

CHAPTER 2: introduction

Downtown Chaska, as it is known today, essentially encompasses much of the area below the Minnesota River bluff and is frequently referred to as Lower Chaska or Old Chaska. Today's "downtown" area was once the entire town of Chaska – a freestanding small town strategically located along the Minnesota River at the cross-roads of railroad lines and highways. Historically, the downtown Chaska area has consisted of a traditional mix of small town activities, including a civic core adjacent to City Square, a "Main Street" commercial & entertainment district, industries, residential neighborhoods, and community institutions.

As Chaska and the Twin Cities metro region have grown over the past two decades, both in size and population, Lower Chaska has evolved into the community's downtown area. Chaska's transition from a freestanding small town to a fast-growing metro community has presented great opportunities as well as challenges to the community. Other major trends impacting downtown Chaska include more large-scale retail competition, online shopping, expanding regional traffic and highways, physical reinvestment needs for buildings and infrastructure, demographic shifts, changing housing needs/preferences, recreational preferences, historic preservation, and interest in community identity.



Growing Need for Downtown Plan

Downtown has experienced some growing pains in conjunction with Chaska's transition from a freestanding town to a larger community within the Twin Cities metro region. Originally, downtown was located at the geographic center of Chaska. As the community has grown, the new neighborhoods and business areas have primarily developed north of downtown and above the river bluff. Downtown is now located on the edge of the community and farther from the center of the metro than the rest of the community. Today a large portion of Chaska is located above the bluff with downtown being the only area below the bluff. Community and metro growth has also resulted in competing business areas, downtown expansion, increased traffic, and an expanding regional highway network. As the oldest part of the community, downtown is in great need of reinvestment to make it competitive within the community and surrounding areas. These reinvestment needs include public infrastructure (streets, utilities, storm water management), housing, commercial buildings, parks and trails. For example, downtown's streets are generally in poor condition and the City plans to reconstruct all downtown streets over the next ten years.





Bridge over Minnesota River, Chaska, Minn.



At the national level, downtown business districts have found it increasingly difficult to remain viable as regional shopping malls, big-box stores, national franchises, and online shopping have grown in popularity. The smaller locally-owned businesses in downtowns struggle to compete with these other retail options. As downtown retail businesses close or relocate, offices and service-oriented businesses often replace them which in turn weakens downtown as a strong retail destination. While downtown Chaska possesses many unique assets, in total it does not currently provide an important commercial destination for the overall community or the expanding population of Carver County.

In 2008, U.S. Highway 212 was relocated from the downtown area below the bluff to a new freeway above the bluff which is projected to increase traffic substantially on MN Hwy 41. Mn DOT continues its study to explore options for a future flood-proof highway crossing of the Minnesota River Valley in the vicinity of existing MN Hwy 41 to address traffic capacity issues for some time.

The City identified the need for a downtown master plan several years ago. In 2009, as a result of a two-day strategic planning retreat attended by City Council members and City Department Heads, the City Council adopted 10-Year Visions and 5-Year Goals to guide the City's strategic planning. One of the 10-Year Visions was "Chaska has a historic downtown with a vibrant commercial district that is 'the' Twin Cities destination". Most of the other 10-Year Visions also related to downtown revitalization. One of the 5-Year Goals was "Promote Chaska's 'Small Town' Image" with one of the action items being to create a downtown master plan. With the update of the City's 2030 Comprehensive Plan, completed in 2010, the City formally established development of the downtown master plan as a priority. This need was also identified by the City's Commitment to Community Task Force in its 2009 report and the Chaska Downtown Business Council, now the Downtown Business Alliance, in its 2009 report Historic Downtown Revitalization Goals.

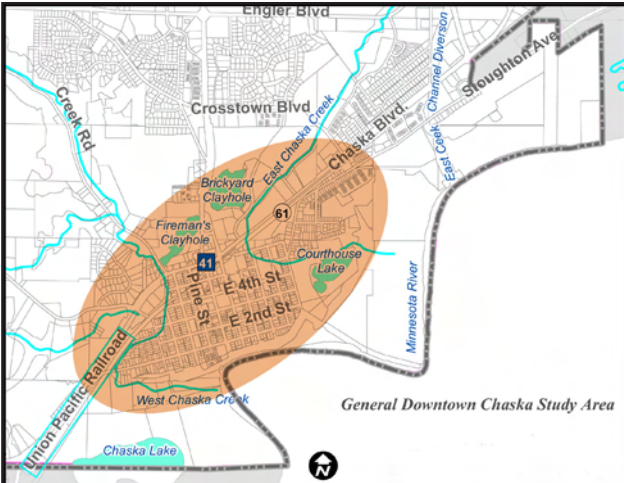
Purposes of the Downtown Master Plan

To address these significant issues, the City recognizes that it needs a long-term holistic vision for downtown with a plan that guides and prioritizes future public investment and private redevelopment efforts. The purpose of the Chaska Downtown Master Plan is to establish a holistic, long-term vision and plan for the downtown area. The purposes of this plan are:

- Establish a big picture framework for clarifying and strengthening downtown's place in the community and the region;
- Build upon the City's prior planning initiatives and downtown project successes to identify the next steps in moving forward with downtown revitalization;
- Provide a guide for future reinvestment efforts by the public sector, private sector and non-profit organizations in downtown over the next ten years;
- Create a fully functional downtown area with traditional small town character that is valued and used by Chaska citizens, employees and visitors.

Defining the Downtown Area

As shown in the aerial photo below and the map to the right, the boundaries of today's "downtown area" are generally the river valley to the south and east, Chaska Boulevard/ County Road 61 to the west, the river bluff to the north, and Crosstown Boulevard to the northeast. Although the downtown commercial area was historically south of Chaska Boulevard (old Highway 212) and rail line, today's downtown commercial area and residences have expanded to the north side of Chaska Boulevard. This expansion of downtown occurred in the 1990s with the redevelopment of the Klein Brickyard to a mixed-use area reflecting and complementing downtown's historic character. With the addition of this substantial retail area, the historic downtown area transitioned to more of service-oriented district. This major downtown change strengthened downtown Chaska's role as a trade center in Eastern Carver County but created new challenges for the historic downtown commercial district.



- Downtown Chaska Design Guidelines Manual (2004) – This manual provides the City’s design guidelines for historic building storefronts in downtown and the primary design criteria for the City’s Storefront Rehabilitation Loan Program.
- Downtown Street Design Master Plan (2003) – City Staff established a vision, guiding principles, and street design types to guide planned reconstruction of all downtown streets. This master plan also recommended improvements to the City’s street functional classifications, street network connections, and traffic control.



Downtown Master Planning Process

Project Phases

The Downtown Master Plan planning process consisted of seven (7) major phases:

Phase 1 – Organize the Effort

Phase 2 – Prepare Downtown Physical Inventory and Market Opportunity Analysis

Phase 3 – Evaluate Downtown Transportation and Parking Needs

Phase 4 – Create Preliminary Downtown Master Plan

Phase 5 – Create Downtown Market Positioning Strategy

Phase 6 – Establish Implementation Strategies

Phase 7 – Prepare and Approve Final Downtown Master Plan

Project Team

The Project Team consisted of City Staff (including the City Administrator, Assistant City Administrator, Director of Planning & Development, City Engineer, Public Works Superintendent, Director of Parks & Recreation and City Planner), Hoisington Koegler Group Inc. (HKGi) planning consultants, and W-ZHA market consultants. The Project Team worked closely with the Project Task Force, a 16-member group that was appointed by the City Council. Task force members were selected to represent key stakeholder groups within the community which resulted in a larger task force than originally planned. In total, there were eight (8) task force meetings from February 2010 to April 2011.

Community Meetings

The project’s planning process occurred primarily during 2010. Kickoff meetings with City Staff, City Council and the Commissions (Planning, Parks/Arts/Recreation, Heritage Preservation, Human Rights) took place in December 2009. Three (3) joint City Council & Commissions work sessions, which were open to the general public, were held during the process. These work sessions were designed to



encourage dialogue regarding downtown's issues, opportunities, and project recommendations.

- December 21, 2009 – Kickoff Meeting, Project Overview, Community Input
- December 8, 2010 – Analysis of Downtown's Physical Environment and Market Opportunities
- January 19, 2011 – Downtown Vision, Guiding Principles and Strategies

A community open house was held for the Downtown Master Plan project on Wednesday, February 16, 2011 at the Chaska Community Center. The meeting sign-in sheet showed 84 signatures, but actual attendance was estimated at over 100 people including those who did not sign in. Comment forms were available and 24 completed comment forms were received from attendees. The comment forms requested input regarding six (6) aspects of the proposed Downtown Master Plan: Vision, Guiding Principles & Revitalization Strategies, Market Position Strategies, Revitalization Opportunity Areas, Downtown Streets Network & Concepts, Downtown Community Gathering Places. This community input is included in the appendix to the master plan.

Key Downtown Institutions Interviews

Individual meetings between the Project Team and key downtown institutions took place in Oct/Nov 2010 including Carver County Government Center, Carver County Library, St. John's Church & School, Guardian Angels Church & School, Moravian Church, Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative School, Auburn Manor Homes and Southwest Transit.

Downtown Development Interviews

Dick Paik, market consultant with W-ZHA, conducted individual interviews with a representative group of downtown development stakeholders, including existing business owners, property owners, potential developers, realtors, and major Chaska employers.

Organization of the Downtown Master Plan

The Downtown Master Plan is organized into eight (8) chapters:

Chapter 1: Executive Summary

This chapter provides an executive summary of the Chaska Downtown Master Plan.

Chapter 2: Introduction

This chapter describes the needs and purposes for the Chaska Downtown Master Plan; defines the downtown planning area; recent and concurrent downtown planning efforts; the Downtown Master Plan planning process; and the organization of this document.

Chapter 3: Downtown Chaska Today

This chapter provides a brief overview of downtown Chaska today, its existing conditions and context. This overview includes existing land uses, development patterns, natural landscape, parks, trails, streets, parking and historic assets.

Chapter 4: Vision and Guiding Principles

This chapter presents the long-term vision for downtown Chaska, including the five (5) main vision elements - community gathering places, vibrant main street district, historic small town character, thriving anchor institutions, attractive neighborhoods - and the eight (8) guiding principles.

Chapter 5: Downtown Market Positioning

This chapter establishes the City's market positioning objective, primary strategies, secondary strategies, and priorities as it positions downtown as a more vibrant community destination. It also identifies downtown's market-based assets, challenges and potential opportunities.

Chapter 6: Downtown Districts, Neighborhoods & Greenbelt

This chapter establishes and describes the seven (7) downtown districts, three (3) downtown neighborhoods and Chaska Greenbelt that make up the larger downtown Chaska area.

Chapter 7: Downtown Plan for the Future

This chapter presents a strategic framework for revitalizing downtown as critical mass of destinations woven together to restore downtown as the community's main business district and community gathering place. This framework's multi-faceted approach is organized around three key downtown elements: built environment, connections, and parks/open spaces.

Chapter 8: Implementation

This chapter lays out the recommended strategies for implementing the vision, guiding principles and strategies of the Downtown Master Plan. It is organized around the following topics: city policies and regulations; recommended implementation actions; partnership and financial considerations; and next steps.

The appendix contains Task Force Meeting Notes and Community Input.

