



GOALS FOR DOWNTOWN COUNCIL BLUFFS

A Review of the Assessment and Goal-Setting Process



The perceptions and opinions of people with a stake in Downtown are very important as we plan for this unique district. While “stakeholder” groups in a downtown planning process typically include businesses and property owners, every resident of Council Bluffs has an interest in the heart of the city. The Downtown planning process included several techniques designed to give people the opportunity to define the goals and directions of the Downtown Council Bluffs Plan. These methods included:

- A survey distributed to property owners, businesses, and others with significant interests in the district.
- A series of ten focus group, inviting stakeholders to discuss Downtown and its future.
- A design charrette, held at Community Hall. During the studio, citizens were invited to comment and contribute to the actual development of the plan.

This chapter considers the first two of these efforts, designed to assess the condition of the district and to define goals and areas of concentration for the eventual plan.

THE DOWNTOWN SURVEY

The Downtown Survey was distributed to about 300 potential participants, of whom 180 returned completed surveys, representing about 60% of the entire sample. The results of the survey are reviewed and analyzed below.

Downtown Report Card

The initial part of the survey asked respondents to grade 28 key systems or features of downtown on a “5” to “1” scale, from the highest to lowest rating. An aggregate rating of 3.5 or above ranks a feature as a major strength of downtown, while a rating below 2.5 indicates that the feature is a major weakness. A rating between 2.5 and 3.0 suggests a system that needs improvement.

Participants painted a somewhat negative picture of the district. Out of 28 systems, only 4 received an aggregate score of 3.5 or above, while 9 systems were ranked at or below 2.5. Another 8 features were rated between 2.5 and 3.0, meaning that 60% of all criteria were considered at least somewhat below average.

The four high-rated features included:

- Effect of Downtown’s beautification and streetscape programs on the district.
- Benefits of the adjacent Mercy and Jennie Edmundson Hospitals.
- The district’s public environment.
- Utilization of Bayliss Park and other public spaces.

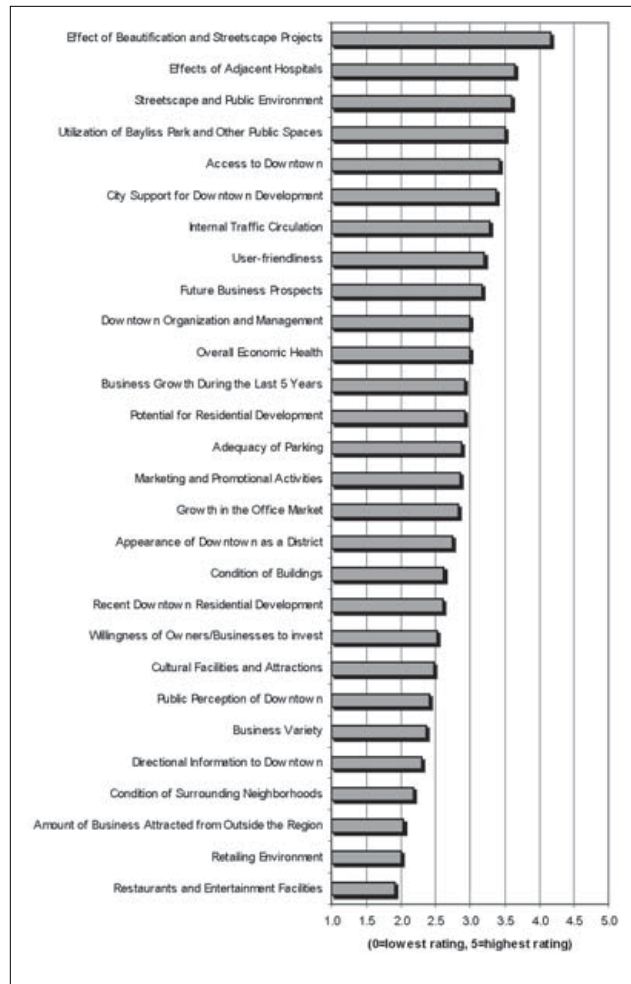
On the other hand, the following ranked as major weakness (listed in ascending order from the lowest ranked feature):

- Restaurants and entertainment facilities.
- Retailing environment.
- Amount of business attracted from outside the immediate region.
- Condition of surrounding neighborhoods.
- Directional information to Downtown.
- Business variety.
- Public perception of Downtown.
- Cultural facilities and attractions.
- Willingness of building owners and businesses to invest.

The following items were rated as moderate weaknesses (with aggregate scores between 2.5 and 3.0, listed in order from the lowest to highest relative score):

- Recent Downtown residential development.
- Building conditions.
- Appearance of the district.
- Growth in the office market.
- Marketing and promotional activities.
- Adequacy of parking.
- Potential for residential development.
- Business growth during the last five years.

Respondents clearly believe that Downtown’s public environment – its recently improved streetscape and public spaces like Bayliss Park – are among its greatest assets. Access, local circulation, city support for development, and business prospects all received above average ratings as well. On the other hand, many stakeholders believe that Downtown performs at a relatively low level, suffers from a poor public perception despite major recent investments, and lacks businesses and owners willing to invest in their buildings. Although restaurant and entertainment industries are staples of downtown revitalization

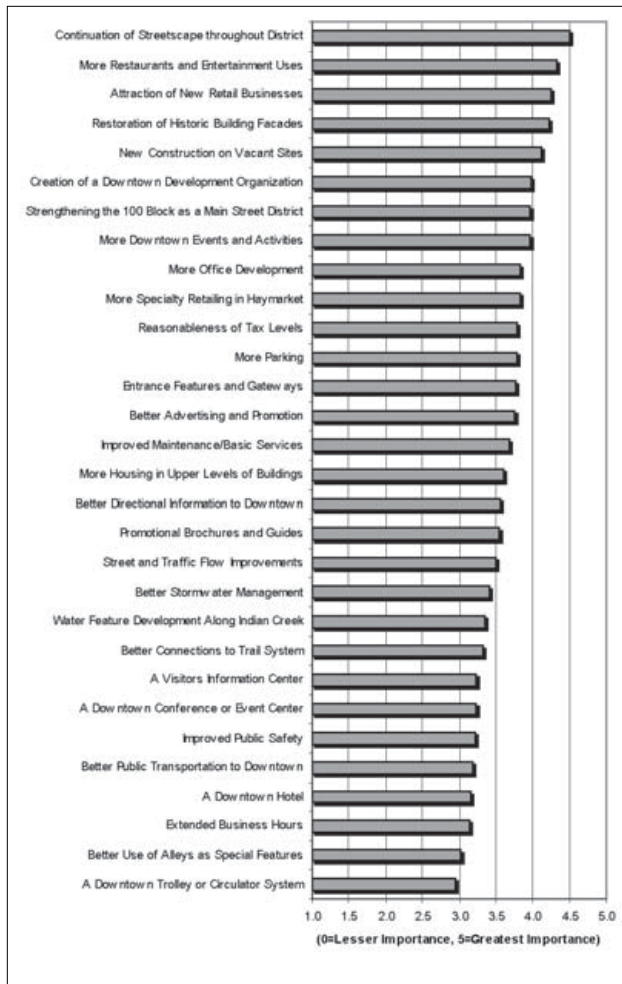


efforts, survey participants rate Downtown Council Bluffs extremely poorly in this area. Retailing is also considered to be a very negative variable.

Importance of Various Actions

The survey then asked respondents to consider a variety of potential actions and ideas for Downtown Council Bluffs by rating them on the basis of importance to the district. Most actions received “positive” aggregate ratings (above 3.0 and a 5-point scale). The five most important priorities, rating a score of well above 4.0 (in order of perceived importance), were:

- Continuation of the streetscape program throughout the district.
- More restaurant and entertainment businesses.
- Attraction of new retail businesses.



- Restoration of historic building facades.
- New construction on vacant or underused sites.

The streetscape program is very highly regarded; most participants believed it should be expanded to include the rest of the district. Attraction of new business is an *outcome* of a successful downtown revitalization process, created by establishing a positive physical and market environment for new development. A variety of specific strategies can produce these desirable outcomes. Other actions that respondents considered very important for Downtown Council Bluffs (ranking above 3.5 in order of importance) include:

- Creation of a Downtown Development Organization.
- Strengthening the 100 Block as a “Main Street” district.
- Generating more Downtown events and activities.

- More office development.
- Increasing specialty retailing in the Haymarket district.
- Having more reasonable tax levels.
- More parking.
- Entrance features and gateways.
- Better advertising and promotion.
- Improved maintenance and basic services.
- More housing in upper levels of buildings.
- Better directional information for motorists to Downtown.
- Promotional brochures and guides.
- Street and traffic flow improvements.

Future Role of Downtown

The survey identified five potential futures for Downtown Council Bluffs and asked participants to select the “most logical” future for the district. This helps to focus future planning by providing a measure for evaluating potential actions.

About 42% of respondents identified the most logical future as “development as an urban center that has a strengthened mix of residential, office, public, cultural, and commercial uses.” Another 18% of respondents identified the most logical future as “a continuation of Downtown pretty much as it is today, with a mix of office, service, government, and some retail and residential uses.” Both leading responses foresaw a mixed use district, with a majority calling for a strengthening and expansion of residential and retail use in this mix.

A significant number of respondents called for greater specialization or focus on certain uses. About 15% of respondents advocated “an increased function as a government, office, and service center, with retail and residential uses being relatively minor parts of the mix” – recognition of current trends at work in the district. About 12% foresaw “re-establishing a strong retail base in Downtown, with parallel development of other supporting uses, most notably offices and housing.” Finally, 7% envisioned Downtown as “evolving into a neighborhood with a focus on residential growth.

Thus, a large majority of respondents considered Downtown Council Bluffs’ future as being a more balanced mixed use district, with a significant role for retailing, housing, and even new office development.

Health and Quality of Specific Settings

The survey asks respondents evaluate the health and quality of specific parts of the Downtown study area on the familiar “5” to “1” scale, from highest to lowest score. Settings that graded above average in order of ranking were:

- Bayliss Park Area
- Omni Business Center and surroundings
- Main and Pearl immediately south of Broadway (the new Fountain Square)

Settings rated moderately below average (in order from highest to lowest score) were:

- Broadway east of 1st Street
- Neighborhoods south of Downtown, including the Glen and Park Avenue corridors.
- West Broadway area, west of Omni Center
- Haymarket

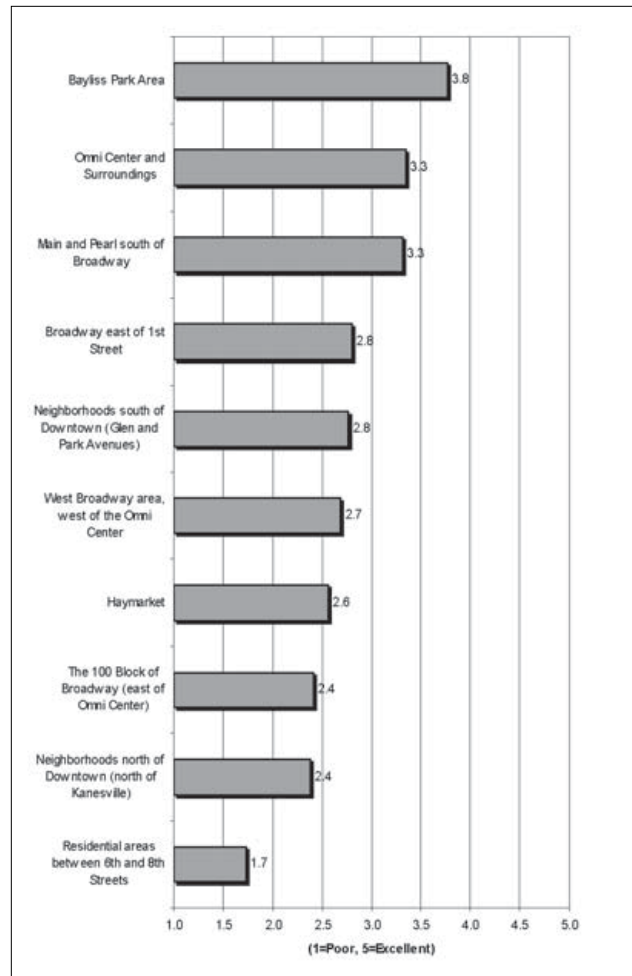
Finally, settings rated well below average (again in order from highest to lowest score):

- The 100 Block of West Broadway
- Neighborhoods north of Downtown (north of Kanesville Boulevard)
- Residential areas between 6th and 8th Streets.

Assets

In an unprompted question, participants were asked to identify the four greatest assets of Downtown Council Bluffs. The following received the most responses (in order of mentions):

- Bayliss Park
- Library
- Historic buildings and architecture
- Beautification and streetscape projects
- Accessibility and proximity to population
- Status as a government service center
- Omni Business Center
- Good traffic flow
- Haymarket
- Strong concentration of offices, including attorneys, real estate, and investment firms
- Union Pacific Railroad Museum
- Senior Center



Liabilities

Also in an unprompted question, participants were asked to identify the four most significant liabilities of Downtown Council Bluffs. The following received the most responses (in order of mentions):

- Deteriorated building conditions
- Lack of restaurants or fine dining
- Deterioration of neighboring residential areas
- Poor retail business variety
- Lack of parking
- Poorly maintained property, including weeds, trash, building deterioration, entries, landscaping, and sidewalks
- Vacant buildings and lots
- Condition of the 100 Block
- Poor public perception of Downtown
- Residential areas on the west edge of Downtown, 6th to 8th

- Lack of cultural or entertainment attractions
- Mynster Street

Most Important Actions

Finally, the survey asked respondents to identify the most important projects or actions that should be completed in Downtown during the next five years. The following actions received the most responses (again in order of number of mentions).

- Continuing the streetscape project, including landscaping, lights, benches, and buried power lines.
- Renovating the 100 Block of West Broadway, including streets and facades.
- Restoring and renovating historic structures, properties, and storefronts that are in poor condition.
- Revitalizing the South Main corridor through Haymarket, from 5th to 9th Avenue.
- Improving the condition of the surrounding residential areas.
- Attracting quality, dine-in restaurants.
- Improving parking.
- Improving gateways into the district, especially on the west side at the foot of the Broadway viaduct.
- Attracting additional office development.
- Offer incentives and grants to owners and tenants for property improvements.
- Attracting more retail development.

FOCUS GROUP PROCEEDINGS

A second vital part of the goal-setting process was a program of eleven focus groups, inviting stakeholders and residents of Council Bluffs to discuss Downtown's future in informal, round-table discussions. The focus group proceedings are integrated into all elements of this Downtown plan. Discussions generally considered three questions:

- What is the current state of Downtown Council Bluffs?
- What is your vision of the district's future?
- What are appropriate actions and policy directions to realize this vision?

The proceedings are summarized by issue areas, in declining order of consideration.

Issue: Appropriate Uses and Community Role for Downtown

- Council Bluff's central district should be a mixed use city center district.
- Retailing, with an emphasis on limited and specialty retailing and neighborhood services, is an important component of Downtown Council Bluffs. While many participants identify a market for additional retailing, few believe that the district can recover its previous retail primacy. A major grocery store seems like a particular niche if it accommodates pedestrians successfully.
- Downtown should plan for additional quality office development in the future. Participants suggested that the current market for office space is minimal, but that new office development should be a part of the Downtown picture and appropriately planned for.
- Development planning should include a focus on experiential aspects, including restaurants, entertainment, events, and attractions.
- Major areas for concentrated policy should be the 100 Block, Haymarket, and Bayliss Park area. The Bayliss Park area has suffered from building demolitions and parking lot construction, that have weakened the city square character of the park. The 100 Block retains the quality of a Main Street district and can be a foundation for further development. Haymarket has often been compared to the Old Market in potential. Rather than mimic the Old Market, Haymarket should build on its own uniqueness. Much of Haymarket's recent growth has involved private offices (such as law firms and title offices) that are associated to nearby government services. Uses like coffee shops, restaurants, business services, and specialty retailers can complement this strength.
- The various uses in Downtown need to be linked together because of the large size of the central district.

Issue: Transportation, Access, and Parking

- The Downtown traffic system does not always function as expected. Kanessville Boulevard was intended to carry most regional traffic, with lower volumes on Broadway. While this occurs, frequent signalization on Kanessville somewhat reduces its effectiveness as a higher speed bypass. Much traffic bound for areas south of the city center instead use Pierce and Bluff Street, creating an unwanted impact on residential areas.
- The role and functioning of Broadway changes through the district. In some places, the street has a high speed character and is difficult to cross. The question is whether the street will be a car-oriented “speedway” or a more pedestrian-scaled street.
- While Downtown is relatively close to the Interstate system, the connections to the district are not clear. Highway 6 and 1st Street/Madison should be reinforced as direct connections and entrances to Downtown.
- Parking in Downtown needs to be rethought. Parking should be accessible and convenient for users without dominating the district. Parking in some cases spills out into surrounding neighborhoods. The use of diagonal parking on Broadway is controversial, supported by businesses but also viewed as a safety and traffic flow problem.
- Pedestrians are often intimidated in Downtown by having to cross wide streets that move traffic at relatively high speeds. Pedestrian linkage among parts of Downtown is sometimes difficult. For example, the pedestrian environment along Omni Business Center is relatively unpleasant, and divides the 100 Block from the Bayliss Park area.
- Downtown should be connected to the city’s growing trail system.



Issue: The 100 Block and Indian Creek

- The scale and historic character of the 100 Block are assets. Some businesses are concerned about long-term policy for the block and are aware of some pressure to redevelop it. Most participants are strongly in favor of preservation and rehabilitation of the block. A financing program should be established to encourage building rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. The rear facades of buildings should also be cleaned up.
- Most participants believe that the north side of the block should be preserved and the south side redeveloped. The south side of Broadway has much less historic value than the north side.
- The Vine Street area, between the historic commercial buildings on the 100 Block and Indian Creek, is generally seen as a deteriorated residential area. Most participants support the redevelopment of this area, and believe that its current condition discourages business and investment on the 100 Block.
- Indian Creek could provide an opportunity for a water-based amenity, possibly a lake or pool. The creek is currently a major liability, but could be converted into a major asset. Any water feature is likely to be cosmetic. The area is not large enough or in the right place to build a facility that has any significant flood control benefit.



Issue: Public Art, Urban Design, and Wayfinding

- The streetscape program has successfully remade the image of Downtown. It will be extended to Haymarket in 2003 and to 2nd Street by 2004. The Broadway section of the program has been more related to a traveling than a pedestrian environment to date. Participants from some parts of the district, notably the 100 Block, suggest a change in the color of lights and parking meters.
- New development should be pedestrian in scale, and should avoid “cookie-cutter” design. New projects, even such large scale uses as grocery stores, should include pedestrian scale features, including awnings and lighting.
- Public art should be incorporated into Downtown revitalization. Community art may be included along an Indian Creek walkway or trail, and connected to Bayliss Park. Public art may be located in nodes in the district.
- It is relatively easy to bypass Downtown despite its strategic location. Stronger entrances, gateways, and wayfinding information and signage can address this problem. In addition, the linkage of Downtown to key approach routes, such as the Madison Avenue/1st Street corridor and the Harry Langdon Boulevard/3rd Street corridors, should be strengthened.

Issue: Approach to Downtown Revitalization

- It is important to focus aggressively on a specific area, rather than take a “shotgun” approach. The community should pick a specific area and make something significant happen. Candidate areas are the 100 Block and the Bayliss Park environs.
- Downtown is in “neutral” now, but is at risk of declining again. Some are concerned that the plan will be insufficiently bold. Projects need to create activity and anchors that will bring people and users into the district. A plan should make sense, rather than doing projects solely “for the sake of doing something.”
- Downtown may be the wrong word for describing this central district.
- Preservation should be favored over removing structures, particularly if the result is more parking or open space. Future development should complement existing attractions and strengths, including the public and financial sectors. A greater local population base would be helpful to development objectives.
- Businesses should cooperate to coordinate improvements and investment.

Issue: Downtown as a Residential District

- Residential development in Downtown Omaha demonstrates the attraction of urban living in the metropolitan area. Downtown Council Bluffs could attract a portion of the Omaha downtown employee market and new employees coming to the area through the Gallup and Union Pacific moves.
- Effectiveness of a downtown housing program in Council Bluffs depends on environment (including outdoor setting), price, and organization. Some are skeptical about benefits of downtown living for employees, because most of Council Bluffs is within a few minutes of downtown.
- Opportunities for downtown living include upper story reuse in the Haymarket and 100 Block historic districts, and in a mixed use area along Indian Creek. Downtown should attract singles



as well as seniors, who are already a demonstrated market in the area. Incentives for adaptive reuse should be tied to using proper preservation techniques.

- Conservation of surrounding neighborhoods is very important. This is particularly true of neighborhoods north of Kaneshville and along Bluff Street. The Bluff Street area could be stabilized by redevelopment of the Monticello Apartments.

Issue: Existing Civic and Historical Resources

- The Public Library is a major attraction. The Union Pacific Railroad Museum should also have a beneficial effect. However, other important features with uncertain futures – the Police Department Headquarters and the YMCA – should remain in the district.
- Bayliss Park is a central and signature feature, the focal point for Downtown. It should continue to have a family orientation and acts as a neighborhood park for the surrounding area.
- Downtown’s churches are key anchors for the downtown community, from both physical and communal perspectives.
- A school needs to remain downtown. Consolidation of Washington and Bloomer into a

new consolidated downtown school is not in the near or medium-term plans. However, the appearance and character of these schools must be reinforced.

- Historical sites and resources are key to Downtown. The district’s resources should be networked into an overall cultural tour. These features in and near downtown include the General Dodge House, the Doll House, the historic jail, Union Pacific Railroad Museum, Lewis and Clark Monument, Fairview Cemetery, and historic commercial districts.

- Policies need to encourage historic preservation, adaptive reuse, and conservation of historic neighborhoods.

Issue: Senior Citizens

- The senior market is significant in Downtown, anchored by the new Senior Center. Housing for older adults should be developed on a site adjacent to the Senior Center.
- Downtown appears ideal for seniors because of the relative adjacency of a variety of services, including medical care, churches, and commercial services. In reality, the distances are somewhat too great to make a comfortable walking distance environment for seniors. This suggests the need for some form of local transportation.