

Chapter 1 – Introduction

A distinct and vibrant downtown starts with a vision. This plan is a vision for downtown Milwaukee to attract and retain creative forward-thinking businesses, residents, and visitors; for an energized investment and economic development climate; and for vitality, cultural richness and progressive living. Depending on the strength of its vision, the identity, substance, and appearance of downtown Milwaukee will advance or stagnate in comparison with other cities in the Midwest, United States, and in the world. This Plan incorporates that vision and provides a blueprint for change.

This Plan is also part of a city-wide comprehensive planning process that began in 1999 in response to State of Wisconsin “Smart Growth” legislation. For the first time in its 163 year history, the City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, together with community partners and elected officials, undertook a comprehensive plan for the entire city. The process began by dividing the city into 13 areas with common social and economic characteristics. The 13 area plans would, based on analysis and substantial public participation, identify priorities for neighborhoods, districts, corridors and catalytic projects. This plan is an update to the original Downtown Plan, one of the 13 area plans. Area plans plus the Citywide Policy Plan now comprise the completed City of Milwaukee Comprehensive Plan.

The legal significance of the area plans, as part of a city-wide comprehensive plan, is that upon adoption all land use decisions in the City of Milwaukee must be consistent with the goals, objectives, and policies, outlined in this area plan.

This Downtown Plan update is an attempt to continue the vision and successful initiatives of the original Downtown Plan. In 1999, the Milwaukee Downtown Plan was created in response to the economic momentum created by Third Ward revitalization, a new convention center, reinvigorated theater and entertainment districts, and Milwaukee River revitalization anchored by the downtown Riverwalk. The Plan was also shaped by the Congress for the New Urbanism’s emphasis on compact walkable mixed use communities, and a return to the joys of urban life. With signs of a downtown renewal after decades of stagnation, city and civic leaders reacted with a planning and policy document to reflect the rapidly changing conditions and dynamics of the downtown market. The result was the 1999 Milwaukee Downtown Plan.

The original Downtown Plan had five broad goals:

- 1) Increase the amount and variety of downtown housing.
- 2) Maintain downtown as the metropolitan area’s single largest concentration of office development.

- 3) Expand the number and variety of destination entertainment venues in the downtown.
- 4) Provide attractive options for travel within downtown.
- 5) Make walking, attractive, easier, and convenient.

A core group of 13 catalytic projects were identified as the foundation of the Plan in order to attract and create spin-off investment to further momentum and development downtown:

- 1) Creation of a public market
- 2) Pabst Brewery Re-development
- 3) Wisconsin Avenue streetscaping
- 4) Kilbourn Avenue streetscaping
- 5) City Hall intersection streetscaping
- 6) Riverwalk Expansion
- 7) Improved lakefront connections
- 8) Mac Arthur Square Re-development
- 9) Park East freeway replacement
- 10) A downtown streetcar
- 11) Park Once
- 12) Two-way street conversion
- 13) Renovation of the intermodal station

The 1999 Plan also identified policies and recommendations by district reflective of their intensities and service areas. Street types were identified and designated based upon their level of pedestrian and vehicular activity. The pedestrian realm, long relegated to the back seat in favor of vehicular movement and parking, was given renewed status with an emphasis on sidewalks, boulevards, and defined street edges with a stressing of street-level pedestrian activation.

By most accounts the 1999 Plan is a success. In the roughly ten years since its inception, most of the goals and objectives of the Plan have been met, with as much or more economic benefit than the Plan initially anticipated:

- Housing – 2,400 units added downtown between 2000 and 2007.
- Office – major office developments since 2000 such as Cathedral Place, Manpower, Time Warner, and ASQ.
- Destinations – expanded dining and retail shops; the Quadracci addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum; Discovery World; substantial completion of the Downtown Riverwalk, and restoration of the Pabst Theater, among others.
- Downtown Travel – expanded river cruises, a Downtown BID Trolley, and various street improvements or enhancements.
- Pedestrian Realm – the Downtown BID public ambassador program; expanded public art; improved and expanded wayfinding pedestrian signage; and Red Arrow park improvements.

Along with many of the catalytic projects, most notably:

- the removal of the Park East freeway
- expansion of the riverwalk south to Third Ward and north to Beer Line 'B'
- creation of the Milwaukee Public Market in the Third Ward
- enhanced lakefront connections including the Lakefront State Park
- a striking renovation of the Amtrak train shed into the Intermodal Station
- A significant streetscape enhancement of Kilbourn and Wisconsin Avenues.
- The conversion or partial conversion of State, Broadway, Milwaukee, Van Buren, Jackson, and St. Paul rights of way from one to two-way.
- A mixed-use redevelopment of the former Pabst Brewing complex - The Brewery development.

Plan Goals and Objectives

In ten years time, market, policy, and political currents have changed course and new dominant issues have risen to the surface. To better reflect the times, this Plan update will reexamine un-finished business from the 1999 plan and re-direct some of its proposals, build upon successes of the Plan, as well as acknowledge a new landscape with new challenges.

To this end, the broad goals of this plan are to make downtown Milwaukee more:

- Centered
- Place-oriented
- Connected
- Dense

In short, the overall goal is to elevate downtown Milwaukee into a regional and nationally recognized urban center known for its livability and innovation.

Objectives to meet these goals include:

- Improve the lakefront and its connections to downtown
- Create and foster a strong retail presence downtown
- Increase transit options downtown
- Preserve and re-use historic and iconic sites downtown
- Maintain and attract human talent
- Build up the pedestrian realm
- Strengthen the center of downtown
- Increase downtown's residential population

Plan Layout

This Plan both replaces the 1999 Downtown Plan and in format mirrors the layout and form of the other 12 area plans as part of an overall city-wide comprehensive plan. The overall organization of this plan is intended to create a document that is clear, concise, and easy to use by structuring guidelines and recommendations first for the entire downtown area, then for specific districts and corridors, and finally for specific catalytic project sites.

This Plan provides a framework for investment intended to be used by both private and public sector individuals and organizations for their strategic and overall decision making process as it pertains to urban design, architecture, land use, and investment in downtown Milwaukee.

The remaining chapters in this document consist of the following:

Chapter 2: The Planning Process – A succinct review and analysis of the downtown plan area along with demographic and physical characteristics and a summary of the public input process and its results.

Chapter 3: Land Use Policy –A summary of types of land uses, related policies, and redevelopment strategies for the downtown as a whole.

Chapter 4: District and Corridor Recommendations –An outline of what, where and how policies, strategies, and design guidelines should be implemented within specific downtown districts and corridors.

Chapter 5: Catalytic Projects – A description of large impact projects for specific sites downtown with recommendations or scenarios for the development of those sites.

Chapter 6: Implementation – Recommended priorities, implementation strategies, and responsible parties for plan initiatives and projects.