



**GR >> VISION**

## THE GR FORWARD VISION

GR Forward's vision for the future echoes the community input received and provides a road map for the future; grounded in the values of the people who live, work, learn, and play in Grand Rapids. Your words, **highlighted in blue** are the building blocks:

### VISION STATEMENT

Downtown Grand Rapids is the **region's Downtown** and the **civic heart** of West Michigan. Together with the Grand River, these assets will provide a singular experience and strengthen the City's identity as **progressive, healthy** and **vibrant**. GR Forward envisions a future where strategic action will promote **job growth**, stimulate private investment and provide a city center **welcoming** to all Downtown residents, nearby neighbors and visitors. A reinvigorated Downtown and Grand River must be **authentic to Grand Rapids** and attainable by developing strategies unique to the needs of Grand Rapiidians.

To achieve this vision, strategies are organized into the following 6 goals:

*“Grand Rapids doesn't need to be 'like' any other city - we have the ingredients to be unique.”*

### >> GOAL 1: Restore the River as the Draw & Create a Connected and Equitable River Corridor

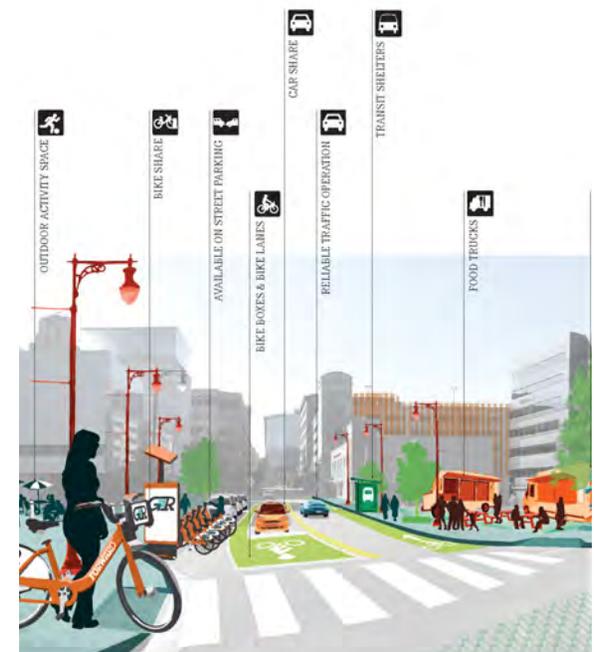
The Grand River is the game-changer for Grand Rapids that can help to attract talent and elevate the City as a unique destination, a catalyst for development and an amenity for the region. The River corridor presents the opportunity to offer a range of connected, unique experiences around outdoor adventures not usually found within urban centers. It's time to re-establish the emotional and physical connections between Downtown Grand Rapids's neighborhoods, and the River that the City was built upon. The River must be accessible and welcoming to all Grand Rapiidians.

### >> GOAL 2: Create a True Downtown Neighborhood that is Home to a Diverse Population

Downtown was once home to four department stores and a mix of housing, retail and services. Throughout the GR Forward process, Grand Rapiidians have indicated the desire to have “more” Downtown - more retail, more services and more activity. These amenities require more people living within the City's core. Housing is a driver to build more value Downtown and more demand for the services that people want. While welcoming new neighbors, we must continue improving services for existing residents and ensure that Downtown living remains accessible and affordable to a range of incomes.

### >> GOAL 3: Implement a 21st Century Mobility Strategy

Owing both to change in travel behavior among the millennial generation and the limited ability to dedicate more land and right-of-way to personal vehicles, the future growth of Downtown will increasingly depend on a multi-modal transportation system that is safe, convenient and affordable to all Grand Rapiidians. This will be achieved by leveraging Downtown's existing transportation assets and providing additional options for the area's employees, residents, and visitors to get around. The end result will be a Downtown where people can choose to drive, but are not required to.



**>> GOAL 4: Expand Job Opportunities & Ensure Continued Vitality of the Local Economy**

Downtown Grand Rapids offers a sense of opportunity. The belief that young, creative entrepreneurs have lower barriers to entry to pursue their professional goals while enjoying the benefits of an urban lifestyle—all at a much more affordable cost of living than major urban centers—is one of the attractive things about the area. As important and necessary as it is to attract talent to the City, it is also critical to grow and retain talent from within Grand Rapids. Today there are a variety of organizations and initiatives dedicated to fostering the next generation of businesses and helping local residents attain quality jobs. In the future, their efforts to expand job opportunities and to grow the local economy will depend on four related factors: Space for business growth at all scales; recruitment and retention of talent; additional marketing to reposition Grand Rapids in a new class of cities and; expanding programs and services designed to link residents with job opportunities. These efforts must take place while Grand Rapids continues to evolve its Downtown as an excellent place to live, work and enjoy.

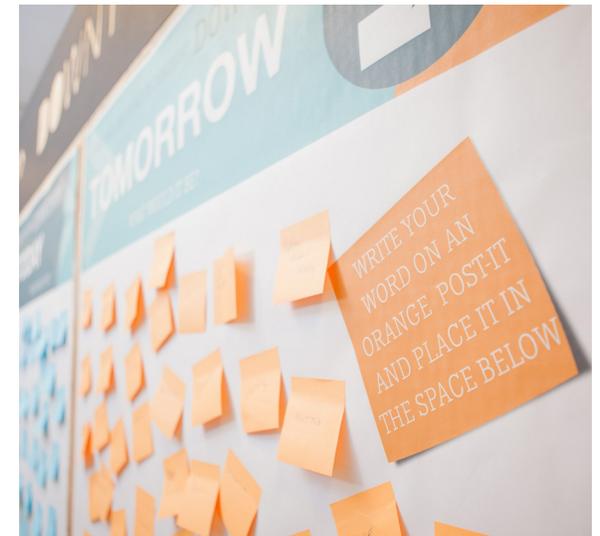
**>> GOAL 5: Reinvest in Public Space, Culture & Inclusive Programming**

Downtowns across the country function differently than they did even a few decades ago. Successful downtowns, those that attract investment and jobs, are quickly adapting to meet today’s opportunities. There are more people living, and excited to live in Downtown Grand Rapids than in almost a century. At the same time, businesses are competing for talent with cities across the country. A key factor in supporting both residential and job growth is the quality of the place. Downtown Grand Rapids needs to provide a unique experience that cannot be found regionally or even in other cities. Through both programming and design, public investment can make a big impact by creating a more inclusive City and Downtown.



**>> GOAL 6: Retain and Attract Families, Talent, and Job Providers with High Quality Public Schools**

Attracting and retaining a diverse population that includes families from all socio-economic backgrounds is vital to achieving both resident and job growth Downtown. This begins with strategic investment in our City’s schools, the expansion of successful PreK-12 programs, and the implementation of new and dynamic programs that can provide exceptional learning opportunities.



## TOWARDS AN EQUITY-DRIVEN GROWTH MODEL IN DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS

*GR Forward* brings together ideas from thousands of Grand Rapidians who collectively imagine a transformed waterfront, a thriving commercial and residential Downtown neighborhood, and a better transportation network for their City's future.

The robust public engagement process also revealed widespread concern regarding everyone's ability to participate in Downtown's historic and future prosperity. Put plainly, a broad swath of our community, including many from historically marginalized areas of the City, believe they're not welcome or don't belong in Downtown Grand Rapids.

*GR Forward* envisions a Downtown and Grand River corridor where all people and communities come together and thrive - regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, language, income, ability and other identity markers. This collaborative planning effort has sought out new and better solutions to ensure that ALL Grand Rapidians have the opportunity to participate and thrive in the "new" Grand Rapids. *GR Forward* also is informed by, and aspires to complement, the ongoing work community groups and networks are already doing to champion diversity, equity and inclusion issues.

The recommendations to set Downtown on the path of equity-driven growth are integrated throughout the strategy sets presented in *GR Forward's* six goal areas. More specifically, *GR Forward* recommends expanding access safe and efficient transportation, quality affordable housing, high quality public education and other important determinants of equity. This section compiles these recommendations into six categorical groups that include more than 20 action items, plus corollary measures and targets, intended to frame a collective, partner-driven implementation approach designed to yield significant results.

### Establish a regional equity framework and plan of action

The *GR Forward* process by design focused rigorously on improving Downtown Grand Rapids and a limited reach of the Grand River corridor. But the trends and patterns of development - housing, transportation, education, health and business - that create the conditions for people to flourish [or not] play out across a much broader geographic area. And so promoting equity requires regional thinking, solutions and collaborative action, just as any meaningful approach to grow and sustain the economy depends on a regional strategy.

>> Identify a coalition of racially and ethnically diverse partners to lead the development of a regional equity framework and plan of action that, among other things, defines:

- Shared understanding of key terms,
- baseline data,
- common rationale and goals to achieve equity,
- clear complementary roles for partners,
- new implementation tools and strategies, and
- measurable indicators to track progress.

>> Work with community assets and partners to continue raising awareness of racial and economic disparities and help strengthen efforts that build the case for equity, inclusion and justice as an urgent economic and social priority.

Measure: An informed and innovative regional framework and strategy to build equity and inclusion in greater Grand Rapids.

Target: Establish project steering committee in 2016. Produce widely accepted regional framework and plan of action by 2017.

### Cultivate an equity perspective in civic governance

Effective community engagement in public process builds relationships, trust and communication channels required to bring new perspectives to the table and breakdown silo-ed thinking. Civic Boards, Commissions, and other leadership bodies also provide a critical method for participating in public decision making, monetary policy, and other resolutions that impact the path forward for the Grand Rapids community. To support integration of an equity and inclusion lens in local decision-making, we must increase representation in formal and informal forums to tap the experience and wisdom of all within our community.

- » Appointing entities should seek to diversify Downtown and Grand River corridor governance and leadership decision-making bodies to ensure a representative cross-section of the Grand Rapids community is at the table when deliberating key issues.
- » Support training, networking activities, mentorship and other leadership development and recruitment efforts that support and engage emerging equity leaders.
- » Deploy proactive and targeted public engagement strategies that effectively bring traditionally marginalized communities

into program design and decision-making processes.

Measure: Demographic and psychographic statistics

Target: By 2019, achieve a proportionate representation of various City Commission appointed Boards, committees, and DGRI Alliances relative to city-wide demographic and psychographic profiles.

### Foster racially and ethnically diverse business ownership

While Downtown Grand Rapids currently enjoys a ground-floor occupancy rate above 90%, the percentage of minority-owned business is very low. Only 20 of 310 [6.5%] ground floor businesses in Downtown are currently owned by persons of color, according to a recent analysis by Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. Diversifying the mix of Downtown business ownership will make Downtown stronger.

- » Identify a coalition of partners and mentors to advance and expand minority business ownership in Downtown;
- » Identify a funding source[s] dedicated to help support minority-owned business success in Downtown;
- » Work with lending institutions to create a specialized lending program designed to

foster minority-owned business success in Downtown;

- » Modify incentive programs to create a more intentional and targeted approach to achieving greater racial equity; and
- » Support positive and effective youth development initiatives that provide opportunities for kids to explore their interests, build skills, and develop their ability.

Measure: Number of ground-floor businesses owned by racial and ethnic minorities in Downtown Grand Rapids

Target: By 2025, increase the number of minority- and locally-owned ground-floor businesses in Downtown Grand Rapids by 50 percent.



### **Achieve a more diverse Downtown workforce**

With nearly 35,000 private and public sector employees, Downtown excels as a regionally significant employment hub. However the percentage of white employees in Downtown is extremely high [90.2%] relative to the percentage of white residents that call Grand Rapids home [60.5%]. More intentional efforts are necessary to diversify the Downtown workforce and build greater equity in Downtown's prosperity.

- » Develop an outreach program and incentives that encourage Downtown employers to diversify the racial composition of the Downtown workforce, with a special emphasis on employing residents from Downtown's near-neighborhoods;
- » Work with community assets and partners to develop a campaign that encourages African American and Hispanic talent who left West Michigan to attend college out of state to return home;
- » Facilitate opportunities for local small businesses to find and retain employees/professionals of color;
- » Promote job growth and better Grand Rapids communities of color to overcome systemic barriers to living wage employment;
- » Create and expand successful workforce development and internship programs; and
- » Support smarter criminal justice initiatives proposed by the Grand Rapids City Commission's 2014 SAFE Task Force.

Measure: Racial and ethnic composition of the Downtown Grand Rapids workforce

Target: By 2025, triple the percentage of non-white employees in Downtown Grand Rapids.

### **Create a more welcoming and inclusive Downtown**

Downtown Grand Rapids currently boasts a thriving dining and entertainment scene and hosts more than 200 special events annually. However, many communities of color cite a distinct feeling of unwelcome and exclusion in Downtown. Specific efforts to expand the number of minority-owned businesses in Downtown should be coupled with intentional efforts to authentically recast Downtown as a welcoming place for all of the City's residents.

- » Support and produce an expanded set of cultural and recreational events that attract diverse audiences;
- » For existing events, integrate more inclusive programming and adopt more intentional marketing efforts designed to attract more communities of color;
- » Work with community assets and partners to integrate a front-line employee training curriculum on intercultural sensitivity, unintentional bias and microaggressive behaviors into successful programs such as the Certified Tourism Ambassadors; and
- » Assemble a task force charged with attracting an African-American Cultural Heritage Museum to Downtown Grand Rapids and re-establishing the African-American festival.

Measure: Surveyed perception Downtown Grand Rapids as welcoming and inclusive by Grand Rapids citizens.

Target: By 2025, at least 85% of all Grand Rapidians surveyed regard Downtown Grand Rapids as welcoming and inclusive.

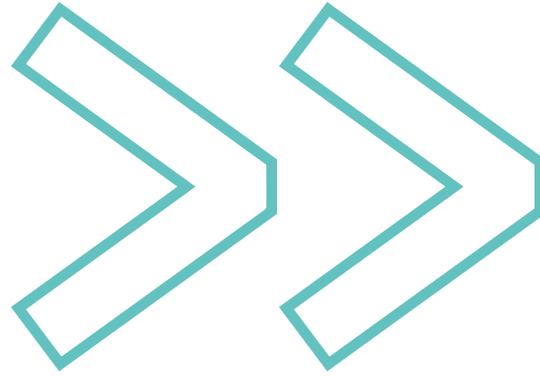
### **Attract a diverse population to the Downtown neighborhood**

While Downtown Grand Rapids is relatively racially diverse among neighborhoods in Grand Rapids, protecting and building upon that diversity is a critical and interrelated driver for all of the racial equity ambitions included in GR Forward. To achieve that ambition, GR Forward proposes to:

- » Provide a diversity of housing types and options, at different price points, to appeal to a wide range of people and families;
- » Protect affordable housing stock, and create tools to expand that supply. Modify incentive programs to assist in achieving GR Forward's target for affordable housing;
- » Modify the zoning code to reduce the development costs for new housing to keep prices more attainable; and
- » Identify effective approaches and tools to lower barriers to home ownership in Downtown.

Measures: Housing inventory by price point and typology

Target: Reach a Downtown housing inventory of 10,000 units and achieve a 30% mix of affordable housing by 2025



The rest of the document is dedicated to illustrating the specific actions that will help to make these goals a reality. This vision and the goals that support it are only as good as the actions the community takes to achieve them. While GR Forward identifies many specific actions, this investment strategy is a living document that can, and should, change as appropriate. New opportunities will arise or new ideas will emerge that exemplify the vision expressed above. These should be embraced. With continued public engagement, those that have helped to shape this plan will also help to shape its implementation.

