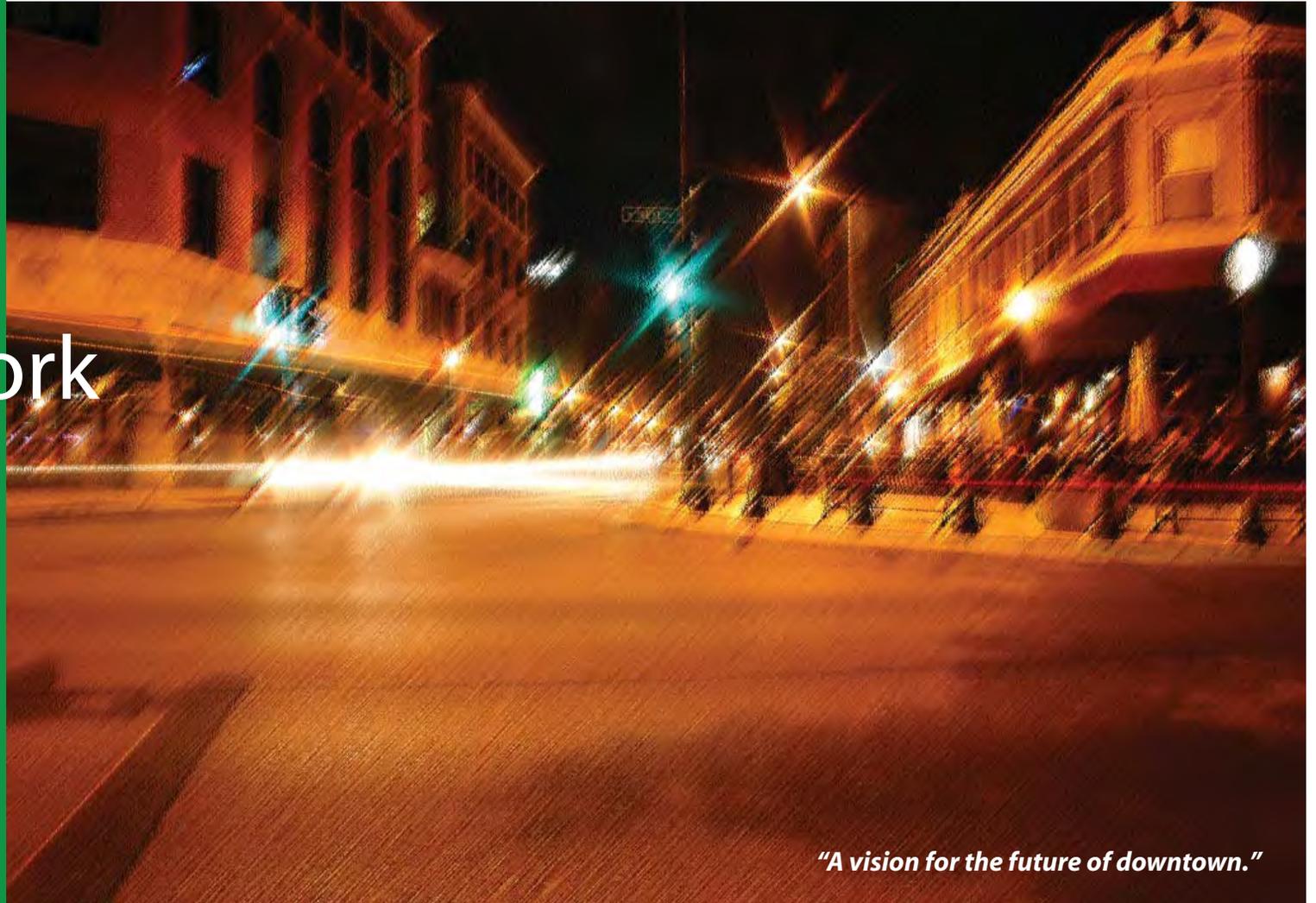


Framework



"A vision for the future of downtown."

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History of Downtown Champaign

REFLECTIONS ON THE DOWNTOWN OVER THE YEARS

an historical narrative by Former Champaign Mayor Dannel McCollum

With the final determination of route for the Chicago Branch of the Illinois Central Railroad in the latter half of 1851, the location of a station nearly two miles to the west of the Champaign County Court House was de facto determined. In mid-1853, shortly after the railroad purchased 80 acres from the Col. M.W. Busey estate, construction of the first buildings began on the "depot grounds," and the area soon became known as the Depot. By the time of the arrival of the first train from



As a junction point to all directions, downtown Champaign once thrived as a midwestern hub for freight and services.

Chicago in regular service to what the railroad called Urbana Station, on July 24, 1854, a great deal of activity was in progress in the depot area. In addition to newcomers to the area, there was significant migration from Urbana. In the first two months of 1855, an effort was initiated to incorporate Urbana and surrounding area, including the Depot, into a single municipality. Due to opposition in the latter area, Urbana incorporated alone without the inclusion of the Depot. In March of that year, the Depot was granted its own post office under the name West Urbana. The separation of the new town from the old had become a determined fact. Commercial development in the depot area occurred on both sides of the tracks. In those early years, the Doane House, which served both as the railroad station and as a hotel on the east side of the tracks,

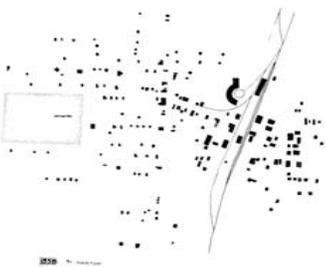


Ruins of Illinois Building Mar. 17-15.

The St. Patrick's Day fire of 1915 destroyed the entire five story Lewis and Company Department store at the southwest corner Park and Neil Street. Fires like this were common throughout the early history of downtown.



1858



1924



1951



1977



1996





The five points intersection of Neil, Hickory, Main and Church Streets has long been considered the center of Downtown. Although fires and demolition have changed the northern face of this intersection the southern faces remain intact.

west of the Illinois Central tracks. This was a consequence of the swale, better known as the north branch of the Boneyard, which runs along Second Street, rendering the area wet and difficult to develop. Almost from the outset, the commercial strength of Champaign-Urbana became concentrated in Downtown Champaign, a circumstance ultimately attributable to its proximity to the railroad. Its steady growth through the latter half of the 19th century,



Lewis and Company reopened in their rebuilt department store. Note the large picture windows which added street life throughout the entire downtown.

was the social center of the community. Also, the Cattle Bank, the only surviving building from that era, remains at the northeast corner of First Street and University Avenue. But, as the 1858 Bowman map of Urbana and West Urbana plainly illustrates, the thrust of the development soon was concentrated

owing to the fact that the presence of downtown Urbana also drew market shares, as subsequently did Campustown. Among the earliest public improvements were

sidewalks.

By the late 1860's, the original frame buildings hastily erected after the coming of the railroad were being replaced with more permanent structures of brick. One of the earliest of these buildings remains on the northwest corner of Taylor and Chestnut streets. The first of the really large brick structures was a three story, Italianate building where One Main stands today; it fell to the march of progress with the building of the Grant Department Store. It was followed shortly by two very similar buildings on the two corners to the west. Only the Metropolitan Building (223 North Neil Street) remains. (Its mate to the north was razed to create a surface parking lot.) Confidence in the future of the area and fire resistance were the determining factors. Beginning in the latter years of the 19th century, the downtown streets were paved with bricks, helping the area rise out of the mud. As the downtown expanded, it did surround a few surviving single family residences, some of which remained until the late 20th century. In the pre-automobile age, even as late as 1910 and a bit beyond, virtually all the social activities of mid-sized cities such as Champaign occurred in or immediately adjacent to the downtown areas: general retail, food markets, banking, offices, government, dining, lodges, churches, entertainment, etc. Respecting the latter, the opera houses of the late 19th century, gave way to the vaudeville movie houses, the grandest of which, the Virginia, survives today. On the immediate periphery were a number of fine apartment buildings dating from the turn of the century. The downtown built environment as it was established in the mid teens remained intact for the next thirty years, from the



The flatiron building served as a landmark in downtown from 1909 to the 1970's but was razed in a last ditch effort to keep major retail tenants from fleeing to the shopping centers and to make way for additional parking. Even with additional parking the stores left to the newly opened Country Fair Shopping Center and Market Place Mall.



For nearly 50 years, downtown Champaign was served by a nine-mile streetcar system that connected downtown to surrounding neighborhoods and even rural destinations. The interurban system was taken up after General Motors purchased the system because of competition with automobiles.

bus service began as people wanted to drive instead of ride. Vintage buildings began to come down as individual businesses attempted to accommodate the increased need for parking. A pioneer in this movement was Robeson's Department Store. The City installed parking meters to encourage turnover and prevent employees from monopolizing scarce places on city streets. But the proliferation of automobiles opened a new threat to the downtown. People



The December 27, 1987 fire destroyed the entire block between Neil, Main, and Fremont Streets. Failing to rebuild the block the developer eventually razed the buildings and sold the property to the City to construct parking. However, in 2004 the City sold this lot to One Main Development for a 30,000 square foot mixed use development

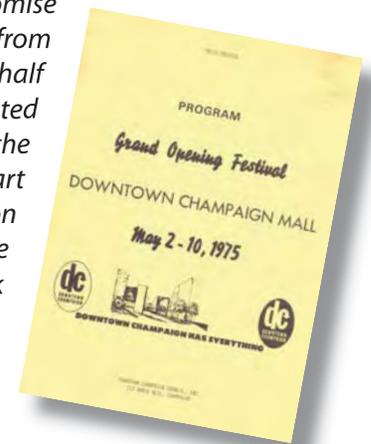
time of World War I, through the Great Depression and World War II. Pent-up consumer demand, unleashed following the defeat of Germany and Japan, was to have a major impact upon downtown. The automobile industry was quick to shift from war production and to dust off its 1942 models for the 1946 production year. The long decline in local

could drive further afield to do their shopping. Developers were quick to seize the opportunity and in 1959, Country Fair Shopping Center opened at the intersection of Springfield and Mattis Avenues. In the downtown, owners of many of the older buildings constructed sleek metal facade treatments to "modernize" their businesses and thus make them appear more fashionable to customers. But the knockout blow to downtown retail was the development of Marketplace, a shopping mall located just north of 1-74 on Neil Street extended. Delighted to have the retail expansion, yet at the same time desperate to appease and preserve the downtown interests, the City embarked upon a study of the aging area. The consultants recommended a plan which would have roofed over much of the central downtown area. The scale and costs of the proposal were staggering, far exceeding what could reasonably be built and sustained. The compromise was the pedestrian mall blocking off Neil Street from the corner of Main and Neil south a block and a half south to Chester Street. The idea, largely promoted by Downtown business interests, was to make the downtown more pedestrian friendly. Another part of the "improvements" was to take out the flatiron block in front of the Sears store and virtually the entire area to the rear of the store and in back of J.C. Penney's to create huge parking lots, all in an effort to keep the two large chain stores downtown.

Once dominated by large department stores, Downtown was the commercial heart of the region. Over time this dominance has shifted to auto-oriented regional shopping centers



Once dominated by large department stores, Downtown was the commercial heart of the region. Over time this dominance has shifted to auto-oriented regional shopping centers



It was all to no avail. Within two years, both Sears



Over a 30 year time period over 60 buildings were leveled to make way for surface parking.. This movement did substantial damage to the urban fabric of downtown Champaign

were built, this time south of Main Street. That failed to arrest the closing of the traditional downtown department stores-Lewis' and Robeson's - with Jos. Kuhn hanging on only by a sliver. For a decade and a half, from 1975 until 1990, what had once been a vibrant downtown became virtually an 8:00 am to 5:00 pm operation. Even the major movie theaters - The Rialto, The Orpheum and finally The Virginia began to shut down, victims of the multiplex operations located elsewhere.



Finance District just in time to take advantage of the first major redevelopment in the downtown-the Bankllinois (now Main Street Bank and Trust) project,

and J.C. Penney's had fled to Marketplace Mall. The pedestrian mall on Neil Street, the perceived trendy, miracle cure for downtown ills, made a downtown already difficult to navigate because of its contorted street patterns, next to impossible. Still larger parking lots

Fortunately, a number of anchors remained in the downtown. Prominent among them were: City government, the News - Gazette, Christie Clinic and major banks. Property values declined markedly. The City government reacted by creating a Tax Increment

followed by the expansion of Christie Clinic . By the mid 1980's, the then mayor had made it a major goal to reopen Neil Street. By then, most people realized what a mistake the pedestrian mall had been. The only question was who should pay for the removal, the downtown interests who had promoted the pedestrian mall in the first place, or the public at large. The matter was resolved when the City financed the reopening of the street, one way south. The City Council realized that the downtown would never come back as the major retail center of the region. Its future lay as a mixed use area as entrepreneurs took advantage of the diminished property values to establish specialty retail, dining and entertainment venues. As traffic increased, it was hoped residential redevelopment would occur in the often vacant upper stories of the older buildings. Using Tax Increment funds, the City embarked upon an ambitious cityscape plan to visually improve the appearance of the public areas. Furthermore, the City Council made provision for outdoor seating venues for restaurants and coffee houses using public sidewalks. A major blow to the downtown occurred when a fire destroyed much of the One Main block, everything east of the former Grants Department Store. After a valiant attempt to redevelop the fire area, the City acquired the block and razed the buildings to create a parking lot. It left the City in a position subsequently to support a major redevelopment project on the site. While it was outside of the TIF district, the future of the Virginia Theater was of growing concern to the City. After it ceased being a movie venue, a husband and wife team continued to keep the theater open with



Marking the first new construction in downtown in over 15 years, One Main features three restaurants, two retail businesses, a business incubator, major computer game designer firm, and 26 condominiums.

After it ceased being a movie venue, a husband and wife team continued to keep the theater open with

live performances. While the theater was in generally good condition for a 70-year-old structure, it had significant shortcomings with respect to current life safety codes. In protracted negotiations with the owner, the City created the Redevelopment Investment Program (RIP). The theory was that much of the costs of renovating older buildings involved life safety codes imposed by government, so the City should participate in the costs. Since TIF money could not be used for the Virginia, funds from other sources were made available. To qualify for RIP monies, either from TIF funds or other sources, a developer had to meet certain criteria, among which were considerations of historic preservation, appropriate facade treatments and permanent improvements to the building. One final incentive was offered under the provisions of which a Class A (bar) license would be made available for significant downtown building renovation projects. Not only were buildings renovated, but traffic in the evening hours increased significantly. The result has been most encouraging. The visual appearance of the downtown with tastefully restored buildings and beautified public areas has had a positive impact. Increased traffic from expanding entertainment venues-bars and restaurants-has moved the downtown from an eight hour to a 17 hour area. Currently, the City is offering incentives for the redevelopment of the upper stories into apartments as well as new construction. Considering the condition of the downtown in the mid-1980s, the transformation has been remarkable.

Dannel McCollum served as a three term Mayor of Champaign from 1987 to 1999. Now retired, Mayor McCollum assists the Champaign Historical Museum in preserving the history of Champaign County.

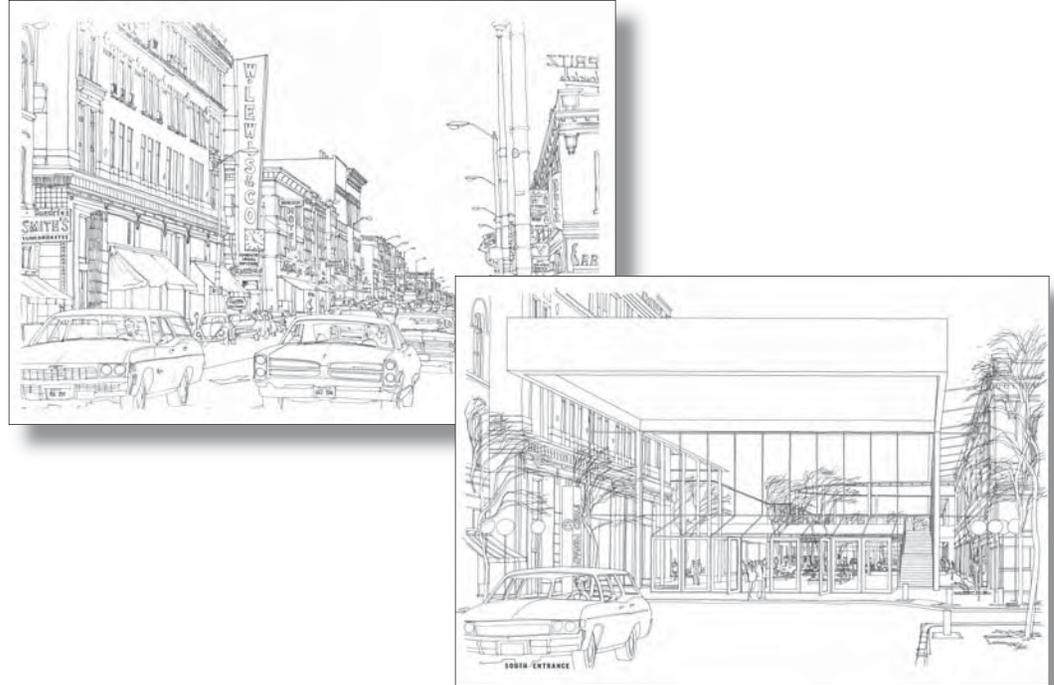


TIME LINE OF MAJOR DOWNTOWN EVENTS

- 1860 - City of Champaign incorporated
- 1868 - University of Illinois is established
- 1887 - Electric streetcar service begins downtown
- 1921 - Virginia Theater opens
- 1936 - Last remaining streetcar is decommissioned
- 1937 - Christie Clinic opens downtown offices
- 1959 - Country Fair Shopping Center opens
- 1964 - Lincoln Square Mall opens in Downtown Urbana
- 1967 - Parkland College opens Downtown campus
- 1970 - Inman Hotel closes
- 1975 - Neil Street Pedestrian Mall opens
- 1976 - Market Place Mall Opens on North Neil Street
- 1977 - Sears and J.C. Penney's close downtown stores
- 1981 - Tax Increment Finance District is established
- 1986 - Neil Street pedestrian mall is removed
- 1987 - Fire destroys entire block at Neil and Main
- 1987 - Christie Clinic begins expansion
- 1990 - Robeson's Dept. Store closes after 116 years
- 1992 - Downtown Plan adopted by City Council
- 1995 - Streetscape phase I project begins
- 2001 - Final streetscape phase completed
- 2004 - One Main Street opens at Neil and Main Street
- 2004 - Parking Lot reconstruction project is completed

Past Planning Efforts

As downtown has evolved, so too has the planning process. Three significant planning efforts ranging from land use to urban design studies have been completed with the intentions of guiding a future vision for downtown. While some of these studies have been more influential on the development of downtown than others, they all have one common similarity. They all recognize the importance of downtown to Champaign and recognize it as the heart of the community. Downtown is perhaps the most dynamic area of the city. It is greatly affected by changes in the economy, local market, local interest and perception. The following plans have all contained ideas for downtown portrayed in written policy and graphic illustration. They all have contributed to the current physical state of downtown as well as the current philosophy on what makes downtown work.



Design Concept Study for Downtown Champaign 1969

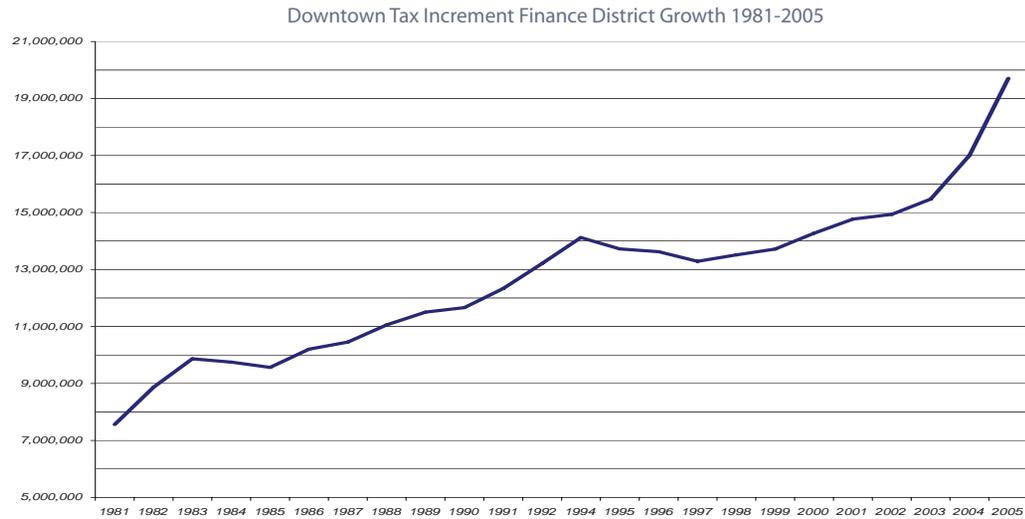
This plan was prepared by a team of architects at the University of Illinois for the Champaign Development Corporation. The plan contained a set of sketches and drawings that illustrated specific design concepts for downtown's transformation. The plan also identified specific mapped strategies of transportation and land use. Most notably, the plan recommended closing Neil Street for a pedestrian mall that would include a rotunda, called Champaign Circle, in the middle of Neil Street at Taylor Street. The plan also called for significant amounts of surface parking to be provided for the mall concept.



Tax Increment Financing District

1986

In 1986 the City Council adopted the first Tax Increment Financing (TIF) plan for a portion of downtown. TIF is a redevelopment financing tool that allows increases in property taxes above the base year to be collected and used for permanent improvements in the designated TIF area. The TIF plan adopted for downtown called for City participation in site assembly for new development, construction of public improvements and assistance for building rehabilitation. The TIF has been used primarily to fund improvements to public infrastructure and to incentivize the improvement of a blighted building stock. Set to expire in 2005, the City Council extended the life of the TIF to 2021. As of 2006 this district has leveraged over \$14 million in funds for the redevelopment of downtown.

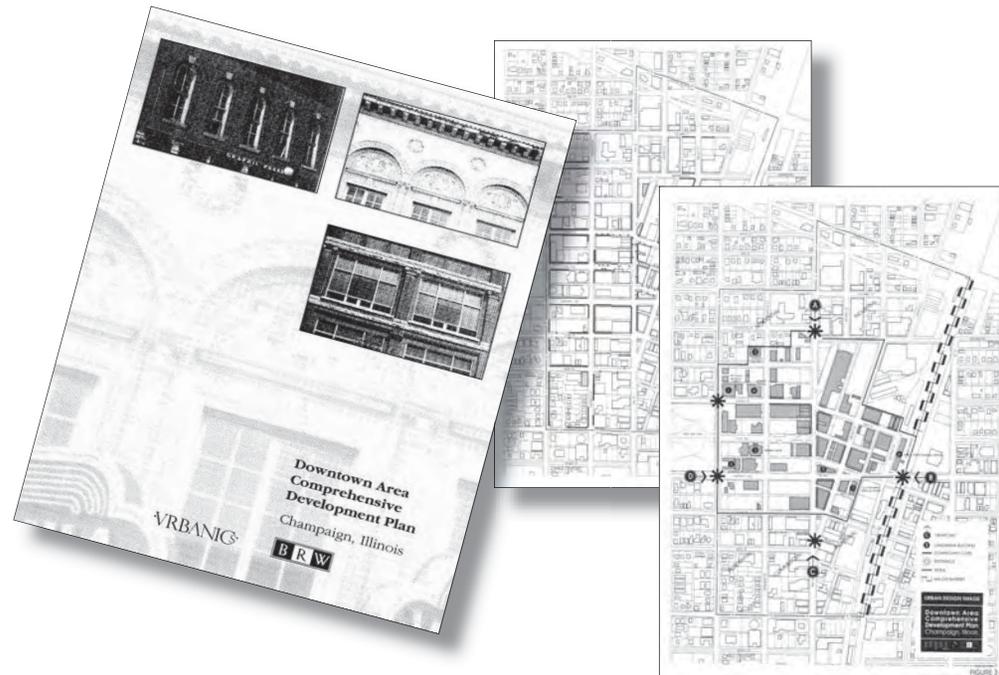


Equalized assessed valuations have risen steadily since the inception of the TIF district in 1981.

Downtown Area Comprehensive Development Plan

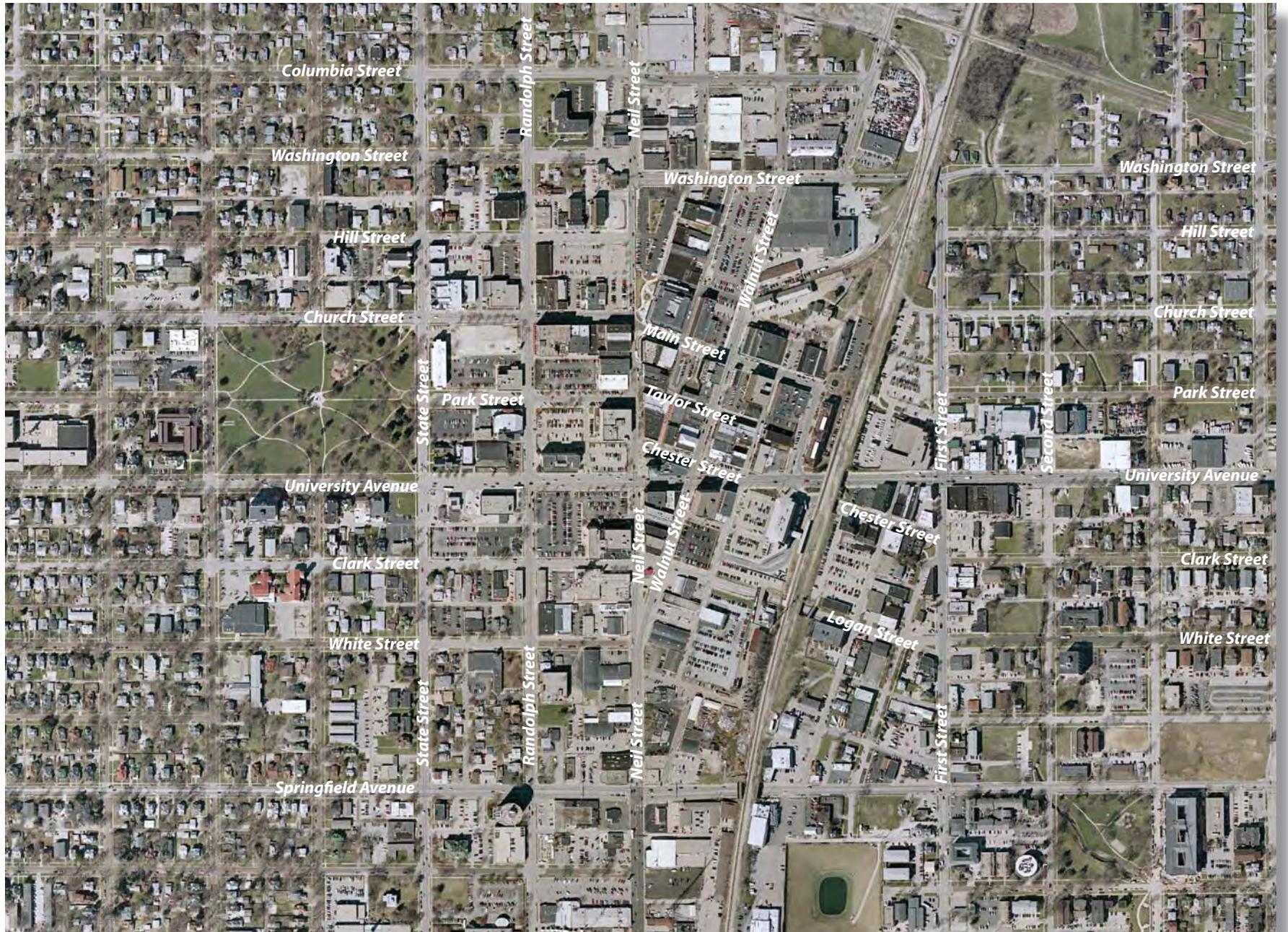
1992

The 1992 Downtown Comprehensive Development Plan established a process for increasing interest in new investment downtown. This Plan was broken into two primary categories: Capital Improvement Projects and Marketing and Organizational Tasks. This Plan has guided policy in downtown over the past 14 years with achievements including the development of the intermodal transportation center, over \$20 million in private investments linked to the Redevelopment Incentive Program (RIP), and a comprehensive streetscape improvement program. A market analysis performed by Urbanics Consultants, Ltd. concluded that there would be an increase in demand for residential units and office space in downtown over the next 15 years. This market analysis also concluded that there would be demand for a hotel/motel and conference facilities.



These three studies have served as the foundation for the 2006 Champaign Downtown Plan.

Downtown Champaign



Public Participation

- Steering Committee (14 meetings)
- Stakeholder Interviews
 - Social Service Organizations
 - Realtors
 - Redevelopment Incentive Program Participants
 - Building Owners
 - Property Owners
- Public Open Houses (3)
- Scenario Workshop (1)
- Plan Commission (2)
- City Council Study Sessions (2)



Issues and Forces

Early in the planning process, Steering Committee members undertook an exercise to document downtown's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The top responses to that exercise are displayed below.

Strengths

- Increase in Residential Units
- Pedestrian Scale Environment
- New Investment
- Entertainment Venues
- Existing Parking
- Existing Building Stock

Opportunities

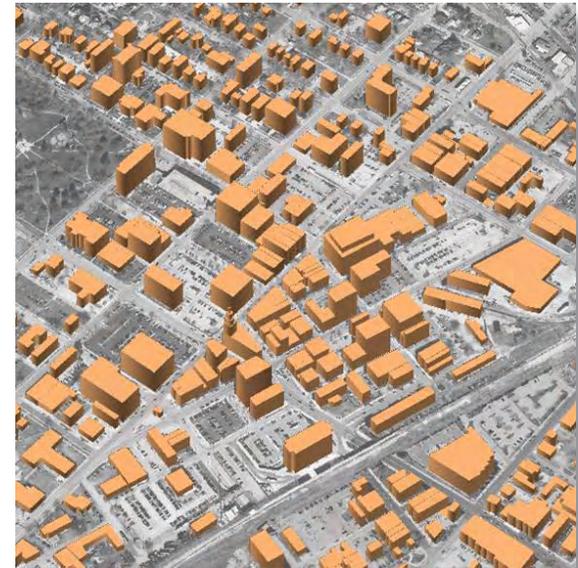
- Vacant Buildings
- Connections to Surrounding Residential
- Redevelopment Opportunities
- Large Parking Lots
- Downtown Organizations

Weaknesses

- Pedestrian Crossings
- Conflicting Land Uses
- Under-utilized Buildings
- Street Litter and Trash
- Lack of Parking Perception
- Vacant Upper Floors
- Lack of Visuals

Threats

- Blighted Areas
- Deteriorating Buildings
- Reliance on Surface Parking
- Perceived Lack of Safety





Trends and Assumptions

During a series of stakeholder interviews and analysis, Planning staff and steering committee members explored a number of developing trends currently impacting the downtown, and assumptions about potential issues that could influence the progress of downtown.

Trends

- Property values continue to rise due to ongoing redevelopment.
- Residential markets in Champaign continue to be strong in the southwest area and generally on the fringe of the City.
- Surrounding communities use Champaign as an employment and shopping center.
- Champaign and Urbana are growing steadily.
- Downtown is becoming more competitive with Campustown and downtown Urbana
- The public transportation system in the area will not change drastically.
- Neighborhood commercial centers are growing increasingly competitive with downtown.
- North Prospect and Market Place mall maintaining their status as the regional shopping destinations in the community and region.
- Downtown is drawing more visitors from regional locations.
- Additional commercial centers will be constructed throughout Champaign, increasing competition with downtown.
- Current renovations are adding demand to the downtown parking system.

Assumptions

- Development pressure will increase as more land becomes available.
- National franchises already present in Champaign will begin to look at downtown for possible second locations.
- Entertainment venues will continue to thrive and expand as opportunities become available.
- Upper-floors of buildings will continue to be converted to residential units.
- Burnham Redevelopment will continue to bridge the gap between Downtown and Campustown, bringing more students into the downtown area.
- Rental rates on housing will continue to climb as renovation costs increase.
- Remaining downtown vacant spaces will be renovated.
- Surrounding neighborhoods will play a large role in housing supply for downtown.

Scenarios and Vision

On February 17, 2005, the City of Champaign hosted a public workshop that engaged people in a discussion on possible scenarios for downtown's future. Five different scenarios were presented as a general indication of how downtown could evolve over the next ten years. Two of the scenarios were intentionally melodramatic stories. One creates a utopian vision of downtown while the second represented the worst case scenario for downtown. The remaining three scenarios reflected more realistic descriptions of possible futures for downtown. The five scenarios are described as follows:



Somewhere Over the Rainbow (Utopian Downtown)

This story describes a utopian atmosphere for downtown with a perfect blend of restaurants, bars and family-oriented space that is safe and constantly in use by everyone. Downtown is a lovely neighborhood where people smile at one another and persons of all backgrounds are accepted. Downtown's perfect mixture of urban and small town life draws in guests from all over the state.

Concrete Ghost town (Worst Case Scenario)

The Concrete Ghost town story illustrates the extreme example of downtown being abandoned by government, businesses and others for the more active growth areas of the City. The result of this exodus is a harsh place where there is little regard for downtown's appearance or safety.



Downtown, Everything's Waiting for You

In this scenario, interest in investing in downtown is very strong, and there is a heightened interest from national chain businesses to locate here. Downtown becomes more of a regional destination and attractive to a variety of users. At first, the visitors to downtown include a mix of local residents with out-of-town visitors. But as downtown continues to evolve as a regional destination, it becomes less desirable for local residents. The increase of land value has also caused many local businesses, social service agencies and non-profit groups to relocate to other more affordable areas of the City. Public/private partnerships are strong and since downtown has become successful in attracting visitors, the City builds public parking and works with the business owners to fund programs to maintain and clean downtown.



Shop Around the Corner

In the *Shop Around the Corner* scenario, the restaurant and bar scene has dissipated somewhat and there is more of a mix of businesses that serve daily needs of residents, employees and visitors. There is still a high demand by people to live in downtown and there have been great strides made in tying downtown to adjacent neighborhoods. Downtown builds a niche for people wishing to walk, bike and take transit more than drive a car. Social service agencies and non-profit organizations enjoy healthy dialogues about keeping appropriate relationships among different groups of downtown users.



Central Perks

Residential development interest in downtown remains strong and the area is attractive to primarily empty-nesters and young professionals. The center of downtown shifts to Neil Street and Main Street and parking concerns continue. Housing prices rise and the residential neighborhoods to the west and northwest see increased demand allowing people to live closer to downtown. However, connections between downtown and areas to the east and northeast are not strengthened and there is still a lack of cohesive tie between downtown and North First Street. Although the market demand for downtown has grown, it comes at a price as less economically influential groups are able to participate in downtown's growth.

Ideal Scenario and Vision Statement

The Scenario Workshop participants held group discussions about the likelihood of these scenarios, how they as individuals might fit into them and how they might respond to the described changes in downtown. While the intent of the exercise was not to pick any one scenario as “preferred”; groups listed many aspects of each scenario that they liked and disliked. The following scenario best blends the comments of the group discussions and can be considered the “ideal” scenario for downtown.

It's 2015 in Downtown Champaign....

Downtown Champaign has continued to generate interest and investment since its rebirth in the late 1990's and early 2000's. People continue to want to live, work and visit downtown for many different reasons. Downtown activities are better diversified than they were in 2005 offering shopping, entertainment, cultural, artistic and educational opportunities for people of all different ages. This creates activity every day and night. Community gathering space gives downtown residents and visitors alike a place to congregate and enjoy the history and vibrancy that downtown has to offer. While it has become even more of a regional destination, downtown has not lost its appeal to local residents. Because downtown has kept an appropriate mix of national and local businesses that complement each other and attract people that want to shop and recreate at both. Downtown is inviting to walk; clean and safe. An active downtown association works closely with the City and others to keep it this way. While parking is available in general, not every destination in the core of the downtown has parking spaces next to them. However, because of downtown's continued successes, walking a few blocks is now considered enjoyable rather than a burden.

Most importantly, it has been learned that what makes downtown ultimately successful is not only investment in physical improvements such as new sidewalks, streets, buildings or holiday decorations, but rather an investment in people, culture and diversity. This contributes to the real reason people want to experience downtown. It is understood that while physical improvements are the easiest things to capture in photos illustrating the success of a downtown, its the intangible energy created by people and relationships that truly attract people's interest and desire to be downtown. Today (2015), when you ask people why they enjoy downtown Champaign, it isn't because of one reason such as a new building or a new bar/restaurant. It is because of many intangible reasons centered on the life downtown creates.



“Downtown Champaign will be a vibrant, walkable downtown, built on its urban character, connected to surrounding neighborhoods, and easily accessible as a regional destination.”

Downtown Steering Committee Winter 2004