

City of

Ann Arbor

CENTRAL
AREA
PLAN

December 1992

- Excerpts -

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DOWNTOWN

Background

The downtown is the heart of the Central Area, and the place that most people feel represents the character of Ann Arbor. Its pedestrian orientation, variety of historic structures, diverse retail and entertainment attractions, along with its proximity to the University's Central Campus, have worked to keep the downtown a vital place even as newer commercial districts have developed at the perimeter of the City.

For purposes of this plan, the downtown is defined as the area contained in the 66-block Downtown Development Authority (DDA) District (Map 4). The DDA, established in 1983 as a tax-increment finance district, contains four major retail centers: Main Street, State Street, South University and Kerrytown.

The downtown is one of the City's major employment centers. An estimated 14,000 jobs, which represent almost a quarter of the City's total, are located in the downtown. This figure is projected to grow 13 percent to 15,850 jobs over the next 20 years. This compares with a City-wide growth rate of 25 percent.

Although the downtown is considered a commercial area, it also functions as an urban neighborhood. An estimated 2,300 residents live in the downtown. A number of new housing units have been added over the past several years through new mixed-use development and loft conversions, although a significant number of units have been lost through new commercial construction and conversions to non-residential uses.

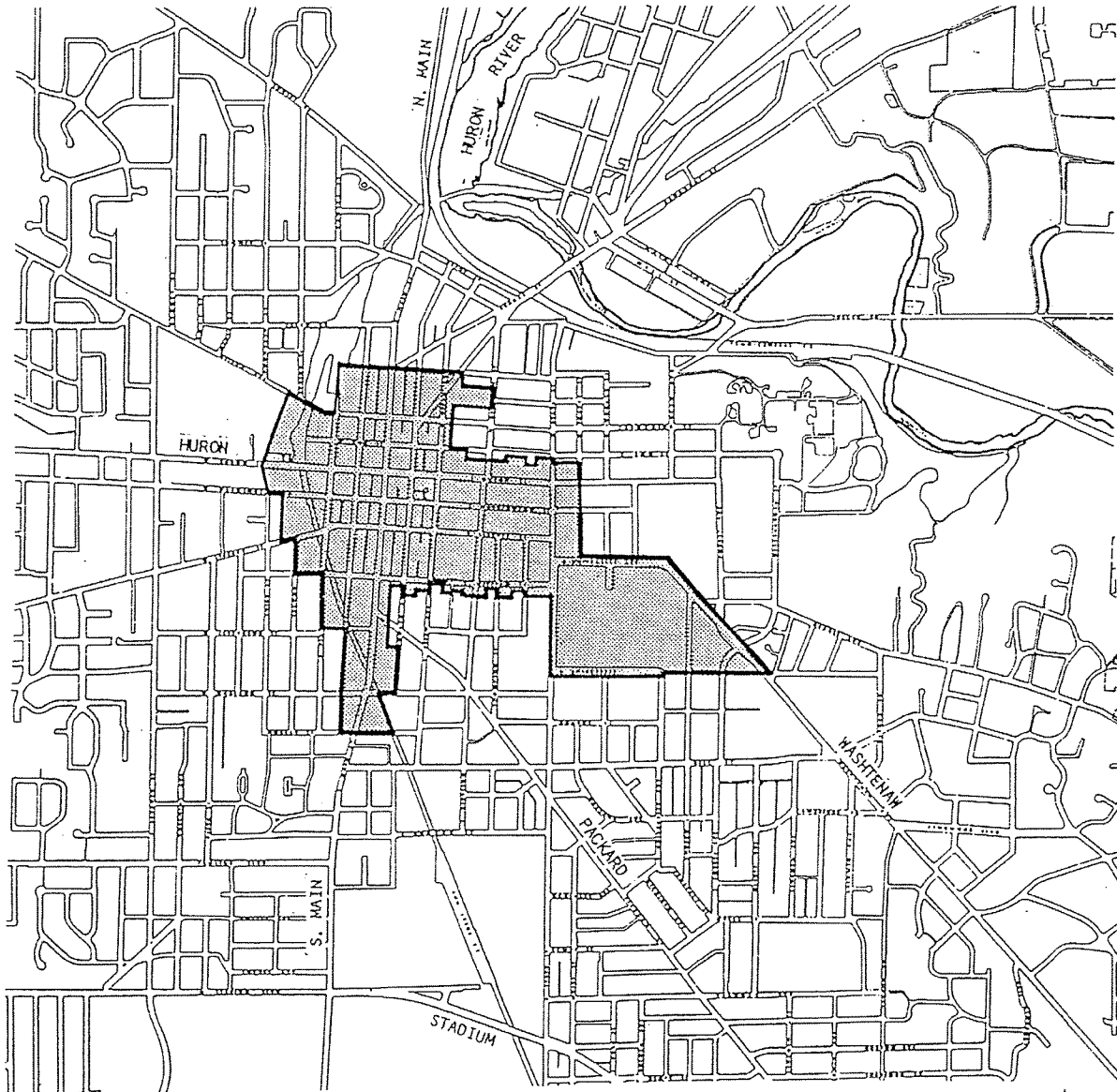
Construction activity in the downtown peaked in the late 1980's after several years of office development. Since 1980, approximately 972,000 square feet of non-residential floor area has been added to the downtown.

Because of the importance of the downtown, it has a rich planning history. The first comprehensive plan for the downtown, A Guide to Action, was developed in 1962 as a joint effort between the Planning Commission and the Chamber of Commerce. The plan focused on efficient circulation patterns and maintaining economic vitality. Construction of Briarwood Mall in the early 1970's prompted the Central Area Policy Plan (1973), which outlined the City's commitment to downtown and surrounding neighborhoods in light of this major development. The policy plan was followed in 1975 by the Downtown Ann Arbor Development and Conservation Strategy. This document was developed as Part I of the Central Area Plan (Part II, covering the neighborhoods, was never completed). Recommendations identified ways to create a unique "downtown neighborhood."

In the 1980's, the emphasis turned to physical improvements. In 1982, the Downtown Development Plan and Tax Increment Finance Plan was developed in coordination with the establishment of the DDA tax increment financing district. The objectives of the plan were increased parking opportunities, planned open space and pedestrian linkages, and increased tax base. This plan was followed by the DDA District Master Plan for Pedestrian Improvements in 1988, which outlined guidelines for future design and location of public and private improvements to the downtown sidewalk system.

Map 4

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY BOUNDARIES



Following several years of unprecedented growth in the downtown, the Planning Commission initiated an update to the 1975 plan and provide guidelines for the future physical form of the downtown. The 1988 Downtown Plan outlines action strategies to meet objectives in the areas of land use, development character and circulation, transit and parking. Since the adoption of the plan, five downtown commercial historic districts have been established.

Problem Statements

Although the Downtown Plan outlines comprehensively the problems facing the downtown, the Central Area planning effort reinforced three areas of concern. These are:

- Downtown Plan Implementation
- Housing
- Security/Maintenance/Cleanliness

Downtown Plan Implementation

Some progress has been made in implementation of the 1988 Downtown Plan, but the efforts of various actors (City departments, DDA, merchants, property owners, residents and developers) have not been well coordinated. Because priorities have not been assigned to the many actions recommended by the plan, implementation efforts have little focus. In some cases, this lack of effort has resulted in an eroding of the consensus built in the development of the plan.

Housing

The downtown lacks certain amenities important to support residential use, such as reliable parking, open space and shops selling convenience goods. Concerns about safety, real or perceived, and noise may discourage new housing development. Regulatory requirements make it difficult to convert vacant upper floors to loft housing. The availability of lower-cost housing units in the downtown appears to be decreasing.

Security/Maintenance/Cleanliness

Although there have been improvements in City police staffing and maintenance efforts in the downtown over the past several years, problems continue to exist. Trash and recycling storage facilities for many parts of the downtown are inadequate, particularly for restaurants. Many sidewalks on both improvement and non-improvement streets are in need of repair. Structural problems in parking structures are being repaired, but appearance and maintenance are still problems. Many property and business owners do not take responsibility for keeping the sidewalk in front of their building clean or free of snow or ice in the winter.

Amendments to Downtown Plan

In the four years since the Downtown Plan was adopted, the pace of new development has slowed considerably. Since many of the plan's recommendations centered on directing new development, the Citizens Task Force determined that some amendments to the plan were needed to provide direction in improving the quality of the environment for existing

development. The following amendments are proposed as refinements to the plan and are meant to reinforce, rather than replace, the plan's objectives. The highlighted portions indicate language to be added or changed.

I. Development Character

A. Scale and Quality

Neighborhood Edges Objective

- 2) Protect the livability of residential areas adjacent to downtown.

Action Strategies

- e) Identify those established residential areas which extend over the neighborhood edges into the interface area and determine whether rezoning from commercial to residential or residential-office is warranted to protect their integrity.

B. Pedestrian/Open Space System

Concentrated Diversity of Activity Objective

- 1) Encourage land use and development patterns which draw people downtown, foster an active street life and contribute to its function as an urban residential neighborhood.

Streetscape Improvements Objective

- 2) Continue to improve and extend the downtown's system of pedestrian connections through public streetscape improvements.

Action Strategies

- e) Promote the planting of flowers and maintenance of street trees by private individuals.

- f) Develop and install an historical street exhibit program in the downtown.

Public Sector Open Space Development Objective

- 5) Develop a downtown park as part of a mixed use development on the centrally-located "Library" parking lot. Encourage preservation of the existing open space area at Community High as a permanent downtown amenity.

Action Strategies

- a) Coordinate public and private initiatives to implement the Library Block Planning and Urban Design Study.

D. Management and Maintenance

Maintenance of Public Spaces Objective

- 1) Improve the quality of maintenance on downtown streets, sidewalks, alleys and public spaces.

Action Strategy

- a) Upgrade maintenance by developing guidelines for trash storage, cleaning streets on a regular basis, increasing enforcement of the snow removal ordinance and encouraging participation in adopt-a-tree or adopt-a-park programs.

Security Objective

- 3) Work to resolve real and perceived security problems in the downtown area.

Action Strategy

- a) Work to resolve security and safety problems by expanding the community-oriented policing approach through bicycle and foot patrols, strengthening cooperative efforts between City and University police, and establishing a downtown Neighborhood Watch program.

II. Circulation, Transit and Parking

A. Circulation and Transit

Circulation Objective

- 1) Ensure that the traffic increases generated by future growth can be accommodated without jeopardizing the quality of the pedestrian environment, overtaxing the capacity of the existing street network, or channeling significantly increased traffic through neighborhoods.

Action Strategies

- a) Enforce lower traffic speed limits and maintain on-street parking to protect the pedestrian orientation of major shopping streets.

B. Parking

Existing Facilities Objective

- 2) Promote better awareness and more efficient use of existing public parking resources by downtown shoppers and service users. Improve the visual appearance and perceived safety of existing parking structures and lots and provide more convenient pedestrian connections between these facilities and retail frontages.

Action Strategies

- c) Make parking structures cleaner, safer and more user friendly by providing attendants and assigned maintenance and security staff.
- d) Shift management responsibility of the downtown parking system to the DDA.
- e) Develop a long-term renovation and maintenance program for downtown parking structures.

III. Land Use Components

A. Retail Strength

Entrepreneurial Activity Objective

- 2) Encourage merchants to cooperate in setting store hours, undertaking promotional activities, identifying possible sites, defining potential incentives, and soliciting developer/retail interest.

Action Strategies

- d) Determine the feasibility of and interest in a centralized retail management program for any or all of the retail districts.

B. Housing

Housing Incentives Objective

- 1) Promote the development and maintenance of downtown housing to expand the downtown resident population and strengthen the downtown's role as an urban neighborhood. Encourage residential use in the upper stories of existing commercial buildings.
 - c) Revise existing zoning premiums, and provide premiums where not currently available, to create incentives for downtown residential use.
 - d) Remove disincentives to housing development and renovation in existing City regulations.
 - g) Consider impacts on residential use in reviewing street occupancy permit applications and proposals for special outdoor events.