North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood

*Omaha, Nebraska*
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North Downtown:
Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood
Creating Places Where People Want to Be

North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood

Omaha, NE

I. Executive Summary

Over the course of the next several years, North Downtown will evolve into one of Omaha’s most exciting and active neighborhoods. The neighborhood will be characterized by mid-rise buildings and urban character, whereby buildings, and the uses contained within them, address the street and activate the sidewalk. New development will be pedestrian-oriented in order to encourage walking and vibrant street-level activity. A variety of uses will be encouraged, and they will be mixed both horizontally and vertically. Active uses such as restaurants and retail will be located on the first level of buildings, while office and residential uses will be encouraged on upper floors. Residential options will range from affordable units and apartments to lofts, condos, and live-work units.

Omaha’s newest urban neighborhood is the result of a year and a half study commissioned by the City of Omaha and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce. The North Downtown Conceptual Redevelopment Study, as it was originally called, was undertaken in order to establish a redevelopment plan for Omaha’s “front door.” The 80-block Study Area is located astride the Cuming Street/Abbott Drive corridor, between Omaha’s new Riverfront and Creighton University’s expanded campus. Presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to proactively guide development in this highly visible location, the study process examined a variety of potential build-out scenarios for the area and ultimately created an implementation strategy to move the plan from vision to reality.

The planning process began in November 2003 and concluded in April 2005 with the unveiling of the final plan document. Throughout the process, a number of meetings where held with the clients, steering committee, major stakeholders, and the general public. Initial meetings were very broad in scope, while later meetings were more focused and served to further refine details from previous meetings. The result was a plan that achieved wide-spread consensus and provided a framework for future growth and development within the Study Area.

Based on the results of the meetings, input from the steering committee, and the market assessment done as part of the planning process, it was determined that North Downtown should evolve into Omaha’s newest and most exciting neighborhood. This neighborhood will be unlike any that currently exists within the metropolitan area. Instead of being auto-oriented and dominated by large set-backs, surface parking lots, and one or two uses, this area will transform, over time, into a very lively, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented urban neighborhood. The neighborhood will develop around two main corridors. Sixteenth Street will evolve into a major north-south mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented corridor, while Webster Street, which links Creighton University with the Riverfront, will evolve into the major east-west mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented corridor. The intersection of these two corridors will be North Downtown’s “100% corner,” and is the preferred location for a large pioneering project or land use anchor such as a multi-block residential project, a new museum, or a community ballpark. Other significant features identified in the plan include an artist live/work district, an office/light industrial district, and a corporate headquarters/urban office park site.

In order to bring the vision for North Downtown to reality, the planning process established a comprehensive implementation strategy. This strategy examines both public sector and private sector initiatives and actions that are necessary to initiate and propel the desired level of redevelopment activity. Areas of focus include strategic policies, procedural requirements, regulatory initiatives, and infrastructure investments. The ultimate strategy allows for a phased approach to be undertaken by both the City of Omaha and the private sector development community. Ultimate build-out of North Downtown could occur within 10 – 15 years.
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood
II. Introduction/ Project Overview

The North Downtown Conceptual Redevelopment Study was undertaken in order to develop a conceptual redevelopment plan for the “North Downtown”/EPA Brownfields Assessment Study Area. This 80-block area, located on the north edge of Downtown Omaha, functions as Omaha’s “front door,” and is positioned for significant redevelopment activity. The Study Area is located between the Qwest Center Omaha and Creighton University, and is bounded by Seward Street on the North, 17th Street on the West, I-480 on the South, and Riverfront Drive on the East. The study area is approximately 290 acres in size and contains 73 property owners and 236 parcels of property. (Map 1)

The Study Area is located at the confluence of new development and multiple visions for Omaha, and represents a critical element in the City’s downtown redevelopment efforts. The goal of the study was to provide a range of development scenarios and conceptual development ideas for Omaha’s “front door.” These scenarios examined the various potential build-out conditions that could occur within this area. Based on stakeholder input, a variety of uses for the area were examined and a range of questions and issues were addressed, including the desired general character of the area; appropriate residential unit types; various densities of development; urban design components; and the implications of these various concepts. This analysis led to a redevelopment plan and an understanding of the implementation steps that will be necessary to move the plan from vision into reality.

Adjacent Redevelopment as a Catalyst

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the Study Area, it must be viewed in the context of Omaha’s continuing redevelopment efforts. Omaha has traditionally been a river city. During its early years, the city grew north and south along the Missouri River. With continued growth during the early- to mid-1900’s, the city developed in a westward manner. Currently, the city extends from the west bank of the Missouri River to 204th Street, approximately 17 miles to the west. Although the city has experienced explosive westward growth during the past 50 years, the City has been very proactive in maintaining the downtown core as a central focus and hub of activity for the entire metro area.

Early Downtown Redevelopment

During the 1960’s, several buildings in the city’s former meat and produce market were saved from demolition. These buildings, over time, were renovated into lofts, restaurants, pubs, and unique stores. This mixed-use area is now called the Old Market (photo 3), and is currently one of the City’s, and State’s, top tourist attractions.

During the 1970’s, the city took the initiative and developed the Gene Leahy Mall, from 10th Street to 15th Street. The concept for the mall was to develop an open space linking the core of downtown with the Missouri River. The project was an immediate success and spurred several public and private development projects, including construction of the W. Dale Clark Main Library, the Peter Kiewit Conference Center and State Office Building, the Central Park Plaza office towers, and an office tower and computer center that are currently occupied by Qwest.

Early Riverfront Development

During the 1980’s and 1990’s, corporate giant ConAgra Foods, Inc. threatened to pull its headquarters operations out of Omaha. As an incentive to keep ConAgra Foods, the State passed a series of tax incentives for businesses and the City and the private sector offered a downtown redevelopment site for a
new headquarters. This site was strategically located between the Gene Leahy Mall’s eastern terminus and the Missouri River, but contained several historic buildings located in the Jobbers’ Canyon National Register District. Ultimately, Jobbers’ Canyon was demolished, and ConAgra Foods built a new headquarters campus adjacent to the downtown Omaha riverfront (photo 4). Omaha lost several buildings that may have been prime redevelopment candidates, but, for the first time in decades, gained access to the riverfront in the downtown area. Several additional development projects ensued, including multiple loft conversions in the Old Market, the renovation of a Union Pacific warehouse into the Harriman Dispatch Center, and several new hotels along 10th Street.

Downtown Northeast Redevelopment Plan
During the late 1990’s, additional growth was directed into the downtown core. The City of Omaha established the 33-block Downtown Northeast Redevelopment Plan, which covers an area generally from I-480 south to Douglas Street and from the Missouri River to approximately 17th Street. The plan was developed in order to assist two major downtown redevelopment projects. The First National Bank of Omaha project consisted of a new technology center, a city-owned parking structure, and an office tower. The $200 million Tower at First National Center, completed in 2003, is 633 feet in height and is the tallest building between Chicago and Denver (photo 5).

The Omaha World Herald’s Freedom Center (photo 6) was a $135 million project that consisted of a printing press facility, a paper roll storage building, new office space, and a parking structure for the region’s largest daily newspaper. Other projects that have occurred within or adjacent to the redevelopment area include construction of the Roman Hruska Federal Courthouse, a $60 million renovation of the Zorinsky Federal Building, for-sale and for-rent residential projects (photo 7), and streetscape improvements along Capitol Avenue (photo 8). In addition, Union Pacific recently completed construction of its new $260 million 19-story corporate headquarters (photo 9) and 1,280 stall parking garage, and work is nearing completion on the $90-million Holland Performing Arts Center (photo 10) that fronts onto the Gene Leahy Mall.

Back to the River
Concurrently with the downtown northeast redevelopment projects, Omaha has maintained the momentum begun in the 1970’s to get back to the Missouri River. Former U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey secured funding for his “Back to the River” initiative, which includes greenways, trails, and open spaces along both the Nebraska and Iowa sides of the river. The centerpiece of Kerrey’s initiative is a $23 million pedestrian bridge, to be constructed north of the I-480 Bridge. This bridge is intended to be a visual landmark for Omaha, similar to the arch in St. Louis.

The trails along both sides of the river will also connect many new and proposed developments. Rick’s Boatyard Café (photo 11), a large destination restaurant with both indoor and outdoor seating, is located at Lewis and Clark Landing, the site of the former Asarco lead refinery (photo 12). This site was cleared and capped, and is now preserved as permanent open space along the river. The National Park Service constructed its Regional Headquarters between the landing and the future pedestrian bridge. Immediately to the north of the pedestrian bridge will be the future home of Riverfront Place. Riverfront Place will consist of two 13-story condominium towers, twenty-seven low-rise town homes, and commercial uses.

North of Riverfront Place is the site of Gallup’s new $81 million Riverfront Campus (photo 13). This project is the home of Gallup corporate offices, Gallup University, and a child development facility. This project is...
significant because it brings several thousand executives to Omaha each year from around the country (and the world) for leadership development training. The campus is bordered on the north by Miller’s Landing (photo 14), a passive park with docking facilities for the River City Star, which provides riverboat excursions up and down the Missouri River.

Qwest Center Omaha
The most eye-catching project along the riverfront is the Qwest Center Omaha (photo 15), a new arena and convention center. This $291 million project is located along 10th Street, on the site of the former Union Pacific shops and rail yards. This project, with its ultra-modern architecture, is intended to spur additional economic development activity within the immediate area. A new 450-room convention center hotel, Hilton Omaha (photo 16), has been constructed immediately to the west of the Qwest Center, and is connected to it via an enclosed skywalk.

Creighton University Master Plan
Creighton University, which is located up the hill and to the west of the Qwest Center Omaha, has recently completed a new campus master plan. This plan will guide future growth and development of the Jesuit University for years to come. The plan designates 17th Street as the new eastern boundary of the campus. Early projects undertaken by Creighton University include a world-class collegiate soccer stadium (photo 17) and new student housing (photo 18). Additional campus projects are forthcoming.

North Omaha Redevelopment
To the north of downtown, a substantial amount of redevelopment activity has occurred in North Omaha. The North Omaha Business Park and Concord Square contain light industrial uses, market-rate residential units, and a park on the site of a former public housing project (photo 19 and 20). In addition, the City and non-profit organizations are actively involved in rehabilitating existing homes and building new homes in the neighborhoods immediately to the north of downtown Omaha (photos 21 – 24). The Long School development, to include new neighborhood-oriented retail, is currently in its initial stages.
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | INTRODUCTION/PROJECT OVERVIEW

1. **Photo 5** – The Tower at First National Center
2. **Photo 6** – World Herald Freedom Center
3. **Photo 7** – 1000 Dodge Condominiums
4. **Photo 8** – Wagon Train Park, First National Technology Center, and Zerody Federal Building Renovation
5. **Photo 9** – Union Pacific Center
6. **Photo 10** – Holland Performing Arts Center
7. **Photo 11** – Bob’s Boatyard Café and Lewis and Clark Landing
8. **Photo 12** – Labor Sculpture, National Park Service Regional Headquarters, and Gallup University
9. **Photo 13** – Gallup University
10. **Photo 14** – Miller’s Landing
11. **Photo 15** – Qwest Center Omaha
12. **Photo 16** – Hilton Omaha
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | INTRODUCTION/PROJECT OVERVIEW

- Photo 17 – Michael G. Morrison S.J. Soccer Stadium
- Photo 18 – New Creighton University Student Housing
- Photo 19 – Concord Square Park and Single Family Housing
- Photo 20 – Concord Square New Single Family Housing Construction
- Photo 21 – Educare Child Development Facility
- Photo 22 – Kellom Greenbelt
- Photo 23 – Jekshen Auto Body Shop
- Photo 24 – New North Omaha Senior Housing
Infrastructure Improvements
In order to accommodate the Qwest Center Omaha and other new development within the area, a new network of streets was designed on the north side of downtown. These streets extend the city’s street grid into the former Union Pacific Yards site and provide a new route to and from the airport along the realigned Cumming Street – Abbott Drive corridor (photo 25). This corridor has received millions of dollars in streetscape improvements, and provides a grand entrance into the city from Eppley Airfield, which had 3.8 million passengers in 2004.
North Downtown Study Area
As can be seen, downtown development, especially along the riverfront, has exploded in recent years. Omaha has accelerated its quest to get back to the Missouri River, and has been quite successful with its mix of public and private sector development projects and open space development. Although redevelopment successes have been plentiful, the North Downtown Study Area has not enjoyed the success that adjacent areas have. As shown by Map 2 – Adjacent Redevelopment, the North Downtown Study Area is the proverbial “hole in the donut.” It is surrounded by active redevelopment to the east, south and west, and Eppley Airfield is located only a short drive to the northeast. Because of the area’s prominence as it relates to downtown, its redevelopment potential, and its function as a “front door” into the City, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce and the City of Omaha desired to proactively address future development within this key area (map 2).
INTRODUCTION/PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Funding
The initial step in this process occurred when the City was awarded a $150,000 Supplemental EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant to assess the environmental conditions of properties in the North Downtown Study Area. The purpose of the study was to determine the presence of any Brownfield sites that could inhibit the redevelopment of properties within the study area. The objective of the study was to identify those sites, if any, that met the Brownfields definition and assess if and how they could be brought back into productive use.

“A brownfield site is defined as an abandoned, idle, or under-used industrial or commercial facility where expansion, redevelopment, or reuse is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination”.

The original boundaries of the Brownfields Study were Seward Street on the north, Izard Street on the south, 9th Street on the east, and 16th Street on the west. A short time after the grant was awarded, the City received a $40,000 Economic Development Administration Grant to help fund the North Downtown Conceptual Redevelopment Plan. Because the work scopes and the study areas of the Brownfields project and the Planning project were so closely aligned, a decision was made to create an expanded area whereby the scope of each study was increased to include the area of the other study. The entire Study Area became known as the Expanded District and took on the boundaries described earlier in the report (Map 1).

Funding under the Brownfields grant was used to assess the environmental conditions of the Expanded District. Funding from the EDA, the City of Omaha ($20,000), and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce ($64,000) was used to conduct the planning portion of the study for the Expanded District. The efficiency of using sequential studies funded by multiple sources allowed the City to expand the geographic coverage of each study for the benefit of the community.

The results of the Brownfield study are discussed in Section IV, Existing Conditions.

Early History of North Downtown
The North Downtown Study Area is located immediately to the north of Omaha’s downtown core. The eastern portion of this area was developed by the Union Pacific Railroad into shops and a roundhouse for the railroad in the mid- to late-1860’s (photo 26). The western portion of the area initially developed as a residential area, and transitioned into a warehouse district during the wholesale jobbing boom of the early 1900’s. This boom was a result of Omaha’s unique position on the Missouri River and the U.P. mainline, and its role as a major distribution center for Nebraska and points west.

The first large building to be constructed in the predominantly residential area was the Ford Plant (Tip Top Building), located at the northeast corner of 16th and Cuming Street. In 1917, a second large building (the M.F. Shafer Building, now known as the O’Keefe Building) was constructed at the northeast corner of 17th and Webster Street. Over time, the neighborhood transitioned from its residential base to one- to five-story industrial, commercial, and warehouse buildings (photo 27).
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EXISTING CONDITIONS
III. Existing Conditions

The North Downtown Study Area is dominated by vacant land, vacant buildings, and surface parking lots. What little development that exists within the area is concentrated along 16th Street near the Study Area's western boundary with Creighton University and along Nicholas Street in the industrial area located on the north side of the Study Area. New development, in the form of the Qwest Center Omaha and the Hilton Omaha, has recently taken place along the Study Area's southern boundary. The following section will detail the composition of the Study Area, including demographics and key physical features, and assess both general market conditions and real estate opportunities.

Demographics
The following information is based on 1990 and 2000 Census data and demographic data provided by the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce. The data was collected for the Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and for Downtown Omaha, an area encompassed within a 2 mile radius from the intersection of 24th and Dodge Street. The downtown area boundary allows for complete geographic coverage of the North Downtown Study Area. Table 1 features a demographic summary of the Omaha area and Downtown Omaha.

Population and Household Growth
The Greater Omaha area, as well as Downtown Omaha, has experienced significant growth over the last decade. Within the Omaha MSA, which includes Douglas, Sarpy, Pottawattamie, Washington, and Cass Counties, the population grew 12% between 1990 and 2000, from 685,798 in 1990 to 787,041 in 2000. During the same time period, the number of households in the MSA increased 14% from 257,286 to 294,502. In 2004, the population count for the MSA stood at 801,189. This represents a 4.5% increase from the year 2000. By the year 2010, the MSA is expected to gain an additional 67,000 people.

The Downtown area, roughly encompassed within a 2-mile radius of the intersection of 24th Street and Dodge Street, has experienced growth parallel to that of the Omaha MSA. In 2000, Downtown Omaha had a population of 62,078 and 28,870 households. By the year 2008, the Downtown is projected to add another 1,800 people to its population.

Age and Household Types
The empty-nester population (persons between the ages of 45 and 64) is the fastest growing demographic segment in the MSA and Downtown. In the MSA, from 1990 to 2000, this age cohort increased nearly 34% from 122,172 in 1990 to 163,482 in 2000. In the Downtown area, the 2003 estimated population was 11,553. By the year 2008, this cohort is expected to grow 16% to 13,373.

While in general, the Omaha MSA is gaining more baby boomers and empty nesters, the Downtown area is also attracting young professionals. Individuals between the ages of 21 and 34 account for nearly 30% of the Downtown’s population. In the balance of the MSA, this age group represents roughly 20% of the population. According to projections by the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, young professionals will continue to make up a significant portion of the Downtown’s population. This concentration will be enhanced by the presence of Creighton University and to a lesser extent, Gallup Organization and other corporate employers.
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS

Table 1: Demographic Summary

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<th>2000</th>
<th>2004 (est.)</th>
<th>% change</th>
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<td>Households</td>
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<td>105,300</td>
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Source: U.S. Census, S.B. Friedman & Company and Demographics Now

Downtown Omaha

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<td>3,346</td>
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Source: U.S. Census, Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and S.B. Friedman & Company

Key Age Cohorts (Year 2000 Comparison)

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<th>Omaha MSA</th>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>Downtown Omaha</th>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>MSA Balance</th>
<th>% of population</th>
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<td>Students &amp; Young Professionals (ages 21 to 34)</td>
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<td>17,580</td>
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<td>Empty Nesters (ages 45 to 64)</td>
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<td>21.2%</td>
<td>10,034</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>141,697</td>
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Source: U.S. Census, Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and S.B. Friedman & Company
Employment Growth and New Facilities
With employment increasing by more than 30% between 1990 and 2002, the Omaha MSA has added more than 100,000 jobs to its employment base over the last 12 years. Most of the growth in employment came from the service and trade industries which each account for more than half of the MSA’s non-agricultural employment base. With the addition of Qwest Center Omaha, Union Pacific Center, and other development, Downtown Omaha is experiencing a spike in job growth as well. Currently, Downtown Omaha contains over 40,000 jobs.

Context Analysis
The study area is strategically located in the heart of Omaha’s redevelopment activity. The downtown core is located directly to the south of the area and is currently experiencing a substantial amount of development, including a new Performing Arts Center, residential projects, and the recently completed First National Tower and Union Pacific Center. (Map 3)

The riverfront lies immediately to the east, and has also experienced a vast amount of activity, including the Qwest Center Omaha, Lewis and Clark Landing, the National Park Service Regional Headquarters, the Gallup Campus, and the soon to be constructed Riverfront Place Condominiums and Pedestrian Bridge, all connected by a boardwalk and riverfront trail.

Immediately to the west of the study area, Creighton University has undertaken a master planning process and developed a framework for development that will extend the campus east to 17th Street. The University has recently completed construction of a premier collegiate soccer stadium and upper class student housing, and new residential and parking projects will ensue.
To the north of Creighton University, a substantial amount of redevelopment activity has occurred on the site of the former Logan Fontenelle Housing Project and within adjacent neighborhood areas. The housing project has been transformed into the North Omaha Business Park and Concord Square, a project that consists of businesses, residential units, and a park. New housing is being built in adjacent areas, and the historic 24\textsuperscript{th} Street corridor will be revitalized with new streetscape amenities and other investments.

The study area is important because it functions as the gateway to Omaha from Eppley Airfield, and is the location where all of the adjacent redevelopment activity merges. If left unplanned, these redevelopment areas will remain disparate and Omaha's gateway will not live up to its potential. Conversely, a plan, with implementation mechanisms, will ensure that that this area develops as a cohesive, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use district that lives up to its role as Omaha’s “front door.”

Site Inventory and Analysis
In order to gain a better understanding of the Study Area, an inventory and analysis was undertaken. This consisted of a Site Analysis, a Transportation Analysis, an Environmental Analysis, and a Regulatory Analysis. These analyses occurred primarily during the early stages of the study process, but were updated periodically as new information became available.

Site Analysis
The Site Analysis consisted of the examination of major physical features within the Study Area, including existing buildings, roads, open space, parking, land use, and property ownership, and is detailed below:

- **Study Area Base Map** – The Study Area Base Map is the basis for all ensuing work efforts. This map documents the existing conditions within the study area, including streets, parking lots, vacant land, existing buildings, and the proposed Creighton University Master Plan. The Study Area is outlined in red on this map. (Map 4)

- **Building Figure-Ground Map** – This map examines the urban fabric of the Study Area (existing buildings and other built structures). As can be seen, there are two pockets of existing fabric, one along the 16\textsuperscript{th} street corridor and another adjacent to and north of the Hot Shops (13\textsuperscript{th} and Nicholas). New structures, such as the Qwest Center Omaha, Hilton Omaha, and Gallup can be seen just outside the Study Area boundaries. The lack of significant existing fabric within the area creates a tremendous opportunity to recreate the urban feel of the downtown area, located immediately to the south. New structures can be designed to emphasize a mixed-use, pedestrian oriented nature for the district and help connect it to adjacent areas. (Map 5)

- **Road System Figure-Ground Map** – The existing roadway network is fairly intact. The study area is served by a network of streets laid in a grid pattern. This network ties directly into the downtown area on the south. To the north, the grid diminishes in the industrial area north of Nicholas Street. South of Cuming Street, the grid has been modified into mega-blocks (to accommodate large parking lots) adjacent to the Qwest Center Omaha. With the exception of these mega-blocks, the street grid facilitates pedestrian movement and makes for a relatively human-scaled district. (Map 6)

- **Open Space Figure-Ground Map** – With the exception of the pockets of buildings along 16\textsuperscript{th} Street and around the Hot Shops, a majority of the area is under-developed. These open spaces, vacant lots, and
parking lots present a unique opportunity to redevelop/re-establish the urban fabric within this area. Large surface parking lots and vacant lots should not be looked upon as end uses, and instead as land holdings until the time is right to develop them with mixed-use structures. (Map 7)
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North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS

Map 4 - Study Area Base Map

Map 5 - Building Figure-Ground Map
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS

Map 6 - Road System Figure-Ground Map

Map 7 - Open Space Figure-Ground Map
Parking Map – Large portions of the study area are given over to the storage of vehicles. This is especially true on the east edge of the study area, adjacent to the Qwest Center Omaha, and on the south side of the study area, adjacent to the downtown area and I-480. Many streets on the west side of the area allow on-street parking, while streets on the east are devoted to moving traffic. Addressing the present and future demand for parking will be critical to the success of this area. (Map 8)

Land Use Map – The study area contains a variety of land uses. The vast majority of the uses in the area consist of parking lots, vacant lots, and vacant buildings. Industrial uses, warehousing and self-storage are also prominent uses within the area. In addition, the area also contains retail, automotive, restaurant/entertainment, and civic uses. A very small amount of residential (SF and MF) is located on the western edge of the study area. It is anticipated that the Study Area will transition from these uses to true mixed-use (retail, office, and residential) in the future. (Map 9)

Property Ownership Map – The study area contains 73 different property owners. Ownership ranges from one lot to several tracts containing multiple acres. The largest property owner in the area is the City of Omaha, with 88 acres. Union Pacific, Mastercraft Furniture Co., the Omaha Belt Line, and Iron Horse Properties each own ten acres or more within the area. Property consolidation and/or acquisition will be necessary for redevelopment activity to occur within the Study Area. (Map 10)

Transportation Analysis
The Transportation Analysis examined traffic flow and volume within the Study Area. Because of the recent nature of street reconstruction within this area, changes are not always reflected in the data.

2002 Traffic Flow Map – The 2002 traffic flow map details average daily traffic in vehicles per day for major streets within the study area. The traffic counts were taken prior to completion of the area’s new roadway network (Cuming Street/Abbott Drive, 10th Street, etc.). As a result, existing traffic counts are dated and do not reflect existing traffic volumes and patterns. Arrows on the respective streets reflect the present direction of traffic flow. (Map 11)
Cuming Street/Burt Street Reconstruction – Cuming Street was converted to two-way traffic flow from 27th (U.S. 75) to 10th Street as part of the street changes accompanying the arena / convention center. The segment from 27th to 30th was not converted. As such, Burt Street remains a high volume roadway detracting from the safe movement of pedestrians between the main Creighton campus and the Medical Center. Upcoming improvements include the following:

- Reconstruct the southbound on-ramp to U.S. 75 to bridge over Burt Street.
- Convert Cuming Street to two-way traffic flow from 27th to 30th, thus completing the continuity of Cuming Street from Saddle Creek Road to 10th Street.
- Reconstruct the 30th and Cuming Street intersection to provide adequate capacity for the future and to accommodate the Cuming and Burt Street changes.
- Convert Burt Street to two-way traffic from 16th to 30th Streets.

These improvements will complete the roadway network serving the Study Area, and will facilitate traffic movement to and from the district.

Environmental Analysis
The Environmental Analysis examined a variety of features within the Study Area. These features included the location of various utilities (water, sewer, telecommunications, etc.) and the results of the environmental analysis that was performed as an input to this study. This analysis resulted in an understanding of potential site impediments and opportunities.

Utility/Infrastructure Maps – An inventory of all utilities located within the Study Area was undertaken. As shown by the following maps, the area is very well served by existing utilities. Future development may require the relocation of existing utilities or the minimal extension (typically one or two blocks at most) of a utility if a specific property is not served. (Maps 12 – 21)
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North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS
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Map 15 – OPPD (electric) map
Map 16 – Energy Systems map
Map 17 – AT&T map
Omaha Brownfields Assessment – As previously stated, an EPA Brownfields Assessment of the Study Area was performed as input to the planning study. As part of this process, a list of potentially impaired properties was established. (Map 22)

This list identifies properties in three categories – Highest, Medium and Lowest Potential Impact

Based on the results of the Brownfields Study, the following conclusions were made:

- Only four (4) sites within the study area had environmental impairment of such a nature that it required EPA action. Of the four sites, only the former Economy Products site remains a Brownfields site because it has contamination remaining that could affect its future use. If the contamination is reduced or eliminated by remediation, the future use of the property could be unrestricted.

- Only six (6) sites within the study area have potential subsurface environmental impairment resulting from historic leaking underground storage tanks. These sites are not considered of concern because the existence of the impairment should not inhibit redevelopment. Any future action necessary to remediate the impairment of the sites would be relatively straight-forward and inexpensive.

- Only two (2) sites within the study area have been the subject of past violations of hazardous waste regulations. These sites are not considered of concern because it is unlikely the violations have caused actual environmental impairment.
In general, there appears to be no significant impact to redevelopment in the 80-block study area resulting from perceived or actual environmental impairment. One particular area having properties of documented historical impairment, 11th Street north of Nicholas, is currently zoned industrial. If the area remains industrial in the future, then the former Economy Products building would need some remediation, but only to the extent necessary to satisfy current health standards for an industrial setting (photo 28). If the area is targeted for commercial or residential zoning in the future, more extensive remediation of the building would be required. If the building is targeted for future demolition (as discussed later in this report), removal of the building materials must be handled in a safe manner due to the contamination remaining at the site.

Regulatory Analysis
The Regulatory Analysis examined a variety of planning issues relating to the Study Area. These included a review of current Comprehensive Plan recommendations, an analysis of existing zoning within the area, identification of historic or landmark structures within the area, and a discussion on parks and open space issues.

Comprehensive Plan - The Comprehensive Plan mentions little about the North Downtown Study Area. This is not surprising considering the plan was completed prior to the recent wave of redevelopment activity on the riverfront. At the time of the plan’s most recent revision, few envisioned the true potential of the North Downtown Study Area. Key items mentioned in the plan, as they relate to the Study Area, include the following:

- The Future Land Use Map identifies industrial and civic/institutional uses as the preferred use in the area in the year 2040.
- An “on-road” bike route is identified for Cuming Street, connecting the neighborhoods to the west (Gifford Park, etc.) with the riverfront. True to plan, as Cuming Street has been reconstructed, a widened sidewalk has been included in its design.
- The area was declared blighted by the City Council in June of 1993.
- The area is located in a low- and moderate-income area.
- The area is located within the federal Enterprise Zone boundaries.
- From a historic transportation perspective, a streetcar ran north-south along 16th Street, providing direct access to the area.
Zoning Regulations - The Study Area is comprised of 8 separate zoning districts, which allow for a variety of uses. These districts include:

- R7 (Medium Density Multiple-Family Residential District)
- R8 (High Density Multiple-Family Residential District)
- GC (General Commercial District)
- CBD (Central Business District)
- DS (Downtown Service District)
- GI (General Industrial District)
- HI (Heavy Industrial District)
- RR (Rail Road District)

These districts range from dense residential districts to mixed-use districts such as Downtown Service and Central Business District, to General and Heavy Industrial Districts. The predominant zoning category is Central Business District, followed by Heavy Industrial and Downtown Service. Based on the desires of the Steering Committee, the area will probably transition to Downtown Service and/or Central Business District, or include an overlay district to ensure appropriate urban design. (Map 23)
Landmarks and Historic Preservation – Although the Study Area was the site of some of Omaha’s earliest development and contains a large number of city blocks and buildings, only one structure in the area is listed on the National Register. The City of Omaha Planning Department has building permit data and survey information for several structures in the area, but an in-depth historical inventory and analysis has never been prepared. As new development occurs within the Study Area, existing structures will need to be evaluated for their historical and architectural significance on an “as needed” basis. The O’Keefe Elevator Building (Schaeffer Building), located at the northeast corner of 17th and Webster, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (photo 29). No other buildings within the study area are listed on the Local or National Register. City Planning staff have identified several additional buildings that possess significant historical qualities. These include the following:

- The Tip Top/Ford Building at the northeast corner of 16th and Cuming
- Fire Station #4 located north of the Tip Top Building
- The warehouse/industrial buildings located adjacent to the Hot Shops Studio/Gallery at 13th and Nicholas
- The concrete frame with brick infill industrial building located north of the intersection of 11th and Nicholas
- The commercial building located on the northeast corner of 16th and California

National Register designation offers no protection from demolition unless federal dollars are to be used. Because no locally designated buildings are located within the study area, historic buildings are offered little in the way of protection if their owner desires to alter or demolish them.

Parks and Open Space - The Study Area is located adjacent to significant green space resources. To the west is Creighton University and the open spaces associated with its campus. To the east is the riverfront with Lewis and Clark Landing and Miller’s Landing. Immediately to the south of the Study Area is Wagon Train Park, located between 14th Street and 15th Street north of Capitol Avenue. Kellom Greenbelt, an open space buffer between residential uses to the north and industrial uses to the south, is the only designated park located within the Study area. This park was recently renovated, with a rebuilt trail, park equipment, and additional connections to the neighborhoods to the north. The greenbelt runs from 16th Street on the east to Logan Fontenelle Park on the west (at the far NW corner of the study area).
Physical Features

The Study Area has a long history and contains a variety of attributes, including buildings, streetscapes, and architectural details, which speak to the unique nature of this area. The following section seeks to capture the essence of the Study Area’s existing urban fabric through multiple photographs. The following thumbnail photographs will document current redevelopment activity, existing architecture, and road corridors within the Study Area.
Existing Conditions

Thumbnail Photographs of Current Redevelopment Activity within the Study Area

Photo 30 – First National Bank Surface Parking Lot

Photo 31 – Energy Systems

Photo 32 – Model "T" Apartments/InPlay

Photo 33 – Union Pacific Child Development Facility

Photo 34 – Hot Shops Art Center

Photo 35 – Entrance Monument at 10th and Cuming
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS

Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Architecture within the Study Area (photos 36 – 55)
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Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Road Corridors within the Study Area (photos 56 – 71)
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS

Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Road Corridors within the Study Area (photos 73 - 92)

12th Street (Looking North)

13th Street (Looking North)

13th Street (Looking South)

14th Street (Looking South)
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North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS

Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Road Corridors within the Study Area (photos 93 - 105)
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood | EXISTING CONDITIONS

Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Road Corridors within the Study Area (photos 106 – 121)
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Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Road Corridors within the Study Area (photos 122 - 135)
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Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Road Corridors within the Study Area (photos 136 - 152)
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EXISTING CONDITIONS

Thumbnail Photographs of Existing Road Corridors within the Study Area (photos 153 - 164)

Izard Street (Looking West)

Izard Street (Looking East)

Nicholas Street (Looking West)

Nicholas Street (Looking East)
General Market Assessment

The downtown is drawing in a mix of new residential, commercial, entertainment, and public/institutional uses that is attracting more residents and visitors to the area. The larger anchor users, including Qwest Center Omaha and Creighton University, are expected to be catalysts in bringing more development and activity to the downtown area.

Residential Market

The City of Omaha, on average, adds between 2,500 and 3,000 residential units to its housing stock per year. Historically, only a small portion of this growth was attributed to units developed downtown. Over the last 15 years, Downtown Omaha gained only 1,500 units, which averages about 100 units per year. However, local developers suggest that the downtown can absorb as many as 250 units per year. With only two major residential developments completed over the last three years (Old Market Lofts and Drake Court Apartments) totaling 398 units, the current demand exceeds the supply, as evidenced in the pricing of the new residential developments in progress. Riverfront Place, one of the most anticipated residential developments within the Downtown, has 105 units priced at $240,000 while townhouse units start at $340,000. The price per square foot for these units ranges between $230 and $240 per square foot. Other new condominium units, such as the Beebe Runyan Lofts and the Rows of SoMa, have similar pricing with asking prices as high as $237 per square foot.

In total, more than 500 multifamily units are either planned, proposed, or under construction in the downtown area. A range of housing types, such as condominiums, rowhouses, and apartments make up the new product in the downtown housing market. Additionally, there is supplemental residential development that serves target populations within the downtown, including artist live/work spaces and student residences. While currently planned projects will tap pent up demand, the growth of the young professional and the empty nester cohorts is expected to support sustained downtown housing development. In addition, more commercial and institutional development will further support demand for downtown housing.

Office/Commercial Market

The office/commercial market in downtown Omaha is experiencing a shift due to the construction and renovation of office space. According to the Lund Company, a locally-based commercial real estate broker and advisor, more than 40% of the Omaha MSA’s office space is located in the Downtown area. Downtown Omaha’s office market also has the highest vacancy rate of among all of the MSA’s submarkets. As of July 2004, the Downtown office market had a vacancy rate of 27%; this rate is more than twice that of the suburban market. Of the vacant space, 40% is classified as Class A premier space while the remaining 60% is Class B space.

New commercial space, including Union Pacific Corporation and the First National Bank Tower, is being added to the downtown in hopes of attracting new tenants. More than 3 million square feet of office space has been recently developed or is currently planned for downtown Omaha. However, much of the new construction office development serves as replacement space for old and outdated space, leaving the downtown with more vacant office space available in the market. Compared to the suburban market, where most submarkets have seen a decrease in their vacancy rate, downtown will realize a significant increase in available space within the next two to three years.
Retaining Market
Downtown Omaha’s retail market has been fairly stable. Most of the new retail development in Omaha is occurring on the periphery of the city. Village Pointe and the Shops at Legacy are recently constructed retail developments located on the outskirts of Omaha. Much of the new Downtown retail and restaurant space is scattered amidst larger mixed-use developments. The Barker and Lerner Buildings may feature ground floor retail space that includes restaurants, a bookstore, and a coffee shop. The Lewis & Clark Landing features a large restaurant (Rick’s Boatyard Café) and the renovated Paxton Hotel will feature two floors of commercial and retail space.

As the number of households, workers, and students within the downtown increase, more demand for retail in the immediate area will surface. Downtown residents will primarily seek neighborhood retail, which includes a mix of convenience goods and personal services. Students, downtown professionals, and visitors are additional target markets for more restaurants and entertainment venues. The North Downtown Study Area has a unique opportunity to capture a significant portion of this demand.

Real Estate Assessment and Opportunities
The North Downtown Study Area is surrounded by a number of development anchors. Its location near Eppley Airfield, Qwest Center Omaha, the Riverfront, and Creighton University makes it a prime location for the expansion of downtown redevelopment. Many of these anchors can be capitalized upon to create a new neighborhood context for the area.

Based on current and projected demographic trends and existing market conditions, the following product types are recommended for North Downtown. They include a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial uses.

Residential
Primary target markets for residential development include young professionals, empty nesters, and students (those who desire to live off-campus). Product types can include urban townhomes and rowhouses, low- and mid-rise condominiums, artist live/work space, and long-term stay lodging that helps support Creighton University, Gallup’s Riverfront Campus, and Qwest Center Omaha patrons.

Retail & Restaurants
General retail that is complementary to Old Market shops, including clothing stores, drug stores, and office supplies is encouraged. Restaurants with different themes and a mix of cuisines are ideal for the student population, tourists and visitors.

Cultural and Entertainment
Different cultural and entertainment uses can include art and art-related galleries, museums, a sports stadium or other sporting facilities, performing arts facilities, and other social venues. These uses could act as a destination draws for the community at large.
Office/Industrial
Primarily due to the proximity of the airport, the development of an office or an industrial park is a feasible use for the northern portion of the study area. This may be attractive to users who rely on the airport as a means of freight or artists who need large spaces (i.e. sculptors and painters) for work space.

The development of an anchor within the North Downtown Study Area is a key to reaching a desirable level of activity within the area. It could be in the form of a large mixed-use project, an entertainment district, or a ballpark. Ideally, the anchor would be a driver for other development in North Downtown and encourage a lively "street-life" environment typical of metropolitan downtowns.
North Downtown: Omaha’s New Urban Neighborhood
IV. Planning Process

The North Downtown Conceptual Redevelopment Plan required a lengthy and thorough process. The process began in November 2003 with a client Kick-Off Meeting and concluded in April 2005 with the unveiling of the final plan document. Throughout this process, a number of meetings were held with the client, steering committee, major stakeholders, and the general public. Initial meetings were very broad in scope, while later meetings were more focused and served to further refine details from the previous meetings. The result was a plan that achieved wide-spread consensus and provided a framework for future growth and development within the Study Area. The following were key points in the planning process:

Client Kick-Off Meeting
The Client Kickoff Meeting was held on November 5, 2003. The Working Group (City of Omaha, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and HDR, Inc.) was introduced and reviewed the scope of work; confirmed goals, objectives, and deliverables; discussed composition of the Steering Committee; and discussed next steps.

The Working Group established a Summary Statement of Goals and Objectives, which stated that the overall goal of the process was to provide a range of development scenarios for the study area as well as conceptual development ideas for the adjacent properties. These scenarios were to examine the various potential build-out conditions that could occur within this area. Based on stakeholder input, a variety of uses for the area were to be examined. This process would address a range of questions and issues, including the desired general character of these areas; what, if any, residential unit types would be appropriate; various densities of development; urban design components; and the implications of these various concepts. This analysis would lead to an understanding of the implementation steps that would be necessary to move the conceptual redevelopment plan from vision into reality.

Steering Committee Selection Meetings
The Working Group met on two occasions to discuss composition of the Steering Committee. The first meeting was on December 5, 2003 and the second meeting was on January 12, 2004. The Steering Committee for the North Downtown Plan included the following:

- David Brown, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce
- Frank Brown, City Councilman
- Dan Burkey, Creighton University
- Roger Dixon, MECA
- Brenda Dooley, Co-Chair, First National
- Pete Festersen, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce
- Al Goodwin, OEDC
- Ken Johnson, Planning Department
- Bruce Kaiman, Sol’s Pawn Shop
- Jim Krieger, Gallup
- Rob Maglinger, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce
- Jennifer Mahlendorf, Mayor’s Office
- Terry Moore, American Federation of Labor
- R.J. Neary, Inverstor’s Realty
- Bob Peters, Planning Department
- Bob Turner, Union Pacific
- Bob Wilson, Co-Chair, Hot Shops
- Carole Woods-Harris, Douglas County Commissioner
Project Team Study Area Tour and Stakeholder Meetings
The Project Team (HDR, Inc. and S.B. Friedman & Co.) toured the Study Area on December 9, 2003. Based on this tour, an initial understanding of the study area was developed. Following this tour, the Project Team met with representatives from the City of Omaha, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and Creighton University. These meetings provided valuable information concerning market trends, opportunities and constraints, and desires for the Study Area.

Steering Committee Press Conference
A press conference to announce the selection of the Steering Committee and to formally kick-off the planning process was held on January 20, 2004. Jointly announced by Mayor Mike Fahey and Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce President David Brown, the press conference was held at the Hot Shops Studios and Gallery and received wide-spread media coverage.

Steering Committee Kick-Off Meeting – Refinement of Development Program
The Steering Committee Kick-Off Meeting was held on February 23, 2004 with representatives of the City of Omaha, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and the North Downtown Steering Committee. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the results of the on-going site inventory and context analysis and to refine the development program. After introductions and a brief overview of the study and study process, the Project Team presented several plausible development concepts and scenarios. Based on discussion and comments from the Steering Committee, the Project Team was directed to pursue a pedestrian-oriented, medium-density mixed-use development concept for the study area that would connect the various redevelopment activities (downtown, riverfront, North Omaha, Creighton University) together and create a destination for all residents of Omaha. Key outcomes of the meeting included the following:

**Opportunities:**
- Potential to create a mixed-use/urban area adjacent to the Qwest Center Omaha
- The area is a “clean slate” for development
- There is ample parking for a variety of events
- The street grid connects with adjacent areas
- The area is close to potential employees and visitors
- Proximity to cultural facilities
- Adjacent investments are catalysts
- There is significant traffic through the area

**Constraints:**
- Real or perceived environmental issues
- Complementing the Old Market without detracting from it
- Traffic congestion/parking during events/peak times
- Maintaining connections to adjacent areas
- Lack of identity/image for the area
- One-way streets
- Large surface parking lots (lack of pedestrian scale)
- Minimal amount of open space in the area
- Lack of mass transit serving the area
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Visions:
- A mixed-use district (residential, retail, office, entertainment, industrial, cultural, civic, etc.)
- Uses integrated vertically and horizontally
- Complements existing amenities and development
- Must be functional and practical
- Connectivity to adjacent areas (North Omaha, CU, riverfront, downtown)
- A destination with a unifying theme
- An area that enhances job opportunities
- Urban character as an alternative to West Omaha

Public Meeting
A joint Brownfields/Planning public meeting was held on March 16, 2004. This meeting summarized work to date on both the Brownfields Study and the Planning Study, and allowed for public comment and discussion. Approximately 60 people attended the meeting, and general consensus was to move forward in the same direction as directed by the Steering Committee. (photo 165)

Internal Design Workshop I
The Project Team met on April 14th and 15th, 2004 to develop initial planning/design concepts for the Study Area based on comments from the Steering Committee, public meeting comments, and the inventory and analysis. Multiple initial concepts were refined into 2–3 plausible concepts, which were reviewed with the Working Group.

Internal Design Workshop II
The Project Team met on June 23rd and 24th, 2004 to refine the preliminary concepts for the Study Area based on comments from the Working Group. Preliminary concepts consisted of an existing plan of the area, development without a significant activity generator, development with a significant activity generator, and a vision/full development plan. These concepts were reviewed with the Working Group prior to Design Workshop I.

Design Workshop I
Design Workshop I consisted of a ½ day workshop held with the Working Group and Steering Committee, and was held on July 14, 2004. The purpose of this workshop was to review comments from the Development Program Refinement Meeting, present draft development concepts that were based on these comments, and present schematic prototypes of potential new residential development for the area. The workshop examined a variety of issues in addition to the draft development concepts, including potential future uses, desired density of development, urban design components, and implications of development. Discussion by the Steering Committee gave the Project Team direction in the refinement of the initial design scenarios.

Design Refinement
The Project Team made revisions and refinements to the original draft development concepts and residential schematic prototypes based on Working Group and Steering Committee Comments during Design Workshop I.

Photo 165 – Public Meeting

greater omaha chamber of commerce
Design Workshop II
Design Workshop II, a second ½ day workshop held with the Working Group and Steering Committee, was held on November 17, 2004. The purpose of this workshop was to review comments from Design Workshop I and to present revised development concepts based on these comments. In addition, the Project Team presented refined building prototypes, streetscape prototypes, and renderings of the Study Area, and discussed implementation strategies necessary to make the vision a reality.

Implementation Meeting
The Project Team met with City Staff (Mayor’s Office, Planning Department, and Public Works) and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce on November 18, 2004 to discuss a strategy for the successful implementation of the ideas and concepts generated during the planning process. The goal of discussions was to establish an Implementation Strategy that would identify both public and private sector initiatives and actions necessary to initiate and propel the desired redevelopment activity within the North Downtown Study Area.

EDA Review
The Working Group held a conference call with representatives from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) on February 24, 2005. The goal of this conference call was to update EDA staff on the status of the project and to discuss future steps in the redevelopment process for the North Downtown Study Area.

Documentation
The Project Team prepared the final document, which included the refined development concepts, building and streetscape prototypes, and Study Area renderings. Documentation of the plan included 10 hard copies of the final document, electronic copies, and a presentation of the final product to the Working Group.