

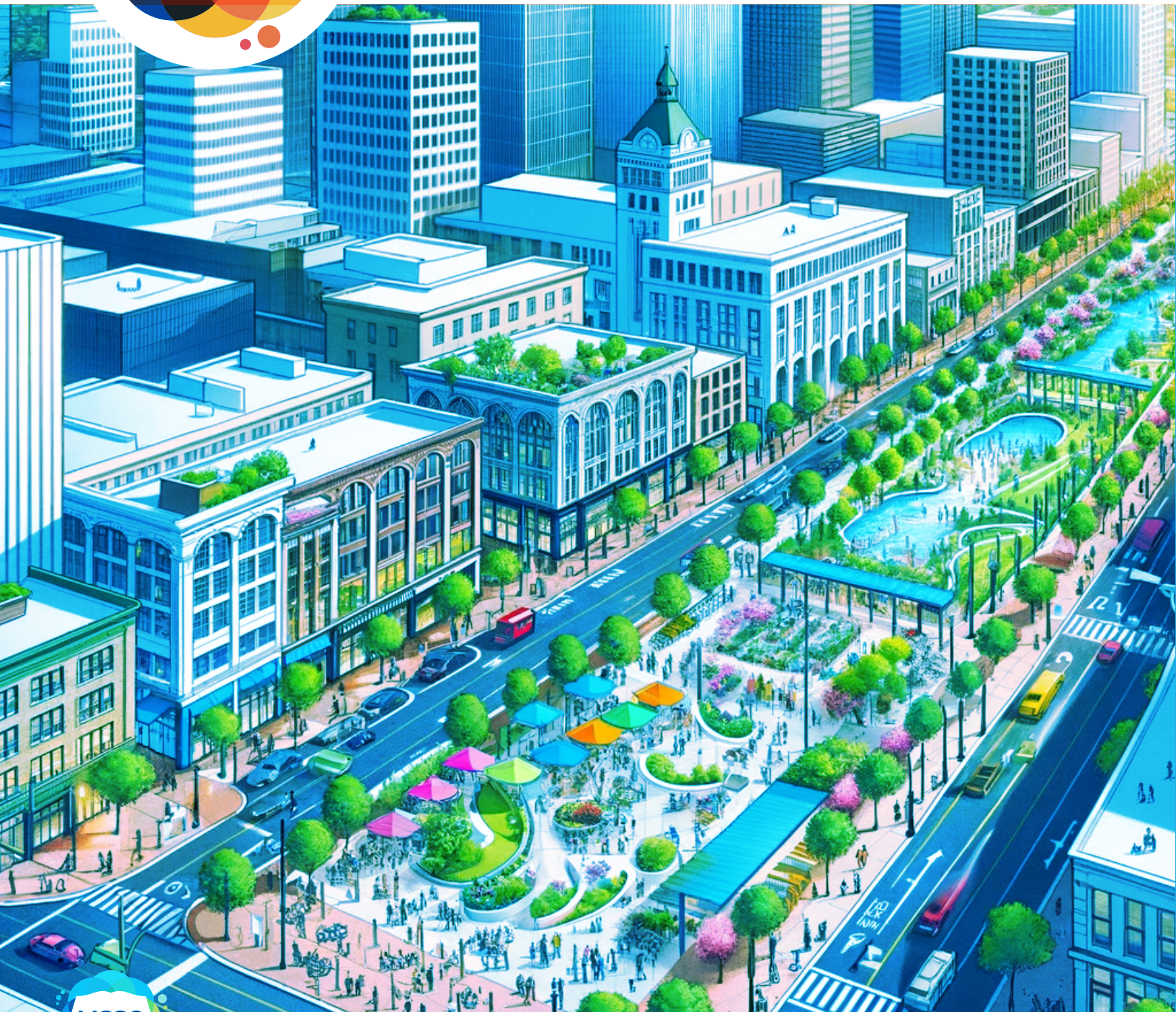
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MICHIGAN
DOWNTOWN
ASSOCIATION



PLANNING FOR DOWNTOWNS



Planning for Downtowns

Downtowns are often the most special place in a community, and the purpose of planning is to keep it that way. A community's master plan should include goals and actions for the downtown area. In communities which do not employ a professional planner or consultant, the downtown director may be the de facto planner for the downtown by virtue of being familiar with the vision and the conditions on the ground. Where there is a professional planner or consultant, a downtown director's role is to inform plan development and advocate for downtown-specific considerations.



LAWS

Two Michigan laws enable planning and zoning. **The Michigan Planning Enabling Act (PA 33 of 2008)** establishes the planning commission, authorizes the master plan and directs its adoption and review processes, regulates that municipalities prepare a capital improvement plan and assigns the capital improvement plan to the Planning commission, and requires an annual report from the Planning Commission to the elected body. **The Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (PA 110 of 2006)** requires that a zoning ordinance “shall be based upon a plan” to use land appropriately, conserve resources and energy, avoid overcrowding, reduce hazards, and provide for public utilities, services, and transportation systems.

Generally, the master plan must demonstrate how zoning regulations protect public health, safety, and welfare.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is a fundamental element of good planning, because it establishes the preferences that drive action. Almost all master planning efforts include a formal engagement process, though they are not required by law, as a vision for the downtown is an important element of the master plan. The downtown director's relationship with business owners offers a key gateway to downtown stakeholders. Downtown directors are often asked to represent these stakeholders in planning efforts, or to recruit stakeholder participation in a community engagement event. These connections are opportunities to build awareness of downtown priorities and the vision for downtown throughout the community.

Downtown organizations may also conduct their own community engagement to understand specific issues, or to get feedback on strategic plans or big developments. Downtown development plans require the establishment of a "citizens' council" to be consulted during the writing of the plan if more than 100 residents live within the area boundary. Some downtowns have Residents' Associations or Neighborhood Associations. These groups can be good starting places for outreach. But downtowns often serve an area that is larger than even the municipality itself, especially in terms of commerce and employment, so media and partnership strategies may also be needed to reach a representative group of participants.

THE MASTER PLAN

The community master plan is important to the downtown. It is the policy document that provides the legal basis for the zoning ordinance, and it's also the coordination document among many of the community's services. Here's how the priorities and goals for a downtown can show up in the master plan:

A master plan should...

Establish a vision for the community

Downtown is a critical piece of a community's self-identity. A statement in the plan describes the community's vision for the downtown. (Hint: it probably has "vibrant" in it.)

Identify existing conditions

Data collected during the master plan process – infrastructure maps, taxable value by parcel, detailed population demographics, building permits – inform a downtown organization's decision-making.

Promote cooperation between stakeholders

In the action plan, downtown goals coordinate with and support other departments and agencies. Conversely, downtown interests expand their reach with community-wide partnerships.

Communicate goals, priorities, and intended actions

The master plan document communicates the goals, priorities, and actions of a downtown organization and other bodies, including their interaction.

Guide long-range development of the community for 20 years

The types of developments that contribute the long-range vision of the downtown are identified and supported.

The Future Land Use Map shows generally how the community intends to use all of its land over the time frame that the plan covers. There is generally a Future Land Use category that describes the downtown, which describes the desired land use and site characteristics (see below). This will align with the vision of the downtown organization. **The Zoning Plan** compares this vision to what the zoning ordinance permits and details changes needed. **The Goals, Objectives, and Action Plan** present the policies and strategies developed through the planning process. Where the downtown organization is listed as a responsible party or a partner, the organization should take on the responsibility of implementing it.



DOWNTOWN LAND USE AND SITE DESIGN

There are generally two components to planning, and subsequently zoning: land use and form/design. Land use describes the activities that are permitted in each district, grouping them into categories like residential, commercial, and industrial. They're what make up the quality or type of the district. These are found in the zoning code under "Permitted Uses." Form/design is what defines the intensity of the district: how big everything can be, how close together, and what has to be done to make that arrangement work, like buffering. These are the site design standards in the zoning code, and may be found within the district or in separate chapters such as Landscaping, Parking, Schedule of Area Regulations, etc.

CORE AREA

The downtown core of the community is generally characterized by active uses and a walkable form. Active uses are accessible to the general public and draw regular foot traffic. Restaurants and retail are the classic examples. Walkability requires narrow lot widths, small and consistent setbacks, and large windows at eye level. Downtowns often also benefit from visual consistency, which requires tight control of signage and architectural features. These conditions are hard to sustain, so identifying a core area, and even limiting requirements to the ground floor, can concentrate these efforts to the geography that is expected to produce the "downtown experience." This is the core area.

DOWNTOWN EDGE

Because downtown is such a special built form, there's a border where it changes. This "edge" is the natural home for community-wide uses other than those which are active and walkable: administration, services, housing, offices, open space, transit, and specialized or legacy industry. The development pattern in the downtown edge is still relatively intense. Conflicts and changes are common as the downtown evolves, which should be acknowledged and prepared for. Streets, sidewalks, and alleys have a heavy coordination burden, including loading zones, waste removal, pedestrians, transit, bikes, scooters, parking, street furniture, and outdoor dining and sales. Building and site standards support this functionality.

PARKING AND MOBILITY

Downtown parking is special! "Walkable" is the opposite of "parkable," so per-parcel parking requirements are incompatible with tight development. Many downtowns have "parking exempt" districts. But parking must be planned and managed! Supply, access, location, funding, and connection to the transportation system as well as transit all must be handled. Use streetscape investments to address conflicts between travel modes (street parking can buffer pedestrian areas, protected bike lanes can serve scooters, tree planters can mark outdoor business areas, etc.) and to implement curb management for ride-sharing and carryout. Commitment from car companies to shift their production away from gas tell us that it's also time to address EV charging.

THE PLANNING COMMISSION

The Planning Commission is the public body that is responsible for developing the master plan, recommending zoning ordinance changes to the elected body, and approving development projects. The downtown organization should work closely with the Planning Commission to make sure that the two bodies share a vision for the downtown, and an understanding of how the zoning supports that vision. Most new businesses to the downtown will need to go through a land use approval process, so it's important for the downtown director to understand it. Ideally, there is a formal connection between the two bodies: the downtown director may contribute to the staff review of new development, for example, or a member may serve as an official liaison.



THE DOWNTOWN PLAN

Because the downtown is so critical to the community's overall vitality, it may be the subject of a more detailed planning effort. A downtown plan often takes one of two forms.

- The community master plan may present a **subarea plan for the downtown district**, with findings and recommendations integrated into the plan's action strategy. Since the master plan is the policy document that supports zoning changes and capital improvements, this is the best approach when those are needed. If there is a downtown organization, it should be closely involved in the creation of this plan, and many of the implementation tasks will be its responsibility. However, this approach is most frequently taken by communities which do not have a Downtown Development Authority.
- Communities which have a Downtown Development Authority have two plans to support it. A **Tax Increment Finance (TIF) Plan** shows how much money the Authority expects to capture over its lifetime. This should coordinate with the **Capital Improvements Plan** in order to allocate appropriate funding for downtown projects. As part of the TIF plan, a Development Plan is required to show how the community intends to spend the captured funds. Projects in the Development Plan are the responsibility of the Authority, though they should be developed in collaboration with the Planning Commission and included in the master plan.

OTHER PLANS, STUDIES, AND REVIEWS

Both the master plan and the zoning ordinance may benefit from findings, policies, and actions developed in other plans, such as a **Park and Recreation Plan, Sustainability/Climate Action Plan**, or a **Non-motorized Transportation Plan**. Adopting these into the master plan, either by referencing the plan date and title or by reproducing relevant text, allows them to serve as the basis for zoning changes where needed.

The **Capital Improvements Plan** is a long-term, annually-updated plan that coordinates infrastructure and other capital investments with the community's budget. The Capital Improvement Plan contains projects that are proposals for capital expenditures and the projects included are not necessarily a confirmed commitment for expenditures. The Planning Commission is statutorily responsible for it, but in practice it is often carried out administratively. The CIP is critical to project implementation, and should coordinate with any TIF plans in the community.

Market studies estimate how an increase or introduction of a land use (commercial, residential, industrial, etc.) can be absorbed into a particular market or segment of land (i.e. downtowns, corridors, municipality, or region). Market studies can be overarching general analyses or specific to retail types and the estimates within the study should be compared to the existing building and zoning landscape. **Economic development strategies** are generally on a larger scale, addressing issues like infrastructure and business and talent attraction. They may propose specific roles and activities for downtown organizations that should be carried into the community's downtown and master plans. These studies and strategies may be commissioned by the downtown organization, the municipality, or by another entity altogether.

If a community feels strongly about the design and/or historic nature of its downtown, it may implement additional review bodies like a **Design Review Board or Historic District Commission** to support them. The purpose of both bodies is to enhance the economic value of each building in the district by attending to the visual and aesthetic character of the whole. Not all communities need these bodies, but where passions for these topics run high, they can provide an orderly process for accommodating them. These bodies function best when they have adopted standards to guide their work, and elements of these standards may be adopted into the zoning ordinance.



PLAN ALIGNMENT AND ACTION

The Master Plan's Implementation Chart, and the Project List in the Authority plan if there is one, positions the downtown director's task list. The tasks in these documents are community-driven, data-supported, prioritized projects and programs. The documents generally identify timelines, responsible parties, and necessary partners, along with providing background information and data needed to get the projects off the ground. A downtown organization which devotes its time to accomplishing these tasks can be confident that its daily activities are yielding long-term value to the community.

As noted, there may be other documents—perhaps many of them—which identify downtown-related tasks, projects, or programs. A review of the community's entire suite of adopted plans and strategies may turn up an even more robust list of assignments for the downtown director or organization. Creating a combined spreadsheet can help organize the information, and also provide a convenient format for regularly reviewing progress, noting barriers, and tracking accomplishments.

These projects and programs are often alongside the day-to-day operations of the downtown organization. Some downtown organizations choose to develop a **strategic plan** to help prioritize resources, including time, and to clearly connect its long-term vision with its to-do list.

