

FOCUS GROUP SERIES #1

INTRODUCTION

To gather topic-specific feedback, four focus group meetings were held in summer of 2021. The focus topics included Assets and Amenities, Economic Development, Housing, and Infrastructure. These focus groups were facilitated by staff from the City of Grand Forks and the Metropolitan Planning Organization as well as staff from SRF Consulting Group.

ASSETS AND AMENITIES GROUP

General Takeaways:

1. City and community has been a positive driver of growth with leadership of economic development, shepherding of the industrial park, and coordinating new multi-use developments. Very positive view of recent redevelopment work downtown and on UND campus.
2. Need to place more focus on older, more established neighborhoods and continue or increase general focus on redevelopment in general. Adding a “missing middle” of housing could be an opportunity in existing neighborhoods, including the potential for accessory dwelling units. There is currently no regulatory path forward for ADUs at this time. Some perception that older neighborhoods may be trailing with upgrades such as street and sidewalk repairs. “Core neighborhoods” should be viewed as a community asset.
3. There has been lack of action regarding a new south-end river crossing. It is a hot issue that is currently pitting neighborhood vs neighborhood, particularly the 32nd Ave S area vs the near southside area currently bearing the brunt of river crossing traffic.
4. Strong support for “new urbanism,” “complete streets,” and “smart growth” concepts, and view transit, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure as critical. Generally negative view of “sprawl” development.
5. City Planning staff are a strength. Too often planning decisions are short-circuited at the 11th hour or well-researched decisions are reversed in favor of the loudest “NIMBY” concerns instead of what might be best for the city as a whole. More neighborhood-level public discussions by elected officials is welcome. It’s critically important to broaden public input process to include as many varying viewpoints as possible.
6. The community generally lacks discrete neighborhood identities.
7. Curiosity about what can be done to promote more volunteerism throughout the community. Agreement among the group that more people should be involved in the various local non-profit and government-related organizations that will encourage more grassroots-driven activity.

Key Takeaways Related to Assets and Amenities:

- Community is doing a good job overall with assets and amenities. Physical assets are a strength and Park District does a good job of programming
- The community could benefit from more “destination parks”. Most are “neighborhood parks”
- Greenway is a critical asset, with the aim to focus most on “natural” amenities and trail systems vs specific facilities. These more developed facilities may fit better in “destination parks” in the urban area. Note that the Greenway is managed by City government and parks are managed by the Park District—they are two separate entities. Yet the community should “treat the Greenway like the Alerus,” viewing it as a key potential draw to the community. East Grand Forks has no greenway management staff, creating a barrier for collaboration and contributing to the public perception of two separate greenways on each side of the river.

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- Perception that the city has been slow to accept regulatory reform for public art. Mural ordinance took years and crosswalk murals denied.
- Some opinion that the community could benefit from more coordination and capacity building for events, whether that be publicly- or privately-led. There is recognition of current City funding programs for events and arts organizations.
- Strong support for continuation of development of new assets and amenities, particularly identifying and supporting local operators and champions that might be new to the space or overlooked before. These include amenities for children and families and indoor opportunities in the winter.
- Need to think regionally when it comes to amenities. The region around Grand Forks has unique amenities that should be promoted as part of the region. For example, Turtle River State Park could be an opportunity to connect Grand Forks, the Air Base, and the State Park with a trail.

Specific Points of Interest:

1. Columbia Mall area of town is viewed as a problem.
2. General support for collaboration with East Grand Forks on development and the Greenway
3. While the new public space to be created as part of The Beacon development is viewed as an opportunity, what does this mean for the future of the current Town Square? The current Town Square is not a welcoming space.
4. Support for the rising economic development strategic focus on high-tech sectors, viewed with promise.
5. Support for flexible zoning changes along University Ave corridor and on mixed-use campus
6. Do not be afraid of “big ideas” such as redevelopment of train yard parallel to Demers Ave, redevelopment of ND State Mill rail spur through town, or bus rapid transit routing concepts linking key destinations.
7. Focus on families is supported, but do not overlook mid-market housing for singles or those without children.
8. Strong interest in water treatment plant site redevelopment.
9. City and development community still planning for auto-dominated transportation systems and development (especially on the south end) that is auto-oriented.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP

General Takeaways:

1. Support for integrated vision in the plan that has some level of community support, and is not just a document used by City and MPO staff. Participants mentioned examples in other communities where visionary plans catalyzed redevelopment of new districts. Call for public clarity about a big-picture vision for development and a definition of Grand Forks identity.
2. Industrial park, downtown, and south end developments have been successes.
3. Call for form-based code, mixed-use development, and support for flexible zoning policy changes to enable development, especially unique redevelopment and infill opportunities that do not fit the traditional mold of existing zoning. This is true for development that the community is currently missing out on, such as neighborhood commercial, missing middle housing.
4. Support for new housing, particularly mid-market knowing that demographics are skewing younger. Housing at \$250k and below is a challenge, anything below \$200k is older housing stock that requires major renovation. Extreme home demand at \$250k price point. Missing intermediary townhomes or smaller houses. Still feeling the loss of mid-market homes in 1997 flooding, current margins prevent much new construction of lower-priced homes.
5. Be creative with land use, such as designing retention ponds to be useful assets and attractions rather than simply a big cost with one dimension of benefit.

Takeaways Related to Economy and Commercial Development

- Generally positive view of the economy as improving. Note that most participants hail from economic development intermediaries and growing businesses. Many open jobs, and a positive local trajectory. Manufacturing very strong and seeing labor force constraints and higher wages. Workforce challenges are the primary constraint.
- Internship programs are strong, students not having trouble finding part-time employment.
- Vacant large-scale retail spaces will likely need to be converted to other uses. Seeing demand for smaller-footprint office spaces as some renters implement hybrid models, yet most are still seeing a need for some degree of office space.
- May be a potential in the future for smaller, niche manufacturing. This could perhaps be a “lighter” industrial land use.
- Development-ready sites for manufacturing and other industrial use should remain a priority. Growing firms have low tolerance for extended process or navigating pending special assessment costs, making pre-installed infrastructure important. Spec 20,000 square foot industrial space would be filled in a hurry. There is consensus that Grand Forks will need more industrial land in the future. Grand Forks has lost economic development opportunities recently due to lack of land and lack of land with access to rail.
- As technology development becomes a stronger economic development priority, need to have infrastructure in place, including flexible, affordable office locations for young firms. Strong support for industry diversification efforts.
- TIF incentives have been a catalyst, both for real estate projects and some economic development incentives. More redevelopment in targeted areas, incentive programs should be structured to assist target areas of the community.
- There is an opportunity to increase dialogue between economic developers and commercial/industrial land developers. Targeted incentives – such as tax deferrals – could spur development of new land.
- The group believes Grand Forks does need new commercial development, perhaps somewhat surprisingly. This is partially driven by the recognition or perception that the community is light on commercial property, partially from a tax-base perspective. Commercial needs are more targeted and amenity- or niche-focused, such as targets for younger families, recognizing this is an emerging demographic along with university students. There is a desire to develop experiential amenities to attract people to the community.
- Career and technical education efforts are critical. New effort to create a career and workforce center is very important.
- Gap in neighborhood commercial, “not done in North Dakota, ever.”

Specific Points of Interest:

1. While numbers don't make sense for new low-priced single family, there may be a potential market for missing middle or mixed-use housing.
2. City or other community leadership should be vocal about establishing a community vision and identity
3. Support for collaborations and unity with East Grand Forks
4. Columbia Mall is viewed as a missing opportunity
5. The train yard parallel to Demers Ave may be a development opportunity, as well as the Mill spur.
6. Strong support for greenways and park design, very positive for real estate and general community.
7. Continue to be aggressive and don't wait for opportunity. Appreciate the “can-do” attitude and reduction of red tape with City and new mayor.
8. GFafb remains a key asset and partner. GFafb with a strong desire to partner and connect with community.

9. Success of the education system is important, it impacts economic development and tax base.

HOUSING GROUP

General Takeaways:

1. Community is generally pro-development and city staff is supportive and easy to work with. Planning staff willing to take a progressive approach to making things work. Breath of fresh air and streamlining with the City processes lately. City has been open to new ideas that make sense.
2. Support for form-based code. Mixed-use downtown vs other areas might look different. Form-based code might incentivize creative development. There could be demand for less intense mixed use.
3. Support for flexibility and innovative neighborhood design. Don't prescribe development too much. Strong support for creativity with lot sizes in neighborhood design.
4. General support for proactive vision and aggressive pursuit of opportunities by the community as a whole.

Takeaways Related to Housing:

1. Good jobs with single-family detached housing and multi-family rentals, particularly downtown.
2. City policy of deferring specials did work and is working.
3. Support for TIF incentives and belief that this practice spurs economic development and increases the tax base in the long run.
4. Sense of demand for senior housing, fitting with demographics. Quality options may prevent seniors from retiring outside the region and losing them. Some seniors wish to downsize, but if only options are \$400k or more, they will just retire to the lake regions.
5. Affordable housing is a huge need. Yet it is not profitable to build duplex and tri-plex rentals because it cannot be done to scale to generate rents needed to cash flow. May be a worthwhile endeavor to pursue affordable housing using city infrastructure support.
6. Has been considerable focus on south end and downtown, but we now need a concerted focus on the north end for planning, vision, and reinvestment. This could be a path to improving affordable housing. Vibrancy downtown could spill northward.
7. Too few landowners surrounding city constrains development.
8. Vacancy for larger-scale rental housing is cautiously-low. We used to fill buildings overnight or before they were completed. Situation has slowed some, but there is still a market. High-amenity buildings doing well.

Specific Points of Interest:

1. Main constraint in the community is bodies, need more people in town. Need to keep expanding market, construction and development competition is good for growth. Need to attract people to live here.
2. Another I-29 interchange could spur development on the south end.
3. Construction stalling due to current input costs.

INFRASTRUCTURE

General Takeaways:

1. Good foresight with plating and expanding infrastructure, led by private developers.
2. Desire to repurpose and reinvest in key areas of the city. Happy with progress in the city and proactive approach to address issues.

Takeaways Related to Infrastructure:

1. Some areas have challenges with pedestrian planning, some conflicts exist. Paths are sometimes interrupted as streets are extended. Could have better plowing of paths in winter (example of N side of

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Demers Ave). Safe routes to school is a good program and well done. Sidewalk system is generally good. Don't give up on sidewalks. Policy should require sidewalks be installed at time of street installation or reconstruction.

2. Great system of recreation trails, but commuter trails are more of a challenge. Would be positive to create multi-use trails connecting to regions outside the city. Interconnect regional destinations such as Thompson or Turtle River State Park. This could use old rail beds. As city builds more multi-use paths, maintenance could become a hurdle.
3. For bicycle commuters, 17th Ave S is risky. Major routes are a tough commute for bicycles, but quieter streets are fine. Some bicycle infrastructure is being added with new construction projects, but there is still a long way to go. Rough ride under South Washington underpass.
4. Very positive utilization of user groups in local decision-making processes.
5. Transit is important. There are issues where lack of snow clearance limits access to bus stations. Grand Cities Mall area is one example. It leads to people walking in the street.
6. Road maintenance has improved in recent years.
7. Key infrastructure future issues include:
 - a. South end Red River crossing (peds and bike should be accommodated if new bridge is built)
 - b. Additional I-29 interchange
 - c. Rail crossing at 42nd Street
8. General support for traffic calming measures. Depending on law enforcement should not be the primary solution.
9. Point bridge is inaccessible for anything except cars. Other bridges are good for ped/bicycle.
10. Underground utilities (water and sanitary sewer) need more press/awareness across the community.
11. Infrastructure installation cost is increasingly an obstacle for new development.

Specific Points of Interest:

1. Western entry to the city along US Highway 2 could use beautification improvements.
2. Some concern expressed about future integration of rural residential housing adjacent to but currently outside city limits.
3. Community lacks indoor public gathering space in winter time.
4. Some frustrations over Red River bridge planning processes. Participant was not in favor of 32nd Ave bridge due to worries about increased traffic in the area.
5. Need to convert empty large-scale commercial spaces.

FOCUS GROUP SERIES #2

INTRODUCTION

A second focus group was conducted in December of 2021. This session garnered feedback on the draft goals and objectives for the Land Use Plan. As before, focus topics included Assets and Amenities, Economic Development, Housing, and Infrastructure. A summary of feedback is given below.

ASSETS AND AMENITIES GROUP

Goals & Objectives - Transportation

1. For Goal 1, important to call out that the bikeshare program has had success. 8,500 rides through pilot this past year. Numbers are expected to grow. Bikes are being tracked with GPS.

Goals & Objectives – Economic Development

1. Objective 1B needs to be careful when considering excess parking and the context of that situation.
2. Goal 3 needs to consider financial aspect of quality of life. City Flex Pace program allows for quality of life initiatives that impact local residents.

Goals & Objectives – Development

1. Goal 1 needs to have an inclusive definition of “family-friendly” – state the qualities intended by the term. Is the environment safe for “prime time”, are all ages included?
2. Goal 2 needs to focus on smart development outside of Downtown including efficient land use and positive property tax results.
3. Objective 3B may be too strong or not realistic (conservation of prime farmland). Instead, focus on the areas expected to be conserved.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP

Goals & Objectives - Housing

1. General comment - City is interested in providing access to housing for future GFafb personnel (current discussions are happening, could be a good source of implementation items)
2. General comment - Air Force in general is trying to get away from running and operating housing. General Kelley very clear that Balford Beatty (housing contractor for the Base) has no plans to expand housing at the Base. Plan should recognize this – could be a good reason for strong allocation of residential land.

Goals & Objectives – Transportation

1. General discussion of connections to the air base – Car pooling and other transportation programs have not lasted in the past when tried. Until the base has a higher population, we may still struggle with supporting carpooling and ride sharing in general.
2. General comment - suggestion that younger people have stigma against bus transit.
3. Regarding Goal 2, how do we implement future technology? Consider new objective or implementation action(s).

Goals & Objectives – Economic Development

1. General comment - Do we need an objective covering greenfield development for local non-traded commercial?
2. For Goal 2, consider value-added agriculture under manufacturing.

3. For Goal 2, natural gas and water infrastructure is key. Some key areas to the west that we need to enable for industrial growth. But the rail line in that area is complicated by BNSF's high-volume traffic in that area of town.
4. General comment - Previous focus group included excellent sharing between economic developers and real estate pros, we should probably include a task in implementation recommending formalizing these discussions (quarterly or something).

Goals & Objectives – Development

1. For Objective 3A, can we create amenities out of the stormwater facilities? Such as larger ponds that could be a recreational amenity while still meeting federal guidelines. Make sure these proposals are favorably considered.
2. For Goal 4, it would be good to align the process with partners and all players involved right away (schools and parks along with City). Need to limit and/or resolve conflicting ideas among local government entities.

Land Use Map Discussion

1. Question about industrial development allowed within proximity to the airport. Airport is now building a new east west runway that may impact industrial development.
2. Can we call out specific opportunity bullet points under each activation zone area?
3. Call out warehouse district between university and downtown (section of University Avenue area a few blocks east of Washington street and some areas near Demers. There has been some previous discussion of the area just North of the Demers overpass bridge just west of what will become the Beacon redevelopment)
4. Is this town blue-collar or white-collar town? What is its identity?
5. Good discussion around the need for commercial and how the mixed-use areas are also commercial land. There is a glut of traditional commercial real estate nationally, nobody knows the true need for future commercial, so the plan is designed for flexibility. There seemed to be consensus on this.

HOUSING GROUP

Goals & Objectives – Housing

Housing Goal: Affordability should be included in addition to stable and accessible housing.

Related Input

1. Community land trust concept needs to be celebrated. For more information, contact Emily Contreras with the Housing Authority.
2. With respect to implementation, focus on tangible actions of change.

INFRASTRUCTURE GROUP

Goals & Objectives – Transportation

1. Include working from home in considering Objective 1A.
2. Define “compact development” in Objective 3A.
3. Need to recognize that bikes can use sidewalks and streets (Objective 3B).

Goals & Objectives – Land Use & Public Health

3. Goal 1 is missing consideration of transportation safety and prevention.
4. Objective 1A needs to consider access to greenway, sidewalks in residential areas, and gym access.
5. Objective 1C needs some context about decentralization of land use.

Goals & Objectives – Economic Development

1. For Objective 1A, recognize that Downtown has its own plan and that the land use plan needs to focus on other areas.
2. For Goal 3 and Objective 3B, use the word “entertainment” instead of “amusement.”

Goals & Objectives – Development

1. For Objective 1C, also need to consider infill and redevelopment compatibility with surrounding areas.
2. For Goal 2, provide an example of existing mixed-use development outside of Downtown.
3. For Goal 3, explain the three aspects of sustainability in laypersons terms.
4. For Objective 4C, identify what will be done to make the plan more well-known publicly.

Related Input

1. The MPO's bike/pedestrian element needs more robust input to understand modal split and needs.