vision

With a rich history and spectacular 19th century architecture, Downtown Helena is the economic, cultural, and social center of Montana's capital city. A stable economy, active lifestyles, independent retail, and a strong connection to trails, parks, and outdoor activities make Downtown Helena a year-round destination for businesses, residents, and tourists.

Downtown as an Economic Driver

Last Chance Gulch has been at the heart of Helena's economy for well over a century. As gold mining faded, Downtown Helena evolved into a political, economic, and social center because of its well-established infrastructure and public institutions.

While Helena has seen commercial growth at its fringes, Downtown buildings still contribute enormous wealth to the community. In fact, Downtown properties contribute 2.5 times more taxes than the big-box developments on North Montana Avenue, on almost half the land.*

"While higher land value, zoning complexities and available land are all challenges with downtown projects, analyses have shown they are far more efficient on many levels than their suburban-style counterparts. Urban3 has found that in cities across the country, downtown, mixed-use properties consume less land, cost less to serve and have much faster return-on-investments than big-box development." – Joseph Minicozzi *

Helena has an extensive trade area with a large high-income, well-educated population. The retail market analysis found Downtown has, conservatively, an existing demand for up to 142,900 square feet of retail developing producing up to $41.4 million in sales. By 2020, this demand will likely generate up to $46 million in gross sales which could be absorbed by existing businesses and/or the opening of 45-60 new stores and restaurants.

Why a Master Plan is Important

Downtown reflects how the community sees itself – a critical factor in business retention and recruitment. Downtown adds to quality of life. Quality of life attracts workforce. Workforce allows the community to attract diverse businesses and industry. Downtown also reflects the economic health of the community – a healthy downtown economy translates to a healthy community economy.

The Downtown Helena Master Plan shapes the vision and long range goals for Downtown over the next 20 years. Helena is Montana's capital city and should have a vibrant, healthy downtown that is a reflection of our State. The Master Plan creates consensus for Downtown's future, and will help guide and direct efforts within the Downtown area, as well as educate developers and public agencies of the central role Downtown plays in the area's economic health.

* *Helena, Montana: Rich History and Resilient Value*, Urban3, Dec. 2013

Downtown Context 2016

Helena and the Surrounding Area

Montana's capital city is located in the central part of the state halfway between Yellowstone National Park and Glacier National Park. In 2010, the US Census Bureau determined that the population of Lewis and Clark County was 63,395 and the county seat, the City of Helena, was 28,190 people. Helena is centrally located within a populous region of central Montana with 428,000 people living within two hours of the capital.

At an elevation of 4,090 feet, the City of Helena is situated among and near some of Montana's best outdoor activities. Mount Helena City Park, at its peak is 5,468 feet above sea level and about 1,400 feet above Last Chance Gulch, incorporates 900 acres of world class mountain biking, hiking, and wildlife viewing just minutes from Downtown.

Helena's connection to the outdoors is a defining characteristic of the community.

Within a short driving distance flows the Missouri River and several neighboring lakes. Holter Lake and Hauser Reservoir Outdoor Recreation Area include fishing, swimming, camping, water-skiing and boating. Canyon Ferry Reservoir, located just 20 minutes east of Helena, is a large reservoir on the Missouri River offering outdoor recreation including ice sailing in the winter. As Lewis and Clark traveled up the Missouri River north of Helena, Meriwether Lewis was struck by the steep canyon walls and noted, 'The Gates of the Mountains' in his journal.

Downtown Helena

In 1864, four prospectors from Georgia, on a final hunt before heading home, discovered gold in Prickly Pear Canyon. The claim was staked and named "Last Chance Gulch," thus marking the beginning of Helena's Downtown core at what is now the city's main street. With the boom brought on by the 1864 gold strike, Helena became the "Queen City of the Rockies."

Situated on Last Chance Gulch at the base of Mount Helena, Downtown quickly grew from a tent camp to a thriving business, retail, fine dining, arts and entertainment district. In 1875, the territorial capital was moved from Virginia City to Helena. By 1888, an estimated 50 millionaires made Helena their home. Today, Downtown Helena celebrates its status as the Heart of Helena - envision the early mining days at Reeder's Alley, wander along Last Chance Gulch to admire the late 19th century architecture and visit the many local merchants, eateries, and establishments that provide the charm of Downtown, and progress to the Great Northern Town Center where contemporary Helena merges with historic Helena.

Downtown Plan Area

The Downtown Master Plan study area generally follows the Downtown Helena Business Improvement District (BID) boundary, however, the Plan also considers adjacent areas outside of the BID that influence Downtown. The Plan Area is approximately one mile long stretching from Lyndale Avenue to the intersection of Park and Cruse Avenues to the south, and between Benton Avenue to the west and Cruse Avenue to the east, encompassing roughly 40 blocks.

Downtown is also located close to other important community centers and destinations, including the Capital, Carroll College, and the Railroad/6th Ward neighborhood. These areas provide important synergies with employment, housing, and other commercial businesses.

Physical Character

The Plan Area can generally be characterized as a mix of historic Downtown buildings, mid-century commercial development, and newer office and commercial buildings. Residential use is limited, but well established historic neighborhoods flank both sides of the Plan Area.

Topography defines much of Downtown's physical layout, with steep hillsides narrowing to a tightly constrained gulch at the south end of the Plan Area. Residential neighborhoods are generally located on the hillsides above the taller buildings located in Last Chance Gulch, giving Downtown a modest skyline, with building heights reaching six stories.

Visual landmarks include the twin spires of St. Helena's Cathedral, the unique Moorish Revival architecture of the Helena Civic Center, the red roofs of Carroll College, and the prominent backdrop of Mount Helena.

The Helena Civic Center features unique Moorish Revival architecture.

St. Helena Cathedral provides a dramatic backdrop for the Downtown. Photography by Wayne Wasilewski

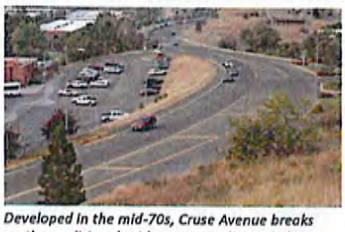
VICINITY MAP

Plan Area
Helena City Limits

Block Structure

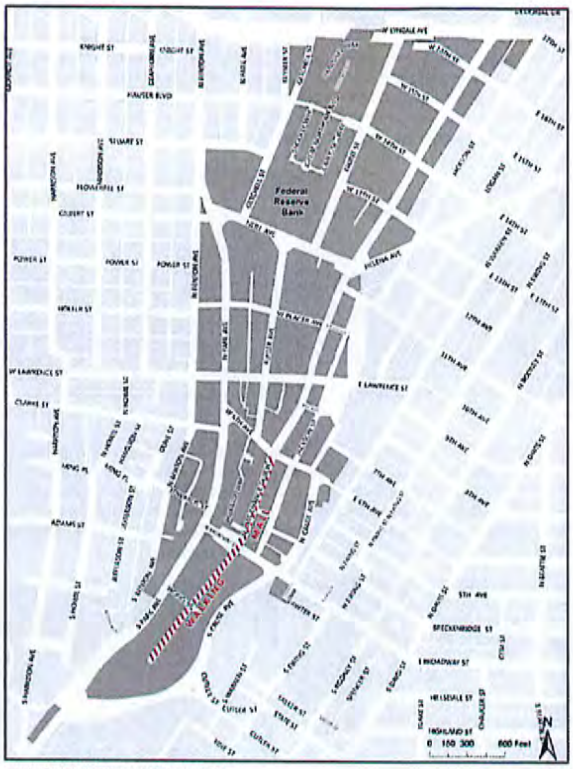
Block sizes and shapes are irregular due to the topography and historic development surrounding mining areas along Last Chance Creek. In general, block lengths are in the range of 300 to 500 feet, with several notable exceptions. Cruse Avenue, which was developed in the mid-70s, breaks up the traditional grid pattern and creates several long blocks in excess of 700 feet. Park Avenue and the walking mall, also have several long, uninterrupted blocks due to topography and development. The Federal Reserve Bank on Neill Avenue disrupts block connectivity to the north due to security requirements.

Last Chance Gulch runs the length of Downtown and features a traditional main street shopping district with short block lengths.



Developed in the mid-70s, Cruse Avenue breaks up the traditional grid pattern and creates long blocks.

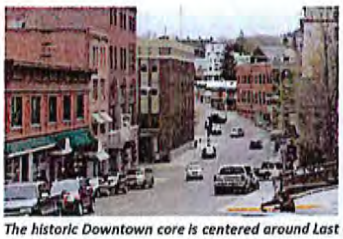
The Federal Reserve Bank's unique security requirements disrupt block connectivity north of Neill Avenue.



BLOCK STRUCTURE

Subareas and Corridors

The Plan Area contains two distinct subareas – the historic Downtown core and the modern Great Northern Town Center. The historic Downtown core is centered around Last Chance Gulch and the Walking Mall, and includes a traditional Downtown shopping street, local shops, bars and restaurants, breweries, offices, local and state government, a hotel, and a small amount of residential housing. The historic Downtown core is characterized by historic buildings, late 19th century architecture and materials, and continuous building fronts that address the street.



The historic Downtown core is centered around Last Chance Gulch and the Walking Mall.

The Great Northern subarea is characterized by modern mixed-use buildings and contemporary architecture with a number of recent developments, including the Federal Courthouse, Montana State Fund, Federal Reserve Bank, and the Great Northern Town Center, which includes a premier hotel and conference center, restaurants, a movie theater, and a unique hand-crafted carousel and kids science museum. Residential housing is limited, although one condominium building was recently constructed and plans exist for residential housing in the Great Northern Town Center.

The Great Northern subareas features modern buildings like the Montana State Fund and a unique hand-crafted carousel.

Unlike many of Montana's historic Downtowns, Downtown Helena is not located on a major highway. Rather, the Downtown extends perpendicular from Lyndale Avenue (U.S. Highway 12), ending at the base of Mount Helena. Primary entry points include Benton Avenue and Last Chance Gulch. These corridors provide easy vehicular access, but lack visual cues such as wayfinding signs and Downtown-style architecture that create a strong gateway to Downtown Helena.

Neill Avenue, which bisects Downtown, serves as a principal arterial on the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) Urban Federal-Aid System. The wide street and higher traffic speeds create a barrier between the historic Core and the Great Northern subareas.

Neill Avenue creates a barrier between the historic Downtown and the modern Great Northern sub-areas.

Reconstruction of Park Avenue and development of Cruse Avenue in the 1960s and 70s eliminated a number of historic Downtown buildings. Along with increased traffic capacity, these projects included development of larger surface parking lots and garages, and significantly altered the existing development patterns and disrupted the traditional street network that was more conducive to walking. Redevelopment along Park Avenue, especially near its southern terminus, has created an active streetscape, anchored by the Blackfoot River Brewing Company and restaurants, cafes, and a bakery.

Cruse Avenue disrupts the traditional street network that is more conducive to walking.

The south end of Park Avenue has become a hip destination for eating and entertainment.

Market Demand

Robert Gibbs of Gibbs Planning Group prepared a Retail Market Study focused on Downtown Helena. The study found that Downtown Helena has an existing demand for up to 142,900 square feet of new retail development which could potentially produce up to $41.4 million in sales. By 2020, this demand will likely increase to $46 million in gross sales. This new retail demand could be absorbed by existing businesses and/or with the opening of 45 to 60 new stores and restaurants. The supportable retail could include grocery stores, limited service eating, apparel and shoes, full services restaurants, general merchandise, and special food services.

Gibbs identified many favorable characteristics of Helena that will help to attract top retailers, restaurants and major employment centers that all are important in supporting a sustainable Downtown. These favorable characteristics include a growing population with an average household income above the state average, a large trade area that extends beyond the City of Helena, the unique, historic character of Downtown, the community's affection for Downtown, and the presence of the state zapital which provides steady employment.

Downtown Helena's two shopping areas, the Great Northern Town Center and the Walking Mall, include traffic generators such as the Cinemark Theater, a hotel/convention center, Exploration Works, and the Great Northern Carousel, but these ares would still benefit from the symbiosis of additional retail and restaurant offerings that would bring increased activity to Downtown. As the state capital, Helena is one of the major hubs in the state and tourism plays a significant role in supporting Downtown Helena's retail and restaurants.

Demographic trends suggest empty nesters, baby boomers and millennials want to live near or in downtowns. This demand for housing is based on convenience of shopping and access to entertainment – something downtowns are uniquely positioned to provide – and is forecasted to bring a tidal wave of people looking to live in downtowns and walkable communities.

Downtown Helena is uniquely positioned to meet the demand for convenient shopping and living in a walkable neighborhood.

Existing Conditions

An inventory of existing conditions pertaining to the Master Plan, including historical context, physical conditions, and the regulatory environment is included in the appendix. The following section provides a summary of the issues and opportunities to be addressed in the Plan.

Land Use

Existing land use closely follows the existing zoning, which generally focuses on bulk and dimensional requirements and the separation of uses. There are four primary zoning districts in Downtown:

- Public Lands and Institutions (PLI)
- Residential-Office (R-4/R-O)
- General Commercial (B-2)
- Central Business (B-3)

Buildings typically consists of two, three and four stories, with a few older historic structures that go as high as six or seven stories. Recent construction has primarily focused on land around the Great Northern Town Center, but also includes renovation projects like the historic Placer Hotel, which was remodeled as residential condominiums.

Redevelopment opportunities abound in Downtown. A large number of underutilized properties – defined as properties where the land value exceeds the value of improvements – are city-owned surface parking lots that could be converted to new Downtown buildings with structured parking.

The existing development code allows zero setbacks and mixed-use, and includes provisions that allow off-site parking, however, there are several components in the development code that either act as constraints or fail to actively facilitate desirable development in Downtown. These are:

- Multiple Zoning Districts that are not Downtown-specific
- Off-street parking requirements
- Lack of design standards that promote Downtown-style development

Opportunities exist to revise the development code to proactively facilitate development that meets the vision of Downtown Helena. The zoning map should be a reflection of what the community wants Downtown to look like in the future. Off-street parking requirements in Downtown zoning districts should be re-envisioned. Options include eliminating off-street parking requirements, revising parking requirements to accurately reflect the way parking is actually used Downtown, improving design standards, or a combination of all three. Finally, zoning should facilitate how buildings integrate into the Downtown environment to protect historic resources and create high-quality, human-scale places.

Moving Forward

Considerations for Downtown land use:

- ✓ Revising zoning codes to reflect anticipated development
- ✓ Amending off-street parking requirements to reflect economics and transportation modes
- ✓ Using the regulations to facilitate desirable development patterns and design standards

Historic Resources

The majority of the Plan Area is part of the Helena Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The Plan Area is essentially an historic Downtown commercial neighborhood that is integral to state and local history. The Helena Historic District reflects several periods of development. The District was first listed in the NRHP in 1972 and contained a "West Residential" section and a "Downtown" section.

Information on historic resources is now woefully out of date. Only one of the almost 90 NRHP-listed historic resources in the Plan Area has been surveyed since 1989 leaving information on the NRHP-listed properties 27 years out of date. In accordance with federal regulations, only properties that were 50 years old or older in 1989 were eligible for listing in the NRHP. In the intervening years, many properties in the BID have attained an age of at least 50 years old, and are now potentially eligible for listing in the NRHP.

There has been significant impact to historic buildings in Downtown. In the late 1970s, "Urban Renewal" planning initiatives demolished a large portion of Helena's National Historic District, razing a roughly 7-block area that contained a significant portion of the District's oldest buildings (dating mainly from the 1860s-1880s).

The Helena Historic District is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Historic resources are a vital part of Downtown's identity.

Parking

While downtown charm is often based on walkability, convenient parking is crucial to the success of downtown businesses and the appeal of downtown housing. Downtown Helena relies on outside visitors from other parts of town and from the surrounding trade area to support Downtown businesses. These visitors, by and large, access Downtown by car and expect to find parking within easy walking distance of their destination.

Managing the supply of public parking to support the desired retail and residential growth in Downtown is a primary role of the Helena Parking Commission. Public parking reduces the need for individual buildings to provide parking on their own – reducing the cost of development and improving the land use within Downtown.

In Downtown, the off-street parking requirements for businesses can be met when a building/use is within 700' of a parking garage or surface parking lot. Required ADA spaces may be also be located off-site if there is an accessible route to the business from the parking. Providing adequate ADA accessible parking is a challenge for the local government as well as local businesses due to existing conditions and topography.

The City of Helena has invested in five parking structures to support Downtown development, including the award-winning Jackson Street structure.

Downtown currently offers over 3.3 million square feet of Gross Leasable Area (GLA). The Parking Commission manages over 3,000 on-street parking spaces and over 2,200 off-street parking spaces in surface lots and parking structures. Private surface lots and structures provide approximately 2,300 additional parking spaces, for a total parking supply of approximately 7,500 spaces.

The current parking ratio of 2.24 spaces per 1,000 square feet of GLA generally falls within recommended guidelines for mixed-use, downtown areas. 2015 parking data provided by the Parking Commission show that 2,059 of 2,754 permit spaces were being utilized (75%), suggesting there is an adequate supply of parking in Downtown.

Circulation

The Downtown street network consists of arterial, collector, and local streets accessing Downtown from Lyndale Avenue (U.S. Highway 12) and the adjacent residential neighborhoods. Principal arterials include Benton Avenue, Last Chance Gulch, and Neill Avenue which are on the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) Urban Federal-Aid System. Additional MDT routes include Park Avenue, 6th Avenue, and Broadway Street, which are classified as minor arterials. Cruse Avenue is classified as a major collector on the MDT system.

Past projects placed a high priority on motor vehicle circulation and, in particular, leaving Downtown. The majority of streets have good capacity and level-of-service, making driving Downtown relatively easy. However, wide multi-lane streets that are favorable to cars negatively affect the walkability and scale of Downtown, and one-way streets affect the viability of Downtown businesses.

Driving in Downtown is relatively easy, but wide streets negatively affect the walkability and scale.

Transit and non-motorized transportation are cornerstones of Downtown circulation. The ability to get Downtown and move around without using a car differentiates Downtown from other places in the community. The Helena Area Transit Service (HATS) operates a limited, but growing, transit system. HATS offers general public curb-to-curb service, one "checkpoint" fixed-route in town, and an East Valley "deviated" fixed-route. HATS is currently developing two new fixed routes that will serve the Downtown. HATS operates Monday through Friday excluding weekends and holidays. The Checkpoint bus route has 21 stops, including the Downtown, and runs every 75 minutes from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM. The curb-to-curb service bus starts at 6:30 AM and ends at 5:30 PM. The East Valley bus connects with the Checkpoint bus for travel within Helena.

Downtown Helena is generally very walkable. The City of Helena adopted a Complete Streets resolution that requires all new and reconstructed roadways to accommodate all modes of transportation and people of all ages and abilities. Walk Score, a website that measures walkability based on the distance to amenities, population density, and road metrics such as block length and intersection density, ranks the intersection of 6th and Last Chance Gulch as a "Walker's Paradise" with a score of 91 out of 100.

In fact, the City of Helena ranks second in the state for walking to work, and third for bicycling to work (7.5% and 3.3%, respectively). Helena also has the lowest share of working age commuters using an automobile to commute to work (83 percent). Helena residents, on average, have shorter travel times (13.5 minutes), with nearly 70 percent spending less than 15 minutes commuting to work.*

The Helena area has approximately 150 miles of off- and on-street bicycle network facilities. This includes bike lanes, shared lane markings, signed bike routes, shared-use paths, and natural surface trails. Designated bike facilities within Downtown are limited to one east-west bike route that bisects Downtown on Lawrence Street.

The Centennial Trail runs by Downtown and is continuing to be developed by the city, including a five-mile corridor connecting Spring Meadow Lake State Park to the east side of Helena near Highway 12 and 18th Street along the BNSF railroad corridor. Portions of the trail are complete, while others are still in the planning stage.

* Greater Helena Area Long Range Transportation Plan – 2014 Update

The Centennial Trail is an amazing amenity close to Downtown, but connectivity issues still remain.

Infrastructure

The City of Helena and local utility companies have made a large investment in the infrastructure in Downtown Helena. Electricity, gas, phone service, internet, sewer, water, and stormwater facilities serve the entire Downtown area, although, in some cases upgrades will be necessary in the near future.

Northwestern Energy is the service provider for electricity and gas in Downtown Helena. As new development occurs, some gas and electrical lines may need to be updated or improved. Suitable sites for new utility locations is the primary constraint for this utility provider. If large facilities are necessary, finding property to house those facilities could prove challenging. For smaller upgrades or expansions, tight spaces in alleys, between buildings, or in streets can also act as constraints.

Traditional phone service and cell phone coverage is available throughout all of Downtown Helena and there are no capacity issues. Internet, which is now an essential utility for most businesses, is available throughout Downtown. Service is typically provided through cable or phone lines; however some areas are served by a wireless network. How internet is delivered to a property and at what "speed" is rapidly changing due to technological advancements. Fiber optics is currently the fastest form of broadband technology, and increasingly in demand within the business community. There are a handful of properties in Downtown served by fiber. Expanding service throughout Downtown is a financial challenge.

Gravity sanitary sewer infrastructure serves the entire Downtown study area. The City of Helena Wastewater Collection System Master Plan (2008) does not identify any capacity-related deficiencies in the Downtown area, but it does note that aging pipe infrastructure continues to be a long-term challenge. As new development occurs, it will be important to take advantage of opportunities to improve aging sanitary sewer infrastructure through pipe replacement and slip lining.

According to the Helena Water Facilities Plan (2005), the City of Helena operates two water treatment plants and two well sources to meet water demand. Water is delivered from the city's treatment plants to the Downtown area through city-owned distribution mains and reservoir pumping stations. Since the backbone water service infrastructure is essentially adequate, the key action will be to take advantage of opportunities to replace aging pipe infrastructure and complete further system looping as private and public redevelopment occurs. High replacement cost and major streetscape disturbances are significant limitations to water services. Remedying limitations in water service may involve complicated replacement of undersized pipe segments to gain connection with larger backbone segments.

An underground storm drain system with street inlets serves the entire Downtown corridor. The storm drain system not only accommodates urban drainage, but conveys runoff from the large rural Last Chance Gulch watershed located upstream of the city. As such, there is a backbone network of large diameter pipes through the heart of Downtown to enable passage of high peak flows generated from the large watershed. The City of Helena Stormwater Master Plan (2003) indicates that the majority of the stormwater backbone interceptor is undersized or in poor condition and needs repair or replacement. Replacement of the storm drain poses complex construction issues because the existing pipe alignment runs near or under building structures in several locations. Replacement with larger diameter pipe also requires significant installation footprints, which can cause corresponding issues with water, sewer, and dry utility conflicts.

Related Plans and Projects

Numerous reports, plans and studies have been completed over the past 15 years that look at attributes of Downtown Helena. Authored by a wide range of agencies and entities, some of these documents focus specifically on Downtown, while others have a far greater scope but still have some correlation to Downtown. These documents were reviewed comprehensively to identify relevant material and analyze aspects that are interrelated. As each document was reviewed, information that is relevant to today's Downtown was incorporated into this Master Plan. Additionally, the City of Helena Engineering Standards and City Code provide guidance for implementation of the concepts contained in this Plan. These documents can be broken into three generalized categories: Infrastructure Planning, Visioning Exercises and Economic Analysis.

Infrastructure Planning

Infrastructure planning includes but is not limited to documents like the City of Helena's Comprehensive Capital Improvements Plan, the recently adopted Long Range Transportation Plan and the 2007 BID Parking Study. These plans and studies contain specific recommendations for projects, and in most instances estimates on project costs.

Visioning Exercises

Visioning exercises are documents that describe a desired future state. They may include ideas or concepts of projects, but typically do not detail the implementation steps or costs. A handful of these documents have involved Downtown Helena, including the 2007 Vision for Downtown Helena and the Helena Greening of Last Chance Gulch report.

Economic Analysis

The number of economic studies that have an indirect or direct connection to Downtown Helena is impressive. Examples of studies with indirect connections to Downtown analyzed in the planning effort include the 2014 Economic Contribution of Nonresident Travel Spending in Montana, and the Comparison of Montana Visitors & Montana Resident's Use of Downtowns presentation competed by the University of Montana. Examples of studies with a direct connection to Downtown Helena include the 2002 Downtown Helena Marketing Plan, the 2010 Helena Area Housing Needs Assessment, and the 2008 draft Branding, Development and Marketing Action Plan.

Tools of the Trade

Downtown planning has come a long way in the last few decades. We now know more about how successful downtowns function than ever before. Below are some proven tools to create successful downtowns:

- ✓ ***Parking Requirements***
  Many communities do not require off-street parking in downtown districts. Examples range from the City of Red Lodge to the City of Missoula, Montana. A more national example is Asheville, North Carolina. Eliminating off-street parking is a policy shift as well as a zoning action. Eliminating off street parking requirements makes it more economical to build downtown, which encourages development, and improves the urban form by reducing the number of surface lots that interrupt the pattern of buildings (life on the street). Rather than requiring individual parcels to supply their own parking, cities play a proactive role in providing mechanisms to facilitate a public supply of parking to support the demand.

- ✓ ***Right Size Parking***
  The amount of parking required for suburban auto-dependent land uses is different than pedestrian-orientated, mixed-use downtowns. Studies find that supplying parking at suburban levels can result in too much parking in downtowns. A "Right Size" parking approach accounts for the ability to park once and combine trips in the downtown and leads to codes that more accurately reflect the demand for parking. Using the Right Size Parking approach, Fort Collins, Colorado, found that restaurants needed 63% less parking, significantly reducing the cost of new development.

- ✓ ***Design Standards and Guidelines***
  Design standards and guidelines are applied in addition to the underlying base zoning designation. They are used to promote a certain look or use in a specific area. Design standards are prescriptive, meaning they must be followed to receive approval for a project, but often include a menu of options to meet the standard. Design guidelines are more subjective and often include architectural review as a means to allow flexibility in design to meet the intent of the guidelines. Design standards are guidelines are relatively new in Montana cities and can be used to encourage or discourage certain uses, protect historic resources, or meet particular goals or visions for an area.

- ✓ ***Design Standards for Off-Street Parking***
  The presence of parking in pedestrian environments can detract from the human scale and experience. Many downtowns pay close attention to the way parking lots and structures affect the look and feel of downtown streets. Implementing design standards that require parking to be more conducive to the built environment of a downtown can minimize the negative effects of parking. For example, prohibiting surface parking on the street frontage can eliminate gaps in the pattern of buildings. Requiring parking structures to have retail or commercial space on the ground floor can keep the streets vibrant and active.

- ✓ ***Form-Based Codes***
  Form-based codes and form-based hybrids are becoming increasingly popular in downtowns. These codes evaluate the site specific design considerations of a building, rather than rely on rigid bulk and dimensional requirements or uses of the building. Form-based codes can ensure building facades encourage a walkable environment, blend the old and the new, eliminate the need for height limits, or reflect the district's overall goals. Form-based codes are fairly common throughout the country, but are relatively new in Montana. Examples include Billings and Missoula, where a form based hybrid was adopted for commercial districts within their communities.

- ✓ ***Incentive Zoning***
  In cases where there are very specific objectives a community wants to achieve, incentive zoning creates a partnership between the governing body and a developer to encourage the desired results. Incentive zoning is commonly used to provide affordable housing, but it doesn't have to be limited to housing. The idea is the developer builds something that is a 'public good,' and in return the governing body gives the developer greater allowances. For example, for providing commercial space on the first floor, the city might grant the developer additional land use intensity or reduction in parking spaces.

Community-Based Planning

Planning Process

The Master Plan represents a community-based planning effort. The process engaged a wide range of stakeholders, business leaders, and the general public to create a plan with strong buy-in and support from the community. The information gathered during the public process drove the vision and content of the Plan.

The process included three steps. The initial step gathered information and identified issues within Downtown, explored ideas to solve the issues, and recognized barriers to implementation. The second step was to form a vision for Downtown and to identify opportunities. In the final step, the goals for the Downtown were refined and strategies for implementation were presented and prioritized.

Public Participation

Public outreach and engagement was an essential component of the Downtown Helena Master Plan process, with the goal of facilitating public participation from all segments of the community and all interested and/or affected stakeholders. Public outreach was achieved through a variety of methods including the Helena BID website, Downtown Helena Master Plan Facebook page, press releases and newspaper articles, a survey, attending events and meetings, stakeholder interviews, a steering committee, and a series of three public charrettes. Public outreach made contact with over 1,700 people during the process. A complete summary of the public process is available in the Public Outreach Summary, included as Appendix C to this Plan.

Public Outreach Tools

- **Helena BID Website**
  The Helena BID website was updated throughout the process with project announcements, meeting materials, and contact information.

- **Downtown Helena Master Plan Facebook Page**
  The Facebook page was 'Liked' by 356 people and provided meeting announcements, articles and ideas for Downtown, and recaps of the charrettes.

- **Press Releases/Newspaper Articles**
  Press releases were prepared prior to the public outreach phase to keep the public informed on the planning process. The Helena Independent Record ran several articles throughout the process announcing the charrettes and reporting on the outcomes.

- **Survey**
  706 people responded to a survey identifying and prioritizing critical needs, issues, and opportunities in Downtown Helena. The survey was available online and at public outreach events and meetings. Results are included in Appendix C.

- **Events/Meetings/Stakeholder Interviews**
  Eighteen events and meetings were attended. This included staffing tables at public events, group presentations, and individual stakeholder meetings.

Key Survey Results

- 75% visit Downtown at least once a week.
- Most visit during business hours (83%), but many also visit in the evening (63%).
- 91% drive to Downtown, but 44% also walk, and 23% bike. Less than 1% ride the bus.
- 80% said Downtown is a special place and that it represents Helena's unique culture and heritage (somewhat or strongly).
- Only 41% agreed that Downtown is vibrant, with many people and activities.
- 95% said Downtown has potential to be more than it currently is (somewhat or strongly agree).

Steering Committee Meetings

An eleven-member steering committee was formed from a representative group of stakeholders to serve as a technical steering committee during the development of the Plan. Stakeholders were chosen to represent various interests and participated in five meetings.

- **Meeting #1**
  The first meeting was held August 20, 2015 and focused on the importance of downtowns and identified constraints and opportunities in Downtown Helena.

- **Meeting #2**
  The second meeting was held September 17, 2015 and recapped Charrette #1. Initial concepts and themes regarding land use, transportation, economics, and infrastructure were discussed.

- **Meeting #3**
  The third meeting was held on October 20, 2015. The meeting previewed the presentation for Charrette #2 and Robert Gibbs presented the market analysis for Downtown Helena. Robert Gibbs also accompanied the committee on a tour of the Walking Mall.

- **Meeting #4**
  The fourth meeting was held November 16, 2015. Charrette #2 was reviewed and the vision, goals, and strategies were discussed along with initial land use and circulation concepts.

- **Meeting #5**
  The fifth meeting was held December 15, 2015 and looked towards the city's role in implementation, reviewed the land use concept and pedestrian/bicycle network, and discussed the guiding principles.

Public Charrettes

A series of three charrettes were facilitated to present information and get feedback from the public in an interactive, engaging format. Each charrette included a different type of exercise to encourage participation.

- **Charrette #1**
  The first charrette was held on September 2, 2015 and was attended by over 82 people. The charrette included an open house with existing conditions graphics, a presentation highlighting the importance of downtowns and place value, and a group exercise that prioritized issues and ideas while identifying barriers to implementation.

- **Charrette #2**
  The second charrette was held on October 20, 2015 and was attended by over 80 people. The draft vision and guiding principles were presented along with market observations and opportunities. Initial land use and circulation concepts were shown and then participants were asked to illustrate their vision for Downtown by answering land use and circulation questions and diagramming their ideas on a map.

- **Charrette #3**
  The third charrette was held on January 26, 2016 and was attended by over 87 people. The presentation included an overview of the Plan and recommendations for the Great Northern District, Last Chance Gulch Retail District, Fire Tower District, and development code. Attendees were asked to prioritize projects or indicate projects that would not be beneficial or feasible.

Group exercises encouraged public participation.

Plan Adoption

The Downtown Helena Master Plan is a shared effort between the Helena Business Improvement District and the City of Helena. Both of these entities will adopt the document. By adopting the Plan, the HBID will incorporate it into the mission of the organization. The City of Helena will adopt the Plan as an amendment to the 2011 City of Helena Growth Policy.

Adoption Process

The first step is for the HBID to adopt the document. The HBID must consider the document at either a regularly scheduled meeting or a special meeting that is open to the public, advertised and conducted according to the organization's bylaws.

Once the HBID has adopted the Plan, City Staff of the Community Development Department will schedule a public hearing with the Helena/Lewis and Clark County Consolidated Planning Board. Because this document will be adopted as an amendment to the City of Helena Growth Policy, it is important the adoption process follows the requirements of 76-1 Part 6 of the Montana Code Annotated (MCA). According to the MCA, the Planning Board must hold a public hearing on the amendment, and make a recommendation to the Governing Body through a resolution.

After making their recommendation, the Planning Board will forward their resolution to the City Commission. The City Commission will then pass a resolution of intent on the Plan. The public will have an opportunity to comment on the Plan to the City Commission.

Following a set amount of time specified in the resolution of intent, the City Commission will pass a final resolution, and the Plan will become effective as an amendment to the Growth Policy.

Master Plan Goals, Vision, & Actions

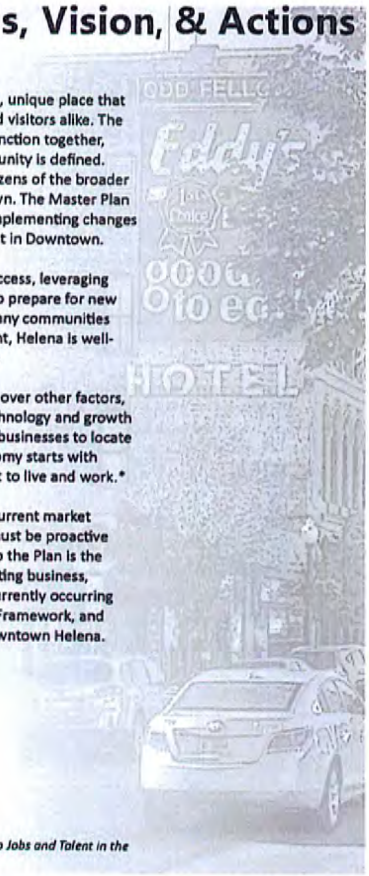
Plan Overview

Downtown is the heart of Helena. It is a special, unique place that has a strong emotional bond with residents and visitors alike. The community has many pieces that all need to function together, but the Downtown is central to how the community is defined. Business owners, residents, employees and citizens of the broader community have a shared passion for Downtown. The Master Plan shapes that passion and provides a guide for implementing changes that will attract future growth and development in Downtown.

The Master Plan builds on Downtown's past success, leveraging its unique sense of place and historic identity to prepare for new opportunities in a changing marketplace. As many communities seek new approaches to economic development, Helena is well-positioned to offer what people are looking for.

Increasingly, people are choosing quality of life over other factors, including higher salaries. At the same time, technology and growth of "creative-class" industries allow people and businesses to locate anywhere. Building a strong and resilient economy starts with creating a great community where people want to live and work.*

Downtown Helena is well-poised for success. Current market trends favor Downtown growth, but the Plan must be proactive to capture these opportunities. Fundamental to the Plan is the idea that Downtown must not only sustain existing business, but capture demand for development that is currently occurring elsewhere. The Guiding Principles, Downtown Framework, and Implementation Actions form the vision for Downtown Helena.



** Place Value: How Communities Attract, Grow and Keep Jobs and Talent in the Rocky Mountain* West, Sonoran Institute

Plan Objectives

The Downtown Master Plan is the story of a grass roots effort to define, understand and capture opportunities for Downtown and the greater Helena community. The planning process unlocks, in precise steps, the potential for the community by improving the potential for Downtown. The Downtown Master Plan is an exciting glimpse into the future where energy is captured to achieve the best results for this magnificent place.

The Master Plan:

- ✓ provides a tool for guiding Downtown economic growth;
- ✓ reaffirms Downtown's role in the community;
- ✓ guides decision-making for public improvements, private investments, and changes to existing regulations;
- ✓ anticipates foreseeable development opportunities; and,
- ✓ provides a clear path for leadership to successfully implement the Plan.

Key Issues

Downtown Helena already has many of the qualities that make a great community. In fact, many of the more difficult pieces, like major employers and institutions, already exist. The Plan highlights key issues that must be addressed to fully leverage Downtown's existing assets. Many of these issues are relatively easy to address, while others will take time and cooperation among many different agencies and individuals.

- ✓ Connections to the greater community need to be strengthened.
- ✓ Business access and visibility is limited by a lack of wayfinding and through traffic.
- ✓ Pedestrian and bicycle routes lack continuity and connectivity.
- ✓ Parking is inconvenient and confusing.
- ✓ Current aesthetic and maintenance levels don't reflect the desired quality of Downtown.
- ✓ Marketing and branding for Downtown lacks a consistent voice and identity.
- ✓ Existing land uses don't support a desirable, walkable Downtown with neighborhood services and amenities.

Guiding Principles

Guiding Principles for Downtown Helena are based on input from community members, businesses, Downtown organizations, city staff, and other affected stakeholders. These principles provide the basic foundation for decision-making throughout the Plan.

DOWNTOWN IS WALKABLE

One of Downtown's most important assets is the concentration of goods and services within easy walking distance. Above all else, walking in Downtown must be clean, comfortable, efficient, interesting, and safe.

DOWNTOWN IS CONNECTED TO THE COMMUNITY

As the heart of the community, Downtown must strengthen connections with other important community centers and destinations including nearby residential neighborhoods, schools, Carroll College, the Capital Area, the Railroad District, the hospital, and parks and open spaces.

DOWNTOWN IS A DESIRABLE PLACE

Downtown must enhance the unique, high-quality environment that attracts a wide variety of visitors, residents, and businesses that benefit from the location and convenience of being Downtown. Downtown must be a desirable place to live, work, shop, learn, and play.

DOWNTOWN IS ALIVE

Downtown must be a vibrant, year-round destination for business and activity throughout the day and evening hours, including residential housing, arts and entertainment, events and activities.

DOWNTOWN IS CONVENIENT

To be competitive in a changing marketplace, Downtown must have convenient access, circulation, parking, and every-day services that allow people to easily visit and stay Downtown.

Downtown Framework

Fundamental to the Plan is that Downtown must not only sustain existing businesses, but capture demand for development that is currently occurring elsewhere. Downtown Helena is well-poised for success. Current market trends favor Downtown growth, but the Plan must be proactive to capture these opportunities.

The Downtown Framework, a conceptual representation of the vision for Downtown, links the modern Great Northern Town Center and the Historic Downtown with a strong retail backbone along Last Chance Gulch. The two "districts" are given distinct identities, but remain strongly connected by the retail core. Each district is anchored by employment and entertainment uses that support the retail core, which provides a strong walking connection along a traditional retail shopping street.

The areas that surround the retail core provide a foundation to support and sustain the other districts by providing opportunities for workforce housing, business incubators and start-ups, and parking. Each area plays an important role and function in the success of the entire Downtown, and is necessary to strengthen Downtown's potential.

The following pages provide descriptions and imagery of the vision for each district. Each district already embodies many of the descriptive characteristics and should look to strengthen and build upon its identity through the addition of its underdeveloped characteristics.

Great Northern District

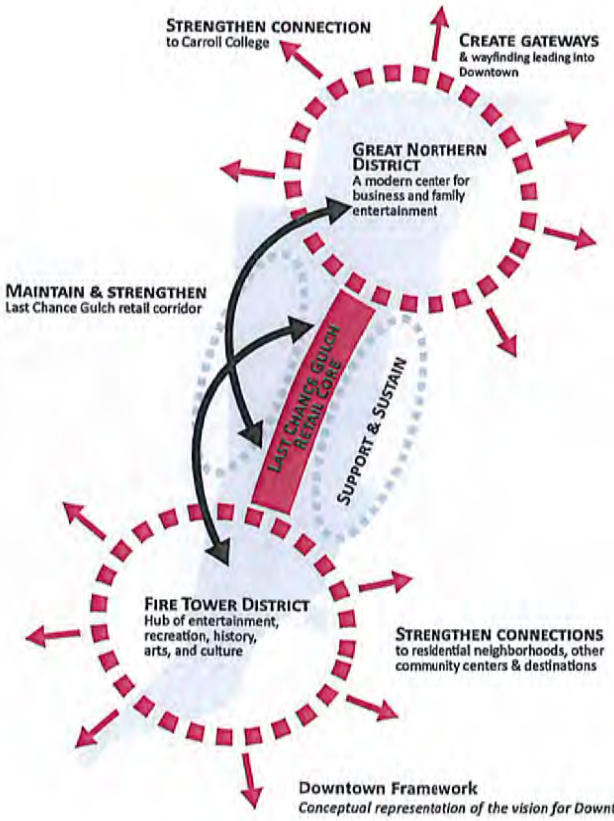
- Minimal Setbacks
- Walkable Streets
- Entertainment/Cinema
- Neighborhood Services
- Hotel/Conference Center
- Health/Fitness Center
- Medical Services/Clinic
- Schools/Colleges
- Business Incubators
- Contemporary/Classic Architecture
- Upper-Level Housing
- Employment
- Class A Office Space
- Secure/Structured Parking
- Ground Floor Office or Retail

Last Chance Gulch

- Wayfinding and Tourism Information
- Shared-Use Bike Lanes
- Convenient, Nearby
- Long-Term Parking
- Short-Term On-Street Parallel Parking
- Upper-Level Office/Residential
- Active Ground Floor Retail
- Low-Speed Two-Way Traffic
- Street Trees/Furniture
- Wide Sidewalks
- Well Maintained/ High Quality
- Well Lit/Pedestrian
- Scale Lighting
- Zero Setbacks
- High Ceilings/Large Windows
- Continuous Storefronts

Fire Tower District

- Public Market
- Employment
- Eclectic
- Active Lifestyle Retail
- Architectural Variety
- Art & History
- Townhomes, Condos, & Apartments
- Affordable/Workforce Housing
- Outdoor Seating
- Trails & Open Space
- Neighborhood Schools
- Gathering Places
- Restaurants, Bars, Breweries
- Performance Arts

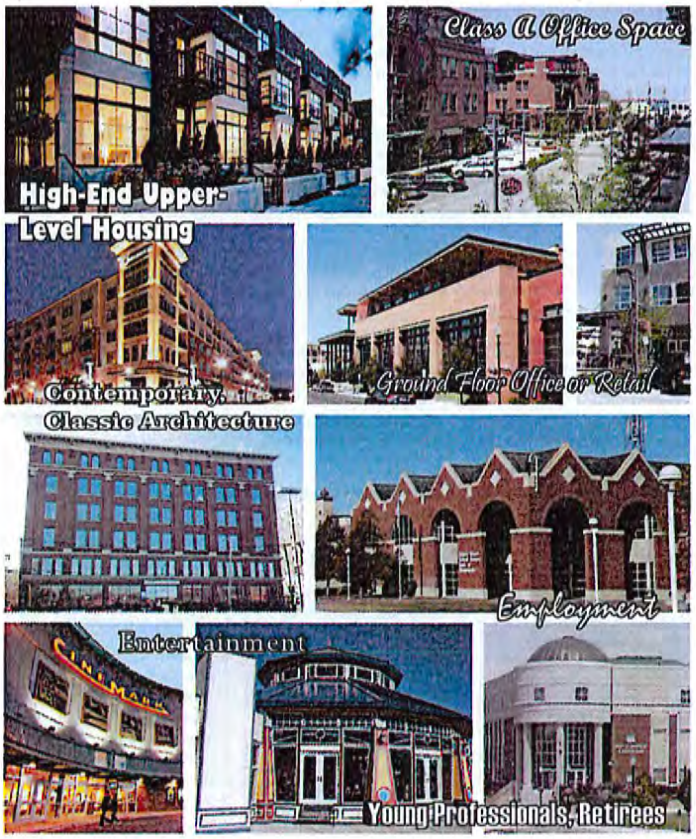


Downtown Framework
Conceptual representation of the vision for Downtown

Great Northern District

A modern center for business and family entertainment

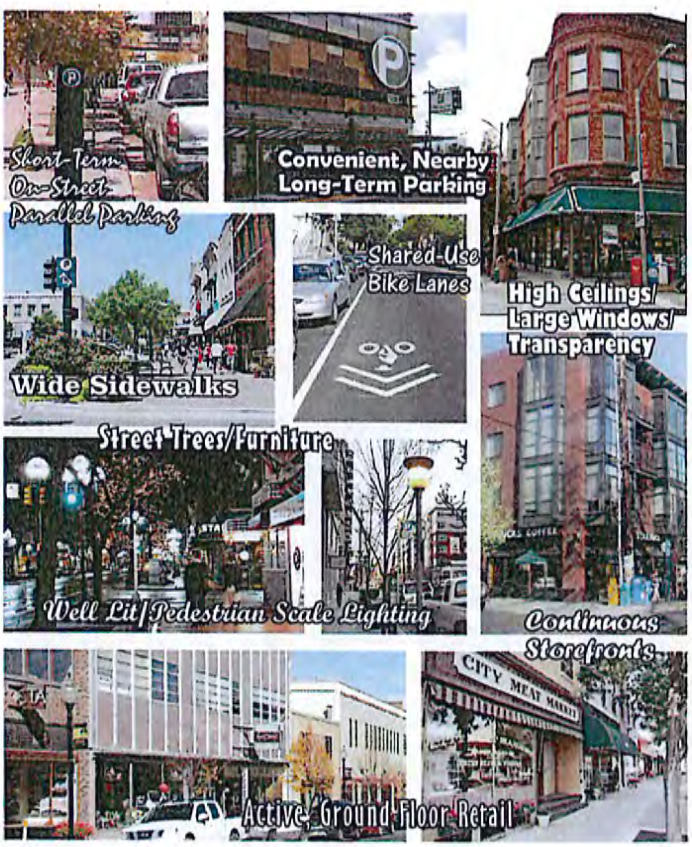
The Great Northern District caters to the modern professional who lives and works Downtown. With upper-level housing, coffee shops, fitness centers, family entertainment, and a lively nightlife, the young professional or retiree's desire for an urban lifestyle is satisfied with a wide variety of amenities.



Last Chance Gulch Retail Core

A traditional, historic downtown shopping street with appeal for both tourists and local residents alike

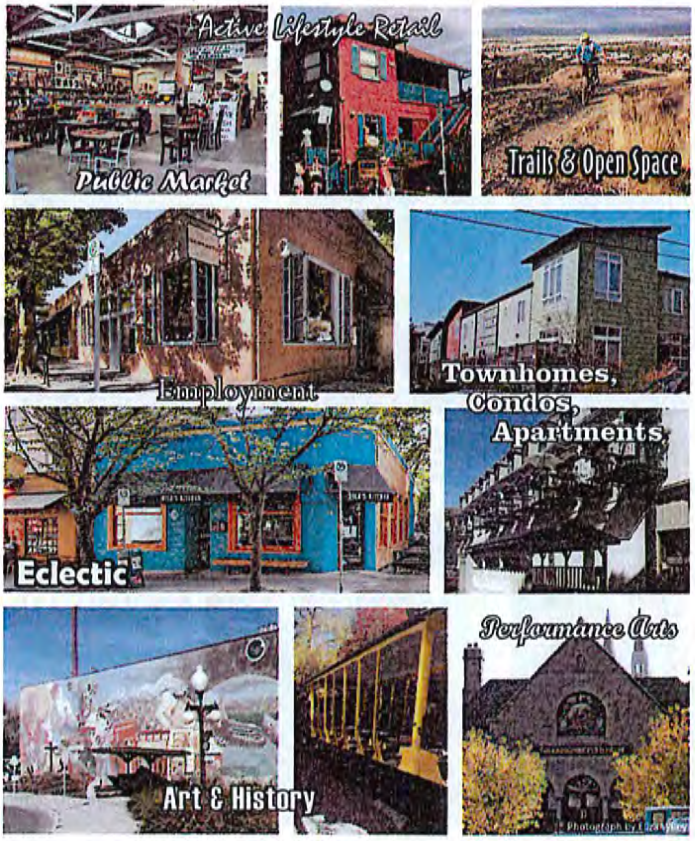
The Last Chance Gulch Retail Core invites Helena and its surrounding communities into the Downtown for a unique experience replete with notable, historic architecture, local shops and restaurants, and an active street atmosphere. A place that celebrates the traditional main street while overflowing with character and charm.



Fire Tower District

Hub of entertainment, recreation, history, arts and culture

By embracing its eclectic mix of businesses and architectural styles, the Fire Tower District's casual atmosphere welcomes the local and visitor to hang out in a brewery, meet up with friends before hitting the trails, or pick up dinner from a local vendor at the public market. Condos and townhouses that appeal to the millennial or baby boomer bring energy and demand for restaurants, outdoor gathering places, and cultural vibrancy.



Implementation Actions

The Downtown Framework imagines the future potential for Downtown and the following pages are a guide to unlocking this potential, beginning with an illustrative plan that captures the overall vision. The illustrative plan identifies specific actions and catalyst projects that should be prioritized to jump start the process and provide momentum for future projects. This is followed by detailed descriptions and renderings of each project to provide guidance and the initial steps towards accomplishing these projects. The actions are separated into five categories aimed at addressing the Key Issues.

Downtown as a **Brand**

Create a Dynamic Downtown **Environment**

Capitalize on Downtown's **Historic** Assets

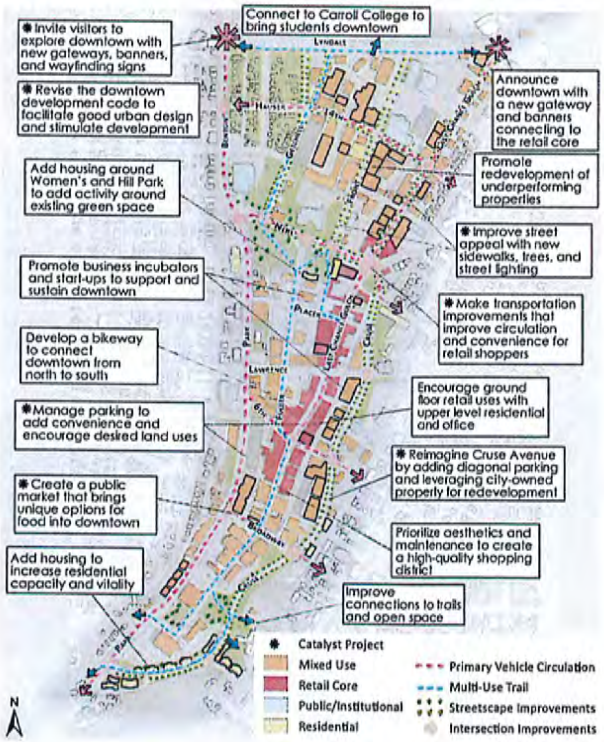
Update & Manage Downtown's **Infrastructure** Assets

Connect Downtown

The Guiding Principle symbols follow each of the actions showing how each action relates to the fundamental goals of the Plan.

- **Downtown is Walkable**
- **Downtown is Connected to the Community**
- **Downtown is a Desirable Place**
- **Downtown is Alive**
- **Downtown is Convenient**

The illustrative plan show the overall vision for Downtown with future recommended land uses and specific projects that are the actions to realizing the vision for Downtown. The plan also identifies future buildings (shown as a thick outline on buildings) that illustrate the ample redevelopment opportunities in Downtown.



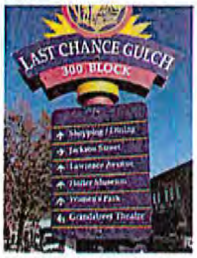
DOWNTOWN AS A BRAND

Downtown is uniquely positioned to attract top retailers, restaurants, employers, and residents. Downtown inherently offers the built-in efficiency of urban systems, connectivity, and walkability that is desirable for creative class jobs, residents seeking an active urban lifestyle, and sustainable growth and development.

These assets are Downtown's brand, but require a concerted effort to market and reinforce these qualities to be successful. Downtown must be perceived as safe, attractive, and inviting. Marketing efforts should address negative perceptions about convenience and safety, and seek to identify and correct issues that negatively affect the Downtown experience.

Create one strategy for all of Downtown

- ✓ **Promote demographic trends and market opportunities.** Articulate the ability to capture a large, underserved retail trade area in a unique, walkable Downtown. Downtown is uniquely positioned to accommodate the desire for convenient shopping, urban living, employment, and entertainment in a setting that is rich with the intangible "X-Factor" that makes Downtown a place people want to be.
- ✓ **Incorporate branding into signage, social media, publications, and tourist information.** Create a consistent message with all of the various marketing and branding materials used to promote Downtown by different agencies and organizations.
- ✓ **Create one Downtown map.** Create a single resource for wayfinding, parking, attractions, and tourist information. Use technology to incorporate smart phone apps, GPS directions, and information about local businesses and restaurants.
- ✓ **Strengthen partnerships.** Partner with organizations like the Archie Bray Foundation, Carroll College, Helena College, Helena School District, and Helena Industries to create events, activities, and demonstration projects Downtown.
- ✓ **Increase marketing budgets.** Hire additional staff, write grants, and increase budget allocation to implement and sustain marketing efforts.



A marketing strategy with consistent wayfinding signage will strengthen Downtown's brand.

Prioritize aesthetics and maintenance to create a high-quality shopping district

- ✓ **Re-evaluate maintenance responsibilities.** Identify and streamline responsibility for maintenance and beautification of areas that are critical to Downtown's brand, such as the walking mall, parks, and parking structures. This includes routine cleanup, removal of graffiti, snow removal, lighting, flower baskets, banners, landscaping, and replacement of deteriorated sidewalks. This should be accomplished by increasing the role of the BID, private sponsorships, and/or contract maintenance.
- ✓ **Create an online system to report maintenance issues.** Establish an online system to report the location and type of maintenance issues in order to identify and address maintenance issues quickly.
- ✓ **Create a Downtown Helena foundation.** Explore options to take advantage of planned giving and private donations to help fund maintenance and beautification.

Create a high-quality Downtown experience.

- ✓ **Develop streetscape improvement standards** for sidewalks, curb extensions, street trees and landscape strips, planters, benches, café seating, garbage receptacles, public art, alley and in-fill spaces, and lighting and utilities.
- ✓ **Develop a facade improvement program** that provides low or no interest loans for awnings, window treatments, landscaping, signing, and other exterior facade improvements that meet specific design guidelines.
- ✓ **Provide foot patrols, bike patrols, and Downtown ambassadors to improve the sense of safety and security Downtown.** Rules and regulations should be gently, but consistently enforced.

A high-quality experience is essential to attracting shoppers. Graffiti and poorly maintained sidewalks detract from the value of being Downtown.

Downtown as a Brand

CREATE A DYNAMIC DOWNTOWN ENVIRONMENT

Capturing the opportunities in Downtown requires creating an environment that encourages private investment in projects that are sensitive to the historic context and topography of Downtown, and provide the diversity to attract Downtown residents and employees. This includes creating a downtown development code that promotes good design, exploring opportunities to redevelop underutilized and under-performing properties, and encouraging housing, food, and neighborhood support services.

Revise the Downtown development code

The existing zoning code focuses on bulk and dimensional requirements and the separation of dissimilar land uses into individual districts. While it generally allows flexibility for Downtown development, it does not actively facilitate the design elements necessary to create a lively, successful Downtown.

A modern development code should guide development and consistently produce quality design reflective of the vision for Downtown. The code should be forward focused and anticipate new development, incorporating design elements that are essential to a good Downtown environment. The code should be an enabler and facilitator for investment in Downtown, emphasizing physical character, quality design, and Downtown identity.

- ✓ **Consolidate Downtown zoning.** Create one zoning district to serve as the base framework for all of Downtown. This will simplify the development process and allow regulatory incentives that are unique to the Downtown. The zoning code must balance individual rights with public good, and provide fair, predictable outcomes for both the developer and the community. The zoning code should recognize context, providing for stability in areas that need to be protected (i.e. historic buildings) and change in areas that need placemaking and new context (i.e. Great Northern). Standards should focus on appropriate building form and scale, setbacks, and the relationship to the street, including off-street parking lots and parking structures.
- ✓ **Eliminate off-street parking requirements.** Eliminating the requirement to provide parking creates a comparative advantage for Downtown by reducing the cost of development. The decision to provide parking becomes market-driven – some projects will choose to provide parking on an individual basis, while others will choose to use the available supply of public parking.
- ✓ **Develop design guidelines.** Unlike zoning standards, which are prescriptive and easily measured, design guidelines are discretionary, performance based, and flexible. Design guidelines allow a design review process as an option to simply meeting the code. Design guidelines often provide a menu of alternative solutions, and can include incentives to promote the desired land use and form. For example, a zoning code that requires windows and transparency along the street frontage may not work for certain building uses. Design guidelines can provide options such as architectural detailing, art work, or landscaping to create a pedestrian friendly street edge.

Design guidelines should be incorporated into the Downtown zoning district and could include elements specific to each district. Design guidelines should provide a statement of intent and act as a guide for the key elements necessary to facilitate the desired future conditions, such as sidewalk widths, on-street parking, streetscape amenities, and necessary utility infrastructure.

LAND USE FRAMEWORK

Create a Dynamic Downtown Environment

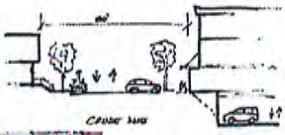
Promote redevelopment of underperforming properties

- ✓ **Create a Tax Increment Financing District.** Evaluate the opportunity to create a new urban renewal district for all or part of Downtown. Under state law, Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a powerful tool for redevelopment in qualifying areas.
- ✓ **Leverage city-owned properties.** Explore opportunities to utilize city-owned surface lots, right-of-ways, and surplus properties for redevelopment. This could include public/private partnerships, housing co-operatives, or long-term land leases for specific uses that are desirable in the Downtown. Potential partners could include the School District and the Helena Housing Authority, which also own significant property in Downtown.
- ✓ **Encourage ground-floor retail use.** Explore opportunities to increase ground-floor retail activity. This could include allowing pop-up retail (such as booths, carts, food trucks) and liner buildings (narrow shops in front of non-active uses) within public right-of-way to create an active streetscape. Review the existing process for granting right-of-way agreements for cafe seating, garbage receptacles, and food trucks for opportunities to expand these uses. Review the existing process for granting right-of-way agreements for cafe seating and food trucks for opportunities to expand these uses.
- ✓ **Encourage business incubators and startups.** With Helena's skilled but aging workforce, there are opportunities for retirees to mentor the younger generation and pass on a wealth of experience. Encourage startups and new businesses by creating a permitting "pink zone" that pre-permits portions a building permit and expedites review. Other incentives could include tax abatements, discounted parking rates, and utilizing city-owned property to reduce land costs.

Last Chance Gulch Streetscape Concept
Public investment in streetscape amenities will help support private investment in underutilized properties.

Encourage Downtown housing

- ✓ **Recruit neighborhood services.** Seek to attract businesses and organizations that provide basic services, like grocery and household goods, medical services, and social opportunities that allow Downtown residents to stay Downtown for everyday needs.
- ✓ **Support neighborhood schools and colleges.** Neighborhood schools are a significant factor for residents and businesses choosing a place to locate. Colleges and universities play a vital role in providing a qualified work force for businesses. Central School, Carroll College, and other learning opportunities are critical for successful Downtown housing.
- ✓ **Encourage workforce and affordable housing.** A full range of housing choices is important for Downtown Helena and affordability. Seek partnerships that provide senior housing, market-rate workforce housing, and subsidized affordable housing in the Downtown.
- ✓ **Add housing around Women's and Hill Parks.** Encourage housing to add activity around existing green spaces. Parks area a valuable amenity for Downtown housing and the presence of more people tends to discourage undesirable behavior in the parks. Explore opportunities for adaptive re-use of existing buildings like BCBS for residential purposes.
- ✓ **Assess the feasibility of converting Cruse Avenue to a local street.** The majority of Cruse Avenue carries less than 2,000 cars per day. Its wide right-of-way would be better utilized for parking, sidewalks, trails, and landscaping that support new development rather than a high-volume traffic corridor. Explore opportunities to leverage city-owned property to create mixed-use housing and structured parking.



Cruse Avenue Concept
De-emphasizing traffic on Cruse Avenue will create new opportunities for redevelopment.

✓ **Create Cruse Avenue housing.** Take advantage of underutilized right-of-way along the southern portion of Cruse Avenue by eliminating the landscaped island to make room for condos and townhomes. Better utilization of the space and opportunity for construction of new housing that appeals to baby boomers and millenials, with trails and open space out the back door in a walkable, urban neighborhood, could be a catalyst project for the Fire Tower District.

Cruse Avenue Housing Concept
Housing along the south end of Cruse Avenue could be a catalyst project for the Downtown.

Create a Public Market

✓ **Study the feasibility of a Downtown market.** Identify economic feasibility and location for a public market consisting of 20,000 - 30,000 square feet of year-round space and 15-20 tenants. The market should provide convenient grocery and household goods that allow residents to stay Downtown and should be in a prominent location with ground-floor access and convenient parking.

Marlow Market Concept
A public market with year-round space for 15-20 tenants will bring unique food options into Downtown.

The Marlow Theater was a major destination for touring vaudeville companies and motion pictures. The theater was torn down in the 1970s when Broadway was extended to Park Avenue.

CAPITALIZE ON DOWNTOWN'S HISTORIC ASSETS

Historic properties are critical to Downtown's economic health and to its broader importance in Helena and Montana as a whole. Historic preservation has proven crucial to every successful downtown revitalization effort in the United States.

Update historic resource inventories

- ✓ **Update the Historic District inventory to accurately reflect current conditions and assets.** The inventory was last updated in 1989, and is over 27 years out of date.
- ✓ **Update the Historic District context so that it covers the mid-century period, and identifying buildings from this period that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.** The current (1989) historic district nomination covers only properties built before 1948. Buildings constructed between 1948 and 1971 need to be identified and evaluated.
- ✓ **Expand the historic building inventory so that it covers all of the Plan Area.** The additional area needs to be surveyed in order to identify historic building assets and to evaluate the area for potential inclusion in the Downtown historic district.
- ✓ **Accurately map historic resources with current GIS applications so that they can be efficiently and effectively managed by decision-makers.**

Montana Club

Historic Walking Mall Buildings

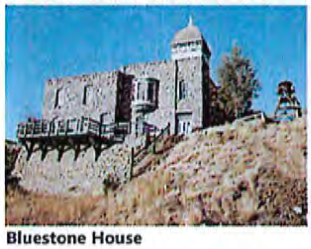
Atlas Building

Promote historic preservation and context-sensitive design

- ✓ **Encourage adaptive reuse and national historic register listing.** Identify historic preservation funding, emphasize quality design, and work with property owners to articulate the benefits of historic preservation and listing.
- ✓ **Collaborate to improve the historic walking tour.** Connect points of interest, public art, and other pedestrian attractions. Paint, engrave, or inlay sidewalks and streets to show pedestrian routes. Improve utilization of smart phone apps and technology to increase visibility and accessibility.

Governor's Mansion

City Hall



Bluestone House

Reeder's Alley

UPDATE AND MANAGE DOWNTOWN'S INFRASTRUCTURE ASSETS

Downtown Helena has a large supply of parking, adequate to support the existing uses and a limited amount of new development. The city has invested significantly in parking resources, including several parking structures in recent years. As new development occurs, additional parking will be required, but much of the demand can be absorbed in shared use parking and reduced trip generation by creating a walkable, mixed-use Downtown.

Downtown parking must be appropriately located and managed to support retail and residential growth. The primary role of the city and the Parking Commission should be to create a supply of public parking that promotes economic development and efficient land use in the Downtown.

Parking by the Numbers

Current Downtown Gross Leasable Area:
~3.36 Million Square Feet

Total Public and Private Parking:
~7,500 Spaces

Current Parking Ratio:
~2.24/1000 Square Feet (residential/ commercial blended rate)

Recommended Parking Ratio:
2.25-2.75/1000 Square Feet

Additional Parking Required to Support 142,000 SF of New Retail:
320-390 Spaces

Manage parking for the public good

- ✓ **Review parking pricing.** Price parking to create high-turnover in desirable/ convenient locations. It should be more expensive to park in front of a business than to park in a garage. Retail storefront parking should turnover 20 times per day.
- ✓ **Offer first hour free parking in garages and surface lots, with pay as you leave technology.** This should be combined with good parking wayfinding signs (integrated into the pedestrian and vehicle wayfinding system) and lighted, well-maintained sidewalk routes to get to and from the parking lots.
- ✓ **Meter on-street parking.** All on-street parking within Downtown should be metered. This is the most effective way to manage time limits and pricing. Revenue from parking meters should be reinvested in maintenance and beautification to enhance the Downtown parking experience. Free 20-minute "quick stop" parking and accessible (handicap) parking should be provided in strategic locations.
- ✓ **Eliminate on-street permit parking.** All long-term lease parking should be in garages or surface lots. This frees up more convenient, short-term customer parking.

- ✓ **Eliminate off-street parking requirements.** Zoning requirements to provide private off-street parking for individual buildings should ne eliminated in the Downtown. This reduces the cost of development in Downtown and increases demand for publicly-owned parking lots and structures, which are currently underutilized. The decision to provide off-street parking becomes market driven where some projects will choose to provide parking while others will choose to use public parking.
- ✓ **Revisit residential parking permits and time limits.** The neighborhoods surrounding Downtown have a large volume of existing parking within easy walking distance that can support Downtown activity. Reserving these spaces for residential use or short-term parking leaves much of this parking underutilized.
- ✓ **Explore public/private partnerships for development of city-owned surface lots.** Converting surface lots to structured parking with opportunities for private development create a new potential revenue and tax base, without reducing the supply of parking. Partnerships could include long-term leases, sale, or shared building ownership (condominium) between the city and a private entity.
- ✓ **Identify funding mechanisms.** Develop funding framework to provide additional parking to meet future demand.

On-Street Parking

15th Street Parking Garage

Managing the supply of public parking will support retail and residential growth in the Downtown.

In general, existing infrastructure adequately serves the current Downtown uses. This includes all major utilities, as well as, streets, sidewalks, parking lot, and structures. However, the age of these facilities requires continuous maintenance and upgrades to remain viable. Because the cost of infrastructure significantly affects development, the city must continue to proactively invest in Downtown infrastructure to support new development.

Transportation Infrastructure

- ✓ **Prioritize streetscape improvements.** Private investment follows public commitment to quality design of streets, sidewalks, bicycle facilities, pedestrian-scale street lighting, landscaping and other amenities. Review and prioritize streetscape improvements where high potential for private investment exists.
- ✓ **Create streetscape design standards.** Supplementing the City of Helena Engineering Standards with Downtown-specific design standards will help create continuity and identity for the Downtown. Standards would address elements like sidewalk widths, street trees and furniture, pedestrian-scale street lighting, crosswalk designs, and paving materials that are unique to Downtown.

Streetscape improvements are key to creating a high-quality, desirable Downtown that promotes pedestrian activity.

Water and Sanitary Sewer

- ✓ **Identify fire flow requirements for higher densities.** Water service can be a major limitation to urban redevelopment if adequate fire flows are not available. Update modeling and reflect future development scenarios and take advantage of opportunities to replace aging pipe infrastructure and complete further system looping as private and public projects occur.
- ✓ **Prioritize replacement of older segments of concrete and vitrified clay pipe.** Support replacement of lines needed to maintain current levels of service in Downtown. As new development occurs, take advantage of opportunities to improve aging sanitary sewer infrastructure through pipe replacement and slip lining.

Storm Drainage

- ✓ **Facilitate storm drainage in accordance with MS4 Permit and City Standards.** Stormwater requirements directly affect the cost of new development. Encourage early consideration of Low Impact Development to reduce development cost Downtown. Consider areas of right-of-way that could be used for micro retention and treatment, so that run-off rates from the Downtown area are not increased.
- ✓ **Improve Front Street infrastructure.** Replacement of storm drain and water lines in Front Street is currently being designed and provides an opportunity to improve the street character.

Gas, Electric, and Communications

- ✓ **Accommodate private utilities within public right-of-ways.** Real estate is the primary constraint for expanding private utility capacity. Allow utility transformers, lines, and other equipment in appropriate locations within public right-of-ways.
- ✓ **Require underground utilities.** Overhead power and communication lines have a significant effect on Downtown aesthetics. Require all new or replacement utilities to be installed underground.
- ✓ **Expand fiber capability.** Availability of fiber is a major locational factor for businesses. Proactively seek to expand the fiber optic network and "last mile" infrastructure in Downtown, including partnerships with private providers and opportunities to create community-owned broadband networks.

Update & Manage Downtown's Infrastructure Assets

CONNECT DOWNTOWN

Downtown circulation is important for both convenience and business vitality. Circulation should focus on moving people first, while balancing the need to have cars and trucks in the Downtown. Vehicle circulation should be improved to provide better access and visibility to retail businesses. Primary vehicle routes should lead to parking that is easy to find and convenient to use.

All streets in Downtown should be two-lanes (one lane in each direction) with appropriate turn lanes at intersections. Current and projected traffic volumes fall well below the typical threshold for multi-lane streets (20,000 vehicle per day). Intersections should be simplified to reduce crossing distances and right-turn slip lanes should be eliminated for pedestrian comfort and safety.

Bicycle and pedestrian improvements should focus on improving the network and eliminating barriers. The bicycle network should consider different types of users – a bicycle commuter needs different facilities than a young child – and the pedestrian network should emphasize a finely connected grid that reduces out-of-direction travel and invites people to keep walking.

Protected Bikeway

Sidewalk & Landscaping

Crosswalk

Bike Lane

Increase transit options

- ✓ **Study the potential for a circulator trolley.** Evaluate a free circulator trolley within Downtown to link the Great Northern and Fire Tower Districts. A trolley provides options for tourists, residents and employees to move about Downtown without using a car.
- ✓ **Establish fixed-route transit services between the Downtown and the capital.** Restore the bus route linking the Downtown and capital employment centers. This route was discontinued due to loss of funding, but was well received when operating.
- ✓ **Create an employee bus pass system.** Offer employee bus passes with membership in Downtown Helena, Inc. (DHI). This is a low-cost way to encourage transit use and provide an additional incentive for businesses to join DHI.
- ✓ **Plan for a Downtown transfer center.** Advocate for locating and constructing a transit hub in Downtown. The Downtown is an ideal location for multiple bus routes to come together around a high density of people, businesses, and services. Long-term, the availability of transit will drive investment and residential housing to the Downtown.

Helena Trolley

Bus

Helena Trolley

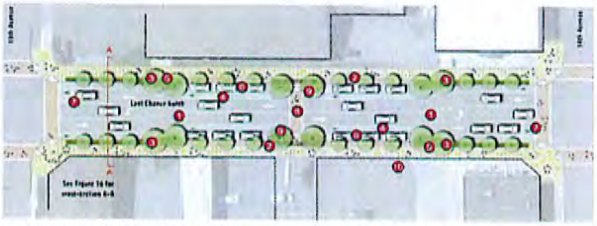
Optimize pedestrian connectivity

- ✓ **Connect the underpass to Carroll College.** Construct a well-lit, charming path that winds from the center of the Carroll College campus to the Lyndale underpass. Use brick or decorative concrete to create an inviting trail that can be easily found and followed.
- ✓ **Improve pedestrian connections to neighborhoods.** Improve, formalize, and maintain existing stairways and walkways connecting the neighborhoods to Downtown. These connections break up large blocks and provide the finer-grid pedestrian network that is crucial to walkability.
- ✓ **Improve pedestrian crossings at intersections.** Add curb bulbouts and crosswalk markings to shorten pedestrian crossing distances and improve safety at various intersections identified in the Proposed Pedestrian Circulation exhibit.
- ✓ **Incorporate streetscape improvements with the Front Street Reconstruction project.** Add wide sidewalks, street trees, crosswalk treatments, and street lighting to emphasize pedestrian safety and circulation. A high-quality streetscape will provide a catalyst for redevelopment of the adjacent private properties.
- ✓ **Improve the Neill Avenue corridor.** Add curb bulbouts and median refuges to shorten pedestrian crossing distances and improve safety at Front and Getchell. Reconfigure the intersection of Fuller to create a conventional T-intersection and eliminate the right-turn slip lane at Park in front of the Civic Center.
- ✓ **Improve Last Chance Gulch streetscape.** Improve street appeal with new sidewalks, street trees, crosswalks, and street lighting between Lyndale and Placer. This corridor provides an important entryway to the retail core and links the Great Northern and Fire Tower Districts.
- ✓ **Improve Cruse Avenue streetscape.** Add sidewalks, street trees, multi-use trail, and street lighting between Park and Broadway. Eliminate slip lanes and islands at Cutler.

Replacement of storm drain and water lines in Front Street is an opportunity to improve the character of the street.

Develop a comprehensive bike network

- ✓ **Allow bikes on malls.** The Last Chance Gulch and Great Northern walking malls are both valuable bike routes. These areas should be signed as Slow or Dismount Zones to minimize conflicts with pedestrians. National studies show the addition of bikes also improves retail sales. Review existing ordinances and/or private covenants for opportunities to amend these rules.
- ✓ **Create on-street bike routes.** Create a network of bike routes with signing and "sharrow" (share arrows) pavement markings in and around Downtown. Bike routes are appropriate for low-volume, low-speed streets where bikes can safely share the lane with cars.
- ✓ **Add on-street bike lanes.** Add on-street bike lanes on higher-volume, higher-speed streets where a separate lane is necessary for safety. These streets may require reconfiguration of lanes or removal of parking to accommodate bike lanes.
- ✓ **Develop a north-south bikeway.** Two of the most important outdoor amenities available to Downtown are Centennial Park and Mount Helena Park. Develop a north-south bikeway consisting of separated trail and protected bikeways (cycle track) to connect these key features.
- ✓ **Incorporate the bike network into the wayfinding system.** Connect bike routes and trails with other transportation options to create a multi-modal system.



Last Chance Gulch Streetscape Greening Last Chance Gulch Report
A comprehensive bike network will provide both options for alternative transportation and recreation amenities.

PROPOSED BICYCLE CIRCULATION

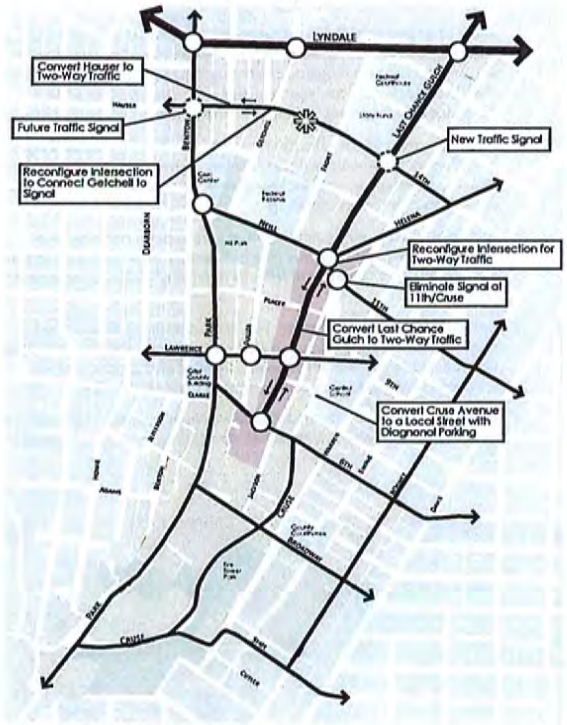
- Bike Route
- Bike Lane
- Multi-Use Trail or Protected Bikeway
- Slow/Dismount Zone
- Existing Multi-Use Trail
- Existing Trail

Improve vehicle circulation and access to increase retail viability

✓ **Improve gateways and wayfinding.** Invite visitors to explore Downtown with new gateways, banners, and wayfinding. Wayfinding should include coordinate guide signs outside the Downtown, as well as bicycle and pedestrian-level signs. Gateway locations could include Benton/Lyndale, LCG/Lyndale, Helena/11th, 6th, and Broadway.

Last Chance Gulch Gateway Concept

Last Chance Gulch and Lyndale Avenue is an important gateway to the Downtown. Architectural features, streetscaping, and wayfinding signs will announce your arrival to Downtown.



PROPOSED VEHICLE CIRCULATION

0 250 500 1,000 Feet

N

Primary Vehicle Access
Future Traffic Signal
Existing Traffic Signal

Connect Downtown

- ✓ **Study the feasibility of converting Last Chance Gulch to two-way traffic.** National studies have shown that two-way streets promote lower speeds, easier access, and higher property values. Converting Last Chance Gulch to two-way traffic will improve access and visibility for important retail areas in the Downtown.

Two-way Traffic on Last Chance Gulch: 6th-7th Ave.
Greening Last Chance Gulch Report
Two-way traffic improves business access and visibility.

- ✓ **Study the feasibility of simplifying the five-point intersection.** The intersection of Neill, Last Chance Gulch, Helena, and Cruse is one of the few intersections in Downtown that experiences poor level-of-service. Reducing the number of streets entering the intersection will improve operations, make the intersection more pedestrian-friendly, and allow two-way traffic on Last Chance Gulch to the south. These changes will require meeting with business owners to address changes to Helena Avenue that would affect access.

Reconfiguration of mini-malfunction junction is critical to restoring two-way traffic on Last Chance Gulch.

- ✓ **Improve the Hauser/14th Street corridor.** Hauser and 14th Street provide an important link between the Great Northern Town Center, adjacent neighborhoods, and Helena Avenue. Converting Hauser to two-way traffic and adding a new traffic signal at 14th Street/Last Chance Gulch will establish the corridor and provide important circulation options around the five-point intersection. A future signal should also be considered at the intersection of Benton/Hauser to complete this corridor.

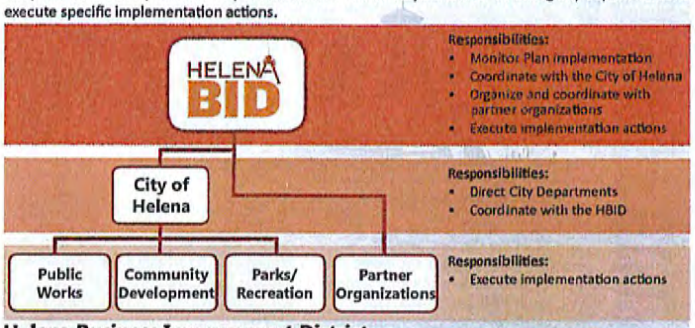
Summary

The Master Plan should be used to guide the growth and investment in Downtown Helena over the next 20 years. The Master Plan Goals and Actions require a diverse range of policy actions, physical changes, and marketing steps to support future growth and development in Downtown Helena. Each implementation action will require leadership and funding as designated in the following chapter.

Implementation

Roles & Responsibilities

Implementing the Plan will require a strong presence leading, organizing, and monitoring the effort. The HBID is the organization with the mission and capacity best fit to lead implementation of the Plan. They will work closely with the City of Helena who will be responsible for directing city departments to execute specific implementation actions.



Helena Business Improvement District

The HBID is the lead organization. They are responsible for advancing implementation, monitoring Plan progress, and providing yearly reports to their membership, the City Commission, partner organizations and to the general public. The HBID cannot implement the Plan without partner organizations, so a significant part of HBID's responsibilities is coordinating with partners who can implement or support implementation of specific Plan elements.

City of Helena

The most significant partner is the City of Helena, who is responsible for implementing many of the Plan elements. The Mayor, City Commission, and City Manager will direct city departments through work plans and budgets to implement the Plan. The individual departments, primarily Public Works and Community Development, will carry out the specific actions.

Partner Organizations

Partner Organizations will vary from action to action. Depending on the action, Partner Organizations will provide either a supporting role, or in some cases, a direct responsibility for implementing the action. For example, the Montana Business Assistance Connection may support an action through technical expertise, while the Montana Department of Transportation may be responsible for specific transportation improvements.

Implementation Strategy

Plan actions and implementation steps, potential partners, timelines, and funding sources are presented in the following tables. Recommendations are generally presented in order of priority, however, some actions may be opportunity-driven or could occur simultaneously. Timelines are presented as short-term (1-5 years), mid-term (6-10 years), and long-term (11-20 years) opportunities. Refer to Chapter 4: Master Plan Goals and Actions for more information.

Partner Agencies

- Helena Business Improvement District (HBID)
- City of Helena – Community Development (CD)
- City of Helena – Parking Commission (HPC)
- City of Helena – Parks and Recreation Department (PR)
- City of Helena – Police Department (PD)
- City of Helena – Public Works Department (PW)
- City of Helena – Zoning Commission (ZC)
- Archie Bray Foundation
- Carroll College
- Downtown Helena, Inc. (DHI)
- Great Northern Town Center (GNTC)
- Helena Area Transit Service (HATS)
- Helena Chamber of Commerce
- Helena College
- Helena Housing Authority
- Helena Industries
- Helena Non Motorized Travel Advisory Council (NMTAC)
- Helena Public Schools
- Helena Tourism Alliance
- Helena/Lewis and Clark County Consolidated Planning Board (CPB)
- Helena/Lewis and Clark County Heritage Tourism Council (HTC)
- Montana Business Assistance Connection (MBAC)
- Montana Department of Revenue
- Montana Department of Commerce
- Montana Department of Transportation (MDT)
- Montana Historical Society
- State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)

Funding Sources

- Helena Business Improvement District (HBID)
- Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)
- Helena Non Motorized Travel Advisory Council (NMTAC)
- Special Improvement District (SID)
- Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)
- Tourism Business Improvement District (TBID)
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF)
- Capital Improvements Program (CIP)
- Gas Tax Funds
- Urban Highway System Funds (Urban)
- Private Donations/Foundations (Private)

1. Downtown as a Brand

Market Downtown to reinforce the qualities that make up Downtown's brand.

Action		Timeline	Lead Agency	Partner Agencies	Potential Funding Sources
1.1 Create one strategy for all of Downtown					
1.1.a	Incorporate demographic and market data into marketing materials	Short Term	HBID	DHI, GNTC, HTC, Chamber, MBAC	HBID, TBID, Grants
1.1.b	Create a consistent message for various materials used to promote Downtown	Short Term	HBID		
1.1.c	Create a single downtown map for wayfinding, parking, attractions, and tourist information	Short Term	HBID		
1.1.d	Strengthen partnerships to bring events, activities, and demonstration projects downtown	On-going	HBID	Archie Bray, Schools, Colleges	
1.2. Prioritize aesthetics and maintenance					
1.2.a	Re-evaluate maintenance responsibilities and funding	Short Term	HBID	PW, CD, PR, DHI	SID, Parking Revenue, Private Donations
1.2.b	Create an online system to report maintenance issues	Short Term	HBID		
1.2.c	Create a Downtown Helena foundation	Short Term	HBID		
1.3. Create a high-quality downtown experience					
1.3.a	Develop streetscape improvement standards	Short Term	CD	HBID, PW, CD, ZC	TIF, CDBG, Grants, Private Donations
1.3.b	Develop a façade improvement program	Short Term	HBID		
1.3.c	Provide foot patrols, bike patrols, and downtown ambassadors	Short Term	HBID	PD	

Timelines

Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

2. Create a Dynamic Downtown Environment

Take steps to enable and facilitate investment in Downtown.

	Action	Timeline	Lead Agency	Partner Agencies	Potential Funding Sources
2.1 Revise the Downtown development code					
2.1.a	Initiate process to consolidate Downtown zoning	Short Term	CD	ZC, HBID	Regular Budgets
2.1.b	Identify specific needs and standards (i.e. building form and scale, setbacks, off-street parking)	Short Term	ZC	CD, PW, HBID	
2.1.c	Develop design guidelines and architectural review process	Mid Term	ZC	CD, HBID	Grants
2.2 Promote redevelopment of underperforming properties					
2.2.a	Create a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District for all or part of the Downtown	Short Term	CD	HBID, MBAC	Regular Budgets, Grants
2.2.b	Prepare an inventory of City-owned properties and current use, identify alternative uses and potential partners	Short Term	CD	HBID, Public Schools, Housing Authority, MBAC	
2.2.c	Review policy for public right-of-way use for opportunities to allow pop-up retail and liner buildings	Mid Term	HBID	CD	
2.2.d	Encourage Business Incubators and Startups	Mid Term	HBID	MBAC, CD	

Timelines
Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

2.3 Encourage Downtown housing					
2.3.a	Identify specific neighborhood services that are needed in downtown (i.e. grocery, household, medical services)	Short Term	HBID	MBAC, CD	Regular Budgets, Grants, Private Investment
2.3.b	Advocate for neighborhood schools and colleges in Downtown	On-going	HBID	Public Schools, Colleges	
2.3.c	Partner with agencies and developers to provide workforce and affordable housing Downtown	Short Term	HBID	CD, Housing Authority	
2.3.d	Explore opportunities for adaptive re-use of buildings for residential purposes (i.e. BCBS)	Short Term	HBID	Private	
2.3.e	Assess the feasibility of converting Cruse Avenue to a local street	Mid Term	PW	HBID	Regular Budgets, TIF
2.3.f	Make underutilized right-of-way available for housing	Mid Term	PW	City Manager, HBID	
2.4 Create Public Market					
2.4.a	Prepare a Feasibility Study	Short Term	HBID	CD, MBAC, Private	Grants
2.4.b	Develop a model business plan with potential vendors and potential incentives/tools	Short Term	HBID	MBAC, Private	Grants
2.4.c	Identify potential locations; Discuss with owners	Short Term	HBID	CD, MBAC, Private	Regular Budgets
2.4.d	Issue RFP for development	Short Term	HBID	CD, MBAC, Private	Regular Budget, Grants, Private

Timelines
Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

Create a Dynamic Downtown Environment

Capitalize on Downtown's **Historic** Assets

3. Capitalize on Downtown's Historic Assets

Use historic preservation and revitalization to increase Downtown's draw.

Action		Timeline	Lead Agency	Partner Agencies	Potential Funding Sources
3.1 Update historic resource inventories					
3.1.a	Update the Historic District inventory to accurately reflect current conditions and assets	Short Term	HTC	HBID, CD, ZC, SHPO	Regular Budgets, CDBG Grants
3.1.b	Update the Historic District context so that it covers the mid-century period, and identifying buildings from this period that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places	Short Term	HTC		
3.1.c	Expand the historic building inventory so that it covers all of the Plan Area	Short Term	HTC		
3.1.d	Accurately map historic resources with current GIS applications so that they can be efficiently and effectively managed by decision-makers	Short Term	HTC		
3.2. Promote historic preservation and context-sensitive design					
3.2.a	Encourage adaptive reuse and national historic register listing	On-going	HTC	HBID, CD, ZC	CDBG Grants, TBID
3.2.b	Collaborate to improve the historic walking tour	Short Term	TBID		

Timelines
Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

4. Update and Manage Downtown's Infrastructure Assets

Manage and invest in infrastructure that supports Downtown development

Action		Timeline	Lead Agency	Partner Agencies	Potential Funding Sources
4.1 Manage parking					
4.1.a	Review parking pricing	Short Term	HPC	HBID, CD, PW	Regular Budgets, Parking Revenues
4.1.b	Offer first hour free parking in garages and surface lots, with pay as you leave technology	Short Term	HPC		
4.1.c	Meter all on-street parking	Short Term	HPC		
4.1.d	Eliminate on-street permit parking	Short Term	HPC		
4.1.e	Eliminate residential parking permits and time limits	Short Term	HPC		
4.1.f	Identify funding mechanisms for future parking construction	Mid Term	HPC		TIF
4.2 Transportation Infrastructure					
4.2.a	Review and prioritize street projects that have a high potential to support private investment	Short Term	PW	HBID, CD	CIP, TIF
4.2.b	Create streetscape design standards (see also 1.3.a)	Short Term	PW		
4.3 Water and Sanitary Sewer					
4.3.a	Update modeling to reflect fire flow requirements for future development scenarios	Short Term	PW	CD, ZC	CIP, TIF
4.3.b	Prioritize replacement of older segments of concrete and vitrified clay pipe	On-going	PW	MDT	

Timelines
Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

Update & Manage Downtown's **Infrastructure** Assets

4.4 Storm Drainage					
4.4.a	Encourage early consideration of Low Impact Development to reduce development cost Downtown	On-going	PW	CD, MDT	CIP, TIF, Private
4.4.b	Consider areas of right-of-way that could be used for micro retention and treatment, so that run-off rates from the Downtown area are not increased	On-going	PW		
4.4.c	Front Street Stormwater and Redesign	Short Term	PW		
4.5 Gas, Electric, and Communications					
4.5.a	Identify appropriate locations for utility equipment within public right-of-ways	Short Term	PW	CD, ZC, HBID, Private Utility Providers	CIP, TIF, Private
4.5.b	Establish a policy for underground utilites for new utilities or major upgrades	Short Term	PW		
4.5.c	Proactively seek to expand the fiber optic network in Downtown	On-going	MBAC		

Timelines
Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

5. Connect Downtown

Improve Downtown circulation for convenience and business vitality.

Action		Timeline	Lead Agency	Partner Agencies	Potential Funding Sources
5.1 Increase transit options					
5.1.a	Study the potential for a circulator trolley	Long Term	HBID	HBID, HATS, MDT, DHI, PW	CDBG, TIF, Transit Funds
5.1.b	Establish fixed-route transit services between the downtown and the capital	Mid Term	HATS		
5.1.c	Create an employee bus pass program	Mid Term	DHI		
5.1.d	Create a downtown transfer center	Short Term	HATS		
5.2 Optimize pedestrian connectivity					
5.2.a	Connect the underpass to Carroll College	Short Term	CD	Carroll College, GNTC	CIP, TIF, TAP, Urban Funds
5.2.b	Improve pedestrian connections to neighborhoods	On-going	PW	HBID	
5.2.c	Improve pedestrian crossings at intersections	Short Term	PW	MDT	
5.2.d	Incorporate streetscape improvements with the Front Street Reconstruction project (see also 4.4.c)	Short Term	PW	MDT	
5.2.e	Improve the Neill Avenue corridor	Mid Term	PW	MDT	
5.2.f	Improve Last Chance Gulch streetscape	Mid Term	PW	HBID	
5.2.g	Improve Cruse Avenue streetscape	Mid Term	PW	MDT, HBID	

Timelines
Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

5.3 Develop a comprehensive bike network					
5.3.a	Review existing ordinances and/or private covenants to allow bikes on the malls	Short Term	NMTAC	HBID, GNTC, CD, PW	CIP, TIF, TAP, Private
5.3.b	Expand the network of on-street bike routes in and around Downtown	Short Term	PW	NMTAC	
5.3.c	Add on-street bike lanes	Mid Term	PW	NMTAC	
5.3.d	Develop a north-south bikeway	Mid Term	PW	NMTAC	
5.3.e	Incorporate the bike network into the wayfinding system	Mid Term	HBID	PW, NMTAC	
5.4 Improve vehicle circulation and access to increase retail viability					
5.4.a	Improve gateways and wayfinding	Short Term	HBID	PW, MDT	CIP, TIF, TAP, Gas Tax, Urban, Private
5.4.b	Study the feasibility of converting Last Chance Gulch to two-way traffic	Short Term	PW	HBID, MDT	
5.4.c	Study the feasibility of simplifying the five-point Neill/LCG/Helena intersection	Short Term	PW	HBID, MDT	
5.4.d	Improve the Hauser/14th corridor, signal at 14th and Last Chance Gulch	Short Term	PW	HBID, MDT, GNTC	

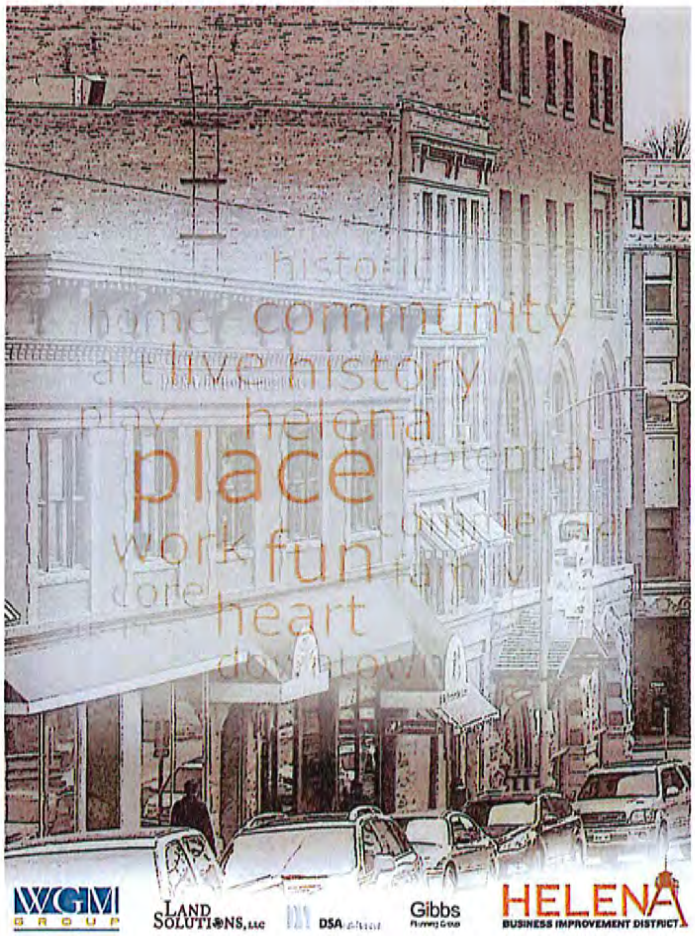
Timelines

Short Term 1-5 years
Mid Term 6-10 years
Long Term 11-20 years

Highlight = Priority Project

Conclusion

The Downtown Helena Master Plan shapes the vision and long range goals for Downtown over the next 20 years. Helena is Montana's capital city and should have a vibrant, healthy downtown that is a reflection of our State. The Master Plan creates consensus for Downtown's future that will help guide and direct efforts within the Downtown area. The Plan requires a diverse range of policy actions, physical changes, and marketing steps to implement. The Plan will need the collective leadership of the Helena Business Improvement District, Downtown Helena, Inc., and the City of Helena along with strong support from partnering organizations for Downtown Helena to reach its full potential.

Appendices

- **A** Existing Conditions Report
- **B** Market Analysis Report
- **C** Public Outreach Summary
- **D** Funding Sources
- **E** Downtown Census/Statistics