Envisioning Regional Design is an ongoing initiative to address growth challenges in the Flatwater Metroplex of southeast Nebraska and southwest Iowa. A September 2006 charrette brought together 150 architects, planners and regional stakeholders to identify growth challenges and opportunities and to envision a sustainable future for the rapidly growing Metroplex region.

The Five Domains of Sustainability—Environmental, Socio-cultural, Technological, Economic and Public Policy—provided a framework for charrette discussions and for interpretation of the results.

Charrette teams examined six environments in the Metroplex:

- **I-80 Corridor Environ**: Examination of growth challenges and opportunities at various sites along the Interstate 80 Corridor between Lincoln and Omaha/Council Bluffs.

- **Communities in the Path of Growth**: The impacts/opportunities of growth in the small commuter town of Ashland.

- **Suburban Conservation Community**: Proposal for a conservation community near Bennington (exurban Omaha).

- **Transformation of Regional Shopping Mall**: Outdated suburban retail area in the mid-sized Metroplex community of Fremont.

- **Near Urban Core Neighborhood**: Building on the revitalization of the Drake Court district near downtown Omaha based on recent studies and improvements in this historic neighborhood.

- **Urban Core Center**: An examination of opportunities for revitalization in downtown Lincoln associated with the Downtown Master Plan, Antelope Valley, and other work and studies.

These distinct environments are models for the many types of rural and urban communities. Challenges and solutions identified in this report are readily transferable to any community facing growth and change.
Several themes emerged from the charrettes that could be applied to a range of urban and rural conditions along the I-80 Corridor and throughout the Metroplex:

- **Lack of a Shared Vision:** There is no shared vision of preferred regional growth patterns, land use policies, or economic goals. Lack of coordination, and competitive tensions lead to inefficiencies and hamper efforts to improve quality of life. Lack of communication and public input leads to mistrust.

- **Outmoded, Conflicting Policies:** Municipal, county and state governments have different, conflicting approaches to planning. Policies and jurisdictions designed to address 19th century conditions are not suited to the global and environmental challenges of the 21st century.

- **Infrastructure:** Critical infrastructure lags behind growth pressures due to lack of coordinated planning and transportation alternatives. With commuter traffic expected to increase eightfold in forty years, alternatives are needed to current transportation networks and funding methods.

- **Ecological Threats:** Economic growth will not occur, and quality of life will diminish, without a consensus of the region’s most fragile natural, social and historic environments and strategies/mechanisms to protect these environments.

- **Land Conversion:** Rural/urban interests are in conflict as farmland and fragile natural environments are lost to sprawl and acreage-style development. There is a critical need to foster understanding of the interdependencies of all communities and natural systems through the creation of food-based coalitions.

- **Energy and Natural Resources:** Valuable natural resources (water, wind, soils, 4-season solar climate) are underutilized or misallocated. Incentives are needed to increase the use of clean, alternative energy and to make energy efficiency a priority through building code improvements and incentive programs.

- **Healthy Living:** Policies are needed to encourage healthy, walkable communities that offer transportation and housing choices in mixed-use developments, preserve urban centers, and promote vibrant public spaces and neighborhood identity.

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**COMMON THEMES**

Public policies and jurisdictional boundaries designed to address 19th century conditions are not suited to global and environmental challenges of the 21st century.

On the cover: rolling hills and open sky in the I-80 Corridor are the backdrop for charrette visions rendered by Robert Hanna.
Five Elements—Land, Water, Materials, Energy and Food—define areas most affected by growth management issues in the Flatwater Metroplex. These elements are common to both rural and urban interests and serve as a basis for discussion and, ultimately, the formation of urban/rural coalitions that are essential to building sustainable communities.

As noted in the themes on the previous page, our current way of doing things is neither cost-effective nor sustainable even for the near future, and continued inaction will lead to extreme consequences as huge demands are put upon natural resources and infrastructure. Flatwater Metroplex stakeholders must coalesce into a single economic, cultural, environmental and civic entity if they hope to maintain or improve the quality of life. They need to discover and adopt tools and means to address the source of problems rather than the symptoms. To achieve this goal, Metroplex stakeholders and their leaders need to consider policies and initiatives that are being enacted by other metro regions in the US:

1. **Adopt state policies** that clarify and prioritize land uses, protect the most arable and fertile rural lands for food production, and protect natural, historic and cultural resources. The state should coordinate reviews of water-related policies to ensure equitable access to clean water for human, agricultural, industrial and wildlife uses. Water is perhaps the most significant element; if the state and region does not get a handle on water policy, economic prospects will fall flat.

2. **Establish regional governance** through a voluntary set of regional partners. Transportation networks, watersheds, natural resources and cities extend beyond jurisdictional boundaries and are not effectively managed by outdated, piecemeal or conflicting approaches. Sustainable development is only achieved through connected, coherent regional policy.

3. **Initiate an effective planning process** through regular conferences, meetings and workshops that give every stakeholder an opportunity at the table. Establish a series of councils and investment zones representing diverse rural and urban interests, identify and publicize best practices, and establish a consensus of the region’s most fragile, natural, social and historic environments. Based on a series of indicators, planning should promote safe, walkable communities, food-based rural/urban coalitions, and energy conservation while protecting the most fragile natural, social and historic environments.
Interconnections and interdependencies represented by the Five Elements are examined through application of the Five Domains of Sustainability: Environmental, Socio-cultural, Technological, Economic & Public Policy.

Through years of testing best practices and model projects throughout the world, W. Cecil Steward of the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities (JCI) identified Five Domains of Sustainability (adding the Technological and Public Policy domains to the commonly used model that identified only three or fewer domains) and created an application tool (E/STEPSM) to apply the Five Domains principles to any design or planning challenge.

Additional research by Steward and JCI staff and partners suggests that the Five Domains paradigm provides valuable and exciting opportunities for a completely new framework for design and/or management at any scale – from a single house to an entire region or ecosystem.

For the city of the future, these domains will be necessary organizing principles for urban administration, urban design and planning, urban growth management, and regional and urban sustainable development.

The domains, and all the information contained within them, are interdependent, interactive, and affective, one in turn upon each of the other four. A systematic analysis of their interdependencies, in any developmental situation, will reduce the potential of unintended, unanticipated consequences at any scale.

**SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS**

Sustainability indicators are measurement tools that alert us to negative trends in systems and communities and help us recognize what needs to be done before these trends become larger problems.

Sustainability indicators differ from traditional indicators (which usually measure just one area as if it were entirely independent of others) in that they reflect interconnections of all five domains of any system or community. Sustainability indicators are effective in generating debate and discussion among leaders and stakeholders of different backgrounds and viewpoints and ultimately help communities craft a shared vision.

*Sustainable design is the promotion of human systems in balance with the natural environment.*
Measuring or projecting the improvement or decline of various quality of life factors over time is clarified using the E/STEP tool (pictured at left). Symbolizing the cyclical quality and interconnectivity of all living systems, E/STEP is an effective tool for plotting various indicators in the three term ranges—short-term (S), medium-term (M), and long-term (L)—each divided into ten time frames that can be defined however the user chooses (i.e. one year, ten years, etc.).

In an ideal world, an indicator (for example, water quality), plotted near the outermost ring of each term scale would be considered as approaching the best possible outcome or condition.

In this example, short-term conditions appear to be approaching optimal, yet the relative immediacy of medium and long-term measures indicate water quality challenges that lie ahead. For further detail, the dots plotted on the scale can be color-coded and sized according to the urgency or scale of the challenge of that particular indicator.

The E/STEP tool allows any user to assess hypothetical yet real life situations and communicate those situations to stakeholders and leadership. By incorporating all five domains the tool is effective both in gauging progress and in revealing the various and complex trade-offs that will occur between indicators.

Fifteen E/STEP indicators were identified for each of the six charrette communities and will be useful not only for those particular environments but for similar communities and situations in the Flatwater Metroplex.

This graphic representation of issues and conditions makes E/STEP an ideal tool for collaborative planning as well as for communicating to leaders and the public a region’s progress towards a sustainable vision and quality of life goals.
The I-80 charrette team defined interchanges as gateways to destinations, and not destinations themselves. In this rendering a research park is set behind a wide, green buffer and designed in a vernacular that blends with natural surroundings.

Retail “lifestyle centers” at exits are discouraged because they compete with existing communities and create visual clutter. New residential and retail development is designed contiguous to existing towns & cities. Preserving the landscape and protecting environmental resources are among key factors in attracting new investment and talent to the Flatwater Metroplex region.
The I-80 charrette team examined growth issues along the 50-mile, six-lane corridor linking Nebraska’s two largest cities while pondering this question: How does the region and the state attract and manage new growth in ways that will not harm the environment or impair the natural beauty of the corridor?

Infrastructure is a key issue as corridor communities ponder costs to support an anticipated eight-fold increase in commuter traffic in the next forty years. Recent projections suggest that funding required to meet highway needs in the Metroplex alone exceeds what Nebraska currently spends on the entire state road system. Some suggested that to keep pace the region needs to explore transit alternatives such as passenger rail service. Continued trail expansion and improvements were also deemed critical for transit and recreational uses.

There was strong support for coordinated regional comprehensive plan including uniform development of regional codes and standards, and both the state and region need to be involved in developing and implementing a funding plan to address infrastructure, economic, environmental and community needs.

The I-80 teams broke into three sub-groups to examine these focus areas:

**Waverly/Greenwood** There is a lack of cooperation and jurisdictional coordination and an urgent need to protect environmental assets and view corridors, with floodplains preserved for natural or agricultural uses. Commercial zoning at the Greenwood exit hasn’t adequately addressed water/sewer issues, and conflicts have arisen from property value/tax inequities.

**Gretna, H370, 180th Street** This area is losing identity and needs to identify landmarks/aesthetic assets and become a gateway to Highway 6 scenic routes, parks and other attractions. Discourage growth that is disconnected from Gretna.

**Ashland, Platte Valley, Pflug Road** The Platte Valley is a unique asset to be protected. The subgroup recommended preservation of valley ridgelines, Loess Hills habitat and prime farmlands and creation of new parks. Develop policies for conservation subdivisions and promote compact, contiguous growth in cities.

Based on the discussions and findings of the I-80 team, the following indicators for the I-80 Corridor were identified:

**I-80 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Interchanges are gateways to destinations, not destinations themselves. New development does not compete with existing municipalities.
- Offer transit alternatives such as light rail.
- Develop a comprehensive regional plan validated through community participation.
- Protect environmental, natural, cultural & historic assets (farmland, habitat, open space).
- Development should consist of uses that that directly benefit from proximity to Lincoln and Omaha but are not viable without entire region.
- Market agriculture as a unique regional asset. Encourage local food markets.
- Protect visual quality of corridor with green buffer & uniform design standards.
- Economic synergy through cooperation. Economic benefits include entire state.
- Develop conservation subdivision policies to address sprawl and land conversion.
- Interchanges are gateways to destinations, not destinations themselves. New development does not compete with existing municipalities.
- Offer transit alternatives such as light rail.
- Develop a comprehensive regional plan validated through community participation.
- Protect environmental, natural, cultural & historic assets (farmland, habitat, open space).
- Development should consist of uses that that directly benefit from proximity to Lincoln and Omaha but are not viable without entire region.
- Market agriculture as a unique regional asset. Encourage local food markets.
- Protect visual quality of corridor with green buffer & uniform design standards.
- Economic synergy through cooperation. Economic benefits include entire state.
- Develop conservation subdivision policies to address sprawl and land conversion.
Environmental
- Number of miles of zoned/protected edges along the corridor/500 yard green zone, either side of the corridor.
- Corridor Landscape Plan/ID miles of implementation.
- Landscape plans for each interchange along the Corridor & number of interchanges with implemented plans.

Socio-cultural
- Centennial Public Art projects extended along Corridor at rest stops/interchanges.
- Coordinated exhibits/information systems at rest stops.
- Nebraska Blueprint information system/”Visions for Nebraska.”

Technological
- Multimodal transportation systems through Corridor.
- Uniform sign system that designates places and communities of interest.
- WIFI & alternative energy technologies along Corridor.

Economic
- Transportation/consumer tax on businesses and development within 2 miles either side of Corridor/Interchanges.
- Interchange Development Plans required for new and existing interchanges; plans to be based on principle of cost sharing between public/private interests.
- Economic Planning & Development Councils along Corridor (i.e., Omaha, Platte Valley, Lincoln regions) with municipal, county, stakeholder representatives whose interests are within 10 miles either side of Corridor.

Public Policy
- Statutes to enable the above economic conditions.
- Standard system of Corridor Overlay Zones for all present and future interchanges and 2 miles wide along either side of the I-80 Corridor.
- “No-build” green space at a minimum width of 500 yards along either side of the Corridor and around exits.

Recommended indicators include a series of Economic Planning & Development Councils along the I-80 Corridor with municipal, county, and stakeholder representatives whose interests are within 10 miles either side of Corridor.
In The Path of Growth: Ashland

Ashland, like other small Metroplex communities, faces challenges to preserve small town life while opening up to growth. Elements identified in three growth scenarios included a passenger rail transit station near the Highway 6 scenic corridor and codes that require houses to conform to a “front porch” aesthetic with street trees and narrower setbacks from the street to create a more human-scaled environment.
Opportunities

The team identified a number of opportunities, including Ashland’s close proximity to Interstate 80 and Nebraska’s two largest cities, the unique/historic character of the downtown and local shopping, strong schools, and regional tourism and recreation destinations. Other favorable factors include:
• Historic, small town appeal that can be preserved, enhanced and expanded through zoning and planning.
• Ideal location for a commuter rail stop. Ashland has one of the longest average commute times of any town or city in Nebraska.
• Potential as an alternative agricultural economic center. The town is located near some of the best agricultural land in the state (Todd Valley).

Challenges

Ashland needs a strong identifier to draw people to the community. Blight along Highway 6 entrance and lack of a strong entry portal further compounds identity problems. There is a perception that the community lacks diversity and that sharp divisions exist between long-time residents and “newcomers,” many of whom commute. This “Us vs. Them” mindset (also geographic, dividing the “north” town from those south of Highway 6) and lack of a unified community vision inhibits the town’s ability to raise development capital and promote an aesthetic standard for the community’s residential and commercial buildings. Other issues include:
• Floodplain that limits growth, poor location for industrial zoning.
• Infrastructure/technological incapacity to address opportunities.
• Housing challenges including uncontrolled sprawl development (trend toward a decentralized core/low-density westward growth) and lack of affordable housing.
• Loss of small town atmosphere and character due to the effects of nearby urban growth, including leakage of local retail to larger urban markets.
• Lack of communication/coordination between town and county jurisdictions.
• Proposal for a huge lake development that would displace Ashland. Introduced in the 2005 Legislature, it was strongly opposed by residents and failed to garner enough votes for a study. However, the idea persists among certain interests.

Having identified opportunities and challenges, the Ashland team offered three scenarios for sustainable growth and development:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Small communities like Ashland must become vocal and proactive in their approach to challenges and opportunities related to urban growth or risk having the costs of growth imposed upon them. The team suggested these immediate steps:

• “Expert” presentations to city officials and planning board.

• Open House/Town Hall meetings on planning and growth issues.

• Greater media awareness of issues.

• Find champions to promote Ashland’s vision both locally and regionally.

• Strategic grant writing and other steps to raise funds for community improvements.

• Foster unity & understanding among residents and create food-based urban/rural coalitions.
Scenario A preserves and builds on neighborhoods northwest of downtown. A commuter train/bus station (possibly a reuse of the existing historic train station) on Highway 6 encourages and defines various commercial development and celebrates Ashland’s railroading heritage.

New and revived commercial development along Highway 6 and Highways 63/66 conforms to the existing community aesthetic and human scale.

Commercial and industrial development at the Ashland-Greenwood exit is controlled to create an attractive, highly visible entry “portal.”

On the edges of Ashland, agricultural and natural terrain interacts with and “flows” into the community while new residential areas east and south of Highway 6 conform to the existing topography and to historical and cultural sites and preserve and protect fragile tallgrass prairie and other related Platte River valley ecosystems.
**Scenario B** focuses on aesthetic design treatments of neighborhoods and highway corridors, suggesting specific codes to encourage a “front porch” aesthetic with street trees and narrower setbacks from the street to create a more human scaled, pedestrian environment. Highway corridors make generous use of “greenbelt buffers” such as street trees and other plantings, and include old-fashioned streetlights and other landscaping elements to conform to an historic small town aesthetic and enhance the pedestrian environment.

In **Scenario C** the new single-family residential area is contiguous with existing residential areas. It includes compact, mixed use residential and commercial neighborhood centers that feature townhouses and apartments, low-rise businesses, parks and schools. These do not compete with downtown retail, but rather serve immediate neighborhood populations and encourage more walking/bike trips. Floodplains would be designated natural areas or parks and industrial uses concentrated in a compact zone near Highway 6 and the rail line, as would a “park and ride” transit hub near a proposed train station or bus stop. A new direct road to I-80 was suggested at the west end of downtown.
The Ashland charrette team recommended, clockwise, from top left, a front porch aesthetic for new and existing neighborhoods; a passenger rail and bus stop possibly located in the existing historic train depot; the development of several mixed-use, neighborhood centers to encourage walking and biking for daily needs; the preservation and extension of natural areas, habitat and small scale farming activities near the town environs.

Maintaining a sense of small town life and protecting environmental and cultural resources while opening up to growth opportunities characterized the overall goals identified by the Ashland charrette team.

The following sustainability indicators are suggested as measures of progress towards those goals:
Environmental
• Survey of all environmental assets.
• Environmental assets/natural resources designated for protection. “No-build” zones designated.
• Ashland’s greenness enhanced through new green spaces, streetscapes, and public recreation facilities.

Socio-cultural
• Heritage/history sustainable and publicly accessible.
• Community-wide vision of Ashland’s future.
• Development principles that will enhance the mixed-use, walkable, bikeable character of an “urban village.”

Technological
• WIFI facilities to cover the entire community.
• New incentives/installations for alternative energy.
• Ashland connected to region via multi-modal transit systems.

Economic
• Community Economic Development Coalition enhanced with sustainable principles and strategies for administering from the perspective of the Five Domains (E/STEP).
• Package of public funded incentives to encourage developers to follow the community’s Development Plan.
• Specific strategy of economic assistance for the development of affordable housing, “urban village life-style”, mixed uses, and locally owned businesses.

Public Policy
• Comprehensive Plan revised to include new sub-area plans for development projects, and add new protections for land, water, energy, materials, and locally produced food systems
• Cross-county, cross-jurisdictional alliances to provide mutually beneficial and smart-growth patterns of land-uses, especially at portals to the I-80 corridor.
• Codes and ordinances to support “green” construction and development on all new building.

Indicators for Ashland include the creation of cross-county, cross-jurisdictional alliances to provide mutually beneficial and smart-growth patterns of land-uses, especially at portals to the I-80 corridor.
Conservation Community principles were applied to a hypothetical site west of Bennington. Participants explored alternatives to typical acreage-style developments and suburban sprawl that rapidly claim farmland and natural areas in the Omaha metro.
The Conservation Community charrette team explored how rural lands can offer affordable, sustainable living environments that protect river corridors, natural water sheds and water resources while creating or protecting natural habitat for indigenous wildlife and conserving valuable productive land for continued farming. The study site is a square section of Northwest Douglas County bounded on the north by State Highway 36, on the east by 192nd Street, by Bennington Road on the south and State Highway 31 to the west. The charrette team included area citizens, planners, land conservation group representatives, developers and a principle property owner.

Although the property is not yet ready for development, the charrette offers a vision for this and similar properties if and when urban development encroaches. The conservation community envisioned for this hypothetical site emphasizes sustainability and preservation of the best agricultural and natural areas.

**Key elements desired for the property include:**
- A farming operation (an organic farm currently operates on the site).
- At least fifty percent open space integrated and interconnected with other uses.
- A minimum density of four dwelling units per gross acre (equals approximately 2,560 units or 10,000 residents for the entire study site).
- Mixed-use development including residential, retail and office.

**Objectives**

The team identified environmental, social/cultural, technological, economic and public policy objectives in setting up this hypothetical conservation community. Key environmental indicators included the importance of preserving contiguous “open spaces” such as natural features, organic farmland and low impact landscaping.
At least fifty percent of the overall property would be dedicated to preserving trees, creeks, slopes and other natural/topographical features. Natural areas would be enhanced through connections and extensions to other natural or open areas.

An organic farming operation integrated into the plan would be capable of feeding the intended population. Important social/cultural factors would include a diverse population and a mixed-use development (residential, retail and office blended together). Population areas would offer a variety of housing opportunities, employment potential for local residents (an environment attractive to office users), and an elementary school and other early childhood development facilities.

Technological aspects of the site include the use of appropriate organic, sustainable agricultural practices, renewable energy resources and LEED green building/design practices.

To be successful, the prospective developer would need to utilize portions of the open space for alternative energy generation (i.e. wind), ensure that the farm is well maintained and attractive, integrate a learning component in the farm and in a community garden, and provide for transit alternatives. Overall, the conduct of the farm and garden operations and their connection to the resident population would serve as important learning tools in modeling a food-based community.

Economic indicators for the site include diverse housing choices, a local outlet for farm products, and a cost-effective tax strategy. Housing units (single and multi family in a range of price options), arranged in clusters near retail and other uses, would be desirable for their mixed use convenience and “town square” aesthetic.

Mixed-use development would enable lower-cost construction and a greater variety of choice within a smaller area. It is important to insure that open space be maintained as lower taxed property.

Flexible zoning and public participation were identified as keys to success of the project.

<table>
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<th>RECOMMENDATIONS</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Creation of a comprehensive plan with Intent and Principles.</td>
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<td>• Environmental protection identified as a primary goal.</td>
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<td>• Roads and other infrastructure minimized.</td>
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<td>• Flexible distribution of housing density and mixed uses.</td>
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<td>• Shared parking to limit permeable surfaces.</td>
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<td>• Allow and encourage alternative energy devices and systems.</td>
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<td>• Open up to public review guided by Intent and Principles.</td>
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Conservation community team members suggested an “eco-valley” design (top) for the rural Bennington site that would allow for continuous wildlife corridors throughout the community and a sense of connection between residents, the natural surroundings, and food systems.

Another key element in the conservation community was a walkable, pedestrian environment for mixed-use residential and commercial areas. The pedestrian environment is enhanced by close proximity and mixing of the residential and commercial areas (thereby saving more land for farming and habitat) and public commons and garden areas.
The mixed-use town center of this conservation community makes a subtle transition from town to country life by integrating natural areas and agriculture into the community. This helps foster a spirit of community by encouraging citizens to work together to conserve land, water, energy materials, and food systems while building a healthy community.

A successful integration of rural and urban emphasizes the use of sustainable, appropriate or “low-tech” methods for farming and a design that integrates existing farm structures into the community.
Environmental
- Site survey of one square mile of existing farmland for natural vegetation, landforms, waterways, and resources/designate such features as “no build” zones/designate conservation easements.
- Plans for balancing conservation strategies, mixed-use village-style clustered housing, organic farming land uses.
- Existing trees, streambanks, watersheds kept in natural state.

Socio-cultural
- Programs with the local/regional communities and markets to re-connect consumers with local food and production.
- Community and farming community linked in suburban/rural coalitions, producers/markets, community assisted agriculture.
- Common community of citizens working to conserve land, water, energy materials, and food systems.

Technological
- Sustainable, appropriate or “low-tech” methods used for farming, design of community/integrate existing farm structures.
- WIFI wireless electronics throughout the community.
- Multi-modal transportation connections to the region.

Economic
- Food production system linked to local metro markets in the restaurant, food stores, institutional, and residential sectors.
- Village-style housing development arranged with daily-needs commercial shops that are locally owned and operated.
- Micro-economic cooperatives organized among residents.

Public Policy
- Conservation Plan and Covenants for the community added as a sub-area plan to the County Comprehensive Plan.
- Appropriate sustainable & affordable relationships determined between community and county for service needs and account for advantages of green design, planning and development.
- Conservation development incentives within the County government, i.e., Tax Increment Financing, etc.
Underutilized malls and big box stores litter the American landscape in which more than a half billion square feet of retail space sits empty. These places are underutilized because they are oriented to cars and are cut off from neighborhoods by high-speed, multi-lane roads.

At right is a vision of how a Fremont shopping mall could be transformed into a transit-oriented, pedestrian-friendly neighborhood center.
This charrette team included local citizens, planners, public officials and the property owners of the 202,000-square-foot Fremont Mall. The mall rests on 21 acres with about 1,300 feet of frontage on the north side of 23rd Street (Highway 30) in northeast Fremont. The site is 700 feet deep with Yager Road the eastern boundary and the west bounded by a partially vacant strip shopping center slated for future use by the nearby Fremont Area Medical Center. Assisted living centers are in the immediate area, and an “active adult” neighborhood with a 66 housing units is being developed north of the mall.

The 40-year-old mall cannot compete head-to-head with larger, newer retail developments in nearby Omaha, but it can thrive as a local community center that focuses on the daily needs of Fremont residents and especially surrounding neighborhoods, businesses and institutions. The site could provide new opportunities for civic engagement and serve as a transportation hub for city or regional destinations. There is significant residential and retail development near the site as well a growing regional health care sector.

**Challenges**

- Auto-oriented design that discourages pedestrian activity.
- Expansive parking areas that contribute to water pollution and flooding due to excessive runoff from impermeable surfaces.
- Unprotected by trees or shrubs, the site is subject to extremes of heat and cold and visual pollution.
- Lacking streetscape connection/scale, it does not function as a community gathering place. Without safe and clearly delineated pedestrian/bicycle connections between retail establishments and residential areas, and without a clearly defined community/neighborhood identity and function, the mall is no more accessible to locals than other malls accessible by auto.
- The mall lacks appeal as a unique destination and does not meet the expectations of shoppers who want a streetfront experience and access to other forms of transit.
• Create more access points through new roads, trails, transit centers, and connections and open up the mall on all sides. New residential development to the north suggests an opportunity to open the mall's blank back wall and create a new road with a pedestrian scale streetscape as well as parkland and a small lake on the current vacant lot. New infill construction should emphasize walkability and pedestrian scale.

• Reinvent 23rd Street as a pedestrian-friendly boulevard from Highway 77 to Highway 275.

• Take advantage of the unique identity of Fremont and its “small town feel.” The site could cater to families, connect to the growing senior population in the surrounding neighborhoods, serve nearby health care facilities, and act as an attractive community plaza/focal point.

• Investigate the development of an innovative transit system by combining aspects of demand-responsive and service route systems. The mall could serve as a transit hub for commuters within the city as well as to Omaha and other regional destinations. A transit system could be part of marketing strategy, using vehicles with a “user friendly” appearance.

• Permeable surface parking lots, solar and wind energy installations, and green roofs would provide long-term cost savings as well as unique “eco-friendly” marketing opportunities.

• Generous plantings of low-water perennials in parking areas and even rooftops would reduce runoff and “heat island” effects and would also help delineate pedestrian pathways.

• Mix tried and-true retailers with unique local retailers to appeal to a broader and more diverse market. Consider how the mall can target “empty nester” residential and the growing network of health care services located near the mall. The area’s strong agricultural roots also suggest a location for a farmer’s market.
Environmental
- Auto parking lot converted into an eco-friendly environment.
- New plan for pedestrian and bike-friendly landscaping for the surrounding district.
- Green spaces/water features protected as parks in the district.

Socio-cultural
- Portions of Fremont Mall redeveloped into community center type facilities, i.e., day-care, youth recreation, community social rooms, children’s museum, branch library, etc.
- Mall surrounded with mixed-income housing; “street” relationships exist between housing & redesigned Mall facades.
- Mall rebranded as city’s “Commercial/Civic Activity Center.”

Technological
- Public transit system with the Activity Center as a primary station/destination.
- Mall district WIFI system.
- District alternative energy/utilities system.

Economic
- District Economic/Planning Council to oversee the planning and redevelopment of the area.
- City incentives packages to encourage redevelopment.
- Plans and redevelopment intentions advertised within the Omaha/Lincoln market/Development teams secured from region.

Public Policy
- New sub-area plan for the district/new plan incorporated into Fremont’s Comprehensive Plan.
- Area studied and declared as “blighted” to enable the use of T.I.F. public funds to augment the development funding.
- Zoning maps and City Ordinances changed to accommodate an “Urban Village” plan for the district.

Surrounding the mall with mixed-income housing, creating “street” relationships between housing and redesigned mall facades, and establishing the mall as a transit center are among suggested indicators.
The rebirth of an historic four-block, inner city housing project offers opportunities to transform an old Omaha neighborhood into a vibrant downtown community. The charrette team identified opportunities and attributes for sustainable development through mixed uses and revitalized commercial, cultural and affordable housing accommodations.

Near Urban Core: Omaha’s Drake Court

Robert Hanna
This charrette focused on developing a unified program for improving the quality of life in the Drake Court Neighborhood on the southwest edge of downtown Omaha. It proposed strengthening the physical, human, social, economic, and environmental capital and creating a safe place for neighbors and visitors.

**Challenges**

The perception of safety is one of the greatest challenges to the neighborhood. Crime, drugs, transients, poor and dilapidated buildings were all cited as reasons the area is considered unsafe. In addition, a large Douglas County corrections facility is located three blocks to the east, adding to the perception of a crime. The overall transient feel of the area also contributes to this perception. Absentee landlords, lack of property reinvestment and one-way streets have all created a “drive through” neighborhood rather than a destination.

**Opportunities**

Fortunately, there is also much to build upon in the area, and considerable progress has been made in rehabilitating the Drake Court Apartments and in boosting public interest in further improving the Drake neighborhood. Area assets include Liberty Elementary School, the Omaha Children's Museum, The Rose Theatre, and a YMCA. Strong multi-family development in the Drake Court complex and its proximity to downtown make it an ideal location for a number of pedestrian activities. In addition to nearby art-based programs, the area has interesting architectural details and human scale. There are a number of possible sites for redevelopment that could leverage private sector involvement and encourage participation of the nearby school. The redevelopment of the Drake Court Apartments, facilitated by the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities, is an important catalyst for inspiring new enterprise in the neighborhood.

Earlier studies of the Drake Court area led by the Joslyn Castle Institute examined elements that comprise a “walkable” street environment, including alleyways transformed into “green” pedestrian passageways. The charrette team discussed other enhancements such as improving perceptions of safety, adequate lighting, good sidewalks, green spaces and natural landscaping, public art, and attention to historic preservation and human scale. The 20th and Howard Street intersection was identified as a central point that could provide many opportunities for business, community, and private investment endeavors.
• Improve access to transportation (bus, shuttle) & enhance pedestrian transit (walking, biking).

• Public green spaces with links between neighborhood/downtown along streets or enhanced alleyways. Rooftop garden on parking garage and development of a community garden.

• Identify and develop local leadership and encourage both parent and student education initiatives. Neighborhood identity—a sense of place—is critical to instilling community pride and a feeling of ownership. Redevelopment should minimize gentrification of the neighborhood and not displace residents.

• One-way streets (Leavenworth, St. Mary’s, Harney, Farnum, 20th, 22nd) should be returned to two-way to improve pedestrian safety and enhance street level, mixed-use retail.

• Streetscape improvements including wider sidewalks, trees, on-street parking (diagonal and parallel). New lighting should be similar throughout the community, providing a sense of safety and community identity.

• Daily services such as a drug store, medical clinic, and grocery store should also be attracted and retained to enhance pedestrian opportunities for neighborhood residents.

• Invent new avenues for restaurants, cafes, and retail and strengthen existing business to encourage residents and visitors to spend more time in the area and enliven public spaces.

• New policies that encourage owner-occupied housing units, improve policing of the area, strengthen communication between residents and city, and lead to a neighborhood master plan.

Strengthening the character of buildings and other spaces, emphasizing pedestrian scale, and balancing hardscape and greenspace were all recommended by the Drake Court charrette team, which also noted the need for street trees and the need to address dilapidated structures and vacant lots.
Environmental
- Green public spaces/green streetscapes increased.
- Walkability and bikeability enhanced/Connectivity to adjacent districts and pedestrian destinations.
- Building stock upgraded/District has a distinct identity.

Socio-cultural
- New mixed uses developed/character of an “urban village”/emphasis on mixed income housing, with daily-needs commercial.
- Safe streets and public places/new Civic Plaza.
- Public facilities/arts corridor emphasized and accommodated.

Technological
- “Multi-modal transit and transportation plan through the district.
- WIFI electronic access available throughout the district.
- Feasibility plans for “district energy & utilities system.”

Economic
- City incentives for the development of infill and new development.
- Daily-needs commercial shops and stores developed paralleled with the affordable and low-income housing.
- Developments with locally-owned businesses have priority.

Public Policy
- “Sub-area Plan” for District incorporated by the Omaha Planning Board and City Council into the City’s Comprehensive Plan.
- Overlay plan for the district to be designated a “Green By Design District.”
- District Citizens’ Development Coalition developed with members including property owners, stakeholders, businesses, institutions, and residences in the district.

Creation of a district Citizens’ Development Coalition, with members including property owners, stakeholders, businesses, institutions, and residences in the district, are among suggested policy indicators.
The 'P' Street corridor linking the Haymarket District to the Antelope Valley Parkway is a place of many possibilities. What are the conditions & attributes that will successfully transform the 'P' Street Corridor into downtown Lincoln’s primary retail streetscape? How does the community maximize retail, housing, & employment opportunities; integrate and enhance its transportation options; and enrich economic, social, and cultural foundations?

The Urban Core: Downtown Lincoln

Robert Hanna
The 20-block “P” Street corridor connects Lincoln’s historic Haymarket District with the Antelope Valley. This west-to-east corridor is part of a transitional zone (along with Q street) between downtown and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s City Campus. P Street intersects the north-south Centennial Mall at 15th Street, which connects the campus to the State Capitol along a pedestrian mall.

The charrette team (consisting of local citizens, retailers, planners and city officials including the mayor) divided the P Street Corridor into three distinct districts: the Haymarket, “Middle ’P’ Street,” and “East ’P’ Street.” The Middle P Street Zone was defined as between 10th and 15th Streets, with 9th to 10th and 15th to 16th serving as “Transition Zones” between the districts.

The transition zones were deemed critical for defining a strong mix of uses (first floor retail, with office/residential above) that can successfully blend one district into the neighboring district. Rather than compete against each other, the team urged that the three districts should work toward a common synergy for the P Street Corridor and that the city should encourage both high- and low-tech solutions to the overall design.

**DOWNTOWN ‘LIVING ROOMS’**

Building in a step back approach—in which the first floor extends to the lot line but upper stories are set back to create visual “view-sheds,” were favored as a way to open-up streetscapes and create opportunities for landscaping throughout the downtown. Step-backs create visual connections between street level and surrounding buildings. Moreover, apartment balconies, office terraces and outdoor cafes (street level and above) could incorporate plants and other elements that would collectively create “green corridors” linking larger public plazas and lending a sense of unity and rhythm.

For the public plaza site at 13th & P, it was recommended that the first two stories of a proposed high-rise building (25 to 30 stories) next to the plaza include green “living rooms” that allow the plaza to extend into the building. It was suggested that an outdoor cafe, as well as offices and apartments, could overlook a plaza designed to “get people outside of four walls and touch as many senses as possible.”
The plaza was defined as “more than a park—a place to make connections that requires a high level of activity.” Overall, downtown buildings should demonstrate that the natural environment can exist in the urban realm through open spaces in unique places, softer building edges and true urban residential experiences.

MORE THAN ‘ONE WAY’

The charrette team recommended that both P and Q streets return to two-way traffic. The current one-way system emphasizes the rapid movement of cars through the downtown but is not conducive to pedestrian safety or street-level retail development. Two-way traffic flows will create opportunities to get people at a speed to see retail and make turns necessary for parking.

In addition to creating a environment more conducive to walkers and bikers, a street car running the nearly length of the P Street Corridor (with turnarounds on either end) would provide yet another transit option as well as strong visual reference for the corridor. The team suggested that the trolley follow a landscaped corridor that undulates from one side of the street to the other in successive blocks, making center-of-the-street stops possible (this design is successfully used in other U.S. cities). It was also suggested that the street grade could be split on P Street at 9th or 10th to allow the trolley and pedestrian traffic to pass underneath.

Finally, Lincoln must be true to its history and culture in continuing and advancing an atmosphere of an open, deliberate and engaging discourse, one that is available to all community stakeholders. The following indicators are suggested as starting points in identifying those key factors that will be used for measuring progress toward sustainability:

Environmental
• Continue, and enhance Lincoln’s urban landscaping installations, i.e. street trees, water features, street furniture, and sidewalk art.
• Design P Street as a pedestrian-friendly, calm traffic shopping street and connect the street, pedestrian experience to the adjacent, intersecting nodes of green spaces.
• Anchor the east and west ends of the “Market Place” with a major public green space (Antelope Creek, Haymarket).

• Incentives to encourage green building design.
• Identification of key people in city government to champion changes such as revised building codes to encourage green, sustainable design.
• Offer financial incentives, including those that provide housing opportunities for all income levels.
• Examine opportunities for revitalizing Centennial Mall as a transition zone along the P St. Corridor.
Socio-cultural
• Visible emphasis to the intersecting 12th Street Arts Corridor, the intersecting Centennial Mall, and to University entrances from P Street.
• Visible recognition to civic/cultural facilities on P St, i.e., Children’s Museum, State Museum, YMCA, Historic Federal Place, Haymarket, etc.
• Civic Plaza and the surrounding redeveloped facilities at 13th and P streets designed to function as Outdoor Downtown Living Room.

Technological
• WIFI technologies showcased up and down Market Place.
• Multi-modal transit systems along length of downtown P Street (use new strategy for P Street circulation to motivate re-planning of entire circulation system for downtown).
• Electronic news and information system on P Street (work with Lincoln Journal Star and UNL School of Journalism to provide/maintain).

Economic
• Market Place Economic Development Coalition formed with Chamber of Commerce (CC), Lincoln Independent Businesses Association (LIBA), Downtown Lincoln Association (DLA), the City, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Downtown Action Team (DAT) (install Incentives and Training Program for new local business owners).
• Low-interest microeconomics program for start-up of locally owned businesses (investigate feasibility among local financial institutions).
• Strategic plan for affordable housing (engage the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority, the Lincoln Urban Development Department and the Lincoln/Lancaster Planning Department).

Public Policy
• Market Place priorities and timelines (identified by coalition of the DAT, the City, the DLA, and representatives of the developers).
• All new development along P conforms to new policies (to be established by the “Lincoln: Green by Design” program).
• City plans, ordinances, and zoning laws clearly enable a new, pedestrian-friendly, energy efficient, green Market Place comprised of mixed uses, mixed-income residential, and retail/commerce that support the new urban demographics of the future downtown.

City plans, ordinances, and zoning laws that enable a pedestrian-friendly, energy efficient corridor comprised of mixed uses, mixed-income residential, and retail/commerce are among policy indicators.
This report was prepared by the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities in cooperation with its Envisioning Regional Design partners including the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund, AIA Nebraska, and the Nebraska Innovation Zone Commission.