

# PLANNING ADVISORY BOARD ZONING COMMISSION

SEPTEMBER 13, 2011

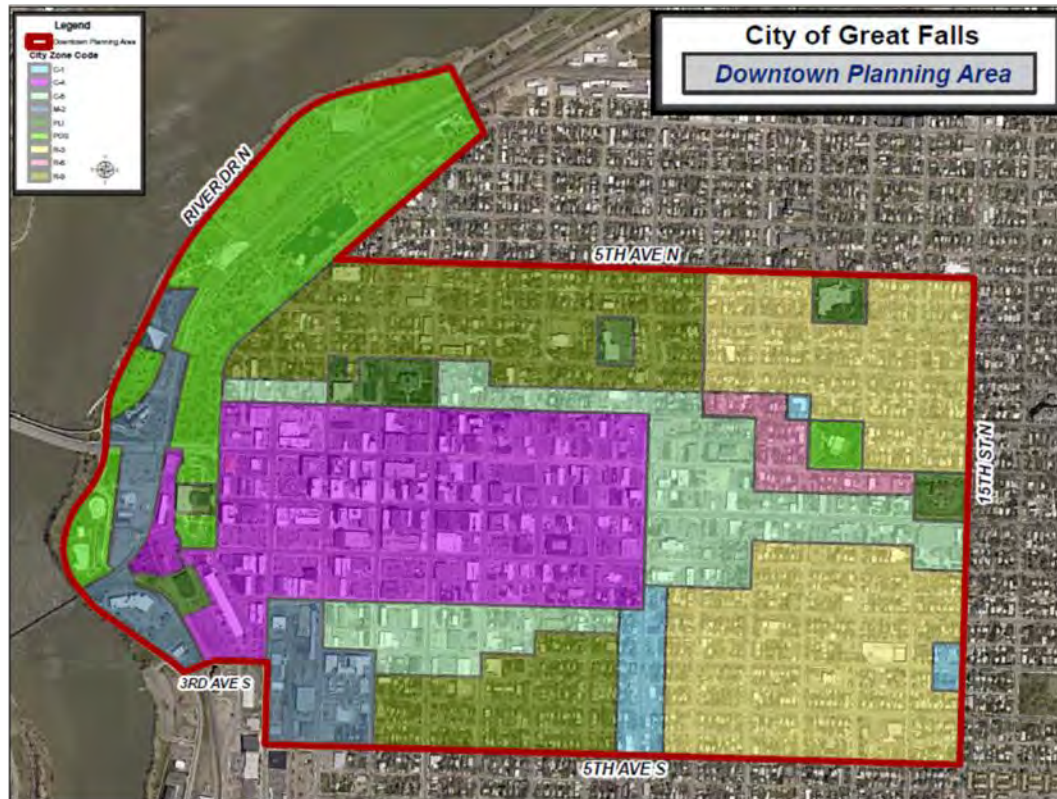
## *Recommendation*

Recommend adoption of the  
Downtown Master Plan

## *Project Planner*

Brant Birkeland, Planner II

## DOWNTOWN MASTER PLAN



## Location Map

### Summary

The 2005 City of Great Falls Growth Policy identifies the need to prepare, adopt and implement a Downtown plan. The Growth Policy describes Downtown as a “vitaly important component of the community in need of special attention. A Downtown plan would focus on specific issues to bring people and activity back into the Downtown and strengthen it as the community’s center for commerce, finance, entertainment, and culture.” The Downtown Master Plan (the Plan) has been prepared to fulfill this recommendation.

Staff recommends that the Plan be adopted as an amendment to the 2005 Growth Policy. Montana Code (*Montana Local Planning Enabling Act, Montana Code Annotated, 2009 76-1-601(4(a))*) provides guidance to the content that may be included in a Growth Policy. Specifically, it states that a Growth Policy may “include one or

more neighborhood plans,” including a Downtown plan as part of the document. A number of cities across Montana routinely follow this practice, including Billings and Missoula, which have both adopted Downtown Plans as amendments to their respective Growth Policies. As an amendment to the 2005 Growth Policy, City Commission will have the ability to utilize the recommendations, developed through a public planning process, to guide land use decisions and policies.

The Plan has been built on a foundation of extensive community outreach and public participation, with a commitment to transparency and collaboration. Prior to the official kick-off of the planning process, staff issued an open invitation to the public encouraging participation in the process through the local media. Additionally, staff sent personal invitations to Downtown stakeholder groups and organizations, encouraging representation in the process. This initial community outreach has been maintained throughout the planning process and has allowed over 100 community members to participate in the development of the plan. Local media has been utilized as a key source of communicating with the public and providing regular updates and announcements. Throughout the planning process, the Plan has been featured 19 times by KRTV, KFBB or the Great Falls Tribune. Additionally, staff has maintained a website dedicated to posting documents, updates and announcements. The website: [www.greatfallsmt.net/downtownplan](http://www.greatfallsmt.net/downtownplan) is a first of its kind for the City of Great Falls.

The preparation of the Downtown Master Plan officially began with a community open house meeting on August 31, 2010. Since the initial meeting, staff has facilitated a total of 24 Working Group, Steering Committee and open house meetings, all of which have been open to the public. In total, community volunteers have collectively contributed nearly 1,100 hours to the development of the Plan.

The result of this community planning effort is a strategically focused, goal driven “blueprint” for the future growth and development of Downtown. In addition to a comprehensive analysis of the history and current condition of Downtown, the Plan establishes a shared vision for Downtown and a series of recommendations in the form of goals, objectives and strategies that are intended to guide the community toward implementing the shared vision.

The primary goal of the Plan is to facilitate the creation of a Downtown that is active, vibrant, accessible and livable. The Plan focuses on four key Downtown elements including:

1. Vitality: Downtown's role as the center of commerce, culture, and community events - year-round, throughout the day and into the night.
2. Livability: the enrichment of the physical, social, and personal well being of Downtown residents, employees, and visitors.
3. Character: the physical elements that create a unique sense of place that distinguishes the Downtown area from other parts of the city.
4. Accessibility: the ability of residents, employees, and visitors to have the option of using multiple modes of transportation to reach Downtown destinations in a safe and efficient manner.

The 82 strategies within the Plan are each designed to make Downtown Great Falls a more desirable place to live, conduct business, recreate and visit. The strategies all seek to create a Downtown that has a balance of amenities, social capital, transportation options, goods and services, cultural, entertainment and educational opportunities. This Plan was not developed with these focus areas in mind, but they became focus areas through an organic process based on citizen input, engagement and dialogue. The goals, objectives and strategies within the Plan address these key components and provide a framework for a vital and thriving Downtown core.

Just as the preparation of the Plan has required extensive collaboration and partnership between the City and Downtown stakeholders and organizations, so will the implementation of the Plan. Staff has taken an initial step to ensure coordination in the implementation process by assigning time frames and identifying potential partners with the capacity and interest to achieve each strategy. The identification of an organization as a potential partner does not commit or obligate the organization, financially or otherwise, to participating in carrying out the strategy. Rather, it formulates an action plan, based on the strengths and resources of the respective Downtown stakeholder groups and organizations, to achieve the vision of Downtown as efficiently as possible.

The Plan offers an option for the establishment of a public/private organization that could facilitate the implementation of the Plan. Specifically, the Plan recommends the development of a Downtown Development Partnership (DDP) and the establishment of a Downtown Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district. This model is based on a partnership, managed by a Board of Directors representing various Downtown stakeholder groups and organizations, whose primary purpose would be to implement the recommendations of the Plan. The development of the DDP would coincide with the establishment of the Downtown TIF district. TIF funds would be used as the primary funding source to implement the Plan. The DDP board would prepare an annual budget and work plan and present the plan to the City Commission. The City Commission would have the final vote in approving the work plan and budget, and would subsequently allocate the TIF funds to the DDP to implement the Plan.

We ask that the Planning Advisory Board and the City Commission accept, adopt and embrace the Downtown Master Plan, which reflects the hard work and shared vision of a committed group of stakeholders and citizens in a process that has taken a year to complete. We believe that adoption of this plan, as a component of the City's overall Growth Policy, will lay the foundation for robust future growth and development of Downtown Great Falls.

Recommended Motion:

“I move that the Planning Advisory Board recommend that the City Commission adopt the Downtown Master Plan as an attachment to the 2005 City of Great Falls Growth Policy.”