

CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS  
**MICHIGAN TALENT PARTNERSHIP  
APPLICATION 2025**

# **MONROE NORTH PROJECT AREA**

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# 1. NAME

Grand Rapids Talent Plan: Monroe North

# 2. LOCATION

The Monroe North project area is an anchor in the broader Talent Plan District—representing a powerful intersection of momentum, opportunity, and connectivity. Extending approximately half a mile from Monroe North in all directions, the Talent Plan District encompasses a vibrant, walkable, and rapidly evolving urban core bounded by Sweet Street to the north, Fulton Street to the south, Seward Avenue to the west, and College Avenue to the east (Appendix B).

Over the past two decades, the Monroe North project area has undergone a remarkable transformation, fueled by significant public and private investment. Today, it stands as one of the city's most dynamic neighborhoods, where historic industrial buildings have been adaptively reused for multi-family housing, offices, retail, and restaurants. The Grand River and surrounding greenspaces offer natural beauty and recreational access.

Strategically located near downtown Grand Rapids and the renowned Medical Mile, the project area is a magnet for talent. Residents and professionals enjoy seamless access to employment hubs, cultural institutions, educational campuses, and dining—all within walking distance. Its “park once” infrastructure, short blocks, and mobility hubs support a lifestyle of convenience and connection, with transit, biking, and micromobility options woven into the urban fabric.

Just beyond Monroe North lies the Belknap Lookout Neighborhood, a historic residential enclave with both new and mature housing stock perched above the industrial valley. With four parks—including championship pickleball courts at Belknap Park—and Grand Valley State University's Downtown Health Campus, Belknap Lookout adds depth and diversity to the district's character.

Anchoring the eastern edge is the Medical Mile, a world-class healthcare corridor and one of Michigan's largest employment centers. Home to institutions like Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine, the Van Andel Institute, Perrigo's North American headquarters, and Corewell Health, this destination is among the fastest-growing life science and medical device clusters in the nation.

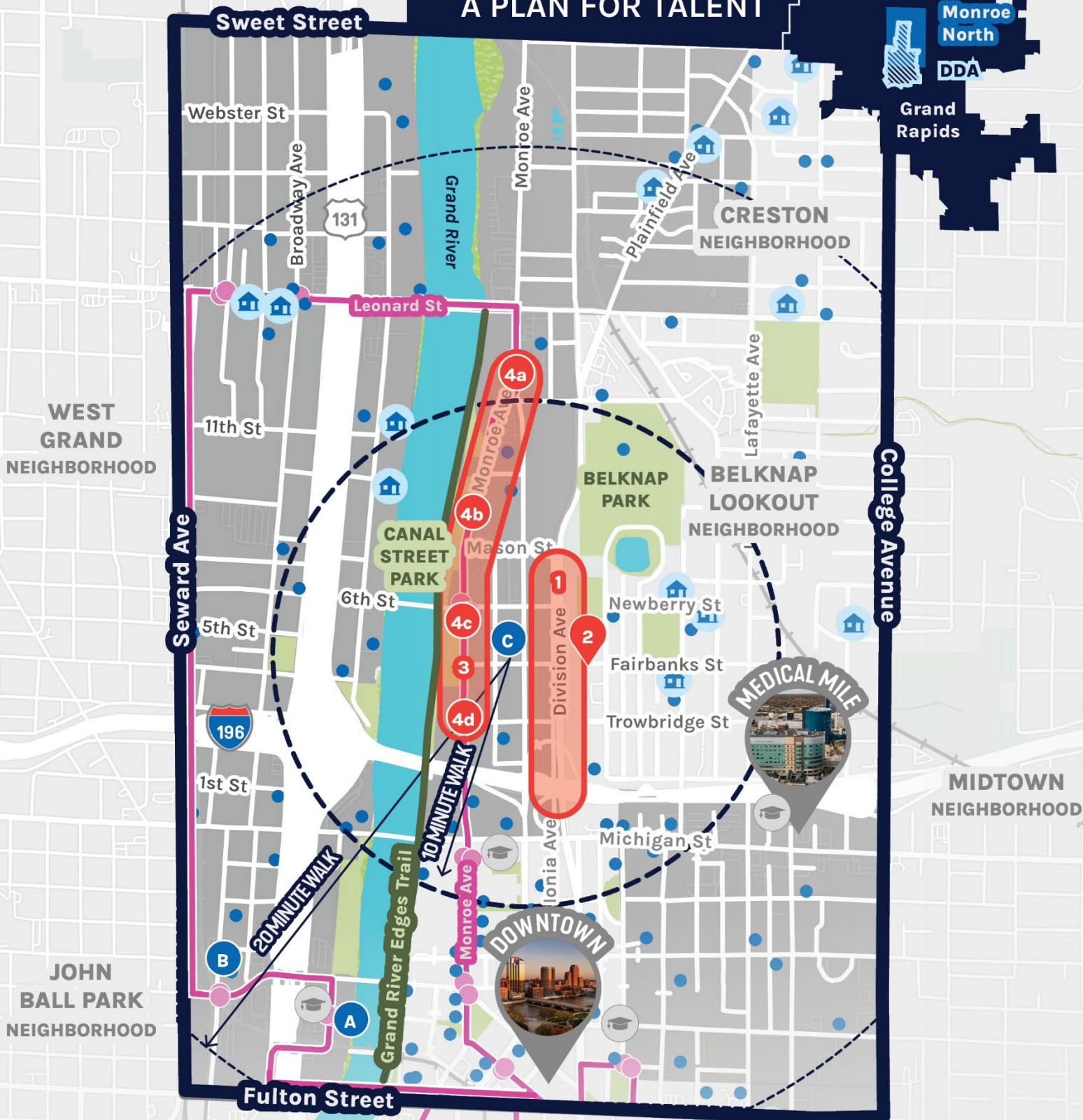
Several recent multi-million-dollar investments in the area underscore the district's potential. These include:

- \$22 million restoration of the Grand River below the 6th Street dam, enhancing river access, fishing, and safety.
- \$48 million redevelopment of the Grand Rapids Public Museum.
- \$175 million redevelopment of an 8.2-acre site into an 8,500-seat sports stadium.
- \$9.9 million investment in Canal Park, including trail amenities, a renovated playground, and enhanced flood protection.

The City has designated Monroe North's future land use as “downtown,” signaling a vision for a denser, more vibrant mixed-use environment. This unique location—between the Grand River and Belknap Hill—offers an opportunity to build on historic architecture, connect downtown with residential neighborhoods and the health innovation corridor, and create a high-density, transit-rich, and amenity-filled ecosystem for talent.

# MONROE NORTH

## A PLAN FOR TALENT



See legend on the following page.





# THE HILLSIDE





## A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

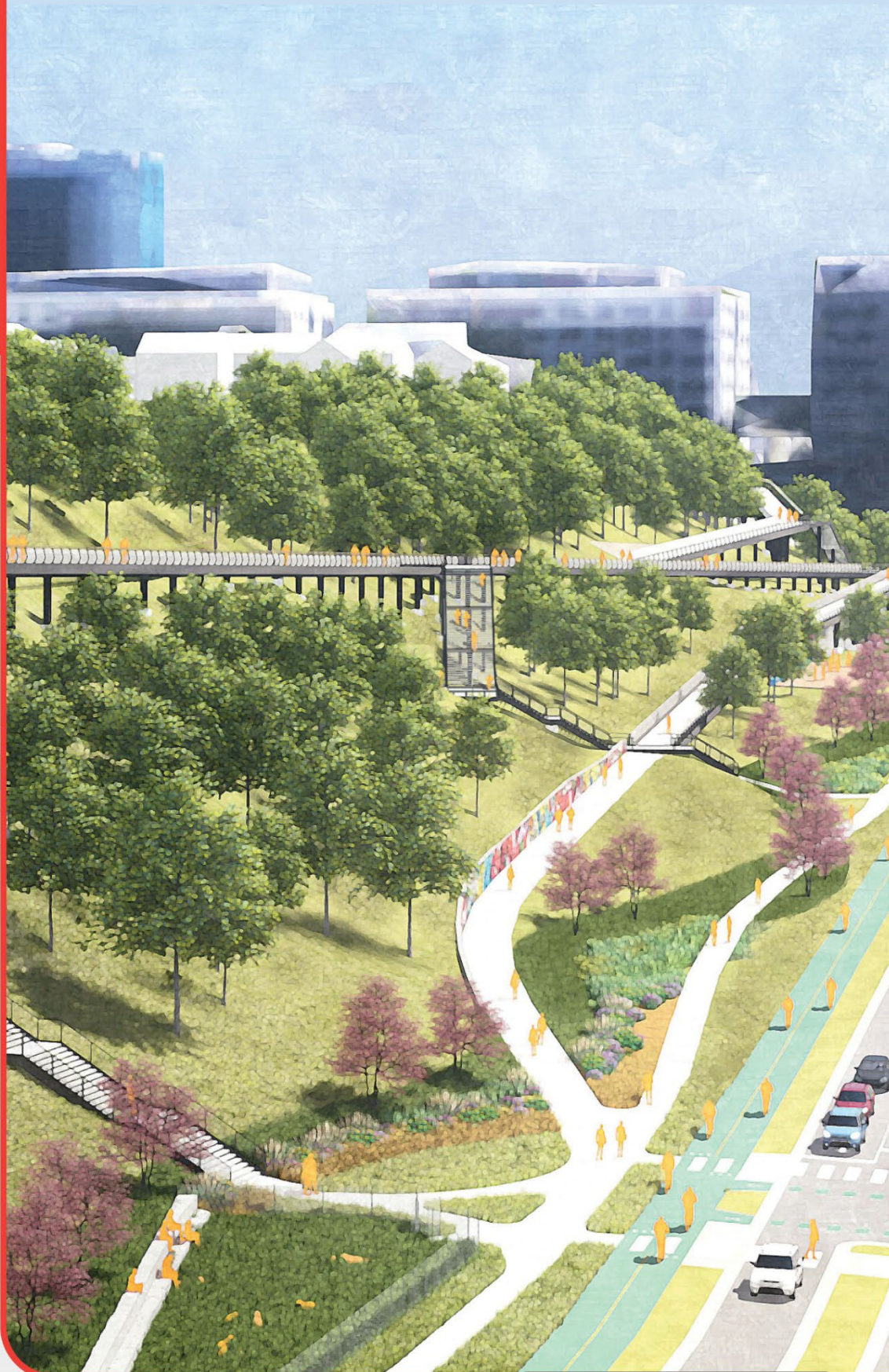
Several long range visions and plans for the city reimagine a vibrant, lush, linear greenspace along the hillside down to the Grand River. The four catalytic projects outlined in Monroe North, such as the Fairbanks Stairs, set the stage for these aspirational visions to become a reality.

### Current Resources and Amenities for Talent

-  New Housing Units (647 from 2023-2025)
-  Building Permits and Investments (\$464 Million from 2023-2025)
-  Significant Developments
  - A. Public Museum
  - B. Sports Stadium
  - C. Corewell Health
-  Business Associations
-  Parks
-  Grand River Edges Trail
-  DASH Line
-  DASH Stops
-  Higher Education

### Future Projects to Attract Talent

-  Reimagining Division and Ionia Avenues
-  Fairbanks Stairs Rehabilitation
-  Safe Pedestrian Street Crossings
-  Transit Improvements - Improved Dash Stops
  - 4a. North Monroe (2 stops)
  - 4b. Canal Park (2 stops)
  - 4c. Riverwalk (1 stop, CW)
  - 4d. Skate Park (2 stops)





### 3. TALENT PLAN

Grand Rapids stands out as a premier destination for talent due to its unique blend of authentic urban experiences, robust placemaking investments, and a collaborative community dedicated to innovation and quality of life. The city's distinctive geography—where the hill meets the river—creates unparalleled opportunities for outdoor recreation, connectivity, and vibrant public spaces that are rare among cities of its size. These natural features aren't just scenic—they are symbolic of a city that rises, flows, and adapts.

Strategic investments in linear parks, greenways, and multimodal infrastructure foster a pedestrian-friendly environment, supporting both active lifestyles and sustainable growth. Grand Rapids' commitment to purposeful programming, diverse events, and ongoing public-private partnerships ensures that these spaces are not only built but thoughtfully activated and maintained, attracting and retaining a dynamic workforce.

The following rankings are but a selection of the many types of recognition received by the city and/or region:

- #1 in LinkedIn Cities on the Rise 2025: The 2025 fastest-growing U.S. metros for jobs and new talent (LinkedIn)
- #2 Sustainable U.S. Metropolitan Area, 2021 (Site Selection Magazine)
- #3 Most Outdoor-Friendly City in the U.S., 2024 (Travel & Leisure)
- #20 in Best U.S. Cities for Women in the Workplace (Checkr)
- #20 in 25 Best Places to Live, Quality of Life (U.S. News)
- Best Beer City, 2025 (USA TODAY 10Best)
- #28 in Best Cities for Jobs (WalletHub)
- #37 in Best Cities to Start a Career (WalletHub)
- #8 America's Best Towns to Visit, 2024 (USA TODAY 10Best)
- #17 Cities with the Hottest Job Market, 2023 (Wall Street Journal)
- #28 Most Hipster City in the World, 2021 (movehub.com)

The city's proven track record of successful collaboration, economic impact from signature events, and a forward-looking vision for inclusive, talent-driven development positions Grand Rapids as the place where people want to live, work, and thrive. Public spaces here are not just built, but cared for and maintained through partnerships and shared stewardship. With this model, places remain vibrant and functional, ready to welcome the next generation of thinkers, makers, and leaders.

The proposed slate of projects is just the beginning. Each initiative is a seed planted with intention, part of a broader vision for growth and talent attraction. The path forward requires continued investment, but the foundation is strong, and the ambition is clear. Grand Rapids is a city where authenticity meets action, and where every hill climbed and river crossed leads to opportunity.

Please see Appendix B for maps of current zoning and future land uses.

### 3(1). HOW THE PROJECTS SUPPORT THE MTP GOALS

The City of Grand Rapids proposes a transformative placemaking plan in the Monroe North Project Area. This effort directly supports the goals of the Michigan Talent Partnership (MTP) Program by creating a high-density, multimodal, and amenity-rich district that enhances quality of life through vibrant street life, locally owned business growth, and a resilient ecosystem for talent.

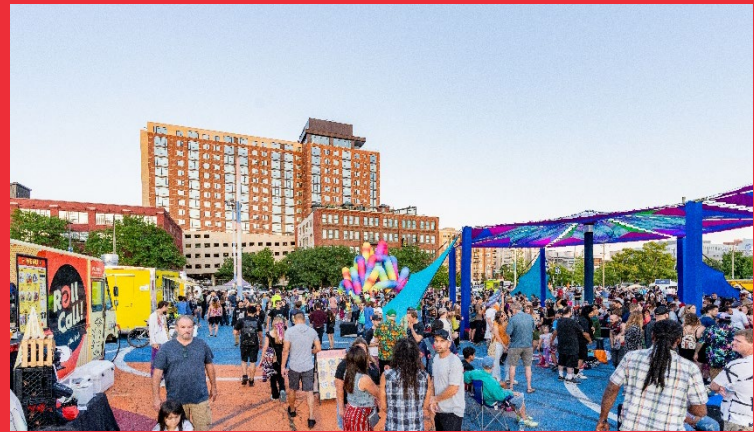
From 2010 to 2019, 34% of Grand Rapids MSA's population growth came from in-migration, underscoring the City's success in creating environments where talent can thrive (United States Census Bureau - Attachment C). The City's planned activities are designed to attract and retain a young, talented workforce, fueling population growth in West Michigan.

The Monroe North Project Area (Appendix B) is uniquely positioned to serve as a magnet for professionals and skilled workers. As a central city neighborhood with a growing concentration of healthcare, housing, and cultural assets, unique proximity to natural features, and a distinctive blend of historic and new urban fabric, it exemplifies the kind of walkable, high-density, and amenitized district the MTP program is designed to support—without the displacement challenges typically associated with urban intensification. This strategically positioned project area is a mix of vacant or underutilized industrial properties and significant recent investments, making it ideal for transformative redevelopment.

The City proposes investment in several strategic and catalytic projects that will improve the safety and appeal of this area, “promote walking, biking, and transit,” and increase access to natural features and outdoor activities. These improvements are part of a larger strategy that leverages public and private investment. The planned activities build on recent Grand River Greenway investments that will eventually place the Project Area in the center of a nonmotorized trail and park network that connects Lowell to the lakeshore across 36 miles and through the heart of Grand Rapids.

Building on and accentuating the essence of the district's legacy urbanism and strengthening the connections between live, work, and play opportunities through strategic, compelling, and experiential projects will establish an authenticity of place. In a world where more places are becoming cookie-cutter look-a-likes, authenticity is essential to attract talented citizens because of the complete and unique experiences that they provide.

The initial projects, combined with the broader vision to eventually invest in the hillside itself, will cement this district into the hearts and minds of residents, workers, and visitors as a unique and authentic place. Ultimately, these placemaking investments, and the on-going private investment, will make the district even more captivating and desirable to attract and retain a young, talented workforce that will fuel diverse population growth in Grand Rapids.





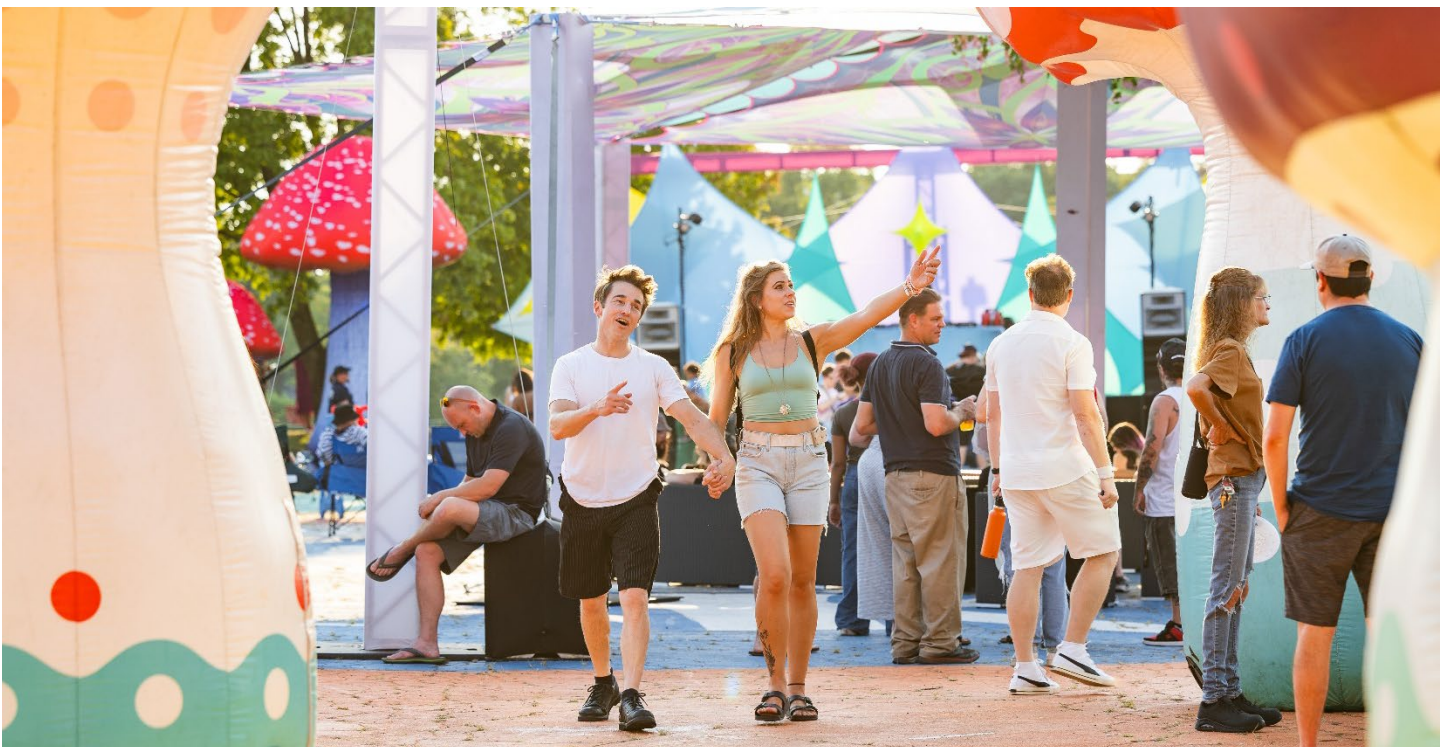
## 3(2). WHICH MTP GOALS THE PROJECTS ADDRESS AND HOW THEY ATTRACT & RETAIN TALENT

Over the past two decades, the City of Grand Rapids invested deeply in planning and community engagement (Appendix E) throughout the Monroe North project area. A consistent theme emerged: The need for better non-motorized connections to the Grand River. As the neighborhoods evolved, so did the proposed solutions—always with the goal of bridging the 100-foot-high hill that separates homes, jobs, services, and the magnificent river.

Challenges also continued to emerge such as navigating Ionia and Division Streets, safe non-motorized connections to the Medical Mile, river access, improving pedestrian safety, expanding public transit, and transforming this former industrial zone into a greener, cooler environment. At the same time, the Grand River has become a regional priority, with the City investing in riverfront parks, expanding trail systems, and acquiring land for future amenities. These efforts support broader regional connections, including non-motorized trails linking Grand Rapids to neighboring communities and, eventually, Lake Michigan.

Grand Rapids requests funding for four interconnected projects: Reimagining Division and Ionia Avenues, Fairbanks Stairs Rehabilitation, Safe Pedestrian Street Crossings, and Transit Improvements. Together, these initiatives will launch a phased placemaking strategy that positions the district as a hub of innovation, vibrancy, and inclusive mobility.

These projects build on a strong foundation of existing mobility services in Monroe North, including Lime scooters and bikes, DART electric vehicle carshare, and regional transit connections. By layering in new infrastructure—such as bike stairways, pedestrian crossings, and upgraded transit stops—the City will create a robust multimodal system. Residents and workers will gain safe, intuitive access to transit, micromobility, and active transportation options, reinforcing Monroe North as a connected, 15-minute neighborhood.





# 1. REIMAGINING DIVISION AND IONIA AVENUES

This transformative project removes outdated, car-centric infrastructure and reclaims space for multimodal transportation, high-quality urban infill, verdant greenspaces, and hillside access. Historically, Division Avenue was under the jurisdiction of the Michigan Department of Transportation. Originally a local road, it was designated as US-131 in the 1930s and built to auto-oriented highway standards. It remained a Business Route until 2017, when it was returned to local control. Despite relatively low traffic volumes today, Division Avenue still reflects its former four-lane trunkline design and runs parallel to Ionia Avenue, creating redundant infrastructure. The project will shift Division Avenue westward, consolidating it with Ionia Avenue. This realignment will free up approximately four acres at the base of Belknap Hill, which will be converted into greenspace prioritized for walking, biking, and transit. The redesign includes a road diet, new pedestrian signalization, ornamental lighting, storm and sanitary sewer upgrades, landscaping, and street furnishings such as benches and bike racks.

When complete, this stretch of Division will feature:

- Two 11-foot travel lanes and a 10-foot center median, designed to accommodate truck traffic while limiting access to side streets for pedestrian safety.
- 9-foot sidewalks and 9-foot single-direction bikeways on both sides, with enhanced lighting and a tree lawn between the sidewalk and bike lane.
- Green infrastructure, including stormwater management systems and street trees, aligned with the City’s Vital Streets Design Guidelines (Appendix C).
- Designated Parking Zones (DPZs) for micromobility, meeting growing demand and integrating public art to enhance the streetscape.

The area formerly occupied by Division will be rebalanced into public greenspace, offering opportunities for small-scale recreation and event programming. This project lays the groundwork for a future phase focused on reimagining the hillside itself. By consolidating two redundant corridors into a single, efficient alignment, the project advances the City’s Vital Streets Design Guidelines (Appendix C) and asset management goals. It reduces car dominance, eliminates excess hardscape, and establishes a flagship multimodal corridor linking Monroe North to downtown, the Belknap Lookout and Creston neighborhoods, and the regional Grand River Edges Trail.

Transit-Rich & Walkable Districts	High-Density Development	Quality of Life
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# 2. FAIRBANKS STAIRS REHABILITATION

The Fairbanks stairs rehabilitation project, which traverses the 100-foot hill, begins to address a major, long-standing barrier in the district. It transforms a utilitarian, depression-era stairway into an inclusive connector between neighborhoods and the Grand River.

Key project elements include rehabilitation of the existing stairs, installation of a bicycle stairway (runnel), landings and benches for respite, and new lighting. It will convert a basic stairway into a multimodal connection between the Belknap Lookout neighborhood and Monroe North. Retrofitting the existing stairway with bicycle wheel channels creates a more direct connection for bicyclists, allowing users to dismount, place the wheels into a channel or trough installed adjacent to the existing stairs, and push their bicycle up the stairs, thus eliminating the inconvenience of forcing users to carry their bicycles up or down. The addition of lighting and replacement of stair rails improves safety and addresses requests from the local running group that uses and helps maintain the stairs.

Transit-Rich & Walkable Districts	High-Density Development	Quality of Life
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### 3. SAFE PEDESTRIAN STREET CROSSINGS

Historically, the Monroe North area was a transit desert—particularly in the post-war and post-interstate highway era—which further isolated the neighborhood despite its prime location adjacent to downtown and the Grand River. This lack of connectivity hindered development and limited access to key destinations. The proposed shovel-ready street crossing improvements are designed to activate public space and encourage safe, multimodal movement between the hilltop, the river and the business corridors between them. Key elements include:

- Three Rapid Flashing Beacons (RFBs) along Monroe Avenue, providing safer pedestrian access to riverfront parks and the Grand River Edges Trail. RFBs are proven to reduce pedestrian injuries by 69%.
- A new signalized intersection at Division and Newberry, featuring countdown pedestrian intervals, transit signal prioritization, high-visibility crosswalks, and best-practice safety features such as box span signal configuration and signal backplates.
- A future bike lane on Monroe Avenue, completing a critical corridor between North Monroe and downtown, ensuring seamless short-distance travel for cyclists.

Monroe Avenue, the last street between the neighborhood and the Grand River, carries approximately 8,000 vehicles per day. These improvements will make crossings safer and more predictable, while Newberry Street—already equipped with bike and pedestrian infrastructure—will serve as a vital east-west connector from Division to the river and one of the few bridge crossings in the district. Together, these improvements demonstrate a clear shift from a car-first model to a people-first multimodal network that offers talent options to get around.

Transit-Rich & Walkable Districts	High-Density Development	Quality of Life	Local Business Support
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### 4. TRANSIT IMPROVEMENTS

Transit is a cornerstone of the City’s mobility strategy. The DASH shuttle, a fare-free circulator of bright pink buses serving Monroe North, Downtown, and the Westside has grown to more than 400,000 annual rides in 2024 and is projected to exceed half a million rides in 2025. DASH directly connects to The Rapid’s Central Station, the Laker Line Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, and the Silver Line BRT system, thereby linking the district with the Medical Mile, Grand Valley State University’s Allendale and Pew campuses, and numerous business districts and neighborhoods. DASH runs every 15 minutes, offering a convenient option for downtown travel (Appendix B).

Enhanced transit amenities advance the Community Master Plan’s call for continued investment in transit stop amenities and are consistent with the Strategic Plan’s objective to “create an accessible, low to no carbon multi-modal transportation experience. (Appendix C)

This project will strengthen transit riders’ experience by installing five new shelters and ADA-compliant boarding pads at key DASH stops along Monroe Avenue, ensuring year-round comfort, safety, and accessibility. These improvements support the City’s “park once” vision where residents and visitors can leave cars in parking facilities outside of the downtown core and navigate seamlessly throughout downtown by shuttle, bicycle, shared modes, or on foot. This approach reduces the need to have a car, and unnecessary vehicle trips, alleviates congestion, and fosters a more pedestrian-friendly urban environment with access to quality of life amenities and key business districts.

Transit-Rich & Walkable Districts	High-Density Development	Quality of Life	Local Business Support
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These four projects directly advance the City of Grand Rapids' Strategic Plan (Objectives 1–4) by delivering multimodal safety, promoting low-carbon travel, coordinating infrastructure with redevelopment, and modernizing curb management for shared mobility. They also support the Community Master Plan's Balanced Mobility goal, including Objective 4.B.2 (support shared mobility), Objective 4.B.4 (promote alternatives to personal vehicles), Objective 4.B.6 (invest in transit stop amenities), and Objective 4.C.3 (establish mobility hubs). Additionally, they reinforce GR Forward Goal 3: Implement a 21st-Century Mobility Strategy, putting Grand Rapids “on the map” for innovative, equitable transportation solutions (Appendix C) and Goal 1: Restore the River as the Draw and Create a Connected and Equitable River Corridor, with access and connection to the Grand River, a series of east/west green corridors to connect neighborhoods to the River and connections to riverfront parcels.

Further, these initial projects will spur implementation of a broader vision for the district, and the hillside in particular. Once complete, the Division/Ionia Avenue project will free up space at the base of Belknap Hill to be reenvisioned. The city is still contemplating opportunities and identifying funding. A strong contender is the future hillside project, referred to as The Ribbon, which could begin a phased reimagining of the hillside that would incorporate two additional stairs and a series of sculptural switchback ramps to connect Medical Mile, the Belknap neighborhood, and Lookout Park to the lower Monroe North district, the Grand River, and regional trails. In addition to being a non-motorized connection, The Ribbon would be an experiential place to engage with the natural hillside, witness grand views and sunsets, and enjoy quiet contemplation and special moments. The Ribbon would include strategically located nodes and nooks along its many twists and turns that facilitate lingering and event activation opportunities with views like no other within the city or region.

## 3A-I. SUPPORTING WALKABILITY/TRANSIT RICH AREAS

Grand Rapids is undergoing a bold transformation, placing mobility at the heart of its strategic vision. Guided by its Strategic Plan, Community Master Plan, Vital Streets Plan, Bicycle Action Plan, and GR Forward Goal 1 and 3 (Appendix C), the City is committed to building a transportation network that is innovative, low-carbon, and equitable. This network prioritizes safety, affordability, and convenience for all residents.

The four interconnected and complimentary projects are more than infrastructure upgrades. They are a declaration of intent and a City strategy to attract and retain talent. They represent a strategic shift away from car-centric planning toward people-centered corridors where walking, biking, and transit are the default modes of travel.

Monroe North has limited entry and exit points due to natural and created barriers across the project area. This investment adds options for talent getting to work, recreation, or a night out on the town.

Together, they support vibrant, multimodal connections that connect neighborhoods, support economic vitality, and reflect the values of a community that increasingly demands sustainable and inclusive mobility options.

Grand Rapids is not just upgrading streets—it's reimagining them. The City is creating inclusive, multimodal corridors that serve all users, including the talent it seeks to attract and retain. Each generation shows a growing preference for neighborhoods that support safe, comfortable, and walkable lifestyles. The City's strategic investments in these four projects reflect a unified vision for sustainable mobility and livable urban design. These projects will improve safety and sustainability, and they will redefine how people experience their city.

## KEY STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE TALENT DISTRICT

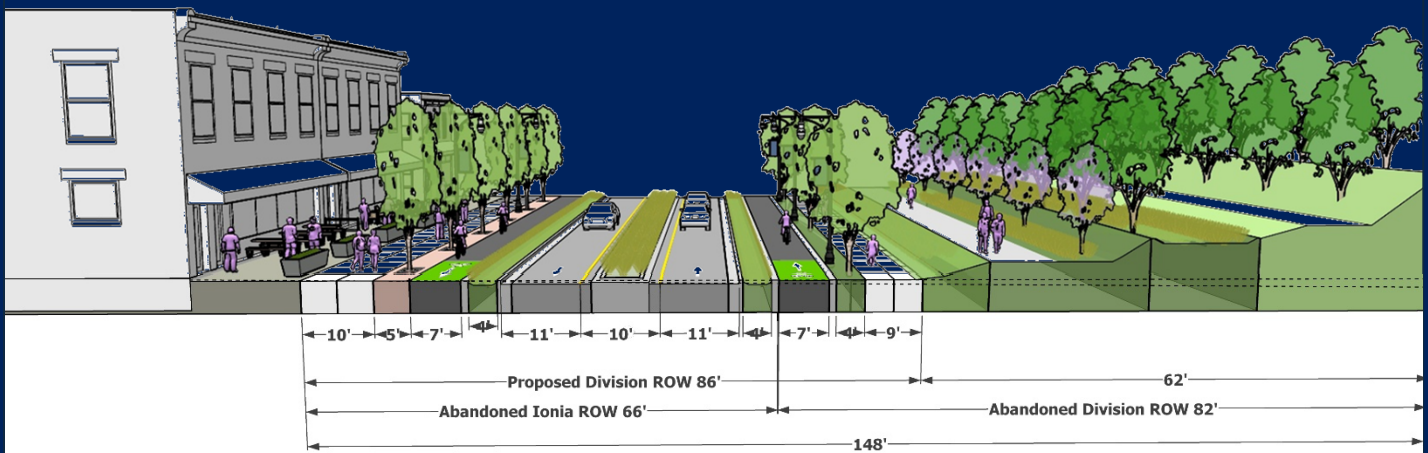
### The Reimagination of Division and Ionia

**Avenues** is a transformative undertaking that allows for more mobility options across the district to expand walkability, enhance transit access, and rebalance roadway space away from automobiles. These improvements are catalytic in attracting talent, supporting redevelopment, and delivering City and State goals for livability, equity, and economic competitiveness.

### The Safe Pedestrian Street Crossings and Transit Improvements

enhancements complement corridor redesigns by improving safety, accessibility, and multimodal connectivity. High-visibility pedestrian crossings—proven to reduce crashes—will link the district to the Grand River Edges Trail and adjacent riverfront parks. Improved DASH stops will include new shelters and ADA-compliant boarding pads, ensuring year-round comfort and accessibility. These upgrades support the City’s “park once” vision and reinforce DASH as a convenient, fare-free option for navigating downtown.

Section of Future Design for Division and Ionia

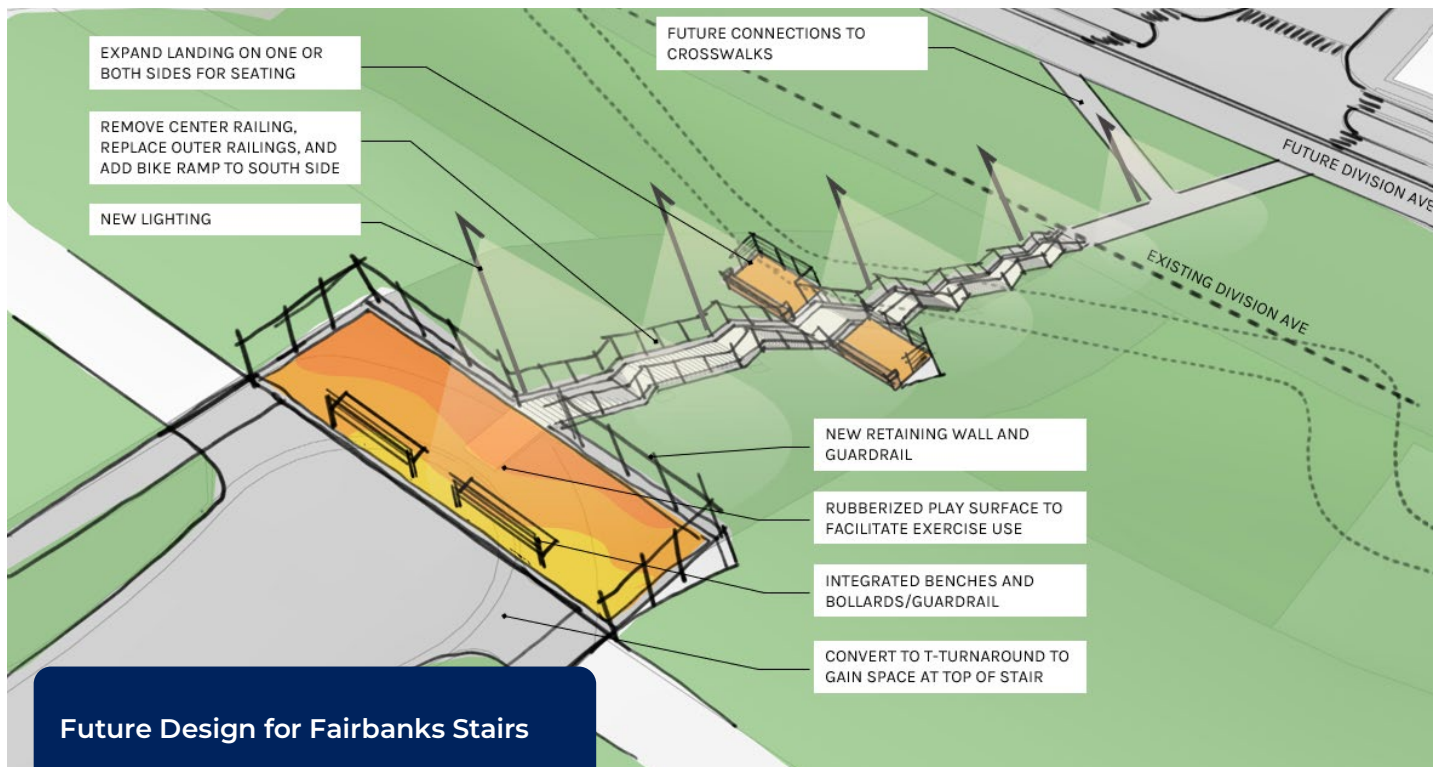


**The Fairbanks Stairs Rehabilitation** project addresses a long-standing physical barrier by improving vertical connectivity between the hilltop and riverfront. The rehabilitation includes a bike channel, new lighting, and rest areas, enabling safe and comfortable access for pedestrians and cyclists. The stairs will connect a new overlook to greenspace and sidewalks along the realigned Division Avenue. Located just one block from Corewell Health’s planned residential development, the stairs will provide medical residents and fellows with quick, multimodal access to the Medical Mile. They are also just three blocks from Sixth Street Park, linking to riverfront parks, cultural amenities, and downtown via the Grand River Edges Trail. An estimated 2,408 households in the Belknap neighborhood stand to benefit from this improved access (Grand Rapids Development Center).



The Fairbanks Stairs Rehabilitation adds vertical connectivity to a horizontal network, linking hilltop neighborhoods to the urban core.





## 3A-II. SUPPORTING CREATION OF HIGH-DENSITY DISTRICTS

Grand Rapids' approach to zoning and housing policy is intentionally designed to attract and retain talent by creating neighborhoods and districts where people of all backgrounds and income levels can thrive. The Grand Rapids Talent District's multi-modal focus, context-sensitive streetscape design, and improved access to the Medical Mile supports redevelopment efforts in Monroe North, encouraging mixed-use density in a central corridor.

Building high-quality pedestrian-centric infrastructure within an established urban context will promote a car-lite lifestyle and lead to opportunities for denser development patterns.

The improvements, coupled with a targeted redevelopment strategy will convert Monroe North into a model 21st-century neighborhood that maximizes residential density, preserves established neighborhoods from development pressure, leverages existing infrastructure and enhanced transit connections, and creates new housing options that support talent attraction and retention.

Monroe North offers the rare combination of strategic location, development-ready sites, and community acceptance that makes transformational investment both feasible and impactful. A realigned Division Avenue and its expansive tree lined sidewalks and buffered bike lanes will abut the block where Corewell Health is developing new housing. In addition to Corewell Health's approximately 1,200 employees at the newly established Center for Transformation and Innovation (CTI) on Monroe, the building, which opened in 2024, has capacity to serve up to 1,800 associates. Corewell alone is contributing to the density by adding 125 housing units, as well as the ability to add 600 more employees.

Additionally, GVSU, West Michigan's largest university and a key driver of economic development, graduates nearly 6,000 students each year—87% of whom remain in Michigan to live and work. GVSU's forthcoming Blue Dot Lab, a downtown tech hub scheduled to break ground in 2026, will triple the university's tech graduates to meet growing demand. Between Corewell Health and GVSU, there are ample opportunities to connect emerging talent with employers.

Additionally, the Fairbanks stairs will provide a compelling link between Medical Mile, the established and ongoing healthcare investment in Monroe North, downtown opportunities, and the unique Belknap neighborhood that boasts its own significant new housing developments. Belknap, one of the oldest and most unique neighborhoods in Grand Rapids, has seen two new affordable and mixed-income housing developments open since 2022, with a third on the way, bringing a total of 154 new units into the district. The neighborhood also includes three city parks and a neighborhood school. The renovated stairs will improve access to these various talent supportive amenities for a broader and more diverse group of people.

## KEY STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE TALENT DISTRICT

- Housing Alignment
  - Grand Rapids is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive housing ecosystem that supports professionals at every career stage—from recent graduates to established leaders. By enabling a broad mix of housing types, price points, and occupancy styles—including affordable units, market-rate apartments, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs)—the city ensures that residents can find homes that meet their needs and budgets.
  - The Talent District's City Center (CC) and Transitional City Center (TCC) zones are designed to support higher-density, mixed-use, and mixed-income development. These changes make it easier to build affordable and market-rate units side by side, directly supporting the development of mixed-income communities. Recent policy amendments (Spring 2024) introduced:
    - More flexible options for small-scale infill housing
    - Expanded allowances for ADUs
    - Elimination of parking requirements in select areas
  - Expand affordable and attainable housing options, in alignment with the MSHDA Region F Action Plan and the 2025 Housing Needs Assessment that identified demand for 1,417 units at 81–120% AMI and 1,927 units at 51–80% AMI before 2030. For context, 446 units were in the pipeline from July 2023 to September 2025, with more expected following the Bridge to Our Future Community Master Plan (2024).
- Leverage planning and economic development tools from the City and Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. to support new housing projects.
- Enhance district identity and marketability through collaboration with the Chamber and business associations. Proposed strategies could include district-specific wayfinding signage and lighting to reinforce Monroe North as a defined and vibrant place.
- Advance a comprehensive zoning ordinance update (2025–2027) with robust community engagement to ensure Grand Rapids remains a destination for talent.



The transition from vacant industrial land to mixed-use residential development represents organic urban evolution rather than disruptive change. Property owners and the community can embrace this transformation as neighborhood improvement rather than gentrification. Monroe North offers the rare combination of strategic location, development-ready sites, and community acceptance that makes transformational investment both feasible and impactful.



## 3A-III. IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE

The Grand Rapids Talent District aims to significantly enhance the quality of life for its residents through various initiatives focused on parks, green spaces, outdoor recreation, arts, and cultural amenities.

Multiple fitness and wellness groups regularly use assets in the Talent District such as Fairbanks Stairs and have long been advocating for upgrades, underscoring the ongoing demand for improved fitness infrastructure. Additionally, the Talent District includes the Grand River, premier waterfront parks, and an extensive trails network that extends throughout the city and region. It also has some of the largest entertainment venues in the city, attracting people across the region and standing out as pillars of talent looking for entertaining, dynamic places to play.

### KEY STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE TALENT DISTRICT

- The reimagination and realignment of Division and Ionia Avenues will introduce roughly four acres of new green space and recreational amenities, fostering outdoor activity and social interaction. Monroe North includes two riverfront parks, nonmotorized trails, and free fitness classes. Ninety-nine (99) district-wide events, including Fork Fest, Zombie Dash, Art Prize, Return to the River and World of Winter festivals, enrich life here and would likely grow with more places for activation. In addition to recreational amenities, many local businesses are within walking distance, ranging from Field and Fire for a quick bite, SILVA for bocce and dinner, Sweetwaters for a mocha, and a bike shop for the adventurers, kicking boxing, and rock-climbing. (Note the attachments for Monroe North Business Association members).
- Lighting, seating, and a bicycle runnel make the Fairbank stairs safer and more accessible for all users. Regular users, including local run clubs and exercise groups, have long been asking for upgrades. One group, “Wednesday Night Hills & Stairs,” has over 1,300 followers on Facebook who join weekly runs. Local businesses, such as Gazelle Sports, host community events in partnership with the group for activities like the “Community Relay Event.” In addition, there will be greater access from the Grand River and Monroe North to Lookout Park where free yoga classes are held and sunset viewing is a highlight, and to Belknap Park, which is home to championship pickleball courts.
- Strategic pedestrian infrastructure installations will help to promote increased connectivity and safer, more vibrant streets. The ability to connect with various public spaces, the natural elements of the Grand River, and the growing number of river adjacent activities will lead to an even more lively urban environment. River adjacent activation today includes “Art in the Park” in Canal Park, Artprize, which brings an estimated 750,000 people to the city, and “Gather GR”, which is a night market series on Monroe running Wednesdays throughout the summer featuring local food, shopping and live entertainment. These activations will continue to grow as the various residential, business, and institutions are provided enhanced access to them, creating a flywheel of greater activation and investment.
- Canal Park will add both temporary and permanent art installations per the Grand River Greenway Public Art Plan (see the attachments), which envisions a vibrant, accessible corridor where public art enhances identity through intentional placemaking that weaves together history, culture and creativity.
- Amway Stadium, a \$175 million, 8,500-seat venue is the future home of the West Michigan Soccer team in the MLS Next Pro league, with an expected opening in 2027.
- Just outside of the Talent District, Acrisure Amphitheater will be a state-of-the-art professional performing arts space that will draw national groups and showcase local talent with an expected opening in 2026 and hold 12,000 attendees.

## 3B. SUPPORTING LOCALLY OWNED BUSINESSES

Grand Rapids is a proud home to local businesses small and large, many of whom call the Talent District home. Grand Rapids is committed to filling vacant retail spaces with locally owned businesses. This is achieved through targeted placemaking investments that enhance public spaces, cultural offerings, and overall livability, making the area more attractive for businesses. Several municipal government entities also provide various forms of support for small businesses and emerging entrepreneurs.

### KEY STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE TALENT DISTRICT

- As noted previously, the City hosts ninety-nine (99) district-wide events. This would grow with more places for activation coming online with the proposed realignment project which adds four acres of linear greenspace. In addition to recreational amenities, events like Fit Fest, Return to the River, World of Winter, and activations at the 555 Monroe NW lot keep this neighborhood buzzing with potential customers for small, locally owned businesses.
- During ArtPrize in September, many businesses host art on their premises, which draws people in. In 2023, ArtPrize injected over \$54 million into the local economy.
- The Retail Specialist (coordinated between the City/Chamber of Commerce/DGRI) has been a support system for businesses who host may have special events, or have questions related to construction or parking, including activating parklets in front of local business to add additional seating for customers.
- Monroe North is a key commercial corridor. Further access improves activation across the district, including visibility for foot traffic and commerce.
- Partnership with the Chamber of Commerce provides support to small businesses who want to expand entrepreneurial growth and community leadership. The Chamber's Equal Business Opportunity Program offers a variety of supports for local businesses, including bid discounts and bonding assistance for small and emerging businesses.
- Partnership with Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc. (DGRI) leverages DDA TIF funds to support real private property improvements. Additionally, DGRI invests to help expedite private development projects and offers grant support for creative strategies that increase retail diversity and help businesses collaborate to increase pedestrian traffic, adding vibrancy through pop-ups, markets, and special events.
- Monroe North was one of the first social districts enacted in the City of Grand Rapids during COVID and it continues to thrive, encouraging community to mosey and experience different local joints, or venture over to the river with a cold drink. See Attachment B.





## 4. IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Corewell Health's upcoming projects—including medical residency housing, the activation of 700 Ottawa, and new parking infrastructure—are private developments and will be funded, designed, constructed, and managed by Corewell.

The four projects proposed in this application—Reimagining Division/Ionia, Fairbanks Stairs, Safe Pedestrian Street Crossings, and Transit Improvements—are public infrastructure projects and will be implemented by the City of Grand Rapids through a combination of City staff and hired consultants and contractors. The City's Street Lighting and Traffic Signals divisions will provide force account services. The Engineering Department will manage construction, hiring consultants and contractors through competitive processes. The department has a strong track record, having initiated 377 capital projects and awarded over 150 projects totaling more than \$382.5 million between FY2022–2024.

### Long-Term Maintenance

- Corewell Health will be responsible for their private facilities.
- The City of Grand Rapids will maintain public infrastructure such as streets, sidewalks, stairs, lighting, bike paths, signals, trees, and public utilities.
- The Downtown Improvement District (DID) is the organization that keeps certain areas of the urban core clean, attractive, and eventful, including the ambassador program that leads daily sidewalk cleaning, landscaping and beautification, restaurant and retail-oriented marketing and promotions, and special events. As more development occurs in the Talent District and Monroe North project area, Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc. will collaborate with the City of Grand Rapids to determine potential expansion of the DID to support the assessment district.

### Continued Sustainability

The consortium will continue to meet regularly (quarterly or as needed) to coordinate activities, review progress, and troubleshoot challenges. Transparent reporting and documentation will be maintained to keep all stakeholders informed and engaged.

Separately, the Monroe North business district is experiencing significant growth and development, including reconstruction of Trowbridge, Ottawa, Newberry, and Mason streets, as well as investment by Corewell Health as part of its medical systems expansion. In the future, consortium partners expect continued public and private development, including proposed Belknap Hillside Improvements, estimated in Feb. 2025 to cost \$54.1 million to \$65.3 million, which would connect the Belknap Lookout neighborhood to the Grand River and downtown; the redevelopment of a defunct railroad passage under I-196 estimated in May 2024 to cost \$6.8 million; additional Grand River restoration activities, development of river access and park improvements; and more bike and pedestrian facilities. The overall Monroe North area development must be performed in phases. For example, the hillside improvements cannot be started without the completion of Division/Ionia realignment, which is the first project in this application. The City, Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc, and other consortium partners will continue to seek funding from public and private sources to support this larger plan and establish seed funds that will attract additional dollars.

## 5. LEAD APPLICANT

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## 6. SUPPORT OF CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR

Please find attached the required letter of support from City Manager Mark Washington.

## 7. PROJECT CONSORTIUM INFORMATION

The Talent District Plan builds on over a decade of input, conversations, and ideation. It is the culmination of studies and plans over the course of the last decade. As a result, additional engagement prioritized strategic focus groups with various key stakeholders, including Neighbors of Belknap Lookout (NOBL), the Monroe North Business Association (MNBA), Monroe North neighbors, Corewell Health, Grand Valley State University, Michigan State University, and the City of Grand Rapids.

A Consortium (see the attachments) was created to vet these projects and will be actively involved in the operations and maintenance of these projects beyond the extent of the grant. Letters of match commitment have been provided by the City of Grand Rapids, Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc., and Corewell Health, among many other letters of support from stakeholders as provided in Attachment A.

## 8. ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES & COMPREHENSIVENESS

The consortium is ready to implement the following eligible activities upon receipt of grant funds. Each activity is tailored and ensures talent is attracted to every element of the project, from involvement in the engagement process to the vibrancy and connection these projects bring to their lives.

### **i. Planning, Engineering, Permitting Review, and Local Assessments**

The budget includes preliminary and final design phase services, construction engineering/inspections, permitting, and administration. Individual projects are at various stages of design.

### **ii. Community Engagement and Stakeholder Support**

All projects identified in this application are based on prior community planning and engagement efforts conducted over the past decade, from Concept Design to Design Development. From September 2021 – June 2022, concept design engagement occurred. In late 2023, the project was refocused into three distinct projects and the design and development phase started. Through mid-2024, a series of focus groups occurred related to each identified project. Consortium members helped refine design concepts and steer decision making, which identified the significant need for these projects. Please see Appendix E for Community Engagement and Stakeholder Support details.

### **iii. Redevelopment of Existing Housing Stock**

Consortium partner Corewell Health plans a new construction building with 125 housing units in the Project Area to attract medical residents and fellows by offering housing close to work.

It has been noted that housing in close proximity to the Medical Mile and Corewell's Center for Innovation and Transformation will help the city be more competitive among medical students and fellows considering residency programs across the country. Further, the City prioritizes the [Michigan State Housing Development Authority \(MSHDA\) Region F Action Plan](#) (Appendix C) goal 4.1 to "Increase the full spectrum of housing that is affordable and attainable to Michigan residents," evidenced by the 2025 Master Plan and the 2022 Strategic Plan (Appendix C). The City actively supports the re/development of housing stock through its incentive toolbox, including brownfield tax increment financing, neighborhood enterprise zones, Affordable Housing Fund, Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILOT), and the Housing Rehabilitation Program.



#### **iv. Mixed-Use and Commercial Property Utilization**

These projects were intentionally selected for their location along key commercial corridors and mixed-use districts where they will improve walkability and activation to have the most catalytic impact. The projects will support historic industrial buildings that have been adaptively reused for multi-family housing, offices, retail, and restaurants.

#### **v. Road and Surface Improvements**

The Reimagining of Division and Ionia Avenues is a significant surface improvement that eliminates a redundant street and frees up land for greenspace, and creates separated bicycle facilities and wide tree-lined sidewalks. Other activities include new pedestrian street crossings that improve safety with rapid flashing beacons or leading pedestrian interval (allows pedestrians to enter the crosswalk 3-7 seconds before vehicles are given a green indication). Five new DASH bus shelters and ADA-compliant boarding pads will ensure year-round comfort, safety, and accessibility to transit. A new bike runnel, respite benches, and lighting will make the Fairbanks Stairs easier to use for walkers and bicyclists of varying abilities.

#### **vi. Costs Associated with Site Improvements**

Lighting, bus shelters, street furniture, and landscaping are included in the budget request.

#### **vii. Support for Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs**

These projects are in Monroe North, a key commercial corridor in the city. The Talent District also overlaps five prominent local business associations and part of Downtown Grand Rapids.

Unless prohibited by funder requirements, City construction projects in the Talent Plan would follow the City's [Equal Business Opportunity Program](#), which offers a variety of supports for local businesses. For example, the standard construction bid process would leverage "discounts" (incentives) for small, local businesses. The City's Micro Local Business

Enterprise (MLBE) Certification program offers automatic bid discounts to small companies located in Kent County on construction and professional/goods & services projects. The Bonding Pilot Program is designed to enhance the bonding capacity of certified construction-based MLBEs, enabling small and emerging businesses to bid on larger public and private projects by providing CPA support, legal assistance, and bonding assistance. In addition, all contractors who take steps to support local workers, partner with MLBEs, and invest in workforce development can qualify for up to 5% bid discounts during the evaluation of their proposals, making them more competitive even if they are not the lowest. If they win the contract, they are paid their full bid amount.

#### **viii. Parks, Green Space, and Public Art Enhancements**

- The Reimagining of Division and Ionia project will establish a new greenspace over "old" Division Avenue.
- A tree-lined path along reimagined Division Avenue.
- New rapid flashing beacon street crossings, improved DASH bus stops with ADA landings, and improved Fairbanks Stairs will facilitate safer, more convenient access to riverside parks, trails, the Grand River, and four parks in the Belknap Lookout neighborhood.
- Certain items such as bus stops and signal cabinets can host art treatments.

#### **vix. Pursuit of Additional Funding Sources**

The Talent Plan will need additional funding to implement and maintain all components, including future elements. Additional funding will be sought for district wayfinding and other marketing/branding. The Consortium will seek federal, state, and local funding to support future projects such as the Hillside and Tunnel improvements. Potential sources include DOT/MDOT funds and the MI Natural Resources Trust Fund. As the Monroe North project area grows, it might be able to support an assessment and DGRI may consider expanding the Downtown Improvement District to help keep the area clean, attractive, and eventful.

## 9. ZONING AND CODE RESTRICTIONS

### HOW THE ZONING CODE SUPPORTS HIGH-DENSITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE PROJECT AREA

Over the past two decades, the City of Grand Rapids has strategically updated its zoning ordinance to create walkable, high-density, and vibrant neighborhoods—making the city a magnet for top talent and supporting community values.

Monroe North's industrial heritage creates a unique slate for development. This former manufacturing district can accommodate substantial residential and mixed-use growth while avoiding the social and political conflicts like displacement that can arise when redeveloping in lower-density neighborhoods.



### HOW THE ZONING CODE HAS BEEN AMENDED

**Rezoning for Density (Appendix C):** In 2007, much of the North Monroe area was rezoned from “I-1 Light Industrial” to City Center (CC) and Transitional City Center (TCC) districts, paving the way for higher-density, mixed-use development and the expanding growth of downtown. The CC district fosters a lively, pedestrian-oriented downtown with diverse housing options and no parking requirements, removing barriers to urban living. The TCC district acts as a transition between the downtown’s CC and surrounding neighborhoods, allowing more development than in smaller, neighborhood commercial zones. It supports dense redevelopment and walkability, especially through the adaptive reuse of historic buildings and flexible infill for new construction.

**Allowing Typologies for Top Talent (Appendix C):** The 2015 GR Forward Plan identified building types and neighborhood features that appeal to professionals in IT/Data, Design/Creative, Academic/Scientific Research, General Upper/Middle Professions, and Start-Ups, which later influenced the Community Master Plan.

**Zoning for Walkability and Transit (Appendix C):** Zoning and development practices have evolved through plans like Green Grand Rapids (2012), Michigan Street Corridor Plan (2015), and Vital

Streets (2016). They prioritize safe streets, multi-modal design, sustainable approaches to both design and asset management, and integrated transit connections, which are key factors for talent seeking vibrant, accessible communities. Goals and recommendations from these intensive community planning efforts have been codified through regular updates to the City of Grand Rapids Zoning Ordinance.

**Amending for Housing (Appendix C):** Recent amendments (Spring 2024) introduced flexible options for infill housing, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), and eliminated parking requirements in select areas. These changes expand affordable housing choices, making it easier for talent to live and grow in Grand Rapids.

**Flexibility in the Code (Appendix C):** The Planned Redevelopment District (PRD) is a flexible zoning mechanism that enables higher-density, mixed-use, and innovative development, helping the city respond to changing housing needs and support vibrant, walkable neighborhoods. It has been used with great success in the Talent Plan District in places such as 608 Coit Ave NE, 221 Trowbridge St NE, 525 Clancy Ave NE, and 123 Newberry St NE.



# PLANS TO ALTER THE ZONING CODE

While the current zoning ordinance (Appendix C) already supports high-density, mixed-use, and walkable development, the 2024 Bridge to Our Future Community Master Plan (Appendix C) has unified the city’s vision for development practices around five goals:

1. Great Neighborhoods	2. Vital Business Districts	3. A Strong Economy	4. Balanced Mobility	5. Desirable Development Character
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.	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.	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.	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.	A strong sense of place through high quality design. New development will improve or support the existing fabric of each neighborhood.

The City is now launching a comprehensive zoning ordinance update (2025–2027), with robust community engagement, to ensure Grand Rapids remains a destination for talent at every stage of their careers. Please see Appendix C for additional details related to the City of Grand Rapids Zoning Code.



## 10. Project Implementation Timeline

The consortium is prepared to implement the identified projects upon receipt of the grant.

PROJECT TIMELINE	2026				2027				2028				2029				Beyond
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
Project 1   Reimagining Division and Ionia Avenues																	
Engagement (finished)																	
Design																	
Permitting																	
Construction																	
Ongoing Maint. & Operations																	
Project 2   Fairbanks Stairs																	
Engagement (finished)																	
Design																	
Permitting																	
Construction																	
Ongoing Maint. & Operations																	
Project 3   Safe Pedestrian Street Crossings																	
Engagement (finished)																	
Design (finished)																	
Permitting																	
Construction																	
Ongoing Maint. & Operations																	
Project 4   Transit Improvements																	
Engagement (finished)																	
Design (finished)																	
Permitting (finished)																	
Construction (Possible 2025)																	
Ongoing Maint. & Operations																	
Administration																	
Grant Reporting																	

### Project Sustainability

After projects are complete, continued maintenance will be supported as part of the City's ongoing operations.

- For Division/Ionia, Public Works will maintain the street as an ACT 51 asset. Forestry Department will maintain the trees, Engineering will maintain the sidewalks, and Mobile GR will maintain signals, signs, and paint.
- For the Fairbank Stairs, Public Works will maintain the asset with help from Forestry Department for trees and Engineering for structural repairs as needed. The City will also look to form agreements with local running groups for assistance in day-to-day upkeep.
- For the Safe Pedestrian Street Crossings, Mobile GR will maintain the signals and crosswalks.
- For the Transit Improvements, Mobile GR in collaboration with The Rapid will maintain and operate the bus shelters. Amenities placed at the shelters such as trash cans will seek support for owners/operators adjacent to the amenities for day-to-day upkeep



## 11. MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

The Consortium will have touch points to review City Development Center data and a monthly DGRI Vitals Report to track progress on goals and outcomes, as well as connect on construction timelines and ensure awareness on project status is shared across the partnership.

### **Goal 1. Create a fully multi-modal district that is more walkable, bikeable, and transit rich.**

- Outcome 1.a. # of new traffic signals installed
- Outcome 1.b. # of new signalized and designated pedestrian crossings
- Outcome 1.c. # of new street/pathway lights installed
- Outcome 1.d. Miles of new sidewalks added
- Outcome 1.e. Miles of new bikeways added (including the bike runnel at Fairbanks stairs)
- Outcome 1.f. # of new or enhanced transit shelters installed
- Outcome 1.g. # of annual DASH riders

### **Goal 2: Support development that will help the Talent District become a higher-density area of the city with a mixture of uses.**

- Outcome 2.a. Zoning Ordinance Update
- Outcome 2.b. # of new housing units developed in the Talent District per permitting records

### **Goal 3: Enhance quality of life by connecting people to the arts and recreation.**

- Outcome 3.a. # of trees planted
- Outcome 3.b. # of benches installed
- Outcome 3.c. # of bike racks installed
- Outcome 3.d. # of trash cans installed
- Outcome 3.e. # of events hosted in the Talent District

### **Goal 4: Boost the local economy and entrepreneurs by activating key commercial corridors.**

- Outcome 4.a. Square feet of new and/or improved commercial space along the project area corridors
- Outcome 4.b. # of businesses launched or expanded in Monroe North
- Outcome 4.c. # of small, mid-sized, and large businesses supported by the business associations in the Talent District
- Outcome 4.d. Estimated construction value of Talent District projects and private investments in the Talent District based on permitting records

## 12. BUDGET

The total project cost is \$13,068,000. The City requests \$7 million. Please see the attached Budget for detail.

## 13. & 14. PROJECT MATCH/ADDITIONAL MATCH

The City commits \$3,568,000 and Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc. (DGRI) commits \$2,500,000 to support the four proposed projects (Reimagining Division and Ionia Avenues; Fairbanks Stairs; Safe Pedestrian Street Crossings; Transit Improvements). Prior to reimbursement, the work will be funded with local City funds and DGRI (Authority funds), which will be available in a phased approach in FY26, FY27, FY28, and FY29. In addition, the City and Consortium bring \$131,654,160 in additional match for district projects, for a total of 1,054% in match. Please see attached letters from the City Manager, City Engineer, DGRI, and Corewell Health. Please see the attached Budget for details.



## ATTACHMENTS

Please see the attachments for grant items 12 (Budget), 13 (Project Match Funding), Letters of Evidence, Letters of Support, and more.

