

AREA SPECIFIC PLAN:

# SOUTHTOWN NEIGHBORHOODS



DECEMBER 2024

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

### OVERVIEW

The Southtown Neighborhoods Area Specific Plan (ASP) is the culmination of a series of community input and feedback sessions with the neighborhood. The ASP outlines the community's vision for the future of the neighborhood and defines the steps necessary to achieve that vision.

The Southtown Neighborhoods ASP is bounded by the following streets: Wealthy, Lafayette, Pleasant, Union, Fuller, Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK), Eastern, Hall, Kalamazoo, Adams, Giddings, Burton, Oakfield, Alger, and Jefferson. Southtown contains pockets of residential neighborhoods bounded by commercial streets on the major north/south and east/west thoroughfares. Industrial uses line the freight rail corridor that cuts through the neighborhood. Defining features within or adjacent to the study area include Pleasant Park, Oakhill Cemetery, Garfield Park, and the commercial corridors on Division, Madison, Eastern, and Kalamazoo Avenues.

### RELATIONSHIP TO THE COMMUNITY MASTER PLAN AND OTHER PLANS

The Community Master Plan (CMP) acts as a blueprint, outlining a vision and broad objectives along with detailed recommendations to achieve them. Building on this foundation, the Area Specific Plans (ASPs) adhere to the same principles and provide more detailed recommendations. These plans illustrate how the overarching vision and goals of the CMP are tailored and implemented to meet the unique needs of individual neighborhoods. Additionally, citywide planning initiatives such as the Vital Streets Plan, Bicycle Action Plan, the Parks and Recreation Strategic Master Plan, Grand Rapids/Kent County Housing Needs Assessment, Grand River Equity Framework, and others offer further recommendations.

## NEIGHBORHOOD TODAY

### COMMUNITY PROFILE

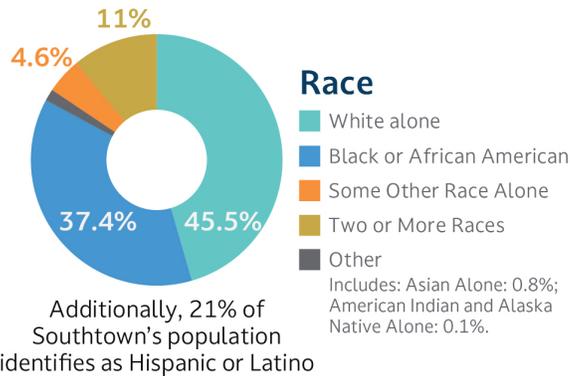
Source: U.S. Census ACS 2020 & 2022 (5-Year Estimates)  
 Census Tracts 29, 30, 31, 32, 35, 36, 37, 41, and 42, Kent County, Michigan

### POPULATION

**35,358 residents**



17.7% of the city's total population



**29.1%**



of residents age 25 or greater have completed a Bachelor's degree or more

### INCOMES



**\$45,391 Median Household Income**

11.6% lower than the city's median household income of \$51,333



**18.8% Families in Poverty**

32.5% of children in Southtown are living in poverty

### HOUSING



**61.2% Homeownership Rate**

6.2 percentage points higher than the city's homeownership rate of 55%



**\$168,478 Median Home Value in 2022**

This represents a 31% increase since 2020 when the Median Home Value was \$128,848.



**\$1,188 Median Gross Rent in 2022**

This represents a 15% increase since 2020 when the Median Gross Rent was \$1,034.



**26.8% Homeowners with a mortgage are cost-burdened**

**57.9% Of renters are cost-burdened**

A household is considered cost-burdened when 30% or more of household income is spent on housing

Census tracts are designed to capture statistical data and are often delineated based on population size and other criteria that do not necessarily correspond with neighborhood boundaries, which can be more fluid and defined by a combination of historical, social, and economic factors. Despite these limitations, the insights derived from analyzing census tract data provide a valuable foundation for understanding the broader trends and dynamics of the neighborhood.

## RELATIONSHIP TO THE SOUTHTOWN BUSINESS AREA SPECIFIC PLAN (BASP)

To date, Southtown and adjacent neighborhoods have had three studies: the 2019 Southtown Business Area Specific Plan, the 2019 South Division Corridor Plan and the Rapid's 2021 Division United Plan (see **Previous Plans and Business Districts** map).

The Southtown Neighborhoods ASP builds on the findings and recommendations of all of these but most specifically the Southtown Business Area Specific Plan (BASP) from 2019, the purpose of which was to create a roadmap for improving commercial corridors and public spaces in the neighborhood. This Plan complements that work by focusing on the seven neighborhoods adjacent to those commercial corridors, specifically looking at the parcels not covered in the previous process with a special focus on issues and opportunities related to housing, affordability, and development/redevelopment.

PREVIOUS PLANS AND BUSINESS DISTRICTS



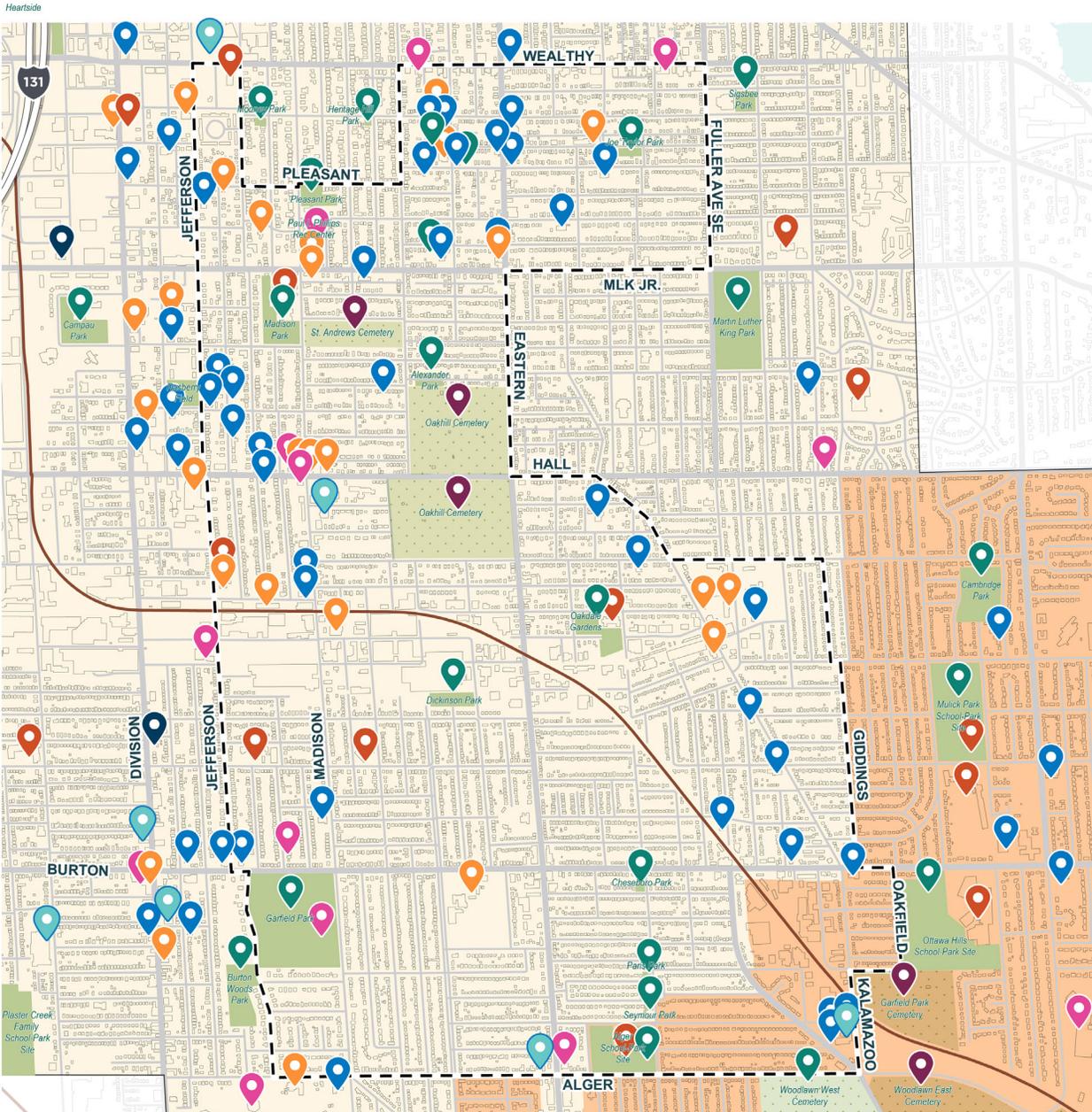
Legend

- Parks & Other Open Spaces
- Cemetery
- Railway
- 2023 Southtown Neighborhoods ASP Study Area
- Commercial
- Office
- Mixed Commercial/Residential

Past Business Area Specific Plans and Corridor Studies

- 1 2019 Southtown Business Area Specific Plan
- 2 2019 South Division Corridor Plan
- 3 2021 Division United Plan

NEIGHBORHOOD ASSETS AND CLASSIFICATION



Legend

-  Parks
-  Places of Worship
-  Traditional Neighborhood
-  Community Services
-  Arts, Culture & Recreation
-  Mid-Century Neighborhood
-  Education
-  Historic & Landmarks
-  Health Facilities
-  Public Services

## NEIGHBORHOOD ASSETS

Some of the assets highlighted by residents (see **Neighborhood Assets Map**) include:

- Open spaces like Garfield Park and MLK Park.
- Commercial corridors such as Eastern Avenue and Madison Avenue.
- The architectural character of the buildings along the commercial corridors.

The Southtown area is a collection of diverse neighborhoods, including Baxter, Boston Square, Oakdale, Madison, Alger Heights, Garfield Park, and South East End, incorporating many unique identities into a single geographic area.

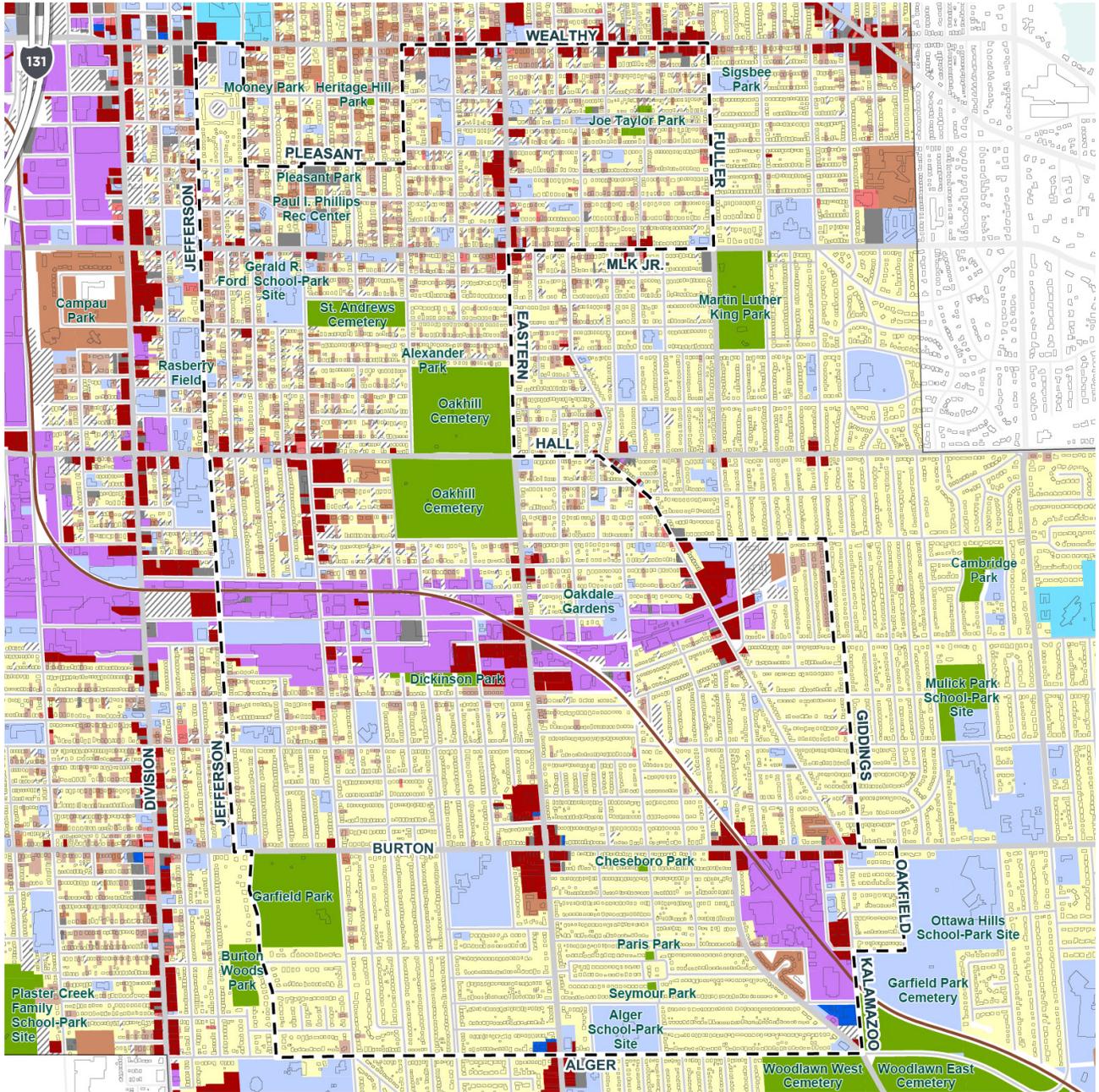
## NEIGHBORHOOD CLASSIFICATION

The Grand Rapids Zoning Ordinance assigns different neighborhood classifications to residential and mixed-use commercial districts based on existing development characteristics. Southtown contains two of the three residential classifications as seen on the map above.

**Traditional Neighborhood (TN):** Designed prior to the advent of the automobile, these neighborhoods were created to offer residents commercial and institutional uses within a short walk of their homes. Housing options include single-family homes and apartments located above storefronts, with commercial and institutional spaces seamlessly incorporated into the neighborhood. The variety in building sizes and uses adds to the vibrancy of these areas.

**Mid-Century Neighborhoods (MCN):** Post-World War II, neighborhoods transformed to accommodate the rise of the automobile. Residential areas expanded, featuring larger lots and buildings set back from the streets, creating a more open feel. The interconnectedness of streets and neighborhoods diminished, with land uses becoming distinctly separated and apartment buildings were no longer mixed with single-family homes. More intense commercial and institutional activities were relegated to heavily traveled corridors, manifesting as strip developments.

EXISTING LAND USE



Legend

- Neighborhood Study Area
- Railway
- Parks & Other Open Spaces
- Single Family
- Multifamily - 2 Units
- Multifamily - 3 Or More Units
- High Density Residential
- Mixed Commercial/Residential
- Commercial
- Public/Quasi Public
- Medical Facilities
- Office
- Industrial
- Parking Lot
- Vacant Lot

## EXISTING LAND USE AND ZONING

### Existing Land Use

The land use in Southtown (see **Existing Land Use** map) is made up of four primary uses:

- Residential neighborhoods that are primarily single family residences with some multi-family housing in the northern section of the community.
- Industrial uses along the rail line that cuts through the study area.
- Commercial centers on major streets and intersections.
- Vacant land predominantly in the northern section of the neighborhood.

### Existing Zoning

Zoning in Southtown generally reflects existing land uses with predominantly residential neighborhoods surrounded by commercial corridors. Properties along the rail line are still used for industrial purposes and are zoned accordingly.

The following zones are found in Southtown and fall under the Traditional Neighborhood (TN) and Mid-Century Neighborhood (MCN) designations:

- TCC - Transitional City Center
- TBA - Traditional Business Area
- LDR - Low Density Residential
- MDR - Mixed Density Residential
- SD-OS - Open Space
- SD-PRD - Planned Redevelopment District
- NOS - Neighborhood Office Service
- SD-IT - Industrial Transportation



*Properties in the Low Density Residential district.*



*Properties in the Traditional Business Area district (pictured above: businesses along Eastern Avenue in the Seymour Square Business District).*

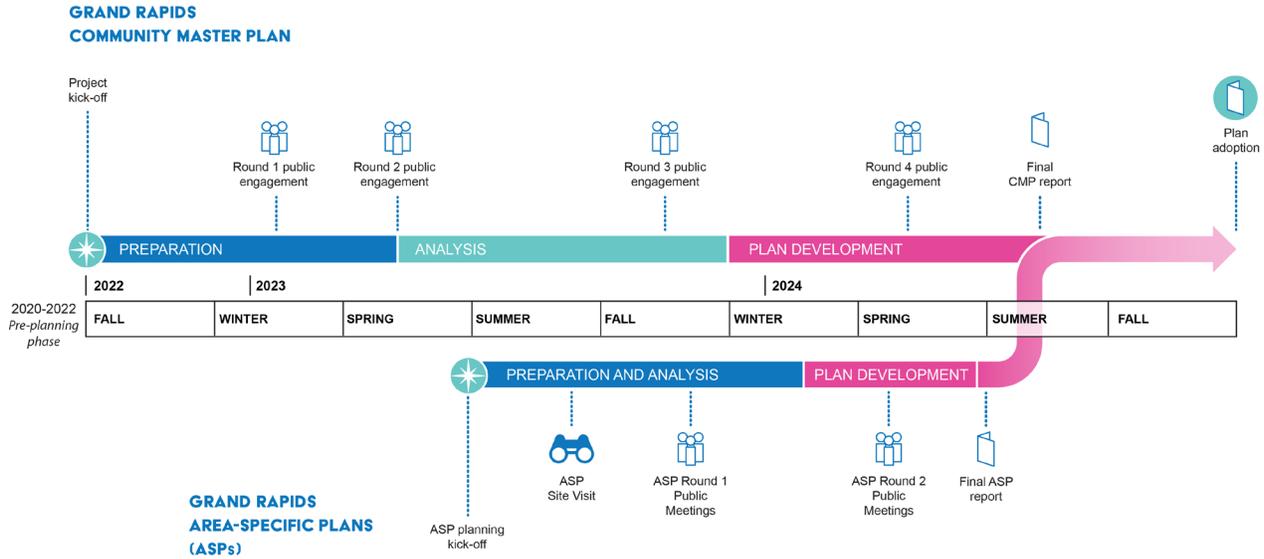


*Properties in the Industrial Transportation district.*

*Source: Notions Marketing Corporation.*

# PLANNING PROCESS AND ENGAGEMENT

## CITYWIDE ENGAGEMENT TIMELINE AND CMP VALUES AND GOALS



### A Comprehensive View

The City of Grand Rapids began developing a new Community Master Plan in 2022, after two years of preliminary planning from 2020 to 2022, and more than 20 years since the release of the previous plan. The citywide engagement process required a comprehensive, phased approach over two years, including:

- Four rounds of **engagement**.
- Various **focus groups and interviews** with key stakeholders to discuss specific issues.
- Regular meetings with the **Steering Committee** to help guide the process.
- Small group meetings and targeted conversations with neighborhood residents through **Community Connectors**. The Connectors were trusted voices in the community, made up of community leaders and activists representing nonprofits and other stakeholders from across the city. They hosted small group meetings, in addition to other tasks, helping to expand the reach of the engagement process.
- The City of Grand Rapids has over 30 **Neighborhood Organizations**, many of which participated in the Community Master Plan process. Some were on the Steering Committee, others served as Community Connectors, and CDBG funding enabled many to host engagement meetings. These organizations helped inform residents about the process and facilitated community conversations.

## Community Master Plan Values

One clear goal of the citywide engagement process was to determine the values that are most important to the community. These values are crosscutting and are threaded throughout the CMP.

### CULTURE



### EQUITY



### SAFETY



### SUSTAINABILITY



### VIBRANCY



## Community Master Plan Goals

The citywide engagement process also revealed residents' overall concerns and priorities, such as a desire for better and more diverse housing options, pleasant public spaces that support economic activity, access to local jobs and amenities, and a prioritization of pedestrian safety and mobility. This community input, combined with the existing conditions analysis, informed the creation of the community goals upon which the CMP is based and **ultimately guided the strategies for the ASPs:**

**1. Great Neighborhoods:** Connected and diverse neighborhoods where residents can thrive. Grand Rapids neighborhoods will have access to housing, retail, open space, and more that meet the needs of residents in all phases of life.

**2. Vital Business Districts:** A network of unique and diverse businesses in all neighborhoods. Vital business districts will provide a variety of products, services, amenities, and safe, walkable places that attract people.

**3. A Strong Economy:** An economy that offers a prosperous quality of life. The Grand Rapids economy will offer a range of employers and job choices so that everyone can access and earn a living wage

**4. Balanced Mobility:** A transportation network that is safe, reliable, and affordable. Grand Rapids will have mobility options that include a variety of ways to move about the city and beyond.

**5. Desirable Development Character:** A strong sense of place through high quality design. New development will improve or support the existing fabric of each neighborhood.

## SOUTHTOWN SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENT

The ASP engagement process began in the summer of 2023, alongside the citywide engagement process. The community priorities identified through the citywide effort helped shape the ASP engagement by highlighting issues and priorities that needed further exploration with community members. The ASP engagement process included:

- Kickoff meeting with stakeholders at Seeds of Promise.
- Two rounds of public meetings.
- ASP related questions and activities in the broader CMP engagement process.
- Regular meetings with City staff and consultants to provide guidance and ensure alignment between the ASP and the efforts and strategies of the Community Master Plan.

### ASP Engagement Summary

Some of the ideas that emerged from public engagement discussions include:

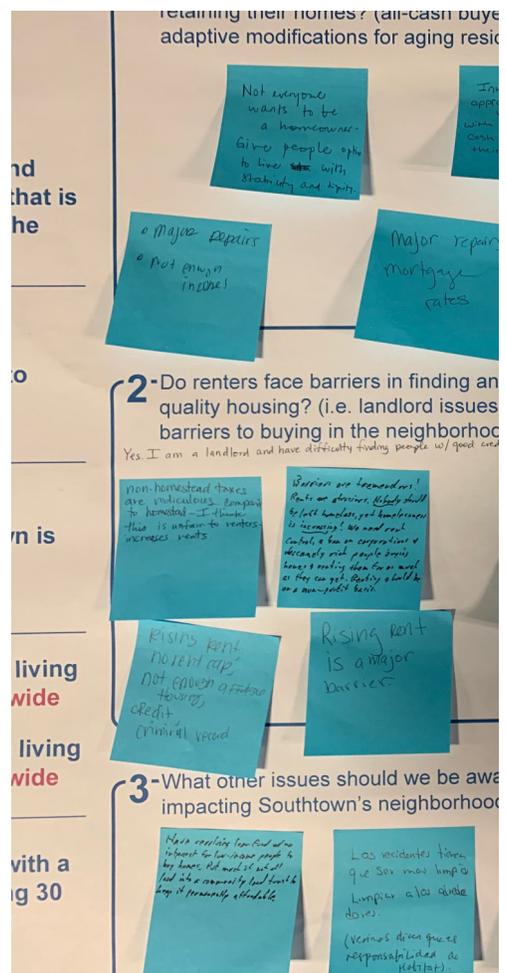
- Supporting quality new development and design guidelines to match existing development character.
- Supporting ADUs within the alley network and the alley maintenance needed to accommodate them.
- Considering infill development options that are denser than single-family housing.
- Prioritizing investments in transit-oriented development and pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.
- Integrating amenities such as bus shelters, benches, and green spaces into multi-family developments to enhance community interaction and livability.
- Exploring opportunities to improve the energy efficiency of existing housing stock.

Residents echoed the need to encourage:

- Sustainable, equitable development.
- A vibrant and thriving business community.
- Safer, walkable/bikeable streets.
- Beautiful neighborhoods with healthy, active community spaces.



Community event in Southtown.



Ideas shared by the community at an outreach event.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Engagement with neighbors, along with data and analysis of existing conditions, led to several key takeaways.

### **SOUTHTOWN IS A COLLECTION OF RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITIES AND BUSINESS CORRIDORS, ALL WITH THEIR OWN IDENTITY**

Southtown is made up of no less than seven neighborhoods. While united by common commercial corridors and public spaces, each neighborhood is unique with its own distinct characteristics. It is important to consider the nuance of each neighborhood when crafting collective strategies.

### **PROXIMATE TO DOWNTOWN AND WITH VACANT LAND, SOUTHTOWN IS FEELING DEVELOPMENT PRESSURE**

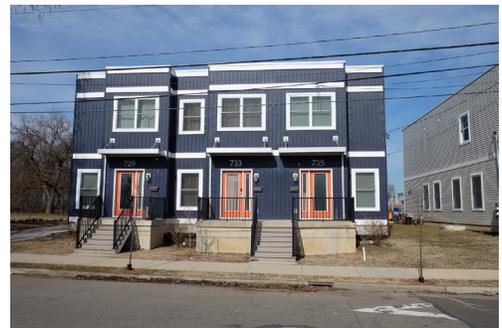
The north side of Southtown faces similar development pressures as Downtown, with investment continuing to move south. This is compounded by Southtown's high concentrations of residential vacancy, making the area prime for redevelopment. New investment could benefit a neighborhood that has experienced decades of disinvestment, but it is important to ensure that the benefits of redevelopment do not bypass long-time residents.

### **HOUSING COSTS (RENT, MAINTENANCE, OTHERS) ARE A MAJOR ISSUE FOR RESIDENTS**

Residents highlighted the costs associated with housing as a major issue during the engagement process. Many existing residents in Southtown are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on rent. Renters are particularly vulnerable to unaffordable price increases since they are not protected by long-term mortgage rates. This issue is exacerbated in parts of the neighborhood with a disproportionately high percentage of renter households compared to the City. Homeowners also face challenges, as maintaining old housing stock can be difficult and expensive. Ensuring affordable housing for both renters and homeowners will be a significant challenge for Southtown.



*A residential block in Southtown.*



*New homes in Southtown.*



*A home under renovation.*

**EXISTING RESIDENTS MUST HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BENEFIT FROM NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENTS**

Many Southtown residents have lived in the neighborhood for decades and experienced its highs and lows. As new investments take place, it will be important for the long-term residents to be able to benefit.

**THE DESIGN AND SCALE OF NEW DEVELOPMENT IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT**

The City classifies Southtown as a residential community with both traditional and mid-century development patterns, contributing to its unique development character. As new development occurs, it is crucial for any new buildings to consider the surrounding context to ensure they complement the neighborhood and add value to the community.



*A vacant commercial building.*



*A new mixed use building.*



*New housing in Southtown.*

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## COMMUNITY GOALS

The following goals were determined with the community throughout the engagement process.

### 01

## DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT DISPLACEMENT

This goal relates to the **Great Neighborhoods**, **Vital Business Districts** and **Balanced Mobility** goals found in the Community Master Plan.

### 02

## A COMMUNITY BUILT BY ALL FOR ALL

This goal relates to the **Great Neighborhoods** and **Desirable Development Character** goals found in the Community Master Plan.

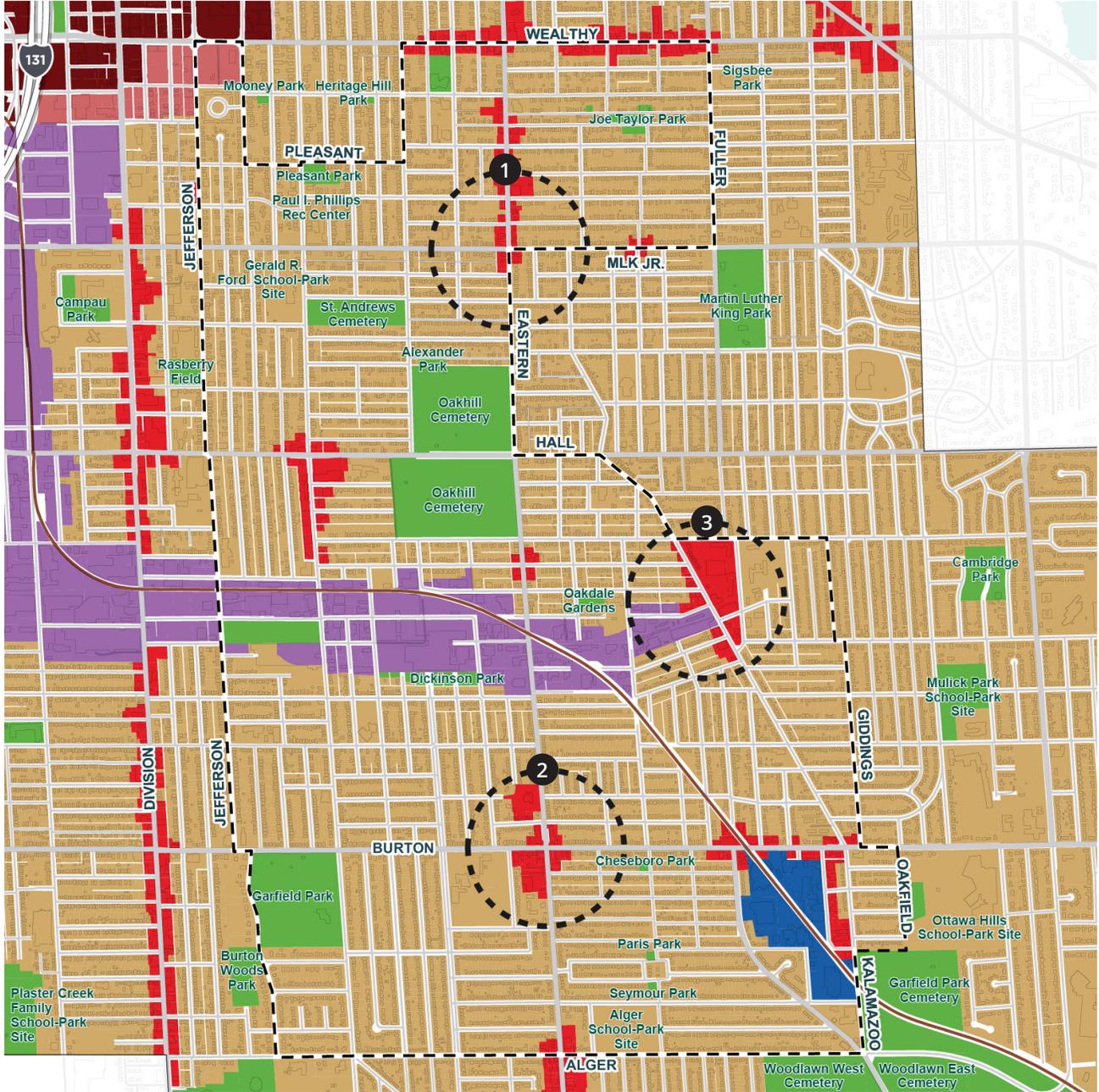
### 03

## PRESERVE LOCAL CULTURE

This goal relates to the **Great Neighborhoods**, **Vital Business Districts**, and **Desirable Development Character** goals found in the Community Master Plan.

# NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE FUTURE

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENT CHARACTER MAP AND NODES



Legend

Neighborhood Study Area

Neighborhood Nodes

- 1** Eastern Avenue and MLK Jr. Street
- 2** Seymour Square
- 3** Boston Square

- Downtown
- Transitional Activity Center
- Community Activity Center
- Neighborhood Center
- Compact Neighborhood

- Suburban Neighborhood
- Manufacturing & Logistics
- Campus
- Innovation Center
- Parks and Open Space

Through the CMP and ASP engagement process, the community helped co-create the Future Character Map, which outlines Grand Rapids' future land use. It emphasizes development character and qualities as well as urban form and function. This map (see **Future Character and Nodes** map) guides future development citywide, reinforcing existing patterns in some areas and supporting changes in others.

### Neighborhood Node



**Intent:** Neighborhood Nodes are central to residential areas or business zones, primarily serving the neighborhood but sometimes drawing regional visitors. They offer local access to businesses, services, and amenities within walking distance. These nodes mix commercial, civic, institutional, and residential uses, and increased residential density within a quarter-mile radius is crucial for supporting them.

**What it means for Southtown:** Southtown has three Neighborhood Nodes as defined by the CMP:

- Eastern Avenue and MLK Jr. Street
- Eastern Avenue and Burton Street
- Kalamazoo Avenue and Fuller Avenue

### Neighborhood Center

**Intent:** Reinforce a pedestrian and transit-friendly environment in a compact area and promote a mix of small-scale retail, service, entertainment, civic, office, and residential uses to enhance the vitality of surrounding neighborhoods.

**What it means for Southtown:** Existing commercial corridors in Southtown will continue to serve as Neighborhood Centers

### Compact Neighborhood

**Intent:** Create, maintain, and promote a variety of housing opportunities to meet the needs of a diverse population while maintaining the desired physical characteristics of the City's existing neighborhoods.

**What it means for Southtown:** Neighborhoods that are predominantly single family housing may grow to provide more diverse housing options.

### Manufacturing and Logistics

**Intent:** Allow for a wide range of types, services, and wage levels in sectors such as production, manufacturing, research, distribution, and logistics while preserving the character and integrity of adjacent land uses.

**What it means for Southtown:** The Southtown industrial district along the rail corridor will continue to serve the City as an important industrial center and support existing jobs.

### Innovation Center

**Intent:** Accommodate a broad range of flexible employment opportunities, with a focus on active ground floor uses abutting public streets to promote compact, walkable areas.

**What it means for Southtown:** Isolated industrial uses may transition to diversified economic centers or multi-family residential to better integrate with adjacent neighborhoods.

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GOAL 01:

# DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT DISPLACEMENT

Grand Rapids has been experiencing significant population growth that aligns with growth at the county level. Consequently, the demand for various types of housing at different price points has also increased.

According to the City of Grand Rapids Community Master Plan (2024):

Grand Rapids is the largest city in Kent County and accounts for 30% of its population. After a short period of decline (5% between 2000 and 2010), the population of Grand Rapids has recovered and is increasing, with new residents partly fueling the City's growth. Additionally, the population of Kent County is expected to grow by about 27% (+169,000 people) by 2045. If Grand Rapids maintains its 30% share of county population, the City will grow to approximately 251,000 residents in that time. In the shorter term, it is expected that Grand Rapids will need at least 14,000 housing units by 2027 to satisfy demand (CMP, 2024).

The housing shortage in Grand Rapids can be alleviated through various means, and the CMP identifies several key recommendations. The ASP process provides an opportunity to observe the impacts of broader citywide policies within ASP areas. In Southtown, there are opportunities to add housing along the commercial corridor, in parking lots, and on vacant lots. There are also opportunities to meet some of this demand in the traditional residential neighborhoods while retaining development character.

The following recommendations offer ideas to add new housing and provide support for existing residents and homeowners.



*Surface parking lots such as the one near the intersection of Madison Avenue and M.L.K. Jr. Street would be ideal places for new housing and redevelopment.*

## REDLINING IN SOUTHTOWN

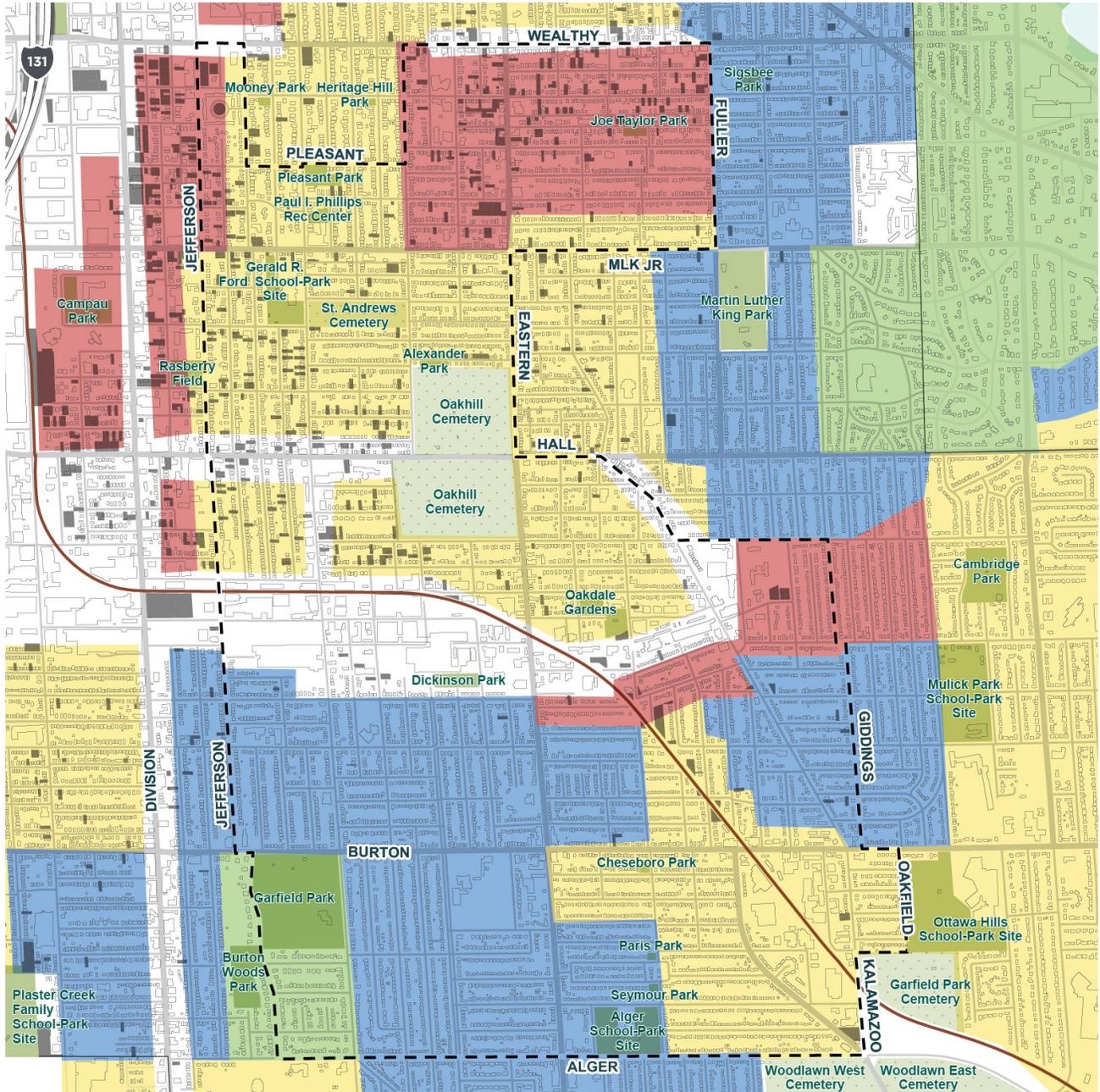
Redlining has profoundly impacted communities across the nation and in Grand Rapids. Historically, redlining involved discriminatory policies that denied mortgages or insurance to residents in predominantly non-white neighborhoods, segregating cities and reinforcing racial disparities. These policies were part of the federal government's Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) program in the 1930s, which rated neighborhoods based on racial composition, leading to systematic disinvestment in communities of color. Today, communities that experienced redlining endure the compounded effects of this discrimination, including under-investment, lower property values, and increased vacancy rates.

Significant portions of the Southtown community were negatively impacted by redlining, especially communities north of the rail line and west of Fuller Avenue (see **Redlining Map in Southtown**). The scars of redlining are readily apparent in the higher number of vacant parcels in areas that were given "Declining" or "Hazardous" designations, which effectively discouraged lending and investments in these communities. Future investment and policies in this area should seek to make amends for this legacy of disinvestment and guard against displacement.



*Vacant land in Southtown.*

REDLINING MAP IN SOUTHTOWN



Legend

- Vacant Lot
- A (Best)
- B (Still Desirable)
- C (Declining)
- D (Hazardous)

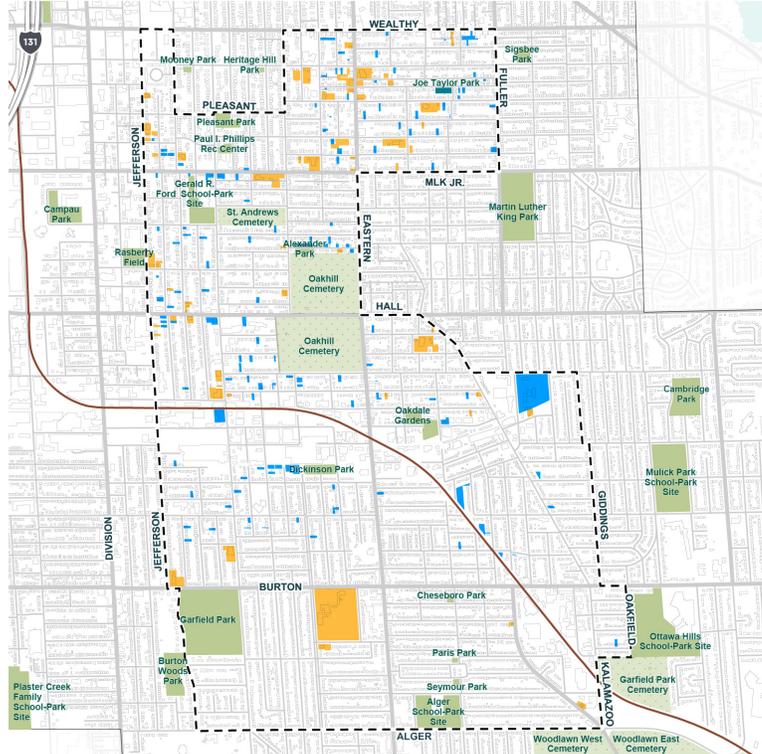
# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1 EXPLORE PARTNERSHIPS TO BUILD AFFORDABLE HOUSING ON UNDERUTILIZED PROPERTIES.

Affordable housing is typically built by utilizing competitive grants or tax credits to fill the financial gaps of providing subsidized units. Developers can also use various zoning incentives that allow them to build more units to offset the costs of subsidizing affordable housing. The City can further support affordable housing by offering underutilized City assets as potential sites for development. This can be achieved through competitive Request for Proposals (RFPs) that require the development of specific City-owned properties to include an affordable housing component.

Religious institutions across the county have been partnering with private developers to build affordable housing on underutilized properties, creating an interesting new model for affordable housing development. This type of development often aligns with their missions and provides cash infusions that help support the religious institution's primary mission. The adjacent map outlines City- and religious institution-owned properties within Southtown. Additional analysis would be needed to identify development opportunities and interested religious institutions.

MAP OF PUBLIC AND RELIGIOUS OWNED PROPERTIES



- Legend**
- Publicly Owned Properties
  - Religious Organizations
  - Neighborhood Study Area

**CASE STUDY:** Be Ready Community Development Corporation (CDC) is a community and economic development organization located in West Side district of Wilmington, Delaware. Since its inception in 2023, and driven by the mission of Be Ready Jesus Is Coming Apostolic Church, the CDC offers support programs for families and youth in the Hilltop neighborhood. Most recently, the CDC has led the development of affordable and supportive housing, with Solomon's Court being its most recent project. An affordable housing development occupying a previously vacant block, Solomon's Court will provide a total of 20 new affordable housing units and ground floor commercial space for small businesses. Phase I (completed) and Phase II (shovel-ready) have been developed in partnership with public, private, and philanthropic institutions.

## 2

### SUPPORT AND EXPAND A COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

Goal 1A within the Community Master Plan recommends developing an anti-displacement strategy by supporting mechanisms to acquire land that can be used to provide more affordable housing options. One of the mechanisms suggested in the CMP is a community land trust (CLT). A CLT is a non-profit organization whose goal is to own and manage land for the betterment of the community. CLTs acquire land and retain ownership indefinitely, leasing it back to the community at below market rate. Homeowners typically own their home, but rent the land from the CLT, who also have control over the home during resale to ensure that it remains affordable.

CLT's are a proven method for providing lower cost housing for communities. Often the hardest part of getting one up and running is organizing a non-profit to administer it. Luckily for Southtown, Dwelling Place is an established affordable housing provider that is actively working on creating a community land trust in the neighborhood. They are currently constructing 42 new homes and community green spaces at 2080 Union Avenue. Building off this success and helping to find additional land and housing opportunities for the community land trust can bring a steady stream of new affordable housing into the neighborhood.



*Affordable housing units under construction at the Community Land Trust located at 2080 Union Avenue.*

### 3

#### ENCOURAGE DENSER HOUSING ON KEY CORRIDORS.

The Community Master Plan (CMP) strongly advocates for incorporating denser housing in areas with adequate transportation infrastructure. The CMP includes specific goals to better coordinate development with transportation decisions, with a particular focus on lots fronting Link Residential and Network Residential streets. The Vital Streets Plan defines these street types as follows:

**Link Residential:** Link Residential streets connect neighborhoods and local destinations. They are common in areas with a traditional grid layout but can be found in any neighborhood type. These streets typically feature low-to-moderate density housing and should support high-quality residential life. They often host community facilities like parks, schools, and places of worship.

**Network Residential:** Network Residential streets are quality residential corridors that efficiently and safely move vehicles and non-motorized users. They are similar to arterial roads but are designed with more attention to non-auto users. These streets typically have higher residential density than other types and often feature community facilities like parks, schools, and places of worship, along with some industrial or small commercial spaces.

Link Residential and Network Residential streets are shown on the map to the right. Existing bus routes are layered onto the map to reinforce the connection between land use density and transportation infrastructure.

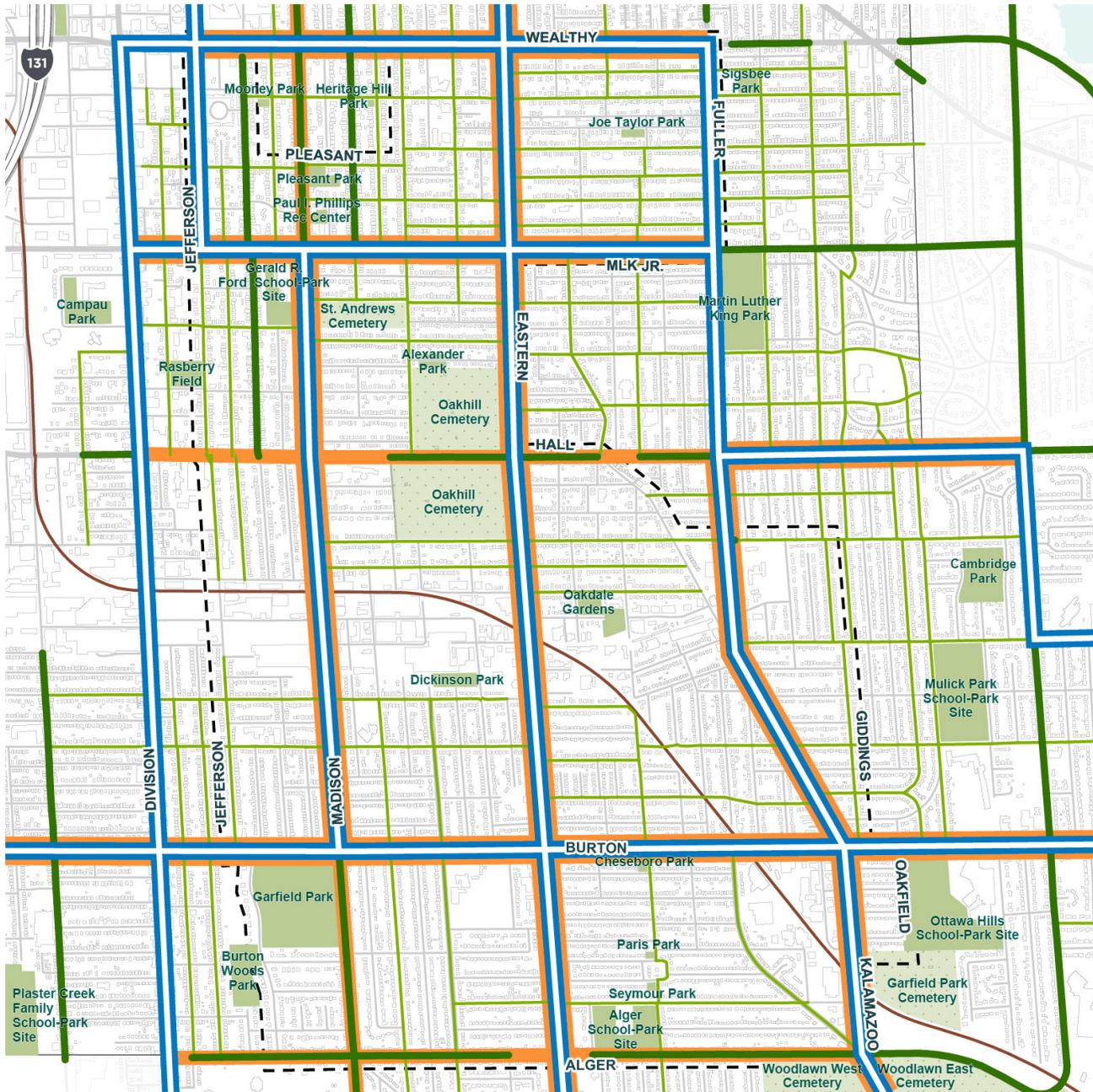
The following streets should be prioritized for consideration of denser residential use based on their classification in the Vital Streets Plan and their access to bus routes:

- Madison Avenue
- Eastern Avenue
- MLK Jr. Street
- Wealthy Street
- Hall Street
- Burton Street
- Alger Street
- Kalamazoo Avenue



*A vacant lot on a bus route at the corner of Madison Avenue and MLK Jr.*

VITAL STREETS PLAN STREET TYPES AND EXISTING BUS ROUTES



Legend

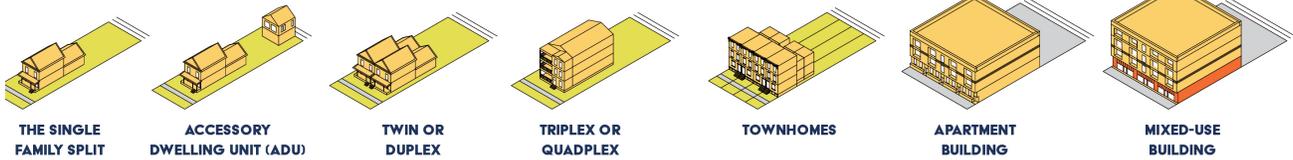
- Neighborhood Study Area
- Existing Bus Route
- Network Residential (Vital Streets Plan)
- Link Residential (Vital Streets Plan)
- Priority Streets for Increased Density (as proposed in the ASP)



I am comfortable with this **in my neighborhood.**



I am comfortable with this **on my block.**



As part of the engagement process, residents were asked about the types of housing they would be comfortable with in their neighborhood and on their block. The types of added density that residents were most comfortable with included single-family housing split into multiple units, accessory dwelling units, and twins or duplexes. Residents had mixed opinions on triplexes or quadplexes, townhomes, and apartment buildings with or without a commercial component.

*Above: During the engagement process, residents were asked to vote with a thumbs up or thumbs down to indicate the types of development they would or would not support in their neighborhood.*

Most residential properties in Southtown are zoned for Low-Density Residential and achieving the future development character identified in the CMP may require broader zoning changes. Based on the engagement, residents would like to see more diversified housing types in their neighborhoods, particularly under three or four units.

Opportunities already exist within the zoning ordinance to add denser housing types and should be further encouraged. According to the Grand Rapids zoning ordinance, an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) is a secondary housing unit on a single-family or a two-family residential lot that is either attached to the main house or a separate structure. ADUs are a great way to add density to neighborhoods without altering their development character. When residents were asked what type of housing they would like to see most on their block to help address the housing shortage, ADUs received mostly positive votes. Both homeowners and potential renters can benefit in various ways: homeowners can supplement their income through renting the ADU and gain opportunities to age in place, while renters often find ADUs more affordable due to their smaller size.

While the benefits of ADUs are numerous, there are some downsides as well. Upfront costs, such as those associated with water and sewer regulations, can be substantial and difficult to finance. To overcome this challenge, the City has continued to refine its legislation to lower barriers to entry and make the process as easy as possible, such as eliminating the owner-occupancy requirement, allowing ADUs in association with duplexes, and making it a by-right use. The City should continue refining as needed.

There are also issues regarding accessibility, parking, and residents feeling like secondary members of the community. Focusing ADUs on properties with an existing alley network may help sidestep some of these challenges by creating additional off-street parking spaces, which can be difficult to find on narrow lots in traditional neighborhoods like Southtown. Additionally, residents would have direct access to their units rather than having to walk through the primary home's property. Alleyways are also the most likely locations for detached parking garages, which offer easier and more affordable opportunities for residential conversions.



*Homes without driveways or alleys can make accessing and parking more challenging for ADUs.*

Another challenge is that residents may be unaware of the benefits of ADUs and current City legislation. As an initial step, neighborhood- or housing-focused organizations could conduct targeted outreach to property owners within eligible areas to educate homeowners on ADUs, discuss their benefits, and provide resources.

The alley between MLK Jr. Street and Worden Street may be a good place for an initial round of engagement. Most of the properties have large rear yards that could easily support an ADU, and it is close to the heart of the Eastern Avenue commercial corridor where the additional residents could help support neighborhood businesses.

**CASE STUDY:** Los Angeles leads the United States in the number of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). The City's favorable regulations, which include no owner-occupancy restrictions and no minimum lot size requirements, have made it a model for ADU development. Los Angeles allows detached ADUs up to 1,200 square feet and two stories tall, with many homeowners converting garages into livable spaces. Los Angeles has also launched the Accessory Dwelling Unit Standard Plan Program, which offers pre-approved ADU designs to simplify the building process.

*Right: Examples of ADUs in Los Angeles. The right photo includes off-street parking and direct access from an alley.*



Source: bunchadu.com



Source: archdaily.com

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GOAL 02:

# A COMMUNITY BUILT BY ALL, FOR ALL

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5

#### PROMOTE HOME REPAIR PROGRAMS.

The City of Grand Rapids has a comprehensive housing rehabilitation assistance program for homeowners that meet certain income requirements. The program provides loans for home repairs and assists homeowners in securing quality contractors and completing projects. Some of the services offered by the City include weatherization and emergency repairs, lead abatement, health and safety repairs, and energy efficiency upgrades.

With the main citywide housing program as a foundation, consideration can be given to expanding the program to address the unique housing needs of specific neighborhoods, especially as expressed during the community engagement process for the ASP.

In Southtown, residents expressed a desire to improve the community without putting long-time residents at risk of displacement. One way to accomplish this may be to offer educational workshops for residents on how to perform minor repairs and regular maintenance on their own homes, so that they can address any repairs quickly while having the City's assistance program available for major repairs.

One factor to keep in mind is that not all residents own their homes and therefore would not be eligible for assistance under the current program. Some avenues that can be explored in this regard may be to expand the program to include rental units and to work with landlords and the Code Compliance and Community Development Departments to improve the conditions of rental housing. This could also serve as a complement to the City's existing Rental Inspection program which is designed to ensure that rental properties meet certain health, safety, and maintenance standards.

Another way to increase the impact of the existing program is to promote the program and publicize its benefits and requirements. This information is available in multiple languages on the City's official website. However, this can be supplemented with printed materials distributed directly to communities, businesses, health centers, or religious institutions, among others.

Finally, the City can partner with local organizations and community leaders to identify homes in need of repair and use technology to collect and share this data. In this way, local partners can help keep the data current, and the City can support them in providing data-driven, targeted housing assistance to residents in areas of greatest need.



*A home currently being renovated in Southtown.*

6

**PRESERVE EXISTING AFFORDABLE HOUSING.**

There's a common misconception that affordable housing is primarily occupied by low-income individuals or those reliant on government assistance. In reality, affordable housing serves a diverse population, including working families, young professionals, seniors on fixed incomes, and individuals with disabilities. Many residents hold jobs that are vital to the community, such as teachers, healthcare workers, and service industry employees. Affordable housing ensures that these individuals can live in safe, stable environments without spending disproportionate amounts of their income on rent, contributing to a healthier, more equitable community for all.

The Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program is the federal government's primary policy tool for encouraging the creation of affordable housing (based on area median income) and many developers and organizations in Southtown have taken advantage of LIHTC financing (see **LIHTC Properties** map). LIHTC requires developers to keep properties affordable for at least a 15 year period, but are often subject to 30 year time commitments. After those time periods, property owners are able to convert the housing to market rate. It will be important for the neighborhood to keep the currently affordable units as affordable. Working with property owners and the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) will be important to monitor units that are reaching their affordability limits in order to restructure or refinance with tax credits, capitalize needed maintenance projects, or find new owners/organizations who have an interest in maintaining their long-term affordability.



Existing LIHTC properties in Southtown.

7

**DEVELOP MECHANISMS TO PROTECT RESIDENTS FROM DISPLACEMENT.**

Policies that promote density should go hand in hand with protections for long-term homeowners so they are not priced out of the neighborhood. This ensures that residents who have long contributed to the fabric of their communities can continue to afford to live there despite the pressures of a changing real estate market. This aligns with recommendation 1.A.5: Develop an Anti-Displacement Strategy, in the Community Master Plan.

Several existing programs in the state are designed to alleviate tax burdens for low-income households.

**Michigan's Poverty Tax Exemption.**

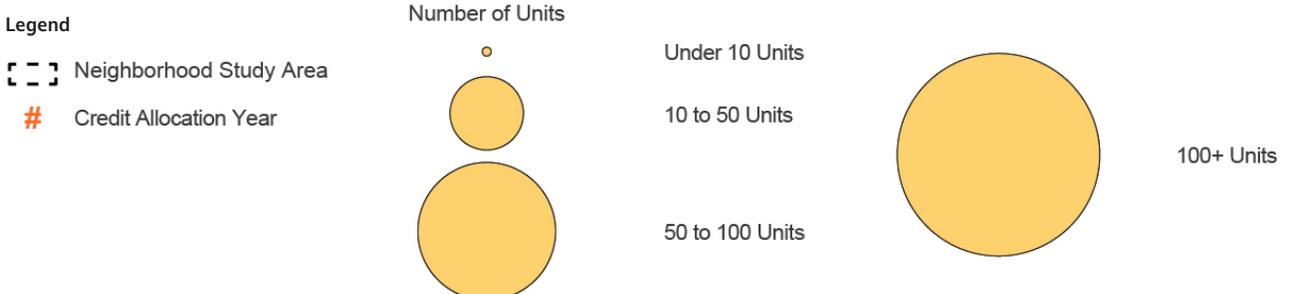
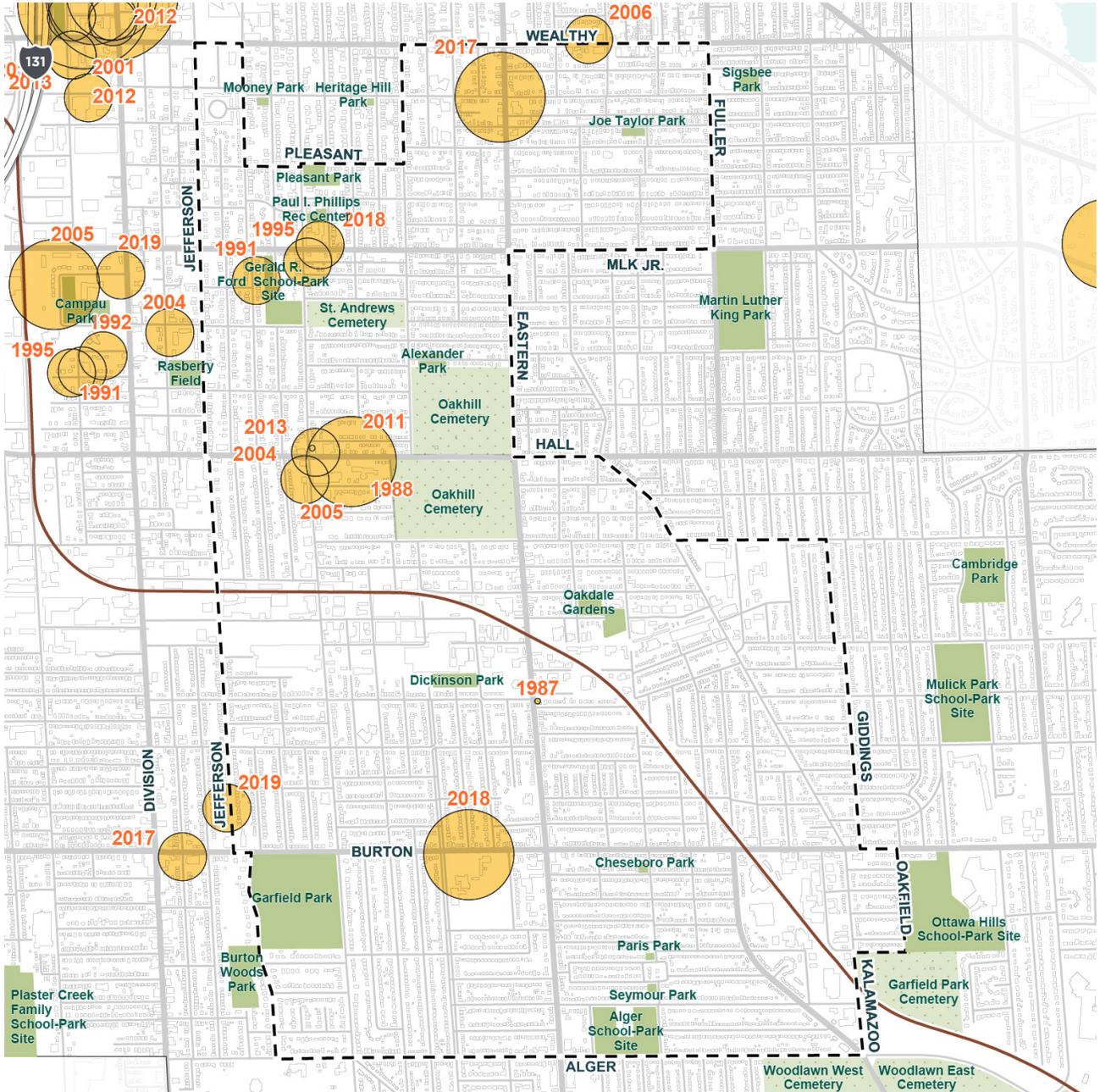
Under this program, eligible residents who meet specific income and asset levels can receive a partial or full exemption from property taxes on their principal residence.

**Michigan's Principal Residence Exemption (PRE)**

exempts a homeowner's principal residence from the tax levied by a local school district for school operating purposes up to 1.8% of the property's assessed value.

LIHTC PROPERTIES - SCALED BY NUMBER OF UNITS (INCLUDES INITIAL CREDIT YEAR)

Source: Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) - LIHTC database



## 8

**CREATE PATHWAYS FOR RESIDENTS TO PROVIDE INPUT ON NEW DEVELOPMENT.**

Providing clear and defined pathways for residents to provide input on new development projects can help ensure new development/redevelopment projects align with the community's needs and vision for their neighborhood. This is especially important for larger projects that have a significant impact on their surroundings.

In this respect, the CMP proposes several recommendations that will help align the code with the community's vision:

- 1.A.4, which ensures residents can access information on all infill development proposals over a certain size, including those approved administratively.
- 1.A.7, which ensures departments are adequately staffed to support higher volumes of development proposals, support the ongoing work of Code Compliance and other departments to assist historically marginalized property owners, and considers the impacts additional development will have on existing public infrastructure and services.
- Design guidelines to help ensure new development is reflective of residents' vision for the community.

Locally, the City's Development with Us (DwUs) pilot program seeks to facilitate meaningful engagement between residents, neighborhood associations, and developers for projects that are anticipated to have a significant impact on the surrounding neighborhood. The program includes enhanced mailings, signage, use of social media, neighborhood meetings, and other engagement techniques to ensure that residents are aware of proposed projects in their neighborhood. It also helps residents identify opportunities to share feedback and engage in the approval process.

**CASE STUDY:** Philadelphia's Citizens Planning Institute (CPI), an initiative of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, increases resident engagement with new developments in their neighborhoods through an eight-week seasonal program that includes seven evening classes: a class orientation, three introductory classes on planning, land use and zoning, and the real estate development process; and three special topic classes, which change every session.



Source: Citizens Planning Institute.

## 9

**SUPPORT RESIDENT-LED SMALL-SCALE DEVELOPMENT.**

Supporting resident-led small-scale development is an opportunity to involve local residents directly in the revitalization of their community. Through training, mentoring, networking, and providing access to financial resources, aspiring local entrepreneurs can help invest in their communities, build affordable housing, and build generational wealth.

Recommendation 1.A.8 of the Community Master Plan advocates for supporting “efforts by the Economic Development Department to provide small-scale developer training to residents.” The Community Economic Development Association of Michigan operates the Real Estate Development Boot Camp, a comprehensive training program that provides the necessary tools to help participants build affordable housing in their communities. With updates each year to address rising construction costs and new funding opportunities, the curriculum keeps pace with Michigan’s real estate development changes. The program features expert speakers from around the State and nation to share practical insights and foster valuable connections.

**CASE STUDY:** A similar private-sector supported program, Jumpstart Germantown in Philadelphia, is a small-scale developer training program that aims to revitalize Philadelphia neighborhoods by teaching interested community members about real estate development. The program includes training sessions, mentorship, networking opportunities, and a dedicated loan program to support new developers, focusing on community improvement and local wealth building.



Source: Philadelphia Citizen.

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GOAL 03:

# PRESERVE LOCAL CULTURE

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 10

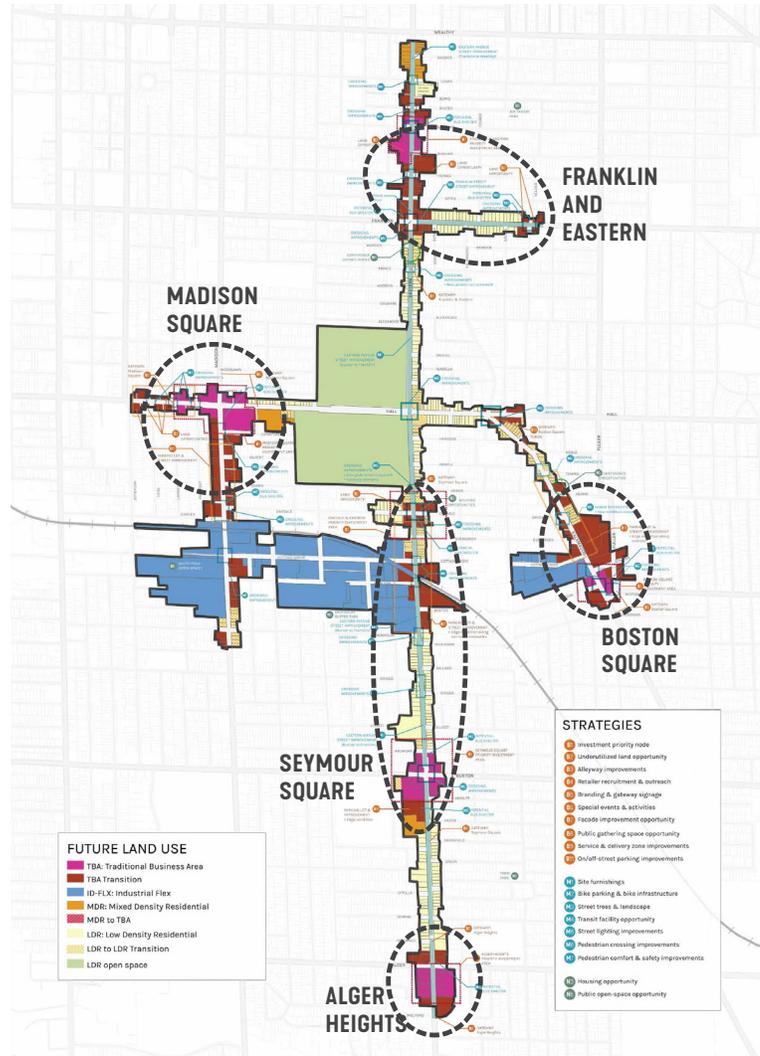
#### SUPPORT NEIGHBORHOOD NODES WITH NEW MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT.

The 2019 Southtown Business Area Specific Plan (BASP) defined guiding principles, goals, and action steps to support economic growth and corridor improvements in the community. Strategies focused on supporting and revitalizing existing businesses to attract new visitors, engage residents, leverage existing cultural and neighborhood assets, and encourage the use of public spaces. These goals remain relevant to support the recommendations in the Southtown Neighborhoods ASP, as increased density, housing affordability, and employment opportunities are fundamental to stabilizing neighborhoods and, therefore, allowing businesses to thrive.

Neighborhood Nodes, as identified in the CMP (see page 16 of this document), are suitable for increased residential development, which also supports existing commercial corridors and business districts. The Southtown BASP highlights additional areas appropriate for increased development beyond the CMP's Neighborhood Nodes, including the Madison Square, Eastern Avenue and Oakdale Street, and Alger Heights business districts.

These corridors also have cultural and community significance. It is important to support the preservation of their identity through appropriately scaled development and the implementation of corridor design guidelines. Highlighting cultural assets through initiatives like tours and artistic tourism can enhance their appeal. Investing strategically in community spaces—like public areas, parking, and streetscape improvements—benefits both businesses and residents (Please refer to the Southtown BASP for additional details on corridor specific recommendations).

#### FUTURE LAND USE MAP FROM THE SOUTHTOWN BASP



A cluster of businesses on Eastern Avenue at Seymour Square.

# 11

## **SUPPORT IMPROVEMENTS TO BICYCLE FACILITIES, TRANSIT FACILITIES, AND PEDESTRIAN CROSSINGS.**

The 2019 Southtown Business Area Specific Plan (BASP) identifies improvements to make it easier and safer to get around by foot, bicycle, or using public transit. These improvements are applicable to the neighborhood at large, as they form a larger mobility network that connects residents with their business districts, parks, the riverfront, downtown, and the larger city. Recommended improvements include:

- Designing and implementing high-quality bike lanes facilities in alignment with the Vital Streets Plan and the Bicycle Action Plan.
- Coordinating with The Rapid and the City's Design Team to implement bus stops that provide seating, cover from the elements, and that provide sufficient information to riders.
- Coordinating with the Southtown CIA, business associations, and the City's Design Team to implement crosswalk improvements in alignment with the Vital Streets Plan and the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) Urban Street Design Guide.
- Designing streets for pedestrian safety and comfort, which in the context of residential neighborhoods, should at a minimum include shade trees, street lighting, buffers (such as landscape islands) from the roadway, places to sit and rest, and safer and more visible crossings.



*Many of the major corridors in Southtown cater to the automobile and are less than hospitable for other modes of transit (pictured below: Hall Street and Madison Avenue).*

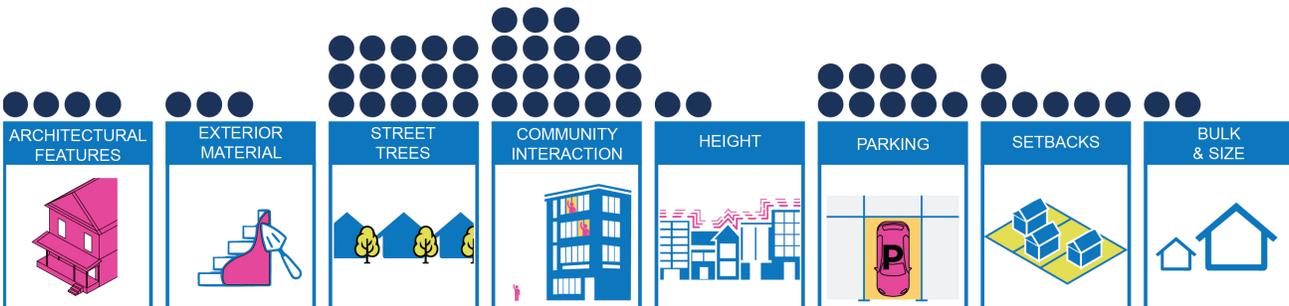
## 12

### IMPLEMENT DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR INFILL THAT BUILDS UPON EXISTING DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS.

The Community Master Plan calls for the implementation of design guidelines to create complete and stable neighborhoods. The guidelines are not tailored to each community, nor do they provide a one-size-fits-all approach, rather, they provide a framework that allows new types of development to occur in a manner that is compatible with existing development. Elements that design guidelines can provide direction on include materials, distinctive architectural features, and the relationship of the building to the street and public realm, among other principles.

How these design guidelines are applied to each neighborhood will depend on identified community priorities, existing policies, and context.

In the case of the various neighborhoods that make up Southtown, the vast majority of properties fall into the Traditional Neighborhood Classification. These properties were built before the automobile era and therefore include historic assets and some of the oldest homes in the City. Characteristics of this development include smaller blocks and building footprints, a mix of uses within a short walking distance, and high-quality materials and human-scale buildings and streetscapes. During the community engagement process, Southtown residents shared that their top three most valued elements in new development were designs that encourage community interaction, increase the tree canopy, and provide parking in a manner that fits architecturally with the historic character of the neighborhood. Based on this feedback and the historic character of the area, identifying assets for preservation, capturing relevant architectural features, maintaining human scale in new development, and balancing pedestrian safety with transit access will be key to how design guidelines are defined and applied in Southtown neighborhoods.



During the engagement process, Southtown residents were asked about the components of development that were most important to them.

## 13

### IDENTIFY VACANT LOTS NOT SUITED FOR DEVELOPMENT THAT MAY BE ACTIVATED AS GREEN SPACE.

Research has shown that access to green spaces is crucial for community well-being, offering both environmental and social benefits. The southern part of the Southtown study area features several small pocket parks (such as Seymour Park) that provide accessible green spaces for the community and complement the larger parks in the neighborhood. While the northern section of the study area lacks these smaller-scale pocket parks, it does contain vacant lots that otherwise might not be suited for development that could be turned into green spaces.

Resident groups and neighborhood organizations across the country have a long history of transforming vacant lots into green spaces, and organizations in Southtown may take a similar approach. The first step includes securing necessary permissions, followed by community engagement around planning and design. Once a plan is in place, volunteers and local businesses can assist with tasks such as clearing debris, planting trees and gardens, and installing benches and play areas. Regular maintenance and community events can help sustain and nurture these green spaces, fostering a sense of pride and ownership among residents. Vacant lots beyond a 1/4 mile walk from existing parks could be prioritized (see **Access to Parks and Vacant Land** map). It is worth noting that, although the Parks Department uses a 1/2-mile standard for walkshed estimates, a 1/4-mile standard was used due to the small scale of the vacant lots that could serve as inner block green spaces within a 5-minute walk.



*Vacant lots across Southtown.*

ACCESS TO PARKS AND VACANT LAND



Legend

- Neighborhood Study Area
- Vacant Lot
- Parks
- Open Spaces
- 1/4 mile walk from park

Note, while Parks and Recreation uses a 1/2 mile walkshed, the 1/4 mile walkshed is used here to identify key areas in Southtown that could be prioritized for greater park access.

# FUTURE SCENARIOS, ZONING, AND IMPLEMENTATION

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## FUTURE SCENARIOS, ZONING, AND IMPLEMENTATION

The recommendations set the stage for future changes. The final section of this Area Specific Plan outlines the potential impact of these recommendations across Southtown and how to implement them. This section is divided into the following parts:

### **Future Development Scenarios:**

This section graphically depicts how many of the recommendations around the built environment and housing could look on typical blocks within Southtown. It includes a variety of developments that add housing in a contextual way, mixed-use developments that support commercial corridors, and larger-scale developments on formerly industrial areas.

### **Site-Specific Improvements:**

While the future development scenarios illustrate potential futures on typical blocks, this section focuses on a specific area within Southtown, showcasing what the recommendations could look like across different goal areas. The primary area of focus is a residential neighborhood adjacent to a commercial corridor.

### **Future Development Character Areas and Zoning:**

The CMP identifies future character areas across the city, often requiring zoning changes to achieve the desired character. This section includes a map and associated chart to help navigate potential zoning changes.

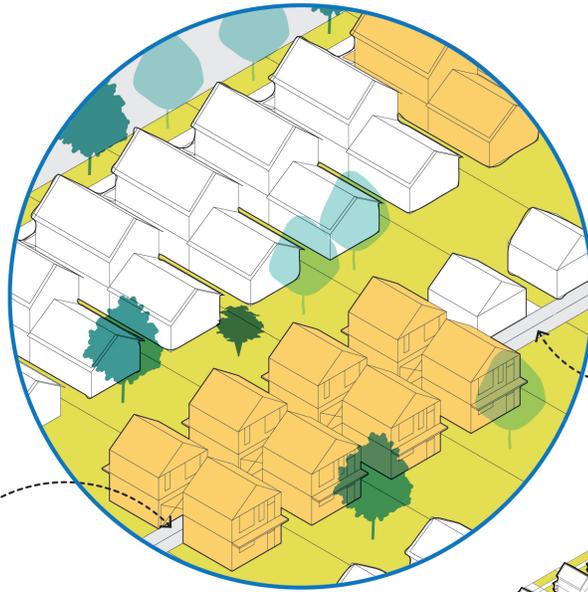
### **Implementation:**

This matrix identifies potential partnerships needed to accomplish the specific recommendations outlined in the plan.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS

### ENCOURAGE ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS (ADU) WITHIN THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

Please see RECOMMENDATION 5 for more details

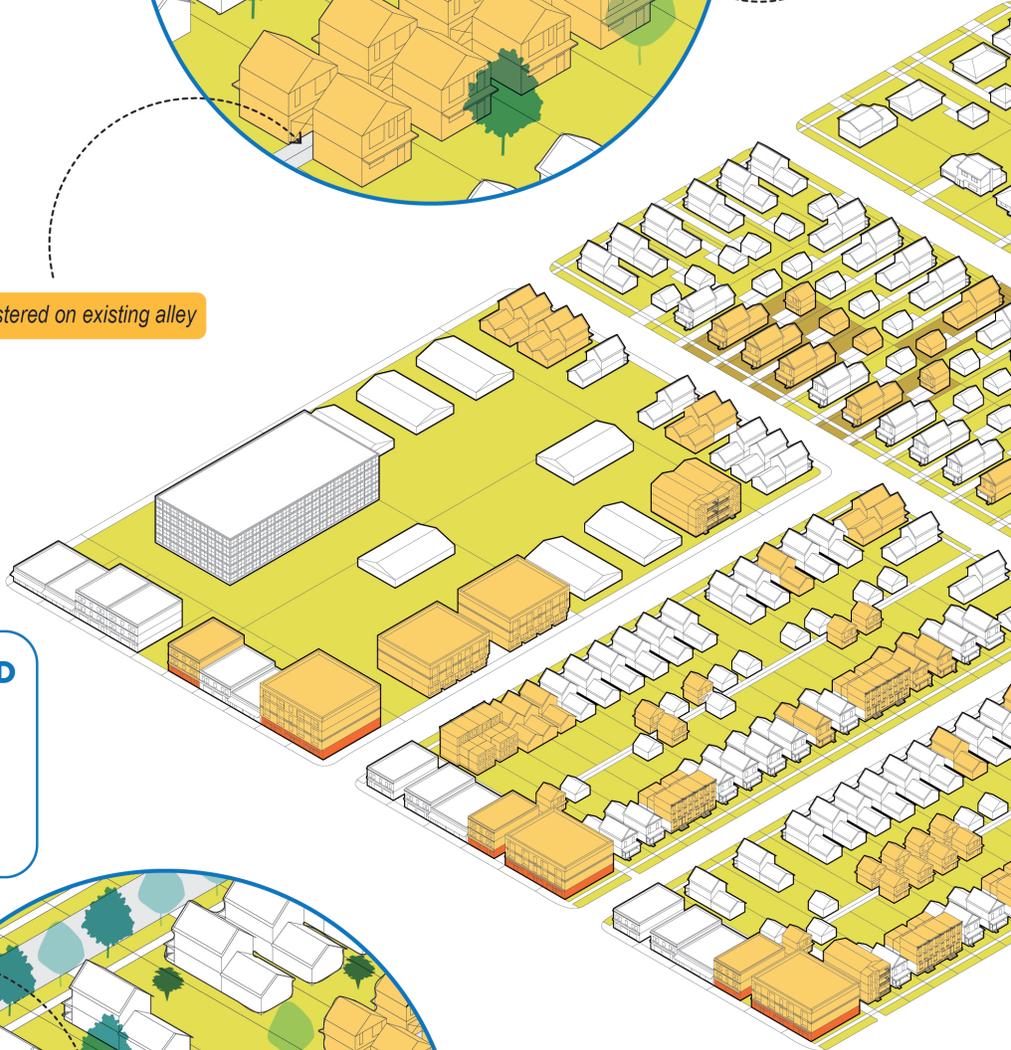


Existing alley

ADUs clustered on existing alley

### SUPPORT NEIGHBORHOOD NODES WITH NEW MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT.

Please see RECOMMENDATION 11 for more details



Height respectful to neighborhood context

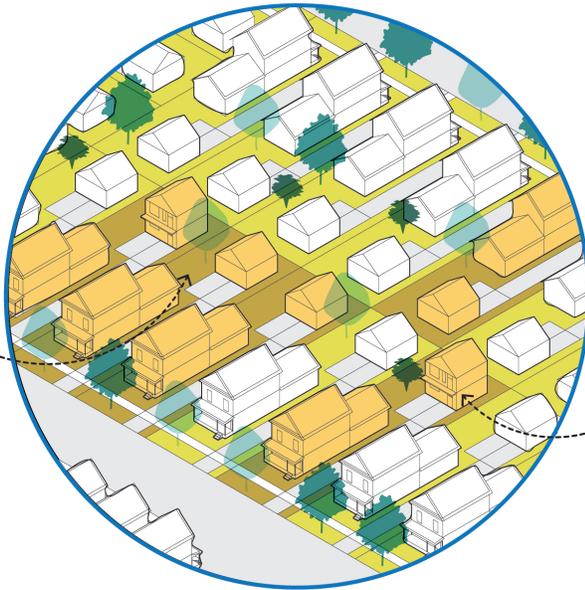
Commercial corridor

Upper floor residential

Ground floor commercial

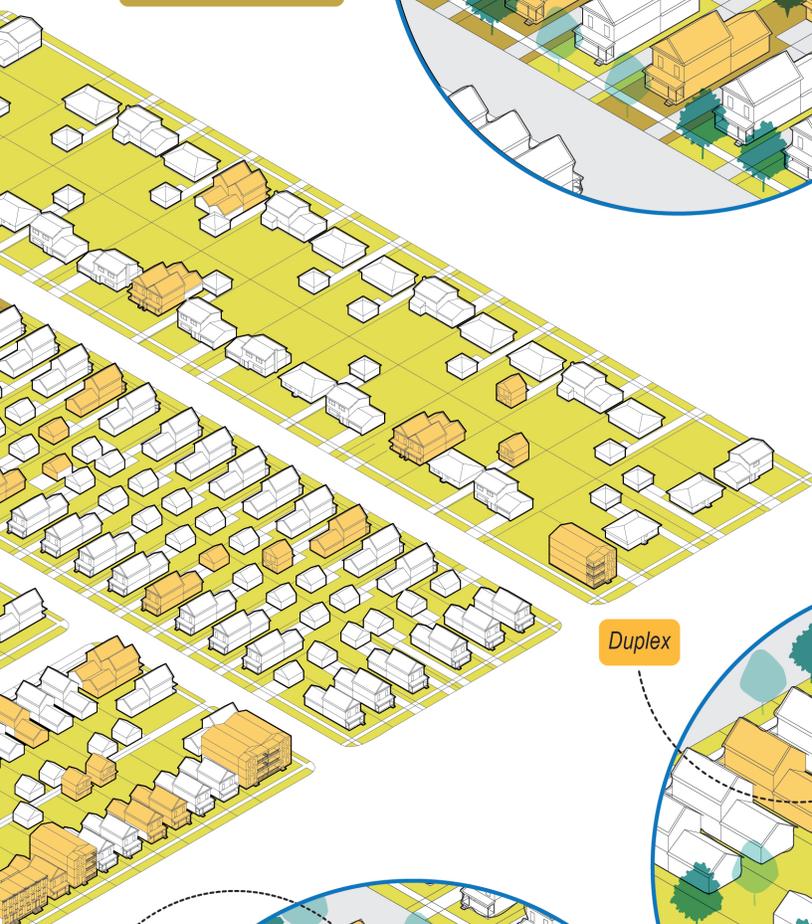
**INFILL VACANT LOTS WITH NEIGHBORHOOD APPROPRIATE DEVELOPMENT.**

Please see **RECOMMENDATION 4** for more details



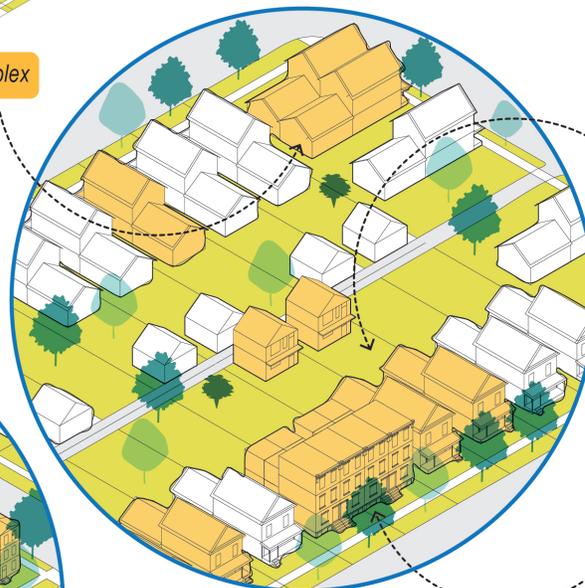
Former vacant lot with new single family home

Former vacant lot with new single family home and ADU



**ALLOW FOR A VARIETY OF HOUSING TYPES IN SINGLE FAMILY DISTRICTS.**

Please see **RECOMMENDATION 4** for more details



Duplex

Single family home with ADU



Duplex

6 unit building

Single family home with ADU

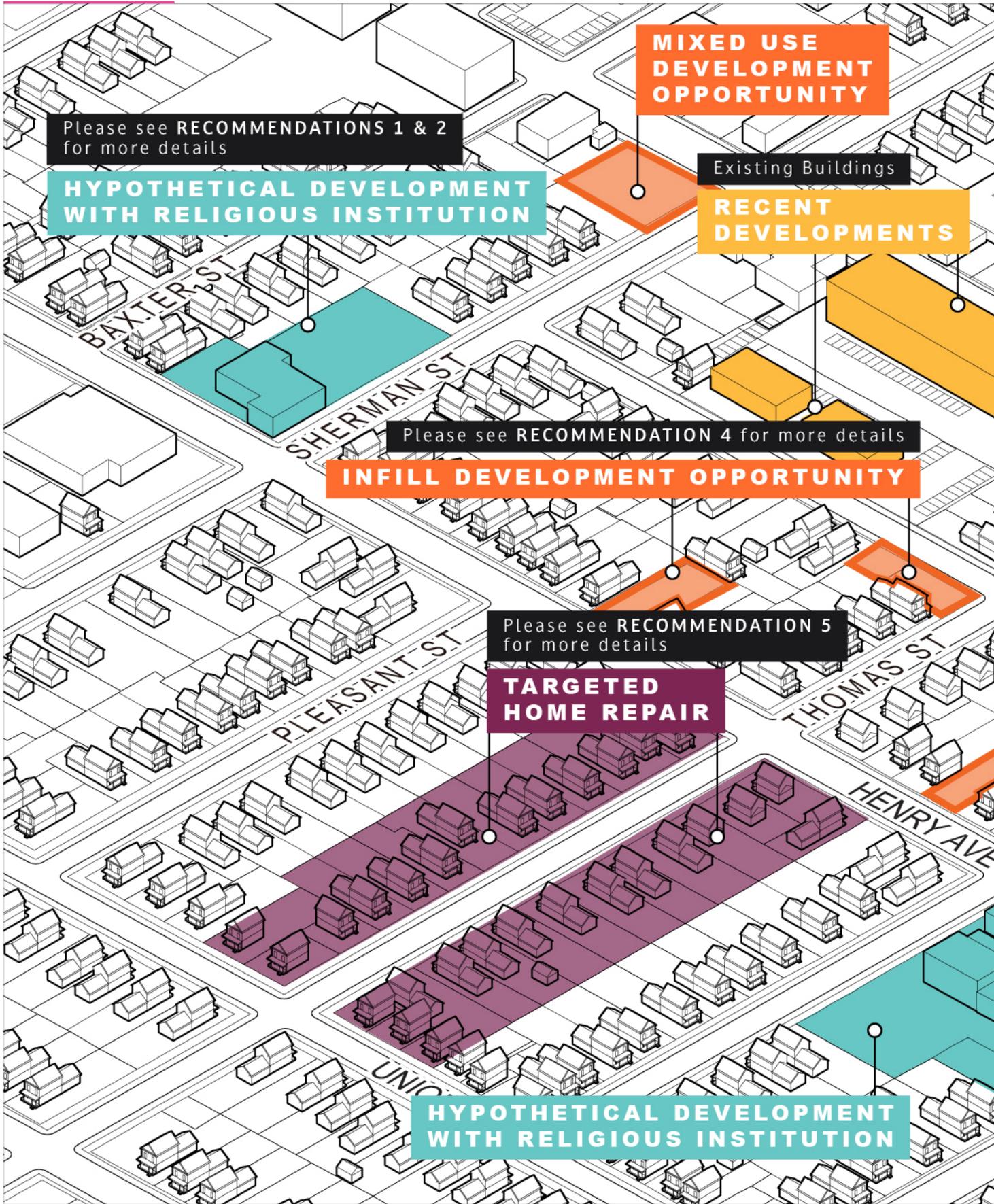
Triplex

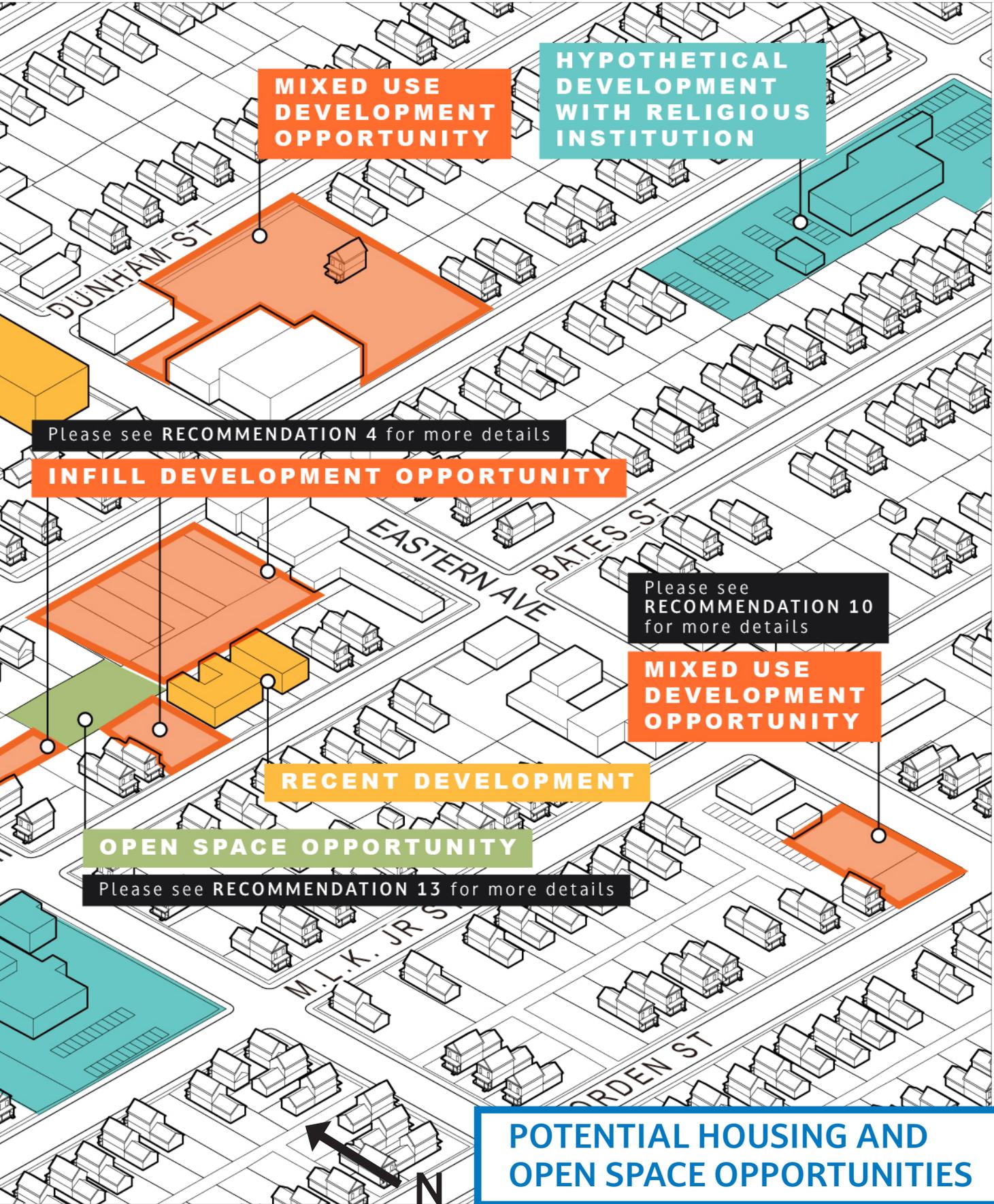
Network/Link Residential Street

Townhomes

**ALLOW FOR DENSER HOUSING ON KEY CORRIDORS.**

Please see **RECOMMENDATION 3** for more details





**MIXED USE  
DEVELOPMENT  
OPPORTUNITY**

**HYPOTHETICAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
WITH RELIGIOUS  
INSTITUTION**

Please see RECOMMENDATION 4 for more details

**INFILL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY**

Please see RECOMMENDATION 10 for more details

**MIXED USE  
DEVELOPMENT  
OPPORTUNITY**

**RECENT DEVELOPMENT**

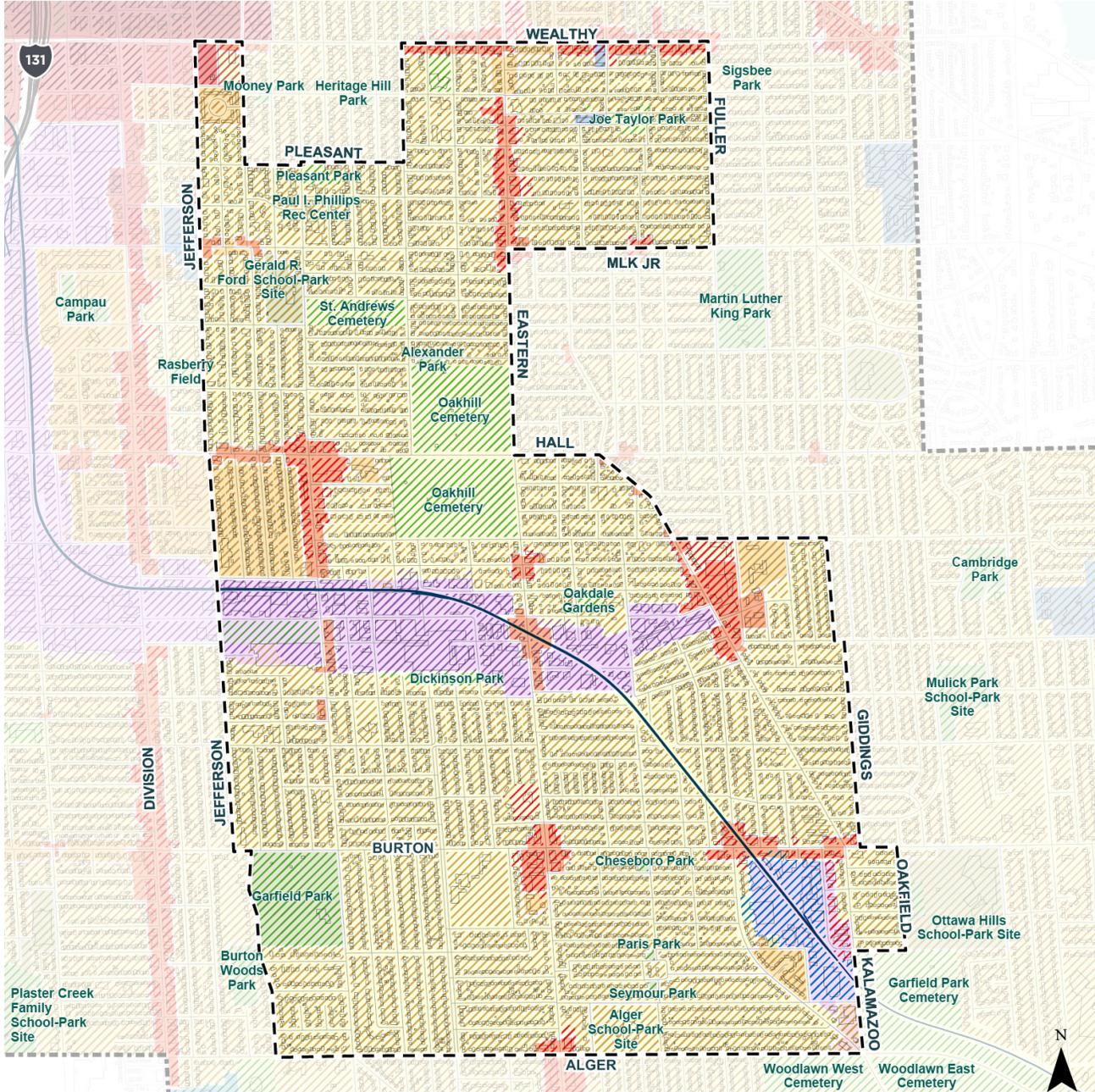
**OPEN SPACE OPPORTUNITY**

Please see RECOMMENDATION 13 for more details

**POTENTIAL HOUSING AND  
OPEN SPACE OPPORTUNITIES**

# FUTURE DEVELOPMENT CHARACTER AND ZONING

## RELATIONSHIP TO ZONING



Legend

**Future Character Areas**

- Downtown
- Neighborhood Center
- Compact Neighborhood
- Transitional Activity Center
- Campus
- Innovation Center
- Parks & Open Spaces
- Manufacturing & Logistics

**Existing Zoning**

- LDR** - Low Density Residential
- MDR** - Mixed Density Residential
- TBA** - Traditional Business Area
- TCC** - Transitional City Center
- CC** - City Center
- IT** - Industrial-Transportation
- OS** - Open Space
- PRD** - Planned Redevelopment District
- NOS** - Neighborhood Office Service

### Neighborhood Center

#### Appropriate Zoning Districts:

- Traditional Business Area
- Neighborhood Office Service
- Transit Oriented Development

### Compact Neighborhood

#### Appropriate Zoning Districts:

- Mixed-Density Residential
- Low-Density Residential
- Neighborhood Office Service
- Planned Redevelopment

### Innovation Center

#### Appropriate Zoning Districts:

- Transitional City Center
- Commercial
- Transit Oriented Development
- Mixed-Density Residential
- Planned Redevelopment

### Manufacturing and Logistics

#### Appropriate Zoning Districts:

- Industrial - Transportation
- Commercial
- Planned Redevelopment

### Campus

#### Appropriate Zoning Districts:

- Institutional Campus
- Transit Oriented Development
- Planned Redevelopment

### Parks

#### Appropriate Zoning Districts:

- Open Space

The **Future Development Character Map** and **Zoning Map** serve different purposes for the City.

**Future Development Character Map:** This map is a visionary tool that outlines the intended use of land in the future, reflecting the community's long-term goals and aspirations. It is part of a Community Master Plan and guides future development, informing decisions about growth and land use changes.

**Zoning Map:** This map is a regulatory tool that defines the current legal use of land, specifying what can be built and how land can be used right now. It divides the city into zones, each with its own set of rules and regulations regarding building types, densities, and uses.

In essence, the **Future Development Character Map** provides a guide for future development, while the **Zoning Map** enforces current land use regulations. The City will need to update its zoning to achieve this vision, and this zoning plan may help coordinate between existing zoning classifications and desired outcomes.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Action	Category	Timeframe	Responsibility - City Departments	Responsibility - External Partners
<b>GOAL 01: DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT DISPLACEMENT</b>				
1. EXPLORE PARTNERSHIPS TO BUILD AFFORDABLE HOUSING ON UNDERUTILIZED PROPERTIES.	P	S	<b>Planning, Economic Development</b>	Religious Institutions, Affordable Housing Providers, Grand Rapids Land Bank Authority
2. SUPPORT AND EXPAND A COMMUNITY LAND TRUST	P	S	Planning, <b>Community Development</b> , Economic Development	Affordable Housing Providers, Grand Rapids Land Bank Authority
3. ALLOW FOR DENSER HOUSING ON KEY CORRIDORS.	R	S	<b>Planning</b>	
4. ALLOW FOR A VARIETY OF HOUSING TYPES IN SINGLE FAMILY DISTRICTS.	R	S	<b>Planning</b>	
5. ENCOURAGE ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS (ADU) WITHIN THE NEIGHBORHOOD.	R	S	<b>Planning</b>	
<b>GOAL 02: A COMMUNITY BUILT BY ALL, FOR ALL</b>				
6. PROMOTE HOME REPAIR PROGRAMS.	P	S	<b>Community Development</b>	Neighborhood Associations, Other Community Organizations
7. PRESERVE EXISTING AFFORDABLE HOUSING.	P	S	Planning, <b>Economic Development</b>	
8. DEVELOP MECHANISMS TO PROTECT RESIDENTS FROM DISPLACEMENT.	O	S	Economic Development, <b>Community Development</b>	
9. CREATE PATHWAYS FOR RESIDENTS TO PROVIDE INPUT ON NEW DEVELOPMENT.	P	S	<b>Planning</b>	
10. SUPPORT RESIDENT-LED SMALL-SCALE DEVELOPMENT.	P	S	<b>Economic Development</b> , Planning	Grand Rapids Land Bank Authority

Action	Category	Timeframe	Responsibility - City Departments	Responsibility - External Partners
<b>GOAL 03: PRESERVE LOCAL CULTURE</b>				
11. SUPPORT NEIGHBORHOOD NODES WITH NEW MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT.	P, R	S	<b>Economic Development, Planning</b>	
12. SUPPORT IMPROVEMENTS TO BICYCLE FACILITIES, TRANSIT FACILITIES, AND PEDESTRIAN CROSSINGS.	C	Ongoing	<b>MobileGR, Engineering</b>	
13. IMPLEMENT DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR LARGE LOT INFILL THAT BUILDS UPON EXISTING DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS.	R	S	<b>Planning</b>	

**CATEGORIES**

- R:** Regulations: Actions that could be implemented through the Framework zoning ordinance rewrite or other update to city ordinances.
- C:** Capital Project: Physical improvements to city facilities and infrastructure.
- P:** Program: Programs or initiatives that may require some ongoing City support or participation.
- O:** Policy: Direction used on an ongoing basis to guide City decisions.

**TIMEFRAME**

- S:** Short-term (1-5 years)
  - M:** Medium-term (5-10 years)
  - L:** Long-term (10-20 years)
- Bold text** indicates who is leading the effort

