

# U to the Zoo

## area specific plan

### History

Recent proposals to develop property along Seward Avenue near GVSU's downtown campus brought the conflicting interests and opinions of neighborhood residents and business leaders into the public spotlight. Similar viewpoints about West Fulton Street were less well known, except to neighborhood activists.

As a result, several Seward Avenue projects were not approved by the City because of neighborhood opposition. It did not appear that conflicts would end until there was more certainty about a desired future; equally frustrating business and property owners and developers. These mutual concerns opened the door to a suggestion by the Grand Rapids Planning Department to prepare an Area Specific Plan. This approach would facilitate discussions among all parties, allowing mutually beneficial compromises to be worked out and a plan for neighborhood preservation, restoration and business revitalization to be forged.

South West Area Neighbors (SWAN) took the lead in starting the plan. SWAN successfully recruited representatives of all the major stakeholders to serve on a Steering Committee, secured project funding and identified consultants to assist with the process. With the Steering Committee now in the lead a consulting team with expertise in neighborhood and business area revitalization was hired to help prepare the plan.

The Steering Committee believed the plan not only had to make good business sense, but it also had to protect neighborhood interests. To ensure the views of all major stakeholders were considered, the Committee established rules on how they would reach decisions. Their conclusion was to decide through consensus, not just by a majority vote. While total agreement is almost never possible, the Steering Committee felt that it was important to get as close to unanimity as possible. This plan was

approved with only one dissenting opinion, bringing people together with renewed hope for the future of the Westside.

### Public Process

Significant input from the public and broad representation from various neighborhood constituencies were required to sort out and balance countering views. Methods to engage the public early in the process included interviews and focus group meetings, which gleaned initial corridor issues, ideas and perspectives.

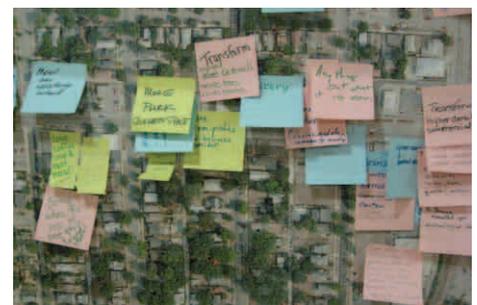
These findings were discussed with the Steering Committee and later became a foundation for planning principles - among the items shared with the public at a well attended community workshop. The first workshop was an opportunity for all parties to listen and learn about the study area. It also allowed the public to rank and add to the identified planning principles and show the places they believed should be protected, improved or transformed. Workshop outcomes were discussed with the Steering Committee and the

resulting ideas were sorted and prioritized for inclusion into a draft land use diagram, along with supporting development concepts and prototypes for specific test sites.

The second community workshop, attended by over fifty people, was an opportunity for the Steering Committee to pose the question – Did we hear you correctly? The session allowed for spirited public discussion and further comments on the draft ideas. The key issues boiled down to whether mixed use was appropriate at the intersection of Seward Avenue and Lake Michigan Drive and whether mixed residential should be mandated on Fulton Street between Lane and Straight Avenues. It ultimately fell to the Steering Committee to sort out those questions and through consensus the answer to both was, yes.

### Vision Statement

*While currently struggling, people in the community have hope and foresight. Their vision for the Fulton Street and Seward Avenue corridors provides an opportunity to cooperatively build on west-side neighborhood pride through shared goals. These are based on a common understanding and help shape a traditional sense of place and neighborhood, balancing the needs of the entire community. Its residents, businesses, and institutions are able to realize the potential of the west side through vibrant, sustainable new growth that is carefully woven into the existing urban fabric, resulting in a connected community that is based on historic development patterns and supportive of creating great public spaces and mindful of all transportation modes.*



# planning principles

## Land Use

- Mix land uses along Fulton Street – homes, stores and businesses.
- Fulton Street should be the main business street.
- Provide small off-street parking lots along Fulton Street.
- Seward Avenue- allow commercial uses at the Fulton Street and Lake Michigan Drive intersections.
- Support a bikeway on Fulton Street.
- Provide diverse and affordable housing choices.

## Neighborhood Character

- Improve sidewalks/support bus service and biking.
- Add more trees and improve landscaping, sidewalks and lighting - create a unified theme.
- Apply zoning regulations so that architectural character fits the neighborhood.
- Enforce rental/property maintenance codes.
- Provide affordable housing choices.
- Help grow locally-owned neighborhood businesses.

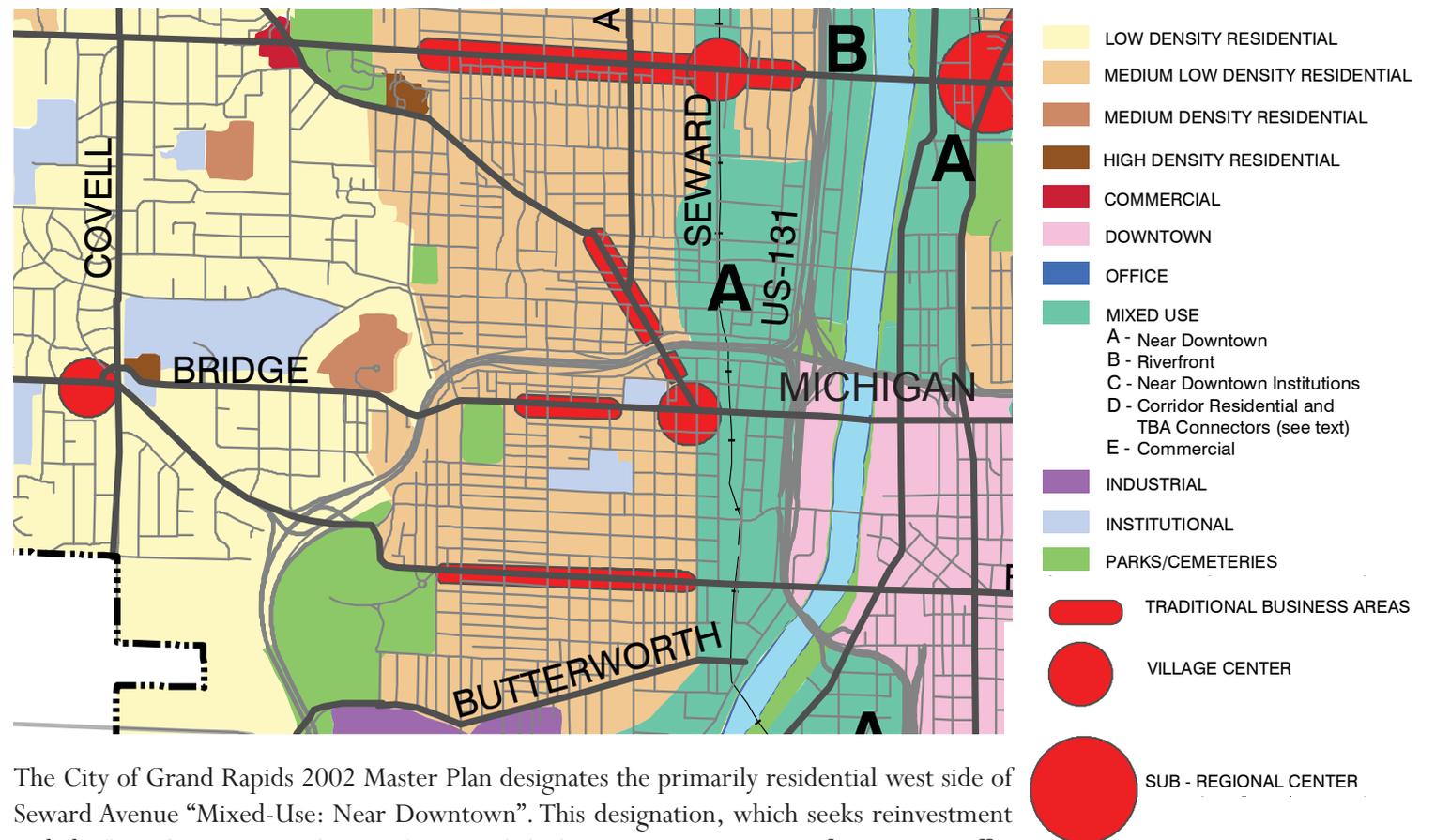
## Safety & Security

- Encourage more evening activities to get people out walking and enjoying the neighborhood.

## Working Together

- Connect the neighborhood and downtown through the GVSU campus with walking and bike paths.
- Maintain communication with residents about change in the neighborhood.
- Balance the needs of residents, commuters, zoo patrons and university students.
- Celebrate Grand Valley State University - be welcoming to its students as a part of the neighborhood.

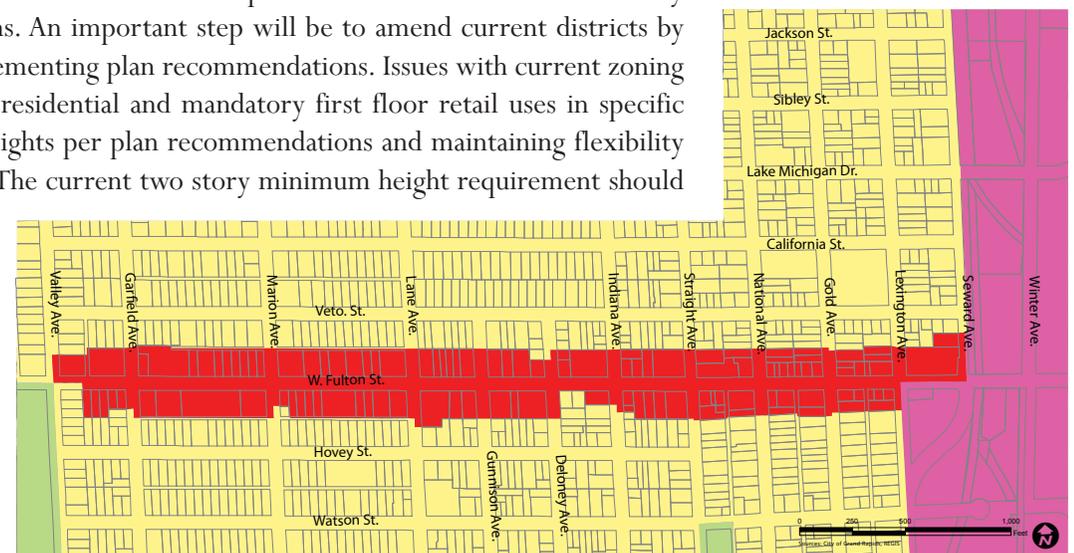
# 2002 future land use



The City of Grand Rapids 2002 Master Plan designates the primarily residential west side of Seward Avenue “Mixed-Use: Near Downtown”. This designation, which seeks reinvestment to help “provide a transition between Downtown’s high intensity concentration of institutions, office and entertainment opportunities and surrounding lower density neighborhoods”, was opposed by some neighbors who believed it opened the door to higher density and more intensive uses. It did, however, gain support in the business community and by key property owners. Those diverging opinions helped initiate this planning process.

# existing zoning

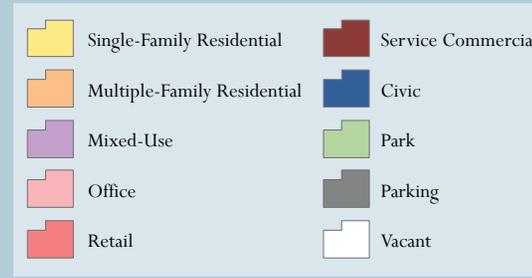
While current zoning designations support traditional urban patterns and architectural forms they do not reflect all plan recommendations. An important step will be to amend current districts by applying a zoning overlay, thereby implementing plan recommendations. Issues with current zoning regulations deal with requiring mixed residential and mandatory first floor retail uses in specific locations, adjusting allowed building heights per plan recommendations and maintaining flexibility in the types of allowed first floor uses. The current two story minimum height requirement should also be reconsidered and one story structures allowed, but with minimum building heights ranging from 18 to 24 feet.



# existing land use

The pattern of existing development in the planning area is typical of traditional urban neighborhoods. It has evolved over time and represents a mix of land uses that give the area a rich and varied character. It is further shaped by small retail shops that serve either the neighborhood or attract a more diverse and broad based clientele, such as Frank's Market, auto and other repair services, offices – both commercial and institutional, small surface parking lots and varying densities of residential – from single family homes to small apartment buildings. While more recent development, especially at the west end of Fulton Street, has broken the traditional mold and placed buildings with intervening parking lots far from the sidewalk, much of the neighborhood's desired character remains intact.

Most buildings still line the streets, in many instances parking is located behind buildings and street trees (unfortunately, most are green ash that either are, or soon will be in decline) shade sidewalks and front yards. Based on public input and clear direction from the U to the Zoo Steering Committee, it is precisely this traditional development pattern and form that is preferred and should be expanded.



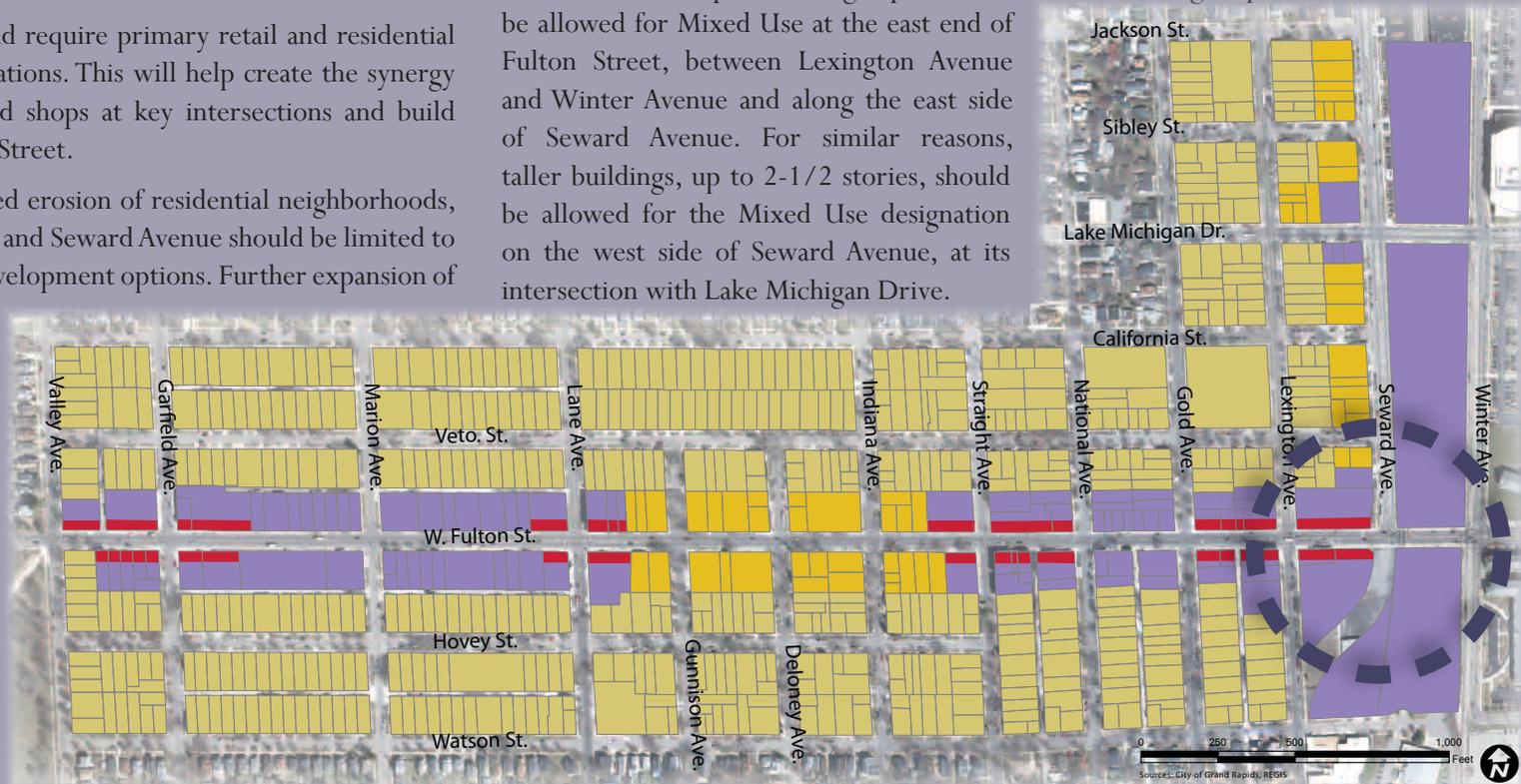
# future land use

The underlying principle for future land use within the U to the Zoo planning area is to promote varied land uses and traditional development character. This is accomplished by encouraging mixed uses, including commercial and residential uses, along most of the Fulton Street corridor and, except for a few targeted locations, primarily along the east side of Seward Avenue.

Another key principle is to target, concentrate and require primary retail and residential uses at specific retail hub and residential core locations. This will help create the synergy necessary to support viable and healthy clustered shops at key intersections and build residential cores along Seward Avenue and Fulton Street.

Given the overwhelming concern for the continued erosion of residential neighborhoods, proposed future land uses along both Fulton Street and Seward Avenue should be limited to the minimum depth necessary to support viable development options. Further expansion of any non-residential land uses (or their supporting activities) into adjacent Medium Low Density

residential areas (see page 22 and related references in the City of Grand Rapids 2002 Master Plan ) is clearly not supported by this plan. Given these requirements, building heights in the planning area should be limited to a maximum two stories, which would still allow sufficient room to accommodate on-site parking. However, because of proximity to the GVSU campus and larger parcel sizes, taller buildings, up to four stories, should be allowed for Mixed Use at the east end of Fulton Street, between Lexington Avenue and Winter Avenue and along the east side of Seward Avenue. For similar reasons, taller buildings, up to 2-1/2 stories, should be allowed for the Mixed Use designation on the west side of Seward Avenue, at its intersection with Lake Michigan Drive.



Limit building heights to a maximum two stories. However, on Fulton Street, between Lexington and Winter Avenues, and along the east side of Seward Avenue, allow four stories for the Mixed Use designation.

# implementation steps

Planning is not an end in itself. The true measure of a plan's value is the extent to which it is carried out. Putting the plan into action involves orchestrating multiple activities among a variety of groups to assure consistency with the vision. It is important to remember that all recommendations stem from

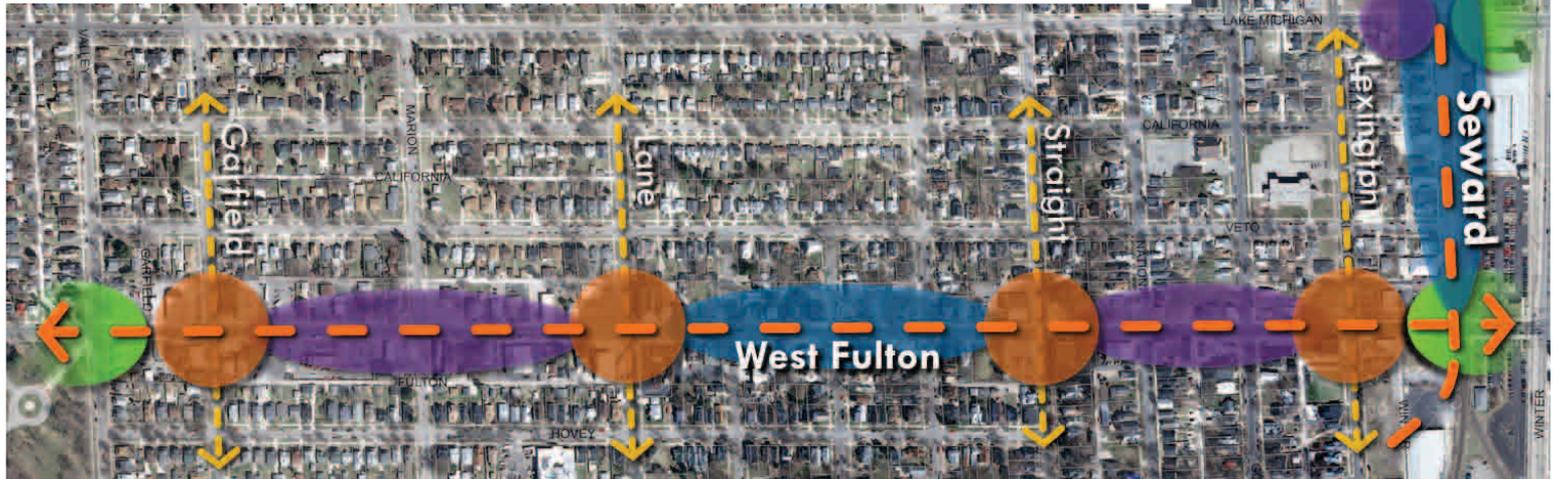
extensive public input and the actions listed below will help guide the implementation of this Area Specific Plan. For ease of use the action items are organized by topic. Although successful implementation will involve efforts from many, the key groups responsible for each one have been identified.

UTO THE ZOO WORK PLAN				
Action	Lead	Support	Resources	Priority
<p><b>ZONING ORDINANCE</b> While zoning currently supports traditional urban patterns and architectural forms, the TBA and TCC designations do not reflect all plan recommendations. An overlay district should be explored, which retains the majority of current allowed uses and zoning requirements, but addresses inconsistencies, such as those related to building heights and mandatory first floor commercial uses in the TBA.</p>	City Planning Department	U the Zoo Steering Committee	Neighborhood and Business Organizations	2012
<p><b>CORRIDOR IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT</b> Economic development tools to help spur corridor improvements and new investment should be explored to implement plan recommendations.</p>	City Planning and Economic Development Departments	West Fulton Business Association	MEDC CAT Team	2012
<p><b>STREETScape/TRANSPORTATION</b> A key concern is the quality of public spaces (along both streets) and opportunities to enhance biking and walking. Consequently, a planning and design process and funding strategy to pay for streetscape improvements and street tree replacement should be initiated.</p>	City Planning and Engineering Departments	MDOT/RAPID	GVSU, Neighborhood and Business Organizations	2013
<p><b>PARKING</b> Given the conflicts between residents and students who park in the neighborhood, a dialogue must be maintained with GVSU, neighbors and the City. Among the options to explore should be an on-street parking permit system.</p>	City of Grand Rapids	GVSU, Neighborhood and Business Organizations	Parking Services	Ongoing
<p><b>CODE COMPLIANCE</b> Issues related to property maintenance and enforcement of building and rental codes were noted as major concerns and should be addressed.</p>	City of Grand Rapids	GVSU, Neighborhood and Business Organizations		Ongoing
<p><b>BUILDING COMMUNITY</b> Among the benefits of this planning process was the dialogue between its various participants. Many ideas were expressed that are clearly beyond the scope of this effort – communicating with stakeholders about change, attractions for children, welcoming GVSU as part of the neighborhood and many others. While the plan may be finished it is imperative that discussions continue to strengthen the community's vision. For that to happen a partnership of all stakeholders and stakeholder groups must be established.</p>	City Planning	Neighborhood and Business Organizations, GVSU		2012

## development concepts



# future land use concept



Gateways



Retail Hubs



Mixed-use Areas



Residential Areas

## acknowledgements

The U to the Zoo planning initiative would not have been possible without the generous support and funding assistance of the Dyer-Ives Foundation, whose mission is to build capacity in those grassroots, neighborhood organizations and related efforts that address issues of systemic poverty or diminish a sense of isolation among residents of the central city of Grand Rapids; the SouthWest Area Neighborhood Association; and the City of Grand Rapids.

Thank you also to Margo Johnson and Kurt Reppart for their time and commitment to the planning process and for taking a leadership role as the liaisons between the Steering Committee and consultant team. Their efforts helped make sure that all meetings and workshops were well organized and well attended. The U to the Zoo Steering Committee further thanks the countless citizens who provided their input and participated in the community workshops – their ideas helped frame the plan and its recommendations.

### *Technical Assistance*

LSL Planning, Inc. thanks its consultant team – Progressive AE, Design Plus, Project Innovations and Guy Bazzani for their efforts and excellent counsel. Their guidance and constant input helped to ensure that the work of the committee and all participants was focused in a positive and meaningful direction.

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