



Downtown Topeka: River South

Brownfields Area-Wide Planning Study



Executive Summary

Just north of the I-70 Polk-Quincy corridor, the hard-working and creative people of River South help to make it a unique neighborhood. Many of the people who live here have done so for a very long time, in some cases for generations.

As the site of the first ferry crossing of the Kansas River serving wagons on the Oregon Trail journey westward, River South served an important role in the history of Topeka. By the 1860s, this location on the river escalated the City of Topeka's regional prominence as a major hub for economic commerce. The river supported the local economy, was an integral component of the social and civic life of the community, provided drinking water, and was an essential corridor within the surrounding ecosystem.

In 1954, following a history of devastating floods, extensive flood protection levees were authorized by Congress. While these levees were put in place to protect the community, they also became a barrier to recreation on the water for the community. Additionally, railroad bridges were built to traverse the river through the heart of the city. Subsequently, the riverfront became the "back door" of the community, inaccessible and overgrown, separated by roadways and railways, and compromised by flooding, effluent and silting.

As River South has changed over the years, the result today is not as desirable as it could be. While there are many active businesses in the area, there are also vacant buildings and parcels that do not help activate the neighborhood or spur economic development.

In addition to the City, there are many residents who would love to see improvements and future investment in River South. This includes residents, advocacy groups like the Riverfront Authority as well as property owners and business owners in the area. As government officials and policy makers work to address major infrastructure improvements to the Polk-Quincy corridor, this report seeks to provide a vision of how River South could redevelop over time. The general premise of the study area is to promote public and private-sector investment in order to establish a vibrant, walkable, mixed-use urban neighborhood.

This includes infrastructure and streetscape enhancements to primary thoroughfares as well as improving riverfront access. It also anticipates the redevelopment of vacant parcels and buildings. In addition, while many of the industrial properties will remain and provide good jobs for their employees, some of these properties will also be redeveloped with

complimentary infill opportunities, over time. The plan provides recommendations for the public realm improvements as well as a vision of how catalyst sites, owned by the City or other public entities, might be used in the future. As a key neighborhood within the downtown framework, and with key access to the biosciences corridor that exists along I-70, attracting investment to River South should be a top priority. We recognize that these public improvements and private investment will take time. This is a vision that is not intended to be implemented overnight, rather be a road map for future decisions around land-use policy, density discussions, and placemaking strategies.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Introduction

In 2018, the City of Topeka received a \$300,000 United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfield Community-Wide Assessment (CWA) Grant for use in inventorying, prioritizing, assessing, and planning the cleanup and reuse of priority brownfield sites throughout Downtown Topeka. A brownfield is defined by EPA as “a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.” Former industrial sites and waste storage areas are included in the EPA definition of brownfields.

An eligible activity under EPA CWA grants is the performance of “area-wide” reuse planning in target areas, corridors, or neighborhoods impacted by the presence of multiple brownfield sites. The resulting area-wide plans (AWPs) are useful in helping local communities establish a vision and action plan to bring positive change to these areas. Rather than a site-by-site approach, and AWP process considers several brownfields simultaneously in the context of other properties in a defined study area. An effective AWP process identifies a reuse strategy for brownfield sites as well as for the larger study area and considers other shared impediments to redevelopment (such as missing or inadequate public or private infrastructure components). This document presents an AWP prepared for properties in the River South neighborhood of Downtown Topeka.

While many operating businesses and occupied residences exist in the study area, there are also properties that contain vacant buildings or land parcels with no buildings on them. In addition, some significant properties are currently owned by the City, or other public entities, which presents a greater opportunity to re-assess the land use, image, and character within River South. Previous studies have evaluated the redevelopment potential of this neighborhood and had prioritized it as the epicenter of downtown redevelopment within Topeka. However, since the completion of these previous plans in 2008, not only had a significant economic recession impacted the local economy, but the Kansas Avenue Core of Downtown Topeka, six blocks to the south of this study area, has experienced a significant revitalization.

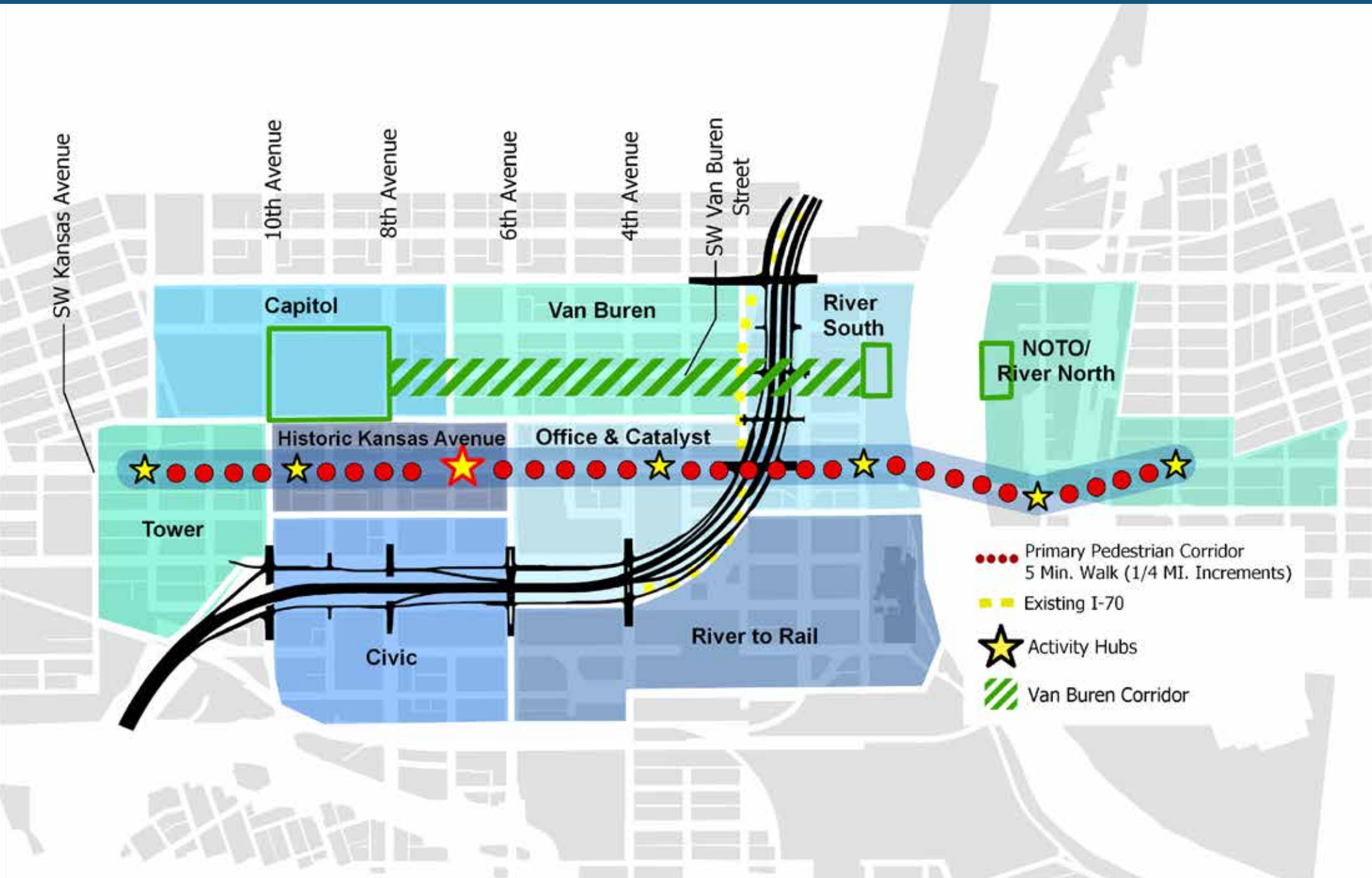
Considering these factors, City staff felt that this was an appropriate time to re-establish a vision for redevelopment in River south.

AWP Project Overview

As a part of a larger Downtown Master Plan update, The City of Topeka (City) wanted to update redevelopment recommendations within the study area. The AWP for the River South neighborhood is one piece of the Downtown Master Plan Update that is focused on knitting together the downtown neighborhoods and

sub-districts through primary pedestrian corridors and a series of activity hubs that are located within an easy, five-minute walk of one another. The AWP for River South focuses on repurposing an existing industrial block, owned by the City of Topeka and the Topeka Transit Authority, and utilizing public infrastructure (through bike/ped connectivity, streetscaping and public parks) to support new uses.

To begin this study and define some of the initiatives outlined above, the City established a project team, sought community partners, and designated a formal AWP study area. Through the AWP process, the City explored design alternatives, future uses, and an implementation strategy to address the brownfield conditions and to attract redevelopment in the River South neighborhood. This AWP document describes the process, community vision, project recommendation, and action plan.



The River South Area Wide Plan is one piece of an overall update to the Downtown Topeka Master Plan, illustrated above. Diagram provided by the City of Topeka.

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Study Area

The City designated an AWP study area for River South early in the process. The study area included a ten-block region north of the Polk-Quincy corridor, located south of the Kansas River between SW Topeka Boulevard and Kansas Avenue. The study area includes more than thirty individual parcels, three of which are under public ownership by either the City of Topeka, Shawnee County, or the Topeka Transit Authority. The City chose this study area location for three specific reasons:

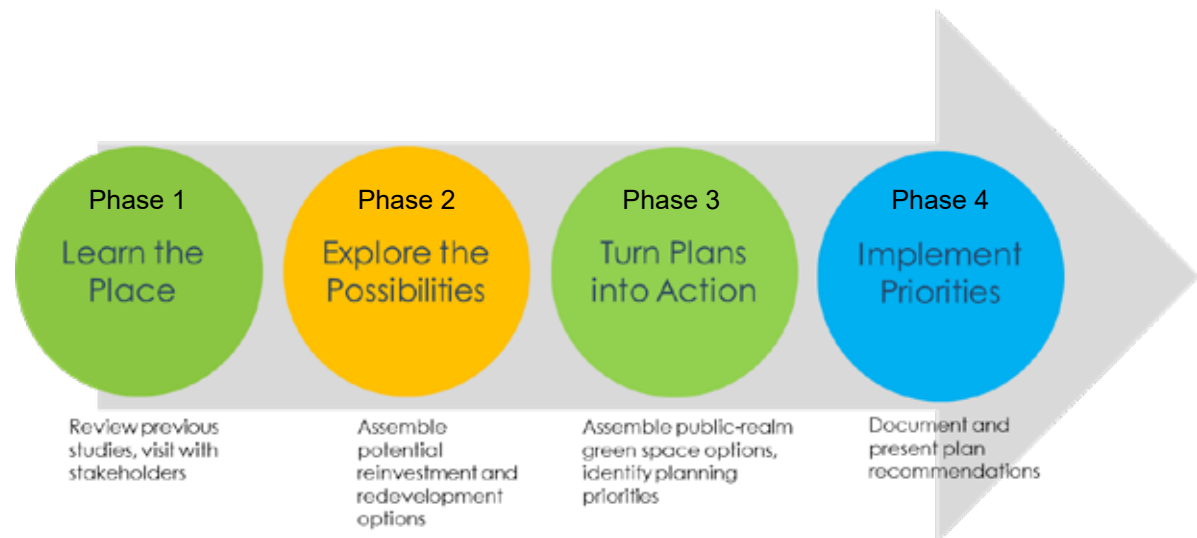
1. Market shifts, and an economic downturn, have drastically changed current redevelopment conditions that vary from previous studies and master plans for the River South neighborhood.
2. Significant reinvestment within the Downtown Core has spurred renewed interest in redevelopment of surrounding subdistricts within the downtown framework. River South, because of its proximity to the rich potential of the Kansas River, is particularly poised for renewed interest.
3. A City-wide brownfield inventory identified a cluster of large brownfield sites in this area of downtown, which are prime redevelopment opportunities to spark future investment within River South.

Study Process

The City approached the AWP process as a collaborative effort with government partners, community stakeholders, and the general public to develop a vision and action plan for the AWP study area.

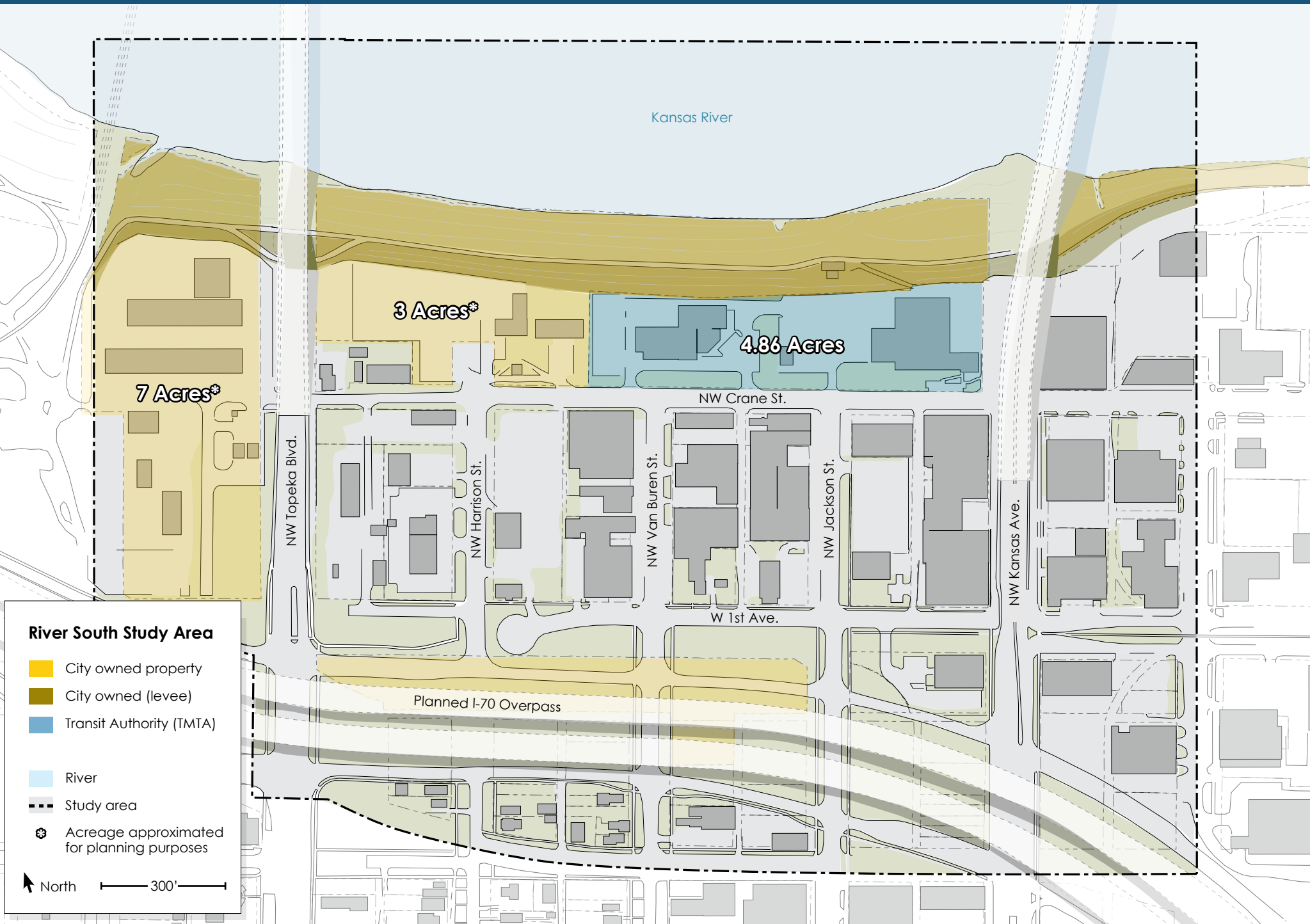
The AWP study team and City staff structured the AWP process around the following community planning objectives:

- **Engagement:** Engage community partners, stakeholders, and property owners to define a cohesive planning vision for the River South neighborhood that will guide the development of conceptual plans for catalyst sites and the surrounding context of the study area.
- **Catalyst Sites:** Designate City-owned, County-owned, and Transit-owned parcels as catalyst sites and build upon the Downtown Topeka Master Plan's vision for the properties. Develop high-level conceptual plans to help knit the River South neighborhood within the overall fabric of the Downtown Community—from Kansas Avenue to the North Topeka Arts District (NOTO).
- **Transportation Connections:** Identify multimodal connections to weave together downtown assets. Identify transportation connections that will make the downtown areas more accessible to all users.
- **Urban Design and Land Use Opportunities:** Identify the community's desire for long-term redevelopment in the study area in terms of future amenities, commercial services, housing, building scale, and spatial arrangement of the urban form.
- **Form-Based Code Support and Amendment:** Identify regulatory options to better support the desired development types and building character for the catalyst sites and the larger study area. Identify specific amendments to the City's regulations that align with the vision for the AWP study area.
- **Implementation Strategies:** Identify actions to implement individual projects on the catalyst sites that will spur redevelopment throughout the study area. Develop an action plan to implement the individual ideas, policies, and projects outlined in this AWP process.



The Area Wide planning process was completed in four separate phases, as outlined above.

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With these objectives in mind, the planning team worked collaboratively with the City of Topeka to assemble the scope of work, for which the key four tasks are summarized, below:

- **Task 1.** Existing Conditions Analysis: The project team began the AWP process with an existing conditions analysis to understand the area's assets, challenges, and brownfield conditions. The project team reviewed current plans, development standards and public services in and around the study area. This data gathering task established baseline conditions to conduct the AWP process.
- **Task 2.** Community Engagement: The project team engaged property owners, residents, governmental partners, and other stakeholders to provide comment and recommendations on the AWP process and the catalyst site components. Beginning in late 2019 and continuing through Spring 2020, the project team hosted two community workshops, conducted stakeholder interviews, engaged property owners, and hosted an ArcGIS Story Map to communicate planning recommendations and solicit input.
- **Task 3.** Conceptual Site Planning: Using stakeholder feedback and existing conditions data, the project team created three conceptual plan alternatives for the catalyst sites, which were then revised into one cohesive recommendation based on feedback from local stakeholders. The final conceptual plan for the River South neighborhood illustrates potential redevelopment scenarios for catalyst sites which includes access, new buildings, parking, and open space.

- **Task 4.** Planning Document: The project team created this AWP planning document to summarize the process, the findings, community feedback, analysis, concepts, and final redevelopment strategy.

Stakeholder Engagement: Learn the Place

The planning process was conducted over several months in an interactive dialogue between City Staff, community stakeholders and the consultant team. This included focus group discussions and telephone interviews with developers, investors, brokers, contractors, business owners and operators, property owners and neighborhood representatives. An initial neighborhood input meeting was also held with local property owners at Lardner Stone. At this meeting, recommendations and analysis of previous plans were presented to the group and input from attendees was collected to record comments, concerns, and potential ideas to incorporate. This information has been used to help craft the plan recommendations and future vision of River South. Detailed comments from these meetings can be found in the Appendix.

Stakeholder Engagement: Explore the Possibilities

Following the initial visit and meeting with property owners, and the data gathered in those sessions and elsewhere, the team worked to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis). This helped to determine the issues and opportunities presented for River South and to shape early ideas of potential public and

private improvements. Considering the regional context, local setting, physical spaces, public services, private investment opportunities and shared strategies, the team identified areas for specific interventions throughout the study area. Based on this assessment, preliminary options for a redevelopment vision was established with recommendations and images of proposed changes that could occur over time. The vision was then refined by the planning team in conjunction with City Staff, the Steering Committee and key stakeholders in a review and comment period to receive input prior to final assembly of the plan.

Stakeholder Engagement: Turn Plans into Action

The process to complete the River South Area Wide Plan was impacted by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which created significant challenges to facilitate in-person meetings with stakeholders and property owners as the final recommendations were assembled. Recognizing the importance of stakeholder engagement, the planning team worked closely with the City and members of the Steering Committee to review preliminary design concepts and develop a community platform to share refined planning concepts for input from the public.

Utilizing the ArcGIS Story Map platform, Stantec developed a public-facing project repository (<https://cutt.ly/river-south>) where members of the community could view key aspects of the plan, listen to a pre-recorded presentation outlining plan highlights and

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provide thoughts and feedback via a short three question survey. Despite this change in the engagement approach, significant feedback was received through this platform and the planning team collected valuable input from the community. A detailed description of the results of this effort can be found in the Appendix.

Stakeholder Engagement: Implement Priorities

Finally, strategies to implement the vision were identified in order to create action items and define roles, responsibilities and partnerships that could help to achieve the goals and objectives. A detailed timeline of phased implementation was not included since many unknowns still remain about the future implementation of the Polk/Quincy realignment and how this construction will impact the pace of development for River South. Once this timeline is better established, a matrix should be developed to begin to summarize the recommendations and prioritize actions and capital improvements, with a summary of the scale of the projects both in terms of relative cost, time and difficulty to execute. To achieve the vision, it will take both public realm improvements and private sector investment.



Due to COVID limitations for face to face stakeholder meetings, the planning team utilized online platforms, such as Arc GIS Story Map, to share final design recommendations and receive input from the community. (<https://cutt.ly/river-south>)

**Existing Conditions,
Previous Studies &
Market Recommendations**

Existing Conditions

The River South District in Downtown Topeka is uniquely positioned to benefit from reinvestment and renewed interest in redevelopment. While previous studies and analysis have addressed this area in previous years, changes in community context and anticipated demographic shifts have significantly shifted perspectives on how this neighborhood might be revitalized.

Context: Why Planning (and acting) Now is Critical

Based on an assessment of findings from the 2019 Downtown Topeka Market Study (completed by KHI for Downtown Topeka, Inc.), four demographic trends point to a high degree of opportunity, coupled with critical fiscal, economic and social imperatives—from both citywide and regional perspectives—to enhance Downtown Topeka as a place to live, work and come together and celebrate a diverse community.

While the Topeka Metro population is projected to grow relatively slowly over the next two decades, most, or all, of this growth is projected to be concentrated in households without children and who prefer urban living. This creates an unprecedented opportunity to increase Downtown Topeka's housing supply which, in-turn, triggers growing retail activity and vitality along Downtown streets.

- The Kansas Health Institute (KHI) projects less than 6% population growth between 2016 and 2036 for the Topeka Metro region. Like other market analyses, KHI projects that the region's growth will be dominated by households without children (specifically stating that the number of children under the age of 14 will likely decrease between 2016 and

2036). This is an indicator that all or most of new growth in net new households will be singles and couples without children.

- National data demonstrates that households without children (and, to a lesser extent, single-parent households) strongly prefer living in walkable downtowns and urban neighborhoods. This preference is based, in part, on a much greater focus on walkable access to “main streets”, jobs, recreation, etc. in place of backyards and larger housing units. This shift is reflected nationally in the market-place. Urban housing values (measured on a per square-foot basis) have been rising much faster than suburban values since 2000.
- A rough assessment suggests that the Topeka region will add 3500 to 5000 net new households over this 2016-2036 period and that downtown should be able to claim a significant share of this demand. Two caveats should be noted to this trend:
 - The share of these net new households who can afford market-rate housing is unknown
 - An expanded market study that clarifies the extent of demand, availability of affordable market-rate housing, and a unity-type and locational preferences, would be valuable in developing a more detailed downtown housing strategy.

The size of the Topeka Metro's workforce is projected to be flat or to decline over the next two decades, triggering a critical imperative to attract and retain essential talent for the creative and knowledge industry jobs for investment in the region.

- While the US workforce is projected to grow much more slowly over the next two decades than in the two decades preceding 2010, the Topeka Metro's workforce (as measured by population aged 25-64) will likely decline by

roughly 6% between 2016 and 2036.

- National data indicates that more than 90% of net new jobs over the next two decades will require some college or equivalent higher education. For the first time in US history, over the next three years, most new hires by US manufactures will require some college education.
- National data also points to a growing concentration of income, as well as job, growth in creative and knowledge industries. Most of the growth in real wages over the past two decades has been concentrated in creative and knowledge industry jobs.
- National data also shows that college-educated 25-29-year-olds (of all races, genders, and ethnicities), is often the most sought-after workforce by creative and knowledge industries. This group represents a significant and growing share of economic growth over the next two decades and are particularly interested in living and working in walkable downtowns and urban districts—often paying a premium for access to urban living. In response, employers, jobs, and investment are increasingly following this workforce to downtowns and closer-in urban locations—and to regions that have walkable, amenitized downtowns and lively urban neighborhoods that draw talent.
- As a result, these downtowns are playing an increasingly essential role as regional economic engines. A scan of the US metros gaining knowledge industry jobs points to a high correlation between regional knowledge industry job growth and vibrant downtowns.

Existing Conditions

All the region's net population growth over the next two decades is projected to be concentrated among residents who are 65 or older, a population that increasingly relies on fixed incomes. This circumstance creates a growing fiscal imperative to take advantage of Downtown's ability to attract younger and higher-income households who can support a growing share of City revenues and to take advantage of Downtown's related ability to attract talent and the jobs and investment that follow. This can represent a particularly critical issue for cities—most specifically for state capitals or cities with large non-profit sectors where a relatively large share of the non-residential tax base is tax exempt.

- National data shows that higher-income households are moving into urban cores at a faster pace than lower-income households and that housing values are rising faster in highly amenitized, walkable urban areas.
- Closely related, data from the IDA's Value of Downtowns study points to the growing importance downtowns are playing as fiscal engines for their cities

Topeka, like most of America, is moving rapidly toward becoming a "majority minority" metro, dramatically increasing the social imperative to enhance Downtown as a "common ground" that is viewed as the shared heart of a diverse region.

- KHI projects that the Topeka Metro's population will be almost one-third minority by 2036 and majority minority by 2066.
- The IDA's Value of Downtowns study points to both the growing importance for downtowns to create public realms that actively invite the full spectrum of the region's population and create a sense of shared



Strong downtown neighborhoods are a strong aspect of local economies and support five critical areas of community growth. Image provided by Stantec.

community across lines of race, age, gender, ethnicity and other perceived difference, and a downtown's unique ability to serve as its city's and region's common ground. This is an essential step toward making regions welcoming to widely diverse communities.

- US data suggests that the workforce will be majority minority before the larger population.
- Stantec's Urban Places team has conducted numerous interviews with national HR leaders (across all industries) and feedback suggests that one of the top criteria today in choosing a place to live, and a company to work for, is diversity.

The advent of connected, and then autonomous, mobility over the next two decades will have potentially greater impacts on regional development patterns than the advent of universal access to cars after WWII. This will offer significant benefits to downtowns and urban cores.

- Within a decade, most cars on the road across North America—and the Topeka region—will most likely have enough onboard connected technology to self-park. A decade later, fully autonomous (driverless) mobility will be the paradigm throughout the developed world. The implications for regional development patterns, and particularly for downtowns, will be significant.

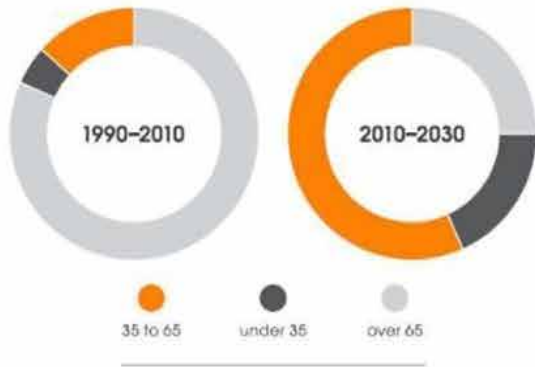
Existing Conditions

- The need to develop additional parking to support new development will begin to decrease sharply over the next five to ten years. Because self-parking cars can park far more compactly, existing parking facilities will be able to accommodate 20-30% more vehicles than they do today.

Given the rapidity of this change, it will be critical to minimize investments in new parking facilities, emphasizing shared parking strategies to accommodate increased demand wherever possible. In the Downtown core, adding housing within a few minutes' walk of existing office development will

facilitate implementing shared parking strategies. The ability to take advantage of existing parking facilities, rather than pay for expensive new structured parking, will reduce the cost premium associated with urban core development, which generally competes with suburban development that can rely on far less expensive surface parking.

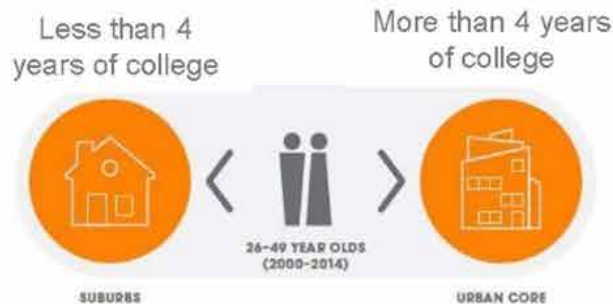
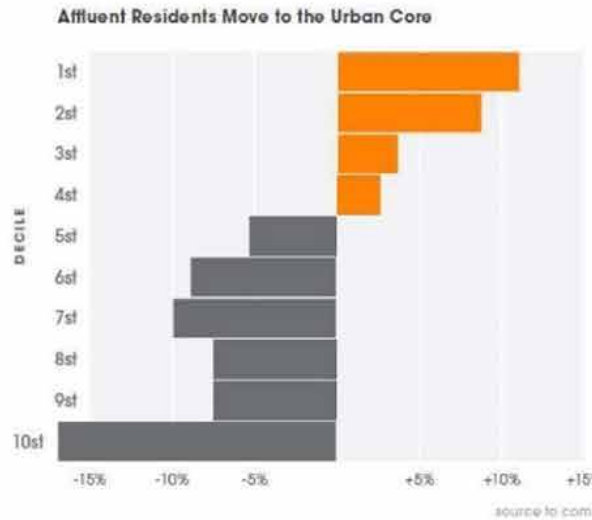
Downtown Indicators



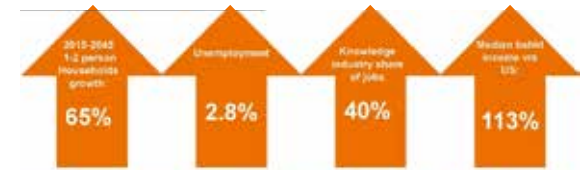
Through the 2000s, the clear majority of newly formed households in North America will comprise individuals or couples groups that strongly prefer urban style multifamily housing.



To satisfy growing demand for housing in urban settings, the US alone will need to create tens of millions of walkable multifamily units by the early 2030s.

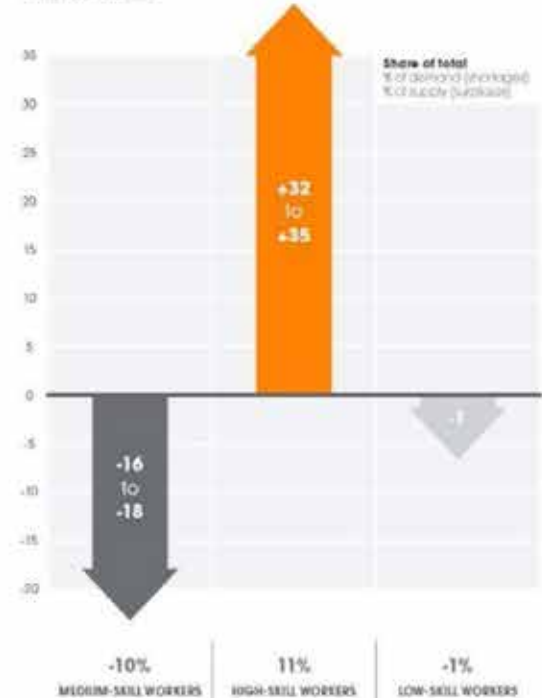


Knowledge workers want to live in lively urban place, where they cluster jobs and investment follow.



By 2020, advanced economies could have too few college-educated workers and too many workers with secondary degrees.

Projected 2020 Labor demand and supply by skill level
millions of workers



Previous Studies

Review of Previous Studies

Many previous studies have evaluated the River South and adjacent neighborhoods. As part of this planning analysis, it was important to review past recommendations to determine relevancy and applicability for the current conditions as they exist within the community. Review of these previous studies is based on three primary considerations:

- from the demographic, economic and social context as previously summarized
- from likely land use, planning and urban design impacts of rapidly evolving mobility technologies over the next two decades
- from what our team learned from visiting with River South property owners, stakeholders, and City leaders.

Downtown Plan (2000)

Creating a signature South Riverfront Park will play a significant role toward achieving the goal of envisioning downtown as a community center rather than strictly a commercial or office use. Related recommendations to connect to the River while safeguarding Army Corp levees, and creating a series of pocket parks along Kansas Avenue to draw people to the district and the riverfront, are both still valid recommendations. This plan also recommends the implementation of a “low water dam” between the Kansas and Topeka bridges to maintain constant water levels and promote active recreational use of the riverfront. While we’re currently unsure about the need for, or environmental implications of building this structure, it is agreed that improvements to safety and accessibility to the riverfront would benefit the River South neighborhood.

Kansas Riverfront Master Plan (2008)

While bold and incorporating an excellent urban design approach in grasping the importance of “River South” as a Downtown district, the passage of time suggests that today this Plan (conceived just before the 2008 Great Recession) belongs to a different city. A few key observations conclude:



Graphic from 2008 plan. Image courtesy of Sasaki.

- **The Plan does not address what today should constitute the River South district’s top priority: the unique opportunity to create a signature Downtown Park** which could be Downtown’s best opportunity to add a transformational amenity that would not only help to attract housing, talent, jobs, and investment to Downtown—but also to the city and region. Innovative approaches that shift the levee from a challenge into the park’s signature amenity will contribute to the park’s unique character.
- **As demonstrated by similar communities in recent decades, an iconic, amenity-rich, downtown park can play a dramatic role in drawing national attention to local efforts to revitalize an urban core.** Similar precedents and examples can easily be found in cities like Topeka such as: Chattanooga, Birmingham, and Cincinnati.
- Like the cities cited above, this destination can also serve another increasingly critical role—as a common ground that is planned, programmed, and designed to invite the full spectrum of the region’s increasingly diverse population to its heart.
- **With the elevated design of I-70, rather than depressed below the sightlines and viewsheds of the neighborhood, a second priority has now been established to develop this underutilized space into a signature downtown public amenity.** The area wide planning process of the River South neighborhood should further define this opportunity, but clearly it should be planned, programmed and designed to convert a potential barrier between Downtown and its riverfront into a compelling destination that helps draw people to the area.

Previous Studies

- **From a land use and development perspective, River South should support and not compete with the Downtown core. In particular:**

- As shown, the 2008 Riverfront Plan absorbs virtually all the demand for downtown housing over the next decade. This housing should be shifted into the Downtown core where it can play a much more effective role in supporting new retail and vitality along Kansas Avenue and other downtown streets. As demonstrated in similar communities across the United States, this approach will be critical to attracting talent, jobs, and investment to Downtown, Topeka, and the region.
- Similarly, other uses such as a hotel, convention or meeting facilities and cultural center, (and other uses that draw vitality to downtown) should be in the Downtown core. Memphis' new downtown baseball stadium offers an excellent example of the benefits of focusing visitor industry facilities in the center of downtown.
- **The Plan relies completely on new construction which, for the foreseeable future, will not be feasible without significant local public investment.** Assuming the new district absorbs the full 850-950 units of housing demand projected for the next decade, rough estimates suggest \$75 to \$100 million must be expended over the next ten years to support this investment. While a substantial portion of this funding may be available through the Neighborhood Revitalization Program tax rebate program

or a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district, it is unclear whether additional essential public funds would be available and even if this level of investment were achievable, the district would inevitably pull this investment from Downtown core improvements, new south and north riverfront parks, NOTO and other higher priorities.

- **The Downtown core offers a stock of older buildings that could take advantage of State Historic Tax Credits.** This funding resource could shift a significant portion of the public investment required to unlock the ability to grow Downtown's residential population away from local sources. A similar example of this should be noted in Wichita, where State Historic Tax Credits played a significant role in unlocking the feasibility of growing Downtown Wichita's residential population.
- Land uses and the plan for the north side of the river should be reconsidered as part of further refinement of the Pappan's Ferry Park, with priorities placed on creating a public space that meets the core goals for the park and open space connectivity on both sides of the river.
- **Preliminary observations of the study area indicate that, in addition to making a Downtown Riverfront park a top priority and shifting new housing to the Downtown core, planning should focus on the River South district's potential to attract "new economy" uses that will be critical to Downtown's future.** This approach would focus on building

on its unique mix of current and potential strengths—direct proximity both to Downtown and to an iconic riverfront park, its stock of industrial buildings that offer a combination of large open spaces and comparatively lower rents, and its current diverse mix of businesses.

- The Plan would require relocating local business, at considerable additional public expense and not necessarily to the advantage of Downtown, which benefits from a diverse jobs base.
- **Relocating Topeka Metro's facilities will remain critical to unlocking the River South district's potential.** Like the 2008 Plan, and previous visits with local stakeholders, this recommendation appeared to be a widely shared goal. An appropriate and available alternative site appears to be under consideration, and Topeka Metro must make investment decisions within a relatively short timeframe regarding their current site. However, there does not appear to be an alternative funding strategy in place to support this relocation. Identifying this funding will be critical to implementing any recommendations from the area wide planning effort.

Historic North Topeka East Neighborhood Plan (2013)

The focus of the plan (redevelopment plan for the City's disadvantaged north-side, prioritizing the arts district, schools, and redevelopment of the Overland Station) continues to appear to be fully valid within today's context. Review and recommendations from this plan closely correlate with our team's review of the North Topeka Arts District Master Plan (2016).

Previous Studies

Topeka Bikeways Plan (2020)

This Plan appears to be fully consistent with the goals for River South that have been discussed with local stakeholders. In the future, it would be useful to study the potential for a shared pedestrian/bike connection across the Kansas River (possibly attached to the existing bridge, possibly a new bridge designed as a signature work of public art) and for expanded bike connections to new South and North River parks.



The 2020 Topeka Bikeways Plan outlined key considerations for bicycle and pedestrian connectivity throughout River South, particularly along 1st Street. (Image courtesy of RDG)

Land Use and Growth Management Plan for 2040 (2015)

Within this plan, the implications for River South focus primarily on the “Pillars for a prosperous community”. These pillars are fully appropriate for the district, and the Neighborhood Revitalization Program, which has significant implications for redevelopment feasibility for River South. Interpretation of the plan suggests the program would not generate funding for public realm, infrastructure, or other types of improvements. An overview of this program is as follows:

- A 10-year refund of increased property taxes due to improvements made on property, is available to property owners. Stipulations include:
 - There must be at least a 10% increase on residential or 20% on commercial property
 - Rebate on increase of taxes only, not pre-improvement value
 - 95% rebate for first five years, 50% on second five years
 - Buildings on historic register get 95% rebate for entire 10-year period

Since 1995, it appears this program has generated about \$430M in private investments, resulting in \$43M in rebates. \$136M in of this investment has occurred Downtown with a subsequent \$19M in new tax dollars generated from the program.

North Topeka Arts District Master Plan (2016)

The findings contained in this Plan continue to be both relevant and support our initial observations of the River South district. Similar urban neighborhoods have proven success in attracting significant housing investment, talent and the creative and knowledge industry jobs that follow. This Plan would strongly benefit from a follow-up, more in-depth, implementation study that focused on public/private partnership strategies for tapping the district’s near and mid-term potential to attract more housing, jobs, and investment. This addendum should include a cost/benefit analysis to demonstrate the mid and longer-term value of public investment in this district.

It may also be suggested that two additional Objectives could be added to this plan:

- Growth: expand revitalization boundaries, more businesses into Association, economic development synergy within, tourism and business draw, walkable hub
- Create a signature, lively and inviting pedestrian connection from the Kansas Avenue Bridge or a new pedestrian bridge animated by interpretive and media-related park programming (see Pappan’s Ferry Charrette and Plan and assessment)
- Development: catalyst sites, new housing, est. historic district, parking, link to riverfront plans—Overland Station should represent the most critical redevelopment opportunity and constitutes a potential catalyst site of Downtown-wide importance
- Enhancement: beautify, sense of place, improve public spaces, wayfinding and branding, public art in alleys and at gateways to communicate authenticity and neighborhood pride.
- Maintain focus on historic preservation and medium density, infill housing with focus on unique arts culture.

Previous Studies

Pappan's Ferry Charette and Plan (2018)

From the beginning of this plan, the goal set forth at the Charrette was “to highlight the diverse history and heritage of the Oregon and California National Historic Trails and Pappan’s Ferry by creating a visitor experience that will engage local residents and destination visitors alike”. The report is successful in recognizing and paying tribute to the historical significance of Pappan’s Ferry and the role it played in the forming of Topeka and Areas West by supporting the Oregon and California National Historic Trails. However, potential implementation challenges may remain.

Noteworthy Charrette facts:

- Pappan’s Ferry is a popular local topic, nearly 100 stakeholders participated in

the workshop including local government representatives, businesses, and other associations.

- The area studied consisted of the Railroad Heritage property and City of Topeka property. Contextual study of adjacent properties/neighborhoods/uses that could contribute to the area as a whole was not considered, nor was there an analysis of how the Heritage properties could transfer to the City for redevelopment purposes.
- The 3 goals included highlighting the history and visitor experience, a list of park property objectives, and a third goal of revitalizing the area.
- User preferences favored more natural examples. However, given the urban context of the site, additional consideration should be given to better integrate recommendations

into the community fabric.

- The design concepts depict individual static elements, typically worthy of one visit. Further development of these recommendations should consider alternative amenities that may be programmed to draw renewed visits.

While the history is explained properly, perhaps the biggest challenge with the recommendations within this plan is that they would not necessarily inspire reinvestment of adjacent properties to create the kind of revitalization Topeka is seeking for areas north and south of the river. There appears to be the need for a catalyst / big idea within this site that would draw regular interest from as far as Kansas City and Manhattan-- to see something unique and be inspired in return for subsequent visits.



The 2018 Pappan’s Ferry Charette and Plan outlined two concepts for the development of regional park on the north side of the Kansas River, above. (Images courtesy of the National Parks Service, 2018.)

Market Recommendations

To unlock the real potential of the River South neighborhood, it is critical to not only focus on River South directly, but on its potential role in supporting Downtown Topeka (south of I-70) in benefiting from a period of unprecedented demographic, economic, social, environmental and technological change. Based on our review of previous studies, and with these considerations in mind, it is our recommendation that:

The mission of the River South neighborhood should be to reinforce Downtown Topeka as the social, cultural, and economic heart for a rapidly diversifying region that can compete in a rapidly evolving economy.

Primary Development Recommendations

To support this mission, we suggest five primary recommendations to be studied and developed, with a focus on effective implementation strategies:

1. Create a signature South Riverfront Park that functions as an important Downtown amenity and destination. This public space can serve as both a ‘central park’ and ‘common ground’ for an increasingly diverse region. Utilize the existing catalyst sites within River South to identify infill redevelopment opportunities that could attract mixed-use office and commercial development to help anchor this Riverfront Park and spark consistent activity for the space.

2. Reinforce the Downtown Topeka core as a regional economic engine to attract talent, jobs and investment that gives Topeka a stronger foothold in the fast-growing ‘new economy’. This can be achieved in the following ways:

- Focus new housing to the core of Downtown Topeka, within a five-minute walk of Kansas Avenue, to take advantage of State Historic Tax Credits and leverage the ability of additional downtown housing to reinforce the core’s vitality. This, in turn, will help attract more housing, talent, jobs and reinvestment.
- Locate new hotels, convention and meeting facilities, and similar uses that contribute vitality IN the core of Downtown Topeka.
- Encourage local universities and other institutions to locate facilities in the Downtown core. Nationally, a growing trend in higher education finds more law schools, architecture programs and professional programs locating facilities in walkable, downtown environments. Not only has this movement demonstrated increased recruitment for these programs, but community retention of graduates from these programs is often higher.

3. Create a River South innovation district that maintains the existing mix of industry, tech, and other businesses, but also positions existing warehouse and industrial uses to transition into “new economy” innovation. This can further support the development of technology and creative industries that seek larger floorplates with lower rents and crave a closer proximity to the Downtown core.

4. Transform the open space below the planned I-70 viaduct from a current barrier (that deters connection and investment) to a unique “highway park” that can serve as a significant new Downtown amenity and destination. (see examples on next page)
5. Further activate Kansas Avenue to the North to promote its role as the walkable heart of the Downtown core (and the region). Consider development of a short-headway, electric shuttle (that could transition to an autonomous shuttle, over time) to provide a high convenience/low-cost connection between the amenities, housing, and jobs in the Downtown Core, River South, and NOTO neighborhoods.



“Leverage the authenticity of existing warehouse and industrial spaces to transition into uses that support “new economy” innovation” Image provided by Stantec

Market Recommendations



(above) Underpass Park, Toronto, Canada. Images courtesy of Stantec; (right) 14th Street Viaduct, Hoboken, NJ;



Key Issues & Opportunities

Key Issues and Opportunities

The location of the River South neighborhood, along the southern bank of the Kansas River, provides a number of opportunities and challenges for redevelopment. A quick assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats helps to identify how planning recommendations may best serve this neighborhood into the future.

Strengths

- A trail connection along the Kansas River levee makes River South a starting and stopping point for many.
- Kansas Avenue is a well-traveled North/South connection to downtown and across the river to NOTO.
- Some existing buildings are good candidates for adaptive re-use.
- The riverfront is an asset to be leveraged.
- The Van Buren corridor provides a direct visual and physical link to the State Capitol.

Weaknesses

- The Great Overland Station, a key site for future redevelopment, is located along the north bank of the Kansas River, in an industrial part of the neighborhood, with very little context or connection to River South.
- There are a lot of gaps in the pedestrian experience along Van Buren.
- The I-70 (Polk-Quincy) corridor presents a visual and physical barrier for connectivity.
- The existing topography on the south side of the Kansas River, makes direct access difficult.
- Existing park and open space is very limited in the area.

Opportunities

- Catalyst sites, on the south bank of the Kansas River, are prime opportunities for mixed-use infill redevelopment and could support an amenity-rich community park.
- Kansas Avenue has the continued potential

to be re-established as a retail and commercial corridor.

- The riverfront could continue to become a linear path of travel, as well as a destination for the downtown and Topeka as a whole.
- Re-using existing buildings could create a strong sense of place and retain character in the area.
- Van Buren has the potential to be redefined as a primary pedestrian link from River South to the State Capitol.

Threats

- It will be challenging to create a mixed-use urban district that complements downtown and doesn't compete with it.
- Local market demand to support the vision of a mixed-use urban district in this location is currently limited.
- Public funds are limited to make needed infrastructure and aesthetic improvements in this area.
- Some community members may feel apathy towards improvements for River South, in



As this diagram illustrates, the River South neighborhood is currently a connector between Downtown Topeka and the NOTO Arts District. (Image courtesy of Stantec)

Key Issues and Opportunities

- favor of other priorities for the City.
- Current plans for the Polk-Quincy realignment of I-70 (which include one-way frontage roads) could continue to be a barrier for downtown connectivity unless a partnership between City leaders and KDOT actively work toward improvements that promote a comfortable pedestrian experience.

Strengths

- **The Kansas River.** The river is a unique amenity at the north end of the neighborhood. Its market impact is limited by physical access, and the absence of visible public amenities that capitalize on the River's presence. Opening up views to the river and physical access to it would help to drive River South as a destination.
- **Industrial businesses and office.** These land uses offer the potential of capturing daytime customer traffic that help drive demand for restaurants and retail goods.
- **The former Ice Plant and smokestack buildings.** These handsome and historic brick structures seem suited to rehab for a range of potential purposes, adding vibrancy and identity, and preserving a piece of the neighborhood's heritage.
- **Streetscape.** Recent streetscaping investments improve the appearance of the Kansas Avenue corridor.
- **Committed local businesses.** There are a handful of longstanding local businesses that are cherished by the community, remain committed to their location, and that along with local residents, seem ready to do their part to help improve the area.

- **Topeka Riverfront Authority.** This community organization has demonstrated a long commitment and proactive energy in promoting activity on the Kansas River. They should be leveraged to help implement plan recommendations in the future.
- **Transportation Connectivity.** The Polk-Quincy corridor (I-70) provides good connections to regional metropolitan areas, including the I-70 animal sciences corridor that has been established between Manhattan, KS and Jefferson City, MO. In addition, Kansas Avenue and NW Topeka Boulevard provide great access and visibility to surrounding neighborhoods.
- **Visibility of area to local traffic.** The high levels of automobile traffic on I-70, Kansas Avenue and NW Topeka Boulevard is a plus for existing and prospective businesses that offer retail goods and services.

Weaknesses

- **Open air industrial storage.** The unsightly, open-air industrial activities, and the lack of screening to the material storage yards, dampen the visual appeal of the area and are a deterrent to nearby development.
- **Local customer base.** The residential customer base for River South is limited by a couple of factors. It's difficult to attract local customers to cross beneath the Polk-Quincy viaduct along Kansas Avenue or to traverse the Kansas Avenue bridge. The residential development that is within walking distance of the study area is generally low-density neighborhoods. Taken together, these factors limit the purchasing power of the neighborhood customer base.



The Van Buren corridor provides a strong visual link to Downtown Topeka and the Kansas State Capitol. (Image courtesy of Stantec)

Key Issues and Opportunities

- **Polk-Quincy Viaduct.** This corridor has a very negative visual appearance, has significant traffic noise, and is uncomfortable for pedestrians to cross beneath. The public space is marginal with broken and cracked sidewalks, overhead roadway, no streetscape, or community identifiers.
- **Perceived safety issues.** Insufficient lighting and low pedestrian traffic make some feel like the area isn't a safe place to be after dark.



(below) Beneath the existing Polk/Quincy viaduct, looking west. Image courtesy of Stantec..

Existing industrial character along Van Buren (top) and NE Crane (bottom), images courtesy of Stantec.



Opportunities

- **Catalyst Sites.** With the properties along the south bank of the Kansas River currently owned by public entities, these parcels have greater access to shovel-ready redevelopment opportunities that could further spark revitalization.
- **Kansas Avenue.** The recent improvements to the downtown core have direct access via the Kansas Avenue corridor into River South. This connectivity is a prime opportunity to strengthen links from the neighborhood into adjacent downtown districts.
- **Van Buren Corridor.** This street has direct connectivity to nearby historic neighborhoods and frames a key viewshed of the Kansas State Capitol building. Lower traffic volumes on this roadway provide an opportunity to reinforce this corridor as a bicycle and pedestrian route.
- **Land availability.** There are several properties throughout River South that are underdeveloped or vacant land, that would support new development when market conditions are right to invest in the future vision of a walkable, urban district.
- **Housing affordability.** This area represents an opportunity to provide some multi-family residential buildings and address the need for housing affordability.
- **Riverfront.** As one of the unique attributes of River South, this resource has long been underutilized. By opening views to the river, increasing access to the water, strengthening views to the north and south, and adding a signature open space anchored with mixed-use office and commercial space, will greatly enhance it as a regional destination.

Key Issues and Opportunities

Threats

- **Mixed-Use Urban District.** In order for it to succeed here, it needs to complement Downtown and not compete with it. Currently, there is limited local market demand to support the vision of a mixed-use urban district in this location.
- **Negative Safety Perception.** The view of River South needs to be positively adjusted to attract investment.
- **Lack of Public Funds.** These funds are needed to make needed infrastructure and aesthetic improvements.
- **General Apathy.** Some of the community members feel there are other priorities for the city. This includes private investors and developers in and out of town.

Infill Redevelopment

Currently, there are vacant parcels and buildings in the area that could be better utilized and help to revitalize the neighborhood. Key pieces of the urban fabric sit empty today, leaving gaps in the experience of visitors and residents.

By filling in some of these gaps, whether by re-using existing buildings or developing new



SW Topeka Blvd. bridge behind the City impound lot

buildings on empty lots, the character of the area can become more cohesive. Shared parking strategies must accompany the new development to provide viable solutions. Additionally, several properties by the river and near the proposed redevelopment on the Simonson site are great opportunities to create iconic projects at key locations in the study area.

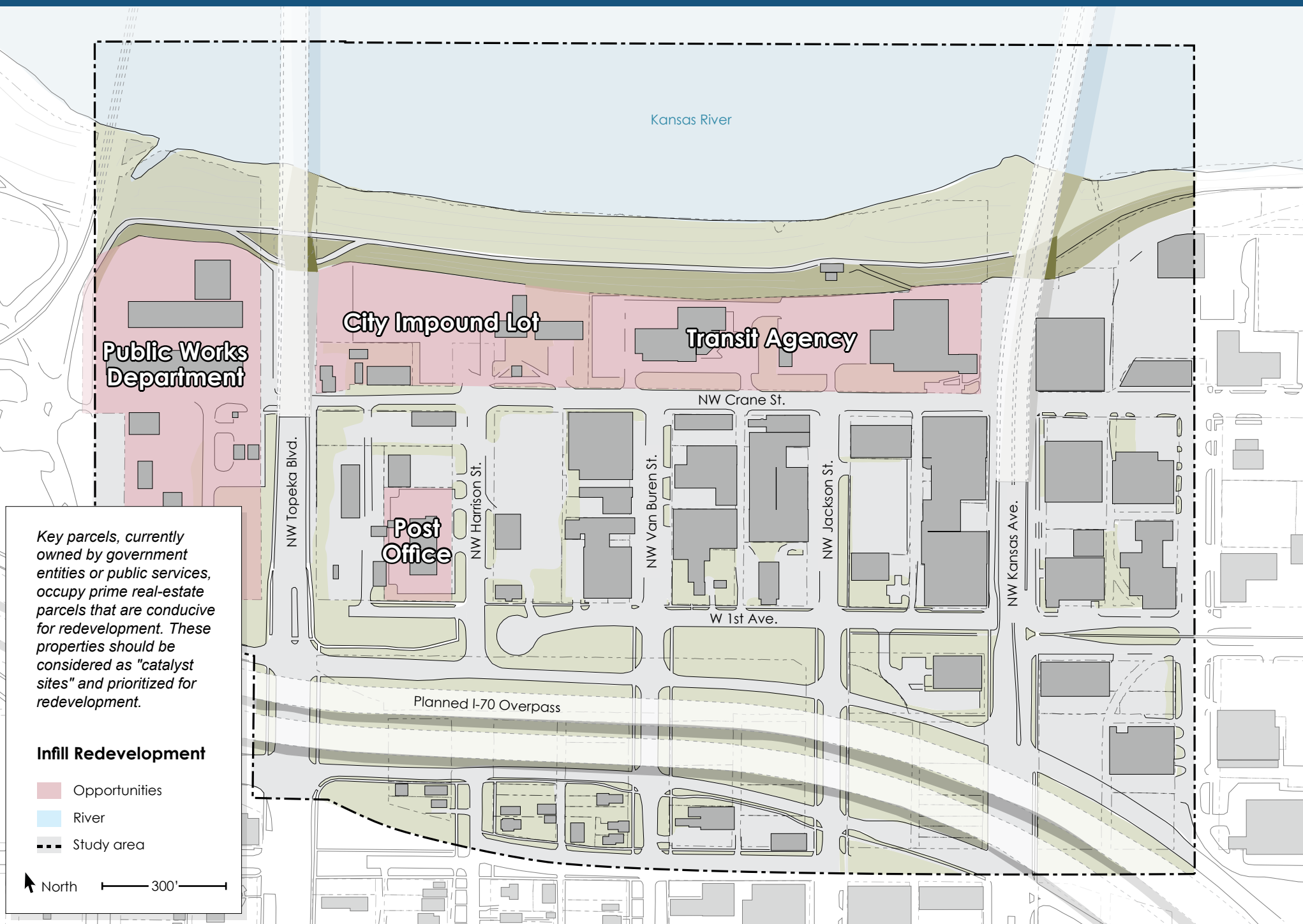


First Street looking west. Image courtesy of Stantec

(below) Kansas River levee trail looking west toward the Topeka Blvd. bridge. Image courtesy of Stantec



Key Issues and Opportunities





*Public Works Department.
Image courtesy of Stantec*



*City Impound Lot.
Image courtesy of Stantec*



*Topeka Transit Authority.
Image courtesy of Stantec*

Land Use & Zoning Conditions

Land Use & Zoning Conditions

River South contains a variety of existing land uses that are primarily comprised of heavy industrial uses, with some Downtown (residential) and Light Industrial properties along the Kansas Avenue corridor. Immediately adjacent to the study area on the east side of Kansas Avenue, properties transition into light industrial with a few Downtown (office) parcels intermingled. While the primary zoning use within the River South neighborhood is industrial, it is becoming increasingly common for businesses and developers to take interest in the character and availability of historic structures and repurpose/rezone these properties for development.



The mix of land uses in River South is not inherently problematic, and in many ways the diversity is a positive attribute. The greater challenge is the disinvestment that has occurred over the decades in many of the properties. The unmaintained structures, vacant buildings, and properties as well as the surface parking lots and materials storage areas do not add to the desire to elevate the area to a dense, vibrant, and mixed-use urban district. However, many of the historic buildings throughout River South are in good locations, include interesting architectural features, and are close to the street. This helps to create an urban environment and the current plans recommend continuing this pattern with future development. The historic buildings also provide unique character to the area and should be retained and reused as much as possible.

(photos this page) existing character of the area creates authenticity and unique sense of place. Image courtesy of Stantec.

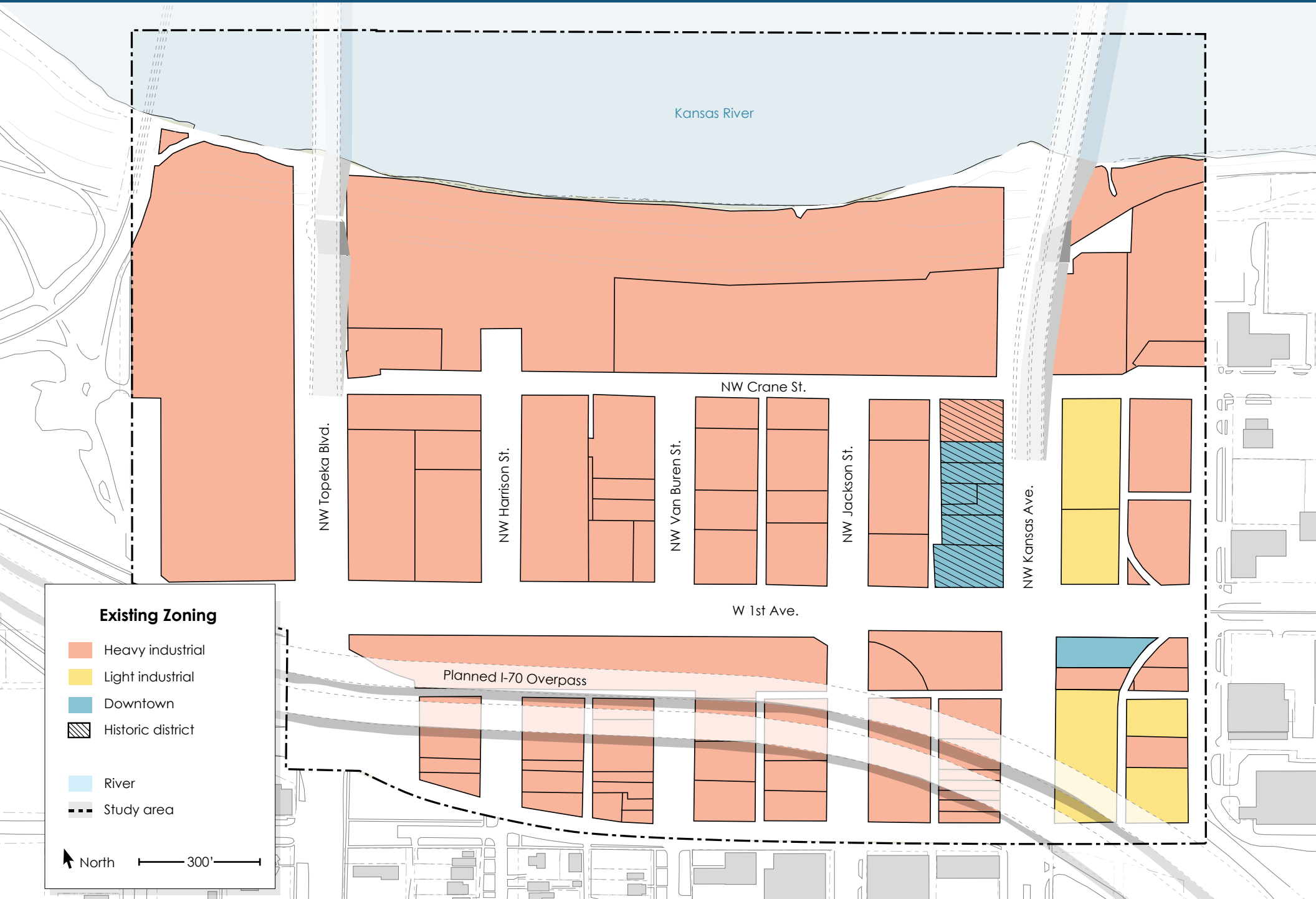


Review of Existing Zoning Conditions

In addition to reviewing existing land uses within the study area, it was important to assess the current regulatory environment for the River South area in Topeka to identify potential considerations as the City moves toward a new vision for the district. This evaluation will serve as the basis for future recommendations related to the development and implementation of zoning/design guidelines/regulations that will help the community achieve its long-range vision for River South. While a form-based code may be considered as one potential regulatory step to implement the vision, it is important to first understand the full potential of the site, relative to the greater downtown core, prior to solidifying final recommendations and dimensional standards for River South.

Previous planning initiatives during the last two decades have established several policy related recommendations for the area. While previous efforts capture the essence of what the community's vision may be for the site, the regulations intended to implement that vision, nor subsequent development initiatives, have emerged as a result. One specific recommendation from the 2008 Kansas Riverfront Master Plan recommends the implementation of an X3, Mixed Use, zoning district and design guidelines. While there are parcels in the community zoned as either X1 or X2, mixed use districts, there does not appear to be any use of the X3 district. Instead, the primary zoning categories in the River South area currently consist of industrially zoned parcels; predominately I2, Heavy Industrial District, which was established to provide for the use and location of the total range of industrial uses.

Land Use & Zoning Conditions



Existing Zoning

- Heavy industrial
- Light industrial
- Downtown
- Historic district
- River
- Study area

North 300'

Land Use & Zoning Conditions

Moving forward, it will be helpful to understand how successful the implementation of the mixed-use zoning districts have been in the community—from both a design and development perspective, as well administratively. Additionally, the success of the districts relative to the character of various neighborhoods and corridors should also be considered.

While current and future planning initiatives will further guide development or redevelopment in the area, an evaluation of the City's current planning tools establishes a basis for the implementation of that guidance. Overall, regulatory guidance for the River South area can be characterized as a mix of light and heavy industrial districts with the inclusion of a few parcels that belong in the D3, Downtown District—located along Kansas Avenue. The current I2 zoning district allows for a wide range of uses compatible to the vision for River South (as well as several uses that are not compatible) but does not include several additional uses that should be considered to fully realize the vision. In addition, the mixed-use zoning districts, if implemented in the area, offer a wider range of potential land uses in the area.

As the city considers future regulation, including the potential development of a form-based code, the inclusion of acceptable and compatible uses should be considered that will contribute to the character of River South. Previous and current planning initiatives will help fine-tune appropriate use categories, but additional attention should be given consideration as the vision for the area further emerges—particularly in relation to recommendations in the 2008 Kansas Riverfront Master Plan.

More importantly, an in-depth evaluation of the dimensional standards that guide development

should be conducted. As drafted, the dimensional standards included in the zoning ordinance for the mixed use and industrial districts do not provide straightforward and predictable results. While the standards provide guidance for the development of specific sites, they do not address the public realm and relationship of various buildings throughout the area. The standards are also not tied to a future vision for the area as it relates to downtown and the greater community. The development of guidelines that focus on the form of development and the public realm, and secondarily land uses, will assist with the community's effort to redevelop River South in-line with the vision—and likely with greater administrative ease.

To support the revitalization of River South, it is recommended that the community fully develop and finalize a vision for the neighborhood—ultimately developing character or place types that will establish the basis for future implementation initiatives. Several of the existing buildings in and around the study area provide a good basis for the development of building envelopes and architecture, however the use of precedent examples found in other neighborhoods and communities will begin to establish and communicate the look and feel of River South while also providing a guide for desired dimensional standards, including building disposition in relation to public realm recommendations, desired density, and building height—and to a lesser degree, building uses.

Based on this evaluation of the regulatory environment for River South, as well as future recommendations for the study area, the following next steps are recommended:

- Once a final vision for River South has been established, review the efficacy of current zoning districts, including the industrial,

mixed use, and downtown districts. While the primary focus will be on land uses and administrative elements related to the districts, dimensional standards will also be important to consider as a final vision for River South emerges through the recommendations within this plan.

- Utilize examples of precedent images, included within this plan, that capture the character of River South. Precedents will be used as a basis and guide for future implementation strategies and further development of a future form-based code approach for revitalization.
- Develop recommendations for appropriate building envelopes and public realm elements. Recommendations will provide a guide for a form-based regulatory tool for River South and serve as a basis for regulatory recommendations.



River South is home to many existing structures that should inform future form-based zoning codes for the area. Photo courtesy of Stantec.

Land Use & Zoning Conditions

Catalyst Sites

The City designated three catalyst sites, which are either already owned by the City of Topeka or another public entity, that could easily represent shovel-ready opportunities for redevelopment. Specifically, the City identified the City of Topeka Street Maintenance Yard, the City of Topeka impound lot, and the Topeka Metro Transit Authority (TMTA) headquarters as key properties which, if developed, could spur additional reinvestment within the neighborhood.

With potential development interest in these properties, individual projects could be realized that will benefit residents, support economic development efforts, and elevate quality of life in Downtown Topeka. Considering these factors, the City wanted to explore conceptual plan options for these sites and define a development program.

The 2008 Riverfront Master Plan focused on an extensive, mixed-use entertainment district for these catalyst sites; whereas market conditions have significantly changed since previous recommendations, the City wanted to use the AWP process to achieve more achievable and market-appropriate redevelopment plans for the catalyst sites in terms of future uses, site programming, and spatial arrangement for site improvements. The City also wanted to address confirmed and perceived brownfield conditions on these sites. The following summarizes the plans for each catalyst site:



City Impound Lot, Image courtesy of Stantec



TMTA Facility, Image courtesy of Stantec



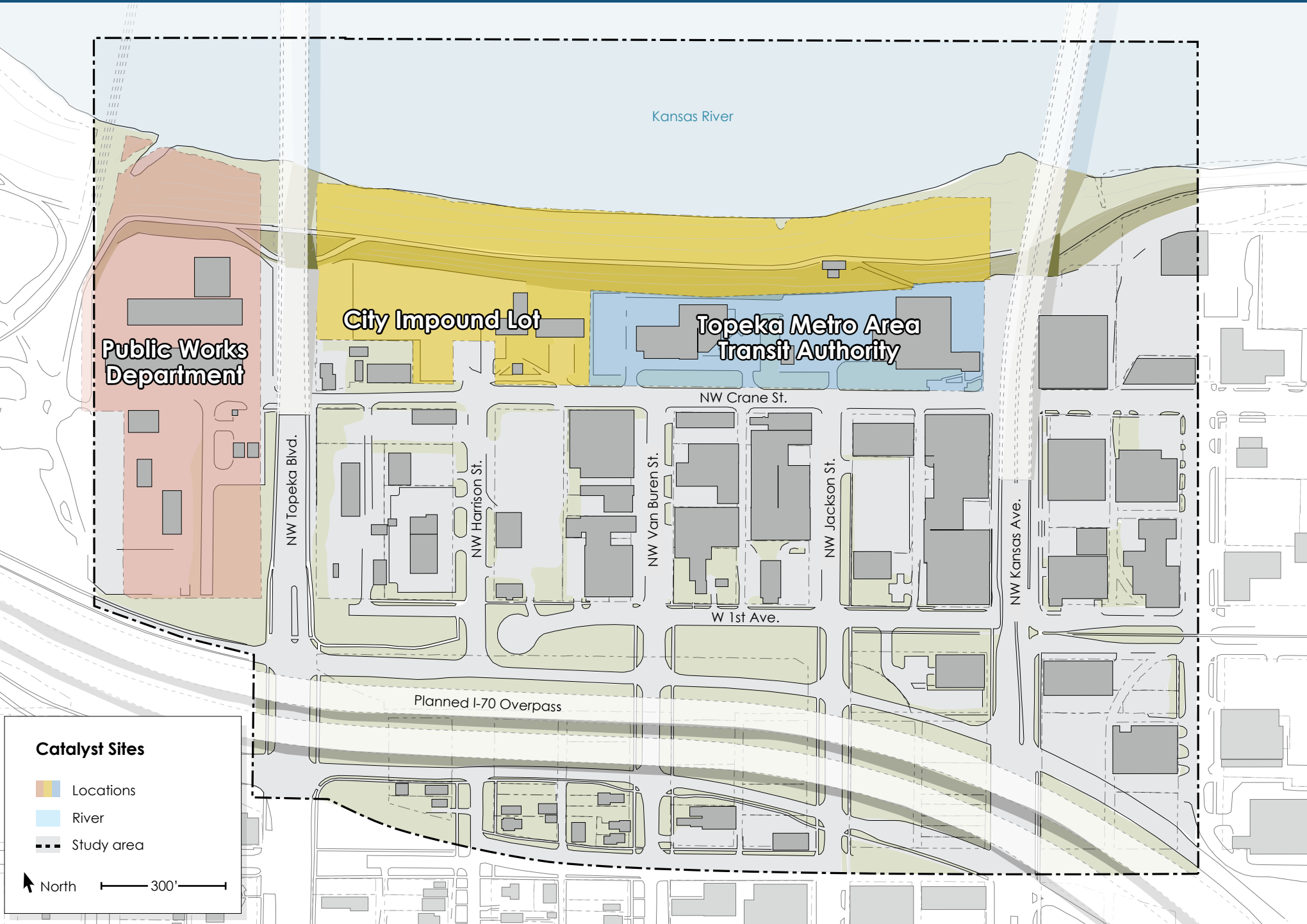
City of Topeka Street Maintenance Yard, Image courtesy of Stantec

City Impound Lot: This catalyst site includes the City Impound Lot and the surrounding City-owned property north of Crane Street and east of NW Topeka Blvd. The community envisions that this site could serve as a prime location for a mixed-use office/commercial/residential development with a large civic gathering space that could serve a dual purpose as a signature riverfront park. The conceptual plan illustrates an open gathering area, plaza spaces, riverfront overlook, and public artwork depicting the rich cultural history of the neighborhood.

Topeka Metro Transit Authority (TMTA): This catalyst site is comprised of the existing TMTA administrative headquarters and bus maintenance/storage facility; on the north side of Crane Street, west of N. Kansas Avenue. While the TMTA facilities that are located on this site are in good operational condition, the transit authority recognizes the inherent value and potential of their riverfront location and are interested in relocated to a new facility, if proper funding becomes available. The conceptual plan recommends that this parcel could also be developed as a prime location for a mixed-use office/commercial/residential development to book end the east side of a signature riverfront park.

City of Topeka Street Maintenance Yard: This catalyst site is comprised of the block on the west side of the NW Topeka Boulevard Bridge along the south bank of the Kansas River. While its location is physically separated by the overpass of the Boulevard Bridge, proximity to the riverfront suggests that its current use as a storage yard may be underutilized. The community identified a long-range vision to potentially utilize this site as an infill redevelopment opportunity for office/residential mix-ed use that would benefit from nearby commercial areas as well as the adjacent riverfront access and amenities.

Land Use & Zoning Conditions



Land Use & Zoning Conditions

Proposed Land Use

The proposed land use plan for River South suggests taking advantage of the riverfront location by proposing a residential, commercial, and office space on the catalyst sites overlooking the river and with views of downtown. While this would displace TMTA, as well as City maintenance facilities, over time it would be a higher and better use of these parcels. Many stakeholders spoke about the desire to make the riverfront more of a destination, so a mixed-use development with restaurants, breweries and coffee shops could make that a reality. Better access to the river for recreational opportunities would amplify this as a destination.

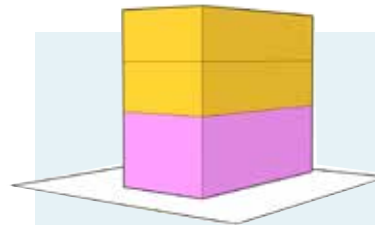
In terms of the southern gateway into River South, the Kansas State Capitol is quite visible from the Van Buren corridor. While the Polk-Quincy viaduct obscures some of this view, this heavy transportation corridor is currently being redesigned by KDOT and would significantly impact vehicular traffic within this area. Considering an alternate use of the space beneath the viaduct, such as aesthetic improvements and community open space, would be a much better visual experience and comfortable pedestrian experience than what exists today.

Zoning Recommendations for Catalyst Sites

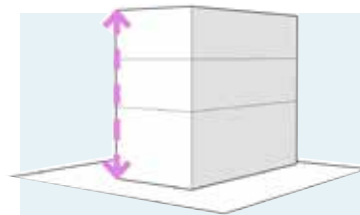
Zoning and form-based codes allow cities and towns to control how development will occur in certain areas. While architectural creativity and most design decisions should be project-specific, there are elements of design that can and should be controlled through zoning.

The purpose of controlling these elements is to create a sense of place in different neighborhoods, or areas within neighborhoods.

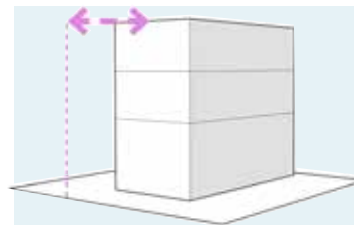
Throughout the study area for River South, including the previously described catalyst sites, the following form-based zoning standards should be considered.



Mixed-Use. Determining which areas are best suited to house a range of uses allows some control over what goes where. By developing a profile for which uses should be mixed, and where, a certain character profile is created. This allows certain neighborhoods to feel different than others.



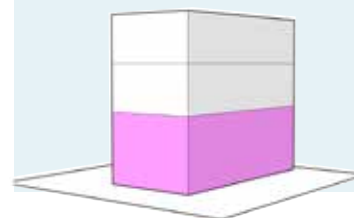
Building Heights. Varying heights of buildings is indicative of a larger density pattern throughout a city or town. Placing a height limit on buildings in certain areas prevents buildings from being too tall in a certain area and creates a sense of place.



Building Setbacks. Providing a zone for pedestrians to safely walk is critical for successful towns and neighborhoods. Additionally, implementing a similar setback within a neighborhood makes the area feel uniform and cohesive.



Building Materials. The materials used for a building reflects the area it's in and can respond to the history of the place. By creating requirements for material use in an area, certain unwanted materials will be prohibited, and the amount of glass on a façade can be encouraged.



First Floor Uses. The pedestrian zone in a town or neighborhood can sometimes feel as though it extends into the first floor of buildings. With that in mind, it is important to create expectations for what kind of use exists within the first floor of buildings in certain areas.

Planning & Urban Design Observations

Planning & Urban Design Observations



Three primary goals (above) provided guidance for the planning recommendations and concepts for River South"

Community Vision and Guiding Principles

Through recommendations from current plans, review of existing conditions, and feedback from local stakeholders, the project team formalized a community vision for the River South neighborhood and the designated catalyst sites. The community's vision for the study area is to **“create a River South overlay District with a focus on industry, technology and innovation: tailored to the new economy and creative industries.”**

To support this vision, the study team established a set of planning objectives that reflect local desires for the study area in terms of character, land uses, amenities, and urban design. The project team used these guiding principles to influence and shape the conceptual planning for the catalyst sites and adjacent areas.

- 1. Signature South Riverfront Park:** Create a signature South Riverfront park that functions as an important Downtown amenity, destination and as a ‘common ground’ for an increasingly diverse region.
- 2. Polk-Quincy Realignment:** Transform the area below the planned Polk-Quincy viaduct from a barrier that deters connection and investment to a unique “viaduct park” that serves as a significant new Downtown amenity and destination.
- 3. Extend the Kansas Avenue Streetscape:** Animate Kansas Avenue to promote its role as the walkable heart of the Downtown core, and the region.

- 4. Provide a redevelopment environment that supports mixed-use:** Locate investment that can enhance Downtown's vitality, and effectiveness as a regional economic engine, into the Downtown core.
- 5. Reinforce Momentum within the Downtown Core:** Take advantage of River South's unique potential to reinforce Downtown as a regional economic engine to give Topeka a stronger foothold in the fast-growing “new economy”.

Goal:

“River South” (as named in the 2019 Market Study) should be planned, programmed, and designed in terms of how it can best reinforce Downtown as the social, cultural, and economic heart for a rapidly diversifying region. From this perspective, River South's most critical land use, programmatic, and urban design goals should be to help position Downtown—and thus Topeka and its region—to manage and benefit from a period of unprecedented demographic, economic, social, environmental, and technological change.

Planning & Urban Design Observations

Planning objectives and implementation

strategies: To achieve this goal, it will be important to focus on five recommended planning objectives and potential implementation strategies as defined below:



GOAL 1

Image courtesy of Stantec.

Create a signature South Riverfront park that functions as an important Downtown amenity, destination and as a 'common ground' for an increasingly diverse region.

Take full advantage of the unique opportunity presented by acres of underutilized riverfront, under public ownership, within a short walk of the Downtown core, and a levee that can represent a defining feature for the park.

Strategy	
1A	Policy: Designate the riverfront for a public park
1B	Sponsorship: City of Topeka through a Public/Private development agreement.
1C	Funding: TBD. A mix of sources could potentially be available including the new Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district or possibly a program similar to the "MAPS" program used to fund Oklahoma City's new downtown arts museum.

Strategy	
1D	Threshold Actions: Commit to, and fund, relocation of Topeka Metro's facilities. Develop a preliminary program and design guidelines together with illustrative material to support a region-wide community engagement initiative to build broad public support.

Planning & Urban Design Observations



GOAL 2

Image courtesy of Stantec.

Transform the area below the planned Polk-Quincy (I-70) viaduct expansion from a barrier that deters connection and investment to a unique “viaduct park” that serves as a significant new Downtown amenity and destination.

Create an innovative, interactive series of spaces below the highway that create a highly engaging Downtown amenity and destination.

Strategy

- 2A** Policy: Designate the land below the highway as a public park, City staff and elected officials to work in close partnership with KDOT to assemble design parameters to support this feature.
- 2B** Sponsorship: City of Topeka; Downtown Topeka, Inc.

Strategy

- 2C** Funding: Given the elevated interstate’s potential to create a barrier and diminish Downtown’s ability to attract development, secure “mitigation funding” as part of the highway reconstruction to fund an innovative park. Similar to South Riverfront Park, identify a mix of potential funding strategies.
- 2D** Threshold Actions: Confirm City’s commitment to securing mitigation funding. Identify analogous public spaces across the globe.

Planning & Urban Design Observations



GOAL 3

Image courtesy of Stantec.

Animate Kansas Avenue to promote its role as the walkable heart of the Downtown core, and the region.

Expand streetscaping improvements from the Downtown core to the Kansas River and beyond. Develop complementary streetscaping and public realm improvements within River South, with bicycle and pedestrian routes that utilize this important connector between Downtown, River South and NOTO.

Strategy

3A Policy: TBD. Confirm that a South Riverfront park and Viaduct park should program highly interactive uses that interface with Kansas Avenue (which is rising to meet the bridge) and animate the Avenue while also inviting passersby to explore the parks. Require that additional private development along both sides of Kansas Avenue include at least one active use that interfaces with the Avenue.

Strategy

- 3B** Sponsorship: City of Topeka.
- 3C** Funding: Mix of TIF funding and infrastructure funding.
- 3D** Threshold Actions: Confirm City's commitment to ensure that adjacent uses activate Kansas Avenue and enrich its pedestrian experience. Begin exploring implementation for bicycle and pedestrian improvements along Kansas Avenue and throughout River South.

Planning & Urban Design Observations



GOAL 4

Image courtesy of Stantec.

Locate investment that can enhance Downtown’s vitality, and effectiveness as a regional economic engine, into the Downtown core.

Housing: *within a five-minute walk of Kansas Avenue, to take maximum advantage of its ability to support retail and other active uses that animate Kansas Avenue. Take advantage of State Historic Tax Credits and leverage the ability of additional downtown housing to reinforce the Downtown core’s vitality, in turn attracting more housing, talent, jobs, and investment. **New hotels, convention and meeting facilities and similar uses:** that draw visitors and help diversify Downtown’s economy, again if possible, within a five-minute walk of*

*Kansas Avenue. **New Facilities for local universities and other institutions:** that would benefit from synergies with the Downtown economy, diversify Downtown’s economy, and add vitality.*

Strategy	
4A	Policy: Designate the Downtown core as a housing priority zone.
4B	Sponsorship: City of Topeka; Downtown Topeka, Inc.
4C	Funding: Explore increasing Neighborhood Revitalization Program tax rebates to match historic rehab rebates for eligible mixed-income

Strategy	
4C	housing and other uses that would enhance Downtown’s vitality and serve larger public purposes such as hotels and conference/meeting facilities. Promote downtown shared parking to take advantage of nearby office parking during days and weekends to reduce the cost burden of providing parking for Downtown core housing and other uses with different peak parking periods. Identify other potential incentives that could be targeted to support new mixed-income housing and other uses that would benefit Downtown.

Planning & Urban Design Observations



GOAL 5

Image courtesy of Stantec.

Take advantage of River South’s unique potential to reinforce Downtown as a regional economic engine to give Topeka a stronger foothold in the fast-growing “new economy.”

Take advantage of River south’s dynamic mix of industrial, technology and other businesses together with its stock of lower cost/large floorplate industrial buildings, proximity to Downtown, and potential proximity to a new South Riverfront Park to support Downtown and the region in attracting creative and knowledge industries. Over time, the area will potentially evolve organically, into higher value new economy uses and real estate redevelopment that meets the urban design guidelines for the district and can keep pace with economic development.

Strategy	
5A	Policy: Create a “River South Innovation District” that both maintains the existing mix of industry, tech and other businesses and positions the existing warehouse and industrial buildings to transition over time to “new economy “innovation, technology, creative industries and similar uses that seek larger floorplates and lower rents. Expand access to job training/workforce readiness programs to ensure broad access to new economic opportunity in the District.
5B	Sponsorship: City of Topeka; Downtown Topeka, Inc.; GO Topeka; Greater Topeka Foundation

Strategy	
5C	Funding: Possibly increase Neighborhood Revitalization Program tax rebates to match historic rehab rebates for eligible new economy investments. Identify any State incentive programs targeted to support new economy investments.
5D	Threshold Actions: Complete a market study to assess potential demand (absorption, types of businesses; spaces preferences: size, type location, etc.; price points and related information). Work with existing ownership of the Ice Plant to ensure that the building is preserved and reused as new economy space, housing, and/or other uses that constitute a real contribution to River South’s vitality and creating an appropriate gateway to Downtown.

Planning & Urban Design Observations

Innovation Districts

Based on the Community Vision and Guiding principles, the preferred planning recommendation for River South focuses on cultivating a neighborhood in which new construction is complementary to the current business and industry of the area, maintains the character of key historic structures, and honors the rich cultural legacy of this place. This approach will develop an innovation and technology district that is attractive to new industries and is tailored to the workforce needs of tech and innovation fields.

The development of a River South Innovation District will rely on a heavy emphasis on office and laboratory space, but also honor the character and presence of existing industries. While office space generally comprises much of the space within a typical innovation district, it also includes other mixed-uses such as new housing, restaurants, coffee shops, breweries and small amounts of retail to support the live-work-play lifestyle that tech & innovation workers crave.

New construction complements the existing character of buildings and honors the authenticity of the neighborhood. Across the country, cities like Topeka are taking an active role in developing innovation districts of their own—which helps to diversify the local economy. In recent years, the Brookings Institute has recognized the rise of innovation districts and as published in a 2014 study, identified key “ingredients” for how successful innovation districts are formed. These ingredients include: Economic Assets, Physical Assets and Networking Assets. For the purposes of this planning study for River South, physical assets have been identified and explored in greater detail.



According to Brookings Institute research, there are three types of Physical Assets:

- **Physical Assets in the Public Realm:** parks, plazas and streets that become hotspots of energy and activity
- **Physical Assets in the Private Realm:** privately-owned buildings and spaces that stimulate innovation in new and creative ways
- **Physical Assets that Knit the District Together:** specific investments aimed to eliminate barriers that hinder relationship building and connectivity

WHO DELIVERS INNOVATION DISTRICTS

The list of institutions and individuals that are driving the growth of innovation districts is as varied as the economic composition of districts themselves. The following list provides a sample of the leaders at the vanguard of this trend in the United States and abroad:

- **Mayors and local governments**, such as former Mayor Tom Menino of Boston, former Mayor Joan Clos of Barcelona, and the Stockholm city government.
- **Major real estate developers and major land owners**, such as Vulcan Real Estate in Seattle's South Lake Union and the Brooklyn Navy Yard.
- **Managers of research campuses**, such as the Research Triangle Park Foundation in Research Triangle Park and the Texas Medical Center in Houston.
- **Anchor companies**, such as Quicken Loans in Detroit, Comcast in Philadelphia, and Amazon in Seattle's South Lake Union.
- **Advanced research institutions**, such as Washington University in St. Louis, Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Drexel University in Philadelphia, and MIT in Cambridge.
- **Advanced medical campuses**, such as the Henry Ford Health System in Detroit and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Pittsburgh.
- **Philanthropic investors**, such as the New Economy Initiative and the Kresge Foundation in Detroit and the former Danforth Foundation in St. Louis.
- **Incubators, accelerators, and other economic cultivators**, such as Barcelona Activa in Barcelona, the Cambridge Innovation Center in Cambridge, and the BioGenerator in St. Louis.
- **Social networking programmers**, such as Venture Café Foundation in Boston and Cambridge and High Tech Campus Eindhoven.

Planning & Urban Design Observations

Innovation Districts are increasingly important for cities across the midwest, including Oklahoma City. Image courtesy of the City of Oklahoma City.



Redevelopment Opportunities

Redevelopment Opportunities



Redevelopment Opportunities

Based on the Community Vision and Guiding principles, outlined above, the preferred planning recommendation for River South focuses on redeveloping existing catalyst sites with new construction, mixed-use offices, and some residential/commercial buildings while maintaining the existing function and use of businesses within the central portions of the neighborhood. Open parcels within these central portions could also be considered for smaller, infill redevelopment, if property owners are interested.

River South Planning Framework

This plan view rendering illustrates how new construction is concentrated on parcels around the perimeter of the neighborhood, while existing businesses remain in central areas. New mixed-use construction is illustrated in blue, with existing structures shown in gray and key “iconic” buildings highlighted in orange. Additional thought has also been given to how public parks and green spaces can support this neighborhood framework. The preferred neighborhood plan includes two noteworthy areas that can serve this purpose: the Polk-Quincy Viaduct Park and the South Riverfront Park. Each has been assigned unique design recommendations that complement the community and reinforce pedestrian movement. As previously described, there are key physical assets that can be developed within neighborhoods, such as River South, to support successful development of an Innovation District: Physical Assets in the Public Realm, Physical Assets in the Private Realm and Physical Assets that Knit the District Together.

Proposed Physical Assets in the Public Realm



Spaces available to the public such as parks, plazas, and streets that become hotspots of energy and activity

Examples of physical assets in the public realm could be pedestrian improvements to streets such as Crane, 1st Avenue, Topeka Boulevard, Van Buren, and Kansas Avenue. They could also include public parks and open spaces such as the signature River South park and the Polk-Quincy viaduct park. Pedestrian improvements to existing streets are critical to encouraging activity and vibrancy within the neighborhood. Rather

than hindering pedestrian flow, green spaces below the viaduct help encourage greater connectivity into the Downtown core.



Planning recommendations for River South include numerous opportunities for reinvestment in the Public Realm, as indicated by the yellow dashed lines in the above rendering. (Image courtesy of Stantec)

Redevelopment Opportunities

Proposed Physical Assets in the Private Realm



Privately-owned buildings and spaces that stimulate innovation in new and collective ways

Physical assets in the private realm are categorized as privately-owned buildings and spaces that stimulate innovation in new and creative ways. Examples of these might include new construction of mixed-use spaces that have coffee shops and breweries on the lower level, office space on the middle levels, and residences on the upper stories. Another example for consideration might be the signature



Photo courtesy of Boston Magazine



Wake Forest Innovation Quarter



Open public space between privately-owned buildings provide numerous opportunities to engage residence and visitors to Topeka through both passive and active recreation opportunities.



The Shipyard (Green Bay, WI)

River South Park. This open space could be owned and maintained by the companies and developers who construct adjacent buildings but could be spaces that are open and available for community use.

Some similar examples of this arrangement can be found in cities across the United States, such as the Shipyard in Green Bay Wisconsin and the Wake Forest Innovation Quarter in North Carolina. Both of which have open green spaces available to the public.

The south bank of the Kansas River offers a prime opportunity for this while also diversifying the local economy, activating the riverfront, and connecting the neighborhood to a walkable and vibrant Downtown core.

Redevelopment Opportunities

Proposed Physical Assets that Knit the District Together



Specific investments aimed to eliminate barriers that hinder relationship building and connectivity

To support walkability, it's also important to consider the physical assets that knit the district together. Examples of these types of assets in River south are very similar to Physical Assets in the Public Realm—with key emphasis on the streetscapes and pedestrian improvements on roadways for pedestrian safety. Examples of these types of improvements could be:

- Protected bike lanes on Van Buren that promote connectivity to the Capitol
- Continued streetscaping and pedestrian improvements on Kansas Avenue that promote connection south to Downtown
- Pedestrian improvements on roadways that connect the north and south sides of the Kansas River



Bicycle and Pedestrian infrastructure improvements to the Van Buren Corridor will be critical to further strengthen connectivity between River South and Downtown Topeka.

Topeka Fast-Track Bike Plan

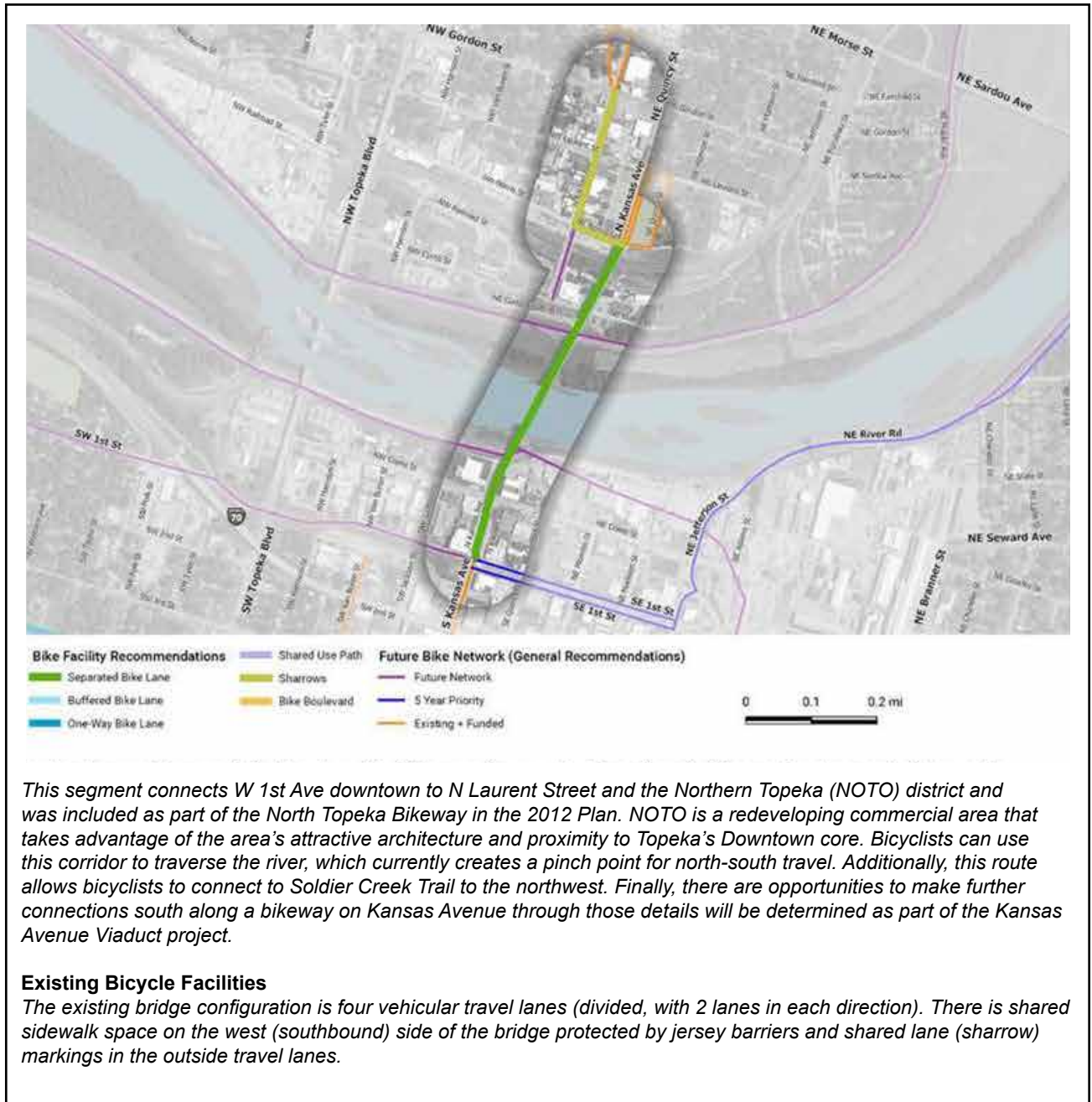
The recently completed Topeka Fast-Track Bike Plan identified a specific approach to encouraging north/south connectivity through the evaluation of a priority bikeway and pedestrian corridor at the Kansas Avenue Bridge and 1st Street. The plan identified improvements to the bridge that would add protected bicycle lanes to encourage greater use, exploration, and vibrancy of all the downtown neighborhoods situated along the Kansas Avenue spine.



As this connectivity diagram illustrates, numerous opportunities (both visual and physical) exist to strengthen connectivity between the north and south sides of the Kansas River.



Kansas Avenue Bridge looking Southbound Option B from Topeka Fast-Track Bike Plan. Image courtesy of Toole Design Group.



This segment connects W 1st Ave downtown to N Laurent Street and the Northern Topeka (NOTO) district and was included as part of the North Topeka Bikeway in the 2012 Plan. NOTO is a redeveloping commercial area that takes advantage of the area's attractive architecture and proximity to Topeka's Downtown core. Bicyclists can use this corridor to traverse the river, which currently creates a pinch point for north-south travel. Additionally, this route allows bicyclists to connect to Soldier Creek Trail to the northwest. Finally, there are opportunities to make further connections south along a bikeway on Kansas Avenue through those details will be determined as part of the Kansas Avenue Viaduct project.

Existing Bicycle Facilities

The existing bridge configuration is four vehicular travel lanes (divided, with 2 lanes in each direction). There is shared sidewalk space on the west (southbound) side of the bridge protected by jersey barriers and shared lane (sharrow) markings in the outside travel lanes.

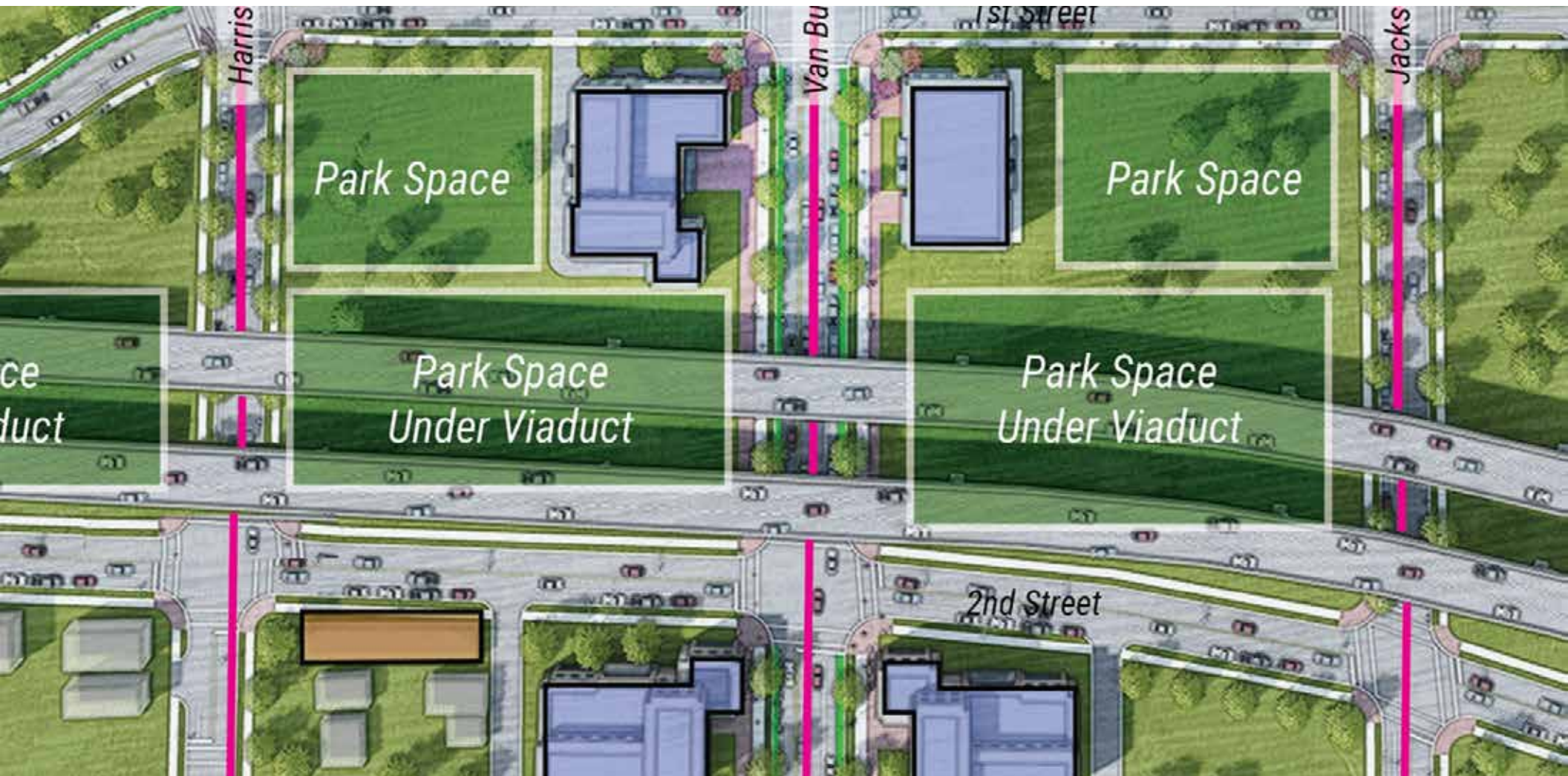
The 2020 Topeka Fast-Track Bike Plan lays out specific recommendations for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure improvements along Kansas Avenue, to connect NOTO with Downtown Topeka. Image courtesy of Toole Design Group.

Redevelopment Opportunities

Polk-Quincy Viaduct

The space beneath the Polk-Quincy viaduct could support pedestrian use and walkability to surrounding areas 1st Street and 2nd Street should be designed in a way to support safe pedestrian crossings and minimize high-speed, high-volume traffic in support of a walkable, pedestrian-friendly environment.

Similarly, many communities across North America have reclaimed spaces beneath highways, nearly identical to this one. Some examples include the development of skate parks, ice skating rinks and farmers markets while others offer less-intense programming such as pedestrian trails, art installations and aesthetic improvements



Redevelopment Opportunities



Chicago Low-Line (Chicago, IL)



Chicago Wabash Lights (Chicago, IL)



Underpass Restaurant (Mexico City, MX)



Phoenix Park (Glasgow, UK)



Underground at Inkblock (Boston, MA)



Underground at Inkblock (Boston, MA)



The Bentway (Toronto, Canada)



Underpass Park (Toronto, Canada)



I-5 Colonnade (Seattle, WA)

As these example images show (above) numerous opportunities exist to utilize the space below the Polk-Quincy viaduct as an important pedestrian amenity.

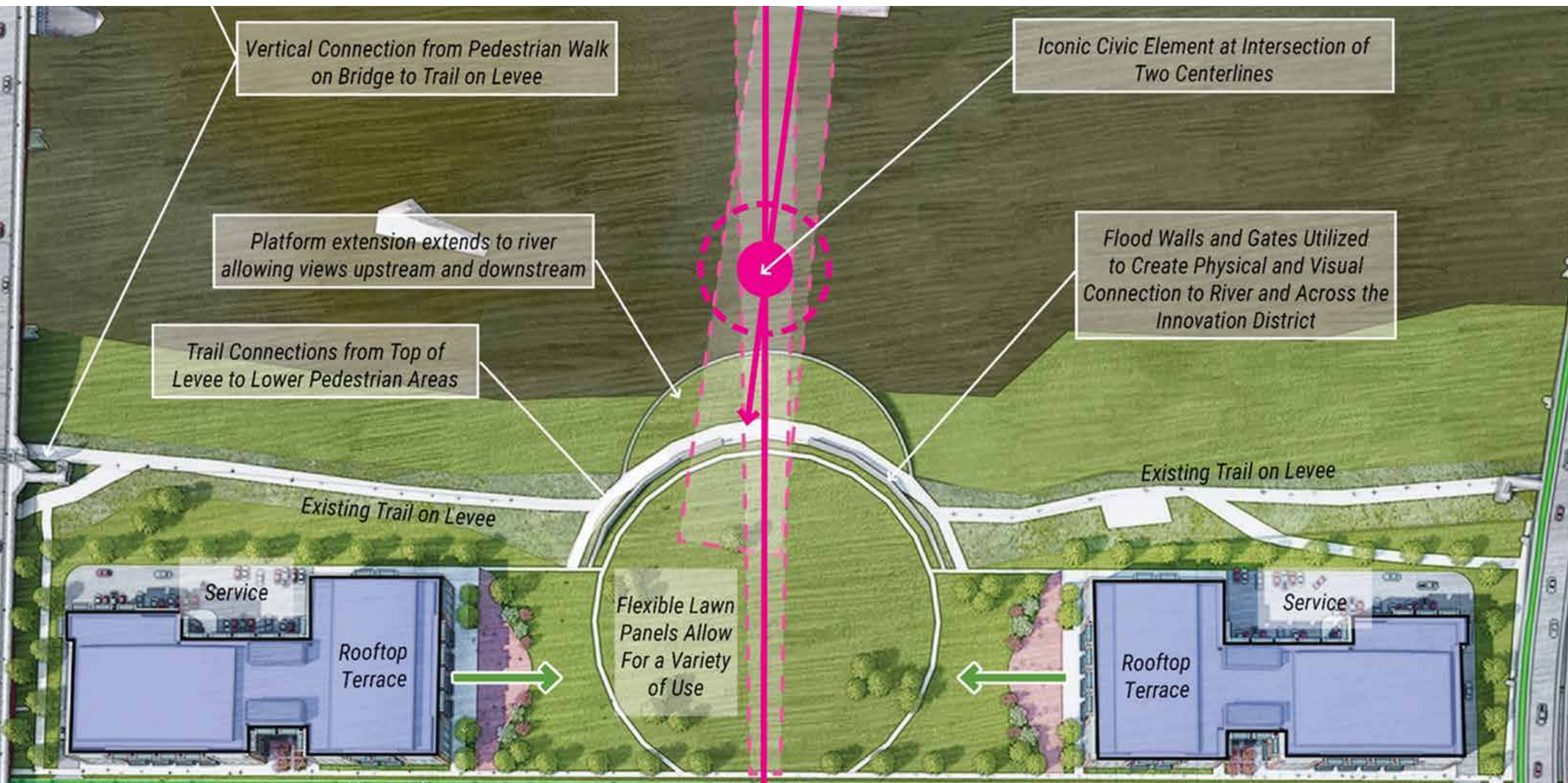
Redevelopment Opportunities

The Signature South Riverfront Park is another open space that has the potential to support community vibrancy, connectivity, and activities. Most notably, this space will be anchored on the east and west ends by new mixed-use office buildings which will provide views over the existing levee. While users within the park will have framed views south to the Capitol

(along Van Buren) this space will also have trail connections and flood walls that open the space out into the River and extend views North.

The lawn and open spaces of this park could be developed by building owners to support community events, similar to other communities throughout the region. Most notably, Surly Brewing

Company in Minneapolis has developed a collaborative community green space adjacent to their facilities in a light-industrial neighborhood. They regularly program community events such as concerts, movies and food truck festivals which engage their employees and contribute to a vibrant community atmosphere.



Redevelopment Opportunities



Surly Brewing Co. (Minneapolis, MN)



Surly Brewing Co. (Minneapolis, MN)



Surly Brewing Co. (Minneapolis, MN)



Ben-Gurion University (Be'er Sheva, Israel)



The Boxyard (Tulsa, OK)



Playa Jefferson Complex (Playa Vista, CA)



Bar K Dog Bar (Kansas City, MO)



Cornell Tech University (New York, NY)



Cornell Tech University (New York, NY)

As the examples (above) illustrate, the open space, that could exist between new construction, along the south bank of the Kansas River, provide numerous opportunities for community amenities. This open space could further engage residence to enjoy a variety of activities and community functions in a safe, outdoor environment.

Redevelopment Opportunities

By reconstructing portions of the existing levee, floodwalls could provide an opportunity to terrace the south bank of the Kansas River to make views more accessible to the activities that occur within the open green space, much like this example from Vancouver, British Columbia.



Redevelopment Opportunities

To further extend these views, pedestrian bridges may also physically extend the connection from these green spaces out into the River and link visual connections to surrounding trails.

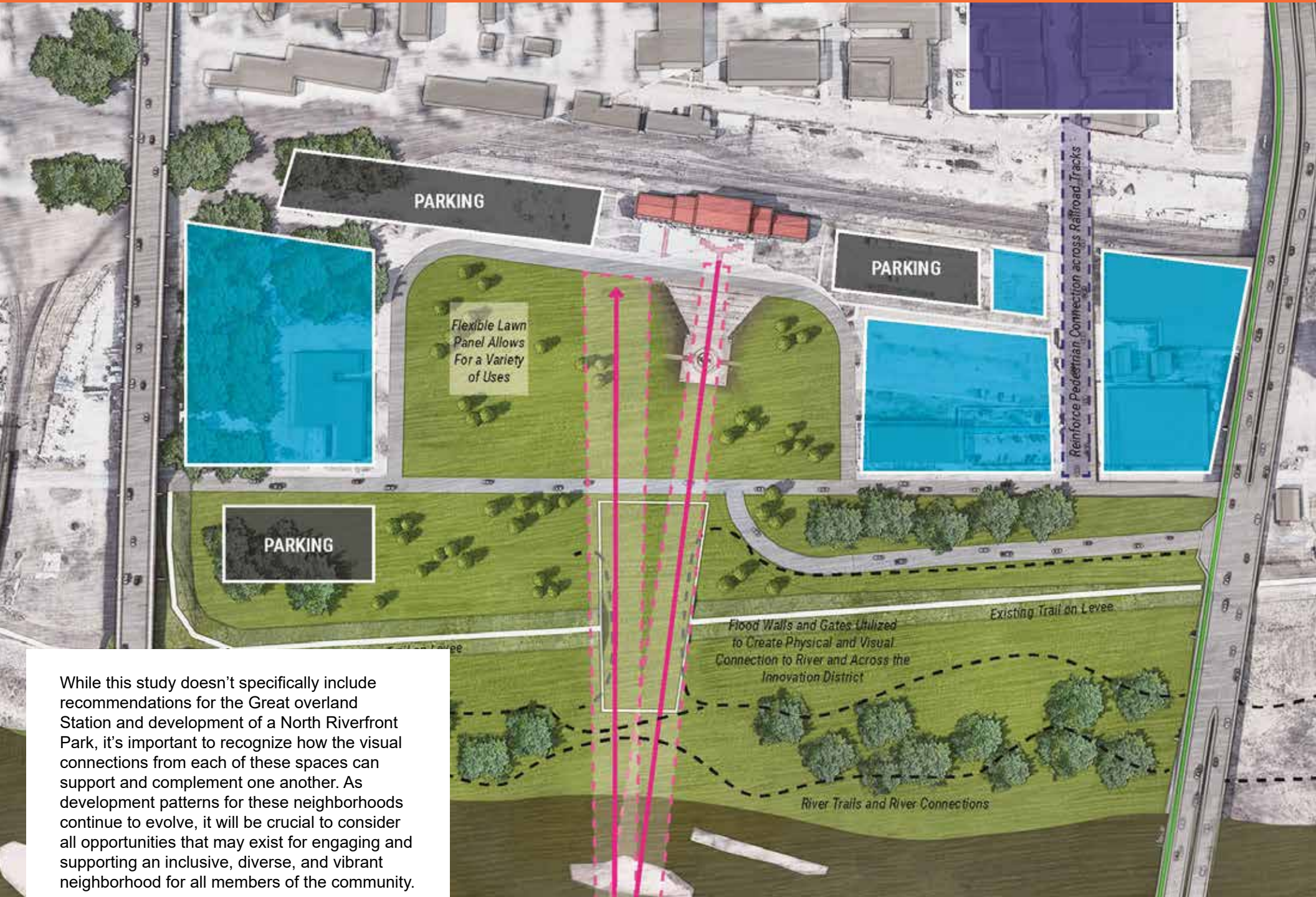
These extensions can also link to critical viewsheds which could include artwork that honors the cultural and historical legacy of this site. An example of this can be seen in the Keeper of the Plains sculpture in Wichita. Throughout all open spaces within River South, artwork will be an important element and could be incorporated in the following ways:

- Building Murals
- Sculpture
- Lighting Displays
- Building Materials
- Landscaping

Public art will help tell the story of this neighborhood and convey the importance of River South and how it impacted so many previous generations of Topekan.



Redevelopment Opportunities



While this study doesn't specifically include recommendations for the Great overland Station and development of a North Riverfront Park, it's important to recognize how the visual connections from each of these spaces can support and complement one another. As development patterns for these neighborhoods continue to evolve, it will be crucial to consider all opportunities that may exist for engaging and supporting an inclusive, diverse, and vibrant neighborhood for all members of the community.



Great Overland Station. Image courtesy of Stantec

Transportation & Mobility



Existing Vehicular Circulation: Semi-Truck Routes

Some stakeholders mentioned that semi-truck traffic is necessary to building access and operations for existing businesses throughout River South. As KDOT has considered future impacts of the Polk-Quincy realignment, W. 1st Street has been maintained as the primary loading and unloading zone for commercial truck activity. With these considerations in mind, streetscaping and landscaping should be added to this corridor to elevate pedestrian comfort and aesthetics as revitalization occurs.

Polk-Quincy Realignment

KDOT is in the process of realigning the Polk-Quincy viaduct to improve traffic flow and replace aging infrastructure. The realignment of this primary corridor will require vacation of some existing buildings within the study area but also provides an opportunity to reconsider how open spaces as treated around and beneath this structure (as described in previous sections of this report). The grade separation between the new realignment will be maintained, but new land is opened up for potential other uses. KDOT has been holding public meetings to solicit input on the new design and the timing of the improvements could be completed in the next 5-10 years. The end condition will likely help traffic flow better to River South but could be disruptive to residents and businesses during the construction period.

Collector Streets: Polk-Quincy Frontage Roads

The B streets in the study area are the two, one-way, frontage roads that have been proposed by KDOT as part of the new Polk-Quincy

realignment project. With a slightly higher volume of use, one-way configuration, and anticipated higher design speed, these streets will need to be designed to better support pedestrian safety and comfort so that they don't impede connectivity between River South and the Downtown core.

Street Improvements: Typologies

A hierarchy of streets will be helpful to the successful redevelopment of River South. It allows for clear wayfinding, directs investment, and is informed by surrounding land use, to best serve that use. The following descriptions and diagrams depict the proposed street typologies for the priority street improvements/investments in the study area.

Arterial Streets: Kansas Avenue and NW Topeka Boulevard

The Primary Arterial Street in the River South Neighborhood is Kansas Avenue. This street should receive the most investment for both roadway and streetscape improvements (see Public Realm chapter for description of Signature Streets). These streets have the highest potential to be the retail and activity core of the area.



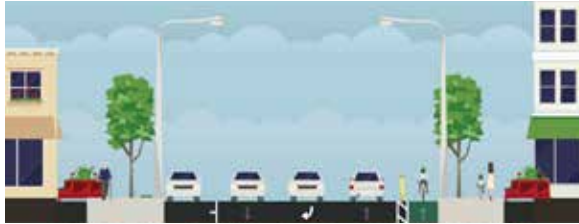
Arterial street design section (two-way, center-turn lane, parking lane, bike lane, landscaped sidewalks)

Collector Streets: NW Van Buren Street

The Van Buren corridor provides a unique opportunity to further connect River South—both visually and physically—to Downtown Topeka

Transportation & Mobility

and the state Capitol building. With lower volumes of traffic than arterial streets, further improvements to this corridor should include streetscaping, bicycle lanes and pedestrian improvements.



Collector street design section (two-way, center turn-lane, parking lane, bike lane, landscaped sidewalks)

Local Streets: 1st Street and Crane Street

These streets have the lowest speeds with the lowest volume of traffic and have the potential to provide a safe, enjoyable experience for both pedestrians and bicyclists alike. With a generous ROW, there is ample room to consider additional streetscaping and landscaping amenities to complement the character of existing buildings and proposed activation of open spaces.



Local street design section Two-lane road with parking lane, bike lane, sidewalks

Street Improvements: Kansas Avenue and Van Buren

As the “main streets” of River South, some

investments could turn Kansas Avenue and Van Buren into safe, enjoyable, and convenient connections to Downtown Topeka. By making improvements for the vehicle, the cyclist and the pedestrian, Kansas Avenue could continue the activity spine of the Downtown corridor into River South (and NOTO) and Van Buren could become the thriving commercial and activity route from the neighborhood, south to the State Capitol.

Bicycle Network

It is recommended that the bicycle network grow quite a bit in River South, in an effort to provide residents with safe mobility alternatives. In addition to the existing Kansas River Levee trail, it is recommended that on-street facilities are implemented in other areas of River South to better connect the neighborhood north to NOTO and south to the Downtown Core.

By creating a protected bike lane along Kansas Avenue, across the Kansas Bridge per recommendations within the 2019 Topeka Bikeways plan, River South will have greater connectivity to surrounding neighborhoods. Furthermore, on-street separated bike lanes along Van Buren will enhance bicycle connectivity in a similar way—through improving



Kansas Avenue Bridge looking Southbound Option B from Topeka Fast-Track Bike Plan. Image courtesy of Toole Design Group.

connectivity to the State Capitol complex to the south.

Since the Kansas River Levee trail does not currently extend further east beyond Kansas Avenue, it is recommended that the wide ROW, which previously supported a rail line along 1st Street, be reconfigured to facilitate a protected linear trail for bicyclists and pedestrians to further connect River South to the surrounding downtown subdistricts and Oakland neighborhood.

Parking

Currently, there is some on-street parking in the study area and a good amount of off-street surface parking. However, much of the on-street parking is not striped, and many of the surface parking lots are privately owned. Many stakeholders have indicated that, to support more development of residential units within the study area, that greater access to parking will need to be provided.

By providing striped, on-street parking in strategic areas, certain uses can be encouraged. Specifically, Van Buren is intended to serve as the retail and commercial core of River South, so providing on-street parking will support active ground floor uses, not just retail. As additional mixed-use commercial types are developed along the riverfront, it is recommended that contained parking (either subgrade or on the lower floors of the new structures) be included as an alternative to



On-street parking, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure could be added to 1st Street (east of Kansas Avenue) as these renderings depict.



Angled parking may be added to occupy space previously reserved for street trolleys. Parking could be designed in a way to allow for a large landscaped median that could accommodate a wide bike/ped trail to link neighborhoods east of River South

surface parking lots. This approach will preserve open space for public use and will reinforce the desired character of the neighborhood.

The other strategy to consider is a reduction in parking requirements. As mobility trends continue to evolve into more inclusive and flexible transit solutions, it is anticipated that more residents within the Downtown core will require less dependence on individual vehicles. As private car ownership declines over time and more people shift to transit, ride-share and shared autonomous vehicle options, the need for urban parking facilities are expected to decline.

Transportation & Mobility

Planning for Smart Mobility

The new mobility technologies and solutions that have emerged in the market of the last ten years have come in four categories: Accessible, Autonomous, Connected, Electric and Shared (ACES). While some solutions fall in all categories, each has potential benefits to consider when evaluating its overall mobility system.

These vehicles are accessible to everyone, operate independently without a driver, are connected to other vehicles and surrounding infrastructure, run on an electric charge, and are

(below) Smart mobility assists users by enhancing communication with pedestrian safety as the top priority. Image courtesy of Stantec.

a shared uses asset for mobility services.

These systems tend to serve the “last half-mile” or “last-mile” of a user’s trip. They operate best on low-speed roads and can connect destinations within a downtown core, campus, or neighborhood. Each shuttle can seat 8-16 people and frequency can be controlled dependent on the demand of the area. Topeka could be positioned to launch an autonomous shuttle program, in order to better serve this area, but also to be on the forefront of the smart mobility economy.

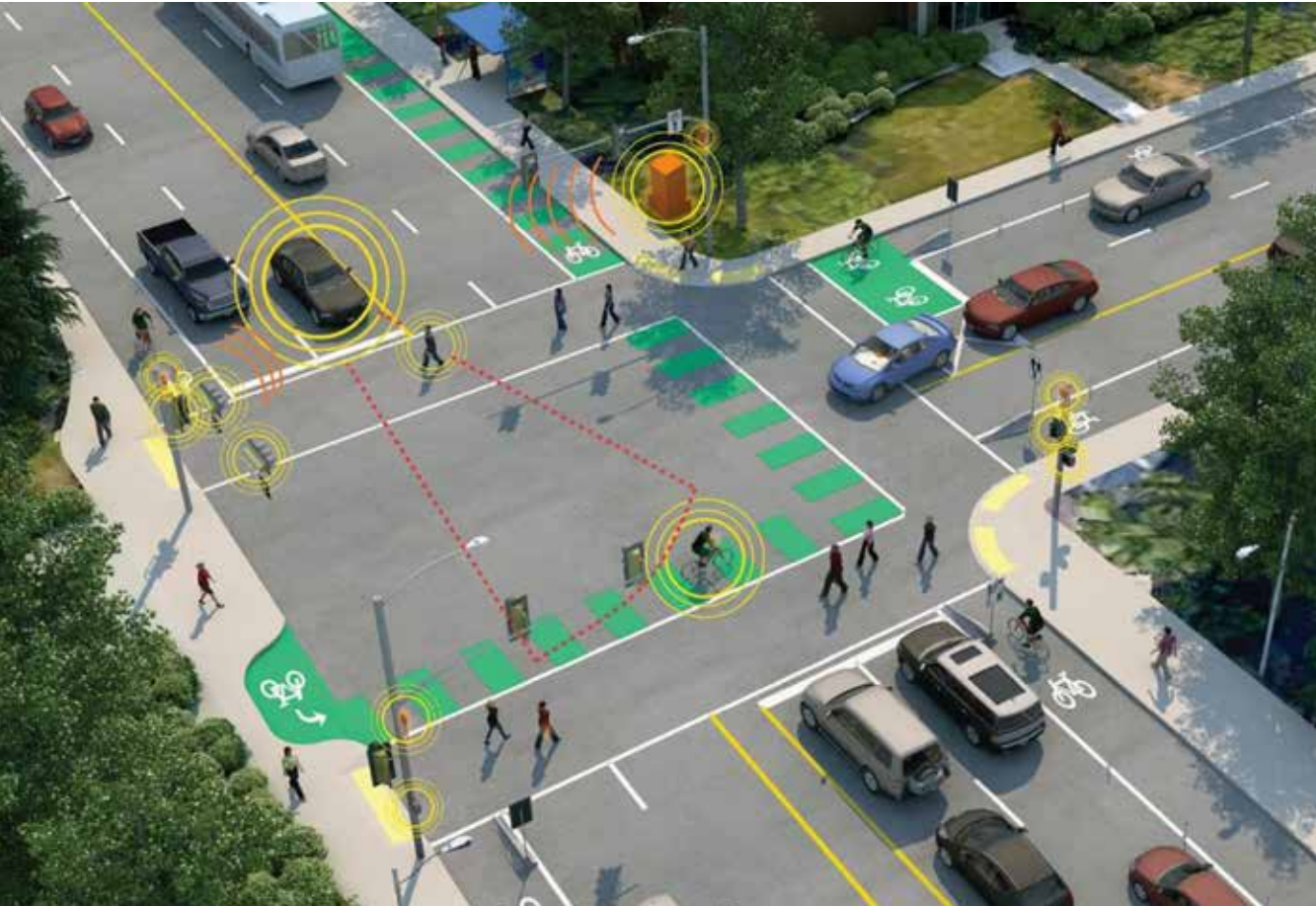
Digital Infrastructure

The arrival of autonomous vehicles over the next two decades will have the same impact as the arrival of universal car ownership following World War II. While many observers predict that autonomous mobility will reignite suburban sprawl, the real disruption will come from shared autonomous vehicles (SAVs). Rod Schebesch, head of Stantec’s SAV research program, calls these 6-13 passenger electric vehicles “the ultimate mobile device for urban connectivity” and predict that they will be omnipresent on streets within a decade. Morgan Stanley predicts that SAVs will dominate growth in global auto manufacturing as early as the mid 2020’s. Of course, the network of SAVs will require cities to invest in a certain amount of digital infrastructure in the form of cameras, sensors, and other devices to ensure the safety and reliability of these systems.

Parking Demand Reduction

SAVs will generate significant dividends for urban centers in cities and suburbs: enriching lifestyles by making every loft, job, gallery and craft brewery literally an app-click away; reducing development costs by sharply cutting parking demand; and freeing up space for parks, plazas and wider sidewalks that can be used for outdoor cafes and other spaces by reducing street width and closing surface parking lots.

SAVs will not disrupt equally, however. They will spread rapidly in urban settings with a critical mass of people and destinations. “Urban” will increasingly signify places where mobility is shared, not owned. In lower-density and rural environments, private AVs will dominate but will phase in more slowly, since they are more expensive to own and operate.



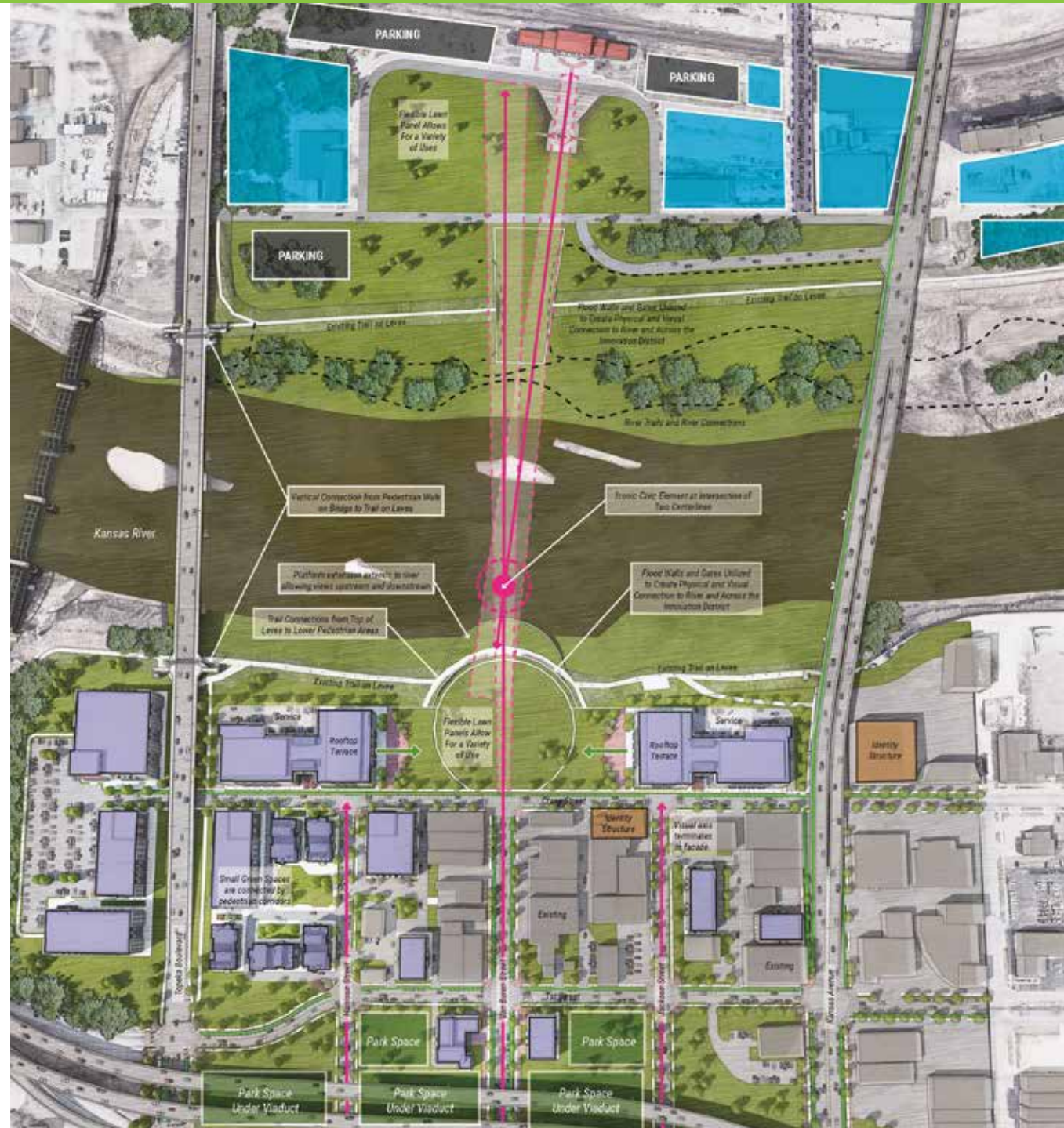
Public Realm

Existing Open Space

Currently, there is limited park and public open space in the study area and no easy access to the riverfront. Additionally, the area is closed-off from the rest of Downtown Topeka by the existing I-70 corridor. In order to create a more connected and pleasant experience in River South, it is recommended to develop a variety of open spaces to serve the community. The public realm is not limited to just parks, it encompasses streetscapes and bike paths as well. Providing a pleasant walking experience creates a desirable environment and encourages visitors to stay longer and experience more of the neighborhood.

Proposed Open Space

In addition to creating an enhanced streetscape and trail network, the River South plans contains two key open spaces to enhance the public realm network. The first is a signature riverfront park oriented for both passive recreation as well as support of neighborhood gatherings such as festivals and events. The second is an urban open space, uniquely situated beneath the Polk-Quincy viaduct, which can facilitate amenities such as skate parks or paved bike trails and activities such as farmers markets. These elements are destinations within the area, and/or they are a means to encourage pedestrian travel and exploration between River South and the surrounding Downtown environment. Some of these elements require more investment than others, but they can all be utilized for programming and events.



Riverfront Access

The Kansas River is one of the most unique assets of the River South neighborhood and the greater Topeka area. Riverfronts serve as connectors and gathering spaces. Activating the riverfront would provide River South and Downtown Topeka with a great social gathering space in the form of waterfront restaurants and bars, included within mixed-use developments containing offices and residences. Providing safe access to the river opens the door for water recreation and retail activation, as well as potentially creating a space for events.

Since the existing levee provides a significant visual barrier between the south bank of the Kansas River and adjacent catalyst sites, creative design solutions should be considered and implemented. These might include a switchback trail, cantilevered overlook, or ferry to connect the amenities on the south bank of the river to those at the Great Overland Station, located on the north bank.

Riverfront: Food & Beverage

A large number of stakeholders mentioned that more restaurants and bars in this area would be welcomed. A riverfront restaurant (developed within a mixed-use building adjacent to the Kansas River) would provide a unique experience and access to both the activity of the adjacent park as well as views of the river.

Ideally, the riverfront trail would connect to a restaurant/bar that is located within a building that provides overlooks out over the river and into the Great Overland Station, NOTO and beyond. The activity from restaurants, cafes, coffee shops and breweries would help to make this area a destination in River South and also for the greater Downtown community.



Bar K Dog Bar (Kansas City, MO)



Boxyard (Tuscon, AZ)



As the diagram (above) illustrates, key view-sheds could be reinforced by the mixed-use buildings that are developed on the south bank of the river. These spaces could have outdoor dining areas that are elevated above the levee, to take advantage of the river views that are unique to the site.

Riverfront: Levee Trail

Part of the riverfront access strategy is also to support the continued use of the existing Kansas River Levee trail that extends across the south bank of the river and provides access to the west of the study area. This important pedestrian corridor provides residents and visitors a mobility option that encourages greater exploration of the River South neighborhood.

Bike and pedestrian networks in a city the size of Topeka have a large impact to increase exercise opportunities as well as provide alternative mobility options. Topeka and River South are compact enough that people could walk or bike to most of their destinations if the network is clearly articulated and safe to use.

Riverfront: Signature Park

With the amount of new mixed-use and infill redevelopment identified in this plan, plus the existing activity that is underway in NOTO and the Downtown core, providing social gathering places is essential to the vibrancy of the neighborhood. A signature riverfront park should be central, public and allow for a range of uses. This green or plaza should have both large gathering areas to promote community activities as well as some small and intimate areas that should be focused on human interaction.

The signature park should be extremely flexible to allow for different types of programming to take place there. It should have an open space that is sized to accommodate events like fairs, festivals, small concerts, workout classes, outdoor movies, children's activities, food trucks and more.



Cornell Tech University (New York, NY)



Surly Brewing Co. (Minneapolis, MN)



As this diagram illustrates, improvements to open space and outdoor gathering areas can not only encompass the space between buildings, but also the south bank of the Kansas River.

Polk-Quincy Viaduct Park

Today, the I-70 viaduct serves as a visual barrier between River South and Downtown Topeka, which is noisy, obtrusive, and uncomfortable for pedestrians to walk. In many ways, its presence separates the potential of River South with the activities and momentum that is underway within the Downtown core. With the new reconstruction of the Polk-Quincy viaduct, and the significant impact this project will have on the study area, it is proposed that the City work collaboratively with KDOT to develop the space beneath the new viaduct into an outdoor community amenity that can serve as a connector, rather than a barrier, to downtown activity.

As a part of the proposed open space network, it is recommended to provide diverse spaces with varying uses. A viaduct park could provide passive recreational space to serve residents in the neighborhood, as well as the broader downtown community.

The proposed site for the viaduct park could include both passive recreational uses (such as an open area for people to throw frisbee or football) as well as some area for active uses such as an urban skate park or paved trail. Either one of these options could fit perfectly within this context and similar amenities have been developed in partnership between transportation authorities and cities in communities such as Toronto, Boston, Vancouver, and Kansas City.

The Polk-Quincy Viaduct will require additional investment to improve its aesthetic as a community park (see the mobility chapter for recommendations regarding frontage roads). These investments could be in the form of several of the ideas listed (at right) including but not limited to: lighting, color, materials, bike

parking, wayfinding and public art. Ideally, public art installations will reflect the history, character, residents and businesses of River South.

Programming: Farmer's Market

Farmer's markets are a great way to engage the community. They benefit the farmer by giving them a space to sell their goods, and it benefits the consumer by offering them locally sourced products. Although they often only occur in the warmer months, these markets provide visitors an opportunity to socialize, spend time outdoors and support their local economy.



Underpass Restaurant (Mexico City, MX)



Underground at Inkblock (Boston, MA)



Underground at Inkblock (Boston, MA)



Underpass Park (Toronto, Canada)



I-5 Colonnade (Seattle, WA)

Farmer's markets also create a sense of place; it gives people a way to spend a Saturday, and places them in a location where they are more likely to spend time after the market. This boosts visits to retailers adjacent to the market itself, and increases visits to other destinations in the area (such as museums, parks, etc.)

Food Trucks

One of many mobile retail options, food trucks are a great way to provide dining options for limited hours of a day. Before placing a permanent restaurant in a space, a food truck is an option that allows a "test" of the demand in that area. It also provides workers or residents another dining option.

Additionally, food truck rallies are a mini food festival, and are an event that brings the community together. In addition to food trucks, coffee bikes, popsicle carts, and others, mobile retailers engage pedestrians and give a neighborhood character.

Programming: Music

Whether an organized music event or a single saxophone player on the street, music is a beneficial part of the community. It is a source of enjoyment for onlookers while also providing an outlet for artists in town.

There are many different kinds of events that incorporate music. Ticketed events can bring revenue to the city or town, but free events entice people to attend an event they normally would not. Whatever kind of event, providing opportunities and encouraging music to take place in River South will create a sense of community.



Food truck



Food truck festival



Farmers market



Farmers market on the street

Programming: Art Walk/Pop-Up Retail

In addition to music events, other arts and cultural events are beneficial to both attendees and those performing or providing goods. Some events, like an Art Walk, give local artists a chance to sell their items to the community and create awareness about their messages. It serves the local economy, including small businesses and entrepreneurs, and allows them to thrive.

Other pop-up events, free or not, such as yoga or other fitness classes, are a great way to bring people together into an outdoor space. Some pop-up retail events not related to art are also beneficial. A local artisan fair or restaurant tasting fair introduce citizens to businesses that they may not have previously been aware of.



Medium size venue



Small size venue

Public Art: Temporary Installations

One of the most effective ways to create a sense of place is the use of public art. Not all art installations have to be expensive; they don't even have to be permanent. In fact, art that changes in a neighborhood not only engages visitors, but it keeps residents interested in the artistic landscape of their community.

Temporary art installations can be done in conjunction with the City or with other events. For example, during events like farmer's markets, artists can be given spaces on the sidewalks or street to create chalk art. This creates a temporary art gallery with a built-in audience.

Public Art: Permanent Installations

Permanent installations require a bit more planning from the City and more of an ongoing partnership with the artists. The City should



Outdoor market in human-scaled environment



Night market on an iconic street

Public Realm

review and approve of the art proposed and be curated over time by professionals who will oversee the proper maintenance of the installations.

Lighting art, murals and structural or sculptural art create destinations within the community. In the age of Instagram, public art takes on an even more influential role; people are constantly sharing their experiences. Creating opportunities for an “Instagram Moment” brings visitors and residents to the area and sparks interest from people who may not have known about the space otherwise.

Public Art: Gateways

A key part of experiencing a neighborhood is knowing you have arrived. Gateways are an opportunity for art, branding, and impact. As the “front door” to the community, these gateways set the tone for what the visitor will experience in the area.

This “you have arrived” strategy is a great opportunity for artist expression of the character of the community and serves as clear wayfinding for visitors. Making it clear that they are in the East End means they spend less time getting oriented and more time enjoying the area.

Gateway elements, sculptures and other public art options are a great way to tell the story of River South and continue a similar aesthetic to what has previously been initiated through improvements to Kansas avenue. By engaging the history of the place, and utilizing people and materials found in the area, public art will help to reinforce the image and character of the place. Much of this can be organized by local residents and artists to ensure that the messages of the installations are genuine, authentic and represent the rich cultural history of River South.



Gateways and large sculpture help create a sense of place at large scales

Murals, public art, and sculptures create sense of place



The Polk-Quincy viaduct is the primary gateway into River South. Proposed improvements should include public art to reflect the authenticity of the neighborhood. Image courtesy of Stantec

Image & Character



View along Van Buren through River South toward the State Capitol, representing typical character of the area (photo: Stantec)

Image & Character

Maintaining and Promoting Character in the Area

River South has a rich tradition and heritage—some businesses have been there for decades and help to reinforce the image and character of the neighborhood includes businesses such as Lardner Stone. Many of these businesses will remain in place and ideally will thrive as profitable ventures in the future. Others are located within prominent corridors such as Van Buren and Crane, where the plan calls for higher-density, mixed-use development to provide a more urban atmosphere to the area. This means that some businesses will remain but may eventually operate from new facilities that better fit with the vision of the area.

Additionally, there are historic elements and buildings in River South that represent the past and present of the area. Some of these buildings include unique elements such as historic building materials, smokestacks, brick, and stone which should be maintained as local landmarks. Additionally, new construction should respond to the character of these elements, using appropriate building heights, materials, and location in relationship to the street. Predominant building materials in the area include red brick, limestone, clapboard siding, and standing metal seam roofs.



(photos this page) views that illustrate unique character in the area

Implementation

Implementation

The process

While a detailed implementation strategy or matrix of phased improvements was not part of this study, a broad overview of the next steps has been provided in order to underscore the importance of the public and private sector both investing to see the vision become reality over time.

The success of implementing the vision is highly dependent on the public and private sector working together. This includes public realm infrastructure improvements as well as private sector investment. The consideration of River South as an innovation district, available as a potential shovel-ready site for Go Topeka to actively market, will help to accelerate the pace of proposed development. These initiatives would serve the over-arching purpose of improving the community, creating a sense of place, and driving development and economic growth in River South.

Emphasizing Kansas Avenue as the primary connection into Downtown Topeka, establishing Van Buren as a key transportation corridor to the Capitol, transforming the Polk-Quincy Viaduct from a barrier into an important open space amenity, improving the bike and pedestrian network, and activating the river are a few of the tactical changes that will be the foundation of this plan's success. These changes will excite current residents and bring new interest and investment into the neighborhood.

To effectively implement the vision, it will be critical that dedicated partnerships between the public and private sector are formed to have the most impact on the area. Those partnerships could be formed between many different entities including the State, County, City, corporations, major institutions, private investors, property owners, community leaders, and others.



The Shipyards (Green Bay, WI)



Wake Forest Innovation Quarter

(below) Innovation District (credit: Boston Magazine)



Implementation

Public Responsibility

Improvements to the public realm are generally those that take place outside private property and are within the public right-of-way. This includes upgrades to street infrastructure and streetscape improvements, improvements to existing open space on public land, creation of new public open space by acquiring land, creating parking facilities and other similar measures. This also will require that the City work with existing property owners and agencies to discuss means of working with them to implement the vision. This may mean selling or leasing property to other parties or moving current facilities to other locations in town.

In addition, the City should be responsible for ensuring that approved developments align with the vision and that the intent of the plan is being carried throughout new projects and initiatives in River South. This includes land use, density, location of buildings and parking, materials, and other considerations.

Additionally, some fundraising or allocation in conjunction with these initiatives should be spearheaded by public entities in River South, the City of Topeka and other entities that can help to secure grants and other monies that will be key to public sector improvements.

Private Responsibility

Much of the vision will also be the responsibility of the private sector. This includes current property owners working with each other for the greater good of the district. For example, as more developers work to revitalize existing structures into housing and commercial office space, a shared parking strategy will require willing sellers to the City in order for those facilities to be implemented.

New development, including retailers, residential, mixed-use, office, maker space, light industrial and other uses would all be the responsibility of private investors. Clearly, none of this will happen until these parties believe that there is a return on their investment and that the district has a market for the products they are looking to implement. While the Kansas Riverfront will help attract interest, there should be strategies in place to implement the vision incrementally.

New development will have to be approved and permitted by the City, but the creative approach to leveraging the land in River South must also be seen as a worthwhile investment by private parties. With a location this close to Downtown and major transportation networks, it seems that it is only a matter of time before this area sees positive reinvestment and redevelopment. As the City population grows and more people want to live and work in urban environments, this will help to create the market and initiate momentum in River South.

Recommendations

1. Relocate existing City of Topeka facilities from the Kansas Riverfront, mitigate brownfield impacts, and make land available for shovel-ready development.
2. Establish zoning and policy regulations relative to land use, heights, densities, setbacks, materials, etc. for River South, particularly for key redevelopment sites.
3. Work with KDOT to establish an open space, comfortable community amenity, beneath the Polk-Quincy viaduct to support greater connectivity between River South and Downtown Topeka.
4. Provide land for the relocation of Topeka Transit and assist in identifying a strategy that will leverage available funding for a new facility and open up reinvestment potential along the Riverfront.
5. Engage the efforts of local community organizations, such as the Riverfront Authority, to strengthen relationships between the north and south sides of the Kansas River, and establish greater connectivity (across the Kansas Avenue bridge) and designate key destinations at 5-minute walk intervals.
6. Explore funding sources that can help to implement public sector infrastructure enhancements and facilitate private investment deals.
7. Actively work with the private development community in Topeka, and beyond, to educate them as to the opportunities in River South.
8. Prioritize selection of private investors who share the vision of the master plan and avoid “selling out” for conventional or suburban style development
9. Assist local businesses by streamlining the process to make property improvements, helping them to stay code compliant and avoid deferred maintenance.
10. Engage local property owners to properly maintain their land and buildings, and where appropriate, encourage them to redevelop or sell properties.
11. Engage local residents to determine appropriate programming for festivals and events to help galvanize the social interaction and sense of community.